
Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt

Alexandra Villing, Marianne Bergeron,
Giorgos Bourogiannis, Alan Johnston,
François Leclère, Aurélia Masson and
Ross Thomas

With Daniel von Recklinghausen, Jeffrey Spencer,
Valerie Smallwood, Virginia Webb and
Susan Woodford

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Portable stoves and braziers in terracotta

Ross Thomas

Portable cooking stoves



Figure 1 Knidian portable stove made by Athenaios, c. 150–50 BC. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 88.875. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

A wide range of cooking stoves, braziers, cooking stands and grills were used in antiquity and at Naukratis. Petrie stated that a ‘complete set of all the types of development has been kept for the British Museum’.¹ This selection included mainly mould-decorated and undecorated Hellenistic stoves or braziers and a few earlier pieces he interpreted as related to these. While Petrie possessed a progressive insight for his time, this is just part of a wider corpus of braziers, stands and grills that would have been used at Naukratis. Many other undecorated forms and types from the Ptolemaic and other periods are poorly represented or not represented at all. Earlier cooking equipment from Naukratis includes an imported Ionian fish grill fragment of 6th century BC date.² Portable stoves and braziers are attested in the Greek world from at least the Archaic period,³ and a classical Greek type with parallels from Athens, but of local manufacture, is also known from Naukratis.⁴ Egyptian Late Period vessels that could be interpreted as braziers are discussed in the chapter on [Egyptian Late Period pottery](#).⁵

A small number of braziers on stands with (undecorated) hand-made pot supports,⁶ including fragments of base were retained.⁷ However, usually only the decorated components from the finer examples of these artefacts were collected, and so such objects are underrepresented in the collection from Naukratis and many technical aspects of the stoves cannot be investigated on the basis of the decorated components only.

The majority of stove fragments from Naukratis are of (probably) tall elaborate stoves on stands with moulded pot supports.⁸ These were sophisticated products of the Hellenistic coroplast’s art, comprising wheel, hand and mould-made parts. Stoves were the main means of cooking and heating in Hellenistic houses throughout the eastern Mediterranean,⁹ made up of a high cylindrical pedestal with a bowl-shaped cavity for the fuel and three projections that supported the cooking pot. These pot supports often featured moulded decoration, as occasionally did the outer face.

Produced from the end of the 3rd century BC to the 1st century BC,¹⁰ such stoves have been found in reasonable quantities in Greece (particularly

¹ Petrie 1886a, 42. He described these as large hemispherical bowls used to contain liquid, not recognizing their role as stoves or braziers. All images in this chapter unless otherwise indicated are © Trustees of the British Museum.

² Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 88.893 (see Aydemir 2005, 92–4, fig. 12, p. 98 no. 5).
³ *Ibid.*, 94–7.

⁴ British Museum, 1886,0401.1775. With parallels for the form from the Athenian Agora (Sparkes and Talcott 1970, 232–3, 377, pl. 97, nos 2017–2019, especially 2018; Scheffer 1981, 83, fig. 59).

⁵ See British Museum, 1974,1119.1 (also Leonard 1997, 295, pl. 7.11).

⁶ Plain hand-made pot support fragments known from the British Museum (1886,0401.1780; 1886,0401.1776; 1886,0401.1779, see also with holes in lug for lifting 1886,0401.1777) and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (AN1888.180; AN1888.179).

⁷ Decorated base sherd with rosettes (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 86.480), as well as a foot or rim of unusual type (British Museum, 1886,0401.1778).

⁸ Rotroff 2006, 200. Probably tall forms on the basis of parallels, although the height cannot be measured with any of the fragments uncovered.

⁹ Ling 1984, 114–5; Burn 2005, 110–3.

¹⁰ Bailey 2008, 158–9, 170–2. Some authors prefer a production date from the 2nd century BC (Scheffer 1981, 88; Rotroff 2006, 203).



Figure 2 Knidian portable stove made by Hekataios, c.150–50 BC. Representation of a theatre mask of satyr, Papposilenos, or possibly Dionysus. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 88.876. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Athens), Italy (e.g. Centuripae and Lanuvium), Asia Minor (e.g. Ephesus, Mytilene, Bamboula-Larnaka), the Levant, Egypt, Cyrenaica and Tripolitania (e.g. Sabratha).¹¹ Production started towards the end of the 3rd century BC, most probably in Knidos,¹² the major production hub of such stoves for the Mediterranean. Production in Knidos increased during the 2nd century BC when significant numbers were supplied to Halikarnassos and other Mediterranean ports, and these exported types were a major influence on the Egyptian production of portable stoves. These popular Knidian stoves were imported at Naukratis from the late 3rd century BC, although they are more common at Alexandria.¹³ The Knidian manufacturers Athenaios (Fig. 1) and Hekataios (Fig. 2), who produced some of the finest and most widely distributed examples in the late 2nd and 1st centuries BC,¹⁴ are represented amongst the Naukratis material.

Excavations in the Agora of Athens have revealed that the main period of use for these objects there was between c. 170–86 BC, with a significant decline by 50 BC,¹⁵ providing close parallels for the imports found at Naukratis (see Figs 1 and 3). However, as the majority of pieces found at Naukratis are of types not found at Athens, it is possible that production had started in Knidos and Egypt before this date.

Copies were made in Naukratis¹⁶ for the local and a wider Egyptian market. Examples found in Alexandria suggest that this city was another production centre for the Egyptian market,¹⁷ though we cannot exclude the possibility that the examples found in Alexandria were produced in Naukratis. Stove pot supports were commonly decorated with theatrical satyr masks, which were fashionable decorative motifs in the Hellenistic period (see chapter on [Ptolemaic and Roman terracotta figures](#)). Many of the examples found at Naukratis have good Egyptian parallels, particularly in finds from Alexandria,¹⁸ but also from Memphis,¹⁹ Athribis,²⁰ Akoris²¹ and elsewhere in Egypt,²² although the decorated forms are rare (or apparently absent) in many Egyptian settlements.²³ Some forms of stove decoration are only found at Naukratis; all the rare Egyptian examples with a bull's head (Fig. 3) are from Naukratis.²⁴ However, bull's heads were popular on stoves in Cyprus²⁵ and Athens,²⁶ suggesting that tastes and demand in



Figure 3 Egyptian portable stove with rest in the form of a bull's head, c. 200–50 BC Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, AN1888.184. Photograph © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Photography by British Museum staff

¹¹ See Mayence 1905, 386, 395; Fairbanks 1928, 134–5; Scheffer 1981, 88; Hayes 1991, pl.18; Didelot 1998, 277; Şahin 2001; Bailey 2008, 158, 170–2; Rotroff 2006, 190–222.

¹² Şahin (2001) suggests Knidos as the most likely production centre. However, Alan Johnston (pers. comm.) has raised an important query concerning the Ionian dialect used on the stoves with fabricant Greek stamps of Athenaios. If from Knidos, a Doric dialect might instead be expected.

¹³ Şahin 2001, 129.

¹⁴ Didelot 1997, 375–95; Şahin 2001, 129; Rotroff 2006, 212.

¹⁵ Rotroff 2006, Contradictory information appears to come from the contextual information from the same excavation which reveals how many pieces were discovered in contexts dating before 170 BC or 150 BC.

¹⁶ Sometimes exact copies, British Museum, 1886,1005.2 (Fig. 4).

¹⁷ Şahin 2001, 129.

¹⁸ Adriani 1952, pl. xii: 4; Didelot 1998, 286–7.

¹⁹ Petrie 1909a; Petrie Museum, London, UC48423, UC47743.

²⁰ Myśliwiec and Abu Senna 1995, 226.

²¹ Tsujimura 1998, 17–18; 1999, 16.

²² Conze 1890, 129; Walters 1903, nos C887–91; Bayer Niemeier 1988, no. 764; Dunand 1990, nos 1005–6. Apparently absent in Buto (Ballet pers. comm.).

²³ Numerous examples from Alexandria (Didelot 1998), but decorated forms are absent in Buto, although plain examples are known from Tebtunis (Ballet pers. comm; Ballet and Południkiewicz 2012, 925–35).

²⁴ Bailey 2008, no. 3690; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, AN1888.184; AN1886.504.

²⁵ Mayence 1905, 393, fig. 52; Hayes 1991, pl. xviii; Şahin 2001, 111, fig. 77.

²⁶ Rotroff 2006, pl. 79, nos 769–72, from contexts dated before 170 BC.

Naukratis may have been slightly different from elsewhere in Egypt at this time, possibly being more like those of contemporary Athens and Cyprus.

Unfortunately we do not know the contexts in which the examples from Naukratis were found, but comparisons with other sites in the Hellenistic world suggest that they probably come from houses, being kept in the courtyard or on the roof. Despite their likely domestic setting, were they nothing more than utilitarian objects? While stoves are usually interpreted as functional cooking and heating devices,²⁷ their highly decorated moulded and occasionally painted forms suggest that they were intended to be seen rather than concealed. As with contemporary Ptolemaic bowls and lamps, functional terracotta objects commonly showed scenes or characters that could be interpreted to have a religious nature and meaning. The depiction of characters associated with the Dionysian sphere (Fig. 4)²⁸ may be little more than decorative motifs borrowed from theatrical masks from a popular satyr play²⁹ and so does not inform interpretations on how these may have been used, but instead illustrates how everyday objects were decorated with religious symbolism in ancient Naukratis.



Figure 4 Egyptian portable stove with a representation of a theatre mask of the bearded head of Papposilenos (or a satyr); copy of Knidian examples 'made by Hekataios' (e.g. Boston 88.876 Fig. 2), c. 150–100 BC. British Museum, 1886,1005.2

Evidence of burning by charcoal or wood can be clearly seen on many discoloured examples. Analysis of a resinous substance on one imported Knidian example in the British Museum³⁰ has revealed pine-pitch resin, probably spilt from a vessel sitting on the stove when molten. Pine resin was imported to Egypt, where it was used as a sealant on ships' hulls and the inside of wine amphorae.³¹ This is rather fitting as the moulded device on the Knidian stove depicts a wine amphora and waves (Fig. 5). Its owner, as with many of Naukratis' inhabitants, may have had contacts in East Greece and been involved in either maritime activities or wine production.³² The stoves were probably not only used solely for heating and cooking,³³ but also for industrial purposes such as the melting of pine pitch. Perhaps they also served to burn incense in domestic religious rituals.³⁴



Figure 5 Knidian portable stove with representation of a transport amphora and waves, and covered with pine-pitch resin, c. 250–200 BC. British Museum, 1926,0324.46

In conclusion, the portable stoves represent another element in the manufacture of highly decorated terracottas at Naukratis during the Ptolemaic period. Naukratis may have been producing stoves, copying the market leaders working in Knidos at this time (Fig. 4). Some of these forms did not travel beyond Naukratis. The (better quality) Knidian stoves were imported to Naukratis from the end of the 3rd to the early 1st century BC, including the work of popular and successful manufacturers Athenaios and Hekataios.³⁵ The industry most likely supplied other parts of Egypt,

²⁷ Şahin 2001, 126; Scheffer 1981, 85; Rotroff 2006, 201.

²⁸ Scheffer 1981, 85.

²⁹ Rotroff 2006, 204.

³⁰ British Museum, 1926,0324.46; V. Steele 2013. Analysis of residues from part of a ceramic brazier (1926,0324.46), two glass vessels (2011,5009.300 and 2011,5009.301) and a metal boat tack (1886,0401.1733) from the Greek and Roman period levels at the site of Naukratis, in the Nile Delta, Egypt. Science Report Envelope No. PR07489 – organic residues report, unpublished British Museum science report.

³¹ Thomas 2011b; Blue, Whitewright and Thomas 2011.

³² See forthcoming chapter on Roman amphorae and stoppers.

³³ Contra Şahin 2001, 126.

³⁴ Şahin (2001, 103–13) argued that such stoves functioned as portable altars and the focus of religious meals as over 50% of such fragments were found within the Sanctuary of Apollo Karneios in Knidos. However, this interpretation was not supported by the distribution within the Athenian Agora (Rotroff 2006, 201).

³⁵ Şahin 2001, 129.

including Alexandria. As with the production of lamps, coffin-fittings, models, mould-decorated pottery and figures, Naukratis was a major innovator (as well as copier) of Hellenistic minor arts, catering for local Egyptian (or Graeco-Egyptian) tastes, albeit with some specifically Naukratite elements that do not seem to have been favoured elsewhere in Egypt. The coroplasts of Naukratis produced objects were perhaps more suitable for the new immigrants of Ptolemaic Alexandria and Lower Egypt than for the more traditional centres of Upper Egypt.

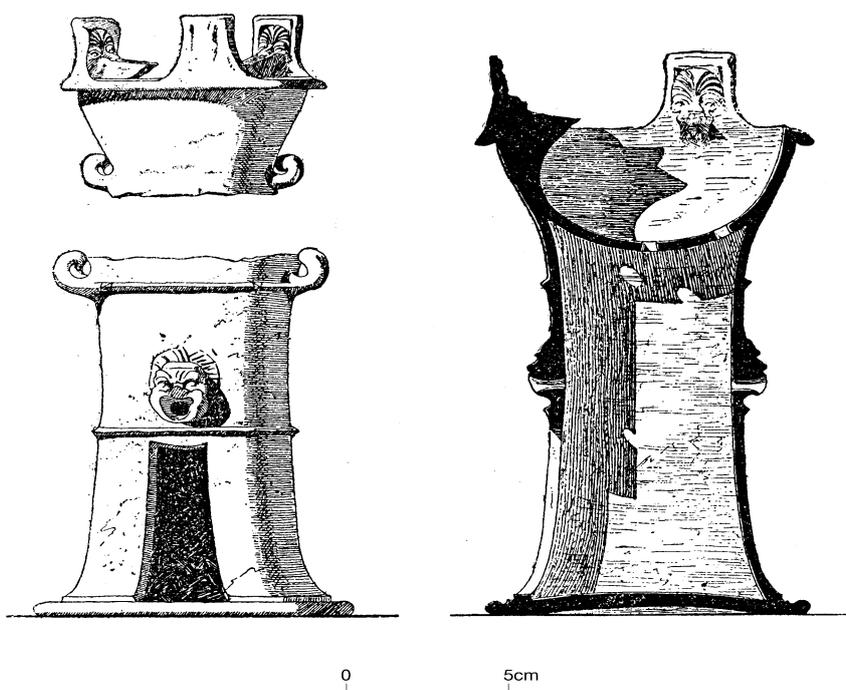


Figure 6 Complete decorated example of portable cooking stove, c.100–50 BC (Bailey 2008, pl. 144, after Conze)