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VOLUME 55 / 2020

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This publication is made possible by a gift from Assunta Sommella Peluso, Ada Peluso, and Romano I. Peluso, in memory of Ignazio Peluso. Additional support is provided by The Peter Jay Sharp Foundation.

The *Metropolitan Museum Journal* is published annually by The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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Manuscripts submitted for the *Journal* and all correspondence concerning them should be sent to journalsubmissions@metmuseum.org. Guidelines for contributors are given on p. 6.

Published in association with the University of Chicago Press. Individual and institutional subscriptions are available worldwide. Please direct all subscription inquiries, back issue requests, and address changes to: University of Chicago Press, Journals Division, P.O. Box 37005, Chicago, IL 60637-0005, USA. Phone: (877) 705-1878 (U.S. and Canada) or (773) 753-3347 (international), fax: (877) 705-1879 (U.S. and Canada) or (773) 753-0811 (international), email: subscriptions@press.uchicago.edu, website: www.journals.uchicago.edu

ISBN 978-0-226-75393-5
(University of Chicago Press)
ISSN 0077-8958 (print)
ISSN 2169-3072 (online)

Library of Congress
Catalog Card Number 68-28799

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The authors are grateful to the peer reviewers of the *Metropolitan Museum Journal* for their suggestions and assistance.

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Typefaces: Calibre, Lyon, and Harriet
Printed on Creator Silk, 150 gsm
Separations by Professional Graphics, Inc., Rockford, Illinois
Printed by Brizzolis, Madrid, and bound by Ramos, Madrid
Printing and binding coordinated by Ediciones El Viso, Madrid

Front and back cover illustration: Edward Ruscha (American, b. 1937). *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966. See fig. 9, p. 68.

Illustration on p. 2: John Haberle (American, 1856–1933). Detail of *A Bachelor's Drawer*, 1890–94. See fig. 1, pp. 44–45.

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ABBREVIATIONS

MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*
MMJ *Metropolitan Museum Journal*

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.

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New Insights into an Old Collection: Ptolemaic Pottery from Hibis (Kharga Oasis)

JAMES C. R. GILL

In the early twentieth century The Metropolitan Museum of Art was granted a concession in the north-central part of Kharga Oasis, an area located approximately 125 miles west of Thebes in the Egyptian Western Desert (see fig. 2).¹ Archaeological investigation was begun there in 1908 under the direction of Herbert E. Winlock (1884–1950) on behalf of the Museum.² Several nearby sites were documented, including the cemetery of Bagawat, the temples of Hibis and Nadura, Ain et-Turba, and Gebel Teir.³ The report on the work carried out at Hibis was published by Winlock in 1941. It included details about the architecture of the temple and the surrounding buildings as well as descriptions of the inscriptional evidence, statuary, bronze figures, and coins; however, the pottery discovered during the excavations was described only briefly in his account.⁴

The work in Kharga was interrupted by World War I, and it seems that during this hiatus the pottery from the excavations at Hibis was disturbed. Winlock described the situation in his report on the excavations: “During the war years—1914 to 1918—the Oasis was threatened by Western Desert tribes, and the Expedition house was occupied as an outpost of the British Army. Extraordinary care was taken of our property, and little was mislaid except the pottery which had still to be mended and drawn and for which the preliminary field notes were very scanty.”⁵ The situation likely explains why detailed information about the pottery was omitted from Winlock’s publication. In his account of a journey made to Dakhleh in 1908, Winlock described the pottery he found at each of the sites he visited and also published drawings and photographs of this material.⁶ Presumably, if he had had access to the Hibis pottery and the associated notes and drawings, he would have described this likewise in his 1941 report.

In 1925, the material stored in the expedition house, which evidently included a mixed array of pottery—some of it from Hibis—was shipped to the Museum, and the house was subsequently demolished.⁷ It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the pottery was

accessioned and, owing to the presence of recognizably Coptic pieces, the entire collection was eventually moved to the Department of Medieval Art.⁸

REDISCOVERING POTTERY FROM HIBIS

The pottery discussed here came to my attention a few years ago when I was searching for material from the Metropolitan Museum’s excavations at Hibis. My research at the time was concerned with the Ptolemaic pottery from Dakhleh Oasis as well as Ptolemaic activity in the Western Oases more broadly.⁹ It was already established that the Hibis temple had been operational during the Ptolemaic Period (ca. 332–30 B.C.), as evidenced by the additions made by Ptolemaic rulers and by the discovery of Ptolemaic coins and ostraka at the site.¹⁰ There, Winlock reported that he had found Greek pottery, such as a black-and-white lekythos and a black polished ware bowl, as well as local globular cooking pots and bottles with pointed bases.¹¹ None of the pottery was ever published in detail, and so I was interested to learn whether any of it had survived and, if so, whether or not it was now held in the Museum.

A search of the Met’s online catalogue brought up a collection of “Coptic” pottery from Kharga, in

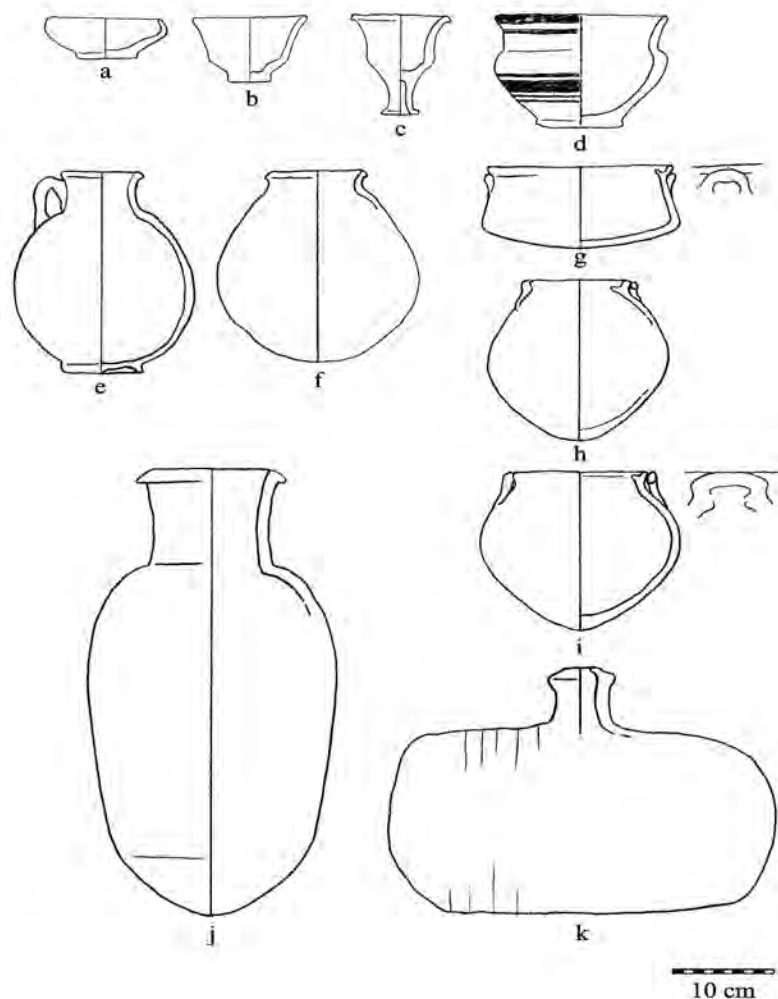


fig. 1 Keg. South Kom, upper level, Hibis (Kharga Oasis), Egypt. Early Ptolemaic, late 4th to 3rd century B.C. Earthenware, $9\frac{7}{16} \times 14\frac{15}{16} \times 7\frac{3}{4}$ in. (23.9 × 38 × 19.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.10.20.266)



fig. 2 Map of Egypt showing the locations of sites mentioned in the text

fig. 3 Renderings of Ptolemaic pottery vessels from Hibis (Kharga Oasis), Egypt. Adapted from "Temple of Hibis: Pottery (Sketches)," ca. 1909–12. (a) sheet 4, bottom right; (b) sheet 17, top center; (c) sheet 16, second from top; (d) sheet 3, bottom right; (e) sheet 5, center; (f) sheet 7, second from top; (g) sheet 1, top left; (h) sheet 7, third from top; (i) sheet 16, bottom; (j) sheet 24, top; (k) sheet 8, center



which it was possible to recognize numerous vessels of Ptolemaic date. It was evident that this pottery was the product of the Metropolitan Museum's twentieth-century excavations in Kharga, yet because of the lack of documentation, there was no way to determine whether the pottery had come from Hibis, Ain et-Turba, Bagawat, or elsewhere.

In a happy coincidence, the field notes and records of the Museum's expedition to Kharga had begun to be digitized and made available online about this time, and I was pleased to discover that the archive included a folder of pottery sketches from Hibis.¹² This folder contains 28 pages of sketches, with 144 drawings of vessels that were unearthed during excavation of the South Kom (mound), encompassing Southern Building II and the area to the east, and clearance of the area northeast of the temple. In this material, forms ranging in date from the Late Period (ca. 664–332 B.C.) to the Coptic Period (ca. A.D. 395–668) can be recognized, including a number of Ptolemaic forms. This revelation alone is

important, as illustrations of the pottery excavated at Hibis by Winlock were never published; however, it is made even more significant by the fact that some of the individual drawings can be matched with specific vessels in the Museum's collection.¹³ Thus, some of the vessels in the Met can now be identified as finds from the early twentieth-century excavations at Hibis.¹⁴

THE PTOLEMAIC VESSELS

The works presented below represent all the Ptolemaic pottery vessels in the Metropolitan Museum's collection that can be shown to have come from the site of Hibis. Other Ptolemaic forms can be recognized among the original Hibis pottery sketches, and although it has not been possible to match these with vessels in the Museum's collection, a few of them are included here in order to demonstrate the range of Ptolemaic forms encountered at Hibis. Furthermore, there are additional vessels from Kharga in the Museum's collection that can be ascribed a Ptolemaic date; however, it has

fig. 4 Carinated bowl. South Kom, lower level, Hibis (Kharga Oasis), Egypt. Ptolemaic, ca. 332–30 B.C. Earthenware, $2\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{9}{16}$ in. (6.4 × 11 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.10.20.303)

fig. 5 Incurved bowl. South Kom, upper level, Hibis (Kharga Oasis), Egypt. Ptolemaic, ca. 332–30 B.C. Earthenware, $1\frac{1}{8} \times 4\frac{9}{16}$ in. (4.2 × 11.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.10.20.318)

not been possible to match these with any of the pottery sketches, so it is unclear whether they derive from the excavations at Hibis or one of the neighboring sites.¹⁵

According to the notations on the pottery sketches, this collection of Ptolemaic pottery from Hibis comes specifically from the excavations in the South Kom, with one additional example from the clearance of the area northeast of the temple. The South Kom appears to equate to the mound containing Southern Building II, as well as the area to the east of this, which, according to Winlock, was a Ptolemaic rubbish dump.¹⁶ The vessels presented here represent common Ptolemaic forms encountered at sites throughout Egypt. In particular, these vessels find close parallels in the Ptolemaic pottery from neighboring Dakhleh Oasis, which has recently been published in detail.¹⁷

The keg, or *siga*, with asymmetrical body and short neck (25.10.20.266) (figs. 1, 3k) is a form that appears to have originated in the Southern Oasis (Kharga and Dakhleh) during the Late Period. It continued to be produced through the Ptolemaic and Roman periods and is still made today.¹⁸ The Late Period kegs exhibit a very tall neck and elongated body, whereas the Roman examples have a short neck and very large, barrel-shaped body. The Ptolemaic kegs tend to have a medium-to-short neck and a body that is somewhere between the Late Period and Roman forms. This example should be dated to the Early Ptolemaic Period (late fourth to third century B.C.), as it is comparable to Dakhleh Form 96;¹⁹ however, a slightly earlier date is possible.²⁰

The small carinated bowl (25.10.20.303) (figs. 3b, 4) can be equated to Dakhleh Form 38, which is regularly encountered within Ptolemaic assemblages in that oasis. Likewise, the small incurved bowl with a ring base (25.10.20.318) (figs. 3a, 5) is a common feature of

Ptolemaic assemblages in both Dakhleh and the Nile Valley, and can be equated to Dakhleh Form 11. Such vessels could have been used as bowls, lids, or even lamps. The footed cup (25.10.23.110) (figs. 3c, 6) is similar in form to a kantharos found at Mut al-Kharab (Dakhleh Form 42), albeit without the handles.

The single-handled jar (25.10.23.116) (figs. 3e, 7) can be equated with Dakhleh Forms 71–73, as well as Form 74, which has a very similar shape, although with two handles. These forms are usually cream-slipped, like MMA 25.10.23.116. The globular jar (25.10.20.154) (figs. 3f, 8) is an example of Dakhleh Form 69, which is common in Dakhleh Oasis and is also encountered elsewhere in Kharga.²¹ Jars with this form were often used as cooking vessels, as evidenced by the fact that they are regularly soot-blackened. It appears that MMA 25.10.20.154 is made from a shale-rich fabric equivalent to Dakhleh Fabric B3, which was commonly used for vessels of this form in Dakhleh.²² Another common cooking vessel form in Dakhleh is the two-handled pot (25.10.23.119) (figs. 3h, 9), which can be equated to Dakhleh Form 48. These bowls have an internal ledge at the rim, designed to receive a lid. They occur with and without handles throughout Ptolemaic and Roman-Period contexts in Dakhleh; however, in Dakhleh, those vessels with two horizontal loop-handles are a hallmark of the Ptolemaic Period. By the Roman Period, such vessels have either small vertical handles or none at all.

Lastly, the large jar with the modeled rim (25.10.20.105) (figs. 3j, 10) was found in an area that was cleared northeast of the temple. This is a common Ptolemaic form, comparable to Dakhleh Form 64b, which is often decorated with painted designs comprising linear, geometric, and floral elements. Indeed, the Museum's jar bears faint traces of black-painted decoration on a cream-slipped background. Although the



fig. 6 Footed cup. South Kom, lower level, Hibis (Kharga Oasis), Egypt. Ptolemaic, ca. 332–30 B.C. Cream-slipped earthenware, $4 \times 3\frac{3}{4}$ in. (10.1 × 9.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.10.23.110)



6

fig. 7 Single-handed jug. South Kom, upper level, Hibis (Kharga Oasis), Egypt. Ptolemaic, ca. 332–30 B.C. Cream-slipped earthenware, $7\frac{5}{8} \times 6\frac{1}{2}$ in. (19.4 × 16.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.10.23.116)



7

fig. 8 Globular jar. South Kom, upper level, Hibis (Kharga Oasis), Egypt. Ptolemaic, ca. 332–30 B.C. Red-slipped earthenware, $7\frac{15}{16} \times 7\frac{3}{8}$ in. (20.2 × 18.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.10.20.154)



9

fig. 9 Two-handed cooking pot. South Kom, upper level, Hibis (Kharga Oasis), Egypt. Ptolemaic, ca. 332–30 B.C. Earthenware, $6\frac{5}{16} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$ in. (16 × 19.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.10.23.119)



8

original design is difficult to make out, it is evident that there were originally floral motifs on the neck and shoulder, narrow and wide bands on the middle body, and a possible floral motif on the lower body. There also seems to have been some kind of geometric pattern on the upper body, perhaps a checkerboard pattern, which may have framed a vertical floral motif. Despite the difficulties in determining the exact original design, it is clear that this is an example of the painted style common in Dakhleh and Kharga during the Ptolemaic Period, and indeed also in the Nile Valley.²³

Several other Ptolemaic forms can be identified among the Hibis pottery sketches, although it has not been possible to match these to objects in the Museum's catalogue. It is likely that the original vessels were lost when the expedition house was occupied during the war. Some of the drawings are included here (figs. 3d, g, i), as they represent good examples of forms that are encountered in Dakhleh and serve to further illustrate the diversity of Ptolemaic forms encountered at Hibis. The carinated bowl (fig. 3d) is equivalent to Dakhleh Forms 40–41, and examples are frequently decorated



fig. 10 Necked jar. Area northeast of temple, Hibis (Kharga Oasis), Egypt. Ptolemaic, ca. 332–30 B.C. Cream-slipped earthenware and paint, 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (42.9 × 23.2 cm), Diam. of rim 5 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (12.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.10.20.105)

with linear designs, as is the case here. The two cooking pots (figs. 3g [cf. Dakhleh Form 49], i [cf. Dakhleh Form 47]) represent additional variants on the cooking pot described above (figs. 3h, 9). There are other drawings in the folder that are not presented here that could arguably be ascribed a Ptolemaic date as well.

CONCLUSION

The (re)discovery of Ptolemaic pottery from Hibis demonstrates that new information can be gained by revisiting old excavations and researching long-held museum collections.²⁴ Furthermore, the current study highlights the usefulness of digitization projects that make museum archives available online so that new connections and discoveries may be made.

It is interesting to note the close similarities between the Ptolemaic pottery from Hibis and that from other sites in both Kharga and Dakhleh. The likenesses point to a shared pottery tradition for the two oases, in which the same range of forms was produced in similar local clays. Yet despite these resemblances, there is evidence of decorative styles associated with either Dakhleh or Kharga, but not common to both.²⁵ Certain specific pottery motifs found elsewhere in Kharga are not found in Dakhleh, and the decorated vessel in figure 10 provides a further example.²⁶ Granted, the decoration is poorly preserved, but from the visible traces it is clear that the design is one not encountered so far in Dakhleh. It perhaps bears greater resemblance to the painted pottery from the Theban region, and thus it is entirely possible that the vessel is an import from the Nile Valley; however, this cannot be determined without closer examination.²⁷ Altogether, the identification of the pottery at the Metropolitan Museum complements the study of other Ptolemaic material from Hibis, such as the coins, ostraka, and temple inscriptions, and helps to complete our understanding of the Ptolemaic phase of occupation at the site.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Marsha Hill and Andrea Achi for providing information about the Metropolitan Museum's collection.

JAMES C. R. GILL

*Adjunct Research Fellow, Centre for Ancient Cultures,
Monash University*

NOTES

- 1 The Met's excavations in Kharga Oasis were the subject of "Art and Peoples of the Kharga Oasis," an exhibition held at the Museum from October 11, 2017, to June 7, 2020.
- 2 Winlock subsequently served as director of the Met, from 1932 to 1939.
- 3 For a summary of this work, see Ratliff and Schimke 2015, pp. 4–6.
- 4 Winlock 1941, p. 42.
- 5 Ibid., p. vi.
- 6 See, for example, Winlock 1936, pp. 15, 18, 21, and pls. VI, VII.
- 7 Ratliff and Schimke 2015, p. 6. Members of the Met's expedition continued to document the Hibis Temple throughout the early 1920s and into the 1930s, with the final work completed in 1937. For a summary, see *ibid.*
- 8 Marsha Hill, personal communication, September 2014.
- 9 Gill 2016.
- 10 Winlock 1941, pp. 33–39. Earlier, Winlock had observed, "The whole site seems to have flourished throughout the Ptolemaic period." Winlock 1910, p. 226. For the ostraka, see Kaplony-Heckel 2000.
- 11 Winlock 1941, p. 42.
- 12 "Temple of Hibis: Pottery (Sketches)," ca. 1909–12.
- 13 This has been achieved by comparing the form and measurements of each vessel with its respective drawing.
- 14 The Met's collection of pottery from Kharga is currently being prepared for publication by Andrea Achi and Gillian Pyke.
- 15 Examples include MMA 25.10.23.111, 25.10.20.341, 25.10.23.113, and 25.10.20.118.
- 16 Winlock 1941, p. 42.
- 17 Gill 2016. The Dakhleh Forms referred to in this article are outlined in *ibid.*, chap. 3.7. Dakhleh Oasis is located approximately 50 miles west of Kharga Oasis.
- 18 See Hope 2000 and Gill n.d./a (forthcoming).
- 19 See Gill n.d./a (forthcoming). MMA 25.10.20.266 can be equated with Gill's Type B1 or B2 kegs.
- 20 In Dakhleh, this rim shape is encountered in Ptolemaic contexts. However, similar forms have been found in southern Kharga and are dated to the fifth to fourth century B.C.; see Marchand 2007, figs. 10–13, 17.
- 21 Ibid., fig. 37; Dunand, Ibrahim, and Lichtenberg 2012, fig. 176.
- 22 Gill 2016, p. 50.
- 23 Ibid., pp. 52–57; Schreiber 2003.
- 24 This has also been demonstrated by the recent (re)discovery of ostraka from Hibis. See Bagnall and Tallet 2015.
- 25 For the Dakhleh style, see Gill n.d./b (forthcoming).
- 26 For examples of motifs found in Kharga but not in Dakhleh, see Marchand 2007, figs. 38, 40, 41. The last is encountered on at least three vessels and so far appears to be unique to Kharga.
- 27 For example, Schreiber 2003, pl. 11, no. 135.

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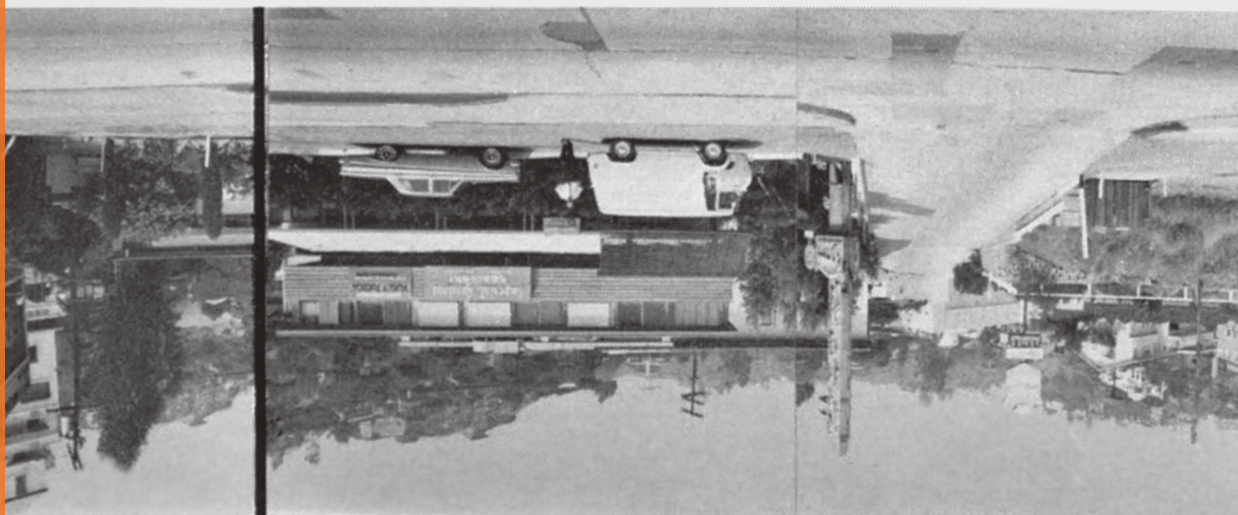
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