

The Mystery Dish: Food for Thought

Among the many ceramics housed in the pottery gallery resides a seemingly innocent decorated pottery dish (UC16777), which was excavated by Petrie in 1890 at the Lower Egypt site of Lahun. At the time Petrie suggested that this dish, along with many others of a similar nature, were used as general domestic serving dishes. However, since then, many others have suggested that this type of dish was actually used as a bread mould or even a fish-scaling dish.

It is difficult to define the function of the dish, but we can attempt to find out using a range of different sources of evidence, such as artistic representation of their use, as well as the archaeological evidence.

There are two sides to the argument here: the dish may have been a bread mould, or it could have been a fish-scaling dish. Let us examine the evidence for these processes.

Bread in ancient Egypt

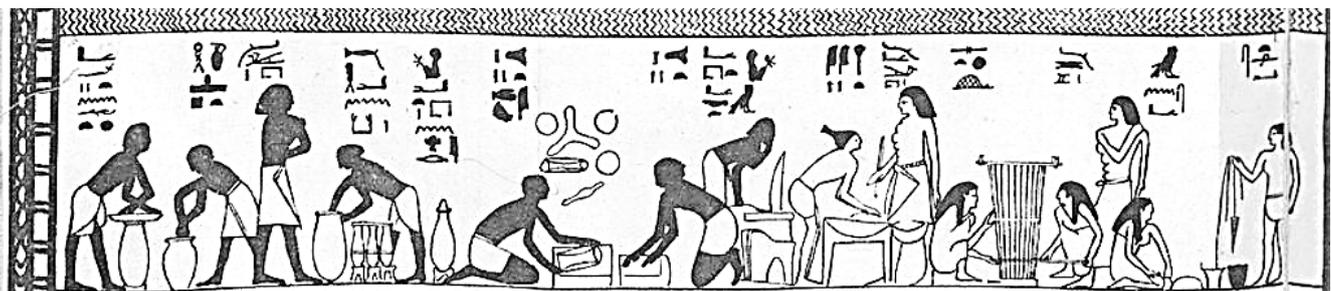
Bread, along with beer, formed a staple part of the average ancient Egyptian's diet. Made from two major cereals that were cultivated in ancient Egypt (emmer wheat and barley), bread was made using flour ground on grinding stones (querns) which was mixed with water, then kneaded and left to rise. The dough could then either be shaped by hand into a loaf and baked or baked using a ceramic mould. Sometimes spices and fruits were added to the dough to create a variety of flavoured bread loaves. On occasion, loaves were decorated, either by pressing a design into them; sometimes they were even shaped into animals for special events such as festivals, or perhaps funerary services. One possible reason for the presence of incised decoration of dishes such as UC16777 is so that the design would be transferred to the loaf. For everyday purposes however, it is probable that loaves would have been kept plain.

Bread production and baking features in many tomb scenes throughout Egypt, as well as wooden models of daily life that would have been included as part of a grave good assemblage for the deceased. In particular, scenes from the tombs of Djehutihotep and Khnumhotep II (both 12th Dynasty) at Beni Hasan, and the tomb of Ti at Saqqara (5th Dynasty), are well known for featuring wall scenes depicting everyday life, including baking and bread production.



UC16777 The "Mystery Dish"
Lahun, 12th Dynasty
Middle Kingdom (ca. 1985-1773 BC)

The dish features incised decoration around its interior rim, depicting tree-like designs, with a linear geometric pattern on its interior base.



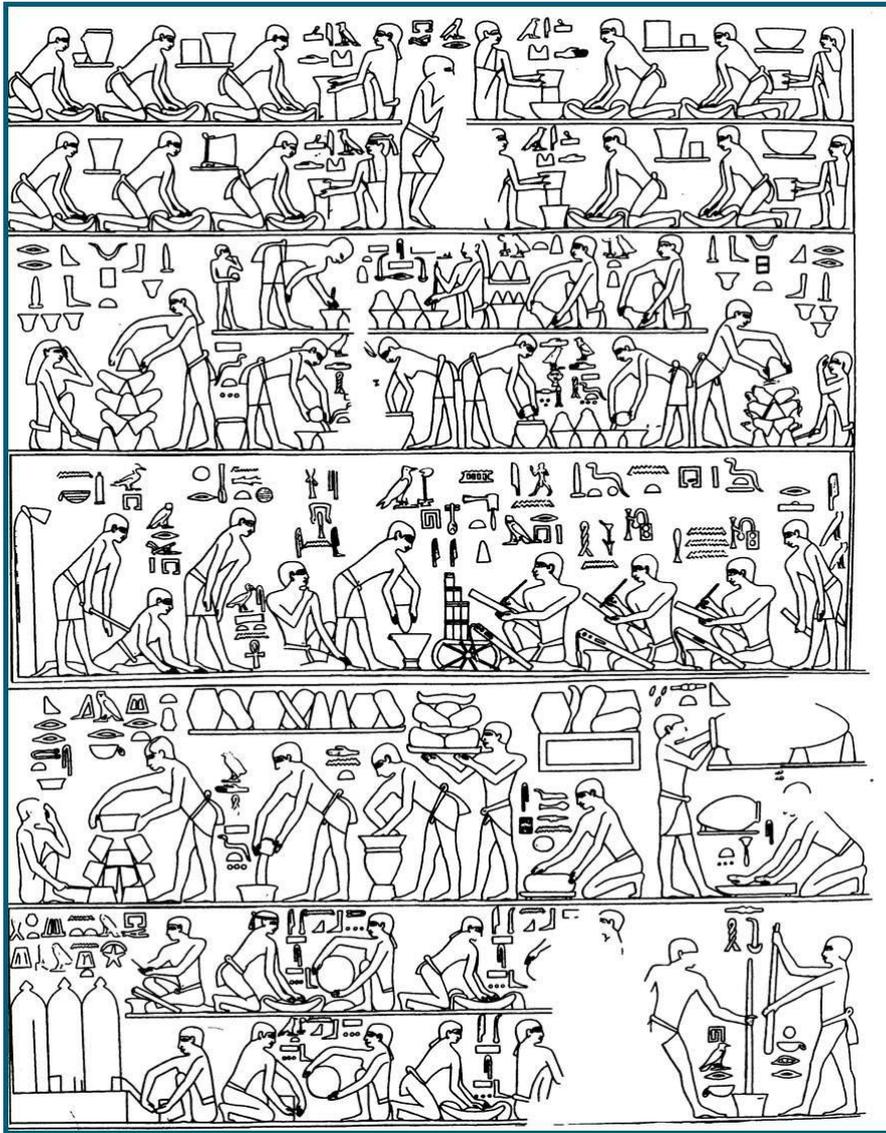
Scene from the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan, depicting different shaped bread loaves, including the most common shape of loaf, the 'cone'. The very last individual of the right hand side is lifting the conical bread loaf out of its mould. Archaeological examples of conical bread mould are well documented, there are even some in the Petrie Museum!



Petrie Museum UC7596
Lower part of red-ware pottery breadmould, containing fragments of string.

Lahun, Late Middle Kingdom.

The hieroglyph sign for "to give" (*di*), (far left) represents the conical bread loaf that was produced from moulds like this one.



Scene from the tomb of Djehutihotep at Beni Hasan, showing a stack of bread loaves, again featuring conical-shaped loaves.

Scene from the tomb of Ti at Saqqara showing bread production, including the use of many different shaped bread moulds, such as cones and dishes.

The scene from the tomb of Ti is particularly useful in this instance, because it shows the variety of shapes for bread moulds, including a dish-shape not dissimilar to our mystery dish. Evidence such as this seems to suggest that the dish may well have been a bread mould. But, there is another side to the mystery which must also be considered.

Could the dish have been used for fish-scaling?

The other theory for the function of UC16777 is that it was used as a dish in which fish were de-scaled. These theories have been suggested due to finds such as the so-called “Fish-Dish” from Lahun (see below), and others of a similar design which feature incised decorative motifs of fish and plants.

However, there is no actual traceable origin of the term “fish-scaling dish”, at least not in academic literature, nor in ancient Egyptian sources – it is unclear as to whether fish were scaled at all in ancient Egypt, as the majority of preserved specimens all retain their scales, and artistic representation of fish never show vessels like this one being used in association! Furthermore, the sides of the dish itself would be likely to hinder the movement necessary when removing the scales, rendering the dish functionally useless.



“Fish-Dish”

Excavated by Petrie at Lahun, but now currently housed in the Manchester Museum, the dish features a large fish design, with plants around the interior rim.



Petrie Museum UC18748

Lahun, Middle Kingdom.

Similar in style and design to our mystery dish, it has been suggested that this dish was used as a fish-scaling dish.

Archaeological attestations of “fish-dishes” are only really typical of the Middle Kingdom, the 12th Dynasty in particular. Yet, fish was a part of the average diet for the duration of Egyptian history (and indeed today in modern Egypt). There is also nothing to suggest that these dishes were actually used, as they do not show any signs of functional wear. So, if they were not used for fish-scaling, what were they used for?

The plot thickens

It seems as though this mystery dish is reluctant to share with us its true function and use-context within ancient Egyptian society. Unfortunately for us, Petrie was not so vigilant in recording the exact location and context of each incised dish from the Lahun excavations, so it is even more difficult to imagine the role of dishes such as this one in everyday life. But, given that it shows no signs of use-wear, and the impracticalities of its shape for activities such as fish-scaling, it is not unreasonable to concede with Petrie’s original proposition that the dish was in fact simply used to serve food, rather than for food preparation or cooking. There are further questions that can be asked of its role in either the domestic or religious (or ritual) spheres, and what each dish meant to the people using them. Many were probably of a standard shape, with plain or no decoration. Some though, may have been produced for special uses, with special or elaborate decoration, which held significant meaning for the people using them, increasing the value of that dish to its owner. It is questions such as these which pottery such as that of the Petrie Museum can help to answer, bringing us closer to the people behind these objects.

It may be possible, one day, to finally solve this mystery, but for now its interpretation is entirely in the mind of the beholder. What do you think? Consider the sorts of dishes and moulds you might use in your own home, what you use them for, and what they mean to you.

References

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