**CHAPTER EIGHT**

**Notes on the Kom el-Hisn Ceramics**

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

Kom el-Hisn is one of the few Old Kingdom Delta sites that have been extensively and systematically excavated. Research there in the 1980s by the Kom el-Hisn Project clarifies our picture of life in the middle of the Nile delta, especially during the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC. Kom el-Hisn is of particular importance because it seems to have been continuously occupied from at least the 5th Dynasty through the 12th.

Kom el-Hisn’s ceramics can be compared to those from recently excavated sites such as Giza and *Ain Asil* in the *Dakhla* Oasis (Soukiussian, Wuttman and Pantalacci 2002). The closest parallel, however, comes from the *Heit el-Ghurab* settlement at Giza in the Memphite region, which was occupied during the late 4th Dynasty (Wodzińska 2007). Giza, to a certain extent, reflects life near the capital, while Kom el-Hisn is in a rural province.

What can a comparison of ceramics from Kom el-Hisn with those from Heit el-Ghurab tell us? This is a complex question and not easily answered. Some observations, nonetheless, can be made.

**II. CLASSIFYING KOM EL-HISN’S CERAMICS BY DYNASTY**

The ceramic material from Kom el-Hisn can be divided into three major chronological groups: Old Kingdom, between the late 4th and late 6th Dynasties; 1st Intermediate Period, although the pottery from that short interval is difficult to identify; and Middle Kingdom, especially the 12th Dynasty. Most of the pottery, however, can be dated to the 6th Dynasty. Karla Kroeper’s analyses of the Kom el-Hisn ceramics document these ceramic forms and styles (see Chapter 8, this volume). But in this chapter I would like to highlight some characteristic forms of this pottery assemblage.

The late 4th Dynasty context at Kom el-Hisn is marked by the presence of red carinated bowls, the so-called “Meidum bowls” (see Chapter Eleven, this volume). These occurred in two major groups, differentiated on the basis of the material of which they were made, either Nile sediments, or marl clay. At Giza both groups of these bowls are securely dated to the reign of *Menkaure*, at the end of the 4th Dynasty. The bowls commonly made of Nile fabrics (similar to Nile B2 in the Vienna System) have S-shaped profiles with the rim diameter the same as or a bit bigger than the diameter of the shoulder (CD6B at Giza – Wodzińska 2007: 299, 301, Fig. 11.20). The bowls made of marl (marl A1 and C in the Vienna System) also have rim diameters equal to or slightly larger than the diameter of shoulder; however, their shoulders are usually sharply angled (fig. 10.1) (*viz*. CD6A at Giza – Wodzińska 2007: 299, 301, Fig. 11.19). Another significant pottery type is a bowl with an internal ledge (fig. 2). Such bowls were known from the early Old Kingdom until the late 4th to the beginning of the 5th Dynasties. Examples found in Kom el Hisn can be dated either to the late 4th Dynasty (see CD32A at Giza – Wodzińska 2007: 304-305, Fig. 11.30), or early 5th Dynasty (Abusir – Katarína Arias Kytnarová, personal communication).

Among the 4th Dynasty pots beer jars made of Nile C fabric were also found, for instance jars with short straight rim (fig. 10.3) (Wodzińska 2003). A very common Old Kingdom form, bread molds, were also made of Nile C and were found in large quantities at Kom el-Hisn; for example, conical molds with flaring walls and flat rim (fig. 10.4). Such molds can be dated to the late 4th Dynasty (for instance pots from Giza, Wodzińska 2007: 306-307, Fig. 11, type F2B), however, it is possible that they date to the 5th Dynasty. The 5th Dynasty Egyptian pottery is still not extensively analyzed with regard to its minor variations, except in some general reports (Kaiser 1969, see also Op De Beck 2006 and Sterling 2004). The pottery from the pyramid field at Abusir shows clear similarities to the late 4th Dynasty pots from Giza (Katarína Arias Kytnarová, personal communication). On the other hand the 5th Dynasty pots can be usefully compared to pottery from the early phase of the 6th Dynasty (Rzeuska 2006). Some of the Meidum bowls as well as bowls with internal ledges (fig. 2) and bread molds (fig. 4 for instance) found at Kom el-Hisn can be categorized as 5th Dynasty material, although the identification is still problematic.

Among Kom el-Hisn’s Old Kingdom vessels, those from the later phase of the 6th Dynasty are clearly visible. These include shallow plates with flaring walls, a round rim, and a groove below the rim on the inside (fig. 10. 5) usually made of Nile B2 fabric with red slip applied to external and internal surfaces.

There were also bowls with undulated body and recurved rim (fig. 10.6) made of Nile B2 with red slipped surface. Such bowls are well known in Saqqara for instance, especially the material published by Teodozja Rzeuska (2006: type 96, number 356).

The Kom el-Hisn assemblage contained many variants of carinated bowls, all of them made of Nile B1 or Nile B2 fabrics with red slipped surface. Bowls with a small carination and round rim, as well as bowls with a small carinated and recurved rim (fig.10.7) in which the rim diameter is larger than the shoulder diameter (see Rzeuska 2006: type 110, number 412); and bowls with a small carination and flat recurved rim (fig.10.8) (see Rzeuska 2006: type 138, number 481). Bowls with low carination and a triangular rim (fig. 9) were also common (see Rzeuska 2006: type 179, especially number 637). There were also bowls with slightly incurved walls, a simple rim, with incised grooves below rim on the outside (fig. 10) (see Rzeuska 2006: types 146-148), both made of Nil2 B2 and covered with red slip.

With regard to the 1st Intermediate Period, the ceramics from Kom el-Hisn are not clearly identifiable, and a larger sample from an area of the site that appears to be of this era will be needed to resolve these chronological issues using ceramic styles. The strong mortuary evidence (reviewed in Chapter Two of this volume) of Kom el-Hisn’s occupation in this interval suggests that 1st Intermediate pottery styles can eventually be identified among the ceramics of the late Old Kingdom Period.

In contrast, Kom el-Hisn’s ceramics of the Middle Kingdom, especially the 12th Dynasty, seem securely dated and typical of Middle Kingdom assemblages elsewhere. The hemispherical bowls made of Nile B1 fabric with a very thin red wash added to their external and internal surfaces (figs. 10.11-12) are most typical of this period. Deep basins with flaring walls and round rims (fig. 10.13) were also present. Basins of such types fit well within the material dated to the early 12th Dynasty from Tell el-Daba (Czerny 1999: 152, Nf 211-215). There were also deep bowls with flaring undulated walls and recurved grooved rim made of Nile C fabric (fig. 10.14). Variants of this type were found at Tell el-Daba (Czerny 1999: 169, Ng 65-67). Among jars three forms were recognized, jars with flaring undulated neck and thickened rim made of marl (probably marl C) (fig. 15) (see Czerny 1999: 95-96, fig. MC 85 – dated to the 12th Dynasty); and jars with flaring necks and thickened rims (fig. 10.16) (see Arnold 1988: 121, 130, fig. 68: 92, 101). Many conical, almost cylindrical, bread molds were also unearthed (fig. 10.17) (see Czerny 1999: 104, 198, figs F 14 and F 23), as well as pot stands (fig. 10.18).

**III. Discussion**

A *spatial* analysis of the distribution of ceramics across the surface and through the depth of Kom el-Hisn is still in progress (Wenke 2013).

Although I (AW) did not participate in the field research at Kom el-Hisn, after considering the entire data set from this site, I created a diagram (fig. 10.19) that shows the relative amounts of vessels generally dated to the Old and Middle Kingdoms. We can say that most of the excavated pottery of Kom el Hisn came from the Old Kingdom. The Old Kingdom material consisted of mostly vessels dated to the late 6th Dynasty (approx. 70% of the Old Kingdom pots).

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| Fig. 19. Kom el Hisn, general distribution of pottery within major periods. |

If we look at the excavated areas we can see that the Old Kingdom material came from following squares: 1192-1035, 1192-1060, 1192-1060, 1192-1060, 1192-1060, 1195-1040, 1200-1088, 1200-1088, 1200-1088, 1200-1088, 1200-1088, 1200-1088, 1200-1088, 1200-1088, 1200-1088, 1213-1042, 1213-1070, 1213-1072, 1213-1072, 1213-1072, 1213-1072, 1213-1072, 1213-1072, 1213-1074, 1213-1074, 1219-1095, 1220-1072, 1220-1072, 1229-1029, 1229-1029, 1229-1029, 1229-1029, 1229-1029, 1229-1029, 1229-1096, 1229-1096, 1229-1096, 1235-1056, 1235-1056, 1235-1056, 1235-1056, 1235-1056, 1235-1056, 1235-1056, 1235-1056, 1235-1065.

The Middle Kingdom vessels occurred only in a limited number of them. These were: 1200-1088, 1229-1029, 1235-1056, with single finds. Squares 1256-1072, 1261-1074, 1263-1074, 1270-1072 contained only Middle Kingdom pottery.

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| Fig. 20. Diagram showing general distribution of jars, bowls and bread molds within Old and Middle Kingdom contexts at Kom el-Hisn. |

The diagram in fig. 10.20 shows general distribution of pottery classes within generally defined Old and Middle Kingdom contexts. The diagram is based on the old excavation data and probably is not very accurate; however, it seems that bowls for both periods were the most common. These were serving bowls, but also basins used during preparation of food. The diagram shows some disparities, but they seem to be roughly equal in their frequencies.

**Comparison to the material from Giza**

Comparisons of Kom el-Hisn’s and Giza’s Old Kingdom ceramics, especially those from Heit el-Ghurab, are intriguing. As noted in Chapter One of this volume, Kom el-Hisn can be considered a special case: a town in the middle of the Delta, possibly an “estate” associated with a cult center elsewhere. On the other hand, Heit el-Ghurab cannot be regarded as a typical Old Kingdom town since it was a special settlement built for a selected group of people, perhaps workmen (e.g., Lehner 2002). Are the ceramics from these two sites similar, and, if so, how? The most obvious comparison concerns the red carinated bowls. These bowls were analyzed metrically by Sarah Sterling (Sterling 2004; Sterling, Chapter 10, this volume). One of the most interesting aspects of this comparison, in my opinion, is that the bowls from Kom el-Hisn most probably dated to the late 4th Dynasty are practically identical to those at Giza. There are no pottery workshops or pottery kilns identified at Giza, but it seems that some of the part of Egypt. The exact place of their origin is, unfortunately, not known.

Heit el-Ghurab has been systematically excavated since 1988 (see Lehner 2002: 27). The Old Kingdom settlement can be divided into several basic quarters such as the Gallery Complex, the so-called Royal Administrative Building, Eastern Town, and Western Town (Lehner 2007:13-15). Each of the quarters differ from each other architecturally; however, the material, including pottery, found in them is quite diverse stylistically. Elsewhere (Wodzińska 2011), I have documented that each of Heit el Ghurab’s various activity areas can be characterized by different relative pottery distribution.

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| Fig. 21. Diagram showing general distribution of jars, bowls and bread molds from Gallery Complex (GIII4) and area AA, Heit el Ghurab, Giza. |

The pattern shown in fig. 20 based on the relative pottery distribution from Kom el Hisn seems to be similar to ceramic vessels occurrence in area AA in Western Town of the Heit el Ghurab settlement (fig. 10.21). In both areas bowls played an important role. According to Ornit Ilan (2001: 337), basic pottery classes (jars, bowls and stands) were used for different functions. Jars were usually utilized as long-term storage but also transport containers as well as drinking pots. Bowls were typically used during preparation and serving of food. They also served as storage vessels, but probably in short-term storage facilities. Bowls can be associated with daily food preparation and consumption. The relative distribution of pots from Kom el Hisn shows that the site, at least in excavated areas, was a regular village whose inhabitants cooked and ate their food locally. Bread was also baked in Kom el Hisn but not in large quantities, in contrast to Giza, especially the Gallery Complex where bread molds largely predominated over other vessels (fig. 21) (see also Wodzińska 2011: 306, Figs 2-3). Bread production at Kom el Hisn was probably associated with individual households and not centrally controlled from outside bakeries as in the case of the Giza galleries. Small amounts of storage jars suggest that no major storage facilities were needed and the food was consumed on a daily basis. It is also worth noting that the relative pottery distribution from Kom el Hisn is very similar for both the Old and Middle Kingdom periods, reflecting the continuity of rural life in ancient Egypt.

**Summary**

The pottery found in Kom el-Hisn shows that the site was occupied between the late 4th and the beginning of the 12th Dynasty but most of the pots excavated during 1984-1986 can be dated to the late 6th Dynasty.

Kom el Hisn was occupied for a much longer period than Heit el Ghurab site. Nonetheless, during the late 4th Dynasty daily life at Heit el Ghurab and Kom el-Hisn were probably quite similar in the range and diversity of activities performed. On the basis of the relative occurrence of basic pottery classes, Kom el Hisn was very similar to area AA within the Western Town and very different from the Gallery Complex at Heit el Ghurab. It is likely, perhaps, thus that Kom el Hisn was a settlement consisting of small individual and somewhat independent households. In contrast, the Gallery Complex at Giza was likely controlled and provisioned from outside sources.

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