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Pictorial evidence on potters' wheels dated to the Late and Graeco-Roman periods in Egypt

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This paper investigates pictorial evidence for potters' wheels dated to the Late and Graeco-Roman periods. The potter's wheel is one of the main, though not the only, tool for shaping vessels during these periods in various regions. Criteria for determining the construction of the device have been developed in order to analyse depictions of potters' wheels. The analysis revealed that reliefs, paintings, and hieroglyphs depict both simple wheels and kick-wheels. It can be established that, from the Late Period onwards, these tools coexisted in Egypt.

Keywords: pottery, ancient Egypt, simple wheel, kick-wheel, Late Period, Graeco-Roman period.

Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and reliefs are important sources that can help us to shed light on Egyptian pottery technologies during the Late and Graeco-Roman periods. Sherds and complete vessels dated to these periods are the primary sources of information on the subject, but as Egyptians left many depictions on the walls of temples and tombs, these are also essential tools for studying ancient pottery production. The issue of workshops is subject of another paper[1].

One of crucial issues concerning pottery production in Ancient Egypt is the precise period when ancient Egyptian potters started to use the kick-wheel. This device significantly speeds up and simplifies the process of making vessels, so a potter can shape a vessel with both hands, without an assistant. Thus, its spread across Egypt probably has changed ceramic

[1] Ярмолович 2023.

production and significantly impacted the economic aspects of the market. The aim of this article is to identify the types and specificities of the potter's wheel and establish the chronology of its appearance and spread from the Late Period onwards.

Criteria for classifying potter's wheels

Numerous studies on potters' wheels around the world indicate that this important tool had diverse configuration in various cultures, which was changing throughout history[2]. The sources, discussed in this paper, are fourteen reliefs and one painting from temples of the Late and Greco-Roman periods, and several hieroglyphic signs. A number of criteria, notably the presence or absence of specific functional parts, are used in the iconographical analysis of the potter's wheel of the Late Period for dividing the representations into several groups:

1) the general appearance of the potter's wheel (axis height, number of functional parts depicted);

2) depiction of a craftsman working at the wheel (e.g., the potter's foot can be shown in motion, to the extent permitted by the ancient Egyptian tradition, when seated at a kick-wheel and vice versa).

Based on these criteria, reliefs and a painting of the Late and Graeco-Roman periods depicting the potters' wheels are divided into two groups: simple wheel representations (SWR) and kick-wheel representations (KWR).

The simple wheel (Fig. 1[3])

Simple wheels having a combined wheel-head and axis are known from pictorial and archaeological sources dating as far back as the Old Kingdom[4]. Therefore, in the Late Period this mechanism was clearly traditional for Egyptian pottery production.

The low simple wheel. The relief in Room L of the sanctuary in the Temple of Hibis in the Kharga Oasis[5] depicts a medium-height axis wheel (SWR 1) rounded at the bottom. Construction of the main part of the temple took place during the 27th–30th dynasties, with subsequent additions made during the Graeco-Roman period[6]. The relief in question is located in a section of the temple built during the reign of Darius I (510–490 BCE)[7].

The next image (SWR 2) comes from the mammisi of Kom Ombo, dating to the reign of Ptolemy VII (145–144 BCE)[8]. Only the lower part of the relief has preserved. It shows a child (?) standing on a low simple wheel, with a goddess (?) depicted at it. As in the previous depiction, the wheel-head and axis are combined.

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[2] Цетлин 2012: 210; Arnold, Bourriau 1993: 15–83.

[3] The drawings are not to scale. The dotted lines indicate reconstructed fragments or those covered by other images. The drawings are made by the author of the article.

[4] Малых 2010: 153–155; Arnold, Bourriau 1993: 44–49.

[5] Winlock 1941: 7, pl. XXXII.

[6] PM 1995: 277–290; Winlock 1941: 7–33; Colburn 2020: 115–116.

[7] PM 1995: 287 (121–123).

[8] PM 1991: 198–199 (21–22).

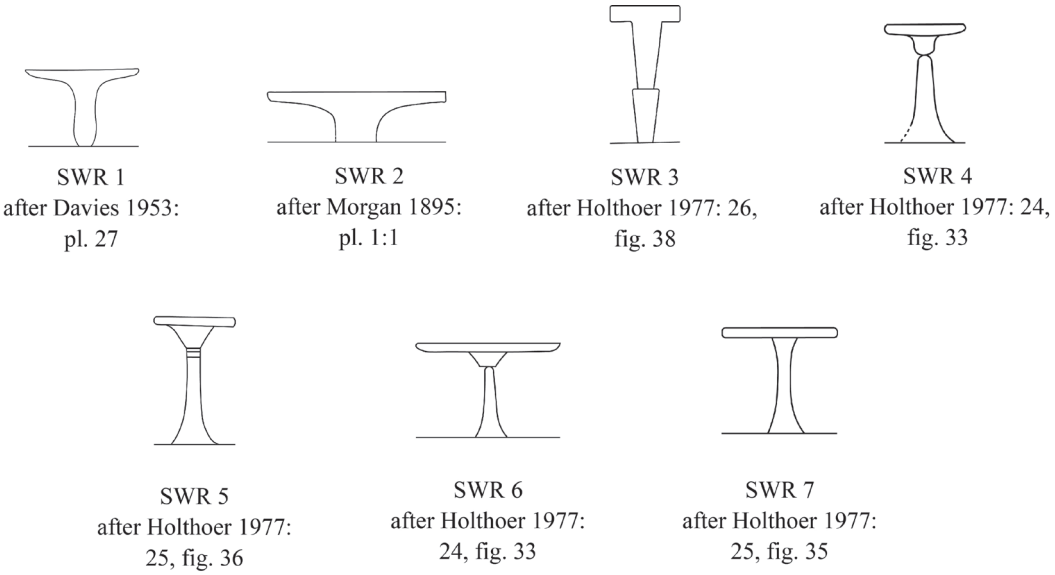

Fig. 1. Ancient Egyptian depictions of the simple wheels of the Late and Graeco-Roman periods

Relief SWR 3 is on the northern wall of the mammisi at the Dendera Temple Complex. It was carved during the reign of Trajan (98–117 CE)[9]. The god Ptah completes the creation of the king depicted as a child, who stands on a simple potter's wheel. The wheel-head and axis are solid, and the device itself stands (?) on a raised platform.

The tall-stemmed simple wheel. On Egyptian reliefs from the Graeco-Roman period, these devices follow two main variants, with either a narrow or a wide wheel-head.

The wheels on the reliefs from the mammisi at Edfu (SWR 4) and from the mammisi on the island of Philae (SWR 5) are of similar construction, and only differ from each other in a few details. The first image is dated to the reign of Ptolemy VII[10] (145–144 BCE), and the second one to the reign of Augustus[11] (27 BCE–14 CE). Both wheels have a tall axis, widening at the bottom, and a narrow wheel-head with a pivot. However, they differ in shape of their wheel-head: in the SWR 4 the wheel-head has an oval shape, while in the SWR 5 it ends in a rectangular platform.

Another two images come from the same temples: the mammisi at Edfu[12] (SWR 6) and the mammisi of the temple on the island of Philae[13] (SWR 7). They were created during the reigns of Ptolemy VII and Ptolemy VIII[14] (145–116 BCE). The wheels' constructions resemble those shown on images SWR 4 and SWR 5, but they differ in having wider wheel-heads.

[9] PM 1991: 103105 (17–21).
[10] PM 1991: 173–174 (83–86).
[11] PM 1991: 227, 228 (221–222).
[12] PM 1991: 173–174 (83–86).
[13] PM 1991: 223, 224 (178–179).
[14] Holthoer 1977: 25.

The pivots of the wheels on SWR 4, SWR 5 and SWR 6 are depicted above the axis rather than inserted into it. Such representations can be traced back to the Middle Kingdom (e.g., in the tomb of Djehutihotp in Deir El Bersha)[15]. Researchers have assumed that the artists intentionally showed the design of the device in this way[16].

The kick-wheel (Fig. 2)

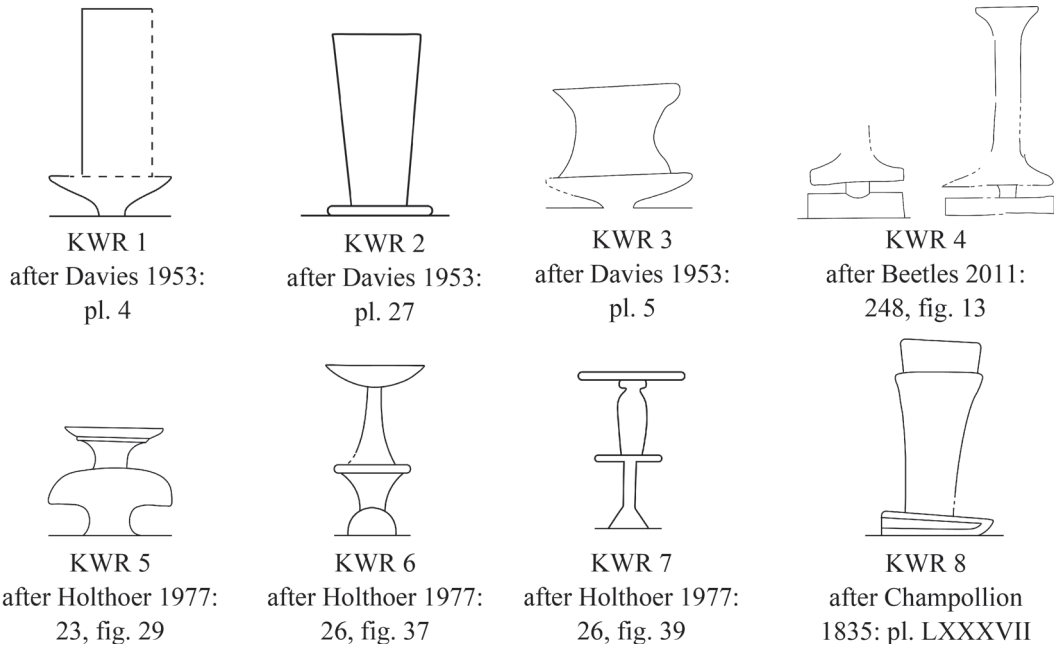

Fig. 2. Ancient Egyptian depictions of kick-wheels of the Late and Graeco-Roman periods

The construction of the kick-wheel is considered to be more advanced than that of the simple wheel. It contains two wheels: the wheel-head on top of the axis and the fly-wheel, which is placed at the bottom of the axis. The main functional parts of a potter's kick-wheel are a wheel-head, a fly-wheel, and an axis[17] (fig. 3). In this combination the wheel-head acts as a platform, where the vessel is shaped, while the fly-wheel and the axis rotate the wheel-head. The fly-wheel was introduced into the kick-wheel as a separate part: kicking the fly-wheel with a foot, the potter shaped the vessel with both hands on the working platform or the wheel-head. The axis connects these two parts, ensuring the rotation of the wheel head[18]. The fly-wheel tends to be larger and heavier than the wheel-head[19].

[15] Arnold, Bourriau 1993: 57, fig. 67.
[16] Arnold, Bourriau 1993: 57.
[17] Цетлин 2012: 207–215.
[18] Holthoer 1977: 31.
[19] Arnold, Bourriau 1993: 80.
[20] According to M. Boriak scheme. See Boriak 2008: fig. 3.

Fig. 3. The kick-wheels. Siwa oasis, January 2025

D. Klotz assumed that the architrave A[20] of pharaoh Ramesses II's court in the Luxor Temple contained a hieroglyphic sign that was the earliest depiction of a kick-wheel[21]. It is part of an inscription, which was partially obscured by the wall of Abu Hagag Mosque, built on the site of the ancient temple. In July 2007, a fire severely damaged the mosque, allowing the inscription to be studied[22]. The hieroglyph depicts the god Khnum seated on a high throne. Before him stands a potter's wheel on a low axis, with a lump of clay prepared for shaping, elevated on a working platform[23]. The god's feet rest on the wheel. The construction of the wheel depicted on this image, more closely resembles an extra-low wheel — a mechanism known in Egypt as early as the Middle Kingdom[24]. When working with such a tool, the potter had to either crouch next to the wheel[25], or to sit on a low stool and bend over it[26]. In this case, the mechanism was turned by an assistant. It was thought to be impossible to depict a god in such an awkward pose, bent over to work on a wheel on the walls of the Egyptian temple. Thus, this image is the depiction of an extra-low wheel, which was known and used by potters during the New Kingdom.

[20] According to M. Boriak scheme. See Boriak 2008: fig. 3.
[21] Klotz 2013.
[22] Boriak 2008: 124; Klotz 2013: 171.
[23] Boriak 2008: 134 (second row of depictions), pl. XXI (C).
[24] Arnold, Bourriau 1993: 69–78.
[25] Arnold, Bourriau 1993: 70, fig. 82, 72, fig. 84.
[26] Arnold, Bourriau 1993: 75, fig. 89–90A.

Kick-wheels with solid axis and wheel-head. One of the earliest known kick-wheels' images appears on the southern wall of the shrine A of the temple of Hibis in the Oasis of Kharga (KWR 1)[27]. It dates back to 510–490 BCE[28]. This wheel has a mushroom-shaped fly-wheel and a rectangular upper part consisting of an axis and a wheel-head (?). The god Khnum shapes a vessel while kicking the fly-wheel with his right foot.

An almost identical tool (KWR 2) is shown on a relief on the western wall of the sanctuary of Osiris on the roof of the Temple of Isis on the island of Philae[29]. It is dated to the Roman period, but an earlier dating is not excluded[30]. The difference between KWR 1 and KWR 2 lies in the shape of the functional parts: the axis and the wheel-head of KWR 2 have the shape of a cone truncated at the bottom, and the fly-wheel is a simple flat triangle.

There are also depictions of kick-wheels with differently shaped upper parts. An image of a god (presumably Khnum) forming a young king on a kick-wheel is preserved on the inner side of the entrance to the shrine A of the temple of Hibis (KWR 3)[31]. The mechanism has a mushroom-shaped fly-wheel; the upper part is in the form of a cylinder flaring at the top and the bottom. It dates back to 510–490 BCE[32].

Two potters' wheels with similar shape of axes are depicted on the walls of the mammisi at the temple of the god Tutu in Kellis (KWR 4), discovered in 1995 during an expedition by the Dakhla Oasis Project[33]. The mammisi is dated to the early 2nd century CE[34]. Only fragments of the painting have preserved and it has been partly reconstructed by scholars. It depicts the gods Ptah and Khnum-Ra in a lively manner, shaping a child and an egg on potters' wheels[35]. The axis of Ptah's tool is slightly lower than that of Khnum-Ra's tool. They use their feet to turn the lower part of the axis, which acts as a fly-wheel. The bases of the devices are shown as a rectangle, into which a rod is inserted, connecting the upper part of the tool with its base.

Kick-wheels with complex construction. On the northern wall of the mamissi of the pharaoh Nectanebo I (380–362 BCE)[36] at the Dendera Temple Complex, there is an image of the god Khnum seated at a kick-wheel (KWR 5). Its fly-wheel and base are mushroom-shaped and separated from the upper part. The central axis resembles an elongated cylinder with an opening on the upper part, on which is a trapezoidal wheel-head.

There are two more images of potters' wheels (KWR 6 and 7) at the Dendera Temple Complex on the walls of the mammisi of the Roman period. These reliefs are dated to the reign of Trajan (98–117 CE)[37]. The first wheel is depicted on the western wall of the mammisi (KWR 6). Its design is generally reminiscent of the tool on the relief KWR 5[38]. It has a semicircular base on which a fly-wheel is fixed, consisting of a trapezoidal part topped by a horizontal tray. The axis is conical, and the wheel-head is bowl-shaped. Another image

[27] Davies 1953: pl. 4.
[28] Winlock 1941: 7, pl. XXXII.
[29] PM 1991: 248–249 (402).
[30] Holthoer 1977: 26 (LPA 12).
[31] Davies 1953: pl. 5.
[32] Winlock 1941: 7.
[33] Beetles 2011: 215–217.
[34] Beetles 2011: 216.
[35] Beetles 2011: 235.
[36] PM 1991: 105.
[37] Holthoer 1977: 25–26 (LPA 9), fig. 37; PM 1991: 103–104 (10)–(16), 105 (17)–(21).
[38] Holthoer 1977: 25–26 (LPA 9); Porter, Moss 1991: 103–104 (10)–(16).

(KWR 7) is situated on the northern wall of the sanctuary[39]. The lower part of the potter's wheel has a table-like shape. The upper axis has an elongated cylindrical shape with a small rectangular stand. The wheel-head is separated from it.

A more conventional depiction of a potter's wheel (KWR 8) comes from the room of Osiris on the roof of the Temple of Isis on the island of Philae[40]. The god Ptah turns a fly-wheel with his right foot. Its construction is reminiscent of KWR 2, but with a rectangular wheel-head (?).

Hieroglyphs depicting potters at work

Hieroglyphs are another source of information about ancient Egyptian potters' wheels. Symbols, depicting a potter's wheel or the god Khnum working on it, were used in the verb  *nḥp* meaning "to form on a potter's wheel (an action performed by a god, especially Khnum)", "to create, to make someone", and "to build a temple"[41] or  *ḫnm* meaning "to shape/create on a potter's wheel"[42]. They could be a part of *nḥp* as a its determinative or abbreviation. The word *nḥp* in this meaning had been recorded during the 21st Dynasty (11th–10th centuries BC in the Third Intermediate Period) for the first time, but it was more commonly used in texts of the Graeco-Roman period[43].

All hieroglyphs are executed in a rather schematic manner, which does not prevent us from determining the type of a wheel depicted, but makes it impossible to conclude about its construction. Therefore, due to the specific nature of work with these sources, identifying features to determine the type of mechanism remains an important issue. As with wheels' depictions on reliefs and paintings, it is advisable to rely on the presence or absence of the main constitutive parts.

Symbols featuring potters' wheels are present in the titles of the gods Khnum and Ptah in explanatory inscriptions to scenes where they work at the potter's wheel, and, only in one case, in a priest's title.

Three hieroglyphs are carved on a statue of a priest of the god Khnum in the collection of the British Museum. The statue dates back to the 26th Dynasty (the Late Period, 664–525 BCE)[44]. These symbols comprise the priest's title,  *ḳd-ḥʿw*, meaning "the one who creates a body"[45]. One of the hieroglyphs is part of the inscription on the statue's base, and two others are on the pillar behind the priest. They look similar: a standing person shaping a vessel at a potter's wheel (fig. 4a). The lower part of the wheel's axis includes a small triangular platform, which seems to be the fly-wheel set in motion with the potter's heel. Despite the schematic nature of the image, a stonecutter (or a scribe?) conveyed the main

[39] Holthoer 1977: 26 (LPA 11), fig. 39; PM 1991: 105
[40] PM 1991: 248–249 (400).
[41] Wb. II: 295.
[42] Kurth 2009: 140 (71), 161 (footnotes 491, 492).
[43] Wb. II: 295.
[44] EA 29478. The British Museum. URL: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA29478?selectedImageId=1613750969 (date of access: 13.11.2025).
[45] Dorman 2002: 108; von Känel 1984: 84.

Fig. 4. Hieroglyphs depicting potters working on a wheel:
a) the statue of a priest EA 29478, the British Museum, 26th Dynasty[46];
b) the southern wall of the Sanctuary A of the Temple of Amun at
Hibis, Kharga Oasis, reign of Darius I, 27th Dynasty [47];
c) painting on the wall of the mammisi of the temple of the god Tutu in Kellis, early 2nd century CE [48]

essence of work on the kick-wheel. The hieroglyphs carved on this statue are currently the earliest representations of the kick-wheel in Egypt, as they occur only on reliefs no earlier than the reign of the king Darius I.

Another hieroglyph appears in the inscription to the figure of the god Khnum on the southern wall of the sanctuary A of the temple of Amun in the Hibis (Kharga Oasis):  *Ḥnmw nḥp-rmṯ* “Khnum, creator of people”[49], which was built during the reign of Darius I. It is worth noting that the interpretation of this hieroglyph as an image of the kick-wheel should be treated with caution due to the preservation of the relief. R. Holthoer in his study provided a drawing based on N. de Garis Davis’s publication, but did not indicate that the sign itself is not clearly legible[50]. In the monograph by N. de Garis Davis, a drawing and a photograph are presented, which show that the sign can indeed be identified as an image of a potter. However, its upper and lower parts, just where the fly-wheel should be depicted, are almost lost[51], but as one of the craftsman’s legs is raised, he is probably turning the fly-wheel (fig. 4b).

[46] The British Museum. URL: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA29478?selectedImageId=1613750969 (date of access: 13.11.2025).
[47] Holthoer 1977: 24, fig. 32.
[48] Beetles 2011: fig. 12.
[49] The hieroglyph in a shape of a potter is listed in LGG IV: 279–280. For a drawing of the inscription, see Davies 1953: pl. 4, 73(B).
[50] Holthoer 1977: 24, fig. 32.
[51] Davies 1953: pl. 4, 73(B).

The western wall of Room II in the mammisi of the temple on the island of Philae features a potter-shaped hieroglyph in the inscription for a relief depicting the god Khnum[52]. The sign  is used as a suffixed pronoun for the first-person singular, rather than as a determinative[53]. It represents the god Khnum, seated on a throne working at a potter's wheel (fig. 4c). R. Holthoer suggested that the mechanism was a kick-wheel[54], although the device lacked a fly-wheel and the god's legs were static. The construction of the device more closely resembles a tall-stemmed simple wheel, which is also depicted on the same relief.

Another sign depicting a craftsman at work is presented in the caption to a depiction of the gods Ptah and Khnum-Ra in the mammisi of the temple of the god Tutu in Kellis at the Oasis of Dakhla (the early 2nd c. CE)[55]. It constitutes a part of Khnum-Ra's epithet  *ḳd-rmṯ* "he who creates people"[56]. The sign is executed in a lively manner: the potter is slightly bent over the potter's wheel and turns the flywheel with his foot.

Conclusions

Pictorial and hieroglyphical sources demonstrate that simple wheels and kick-wheels coexisted in Egypt since the middle of the 7th century BCE. While the former is known from the Old Kingdom onwards, evidence for kick-wheels only appeared in the Late Period. Traditionally, the introduction of the kick-wheel in Egypt has been linked to a foreign influence. Kick-wheels had been being used in the Syro-Palestinian region since the 7th century BCE[57] but only appeared in Egypt a century later on a relief from the Sanctuary A of the Temple of Hibis dated to the 27th Dynasty[58].

However, a hieroglyphic sign identified on a 26th Dynasty statue of a priest of the god Khnum EA 29478 in the British Museum, seems to depict a potter working on a kick-wheel. As this statue predates the arrival of the Persians in Egypt and date back to the first half of the 7th or last quarter of the 6th century BCE, these signs provide arguments for pushing back the date of the emergence of the kick-wheel in Egypt and at the same time question its foreign origin.

Apparently, the potters' wheels had a variety of constructions with changing numbers of functional parts. According to R. Holthoer, the more functional parts, the more developed the pottery production[59]. Moreover, the potter's wheel was used not only for shaping but also at other stages of ceramic production. For example, scholars have noted that in scenes on reliefs with depictions of SWR 1 and 2, the gods use the potter's wheel not to create the king, but to "complete" him (that is, they, figuratively speaking, to "paint" him, not to "shape" his body)[60].

[52] Holthoer 1977: 25 (LPA 7), fig. 35; PM 1991: 224 (178179).
[53] Holthoer 1977: 25 (LPA 7).
[54] Holthoer 1977: 25 (LPA 7).
[55] Beetles 2011: 215–251, fig. 12.a.
[56] Beetles 2011: 222–223; LGG VII: 228.
[57] Moorey 1994: 147–148.
[58] Arnold, Bourriau 1993: 79.
[59] Holthoer, 1977: 31.
[60] Arnold, Bourriau 1993: 49.

There are several hypotheses for explaining the introduction of kick-wheels in Egypt. Studies of Late Period pottery have shown that Egyptian potters at this time were strongly influenced by the cultures of neighboring countries, where the kick-wheel had been being used since an earlier period. It is possible that foreigners who had settled in Egypt had brought this tool with them, and later it spread throughout the country. However, epigraphic evidence suggests that ancient Egyptians may have invented the kick-wheel independently, given their two-thousand-year experience in producing wheel-made pottery.

We still have no definitive answer as to when this mechanism first appeared in Egypt and this complex issue may only be solved with the discovery of new sources on ancient Egyptian and Middle Eastern pottery traditions, as well as an in-depth study of technological features of archaeological ceramics.

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Изобразительные источники Позднего и греко-римского периодов о гончарных кругах в Египте

В. И. Ярмолович

В статье представлено исследование изобразительных свидетельств о гончарных кругах, использовавшихся в Поздний и греко-римский периоды истории Египта. Гончарный круг являлся одним из основных (хотя и не единственным) орудием для изготовления сосудов в указанные эпохи. Для анализа изображений гончарных кругов были определены критерии, позволяющие установить конструкцию устройства. Анализ позволил сделать вывод, что на рельефах, росписях и в составе слов, записанных иероглифами, изображены как ручные, так ножные гончарные круги. Можно сделать вывод, что начиная с Позднего периода эти орудия сосуществовали в Египте.

Ключевые слова: гончарство, древний Египет, ручной гончарный круг, ножной гончарный круг, Поздний период, греко-римский период.

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