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EARLY ROMAN GLASS FROM MARINA EL-ALAMEIN

Renata Kucharczyk

The last few seasons of archaeological excavations and conservation work in the town area at the site of Marina el-Alamein¹ produced a significant assemblage of glass finds, closely comparable to the early Imperial glass from other Mediterranean sites. Although the repertoire of standard Early Roman glass forms represented in this set is quite broad, domestic items of everyday use evidently prevail over luxury items. A large number of open tableware forms can be distinguished, such as beakers and bowls used as drinking vessels. Shallow plates and dishes, and deep bowls for serving food come in second. Household containers seem to be limited so far to a large, probably square, strong-handled jug. Another group includes a variety of types and sizes of toilets flasks and bottles for perfumes, ointments and the like.

Almost all of the recorded fragments are plain with only a few beakers showing engraved and applied trail decoration. Pontil marks in the bases are largely absent, but a faint scar can be observed in a few cases. Presumed "cast" glass is represented by some fragments of windowpanes. Blown glass is overwhelmingly dominant with the excep-

tion of four fragments of ribbed bowls made by casting.² A few gaming pieces, balls and stirring rods attested in the assemblage were formed by a non-blowing technique.

The vessels were made (where black or ivory weathering and irisation did not prevent observation) of colorless or natural greenish-blue glass. While tablewares were made of good quality decolorized glass, the greenish-blue glass used for various types of containers appears to have been of noticeably poorer quality. In view of this, there is every reason to suppose that these pieces were made locally in the region, even if wasters or any other evidence of glass working is still lacking from Marina. The question of the provenance of the luxury vessels remains open, although Alexandria seems to be the likeliest candidate. It is reasonable to assume that some of these vessels were imported either from the Levant or Italy. Interestingly, the highly decorated glassware of the 1st-2nd centuries AD, traditionally connected with the renowned Alexandrian glass industry that flourished at the time, is virtually absent from the assemblage. Another significant feature is the absence of any difference between what was

1 For excavations carried out by Prof. Dr. W. A. Daszewski's team from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology and for the conservation of private residences in the town area, presently conducted by a Polish-Egyptian Preservation and Restoration Mission headed by Prof. Dr. S. Medeksza, see reports published yearly in *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*.

2 The technique for producing such bowls has yet to be understood in full. Possible methods include casting, cutting, sagging and polishing. Most recently suggested is tooling on a potter's wheel.

found in domestic and in burial contexts. The inhabitants of this town apparently buried their dead with the same glass vessels they used in the household.

The glass dates generally from the 1st to 3rd centuries with a concentration in the 1st and 2nd century AD.

Drinking vessels predominate in our assemblage. The relatively large numbers of indented beakers with four indents (Isings form 32)³ prove that they satisfied a widespread need. All are either colorless or have a slight yellowish-green tinge. They are cylindrical in shape with unworked, cracked-off rims and a constriction just below [Fig. 1:2]. Only a few fragments were finished with a vertical fire-rounded rim [Fig. 1:3]. The chief characteristic of these vessels is the contrast between the thin walls and easily recognizable bases. These bases are flat or kick-up, and noticeably thick, almost square, without pontil mark [Fig. 1:1]. This very popular form of what was essentially a utilitarian object, although usually considered of Eastern origin, enjoyed wide distribution. Find places extend from Britain to Egypt. In Egypt, specimens occurred at Karanis⁴ and they are not uncommon in the Red Sea region.⁵ Among the beaker sherds observed in the assemblage, there are a few with faintly engraved horizontal wheel-cut lines encircling the upper wall. They might have belonged to

a different type of the beaker, probably a tall, thin-walled form with conical body and flaring foot [Fig. 1:4,6], which was also identified among the sherds.⁶

The few out of the ordinary pieces in this assemblage are all the more conspicuous because of the prevalent simplicity of forms displayed by the glass vessels from the excavations. One such luxury item is the pillar-moulded bowl, a hallmark of 1st century AD glass practically all over the Roman Empire. Only three fragments of such vessels were recovered [e.g. Fig. 1:7]. They were made of decolorized glass, and have an extremely faint greenish or bluish tinge. The limited number of examples from Marina may suggest non-Egyptian origin and may support Harden's opinion that although these bowls are considered an Eastern Mediterranean form, they were rare in Egypt. Apart from Alexandria, the form has been reported from Karanis⁷ and Tell el-Balamun.⁸ Numerous pieces were excavated in the Red Sea region.⁹ Considerable quantities of this well-known type are common in a wide geographical distribution across the Mediterranean and even far up into the Black Sea area.

Vessels with applied fillets, as they are known, are generally connected with the shallow bowl or deep dish type. Two pieces with this plastic ornamentation (Isings form 43) were recovered [e.g. Fig. 1:8].¹⁰ The

3 C. Isings, *Roman Glass from Dated Finds* (Jakarta 1957), 46-47.

4 D. Harden, *Roman Glass from Karanis* (Ann Arbor), 1936, Pl. XV : 376, 391, 393.

5 J.-P. Brun, "Les objets en verre", in H. Cuvigny (éd.), *La route de Myos Hormos* (IFAO: Cairo 2003), 516, Fig. 239:11. The beakers from Quseir al-Qadim display a certain variety of body shapes, cf. C. Meyer, *Glass from Quseir al-Qadim and the Indian Ocean Trade* (Chicago 1992), 27-28, Pl. 8: 149-166.

6 Such a beaker has been published from Cyprus, cf. A. Oliver Jr., "The Glass", in *La Nécropole D'Amathonte. Tombes 113-367, Études Chypriotes XIV* (Nicosie 1992), 106, 121:T.199/28; Brun, op. cit., 516-517, Fig. 239:7.

7 Cf. Harden, op. cit., 118-119, one fragment.

8 A. J. Spencer, *Excavations at Tell el-Balamun* (1991-1994) (London 1996), 18, Pl. 87:20.

9 Quseir: Meyer, op. cit., 17-18, Pl. 1:1-25; Berenice: S.E. Sidebotham and W.Z. Wendrich, *Preliminary Report of the 1994 Excavations at Berenike* (Leiden 1995), 37-38, Fig. 16; Maximianon: Jean-Pierre Brun, op.cit., 517, Fig. 240: 24.

10 Isings, op. cit., 59.

bands are attached in pairs at opposite sites of the rim and tooled into a series of ribs. They imitate handles. One fragment is noticeably big and may belong to a shallow plate. The estimated diameter of the crimped band attached to the almost horizontal rim is about 12 cm. Parallels are fairly numerous. Vessels with this plastic element have been attested over a wide area of the

Mediterranean and even as far afield as the Black Sea coast.

Other tableware forms are represented only by rim and base fragments [Fig. 2]. Two well-known types are prevalent among the bases. A ring base of colorless glass with a slight greenish tinge, common on a variety of vessel shapes, was in our case part of shallow bowls or plates, one of the

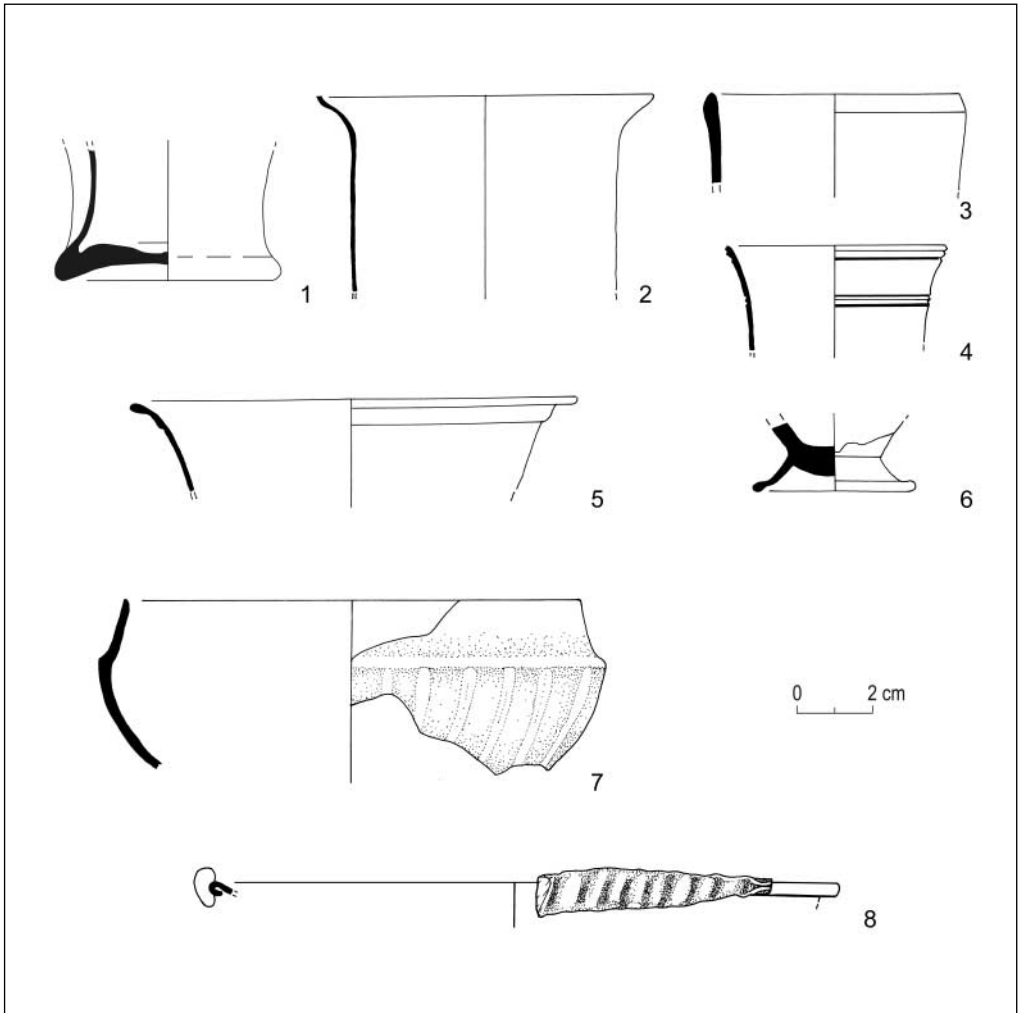


Fig. 1. Beakers (1-6), pillar-moulded bowl (7) and dish with applied fillet (8)
(Drawing and inking R. Kucharczyk)

most common household items in Roman times [Fig. 2:1-3]. Bases of this type were recorded at Karanis,¹¹ Quseir al-Qadim,¹² Maximianon.¹³ High bases recovered in quantity from the site [Fig. 2:4-6] must have been used for a variety of shapes and sizes. They can be connected with both shallow dishes and broad plates and deep bowls. Bases were rather not made at the same time with the vessel, but were attached later by "post" technique.¹⁴ Their characteristic feature is an inner ridge, made by the thrust of the base from below. (A hypothetical reconstruction of the whole vessel was made with some rims identified among the sherds [Fig. 2:7]). Such forms are well attested at Kom el-Dikka,¹⁵ Karanis¹⁶ and Eastern Desert sites.¹⁷ One unbroken bowl has been published from Dush.¹⁸

Bottles and flask of various kinds and sizes constituted the second most common group of glass finds in Marina [Fig. 3:1-9]. The majority belongs to long-necked unguentaria, the most widespread and constant shape in early Roman glass. Such bottles were used by the living as containers for perfume, sweet-scented essences and other valuable volatile liquids, probably also for medical substances and oil. Some of them still contain traces of unguents. These

receptacles, commonly referred to also as "tear bottles", were given in great numbers as gifts to the dead in burial offerings.¹⁹ They are cheap, quickly and carelessly made. All such specimens from the Marina site were made of poor quality, natural green glass with bubbles (although it is often hard to see the glass under the black weathering). The body tends to be pear-shaped, conical or oval. The long neck is cylindrical with an outplayed, wide, flat, folded rim. In most cases the bases are entirely solid, serving as ballast for the vessel with its tube-shaped interior of very small capacity [Fig. 3:1]. Some, however, feature a hollow base [Fig. 3:2-3]. This long-lived and mass-produced type is not restricted to the Eastern Mediterranean. Of the numerous parallels, suffice it to mention the bottles excavated at Kom el-Dikka, as well as finds from Karanis,²⁰ the Roman cemetery at Douch²¹ and Quseir.²²

Another type of toilet container is represented by four fragments of flasks with a thick, distinctive "collar-like" rim [Fig. 3:4-5]. They have a characteristic short cylindrical neck with slight constriction at the bottom and most probably pear-shaped body. According to Harden, this shape is well attested in Egypt. Similar specimens but with different rims are known from

11 Harden, op. cit., Pls. X:83, 123, 130, 166; XI:73-74, 76.

12 Meyer, op. cit., 25, Pl. 6:99-107.

13 Brun, op. cit., 518, Fig. 242:51-52.

14 For an explanation of this term, see Harden, op. cit., 18.

15 Author's personal observations.

16 Harden, op. cit., 25, Pl. X: 170, Pl. XIV.

17 Quseir: Meyer, op. cit., 25, Pl. 6:108-115. Maximianon: Brun, op. cit., 519, Fig. 243:58-59.

18 Fr. Dunand et al., Douch. La Necropole (IFAOC: Cairo 1992), 9, 241-242, Pl. 68:1.

19 Many unguentaria were recorded at the nearby Roman cemetery, e.g. W.A. Daszewski, *PAM XII, Reports 2000* (2001), 50, Fig. 3.

20 Harden, op. cit., Pl. XX:779, 803, 805.

21 Dunand et al., op. cit., 241, Pl. 68:3.

22 Meyer, op. cit., 29-30, 193, 195, 203-204.

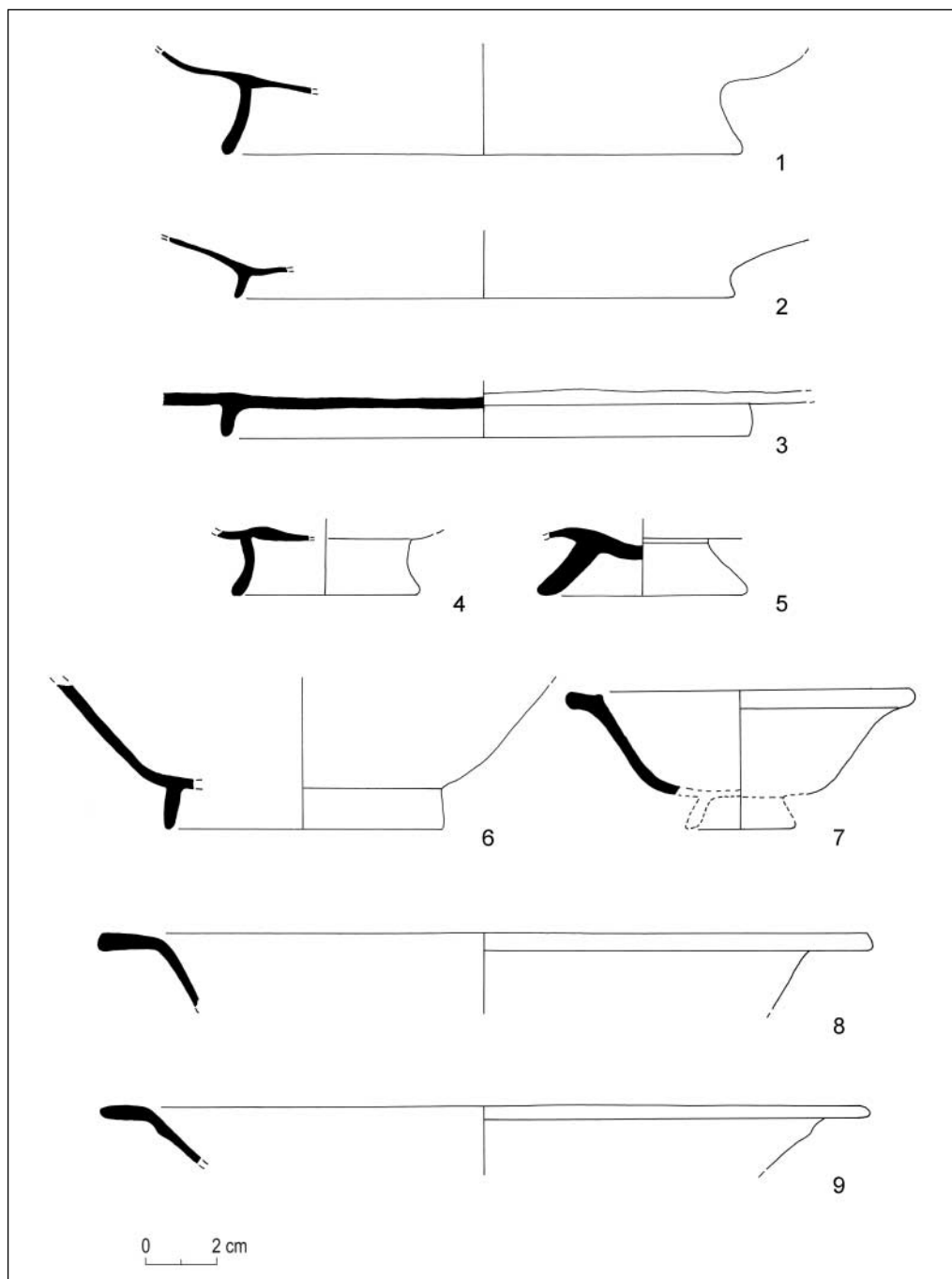


Fig. 2. *Bowls and plates*
(Drawing and inking R. Kucharczyk)

Karanis²³ and there is one sherd from Quseir al-Qadim²⁴ and another from Elephantine.²⁵ Complete bottles of this type were published from Dakhleh²⁶ and Oxyrynchus.²⁷ A small intact jar was also unearthed [Fig. 3:8].

Toiletries are among the earliest blown vessels. Aryballoi (Isings form 61),²⁸ containers for fragrant oils or scents, were used by bathers and athletes for anointing the body. Produced in a variety of media, including pottery and metal, these vessels

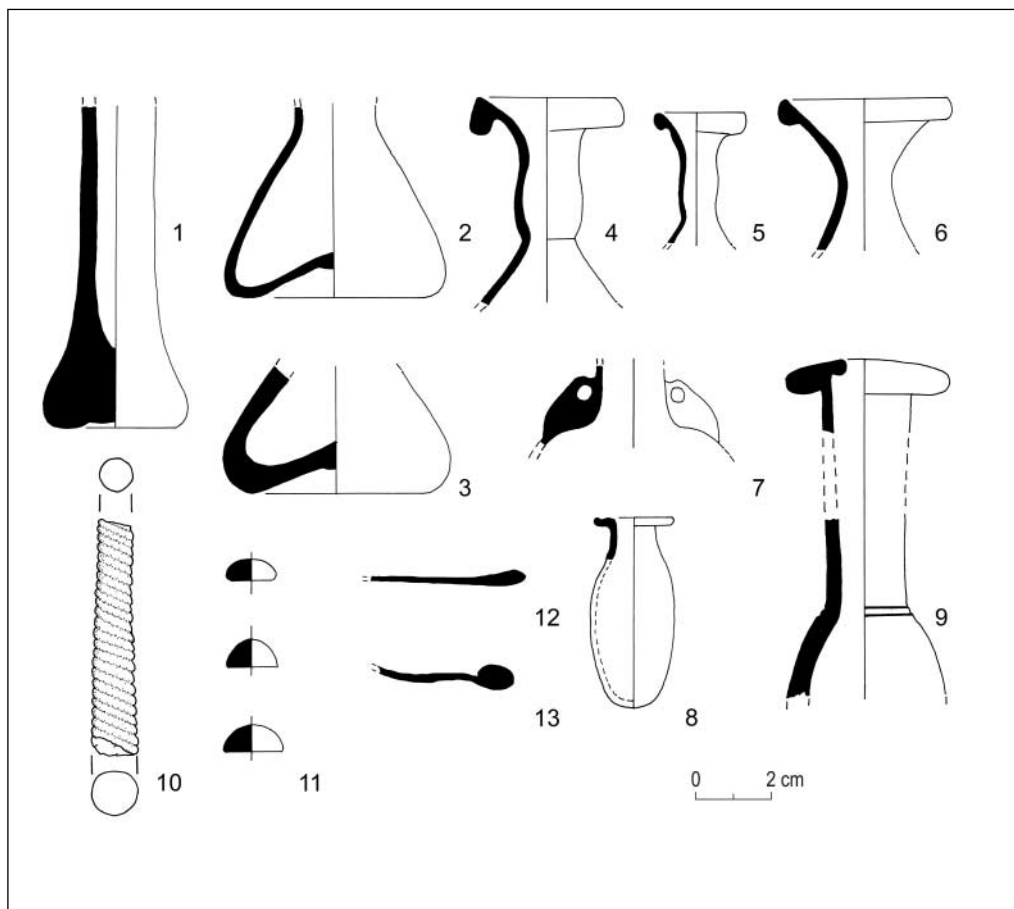


Fig. 3. Long-necked unguentaria (1-3), toilet flasks (4-9), stirring rod (10), gaming pieces (11), window panes (12-13) (Drawing and inking R. Kucharczyk)

23 Harden, op. cit., Pl. XVII:516, 537, 542.

24 Meyer, op. cit., 28, Pl. 8:170.

25 M. Rodziewicz, Early Roman Industries on Elephantine, *Elephantine XXVII* (Mainz am Rhein 2005), Pl. 4:69.

26 C. Marchini, Glass from the 1993 Excavations at Ismant el-Kharab, in: C.A. Hope and A.J. Mills (eds), *Dakhleh Oasis Project: Preliminary Reports on the 1992-1993 and 1993-1994 Field Seasons* (Oxford 1999), 81-82, Fig. 4b.

27 J.D. Cooney, "Glass", in: *Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities in the British Museum* (London 1976), 107, no. 1093.

28 Isings, op. cit., 78-80; with many references to dated finds, mostly from the West.

always maintained the same shape: a bulbous body, characteristic short, tubular neck, horizontally flattened rim and dolphin-shaped handles forming complete loops which extend between the upper part of the shoulders and the rim. Usually the glass is thick, as befits their purpose. Since such flasks were carried around from place to place, stoppers as well as attaching chains were required. Fragments of two aryballoï: handles with part of the necks, have been observed among the glass sherds from the site [Fig. 3:7]. Fairly close parallels are to be identified among the finds from Karanis,²⁹ Tebtynis, Douch and Ain et-Turba (engraved).³⁰ From Egypt we can also quote examples from Quseir al-Qadim,³¹ sites on the route to Myos Hormos,³² and Elephantine.³³

In addition, more than 20 fragments of windowpanes were unearthed. Unfortunately, the original colors have been obscured by heavy weathering and no original edges have been preserved. They were most probably made by the "cast" technique, but glass deterioration is such that a sure identification of the technique is impossible. Five fragments with original looped and rounded edges [e.g. Fig. 3:12-13], belonging to the free-blown "crown/bull's eye"

windowpane, were also found. Panes were noticeably big, with diameters reaching approximately 22 cm.

A few items, formed by non-blown technique, included sections of spirally twisted rods and gaming pieces. Four monochromatic segments of such rods were observed in the assemblage [Fig. 3:10]. They may have been used for stirring and dipping perfumes or applying cosmetics from tall containers. A few such fragmentary rods have been noted by the author in the Polish excavations at Kom el-Dikka and Tell Atrib. They are also known from Karanis³⁴ and Quseir al-Qadim³⁵ in Egypt.

Among typical items reported from many Greco-Roman sites are glass astragali, either colorless or colored. Together with glass balls, these objects are usually identified as gaming counters. They may have seen different use, however, as ring stones, insets, inlays or toys. The seven such pieces from Marina [Fig. 3:11] are covered by black weathering. Three balls were made of millefiori glass. Unfortunately, the pattern is unclear. Comparable pieces have been noted at Karanis;³⁶ one is published from Quseir al-Qadim.³⁷ They have also been recorded by the author among the glass finds from Kom el-Dikka.

29 Harden, op. cit., Pl. XX:773.

30 M.-D. Nenna, Verres gravés d'Égypte du Ier au Ve siècle ap. J.-C., in : D. Foy et M.-D. Nenna (eds), Échanges et commerce du verre dans le monde antique (Éditions Monique Mergoil : Montagnac 2003), 368.

31 Meyer, op. cit., 31, Pl. 10:225-228.

32 Brun, op. cit., 521, Fig. 244:82-84.

33 Rodziewicz, op. cit., Pl. 4:56-58, 62-64.

34 Harden, op. cit., Pl. XXI: 860-864.

35 Meyer, op. cit., 40, Pl. 14:361.

36 Harden, op. cit., Pl. XXI:897.

37 Meyer, op. cit., 40, Pl. 14:360.