

Golden Mummies of Egypt

Audio guide

5. Meroitic pottery vessel

00:00:00 Dr Campbell Price

This round pottery vessel has a diameter of 28.5 centimetres. It is made from red pottery and has a lipped opening at the top. It is decorated with horizontal black bands between which is a freeze of lotus flower motifs which encircles the vessel.

00:00:22 Greg Jenner

OK, so this is a lovely thing. I like how round it is. It looks very, I don't know, I feel like I just want to hold it.

00:00:27 Campbell

Very tactile.

00:00:28 Greg

Yeah, it just looks like you could sort of nestle it in your arms and just gently carry it around. So, where's it from? Because it doesn't look very Egyptian to me. So, I'm not, the lotus is, I think lotus is an Egyptian plant, but it doesn't feel like the sort of thing I've seen in Egyptian galleries and museums before. So, is it Egyptian?

00:00:52 Campbell

So, it technically is Sudanese because it comes from a site to the South of Egypt in what is now modern Sudan. And it's part of a whole series of quite distinctively decorated vessels which do borrow pictures, images, motifs, you might call them, from Egyptian art. So, as you say, the lotus flower, this water lily essentially, is quite common in the art of the time of the pharaohs. But this we know quite precisely comes from the Meroitic empire. So, Meroë is a very important town, or city, in ancient Sudan. It's to the north of the modern capital of Sudan, Khartoum. And it was kind of a neighbouring empire to the Ptolemies in Egypt, and eventually to the Roman Empire. The Romans never conquered the Meroitic empire, but they did trade with them. So, I wonder whether this is an object which could have held stuff that was traded.

00:02:04 Greg

Yeah. I mean, presumably, what are you going to put in something like this? Wine? Oil? Seeds? I mean, the little lid at the top, it's not that wide, is it? You can't cram in big objects. It's gonna have to be liquid, probably?

00:02:18 Campbell

Yeah. And I think the fact that, the lid is quite small, so if you imagine, yeah, you put something in and you don't want the thing to splash out, maybe? You would seal the lid with some kind of covering, maybe leather, maybe fabric, maybe linen. Yeah, animal skin is possible, and then you'd bind it with a kind of rope or a cord to keep it closed. Because, you know, in the ancient world there was no plastic, there's no Tupperware. So, if you want to send stuff a long distance, you're going to have to use pottery.

00:02:56 Greg

Yeah, so Meroë, you know, I don't think I've heard of that much. Sudan did have an empire that briefly ruled Egypt, though, didn't it? The Nubians?

00:03:07 Campbell

It did. What Egyptologists call the 25th Dynasty, who for about a century, between like 600, well 700 and 600 BC, rule Egypt and Sudan as a united kingdom. But at this time, again, we're talking last couple of centuries BC, first couple of centuries AD, the Meroitic empire is pretty vast and pretty important, and one of their main commodities, and I visited, Greg, actually went to visit the site where these things are being excavated in Meroë, one of the big commodities was iron. So, if you imagine the Iron Age, named after like a major technological, metallurgical innovation and the use of iron metal, a lot of that was centred in Meroë. So, that meant there was a lot of wealth coming in. And I think, although fewer people have heard of the Meroitic empire, it was very important. They built more pyramids than in Egypt, so there is a pub quiz question answer. Which country in the world has more pyramids than Egypt? It is Sudan. And, so this is the kind of material evidence of the trade networks, because these distinctively decorated pots have been found in Egypt and other parts of the Mediterranean.

00:04:36 Greg

Their pyramids aren't as big as the Great Pyramid, though, are they? We're talking mini pyramids?

00:04:41 Campbell

Yeah, they're relatively small, and they're quite steep compared to those famous ones at Giza.

00:04:46 Greg

OK, ok, because you know the Egyptian pyramids, there's like 100 aren't there in Egypt?

00:04:50 Campbell

Yeah.

00:04:51 Greg

In Sudan we're talking, or in Meroë, we're talking more, but small?

00:04:56 Campbell

Maybe around 200, but yes, smaller and steeper for kings and queens of the Meroitic empire.

00:05:03 Greg

So, there's this big trade network happening. These two civilizations, these two empires have been side by side for a long time, but Meroë is later than Nubia, the 25th Dynasty. And then the Romans show up and they're trading. There's a lot of change happening in the world, isn't there? There's a lot of names and empire shifts and new dynasties and new kings, new rules, new... And then new technologies; iron coming along, which obviously gives you stronger swords, stronger tools for farming, better armour for going into battle. The Iron Age is a big step on from the Bronze Age because, you know, your sword is going to do more damage. So, that's really interesting, actually, that North Africa is place where innovation is happening.

00:05:44 Campbell

Yeah. I think really, in some ways, Meroë itself at some point becomes a little bit of a frontier to the Roman Empire itself. So, if we think of, so, Cleopatra pops her clogs 30 BC. Along comes Octavian, who becomes the emperor Augustus. He has a statue, a really beautiful metal statue, set up in the South of Egypt. And it gets attacked. It gets pushed over. And what happens to the head, perhaps ceremonially and highly symbolically, it is decapitated. The head is taken off and then it's buried at Meroë under a staircase. So, whenever you walk on the staircase, what are you doing? You're trampling the emperor Augustus. So, I really wonder if there was a flashpoint, maybe a military flashpoint around the area of Meroë, or a bit to the north towards the Egyptian border, where the people of the Meroitic empire did not like the Romans.

00:06:53 Greg

Yeah, there's, you know, you can have a minor squabble, but cutting someone's head off and then stamping on it, that's...

00:06:59 Campbell

That's just petty.

00:07:01 Greg

Yeah, not a fan, not a fan. OK, so this little gentle, simple pot actually opens us up to a much bigger political arm wrestle between the mighty Roman Empire, the Egyptian world that's been conquered, and then this new empire that we haven't heard so much about, but actually is also pretty important, the Meroitic?

00:07:27 Campbell

Meroitic, I would say, yeah, Meroitic.

00:07:30 Greg

Meroitic, alright. Cool. Alright, well, that's, that's fascinating. I mean, I'm looking at it, wondering did people wee in it? Was it...

00:07:37 Campbell

You would, Greg!

00:07:40 Greg

I'm just looking thinking is it a potty? I don't think it's a potty. I think you're right. I think it's for transporting wine or milk or oil or something tasty. Hopefully.

00:07:50 Campbell

Greg, I know you are, yeah, toilet obsessed. But yes, I think not used as a loo.

00:07:55 Greg

All right, all right. Sorry.