

Organisation of soapstone vessel production as reflected in Egyptian and Norwegian quarry landscapes

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Vessel quarry pits and galleries littering the hills at Gebel Rod el-Baram in Egypt's Eastern Desert



Quarry and workshop for vessel production in Wadi Abu Qureyah



„A room with a view”: Workshop for vessel production in Wadi Abu Qureyah



Gebel Rod el-Baram: Workshop in the foreground, soapstone lens in the background

Below: Known areas (circles) of soapstone vessel production in the Eastern Desert, Egypt



Like the Alpine region, Egypt and Norway have long traditions of soapstone procurement. Highlights in both countries are vessel production, especially for cooking pots. The ultramafics of the central Eastern Desert defined the procurement zone in Egypt; in Norway production took place in Precambrian and Caledonian rocks in hinterland coastal districts and mountain regions across the country.

Globally, there are many similarities between vessel quarries and technologies used in procurement (e.g. carving of preforms from bedrock, often at steep faces and in shallow galleries). Differences observed must be sought in e.g. geological constraints, age, intensity and longevity of production, traditions and social organisation of the work. This contribution focuses on modes of organisation in Egypt and Norway, based on works by Harrell and Brown (2008) and Skjølsvold (1961, 1969), respectively.

The Arab Bedouin traditions in Egypt

The soapstone quarry landscapes in the Eastern Desert are enormous. Thousands of small pits and galleries for production of *barams* (cooking pots) litter hills in the arid landscape, larger clusters of quarries often covering several square kilometres. Production was simple, using chisels and mattocks for obtaining suitable, small blocks, which were almost finished to various kinds of vessels immediately beside extraction spots. The most intense production may have taken place after the heydays of the soapstone industry on the Arabian Peninsula in the 8th to 12th centuries and there are indications that Arab immigrants played the central role in starting and sustaining the industry. Their descendants, especially the Ahabda Bedouins, were involved in vessel procurement until recently. The vessels were, in addition to Bedouin use, traded in settlements along the Nile Valley, the Red Sea coast and, presumably, in Arabia and elsewhere. Transportation would initially have taken place along the major trade routes crossing the Eastern Desert close to the quarry landscapes.

It is very likely that the clusters of tremendous amounts of closely spaced small quarries not only reflect development in time, but, more importantly, the organisation of the nomadic Arab tribes. These were divided in numerous clans and families with territorial rights, and it may be that specific clans had rights to clusters, extraction spots being operated by families who specialised in *baram* production. In cases with evidence of more complex production processes (larger quarries, underground operations), it is likely that more highly skilled practitioners were involved. It is also possible that the few quarries in which preforms were carved directly from the rock can be dated to the Roman period.

Pre-Roman Iron Age vessel production in Norway

Bubakk is the earliest dated soapstone quarry in Norway, located in the central mountain region of the country. It is a small hilltop quarry, in which intensive, skilled procurement of thousands of vessels, partially in the form of funerary urns, took place in the Pre-Roman Iron Age, around 500-200 BCE. Production technology focused on carving of preforms from bedrock. The quarry's remote location raises important questions about organisation. It may be that yet unknown farm settlements existed and thus the work may have been carried out by specialists living in close proximity to the site.

However, with the lack of settlement evidence, elements of alternative organisation forms might include relationships with other (seasonal) uses of the mountain region (e.g. hunting practices, bog iron production), but also "ritual journeys" from settled areas to procure vessels. In this perspective it is notable that funerary urns were produced at Bubakk, artefacts which would have had significant symbolic value. No certain Bubakk vessels have been found in burials, but it is likely that products from the quarry were traded or exchanged within supra-regional networks.

Viking Age "vessel smiths"

In the Viking Age (8th-11th century CE) Norwegian vessel production dramatically increased and there are dozens of quarries tentatively dated to this period. They range in size from single extraction spots to substantial landscapes showing extraction along cliffs, in galleries and underground mines. The dominant production technology involved the carving of preforms directly from the rock. Larger quarry landscapes are often located close to farms, which would have had rights to exploitation.

Evidence from quarries (distribution, size, layout, technology), the quality of vessels produced, and widespread trade suggest that two procurement practices went hand in hand. There must have been a "farmer tradition" associated with less skilled production for home use, as well as a professional, often called "vessel smith", tradition that involved highly skilled, perhaps travelling craftsmen. Regional and international trade took place through centres along the coast and finds points to trade with Denmark, North Germany (Haithabu) and possibly Sweden and Iceland.

Conclusion

This arbitrary selection of examples is entirely based on my own familiarity with soapstone exploitation in Egypt and Norway, but it may give input as comparative material for research in the Alpine region and elsewhere. As a global phenomenon, vessel procurement obviously was organised differently in various cultures and across time. The examples show that characteristics of the quarry landscapes may aid in suggesting specific modes of organisation.

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The Pre-Roman Iron Age soapstone quarry at Bubakk in the Central Norwegian mountains



Tandsterstyggeberget soapstone quarry, probably dating to the Viking Age. Note the spoil heaps.



Carving of vessel preforms from the rock. Left: Tandsterstyggeberget. Right: Bubakk (vessel removed)



Typical Viking Age vessel forms. After Skjølsvold 1969.

Right: Steps in the production process of Viking Age vessels. After Skjølsvold 1969.



Use of soapstone in Egypt and Norway

BCE/CE	Egypt	Norway
5000	Neolithic	Mesolithic
4000	Predynastic	
3000	Pharaonic	Neolithic
2000		Bronze Age
1000		Iron Age
0	Prolemaic Roman/Byz. Islamic	Vessels
1000		Vessels
2000		Vessels
		Architecture
		Fire places
Many periods	Beads, small sculpture, seals	Moulds, spinning whorls, net sinkers, small sculpture