

Editoriale

Si chiude il 2016 con tante novità all'orizzonte e soprattutto grandi soddisfazioni per il Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza, il suo territorio e la ceramica in generale.

Il grande successo di Argillà, il Festival della ceramica tenutosi a settembre, ha consolidato un trend positivo in termini di apprezzamento e coinvolgimento di pubblico negli eventi organizzati nella kermesse di tre giorni intensissimi.

Questa edizione, la quinta della storia faentina, è stata interamente organizzata dal MIC, con uno staff attento e preparato per accogliere i 250 espositori provenienti da tutta Europa, i 90 eventi e le oltre 90.000 presenze in due giorni. La ceramica è materia molto rivalutata ed apprezzata soprattutto negli ultimi anni, con nuovi interessi collezionistici legati alla contemporaneità e non solo. Anche dal punto di vista formativo, grazie ai corsi post-diploma ITS, si stanno formando giovani interessati a continuare la gloriosa tradizione ceramica che per secoli ha caratterizzato i nostri territori. Uno dei compiti del Museo faentino è proprio quello di supportare le nuove figure che si affacciano nel complesso mondo del lavoro valorizzando e creando occasioni per il preziosissimo "mondo del fare". E Argillà è proprio uno di questi efficaci strumenti.

"Majolica. The legacy of 1000 years of Italian Ceramics" è il titolo della mostra itinerante che inaugura il 9 dicembre all'Henan Museum nella cinese Zhengzhou. 150 manufatti raccontano mille anni di storia ceramica italiana. Un progetto itinerante che interesserà altre quattro sedi (Hangzhou, Shenyang, Taiyuan, Shenzhen) fino alla primavera 2018 e che ci rende orgogliosi. Nella patria della porcellana portiamo il respiro della maiolica italiana, con la sua iconografia e i suoi codici estetici apprezzati in tutto il mondo.

Non possiamo in questo fine anno non ricordare le difficoltà dei territori italiani colpiti dagli eventi sismici. Interi patrimoni culturali, simbolo della nostra storia, sono andati irrimediabilmente distrutti e danni ingenti hanno subito le opere d'arte di pinacoteche e chiese, ora ricoverate in situazioni precarie, in attesa di restauro. La nostra solidarietà va ai colleghi che con indefesso impegno stanno prestando il loro operato nelle difficoltà contingenti.

Un ultimo pensiero va a coloro che ci hanno lasciato in questi ultimi mesi: il maestro Giancarlo Sciannella e la storica dell'arte Santa Cortesi. Il primo, artista abruzzese di origine ma romano d'adozione, ha sempre espresso una personale ricerca estetica, partecipando a diverse edizioni del Premio Faenza nelle quali ha ricevuto riconoscimenti. Santa Cortesi, invece, fu ottima e valente storica e critica d'arte, conoscitrice della ceramica e delle arti faentine, persona di grande sensibilità e disponibilità intellettuale.

Colgo l'occasione per augurare a tutti un sereno e lieto 2017!

Claudia Casali
Direttore MIC

The Nubian ceramic collection by Monneret de Villard

Part I: the role of Aswan

MARCO BALDI

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Nubia is conventionally defined as the territory lying between the First and Sixth Cataracts of the Nile, now divided between Egypt and Sudan, although settlements further south have been linked to the Nubian culture¹. Following the birth of the Nubian archaeology in the early 20th century, the indigenous ancient civilizations have been better-known thanks to international archaeological missions working throughout Nubia, revealing a very long-lived settled occupation of the area since Prehistoric epoch.

A relevant aspect suggested by fieldwork is the occurrence of ceramic goods since an early stage of the local cultural development, before than Europe at the actual knowledge. Neolithic and proto-historical pottery laid the bases of an artisanal and artistic tradition that found expression in the Kushite and Christian productions, able to harmonize autochthonous heritage and foreign influences.

Following previous inquiries in the area, the investigation and partially salvage campaign of the Lower Nubian archaeological landscape while erecting the Aswan Dam, in the sixties of the last century, represented the turning point for the knowledge of the ancient local ceramic production: international teams brought to light plentiful and heterogeneous pottery assemblages from differently-dated sites, offering the first preliminary systematic vision of the regional manufacture. Furthermore, the growing interest in Upper Nubia by several archaeological missions in the last decades has widened the known picture of Nubian pottery. Our perception of it has been especially enriched by field activity in the island of Meroe, core of the homonymous kingdom, as well as by the Polish mission at Dongola, capital of Christian Makuria.

In addition to new ceramic findings from excavation works and surface surveys in Egypt and Sudan, rediscovery of collections from different museums, previously no or very partially published, have been improving our knowledge; pot-wares in the “Museo de Ciencias Naturales” in La Plata², as well as the donations by Ugo Monneret de Villard to the “Museo delle Ceramiche” in Faenza, are very emblematic cases.

They cover a wide territory between Egypt and Sudan, following the long routes of the Monneret de Villard’s journeys (figs. 1-2)³. According to the original records, the Italian scholar donated to the museum a total of 343 Nubian pot-pieces among forms and sherds in three different moments in 1933, 1935

Fig. 3. Faenza, Ceramic samples donated by Monneret de Villard on display at the "Museo delle ceramiche". Pieces recovered at Aswan are shown. Faenza, MIC, Photo archive, 1940



as painted, stamped, incised and excised motifs, as well as elements made in relief, are on 83% of the pieces (figs. 3-4)⁴.

In 240 cases the provenance accompanied the donations or was inferred from captions in the fourth volume of his volume *La Nubia medioevale*, reporting drawings of some ones; the other 65 pieces lack in source, nevertheless their nature suggests Lower Nubian productions. The geographical distribution of pottery offers the clearest distinction among the three donations: all pieces of the first group came from Aswan, whereas the second donation includes Lower Nubian samples, and in the last occasion Monneret sent to Ballardini potsherds recovered in a very broad area including Nubian, eastern and central Sudanese sites, as well as Upper Egyptian localities⁵.

Fig. 4. Faenza, Ceramic samples donated by Monneret de Villard on display at the "Museo delle ceramiche". The group comprises whole vessels now lost. Faenza, MIC, Photo archive, 1940



THE LONG JOURNEY IN NUBIAN POTTERY

Notes accompanying the pieces highlight the pre-eminent attention of Monneret to the Christian period, or rather to the productions attributed to the Nubian Christian kingdoms according to the few available data at his time⁶. Current knowledge on Egyptian and Sudanese ceramic production, on the contrary, allows to recognize the very wide chronological range of the collection. Lacking any information on finding contexts, dating and social milieu

of the samples have been based on technical and decorative solutions, as well as on morphological aspects in a few cases. The chronological heterogeneity of corpora highlights the long-lived anthropization of some sites, sometimes strengthening past excavation works.

Though its core can be dated after the rise of the Meroitic kingdom in the third century BC, the donation comprises a selection of pre-historical fragments, coming from peripheral areas outside Nubia. Two of them, both hand-made, were found at Sagadi, in the actual Sudanese region of Gezira, to the south of the ancient Nubian territories. The most ancient one is an unslipped fragment of an unidentified vessel 0.6 centimetres thick, likely made during the first half of the fifth millennium BC; it has unhomogeneous coloured paste due to instable firing, and shows comb-pricked motifs decorating the external face⁷. The second sherd is a fragmented rim whose poor preservation hides its original form. The paste, carbonized in a bad firing, was tempered with mica and quartz grains, whereas surface is slipped and exteriorly rouletted⁸; wall thickness varies from 0.7 and 1.2 centimetres. It can be referred to the so-called Jebel Moya culture⁹ and dated between the mid-second and the mid-first millennia BC.

The other pre-historical pieces were recovered at the adjoining sites of Kassala, Goz Regeb and Dimiat es-Sahl in actual eastern Sudan; they can be referred to different phases of Gash Group, occupying this area between the third and the second millennia BC¹⁰. It is a hand-made coarse production making dark unslipped table vessels and cooking pots whose wall thickness varies from 0.4 to 1.6 centimetres. In addition to quartz sand, mica and organic material, that were very common inclusions of Sudanese pottery, clay was tempered with big-sized lithic components, as well as minerals; some sherds show calcareous elements highlighting low-temperature firing. Comb-pricked and rouletted motifs, as well as graffiti, linear incisions and finger impressions, decorate their external faces.

THE HETEROGENEOUS COLLECTION FROM ASWAN

A relevant role in the Monneret collection must be recognized to the site of Aswan, in the area of the First Cataract of the Nile in actual Egypt: several specimens that were likely locally produced, recovered at the site or exported to Lower Nubia, are attested.

Though an accepted convention makes Aswan a Nubian place, its industry is not representative of the Nubian world, by virtue of the particular nature of the site, laying on the border with ancient Egypt. The erection of an Isis temple in the very close island of Philae in the third century BC was the turning point for Aswan¹¹: the complex became a fundamental pilgrimage place having also an eminent political role, attracting believers, rulers and ambassadors from both kingdoms; this determined a peculiar cultural milieu that found expression also in the local ceramic production, whose tradition grew stronger in the following centuries¹².



Fig. 5. Wheel-made fragmented ceramic plate from Aswan (Egypt). It is decorated internally by a painted radial design. Meroitic kingdom. 2nd-4th centuries. Faenza, MIC, inv. n. AB 470

Fig. 6. Potsherd of wheel-made unidentified ware from Aswan (Egypt). It shows a stamped cross surmounting a curvilinear element maybe symbolizing Golgota. Christian kingdom of Makuria. 9th-11th centuries. Faenza, MIC, inv. n. AB 550

Vessels and fragments recovered at Aswan made entirely the donation of 1933. It is unclear if Monneret originally thought to end his contribute to the Faenza museum with this sending, nevertheless the heterogeneous character of the Aswan group, showing various forms and technical solutions, highlights his aim to offer a cross-section of the local production. Most of these pieces belong to typological variants whose diffusion is known for Byzantine and Islamic Egypt¹³. The group comprises eight wheel-made whole vessels, suggesting his intention to give a picture of the domestic ceramic equipment in very common forms. They have dense fabric and usually hard white or red slip, occasionally polished, highlighting the destination to medium-high level social classes owners. Seven of them were probably made in the Aswan area; the technical homogeneity and the absence of decorative themes confirm the merely morphological basis of their selection¹⁴. Tempering of mica and quartz sand is recurrent, as commonly done by Nubian potters, as well as iron for non-cooking wares; the adding of kaolin in a bowl is a rarer but known occurrence, observed in very differently-dated cases, from Meroitic to recent times: kaolin absorbs little water and shrink little during drying process, reducing the risk of crack.

The proposed dating for this group lasts from the third to fifteen centuries, suggesting a wide range for some long-lived forms. In addition to a Roman white-slipped carinated cup¹⁵, it includes a Byzantine red-slipped handled lamp having hemispherical body with convex base, concave shoulders, convex discus bearing a big filling-hole and two smaller wick-holes¹⁶; four differently typed bowls¹⁷ and a goblet¹⁸ were made during the Islamic times.

A hand-made carinated ring-based bowl, originally covered by a lid, was imported from Lower Nubia between the sixth and seventh centuries; its surface shows red slip decorated by a painted black festoon¹⁹. Other four sherds are likely remains of Lower Nubian wheel-made table vessels made within a range lasting from the second to eleventh centuries, according to the decorative themes: fragments of two fine white-slipped wares covered by painted floral motifs²⁰, a Meroitic fragmented plain-rimmed plate decorated by a radial design on white background (fig. 5)²¹, and a Christian fine red-slipped piece



showing a cross surmounting a curvilinear element (Golgota?) stamped before firing (fig. 6)²². Their dense uniform pastes highlight good firing conditions.

Though it is unknown how they arrived to Aswan, these Nubian-made pieces confirm the intercultural milieu of the site, as well as a total of twelve fragments linked to different Egyptian artisanal traditions. Among them, the single Christian sample is from a fairly fine brown-slipped vase being 0.7 centimetres thick, likely made in a workshop bound to important members of the Coptic community. It partially preserves a painted haloed knight, having bearded standardized face and wearing cap over a garment; he wears a sword and the right hand holds a spear. The piece broke at withers, preserving clearly delineated head and neck of the horse. The motif was realized with black pigment, and few traces suggest the additional employ of red. Blackened areas could suggest that the ware was a cooking pot, nevertheless the fine decoration and the dense fabric make this unlikely²³.

In addition to an Abbasid fragmented slightly porous footed bowl, bearing a roughly painted bird²⁴, the Egyptian collection from Aswan includes ten sherds of later glazed table vessels, likely made at the area of Fustat (present Cairo)²⁵. Paste is dense, very fine, with tempering of quartz, mica and iron, usually conferring light pink colour; wall thickness varies between 0.45 and 0.9 centimetres. Different-coloured glaze, usually applied by painting technique, covers one or both surfaces of every piece. Wide chronology between the tenth and fifteen centuries can be suggested for three of them showing long-lived solutions known from Fatimid caliphate to Mamluk sultanate²⁶: two green-glazed pieces²⁷ and a remain of a very fine splashed plate²⁸, that is the only case of glaze applied by immersion in the Monneret collection. Furthermore, common feature of contemporary table vessels is transparent glaze covering slip, as observed in five Aswan pieces; the beginning of their making range can be postponed to the twelfth century according to painted²⁹ and incised³⁰ decorative underglaze themes on interior surface (fig. 7). At the same time, peculiar techniques and combinations of colours were specifically employed by Fatimid ceramists³¹: a fragmented bowl is exteriorly covered by transparent glaze and decorated by unidentified underglaze green elements over yellow background³²; a white-glazed sample has on the interior surface black upright leaves painted overglaze (fig. 8)³³.

Fig. 7. Potsherd of wheel-made glazed plate from Aswan (Egypt). Incised decorative themes were realized underglaze. Islamic Egypt. 12th-15th centuries. Faenza, MIC, inv. n. AB 585

Fig. 8. Potsherd of wheel-made glazed bowl from Aswan (Egypt). Floral motifs were painted overglaze. Islamic Egypt. 12th-15th centuries. Faenza, MIC, inv. n. 3433,1



Fig. 9. Potsherd of wheel-made glazed bowl from Nubia (Egypt - Sudan). Relief floral elements were realized underglaze. Islamic Egypt. 10th-15th centuries. Faenza, MIC, inv. n. AB 3456.

Fig. 10. Hand-made clay sealing from Aswan (Egypt). It probably closed a wine jar. It bears an incised Coptic monogram of unclear attribution. Coptic Egypt. 5th-14th centuries. Faenza, MIC, inv. n. AB 636

The glazed corpus by Monneret was enriched by eight unsourced fragmented small table vessels; they have dense paste that is sometimes coloured inhomogeneously because of instable firing conditions. The giver indicated their recovering at Nubia, but the non-use of glaze in Nubian ceramic industry suggests their production in Egypt. Two pieces have light blue glaze covering the entire surfaces³⁴, employed under Mamluks, whereas other five ones were likely made between the late tenth and late fifteen centuries: four of them were covered by green glaze (fig. 9)³⁵, in addition to a made likely specimen showing transparent glaze over yellow slip³⁶. The eight specimen can be dated to the Fatimid period according to the combination of green glaze on interior surface and transparent glaze over yellow slip exteriorly³⁷.

Finally, the collection from Aswan includes five hand-made jar sealings witnessing wine trade from Egypt. Following the distinction introduced by Jackie Phillips examining sealings from Hambukol³⁸, four flat-based 'stoppers'³⁹ and one 'cone'⁴⁰ can be recognized: stoppers are disc- or truncated cone-shaped and were placed inside the vessel neck without overlapping the vessel rim; cones have only their lower part inserted inside the vessel neck⁴¹. Badly-preserved red painting covers partly their top, that bear stamped designs, drawing Coptic monograms in three cases and Arabic letters on the other two pieces (fig. 10). The function of these signs is unclear: according to different suggestions, they may have identified manufacturer, seller, production place or customers, or indicated some quality or quantity control⁴². A similar Coptic sample from Kassala, in actual eastern Sudan, highlights wine trade from Egyptian territories to peripheral areas⁴³. An exhaustive classification of such objects is actually lacking: they can be generically dated within a wide range, from the fifth century for Coptic pieces and from 641 for Islamic ones⁴⁴, until the end of the fourteen century.

THE SPREAD OF ASWAN-MADE POTTERY IN LOWER NUBIA

Aswan-made pottery was well-known in Egypt⁴⁵ and occupied a relevant role in the Nubian territories, whose ceramic equipment partly depended on importations from the border-site, especially from the second century. The