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Bichrome Painted Nile Clay Vessels from Sai Island (Sudan)

DECORATED ceramic vessels in red-and-black painted (Bichrome) style are well attested from XVIIIth Dynasty contexts in Egypt, both in Nile clay and in Marl clay variants.¹ This specific ware probably recalls a painted style from Cyprus distributed and imitated throughout the Levant.² In Lower and Upper Nubia, this Egyptian Bichrome style is also present, and preferably Nile silt versions are known. Whilst Marl clay vessels from Egypt and in particular from Thebes have been discussed in a detailed study,³ Nile clay variants from modern Sudan have received little attention. The aim of this article is to present as a case study the group of Bichrome decorated Nile clay vessels from the New Kingdom town on Sai Island. Their form repertoire and most common decorative motifs will be discussed and first thoughts about their possible meaning and provenience presented. As chemical and petrographic analyses are still in progress, the present focus is on the vessels themselves.

The Material

Among the rich material excavated in the Pharaonic town on Sai Island,⁴ a group of Bichrome decorated necked jars and large storage vessels that show linear and floral as well as figurative designs is of special interest. Relevant sherds were found in all three sectors recently excavated: SAVI North, SAVI East and SAVI West. Sector

1. HOPE 1987, p. 105-106; BUDKA 2010a, p. 351.

2. As suggested already by HOPE 1987, p. 109. For the real Bichrome Wheelmade Ware in Egypt see, e.g., HEIN, STIDSING 2013.

3. HOPE 1987, p. 97-122.

4. See BUDKA 2011, p. 23-32; BUDKA, DOYEN 2012-2013, p. 188-198; BUDKA 2012, p. 54-63; BUDKA 2013a, p. 78-87; BUDKA 2014a, p. 28-37.

SAVI North features various mud brick structures of small scale and the northern part of the town enclosure. The major building phase when also the enclosure wall with bastions was built is associated with Level 3 and the ceramic evidence suggests this occurred during the mid-XVIIIth Dynasty, not prior to the reign of Thutmose III.⁵

The new excavation area SAVI East was opened in 2013, located 30–50 m north of the Temple A at the eastern edge of the town.⁶ The main architectural feature unearthed in this sector is Building A. This large mud brick structure is contemporaneous with Temple A and the structures in the southern part of the town and can be dated to the reigns of Thutmose III and Amenhotep II.⁷

SAVI West lies in line with the western town gate and was opened in 2014. The enclosure wall was discovered as well as mud brick structures of mid to late XVIIIth Dynasty date. At present, there is no evidence of an early XVIIIth Dynasty activity at SAVI West.

The amounts of Bichrome style vessels processed in detail are the following: From SAVI North, 29 Nile clay fragments are included in the database with 2287 sherds in total. This is material from excavations in the year 2010–2012.⁸ At SAVI North, most of the Bichrome decorated sherds come from levels 2 and 1 with mixed material. Their earliest appearance is in level 3, partly contemporaneous with Thutmose III (see below).

SAVI West yielded a considerable number of Bichrome decorated vessels of which seven Nile clay fragments are included in the database of the 2014 season (a total out of 209 sherds). The associated material is of mid-XVIIIth Dynasty date. At SAVI East, only one Bichrome painted sherd out of 248 pottery fragments (2013–2014) was processed. It comes from a mixed filling close to the surface.

All of the Nile clay fragments belong to large storage jars or to ovoid bottles (fig. 1). The latter have a tall neck and rounded lips. The bodies are ovoid to globular and the base is rounded. The large storage jars have a slight carination at the maximum diameter and are rather globular. Both vessel types were made in sections and joined together—the body was regularly made in coiling technique; the base and upper part are usually wheel-thrown.

Most of the Bichrome decorated Nile clay jars are made in a very chaffy variant of a Nile B2 or a Nile C2. The surface is usually coated with a rather thin white (or cream colored) wash and painted in red and black. Few examples attest

5. BUDKA 2011, p. 29; BUDKA, DOYEN 2012–2013, p. 181–182.

6. BUDKA 2013a, p. 78–87; BUDKA 2014a, p. 28–37.

7. BUDKA 2013a, p. 85–86.

8. Cf. BUDKA 2011.

a more common Nile B2 fabric with painted decoration on an uncoated surface (see, e.g., N/C 306, fig. 2).⁹ Especially the cream/white coating, but also the style of decoration (see below), indicates that these jars are imitations of Egyptian Marl clay vessels. Bottles with a long neck, made in Marl A2, A3 and A4 clays of the Vienna System and painted either in red and black, in red, black and blue, or in black only are well known in Upper Egypt,¹⁰ and have also been found on Sai (fig. 3). For Marl clay vessels, Bichrome style decoration is also known for jugs, bowls and various dishes.

The published Marl clay jars which represent close parallels for the Nile clay jars are dated to the period from Thutmose III/Amenhotep II to Thutmose IV.¹¹ A “Theban manufacture” was proposed by C. Hope¹² and was also suggested for the finds from Elephantine.¹³

The Most Common Motifs

Comparable to the Bichrome painted Marl clay vessels, also the motifs of the Nile clay group comprise simple linear designs as well as floral and faunal elements (e.g. flowers, lotus buds, ducks, horses and papyrus).¹⁴ Simple linear patterns are the best attested motif for the Bichrome decorated group: the sections of neck to shoulder, the shoulder itself and the body are frequently decorated with alternating red and black bands (fig. 1). The shoulder of tall necked bottles often shows either inverted V-shapes or pending triangles, probably representing schematic floral garlands (fig. 4).¹⁵ This pattern is also well attested for the Marl clay bottles.¹⁶ For the latter, Hope could reconstruct a uniform layout of the decorative scheme: on the upper part of the vessel, a wide band with large-scale motifs was situated; the neck usually contains a narrower panel with the mentioned bands and V-shapes/triangulars.¹⁷ Bands with inverted V-shapes and pending triangulars also appear in combination with each other, one above the other (e.g. SAVIN N/C 733). Another geometric pattern frequently attested, especially on the large storage jars, is a narrow

9. In Egypt proper, cream coated Nile B variants are attested; see HOPE 1987, p. 105.

10. HOPE 1987, p. 105-111.

11. HOPE 1987, p. 108-109, 116; BUDKA 2010a, p. 351.

12. HOPE 1987, p. 116.

13. BUDKA 2010a, p. 351.

14. HOPE 1987, p. 106-108.

15. HOPE 1987, p. 106.

16. HOPE 1987, p. 106. Two Bichrome painted vessels analyzed by Hope are made in Nile silts and correspond to the group discussed here.

17. HOPE 1987, p. 106.

band with a kind of grid: a series of rather thin, black horizontal bands are crossed by broader black lines running vertically through them.¹⁸

On the Nile clay jars from Sai, floral designs like papyrus buds (e.g. SAVIN N/C 614, fig. 5) seem less common. In SAVIN N/C 441 part of the main panel is preserved and it probably depicts a horse or another animal (fig. 6). Standing, rearing and galloping horses are well known as motif on Bichrome painted vessels,¹⁹ including the famous Nile silt jar Berlin 14412.²⁰ The Sai fragment finds another close parallel at Elephantine, suggesting an ibex or antelope as possible alternative motif: fragments of a large, white coated Nile clay jar (38801E/a-02) show a panel with an antelope and floral elements (fig. 7).²¹

All in all, as most fragments derive from the shoulder and neck, the decoration of the main panel on the upper body remains a bit obscure. SAVIN N/C 441, the fish jar from Kerma (see below), the sherds from Elephantine and especially the comparison with the Marl clay and Nile clay vessels from Thebes indicate that there might have been a larger variability than is currently traceable due to the poor state of preservation.

Dating and Parallels

The ceramic fragments from the temple town of Sai Island are not unique in Nubia, but do find among others parallels at Askut²² and Sesebi.²³ Further matches were recently unearthed in Kerma/Dokki Gel where they have been dated to the early XVIIIth Dynasty, possibly to the reign of Hatshepsut and early Thutmose III.²⁴ Especially remarkable is a large Bichrome painted Nile jar with the depiction of a fish, a tilapia, on the main panel.²⁵

18. This motif is also well attested on Bichrome decorated Nile jars from Elephantine (personal observation, publication in preparation).

19. Cf. LOYRETTE, FEKRI 1991, p. 12-15 with further parallels.

20. See HOPE 1987, p. 106.

21. 38801E/a-02 and the other Bichrome decorated Nile clay vessels from Elephantine are currently being prepared for publication by the author. A Bichrome decorated Marl clay vessel with the representation of a horse (EZN 737) from a XVIIIth Dynasty house at Elephantine will be published by Anne Seiler, see BUDKA 2008, p. 126, Anm. 290.

22. SMITH 1995, p. 145 fig. 6.5.

23. Personal communication Pamela Rose, in charge of the pottery from this site, who kindly shared on different occasion information about this important material. For the generally close comparisons of the material from Sesebi to Sai cf. SPENCE *et al.* 2011, p. 37.

24. RUFFIEUX 2009, p. 124-126, 127-128.

25. RUFFIEUX 2009, p. 124-126 fig. 3-5.

The town of Elephantine at the First Cataract has, to the best of my knowledge, up to now produced the most substantial amount of Bichrome painted Nile clay vessels from settlements: More than 50 fragments have been studied in detail and are associated with a comparable number of Bichrome painted Marl vessels. This material, comprising the same types of vessels like on Sai Island and also produced in a chaffy Nile clay, comes from contexts datable between the early reign of Thutmose III and Thutmose IV.²⁶ All in all, a mid-XVIIIth Dynasty date can therefore be proposed for the group of vessels. The first appearance of the SAVI North pieces within level 3 (e.g. N/C 723.01 with the joining pieces N/C 265, 305, 311) supports this date for Sai Island. However, the absolute date of the first presence of Bichrome painted jars still poses several questions—for now, the jar from Dokki Gel with the unique tilapia motif would be the earliest vessel.²⁷ Both its singular design and finding spot suggest that this might be an illusion based on a very fragmentary understanding of the distribution of the ware. For now, a dating of the Dokki Gel jar closer to the Sai Island and Sesebi pieces and thus a bit later than proposed (e.g. the era of Thutmose III) might fit better to a regional perspective and the findings in Upper Nubia. This would also correspond to the evidence from Theban tomb reliefs showing comparable decorated jars from the reign of Thutmose III onwards.²⁸ Nevertheless, recent and still unpublished finds at Elephantine might allow a dating of the first appearance to the reign of Hatshepsut. All in all, the first appearance of Bichrome decorated Nile clay jars remains a matter of discussion, but can be securely tied to the mid-XVIIIth Dynasty.

Possible Implications

To address possible functions of the Nile clay decorated vessels, it seems helpful to refer to the better contextualized Theban vessels.²⁹ Thanks to 1) the archaeological contexts and 2) the pictorial evidence from Theban tombs of nobles two central meanings of such decorated Marl clay vessels are known: 1) as offerings in Houses of Millions of years and thus related to the cult of Amun and the king³⁰ and 2) as wine jars used in the Beautiful Feast of the Valley during banquets. Both meanings are therefore closely connected with festivals. I have argued somewhere else that

26. BUDKA 2010a, p. 351 and personal observation.

27. RUFFIEUX 2009, p. 127-128.

28. HOPE 1987, p. 112-113.

29. See BUDKA 2010a, p. 351.

30. Cf. the earliest finds at the temple of Amenhotep II; see HOPE 1987, p. 110-111 n. 62.

the fact that such vessels found outside of Thebes were imported to these sites may have enhanced the sense that they were not intended for everyday use.³¹ In the case of the material from Elephantine, the majority of decorated wares during the New Kingdom originate from Thebes. It was suggested that this might reflect their use by Theban officials who spent time in the area of the southern border of Egypt and imported particular votives—as well as objects of both daily use and luxury—known to them for their cultic activity at home.

The question therefore arises, whether a similar picture can be drawn from the Nile clay jars found in Egyptian settlements in Nubia. Could these jars be references to cultic activities following a scheme known from back home? At all of the finding places of the Bichrome vessels, especially at Sai, Sesebi and Dokki Gel, Pharaonic temples and corresponding cults are attested. It is tempting to assume that such jars copy Marl clay vessels used at Thebes and have become subsequently integral parts of the Egyptian cult going on in Upper Nubia.

It seems unlikely to be a coincidence that the high variability of ceramic wares including various imports and decorated wares at Sai Island started exactly at the time when the temples and cult reached a heyday during the mid-XVIIIth Dynasty.³² Apart from a possible use connected with temple cult, it is also worth to consider whether such jars can be regarded as “luxury wares”. Was the range of painted ceramic vessels, so different from the Nubian pottery style, used to demonstrate the sophistication of the Egyptians officials? Or was it perhaps important for an Egyptian himself, living abroad, to surround himself with things and objects evoking the international sphere from cities like Thebes back home? Or maybe this holds true for Egyptianised Nubians working for the Egyptian administration and living in an Egyptian-style town as well?

Apart from the attractive, but not provable idea of an active role of ceramic vessels in creating “Pharaonic lifestyle” on Sai Island,³³ it is also possible that imported and nicely decorated vessels like the group presented here were regarded, especially in Upper Nubia and maybe by (Egyptianised) Nubians, as simply pretty “knick-knacks with exotic cachet”.³⁴

31. BUDKA 2010a. See also BUDKA 2013b, p. 188-195.

32. Cf. BUDKA, DOYEN 2012-2013, p. 193-196 fig. 23.2.

33. Cf. BARRETT 2009, p. 227.

34. BARRETT 2009, p. 226.

Conclusion and Outlook

Based on the recent finds at Sai Island and the large number of comparable fragments excavated at Elephantine, Dokki Gel and Sesebi, the distribution of these very specific pottery vessels made in Nile clay is better understood. There seems to be a concentration in two regions: 1) the area of the First Cataract and especially the town on Elephantine and 2) the area between the Second and Third Cataract with Sai and Dokki Gel as the key sites. The identical ware, shape and pattern of decoration of these examples which all come from contexts datable between Hatshepsut/Thutmose III and Thutmose IV make it likely to assume a common provenience or even a single workshop.³⁵ For now, Elephantine seems the most likely production place—while Thebes was the production centre for the Bichrome decorated Marl clay vessels, the Theban officials seem to have motivated a sub-production of similar vessels in Nile clay in the area of the First Cataract as suggested by recent findings on Elephantine. These vessels would have been more easily available to fulfil the demand of festive vessels with decorative motifs in Egyptian temple towns in Nubia.

All in all, the group of Bichrome decorated Nile clay vessels are likely to add another chapter to the well-known importance of Elephantine as trading point from and to Nubia during the New Kingdom.

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35. Contra RUFFIEUX 2009, p. 128 who suggests a local production for the vessel with the tilapia representation.

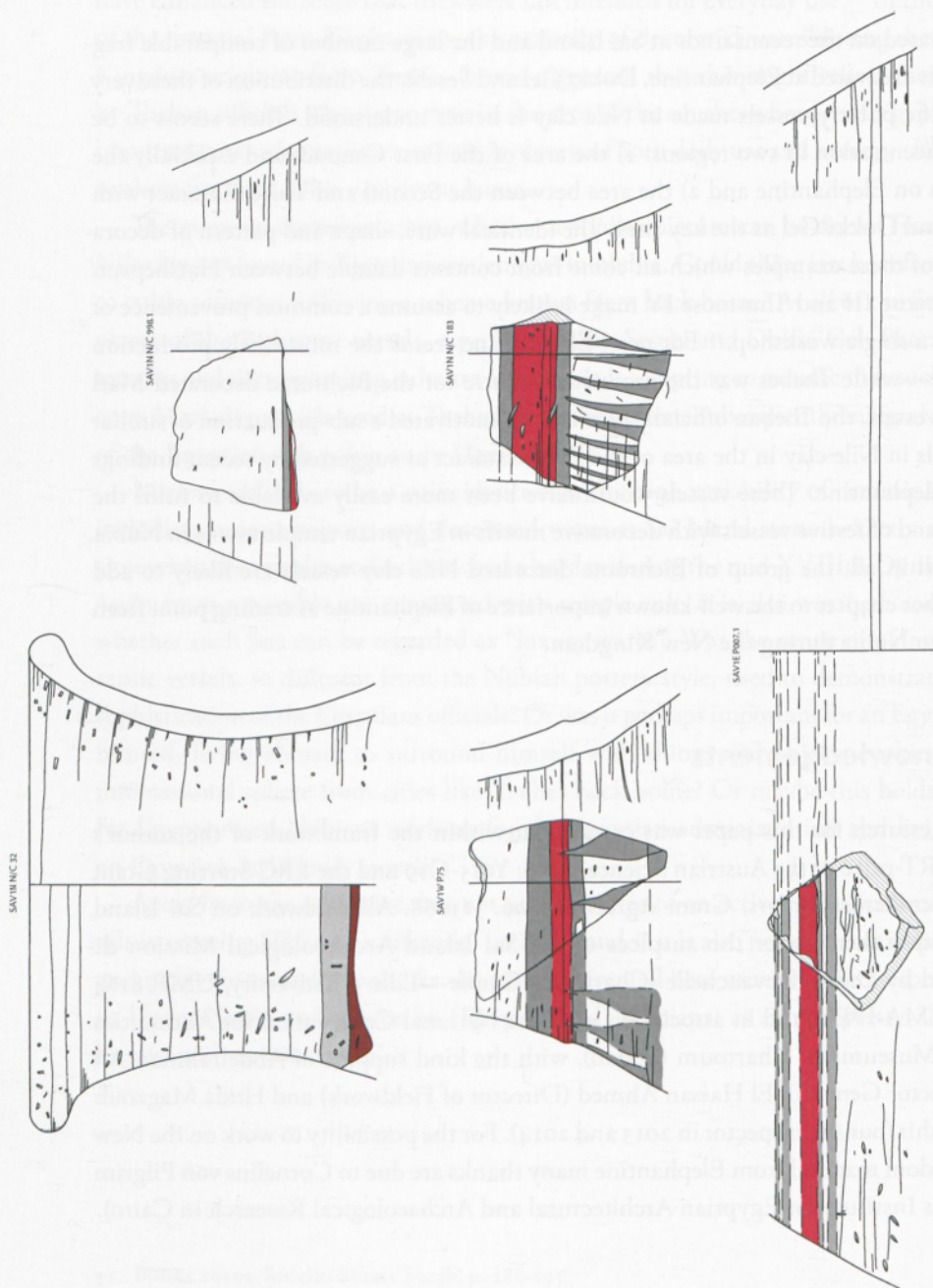


Fig. 1. Selection of Bichrome decorated Nile clay jars from Sai Island. Scale 1:3. Illustration: Elke Schuster.



Fig. 2. Fragment SAVIN N/C 306, Nile B2 bichrome painted on uncoated surface (Photo: J. Budka).

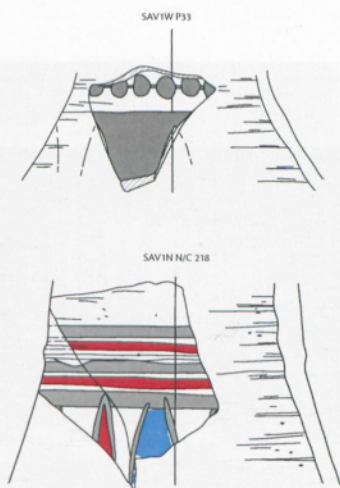


Fig. 3. Selection of decorated Marl clay vessels of the mid-XVIIIth Dynasty. Scale 1:3. Illustration: Elke Schuster.



Fig. 4. Fragment of a necked jar, bichrome decorated, SAViN NIC 608 (Photo: J. Budka).



Fig. 5. Fragment of bichrome decorated jar, SAViN NIC 614 (Photo: N. Bozet).



Fig. 6. Fragment of bichrome decorated jar, SAV1N N/C 441 (Photo: J. Budka).



Fig. 7. Fragment of bichrome decorated jar, ELE 38801E/a-02 (Photo: J. Budka).