Networks in the Hellenistic World

According to the pottery in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond

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Abstract

At some point in Graeco-Roman antiquity, the traditions of Pharaonic Egypt gave way to a differently constituted culture and society; and such a development did not happen overnight. Here I focus on the Ptolemaic era and try to assess whether and how this foreign dynasty’s political and economic control affected native culture by a close examination of the ceramic assemblages from three sites: Naukratis, Coptos, and Elephantine. By assessing and comparing the relative amounts of dining, serving, and cooking vessels within a given assemblage, I suggest that it is possible to recognize a movement away from collective gatherings within the Sanctuary of Khnum at Elephantine. Such a change may mark an initial stage in the transformation away from long-lived patterns of Pharaonic society.

Keywords: Ptolemaic Egypt, pottery, social change, Naukratis, Coptos, Elephantine.

Introduction: Setting the Stage

‘Society is a very complex structure, and therefore the study of it cannot be simple. In any country at one time there are many varieties of it in different classes, and probably the contemporary differences are as great as those of many centuries in any one class … We can at least examine the factors that go to framing the conditions in which a society grows, and try to trace the discoveries without which it had no chance of growing. It is not too much to say that the discoverer is the maker of society.’

From the perspective of the political historian, the centuries leading up to Ptolemaic rule over Egypt were a roller-coaster of conflict: repeated episodes of invasion and foreign take-over punctuated by periods of native rule. From 670 BC, when Esarhaddon made Egypt an Assyrian vassal-state, until 305 BC, when Ptolemy son of Lagos was crowned king of Egypt, rule of the country passed through three native and two foreign dynasties. What effect did this political roller-coaster have on Egyptian society? Here I focus on the Ptolemaic era and the effects of this foreign dynasty’s political and economic control. Two theories are possible. The first is that Ptolemaic rule created or inspired a single largely Hellenized cultural sphere. The second is that there were two worlds – a thick layer of traditional Egyptian beliefs, customs, and lifestyles with, on top, a thin Hellenized veneer for government and business elites.

Historians of post-Pharonic Egypt have hardly ignored the question of the effect of foreign rule on Egyptian society. Close study of the evidence of inscriptions, temple building, religious rituals, social organization, and artistic remains have led to widespread agreement on three points: 1) turmoil and upheaval was largely confined to the political sphere; 2) foreign dynasties introduced or inspired few significant cultural changes; and 3) age-old institutions integral to Egyptian culture and identity thrived and in some cases were in fact strengthened. In other words, of the two theories posed above, historians uniformly support the second. Traditional Egyptian culture and society seems to have remained stable and even vibrant throughout Ptolemaic times.

The first category of evidence generally adduced by historians is linguistic – the continuation of the Egyptian language and alphabets as seen in personal documents as well as official inscriptions. Demotic, the popular script developed in the 7th century BC, continued in wide use. Along with demotic, hieroglyphic script also remained viable, as evidenced by official inscriptions such as the Rosetta Stone, which records a temple decree issued by King Ptolemy V in 196 BC.

Temple building and priestly authority continued. Indeed, the Ptolemies devoted more attention and resources to temple buildings, new and old, than in any previous period of Egyptian history. Major new constructions include the temples of Horus at Edfu, Hathor at Denderah, Isis at Philae, Sobek at Kom Ombo and Khnum at Esna. The Ptolemies made so many additions and renovations at the venerable complex of Amon at Karnak that it has been termed ‘an almost permanent construction site.’ And official support continued for traditional festivals and priestly perquisites within sanctuaries.

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1 Petrie 1923, 1.  
Finally, the evidence of that most fundamental component of Egyptian political life: royal portraits. On coins, portable emblems of power as well as an integral part of Mediterranean economic life, Ptolemaic kings and queens appear in the naturalistic guises popular for important people in the classical world – as slightly improved but essentially recognizable individuals. But coins are an obvious example of an official, top-down cultural artifact. In sculptural depictions found in Egypt, on the other hand, the Ptolemaic rulers appear as pharaohs, icons carved in native stone, the medium long preferred for the representation of eternal power. Two different faces, for two different worlds: one looking out, the other in.

This evidence presented above, powerful and widespread, indeed reveals a deeply embedded traditional society. And yet two points must be acknowledged: first, that eventually the traditions of Pharaonic Egypt gave way to a differently constituted culture and society; and second, that such a development did not happen overnight. Since Egyptian society, as indeed all human societies, was a locus of both tradition and change, it is worth pursuing other angles of inquiry with an eye to recognizing and calibrating the stirrings of those changes. To that end, here I present an initial examination of some Ptolemaic-period ceramic assemblages, a body of material not yet studied from this vantage point. It turns out that a look at the pottery adds a different perspective. I close by offering some new ideas for analysis and presentation that are not often pursued but that could make ceramic data more understandable and also relevant to other scholars.

The contribution of ceramic evidence

What can ceramic evidence contribute to the question of how Egyptian society changed under Ptolemaic rule? In order to answer this question, we must first acknowledge the realities and limitations of the data. When we talk about pottery in Ptolemaic Egypt, we are largely talking about quite mundane remains. Ptolemaic period pottery was rarely decorated, so it was not a vehicle for artistic or symbolic representation. It is almost never found outside Egypt, meaning that it was not a trade item that might contribute to studying the economy. In fact most of what is found on excavation is uninspiring – literally and simply ancient dishes and pots and pans. How can such data be organized to answer large historical questions?

I suggest that the answer lies in leveraging three inherent aspects of excavation pottery. First: context. If there is one thing that we usually know about excavation pottery, it’s where it comes from. To appreciate what a group of vessels can tell us, we need to take their specific context into account. Second: function. Nothing is more essential to understanding the larger meaning of a group of pottery...
Fig. 2. Naukratis, vessels for individual eating and drinking, and for serving (Berlin 2001)

Fig. 3. Naukratis, cooking vessels (Berlin 2001)
than knowing the various uses to which vessels were put. While this is often difficult to determine with precision or certainty, there are clues to help narrow down the options. For example, the kinds of wares and surface finishes, shapes and sizes all tend to differ according to basic functional categories such as table service or kitchen utility wares. The third aspect is *quantity*. In order to assess an assemblage and compare it with another, we need to know how much of any given item is there. By identifying and adding up items by function, we have a much better chance of understanding how typical or special the assemblage is. Here I deploy the three aspects of *context*, *function*, and *quantity* in order to elevate three typical assemblages of (rather boring!) Ptolemaic period pottery into useful and even interesting historical evidence. I use the published material from three sites: Naukratis in the Delta, Coptos in Upper Egypt, and Elephantine down near the First Cataract.

**Focus: Naukratis and Coptos**

First, Naukratis. The pottery was excavated between 1977 and 1983, under the direction of Al Leonard, Jr. of the University of Arizona. A number of other excavators preceded him at the site, beginning in 1884 with William Flinders Petrie. Careful correlation of plans and finds of earlier projects allowed Leonard to suggest that his two areas of excavation were most likely private housing on either side of a large Ptolemaic garrison, termed by earlier excavators ‘the Great Temenos’ (Fig. 1).

The great majority of vessels found are items for individual eating and drinking (Fig. 2.1-5). Predominant are small bowls with incurved rims; in all there were 388 fragments found of this type, and another 105 of bowls with everted rims. Accompanying the bowls were 247 fragments of nicely sized saucers with thickened rim. For mixing, pouring, and serving food and drink residents of Naukratis used large bowls, either kraters or dinoi, and two types of jugs (Fig. 2.6-8). As for cooking, they had three main forms of vessels (Fig. 3). Most common were cooking pots. There are several types, but all share a narrow mouth and deep globular body. Second in popularity were casseroles, a broad but more shallow vessel with a rounded bottom. Lastly there were stew pots, which combined the wide mouth of a casserole and the deep body of a cooking pot. Altogether the pottery from Naukratis comprises 740 individual dining vessels, 188 utility and serving vessels, and 575 cooking vessels.

Up the Nile at Coptos is the ancient Sanctuary of Min, already thriving from the early second millennium BC. Here too there have been several excavation projects, again beginning with the indomitable Petrie in 1893. I will use the material excavated between 1987 and 1992, under the direction of Sharon Herbert of the University of Michigan (Fig. 4). Ptolemaic-period remains inside the sanctuary included small rooms with ovens, grinding installations, and a great deal of pottery.

The material breaks down as follows. There were enormous numbers of individual dining vessels, in the same order of popularity as at Naukratis: over 1000 fragments of incurved rim bowls, almost 600 thickened rim saucers, and just 225 everted rim bowls (Fig. 5.1-5). As for serving vessels, there were many: large bowls, again either in the shape of a dinos or a krater (Fig. 5.8), as well as a third form of large bowl, which I named a grooved rim bowl (Fig. 5.7). These are too large for individual dining, but not as big as the kraters and dinoi. I classify them as medium-sized serving vessels. As for jugs, there were a few different types but not that many in total: just 162 – disproportionately fewer vessels for pouring than for mixing and serving (Fig. 5.6). (This makes me wonder if some of those big bowls were used for punch, and people just dipped their small bowls or cups inside.) As for cooking vessels, again the same three shapes of cooking pots, casseroles, and stew pots occur, and in the same order of popularity, with cooking pots the most numerous by far (Fig. 6).

When the raw figures of pottery by type are tabulated, the Coptos assemblage suddenly looks rather odd. There are enormous numbers of vessels for individual dining.
Fig. 5. Coptos, vessels for individual eating and drinking, and for serving (Herbert - Berlin 2003)
and serving as compared to cooking. Such radically disproportionate numbers led Sharon Herbert and I to interpret the structures not as permanent housing but rather as temporary encampments likely connected with periodic festivals, and their contents as specialized festival assemblages. How do these festival assemblages from Coptos compare to the simple domestic assemblages from Naukratis? While the types of pottery from both sites are very similar, the ratios between the functional groups differ dramatically (Fig. 7). At Coptos, almost half of the entire assemblage (45%) consists of serving vessels: large and medium-sized bowls and jugs. A full third (35%) is made up of small bowls and saucers for individual eating and drinking.

Fig. 6. Coptos, cooking vessels (Herbert - Berlin 2003)

**Fig. 7.** Chart comparing ratios of pottery from Naukratis and Coptos according to functional groups (Herbert - Berlin 2003)

**Fig. 8.** Chart showing ratios of pottery from House P at Elephantine in the early Ptolemaic (phases 1 and 2) and later Ptolemaic (phases 3 and 4) periods, according to functional groups (Herbert - Berlin 2003)
Only 20% of the assemblage consists of cooking vessels. At Naukratis, on the other hand, almost half of the assemblage is comprised of individual table vessels, a figure in keeping with domestic deposits from other sites in the Hellenistic world. For example, similar ratios are found in the domestic assemblage from Hellenistic Troy, in Turkey and Gamla, in northern Israel. Serving vessels comprise only 13% of the domestic assemblages from Naukratis, one third as many as at Coptos, while cooking vessels make up 38% of the Naukratis assemblages, almost double that at Coptos. In other words, the marked difference in relative amounts of dining, serving, and cooking vessels at Naukratis and Coptos strongly suggest that people were using these vessels under differing circumstances.

**Focus: Elephantine**

This conclusion is pertinent to an analysis of the Ptolemaic-period ceramics found at Elephantine. Here I investigate the pottery recovered between 1987 and 1992 by the German expedition under the direction of P. Grossman and published by David Aston. The excavations, northwest of the Sanctuary of Khnum, uncovered portions of several seemingly domestic structures, including one which they named House P, in its entirety. House P contained enormous quantities of pottery. Neither the actual function of House P nor its relationship with the sanctuary is clear. Can the pottery help?

Here I rely on David Aston’s monumental and thorough publication but in so doing I run up against an issue characteristic of many publications of Egyptian pottery. Aston presents and illustrates every vessel, and assigns each to a fabric and ware group according to the Vienna System, but makes no attempt to classify vessels by functional group nor provides any overall quantification. Rather, every vessel is presented as an end in itself. For the purposes of this analysis, I went through each of House P’s Ptolemaic assemblages, grouped the vessels by function, and counted them. While my results are certainly incomplete and likely flawed by such second-hand analysis, I would argue that my general procedure is reliable. First I identified small saucers and bowls for individual dining, then medium and large utility and serving bowls, then cooking vessels, store jars, and finally stands – of which there were an interestingly large number.

The ratios between functional groups varied through time, and in an interesting way (Fig. 8). In the earlier part of the Ptolemaic period, there was a roughly even number of vessels for dining and serving. In the later part of the period there are many more vessels for individual dining but the number of serving vessels strongly diminishes.

Does this mean anything?

It may. A comparison of the ratios of pottery groups from the earlier and later Ptolemaic phases of House P at Elephantine with that from the households at Naukratis and the festival camps in the sanctuary at Coptos reveals an eye-catching pattern. The early Ptolemaic phase, with many serving vessels, is most similar to the pattern at Coptos. The later Ptolemaic phase, with fewer serving vessels but many individual dining vessels, resembles the pattern at Naukratis.

This discrepancy could suggest a change in the function of Elephantine’s House P from the earlier to the later Ptolemaic periods. At first the house could have been the scene of sanctuary-related activities, similar to Coptos. The changing patterns of the later Ptolemaic assemblages, on the other hand, could reflect a decrease in festival activities, or at least suggest that by this time whoever was living here was simply running a regular household. Such a change of function could mean that rituals and activities in the sanctuary itself were also changing.

And changes such as these – fewer festivals or fewer participants in those festivals – are exactly the types of social alterations that need investigating. I began by posing two options for the effect of Ptolemaic rule: one an increasingly unified Hellenic culture and the second a thick layer of native culture topped by a thin Hellenized veneer. Overwhelmingly, the evidence supports the second of these two options – at least at the beginning of the Ptolemaic era. But at some point that native culture must have begun to change in fundamental ways. Capturing the character and trajectory of change is a daunting task, especially since that native culture was comprised of millions of daily lives, each propelled by individual circumstance. One way to capture those changes is by studying pottery. Ceramics derive from and reflect people’s lives, which encode and reflect larger developments – away from some traditional activities, perhaps, such as large-scale gatherings in sanctuaries.

After all, while temples and sanctuaries long occupied a fundamental place in Egyptian life and culture, eventually popular participation waned. There came a time when the temples still stood but the festivals that had filled the grounds ceased, when the people who had believed in and animated them turned their energies elsewhere. When and how that happened are questions worth asking. Pottery can provide data that will help find the answers.

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Bibliography


