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**THIN-WALLED WARE FROM KOM AL-AHMER (ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT)**

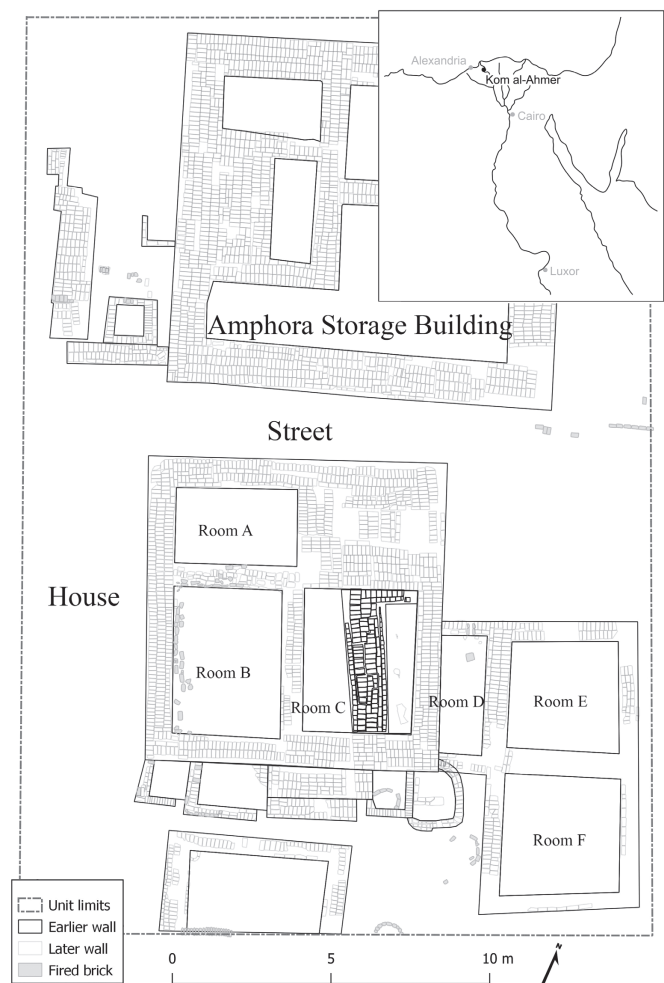
*In the 2019 excavation season, a part of a Roman house was excavated; thirteen well-preserved forms of thin-walled beakers and bowls were found among the material culture. The vessels' fabric and surface treatments allow their provenance to be hypothesised from numerous production sites. Until today, no thin-walled ware kilns have been attested in the Western Nile Delta; however, the technical characteristics of the fabric and the abundance of clay in this area can suggest the existence of a regional production for two of these forms.*

Thin-walled – Roman pottery – Egypt – Kom al-Ahmer – Western Nile Delta

**1. Introduction**

Kom al-Ahmer is located in the northwestern Delta of Egypt. The site lies 35 km south of Rosetta, 40 km southeast of Thonis-Heraclion, and about 50 km southeast of Alexandria, the three main important Nile ports of the Mediterranean coast of Egypt. Excavations at the site began in 2012, and since 2014 work has been in progress in Unit 4, where two buildings have been brought to light and whose last phase of life dates to the first half of the 5th century AD<sup>1</sup> (**fig. 1**).

The southern building has been interpreted as a house, but it also bears evidence of commercial activities and bone object manufacturing (Marchiori 2019; Mondin 2019: 65–69). The remains are constituted of three rooms on the ground floor and some annexes built on the east and south sides of the main building. Room C is the largest room (4,55 x 3,6 m), and it was excavated down to the level of the house's mud brick walls foundations. Thanks to this deep excavation, it was possible to bring to light the various phases of the building's life. Moreover, the deep wall foundations cut into the structures of an earlier building with a different orientation from the house of the Middle-Late Roman period. As the excavation continued, it was possible to detect the corner of an earlier building and to carry out a deep excavation in the inner and outer space of this earlier building. This context is still being investigated, but it is worth pointing out some thin-walled beakers and bowls (**fig. 2**) that allow us to propose some considerations on this ceramic group and the chronology of use of the older building.



**Fig. 1.** Plan of Unit 4, excavated at Kom al-Ahmer.

<sup>1</sup> This contribution is the result of major research by the team coordinated by Mohamed Kenawi and Giorgia Marchiori. I would like to thank the scholars who provided me with valuable advice and information for the writing of this article: Sandrine Elaigne Eyango, Archer Martin, Laura Rembrant, Eleni Schindler Kaudelka, and Kathleen Slane.

## 2. Thin-walled ware from Unit 4

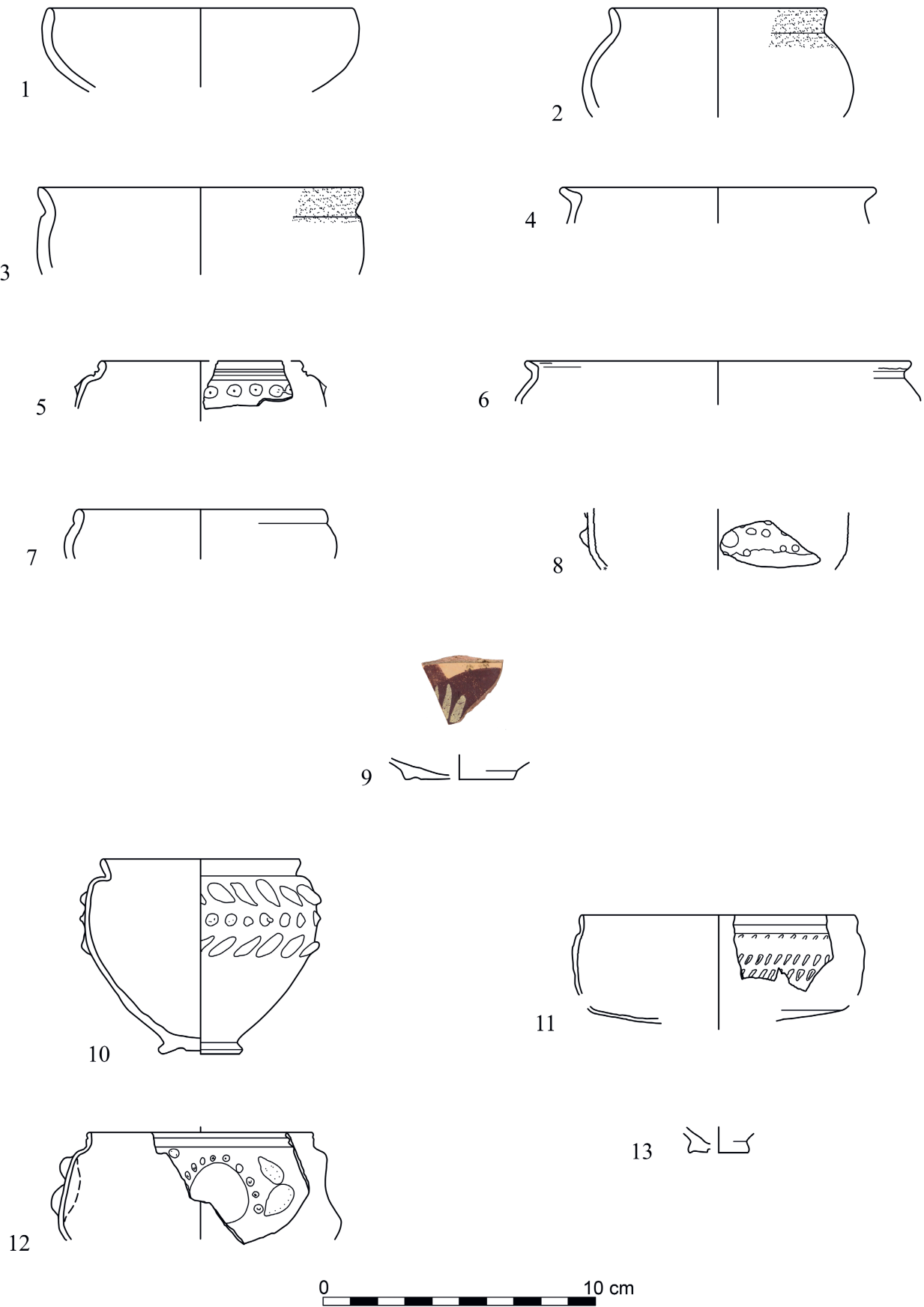
Thin-walled wares are a type of Roman pottery that imitates metal. The best-known productions are the Italian ones, which were exported and imitated all over the Mediterranean Sea. The name refers to the main characteristic of this ceramic class, which is the particularly thin walls, although the Egyptian productions generally have thicker walls. At Kom al-Ahmer, thirteen well-preserved sherds of thin-walled ware were discovered within the stratigraphy of the house: eleven were found inside Room C (five in the stratigraphy associated to the earlier structure; six sherds from the mixed materials found in the upper layers pertaining to the house) and two sherds in the layers of Room B (west of Room C). The fabrics allowed me to distinguish different productions ranging from Egyptian to imported. Among the Egyptian productions, five vessels have red fabric and were made of alluvial clay, while four are made of kaolinitic clay, probably from the area of Aswan. Four beakers with clearly distinguishable fabrics from those mentioned above are of uncertain origin.

The vessels made from alluvial clay have a fine, reddish-brown fabric but with inclusions of mica, sand, and sometimes organic voids. The wall thickness ranges from 1.2 mm to 4.5 mm. No beaker has preserved handles. The rounded bowl **2.1** has a slightly in-turned rim. The upper part of the outer surface has a deliberately rough surface treatment. The fabric has yellowish-white limestone inclusions; rounded voids with white edges are attested. This shape's parallels are common in Egypt in different fabrics: at Mons Claudianus, the form is dated to the Antonine period (Tomber 2006: 42, type 47). At Coptos, parallels come from a context dating from the 2nd century AD (Herbert and Berlin 2003: 110–111 R2.1). At Elephantine, bowls with the same shape are dated from the middle of the 1st to the 2nd centuries AD (Rodziewicz 2005: 23, 185, pl. 69.1133). Globular shaped beaker **2.2** has a slightly out-turned rim. The rim is decorated with a band of white slip (made by dripping). This plain form was made of fine alluvial fabric (with small limestone inclusions) with rare organic voids. This shape's parallels are common in different fabrics: at Cosa, the form Marabini LXXIV is of uncertain date (Marabini Moevs 1973: 255–256). In Egypt, at Mons Claudianus, the form is dated from the mid-1st century until the first quarter of the 2nd century AD (Tomber 2006: 36, type 34). The rim **2.3** has a similar shape to that of bowl 2.2, with an out-turned rim and a white band made by dripping on the rim. The alluvial fabric is fine with few limestone and mica inclusions. The small sherd **2.4** is a bowl with a lid-seat on the rim. The alluvial fabric is light brown, and the profile is analogous to the form 2.6, which is made of kaolinitic fabric. This form is common in different fabrics and parallels; it is attested at numerous sites in Egypt mainly during the 1st – 2nd centuries AD. At Mons Claudianus, the form is attested in the stratigraphy dated from Antonine to Severan (Tomber 2006: 38, type 36). The vertical rim of the rounded beaker **2.5** has a pale white slip that coats the outer surface, and the shoulder is adorned by at least one line of yellowish-white dots of barbotine decoration. The red alluvial fabric is characterised by small inclusions and rare but well visible organic voids. The form

dates back to the 2nd century AD; there are parallels found at Tebtynis (Ballet and Południkiewicz 2012: 126–127, pl. 58.544); closer profiles are attested from the middle of the 1st to the 2nd centuries AD from Elephantine (Rodziewicz 2005: 23, 178, pl. 65). At Coptos, it was found in a context dating from the 2nd century AD (Herbert and Berlin 2003: 110–111, R2.2).

Four sherds were made with kaolinitic clay; the presence of red stone inclusions allows me hypothesise the production in the area of Aswan. The poorly preserved rim sherd **2.6** has the same shape as type 2.4, which was produced in alluvial clay. At Elephantine, parallels come from contexts dated from the middle of the 1st to the 2nd centuries AD (Rodziewicz 2005: 23, 178–179, pl. 66, 1061–1063). The rim of beaker **2.7**, with a globular body and plain surfaces, has a wall thickness of 3.1 mm. The fabric is pink, and the surfaces are coated with a light buff slip. Parallels are attested at Elephantine for a long period between the late 1st and the beginning of the 5th centuries AD (Gempeler 1992: 124, T605, ab. 70). At Mons Claudianus, they are attested between the end of the 1st and the first quarter of the 2nd centuries AD (Tomber 2006: 30–31, type 15). The badly preserved carinated body sherd **2.8** is decorated with white barbotine irregular dots. The upper part of the body, where the barbotine decoration is located, is coated with a thick, light pink slip. Parallels from the island of Elephantine are attested from the middle of the 1st to the 2nd centuries AD (Rodziewicz 2005: 23, 178, pl. 65). At Mons Claudianus, these forms are attested mainly from the 2nd century AD; however, they are also attested in various fabrics until the beginning of the 3rd century (Tomber 2006: 31, type 16). At Coptos, they were retrieved in a context dating from the 2nd century AD (Herbert and Berlin 2003: 110–111 R2.2–3). A small sherd of the open form **2.9** is characterised by a brown and white floral decoration. The fabric is light pink, hard and fine. It is probably imported from the area of Aswan; nevertheless, this type of decoration is quite rare. Some examples were found in the production site of Elephantine in contexts dating from the middle of the 1st to the 2nd centuries AD (Rodziewicz 2005: 23, 50–56; see also Jacquet-Gordon 1984).

The other four sherds have unusual characteristics, and the provenance is uncertain. The only complete beaker found at Kom al-Ahmer is form **2.10**, decorated with white barbotine. The lower part of the vessel has deformed walls due to the presence of bubbles in the clay. The ring foot base is finely moulded. The decorated upper part is coated with a poorly preserved white slip. This shape's parallels are common in Egypt in different fabrics: in the Delta, at Schedia, in the kaolinitic clay of Aswan (Martin 2017: 862, fig. 4. See also Ricci 1985: 280, tipo I/399); at Mons Claudianus, the form is dated to Trajanic period, but it is attested until Severan times (Tomber 2006: 31–32, type 16). This shape's parallels at Elephantine are attested from the middle of the 1st to the 2nd centuries AD (Rodziewicz 2005: 23, 178, pl. 65). This form was also produced in north Italian workshops and exported in the Mediterranean Sea; it was in use between the third quarter of the 1st and the first half of the 2nd centuries AD (type Marabini Moevs XLVI – Marabini Moevs 1973: 193; Kenrick 1985: 316, B466). The characteristic that distinguishes this



**Fig. 2.** Thin-walled ware from Room C of the house.

beaker from the aforementioned parallels is the grey fabric associated with the white barbotine decoration. In fact, the different coloured slip, compared to the body, is characteristic of the Aswan and Egyptian productions in general. This vessel was probably over-fired, and the characteristic inclusions of the Aswan production are not well visible; however, the beaker was probably produced in Upper Egypt.

Some sherds found in the lower stratigraphy of Room C constitute part of a carinated beaker with three lines of rouletted decoration **2.11**. The shape is not very common in Egypt; the surface treatment of the inner surface and the lower part of the body, which is coated with a shiny grey slip, are also unusual. The upper part of the outer surface is rough. The clay exhibits dark reddish-brown fabric, limestone, and rounded voids with white edges. The form is common and attested in Italy at least from the 1st century BC, often with double handles; the type with metallic glaze is attested in the Augustan period (type Marabini Moevs XLIII – Marabini Moevs 1973: 127–131). At Tarsus, these types of profiles are attested in the early imperial contexts (Jones 1950: 257, type 606 with barbotine decoration). The production area is uncertain; some of the characteristics of the fabric point towards a possible Syracusan production (Ricci 1985: 347–348; Cannata 2018: 430, tav. 1); nevertheless, the metallic slip coating does not seem to be compatible with this production. The possibility of an Egyptian production cannot be excluded.

The rim **2.12** is an imported beaker; the body has depressions and a barbotine decoration. The fabric is light grey, fine, and both surfaces are coated with a thin and irregular dark grey slip. Parallels are mainly common in Italy and Spain in contexts dated from the beginning 1st century AD to the third quarter of the same century (Marabini Moevs 1973: 132, 282, n. 217; Ricci 1985: 318–319, dec. 36).

The foot fragment **2.13** probably belongs to a form similar to 2.10. The fabric is light red, fine, with rare mica and sand inclusions. The poorly preserved sherd appears to have been intentionally pierced in the centre of the base after firing. As mentioned for fragment 2.10, the production of these beakers is attested in the area of Aswan and many Mediterranean centres. In this case, 2.13 is an imported vessel, but the provenance cannot be determined.

### 3. Final remarks

The archaeological investigation involved a limited area. The presence of thirteen fragments of thin-walled vessels of different provenance suggests that this class was highly attested in the Roman stratigraphy.

To date, no evidence of ceramic production has been found at Kom al-Ahmer. The variety of fabrics indicates that the site, located along one of the navigable canals of the Nile Delta (Pennington 2019: 65–66), was well connected to the major Egyptian and Mediterranean production centres. It is particularly significant to observe that form **2.11** had fabric characteristics that may suggest an Egyptian production of which there is no evidence to date.

The forms found in the deep contexts are generically dated back between the second half – end of the 1st century AD and the 2nd century AD. Only forms **2.11** and **2.12** seem to be earlier. Four coins dating back between the middle of the 1st century AD and the 2nd century AD have been found; however, there are also four Greco-Hellenistic coins and two sporadic later finds (4th–5th centuries AD). Indeed, the lower layers have been partially altered by the cut of the foundation trenches for the walls of the Middle-Late Roman house.

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