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BIFAO 102 (2002), p. 425-436

Sayed Yamani

New Year's Bottles from Tell Marqula (Dakhla Oasis).

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New Year's bottles from Tell Marqula (Dakhla Oasis)

Sayed YAMANI

THE four New Year's bottles which are presented here have been found in Tell Marqula during excavations carried out by the Antiquities Inspectorate of Dakhla.[1] Tell Marqula is located south-west of Mut, the capital of Dakhla oasis. It was probably part of an important ancient site which also included Bir el-Saghla, about 2 km north-west of Tell Marqula. The main site of Mut el-Kharab, the New Kingdom and Late Period capital of Dakhla is only 300 m south of Tell Marqula. Lastly, there is a Roman necropolis at Kom Beshay, about 400 m east of Tell Marqula. Nowadays the hill is surrounded by fields, due to recent agricultural expansion. The numerous Roman wells around Tell Marqula show that the area was cultivated in Antiquity.

The necropolis of Tell Marqula probably covers all the surface of the tell. The tombs have been built both on the top of the hill and on its slopes. All of them are mudbrick constructions, covered with mudbrick vaults. Some of them have floors made of sandstone slabs. Twenty-five tombs have been excavated, but this cluster is only a small part of the necropolis. The tombs contained undecorated sandstone sarcophagi. Some of them had been hewn from one single block while others had been built on the spot using sandstone slabs. Most of the burial chambers housed more than one sarcophagus.

Few monuments of the Saite Period in Dakhla have been published as yet. On the other hand, New Year's bottles of unknown provenance are often found in museums. So it seemed valid to publish the four vases of Tell Marqula and appended to them, a scarab seal found together with bottle no. 912, which is relevant for dating.

1 The necropolis of Tell Marqula was excavated by the author between 1988 and 1992. I thank Ayman Hussein (Ifao) who made the drawings, Alain Lecler (Ifao) who made the pictures, and Anne Mathieu who checked the English text.

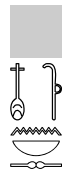
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KHARGA MUSEUM No. 807

Excavator's number : Dakhla Inspectorate Register no. 1501.
Faience : Greenish ; glaze worn off. Height : 16.7 cm. Width : 13.8 cm.
Lentoid bottle. Mouth shaped as a papyrus capital. High narrow neck flanked by two ibex heads. Upper part of the flask body decorated with five rows of geometric and floral patterns reminiscent of a garland or an *ousekh*-collar. Both edges bear a short inscription :



Nb(.t) Ḥtp(.t) dj ʿnḫ n nb=s
It is Nebet Hetepet [a] *who has given life to its owner.*



... (wp) rnp(.t) nfr(.t) n nb=s
It is (the god X) who has opened a Happy New Year to its owner.

a. Cf. J. Vandier, "Iousâas et (Hathor) – Nébet-Hétépet", *RdE* 16, 1964, p. 55-146 ; *id.*, *RdE* 17, 1965, p. 89-176 ; *id.*, *RdE* 18, 1966, p. 67-142. There are occurrences of the writing  (S 12) instead of  (V 30) at the Late Period : *id.*, *RdE* 16, p. 111, p. 114 ; *id.*, *RdE* 17, p. 96. Moreover, Vandier (*RdE* 17, p. 101, doc. E. LXXXIX) quotes a New Year's bottle bearing the following formula : "Nébet-Hétépet ouvre une heureuse année à...".

Another New Year's bottle from Ayn Manawir (Kharga Oasis) is inscribed with the formula : "It is Nebet Hetepet who has given life", which lacks the usual ending *n nb=s*, "for its owner" : P. Dils, *BIFAO* 96, 1996, p. 429, fig. 65, p. 430.

KHARGA MUSEUM No. 910

Excavator's number : Dakhla Inspectorate Register no. 756.
Faience. Green ; glaze partly worn off. Height : 9.6 cm. Width : 7.7 cm.
Lentoid bottle. Mouth shaped as a papyrus capital with details of the sepals. High narrow neck flanked by two small handles looking like a folded papyrus stalk, the umbel downwards. Upper part of the flask body decorated with four rows of geometric and floral patterns reminiscent of a garland or an *ousekh*-collar. On one side of the body is a vertical inscription within a pannel decorated with a feather pattern.[2] On the edges of the bottle are decorative borders with a stylised floral pattern usually called « rosette ».



Ptḥ wp rnp(.t) nfr(.t) n nb=s
It is Ptah who has opened a Happy New Year to its owner.

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KHARGA MUSEUM No. 912

Excavator's number : Dakhla Inspectorate Register no. 758.
Faience. Blue-green ; glaze mostly worn off. Height : 14.2 cm. Width : 10.7 cm.
Lentoid bottle. Mouth shaped as a papyrus capital. High narrow neck flanked by two ibex heads. Upper part of the flask body decorated with five rows of geometric and floral patterns reminiscent of a garland or an *ousekh*-collar. On one side is Hathor as a cow crowned by a disk between high feathers and leaning on a papyrus bark in a papyrus marsh.[3] Before the hathoric cow is a big *s*ꜣ sign (V 17). On the other side is a vertical inscription between two figures of divinities facing each other. On the right, the god Nefertum bears his usual lotus crown with high feathers and *menit*-counterweights. He holds a *was*-sceptre, the head of which is very accurately designed as a sethian head. On the left, the goddess Sakhmet is crowned by a disk and holds a papyrus sceptre. At the bottom is a large *nb*-basket decorated with basketwork design. Both gods are seated on it. The edge is decorated with a herring-bone pattern imitating papyrus basketwork.



Swtḫ [a] *wp rnp(.t) nfr(.t) n ḥm nṯr Swtḫ n Swtḫ-jr-dj-s(w)* [b]
It is Seth who has opened a Happy New Year
to the priest of Seth, to Sethirdis.

a. Although it is incorrectly spelled, the name can hardly be read otherwise.

In the first occurrence, instead of the 𓈖 (X 1) the sign looks like a 𓊃 (Q 3). The 𓇋 (Aa 1) is not perfectly circular but rather oval forming an 𓎛 (H 8). In the other two occurrences, the 𓇋 is circular but it is written above the stroke (Z 1). The only other option would be to read *Ḫnsw*. Nevertheless, as far as we know, the lack of the 𓈙 (N 35) forbids this reading. Besides, in order to read *Ḫnsw* we have to assume an inversion of the 𓐍 (M 23) which occurs but seldom. So, on palaeographical grounds, the reading *Swtḫ* shows less discrepancy with the normal writing than *Ḫnsw*. About the spelling of the name of Seth : G. Roeder, *ZÄS* 50, 1912, p. 84-86 ; H. Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, Leiden, 1967, p. 1.

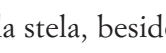
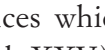
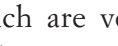
However, the main argument in favour of the reading *Swtḫ* is the location of the bottle at Mut. It is well known that Seth is Lord of Dakhla and that his cult is still flourishing in the oasis during the First Millenium B.C., even as it had begun to decay in the Nile Valley.

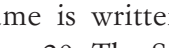
2 Similar decoration with cross-hatching instead of the feather pattern on Berlin New Year's flask 9480 : Fl. Dunn Friedmann, *Gifts of the Nile. Ancient Egyptian Faience*, Museum of Art, Rhode Island, Providence, 1988, no. 126, p. 138 and p. 229.

3 Cf. München Äg. Sammlung 382 : S. Schoske, B. Kreissl, R. Germer, *« Anch » Blumen für das Leben. Pflanzen im alten Ägypten*, München, 1992, no. 60, p. 134.

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The most famous document is the greater Dakhla stela (Sheshonq III, *circa* 820 B.C.): A.H. Gardiner, "The Dakhleh Stela", *JEA* 19, 1933, p. 19-30. See also the smaller Dakhla stela (XXVth Dyn., reign of Peye-Piankhy): J.J. Janssen, "The Smaller Dâkhla Stela", *JEA* 54, 1968, p. 165-172, pl. XXV. Comprehensive studies of the cult of Seth in Dakhla: O. Kaper, *Temples and Gods in Roman Dakhleh. Studies in the Indigenous Cults of an Egyptian Oasis*, Groningen, 1997, p. 55-65; *id.*, "The statue of Penbast. On the cult of Seth in the Dakhleh Oasis", in J. van Dijk (ed.), *Essays on Ancient Egypt in Honour of Herman Te Velde*, Groningen, 1997, p. 231-241. Recent excavations on the site of Mut el-Kharab have gathered further data. It is confirmed that the large mudbrick precinct (240 x 180 m) housed a temple of Seth in the XXVIth Dyn.: C. Hope, *BACE* 12, 2001, p. 47-63; O. Kaper, "Two Decorated Blocks from the Temple of Seth in Mut el-Kharab", *BACE* 12, 2001, p. 71-78.

Indeed, if we check the occurrences of the name of Seth in Dakhla, we find that it is sometimes misspelt. For instance, in the greater Dakhla stela, beside the full writing  we find twice  (Gardiner, *op. cit.*, fig. 1, p. 29). In the smaller Dakhla stela there are two occurrences which are very close to the spelling on bottle 912:  and  (Janssen, *op. cit.*, pl. XXV). Later, in the Roman Period temple at Deir el-Hagar, we even find  with an *i* instead of an *s*: J. Osing, "Seth in Dachla und Charga", *MDAIK* 41, 1985, p. 229-233; see p. 230.

b. Ranke, *PN* II, 317, 12. Checking the original copy of the text from the cella of Ammun's temple in Aghurmi, we find that the name is written  with an  (H 8) instead of the  (Aa 1): G. Steindorff, *ZÄS* 69, 1933, p. 20. The Sethirdis of Siwa was a ruler of the oasis during the XXVIth Dyn. (reign of Amasis): K. Kuhlmann, *Das Ammoneion. Archäologie, Geschichte und Kultpraxis des Orakels von Siwa*, Mainz am Rhein, 1988, p. 104-105. About the theophorous names including Seth in the oases, cf. Osing, *op. cit.*, p. 229, n. 6 and H. Jacquet-Gordon, "A Statue from Dakhla Oasis", *MDAIK* 47, 1991, p. 173-178, pl. 15.

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KHARGA MUSEUM No. 920

Excavator's number : Dakhla Inspectorate Register no. 795.
Faience. Green. Height : 12.2 cm. Width : 10.9 cm.
Lentoid bottle. The lower part of the body is deformed on one side. Mouth shaped as a papyrus capital with details of the sepals. High narrow neck flanked by two small handles looking like a folded papyrus stalk, the umbel downwards. Upper part of the flask body decorated with four rows of geometric and floral patterns reminiscent of a garland or an *ousekh*- collar. Both edges are inscribed with the same text.



Imn-rˁ Ptḥ wp rnp(.t) nfr(.t) n nb.i
It is Amun-Ra and Ptah who have opened a Happy New Year to my owner.

KHARGA MUSEUM No. 919

Excavator's number : Dakhla Inspectorate Register no. 757.
Scaraboid seal.
Faience. Green. Length : 3.3 cm. Width : 2 cm. Height : 1.3 cm.
Back : crocodile.
Inscription : *Psmṯk*.



Kharga Museum, no. 919.

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New Year's bottles are a very homogeneous and well-known type of objects, so that a general comment would be out of place in this article.[4] They were offered as gifts for the New Year, at the beginning of the inundation. Accordingly they were decorated with redundant symbols of the yearly renewal of an everlasting life, hence their inclusion in burials.

As for the ornementation, one point is worth noticing : usually the small handles stuck to the neck are ape-shaped. The Tell Marqula bottles show two less frequent though documented variants : heads of ibex (807 and 912) – the horns being similar to the *rnp* sign[5] – and folded papyrus stalk (910 and 920).[6]

Most of the gods mentioned in the formula or represented on the body are the divinities usually documented on New Year's bottles : Amun-Ra, Hathor, Ptah, Sakhmet and Nefertum.

On the contrary, the mention of Seth, if we read it well, is a unique case. But the point is not so odd as it looks at first sight. Indeed, so far as we may surmise, Seth is mentioned, not in relation to wishes for the New Year, but as the god of the owner of the flask whose theophorous name includes the god's, and who is actually the god's priest. As Tell Marqula is very close to the precinct of Mut el-Kharab, it seems obvious that the priest of Seth Sethirdis was in charge of a priesthood in the neighbouring temple. This does not necessarily mean that bottle 912 was manufactured in Dakhla. Such a flask might have been ordered from a workshop of the Nile Valley. At all events its being inscribed with a name and title shows that it is not an object of mass production.

Usually New Year's bottles are dated of the XXVIth Dynasty. The seal inscribed with the name Psammetik fits well with this dating.[7]

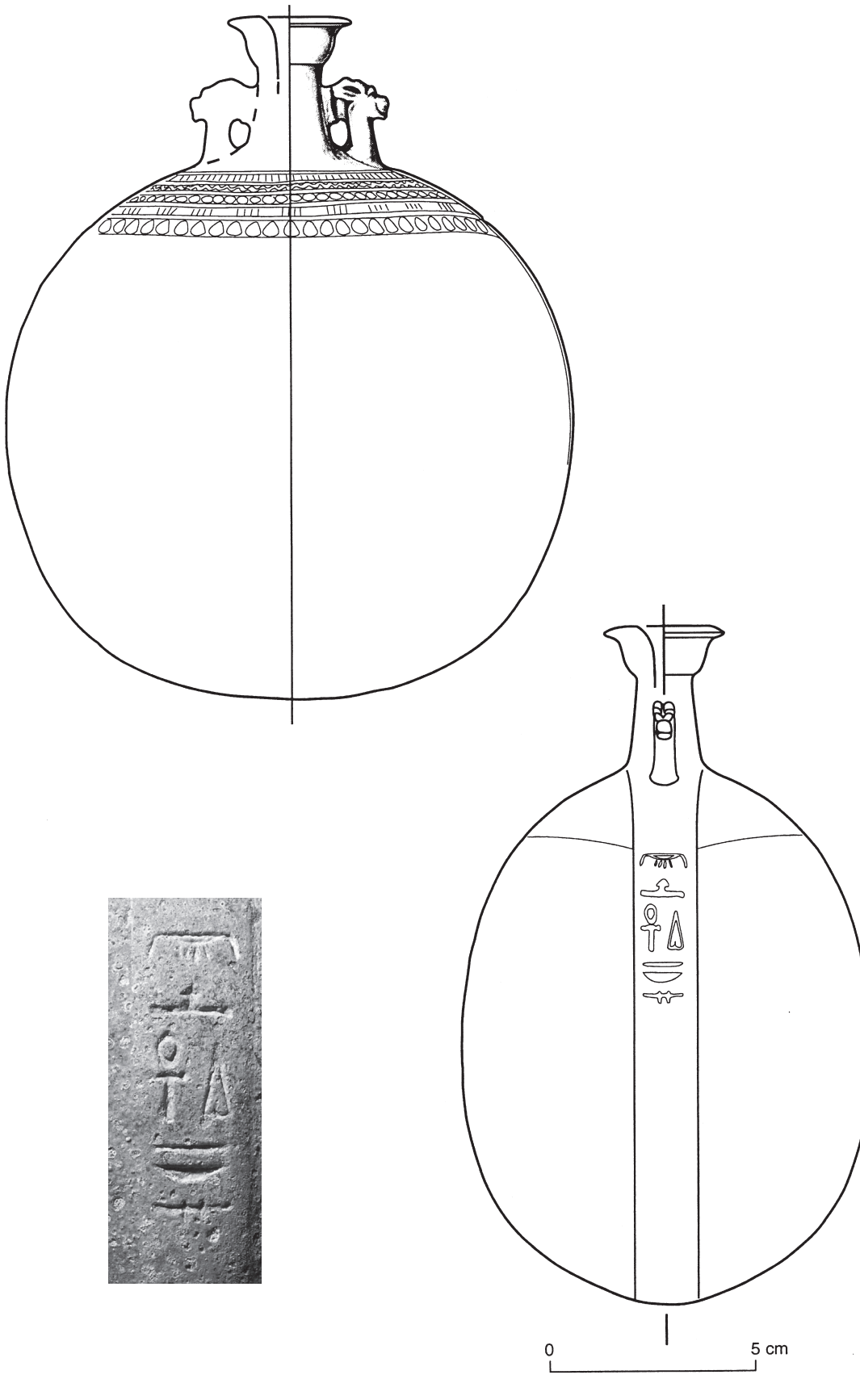
4 Most recent comprehensive study : C.-H. Blanquet, "Typologie de la bouteille de nouvel an", in Cl. Obsomer, A.-L. Oosthoek (ed.), *Amosiadès. Mélanges offerts au professeur Claude Vandersleyen par ses anciens étudiants*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1992, p. 49-54.

5 L. Keimer, *Supplément aux ASAE* V, Le Caire, 1947, p. 1-15.

6 For instance W.M.Fl. Petrie, *Hyksos and Istraelite Cities*, *BSAE* XII, London, 1906, pl. XXI, 4.

7 Moreover building activity is now documented in Mut el-Kharab during the Saite Period : O. Kaper, *BACE* 12, 2001, p. 75-77.

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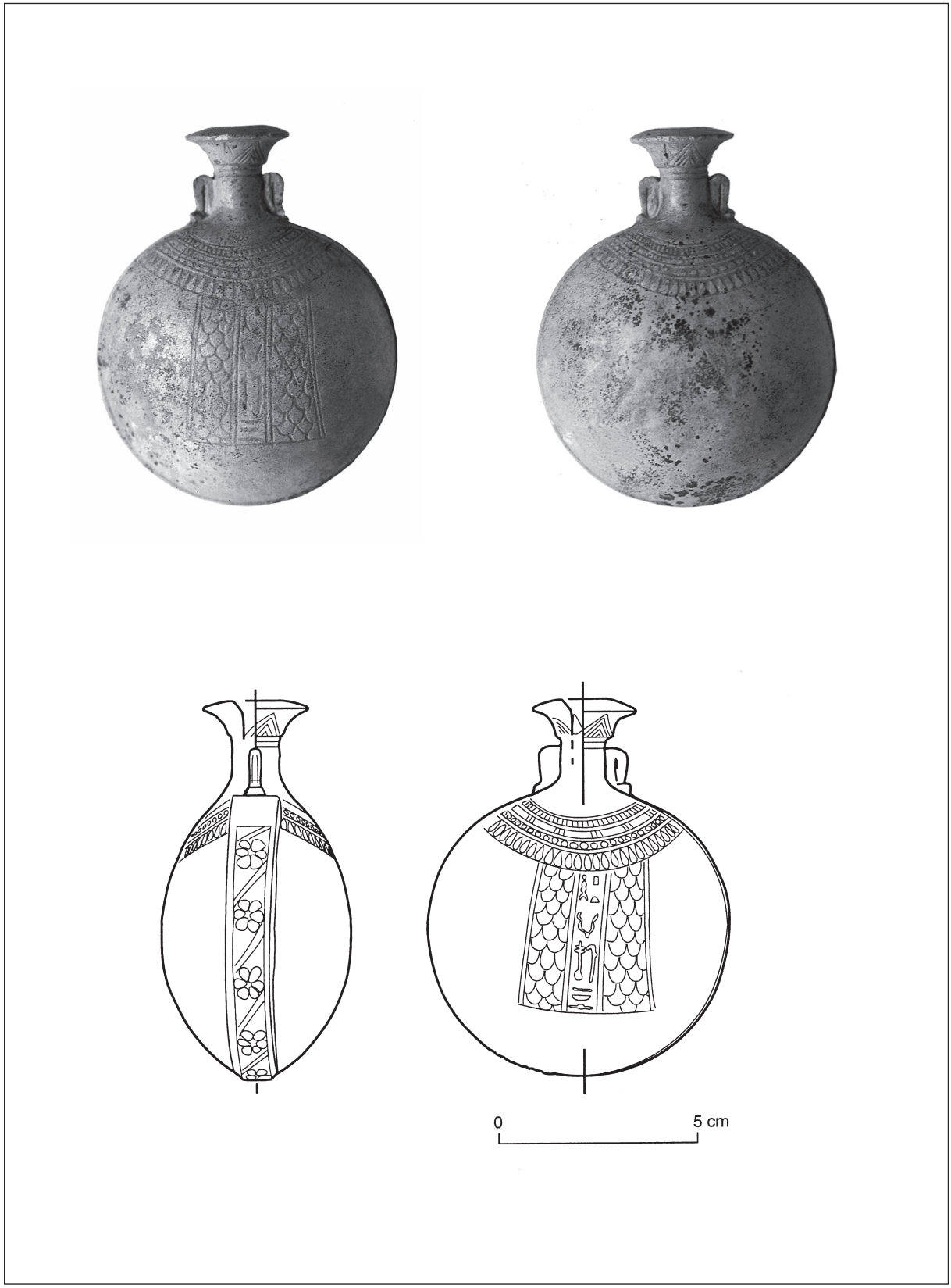
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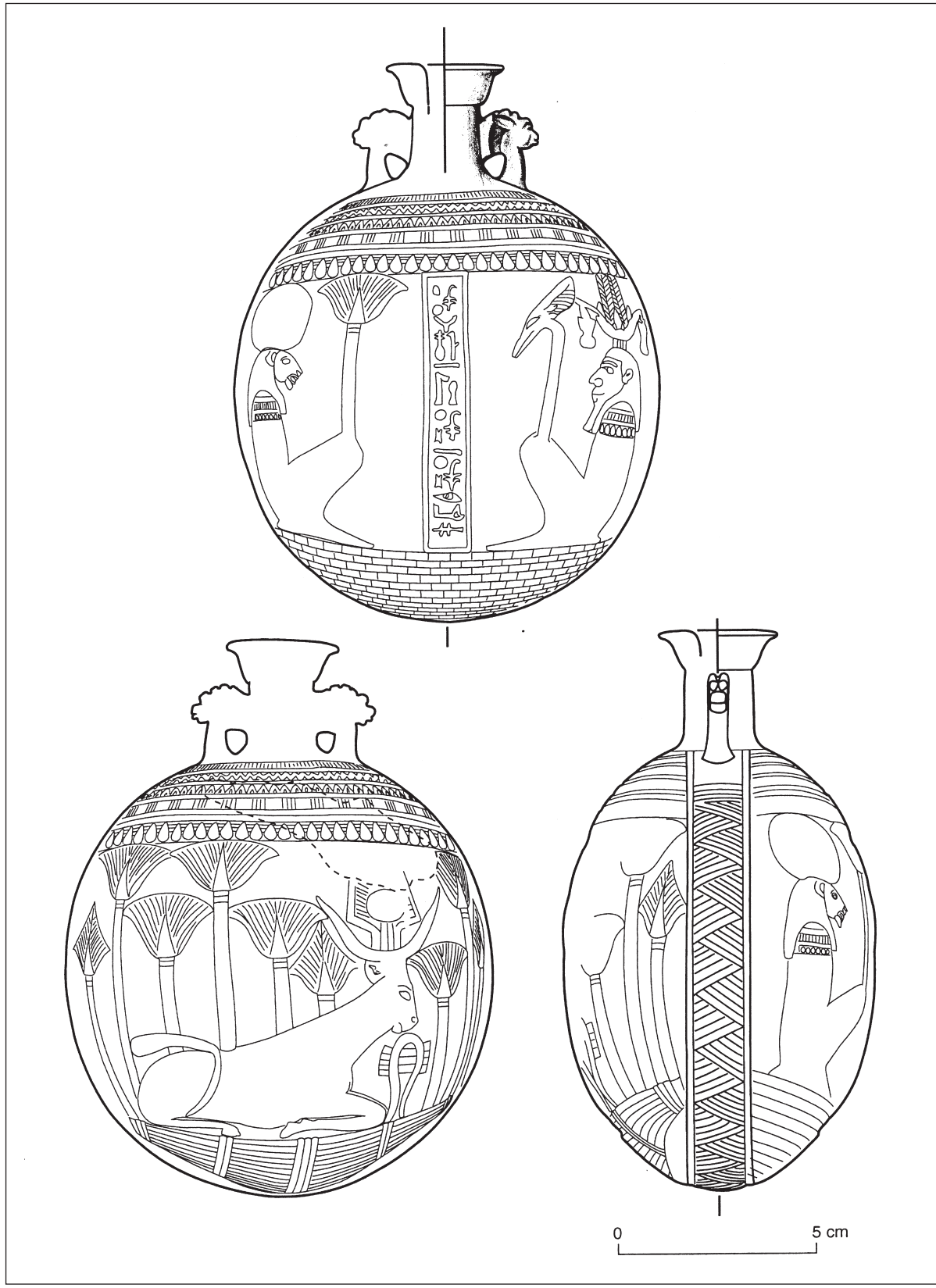
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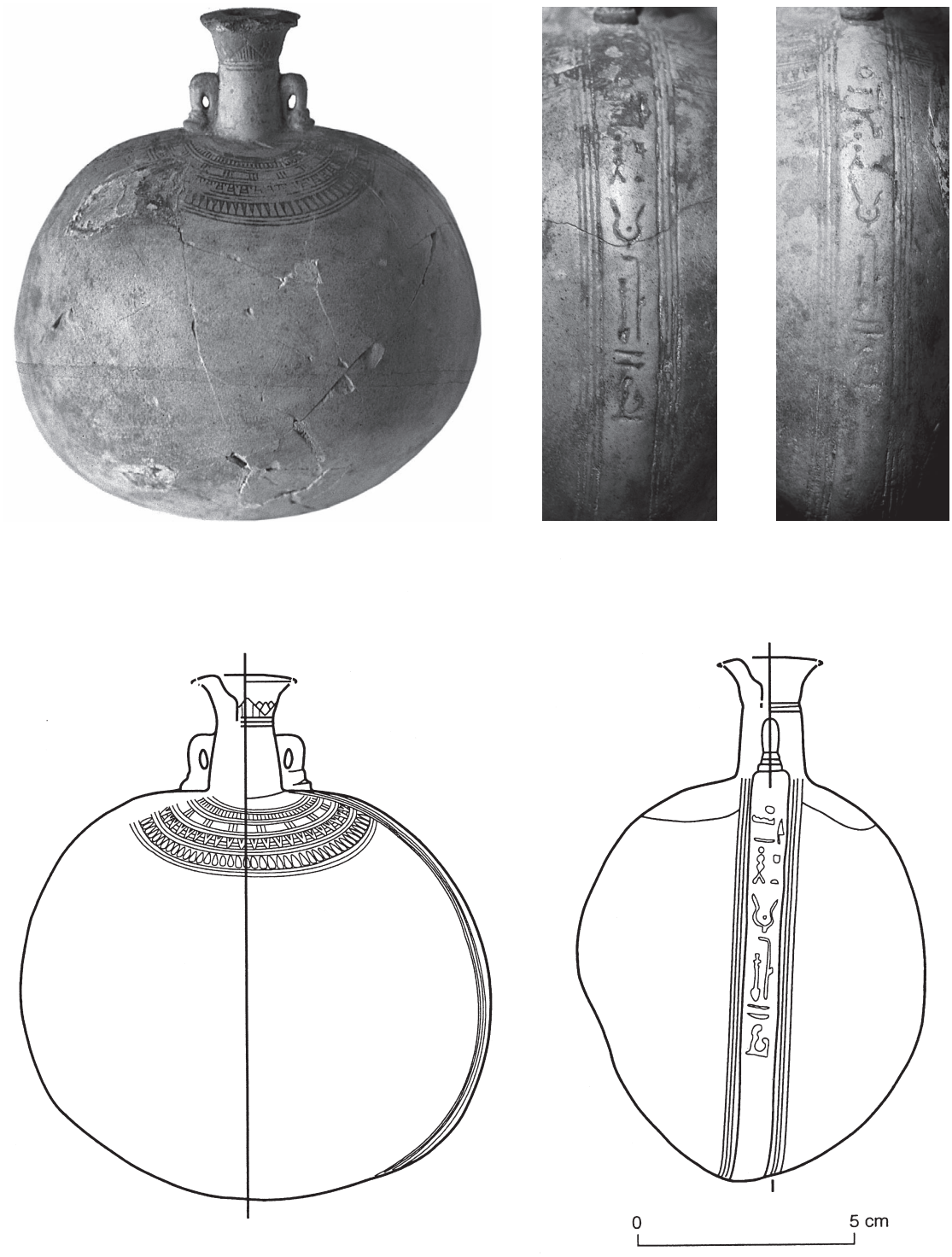
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