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An unusual storage jar with a face from Deir el-Banat (Fayoum oasis)

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The article is devoted to investigation of a fragment of a vessel decorated with a face depiction. It was found during archaeological excavations at Deir el-Banat (Fayoum oasis). The site is divided into three parts — the northern necropolis, the southern necropolis and the ‘convent’. The fragment was found on the surface in the ‘convent’s territory. It is a shoulder of a big vessel. The depiction of a face (two eyes and a nose) is made with lumps of clay and applied to the outer surface of the vessel. A thin bulge is above the eyes. The vessel is made of Nile silt fabric.

An analogy for the vessel from Deir el-Banat was found in Tebtynis situated in the Fayoum oasis as well. This neckless storage jar has sloping shoulders, a conical body and a base with a ring foot. Its shoulders are divided into two parts: the upper part has a relief surface, while the lower one bears a depiction of a face and wave-like ornaments. Loop handles are fixed on the lower part. This vessel is also made of Nile silt fabric. This allows us to reconstruct the vessel from Deir el-Banat and date it to the 8th century CE.

Keywords: pottery, Fayoum oasis, figure vessel, medieval Egypt, necropolis, convent.

A site of Deir el-Banat, which is situated on the south-eastern edge of the Fayoum oasis, is divided into three parts — the ‘convent’, the northern and southern necropolises¹. Since 2003 the Centre for Egyptological Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (CES RAS) has been conducting archaeological excavations on this site². A lot of pottery was found on the surface and in graves. The complex research of the pottery is in process; however, some preliminary results can be already presented.

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Galina A. Belova and Dr. Sergej V. Ivanov for the opportunity to work with the material from Deir el-Banat. I also would like to thank Dr. Elena Yu. Chepel for proofreading the text of this article.

² Белова 2012; 2017; Васильев, Боруцкая 2009; Орфинская 2015; 2016; Орфинская и др. 2017; Толмачева 2017a; 2017b; Фридманн 2015; Belova, Ivanov 2019; Ivanov 2017; 2019; Krol 2005; Tolmacheva 2017, etc.

This article deals with one of the vessels' fragments that comes from the surface in the 'convent's territory (fig. 1–2). The orientation of the sherd allows me to suggest that it was a shoulder of a vessel. The diameter of this vessel was approximately 55,8 cm. A face — two eyes and a nose — is depicted on its outer surface. They were made with lumps of clay. Above the face application a thin bulge is located.

The vessel is made of Nile silt fabric. It contains medium quantity of common and coarse vegetable temper, medium quantity of fine mica³. The break is homogeneous GLEY1 2.5/N (black)⁴. Both the outer and inner surfaces of the fragment are eroded.

As this fragment comes from the surface in the 'convent's territory, its dating is complicated. The 'convent' functioned in 6th–11th centuries CE⁵. P. Grossmann investigated its ruins and assumed that its territory had been occupied with a church and a number of buildings used for living⁶. The church was built of fired bricks, while other buildings were made of mud bricks⁷.

In Egypt a tradition of decorating pottery with various images has a long history. This practice has existed since the Predynastic period⁸. In her paper on New Kingdom (18th–20th Dynasties; 1550–1070/1069 BCE) figure vases J. Bourriau pointed out that they fall into two broad classes according to their technological features. The class A includes vessels with three-dimensional elements (as the vessel from Deir el-Banat); the class B is represented by 'sculptural vases' (i. e. these vases are made in the shape of something)⁹. Egyptian potters used various motifs — human depictions (both men and women), animals, gods, fruits, etc.¹⁰

As the fragment from Deir el-Banat is rather small and has no diagnostic features, it is difficult to judge the shape of the vessel it belonged to. So far I have found only one analogy that can give us an idea of how this vessel could look. A storage jar with similar face was found in 2000 during archaeological excavations of IFAO (*Institute français archéologie orientale*, Cairo) in Tebtynis in the south of the Fayoum oasis¹¹.

The face on this storage jar (French *jarre de stockage*) is made with lumps of clay applied to the outer surface of the jar. It also has a semi-oval frame (perhaps brows) and a mouth. The neckless jar has sloping shoulders, a conical body and a base with a ring foot. Its shoulders are divided into two parts: the upper part has a relief surface, while the lower one bears a face depiction and wave-like ornaments. Loop handles are fixed on the lower part. In the middle of the body there are three lines made with red paint. The jar from Tebtynis is made of Nile silt clay with vegetable temper and covered with white slip¹².

The storage jar comes from the domestic context dated to the 8th century CE¹³. S. Marchand mentioned that there are no analogies for this jar on their site¹⁴. The jar from Tebtynis allows me to reconstruct the vessel from Deir el-Banat (fig. 3) and preliminary date it to the 8th century CE.

³ The fabric description was made with a 10x hand lens during the work on the site.

⁴ The colour descriptions are made using the 'Munsell soil color charts' (New Windsor, 2000).

⁵ Krol 2005: 215.

⁶ Grossmann 1991: 788b.

⁷ Grossmann 1991: 788b.

⁸ Bourriau 1981: 30–39; Bourriau 1987: 81–82. For further reading on some types of ancient Egypt-

ian figure vases see Yarmolovich 2015; Яромлович 2017.

⁹ Bourriau 1987: 81–82.

¹⁰ Bourriau 1981: 30–39; Bourriau 1987: 81–82.

¹¹ Rousset et al. 2001: 432 (fig. 20), 435.

¹² Rousset et al. 2001: 432 (fig. 20), 435.

¹³ Rousset et al. 2001: 432 (fig. 20).

¹⁴ Rousset et al. 2001: 435.

DeB 08/0123

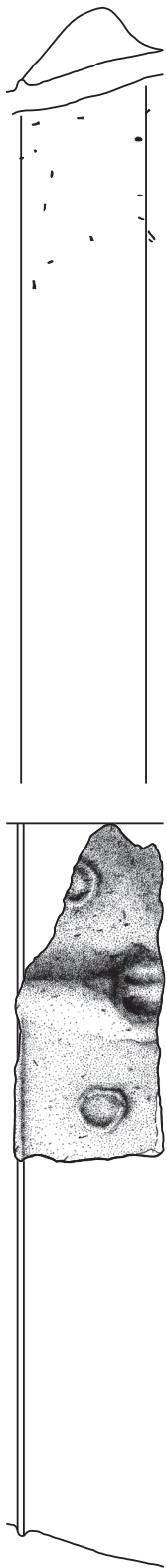


Fig. 1 (upper). Fragment of the vessel from Deir el-Banat (DeB 08/123).
Drawn by V. I. Yarmolovich and O. V. VingoItc



Fig. 2 (lower). Fragment of the vessel from Deir el-Banat (DeB 08/123). Photo by S. V. Ivanov

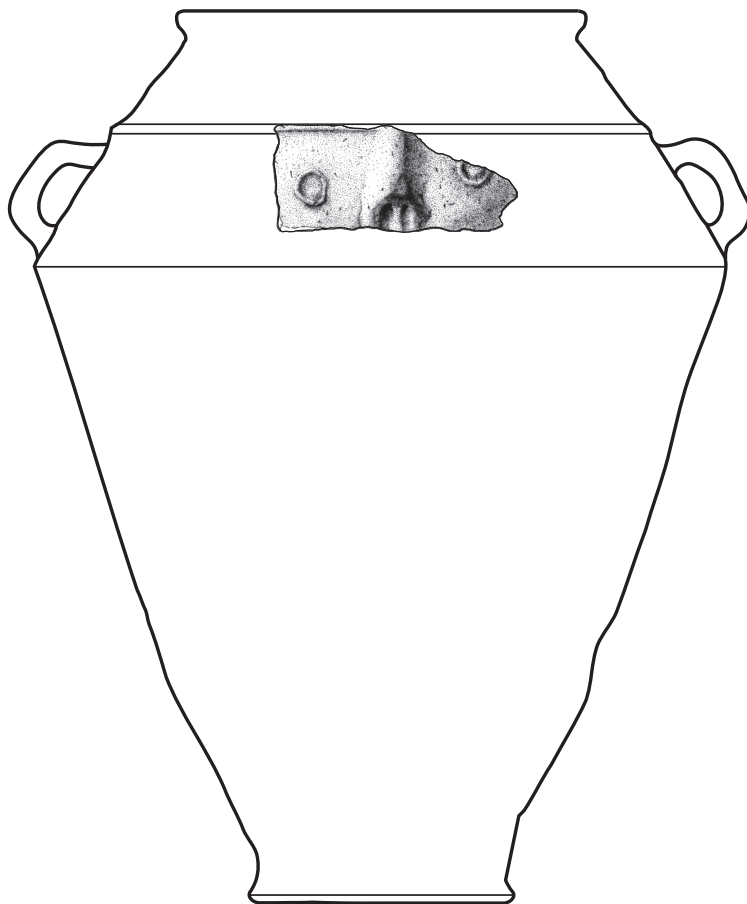


Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the vessel from Deir el-Banat (DeB 08/123).
Based on a vessel published in Rousset et al. 2001: 432 (fig. 20). Not to scale

To conclude, it is possible to date the fragment with the face application to the 8th century CE. Interestingly, while there are only two jars with similar depictions of such a face, other decorations (the wavy-like ornament, lines made with red paint and usage of white slip)¹⁵ are typical of Coptic and Islamic periods¹⁶. Another interesting question is the purpose of placing face depictions on storage jars. In Pharaonic period potters created various figure vessels¹⁷. One of the most widespread categories was Bes-vessels, which first appeared in the New Kingdom and were manufactured until at least the Graeco-Roman times. A depiction of Bes on the vessels can be certainly connected with his functions. He was an apotropaic deity, a protector of various aspects of daily life. Obviously, his depictions were believed to be important for protection of commodities kept in these vessels¹⁸. However, the fragment from Deir el-Banat cannot be identified as belonging to a Bes-vessel because of its dating. The future research perhaps will help us understand the function of this vessel.

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¹⁵ Rousset et al. 2001: 432 (fig. 20).

¹⁶ Bourriau 1981: 88–97.

¹⁷ See for example Bourriau 1981: 30–39; Bourriau 1987; Yarmolovich 2015; Ярмолович 2017.

¹⁸ Yarmolovich 2015; Ярмолович 2017.

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Глиняный сосуд с изображением лица из Дейр-эль-Баната (Фаюмский оазис)

В. И. Ярмолович

В статье представлены предварительные результаты изучения фрагмента керамического сосуда с изображением лица. Этот фрагмент обнаружили в ходе комплексных исследований памятника Дейр-эль-Банат в Фаюмском оазисе. Памятник условно делится на три части — северный некрополь, южный некрополь и «женский монастырь». Датировку фрагмента сосуда затрудняло то, что он был найден на территории «монастыря» вне археологического контекста. Судя по ориентации фрагмента, это было плечо достаточно большого сосуда, однако диагностические признаки (венчик, донце и т. д.) у него отсутствуют. Изображение лица (два

глаза и нос) выполнено с помощью фигурных налепов. Над глазами проходит тонкий валик. Сосуд выполнен из нильской аллювиальной глины (*Nile silt*).

Аналогичный банатскому фрагменту сосуд был найден во время исследований Французского института восточной археологии (*IFAO*) в Тебтюнниси, тоже расположенном в Фаюмском оазисе. Он имеет валикообразный венчик, разделенный неглубоким желобом, достаточно широкие плечи, коническое тулово с кольцевым поддоном. На его плече изображено лицо, а также закреплены ручки-ушки. Сосуд из Тебтюнниса датирован VIII в. н. э. Это позволяет реконструировать сосуд из Дейр-эль-Баната и предварительно отнести его к VIII в. н. э.

Ключевые слова: керамика, Фаюмский оазис, фигурный сосуд, средневековый Египет, некрополь, монастырь.

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