

Aude Simony

THE ROMAN NECROPOLIS OF KOM ABU BILLU (EGYPT): AN OVERVIEW OF CERAMIC MATERIAL IN FUNERARY CONTEXT

Since 2012, research has been carried out by the French Mission led by S. Dhennin (CNRS, HiSOMA) on the site of Kom Abu Billu, located on the western edge of Egyptian Delta in Menoufia Governorate. Recent archaeological excavations have focused mainly on the western part of the site, especially on the Greco-Roman necropolis area (Sector 2), revealing a remarkable number of artefacts in association with mud-bricks tombs, mainly ceramic vessels, but also lamps, terracotta figurines, faience and glass containers, and metallic objects. Most of these elements were very probably part of the funerary equipment of the burials. Thus, this paper aims at presenting and exploring the specificity of locally produced Roman pottery from one of the largest Greco-Roman necropolises of Lower Egypt.

Egypt – Roman necropolis – Egyptian amphorae – cooking wares

1. Introduction

The archaeological site of Kom Abu Billu is located in the southern part of the western Nile Delta, on the fringe of the Libyan Desert, about 60 km northwest of Cairo, in an area currently belonging to the Menoufia Governorate (**fig. 1**). During Pharaonic times, a sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Hathor of Mefkat would have been located in the vicinity of the site (Dhennin 2022: 84). Moreover, Kom Abu Billu may correspond to the ancient city of *Terenouthis* mentioned in written sources from the imperial period (Dhennin 2011: 108).

Between 1887 and 1888, excavation campaigns funded by the Egypt Exploration Fund were undertaken by Francis Llewellyn Griffith (Griffith 1890: 60-64) leading to the discovery of a pharaonic and Greco-Roman necropolis as well as blocks from the temple (Dhennin 2022: 84). Later, in 1935, the Greco-Roman necropolis was unearthed again during an excavation campaign by the University of Michigan under the supervision of Enoch Peterson, revealing numerous mud-bricks tombs covered by painted plaster and displaying different shapes and sizes, as well as archaeological artefacts associated with the structures. Unfortunately, all these discoveries remain still unpublished.

Some important rescue excavations were carried out by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities between 1969 and 1975 (Farid 1973; El-Sawy 1977; Hawass 1979; El-Sawy 1980; Abd el-Aal 1983) before the creation of the el-Nasseri canal now crossing the site and, between 2006 and 2007, before banana trees were planted all around the archaeological area (Wagdy and El-Ebiary 2011). During these rescue operations a large part of the Pharaonic and Greco-Roman cemetery, only mentioned in few reports, was cleared.

Since 2014, excavations have resumed on the site under the supervision of Sylvain Dhennin (CNRS, HiSOMA). After

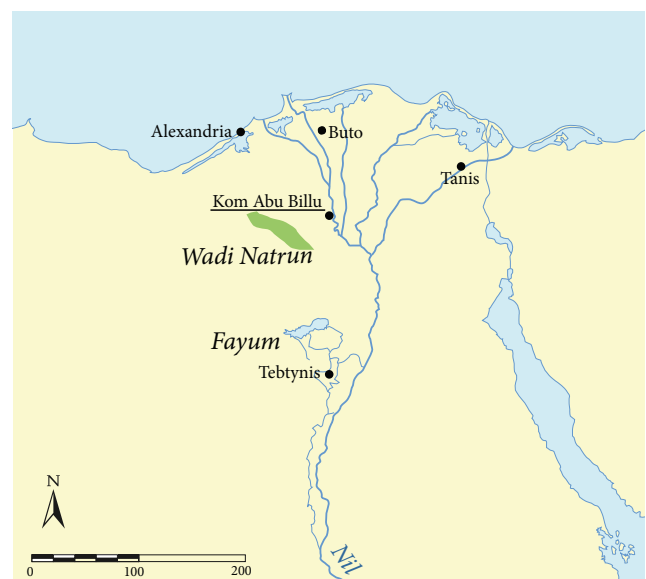


Fig. 1. Map of Lower Egypt indicating the location of Kom Abu Billu (© Ifao).

two campaigns aiming at surveying and mapping the whole site (Dhennin et al. 2014; Marchand and Simony 2017), the study of several areas including the necropolis located in the western part of the site, (Dhennin et al. 2022: 1) was carried out between 2014 and 2021.

2. Sector 2: chronology and occupation phases

The area under study (Sector 2) is located on the western part of the site, threatened by the expansion of the banana-tree

plantations in its northern and western part. This sector was also previously disturbed by numerous pits due to important looting during Late Antiquity. During the five excavation campaigns, more than 400 m² of the necropolis were unearthed and 107 mud-brick structures and tombs have been discovered (Dhennin et al. 2022: 38).

The superstructures of the tombs are of different shapes, either rectangular, octagonal, pyramidal, domed or barrel-shaped (Dhennin 2011: 114-119). They were originally covered with a white plaster coating (usually painted), and some of them were equipped with an offering table and a niche containing a funerary stela. The presence of these stelae is one of the main characteristics of the burials from Kom Abu Billu. Many examples, now stored in different museums around the world, were found during the excavations in the 19th and early 20th centuries and have been partially published (Dhennin 2011: 109-110 with references). They are usually rectangular and decorated with an engraved, embossed or painted scene depicting the deceased following the Greek tradition in association with Egyptian symbols. A Greek epitaph, sometimes visible in the lower part of the stela, bears the name of the deceased, his filiation, his age and some encouraging or supporting words for his journey to the underworld (Dhennin 2015: 154).

According to Paul Picavet, in charge of the excavations of the area, these monumental tombs belong to the three first occupation phases of the necropolis, most likely very restricted in time and covering the 2nd and the 3rd centuries AD (Dhennin et al. 2022: 50-65).

A first phase (Phase 1) consists of the installation of the oldest tombs in this area, directly on the geological soil. It includes the construction of the large, octagonal tomb, measuring around 5m on each side (T17). Following this first installation, the tombs were totally or partially covered by sand, their superstructures being used as foundation for later tombs from Phase 2.

During a second phase (Phase 2), it seems that a very large number of tombs were built, drastically restricting the space between the structures. The whole area was then covered by sand again, and five new tombs were built in a third phase (Phase 3). A last covering episode marks the end of the monumental phases in this area.

A 4th and last phase corresponds to a late reoccupation of the necropolis with single or collective burials dug in the sand or in the mud-brick superstructure of old tombs. Several burials are arranged around the largest and oldest tomb (T 17) which was probably still visible. This reoccupation phase dates to the end of the 3rd and 4th century AD according to the dating given for the coins held by the deceased and corresponding to Charon's obol.

The archaeological material found in the necropolis is quite abundant and diversified. Unfortunately, most of the tombs discovered so far show evidence of looting, and the artefacts found around these structures mostly consist of disturbed funerary equipment. Nevertheless, ceramics vessels of local origin make up most of the archaeological material found near or in association with the tombs.

3. The pottery

3.1. Small and medium-sized closed vessels

The category of small to medium-sized closed vessels, such as vases for liquids, is by far the best represented in the contexts of the necropolis. It counts mainly water jugs and flasks. A first group includes water jugs characterized by a globular, ribbed body sometimes equipped with a small spout and a high flared neck with a filter with four holes, one of which is placed centrally. The rim is deeply grooved in its central part, and characterize by a plastic decoration formed by the fold of the inner part of the lip (**fig. 2, 1-4**). Water jugs with such plastic treatment of the rim find parallels only in very few contexts of the western Delta (Kormysheva et al. 2015: fig. 61, 11/17-1/38 p. 15). The fabric is alluvial, fine, dense, sandy and micaceous, and the outer surface is systematically covered with a light-colored slip. A few examples show painted decoration of dots and lines on the upper part of the body (**fig. 2, 4**).

Another variant consists of water jugs with a poly-lobed neck (**fig. 2, 5**). The neck is rather short; its general aspect is created by a pressure exerted at different points during the shaping process. The rim is slightly bevelled or, on the contrary, rounded. These vessels are equipped with a slightly domed filter, pierced by six holes (five evenly distributed around the perimeter and one central) and with two vertical handles with a rounded section, placed on either side of the neck and going down to the shoulder. This type finds parallels on the site of Bouto in both consumption and production contexts from the 2nd and 3rd century AD (Ballet et al. 2019: 162, fig. 58 nos. 12-13, type G1, 175 fig. 66 no. 21). Both water-jugs types are well represented in the Kom Abu Billu necropolis during Phases 1, 2 and 3. Their presence in the levels of Phase 4 is probably residual.

Small flasks are the second most significant group in the contexts of the necropolis. They are of two types. The first has a high neck and an oblong body with marked ridging in its lower part and a ring base (**fig. 2, 6**). The second type is characterized by a high and narrow, strongly carinated neck and a flared or straight rim, an ovoid or piriform body and two small, symmetrical, vertical handles joining the shoulder to the neck (**fig. 2, 7-9**). The fabric used is similar to the water-jugs types, and a whitish slip, usually applied by soaking, is visible in the upper part of the vessel. A few examples, presenting a painted decoration of plant motifs (bunches of grapes), have, however, been noted (**fig. 2, 10**).

The presence of similar vessels is attested on different sites of the Delta (Holladay 1982: fig. 12, 147; Ballet et al. 2019: 175, fig. 66 nos. 22-23), Middle Egypt (Ballet and Południkiewicz 2012: 110, pl. 51, fig. 458, 289, Faiers 2013: 69, 150, fig. 2.72 nos. 445-447) and in the oases of the Western Desert (Ballet 2004: 224, fig. 220 no. 48a/B; Dixneuf 2018: Pl. 8.1.10-11; Caputo 2020: 84-85, pl. XII no 207, 103). In Kom Abu Billu, these flasks seem to be more numerous in the contexts of Phase 4, even though they sometimes occurred in contexts of Phase 1, 2 or 3. Indeed, this shape seems to be more frequent in Egyptian contexts starting from

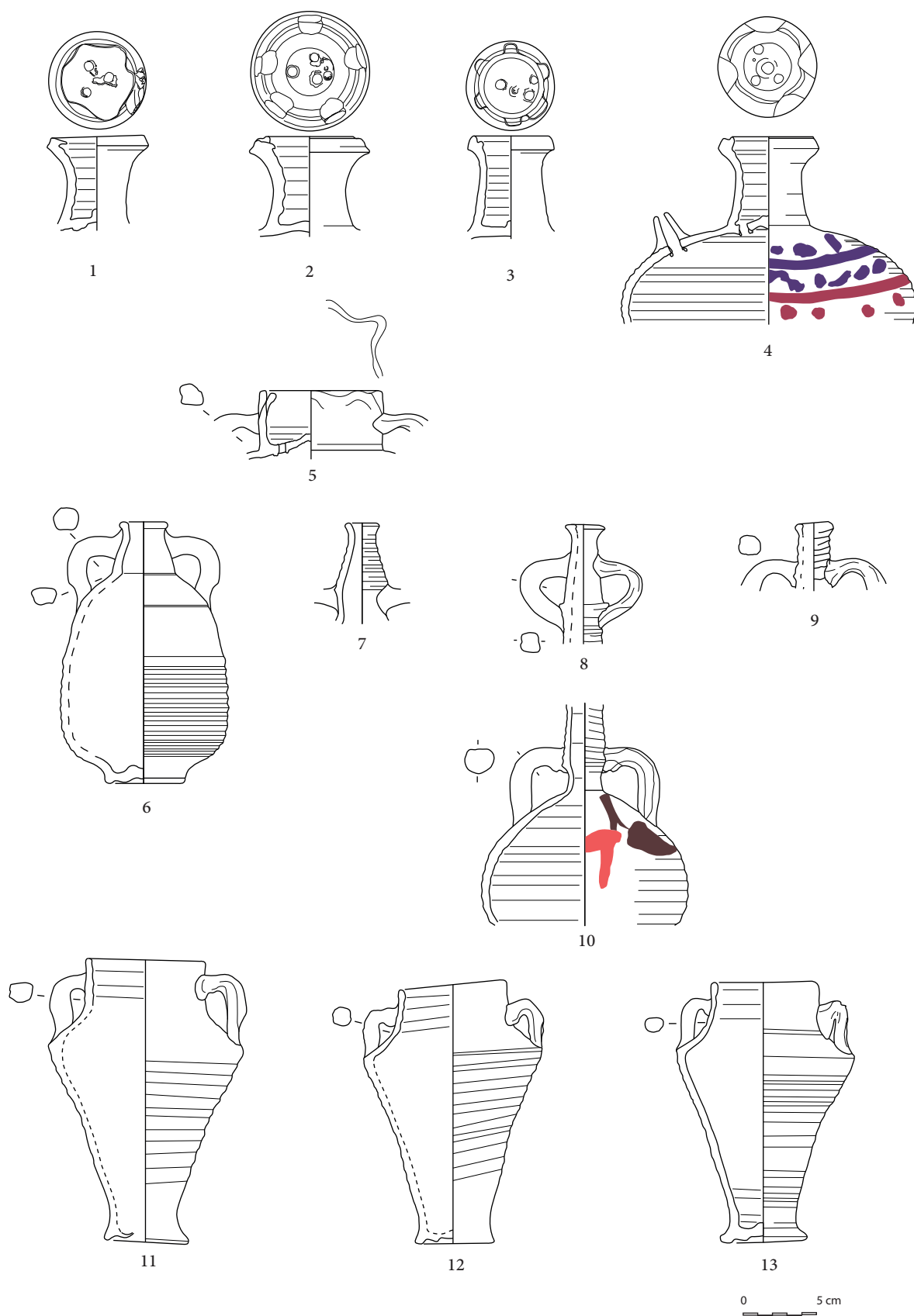


Fig. 2. Small and medium-sized closed vessels from Kom Abu Billu necropolis (sector 2). 1-4. Water jugs with plastic decoration of the rim. 5. Water jug with poly-lobed neck. 6. Flask with oblong body. 7-10. Flasks with carinated neck. 11-13. Closed vessels with high neck and upper carination (J. Marchand / A. Simony © French Mission of Kom Abu Billu).

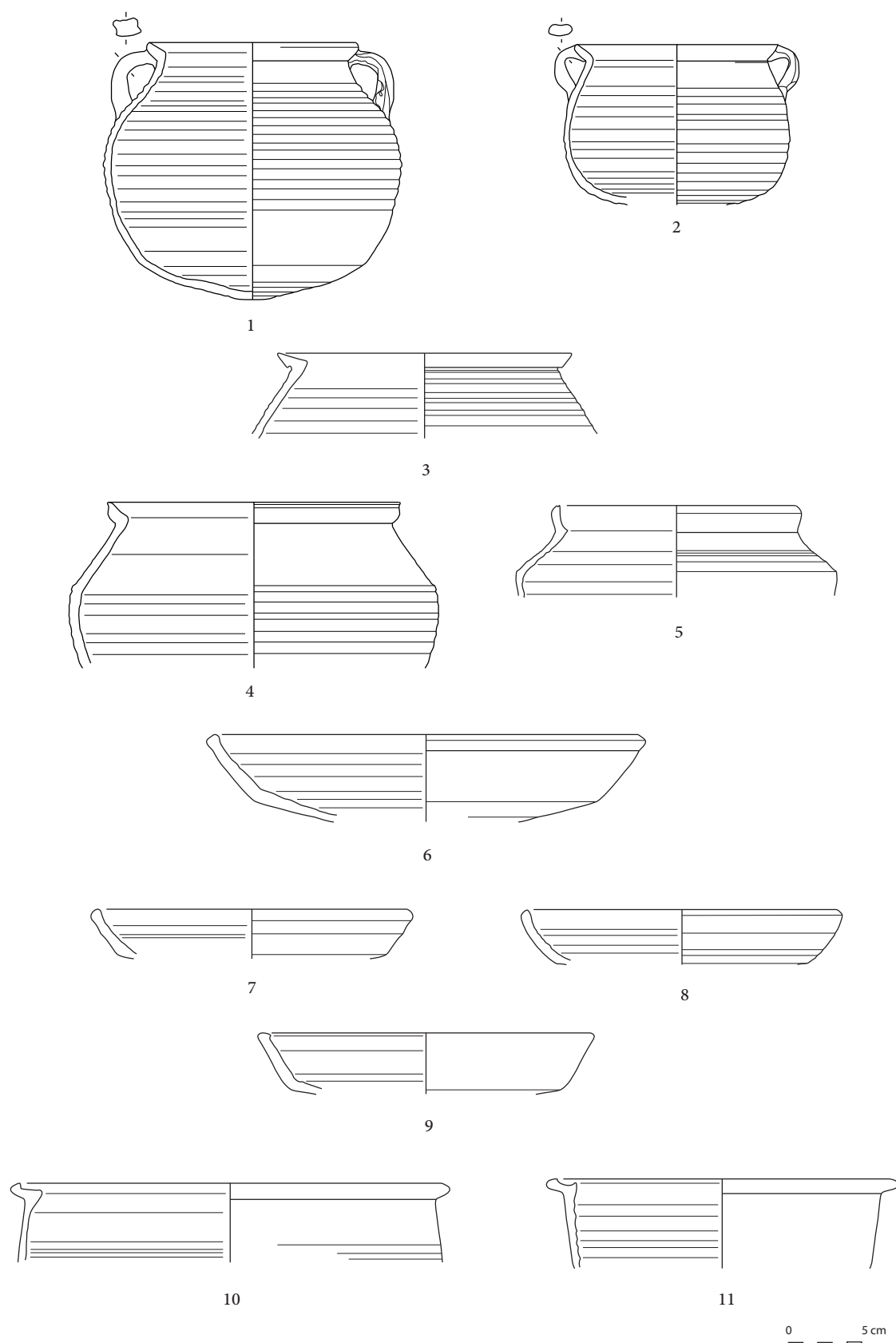


Fig. 3. Cooking wares from Kom Abu Billu necropolis (sector 2). 1-3. Cooking pots with flared rim and globular body. 4-5. Cooking pots with slightly convex neck and carinated body. 6. Cooking pan with bevelled lip. 7-8. Cooking pans with simple in turned rim. 9. Cooking pan with rounded thickened lip. 10-11. Casseroles with grooved edge (J. Marchand / A. Simony © French Mission of Kom Abu Billu).

the 4th century AD, even though it may occur in earlier ones (Ballet and Południkiewicz 2012: 110, pl. 51, fig. 458, 289; Faiers 2013: 69, 150, fig. 2.72 nos. 445-447; Ballet et al. 2019: 175, fig. 66 nos. 22-23).

The presence of vessels with a high carination (**fig. 2, 11-13**) is also particularly significant in the necropolis. These closed vases of different sizes have a straight neck, a strongly carinated upper body and a ring base, usually pierced after firing (**fig. 2, 11**). The fabric, made of Nile Silt, is usually fine and sandy, and the surface treatment, relatively basic, consists only in a simple smoothing of the outer surface. This shape, particularly well attested in the necropolis, seems to be rarely encountered on other sites and archaeological contexts of the Egyptian Delta. In Kom Abu Billu these carinated vessels are usually associated with the tombs from Phases 1, 2 and 3.

3.2. Cooking wares

The category of cooking wares mainly includes standard cooking pots with an elongated and widely flared rim and a globular ribbed body (**fig. 3, 1-3**). This shape is particularly common in the domestic contexts of the Delta and Alexandrian region (Coulson 1996: n. 33 type F; Majcherek 2008: 45, fig. 10; Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009: 321, KKP5, fig. 113, 323; Lecuyot 2017: 905, fig. 3; Ballet et al. 2019: 163-164, fig. 59, nos. 1-3) or across the country in Upper Egyptian sites (Gempeler 1992: Abb. 103, Nr. 10, K419; Tomber 2006: 77, Type 28, 79, fig. 1.29 nos. 358-359) from the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd century AD, until the first half of the 3rd century AD. The general shape, and more particularly the treatment of the rim, more or less recalls the *caccabai* of the Hellenistic period whose production finds its origin in the Aegean region (Waksman and Lemaître 2010: 783, fig. 5, 788). Other types are characterized by a slightly convex and flared neck, a grooved rim and a slightly carinated, ribbed body (**fig. 3, 4-5**). This shape, which occurs in Kom Abu Billu during Phases 1, 2 and 3 is also known in Bouto (Ballet et al. 2019: 173-174, fig. 65 no.12) and Memphis (French 2013: 165, n. 310, 174, fig. A2.6: b). It probably appeared during the 2nd century AD and seems to last well beyond the Late Roman period (Ballet, Bosson and Rassart-Debergh 2003: 118, 127, no. 79).

A significant number of shallow cooking pans or cooking plates with sloping sides or convex wall, a low carination and a flat or slightly rounded bottom in the tradition of *tagenon* and *patina* types of Roman tradition (Rotroff 2006: 188-189) have also been recognized. This shape, particularly common around the Mediterranean (Simony 2020: 593 with references), is well attested throughout the Early Roman Empire. Different variants are attested in the necropolis, showing rather a bevelled lip (**fig. 3, 6**), a simple, slightly inturned rim (**fig. 3, 7-8**) or a round thickened rim (**fig. 3, 9**). This form is very well attested in Alexandria starting from the 1st century AD (Lamarche 2003: pl. 14, fig. 72, 179; Ballet 2017: MAJ 517, 69, pl. 7), the Delta (Holladay 1982, no. 11, pl.32, 141), but also in Fayum (Ballet and Południkiewicz

2012: 57, pl. 12 n° 159) or in Upper Egypt (Tomber 1992: 141-142, fig. 3.6; Tomber 2006: fig. 1.47, 123, type 98, 124; Tomber 2007: fig. 6.10 n° 116) in later levels dated to the 2nd century AD.

Lastly, casseroles with a flared or even horizontal rim, marked by a wide internal groove, oblique walls and a rounded carination (**fig. 3, 10-11**) are to be compared with the Egyptian repertoire from the 2nd and 3rd century AD (Coulson 1996: 70 fig. 35, type E; Tomber 2007: 196-197 fig. 6.10, n° 113; Monchamp 2014: 9, figs 1-6).

The cooking wares from Kom Abu Billu are systematically made of fine and sandy Nile Silt fabric and the surface treatment consists of a generally careful smoothing. When a clay-based coating is applied it is most often a fine matt slip, orange or red to brownish-red in colour.

3.3. Amphorae

Several fragments of amphorae of both type AE3-2 (for the earliest phases) and AE3-T1 (for phase 4), whose production seems to be located in the Delta, were discovered near the tombs. Amphorae AE3-2 with cylindrical neck (**fig. 4, 1-4**), dated from the end of 1st to the beginning of 3rd century AD are represented in two variants with a rounded rim (Dixneuf 2011: 112, 331, fig. 97 variant A), an inverted quadrangular rim (Holladay 1982: pl. 39, fig. 64; Tomber 2006: 149-150, fig. 1.58 n. 871; Dixneuf 2011: 112-113, 331-332 fig. 97-98 variant B or C). The later variant, AE3T-1 (**fig. 4, 5-6**), displaying a triangular rim (Dixneuf 2011: 139, 344, fig. 120), is dated from the second part of the 3rd to the 4th century AD. The fabric from these different types always consists of medium fine, brown Nile Silt.

3.4. Open vessels

The category of open shapes includes small bowls characterized by an in-turned rim with a flat, sloping lip and a flat base (**fig. 5, 1**). Made of fine Nile Silt fabric, the surfaces do not show any traces of surface treatment, but the presence of pigment and mortar remains on the inner surface corroborates their use in the funerary context, during the occupation of the necropolis and the phase of renovation or decoration of the tombs. Numerous examples of thin-walled beakers of local origin with a short neck, a ring base and a plastic decoration created by intentional depressions all around the body (**fig. 5, 2-4**) have also been noted. This plastic treatment aimed probably at imitating Italic examples (Ballet and Południkiewicz 2012: 116, 292, no. 494; Mayet 1975: 37-38, pl. XI, nos 81-87), together bowls with a rounded carination and with a rounded, grooved rim and two or three lines of chattering on the upper part of the body (Marabini 1973: 10-108, pl. 18, no. 181) (**fig. 5, 5-6**). These small containers are characteristic of the funerary deposits at the corners of the mud-brick tombs of Phases 1, 2 and 3.

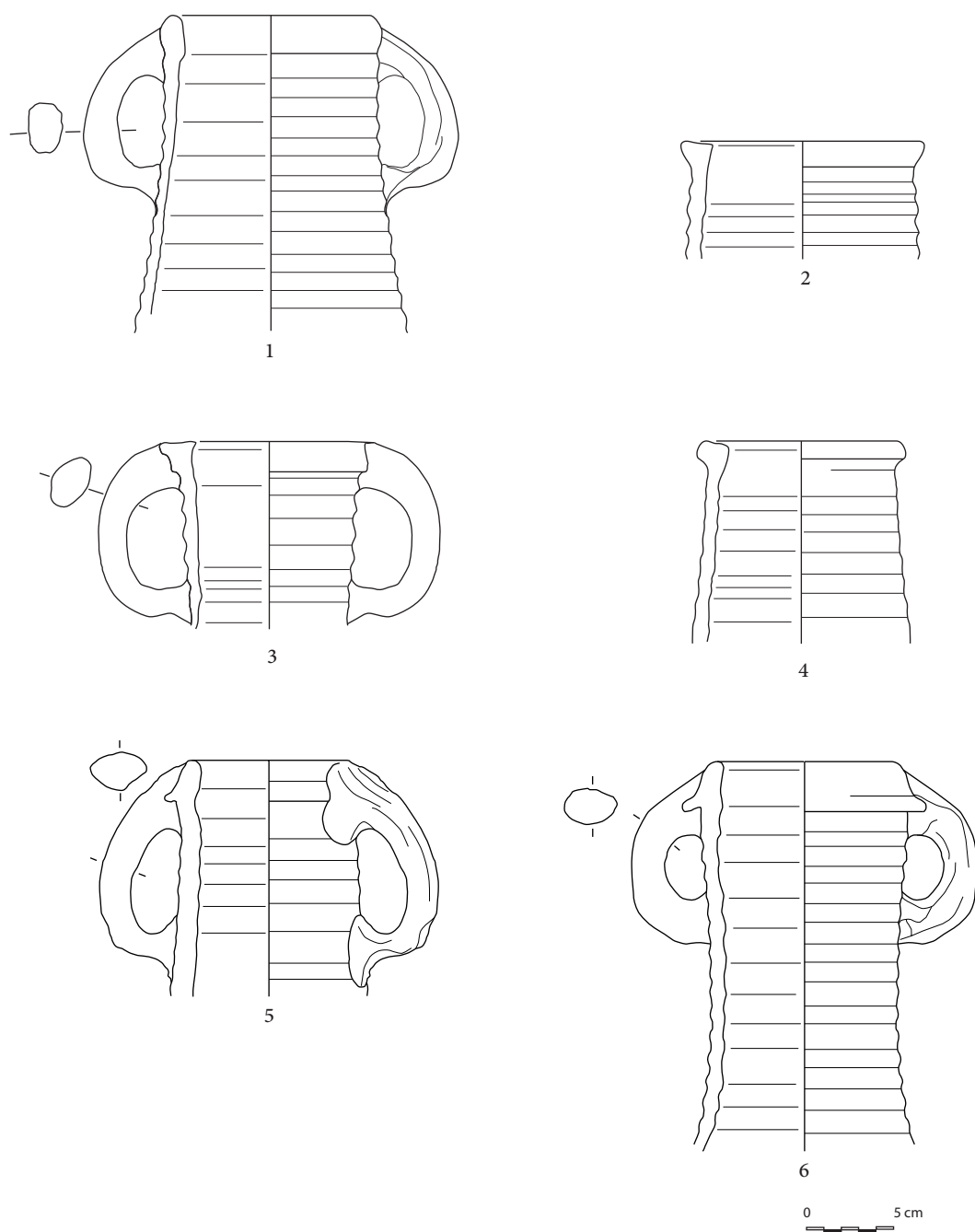


Fig. 4. Amphorae from Kom Abu Billu necropolis (sector 2). 1. Amphora AE3-2 with rounded rim. 2-4. Amphorae AE3-2 with quadrangular rim. 5-6. Amphorae AE3T-1 with triangular rim. (Y. Mahmoud / A. Shabaan / A. Simony / C. Edwar © French Mission of Kom Abu Billu/ CEAlex).

Conclusion

All of the ceramic material presented here is of local origin, or at least produced in the area of the Western Delta, which is not really surprising considering the fact that imported material only represents less than 5% of the ceramics from Sector 2. Except the amphorae, the vessels show really homogenous and similar Nile Silt fabrics, suggesting a local origin or at least a production centre in the immediate surroundings of the site. No evidence of pottery workshops from the Early

Roman period has been discovered so far, although Kom Abu Billu is known to be a production center of glass during the Early Roman period (Nenna and Seif El-Din 2000: 26-29, 39-40), of amphorae LRA5/6 type (Ballet 1994) and possibly common and cooking ware during the Late Roman and early Islamic periods (Marchand and Simony 2017: 917-920). The typological repertoire, quite restricted, is composed of coarse, cooking and fine wares with many parallels in domestic assemblages from the Early Roman period in Egypt or even the eastern part of the site, where excavation started in 2017,

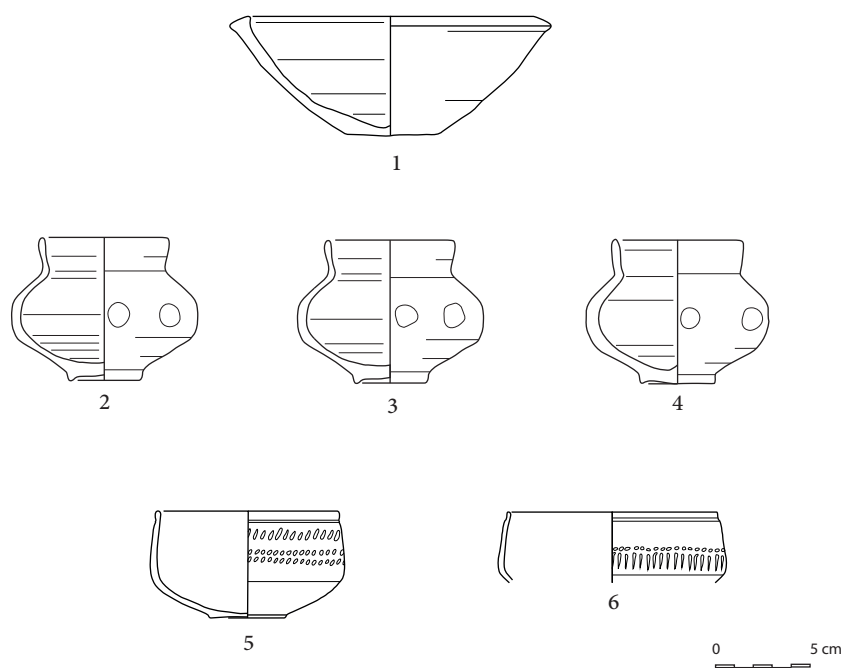


Fig. 5. Open vessels from Kom Abu Billu necropolis (sector 2). 1. Small bowl with in turned rim. 2-4. Thin-walled beakers with depressions on the body. 5-6. Soft Carinated bowls with rouletting decoration on the upper part of the body. (A. Shabaan / A. Simony / J. Marchand/ C. Edwar © French Mission of Kom Abu Billu/ CEALex).

suggesting that there was no specific production for the funerary sphere. Furthermore, it seems that domestic vessels could have been reused for funerary purposes in certain cases (Van Andringa 2021:101).

Most of the shapes presented in this paper belong most probably to the three first phases of the occupation of the necropolis and only few examples can be associated absolutely certainly with the 4th and last phase of later burials. These containers may correspond to the remains of offerings made at the time of the funerals or afterwards (Dhennin 2015: 148). Indeed, lamps, cooking vessels, vases for liquids, and beakers were often found placed in the corner of the tombs and turned upside down, as is already attested in other necropolises of the Roman world (Van Andringa 2021: fig. 69,

101). On the other hand, amphorae necks were often stuck in the ground, and the vases for liquids, which often have a base pierced after firing, could have been linked to libations (Dhennin 2015: 159).

Then, excavations conducted by the French mission have not only confirmed the location of the necropolis of Kom Abu Billu in the western part of the site but also uncovered numerous funerary structures and their associated material, helpful for a better understanding of the funerary rituals of Roman Egypt.

Aude Simony
Centre d'Études Alexandrines (CEALex)
aude.simony@cea.com.eg

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