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Edited by
Paolo Matthiae, Frances Pinnock, Lorenzo Nigro
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A POTTERY ASSEMBLAGE FROM THE NORTH-EASTERN QUARTER AT APAMEA (NORTHERN SYRIA): PRELIMINARY RESULTS

VALENTINA VEZZOLI

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the preliminary results of the study of the Islamic pottery from the North-Eastern quarter at Apamea, in Northern Syria. The area was intensely excavated by the group of "Centre de Recherches Archéologiques" of the Université Libre de Bruxelles and brought to light an important bathroom complex, that was later occupied as inhabited area during the Islamic period.

The analysis of the ceramic assemblage from this settlement provides a significant contribution, from a typological and chronological point of view, to our knowledge of pottery productions of the 13th and 14th centuries from a rural settlement in Northern Syria and it allows to illustrate an usually underrepresented territory.

THE SITE OF APAMEA: ARCHAEOLOGICAL CAMPAIGN IN THE NORTH-EASTERN QUARTER.

The archaeological excavations of the North-Eastern quarter at Apamea carried out by the "Centre de Recherches archéologiques" of the Université Libre de Bruxelles from 2003 brought to light an important thermal complex (Fig. 1). It is situated to the south of the street that coasts the Northern walls, between the shops of the colonnade street and the water adduction complex. It seems to be used from 2nd cent. AD to the 7th cent. AD and later reoccupied as inhabited area probably until the Mamluk period.

The Islamic Occupation¹

The thermal complex started to be occupied as inhabited area probably after the Arab conquest of the town in AD 636, but it was initially a rather modest settlement. It was during the following phases that the Islamic occupation exploited the entire area of the bathroom complex and created new spaces depending on the general disposition of the structures. The features of the settlement together with the amount and the types of pottery finds witness a modest but intensive occupation. The archaeologists identified 5 phases: phase 6Y, 6Z, 6A, 6B and 6C, that I briefly explained in my contribution.

¹ I am grateful to the group of archaeologists and to the director of the Belgian Mission at Apamea, Prof. Didier Viviers, for their communications and help in their excavations of the Islamic levels. Most of the information about the archaeological investigations at the North-Eastern quarter appear in the publications: Viviers 2006; Viviers, Vokaer 2007; 2008.

Phase 6Y

The *calidarium* regains its initial extension since the wall built during the Byzantine period was destroyed. The Islamic occupation is characterized by the creation of some pits and the installation of small *tannurs*.

Phase 6Z

During this phase the big Byzantine basin in the *frigidarium* is risen and a new beaten earth soil is created. Outside the building the space is delimited by a wall that follows the eastern perimeter while to the west a Byzantine wall is still in place. At the centre of this area a rectangular basin is collocated, together with a small fireplace and four pits. In the *calidarium*, the southern brick wall is rebuilt using some reemployed stones with mortar, a new beaten earth soil is created and two *tannurs* are installed. This phase ends with the collapse of the southern part of the dome in the *calidarium*.

Phase 6A

The *frigidarium* is characterized by a compact level of pebbles and by a small space delimited by four big stones with three *tannurs* and a fireplace. Outside the room, another *tannur* and a pentagonal basin are installed. The *calidarium*, where the northern part of the dome is preserved, is still occupied and some *tannurs* are placed inside it.

Phase 6B

During this phase the space is intensely reorganized. The *frigidarium* is divided in two areas: the northern part has a paving with two *tannurs*, while the southern part a beaten earth soil with a *tannur*. The exterior of the building is divided in three rooms delimited by coarse walls. The inhabited area is transferred to the south where small rooms with *tannurs* are created. The northern part of the *calidarium* is still preserved and some ancient columns are used to support the dome, that at the end of this phase definitely collapses.

Phase 6C

The latest phase of the Islamic occupation is characterized by the construction of a new soil with *tannurs* in the *frigidarium* (Fig. 2). The exterior is still divided in small spaces. The central room was abandoned while the big room in front of it is still occupied, in fact some *tannurs* and *silos* have been discovered by the archaeologists. The *calidarium* is partly used and some *tannurs* are placed in this limited space. The area at the north of the bathroom complex was occupied by a lime kiln. The end of this latest phase is probably caused by an earthquake, the dome of the *frigidarium* collapses and the entire quarter is definitely abandoned.

THE POTTERY ASSEMBLAGE

The preliminary objective of this study has been the creation of ceramic types on the basis of fabric features, morphology and functions. The aim is to define the ceramic repertoire from the Islamic settlement of Apamea and to arrive at an understanding of the nature of the Islamic occupation in the North-Eastern quarter of the town.

In this contribution the pottery from the phases 6Z, 6A, 6B and 6C is presented first and extensively since they produce a large amount of ceramic pottery that gives the occasion for a detailed study. About 1453 sherds of pottery were collected, 489 sherds of Glazed Pottery (MFN 249)² and 964 sherds of Unglazed Pottery (MFN 259). Not all categories are discussed here, but only the more representative.

This ceramic study is of particular relevance in having the potential to provide a precise picture of ceramic groups spread in Apamea and it also witnesses the presence of a Middle-Islamic settlement, probably Mamluk, in this area of the old city that is usually considered by textual sources as completely abandoned and in ruin.³

UNGLAZED POTTERY (TOTAL 964 SHERDS, 66% OF POTTERY ASSEMBLAGE)

Unglazed wares are very common at the thermal complex of Apamea during the Islamic occupation with a quite large variety of shapes mainly used for preparing, serving and storing food.

Handmade Geometrically Painted Ware (Total 702 Sherds)

Handmade geometrically painted ware is the most common type of pottery, in fact 702 sherds (MFN 141) were collected, representing 48% of the entire pottery assemblage and 73% of the unglazed pottery assemblage. The handmade geometrically painted vessels have a quite coarse and not plastic fabric, buff to light rose in colour, which contains many vegetal and mineral inclusions (calcium carbonates, iron oxides and some quartz).

The decorative patterns are usually painted in red, but also in black-dark brown and sometimes, but very rarely, they could also have bichrome decoration, red and black (Fig. 3,4). The patterns are quite standard: lines, nets, bands and simple geometrical designs. In some cases the decoration can be carefully executed. The decoration is usually painted on the exterior and on the rim in the case of open forms. Generally it is not possible to define a chronological distinction on the basis of the decorative patterns. This pottery group is handmade and the most used technique of manufacturing is the coiling technique, but we collected also two fragments that present traces of texture left by a cloth. They were probably manufactured by modelling the clay on a cloth full of sand.

The shape inventory of handmade geometric painted ware is quite rich: water jugs, ewers, dishes, compartments dishes, big jars and bowls (Fig. 3,1-3). It seems that this group was employed for different purposes, for storing and transporting food, for serving water and probably also for food preparation.⁴ Presumably, this type of pottery

2 In addition to the sherd count, in the parenthesis is given the Minimum Forms Number.

3 Medieval sources usually described the old town as completely abandoned; from the 11th cent. the only occupied settlement in the area seemed to be the citadel, Qal'at al-Mudîq. Van Berchem, Fatio 1914: 188-194.

4 Some sherds present burning traces.

was produced mainly in small centres or villages for local use. This group is spread all over the 4 phases (6Z, 6A, 6B and 6C) without any relevant change.

The handmade ware has been produced in many sites of Middle East and it makes its appearance during the eleventh century⁵, but it flourished during the Mamluk period (13th-14th cent.), when pots were decorated with more delicate and elaborate patterns and continued to be produced during the Ottoman period, but the decoration technique was more simple and coarser.

Handmade Cooking Ware Tempered with Calcite (Total 21 Sherds, 8 MFN)

Another handmade production that appears in the unglazed assemblage from the site of Apamea is the Handmade Cooking Ware tempered with calcite. It is a coarse pottery production with a very porous and not plastic body with numerous inclusions; calcite and vegetal inclusions are intentionally added to the fabric⁶. This group is present substantially with a single shape, a globular pot with slightly everted rim and big handles that are often coarsely decorated with incisions. The shoulders also present a band of incised or thumbled decoration (Fig. 3,5-6). This handmade cooking ware is present in the latest phases (6B and 6C); only one fragment appears in phase 6A, while no sherd was collected in the earliest phase, 6Z. This group does not appear frequently in the archaeological literature, some finds from the South of Bilād al-Shām share similarities as concern the shape and the fabric with the group found in Apamea,⁷ these objects date from the middle of the 13th cent. to the 15th cent.⁸

Moulded Ware (Total 87 Sherds, 32 MFN)

Moulded ware is quite frequent at the thermal complex of Apamea. This group has a green-buff coloured fabric, containing some mineral inclusions (round quartz and calcium carbonates).

The most spread shape is a mould-made flask with flat body. The upper part of the neck is wider with ridges while the lower part is narrow; it has two handles emerging from the base of the neck. This is the typical flask of Mamluk period (13th-14th cent.). These wares are usually decorated with geometric, floral or epigraphic designs (Fig. 3,7-8). Some fragments of jugs with moulded decoration have been collected at Apamea, but no complete form have been identify at least. The Moulded ware are present in all the four phases (6Z, 6A, 6B and 6C).

5 Stern, Stacey 2000.

6 The preliminary description of the fabrics has been made by Dr Agnès Vokaer, responsible of the pottery assemblage of the Archaeological Mission of the Université Libre de Bruxelles at Apamea.

7 The objects from the South of Bilād al-Shām are globular cooking pots with a simple slightly everted rim with horizontal pointed handles (while the finds from Apamea usually have wide vertical handles). They have a buff to light brown clay mixed with straw, quartz sand and crushed quartzite. Avissar, Stern 2005: Type II.2.2.2, Fig. 40,2-7.

8 Avissar, Stern 2005: 94.

Orange Ware Painted in Red (Total 22 Sherds, 5 MFN)

This is not a very common group, in fact it represents only the 2.5 % of the unglazed finds. The Orange Ware painted in red has an orange fabric with many inclusions, usually round quartz, calcium carbonates and vegetal tempers. The body is very hard and compact. The outer surface is painted in red with a coarse and rough decoration. It was probably employed for the storage of foods, in fact we mainly found big jars with big and resistant handles. Also the group of Orange Ware painted in red appears in all the phases (6Z, 6A, 6B and 6C).

GLAZED POTTERY (TOTAL 489 SHERDS, 44% OF THE POTTERY ASSEMBLAGE)

Glazed pottery represents the 44% of the pottery assemblage found at the thermal complex in Apamea during the phases 6Z, 6A, 6B and 6C. The two most widespread functional types are cooking wares (globular pots and baking dishes) and tablewares (bowls and dishes).

As regards local glazed tablewares they include bowls decorated in different techniques (slip painted, monochrome glaze and sgraffiato) but the most common type is the slip painted decoration under transparent coloured glaze. Except for the Fritwares (discussed separately), all the categories of glazed pottery share similar features in their fabrics. They have a red fabric⁹ with mineral inclusions (calcium carbonate, round quartz and iron oxides). The porosity and the amount of inclusions differ depending on the ceramic group.

Glazed Brittle Ware (total 96 sherds, 30 MFN)

Glazed Brittle Ware is present at Apamea with two different shapes: closed vessels (cooking pots) and open vessels (baking dishes). Glazed Brittle ware presents the same petrographic and chemical features that all the Brittle Ware productions in Apamea have since the Roman and Byzantine periods. This type of fabric is part of the so-called "Group 4" or "Workshop 4" and seems active in Apamea from the Roman to the Islamic period.¹⁰ The fabric has an elongated porosity that is parallel to the walls and it has a lot of quartz and chert inclusions. The vessels are usually glazed inside the base with a transparent colourless glaze, and cooking pots usually present splashes of glaze also on the exterior. In Phase 6A the most common shape is a holemouth cooking pot with folded rim and basket handles (Fig. 4,2). The inner bottom is covered with a transparent glaze and glaze patches are also found on the shoulders. This type is frequently attested on Ayyubid sites (Qal'at Ja'bar, Balis, Tilbeshar).¹¹ The rim can be also grooved, but this is less frequent. In the following phases (6B and 6C) it is

9 The colour is given by the presence of iron oxide.

10 Schneider, Vokaer, Bartl, Daszkiewicz 2007: 719..

11 Qal'at Ja'bar: Tonghini 1998: Fig. 145.g; Balis: Leisten 1999-2000: 52; Tilbeshar: Rousset, Issa 1998: Fig. 36.

more frequent a cooking pot with wide folded rim (Fig. 4,1). As regard open forms, no morphological change has been noticed during the 4 phases. The most frequent shape is a baking dish usually with grooved or thickened rim and lug handles at the height of the edge (Fig. 4,3-4). The glaze is thin, transparent and colourless and it mainly covers the bottom of the inner surface and less frequently the entire inner surface. It can be dated to the 13th cent.¹²

Slip Painted Ware under Transparent Coloured Glaze

One of the most widespread groups of the Glazed assemblage is the Slip Painted Ware. 264 sherds (MFN 154) were collected and represent 54% of the total glazed pottery assemblage. On the basis of morphological and decorative features it was possible to distinguish two different groups:

Slip Painted Ware under Transparent Coloured Glaze. Type 1

This first type has a white slip painted decoration that consists of broad, straight, sometimes interlacing lines. The body is covered by a shiny glaze that could be green or yellow. The glaze covers only the inner surface of the artefact and sometimes the upper part of the external surface, that is usually smoothed.

Forms are quite standard: 1. A small bowl with plain rim (Fig. 5,1) or 2. a bowl with a rounded ledge rim and carinated shoulder (Fig. 5,2-4). They both have a ring foot sometimes moulded by hand.

Type 1 is generally spread all over the four phases (6Z, 6A, 6B and 6C) and it is the most common group of Glazed Slip Painted Ware mainly in the two latest phases (6B and 6C)¹³.

Slip Painted Ware under Transparent Coloured Glaze. Type 2

The second type has a more complex and filled decoration painted with white slip. The lines are thinner and they create criss-cross patterns, nets, abstract geometrical figures. The body is covered by a thin glaze that is very clear, almost colourless (or pale yellow), often associated with splashes of green glaze. It covers only the inner surface and sometimes the upper part of the external surface. The glaze is quite often not preserved in correspondence with the slip that comes off. The outer surface is usually smoothed. The typical shape of this group is a bowl with slightly carinated walls and flaring rim (Fig. 5,5). It has a ring foot more regular than that of type 1.

This second type is more frequent in the phase 6A, where we found more than 50% of the total fragments belonging to this group. It appears also in the late two phases but in small amount. At the present state of our study, it is difficult to place or distinguish from a chronological point of view the two types. They can probably date,

12 Kettler, Stern 2006: Fig. 18.

13 This group is quite known in the archaeological literature, similar finds were found at Tell 'Arqa (Hamikian, Salamé-Sarkis 1980: Fig. 7,5); Cesarea (Pringle 1985: Fig. 5,26-29).

on the basis of comparisons with other finds from the Levant, to the Mamluk period (13th-14th cent.).

Graffita Ware (total 12 sherds, 5 MFN)

Glazed bowl decorated with sgraffiato technique are here less common than other type of local glazed bowls. The sgraffiato wares are decorated with designs incised with a pointed tool, which removes some of the slip that was applied previously to body. The incised decorations are mainly simple straight or wavy lines.

The number of sherds is not sufficiently representative to define a morphological type, the most frequent shape is a bowl with flaring walls, simple rim and ring foot.

Ancient Graffita (total 36 sherds)

In the phase 6Z it is present a good quantity (36 sherds, 15 MFN) of residual material dated to the 11th cent. This group is the so-called Ancient Graffita or "Tell-Shahin Ware".¹⁴ It has a beige body, very different to the fabrics we usually find at Apamea and this suggests that it was probably an imported item. The incised decoration is very thin, the body is covered by a creamy slip and by colourless transparent glaze or yellow and green transparent glaze.

Monochrome Glaze Ware (56 Sherds)

Monochrome glaze wares found at the thermal complex of Apamea are covered by a transparent coloured glaze, it is usually green in colour, less frequent brown and colourless, that leans on a layer of white slip.

This group mainly shares the same type of fabric of the above mentioned Slip painted ware.

The Monochrome glaze wares present a variety of shapes in comparison to other glazed pottery types, closed forms (small jars and jugs) and open forms (bowls) can be distinguished (Fig. 4,5-7).

Fritwares (TOTAL 28 SHERDS, 10 MFN)

A few examples of Fritwares were collected in the phase 6Z, 6A, 6B and 6C at the thermal complex in Apamea and they are usually in a very fragmentary state of conservation. This means that they rarely provide a more precise chronological indication. It was possible to identify some sherds of Fritware with black painted decoration under transparent turquoise glaze and Fritware with lustre decoration and cobalt blue. Two shapes were identified in this category: a medium-neck jug with handle with a dark lustre decoration (Fig. 4,8) and a base probably of a small jug also with dark lustre (Fig. 4,9). For both cases the decoration is fine and very well

14 Tonghini 1995.

executed. These two pieces date to the Ayyubid period (first half of the 13th cent.), but they are probably residuals.

Three pieces show a simpler decoration with radial patterns that alternate cobalt blue and lustre. Here the lustre is clearer in comparison to the two previous finds. We could hypothesize a later dating, probably to the Mamluk period (13th-14th cent.).

CONCLUSIONS

The pottery assemblage from the North-Eastern quarter at Apamea presented in this contribution witnesses the presence of local ware productions, both for glazed wares and unglazed wares. The most widespread types are Handmade Geometrically Painted Ware (702 sherds) mainly used for preparing and storing food, Brittle Wares (196 sherds)¹⁵ for cooking and Slip Painted Wares (264 sherds) used as tableware. The nature of this assemblage together with the features of the settlement emerging from the archaeological data attests a modest but intensive occupation of the bathroom complex during the Islamic period. This area can be considered as a services area, given the presence of several *tannurs*, pits and of a lime kiln situated just to the north.

On the basis of the preliminary study of the ceramic material and the comparisons with other sites in the region it is possible to date these phases to the Mamluk period (13th-14th cent.). However, rural Mamluk settlements in Northern Syria has not been yet discussed in detail and further archaeological studies are necessary for a better definition of the material culture of this period. Moreover, the following studies will also provide a deeper analysis on the material from the more ancient phase (6Y) that we didn't discuss in this presentation and that could witness the presence of an earlier Islamic occupation in this area.

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¹⁵ This number includes both glazed brittle ware and unglazed brittle ware.

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Fig. 1: The archaeological investigation at the north-eastern quarter of Apamea (Northern Syria).



Fig. 2: Small rooms with tannurs in the frigidarium found under the collapsed dome (Phase 6C).

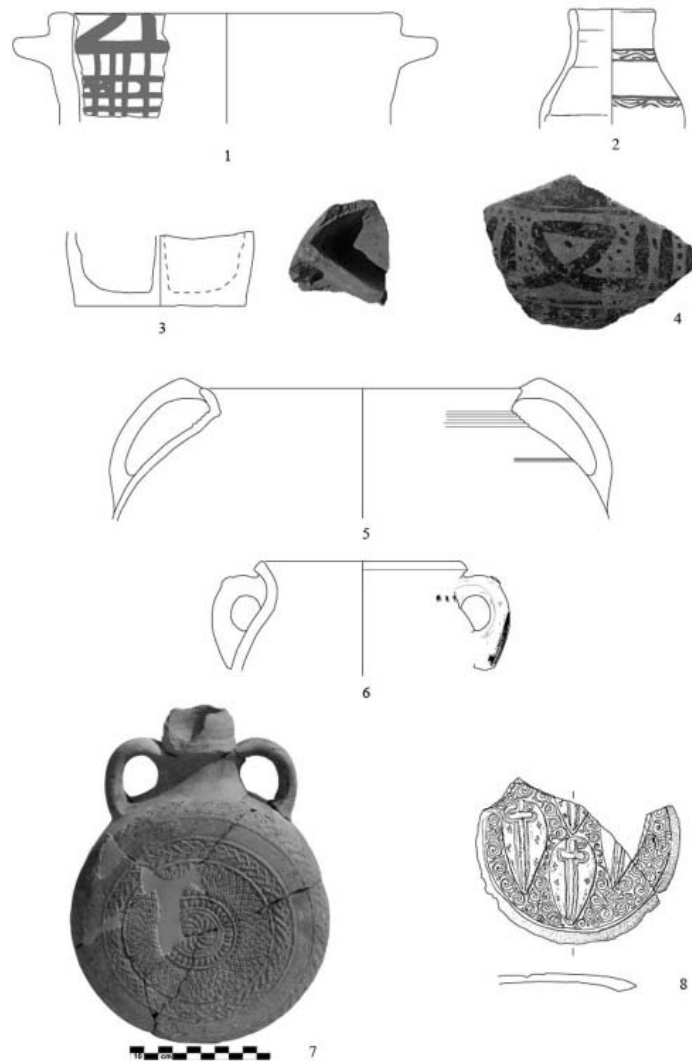


Fig. 3: 1. Big bowl, Handmade Ware painted in red (AP.05.I.3.11); 2. Jug, Handmade Ware painted in red (AP.04.IV.130.83); 3. Compartments dish, Handmade Ware (AP.06.I.7.2); 4. Handmade Geometrically Painted Ware with bichrome decoration, black and red (AP.05.I.64.39); 5. Pot, Handmade Cooking Ware tempered with calcite (AP.05.I.129.11); 6. Pot, Handmade Cooking Ware tempered with calcite (AP.04.IV.71.6); 7. Pilgrim flask, Moulded Ware; 8. Moulded decoration of a flask (AP.04.IV.46.50).
Source: Drawings by Anja Stoll (CReA-UIB).

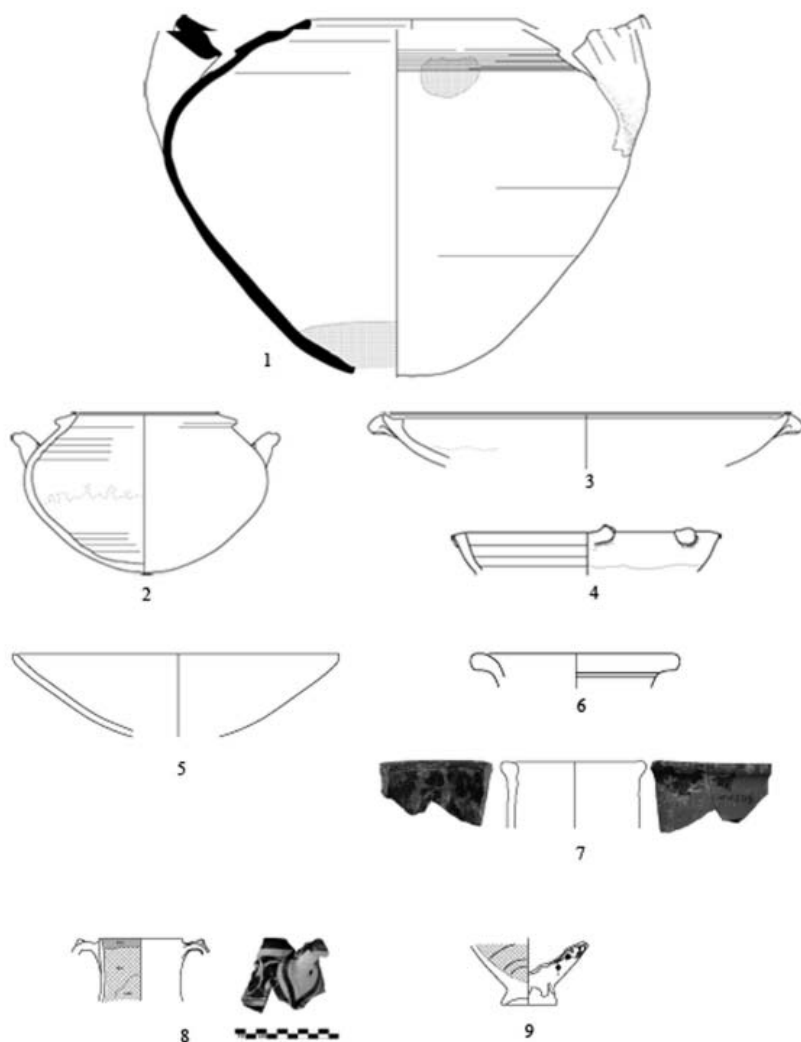


Fig. 4: 1. Pot, Glazed Brittle Ware (AP. 02.I.62.26) Drawn by Anja Stoll (CReA-UIB); 2. Pot, Glazed Brittle Ware (AP.05.I.129.2); 3. Baking dish, Glazed Brittle Ware (AP.05.I.13.12); 4. Baking dish, Glazed Brittle Ware (AP.04.IV.79.17); 5. Bowl, Monochrome Green Glaze Ware (AP.04.IV.30.3); 6. Jug, Monochrome Green Glaze Ware (AP.04.IV.29.8); 7. Jug, Monochrome Green Glaze Ware (AP.06.I.12.5); 8. Small jug, Fritware with lustre decoration and cobalt blue (AP.04.IV.212.27); 9. Base of Fritware with lustre decoration and cobalt blue (AP.04.IV.117.23).

Source: Drawings by Anja Stoll (CReA-UIB).

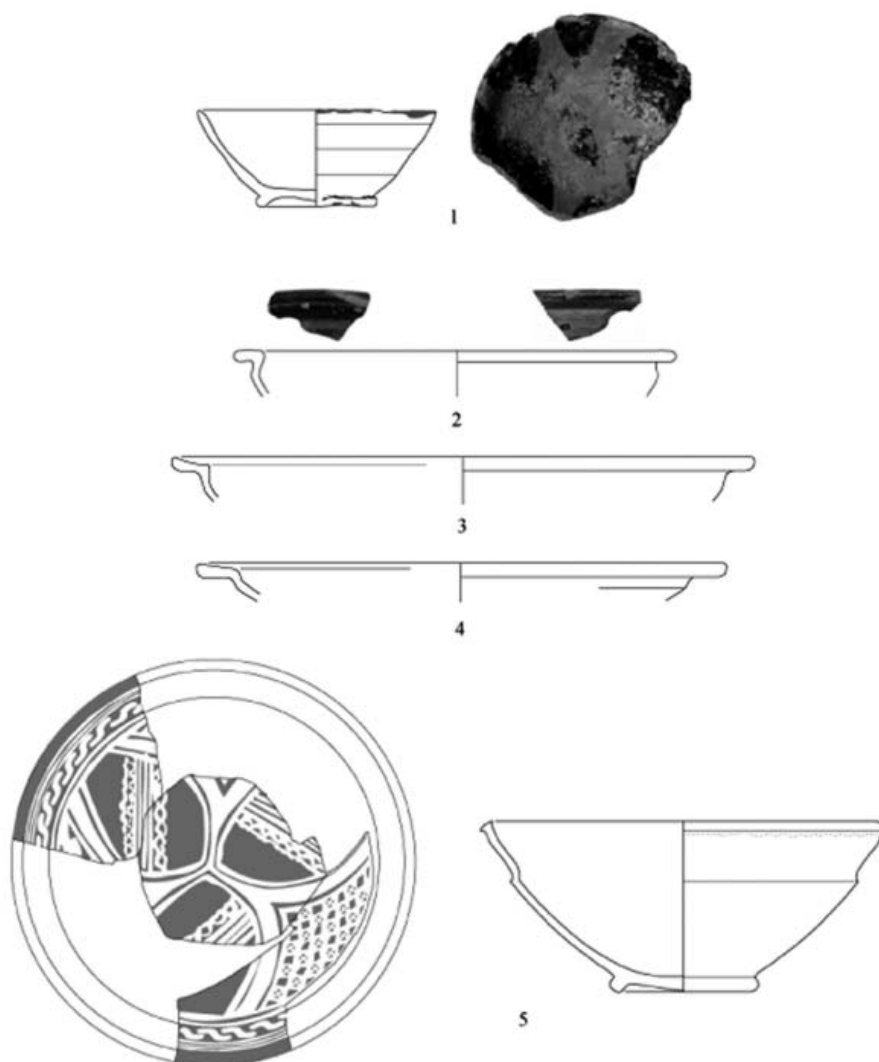


Fig. 5: 1. Bowl, Slip Painted Decoration under Transparent Green Glaze. Type 1. (AP.06.I.3.14); 2. Bowl, Slip Painted Decoration under Transparent Green Glaze. Type 1. (AP.05.I.71.21); 3. Bowl, Slip Painted Decoration under Transparent Yellow Glaze. Type 1. (AP.04.IV.117.21); 4. Bowl, Slip Painted Decoration under Transparent Yellow Glaze. Type 1. (AP.06.I.3.21); 5. Bowl, Slip Painted Decoration under Transparent Yellow Glaze with splashes of green glaze. Type 2. (AP.03.I.75.9).