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ASWAN WARE IN TYRRHENIAN CENTRAL ITALY

Aswan Ware is widely attested but nowhere frequent in Egypt outside its region of origin. In the Mediterranean and beyond, products of Aswan (mostly fine wares and Aswan Flasks) have been identified on a number of sites, often as single items. The discovery of thirteen pieces of Aswan Ware on three sites of varying dates in Tyrrhenian central Italy – Ostia, Rome and Lugnano in Teverina – suggests that Aswan Ware may be a recurring but unrecognized, minor presence there and perhaps elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

Aswan Ware – Aswan – Ostia – Rome – Lugnano in Teverina

1. Introduction

With the term “Aswan Ware”, we intend the coarse ware, cooking ware and amphorae produced by workshops in the region of Aswan, ancient Syene, (Ballet et al. 1991: 140-143; Katzfäger 2014: 597-598) using distinctive kaolinitic fabrics. These are usually described as pinkish-yellow, hard, gritty with red and other inclusions and very often present a thin, matt slip (usually reddish) that does not always adhere well (Adams 1964: 130, 160; Ballet 2002: 89-90; Dixneuf 2012: 142-143; Gempeler 1992: 20-21; Aston 2007: 430). In recent years, much work has been done at Aswan on ceramic fabrics (Katzfäger, Peloschek and Rembart 2016; Ownby and Brand 2019: 380-381). The publication of a specific monograph on ceramic fabrics resulting from one project is awaited, but preliminary results with color photographs are already available (Rembart 2020: 28-35; also Rembart and Betina 2021). Two groups concern us here – Aswan Pink Clay and mixed fabrics (Rembart 2020: 31). For the former, the typical fabric is a natural mix of kaolinitic clay and Nile silt, with an irregular to smooth break, a large component of iron oxide (responsible for the red color) and readily visible inclusions of rounded quartz and orange-red claystone, as well as some white ones, a few volcanic black ones and very occasional mica particles. There is also a very fine, light pinkish gray version with a very smooth break and reddish orange inclusions that are barely visible to the naked eye, as well as black ones, quartz and clay pellets. The mixed fabrics consist of mixtures of Aswan Pink Clay and Nile silt, with either the kaolinitic or the Nile silt component prevailing. They resemble Aswan Pink Clay, and according to Rembart the Aswan Pink Clay and mixed fabrics cannot be distinguished by eye.

Aswan Ware is related to fine wares inspired by Mediterranean sigillata and red-slip wares – Egyptian Red-Slip Ware A/

Group O (Hayes 1972: 387; Rodziewicz 1976: 54) and Egyptian Red-Slip Ware A Variant/ Group W (Hayes 1980: 531; Rodziewicz 1976: 61) – made from the same kaolinitic fabrics and attested mostly in the late antique period but dating to as early as the Augustan period (Gempeler 1992: 56; Hayes 2015; Rodziewicz 1976: 55-56).

Traditionally, Aswan Ware was seen as arising under Roman influence and indeed perhaps with the direct participation of military potters (McNally and Schunk 2000: 96-97), and there seems to be no doubt that its production was largely a Roman and later phenomenon (Ballet 2001: 115 and 121; Ballet 2002: 89; Katzfäger, Peloschek and Rembart 2016: 731). Earlier initial dates have been proposed, however. Rodziewicz (1992: 107) argued for a date to be determined in the Ptolemaic period for the beginning of the use of kaolinitic clay, although most Hellenistic pottery at Aswan was made in Nile silt clay. Ballet (2002: 89) also opts generically for the Hellenistic period, although she specified elsewhere the end of the Hellenistic period (Ballet 2001: 115 and 121). Katzfäger, Peloschek and Rembart (2016: 731) indicate its introduction generically in the Ptolemaic period with an increase in importance in the Roman period. The most specific indications are that kaolinitic and mixed fabrics were used from the 2nd century BCE, although they gained popularity only in the late Ptolemaic or early imperial period (for the main Aswan Pink Clay variant: High-Steskal, Peloschek and Rembart 2016a; for the finer variant of Aswan Pink Clay: High-Steskal, Peloschek and Rembart 2016b; for mixed fabrics: High-Steskal, Ownby and Rembart 2018; for these fabrics in general also Rembart 2020: 33).

The typology for Aswan Ware in Gempeler (1992), of which an interesting discussion is found in McNally and Schunk (2000: 98-113), continues to be used, although he disposed often of scant or less than satisfactory dating

evidence (Martin-Kilcher and Wininger 2017: 3-4, 255). Aston (2007: 430-432) offers a useful overview of Aswan amphorae, using Gempeler's typology for them. A recent publication, however, proposes a new typology (Rembart 2020). It has rightly been observed (Martin-Kilcher and Wininger 2017: 3) that the work by Rodziewicz (2005) is best used for comparanda. The repertoire of Aswan Ware consists of utilitarian vessels ranging from table, storage and cooking wares to amphorae and so-called Aswan Flasks.

Aswan Flasks constitute a particular group of pottery with an unusual and easily recognizable shape, consisting of two smooth, parabolic parts joined together to form a shape recalling an American football with the addition of a cylindrical neck without handles (Bailey 2011: 173). Vessels of this shape, often called kegs or also egg-shaped bottles among other terms and associated particularly with the southern oases, began to be produced before Ptolemaic times in the Late Period or even earlier and continue to the present day (Aston 2007: 441-442; Soto Marín 2019: 193). The earliest archaeological evidence specifically for Aswan Flasks dates to the mid-4th century (Bailey 2011: 177). Bailey (2011: 174-179) reviews the archaeological evidence for these vessels, which occur sometimes in Egyptian Red-Slip Ware A but more often in Aswan Ware, and the papyrological references for *omphokera/omphakera*, with which he identifies them, and concludes that they were used from the mid-4th century to most of the 5th.

As amphorae and Aswan Flasks are transport containers rather than trade goods in their own right, one must ask what their contents were. Aswan amphorae are often considered to be wine containers (e.g., Gempeler 1992: 52, 53, 55, 191; Martin-Kilcher and Wininger 2017: 279). However, two recent publications (Hepa et al. 2018; Rembart 2020: 24) prefer to remain cautious. Bailey considers Aswan Flasks to be wine containers as the title of his article indicates, and he argues in favor of their identification with vessels mentioned in papyri called *omphoreka* or *omphareka* that have to do with wine (Bailey 2011: 178-180). On the other hand, Hayes (2008: 93) suggests merely that Aswan Flasks were containers for a special product.

[AM]

2. Aswan Products in Egypt

Kaolinitic products from Aswan were distributed widely throughout Egypt from an early date in their production (Ballet 2001: 121; Katzjäger 2014: 598). It has even been suggested that Aswan was a major supplier of pottery to the whole country, favored by the ease of shipment northward down the Nile (McNally and Schrunck 2000: 97). Alexandria, where Egyptian Red-Slip Ware A is well known, may have served as a redistribution center for it toward sites in the western Delta, such as Kellia (Ballet 1990: 46; Dvůřák Schrunck 2003: 92, note 14).

A certainly incomplete review of Egyptian sites outside the region of Aswan for which statistics are available tempers the idea that Aswan Ware was important throughout Egypt (Martin 2017: 866). In Upper Egypt, it accounts for less than 1%

of the diagnostic sherds at Coptos (Herbert and Berlin 2003: 133). At Mons Claudianus in the Eastern Desert, a place with no pottery production of its own, Aswan amphorae make up between 0,1% and 0,2% of the amphorae overall in a count of rims, bases and handles (Tomber 2006: 205). Other forms there also come from Aswan, especially among the thin-walled wares, and make up between 0,8% and 4,6% of the pottery in a count of rims, bases and handles (Tomber 2006: 25-27). Percentages are not given for Pelusium, the port at the mouth of the easternmost branch of the Nile, but the presence of Aswan products – fine wares, cooking wares and transport vessels in the form of kegs – is considered to attest a weak but regular flow of goods from the region of Aswan (Dixneuf 2012: 56). At Schedia in the western Delta, a river port serving Alexandria, fine wares, coarse and cooking wares and transport vessels are all attested from the Ptolemaic period onward (Martin 2017). The last appear only anecdotally, making up less than 0,01% of the transport vessels. The coarse and cooking wares range from less than 1% to more than 2% of the utilitarian vessels. Fine wares from Aswan rise to more than 15% of the fine wares in the 5th and 6th centuries. Fine wares from Aswan and utilitarian Aswan Ware do not necessarily appear in parallel. At Wadi Natrun, the monastic settlement in the Western Desert, Egyptian Red-Slip Ware A and A Variant prevailed over the previously dominant African Red-Slip Ware and other imported fine wares in the 7th century (Konstantinidou 2013: 58; Konstantinidou 2015: 240), but the discovery of an Aswan amphora is considered quite rare (Konstantinidou 2010: 952). The former may be present but not the latter, as, for example, in the area of the Mareotis, immediately to the south and west of Alexandria, (Tomber and Thomas 2011: 42). At Kom al-Ahmer-Kom Wasit in the Delta, only Aswan fine ware appears in a recent publication (Mondin 2019: 89-90), although fragments of thin-walled ware and a painted cup have been found in other contexts there (Cristina Mondin, personal communication).

One gains the impression that, while widely attested, Aswan Ware is not common on Egyptian sites outside its region of origin. For the most part, it probably accompanied non-ceramic goods originating from the region of Aswan or farther south (Ballet et al. 1991: 143), although cooking vessels may have been desirable in their own right because of their good resistance to thermal shock (Ballet 2001: 121). It is unlikely to have been a question of wine, as Aswan amphorae are distributed mostly within the region and are rare on workshop sites there (Ballet et al. 1991: 143).

[AM]

3. Aswan Products outside Egypt, in the Mediterranean and Beyond

Dixneuf (2012: 56) supposes that the presence of pottery from Aswan at Pelusium is probably to be associated with its export into the eastern and western Mediterranean. If that is true at Pelusium, it may also hold for Schedia as well. What evidence is there, though, for pottery from Aswan in the wider Roman world?

Egyptian Red-Slip Ware A has been registered on Mediterranean sites and beyond. According to Hayes (1972: 397 and 461 with Map 18; 1981: 531), it occurs in small quantities in Cyrenaica, with some examples in Cyprus and the Negev, as well as at Carthage. Ballet (2001: 124) indicates that fine ware from Aswan reached the coast of Syria and Palestine. Reynolds (2011: 219) says that Egyptian Red-Slip Ware A is common in 7th-century Beirut. Some Egyptian Red-Slip Ware A Red-Slip Ware A has been discovered on Crete at Gortyn (Dello Preite 1997: 197; Lippolis 2001; Fabrini et al. 2003: 849; Perna 2016: 113). Kenrick (1985: 402-403) publishes two dishes, two bowls and a flagon from Benghazi. The so-called church shipwreck at Marzamemi off Sicily also gave an example of a plate (Leidwanger, Greene and Donnelly 2021: 307). Two more plates came to light at Valencia (Ribera i Lacomba and Rosselló Mesquida 2016: 551, 553). A bowl is registered at Marseille (Bien 2007: 264). A sherd of a probable closed vessel was found as far away as London (Tomber and Williams 1996) and another probable fragment at Cadbury Congresbury in Somerset (Hayes 2007: 81, note 92).

Hayes (1972: 397) knows of Egyptian Red-Slip Ware A Variant at Istanbul and perhaps Antioch.

Aswan Flasks have also been registered outside Egypt. The findspots include Kourion (Hayes 2008: 93; Bailey 2011: 177), Athens – two in a single context (Hayes 1980:

532; Hayes 2008: 93; Bailey 2011: 177), Chios (Hayes 1980: 532; Bailey 2011: 177), Aquileia (Hayes 2008: 93), Locarno (Hayes 2008: 93) and Marseille (Tréglià 2003: 441).

An Aswan amphora, probably dating to the 5th century, was recognized at Knossos on Crete (Hayes 1983: 156).

Finally, a painted jar (KE 863) found at Kenchreai in the Peloponnese and published as generically Late Roman Egyptian must be from Aswan (Adamsheck 1979: 117; Rife and Heath 2013-2022).

Thus, it can be confirmed that pottery from Aswan did circulate to some extent both in the eastern and the western Mediterranean and even beyond. The published evidence suggests that this is largely a late antique phenomenon and that it concerns mostly fine wares and Aswan Flasks. However, it is possible merely that Egyptian Red-Slip Ware A and Aswan Flasks are more readily identifiable and therefore published outside Egypt than other products of Aswan or that they can be recognized more easily when illustrated as unknown pieces, while other Aswan products may languish among miscellaneous unknown items in storerooms and publications. Although one might be tempted to think of these as items in travelers' baggage, as they are usually single pieces (with the exception of Cyrenaica, Cyprus and parts of the Levant), the number and widespread distribution of the findspots indicates probably that they represent occasional items of trade.

[AM]

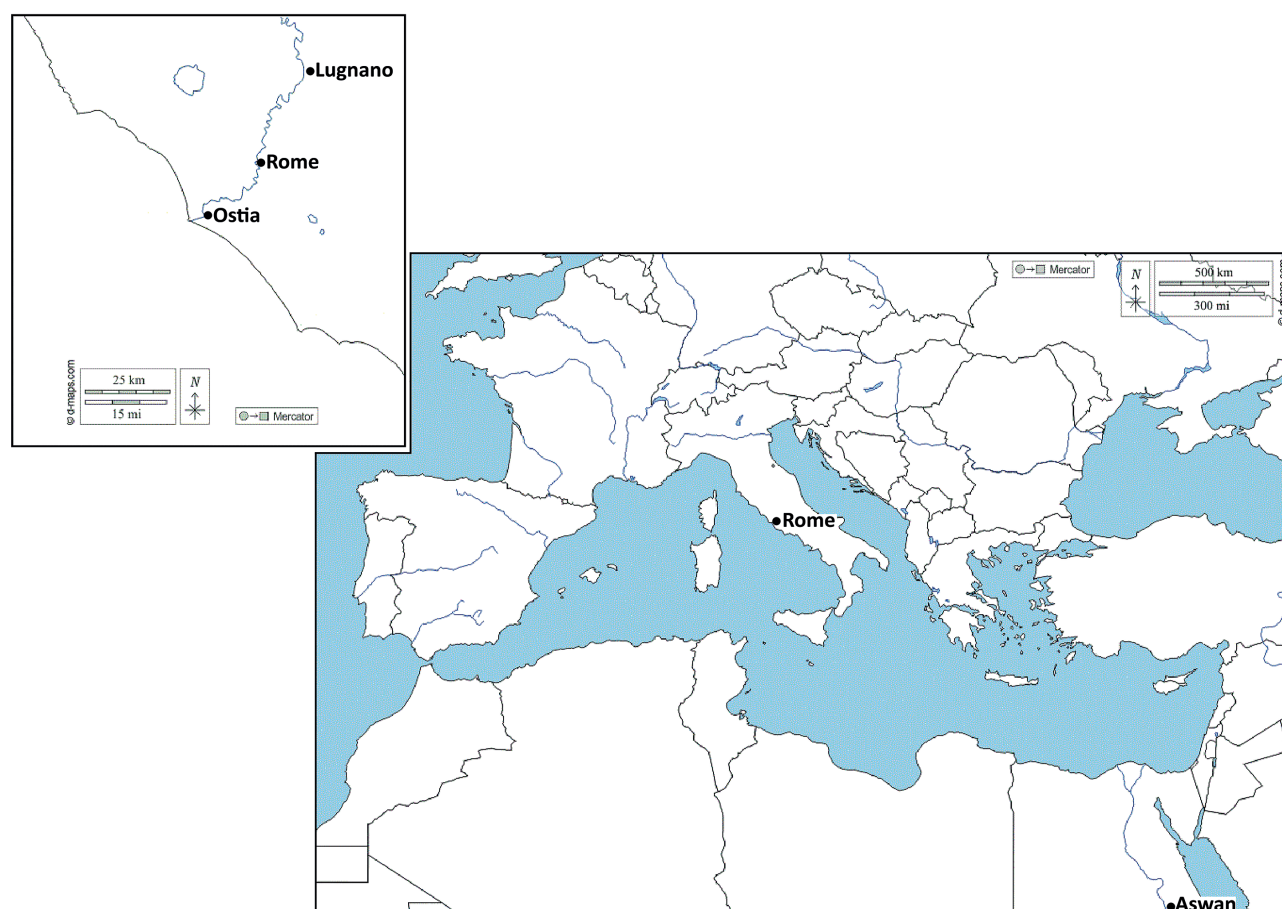


Fig. 1. Map showing the locations of the main sites mentioned.

4. Aswan Ware in Tyrrhenian Central Italy

Given the relative scarcity of Aswan Ware in Egypt outside its region of origin and even more so of pottery of any sort from Aswan beyond Egypt, the discovery of examples of Aswan Ware in Tyrrhenian Central Italy is noteworthy (**fig. 1**).

Full mineralogical analyses of the pieces remain a *desideratum*. However, it was possible to obtain first readings with a Niton pXRF analyzer of samples of the pieces that had come to light by 2019 through the offices of Lars Heinze of the CeramEgypt Project and with the permission of Prof. Michael Heinzelmann of the Universität zu Köln, to both of whom we express our gratitude. Heinze's response was guarded. Most of the pieces he read are kaolinitic and could be in Aswan Pink Clay, while some are better considered as mixed fabrics. However, he did not wish to affirm categorically that they are from Aswan. The fabrics are shown in Dino-Lite images calibrated to 50X magnification (**fig. 2**).

[AM]

4.1. Ostia

In the DAI-AAR excavations at Ostia, two fragments were found that are compatible with Aswan Pink Clay, as well as a third that could be in a mixed fabric (**fig. 2 a-c**). The first two can be compared to the typical Aswan Pink Clay (Rembart 2020: Fig. 27a) and the third to the mixed fabric with a greater kaolinitic than silt component (Rembart 2020: Fig. 28a). All three present a thin, matt red slip on the exterior such as appears on Aswan Ware. The first two sherds come from US 2336 and US 2407, the third from US 1457. These are respectively a flooring layer dating to the early 2nd century (Heinzelmann 2020: 294-295, 297), a post-antique accumulation (Heinzelmann 2020: 304-305) and a layer dating to the mid-3rd century whose surface constituted an occupation layer (Heinzelmann 2020: 174-175, 179). All three fragments are unidentifiable body sherds, allowing no discussion of the function of the vessels to which they belonged.

[AM]

4.2. Rome

From the Palatine East Excavations (henceforth PE) in Rome (Hostetter and Brandt 2009), nine diagnostic sherds were identified across two sectors (A and B) in stratigraphic units that range in date from the late 1st to mid-6th centuries CE. With one exception (handle fragment with mixed Nile-kaolinitic clay, no slip preserved), the sherds seem closest to the main Aswan Pink Clay (Rembart 2020: Fig. 27a; High-Steskal, Peloschek, and Rembart 2016a) and preserve matt slips of varying tones of red.

A flanged rim (Dia. 15 cm) sherd — not seen by Heinze — was recovered in PEA179 (i.e., Palatine East, Sector A, US179) that dates to 80-90/100 CE (**figs. 2d and 3a**). No exact parallel was identified but it fits well among the casserole variants identified by Gempeler (1992: 149-150 [esp.

K 201]) and Rembart (2020: 133-134 [Casserole Type 6]) all of which date to the second half of the 1st to 4th century CE.

Five sherds belonging to amphorae (presumably for wine) were identified. From PEA135 (270/290—300/310 CE) comes a rim (Dia. 8,5 cm) with an almond-shaped rim and which appears to be of the Aswan Pink Clay (**figs. 2e and 3b**). The rim is from an amphora (Gempeler 1992: 189 K703 [1st to 3rd century CE]) that relates to Type 15 (Rembart 2020: pl. 41 no. T657 [1st-5th century CE for type]) or Type 16 (Rembart 2020: pl. 42 no. T663-664 [1st-5th century CE for type]) amphorae identified at Syene. Three joining sherds of a single amphora came from PEA12 (350/360 - 400/425 CE). This form, perhaps of mixed Aswan clay, is preserved from the rim (Dia. 6 cm.) to upper shoulder with one of its handles with oval section attached at mid neck (**figs. 2f and 3c**). A close parallel to this vessel is an amphora excavated from a house in Elephantine in a stratigraphic unit dated to 475-565 CE (High-Steskal, Katzjäger and Rembart 2018: vessel K2). To this group should also be assigned the two handle sherds from PEA96 (300/310 - 310/320 CE) that display a rounded section and are in a fabric similar to the Aswan Pink Clay (**figs. 2g and h**); these are probably from the same vessel. A third handle with an oval section and worn surface that leaves no trace of slip comes from PEB186 (500/525 – 550 CE). Notably, this last handle (not read by Heinze) has a fabric (**fig. 2i**) that appears to be a mixed Aswan fabric (cf. High-Steskal, Peloschek and Rembart 2016).

Two sherds belong to closed, amphora-related forms (e.g., pitchers and amphoriskoi). The first, from PEA174 (100/120 - 150/170 CE), is a handle with two furrows along its dorsal side (not seen by Heinze) in the Aswan Pink Clay (**fig. 3d**). The literature offers no close parallels. Among amphorae, the closest parallel is a Syene Type 15 amphora, (1st to 3rd century CE: High-Steskal and Rembart 2016: vessel K12). More likely, however, this is a tall, closed form like a pitcher or jug. The other is a rim (Dia. 12 cm.) from PEA12 sherd with a single, small handle with rounded section (**figs. 2j and 3e**). In the hand specimen the paste appears to be the typical Aswan Pink Clay, but Heinze's preliminary reading suggests that it is perhaps a subgroup because of the sample's low Titanium value. The form is not unlike an *amphoriskos* published by Gempeler (1992: 184, pl. 117 no. 1 [K611: 3rd century CE]).

From PEB180 (500/525 – 550 CE) comes a sherd in a mixed Aswan Pink fabric (**figs. 2k and 3f**) that is preserved from the mid(?) - neck to beginning of the shoulder. Enough of the shoulder and body are preserved to suggest that vessel is a flask. What little is preserved of the body has a curvature perpendicular to that of the profile suggesting that form might be an Aswan Flask as described above.

[VM]

4.3. Lugnano in Teverina

Fragments of a single vessel, mostly joining, were found at Lugnano in stratigraphic units belonging to two fills cut by graves for an infants' cemetery (Martin et al. 2022: 136-137, 140-145), largely from the lower fill dating to the 3rd century (SU 104, 111, 117 and 150) but in part from the upper fill dating to the 5th (SU 118). The piece consists of fragments

of a handle and the shoulder and body of an amphora (figs. 2l and 3g). Their fabric, judged compatible with Aswan Pink Clay in the first reading, is close to the finer sort of Aswan Pink Clay (Rembart 2020: Fig. 27b), with a thin, matt, red slip on the outside. With its cylindrical body and rounded shoulder

on which the lower extremity of the handle is attached, this piece could belong to a number of amphora types produced in the region around Aswan (Gempeler 1992: 188-192), but without the rim it is impossible to attribute it to a specific type. [AM]

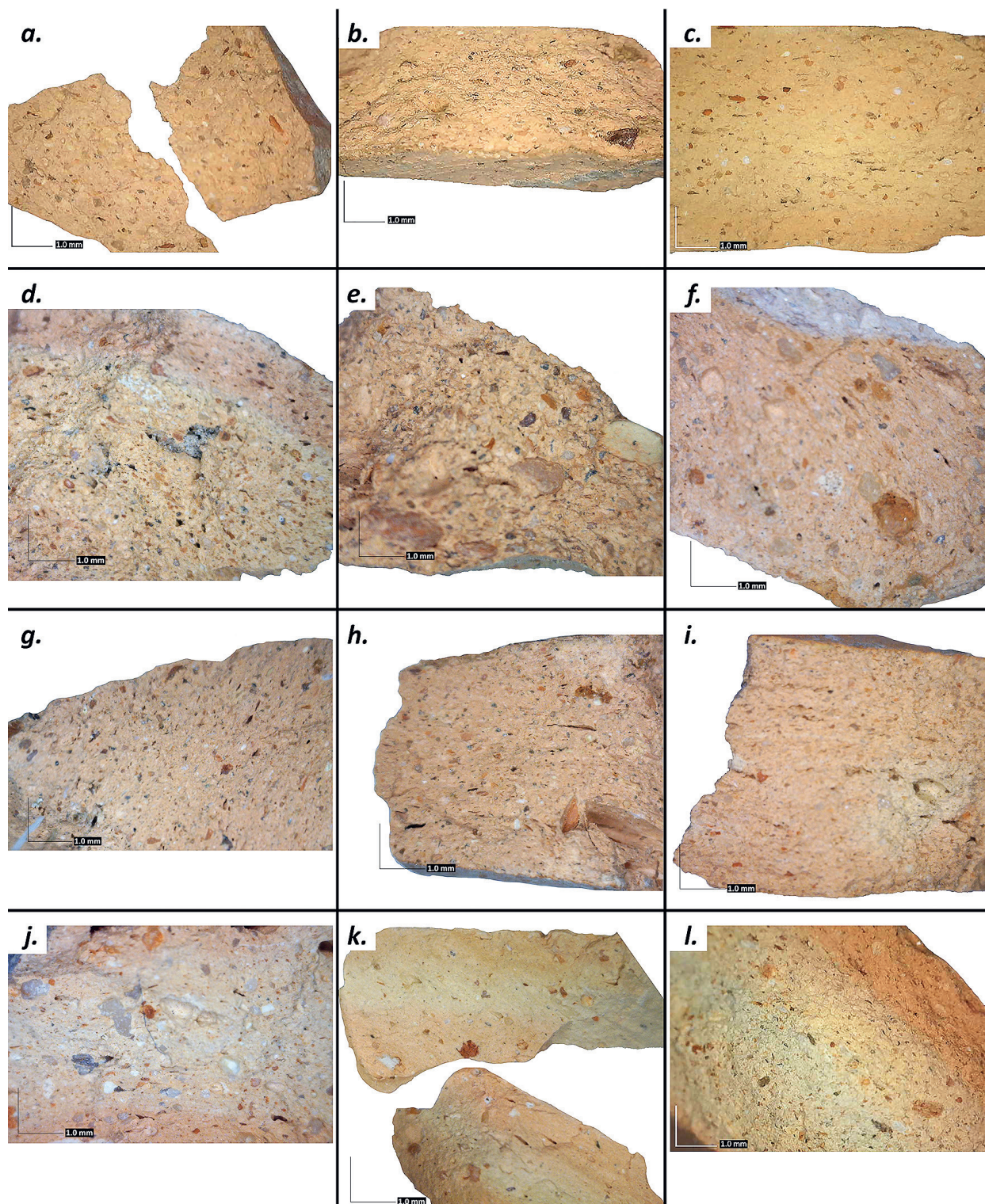
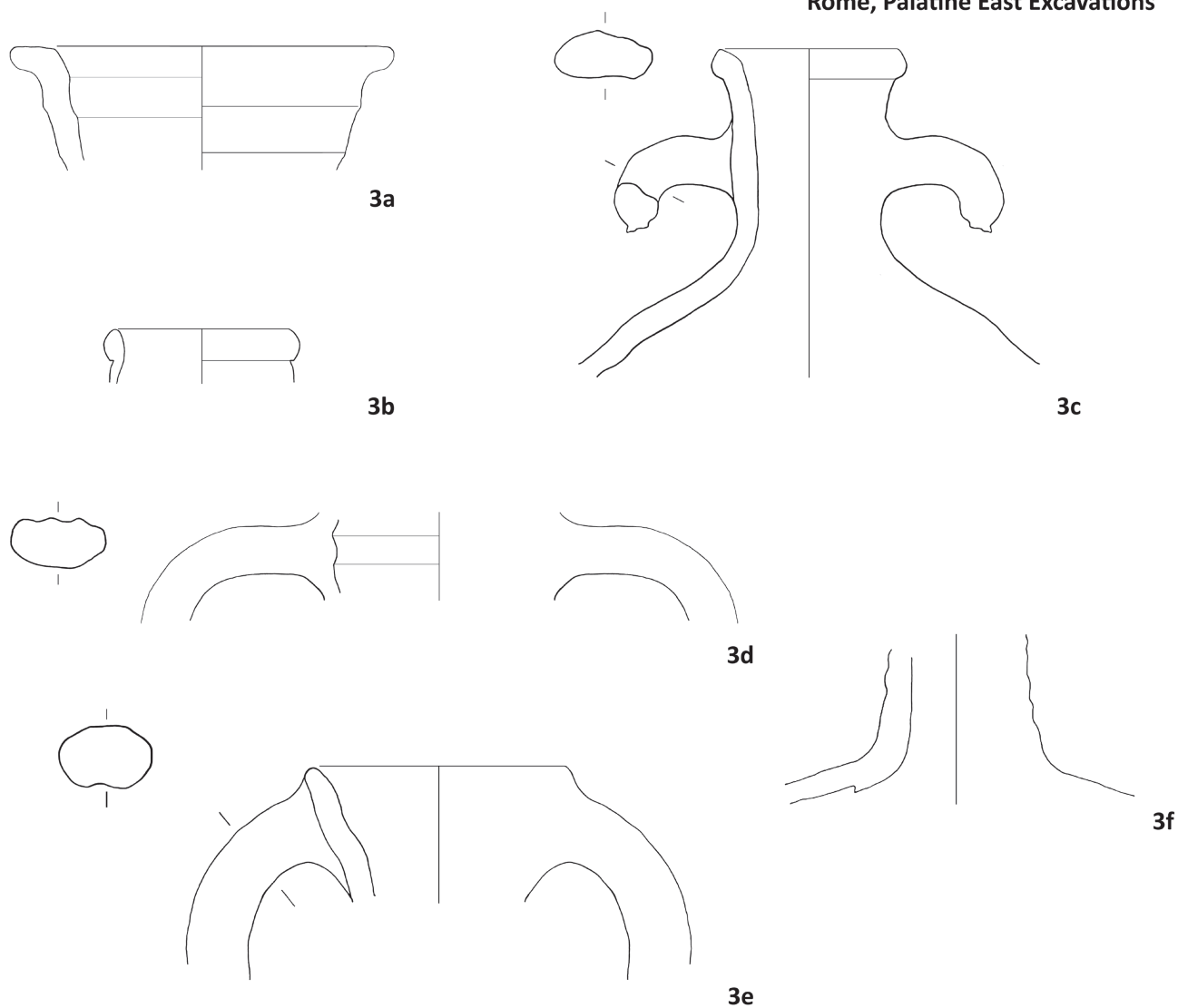


Fig. 2. Fabrics (Dino-Lite images - calibrated magnification, 50X; actual, 49.8X) – a) Ostia – US 2336; b) Ostia – US 2407; c) Ostia – US 1457; d) Palatine East – A179; e) Palatine East – A135; f) Palatine East – A12; g and h) Palatine East – A96; i) Palatine East – B186; j) Palatine East – A12; k) Palatine East – B180; l) Lugnano in Teverina - amphora.

Rome, Palatine East Excavations



Lugnano in Teverina

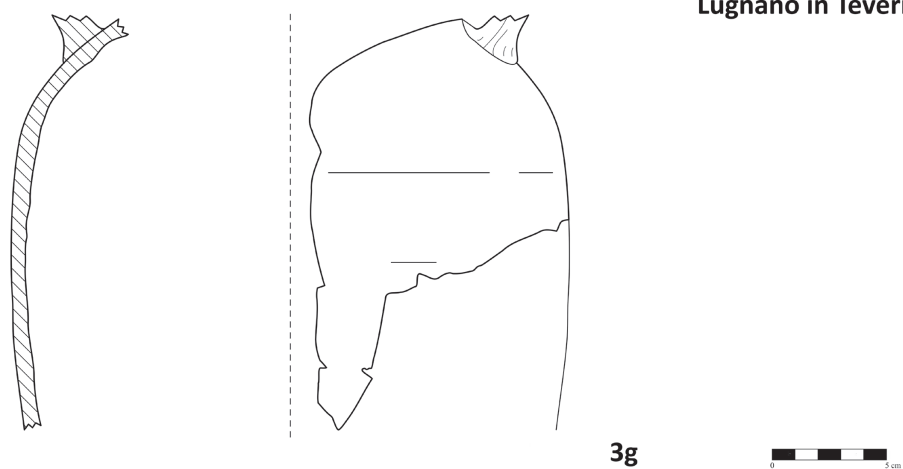


Fig. 3. Forms – a) Palatine East – A179; b) Palatine East – A135; c) Palatine East – A12; d) Palatine East – A174; e) Palatine East – A12; f) Palatine East – B180; g) Lugnano - amphora.

5. Conclusions

Pottery of any sort from Aswan will certainly never be important on sites beyond Egypt, and late antique fine wares and the occasional Aswan Flask may well prove to be its major representatives. However, the discovery of these thirteen pieces from three sites and in contexts of various dates suggests that Aswan Ware is likely to be a recurring minor presence in Tyrrhenian central Italy and perhaps in other parts of the Mediterranean that risks going unrecognized,

not only on major sites such as Ostia and Rome but even on ones more removed from the main currents of maritime commerce, such as Lugnano in Teverina. Transport vessels prevail in this sample, with seven of the thirteen pieces, while three are attributed to other forms and three more are unidentified. Therefore, the interest was probably largely in the contents of the transport vessels, presumably wine. The three diagnostic fragments attributed to other forms show, nevertheless, that this was not always the case.

[AM, VM]

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