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CRUSADERS' POTTERY OF AL-MĪNĀ FOUND AT FUSTĀT*

The scholar to whom the present volume is dedicated is prominent among those orientalist who enriched the traditional source material, which is the basis for philological and historical research, by appeal to archaeology. Therefore I feel justified in contributing this small article of some what specialistic character to the volumes being offered him by his friends and pupils as a symbol of attachement and respect.

The mounds of al-Fustāt which cover a vast area East of present day Old Cairo have long been the terrain of archaeological activity. Excavations commenced already in the 19th century, and although at the beginning they were more a treasure-hunt than a scientific investigation¹, they turned gradually into modern, methodical research. The field work has been particularly intensified within the last several years due to the rapid growth of the modern city of Cairo involving the urbanistic development of this otherwise archaeological area.

* This study was made possible through the funds made available to the Fustat Expedition of the American Research Center in Egypt from the Smithsonian Institution.

¹ Dr. Fouquet's activity at Fustāt might well be cited as an example of this primitive archaeology. However, considering the epoch and circumstances, he cannot be blamed too severely. It resulted, at least, in building a valuable collection of artifacts (pottery, glass-weights etc.) and in a publication which cannot be disregarded even today; cf. D. Fouquet, *Contribution à l'étude de la céramique orientale*, Cairo 1900. Much better controlled and so far the largest field-work at Fustāt was conducted by Ali Bahgat; cf. his and A. Gabriel's *Fouilles d'al-Foustat*, Paris 1921.

As the result extensive excavations reopened at the site². Every year they bring to light new and rich material for study.

It is quite obvious that the principal object of the research at Fustāt has been the city itself whose remains are revealed step by step from under the debris. But the upper archaeological stratum, which, for the most part, covers entirely the ruins of the old city, is also of considerable scientific interest. In some places this stratum is as much as several meters thick and apparently accumulated in the course of the later Middle Ages when the abandoned quarters of Fustāt had been used as an enormous dumping-ground. It is composed of all sorts of waste and refuse which were carried off from the inhabited parts of the town and thrown in the ruins. Together with the debris of the older constructions they formed the rubble-mounds of today. The upper layer unfortunately did not preserve any original stratification. It was hopelessly disturbed by countless diggers who for generations sifted it for *sibakh* and artifacts and picked through it looking for building materials. But although devoid of the stratigraphical evidence many objects extracted from this layer present a considerably scholarly interest.

One category of such objects, namely fragments of glazed, sgraffito pottery of the so-called al-Minā type will form the subject of this communication.

This type of ware was fully described and identified, for the first time, as a local product of al-Minā (Latin : Portus Sancti Symeonis; medieval Arabic : Suwaidiya) by the late Arthur Lane who on behalf of Sir Leonard Wooley published the medieval finds from the excavation of this site³. Port St. Symeon located at the mouth of the Orontes was one of two ports, and after 1188, when

² They are carried out by the Islamic Section of the Department of Antiquities (no report has been published to date) and independently by the American Research Center in Egypt. Cf. the first and the second (in two parts) preliminary reports by G. T. Scanlon in the „Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt“ 4 (1965), pp. 7—30; 5 (1966), pp. 82—112; 6 (1967), pp. 65—86. The third report by W. B. Kubiak and G. T. Scanlon is in the press.

³ A. Lane, *Medieval finds at al-Mina in North Syria*, „Archaeologia“ 87 (1938), pp. 19—78; Cf. especially pp. 19 ff. and 45—51.

Şalāh ad-Dīn captured the other, Lattakiya, the only port of the Principality of Antioch. From that date the port must have grown in importance continuing to flourish until 1268 when the Mamluk

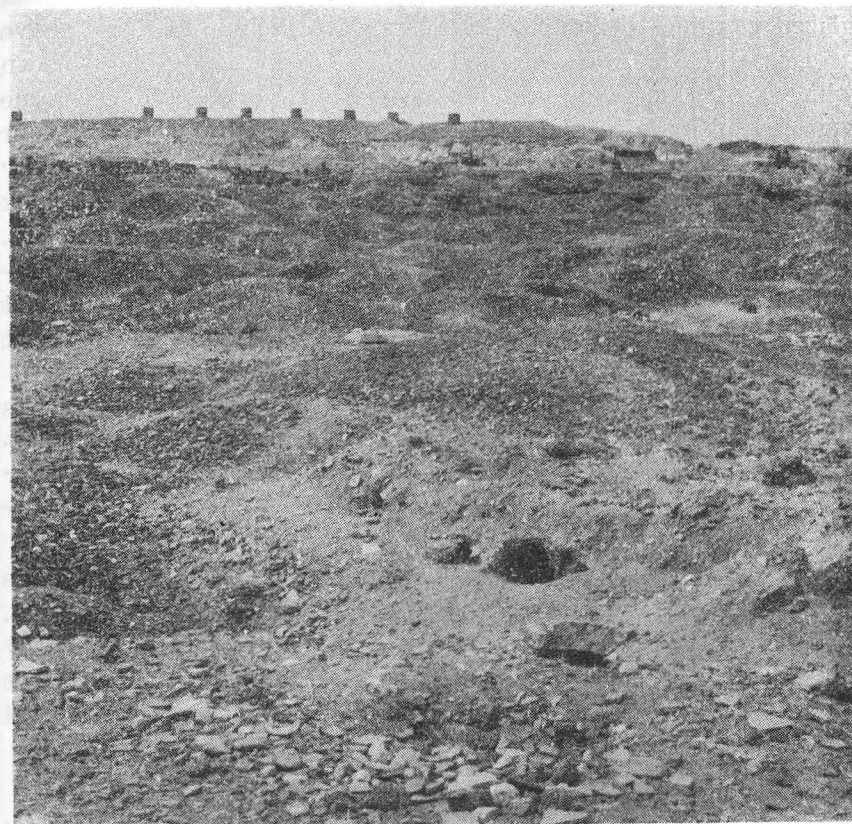


Fig. 1. General view of the Fuṣṭāṭ mounds
(Scale 1:2)

Sultan Baibars seized and destroyed it. As the port was never rebuilt the latter date provides a *terminus ante quem* to all finds originating from the site.

The finds of this local sgraffito-ware were very frequent at al-Minā in archaeological layers corresponding with the Crusading settlement. The pottery was dated additionally by coins mostly

of the first half of the 13th century ⁴. The resultant dating between the year *ca* 1200 and 1268 is confirmed by the finds from other archaeological sites ⁵.

The wares in question belong to a large family of the lead glazed ceramics decorated in a sgraffito technique. They have a characteristic two coloured glaze: Green and yellow-brown which varies in shade and intensity even on one and the same vessel, from pale to almost emerald-green and from cream-colour to dark honey-brown. The clay body is covered with a fine, usually thin white slip through which the decoration is incised in thick lines. The incised lines show the darker clay body under the slip. Covered by the transparent glaze they fired olive-green or chocolate-brown. These incised lines with their darker hue clearly contrast the lighter background to the advantage of the colouristic effect produced by the ware.

The bowls were fired upside down. Sometimes in the process the surplus of the glaze flowed down to form dark, vitreous swellings on the edge of the vessel. The exterior of bowls is usually left unslipped and unglazed except for the narrow strip near the lip.

The clay body is equally characteristic; it is light buff-orange or pinkish-buff ⁶, hard and well silted though rather coarse grained. The walls are thickly potted and, although the vessels are generally carefully turned and often elaborate, the Port St. Symeon potters do not show much ingenuity with their shapes. Only several

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁵ The problem of dating is discussed by Lane, *op. cit.*, pp. 45—46. He compares finds of the similar pottery from 'Atlit in Palestina where the occupation layers are dated between 1217 and 1291. Cf. also C. N. Johns, *Medieval slip-ware from Pilgrims Castle Atlit*, „The Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine“, 3 (1934), pp. 137 ff. More recent finds of the same pottery from Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria in the layer which corresponds chronologically to the Ayyubid period corroborate the Lane's dating; Cf. W. Kubiak, *Overseas pottery trade of Medieval Alexandria*, „Folia Orientalia“, 10 (1969), pp. 11 ff. and id., *Les fouilles polonaises à Kom el-Dikka en 1963 et 1964*, „Bulletin de la Société Archéologique d'Alexandrie“, 42 (1967), pp. 59 and 64.

⁶ Lane, *op. cit.*, p. 46, describes it as light orange or pinkishred.

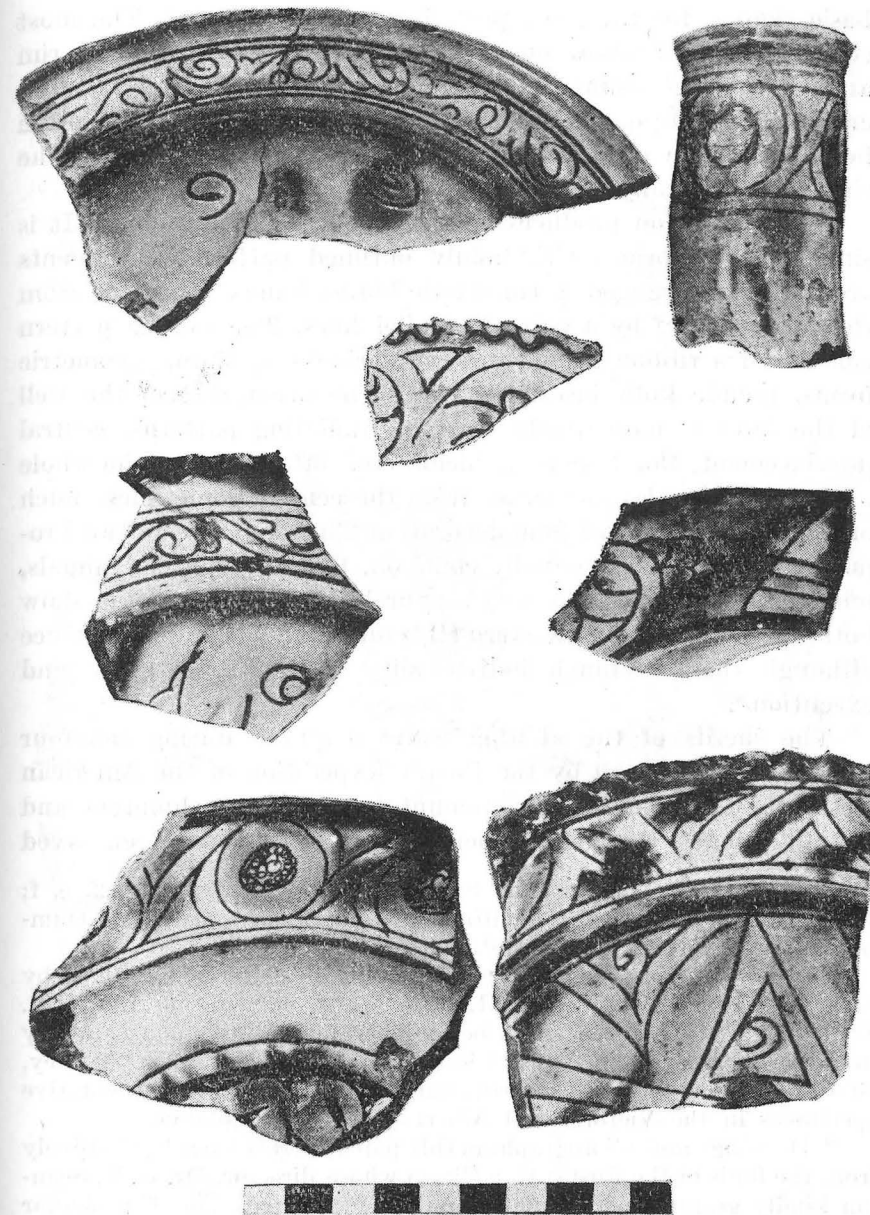


Fig. 2
(Scale 1:2)

basic shapes, for the most part, bowls were recorded. The most common is the shallow bowl with a flat, almost horizontal, rim and sharp ridge round its inner edge. The outer edge is often crinkled. Less frequent are the bowls with a vertical rim, often bewelled at the edge, and simple bowls with flaring sides. The ring foot is usually low⁷.

The decoration produces on the whole a pleasing effect. It is simple and vigorous with boldly outlined patterns. Ornaments are normally arranged in concentric border-bands, separated from the central motif by a pair of parallel lines. The border pattern consists of a ribbon of leaves, scrolls, rinceaux, simple geometric forms, pseudo kufic inscriptions etc. The decoration of the well of the bowl is more freely treated. Radiating patterns, central interlacement, floral motifs, shields etc., often occupy the whole of the well or splay outwards from the center. Sometimes much of the surface is left without decoration. The zoomorphic and anthropomorphic patterns are equally common. Figures of birds, animals, monsters and humans as well as purely ornamental motifs show both the Western and Eastern (Byzantine and Islamic) influence although there is much individuality in their treatment and execution⁸.

The sherds of the al-Minā wares acquired during the four seasons of excavation by the Fustāt Expedition of the American Research Center in Egypt, amount to about one hundred and twenty pieces⁹. Of this number about seventy have been saved

⁷ Cf. A. Lane, *op. cit.*, fig. 8; C. N. Johns, *op. cit.*, fig. 2, e, f; David Talbot Rice, *Late Byzantine pottery at Dumbarton Oaks*, "Dumbarton Oaks Papers", 20 (1966), fig. 9 H.

⁸ The designs can best be studied from the material published by Lane, *op. cit.*, pl. XXI–XXVI, also Johns, *op. cit.*, pl. LIV, LV. Well preserved examples are to be found in many museums, especially in Syria (Damascus, Tartūs, Citadel of Aleppo), Jordan, Turkey, Greece and probably in other countries, not to mention representative specimens in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

⁹ Drawings and photographs in this paper were secured exclusively from the finds of the Fustāt Expedition whose director, Dr. G. T. Scanlon kindly granted permission to publish this material. The similar finds from other excavations at Fustāt have not yet been studied. Some of them however are on exposition in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo.

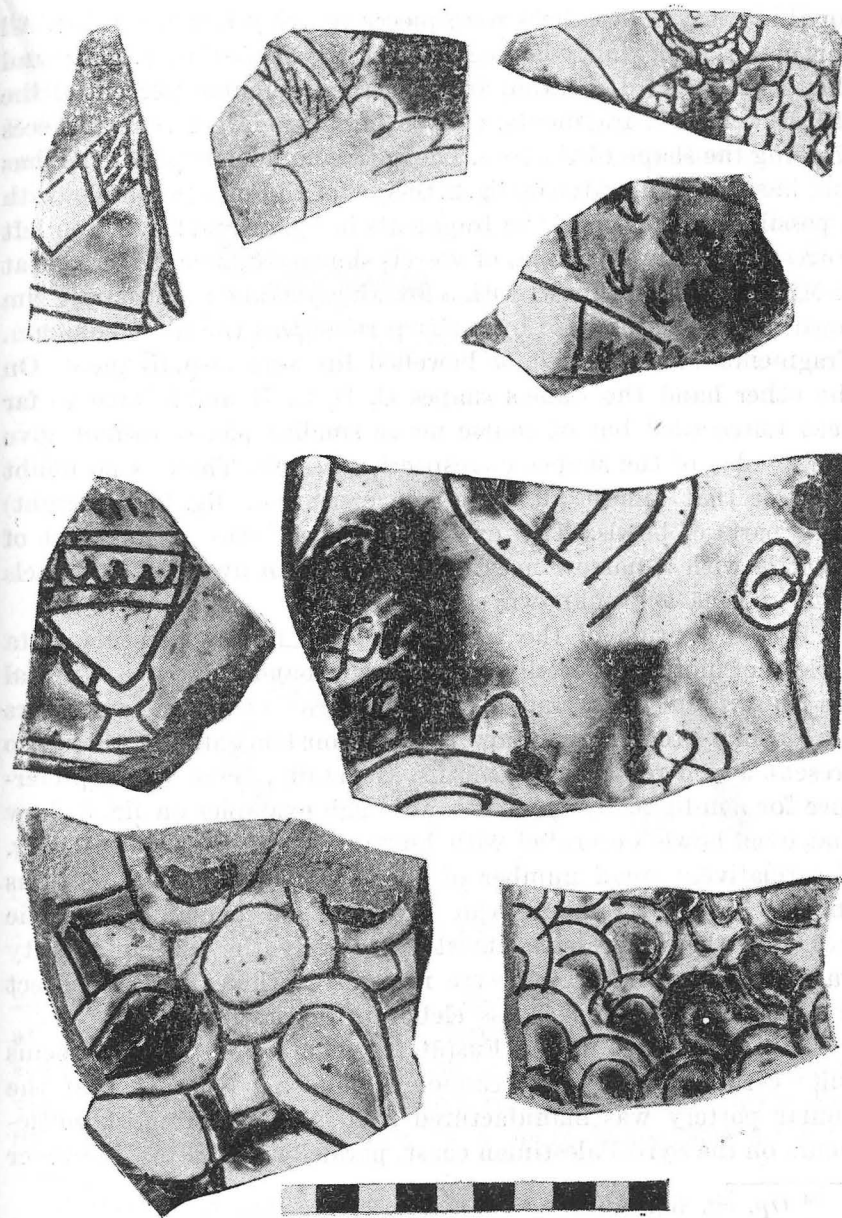


Fig. 3
(Scale 1:2)

for this study. The others were pieces too tiny to be of value. All this material was fairly homogenous as the shapes, clay, glaze and the technique of decoration are concerned. About 80 percent of the sherds were rim fragments. Only a few were larger central pieces showing the shape of the foot. The most common shapes of the rims and bases are illustrated on fig. 2. Shapes of all Fustāt examples with a possible exception of the fragments in fig. 4c and fig. 2, top left correspond with the shapes of vessels shown by Lane¹⁰. Here, as at al-Minā, the shallow bowl with a low ring foot and a flat flaring rim separated from the base by a sharp ridge was the most common. Fragments with crinkled or bewelled lip were also frequent. On the other hand the Lane's shapes C, D, E, H and L have so far been unrecorded but of course many smaller pieces cannot give a clear idea of the shapes of respective vessels. There is no doubt however that almost all (with one exception, fig. 2, top right) were parts of bowls. The exceptional piece was a fragment of a bottle with a narrow neck. As far as I am aware such vessels from al-Minā are unknown elsewhere.

The decoration of the fragments from Fustāt presents quite a variety of motifs, especially of the border-bands. The most typical are shown on fig. 2 and 5. The patterns of the bowl-centers were usually too fragmentary to be reconstructed, but they also present a rich repertory of motifs. Generally, there was a preference for non-figurative patterns, although examples on fig. 3 show that even bowls decorated with human figures were not lacking. The relatively small number of the more sophisticated patterns on the Fustāt fragments can probably be explained by the fact that they represent almost exclusively the inferior quality wares¹¹. Those, naturally, were not only technically less perfect but also bore a simpler, less elaborate decoration.

The provenance of the Fustāt fragments from al-Minā seems quite certain although we cannot exclude a possibility that the similar pottery was manufactured also in other Frankish settlements on the Syro-Palestinian coast, parallelly to al-Minā. However

¹⁰ *Op. cit.* fig. 8.

¹¹ About one third of the finds at al-Minā were of a distinctly low quality (*ibid.* pp. 47 f.). Fustāt fragments represent rather a medium class.

al-Minā is the only place where the evidence of the local manufacture was discovered. But the kiln-site was, unfortunately, not excavated¹². There is also a possibility that after the capture of Port St. Symeon in 1268 the local potters settled elsewhere and continued the similar industry. Lane advocates a theory that it might have been at 'Aṭlīt which survived Port St. Symeon for

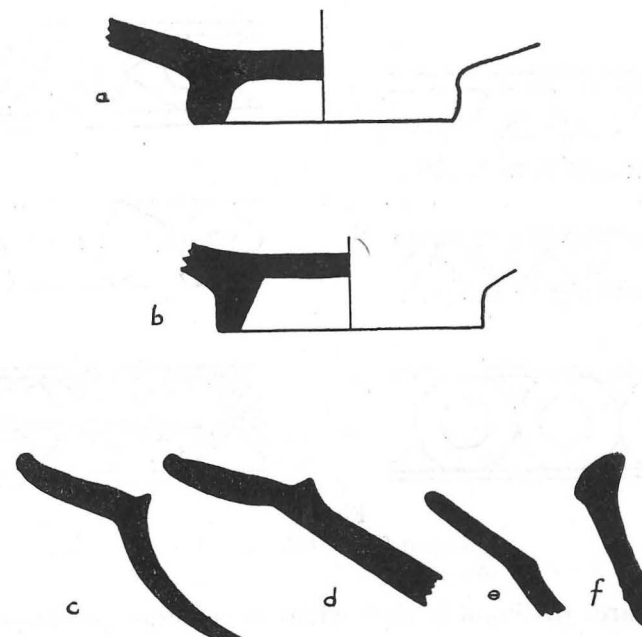


Fig. 4
(Scale 1:2)

23 years¹³. Yet this theory is supported only by the fact that at 'Aṭlīt the wares of al-Minā type occurred apparently in all strata of the Crusading occupation, i.e. from 1217 until its very end in 1291, i.e. almost a quarter of a century after Port St. Symeon ceased to exist¹⁴. It is more likely that after the

¹² *Ibid.* p. 45 and 46, n. 5.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 45 f.

¹⁴ *Loc. cit.* Cf. C. N. Johns, *Excavations at Pilgrims' Castle 'Aṭlīt*, „Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine“, 1 (1932),

Mamluk conquest the potters of al-Minā continued their craft in Cyprus. The latter theory is, at least, supported by the numerous finds of the presumably Cypriot pottery showing a strong influence of al-Minā ware both in the field of technique and decoration¹⁵. The likeness occasionally goes so far that there is an uncertainty about the provenance of particular pieces. But, on the whole, the

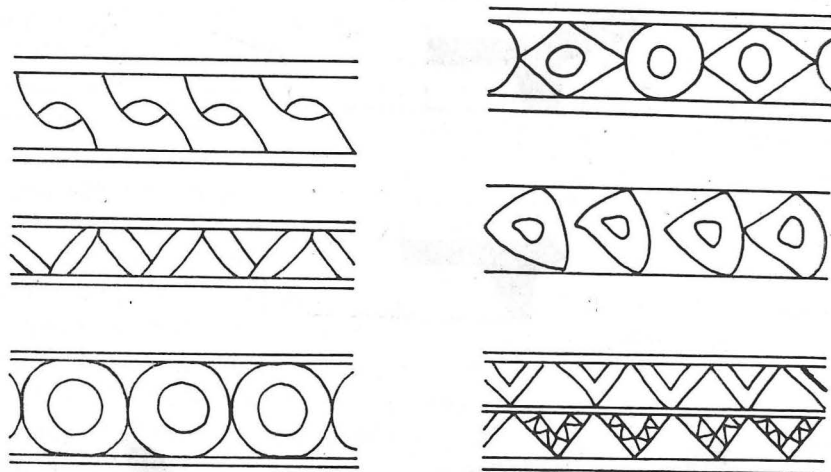


Fig. 5
(Scale 1:2)

al-Minā wares distinguish themselves from other products markedly enough to secure a reliable classification.

The mass importation of al-Minā pottery to Egypt demonstrated by the numerous finds not only at Fustāt, of which our

pp. 1 ff; 2, pp. 138 ff; *Medieval slip-ware from Pilgrims' Castle 'Atlit*, „QDAP“ 3, pp. 137 ff; *Excavations at Pilgrims' Castle 'Atlit, Stables of the South-West of the Subarb*, „QDAP“ 5, pp. 31 ff.

¹⁵ J. du Plat Taylor and A. H. S. Megaw, *Cypriot Medieval Glazed Pottery, Report of the Department of Antiquities Cyprus 1937—1939*, Nicosia 1951, pp. 6 f.; A. I. Dikigoropoulos and A. H. S. Megaw, *Early Glazed pottery from Polish, Report of the Department of Antiquities Cyprus 1940—1948*, Nicosia 1958, pp. 82 ff., cf. also R. L. Hobson, *The later Al-Minā pottery*, „British Museum Quarterly“, 11 (1937), p. 116, id. *Syria or Cyprus*, „Ars Islamica“ 4 (1937), p. 193.

material constitutes only a small fraction, but also in Alexandria¹⁶, appears as an interesting historical and economic phenomenon. Together with the still much greater amount of imported Byzantine pottery it must have dominated the Egyptian market of cheaper table-ware for at least several decades in the 13th century. It points to an active trade between the Islamic and the Latin and Greek worlds, But on the other hand it bears witness to a peculiar decline in the ceramic industry in Egypt. Cheaper though good quality table-wares decorated in a sgraffito technique had been traditionally manufactured in Egypt in amounts sufficient for the local consumption and occasional exportation. But, probably sometime in the 12th century, the later type of this ware, known as the Fatimid sgraffito and produced at Fustāt in quantities, ceased to be manufactured, and the gap had been filled up by imports, such as al-Minā wares¹⁷.

¹⁶ Cf. W. B. Kubiak, *Overseas pottery trade of Medieval Alexandria*, „Folia Orientalia“, 10 (1969), p. 16; A. Lane, *Archaeological excavations at Kom el-Dik, a preliminary report on the medieval pottery*, „Bull. Faculty of Arts Alexandria University“, 5 (1949), pp. 144 ff.

¹⁷ In later times this situation disadvantageous to the local crafts has been modified and the vigorous industry of a sgraffito ware in Egypt reestablished under a direct influence of the Byzantine and al-Minā models. Contrary to a much repeated opinion (cf. D. Talbot Rice, *The pottery of Byzantium and the Islamic World in Studies in Islamic Art and Architecture in Honour of Professor K. A. C. Creswell*, Cairo 1965, p. 194) that in this domain the influence acted in one direction only, i.e.; from Islam to Byzantium. There is evidence that the reverse action also occurred. A paper on this interrelation and the problem of the origin of the Mamluk sgraffito ware is in preparation by the present writer in collaboration with Dr. G. T. Scanlon. For some other problems concerning pottery finds from Fustāt see the latter's: *The Fustat Mounds A Shard Count 1968*, *Archaeology*, Vol. 24, Nr 3, pp. 220 ff.