

Eight New Year's flasks from Tell Tebilla

Ayman Wahby – Mohamed Ali Abdelmawla – Sherief Abdelmoniem

ABSTRACT

The joint mission from Mansoura University and the Daqahlia inspectorate (Supreme Council of Antiquities) began its work at the Tell Tebilla site near Mendes in the Delta in November 2018. During the excavation, several mastaba tombs were discovered. One of these, the so-called "Burnt Tomb" (Mastaba no. 4/M4), dates to the early Ptolemaic Period, and revealed a corpus of various objects made of pottery, stone, bronze, faience, and clay. Among the objects found are also eight New Year's flasks, which are the focus of the current paper. It is our intention to present the flasks, and discuss their function, inscriptions, contents, and ownership.

KEYWORDS

New Year flasks – Tell Tebilla – pottery – festivals – gods – religion

ثمانية قوارير رأس السنة من تل تبيله

أيمن وهبي – محمد على عبد المولى – شريف عبد المنعم

الملخص

بدأت البعثة المشتركة لجامعة المنصورة وتفتيش آثار منطقة الدقهلية (المجلس الأعلى للآثار) عملها في موقع تل تبيله بالقرب من منديس بالدلتا في نوفمبر من عام 2018. حيث تم الكشف أثناء أعمال الحفائر عن العديد من المصاطب. واحدة من تلك المصاطب المسماة «المقبرة المحروقة» (المصطبة رقم M4/4)، يعود تاريخها إلى أوائل العصر البطلمي، عثرنا بها على مجموعة من اللقى الأثرية المختلفة المصنوعة من الفخار والحجر والبرونز والفائيس والصلصال. ومن بين اللقى الأثرية التي تم العثور عليها، ثمانية قوارير رأس السنة، والتي هي محور هذا البحث. حيث نعتزم تقديم القوارير ومناقشة وظيفتها.

الكلمات الدالة

قوارير رأس السنة – تل طيبة – فخار – أعياد – آلهة – ديانة

LOCATION AND HISTORY

Tell Tebilla is located about 12 km to the north of Mendes. Inscriptions from Tell Tebilla, known as "the district of Ra-nefer" (*R3-nfr*; *R-nfr*), mention that it was located within the sixteenth Lower Egyptian Nome in the eastern Delta (Malek 1985: 39; Kees 1932: 148-150). Its strategic location made it an important maritime port at the entrance to Lake Manzala, which connected the Mediterranean Sea with two or more harbours on the defunct Mendesian branch to its southeast, and the Mansoura-Damietta branch of the Nile to its northwest (Mumford 2013: 38-67).



Fig. 1 The site of the Mansoura University and the Supreme Council of Antiquities mission at Tell Tebilla seasons 2018–2020 (photo Ayman Wahby, © Mansoura University)

The history of the site commences already during the Old Kingdom, but it was only in the first millennium BC that the city rose to prominence, particularly from the Twenty-second to the Thirtieth Dynasty and during the Ptolemaic and Roman Period (Mumford 2000; Mumford 2002: 182, 18–23; Lefebvre 1933: 87–90). The extant mound includes a necropolis with mud brick tombs, settlement areas and traces of a temple. The temple was called *ḥ.wt-ḥzj* (*ḥ.wt-ḥs*), and was dedicated to the main god of the area, Osiris, who was known locally as Osiris *Ḥsj*, but also to other gods such as Isis, Horus, and Sobek (Malek 1985: 39; Edgar 1914: 278; Gauthier 1925: 121–22).

A magnetic survey carried out at Tell Tebilla in 2018 by a joint team of Mansoura University and the Daqahlia inspectorate (Supreme Council of Antiquities [SCA]) revealed several tombs including the so-called “Burnt Tomb” (Mastaba no. 4/M4) (fig. 1). Objects and ceramics recovered during this tomb’s excavation could be dated, based on the ceramic material, to the early Ptolemaic era, *ca.* fourth to third century BC. The tomb might have belonged to a high official or priest associated with the Osiris temple at Tell Tebilla.

THE FLASKS

During the clearance of the rooms and central hall of Mastaba no. 4, the team discovered eight vessels made of faience, as well as other sherds. Certain types of these Late Period Egyptian flasks have recently, rightly or wrongly, acquired their own descriptive designation, such as “pilgrim flask” or “New Year’s flask” (Seif El-Din 2006: 15).

These flasks have a lentoid shape with a short neck and externally thickened rim, and two handles. There are traces of residue on the interior, while the exterior is coated, obscuring

much of the decoration and the inscriptions. Over the rim, on the neck and on the handles are traces of reed binding from the vessel's closure (Rose 2016: 249).

The term New Year's flask is commonly used by Egyptologists to refer to a type of vessel, which was generally lentoid in shape, and consisted of two equal sized open forms, placed rim to rim and stuck together, with a separate narrow neck inserted at the top. From the neck to the body, horizontal loop handles were subsequently attached. The body itself could be manufactured from two wheel-thrown bowls, which were subsequently joined together, but in this case they were most apparently made in a mould. A hole was punched through the body to insert the separately produced vessel neck, and clay added to the exterior to seal the joint between the neck and body. Afterwards the handles were added (Seif El-Din 2006: 15).

According to inscriptions found on three of the vessels, they were used to hold wine. All but one contained traces of its original content, and all still preserved traces of the original closure of the mouth, fixed over the handles as well as the vessel mouth itself. The inscriptions on the flasks offer invocations from gods and goddesses mentioned in the inscriptions on the vessels to the owner of the flask (Seif El-Din 2006: 16).

In terms of their decoration, the flasks were either left plain, or decorated with collars of geometrically moulded motifs, straight and wavy lines, and oval shapes. A column with a hieroglyphic inscription was placed on either the sides or in the middle of the flask. The inscriptions mention mainly but not exclusively deities from Lower Egypt. Among these gods and goddesses one encounters Ptah, Nefertem, Sekhmet, Isis, Thoth, Amun, Mut, Khonsu and Bastet (Seif El-Din 2006: 16).

These types of flasks were very well known around 600 BC in Sais and produced at Naukratis during the Twenty-sixth Dynasty (Masson 2007: 614, pl. XXVII). According to Aurellia Masson, the production of New Year's flasks at Naukratis was perhaps intended for a more local or regional market. Although a possible Naucratic origin has been suggested for a pilgrim flask found in Carthage (Stampolidis - Karageorghis 2003: 493). However, no exact parallel has so far been found among the fragments in fine yellow paste discovered at Naukratis itself. New Year's flasks tend to be perceived as purely Saite era products (664-525 BC). The cartouches incised on the body of these New Year's flasks often refer to Apries or Amasis, the two last important pharaohs of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty (Blanquet 1992: 52), or to the Divine Adoratrice Ankhnesneferibre (the God's wife of Amun, from around 586 to 525 BC; Caubet - Pierrat-Bonnefois 2005: 148-151, no. 398). Specimens discovered outside of Egypt date to seventh to sixth century BC contexts (Caubet - Pierrat-Bonnefois 2005: 151). These vessels have been distributed far across the Mediterranean and the Near East, but only a few examples, until now, have been recorded from Nubia (for the various examples found outside Egypt, see Hölbl 1979: 36; Felder 1988: 119). Recent excavations within Egypt have provided a few examples from slightly later contexts. For example in a late Twenty-sixth to early Twenty-seventh Dynasty context (Masson 2007: 614, pl. XXVII), and in a Persian era context at Ayn Manawir in the Kharga oasis (Wuttman *et al.* 1996: 429-430), but also in the priests' quarters of Karnak, with a date between the end of the Late Period and the early Ptolemaic era.

The type flasks discovered at Tell Tebilla generally date to the Late Period and early Ptolemaic times. Although most common in the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, in the case of the Tell Tebilla examples a more exact date, between the late fourth to the beginning of the third century BC

can be proposed, based on other ceramic material found *in situ*, including a torpedo amphora and basket handled amphorae (fig. 2).

In general, these flasks were probably meant to hold sacred (Nile) water, oil, or wine. Several examples of the flasks from Tell Tebilla bear a hieroglyphic inscription on the side referring to the god Ptah (flask nos. 1, 3, 7 and 8), with an invocation for a happy new year to the flask's owner. The choice for Ptah was most likely because of his associations with magic and healing, as well as his role as one of the major creation gods. On each side of the flask's neck, a baboon, the sacred animal of the god Thoth, the lord of time, is positioned. The day of the arrival of the Nile flood was a very crucial event, since it marked the beginning of the Egyptian calendar and the New Year. It took place in late July and it was the first day that the Sirius star could be seen early in the morning from the west. On that day, the water of the Nile was considered miraculous, and whoever drank it would cure their illness. Therefore, at that time, thousands of flasks were filled with water. The flasks could however also be used as a container for oil as Eva-Carola Felder (1988: 130) has argued. In both cases, the flask's content could be used in rituals or for healing. The New Year's celebration, the water and the colours used upon the flasks (*i.e.* green and blue) were all symbols of regeneration and therefore their combination on the flasks clearly suggests a function within renewal and regeneration rituals. The chemical analysis of the contents of one flask identified traces of honey, thus indicating a possible later reuse (Caubet – Pierrat-Bonnefois 2005: 151).

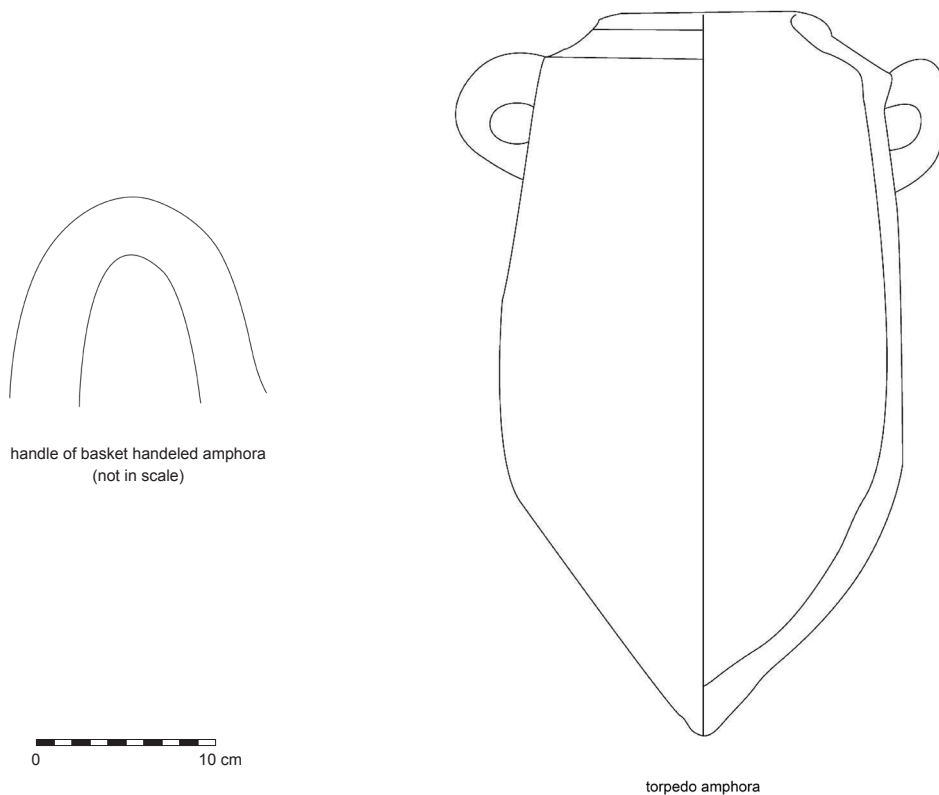


Fig. 2 Examples of pottery dated to the fourth century BC (drawing Imam Salah, © Mansoura University)

CATALOGUE

FLASK NO. 1 (FIG. 3)

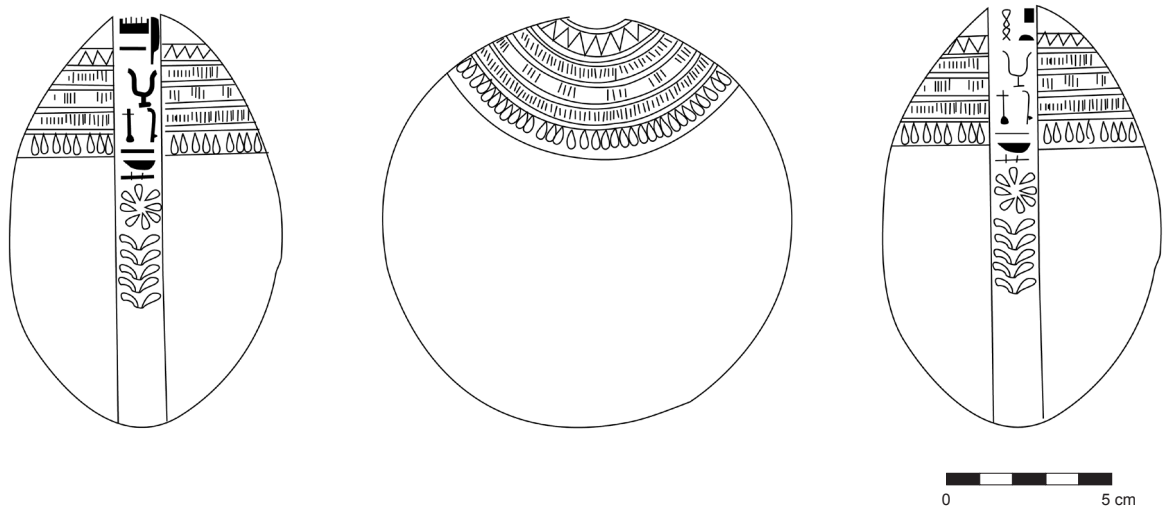


Fig. 3 Flask No. 1 (drawing Imam Salah, © Mansoura University)

Material: faience

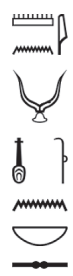
Height: 9 cm

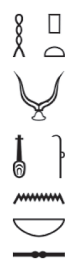
Description: A flask with a lenticular body, its spout is missing as well as the top of the neck. The upper part of the body on both sides is decorated with an incised collar very similar to the *wsh*-collar that was worn by men, women and deities in ceremonies and feasts. Moreover, it may have been worn by the owner of the flask who was offering it during the celebration of the New Year. This collar represented the primeval god Atum and his Ennead and it was a part of offering rites to the gods in temples (Handoussa 1981: 143–150). The *wsh*-collar consists of several rows composed of vegetal and geometric patterns covering most of the upper half of the flask, as it used to cover the majority of the wearer's chest, hence its designation of *wsh*, "wide", in reference to the fact that it covers a large area (Erman – Grapow 1957 I: 365 [16]).

This collar consists of five moulded decoration rows of various patterns that are separated by curved lines. The first line from the bottom has oval-shaped beads, the second row consists of modules in the form of a vaulted triangle without the base, separated by small shapes, while the third row has small circular beads. These beads may symbolize the seeds of plants that would grow due to the arrival of the inundation, which coincided with the celebration of the New Year. As some of those flasks were filled with floodwater, the *wsh*-collar decorated with various botanical elements found on most of the New Year's flasks clearly has a symbolic importance. Finally, the fourth and fifth row of the collar consist of vertical lines.

A band with an inscription occurs on both edges of the flask and it bears a New Year's formula invoking Ptah and Amun to grant a happy New Year to the flask's owner. This follows a fixed and specific pattern in positioning the New Year's formula on these flasks, where a band with an inscription is assigned to both edges of the flask containing a double formula that begins with the mention of one or more deities and the request to grant a happy New

Year to its owner. The texts are always written from right to left in vertical columns. On a few occasions, the text is written in vertical columns also on one side of the body. Both inscriptions end with a rosette flower and other floral patterns.

	<p><i>ʿImn wp rnp.t nfr:t n nb=s</i> “(May) Amun open a happy New Year to its owner”</p>
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	<p><i>Pth wp rnp.t nfr:t n nb=s</i> “(May) Ptah open a happy New Year to its owner”</p>
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FLASK NO. 2 (NO. 221) (FIG. 4)

Material: faience

Height: 12 cm

Description: A lentoid flask with a round body, it is missing its spout and the whole neck, while the body is decorated on the front and back with an incised collar consisting of five rows separated by double or triple curved lines. The first row consists of triangular leaves of plants, rows two to four of vertical lines, while the fifth row is similar to the first but in reverse.

The sideband has the New Year’s formula on both sides requesting a happy New Year from Amun and Nebethetepet. The goddess Nebethetepet occurs in the New Year’s formula on more than one occasion. This flask is for instance very similar to several found at Ayn Manawir in the Kharga oasis. These flasks are also engraved with two New Year’s formulas, one of which related to Amun and the other to Nebethetepet “who grants life” (*ʿImn wp rnp.t nfr:t n np=s; Nb.t-ḥtp.t di ʿnh*; Wuttmann *et al.* 1996: 430, Fig. 65). The goddess Nebethetepet is mentioned again in exactly the same formula on a flask from Tell Marqula in the Dakhla oasis: “Nebethetepet who gives life to its owner” (*Nb.t-ḥtp.t di ʿnh n nb=s*; Yamani 2002: 426). The side of the Tell Marqula flask is however decorated with a side strip with floral motives (Yamani 2002: 433).

On the Tell Tebilla flask no. 2, the name of Nebethetepet was written using the *nbw*-sign () instead of the *nb*-sign (). This manner of writing the name of the goddess first appeared in

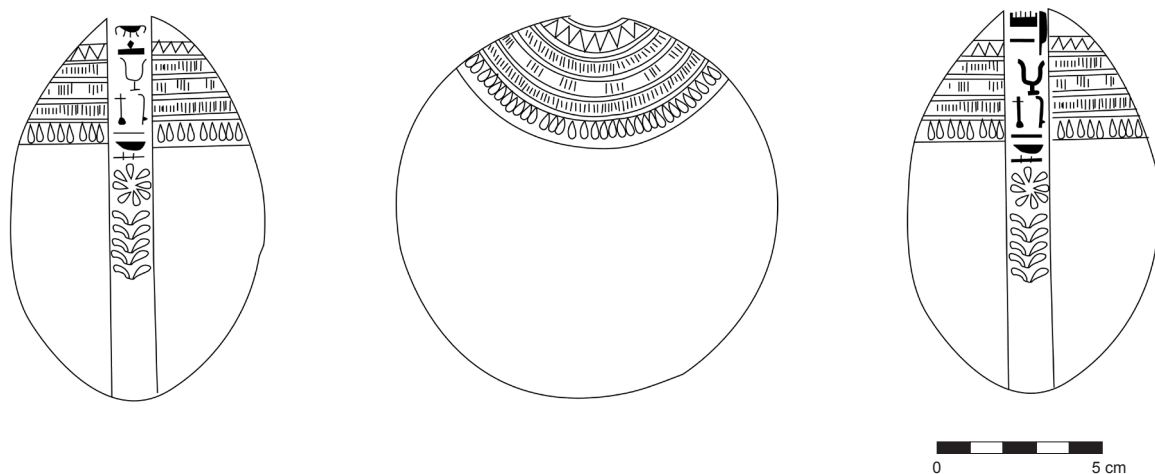




Fig. 4 Flask No. 2 (drawing Imam Salah, © Mansoura University)

the Twenty-sixth Dynasty on the Amasis naos from Athribis, and it also occurs in inscriptions from the temple of Hibis in the Kharga oasis (Davies 1953: pl. 17; Habachi 1982: 227, pl. 44b, Fig. 11; Yamani 2002: 426). In the Ptolemaic period, the *nbw*-sign was commonly used for writing the name of the goddess. This is for instance obvious in various inscriptions from the Hathor temple at Dendara (Dümichen 1865: 5–6; Chassinat – Daumas 1972: Pl. 639; Daumas 1988: 631).

In the Heliopolitan creation myth, Nebethetpet was associated with the creation process as she represented the hand of the god Atum (Champollion 1835–1845: pl. 78.2; Vandier 1964: 14; Porter – Moss 1991: 234, 277–278). She was the female element of the god Atum in the creation of the universe (Kamal 1916: 72, 75, 78; Vandier 1964: 59–60, 80, 123; Faulkner 1937: 166–171; Leitz 2002: 111–112). In addition, many texts refer to her as a creator goddess in her own right (Zivie 1986: 123, nos. 11–14, footnote 135; Vandier 1964: 139).

	<p><i>Imn wꜣ rnp.t nfr.t n nb=s</i> “(May) Amun open a happy New Year to its owner”</p>
	<p><i>Nb.t-ḥtp.t wꜣ rnp.t nfr.t n nb=s</i> “(May) Nebethetpet open a happy New Year to its owner”</p>

FLASK NO 3 (NO. 222) (FIG. 5)

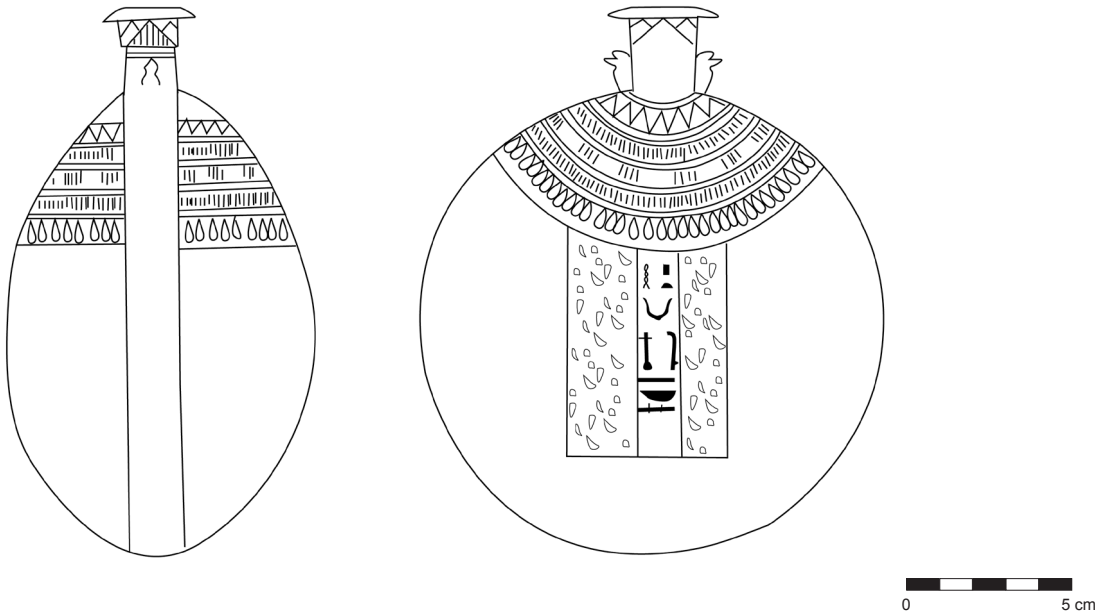


Fig. 5 Flask No. 3 (drawing Imam Salah, © Mansoura University)

Material: faience

Height: 15.0 cm; spout diameter: 3.5 cm

Description: A flask with a lenticular body and a short cylindrical neck terminating in a papyrus capital with incised details beneath the rim. Two figures of squatting baboons with paws to the mouth flank the neck on the shoulders and take the place of the handles. The upper part of the flask’s body is decorated with an incised collar consisting of three rows of floral and geometric patterns separated by double curved lines. The entire decoration is in blue, perhaps in order to imitate lapis lazuli. On one side of the body, two columns of decorations feature with a feather pattern, surrounding a single column of an inscription with the typical New Year’s formula invoking Ptah to grant a happy New Year.

<p>A vertical column of seven hieroglyphic symbols: a papyrus capital, a square, a semi-circle, a U-shaped symbol, a staff with a hook, a zigzag line, and a semi-circle with a horizontal line below it.</p>	<p><i>Pth wp rnp.t nfr.t n nb=s</i> “(May) Ptah open a happy New Year to its owner”</p>
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FLASK NO. 4 (NO. 223) (FIG. 6)

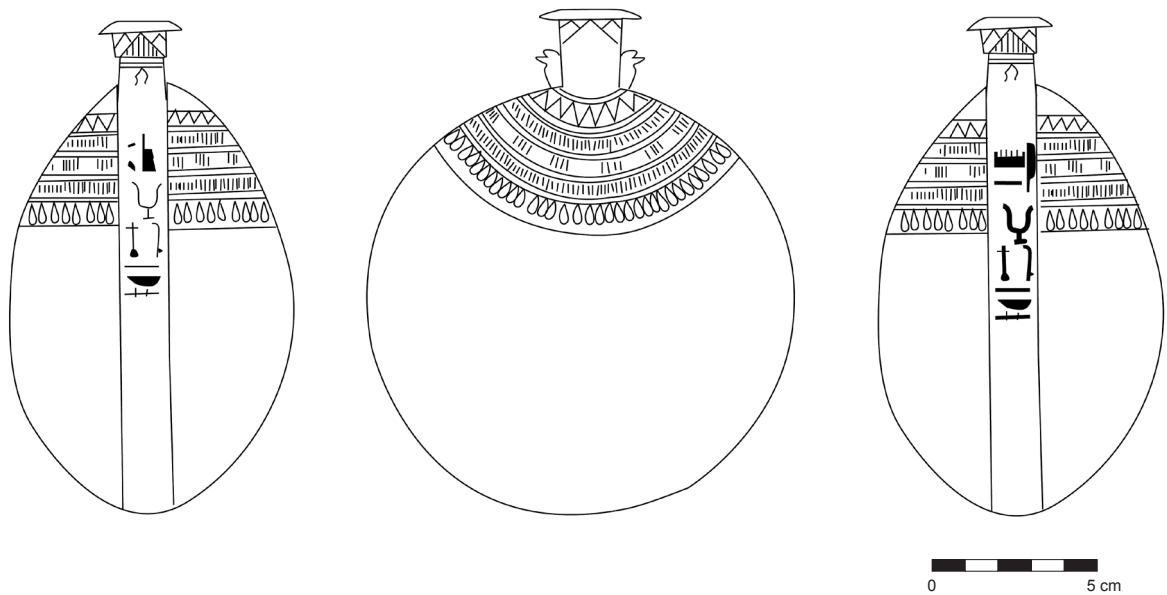


Fig. 6 Flask No. 4 (drawing Imam Salah, © Mansoura University)

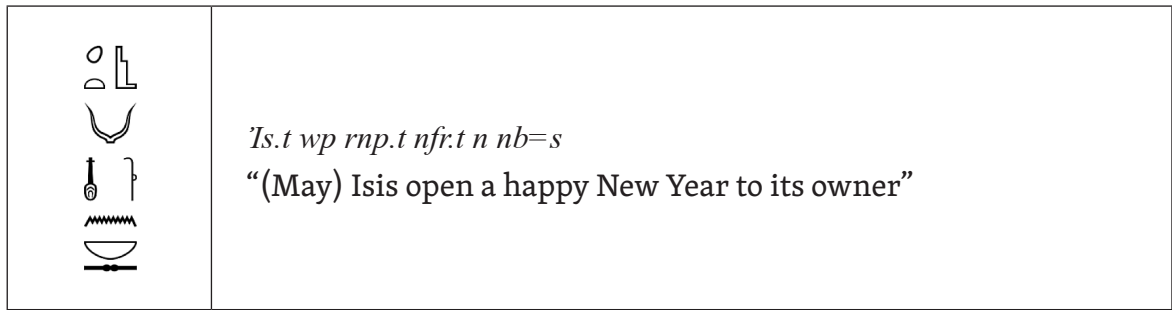
Material: faience

Height: 9.8 cm

Description: A lentoid flask with a round body, missing the spout and most of the handles. The flask’s body is decorated with a *wsh*-collar consisting of two rows of floral and geometric patterns, each row suspended by a double band of threads. The handles of the flask were in the form of a pair of baboons, but currently only the lower part of a single squatting baboon is still visible on the shoulder on one side of the neck.

The flask has a round text band on both edges. Both contain a hieroglyphic inscription representing the New Year’s formula with two different deities (Amun-Re and Isis) mentioned. The name of Isis is very regularly in the New Year’s formulas accompanied by that of Amun or Amun-Re. This is for example also the case on the flask Louvre Museum (E22604; Guichard 2005: 51).

	<p><i>ʿImn-R^c wp rnp.t nfr:t n nb=s</i> “(May) Amun-Re open a happy New Year to its owner”</p>
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FLASK NO. 5 (NO. 224) (FIG. 7)

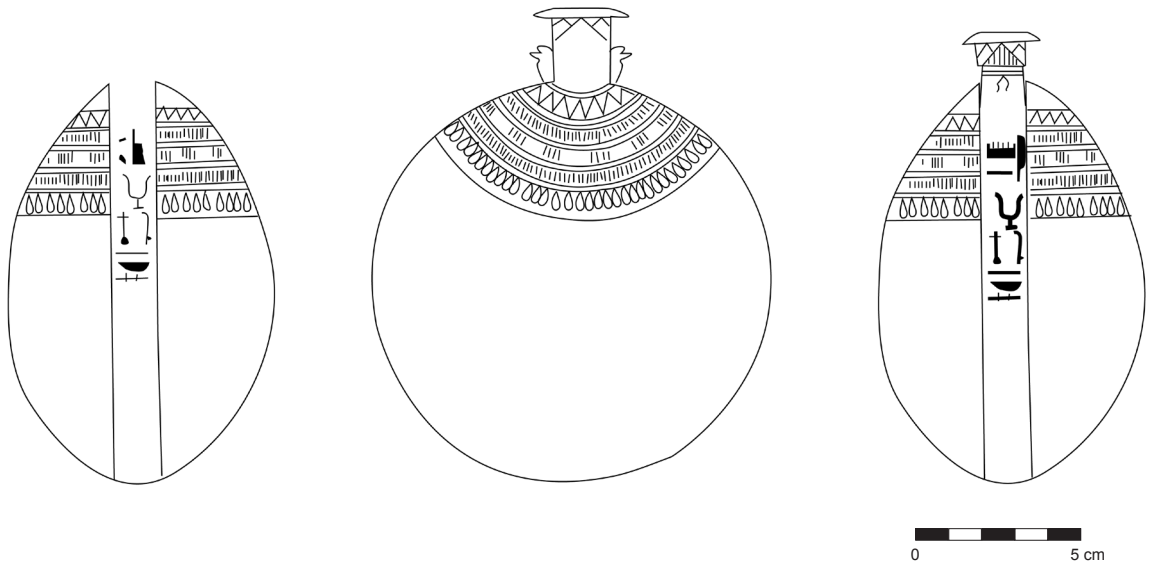
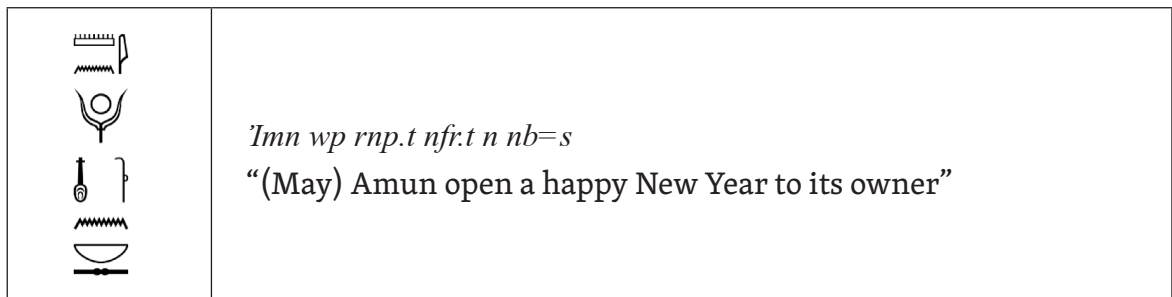


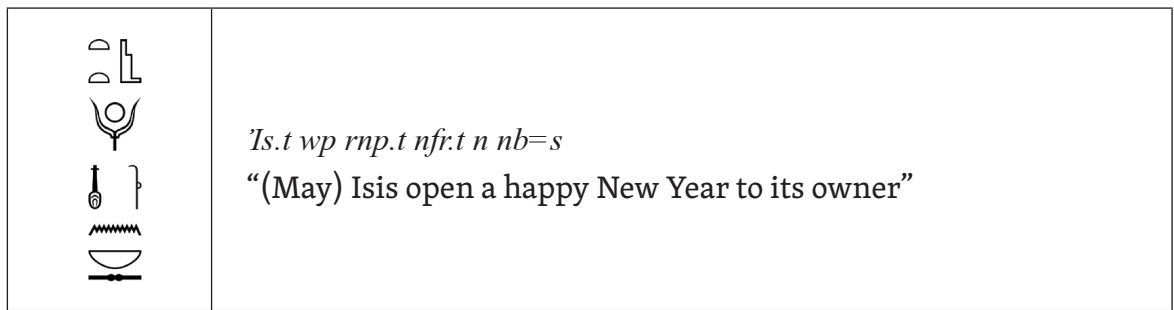
Fig. 7 Flask No. 5 (drawing Imam Salah, © Mansoura University)

Material: faience

Height: 15.0 cm; spout diameter: 2.5 cm

Description: A lentoid flask with a round body. The body was recreated from various fragments, with large parts still missing. The handles have a form in the guise of the head of a crocodile (Sobek?). The flask was decorated with a *wsh*-collar consisting of two rows of floral and geometric motifs and it is bearing the traditional formula on both its edges.





FLASK NO. 6 (NO. 225) (FIG. 8)

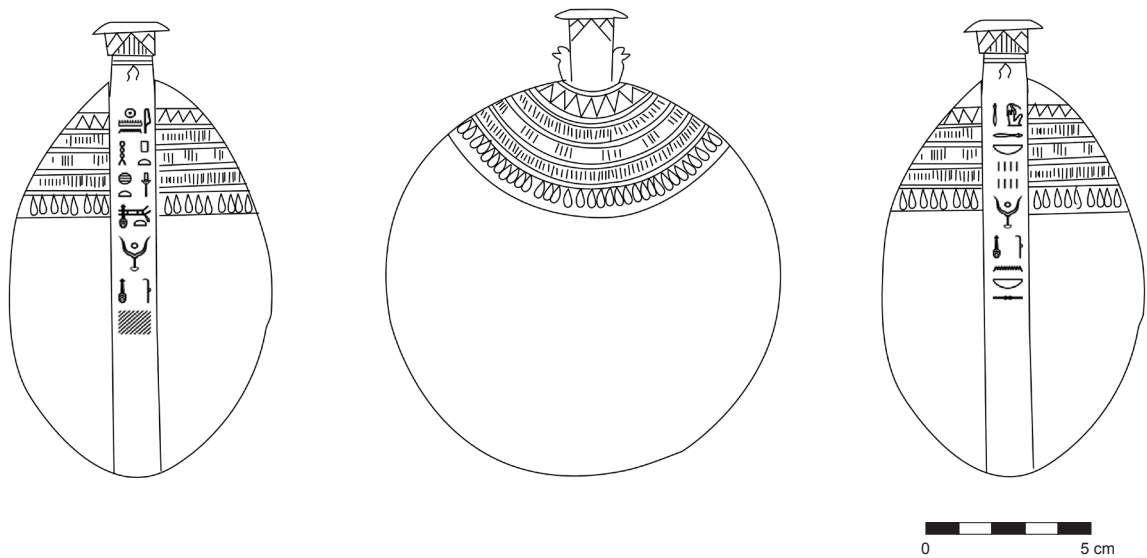



Fig. 8 Flask No. 6 (drawing Imam Salah, © Mansoura University)


Medium: faience

Height: 18.6 cm (max); spout diameter: 3.2 cm

Description: The flask consists of four reconstructed fragments. It has a narrow neck, ending in a papyrus capital representing the spout of the flask. Two small squatting baboons with paws to the mouth flank the neck on the shoulders and take the place of the handles. The upper part of the body is decorated with a *wsh*-collar, consisting of four rows of floral and geometric patterns. On its edges, the New Year’s formula lists numerous deities. The inscription ends with a cross-pattern decorative elements.

	<p><i>ʿImn-Rʿ Pth Šhm.t Nfr-tm wp rnp.t nfr:t [n nb=s]</i> “(May) Amun-Re, Ptah, Sakhmet and Nefertem open a happy New Year [to its owner]”</p>
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On a flask from the Twenty-sixth Dynasty that is currently preserved in the Louvre Museum (E22605), the name of the goddess Sakhmet is written with the same sign on one side of the flask, next to the deities Ptah and Amun-Re as well. On the other side, the deities Bastet, Neith, Khonsu and Amun are mentioned. The name of the god Nefertem appears in this form on a fragment of a New Year’s flask currently preserved in the Louvre Museum (E32834; Leitz 2002: 221).

	<p><i>Dḥwty ʿ3 ʿ3 nb Ḥmnw wp rnp.t nfr:t n nb=s</i> “(May) Thoth twice great, lord of Khemenu, opens a happy New Year to its owner”</p>
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FLASK NO 7 (NO. 226) (FIG. 9)

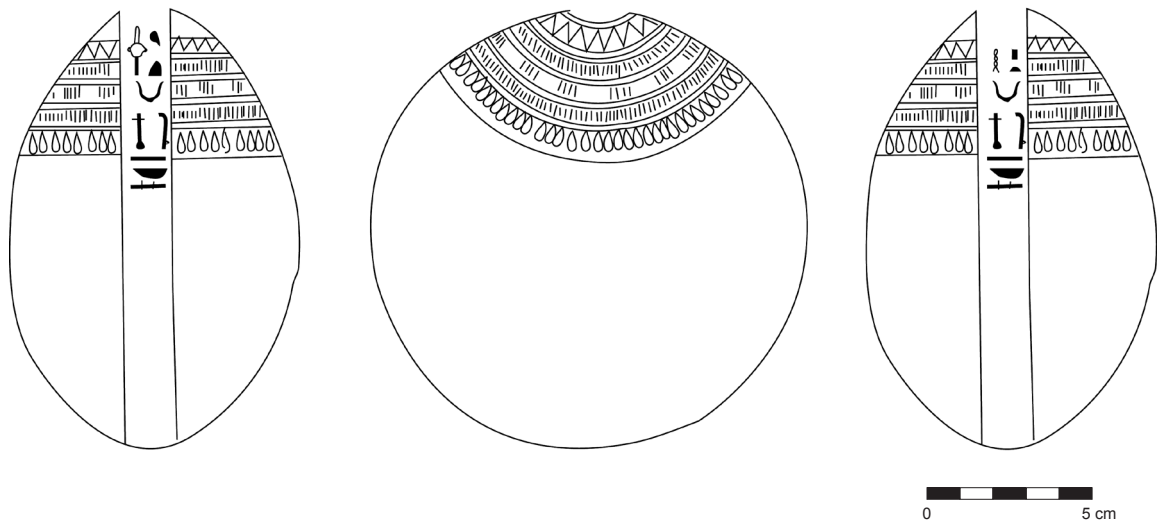


Fig. 9 Flask No. 7 (drawing Imam Salah, © Mansoura University)

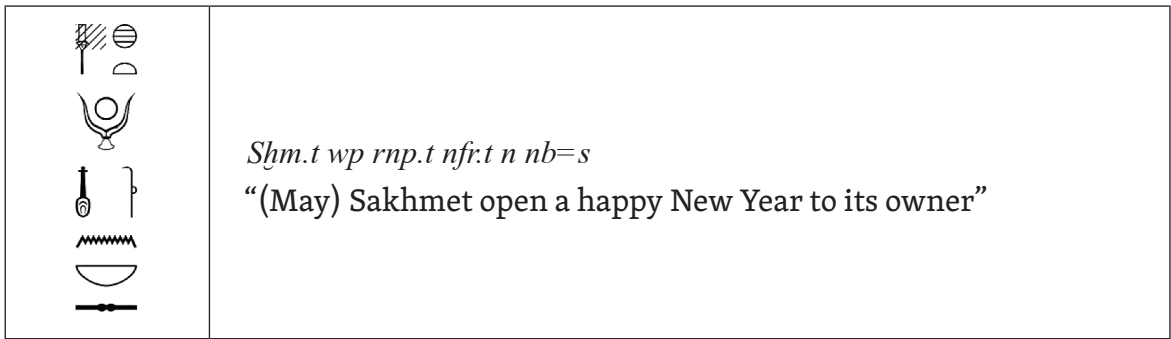
Material: faience

Height: 12 cm (max)

Description: Three reconstructed fragments form half of the flask, which is also missing its neck and spout. The preserved part is engraved with a *wsh*-collar consisting of five rows of varied patterns and separated by a curved line. The usual invocation formula appears on the sides of the flask including the names of Ptah and Sakhmet.

New Year’s formulae mentioning Ptah and Sekhmet already occur on these flasks since at least the New Kingdom (e.g. British Museum [EA43244]). In the Late Period, it became common to combine these deities within the inscriptions (e.g. British Museum [EA32592]) or representing their figures on the bodies of the flasks, as is the case on a flask in the Kharga Museum (Yamani 2002: 434-435; Quertinmont 2013: 28, no. 15, 29).

	<p><i>Ptḥ wp rnp.t nfr:t n nb=s</i> “(May) Ptah open a happy New Year to its owner”</p>
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The name of the goddess Sakhmet was in this instance written in the opposite direction (left to right) than the rest of the inscription (right to left). This was not a mistake of the engraver, as it occurs elsewhere as well. For example, on a flask in the British Museum (1850,0227,58), the name of Ptah was written in the opposite direction to the remainder of the formula (for the relationship of Sakhmet and the New Year, see, Germond 1981 and 1986).

FLASK NO. 8 (NO. 229) (FIG. 10)

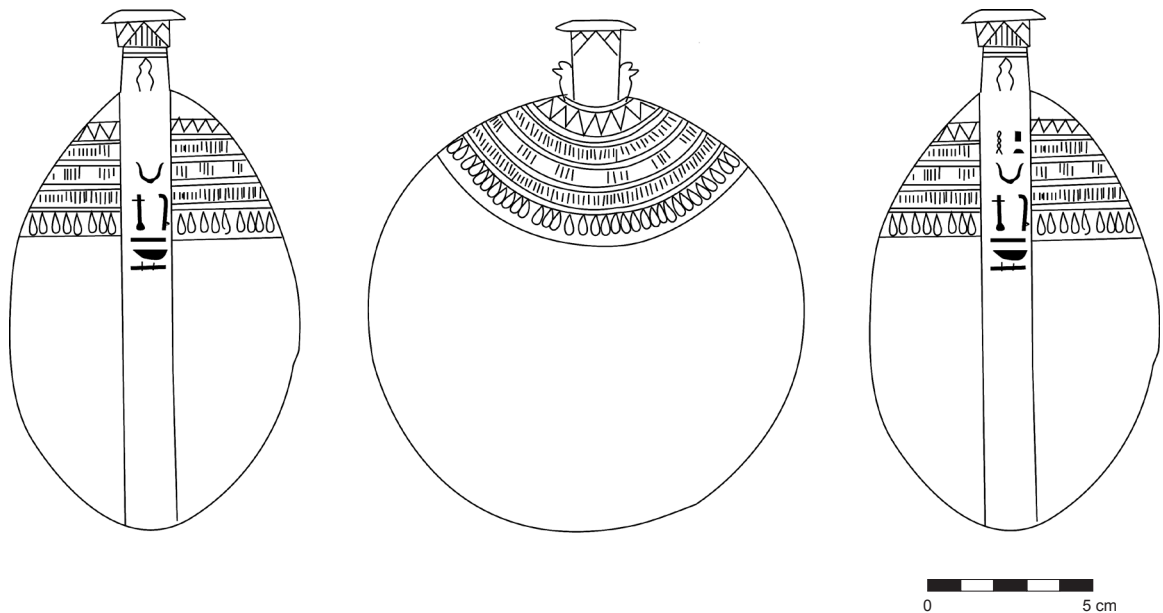


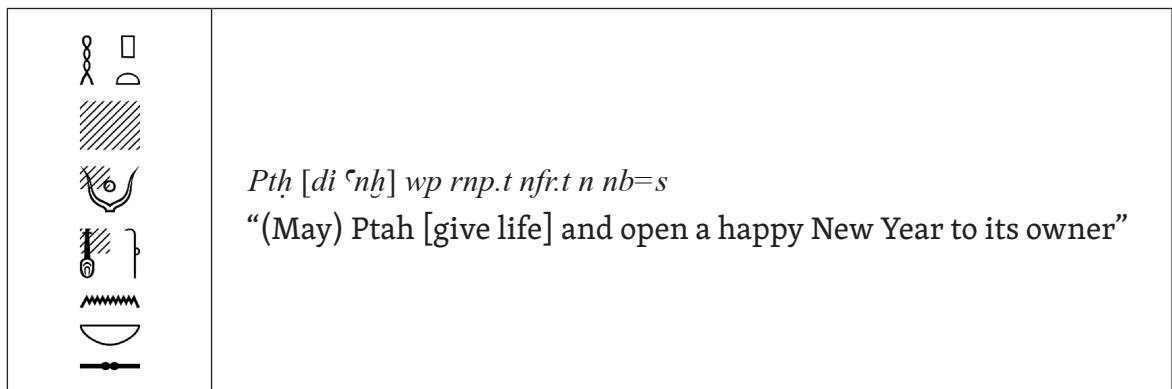
Fig. 10 Flask No. 8 (drawing Imam Salah, © Mansoura University)

Material: faience

Height: 17 cm

Description: The flask was reconstructed from many fragments, and it is still missing some parts of the body. Its spout is in the form of a blooming papyrus flower with incised details beneath the now partially missing rim. Two small squatting baboons with paws to the mouth flank the flask’s neck on its shoulders and the remains of a *wsh*-collar appear on the body. The collar consists of four rows of floral and geometric patterns.

The New Year’s formula inscribed is remarkably different from all other flasks thus far described. On the one side, the formula lacks the usual beginning, as no deity is mentioned. The other inscription only has the name of Ptah, as the rest of the text has not been recovered. This leads us to suggest two possibilities for the interpretation. Firstly, the formula could have been inscribed without specifying a deity, as is common on other flasks as well (e.g. British Museum 1850,0227,57). Secondly, the formula is related to the god Ptah, but the text was inscribed over the two text columns, with the first one mentioning the name of the god, possibly with the now missing addition “who grants life”. A comparable example is a flask in the Kharga Museum mentioning both Ptah and Sakhmet (Kharga Museum no. 807; Yamani 2002: 426). The second column then contained the typical continuation of the invocation.



CONCLUSION

During the excavation of Mansoura University and the Daqahlia inspectorate (SCA) of Mastaba no. 4 at Tell Tebilla in 2018, (fragments of) eight New Year’s flasks were discovered within the rooms and central hall of the tomb. The flasks could be dated to the early Ptolemaic Period. Due to the scarcity of production of this type of flasks, it could not be ascertained whether these flasks were manufactured locally or imported from elsewhere. New Year’s flasks are still among the scarcest archaeological finds in Egyptian archaeological contexts.

The concept of renewal is expressed in the form, decoration and inscriptions associated with these flasks. The round shape of the flask’s body brings up associations with the sun disk, a daily very clearly visual symbol of rebirth at sunrise. The manufacture of the handles of the flask in the form of two baboons in a squatting position around the flask’s mouth was likewise an important symbol of renewal and rebirth, as baboons praised the sunrise every morning.

The decorative patterns applied on the body of the flask in the guise of a collar referred to the renewal of the agricultural cycle with the arrival of the Nile flood at the opening of the year. The individual rows of the collar on the flask consisted for instance of various floral patterns, containing both plant seeds and flowers, often exclusively painted in green and blue. The flask’s spout moreover took the form of a papyrus capital or a blooming lotus.

The New Year’s formula engraved on the flasks was associated with specific deities that had clear roles in Egyptian creation myths as well as in terms of motherhood and (re)birth. The god Ptah is the most frequently mentioned deity in the New Year’s formulas, most likely

following his role as one of the central creator deities (see *e.g.* the Memphite theology). He regularly appears with the other two members of his triad: his wife Sakhmet and their son Nefertem. The occurrence of the goddess Isis in several inscriptions on the New Year's flasks is also of great significance. It undoubtedly refers to her role within the resurrection of Osiris and the conception and birth of their son Horus.

Unfortunately, we were unable to identify the owner of these flasks, but suggest it belongs to a high official or a priest associated with the worship of Osiris in his local form as Osiris *Hsj*.

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Ayman Wahby

Mansoura University

Mohamed Ali Abdelmawla

Mansoura University

Sherief Abdelmoniem

Faculty of Archaeology, AinShams University

sherif_arch@yahoo.com