

# TELL EL-RETABA CERAMIC SURVEY, 2007

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## INTRODUCTION

During the first season of work of the Tell el-Retaba Archaeological Mission 608 sherds were collected from the surface of the site on both sides of the modern asphalt road cutting across the site. The coordinates of all the sherds were mapped. Time limits necessitated the collection of only diagnostic sherds, that is rims, bases, handles. Body parts were taken only in the case of interesting fabrics, mainly imported wares.

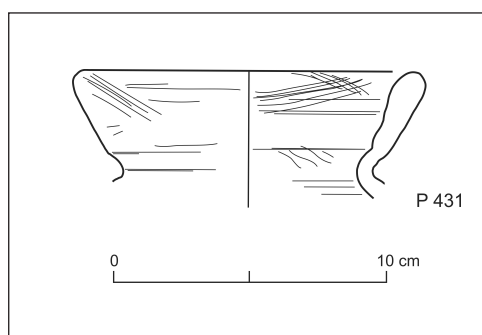
A quick assessment of the dating of the pottery assemblage places it quite well in

the late New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period/Late Period, confirming Carol Redmount's earlier findings (1989: 125). Some parts of the site seem to differ, however, like the northern part which has more sherds of Eastern imported wares; this part is tentatively dated to the late New Kingdom–Third Intermediate Period. The eastern part, where the previously excavated houses are located, has yielded more types including bread trays, various bowls, jars and large basins typical of the Third Intermediate Period–Late Period.

## EGYPTIAN WARES

The earliest site occupation recorded in this assemblage is represented by a jar made of marl clay (MC, MF?) with well smoothed surface [*Fig. 1*] dated in all likelihood to the late Middle Kingdom–Second Intermediate Period (T.I. Rzeuska, pers. comm.). The sherd bears out the earliest date already given by Redmount (1989: 125).

Coming from the western part of the site is a body sherd from a closed vessel with blue-painted decoration, unfortunately too fragmented for the pattern to be discerned. Vessels of this kind are believed to have occurred for the last time in the tomb of



*Fig. 1. Late Middle Kingdom–Second Intermediate Period jar  
(Drawing A. Wodzińska)*

Ramesses IV (Aston 1996: 79), but without the ornament pattern a more accurate dating is impossible. The sherd is made of NB2 clay, the sandy variant.

Jars made of Marl A4 clay [Fig. 2:1–2] seem to be very common at the site. They are always well smoothed and sometimes slightly polished. Published parallels from other sites place them in the late New Kingdom (tomb of Ramesses VI, cf. Aston 1996: 19, 120, Fig. 18:4) and the Third Intermediate Period (Aston 1996: 24, 130, Fig. 28:6).

Jars with rounded recurved rim made of Marl A4 clay [Fig. 2:3] can be dated to the late New Kingdom and beginning of the

Third Intermediate Period, particularly the Twentieth–Twenty-first Dynasties (Aston 1999: 46). Their surface is uncoated, only smoothed. Aston describes similar jars found on Elephantine (1999: 49–50, Pl. 10:247).

Vessels made of marl clay were not as common as those made of Nile silt. The closed pots made of Nile clay are either uncoated [Fig. 2:6] or coated with white or pinkish slip [Fig. 2:4–5, 7] and well smoothed.

A jar with long straight neck and rounded rim is made of Nile B2 sandy clay (Redmount 1989: 404–405, Fig. 54:336–349, especially 339) [Fig. 2:6]. A pinkish coat occurs on the external and partly

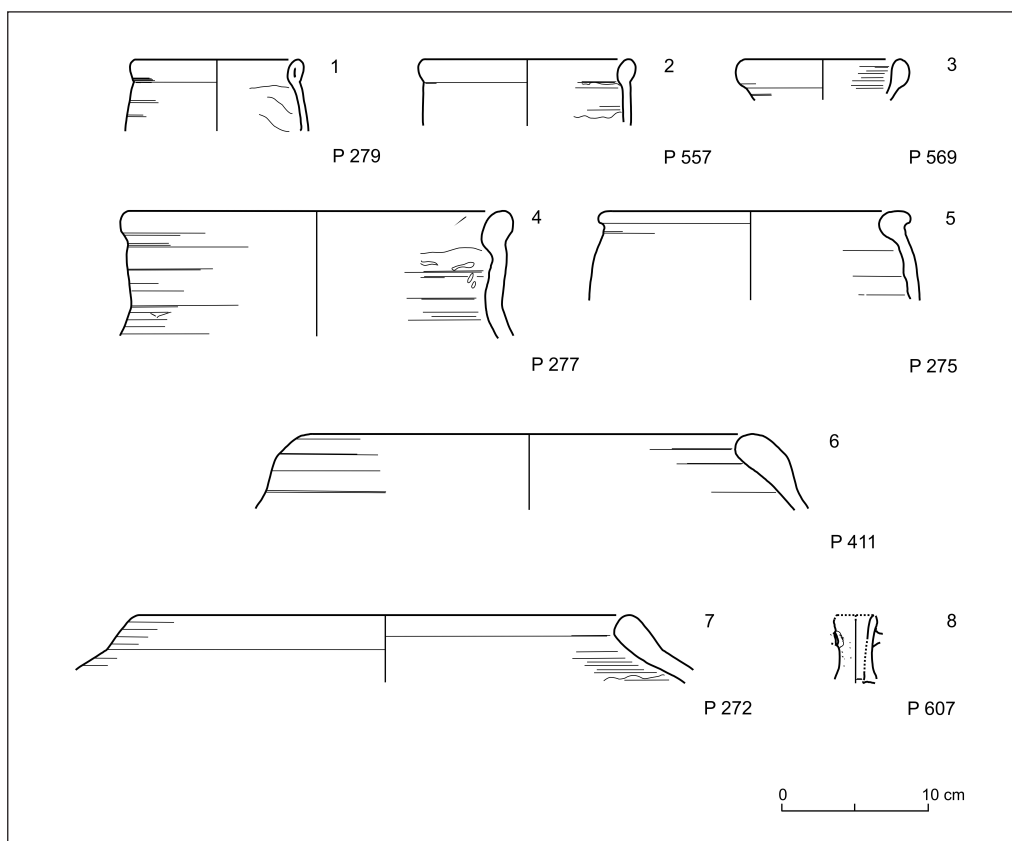


Fig. 2. Late New Kingdom–Third Intermediate Period jars; P277, maybe also until the Late Period; P275, Third Intermediate Period, maybe until the Late Period (Drawing A. Wodzińska)

internal surface. The vessel can be attributed to the late New Kingdom (Tell Daba, cf. Aston 1996: 143, Fig. 41:5), the Twenty-first–Twenty-second Dynasties (Aston 1996: 24, 133, Fig. 31:308) or the Late Period (Bavay 1998: 323, 26, Fig. 35:48; French 1996: 9, 11, Fig. 1, Type 2).

The jar made of NB2 sandy clay and covered with pinkish coat [Fig. 2:5] is dated to the Twentieth–Twenty-first Dynasty (Aston 1996: 26, 143, Fig. 41:5).

Hole-mouth jars [Fig. 2:6–7] are very common in Retaba. Many of them were found during a survey conducted by the

Wadi Tumilat Project directed by John S. Holladay Jr. (Redmount 1989: 394–395, Fig. 54:268–284). Those vessels are always made of Nile clay tempered with sand. Their surface is either white/pink coated [Fig. 2:7] or only smoothed without additional slip [Fig. 2:6]. The pots presented here can be dated to the Third Intermediate Period (Hummel, Shubert 1994: 9–10, Figs 3–4) [Fig. 2:6] and the Late Period (Bavay 1998: 325–326, Fig. 35:56) [Fig. 2:7].

A small fragment of a pilgrim flask made of Nile B2 clay [Fig. 2:8] with a smoothed surface was also collected. The handle placed

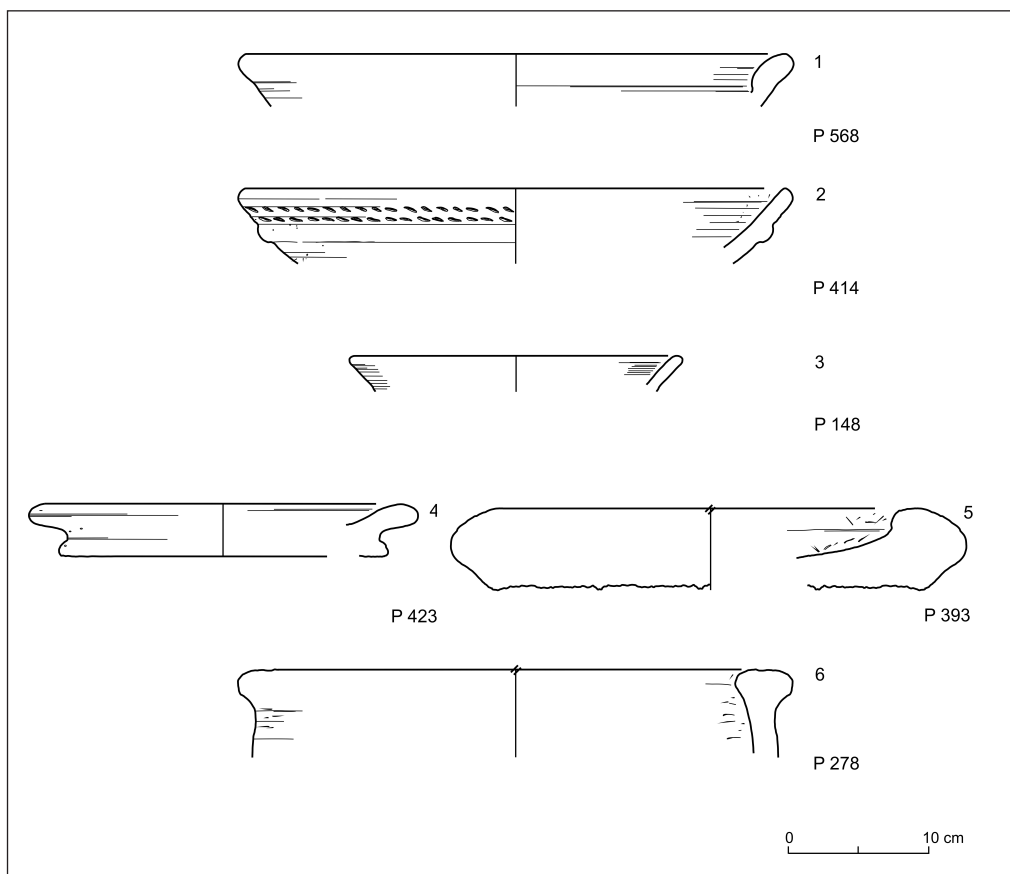


Fig. 3. Late New Kingdom–Third Intermediate Period bowls  
(Drawing A. Wodzińska)

high on the neck points to a date in the mid 8th–7th century BC (Aston 1999: 159, 96–98, Pl. 60:1798).

The open forms presented below are also firmly placed in the late New Kingdom through Third Intermediate Period timeframe. A bowl with internal ledge [Fig. 3:1] is made of marl clay. Its surface bears a thick pinkish coat on the interior and exterior. The form is very similar to a bowl from Qantir dated to the Twentieth–Twenty-first Dynasty (Aston 1998: 620–621, Fig. 2515).

This characteristic bowl with external ledge and two rows of string impressions [Fig. 3:2] seems to be an innovation of the Ramesside period (Aston 1998: 15). It is

made of Nile B2 fabric with significant amounts of sand. The vessel is typical of the late New Kingdom (Spencer 2002: 25, Pl. 25:E2), although it appeared also later in the Third Intermediate Period (Aston 1999: 15, 17, Pl. 1:1; Brunton, Engelbach 1927: Pl. XXXIII:12A; Quibell 1898: Pl. XII:9).

Simple uncoated bowls with flaring walls [Fig. 3:3], also made of Nile B2 sandy clay, appear to be one of the most common ceramic vessels known from Tell el-Retaba (Redmount 1989: 372–373, Fig. 54:97–98). Their surface is usually smoothed without any additional treatment. On the basis of parallels from other sites the type can be dated to the late New Kingdom (Ramesses

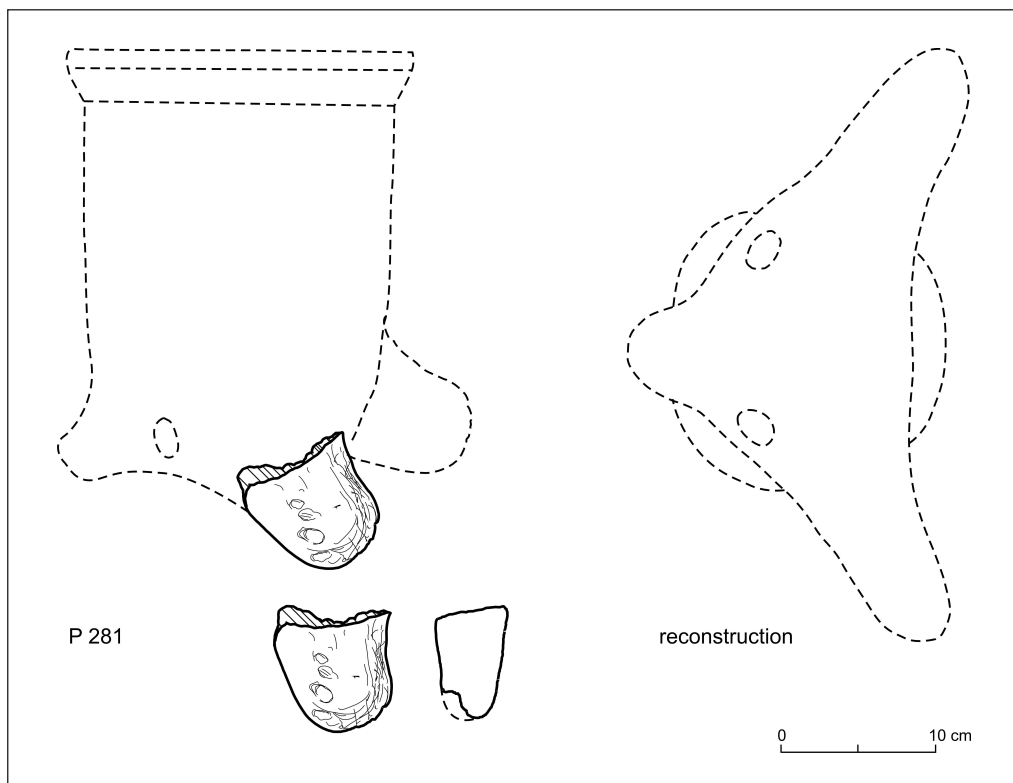


Fig. 4. "Fire-dog", Late New Kingdom–Third Intermediate Period. Reconstruction based on a pot excavated in Tell el-Retaba by W.M.F. Petrie (Drawing A. Wodzińska)

III to Ramesses VI, Aston 1996: 106, 10, Figs 4b, 8b) and the Third Intermediate Period (Aston 1996: 125, Fig. 23a, especially the reign of Osorkon II).

Shallow bread trays [Fig. 3:4], made of either Nile C or Nile E clay, also occur in large quantities on the site (Redmount 1989: 390–391, Fig. 54: 251–255). Such vessels were very common during the late New Kingdom, the Third Intermediate Period, but also later in the Late Period going on the Ptolemaic age. The tray presented here finds parallels among vessels from the times of either Ramesses III or IV (Aston 1996: 108, Fig. 6), also from the Twenty-second Dynasty (Aston 1996: 126, Fig. 24; Bavay 1998: 319–320, Fig. 32:14) and the Late Period (Basilico, Lupo 2004: 6, 11, Fig. 2c).

Many fragments of large trays made of coarse Nile C [Fig. 3:5] were also collected. Their diameter is usually larger than 40 cm. The body is always handmade. On the basis of known vessels of this type they can be dated to the Twentieth Dynasty (Aston 1996: 18, 113, Fig. 11:247), and later to the Twenty-second Dynasty (Bavay 1998: 323–324, Fig. 34:46–47).

A large Nile C uncoated vat [Fig. 3:6] was noted by Redmount (1989: 378–379, Fig. 54:131). Dating is elusive however, the late dynastic material from Elephantine pointing with some likelihood to the mid 8th–7th centuries BC (Aston 1999: 159, 78–79, Pl. 53:1634).

A fragment of so called “fire-dog” (Petrie 1906: Pl. XXXVIB:54) [Fig. 4] was found in the southeastern part of the site.

The foot of the vessel is made of Nile B2 clay. Pots of this kind are plentiful at the site, a few examples having been published already (Petrie 1906: Pl. XXXVIB:53–55). They are common in settlements of the late New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period (Aston 1996: 61; 1998: 580–581, Fig. 2384, Twentieth–Twenty-first Dynasty; Myśliwiec 1987: 39, 51–52, Fig. 303–304, two pots found in the Seti mortuary temple at Thebes come from a group described as diverse pots from the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period), where they were used as supports for cooking pots placed over a fire (Aston 1996: 62).

Although the majority of the Retaba vessels came from the Late New Kingdom/Third Intermediate Period/Late Period, a few pieces are of a later date. A fragment of jar made of Nile B2 sandy clay had a thin white coat with decoration in black and brown paint [Fig. 5]. Such floral motifs can be dated to the Ptolemaic Period (Południkiewicz 1992: 96, 98–99, Figs 7–8).

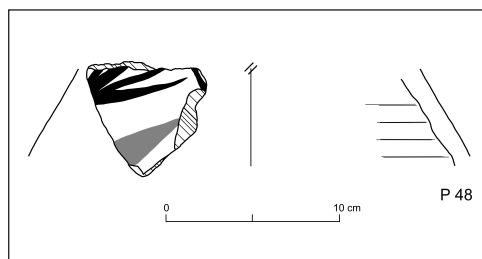


Fig. 5. Ptolemaic Period jar with black and brown painted decoration (Drawing A. Wodzińska)

## IMPORTED WARES

A few examples of imported wares were also found. They are representative of Retaba's and ultimately Egypt's foreign relations in the late New Kingdom–Third Inter-

mediate Period and later. The imports came from two general directions, including mainland Greece and the Greek islands and Cyprus in the north, and the East with

Phoenicia and Palestine in the east (Redmount 1989: 130).

A thin-walled body part probably represents a Mycenaean stirrup jar (K. Lewartowski, M. Siennicka: pers. comm.; Bourriau, Nordstrom 1993: 183, Pl. VIIa) [Fig. 6:1]. It is made of very homogenous, pale pink clay. The external surface was decorated with red painted stripes and additionally lightly polished. Parallel lines visible on the internal surface indicate that the pot was turned.

One fragment of a closed vessel made of foreign clay is covered with black slip on the outside and polished [Fig. 6:2]. Additionally, the upper part of the sherd was decorated with red and cream painted stripes. The surface treatment indicates the Greek (Minoan?) origin of the vessel but the further research is needed in this place.

Several fragments of handles are attributed to Levantine storage jars well known in Egypt (Bikai 1989; Sagona 1982: Plate XXIII:590). They are made of light orange, homogenous

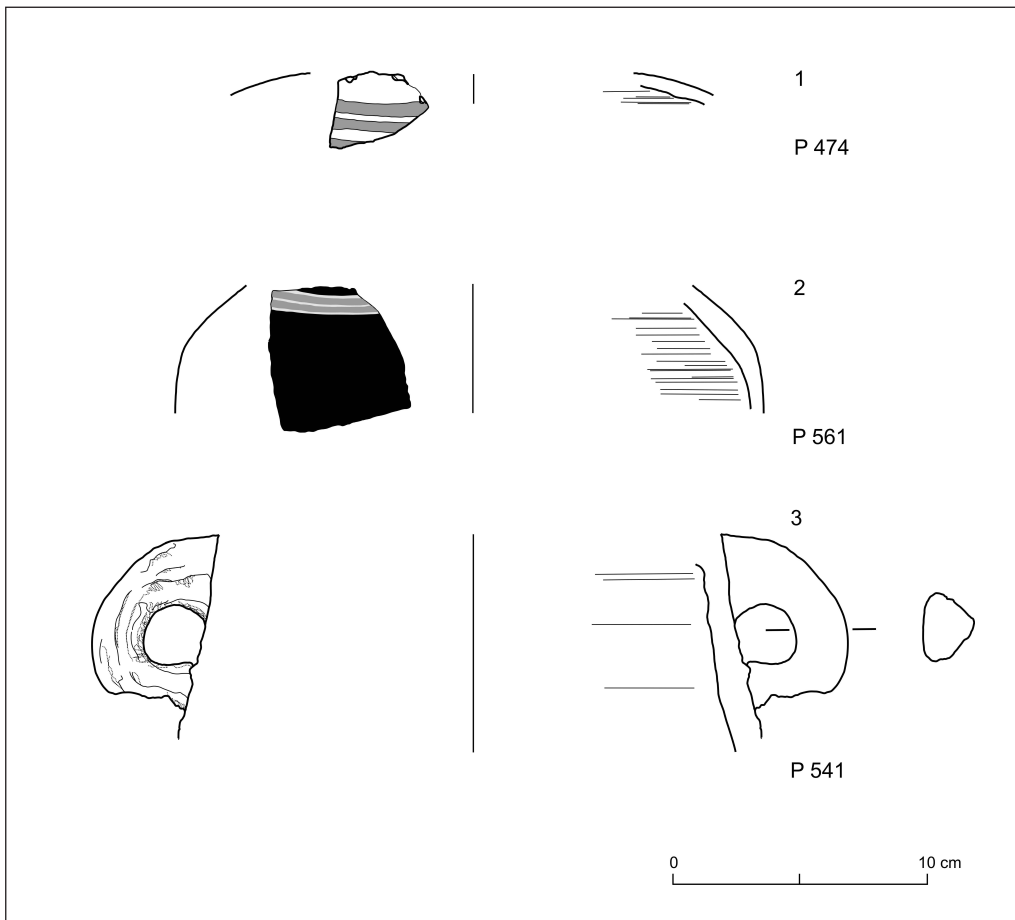


Fig. 6. Imported wares: P474, Mycenaean jar; P561, Minoan (?) jar; P541, Levantine storage amphora (Drawing A. Wodzińska)

clay containing moderate quantities of small, <0.5mm, white particles. Their surface is smoothed without additional treatment. The shape of the jar shown here [Fig. 6:3] exhibits features common in the late Saite–Persian

periods (5th–4th centuries BC) (Aston 1999: 213, 32–36, Pls 72:2044, 73:46, 49–56) and the second half of the Persian period through the Ptolemaic age (Gratien 1997: 71, 74, Pl. I, Fig. 1:5–103).

## CONCLUSIONS

A provisional assessment of the pottery from the survey at Tell el-Retaba indicates that most of the recorded vessels date from the late New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period. A few sherds have been associated with the Late Period, one probably comes from the Ptolemaic age.

Egyptian ceramics are made mostly of Nile B2 clay, particularly the sandy variant of the fabric. Marl clays are rarer than on other sites in the Delta. The late New Kingdom–Third Intermediate Period pots

are either uncoated or have a white/pinkish slip. A few red-slipped vessels were also found.

The site has provided proof of far-flung foreign contacts as demonstrated by the occurrence of imported vessels which most probably came from Greece, the Levant, maybe also from Cyprus. More research is needed, but even at this stage of the research the site seems perfect for international contacts. More imports will surely be found in all future excavations.

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