

Late Roman commerce in the *Metelis* region (Alexandria – Egypt) A study of North African and other Mediterranean Red Slip Wares

Cristina Mondin

The study of the import and imitation of the red slip ware in the *Metelis* region started because of the good presence of fine wares unearthed during the excavations of the site of Kom al-Ahmer (probably identifiable with the ancient *Metelis*). The Italian archaeological mission “Kom al-Ahmer / Kom Wasit Archaeological Project” began in 2012 and shall last for ten years. This work started after a series of systematic surveys in Beheira province conducted in 2004 by Penelope Wilson and since 2008 by Mohamed Kenawi. During the survey, many archaeological sites were identified, that are evidence of extensive occupation in this area of the Nile Delta during Roman times. Briefly, and after three years of field work, it is evidenced that: Kom Wasit was populated since the Late Dynastic period until the late Hellenistic period. The nearby site of Kom al-Ahmer was inhabited during the Hellenistic-Early Roman periods and seems to have replaced the village of Kom Wasit. In fact, here the population started at the end of the Hellenistic period and continued up to the arrival of the Arabs and until the 12th century AD.

Kom al-Ahmer is located 44 km SE of Alexandria and 7 km west of Mahmoudia (fig. 1), where the Rosetta branch of the Nile flows today. The geographical aspects at present is completely different than what we would expect in the past. In fact, already in ‘800 with the land reclamation projects started by Mohamed Ali Pasha and finally with the building of the Aswan dam in 1971, the Delta region has changed considerably. Probably, in Roman period, the site was located along the banks of the Rosetta branch: directly linked both with the Mediterranean Sea and Upper-Middle Egypt.

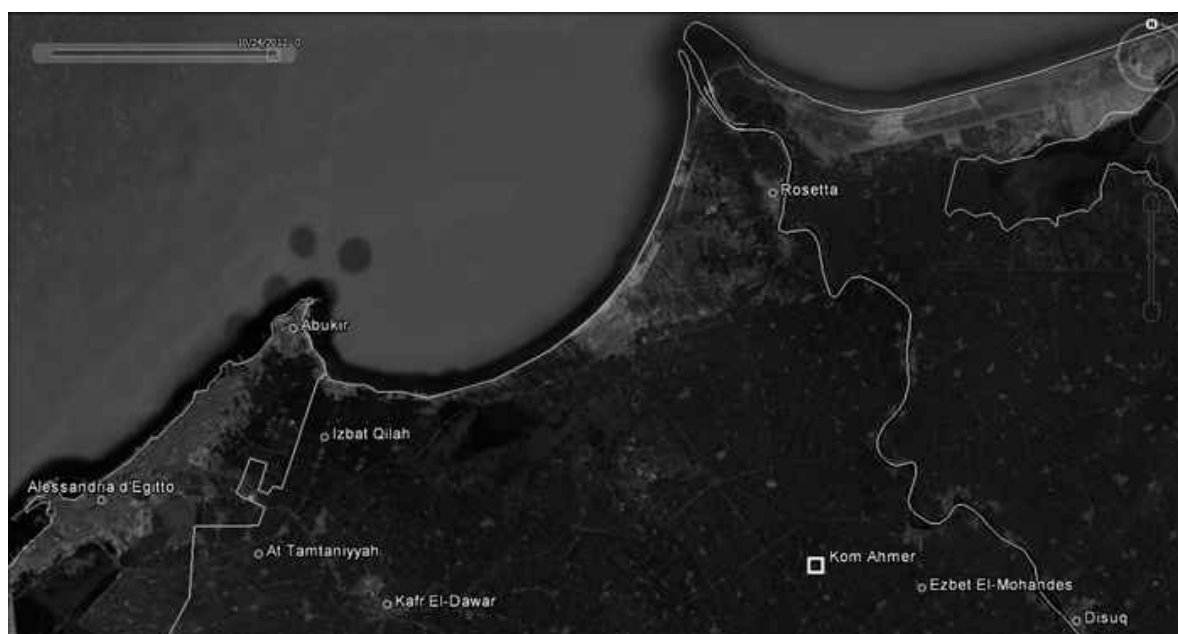


Fig. 1

Excavations at Kom al-Ahmer started in 2012. To date, three archeological areas have been opened which brought to light Red Slip ware: Unit 1 on the second kom along the northern slopes; Unit 2 along the southern slopes of the same kom and Unit 4 to the west of the hill, near the Roman baths excavated in 1942 (fig. 2). The study of pottery is based on more than 30.000 sherds and 341 are fine ware. The data presented is partial and based on a short period of excavation.



Fig. 2

The fine wares are far fewer than the amphorae and coarse ware. 341 sherds of red slip ware (RSW) were found (1% of the total of the ceramics and tools). Of these, 66% (226 sherds) are diagnostic. The Egyptian red slip wares are only 40% of the total (137 pieces), while the remaining 60% (204 sherds) are fine wares from the Mediterranean basin. Of these, 126 sherds are African RS (62% of non-Egyptian pottery and 37% of the total RSW of Kom al-Ahmer – just 45 are dating, fig. 3); 75 sherds are Cypriot RSW or LR D (37% of non-Egyptian pottery and 22% of the total RSW – 60 are dating) and only 2 sherds are Phocian RSW or LR C (1% of non-Egyptian pottery) and 1 piece of rim with yellow clay (perhaps coming from Syria and Palestine, the fabric is similar to the productions of Eastern Sigillata A).

Regarding the preliminary study of pottery from the three different areas of excavation, it seems that the three contexts are in chronological sequence. In fact, Unit 4 is the oldest and the recognizable studied sherds are belonging to the period from the second half of the 4th century until the beginning of the 6th century. Unit 2 has pottery dating from the 4th century until the Islamic period, with a large quantity of pottery dating during the 6th and 7th centuries. Finally, Unit 1 dates between the late 3rd and the first half of the 7th centuries. These three contexts allow us to follow the flow of imports of fine wares during the entire Late Roman / Early Byzantine period.



Fig. 3

The flow of imported fine wares reflects the political events that have affected Proconsular Africa. Imports from this region represent almost a monopoly of fine pottery imports through the first half of the 5th century. Around the third decade of the 5th century, this region suffered the invasion of the Vandals. Undoubtedly, the invasion has influenced the exports of pottery from Proconsular Africa. Indeed, at Kom al-Ahmer, it is possible to see a significant reduction in imports of African pottery (fig. 4). This reduction has also been recorded in the rest of Egypt.

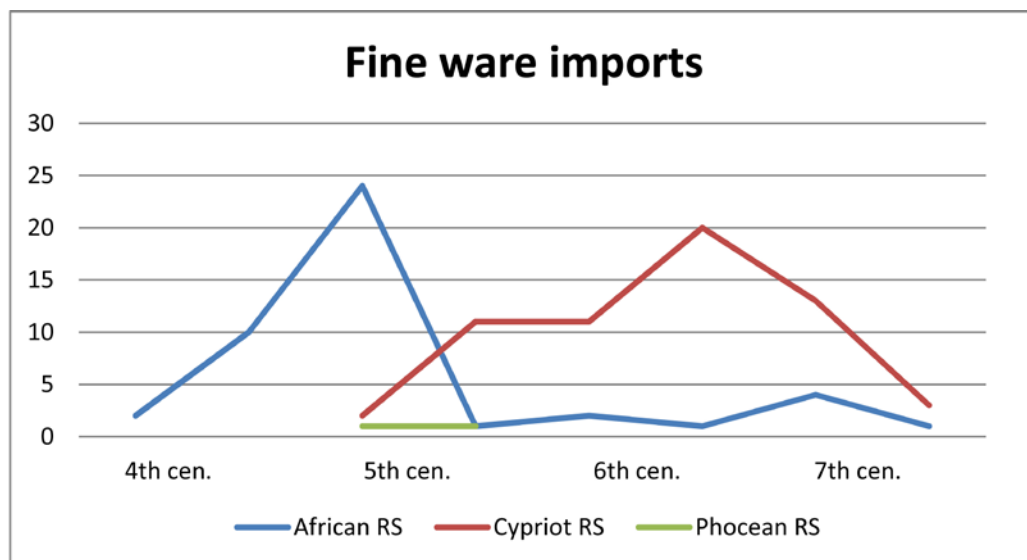


Fig. 4

The dynamics of trade affected the region of *Metelis*, but generally, there was no decline of imported vessels. The only change was the areas of imports. In fact, from the mid-5th century onwards it had a considerable import of Cypriot RSW ware. In particular, the first substitute of the African RSW ware was the form Hayes 2 of Cypriot RSW ware and later its evolution the Hayes 9 form.

The form Hayes 2 is an imitation of African RSW ware Hayes 84 form which in Kom al-Ahmer, to date, is not attested. The choice to import fine pottery from Cyprus and from the coasts

of Turkey was facilitated in particular by the already active trade with this region. Indeed, since the second half of the 4th century, most of the amphora imports were LRA 1.

After the conquest of Carthage and the North African region by the Byzantine Empire in 534, there is a resumption of pottery imports from North Africa in many Mediterranean contexts. Based on the available data, this does not seem to be the case of *Metelis*. In fact, here the trade flows between North Africa and this region of the Delta remained limited compared to imports of Cypriot RSW.

The second important historical moment in which influenced the import of fine pottery in the region was the Arab arrival in Egypt. With the conquest of Alexandria in 641, and later the rest of Egypt, the pottery horizon changes completely. Imports of red slip ware cease in favor of the arrival of glazed pottery, widely attested in the contexts of Unit 2 of Kom al-Ahmer.

The value of fine Mediterranean pottery in the economy of Egypt, Delta and the *Metelis* region is evident both in the number of imports and in imitations of local potteries. The presence of fine Egyptian ware represent "only" 40% of the fine ware, so the imported pottery was more appreciated by the local market. 44% of Egyptian RSW came from the Aswan region, while the Egyptian RSW B is more numerous (75 sherds – 55%) and only 2 sherds are type C. The most widely-attested Egyptian RSW often looks like the production of African RSW. The most common forms of Aswan fine ware and Egyptian RSW A are dated between the 6th and the 7th centuries; once again after the Proconsul Africa occupied period by the Vandals.

In conclusion, before the invasion of the Vandals, the target market for imports of fine ware was definitely the North African/Tunisian area. As a result of this invasion, it seems that the Delta and *Metelis* areas diversify imports. Based on the data collected in Kom al-Ahmer, the trade route that became predominant was from Cyprus and Southern Turkey. Present, but less significant for fine pottery, were those from North Africa and Upper Egypt. The evidence of Phocean RSW is rare, as amphorae from the Aegean coasts of Turkey are uncommon (fig. 5).



Fig. 5