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Naqlun: The Pottery

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THE POTTERY

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In the course of archaeological work carried out on the kom in Naqlun in 2000, an assemblage of earlier pottery was discovered in the general area of what has been designated as passage E.9, interspersed with ceramics typical of the late 9th to 11th centuries.¹⁾ This assemblage is of a nature that justifies a separate, albeit still preliminary discussion of the material.

The pottery constitutes a deposit of a few hundred pieces, making up part of a leveling or rubbish layer. The original structure of this layer seems to have been

heavily disturbed and partly destroyed in the 10th-12th centuries, when numerous burial pits were dug in it. In consequence, it survives over an area of but 3 m², having a thickness of c. 0.5 m.

The deposit includes tableware, domestic vessels (mostly painted), cooking pots and amphorae. Storage vessels are entirely absent, as are glazed pots in the tableware class. During previous research in 1988, 1989 and 1992, typologically similar pottery had come to light in room D. 1 (lowest layer) in sector B (leveling layers).²⁾

LATE ROMAN POTTERY

Four shapes (*Fig. 1a-d*) are in clear domination, constituting some 90% of the Late Roman potsherds. Late Upper Egyptian variants of these shapes are known from the excavations on Elephantine (T 222; 261; 279; 325),³⁾ among others, while the vessels representing these variants refer to imported shapes known in Egypt since the 5th century. The ones found at Naqlun are for the most part made of Nile silt covered with red or light slip; some are

made of clay that, to judge by the color in the break and the structure, should be considered as intermediate between Nile silt and Upper Egyptian marl clay. It has been suggested that this kind of clay originated from somewhere in the vicinity of Dendera.

Many of the plates are decorated on the floor with stamped decoration, which is quite simple in comparison with the decoration of early variants of this type of

1) Cf. reports: T. Górecki, "The Pottery from Naqlun", *PAM V, Reports 1993* (1994), 63-78; W. Godlewski, T. Derda, T. Górecki, "Deir el Naqlun (Nekloni), 1988-1989, Second Preliminary Report", in: *Nubica III/1* (1994), 226-231, especially figs. 17.1, 17.5-10, 19.1-3, 19.35-36.

2) Godlewski, Derda, Górecki, *Nubica III/1*, op. cit., figs. 18.1-8 (room D.1); T. Górecki, "Deir el-Naqlun 1992: The Pottery", *PAM IV, Reports 1992* (1993), 61, figs. 5 b, c (sector B).

3) R. D. Gempeler, *Elephantine X. Die Keramik römischer bis früh-arabischer Zeit* (Mainz am Rhein 1992).

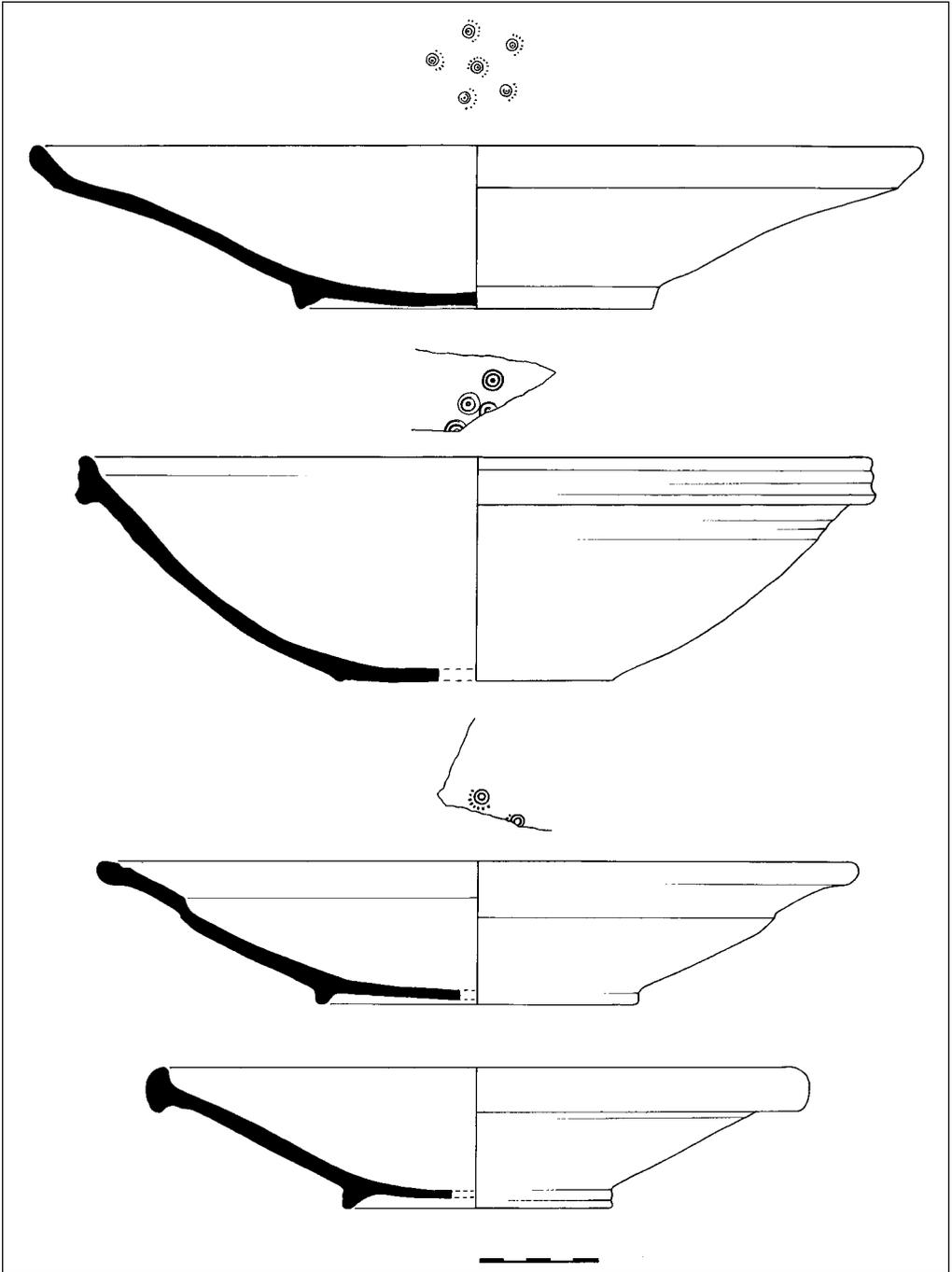


Fig. 1. Naqlun. Pottery of Late Roman types. From top to bottom: Nd.00440, Nd.00454, Nd.00412, Nd.00422 (Drawing T. Górecki)

pottery. There are no clearly accentuated central motifs (figural or other). Instead, there are sets of concentric circles in two varieties,⁴⁾ impressed in groups of five to eight stamps.

While Gempeler dates shapes of this sort to c. AD 650 at the latest, the archaeological context at Naqlun clearly indicates that they could have been still in production at the beginning of the 9th century.

PAINTED DOMESTIC WARE

The prevalent shape in this group are bowls of varied depth, from shallow with a conical body and cylindrical-conical (often referred to as carinated bowls, *Fig. 2*) to deep with a roughly cylindrical body. All are made of Nile silt and bear painted decoration on a light slip. The chief ornamental motifs include single or double arches repeated all around the circumference,⁵⁾ intersecting arches, or else a zigzag of stylized floral elements of lanceolate shape running around the body with simple motifs resembling the letter V inscribed in the triangular fields of this pattern (*Fig. 2*, top). This second type of decoration is typical of Upper Egyptian or Nubian pottery and is very seldom encountered on ceramics produced in Lower Egypt.⁶⁾

The decoration is executed on a light slip and is either monochrome (red or brown line), bichrome in three variants (lines which are red and black, red and yellow, black and yellow) or tricolor (black, red and yellow).

The use of a yellow pigment for decorating the vessels in this assemblage is

absolutely unique and noteworthy. Yellow appears in the linear decoration of vessels (the above described bowls exclusively) belonging to this one deposit and on a few other fragments found in different stratigraphic contexts on the kom in Naqlun. One observes a similarity between the decoration of many of the vessels in this set and the medieval Upper Egyptian and Nubian pottery, although yellow in the latter ceramics occurs only as a color of the slip and not of the painted ornamental motifs.⁷⁾ Yellow was used, although to a limited extent, in Egyptian pottery of the Islamic period, namely, in the decoration of the so-called Coptic Glazed Wares (=underglaze slip painted wares) and the so-called Fayyumi Wares. This could suggest a chronological convergence of the pottery from our deposit and the early glazed ceramics, especially if this hypothesis were to be supported with chemical analyses of the yellow pigment sampled from pottery of both categories.

A viable date for this group of ceramics falls is the 8th-9th centuries.

4) The stamps are undoubtedly modeled on patterns taken from imported ceramics, cf. J. W. Hayes, *Late Roman Pottery* (London 1972), figs. 40; 26 e-g and 31 m.

5) Identical with motifs on bowls from Tebtynis, cf. M.-O. Rousset, S. Marchand, "Tebtynis 1998: Travaux dans le secteur nord", in: *Ann. Isl.* 33 (1999), nos. 75 and 79; id. id., "Secteur nord de Tebtynis (Fayyoun). Mission de 1999", in: *Ann. Isl.* 34 (2000), figs. 36d, 37c, 42p.

6) A very rich repertory of variants of this type of decoration in Nubia is given by W. Y. Adams, *Ceramic Industries of Medieval Nubia, Part II* (Kentucky 1986), including Figs. 173 (E 14.3) and 175 (G 14.5).

7) *Ibid.*, 201f.

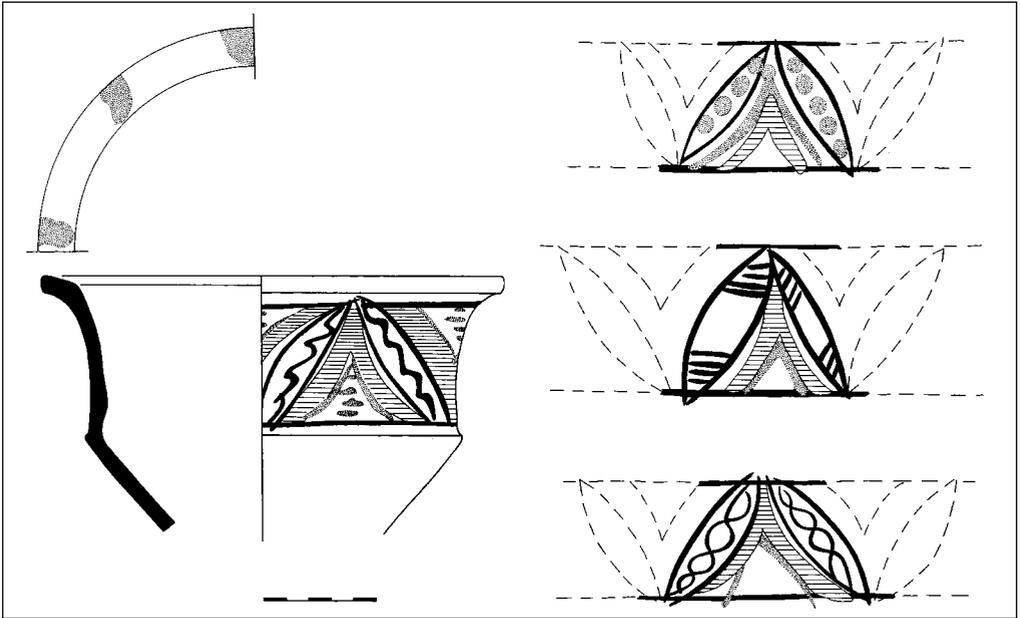


Fig. 2. Naqlun. Carinated bowls with painted decoration: Nd.00303 and three examples of decoration motifs, top, and Nd.00300, below. Colors in the drawing rendered as: solid – black, dots – red, dashes – yellow (Drawing T. Górecki, photo W Godlewski)

AMPHORAE

All the amphorae were made of Nile silt. Most of the sherds represent Late Roman Amphora Type 7 and only a few are of the Late Roman Type 5/6.⁸⁾

A characteristic feature of this version of LR 7 amphorae (*Fig. 3, left*) is the cylindrical form of the uppermost part of the body, a strongly everted and thickened edge separating body from shoulder, and the fairly flat, definitely not convex shoulders. These are features that are

typical of the latest version of this amphora.

The ovoid amphorae LR 5/6 (*Fig. 3, right*) are characterized by a short, c. 4 cm-high neck, which is either cylindrical or slightly flaring and measures 10-11 cm in diameter. The body just below the neck, where the loop handles are attached, is decorated with more than a dozen parallel engraved lines.

This group can be dated to the 8th and early 9th century.⁹⁾

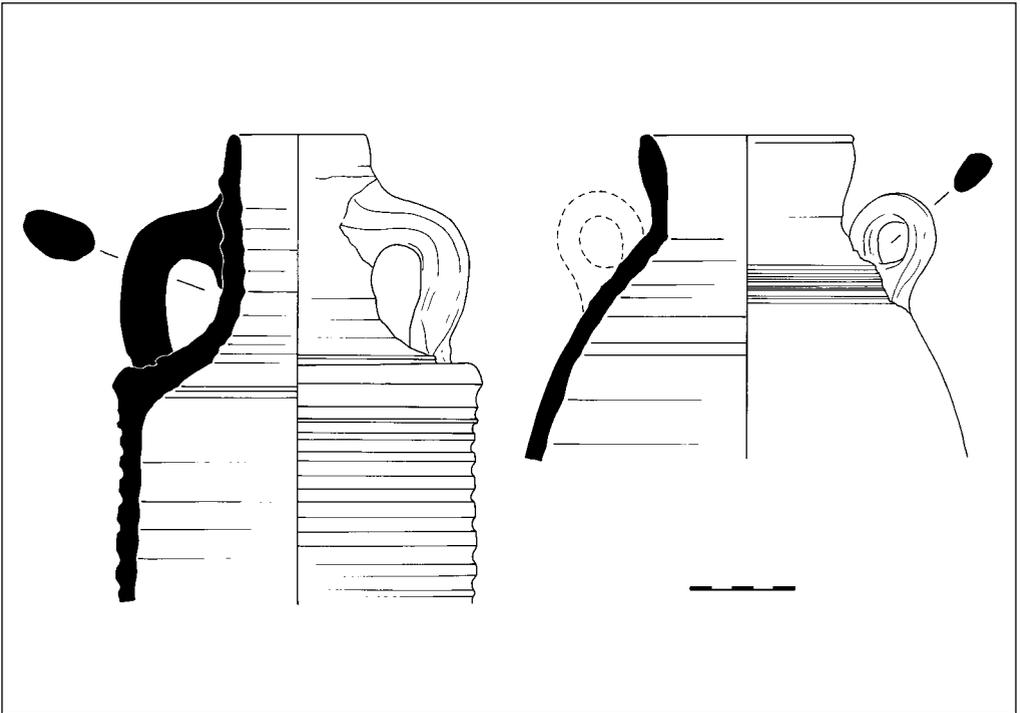


Fig. 3 Naqlun. Amphorae types: LR 7 – Nd.00581 (left) and LR 5/6 – Nd.00383 (right) (Drawing T. Górecki)

8) Cf. Górecki, *PAM IV*, op. cit., figs. 5 b-c.

9) Type LR 5/6 covers a broad chronological horizon, the latest vessels being dated by A. Zemer (*Storage Jars in Ancient Sea Trade*, Haifa 1977) to the 7th-early 8th century AD (pl. XXII, p. 73). At Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria they have also been found in late contexts of the early 9th century, cf. G. Majcherek, *Roman and Byzantine amphorae from Alexandria (Kom el-Dikka)*. Typological study (in Polish), unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Warsaw University (1992), 118.

REMARKS ON THE CHRONOLOGY

What is important for the chronology of this assemblage is the fact that despite meticulous exploration of the section of the passage E.9 containing the deposit not one of the vessels could be restored completely. This could suggest that the vessels were discarded sometime after they had gone out of use and only the broken potsherds were then thrown in to level the street. Such a putatively two-phased deposition of the sherds could have bearing on the dating, as it is viable then that an 8th-century deposit could have been re-deposited and consequently could turn up on one level with later pottery of the 9th century. Additional probes and discerning study of passage E.9 in the coming seasons

should provide evidence to either disprove or confirm this theory.

Overall, taking into consideration parallels from other sites, as well as from room D. 1 (lowest layer) and Area B (leveling layers) on the kom in Naqlun, it seems that the deposit fits the general chronological horizon of the mid-8th to mid-9th century. Significantly, but perhaps merely due to the randomness of discovery, there are no glazed ceramics in this deposit (as also in D. 1 and Area B). This fact could be considered as an additional argument in favor of our pottery coming from a time before the introduction of glazed ceramics in the region, that is, in the late 9th or 10th century.