

# SAQQARA 2012: THE POTTERY

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**Abstract:** The pottery analyzed this season was associated with the Lower Necropolis (areas of Chapel 14 of Ikhi/Mery and Chapel 13) from the late Old Kingdom as well as the Upper Necropolis from the Late through Roman periods, extant in this region. The assemblage from the Lower Necropolis supplemented the little known ceramic repertoire from the Saqqara phase II (Pepi I–Merenre). Of interest is a type of miniature vessel possibly connected with child burials. As for pottery from the Upper Necropolis, the form repertoire indicates that the area currently explored was the site of simple embalming caches.

**Keywords:** Saqqara, necropolis, pottery, child burial grave goods, Old Kingdom, Marl C fabric, Late Period, Ptolemaic period, Greek amphorae, EB III Combed Ware

The pottery assemblage collected in the 2012 season from excavations by a Polish–Egyptian archaeological and conservation team in West Saqqara was for the most part a standard repertoire expected from the two cemeteries existing on the site: the

lower one from the late Old Kingdom and the upper one from Late Period through Greco-Roman times. The collection was less numerous compared to previous seasons, but included examples of some rare vessel types meriting a broader discussion.

## OLD KINGDOM

The archaeological excavation was conducted in the vicinity of Chapel 14, which belonged to Ikhi/Mery and Chapel 13, both explored initially in the 2002 season (Myśliwiec 2003; 2015, in this volume) and dated by the pottery assemblage discovered then to pottery phases II and II/III respectively (Rzeuska 2006: Pl. 2). The phases correspond to the reigns of Pepi I–Merenre and the first half of the rule of Pepi II respectively (Rzeuska 2006: 382–383; Kuraskiewicz 2013: 23). The repertoire of phase II vessels from the

necropolis is the least well represented and hence little studied, thus raising the scientific importance of the finds from Chapel 14 and the vicinity of its entrance.

The niche in front of the entrance to the chapel was found to contain a middle-sized red-slipped jar (SQ 2142) of Form 24 and a middle-sized bread mold (SQ 2121) that represented a new type, Form 274 (for form classification, see Rzeuska 2006: Pls 198–201; 2013: Figs 163–166) [*Fig. 1*]. Jars of this type have been recorded in the assemblage (Rzeuska 2006: 136–138),

specifically from pottery phase II and were produced still in phase IV, that is, in the last stages of the use of the Lower Necropolis (Rzeuska 2013: Fig. 173). In terms of bread molds, this is the first find of the kind from phase II despite the numbers and variety of bread molds known from the necropolis. Compared to recorded forms of similar shape, that is, Forms 202 and 208, the present example has thinner walls and more squat body proportions. The maximum-diameter-to-full-height ratio approximated 5:3 compared to about 3:2 for the other two forms. The vessel was covered in its entirety with a thick coat of a fine-grained substance. It may have been used to hold mortar or the white paint that served to decorate the chapel. It is unusually well preserved; the rule is rather that vessels with traces of a similar white substance are heavily fragmented as they were trashed after usage.

The same location near the entrance to Chapel 14 produced three miniature vessels resembling thimbles (SQ 2115, SQ 2116, SQ 2117), handmade of Marl C,

representing Form 228 [Fig. 2 top row]. The finds confirm yet again the use of Marl C fabric (Bader 2002: 30) for ceramic production already in the Old Kingdom, long before it started to be used on a mass scale for pottery made from the terminal Eleventh–early Twelfth Dynasty through the beginning of the New Kingdom (Bader 2001). Miniature thimbles are very rare on the whole and only three other examples are known from the necropolis at hand, two of these being of Marl C clay and one of Nile B1 (Rzeuska 2006: 366–367). Thus, it was quite surprising to discover in the chamber of burial shaft 13/5 in the neighboring Chapel 13 (SQ 2125, SQ 2126) and in the fill of shaft 13/3 (SQ 2127), three more vessels of this kind and made of Marl C fabric [Fig. 2 bottom row]. On the grounds of the presented set of finds, this type of vessel may be dated to pottery phase II–early phase III. It should not be associated with other miniature vessels that are so common in both royal and private cemeteries of the Old Kingdom, but the actual function remains unclear.

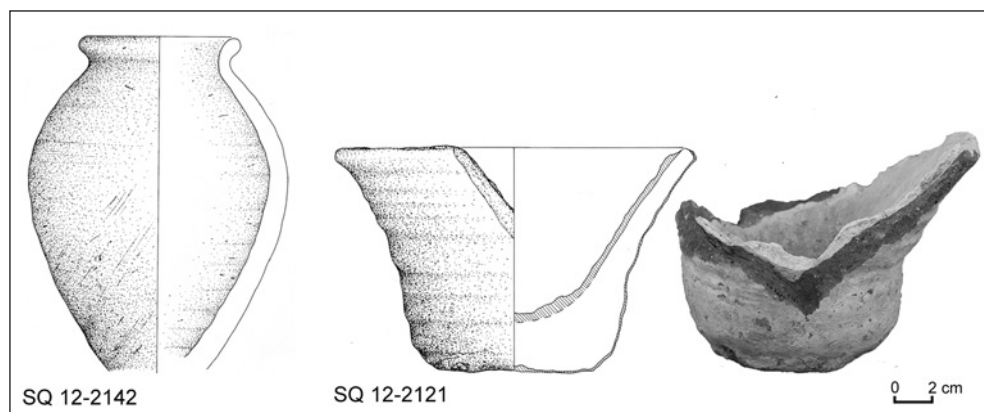


Fig. 1. Middle-sized jug Form 24 and new type of bread mold Form 274, recorded in pottery Phase II

All field and ink drawings A. Cedro; photos T.I. Rzeuska.

The context of the discovery of the vessels from Chapel 13 could provide a helpful hint. Unlike the vessels from earlier seasons and the ones from Chapel 14, which were found in redeposited contexts, those from Chapel 13 came from the burial chamber and shaft, suggesting a closer link with funerary rituals than with the mortuary cult. Another indication is that the three vessels from Chapel 13 contexts were discovered next to child burials, that is, Burial 649 in shaft 13/5 and Burial 650 in shaft 13/3. According to the team's anthropologist, the first burial was of a child aged 9 years  $\pm$  24 months, whereas the second one contained fragmentarily preserved bones of a child under 10 years of

age mixed with a few vertebrae of an adult individual and faunal remains. Should these vessels be grave goods accompanying only child burials, as can be assumed based on the present finds, it would explain their rareness in a necropolis where child burials are very rare. They may have been meant to represent miniature beer jars, made exclusively for the purpose of being placed with child burials.

A bowl Form 146 with two circumferential grooves under the rim (SQ 2115A) is another vessel meriting attention from burial shaft 13/1 in Chapel 13 [Fig. 3]. The maximum body diameter of this vessel was 20 cm, making it a reduced variant of the form, which was recorded as measuring

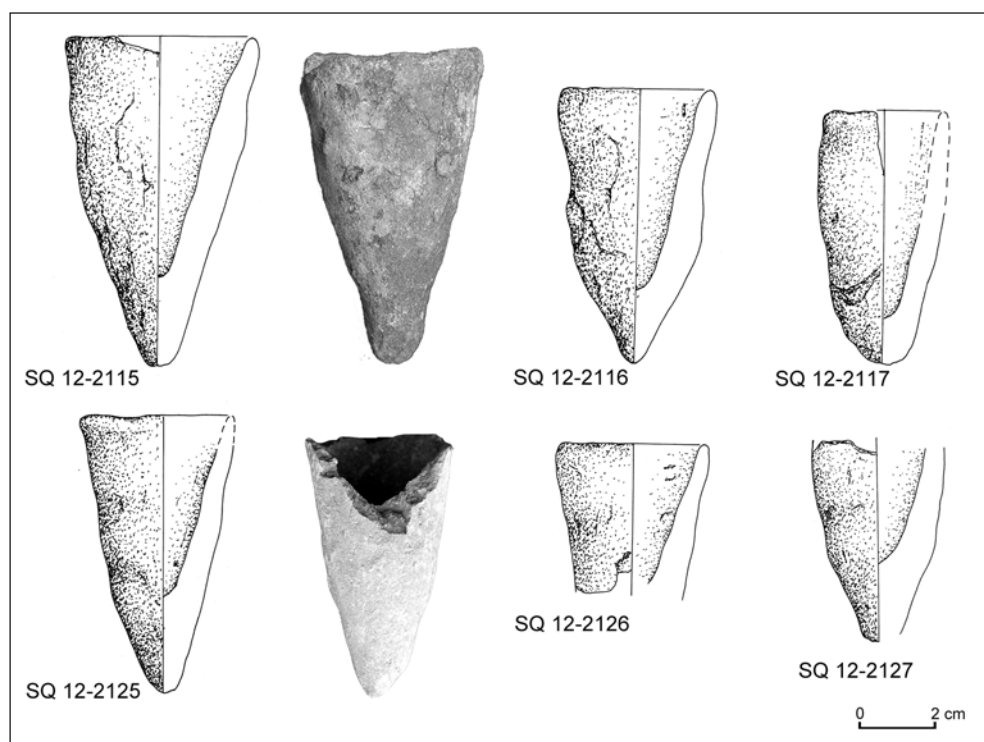
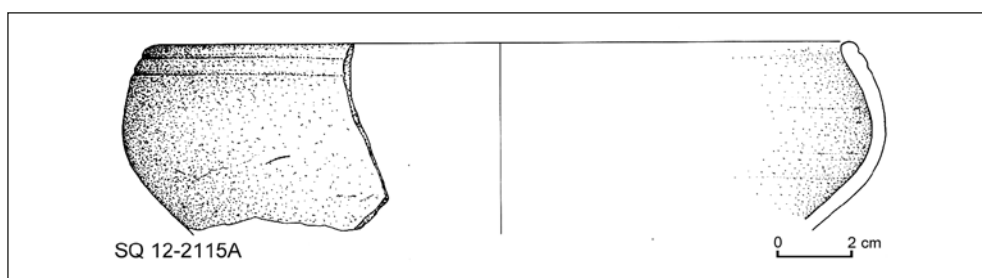


Fig. 2. Miniature vessels Form 228, made of Marl C clay: top row, from the entrance to Chapel 14; bottom row, from the burial shafts inside Chapel 13 next to the child burials

approximately 27–28 cm. The find context of this bowl in Chapel 13 confirmed its hitherto uncertain dating to pottery phase III (Rzeuska 2006: 412). The outer surface of the bowl bears evident traces of sooting; the absence of similar traces on the inside walls indicates that it had been used for heating the contents.

Of particular importance are sherds of a storage vessel or vessels from in front of the entrance to Chapel 14, which represent the Early Bronze Age III Combed Ware

imported from the Levant. Sherds of this ware had been discovered during the earlier exploration of Chapels 13 and 14, and they could well come from the same vessel as suggested by the identical fabric (Rzeuska 2003: 145–146). Planned petrographic analyses of the fabric will shed light on the question of the origins of this vessel or vessels, whether they were indeed imported from the Levant or constituted an excellent local imitation [*Fig. 4*].



*Fig. 3. Bowl representing a smaller variant of Form 146, from a shaft in Chapel 13*



*Fig. 4. Fragments of vessels possibly imported from the Levant, representing Early Bronze Age III Combed Ware*

Shaft 35 yielded in turn an almost complete carinated bowl of the Meidum type (SQ 2147) and a beer jar (SQ 2148), representing Form 184 and Form 8 respectively [Fig. 5]. The latter has lumps of dried clay on the inside walls, probably

remains of the false filling that is presumed to have imitated beer. The bowl is present regularly in pottery phases III–IV, the beer jar of this form only in phase IV, which helps to date the burial in shaft 35 to phase IV.

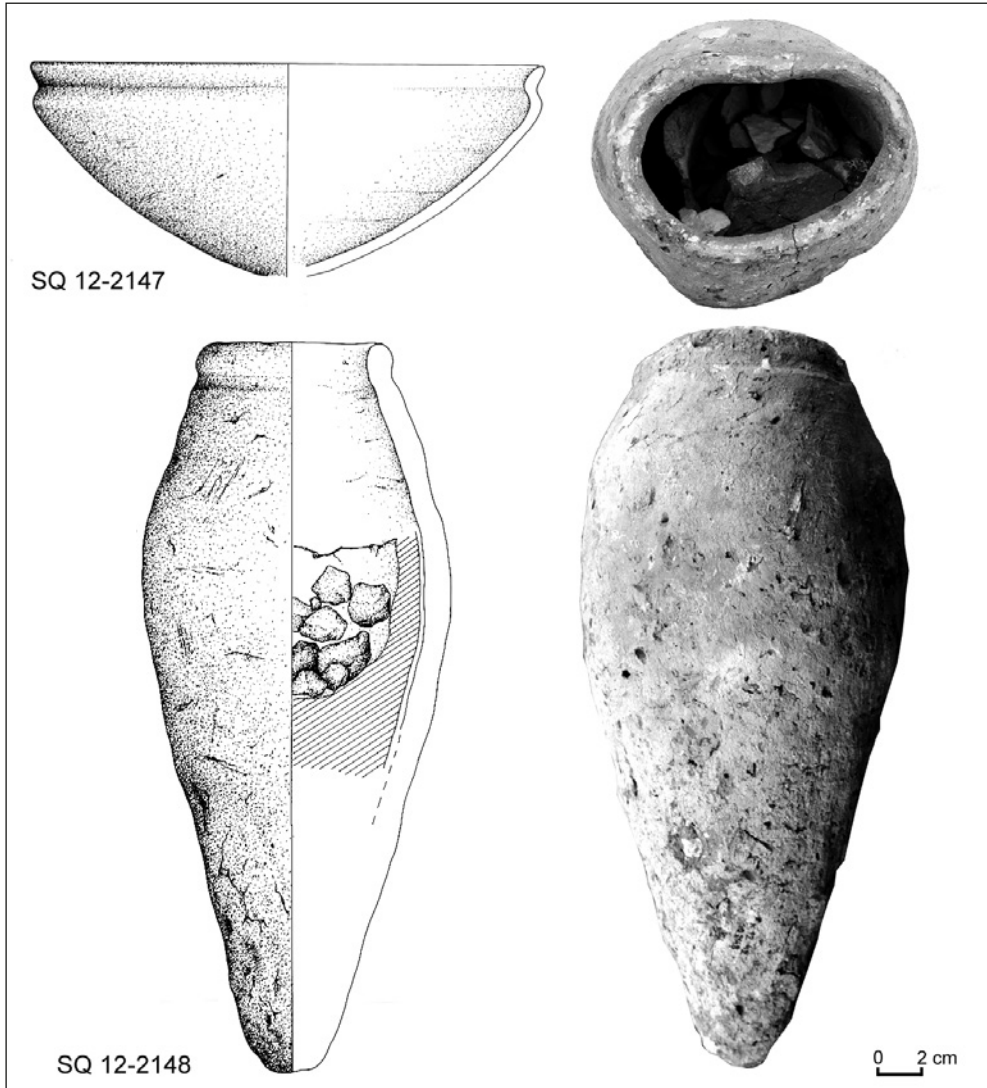


Fig. 5. Carinated bowl Form 184 and beer jar Form 8 from Shaft 35; note lumps of dried Nile silt on the inside walls

## UPPER NECROPOLIS

Little pottery was also recorded from layers connected with the Upper Necropolis. The burials were frequently accompanied by pottery from the late Old Kingdom, retrieved undoubtedly from Lower Necropolis contexts. This was the case of a bowl of Form 132 (SQ 2109) found with burial 615 [Fig. 6]. Even if there are ceramics with the burials, like two small jars (SQ 2135, SQ 2120), their fragmentariness makes it somewhat unlikely that they were part of the grave goods, which were very modest as a rule [Fig. 7]. Jar SQ 2135 was made of Nile silt tempered with organics, which is a relatively frequent fabric in the assemblage giving rise to the assumption that the pot represents local ceramic production. Vessels of this form are common from this particular section of the necropolis, although they are usually made of Marl A4 clay (Rzeuska 2003: 151–152). The other jar is made of a very fine marl (kaolin) clay, which requires petrographic analysis before its origins can be determined with certainty. Vessels of this kind of fabric are again quite frequent in the assemblage from the necropolis and come in a rich repertoire of shapes; considering that most of the deceased buried in this part of the necropolis represented the poorer strata of Memphite society, it is not to be excluded that the clay was obtained somewhere in the area. The sharp change of angle at the

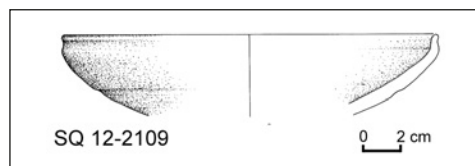


Fig. 6. Bowl Form 132 from the terminal Old Kingdom, found next to late burial 615

shoulder is typical of Late Period pottery (French and Ghaly 1991: 119).

The material included, as in earlier seasons, semiglobular and thick-walled bowls referred to as “goldfish bowls” (Ditze 1992: 7–8) or “cooking pots” (Smoláriková 2011: 100) (SQ 2138, SQ 2140) and a deep vat with profiled edge (SQ 2146) [Fig. 8]. The bowls were made of Nile silt B2 heavily tempered with organics and presumably with unfinished surface. Like most vessels from the upper layers of the burial ground, the surface of the bowls deteriorated as a result of mineral salts in the deposits, making it impossible to be sure as to how the surface was finished.

Found in loose sand, this pottery can be dated only by well-dated parallels. There are numerous examples from the Memphite necropolis (Aston 2011: 50–64), especially from the undisturbed mummification in the tomb of Menekhibnekau Abusir. The corresponding date is in the late 6th–early 5th century BC (Smoláriková 2011: Fig. 123).

One should mention the handle and neck of a Samos amphora (SQ 2150) [Fig. 10], which is a class of imported vessels that are regularly encountered in

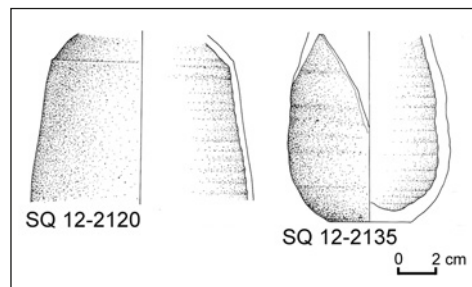


Fig. 7. Small jars from the Late Period, typical of finds from the Upper Necropolis

the pottery assemblage from the necropolis (Rzeuska 2007: 209, 221). A complete novelty, however, is a small “echinus bowl” (SQ 2110) typical of Ptolemaic-period wares. It is the first vessel of this kind to come from the Upper Necropolis [Fig. 9]. Like the Late Period vessels, this bowl was also found in loose drifted sand.

It is not clear how these ceramics should be viewed in the context of the Upper Necropolis. Were they part of the grave goods or where they rather connected with

the mummification process? The latter is a distinct possibility in view of the traces of dark resinous substances observed on the inner surfaces. Moreover, the bowls presented here are common in embalmers’ caches of type B3 of the Late Period, found in the Memphite necropolis (Aston 2011: 79).<sup>1</sup> This kind of caches were “buried in separate shafts or chambers specifically made for this reason” (Aston 2011: 64–65). To date, nothing resembling a cache has been found in the Upper

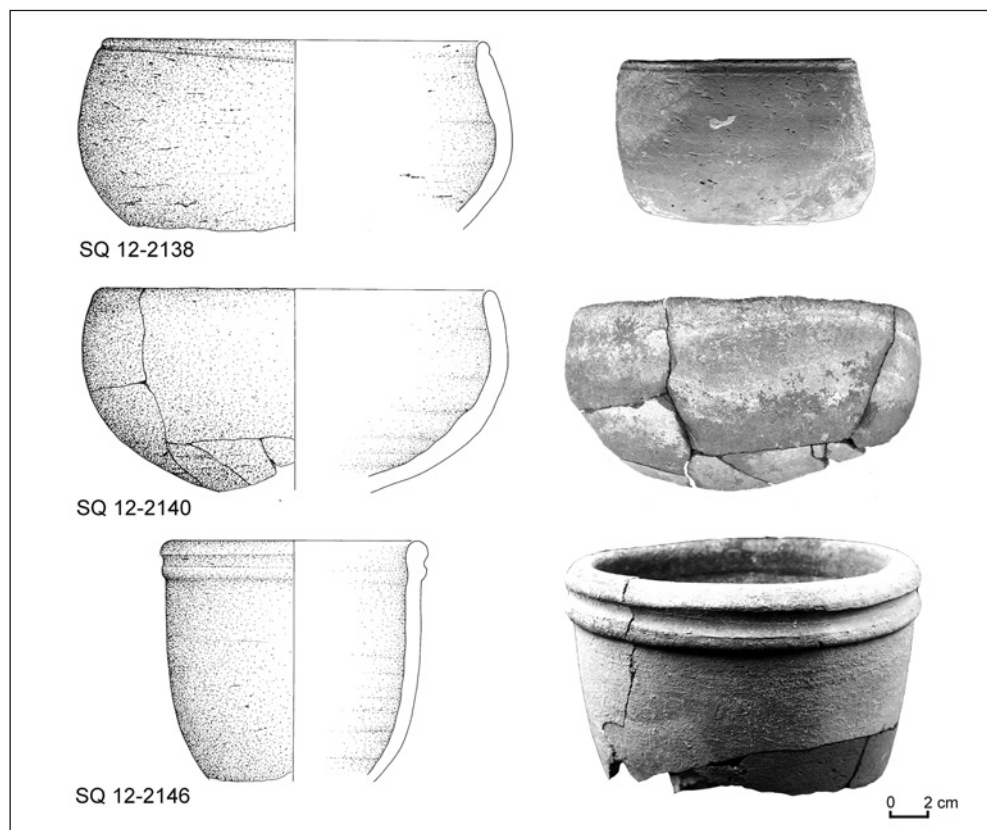


Fig. 8. Frequent types of ceramic vessels from the Upper Necropolis: “goldfish bowls” typical of B3 type mummification caches and deep vat from the Late Period

<sup>1</sup> For a list of identified post-embalming caches and relevant literature, see Budka 2006; Smoláriková 2009; Ikram and López Grande 2011: 205, note 2, 219–224.

Necropolis at West Saqqara, but taking into account that almost all the burials of the Upper Necropolis had been disturbed, it is not excluded that these structures were also damaged during the robbing.

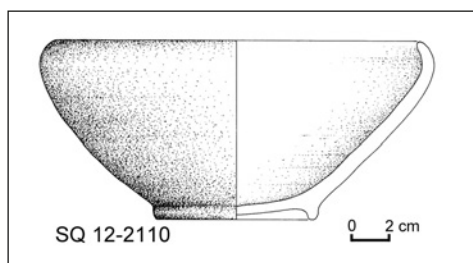
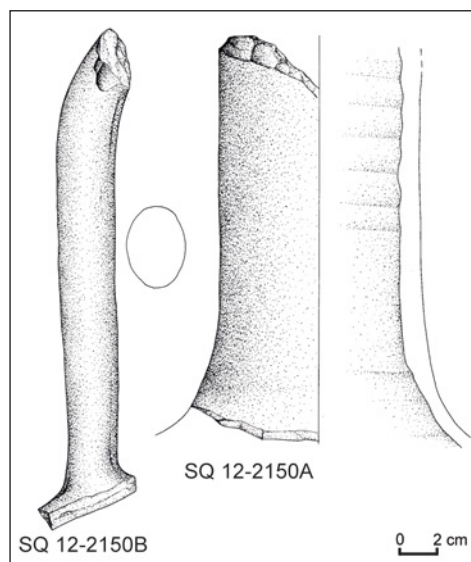


Fig. 9. Ptolemaic "echinus bowl"

Fig. 10. Amphora imported from Samos



## RECAPITULATION

To recapitulate, the assemblage from the 2012 season represented for the most part a well known and recorded repertoire of shapes. In the case of the Lower Necropolis, the set of pottery associated with the functioning of Chapel 14, dated to pottery phase II, was of particular merit, contributing to the still poorly studied repertoire of forms from this phase. The surprisingly numerous assemblage of miniature vessels, "thimbles", perhaps connected with child burials, has contributed significantly to the discussion of the

function of these vessels. Of equal significance are fragments of imported(?) vessels of Early Bronze III Combed Ware. As for the Upper Necropolis, the classic repertoire of bowls associated most probably with embalmers' caches was supplemented for the first time with a typical Ptolemaic "echinus bowl".

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