

A distinctive ware from western Sicily (10th-11th Centuries)

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Introduction :

The aim of this paper is to describe and define a subclass of the polychrome-glazed ceramic tradition of North Africa and Sicily and to discuss its dating and distribution.

Despite numerous individual publications of excavations and church façades there is still no broadly accepted classification system for North African medieval pottery which allows us to make comparisons across the entire region.

The subclass described below has been catalogued from various parts of the central Mediterranean and demonstrates consistently similar form, style of decoration, technique of manufacture, and petrofabric, allowing it to be classified as a meaningful group.

Description :

The most common form is an open carinated bowl with a nobbled rim (Fig. 1.) Although carinated bowls are common in the early eleventh century the rim generally tends to be notched (Berti & Tongliorgi 1981 : Fig. 54), whilst the nobbled rim seems to be specific to this class of pottery.

The bowl is glazed over the entire surface with a thick lead glaze which often takes on a slightly yellowish tint. Speckling in the fabric often shows through giving a slightly mottled appearance.

Decoration is in either two or three colours : brown, green and yellow. The brown is used exclusively for lines and hatching, the green and yellow are used as fills and are always contained within an area defined by a line of brown. Yellow is sometimes present and sometimes not, green and brown are always present.

The decorative scheme can be divided into four zones (Fig. 2): 1) exterior, above the carination 2) exterior; below the carination; 3) interior; above the carination; 4) interior, below the carination. The exterior decoration is very standardised and shows very little variation, whereas the interior decoration is much more variable. Zone 1 is the most standardised of all the decoration zones ; the only decoration

ever found here consists of three or four concentric semicircles, outlined in brown. The space between the top and middle semicircles is filled with green, and the area inside the smallest is filled with either green or yellow (fig. 1). Zone 2 is often left undecorated, if there is any decoration it usually consists of isolated paintbrush marks in any of the three colours. Zone 3 can be filled with any one of a repertoire of seven different repetitive bands. The most common is an interlocking heart design, drawn in brown and filled with green or sometimes every third or fourth heart will be filled with yellow (Fig1). Six other design bands have been recorded, the simplest consisting of horizontal bands of brown and green, the most complex a series of repeating shapes (see Molinari & Valenti : in this volume). Zone 4 is by the most complex and variable of the decorative areas, and is also the one which it is most difficult to find intact. Often the decoration is at least partly figural, consisting of palmettes, birds inside circles and bands of repeating motifs. The area can be subdivided as a radial pattern, or into halves or quarters. In some cases the design is based upon a central circle.

The fabric is pinkish-red speckled with white, it has a subconchoidal to rough fracture. Up to 50% of the body consists of creamy white inclusions of crushed lime, possibly shell, of an irregular shape which often form «explosion chambers». There are infrequent, small (<0,1mm), irregular air holes. Almost always the surface of the fabric is lighter than the body in the fashion known as a «schiarimento superficiale».

Occurance :

LIBYA :

Ajdabiyah. This class of pottery was first defined at Ajdabiyah in Cyrenaica (Blake et al. 1971 : 111-112). Later Riley (1982) published a more detailed study of the Ajdabiyah material in which he described this class as «polychrome glazed ware», and noted that it constituted 30% of the total glazed assemblage. The fabric I have described above corresponds exactly to Riley's «fabric A». These authors propose an 11th or 12th century date based upon parallels from Pisa, they also suggest an eastern Maghrebi origin based on parallels from Bougie, the Qala of the Benu Hammad and Byrsa. However, as will be argued

below, these parallels are valid only in the most general terms.

Barqa. Excavations in progress at Barqa, the medieval capital of Cyrenaica, have so far produced only a small quantity of glazed medieval pottery. However 7% of the total glazed assemblage can be identified as belonging to the class under discussion. This percentage will almost certainly be much higher when medieval layers are reached (Kennet 1991).

Surt. Excavations at the medieval site of Surt revealed a large quantity of this pottery. Unfortunately the excavations have never been fully published (for two examples see Abdussaid et al. 1978 : plate.II). Indications are that this pottery formed a very high percentage of the glazed pottery from the site (prof. G. Fehervari personal comment).

SICILY :

Mazara del Vallo. Such pottery has been found in abundance in the Sicilian countryside around Marsala and Mazara del Vallo during field survey carried out by the Soprintendenza di Trapani (Fentress *et al.* 1990 : 79-81 et fig.3). Here it was extremely abundant, constituting 28% of the glazed pottery collected by the survey.

Monreale Survey. Field survey in the area around Camporeale, S. Giuseppe Iato and Roccamena (Johns 1988) has produced more than two thousand sherds of glazed medieval pottery dating from the 10th to the 13th century. Of this 20% is classifiable as the type of pottery under discussion here. Importantly a kiln tripod of the same fabric was discovered by the survey.

There are numerous other instances of the occurrence of this type of pottery from various sites in Sicily such as Piazza Americana (Gentili 1950 : Fig 33,2), the Valle del Platani (Scuto 1990: Frag. 98, p. 43) and Casale Nuovo-Mazara del Vallo (Molinari & Valente; in this volume). The museum at Caltagirone also holds a number of examples. This ware is certainly more abundant in Sicily than the hitherto published material would suggest. For occurrences in mainland Italy see Molinari, in this volume.

TUNISIA & ALGERIA :

As noted above, broad parallels can be drawn the polychrome glazed wares current in the central Mediterranean from the 10th/11th to the 13th centuries. There are many similarities, especially regarding decorative elements, from sites such as the Qala of the Benu Hammad (Marcais 1913 : pl.XIV) or in Tunisia (Zbiss 1955 : Fig.10). However a more precise examination of the form, fabric and decoration show the Tunisian and Algerian material to be easily distinguished from the class under discussion here. The author has also examined pottery from Mahdia, Byrsa, Ghirza (Brogan, Smith 1984 : 274-279), Ben Toleis and Raqqada of a very similar style but with definite differences of fabric, decorative scheme and form, indicating that pottery conforming to the above description does not seem to occur anywhere west of Surt on the North African

coastline.

EGYPT :

There is the possibility that some sherds of this class have occurred in Egypt. Two sherds published by Philon (1980 : Figs.127, 130, & Plate VI) do seem remarkably similar. Of four sherds from Fustat in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (C.788-1919, C.16 to B-1949) reputedly from Sicily none fit the description above. They do however seem to be of North African or Sicilian provenance.

Dating evidence :

As yet the contexts where this pottery has occurred have been frustratingly void of dating evidence. No examples occur on the Pisan churches, although parallels in decorative scheme invite a date in the early eleventh century (Berti & Tongiorgi 1981 : Tav.LVII, LXXI). It must, however, be born in mind that the earliest churches in Pisa date to the early 11th century. The evidence from the three sites in Cyrenaica, where this pottery makes up a large percentage of the glazed assemblage, might be taken as suggesting a date which goes a little earlier into the tenth century.

Blake et al. (1971 : 105-106, 113-119) make a reasonable argument for the main flourishing of Barqa, Ajdabiyah and Surt from the middle of the tenth century. It was certainly at this time that the three remarkably similar mosques were refurbished. The lack of later monuments or evidence of later occupation, especially at Surt and Ajdabiyah, tempt the suggestion that it was from the middle of the tenth to the middle of the eleventh century that these towns flourished. It is likely that is within this period that the majority of the pottery assemblage must date.

In neither case is the dating evidence strong. For the time being a mid-tenth to a mid-eleventh century date seems acceptable.

Conclusions :

Al though the precise production centre of this pottery has not yet been established all the indications point to a location or locations somewhere in western Sicily. The fabric is very similar to fabrics known to be from Sicily. Such as the material from the Agrigento kilns (Ragona 1989). A kiln tripod in this same fabric, found by the Monreale survey, reinforces this view as does the petrographic analysis of three sherds from Sicily (Paterson ; in this volume).

The most interesting aspect of this class of pottery is undoubtedly its distribution. (Fig 3). It is not only that Sicilian pottery occurs in Cyrenaica during the 10th/11th centuries, but the fact that it is being exported in such seemingly large quantities. This seems to break the pattern of pottery trade which had been established throughout the classical period also argues against Fulford's contention that the classical pattern was determined by the winds and currents prevailing in the central Mediterranean (Fulford 1989). Certainly historically there is no obvious reason for

such a pattern of trade. There is no doubt that ships sailed regularly from Sicily to Egypt and North Africa throughout the medieval period (Goitein 1967 : 212-214) but this does not explain why Sicilian pottery should form such a large part of the glazed assemblage of a town like Ajdabiyah, neither does it explain the seeming absence of any material from Tripolitania, Tunisia and further west. This question will have to stay open until more precise data has been collected.

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