

CERAMICS OF THE LATE COPTIC PERIOD

It is unreasonable to posit any major changes, either in taste or technique, immediately following the Islamic conquest of Egypt. We may assume that during the late seventh and early eighth centuries, there was a shift of the better ateliers from [Alexandria](#) to the new capital at al-Fustat (Cairo) and a somewhat less precise movement away from the patronage and taste of the religious establishments, whether Coptic or Orthodox (Melchite), to those of the Arabic governing cadres.

Nowhere is this more strikingly apparent than in the employment of Arabic inscriptions on pottery, sometimes alone but more often accompanying an older medley of motifs, best seen in the bowl fragment with ducks and grapes in the British Museum (Lane, 1958, pl. 5-A). Indeed, the lengthened life of some of these motifs (Grube, 1962) against competing influences from [China](#) and Syria and [Persia](#) goes far toward proving the integrity and distinction of Egyptian wares in the broad category of Islamic ceramics.

Notwithstanding this continuity, it can hardly be gainsaid that the decisive process, one by which we can measure the popularity of “old” against “new” ceramics, was the reintroduction of glazing into Egypt, which stratigraphical tests at al-Fustat place at the turn of the seventh century, soon after ‘Abd al-Malik’s reform of the coinage in 695-696.

It has been generally accepted that there had been lead glazing in the Eastern Mediterranean provinces of the [Roman](#) Empire (ca. 100 B.C. to A.D. 100) generally on cups and chalices, often with barbotine decoration, and, further, on a true clay body, as distinct from the fused frit body employed by the [ancient Egyptians](#) for their “glazed” ceramics.

However, whereas the technique apparently died out in [Egypt](#) and Syria, it seems to have been practiced almost continuously in Mesopotamia and parts of Persia, certainly during the Sassanid period and through the

advent of [Islam](#) in the area. When glazing does appear in Syria and Egypt, it was probably imported from [Persia](#) or made locally in imitation of these imports. Archaeology, both at [Alexandria](#) and more particularly at al-Fustat (because there was no large-scale occupancy before the arrival of 'Amr ibn al-'As in 639-640), permits us to chart the reactions of the potters to the novelty of glazing.

On one front, they simply glazed certain objects that they were producing with molded or stamped or rouletted designs. This was particularly noticeable with stub-handled lamps where duplication of motifs connects the unglazed with the glazed. (The transition is thoroughly discussed in Scanlon, 1984; the archaeological verification has been published relative to Kubiak and Scanlon, 1973a, fig. 2, which is unglazed, and Kubiak and Scanlon, 1980, fig. 3, which is covered in a brown lead glaze.)

It can also be noted on fragments of what M. Rodziewicz terms "céramique Romaine tardive," otherwise known as highly polished "pseudo-Samian" redwares, that were covered by a green lead glaze. Or, the rouletted designs (e.g., in Rodziewicz, 1976, type O-25, and in Scanlon, 1967, fig. 3-b) were transferred to a buff-brown clay vessel and glazed as can be seen in Figure 1, a fragment found in an eighth to ninth century context in al-Fustat.

Though not the key to motival continuity, pseudo-Samian ware seems to have been the longest-lived of any made in Egypt; it was certainly in common use as tableware up to the threshold of the eleventh century. New shapes, unlike any surveyed by Hayes or Rodziewicz, were introduced, such as that in Figure 2, which is from the wall of a vaselike vessel with applied nodules and a rudimentary leaf and branch decoration in black slip. It can be securely dated to the ninth century.

The more usual Coptic "carry-over" design (black and white slip on a pseudo-Samian standard shape) is obvious on the vessel fragment in Figure 3. It is from an eighth-century find-spot. Nor must it be forgotten

that the usual rouletted, stamped, and gouged motifs continued to be employed on the polished redware without additional slip decoration or glazing.

A third response was simply to continue slip-painting vessels in the old-fashioned red-on-cream slip styles of geometrics, guilloches, and plaits (Figure 4, which was found in the undisturbed pit that contained the famous luster goblet and can therefore be dated to 750-800, and Figure 5, whose design is in black and red on an orange-white wash overall slip and whose find-spot allows a dating of the ninth to tenth century).

A major variant within this survival mode was the continuing utility of the Apa Jeremiah ambit of decoration. Figures 6 and 7 exhibit, albeit on a reduced scale, the interest in zoomorphic motifs. The former can be dated to the eighth to ninth century. And, though the latter is a surface find, it can be related motivally to the last period of the monastery of Apa Jeremiah, about 900. The more abstract patterns (random lines, circles, dots, and ovoid hatching) can be seen on the earliest slip-painted filter bottles (Scanlon, 1986, figs. 179, 188).

However interesting these efforts were toward establishing a sense of ongoingness in the realm of decorated pottery, the major response must be seen in the realm of lead-glazed wares of the eighth and ninth centuries. A wealth of motifs from the [Christian](#) period were renewed and/or modified so as to integrate both with the demands of the new technique and to satisfy a newly evolved taste. Here the key factor is the tonality of the clay, irrespective of the mode of applying the decoration.

It is always of the buff-white to the buff-brown range and rather tightly potted. (Very few of the early lead-glazed pieces found at al-Fustat were of the red clays that Rodziewicz would like to see as the link, though the pieces which do survive can be seen as experiments.) One group carried stamped and molded designs, but did not have much of a market after 900.

The other, based on underglaze painting, can be found in dated contexts throughout the tenth century, which means it competed however fitfully against both Samarra luster and local imitations of Chinese imports.

The decoration was applied in one of two ways. The design was painted in slip directly on the bisque-fired vessel and then covered with a transparent glaze. After the second firing, the surface was both smooth to the touch and gritty. The designs were relatively simple and slapdash, though a certain vigor was attained through using two or three colored slips. Once again there was a zoomorphic group (Figure 8) and another based on rosettes and abstract leaf patterns (Figure 9).

In the somewhat later method and on larger vessels, the inner surface was covered entirely with a design painted in colored slips on an overall white slip and covered with a transparent glaze; thus it was totally smooth to the touch after the firing. The leaf and scroll design of Figure 10 echoes the lead-glazed sgraffito wares familiar from Samarra, whereas the geometrics and rosettes of Figure 11 remind us of the pottery sequences from both Apa Jeremiah and EIPHANIUS.

Finally, there are two ceramic developments evident from the finds at al-Fustat but absent from Alexandria, which complete the general outline of “carry-overs.” From the same, undisturbed pit that produced Figure 9 there came forth a small vase with a simple external linear decoration in black slip (Figure 12). But the clay was white with a slight buffish overtone and without any covering slip other than the decorative lines in black; the surface was gritty to the touch. Both the shape and decoration prompt one to think of pre-Islamic models. This was confirmed by the more naturalistic decoration to be seen on Figure 13, made of the same white clay with black motifs of a palm-tree and an elliptical medallion containing leaf forms suggestive of the ful (bean) plant.

From the same find-spot another fragment of the exact same ware carried a zoomorphic motif, one similar to that seen in Figure 6, which again

bespeaks a “carry-over” from the pre-Islamic Coptic range of slip-painted pottery. We know from a study of filters that an atelier in Giza produced a distinct line of vessels noted for having slip decoration; we might attribute this distinct white-ware range to the same venue. On archaeological grounds we may assume a life span from about 800 to 1000 for these kilns, and imagine them as producing nothing but slip-painted utility wares that, if decorated, were reminiscent of pre-Islamic norms and modes of decoration.

At a second remove, a number of late classical and [Christian](#) motifs were available in [Egypt](#) on vessels imported from the kingdoms of Nubia and most particularly from Faras. Those that have appeared in al-Fustat are from both phases of W. Y. Adams’s “Classic Christian” period, which runs from about 850 to 1000 (Adams, 1962). In a later study, Adams has related most of the relevant motifs to those prevalent in Coptic [art](#) in the sixth and seventh centuries (Adams, 1981). These wares are quite distinct in color and tightness of the clay body and the tonalities of the covering and decorating slips, and cannot be confused with the purely Egyptian slip wares as exemplified in Figures 4 and 5.

This is obvious in our example of what Adams calls the “connected leaves” motif (Figure 14), which can be dated immediately before 900. In Figure 15 we see a variant of this motif in the circular register of a deep bowl, which with the central motif of triangular hatching might be assigned rather to the [Aswan](#) potteries. However, from the find-spot of the various fragments which compose the vessel, we must place it also before 900. From the rather large number of fragments with zoomorphic motifs, that in Figure 16 is somewhat different in detail from those analyzed by Adams in that the collar is vertically rather than horizontally striped. It is from Faras and can be dated from the find-spot to the early tenth century.

Thus it would seem that the [themes](#) and decorative motifs of pre-Islamic pottery continued to exercise some hold on the imagination of the

craftsmen and customers through the tenth century. There is little doubt that, except for the Giza factories, the personnel of those in the Greater Cairo area had become Muslim by this date. The market for slapdash, lead-glazed wares was practically wiped out by the appearance and plethora of newer types of pottery, for example, luster wares and underglaze sgraffito wares, imitations of Chinese celadons and splash wares, and particularly by the range of so-called Fayyumi wares.

By the middle of the eleventh century, the importing of Nubian [Christian](#) pottery had ceased. Hence the luster plate with an interior decoration of a priest with a censer (Lane, 1958, pl. 26-A) must be considered a straightforward commission rather than the reflexive expression of the Egyptian potter. A very few pieces of slip-painted, unglazed pottery have been noted from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but these are proof not of a revival or of an incredible survival but simply of a genre and metier in the grip of economic and artistic poverty.

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