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ISLAMIC POTTERY IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF THE VENETIAN LAGOON. A CONTRIBUTION ON THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VENICE AND THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN DURING THE 11TH-12TH CENTURY

Introduction

This contribution considers fragments of glazed pottery found in the excavations at Jesolo (VE; ancient *Equilus*), Loc. le Mura in 2014 (Figs 1-2). The typology and mineralogical and petrographical analysis reveal that they come from Egyptian wares. At least two, or possibly even three, of the four fragments, belong to a rather well-known type that has already been identified in Italy (the so-called "Fayyumi Ware"), while the fourth is a monochrome glazed pottery with a decoration incised into the surface at the biscuit stage. The aim of this study is to present the finds, analyze and discuss their distribution and chronology and, finally, attempt to contextualize them in the wider setting of pottery consumption in the Venetian lagoon area.

The pottery and the context

The fragments come from a structure currently under excavation (Excavation area 3000; building 3082) that was lined with wooden planks (see *infra* for its purpose) and used during the final stage as a dump (Figs 3-4). This structure contained four layers of deposits. The pottery discussed here was obtained from the second layer (3175: one fragment) and from the third one (3083), the thickest and most recent, sealing the fill (3083). The radiometric dating of a sample of wood taken from the containment structure indicates a period between the 9th and 10th centuries¹, while another dating carried out on

wood fragments found in the deposit itself show a period between the 10th and 11th centuries².

With the exception of a single fragment (No. 1; Fig. 4: 1) from layer 3175, all the other glazed pottery sherds come from the final fill of the pit (3083). In this deposit our three fragments (Nos 2-4; Fig. 4: 2-4) occurred in association with a number of sherds of various types of Byzantine pottery: Fine Sgraffito Ware, Green and Brown Painted Ware, and Slip Painted Ware³. These products are all dated to the second half of the 12th century or slightly later in the case of the third type (Vroom 2005: 82-83, 84-85, 124-125). The presence of these ware groups tells us that the deposit (3083) was formed during the second half of the 12th century. However, both this deposit (3083) and the previous one (3176) contained various fragments of far older pottery (including single fired glazed pottery and amphorae with different chronologies)⁴. This means that these layers contain a number of residual objects and we cannot automatically associate the date of formation of the context with the whole pottery set, including our fragments. The chronological range – 10th-11th century (referring to the time when the structure was built) and the second half of the 12th century (the time when it was sealed) date the activity but not the materials contained.

The sherds in discussion were produced using three types of technique. One fragment (no 369048) is of polychrome tin glazed pottery (externally glazed), two other (Nos 368990

¹ Dating relative to layer 3144, which can be interpreted as the original wooden wall of the structure (Cal AD 775 to 975). All radiocarbon dating was carried out by Beta Analytic Inc.

² Samples of wood fibre were taken from the following layers: 3175 (Cal AD 885 to 970), 3126 (horizontal beam?), 3083 and 3176 (Cal AD 975 to 1015).

³ For the most up-to-date overview of Byzantine imports to Italy, including the Venetian lagoon area, see D'Amico 2012.

⁴ Claudio Negrelli has written an in-depth discussion of the amphorae in this context in Gelichi, Cadamuro, Cianciosi, Ferri, Grandi, Negrelli 2017: 56-72.



Fig. 1. Jesolo, location; Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale Università Ca' Foscari, Venice.

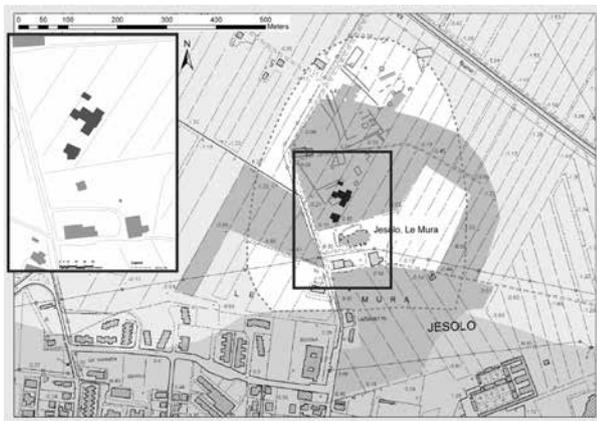


Fig. 2. Jesolo, location of excavation area; Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale Università Ca' Foscari, Venice.



Fig. 3. Jesolo, photograph of structure 3082 during excavation; Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale Università Ca' Foscari, Venice.

and 369047) are from painted glazed pottery while the fourth one (no 369040) is a green monochrome glazed pottery fragment with a decoration incised into the biscuit under a monochrome glaze using a wide-tipped tool (Fig. 5). The use of mineralogical and petrographical analyses (see Appendix) makes the identification of these small fragments fairly straightforward. As already mentioned, they are polychrome glazed pottery fragments of Egyptian origin. Let us now attempt to contextualise them with regard to typology.

“Fayyumi Ware”

“Fayyumi Ware” in general is discussed in a recent publication (Williams 2013; see also Philon 1980: 35-41; François 1999: 22; Mason 2004: Figs. 4.1 and 4.2) providing an up-to-date overview of the debate regarding this category of table wares, their origin and chronology. A considerable body of pieces is also examined in a useful catalogue of finds throughout the Mediterranean area (Williams 2013)⁵.

The term “Fayyumi Ware” does not refer to a specific type of pottery but was used by Ballardini to describe a group of ceramic vessels known as *bacini* set into the walls of the campanile of Pomposa abbey (Ballardini 1936) because of their resemblance to ceramics discovered by the Italian archaeological mission at Tebtunis in the Fayum Oasis, Egypt⁶. Some of these ceram-

⁵ The catalogue of finds is well written with the exception of the section dedicated to the Italian *bacini*. Although the ceramics sets from the Torre Civica of Pavia and campanile of Pomposa represent particularly significant associations for this type of ceramic, the bibliographical references are minimal and texts in Italian are under-represented. This may be not a great bibliographical problem in the case of the two *bacini* embedded in the walls of San Piero a Grado, although they were published in a critical edition that was far more ample than the references contained in Berti 1993 (see Berti, Tongiorgi 1981) and of those in Pavia (which were published exhaustively in Blake, Aguzzi 1989 as well as in Blake, Aguzzi 1990). The case of Pomposa is rather different because it was examined in a critical edition published in 1999 (Gelichi, Nepoti 1999) with colour photographs of all the *bacini* and drawings of the detached partial examples (and, here too, mineralogical and petrographical analyses of the clay of some examples was carried out by Claudio Capelli, see Gelichi, Nepoti 1999: 222-223). Williams only uses Ballardini's works (1936; 1964), and therefore bases his comparisons on the 19th-century watercolours by Errard (Williams 2013: Figs. 9-92), which contain a considerable number of errors with respect to the originals.

⁶ Ballardini 1936: 124, Pl. XXXe. These ceramics were also included in Bagnani 1933, Pl. XVIII.

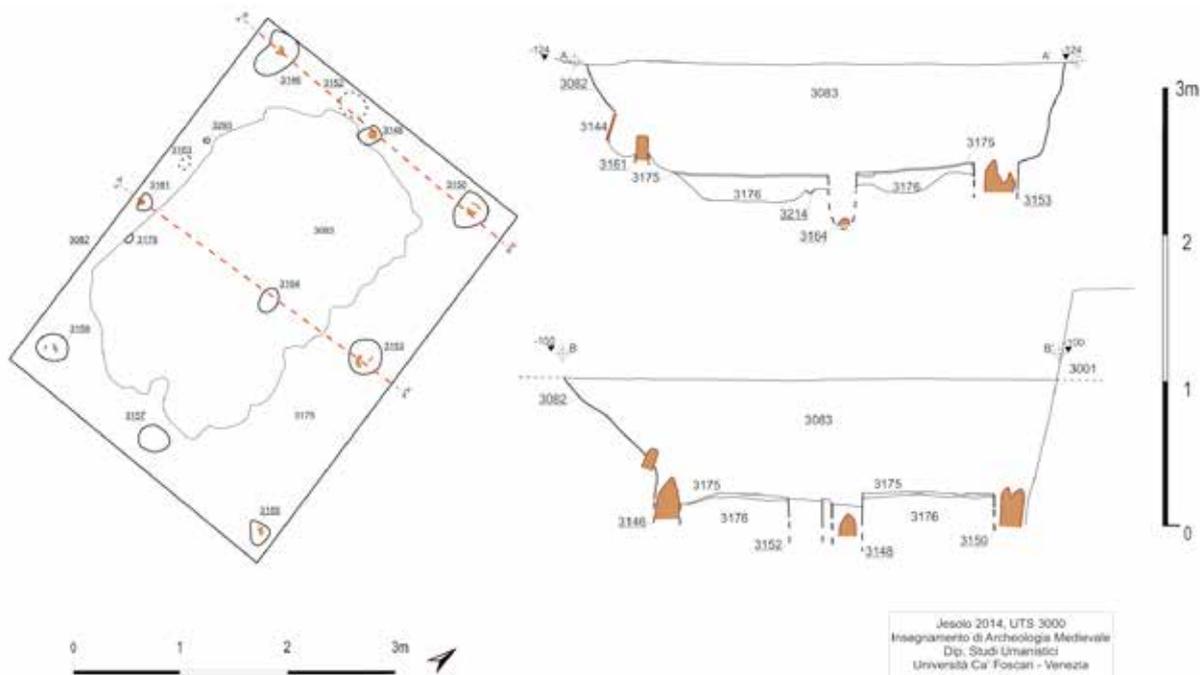


Fig. 4. Jesolo, drawing and stratigraphic section of structure 3082; Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale Università Ca' Foscari, Venice.

ics featured a vivacious polychrome decoration of splashed and dripped colours typical of many products from the Islamic area that have been generically defined as Splashed Ware⁷. It later emerged that while these ceramics were Egyptian, they were not produced in Fayum. Moreover, the fact that there has been a tendency to group different typologies produced using different techniques under this heading shows that we need to develop a more precise characterisation based on close observation and technological analyses⁸.

The origins, formative moments and chronological range of this category of products are far from being clear. Until fairly recently, there was a widespread consensus among the experts that the prototype inspiring the Islamic potters – firstly in the Mesopotamian area and then in Egypt – was to be found in the Chinese ceramics produced during the T'ang dynasty. The theory of this east-to-west imitative movement ob-

viously influenced the dating proposed for this group of Egyptian ceramics. The juxtaposition with the Chinese ceramics and with more recent Mesopotamian “imitations” (8th century) has pushed the chronology of the Egyptian products back to the 9th century. Recently, this interpretation has been justly and strongly criticized (Watson 2014). The new interpretation, which gives far more importance to local traditions, Coptic and Syrian, that resulted in products like Coptic Glazed Ware and the Yellow Glazed Family (Watson 2014: 126-128), has also led to a chronological shift (as well as opening up intriguing new socio-economic perspectives). Therefore, in addition to re-examining classifications and the relations between the various technologies⁹, we also need to reconsider dating on the basis of more solid archaeological foundations.

For the moment, in order to simplify matters, we will group our three fragments (Nos 1, 2 and 4) under the category recently defined as

⁷ Watson 2014: 132-133 is rightly critical of the use of this term, underlining that “distinguished archaeologists have equally failed in clear definition”. However, better definitions that take into account typology and not just the final decorative effect are also required for other ceramics and not just for those generically described as Splash Ware.

⁸ With reference to ceramics belonging to this group in the Benaki museum, Athens, Philon (1980: 35) has suggested that “Due to the great variety of this group in the Museum, a division into subgroups seems desirable”.

⁹ A step in the right direction has been taken by a recently launched research project that analyses the technological characteristics of glazed coatings to identify the different pottery-making traditions. Promising results are contained in Tite, Watson, Pradell, Matin, Molina, Domoney, Bouquillon 2015.

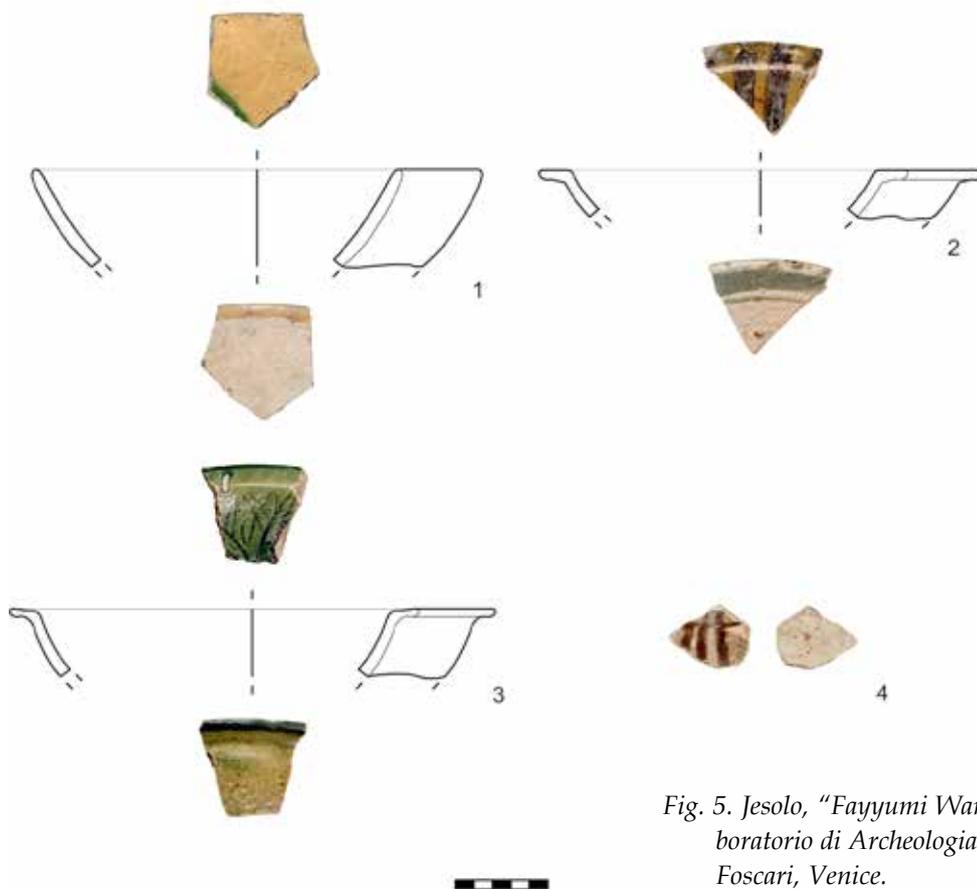


Fig. 5. Jesolo, "Fayyumi Ware" and sgraffito ware; Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale Università Ca' Foscari, Venice.

"Classic Fayyumi Ware" (Williams 2013: 132)¹⁰. This production is typically glazed (sometimes tin-opacified) with generally radial decorations using multiple colours¹¹. There are various types of radial decorations: some have precisely designed bands dividing the vase into regular sections while others have swirling radial streaks running outwards from the centre and causing some of the colour to run. Chemical and physical analyses are usually required in order to distinguish the presence of tin and lead glazing on these ceramics. As mentioned, we know that ceramics of this type were made at al-Fustat, near Cairo, but they were probably also being produced in other sites in Egypt. During the Fatimid period, these ceramics were exported to various parts of the Mediterranean region, to Palestine in particular.

¹⁰ There is greater uncertainty with regard to the third fragment (No. 1) given that all that can be made out on the surviving sherd is a yellowish glaze with a green patch near the broken edge suggesting that the decoration was in that colour.

¹¹ These are the types that Aguzzi, Blake (1989: 212-215) - referring to the *bacini* on the Torre Civica of Pavia - describe as "vivacious polychrome".

On this occasion we should also bear in mind another type of ceramic traditionally associated with "Fayyumi Ware" - even though it is not present among the fragments found in Jesolo. I am referring, of course, to the type with a decoration of green spots (Blake, Aguzzi 1989: 215-126), known as the Green Spotted Type. It must be mentioned here because ceramics of this type are present in association with "Classic Fayyumi Ware" in two out of the three Italian contexts that we will consider and may be useful for our general chronological discussion (see *infra*).

Although there are numerous finds where other ceramics are associated (or associable) with "Fayyumi Ware", only very few contexts provide us with precise and reliable chronological data. As far as Egypt is concerned, George Scanlon, who was one of the first experts to study the finds from the al-Fustat excavations, classified them as "Fatimid Fayyumi-I" types¹², while pointing out that the types discussed here belong to the final phase of this long period.

¹² Scanlon 1993: 298-299. This group is dated very broadly to a time period ranging from 850 to 1220.

Nevertheless, in a recent review and discussion of ceramics originating from al-Fustat (Istabl Antar excavation), sherds of “Classic Fayyumi Ware” and of the Green Spotted Type were found in association in a waste pit (No. 41) dated to the first half of the 10th century (Gayraud, Treglia, Vallauri 2009: 185-189, Fig. 10: 19-20). In the Middle Eastern area, in Caesarea (Palestine), ceramics of this kind have been found in association with Fatimid coins dated between 1071 and 1150 (Boas 1994). Lastly, examples of ceramics resembling “Classic Fayyumi Ware”, that is, with a polychrome splashed decoration, have been found in the Serçe Limani wreck in Turkey, dated to around 1025 (Waksman 2011: 204, fig. 4; we will return to this context below).

An evaluation of Italian contexts will also prove useful in narrowing down the chronology concerned.

“Fayyumi Ware” in Italy

At the time of writing, the Egyptian ceramics classified as “Fayyumi Ware” have only been found (or mentioned) in three other places (Fig. 6). In all cases, the ceramics concerned are *bacini* embedded in the walls of buildings in Pisa (Church of San Piero a Grado), Pavia (Torre Civica adjacent to the cathedral) and Pomposa in the province of Ferrara (campanile of the abbey). Examples of the same type have also been found in excavations in both Pisa and Pomposa, with the exception of Pavia¹³. We must also add to this small group the finds from Palermo, recently mentioned in the specialist literature which (D’Angelo, Sacco 2014).

Pisa. Bacini of San Piero a Grado

Green spotted tin-glazed ceramics from Egypt have only been mentioned as being present on the church of San Piero a Grado (Nos 21 and 55; Berti, Tongiorgi 1981: 166, Pl. LV; Berti, Di Giorgio 2011: 48, fig. 65). The examples are the bottom of a dish and an almost complete vessel (a deep bowl with a low ring base and



Fig. 6. Map of Italy showing sites of provenance of the Egyptian ceramics studied in this paper; Sauro Gelichi and Lara Sabbionesi.

narrow rim), both with a glazed interior (low tin content) and a yellow lead glazed exterior. The decoration consists of lines of green spots irregularly radiating from the centre (Figs 7-8).

The context of San Piero a Grado is traditionally dated from the late 10th to the early 11th century (Berti, Tongiorgi 1981). This traditional chronology, based on the principle of the contextual placement of all of the ceramics concerned, has recently been called into question (Meo 2013-14: 110-111, 310; [in print]) and brought forward to the second half of the 11th and first half of the 12th century.

I have been informed of 4 tiny fragments possibly belonging to a closed vessel decorated with green and brown spots coated with a yellowish lead glaze found during the excavation of the tower house in Via Toselli (*ex inf.* M. Di Giorgio).

Pavia. Torre civica

The ceramics, formerly set into the walls of the civic tower of Pavia and lost after its collapse, were carefully described and analysed in 1989 (Blake, Aguzzi 1989; Sfrecola 1989; Blake, Aguzzi 1990) after a number of preliminary partial editions (cf. Aguzzi 1973-75). On that occasion, a number of the characteristics of the types present were described in detail and distinguished from each other.

¹³ Writing with regard to the Islamic ceramics found in the excavations of the Torre Civica of Pavia, Blake remarks that they are particularly interesting because they are different types to those in the Civici Musei or still visible on the exterior of the Torre Civica (Blake 1978: 147).

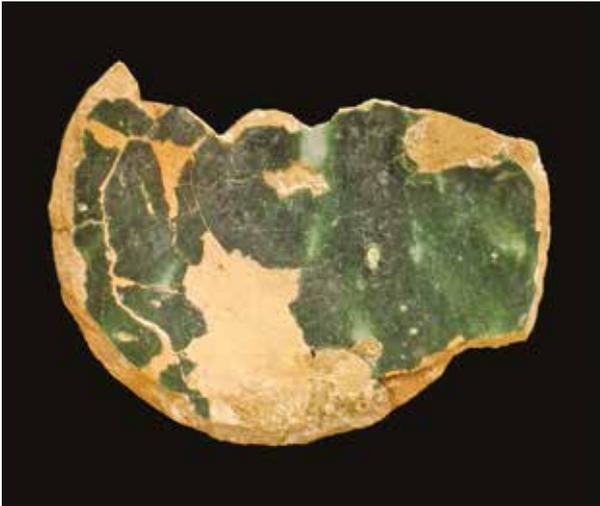


Fig. 7. Pisa, church of San Piero a Grado, bacino N. 21. Courtesy of M. Di Giorgio.

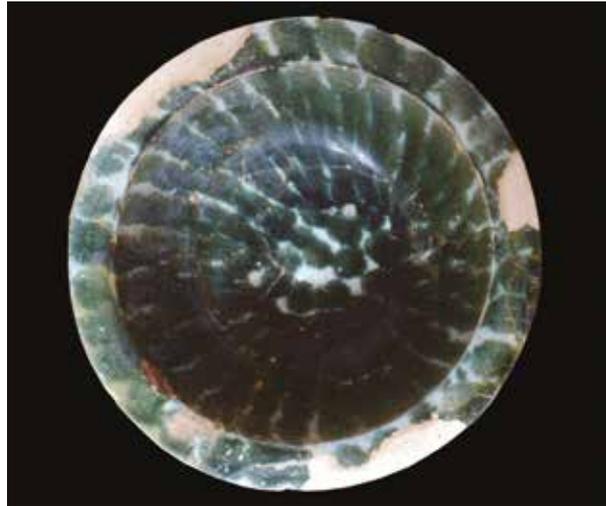


Fig. 8. Pisa, church of San Piero a Grado, bacino N. 55. Courtesy of M. Di Giorgio.



Fig. 9. Pomposa, bacino N. 17. Courtesy of Soprintendenza Ravenna.



Fig. 10. Pomposa, bacino N. 39. Courtesy of Soprintendenza Ravenna.

The civic tower of Pavia had 26 *bacini* plus three fragments of certain Egyptian origin that can be classified among the types discussed in this paper (Blake, Aguzzi 1989: 212). At least 10 (plus two fragments) were classified as “Classic Fayyumi Ware” (defined here as “vivacious polychrome”: Blake, Aguzzi 1989: 212-215), and were both tin/lead glazed and only lead-glazed. Two *bacini* were identified as green spotted ware (defined here as “green spotted tin-glazed”; Blake, Aguzzi 1989: 215-216).

There are no precise documents on the construction of Pavia’s civic tower, thus it can only be dated on the basis of typological and stylistic analogies with other similar buildings and, not too paradoxically, through a comparison with the *bacini* set into the campanile of Pomposa. Analogies with this tower are also recognised in a number of architectural details. Moreover,

the Torre Civica of Pavia is traditionally dated to before the 11th century, or rather to the first half of the century, on the basis of a number of architectural analogies with the Holy Sepulchre of Milan (consecrated in 1030) and with the campanile of San Michele Maggiore, also in Pavia (Blake, Aguzzi 1989: 223).

Pomposa. Campanile

The ceramics set into the bell tower at Pomposa were republished fifteen-odd years ago (Gelichi, Nepoti 1999) in a critical edition replacing previous publications (Errard, Gayet n.d; Ballardini 1936; Salmi 1936: 227-237; 1966: 237-243), including two articles by Corbara (1978; 1980) who was the first to have had the opportunity for thorough study, and published good quali-

ty black-and-white photographs. However, not being a specialist, Corbara made some inappropriate typological attributions and some wholly unacceptable scientific assessments.

The 1999 publication is based exclusively on the analysis of close-up colour photographs rather than an autopsy¹⁴, which made it impossible to study the profiles of the vessels and occasionally impeded the evaluation of the typologies present. This situation led to a critical text containing some uncertainties with regard to typological identification. Nevertheless, we were able to compare some of the examples to various ceramic fragments in the Abbey Museum that resembled those walled into the campanile and therefore probably originated from the tower itself. In some cases, this helped us increase confidence with regard to technological aspects (as well as providing us with the profiles of some typologies as far as the surviving parts were concerned). Moreover, some of these fragments underwent mineralogical and petrographical analyses which finally confirmed their Egyptian origin.

The ceramics set into the Pomposa bell tower are of various typologies (polychrome tin-glazed, metallic lustre, fritware etc.) and possibly also of different origins. Nevertheless, on this occasion we will refer only to polychrome tin/lead-glazed ceramics classified as “Classic Fayyumi Ware” (two examples are present on the campanile, while a further four fragments, possibly from three vessels are in the Abbey Museum; Fig. 9; 11: 1-4) and as the Green Spotted Type (two examples are set into the campanile; Fig. 10). A few examples of this type (Fig. 11: 8-9) were found during the excavations carried out in the abbey cloister in 1998 (Librenti, Zappaterra 1999: Fig. 4), which will be discussed below.

The chronology of the Pomposa ceramics is linked to an inscription attributing the foundation of the tower to a certain *magister Deusdedit* in the year 1063 (Salmi 1966: 259)¹⁵. There is no stratigraphic reason to doubt the association between the epigraph and the building or the fact that they are more or less contemporaneous. Although the construction period may have last-

ed several years, the typology and style of the campanile appear fairly consistent throughout the structure. An analysis of the distribution of the ceramics, at least of those still *in situ*, reveals no particular or distinct concentration of types: the Fatimid lustrewares, for example, reach the sixth stringcourse and “Classic Fayyumi Wares” are present up to the eighth one. These data seem to support the theory that the tower is essentially homogeneous both with regard to structure and, until proved otherwise, insertion of the ceramics. It is extremely plausible concerning that the entire complex dates to the second half of the 11th century¹⁶. The Pomposa association is therefore one of the most certain in chronological terms.

As mentioned, ceramics of this type were also found during the excavations in the cloister carried out in 1998. The collection consists of three monochrome tin-glazed fragments, yellow, green and brown in colour (Fig. 11: 5-7; cf. Librenti, Zappaterra 1999: 258-259, Fig. 4: 1-3) and two fragments from one or possibly two tin-glazed examples with a polychrome decoration, also “Classic Fayyumi” (Fig. 11: 8-9; cf. Librenti, Zappaterra 1999: Fig. 4: 4-5). Although they have not undergone mineralogical and petrographical analyses, typological similarities clearly indicate their Egyptian origin¹⁷. These finds come from the foundation trench (layer 62) of the cloister walls and were found in association with north Italian single-fired glazed ceramics (“pottery with sparse glaze”), coarse cooking wares and glass. According to the scholars (Salmi 1966: 78, 116-117), the cloister was rebuilt under Abbot Vidor, in the first half of the 12th century. However, due to the associations of ceramics the chronology of the layer in question has been pushed back to the second half of the 11th century (Librenti, Zappaterra 1999: 258).

While the ceramic fragments stored in the Abbey museum, which are of the same type as vessels set into the bell tower, may have been found during the course of work carried out in the vicin-

¹⁴ When Sergio Nepoti and I have obtained opportunity to study the ceramics, the scaffolding had already been removed from the campanile, hence we could not examine the brickwork and ceramics directly.

¹⁵ The inscription also states that it took place under Abbot Maynard (1063-1074) and at the time of Prior Marcus.

¹⁶ Scholars hesitate to attribute the work on the bell tower to Abbot Vidor (1148-1161) because the epigraph mentioning work carried out under this Venetian abbot (Novara 1999) does not specify where.

¹⁷ We cannot be equally confident about the provenance of the (apparently) monochrome examples, although a macroscopic examination of the fabric suggests that it may be the same.

ity of the campanile¹⁸ (validating our theory that they come from fallen *bacini*), the same cannot be said of the fragments from the cloister. This suggests that the Egyptian ceramics at Pomposa were not only conceived for decoration of the bell tower but may also have been of domestic use¹⁹.

Palermo, urban excavations

A recent publication mentioning three fragments of ceramics with polychrome decorations found during excavations in the old town in Palermo, considers their jaspé decoration to be the same as that of Splashed Ware (*supra*, note 10). The fragments in question bear a vague resemblance to the Egyptian types discussed here, although we should remember that this technique was widely diffused throughout the eastern world. The text does not refer to the origin of the sherds, and even the mineralogical and petrographical analyses fail to establish their exact provenance²⁰. Taking the forms into consideration, I think at least two of the three fragments can be excluded from the group being discussed (D'Angelo, Sacco 2014: Fig. 9-10, fragments "a" and "c").

Incised Pottery ("Fatimid Sgraffito Ware")

The last fragment from the Jesolo excavations belongs to an open vessel with a decoration incised into the biscuit under a monochrome green lead-glaze. The decoration (floral?) was made using a tool with a fairly broad tip. Technically speaking, it cannot be described as

¹⁸ Unfortunately the museum inventories make no precise reference to provenance.

¹⁹ Additionally, it should be pointed out that at least two other buildings in the Pomposa complex had *bacini* set into their walls: the atrium, which a surviving inscription attributes to the first half of the 11th century and the so-called 'Palazzo della Ragione' (the abbey palace), which the experts attribute to the following century. Unfortunately, the *bacini* set into the atrium are recent replacements and only one of them, very fragmentary, (probably stonepaste) is still *in situ*, in the 'Palazzo della Ragione'. However, this does not necessarily exclude the possibility that the fragments in the Abbey museum were originally part of the decorative scheme of either the atrium or the Palazzo. There is no evidence that the cloister had a similar decoration which means that there is currently no support for the theory that the ceramics found in the 1998 excavation belonged to architectural *bacini*.

²⁰ Lazzarini makes a generic reference to North African countries (cf. D'Angelo, Sacco 2014: 332).

sgraffito because the design was not scratched into the slip (Gayraud 2003: 598).

Ceramics with incised decoration were produced in the Mediterranean but also documented in Egypt (Philon 1980: 263-284): in view of the technique adopted they should not be defined as "Fatimid Sgraffito Ware" (Scanlon 1999), but as "Incised Ware" according to Philon's definition (1980: 263). This group includes ceramics made from "buff-brown clay" or "soft pale yellow" (according to the author concerned) or from clays with a high silica contents (stonepaste or fritware). These ceramics – represented by both open (the majority) and closed vessels – are generally coated in a monochrome glaze (green, shades of yellow, purple; etc.). Based on Egyptian excavations, their chronological range covers the period from the last quarter of the 10th century to the 12th century (Scanlon 1999: 265).

These ceramics also seem to be related in some way to a group of vessels with an incised decoration, also from the Fatimid period, from the Serçe Limani wreck in Turkey (Jenkins 1992)²¹. However, recent evidence shows that the ship's cargo of glass and ceramic goods originally came from Beirut (Waksman 2011). This indicates that the resemblance and close chronology probably result from a shared cultural and productive experience what puts in question presumed Egyptian origin of the ceramics from the wreck (unlike our fragment).

The Jesolo context and the chronology of "Classic Fayyumi Ware" in Italy

As we have seen, the ceramics from the Jesolo context do not really help us resolve the chronology of this type (*supra* 2), nonetheless we may be able to obtain more precise information by considering the *bacini*.

The ceramics on the Torre Civica in Pavia were dated on the basis of their similarity to the vessels from Pomposa and Pisa. As we have seen, two proposals have been put forward for the Green Spotted Type *bacini* set into the church of San Pietro a Grado in Pisa: an early chronology (late 10th – early 11th century) and a datation we might define as late (c. 1070 – c. 1100). Both chronologies are based on different evaluations of the relative

²¹ For example, in the decorative motive made using a broad-tipped tool and in the fact that at least one of the examples is coated with a monochrome green glaze like ours.

chronology of building phases of the church and on whether the ceramics can be considered to be contemporaneous with the building, but none can be confirmed by evidence providing absolute dating (inscription, written document, etc.). The chronology of the *bacini* from Pomposa bell tower, on the other hand, is bolstered by the reliable and plausible juxtaposition of ceramics and building, which has a certain foundation date (1063). Therefore, considering the construction time, we can date the vessels within the second half of the 11th century.

Basically, the Italian chronologies seem to point towards the period mentioned above. They are also confirmed by the Caesarea context based on the association of coins (1071-1150) and, to the extent that this comparison may be useful²², they are also fairly close to those of the Serçe Limani wreck, dated to around 1025²³.

Considering a whole series of factors linked to the formation of deposits and the life expectancy of objects, the Italian chronologies are somewhat later than the traditional ones proposed for “Fayyumi Ware”.

How are the ceramics found in Pomposa, Pavia, Pisa and Venice related? As we have seen, they tend not to be widely present in the archaeological record. Is there a specific explanation for their rarity and their concentration in an above-mentioned group of sites?

The two Pisan examples, which are at the moment isolated, must be considered as a case apart. The presence of other Egyptian typologies among the *bacini* and in the excavations in the city show that they were probably directly imported from Egypt. The cases of Pavia, Pomposa and Venice may share a direct link.

At the time of writing all three represent isolated episodes. No such ceramics have been found in the area around Pomposa, not even in Ferrara where numerous excavations have been undertaken in recent years and imported pottery is extensively documented. I do not know of any such vessels found in excavations currently carried out in Pavia.

As has already been suggested, it is fairly possible that these ceramics reached Pavia through the mediation of Venice (Blake, Aguzzi 1989). But it is even more likely that they also reached Pomposa via Venice, especially in view of the strong relations between the abbey and the aristocratic families of the Veneto region. The discovery of ceramics of this type in Jesolo (which is like saying: “Venice”) strengthens what previously seemed to be but plausible supposition.

We must also consider a further aspect relating not only to the type of ceramics imported but also to the motives justifying their use in architecture. The existence of typological and formal similarities between the campanile of Pomposa and the Torre Civica of Pavia is further reinforced by the fact that both structures use decorative ceramics, many of which of the same origin. This gives rise to a link between the patrons and the actual builders of both towers. While it may be an exaggeration to envisage the involvement of the same team of craftsmen, it may not even be necessary. It appears certain that both masters and craftsmen working in these two very distant sites shared similar technical and ideological backgrounds as well as the same formal values involving use of *spolia* and coloured ceramics.

Jesolo, Venice and Islamic pottery

How can we contextualise the ceramics found at the Jesolo site? They come from a context that does not currently appear to be associated with any other building or settlement, given that the corresponding levels have been destroyed by later intervention. In terms of morphology and construction, the 3082 structure resembles the barns or granaries found throughout Europe (Gardiner 2013: Fig. 2.5-6) as well as in Italy (Bianchi, Grassi 2013: 80-86, Fig. 5.6), in the form of rectangular constructions raised above the ground on wooden posts. In

²² The cargo contained ceramics with polychrome decorations resembling “Classic Fayyumi Ware” as well as glazed ceramics with patterns incised into the biscuit. The provenance of these ceramics, especially of the incised examples (“Serçe Limani Sgraffito Ware”), has long been discussed (Jenkins 1992) but a recent series of archaeological evaluations combined with chemical analyses have confirmed that they were produced in Beirut (Waksman 2011).

²³ This dating was proposed on the basis of the association of coins and Fatimid glass weights bearing the name of the Sultan Imam al-Zahir (as well as coins minted during the reign of the Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Hakim: 996-1020). Two volumes have been published on this excavation, the first on the ship, the second on the glass objects. Information on the ceramics can be found at <https://simerg.com/literary-readings/excavation-of-a-byzantine-shipwreck-and-the-discovery-of-fatimid-artefacts/>.

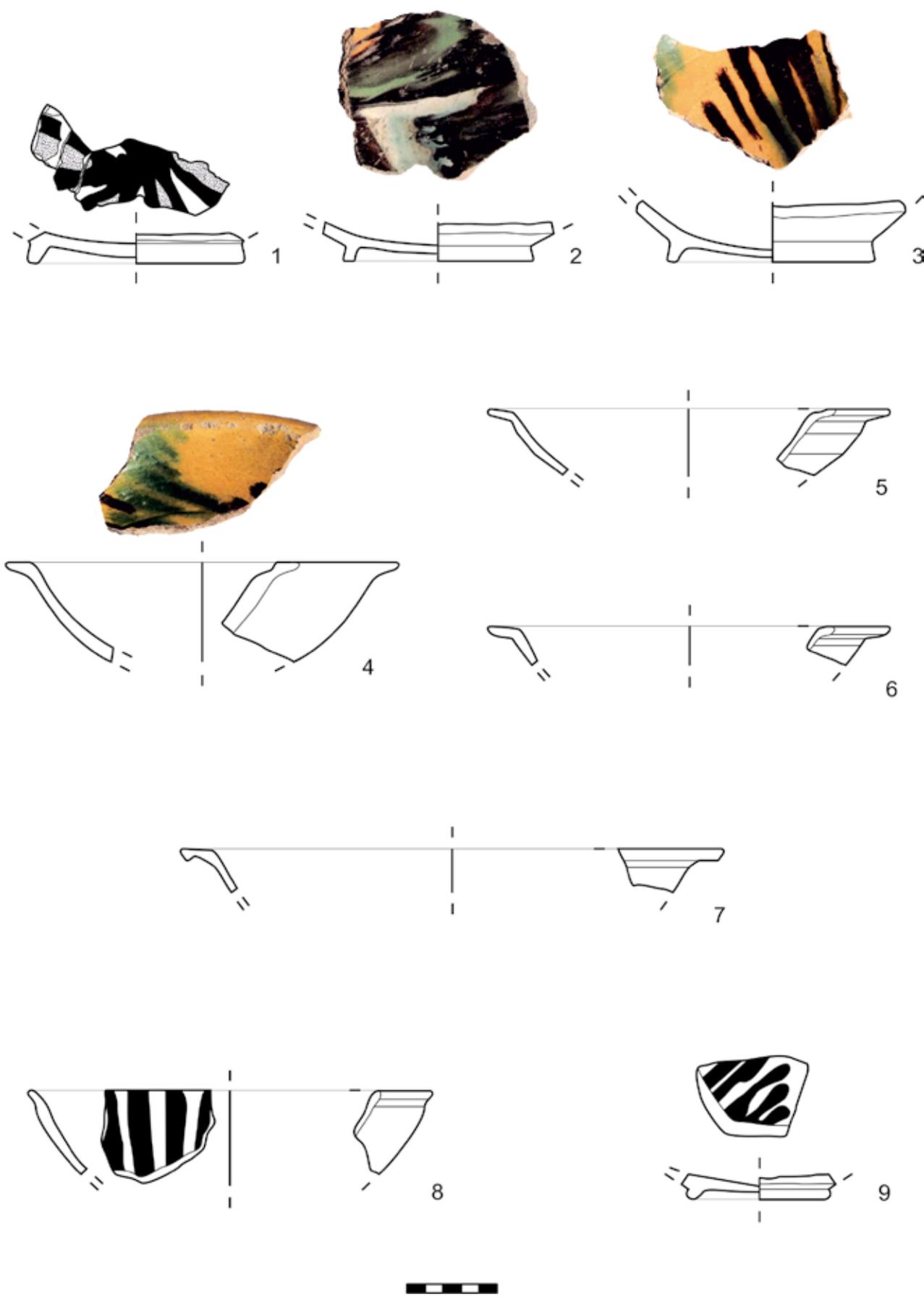


Fig. 11. Pomposa, ceramics in the Abbey Museum and from the 1998 excavation. Redrawn by Lara Sabbionesi from Gelichi, Nepoti 1999 and Librenti, Zappaterra 1999.

this particular case, the structure was provided with a rectangular pit with planking stabilising the earthen walls. After the structure was abandoned, the pit, originally dug for drainage purposes, was filled with rubbish, and is now the only preserved part of the structure. Its dimensions – 3 x 4 m, or 12 m² – also correspond approximately to the measurements given in the literature. Unfortunately, nothing was found in the interior that could bear out the hypothesis – such as burnt grain remains – but the absence may also be explained by the fact that the building was not burned but deliberately abandoned. The structure belongs to the same phase as a round pit, in which numerous carpological remains – fruit stones and seeds – have been found.

The data show that between the 10th and 11th centuries the place in discussion may possibly have been used for habitational purposes, certainly for storing and preserving foodstuffs. The excavation area is located approximately a hundred metres from the site of the cathedral of *Equilus*. So far there is no archaeological evidence showing that those two places were contiguous, but it seems extremely probable. This suggests that our excavation area was ecclesiastical or rather episcopal property. We know that storage structures were the domain of the aristocracy, so the presence of a granary does not weaken this interpretation in any way. Datation of the Egyptian ceramics refers to the period in which the cathedral of Santa Maria Maggiore was being rebuilt in monumental form – although the precise chronology of the building is not known. The rebuilding programme took place under a succession of bishops, the most prominent of whom were two bishops from the late 11th century: Stefano Dolfín (1084-1096) and Giovanni Gradenigo (1097-1105; Dorigo 1994: 259-298).

The 11th-century history of *Equilus* and its community is not entirely clear. It probably became an episcopal see (9th century?)²⁴, somewhat later than the neighbouring ones and in the centuries immediately after its establishment it had an extremely active and economically flourishing community depend-

ent, however, upon Venice²⁵. A number of 11th- and 12th-century documents mention the presence of inhabitants of *Equilus* in the Levantine ports (Dorigo 1999: 236), where they participated in the expansion of trade characterising the economic policies adopted by the *Serenissima* in that period. But at the same time, other documents refer to the transfer of numerous inhabitants from *Equilus* to Venice between the 12th and 13th centuries. These transfers must have been intended to concentrate the nerve centre of Venice's economic activities in the heart of the city. This extremely flourishing background situation explains why the cathedral of Santa Maria Maggiore was built in an imposing form, definitely out of scale with its surroundings (Dorigo 1999). Nevertheless, we can assume that the reasons for this ambitious architectural project lie with the political strategies adopted by the local bishops in the second half of the 11th century rather than with a grassroots initiative. Both bishops – Gradenigo and Dolfín – came from families belonging to the highest Venetian élite and it is fairly probable that the construction of the church – clearly influenced by the basilica of St Mark – was promoted and pursued in the context of internal competition in the ranks of the Venetian aristocracy (Secci 2015-2016: 323-325). Regardless, the second half of the 11th century was a period in which episcopal power in *Equilus* was being consolidated and reinforced (albeit projected into the Venetian arena), as well as a time of great commercial ferment and dynamism. The presence of Egyptian ceramics, especially if they can be associated with the episcopal area, is therefore not surprising.

Relations between Venice and the Islamic world in the early middle ages are character-

²⁴ The first documented bishop of *Equilus* is mentioned in 846 (Visentin 1954: 23).

²⁵ *Equilus* is mentioned only three times in the *Istoria Veneticorum*. In the first case (Ist. Ven. I, 6) it is listed as one of the islands in the lagoon archipelago and explicit reference is made to the bishopric (although without specifying when it was established). The second mention (Ist. Ven. III, 37) is in reference to the 10th-century Hungarian invasions held to be responsible for the destruction of the settlement along with other coastal sites. The third, perhaps the most interesting from our point of view, refers to the existence of a port at *Equilus* (Ist. Ven. IV, 91) but above all to the presence of the Venetian fleet there, which was due to set sail for Spalato under the command of the Doge Pietro II Orseolo (961-1009). This episode suggests that the port of *Equilus* was considered to be at the disposal of the duchy. The text also mentions bishop Pietro of *Equilus* (Ist. Ven., III, 1 and 18).

ised by a lack of documentary data. However, the evidence we do possess suggests that there was an intermittent yet lasting relationship. A western source informs us that at the beginning of the 9th century Venetian merchants were selling oriental goods at the Pavia fair, Tyrian purple, in particular (Nallino 1965: 165). However, this document alone would not suffice as proof of regular Venetian trade with oriental ports if we did not have specific and direct evidence such as the decree issued by Emperor Leo V of Byzantium (813-820) that forbade Venetian merchants from travelling to Egyptian cities, thus implicitly confirming that these were routine journeys (Nallino 1965: 166). Even the traditional theft of St Mark's relics from Alexandria (which also took place in the 9th century), although shrouded in myth, is further proof of the close relationships existing between these two parts of the world. These connections are again confirmed in the following century, when another Byzantine emperor – John Tzimiskes (969-976) – enjoined the Venetians to interrupt their trade with the Arabs, to whom they sold weapons and timber²⁶.

Obviously, this familiarity cannot be considered as direct confirmation of the presence of Islamic or even Byzantine ceramics in the lagoon area before the late 11th century. Nonetheless, it is possible, that ceramics were not then regarded as objects of any great value, as they are rarely mentioned in the 11th-century manuscript on "Gifts and Rareties" (*Kitāb al-Hadāyā wa al-Tuḥaf: Ghāda al-Ḥijjāwī al-Qaddūmī* 1996)²⁷. These relations do not seem, however, to emerge in the field of figurative art (Mathews 2014: 22) suggesting that the oriental culture had little influence on these societies before the late 11th century. In brief, even "exotic" ceramics were not a particularly sought-after good or at any rate they were not sufficiently in demand to generate substantial or appreciable imports before that time.

The Egyptian ceramics found in *Equilus* in the second half of the 11th century is one of the first pieces of evidence of a change of direction that would lead, in the 12th century, to

of imported goods, marked and measurable increase in the archaeological record. The *Serenissima's* privileged relations with the Byzantine area meant that in Venice and in the immediate vicinity (including *Equilus*) Islamic tin- and lead-glazed ware would be overtaken by monochrome and polychrome *sgraffito* ware produced by Greek workshops. However, links with the Islamic world, the eastern in particular, continued with imports of stoneware or fritware (some with incised decorations) from the Syro-Egyptian area. This process took place shortly before the launch of a locally based production of polychrome lead-glazed pottery – both painted and *sgraffito* ware – in the lagoon area.

The context of *Equilus*, which sums up this phenomenon very well, coincides with two tendencies taking place at local level. The first regards the economic development of the community that gives many local families access to Levantine emporia, while the second concerns the emergence of important bishops of Venetian origin who make significant investments in the ambitious construction project of Santa Maria Maggiore. These overlapping trends not only justify the associations that we have analysed, but also give us insight into the early stages of an interesting and widespread phenomenon.

Appendix. Catalogue of finds

1. Jes14 - 368990 (layer 3175). Fig. 5: 1.
Hemispherical bowl with thin rim. Yellow thin lead glazed interior with abundant quartz; transparent and thin outside. Green spot inside.
Clay: buff pink fabric, matrix carbonate. Egypt.
2. Jes14 - 369047 (layer 3083). Fig. 5: 2.
Hemispherical bowl with flat rim. Yellow thick and regular lead glazed interior; transparent, thin and with inclusions outside. Radial decorations in brown inside.
Clay: buff pink fabric, matrix ferric. Egypt (Nile?).
3. Jes14 - 369040 (layer 3083). Fig. 5: 3.
Hemispherical bowl with flat rim, similar to previous. Green thick lead glazed interior; transparent thin lead glazed with quartz outside. Incised decoration inside.

²⁶ In this case reference is made not only to Egypt but also to Libya and Tunisia (Nallino 1965: 167-169).

²⁷ The text describes gifts and objects exchanged between the governments of various countries with the highest echelons of the Muslim administration and society during the Fatimid era.

Clay: buff pink fabric, relatively coarser than the previous one. Egypt.
4. Jes14 - 369048 (layer 3083). Fig. 5: 4.
Hemispherical (?) bowl. Tin glazed interior.

Transparent lead glazed outside. Radial decoration in brown inside.
Clay: buff pink fabric, matrix carbonate. Egypt.

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