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***MORTARIA AT SCHEDIA (WESTERN DELTA, EGYPT)***

*Excavations at Schedia, an important center in the western Delta of Egypt, brought to light a very limited number of fragments of ceramic mortaria, imported from Tyrrhenian Central Italy and in one case from northern Syria. An Italian piece and the Syrian one bear stamps of some epigraphic interest. The mortaria found at Schedia are evaluated in the context of mortaria in Egypt.*

*Mortaria – Egypt – Potters' Stamps – Agathobulus – Ladas*

**1. Introduction**

The Greco-Roman town of Schedia is located about 40 km southeast of Alexandria in the Western Delta region of Egypt (Schedia. Alexandrias Hafenstadt am Kanopischen Nil: Forschungsprojekt der Universitäten Göttingen und Köln, viewed 30 December 2018 <[www.schedia.de](http://www.schedia.de)>). The historical sources make clear the importance of this city, which was located where a canal left the Canopic Nile (then the westernmost branch of the river) to bring fresh water to Alexandria and guarantee the metropolis' access to the Nile Valley. Excavations were undertaken there between 2003 and 2009 by a project under the auspices of the Universities of Göttingen and Cologne. This paper concerns a very small part of the ceramic record – the *mortaria*.

There is still some debate about the related questions of what should be included in the category of *mortaria* and what functions such vessels served. A major point of contention concerns vessels otherwise similar to undoubted *mortaria* but lacking trituration grits on the interior. It has been argued that vessels must have trituration grits to count as *mortaria* (Vallerin 1994: 172 and 184), but other scholars have expressed the contrary view, as, for instance, a rough fabric may have made them unnecessary (Swan 2005: 175). A recent overview states that the only universal attribute of a *mortarium* is an open form with a sufficiently robust wall or rim to be gripped firmly, while three more attributes may be present, but not necessarily so, although their absence can cast doubt on a vessel's status as a *mortarium* – trituration grits, a spout for pouring and a potter's stamp (Symonds 2012: 169). Such vessels were certainly used for specific functions rather than ordinary purposes and enjoyed a wider distribution than other coarse ware from the same production centers (Symonds 2012: 170-171). The need for them could be so felt

that they might be made by special order (Swan 2005: 176). Largely on the basis of literary sources and to some extent on that of figural representations, their primary function has long been considered to be grinding and pulverizing, in particular for making sauces and foodstuffs but also possibly for preparing other materials: e.g. pigments for wall-painting and clay or inclusions for pottery production (Baatz 1977: 149-150; Cramp, Evershed and Eckhardt 2011, 1340-1341; Pallecchi 2002: 34-39 (discussion) and 277-291 (Greek and Latin sources); Symonds 2012: 171; Γιαγκάκη 2008: 51-53). Mixing is, however, clearly also a function of these vessels, which indeed have been characterized as multi-purpose mixing bowls (Cramp, Evershed and Eckhardt 2011: 1341 and 1347; Hartley 1998: 213). Thus, one can speak of the elaboration of solid substances in connection with food preparation, the elaboration of crumbly or liquid substances in connection with food preparation, the elaboration of materials in connection with artisanal activities (Γιαγκάκη 2008: 50-70). Residue analysis has been carried out on fragments from British sites and one in northern Germany (Cramp, Evershed and Eckhardt 2011: 1341-1350; Symonds 2012: 171-172). The results indicate that these vessels were used regularly to process leafy plant and animal carcass products, the latter mainly from ruminants. The presence of dairy products on one site is considered exceptional. Their use for grinding cereals cannot be disproven, as cereals (like wine and oil) are difficult to detect, but processing cereals will not have been an important function. It cannot be said to what extent they were used for the elaboration of substances other than foodstuffs, such as cosmetics, using the same raw materials. In the light of these considerations, it seems unnecessary to distinguish between otherwise similar vessels with or without trituration grits, all the more so as *pelvis*, the alternative term suggested for the latter (Vallerin 1994: 172 and 184, followed

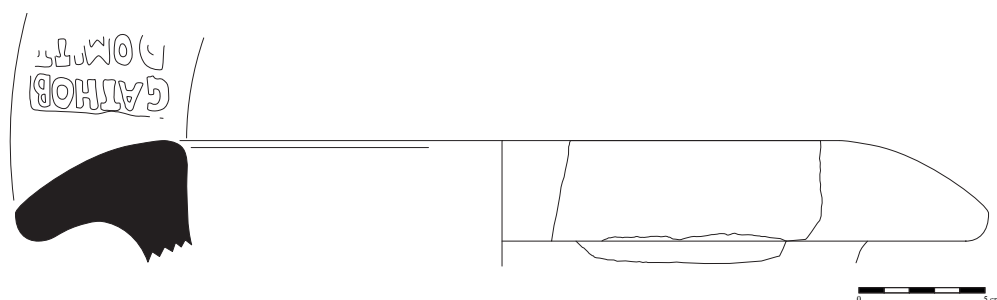


Fig. 1. Central Italian *mortarium* Dramont D2, rim sherd with stamp (stratigraphic unit 14195).

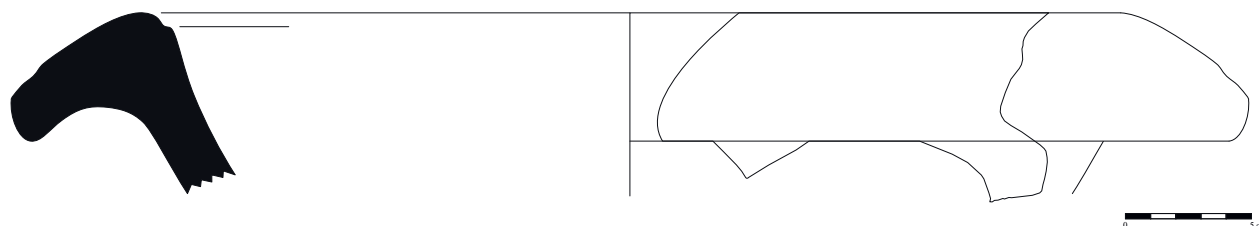


Fig. 2. Central Italian *mortarium* Dramont D2, rim sherd (stratigraphic unit 14072).

by Spanu 2011-2012: 241, nota 2), seems to be associated with the prosaic activity of washing (Pallecchi 2002: 38, nota 16). All these vessels will be called *mortaria* here, as is usual in the English-language literature.

Among more than 200,000 sherds found during the excavations at Schedia, only ten (belonging to no more than six individuals) can be attributed to *mortaria*. They are all imported, from two distinct origins.

## 2. The Central Italian *mortaria*

This group consists of three rim sherds (one without the lip), a base sherd and five body sherds. The two rim sherds that preserve the lip do not belong to the same vessel and come from different stratigraphic units in the same area (stratigraphic units 14072 and 14195). The base sherd was found in a stratigraphic unit in another area (9107). There are joins among the five body sherds, all from the same stratigraphic unit in a third area (5189), and they appear to belong to a single vessel. It cannot be said whether they come from the same vessel as the rim sherd without the lip, which was found in another stratigraphic unit in the same area (5242). An association between any of these and the base sherd or the other rim sherds is unlikely for stratigraphic reasons.

The group presents a pink fabric (7.5YR 7/3) that is very hard, fairly irregular in the break and rather rough in texture. It contains frequent red and dark gray inclusions ranging from small to large in size, as well as occasional small, clear ones. It can be attributed to Tyrrhenian Central Italy, corresponding to Italian White Ware in the (British) National Roman Fabric Reference Collection, which was used for *mortaria* (The National Roman Fabric Reference Collection: A Handbook, viewed 30 December 2018, <<http://romanpotterystudy.org/>

[nrfrc/base/index.php?GUID=&fabricCode=ITA%20WH](http://romanpotterystudy.org/nrfrc/base/index.php?GUID=&fabricCode=ITA%20WH)>).

The two rim fragments preserving the lip have broad, rounded hanging rims (fig. 1 and 2) and can therefore be attributed to the Central Italian production of *mortaria* of the type Dramont D2, a *mortarium* with a broad, rounded hanging rim, thick walls and a flat base (Pallecchi 2002: 46-53). The rim fragment that does not preserve the lip is compatible with this type, and the fragment of a flat base (fig. 3) should also belong to it, and it is very likely that the body sherds do also. In the area of Rome, this type of *mortarium*, called Olcese 12, is attested in post-Augustan contexts of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD (Olcese 2003: 105).

The rim sherd from stratigraphic unit 14195 (fig. 1) presents a Latin stamp with raised letters inside an impressed rectangle. The letters are in two rows, going from the inner edge of the flange to the outer one. Thus, the stamp was placed to the right of the spout (Pallecchi 2002: 79, Fig. 25). It was probably poorly impressed, and now its surface is degraded. Nevertheless, it is possible to propose a reading: [A]GATHOB[uli] / (Cn.) DOMIT(i) T(ulli).<sup>1</sup> Thus, the stamp attests *Agathobulos*, a slave of *Domitius Tullus*. This is very close to the text of a stamp in *lunula* known on bricks (CIL XV, 1002): AGATHOBULI (Cn.) DOMITI TULL(i) (Dressel 1891: 283 – for other stamps of *Agathobulus* see Dressel 1891: 80-81, n. 258-259, and 283-284, n. 1003; Steinby 1978: 244, n. 775). In the case of the stamp found on the *mortarium* at Schedia, there must have been an A at the beginning of the first line. There is probably too little space at the beginning of the second line for CN, the only letters that could possibly be integrated. The trace of the right edge of the stamp after the B excludes any further development to the right.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Silvia Pallecchi for her help with the reading.

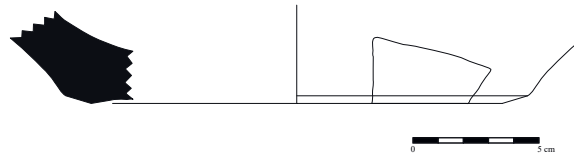


Fig. 3. Central Italian *mortarium* Dramont D2 (probably), base sherd (stratigraphic unit 9107).

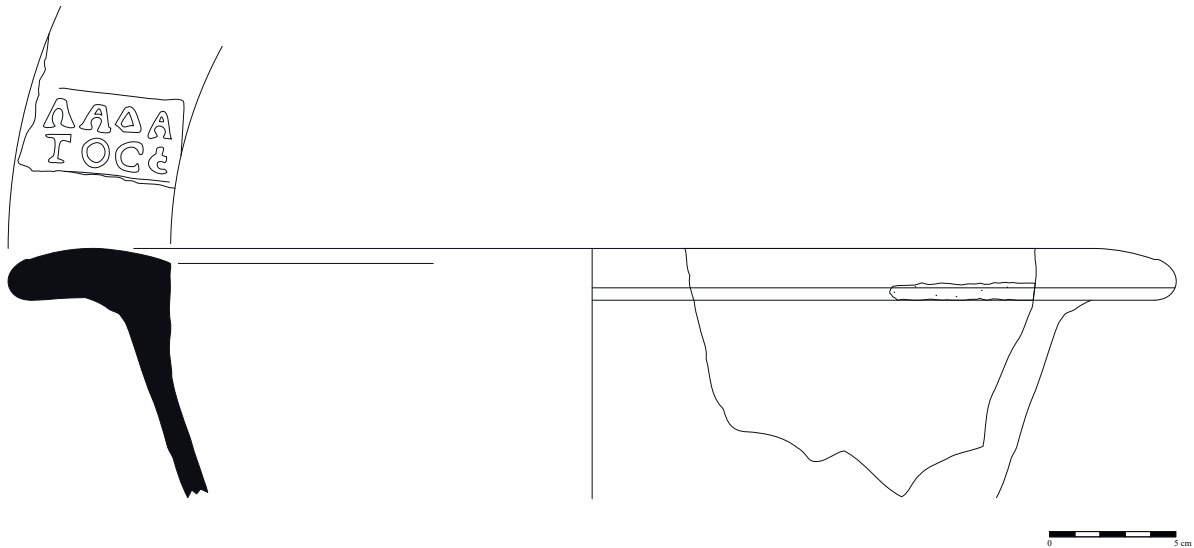


Fig. 4. North Syrian *mortarium*, rim sherd with stamp (stratigraphic unit 17047).

The outline of *Agathobulus*'s career can be reconstructed (Pallecchi 2002: 154, 159, 160). He is first attested as a slave of *Cn. Domitius Tullus*, when he appears to have a managerial function in the *figlina* and to be specialized in the production of building ceramics. He was freed during the time that the *figlina* belonged to *Domitia Cn. f. Lucilla*, *Tullus*' niece and adopted daughter, and continued to work as a manager. Historical sources provide dates for *Domitius Tullus* (Pallecchi 2002: 152). He was born somewhat before AD 42, when he and his brother *Lucanus* were adopted by *Cn. Domitius Afer*, the founder of the *figlina*. The two brothers owned the *figlina* jointly until *Lucanus*' death in 93. From then until his own death in AD 108, *Tullus* was the sole owner. Therefore, the stamp found at Schedia can be dated to the years between AD 93 and 108. It is noteworthy because it is the first testimony of *Agathobulus*' involvement in the production of *mortaria*.

This is perhaps not the first attestation in Egypt of a stamped *mortarium* from the *figlina* of the *Domitii*. A poorly legible stamp found at Medinet Madi in the Fayyum may contain DOMI in the second line associated with [C]ORNELIV in the first (Spanu 2015).

### 3. The Northern Syrian *mortarium*

Only one fragment, a rim sherd found in stratigraphic unit 17047 in still another excavation area, does not belong to the Central Italian group (fig. 4). Its fabric, shape and stamp

assure the fragment's attribution to a well-known group from northern Syria (for an overview with indications of previous bibliography see Hayes 1967; for updates Vallerin 1994 and Γιαγκάκη 2008). The fabric is red (2.5YR 4/6), very hard, irregular in the break and rough in texture, with many transparent, dark and white inclusions ranging in size from very small to large. The rim is broad and slightly downturned on a high wall. The stamp presents one of the names known on these vessels.

The definition of North Syrian group is well established in its main lines. It presents a single basic form, with a broad and slightly downturned rim provided with a small spout, a high flaring wall curving on the inside into a flat base (Hayes 1967: 337; Vallerin 1994: 172; Γιαγκάκη 2008: 44-46). The fabric is gritty and of a distinctive dark brown color (Mills and Beaudry 2007: 746; Blakely, Brinkman and Vitaliano 1992: 203-204 (with subgroups); Hayes 1967: 337-338; Vallerin 1994: 172; Γιαγκάκη 2008: 46-47 with a color image at εικ. 6). Ras el-Basit is known to be a center of production (Hayes 1967: 340-342; Vallerin 1994: 184; Γιαγκάκη 2008: 47-48), and there may be others in the same region (Vallerin 1994: 184; Γιαγκάκη 2008: 47-48; Blakely, Brinkman and Vitaliano 1992: 203-204). The stamps, mostly in Greek but also in Latin, appear, usually in the genitive, most often on two lines within a rectangle and can be associated with a *signum* at the beginning or end (Hayes 1967: 338-340; Vallerin 1994: 172; Γιαγκάκη 2008: 44-46). The group's distribution covers the eastern Mediterranean from Syria to Turkey, Cyprus and

Greece in one direction and along the Levantine coast to Egypt in the other, and there are occasional attestations as far away as Rome and the northwestern provinces (Hayes 1967: 341-342; Spanu 2011-2012: 251-252; Vallerin 1994: 174-180; Γιαγκάκη 2008: 49-50). The basic date range has been fixed between the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> centuries (Hayes 1967: 347; Hayes 1997: 80; Vallerin 1994: 180-184; Γιαγκάκη 2008: 48-49), with a suggested survival in a modified form as late as the 7<sup>th</sup> (Hayes 1997: 80; Swan 2005: 175; Γιαγκάκη 2008: 48-49; and not wholeheartedly Hartley 1998: 216, note 14). The transplantation of potters from the West, whether from Italy (Hayes 1967: 347) or from Dacia, Moesia and neighboring regions (Hartley 1998: 216, note 14), may have given rise to the production of *mortaria* in northern Syria, although Symonds (2012: 170) casts doubt on a Dacian/Moesian derivation, while accepting some sort of connection with earlier *mortaria* with Greek or Italian origins. It is not to be excluded that a transplantation took place in connection with the reconquest of Syria by Aurelian (Spanu 2011-2012: 249).

Our stamp is in incuse Greek letters within a rectangular frame on two lines running from the outer edge of the flange to the inner one: ΛΑΔΑ/ΤΟΣ followed by a *signum* (perhaps a stylized leaf). This is one of a limited number of names that occur on North Syrian *mortaria*, either in Greek or in the Latin stamp ALEXAN/DRILADA. Λαδᾶτος is interpreted as the genitive of Λάδας, an unusual formation, although male nicknames in -ᾶς with genitive in ᾶτος are attested on papyri in Egypt, especially in the Roman period (Mayser 1906: 252-253). Aside from the stamps on North Syrian *mortaria*, Ladas is not a common name. In Greek literature, it was remembered as the name of two champion runners at Olympia and became proverbially associated with nimbleness in Roman times (Benseler 1863-1870: 760). In epigraphy, Ladas appears on an inscription from Thessaly (Lameere 1939: 260) and on a funerary inscription from Syria (Jalabert and Mouterde 1929: 110). On the former, it refers to a hunting dog and is considered an appropriate name because of its proverbial association, while on the second, as on the *mortaria*, there is no obvious connection with nimbleness.

The Greek stamp has been found at Ras el-Basit, elsewhere in Syria and Palestine and on the northern coast of the Sinai Peninsula, while the Latin stamp is attested at Ras el-Basit, elsewhere in Syria, in Palestine, on Cyprus and in the region of Alexandria (Hayes 1967: 342-346; Jalabert and Mouterde 1953: 660; Vallerin 1994: 178, 180).

#### 4. The *mortaria* in the Egyptian context

It has been remarked that *mortaria* are more frequent on some sites or in some regions than elsewhere, and in Egypt and in general in the eastern Mediterranean ceramic *mortaria* are considered uncommon finds (Hayes 1967: 337; Hartley 1998: 211-214). A survey in 1998 indicated 45 stamped *mortaria* for all of Egypt (of which seventeen at Alexandria) compared to hundreds each in Switzerland and Belgium and thousands each in France and Britain (Hartley 1998: 212-213). The number of stamped *mortaria* known in Egypt has risen somewhat since then, with, for instance, the finds of a

Central Italian *mortarium* in the Fayyoun (Spanu 2015) and of two Central Italian *mortaria* (Spanu 2011-12: 241-246; Spanu 2014) and two North Syrian ones (Spanu 2011-12: 246-252) at Antinoupolis. Unstamped *mortarium* fragments are also known in Egypt: for example, two Italian ones at Coptos (Herbert and Berlin 2003: 106-107); two Italian ones, another imported one and one apparently of Egyptian production at Mons Claudianus (Tomber 2006: 133); three *mortaria* in an Egyptian alluvial fabric at Kom al-Ahmar in the Delta.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the number is still less than 70, including the Schedia pieces. A more complete survey of published and unpublished contexts would certainly garner more examples but would not contradict the rarity of *mortaria* in Egypt. Indeed many publications of ceramic assemblages make no mention of them.

A possible explanation for the rarity of ceramic *mortaria* in Egypt is that they were replaced by *mortaria* in other materials. In particular, it has been suggested that ceramic *mortaria* were frequent in the eastern Mediterranean until the Hellenistic period and gave way in Roman times to ones in stone and marble (Hayes 1967: 337; Hayes 1997: 80). The idea has met with some skepticism, however (Hartley 1998: 214), and indeed on British sites where stone *mortaria* are common they appear in addition to ceramic ones rather than as replacements of them (Cool 2005: 56). Schedia can offer little support for the hypothesis, as stone *mortaria* there are only slightly more common than ceramic ones, with ten individuals identified – six attributable to Spanu 1, one to Spanu 2 and three to Spanu 5 in terms of a recently proposed typology (Spanu 2017).

It has been asked why *mortaria* are discovered sometimes at great distances from their places of production in spite of their size and weight (e.g. Kreković 2004: 93). A definitive answer is impossible because of the many unknown factors (ranging from the specific use envisioned for *mortaria* on any given site to possible fiscal inducements (see Spanu 2011-2012: 251, note 21, for the latter). In some regions, such as the northwestern provinces, the appearance of *mortaria* is considered a sign of Romanization, specifically the adoption of Roman cuisine (Batz 1977: 152-155 – see also Cool 2005: 54, with further references; Symonds 2012: 169 and 198). This is rightly dismissed as a possibility in the East – *mortaria* were known and used there long before the arrival of the Romans and could perhaps be associated with Hellenization (Blakely, Brinkman and Vitaliano 1992: 207), and indeed *mortaria* must have been introduced to the Romans from the Greek world (Batz 1977: 154-155). In the case of Schedia, one can say only that the *mortaria* fit a known pattern of distribution that must have met some demand. Both Central Italian and North Syrian *mortaria* were already attested in Egypt. They apparently benefited from a trade route leading from Central Italy to Greece and then the Levant and from there to the mouth of the Nile and upriver (Pallecchi 2002: 52-53; Spanu 2011-2012: 25).

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Cristina Mondin for information about these *mortaria* that she is preparing for publication.



## 5. Conclusions

The *mortaria* from Schedia are important in several aspects. In a province in which so few *mortaria* are known, six new individuals enrich the file considerably. The two potters' stamps on the *mortaria* from Schedia are also significant epigraphically. The Central Italian one provides the first evidence of the involvement of *Agathobulus* in the production not only of bricks and tiles but also of *mortaria*. The North Syrian one is apparently the first attestation of the stamp in Egypt proper and the farthest from its place of origin.

They also give rise to questions. How is the rarity of *mortaria* in Egypt with an occasional presence there over the course of several centuries to be seen? Were *mortaria* used in Egypt for the preparation of foodstuffs or rather in some artisanal activity? Indeed, were they always used for the same purpose throughout the country and over time? If they were used for the preparation of foodstuffs, do they represent a certain limited desire for Greco-Roman cuisine? The scarcity of *mortaria* in a province such as Egypt could prove to be as instructive as their frequency in others.

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