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LINKING WASTE AND PRODUCTION. WHAT A ROMAN WASTE PIT FROM SYENE/UPPER EGYPT REVEALS

In ancient times, the Upper Egyptian city of Syene formed an important link between Egypt and neighbouring Nubia to the south. As a border town, it served not only as a transshipment point for goods but also as a station for troops. Three cohorts are attested in inscriptions for the Roman imperial period, who certainly brought their own customs and traditions. This also increased foreign influence in the first cataract region. By analysing pottery finds from a waste pit from residential buildings in the urban area, an attempt is made to show cultural connections between a border region and the Mediterranean area. The discarded material consists almost exclusively of vessels from local pottery production, whose repertoire of forms clearly shows influences from Italy, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levantine region.

Roman Egypt – pottery studies – local production – material culture studies – cultural transfer

Introduction

The Upper Egyptian city of Syene, situated on the first cataract, was an economic and political centre in antiquity and formed an important link between Egypt and the neighbouring Nubia to the south (Rembart 2020: 1). The city, together with the Nile island Elephantine opposite, functioned as a trading hub for the exchange of goods to and from Inner Africa, including luxury goods such as gold and ivory. Another important export product of the region was the well-known regional rose granite. It was quarried in local quarries since the Pharaonic period and exported to other provinces of the Roman Empire via the river ports of Syene and Elephantine. Furthermore, Syene functioned as an important starting point for expeditions to Nubia beginning in the Pharaonic period. At the beginning of the 2nd century BCE, the region of Syene became one of the most important ceramic production centres of the post-pharaonic period (Rembart 2020: 34-35). The so-called Aswan Pink Clay was used to produce all kinds of vessel forms that were exported to Egypt and beyond its borders (Rembart and Betina 2021; Rembart et al. 2020). Syene thus flourished, particularly due to the trade, and reached an economic upturn in Hellenistic times, which is recognisable by the expansion of the inhabited city area (Müller 2010). In addition to its function as a trading hub, Syene also had administrative and military importance. The region of Aswan served as a station for troops from early on (Rembart 2020: 184). Although the archaeological evidence for this is still lacking, written sources point to a foreign military presence since the Late Period. Three cohorts are documented for the Roman Imperial period, which are mentioned by name on inscriptions. This led to different cultures coming together in the southernmost city of the Roman Empire, leaving an influence in the first cataract region. With the help of the

evaluation of ceramic evidence from a waste pit, it will be shown to what extent cultural transfers are recognisable in the ceramic material culture of Syene.

The archaeological evidence

The urban area of ancient Syene is located in the southern centre of Aswan (**fig. 1**), which nowadays is completely overbuilt with modern houses. In 2000 the Swiss Institute for Architectural and Archaeological Research on Ancient Egypt, Cairo (SIK) initiated excavations in this district of the present city. Up to now, approximately 94 areas have been archaeologically investigated. From 2011-2014, a cooperation project with the Austrian Archaeological Institute (OeAI) at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (OeAW) was carried out to research everyday culture in Syene and Elephantine from Ptolemaic to late antique times based on the material legacy from residential buildings¹. In the course of this project, the residential buildings in area 2 (Birket Damas), located in the southern part of the ancient city and bordered by the Late Period city wall (6th/5th century BCE), were archaeologically investigated (**fig. 2**). As a result of the archaeological investigations, it was possible to document three residential houses with connected service areas that had been continuously inhabited from the mid-1st century CE to at least the early 3rd century CE (Rembart 2020: 7-10).

In order to be able to document the ground plans of the individual houses more precisely, entire walls were removed. Thus, in the space between two houses, a finding was discovered that could be interpreted as a waste disposal. Both houses

¹ Austrian Science Fund-Project (FWF P 23866) "Housing in Antiquity in Syene/Elephantine, Upper Egypt" directed by Sabine Ladstätter.

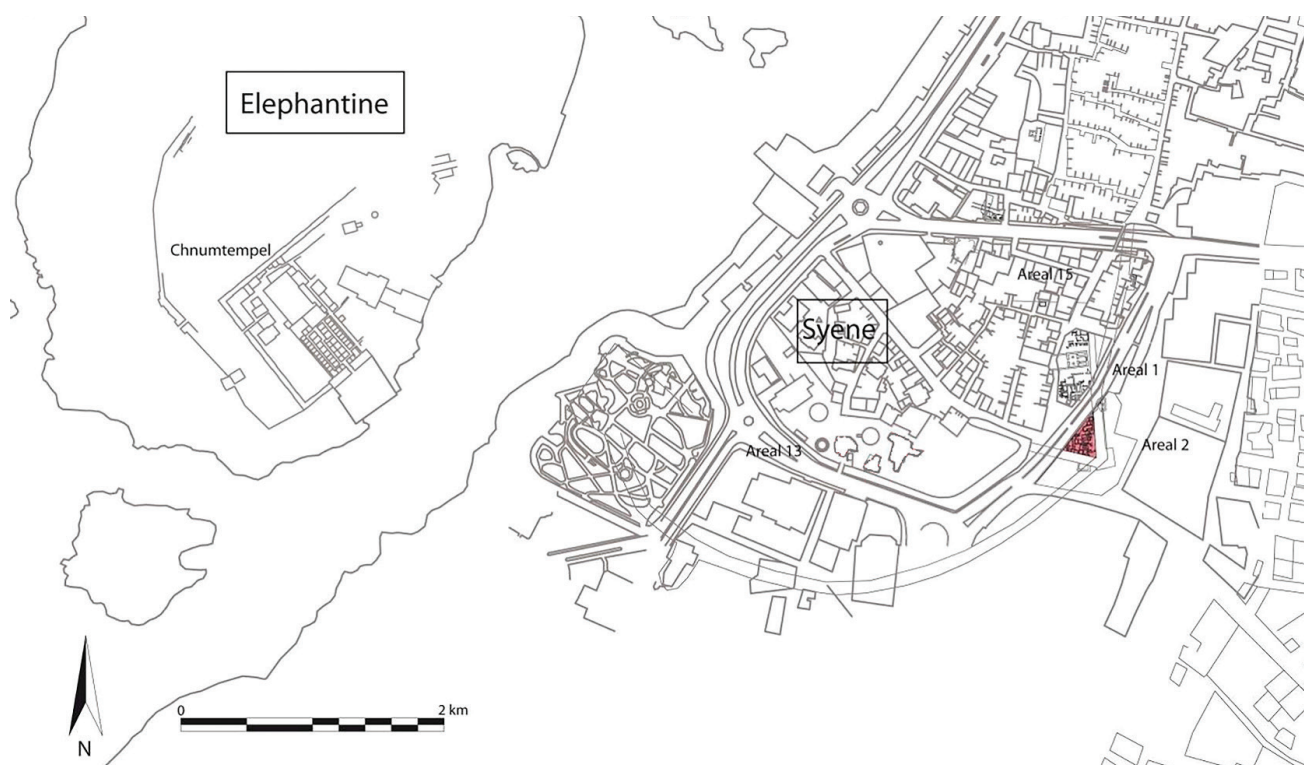


Fig. 1. Map of Elephantine and modern Aswan (the excavation area “Area 2” marked in red)
(© ÖAI-ÖAW/ H. Schwaiger).



Fig. 2. Roman housing in Area 2 (© ÖAI-ÖAW/N. Gail).

were built so that they do not abut directly against each other, creating a space between the walls along the entire length of the houses. Over the decades, the room with a length of 4.5 m and width of 0.5 m was filled with waste (**fig. 3**). This waste layer consisted mainly of sandy-loamy soil mixed with numerous artefacts of various material groups and organic remains. Stratigraphically several fill layers are identifiable, suggesting a multi-phase deposition². At the time of the excavations, the houses were mostly destroyed, and only part of the ground floor was preserved; however, the waste layer in the space between was preserved to a height of 1.5 m. Most of the discarded material is ceramic, which gives an insight into the consumer behaviour of the inhabitants of Syene. In addition to numerous, largely broken fragments, several complete vessels were also recovered from the waste layer.

Pottery³

6.200 pottery fragments were found in the waste pit, of which about 1.000 fragments were classified as diagnostic (rim and base fragments as well as wall fragments of imports). A total of 528 diagnostic pieces were drawn and recorded in detail with all information on wares, fabrics, dimensions and colours. These fragments are used for a detailed evaluation.

The waste pit includes all the common ceramic wares⁴, with tableware dominating by far, followed by coarse and cooking ware (**fig. 4**). The group of the amphorae is divided into locally produced amphorae made of Aswan Pink Clay and amphorae, which are made of Nile clay. In addition to the ceramic finds, some fragments and a whole vessel made of faience also came to light in the waste pit. Most of the faience vessels produced in Roman times show similarities with sigillata forms (Tomber 2006: 44-51). The plate found in Syene seems to copy plates of the Eastern Sigillata A (ESA) form Atlante 36-38 and was probably produced locally (Tomber 2006: 44-51; Rodziewicz 2005: 30).

The evaluation of the fabrics of the diagnostic fragments⁵ shows that nearly all vessels are of Egyptian origin. The majority is made of the local so-called Aswan Pink Clay (**fig. 5**). This is not surprising – as mentioned at the beginning – this kaolinitic clay paste, with its pinkish appearance, has been mined in the Aswan area since the 2nd century BCE. Especially from the Roman imperial period onwards, Aswan Pink Clay became a very popular clay raw material used to produce all kinds of vessel forms. Among the diagnostic fragments of the tableware, eight fragments could be identified as imports, only two of which originate from the Mediterranean region. These pieces are base fragments;



Fig. 3. Waste layer between two houses in Area 2 (© ÖAI-ÖAW/ H. Schwaiger).

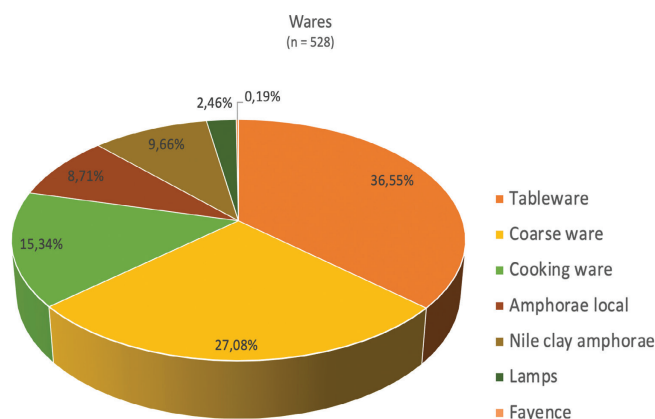


Fig. 4. Distribution of the spectrum of finds from the waste pit (© ÖAW-ÖAI/L. Rembart).

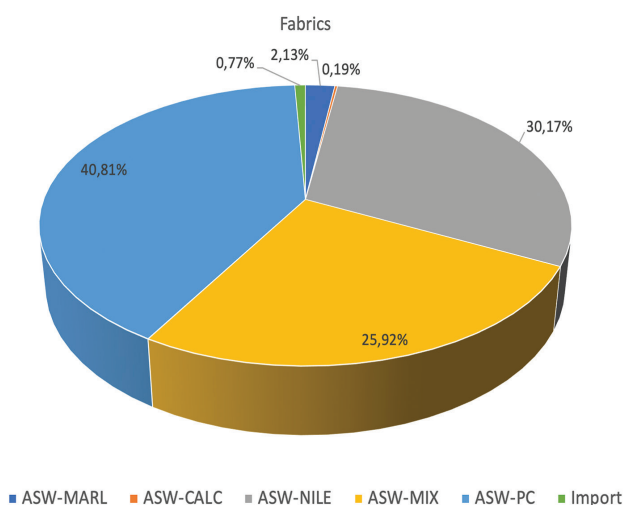


Fig. 5. Distribution of the fabrics (© ÖAW-ÖAI/L. Rembart)
ASW-MARL = Egyptian Marl Clays; ASW-CALC = Egyptian Calcareous Clays; ASW-NILE = Nile Mud; ASW-MIX = Aswan Pink Clay and Nile Mud; ASW-PC = Aswan Pink Clay.

² Communication of the archaeologist Helmut Schwaiger.

³ The analysis of the pottery is part of the project "Waste as a source of information: Archaeological investigation of a Roman waste deposit in Syene, Upper Egypt" (APART-GSK 11924).

⁴ The definitions of the individual wares were made in the course of the FWF-project.

⁵ The names and abbreviations of the fabrics were developed by Lisa Betina (previously Peloschek) in the course of the project. See also: Peloschek 2015.

on the one hand, two matching fragments of Italian sigillata, which can presumably be completed to a plate of the form Consp. 3 (Ettlinger et al. 1990: 56-57), and on the other hand, a thin-walled beaker or small bowl. The flat and straight base is very common for thin-walled cups and bowls of the Roman Imperial period. Therefore, an exact assignment to a form or type is not possible due to the fragmentary state of preservation. The other fragments could be classified as intra-Egyptian imports, which probably came from Buto to Syene. Several pottery kilns in this ancient city in the Delta indicate a large pottery production of various wares from the Ptolemaic period to Roman times (Hartung et al. 2003: 233-244; Hartung et al. 2007: 126-142; Ballet et al. 2011). Among other things, red slip ware was produced in Buto,

characterised by a thick, dull glossy slip and a very fine Nile mud fabric (Ballet et al. 2023). The fragments from Syene can be supplemented on the one hand to form bowls with a vertical rim and a small, thickened lip and on the other hand to form plates with a short, angled rim.

The repertoire of shapes of the locally produced pottery found in the waste pit includes all common forms. A closer look at the distribution of these forms shows the dominance of the small bowls with more than 30%. This open form was used for serving and storing food and was produced in tableware and coarse ware. The different shapes of the small bowls – with and without decoration – are particularly evident in the tableware (fig. 6). In many pieces, there is also a recognisable resemblance to Mediterranean forms, which probably



Fig. 6. Bowls and plates of the tableware (Drawings © ÖAW-ÖAI/L. Rembart, Photos © ÖAW-ÖAI/N. Gail).

served as role models for the locally produced vessels. Foreign influences can be traced in the border town Syene from an early date and strongly influenced local pottery production from the 3rd century BCE onwards (Rembart 2020: 184-189). In Ptolemaic and early Roman times, the forms of the Eastern Sigillata (**fig. 6, 3**) were used as models. From the end of the 1st century CE onwards, more and more forms appeared in Syene that are based on the African Red Slip Ware (ARS) in terms of form typology. Especially in the repertoire of plate shapes, the similarities with ARS can be recognised. These flat plates (**fig. 6, 7-8**) with a plain rim and a small, pointed base are strongly reminiscent of the ARS plates from Hayes 26/27 (Hayes 1972: 49-51). At that time, however, imitations of ARS were limited to very few plate forms. It was not until late antiquity that most of the locally

produced tableware was oriented towards the shapes of the North African ceramic production (Katzjäger 2017: 37-47; 455-456). The shapes of most of the bowls (**fig. 6, 2, 4-5**), on the other hand, seem to be much more oriented towards the repertoire of shapes of the thin-walled ware. Although cylindrical cups imitating Italian forms were produced locally, this type of drinking vessel does not seem to have prevailed in Syene (Rembart 2020: 185). Rather, the bulbous bowls remained the predominant drinking vessels in the Roman imperial period. The most frequent form found in the waste pit is a small bowl with a small, thickened knob-like rim (**fig. 6, 2**). These small bowls are more or less of the same size and have an offset, flat base. As they fit well in the hand and the bottom can be easily grasped with the fingers, one can well imagine that they were used for drinking.



Fig. 7. Locally produced pitchers (Drawings © ÖAW-ÖAI/L. Rembart, Photos © ÖAW-ÖAI/N. Gail).

Some tableware bowls, especially thin-walled ware bowls, have a distinctive and sometimes colourful painted decoration (**fig. 6, 4-6**). This type of decoration is typical of ancient Egyptian pottery, which was still very popular in Ptolemaic times (Rembart 2020: 187). At the beginning of the Roman imperial period, the painting disappears completely and is only taken up again by potters around the middle of the 2nd century CE. In late antiquity, this decorative technique reached its peak, and most of the tableware was decorated with vegetal and/or figural decoration as well as ornaments (Katzjäger 2017: 54-62). The tradition of painted tableware in the Roman world is rather limited to this area of the east, where it is also an essential part of the Meroitic and Naba-

taean ceramic production (Amr et al. 2005; Schmid 2000: 27-29; Tomber 2006: 26). Even if the motifs and style differ, an influence of these two ceramic productions on the local production of Syene cannot be excluded.

An astonishing number of pitchers, some completely preserved, were found in the waste pit. Although the locally produced pitchers are not as beautifully and carefully shaped, they show form-typological similarities to vessels from the Mediterranean region, especially the bulbous, one-handed pitchers (**fig. 7, 10-11**). On the one hand, they are strongly reminiscent of ESA and Cypriot Sigillata (ESD) forms, and on the other hand, of early jugs from Buto (Ballet et al. 2019: 97-102). The rouletting decoration on the outside of the wall

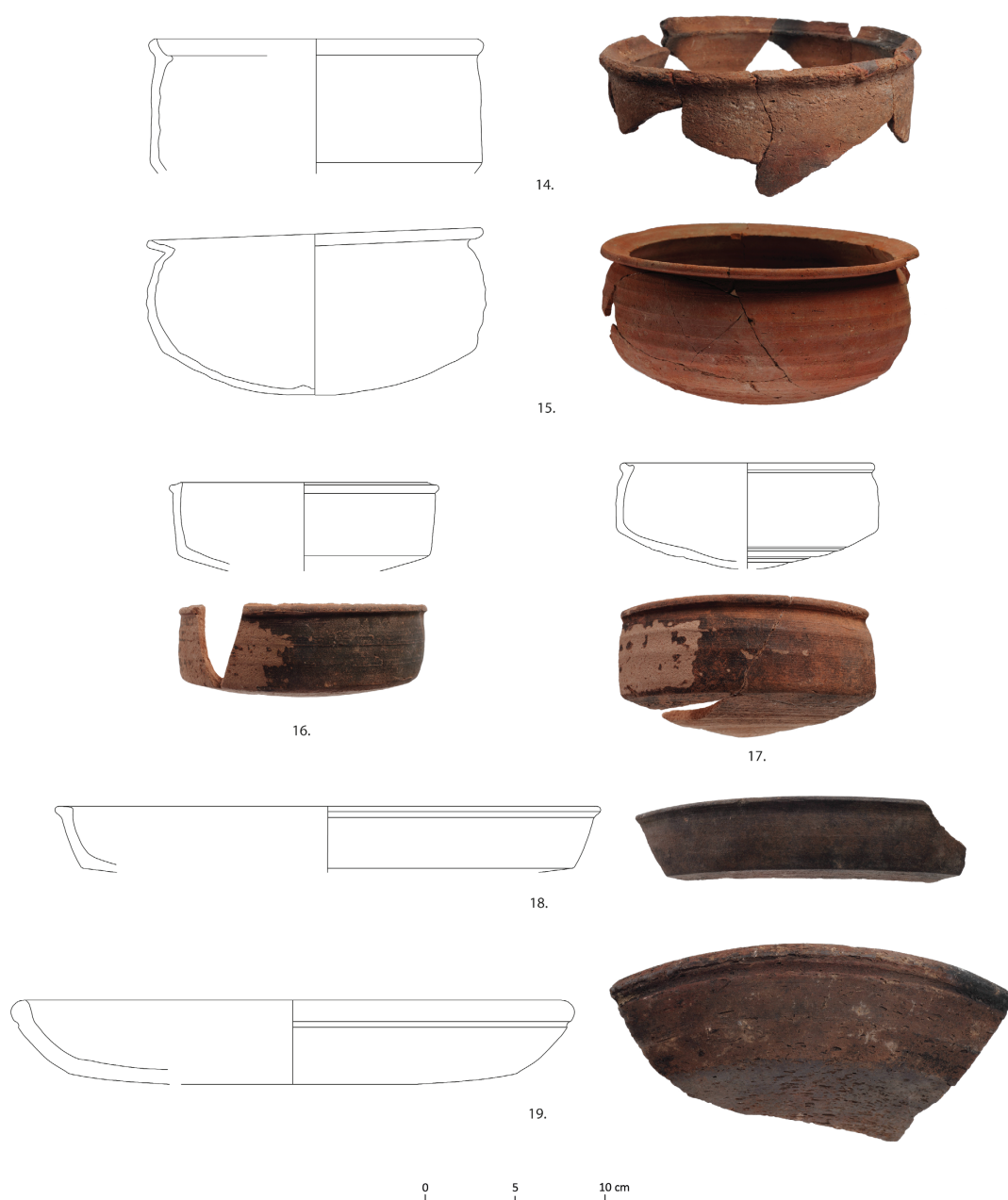


Fig. 8. Locally produced casseroles and plates (Drawings © ÖAW-ÖAI/L. Rembart, Photos © ÖAW-ÖAI/N. Gail).

on pitchers (**fig. 7, 13**) is atypical of Egyptian pottery, but this decoration is often found on ESA (Hayes 1985: 42-47) and ESD (Hayes 1967; Hayes 1985: 79-91) vessels.

The evaluation of the cooking ware, which came to light in the waste pit, also provides information about cultural links between Syene and the Roman world. It is interesting to note that among the cooking ware, it is mainly open shapes – such as plates and casseroles (**fig. 8**) – that are found, while cooking pots are underrepresented. Casseroles and cooking plates can be seen as local imitations of Mediterranean vessel forms. These forms appeared in the 3rd century BCE as completely new cooking utensils on the market in Syene, which did not exist in this form before (Rembart 2020: 185-187). Local potters adapted common Italic forms, such as plates of the Pompeiian Red Ware (**fig. 8, 19**). In the course of the 1st century CE, new and significantly smaller forms of casseroles appeared. Most vessels have a diameter between 14 and 17 cm and were made of the local Aswan Pink Clay (**fig. 8, 16-17**). The vessels of the African Cooking Ware from Tunisia may have served as models for these small casseroles. In the repertoire of forms of this Tunisian cookware, there are some casseroles that the locally produced vessels come close to in their form typology (Bonifay 2004: 231-327, especially type 20, 23-26).

In the repertoire of cooking pot forms, it is noticeable that the typical cooking pot shapes of the Roman Imperial period, characterised by a flared rim or a slightly overhanging flat rim, are missing (Rembart 2020: 187). Most of these cooking pots were produced in Phokaia/Foça, and since the end of the 1st

century CE, these two cooking pot shapes dominated in the Eastern Mediterranean (Istenič and Schneider 2000; Ladstätter 2007: 207). For Upper Egypt, these cooking pot forms do not seem to have been proven so far either as an import or a local imitation. In the Delta, however, there is some evidence that the Mediterranean forms were also imitated in Egyptian pottery workshops (Ballet et al. 2019: 163, form M 1). The locally produced cooking pots (**fig. 9**) from Syene are more strongly oriented in their rim design to cooking pots from the Levantine region (Rembart 2020: Topf Typ 42.1. 51.1. 53.1. 57). However, at the same time, the potters of Syene developed their own shape diversity. It is questionable, however, to what extent the rim shape had a technological effect on the cooking process and whether and how it can be concluded that Levantine cooking habits were adapted.

To better grasp cultural links, we must look at imported goods. As mentioned at the beginning, only two fragments of tableware imported from the Mediterranean region were found in the waste pit. Therefore, we should take a brief look at the amphorae. The evaluation of the amphorae shows that only locally produced Aswan Pink Clay amphorae (**fig. 10, 25-26**) and amphorae made of Nile clay (**fig. 10, 23-24**) were disposed of. Since there are no imported amphorae from the Mediterranean or Levantine region, it can be assumed that only local or domestic Egyptian products were consumed. However, no clear statement can be made about the contents of the respective amphorae. Ptolemaic-Roman tax receipts show that castor oil, among other things, was traded from Syene (Lochner 1999: 77). It is highly probable that wine

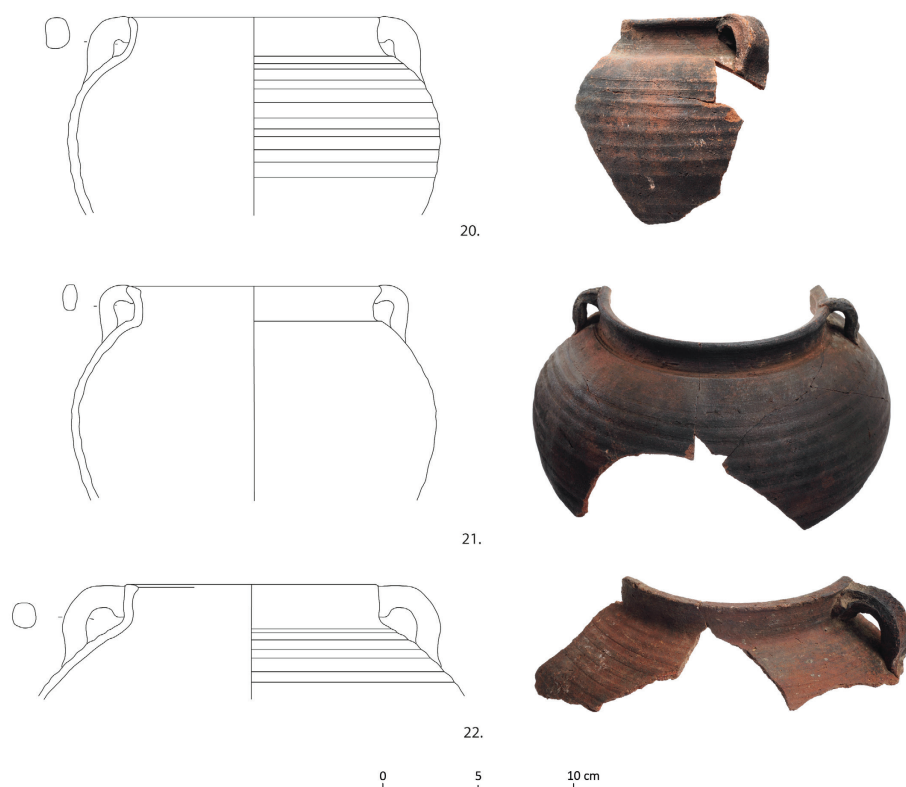


Fig. 9. Egyptian cooking pots (Drawings © ÖAW-ÖAI/L. Rembart, Photos © ÖAW-ÖAI/N. Gail).



Fig. 10. Amphorae of Egyptian origin (Drawings © ÖAW-ÖAI/L. Rembart, Photos © ÖAW-ÖAI/N. Gail).

from the Delta or the oasis arrived in Syene in the amphorae made of Nile mud.

Conclusion

The few imports from the waste pit reflect the general picture of imported goods in Syene. Even though there is normally more imported pottery in the finds from Syene, the evaluation shows that in the course of the 1st century CE, imports – mainly imported tableware – steadily decreased and seemed to disappear almost entirely at the beginning of the 2nd century CE (Rembart 2020: 17; Martin-Kilcher and Wininger 2017: 260-264). The reason for this is probably to be found in the local pottery production, which experienced an upswing at this time, reaching its peak in late antiquity (Katzjäger 2017: 461-463).

Since that time, especially since the Roman imperial period, evidence of this export commodity can be found throughout Egypt⁶. The Roman military can probably be regarded as the first buyer and perhaps also as a producer of the tableware. Especially in the Eastern Desert, where the stationing of Roman troops has been well-researched archaeologically, numerous vessels made of Aswan Pink Clay were found. It appears that some vessels – especially vessels of the thin-walled ware with barbotine decoration – were produced exclusively for Roman soldiers, as these vessels are so far underrepresented in the urban context of Syene (Tomber 2007: 180-182; Tomber 2006: 26-27). It can be

assumed that the soldiers not only brought foreign influences to Upper Egypt but also the know-how for the production of pottery on a large scale and the knowledge and possibilities of supra-regional marketing (McNally and Schrunck 2000: 97; Gempeler 1992: 56).

It should be noted that a direct cultural exchange with the Mediterranean region cannot be clearly identified at first glance. Neither the imports nor the distribution of the locally produced tableware indicates that Syene was strongly integrated into the Roman world. Only a closer look at the variety of shapes of the locally produced pottery and the decoration shows that the southernmost city of the Roman Empire was not so far behind. Especially in tableware, influences from the Eastern Mediterranean can be detected. For the production of small bowls, the potters of Syene were apparently inspired by Italian or Asia Minor forms. In contrast, the North African ceramic production served as a model for plates. Changing influences are also reflected in the cooking ware. In terms of shape, open forms remain attached to Mediterranean models, while closed forms were inspired by Levantine cooking pots. The ancient Egyptian tradition of painting vessels was taken up again in Syene in the middle Roman Imperial period. The colourful vegetal and geometric decorations can be seen as an independent interpretation of local ceramic production. The inspiration for this came, among others, from the neighbouring southern country of Nubia and shows that cultural connections also existed beyond the borders of the Roman Empire.

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⁶ An excellent and current overview of all places in Egypt where pottery from Syene was found can be browsed at the LCP webpage: <<https://www.levantineceramics.org/wares>> (19.02.2023).

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