

ABYDOS AND COMBED WARE

By M. W. PRAUSNITZ

Nearly 60 years ago in the Royal tombs of the First Dynasty of Egypt, Sir Flinders Petrie discovered a piece of pottery of "Amorite Style"¹. It resembled the combed ware Sir Flinders had found a few years earlier at Tel el Hesi² in Israel. In the course of the excavations at Abydos pitchers were found, which again could be paralleled by sherds from Tell el Hesi³. These finds became the foundations of the absolute chronology of Palestine and Syria in the Early Bronze Age.

The name "Amorite" was most fitting, as the home of this kind of pottery was Phœnicia, Southern Syria and Northern Palestine. Equally well chosen was the technical description given to this type of ware, namely "combed ware." The decoration was certainly derived from basketry and gained inspiration from the strings wound around the vessel for purposes of transport.

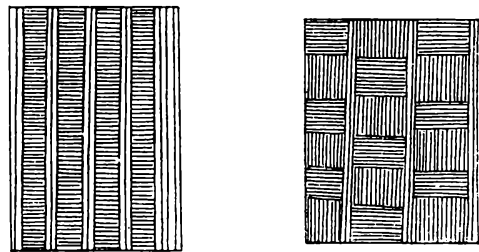


Fig. 7

On inspection three different techniques of combing can be recognised :

- (a) simple combing—incised lines
- (b) pattern combing
- (c) wheel combing (band combing).

(a) The first and earliest combing consists simply in combing and scraping lines on pottery. But little chronological significance can be attached to

¹ W. M. F. Petrie: *The Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty*, Vol. I, p. 28, Pl. XXXVIII, No. 9.

² W. M. F. Petrie: *Tell el Hesi*, London, 1891.

³ *ibid.*, p. 41.

I wish to thank Prof. V. G. Childe and

Dr. K. M. Kenyon of the Institute of Archaeology, London, for granting me access to the Tell el Hesi sherds. Also I wish to acknowledge my profound gratitude to Mr. Arkell, curator of the University College collection, who greatly helped me in finding the Abydos sherds.

this type of decoration, universally used on painted pottery. It is found amongst the very earliest pottery of the Levant and the Sudan. The ware is mostly thick, black and full of carbonised vegetable matter⁴.

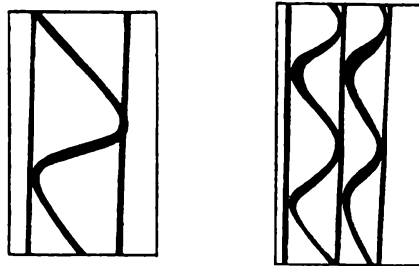


Fig. 8

(b) Pattern combing is a superior kind of decoration. Vertical and horizontal lines are combed onto the plain surface, forming attractive designs (see Fig. 7). It is usually found on big storage jars which are extremely well fired and distinguished by their tall and symmetrical shape. Because of the hardness of the clay and its red brick colour, it was called "brick ware" at Jericho. The same kind of ware was called "stone ware" in the Jebel region, while the excavators of Megiddo gave it the name of "metallic ware"⁵. This pattern-combed ware seems to be a form of development of the burnished stone ware which is hand-made. The pattern-combed jars, on the other hand, are thinner, more evenly baked and, which is more important, the flaring rim and upper part of their bodies are wheel-made. They were not covered by a slip, nor were they burnished.

(c) Wheel-combed decoration, frequently named "band-combing", succeeded pattern-combing towards the end of the Early Bronze Age and the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age of Palestine and Syria. In this type of decoration straight horizontal bands alternating with wavy lines move around the body of the vessel in accordance with the turn of the wheel. Generally the pots are wheel-made (see Fig. 8).

We are here mainly concerned with "pattern-combing". The distinctive form of these large vessels, the hard, high-ringing clay and wheel-made finish bear witness to a great advance in the potter's art. The decoration as well as the vessel can easily be recognised and traced. It is essential for the purpose of this study to realize that the three qualities of this ware : pattern-combed

⁴ M. Dunand: *Rapport préliminaire sur les fouilles de Byblos en 1948. Bul. Musée de Beyrouth*, Vol. IX, p. 56-58.

A. J. Arkell: *Early Khartoum, O.U.P.*, 1949, Chaps. IX-X.

⁵ Ann M. Ehrlich: *Early Pottery of the Jebel Region*, Philadelphia, 1939, Chaps. Types XI and XII.

Engberg and Shipton: *S.A.O.C.*, No. 10.

decoration, hard-baked clay, wheel-made finish of upper part with a flaring, i.e. everted rim, are usually found together (Figs. 9, 10, 11 and 12).

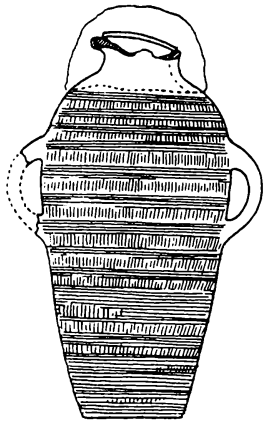


Fig. 9

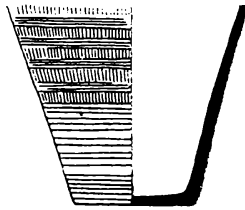


Fig. 10

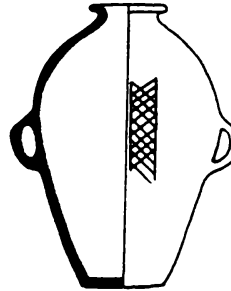


Fig. 11

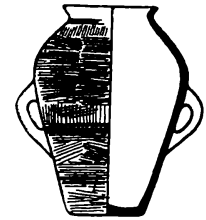


Fig. 12

Pattern-combed jars in Egypt.

The assumption that combed ware from Palestine and Syria was contemporary with the Abydos pitcher of the First Dynasty of Egypt is based on the sherds found by Petrie at Abydos. Dr. H. Kantor of Chicago collected all the material available and, in her chart, the two small combed sherds⁶ figure as latest. But Scharff's description of these two sherds in Leipzig as thick, black sherds of crude vessels is more characteristic of the Syrian "neolithic" ware, or, as has often been suggested by many, including Scharff himself, of Nubian combed ware⁷.

Petrie also found a two-handled storage jar in the tombs of the Courtiers of the First Dynasty. This jar was "wheel-turned inside and finished by diagonal scraping" and when knocked it had the high ring of metallic ware⁸. This vessel undoubtedly does belong to the simple combed, hard stone ware and though it may date later than the First Dynasty, it does anticipate our pattern-combed storage jar. Unfortunately this vessel was left on the site. In the tombs of the Courtiers, at any rate, no Abydos pitcher was found.

One very good example of pattern-combed storage jars was found by G. Brunton⁹ and belonged to a Tomb-group of the IV-V Dynasties. It is described as follows: "the large two-handled jar with its surface combed first vertically then horizontally is almost certainly from some foreign source . . ." The vessel is now in the British Museum and in all respects conforms

⁶ J. H. Kantor: *The Early Relations of Egypt and Asia*, *J.N.E.S.*, Vol. I, p. 208-9.

⁷ Alexander Scharff: *Die Altertumer der Vor- und Fruhzeit Aegyptens*, Berlin, 1929, p. 194.

⁸ F. Petrie: *Tombs of the Courtiers*. London, 1925, Pl. iv, 9.

⁹ G. Brunton: *Matmar*, London, 1948, p. 45, Pl. xxxvii.

with pattern-combed storage jars from Syria and Palestine¹⁰. Its shape is a little more elongated than one might expect. (Pl. XIX.)

Similar storage jars, but of the VIth Dynasty, were found at Saqqara South and Giza. One of them is reported to be in the Cairo Museum¹¹. Jequier, who excavated two of them from two tombs, was able to prove that they belonged to the VIth Dynasty (Pepi II)¹². They had been owned by two Court officials, titled among others "overseer of the bath." Is it possible that they contained the renowned oil of Syria for the Court of Pharaoh ?

Abydos Pitchers from Egypt.

Probably more handled pitchers of the so-called Abydos type were found in Egypt, than in their own home in Syria. Here we are faced with a genuine and obvious difficulty. The pitchers vary greatly. Some, for instance, are of the metallic ware and appear to have no handles, while others less well fired, with handles, are quite atypical of the Palestinian and Lebanese vessels. Most conspicuous of all are the well-known painted pitchers. The painted pitcher is a stranger in Palestine and Southern Syria but has been found as far north as Judaidah in the Plain of Antioch¹³. Thus we have evidence of the wide trade and influence exercised by Egypt from the middle of the First Dynasty onwards. The many varied Syrian handled jars indicate the great power and attraction the united Nile Valley had for the nations of the Levant.

During recent years a very great number of Tombs of the first two Dynasties of Egypt has been excavated¹⁴. At Helwan in four seasons no less than 3,644 tombs were opened yielding nine different types of handled pitchers. Prof. Emery found two types of Syrian pitcher in the First Dynasty graves at Saqqara¹⁵. There was also an alabaster imitation of the handled pitcher¹⁶. Yet from these many tombs, not one single pattern-combed jar or even sherd was reported¹⁷.

Palestine and Syria.

The Palestinian and Syrian sites where one or more of the different types of handled pitchers known from Egypt were discovered are numerous indeed¹⁸.

¹⁰ I am most grateful to Mr. Edwards of the British Museum for assistance and permission to study and to photograph the pot.

¹¹ Régistre d'entrée No. 52523.

¹² J. Jequier: *Tombeaux de particuliers contemporains de Pepi II*, Cairo, 1929, p. 13-15, p. 25.

¹³ R. J. Braidwood in *J.N.E.S.*, Vol. I, p. 198, note 141.

¹⁴ Macramalla: *Cimetières archéiques*, Cairo, 1940.

Saki Y. Saad: Royal excavations at Helwan, Cahiers Nos. 3 and 14, Cairo, 1949, 1951.

¹⁵ W. B. Emery: *Tombs of the First Dynasty*, Cairo, 1949, p. 152.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, Type D.D. 1.

¹⁷ I am much indebted to Prof. Emery who confirmed with me the absence of combed pottery from his excavations.

¹⁸ As shown below, Abydos types of jugs were found in Palestine among others at Tell el Hesi, Ay, Jericho, Megiddo, Tomb nr. Kh. Kerak and Tell el Fara nr. Nablus. They are reported, unpublished, from Tell ed Duweir (Lachish), Kh. Kerak, Tell Eklatiya nr. Tiberias.

At Ay the handled pitcher was found among the burnt layer of "parquet B" ¹⁹. The succeeding layer C was identified as contemporary with the Third Dynasty ²⁰. After that date Early Bronze Age Ay ceased to exist. The catalogue of the finds does not contain one pattern-combed sherd or storage jar! Tell el Farah near Nablus was destroyed according to Père de Vaux in Early Bronze IIB. The metallic Abydos pitcher was in the last layer ²¹ which the excavator dated at 2800 B.C. Amongst the published finds there is not one pattern-combed jar though some odd combed sherds are reported to have been found. In the northern part of the Jordan Valley on the highway from Northern Syria to Egypt near Kh. Kerak a tomb group of some fifty vessels was found including one Abydos pitcher and a little round jar decorated with painted triangles, filling dots and lines exactly like the painted Abydos pitchers ²². The remarkable fact about this group was that no Kh. Kerak ware was discovered. Pattern-combed ware was apparently also absent.

In Northern Palestine, at Megiddo, three types of handled pitchers resembling the Abydos pitchers have been found. The chart showing the results of the excavations indicates that the stump-based handled pitcher appears during stages VI-IV. Later during stages III-I the flat-based pitcher of metallic ware is shown together with pattern-combed metallic pottery ²³ (Pl. XX.). The chronology worked out for Megiddo was mainly based on the alleged contemporaneity in Egypt of stump-based, flat-based pitchers and combed-ware. Stage III was believed to be contemporary with the end of the First Dynasty or the beginning of the Second Dynasty. From stage III metallic Abydos pitchers continue to occur together with pattern-combed ware, while the stump-based pitcher was going out of use. The range of the flat-based handled pitcher is very considerable and may well overlap with the rise of pattern-combed pottery. The equation, however, with Abydos and the First Dynasty still remains to be proven.

At Ras Shamra, Prof. Schaeffer found pattern-combed jars (Fig. 13) together with Kh. Kerak ware as late as "ancien ugarit 3". There were no Abydos pitchers ²⁴. The lowest level at Tell Beth Mirsim level J, produced pattern-combed ware ²⁵. Again there were no Abydos

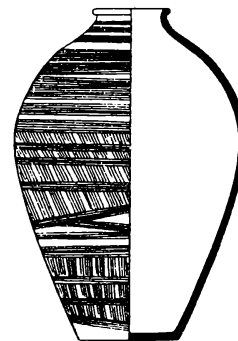


Fig. 13

¹⁹ Marquet-Krause: *Fouilles d'Ay*, Cat. No. 2538.

²⁰ W. F. Albright: *Archaeology of Palestine*, p. 76, Pelican ed.

²¹ Père de Vaux: *R.B.*, Vol. LV, p. 555, fig. 4.

²² B. Maisler: Early Bronze Age Tomb nr. Kinneret (Kh. Kerak). *Bul. of Jew. Pal. Expl. Soc.*, Vol. X, Pl. I.

²³ Engberg and Shipton: *S.A.O.C.*, No. 10, Type 8c, Stage VI-IV.

Shipton: *S.A.O.C.*, No. 17, Types 3, 11, a.b.d. III-I.

²⁴ C. F. Schaeffer: *Ugaritica II*, p. 236, figs. 7, 8, 12.

²⁵ W. F. Albright: *A.A.S.O.R.*, Vol. XII, Pl. II.

pitchers, nor was there any Kh. Kerak ware. It is known that Tell Beth Mirsim was founded near the end of the Early Bronze Age of Palestine.

From the foregoing discussion a coherent picture seems to emerge, into which the evidence from Egypt, as well as that from Palestine and Syria appears to fit. Only careful future excavations of the Early Bronze Age levels in Palestine and Syria can confirm it. During the reign of the later Pharaohs of the First Dynasty the Abydos pitchers began to arrive in Egypt from all parts of the vast area of Syria and Palestine. By the time of the Third to Fourth Dynasty pattern-combed vessels of hard clay and finished by wheel, spread north and south. On the way south, pattern-combed pottery mingled with the painted pottery of southern Palestine. There it continued to flourish until the fall of the Old Kingdom, when it was ousted by the characteristic wheel-combed ware of the end of the Early Bronze Age.

		Part I										Part II									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
STAGE I	STAGE II	STAGE III	STAGE IV	STAGE V	STAGE VI	STAGE VII	STAGE VIII	STAGE IX	STAGE X	STAGE XI	STAGE XII	STAGE I	STAGE II	STAGE III	STAGE IV	STAGE V	STAGE VI	STAGE VII	STAGE VIII	STAGE IX	STAGE X

Megiddo Stages.