Eastern Desert Ware: fine pottery from an arid wasteland

Archaeological excavations in the deserts between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea have produced examples of a fine type of pottery which in the past has been associated with a people known as the Blemmyes. Hans Barnard reassesses the evidence.

Archaeological research in the Egyptian part of the desert between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea has, in the recent past, often had to be restricted for security reasons. However, between 1991 and 2001, restrictions were eased and several expeditions, in the course of their work, encountered a remarkable corpus of ceramic vessels now identified as Eastern Desert Ware. Most of the contexts in which Eastern Desert Ware was found could be dated to the fourth-sixth centuries AD by associated pottery, coins or radiocarbon dates. However, this ware may have been produced as early as the second century AD and have continued in production until as late as the eighth century AD. Most of the vessels belonging to this corpus were relatively small bowls and cups, with proportionally thin walls, made without the use of a potter’s wheel. Their surfaces were carefully wiped, smoothed or burnished (polished) and decorated with impressed or incised patterns. These were often remarkably asymmetric and frequently augmented with a white inlay or a partial red slip. Occasionally, slight modifications appear to have been made to the shape of the vessels to enhance the decorative pattern, or elements of the design were applied after the vessels were fired. With such a distinctive appearance these vessels must have stood out, especially when used as serving vessels, as can be inferred from their shape.

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Eastern Desert Ware from Sayala (KHM 76918 and KHM 77217, courtesy of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna) and Wadi Qina (P835 and P840, courtesy of the Napstek Museum in Prague), two Late Roman (Byzantine) settlements in the Dodecaechion (Lower Nubia)
report on his visit to Lower Nubia but the only known sources of this gemstone were in the Mons Smaragdus area, far from Lower Nubia and indeed the Nile Valley. It is also noteworthy that the son of a Blemmye mentioned in one of the texts is identified as being a Megabari in another text. A conclusion that seems secure, however, is that small groups of pastoral nomads roamed the desert between the Nile and the Red Sea in antiquity, just as they do at present. As today, there seems to have been some confusion concerning the ethnic units comprising these groups.

With only a few exceptions, Eastern Desert Ware is made of a rusty red to orange fabric with white mineral and very few organic inclusions. Many of the decorations were probably made with the thorn of a date palm, which has a triangular section. The inspection of thin-sections of a number of sherds, with a polarizing microscope, showed most of the inclusions to be poorly sorted, angular quartz or feldspars. The elemental composition of both the paste and the inclusions is currently being studied by mass spectrometry, but the preliminary interpretation of the data indicates that the vessels were made in a number of geologically different places. A series of experiments, aimed at replicating Eastern Desert Ware, has proved that the production of such pottery by nomadic groups is quite feasible.

All of the ancient sherds studied so far appear to have preserved fatty acids in their ceramic matrix. As these are common in animal and vegetable fats and oils, the determination of their origin is difficult. It is also unclear whether these residues represent the first food to come into contact with the vessels, during which the matrix became saturated, or are the result of the trapping of different molecules each time the vessel was used. Possible sources of the organic residues include not only food, but also trash surrounding discarded vessels, and human remains decaying close to their grave goods. However, the presence of fatty acids in Eastern Desert Ware is interpreted as indicating that these vessels were used for food and not solely as receptacles for water or as grave goods. Recently a search has been initiated for proteins attached to the ceramic matrix and this may shed light on many of these uncertainties. If they can be found and identified, proteins will be far more specific than fatty acids.

The evidence summarised above indicates that Eastern Desert Ware is the result of the household production of a utilitarian ware by groups of (pastoral) nomads whenever the need occurred or the opportunity presented itself. Its occurrence in the archaeological record coincides with the large influx of traders, miners and quarrymen during Graeco-Roman times. Their interaction with the indigenous inhabitants of the desert seems to have provided the infrastructure that facilitated the accumulation, and possibly also the production, of these remarkable ceramic artefacts.

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