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The pottery from the bath complex at Memphis (season in 2023)

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This article presents preliminary results of the study of ceramic material from archaeological excavations conducted in 2023 by the Russian mission of the Centre for Egyptological Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences to Kom Tuman (ancient Egyptian city Memphis). A bath complex was discovered in the northeast part of the site. According to an investigation of its architecture, the complex belongs to Hellenic baths types. Investigation of the ceramics confirmed that there was human activity in this complex during the Ptolemaic period. The range of Ptolemaic pottery includes such shapes as Amphores Égyptiennes, cooking pots, casseroles, tagena, various bowls and plates as well as Ptolemaic black ware.

Keywords: pottery, Ptolemaic period, baths, Memphis, Ptolemaic black ware.

In 2023 the Russian Archaeological mission to Kom Tuman (under the direction of Dr. G. A. Belova) discovered a bath complex in squares X.G1 and X.H1¹. The complex which is constructed of fired bricks and mud-bricks consists of a series of baths that are linked by water ducts (fig. 1). According to an investigation of its architecture, the complex belongs to Hellenic baths types². Various ceramic vessels were found during the works in this area. The pottery material from this complex has been studied in the field over two excavation seasons in 2023 and 2024.

The methodological approach established at the site is described thoroughly by S. Laemmel in her publication of the Kom Tuman pottery³. This approach is adopted here for the investigation of the ceramic material from the baths, but with some additions⁴. Many vessels are identified according to S. Laemmel's typology, thus the nomenclature and quantity of the fragments are indicated in the database. New types and well-preserved vessels are kept as well as known types made of untypical fabrics.

¹ Belova, Ivanov 2023: 38–39.

² Belova, Ivanov 2023: 39–40.

³ Laemmel 2021: 2–4.

⁴ I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Sabine Laemmel for her valuable comments during the study of the pottery from the bath complex.



Fig.1. View of the bath complex (From Belova, Ivanov 2023: p. 39, fig. 5)

Basically the assemblages from the baths consist of pottery which is dated to the Late and Ptolemaic periods. Vessels of the previous epochs of Ancient Egyptian history (i. e. the Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom, and Third Intermediate Period) are also identified in these assemblages. They are regarded as residual material⁵. However it is essential to emphasize the prevailing proportion of Ptolemaic pottery over pottery of the Late period. The assemblage 23/0075, that was discovered near a drain of the baths, contains solely pottery of the Ptolemaic period. Fragments of amphorae which came from upper stratification layers of the complex are dated to the Roman period. The general state of preservation of the material can be characterized as quite good (in terms of preservation of surface treatment), although many vessels are not complete.

The Ptolemaic pottery is represented by various amphorae, cooking wares, table wares, fine wares, Ptolemaic black wares, coarse wares, lids, braziers, lamps, and others. There are both Egyptian and imported amphorae. Egyptian amphorae include the ubiquitous AE 2 type⁶ (fig. 2.1), which in general is dated to the second half of the 3rd to 1st c. BCE⁷.

Another type of Egyptian amphora is represented by jars with modelled rims and handles attached under it. It has close morphological parallels in Tebtynis (Fayoum oasis)⁸, but the fabric is different (fig. 2.2). Marangou and Marchand date it to the end of the 3rd — beginning of the 2nd c. BCE⁹.

⁵ Laemmel 2021: 11–26.

⁶ Amphore Égyptienne 2.

⁷ Dixneuf 2011: 87–95.

⁸ Marangou, Marchand 2007: 264, 287, fig. 120–121.

⁹ Marangou, Marchand 2007: 264, 287, fig. 120–121.

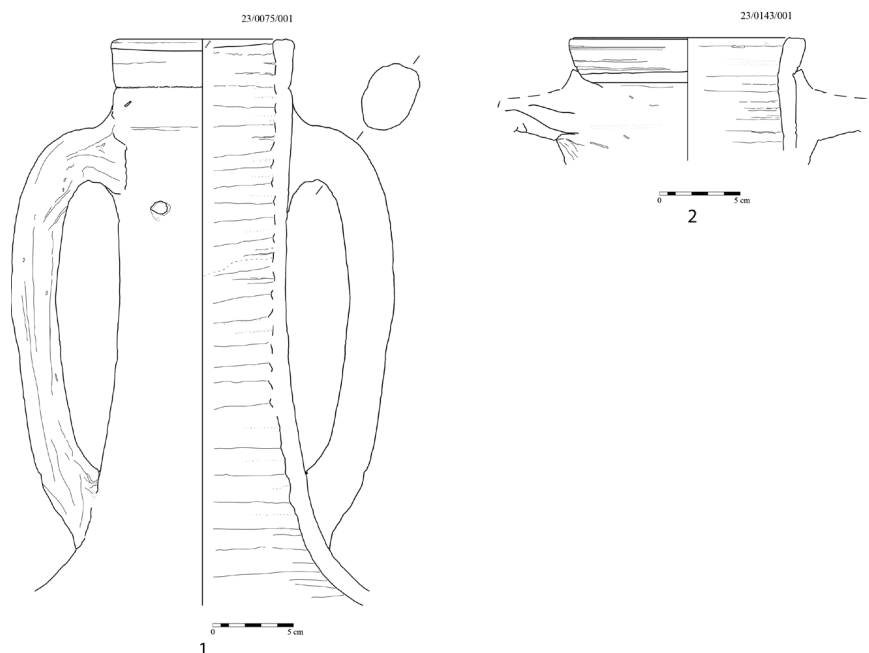


Fig. 2. Egyptian amphora. Drawn by V. Yarmolovich

The state of preservation of the imported amphorae from the bath complex, of which only handles and body sherds remain, makes their precise identification difficult, but it is most likely that they came from Kos (East Aegean)¹⁰ and are dated to the Hellenistic period.

Local cooking ware is made of various Nile silt fabrics of uneven quality. The range of shapes includes cooking pots with modelled rims, casseroles with various morphological features, and cooking pans. These types are represented in significant quantities and all belong to the late Ptolemaic and Roman pottery corpus.

Another category of pottery which pertains to the Hellenistic period is the Ptolemaic black ware (also known as the Memphis black ware). This category, as its name suggests, is typical of the Ptolemaic period and has several distinctive features. At the bath complex it is represented by rolled-rim plates, bowls with low carination and out-turned rims (fig. 3), saucers, and unguentaria. Although they are products of Egyptian pottery workshops, the origin of their shapes is connected with the integration of Greek culture into Egypt during the Ptolemaic period. According to S. Rotroff, rolled-rim plates, which compare well in terms of shapes to the plates from the Russian excavations in Memphis, were widespread in Attica from 200 to 150 BCE¹¹. Bowls with low carination and out-turned rims have close parallels in the Buto ceramic corpus of the Ptolemaic period¹².

¹⁰ Laemmel 2023: fig. 750–754.

¹¹ Rotroff 1997: fig. 48 (670–679).

¹² Laemmel 2023: 40–43, fig. 419–426.

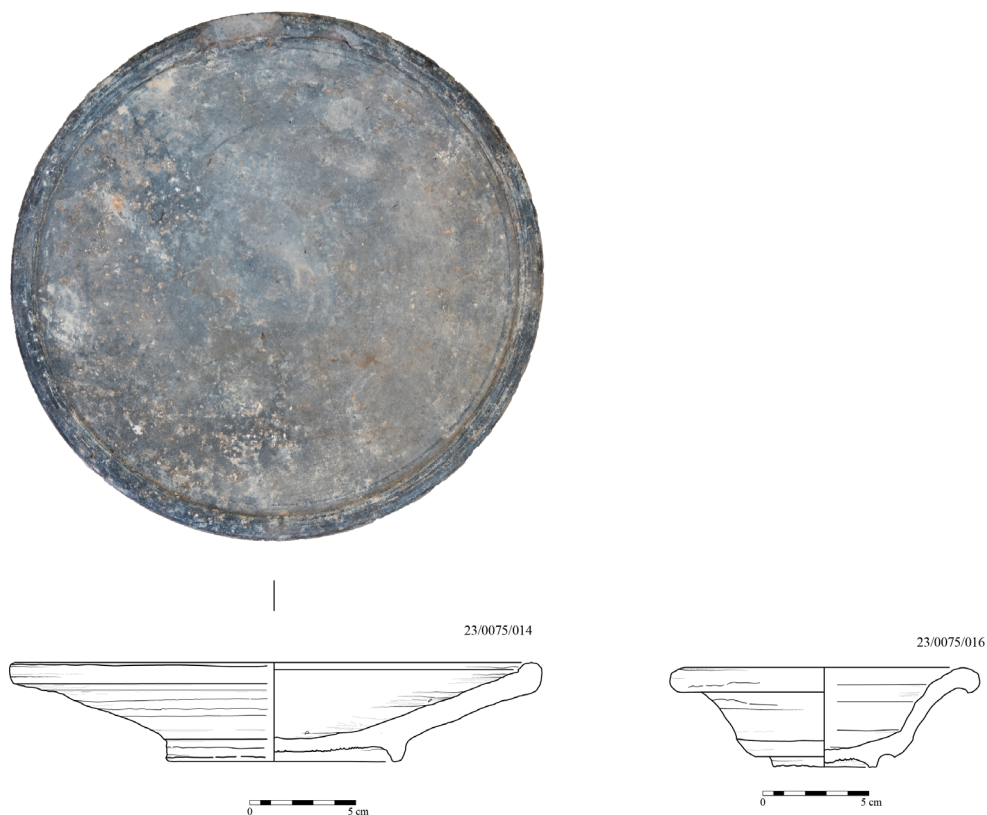


Fig. 3. Assortment of Ptolemaic black ware shapes from the bath complex.
 Drawn by V. Yarmolovich, photographed by S. V. Ivanov

To sum up, the ceramic assemblages that were found in the bath complex in the site Kom Tuman comprise a collection of Ptolemaic pottery mixed with vessels of other periods¹³ (from the Old Kingdom to the Third Intermediate Period as well as the Roman period). The quantitative dominance of Ptolemaic pottery over ceramics of other periods allows for the inference that activity in this complex took place during the Hellenistic period of Egyptian history. The adoption of Greek traditions by Egyptians resulted in significant alterations to pottery, highlighted among others by the presence of amphorae and of the characteristic Ptolemaic black ware. Memphis was an important city during this time as evidenced by various sources. The discovery of this material at Kom Tuman, together with other historical records, offer new insights into the life of the Memphite residents during the Hellenistic period. Moreover, the imported pottery (various amphorae, fine wares, and etc.) points to the connections between Egypt and other countries at this time.

¹³ In 2010 the Russian mission discovered the assemblages contained Ptolemaic amphorae. See Yarmolovich 2021.

Description of assemblages from the bath complex

23/0027

Square: X.F1.

Context: Surface turab.

Quantity: 1277 fragments.

State of preservation: small to medium-sized fragments. Some sherds have eroded surfaces or rounded breaks.

Description: mixed assemblage. The majority of the vessels are dated to the Late and Ptolemaic periods. Ptolemaic types include AE 2, cooking pots, various bowls and plates, jars with short necks. The variety of shapes suggests a function related to home use. The Late period is represented by various jars, bottles with high neck, bowls, lids which are typical of earlier phases of our site.

Date: Late period to Ptolemaic period with earlier (from the Old Kingdom to the Third Intermediate Period) and later intrusions (Roman period).

23/0044

Square: X.F1

Context: Over the wall 372 or 272.

Quantity: 145 fragments.

State of preservation: small to medium-sized fragments. Many fragments have rounded breaks or eroded surfaces.

Description: mixed assemblage. It contained pottery which is dated from the Old Kingdom to the Ptolemaic period (including Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom). The majority of the vessels are characteristic of the Late period pottery corpus (local and imported). The locally made pottery includes lids, a storage jar, a bottle with groove below rim, plates/dishes. The assemblage contained fragments of Aegean amphorae and Levantine torpedo jars. The pottery which can be certainly dated to the Ptolemaic period is rare or badly preserved.

Date: Late Period with some intrusions from earlier periods.

23/0075

Square: X.G1.

Description of the context: Pottery accumulation 524.

Quantity: 113 fragments.

State of preservation: medium to large fragments. One plate is complete, one complete upper part of an Egyptian amphora. Good surface preservation.

Description: this assemblage contained various plates, bowls, cups, cooking pots, casseroles, amphorae fragments, and coarse wares. A minor portion of this collection consists of imported amphorae, predominantly featuring those from Egypt. One of them is a well-preserved upper part of an Egyptian amphora, presumably AE 2 or transitional type. Various shapes of Ptolemaic black ware (rolled-rim plates, bowls with low carination and out-turned rim) point also toward the Ptolemaic period. Just a few bodysherds are probably residual (Late Period). One sherd is connected with high temperature activity.

Date: Ptolemaic period (late 3rd c. to 1st c. BCE).

23/0089**Square:** X.II**Context:** Turab**Quantity:** 64 fragments.**State of preservation:** fragmented, the surfaces of several vessels are eroded.

Description: the assemblage consists mainly of the pottery of the Late and Ptolemaic periods. The vessels are functionally varied (domestic pottery, cooking wares and transport containers). Pottery from earlier phases is also represented (Old Kingdom). Imports (North Aegean, Cypriot?) are rare. The vessels of the Late period are typical for the Persian period. A strainer jug could be dated to the late Ptolemaic period.

Date: from the Late period to the late Ptolemaic period.**23/0095****Square:** X.II.**Context:** Pit along drain 537.**Quantity:** 226 fragments.

State of preservation: small to big fragments. The surfaces in general are well preserved.

Description: the pottery of the Ptolemaic period which constitutes most part of this assemblage includes Egyptian amphorae (AE 2), cooking ware, bowls with incurved rim ('Echinus bowls'), an unguentarium, Ptolemaic black ware, and various necked jars. The vessels dated to the Late Period are cooking pots, bowls, dishes, fine wares, lids, stands, Torpedo jars, and others. Funnel necked jar, neckless jar and a Canaanite jar are dated to the New Kingdom.

Date: Ptolemaic period with earlier (Old Kingdom, New Kingdom, Late period) intrusions.

23/0117**Square:** X.II.**Context:** Fill of rooms (?) = compact layer under turab.**Quantity:** 248 fragments.

State of preservation: small to medium sherds, in general the surface preservation is good, however some sherds have rounded breaks and eroded surfaces.

Description: mixed assemblage. It contained amphorae, domestic pottery, various dishes and plates, lids, cooking pots, and production vessels which are mostly dated to the Late period and the Ptolemaic period. Residual pottery of earlier phases is also attested at this assemblage (Old Kingdom, New Kingdom). Several unusual fragments come from this assemblage. Among them are a stamped handle of an imported vessel of unknown provenance, and several Egyptian goblets. A fragment of keg can possibly be dated to the Roman period.

Date: Late period with earlier and later (Roman period) intrusions.**23/0141****Square:** X.H1-II.**Context:** Below floor 538.

Quantity: 53 fragments.

State of preservation: small fragments. Many sherds have eroded surfaces and/or rounded breaks.

Description: many fragments from this assemblage are dated to the Late period. It contains local pottery as well as imports (Levantine, Ionian and Aegean). The body sherd of a table amphora from Clazomenae could be dated to the 5th—4th c. BCE or even to the Saite period.

Date: Late to Ptolemaic period. The assemblage also contains an earlier intrusion (New Kingdom).

23/0143

Square: X.H1-I1.

Context: Brickwork of Wall 528.

Quantity: 49 fragments.

State of preservation: small fragments. Surfaces are well preserved.

Description: the pottery assemblage includes various vessels typical of the Ptolemaic period (Egyptian amphorae, bowls with incurved rim, and plates). There is less Late period pottery than of the Ptolemaic period. Imported pottery of the Late period includes body sherds of torpedo jars, Corinthian amphorae and Chian/Clazomenian amphorae. One sherd dated to the Old Kingdom is also attested.

Date: Ptolemaic with earlier intrusions (Old Kingdom and Late Period).

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Керамика из банного комплекса в Мемфисе (сезон 2023 г.)

В. И. Ярмолович

В статье представлены предварительные результаты изучения керамического материала из археологических раскопок, проведенных в 2023 году российской экспедицией Центра египтологических исследований РАН на Ком-Тумане (древнеегипетский город Мемфис). В северной части памятника был обнаружен банный комплекс, который согласно результатам исследования архитектуры относится к типу бань, распространенному в эллинистический период. Исследование керамики подтвердило, что в этом комплексе в птолемеевский период было присутствие человека. Ассортимент птолемеевской керамики включает такие формы, как египетские амфоры, горшки для приготовления пищи, кастрюли, тажины, различные миски и тарелки, а также птолемеевскую черную посуду (Ptolemaic black ware).

Keywords: керамика, птолемеевский период, бани, Мемфис, птолемеевская черная керамика.

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