



THE ARTS OF MAKING IN ANCIENT EGYPT

VOICES, IMAGES, AND OBJECTS OF
MATERIAL PRODUCERS 2000–1550 BC

edited by
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Faience Craftsmanship in the Middle Kingdom

A market paradox: inexpensive materials for prestige goods

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Abstract

The production of faience in ancient Egypt seems to represent a historical market paradox, as it does not fit into a theoretical bipolar (prestige/common) partition of goods. Made of common and inexpensive components, faience artefacts are both widespread across lower strata of society and in use in the uppermost segments of society, often beside very expensive materials, such as metal and ivory. The article aims at analysing four key elements which can determine a clearer social profile for faience production in the Middle Kingdom: a) the *geographical setting of production*, encompassing both the provenance of raw materials and the places of production; b) the *identity of the makers*, including the skills and the degree of specialisation required; c) (a revision of) the *taxonomy of artefacts produced*; d) the *identity of the end-users*. Accordingly, faience cannot be considered *per se* a prestige good, especially since the primary components can be found everywhere and the technology employed is not extremely complex. The only segment in the operational chain that could be controlled is the manufacture: the control over the technical skills of the artisans. The labour, i.e. the skilled artisan, can convert common objects into prestige goods. The only way to clearly distinguish the social role of the faience is to primarily assess for each type of faience artefacts its production technique and the end-user target.

Keywords: Faience; Middle Kingdom; prestige goods; workshop; craftsmanship; manufacture; technical production; faience figurines.

The use of different kinds of raw materials has often been seen as one (out of many) of the parameters to measure and predict social stratification as different types of raw material may be associated with different types of clientele (Santacreu 2014, 237-238). A rough polar division of materials can be attempted at an abstract and theoretical level: on the one side, a) the more expensive/precious raw materials, in relation to their economic value, the difficulty in obtaining them in a local environment, the index of their demand, the high level of technology/skills required and their quality, such as durability, colour and resistance; on the other side, b) the less expensive and ordinary raw materials, in relation to their easy accessibility, the simpler technology required and the minor exploitation of (human) resources (Schortman, Urban 2004, 194; Zakrzewski, Shortland, Rowland 2016, 228).

In ancient Egypt – as in several other civilizations – type a) materials (*e.g.*, cedar wood, ivory, metal, lapis lazuli) have usually been perceived as more connected with the elite, while type b) materials (*e.g.*, mud, clay, basketry) have usually been associated with a less wealthy clientele. Such a pattern was not meant to crystallize the relation between social classes and raw materials into a rigid grid of correspondences, but to frame the extent of the “range of choice”.¹ Where the most powerful and rich classes could afford a wider range of materials, spanning from the most ordinary and less expensive to the rarest and most expensive ones, the less wealthy would necessarily have had a more limited spectrum of possibilities, with the index pointing towards the most accessible resources (see Fig. 1). For instance, although kings were one of the wealthiest social groups in ancient Egypt, this did not prevent them from employing materials of modest economic value: a statue in unfired clay is preserved for the 18th dynasty pharaoh Amenhotep III (Bianchi 1998, 24). An anthropological approach carried out by Dean Arnold in contemporary Ticul in Yucatán (Mexico, between 1965 and 1997) has shown that also ordinary material, such as clay (though clay of high quality), can be considered of strategic importance and be placed under the control of the elite (Arnold 2000). In the same logic, the presence of significant quantity of gold in lower/middle class burials of the village around Qau, in the northern part of Upper Egypt, during the First Intermediate Period (Brunton 1927, 76), does not represent an upheaval of the social order, but reflects the dynamics of the private market, which is not exclusively dictated by sustenance and primary needs (Kemp 2006, 309). However, in marginal centres and lower social levels, prestige goods are necessarily attested at a reduced scale only (Ekholm 1972).

The production of faience in ancient Egypt then seems to represent a historical market paradox, as it does not fit into such a bipolar partition: made of common and inexpensive components, faience is widespread across lower strata of society while being frequently used among the uppermost segments of society (Friedman 1998, 15). For instance, in a rapid survey of early New Kingdom (1550-1450 BC) faience distribution, Diana Crag Patch has shown that faience, at least in funerary and ritual contexts, was deliberately chosen by royalty and the uppermost levels of society: the royal

1 This does not imply that certain types of raw material were automatically excluded from certain social levels, since the logic for the choice of particular materials is not only dictated by economic constraints. Several other complex factors come into play, such a religious symbolism, socio-economic mobility, personal experiences, etc.

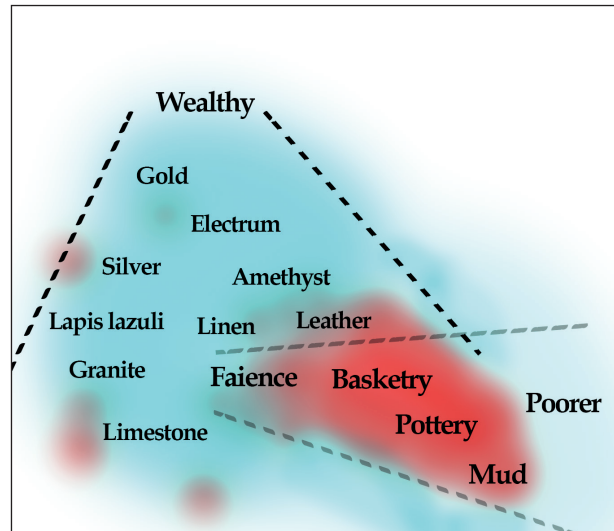


Figure 1: Graphic visualisation of the “range of choice” of material types in Egypt for richer and poorer social classes.

tombs of the Valley of the Kings and, above all, the burial equipment of Tutankhamun, contain a relatively high percentage of faience artefacts (Patch 1998, 43; see Fig. 2). Such a measure is not to be confined inside a definite and narrow chronological framework: also during the Old Kingdom (2700-2160 BC), faience was deliberately targeted by the royal class, as shown by the thousands of faience tiles employed for the step pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara (Ziegler 1999). Nonetheless, faience can hardly be listed among ancient prestige goods without some reluctance. The technology involved in its production did not require sophisticated methods: the silica forms the bulk of the body; the addition of lime and alkali flux or soda helps to cement the quartz grains together, while the copper oxide produces the greenish-blue colour; once the figure was formed, and dried, it was fired in a kiln. Faience frequently has two distinct body layers; a coarse, often discoloured, core covered by a brilliant white layer over which the glaze was placed (by means of three different techniques, application, cementation and efflorescence, see Nicholson, Peltenburg 2000, 189-191; Tite, Shortland, Vandiver 2008). After the application of the decoration made with a common ink of manganese and iron oxide, the figure was fired again (Nicholson, Peltenburg 2000, 186-187). The kiln needed to reach a relatively high temperature, between 800-1000 °C, which is easily obtained even with fairly basic technology (Nicholson, 1998, 51; Vandiver 1998, 124; cf. Davidovits, Davidovits 2007). For instance during the Amarna period, faience production seems to have been combined with other crafts, like metallurgy, pottery and also bread making, to economise resources such as manpower and fuel (Friedman 1998, 17; Vanthuyne 2013, 400; see Eccleston 2008, 33-35). The paradox is replicated again in the fact that the use of faience seems to have been motivated in part in response to a market need for artificial stone, as an inexpensive material substituting expensive raw materials such as turquoise and lapis lazuli (Vandiver, Kingery 1987, 32). The connection between lapis lazuli and faience, mainly given by similarity of colours, was already evident to ancient Egyptians who often merged the two materials on the lexical level (*hsbd*, *Wb.* III, 334.1-13, mainly used for lapis lazuli but occasionally also for faience: Baines 1985, 282-297 and Harris 1961, 124-129). Yet, the archaeological evidence again seems to point to the opposite direction, as faience objects do not seem

<i>Jewelry</i>	<i>Ritual Equipment</i>
Beads: ex. CCN 85, CCN 256, CCN 4t, CCN 525	Objects representing forelegs of bovids: ex. CCN 261f
Collars: ex. CCN 53a; CCN 21u	Figurines of deities: ex. CCN 261g
Amulets: ex. CCN 256rtr; CCN 620(18–20)	Wands: ex. CCN 620(9–10)
Rings: ex. CCN 53b, CCN 620:66	Shabtis and their tools: ex. CCN 459h
Bracelets: ex. CCN 620(40–41), CCN 620(38)	Was scepter: ex. CCN 629(14–17)
<i>Vessels (67)</i>	<i>Furniture</i>
Heset: ex. CCN(31–32)	Headrest: ex. CCN 403b
Nemeset: ex. CCN 542zz	Inlay: ex. CCN 12a
Hes jars: ex. CCN 461t	<i>Games</i>
Drop-shaped jar: ex. CCN 399a	Gaming pieces: ex. CCN 12c
Cups: ex. CCN 549q	
Oviform jars: ex. CCN 620(29–30)	

(CCN = Carter Catalogue Number)

Figure 2: Table showing the objects in faience from the tomb of Tutankhamun, from Patch 1998, 34, table 1.

to have been considered inexpensive products judging by the fact that they were often included in burials besides very expensive materials, such as metal and ivory (*cf.* the case of Kha/Merit, Russo 2012). Therefore, faience products were *not* only perceived as inexpensive replacement for more costly materials (*cf.* Patch 1998, 43), but contemporary also as “deluxe objects intended for a discriminating clientele” (Bianchi 1998, 22).

In order to evaluate the social value of commodities, Franck Vigneron and Lester Johnson identified three non-personal perceptions of luxury brands/goods in contemporary society: 1. perceived uniqueness = something difficult to obtain; 2. perceived quality = superior quality and performance in comparison with ordinary commodities; 3. perceived conspicuousness = public consumption of distinctive goods important for social representation (Vigneron, Johnson 2004). Faience as a raw material does not fulfil any of these requirements, since its components are ubiquitous (as opposed to uniqueness) and clearly of a relatively low value (as opposed to quality) in comparison with more expensive and exotic materials such as lapis lazuli and turquoise. In addition, faience did not require a high technology, as demonstrated by its production which could have been combined with other crafts, such as pottery and bread making (Eccleston 2008, 33–35); by consequence, at least on a theoretical level, faience goods could be produced and consumed by a large range of people and are not distinctive of specific social levels (as opposed to conspicuousness).

However, the value of an object does not lie in the object itself, but in its “transactional potential” for communication (Kemp 1995, 28). The faience paradox has been often addressed by two explanations: a) faience, given the brightness and plasticity of its body, was imbued with symbolic values; faience has been always regularly associated with light, rebirth and fertility, and eventually with the goddess Hathor (Wilkinson 1994, 104–25; Bianchi 1998, 22–31); b) the ontological kernel of faience cannot be immediately found in nature, as it represent the most ancient synthetic material, whose manufacture was regulated by human technology and expertise. Pamela Vandiver and David Kingery defined it as “high-tech ceramic” in order to stress the technological manipulation of raw materials for obtaining a product deviating from the traditional ceramic practices (Vandiver, Kingery 1987, 19). Faience, therefore, represented one of the first human creations, on an even higher level than Prometeian fire, which already existed in nature. Such a symbolism, affecting the imaginary perception of technological possibility of controlling and chemically transforming nature, could have led to the increase of the value of faience. Yet, a prestige good, to remain one, needs to be controlled by a narrow group of people (Earle 1987; *id.* 1997; Hayden 1995; *id.* 1998,

17-18), while the (ubiquitous) nature of the raw materials for faience production is difficult to control; therefore, the parameter of symbolic value cannot explain the social value of materials entirely by itself.

Obstacles in identifying the social profile of faience production

One of the main obstacles in identifying the social profile of faience production in ancient Egyptian material culture lies in a lack of adequate methodological approaches. Three main obstacles can be targeted:

- a. Egyptological research has too often focussed on the analysis of the single finished products, creating types over types (*cf.* critique in Quirke 2013) according to their morphology, iconography and/or function, but marginalising the analysis of the productive processes that lead to the creation of the artefacts themselves. For instance, Middle Kingdom statuettes made of mud, stone and wood (Quirke 1998, Tooley 1991) often have been correlated with the faience figurines of the same period merely on the basis of some analogies of the themes represented (see Fig. 3). However, they could have had completely different functions, use and meanings as given by the different processes of production involved in their creation (*cf.* paddle dolls *vs.* female figurines with truncated legs, see Tooley 2017; Morris 2011; Miniaci forthcoming A);
- b. Due to the peculiar body plasticity and the signature of the shiny glaze, faience encapsulated a strong visual “appeal power” that in turn tends to create a strong divide between the objects made of faience and those made of other materials, and – simultaneously – to obscure structural differences among the objects made of faience themselves. For instance, faience scarabs whose base was carved with accurate inscriptions have often been grouped together with plain scarabs under the common category label of “faience scarabs”, which in turn have been grouped under the label “faience amulet and seal”. The shiny glaze and the exterior appearance of these artefacts has erased a rather distinctive character: the production of these two types of objects required two different types of skills (faience technology and calligraphic skills for miniaturist carving), implying that these two categories of objects point to two separate social and technological spheres;
- c. Due to the fact that faience in Egypt was unremittingly used from the 4th millennium BC onwards (Tite, Shortland, Kaczmarczyk, Vandiver 2008, 58), it has often been subjected to an anachronistic chronological flattening, so that objects of different periods have been compared and analysed together without considering the advance in technology, shift in manufacturing system, and change in social control over its production. For instance, in the New Kingdom there is direct evidence that a large part of faience industry – as well as of its market – was controlled by the State. In the Great Harris papyrus, however reliable or not about the quantity expressed, over 5700 faience amulets, collars, bracelets, scarabs and rings were recorded as donated by Ramses III in the way of an *inw*-donation to various

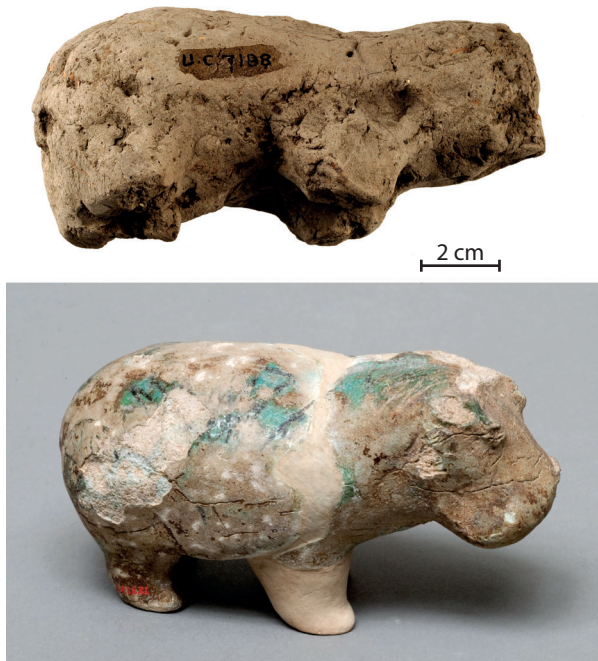


Figure 3: Mud hippopotamus figurine Petrie Museum UC 7188 in comparison with a similar faience hippopotamus figurine MMA 15.3.394. Courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology © Photo: Gianluca Miniaci. License under Creative Common Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

temples across Egypt (Grandet 1994, 243, 270, 278, 295, 296, 298, 315, 316). At Quantir, large faience factories seem to have been located close to the royal palace, where thousands of moulds were discovered (Hamza 1930; Shortland 2012, 94-6). The same cannot be said for other periods for which we have less evident source of information; for instance in the Middle Kingdom faience production might have been regulated mainly by a private market. Nonetheless, also for the New Kingdom recent studies have demonstrated that a private market for faience objects existed beside the temple and palace production (based on the archaeological documentation: Kemp, Stevens 2010, vol. I, 478-480; Kemp, Stevens 2010, vol. II, 249-296; based on the distribution pattern of moulds and faience objects across the site of Amarna: Vanthuyne 2013, 414-418; cf. Vandenbeusch, Miniaci, Quirke 2015).

Identifying key steps in the operational chain of faience production

Artefacts encapsulate cultural and social patterns that can be decoded through the analysis of their materiality. By applying the methods of the “chaîne opératoire” drawn from anthropological theory and ethnographic studies (Leroi-Gourhan 1963; Lemonnier 2005) onto the archaeological material (Dobres 1999, Martinon-Torres 2002, Coupaye 2009), two primary elements involved in the process that converts a raw material into a finished usable object can be targeted: a) the *geographical setting of production*, encompassing both the provenance of raw materials and the places of production; b) the *identity of the makers*, including the skills and the degree of specialisation required. By identifying the key patterns that regulate the production of faience in the Middle Kingdom, it is possible to assess more clearly cultural index of faience within ancient Egyptian society.

a) *The geographical setting of production*

As mentioned briefly above, the raw materials for faience production are geographically widespread all over Egypt, with its components – quartz (obtained from sand, flint or crushed pebbles), water, lime and alkali – easily accessible and rather universal. Sand can come from either the desert or beaches, while white quartzite pebbles are obtained from the river bed (Turner 1956, 277-300); lime is present in plant ash (Shortland 2012, 103); soda can derive either from large evaporitic soda deposits, such as the Wadi Natrun lake and other minor deposits (Shortland 2004), or even from the ash of various plants which contain high levels of potash and soda. A third method to obtain the soda is to produce it artificially by using man-made salt pans to precipitate minerals from sea or river water (Shortland 2012, 100). Copper, generally used to give the brilliant blue colour, was the most expensive ingredient, yet might have been readily supplied by scraps from local metal-working workshops, given the low percentage needed (<5 %).

A more difficult task is to identify the place of faience production, as the furnaces associated with glazing do not present any obvious markers beyond wasters and production tools, such as moulds, stands, copper tools and vessels, which are rarely found in archaeological contexts since they were all easily recyclable. Therefore, the identification of faience kilns rests on the finds associated with them (Zakrzewski, Shortland, Rowland 2016, 284). Unfortunately, for the Middle Kingdom only two faience workshops have been tentatively identified, one at Lisht in the Fayum and another at Kerma, in Sudan.

In the late Middle Kingdom settlement of Lisht (Fayum), Arthur Mace identified the areas A1.2 and A1.3, inside the building A1, as “glaze factories” (Mace 1927, 17). Mainly three elements of evidence support the identification of area A1.2 with a faience workshop: a) the high quantity of debris from faience production found there (mostly beads and many hundreds of small marl clay balls along with clay semicircles, Nicholson, Peltenburg 2000, 181); b) the discovery of a semi-circular structure built in the corner of a room filled with ash deposit, recently re-cleaned by Felix Arnold who confirmed this structure to be a kiln (Arnold 1996, 15; see Fig. 4); and c) the discovery in the same area (inside shaft tomb no. 879, located under the northern extension of the house A1.3) of the remains of the burial equipment of the *imy-r thntyw*, “overseer of glaze-workers” Debehni (Bourriau 1996, 110-111; Kemp, Merrillees 1980, 220-225). Probably, A1.3 was the workshop – or even the residence itself, see hybrid households documented at Abydos in the same period (*cf.* Picardo 2015) – of the chief craftsman of faience Debehni (Arnold 1996, 15, fig. 4). In addition, in the same area, in the late New Kingdom, a primary or secondary faience and glass production was discovered, probably a sign of production continuity (Hayes 1959, 410; Keller 1983, 28).

For the phase of the great royal tumuli – Classic Kerma phase (tumuli K IV and III, ca. 1750-1580 BC) – George Reisner evoked the existence of faience kilns in Kerma (Sudan), because he had found a large amount of glazed quartz pebbles and wasters in this area, without, however, providing further information as the kilns were “too damaged to be drawn” (Reisner 1923, Parts IV-V, 134-135). Although some traces of local production can be identified in Kerma faience (Wilde 2011, 124), no kilns have been certainly identified at the site (Lacovara 1998, 48-49). Peter Lacovara has debated the existence of local faience production in Nubia during this period and suggested

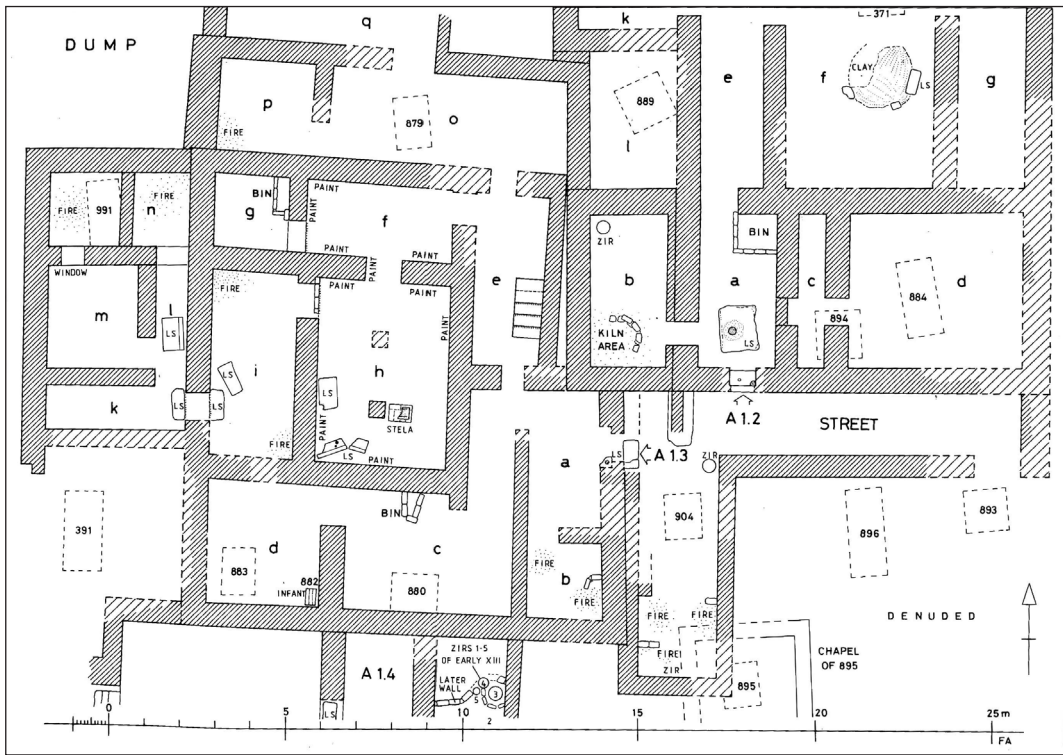


Figure 4: Plan of domestic buildings built above shaft tombs at Lisht North, including Houses A 1:2, A 1:3 (faience workshop?), from Arnold 1996, fig. 4.

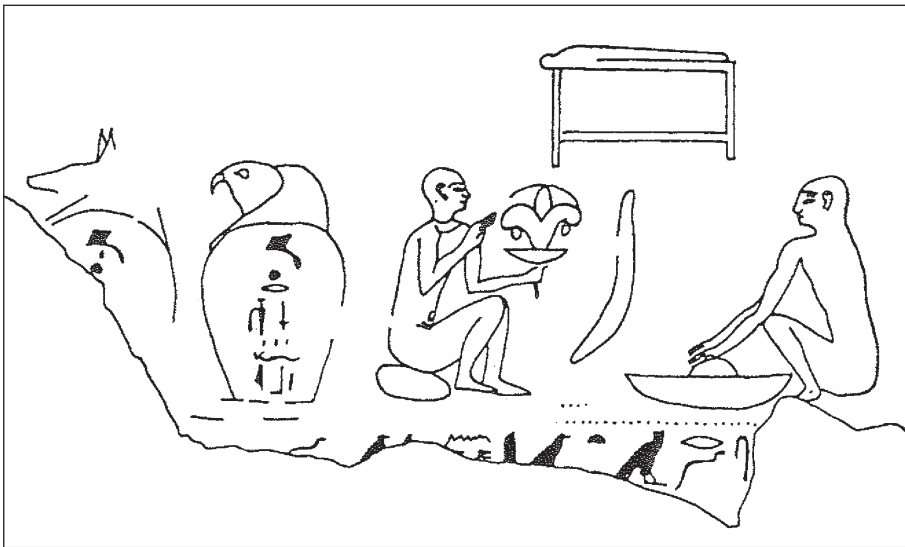


Figure 5: A possible scene of faience production from the tomb of Ibi (TT 36), 26th dynasty (ca. 664-610 BC), after Davies 1902, pl. 25.

that the faience production at Kerma was based on the reuse of imported faience pieces from Egypt, employed as raw material (Lacovara 1998, 49).

b) *The identity of the makers*

Remarkably, scenes of faience production are virtually absent from ancient Egyptian representations, even though these show a wide range of crafts and expertise at work (*cf.* van Walsem 2005; Hartwig 2004). Paul Nicholson has tentatively identified a possible scene of faience production in a 26th dynasty tomb at Thebes (TT 36, belonging to Ibi: Nicholson 1998, 56, fig. 31) but several doubts remain on this hypothesis (see Fig. 5).

Similarly, specific mention of faience production is missing from literary evidence: the Teaching of Kheti (also known as the Satire of Trades: Roccati 2000; Vernus 2001, 239-264; Jäger 2004, Teil I) takes into consideration a broad range of manual professions yet does not mention faience-workers (Quirke 2004, 121). In the absence of visual representations and direct textual sources that could help clarify the process of faience production, the titles born by craftsmen are the ultimate criterion to decode methods of manufacture.

Unfortunately, for the Middle Kingdom only three titles are attested which could refer to the production of faience: i) *imy-r w^crt n t^hn.tyw* “section overseer of glaze workers”, attested in the stela of Kebu, purchased in 1859 by the British Museum (BM EA 844, *HTBM* V, pl. 13; Quirke 2003, 86; see Fig. 6a); ii) *imy-r t^hn.tyw* “overseer of glaze-workers”, attested on a gilded (?) wooden coffin fragment belonging to Debehni found in the shaft-tomb 879 at Lisht (Bourriau 1996, 110-111; see Fig. 6b); iii) *t^hn.ty* (?) “glaze-worker”, attested on a greywacke statuette belonging to Sehetepibre set into a limestone offering table found in the shaft-tomb 883 at Lisht (MMA 22.1.107a, b; Hölzl 2015, 229-30, cat. no. 167; Quirke 2016, 170; see also Quirke in this volume; see Fig. 6c). The ancient Egyptian word, *t^hn.t* (*Wb.* V, 390.11-391.16-18), which derives from the stem *t^hn* “gleam”, “shine”, “dazzle” (*glänzen; leuchten; erhellern; erheitern, Wb.* V, 391-393.22) was usually employed to refer to faience and glass (Nolte 1968, 138); as suggested by John Raymond Harris, it is unlikely that ancient Egyptian distinguished between glaze and glass (Harris 1961, 137). The attestation of the phrase *t^hn.t m^sc* “true *t^hn.t*” seems to indicate the existence of faience imitations. It could also shed some doubt on the correct association between this word and faience (Harris 1961, 135, 137-138), but a faience vessel found at Tell el-Yahudiyeh with an inscription describing it as *t^hn.t* seems to remove any doubt over such an interpretation (Naville, Griffith 1890, pl. 8).

Textual evidence, though scarce, suggests that already during the Middle Kingdom if not earlier (*cf.* Kuraszkiewicz 2015, esp. 47), the production of faience required the elaboration of devoted specialists for the supervision of the work: evidently, supervisors needed to oversee the work of makers and artisans; therefore a specialised overseer may imply also specialised makers. In addition, as noted by Stephen Quirke in this volume, the producer and the manager of faience production at Lisht (points ii and iii) had resources that indicated a rather wealthy social status, as they both managed to have inscribed objects and luxury materials as gold and greywacke (*cf.* Klemm, Klemm 2001, 633-634).

It is worth extending the lexicographical analysis slightly further to investigate the immediately following periods, as a possible shift in the titles related to faience production could mirror changes in the production technique and technology, hence

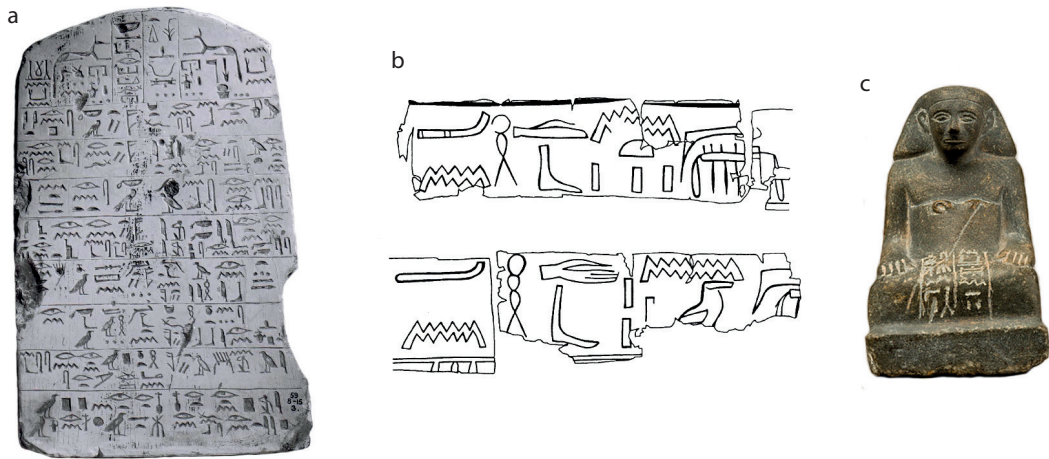


Figure 6: a. Stela of Kebu, BM EA 844 © Trustees of the British Museum; b. facsimile of the name and title of Debehni from the shaft 879 at Lisht, from Bourriau 1996, fig. 7; c. greywacke statuette belonging to Sehetepibre MMA 22.1.107a, b © Creative Common Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

also in market demand/supply and, ultimately, the social value of faience. During the New Kingdom, the word *hsbd* may have entered the administrative vocabulary side by side with (or replacing?) the term *thn.t* with regard to faience production (but not in the material vocabulary, as *thn.t* is still attested in the Late Period and Ptolemaic lists among the precious and semi-precious stones to be used for making small figures, amulets of various types, seals and beads, see Harris 1961, 136 for bibliography). The word *hsbd* (*Wb.* III, 334.1-13) was in use since the Old Kingdom for lapis lazuli and it could have been more generally employed as a basic term for the blue colouring (in the inscription of Niankhsekhem of the 5th dynasty, it is stated that the “hieroglyphs were inscribed in blue-*hsbd*”, Baines 1985, 286, see also n. 23). However, *hsbd* may also be referring to materials imitating lapis lazuli, like blue frit, faience and glass (see *hsbd mꜣꜥ*, Harris 1961, 128-9; Aufrère 1991, 465). In some titles appearing in the New Kingdom there are no traces of *thn.t* anymore: Hatjay and Ptahmose bear the title *hry irw hsbd n nb tꜣwy* “chief faience/glass/lapis worker of the lord of the Two Lands” (respectively, stela false-door, Cairo JE 25641, Gaballa 1979, 46, fig. 2, pl. 2; and papyrus Krakow MNK IX-752-4, Luft 1977, 48-9); while Qenenhor, apparently a supervising official attached to the treasury and bearing ranking titles, is a *imy-r irw hsbd* “overseer of the faience/glass/lapis workers” (Papyrus Vatican 64, Bellion 1987). Although the use of *hsbd* may be related to the introduction of glass production and therefore be a term employed for the glass, the inscription *irw hsbd n Imn Rh-Imn* “*hsbd* maker of Amen Rekhamen” (19th dynasty stela of Rekhamen, Edinburgh, National Museums Scotland, A.1956.153: Friedman, Borromeo, Leveque (eds.) 1998, 156, 250 [166]; Shortland 2012, 71) reported over a stela made in faience would suggest that, at least

in this case, *hsbd* was employed to refer to a faience – rather than to glass² or lapis lazuli – maker. In addition, in the New Kingdom, another term, again not involving the term *ḥn.t*, was employed to refer faience makers, *bꜥbꜥ* (*Wb.* I, 447.5; Ward 1977, 276; Gardiner 1947, 67*-69*; Drenkhahn 1976, 45-9; Steinmann 1980, 155-6).

Therefore, it seems that, during the New Kingdom, *ḥn.t* was excluded from the administrative vocabulary but not from the lexicon used for indicating faience. This can be connected with the rise of glass production but may also be a lexical indicator that deeper changes in the technology of faience occurred by the New Kingdom, probably in relation to a more massive use of moulds (*cf.* Quirke, Tajeddin 2010). Regardless of the cost of the raw material, moulds allow a seriation in production and accordingly more rapid fabrication: the faience production with the support of moulds required less advanced skills (see below).

The social index of faience products in the Middle Kingdom society

In a comparative analysis of the production phase, points a) the *geographical setting of production* and b) the *identity of the makers* are conflicting, as the value and the provenance of the raw materials, easily accessible and widely dispersed across the country, contrast with the high degree of specialisation and the advanced technical skills required by a Middle Kingdom craftsmen. The scarcity of identified production places (only one in Egypt; the other possible one in Nubia) strongly conflicts with the abundance of faience artefacts in use during the Middle Kingdom, and in general during all of Egyptian history.³ In turn, an abundance of faience artefacts also conflicts with an inexplicable absence of faience production from the widespread pictorial scenes of material manufacture and the deafening silence in the literary Satire of Trades, set against the wide range of manual professions mentioned. Therefore, Middle Kingdom faience production continues in its inflexibility to fit into a polar division of materials, and, in this respect, it can be considered semantically ‘promiscuous’ and ‘ambiguous’.

However, such a faience ambiguity fades when we “revise” two primary consumption criteria: c) the *taxonomy of the artefact types produced* and d) the (geographical) *identity of the end-users*, when appropriately linked to the different branches of point c) (the *type of artefact produced*). As highlighted by Mario Liverani for the ancient Near East, crafts have a plurality of customers, and the workshops which exclusively produce for the elite or the temple/palace needs (*cf.* Di Paolo 2014) can adapt/reinvent their productive system for producing (similar/alternative) commodities for a wider segment of society (Liverani 2005, 55).

2 It is possible that the production of faience and glass were strongly interconnected, as in the New Kingdom the advance in glass and metal technology led to the development of stronger faience body, see Nicholson 1993, 30. However, it must be acknowledged that ancient Egyptian glass was produced with a completely different technology from that of faience and, during the New Kingdom, it seems to have been strictly confined to palace production (Tite, Shortland, Kaczmarczyk, Vandiver 2008, 58).

3 The scarcity of documented production places can be explained by the archaeological incompleteness (excessive focus on funerary contexts) and/or by difficulty in identifying workshop areas (probably because its production may have been combined with other crafts).

c) *A revision of the taxonomy of the artefact produced*

Faience artefacts in the Middle Kingdom span from the small disk beads for body ornament and amulets to statuettes and models of medium size to large funerary masks and vessels (see Bourriau 1998 for examples). However, for the type of analysis carried out here, unambiguous criteria for isolating categories of objects must be targeted clearly.

Heike Wilde divided faience artefacts of the Middle Kingdom into five main classes: *Votivgaben*; *Gefäße*; *Kleinplastiken*; *Perlenschmuck*; *Besonderheiten* (Wilde 2011, 115-124). However, such a division is based on a functional analysis of the artefacts, which reflects a modern etic approach involving our current taxonomic perception of artefacts. In order to move closer to the nature of ancient faience producers, I propose here a division of faience artefacts according to the manufacturing technique used for their creation. Faience manufacture is based on two methods, both implemented by different degrees of surface grinding, painting, incising, inlaying:⁴ a) moulding on a form, which often included pressing the paste into open face moulds; b) free hand modelling, complemented by additional handling.

In technique a), the moulding can provide sophisticated shapes to the paste and requires careful work and high skills, above all in crafting the mould. Yet, the faience production for the persons who were in possession of the mould is relatively simpler than technique b) and could be carried out by less skilled craftsmen/workers because it involves simpler mechanical gestures (pressing the paste into the mould) and relatively basic technology (Tite, Shortland, Kaczmarczyk, and Vandiver 2008, 58-9. *Cf.* Quirke, Tajeddin 2010, 341-361; Vanthuyne 2012-2013, 395-429). This can be acquired through empirical experience and an elementary knowledge of firing processes, as, in fact, faience-making is essentially a cold technology (Peltenburg 1987, 20). The main obstacle is given by the control in the proportion of the ingredients, as a lower proportion of silica will probably not produce a crystalline material.⁵

Technique b), by contrast, is less common and requires particular skilfulness in the craftsmanship, as the hand modelling of the paste demands a high degree of accuracy and attention for details. Forming fine details in faience is a difficult task to achieve: the body material is too coarsely particled to be very plastic and tends to slump and deform under its own weight once shaping is complete (Vandiver, Kingery 1987, 32; Vergès 1992). When shaping is too rapid, the material cracks or splits, and although the addition of water can help shaping, the finished objects may crumble once dry (Nicholson, Peltenburg 2000, 187).

In this way, faience artefacts do not risk to be homogenised by the nature of their own overshadowing materiality, “the faience”, neither to be grouped according to morphological and iconological criteria, which are mainly based on modern observation. For instance, among the objects produced with technique b) (Miniaci forthcoming B), there are small faience figurines, reproducing a vast array of themes (Miniaci 2014; *id.* 2017; *id.* forthcoming A). None of the faience figurines of the late Middle Kingdom

4 A third method, namely wheel-throwing, was in use only from the New Kingdom onwards and it is not taken into consideration here; see Nicholson, Peltenburg 2000, 189.

5 The techniques in use were most probably the same as those practiced during the Old Kingdom. For the process of efflorescence, application and cementation, see Tite, Freestone, Bimson 1983, 17-27; Vandiver, Kingery 1987, 19-33; Nicholson 1998, 58; Nicholson, Peltenburg 2000, 189-191; Tite, Shortland, Kaczmarczyk, and Vandiver 2008, 59.

Figure 7: Faience figurine representing a female dwarf from the Petrie Museum UC4505. Courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology © Photo: Gianluca Miniaci.

were mechanically reproduced and reproducible, and only the expert hand of a trained and skilled artisan (or circle of artisans) could have created artefacts that share similarity in manufacture, shape and decoration (see Fig. 7). This type of object can be considered of a social value different from others, as for instance faience beads (Xia 2014, 38-39) and amulets (Grajetzki 2017), which were produced with the same materials but with a different technique, and widespread across a much wider segment of society.

d) *The identity of the end-users*

Faience artefacts during the Middle Kingdom have been found in all strata of society, from the uppermost to the wealthy, the middle segments and the lowest ones. Clearly, faience cannot be considered a privilege of the royal entourage. This can lead one to suppose that faience was quite widespread and considered a lower product regulated by autonomous modes of production and local demand. However, by analysing the distribution of artefacts produced with manufacture technique b), the picture immediately changes. Faience figurines, although attested throughout the country from the Delta to its southernmost end (Kom el-Hisn, Memphis, Abusir, Dahshur, Lisht, Tarkhan, Riqqeh, Hawara, Lahun,⁶ Harageh, Beni Hasan, Deir el-Bersha, Meir, Asyut, Rifeh, Matmar, Mostagedda, Badari, el-Mahasna, Abydos, Hu, Dendera, Thebes, Esna, el-Kab, Edfu, Elephantine)⁷ are mainly concentrated in the diagnostic late Middle Kingdom sites: Lisht (ca. 128 items), Abydos (ca. 79 items), Harageh (23 items), Thebes (21 items),⁸ and Lahun (16 items + 14 items from a British Museum purchase lot -?-) (Miniaci forthcoming B (see Fig. 8)). In the rest of Egypt only sporadic cases – with one, two or, more rarely, a handful of specimen – have been recorded.⁹ Three of the spots in which these figurines are concentrated are key sites that are specifically representative of late Middle Kingdom power centres: Lisht, Lahun and Harageh. Thebes and Abydos, which played a key role as places of power, religious, ideological and cultural significance in the late Middle Kingdom.

As can be seen, therefore, these figurines were not equally accessible in all parts of Egypt but concentrated in key late Middle Kingdom sites. In addition, the homogeneity in iconography and style of these figurines found in sites far away from each other seems to point to a centralised production with a voluntary (intellectual) control both over the type of manufacture and the choice of iconographic repertoire. The range of subjects would at first



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- 6 In order to avoid confusion, I will use here the name Lahun to designate the site labelled by Petrie as Kahun.
 - 7 They have been attested also in peripheral areas: Serabit el-Khadim, Gebel Zeit, Tell el-Ajjul, Byblos, Aniba, Faras, Mirgissa, Kerma. This is discussed in Miniaci forthcoming A.
 - 8 The number of faience figurines coming from Thebes should be higher, but I have excluded all items whose provenance was not confirmed by evidence.
 - 9 For complete bibliographic reference, see Miniaci 2017 and *id.* forthcoming A.

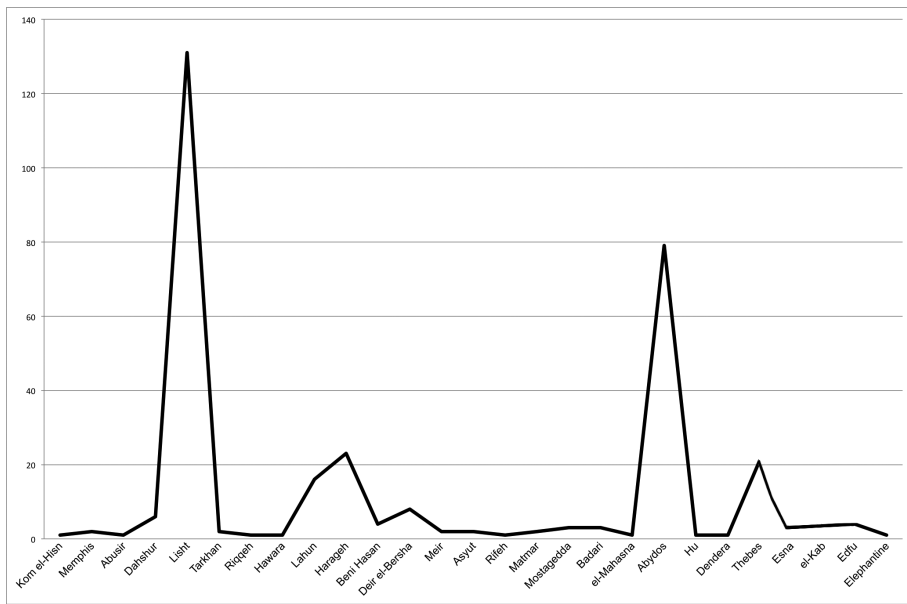


Figure 8: Table showing the geographical distribution of Middle Kingdom faience figurines across Egypt © Gianluca Miniaci.

appear to point to ‘variety’ and ‘autonomy’ since the themes are rather broad, but in the end turn out to be very exclusive and distinctive since they are frequently recurring and they often copy one another very closely. This implies a common complex vocabulary, dictated by a narrow segment of society that exercised intellectual control over the artefactual production. Faience figurine genesis, i.e. the mental elaboration which gave birth to the material inception, is not a neutral operation but aimed at encapsulating and conveying a message (Miniaci forthcoming A). This was given by physical qualities that are naturally striking, such as the visual brilliance – to engage the senses and rivet attention – and by the intrinsic symbolic vocabularies, as the themes chosen were closely related to rebirth, regeneration, childhood/youth and protection. Therefore, faience figurines unlike for instance beads were commissioned and employed by a narrow circle of persons.

Conclusion

Faience production cannot be easily controlled in all steps of its *chaîne opératoire*; and, as something that cannot be fully controlled, it can easily escape the control of the wealthy. Accordingly, faience cannot be considered *per se* a prestige good, especially if the primary components can be found everywhere and the technology employed is not extremely complex. The only segment in the operational chain that could be controlled is the manufacture: the control over the technical skills of the artisans. The labour, i.e. the skilled artisan, can convert common objects into prestige goods. All this makes faience an ambiguous media, which straddles between the categories of prestige and daily-life goods, and can be produced for and used by both the wealthy and the non-wealthy.¹⁰

10 Cf. Xia 2014, 103. In the Middle Kingdom, 83% of beads were made in glazed composition, including also lower strata of society. See also Wilde 2011, 121-123.

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THE ARTS OF MAKING IN ANCIENT EGYPT

This book provides an innovative analysis of the conditions of ancient Egyptian craftsmanship in the light of the archaeology of production, linguistic analysis, visual representation and ethnographic research.

During the past decades, the “imaginative” figure of ancient Egyptian material producers has moved from “workers” to “artisans” and, most recently, to “artists”. In a search for a fuller understanding of the pragmatics of material production in past societies, and moving away from a series of modern preconceptions, this volume aims to analyse the mechanisms of material production in Egypt during the Middle Bronze Age (2000–1550 BC), to approach the profile of ancient Egyptian craftsmen through their own words, images and artefacts, and to trace possible modes of circulation of ideas among craftsmen in material production.

The studies in the volume address the mechanisms of ancient production in Middle Bronze Age Egypt, the circulation of ideas among craftsmen, and the profiles of the people involved, based on the material traces, including depictions and writings, the ancient craftsmen themselves left and produced.



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