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GLASS FINDS FROM THE BASILICA IN MAREA, 2018

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Archaeological excavations conducted at the Basilica produced almost a hundred glass vessels fragments. In addition, a few shards of windowpanes, a piece of a bangle, and a half of a circular glass weight, with an Arabic inscription, have also come to light. The collected assemblage runs from the 4th through the 8th century AD. Most of the vessels were made of naturally-coloured glass of bluish-green and various shades of green. Strongly coloured and colourless glass was observed only in a few cases.

In general, the fabric is of inferior quality, very often with countless rounded and elongated bubbles, blowing spirals, occasionally with deformations and black impurities. Almost all of the collected shards exhibit various degrees of surface weathering. Most of them show a creamy/white enamel weathering, a layer of silver and peacock iridescence, black spots, some have sand deposit, particularly those found in the cistern (Fig. 1; room no. 54). Many fragments are weathered to such an extent that their original colour cannot be detected. The uniformity in colour, distinctive low quality of the glass, simple workmanship, limited variety of vessel types and lack of attention to detail, seems to indicate that all the glass found during excavations, except for one vessel, was made in local glass workshops operating in or around the ancient city, from material undoubtedly brought from a single primary production site. Glass finds retrieved from this season derive primarily from the fill and debris within the building, cisterns and sondages.

Much of the assemblage was made up of various types of free-blown, undecorated, entirely utilitarian in nature containers, poorly fashioned as flasks, bottles, and a jug dated to the 4th – 6th century AD. They

can be identified mainly by their long or short cylindrical, and conical necks with infolded or rounded rims, concave bases, and a handle. Their bodies are assumed to have been either spherical or cylindrical [Figs. 2, 3, found in room no. 54]. However, most of these receptacles have narrow necks for nothing but liquids, those with wide cylindrical necks may signify storage vessels for semi-liquid substances [Fig. 3]. Decoration, if present at all, is very simple and limited to the applied trails of the same colour as the main body of the vessel, protruding from its surface [Fig. 4, found in room no. 13].

Among other glasses present at the assemblage one should mention lamps. They are represented by two types of specimens dated to the 5th – 7th century AD, well attested at the site and on many Egyptian sites. Among them is the fragment of a side wall and a handle of a thin walled tumbler-shaped lamp made of low quality green glass, with a hollow, out-folded rim [Fig. 5, found in room no. 2]. Usually this type of lighting device is equipped with three short, trail ear-shaped handles with a broad uneven base, drawn from the body up to the rim, arranged in a triangle, each with an oval section. Excavations at the Basilica have also revealed few detached handles of green glass, as well as one example made of blue glass.¹ Fragments of such lamps either freestanding on a flat surface, or suspended by its handles by metal hooks, have been already attested at the site, at the

¹ Strongly coloured glass, as dark blue, emerald green or purple are extremely rare at Marea. They have been observed on vessels of a rare type, including the *eulogia* bottle (late 6th – early 7th century AD) and windowpanes of the early Islamic date (9th – 10th century AD), including flat and circular (bull's eye) type.

bath (Kucharczyk 2008, 133-134, Fig. 46:36) and in the Basilica (Kucharczyk 2005b, 55-56, Fig. 1:11; Babraj, Drzymuchowska, Willburger 2014, 6). They are also reported from the Kom el-Dikka site in Alexandria and many other sites in Egypt (Kucharczyk 2007a, 49-50, Fig. 2:4-5; 2010, 63-64, Fig. 5:4-6, 8-10; 2016, 93).

The second type represents a bowl-shaped lamp with a solid stem flattened on one side, with a tooled rounded, deep depression on its lower part [Fig. 6]. Such lamps were usually inserted in a *polycandela* tray, used to hold multiple light sources, or they were suspended independently with the help of a metal ring, hanging from hooks by chains or wire. Significant quantities of this type of lamp found at the site, a striking uniformity of shape and decoration, marked similarities in the quality of glass fabric, and additionally a few malformed stems, argue strongly in favour of their local manufacture, not only by a single workshop from the same batch of glass, but even by the same hand. Lamps with this peculiar decoration, observed with some frequency at the site but not elsewhere, could be considered perhaps as some sort of regional "trademark" (for finds from Marea, see Kucharczyk 2004, 63-64, Fig. 1:1-4; 2005b, 55-56, Fig. 1: 4-7; 2007b, 73-74, Fig. 3:2-4; 2008, 133, Fig. 46:33-35; Babraj, Szymańska, Drzymuchowska, Willburger 2013, 63-64, Fig. 8d; for similar finds from Kom el-Dikka, see Kucharczyk 2005a, 40-41, Fig. 6: 8; 2007a, 49-50, Fig. 2:6-8).

The excavations also produced a high-ring base from a shallow bowl/or plate and a side wall of a thin-walled hemispherical bowl, with a cracked-off rim, characteristic for the 4th - 5th century AD. It should be emphasized that this type of open forms are very poorly represented at Marea (Kucharczyk 2007b, 73-74, Fig. 3:10; 2008, 132, Fig. 46:26), in contrast to the Kom el-Dikka site, where they are very common finds, strengthening the assumption about their Alexandria production (Kucharczyk 2007a, 51-52, Fig. 3:10-12; 2010, 60-61, Fig. 3: 1-4; 2016, 89-91, Fig. 2B:10-15).

Of particular interest in this assemblage is the colourless cup with slanting walls, thickened rounded rim and slightly concave base. The elaborate decoration of this exceptional vessel, applied on the outer surface features spirally wounding opaque white trails below the rim and at the bottom part of the vessel, near the base, where they were dragged into festoons, and marvered flush. Additionally, few pinches were made around the base [Fig. 7; sondage in room no. 2]. This vessel, undoubtedly a luxury ware, is unique not only at Marea, but also in Egypt.² It is dated to the 5th - 6th century AD. Good parallels to

² Recently few vessel's fragments with this type of decoration on colourless glass came to light at Berenike on the Red Sea coast of Egypt-personal observation.

this vessel can be found in Italy (Harden 1987, 144-145; Whitehouse 2001, 215-217).

Footed vessels, mostly wineglasses form a small group dated to the 6th - 7th century AD. Only in a very few instances, the larger portion of a bowl was preserved. A bowl and a solid stem are separate elements: the lower was tooled, the upper blown usually of one colour of glass. Survived bases show prominent pontil scars, sometimes traces of glass from the pontil [Figs 1, 8, 9]. A very fine, thin walled example made of dark blue glass is worth mentioning, as vessels made of this colour of glass are almost absent at Marea [Fig. 9; found in the cistern, in room no. 54]. It is notable that vessels on foot belong to one of the most common type of vessels at Marea (for evidence from the bath, see Kucharczyk 2008: 132-133, Fig. 46:29-32; from the Basilica, see Kucharczyk 2004: 64-65, Fig. 1:5-6; 2005b: 57-58, Fig. 2:1-3: vessel no. 2 is interesting as it combines two glass colours: a bowl blown of light blue glass, supported on a light greenish foot; 2007b: 73-74, Fig. 3:5-8; Babraj, Szymańska, Drzymuchowska, Willburger 2013: 63-64, Fig. 8:e,g,f; Babraj, Drzymuchowska, Willburger 2014: 56-57, Fig. 9:2-4).

Among the finds from the Basilica there is also a fragment of a roughly circular stamped disc (glass weight) in Kufic script, made of bluish-green glass (M180137, found in room no. 13). Worth noting is that this is the second example of such an object discovered at the Basilica. The first bears the name of Muhammad ibn Shurahbil, the high-ranking official, who served several governors in the Abbasid period (133-152 H which corresponds to AD 749-69; see Balog 1976, 123, nos 336-338; Morton 1985, 89, no. 191, Pl. IX). Glass weights were used for the accurate weighting of gold or precious goods. They were manufactured and used in Egypt, particularly in the early Islamic period (8th - 9th century AD), supposedly by the office of weights and measures (*dār al-iyār*). The first bears the name of Muhammad ibn Shurahbil, the high-ranking official, who served several governors in the Abbasid period (133-152 H which corresponds to AD 749-69; see Balog 1976, 123, nos 336-338; Morton 1985, 89, no. 191, Pl. IX).³

The very limited presence of window glass is surprising. Only few fragments of flat panes, executed by the cylinder or the muff process, based on free-blowing, were found. None had any preserved edges. Their original colours are difficult to determine, owing to their state of preservation. They show heavy weathering, resulting in a black and irised surface, usually flaking off in thin layers. It seems highly probable that they were inserted into plaster screens

³ The inscription was kindly read by dr Dorota Malarczyk from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków

or *claustra* (Kucharczyk 2009, 155-162), perhaps similar to those found at the bath and recently also at the Basilica. *Claustra* placed high on the walls limited the daylight illumination, ensured a dimmed and intimate atmosphere, appropriate to a church interior.

In addition to glass vessels and windowpanes, the excavations produced also one piece of a monochrome bangle (appearing black), semicircular in cross-section, decorated with vertically tooled ribbing (found in room no. 55). This type of personal adornment is dated to the late Roman/early Byzantine period (Spaer 1988, 55; for parallels from Kom el-Dikka, see Kucharczyk 2010, 65, Fig. 6:3, and references to similar finds from other sites in Egypt). The almost total absence of personal adornments from Marea is noticeable. A handful of beads made of glass (blue, yellow and bluish-green glass) and stone (crystal and amethyst) were found alongside a hairpin at the sewage channel surrounding the bath (Szymańska, Babraj 2008, 38, Colour phot. 84). Two plain, uncut green beads made by the drawing technique, finished by hot-working and tooling, recently came to light at the Basilica. They are usually connected with mass-produced specimens (Babraj, Drzymuchowska, Willburger 2014, 56, Fig. 9:11).

GLASS FROM THE OLDER CHURCH

Archaeological works at the newly discovered church have yielded a very small amount of glass fragments, belonging to a bottle and lamps/beakers assigned to the 3rd - 5th century AD. Although few, they are nevertheless very crucial in dating this building. None of the recorded glass finds is of local origin. They seem to represent Alexandrian glass workshops production.

Of particular interest is a toilet flask characterising a typical Egyptian product of the 3rd century AD. This is the first evidence of this type of receptacle at Marea. The survived fragment features a short cylindrical neck, constricted at the bottom, with an outplayed mouth and rolled-in rim. Such specimens usually have a pear-shaped body. Most probably it was blown of colourless glass, however, its original

colour is impossible to detect due to heavy black weathering. Similarly shaped specimen came to light at Kom el-Dikka at the early Roman house (Kucharczyk 2011, 63-64, Fig. 7:4, with references to similar finds from other sites in Egypt).

Among the recorded fragments are a few body parts of what appears to have been lamps/or beakers, usually with a cracked-off or rounded rim and variously shaped bases, epitomising specimens distinctive for the 4th - 5th century AD. Such objects could be used for either of these purposes, under varying circumstances. All vessels were made of bubbly, yellowish-green glass. This type of vessels is extremely rare at Marea, just a few pieces from the Basilica (Kucharczyk 2007b, 73, Fig. 3:1; Babraj, Drzymuchowska, Szymańska, Willburger 2013, 63-64, Fig. 8c; Babraj, Drzymuchowska, Willburger 2014, 56). Their very limited number seems to point that they are not products of local workshops. It is highly likely that they were manufactured at the Alexandrian workshops, where not only lamps/beakers of these colours, but also variously shaped bottles, bowls and windowpanes, are nothing unusual, which is shown by late Roman contexts at Kom el-Dikka. Remarkably, one fragment of such vessel was found together with an amphora shard pressed into plaster coating of the imposing bench, decorated with a stamped herringbone pattern (uncovered in the northern aisle of the building) [Fig. 10]. The ceramic fragment was a densely ribbed body shard of Gazan amphora (LRA4), representing a form dated to the second half of the 5th - early 6th century AD (Majcherek 1995, 166-168). It could be naturally considered a useful *terminus a quo*, should more evidence come to light. The Gazan amphorae are quite a common find in the site, and are amply reported from later contexts at the baths (Majcherek 2003).

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Fig. 1. Fragments of bottles and wine glasses (photo R. Kucharczyk)



Fig. 2. Necks of bottles (photo R. Kucharczyk)



Fig. 3. Fragments of storage vessels (photo R. Kucharczyk)



Fig. 4. Fragment of a bottle with an applied thread (photo R. Kucharczyk)



Fig. 5. Fragment of a thumbler-shaped lamp (photo R. Kucharczyk)



Fig. 6. Stem of a lamp with a rounded depression (photo R. Kucharczyk)



Fig. 7. A bowl with an opaque white marvered decoration (photo R. Kucharczyk)



Fig. 8. Fragment of a green wineglass (photo R. Kucharczyk)



Fig. 9. Fragment of a blue wineglass (photo R. Kucharczyk)



Fig. 10. Fragment of a Gazan amphora (LRA4) found in the bench (photo R. Kucharczyk)

