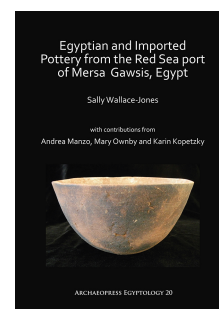




## Birmingham Egyptology Journal

Review by Carla Gallorini

Review of Sally Wallace-Jones, *Egyptian and Imported Pottery from the Red Sea Port of Mersa Gawasis* [sic], *Egypt*, with contributions from Andrea Manzo, Mary Ownby and Karin Kopetzky, Archaeopress Egyptology 20, Archaeopress Publishing, Oxford, 2018. Available both in printed and e-versions: Printed ISBN 9781784919030, EPublication ISBN 9781784919047. Paperback RRP £32.00, EPublication RRP £16.00; viii+186 pages, 155 figures, including 43 colour plates.



The book under review represents the final publication of the Egyptian ceramic material excavated between 2001 and 2011 by a joint Boston University and University of Naples “l’Orientale” mission to Mersa/Wadi Gawasis,<sup>1</sup> led by Kathryn Bard and Rodolfo Fattovich.

Since 2001 various preliminary reports on the pottery from the site have appeared, both online and in print, most notably Cinzia Perlingieri’s contribution in the regional volume of the *Handbook of Pottery of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom*.<sup>2</sup> Wallace-Jones’ book builds on these foundations and its main aim is ‘to make sense of the Egyptian ceramic material; to consider what it can may [sic] about when and how the site was used, how pottery technology changed during the period of occupation and what significance that might have. A further aim is to consider the different areas of the site, examining how various areas might have been used and by whom’ (p. 3).

The first half of the opening chapter (Chapter One, pp. 1-3) offers a brief introduction to Mersa Gawasis and a summary of the evidence supporting the identification of the site as ancient *Saww*, the harbour and base from which seafaring expeditions to Punt and Bia Punt were launched during the Middle Kingdom. This section is informative, but the lack of references to maps showing the location of the site and of the various archaeological features makes some of the descriptions difficult to follow, and it is surprising considering that such maps exist in the book (Figs. 113 and 114). The general feeling of untidiness is amplified by

<sup>1</sup> The most recent publication on the work at Mersa Gawasis is Bard and Fattovich 2018, with extensive bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Perlingieri 2012: 362-376, with extensive bibliography.

typographical errors (see front cover, title page and p. 3), by the lack of consistency in the way references are listed (on p. 1 alone there are 4 permutations: Sayed 1977: p 149; Fattovich 2012: 5; Fattovich, 2012: p 5, and Perlingieri 2007: 110-114), and by the presence of double and triple blank spaces after punctuation marks (p. 2) and before closing brackets (p. 3). More worrying is the mistake in describing the location of Mersa Gawasis, which is in fact south of the modern city of Safaga and north of al-Qusair, not north of Safaga and south of al-Qusair as stated (p. 1). This is only a small selection of the inconsistencies and mistakes found throughout the book; the present review will only touch upon the most significant faults, but it is undeniable that the proofreading and editing fall well below the expected standards.

The second half of the chapter (pp. 4-6) examines 'vessel content and capacity'. The author acknowledges that it is unusual to start the analysis of the ceramic material from a site by looking at the vessels' contents and their capacity rather than presenting a detailed pottery corpus, and she justifies this novel approach by stating that 'the primary function of many vessels at the site was to transport and or contain some commodity essential to the activities taking place. Therefore, a consideration the [sic] types of vessels present and what they might have contained is of some significance' (p. 4). However, the lack of a clear description of the vessel types (that is shape and fabric) creates confusion and forces the reader to flick back and forth through the whole book, trying to find essential information. For example, while discussing 'zirs',<sup>3</sup> fabric 'marl AV3' is mentioned as being 'present at Mersa Gawasis in some quantity' (p. 4); but what kind of fabric is 'marl AV3'? Is the author referring to the site's own fabric classification system? Is it a novel name for the fabric normally called Marl A3, and as such a reference to the Vienna system?<sup>4</sup> To find an answer the reader has to fast forward to Chapter Five 'Pottery types, fabrics and wares', only to discover that the Vienna system was indeed used as a parameter for fabric classification, but the author had decided to adopt an unusual name for Marl A3 (pp. 64-65). More confusing still: 'Bottles are another type of vessel necessary for provisioning the site. There is considerable sherd evidence for these bottles, suggesting the presence of hundreds of vessels in several different types. This group of vessels, made from marl AV3 or Nile silts and nicknamed water jars and beer bottles, has a significant distribution through both time and area in the Middle Kingdom....' (p. 4). With no references to the figures or to the descriptions in the 'Corpus of vessel types' (pp. 68-86), it is impossible to relate the terms 'water jar' and 'beer bottle' to actual vessel types present at Mersa Gawasis. By flicking through the figures, a reader with previous knowledge of Middle Kingdom pottery can find examples of 'beer bottles' rims in Figure 127,<sup>5</sup> but 'water jars' are more problematic as the nickname is not specific to a particular vessel type, and it has been used in the literature for a wider variety of shapes. For example, Janine Bourriau in her catalogue of the exhibition *Umm el-Ga`ab – Pottery from the Nile valley before the Arab conquest*, uses the term for at least three different vessel types: globular bottles with tall flaring neck in Nile B2 (Bourriau 1981: 56, no. 96), ovoid bottles with medium length straight neck, rolled rim and applied decoration in Marl A2 (Bourriau 1981: 57, no. 100), and globular bottles with short, straight and wide neck, and modelled rim in Marl A3 and Nile C (Bourriau 1981: 70, nos. 131 and 132). None of the rims in the figures dedicated to the closed forms in marl AV3 is labelled as 'water jar' (Figures 134-135) and the term does not appear in any of the descriptions in the 'Corpus of vessel types' (pp. 68-86), nor in Chapter Five. Checking all the entries for 'water' in the index brings a clue: in the chapter dedicated to the chronology of the site there is a reference to 'smaller, marl clay jars often described as water jars and dated by Bourriau to the early 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty....' (Bourriau

<sup>3</sup> A large bag-shaped jar, with wide aperture and flat base, usually made of Marl C fabric.

<sup>4</sup> Nordström and Bourriau 1993: 142-190.

<sup>5</sup> Although the caption simply reads 'Nile B2: Closed forms: bottle rims and small jars.'

1981: 70)' (p. 9). As just seen, this entry in Bourriau 1981: 70 refers to globular bottles with short, straight neck, and modelled rim, so we must assume that this is what 'water jars' looked like at Mersa Gawasis. It is clear that the novel approach does not help the reader and it could lead to misunderstandings. Notwithstanding these criticisms, this section provides a concise summary of the pictorial, epigraphical and archaeological evidence used in the identification of the possible uses and contents of three vessel types that seems to be relatively common at Mersa Gawasis: zirs, beer bottles, and jars with corrugated neck in Marl C. However, by the author's own admission, the identification of any commodity eludes her 'as no jar contents remain to confirm the theory' (p. 5).

The emphasis in Chapter Two (pp. 7-13) is on dating, as the author attempts to create a chronological framework for the site using the ceramic material. Again, because the methodology used for quantification and the full pottery corpus have yet to be described in detail, the chapter is not easy to navigate. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of references to illustrations, mistakes in the captions (e.g. 'Marl B2/C Beer Bottle base' Figure 1, p. 8, should read 'Nile B2/C Beer Bottle base') and a rather careless attitude toward conventional terminology (e.g. the use of 'zir' for any kind of large storage jar, p. 9). Chronologically sensitive vessel types, like hemispherical cups, beer bottles and zirs, are barely touched upon, while great emphasis is given to decorated sherds from rare types with less well proven chronological significance. There is little or no reference to comparable material from modern, controlled excavations, while references to Petrie and Quibell's publications are plentiful. Also, there is no genuine attempt to quantify the relative proportion of types in each layer or phase, so that the author relies solely on the presence or absence of a type to date the excavation units. With such premises, it is hardly surprising that almost all excavation units listed in the chronological table at the end of the chapter can only be dated loosely to the Middle Kingdom. As it stands the discussion adds very little to the chronological framework for the site already established through textual evidence.

Chapter Three, 'The functioning of the site', (pp. 14-34) is an attempt to use 'the range of vessels present' at Mersa Gawasis to 'draw conclusions about how different vessels were used and how specific areas of the site might have functioned alongside a consideration of how these contributed to the expeditions as a whole' (p. 14). This is to be achieved by discussing the ceramic material from four excavation units, WG 19, WG 32, WG 49 and WG 51, as they are 'very representative of other similar units on the site' (p. 14). Three more units are also described in the chapter (WG 61, WG65 and WG 67, pp. 19-22), but it is not clear on which basis they have been chosen. For each excavation unit, selected body sherds are listed by fabric while the diagnostics are grouped mainly by pottery type; references to figures are limited and, when present, are reserved for rare types. The main problem with this chapter, however, is exemplified by the description of the diagnostics from WG 32 (p. 17): 'Notable in this context is a large number of Nile B2 and marl C rims of Bader bottle types C and D and also type 7B dating to the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> dynasties. There are also large rims with diameters up to 27cm of Bader type 2 and 3 zirs, dating to the mid-12<sup>th</sup> dynasty (Bader 2002)'. Judging by the bibliographical reference, the types discussed in the paragraph refer to Bettina Bader's 2002 article in *Ägypten und Levante* XII, 'A concise guide to Marl C pottery.' However, none of the types mentioned appear in the article. In Bader's typology of Marl C vessels, each type is labelled with an Arabic numeral: so, for example, deep bowls with direct rim are Type 6, while zirs are Type 57; variants of a given type are marked by the addition of a letter, therefore zirs are labelled as Type 57 a-i; letters never appear on their own. The only other publication by Bader listed in the bibliography is *Tell El-Dab`a XIII, Typologie und Chronologie der Mergel C-Ton Keramik*<sup>6</sup> where the same typology is used. It

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<sup>6</sup> Bader 2001. Bader's 2002 article is a short English summary of this publication.

is possible that ‘Bader type 2 and 3 zirs’ refers to a plate (Abb. 43) in *Tell El-Dab`a XIII*, where Bader illustrates the development of zirs Type 57 through time and in which the different stages are numbered as Type 1-9. If that is the case, then the date ‘to the mid-12<sup>th</sup> dynasty suggested by Wallace-Jones for Type 2 and Type 3 does not correspond to the date put forward by Bader, that is Tell el-Dab`a ‘Str. H-G/3’, which correspond to the period from the middle of the Twelfth to the early Thirteenth Dynasty. The same is true for ‘bottle type C and D’, which cannot be related to any of Bader’s types, while Type 7 in Bader’s typology, a deep bowl with incised decoration around the rim,<sup>7</sup> has no variant ‘B’. This muddled typology is repeated throughout the chapter, making it impossible for the reader to identify with confidence the vessel types under discussion and undermining the credibility of the text. In its present form, the chapter cannot be considered a reliable source of information and any conclusion drawn on such evidence must be treated with extreme caution.

Chapters Four and Five deal respectively with ‘Pottery Technology’ and ‘Pottery types, fabrics and wares’. Chapter Four offers an overview of the shaping methods used in the production of the pottery found at Mersa Gawasis through the close examination of the marks left on the vessels during manufacture. This approach is not new,<sup>8</sup> but it is effective, and the many photographs interspersed through the text clearly illustrate the different shaping methods. In the printed version of the book the colours of the photographs have a strange reddish tinge: whether this is due to a problem with the printing or if the wrong colour mode (RGB instead of CMYK) was applied to the pictures in the original manuscript is impossible to say. Chapter Five (pp. 62-67) opens with a brief account of the methodology used to sort and process the pottery (p. 62), while the bulk of it is dedicated to the description of the fabrics found at the site (pp. 63-67). As already mentioned above, the Vienna System was used as a parameter for fabric classification, but the denominations of the Marl A variants differ from the original (Marl A1 = marl AV1, Marl A2 = marl AV2, Marl A3 = marl AV3 and Marl A4 = marl AV4), and we also learn that throughout the book the term Marl C is not used with its original meaning, but designates the variant Marl C1. Imported fabrics are not described, possibly because foreign pottery is discussed in the appendixes by other authors.

The corpus of vessel types is presented separately from chapter Five (pp. 68-86) in the form of tables (pp. 75-84) and is followed by Figures 117-147, with drawings of selected diagnostics, which ‘give a range of the representative type of vessels at Mersa Gawasis’ (p. 62). The types in the tables are numbered according to Wodzinska’s *A Manual of Egyptian Pottery*,<sup>9</sup> and cross-referenced to Schiestl and Seiler’s *Handbook of the Pottery of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom*<sup>10</sup> (p. 69). There are no references in the tables to Figures 117-147, making the identification of the types ambiguous, unless the reader has easy access to Wodzinska’s or Schiestl and Seiler’s volumes. It is surprising that the type numbers listed in these tables are never used in the main body of the book and the same is true for the verbal descriptions of the types. As it stands, the corpus is of limited use because the pottery types listed in it cannot be easily and unambiguously linked to the types discussed in the book.

The last factor to consider is quantification, as the relative proportion of different pottery types is used to identify the functional/social aspect of the different areas of the site. The methodology used for the quantification of the pottery from Mersa Gawasis is first described in Chapter Five and then touched upon again in the introduction to the Corpus (pp. 69-70) and in Appendix Four (p. 136). Although this is not openly mentioned, the author seems to be using a variation of the *vessel represented* approach,<sup>11</sup> by counting the body

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<sup>7</sup> Bader 2001: 41, Abb. 4.1. Type 7 is not mentioned in Bader 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold 1993: 11-141; Rzeuska 2006: 45-54.

<sup>9</sup> Wodzinska 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Schiestl and Seiler 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Orton and Tyers 1990: 83.

sherds for each type and then looking at the diagnostics for that type to reach an estimate of how many vessels of that type were present in the assemblage (p. 62, p. 69 and p. 136). This quantification method has been proven to be statistically invalid and to have a bias depending on the completeness of the assemblage and the brokenness of each type.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, all references to quantities and relative proportions of types presented in the book should be taken only as general suggestions, and any conclusion drawn on such quantities should be considered as speculative.

In its present form, the book fails to deliver on the aims it set out to achieve. It does not 'make sense of the Egyptian ceramic material' as it does not present a classification that is reliable and coherent, and it adds very little to the discussion on 'when and how the site was used' because it relies on an inaccurate typology and on an unreliable quantification measure. Finally, inconsistencies, ambiguities, repetitions and mistakes are a constant occurrence in the book, compromising its readability and at times undermining the reader's confidence in its contents. They also serve as an unwelcome reminder of the importance of careful proofreading and editing by the author, especially if the publisher does not provide these services as standard.

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<sup>12</sup> Orton, Tyers and Vince 1993: 169.