

Two Drinking Cups, Egypt 1550 BC

Date : November 13, 2006

Politics of Viewing

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What gives a viewer the right to look at a picture? Or an object? Or these two drinking cups, of fired Nile mud, made three and a half millennia ago in the lower Nile Valley, and buried at a site an archaeologist chose to dig in 1914 and chose to call Harageh, the pair now sits on a low glass shelf in a university museum in London. What gives us the right to learn, might be the recognition of political realities, that London had troops occupying Egypt in 1914, that London museum-goers and university students have higher living standards, better health service, higher literacy rate, that politics, society and the economy, after all, exist. And a live connection with the home-town of the man who dug out the pots for the archaeologist, to let people living in that part of Egypt see London as it is.

These two cups were the only surviving finds along with some glazed beads and the remains of a [body](#) identified as a male child: [The record card from the excavation \(in the Petrie Museum Archive\)](#)

Ceramic typologists place the cup form in the local production sequence at c.1600-1500 BC, when the kings based at Thebes, in the South, fought to reunite Egypt. It is not possible to identify the precise date, so to know whether the cups were made before or after the reunification – and from that to imagine the lives of the makers and users, and the people who buried this child.

A Museum Object?

A dilemma in the control records of the institution: is a pair two objects or one? A pair is as easily breached as any set, by taking one physically separable item to a different place, by the choice of not keeping a link that is reinforced here by the words on them, that continue from one to the next cup. The same breach or keep is continually created-undone either by the memory of or by the sight of the rest of the world around the display-case, or around the computer-screen. The 'it' only becomes an object – museum object, object of study – by heavy forgetting.

Of fired Nile-flood silt, at one level these two objects embody Water-drinking, a pair of regular drinking cups – the shape is found abundantly enough on archaeological sites of this region and period. These two have, though, been chosen for a moment out of the ordinary, a choice that has left its traces in faded writing. Special words, special use, that makes these cups more precious than other cups, not for reflecting literate (elite) life, but for reminding

us of the sacredness of the everyday: not to assume what any other cup might have been at a moment of its use; and instead to remember how we depend on the incessantly repeated act of drinking water. A literate user had a life, a producer had a life, an illiterate user had a life, but history and archaeology and their philologies use some users more comfortably than others. The museum display naturalises the social hierarchy that we bring to the object, but this pair disrupts the hierarchy of the bog-standard drinking-cup by making it more obvious that any Thing can be sacred in its ordinariness, because this pair is covered in ritual recorded in writing, and this ritual makes explicit precisely the sacredness of all Material and every Thing.

The Writing

Deities named in this ritual include the creator, the sun-god Ra; the god of order and kingship, Horus; the god of metal arts, Ptah; and the goddess of sensual life, Hathor.

[\(on cup UC 16129\)](#)

Pronouncement for offering things to the Transfigured Spirits,
opening the mouth at the beginning of reading.
'Heaven shall be opened to you;
earth shall be opened to you
the ways in the Land bearing the God shall be opened to you,
so that you may go out and in with Ra,
when you have ranged like the Lords of Eternity.
Receive senu-loaves as the gift of Ptah,
and pure bread off the altars of Horus.
Your flight-soul lives, your limbs flourish;
your sight is clear in the ways (of darkness).
The Nile-flood god gives you water;
The Grain-god gives you bread;
Hathor gives you beer;
The Cow-goddess gives you milk.
You wash your feet upon blocks of silver on slabs of turquoise;
you don the 'pure'-garment,
(continued on cup UC 16128)
[and are with Ptah,
You are given bread from your barley,
you drink water at the altar of Ra.
Osiris gives you [new forms].
You glimpse the shining of the water,
when you have moved out from your house of darkness;
The Nile-flood strikes seven cubits deep over your fields in your house of thirst.
You drink a jug of milk, as the gift of the cow-goddess Sekhat-Hor.

You don the 'pure'-garment, and untie any other,
the hands of the Weaving-goddess have clothed you.
You look at the Sun-disk, and worship Ra.
You pacify the one who rises in the Primeval Waters.
You are given bread in Hutkaptah (Memphis), pure in your offerings.

Three references

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UC 16129 and 16128 Photos online at

<http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/harageh/archive/uc16129.jpg>

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