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**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

## **Pots for Monks. Ceramics and Life in the Old Monastery of Baramūs in the Wādī al-Natrūn, Egypt (4<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> c.)**

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### **Propositions**

1. The site identified as the Old Monastery of Baramūs is the only location so far to provide evidence about the earliest phase of monasticism in the Wādī al-Natrūn.
2. According to ceramic evidence, it seems that during the first two centuries of its existence, the Old Monastery of Baramūs was open to direct or indirect contacts with the Mediterranean world. This is implied by the notable presence of non-Egyptian wares.
3. The seventh century marks a striking and sudden change that reflects the social, political and economic changes that affected the Mediterranean world as a whole. The predominance of Egyptian wares in the Old Monastery of Baramūs indicates that here the transition meant a turn to local resources and surpluses.
4. Certain pottery types found in the Old Monastery of Baramūs raise interesting questions concerning issues of continuity and change in Egyptian material culture, showing in particular that a slow process towards its '*Orientalisation*' was set in motion as soon as the late seventh century.
5. Efforts to gather written evidence beyond formal histories and hagiographies, which would give an insight into life in a Lower Egyptian monastic site are frustrated by the lack of texts, such as papyri, *ostraca* and epigraphic evidence. They are more reliable, in the sense that they reflect actual everyday life activities.
6. Hagiographical texts, although *biased* due to their edifying character, are not treated as unreliable however when referring to the names of pots. Even if they meant to idealise the spiritual struggle of a monk, or use stories as paradigms of ideal spiritual life, I see no reason to mistrust single words in stories referring to pots and their possible function. A list of names for *pots* present in stories about *monks* help one to approach the prime use and function of some pottery finds.
7. The movements and journeys of monks, their contact with the outer world, and their interaction with pilgrims and merchants are some further issues that can be brought into a relationship with ceramic finds.
8. Would it be easy to determine the function and role of ceramic vessels on the monastic table? Resin-linen and amphora-contents, possible grease or food remains in cooking-pots should be kept by excavators as data to be analysed and studied with the archaeobotanical and archaeozoological remains.
9. Many sites of the Wādī al-Natrūn are at risk, due to various activities, which severely disturb the historical landscape. If urgent action is not undertaken soon, valuable information about the birth and development of monasticism in the region will be lost for good.

10. Urgent action is required to register, preserve and restore treasures (portable icons, minor objects, manuscripts, etc.) kept in the still inhabited Coptic monasteries in Egypt, and to conserve damaged wall-paintings in their churches.

11. Ancient Coptic and other monasteries, being significant as archaeological monuments and religious centres, may attract tourists and pilgrims, and therefore contribute to the economic flourishing of certain areas.

12. As long as profit stands as the main value, while moral values seem to gradually weaken, the global crisis will deeply affect the lives of entire populations. In this respect, Humanities and Social Sciences run a serious risk, in spite of their indisputable importance.