

HANDLED WITH CARE.
TWO IBEX-HANDLED VASES IN THE DUTCH NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF ANTIQUITIES¹

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1. *Introduction*

In the Egyptian collection of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden (RMO) are two enigmatic stone vases (see fig.1). The few vases that are known of this type are often labelled as 'luxury vases', mostly based on the material of which they are fashioned and the colourful decorations applied to them. This article aims to give some background to the RMO vases, to put them in a broader perspective, and to discuss the peculiar feature of the ibex-shaped handles. After discussing the material, textual and pictorial evidence, it might be possible to say more about their original function and context.



Fig.1a. AAL 10a with two complete animal-shaped handles. Fig.1b. AAL 10b with collar-decoration and one original animal-shaped handle (in the photograph the handle on the left is reconstructed). The neck is decorated with a floral pattern.

¹ I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Maarten Raven of the RMO for his support and advice on this topic. I also want to thank Prof. Dr. Maarten Raven, Dr. Rob Demarée and Jurgen van Oostenrijk, MA for proofreading this paper.

2. *A short biography of the RMO vases*

Both vase AAL 10a and vase AAL 10b were part of a collection of about 5,600 aegyptiaca that was sold by the merchant Giovanni d'Anastasi. This was the first collection sold by d'Anastasi and hence it became known as the 'first Anastasi collection'.² This collection was bought by order of King William I of the Netherlands who entrusted it to the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden in 1829.³ Here it has been ever since. The first Anastasi collection contained objects that can be retraced to among other places Sa el-Hagar, Saqqara, Gizeh, and Luxor. The provenance of the two vases and a lot of other objects could not be ascertained despite early efforts by the first director of the National Museum of Antiquities, Caspar J.C. Reuvens. The context of the vases thus remains a mystery. AAL 10b received some brief attention, and nowadays is displayed in a context of daily life, while AAL 10a is displayed in funerary contexts.⁴

3. *Discussion: Searching for context and contents*

In order to create a framework for the analysis of these vases it is necessary to incorporate the RMO vases in a wider corpus of vases with a similar shape and decoration (appendix 1). Petrie already noted that vases like AAL 10a and AAL 10b are probably the successors to the more squat type of high-necked vases without handles which seem not to occur after Hatshepsut (types A and B in fig.2).⁵ Most of the parallels to AAL 10a and AAL 10b date from the reigns of Ramesses II and his successor Merneptah.⁶ Almost all the other vases of types F and G are dated to the 18th – 20th dynasty.⁷ We can divide the corpus in appendix 1 in nine classes (table 1; almost all are of types F or G). These classes are formed on the basis of two important characteristics: the decoration and the handles.

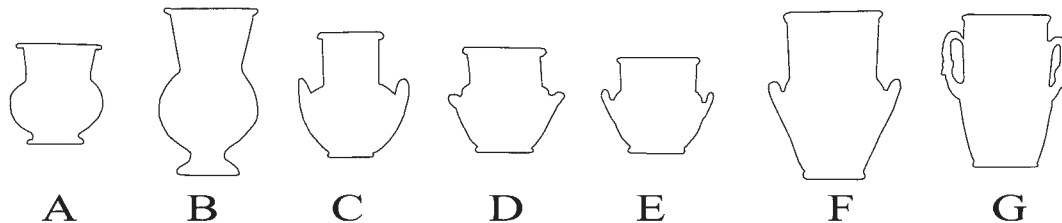


Fig.2. Overview of types of vases (A-D after Petrie 1937; E after Anthes 1959; F after Sotheby's 2004; and G RMO AAL 10b). This sequence indicates the development of the type according to Petrie except for F and G. G might be a variation on type F (the different types are not to scale).

² The second Anastasi collection was sold to the British Museum in 1839 and parts of the third collection went by auction to the Louvre in 1857 (Dawson 1995:15). Giovanni d'Anastasi, who came to Egypt with his father during the Napoleonic invasion, became one of the most influential and prosperous merchants in Egypt. He became Swedish-Norwegian Consul-General in Egypt and just as his British (Henry Salt) and French (Bernardino Drovetti) colleagues he amassed collections of Egyptian antiquities to be sold for his own profit.

³ The negotiations ended at the 28th of April 1828 and a price of 230,000 francs was paid on the 13th of June 1828. The crates with the objects arrived at the National Museum on the 1st of January 1829 (Schneider 1985:19).

⁴ AAL 10b is discussed in Petschel (1999:166). AAL 10a was very briefly discussed by Pommerening (2005:408-409).

⁵ Petrie 1937:13.

⁶ Date based on the cartouches on the neck and belly of the vessels.

⁷ Only one exception is known to me: a similar vase found in the tomb of Psusennes at Tanis by Montet (1951:165).

/	Cartouche decoration (B)	Floral decoration (b)	No decoration (x)	Total
Ibex handles (A)	1	4	3	8
Ovoid handles (a)	3	3	3	9
No handles (X)	2	0	0	2
Total	6	7	6	19

Table 1. Overview of the vase classes based on the handles and decoration. This overview is based on published pictorial references. There are more examples known e.g. from Ugarit and the Merneptah cache that are not all included in this overview (the present location of most of these latter vases is unknown).



Fig.3. some of the thirteen alabaster vases found by Howard Carter in the Valley of the Kings in 1920, the so-called 'Merneptah cache' (Copyright Griffith Institute, University of Oxford).

The context of some of these vases is known: one was found in a tomb at Heliopolis; one was found in the so-called 'Gold tomb' (KV56); and thirteen others (not all are included in table 1) were found in a cache that was discovered by Howard Carter in the Valley of the Kings in February 1920 (the 'Merneptah cache': fig.3). This cache was found near the entranceway to the tomb of Merneptah in the Valley of the Kings. The excitement that this find caused made that "*Lady Carnavon [...] insisted on digging out these jars [...] with her own hands.*"⁸ Lady Carnavon apparently kept one of these vases herself which she later

⁸ See <http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/cc/page/tsript/ts18a.html> for the text and map from Howard Carter's journal. Maps place the cache in the area in between the tombs of Ramesses II, Merneptah, Tutankhamen and KV55.

donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.⁹ Some of the other vessels from the cache ended up in the Cairo Museum, the British Museum, and Highclere Castle.¹⁰

3.1 *Shape*

Both AAL 10a and AAL 10b (figs. 1a and b) can be considered as a form of funnel-necked jar with a large mouth and nearly straight neck.¹¹ This form usually has a rounded base, but flat bottomed funnel necked jars also occur. This type is characteristic of the 18th and 19th dynasty. Aston describes two types that seem to correspond to the vases investigated here: 1) 'long-necked flask with horizontal loop handles'; and 2) 'shouldered jar or amphora with wide neck, handles arch upward, run from neck to shoulder'.¹² The vertical shape of the vessels is nearly symmetrical, but it should be noted that the vessels have a clear front and rear side which can best be determined by looking at the text and decoration (see 3.3).

The necks of AAL 10a and AAL 10b slope slightly inward from the top down and have a protruding lip. The rim of AAL 10b is a bit irregular and has no ridge on the inside to support a lid. The rim of AAL 10a seems more regular and nowadays carries a lid.¹³ The narrowest point of the neck of AAL 10b is at the join with the shoulders, which is even better visible in AAL 10a. The convex shoulders move slightly outwards and continue in the belly of both vessels, narrowing down towards the base consisting of a small foot. The body of the vessels is nicely formed with only a small dent in the top of the belly and in the foot of AAL 10b, and a small dent in the lower belly of AAL 10a.¹⁴ On the inside the neck of AAL 10b shows a nearly straight vertical descent implying that the wall thickness of the neck might vary slightly. The belly of the vessels is hollowed out on the inside, starting at the shoulders and more or less describing an acorn shape. On the bottom inside of AAL 10b there is a small, round depression, probably remains of the drilling process. On the lower inside of AAL 10b there is a thin crystallized layer, which is also visible on the lower part outside. AAL 10b has been restored in several places, particularly the mouth and the right handle. The rim seems vulnerable and two large cracks start from the rim and go down to the belly (restored). AAL 10a has been restored on the rim, where a larger piece is at present missing, and on the smaller of the two ibex handles.

Both vases are made of 'Egyptian alabaster' (i.e. travertine), a relatively hard sedimentary calcite.¹⁵ They show regular horizontal grooves on the inside of both neck and belly, which

⁹ Hayes 1959:354.

¹⁰ On some of the vases in the Cairo Museum the following *Journal d'Entrée* numbers can be found: 46780 (or 46708), 46706, 46707. The vase in the British Museum has the number EA55013 and was donated to the museum by Lord Carnarvon in 1920 (http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx). A number of objects from the Merneptah cache were donated to Lord Canarvon by the Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte, among which a vase with the cartouche of Ramesses II (Reeves 1988:44).

¹¹ Aston 1996:13.

¹² Aston 1994:152 and 154.

¹³ It is difficult to ascertain whether this lid originally belonged to the vessel. It fits perfectly and has a floral decoration in black ink on the outside. The Highclere Castle vase might have been found with the lid it carries nowadays (Reeves 1988:50).

¹⁴ This dent in the foot of AAL 10b is already nicely rounded and polished. It might have already been inflicted in ancient times.

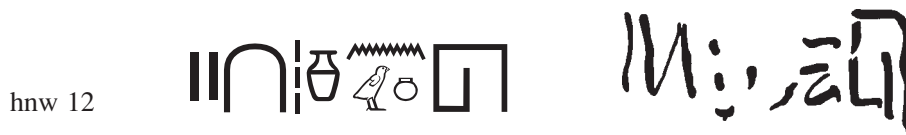
¹⁵ The term 'alabaster' or 'Egyptian alabaster' has caused some confusion in the study of ancient Egyptian material culture. Aston argues that the material usually referred to as '(Egyptian) alabaster' is in fact travertine (Aston 2000:59).

indicates that they were drilled from the top and smoothed regularly. The neck remains relatively rough while the belly was hollowed out further and then smoothed. This smoothing must have thinned the walls of the vessel and made them semi-translucent.¹⁶

Some of the parallels for these two vessels have the exactly identical shape and features while others are slightly different. Examples from the British Museum, Metropolitan Museum, and Cairo Museum are more bulky and generally have a wider mouth. Some examples from private collections have ovoid handles which are sometimes pierced by holes.¹⁷ One peculiar example with ibex handles and a small protrusion on the outside bottom comes from KV56. Davis notes that a small pedestal was found with it, but this is not described further.¹⁸ This might imply that this vase was to be securely fixed, perhaps for elevated placement.

3.2 Text on the vases

In the 19th century Conrad Leemans noted that there was a hieratic text visible on both RMO vases just below the rim. These texts were recorded in his monumental catalogue but are no longer visible nowadays.¹⁹ The text on AAL 10a that was seen by Leemans, can be transcribed and transliterated as follows:



This indicates that the vessel could contain 12 ‘hin’ or 5,676 liter.²⁰ The text on AAL 10b is longer than that on AAL 10a. It might, for a part, be repeating the same text as AAL 10a, but this is hypothetical. The text Leemans copied for AAL 10b seems at this time illegible. Assuming that Leemans was right in his reading of the text on AAL 10a, we can conclude that the quantity of the contents of the vessel was well-known and probably of a certain value. AAL 10b also shows us that these texts indicating the volume were written on the back of the neck: the floral collar was draped on the chest of the vase, as if it were a person, and fixed on the back with a cord.²¹ This gives the vessel a clear front and rear side.

Next to type G AAL 10a and AAL 10b there is one type F vessel known to me with a confirmed hieratic text but no cartouches. This vase, that was sold at Sotheby’s in 1989 and which is presently in the Fondation Gandur pour l’Art collection, contains a hieratic text that can be translated as: *‘first class oil, excellent styrax (nnyb), prepared in the workshops of*

¹⁶ This allows us to categorize the material as Aston’s material category 2: ‘a translucent calc-sinter, coarse grained’ (Aston 2000:60).

¹⁷ Similar to Aston’s ‘long neck flask with horizontal loop handles’ (Aston 1994:152).

¹⁸ Davis 1908:46.

¹⁹ Leemans 1851, volume 2, plate 63, nos. H368 and H367a-c. I would like to thank Dr. Rob Demarée for helping me with the translation of the hieratic texts.

²⁰ The value of the hin varies slightly through time. The hin used here is that calculated by Pommerening (2005:203-205) for the New Kingdom: 1 hin = 0,473 liter. Pommerening also mentions that the indicated and calculated volumes of AAL 10a do not match and possibly the text ‘12 hin’ is either incorrect or incomplete (Pommerening 2005:408-409).

²¹ A similar pattern is visible on the vase published by Chappaz (2001:69).

pharaoh'.²² If the text on this vase refers to the actual contents, it is one of only a few cases that inform us about their original contents: a resin-like substance from the *Styrax officinalis* tree that was used for medicinal purposes and as incense or perfume.²³ Interesting about this vase is that it shows nearly the same decoration as AAL 10b.

Two vases that contain both a hieratic text and a cartouche are known to me. One example was found in the excavations of a burial site at Ard el-Naam in Heliopolis. This vase contains a cartouche of Ramesses II but "*perhaps they belonged to a person of high rank whose name (?) was inscribed in ink, because there is a faint trace of black ink upon the second pot.*"²⁴ This text could indeed have contained a name, as the line of hieratic might be interpreted to start as "*sš nsw ...*", king's scribe. A second example in the former Charles Pankow Collection was sold at Sotheby's in 2004 and is presently in a private collection. This vase has a cartouche of Merneptah on its neck and an unpublished painted hieratic text on the shoulders.²⁵

Other type F and G vases without a hieratic text contain royal cartouches, posing the question whether these vases had similar functions (since shape and form do not necessarily seem to be related to decoration). It should be noted that the six vessels with cartouches all date from either the reign of Ramesses II or that of his successor Merneptah. Of these at least one comes from the above-mentioned Merneptah cache. It is not unlikely that another four vases in appendix 1 might also come from this cache since the whereabouts of the larger part of the remaining eleven vases that were found at the time is unknown.²⁶ All of the inscriptions are carved and all show approximately the same text:



*n(.y) sw.t bi.t.y Wsr-M3'.t-R'-Stp-n-R' di 'nh
s3 R' R'-msi-sw-mri-Imn di 'nh [m] dt*

'King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Ramesses (II), son of Re, given life forever.'²⁷

²² Chappaz 2001:69 and Bianchi 2011:138-139. This vase (FGA-ARCH-EG-127) from the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art was displayed at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva in 2001-2002. I would like to thank Dr. Jean-Luc Chappaz and Dr. Robert Steven Bianchi for providing me with detailed photographs and additional information on this vase and a second vase (FGA-ARCH-EG-323) in the collection of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art.

²³ This tree can be found in Greece and the Near East (Germer 1985:147).

²⁴ Messiha 1966:192.

²⁵ Sotheby's 2004:53.

²⁶ First, the former Pankow vase (mentioned above) might also come from this Merneptah cache, as Sotheby's identified Howard Carter as the source of this vase (Sotheby's, *The Charles Pankow Collection of Egyptian Art*, New York, 2004, dec. 8, p. 53). Second, the vase at Highclere Castle obtained by Lord Carnarvon. Reeves (1989:30) notes that next to this vase H272 (footnote 10), there are fragments of a second similar vase in the Highclere Castle collection. Third, the vase offered for sale at the Brussels Ancient Art Fair in 2010 of which the provenance is unknown. Fourth, the vase found at Ard el-Naam although this is more difficult to explain since this was found near Cairo in a tomb to be dated somewhere between the New Kingdom and the Greco-Roman Period (Messa 1966:2-6). Finally, the vase found and published by Petrie in his publication about stone and metal vases.

²⁷ This text comes from a vase offered for sale at the Brussels Ancient Art Fair in 2010 and is representative for vases of similar type. Other vases show the cartouche of Merneptah instead of Ramesses II.

The presence of these cartouches on type F and G vases seems to be an indication of the royal use of these vessels. It also strengthens the hypothesis of the Merneptah cache to be remains associated with the burial of this king. However, if this was the case one might ask why Merneptah would use vessels inscribed with the name of his father and not his own? Was this a cache for two kings? Did Merneptah usurp or reuse vases of his father without changing the name? Or were the vessels with the Ramesses II cartouches some sort of heirloom? These questions remain for now unanswered.

3.3 *Decoration patterns*

AAL 10a is devoid of any decoration except the two ibex-shaped handles. AAL 10b still contains some remains of painted decoration nowadays, which was already described and reconstructed by Leemans.²⁸ The vessel has a decorative band on the neck just below the mouth. On the front it consists of two rows of *Nymphaea coerulea* (blue lotus) petals of which the top row is bound together by smaller lines (straps?).²⁹ On the front, draped over the shoulders of the vessel is a floral collar which consists of two rows. The lower row has the same petals as the rows around the top of the neck. The inner row contains three blue lotus flowers and two small buds to the sides. The nature of these small buds is difficult to determine. They do not seem to be lotus buds and resemble only slightly the seeds of the *Styrax officinalis*. Perhaps they should be seen as straps rather than buds.³⁰ Nowadays the back of the vessel is undecorated, but in his drawings Leemans noted two cords with papyrus umbel ends that are tied together at the rear of the vessel. Finally, around the handles we also see two smaller collars with lotus petal decoration.

These decorative patterns still visible on AAL 10b are also known from similar vases of pottery. Parts of these motifs, like the draped *Nymphaea coerulea* and the bands of its petals, were already sporadically used on the early 18th dynasty blue painted pottery and became more frequent on this pottery in the Amarna period and after.³¹ The most striking parallel for this decorative scheme is, however, the polychrome pottery vessels from the 18th-19th dynasty from Deir el-Medina and Gurob.³² These vases often have an ovoid shape with a long slightly sprouting neck, horizontal handles and a pointed or convex bottom.³³ Some identify this vessel shape as the hieroglyphic ‘heart’ sign or even as a symbolic representation of the human body.³⁴ These vases or amphoras are decorated with bands and collars which mainly

²⁸ Leemans 1851 volume 2 plate 63 no. H368 and H367a-c.

²⁹ The *Nymphaea lotus* and the *Nymphaea coerulea*, both water lilies, were used frequently in Egyptian iconography and architecture. They can be mainly distinguished on the basis of their colour and petal shape (Germer 1985:37-39 and Hepper 1990). In this article I will refer only to the *Nymphaea coerulea*, the blue lotus with narrow, pointy leaves. Usually the petals or leaves used in depictions of funerary wreaths are identified as lotus petals. It should be kept in mind that olive leaves, willow leaves and celery leaves were also used to make similar wreaths (Hepper 1990:9-10). In ancient Egyptian floral depictions especially the olive leaves are difficult to distinguish from the lotus petals (Hepper 1990:16-17).

³⁰ Manniche (1989) describes a possible parallel for this bud-like feature, associated with *Papaver somniferum* L. (see also note 36), lotus leaves and papyrus plants (Manniche 1989:25). The bud as part of the strap can be seen in Manniche 1989:32.

³¹ Brovarski 1982:88-89.

³² Bell 1997:49-75.

³³ E.g. Andreu 2002:97 and Saleh 1987:220.

³⁴ Bell 1997:56. It might also be the case that it is a representation of a lotus bud (Germer 1985:38).

incorporate blue lotus petals, lotus buds, poppy flower elements, mandrake fruits, and check-board motifs. Elements like the lotus flower symbolize rebirth, while mandragora was known for its aphrodisiac and narcotic qualities and is regularly associated with the lotus in floral collars.³⁵ The petal of the poppy flower (*Papaver rhoeas*) was known for its medicinal qualities.³⁶

These elements in the above combination of bands and collars are very typical for the Deir el-Medina decoration scheme of the 19th-20th dynasty. Bell associates it with festivities that took place in the Deir el-Medina region. She firstly mentions festivities that were held during the funeral of the deceased.³⁷ In this case the vessels would have been prepared for serving wine. The second theory that Bell mentions is a role for the vessels in the 'Festival of the Valley'.³⁸ This festival involved a visit of the cult statue of Amun to the mortuary temples in the West and had to ensure the rebirth of the dead. This festival also involved a banquet in the presence of the deceased. During these festivities, vessels like these might have been presented to the deceased.³⁹ The fact that these vessels are often in a very good condition might emphasize that they were deposited in a burial context.

Why is a similar decoration applied to a stone vessel? The most simple solution would be to think that the stone vases represent a more luxurious variant of the polychrome pottery vessels. However, the wide-mouthed stone vessels seem not very suitable to pour liquids and in most cases the stone vessels have a (considerable) larger capacity than their pottery contemporaries. Other hypotheses might be that the decoration was to invoke the properties of the plants depicted, i.e. medicinal, narcotic or simply as a perfume, or that the use of stone was to make the vases (symbolically) durable.

3.4 *Ibex-shaped handles*

The most intriguing characteristic of these vessels are the animal-shaped handles, which, like the decoration, might give us a clue to the function of these vessels. The handles have the shape of an ibex or rock-goat. Identification of the animal can be done firstly on the basis of the horns and secondly on the basis of facial markings.⁴⁰ The animals on the RMO vases cannot be identified further than being an ibex. A well-preserved parallel to AAL 10b from the Thalassic collection and another from the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art (FGA-ARCH-EG-323) show us the same ibex handles with traces of decoration.⁴¹ Next to the floral collar around its neck, we see a black-green motive on the neck of the animal and a black one around the area where its eyes should be. Especially the latter shows great resemblance to the facial markings of young adult males and females of *Capra aegagrus*, and the absence of a goatee might

³⁵ Germer 1985:171.

³⁶ The presence of *Papaver somniferum* cannot be ascertained in Egypt before the 18th dynasty, and even from that date on it is more likely that we are dealing with *Papaver rhoeas*, Germer 1985:44-45.

³⁷ This theory is largely based on the contents of the embalming cache of Tutanchamun, Bell 1997:56.

³⁸ The 'Festival of the Valley' was celebrated in the second month of the summer; 10th month of the year, between harvest and inundation (Schott 1952:5).

³⁹ Bell 1997:56-57.

⁴⁰ Vernus identifies the ibex as either *Capra aegagrus* or *Capra ibex nubiana* (Vernus 2005:108). More conclusive though is the identification by Osborn (1987:243-244) who based the identification of the Syrian ibex (*Capra aegagrus*) also on the facial markings.

⁴¹ Lacovara 2001:124-125 and Bianchi 2011:138-139.

argue in favor of the latter.⁴² These animals originate from the Levant and Syria and it is unknown when and by whom they were introduced in Egypt, next to the indigenous *Capra ibex nubiana*.⁴³ Both animals have long bent, ribbed or ringed horns and can be associated with the evil forces in ancient Egyptian religious belief.⁴⁴ However, the ibex also has a positive connotation in which it is associated with the renewal of the year, a year, or renewal in general. This is a feature that comes forth from the annual growth of its horns which were later identified with the hieroglyphic sign for 'year', *rnp.t*.⁴⁵ It was also connected to the god Min: both god of fertility and renewal, and patron god of the mountains where the ibex lived. Jan Quaegebeur gives an interesting analysis of the role and significance of the ibex on an alabaster model barge of Tutankhamen.⁴⁶ Some of these interpretations, but also additional ones, can be applied in the case of the RMO vases. The ibexes can be seen as a sign of protection. We know that ibex heads were used to crown the bow and stern of ships and barks, in order to invoke the divine protection of the god associated with the animal in question. Rare cases where a gazelle, which is sometimes interchangeable with the ibex, is represented as an uraeus-like creature on royal diadems or cornices also occur.⁴⁷ This symbolism, together with the exquisite execution of some of these vessels, might confirm that these vases were for royal use. A second interpretation is that the presence of the ibexes invokes a sense of rebirth, renewal and hence eternity that was associated with the owner, the ritual function, or the place of deposition of the vessel. A third interpretation is that the presence of the (young) ibexes can be associated with the contents. Quaegebeur already associates ibex-shaped vessels with the pouring of (mainly) milk, making the vessel some sort of medicinal or ritual container.⁴⁸ Although symbolic considerations seem to be the reason for the use of the ibex for these stone vases, one should also consider the practicality of the design. The ibex is one of the few animals with nicely bent horns that could perfectly serve as handles.⁴⁹

When we look at the vases we see the neck and head of the ibex protruding from the side of the vessel. On AAL 10b we can still see a small decorative collar around the neck (see fig.4a). From the top of the head a long protrusion, the horns, connects the ibex head with the neck of the vessel.⁵⁰ The smaller holes on the sides of the head must have served for fixing the separately-made ears. The eyes of the animal would have been applied nearer to the front of the animal head.⁵¹ The original handle of AAL 10b and one of the handles of AAL 10a still

⁴² Older animals no longer have these facial markings (Osborn 1987:243-244). Interesting is a vase in the Cyprus Museum which seems to have a goatee, arguing in favor of a older animal (Dikaios 1961: 148).

⁴³ Quaegebeur 1999:13-14.

⁴⁴ Similar to gazelles.

⁴⁵ For the growth of the horns see Vernus 2005:109. Examples are known of vases and depictions showing intricately entwined plant motives among which the *rnp.t* sign bearing the rings of the ibex-horns (Gardiner 1999:479 sign M4, notched palm-branch).

⁴⁶ Quaegebeur 1999.

⁴⁷ Quaegebeur 1999:37-44.

⁴⁸ Quaegebeur associates the pouring of milk among others with the festivities for the new year (Quaegebeur 1999:87-89). For this theory see also the ibex-shaped vessel found in the tomb of Tutankhamen (Carter 1933:147).

⁴⁹ Although it seems doubtful that these handles could be fully used as such: the vessel is relatively heavy.

⁵⁰ On the back of the horns of one of the ibexes of AAL 10a we see two small depressions, perhaps indicating that the artist wanted to differentiate between the two horns.

⁵¹ Lacovara 2001:124-125 suggests for the nearly exact parallel of AAL 10b in the Thalassic collection that the holes were meant for inset horns. If we look at other ibex representations it seems more likely that the large curve of the horns was used for the handle itself while the ears (which are positioned lower than the horns) were inset on the sides (also argued by Pommerening 2005:408-409). See also ibex parallels in the tomb of Tutankhamen

contain some brown material in the ear socket with which the ears were fixed (see fig.4b). The vase FGA-ARCH-EG-323 from the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, still contains the remains of one of the ears.⁵²

These handles are a feature that we also see on other vases in the corpus, especially on vases that are wider but apparently not taller than the RMO vases.⁵³ The ibex as a symbol of renewal would fit well with the decorative floral patterns that seem to embody a similar symbolism. In this case they would fit the theory of Bell, possibly attributing them to a funerary context. But what about the vessels that are not decorated with floral designs but with cartouches? Are the ibexes meant to symbolically renew the king, his body, or his reign? Does this mean that these vessels are connected with the funeral of the king? Considering that (at least) two of these vessels without (apparent) floral decoration and with ibex handles come from the Merneptah cache, and one from the 'Golden Tomb', this seems likely. With the colourful decoration of the ibex handles of the Thalassic and Gandur vases, and the colourful decorated inscribed cartouches of the BAAF vase we have to consider the possibility that the large ibex-handled vases from the Merneptah cache and 'Golden Tomb' were once also painted.



Fig.4a: traces of the decorative collar around the neck of the ibex (AAL 10b). Fig.4b: the socket for the ear, just below the horns of the ibex, showing remains of the adhesive material for the inset ear (AAL 10b). Fig.4c: photograph showing the angle at which the ear socket was drilled in the back of the ibex head (AAL 10a).

(Edwards 1978:219 and 222-223). Petschel also interprets the holes as sockets for inset horns in the only publication of AAL 10b (Petschel 1999:166). A clearer parallel for the sockets as ear insets can be seen on a vase in the Cyprus Museum, where the eyes are shaped separately (Dikaïos 1961: 148). The sockets of AAL 10a are more at an angle, indicating that the attached feature pointed more to the back of the animal (fig.4c).

⁵² Bianchi 2011:138-139.

⁵³ The largest known example, the British Museum vase EA55013, could contain 22 hin (see also Pommerening 2005:408).

4. Concluding remarks

What does this analysis tell us about the RMO vases? The provenance of the vases remains a mystery. Other vases were found from Luxor to Ugarit and it is difficult to pin down this type of vase to a locality, such as the polychrome pottery vases from Deir el-Medina and Gurob, though on the basis of their decoration there is great similarity with this group. The contexts in which they were found in situ are almost all funerary: in the Valley of the Kings Merneptah cache, 'Gold Tomb', or in tombs and burial pits elsewhere (Ard el-Naam and Mit-Rahina). Examples known from a domestic context are from the Levant, which makes the interpretation more difficult. The RMO vases can only be dated on the basis of their similarity with vessels that carry a cartouche. This means that the vessels are probably to be dated in the Ramesside period. For AAL 10b we can make a good hypothetical reconstruction of the decoration, since nearly similar vases in the Thalassic and Gandur collections show us the patterns and colours used, as well as information on the animal that forms the handle. It is unknown whether AAL 10a carried any form of decoration. It is possible that it was once decorated similarly to AAL 10b, but in Leemans' time had already completely lost its surface decoration. Finally the contents of the vessels give a relatively coherent answer. The vase from the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art (FGA-ARCH-EG-127) which alludes to the contents as styrax oil and the crystallized residue in AAL 10b might point to use for fluids for which Egyptian alabaster was suitable. The one vase from Heliopolis contained waste from the mummification process. This, combined with the find location of the larger part of the ibex-handled vases, might attribute these vases to a funerary context. Whether they were used in the mummification process or in the festivities associated with the burial itself remains unclear. One should be aware of an alternative use as well, since the domestic and palatial context of the Ugarit vases might suggest a similar use in Egypt. Despite their peculiar character and the recorded provenance of a number of the vases it remains difficult to get a clear image of their exact context and use. Other finds will have to complement or reject these hypotheses.

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Measurements:	AAL 10a	AAL 10b
Maximum height	33,5 cm	37,2 cm
Maximum width	28,2 cm	28,8 cm
Diameter foot	13 cm	14,9 cm
Diameter mouth	19 cm	20,4 cm
Maximum diameter	19,9 cm	22 cm
Height of the neck	13 cm	12,7 cm
Height of the belly	19,5 cm	22,8 cm
Height of the rim	1 cm	1,5 cm

Table 2. Overview of the measurements of the RMO vases.

Appendix 1: Table with parallels to AAL 10a and AAL 10b

	Name:	Present location:	Provenance:	Date:	Type:	Text?	Hin:
1	AAL 10a	RMO	?	NK?	Ax	yes	12
2	AAL 10b	RMO	?	NK?	Ab	yes	
	?	BAAF 2010	?	Ramesses II	aB		
3	EA55013	British Museum	Merneptah cache, KV	Merneptah	Ax		
4	Firenze 3267	Museo Egizio di Firenze	?	18th-19th dynasty	ax		
5	M.8355	Musee d'Aleppo	Maison d'albâtre Ugarit	13th century B.C.	ab		
6	?	?	Tomb 34 Gurob	NK	ax		
7	?	?	Tomb Z Mit Rahina	19th-20th dynasty?	ax		
8	?	Metropolitan Museum of Art	Merneptah cache, KV	Merneptah	AB		22
9	?	Private collection	KV?	Merneptah	aB	yes	
10	FGA-ARCH-EG-127	Fondation Gandur pour l'Art	?	19th-20th dynasty?	ab	yes	17
11	FGA-ARCH-EG-323	Fondation Gandur pour l'Art	?	19th dynasty	Ab	yes	
12	74A	Thalassic Collection	?	Ramesses II	Ab		
13	Petrie 909	?	?	Ramesses II	XB		
14	?	?	Ard el-Naam Heliopolis	Ramesses II	aB	yes	
15	?	?	Gold Tomb, KV	19th dynasty?	Ax		
16	?	Cyprus Museum	?	13th century B.C.	Ab		
17	H272	Highclere Castle	Merneptah cache, KV	Ramesses II	XB		
18	09.889.92	Brooklyn Museum	?	19th-20th dynasty?	ab		

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Handles:	Decoration:	Other:
ibexes	?	
ibexes	collar and bands	
oval disc shaped with hole	decorative band, cartouches on neck and belly	
ibexes	none	Found with 12 other vases
oval disc shaped, no hole (?)	none	Collezione Ricci 1832
oval disc shaped with hole	Neckband with leaves(?)	Domestic context
oval disc shaped	?	Tomb context. Fragments of 3 vases found
oval disc shaped with hole	?	Tombcontext
ibexes ('nubian ibex'?)	cartouche Merneptah	Found with 12 other vases near the tomb entranceway
oval disc shaped with hole	cartouche Merneptah, hieratic text and 'foliate collar'	Possibly from the Merneptah cache
oval disc shaped with hole	floral collar, neck band with knot and long hieratic text	Text: "first class styrax oil made in the workshops of the pharaoh"
ibexes	floral collar, neck band and decorated handles	Text: "a wreath [garland] and bread of the gods..."
ibexes	floral collar, neck band and decorated handles	Colour perfectly preserved
?	Inscription on neck and belly, cartouche Ramesses II	Petrie did not record the provenance of this vessel
oval disc shaped with hole	Inscription on neck and belly, cartouche Ramesses II	Sealed when found containing dechets of the mummification process
ibexes	none	According to Davis: small protusion at bottom to place vase in stand
ibexes	floral decoration with lotusflowers	Ibexes have short horns and beard attached to belly of vessel.
none	Cartouche Ramesses II	Reported to come from the Merneptah-cache, possibly with lid.
oval disc shaped with hole	floral collar and neck band	

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