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Zîr Vessels from the Tomb of Osiris at Umm el-Qaab*

DURING THE COURSE of recent fieldwork by the German Archaeological Institute Cairo at Umm el-Qaab, Abydos, abundant ceramic vessels postdating the Early Dynastic Period of use of the royal cemetery were documented as part of the project “Cult of Osiris at Umm el-Qaab”.¹ According to both the ceramics and other finds (small finds, inscribed objects and various types of materials), a first peak of activity is noticeable during the Nineteenth Dynasty. An increase in and a revival of cultic activity at the site took place especially during the Twenty-Fifth and Twenty-Sixth Dynasties.² The general importance of Abydos during the first millennium BC is also reflected by the votive pottery deposited at Umm el-Qaab, and this holds true for the Libyan Period as well.

A substantial amount of typical votive jars and offering cups can be dated to the Twenty-Second Dynasty.³ In addition, various closed shapes that are well known from Late New Kingdom and Libyan Period contexts at settlements and temple sites are attested at Umm el-Qaab, e.g. globular jars, neckless jars and storage vessels of different kinds.⁴ This material also finds parallels in contemporaneous Theban tombs and burial places at Abydos.⁵ Related to the various types of storage vessels is an intriguing vessel group of a very specific character: the so called *zîr* vessels, presumably used for storing water. Well known from settlement contexts, such large and heavy water jars are not likely to appear within a corpus of votive pottery with a defined ritual character. Nevertheless, from time to time *zîr* vessels have been deposited around the tomb of

* For improving the written English of this paper, I am very grateful to Kenneth Griffin.

1. See EFFLAND, BUDKA, EFFLAND 2010.

2. See EFFLAND 2006; BUDKA 2010a.

3. The absolute amount of the material still needs to be assessed in detail, but Libyan Period pottery might make up around 15 % (or more) of the total, cf. BUDKA 2010b, p. 52 with note 146.

4. Cf. e.g. ASTON 1999, p. 20–21, pl. 7; ASTON 2009, p. 323.

5. Cf. BUDKA 2010b, p. 52.

Osiris at Umm el-Qaab. Small numbers of *zîr* can be dated to the Eighteenth Dynasty,⁶ but a more substantial group of jars possibly used for the storage of water originates from the Libyan Period. The latter will be the focus of the present paper—their shape and size will be discussed as well as their possible function; first ideas about their relevance for the study of the cult of Osiris in the first millennium BC are presented.

The Egyptian *zîr* or water jar

Based on finds, primarily from settlement contexts and especially of the Middle Kingdom, Arnold, Bietak and others proposed a functional label for a specific type of jar as water jar or *zîr*.⁷ Such ceramic containers of mostly ovoid to baggy shape are well known from various periods until the present time to store and cool water.⁸ That this type of vessel was not always restricted to the use of water storage can be nicely illustrated by the multifunctional character of *zîrs* produced in Marl C.⁹

New Kingdom examples of large storage jars of the *zîr* type are common at various settlement sites like Memphis,¹⁰ Amarna,¹¹ the Ahmose town and temple area at South Abydos¹² and Elephantine.¹³ The typical shape of this Eighteenth Dynasty type is an ovoid or globular body with rounded bases, a tall neck and a modelled rim or outer lip. In many cases a collar marks the junction of the body and the neck (fig. 1).¹⁴ This is connected with the typical way of shaping these vessels: the lower part comprising the body is done in coiling technique, whereas the upper part was shaped with the help of a turning device. Particularly the rims with often angular rounded lips are

6. Cf. South Abydos, Ahmose town and temple area (BUDKA 2006, p. 94-95, fig. 6). At present, no water jars predating the Eighteenth Dynasty have been found at Umm el-Qaab, but *zîrs* of the Middle Kingdom (and Second Intermediate Period) are known from other contexts of the site of Abydos (in particular from the Senwosret III complex, see WEGNER 2007, p. 247 ff. (nr. 68-69); MANASSA 2011, p. 81-87).

7. See ARNOLD Do. 1982, p. 54; BIETAK 1991, p. 322, fig. 296; BADER 2001, p. 155. The Arabic term *zîr* was first introduced for the Pharaonic vessels by Manfred Bietak (see BIETAK 1991, p. 322).

8. For modern *zîrs*, see REDMOUNT 2002, p. 182-184, fig. 10.2-3.

9. See BADER 2001, p. 155-158 for the functional diversity of these containers, used for various commodities in a range of different contexts. Cf. also MANASSA 2011.

10. BOURRIAU 2010, p. 395, type 10.10.24, fig. 108.

11. ROSE 2007, p. 105, nos. 453-454, SH 11.2, p. 252, cf. also p. 106, nr. 460, SH 12.4, p. 254.

12. BUDKA 2006, p. 94-95, fig. 6.

13. SEILER 1999, p. 216-219, fig. 51.3; BUDKA 2005, p. 95-96, fig. 29.6-7; 101, fig. 33.6-7.

14. See also examples from Malqata, HOPE 1989, fig. 3g-h, and a vessel from Karnak-North, JACQUET-GORDON 2012, p. 138, fig. 61g (Nile B2 with white wash). For examples of this type from a funerary context see LACOMY 2011. Cf. also ROSE 2003, p. 206-207, fig. 4. For vessels of a similar type of much smaller size from a Ramesside tomb group, see WERLEN 2011, p. 154-155, fig. 19 ("Trichterhalsvasen").

clearly wheel-thrown.¹⁵ A number of fabrics are attested for *zîrs*—Marl clays as well as Nile silts.¹⁶ Especially interesting is a particular Mixed clay, an innovation of the Eighteenth Dynasty and to our present state of knowledge restricted to such water jars.¹⁷ This specific material obviously combined preferred properties of both Marl clays and Nile clays (hardness as well as porosity for cooling effects¹⁸) and resulted in finished products of less weight than for example contemporaneous Marl A4 variants.¹⁹ The *zîrs* from Umm el-Qaab originating from the Libyan Period are predominantly made in a very hard, dense Nile clay variant, which bears some resemblance to the earlier Mixed fabric and should ideally be studied microscopically in the future.

The *zîr* jars at Umm el-Qaab

A number of fragments from storage vessels of large size with coiling traces were observed since 2006 within the Osirian votive pottery from Umm el-Qaab. Initially, only inscribed fragments (see below) received special attention,²⁰ but from 2010 onwards we collected every sherd falling into this category, resulting in a large corpus of isolated pieces and fragments.²¹ The 2012 season witnessed a major advancement in reconstructing the actual vessel types.²² A total of 72 *zîrs* were classified and we made good progress in assessing their different shape and sizes. In addition to the individual vessels reconstructed, more than 20 small fragments indicate a total amount of roughly 100 of these very large storage vessels of a specific type.

Although they show common features, there is a high variability in their capacity and size as well as in the shape of the rims (fig. 1-2)—e.g., the rim diameter ranges from 16,5 cm to 24 cm and the lips can be both angular and rounded. The shape and

15. For this typical production technique, see ARNOLD DO., BOURRIAU 1993, p. 30, fig. 27 and p. 33-34, fig. 32 (Middle Kingdom examples). See also SEILER 1999, p. 216-219, fig. 51.

16. Cf. BUDKA 2006, p. 94, fig. 6 for a collection in various fabrics from the Eighteenth Dynasty.

17. First observed by SEILER 1999, p. 217; confirmed by BUDKA 2005, p. 94 with note 321 and BUDKA 2006, p. 85 (labelled as III-a).

18. Modern *zîrs* are usually made in porous Nile silts for cooling of the water, see REDMOUNT 2002, p. 182.

19. To illustrate the substantial heaviness of *zîrs*: the weight of a complete Eighteenth Dynasty vessel from Amarna in a Nile silt fabric is given as 22,5 kg, see ROSE 2007, p. 105, nr. 454.

20. See EFFLAND 2011, p. 144.

21. In addition to the generally wide scattering of the material throughout Umm el-Qaab, A. Effland could show that some newly excavated pieces join with fragments found by Amélineau, now kept at the Louvre (see EFFLAND 2010a, p. 70, note 272).

22. This work is carried out by our skilled workmen from Quft and el-Araba in the spacious sherd yard of the German House; my sincere thanks go especially to Mohammed Awadalla, Hamdi Sabri and Mahmoud Abdin for their patience in tracing joining pieces. For realising drawings of the reconstructed vessels, I am grateful to Nicole Mosiniak and Julia D. Preisigke.

height of the neck shows much variation—from funnel-shaped tall necks (fig. 2, ZI 16), to slightly conical medium tall necks (fig. 1) and medium tall, almost vertical necks (fig. 2, ZI 15). According to the proportions, the wall thickness of the vessels differs and examples with a rim diameter of less or around 20 cm are quite thin-walled. In general, the vessels tend to be quite thin-walled towards the base—resulting in a lack of preserved lower parts within our sherd collection. Until today, we have been unable to reconstruct more than the complete profile of a singular vessel (ZI 14, fig. 1 and fig. 3).

All of the *zîrs* from Umm el-Qaab documented so far are made in Nile silt wares—most common is a dense, hard Nile B2 variant with little organic inclusions, some limestone and with a fine texture (e.g. the examples shown on fig. 1).²³ Also attested is a fabric that can be labelled as Nile C2 variant, as more chaff and organics are present. The surface treatment of the vessels differs—the majority shows a thin red wash (fig. 1), but a white wash (commonly found also on New Kingdom samples²⁴) is also present (fig. 5)²⁵ as well as uncoated examples.

On 29 examples of the *zîrs*, hieratic docketts have been observed on the neck (fig. 4) or the shoulder of the vessels (fig. 5-6).²⁶ These docketts are dedications of kings and the High Priests of Amun (fig. 6) of the Twenty-second Dynasty.²⁷ Ranging from king Osorkon I to the High Priest Takeloth F, the *zîr* docketts provide a firm dating of this group of vessels, lasting approximately 60 years.²⁸ The common formula is *jrj n* (King XY), “made by King XY”, in rare cases with a day/year date. These texts are currently being studied in detail by Andreas Effland.²⁹

The significance of water jars at the tomb of Osiris

The ritual aspects of water and especially its important role within the cult for Osiris are well known.³⁰ Water poured at the tomb of Osiris at Umm el-Qaab might hold several implications: resembling the Nile flood and thus the fertility of the god, rejuvenating the god by refreshing his heart through libation³¹ or watering plants at

23. Labelled as I-d-3 in the local fabric system, see BUDKA 2010a, p. 39, table 1. Also at Amarna, *zîrs* are attested in a Nile D group silt, fabric I.4, see ROSE 2007, p. 12.

24. See BUDKA 2006, p. 94 with references in note 80.

25. Cf. EFFLAND 2012, p. 83, fig. 5.

26. Cf. EFFLAND 2010a, p. 70; EFFLAND 2013a, p. 37.

27. Three pieces mention a High Priest of Amun (see fig. 6; for one example see EFFLAND 2010a, p. 70.

28. EFFLAND 2012; EFFLAND 2013, p. 37; EFFLAND, BUDKA, EFFLAND 2013, p. 4, fig. 4.

29. I would like to thank Andreas Effland for sharing information about these texts and for a very stimulating exchange and discussion of *zîrs* in general.

30. See e.g. ASSMANN 2003.

31. Cf. EFFLAND in 2013b.

the tomb as incarnations of the revived god respectively as parts of the sacred grove at the god's tomb.³² The latter, watering real plants in the desert, allows for the possibility of a "profane" use of water as drinking water. Given the location of the tomb at Abydos, there was a need to store water not only for the libations, but also for individuals performing ritual acts and participating in processions.

Except for a thin silty layer persevered on the interior of some of the jars, there are no traces of any contents of the storage vessels labelled here as *zîrs* from Umm el-Qaab. Although proof is lacking, I will argue in the following that a use of these jars as water vessels is very likely. Until today, *zîr* vessels are "used to store drinking water for human consumption."³³ The hieratic royal dedications on the storage vessels from Umm el-Qaab, "made by King XY", would correspond at best with an explanation that the specific jar and its sacred content played an important role in a ritual act at the tomb. Water is here the prime candidate given its significance for Osiris–Nile water stored in such jars and intended to be used ritually could explain the royal dedications. One might speculate further that it was a restricted royal sphere of activity, maybe motivated by the wish of Libyan rulers to use Abydos and the cult of Osiris as a stage for demonstrating their legitimacy.³⁴

Aspects of Libyan Period cult for Osiris at Abydos

It is still premature to present a conclusive reconstruction of the cult for Osiris at Abydos during the era of Libyan rule.³⁵ But the important group of inscribed *zîr* vessels allows some preliminary thoughts that open up ideas about the general attitude of Libyans towards Osirian rituals. Similarly to the Kushites, Abydos seems to have played a major role in the ancestor cult of the Libyan kings.³⁶

Because of the frequent appearance of hieratic docketings on the *zîr* vessels, a ritual context, most likely for storing water for libations, can be proposed for the vessels found at the tomb of Osiris. The ritual significance of the *zîrs* from Umm el-Qaab is further stressed from observations through the ceramicist's eyes: to my present knowledge, there are no parallels anywhere in Egypt for this particular vessel type.³⁷

32. For the possible sacred grove of the god at Abydos, cf. EFFLAND 2010b, p. 90; for gardens in funerary/ritual contexts and their association with Osiris, cf. WILLEMS 2003.

33. REDMOUNT 2002, p. 182.

34. Cf. EFFLAND 2013c; Effland forthc.

35. See also EFFLAND 2013c; Effland forthc.

36. EFFLAND forthc.

37. See e.g. ASTON 1996 and WODZIŃSKA 2010 without parallels. I would like to thank David A. Aston who confirmed this lack of parallels on the occasion of a visit to the German House at Abydos in October 2010.

The only equivalents are the predecessors of the Eighteenth Dynasty mentioned above. Do we encounter here a gap due to the limited knowledge of Late New Kingdom and Early Third Intermediate Period material from settlement contexts? In view of a sequence available from Elephantine³⁸ and other material like Third Intermediate Period pottery from el-Ashmunein,³⁹ lacking this specific type of water jar, I do not believe that this is the case. The *zîrs* from Umm el-Qaab are obviously a local phenomenon connected with the cult of Osiris, as indicated by the hieratic docket. Furthermore, I am inclined to think that these vessels of the Twenty-second Dynasty illustrate the well-known phenomenon of Libyan “archaism”.⁴⁰ A Kushite reuse and “modernisation” of ancient forms is well traceable within the pottery corpus from Umm el-Qaab,⁴¹ a similar practice already prior to the Twenty-fifth Dynasty seems likely.

As stated elsewhere,⁴² during the Libyan Period cult-related pottery reflects New Kingdom traditions, featuring some innovations like an increase in the size of vessels or the modification of decorated vessels. I would like to propose that the Umm el-Qaab *zîrs* of the Twenty-second Dynasty further support a revival of earlier models with specific Libyan modifications like royal hieratic dockets referring to votive activities for Osiris.

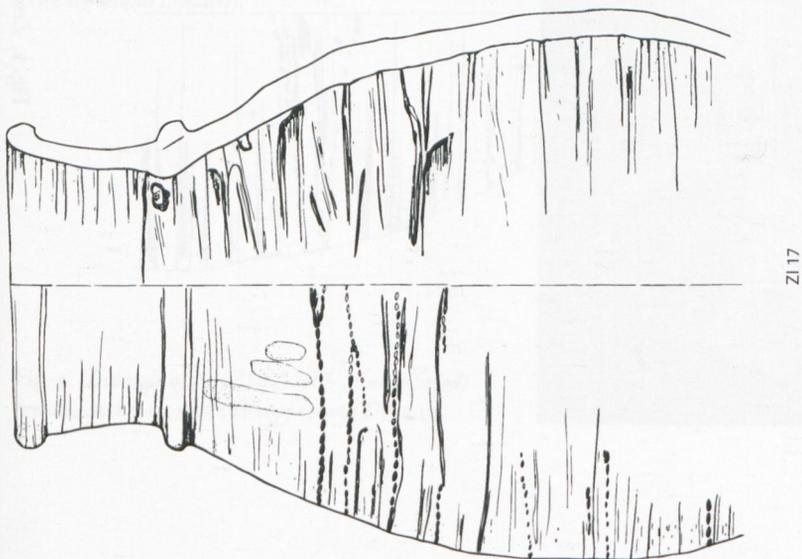
38. Cf. ASTON 1999; further material from Late New Kingdom levels is currently studied and under the responsibility of the present author.

39. Cf. SPENCER 1993, pl. 44-78 without parallels.

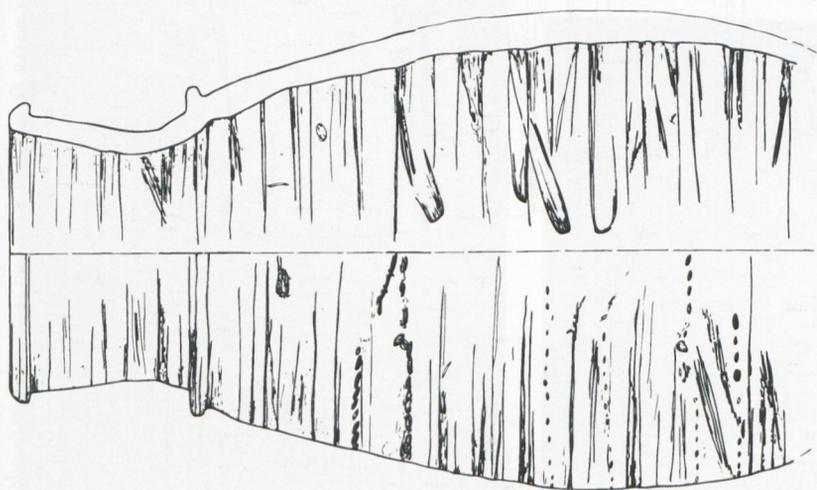
40. Cf., e.g., MORKOT 2007.

41. BUDKA 2010a, p. 60; BUDKA 2010b, p. 58. For another possible example of “archaism” in painted Late Period pottery see MASSON 2011.

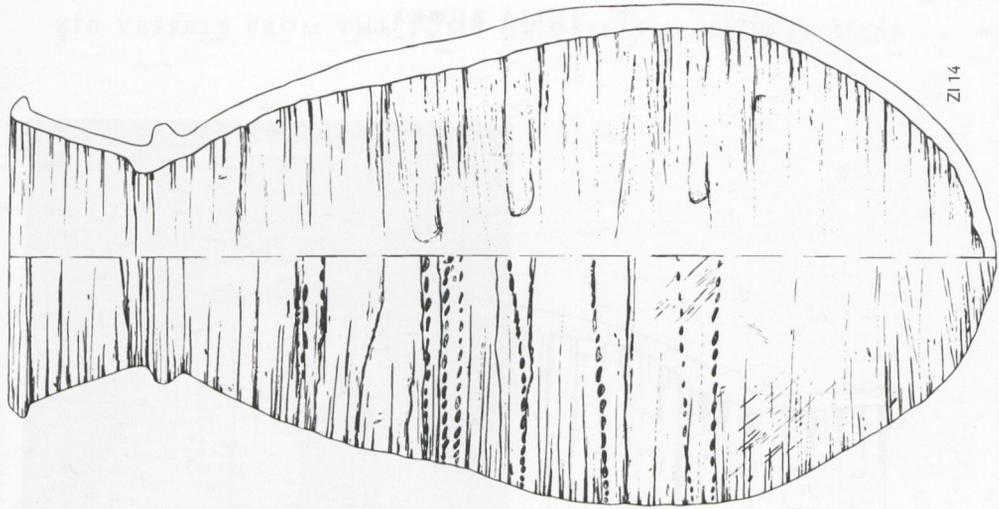
42. BUDKA 2010b, p. 55.



ZI 17



ZI 13



ZI 14

0.1
1/5
5 cm

Fig. 1. Selected zir vessels of most common types from Umm el-Qaab, Twenty-second Dynasty.



Fig. 2. Less common types of zir vessels from Umm el-Qaab, Twenty-second Dynasty.

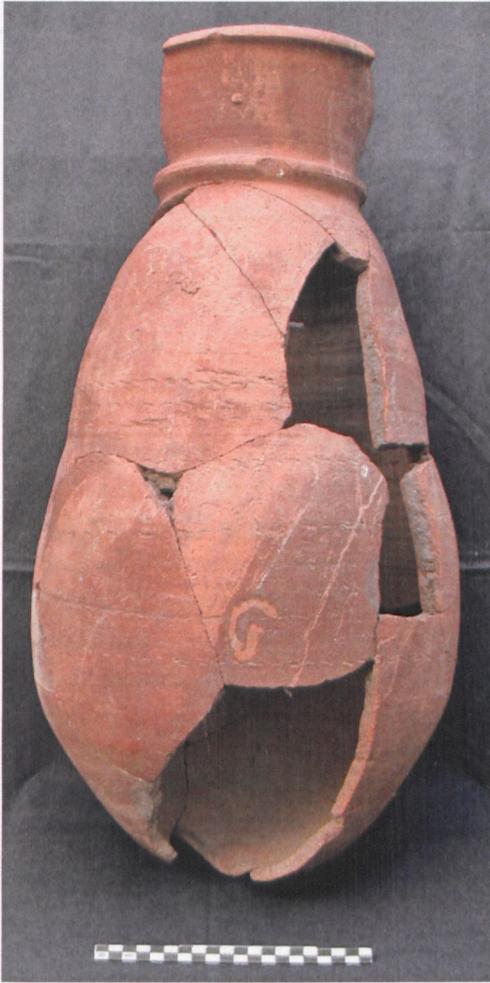


Fig. 3. Reconstructed complete profile of zîr ZI 14 (Twenty-second Dynasty).

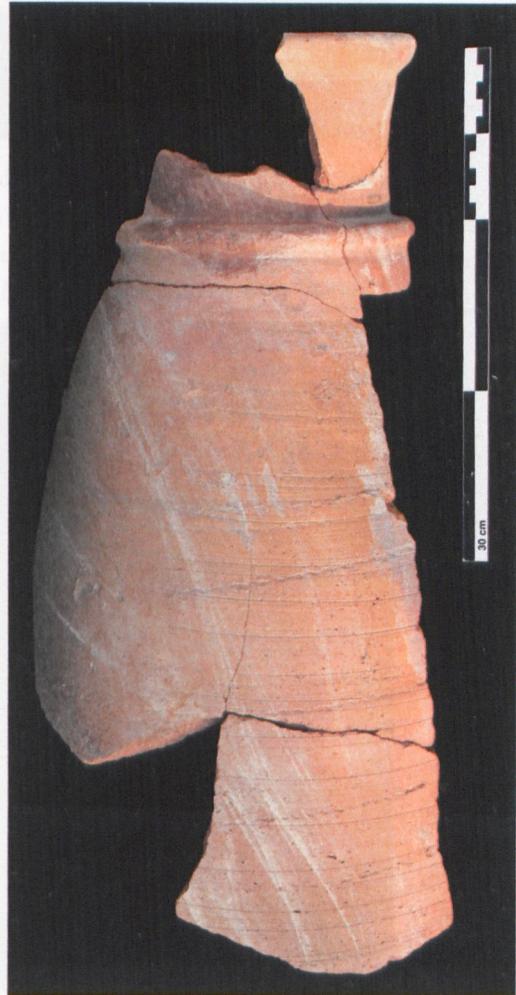


Fig. 4. Example of zîr (ZI 24) with (almost faded) hieratic docket on neck (Twenty-second Dynasty).



Fig. 5. Example of zâr (ZI 20) with hieratic docket on shoulder (Twenty-second Dynasty): jr n pr-š Šnḳ, made by King Sheshonq (K2413).



Fig. 6. Example of shoulder fragment of zâr with hieratic docket (K2418), mentioning a “High Priest of Amun-Ra-Sonter” (Twenty-second Dynasty).