

PAINTED DECORATION ON WATER JARS FROM BYZANTINE ATHRIBIS IN THE EGYPTIAN DELTA

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Abstract: Water jars are easily recognizable as a type owing to the strainer fitted into the neck of these vessels. This form was distinguished in the assemblage coming from the Polish excavations around Kom Sidi Youssuf in Tell Atrib, the site of ancient Athribis in the Nile Delta. The discussed vessels were made of Nile silt and richly painted on the surface. The article focuses on the decoration of these water containers, presenting a catalogue of motifs: geometrical, vegetal, zoomorphic, human and others. The set is dated to the 6th–7th century AD based on the excavation context and comparative studies of the so-called Coptic painted pottery from Egypt.

Keywords: Athribis, Byzantine, Coptic, Egypt, Kom Sidi Youssuf, painted decoration, pottery, Tell Atrib, water jars

The water jar, called a *gargoulette* in French, is a type of vessel still used in Egypt, made distinctive by the water strainer (Bailey 1998: 82ff.), which is also called a filter (Scanlon 1979:37), fitted inside the neck, at its base, the purpose being to prevent insects and dirt from polluting the water and creating in effect a gurgling sound when water is poured (Winlock and Crum 1926: 90). The porous clay from which they were made allowed for surface evaporation of water seeping into its structure, thus ensuring the specific water-cooling function.

The present article treats on an assemblage of water-jar sherds discovered during Polish excavations at the site of Tell Atrib

in Egypt in the Nile Delta. Byzantine-age layers were explored in 1969 and then again in 1979–1984 by Barbara Ruszczyc and Pahor Labib for the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw and the Coptic Committee Cairo (see Ruszczyc 1980; 1986; 1989, 1997). Several test trenches were investigated on Kom Sidi Youssuf and its fringes, and in sector T situated to the north of the mound where a tomb of an Islamic saint stands (Myśliwiec 2000: 10–11, Fig. 1). Lowermost in sector T was a fill of ashes and rubble, yielding debris of architectural decoration originating from a church: marble revetment slabs, capitals and bases, burnt bricks and wooden elements (Górecki

forthcoming). The overlying layer, dated by numerous coins to the 6th and 7th centuries AD (Krzyżanowska 1990; 2009),

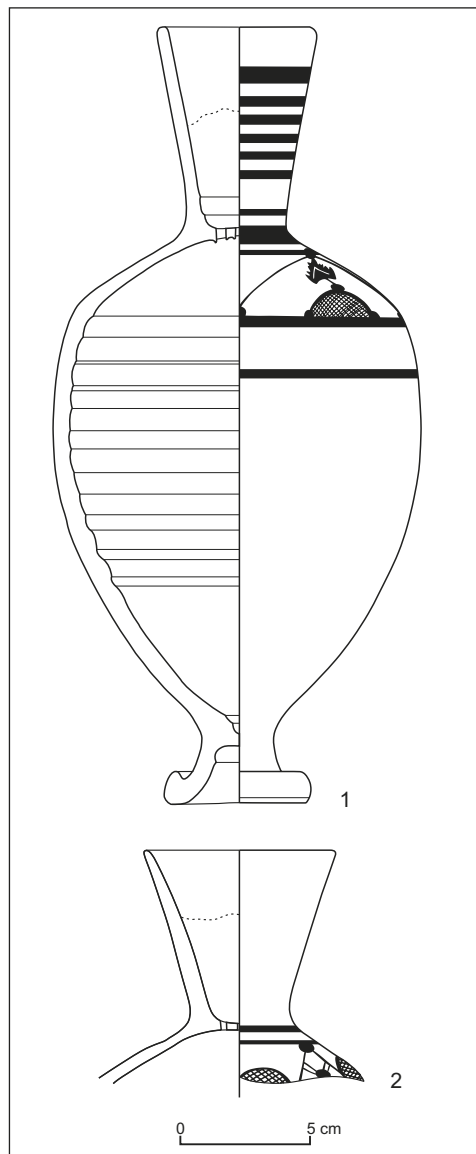


Fig. 1. Complete water jar (top) and neck fragment (Drawing K. Dmowska; digitizing M. Puzkarski)

proved exceptionally rich in Late Roman and Byzantine pottery (Ruszczyc 1986: 350).

This rich pottery assemblage encompassed a set of 1134 sherds representing painted ceramics that were assigned to the water jar type based on characteristics of shape and a distinctive painted decoration. Diagnostic pieces included nine base fragments and 129 sherds from the neck part. The rest were body sherds showing a diversity of painted ornamental motifs. Added to this set were undecorated non-diagnostic sherds coming from the lower parts of vessels of this kind, too small to contribute any information on the shape or proportions of these vessels. The material is very fragmented owing to the brittleness of the ceramics. The necks of the vessels, of sturdier shape, are usually in better condition. Bases are few and the thin-walled body sherds are not easily reconstructed. From the above set, it was possible to reconstruct the overall shape of only one more or less complete vessel and another neck and shoulder fragment [Fig. 1:1–2].

The typical water jar has an oval body gently passing into narrow shoulders and a simple straight neck, which flares out toward the top, terminating in a straight rim. The vessel has a hollow ring base with flaring edge and a constriction where it meets the body. No handles are present. The body walls of these vessels are thin to medium-thick (from 3 mm to 7 mm), resulting in very few pots being preserved whole. The fabric is a porous Nile silt, medium- to fine-grained, tempered abundantly with fine chaff and small amounts of sand, crushed ceramics and mica. The break is mostly grey, less frequently pink; brown and brick red occurs as well and

very rarely black. Streaked cores are also encountered with the predominant grey usually on the inner side of the vessel. The surface of the jars was slipped, the slip taking on various shades of yellow, beige and pink, as well as white. The decoration was painted mostly in black and in shades of brown and red.

Regardless of the differences in the general shape and details of the parts, water jars were invariably decorated with painted ornaments on the shoulders and neck of the vessels. In two cases, the decoration of the vessel could be reconstructed in general terms [see *Figs 1; 6:42,43*]. For the most part, however, the sherds were analyzed in isolation from their position in the decoration of the pots, although some general statements concerning the composition of the ornaments could be made based on a thorough analysis. The

illustrated sherds represent the largest fragments with the most distinct and recognizable decoration; the remaining pieces were too fragmentary to contribute significantly to the present analysis.

The painted motifs recognized in the assemblage can be divided into three groups: geometric (912 sherds), vegetal (76) and zoomorphic (12). Two sherds with human motifs and one instance of a painted inscription were noted. Apart from these, there were several ornaments, more or less unidentified, mostly due to the small size of the surviving sherds.

GEOMETRIC MOTIFS

Different geometric motifs were the most common form of ornament:

– Lines of various width and color (251 examples), singly or in groups of several, mostly in combinations of three, the one in

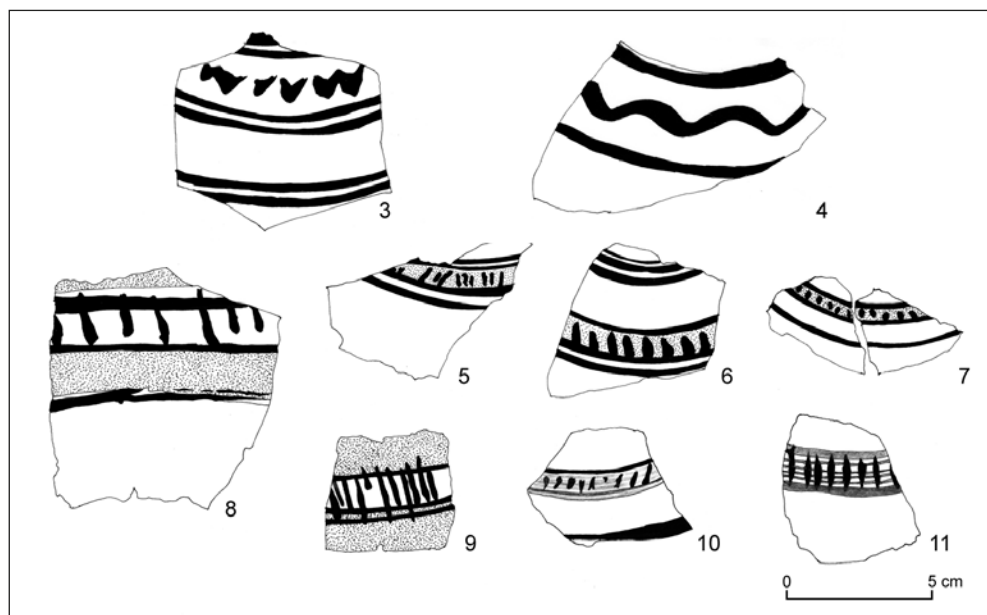


Fig. 2. Motif of circumferential bands combined with a wavy line (3, 4) and short vertical bars (5–11) (Drawing A. Południkiewicz; all plate design E. Czyżewska-Zalewska)

the center wider than the outer ones. They are usually painted on the neck, at the base of the neck and on the widest part of the shoulders. Common color combinations include three black lines, a dark red (or brownish black) line between black lines, and a yellow line between brown ones.

– Wavy line between two straight lines (22 examples); painted in black [Fig. 2:3–4].

The waves can be gentle or pointed and are oriented horizontally. They can also be arched. Combined with other designs, they run vertically [Fig. 5].

– Bands combined with lines, carelessly painted in black or brown, sometimes overpainted with short vertical strokes [Fig. 2:5–11].

– Lines of dots of different size, usually at

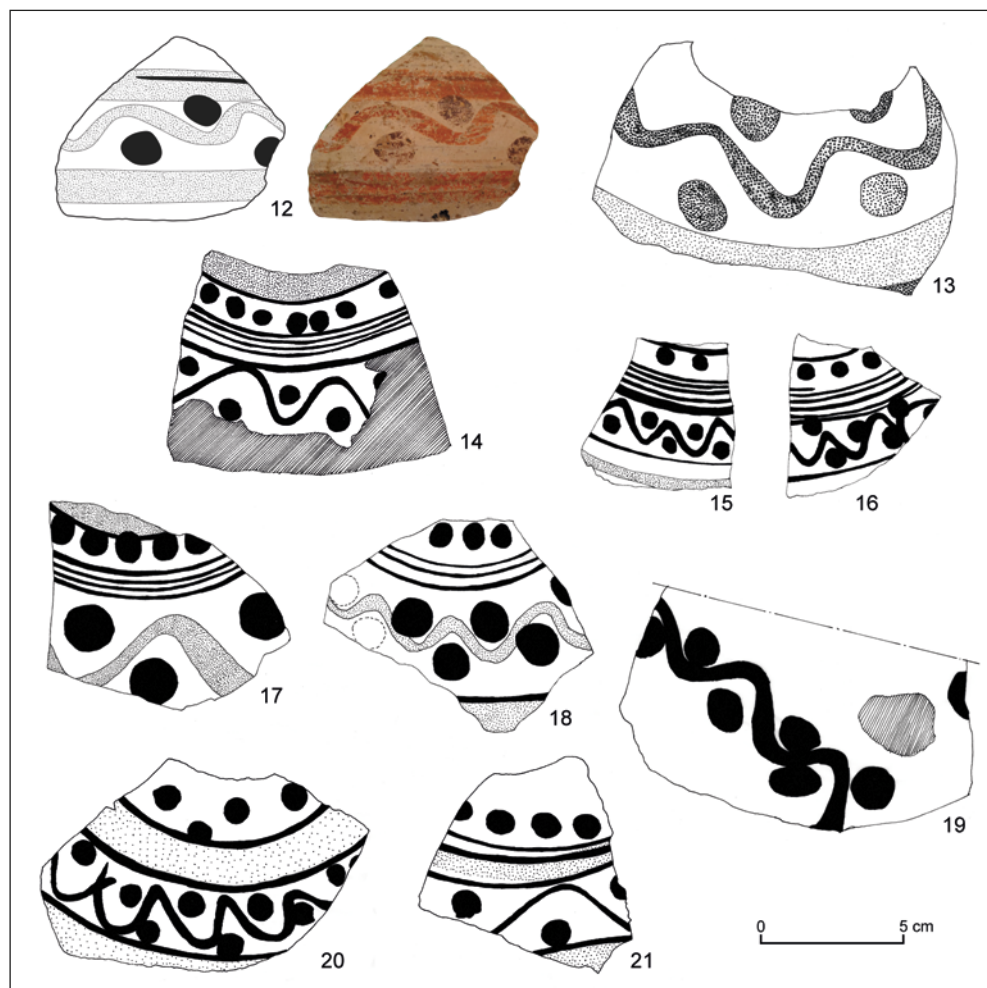


Fig. 3. *Wave with dots motif* (12–21)
(Drawing and photo A. Południkiewicz)

the base of the neck, often between two or more lines (75 examples). Always in black.

- Wavy line with dots in the curves, a motif accompanying other decoration (55 examples) [Fig. 3]; either brown or black, painted with a thick brush [Fig. 3:12,13,17–19], although examples executed with a thin brush were also noted [Fig. 3:14–16,20,21]. Dots could be painted directly on the line [Fig. 4:30]. Sometimes the wave is bordered by pale

- red bands with black contours, with black dots painted above the upper band [Fig. 3], and in one instance a single line divides the wave from a chain of dots which is transected by a line [Fig. 4:30].
- Individual dots of varying size, red or black, isolated or connected by one or two lines, in the form of a zigzag (11 examples) [Fig. 4], or transected by up to six lines (14 examples) [Fig. 5], forming part of the decoration of a metope. Always black.

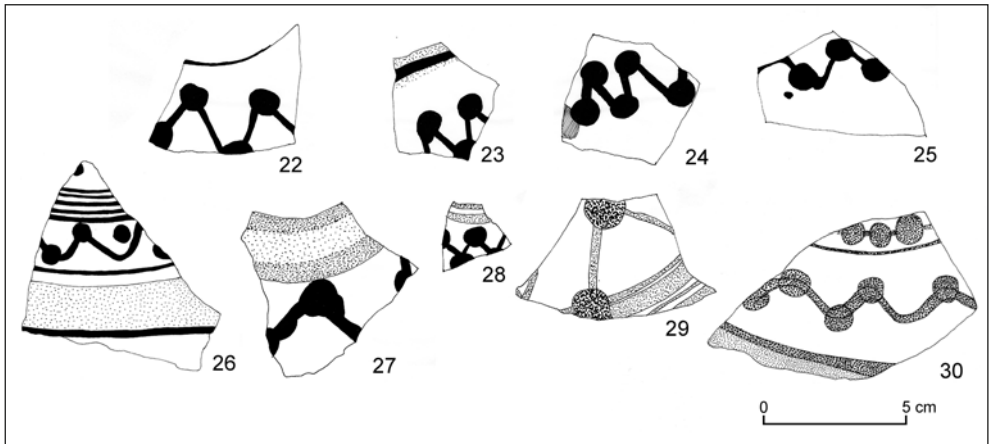


Fig. 4. Motif of zigzags with dots (22–30)
(Drawing A. Południkiewicz)

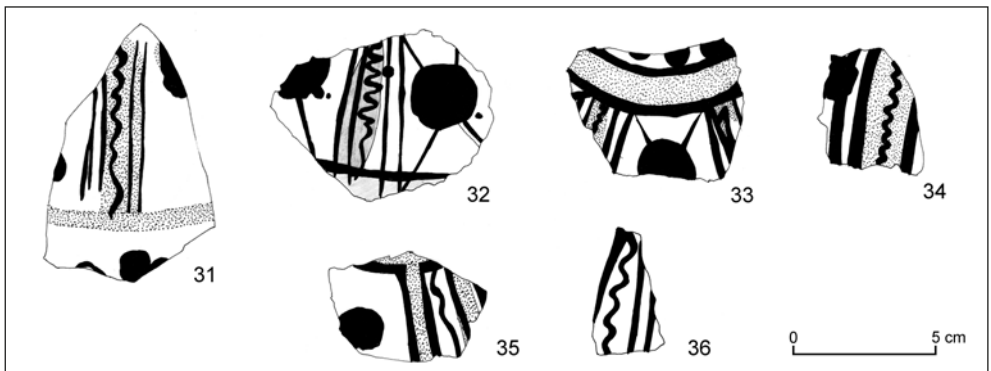


Fig. 5. Composite metope motifs (31–36)
(Drawing A. Południkiewicz)

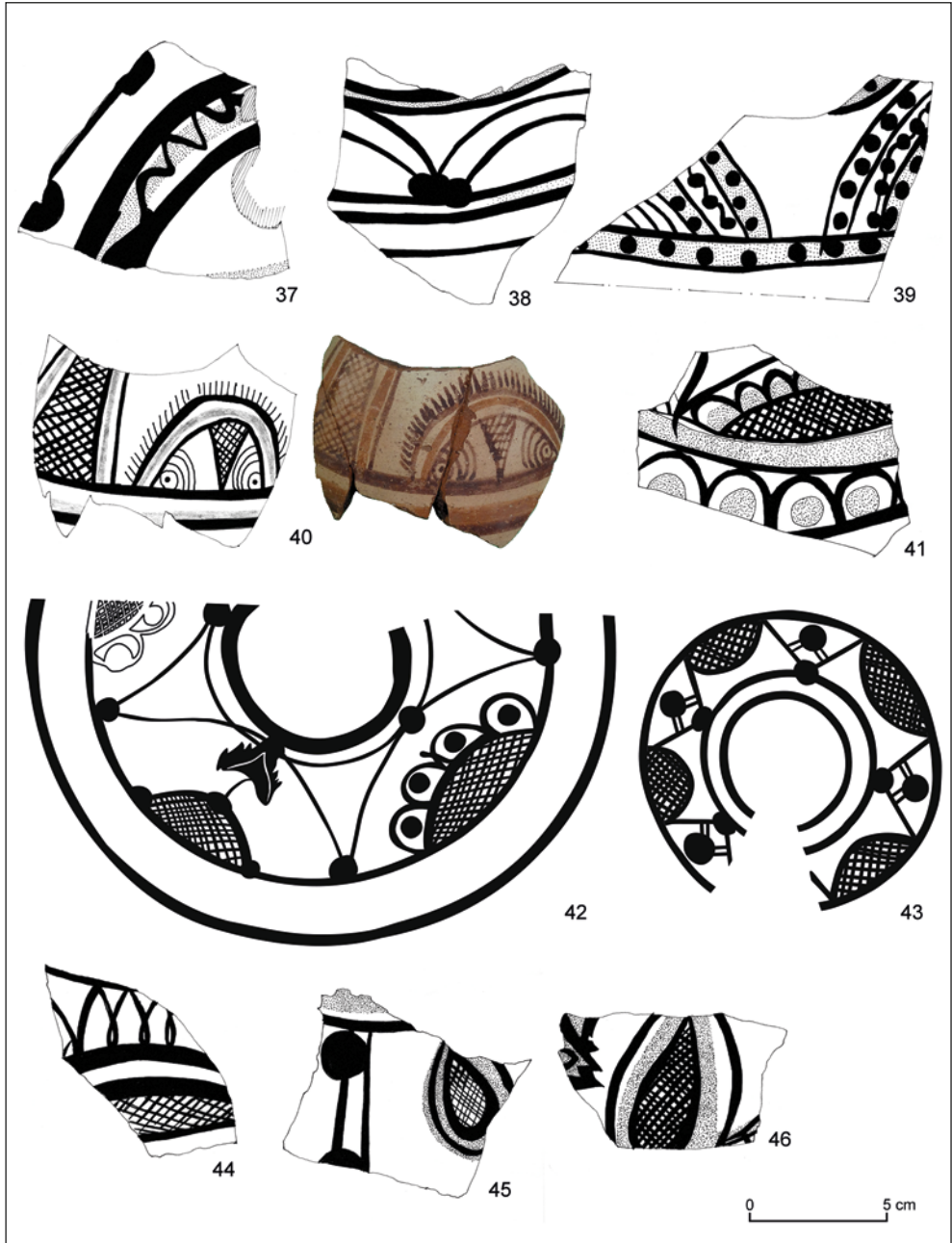


Fig. 6. Arcades and hatched-figure motifs (37–46)
 (Drawing A. Południkiewicz, K. Dmowska; photo A. Południkiewicz)

– Semicircles/arcades, plain or filled with dots, wavy or zigzagging lines and other elements (18 examples). Set on horizontal lines encircling the body at the widest point and rising to the base of the neck. Some consist of two semicircular lines, and the space between them is filled with a wavy line. An arcade surrounds the spout on this example [Fig. 6:37]. Some are empty, with just one dot at both ends [Fig. 6:38]. In other cases, the arcades are made up of more than two lines, sometimes filled with symmetrically placed dots or a wavy line with dots in the curves. They stand on a red dotted band [Fig. 6:39]. The space below the arcade is often filled with various decorative motifs, e.g., four concentric circles with a dot in the centre, placed symmetrically in the corners, and between them an upside-down triangle filled with a lattice pattern [Fig. 6:40]. Additionally, the outer border of this arcade is decorated with short perpendicular lines and the whole decorative motif is placed in a metope bounded by a lattice motif.

– Lattice motif applied as filling of various shapes: almonds, semicircles, circles, triangles etc. (46 examples) [Figs 6, 7]. The two examples [Fig. 6:42,43] are a reconstruction of the decorative band from the vessels shown in Fig. 1.

– Band of fitted triangles hatched with lines in one direction (one case) [Fig. 7:50].

– Spirals (53 examples), single, running both clockwise [Fig. 8:57,58] and anti-clockwise [Fig. 8:59], or multiple, twisting upwards [Fig. 8:54–56] or downwards [Fig. 8:51,52]. In a few cases, the motif takes on the form of a chain of circles [Fig. 8:53]. Lines are thick, painted carelessly and unevenly, in brown, purple and black on a cream-colored background.

– Vertical bands composed of several geometric motifs, mainly in black or brown, running from the middle of the body towards the neck, setting off metopes of other decoration (40 examples). The simplest forms consist of vertical lines: three straight ones or two straight ones divided by a wavy one [see Fig. 5]. Careless strokes of red applied with a thick brush appear on the bands. The vertical bands can also be more elaborate and sometimes they constitute the only decoration of the vessel [Fig. 9:65–67]. In the case of one water jug [Fig. 9:67], the bands are composed of double lines with a chain of links tied in knots between them. Short downward strokes with spots at the ends appear on the outside. The vessel is covered with cream-colored slip and the bands are red. A similar motif on another vessel

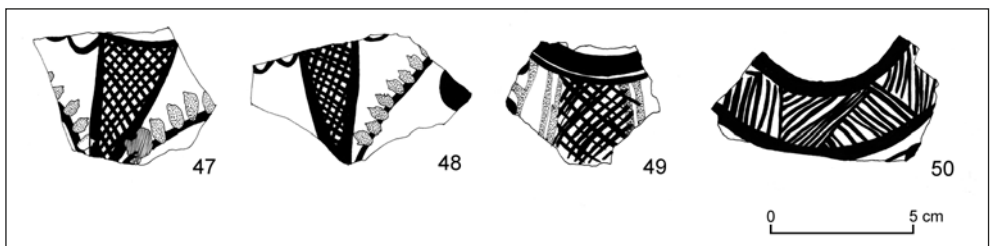


Fig. 7. Examples of hatching (47–50)
(Drawing A. Południkiewicz)

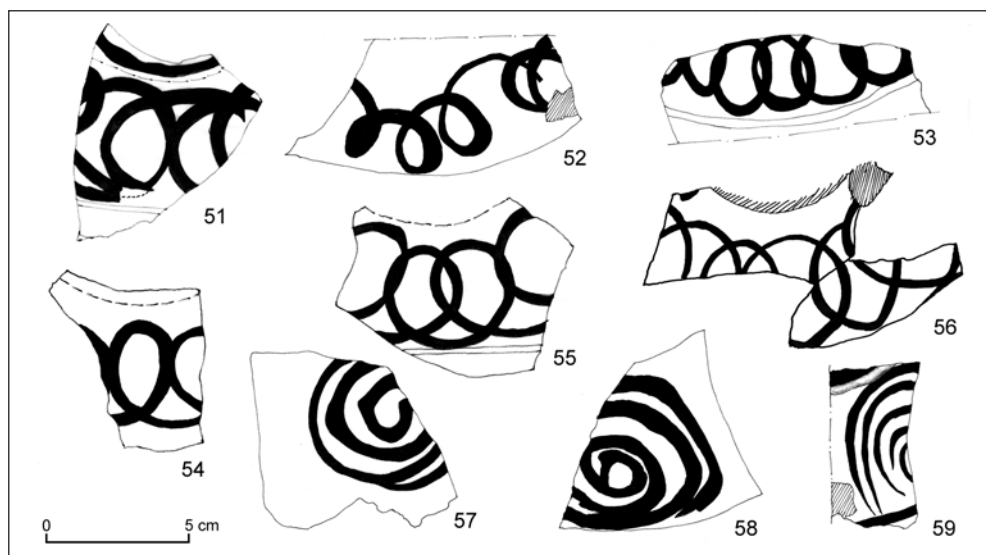


Fig. 8. Spiral motifs (51-59)
(Drawing A. Południkiewicz)

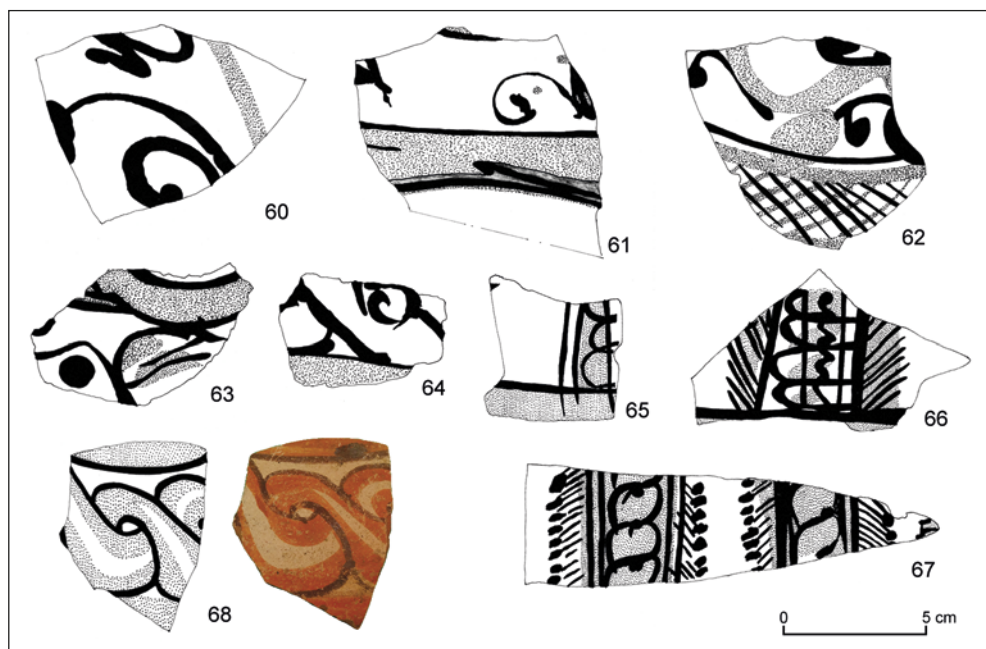


Fig. 9. Compositions made up of different motifs (60-64, 65-67) and, bottom, guilloche (68)
(Drawing and photo A. Południkiewicz)

[*Fig. 9:66*] features upward strokes and horizontal arcs transected by two vertical lines and a zigzag, with an irregular red smudge inside. In this case the decoration began at the red-and-black band running around the body of the water jug. A simplified version of this motif was also noted [*Fig. 9:65*].

– Plait- or guilloche-motif [*Fig. 9:68*]; thick coils of red-brick color with black contours, the cream-colored background slip seen in a narrow strip in the middle.

VEGETAL MOTIFS

Vegetal motifs constituted the second largest group of motifs. Two types were distinguished: floral and foliate.

On six sherds there is a flower bud turned to the right, with leaves at the base and an undulating stem suggestive of an aquatic plant [*Fig. 10*]. The bud and leaves are painted with thick strokes, whereas the stem is thinner. The bud is brown or red and its contours are either black, purple or brown. The background slip is white or cream-colored. Another flower has long narrow petals fanning out up from a large dot [*Fig. 11:78*]. The petals are outlined

with thick dark brown strokes and shadowed with light brown paint.

Foliate motifs are more varied. Three or more small leaves shown side by side are a very frequent type [*Fig. 13:92,94,96–98,104,105,107*]. Most have thick black contours, which are filled in with red paint. Some are stemmed or have short thin shoots. Veined leaves occur as well [*Fig. 14:111–115*]. Plants with large deeply-cut leaves are another common type [*Fig. 14:116–121*]. Always turned to the right, they are drawn carelessly with thick irregular black strokes and filled in with red paint. No stems or other decorative elements are discernible. The third type is a single elongated leaf pointing up or down, painted with thick double contours and short strokes along the whole outline or just parts of it [*Fig. 13:89,106,110*]. They are drawn in black or purple and the leaf is colored with red or orange paint.

The next type comprises elongated leaves with double contours but without the strokes, all pointing up [*Fig. 13:88,91,93,95,98–100,102,109*]. In one case, three such leaves fan out from one point [*Fig. 11:77*]. The stem, where

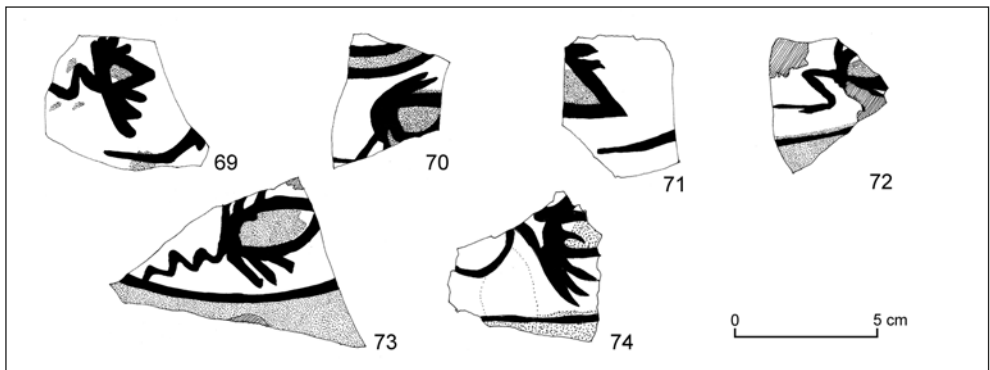


Fig. 10. Floral motifs (69–74)
(Drawing A. Południkiewicz)

visible, is straight and veining is marked in the lower part of some of the leaves. In one case, the vein is an extension of the stem which divides the leaf in two [Fig. 13:104]. There are short horizontal strokes painted on a red background on either side of it.

All drawings are executed carelessly, with haste. A smudge of red paint is visible in the center of each leaf.

A small branch with leaves arranged alternately is yet another type of foliate motif [Fig. 11:79]. It is aligned

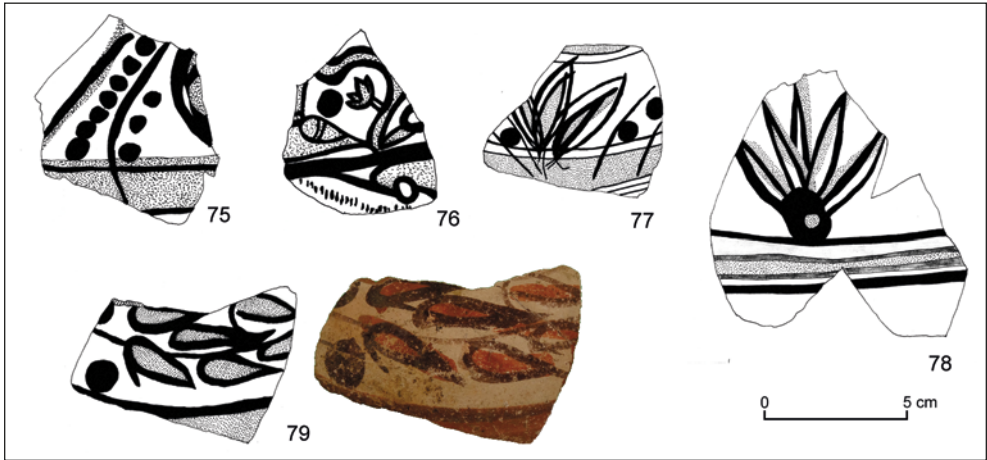


Fig. 11. Floral motifs (75–79)
(Drawing and photo A. Południkiewicz)

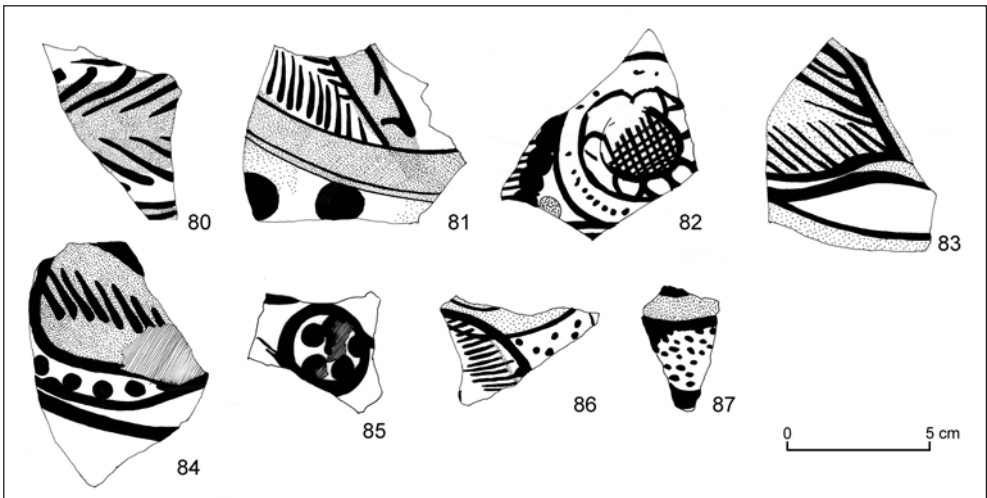


Fig. 12. Floral motifs in composition with other motifs (80–87)
(Drawing A. Południkiewicz)

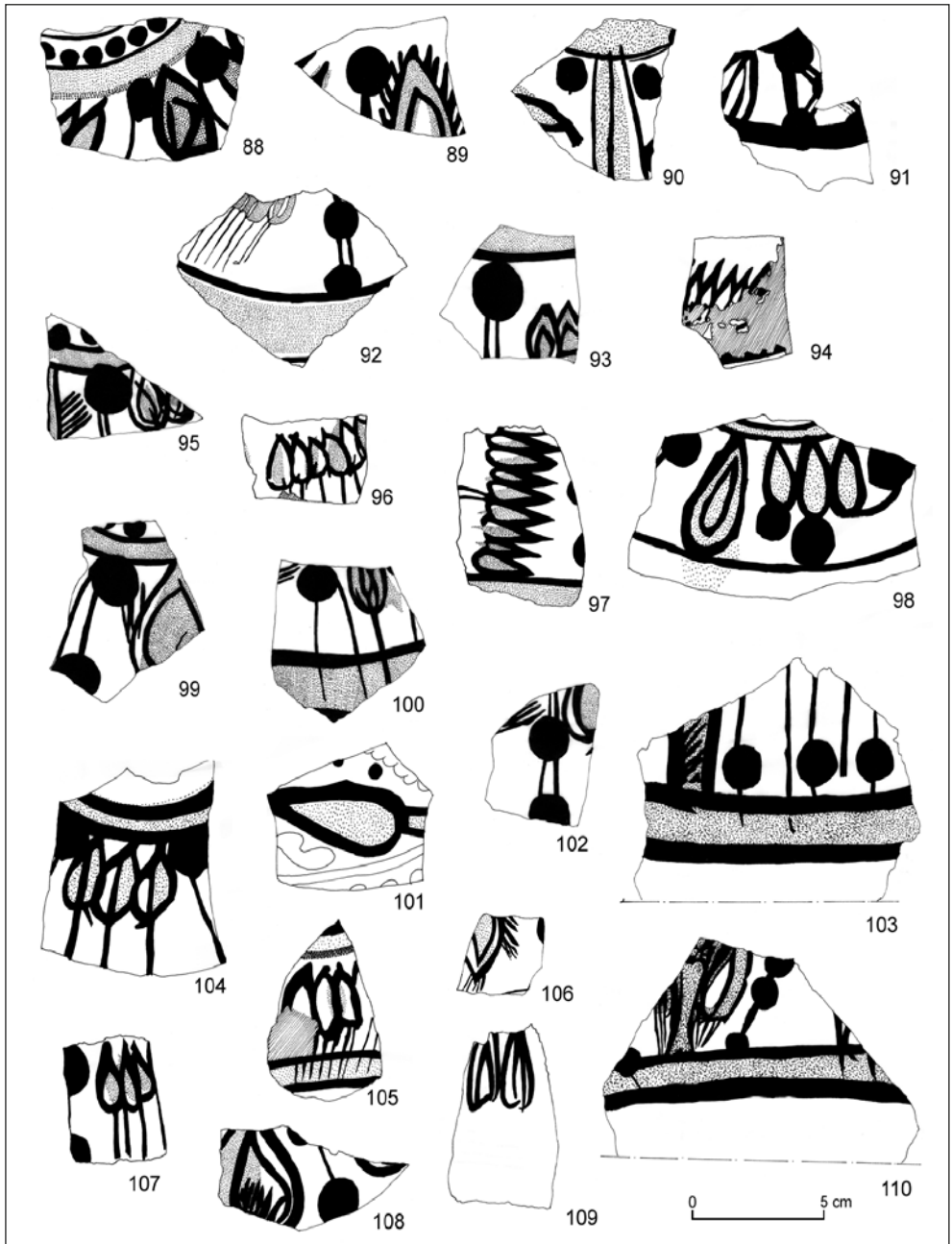


Fig. 13. Foliate motifs (88–110)
(Drawing A. Południkiewicz)

horizontally and the leaves are narrow and elongated, with black contours and brick-red filling.

Some other pottery fragments featured stylized vegetal motifs, but the plants depicted there could not be identified due to their small size and illegibility.

ZOOMORPHIC MOTIFS

Zoomorphic motifs, which constitute the third category of ornaments, include depictions of fish and a bird. Five images of fish are especially worth noting due to the size and better state of preservation [Fig. 15:123–127]. Distinct heads are

visible, featuring a large eye and dorsal and pelvic fins marked with short diagonal strokes (one example without fins), the scales accentuated with wavy lines, dotting and hatching. Most of the fish are painted red on a pink slip (the varied intensity of dotting indicates different shades of red).

The other zoomorphic motif noted is a bird. A pair of thin legs terminating in claws can be seen below the body; there is also the lower edge of a wing. The build of the legs suggests it could be a kind of pigeon [Fig. 15:122]. The vessel fragment is covered with pink-beige

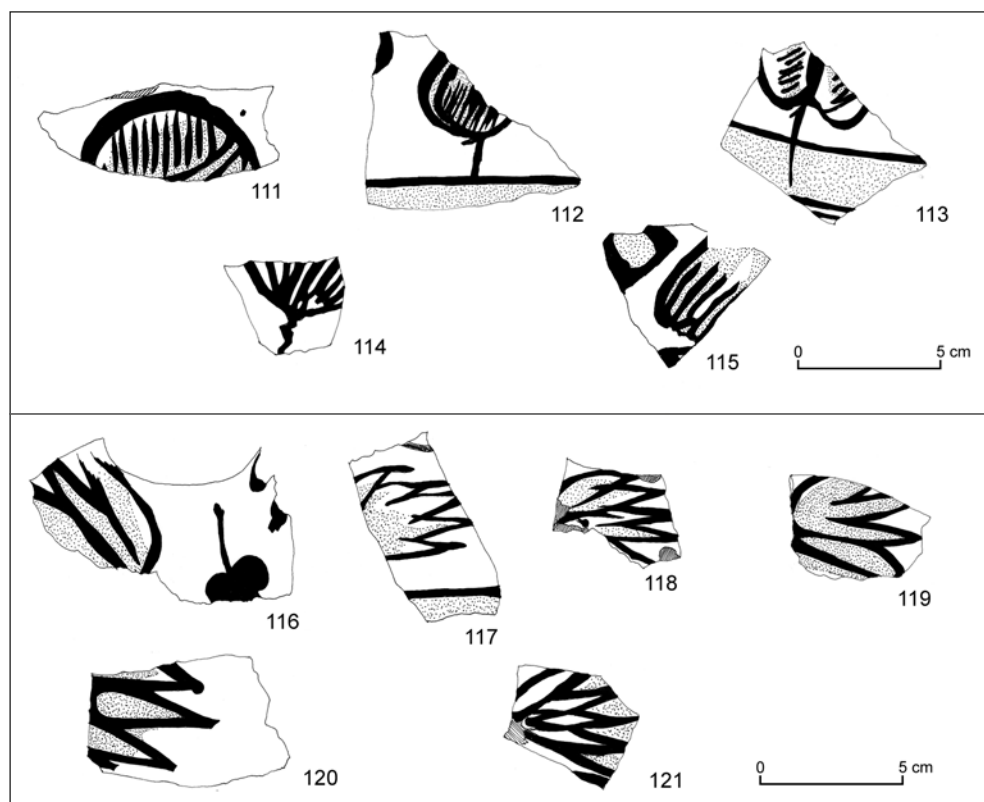


Fig. 14. *Veined leaf motif* (111–115) and, bottom, *multi-leaf motif* (116–121)
(Drawing A. Południkiewicz)

slip and the lower edge of the body is painted in red.

HUMAN MOTIFS

Two fragments bear fragmentary representations of human faces featuring large eyes [Fig. 16]. In one case, the red band with black dots may be interpreted as either curls or a cape. The other face is framed with black hair.

It is impossible to say whether these images were of saints or laymen, and whether they were part of full figures or not.

EPIGRAPHIC MOTIF

A fragmentary inscription was found on one of the pottery sherds. Two Coptic letters, *hori* and *ni* (or *eta*), were preserved [Fig. 17:130].

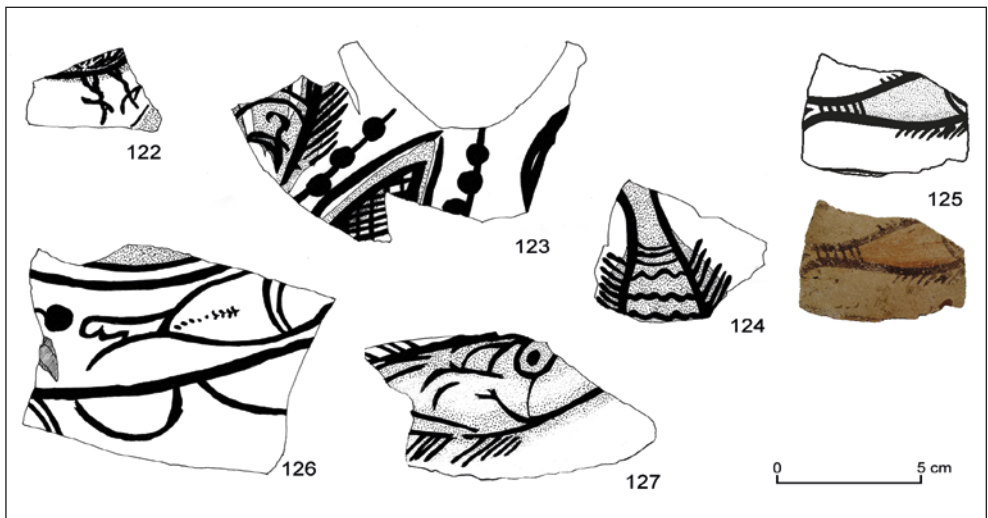


Fig. 15. Zoomorphic motifs: bird (122) and fish (123–127)
(Drawing A. Południkiewicz, M. Puzkarski; photo A. Południkiewicz)

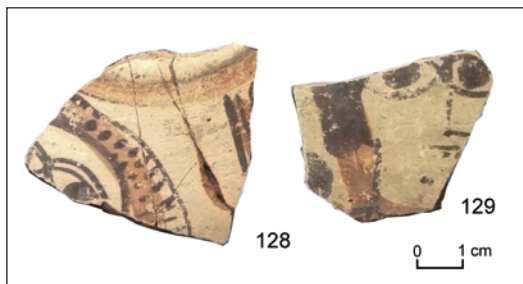


Fig. 16. Human motifs (128–129)
(Photo T. Górecki)



Fig. 17. Fragment of inscription in Coptic
(Drawing M. Puzkarski; photo A. Południkiewicz)

COMPOSITIONS

The motifs are combined in different ways, either as horizontal registers or registers of metopes separated by geometrical motifs. In the former case, rows of connected black dots appear together with several narrow black lines, which divide them from a wavy line with dots [Fig. 3]. The metopes also contain sets of different geometric motifs (for a plant and zoomorphic motif composition, see Fig.

15:123]. The decoration of the metopes is not always identifiable due to the small size of the pottery fragments. In some cases, however, two diagonal lines with a big dot at their intersection can be seen [Fig. 5:32,33].

There are many sherds with a design that is not always identifiable and combines motifs either geometrical and vegetal (some of them treated very schematically) or others [Figs 9:60–64; 11:75,76; 12:80–87].

DISCUSSION

The water jars discussed here are more or less decorated in all instances, although undecorated vessels are known as well. The ornaments unfold in registers or as a series of metopes on the shoulders of the jars and on the necks. Ornaments included a predominance of simple and combined geometric motifs, flower and foliate ornaments and the less frequent zoomorphic representations (mainly fish). Rules of symmetry were followed, alternating two different motifs, creating four sectors in cases where there were no handles. Otherwise handles separated the register into two parts.

An analysis of dated parallels in the context of the ornamentation found on the water jars sets the dating margin for the Tell Atrib assemblage. Starting with geometrical motifs, various sets of lines are the most frequent motif on different sites. An interesting group of necks of different form with striped decoration come from the monastery of Old Baramus in Wadi Natrun, dated mainly to the 5th–7th century (Konstantinidou 2012: 157–177).

Spirals are frequent on water jars from Antioch. The single spirals are dated to the 3rd–4th century AD, while bands

of continuous spiraling motif are of 5th century date (Guerrini 1974: 81). In Ashmunein, the single forms are from the 5th century AD (Bailey 1996: 64, Fig. 15,16–19; 77, Fig. 48,6–9). Also at Amarna, they are of 5th–6th century date (Faïers 2005: 140–142, Fig. 2.46, Cat. 311, for the dating, see 267–268). In Kellia, the simple spiral appears on a jar from the 7th century AD (Egloff 1977: 51, Pl. 68.3), and some examples dated to the second half of the 6th and beginning of 7th century AD (Bonnet and Borel 2013: 148, 250), and to the 6th and 7th century on vessels from Gurna (Myśliwiec 1987: 143–146). On storage amphorae from Tell Atrib, single spirals are part of a frieze; they are painted between bands, close to one another, often touching. The vessels came from strata of the end of the 6th–mid 7th century AD (Górecki 1990: 36, Fig. 13).

Parallels for the wavy line between straight lines are known from Hermitage EE.06 in Deir el-Naqlun, dated to the second half of the 5th–third quarter of the 6th century AD (Godlewski, Danys, and Maślak 2016: 283, 286, Fig. 16, in this volume), and from Kellia (QR 195) where they were dated to the end of the 7th/

beginning of the 8th century AD (Ballet, Bosson and Rassart-Debergh 2003: 67, 171, Pl. 25.157). A similar motif appears on water jars from Ashmunein dated to the 8th–9th century AD (Bailey 1998: Pl. 51:J 186, J 220, J 224, J 226). The wavy line with dots, identified as a schematic scrolling vine motif, finds parallels in Kellia, on vessels dated to the 4th–5th century AD (Egloff 1977: 50, Pl. 64) and to the 6th and 7th century (Myśliwiec 1987: 143–146, 1780; Ballet, Bosson, and Rassart-Debergh 2003: 22, 168, Pl. 25.148; Bonnet Borel and Burri 2003: 127, 213, Figs 106.160, 107.213), as well as on ceramics from Edfu from the 6th/7th century AD (Kalinowska-Habdas 1957: 268, Fig. 8).

Semicircular arcades are known from Antinoe, from the 5th century onward (Guerrini 1974: 87, Figs 32–35). At Kellia, double semicircular lines with dots on the inside were found on a pot dated to the 7th century AD (Egloff 1977: 51, Fig. 70.3). A jar with arcades full of black dots and a red hatched filling comes from the 5th century AD. Similar decoration from Karanis is assigned to the 3rd–mid 5th century AD (Johnson 1981: 7, 20), although Karanis dates should be treated with caution. In Tôd, such decoration comes from the 5th–mid 6th century AD (Pierrat-Bonnefois 1996: 196, Figs 51–53).

Guilloches are a common motif on mosaics, wall paintings and vases, such as those from Kellia from the 4th–5th century AD (Egloff 1977: 50, Fig. 66.3; Bonnet Borel 2013: 214–215, 84). Antinoe yielded many potsherds with different painted types of guilloches, mostly from the 4th century AD when the motif was widely popular. A vessel from the Staatliche Museum is dated to the 5th century AD (Badawy 1978: 307, Fig. 4.101),

the vase from Semna to the 7th century AD (Badawy 1978: 307, Fig. 4.100), the vase from Semna to the 7th century AD (Badawy 1978: 307, Fig. 4.101), a vase discovered in Luxor to the 7th or 8th century AD (Badawy 1978: 307, Fig. 4.99). Vessels from Karanis came from a context dated to the 3rd–mid 4th century AD (with the reservations above regarding the date, Johnson 1981: 6, Pls 13,105; 14,109; 15,114). From Bawit there are examples dated to the first half of the 7th century AD (Marchand and Dixneuf 2007: 318, 385, Fig. 30). A vase from the Sèvres Museum is dated to the 7th century AD (Bulté 1981: 58, Pl. X,77). A plate from Edfu with a guilloche ornament was of the 6th/7th century AD (Kalinowska-Habdas 1957: 253, Fig. 8).

The motifs of dots joined by lines appears in Kellia on ceramics from the 7th century (Egloff 1977: 51, Fig. 96.68). Decoration of the kind is also seen on vessels from Kellia from the 4th–5th century AD (Egloff 1977: 50, Fig. 96.73).

Hatching as a motif is equally frequent: in Kellia on vessels from the 4th–5th century AD (Egloff 1977: 49, Fig. 64.1,4) and the 6th century AD (Egloff 1977: 50, Fig. 68.1). Guerrini compared the pottery from Antinoe with ceramics from Baqariya from the 3rd–4th century, but pointing out that the Antinoe pottery is later (Guerrini 1974: 85, Pls 27–31). The Karanis examples are dated to the 3rd–mid 5th century AD (Johnson 1981: 6, Pls 14, 16, 20). On Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria the motif appears in composition with other motifs and is dated to the beginning of the 7th century AD (Rodziewicz 1983: Figs 50, 51).

The flower and foliate motifs are very schematic, but they may be identified as lotus and scrolling-vine motifs. Some

of the motifs resemble aquatic plants. Zigzag lines represented a water environment in ancient Egyptian art and these motifs often occurred together. Some parallels are known, mostly on vessels from Antinoe dated to the 3rd–4th century AD (Guerrini 1974: Pl. 56,3). Similar groups of three leaves are known from Antinoe ceramics (Guerrini 1974: Pl. 59,11). Kellia ceramics have also yielded many parallels for the plant motifs: leaves with double contours dated to the 7th century AD (Egloff 1977: 51, Pl. 68.2), lanceolate leaves with a common stem from the 6th century AD (Egloff 1977: 50, Pl. 65.5), narrow leaves [*Fig. 14:111–121*] from the 7th century AD (Egloff 1977: 51, Pl. 69.1), veined leaves from the 4th through 5th century AD (Egloff 1977: 49, Pl. 64-1,2). A wreath of leaves appears on the shoulder of a bottle from Elephantine, dated to the 4th century AD; according to Gempeler, it is unique among the Elephantine finds (Gempeler 1992: Fig. 77.1, Pl. 34.8).

Despite having just one example with an inscription in the set from Tell Atrib, texts are hardly an exception on water jars (Ballet, Bosson, and Rassart-Debergh 2003: 175, 165; Danys-Lasek 2012: 230, Fig. 5:Nd 08.768).

No parallels have been found for the fish motif on our water jars, although the motif itself is quite common on many sites in Egypt, mainly Edfu (Kalinowska-Habdas 1957), Antinoe (Guerrini 1974) and Kellia (Egloff 1977). No other motifs that could be considered as Christian symbols were identified in the analyzed assemblage; thus it is not so obvious that the fish in this case should be treated as a symbol of Christ (Cabrol and Leclercq 1939: 1246). Bird

representations were also common motifs, not only on ceramics, and need not have had more than decorative value. A similar pair of bird's legs is found on a mosaic floor from Antioch from the beginning of the 6th century AD (Campbell 1988: 6, Pl. 5). The dove in Christian religious symbolism is a symbol of the Holy Spirit among others. However, the fragmentary state of the representation precludes identification to species of either the bird or the fish. Human representations occur on many kinds of vessels, for instance, a plate from Antinoe with an image featuring a similar face and hair, dated to the 5th century AD. The fragment is too small again to determine the nature of the person depicted (Guerrini 1974: 89, Fig. 41).

SUMMARY

The ornaments appearing on water jars excavated in Byzantine-age layers in Tell Atrib reflect a shared set of iconographic motifs used in the decoration of so-called Coptic wall paintings, mosaic floors, textiles and ceramics. This particular group of motifs is unquestionably connected with water and its symbolism, drawing extensively on a variety of motifs from ancient Egyptian art, as well as Ptolemaic–Roman and early Christian cultural models.

The chronology of this set is burdened by the limited number of publications of pottery from dated stratified contexts. On typological and stylistic grounds, they range usually from the 5th to the 8th century AD. However, most of the water jars from this assemblage could be dated more narrowly to the 6th–7th century AD, a dating confirmed by the coins found in context with the pottery.

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