

# SYRO-EGYPTIAN UNDERGLAZE PAINTED CERAMICS FROM KOM EL-DIKKA 13th–15th CENTURY STUDY REPORT (2002/2003)

Małgorzata Redlak

The study of the Arabic ceramics collection unearthed during archaeological excavations at Kom el-Dikka, Alexandria, in the past 45 years, commenced in 1999.<sup>1)</sup> Sherds for analysis are selected based on typological criteria in use for Arabic (Islamic) ceramics and with reference to the chronology of various types.<sup>2)</sup>

In 2002, Syro-Egyptian<sup>3)</sup> ceramics became the object of closer study. The Syro-Egyptian ware was produced between the late 12th and early 16th centuries from a quartz ceramic body (also

known as frit or stonepaste), white in color with a slightly creamy hue; it bears painted decoration applied under a colorless glaze with a greenish tinge. The bowls, goblets and stem bowls received decoration on both the inner and outer surfaces; jars, jugs, household pots with a handle and a broad rim, boxes supported probably on serrated feet, and wall tiles were, naturally enough, painted on the outer side only. Ceramic ware of this type was manufactured in what is today Egypt, Syria and Palestine under the Ayyubid

1) This work shall culminate in a publication discussing in depth the ceramics from Kom el-Dikka from a chronological viewpoint, as announced in W. Kubiak, "Kom el-Dikka. Islamic Finds – Storehouses Survey 1995/96", *PAM VIII, Reports 1996* (1997), 32-39.

2) To date, the following types of Arabic glazed ceramics have been studied: Early Lead Glazed ceramics (ELG), Lustre Painted Wares (LPW), Fayyumi type or Polychrome Glaze Wares (PGW), Fatimid Underglaze Painted wares (FUP), Fustat Fatimid Sgraffito (FFS), and Semi-Glazed ceramics (SG) from the 12th-13th centuries referred to on occasion as "peasant" or "la céramique à glaçure jaune vif" (originating, for instance, from Yemen, Spain, and Egypt).

In the past, Arabic ceramics from the Egyptian-Polish excavations at Kom el-Dikka were discussed in: W. Kubiak, "Overseas Pottery Trade of Medieval Alexandria as Shown by Recent Archaeological Discoveries: A Preliminary Communication", in: *Folia Orientalia* (Warsaw 1963), 1-30; R.P. Gayraud, "Note sur les céramiques médiévales des fouilles de Kôm al-Dikka (Alexandrie)", in: *ASAE* 70 (1984), 234-245; Katarzyna Zagórska, "La céramique musulmane ancienne avec la glaçure de Kôm el-Dikka, Alexandrie", in: *Occasional Paper*, National Museum in Warsaw, part I (Warsaw 1988), 83-95. For a more comprehensive discussion of Early Lead Glazed Arabic ceramics, see M. Rodziewicz, "La céramique émaillée copte de Kôm el-Dikka", in: *EtTrav* X (1979), 338-345.

3) The present report makes no distinction between the places where specimens of the different types and styles of decoration of Syro-Egyptian ceramics were produced. The group of ceramics with distinct Syrian features is discussed separately.

(1169-1260) and Mamluk (1250-1517) dynasties. Some of the base undersides carry marks serving as signatures, applied in cobalt blue or in black.<sup>4)</sup> It is worth pointing out here that one of the marks appearing on Mamluk ceramics, resembling the Arabic letter “h” or the numeral ° (five),<sup>5)</sup> had already been seen on a frag-

ment of Fatimid underglaze painted bowl from Kom el-Dikka studied in the past.

A study of the forms, ornamentation, and decorative techniques in evidence among the Syro-Egyptian ceramics culled from the Kom el-Dikka finds has led to the distinction of the following types, briefly described below.<sup>6)</sup>

## TYPE I

Ceramics with two-color decoration, painted in black under a transparent glaze (colorless or with a blue tinge), from the early 13th century (*Fig. 1*), are represented by a small set of sherds of a jar and of bowls and goblets with hemispherical and carinated bodies. The bottoms have ring feet; the rims are straight. The interior surfaces are decorated with geometric plaited patterns, checkered patterns, medallions, or densely arranged vegetal motifs, usually framed in a tondo. In some

instances, black checkered patterns (some of them stencil-applied) were additionally enhanced with an etching needle, producing a slender line of contrasting color. In the archaeological layers of the Muslim necropolis at Kom el-Dikka, ceramics of this sort were found together with specimens of Fayyumi and Fustat Fatimid Sgraffito wares, H-type oil lamps (after the Fustat typology), Chinese proto-porcelain, Italo-Sicilian proto-majolica, and Almohad ceramics from North Africa.<sup>7)</sup>

## TYPE II

Ceramics with two-color decoration, painted in black under a turquoise-tinged glaze, coming from the 13th century (*Fig. 1*). This type is represented by a small set of fragments from bowls, goblets, and jars. The bottoms feature a ring foot; the rims are either straight or everted to a varying degree, with a flattened edge. Also preserved are pieces of the cylindrical necks of jars. The inner surfaces of the

bowls are decorated with an assortment of vegetal motifs (including a “water-weed” design), as well as palmettes, floral rosettes, and four-petalled rosettes. Some parts of these decorative compositions are filled with a checkered pattern or with diagonal hatching. The outer walls, meanwhile, feature a stylized lotus petal motif. These sherds originated from disturbed layers.<sup>8)</sup>

4) J. Byliński, “Marks and Signatures of Artisans on Medieval Islamic Pottery from Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria”, in: *Alexandrian Studies in Memoriam Daoud Abu Daoud, BSAA* 45 (1993), 55-68.

5) In Islamic symbolism, the letter “h” (referring to Arabic “Huwa”, meaning “He” as in God) corresponds to the numeral five °.

6) Given the short form of this report, each paragraph characterizing a given ceramic type is concluded with a single reference to comparative literature.

7) H. Philon, “Stems, Leaves and Water Weeds: Underglaze-Painted Pottery in Syria and Egypt”, in: *The Art of Syria and the Jazira, 1100-1250*, ed. J. Raby (Oxford University Press, 1985), 113-126.

8) *Eredita dell’Islam*, ed. G. Curatola (Venezia 1994), cat. no. 163 b,c.

## TYPE III

Ceramics with three-color decoration, painted upon white background in black and in turquoise dye under a transparent glaze, from the late 13th-early 14th centuries (*Fig. 1*). This type constitutes but a small group among the sherds unearthed at Kom el-Dikka. Apart from pieces of a jar neck, there are some pieces of bowls (standing on ring feet), body walls

(indicating that at least some of the bowls were conical in shape) and rims, either flat or everted, flattened at the edge. The decoration of the bottoms features palmettes and stylized plants. The application of the turquoise dye was not always very careful. Similarly as in the case of Type II, these specimens were found in disturbed layers.

## TYPE IV

Ceramics with three-color decoration, painted upon a white background in black and in cobalt, then covered by a transparent glaze, from the 14th century (*Fig. 1*). Referred to as Blue and Black on White (BBW)<sup>9)</sup> or, occasionally, as Sultanabad-style ceramics, they form the most numerous and variegated group among the types discussed here. The predominant forms are bowls and goblets upon ring feet, with hemispherical bodies and straight rims. Other bowls can be rather shallow, with a broad, flatly everted rim; there is also a small group comprised of bowls-*cum*-lids decorated on both sides, with a flat bottom/top. The assortment is completed with a bowl on an elevated stem. Some of the fragments constitute jar and jug body sherds. As regards the decorative motifs<sup>10)</sup> and composition, this group is dominated by rosette designs (also known as segment panels) with rays of different sorts and by circles concentrically framing a central tondo or polygon. Animal images (assorted four-footed beasts, as well as birds and fishes), plaited patterns, "chessboards",

palmettes, floral rosettes, and stars are among the motifs most in evidence. Other popular motifs include pseudo inscriptions, stylized vegetal patterns against a dotted ground, spiral and diagonal hatching, and dot patterns (usually arranged in groups of four). The outer walls of the bowls and goblets are usually decorated with vertical line patterns and stylized plant tendrils, branches, lambrequin and meandering patterns. A few of the bowl and goblet fragments carry signatures (cf. note 4 above). In addition to its painted decoration, one of the body sherds, most probably from a stemmed goblet, is also adorned with oval patterns pierced through the wet body and then covered with a transparent glaze, a technique which imparts an artificial translucency to the pattern. At the Kom el-Dikka site, ceramics of this sort occurred alongside red-bodied Mamluk ceramics painted with a slip or decorated in etching needle (*sgraff* technique); also with copies of Chinese celadon and with Andalusian ceramics from Paterna.<sup>11)</sup>

9) G.T. Scanlon, "Fustat Expedition Preliminary Report, 1965, Part II", *JARCE* 6 (1967), 77, fig. 6a; id., "Fustat Expedition Preliminary Report, 1968, Part I", *JARCE* XI (1974), pl. XIV,b; id., "Fustat Expedition Preliminary Report, 1972, Part I", *JARCE* XVIII (1981), pl. VII,b.

10) Photographs of two pieces appeared in: M. Rodziewicz, "Fouilles de sauvetage dans la partie Nord de Kôm el-Dikka", *EtTrav* X (1978), 353.

11) E. Atil, *Renaissance of Islam. Art of the Mamluks* (Washington 1981), 153-174.

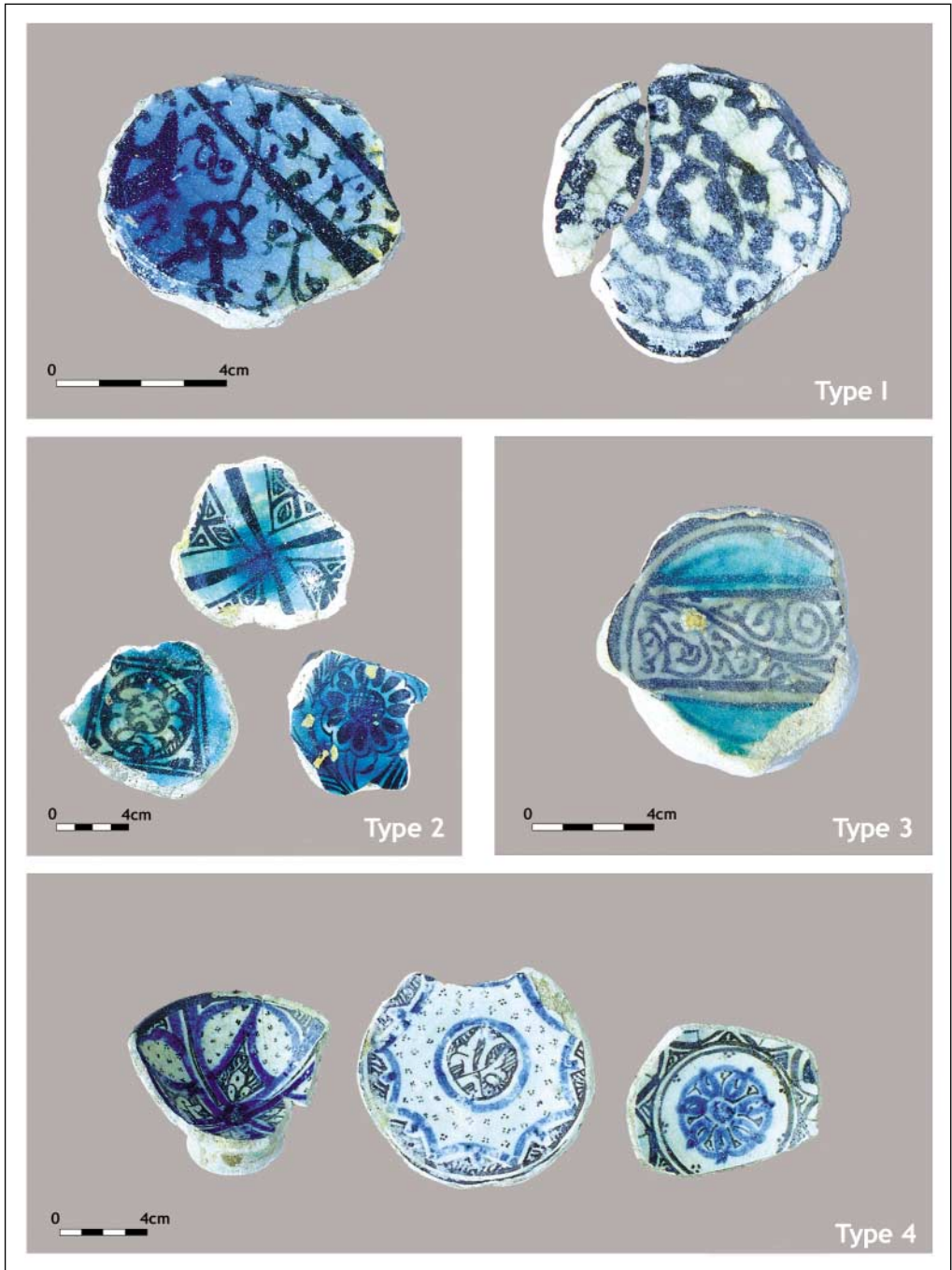


Fig. 1. Examples of Syro-Egyptian underglaze painted ceramics types I through IV  
(Photo W. Jerke)

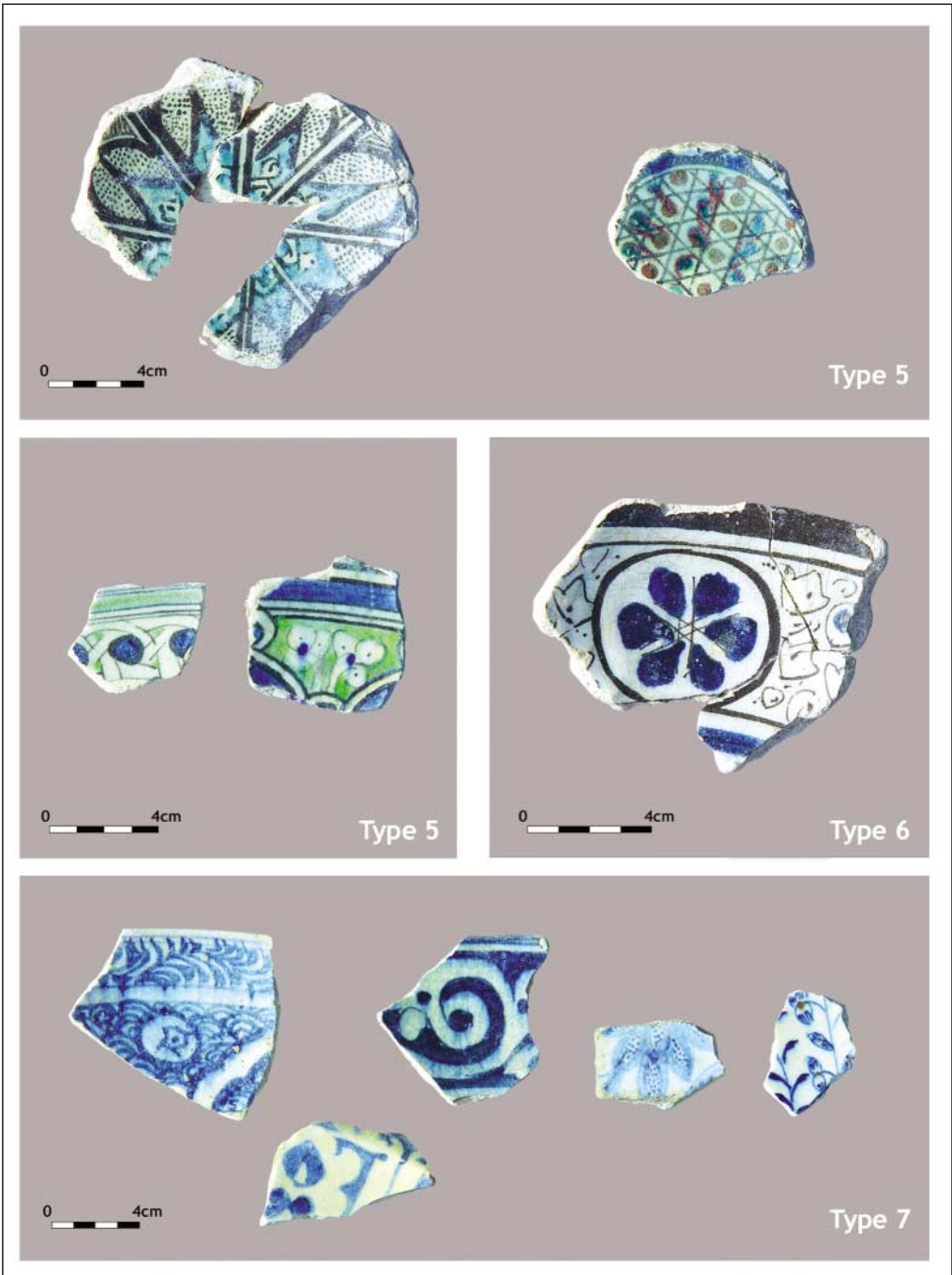


Fig. 2. Examples of Syro-Egyptian underglaze painted ceramics types V through VII  
(Photo W. Jerke)

## TYPE V

Ceramics with four-color decoration, underglaze painted in cobalt and black as well as with red, turquoise, or light green dyes upon a white background (*Fig. 2*). Given the use of the additional dyes, these wares can be divided into sub-groups, with the Kom el-Dikka excavations including but a few specimens from each one. Bowl bottoms on ring feet (some of them quite pronounced) are predominant; the preserved rims (in the red dye group) have everted edges. The sherds originate from

disturbed layers; their dating ranges from the 14th to the early 16th centuries. The ornaments decorating the surviving examples from each group are analogous to those seen in the group of ceramics discussed above. The decoration appears on both sides of the open-form vessels; the additional colors enriched the decorative scheme and likely accommodated to the current tastes of the period. The red dye appears as an intensive dark red or brown (of bole-red clay) and as dark pink.<sup>12)</sup>

## TYPE VI

Ceramics with three-color underglaze decoration painted in cobalt and black upon a white ground, done partly in relief with use of slip, dated to the 14th-15th centuries (*Fig. 2*). This group makes for an imitation of similarly decorated Persian ceramics which were produced in Sultana-bad and Kashan. The wares excavated at the Kom el-Dikka site include but a few fragments of original Persian ceramics, and

Near Eastern imitations thereof are similarly infrequent (pieces of a jug, an albarello-shaped vessel and bowls). All sherds originate from disturbed layers. On the pieces of earlier wares, the relief decoration is traced in black; on later ones, it takes the form of small, round protrusions deployed among painted ornaments. It is also to be seen on the outer sides of bowls.

## TYPE VII

Ceramics with two-colored decoration, underglaze painted with cobalt, primarily from the 15th century (*Fig. 2*), comprise a small but varied group among the finds from Kom el-Dikka. Pieces of these ceramics come from disturbed layers. The group is dominated by pieces of bowls and goblets on ring feet with straight rims, everted slightly or pronouncedly (flattened edge). Also preserved are odd forms: the bottom of a small bowl with fluted inner

surface, a piece of footed polygonal box, and two pieces of a single-handled household vessel with everted rim. There is also a small fragment of architectural wall tile, most probably of hexagonal shape. The style of the decorative compositions refers to those seen on blue-and-white Chinese porcelain, as well as to indigenous motifs. One of the bowl-goblet sherds is decorated in a way which suggests that a stencil may have been used. For the most part, the

12) V. François, *Céramiques médiévales à Alexandrie* (IFAO: Le Caire 1999), 26.

brush-painted compositions were executed with considerable skill, although the cobalt dye has, in many instances, run in

the course of firing. In some cases, the dominant blue-and-white color scheme is interspersed with pieces painted in black.<sup>13)</sup>

*Translated by Bartłomiej Świątek*