

Mosaic Floral Plaque Fragment from Alexandria

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Abstract: Recent archeological work at the Kom el-Dikka site in Alexandria yielded a fragment of cast mosaic-glass floral plaque. It is one of just a few pieces of this category of glass known from regular excavations in the city. It exhibits a set of stylized flowers and fruits arranged in right-left symmetry, characteristic of this type of objects, which are generally assigned to the first century BC – first century AD. It is presumed that they were intended as inlays on wooden boxes and other furnishings, whereas larger examples were used as revetment panels in architectural contexts. The plaque from Kom el-Dikka was found in a late Roman context, containing also residual material from the early Roman period.

Keywords: Alexandria, Kom el-Dikka, Roman mosaic glass, mosaic floral plaque

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Mosaic glass is inseparably associated with the Alexandrian glass industry after the Hellenistic period.¹ Alas, like in the case of many other categories of luxury glass credited with being an Alexandrian specialty,² the archaeological evidence for polychrome glass from the

¹ The earliest evidence of the Alexandrian glass industry comes from the late Hellenistic period and is based solely on textual references, see: Cicero, *Pro Rabirio Postumo* 1931: 14.40; Strabo. *Geogr.* 1930: 16.2.25.

² A surprisingly small number of luxury glasses of the Hellenistic and Roman periods was found in Alexandria during regular excavations: Breccia 1912: 99–107; 1922: 229–231; Adriani 1952: 53, Pl. 35.4; Nenna 1993: 45–52; for a gilded cup excavated at Kom el-Dikka, see: Davidson-Weinberg 1987: 133–136; for toilet flasks, including mold-blown double-faced cosmetic vessels, see: Kucharczyk 2004: 43–45, Fig. 1; 2010a: 59, Fig. 2:5; 2011: 63–64, Fig. 7; for a double-faced toilet flask excavated at the Marina el-Alamein site, most probably of Alexandrian origin, see: Kucharczyk 2010b: 115–116, Fig. 1.7; for dichroic glass excavated at Kom el-Dikka, the only other site in Egypt (beside Oxyrhynchos) where this extremely rare late Roman glass came to light, see: Kucharczyk 2014: 29–35; for mosaic glass that was probably made in Alexandria, see: Nenna 2013: 309–325; for painted glass, see: Hope, Whitehouse 2003: 291–310; for glasses with cut decoration excavated in Egypt, some apparently of Alexandrian origin, see: Nenna 2003: 359–375; Auth 1983: 39–44; for two fragments of the late Hellenistic cast colorless hemispherical bowls with cut vertical fluting on the exterior, recently excavated at the Boubastis temple in Alexandria (the author is currently preparing a publication of glass finds from this site).

city is still limited and disappointing. Some fragments had been reported from a few sites in Alexandria: from the Chatbi and Ras el-Tin cemeteries.³ The most abundant assemblage (more than 100 fragments) comes from Kom el-Dikka.⁴ It consists of deep and shallow bowls exhibiting floral patterns of diverse colors and motifs, fragments of wall decoration, beads and gaming counters. Moreover, there are patterned mosaic canes reinforcing the case for a local production of polychrome glass. Mosaic glass from Kom el-Dikka belongs both to the early and the late Roman periods, although most pieces fit in the latter period. They represent chiefly pieces of wall revetments mimicking various types of marbles and *serpentino verde* (*lapis lacedaemonius*). It should be emphasized that the imitation of the latter was very popular in the Alexandrian glass workshops, particularly in the late Roman period as evidenced by many finds excavated at Kom el-Dikka, including, besides vessels and wall decoration, also mosaic canes.⁵ It seems that the similar material recently excavated at the Red Sea port city of Berenike could be of Alexandrian origin.⁶ This may be the case of a few early Roman bowls, including a *patellae* cup with an imitation of *serpentino verde*. Of Egyptian, often labeled also as being ‘of Alexandrian provenance’, are many fragments in various museums and private collections. A rich collection of mosaic glass is in the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria.⁷

The object discussed here is a fragment of cast mosaic floral plaque recently found at the Kom el-Dikka site (inv. no. 250.18.12). It came to light during excavations in sector U, located northwest of the Theater Portico, in a context dated to the fourth–sixth century AD, with some residual material of the first century BC to third century AD.⁸ It is worth remembering that earlier excavations in this sector yielded a few fragments of similar plaques showing a daffodil and a grape cluster. They came from layers dated to the mid fifth century AD.⁹ One more fragment with a tulip-shaped flower and also with a grape cluster made of yellow, white, blue, green and red glass was discovered in the residential quarter (sector W1), situated in the eastern part of the site (unpublished, inv. no. W1/2634/76). Unfortunately, similarly to the other mosaic glass from Kom el-Dikka also this fragment was found in the late, mixed context.

³ Breccia 1912: 99–106, nos 312–347, Figs 65–79; Adriani 1952: Pl. 35.4; Grimm, Wildung 1978: nos 1–8; Nenna 1993: 45–52.

⁴ Kucharczyk 2010a: 67, Fig. 7:2; 2011: 66–67, Fig. 9:3.

⁵ In this context two sites in Egypt should also be mentioned: Ain et-Turba and the Bagawat necropolis in Kharga oasis where a large quantity of late Roman mosaic glass fragments has come to light (Nenna 2002: 153–158; 2013: 309–325; 2010: 202).

⁶ Kucharczyk forthcoming.

⁷ Breccia 1922: 229–231; Wente 1983: 19–22; Shahine 1995: 426–428, Pl. LXXXII; Nenna 1993: 378–379; Grimm, Wildung 1978: no. 133.9–10.

⁸ For the results of the excavations in sector U initiated in 1980–1981, see: Rodziewicz 1984–1985: 241–242; for the continuation of the work in 1990–1991, see: Majcherek 1992: 7–10; Majcherek, Kucharczyk 2014: 23–37; for campaigns in 2012 and 2013 and the glass material, see: Majcherek 2015.

⁹ Rodziewicz 1992: 319–320, Fig. 6.

DESCRIPTION AND MANUFACTURING PROCESS

The fragment (two joining pieces), broken horizontally along the short side, represents about one half of a rectangular plaque with one original short edge preserved on the bottom of the inlay. The present length is 3.8cm to 3.6cm, width 4cm, thickness varying from 0.7cm to 0.5cm. The vegetal decoration is composed of sections of pre-formed composite mosaic canes and strips of colored glass arranged as flowers, leaves, stems and fruits. Additionally, the decoration includes irregular chips of blue glass. The separate sections of mosaic canes were assembled in a mould in the desired pattern and set into a dark blue ground (now appearing as opaque black), then heated until the fusing of the glass. Subsequently the object was ground outside a mould. The slightly convex upper side was polished to smoothness. The back surface is rough and rippled. Whitish weathering is evidenced both on the upper and back surface. All preserved sides are vertical and fairly smooth. The glass is of low quality with sand particles and small cavities clearly visible in the section. All elements of the decoration penetrate the plaque through the thickness, but disappear towards the underside. The vegetal composition was inlaid only on the front of the plaque and was undoubtedly intended for viewing only from one side.

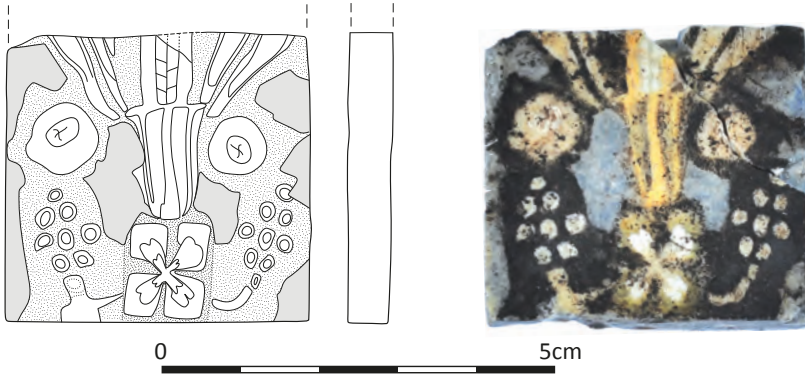
The plaque, made of opaque glass, exhibits a set of stylized flowers and fruits arranged in right-left symmetry, characteristic of this type of objects (**Fig. 1**).¹⁰ The centre of the design occupies a fragment of a large floral element, which dominates the entire decoration. It consists of a sheaf of wheat, with a yellow stem and head composed of squarish, off-white kernels with pale green outlines, and yellow beards. It is flanked by thin yellow leaves. Two thick stems, each composed of two thinner stems made of white and yellow glass, project from both sides of the sheaf.

The stem is flanked by two rounded fruits or buds of various sizes, with a white center and a dark x-shaped element set in milky-white glass. Below them are two fruits, which look like inverted grape clusters with a milky center embedded in white matrix. In the middle of the lower border is a quatrefoil flower with four heart-shaped petals. Each petal has a white-yellow centre tipped in yellow. The decoration is completed by irregular chips of blue glass, visible along the edges of the plaque and next to the wheat stem.

The fragment of floral plaque from Kom el-Dikka is not one of the finest surviving examples of this kind, both in terms of the colours and the quality of manufacture. If not for the blue and yellow glass, it would look almost monochrome. The number of colors used is surprisingly limited. When compared to many similar objects made of fresh, vividly colored glass, ours is rather odd. The quatrefoil flower with four heart-shaped petals is a good case in point. This motif, which is one of the most popular on plaques, is usually composed of several colours: opaque yellow, white, grey and red, and turquoise.¹¹ Here,

¹⁰ For the principal varieties of flowers and plant motifs employed in floral plaques and illustrated in drawings (Nilotic lotuses, daffodils, tulip-shaped flowers, fan-shaped flowers, quadrefoils, wheat sheaves, poppy-heads, grape clusters), see: Grose 1989: 355, Fig. 167.

¹¹ For examples of individual polychrome inlays with a quatrefoil flower with four heart-shaped petals, broadly dated either to the third century BC – first century AD or first century BC – first century AD, see:



1. Fragment of mosaic floral plaque (Phot. A. Zawadzińska; drawing: A. Jurgielewicz, M. Momot).

there are barely two colours: opaque white and yellow. On the other hand, poor workmanship is evident, even if only in the sheaf of wheat. It lacks the finesse that characterizes this motif in other finds of this type.

Although the plaque is not complete, it is sufficient to show the paucity of elements forming the decoration. Compared to other examples, which are crowded with various flowers and fruits, ours seems almost blank. Wherever on other plaques there are, for example, daffodils, buds or quatrefoil flowers, elements ‘condensing’ the decoration, on our object this role is filled by ordinary chips of blue glass, a feature not seen on any other specimens. Chips and stripes of mosaic and monochrome glass (waste) were incorporated into such objects, but only as backing.¹² The piece from Kom el-Dikka lacks flair. It remains in great contrast to other objects of this type, which show high levels of formative technique and beauty.

Floral plaques are divided into two subclasses based on stylistic grounds. The first, to which our find belongs, is characterized by clearly defined motifs, embedded in translucent cobalt blue or dark blue ground. The second has floral elements embedded in a translucent to transparent greenish-blue ground, and they are less regular with slightly blurred contours. Examples from this group are by far the more numerous.

None of the plaques was ever found in position, hence their purpose has not been established beyond doubt. Given their size, these attractive and exuberant objects may have been intended as decorative elements in the architectural context, as inlays for wooden jewel boxes and furniture and the like, where they undoubtedly could have been admired at

Bianchi *et al.* 2002: 142–143, no. EG-28b, presumably from Alexandria; Grose 1989: 346, nos 632, 639; *Per-neb II* 1993: 28–29, lots 28–29; *Per-neb III* 1993: 30–34, lots 53–57, 64–65; *Kofler-Truniger Coll.* 1985: 123–124, lot 240; 130, lot 248; Filarska 1962: 90, Pl. XXVII, no. 200267; Ettinghausen 1962: 18–19.

¹² Grose 1989: 356; Stern, Schlick-Nolte 1994: 404.

close range. In this context, one should recall evidence from Petra. The unburnt fragment of wood which may come from wooden furniture, was found with a mosaic floral inlay.¹³

ORIGIN AND DATE

Mosaic floral plaques come almost exclusively from Egypt. Beside Alexandria, the find places include sites in Middle Egypt: Asyut,¹⁴ Antinoopolis¹⁵ and Ihnasya.¹⁶ A significant number of fragments are said to be from Bahnasa (Oxyrhynchos).¹⁷ Many pieces were purchased at Luxor, which may suggest an Upper Egyptian origin.¹⁸ Other evidence from the region came from Dendera.¹⁹ They have also been observed at two sites in the Eastern Desert: Douch²⁰ and Ain et-Turba.²¹ Outside Egypt, isolated examples are noted in Upper Galilee²² and Petra.²³ The fairly widespread find spots include also Olympia²⁴ and Dion²⁵ in Greece, Aquileia²⁶ and Aosta²⁷ in Italy, Ptuj in Slovenia,²⁸ and Castra Vetera in Germany.²⁹ Additional examples have been reported from Limoges and Autun³⁰ in France and Clunia in Spain.³¹

An abundant number of fragments are housed in many museum collections around the world. In Egypt, they are kept in the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria³² and the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.³³ A few object are in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem³⁴ and the Miho Museum near Kyoto.³⁵ Among published examples are those stored at European museums: Benaki Museum in Athens,³⁶ Egyptian Museum in Florence,³⁷ National Museum in

¹³ Kolb, Keller, Fellmann Brogli 1997: 243.

¹⁴ Cooney 1976: 134, no. 1661.

¹⁵ Cooney 1976: 133, nos 1642–1643.

¹⁶ Newby 2000: 16–17, no. 1.

¹⁷ Object stored in the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, no. 25153; Grimm, Wildung 1978: no. 133.9–10; *Kofler-Truniger Coll. 1985*: 114–115, lots 221–222.

¹⁸ Cooney 1976: 133–134, nos 1646–1660.

¹⁹ Petrie 1900: 31–32.

²⁰ Excavation of the IFAO, inv. nos 311c, 79.24.

²¹ Object stored at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 08.268.e3.

²² Davidson-Weinberg 1973: 47–51, Figs 5–6.

²³ Kolb, Keller, Fellmann Brogli 1997: 242–246, Figs 15a, 16a, 17a.

²⁴ Furtwängler 1890: 207, no. 1335.

²⁵ Object stored at the Museum in Dion, unpublished.

²⁶ Mandruzzato 2008: no. 165.

²⁷ Barovier Mentasti *et al.* (Eds) 2003: 42, no. 12.

²⁸ Korošec 1982: 33–39, Pl. 3.

²⁹ Lehner 1927: 298, Pl. XII.

³⁰ Hochuli-Gysel 1992: 103–107; Loustaud 2000: 292, Fig. 52.

³¹ Unpublished.

³² Shahine 1995: 154, no. 91.

³³ Aldred *et al.* 1978: Fig. 184.

³⁴ Spaer 2001: 242–244, 248–249, nos 600–603; Bianchi *et al.* 2002: 81:V–36a, V–36b, V–36c, V–37.

³⁵ *Egypt to China 2001*: 86, no. 118.

³⁶ Clairmont 1977: 6, Pl. I, no.15.

³⁷ *Le vie del vetro 1988*: 101–102, nos 23–24.

Warsaw³⁸ and the Antikensammlung in Berlin.³⁹ To this list one can add the British Museum,⁴⁰ the Victoria and Albert Museum,⁴¹ the National Museums Scotland⁴² and the Louvre Museum.⁴³ Examples can be cited also from a few American museums: the Corning Museum of Glass,⁴⁴ the Metropolitan Museum of Art,⁴⁵ the Toledo Museum of Art,⁴⁶ the Princeton University Art Museum,⁴⁷ as well as the Fitzwilliam Museum.⁴⁸ Some private collections, e.g. ‘Per-neb’ Collection,⁴⁹ Gréau Collection,⁵⁰ Sangiiori Collection,⁵¹ Ernesto Wolf Collection,⁵² Kofler-Truniger Collection⁵³ and Erwin Oppenländer Collection,⁵⁴ are worth mentioning.

Although there are many examples of such plaques, they are very poorly dated. Generally, they tend to be assigned to the first century BC – first century AD.⁵⁵ Fragments excavated in Alexandria have also offered no definitive conclusions regarding the dating. Those from the Chatby necropolis come from the fill overlying the Ptolemaic necropolis, though the stratigraphy of the site cannot be dated securely.⁵⁶ On the other hand, fragments from Kom el-Dikka were found in the late Roman (fourth-sixth century AD) context, containing also residual material from the early Roman period (first-third century AD).⁵⁷ A similar situation occurred at Douch and Ain et-Turba⁵⁸ and the atypical example from Upper Galilee is similarly burdened.⁵⁹ Only a very few fragments are well dated. Those from Petra⁶⁰ and Limoges⁶¹ were found in a first century context. The one from Ptuj has been dated contextually to the mid-first century BC through mid-first century AD.⁶²

³⁸ Filarska 1962: 91, 119–121, Pls XXXIV–XXXV.

³⁹ Platz-Horster 2002: 147, Fig. 1.

⁴⁰ Cooney 1976: 133–134, nos 1642–1664.

⁴¹ Honey 1946: 24, Pl. 3.E.

⁴² Lightfoot 2007: 188–189, nos 492–493.

⁴³ Arveiller-Dulong, Nenna 2011: 393–395, nos 649–653.

⁴⁴ Goldstein 1979: 254–257, nos 758–776.

⁴⁵ Grose 1989: 355, Fig. 166.

⁴⁶ Grose 1989: 365–367, cat. nos 646–653.

⁴⁷ Antonaras 2012: 286, no. 477.

⁴⁸ *Fitzwilliam Museum 1978*: 27–28, no. 44c.

⁴⁹ *Per-neb I 1992*: 11, lots 7–8; *Per-neb II 1993*: 9–12, lots 4–10; *Per-neb III 1993*: 25, lot 30.

⁵⁰ Froehner 1903: Pl. LXIV.

⁵¹ *Sangiiori Coll. 1999*: 38, no. 95.

⁵² Stern, Schlick-Nolte 1994: 404–407, nos 146–147.

⁵³ Müller 1964: A234a–g, p, r, u–x; *Kofler-Truniger Coll. 1985*: 114–115, lots 221–222.

⁵⁴ Saldern *et al.* 1974: 123, no. 333.

⁵⁵ Stern, Schlick-Nolte 1994: 404, 406 late first century BC to first century AD; Spaer 2001: 248–249 probably late first century BC to first century AD; Grose 1989: 355–356: *since no plaques are preserved in dated context, their chronology cannot be fixed precisely in the Hellenistic period.*

⁵⁶ Breccia 1912: 104–106, nos 337–345, Figs 70–77; Nenna 1993: 46–47, Fig. 1a-b.

⁵⁷ Cf. *supra* nn. 8–9.

⁵⁸ Arveiller-Dulong, Nenna 2011: 393.

⁵⁹ Davidson-Weinberg 1973: 47.

⁶⁰ Kolb, Keller, Fellmann Brogli 1997: 242–243, Figs 15a, 16a, 17a.

⁶¹ Hochuli-Gysel 1992: 105.

⁶² Korošec 1982: 33–39.

Since most plaques have been found in Middle Egypt and they are scanty attested elsewhere it seems that their production site was located somewhere in the region. The similarity in size and shape (they are usually 12–15cm long and 6–7cm wide), as well as homogeneity of technique and decoration style seem to reinforce the claim that they were produced not just in one region, but even probably in just one glass workshop. It is worth recalling that although never quite identical, they always share the same basic decorative elements, such as flowers with and without stems, fruits, leaves, stalks of grain, all arranged in various combinations in right-left symmetry.

Can Alexandria have been the place of production for these plaques? Strabo not only refers to the glassmakers at Alexandria, but he also mentions polychrome glass being produced there.⁶³ He meant most probably mosaic glass. Up to now only the finds from Kom el-Dikka seem to confirm his words and also the common opinion of the scholars, that mosaic glass was made in the city. Unfortunately, the limited numbers of mosaic glass coming from regular excavations and the very limited evidence of Roman glass workshops largely destroyed by intense urban sprawl causes our knowledge of the manufacturing of this and many other categories of luxury glasses in ancient Alexandria to be based on conjectures rather than on the archeological record.⁶⁴

Despite all these ‘shortcomings’, the fragments from Kom el-Dikka are a valid contribution to the still very short list, not only of mosaic floral plaques excavated in Alexandria, but mosaic glass from this city in general, of which so much is said, but unfortunately so little is known.

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⁶³ Strabo, *Geogr. 1930*: 16.2.25.

⁶⁴ Kucharczyk 2014: 34–35.

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