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**FINE WARE AT SCHEDIA (WESTERN DELTA, EGYPT): A CHOICE OF IDENTITY?**

The concept a Roman fine-ware boom in the Augustan-Tiberian period is familiar.<sup>1</sup> People both in the East and the West wished to present themselves at table in the Roman fashion, by using either Italian sigillata or wares that adopted the repertoire of Italian sigillata. The latter might be newly created wares (such as Gaulish sigillata or Eastern sigillata B) or existing ones that underwent a profound renewal (such as Eastern sigillata A). After this time of unity, each ware developed on its own.

At Schedia in the western Delta of Egypt, an important river harbor according to the sources, located c. 40 km southeast of Alexandria,<sup>2</sup> little such sigillata was found, whether in phase or residual. More than 206,000 sherds (attributable to a maximum of some 198,500 vessels after accounting for joins) have been examined in stratified contexts ranging in date from the Ptolemaic period to late antiquity. Of these, seven sherds from a maximum of six vessels belong to Italian sigillata: a rim sherd of Consp. 20.3, two joining Consp. 20 sherds without the lip, a Consp. B 2.9 base sherd, an unidentifiable base sherd, two unidentifiable body sherds.<sup>3</sup> Other sigillatas are attested, although still rarely: Eastern sigillata A – 278 sherds from a maximum of 248 vessels, Eastern sigillata B – 30 sherds from a maximum of 21 vessels, Cypriot sigillata – nine sherds from possibly as many vessels, Eastern sigillata C – one sherd. That gives rise to the question of what fine ware the people at Schedia used.

The scarcity of standardized fine wares at Schedia has made the provisional dating of the layers and phases difficult.<sup>4</sup> It is necessary to rely for this essentially on the amphora

evidence. We can distinguish a late-antique horizon, characterized by Carthage Late Roman Amphorae 1 from Cilicia, Carthage Late Roman Amphorae 4 from Gaza and Carthage Late Roman Amphorae 7 and AE 3T from Middle Egypt. Another horizon can be dated no earlier than the late 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century because of the presence of various subforms of the Amphore Égyptienne 3, mostly from the northwestern coastal region of Egypt but also from other parts of the country. Only a few layers close to the level of the water table were without any later material and could go back to the Ptolemaic period or the early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

In the lowest layers at Schedia, the dominant fine wares are burnished black or red (Black Fine Ware and Red Fine Ware), normally attested together (**fig. 1–2**). Otherwise there is a small amount of imported black-gloss ware, the occasional piece of Hellenistic relief bowls and some examples of Alexandrian Hellenistic Ware. Black Fine Ware and Red Fine Ware were undoubtedly produced at various centers in the Delta, perhaps including at Schedia itself.<sup>5</sup> The characteristic shapes of Black and Red Fine Wares are a bowl with a curved profile and a plain rim and a plate with an offset rim, which both find widespread parallels in the Hellenistic world (**fig. 3–4**). They often present stamped decoration on the inside, sometimes linked by incised lines (**fig. 5–6**).

By analogy with other places that did not simply import Italian sigillata as their normal fine ware, one might expect to find that regional wares adopted the Italian sigillata repertoire. Red Fine Ware would seem to be the logical candidate for this role at Schedia. It is indeed the most common fine ware not only in the layers of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD but also in those of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> – all together it amounts to 1025 pieces from a maximum of 864 vessels –, alongside a certain amount of Black Fine Ware (probably to be considered residual, at least in the later layers). Hellenistic shapes dominate, however, with similar bowls and plates to those in the earlier layers. Pieces inspired by sigillata are very rare – among them, one that recalls Consp. 23 in Italian sigillata and Hayes 45 in Eastern sigillata A<sup>6</sup> (**fig. 7**) and another Consp. B. 2.6 in Italian sigillata<sup>7</sup> (**fig. 8**).

<sup>1</sup> J. POBLOME ET AL., The Concept of Sigillata. Regionalism or Integration. RCRF Acta 36, 2000, 279–283 in part. 282; J. POBLOME/M. ZELLE, The table ware boom. A socio-economic perspective from western Asia Minor. In: C. Berns et al. (eds.), *Patris und Imperium. Kulturelle und politische Identität in den Städten der römischen Provinzen Kleinasien in der frühen Kaiserzeit*. Kolloquium Köln, November 1998. *Babesch Suppl.* 8, 2002, 275–287; J. POBLOME, Italian Sigillata in the Eastern Mediterranean. In: J. Poblome et al. (ed.), *Early Italian Sigillata. The chronological framework and trade patterns*. Proceedings of the First ROCT-Congress, Leuven, May 7 and 8, 1999 (Leuven-Paris-Dudley 2004) 17–30; J. POBLOME/P. TALLOEN, The Eastern Roman Empire. In: J. Poblome et al. (ed.), *Early Italian Sigillata. The chronological framework and trade patterns*. Proceedings of the First ROCT-Congress, Leuven, May 7 and 8, 1999 (Leuven-Paris-Dudley, 2004) XII–XIV.

<sup>2</sup> For the site and the project see MARTIN 2008, 263; MARTIN 2010, 945.

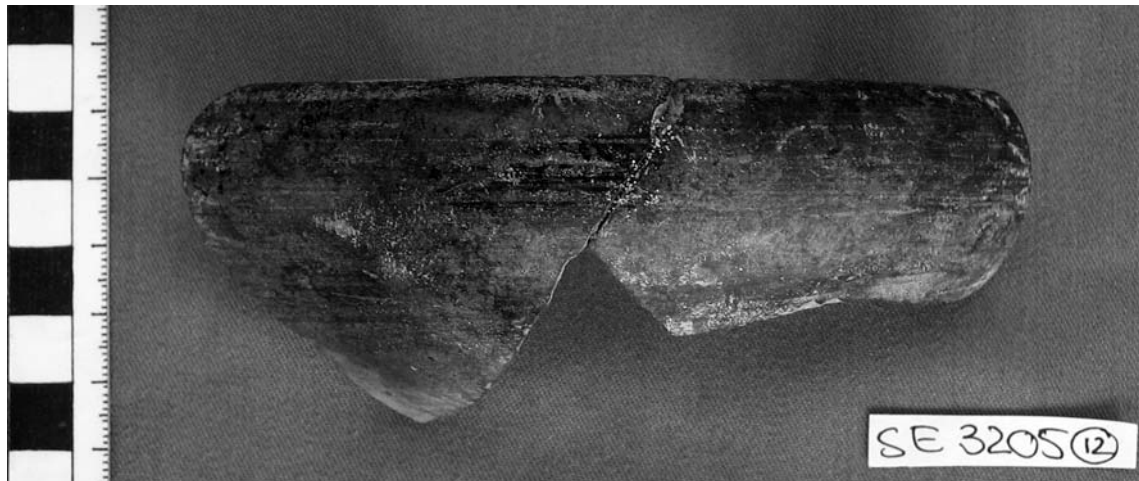
<sup>3</sup> E. ETTLINGER ET AL. 1990, 86–87 for Consp. 20 and 156–157 for Consp. B 2.9.

<sup>4</sup> See MARTIN 2008, 263–266, for preliminary information on the phases; also MARTIN 2010, 946–947.

<sup>5</sup> The Franco-German collaboration Ceramalex, to which the Schedia project belongs, is investigating the provenience of these wares.

<sup>6</sup> ETTLINGER ET AL. 1990, 92–93; HAYES 1985, 34.

<sup>7</sup> ETTLINGER ET AL. 1990, 156–157.



**Fig. 1.** Black Fine Ware, echinus bowl (SE 3205).



**Fig. 2.** Red Fine Ware, echinus bowl (SE 3002).

This is in striking contrast to another Egyptian ware, attested at Schedia by some pieces – faïence, whose major Greco-Roman production center appears to have been at Memphis, near modern Cairo at the southern tip of the Delta.<sup>8</sup> This would seem an unlikely ware to adopt shapes from the sigillata repertoire. On the one hand, it had a tradition of production in Egypt going back to the earliest Pharaonic times.<sup>9</sup> On the other, its less plastic, quartz-based material did not lend itself to such working.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the producers of faïence in the Roman period adopted shapes derived from sigillata for the bulk of their output – the cup T12.4 (**fig. 9**) and the plate (**fig. 10**).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> NENNA ET SEIF EL-DIN 2000, 39.

<sup>9</sup> G. PIERRAT-BONNEFOIS, *En Égypte, l'époque thinite, l'Ancien et le Moyen Empire*. In: A. Caubet/G. Pierrat-Bonnefois (eds.), *Faïences de l'antiquité de l'Égypte à l'Iran* (Paris 2005) 35–41.

<sup>10</sup> For the technology see NENNA ET SEIF EL-DIN 2000, 17–27.

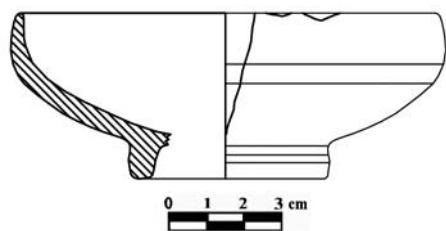
<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 311 (for the cup T12.4) and 319 (for the plate T13.3).

Fine ware following the contemporary Mediterranean models appears at Schedia only from the 4<sup>th</sup> century onward, although once again not in large quantities.<sup>12</sup> Egyptian Red-Slip Ware A/Group O from Upper Egypt, Late Roman D Ware from Cyprus and the Anatolian coast opposite it and Egyptian Red-Slip Ware B/Group K from Lower Egypt are each attested by somewhat more than 100 examples, followed by African Red-Slip Ware D. African Red-Slip Ware C and Phocaeen Red-Slip Ware are attested only by a handful each.

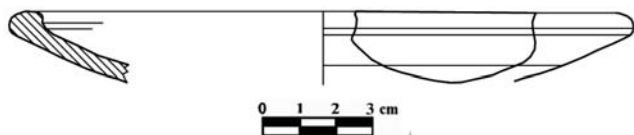
How to explain the scarcity of sigillata and wares inspired by sigillata at Schedia? It was certainly not because sigillata was unavailable, since it is well attested at nearby Alexandria.<sup>13</sup> Nor could the local potters have been unaware of sigillata. The attestation of sigillata at Schedia is enough to exclude

<sup>12</sup> See MARTIN 2008, 268.

<sup>13</sup> See ÉLAIGNE 2012, 44–48 for Italian sigillata, 122–136 for Eastern Sigillata A, 158–162 for Cypriot sigillata.



**Fig. 3.** Red Fine Ware, echinus bowl (SE 5240).



**Fig. 4.** Black Fine Ware, plate (SE 5232).

that. Furthermore, the occasional imitations of sigillata in Red Fine Ware show knowledge of fine-ware trends elsewhere, as do imitations of Cypriot sigillata forms in local or regional coarse ware, which are also found at Schedia – for example, a bowl inspired by Hayes P 41<sup>14</sup> (fig. 11). The potters supplying Schedia could undoubtedly have renewed their repertoire with shapes derived from sigillata if they had wanted. Evidently, they saw no reason to do so. The purchasers of fine ware at Schedia must have been little inclined to acquire such products. That shows in turn that most inhabitants of Schedia were not interested in presenting themselves in the Roman fashion, unlike their contemporaries elsewhere. In other words, they wished to hold to their previous identity as expressed by Hellenistic table ware and did not accept the new proposal offered in the Augustan-Tiberian period.

It remains to be seen how the situation at Schedia compares with Egypt as a whole. It is certainly in contrast with syntheses drawn largely on the basis of material from Alexandria, Mons Claudianus and Elephantine, which indicate considerable importation and imitation of sigillata.<sup>15</sup> These centers are respectively the capital and major port of the province, a state-operated granite quarry in the Eastern Desert and a place near the southern frontier with a strong military presence, which could explain their receptivity to Roman fashions in fine wares. We should probably expect that behavior varied geographically and by social groups,<sup>16</sup> as it does in Egypt today, where more westernized people in the larger cities sit around tables to eat with cutlery, while traditional ones with stronger village roots sit on the floor to eat with their hands.

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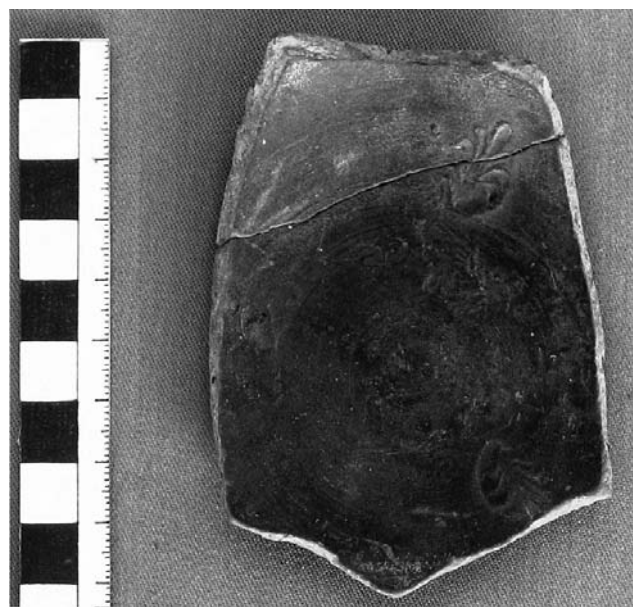
<sup>14</sup> HAYES 1985, 88.

<sup>15</sup> GATES-FOSTER 2012, 353–355; ÉLAIGNE 2012, 255–267; S. McNALLY/I. SCHRUNK, *The Impact of Rome on the Egyptian Pottery Industry*, *Journal Am. Research Center in Egypt* 37, 2000, especially 91–101.

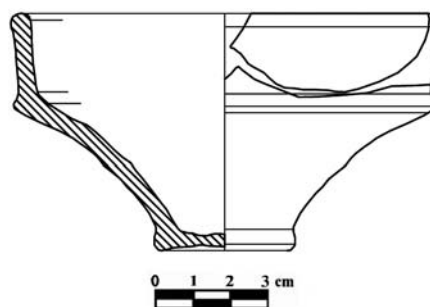
<sup>16</sup> GATES-FOSTER 2012, 248, emphasized the regional variation in pottery of the early imperial period in Egypt.



**Fig. 5.** Red Fine Ware, base with stamped and incised decoration (SE 3205).



**Fig. 6.** Black Fine Ware, base with stamped decoration (SE 3205).



**Fig. 7.** Red Fine Ware, vessel recalling Conspectus 23 in Italian sigillata and Hayes 45 in Eastern sigillata A (SE 6092).

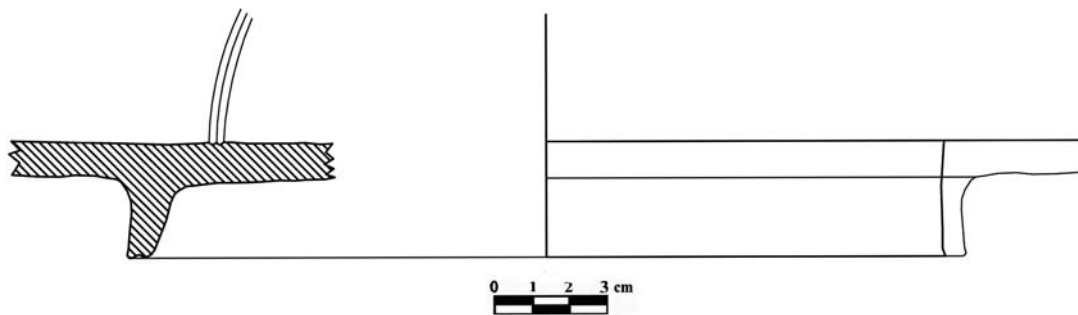


Fig. 8. Red Fine Ware, base recalling Consp. B 2.6 in Italian sigillata (SE 3002).



Fig. 9. Faïence, cup T12.4 (SE 30008).

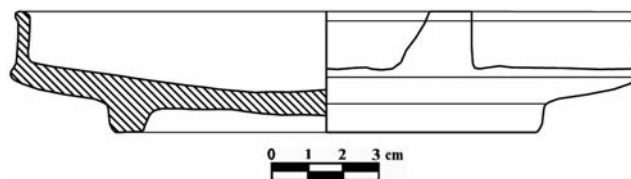


Fig. 10. Faïence, plate T13.3 (SE 7535).

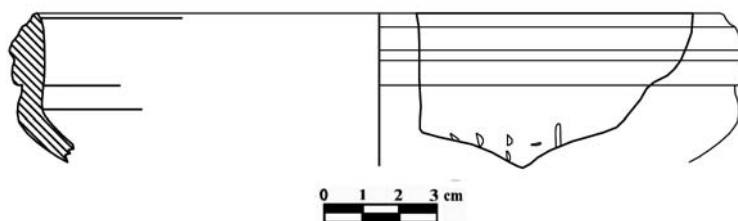


Fig. 11. Local/Regional Coarse Ware, bowl imitating Hayes P 41 in Cypriot sigillata (SE 2901).

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