

Julia Budka

Egyptian Cooking Pots from the Pharaonic Town of Sai Island, Nubia

A FORTIFIED New Kingdom town was built on the eastern bank of the large island of Sai, located just south of the Batn el-Hagar in Upper Nubia.¹ It was probably founded by Ahmose Nebpehtyra and functioned as a “bridgehead into Kush proper,”² enabling Ahmose and the following kings of the 18th Dynasty (especially Thutmose I), to go further south on campaigns against the kingdom of Kerma.³ The ceramic material from this important Pharaonic administrative centre finds ready parallels not only in other Egyptian settlements in Lower and Upper Nubia,⁴ but also in various New Kingdom sites in Egypt,⁵ especially Elephantine,⁶ Abydos⁷ and Deir el-Ballas.⁸ However, local components and site-specific features are present on Sai and are currently being investigated within the framework of the European Research Council project AcrossBorders.⁹

Of particular interest for key research questions of AcrossBorders focusing on the cultural identity of the occupants of 18th Dynasty Sai—were they Egyptians, Egyptianized Nubians or a mix of both?—is functional pottery connected with food preparation or food serving. This paper will present some data on Egyptian cooking pots deriving from contexts of the early to mid-18th Dynasty within the New Kingdom fortified town of Sai, discussing their possible implications.

1. See GEUS 2004; DOYEN 2009; BUDKA, DOYEN 2012–2013; BUDKA 2014; BUDKA 2015.

2. DAVIES 2005, p. 51.

3. VERCOUTTER 1973, p. 7–38; TÖRÖK 2009, p. 158–159; MORKOT 2013, p. 913; BUDKA 2014, p. 56.

4. Cf. HOLTHOER 1977, *passim*. See also MIELLE 2011–2012, p. 173–187.

5. Cf. BUDKA 2011, p. 23–33; BUDKA, DOYEN 2012–2013, p. 188.

6. SEILER 1999, p. 204–224; BUDKA 2005, p. 90–116; BUDKA 2010, p. 350–352.

7. Cf. BUDKA 2006.

8. BOURRIAU 1990, p. 15–22 and p. 54–65 (figs.).

9. Cf. BUDKA 2015.

Nubian and Egyptian Cooking Pots

The general co-existence of Egyptian (wheel-made) and Nubian (hand-made) pottery traditions on Sai Island is also well-known from other Upper Nubian New Kingdom sites.¹⁰ At Sai, a Nubian component is traceable at all sectors recently excavated in the New Kingdom town: SAVI North, SAVI East and SAVI West. Hand-made cooking pots, but also some fine wares (black-topped cups and beakers) and storage vessels are attested in considerable numbers, especially in the early levels (Levels 5 to 3 at SAVI North).¹¹ The Nubian assemblage at Sai is comparable to findings at other Upper Nubian sites established in the early 18th Dynasty like Sesebi.¹² One intriguing aspect of foodways at Sai seems, however, to be unique: there is a composite fusion of Nubian and Egyptian tradition regarding the cooking pots—both imported, authentic Egyptian wheel-made cooking pots¹³ and locally made examples thrown on the wheel are used side by side with Nubian-style products (hand-made pots with basketry impression or incised decoration).¹⁴

Imported Egyptian Cooking Pots from 18th Dynasty Levels

From the earliest levels onwards in all sectors of the New Kingdom town (SAVI North, SAVI East and SAVI West),¹⁵ indigenous Egyptian cooking pots of a type well attested from 18th Dynasty settlement contexts at Elephantine¹⁶ appear associated with Nubian basketry ware. Since the areas SAVI East and SAVI West are currently still under excavation, the following is mainly based on sector SAVI North where excavations were conducted from 2008–2012.¹⁷

10. Cf. SMITH 2002; SMITH 2003, p. 43–53; SPENCER 2014, p. 55.

11. BUDKA 2011, p. 26, 28; BUDKA, DOYEN 2012–2013, p. 188; MIELLÉ 2014, p. 389–390.

12. ROSE 2012.

13. BUDKA 2011, p. 26; BUDKA 2012, p. 60; BUDKA, DOYEN 2012–2013, p. 196 fig. 26.

14. BUDKA, DOYEN 2012–2013, p. 197 fig. 27.

15. Cf. BUDKA 2015, p. 42–46.

16. See SEILER 1999, p. 221–223; BUDKA 2011, p. 26; BUDKA, DOYEN 2012–2013, p. 196.

17. I am grateful to the Sai Island Archaeological Mission of Lille 3 University for the possibility to consider the material from SAVI North within the framework of AcrossBorders. For the excavations cf. BUDKA, DOYEN 2012–2013, p. 167–208.

Fabrics

The authentic Egyptian cooking pots from Sai Island are manufactured either in a sandy version of a Nile clay B2 or a variant of a Nile clay E of the Vienna System. The latter is an Upper Egyptian variation of the Nile E as described within the Vienna System,¹⁸ originating from the Nile delta.¹⁹ A range of variations in the grain size, from very fine to fine and medium sand, is attested within these very distinctive sandy fabrics clearly imported from Egypt.²⁰ The size and the distribution of the non-plastic inclusions, with abundant quartz, microcline, coarse biotite mica and metamorphic rock fragments, suggest that feldspathic, medium-grained sand was intentionally added to the clay.²¹ Both, the sandy Nile clay B2 and the Upper Egyptian Nile clay E variant, are well attested fabrics in 18th Dynasty levels at Elephantine.²²

Besides the Egyptian Nile clay fabrics, a local (Upper Nubian) variant of a sandy Nile B2 is used for cooking pots on Sai Island. This clay is less well-sorted and the non-plastic inclusions are fewer than in the Egyptian fabrics, with organic temper (chaff) added in differing quantities. Variations with a considerable amount of chaff are labelled as local Nile C2 fabric.

Level	Dating	Imports	Local var.	Total
5	early 18th Dynasty	1	0	1
4	early 18th Dynasty	8	0	8
3	Thutmoside	13	13	26
				35

Table 1. *Origin of Egyptian cooking pots from 18th Dynasty levels in SAVI North (N = 35).*

The distribution of the Egyptian-style cooking pot fabrics from sector SAVI North is illustrated by a total of 35 examples in the pottery database and seems to be reflecting a diachronic development (Tab. 1). As will be discussed below, imported versions of wheel-made cooking pots dominate the corpus in the early levels, whereas local copies in Upper Nubian fabrics appear from the mid-18th Dynasty onwards.

18. See NORDSTRÖM, BOURRIAU 1993, p. 175.
19. Cf. BUDKA 2006, p. 84 (for a local variation at Abydos).
20. Cf. also the variants of Nile E as labelled by Bietak in Tell el-Daba (I-e-1 to I-e-3), see NORDSTRÖM, BOURRIAU 1993, p. 175.
21. Petrographic (OM) and chemical analyses (iNAA) of cooking pots from Sai were conducted from 2013–2015 by Giulia D’Ercole and Johannes Sterba and will be published elsewhere.
22. Cf. BUDKA 2011, p. 26 (based on a large corpus of ceramic material currently studied by the author).

Shapes and Types

Within the form class of Egyptian cooking pots attested from Sai Island, four individual types can be differentiated according to details of shape. All of them find close parallels at Elephantine.²³ Type A is reminiscent of Second Intermediate Period ceramic style and also very close to Nubian cooking pots.²⁴ Type B is typical for the early to mid-18th Dynasty, as are Types C and D. Type D is probably slightly later in date (mid to late 18th Dynasty).

Type A

[fig. 1]

Restricted bowl with direct rim and simple contour. Cf. Nubian cooking pots; cf. Second Intermediate Period parallels, e.g. in Karnak (treasury of Thutmose I).²⁵ Equals type Seiler “Abb. 53.1”; not very common at Sai. Attested with red rim (see fig. 1a) and uncoated/with smoked surface (fig. 1b). Usually one or two shallow grooves below the rim.

Type B

[fig. 2]

Restricted bowl with direct rim, slightly recessed with shouldered/carinated contour.

This type (Seiler “Abb. 53.2”) is obviously a new development within the New Kingdom and most common in the early 18th Dynasty. The carination/maximum diameter usually has traces of rope impressions (fig. 2).

Type C

[fig. 3]

Restricted bowl with directed rim, strongly recessed with shouldered/carinated contour. This type (Seiler “Abb. 53.3”) is obviously a new development within the New Kingdom and most common in the early to mid-18th Dynasty (fig. 3). Usually with rope impressions at the carination.

23. See SEILER 1999, p. 223 fig. 53.

24. See SEILER 1999, p. 221 n. 516.

25. JACQUET-GORDON 2012, p. 66 figs. 31b–d (Second Intermediate Period).

Type D

[fig. 4]

Very similar to type C, but with folded rim/outer lip, strongly recessed with shouldered/carinated contour. This type is most common in the mid to late 18th Dynasty.²⁶ At Sai attested both in local and imported Nile clay variants (fig. 4). Usually with rope impressions at the carination.

All in all, the new class of cooking pots of the 18th Dynasty is most common in the early to mid-18th Dynasty; the types described above survive with slight changes until the late 18th Dynasty. Some variants regarding the size, carination and details of the rim shape are attested throughout the class (cf. fig. 5). The rim gradually becomes more pronounced and the folded rim or lip of type D is a late morphological feature within this series of cooking pots.

Cooking Pots and their Possible Implications for 18th Dynasty Lifestyle on Sai

Interestingly, there seems to be a diachronic development for the use of cooking pots on Sai with the real Egyptian cooking pot most common in the earliest levels, pre-dating Thutmose III.²⁷ During the heyday of Sai in the later reign of Thutmose III and Amenhotep II, the Nubian variants of cooking pots outnumber the Egyptian ones and dominate the cooking assemblage.²⁸ The Egyptian style cooking pots are often made in local fabrics and not imported from Egypt (see above). This is particularly significant, as the ceramics corpus from the New Kingdom town of Sai becomes generally more sophisticated in the mid-18th Dynasty and decorated imports from Egypt increase compared to earlier levels.²⁹

The origin of the Egyptian cooking pots within Egypt itself can be traced a little bit further. I would like to follow Seiler who stressed the “Upper Egyptian” origin of this class of cooking pots (especially types A–C).³⁰ They are markedly different from the Second Intermediate Period tradition and early New Kingdom

26. For a late 18th Dynasty example see BUDKA 2005, fig. 35.10.

27. BUDKA, DOYEN 2012–2013, p. 196.

28. Cf. the similar situation during the New Kingdom at Askut: SMITH 2003, p. 119.

29. BUDKA, DOYEN 2012–2013, p. 195–196.

30. SEILER 1999, p. 221.

versions from Lower Egypt (Memphis and the Delta sites) where a rolled lip/folded rim dominates the appearance of large restricted bowls used for cooking.³¹ As highlighted by Seiler, the “southern” variant with its restricted form and direct rim is very close to Nubian cooking pots.³² The first appearance on sites with significant Nubian presence in the Second Intermediate Period, like Elephantine and Sai, might thus not be a coincidence.³³ However, the “Upper Egyptian” class of cooking pots (here especially types B and C) is also well attested in the Ahmose town at South Abydos.³⁴

Returning to the evidence from Sai, there are some aspects of the wheel-made cooking pots which might be significant in a broader sense. The Egyptian examples (types A–D) all show comparable proportions with a mouth diameter ranging between 27–30 cm. There are only a few larger and even fewer smaller examples. The variety of the size of Nubian cooking pots is much higher, covering a rim diameter from 20–35 cm. This might indicate a slightly different function that will ideally be tested by residue analysis – maybe a distinction was made regarding the specific food to be prepared in each pot.³⁵ Another possibility is that the choice of an Egyptian or a Nubian cooking pot was dependent on its user and his/her identity.³⁶ However, one cannot rule out the option that local products were simply integrated into the material culture of the Egyptian occupants and that their significance for distinguishing cultural identities is less substantial. Yet, because the appearance of the imported Egyptian cooking pots on Sai Island is to the best of my knowledge unique in Upper Nubia,³⁷ it seems reasonable to assume more than a random appearance and to connect this evidence with site-specific characteristics.

Given the diachronic development, appearance and distribution of indigenous Egyptian cooking pots within the town of Sai, I would like to propose the following scenario:

31. BIETAK 1991, p. 45 figs. 11.10–11 (Second Intermediate Period); BOURRIAU 2010, fig. 34b (New Kingdom). It is notable that also in Askut (Lower Nubia) the “northern” type of Egyptian cooking pot was used—see SMITH 2003, p. 116 fig. 5.19.

32. SEILER 1999, p. 221.

33. Cf. BUDKA 2011, p. 26.

34. BUDKA 2006, p. 84.

35. Cf. SMITH 2003, p. 113–124, especially p. 119–120.

36. Cf. SMITH 2003, p. 119; see also PAPPA 2013.

37. Until now, no other site in Upper Nubia has produced early 18th Dynasty cooking pots in original Egyptian Nile clay (see BUDKA, DOYEN 2012–2013, p. 197).

- At the beginning of the 18th Dynasty, the Egyptian “bridgehead”³⁸ Sai was still isolated in Kush and therefore depending on Egypt in terms of supplies and equipment; the site was furnished with ceramics, including both functional vessels and other types. Imported cooking pots allowed Egyptian-style cooking in the “home-away-from-home” during the early 18th Dynasty. All of the Egyptian cooking pots are therefore real imports during the early phase.
- By the time the Kerma kingdom was subdued under the reign of Thutmose III, the town of Sai was consequently enlarged. The Egyptian occupants of the island gradually had new means for provision and food preparation at their disposal: on one hand, Egyptian style vessels were reproduced thanks to a local pottery workshop also trained in wheel-made production;³⁹ on the other hand, Nubian elements are traceable in households and storage units. This may be related to Nubian women who were married by the Egyptian town community,⁴⁰ or simply to Nubian families loyal to the new rulers from Egypt and engaged with food preparation. The Nubian style of cooking gradually increases and a complex mixture of lifestyles is traceable. In general, by the time of Thutmose III, Sai became more self-dependent and less reliant on Egypt. Networks within Kush and between Egyptian sites grew stronger, as did regional and local patterns.⁴¹ Local replacements of Egyptian type cooking pots were getting more common, which explains the decreased percentage of imported cooking pots.

This possible scenario may be altered or confirmed by ongoing excavations on Sai Island and Elephantine. Nonetheless, Egyptian cooking pots of the 18th Dynasty are not only a highly interesting class morphologically, but also one of the key vessel groups to illustrate the sometimes quite close relationship between the Egyptian wheel-thrown tradition and the Nubian hand-made ceramic production.

38. DAVIES 2005, p. 51.

39. Except for a small number of wasters and unfired sherds, no traces of the actual workshop were yet found within the Pharaonic town of Sai; for archaeological evidence of wheel-thrown pottery production at Askut see SMITH 2003, p. 117.

40. Cf. SMITH 2003, p. 192–193.

41. Cf. the general assessment of Sai in its macrocosm: BUDKA 2015, p. 51.

Object No.	Type	Ware	Dating	Findposition	Level/ SU	Fig.
SAViN N/C 858.9	A	Nile B2 red rim	early (to mid-) 18th Dynasty	190/2260, between walls 52 + 46	3	1a
SAViW Po12.10	A	Nile B2 UC	mid-late 18th Dynasty	Sq.1, 0-2m SN, 0-4m EW	SU 507	1b
SAViN N/C 849.2	B	Nile E2var UC smoked	early 18th Dynasty	180/2270, west of 41E, north of 41S	4	2a
SAViN N/C 849.3	B	Nile E2var UC smoked	early 18th Dynasty	180/2270, west of 41E, north of 41S	4	2b
SAViN N/C 1121.5	C	Nile B2local UC	mid 18th Dynasty?	190/2260, from mud brick debris E	1	3a
SAViN N/C 1114.6	C	Nile E2var UC smoked	mid-18th Dynasty	190/2250, from the interior or N14	3	3b
SAViW Po12.1	C	Nile B2 UC	mid-late 18th Dynasty	Sq.1, 0-2m SN, 0-4m EW	SU 507	3c
SAViN N/C 1121.5	C	Nile B2local UC	mid 18th Dynasty?	190/2260, from mud brick debris E	1	3d
SAViE P179	D	Nile E2var UC smoked	early to mid-18th Dynasty	Sq. 4B, from installation	SU 452	4a
SAViN N/C 1190.5	D	Nile B2 UC	mid-18th Dynasty	190/2270, 5W, 5N	3	4b
SAViN N/C 668.16	D var	Nile C2local UC	18th Dynasty?	190/2250, south of 43 and 45	1	5a
SAViN N/C 930.10	B var.	Nile C2local UC	mid-18th Dynasty	180/2260, north of 31N, west of 33W	3	5b
SAViN N/C 1031.3	B var	Nile C2local UC	18th Dynasty?	200/2260, surface	1	5c

Table 2. Detailed information on illustrated cooking pots.

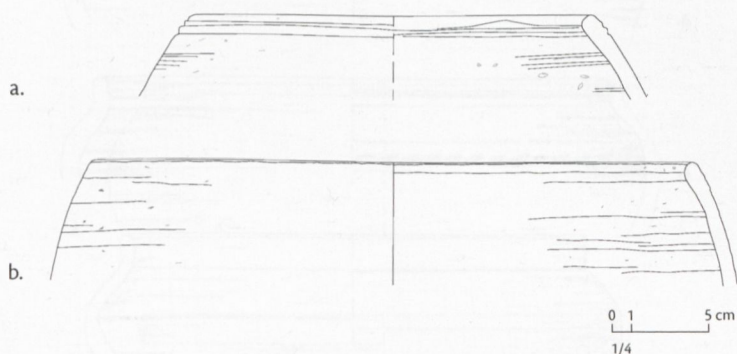


Fig. 1. *Examples of Egyptian cooking pots type A, New Kingdom town of Sai. Scale 1:4.*



Fig. 2. *Examples of Egyptian cooking pots type B, New Kingdom town of Sai. Scale 1:4.*

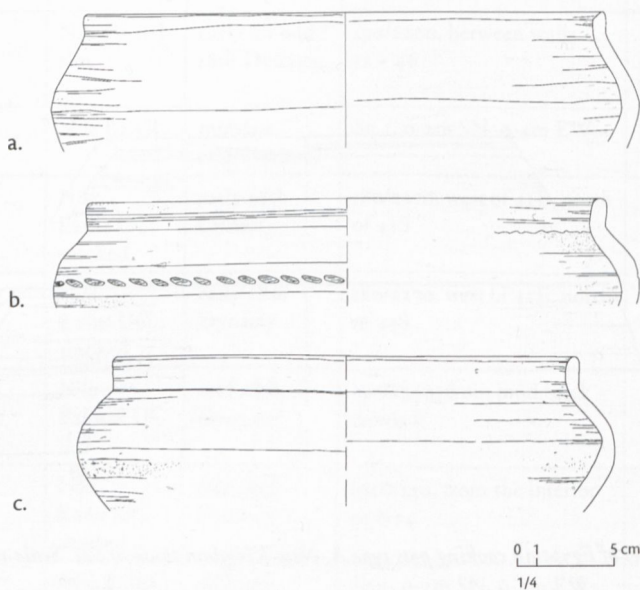


Fig. 3. Examples of Egyptian cooking pots type C, New Kingdom town of Sai. Scale 1:4.

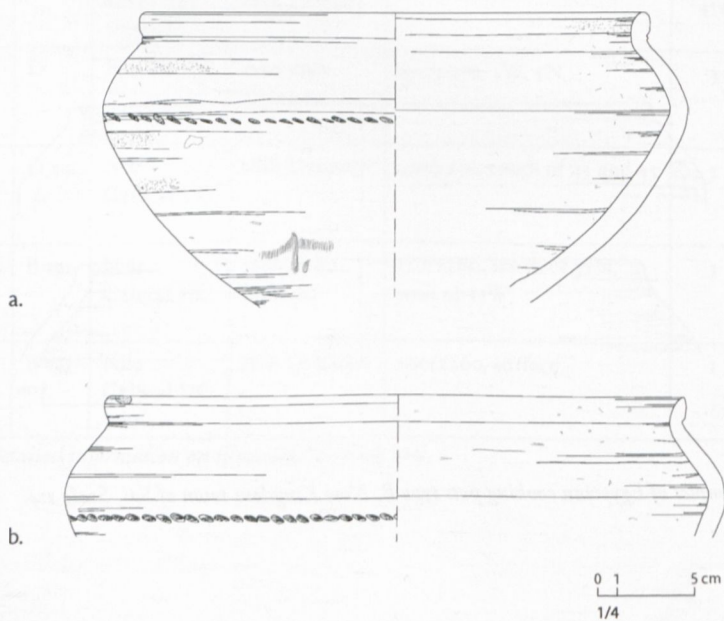


Fig. 4. Examples of Egyptian cooking pots type D, New Kingdom town of Sai. Scale 1:4.

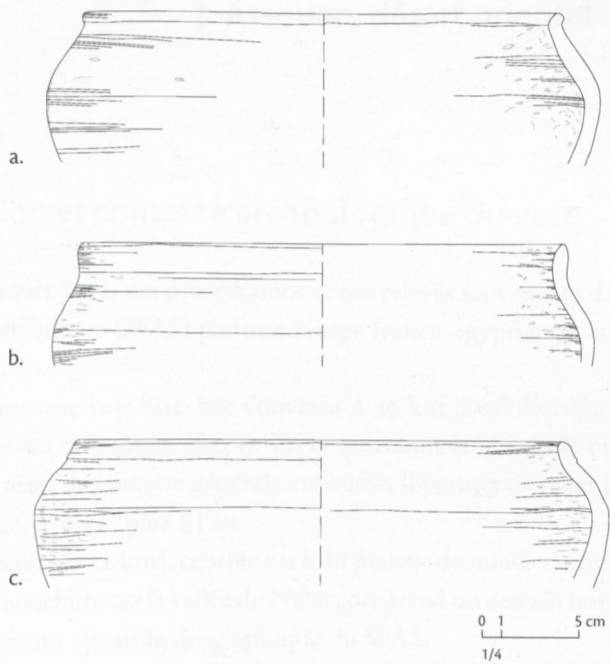


Fig. 5. Variations of Egyptian cooking pots, New Kingdom town of Sai. Scale 1:4.