A Preliminary Analysis of Some Elements of the Saite and Persian Period Pottery at Tell El-Maskhuta

Patricia Paice†
University of Toronto

The Wadi Tumilat

An ancient shipping canal, the precursor to the modern Suez Canal, once joined the Nile to the Red Sea by following the route of the Wadi Tumilat east to the Bitter Lakes and then turning south to a point near the modern town of Suez. Through a combined strategy of survey and excavation the Wadi Tumilat Project has been able to date, with a high degree of probability, the original construction of the canal to the late 7th century BC, i.e. during the reign of Necho II of the 26th Saite Dynasty. That this dating coincides with classical sources says something for both contemporary archaeological method and classical histories. This canal was enhanced and completed in the early 5th century BC by the Persian emperor Darius, who erected four commemorative stelae along the route. A period of neglect of the canal was rectified by Ptolemy II and the canal was renewed by the Roman emperor Trajan (Diodorus 1967: Bk. 1.33.8–12; Herodotus 2008: Bk. II.158; Pliny 1967: Bk. VI.xxxii.165–167; Strabo 1960: Bk. 17.1.25; Holladay 1982).

Tell el-Maskhuta

The Project's surface survey of the Wadi Tumilat, co-directed by C. A. Redmount and J. S. Holladay, has located many ancient sites, but excavation has been limited to the large site of Tell el-Maskhuta, at the eastern end of the wadi.

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There are two major occupation periods at the site. The earliest was the Second Intermediate Period or Middle Bronze IIB settlement which probably lasted not much more than one hundred years before being abandoned during the 17th century BC. After a thousand year gap, the site was reoccupied. Periods of occupation during the life of this second settlement have proved to coincide with canal activity attested in classical sources, from the founding of the town-site of Necho (ca. 610 BC) down to its termination during the 2nd century (?) AD.

It is the second settlement which is the focus of the present paper. Modern excavation methods at Tell el-Maskhuta have provided us with a large, well stratified corpus of Saite and Persian Period pottery. This corpus has many virtues. On the one hand we have confidence that there is not pottery datable earlier than 610 BC (other than that of the Second Intermediate Period, one thousand years earlier), and at the other end of the scale, it has proved possible to separate the Hellenistic and Roman Period pottery from its Persian Period predecessors, a process not always possible at more thinly occupied or stratigraphically disturbed sites.

**Pottery Processing**

All pottery excavated is sent to the pottery shed for processing. After washing and field reading, all diagnostic sherds are saved; that is, all rims, handles, bases, shoulders, spouts, and distinctive or decorated body sherds from a pottery basket are set aside in their individual compartment. All the diagnostic sherds are then registered before they are separated from their pottery basket. Only then can the ceramic typologists (3–4 during 1985) sort all these sherds according to ware and functional/formal type. This information is entered by the pottery registrars on the card that will contain the drawing. During the initial typological sorting procedures any sherds which are so alike that one drawing will represent each of them are grouped together, and the best example is chosen to be drawn. Those sherds which are not to be drawn are listed by registration number on the back of the card which will contain the drawn example. Information recorded for each sherd includes ware category, surface treatment, diameter, and the proportion of the profile that is preserved.

In practice, the standards of similarity applied in this initial typological sort are so rigorous that we end up drawing well over half of all registered sherds. Since 1979 three to four full-time artists have regularly drawn over 10,000 pieces of pottery during a two month excavation season in order to complete processing the bulk of that season’s pottery before leaving Egypt. A final one-month study session following the 1985 excavation season served to tie up all the loose ends.