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LOCAL COOKING WARES FROM THE WESTERN NILE DELTA, EGYPT (1ST– 3RD CENTURY AD)

Research conducted since the late 1990s in the western part of the Nile Delta, particularly in the city of Alexandria and its chôra*, by the Centre d'Études Alexandrines (CEAlex, CNRS) and the Mission Française des Fouilles de Taposiris Magna-Plinthine (IFAO, University of Paris-Nanterre, HiSoMA, CNRS) as well as on the site of Buto/Tell el-Fara'in, located further south on the eastern side of Rosetta branch of the Nile, by the Mission Française de Bouto (IFAO, University of Paris-Nanterre) since 2001, has produced a remarkable amount of ceramic material from both consumption and production contexts. Based on pottery assemblages found on different, recently excavated sites, this paper aims to present local cooking wares produced during Early Roman times (1st-3rd century AD) on the western side of the Delta. This presentation will lay particular stress on the typology of these Egyptian productions – such as cooking pots and cooking pans – and their relationships with imported types, in order to investigate the influence of these importations on local production and to consider the economic vitality of the Western Delta area.*

Egypt – Nile Delta – cooking wares – cooking pots – cooking pans

1. Introduction

The appearance of Egyptian cooking ware dates back to the Ptolemaic period, in that, the forms identified as such are in fact very limited in the Egyptian repertoire prior to Alexander the Great's conquest of the country (Ballet and Południkiewicz 2012: 65). The category of culinary vessels including the ensemble of receptacles designed for cooking (cooking pots, cooking pans and casseroles) is particularly well represented in Egyptian archaeological contexts of the Early Roman Empire. Delta productions are characterised by the almost systematic use of fine textured alluvial clay (from Nile silt) containing plenty quartz and mica and most probably chosen for its heat-resistant qualities. The use of this type of clay, which had already begun by the end of the Ptolemaic era (Ballet and Harlaut 2001: 319; Harlaut 2002: 273; Harlaut and Hayes 2018: 114), appears to become standard throughout the period and probably results from a technical choice that was directly linked to the very function of these receptacles. Surface treatment consists of a generally careful smoothing and when a clay-based coating is applied it is most often a fine matt slip, orange or red to brownish-red in colour. From the morphological point of view, Early Roman period forms are largely influenced by the preceding period, representing both a continuation and an evolution of the older models and thus sitting in direct descent from the forms that make up the traditional cooking wares of the Hellenistic era (*chytrai*, *caccabai*, *lopades* and *tagenon)*. Certain forms produced during the Early Empire, which display strong similarities to receptacles attested in other parts of the Mediterranean basin, are quite well represented within the archaeological contexts of the Egyptian Delta.

2. An introduction to the different sites and contexts

The ceramic material presented in this article comes from three sites located in the western part of the Nile Delta that have recently been the subject of ceramological studies (**fig. 1**).

The first of these is the former Diana Theatre, which is situated in the centre of present-day Alexandria and was excavated by the Centre d'Etudes Alexandrines (CEAlex) between 1994 and 1997 (Empereur 1995: 743-747, Empereur 1996: 959-970; Rifa Abou El-Nil 2009: 374). This intervention revealed the remains of a residential zone dating to the first centuries of the Empire and characterised by the presence of wealthy houses. One of these, The House of Medusa, featured a floor paved with seven mosaics, whose occupation dated to the 2nd century AD (Elaigne 1998: 75; Guimier-Sorbets 1998: 117).

Further west, the site of Taposiris Magna is located some 45 km from Alexandria on a ridge of sandstone, the *taenia*, between the Mediterranean Sea and the shores of Lake Mariout (Boussac 2009: 125). This lakeside site, part of Alexandria's hinterland, has been excavated since 1998 by the *Mission Française des Fouilles de Taposiris Magna-Plinthine*, led by M.-F. Boussac (University of Paris-Nanterre) and then from 2017 by B. Redon (IFAO, HiSoMA, CNRS). Between 2003 and 2004, excavations were conducted in the area of the lakeshore harbour, and of a bridge and its environs (Sector 4) by M. El-Amouri and revealed occupation levels of the Early Roman Empire (1st-2nd century AD) (Boussac 2009: 132; Boussac and El Amouri 2010).

Lastly, the ancient site of Buto, present-day Tell el-Fara'in, sits approximately 15 km from the Rosetta branch of the Nile, to the north-west of the town of Kafr el-Sheikh.

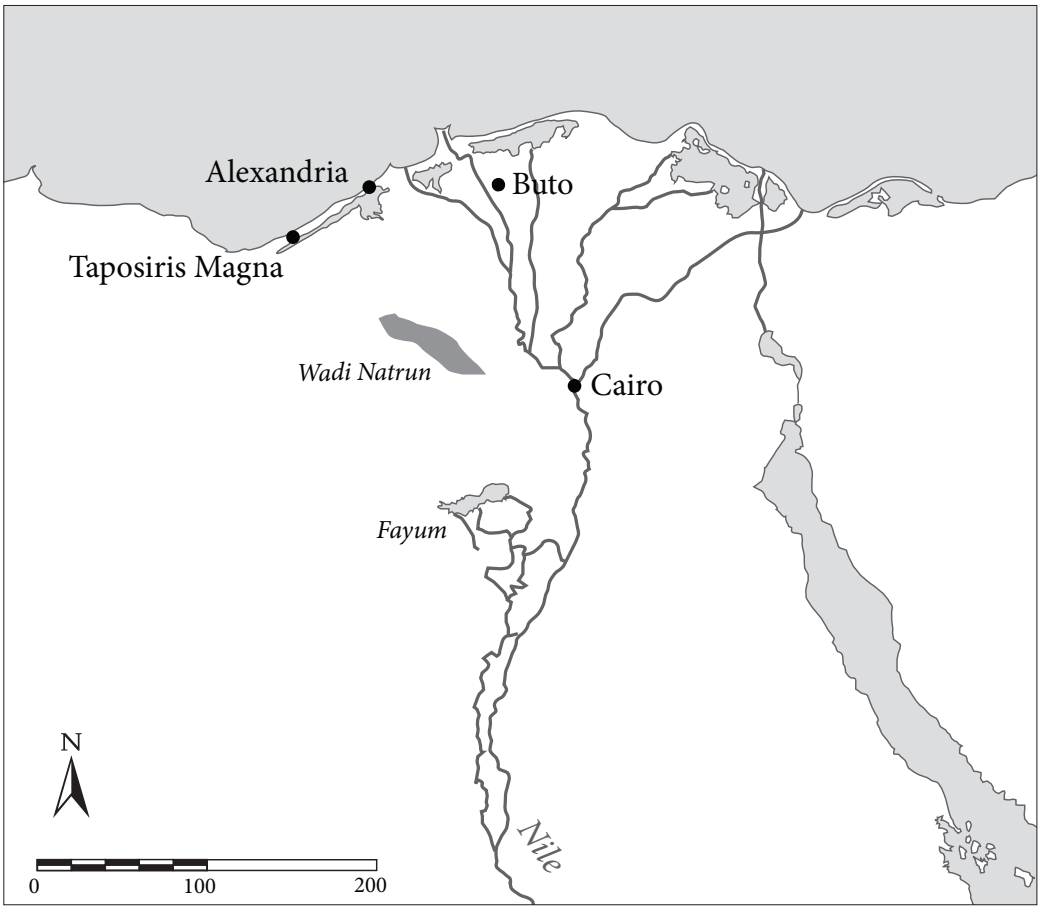


Fig. 1. Map of Lower Egypt indicating locations of the three sites.

Within a concession held by the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo (DAIK), P. Ballet (University of Paris-Nanterre) has led the Mission Française de Bouto since the beginning of the 2000s in research into the latest phases of the urban area (Ballet et al. 2011: 77). Between 2001 and 2006, work was mainly concentrated on the recording and excavation of pottery workshops, and the study and characterisation of the ceramic productions. Indeed, the site of Buto was an important centre of industry involving a multitude of pottery workshops manufacturing both fine and common ware dated to the Early Roman Empire (Ballet et al. 2011: 77). In 2003, a workshop that produced common and cooking ware (Sector P3) around the 3rd century AD was unearthed under the direction of G. Lecuyot and A. Schmitt (Lecuyot 2018: 899-900).

The ceramic assemblages discovered on these three sites were composed of a large percentage of fragments of common and cooking wares. Thus, this material provided an opportunity to conduct a comparative study of cooking receptacles from different contexts (domestic and workshop) that were manufactured and circulated in the Western Delta during the Early Roman period (1st-3rd century AD). Within this paper, it has been chosen to concentrate primarily upon receptacles that display morphological similarities with productions attested within the Roman Empire and distributed around the Eastern Mediterranean at this period.

3. Cooking pots

Cooking pots produced in Egypt throughout the Early Roman Empire, most probably directly inspired by older models of Greek origin, display a large typological variety. The repertoire of this period is thus characterised by numerous variations in the shape of the rim, the neck and the body, as well as in their dimensions. These vessels quite frequently have symmetrical vertical handles and the bottom is systematically rounded, most probably in order to ensure optimal heating. Among the productions that have been identified in the Western Delta, certain types present great similarities to receptacles distributed around the Eastern Mediterranean.

Cooking pots with an elongated and widely flared rim, a globular or oblong ribbed body (**fig. 2, 1** and **2**) constitute a particularly frequent group within all the assemblages studied on these three sites. According to the dating of the contexts in which they are found, it would appear that they were produced in the Western Delta from the end of the 1st or beginning of the 2nd century AD until the first half of the 3rd, without the general form displaying any variations or notable changes. The form of these receptacles, and more particularly the treatment of the rim, more or less recalls the *caccabai* of the Hellenistic period. This type, which is represented in the archaeological contexts of the Diana site in Alexandria as well as at Taposiris Magna, also appears

as one of the productions of the workshop sector P3 at Buto (Lecuyot 2018: 902, fig. 3, 905) (**fig. 2, 1** and **2**). Indeed, it is particularly frequent in this latter site where such flared-rim pots represent more than a quarter of the cooking pots produced in this workshop (Lecuyot 2018: 902). The presence of these receptacles is also attested on other sites of the Nile Delta, such as Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria (Majchereck 2008: fig. 10, 45), Kom el-Qady (Coulson 1996: nº 33 type F; Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009: KKP5, 321, fig. 113, 323) and Kom Abu Billu, and they are also found among the presumed local productions of certain Upper Egyptian sites, such as, for example, Mons Claudianus (Tomber 2006: Type 28, 77, fig. 1.29 nos. 358-359, 79) and Elephantine (Gempeler 1992: Abb. 103 Nr. 10, K419). These cooking pots, so frequent in Egyptian contexts, thus present a general morphology that is similar to wide-mouth cooking pots that are well attested at other points of the Mediterranean (Argos: Abadie-Reynal 2007: pl. 56 fig. 361.1-361.2, 214-215; Thasos: Abadie-Reynal and Sodini 1992: 37, CC2, fig. 15; Sparta: Bailey 1993: 248, n° 194; Ostia: Carandini and Panella 1973: 141, n° 186, pl. 29, 203, n° 353, pl. 44; Knossos: Hayes 1983: 122-123, n° 58 - 64, fig. 5; Sackett et al. 1992: 123, D3, 13, pl. 174, 237, D4, 32, pl. 177, 243, R1, 7, pl. 184, 253, U76, pl. 194; Isthmia: Peppers 1979: 197, type A176, fig. 122; Athens: Robinson 1959: pl. 11 J55-J56, 56; Berbati-Limnes in Argolid: Wells 1996: 304-305, n° 19, fig. 56; Corinth: Williams and Zervos 1985: 65, n° 29, pl. 12; Knidos: Doksanalti 2010: 770, fig. 3, 775, type CW-III) and whose production is of Aegean origin (Waksman and Lemaître 2010: 783, fig. 5, 788). According to J. W. Hayes, these forms correspond to an Aegean production (Hayes 2003: fig. 19, no. 201, 481-482) that appears at the very end of the 1st century AD and gradually disappears during the second half of the 3rd century AD (Abadie-Reynal 2007: 215), even though a few examples are still found much later (Doksanalti 2010: 769).

A second variant of the cooking pot with flared rim has a lip bevelled to the exterior and an ovoid ribbed body: it is only attested in the productions of Sector P3 at Buto (Lecuyot 2018: 902, fig. 5, 905). The rim is flared while the lip is widened and bevelled to the exterior, and there is a pronounced inner ridge. The neck is concave at its base and the ribbed body is most often ovoid (**fig. 2, 3**). This form, which was produced at Buto and is occasionally attested at different sites in Egypt, such as Tell el-Maskhuta in the Eastern Delta (Holladay 1982: fig. 9 pl. 32, 141) and Mons Claudianus in the Eastern Desert (Tomber 2006: type 53, 85, fig. 1.31 n° 411), can be compared with similar receptacles found at Paphos (Hayes 2003: n° 18 fig. 187, 480). These productions of presumed Cypriot origin are also dated to between the 1st and the first half of the 2nd century AD (Hayes 2003: 479). In addition, such shapes are also common in Syria in the 3rd century AD where they are presumed to be of local origin (Vokaer 2011: cooking pots types A2 and A3; Vokaer 2014: figure 4: 5, 42, 43).

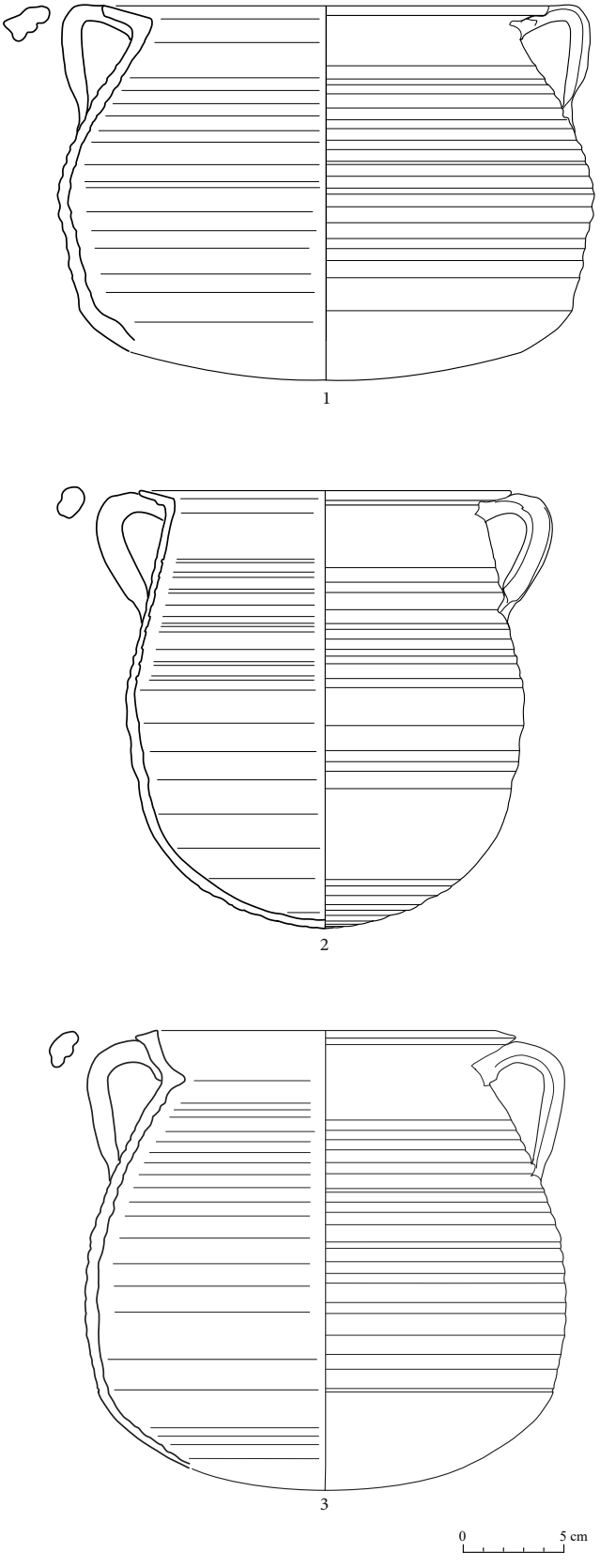


Fig. 2. Central Cooking pots produced in the Buto workshop (Sector P3); 1. Cooking pot with flared rim and globular body (P3 US2.4); 2. Cooking pot with flared rim and oblong body (P3 US4.3); 3. Cooking pot with flared rim and bevelled lip (P3 US2.6). Drawings and CAD: Mission Française de Bouto.

4. Cooking pans or oven dishes

A second category of culinary receptacles is composed of a series of shallow open forms with a slightly flared, angled

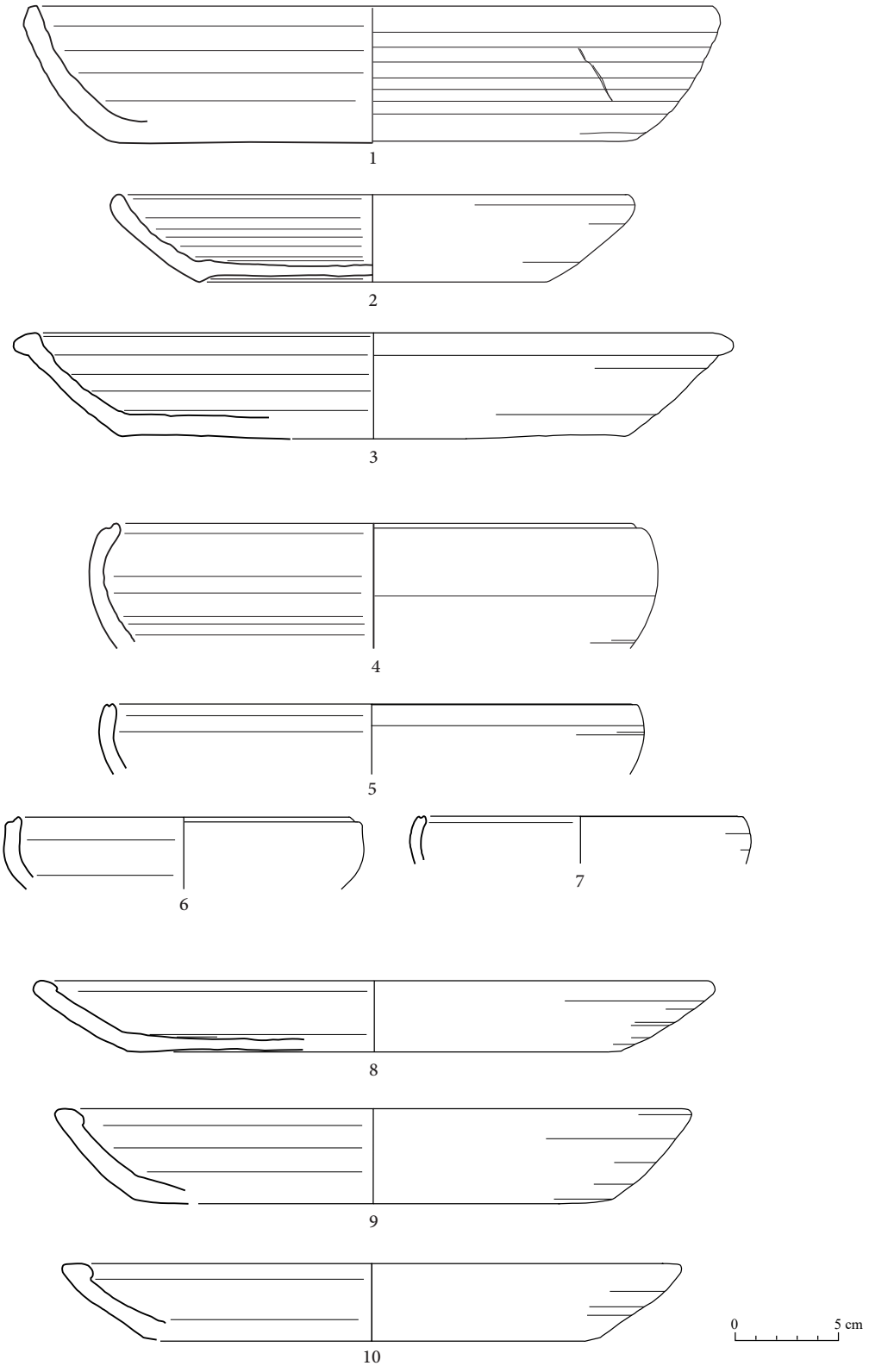


Fig. 3. Cooking pans or oven dishes. 1. Cooking pan with plain rounded rim from Sector P3 in Buto (P3 US1nc.1); 2. Cooking pan with plain rounded rim from Sector 4 in Taposiris Magna (440.1); 3. Cooking pan with plain rounded rim (variant) from Sector 4 in Taposiris Magna (441.19); 4. Cooking pan with grooved lip from Sector P10 in Buto (P10 1231.7); 5-7. Cooking pans with grooved lip from Sector 4 in Taposiris Magna (466.7.11, 440.9, 456.8); 8-10. Cooking pans with thickened lip from Diana site in Alexandria (4315.1.2.2, 4383.1.1.6, 4383.2.8). Drawings and CAD: Mission Française de Bouto (1) and author (2-10).

or convex wall, a low carination and a flat or slightly curved bottom (Bats 1988: 69). These cooking pans of Egyptian manufacture are widespread in all Egyptian contexts from the end of the Hellenistic period and the beginning of the Roman Empire. They are probably derived from Hellenistic pans of the *tagenon* and *patina* type and may have been influenced by models in circulation within the Mediterranean basin since the early beginning of the 1st century BC (Ballet 2017: 68-69; Hayes 2000: 291). The locally produced receptacles very often display traces of burning on the bottom, but also on the lip. Thus, they may have been used both as a cooking pan and a lid (Ballet 2017: 69). In all probability, the productions identified in the north-west Delta region were influenced by Italic cooking pans in circulation in the Mediterranean basin, and one of the most common local forms, with a plain rounded lip, might correspond to the Pompeian Red Ware type (Goudineau 1970: 170). This form is in fact particularly frequent in Sector P3 at Buto, where it was part of the production (**fig. 3, 1**). Numerous misfired fragments of this type have been collected in this sector and there is no doubt about the production of this type in the workshops of Buto. These pans are characterised by a large diameter (35 cm on average) and shallow depth. The lip is plain and rounded, and the wall is angled or slightly convex with light ribbing on the external surface and turning lines apparent on the inside. The discovered examples can be dated to between the end of the 2nd century and the end of the 3rd century AD. Other local variants of this type of pan with a rounded and thickened lip dated to the 1st-2nd century AD are also attested in the contexts of the harbour zone (Sector 4) at Taposiris Magna (**fig. 3, 2-3**).

Cooking pans with convex wall and grooved lip (**fig. 3, 4-7**), seemingly inspired by the *orlo bifido* type of Italic origin, are also attested in Alexandria, Taposiris Magna and Buto. A few examples fitting this category were discovered in contexts related to the dredging of the channel in the harbour zone of Taposiris Magna (Sector 4) and on the Diana, Cricket Ground (Hayes and Harlaut 2002: no. 25, 111, fig. 59, 127) and Gabbari (Lamarche 2003: 138, fig. 37 pl. 8, 173) sites in Alexandria. However, while other examples have been found in the bath sector of Buto (P10), their presence has not to date been attested in the workshop sector of the site (P3). These receptacles are characterised by the existence of different modules. Thus, the diameter of the examples from Taposiris Magna varies between 16 and 17 cm, whereas those found in the contexts at Alexandria and Buto measure respectively 24 and 25 cm. The lip of such receptacles bears a shallow but noticeable groove that is sometimes off-centre. Their diameter is considerably smaller than the Italic prototypes distributed around the Eastern Mediterranean from the late 2nd century BC (Hayes 2000: 291). We have recorded the presence of a few examples of Italic origin in Alexandrian contexts (Hayes and Harlaut 2002: no. 27, 105, fig. 28, 121), which might come from the Tyrrhenian coast in the region of Latium, although the majority of productions seem to originate in Campania. These productions appear to have been spread around the Eastern Mediterranean from the 2nd century BC onwards. Local copies gradually appear at different points in the region between the 1st century BC and the course of the 2nd century AD (Hayes 2000: 291). The Delta examples are therefore relatively late, dating to a time period between the end of the 1st century AD and the first half of the 2nd century AD. Thus, they could represent a distant imitation of the Italic *orlo bifido* type.

And finally, the large pans with a rounded lip thickening to the inside, and sloping walls (**fig. 3, 8-10**) are well attested on the three sites. The rim of these receptacles is characterised by a more or less thickened lip of rounded section and emphasised by a more or less obvious incision on the inner surface. The wall is smooth and angled, and its junction with the bottom is systematically marked by a slight bulge on the inner surface. The base is flat and quite irregular. This form is very well attested in the 1st century AD levels in Alexandria, particularly on the Diana site but also among the archaeological material from Gabbari necropolis (Lamarche 2003: pl. 14, fig. 72, 179), and also that of the Majestic site in slightly earlier levels dated to the end of the 1st century BC (Ballet 2017: MAJ 517, 69, pl. 7). Further examples have also been identified on other Egyptian sites, such as Tell el-Maskhuta, (Holladay 1982, n° 11, pl.32, 141) Tebtynis (Ballet, Południkiewicz 2012: 57, pl. 12 n° 159) Mons Porphyrites (Tomber 1992: 141-142, fig. 3.6; Tomber 2007: fig. 6.10 n° 116), and Mons Claudianus (Tomber 2006: fig. 1.47, 123, type 98, 124) in later levels dated to the 2nd century AD. The slope of the walls recalls that of certain cooking receptacles with angled walls in a direct line of descent from *tagenon* and *patina* types (Rotroff 2006: 188-189). Nonetheless, the treatment of the lip evokes that of the large pans with inner lip of the Hellenistic period that were well distributed throughout the Mediterranean. They could also be compared with the similar cooking pans that are frequently attested in Corinth from the 1st century AD (Slane 1986: 305, fig. 18, 281).

5. Conclusion

In the Early Imperial period, the cooking receptacles produced in the western Nile Delta evolved in continuity with the cooking pottery of the Ptolemaic era, which were themselves descendants of Greek models in circulation around the Mediterranean. The repertoire of Egyptian cooking ware gradually changed during the Roman period, moving bit by bit away from Hellenistic forms and apparently integrating common forms of the Roman world.

Indeed, from the beginning of the Early Roman Empire, the influence of certain imported forms is clearly noticeable within the repertoire of Egyptian ceramics. While this phenomenon mainly concerned certain categories, such as local productions of fine walled pottery and amphorae, it also affected the repertoire of cooking ware. Thus, flared rim pots, so frequent in Egyptian contexts of the Early Roman Empire, present, from a morphological point of view, certain similarities with Aegean types. Likewise, *patina*-type flat-bottomed cooking pans (oven dishes) display form characteristics that are close to those of Italic models in circulation in the Mediterranean basin and distributed around the Eastern Mediterranean (Ballet 2017: 68-69). This Mediterranean influence on the productions of the Western Delta could be explained by the geographic location of this region, and

its permeability to trade in merchandise and goods, and it is thus unsurprising to note that local potters were inspired by imported ceramics and integrated them into the native repertoire (Peignard-Giros 2007: 217).

Nevertheless, we should note that imported cooking receptacles are not always well represented in the ceramic assemblages of the western Nile Delta. In addition, the adoption of cooking forms common to the Mediterranean basin into the repertoire of productions attested in this region of Egypt might also be understood as the presence of a sphere of Mediterranean cultural influence and of a common evolution of cooking receptacles and their use during the Early Roman Empire, which was experienced at different points around the Mediterranean basin (Peignard-Giros 2007: 210).

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