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LATE ANTIQUITY ON ELEPHANTINE ISLAND, UPPER EGYPT

Pottery as mirror of Roman Society

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Elephantine Island is located opposite the ancient city Syene (Aswan), on the east bank of the Nile in southern Egypt. Both ancient settlements had fully functional Nile harbours through which trading activities could take place, for example the trade in rose granite, which was obtained in local quarries.¹ Furthermore they served as the base for expeditions to Nubia and as military posts at the first cataract region to secure the border to the south. Since the era of the Pharaohs, Elephantine, with its huge sanctuary of the god Chnum, was one of the most famous religious sites within Egypt. In the 5th century AD, as the temple was dismantled, new housing complexes were built at the former temple site.² All of them have differing ground plans and, in addition to private use, some include integrated workshops in the courtyards. Previous studies have shown that many inhabitants on Elephantine Island were craftsmen, working with metal, stone and clay, who sold their products over long distances. It is assumed that the housing complexes were inhabited until the 8th or perhaps 9th century AD. The aim of the project is to define the traditions, customs and transformations of the inhabitants of Elephantine Island during the centuries. The pottery of four selected Late Antique and early Byzantine housing complexes will be analysed in detail.³

Complex K20 – The local pottery production

Since autumn 2011, the pottery of complex K20⁴, which was used as a stone workshop and metalworking factory, has been processed. Based on the pottery research conducted so far,

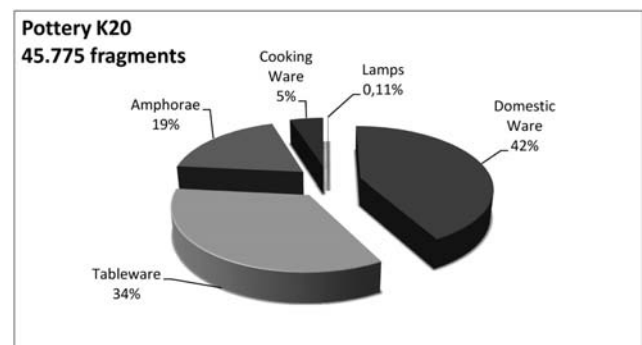


Fig. 1. Statistical analysis of the pottery from complex K20.

the ratio of individual pottery groups can be demonstrated. The completed statistical analysis includes more than 45,000 shards. Particularly noteworthy is the very high percentage of tableware (34%), the relatively small number of amphora fragments (19%) and the small amount of cooking ware (5%) (fig. 1). More than 80% of the diagnostic and more than 60% of the whole ceramic material is made of the well known “pink clay”. The deposits of this type of clay are supposed to be near Aswan, more precisely on the west bank of the Nile, in the vicinity of the Roman quarries. Nearby some Late Antique pottery kilns and wasters were found in and around the Late Antique monastery of Saint Simeon at the west bank, which was built in the second half of the 6th century.⁵ But also on Elephantine itself bricks from kilns, wasters, unfired vessels, clumps of raw clay, stamps and moulds as well as the large amount of shards made of pink clay, belonging to all different pottery groups, were located.⁶ Although no intact pottery kiln has been found on the Island, the corpus of finds allows the assumption of a local large-scale pottery production on Elephantine Island, which had already started in the Roman Period and reached its peak in Late Antiquity. The evidence of pottery production at the monastery of Saint Simeon, Elephantine Island and the Roman fort at Nag el-Hagar, situated 30 km north of Aswan, shows the great importance of the whole region in terms of

¹ W. KAISER/P. GROSSMANN/G. HAENY/H. JARITZ, Stadt und Tempel von Elephantine. Vierter Grabungsbericht, Mitt. DAI Kairo 30, 1974, 70; H. JARITZ, The Investigation of the Ancient Wall Extending from Aswan to Philae. Ibid. 43, 1987, 67–74; H. JARITZ, The Investigation of the Ancient Wall Extending from Aswan to Philae. Second Preliminary Report. Ibid. 49, 1993, 107–132.

² ARNOLD 2003; P. GROSSMANN, Kirche und spätantike Hausanlagen im Chnumtempelhof. Beschreibung und typologische Untersuchung. Elephantine 2. Arch. Veröff. DAI Kairo 25 (Mainz 1980).

³ Within the FWF-Project (P23866) of the Austrian Archaeological Institute under the direction of Sabine Ladstätter, called „Housing in Antiquity in Syene and Elephantine in Upper Egypt”, in cooperation with the Swiss Institute for Architectural and Archaeological Research in Egypt.

⁴ ARNOLD 2003, 73–77; 98–102.

⁵ BALLETT ET AL. 1991, 140–142.

⁶ GEMPELER 1992, 25f.

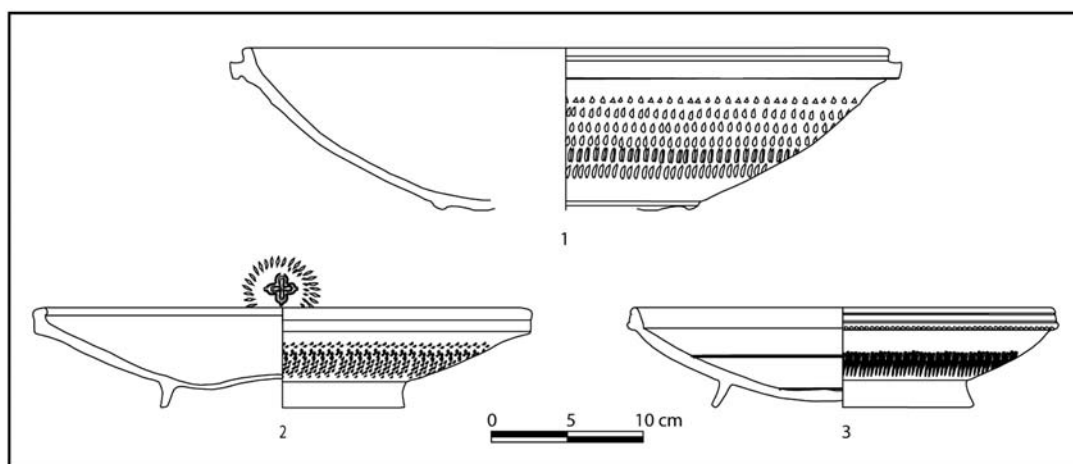


Fig. 2. Egyptian Red Slip A Ware. – Scale 1:5.



Fig. 3. Painted decoration on a jar (N. Gail, ÖAI).

pottery production in Late Antiquity.⁷ The numerous exports of those locally produced vessels are remarkable. On the one hand they were widely spread throughout Egypt and to the Mediterranean area beyond, occurring in the Lebanon, Palestine, Cyprus, Carthage, Cyrenaica, Sicily and single

shards as far afield as Marseille and London⁸, and on the other hand to Nubia, south of Roman Egypt.⁹

The most common group made of *pink clay* is the *Egyptian Red Slip A Ware* (fig. 2).¹⁰ Most of the shapes are similar to those of the *Tunisian African Red Slip Ware*, the *Late Roman C Ware* from Asia Minor and the *Cypriot Red Slip Ware*.¹¹

Many vessels are often badly shaped, so that they are not able to stand upright. A lot of them are decorated with stamps, rouletting or painting. In contrast to stamp motives and the rouletted decoration, the painted decoration is totally locally influenced. The style of the painted motives, which has its origin already in the Ptolemaic Period, suggests very strong local traditions, preserved over the centuries (fig. 3). Although cross and Chi-Rho motives point to a Christian community on the Island, these Hellenistic decoration systems were not replaced in Late Antiquity. In Upper Egypt the evidence of pagan cults can be attested until the beginning of the 6th century AD.¹² Identical types of vessels with red slip also occur with a white slip. They are very rare at Elephantine and in ancient Egypt in general, but they are very common on sites in Nubia.¹³

⁷ BALLETT ET AL. 1991, 140–142; P. BALLETT/M. VICHY, *Artisanat de la céramique dans l'Égypte hellénistique et romaine. Ateliers du Delta, d'Assouan et de Kharga*, Cahiers Céramique Égyptienne 3, 1992, 113–116; GEMPELER 1992, 56; M. SIELER, *Egyptian Red Slip A and its production at the site of the Late Roman fort at Nag el-Hagar/Upper Egypt*, RCRF Acta 40, 2006 (2008), 271–278; M. RODZIEWICZ, *Field notes from Elephantine on the early Aswan pink clay pottery*, Cahiers Céramique Égyptienne 3, 1992, 106.

⁸ BAILEY 1998, 8; R. TOMBER/D. WILLIAMS, *An Egyptian Red Slip A sherd from London*, Britannia 27, 1996, 382–387; J. W. HAYES, *A supplement to late Roman pottery* (London 1980) 531; P. REYNOLDS, *Fine wares from Beirut contexts, c. 450 to the early 7th century*. In: M. A. CAU/P. REYNOLDS/M. BONIFAY, LRFW 1. *Late Roman Fine Wares. Solving problems of Typology and Chronology*. Roman and Late Antique Mediterranean Pottery 1 (Oxford 2011) 219; S. BIEN, *La vasaille et les amphores en usage à Marseille au VIIe s. et au début du VIIIe siècle: première ébauche de typologie évolutive*. In: M. BONIFAY/J.-C. TRÉGLIA, *Late Roman Coarse Wares, Cooking Wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean*. Archaeology and Archaeometry 1 (Oxford 2007) 264.

⁹ W. Y. ADAMS, *Ceramic industries of medieval Nubia. UNESCO archaeological survey of Sudanese Nubia: memoirs 1–2* (Lexington 1986) 525–560.

¹⁰ HAYES 1972, 387–397.

¹¹ GEMPELER 1992, 41; HAYES 1972, 387 f.

¹² J. HAHN, *die Zerstörung der Kulte von Philae. Geschichte und Legende am ersten Nilkatarakt*. In: J. HAHN/S. EMMEL/U. GOTTER, *From Tempel to Church. Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity*. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 163 (Boston 2008) 203–242.

¹³ BAILEY 1998, 36f.

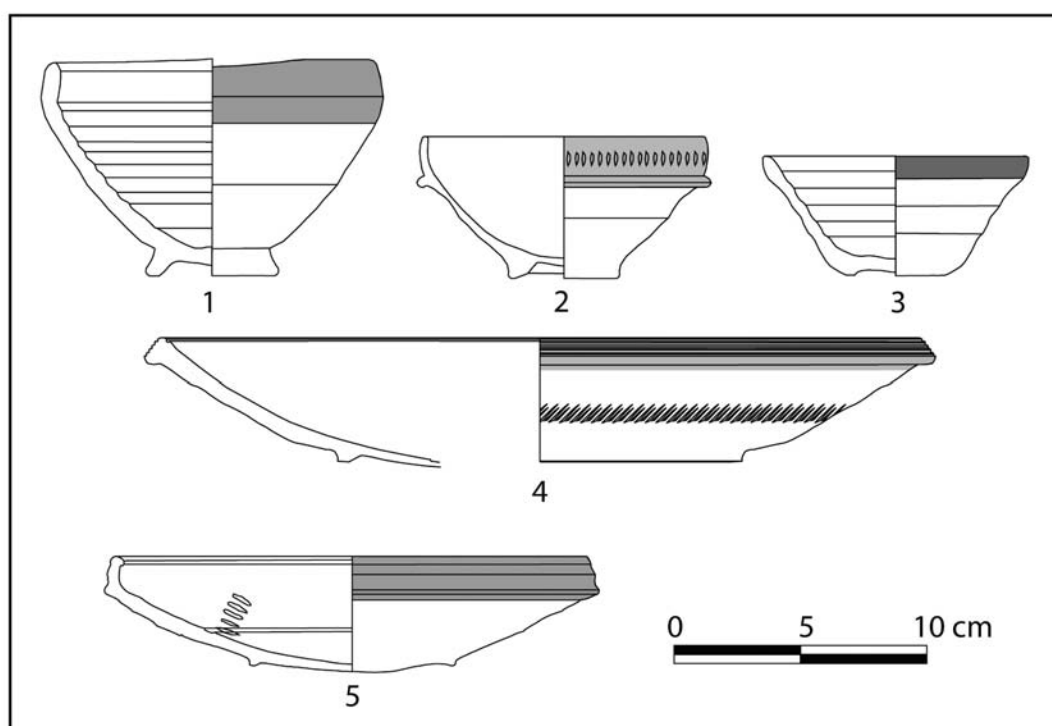


Fig. 4. Aswan Fine Ware. – Scale 1:3.

Also local forms and patterns of tableware can be recognized within the so-called *Aswan Fine Ware*, which is characterized by its dichromatism (fig. 4).¹⁴ Some shapes and decorations are indeed similar to the *Egyptian Red Slip A Ware*, but special bowl types can also be traced back to the Ptolemaic Period with only a few changes over time. One good example in this regard is this special kind of bowl, which appears in different diameters from 10 cm up to 26 cm (fig. 4.1). These vessels, belonging to the *Aswan Fine Ware*, occur with an orange-red slip or, more unusually, with a white-yellow slip. It seems plausible that the darker rim is an intentionally added decoration rather than coloured by stacking the objects in the kiln, because sometimes red spots or fingerprints can be seen on the surface. A few vessels show one or two vertical scratched lines on the rim, simultaneously completed with painted decoration. So far it is not clear whether these are special marks made by a potter or whether they are a part of the decoration.¹⁵

Another locally influenced vessel type is a small white-slipped bowl with an average diameter of 16 cm (fig. 5). It seems to appear in the 4th century and disappear at the end of the 6th century AD. Most of these bowls are made of a special type of clay, which is very similar to the *pink clay*, but the fabric is much harder tempered with a mass of black inclusions, perhaps some ferruginous components. Because of the large number of those shards, the similarity to the *pink clay* and the mining of iron oxide on the west bank of the

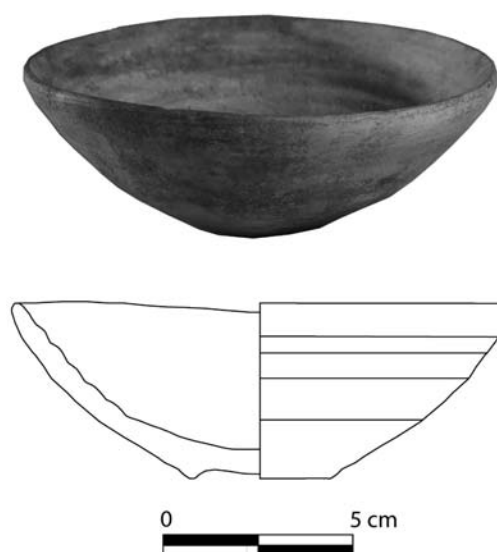


Fig. 5. White slipped bowl. – Scale 1:2.

Nile¹⁶, a production on Elephantine Island and the surrounding region can be proposed.

Change and adaptation of pottery can be shown by analyzing the Late Antique cooking ware. In addition to the spectrum of cooking pots, an increased number of casseroles, made of very soft Nile alluvial clay and not of sandy, quartz-containing clay as previously predicted (fig. 6) has been determined. These new cooking vessels, which are not

¹⁴ D. M. BAILEY, *The Pottery from the South Church at El-Ashmunein*. Cahiers Céramique Égyptienne 4, 1996, 55 f.

¹⁵ GEMPELER 1992, 27.

¹⁶ R. KLEMM/D. KLEMM, *Steine und Steinbrüche im Alten Ägypten* (Berlin 1993) 290.

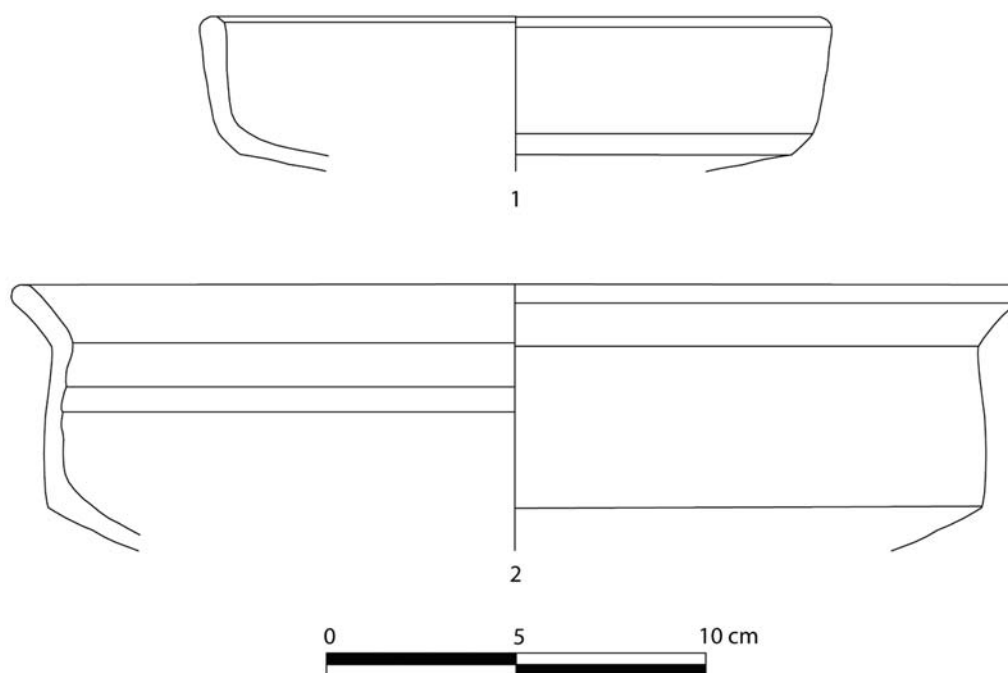


Fig. 6. Casseroles (Cooking Ware). – Scale 1:2.



Fig. 7. Late Roman Amphora 1 (N. Gail, ÖAI).

resistant to open fire, seem to indicate a new preparation of food and/or the usage of new ovens at that time.¹⁷ As the number of cooking ware shards inside the house K20 and its courtyards is very small (5%), communal cooking areas within the village are conceivable too.

¹⁷ See P. ARTHUR, Form, function and technology in pottery production from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages. In: L. Lavan/E. Zanini/A. Sarantis (eds.), *Technology in Transition A.D. 300–650, Late Antique Arch. 4* (Leiden 2007) 179–181.

Amphorae establish a clear link between trade and food. The decrease of amphorae fragments in the ceramic material (19%) reflects a massive change in trade relations from the Roman Period to Late Antiquity. Almost all fragments belong to amphorae made from Nile alluvial clay or *pink clay*. Most of the pieces found in K20 are part of the *Late Roman Amphora 7*, a type whose production is only known in Middle Egypt so far from the end of the 4th to the 7th century AD.¹⁸ Imported amphorae, like the *Late Roman Amphorae 1*¹⁹, are the exception rather than the rule (fig. 7). The Late Antique trade was certainly primarily focused on regional products. But Egyptian wine for example was a popular commodity and was exported throughout the Mediterranean area.²⁰

Conclusion

Furthermore, as a result of all these facts, it can be assumed that there were several independent, Late Antique pottery workshops in the vicinity of modern day Aswan. They can be identified by different manufacturing techniques and qualities of the vessels, which were produced for specific purposes. Summing up, it can be said that in general there are only a few imported shards of table ware. Merely 27 shards out of

¹⁸ R. TOMBER/D. WILLIAMS, Egyptian amphorae in Britain and the western provinces. *Britannia* 31, 2000; BAILEY 1998, 129; PEACOCK/WILLIAMS 1986, 204.

¹⁹ Ibid. 185–187; P. REYNOLDS, Levantine Amphorae from Cilicia to Gaza: A Typology and Analysis of Regional Production Trends from the 1st to the 7th Centuries. In: J. Ma. Gurt i Esparraguera/J. Buxeda i Garrigós/M.A. Cau Ontiveros, *LRCW I: Late Roman Coarse Wares, Cooking Wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean. Archaeology and Archaeometry. BAR Internat. Ser. 1340* (Oxford 2005) 565.

²⁰ W. Y. ADAMS, The Vintage of Nubia, Kush. *Journal Nat. Corporation Antiqu. and Mus. (NCAM)* 14, 1966, 278; GEMPELER 1992, 54 f.

more than 45,000 belong to the *African Red Slip Ware* or *Egyptian Red Slip B Ware*. Therefore the dominance of local ceramics and the importance of the local pottery production on Elephantine show, through its export until the end of the 7th century AD, the enormous cultural diversity of this region in Late Antiquity. The variety of shapes, especially of tableware, is in many respects dependent on the pottery

of the Mediterranean area, but there still exist significant, local, typically Egyptian forms, which were handed down over centuries. Although the inhabitants of Elephantine Island and their eating and drinking habits were influenced by the Romans and, after the middle of the 7th century, by the Arabs, old Egyptian traditions seem to have been retained.

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