

OSTRICH EGGSHELL

قشر بيض النعام

Jacke S. Phillips

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Strausseneierschale
Coquille d'oeuf d'autruche

Ostriches were hunted in Egypt from the earliest times. From their eggshells beads, pendants, and vessels were manufactured. Decorated eggshells were used from the Predynastic Period onward and seem to have a religious meaning.

عرف صيد النعام بمصر منذ قديم الزمان. فقد صنع من قشر بيض النعام الخرز والدلايات وأيضاً الأواني. استخدم قشر البيض المزين بالنقوش منذ عصر ما قبل الأسرات وعلى ما يبدو كان لهذا القشر المنقوش معنى ديني.



Ostriches were hunted from earliest times in what are now the southern Egyptian, Sudanese, and Libyan deserts for food, feathers, and eggshells (Behrens 1986a, 1986b, 1986c; Darby et al. 1977: I: 315 - 317; Houlihan 1986: 1 - 5; Phillips 2000; 2008: I: 148 - 152). Ostrich eggshell has been recovered at prehistoric and Predynastic sites all along the Nile Valley, and in the Fayum and deserts (Vermeersch 1978: 65, 146; Wendorf 1968: 798, 802, 887, 896; Wendrich personal communication). Individual eggshells, which can be as large as 170 by 130 mm and 3.5 mm thick, have been found in graves of Naqada I - III and some settlement contexts. A few were decorated and occasionally clay “eggs” were used in lieu; one shell even substituted for the missing head of the deceased (Kantor 1948; Petrie et al. 1896: 28; Rizkana and Seeher 1989: 19 - 20). Eggshell jewelry is common from Predynastic times through Dynasty 22 (Kemp 1980: 8; Lucas 1962: 38, 44; Midant-Reynes 2000: 319), mostly as small disc-beads that were shaped, drilled, and strung as simple necklaces (Gratien 1998; Lucas 1962: 44). Larger perforated discs may have been ear, forehead, or clothing

ornaments (Andrews 1990: 65; Menghin and Amer 1932: 51; Needler 1984: 306 - 307; Nordström 1972: 124 - 126; Rizkana and Seeher 1989: 19). Pendants, likely having amuletic significance, were perforated at one end and cut to a variety of shapes. Eggshell is sometimes painted, but seems not to have been used as inlays in Egypt (Phillips 2008: II: note 155).

Vessels are the only other objects known to have been made from ostrich eggshell. Extremely few are published, but the variety of types chiefly dating to Dynasty 18 include a “container” and cup, both featuring a drilled hole (that on the cup probably intended for a wooden handle), and fragments thought to be a vessel (Hayes 1959: 23; Helck 1986; Säve-Söderbergh and Troy 1991: 170; Thomas 1981: I: 87 no. 755). The added anhydrite neck/rim of a flask from Abydos suggests its date is Dynasty 12 or the Second Intermediate Period, despite its 18th Dynasty context (see Fay 1998 for the dating of anhydrite exploitation; Steven Snape personal communication). At least six vessels are reported from Hyksos Period tombs at Tell el-Dabaa (van den Brink 1982: 51 - 52, 83 - 89). Vessels also were produced earlier despite

their extreme rarity in the archaeological record, as attested by an elaborate Dynasty 6 perfume vessel recently found in the Dakhla Oasis (Sheikholeslami 2000: 33, 58 no. 13, 126 H), and undoubtedly were used as water containers from earliest times before the production of ceramic vessels. Ostrich eggs were exported to the Aegean from the late Old Kingdom onwards and converted to vessels there (Sakellarakis 1990).

In Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt ostrich eggs, sometimes painted, have been found in religious contexts, such as at Berenike (Sidebotham and Wendrich 2000: 140 - 142). In Coptic Egypt, the egg itself came to symbolize the birth and resurrection of Christ, often decorating the church interior (Butler 1884: 77 - 79). This symbolism has passed down into both the eastern and western churches.

Bibliographic Notes

A brief overview on finds of ostrich eggshell from an ethnobiological perspective can be found in Manlius (2001), while Behrens (1986a, 1986b, 1986c), Helck (1986), and Phillips (2000, 2008) provide more Egyptological foci. The ostrich itself, together with its ancient exploitation, is discussed by Darby et al. (1977) and Houlihan (1986). Bead manufacture is examined by Gratien (1998) and vessel manufacture (in the Aegean) by Sakellarakis (1990). Eggshell objects in the Near East are discussed by Laufer (1926) and Moorey (1994: 127 - 128); those in the Aegean are discussed by Phillips (2008: I: 148 - 152).

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