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EGYPTIAN RED SLIP WARE A AND ITS PRODUCTION AT THE SITE OF THE LATE ROMAN FORT AT NAG EL-HAGAR/UPPER EGYPT

The late Roman fort at Nag el-Hagar

The late Roman fort at Nag el-Hagar is situated on the east bank of the Nile adjacent to a small village and palm gardens, c. 30 km north of Aswan, where the southern frontier of the late Roman province of *Thebais* (Upper Egypt) ran near *Philae* and *Syene*. After having been partly excavated by the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) between 1984 and 1989¹, two seasons of documentation and field work on the fort were conducted in 2005/06 as part of an Egyptian-Swiss Joint Mission with the Swiss Institute of Architectural and Archaeological Research on Ancient Egypt at Cairo, co-directed by M. el-Bialy (Director General for Aswan and Nubia of the SCA) and M. Mackensen (Institute of Prehistory and Archaeology of the Roman Provinces of the University of Munich)².

The fort at Nag el-Hagar measures approximately 2 hectares, showing characteristic late Roman features like the projecting U-shaped intermediate and gate towers and

square-shaped corner towers (fig. 1). The western front of the fort, including the main gate and towers, was built of stone blocks, whereas the rest of the curtain wall as well as most of the inner structures were made of mudbrick and have been damaged heavily by clandestine digging for building material, the so-called *sebakhin*. Its most outstanding feature is a palace complex of ca. 0.18 ha in the southeastern quarter (fig. 2). This residential area of the fort was excavated in 1984 to 1989 and, according to M. Mackensen, is to be seen in connection with the presence of high-ranking officials of the late Roman administration in this part of Upper Egypt³.

¹ MUSTAFA/JARITZ 1985; WARETH/ZIGNANI 1992.

² For a detailed report of the 2005 campaign at Nag el-Hagar cf. MACKENSEN ET AL. 2006, whose results on the structural development of the fort as well as the dating evidence based on the coins and ARS wares I will be referring to in the following.

³ Cf. *ibid.* 167–170.

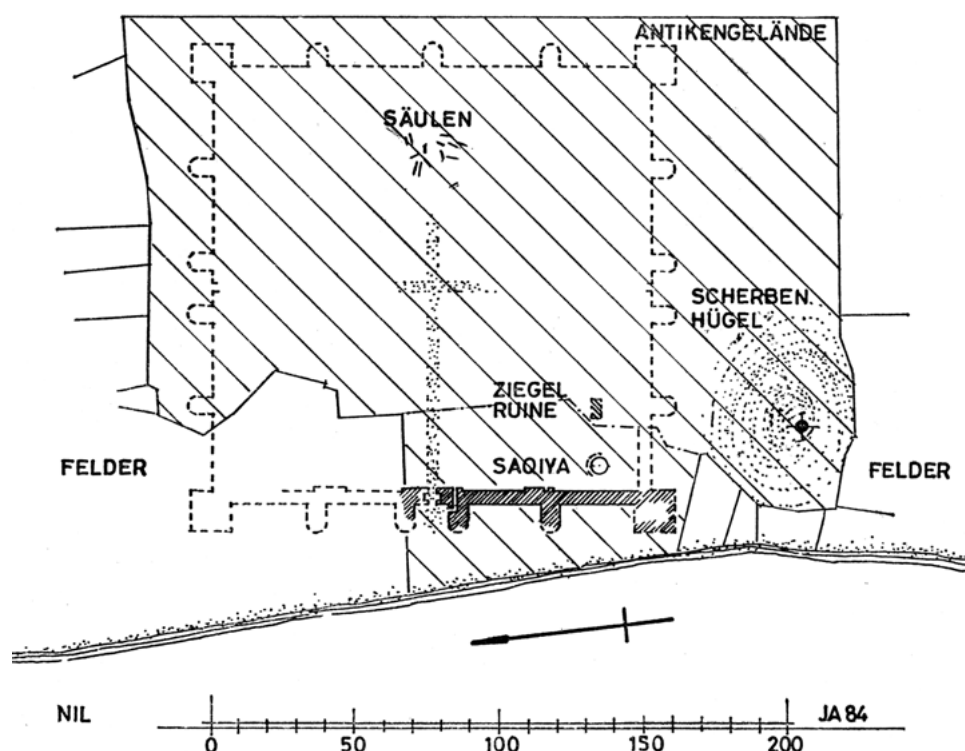


Fig. 1. Nag el-Hagar, provisional schematic plan of the Roman fort (after MUSTAFA/JARITZ 1985, 22 fig. 1).

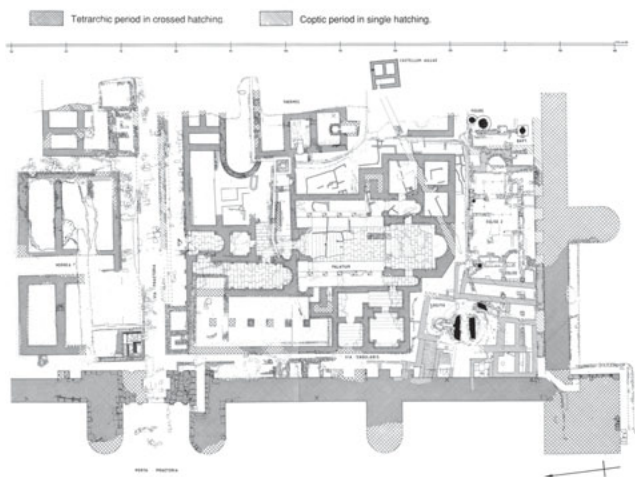


Fig. 2. Nag el-Hagar, south-west area of the fort with enclosure wall and palace (after WARETH/ZIGNANI 1992, pl. 22).

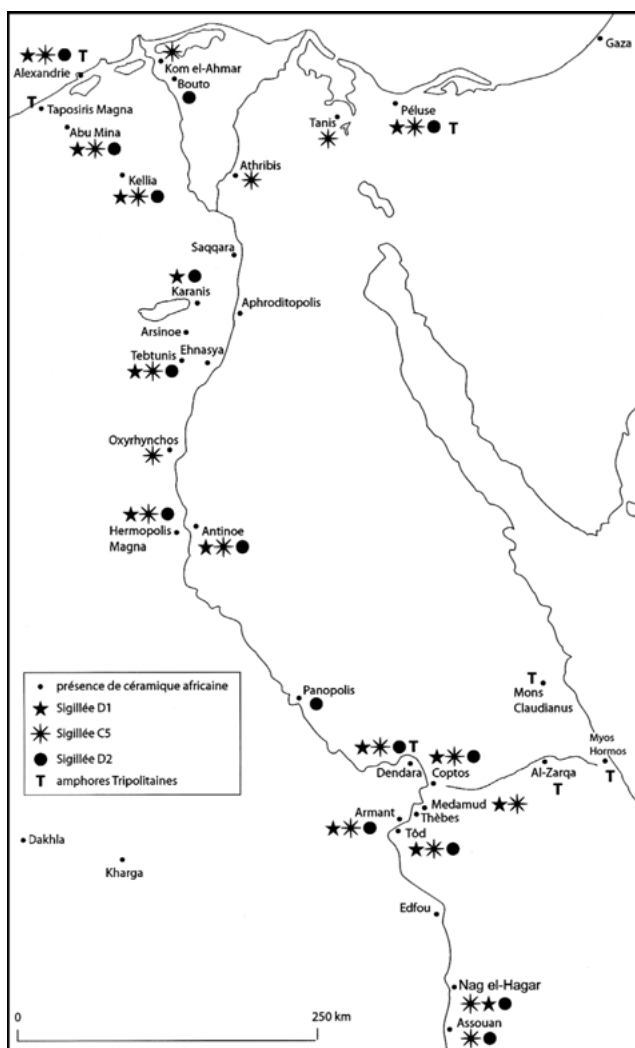


Fig. 3. Distribution of ARS ware from central (C⁵) and northern (D¹ and D²) Tunisia in Egypt (after BONIFAY 2004 with additions by MACKENSEN 2006, 214 fig. 9,1).

P. Zignani, one of the excavators of the Egyptian-Swiss mission of the 1980s, dated the fort at Nag el-Hagar to around AD 300, mainly based on general comparisons with other late Roman fortifications in Egypt and supposed historical links⁴. According to H.-C. Noeske⁵, eight of the nine unstratified late Roman bronze coins from the 1980s excavations were minted in the years AD 296/297 and 304/305, thus pointing to building activity around that time.

Ceramic evidence from the campaigns 2005/2006 at Nag el-Hagar

One of the goals of the ongoing research at Nag el-Hagar is to establish a chronological framework of the site, i.e. of the beginning and the end of the military garrison as well as of the later, presumably civilian settlement, based on reliable archaeological data.

Therefore a large-scale pottery survey of the fort and its surroundings was carried out in the seasons of 2005 and 2006, which provided, alongside the finds from the areas excavated in 2006, a surprisingly wide range of imported as well as regional and local late Roman fine wares and amphorae⁶. For the future campaigns, in which further parts of the southeast quarter as well as of the ramparts will be excavated, stratified material is to be hoped for. For now, based on the current state of our research, it is the chronologically relevant unstratified fine wares which will be discussed here, focussing on the Egyptian Red Slip Ware A (ERS A).

African Red Slip Ware

Before turning to the Egyptian fine wares from Nag el-Hagar, I shall briefly refer to the large amount of African Red Slip Wares (ARS) from the site which were analysed and published by M. Mackensen⁷. The state of research with only small numbers of ARS published from other late Roman sites in Middle and Upper Egypt does not yet allow for conclusive comparative studies. However, a look at those few late Roman sites from which comprehensive ceramic sequences have been published, like e.g. Hermopolis/El-Ashmunein⁸, Tôd⁹, Amarna¹⁰ and especially Elephantine¹¹, makes the range of more than 150 ARS vessels now known from Nag el-Hagar seem impressively large (fig. 3). Various ARS vessel-forms of the central Tunisian fabrics C³ to

⁴ WARETH/ZIGNANI 1992, 205–207. The Egyptian-Swiss excavations of the 1980s neither produced stratified coins or pottery deposits, nor was any work done on the chronologically relevant unstratified fine wares.

⁵ H.-C. NOESKE, Coins. In: MACKENSEN ET AL. 2006, 171–173.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.* 174–188.

⁷ M. MACKENSEN, African Red Slip Ware. In: MACKENSEN ET AL. 2006, 174–179; MACKENSEN 2006, 219–224.

⁸ BAILEY 1998, 1–7 pl. 2–5.

⁹ PIERRAT 1991, 193; *id.*, Évolution de la céramique de Tôd du II^e au VII^e siècle apr. J.-C. Cahiers Céramique Egypt. 4, 1996, 189–206, 199; 204.

¹⁰ FAIERS 2005, 65 f. fig. 2,3.

¹¹ GEMPELER 1992, 42–44.

C⁵ as well as of the north Tunisian fabrics D¹ and D² were identified, dating from the early 4th century to the first half of the 7th century¹².

The chronological distribution of the ARS from Nag el-Hagar shows that about 15 % of the finds date from the early 4th century to the middle of the 5th century, the time during which the military garrison at Nag el-Hagar might be assumed. The second half of the 5th and first half of the 6th century are strongly represented with the central Tunisian dish Hayes 84 being by far the most common form, followed by the north Tunisian forms Hayes 91A and B. The second half of the 6th and first half of the 7th century show a decline in the supply with ARS, represented only by few sherds of the forms 91C and D as well as a variant of the large dishes with sloping floor and heavy knobbed rim form 104B¹³.

So far, none of the other late Roman finewares like late Roman C or D Ware known to be imported to Egypt, albeit to a much lesser extent, have been identified at Nag el-Hagar.

Egyptian Red Slip Ware A

By far predominant within the surface-finds at Nag el-Hagar was the Upper Egyptian table-ware known as Egyptian Red Slip Ware A (ERS A) since J. Hayes' classification of the late Roman fine wares in 1972. At the time, Hayes already stated the close connection of this ware with the Tunisian ARS forms imported to Egypt¹⁴. Since then further attempts were made to classify the wide range of Egyptian fine wares¹⁵, e.g. by M. Rodziewicz when working on the material from the Polish excavations at Alexandria¹⁶, and by R. Gempeler, who introduced an extensive albeit problematic ERS A catalogue of the pottery from the German excavations at Elephantine¹⁷.

The pinkish or orange-red ERS A was the finest of the Egyptian wares, being predominant at the late Roman sites of Upper and Lower Egypt and also occurring in the Sinai and Palestine as well as in Carthage, the Cyrenaica, Cyprus and Sicily¹⁸. Production centres of ERS A Ware have been identified in the Aswan area at Elephantine as well as close to the monastery of St. Simeon¹⁹ and at Nag el-Hagar²⁰.

Chronologically listed samples of the more than 1500 diagnostic ERS A sherds from Nag el-Hagar are presented in **figs. 4–5**, showing selected finds from the survey as well as the unstratified demolition debris documented during the 2006 excavations. Notwithstanding the fact that there exist of course numerous ERS A forms which are of Egyptian origin as well as those which have degenerated too far from the imported vessel forms they once copied to be called imitations (like e.g. the painted bowl Gempeler T362 Var./imit. Hayes 91C Var. with undulating rim **fig. 5,5**), most of the samples shown here are of vessels which rather closely copy their respective ARS prototypes.

The series begins with dishes with flat floor, straight wall and plain rim which imitate form Hayes 50B, dating about AD 280–375 (**fig. 4,1.2**)²¹. Close imitations of the north Tunisian dish with short, flat rim form 58B (**fig. 4,3**) are represented as well as those reminding of form 59. The dishes

with incurved rim copying form Hayes 61A (**fig. 4,4.5**), bowls with two-part flaring rim like Hayes 67 (**fig. 4,6.7**) and small, deep bowls with flat rim and hanging, sometimes grooved lip like forms Hayes 73 and 74 (**fig. 4,8.9**) already belong to a group of forms imitating ARS vessels of the second half of the 4th and first half of the 5th century²².

Corresponding to the ARS vessels found at Nag el-Hagar, the supply with ERS A obviously continued throughout the 5th century without any noticeable hiatus. This is shown e.g. by the very strong presence of vessels copying plates with gently sloping floors and upright rims form Hayes 82 (**fig. 4,10–12**) as well as the corresponding deep dishes Hayes 84 (**fig. 5,1–3**). They are imitations of central Tunisian vessel-forms which date from the mid 5th to the first half/mid 6th century and which were obviously much in demand. Only few vessels imitating the early forms Hayes 91A/B were found, whereas copies of form El-Mahrine 18 (**fig. 5,6**) are quite common, imitating a north Tunisian bowl which dates approximately AD 450–525²³. Another group of very well represented forms comprises the flanged bowls imitating ARS vessels Hayes 91C (**fig. 5,4**), dating to c. 530–600+, and Hayes 91D (**fig. 5,7**), dating to the first half of the 7th century²⁴. Bowls with curved body, broad horizontal rim and an upward hook at the lip copying form Hayes 95 (**fig. 5,8**) date to c. 500–550²⁵. The rare bowl Gempeler T 346b imitates form Hayes 97 with a flat, downward tilted rim, the edge of which is scalloped to form slightly concave sides and a deep groove close to the lip (**fig. 5,9**). Its north Tunisian prototype has a production span from the end of the 5th century to the mid 6th century²⁶. Further forms attributable to the 6th century include the numerous imitations and derivatives of the ARS form 99 with heavy, rolled rim (**fig. 5,10.11**).

¹² MACKENSEN 2006, 219–222 fig. 9.4, 9.5.

¹³ Ibid. 221 fig. 9.5, 7.8.18.

¹⁴ HAYES 1972, 387–394 discussed the range of forms presented by H. E. WINLOCK/W. E. CRUM, *The monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes I* (New York 1926) pl. 37.

¹⁵ Cf. BAILEY 1998, 8 f. giving a summary of the history of research on Egyptian fine wares.

¹⁶ RODZIEWICZ 1976.

¹⁷ GEMPELER 1992 grouped the ERS A vessels on the grounds of general shape (dishes, bowls, cups, etc.) rather than of formal similarities like rim profiles, thus making it difficult to show their chronological development. Also the dates for individual forms, proposed by Gempeler on the grounds of unpublished contexts, are impossible to verify.

¹⁸ HAYES 1980, 531; cf. also BAILEY 1998, 8. – A fragment of a closed ERS A vessel from London: D. WILLIAMS/R. TOMBER, *An Egyptian Red Slip A sherd from London*. *Britannia* 27, 1996, 382–387.

¹⁹ T. ULBERT, *Keramikstempel aus Elephantine*. *Mitt. DAI Kairo* 27, 1971, 235–242, pl. 64; D. M. BAILEY, *A poinçon for decorating Egyptian Red Slip A Ware and two moulds in the same fabric*. *Ant. Journal* 66, 1986, 393 f., pl. 70; BALLETT ET AL. 1991, 140–142.

²⁰ WARETH/ZIGNANI 1992, pl. 24, 1740; BALLETT ET AL. 1991, 142 f.

²¹ HAYES 1972, 69–73.

²² Ibid. 124; for a revised chronology cf. MACKENSEN 1991, 406 f.

²³ MACKENSEN 1991, 408–410.

²⁴ For the chronology of Hayes 91A–D cf. MACKENSEN ET AL. 2006, 179 with n. 61 and 62; BONIFAY 2004, 179–181.

²⁵ HAYES 1972, 149.

²⁶ Ibid., 151; M. MACKENSEN/G. SCHNEIDER, *Production centres of African red slip ware (3rd–7th c.) in northern and central Tunisia: archaeological provenance and reference groups based on chemical analysis*. *Journal Roman Arch.* 15, 2002, 121–158 esp. 129.

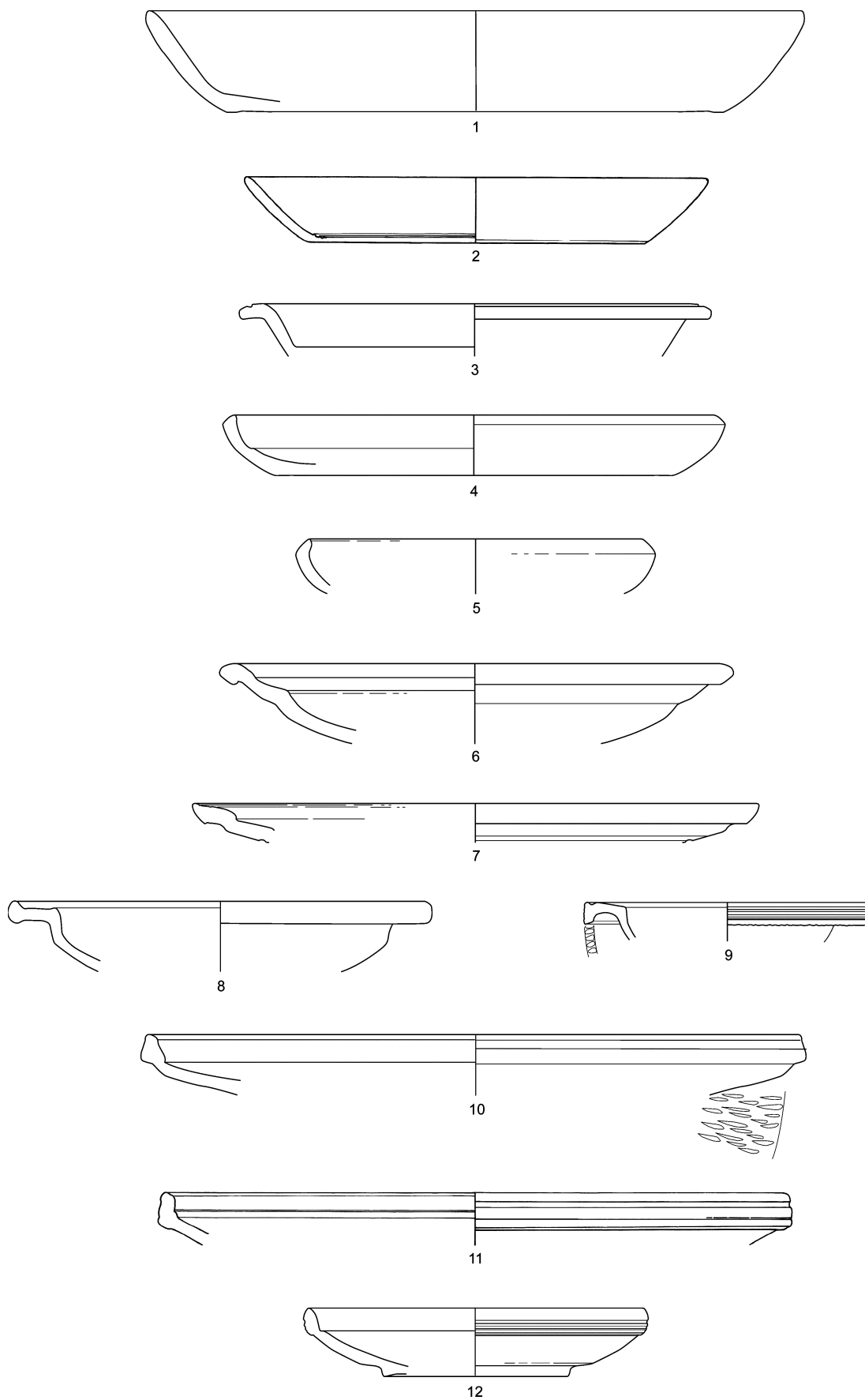


Fig. 4. Nag el-Hagar. Egyptian Red Slip A Ware. Scale 1:3.

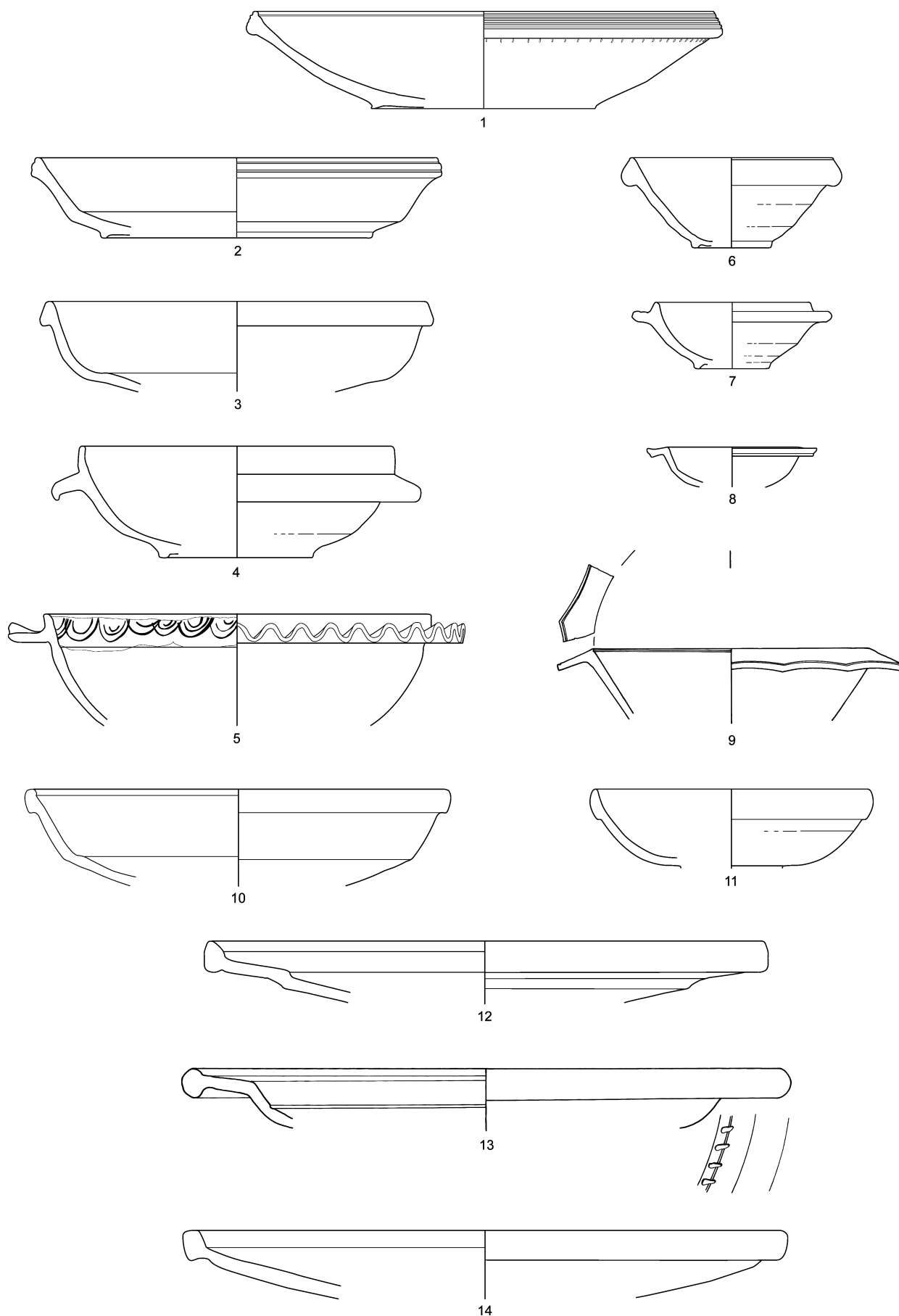


Fig. 5. Nag el-Hagar. Egyptian Red Slip A Ware. Scale 1:3.

Like the earliest ERS A, also the latest datable vessel forms partly correspond to the ARS imports found at Nag el-Hagar, as is shown e.g. by large plates with heavy knobbed rim and fairly flat stepped up floor copying the north Tunisian form Hayes 90A and B (fig. 5,12,13), which precedes form Hayes 105 and occurs in contexts dating to c. 550–600+²⁷. Among the big group of large dishes with sloping or curved floor terminating in a heavy knobbed rim, the ones with a knobbed, less upward projecting rim (fig. 5,14) are imitations of form Hayes 105A–C (c. 525–600)²⁸.

The range of identifiable ERS A vessels from Nag el-Hagar closely matches that of the ARS forms and represents a time span dating from the 4th to the 7th century, the majority of the vessels being from the 5th and 6th century. As with the ARS sherds found at Nag el-Hagar there is no significant chronological gap in the range of unstratified ERS A forms which would indicate a gap between the end of the military garrison and the beginning of the supposed civilian settlement at Nag el-Hagar.

Only 4 % of the material can securely be dated to the 4th and early 5th century, the time relevant for the construction of the fort and the military settlement at Nag el-Hagar. As with the ARS wares discussed above this might be mostly due to it being survey material gathered from the surface and therefore mainly representing the latest phases. Nevertheless, the question arises whether the strong presence of ERS A at Nag el-Hagar from the mid 5th century onwards has to be considered in connection with the beginning of the local pottery production, probably after the ending of the military presence there.

The ERS A production centre at Nag el-Hagar

Since the publication of a pottery punch showing a Chi-Rho from the 1980s excavations at Nag el-Hagar (fig. 6,13)²⁹, it seemed likely to assume a fine ware-production centre in the vicinity of the late Roman fort. This was confirmed by P. Ballet in her assessment of pottery-production in Roman Egypt, mentioning Nag el-Hagar as a production site of Egyptian Red Slip Ware A as well as of amphorae and, to a lesser extent, of cooking- and storage vessels³⁰.

The surveys of the seasons 2005/06 now enable us to draw a more detailed picture especially concerning the beginning of the pottery-production there. The abundant finds of over-fired, deformed and partly over-glazed vessels, wasters and oven slag come from a vast rubbish heap which is situated south of the late Roman fort, its centre in about 50 m distance from the curtain wall (fig. 1).

Besides the different types of common pottery and amphorae³¹, a considerable amount of wasters and misfired ERS A vessel-forms were found. Their fabrics are macroscopically indistinguishable from those of the known potteries in the Aswan region. The selection of the most common forms (fig. 6) shows that none of the vessels known to be produced at Nag el-Hagar date any earlier than around the mid-fifth century, beginning with imitations of form Hayes 74 (fig. 6,1) and again with those of the dishes Hayes 82 and

84 being very well represented (fig. 6,2–6). The series continues with imitations of ARS forms Hayes 89/90 (fig. 6,7), 91D/El-Mahrine 18.1 (fig. 6,8) and 99 (fig. 6,9,10) as well as a group of vessels reminding of the later variants of the Late Roman C-form Hayes 3, but which might just be derivatives of the ARS form Hayes 84 (fig. 6,11,12)³². Thus, even when taking into consideration given uncertainties due to the nature of surface-finds, it seems most likely that the large-scale pottery-production at Nag el-Hagar did not begin before the mid-fifth century, probably coinciding with the time when the military garrison of the fort ended.

The current state of research does not allow for qualified statements concerning the range of forms and scale of distribution of the potteries at Nag el-Hagar in comparison with those of the Aswan area, especially since the size, exact dating and range of forms of the latter are also yet unknown³³. Still, the extensive rubbish heaps south of the curtain wall of the fort at Nag el-Hagar do present strong evidence for a production of considerable size³⁴.

The question when the pottery-production at Nag el-Hagar or the whole post-military settlement ended has to be considered in context with the problems concerning a valid chronology of the Egyptian fine wares: ERS A vessels mostly copied and varied forms of the fine wares imported to Egypt from the 4th century onwards (mainly ARS, but also LRC and LRD), original forms were developed to a far lesser extent³⁵. It becomes increasingly evident that the production span especially of the later ERS A forms lasted considerably longer than that of their imported prototypes. This is indicated for instance by stratified late Roman and Byzantine deposits from Tôd in Middle Egypt³⁶ as well as by recently published material from Amarna³⁷. However, in order to specify the production spans of the respective ERS A forms, further chronological evidence from Egypt, such as coin-dated pottery deposits, is desperately needed³⁸.

²⁷ For the state of research cf. BONIFAY 2004, 177.

²⁸ HAYES 1972, 166; MACKENSEN 1993, 428.

²⁹ WARETH/ZIGNANI 1992 pl. 24,1740.

³⁰ BALLETT ET AL. 1991, 142 f.

³¹ The amphorae from the campaign 2005 in Nag el-Hagar were studied by F. SCHIMMER, North African and Eastern Mediterranean amphorae. In: MACKENSEN ET AL. 2006, 185–188.

³² The dependencies of ERS A forms on Phocaian (LRC) imports in the second half of the 5th and the 6th century might well be bigger than hitherto assumed, as is shown e. g. by a cross-stamp on an ERS A plate which clearly copies an LRC-stamp type, cf. M. SIELER, Vier spätantike Teller mit Stempeldekoration und eine Tonpunze. In: L. Wamser (ed.), Die Welt von Byzanz – Europas östliches Erbe. Ausstellungskat. München (Darmstadt 2004) 254.

³³ The production of lamps, *balsamaria*, terracotta-figurines and ERS A could be identified in the area of the Chnum temple at Elephantine. In or near the monastery of St. Simeon apparently ERS A vessels in varying qualities were produced: cf. BALLETT ET AL. 1991, 140–142.

³⁴ Ibid. 142 f.

³⁵ Cf. HAYES 1972, 387–397; BAILEY 1996, 56; ID. 1998, 8; BONIFAY 1998, 145 f.; P. BALLETT, Céramiques hellénistiques et romaines d'Égypte. In: P. Lévêque/J.-P. Morel (edd.), Céramiques hellénistiques et romaines III (Paris 2001) 105–144 esp. 116.

³⁶ PIERRAT 1991, 198–201 fig. 70; LECUYOT/PIERRAT-BONNEFOIS 2004, 148.

³⁷ FAIERS 2005, 67.

³⁸ The complete lack of early Islamic glazed pottery or any other kind of Umayyad or Fatimid finds at the site, which might suggest a date

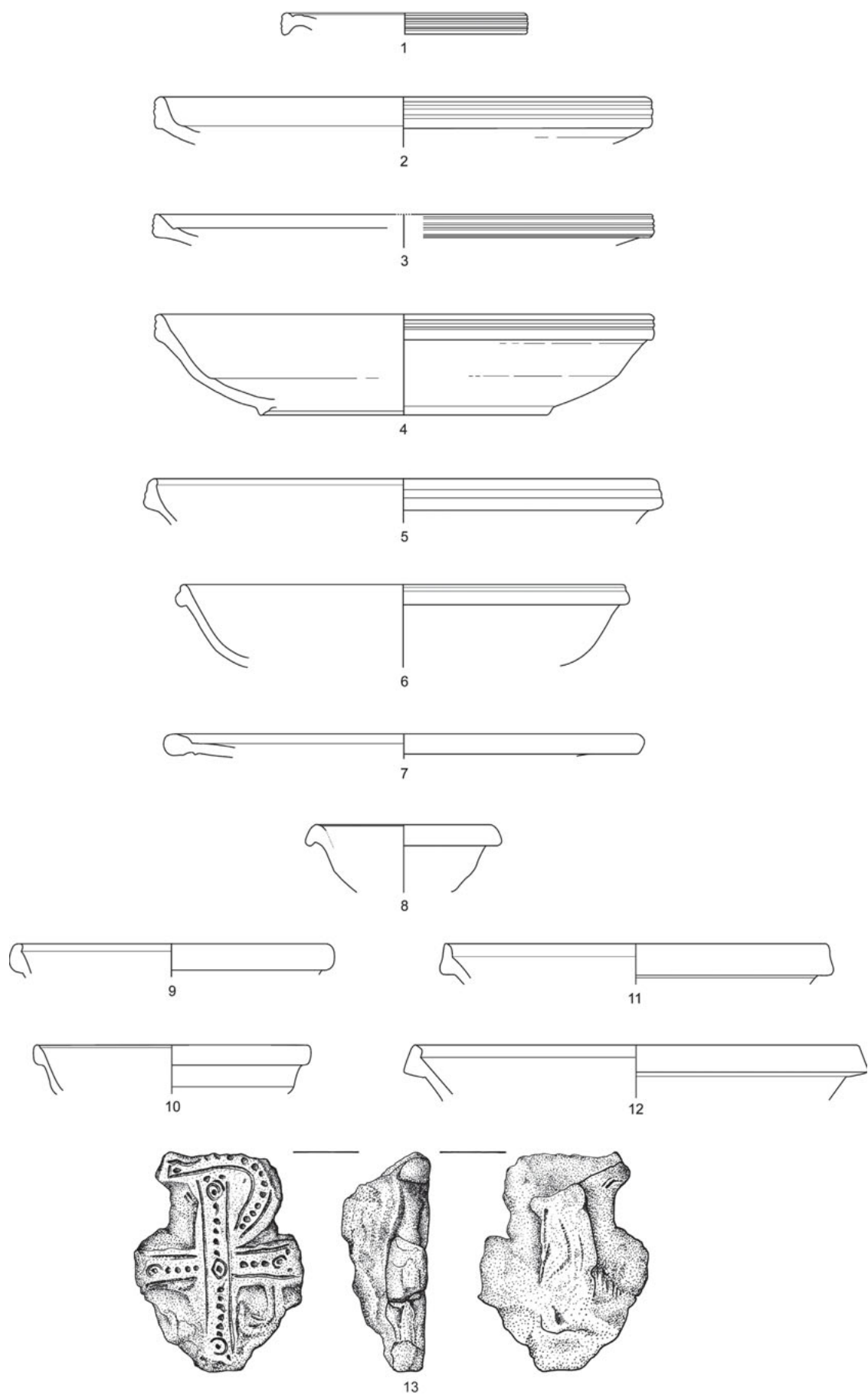


Fig. 6. Nag el-Hagar. ERS A production site – samples of locally produced misfired vessels. Scale 1:3.

Summarising the results of the surveys carried out 2005/06 in Nag el-Hagar, the ARS ware, amphorae and *spatheia* from central and north Tunisia as well as amphorae from the eastern Mediterranean clearly show the trade connections and the supply with imported goods from the early 4th to the second half of the 6th century³⁹. The wide range of ERS A from Nag el-Hagar closely matches that of the ARS forms, covering the time of the 4th to at least the first half of the 7th century. Finally the strong presence of ERS A from the mid 5th century onwards may have to be interpreted in

connection with the beginning of the local fine ware production after the ending of the military presence at Nag el-Hagar.

around the middle of the 7th century for the end of the post-military settlement at Nag el-Hagar, has to be judged with care, since evidence e.g. from Tôd (cf. PIERRAT 1991, 199) points to a very slow introduction of these new wares to Egypt up to several centuries after the beginning of Islamic rule.

³⁹ Cf. MACKENSEN ET AL. 2006, 195.

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