

The possible religious associations of EC139 by Bethany Saunders

EC139 is a dark blue faience fragment from the rim of a lotus bowl, which would have been originally measured as 18cm in diameter. The morphology of the bowl is believed to have been carinated, shown from the clear curvature of the sherd (starting at 50.7mm) which shows the vessel to have been a



shallow, open bowl. The inside of the sherd is significantly darker blue than the outside but there are areas with lighter pigment showing an inconsistency within the colouring.

Various black lines can be seen on the inside, which join at the tip and extend outward as they move away from the rim. The lines are rounded at the bottom and meet with one another to create a U shape. The presence and placement of



additional pointed tips reveal this black design to be a typical lotus flower, as commonly seen in representations of the blue lotus in ancient Egyptian art. The main flower is clearly visible but the rest of the decoration is visually limited due to damage that removed glaze and potential oxidation. The remnant of a similar faded petal lies next to it, which is shown on similar marsh bowls that follow the pattern of an open lotus covering the base.

The Egypt Centre has dated EC139 to the 18th Dynasty, New Kingdom. Parallel bowls can be used in conjunction, such as EA4790 (BM), and 22.3.73 (MMA), and are also dated to the New Kingdom, commonly being found in Thebes, Upper Egypt.¹

These pieces are useful comparisons within relative dating to establish a typology, as they share the same style and iconography as EC139 with marshland imagery decorated in manganese, alluding to fertility. They also show what the rest of EC139 could have potentially looked like; the central pool surrounded by numerous blue lotus flowers is seen as a repetitive theme of regeneration, thereby noteworthy within a religious context. The New Kingdom is considered to be the technological pinnacle of faience craftsmanship.²

Blue faience bowls with black designs were common products of this time, and were more finely decorated on the interior than the exterior (which is noticeable with EC139).³ Technological innovations of the New Kingdom declined after its time: traces of cobalt (the blue modifier) virtually disappear and foreign influence led to the replacement of manganese.⁴



A full view of the inside of EA4790, depicting similar iconography. The British Museum.



The underside of 22.3.73, depicting an open lotus. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹ The British Museum, 2017. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000

² Nicholson & Peltenburg, 2009, p. 182.

³ Nicholson, 1993, p. 25; this could give further insight into how the bowl was manufactured, as the differences in quality could reflect a change in craftsmanship – i.e. potentially done by different people.

⁴ Nicholson & Peltenburg, 2009, p. 185; Nicholson, 1993, p. 37; therefore, techniques which were most likely used on the sherd disappear after the New Kingdom, thus placing it within this context.

Egyptian blue has divine connotations associated with the concept of solar rebirth and blue-haired deities such as Hathor.⁵ This is exemplified by the depiction of the blue lotus on EC139, which is a common funerary motif incorporated into items of utility and beauty, such as faience bowls used in offerings; it is echoed in the creation myth as symbolic of rebirth, as the new born sun rose out of a lotus on the waters of Nun.⁶

Hathor is known from her epithet as 'Lady of the Sycamore'.⁷ Sycamore trees are symbolically connected to the passage of Ra because they grow on the margins of cultivation, thus standing between the desert and alluvium; this is the point of transition connecting the East and West sides of the Nile valley with the movement of the sun – i.e. rebirth in the East and death in the West.⁸ This is shown throughout a Middle Kingdom text:

Titled: 'Going in and out of the Eastern Gates of the Sky among the Followers of Re and Knowing the Souls of the Easterners':

'I am he who rows and does not tire in the bark of Re; I know those two sycamores which are of turquoise between which Re goes forth, which go strewing shade at every eastern gate from which Re shines forth ...'

- Coffin Text spell 159.⁹

Hathor's association to the turquoise sycamore places the sherd in a religious context as a vessel used in offerings to the goddess either in a tomb or temple, emphasising the magically potent iconography and colouring of faience holding regenerative symbolism. Thus, the goddess's identification as 'Lady of the Sycamore' (associated with the Eastern

⁵ Wegner, 2009, p. 456.

⁶ Ossian, 1999, p. 50.

⁷ Wegner, 2009, p. 456.

⁸ Wegner, 2009, p. 459.

⁹ Wegner, 2009, p. 460.

horizon and passage of Ra) fuses with her epithet as 'Lady of Turquoise' (connoting the ideals of birth) to incorporate several symbolic attributes that can be assigned to funerary objects.

Glazed faience vessels were more commonly found in the contents of tombs and temples, where a less expensive replacement was deemed suitable – thus adhering to the production of faience as an inexpensive and economical substitute to mimic precious stones.¹⁰ The known methods of glazing were rarely applied to domestic vessels of household use, especially bowls, as their low durability proved them dysfunctional as practical items of daily use.¹¹ The shallow faience bowl is considered by Patch and Hall to have been a common item decorated with iconography of a watery environment (like the lotus flower), used as funerary equipment.¹² The marshland decoration is suitable within places holding prominent religious symbolism to ensure the survival of one's identity.

The resources needed for faience would have been difficult to obtain, making it an essential luxury product. The most costly ingredient was probably copper, as it was distantly mined from the Nile valley; this produced the brilliant turquoise colour, thereby suggesting that objects of this colour mainly belonged to the elite whom had access to these resources.¹³ However, Friedman notes that many parallels have been found in the burial context of female tombs, such as EA4790 (BM).¹⁴ This is supported by Carter who found various bowl fragments at Deir el-Bahri holding inscriptions of Hathor with queens or princesses.¹⁵ This

¹⁰ Peck, 2013, p. 155 & 158; Nicholson, 1993, p. 35.

¹¹ Bianchi, 1998, p. 26.

¹² Patch, 1998, p. 39; Hall, 1913, p. 29.

¹³ Patch, 1998, p. 33.

¹⁴ The British Museum, 2017. Hall, 1913, p. 13.

¹⁵ Pinch, 1993, p. 309; Friedman, 1998, p. 211.

feminine appeal could be carried by the symbolism of the bowls, as females identify with Hathor regarding fertility within the role of mother or daughter of the sun god.¹⁶

EC139's shallow morphology, small dimensions (measuring at 18cm) and aquatic decoration show that it would have been suitable for liquids. Intoxicating liquids (wine or beer) were used as important sacred libations for Hathor, due to her epithet as 'Lady of Drunkenness'; this is reinforced in the mythological story 'The Destruction of Mankind', whereby Hathor's wild nature is appeased with dance, music and wine.¹⁷ The general significance of wine links to Hathor's representations of rebirth; its production was combined with the coming of the inundation, thus bringing a renewal of life.¹⁸ The oxidation on the inside of the sherd possibly occurred from the bowl's contents. This is possible with wine as the copper present in the faience accelerates iron oxidation, thus greatly accelerating wine oxidation.¹⁹ The black paint used for the lotus decoration is composed of manganese and iron oxides, but iron is known to discolour glaze and prevent the blue colouring, therefore showing an absence of iron on the inside of the sherd due to the dark blue.²⁰ This limits the concentration of iron to the manganese, thereby reacting with the wine as a form of oxidation, indicating how the dots follow the decoration with an unusual accuracy. Due to the importance of intoxication associated with Hathor's epithet and primary observations, the bowl would have most likely contained wine. However, further chemical analysis is needed to identify traces of residue in order to tell what the vessel actually contained.

¹⁶ Pinch, 1993, p. 315.

¹⁷ Poo, 2010, p. 2; Pinch, 1993, p. 314.

¹⁸ Poo, 2010, p. 2. This could also be associated with other liquids such as milk and water.

¹⁹ Nicholson, 1993, p. 14; Noble, 1969, p. 437.

²⁰ Petrie, 1974, p. 25.

Useful reading:

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