

«And their figures and colours should be different»

*Incised and carved glazed wares from Fuṣṭāṭ
(9th-12th century) in the Martin Collection
(International Museum of Ceramics in Faenza) - Part III*

In the first part of this article I outlined the historical and technological background to the production of “Fuṣṭāṭ Fāṭimid *sgraffito*” wares (“FFS”) between the 11th and 12th centuries, through a selection of material now kept in the International Museum of Ceramics in Faenza (from the so-called “Martin Collection”) and in other important museum collections worldwide¹. In the second part, I discussed the technical, morphological, and stylistic aspects of “FFS” within a plausible chronological framework, based on the same material². In this third and final part, I will concentrate on the evidence for trade of “FFS” within Egypt and across the Mediterranean, and on the impact that this distinctive production had on the Syrian and Iranian incised frit-wares of the 12th century and beyond.

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THE IMPACT OF FUṢṬĀṬ INCISED WARES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE EGYPT

As our knowledge of the different ceramic traditions from around the Medieval Mediterranean gradually expands and improves, the urban and industrial milieu of Fāṭimid Cairo appears more and more clearly as the only environment where “FFS” wares could have been conceived and produced. Born as a local response to the increasing appreciation (and, possibly, soaring prices) of imported chinaware, the craft of monochrome-glazed stonepaste spread from Fuṣṭāṭ to numerous other cities within the Fāṭimid political and commercial sphere, in the same way as lustre-wares and other fine goods produced in the capital. «Please buy me six painted platters, made in Miṣr [i.e. Fuṣṭāṭ]. They should be of middle size, neither very large nor very small; and twenty [regular] bowls and forty small ones. All should be painted, and their figures and colours should be different»³. This is what a Jewish merchant from 'Aden wrote to his contact in Cairo around the year 1135, a very specific request probably concerning “FFS” products to be shipped to Yemen⁴. Several other orders for “colourful” *ghaḍār* and *ṣīnī* vessels, also dated to the first half of the 12th century, were discovered by Goitein among the Geniza documents; sometimes, fine ceramic objects are also mentioned in trousseau lists and household inventories from Cairo and Alexandria. However, if we exclude this precious handful of textual fragments, it is only thanks to the archaeological data that we can attempt to draw a comprehensive picture of the diffusion and impact of incised frit-wares beyond Fuṣṭāṭ. The vividness of this picture depends on the extent and accuracy of the archaeological surveys conducted

Fig. 1. Map of medieval Egypt, the Levant, and Arabia, with the cities and seaports mentioned in the text



in often minor medieval sites, as well as on the quality of the relative publications.

“FFS” ALONG THE NILE

Under the Fāṭimids, the ancient city of Alexandria (Iskandariyya in Arabic) was the second most important settlement of the Nile Valley, closely connected with Cairo via land and fluvial routes, and acting as a paramount seaport for both military operations and maritime trade⁵. Although economically dependent on Fuṣṭāṭ, the city enjoyed an analogous social affluence, with a continuous flow of goods from the capital aimed at satisfying the needs of the local population as well as being exported to Palestine, Byzantium, North Africa, and Italy⁶. Since 1960 excavations have been carried out by Polish and French

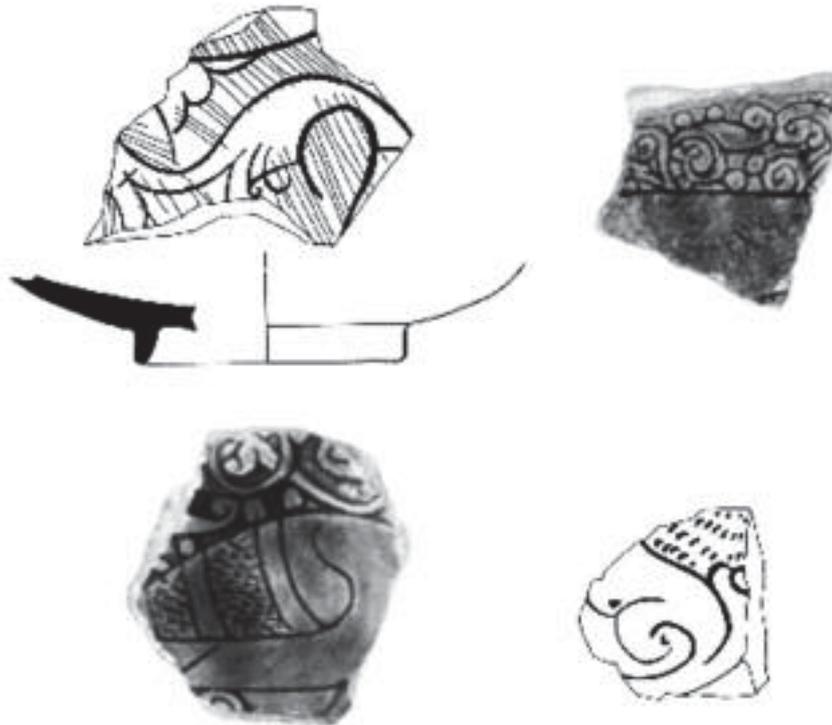


Fig. 2. Egyptian carved and incised stonepaste (“FFS”) finds from Kūm al-Dikka, Alexandria (from V. FRANÇOIS, *op. cit.*)



Fig. 3. Egyptian carved and incised stonepaste (“FFS”), two bases of segmental bowls, first half of 12th century. International Museum of Ceramics in Faenza (inv. AB 2274, AB 2323)

teams at Kūm al-Dikka and Kūm al-Naḏūra, two hillocks situated within the Ayyūbid walls of Alexandria, inhabited and then used as cemeteries during the Fāṭimid period. Beneath the heaps of rubbish here accumulated since the 13th century, the archaeologists unearthed numerous “FFS” sherds, yet without being able to date them on the sole basis of their find-spots (fig. 2)⁷. Their stylistic resemblance to some of the Fuṣṭāṭ sherds in the Faenza collection is truly

remarkable (fig. 3). From the same strata, the diggings also yielded fragments of *qīngbái* porcelain and Yāozhōu celadons, demonstrating that the most valued and imitated wares in Fustāṭ were rapidly reaching the markets of Alexandria, doubtless influencing the taste of local customers. Unfortunately, the surveyed areas of Kūm al-Dikka and Kūm al-Nazūra were located on the periphery of the Fāṭimid town. Excavations in the densely urbanised centre of the city may prove more fruitful, but would require extremely arduous logistics.

At the opposite end of the Nile Delta, about one hundred and fifty miles to the east of Alexandria, lay the prosperous island-city of Tinnīs, a textile centre where the caliphal *ṭināz* workshops were located⁸. Celebrated in Nāsiri Khusraw's travelogue as «populous and with good markets», the settlement was abandoned by order of Saladin in 1192, and then definitely destroyed by the Ayyūbid sultan al-Kāmil in 1227⁹. This useful *terminus ante quem*, combined with the commercial importance of the town in the Fāṭimid period, guaranteed the Institut Français d'Achéologie Orientale three successful seasons of excavations between 2004 and 2006, which yielded a noteworthy amount of pottery from the 11th and 12th centuries¹⁰. The sherds labelled by the archaeologists as «Fustāṭ Fāṭimid *sgraffito*» are about 7% of the glazed ceramic finds, but if we also count the incised fragments mistaken for «Seljuk white ware», coated with transparent glazes occasionally stained by cobalt streaks, the actual figure rises to 15%¹¹. Far from being Persian imports, these fine stonepaste vessels were certainly produced in the ateliers of Fustāṭ, as confirmed by their characteristic profiles and styles of incision.

In the second part of this article, I have already mentioned the excavations carried out by the Kuwait National Museum at Bahnasā (1985-7), an important administrative centre of Upper Egypt some forty miles south of the Fayyūm oasis. Due to the 'Irāqī invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the negative album of the ceramic finds and the original manuscript records went lost, so that the final report of these excavations, only published in 2006, is particularly defective with regard to the pottery sequence. Several examples of stonepaste with «extremely fine incised *sgraffiato* designs» are mentioned but not recorded, nor illustrated; moreover, they are inexplicably attributed to the «late 9th century»¹². Other «FFS» fragments with green glazes are laconically dismissed as «celadon imitations» (fig. 4), while more attention is paid to monochrome-glazed, undecorated frit-wares (as if they belonged to a completely different category) and, of course, lustre-wares¹³.

Definitely more accurate is the report on the medieval ceramics excavated by the Musée du Louvre in Ṭawd, a market town 15 miles south-west of Luxor. Here, the archaeologists discovered «une série assez nombreuse de petits tessons au parois inférieures ou égales à 5 mm, au décor incisé sous glaçure monochrome», showing all the main glaze colours typical of «FFS» wares (fig. 5)¹⁴. The same Fāṭimid context yielded two fragments of lustre-painted bowls of the *sa'd* type, suggesting that all the fine wares produced in Fustāṭ were also shipped along the Nile to be sold in the markets of Upper Egypt. Here, as well as in the Fayyūm and Delta districts, there is an evident connection between «FFS» and lustre-ware finds in terms of quantity and distribution, indicating that the two productions were somewhat complementary, and aimed at the same market sector

Fig. 6. Egyptian incised stonepaste (“FFS”), two bases of segmental bowls, first half of 12th century. International Museum of Ceramics in Faenza (inv. AB 2164, AB 2237)



throughout the region. As expected, the incised stonepaste finds of both Bahnasā and Ṭawd match closely some of the Fuṣṭāṭ sherds in the Faenza collection (fig. 6).

The list of Egyptian archaeological sites where pottery of the Fāṭimid period has been recently brought to light also includes al-Ashmūnayn, Dendera, Dakhla, and Tebtynis, but the brief interim reports published by the excavators do not mention any “FFS” finds¹⁵. New precious clues to the chronology, diffusion, and status of this ware might eventually come from the still poorly studied cities of Damietta (Dimyāt) and Qūs, respectively an important seaport of the Delta and the Fāṭimid capital of Upper Egypt, but this would require on the part of the archaeologists a significant shift of focus from the ancient to the Islamic period.

“FFS” ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN

Despite the insistence of recent scholarship on the vast scale and excellent organisation of Fāṭimid maritime commerce across the Mediterranean, there is still little evidence as to how and in what quantities Egyptian pottery was traded by sea in the 11th and 12th centuries¹⁶. Unlike spices, wine, glass, textiles, luxury goods and the like, earthenware vessels were a basic commodity produced in almost every region of the Mediterranean basin, so that their extensive trade was probably considered superfluous. The forty-four Syrian splash-ware and “champlevé” bowls recovered from the Serçe Limanı shipwreck (*circa* 1025) seem to confirm this hypothesis¹⁷. In fact, they only constitute a small appendage to the cargo of a Byzantine merchant ship that was sailing along Palestine and southern Anatolia, carrying three metric tons of fine Islamic glass cullet and 110 wine amphorae¹⁸.

An attempt to evaluate the overseas pottery trade of medieval Alexandria on the basis of some archaeological discoveries was made by Władysław Kubiak, but the evidence mainly concerned the eastern Islamic Mediterranean, leaving

a conspicuous gap as to western Europe that still remains largely unexplored¹⁹.

Nevertheless, if we take into account quality ceramics such as lustre-wares or incised frit-wares, there is sufficient evidence to suggest a certain maritime mobility, which may or may not have involved cross-cultural trade. The emblematic case of the Syrian and Egyptian *bacini* set in the walls of numerous medieval Italian churches and belfries is still hotly debated by scholars, who have not yet reached a consensus on how these vessels reached their present location²⁰. Did they arrive directly from the regions where they were produced, or rather via North Africa, Sicily, and Byzantium? Were they traded as actual merchandise, or imported into Christian Europe as souvenirs, curiosities, or loot?

As we have already seen, only one among the published Tuscan *bacini* can be securely identified as an example of “Fustāṭ Fāṭimid *sgraffito*”, and probably arrived in Pisa in the very early 12th century²¹. A second stonepaste vessel (from the Pisan church of San Sisto) may be tentatively attributed to the same group, although its incised scroll bands are atypically arranged and executed (fig. 7)²². The singularity of this decoration – suggesting a more eastern provenance – stands out in comparison with the typical “FFS” scroll band on a purple-glazed *bacino* from the so-called *cortile di Pilato* in the basilica of Santo Stefano, Bologna (fig. 8). This second important vessel, the only other complete example of “FFS” to be found in Italy, was almost certainly set in place when the brickwork of the adjacent church was renovated in 1145²³. The chips on its rim allow us to catch a glimpse of its white stonepaste body, while its incisions show a marked similarity with those found on other cono-segmental bowls, fragments of which are in the Faenza Museum and in other European collections²⁴. Apparently, all the remaining traces of “FFS” in the Italian peninsula consist of a few sherds excavated in Genoa, under the ducal palace of the city, and possibly in Ravello (near Amalfi)²⁵.

The assemblage of imported Islamic wares discovered in Genoa, Venice, Otranto, and other important medieval seaports is indeed remarkable, but as convincingly argued by Cristina Tonghini, this does not necessarily imply direct commercial contacts with the Muslim world²⁶. David Abulafia, who discussed the evidence offered by 669 Pisan *bacini*, believed that most Egyptian

Fig. 7. Incised stonepaste *bacino* from the church of San Sisto, Pisa. Syria (?), 12th century (from G. BERTI, L. TONGIORGI, *op. cit.*)

Fig. 8. Egyptian incised stonepaste (“FFS”), *bacino* from the *cortile di Pilato*, basilica of Santo Stefano, Bologna. Late 11th or early 12th century (photo by F. Bongianino)





Fig. 9. Egyptian incised stonepaste ("FFS") finds from Corinth (from C.H. MORGAN II, *op. cit.*)

vessels had found their way to Italy via North Africa; yet, the occurrence of Fāṭimid luxury wares in Ifrīqiyya and their influence on the local production seem to have been minimal²⁷. If it is true that Tunisian and Maghribī wares represent the vast majority of the Italian *bacini*, this might well indicate an established commercial relationship; however, the same conclusion cannot be drawn for Egyptian lustre-wares or "FFS".

With regard to incised stonepaste, it appears from a preliminary survey of Italian archaeological sites that Syrian wares occur more frequently in 12th-century contexts than their Egyptian

counterparts: transparent- and turquoise-glazed *bacini* from Pisa, Pavia, and Pomposa bear a striking resemblance to incised frit-wares excavated at Ḥamā and Qal'at Ja'bar, while a conspicuous number of similar sherds from Venice, Salerno, and Ravello show the characteristic slanted foot-ring generally associated with "Tell Minis" vessels²⁸. This seems to indicate that the networks between the Latin West and the Crusader States in the Levant might have favoured the circulation of fine Islamic ceramics across the Mediterranean more than the actual maritime trade with the Fāṭimid lands.

Evidence of a completely different situation emerged from archaeological finds in the Byzantine territories, most notably in Corinth, a site extensively excavated by the American School of Classical Study in Athens throughout the last century²⁹. As suggested by the Serçe Limanı shipwreck, some "Fāṭimid" pottery was already being traded by sea with Byzantium in the early 11th century. One hundred years later, there is good reason to believe that the import of Islamic ceramics – especially from Fustāṭ – into the Empire had reached a substantial scale. The Corinth excavations yielded a wide variety of Egyptian incised stonepaste, originally misattributed to Persia, yet clearly showing decorations and shapes typical of "FFS" wares (fig. 9)³⁰. Even more significant,

Fig. 10. Byzantine sgraffito fragments showing the stylistic influence of "FFS", 12th century. International Museum of Ceramics in Faenza (inv. AB 830, AB 871, AB 876)

