

Pottery of Manqabad 2

Pottery Production and types
from the Monastery of Manqabad
at Asyut (Egypt)

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Access Archaeology





ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

Summertown Pavilion

18-24 Middle Way

Summertown

Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80327-467-6

ISBN 978-1-80327-468-3 (e-Pdf)

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Introduction

The present volume has the principal aim to present, document and analyse a new selection of ceramics deriving from the Egyptian site of Manqabad (Asyut). The Italian Egyptian project at this monastic complex started in 2011, sponsored by the University of Naples “L’Orientale” (UNIOR) and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation (MAECI) and is directed by Rosanna Pirelli, professor of Egyptology and Archaeology and Art History of Ancient Egypt at UNIOR.

The site is located about 9 km north of Asyut and was accidentally discovered in 1965, during construction work for the local electrical system. Between 1976 and 2010 it was excavated only by Egyptian inspectors of the Antiquities Service (SCA). The main phases of occupations can be identified as follows: a First Christian Period (Phase I, 6th century AD), a Second Christian Period (Phase II, 8th century AD) corresponding to the beginning of the Islamic Period; an Islamic Period, 19th century CE, reign of Mahmud II). In addition to that, three more periods of possible, or less regular human presence can be suggested as follows: a Pharaonic Period (deduced from the finding of hieroglyphic signs on at least two limestone blocks reused in Christian era analysed during the 2014 and 2018 missions); a Ptolemaic Period (?); and a Late Roman Period (for the presence of thermal-bath-like architectural structures in the central area of the site). Moreover, some literary (papyrus) sources quote the occurrence of a *castrum* at Likopolis still in use during the first half of the 5th century AD. This date can be seen as a *terminus post quem* for the beginning of the monastic settlement at Manqabad.

During the UNIOR field missions conducted so far, the team has been able to re-discover and outline the history of this huge monastic site (92.000 m²) in the Middle Egypt region, which is formed by three main areas: the Northern Sector, a 230m. long double row of monastic housing units and a chapel located at the northern end of the site, today limited by the modern Muslim cemetery; the Central Sector, including more housing units, a possible thermal bath complex of the Late Roman Period and a ‘Qasr’; the Southern sector with the possible remains of another church, a monumental gate on the west and a quite high ‘dump’, which could represent the production area of the site. One of the principal goals of the project is the study and publication of the related findings, today stored at the SCA warehouses in el-Ashmunein and Shutby, together with the analysis of the material deriving from the ongoing excavations. Of course, pottery has a prominent role in the identification of the different phases of occupation and production/domestic activities performed in the ancient monastic community. Therefore this volume aims at presenting the most significant ceramic typologies identified from

Manqabad, while collecting as much references and parallels as possible deriving from several different monastic sites in Egypt. Notwithstanding the still ongoing process of study of this assemblage (many archaeometric and possibly content analysis have been planned and hopefully will be performed in the forthcoming seasons), the wish of the author is to share with the scientific community those typologies identified, in order to contribute to the debate about the documentation, study, publication and classification of ceramic material from Byzantine Egypt.

Methodological issues

The study conducted on the Manqabad ceramics has been affected, since the first attempts, by several difficulties, of which the effort to find reliable parallels in the available literature is one of the most important. In fact, if we do not consider the most recent volumes and papers dedicated to assemblages of Byzantine pottery from Egypt, many publications, mostly regarding ancient excavation material, still present an incomplete set of data, which cannot be properly used as comparative repertoires. Unfortunately, it was not possible to get technical or general information about vessels (nor even a picture or drawing) deriving, for example, from Thebes (St.Epiphanius), Saqqara (Apa Jeremia) and many other similar sites. More in general, ceramics is one of the most complex and ubiquitous archaeological material used mainly to measure time, but it is also a social media that makes it possible to transmit different messages through symbols loaded with social, cultural and functional meaning¹. In this respect, Egyptian archaeological ceramics analysis is still in its infancy, but it is essential in order to obtain a better understanding of the behaviour of the people who produced, distributed and used these ceramics. Despite the enormous progress made in the last 30 years in the field of Pharaonic ceramic study, the Late Antique material has not received the same attention from scholars until quite recently. With few exceptions, the oldest excavation reports of monastic sites across Egypt bear no useful sets of data related to pottery items, while the most recent publications have successfully changed this attitude and laid the bases for a complete documentation system of the single site assemblages. The issue of classifying the Egyptian pottery produced in the Byzantine Period has interested scholars since the 1970s², starting from some terminological issues and chronological labels

¹ Schiffer M.B. 2010. Behavioral Archaeology. Principles and Practice. Routledge; Schiffer M.B, Skibo J.M. 2008. People and Things. A behavioral approach to Material Culture, Springer.

² Egloff, M. 1977. Kellia, La Poterie Copte. Quatre Siècles d'artisanat et d'échanges en Basse Egypte, Recherches Suisse d'Archéologie copte III, Genève; Hayes J.W. 1972. Late Roman Pottery. The British School at Rome. London; Rodziewicz M. 1976. Alexandrie I. La ceramique Romaine tardive d'Alexandrie. Editions Scientifiques de Pologne, Varsovie.

(Roman, Byzantine, Coptic) and continuing with the selection of dating criteria (size, function, typology of clay, capacity, contents, evidence of use, textual evidence, radiocarbon analysis and possible occurrence of coins) and comparative analysis with the Nubian types³. In particular, the work of Pascale Ballet in the 90s and 2000s for the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (IFAO) is definitely of fundamental importance⁴ since for the first time it involved a systematic pottery survey of several Egyptian sites, the use of different sources of information about the pottery production combined with fabric analysis, and the definition of the distinctive features of an atelier, to be identified in the field. The last twenty years have seen a growth in published catalogues of Byzantine pottery from different Egyptian sites, including some attempts at web-based portals and dedicated conferences⁵. Nowadays Egyptian ceramics in general are at the center of a lively debate, since recent years have seen a shift of attention towards production, materials and function studies⁶, but the Byzantine ceramics still lack a comprehensive treatment. In fact, we still have to deal with the lack of a unique and complete system of classification of the Byzantine pottery in Egypt. Certainly, many fundamental volumes are available to be used as parallel repertoires, edited most of all during the last three decades, which form the essential bulk of the relevant literature⁷. But it is still very common to find a single and self-referential system of classification for each site and its related pottery assemblage. Considering those general methodological issues, this catalogue does not include a new system of pottery classification, but simply refers to previous schemes, when possible, in order to identify the typologies.

³ Adams W.Y. 1986. *Ceramic Industries of Medieval Nubia*, 2 vols. Princeton.

⁴ Ballet P., Picon M. 1987. 'Recherches Préliminaires sur les origines de la céramique des Kellia (Égypte). Importations et productions égyptiennes', in: CCE 1, pp.17-48; Ballet P. et alii. 1991. 'Artisanat de la céramique dans l'Égypte Romaine tardive et Byzantine. Prospections d'ateliers de potiers de Minia à Assouan', in: CCE 2, pp. 129-144; Ballet, P., Bosson, N. and Rassart-Debergh, M. 2003. *Kellia: 2, L'Ermitage copte QR 195. Céramique, inscriptions, décor*, FIFAO 49. Le Caire; Ballet, P., and Poludnikiewicz, A. 2012. *Tebtynis V. La céramique des époques hellénistique et impériale. Campagnes 1988-1993. Production, consommation et réception dans le Fayoum méridional*, FIFAO 68. Le Caire; Ballet, P., Guidotti M.C. 2014. 'Identificazione e analisi delle discariche domestiche e industriali della città di Antinoe', in: Pintauro R. (ed.) *Antinoopolis II*, Firenze, pp. 165 – 221.

⁵ See for example: 'Roman Amphorae: a digital resource' of the University of Southampton (2005, updated 2014, https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/amphora_ahrb_2005/cat_amph.cfm).

⁶ See: Peña T. 2007. *Roman Pottery in the Archaeological Record*, Cambridge University Press; Bader B. and Ownby M.F. (eds.). 2013. *Functional Aspects of Egyptian Ceramics in their Archaeological Context*, 2009, Leuven, Paris, Walpole; Bader B. (2017) *Ancient Egyptian Pottery*. Oxford Handbooks Online; Warden L.A. 2021. *Ceramic Perspectives on ancient Egyptian Society*. Cambridge Elements, Cambridge University Press.

⁷ See: Adams 1986; Ballet 1987, 1991, 2003, 2012; Bailey 1998; Beckh 2013; Bourriau 1981; Colmenero 2017; Czyżewska 2013; Dixneuf 2018; Egloff 1977; Faiers 2005, 2013; Gempeler 1992; Guidotti 2004; Hayes 1972; Lecuyot 2000, 2004; Pierrat 1991, 1996; Rodziewicz 1976; Wodzinska 2010.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank first of all Prof. Rosanna Pirelli (UNIOR) for giving her the chance to work on this very interesting material in the framework of the Manqabad archaeological mission. She wishes to express her gratitude also to Dr. Maria Cristina Guidotti and Dr Jane Faiers for their revision of the volume and inspiring suggestions about the classification and identification issues. Many thanks also to Jane Faires who kindly provided the drawings of selected vessels. The author's indebtedness goes also to the director and inspectors of the el-Ashmunein SCA store (Nasser Nanoss, Ali abd al-Dhahar), to Dr. Ezzat Salib G.D. of the Restoration for Archaeological site, and more in general to the Inspectorate of el-Minia, for granting permission to work on the material from Manqabad, their kindness and co-operation. Many thanks are due also to Richard Sadleir for correcting the many drafts of the English text; to Dr. Delphine Dixneuf, Dr. Vincente Barba Colmenero, Dr. Ilona Regulski and Dr. Wolfgang Müller for providing parallels and related bibliography from Asyut and Aswan. Last, but not least, the author owes a great debt also to her family, and to her husband Stefano in particular, for the great support shown during the overall process of studying and writing.