

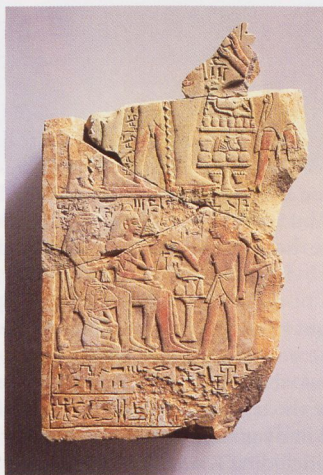


An Egyptian Painter's Utensils from Dra' Abu el-Naga

The Dra' Abu el-Naga project is a joint venture of the German Archaeological Institute, Cairo (DAI) and the University of California, Los Angeles. **Daniel Polz** reports on an unusual find in the early New Kingdom private cemetery on the west bank at Luxor.

During the 1991-2 field seasons in the necropolis of Dra' Abu el-Naga, a large number of shaft tombs and the remains of several tomb superstructures were unearthed. Each of these free-standing mud brick structures consisted of an open court with an entrance wall or pylon to the east and a small, most probably vaulted, chapel to the west (see *EA* 7 pp.6-8). The floor of both the courts and the chapels, and a certain area outside and around the superstructures, was covered with a hard plaster of mud and gypsum. The mud brick walls were coated inside and outside with a white gypsum plaster and were mostly undecorated. However, the inside walls of one chapel seem to have been painted with simple geometrical patterns, limited to the lower parts of the walls. Inside the chapel and in front of the back wall, a round-topped limestone stela of the tomb owner and his relatives was erected. Apparently, the only fully decorated elements were the stelae, several of which were found during the excavation of the chapels.

The superstructures were the 'cult' places for the families whose members were buried in the subterranean chambers. On the occasion of a funeral ceremony or during holy feasts in the necropolis, the open courts were used for gatherings of the deceased's family and members of the household, and gifts of food were placed on the offering tables in front of the stelae. From textual sources, it seems that these gatherings sometimes had the character of celebrations or festivities rather than being mere obsequies. In this sense,



Lower part of a stela with remains of colour

they were comparable to the Christian custom of funeral feasts.

Pottery vessels were used during the celebrations in the superstructure courtyards. Some of these – beer and wine jars, small and medium sized bowls – would be used only for the celebrations and then discarded. They were usually deposited outside the superstructures, along the northern and western walls of the chapels.

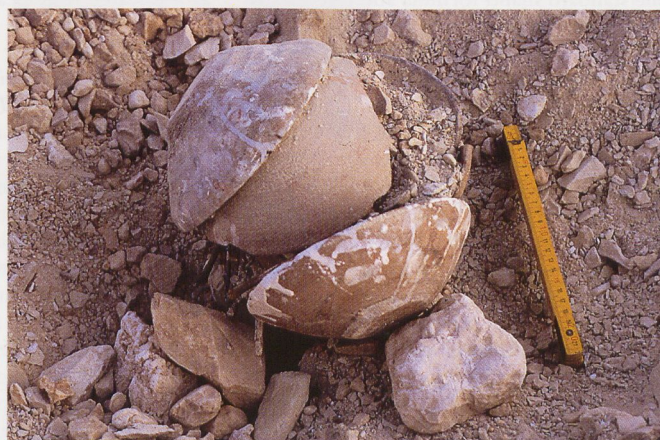
Close to one of these dump areas and approximately 2.5 m. distant from the outside west wall of a chapel, the utensils of an Egyptian painter were uncovered in an otherwise unstratified layer of limestone chips. The deposit consisted of 10 pottery bowls of different forms and sizes and a bundle of paint brushes,

one thick and sixteen thin, which had been carefully placed inside several bowls. Seven of the bowls were stacked inside one another, in an upright position and the remaining three were put upside down to cover the pile.

The bowls date to the early New Kingdom and are rather common-ware vessels indicating that they were not manufactured especially for the purpose of being used as a painter's 'palette.' All of the bowls still contain more or less substantial amounts of colour pigments. Indeed, they represent the entire colour palette used during the New Kingdom: red, yellow, green, blue, white, and black. Most of the bowls had been used extensively and show breaks and cracks, while others are half-broken. Almost all of them were used



Remains of superstructures in the necropolis



The painter's bowls and brushes in situ



for more than one colour. In some cases, several layers of colour cover the breaks.

According to X-ray analysis done by Dr Marzoni Fecia di Cossato, the pigments consist of the following materials: red is a red ochre; yellow is a yellow ochre; green is copper wollastonite; blue is the famous Egyptian Blue; white is magnesian-calcite, containing huntite; and black is ground charcoal.

For what purpose were the colours used and why were the utensils discarded outside a tomb superstructure? As mentioned above, no traces of decoration were found in the tomb superstructures of Dra' Abu el-Naga, except coloured geometric patterns on the inside walls of one of the chapels. Our painter's utensils, however, could not have been used for the application of these patterns. Only one of the brushes is of a reasonable thickness and none of the bowls could have sufficed for the large amount of paint required for even a partial decoration of the walls. Besides, certain pigments in the bowls (i.e. green and black) do not appear on the decorated wall fragments. Therefore, there must have originally been smaller objects to be painted. During the excavation of the superstructures, shafts and chambers in Dra' Abu el-Naga, multicoloured objects were found, including pottery vessels (e.g. canopic jars where colours were used to imitate the more precious stone vessels, and stoppers in the shape of human heads), other small objects and stelae. The last is the only group of objects for which the entire palette of colour pigments present in the bowls would be needed: red and yellow for the skin colour of the persons depicted; green and blue for objects on the offering tables; white as the 'background' colour and for garments; and black for the wigs and eyes of the persons depicted and also for stools and chairs. It seems reasonable, therefore, to assume that the stelae which were to be erected at the back wall of the superstructures in Dra' Abu el-Naga were painted on the spot.

At first sight, it might seem that our painter left his tools close to his working place: the orderly way in which he 'stored' them would indicate that he intended



A scribe at work using a brush (Theban tomb 56).

(Photo: Eva Hofmann)

to reuse them for the next job. However, for unknown reasons, he never returned and his utensils were found as he deposited them - 3,500 years later.

But why would our painter take a considerable amount of effort and labour to excavate a hole in the thick layer of limestone chips, and why would he put three of the bowls upside down to cover the others? There may be another explanation. The tools were used to paint a decorated and inscribed stela, an object closely related to the funerary ceremonies as a substitute for the offerings made during the actual ceremonies. Possibly, the tools employed were regarded as sacrosanct, in the same way as the pottery vessels used during the ceremonies. This would explain why we know of several comparable finds from other tombs of the Theban necropolis. Once the tools had been used to paint a funeral-related object of a certain importance, they may have been considered sacred and were thus buried close to the tomb for which they were employed.



The painter's utensils. (Photo: Dieter Johannes)



Two bowls with remains of white, blue and green pigments.

(Photo: Dieter Johannes)

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