

Distribution of the pottery vessels within the graves at Tell el-Murra cemetery*

Despite the fact that most of the graves at Tell el-Murra cemetery have been robbed (probably in ancient times), the placements of the ceramic vessels have not been disturbed. The robbers concentrated on the items of higher value (jewellery, ornaments, copper, and gold items) instead of ceramic and stone vessels. Thanks to that we are able to study the placement of particular types of vessels, which is an indication of the funerary practices that took place and can thus provide some insight into beliefs in the afterworlds.

One cannot notice any single rigid rule concerning the location of specific vessel types within the graves. Nonetheless, several regularities can be observed.

In the graves from Tell el-Murra two body orientations dominant: 1. placement of the body in a contracted position on the left side, with the head to the north-east and the face to the south-east
2. and on the left side, with the head to the north and the face to the east.



Wine jars:

--were **in most cases found in the northern parts** of graves or even in a separate chamber located to the north of main chamber, and of the coffin, above the head of the deceased. Because of their size, they were located outside the coffin.

Such localization of wine jars within the graves among the other types of vessels is quite significant and probably suggest their higher value than other vessels (for example rough ware beer jars put usually in southern part of the grave-mentioned below). Wine jars represent good quality pottery, made of compact and homogenous clay and finished very carefully. It has value as a mere vessel.

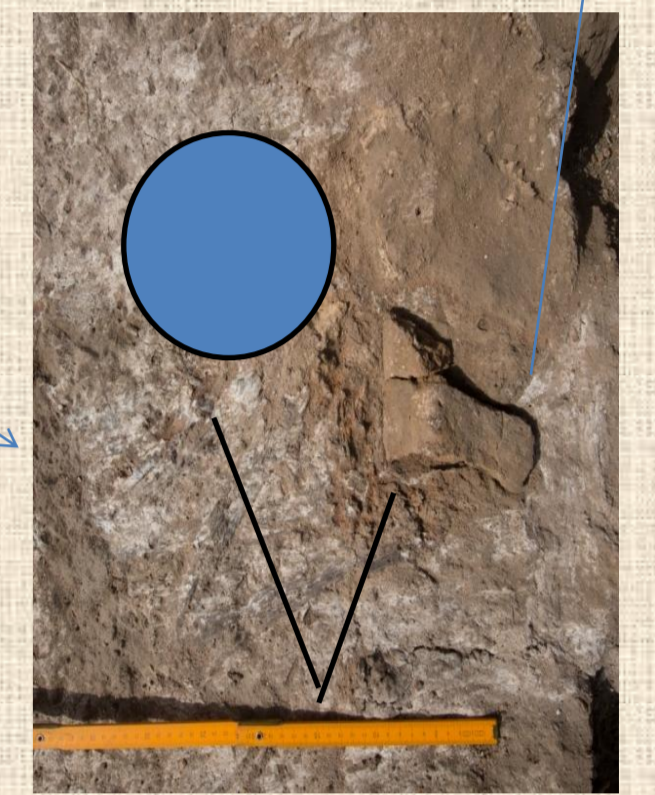
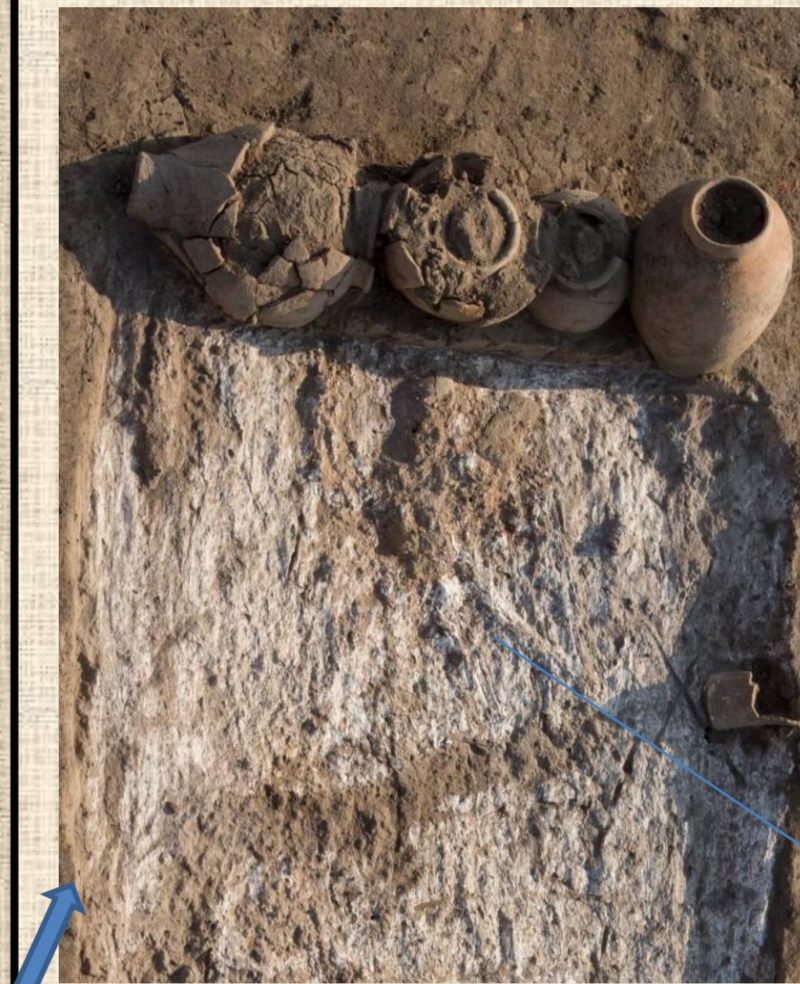
Besides, it is probably reflection of the fact that contrary to bread and beer, which were the base of daily diet of ancient Egyptians, wine as well as meat were valuable commodities and were probably consumed rather during festivals and on special occasions. wine jars (a vessel itself) were put into the graves as a mere symbol of wine or other goods.



Bread moulds:

Pieces of bread moulds were found in a few graves and their placement could be interpreted in two ways.

--In grave no. 42 a piece of a bread mould was **found directly next to the head of the deceased**. In this case it is highly probable that it was placed as a part of the assemblage. Bread moulds were a symbol of bread (a staple of the daily diet) (cf. Garstang 1903: Pl. 30/17; Peet, Loat 1913: 17; Quibell 1898: 19).



--Pieces of bread moulds were also discovered in graves 33 and 39, inside the grave (**in the soil which filled the chamber**), but at higher level than the bottom of the burial, where the deceased and other items were located. Perhaps they are remnants of rituals, funerary practices performed after the body was placed in the grave. It would then be a similar situation to that of beer jars found at the grave, but outside of its interior (mentioned below). Examples of bread moulds located on the casing of graves from other sites confirm the enactment of similar practices (Brunton 1937: 105; Brunton, Caton-Thompson 1928: 5; Dębowska-Ludwin 2018: 28).

--One interesting case concerns **pieces of several bread moulds put intentionally inside one of the jars** located in the south-western corner of the north (storage) chamber of grave 40. They were definitely put there before the grave was closed (the jar is situated at the same level as the other jars and directly next to the other vessels from the assemblage). The question therefore arises: are these the remains of rituals performed after the laying of the body but when the grave was still open? Were the jar and the fragments of forms placed in it used during funeral practices, and at the same time were they to be part of the inventory?

The jar which contained the pieces of bread moulds was probably used as a beer jar. If so, the discussed case would be a kind of combination of two types of vessels symbolizing the basic products of the daily Egyptian diet (bread and beer), a two-in-one offering.



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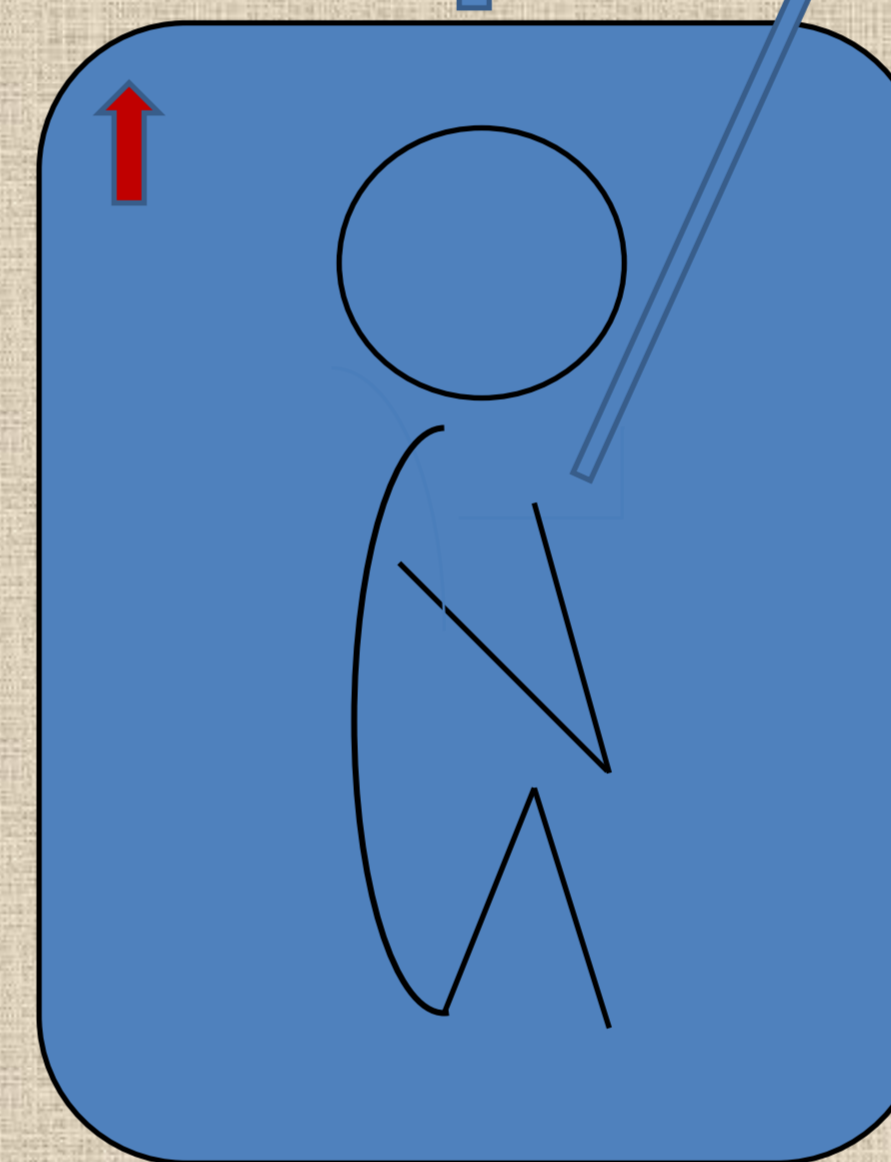
Shallow forms: bowls, plates and trays:

--they were **frequently put edgeways** between the wall of the grave and the wall of the coffin, or close to the wall of the burial in different parts of the grave. Such positioning could have been done for practical reasons: shallow forms took up less space and fit perfectly into corners or narrow spaces. In addition, some of these vessels (like some of the stone shallow forms from Tell el-Murra graves) were discovered **broken into pieces** (but in original position). The question is: Was this the result of postdeposition processes or of intentional treatments as a part of funerary practice?



--in a few cases the bowls were **found upside down**. In one of the graves, the bowl and the tray (both upside down) were put one on top of the another (a possible practical solution, analogical positioning dishes in a kitchen). In another grave, the bowl was located upside down covering the rim of the jar (as a lid).

--One bowl and one tray were found inside coffins



Beer jars

--they were **frequently situated to the south**, below the feet of the deceased or in an additional chamber located to the south of the main chamber. In graves with coffin they were placed outside the coffin.

This positioning (far from the head and face of the deceased) suggests that the vessels had a relatively low intrinsic value (contrary to the wine jars-mentioned above). Indeed they were pottery of low quality, made not very carefully and their contents were far more important. According to Egyptian beliefs in an afterlife as a continuation of the earthly life, it was necessary to provide a dead person with the same goods that he required in daily life in the afterlife (Ikram 2003: 23, 27-28; Leprohon 2001: 569-570). One of these was beer, a staple of diet in ancient Egypt. Beer jars constituting an integral **part of an assemblage**, were placed in the graves as a **symbol of beer or of other goods**.

--In the case of a few graves the jars were **situated to the south, but at a higher level**, in the area slightly above the bottom of the burial, where the deceased and other items were located, outside the outline of the grave. These vessels situated outside the grave were **probably used during funerals or later sacrifices** related to the cult of ancestors (Köhler 2000, 89; Köhler & Smythe 2004, 134; Jucha forthcoming: 291).



Graves with coffins

Only in four of ten graves with pottery coffins were pottery vessels found inside the pottery coffin. In all cases they were small or medium-sized vessels: narrow cylindrical jars located to the west of the head of the deceased; a flat plate, as well as a bowl and a small jar found in the south-east corner of the coffin. This clearly shows that pottery vessels were placed in coffins rather sporadically and in restricted quantities. More valuable objects like stone vessels, bone bracelets, a rounded clay token, flint knife, or cosmetics palette were put into the coffins more frequently.

