Mold-made ceramic *askoi* in Roman Egypt: a new perspective on a group preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum



Abstract: This study examines a distinctive group of five mold-made ceramic vessels of the *askos* type preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum. It aims to identify their material, technical, and iconographic characteristics, as well as to determine their potential production centers and chronological framework through a descriptive, analytical, and comparative approach, drawing on parallels from Egypt and beyond. The results demonstrate that these vessels represent a clear case of skeuomorphism, whereby local Egyptian potters sought to imitate luxury metal prototypes (bronze and silver) in terms of casting details, applied relief decoration, and twisted handles. The study further reveals that the *askos* was not merely a utilitarian container but a multifunctional object: it was used in daily life for pouring liquids, in medical contexts as a body warmer, in ritual practices —particularly female purification rites in the Fayoum— and in funerary contexts, where it played a role in symbolic libation rituals intended to facilitate the soul's journey. On the symbolic level, the study analyzes the decorative iconography, which combines athletic scenes (such as weightlifters), Dionysiac elements (including ivy leaves and maenad masks), and the duality of Eros and Psyche. These motifs reflect concepts of fertility, transcendence over death, and spiritual liberation. The study concludes that this group dates to the early Roman period (from the late 1st century BCE to the 1st century CE) and represents the output of local workshops in the Fayoum, Memphis, and the Delta, reflecting an interaction between Mediterranean techniques and Egyptian social and ritual needs. As such, these vessels constitute a form of "hybrid material culture" expressing the aspirations and worldview of society in Roman Egypt.

Keywords: *askos*, Roman Egypt, mold-made ceramics, Grand Egyptian Museum, ritual purification, iconography, metal imitation

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INTRODUCTION

Ceramic material constitutes one of the most informative categories of archaeological evidence for reconstructing technological traditions, economic activities, and cultural interaction in the ancient Mediterranean. Among ceramic forms, mold-made *askoi* (ἀσκοί) occupy a distinctive position because they combine sophisticated manufacturing techniques, elaborate relief decoration, and diverse domestic, ritual, and funerary functions. Although numerous examples have been recovered from Roman Egypt, these vessels have generally been treated as isolated museum objects rather than as a coherent archaeological group.

The present study re-examines five mold-made ceramic *askoi* preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum within their broader archaeological context. Through an integrated typological, technological, iconographic, and comparative analysis, it seeks to define their diagnostic characteristics, refine their chronology, explore their possible production centers, and reassess their functional significance within Roman Egyptian society. By doing so, it aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the development of mold-made ceramics and their relationship to local religious and domestic practices during the Roman period.

Previous scholarship has documented several of the vessels examined in the present study. Three examples from the primary corpus [see below, ***Figs 1, 3, 4***] and two comparative specimens [see below, ***Figs 6, 8***] were first published by C. C. Edgar (1911: 53–56, Nos 26275–26279, 32381) in the *Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire* and were subsequently re-examined by Shahira Abdel Hamid Hashem in her doctoral dissertation on relief-decorated ceramic vessels of the Greek and Roman periods (Hashem 2011: 69–172, Figs 43–46). While these studies made an important contribution by documenting and publishing the material, their treatment remained primarily descriptive. Neither author recognized these vessels as a coherent typological group characterized by shared

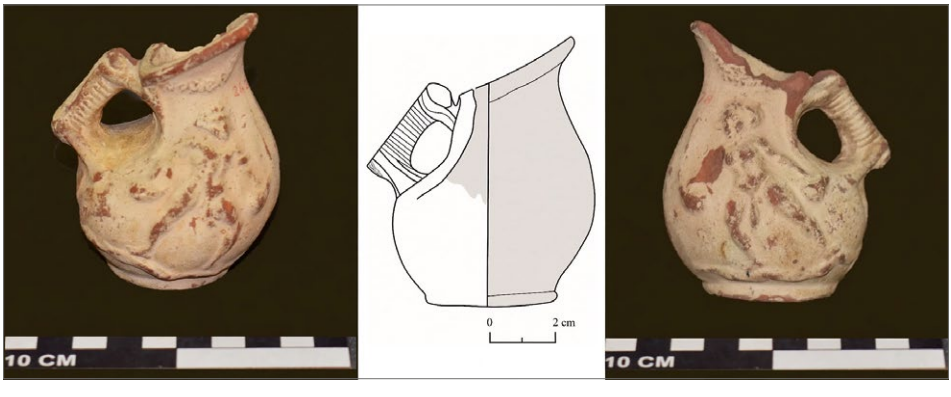

Fig. 1. Ceramic *askos*, findspot unknown, preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum, Inv. No. 10533 (Photo and drawing Y. Mahmoud)

morphological and iconographic features, nor did they propose a secure chronological framework or investigate their functional and ritual significance. These shortcomings leave significant questions regarding the classification, dating, and interpretation of this vessel type, which the present study addresses through an integrated typological, chronological, and functional analysis.

In modern archaeological scholarship, the term "*askos*/ἀσκός" (plural: *askoi*/ἀσκοί) refers to a class of ceramic vessels characterized by a lateral spout and a horizontal or slightly inclined axis. This is a modern analytical designation, while the original ancient terminology remains uncertain. The word derives from the Greek term for "wineskin", reflecting the vessel's morphological resemblance to animal skins —particularly those of goats— traditionally used for storing and transporting liquids. This association is further reinforced by the frequent tendency of early potters to emulate zoomorphic and avian forms (Mayer 1907: 210–211; Beazley 1921: 325–326). In its standard form, the *askos* is a low, rounded vessel with a convex upper surface, flat base, lateral spout, and handle. Variants include elongated or cylindrical bodies, as well as mold-made examples rendered in fully plastic and often zoomorphic forms (Smith 1896: 17–18; Beazley 1921: 325–326; Clark, Elston, and Hart 2002: 70).

Askoi were produced using both wheel-throwing and mold-making techniques. Wheel-made examples were commonly constructed in multiple parts: a lower section formed upright, an upper section shaped in reverse, and a separately made spout attached later. Mold-made vessels, by contrast, were typically produced in two halves pressed into molds, then joined with slip and carefully finished. This technique often explains the presence of fingerprints on internal surfaces and occasional visible seams, particularly at joints such as handle attachments (Schreiber 1999: 93–94). In some cases, spouts were independently wheel-made and subsequently attached to mold-made bodies.



Fig. 2. Ceramic *askos*, discovered in the Fayoum, preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum, Inv. No. 10036 (Photo Y. Mahmoud)

The functions of *askoi* were diverse, encompassing utilitarian, ritual, and funerary contexts. In domestic use, they were associated with the storage and pouring of liquids, including water, wine, and oils. Their design facilitated controlled pouring, and, in some cases, buoyant or weight-balanced forms allowed for automatic filling when submerged in wells or cisterns (Mayer 1907: 209). Hesychius of Alexandria further notes a conceptual association between the *askos* and the hydria, reinforcing its domestic water-related function (Hesychius, *Lexicon*, 242, ἀσκός).

Metal and ceramic *askoi*, particularly those made of bronze and silver, were also used in sympotic contexts for wine storage and serving (Mayer 1907: 10). Some examples bear inscriptions identifying them explicitly as drinking vessels, while ceramic forms often imitate metal prototypes, supporting the hypothesis that they derived from luxury containers or leather wineskins (Rotroff 2006: 80–81). Smaller vessels, such as the "Agatharchos *askos*", likely served to dispense concentrated liquids in limited quantities (Sideris 2022: 98). Additional domestic uses may have included oils for athletic and therapeutic applications (Mayer 1907: 209–210).

In ritual contexts, *askoi* played an important role in purification practices and mystery cults. In Roman Egypt, particularly in the Fayoum, they were employed for pouring lustral water within secluded domestic ritual spaces, including rooms situated beneath staircases, where they were associated with female purification rites preceding festivals such as the Thesmophoria (Ibrahim 2021: 652–653). They also served as votive offerings in sanctuaries and participated in Dionysiac libations, as reflected in decorative programs featuring theatrical masks, ivy, and other Dionysiac motifs (Sevilla-Sadeh 2021: 297).

Askoi were equally significant in funerary contexts, where they occur more frequently in burials than in domestic assemblages (Sideris 2022: 98). They were deposited in graves to provide water, wine, or funerary oils for the deceased (Mayer 1907: 210; Sideris 2022: 98), while their iconography —particularly representations of Eros and Psyche— evoked concepts of death, rebirth, and the immortality of the soul, themes that may also reflect Orphic and Dionysiac-Bacchic beliefs in salvation (Bremmer 2013: 46; Sevilla-Sadeh 2021: 294).

Beyond ritual and funerary use, *askoi* also appear in public bathing contexts, where attendants employed them to pour water in steam rooms, as illustrated by the mosaics of the House of Menander (Ibrahim 2021: 650). At the same time, they developed into objects of social display, evolving from simple zoomorphic forms into refined Attic types whose mythological and athletic decoration communicated elite identity and cultural values (Beazley 1921: 326, 331; Bettini 2005: 202).

Accordingly, the *askos* should be understood as a multifunctional vessel in which practical utility, ritual performance, and symbolic expression converged. Building upon this perspective, the present study examines a group of early Roman mold-made *askoi* preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum as products of ceramic skeuomorphism, through which Egyptian potters adapted prestigious bronze and silver prototypes

while preserving their formal, decorative, and iconographic complexity. Their Dionysiac, athletic, and funerary imagery (Sideris 2022: 91) further illustrates the interaction between Mediterranean technological traditions and local Egyptian ritual practices, revealing a hybrid material culture that articulated both social aspiration and concepts of rebirth and immortality (Bettini 2005: 202).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive–analytical and comparative approach to the examination of mold-made *askoi* preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum. It integrates direct examination, technical and artistic analysis, and comparative evaluation of parallel material. The research is based on firsthand inspection of the vessels in storage, allowing for detailed documentation of their physical and technical characteristics, including clay fabric, traces of molding, joint lines, and methods of attachment of applied elements, as well as an assessment of their state of preservation.

In addition, a formal and stylistic analysis examines shape, structural components, and decorative schemes in light of prevailing artistic conventions of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Iconographic analysis is also employed to interpret the depicted scenes and relate them to their symbolic contexts, particularly those associated with Dionysiac imagery. Comparative analysis is central to establishing chronology and possible centers of production through systematic comparison with analogous examples from within Egypt and beyond, including metal vessels. This approach further highlights the phenomenon of ceramic imitation of metal prototypes.

The present analysis is subject to several methodological limitations that should be acknowledged. Most of the examined vessels lack secure archaeological contexts, and their provenances are known only through museum documentation. Consequently, chronological assessment relies primarily on typological comparison, manufacturing technology, and stylistic parallels rather than stratigraphic evidence. Likewise, archaeometric techniques, including petrographic analysis, X-ray fluorescence (XRF), and residue analysis, were beyond the scope of the present study because destructive sampling was not permitted. Accordingly, the interpretations proposed here should be regarded as evidence-based archaeological hypotheses derived from the combined evaluation of typological, contextual, and iconographic data rather than as definitive conclusions.

DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

The five vessels preserved in the Grand Egyptian [***Table 1***] exhibit a high degree of homogeneity in manufacturing technique, as confirmed through direct examination of the objects in the museum storerooms. This close examination has enabled the identification of raw materials, forming techniques, and decorative

patterns, as well as the partial reconstruction of the overall structural characteristics of certain examples. To avoid redundancy in the descriptions, a general presentation of shared features has been adopted, supplemented with two tables [*Tables 2* and *3*]: one concerning fabric and surface treatment, and the other providing detailed measurements.

Data from the Grand Egyptian Museum database and the records of the Egyptian Museum indicate a lack of conclusive information regarding the exact findspots of these vessels. Nevertheless, the documentation suggests that two examples were discovered at Mit Rahina, one in the Fayoum, while the provenance of the remaining two remains unknown. *Table 1* presents the current accession numbers at the Grand Egyptian Museum alongside their former registration numbers in Cairo, as well as the available provenance data.

Table 1. Museum registration numbers and provenance

Fig.	GEM No.	SR No.	JE No.	CG No.	Findspot
1	10533	5-1586	–	26278	Unknown
2	10036	5-1613	42289	–	Fayoum
3	10542	5-1607	–	32381	Mit Rahina
4	10151	5-1585	–	26277	Unknown
5	10227	5-1616	45412	–	Mit Rahina

Table 2. Measurements (cm)

Fig.	GEM No.	Height	Length	Width
1	10533	8.4	7.5	6.7
2	10036	8.5	7.8	6.9
3	10542	8.5	8.6	4.7
4	10151	8.6	8.0	7.7
5	10227	9.2	6.8	3.9

The vessels measure 8.4–9.2 cm in height, 3.9–7.7 cm in width, and 6.8–8.6 cm in length [*Table 2*].

Regarding raw materials, two of the vessels were manufactured from Nile silt clay, whereas the remaining two, Nos 10542 and 10151 [see below, *Figs 3, 4*], were made from marl clay. The exterior surfaces of four examples are covered with slip coatings ranging in color from very pale brown to reddish yellow, pale yellow, and red, while one specimen lacks any surface coating [see *Fig. 4; Table 3*].

Technically, the vessels were produced using two-part molds consisting of nearly symmetrical halves, as evidenced by longitudinal joint lines on both the front and back surfaces, as well as clear fingerprints on the interior. Handles were manufactured separately and decorated in relief to imitate twisted metal wires around a central core before being attached at the upper interior rim and shoulder; visible traces of joining are present at all points of attachment. The bases are flat, separately formed, and subsequently fixed to the body during the leather-hard stage.

Table 3. Fabric and surface treatment

Fig.	GEM No.	Clay	Slip
1	10533	NB2[1]	Very pale brown (10YR 7/3)
2	10036	NB2	Reddish yellow (5YR 6/6)
3	10542	Marl	Pale yellow (2.5Y 7/3)
4	10151	Marl	Pale yellow (2.5Y 7/3)
5	10227	NB1[2]	Red (10R 4/5)

Decoratively, the vessels generally feature symmetrical relief ornamentation on both sides of the body; however, this is not a fixed rule, as some examples display differing decorative schemes on each side [see *Fig. 4*].

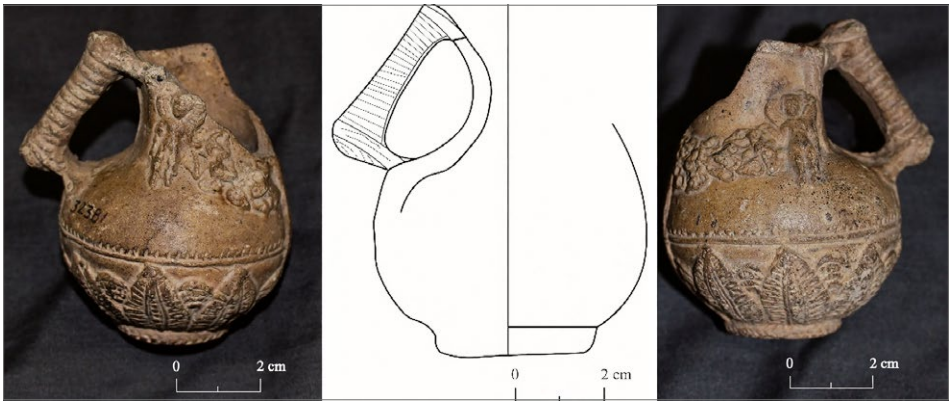

Fig. 3. Ceramic *askos*, discovered at Mit Rahina, preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum, Inv. No. 10542 (Photo and drawing Y. Mahmoud)

1 Clay fabric "Nile B2" represents the most widespread and enduring category within the Vienna System for the classification of ancient Egyptian ceramics. It is an alluvial clay fabric characterized by its adaptability across different regions and chronological periods, reflecting its suitability for a wide range of production needs. The diagnostic feature of this fabric lies in its groundmass, which is compositionally similar to that of Nile B1, yet distinguished by the presence of larger and more abundant mineral and organic inclusions, resulting in a comparatively coarser texture. Microscopic analysis reveals a high proportion of fine sand, accompanied by clearly visible grains of medium sand, as well as occasional inclusions of limestone and freshwater mussel shell. These components are geologically associated with the Gezira deposits of the Nile Delta, indicating a natural origin rather than intentional addition (Arnold and Bourriau 1993: 171–172).

2 Clay fabric "Nile B1", methodologically classified as NB1 within the Vienna System, represents one of the most distinctive categories in the study of the technological development of alluvial ceramics in ancient Egypt. Its diagnostic feature lies in the presence of abundant fine sand, accompanied by scattered grains of medium and coarse sand. The defining characteristic, however, is the notable inclusion of fine straw particles measuring less than 2 mm in size. Following firing, these organic inclusions appear as small, elongated voids or as whitish silica pseudomorphs resulting from the combustion of vegetal matter. This produces a distinctive fracture surface characterized by a visual balance between the temper and the clay groundmass, offering a key criterion for fabric identification (Arnold and Bourriau 1993: 171).

The *askoi* in the Grand Egyptian Museum collection display a variety of decorative programs that can be broadly divided into two main categories: figural and vegetal motifs, which frequently appear in combination on the same vessel [*Figs 1–3*]. However, two examples are decorated exclusively with vegetal elements [*Figs 4, 5*].

Two vessels [see *Figs 1, 2*] share closely related decorative schemes. The neck of each is adorned with garlands hanging symmetrically on both sides. On both faces of the body, a nude youth is depicted frontally, with his legs apart and his left knee bent, holding halteres in both hands, while an additional ring appears on the upper part of the left arm.



Fig. 4. Ceramic *askos*, preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum, Inv. No. 10151 (Left: photo by the Documentation Department of the Grand Egyptian Museum; right: photo reproduced from the *Catalogue général*)

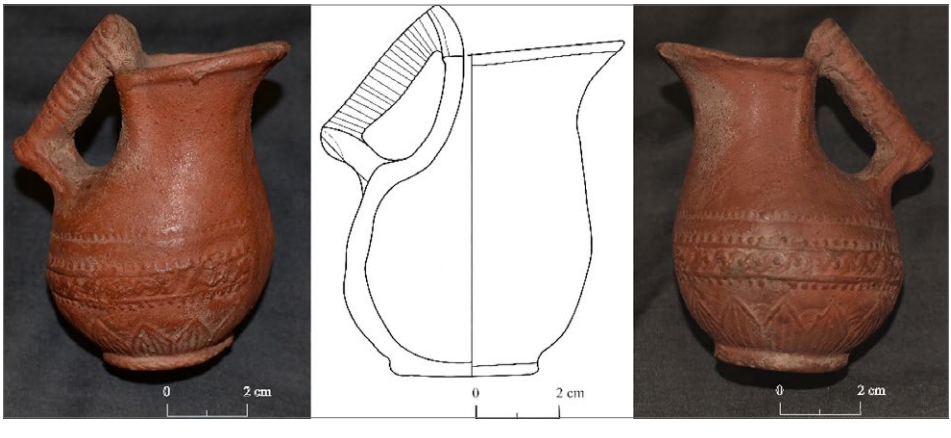

Fig. 5. Ceramic *askos*, discovered at Mit Rahina, preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum, Inv. No. 10227 (Photo and drawing Y. Mahmoud)

A wavy band runs beneath the feet, while the lower part of the vessel is decorated with a prominent leaf motif.

Despite their close similarity, differences in craftsmanship are evident. Both vessels are nearly identical in size, with *Fig. 2* exceeding *Fig. 1* by only 1–3 mm, suggesting the use of different molds based on the same prototype. Vessel No. 10533 [see *Fig. 1*] is covered with a pale brown slip extending over the exterior and upper interior surface, suggesting a higher level of technical execution. By contrast, Vessel No. 10036 [see *Fig. 2*] lacks a surface coating and has a rougher exterior, indicating manufacture by a less skilled craftsman. Given that Vessel No. 10036 was discovered in the Fayoum [see *Fig. 2*] and its close similarity to the unprovenanced vessel [see *Fig. 1*], the latter likely also originated from the same region.

Vegetal decoration predominates on *askos* No. 10542 [see *Fig. 3*], discovered at Mit Rahina. Its neck is decorated with two Eros figures holding the ends of a large wreath. A narrow raised band encircles the mid-body, containing a row of small denticulated impressions resembling marks produced by a pointed metal tool. Large leaves rise from the base on both sides of the lower body, separated by small arches filling the intervening spaces. The vessel's mouth is completely missing.

Similar motifs, with variations, appear on *askos* No. 10151 [see *Fig. 4*], where a single Eros is depicted on one side only, shown frontally, winged and nude, and holding a wreath. Below the shoulder, a rope-like band with dotted decoration encircles the body, bordered above and below by rows of dots. The lower body repeats the vegetal scheme seen in *Fig. 3*. The vessel, made of marl clay, it is currently fragmentary, with a broken mouth, cracks at both ends of the handle, and surface discoloration due to aging.

Finally, *askos* No. 10227 [see *Fig. 5*] represents a purely vegetal decorative scheme. Its ornamentation closely parallels that of *Fig. 4*, but without any representation of Eros on either side. The vessel is made of Nile clay, coated with a glossy red slip, and is generally well preserved.

COMPARATIVE STUDY

The author has identified a number of comparable examples of ceramic *askoi*, both produced in Egypt and imported from external production centers. These parallels are examined below.

CERAMIC *ASKOI* FROM EGYPT

Since the five vessels under study originally belonged to the collection of the Egyptian Museum, the museum records and the *General Catalogue* were consulted. These sources revealed that the original group included three additional *askoi* of the same type, registered under Inv. Nos CG 26275, CG 26276, and CG 26279. Comparable specimens have also been identified in other collections, both within Egypt and abroad, including examples held by the Alexandria National Museum

and the Australian National University Classics Museum (ANU Classics Museum, Acq. No. 1984.03) A further specimen (Perdrizet 1921: 88, Pl. LXV, Fig. 219) from the Fouquet Collection[3] is attributed to Kom Firin,[4] while other parallels have been identified in the Fayoum, Sheikh Abada, and the Sohag National Museum.

Askoi in the Egyptian Museum (Cairo)

1 – *Askos* CG 26275 [*Fig. 6*]

This vessel measures approximately 10 cm in height and is decorated on both sides with a rich figural composition. The scene depicts a winged, nude Eros moving to the right and holding a vessel into which he pours from a small *askos*. Opposite him is Psyche, kneeling on one knee, with butterfly wings and wearing a chiton fastened by a belt above the folds of the garment. This decorative scheme represents a clear example of figural ornamentation associated with Dionysiac and mythological themes (Edgar 1911: 53–54).

2 – *Askos* CG 26276 [*Fig. 7*]

With a height of 8.5 cm, this vessel



Fig. 6. *Askos* No. 26275, Egyptian Museum, Cairo collection



Fig. 7. *Askos* No. 26276, Egyptian Museum, Cairo collection

3 Daniel Marie Fouquet (1850–1914), a French physician and scholar based in Cairo, was one of the prominent collectors of antiquities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He owned an important collection of Egyptian and Graeco-Roman artifacts, including ceramics, bronzes, and Coptic objects. His collection was later dispersed through a public auction held in Paris in 1922 and is considered an important source for several objects now held in museum collections (Perdrizet 1921: 1–5).

4 Kom Firin is an archaeological site located approximately 10.5 km west of Naukratis, in an area that experienced intensive agricultural activity during the 20th century. Despite this, the site's high mound, rising in places to more than 12 m, offers significant potential for studying settlement patterns in this region, which remains insufficiently investigated among Pharaonic-period sites west of the Canopic branch of the Nile. A research project conducted by the British Museum over nine field seasons has enabled documentation of the site's overall development, in addition to targeted excavations that revealed selected aspects of its layout and functions (Spencer and Smoláriková 2008).

is made of light red clay covered with a yellow slip, interspersed with a red patch and traces of golden particles. Its decoration consists of vertical divisions formed by denticulated bands, garlands suspended from the neck, and a row of six rosettes on the body surmounted by rows of raised knobs. The lower section is adorned with a compressed floral calyx motif. This example reflects the diversity of decorative programs based on vegetal and geometric elements (Edgar 1911: 54).

3 – *Askos* CG 26279 [*Fig. 8*]

This example measures approximately 10.5 cm in height and is made of red clay coated with a reddish-brown slip, with traces of white slip visible on the interior surface. It is distinguished by complex figural decoration. On one side of the body, an elderly, bearded man, bald at the crown, is depicted wearing a long-sleeved garment tied at a low level and carrying over his left shoulder a pole from which a large basket hangs at each end. On the opposite side stands another bald figure with prominent ears, depicted frontally, clad in a himation and holding a long, unidentified implement. Beneath these scenes are acanthus leaves with curling tips, while elongated pointed leaves run along the joining seams of the molded halves, clearly emphasizing the mold-made technique and relief decoration (Edgar 1911: 55).



Fig. 8. *Askos* No. 26279, Egyptian Museum, Cairo collection

Askos, Alexandria National Museum (inv. no. 484) [*Fig. 9*]

This vessel is comparable in general form to the previously discussed examples, as well as in its forming and decorative techniques, as observed through visual examination in the museum display cases. It bears relief decoration depicting a child riding on the back of a bird (personal observation during a museum visit).



Fig. 9. *Askos* No. 484, National Museum of Alexandria collection (Photo Y. Mahmoud)

Askos, Australian National University Classics Museum (inv. no. 1984.03) [*Fig. 10*]

Discovered in Alexandria, this vessel measures 11.6 cm in width and 9.8 cm in height. It is well preserved, with only minor wear around the spout. It is made of pale brown somewhat coarse clay with small white inclusions and scattered voids. According to the museum's published description, it employs the same manufacturing and decorative techniques observed in the Grand Egyptian Museum group. The sides of the *askos* are decorated with a frontal comic mask surrounded by fruiting ivy tendrils extending toward the spout. The vessel has been dated to the 2nd century CE (ANU Classics Museum, Acq. No. 1984.03).

Askos, Fouquet Collection [*Fig. 11*]

This example, with a height of 6.8 cm, was discovered at Kom Firin and is made of brown Nile silt clay. It features Dionysiac decoration: on each side of the body appears a maenad mask, while the neck is adorned with a wreath from which ivy leaves branch out. The lower part of the vessel is decorated with raised leaves comparable to those seen on the lower zones of vessels *Figs 3* and *4* (Perdrizet 1921: 88, Pl. LXV).

Askos, Kaufmann Collection (Frankfurt) [*Fig. 12*]

This vessel was reportedly found in the Fayoum and later deposited in the municipal gallery of Frankfurt am Main. It was acquired by Kaufmann, who assembled



Fig. 10. *Askos*, Museum of Classical Antiquities, Australian National University, Acq. No. 1984.03



Fig. 11. *Askos* from Kom Firin, part of the Fouquet Collection

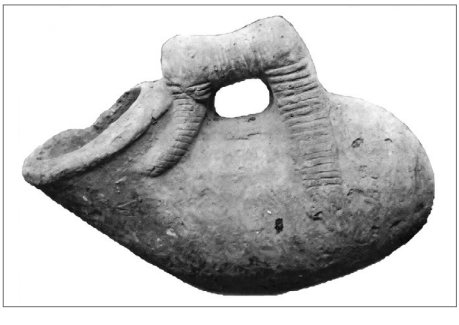

Fig. 12. *Askos* from the Fayoum, preserved in the Municipal Museum of Frankfurt am Main

a substantial collection of terracotta figurines and mold-made vessels with relief decoration during his work in the Fayoum and other regions of Egypt. While its general form corresponds to the previously described examples, it differs in lacking the characteristic flat base, instead more closely resembling an actual wineskin. Its decoration is limited to the imitation of metal prototypes, consisting of incised grooves and twisted-wire motifs around the handle, without vegetal or figural elements. Unfortunately, Kaufmann did not provide a detailed description; the vessel appears only in the final plate of his publication (No. 817), within a group of vessels numbered 811–818, which he described in general terms as perfume containers, jugs, and lentoid flasks,[5] dating to the early Roman imperial period (Kaufmann 1915: Taf. 74, Fig. 81).

Askos, Louvre Museum (Inv. No. E 12244) [*Fig. 13*]

This vessel was discovered at Sheikh Abada during the 1902–1903 seasons and is now housed in the Louvre. Although broadly comparable to the aforementioned examples, it differs in several respects: the handle takes the form of a simple loop without twisted-wire decoration, and the flat base is replaced by three small projections on which the vessel rests. The workmanship is relatively coarse, and cracks caused by rapid drying before firing are evident, indicating a lower level of craftsmanship than that of the other specimens (Louvre, Inv. No. E 12244).

Askos, Sohag National Museum [*Fig. 14*]

The general display at the museum includes a vessel whose body was entirely wheel-made in three joined sections. The



Fig. 13. Plain undecorated *askos* from Sheikh Abada, preserved in the Louvre Museum, Inv. No. E 12244



Fig. 14. *Askos* with vegetal decoration, preserved in the Sohag National Museum (Photo Y. Mahmoud)

5 Lentoid flasks are small vessels typically intended for storing perfumed oils or other precious liquids. They are characterized by a flattened, lens-shaped body, with two flattened faces and rounded edges. This design facilitates ease of handling and storage, while also helping to minimize and preserve the contents. Such flasks were widely produced in both ceramics and glass throughout antiquity, particularly during the Graeco-Roman period. They served not only for everyday use but also in ritual and funerary contexts. Numerous examples have been recovered from archaeological sites across Egypt and the broader Mediterranean, attesting to their widespread distribution and functional versatility.

rear section was formed separately and decorated with an incised floral motif in the shape of a rosette; the middle section, surmounted by the handle, takes the form of a semicylindrical connector; and the third section comprises the spout, shaped to conform to the general appearance of the previously discussed examples. The joints between these parts remain visible, attesting to the method of assembly (personal observation during a museum visit).

Together, these ceramic examples highlight the diversity of forms and decorative programs characterizing *askoi* in Egypt, as well as variations in quality and production centers. At the same time, they demonstrate the persistence of fundamental morphological and technical features, thereby reinforcing the interpretation of the *askoi* preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum within this broader framework of ceramic production during the Roman period.

CERAMIC ASKOI FROM OUTSIDE EGYPT

The following selection presents a group of glazed ceramic *askoi* of Italian Roman production, intended for formal, technical, and decorative comparison with the group preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum:

Askos [*Fig. 15*] represents an example of a green-glazed ceramic *askos* characterized by an oval body and the absence of a conventional handle, which is presumed to have originally consisted of two straight rods decorated with spiral motifs. The body is adorned with relief decoration depicting large vine leaves, tendrils, and grasshoppers. The spout takes the form of a stirrup, while the upper handle system terminates in paired disc-like elements. The vessel measures 12.70 cm in height and 21.59 cm in width. It was discovered at Ain es-Selmani in Benghazi (Cyrenaica, Libya) and is currently housed in the British Museum (Reg. No. 1861,0724.11).

Askos [*Fig. 16*] is a lead-glazed *askos* with a compressed oval body and a stirrup spout, distinguished by a twisted



Fig. 15. Green-glazed ceramic *askos* decorated with vine scrolls and a grasshopper motif (© Trustees of the British Museum, Reg. No. 1861,0724.11)



Fig. 16. Ceramic *askos* with an oval body covered in raised nodules; brownish-red fabric with an olive-green glaze (© Trustees of the British Museum, Reg. No. 1856,1226.585)

double handle terminating in disc-shaped elements. The body is covered with relief decoration consisting of raised spherical nodules. It is made of red-brown clay with an olive-green glaze. The vessel measures 7.40 cm in height and 8.50 cm in length and is attributed to Italian production of the 1st century CE. It is preserved in the British Museum (Reg. No. 1856,1226.585).

Askos [*Fig. 17*] displays a swollen body with a restored stirrup spout and a sculptural handle in the form of a leaping predator (either a panther or lioness), whose forepaws attach to the rim of the spout. The body features relief decoration of two bulls on either side. It is made of pinkish-red clay coated with a yellowish-green glaze, with iridescence visible on the lower body. The vessel measures 11.40 cm in height and 8.50 cm in length and is likewise attributed to 1st-century CE Italian production (British Museum, Reg. No. 1873,0820.397).



Fig. 17. Ceramic *askos* with a globular body and a handle in the form of a leaping predator (perhaps a panther or lioness); each side bears a relief decoration depicting a bull (© Trustees of the British Museum, Reg. No. 1873,0820.397)

Askos [*Fig. 18*] is another lead-glazed *askos* with a compressed oval body, a stirrup spout, and a handle composed of two twisted rods incorporating a hinge-like element at the lower end. The relief decoration consists of fruit-bearing branches, likely representing the olive. It is made of red-brown clay with an olive-green glaze. The vessel measures 10.60 cm in height and 13 cm in length and belongs to Italian production of the 1st century CE (British Museum, Reg. No. 1856,1226.584).

Askos [*Fig. 19*] provides an additional example of a Roman lead-glazed *askos* dating to the early 1st century CE, likely produced in southern Italy. It is designed in imitation of a leather wineskin and is decorated with relief motifs of ivy leaves and berries associated with the symbolism of Dionysus, the god of wine. The vessel measures 10.6 cm in height (Metropolitan Museum of Art, Object No. 17.194.885).

Taken together, these Italian Roman ceramic *askoi* —dating to the 1st century CE— exhibit a number of shared characteristics in form, technique, and decora-



Fig. 18. Lead-glazed ceramic *askos* with molded vegetal decoration on the exterior (© Trustees of the British Museum, Reg. No. 1856,1226.584)

tion when compared with the Egyptian examples under study. They are generally characterized by oval or globular bodies combined with distinctive stirrup spouts, while handle designs vary between straight rods, twisted elements, or fully sculptural animal forms. The vessels are typically made of red or red-brown clay coated with lead or enamel glazes in olive and yellowish-green hues, reflecting an intention to imitate metal prototypes. Their decorative programs range from vegetal motifs —such as vine, ivy, and olive— to animal figures, including bulls and predators. These elements collectively reflect symbolic associations, often linked to Dionysiac culture and drinking rituals, particularly those involving wine.

COMPARATIVE BRONZE EXAMPLES

Bronze *askoi* constitute some of the most important comparative evidence for understanding the origins of the mold-made ceramic forms examined in this study. Metal prototypes provided the primary models from which ceramic versions were derived, both in terms of overall morphology and the treatment of handles and decorative schemes.

A particularly instructive example is the bronze *askos* preserved in the Ashmolean Museum (Acc. No. AN1932.191) [*Fig. 20*]. This vessel, discovered at Pompeii and dated to the period between 50 and 75 CE, is made of copper alloy and measures approximately 13 cm in height, 17 cm in length, and 9 cm in width. It is characterized by a flattened pear-shaped body, an upper spout, and a top handle — features that closely correspond to those observed in the ceramic *askoi* under study, despite differences in scale and material (Ashmolean Museum, Acc. No. AN1932.191).

A more elaborate and technically sophisticated example is the bronze *askos* housed in the Louvre Museum (Inv. Nos MND 721, Br 2930) [*Fig. 21*]. This vessel dates to the 1st century CE and is thought to have been produced either in Italy or in the Near East; it was reportedly discov-



Fig. 19. Lead-glazed ceramic *askos* with molded vegetal decoration on the exterior (© Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Object No. 17.194.885)



Fig. 20. Bronze *askos* (© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, Acc. No. AN1932.191.1)

ered in the vicinity of Berytus. It measures 17.5 cm in height, 19.5 cm in width, and 6.2 cm in diameter, with a weight of approximately 776.5 g. The handle, cast separately, is decorated with a vegetal motif terminating in a flower and incorporates a central circular element surrounded by spiral ornamentation. At the point of attachment between the handle and the body is a figural scene depicting a satyr holding a *pedum*[6] and a bunch of grapes and wearing a *nebris* — a clear reference to Dionysiac imagery (Louvre, Inv. Nos MND 721, Br 2930).

This vessel was produced using a combination of advanced metalworking techniques, including casting, hammering, turning, and soldering, with finely incised details, some of which were enhanced by silver inlay. Such features reflect the high level of craftsmanship characteristic of luxury metal production in the Roman period and underscore the extent to which ceramic *askoi* emulate prestigious bronze prototypes in both form and decorative vocabulary (Louvre, Inv. Nos MND 721, Br 2930).

In addition to the preserved bronze examples, the depiction of a metal *askos* in a Ptolemaic mosaic from Alexandria [*Fig. 22*] provides important visual evidence for the presence of this vessel type in an earlier context. This mosaic was discovered in 1993 at the site of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and is dated to the period between 200 and 150 BCE. The scene portrays a male dog rendered in a naturalistic style, beside which appears a gilded metal *askos* equipped with ring handles.



Fig. 21. Elaborate bronze *askos* from the Roman Imperial period (© Musée du Louvre, Inv. Nos MND 721, Br 2930)



Fig. 22. Ptolemaic mosaic (200–150 BCE), discovered in 1993 in the flooring of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, depicting a naturalistic scene of a male dog beside a large metal *askos* (Higgs 2001)

6 *Pedum* (shepherd's staff): a staff with a curved end, originally associated with shepherds in the Greek and Roman worlds. In Roman art, it later acquired multiple symbolic meanings, becoming a marker of pastoral identity as well as an emblem of authority and leadership. It was also associated with religious rituals and certain deities such as Bacchus and Cybele. In addition, it appeared in theatrical and hunting contexts, reflecting its transformation from a practical tool into a complex cultural and social symbol in the Roman era (Ali 2022: 398).

A proportional comparison between the size of the vessel and that of the depicted dog suggests that the metal *askos* was of considerable dimensions. This observation supports the interpretation that mold-made ceramic examples —such as those preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum— represent reduced-scale versions of larger and more luxurious metal prototypes (Higgs 2001: 88; Queyrel 2012: 320–322; Lightfoot 2016: 82, Fig. 107).

ANALYTICAL STUDY

SYMBOLISM OF THE FIGURAL THEMES ON *ASKOI*

The iconographic repertoire of the mold-made *askoi* extends beyond decoration, expressing a coherent symbolic program in which functional, religious, and eschatological concepts converge. The principal themes represented on the Egyptian vessels —including athletes, Eros and Psyche, ivy garlands, theatrical masks, satyrs, and maenads— suggest that these objects participated in ritual practices associated with bodily renewal, fertility, and the transition between life and death. Although the precise meaning of each motif cannot be established with certainty, their recurrent association on Roman Egyptian *askoi* indicates that they formed part of a shared symbolic vocabulary readily understood within the religious milieu of the period.

Athletic imagery, represented on vessels [see ***Figs 1, 2***], reflects both the practical and symbolic functions of the *askos*. As these vessels were commonly employed for storing and pouring oil or wine, scenes depicting athletes naturally evoke the gymnasium, where oil formed an indispensable element of athletic training and bodily preparation (Mayer 1907: 210–212; Beazley 1921: 329; Miller 2004: 11–18). Beyond their practical associations, athletic figures acquired broader symbolic significance in funerary and votive contexts, where they expressed *aretē*, honor, and the idealized excellence of the deceased, transforming the *askos* into a vehicle for commemorating personal achievement and social identity (Bettini 2005: 202; Kyle 2015: 139–145).

The Dionysiac imagery decorating many *askoi* —including satyrs, maenads, ivy wreaths, theatrical masks, and vine motifs— extends this symbolism into the sphere of ritual renewal and eschatological belief. In Greek religious thought, Dionysus was closely associated with wine, ecstatic ritual, choral performance, and the dissolution of ordinary human boundaries, themes vividly expressed in Euripides' *Bacchae* (64–82, 278–285, 370–385). Within Dionysiac and mystery cult traditions, these concepts became closely connected with ideas of renewal, transformation, and the hope of a blessed existence beyond death, allowing such imagery to acquire particular significance in funerary contexts (Burkert 1985: 161–167; Seaford 2006: 26–37).

Within this iconographic program, the recurrent association of Dionysiac, erotic, and psychical imagery is particularly noteworthy. Ancient literary tradition consistently associates Dionysus with ecstatic experience, divine inspiration, and ritual transformation through

wine, music, and dance (Euripides, *Bacchae* 64–82; Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a–245a; Aristotle, *Politics* 8.7). In Platonic philosophy, Eros constitutes the force that guides the soul toward beauty, truth, and immortality (Plato, *Symposium* 206a–212b; *Phaedrus* 249d–257b). Although no ancient author explicitly presents Dionysus, Eros, and Psyche as a unified theological triad, their recurring association within the visual program of these *askoi* may reasonably be interpreted as expressing complementary concepts of vitality, fertility, regeneration, and the soul's transition beyond mortal existence (Burkert 1985: 296–303; Seaford 2006: 220–229).

The iconography of the maenads further reinforces this interpretation. Their ecstatic dance represents the temporary abandonment of ordinary social constraints through communion with Dionysus, while their repeated appearance on *askoi* accords closely with the ritual associations of these vessels in Dionysiac contexts. Whether containing wine or, in certain ritual settings of Roman Egypt, purified water, the *askos* functioned as a symbolic medium through which ritual purification and transformation could be expressed (Euripides, *Bacchae* 677–713; Sevilla-Sadeh 2021: 294, 298). Rather than serving merely as decorative motifs, the maenads articulate the Dionysiac concepts of ecstasy, renewal, and ritual transformation embodied by the vessel itself.

RITUAL FUNCTION: PURIFICATION AND FEMALE RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

In Roman Egypt, particularly in settlements in the Fayoum, such as Bakchias, Tebtynis, and Soknopaiou Nesos, archaeological, papyrological, and iconographic evidence indicates that female ritual purification formed an important component of domestic religious practice (Nifosì 2019: 176–224; Ibrahim 2021: 650). Within this context, the mold-made *askos* appears to have fulfilled a specialized function extending beyond the storage and pouring of liquids, instead participating in practices of bodily purification undertaken before religious observances. The vessel's globular body and narrow lateral spout, capable of regulating the controlled flow of liquid, are consistent with such a ritual function (Ibrahim 2021: 650).

Papyrological evidence provides important support for the interpretation of domestic ritual purification practices associated with menstruation. Three Demotic papyri from the Louvre describe a designated women's room in which groups of women performed purification during menstruation, referring to this space by the terms *hrr.t*, *hrhr.t*, and *hlyl.t* (Nifosì 2019: 201–203). Although this room has often been identified with the so-called "room beneath the stairs" attested in later Aramaic, Greek, and Coptic documents from Elephantine and Thebes, the available literary evidence does not conclusively demonstrate either its precise architectural location within the house or its exclusive association with menstrual purification (Nifosì 2019: 204–208). Additional papyrological evidence from marriage contracts, including *P. Bacch.* 2 and *P. Ryl.* 2, records vessels such as the *louterion* (λουτήριον) and the *amis* (ἀμίς) among the household furnishings included in a bride's dowry, indicating that equipment for ritual washing formed part of the domestic assemblage (Nifosì 2019: 203).

The inclusion of vessels such as the *louterion* and the *amis* in marriage contracts demonstrates that facilities for ritual washing constituted a recognized element of the domestic household assemblage. Within Greek religious practice, such domestic provisions correspond to the wider concept of ritual purity (*hagneia*, ἁγνεία), according to which women were expected to undergo purification before participating in sacred rites, including the Thesmophoria dedicated to Demeter (Parker 1983: 32–73; Burkert 1985: 242–245, 285–290; Larson 2007: 11; Nifosì 2019: 201–203).

The archaeological evidence corresponds closely with the available papyrological sources. Excavations in the Fayoum have revealed that spaces constructed beneath domestic staircases occurred in a variety of architectural forms. These included concealed chambers accessed through trapdoors placed on staircase landings, as well as small rooms entered through ordinary doorways beneath the staircase. Examples of the first type have been documented in House VIII at Bakchias (Pernigotti and Capasso 1995: 12, Fig. 2, 60, Fig. 49) and House II 201 at Soknopaiou Nesos (Boak 1935: 12–13, Pl. IX), where hidden chambers were accessible only through trapdoors located on the stair landings. Owing to their extremely restricted dimensions and difficult access, these chambers have generally been interpreted as secure storage facilities rather than spaces intended for regular human occupation. A second architectural type is represented by Room O in House VIII at Bakchias, a small room constructed beneath the staircase and entered through a conventional doorway from the central room of the house. Although too small for prolonged occupation, its paved floor distinguishes it from a simple storage compartment and suggests that it may have fulfilled a more specialized domestic function (Nifosì 2019: 199–201).

Further archaeological support is provided by terracotta figurines from Roman Egypt, particularly figurines Nos 10019 and 31161 preserved in the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria. As demonstrated by Ibrahim (2021: 645), both figurines depict nude women in a squatting position while holding an *askos* and pouring water directly over the genital area. This posture, commonly described as the "frog position", has long been associated with childbirth and female fertility and has also been connected iconographically with the Baubo motif within the Demeter cycle (Murray 1934: 95). Considered together with the archaeological and papyrological evidence for female purification practices in Roman Egypt (Nifosì 2019: 197–204), these figurines provide direct visual evidence linking the *askos* with female ablution. They therefore represent the strongest archaeological indication currently available that the vessel could have functioned as an implement employed in rituals of bodily purification. Within this interpretative framework, the *askos* may be understood as transforming an ordinary biological act into a symbolic ritual concerned with fertility, purification, and the renewal of life.

Comparable evidence from outside Egypt provides a useful comparative perspective for interpreting the ritual function of the *askos*. A mosaic from the House of Menander at Pompeii depicts attendants carrying *askoi* within a bathing context, indicating that this vessel type could

be associated with bodily cleansing and the controlled pouring of liquids beyond Egypt (Franken 2018: 48). Although the Pompeian evidence belongs to a different cultural and regional setting, it suggests that the *askos* fulfilled comparable functions in other parts of the Roman world. The Egyptian material may therefore be understood not as an isolated phenomenon but as a regional adaptation of a vessel whose morphology was particularly well suited to the controlled application of liquids during bathing and ritual purification.

Viewed together, the papyrological documentation, domestic architecture, terracotta iconography, and comparative archaeological evidence support the interpretation that mold-made *askoi* participated in a coherent system of female ritual purification. Nevertheless, the available evidence does not demonstrate that every *askos* fulfilled this function. Rather, it suggests that at least a significant group of these vessels —particularly those associated with the Fayoum and decorated with iconography related to Demeter and Dionysus— were employed in purification rites preceding participation in female religious ceremonies, especially the Thesmophoria. Within this framework, the *askos* should be understood not merely as a utilitarian container but as a ritual instrument mediating between the female body, domestic religious practice, and the attainment of ritual purity required for participation in sacred festivals.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN DIONYSUS AND DEMETER

Building upon the archaeological evidence for the ritual use of *askoi* in female purification practices, the iconographic program of these vessels further reflects the close interaction between the cults of Demeter and Dionysus within the religious landscape of Roman Egypt. Rather than representing separate devotional traditions, the imagery suggests a complementary symbolic system in which both deities participated in successive stages of fertility, purification, and renewal. This interaction is clearly reflected in the material expression of the Egyptian *askoi*. Several vessels combine iconographic elements traditionally associated with Demeter, particularly Baubo, with unmistakably Dionysiac imagery, including ivy garlands and maenad masks (Ibrahim 2021: 645). Rather than indicating adherence to separate cults, this coexistence suggests that the vessels participated in a shared symbolic vocabulary linking fertility, bodily purification, and regeneration.

Within this symbolic framework, Demeter embodied agricultural productivity and ritual purity, whereas Dionysus represented the regenerative forces of viticulture, ecstatic experience, and spiritual rebirth (Meyer 1987: 257). The archaeological evidence discussed above indicates that mold-made *askoi* participated in female purification rituals performed before festivals dedicated to Demeter while simultaneously expressing Dionysiac concepts of spiritual transformation through their iconographic program (Mayer 1907: 211; Nifosì 2019: 200; Ibrahim 2021: 652). Consequently, the symbolic association of the two deities appears to have been embedded not only in theological traditions but also in the visual language of these vessels.

Ancient mystery cult traditions provide an interpretative framework for understanding this iconographic synthesis. Intermediary figures, such as Eubouleus,[7] connect the ritual spheres of both deities. Although Eubouleus appears in the Demeter tradition as the swineherd whose pigs disappeared into the earth at the time of Persephone's abduction, Orphic and Dionysiac traditions identify him as an epithet of Hades or Dionysus, thereby bringing Demeter and Dionysus within a shared eschatological framework centered on death, renewal, and rebirth (Meyer 1987: 257; Bremmer 2013: 35). Likewise, Orphic traditions identifying Dionysus as the son of Persephone, Demeter's daughter, further reinforce this theological relationship by embedding Dionysiac theology within an explicitly feminine ritual lineage (Meyer 1987: 590). These literary traditions do not constitute direct evidence for the function of the *askoi* but provide a coherent interpretative framework for understanding the convergence of Demeter-related and Dionysiac imagery on the Egyptian vessels.

This iconographic synthesis may also be interpreted within Platonic and Neoplatonic thought, where bodily purification constituted a preparatory stage for attaining *entheos* (ἔνθεος), the condition of divine inspiration associated with Dionysus (Sevilla-Sadeh 2021: 298). From this perspective, Demeter's sphere of ritual purification and Dionysus' sphere of ecstatic transformation represent complementary stages within a single religious process rather than independent cultic traditions. Comparable concepts appear in funerary iconography, where representations of Psyche accompanied by Eros on libation vessels have been interpreted as symbolizing the soul's transformation and immortality. Within this broader symbolic framework, Dionysus functions as the chthonic deity completing the soul's journey following the process of purification initiated under Demeter's domain (Sevilla-Sadeh 2021: 294). Although these philosophical and iconographic parallels cannot determine the precise intention behind every individual *askos*, they reinforce the interpretation suggested by the archaeological and iconographic evidence.

Finally, the religious syncretism characteristic of the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods provided favorable conditions for the dissemination of this shared symbolic language. The political self-representation of Mark Antony as Dionysus-Osiris and Cleopatra VII as Isis, identified with Demeter and Aphrodite, illustrates the broader cultural environment in which such hybrid religious identities flourished (Bremmer 2013: 35; Ibrahim 2021: 654). Within this milieu, the *askos* should be understood not simply as a utilitarian vessel but as

7 Eubouleus (εὐβουλεύς): Literally meaning "the Good Counselor" or "He of Good Counsel", Eubouleus is a mythological figure closely associated with the Eleusinian mysteries. In the Eleusinian tradition, he is identified as the swineherd whose pigs disappeared into the earth when Hades abducted Persephone, an event that became etiologically linked with the sacrificial pig rituals of the Thesmophoria and the Eleusinian cult. His role subsequently expanded within the mystery tradition, where he became closely connected with the chthonic sphere and the religious symbolism of fertility, death, and rebirth. See Burkert 1985: 285–290; Clinton 1992: 47–79.

a ritual medium through which acts of purification were integrated into wider concepts of fertility, rebirth, and immortality within the sacred sphere shared by Demeter, Persephone, and Dionysus.

PRODUCTION CENTERS

The available archaeological evidence suggests that the production of mold-made *askoi* in Roman Egypt was not restricted to a single workshop tradition but was instead distributed among several regional production centers. Variations in ceramic fabrics, manufacturing techniques, and decorative repertoires indicate the existence of multiple workshop traditions, although the current evidence does not permit the secure attribution of individual vessels to specific workshops.

Within this framework, the Fayoum emerges as one of the principal production centers for *askoi*, where this industry appears to have been closely associated with specialized ritual functions. Archaeological data confirm that certain examples —such as Vessel No. 10036 in the Grand Egyptian Museum collection— were discovered in the Fayoum. Vessel No. 10533, which is closely comparable in mold and execution, may likewise be attributable to the same production zone. This concentration correlates with the prevalence of purification practices, particularly within domestic ritual spaces such as rooms beneath staircases in settlements like Bakchias and Tebtynis. In these contexts, *askoi* were used for pouring lustral water — especially for female purification rites preceding participation in religious festivals, most notably the Thesmophoria associated with Demeter (Mayer 1907: 211; Ibrahim 2021: 650).

In contrast, the Memphite region (Mit Rahina) represents a production area distinguished by notable technical variability, reflecting a possible effort to replicate the appearance of luxury metal wares using diverse ceramic fabrics. Workshops in this area employed both Nile silt —as exemplified by vessel No. 10227— and calcareous marl clay, as seen in vessel No. 10542. This material diversity may be interpreted as an intentional strategy to produce cost-effective alternatives that visually and functionally approximated Roman fine wares, particularly in their light coloration and durability, thereby echoing the aesthetic qualities of bronze or gilded vessels.

In the Nile Delta, sites such as Kom Firin, Naukratis, Buto, and Athribis constituted hybrid production environments combining Egyptian, Greek, and Roman influences. *Askoi* from these centers — such as those attributed to the Fouquet Collection at Kom Firin— are typically fashioned from brown Nile silt and decorated with elaborate Dionysiac motifs, including maenad masks. This stylistic profile reflects the enduring historical role of Naukratis as a hub of intercultural exchange, as well as the development of specialized workshops at Athribis known for producing thin-walled vessels with mold-made ornamentation that imitates precious metalwork.

Evidence from Middle and Upper Egypt further attests to regional production centers exhibiting a degree of technical autonomy. For instance, a vessel preserved in the Sohag National Museum was entirely wheel-made and assembled from three separate components, suggesting that southern workshops attempted

to reproduce the canonical *askos* form without fully adopting the mold-based technologies prevalent in the north. Similarly, an example from Antinopolis is characterized by a simplified morphology in which the conventional flat base is replaced by three protrusions — an adaptation likely reflecting local functional requirements.

As for Alexandria, although complete ceramic examples directly attributable to the city are scarce within the present corpus, it nonetheless functioned as the primary artistic milieu from which the original prototypes —particularly metallic ones— emerged. A depiction of a gilded metal *askos* in the so-called "Dog Mosaic" from Ptolemaic Alexandria provides compelling evidence that such luxury models predated their ceramic counterparts and served as the visual templates upon which provincial workshops based their simplified adaptations.

In sum, the geographic distribution and technical diversity of *askos* production in Roman Egypt reveal a flexible and dynamic industrial system. This system successfully balanced the artistic emulation of elite models with the functional and ritual needs of local communities, operating within a continuous framework of interaction between metropolitan centers and regional workshops.

DATING

In the absence of secure archaeological contexts, the proposed chronology of the Grand Egyptian Museum *askoi* is based upon the convergence of several lines of evidence. These include vessel morphology, manufacturing technology, decorative repertoire, ceramic fabrics, and comparison with securely dated ceramic and metal parallels from Egypt and the wider Mediterranean.

Comparisons with ceramic *askoi* housed in the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir —particularly those registered under CG 26275, CG 26276, and CG 26279 (Edgar 1911: 53–55)— indicate that this vessel type was in circulation in Egypt during the Roman period. These examples display strong similarities with the Grand Egyptian Museum group in terms of their overall piriform shape, mold-made manufacture, and applied vegetal and figural relief decoration, as well as their imitation of metallic elements in the treatment of handles and vessel bodies. Notably, some of these Egyptian parallels incorporate Dionysiac and figural motifs, reinforcing their attribution to a shared or closely related chronological framework.

Further support for this dating is provided by comparisons with *askoi* from Alexandria (ANU Classics Museum, Acq. No. 1984.03), the Fayoum (Kaufmann 1915: Taf. 74, Fig. 817), Kom Firin (Perdrizet 1921: 88, Pl. LXV), Sheikh Abada (Antinopolis) (Louvre, Inv. No. E 12244), and Sohag. These examples exhibit comparable developments in mold-made techniques and decorative programs, with minor variations that may be attributed to differences in production centers or levels of craftsmanship. Collectively, this body of evidence points to the widespread distribution of this vessel type across Egypt during the Roman period, alongside a clear presence of broader Mediterranean artistic influences.

Parallels with ceramic *askoi* from outside Egypt are particularly significant for refining the chronological framework.

Lead-glazed *askoi* preserved in collections such as the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art are generally dated to the 1st century CE. These vessels demonstrate notable similarities in overall form, trefoil or stirrup spouts, and vegetal and Dionysiac relief decoration, suggesting a shared aesthetic vocabulary and functional role, as well as the circulation of common formal models across different regions of the Roman world during this period (British Museum, Reg. Nos 1856,1226.584, 1856,1226.585, 1861,0724.11, 1873,0820.397; Metropolitan Museum of Art, Object No. 17.194.885).

Comparisons with dated bronze *askoi* —such as those held in the Ashmolean Museum (Acc. No. AN1932.191) and the Louvre (Inv. Nos MND 721, Br 2930), likewise assigned to the 1st century CE— further support the interpretation that mold-made ceramic examples represent direct or indirect imitations of luxury metal prototypes. This hypothesis is strengthened by the depiction of a gilded metal *askos* in a late Ptolemaic mosaic from Alexandria (Higgs 2001: 88; Lightfoot 2016: 82, Fig. 107), dated to the 2nd–1st centuries BCE. Such evidence suggests that the metallic form predates its ceramic counterparts, with the latter representing a later phase of adaptation into a more economical medium during the Roman period.

Considered collectively, these criteria consistently indicate a date within the early Roman period. The closest archaeological parallels belong to assemblages dating between the late 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE, although a limited continuation into the early 2nd century CE cannot be excluded. The chronological framework proposed here should be regarded as the most plausible interpretation of the currently available archaeological evidence rather than as an absolute dating.

CONCLUSION

The present study of the *askos* vessels preserved in the Grand Egyptian Museum and dated to the Roman period yields a set of interrelated conclusions concerning their manufacture, function, chronology, and cultural significance within the context of Roman Egypt.

First, with regard to fabrication and decoration, the vessels were predominantly produced using two-part longitudinal molds, as evidenced by visible joining seams and internal finger impressions. Secondary elements —such as handles, spouts, and bases— were manufactured separately and attached at a semi-dry stage. The primary raw material consisted of Nile silt, although selected examples in marl clay suggest deliberate attempts to imitate finer Roman ceramic wares. Their decorative schemes are typically executed in relief and display a high degree of bilateral symmetry, incorporating both figural and vegetal motifs. These features collectively reflect a conscious emulation of contemporary metal prototypes, particularly in the treatment of vessel form and the rendering of braided handles.

Second, the functional spectrum of the *askos* appears to have been notably diverse. Beyond its basic utilitarian role in storing and pouring liquids such as water, wine, and oils, the vessel was in-

tegrated into medical and athletic practices, particularly in the context of gymnasium culture, where it was associated with the application of oils. Furthermore, archaeological evidence situates the *askos* within bathing environments, where it likely functioned as part of the equipment used for pouring water or producing steam. Its frequent occurrence in funerary contexts also underscores its role in mortuary rituals, where it served both as a container for offerings and as an implement for libation.

Third, the iconographic program of these vessels conveys a rich symbolic dimension. Representations of athletes with halteres emphasize ideals of *aretē* (virtue) and physical excellence, while Dionysiac motifs —such as ivy, garlands, and theatrical masks— evoke notions of vitality, renewal, and transcendence over death. Scenes depicting Eros and Psyche further introduce eschatological themes, symbolizing the journey of the soul and its liberation from the material body.

Fourth, the available evidence suggests that these vessels were largely produced in local Egyptian workshops, albeit strongly influenced by broader Mediterranean artistic traditions. Production centers include the Fayoum, where the vessels appear closely associated with purification practices; Memphis (Mit Rahina), where refined imitations of metal wares may have been produced; and sites in the Delta, such as Kom Firin, Naukratis, and Athribis, where hybrid stylistic features emerge. Additional regional production is attested in Middle and Upper Egypt, reflecting a degree of technical independence. Comparative analysis supports dating this corpus to the early Roman period, from the late 1st century BCE through the 1st century CE, with limited continuation into the early 2nd century CE.

Finally, the *askos* must be understood within its broader social, religious, and cultural frameworks. These vessels reflect patterns of aspirational consumption, providing affordable ceramic alternatives to elite metal objects. At the same time, they may have played a significant role in gendered ritual practices, particularly in the context of female purification rites associated with Demeter and festivals such as the Thesmophoria. More broadly, the *askos* exemplifies the hybrid cultural identity of Roman Egypt, wherein local traditions and Mediterranean influences were dynamically integrated within a shared material and symbolic system.

These findings suggest that the *askos* was not merely a functional container but a multivalent artifact, operating simultaneously within technical, ritual, and ideological domains.

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