

UMM EL-QA'AB AND THE SACRED LANDSCAPE OF ABYDOS: NEW PERSPECTIVES BASED ON THE VOTIVE POTTERY FOR OSIRIS

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Abstract

Material evidence for the sacredness of the landscape of Abydos can be found in numerous pottery vessels deposited at Umm el-Qa'ab and other places connected with rituals and festive processions for Osiris. The pottery attests to cultic activities from the late Old Kingdom throughout all ages until late Roman/early Byzantine times. According to the ceramics evidence, one of the heydays of the cult for Osiris at Umm el-Qa'ab was Dynasty 25.

Recent fieldwork by the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo has resulted in a considerable increase in our understanding of the nature, date, size and variability of *in situ* pottery deposits in the surroundings of the tomb of Djer/Osiris datable to Dynasty 25. The large deposit O-NNO allows us for the first time to specify the contemporaneous use of large votive vessels and the well-known offering cups, the so-called *qa'abs*. The ritual framework for the cult of Osiris will be discussed, including references to textual sources, architectural remains and the sacred landscape of Abydos.

Umm el-Qa'ab: 'Mother of pots'

The German Archaeological Institute in Cairo has been conducting excavations at Umm el-Qa'ab since 1977 (Dreyer 1999; Müller 2006b, 37, n. 1; Dreyer 2007; O'Connor 2009, 137–57). The burial ground of the Proto- and Early Dynastic rulers gained special importance once again from the Middle Kingdom onwards. Possibly as early as in Dynasty 13, the tomb of king Djer of Dynasty I was reinterpreted as the burial place for the god Osiris himself (Amélineau 1899).¹ Since 2006, a new project directed by Ute Effland has focused on the cultic activities at Umm el-Qa'ab that post-date the Early Dynastic period and were connected

with Osiris (Effland, Budka and Effland 2010; Effland and Effland 2013). The tomb of Djer/Osiris, which has been re-excavated by the German Archaeological Institute Cairo in the last few years, was the main focus of this project.

The major material remains of the cult connected with this tomb are millions of sherds and thousands of complete pots (Budka 2010a, 52–53). The name 'Umm el-Qa'ab' is based on the large number of small votive cups, the so-called *qaabs*; 'mother of pots' is, therefore, a most suitable name (Pumpenmeier 1998, 125–26; Müller 2006b, 38; Budka 2010a, 35; Budka 2014, 57).

The votive pottery deposited at Umm el-Qa'ab around the Early Dynastic royal tombs, studied in detail since 2008, has revealed certain heydays of use and also illustrates various cult activities (Budka 2010a, 55–58; Budka 2010b, 51). The main types of votive pottery at Umm el-Qa'ab are beer jars, *qaabs*, incense burners and several types of jars including wine amphorae from different regions (Budka 2015b). There was a first heyday during the Tuthmoside era, another during the Ramesside period and finally a revival of cultic activity at the site in the Late Period, especially during Dynasty 25 (Budka 2010a, 52–53; 2010b, 55–58; 2014).

Votive pottery tradition at Umm el-Qa'ab

The millions of pottery vessels deposited at Umm el-Qa'ab, spanning a time period of more than 3,000 years, are all votive vessels for Osiris, dedicated either by identified persons or by anonymous donors (Budka 2015a, 284). Depositing pots in the area had a very long tradition and started even before the reuse of the Early Dynastic cemetery. The long-lasting tradition of ceramic votive areas in Umm el-Qa'ab can be traced back to the Naqada III period.²

¹ For more recent work see Effland, Budka and Effland 2010; Effland and Effland 2013; Budka 2014.

² For early votive offerings in North Abydos, see the contributions by Knoblauch and Bestock in this volume.

In this respect, the Predynastic cemetery adjacent to the royal tombs of Dynasties 1 and 2 at Umm el-Qa'ab, Cemetery U (see Adams 1999; Hartung 2007), is of importance. In the vicinity of the famous tomb U-j (see Dreyer 1998; Dreyer 1999), offering cult and the deposition of ceramic vessels was observed. Dreyer (1998, 15–16) documented an offering place (in German 'Opferplatz'): a cultic area with more than 100 votive vessels on the desert surface. Most common are simple dishes and plates, usually deposited upside-down on the ground (Dreyer 1998, 15–16, figs 8–9). One example shows irregular red paint, maybe a reference to blood and to real food offerings. As will be shown below, both the upside-down position of dishes and plates on the ground and red splashes on votive vessels are common features of the later cult associated with Osiris.

The tomb of Osiris and ancestors' cult

The tomb of Djer stands out because it is the earliest substantial monument with hundreds of subsidiary tombs (Dreyer 2012). During the Middle Kingdom, the main chamber was re-excavated and equipped with a staircase connected with the reinterpretation of the tomb as the burial place of the god Osiris (Petrie 1901, 9; Müller 2006b, 44; O'Connor 2009, 89–90).

The most impressive relic of the Middle Kingdom re-modification of the tomb of Djer is the Osirian bed representing a mortuary bed with the recumbent Osiris (Effland, Budka and Effland 2010, 33–35). The location of this statue discovered by Amélineau was reconstructed by Ute and Andreas Effland in the central chamber, enclosed in a newly discovered limestone shrine (Effland and Effland 2013, 17–20). The bed, and especially texts and reliefs from the temple of Seti I at Abydos, illustrate the main themes of the Osirian cult (see David 1981, *passim*): the regeneration of the god; his awakening from a passive mode; and the impregnation of Isis, which are all essential for the cosmic cycle, and for both the royal and the funerary cult (see O'Connor 2009, 31–41).

References to the royal ancestors' cult are specific to Abydos and can be illustrated by the complex of Ahmose and the pyramid of Tetisheri (Harvey 1998;

O'Connor 2009, 105–10), but also the famous King List from the Seti I temple (Kemp 1989, 21–22; A. Effland 2014, 27). However, lists of royal names and a possible ancestors' cult seem to go back at Abydos to the very early history of the site. Two necropolis clay sealings from the tomb of Den and Qa'a give a sequence of royal names of Dynasty 1. Although other explanations are possible,³ the most likely interpretation for the seal of Qa'a is that the king appears here as Foremost of the Westerners (=Khenti(y)amentiu) in front of his predecessors (Dreyer 1996, 72–73, fig. 26; Morenz 2004, 108, n. 458). This early reference to the ancestors' cult could explain the continuous importance of the site for pharaonic kingship and the legitimacy of rulers throughout the centuries (see Effland and Effland 2013, 90–97). A long-lasting tradition appears to be one of the key themes of Abydos—nicely illustrated, for example, by the building activity of Ahmose (Dynasty 18), reflecting on the architecture of the Old and Middle Kingdom while at the same time composing something innovative. The clear references to earlier periods were intended to express legitimacy and encouraged the strong royal interest in Abydos. All in all, as Ute Effland has proposed, the ancestors' cult might be viewed as the most important 'cult-impact' (Effland 2013, 324–26) for the site.

Votive pottery marking sacred places at Abydos

One of the major buildings in Abydos is the complex of Seti I (Eaton 2007; O'Connor 2009, 43–61; Schröder 2010, 104, with further literature). Within its main east–west axis there is a so-called desert pylon in the western part, opening towards Umm el-Qa'ab. Interestingly, in front of this desert pylon, a large deposit of votive pottery is noticeable (Effland and Effland 2010, 142). Based on a surface check, this pottery mainly dates to the Late Period, especially to Dynasty 25. Thus, the area behind the Osireion was of importance during this era.

The investigations of Ute and Andreas Effland (2010) have shown that there were several important connections between North Abydos, Umm el-Qa'ab, the Seti I complex and South Abydos. A significant landmark at Umm el-Qa'ab was the so-called Southern

³ Khenti(y)amentiu as deity and protector of the necropolis, cf. Dreyer 1996, 73; Wengrow 2006, 131.

Hill (Effland, Budka and Effland 2010, 82–83, fig. 52; Effland and Effland 2010, 137–39).

It is striking that the main cultic axes constructing the sacred landscape of Abydos and representing the processional ways during the festival for Osiris were marked by votive deposits, predominately dating to the Late Period. Thus, Dynasty 25 obviously reused already-existing structures and revived processional features set up during the New Kingdom.

Votive pottery of Dynasty 25 at Umm el-Qa'ab

The votive pottery of Dynasty 25 has the potential to illustrate cultic activities at Abydos, especially at Umm el-Qa'ab (Budka 2010b, 55–58). The heyday of cultic activity at Umm el-Qa'ab, which produced tonnes of pottery, is the Late Period and here especially Dynasties 25 and 26.

Dynasty 25 marks the beginning of the typical shape of the so-called *qaabs*, which continued into the Ptolemaic era (Müller 2006a, 82; Budka 2010a, 45). The *qaabs* are reminiscent of miniature vessels of the Middle Kingdom and in some respects they recall canopic jars (see Budka 2010b, 58). Some were found with organic contents: small branches, some grain, also charcoal and, interestingly, goat droppings (U. Effland 2010, 29–30).

An *in situ* deposit of *qaabs* in the surroundings of the tomb of Khasekhemwy was investigated by Ute Effland (U. Effland 2010, 25–30). She was able to demonstrate that this deposit is not a random assemblage, but was carefully laid out, reflecting organized votive activities embedded in the yearly festival of Osiris. Organic remains strongly point to Osiris as god of vegetation, but especially to the aspects of regeneration and fertility (U. Effland 2010, 30).

Apart from the *qaabs*, a specific type of storage vessel, the so-called Late Period bottles, are most common during Dynasty 25 at Umm el-Qa'ab. These large bottles are a very special type of vessel, clearly locally produced in very large numbers. At Umm el-Qa'ab, they were arranged to form rows respectively to mark pathways (Budka 2010b, 56–57). Until recently, no traces of any content were found within the bottles, suggesting that they were deposited empty (but see below).

Interestingly, the rows of jars at Umm el-Qa'ab share some similarities with embalming deposits at Thebes (Budka 2006; 2010b, 60–61). Each kind of deposit follows local aspects that resulted in individual

orientation and specific features, but in both cases the focus seems to be on aspects of regeneration and the cult of Osiris. Ritual killing holes (intentional perforations of vessels executed post-firing) of the vessels are attested both at Umm el-Qa'ab and at Thebes (see Budka 2006, 96 with further references).

The deposit O-NNO

The discovery of a very large new ceramic deposit at the tomb of Djer/Osiris allows an updated assessment of Late Period votive activity at Umm el-Qa'ab. Already in 2011, the first vessels were unearthed along the eastern edge of the subsidiary tombs of Djer. We soon assumed that these are related to the row of well-preserved vessels leading towards the south (Effland and Effland 2010, 138) found in the area in front of the tomb of Den by Naville (1914, 38, pl. XVIII.4 and pl. XIX.1) and by Müller (2006b, 39–48).

In 2012 and 2013, more vessels of this deposit labelled O-NNO were unearthed. It became obvious that the deposit excavated in 1985 above B40 (Aston 1996) was probably once part of O-NNO in its south-eastern area (Fig. 1). All in all, the pottery assemblage comprising O-NNO (Fig. 2) and the rows of vessels discovered by Naville and Müller once formed an alley from the subsidiary tombs of the tomb of Djer to the tomb of Den and farther towards the so-called Southern Hill (see Effland and Effland 2010, 138).

The votive deposit O-NNO was completely excavated in 2013. The pottery vessels were documented and studied in 2014 (see Budka 2014). A total of 2,686 vessels could be reconstructed from 3,806 sherds—the actual number of deposited vessels was probably even larger, as parts of the deposit were disturbed in antiquity.

The most important vessel types fall into the two categories of closed and open forms. Of these, 24% are storage vessels of types already well attested at Umm el-Qa'ab: the so-called Late Period bottles (Budka 2010b, fig. 16). More than 2,000 pieces are small *qaabs* (Budka 2010a, fig. 23; 2014, fig. 5). In addition, a few other dishes and incense burners are present.

Interestingly, as observed in other votive deposits, there are several references to rituals in O-NNO (Budka 2014, 57). First of all, a large number of killing holes was observed (Fig. 3). Secondly, several traces of irregular red paint, possibly also with an apotropaic character, were documented on various types of vessels—on *qaabs* as well as Late Period bottles.

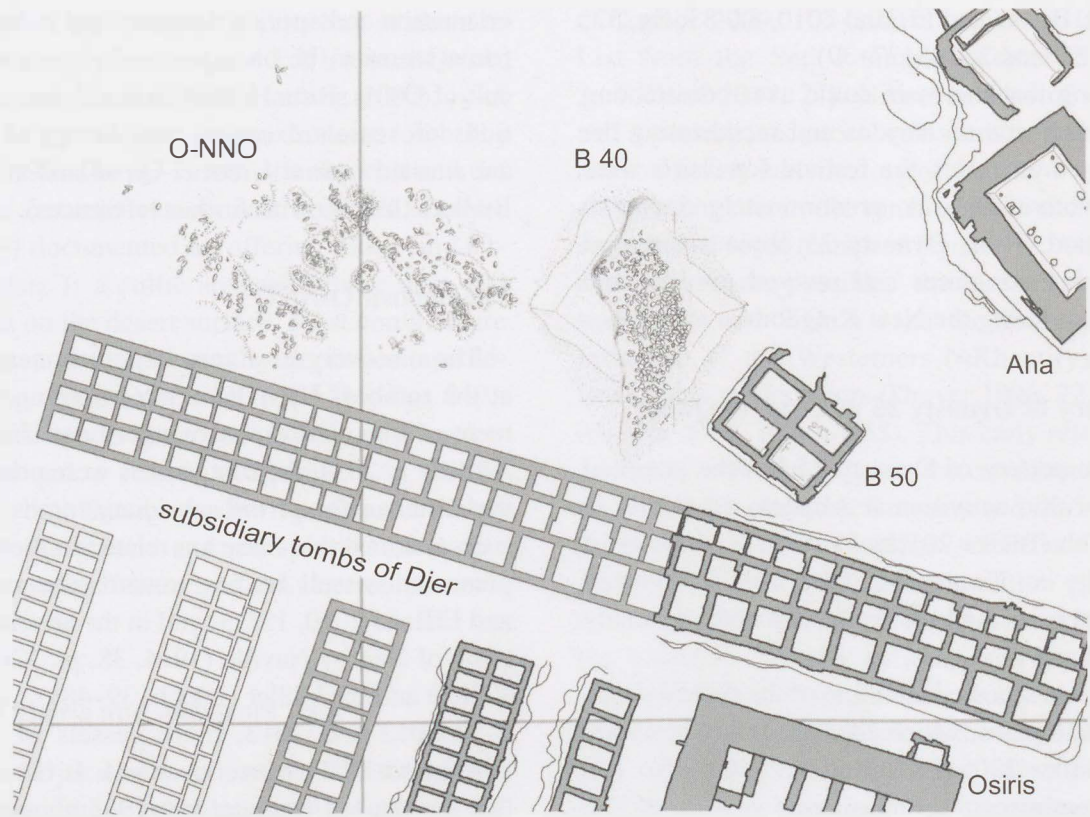


Fig. 1: Plan of deposit O-NNO on the eastern side of the tomb of Djer/Osiris. Plan by U. Effland, I. Klenner, M. Sählhoff et al. © DAI Osiriskultprojekt.



Fig. 2: Votive pottery deposit O-NNO; the large vessels form an alley leading towards the south. Photo: U. Effland.



Fig. 3: Late Period bottle with killing hole from O-NNO.
Photo: J. Budka.

Most important, however, is that for the first time there are traces of contents inside the Late Period bottles, which were previously assumed to have been deposited empty. Complete examples and fragments of *qaab*-dishes, and remains of their filling (botanical remains and sand) were discovered. Thus, for the first time, the deposition of the large Late Period bottles can be directly associated with the ritual deposition of *qaabs*. Because the contents of the *qaabs* are identical with what was documented by Ute Effland in the *in situ* deposits, a similar ritual framework embedded into the calendar of the Osiris cult seems likely.

Another interesting detail is that the bottles of O-NNO frequently have a hole in the base. In a number of cases, muddy remains closing this perforation (well attested for beer jars) were still found within the vessel. It remains unclear whether this indicates an original filling of these vessels with Nile water (strongly associated with the cult of Osiris) or with Nile mud, as is attested from other periods.

All in all, the association of the *qaabs* with the Late Period bottles is of great importance to our

understanding of the process of depositing the vessels. In some cases, the votive dishes were obviously positioned in already-laid-out storage vessels. In other cases, small groups of *qaabs* were put next to the Late Period bottles. This is well illustrated by a small assemblage of sixteen votive dishes found still *in situ* (Fig. 4).

All of the vessels of this assemblage were deposited with the opening to the ground—a position already attested for offering dishes during the Naqada III period at Cemetery U (see above) and also for Late Period dishes found *in situ* in front of the tomb of Den (Müller 2006b, 40). An unusual feature of the assemblage within O-NNO, however, is that from the sixteen vessels, one is not of Late Period date, but is actually an Early Dynastic lid (Budka 2014, 63, fig. 17). Therefore, old and new vessels were used side by side within a pottery votive deposit of the 8th century BC. The Early Dynastic lid is probably a piece from the original burial of Djer and obviously became ritually important for the votive offerings to Osiris more than 2,000 years later.

'Archaism' as guarantee of continuation

'Archaism' and references to the original tomb contents seem to be important aspects in understanding the complex composition of the Late Period votive pottery at Umm el-Qa'ab. In an earlier paper, I have proposed that the so-called Late Period bottles recall ovoid jars from the Pre- and Early Dynastic tombs (Budka 2010b, 60). There was obviously a clear intention to connect to, and to physically continue, the original inventory for Osiris Djer (Budka 2014). Given the Kushites' preferences for 'archaism' in relief and sculpture, it is no coincidence to find this in pottery datable to Dynasty 25 at Abydos (Budka 2010b, 60 with further literature).

I believe that change and continuity are key aspects of the votive activities at Umm el-Qa'ab; the *qaabs* are nothing other than a continuation of a very specific shape from the Sesostri III complex (Budka 2010a, 58), but with a slightly modified shape, manufactured in Late Period clay fabrics. Red paint splashes on Late Period dishes find their predecessors in Naqada III dishes from the offering place at Cemetery U (see above).

Osiris as king and as god forms a unity, and by this specific way of composing votive offerings making a connection between the original inventory and later activities, an everlasting cycle was evoked.



Fig. 4: *Qaab*-deposit within O-NNO. Photo: U. Efficand.

The ritual framework for Osirian votive vessels

The new finds in O-NNO illustrate the fact that, despite the very high number of ceramic votive vessels, the millions of pots at Umm el-Qa'ab were deposited in an organized way during the Late Period. The ritual traces strongly speak against an open 'pilgrim activity'. This was already indicated by the *in situ* deposits of *qaabs* meticulously studied by Ute Efficand (U. Efficand 2010). Since the pottery deposit O-NNO allows a clear association between *qaabs* and Late Period bottles, it is now unlikely that any kind of vessel could have been deposited at Umm el-Qa'ab in the 1st millennium BC by an ordinary traveller or an individual pilgrim. We have to assume that priests and other personnel of the temples were responsible, along similar lines to what was always proposed for the earlier periods (especially the New Kingdom). It is clear that a lot of manpower must have been involved in arranging the votive vessels on special occasions (festive dates) embedded in the sacred landscape of Abydos. A parallel may be drawn to a Late Period animal necropolis, where thousands of votive vessels are similarly integrated into a complex structure with a high degree of organization (see Kessler 1989; 2003; Fitzenreiter 2003, 234).

Most importantly, the references in the Late Period to the Pre- and Early Dynastic Period, thus to the original phase of use of the necropolis, have been underestimated. The deposit O-NNO forms an integral part of the sacred landscape shaped during Dynasty 25 in Abydos. Following major landmarks from earlier periods, especially the complex of Seti I with the Osireion, the Kushites also activated the old processional way through the large wadi. The importance of Abydos, and here especially the concept of a sanctuary of Osiris as represented by the Osireion, led to the much-debated form of the underground rooms of the pyramid of Taharqa in Nuri (see Kendall 2008).

The row of votive vessels at Umm el-Qa'ab (of which O-NNO is a part) emphasizes in particular the importance of the connection between the Osireion and the Southern Hill. Similar to finds made by Naville, during recent work more clay statues of Osiris were discovered (Pamer and Efficand 2015). These statues were buried during the Khoiak rites at Umm el-Qa'ab. This all implies that the pottery vessels were themselves votives, but also markers of important pathways during the Osirian festivals.

The long-lasting tradition of pottery votive offerings at Umm el-Qa'ab, reaching from the Predynastic period until late Roman times with a florescence in the Kushite period, refers to kingship, royal ancestors and the god Osiris. Ute and Andreas Effland have convincingly argued that concepts of the Egyptian Netherworld were projected on to the landscape of Abydos, which in turn became a sacred place (Effland and Effland 2013, 11; A. Effland 2014, 27). The plateau of Umm el-Qa'ab with the earliest burials facing the entrance to the Netherworld was the perfect place to perform rituals aiming to achieve regeneration and resurrection. Umm el-Qa'ab was the centre of this cult activity, which lasted several millennia, resulted in millions of pots and focused on continuity as well as change.

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