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ROMAN INFLUENCE ON POTTERY FROM THE ANCIENT TOWN SYENE (UPPER EGYPT)

Syene, the modern town Aswan, held an important significance in ancient times. The southernmost town of the Roman Empire, located at the first cataract, was an economic and political centre and made an important link between Egypt and the adjacent Nubia¹. *Syene* became the crossroads for the trade with goods from and to Inner Africa, including luxury goods like gold and ivory. Furthermore the town was the starting point for huge expeditions to Nubia. The red granite extracted in local quarries since Pharaonic times was another important export product of the region. It was shipped through the river ports of *Syene* and *Elephantine* to the north. In addition *Syene* had also an administrative and military importance, because customs duties had to be paid and three auxiliary units of 1.500 soldiers were stationed there².

Area 13

The urban area of the ancient town *Syene* is located in the southern centre of Aswan and is nowadays completely overbuilt with modern houses. The ceramic findings stem from the rescue excavations of Area 13³ which is located in the southern part of the city (fig. 1).

In Area 13 remains of residential buildings from the Ptolemaic period up to the Roman times were found⁴. The preliminary analysis of these findings has shown buildings of high quality and rich domestic inventory in the late Ptolemaic period. In early Augustan times some rebuilding works took place and even one house got a small private bath. Probably in

the 2nd century AD the houses have been converted to several shops which were located next to a street. In late Roman times – probably in the 4th century – these shops were closed and walled up as a consequence. At the same time the street were extended and a building with two apses was constructed, whose function is not yet clarified completely.

The Pottery

The analysis of the pottery of Area 13⁵ has shown that at the end of the 1st century BC the Roman influence increased in *Syene*. Especially in the spectrum of tableware some imports can be found. The majority of the imported vessels came from the eastern Mediterranean, mainly Eastern Sigillata A⁶ (fig. 2). For the most part the spectrum is limited on early Imperial forms, especially of the Augustan times, like Atlante 4⁷ and 22⁸ (fig. 2). Even the Eastern Sigillata B⁹ reflects the common forms of the early Imperial times. Because of the thin wall, the clear-cut rims and the fine rouletting decoration the dishes and bowls represent the typical forms of the 1st century AD¹⁰. Especially dishes and bowls of the types Atlante 58¹¹ and 70¹² are characterized with clear-cut rims. In addition to the Eastern Sigillatas only a few fragments of Italian Sigillata were found. The majority of them can also be dated in the Augustan times, like plates of the form Conspectus 11¹³ and bowls of the form Conspectus 13¹⁴ and Conspectus 21¹⁵.

¹ G. HÖLBL, *Geschichte des Ptolemäerreichs. Politik, Ideologie und religiöse Kultur von Alexander dem Großen bis zur römischen Eroberung* (Darmstadt 2004) 54–57.

² One inscription which was found in Aswan mentions three auxiliary cohorts: Cohors I Hispanorum, Cohors II Ituraeorum und Cohors I Thebaeorum. See: V. A. MAXFIELD, *The Deployment of the Roman Auxilia in Upper Egypt and the Eastern Desert during the Principate*. In: G. Alföldy/B. Dobson/W. Eck (eds.), *Kaiser, Heer und Gesellschaft in der römischen Kaiserzeit. Gedenkschr. E. Birley. Heidelberger Althist. Beitr. u. Epigr. Stud.* 31 (Stuttgart 2000) 410–414.

³ The excavations took place in 2004 until 2006 and were conducted by the Swiss Institute for Architectural and Archaeological Research in Ancient Egypt, Cairo in cooperation with the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Aswan. See: C. v. PILGRIM/K.-Ch. BRUHN/J. H. F. DIJKSTRA/J. WININGER, *The Town of Syene. Mitt. DAI Kairo* 62, 2006, 264–270.

⁴ Area 13 has not been published yet. However there is a master's thesis about Area 13c. See: M. HEPA, *Ein griechisch-römischer Siedlungsbefund in Assuan /Ägypten. Area 13b. Stratigraphie und Befund* (unpubl. master thesis Cologne 2011).

⁵ The analysis of the ceramic findings is a part of the FWF-Project P 23866-G 18 "Housing in Antiquity (Late Ptolemaic, Roman and Late Antique Period) in Syene and Elephantine, Upper Egypt" headed by S. Ladstätter, Austrian Archaeological Institute, in cooperation with the Swiss Institute.

⁶ HAYES 1985, 9–48.

⁷ Ibid. 15f.

⁸ Ibid. 23f.

⁹ Ibid. 49–52.

¹⁰ Two productions series of the ESB were defined by J. W. Hayes: HAYES 1985, 50–52; for ESB in early Roman complexes see: S. LADSTÄTTER, *Keramik*. In: H. Thür, *Das Hanghaus 2 in Ephesos. Die Wohneinheit 4. Baubefund. Ausstattung. Funde. Forsch. Ephesos* 8,6 (Wien 2005) 232–236; EAD., *Keramik*. In: F. Krininger, *Hanghaus 2. Wohneinheit 1 und 2. Baubefund, Ausstattung, Funde. Forsch. Ephesos* 8,8 (Wien 2010) 181–183.

¹¹ HAYES 1985, 63.

¹² Ibid. 66f.

¹³ Conspectus 70.

¹⁴ Ibid. 74.

¹⁵ Ibid. 88.

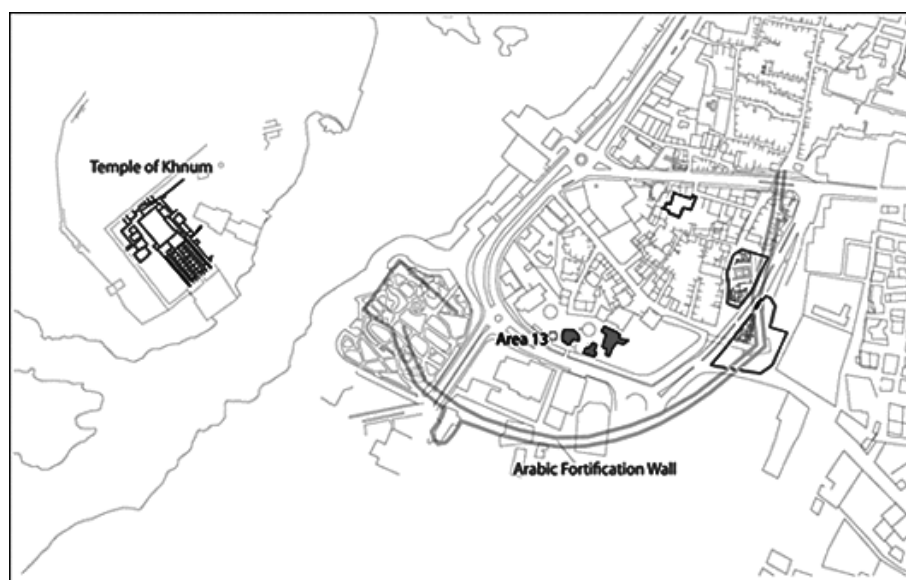


Fig. 1. Map of modern Aswan.

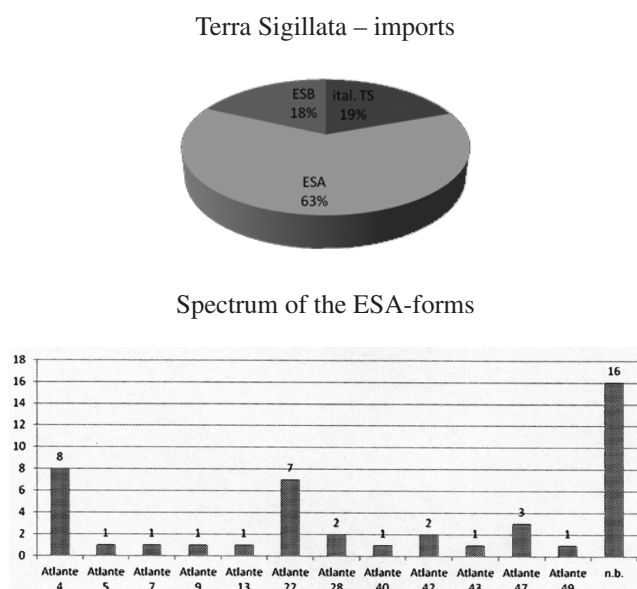


Fig. 2. Distribution of the Terra Sigillata.

■ Tableware ■ Coarse Ware ■ Kitchenware ■ Amphoras ■ Lamps

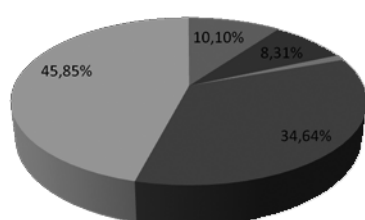


Fig. 3. Distribution of the ceramic findings of Area 13c.

Not later than in early Imperial times an important production centre of ceramics – especially finewares and amphorae – had developed in the region of *Syene*. The products of this locally produced pottery were not only exported in Egypt but also to North Africa and the Mediterranean Area. For that reason it is not surprising that more than 90% of the ceramic findings consist of locally produced vessels. It is especially noteworthy that the tableware is the most common ceramic type next to the coarse ware. The kitchenware, the amphorae and the lamps on the other hand are represented with a small percentage (fig. 3).

The most common ceramic class of the tableware is the so called Egyptian Red Slip Ware (fig. 4). This type is characterized by a dull, red slip. The vessels were produced of “pink clay” which is typical for the region of Aswan¹⁶. This clay is pinkish in its colour and has except for quartz, red sandstone and black volcanic inclusions¹⁷. Typical forms of the Red Slip Ware are plates and bowls. Some of them indicate an influence of the imported pottery. Especially plates have a resemblance with forms of the Eastern Sigillata A¹⁸.

In early Imperial times a new ceramic class emerged in the spectrum of the findings – the thin-walled pottery. Most of the vessels derive from Italian prototypes, but deviate in typology and date¹⁹. The most common form is a small bulbous bowl with a short everted rim and two handles (fig. 5). Especially

¹⁶ BALLET ET AL. 1991, 140–143; P. BALLET/M. VICHY, *Artisanat de la céramique dans l’Égypte hellénistique et romaine. Ateliers du Delta, d’Assouan et de Kharga*. Cahiers Céramique Égyptienne 3, 1992, 113–116; R. D. GEMPELER, *Die Keramik der römischen bis früh-arabischen Zeit. Elephantine 10* (Mainz 1992) 19–21; M. RODZIEWICZ, *Field Notes from Elephantine on the Early Aswan Pink Clay Pottery*. Cahiers Céramique Égyptienne 3, 1992, 103 f.

¹⁷ I would like to thank L. Peloschek for this information.

¹⁸ Plates which are related to Eastern Sigillata A-plates of the form *Atlante 4* are very common at the end of the 1st century BC in *Syene*.

¹⁹ A. RICCI, *Ceramica a pareti sottili*. In: G. Pugliese-Carratelli (ed.), *Atlante delle Forme Ceramiche II. Ceramica Fine Romana nel Bacino Mediterraneo (Tardo Ellenismo e Primo Impero)*. EAA (Roma 1985) 231–357; TOMBER 2006, 25.



Fig. 4. Egyptian Red-Slip Ware.

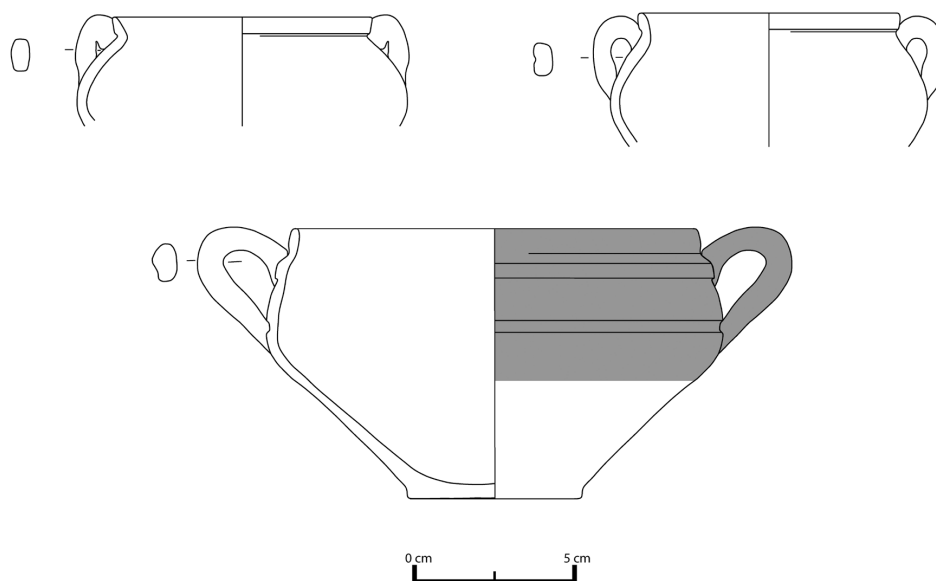


Fig. 5. Thin-walled pottery.

at the end of 1st century and the 2nd century AD these small bowls were in use. At the same time beakers and bowls with barbotine decoration appear (**fig. 6**). The dots usually bounded by horizontal rows and are lighter in colour to stand out clearly from the darker surface. In contrast to the well made vessel the barbotine is much more crudely applied and at some points the dots coalesce. The barbotine is a common decoration in the late 1st beginning of the 2nd century AD in Egypt²⁰. All of

the vessels are Egyptian in origin and the fabric suggests that they were locally produced. It is assumed that there may be some production centres for thin-walled pottery in the region of *Syene*²¹. Definitely vessels of this type were exported all over Egypt.²²

²¹ BALLET ET AL. 1991, 142.

²² S. C. HERBERT/A. BERLIN, The excavation: occupation history and ceramic assemblages. In: Id., Excavations at Coptos (Qift) in Upper Egypt, 1987–1992. *Journal Roman Arch. Suppl.* 53 (Portsmouth 2003) 110 f.; TOMBER 2006, 26; P. BALLET/A. POLUDNIKIEWICZ, Tebtynis V.

²⁰ TOMBER 2006, 26.

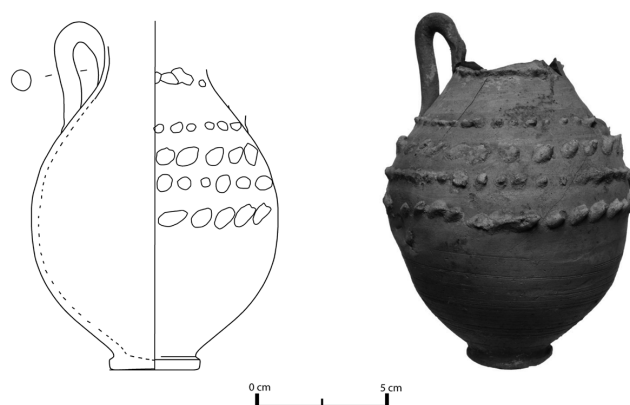


Fig. 6. Thin-walled jug with Barbotine decoration.

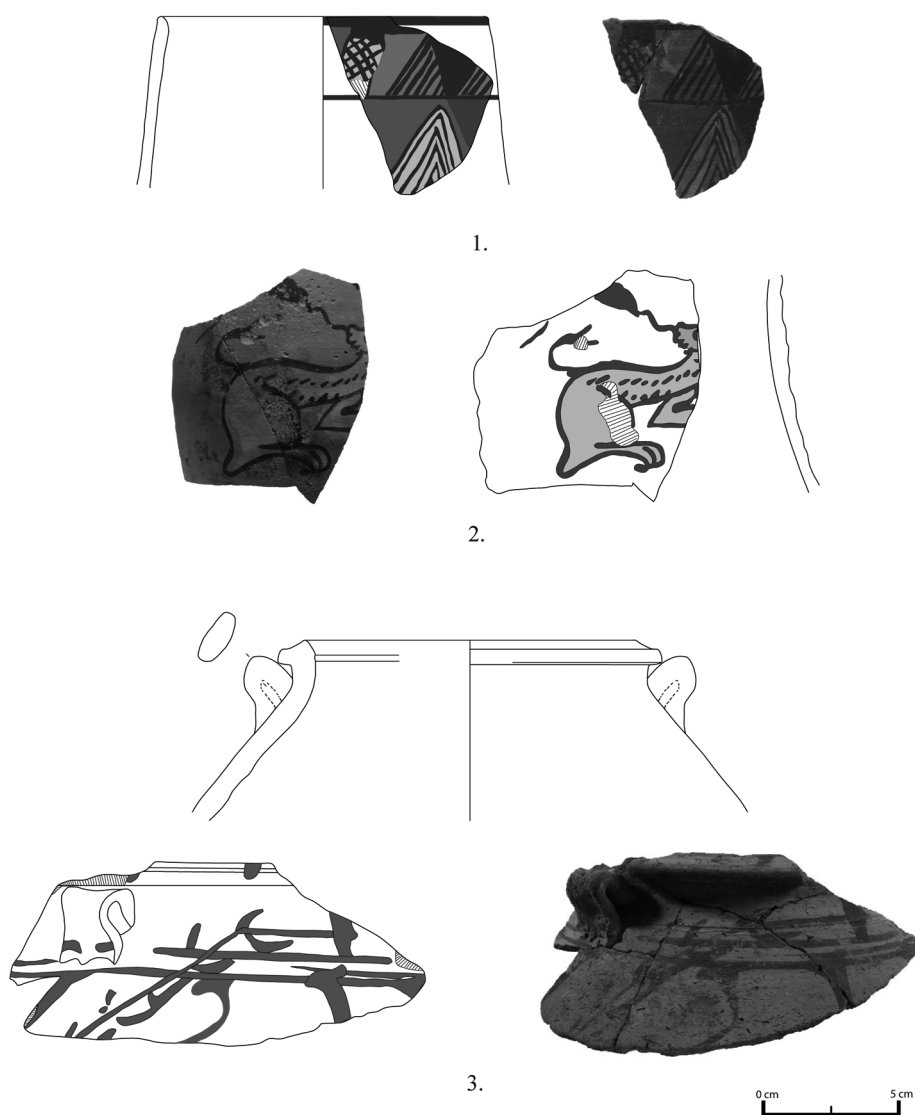


Fig. 7. Painted decoration on tableware (1–2) and coarse ware (3).

In addition to the Roman influence, the Egyptian traditions – such as the polychrome painting of vessels – did not disappear. Since the Pharaonic times painted decoration can be found on different kind of vessel types. Especially the tableware (**fig. 7**) was decorated with geometric and vegetable motifs, which are very popular motifs since the Ptolemaic period.²³ In early and middle Imperial period a decline can be recorded, while the painting on pottery enjoyed a great popularity again in Late Antiquity²⁴.

But also on coarse ware this kind of decoration can be found. In many cases storage vessels – like pots – were decorated with band decoration and/or geometric motifs (**fig. 7**). But in many cases the quality of the painting is worse than the painting on the tableware. Because the major part of storage vessels was made of Nile Silt clay. This clay is characterised by a brown colour and chaff inclusions, which are sometimes preserved. For that reason the surface of these vessels is rough and the painting do not stick very well.

Even the cooking vessels are of Egyptian origin. It seems that the majority of the kitchenware was locally produced. In *Syene* two main types of cooking pots can be found. Both types are globular double-handled cooking pots; one has a short triangular rim and the other a sharply everted rim (**fig. 8**). It seems that most of the cooking pots were made of very fine Nile silt clay, which is sandy and has small Quartz inclusions while only a small amount of pots were made of pink clay. But this assumption needs to be researched further.

The same applies for the amphorae of *Syene*. All of them were made of the brown Nile silt clay and have a long straight thin neck (**fig. 9**). The rims are distinguished by a slight thickened rim, sometimes enlarged or curving inwards. The amphorae were used to transport and store wine and olive oil. Only a few import amphorae were found in the material of *Syene*²⁵.

The production of lamps which were derive by Italian prototypes, like Roman relief lamps, started in Egypt in the late 1st century BC²⁶. However lamps of Hellenistic types, which are characterized by a long nozzle and a relief pattern on the shoulder continued in Upper Egypt until the 2nd century AD²⁷. For that reason it is not surprising that the majority of the lamps in *Syene* are these Hellenistic-derived lamp types.

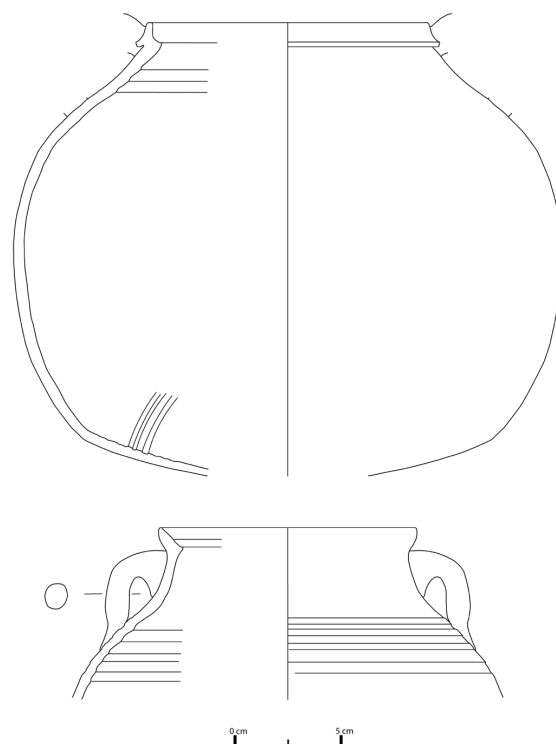


Fig. 8. Cooking pots.

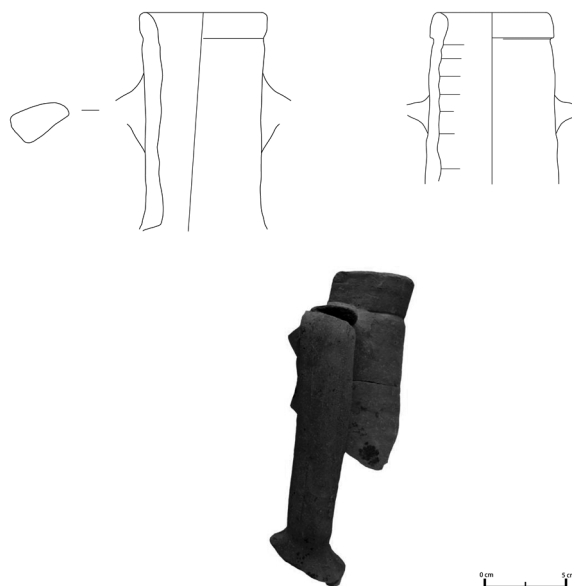


Fig. 9. Nile silt amphorae.

Les céramiques des époques hellénistique et impériales. Fouilles Inst. Française Arch. Orientale Caire 68 (Cairo 2011) 125 f.

²³ There are a lot of comparable examples on Elephantine see f. e.: D. ASTON, Pottery from the Late New Kingdom to the early Ptolemaic Period. Elephantine 19 (Mainz 1999) Pl. 106,2800; 117,3071; 120,3106.3108.3110.3012; but also for Syene see f. e.: S. LADSTÄTTER, Keramische Fundkomplexe aus dem Areal 15 der Stadtgrabung in Syene/Aswan. In: Ead./V. Scheibelreiter (Hrsg.), Städtisches Wohnen im östlichen Mittelmeerraum 4. Jh. v. Chr.–1. Jh. n. Chr. Akten des internationalen Kolloquiums vom 24.–27. Oktober 2007 an der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Arch. Forsch. 18 = Denkschr. Wien 397 (Wien 2010) Nr. 20; 52–55.

²⁴ See also in this volume D. KATZJÄGER, Late Antiquity on Elephantine Island, Upper Egypt. Pottery as mirror of Roman Society.

²⁵ In many cases only wall fragments have been preserved. The majority of them are imports from Tunisia.

²⁶ KNOWELS 2006, 311; 394 f.

²⁷ D. M. BAILEY, A Catalogue of the lamps in the British Museum I. Greek, Hellenistic, and early Roman pottery lamps (London 1975) 241; KNOWELS 2006, 311.

The local produced pottery as well the imports show that in early Imperial time Roman influence is observed in Upper Egypt, which can be recognized in the spectrum of forms and their adaption in the local pottery production. Due to the phenomenon of romanization on one hand and the perpetuation of Egyptian traditions on the other hand, it is quite obvious that in Upper Egypt two different cultures had been merged in a singular way.

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