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## JANUARY 2021 ARCHAEOLOGY

### *A New Year's flask with the name of Pharaoh Ahmose II*

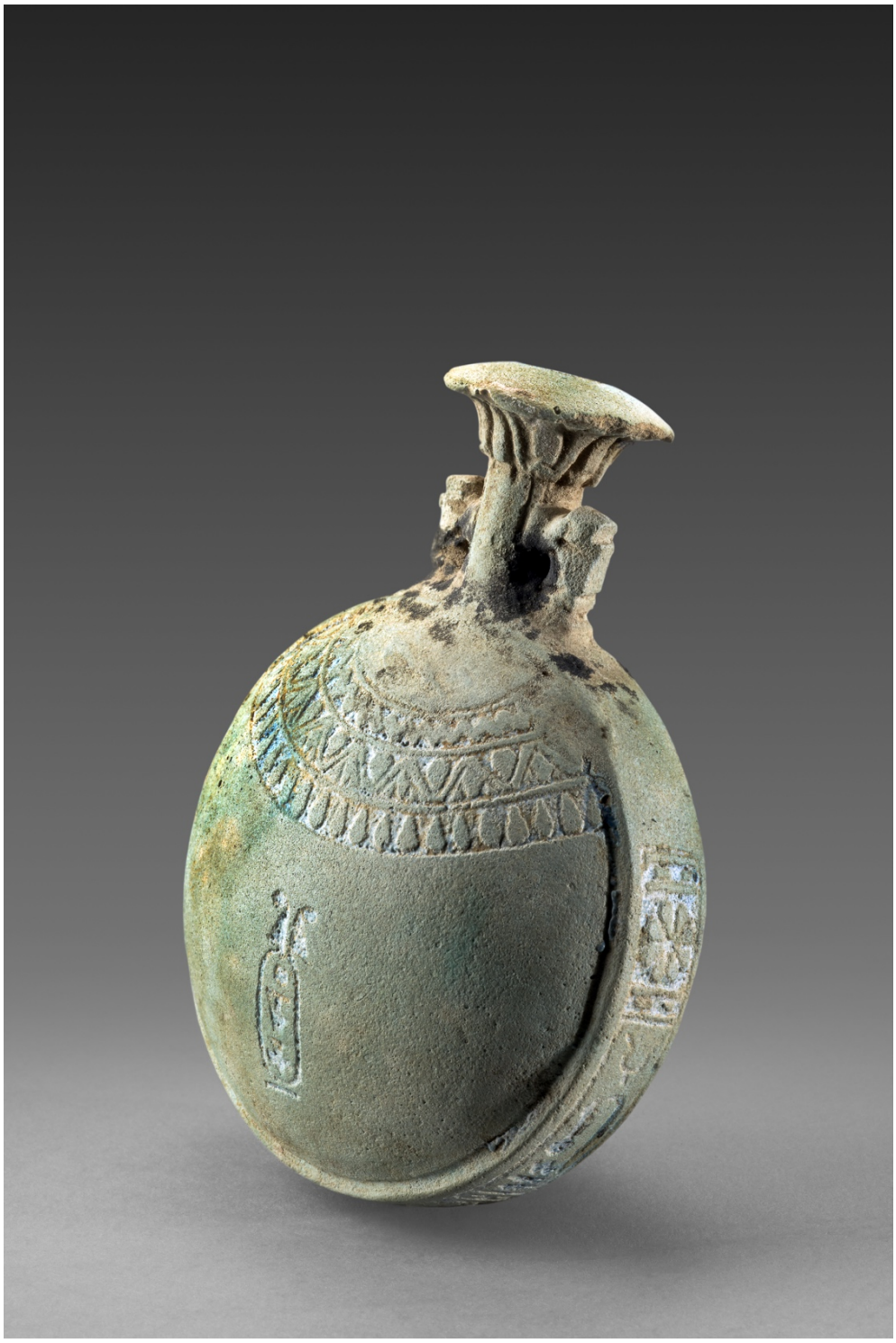

Fig. 1. © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art. Photograph: Grégory Maillot

Mankind has always been fascinated by time and seeks to count it as much as to tame it. Birthdays, wedding anniversaries, deaths, major events – these rituals allow us to set milestones in our lives and to anchor ourselves in *time*. Early on, many cultures and civilisations developed calendars based on the observation of the seasons, the moon, the sun and the stars. Better than any other, the first day of the calendar, and therefore of the annual cycle, is a symbolic marker of time, and it is no doubt on this occasion that the flask in question was offered as a gift or used in a ritual.

*New Year's flask with the name of Ahmose II*

Origin unknown
Late Period, 26th dynasty, reign of pharaoh Ahmose II (570–526 BC)
Blue-green Egyptian faience
9.5 cm high
FGA-ARCH-EG-0086

**PROVENANCE**

Galerie François Antonovich, Paris, before 06 July 1999

The first of January is not universally recognised as the beginning of the year, far from it: according to the traditional Chinese calendar, for example, the year begins between the 20th of January and the 19th of February and gives rise to two weeks of celebrations, whereas the Jewish calendar sets the New Year between September and October, the occasion for two feast days. Another example, according to the Hegirian calendar, the Muslim New Year is celebrated 11 days earlier each year than the previous year, and not all Muslim countries celebrate it on exactly the same day.

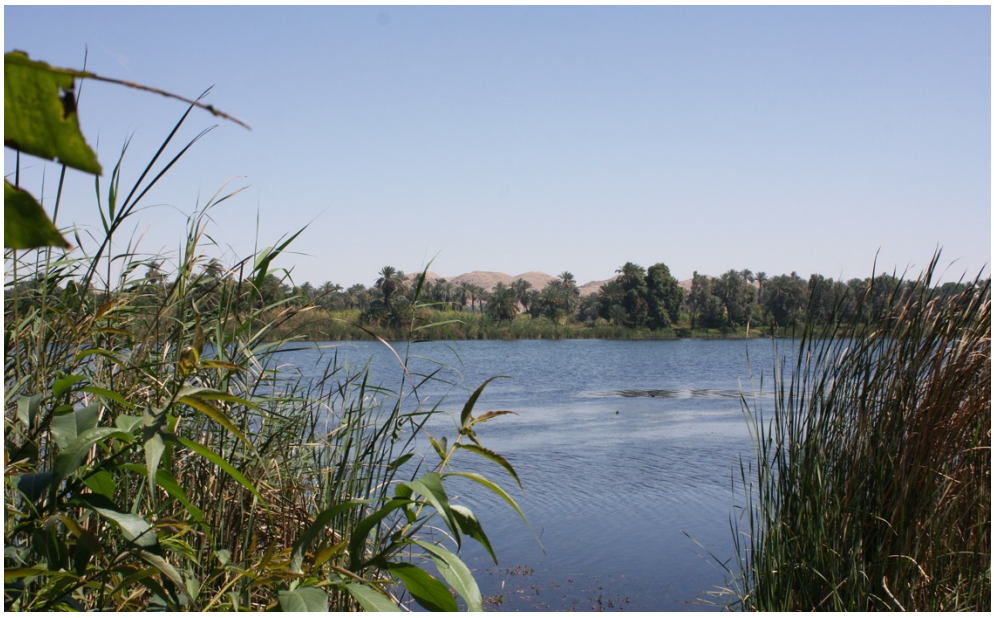

Fig. 2: The land of Egypt owes its lushness to the waters of the Nile, as well as to the silt once brought by the annual flood of the river. The aridity of the Sahara is never far away, as the desert hill visible in the background shows. Photograph by the author

In ancient Egypt, the New Year was marked by two theoretically concomitant phenomena, one astral, the other natural. On the one hand, there was the heliacal rising of the brightest star in the sky, Sapedet (called Sothis by the Greeks, which we know today as Sirius), which had been invisible for seventy days. On the other hand, the Nile flood arrived at the same time in Aswan – the country's symbolic southern border – swollen with water from the monsoon rains that fell in abundance on the basin of the Blue Nile, on the highlands of Ethiopia. This flood carried the silt that was being deposited gradually over the summer on the cultivated plains and, literally, fertilised the country (fig. 2).[1] Of course, the arrival date of the flood in Aswan could vary somewhat, and it took several weeks before it reached its peak in Memphis. However, the New Year was celebrated around July 19 and marked the first day of the first month of the Akhet season, itself written with the hieroglyphic sign of plants emerging from the flood.

**A flask of Nile water as a New Year's gift?**

There is little doubt that the way of perceiving and celebrating the New Year evolved over the many centuries of Egyptian Civilisation, but the day has been significant since at least the Old Kingdom (ca. 2650 BC).[2] However, it is only much later, during the 26th Dynasty (664–525 BC) that small, highly stereotypical faience flasks with similar characteristics were produced (figs. 1, 4–5)[3] and traditionally offered on this occasion. They are typically formed of two lenticular sides joined to a flat band that could receive a hieroglyphic text and a decoration of chevrons and rosettes, as is the case on the flask in the collection of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art.

A necklace of the *usekh* type decorates the upper part of the body on each side. The outer row of beads consists of drop-shaped beads, and the middle row shows open papyrus umbels alternating with closed bulbs. The third row is a zigzag; some examples have more elaborate *usekh* necklaces, in particular a flask kept at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, an exceptional object in many respects (fig. 4 and see below).

The neck of the flask in the collection of the Fondation Gandur, in the shape of a papyrus stem and umbel, is decorated with two small animal figurines on the sides. These are, as in most examples, two small squatting Cercopithecus, leaning against the neck of the flask with their hands in front of their faces. The choice of this animal is not trivial: it represents the god Thoth, often depicted with an ibis head, but which could also take the form of a baboon (fig.

[1] The Aswan High Dam, built in the 1960's today prevents the flood from reaching Egypt.
[2] JAUHIAINEN, *Do not celebrate your feast without your neighbours*, p. 68–9.
[3] BLANQUET, « Typologie de la bouteille du nouvel an ».

3).[4] Among other things, this god was considered to be the master of time and calendar, and the first month of the year was dedicated to him. The papyrus plant is a reminder of the flooding of the Nile and the fertility it brought; this is also the case for the colour of the flasks themselves, originally blue or blue-green, as well as for the flowers of the *usekh* necklace.

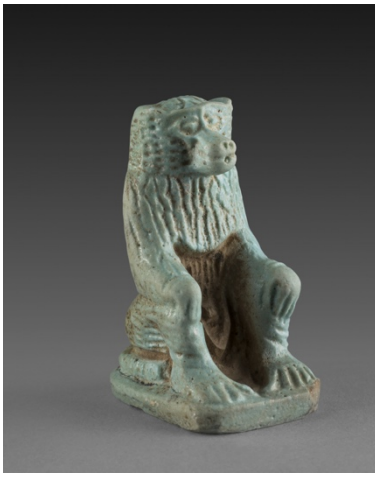

Fig. 3. Amulette representing the god Thot as a baboon.
FGA-ARCH-EG-0123.
© Fondation Gandur pour l'Art.
Photograph : Grégory Maillot

While the iconography is telling, this flask also has a short hieroglyphic text in two parts, inscribed on either side of the object on the flat band. Instead of the *Happy New Year*, now internationally associated with New Year's Day, the ancient Egyptians used a range of similar, though more extensive, formulae associated with one or more deities. Amun, one of the major gods of the pantheon, to whom the great temple of Karnak in Thebes (Luxor) is dedicated, is sometimes named on these flasks (see Fig. 4, where Amun is mentioned together with his wife Mut and their son Khonsu (central column of the text). But it is Ptah and his wife Sekhmet, principal deities of Memphis (south of Cairo), who are most frequently invoked. Sekhmet, often depicted with the head of a lioness, had great destructive potential and amulets of Sekhmet were readily exchanged on New Year's Day in the hope of appeasing her. Ptah is one of the oldest gods, known since the first dynasty (ca. 2900 BC), and considered according to certain mythologies, especially in Memphis, as the creator god. It is therefore not surprising that his name often appears on New Year's Day flasks, which is precisely the case on our flask of Ahmose II.

*May Ptah give life and open a beautiful new year for its owner.*[5]

The *owner* referred to here is no doubt the owner of the flask, whose name was only rarely spelled out, as for example on the exceptional flask of the Metropolitan Museum, on which even the titles and the names of the father of its owner – Amenhotep – are detailed (fig. 4).

No trace of the contents of these flasks has apparently ever been found; in all likelihood it could have been water from the Nile, collected during the flood. The small size of these gourds[6] could at first make us relegate these objects to the sidelines, or even consider them insignificant in comparison to the monumental sculptures or extraordinary treasures

[4] WILKINSON, *The complete gods and goddesses,* p. 215–7.

[5] Transliteration : *dỉ ꜥnḫ Ptḥ // wp rnp.t nfr.t n nb-s.* The hieroglyphic text is written in columns but is shown here as a line.

[6] Larger examples were produced, such as e.g., the New York Metropolitan Museum flask MMA 30.8.214 (fig. 4 ; see https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/550895 ; JANSEN-WINKELN, *Inschriften der Spätzeit*, p. 1070).

excavated in Egypt. On the contrary, however, it is precisely this type of objects that allow us to establish an immediate connection with our distant ancestors: most of these gourds fit perfectly in the hand, and when we grasp them today, we can imagine - almost feel - that they were handed down from hand to hand as gifts on New Year's Day. Thus, the owner of the inscription is not the person who bought or commissioned the object, but the person for whom the gift and wishes were intended.

The addition of the name was perhaps a prestige mark or a thoughtful or affectionate personalisation in favour of the recipient of the flask. However, as several New Year's flasks, show (see fig. 5 for an example also kept at the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art), the absence of the greeting formula, dedication to the god, or name of the owner in no way diminished their symbolic significance. Despite the temporal distance separating us from the Ahmose and other Yufâa, the presence of the other stereotypical iconographic motifs, such as the *usekh* necklace or the squatting baboons are sufficient to enable us to identify a New Year's flask.

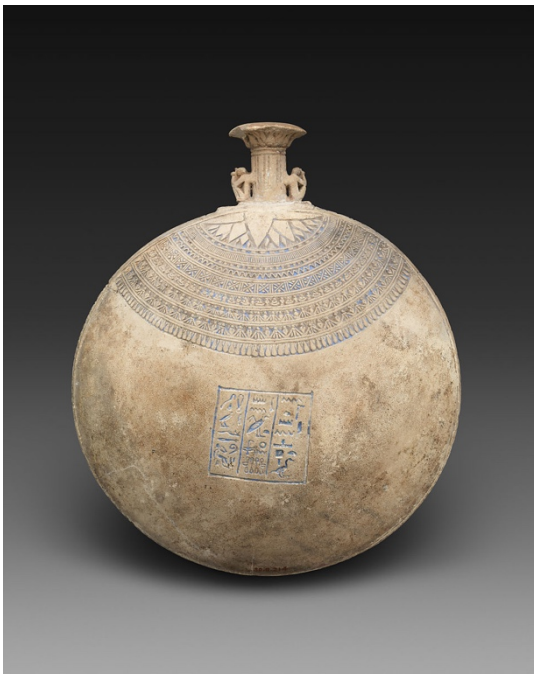

Fig. 4. New Year's flask for the divine father Amenhotep, son of Ioufâa.
New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 30.8.214

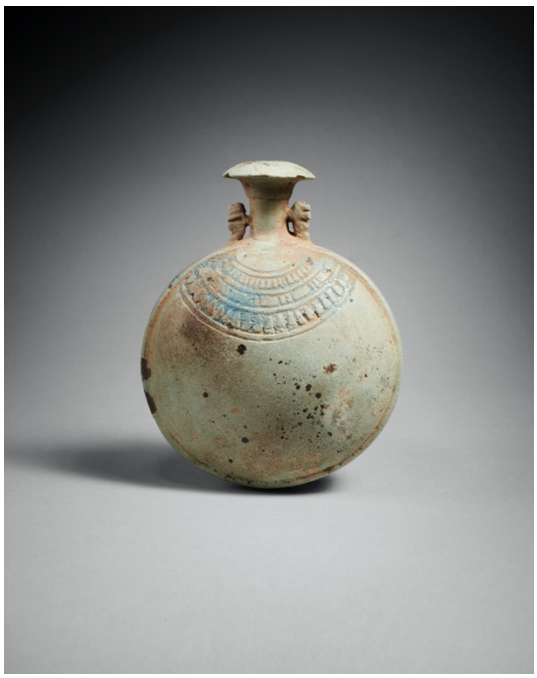

Fig.5. Anepigraphic New Year's flask.
FGA-ARCH-EG-0087.
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Photograph : Thierry Ollivier

**Clouds - and a powerful enemy - on the horizon**

A detail still to be noted on this New Year's flask allows it to be included in a relatively rare category. Some hieroglyphic signs are inscribed in an oval topped with two ostrich feathers, in the centre of one of the lenticular sides:

Khenemibrâ, *the one whose spirit joins Ra*
or the coronation name of Ahmose II

Let us put this in the context of the reign of this pharaoh. Although Egypt was still an independent and powerful country during the reign of Ahmose II, the penultimate pharaoh of the 26th dynasty, it was no longer as isolated as it had been in the past. The natural barriers provided by the Libyan desert in the west and the Arabian desert in the east, had long protected the country from foreign invasions. Only two peoples had previously managed to conquer and rule all or part of the country. Long after the success of the Hyksos, a people originally from the Levant who ruled the north around 1650–1550 BC,[7] the Nubians invaded Egypt from the south around 744 BC. They managed to control a huge territory, but as they ventured into the Near East, they came up against another powerful empire that was to play a decisive role in Egypt: Assyria, based in Mesopotamia, whose kings Sargon II and Sennacherib stopped the Egyptian-Nubian advance, before Assubanipal, who counter-attacked, invaded Egypt, and pushed the Nubians back to their homeland (664–663 BC) after a succession of failures and victories.

The country of the pharaohs presented major economic and strategic assets, and although the Assyrians did not remain in the country, they nevertheless established a vassal power in the person of King Psammetic I, who came from Saïs in the Nile Delta and whose father Nekaou had sided with the Assyrians against the Nubians. Psammetic enjoyed a particularly long reign, which allowed him to benefit from the weakening of the Assyrian empire following the death of Assubanipal in 627 BC. He reunified Egypt and freed himself from external power, and was thus considered the first king of the 26th dynasty, which thus marked the return to strong indigenous power. But unlike the New Kingdom in the previous millennium, this time it was not to last.

[7] MARGUERON et PFIRSCH, *Le Proche-Orient et l'Égypte antiques,* p. 208–9.

Although Ahmose belongs to this 26th dynasty, he is not a descendant of Psammetic. Indeed, the grandson of the latter, Wahibrâ (also known as Apriès) led a military campaign in Libya which ended in disaster for the Egyptian forces. A civil war ensued which, despite a request for help addressed to the Babylonians by the king, saw Wahibrâ dethroned in favour of one of his generals, the future Pharaoh Ahmose II. Aware that Egypt was no longer as powerful as in the past and conscious of the danger that the Persian Empire – a new and growing force in the East – posed, Ahmose concluded an alliance with the Greek city states, who enjoyed favourable trade relations, particularly in the city of Naukratis in the Nile Delta.

Ahmose ruled for more than forty years and we cannot determine for which New Year's Day exactly the gourd bearing his name was made. This day was probably seeen more as marking the renewal of a perpetual natural cycle than as a linear progression from the past to the future, and perhaps Ahmose still dreamed of being the founder of a great dynasty of kings who would rule a powerful empire as it had once been, rightful return to the established divine order. But this was not to be: fortunately for him - so to speak - he died only a few months before the inevitable invasion of the Persian armies of Cambyse. Psammetic III (fig. 6), son of Ahmose, tried in vain to resist. He surrendered to the Persians at Memphis after a very brief reign, and his desire to regain power ultimately led to his execution.[8]

Fig. 6. Head of Psammetic III. Musée du Louvre, inv. E10706 © Musée du Louvre Dist. RMN-Grand Palais. Photograph: George Poncet

Egypt never regained its former glory; it lived under the yoke of the Persians for more than a century, and although there were still a few Egyptian kings, the return of the Persians and the invasion of Alexander the Great put a definitive end to it. However, this did not mean the end of the Egyptian civilisation, nor of its culture. The temples dedicated to the ancestral gods remained active, new ones were erected, both by the Macedonian kings who ruled the country after Alexander's death, and during the Roman domination. The last known hieroglyphic text was engraved more than nine centuries after the death of Ahmose II.

Dr Xavier Droux

Curator of the Archaeology collection

Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, January 2021.

[8] For an overview of this period, see MARGUERON & PFIRSCH, *Le Proche-Orient et l'Égypte antiques*, p. 369–79; DODSON & HILTON, *The complete royal families*, p. 242–81.

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**Exhibition :**

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