

Fig. 1 The travertine vessel discovered in the tomb of Neferinpu (AS 37) at Abusir South (photo M. Frouz)

The Old Kingdom “kohl-pot” and its reinterpretation

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The development of stone vessel production in the Old Kingdom has a specific outline (Jirásková, *forthcoming b*). There are two separate branches of production, one designated for the ruling kings, the other intended to be distributed among members of the royal family and officials. The royal corpus included variations of older prototypes, whereas the non-royal assemblages had a rather simple concept that enabled a detailed analysis of their typology and chronology (Jirásková, *forthcoming a*). Although there are mostly model vessels to be found in the non-royal funerary contexts, several other classes also appear in some of the non-royal burial chambers. The so-called “kohl-pot” belongs to these specific pieces, being rather rarely discovered in the burial chambers of officials’ tombs in the latter part of the Old Kingdom.

The vessel is of a specific shape – a very short jar with a concave-shaped body, splayed foot and wide, flaring, flat rim. Some examples might be interpreted as a cylindrical jar, but it is much smaller, and in fact, does not fully correspond to the short cylindrical jars of the Early Dynastic Period and the very beginning of the Old Kingdom. When the short cylindrical jars are omitted, and only the typical pieces of the Fourth to Sixth Dynasty are considered, there are only several preserved instances to be named, being made of various materials. This is quite a common occurrence, since the material of the Old Kingdom stone vessels deposited in the non-royal contexts was dominated by travertine. In the case of these “kohl-pots”, it is possible to also find siltstone, diorite, limestone or porphyry or granite pieces (tab. 1). Although bowls made of diorite (a popular Old Kingdom kind of stone) are seldom

discovered in the burial chambers of the Old Kingdom officials at Giza, other materials than travertine and diorite are rare and appear exclusively in royal contexts.

The catalogue of the so far known “kohl-pots” is not long. One of them (the best documented) was found by the Czech mission at Abusir South. This example comes from the intact tomb of Neferinpu (Bárta *et al.* 2014: 102–103, Figs. 6.46 and 6.47; for details, see tab. 1 and fig. 1). It was deposited in the limestone sarcophagus, by the left hand of the priest, together with a wooden staff and a wooden sceptre. Although the tomb was found untouched by robbers, the condition of the vessel was rather poor. The high level of weathering on its surface, as well as the damage on the rim parts, pointed to the pre-burial usage of the pot. However, it was discovered empty of any contents, and therefore probably represented only a symbolic vessel.

site	tomb number	owner	dating	material	H	MRD	BD	notes
Abusir	AC 1	Sahure	early 5D	travertine	12.7 cm	20.5 cm	17.2 cm	much larger than others
Abusir	AS 37	Neferinpu	latter 5D	travertine	5.2 cm	10.4 cm	8.6 cm	
Giza	G 4215	Menib	late OK	silt stone (green schist)		5.0 cm		Pelizaeus museum Inv. No. 3108
Giza	east of Tepemankh	unknown	5–6D	diorite				Cairo
Giza	G 8640	Ankhhaf	6D	limestone	3.3 cm	5.3 cm		
Giza	G 5552	unknown	6D	travertine	4.8 cm	7.4 cm		
Giza	G 7147 B	unknown	5–6D	porphyry or granite	4.4 cm	10 cm	8 cm	
Giza	G 5227 B	unknown	5–6D	travertine	6.9 cm	10.65 cm	9.5 cm	
Giza	S 80	unknown	6D?	ivory	3.1 cm			
Matmar	3234	unknown	5D	silt stone (green schist)	5.3 cm	10.8 cm	9.8 cm	
Abydos	F 40	unknown	5–6D	travertine	4.5 cm	8.7 cm	6.8 cm	

Tab. 1 The list of published Old Kingdom "kohl-pots". H = height, MRD = maximum rim diameter, BD = base diameter

This unusual and interesting find was the initiator of the presented research of the author of this study. Such vessels are traditionally described as "kohl-pots", which means that they should have been used as containers of the black cosmetic substance applied as a contour on the eyes. However, there is no clear evidence for this interpretation, and in fact, none of the known examples had any traces of dark coloured contents inside. The present study thus aims to compile the available evidence on the existing vessels, or their other kinds of representation. All the data connected with these seems to indicate another possible, and more plausible, interpretation of the vessel and its purpose.

Another example of the so-called "kohl-pot" comes from the tomb of Menib, excavated by Hermann Junker (1950: 22, 218, Taf. VIc). This vessel is recorded as being found in the serdab, together with pieces of wooden statue(s) and a copper instrument. Another piece from Giza was also discovered by Junker in the debris of a deep "serdab" (?) in an anonymous tomb situated to the east of the tomb of Tepemankh (Junker 1927: 104, Taf. IXa; Junker 1950: 22). The first example was made of "green schist" (rather siltstone in modern terminology, see Aston 1994: 29), the other of diorite.

There are more examples that come from Giza, such as the one from the intact burial chamber belonging to Ankhhaf (Hassan 1941: 139, fig. 117, pl. XLIII). It was reported as "containing a dried white material (?) most probably for kohl". The vessel was found lying on the lid of the sarcophagus approximately in its middle part, together with a limestone headrest situated to the north of it.

Two more vessels of this typical shape were published by George Andrew Reisner and William Stevenson Smith in the overview of the Old Kingdom stone vessels. One of

them was made of travertine and found in the debris of the burial chamber in tomb G 5552 (2359A), the other was made of porphyry or granite and comes from the burial chamber of shaft G 7147 B (Reisner – Smith 1955: Fig. 138; also at www.gizapyramids.org, find nos. 33-3-43 and 37-8-6). Reisner also discovered another travertine pot in G 5227 (www.gizapyramids.org, find no. 40-1-2a). It was found in shaft B in front of the entrance to the burial chamber. Interestingly, next to this vessel, a rounded piece of red ochre was also uncovered.

Another interesting example comes from Matmar. Tomb 3234 excavated by Guy Brunton contained the remains of a male body, with only three pieces of burial equipment left at his head. One of these was a travertine "kohl-pot", another an ivory scribal palette with remains of black and red ink, and another one was a flat copper instrument with a wooden handle (Brunton 1948: pl. XXXVII).

The last example comes from Abydos, tomb F 40. It is a travertine vessel of similar shape, this time being found together with a decorated lid (Sowada 2010: 222, fig. 2, pl. 2). However, the lid was made of a different material, which is not usual, and therefore might have originally belonged to another vessel (although it fits the travertine piece). In fact, none of these "kohl-pots" was ever found closed with a lid, which is an important feature concerning its interpretation.

There is one more – slightly earlier – example from the beginning of the Fifth Dynasty. However, this time, it was found in the mortuary complex of King Sahure at Abusir (Borchardt 1910: Abb. 148). As was mentioned above, the royal and non-royal contexts should be divided in the Old Kingdom, since the production of stone vessels at that time followed a different pattern in these two cases. Moreover,

the royal vessel is much larger than those from private tombs (compare data in tab. 1).

Last, but not least, it is also interesting to mention Junker’s publication of two similar pieces, this time made of ivory, one found in the tomb S 80. This item is described as containing remains of blue-colour material (Junker 1951: 107–108, 173).

Ali el-Khouli (1978: pl. 41) also included several squat cylindrical jars in his Class I. However, all of them are much earlier – Early Dynastic or Third Dynasty, and do not exactly correspond to the shape of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty types. Concerning other typologies, the vessel of this shape was not discussed by Reisner at all (see Reisner 1931: 130–201). Hermann Junker (1950: 22) and Selim Hassan (1941: 139), who were the first explorers to find them, considered them to be cosmetic vessels – “kohl-pots”. Junker noticed that there were few cosmetic utensils present in the private tombs of the Old Kingdom, and since these vessels resembled in their size (but not the shape) the later “kohl-pots” of the Middle Kingdom, they both found the same explanation plausible. Barbara Aston (1994: 105) included the vessel as no. 38 in her catalogue of forms, but she paid no attention to its usage.

Taking into consideration all available data, there is another interpretation of the vessel that is based on its archaeological contexts and epigraphical evidence. Most of the pots come from burial chambers, some also being found in serdabs. In the case of Matmar, it was found together with a scribe’s utensils, and also, in the case of G 5227 B, a piece of red ochre was discovered close to it. All of the contexts were disturbed, except for the vessel from the tombs of Neferinpu and Ankhhaf. In the case of the first one, the vessel was situated not by the head of the deceased, as would be supposed in the case of a cosmetic jar (standard position of cosmetic vessels in the Old Kingdom), but by his hand, next to the other insignia of his social position – a staff and a sceptre. Moreover, the real cosmetic vessels that start to appear in the Old

Kingdom private tombs by the Sixth Dynasty always have a lid and are of elongated slender shape. Except for the example from Abydos, which is situated far from the centre and might be influenced by local tradition, none of the vessels had any lid.

The position of the vessel in the burial chamber of Ankhhaf was slightly different. It was situated on the sarcophagus, which is an unusual place. However, there was also the headrest and other pieces of burial equipment traditionally placed inside the sarcophagus. Also in this case, the vessel was not put by the head of the deceased, but rather by the body part, *i.e.* closer to Ankhhaf’s hand, rather than to his face. Unfortunately, the other examples were found scattered in the debris, and their primary positions are not clear.

Some of the vessels look like new pieces made just for the burial. Others are worn out with chips on the rim and base parts, and sometimes weathered surfaces. The state of preservation must also have depended on the production material. In this case, travertine was the most fragile material, and it is not surprising that the pieces made of it are the most damaged ones.

The shape of the vessel is also peculiar. There are no similar vessels to be found among pottery and copper products, and it seems that their shape was probably derived from the short cylindrical jars made of stone, sometimes appearing prior to the Fourth Dynasty.

Since there are no other examples of the real vessels except for the burial contexts, it is necessary to search for an explanation in other kinds of documents. The most fruitful is the iconography, which gives a precise idea of the usage of such a vessel. Since the shape of the vessel is similar to the quite common pottery stand, one should be aware of the misidentification of the two pieces. The short pottery stands usually function as a kind of support in the depictions of funerary offerings presented to the deceased, whereas the vessel is present only in relation to scribes. One important detail lies in the position of the scribe. It is

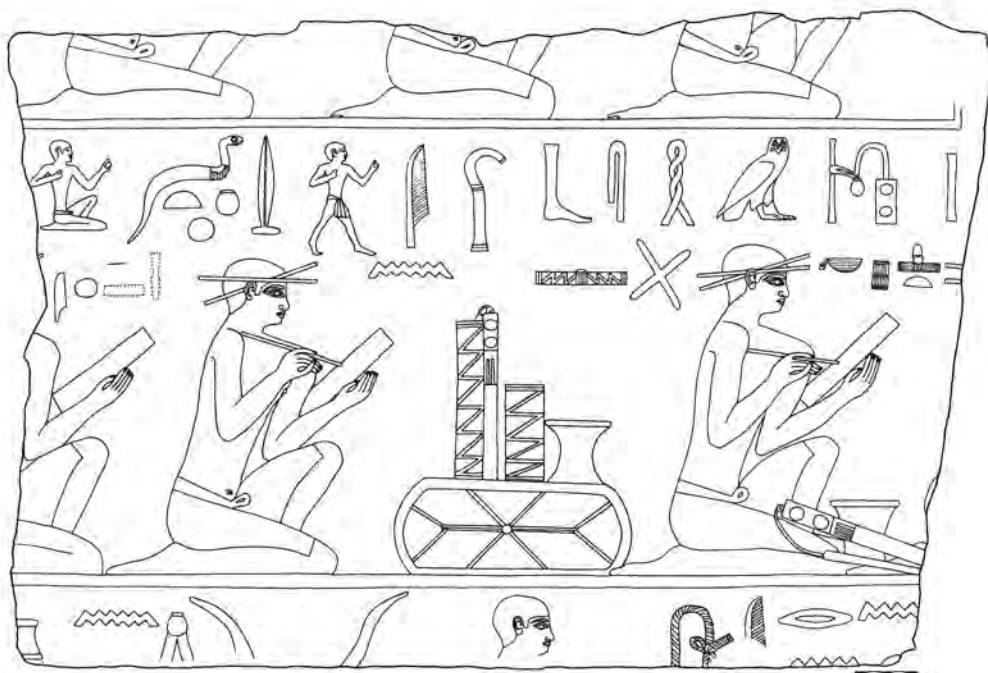


Fig. 2 Depiction of scribes with all the utensils they needed to perform their work. Tomb of Hetepka at Saqqara (after Martin 1979: pl. 11)

never used by the standing or walking men, but only the seated officials. If this fact is considered together with other equipment of the scribes, which constitutes a palette with colours and sticks and papyrus scrolls, it is clear that the vessel was supposed to hold water. The standing or striding figures usually have a bag connected to the palette, which may hold either pigments or water (?). The vessel in this case would be too heavy and impractical. There are numerous examples, again coming from the latter part of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, either from Memphis or the provinces (fig. 2). Slightly different evidence comes from the tomb of Nikaiankh II at Tehna. To the right of his false door, Nikaiankh II is depicted with three scribes behind him. The first one presents him a papyrus scroll, the middle one the palette, and the last one the water jar of exactly the same shape as the so-called “kohl-pot” (fig. 3).

It might seem to be strange to find a stone vessel used for such a common activity connected with many aspects of Egyptian administration. The first idea of the author of this article was that the stone pieces would have been mere luxurious versions of the commonly used cheaper variants of the vessel. However, the evidence does not support such an idea. As was mentioned above, there are no examples of the vessel in pottery or copper. In fact, rough pottery would not be suitable for such a container, unless it was somehow coated to keep the water from leaking. Copper would be more suitable in this case, but most of the known copper vessels are pieces used for ritual activities connected with purification. None of the copper bowls have a similar shape that would remind us of the scribes’ water jar (Radwan 1983). Moreover, it would also be a “luxurious” version, since copper was still precious material in the late Old Kingdom.

On one hand, stone seems to be impractical, especially in the case of commonly used travertine, but on the other hand, it was waterproof, and also heavy and stable enough. Massimiliano Samuele Pinarello (2015: 29, 32) came across the vessel when he was dealing with the scribes’ utensils, but he rejected the possibility of such a function of the vessel. He pointed to the fact that travertine disintegrates in contact with water. It does, and it perfectly fits with the state of preservation of one of the above listed “kohl-pots”. The tomb of Neferinpu was equipped with an unsightly badly looking vessel. It not only had numerous minor chips on the edges, but it was also heavily weathered, although it was found inside a sealed sarcophagus, where no water would have had access. In this respect, the vessel must have been frequently used before being deposited in the tomb. Such usage thus caused the chips, and regular contact with water during the usage would have been responsible for the “weathering” of its surface.

From this point of view, the vessel should be perceived as a kind of social marker, or insignia, as well as the staffs and sceptres. Finds of scribal palettes in burial contexts are of the same nature. Unfortunately, there are only a few examples of both items being found together. Pinarello has tried to make a catalogue of the archaeological evidence concerning scribes’ utensils, but it is not complete (Pinarello 2015: 27–94). From the Old Kingdom context he mentions the examples of sets from Matmar and South

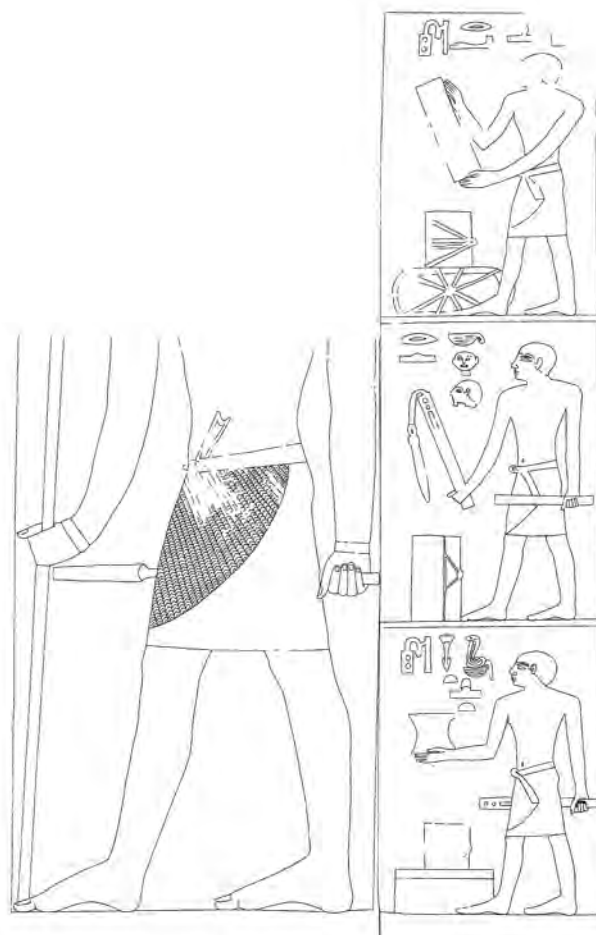


Fig. 3 Three scribes with three basic objects they used – papyrus scroll, palette with colours and brushes (treated sticks), and a water jar. Tomb of Nikaiankh II at Tehna (after Thompson 2014: pl. 60)

Saqqara. Writing palettes included in the catalogue come only from Deshaseh (tombs 85 and 147). However, there are more examples discovered in the Memphite cemeteries. Shaft 125 excavated by Junker contained, among other numerous pieces of burial equipment, a scribe’s palette (Junker 1951: 172, Taf. 21c) made of “schist” – rather siltstone in modern terminology (Aston 1994: 29). The tomb is dated to the Sixth Dynasty. Another example comes from shaft G 5551 C, where a wooden scribal palette was discovered by Reisner (www.gizapyramids.org, find no. 33-3-44a). The shaft is situated very close to G 5552 A, where one of the “kohl-pots” was found. It is just a question of whether the contents of the two robbed shafts were mixed up in the past.

Two so far unpublished examples come from Abusir South. They were both found on the lid of the sarcophagus in the partly disturbed burial chamber of Shaft A in the tomb of Inti (Bárta – Vachala *et al.*, *forthcoming*). One of them was a travertine palette with a fragment of an inscribed lid, the other a fragile, only partly preserved simple wooden palette (141a–d/AS22/2002). Since both palettes were found broken, and their positions were close to the damaged edge of the lid of the sarcophagus (the lid of the travertine piece was found on the debris inside the sarcophagus), where ancient looters had made a hole to take out the body of the deceased, it seems that the primary positions might have been within the wooden coffin of

the sarcophagus: it could have been partly taken out with the body, together with a few other personal belongings that were found scattered either inside the sarcophagus or around the hole in the south-west corner.

To sum up, the unique shape of the vessel, the archaeological contexts of the so far known pieces, and above all the iconographical evidence, lead us to suggest that a reinterpretation of this vessel and its function might more closely fit the circumstances of these finds. There is no reason why the vessel should be called a "kohl-pot" used for the storage of black eye paint. Instead, the archaeological and iconographical data might better suggest that its function was as a water pot of the Old Kingdom scribes. At least some of the discovered examples bear traces after usage, others do not. Since the only known pieces come from the burial contexts, it is difficult to say if these stone vessels were produced for the funerary purpose only, and the commonly used pots were made of different material that would perish over time.

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Abstract:

The article aims to interpret the so-called "kohl pot" in the Old Kingdom. There are only several vessels of this type that have been discovered and published so far. All of them come from burial contexts, and although some of them have been described as cosmetic jars, there is no reason as to why. The author of the present study has arrived at another interpretation based on the archaeological contexts of the vessels and on iconography. The position of the vessels in burial chambers, as well as their depictions in the Old Kingdom reliefs, rather point to their usage by ancient scribes as water pots.

stone vessels – kohl pot – scribes – travertine – Old Kingdom

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