

# Egyptian imitations of Chinese celadon from the 14th–15th centuries found at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria

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**Abstract:** In Islamic Egyptian glazed ceramics there are three ceramic types inspired by Chinese pottery, stoneware and porcelain: *sancai* pottery, celadon stoneware and Blue and White porcelain. Egyptian imitations of Chinese celadon ware, produced in the 14th and 15th centuries mainly by Cairene potters working at the Fustat workshops, are particularly noteworthy and the Kom el-Dikka site in Alexandria, excavated by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw, has yielded a collection of over 300 pieces. The typological analysis was based on 235 distinct fragments of utilitarian wares selected on account of their form, decorative elements, technical quality, possible technological defects and characteristics that qualify them as imitations of Chinese celadon. Two typological ware groups were distinguished: those inspired by Chinese prototypes and those representing indigenous Egyptian ceramics infused with certain features copied from the Chinese celadons.

**Keywords:** Islamic ceramics, Mamluk glazed ceramics, Egyptian imitations of Chinese celadons, Egyptian Mamluk celadons

Inhabitants of the Muslim Caliphate, mindful of Mohammed's teachings that the quest for knowledge should be pursued even in China (Mahomet 1993: 105), were well aware of the land of As-Sin lying far to the East, home of sages and of artists fashioning objects of great beauty. The Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta (1304–1369), whose voyages took him to the Middle Kingdom, wrote in his journal that “the inhabitants of China surpass all other peoples with the perfection of their skills in artistic handicrafts” (Ibn Battuta 2008: 279). Thin, yet robustly durable paper,

silken fabrics which caressed the skin of the wearer, shiny lacquer ware, bronzes adorned with mysterious characters, and varicolored ceramics were legendary in Islamic society. For centuries the Muslim Caliphate (established in the 7th and 8th centuries across a huge swath of the Eastern hemisphere, from Central Asia and northern India through Iran, the Middle East, and Arabia to Anatolia, North Africa, and Andalusia on the Iberian Peninsula) had been a destination for nomadic Turkic tribes which, with the passage of time, adopted a settled lifestyle and converted

to Islam. These migrations originated in regions profoundly influenced by the civilization of China, and as the successive waves of wanderers settled in the West, they brought with them various elements of Chinese culture (first and foremost in the material sphere) subsequently embraced by Muslims (always subject to

approval of the Caliphate's rulers). Beginning in the 9th and 10th centuries, there are confirmed accounts of commercial exchange between the eastern reaches of the Caliphate and China, also as regards imports of ceramic bowls, dishes and household wares (Scanlon 1970: Pls VII–XVI; Kahle 1956).

## CHINESE CELADON AND ITS EGYPTIAN IMITATIONS

Even as the Seljuk Turks established themselves in Greater Iran during the 11th century, the influence of Chinese art on the artistic cultures of the lands they conquered grew. As the new arrivals from the north-east—Qipchaq Turks, Mongols and Circassians—made their presence felt, these influences were permeated into Egypt and even reached Ifriqiyya (modern-day Tunisia). The Muslim courts of Greater Syria and Egypt began using celadon, that is, stoneware vessels covered with a uniform feldspathic glaze of the highest quality. The typical celadon was finished in a shade of light green, olive or willow green, light turquoise or light blue hues, and less frequently, tones of beige or grey. Other celadon characteristics included a highly compact body structure, well baked and smooth to the touch, with a bluish-tinted grey color of the porcellanous stoneware in the break (Gompertz 1980: 22). A more fleeting but equally distinctive trait was the ringing sound when struck. Celadons were produced as monochromatic pieces or with underglaze ornamentation, either incised or carved in the *champlevé*

technique. Celadon decoration may have also been molded in relief or cut in openwork. The air bubbles in the glaze and the crackle on the surface are decorative in their own right. These effects are a consequence of the contractility of the glazing, which displays a tendency to shrink more than the body during the cooling process. Celadon vessels were fired in special furnaces at a temperature of approximately 1300°C, in a reducing atmosphere.

In its standard *pinyin* transcription, the Chinese name for celadon is *qingci* and may be translated as “greenish porcelain”.<sup>1</sup> The color of the monochromatic glaze was thus elevated to something of a hallmark, a distinctive aesthetic trait which lent its name to this type of ceramic.

The term “celadon” as a designation for greenish Chinese ceramics became standard usage in Europe during the 17th century.<sup>2</sup> The arrival of celadon in Europe is associated with a number of legends (Gompertz 1980: 21). One of them has it that a penchant for *qingci* ware was displayed by the Ayyubid sultan Salah ad-Din (1171–1193) who upon ascending to the throne sent

<sup>1</sup> In Chinese, *qingci* denotes stoneware as well as porcelain. A celadon typology based on Chinese-language sources was proposed by Amelia Macioszek (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Celadon and other Chinese ceramics were occasionally referred to in the academic literature from the mid-20th century as *martabani*, a term derived from Martaban, the name of a port city in Myanmar (formerly Burma) where ceramics were loaded onto ships bound for Thailand, the Philippines, the Indonesian islands, India, the Red Sea coast, and Europe.

40 celadon pieces to Damascus as a gift for Nur ad-Din (1147–1174), conqueror of the Crusaders. Salah ad-Din propagated a simple, low-key lifestyle among Muslims and, true to this ethos, he exhorted his subjects to shun ornamental wares in favour of monochrome vessels — celadon fitted the bill perfectly. This particular legend features an etymological note, tracing the origin of the term “celadon” to the Latinised version of sultan Saladin’s name. In modern usage, older wares are referred to as “*longquanyao*-type porcelain”, and



Fig. 1. Celadon small bowls of the 13th century from China: top, fishes in relief (SKAZsz 2872; 3.5 x 12.3 cm); bottom, incised peony branch ornament on the outer wall (SKAZsz 2733; 6 x 11.6 cm) (National Museum in Warsaw/photos P. Ligier)

more recent ones as simply “celadon-type porcelain”. An alternate term for the type of ceramic of which celadon vessels are made is “stoneware”. The Chinese art collection of the National Museum in Warsaw includes several specimens (Jacoby, Markiewicz, and Popkowska 2009: 215–216, Fig. III.4–5) [Fig. 1].

Celadon wares were produced in pottery workshops operating in the northern provinces of China. The names of some of these workshops have been immortalized as designations for certain kinds of wares: *longquan*, *yazhou* and *guan* among others. The wares were turned on potter’s wheels or molded in forms in what were then innovative shapes, many of them derived from ritual bronze vases and censers produced between the 1st and the 15th centuries. Copies of these old wares are still produced today.<sup>3</sup>

Celadon vessels were imported to Egypt already in the 10th century (Gyllensvärd 1973; 1975; Scanlon 1967: 74–75; 1970: 85–88; 1982: 120–121; Mikami 1988: 10; Kubiak 1969: 17; François 1999: 143, Pls 5, 15, 17, 18). Their popularity, coupled with a general increase of commercial exchange with the Muslim lands of the Middle East, peaked between the 12th and the 14th centuries (Mikami 1988: 11), in the period when China was ruled by the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), and the first rulers of the Ming dynasty (1368–1643), and Egypt and Syria by the Ayyubids (1171–1250) and Mamluks (1250–1517).

<sup>3</sup> Chinese celadon probably resembled vessels and artefacts sculpted from nephrite/jade, which has a similar color and was much valued in Chinese culture. In this sense celadon may be thought of as a less expensive alternative to the treasured jade; this would certainly contribute to the unwaning appeal of *qingci* and to its continued production over the centuries. That said, there is nothing in the Chinese sources to confirm such a connection. Export of celadon from China to Korea and Thailand led indigenous craftsmen in those lands to begin their own production of celadon wares, employing Chinese technology while remaining true to their own forms and decoration.

With time the thriving commerce between Egypt and China led some Egyptian craftsmen to attempt imitations of Chinese artistic objects in order to meet the high demand.<sup>4</sup> The Mamluk era witnessed thus the emergence of a new type of ceramics: Egyptian imitations of Chinese celadon, a category of glazed ceramics. In terms of decoration, these ceramics may be divided into three subcategories: with uniform glazing, with incised and stamped underglaze ornaments, and with ornaments molded in raised relief or as appliqués. Such “Egyptian celadon” was produced during the 14th and 15th centuries, first and foremost by Cairene potters working in the Fustat workshops. Distinguishing Chinese celadon prototypes from their Egyptian imitations is fairly easy.

It should be noted that Chinese ceramic imitations by Egyptian craftsmen, regardless of the specific type of decoration, referred to colors of the glazes, stylistics of the decoration, and occasionally the shape; in other words, it was ware appearance and not the ceramic pastes or glazes in terms of their physical and chemical properties or formulations that was important. One reason for this was that Chinese craftsmen jealously guarded their technological secrets,<sup>5</sup> leaving Muslim imitators to their own devices as they endeavored to identify raw materials and to devise formulations that enabled them to produce similar wares. Islamic potters had no way of knowing that feldspar, a silica-rich mineral, was a key component of Chinese celadon stoneware (as well as of Chinese porce-

lain and various glazes). In their search for similar effects, they chanced upon quartz sand (which likewise contains silica) and, beginning in the 12th century, they formulated and pressed quartz/stoneware ceramic pastes. In a proportion of 1 to 10 units, quartz paste consisted of 5–6 parts quartz/quartz sand, 1.5–2 parts glass, 1 part cullet (which acted as an adhesive during the firing process), 1 part clay, and appropriate proportions of auxiliary ingredients (Mason 2004: 73–74). Fine white clay (Mason 2004: 8–14) was an optimum raw material, but stoneware that turned beige after firing, as well as red Nile clay were also used.

Distinguishable Egyptian wares imitating Chinese celadon were first noted by archaeologists excavating in Egypt in the 1920s (Bahgat 1922: Pls 74, 107; Bahgat and Massoul 1930: 69–70, Pls 54/1,5, 61/7, G52, J/72, 74; Scanlon 1965: 27, Fig. 4; 1971: 227, Pl. 5/b–d; 1984: 117, Figs 3–4; François 1999: 29–30, Figs 114–129, Pls 5/114–119, 13/3, 17/114). Items compatible with this typology were discovered at Fustat in Cairo, Kom el-Dikka, Kom el-Nadura, and Majestic in Alexandria. In Fustat, archaeologists digging in the 1960s and 1970s under the auspices of the American Research Center of Cairo unearthed large quantities of potsherds deriving from “Egyptian celadon” — almost 7000 specimens in September of 1968 alone, as juxtaposed with not more than 400 sherds of the Blue-Black-White type wares and almost 300 sherds of the Black Under Green Glaze Painted type (also called Silhouette

<sup>4</sup> The production of ceramics inspired by the Chinese *sancai*, or tricolor, wares, painted in streaks and spots with green, light and dark brown glazes developed at an earlier stage, in the 9th and 10th centuries, in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and in other parts of the Caliphate.

<sup>5</sup> That said traditionally, the Arabs did succeed in ascertaining the technological details of producing paper thanks to information extracted from Chinese prisoners taken at the battle of Talas Valley in 751 (Kennedy 2011: 252–253).

type) over the same period (Scanlon 1971: 225).<sup>6</sup>

Soon enough, imitations of Chinese celadon from museums and private collec-

tions began to be referenced (Grube 1976: 278–279, Fig. 224; Atıl 1981: 183–184, Cat. 92; Jenkins 1983: 28–29, Fig. 31; Soustiel 1985: 127, Fig. 137).

## THE KOM EL-DIKKA COLLECTION

The general description here presented of “Egyptian celadon” coming from the excavation site of the Polish–Egyptian Archaeological Mission at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria (in the period from the 1960s through the 1980s) is of a typological nature. No stratigraphic analysis could be carried out for lack of the original excavation documentation. Published parallels date the “Egyptian celadon” from Kom el-Dikka to the Mamluk era, approximately between 1300 and 1450, much like the specimens unearthed at Fustat (Scanlon 1984: 117, Fig. 3).

The collection of finds, numbering over 300 items, was examined by the present author in the summers of 2010 and 2012. This analysis was based on 235 distinct fragments of utilitarian wares, selected on account of their form, decorative traits, technical quality, possible technological flaws and, first and foremost, characteristics making them an imitation of Chinese celadon. As mentioned above, the imitative traits of Egyptian celadon derive primarily from color schemes and visual qualities of the glaze, as well as the style and deployment of decorative motifs, and these determined the present selection. None of the potsherds seem to feature any signatures or manufacturing marks to identify the makers.

The bodies of the Egyptian wares are made mostly of stoneware paste; they are rough to the touch, brittle, and general-

ly prone to deterioration. This 14th and 15th century fabric has been designated by Robert Mason as “porous granular stoneware” (Mason 2004: 204). Breaks typically reveal a beige color, less frequently white or, occasionally, red; the items most similar to the Chinese models have breaks of light grey. As far as the technological aspect is concerned, the best specimens are those with a white body (analogous to the Blue-Black-White type produced in the 14th century). Towards the end of the 15th century, wares were executed and finished with less attention and skill; bodies were fragile and crumbling, and glazes flawed.

The glaze of the “Egyptian celadon” is either transparent or dull (the latter enriched with tin compounds). It comes in a broad range of hues, spanning various shades of willow green, solid green with a turquoise or light blue tint, olive green, grassy green, and light grey. Statistically speaking, transparent glazes and tin glazes are balanced on the whole; transparent glazes were more likely to be used on wares decorated with underglaze incisions, and tin glazes on molded wares with relief decoration. Egyptian potters habitually applied double glazes in various shades of green. The first layer of inferior quality glaze served as a ground upon which the higher quality glaze was then poured so as to obtain the desired color and quality. It would appear that this second glaze was

<sup>6</sup> Of the sherds unearthed in September 1968 only Mamluk Red Clay Sgraffito and Slip Painted type sherds exceeded in quantity the celadon imitations.

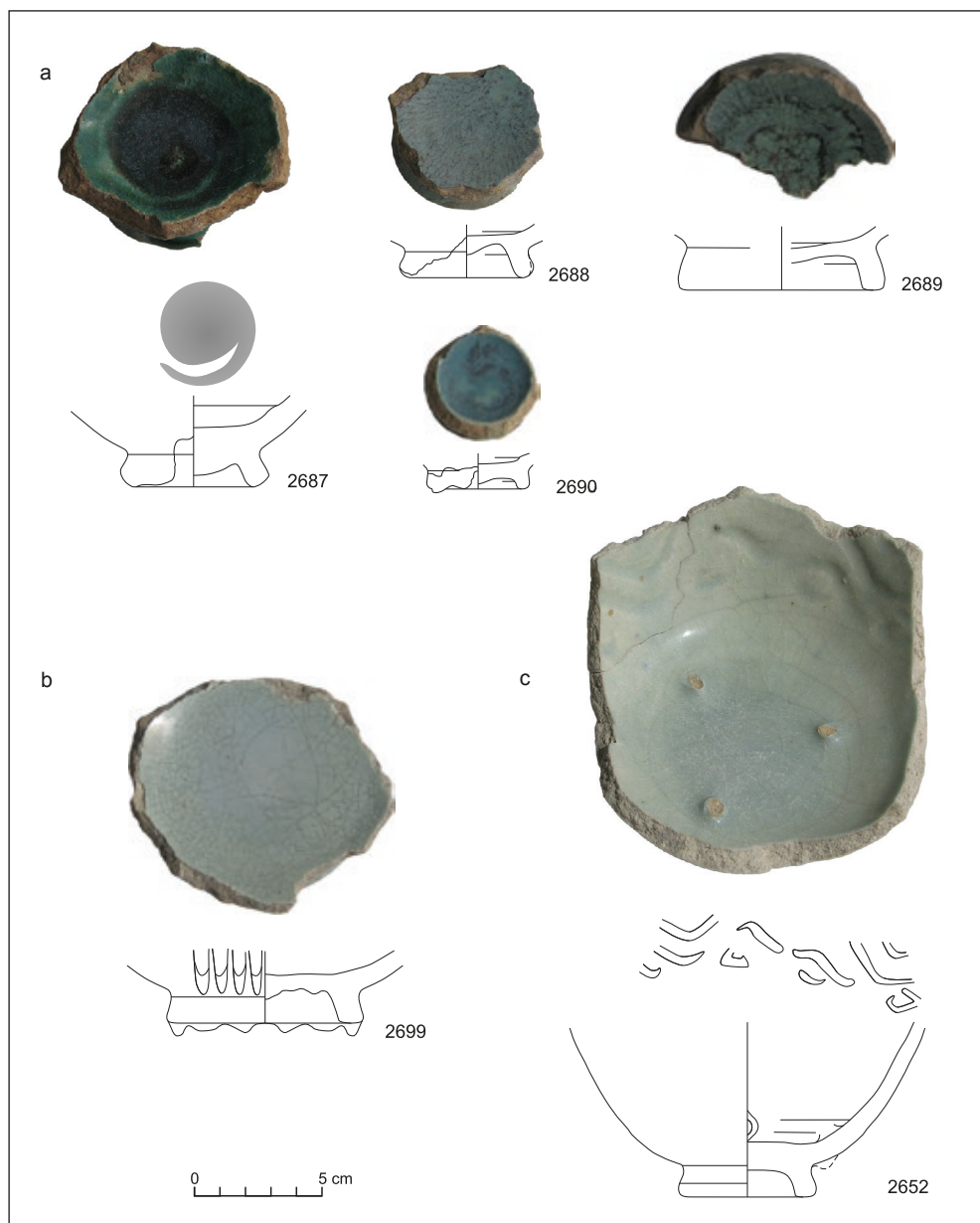


Fig. 2. Egyptian celadon examples from Kom el-Dikka: a – bowl and small bowl bottoms with concentric and linear copper coloration streaks; b – bowl bottom “adorned” with crackelure; c – fragment of a small vase bearing traces of a tripod stand (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak, drawing K. Pawłowska, digitizing K. Danyś)



applied in copious quantities, with the bottoms of some bowls and small bowls covered with a coat several millimeters thick. The outer side of the bottom usually received a layer of the ground glaze, whatever remained after the application of the first layer. The outer walls of the wares, around the base, often display purple streaks resulting from the precipitation of copper pigments, attesting to an admixture of copper oxide, carbonate or sulphate used to obtain the color of the glaze (Atıl 1981: 183–184, Fig. 92). On a few of the Kom el-Dikka specimens, this precipitation of copper pigments yielded aesthetic results which, while quite appealing, were probably unintended [Fig. 2:a].

Egyptian potters also succeeded in obtaining a fine cracking effect (crackelure), which was appreciated in the Chinese ceramic craft as an ornamental effect [Fig. 2:b].

The same workshops which produced Egyptian imitations of Chinese celadon also turned out Mamluk ceramics of the Blue-Black-White (BBW) and Blue-White types, as suggested by the odd accidental splashes of black and cobalt blue in evidence on the Kom el-Dikka wares. The ceramics were subjected to a single firing session at approximately 1300–1400°C, which used a tripod stand in the case of bowls (traces of which can be discerned on many of the potsherds) [Fig. 2:c].

## TYPOLOGY

Egyptian imitations of Chinese celadon found at Kom el-Dikka may be divided into two typological groups based on shape, glaze coloring and ornamentation. One group consists of vessels inspired by Chinese prototypes, the other of wares belonging to indigenous Egyptian ceramics with Chinese celadon characteristics.

### GROUP INSPIRED BY CHINESE PROTOTYPES

In terms of shapes, the first group referred to above is comprised of goblets on a high foot, cups on a high foot, cone-shaped lids, slender beakers, and bowls with flat or carinated bottoms and perpendicularly formed walls topped with an everted rim, bowls with notched rim edges, and bowls with fluting on the inner and outer walls. Odd pieces within this group comprise a fragment of a small jug with dragon-shaped handles and fragments of three artifacts of unknown function.

### Forms

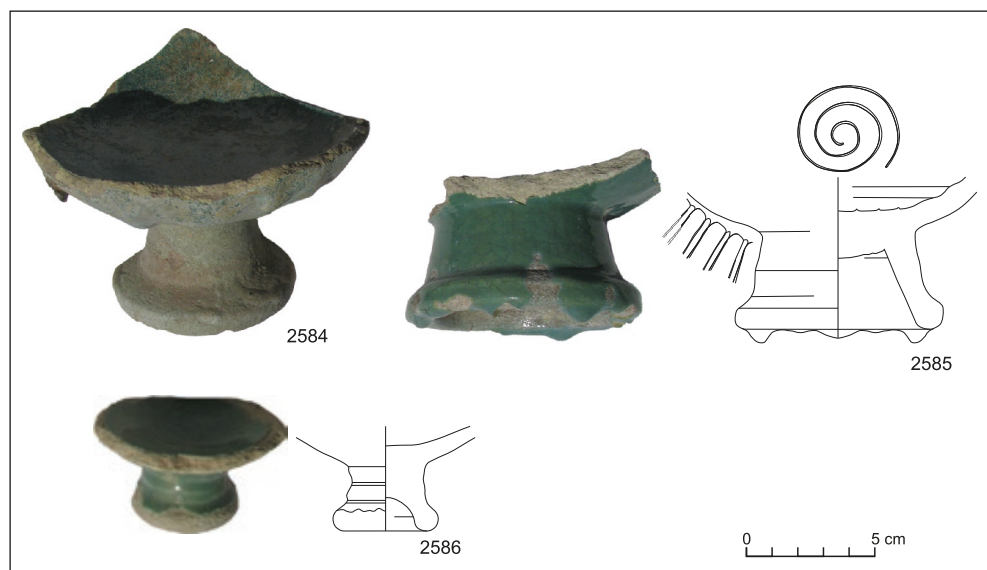
Goblets seem to have been a popular vessel during the Mamluk era, occurring in all the types of Mamluk ceramic ware. The Chinese models for these vessels are present in Chinese Celadon wares (Gompertz 1980: 205, Fig. 115a) as well as in the exhibition catalogue *Blåvitt. Blue and White. Mavi Beyaz* (Houby-Nielsen 2008: 66). The Egyptian goblet usually consists of a bowl supported on a conical foot, oftentimes with a protruding element molded at the center of the stem. The Kom el-Dikka excavations have yielded several dozen fragments of feet with such molded swellings, but precious few fragments of the goblet bowls [Fig. 3]. Based on what we have, it may be surmised that the bowls of the goblet on high feet tended to be hemispherical or flattened, with walls curving toward the bottom; the edges, meanwhile, were rolled into a welt or had an everted rim. The goblet

fragments from Kom el-Dikka are covered with olive green, willow green, light grey, or greenish glaze. In some instances, the stoneware paste from which the bodies of the vessels were shaped is grey, as it would be in Chinese celadon. Many of the goblet bowls were decorated on the inside with a stamped rosette/chrysanthemum and with incised interweaving elements on the outer walls. The outer surface of one goblet bowl fragment is molded in fluting (called also a lotus petals motif), a very popular motif in Mamluk art with Chinese lineage. In some cases the rim edges were decorated with notches [see *Fig. 3*].

Knobbed stems recall the Egyptian Mamluk *ka's* cup at the Louvre (Ettinghausen 1974: 63, *Fig. 16*; Soustiel 1985: 127–128, *Fig. 137*), indicating that such vessels were produced in imitation of Chinese celadon (Gompertz 1980: 205, *Fig. 115a*). They consisted of a straight-rimmed bowl

mounted upon a high conical foot with a protruding element (knob) in the middle. None of the “Egyptian celadon” sherds from Kom el-Dikka could be definitively associated with such a cup; the foot fragments with the distinctive swellings may have belonged either to goblets or to cups [*Fig. 4:a*].

Two lids found at Kom el-Dikka are of a form which is innovative in Egyptian Mamluk ceramics, most Egyptian lids assuming rather a domed or hemispherical shape. A Chinese vase with a hemispherical lid topped by a fluted conical knob (Gompertz 1980: 151, *Fig. 73*) may have been the inspiration for Egyptian potters in this case. The Kom el-Dikka lids are made of stoneware ceramic paste, light grey in color for the smaller one and red for the larger. The smaller lid has willow green glaze with copper precipitations visible in the flutes. The larger lid has a tin glaze of



*Fig. 3A. Forms of the First Group: goblets (diagnostic elements) (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak, drawing K. Pawłowska, digitizing K. Danyś)*





Fig. 3B. *Forms of the First Group: goblets (diagnostic elements) (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak, drawing K. Pawłowska, digitizing K. Danyś)*

turquoise color. The difference in their dimensions notwithstanding, both lids are tiny, not to say miniature; they would probably have been used as lids for flasks used to hold medicine or cosmetics. Their unglazed bottoms have specially shaped grooves which would fit into the tops of flasks. These lids and one more item (a small bowl) are the only pieces imitating Chinese celadon from Kom el-Dikka to be preserved in their entirety [Fig. 4:b].

Much like bowls, beakers were not a new form in Egyptian ceramics, although their forms as produced during the Tulunid and Ayyubid eras (respectively in the 9th and in the 12th/13th centuries) were slightly different.<sup>7</sup> The Mamluk period in Egypt was one in which beakers were produced in large amounts, probably under the influence of the Muslim lands to the East. While beakers also occur among the Sgraff/Slip Painted ceramics of red clay



Fig. 4. *Forms of the First Group: a – knobbed goblet or cup stems; b – conical flask lids (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak, drawing K. Pawłowska, digitizing K. Danyś)*

<sup>7</sup> Earlier on, during the Ayyubid period, ceramic beakers were generally tall and narrow, on a low foot flaring at the bottom. Meanwhile, a shape similar to the “Egyptian celadon” vessels described here was common among glass beakers painted with varicolored enamel.

and in the Blue-Black-White type, the greatest quantities of beakers were produced in the form of celadon imitations, indicating a high level of consumer demand.

Gompertz (1980: 137, Fig. 68a) presents a celadon beaker of almost cylindrical shape with an overall slenderness and a pronounced narrowing of its wall towards the bottom that became a typical characteristic of Egyptian beakers imitating celadon (Scanlon 1984: 117, Fig. 3). Apart from that, Egyptian vessels are notable for a relatively free hand in shaping the ring foot, which widens usually toward the bottom, occasionally embellished with a protruding or recessed element above the ring. The outer bottoms are glazed, with a conical protrusion in the center formed on the wheel. Walls are either smooth or fluted; incidentally, these flutes constitute the only decorative element in this group of items. The glaze on these vessels is either transparent green or light turquoise tin, usually applied in two layers; the interiors were covered with glaze of an inferior kind, while more care and color effects were lavished on the outer walls. If drops of glaze happened to flow down to the edge of the foot rim in the course of firing, producing unwanted bulges, these were then knocked off; unless, that is, the bottom of the beaker turned out to be uneven, in which case a drop of excess glaze left in a strategic location made for added stability. Most of the illustrated vessel fragments are from the 14th century and are made of white and beige stoneware ceramic paste; the vessels with a red stoneware body and weak glazing are dated rather to the 15th century [Fig. 5:a].

The Kom el-Dikka finds include some fragments of bowls that are Egyptian imi-

tations of a Chinese bowl with a flat bottom progressing at right angles into a low, straight wall and concluding with a broadly everted rim (Gompertz 1980: 138, Fig. 69). These are made of a stoneware ceramic mass. The smaller bowl fragment is covered with transparent green glaze and has a notched rim. The larger of the two has a willow green glaze with minor tin inclusions and a greyish hue; its outer wall was pressed to produce vertical fluting and also featured bulging rings. It should be borne in mind here that the glazed and decorated open form ceramic vessels characteristic of Islamic lands generally stood upon ring foots, so the flat bottom seen here is a formal innovation. The specimens shown here may have been intended for use as *zubdiyya*, that is, smaller bowls for serving sauce or liquefied fat (Zaza 1967: 43) [Fig. 5:b].

Decorative notching of the rims of “Egyptian celadon” bowls is another innovative stylistic trait. Gompertz cites a considerable number of Chinese models (Gompertz 1980: 97, Fig. 34a, 100, Fig. 37/a–b, 111, Fig. 45, 134, Fig. 65, 163, Fig. 82/a, 184, Fig. 98a). The rim incisions on the Chinese wares were made at equal intervals and the Egyptian potters adopted a similar practice, cutting a V-shaped notch and, on the inner wall beneath this, shaving off a layer of the body so as to form a slight hollow which ensured equal glazing in the course of firing. The Kom el-Dikka dig has yielded fragments of large bowls decorated with similar incisions, most of them covered with a thick layer of glaze [Fig. 6:a].

Many Chinese celadon wares—foremost vases with lids, goblets of various sizes, bowls, and beakers—feature molded fluting of the inner and/or outer surfaces (Gompertz 1980: 141, Fig. 71, 184, Fig.

98/a–b, 185, Fig. 99b). Egyptian imitations of such vessels (jugs, little jugs, bowls, cups, beakers of varying sizes, lids and candle holders) have been excavated in large quantities at Fustat during the 1920s, as well as in the 1960s and 1970s (Bahgat 1922: Pls 73, 107/1; Bahgat and Massoul 1930: 69–70, Pls 54/1,5, 57/5, 61/7?, G/51, J/72; Scanlon 1984: 115–126, Figs 3–4). Similarly at Kom el-Dikka, where finds of fluted utilitarian vessels were also abundant: pieces of all and sundry beakers, jugs, miniature jugs and bowls of varying dimensions. Fluted beakers have already been discussed above. Fluted jugs formed

an important and seldom encountered category. They were of ovoid or baluster shape with vertical fluting, either straight or slightly diagonal. The jug fragments excavated at Kom el-Dikka are of a high technological quality [Fig. 6:b].

Fluting was also used to decorate small jugs with bulging bodies and short necks ending in straight or rolled rims. The fragments of such vessels found at Kom el-Dikka constitute fine imitations of their Chinese models in terms of color and glaze quality [Fig. 7].

Fluting on open-form vessels occurred on bowls, in some cases on the outer as well

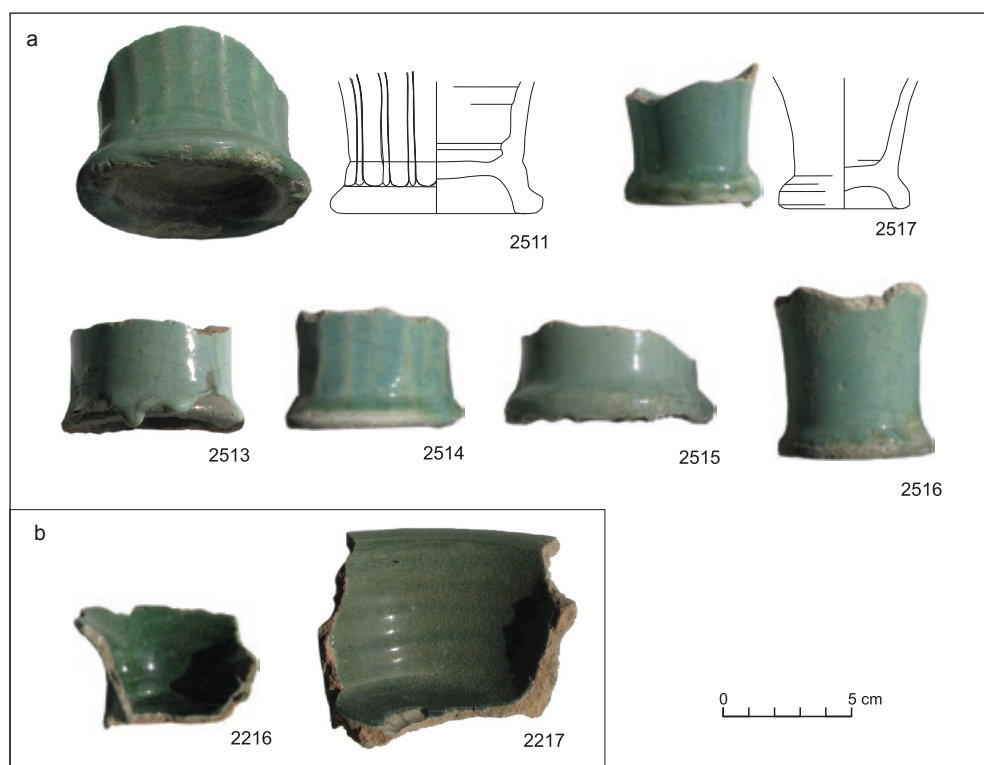


Fig. 5. *Forms of the First Group: a – beakers; b – bowl and small bowl with flat bottoms, straight walls and everted rims (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak, drawing K. Pawłowska, digitizing K. Danys)*

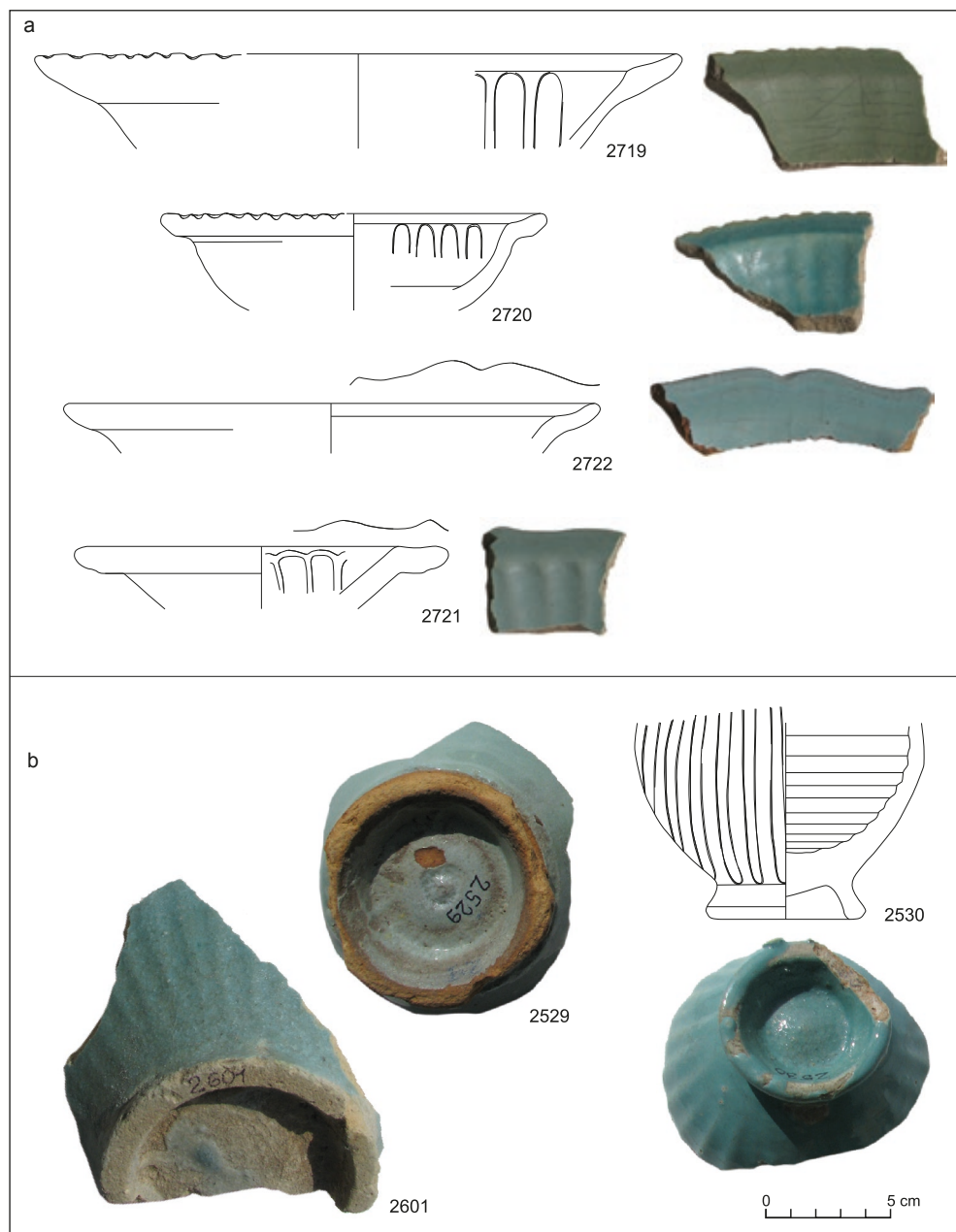


Fig. 6. Forms of the First Group: a – bowls with decoratively incised rim edges; b – jugs decorated with fluting (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak, drawing K. Pawłowska, digitizing K. Danys)



as the inner surfaces. Interestingly enough, fluted decoration was applied on vessels ranging in size from the very small to the very large. In the case of bowls, fluting would have been a popular embellishment in that they made for a rosette, a favorite decoration in Mamluk ceramics. In some cases, the reverse side of a bowl was also accentuated with incised lines in a rosette arrangement. Large bowls of this sort would have probably been used to serve big portions of cereals or meat, as seen, for example, in the feasting scene in the miniature illustrating *Maqamat* by Hariri in the St Petersburg manuscript from approximately 1225 (Ettinghausen 1962: 113) [Fig. 8].

The Kom el-Dikka finds include fragments of three items whose nature and use evade us [Fig. 9]. The vessel top to the left resembles a cup upon a slightly expanding ring foot. The stoneware ceramic body is beige in color; the outside is covered with turquoise tin glaze, and the inside was not

glazed completely. The body of this mysterious vessel bears traces of perforations at three points along the upper edge of the preserved fragment; an aperture some 1.3 cm wide and of unknown height was located 1.7 cm from the base and, above this, 3 cm from the base, there were two small glazed incisions. The fragment is too small, and the apertures too irregularly spaced, to enable an educated guess as to the shape or designated use of the vessel [Fig. 9:a].

The second unidentified fragment is most likely a stand comprised of a circular base and four vertical supports with fluting on the outside (conceivably, these would have been joined at the top with a clamp of some sort). The preserved part of the wall and the bottom are covered with turquoise tin glaze, with copper discolorations; the top of the base and a ring between the supports were left unglazed. This fragment was probably used as a support for another vessel, the latter possibly with a spiked



Fig. 7. *Forms of the First Group: small jug rims, also with fluted walls (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak)*



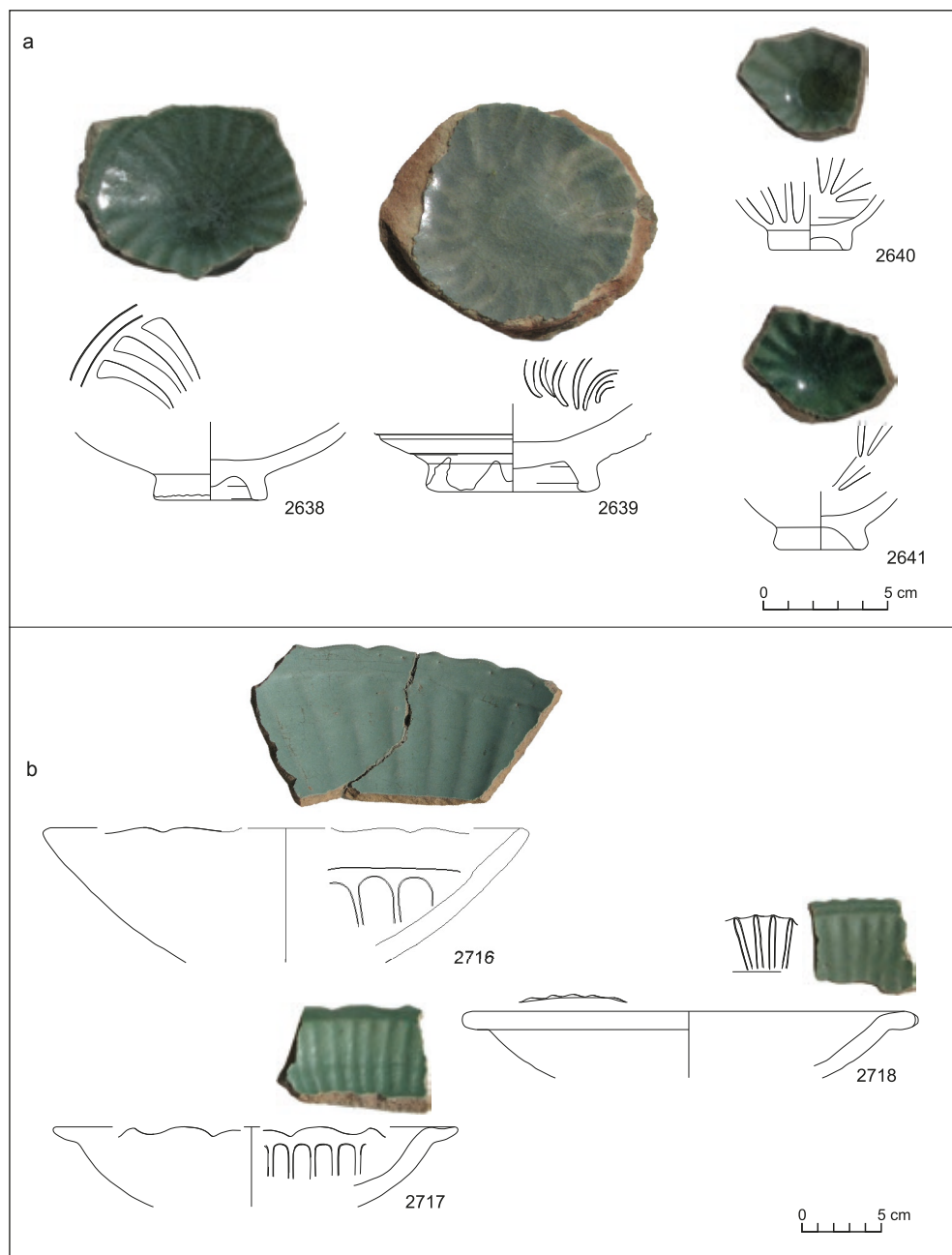


Fig. 8. *Forms of the First Group: bowls fluted inside (a) and on the walls (b) (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak, drawing K. Pawłowska, digitizing K. Danys)*

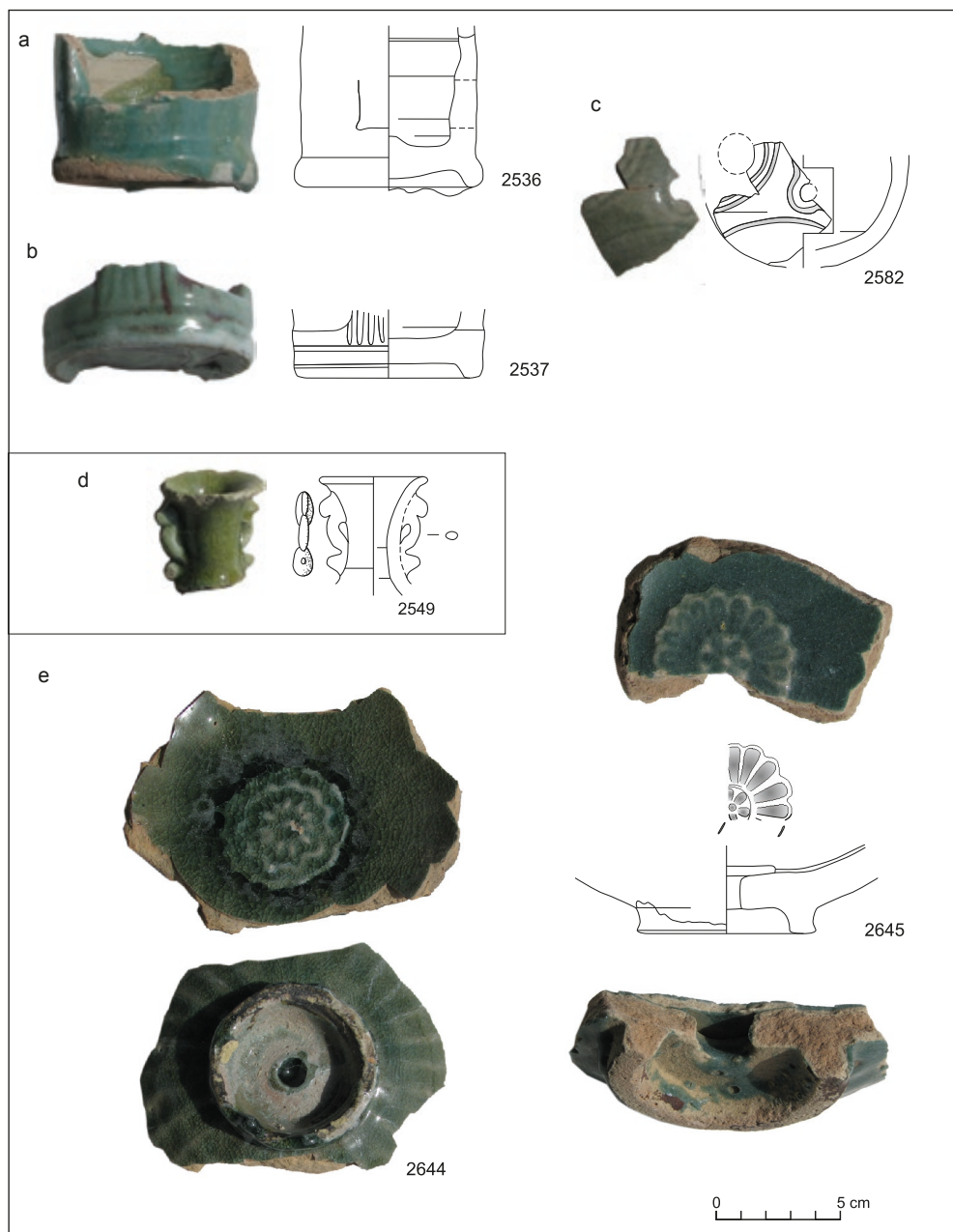


Fig. 9. Mystery vessels: a–c – examples of decoration on vessels from the First Group; d – Chinese-style small jug fragment; e – bowls decorated with appliqué rosettes/chrysanthemums (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak, drawing K. Pawłowska, digitizing K. Dąbys)

ending, hence the additional clamp. It may also have served as a stand for an incense burner; the heat generated by the burner would explain the unglazed sections. One may add at this point that throughout the ages Chinese craftsmen had turned out wooden or metal stands for all kinds of ceramic, glass, metal, stone, lacque and ivory wares [Fig. 9:b].

The third is a fragment of a bulging, spherical or hemispherical object with traces of small, round perforations at the edges. It is made of greyish brown stoneware ceramic, glazed on both sides, with incised lines on the outside and incised rings around the apertures. This may have been a lid for an incense burner [Fig. 9:c].

### Decoration

A fragment of a small jug found at Kom el-Dikka bespeaks Chinese influences at work in its making. The top of the neck is everted, chalice-like, and has been augmented with two handles stylized to resemble Chinese mythological beasts, either dragons or phoenixes (although the reference could also be to altogether more common creatures, namely fish). Zoomorphic handles of this sort were used to decorate Chinese jugs of the *kinuta* (hammer) type, a category of celadon (Gompertz 1980: 157, Fig. 78, Pl. G, 161, Fig. 80, 166, Fig. 84a). The characteristics of these jugs included a cylindrical main body and slightly sloping shoulders proceeding into a high, cylindrical neck with two zoomorphic handles and a flatly everted, broad pouring rim.

The small jug from Kom el-Dikka departs from this archetype in the shape of its pouring rim. The main body, now lost, probably had an ovoid shape that was popular in Egyptian ceramics. The handles

were shaped in a mold before being stuck onto the body, which was beige after firing and was covered with an olive green transparent glaze [Fig. 9:d].

Appliqué rosettes-cum-chrysanthemums are among the most interesting decoration used on “Egyptian celadons”, in formal terms as well as by virtue of the means of execution. They are the foremost example of Chinese inspiration in the ornamental sphere.

They were found in the Fustat excavations (Scanlon 1971: 227, Pl. 5). The Kom el-Dikka finds include several bowl fragments with decoration of this sort. The photographs in the exhibition catalogue *Blåvitt. Blue and White. Mavi Beyaz* show Chinese celadon bowls with appliqué chrysanthemums, wasters from their firing, and Egyptian imitations (Houby-Nielsen 2008: 46, Fig. 10, 24, Fig. 12, 44, Fig. 7, 71, Fig. 2, 103, Fig. 24, 123). In Chinese art, chrysanthemums symbolize continuity in perseverance and long life. Meanwhile, a six- or eight-petalled rosette was a Mamluk heraldic device associated with the Qalaun family of sultans (1290–1293); it was not associated, however, with the Egyptian celadon imitations under discussion, but with Sgraff/Slip Painted wares instead (Mayer 1933: 24–25).

The presumed production method was for the body of a chrysanthemum bowl to be built up from stoneware paste around a rod of approximately 1 cm in diameter spinning on a potter’s wheel (thanks to this device, the aperture at the bottom of the bowl was stable). At the same time, more ceramic paste was used to mold a chrysanthemum. After the bowl (replete with its ring foot) had been formed, it received a layer of glaze on the inside and outside, as did both sides of the chrysanthemum.

The glazed chrysanthemum was then carefully applied over the aperture at the bottom of the bowl. During firing, the glaze at the bottom of the bowl intermingled and hardened with the glaze on the underside of the chrysanthemum, permanently attaching the decoration, while any excess glazing flowed out through the aperture.

The chrysanthemum bowl fragments found on Kom el-Dikka comprise a number of bowl bottoms. The rosette-cum-chrysanthemums decorating them are of varied shape and thickness. The bodies were

shaped from stoneware paste of white as well as red color and covered with transparent green glaze of various hues or with turquoise or green tin glaze. The thick-walled bowls seem to be flawed technically, as suggested by the fact that some of the chrysanthemums have become unstuck from the underlying bowl body [Fig. 9:e].

The bowls and small bowls with rosette/chrysanthemum decorations applied by stamping were surely less labor-intensive. Several dozen fragments of such vessels — bottoms and pieces of walls — were

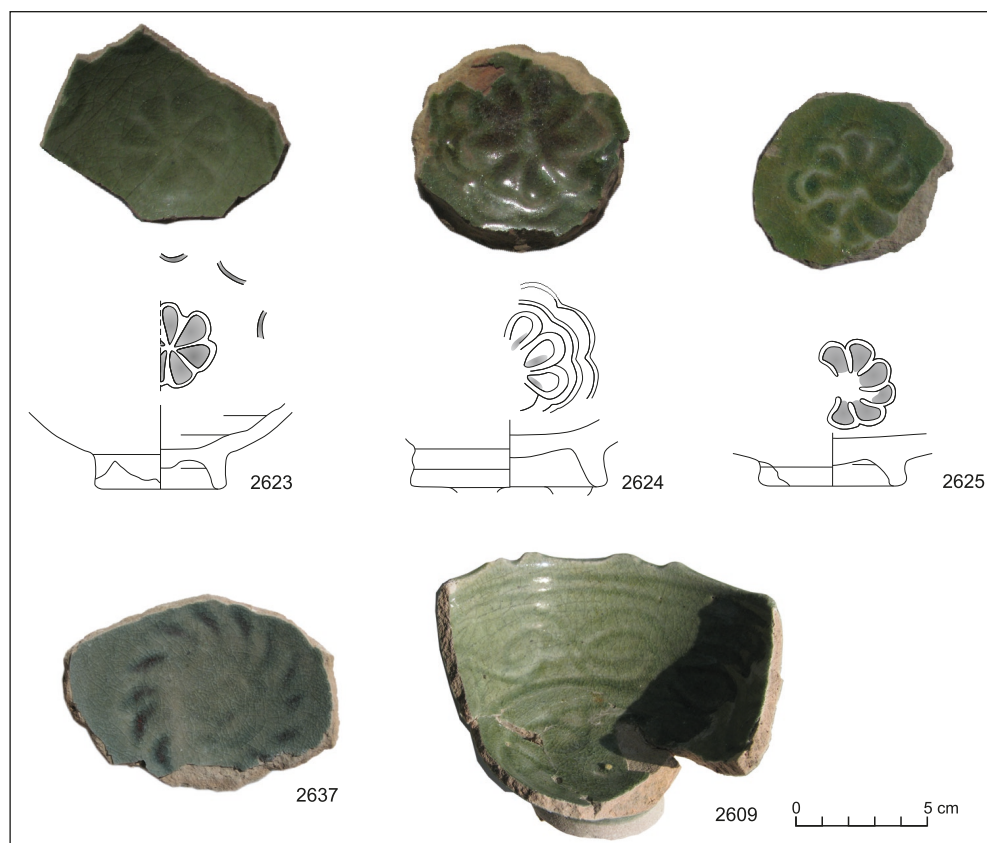


Fig. 10. Examples of decoration on vessels from the First Group: top row, bowls decorated with stamped rosettes; bottom row, bowls with whirling rosettes (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/ photos M. Redlak, drawing K. Pawłowska, digitizing K. Danyś)

discovered at Kom el-Dikka [Fig. 10:a]. The rosettes varied in shape and in the degree of care exercised in their execution: some were painstakingly stamped into the body of the bowl, while others are barely discernible underneath the glaze. The petals

of the rosettes are rounded, spiked, or tipped with a straight line (making the design as a whole evocative of a windmill). In some cases, the rosette petals touch one another and in others they are separated; in some instances, they are arranged

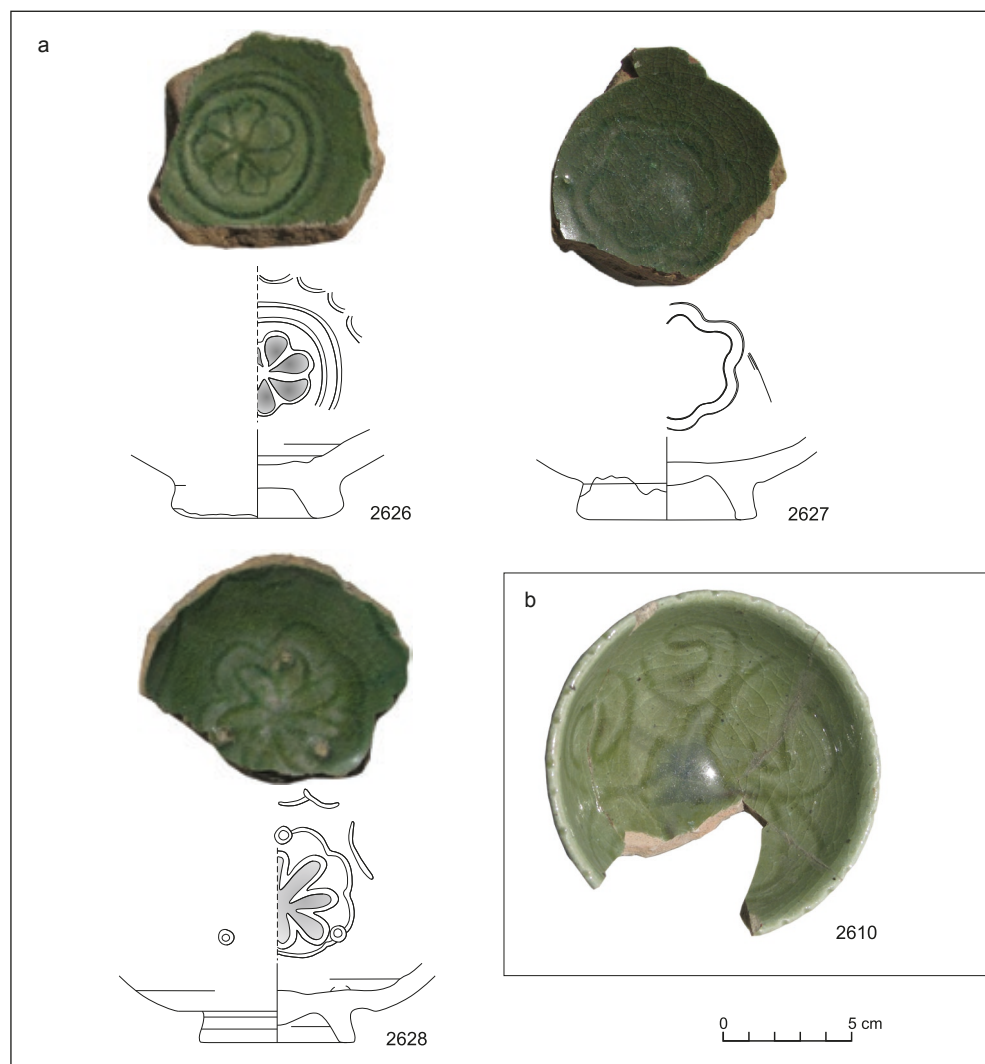


Fig. 11. Examples of decoration on vessels from the First Group: a – bowls decorated with incised rosettes and latticework; b – bowl decorated with crescents at the tips of radiating rosette (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak, drawing K. Pawłowska, digitizing K. Danyś)



diagonally into a “whirling rosette” shape [Fig. 10:*b*]. Some of the rounded petals have a double outline. Occasionally, the compositions forego a central element altogether, making do with a rosette-shaped contour reminiscent of a medallion. If the stamp was firmly applied to a body of white stoneware ceramic paste, the resulting rosette featured white color accents in the petal outlines.

One bowl fragment in which the side-wall has been preserved provides clues regarding the decoration beyond the rosette. These were usually incised circles of a double interweaving motif with circular or oval rings; other motifs included tendrils, leaves, and Chinese meanders. In some instances, a “lambrequin” rosette outline separated the interweaving outer decoration from the central rosette



Fig. 12. Examples of decoration in relief on vessels from the First Group (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak)



(Scanlon 1971: 227, Pl. 5; 1984: 117, Figs 3–4) [Fig. 10:c].

A considerable part of the Kom el-Dikka finds comprised fragments of bowls and small bowls decorated exclusively with incised motifs. The central motif on the bottom was usually a rosette with narrow petals, a radiating rosette or a radiating “whirling rosette”; these were executed in free form, sometimes schematic and sometimes rather haphazard [Fig. 11:a]. An interesting take on this form of decoration are crescents at the tips of a radiating rosette on a fragment of hemispherical small bowl [Fig. 11:b].

Chinese celadon vessels often featured decoration in relief. This effect was obtained either through forming in a mold (or, in the case of vessels with bulging walls, in two molds) or through painstaking, deep incision work on the bodies prior to glazing and firing (Gompertz 1980: Pl. C, 104–105, Figs 40–41, 116, Fig. 50; Gyllensvärd 1975: Fig. 20). In many places, details of the relief motifs are accentuated with thin incised lines produced with a special tool resembling a comb. The contours of the motifs were formed in the *champlevé* technique so as to produce shading effects in the colored glaze. One surmises that wares of this sort also exerted their influence on Egyptian craftsmen, particularly seeing as, in ages past, relief decorations were rare in Egyptian art.

Among the stoneware ceramic sherds with monochromatic glazing in various celadon hues one can distinguish a group of jug, bowl, and goblet fragments with relief decorations (mostly in the appliqué and mold-forming techniques). Applied elements of ceramic paste rolls and knobs were stuck onto the wet body in simple patterns. Molded decoration presented projections

in the desired places or, in some instances, continuous patterns (which were covered by the glaze, such as the pineapple peel design also known from Chinese celadon; Gompertz 1980: 76, Fig. 27a–b). The linear incisions upon the applications may be construed as a reference to the comb incisions upon Chinese celadon [Fig. 12].

#### INDIGENOUS EGYPTIAN CERAMICS WITH CHINESE CELADON CHARACTERISTICS

The second group in the collection of Egyptian imitations of Chinese celadons from Kom el-Dikka is comprised of fragments of vessels of traditional forms in widespread use in Egypt for centuries, but glazed in a manner clearly imitative of Chinese wares. The imitation is so close that it merits consideration in the present context. This group comprises a considerable number of bowls, small bowls, beakers, and oil lamps, as well as the less common *albarello* and *sirinja* vessels and spherical–conical receptacles covered with glazes the quality and colors of which place them among the celadons. These fragments are generally monochromatic and, barring one exception, undecorated.

#### Form

The largest item group among the Kom el-Dikka finds comprises monochromatic bottoms of bowls, small bowls, and cups as well as occasional walls from such vessels [Fig. 13]. The colors of their tin glazes present a fine imitation of Chinese monochromatic celadon of a variety produced in large numbers as well as affirming stylistics of Mamluk imitations.

Two *zubdiyya* bowls made of stoneware ceramic paste covered with turquoise tin

glaze assume the forms dated to the Fatimid era (969–1171) – a hemispherical body resting upon a ring foot, one of bowls with straight rim, the second one with everted rim. The widespread and long lasting use of these forms in Egypt confirms the traditionalism in native ceramics. Notwithstanding, bowls of these shapes have long

been common among Chinese celadon, attesting to the ubiquity of both particular forms [Figs 14, 15].

The container/jug of *albarello* type, used for storing spices, has a distinctive shape with the main body evocative of a bamboo stem section, a flattened bottom and shoulders, a small ring foot, and

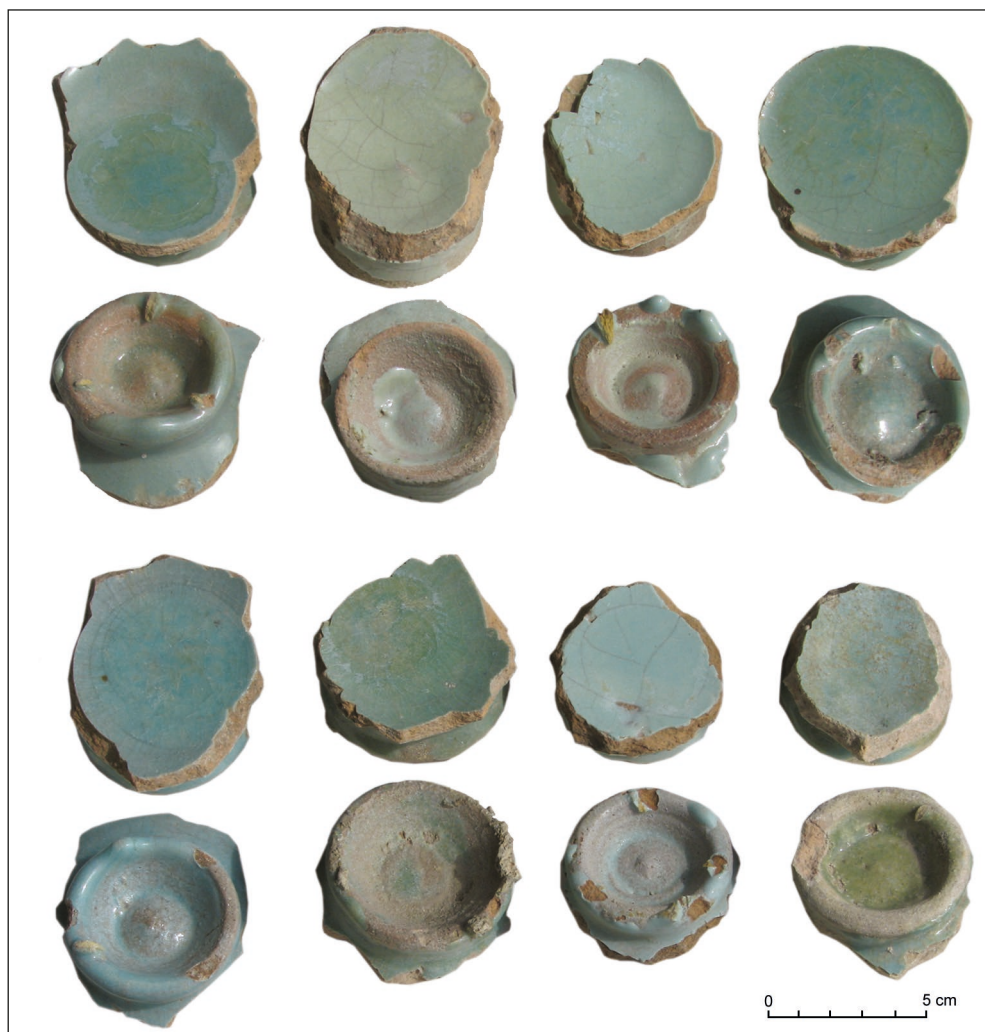


Fig. 13. Examples of decoration on vessels from the Second Group: bowls glazed monochromatically (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photos M. Redlak)

a low, narrow neck ending in a rolled rim. *Albarelo*-type receptacles became a fixture in Islamic ceramics, particularly in lands around the Mediterranean Sea, in the 13th century.

The Kom el-Dikka artifacts include several fragments of *albarelo* spice containers. The illustrated pieces are made of stoneware paste; after firing, the body of one assumed a light red color, and the other turned beige. A double layer of dull turquoise glaze was applied to the entire vessel. The main body is accentuated with flutes. The smaller *albarelo* has a drilled hole which was used to wire the vessel together after it had broken or cracked; this suggests that the vessel was once a valued possession [Fig. 16:a].

The *sirinja*, a bowl subdivided into seven compartments or small bowls, was a distinctive vessel in the Arabic lands and in Iran. It was used for serving seven dishes, the names of which commenced with the letter *sin* as part of the Nouruz or New Year's celebrations on March 21, the day of the spring equinox. Six compartments are arranged rosette-like around the central

seventh one. The color and quality of the glaze suggest that this *sirinja* was made at a workshop which produced celadon imitations. Illustrated is a fragment of the central compartment with parts of two surrounding ones [Fig. 16:b].

The Islamic Art Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw include an oil lamp in the shape of a small jug made in Egypt sometime during the 14th century, measuring 13.4 cm by 11 cm and representing type I in the Fustat typology (Kubiak 1970: 13–15, Fig. 11/a–b) [Fig. 16:c]. It is an excellent example of a Mamluk lamp preserved in its entirety. Its turquoise glaze features the crackles characteristic of celadon and its imitations.

### Decoration

One of the bowl bottoms found at Kom el-Dikka features original decoration comprised of a tripartite tondo with lines filling out the central band [Fig. 16:d]. This schematically rendered tondo may have been derived from the heraldic round shields frequently found on Mam-



Fig. 14. Hemispherical bowl (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photo M. Redlak)



Fig. 15. Bowl with everted rim (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photo M. Redlak)

luk ceramics of the Sgraff/Slip Painted type. To follow this train of thought, the lines in the central field would be in lieu of an inscription. Such an inscriptive coat-of-arms was popular especially

during the reign of the Burji Mamluks. The remaining traits of this preserved vessel bottom place it in the category of Egyptian imitations of Chinese celadon.

## RECAPITULATION

The article presents a general description of one of several stylistically distinct types of glazed ceramics produced during the

Mamluk era. Apart from these “Egyptian celadons”, Mamluk pottery during the 14th century was dominated by Sgraff/Slip



Fig. 16. Examples of Egyptian indigenous wares with Chinese celadon characteristics: a – albarell-type containers; b – sirinja bowl with seven compartments; c – oil lamp (National Museum in Warsaw SKAZsz 3521); d – bowl bottom with incised decoration presenting stylized Mamluk heraldic round shield, from the collection of the (National Museum in Warsaw/photos M. Redlak; c – P. Ligier; drawing K. Pawłowska, digitizing E. Czyżewska-Zalewska)

Painted wares, which largely accounted for the tableware and furnishings of Mamluk noble houses. Another line of wares comprised the Blue-Black-White vessels painted in various patterns and motifs; surviving examples testify to the exceptionally rich ornamentation cultivated in Islamic art at the time. Come the 15th century, utilitarian and architectural ceramics of the Blue-White type came to the fore; of course, this was another Islamic adaptation of a Chinese model, with inspiration for the shapes and decorations of these wares derived from blue-and-white *qing hua* (blue flower) porcelain.

These newer trends notwithstanding, production of Egyptian ceramics imitating Chinese celadon continued. It is this consistent production of “Egyptian celadon”, along with the stylistic appeal of these vessels which fuelled the output of monochromatic wares of stoneware paste covered with tin glaze or transparent glaze of blue, white, brown, purple, green, or turquoise color, fragments of which were discovered at Kom el-Dikka. Some of them feature notched edges, fluted walls and relief applications, but their color schemes are inconsistent with the Chinese celadon archetypes.

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