

Roderick C. A. Geerts

IMITATION AND INTEGRATION

CHANGING OBJECTSCAPES AT BERENIKE (EGYPT)

During the Augustan period there was an influx of ‘new’ material culture in Egypt. This influx caused changes in objectscales and instigated a material culture revolution in the following decades. This is especially evident in the objects executed in different materials. The changing objectscales and circulating ‘new’ objects enabled the production and the use of a new koine. Ceramic, faience, glass, and wooden artefacts uncovered in the harbour of Berenike on the Red Sea coast provide great insight into these processes. This paper will explore some of these artefacts and their use within a changing society.

Egypt – Berenike – objectscales – pottery production – table ware

Introduction

Objects surround us all in daily life. These objects exert their own influence on how people live their lives. The whole range of objects in use in a certain period and geographical region comprise the “objectscales” (see Pitts and Versluys 2021, on objectscales). Through time these objectscales are subject to change as new objects enter a region, for instance through conquest or shifting power relations. This pattern can be studied in Egypt; the harbour of Berenike offers an unique insight into some of these processes because of the well-preserved material culture at the site. This paper will delve into the changing objectscales and the implications for the integration of Berenike, and by extension Egypt, into the Roman Empire. During the Augustan period new material culture is introduced and that has its repercussions throughout the Early Roman period in changing morphology of vessels executed in different materials.

Cultural revolution and objectscales

People are surrounded by objects in their daily lives, which could either be used regularly or play solely a passive role (Hahn 2015: 10). Their functioning within a larger context is known as *objectscales* (Pitts 2019; Versluys 2017), the definition of which follows (after Pitts and Versluys 2021: 369-370). Analysis of an assemblage is typically used to describe artefact configurations within a site where an objectscale can be used to work with more comprehensive and less schematic groups of objects at the level of entire sites, periods, or regions. An objectscale is, thus, in short, a part of space-time. The study of objectscales is based on four central questions that are attached to a specific period:

- What objects, styles, and material types are new?
- Where do these come from?
- How are these innovative?
- What are the historical consequences of these material changes?

Three parameters are important in answering these questions: the principles of connectivity, relationality, and impact. Briefly, connectivity is important in answering the first two questions, as it supports the exchange of ideas and objects through intensified contact, thus leading to innovation and change within an objectscale. Relationality assumes that objects are always part of the *inter-artefactual* domain (Gell 1998: 216). This means that objects created within a given *objectscales* emerge according to the same principles because their relationship to other objects within the *objectscales* is the same. This principle forms a bottom-up perspective for looking at *objectscales*. Impact is based on the influence that (groups of) objects have, as *actants* (Latour 1993a: 23; 1993b: 392-396), on their environment. It is also central to answering the last two questions about the changes that take place through objects.

Each specific *objectscales* is bound to a place and time. *Objectscales* change, but also several coexist in geographically adjacent areas. The transition, or contact zone, between two *objectscales* will be gradual rather than an abrupt and absolute boundary. Within these contact zones an interplay of the *habitus* of various populations, material culture, and customs can lead to new hybrid forms, so that the transition is gradual and has no sharp boundary. Therefore, the context of that material culture is of the utmost importance; there is no one-on-one relation between an object and a cultural identity, but rather an assemblage of material culture that is not formed in social and physical isolation. Rather, it represents continuous interaction through a consciousness of

difference. This makes *objects* fluid and diverse over time, but they can also be different for each type of site. Thus, studying *objects* gives the opportunity to study these changes in a diachronic perspective.

The influx of new material culture in Egypt introduced inhabitants to new types of vessels. This influx of this material culture was very evident during the Augustan period, when Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire and was (re) structured accordingly (Van Aerde 2018; Capponi 2005; Wallace-Hadrill 2010). This event coincides with a phenomenon in the whole Eastern Mediterranean, the so-called “table ware boom” (Poblome and Zelle 2002: 275-287; Poblome et al. 2007: 221.). New fine ware products, such as Italian Sigillata and Eastern Sigillata B, flooded the market, and existing repertoires and *objects* changed accordingly. These new and redesigned sigillata vessels signified an empire-wide cultural integration and can be used as a marker of Roman culture in the provinces (Gates-Foster 2019: 653-655; Poblome et al. 2007: 221; see also Capponi 2005: 176-177). This table ware boom, however, is most commonly attested in ceramics, as pottery survives in much larger quantities than glass, wood, or metal. It should, however, not be forgotten that table wares could be executed in multiple materials while still serving the same function. A reason for not finding table ware in other material is that wood either was used for fuel or decayed, glass

and metals were often melted down and reused, especially as the latter maintained its intrinsic value based on weight (Reitlinger 1963: 14; Vickers 1986: 137). Thus, ceramics provide better and broader insights into trends and changes in table wares than do other materials (Vickers 1998: 6). In Berenike, however, table wares in perishable materials have survived the test of time. These table wares give insight into the changing *objects* in a more complete manner and show changes that cannot be attested in this scope at other sites.

Table wares in Berenike

Table wares in the Roman Empire could be executed in various materials including clay (both fine and coarse wares), glass, base and precious metals, wood and, specifically in Egypt, faience (see for overviews of the various materials Hayes 1972; Isings 1957; Nenna and Seif El-Din 2000; Strong 1966). At the time Egypt was incorporated into the Roman Empire, the industries making these objects had already been functioning for many centuries, and they would continue to flourish during the Roman period (Nicholson and Shaw eds. 2009 give an overview of most productions). The use of the objects discussed below is not new in Egypt, but their morphology is. Table wares, in this case, were imported,

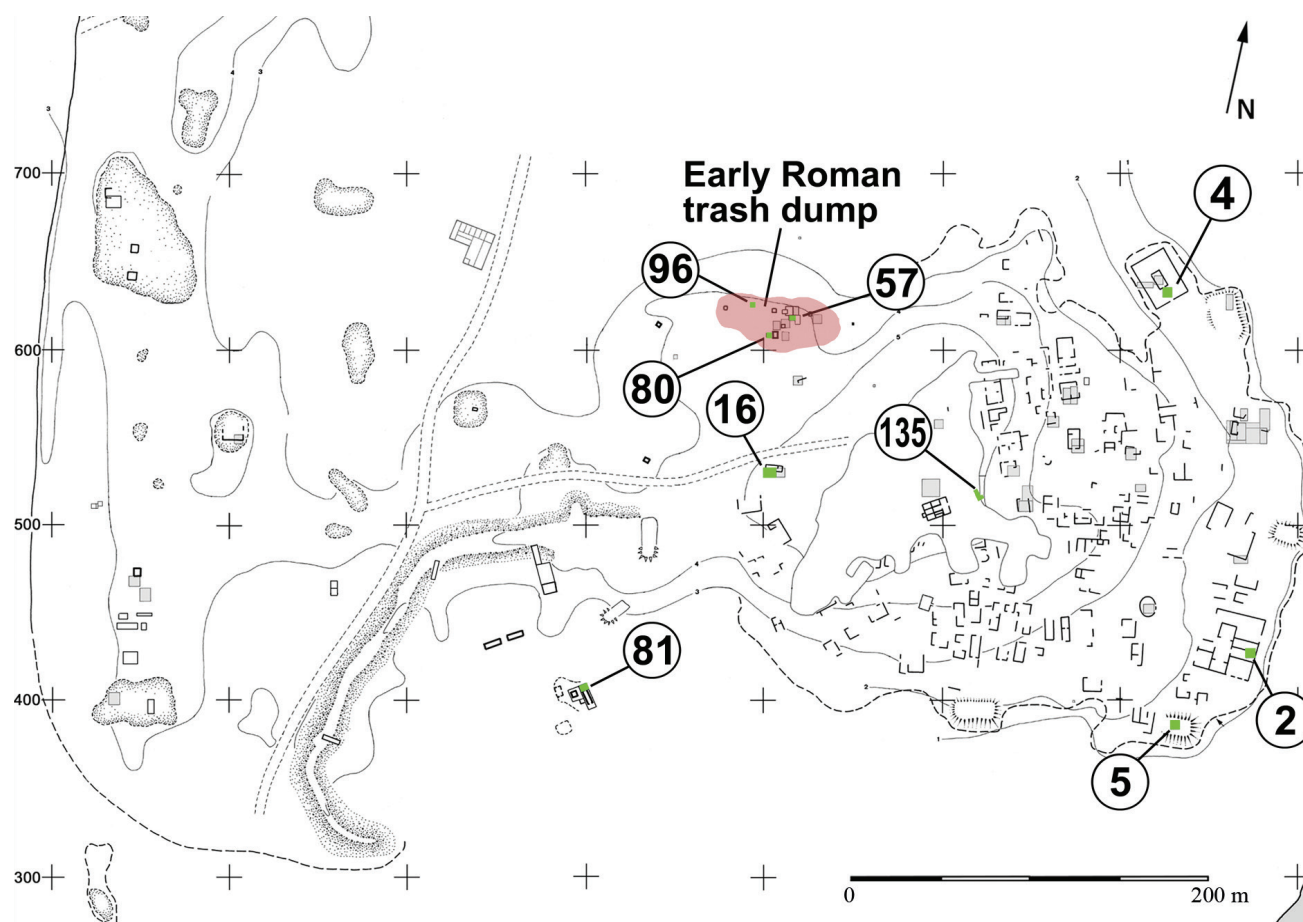


Fig. 1. Location of Berenike and the Early Roman trash dump on the edge of the city, highlighted are the trenches mentioned in the text (figure provided by M. Hense).

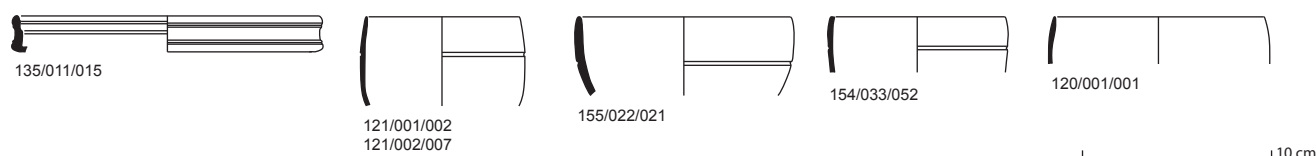


Fig. 2. Imported ceramics: Atlante 34-36 plate (left) and Hofheim 22 cups (right).

produced, and used in the Ptolemaic period (e.g. Élaigne 2012; Harlaut and Hayes 2018). The influx of new vessels influenced the *koine* and made craftsmen in Egypt familiarise themselves with these new shapes to such an extent that, like the rest of the population, these shapes became part of the *objectscape* and when making table ware these shapes sprang to mind in favour of the older versions. The vessels discussed in this paper comprise a selection of forms from the whole range of table wares, but are vessels that were executed in multiple materials. Before delving into the vessels themselves, below follows a short overview of the site.

The Late Roman-era settlement at Berenike overlies most of the Early Roman city. Therefore, most trenches only yielded residual Early Roman finds. There are, however, several trenches (BE95-4 and BE95/96/97-5, see fig. 1) with Early Roman material, most of which are situated on the Early Roman trash dumps to the northeast of the settlement (fig. 1). Those trenches yielded a fair amount of fine table wares, albeit less than 0.5% of the total pottery corpus (Hayes 1996: 147-148, 154). The complete Early Roman table ware assemblage is therefore low in number, but the vessels discussed are representative for this period. There are a number of imported vessels among these table wares.

Berenike's location in the Eastern Desert and on the Red Sea Coast meant it had to be supplied in order to provide basic necessities. To date there is little evidence to suggest that specialised artisans producing table ware of various materials were active on site, evidence suggests that woodworkers probably were (Sidebotham 2011: 201-205). Evidence for other artisans on site that could have produced table ware on site, during the Early Roman period, is lacking. When studying the *objectscape* at Early Roman Berenike it is, therefore, safe to assume that, wooden table ware excepted, all table wares were imported to the site. Furthermore of the discussed materials, the sigillata certainly originates outside Egypt, the glass possibly and the faience and wood were made within Egypt, and the latter likely in Berenike itself. All these vessels will be discussed below starting with the ceramics, followed by glass, faience and wooden table ware.

The ceramics can be divided into imported vessels and those produced within Egypt. For the imported vessels mainly the sigillata vessels are relevant for this study. Those comprise the Atlante ESA 29, 34-36, 46-48 and 57 forms (Hayes 1985). In the various trenches fragments of at least eleven of the 34-36 plates have been found (fig. 2, see Geerts 2021: 142 for an overview). These vessels are all imported from the production sites in the Eastern Mediterranean. Another vessel initially produced outside Egypt is the Hofheim 22 cup (Ritterling 1913). Vessels are known from the Northwestern

Limes (Ritterling 1913, form 22) and from the Mediterranean, e.g. in Cosa (Moevs 1973: 225-227, form XXXVI) and Corinth (Hayes 1973: 463, form 193, and Wright 1980: 157, form 85).

Along the Nile Valley and in Aswan several of these imported vessels were imitated in local clays. Examples of these are the Atlante ESA 34-36 plates imitated in the Nile silt fabric, type MC 75 (Hayes 1996: 162-163 no. 9; Tomber 2006: 118). Two Hofheim 22 cups found in Berenike (fig. 2) shows that those were made in the Nile Valley as well. The other three vessel types are produced in Nile silt or Aswan fabric but not (yet) attested at Berenike. At Mons Claudianus they, however, have been found in Early Roman strata, see types MC 30, 78 and 82 (Tomber 2006: 105-107 and 119).

The imported glass vessels also include forms similar to the Hofheim 22 cups, the Isings 12 hemispherical bowls. Those have been found in Berenike (Nicholson 2000: 205-206) and also in the port of Myos Hormos 320 km north of Berenike (Meyer 1992: 50-51). A second vessel is the Isings 5 plate of which a specimen was found on the surface of the Early Roman trash dumps. These vessels have an overhanging rim and a low ring base making them similar in shape to ceramic table wares like the Atlante ESA 57 plates, and have a similar production date although the glass can already be found in 1st century contexts (Isings 1957: 21). Similar to the Atlante ESA 34-36 plates are the plates Isings 47 (fig. 3). As this plate comes in multiple variations the glass form Isings 47 with beaded rim is also similar to Atlante ESA forms 29 and 34-36 (see Fünfschilling 2015: 139 for some variations). Another shape common in multiple materials is a hemispherical cup with ring base with an upright rim and a stubby flange partway down the wall, Isings 69. A cup that has parallels in ceramic table ware as well, MC 30 (MC Mons Claudianus, see Tomber 2006: 105-107), even though those have not been attested at Berenike as of yet.

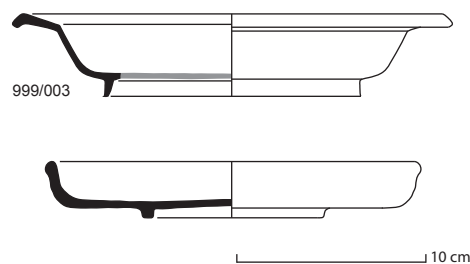


Fig. 3. Imported glass: Isings 5 (the lower plate after Isings 1957).

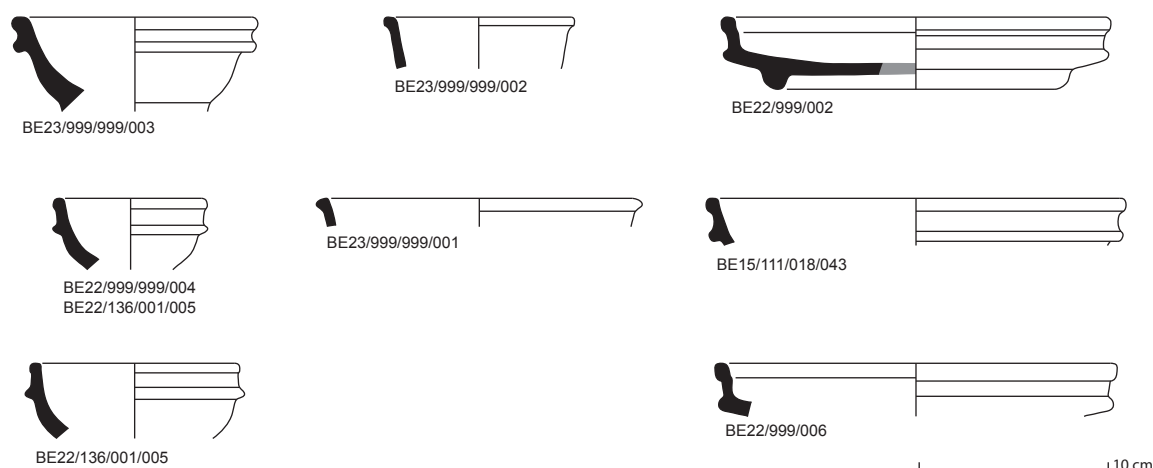


Fig. 4. Imported faience: MC 12 (left column), vessels with beaded rim (middle column) and a plate with ring base and straight rim (right column).



Fig. 5. Wooden vessels: a plate with ring base en straight rim (left) and a cup with flange (right, after Zych 2011: 129).

	Ceramic, non Egyptian	Ceramic, Egyptian	Glass	Faience	Wood
Hemispherical cup with a flat base	Hofheim 22	Hofheim 22	Isings 12		
Hemispherical cup with ring base with an upright rim and a stubby flange	Similar to Atlante ESA 46-48	MC 30	Isings 69	T12.4 / MC 12	X
Plate with beaded rim	Atlante ESA 29	Similar to MC 82	Isings 47	T12.1	
Plate with overhanging rim	Atlante ESA 57	MC 78	Isings 5	T13.2 / MC 14	
Plate with ring base and straight rim	Atlante ESA 34-36	MC 75	Isings 47	T13.3 / MC 13	X

Table 1. Vessels in multiple materials found at Berenike, known types from the region, but not found at Berenike in grey. An X marks vessels found, without a type in the prevalent typologies

In faience most of the aforementioned types were also produced (Nenna and Seif El-Din 2000 and Nenna 2013; 2014). Two of those have been found at Berenike (**fig. 4**). Several plates with ring base and straight rim, form T13.3 similar to the Atlante ESA 34-36 plates, have been found in the Early Roman trash dumps. At the same location excavations also documented a hemispherical cup, T12.4 or MC 12 (Tomber 2006: 48). The faience forms sometimes predate the imported vessels of the same shape as has been noted by Tomber (Tomber 2006: 46), but the dates provided for the forms cited in this study are later in date then the imported ceramic, mainly sigillata, vessels.

Wooden vessels are scarce on most sites, but the exceptional preservation at Berenike allows for those to be found in large quantities (e.g. 100 bowls in a shrine, Sidebotham 1999:

70-73; or a dozen in a temple, Sidebotham et al. 2015: 308). For this paper, the vessels that will be discussed have shapes similar to the table wares discussed above. The first vessel, found on the surface at the Early Roman trash dump (**fig. 5**), resembles the Atlante ESA 34-36 and ESB 7 plates. The second group of vessels resembles the MC 30 cups. Those fragments are dated to A.D. 40-70. It has been remarked that those vessels resemble sigillata and one footring base fragment preserved a layer of red paint. That paint would have made it resemble sigillata even more (Zych 2011: 128-129). Similar shapes in Eastern Sigillata have been found at Berenike, for instance in Trench 2 (Hayes 1996: 168-168).

In sum, the vessels described above imitate the various shapes of table wares in production and use. Imitation was a common phenomenon in the Roman Empire (Gazda 2002;

Perry 2011); it occurs most often in ceramic (e.g. Geerts 2020; Willet 2012: 338-359). This practice is not limited to the Roman period in Egypt (see Marchand 2011: 604-605). An overview (**table 1**) makes clear that vessels produced in one material were imitated in other materials. The scarcity of wooden vessels, and main distribution of faience vessels within Egypt, do not signify that those ones lacking in the table have not been made. This table shows clear morphological similarities within the table ware from the Early Roman period. The table can easily be expanded with other wares, like the Italian sigillata, the Conspectus 18 is for instance similar to the last vessel in table 1 (Ettlinger et al. 2002).

Conclusion

Material culture, in this case table wares, can provide valuable insight into changing objectscales in Berenike and Egypt. When Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire an influx of new material culture ensued. This influx changed the prevalent *koine* used in both consumption and subsequently production contexts. A process similar has been observed with ceramic vessels imported during the Ptolemaic period (Élaigne 2002: 160). Changes in ceramic assemblages are normally easier to observe in table ware which, besides functional purposes, also are display items on the table when having visitors. Therefore, table wares are more prone to fashion and change (e.g. Willet 2012: 323) than cooking wares or amphorae because those serve a more practical purpose without the need for display.

In this case the earliest vessels that came into Egypt instigated the changes in the objectscales. The difference in shape of the imported vessels from local (Ptolemaic) ones is an obvious indication for the order in which these changes in the objectscale took place. Imported Italian, Eastern sigillatas and glass vessels entered Egypt and were used by the local population, when they were not further exported to for

instance India. The use of these vessels gradually influenced the production of vessels locally. These new morphologies became engrained in the minds of the users and producers and afterwards similar vessels were made in local clays, faience, and wood. Obviously, the dating of those locally produced vessels is closely related to the imported vessels. This can be observed within contexts in Berenike and at other sites. During the Augustan period Italian sigillata vessels are present, while the faience and other vessels are usually found in later contexts.

These vessels, and the processes behind them, clearly show the influence that the interaction of two different objectscales and the introduction of a new morphology can have on each other. Through a process of daily interaction the presence and morphology of these vessels becomes integrated and gradually influence and change, if ever so slightly, objectscales. As can be seen it is a process that takes a while to fully change the objectscale and for morphologies to be engrained and spread over multiple productions. Berenike offers a unique insight into this process because of the survival of a multitude of table wares in different materials. This insight provides the means to study the changes taking place during the Early Roman period and put them into their broader cultural and historical context. It shows the way into which Berenike, and by extent Egypt, became integrated into the Roman Empire and its material culture.

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Roderick C. A. Geerts
ADC ArcheoProjecten (Netherlands)
r.geerts@archeologie.nl

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