

# The Egyptian Alabaster Vessels from Ai

RUTH AMIRAN

Israel Museum, Jerusalem

THE verification of an old suspicion stimulated this writer to tackle afresh the problems connected with the important group of alabaster and hard-stone vessels discovered at Ai by Judith Marquet-Krause in 1934.<sup>1</sup> At the time, the excavator herself, and subsequently other scholars who dealt with this group, who were concerned principally with its chronological aspect, dated the group to the time of the Second-Third Dynasties of Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

We shall first deal with two of the vessels found in room 116 of sanctuary A — Nos. 1484 and 1485. Both were described by the excavator as 'coupe sans fond'.<sup>3</sup> Though indeed 'sans fond', these are not 'coupes'. Their most characteristic feature is the absolutely level 'rim' at either end. This suggested that neither object was complete in itself, and that each in fact is only *part* of a vessel. In checking the objects, it was found that the two match perfectly, and had originally been glued together to form the body of one jar, a fact which necessitates a completely new restoration and interpretation. The photographs on Pl. 39 and the drawing in Fig. 1 show the vessel in its 'separated' form, as published by the excavator, as well as our new restoration. It is evident that two additional segments, viz. the base- and rim-segments, which were not recovered in the excavation, must originally have been glued to the lower and upper flat 'rims' of the two extant segments, respectively. Thus, the complete vessel was composed of four segments.

This method of constructing stone vessels of parts made separately is well known in the stone industry of ancient Egypt, going back apparently to the beginning of

---

<sup>1</sup> Judith Marquet-Krause: *Les fouilles de 'Ay (Et-Tell) 1933-1935*, Paris, 1949, p. 19, Pls. xxiii LIII, LXVI and LXIX.

<sup>2</sup> W. F. Albright: *JPOS* 15 (1935), pp. 209 ff.; idem, in R. W. Ehrich (ed.): *Relative Chronologies in Old World Archaeology*, Chicago, 1954, pp. 30 f.; G. E. Wright: *The Pottery of Palestine from the Earliest Times to the End of the Bronze Age*, New Haven, 1937, p. 76; R. de Vaux: *RB* 64 (1957), p. 567; J. B. Hennessy: *The Foreign Relations of Palestine during the Early Bronze Age*, London, 1967, pp. 69-70, Pl. vi.

<sup>3</sup> It is only recently that these two objects could be brought together; upon distribution of the material of the Ai excavations in 1935, No. 1484 was deposited with the Department of Antiquities, while No. 1485 remained with the expedition (whose lot was later bequeathed to the Hebrew University).

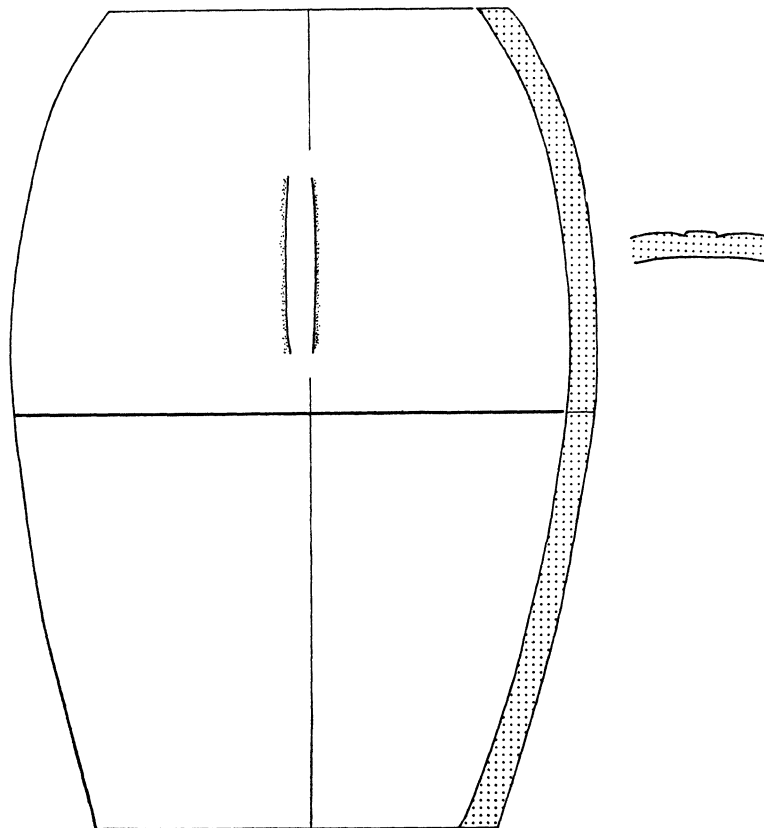


Fig. 1. Segmented alabaster jar from Ai. Note degenerate handle (1:2).

the Dynastic period.<sup>4</sup> The complete specimen nearest to the Ai vase is a jar made in two halves (Fig. 2: 2; Pl. 40: A), the top part of basalt and the bottom of limestone; it was found in the burial-chamber of tomb 3503 at Saqqara (dating to the reign of Djer).<sup>5</sup> Figure 2 shows, besides the Ai vessel and the one from Saqqara just mentioned, one complete vessel (Fig. 2: 4) and five more separate vessel segments. A complete four-segment vessel, or even a complete three-segment one, is unknown to us. It seems, however, that a base from Saqqara (Fig. 2: 5),<sup>6</sup> dated to the reign of Den, is part of a four- or three-segment vessel. In Fig. 2: 6-8, are three

<sup>4</sup> W. von Bissing: *Steingefässe* (Cat. gén. des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire), Vienna, 1907, pp. II-III, stresses the technical inducements for multi-segmented vessels.

<sup>5</sup> W. B. Emery: *Excavations at Saqqara. Great Tombs of the First Dynasty II*, London, 1954, pp. 128, 165; Fig. 224; Pl. LIII, Type G 17.

<sup>6</sup> W. B. Emery, *ibid.* I, Cairo, 1949, p. 137; Fig. 74, Type I 8 (designated by the excavator as 'bowl').

upper segments; No. 6 is from Abu Roash (tomb 807), dated to the latter part of the First or to the Second Dynasty.<sup>7</sup> Nos. 7 and 8 are from the tomb of Hemaka,<sup>8</sup> from the time of Den. Fig. 2: 4 is a complete vessel from Naga ed-Der,<sup>9</sup> from group 3150, type s IV, dated to the Second Dynasty. It is composed of two segments, the upper comprising a smaller portion of the body than the lower.

The Ai jar displays another feature of great interest, not noticed by the draughtsman of the 1933–35 expedition, and apparently overlooked ever since. Two short parallel grooves are incised on the exterior of one segment, which we now recognize as the upper part of the body (Pl. 39: A; Fig. 1). This feature can be interpreted only as the imitation of a degenerate handle.<sup>10</sup> There must originally have been two such handles, though the part of the jar where the second one should be is missing. This type of handle is a most common and typical element in EBA II pottery, and is familiar to us from various types of jars, jugs and juglets. Some of the many variants of this element are to be found on vessels from Arad (see Pl. 40: B–E).<sup>11</sup> Both the general shape of the Ai vessel and its degenerate handle allow us to conclude that — although made in Egypt of Egyptian alabaster and Egyptian in technique — it is Canaanite, in general character and in particular details, a clear imitation of Canaanite pottery. Canaanite vessels have been discovered in considerable quantities in First Dynasty tombs in Egypt, and many of them naturally display this type of degenerate handle.<sup>12</sup> An analogous Egyptian imitation in stone of another Canaanite pottery type is the alabaster jug (Fig. 3) discovered in a tomb in northern Saqqara,<sup>13</sup> dated to the time of Den. It undeniably has as its prototype the most common jug of the EBA II — the ‘type specimen’ par excellence of the period — and is the first and most common foreign vessel type to have reached Egypt in this period. This class of object could most probably be augmented by additional analogous cases among the Egyptian stone vessels, the pottery repertory of the proto-Dynastic period being saturated with imported Canaanite types and their local Egyptian imitations.

The date of the Ai jar, as implied from the above discussion, seems to be the time

<sup>7</sup> A. Klasens: *The Excavations of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities at Abu-Roash, Report of the Third Season I*, Leiden, 1960, Fig. 19: 221, type z (?) (Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden 41).

<sup>8</sup> W. N. Emery: *Excavations at Saqqara. Tomb of Hemaka*, Cairo, 1938, Pl. 33: 19 and Pl. 36: 46.

<sup>9</sup> G. A. Reisner: *The Early Dynastic Cemeteries of Naga-ed-Der I*, Leipzig, 1908, pp. 87 and 105, Fig. 196; A. C. Mace: *The Early Dynastic Cemeteries of Naga-ed-Der II*, Leipzig, 1909, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> The history of this degenerate feature requires more study; it may have originated either in a lug-handle or in a loop-handle.

<sup>11</sup> To be published shortly in *Early Arad. The Chalcolithic Settlement and the Early Bronze Age City I, Report of the 1962–66 Seasons*, by Ruth Amiran, U. Paran, Y. Shiloh, R. Brown, Y. Tsafir and A. Ben-Tor.

<sup>12</sup> W. M. F. Petrie: *Abydos I*, London, 1902, Pl. VIII: 5.

<sup>13</sup> W. B. Emery, *op. cit.* (above, n. 5), p. 144, Fig. 77, type DD 1.

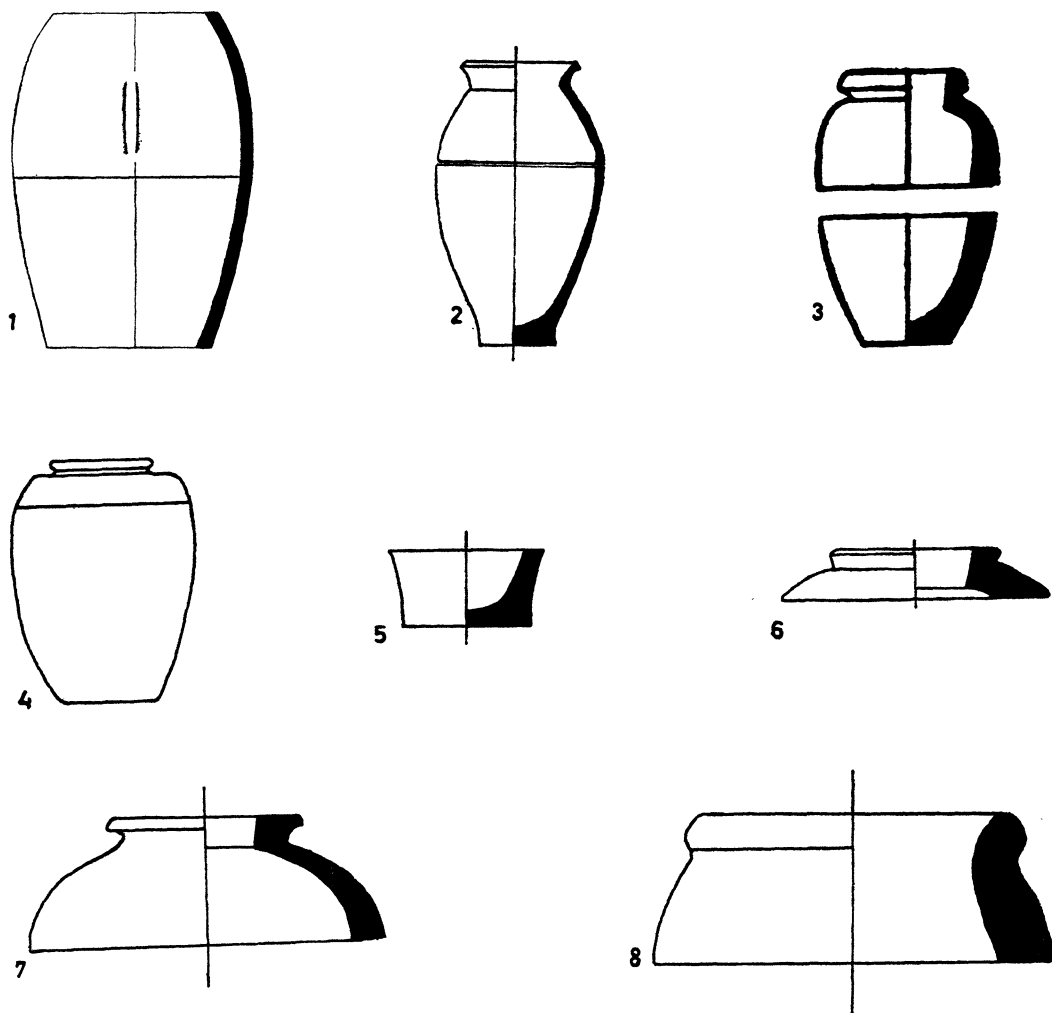


Fig. 2. Segmented vessels and segments (ca. 1:5; 1, 3-7, alabaster; 2, basalt and limestone; 8, limestone). No. 3 is from Macramallah.

of the First Dynasty (from Djer on), coinciding with the EBA II.<sup>14</sup>

Following our study of the 1484+1485 jar, it would seem worthwhile to re-examine the entire group of alabaster and other stone vessels from Ai. The most conspicuous object of the entire group, beyond any doubt, is the fragmentary zoo-

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Amiran: A Preliminary Note on the Synchronism between the Early Bronze Strata of Arad and the First Dynasty, *BASOR* 179 (1965), pp. 30-33; idem and Elise J. Baumgartel: A Second Note on the Synchronism between Early Bronze Arad and the First Dynasty, *ibid.* 195 (1969), pp. 50-53.

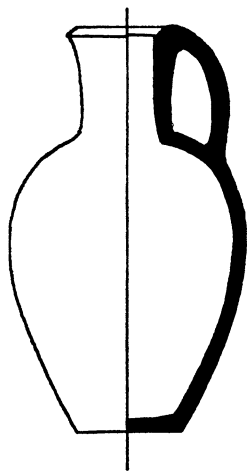


Fig. 3 (1:2).

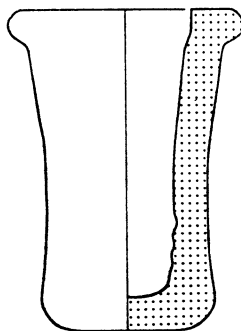


Fig. 4 (1:2).

morphic vessel No. 1459,<sup>15</sup> of which only the hind-part has been mended, though with many gaps. The closest comparable specimen is a zoomorphic vessel in marble from Abydos (Pl. 42), described by Petrie as a 'model waterskin', and dated by him to the time of Semerkhet.<sup>16</sup> It is a very small vessel, a sort of miniature in the model-vessel category. Upon the analogy of this miniature, we are inclined to consider that the hind-part No. 1459 should be reconstructed with neck No. 1498, as demonstrated in the combined drawing in Fig. 5 (and see the photographs on Pl. 41).<sup>17</sup> The profile of the rim of No. 1498 is indeed not very common, but has a close counterpart in a limestone jar from tomb γ (of Queen Merit-nit) at Abydos.<sup>18</sup> Theoretically, it could therefore belong to such a jar. The curious mouldings around the base of

<sup>15</sup> Both Judith Marquet-Krause and Hennessy defined it as the figure of an animal. Two suggestions as to the identification of the animal have been put forward: the excavator (followed by most scholars) regarded it as a hippopotamus, while P. R. de Vaux suggested that it represented a pig, tied and prepared for sacrifice (*RB* 64 [1957], p. 567). — Pl. 41:A shows the 1936 mending, which failed to position many of the fragments (including a piece of a third leg), still in the store-rooms of the Department of Antiquities and Museums.

<sup>16</sup> W. M. Flinders Petrie: *The Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty* I, London, 1900, p. 28, Pl. xxxviii: 3, now in the Ashmolean Museum, No. E 3231. I have to thank the Director of the Ashmolean Museum for the photographs and permission to reproduce them here. Hennessy, *loc. cit.* (above, n. 2), also mentions this vessel as a parallel to the Ai example.

<sup>17</sup> As for the kind of alabaster: according to Prof. L. Picard, of the Hebrew University, the two fragments, body and neck, could very well have originated in the same quarry. We have to remember, however, that the hind-part of the body was found in room 120, whereas the neck is from room 116.

<sup>18</sup> W. M. Flinders Petrie: *The Royal Tombs of the Earliest Dynasties* II, London, 1901, Pl. LIII F: 483.

the neck, however, demand a different interpretation; they consist of two bands intertwined in a knot (Pl. 41: B). The Abydos miniature vessel shows that the animal motif stops at the neck, it having no head — an observation which corroborates our suggestion. A decisive proof towards this assumption is found in the two-band mouldings on the one complete leg, which we interpret (together with those on the neck) as representing ropes tying the ends of the legs to the neck, thus forming a handle for the 'waterskin'.<sup>19</sup> The artist who made our composite drawing of this vessel<sup>20</sup> noticed the beginning of a hoof still preserved on the complete leg (Pl. 41: C). Following Petrie's definition of the Abydos specimen as a 'model waterskin', we should designate the 'new' vessel No. 1459+1498 as a zoomorphic vessel of the size and shape of an actual waterskin.

This specimen (No. 1459+1498) is a very large vessel, the production of which (including the drilling, fashioning of the legs, tail and ropes, as well as the polishing of the surface) must have involved a great deal of labour. We know of no other such vessel or animal figure comparable in size.<sup>21</sup>

The small cylindrical jar No. 2366 (Fig. 4) is a common type of such long duration that it is of limited chronological value.

The bowls constitute the only type with more than one example in the entire group. A re-examination of all the bowl fragments (both at the Rockefeller Museum and in the Hebrew University collections) proved most worthwhile. It yielded two completely new, unpublished bowls (2 and 6), as well as some fragments (5) additional to those published. The list of bowls now sorted out and mended is as follows (Fig. 6; Pl. 43):

- |                         |                             |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1) No. 1489 — Alabaster | 4) No. 1491 — Limestone     |
| 2) No. 1520 — Alabaster | 5) Nos. 514+692 — Alabaster |
| 3) No. 1475 — Limestone | 6) Nos. 344+399 — Alabaster |

The four alabaster bowls are variants of one type: a flat base with an incised circle on the inside, a convex body and an inverted rim (designated by Reisner as 'internal rim') ending in a diagonal, flat lip. They differ from one another in size and depth. This is a prevalent type of bowl in First Dynasty contexts, designated by Emery as type s 1–10 (as, e.g., from the abovementioned tomb 3503 at Saqqara<sup>22</sup> and cemetery 800 at Abu Roash).<sup>23</sup> The two stone bowls are of reddish or greyish limestone. No. 1491 is a very shallow dish, designated by Emery and Klasens as type τ 2, and

<sup>19</sup> R. de Vaux, *loc. cit.* (above, n. 15), noticed the 'ropes' on the leg.

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to Mrs. Elisheva Shibolet-Wolff for the careful execution of this difficult drawing.

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Nora Scott, Curator of the Department of Egyptian Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, has called my attention to a very large cylindrical jar from Abydos (about 40 cm high); cf. Petrie, *op. cit.* (above, n. 12), Pl. XLII: 6.

<sup>22</sup> Emery, *op. cit.* (above, n. 5), p. 165, Fig. 224.

<sup>23</sup> Klasens, *op. cit.* (above, n. 7), Fig. 18.

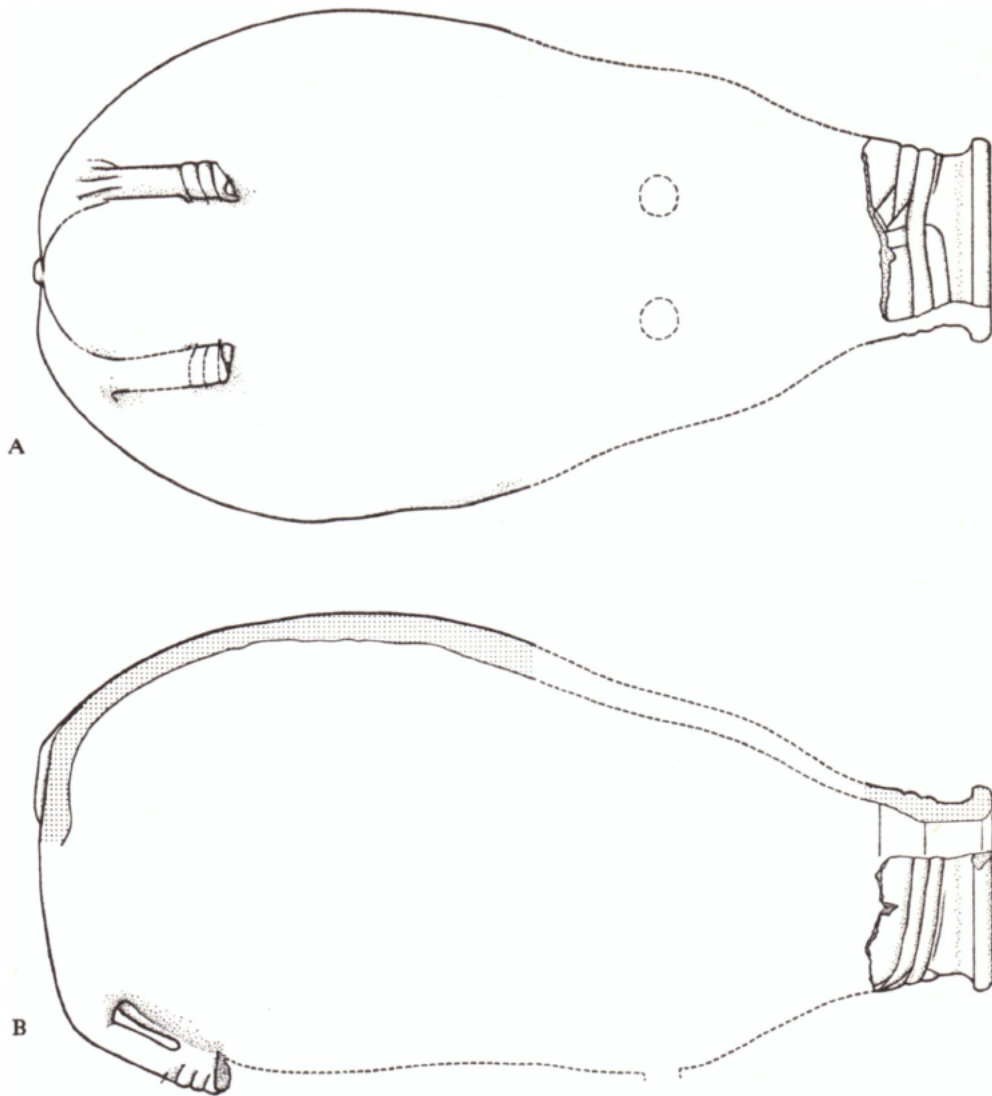
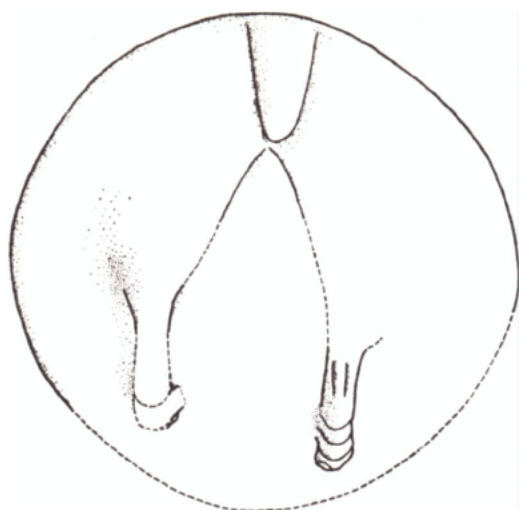


Fig. 5. Suggested reconstruction of alabaster vessel from Ai, in the form of a water skin (2:5).



C

typical of the contexts just mentioned. According to Reisner,<sup>24</sup> the 'Flat-Bottomed Dish and Bowl' (his type x) is very common in the time of the first three dynasties. The 'Round-Bottomed Dish' (his type ix), not so very common, is characteristic of the First and Second Dynasties, becoming almost extinct during the Third Dynasty. No. 1475 is of a different type, with a pronounced large, flat rim. This, once again, seems to be an Egyptian imitation of a Canaanite vessel.

The most interesting fact about the alabaster bowls is that two of them, Nos. 514+692 and 344+399, were not found in sanctuary A, but in loci 42 and 22 in area G, the acropolis area.<sup>25</sup> All other objects in the group, with the exception of these two bowls, came from two rooms in sanctuary A: the body of the zoomorphic vessel from room 120 and the others from room 116 (including the cylindrical jar found in the niche annexed to this room). That the two alabaster bowls come from the acropolis temple strengthens, on the one hand, the hypothesis of Marquet-Krause that the alabaster vessels in sanctuary A were an heirloom transferred there from an earlier temple;<sup>26</sup> and, on the other hand, Callaway's conclusion that there were two floors, and thus two strata, in the history of the acropolis temple.<sup>27</sup> The

<sup>24</sup> G. A. Reisner: *Mycerinus. The Temples of the Third Dynasty at Giza*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1931, pp. 137-170.

<sup>25</sup> According to the original copy of the excavation catalogue, it is clear that the provenance given in the publication for No. 344 (area D), is a mistake and should be corrected to area G.

<sup>26</sup> Marquet-Krause, *op. cit.* (above, n. 1), p. 19, n. 1.

<sup>27</sup> J. A. Callaway: The 1964 Ai (Et-Tell) Excavations, *BASOR* 196 (1970), pp. 2 ff.



RUTH AMIRAN

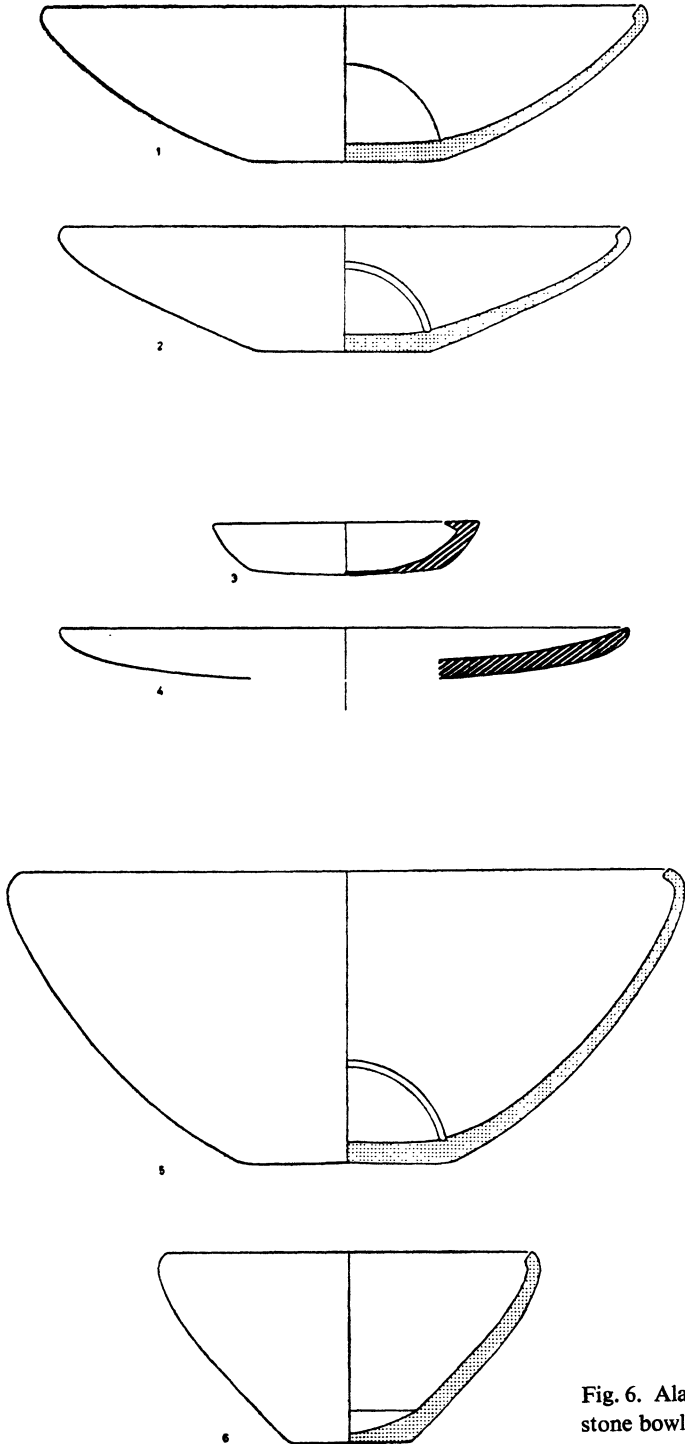
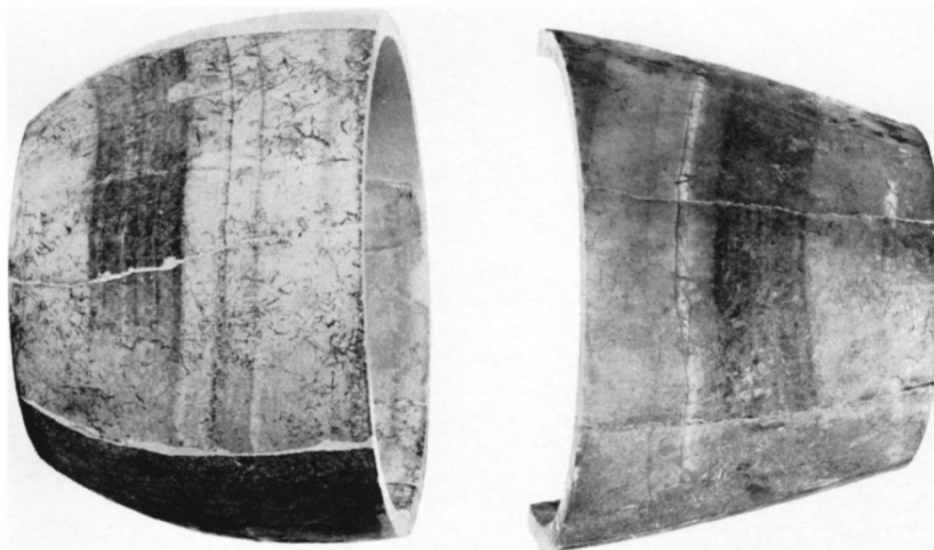
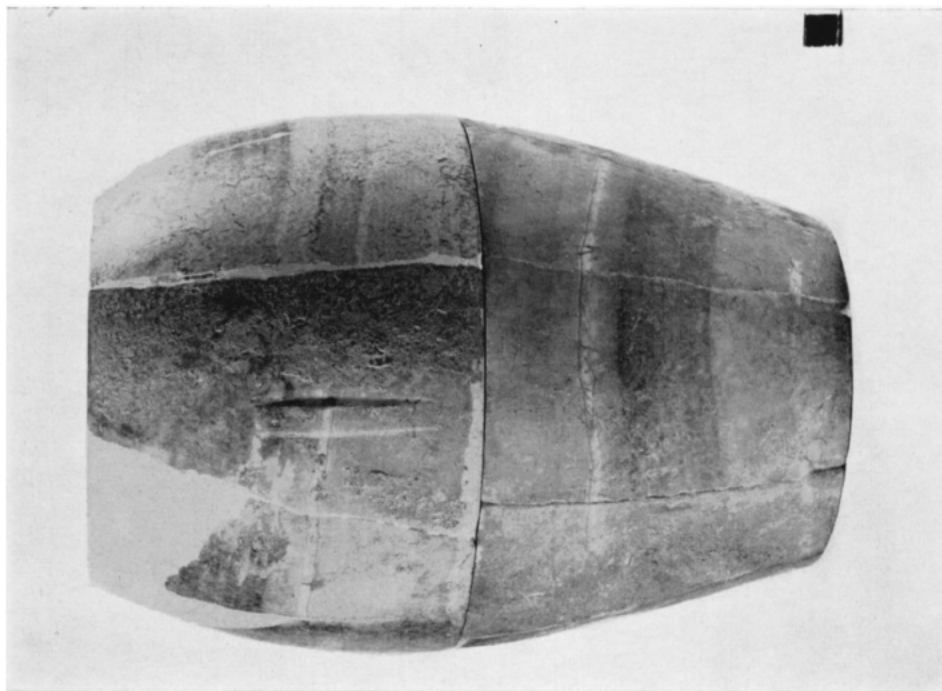


Fig. 6. Alabaster and limestone bowls from Ai (1:4).

two bowls indeed constitute additional evidence for the identification of the acropolis building, in its initial phase, as a temple.<sup>28</sup>

All the items discussed — the reconstructed 'waterskin' vessel, the reconstructed segmented jar with degenerate handles, the small cylindrical jar, the four alabaster bowls and the two limestone bowls — date the group to the First Dynasty. This entire foreign group must originally have been part of the furnishings of the EBA II acropolis temple. Following a destruction or even a change of population, they were removed to the EBA III sanctuary A, continuing in use there till its destruction. The rarity of alabaster vessels, and especially of zoomorphic vessels, makes it likely that these were the cult utensils in use there.

<sup>28</sup> It is hoped that the excavations of the current expedition to Ai, at work since 1964 under the direction of J. A. Callaway, will clarify the question as to whether the remains beneath sanctuary A, designated by Miss Marquet-Krause as sanctuary B and sanctuary C, are really remains of sanctuaries, or those of ordinary houses. All further speculation on this point must await Dr. Callaway's results.



A-B: Segmented alabaster jar from Ai. Note degenerate handle (in B).

PLATE 40

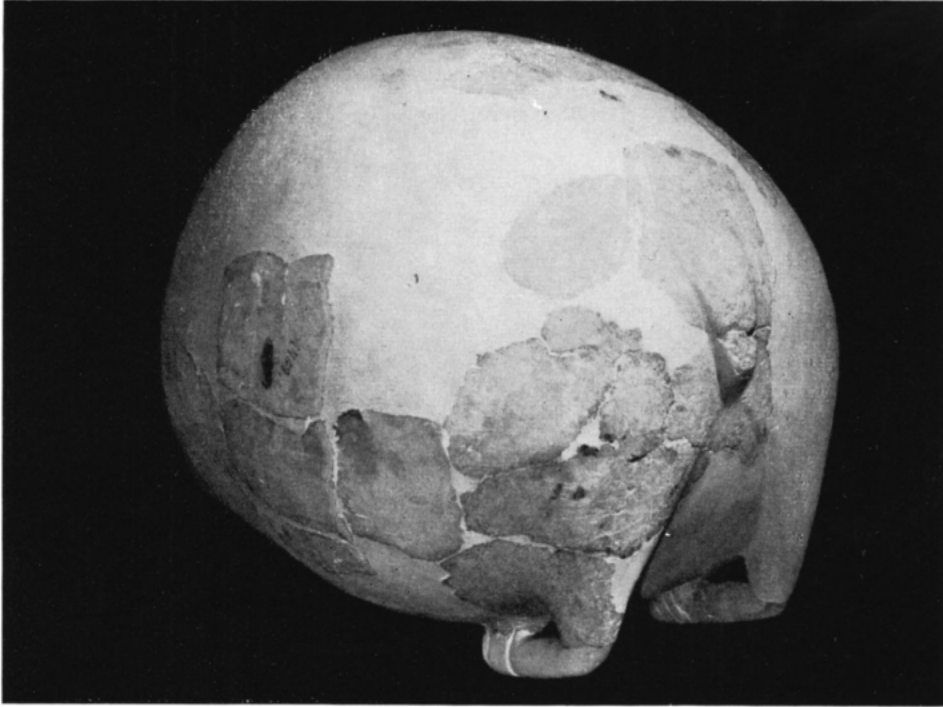


A: Segmented stone jar from Saqqara.



B-D: Pottery from Arad displaying degenerate handles.

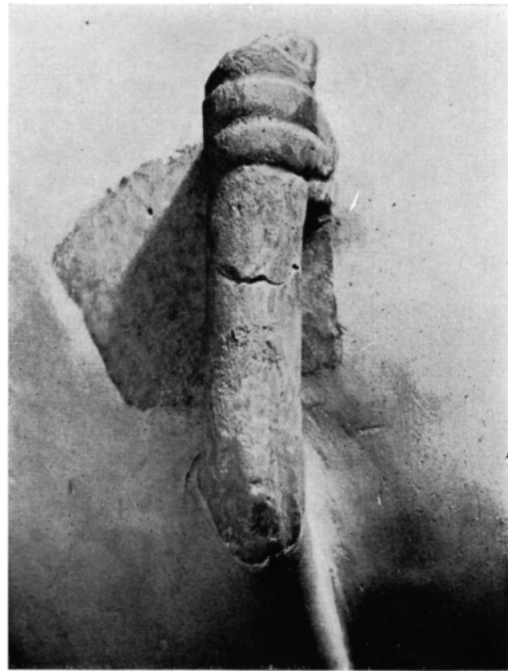




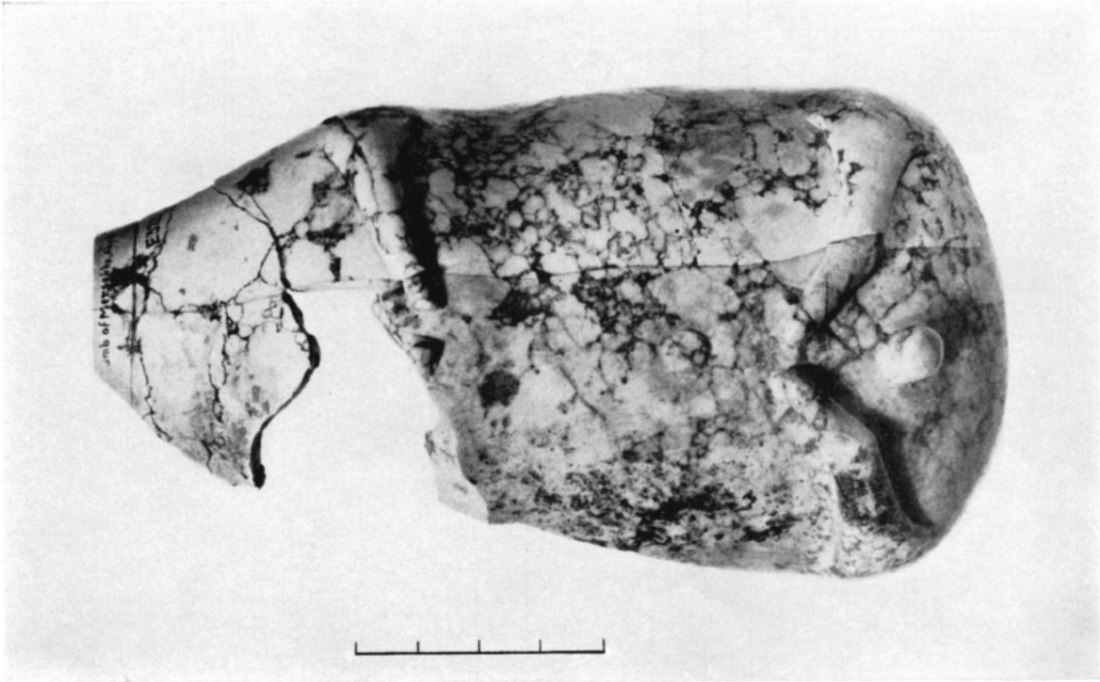
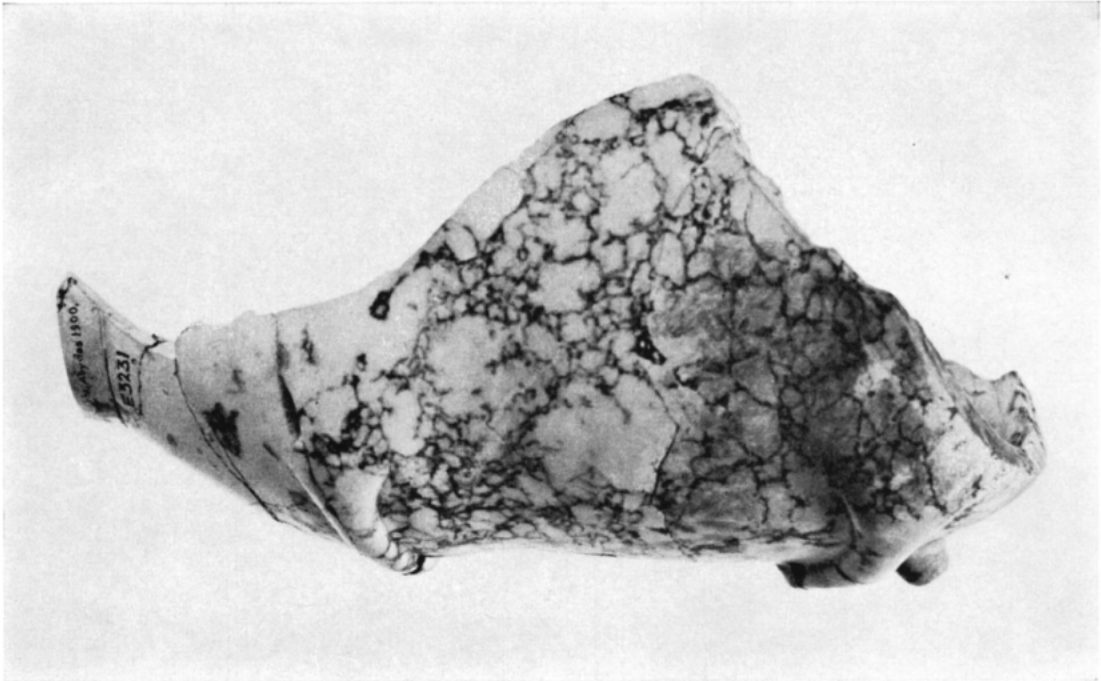
A: Alabaster vessel from Ai in the form of a waterskin (partly restored).



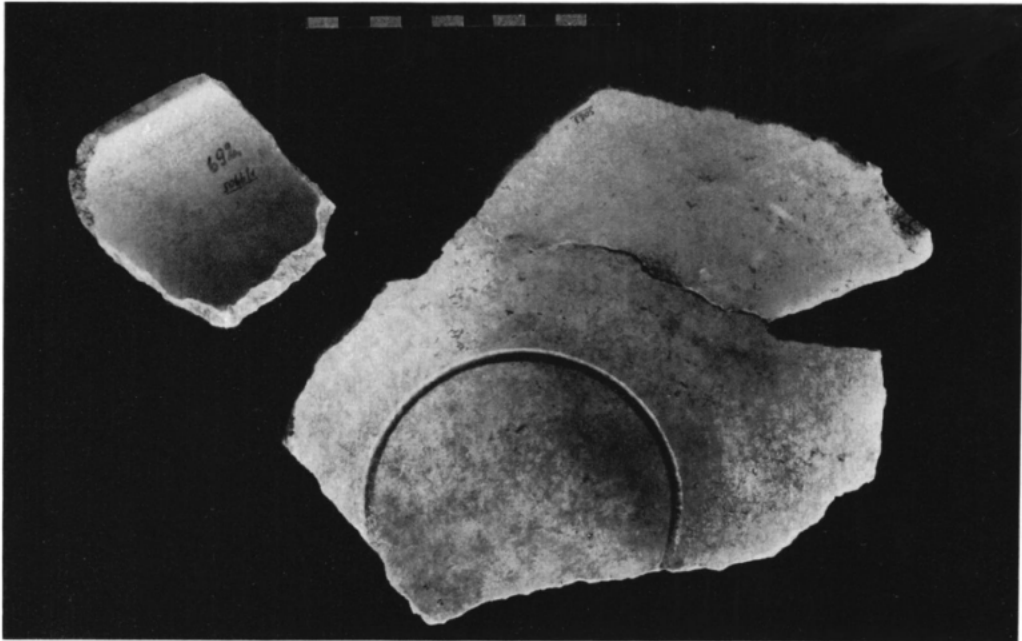
B: Neck of A, displaying knotted bands.



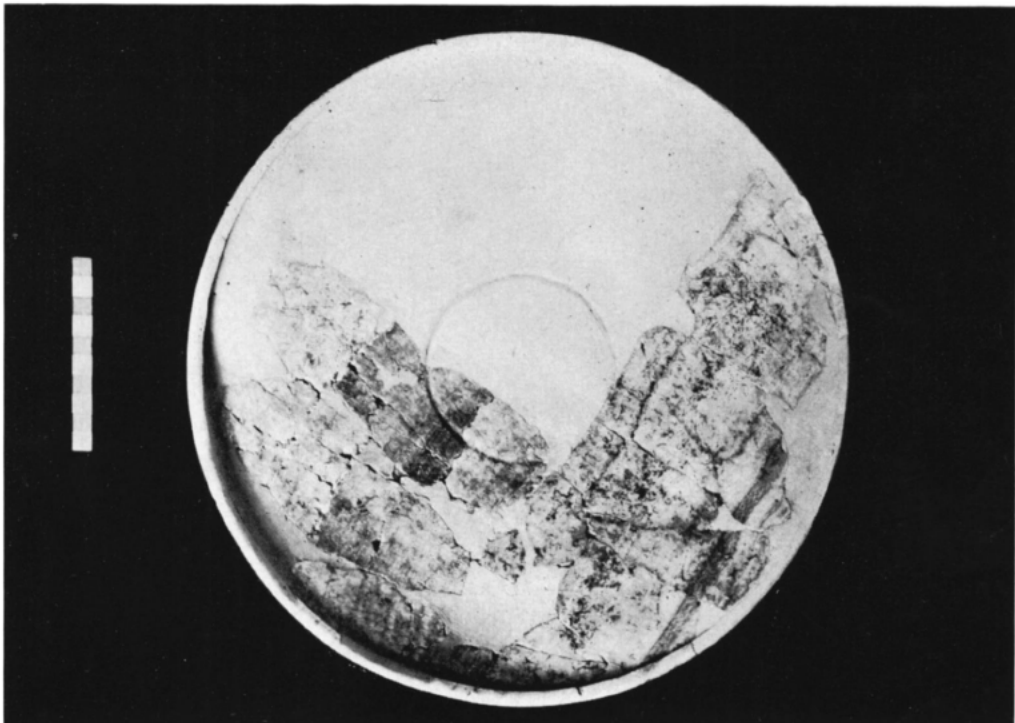
C: Detail of A, displaying hind leg with bands.



A-B: Stone vessel from Abydos, in form of a waterskin.



A: Alabaster bowl No. 514+692 from Ai.



B: Alabaster bowl No. 1520 from Ai.