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CONCLUSIONS

The present research aimed to investigate to what extent the ceramic assemblage unearthed in the Old Monastery of Baramūs could contribute towards a better understanding of the activities taken place in its environment. After an introduction to the history of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn from the antiquity until the early Arab period, followed by the history of the Old Baramūs and the archaeological investigation carried out in the site, the ceramic types are presented in detail. It is noteworthy that even some of the well-known classes (*e.g.* what we called the *Nile fabric red slip wares*) might seem rather complicated in their identification, when found at a distance from their alleged production place. Whenever possible, new evidence was added with further notes on known types, or even with descriptions of unknown wares (*e.g.* the wares containing holy substances from the Monastery of Saint Macarius). In terms of pottery studies, what I would suggest is to gather and synthesise all the known information, in order to establish a consistent and precise terminology that would concern the Egyptian ceramics of the Byzantine and the Early Arab times, taking into account the regional variations.

Presenting and discussing the ceramic types is not enough to clearly see how a site evolved and what kind of activities were taking place in the structures discovered. Hence, an effort to view every functional ware in its context was also made, resulting in interesting remarks. The function of the tower as refuge and treasury is implied by the fact that most of the fine wares were found there. It must have been part of the site's nucleus, since the first years of the Monastery's formation, when groups of scattered hermits would dwell in free individual cells around the centre of the *laura*. For that reason, most of the wares dating to the late fourth, fifth and sixth century are found in this building. It seems that many of the scattered hermits must have gathered close to the centre of the monastic complex somewhere in the seventh century. This is implied by the fact that most of the excavated cells, enclosed in the defensive wall, which was built at a certain moment to protect the centre of the *laure*, did not release any ceramic type dating before the seventh century. The situation in these cells is different from that in the tower, with the storage jars and the cooking wares predominating, as the most appropriate wares to cover each monk's daily needs.

Continuity and change in types and ceramic tastes within the confines of the Old Baramūs is what was inquired next. The percentages of functional wares and types per century were cited so as to follow which were the types that survived and which were those that disappeared as time went by. During the period of our study some major modifications⁸⁷ affected Egypt and the Mediterranean world and it was interesting to see whether and how the Old Baramūs was subjected to them.

So far, the ceramics provided information about dating, pottery production and distribution, contacts of the monks with the outer world and some hints about their organisation and activities in the Monastery. The texts, on their behalf, enriched this information with notions about ceramic objects, and details about the identity, habits and daily life of the monks.

An effort to cite and compare the ceramic with the textual evidence has numerous weak points. In our case, the yet unfinished fieldwork,⁸⁸ and the necessity to be restricted in a limited number of contexts and pottery finds, meets the lack of

⁸⁷ I mean here the Arab invasions in the seventh century and the change from the Umayyad 'Arab Kingdom' to the 'Abbāsīd 'Islamic Empire' in the mid-eighth.

⁸⁸ The total set of samples represent around 50% of the entire site.

papyrological evidence from the Delta region. It was therefore inevitable to focus on sources that do not cover the whole period of our study, but mainly the *golden era* of the Egyptian monasticism. Nevertheless, important information can in fact be extracted, proving that the simultaneous study of both archaeological and textual evidence could result in rather round conclusions.

The ceramic objects unearthed in the Old Monastery of Baramūs included more or less recognisable forms, many of which arrived from the renowned pottery production centres of the Mediterranean: Africa, the Aegean, Asia Minor, Cyprus, Syria and Palestine. It is thanks to these items that we were able to trace the contacts that the Monastery once had with the Mediterranean world, some of which are confirmed by the texts.⁸⁹ Apart from the requirement to cover the basic needs, some of which would arrive from places outside Egypt, a world of monks originating from various places of the Mediterranean, as well as of pilgrims seeking to meet a holy man is evoked, and this world is well described in the literary sources.

Judging by the character and identity of the non-Egyptian wares that occur in our site, one would observe that they are mostly found in other settlements of the Egyptian Delta as well.⁹⁰ Hence, their presence in one of the Monasteries of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn appears perfectly logic. Furthermore, in the effort to gather the information concerning the Egyptian links with the Mediterranean milieu, one more settlement and the evidence that it bears is now added.

Let us keep in mind that the majority of wares found in the Old Baramūs were made in Egypt, so that one would easier understand the actual place of the Monastery in the Egyptian environment. Connections with all parts of the Egyptian territory, apart from the oases, are attested, especially after the seventh century. But a definite orientation towards relatively nearby regions, such as the Mareotis, the Delta and Fuṣṭāṭ is more evident. To the well-known Egyptian pottery production sites, one more is located in the environs of the Monastery of Saint Macarius, although not yet fully investigated. Hence, the Wādī al-Naṭrūn may now stand next to sites, such as Kūm Abū Billū, rendering the need for a more intensive research in the Delta crucial.

The contribution of the literature in the above issues is not significant. Texts describing the life of the monks, or the history of the Coptic Patriarchate would not care to portray any aspect of pottery production, while their notions about trade contacts are rather scarce, although not inexistent. What one could draw from the sources concerning the ceramic objects is a list of their names and information about their function. From our brief research it was possible to identify ten out of sixteen objects, mentioned in the texts and relate them to specific wares. The analogy is already not bad, but a lacuna does exist, especially as far as specialised objects are concerned.

On the other hand, the literary sources vividly illustrate, issues concerning the identity of the monks next to aspects of their everyday life. One of them is strongly related to the ceramic objects, that is the daily diet. In this case, the texts are full of information, about the nature, the time of the meals and the frequency of their consumption. But still, a mutual dialectic is possible here. The content of a vessel can be defined through chemical analyses, while the contribution of archaeobotany, archaeozoology and physical anthropology may be proven substantial; so that only such an interdisciplinary approach may confirm or put into doubt the testimony of the texts. In this respect, fieldwork in the Old Monastery of Baramūs has a lot to offer

⁸⁹ Especially the links with the Gaza region (on this topic see also: Ballet 2005).

⁹⁰ See the list of parallels in the respective catalogue entries (especially Nos. 1-39).

after the outcome of the physical anthropologist's⁹¹ report and the study of the grains and bones found in the site – only some of which mentioned in chapter five.

Combining the information that the ceramics and the texts provide, we may maintain that life in the Old Monastery of Baramūs, from its foundation until the ninth century, went through three momentous phases. The first phase extends from the fourth to the seventh century; the second almost covers the eighth century; and the third the ninth century to about 905.⁹²

During the first phase, Egypt must have been to a certain extent orientated towards the Mediterranean, still being a part of the Byzantine Empire. Provisions and wares from the major centres of the Mediterranean reached even the Old Monastery of Baramūs, either via Alexandria's maritime trade, or through terrestrial routes. Alexandria is not far from the Wādī al-Naṭrūn, while it is often mentioned in the literary sources that the monks were travelling to Alexandria 'by boat through the river'. At the same time the desert of Sketis was at the crossroad of the caravan routes that travelled from the Western Desert to the Nile Delta and the Red Sea. Through settlements of the Western Desert, such as the oasis of Bahariya, many African products must have reached the Old Monastery of Baramūs. In the early Arab period (as well as during the medieval times) caravans departing from Fustāṭ were heading towards Alexandria or the north-western part of Egypt. Their route included several stations among which were the monastic communities of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn, al-Mūnā (Kellia) and so on. The transactions of the monks with merchants – cameleers are confirmed by the literary sources. The monks were exchanging their artefacts (mainly baskets and ropes) or agricultural products, such as wheat, to cover their daily needs.

In the seventh century, a period of gradual but significant changes was about to begin. These changes came dimly into sight since the sixth century. Various parts of the Byzantine Empire were affected by new conditions at different times, and Egypt was one of them. After the Arab conquest Egypt's trade and foreign exchanges were progressively being replaced by a self-sufficient system based mainly on local resources and production. This process is clearly reflected in pottery, by the gradual predominance of the Egyptian pottery types.

The second phase in the history of the Old Monastery of Baramūs was opened with the Arab conquest and lasted until approximately the end of the Umayyad dynasty's rule and slightly later. The most striking phenomenon in material culture is the survival of Late Roman types and structures. As a result of the fiscal decentralisation of the caliphate, Egypt could consume the great part of its surplus inside the region. The Arabic Umayyad dynasty had guaranteed technological continuity and development from Late Antiquity in the Levant and in Egypt (Arthur 2007, 173).

Since the early ninth century, new forms and techniques gradually emerged. It seems that the so-called Abbāsīd revolution coincides with the beginning of a process that would eventually give its fruits in the tenth century. It is the process of 'Arabisation' and the definite 'orientalisation' of Egypt, its people and its culture. It is interesting to observe that during this slow and rather time-consuming process several 'Late Antique' and 'Mediterranean' elements were skilfully incorporated in the norms

⁹¹ Ms. Ilse Timpermann.

⁹² It is here cited a part of the article: Konstantinidou A., Potsherds Narrate History. The Old Monastery of the Romans (Baramūs) in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn from its Foundation until the Early Arab Period (4th – 9th c), submitted for publication in the *Acts of the 9th International Congress of Coptic Studies* (Cairo, September 14-20, 2008).

‘under-construction’. Hence, this phase might be seen in a sandglass as the passing of the last sand-drops from the bulb of the Mediterranean Late Roman/ Byzantine tradition to that of the Oriental Medieval Arab standards.

To what extent the above observations and draft could be applied to the region of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn as a whole is difficult to say. So far, the Old Monastery of Baramūs stands as a unique case study, but the excavation carried out in the environs of the Monastery of Saint John the Little by the American team of Yale University and the survey in the surrounds of the Monastery of Saint Macarius undertaken by the team of Leiden University will soon give answers to many questions.

Despite its indisputable importance in the understanding of the history of monasticism, the area of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn is at risk. Many sites, which lie around the Monastery of the Virgin of Baramūs, the Monastery of the Syrians and the Monastery of Saint Macarius are threatened (Innemée 2002), due to illegal excavations by treasure hunters, or levelling by farmers, who want to cultivate their land themselves or sell it for cultivation. To use the words of Karel Innemée (2002, 35) the deterioration of the Wādī al-Naṭrūn *will prevent us from learning more about the early phase of monasticism in the Wādī al-Naṭrūn [...]. Urgent action is needed.*