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Alexandria: Kom El-Dikka Islamic Finds - Storehouses Survey 1995

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ALEXANDRIA

KOM EL-DIKKA

ISLAMIC FINDS – STOREHOUSES SURVEY 1995/96

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with contribution by Małgorzata Redlak

The first stage of a new project aimed at publishing the medieval finds from Alexandria contrives to assess the artifacts and the records made in the course of the Polish excavations on Kom el-Dikka, that is, since 1960, and generally prepare the material for further study and eventual publication. The team worked within the frame of the Polish Mission in Alexandria from November 1995 through January 1996.¹

The medieval artifacts from the site have never been systematically studied nor considered in a broader historical context. Material has remained imperfectly classified and recorded mainly in the site's registers, photographic files, field diaries, architectural drawings (the most satisfactory of all) and occasional additional notes and accounts. Except for the anthropological material from three superimposed Muslim cemeteries (which has been studied successively and professionally published), few other categories of finds have received similar methodical treatment. This was certainly due not to a lack of interest or appreciation of their value but rather to absence of qualified staff of Islamic archaeologists.

At Kom el-Dikka in the Islamic period, the site served alternately as a burial ground and a dump for urban refuse. Whether

¹ The team was made up of Małgorzata Redlak, specialist in Islamic art, staff member of the National Museum in Warsaw Gallery of Oriental Art, and Dr. Władysław Kubiak, professor of Islamic archaeology at Warsaw University. Both are well acquainted with the site through frequent visits, while Kubiak was also head of the Polish mission to Kom el-Dikka in 1963-1966 and had supervised the Islamic material excavated at other sites for some years before that.

there were any habitation anywhere on the site built during this period is still uncertain. What has been confirmed are industrial facilities of different kinds. Only naturally, the finds constitute two separate groups: the remains of the three cemeteries (funerary constructions, which were for the most part removed after having been documented, rests of a small construction, possibly a mosque, tomb inscriptions and skeletal remains) and objects made of a variety of materials, which were found both in the strata of the burials and in the dump. Imperfect records, often disturbed stratigraphy and other less apparent reasons were responsible for the fact that many objects do not have a clearly determined provenance nor definite chronology, leading in consequence to classification of the material according to typological criteria instead of archaeological ones.

The main object of study in the reported season of work was pottery, by far the most important and largest category of preserved artifacts. Other objects such as those made of stone, plaster, metal, wood, bone, etc. had to be left for future investigation after only a superficial examination. The numerous glass fragments were excepted and turned for more detailed study to Mrs. Renata Kucharczyk-Majcherek, a permanent member of the Kom el-Dikka Mission.

For practical purpose the pottery has been divided into three distinct groups: a) unglazed or only partly glazed, undecorated utility, mainly domestic wares; b) artistic or semi-artistic, usually glazed wares of Egyptian manufacture; and c) imported pieces of various provenance.

The first group naturally consists mainly of potsherds selected in the course of excavations, although the number of whole or restorable vessels is considerable compared to the other groups. This selection was made largely at random, frequently by the diggers themselves, the criterium being mainly size. Later the sherds were sorted by trained archaeologists to be stored as study material.

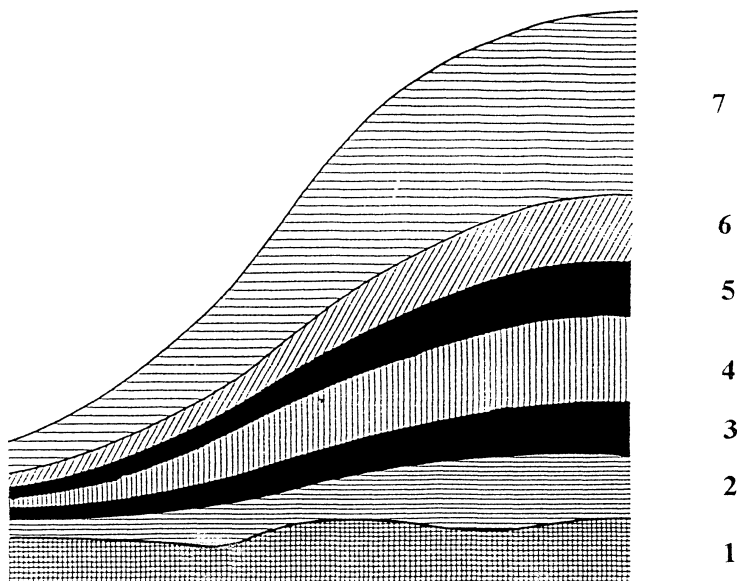


Fig. 1. Diagram of section of the Islamic strata in the eastern part of Kom el-Dikka, drawn by W. Kubiak: 1) Early Islamic burials cut into late Roman and Byzantine structures and debris - c. 650-750; 2) Mainly non-organic fill and debris with occasional Arabic structures; 3) Middle Necropolis - c. 850-950; 4) Fill with possible contemporaneous structures 950-1100; 5) Upper Necropolis, c. 1100-1200; 6) Black, organic deposit (only in the southern part of the Kom; in other parts - usual debris, c. 1200-1300; 7) Upper layers, removed mainly in the 1950s, topped by the 19th century fort.

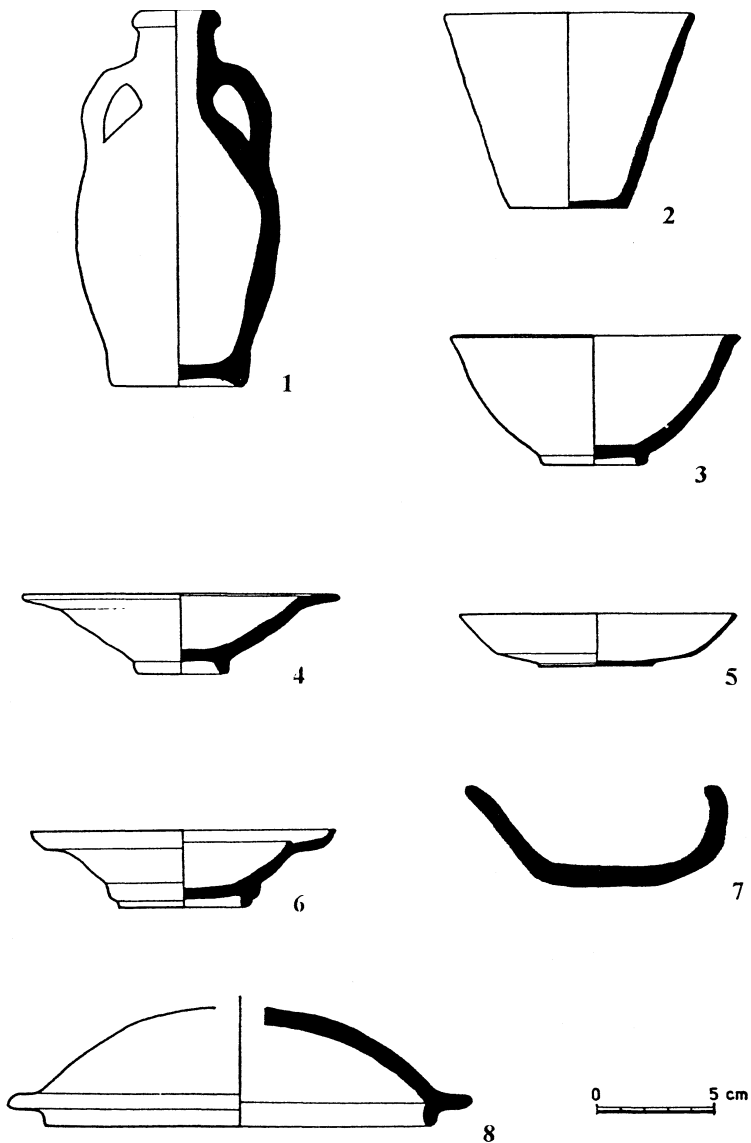
This particular body of material turned out to be the most difficult to assess, classify and date, owing mostly to the almost complete absence of published comparative material from Egyptian sites of the medieval period. Practically the only comprehensive study of this kind of pottery was prepared by the present writer on the basis of Fustat finds several years ago, but unfortunately it remains unpublished. The recent work in Alexandria, for a variety of reasons, has not

much advanced the study in question and the bulk of sherds had to be left for further examination in the future.

Accordingly, the other two groups, that is, the glazed Egyptian wares and imported ones, became the main object of our attention this year. All the 20,000 pieces were individually handled, sorted, classified according to typological and chronological criteria, then labeled for storage.

The group of Egyptian products represents practically all the known kinds of glazed wares down to Mamluk times, and includes a variety of shapes and techniques, as well as many sub-categories, such as oil lamps, water bottle filters (glazed and unglazed), spheroidal vessels and very rare tiles. The following types were identified:

- a) semi-glazed with lead and tin added to the glaze, mainly green, yellow and manganese, thinly applied to red clay dishes, shallow bowls and plates well known in Upper Egypt in a red-varnished variety, related to the late Roman C type which survived in Early Islamic contexts, until the 10th century at Fustat for example. This relationship had led M. Rodziewicz to designate it rather misleadingly as "Coptic";
- b) early lead-glazed with a thin, poor green glaze applied to smallish bowls and saucers of the preceding type and, possibly, the same provenance;
- c) related type but with better quality glaze, sometimes polychrome, usually with moulded decoration, which is quite uncommon in Alexandria;
- d) lead and tin glazed, polychrome with "splashed" decoration. Obvious imitation of Chinese Tang models, attributed to as early as the 8th-9th century, like types a-c above;
- e) so-called Lustre Ware, which is chronologically the next to be listed, although the rare fragments on Kom el-Dikka (a few dozen sherds with some more registered and kept in the Antiquities Organization's stores) belong not to the earliest Tulunid phase, but to the 10th-11th century, that is, the Fatimid period. The type is being studied for publication by Małgorzata Redlak;



See p. 37 for legend ☉

- f) so called Fayyumi ware, mainly 11th century polychrome tin-glazed products;
- g) so called Fustat Fatimid Sgraffito, under usually transparent siliceous glaze, occasionally with a differently colored rim and opaque glaze;
- h) Ayyubid or late Fatimid underglaze painted ware usually in manganese (studied by M. Redlak);
- i) Ayyubid overglaze painted;
- j) monochromatic tin glazed, yellow, from the Aswan region;
- k) monochromatic of various colors from various periods, including a large group of Chinese celadon imitations;
 - 1) imitations of celadon with carved design and clear green glaze;
- m) the same with opaque glaze and applied decoration made in Chinese manner;
- n) Mamluk blue-black on white ground, imitations of early Ming or late Sung wares;

Fig. 2. Pottery:

- 1) *Dark red wash or varnish; red clay, probably local from Alexandria region. 12th-13th century.*
- 2) *Dark olive-green plain lead glaze thinly applied interior; exterior unglazed with spots of green glaze; unevenly fired sandy buff-red clay same as fig. 5; c. 9th century.*
- 3) *The same type as fig. 4 but green glaze and brown ornament. 12th-13th century.*
- 4) *Underglaze painted semi-artistic ware, probably local ware, yellowish glaze and brown linear design; red clay, rather crudely potted. 12th-13th century.*
- 5) *Dull yellow and grass-green lead glaze of rather poor quality; exterior partly unglazed; buff-red, sandy clay, probably from Aswan region as in red varnished table ware; 9th century.*
- 6) *Uncommon shape for this kind of ware. Shiny dark green glazed interior; externally only part of rim glazed; the same clay as fig. 2; c. 9th century.*
- 7) *Oil lamp of uncommon shape; unglazed; red clay imperfectly fired. 10th-11th century.*
- 8) *The same type of ware as fig. 3. Dish cover. Top of knob-handle missing.*

- o) Mamluk sgraffito and slip-painted semi-sgraffito of several subtypes;
- p) Mamluk slip painted under clear green glaze; Mamluk painted with black pigment under a bright green, clear glaze;
- r) imitations of Maghrebi wares;
- s) several subtypes of semi-artistic vessels, some of them possibly of local Alexandrian manufacture.

The outline of types given here cannot be regarded as either definite or entirely clear and satisfactory, since many pieces, especially of the cruder kinds, do not conform to ideal models and cannot be assigned to specific types or separated into new or distinct types. Yet the situation with glazed ware is much better than in the case of the more widespread and omnipresent ordinary unglazed ware. The Alexandrian finds are of particular importance and the planned research project combined with further explorations of Islamic strata on the site should lead to clarifying many an obscure point not only in ceramology, but generally in the art history and material culture in this part of the world.

The most interesting of the classified imports are from China and the Far East, originating from different periods starting with the Tang Dynasty and ending with Ming. The most frequent are Yue yao porcelain, ying ching and Ting yao and celadons from Northern China (so-called Northern Celadon), Lung Chaun celadon, Tzu Chou yao and so-called Martabani stone ware. These wares were frequently imported from the 9th to the 15th century. Annamese and Siamese products are also represented in all probability, although some of the pieces require further specialist studies and analyses.

The Far Eastern pottery forms a very distinctive group and differs considerably from any products from the Mediterranean basin. Of these one should mention the wares from Byzantium-influenced areas of Anatolia, the environs of Constantinople with their Zeuxippus ware, and Cyprus. Also popular were wares from

the Syrian coastal centers at Al-Mina and Athlit, etc. Frequent in the 10th-14th century were wares coming from further west: Tunisia, possibly Morocco and quite commonly Spain. South Italy was represented with proto-majolica wares from Sicily, Apulia, possibly Calabria, and regions as far north as Amalfi and Orvieto. The frequency of imported pottery and its extraordinary range in geographical terms was hardly surprising in the great *emporium* of a town that Alexandria was and remained in the Islamic period. But for a historian it is useful confirmation of its cosmopolitan identity. On the other hand, the absence of local wares, with the possible exception of one semi-artistic group – for the convenience of this paper classified as local, although with tangible proof as yet unavailable, disclaims Alexandria as an important production center. Abundant evidence in written sources concerning textiles, but not confirmed by archaeology, might be an exception from the rule. In view of the largely fragmentary and incomplete evidence from the site, a minute examination of the remaining Islamic layers in the future is an absolute imperative. Not only will it make possible the exploration of lower-lying strata, but it will primarily bring the Islamic medieval reality into sharper focus presented in a number of publications of this valuable material. The first, already advanced stage of this project, which is planned for many years of study, will consist of an interim report on the historical and archaeological background, with examples of the particularly significant material, and a separate publication of the Islamic cemeteries.