

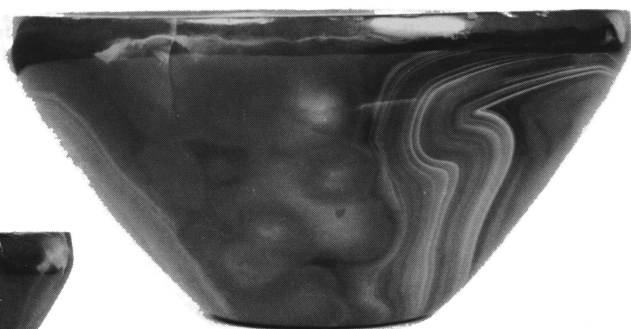
MVSE ANNUAL of the
MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA



NUMBER THREE: 1969



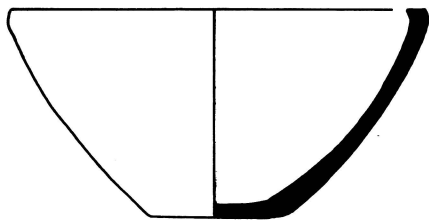
1. Agate bowl in the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia.



AN AGATE BOWL FROM EGYPT

Amongst the treasures which have come down to us from the ancient Mediterranean world are vessels carved from semiprecious stones.¹ Agate, onyx and sardonyx, all subvarieties of chalcedony, seem to have been the stones most commonly used for this purpose, and of these agate was perhaps the most usual.² Perfume bottles, aryballoi, cups and bowls of various shapes were carved out of these hard, colorful materials.³ Such chalcedony vessels continued to be valued in the medieval and Renaissance periods,

when they were often mounted in gold and silver, set with precious stones. One example, a perfect illustration of the esteem in which these ancient vases were held, is Abbot Suger's chalice now in the National Gallery, Washington.⁴ So popular were these vases that relatively few have survived in their original, unadorned state. One which is so preserved is an agate bowl in the Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri (Figs. 1 and 2, and color photo on back cover).



2. Profile of Missouri bowl (half actual size) .

The Missouri bowl⁵ is simple in shape. Its base is very slightly convex, making it stand unevenly; its sides flare outward to an incurved rim, the upper edge of which is flat. The surface of the vase is highly polished. In contrast to the simplicity of the shape, the colors of the agate are rich and varied. They range from milky-white to various shades of brown—reddish-brown through honey-colored to dark brown. The milky-white striations form irregular patterns or swirl around the vase, with small honey-colored patches interspersed on the dark brown background. Around the rim runs a continuous uneven band of pale brown. The whole vase is highly translucent; with the light shining through in differing degrees of intensity and its brilliant polished surface, the general effect is one of great subtlety and beauty.

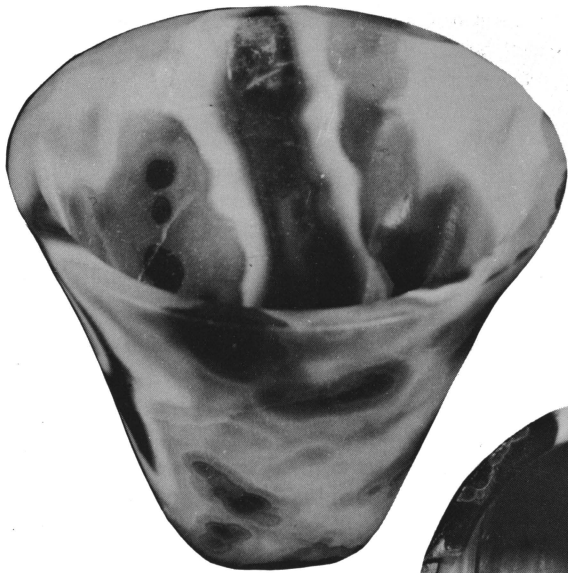
The bowl in Missouri is interesting not only for its beauty but also for its connection with a set of agate vases unearthed in 1930 in Egypt. It was then that the engineer Abd El-Hamid Diraz, who was in charge of extending the railway between Qift and Qusseir, visited the Chief Inspectorate of the Antiquities Department at Luxor to report the discovery of a set of agate vessels. According to him these vessels were found by his workmen while making the embankment for the rails. The workmen tried to hide them, but luckily news came to Diraz in sufficient time. He was then able to use his influence, promising rewards to those who would deliver their finds and threatening with severe punishment those who would hide them.⁶ The result was the delivery of six beautiful vases, which were immediately sent to the Cairo Museum⁷ to be placed in the jewelry room, which contains fabulous works of art. Reginald Engelbach, then Chief Keeper of the

Cairo Museum, was so interested in this set of vessels that he arranged for an inspection of their finding place and soon after published two reports about the pieces and their discovery.⁸ According to the second report, the vessels were found "in a shallow 'borrow-pit' about 8 metres north of the embankment, the exact spot along the line being Kilo. 6, m. 300, the level crossing being at Kilo 6."⁹

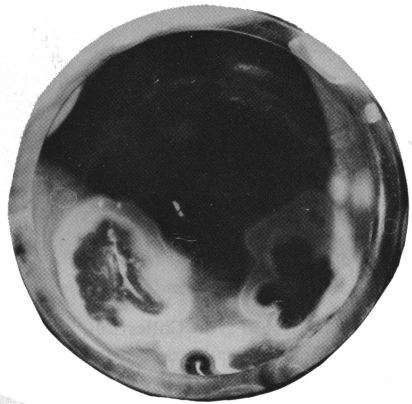
These six vases (Fig. 3) comprise a kalathos, three bowls, a simpulum and a rhyton.¹⁰ The kalathos (A), which is in perfect condition, stands on a flat base; its flaring sides end in a flat rim like all the other vases. Its colors are light to dark brown with patches of purple outlined in white. Of the bowls only one is complete (B), the other two have parts missing—a rectangular section of rim (C) and almost half the bowl (D). In shape they all differ: one (B) is hemispherical, the second (C) is round-bottomed but its sides are vertical and the smallest (D) is a shallow vessel on a ring foot; a groove runs around the rim. The colors are dark reddish-brown with striations of white (B) and red and brown (C and D). The simpulum (E), which is missing its handle, has a leaf carved in relief on the outside with a thin piece of iron wire embedded in it. This wire seems to be an original part of the vase and not added later for a repair to the handle. It lies deep in the leaf and projects over the rim in a way that indicates that the artist found that a handle projecting from the rim would need to be strengthened. The rim of the simpulum is grooved; its colors are reddish-brown with striations in white stained with blue. All these beautiful pieces are characterized by transparency and variety of color, but the rhyton (F) is perhaps the finest of the collection. It is carved in the shape of a calf's head and neck, with the head raised and the neck stretched out. The colors are light and dark brown with patches in purple surrounded by white. The head is carved mainly in the light brown portion; the horns are partly purple. Of all the pieces it exhibits the greatest transparency and variety of colors.

Nothing was found with these vessels to give

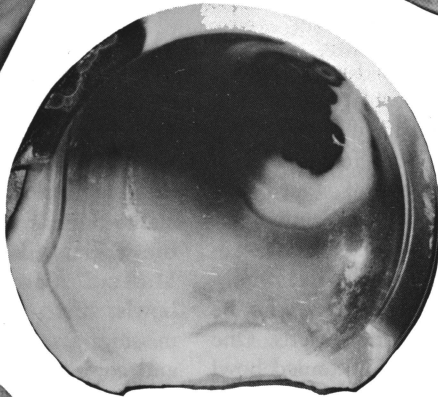
3. Six agate vases in the Cairo Museum. A: kalathos; B, C, D: bowls; E: simpulum; F: rhyton. Photograph courtesy The Cairo Museum.



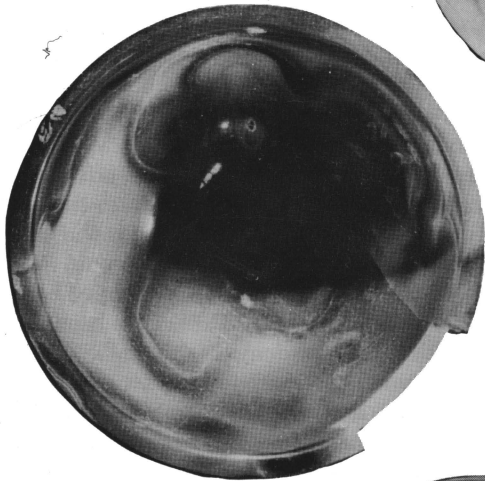
A



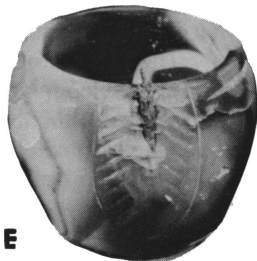
B



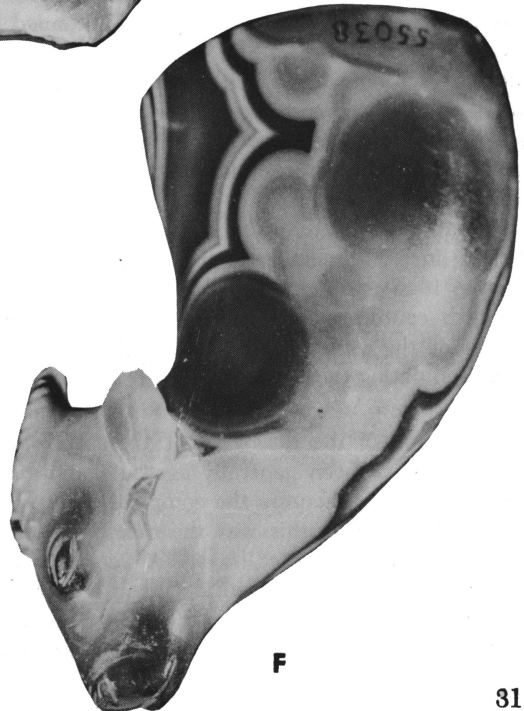
D



C



E



F



4. Agate bowl in Bog Farm Collection, England. Photo courtesy of the owner.



5. Sardonyx bowl in collection of Mr. Emmanuel Kaye. Photo courtesy of the owner.

an idea of their date,¹¹ except for a few potsherds which were considered of no interest at the time of their discovery, though they might have given a clue to the period.¹² The dating must, therefore, be based on stylistic criteria only. In the case of stone vases this is particularly difficult, as differing opinions indicate. Engelbach attributed the vases to the Graeco-Roman period,¹³ Lucas thought they were “. . . probably Roman . . .”.¹⁴ The shapes, however, can be paralleled in Egyptian vases of earlier periods. One may, for example, compare the round-bottomed bowl (C) with the bowl in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (see note 3), which is dated to the first half of the seventh century B.C. Other writers, therefore, in discussing two of the pieces, have given earlier dates. Adriani considers that the rhyton is Classical (fifth or fourth century B.C.) from his examination of the relationship of the calf's head to its neck.¹⁵ Berta Segall, in her discussion of the hemispherical bowl, assigns it to the Achaemenid-Egyptian period (fifth–fourth centuries B.C.).¹⁶ The most recent presentation of the vases as a group by Buehler follows Segall in dating the vases to this period.¹⁷

At the time of the discovery of these six vases, it seems to have been generally agreed that the Cairo Museum did not acquire the complete group. Engelbach believed that this was the case,¹⁸ and Lucas, describing the same set, says: “A very fine set of agate vessels . . . was found at Qift in Upper Egypt, of which six were acquired by the Cairo Museum and two (the largest) by a dealer.”¹⁹ We can now trace

the history of these two missing vases with some certainty. One of them is the Missouri bowl; the other is an agate bowl now in England, known as the Bog Farm bowl (Fig. 4).²⁰ The two bowls were sold together from the collection of King Farouk, and at the time of their sale the buyer was informed that they belonged with the set of vases in the Cairo Museum. Given this information about the two bowls, there can be little doubt that they are the missing vases, and consideration of their style, size and color makes the attribution even more certain.²¹

The Bog Farm bowl, which is similar in color to ours, is smaller and of a more elaborate shape.²² It stands on a slightly raised base from which its curved sides flare out gently to a vertical, offset rim separated from the body of the vase by three mouldings. The upper edge of the lip is flat, as is the case with the Missouri bowl and the Cairo vases. We may compare this bowl with a sardonyx bowl (Fig. 5) found in Rome in 1731.²³ This beautiful bowl in dark brown sardonyx with milky-white striations has a small base, curving sides and an offset rim. There are two grooves just below the lip and also at the junction of the rim and the body of the vase. Although more rounded in shape than the Bog Farm bowl, it is somewhat similar.

The six Cairo vases and the two vases which appear to belong with them should now be discussed as a group. All of the same material, agate, they are all on approximately the same scale. The Missouri bowl is the largest vase in the group; the Bog Farm bowl lies between the two largest Cairo vases. This

does not quite fit the information given by Lucas, that the two largest of the group were missing,²⁴ but one can readily imagine that he did not see the missing bowls himself. The group as a whole exhibits great variety in shape and treatment. The simplicity of the Missouri bowl accords well with the three bowls and the kalathos in the original set, whereas the more elaborate Bog Farm bowl may be placed with the rhyton and the simpulum.

The dating of the whole group remains a problem. The Missouri bowl is somewhat similar in shape to a tiny bowl in Karlsruhe, dated to the period of Ptolemy I, 305-284 B.C., or a little later.²⁵ If, however, the Cairo vases are to be dated as early as the fifth-fourth centuries B.C., then it would seem that the two new bowls should also be dated to that period. Dr. Buehler feels that both could have been made this early, despite the more elaborate profile of the Bog Farm bowl.²⁶ Lacking sufficient dated stone vases to use as parallels, we feel that there is still much work to be done on this group of vessels before a definite chronology can be reached.

It remains to be asked why these eight vases were buried in a deserted place in Upper Egypt. The burial spot seems to have been on a caravan route between the Nile and the Red Sea.²⁷ Engelbach guessed "that a traveller from the east, intending to sell the objects in Qift, buried most of them in a pot, just as he came in sight of the cultivation, at a spot easily recognizable, taking specimens in to Qift with him, and died or was killed before he could return to his cache."²⁸ Engelbach is probably correct in his guess only on one point. It is quite likely that the agate itself came from the east, from India. Agate has been found in Egypt but mostly in the form of pebbles,²⁹ whereas India is known to have been a source of agate for the ancient world.³⁰ The material, therefore, may have come from the East but it has been suggested that the carving of the vases was more likely to have been done in Egypt.³¹ Egypt, it seems, was a center for the production of vases in agate and other types of chalcedony, in the fifth and fourth centuries. In the Hellenistic period there must have been many workshops in the Near East but in the Roman Imperial period the center seems to have

moved to Rome.³² Most of the vases which have come down to us belong, in fact, to the Roman imperial period. Our vases, therefore, the Cairo set and the two new bowls, are important evidence for the workmanship of earlier periods.

LABIB HABACHI

Former Inspector of Antiquities, Egypt

JANE C. BIERS

University of Missouri

¹ Literary sources refer to them. See, for instance, Appian, *Civil Wars* xii. 115—two thousand vessels in onyx from the treasury of Mithridates at Talaria; Pliny, *Natural History* 36.59—onyx drinking vessels; 37.140—dishes of agate.

² Chalcedony is a fine-grained variety of quartz with a fibrous microstructure. The subvarieties of chalcedony are characterized by bands of different colors and degrees of translucency. C. Frondel, *Dana's System of Mineralogy III, Silica Materials* 7th ed. (New York and London 1962) 195-214 *passim*.

³ For the most recent work on chalcedony vases, see Hans-Peter Buehler, *Antike Gefaesse aus Chalcedonen* (Dissertation Wuerzburg 1966). For other examples not included in this work see John D. Cooney, "A Perfume Flask from Antiquity," *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 52 (1965) 45-46; agate aryballos and cup—A. Conze, *Allertuemer von Pergamon I*, 2 (Berlin 1913) 293, pl. 57, nos. 18, 19; agate bowl, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 21.300—Dows Dunham, *Royal Cemeteries of Kush I, El Kurru* (Cambridge 1950) 30, pl. 39 F; agate piriform aryballos (unpublished), Metropolitan Museum of Art 40.61.2, gift of Mrs. Edward S. Harkness, 1940, also cup fragment X.412 and bottle fragment X.413; onyx alabastron (unpublished), British Museum 69.2-5.6, also agate cup 60.9-28.6, and two chalcedony cups, 1923.4-1.1190 and 1923.4-1.1191; agate amphora (unpublished), The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore 41.204.

We would like to thank Dr. Buehler for his helpful suggestions. We also wish to thank Dr. John D. Cooney for calling to our attention the agate bowl in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and Mr. Andrew Oliver, Jr. for supplying us with most of the other examples mentioned in this article, as well as relevant information.

⁴ National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. No. C-1. In this chalice from Saint Denis, France, an ancient sardonxy cup is combined with medieval base, rim and handles in silver-gilt, set with precious stones. Five medallions embossed in gold decorate the base. C. Seymour, Jr., *Masterpieces of Sculpture from the National Gallery* (New York 1949) 171.

- ⁵ Acc. No. 60.12. Height 0.053-0.0545 m.; diameter of base 0.041 m., of rim 0.112 m. The vase is complete but two cracks extend down from the rim, which is chipped in places; there are two small fractured areas on the outer surface at the rim. No marks of grinding are visible.
- ⁶ The Department of Antiquities was exceptionally generous in the recompense awarded, but of course the value of these vases far exceeds what was paid.
- ⁷ *Journal d'entrée* (hereafter *J. E.*) nos. 55034-55039.
- ⁸ R. Engelbach, "A Set of Agate Vases" and "Notes of Inspection I-The Road to El-Quseir," *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* 31 (1931) 126-127 and 132-137, pl. 1. The *J. E.* nos. for four of the vases are incorrectly given by Engelbach as 53035, 6, 7, 9.
- ⁹ Engelbach, *op. cit.* 135.
- ¹⁰ A. Kalathos *J. E.* 55034. Height 0.077 m.; diameter of base 0.043 m.; of rim 0.091 m.
- B. Bowl *J. E.* 55035. Height 0.053 m.; diameter of rim 0.084 m.
- C. Bowl *J. E.* 55036. Height 0.057 m.; diameter of base 0.05 m.; of rim 0.10 m.
- D. Bowl *J. E.* 55037. Height 0.028 m.; diameter of base 0.036 m.; of rim 0.064 m.
- E. Simpulium *J. E.* 55039. Height 0.037 m., diameter of rim 0.035 m.
- F. Rhyton *J. E.* 55038. Length 0.09 m.
- ¹¹ A Roman lamp, Cairo Museum *J. E.* 55040, was found nearby but not actually with them.
- ¹² Engelbach, *op. cit.* 135.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* 127.
- ¹⁴ H. Lucas, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries*, 4th ed. rev. (London 1962) 387.
- ¹⁵ A. Adriani, "Rhyta," *Bulletin Société Royale d'Archéologie-Alexandrie* 33 (1939) 358, no. 3, fig. 9.
- ¹⁶ B. Segall, "Tradition und Neuschöpfung in der Fruehalexandrinischen Kleinkunst," *Berlin Winckelmannsprogramm* 119/120 (1966) 7-8.
- ¹⁷ Buehler, *op. cit.* 46.
- ¹⁸ Engelbach, *op. cit.* 135-136.
- ¹⁹ Lucas, *loc. cit.*
- ²⁰ Collection Bog Farm, Kent. We are grateful to the owner for the photograph and for permission to publish the vase.
- ²¹ In 1965-66, while on a lecture tour of the United States, Dr. Habachi visited Columbia, Missouri, and as soon as he saw the bowl in the Museum collection, was struck by its resemblance to the vases in Cairo. Without any knowledge at that time of the second bowl in England and of the history of the two bowls, he felt sure of the provenance of the Missouri bowl. In 1930 Dr. Habachi was beginning work as Inspector of Antiquities in Egypt and so has intimate knowledge of the Cairo vases and the circumstances of their finding.
- ²² Height 0.039 m.; diameter of rim 0.091 m.
- ²³ Height 0.051 m.; diameter of rim 0.102 m. Collection Mr. Emmanuel Kaye, The Croft, Hartley Wintney, Hampshire, England. We are indebted to Mr. Kaye for information about the bowl and for the photograph. The vase was found in the cemetery of Priscilla, Rome, in 1731 and presented to the Kircheriano Museum by the Marquis Capponi. A tooled brown leather case was made for the bowl in that year, reputedly in Florence. Some time later the bowl was removed from the Museum, and subsequently it was sold from the collection of J. P. Morgan (Parke-Bernet Sale, March 22-25, 1944, p. 27, lot 114, ill. p. 18).
- ²⁴ See above p. 28.
- ²⁵ A. Massner, "Kleine Achatschale," *Ruperto-Carola* 20 Vol. 43/44 (June 1968) 17-18. Dr. Buehler would like to date this vase slightly later.
- ²⁶ Letter of March 3, 1969.
- ²⁷ Segall, *op. cit.* 7.
- ²⁸ Engelbach, *op. cit.* 136.
- ²⁹ Lucas, *op. cit.* 387.
- ³⁰ Pliny, *Natural History* 37. 54. 140 "et in India inventae . . ."; Buehler, *op. cit.* 6-8.
- ³¹ Segall, *op. cit.* 7. We cannot tell whether the remainder of Engelbach's conjecture is correct, but it seems more likely that these eight vases represent someone's treasure hidden in time of danger.
- ³² Buehler, *op. cit.* 17, 20, 23, 39.