

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/20292> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Konstantinidou, Alexandra

**Title:** Pots for monks : ceramics and life in the Old Monastery of Baramus (Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt) 4th - 9th c.

**Issue Date:** 2012-12-12

# CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Λάθε βιώσας

## 1 – GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Information concerning monasticism is rich: numerous *Apophthegmata*, *Vitae*, *epistulae*, *Regulae monasticae*, even imperial edicts and many other texts written on papyri and ostraca, shed light on various aspects of this movement. Nevertheless, monasticism is a phenomenon that survives until nowadays, but remains incomprehensible in its true sense; especially, since modern day life standards are so against any value that favours the renunciation of this life's all 'good things', such as family, property, marriage, career, personal will and honour – as Harnack already observed in 1901 (Harnack 1901, 10. See also: Goehring 1999, 277; Harmless 2010, 493). But that is exactly what the first monastics aimed to do, following the narratives and ethical teaching of the New Testament: they meant to renounce the *earthly* pursuits for a life of religious contemplation and service. The sources exalted *the spatial withdrawal from the social world of the villages and towns to the isolation of the desert* (Goehring 1999, 74), and thus the *myth of the desert* was being gradually shaped (for an interesting discussion see: Goehring 2003).

Monasticism is widely considered to have originated in Egypt. However, this view is only partially true. Scholars now recognise that regions such as Palestine, Syria and Cappadocia were contemporary and equally significant monastic centres (Harmless 2004, 17; *idem* 2010, 493-494). From the very beginning there have been three different directions in Egyptian monasticism<sup>1</sup>: the *hermit-life* established by Saint Antony (c. 251-356) himself, the Father of monasticism; the *coenobitic monasticism* organised by Saint Pachomius (c. 292-346) in Tabennisi; and the so-called *semi-anchoritic* variety, which has one of its most important centres in the desert west of the Nile Delta. This area, now known as Wādī al-Naṭrūn, was called Sketis (Wipszycka 2009, 214-217) in early Christian times. In this region groups of hermits began congregating, generally around a 'holy man,' and consequently, these settlements became so large they eventually were transformed into some of the world's earliest monastic communities.

Wādī al-Naṭrūn is considered to be one of the cradles of asceticism. The first hermits arrived in the region around the middle of the fourth century (Wipszycka 2009, 215). In the period between the fifth and the tenth century groups of scattered hermits turned into well-organised communities and monasteries; the reputation of which soon surpassed the confines of Egypt. In its heyday, approximately one hundred smaller and larger monastic complexes must have existed here. At present, four monasteries are still inhabited, while the others either lie in ruins or have been covered by desert sands. The monasteries that are still inhabited today have played and continue to play a vital role in the preservation of the material and immaterial religious heritage. So do many of the ruined settlements, which survived well until the Mamlūk period, allowing one to follow the new conditions that Arab rule gradually brought. While Nitria (Harmless 2004, 279-281; Wipszycka 2009, 124-126) and Kellia (Harmless 2004, 281-282; Wipszycka 2009, 206-212) – the other two significant monastic communities of Lower Egypt – were abandoned somewhere in

---

<sup>1</sup> Goehring (2007, 392, note: 9) observed that the close examination of evidence, in an attempt to determine *the developing patterns over time*, shows how difficult is for one to draw a *clear dividing line* between the three directions of Egyptian monasticism.

the eighth century, Sketis, the present day Wādī al-Naṭrūn, went through all the momentous phases of Egyptian history and particularly those relating to Egyptian Christianity.

The importance of Wādī al-Naṭrūn, its monuments and the monasteries' manuscript collections, was recognised in the early twentieth century by Hugh Evelyn-White, who undertook an expedition there, in 1926. The results were published posthumously by W. Hauser as H. Evelyn-White: *The Monasteries of the Wādi 'n Natrun. Part I. New Coptic Texts from the Monastery of Saint Macarius*, New York 1926. *Part II. The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis*, New York 1932. *Part III. The Architecture and Archaeology*, New York 1933. This invaluable and monumental work is hardly surpassed, and remains the key reference for anyone interested in the long history and tradition of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn. It was therefore impossible to avoid constantly citing it in the present volume.

At the same time approximately, the area of Wādī al-Naṭrūn attracted the interest of Umar Tussun, Prince of Alexandria, who published the book *Études sur le Wadi Natroun, ses moines et ses couvents*, Alexandria 1931. Nine years later, in 1940, the article of Ahmad Fakhry, Wadi el Natroun appeared in the fortieth volume of the *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte*. And that was all, as for some fifty years no project was carried out in the region, despite the antiquities discovered and its evident significance as a centre of monasticism. The only exception is the study of the wall-paintings of the Saint Macarius Monastery (Dayr Anbā Maqār al-Kabīr) and the Monastery of the Syrians (Dayr al-Sūryan), which was carried out by French scholars in the years 1971 and 1972. The outcome of this research is published by J. Leroy in the volume entitled *Les peintures des couvents du Ouadi Natroun*, Cairo 1982.

After years of relative neglect, scholarly interest in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn was rekindled in the middle of the 1990's, when new research was undertaken in the region. An American mission from a private foundation started excavating the site of the Monastery of Saint John the Little. After two relatively unfruitful seasons this excavation was continued recently by a team from Yale University under the leadership of Dr. Stephen Davis. In addition, a team from Leiden University has been excavating at the site of Dayr al-Baramūs, one of the oldest sites of Sketis, from which a ceramic assemblage emerged, whose study has resulted in the present volume. A second team from Leiden has been working on uncovering and conserving mural paintings and texts in the church of the Holy Virgin in the Monastery of the Syrians. And recently, another team from Leiden commenced a survey project in the surrounds of the Saint Macarius Monastery.

All three Leiden projects, under the direction and leadership of Dr. Karel Innemée, have been continued with minimal interruptions until now. The Baramūs excavation was financed by the NWO in the period 1995-1999; in 2002, 2005, 2006 and 2007 three excavation seasons, funded by the Faculty of Archaeology at Leiden University were undertaken. At this moment a volume on the results of the excavations of 1995-2006 is being prepared (to be published in the series SKCO, Reichert Verlag, Wiesbaden).

Meanwhile, the proceedings of one of the Symposia organised in 2002 by the *Saint Mark's Foundation of Coptic Studies and the Saint Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society*, were published in 2009. *Christianity and Monasticism in Wadi al-Natrun* is a volume that includes important up-to-date articles and reinstates the Wādī al-Naṭrūn into scientific attention.

## 2 – THE PRESENT RESEARCH

### Scope, ignificance, working method and structure

The northernmost of the four surviving monasteries in Wādī al-Naṭrūn is the Monastery of the Virgin Mary of Baramūs (Dayr al-Baramūs). Since 1996 a team from the University of Leiden has carried out excavations in an area north of this Monastery. The remains of another ‘twin’ monastic compound came to light and there is reason to believe that we are dealing with the Old Monastery of Baramūs, which was founded in the late fourth century by Abba<sup>2</sup> Macarius the Egyptian (c.300-390). This is probably where the first monastic community of Sketis gathered.

The excavations in the Old Monastery of Baramūs have yielded considerable amounts of pottery dating from the fourth century, which corresponds to the foundation date of the settlement, until the Mamlūk period (1251-1517), when the site was eventually deserted. The present study examines the pottery finds dating from the fourth to the ninth century. One would logically wonder why not all the finds are presented here, and for what reasons the ninth century was chosen as a terminus. First of all, the study of the material dating from the Fāṭimid (969-1171) to the Mamlūk periods was undertaken by my colleague and friend, Anetta Łyżwa-Piber, already some years before I joined the project. This was the main reason why this research did not go further than the ninth century.

From historical point of view, the period from the second half of the ninth to the tenth century could be considered as a turning point, being a period of short-lived dynasties, which after times of turbulence or anarchy broke away from the central ‘Abbāsid caliphate and ruled Egypt for Egypt: the *Tulūnids* (868 – 905) and the *Ihšīdids* (935 – 969) (Lane – Poole 1901, 59-91). As for Wādī al-Naṭrūn itself, it was the period of walled monasteries, marking the definite transition from semi-anchoritic to a more coenobitic way of life. However, since such historical changes do not have immediate effects on material culture, one may correctly consider the ninth century, as an artificial border line.<sup>3</sup>

From archaeological point of view, a ninth-century destruction level is also attested throughout the Old Baramūs, marking a period of renovations and additions in the site.

From ceramological point of view, it seems at first that the ninth century has not brought serious changes to the technology and morphology of the wares. Many Egyptian ceramics had a very long life, from the fifth until the tenth/eleventh century, or even later. Persistence of *old* types was a fact and the general impression appears justified, that Egypt did not follow changes in taste that were manifested in the late seventh century Mediterranean world. The only striking innovation in ninth century Egyptian pottery was the re-appearance of glaze, but is that enough to make one consider the ninth century as the beginning of changes in ceramic technology? An attempt to answer this question appears in the main text.

The main scope of this research is to examine the history and daily life of the monastic community that lived in the Old Monastery of Baramūs, from its foundation, to the first centuries following the Arab conquest. The ceramic objects and sherds can be really useful in such an investigation. Hence, a first and necessary step is to present and exhaustively discuss the material found. It is worth mentioning that although

---

<sup>2</sup> The name of a monk is usually preceded by the Greek word *abbas* or *abba*. About the term see: Derda and Wipszycka 1994.

<sup>3</sup> I owe this comment to Prof. Dr. Jeroen Poblome.

Wādī al-Naṭrūn and its monasteries have never ceased attracting the interest of the early travellers and later that of the scholars, there is no publication available that concerns a pottery assemblage from a monastic settlement in the region. Only Sandrine Marquié (2007) published an article concerning the amphorae found during the surveys that were held in the villages Banī Salāma and Bīr Hūkīr, in Wādī al-Naṭrūn. But the finds do not belong to a monastic environment. So this study is the first to present a complete ceramic typology from a monastic complex in Wādī al-Naṭrūn. And provided that the hypothesis about the actual identification of the site is indeed right, then we are dealing with the first complete ceramic typology from one of the earliest *laurae* that was founded in the area.

The study of the pottery finds in the Old Monastery of Baramūs has been carried out, in seven consecutive missions, starting in 2005. The first thing that needed to be done in the field was to sort out the objects and sherds that belonged to the period that this research examines. A further step was to roughly sort out the material chosen, according to its functional category: table ware<sup>4</sup> (table wares were automatically separated according to their technical characteristics into red slip wares, painted wares, 'gouged' wares, etc.), cooking-ware, amphorae, and so on. This sorting out was carried out in an effort to find matching pieces, so as to reconstruct certain vessels. The restorer of the project Lara Aladina Carvalho Rodriguez undertook the difficult task of the material's conservation. At the same time it became essential to re-organise the existing store-room.<sup>5</sup>

After sorting, the material was ready to be documented. For this purpose, a Microsoft ® Office ® Access database was initially designed by Nicolas Chronopoulos that allowed: the detailed registration of the excavation data (square, area, level and pottery lot number) of each piece; the classification of the material, according to functional category (table wares, cooking-wares, other utilitarian wares, amphorae and miscellanea); the measurement of each piece's dimensions (in centimetres); the description of the visual and technical characteristics of each piece (form, fabric, surface treatment, decoration etc.); and the bibliographical documentation, so as to identify and date the described piece, as well as attribute it, if possible, to a certain production zone. This quantity of information could be more easily handled and organised, when registered in a database, through the tools of which it is possible to relate and combine data, in order to draw important conclusions of typological, chronological and statistical nature. The registered finds were drawn and photographed by the author and then digitalised with the kind help of Joanne Porck using the programs Adobe ® Illustrator ® and Adobe ® Photoshop ®. To each drawing and photograph, a special number was given that was also registered in the database.

It is always important to examine comparative material, so as to better understand the finds of a site. I was fortunate enough to participate in the initial survey around the Monastery of Saint Macarius,<sup>6</sup> as well as walk with Karel Innemée out to the sites that lie around the Monastery of the Virgin of Baramūs and the Monastery of the Syrians. As a result, an acquired experience from Wādī al-Naṭrūn as a whole contributed towards the comprehension and identification of less common types that seem to occur frequently in the monastic settlements of the area.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ware: a class of pottery whose members share similar technology, fabric, and surface treatment* (Rice 1987, 484)

<sup>5</sup> In 2005 there was only one store-room, but now we use three store-rooms (all located in the keep of the Monastery of the Virgin of Baramūs).

<sup>6</sup> First mission in June 2009.

It would be untrue to assert that absolutely no problems occurred while working on the documentation of the ceramics. On the contrary, all kinds of unexpected obstacles came about. Hence it was almost impossible to establish and follow a definite working schedule. This lack of time imposed the study of selected contexts that represent each sector of the excavation site. Therefore, the present study should by no means be regarded as the complete catalogue of objects found in the Old Monastery of Baramūs.

Since it has not been possible to register, document and count all the finds that date from the fourth to the ninth century, and since part of the material was discarded during the missions held before 2006, I hesitated to spend time making thorough quantifications, for fear that the results would be misleading. Only indicative references are made, based mainly on squares, the material of which was kept in its totality. At any rate, the excavation in the site is in progress,<sup>7</sup> so that the present data are still likely to change after the end of the project. I have to admit that the inconsistent quantification method I followed should be regarded as one of this thesis' weak points.

A second insufficiency is the inability to conduct any kind of analysis in the laboratory. The exact composition of fabrics can be identified by petrographic analyses in collaboration with a geologist. Such analysis allows identifying the mineral components in pottery, so as to tie the artefacts to specific geological source areas. This information provides insight into how potters were selecting and using local and non-local resources, allowing archaeologists to determine whether pottery found in a particular location was locally produced or traded from elsewhere. Chemical analysis would allow the opportunity to trace possible food remains in many of the cooking-pots; identify the composition of the resin linen that was applied at the inner surface of certain amphorae; and figure out what kind of oil was burnt in the lamps, etc.

Hopefully, future research in the site of the Old Monastery of Baramūs will manage to cover all the above inadequacies.

The present study is divided into four chapters, including this short introduction, and incorporates a catalogue of objects.

The general area of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn and the excavation site of the Old Baramūs are examined in chapter two. The geography and geology of the region are examined first. An attempt to pull together information concerning the history of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn met with rather complex, yet interesting issues of hagiology and historiography. The legends concerning the foundation of the Old Baramūs are presented as an example of invented tradition. This chapter closes with the description of the excavation site and the main contexts, from whence comes the ceramic material discussed in the present study.

The third chapter is dedicated to the pottery itself, with an introduction to the advances of pottery studies in the Mediterranean and in Egypt, as far as the period from the fourth until the ninth century is concerned. A list of Egyptian fabrics, based solely on visual criteria, is cited next. Further fabric variations that concern non-Egyptian products are given in each of the respective chapters. The brief presentation of the ceramic finds follows. A short introduction to each class, noting the common lines or the possible peculiarities of the Baramūs material, when compared with other

---

<sup>7</sup> About 50% of the entire site remains excavated until the present.

published parallels, precedes the detailed description of each sherd or object, in the form of a catalogue.

The catalogue entries are structured, giving first the catalogue number, followed by the context and the figure number. Then a brief description of the form and of the fabric is given. In all cases the form is also illustrated (in a 1:4 or 1:5 scale) and for that reason the full dimensions of each object or sherd are not cited. As for the fabric, it is its code and its Munsell colour that are mentioned. Slip or/ and decorative features are also described when dealing with slipped or decorated vessels. Finally the date and a list of parallels are added. The list of parallels is by no means complete, especially as far as the non-Egyptian imports are concerned. If we were to insert all the published parallels, the list would grow big and, I am afraid, rather tiresome.

Some preliminary conclusions and a summary of the most frequently occurring types in the Old Baramūs supplement the presentation of the finds. Then the presented ceramics are examined in their *functional context*, so that the character of certain buildings of the site and the activities developed around them are better understood. Furthermore, the occurring types are integrated in their *chronological context* (types in time) and one would be surprised by the obvious changes that each historical phase brought. In a broader aspect, the place of the Old Monastery of Baramūs in the Mediterranean world (4<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> c.) is investigated, through comparisons between the pottery of the Old Baramūs and other representative sites of the Mediterranean.

The textual evidence concerning on the one hand the ceramic vessels (*the pots*) and on the other hand those who actually used them (*the monks*) is examined in chapter four. Names and functions of *pots* are sought out in the sources and an effort is made to link them to well-known types. And since the pots we are dealing with were used by some generations of *monks*, aspects of their everyday life, mostly connected to these artefacts are also discussed: their daily schedule, dietary practices and contacts with the outer world are some of these.

The synthesis of the conclusions drawn from the study of the ceramic assemblage – representing the archaeological evidence – and that of the textual evidence comes as the final outcome of this study. Archaeology confronts literature in an effort to follow if, how and to what extent, each of these two fields contributes to a better understanding of past activities and traditions.

For the transliteration of the Arabic toponyms and names the recommendations and principles dictated by the Arabic studies of the *Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* are followed (Fig. 1.1).<sup>8</sup> Ancient Greek and Coptic names are cited as they are, with a phonetic transliteration in parentheses, for readers unacquainted with these languages.

---

<sup>8</sup> It was not always possible to apply the transliteration principles. The symbols to be used do not appear when working on Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop files. Hence, the toponyms appearing on maps are not transliterated according to Fig. 1.1.

ا	'	ز	z	ق	q
ب	b	س	s	ك	k
ت	t	ش	š	ل	l
ث	<u>t</u>	ص	ṣ	م	m
ج	ǧ	ض	ḍ	ن	n
ح	ḥ	ط	ṭ	ه	h
خ	ḫ	ظ	ẓ	و	w
د	d	ع	ʿ	ى	y
ذ	<u>d</u>	غ	ġ		
ر	r	ف	f		

Fig. 1.1 Principles of transliteration of the Arabic words used in the present study (IFAO\_études Arabes\_Recommandations)