

# objets 4/5

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J.S.N. WRIGHT

## **An early egyptian vessel in the form of a frog**

Of all the skills which typify Egyptian civilisation in the predynastic and archaic periods, the most brilliant was without doubt that of fashioning stone vessels. We are fortunate that a great number of these have survived, for they display an unparalleled technical brilliance as well as in many cases also a perfect synthesis of aesthetic form and function. Materials most frequently employed in the predynastic period were limestone, basalt, and alabaster, but we also find breccia, marble, porphyritic rock, diorite, greywacke, serpentine, volcanic ash and steatite.<sup>1</sup> The apogee of this great craft was in the very late predynastic and archaic periods, when, in addition, we find vessels made from jasper, obsidian and quartz. It is still not completely understood how these stone vessels were made, although it is apparent that the outside was fashioned first, before the inside was hollowed out.<sup>2</sup> A flint-headed drill was used for the basic cutting of the inside of

these bowls,<sup>3</sup> but some of the technicalities involved in the precision of such workmanship are still something of a mystery. Of course, these vessels vary considerably both in size and quality, but among them all we do find examples which are as aesthetically outstanding as they are technically and functionally perfect. Such a specimen is the



little green diorite vase in the form of a frog, which is here published for the first time.

Most of the smaller vessels from the late predynastic and archaic periods, vases and bowls, would have been used for containing toilet requisites and it is probable that our little bowl was made for holding some precious ointment, paint



or perfume. The shape is unusual, for, although there exists a whole corpus of bowls shaped in the form of birds, animals and reptiles, the vast majority of predynastic and archaic stone vessels are of simpler forms, plain dishes, bowls or jars. Emery<sup>4</sup> gives line drawings of ninety-eight basic types, but there are many others of more individual design, especially in the archaic period, to which our specimen probably belongs, when craftsmen appeared capable of making vases in stone of almost any shape. There is a beautiful vase made of red breccia in the British Museum, which takes the form of a dove;<sup>5</sup> another, in Brussels, comes in the shape of a tortoise,<sup>6</sup> while among the collection of vases discovered in the pyramid complex of Djoser, are two carved to resemble a reed-basket and a leaf.<sup>7</sup> Another example from Helwan, is a bowl carved in imitation of a straw basket.<sup>8</sup> There are also several in the form of frogs, some from the earlier pre-



dynastic period. In the collection of University College, London, there is a prototype of our little vase, possibly Gerzean, in black steatite;<sup>9</sup> it is of less sophisticated concept and workmanship, with the bowl a simple aperture made in the centre of the frog's back, without rim or lugs.

Another early example is in Munich.<sup>10</sup> Made of marble, and with the eyes evidently prepared to receive an inlay of another material, this curious frog has had the back part of its body hollowed out as a bowl. In style, the Munich frog shows close parallels with similar vases found in the Near East in the Djemdet Nasr period. More singular still is a small object in beautifully veined alabaster, also in the University College collection, London, where, instead of the body of the frog forming the bowl, a tiny vessel actually rests on top of the frog's back.<sup>11</sup> In the other extreme, there is an example, in limestone, where the whole body of the frog has been scooped out to form the bowl.<sup>12</sup>

This small vessel which we illustrate here is one of the most perfect specimens of this genre. Nothing is known of its provenance: it is now in a private collection on the continent and was recently acquired on



the London art market, having apparently been obtained from an Egyptian dealer. It is 7.75 cm in length, 6.4 cm wide and 2.8 cm high, the diameter of the mouth of the vase being 2.1 cm. The stone is a green diorite and so perfectly matched to the subject of the sculpture that one might imagine that we are dealing with a petrified specimen rather than a carving. The form is slightly bulbous, but neither exaggerating the shape of the frog, nor restricting the area of the vessel. The completely round aperture has a very flat rim, which does not disturb the contour of the carving from either the profile or from the frontal aspect. Nor do the two lugs drilled one on either side of the vessel disturb in any way the delineation of this delightful little creature. From no aspect is there the slightest dichotomy between the function of the object and its sculptural form. Looking at the front, we see the slightly pointed head resting demurely on two legs: the eyes are clearly marked but were evidently not meant, as with some other examples,<sup>13</sup> to receive any inlay. The muscles and nerves at the back of the eyes are shown in two short prominent vertical ridges, perfectly contrasting with the horizontal lines of the two front feet.

We can also just see the joints of the two back legs, which in turn balance the slight prominence of the two lugs higher up on the body. The underside also shows this adherence to balance of detail, with the two front legs clinging closely to the chest, and with the backlegs projecting slightly, but with the feet nevertheless tucked away beneath the body. Both front and back feet have details sketchily marked.<sup>14</sup> From the back view the sculptural form is very discreet, with the two rear legs, delineated symmetrically and also rather freely, being the only guide to the frog shape: from this angle the top half of the bowl gives no indication at all. But the quality of this sculpture can perhaps best be seen from the profile with the body of the frog

exactly containing the area of the vase, and with the projection of the head at the front being matched at the rear with the two protruding back legs.

The sacred character of the frog, worshipped from at least as early as the fourth dynasty in the form of the goddess Heket,<sup>15</sup> is due to its association with fertility and fecundity. Hence from the eighteen or nineteen dynasties onwards the frog was occasionally used as a sportive



ideogram for *whm'nh*, «repeating life»,<sup>16</sup> while the hieroglyph for a tadpole represented the numeral 100.000.<sup>17</sup> Different types of frog occur in Egyptian art: *rana*, which our little vessel represents; *rana mascareniensis*, the smaller frog, common as an amulet, usually with legs outstanding and ribbed down the back; and *bufo viridis*, the toad. There are representations of all these from the earliest predynastic times, in a variety of materials and forms. We will never know why an anonymous Egyptian craftsman chose to display his virtuosity in the form of our green diorite vessel, but can only be thankful that his little masterpiece has survived from among many stone vases fashioned during the late predynastic and archaic periods.

#### NOTES

1. Lucas, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries*, London 1948, p. 481, see also *Objets*, no 2, Geneva 1969, pp. 39/55.
2. Quibell, *Annales du Service*, XXXV, p. 77.
3. Emery, *Archaic Egypt*. Penguin 1961, p. 215.
4. Emery, *op. cit.* p. 217.
5. B.M. 35.306.
6. Brussels E. 3009.
7. Illustrated in Capart, *l'Art Egyptien*, vol. IV, pl. 611.
8. Z. Saad, *Excavations at Helwan*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1969, pl. 27.
9. University College (London) collection, 15213.
10. *Ägyptische Sammlung des Bayerischen Staates*, AS 1588.
11. Univ. Coll., Collection 15206.
12. Univ. Coll., Collection 15212.
13. e.g. Univ. Coll. Collection 15206.
14. Similar in this respect to Univ. Coll. Collection 15213.
15. Czerny, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, Hutchinson 1957, p. 24.
16. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 475.
17. Gardiner, *op. cit.* p. 191.

