البحث
5

Astudy Of Coptic Pottery From Kharga Oasis

By

Baheia Shaheen

University Of Alexandria,

Faculty Of Arts .

A study of coptic pottery from kharga oasis

Baheia shaheen

University of Alexandria, Faculty of Arts

The splendor of Coptic pottery is mainly due to its environmental and religious aspects. But, little is known about that pottery despite of all the efforts in the researches on Late Roman Pottery from Egypt made by several great scholars such as Hays[1], Petrie[2], Egloff[3], Winklock[4], Jackpuet[5] and Rodziewicz.[6] In addition, the researches on the Christian pottery in Egypt are still uncompleted.

This paper attempts to focus on Coptic pottery from Kharga Oasis trying to trace the artistic role played by local potters in that southern part of Egypt during the Christian era. It is worthy mentioning here, that the excavated pottery from Kharga are extremely valuable in studying the Coptic pottery[7] from Egypt because of their decorative properties. The collection of Coptic pottery from Kharga has been brought to light after the latest excavations of the IFAO, the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology in Cairo, in 1976. It was published[8] but all what we have are just registers of forms and styles of the pots collected during the excavations seasons in Kharga. Also, no further studies were made. So, my paper's aim is to stuy this collection in an analytical study.

The large collection excavated in 1981-82 in the fortress of the oasis, at Dush, came from its temple and its cememtry, which ceased to be used before the fourth century. A.D.[9] Moreover, Christian signs appeared on the painted examples made Rodziewicz dated it from the late third to the mid-fifth centuries A.D. as a whole.

On surveying the excavated examples we will notice the growth of a local tendency and it may be suggested that there was an industry for pottery in the oasis.[10] We must take in consideration that red slip ware are rather numerous while the painted ones appear later together with the North African red wares of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D[11] are not so far, local red slip ware from Kharga Oasis (the name of Kharga red ware would be appropriate)[12] can be considered as an important group of the Egyptian table wares from Late Roman Period.[13] This seems to indicate that the Egyptian ware arose as a cheap local substitute for the newly popular ware[14] and its beginning should probably not be put before the late fourth century A.D.

In Kharga, 19 different forms[15] of that Late Roman ware could be distinguished referring to the strong connection with North African ware. Its dating to the fourth century was provided not only by comparisons with other Egyptian red wares but also by numismatic.[16]

The analytical study of Kharga Red Slip Ware reveal many artistic aspects:

1. It seems very probable that it combines the high technology of North African Ware with local techniques in the oasis. Since, the North African products were being something of Luxury and there can be no doubt that here it served as the standard of tableware locally manufactured.[17]
2. Local modification in technology and decoration are obvious, e.i, instead of the stamped decoration which is the most important character of North African Ware, appears a very simple incised decoration.[18]
3. It is noticeable that imports from North Africa are so rare. The remarkable example of such class is that one found in the military area at Dush. Its chronology appeared much before the middle of the fifth century A.D.[19] I may suggest that here the existence of a such imported example of North African ware in the oasis in that date was a direct result of the traditional migration road of North African pottery that was leading from the Mediterranean up the Nile into Nubia as far South as Aksum. At any rate, this is clearly confirmed by the appearance of North African examples in Aksum dated to the mid fifth centry A.D.[20]

Another explanation to the appearance of North African ware and its imitations by local potters is what is mentioned by Hope[21] that

On surveying the plain ware examples from Kharga, one can realize that:

1. The local potters of the oasis had succeeded in imitation of North African ware to an astonishable degree especially in the examples including the plates and blows (Plate. I) dated to the beginnings of the fourth century A.D.
2. Examples dated to the late fourth and mid-fifth centuries A.D. confirm that the normal shapes are low and high footed dishes and plates, deep vertical sided bowls, open bowls and a number of closed shapes though these don't seem to be very common (Plate. I).
3. A special form seems to have been made in Kharga consisting of pots of coarse past with tapering foot (Plate. I). This type of foot is very common in Egyptian pottery in Upper Egypt, presumably made separately and luted onto the body. Its examples should probably not be put before the late fourth century.[24]
4. Bottle-shapes are also found dated to the fourth century A.D. though these don't seem to be very common in the oasis (Plate. II). The scarcity of this form seem to owe more to the local pottery tradition. Similar shapes have been found at Karanis dated to the sixth[25] century A.D. but have higher foot than Kharga's ones. Also examples dated to the seventh century found at Ehansya.[26] So, it seems possible that the examples of the flagons from Kharga are the earlier examples of that closed forms in upper Egypt. I must add

that it is well accepted that such closed forms, according to Hays[27] are rather uncommon in Egypt.[27]

So, chronologically speaking, those examples from knarga are of great importance in studying such a form due to its rarity among Egyptian Pottery.

The standard scheme of decoration on plain wares from Kharga would seem to be generally simple grooves or rouletted bands.[28]

II. Painted Pottery from Kharga

At Dush, painted pottery came from the upper strata both in the temple and the fortress dated to the period from the third and fifth centuries A.D according to a hoard of numismatics found in the temple.[29] Besides, the earliest examples from Kharga came from the tombs which ceased to be used before the fourth century.[39] So, I can claim that painted pottery from Kharga covered the period from the late third to mid fifth centuries A.D.

This will be more confirmed if we take in consideration the appearance of North Africa Red Slip Ware of the fourth and fifth centuries previously mentioned.

Still more striking that the decoration on the pottery from Kharga follow the same extend ornamentation on the wall-paintings

from Bagawat[31] dated to the fourth century A.D as it will be dealt in my analyzable study of the styles of paintings on Kharga ware.

The excavations at Kharga had yielded a considerable large amount of examples of painted pottery which included jugs bottles and amphoras. It came from Douch. Hencefore, Rodzienricz[32] propose a "Douch, Painted Ware" name for this type of pottery (which is represented by eight basic forms decorated with geometrical and floral motives).

One should perhaps note that painted wares are generally rare in Mediterranean throughout late Roman times.[33] But in Egypt, various painted wares in the local tradition appear to have dominated the market.[34] A series of plates decorated with painted fish of upper Egyptian manufacture have been puplished by Winlock[35] from Thebes. Now it is almost agreed that the Egyptian Red Slip Ware, Egyptian A, is the most widespread of Egyptian wares and it appears to be commonest in Thebes.[36] Furthermore, it is manufactured there as it is indicated after excavating many kilns there. It would be right consecutively, to suggest that Kharga pottery is also manufactured in the oasis.

As for the pottery in the oasis from the early Roman time, its favourite artistic styl was black paint only depicting simple geometrical patterns.[37] Many examples, mainly amphorae-shape, from the cemetry

at Dush are indicating the existence of a local tradition before the fourth century A.D.[38]

It also marks a very distinct departure from the repertoire of shapes and properties of both early Roman and North African pottery creating its local artistic characteristics which successfully filled local market from the fourth century to the mid fifth century A.D.

Various painted wares were made in Kharga throughout the period in question. Their style can be shown through two groups of pots from Douch; one is a style of systematic friezes, another is a style of free zone.

However, the free style is limited to the whit slipped, closed forms and the painted colour is black (Plate IIIe).[39]

Concerning the examples of the systematical style, one can note the following features:

1. A complete lack of human figures.
2. Many types of the cross-sign appeared (Plate IV-c).
3. A common use of floral and geometrical motifs in polygonal zones especially on the closed forms (Plate IV-a).
4. Paintings on the pots are either black and red on White[40] ground or brown and white on red slip[41] but they are not very numerous (Plate IV-a).

Here its worthy noting that such Christian signs appeared on pots as additional elements executed in black. The striking example is the great dish from Douch with cross figure (Plate IV-c). In the boader sense, however, the cross has become the mark and sign of the Christianity meanwhile symbolizing Christ and his sacrifice for mankind.(47) Here, the presence of such important Christian sign on a locally made example from Kharga may lead us to suggest that such vessels with cross figure were put to use in the church for variety of purposes. Moreover, the artist divided the inner surface of the open forms examples from Kharga by a large cross into four fields to be filled with other types of crosses (Plate IV-c). A similar concept appeared on many painted open forms dated to the early Christian period in Nubian.(48) This might have resulted in the widespread of artistic Coptic spirit in Upper Egypt.

Another particular motif is the rosetta. It appears on a deep bowl from fortress at Douch (Plate IV-d) but with figure of a cross inside it changing the motif into a Christian symbol.(49)

In fact many examples from Alexandria in the Greaco-Roman Museum gave another indication for such tendency as it is shown through the examples from Kom-El Shugafa, Kom-El-Dikka and from western Delta.(50) (Plate V-a)

Also, the rosetta is appeared as a favorite decorative element in the famous Christian tombs of Bogwat on the scene depicting Eirene.[51] The same motif come from all Egypt and tends to strengthen the claim of an Egyptian origin for the whole types.

Another particular motif is the olive tree, which appears on an amphora from Douch. It is particularly important to mention that the olive tree appears in a linear form on a plate from Aswan (Plate V-c). Therefore, I would suggest that there was or certain connection between Kharga painted pottery and the products from Aswan[52] and Nubian[53] due to the fact that the ornament here eliminated the figural representations and also use the same selections of ornaments.

To sum up, Coptic pottery from Kharga would be an ideal source for studying pottery industry in Upper Egypt in that period.

It seems that, Kharga Red Slip ware arose as a cheap local subtitute for Egyptian A ware and its date should probably not before the time of Diocletian, and local pottery traditions from Kharga were strongly influenced by both Aswan and Nubian pottery.

So, there would seem to be no doubt that there was a certain interactive artistic school in that period in southern part of Egypt from the time of Diocletian till the invasion of Blemmyers in the mid of the fifth century A.D.[54] It has been firmly established that importation here seems to be linked with spread of Christianity in lower Egypt.

In conclusion, Coptic painted wares from Kharga may be considered as the predecessors of Egyptian Red Slip A ware but creating its own characteristics forming a local version and succeeded in keeping the local markets well-supplied with local pottery from the fourth century to the mid of the fifth century A.D. From the artistic point of view, we may consider Kharga Red Ware as a root from the roots of Coptic pottery in Egypt.

NOTES

1. Hays, J.W., "*Late Roman Pottery*", London, 1972.
2. Petrie, W.M.F, "*Ehnasya*", London, 1904.
3. Egloff, *La Poterie Copte*, I.
4. Winlock, H.E, "*The Monastery of Epiphanios at Thebes*", New York, 1926.
5. Jacquet-Jordon, H, *Les Ermitages Chrétiens du désert d Ésna*, III, Le Caire, 1972.
6. Rodziewicz, M., "*The Christian Pottery in Nubian Kharga Oasis*" Paper presented at the symposium of International Society for Nubian Studies, Heidelyberg, 1982.
   - La Céramique Romaine Tardive d'Alexandrie, Alexandrie, I, Varsovie, 1976.
   - Introduction á la Céamique á Engobe Rouge de Kharga, in, Cahier de la Ceramique Egyptienne, CCE no 1, 1987.
   - On the Origin of the Coptic painted Pottery in Kharga Oasis, in IFAO, 1985, pp. 235-341.
7. By coptic we usually mean a definite style: the specific art idiom of the Nile Oasis during the Christian era. But it is also employed to describe a period identical with the Christian era of Egypt. Coptic art is a nativ art, the art of exploited people whose expressive energies were awakened by Christianity.
8. Rodziewicz, *Coptic*. Lo. It.

9. Rodziewicz, *Christian pottery in Nubian*, p. 367.

10. As it is now confirmed by hope after the Canadian survey in the oasis of Dakhla has identified five kilns dated to the first century A.D. cf Hope C.A., Dakhla Oasis, in, Bulletin de Liaison du Group international d'Études de la Céramique Egyptienne IV, 1979, pp 13-14.

11. Rodziewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 369.

12. Idem, "Documents de Fouille. Études Préliminaires, in BIFAO, 80, Le Caire 1980, pp 335-336. Also, Jascou called it "Pesudo-Sigillata". Of. Jascou, J; "Douch", BIFAO, 80, 1980, p. 56.

13. Hays, *op. cit.*, of. P. 387

.....Hays proposed to call the classes of imitiations of African Red Slip Ware from Egypt as Egyptian A, B, C. He refers to Egyptian A as Cpotic Red Slip Ware while Adams in his "An Introductory Classification of Christian Nubian Pottery, Kush, X, 1962 Ware 4) called it imitation of Samian Ware. Moreover, Winlock in his "The Monastary of Epiphanius at Thebes" mentioned that it appears to have been made in Luxor region where it is particularly common between about the end of the fourth century to the end of the seventh centuries A.D.

14. Hays, *op. cit.*, p. 388.

15. Rodziewicz, *BIFAO*, 1980, p. 335.

16. Wagner, G, "Trésor de Monnaies en bronze du IV^{e}S., in, *BIFAO*, 1980, p. 336.

17. One should perhaps note that in upper Egypt, as Hays mentioned, the local factions kept the market well supplied with imitations of the Luxory

imported wares from the 5th cent. Onwards Hays, op. cit. p. 420. Just as North African Pottery had been copied in Egypt (Hays' Egyptian A,B,C) so the Egyptian red slip ware in its turn copied in different sites of Egypt. In Kharga, Egyptian A slip ware dish-and bowl shapes were copied.

18.Rodziewicz, *IFAO*, 80, 1980, p. 335.

19.Rodziewicz, *BIFAO*, 1987, p. 128 also compare with type 91 in Hays, *late Roman Pottery*, p. 144 and the also dated it to the fifth century. A.D.

20.Idem, *IFAO*, 1987, p. 130. of forms nos 1571, 28, 30, 37.

21.Hays, *op. cit.* p. 421.

22.Hope, C.A., Dakhala Oasis Project," Report on the study of the Pottery and kilns", in, SSEAJ, X, 4, 1980, p. 299, PL. XXIX, XXV.

- Rostovtzeff, M, Social and Economic life of Roman Empire, vol. I Oxford 197, p. 474.

23.Rodziewicz, *IFAO* 1987, p 131 forms nos 11, 12 from Douch dated to the fourth century A.D bearing great resemblance to the African forms.

- Waage, O.F., Hellenistic and Roman Tablewares of North Syria, IV, 1, p 56.

24.It includes pottery in the kharga area particularly Bagowat, Oasr el-Zayan, Douch and now either exhibited at Kharga Museum or in the storehouse at Douch. I myself had visited both the museum and the storehouse last 1998 and touch the different artistic aspects of Kharga ware here I must express my deep thanks to Prof. Dr. ***Gaballa Ali Gaballa***, the secretory-general of the supereme Council of Antiquities for

allowing me to examine the whole collection in the stores of the council at Douch in Kharga Oasis.

cef. Rodzienricz, IFAO, 1980, p. 335.

Rodzienricz, BIFAO 1987, forms 40, 43.

25.Hays, op. cit. P. 388.

26.Ibid, p. 395.

27.Ibid. loci-cit.

28.Hays, op. cit. p. 395.

29.Rodziewicz, op. cit, forms nos 29,31,32.

30.Jascou, *BIFAO* 80, p. 336.

31.Rodziewicz, *BIFAO* 80, p. 334.

32.Fakhary, A, "*The Necropolis of AL-Bagawat in Kharga*" Oasis, Cairo, 1951, fig. 24, 65.

33.Rodziewicz, *BIFO* 80, p. 335.

34.Hays, op. cit. p. 412.

35.Ibid, p. 388.

36.Winlock, H.E, "*The Monastery of Epiphanios at Thekes*, New York, 1926, pp. 78-96, Ph. XXXIII B.

37.Cf. Hays, *op. cit.* 420.

He mentioned that in Upper Egypt local Egyptian A ware factories in Thebes and Asswan regions kept the market well supplied with good imitations of the Luxury imported wares from 5th century on wards expanding their market to cover Nubia during the sixth century A.D

38.Rodziewicz, *IFAO* 1982, Inv. No 1107, 1480.

39.Ibid, Inv. No 1097.

40.Idem, *Nubische studien*, p. 368.

41.It is produced in limited quantities mostly, open forms, small jugs and amphorae. The painter here prefered the circular borders or points surrounding a centeral representation of the figure.

ef. Rodziewicz, *Coptic Pottery*, p. 237.

42.Idem, *Nubishen studien*, 1982, p. 368.

43.Idem, ET, IX, no 45.

Rare examples have been excavated from kom-el-Dikka dated to the fourth century A.D.

Cf. Idem, *La ceramique Romaine Tardive d'Alexandir*, Warszawa, 1976, p. 58, no O22-O29.

44.Graeco Roman Museum Inv. No 5312, 5314, 25262

Also cf:

Breccia, E, Le Musée Gréco-Romain, Bergamo, 1924, PL. 37, 132, pp. 59-60.

Pagenstecher, R, Expedition von Sieglin, II, 3, Leipzig 1913, Pl. XLIII, 2.

Botti, G., Fouilles dans la Ceramique d'Alexandrie en 1898, Bull. Soc. Alex. I, 1898, pp 10-20.

45.Winlock, *op. cit.* PL. XXX III B

Emery, W.B,-Kirwan L.P, The Excavations and Survey between Wadi-es-Sedua and Adindan, 1929-1931, Cairo, 1935, PL. 114, type 89.

46.Hays, *op. cit.* 397.

47.Ferguson, G., *Signs and symbols in Christian Art*, Oxford, 1961, p. 18.

48.Ibid, p. 165.

49.Adams, W. Y., An Introductory Classification of Christian Nubian Pottery, Kush X, 1962, ware 20.

- Michalourki, K, Faras. Fouilles polonaises 1961-1962, Varsovie, nos 1965, plates 41 nos 4,6 43 no 3.

I must add that pottery from Nubia and Kharga has many similar sets of ornaments in the early Christian period being a sign of similar aesthetical predispositions or as a result of interrelations.

Cf. Adams, W. Y., Progress Report on Nubian Pottery, II, The imported wares, Kush XVI, p. 34.

50.Dinkler, E, "Die Deutschen Ausgrabungen auf den Inseln Sunnarti, in, Kunst und Geschichte Nubiens, *Racklinghausen*, 1975, pp. 22.

51.Pagenstecher, R, Expedition-von. Sieglin, II 3, PL XLIII, 1, PLXLIII2.

- Breccia, Le Musée Gréco-Roman, PL. 37 pp. 59-60.
- Greco-Ra Inv. No 25262.

52.Fakhry, *op. cit*, fig. 64 Pl. XXII.

53.Adams, progress, II, p. 34.

54.Winklock, 1941 pp. 48, 49.

55.Ibid, *loc. Cit.*

REFERENCES

Adams, W.Y., An Introductory classification of Christian Nubian Pottery, in, Kush X, 1962.

- Progress Report on Nubian Pottery, II, in, Kush XVI.

Breccia, E, Le Musée Greco-Romain, Bergamo, 1924.

Botti, G, "Fouilles dans la Ceramique d'Alexandrie, 1898, in, Bull Soc. Alex. I, 1989.

Dinkler, E, Die Deutschen Ausgrabungen auf den Inseln Sunnarti, in, Kunts und Geschichte Nubiens, Racklinghausen, 1975.

Emery, W.B-Kirwan, L.P, "The excavations and survey between Wadi-es-Sebua and Adindan, 1929-1931, Cairo, 1935.

Fakhry, A, "The Necropolies of AL-Bagawat in Kharga Oasis, Cairo, 1951.

Ferguson, G, "Signs and Symbols in Christian Art, Oxford, 1961.

Hays, J.W., "Late Rom Pottery, London, 1972.

Hope, C.A., "Dakhala Oasis Project", in SSEAJ, X, 4, 1980.

Jacquet, J.H., "Les Ermitages Chrétiens du désert d'Esna, III, Le Caire, 1972.

Jascou, J., "Douch", in, BIFAO, 90, 1980.

Michalowski, K, Faras, Fouilles Polonaises 1961-1962, Varsovie, 1965.

Pagenstecher, R., "Expedition von Sieglin, II, Leipzig, 1913.

Petrie, W.M.F, Ehnasya, London 1904.

Rodzieuricz, M., "La Ceramique Romaine Tardive d'Alexandrie, Alexandrie I, Varsovie, 1976.

- Introduction à Engobe Rouge de Kharga, in, Cahier de la Ceramique Egyptienne, no 1, 1987.

- On the origin of the coptic painted pottery in Kharga Oasis, in IFAO, 1985.
- The Christian pottery in Nubian and in Kharga Oasis", Paper. presented at the symposium of International Society for Nubian studies, Heidelberg, 1982.

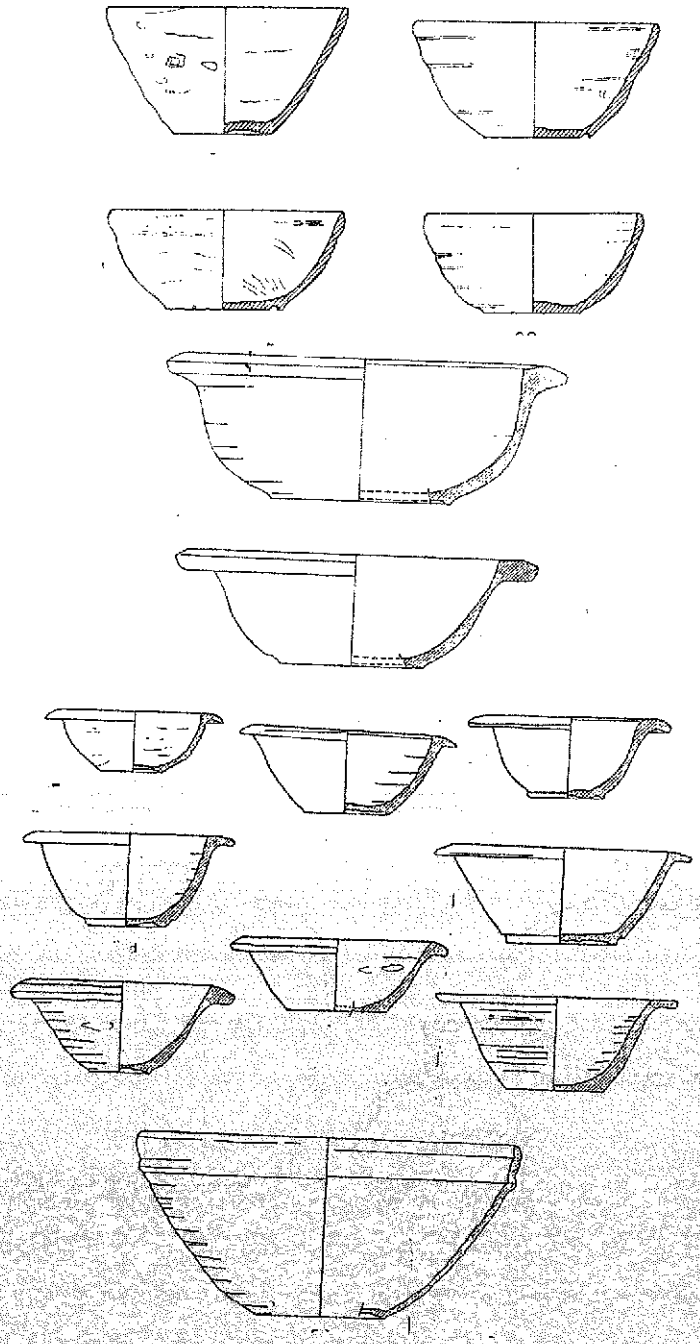
Rostovtzeff, M. "Social and Economic life of Roman Empire, vol. I, Oxford, 1957.

Waage, O.F., Hellenistic and Roman Tableware of North Syria, Antioch on the Orntes, IV, 1948.

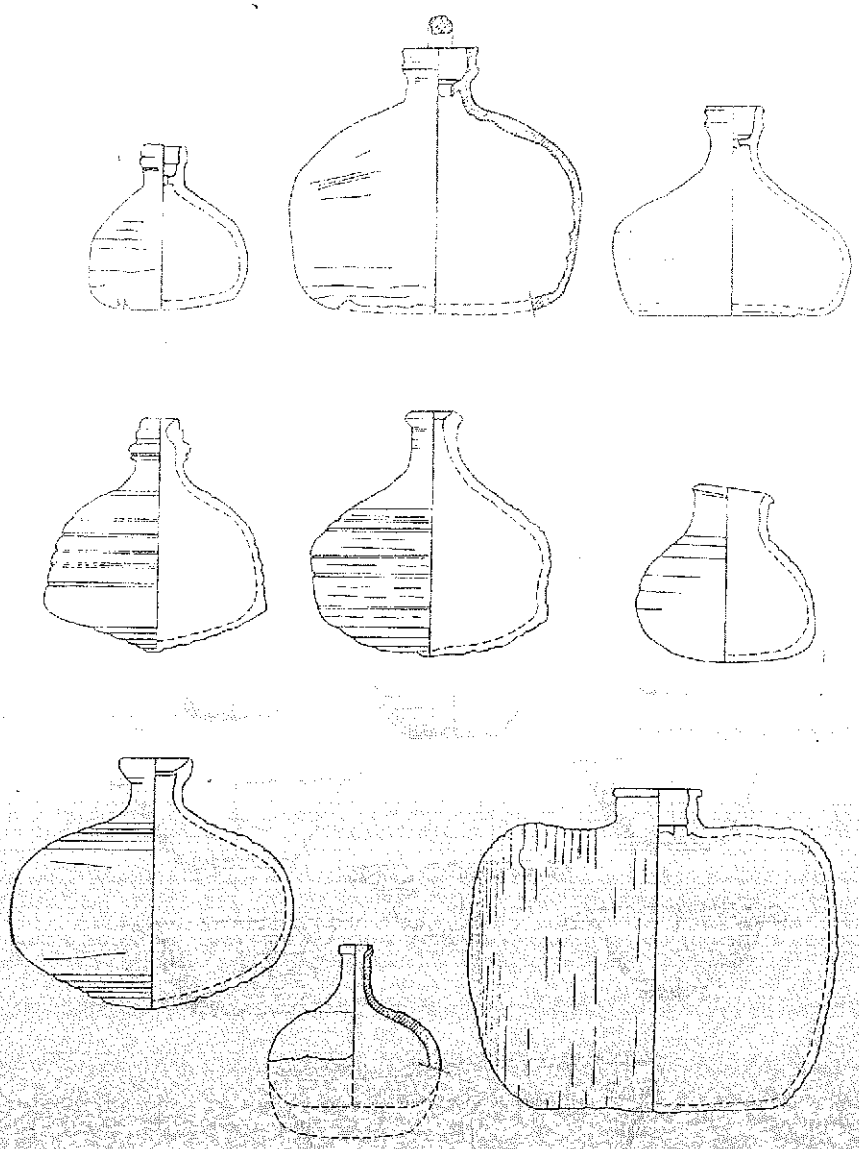
Winlock, H.E, "The Monastery of Epiphanios at Thebes, New York, 1926.

Wagner, G, "Trésor de Monnaies en Bronze due IV^{e}S, Kharga, in BIFAO, 1980.

Plate I

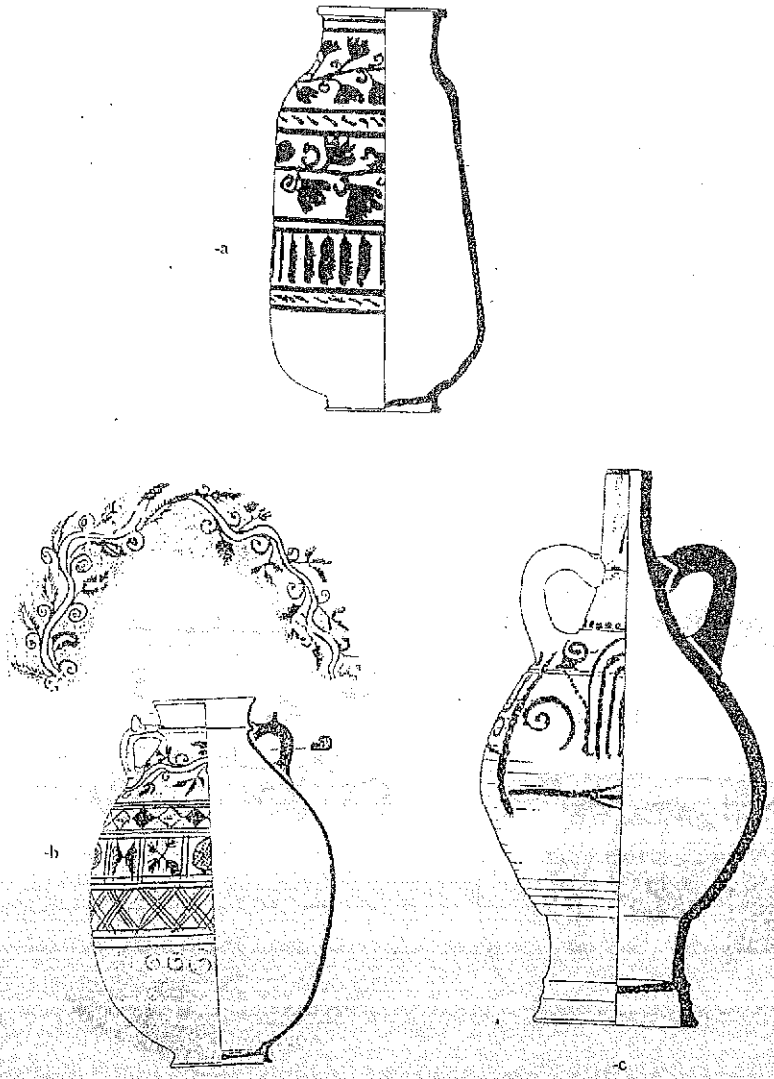


Plain plates and bowls from Duch, After Radziewicz, Introduction à la Ceramique à Engobe Rouge, Pls. Nos XLII, XL.

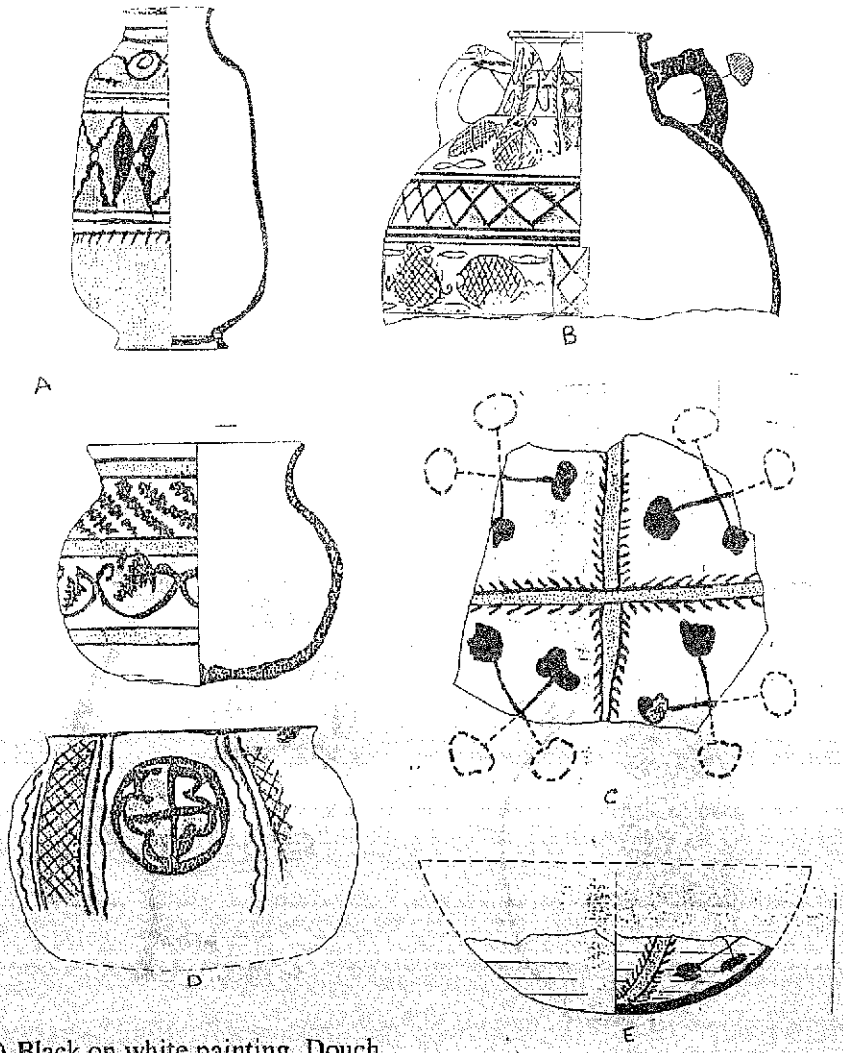


Bottle-shape from Douch, After Rodziewicz, Nubische Studien, 1982, Fig 5.

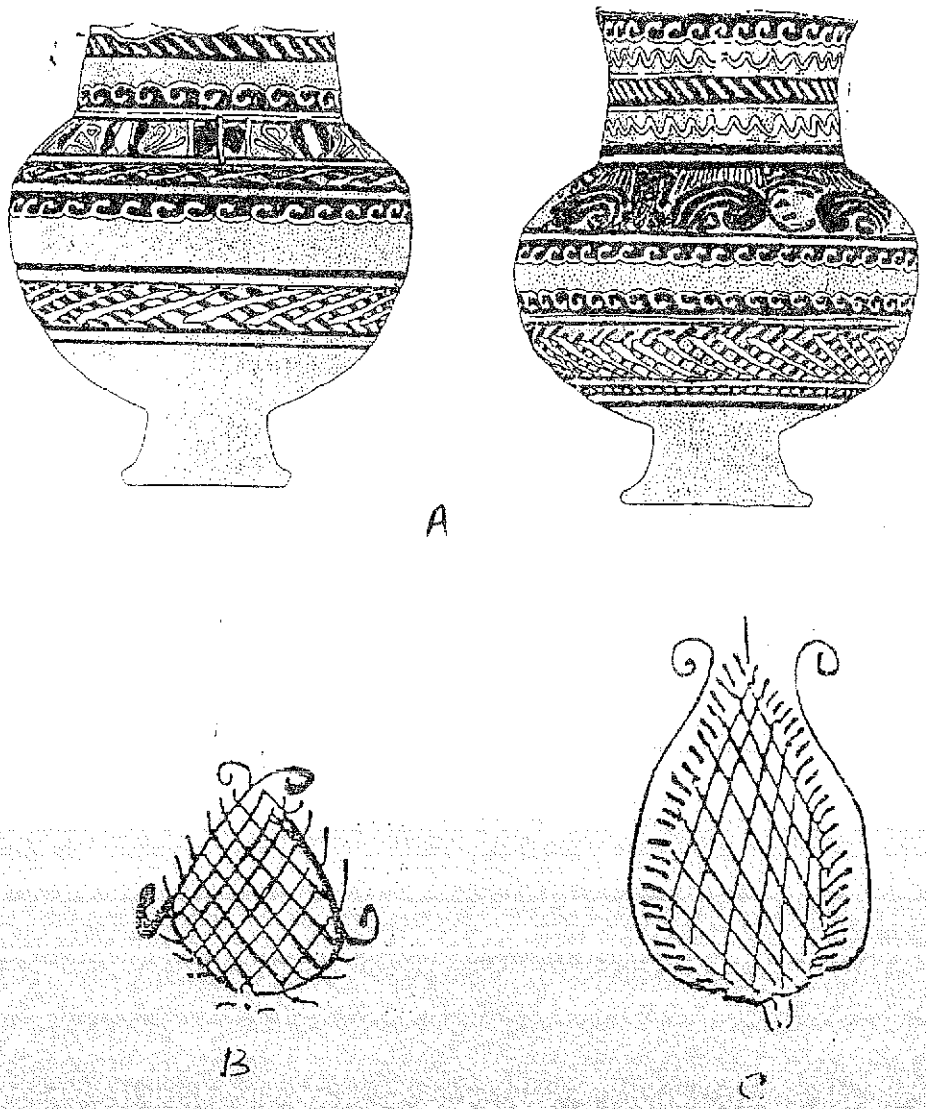
Plate III



A) Systematic Friezes style.
B) Floral paintings from Douch
C) Free style
After Rodziewicz, The Christian pottery in Nubian and Kharga in Nubische Studien, 1982, Fig. 2.



A) Black on white painting, Douch
B) Black and white on red.
After Rodziewicz, Nubische Studien, Figs. 3, 4.
C) Gross-motif, Douch
D) Rosetta-motif, Douch
E) Big dish from Douch with cross motife.
After Rodziewicz, Nubische Studien, Figs. 6, 7-b



A) Black and white on red Slip painted Vase from Alexandria. After Pagenstecher, Exp. Von Sieglin, II, 3, PL. X2 III.
B) Olive-tree motife, Douch, After Rodziewicz, Nubische Studien, Fig. 1
C) Olive-tree on plate from Aswan. After Meisterwerke, Ältägyptischer Keramik, 1978 PL. XV, no 438.