

RANDOM OBJECTS:

New Year Flasks from the 26th Dynasty

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Opening of the Year

Perhaps the most important day of the year in the Egyptian calendar for the general populace of ancient Egypt was the beginning of the Nile flood, which replenished the soil with fertile silts and saturated the land ready for germinating the seeds retained from the previous year's harvest. Coinciding with the appearance in the night sky of the star Sirius, and closely associated with it, the new agricultural year was celebrated in an annual New Year festival called *wep renpet* (*wp rnp.t*), meaning "opening of the year."

The Egyptian year was divided into three seasons: Akhet (June-September), Peret (October-February) and Shemu (March-May). In the first month of the Akhet, called Thoth, the rivers Atbara and Blue Nile brought down heavy monsoonal rainwaters into the Nile just short of Khartoum in the Sudan, flooding the Nile, reaching Egypt in late June or July, beginning to subside in October.

Like many aspects of Egyptian life, there was a dichotomous aspect to *wep renpet*. Although the floods were greeted with great anticipation, with hopes for good harvests and an optimal and prosperous year ahead, a low flood might result in drought and hardship, whilst a heavy flood could destroy physical infrastructure and delay the planting of seeds so that germination and survival of young plants were threatened. It was a high-risk time of the year, and was greeted accordingly with various objects manufactured to commemorate the event and confer luck upon it.

Objects of celebration are a particular feature of the 26th Dynasty (c.664-535BC) Saite Period. Items of jewellery, for example, were common. A faience ring shown left (UC58328) is a nice example from the 26th Dynasty.



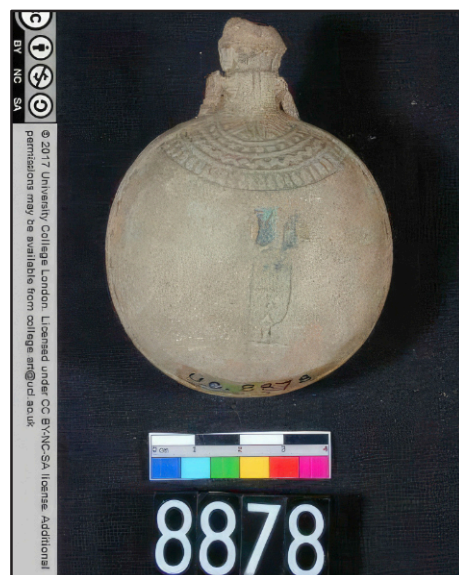
UC58328: Faience ring, bezel inscribed with hieroglyphs for 'a good new year's day'.

Flasks

In the 26th Dynasty, New Year flasks became particularly popular. Although a great many were produced in Naukratis in the western Delta, they are also found in Upper Egypt, other areas of Lower Egypt and abroad. They are usually very small, only a few centimetres tall, lentoid in shape, and made of faience, often decorated with papyrus and lily capitals. They sometimes feature lug handles on the shoulders (often in the form of Thoth, responsible for knowledge, wisdom and the calculation of time), and bands of decoration around the body of the vessels (often the *usekh* collar) and further decoration down the vessel's sides.

Many have hieroglyphs often mentioning the *wep renpet*, sometimes reading *wp rnp.t nfr(.t) n nb.s* "opens/inaugurates a perfect year for his/its lord" where the lord is presumably the owner of the flask. Other hieroglyphs list the names of deities and sometimes the name of a king. The most frequent kings named were Apries and Amasis from the 26th Dynasty. A variety of deities were named, usually local to where they were found, and included (in no particular order) Ptah, Sekhmet, Amun, Amun-Ra, Hathor and Nefertum. Sometimes the God's Wife of Amun is mentioned.

No two flasks are the same, but all are instantly recognizable as New Year flasks. It is not known what the flasks contained. Perhaps the most plausible theory, given how small they were, is that they contained a celebratory scoop of new Nile flood water. Some of them were included in burials, perhaps because of their association with renewal.



UC8878: Light blue glaze as infilling on white bodied 'New Year flask'. Cartouche of Wahibra on front. Petrie considered that the rough style probably means it is the reign of Apries (Wahibra as birth-name).



Sources of Inspiration

The similarity between New Year flasks and the earlier New Kingdom pilgrim flasks such as UC66492 (shown left; c.1550-1069BC) may suggest that the pilgrim flasks were the inspiration for New Year flasks. Pilgrim flasks were originally a Levantine form, but soon became manufactured locally in Egypt. Although the shapes of the New Kingdom and 26th Dynasty forms were similar, the meaning had probably changed completely by the time of the 26th Dynasty, over 500 years later.

Acknowledgements

All images are courtesy of **UCL Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology**. Captions are based on those included in the notes to objects in the online collection.

UC66492: Pilgrim flask with red slip and decoration of concentric circles on body. See Kilroe, L. 2014. *Biography of an Egyptian Pilgrim Flask* (link below).

Also in the Petrie Museum

UC8869 (opposite)

A green glazed faience, with blue inlay, 'pilgrim flask'. The neck is missing, and the body bulbous. Inscription down centre between two columns of crossed lines in hieroglyphs 'Ptah, open a good year for his lord'.

UC58330

Egyptian blue ovoid amulet with plain back, underside inscribed with hieroglyphs for a good new year.

UC8876

Piece from a faience 'New Year flask'. Pierced at top and bottom for entrance to flask itself. A seated ape with hands to face on each side, with four lotus plants separated by four buds in relief.

See also, for example:

UC58328 UC45477 UC58330 UC59957

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Further Reading

Masson, A. New Year's flasks. British Museum

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20190801143000mp/> /https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/masson_pilgrim_flasks_new.pdf

https://www.academia.edu/9842708/New_Years_flasks_from_Naukratis_2014?auto=download

Villing, Alexandra; Marianne Bergeron, Giorgos Bourogiannis, Alan Johnston, François Leclère, Aurélia Masson and Ross Thomas. With Daniel von Recklinghausen, Jeffrey Spencer, Valerie Smallwood, Virginia Webb and Susan Woodford. Naukratis - Greeks in Egypt.

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20190801105436/> /https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_research_catalogues/ng/naukratis_greeks_in_egypt.aspx

Kilroe, L. 2014. Biography of an Egyptian Pilgrim Flask. UCL Blogs. 28th February 2014. <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/museums/2014/02/28/pottery-project-guest-blog-biography-of-an-egyptian-pilgrim-flask/?fbclid=IwAR2JK3xVlplPp-YhONk6XIXnQeLrWghY7dnngLnOGrQj2xFKh3lUDpJ1hGY>

Yamani, S. 2002. New Year's Bottles from Tell Marqula (Dakhla Oasis). BIFAO 102 (2002), p. 425-436

<https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bifao/102/22/>