

# GLAZED IFRIQIYYAN CERAMICS FROM THE HAFSID PERIOD FROM THE SITE OF KOM EL-DIKKA IN ALEXANDRIA

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**Abstract:** The presented pottery collection comes from the excavation of a medieval Islamic cemetery discovered at the Kom el-Dikka site in Alexandria, Egypt. The described set represents only a small fraction of an assemblage consisting of ceramics imported from the world known at the time. Hafsid pottery is easily distinguished thanks to a characteristic palette of colors: brown and blue patterns painted on a creamy-white background. The decoration repertoire can be divided into the following main groups of motifs: zoomorphic, floral, geometric and pseudo-epigraphic. The archaeological evidence is insufficient to support a periodization of this collection; the suggested dating follows from a stylistic analysis of the decoration compared with dated parallels from excavations on the citadel in Tunis and the *bacini* (bowls) preserved in Italian cathedrals.

**Keywords:** Alexandria, Kom el-Dikka, Hafsid ceramics, glazed Ifriqiyyan ware

The ceramic assemblage of glazed Ifriqiyyan ware presented below was collected from layers which covered the later phases of the early medieval Islamic cemetery occupying the mound of Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria. The excavations in question were conducted by teams from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw, starting from 1960 (for results of investigations in the cemetery layers, see, e.g., Lipińska 1966: 183; Promińska 1972; Majcherek 1999: 30–31; 2000: 29).

The currently accepted chronology for the successive phases of the Kom el-Dikka burial ground is from the 7th/8th century AD (Lower Necropolis), through the 11th/12th century AD (Middle Necropolis) to the 13th/14th century AD (Upper

Necropolis). The Ifriqiyyan wares were associated with the Middle and Upper Necropolis strata, deposited as rubbish in the burial ground following its desecration, possibly as a result of a change of the ruling dynasty (François 1998: 58). They were found together with numerous imports from Spain, south Italy, Byzantium, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula and even China.

Islamic ceramics feature decoration consisting of mainly geometric, floral and calligraphic motifs (which could also provide a background for figural scenes, Dziekan 2008: 339). Ifriqiyyan wares represented a low quality local production, the Hafsid dynasty ruling Ifriqiyya (overlapping with modern Tunisia) in the years 1236–1574 preferring to support domestic public, mil-

itary and religious institutions rather than a development of the arts. They were faced with a constant threat of war due to restless Berber tribes and territorial ambitions on the part of their western neighbors (Dziubiński 1994: 144). Their pottery was characterized by simple decoration, poor artistic quality and the absence of techniques like luster painting, for example, which were well known and commonly used in other production centers.

The main and possibly the only production centers of this ware were located close to the Hafsid court and did not coincide with other ceramic production centers (Soustiel 1985: 153). Little is known with regard to this production, the 11th and 12th centuries being dominated by products of the Carthago workshops (*Couleurs de Tunisie* 1994: 102). No other production center appears to have existed before the 14th century, at which time a dynamic new workshop started operating in Tunis or its suburbs (Soustiel 1985: 158). The final years of Hafsid rule in the 16th century were linked to the Qallaline atelier, which was extremely active and popular in the Ottoman period (François 1999: 101).

The pottery group from Kom el-Dikka counts 88 sherds with painted decoration, selected from a collection of about 219 pieces. The ware is distinctive due to a specific repertoire of shapes, as well as a lightness and linearity of the ornaments. The color palette combines cobalt blue and manganese brown glazes (in different proportions depending on the phase) commonly used on a creamy-white background. The fabric is not without significance. It is tempered with white and dark brown/black grains (limestone and pyrite). The paste is porous in the break, frequently layered, representing uneven, so-called sandwich firing.

Five main colors of the paste were distinguished: 1) creamy yellow, pale (27%); 2) shades of orange (light and pinkish) (21%); 3) red brick (15%); 4) "sandwich firing": light orange with light yellow core (12%); light yellow with light orange core (18%); 5) light pink (6%); 6) others (1%).

Relatively thick walls of the vessels reflect poor pottery skills. The repertoire of forms is quite limited, the most frequent being deep bowls of various sizes, accompanied by some jugs and lids. Most forms can be restored despite the poor state of preservation; many have counterparts at other sites. A typology based on diagnostic rims, much more diverse than the bases, was developed for the Kom el-Dikka collection. However, particular decoration motifs could not be assigned to specific vessel shapes (save for a few) owing to the small number of excavated sherds and lack of good comparanda.

The following typological classification has been adopted [*Fig. 1*]:

#### **Type I** (13 sherds)

Deep bowl on a proportionately large ring base. Rim straight, slightly narrowing toward the top. Predominant type.

#### **Type II** (2 sherds)

Deep bowl with slight carination, marked with a double groove on the external body wall and a faint break on the inside. Rim rounded on top, slightly bent outward. Ring base. Shape identified based on the grooved surface and rim.

#### **Type III** (5 sherds)

Bowl with carinated wall, slightly rounded on the outside. Thickened rim, oblate on top, visibly distinct from the body. Ring base.

**Type IV** (15 sherds)

Group characterized by considerable dimensions, the diameter ranging from 36 cm to 44 cm. Wall 1 cm thick, straight and flaring. Rim rounded and outturned, slightly flattened on top. Flat base. More than half of the sherds bear traces of repairs, demonstrating the value of these vessels to their users. Pseudo-calligraphic patterns imitating the word *al baraka* appear often

on the inside walls; they are not encountered on other types.

**Type V** (6 sherds)

Bowls with semicircular bodies, broad flattened rims bearing decoration on their top, the edges slightly rounded. Ring base. Often decorated with a single central motif (either an oval or a small fish) filled with a checker pattern. Fully pre-

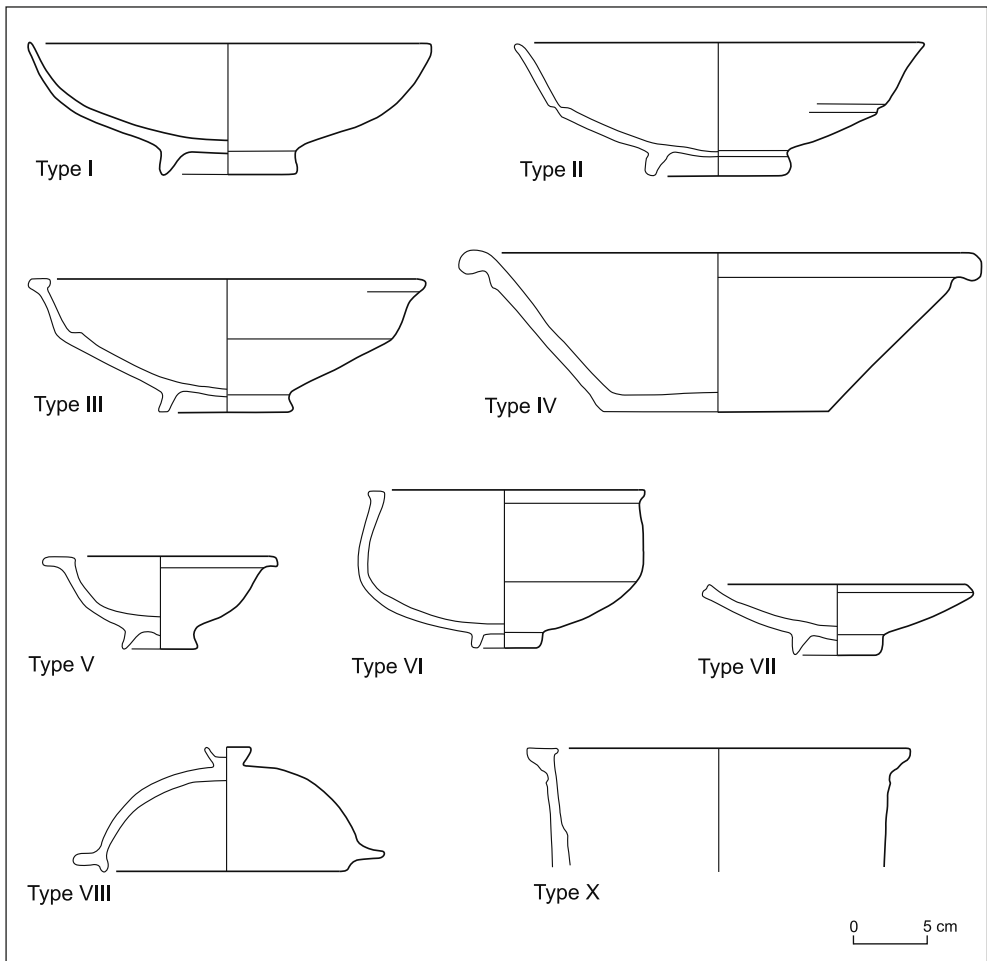


Fig. 1. Typology of Ifriqiyyan glazed vessels from Kom el-Dikka (Drawing A. Zawadzińska)

served parallels were noted in the Pisa cathedral.

**Type VI** (2 sherds)

Bowls with bulging body (body diameter bigger than that of the rim). Inward turning walls terminate in a rim, flaring outward insignificantly, oblate on top. Disproportionately small ring base. Decoration on the outer wall surface.

**Type VII** (3 sherds)

Plate or flat, middle-sized broad bowl; rim slightly prominent. Ring base.

**Type VIII** (4 sherds)

Lids, a homogeneous group in terms of shape, differentiated by the size. Spherical body and pin handle at center top. One rim enabling the lid to rest on top of a pot and a second, inner rim preventing the lid from slipping off.

**Type IX** (5 sherds)

Jars of varying sizes with bulging bellies and narrow necks, with one or two handles. Both flat and ring bases. Full profile not preserved, so neither height nor maximum width could be established. The jars from Kom el-Dikka are unique in the Hafsid period; there are no known parallel finds from any other site.

Sherds without preserved rim were classified according to base shape. Two main forms were present: flat bases (8 fragments, most probably bowls of type IV) and ring bases (18 fragments, probably from vessels of types I, II, III, V, VI, VII). Four body fragments could not be identified to type.

Ornamental motifs on vessels from the group excavated on Kom el-Dikka included:

- **zoomorphic patterns** [Fig. 2]: brown outlines of the animal body and its parts; the fur, feather or stylized scales drawn in cobalt blue (vertical and horizontal lines, checkered “peacock eye”). Depictions include images of quadrupeds (horses which are unique in Kom el-Dikka, and gazelles), fish, and peacocks;
- **joint rosette and six-point star** [see Fig. 2]: emblem consisting of a six-leaf flower and double-triangle star, the inside lines forming a hexagon. Pattern painted in brown (star) and cobalt (rosette) glaze or in blue only. Hexagonal space in the center may be filled with an inscription in double tondo(?), checker oval or another double-lined hexagon with floral or “peacock eye” filling;
- **checker central motifs**: thick, brown ovals (made with one or two touches of the brush), filled with manganese or cobalt grid pattern. Situated in the center of the bowl without any accompanying ornaments. Checkered ovals are associated with bowl type V: spherical body and wide, flat rim (with painted lines forming concentric circles);
- **pseudo-calligraphic patterns** [see Fig. 2]: patterns imitating handwriting, resembling the Arabic word *al brkah*, written in *naschi* style (Blair 2006: 25, 29). *Al baraka* (=blessing, opulence, prosperity) is a very popular formula for expressing best wishes. The decoration appears on the inner wall surface of large bowls of type IV and the outer wall surface of bowls of type VI. The letters are casual: the letter “b” lost the dot below it, “r” was horizontal and pointing upwards, the finishing marks (“k”) and *tamarbutah* placed above the



Fig. 2. Examples of ornamental motifs on Hafsîd ceramics  
(Photos A. Zawadzińska; processing B. Wójcik)

writing level. In one case, the inscription was upside down. The background is filled with cobalt blue dots and circular lines;

- **floral designs** [see *Fig. 2*]: present either as the main motif covering all of the available space (usually two-color or cobalt only), as a voluted branch supported by leaves, spots and rounds/dots and circles, or as a thin band running around the body or underneath the rim. The floral patterns are strongly stylized and unrealistic, usually bordered with wide manganese-brown stripes [see *Fig. 2*];
- **big flowers** [*Fig. 3*]: a four petal rosette (each petal bearing an extra spindle-shaped mark); four leaves with half a spindle-shaped rod and a cuboid filled with an arabesque. Always as a single central motif against a plain background, in two(?) colors;
- **spinning radial rosettes** [see *Fig. 3*]: rays, pointing to the right, with extended endings filling the entire inner surface of the bowl. Underneath the rim there is a double line running concentrically. Decoration applied only in cobalt blue against a plain creamy-white background;
- **radial rosettes** [see *Fig. 3*]: double-line rays radiating across the entire inner surface of the bowl, from the center to the rim; ends with lambrequins with arabesque and manganese stripes running around;
- **ships** [see *Fig. 3*]: ship motifs very similar to those on finds from other Islamic countries, represented as single-mast sea vessels with high sides and huge sails with vertical lines across. Decoration applied in two-color glaze or in cobalt blue only.

Motifs on another 19 pieces either occurred only once or could not be identified. Two jars and one lid were adorned with stripes of varying colors and width, while five bowls bore geometric and zigzag patterns; a guilloche appeared once, as did criss-cross and linear decoration.

The collection is not sufficiently well documented in terms of stratigraphic context, hence the dating of particular sherds has to depend on comparative studies of pottery imported from Ifriqiyya to the city of Pisa and embedded in the facades of the cathedrals there (Berti and Tongiorgi 1980; 1981a; 1981b). A characteristic Hafsid decorative feature is the use of manganese brown glaze for the main pattern, supplemented with additional ornaments painted in cobalt blue. Abdelaziz Daoulati distinguished three phases of Ifriqiyyan ceramic production, based on the introduction of cobalt blue glaze in the 12th century. And so, Phase I (11th–12th century) was dominated by Raqada production, ceramics with antimony yellow glaze, green and brown decorations. Phase II (12th–15th century) encompassed ceramics with creamy-white tin glaze, decorated in cobalt blue and manganese brown. Finally, Phase III (14th–15th century), featuring characteristic zoomorphic patterns (animals depicted in pairs) and described by a domination of blue glaze over brown, and a compositional *horror vacui* (*Couleurs de Tunisie* 1994: 111–113). The Kom el-Dikka finds do not correspond to this classification, Phase I being associated with the Almohad Dynasty and hence beyond the scope of this presentation and Phase III not represented at all. Thus, it is essential to improve and develop the existing chronology, which is currently superficial and insufficient.

A comparative study of the ornamental motifs on Phase II Ifriqiyyan ceramics from Kom el-Dikka gives some suggestions regarding their inner chronology. Animal patterns are dated to the 11th through 12th century AD (François 1999: 100–101) and this early dating appears to be confirmed by an example of a brown peacock body on creamy background from Carthage (*Couleurs de Tunisie* 1994: 136,

No. 81), dated to the 10th–11th century AD. All the motifs in double-color glaze are not earlier than the 12th century to believe Daoulati (*Couleurs de Tunisie* 1994: 197–202); therefore, the monochrome brown patterns may be dated earlier and treated as a transitional phase. The latest dated finds of this group are the bacini from the Santa Maria Cathedral in Pisa, from the end of the 12th century or



Fig. 3. Examples of ornamental motifs on Hafsid ceramics  
(Photos A. Zawadzińska; processing B. Wójcik)

even the beginning of the 13th century (Berti and Tongiorgi 1981a: 24, Figs 19, 26; 21, 33; 28, 36; 31). Summing up, the suggested dating for zoomorphic patterns is not earlier than the 12th century (for blue and brown adornments) and they are present until the turn of the 13th century.

The joint rosette and six-point star is a numerous and diversified group with many parallels in Carthage (*Couleurs de Tunisie* 1994: 142, No. 92), Pisa (Berti and Tongiorgi 1981b: Pl. CXXV, Fig. 13), Naples (Fontana and Ventrone Vassallo 1984: 485, Pl. CCXXLII, No. 4) and in the Kom el-Dikka assemblage (1940–1942 excavations by Alan Wace) (François 1999: 102, Nos 228, 229). This decoration style is dated to the period between the end of the 12th century through the mid 13th century. The balanced use of blue and brown glazes, as well as the relatively good quality of the painting, favors such a dating.

The big flower motif, even though infrequent, deserves individual treatment owing to its conspicuous size. Only five pieces of this type are noted. A collateral sherd from Tunis (*Couleurs de Tunisie* 1994: 143, No. 94) can be dated to the end of the 12th or the beginning of the 13th century. A pseudo-inscription on a body wall fragment with this decoration is dated to the same period.

Floral motifs are the most numerous group, displaying either a realistic or a stylized mode of the composition. The first is applied with more care and fills the entire surface of the wall, using both blue and brown glaze. The second is rather unrealistic, sloppy, the cobalt plants always bordered with brown stripes creating concentric circles around the bowl or lid. It is not certain which of these two came first, although François suggested an ear-

lier date for the realistic style placing it at the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century (Berti and Tongiorgi 1981a: Pls XXX–XXXII; 1981b: Pl. CXXVII, Fig. 118). The second style can be as late as the 13th and 14th century AD (François 1999: 101), a less careful drawing of ornaments being typical of later centuries.

Central motifs (checkered ovals and fishes) are connected inseparably with bowl type V. Parallels with very reliable dating to the end of the 12th through the mid 13th century AD come from the San Miniato Cathedral (Berti and Tongiorgi 1981a: Figs 33, 35, 38).

The radial rosette has one parallel in the San Miniato Cathedral (Berti and Tongiorgi 1981a: 31, Fig. 15) and like most of the bacini is dated to the end of the 12th through mid 13th century. Sherds with a spinning radial rosette were noted at Kom el-Dikka previously and François dated them to the 12th/13th century (François 1999: 102, Nos 232, 233) based on the brown and blue colors of the glaze. Aly Bahgat (1922: 99) noted a similar find from Egypt, dating it to the 13th century. Taking into consideration the growing tendency to use cobalt glaze at the expense of manganese brown, these sherds should be dated to the period between the 13th and 15th century.

Pseudo-calligraphic decoration consisting of letters (or marks imitating letters), written in *kufi* or *naschi* style (most of the group), is not easily dated for lack of parallels. A group of finds in the present collection features a greenish background glaze that should probably be placed later in time, between the 12th and 15th century. Some of the sherds bearing a pseudo-calligraphic decoration on the wall were preserved with the bases allowing the central decoration to



be identified as a joint rosette and star. They may be dated to the period from the end of the 12th to the mid 13th century. Another argument in favor of the dating suggested above is a bowl with pseudo-inscription described as unique (*Couleurs de Tunisie* 1994: 144, No. 95) and dated to the same period, that is, 12th–13th century. Pots and bowls from previous excavations at Kom el-Dikka (François 1999: 101) were dated alike. Two pieces, a bowl and a storage jar, stand out in this group, being painted in the earlier *kufi* style (Blair 2006: 16, 25) [see Fig. 3]. A similar find, with checker fields, was recorded in Mahdija and is dated to the last phase of the settlement after 1057 (Louhichi 1997: 310, Fig. 35). In keeping with Daoulati's idea for dating the introduction of cobalt glaze, these vessels come from the mid 12th century at the earliest.

Ship motifs are said to have been inspired by Andalusian art (*Couleurs de Tunisie* 1994: 113) and like other well known examples come from the workshops of Malaga or Valencia. Finds from the citadel in Tunis are dated to the 14th/15th century, and the same dating is suggested for the Kom el-Dikka examples.

Criss-crossing lines and concentric bands are the most numerous among the miscellaneous motifs. A body sherd from a storage jar bears a horizontal zigzag pattern consisting of two lines, a brown one and a cobalt blue one outlined with brown. Jugs covered with similar patterns were discovered in Egypt and are dated to the 13th century (Bahgat 1922: 99). Assuming that zigzag/criss-cross line motif came to Ifriqiyya from the East, the suggested dating for sherds with such ornamentation is the 13th/14th century.

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Summing up, products from the Hafsid period are distinguished by the color palette, combining cobalt blue and manganese brown motifs against a background of creamy-white tin glaze. The decoration style is also characteristic, beautiful in its own right, but inferior to contemporary ceramics from Andalusia, Egypt and Persia. This pottery is also substantially different from earlier ceramics not only in terms of glaze color, but also the choice of decoration motifs.

Assuming, after Daoulati, that cobalt glaze was introduced in the 12th century, we may also take for granted that it steadily increased its share in the painted decoration, ultimately displacing manganese brown glaze (*Couleurs de Tunisie* 1994). Spain cannot be taken into consideration as the origin of this innovation, because blue decoration on products from Malaga and Valencia appeared almost a century later (Caiger-Smith 1985: 85–99). Egypt could be the source, ceramics with cobalt motifs (Iakabi type and *Fatimid Fustat Sgraffito*) appearing there in the 12th century (Watson 2004: 286, 291). At the turn of the 13th century also Persian workshops started using blue paint on *lajwardina* and *mina'i* pottery (Watson 2004: 348–351, 363–371).

One should also note the gradual deterioration of the quality of the ornaments. The lines of animal and rosette motifs in the earlier phase were crisp and sharp, although never as perfect as on Egyptian or Syrian counterparts. In the 13th century and later, depictions were executed carelessly, the glaze spilled and fuzzy at times, the compositions characterized by *horror vacui*.

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