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Tracing Tangible Borderscapes Between the First and the Second Nile Cataracts Ceramics in the Ninth–Tenth Centuries CE

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Abstract: This paper examines perspectives on ceramic production between the First and Second Nile Cataracts during the ninth and tenth centuries CE, by analysing how pottery reflects socio-cultural interactions across political frontiers. By focusing on ledged vases produced in Aswān and Faras, the study investigates differences in stylistic choices as adaptations shaped by interactions and experiences of potters working in the Egyptian-Nubian borderland. The theoretical framework draws on the concept of borderscapes, which emphasises complexity and fluidity of border landscapes as dynamic cultural zones.

Keywords: borderscapes, pottery, Makuria, Fatimids, Nubia, Egypt, Aswān, Faras

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The area between the First and Second Nile Cataracts has long served as a borderland between upstream and downstream Nile civilisations, with the city of Syene/Aswān[1] marking a political boundary from the Graeco-Roman period onwards. Archaeological evidence reveals vibrant cultural and economic exchanges between Egypt and Nubia[2] that extended beyond the politically defined frontier. The paper examines perspectives on experiencing the borderscape[3] regions through the lens of pottery production at Aswān and Faras – two

[1] The author will use name Syene when referring to the city prior the Arab conquest, and Aswān for the later period.

[2] The material culture shows porous and permeable border zone between Egypt and Nubia prior to the discussed periods (Raue 2002; de Souza, Schröder 2025; see also Eller 2025 in this volume).

[3] Gatto 2022. The Borderscape Project, headed by Maria Carmela Gatto, uses the discussed concept (see website *Borderscapeproject*). For the theoretical framework, see: Cosgrove 1984; Brenner 1999; Corner 1999;

major centres active in the area of the First and Second Cataracts. Particular focus is given to the ninth–tenth centuries CE, emphasising ledged vases with elaborate painted decoration, demonstrating shared traditions and distinct local styles across the border.

The discussed region and period demonstrate various types of borderscapes, from the official, politically based border between the caliphate of Egypt and the kingdom of Makuria to the cultural boundary between Egyptians and Nubians, as well as the religious divide between Islam in the north and Christianity in the south. Adopting the borderscapes framework emphasises the permeability of political frontiers, representing dynamic membranes and interactions across landscapes.[4]

The paper also aims to explore the various roles of the area between the First and Second Cataract from different perspectives. Syene/Aswān served as a key socio-commercial hub in the region; yet, from the viewpoints of successive political centres located in northern Egypt since the Graeco-Roman period, it remained a peripheral zone. Faras, once the capital of the kingdom of Nobadia, was reduced in function after its incorporation into Makuria, and losing its importance in comparison to centrally located capital of Old Dongola between the Third and Fourth Cataracts. However, this paper focuses on the perspective grounded in the region itself, viewing Syene/Aswān and Faras as 'new centres' – zones of dynamic cultural change and spatial organisation.[5]

The socio-cultural permeability of the First and Second Cataracts area is examined here from a regional perspective, with pottery production and the aesthetic choices of local potters reflecting the complexity and dynamics of mutual interactions. Aswān played a significant and influential role in shaping pottery production in Old Dongola by transmitting models of tableware and amphorae.[6] Shifts in pottery styles and broader cultural changes in Nubia were closely tied to the arrival of Christianity in the mid-sixth century CE.[7] The aforementioned changes led to integrating the Nubian kingdoms into the Byzantine cultural sphere and the wider Christian *koiné*. This moment marked a key turning point, facilitating the region as a borderscape where Egyptian and Nubian population interacted through the Christendom platform, possibly fostering pottery production.[8]

Donnan, Wilson 1999; Parker, Vaughan-Williams 2012; Eker, Van Houtum 2013; Brambilla 2015; dell'Agnese, Amilhat Szary 2015; Schoonderbeek 2015; Loenhoff 2016; Krichker 2019.

[4] According to modern borderland theory, frontiers are viewed as spaces of layered identities, networks and interactions (Paasi 2002: 16).

[5] The discussion of borders as rigid territorial models in geopolitical theory includes the concept of 'territorial traps' (Agnew 1994; Kadercan 2024), which refers to state-centric notions of fixed sovereignty. Within this framework, peripheral zones, as viewed from the perspective of capital cities, can emerge as 'new centres'. Critiques of this concept emphasise that state borders should be understood as fluid constructs shaped by social, economic, and cultural interactions, rather than as fixed territorial divisions (Derrick 2020: 10; Kaldellis 2023).

[6] Pluskota 2001: 361–363.

[7] Edwards 2011.

[8] The author's discussions covering various aspects of pottery from the First and Second Cataracts were presented at the conferences 'Frontier Wanderings. Relations across the First Cataract: Movement of People, Ideas, Goods, Skills and Craftsmanship (6th–15th century)', and 'Gateway to Africa: Cultural Exchanges Across the Cataracts (from Prehistory to the Mamluk Era)' with the latter accepted for publication (de Lellis-Danys forthcoming a).

The choice of the ninth and tenth centuries CE as the focal point of the study stems from observable stylistic shifts in pottery manufacture in both Aswān and Faras. The similarities between forms and decorative motifs highlight the borderscape character of the region and the influence of Christian *koiné* on the aesthetic language of pottery, likely derived from the illuminations of manuscripts. Highly decorative ledged vases, produced in both locations, embody this aesthetic and are therefore selected as the case study in this paper.[9]

THE HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE FIRST–SECOND NILE CATARACT

The region between the First and Second Cataracts (**Figs 1**–**2**) was a shifting frontier between Egypt and Nubia, fostering trade and cultural exchange. Egyptian temples coexisted with Kushite economic activities, reflecting blended influences.[10] While historical sources stress conflict between Romans and Meroitic or Blemmian groups,[11] material culture reveals intertwined traditions[12] and imports from Syene.[13] After the Meroitic collapse, the kingdom of Nobadia rose in the sixth century CE, controlling Lower Nubia.[14] New funerary practices were adopted[15] while preserving Meroitic traditions.[16] Syene became a key frontier city of Christianity,[17] though pre-Christian rites lingered at Philae until 537 CE.[18] Therefore, the First and Second Cataracts area was a dynamic zone of fluid boundaries where Christendom coexisted with non-Christian beliefs among the Nobadians and Blemmies. Christianity reached Nobadia *c*. 543 CE,[19] though earlier influences are possible and the conversion process remains unclear.[20] Syene was also a centre of pottery production,[21] mixing local and Mediterranean concepts.[22] Pottery trade between Syene and Nobadia[23] reinforced both economic and religious ties, where Syene supplied Nubia with wine.[24]

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[9] The theoretical framework from other disciplines incorporate concepts such as 'border thinking' in post-colonial studies (Mignolo 2000) and 'design thinking' in architecture (Viganò 2010), both understood as comprehensive and imaginary view. Testing these approaches in the relation to potters' choices and experiences, may offer new avenues for exploring and imaging border landscapes and dynamics.

[10] Török 2011.

[11] Edwards 2004: 145; Török 2009: 384–425; Obłuski 2014: 195–196.

[12] Obłuski 2014: 55; see also Eller 2025 in this volume.

[13] Pottery production is attested in Syene since the third century BCE (Ballet *et al*. 1991: 113–116; Katzjäger, Peloschek, Rembart 2016).

[14] Welsby 2002: 20–21.

[15] Obłuski 2014: 55–57.

[16] Welsby 2002: 17.

[17] Sauneron 1972; Dijkstra, Worp 2006.

[18] Welsby 2002: 23; Török 2009: 515–516; Dijkstra 2013; 2021.

[19] Welsby 2002: 35–67; Edwards 2011.

[20] Edwards 2014: 420–421.

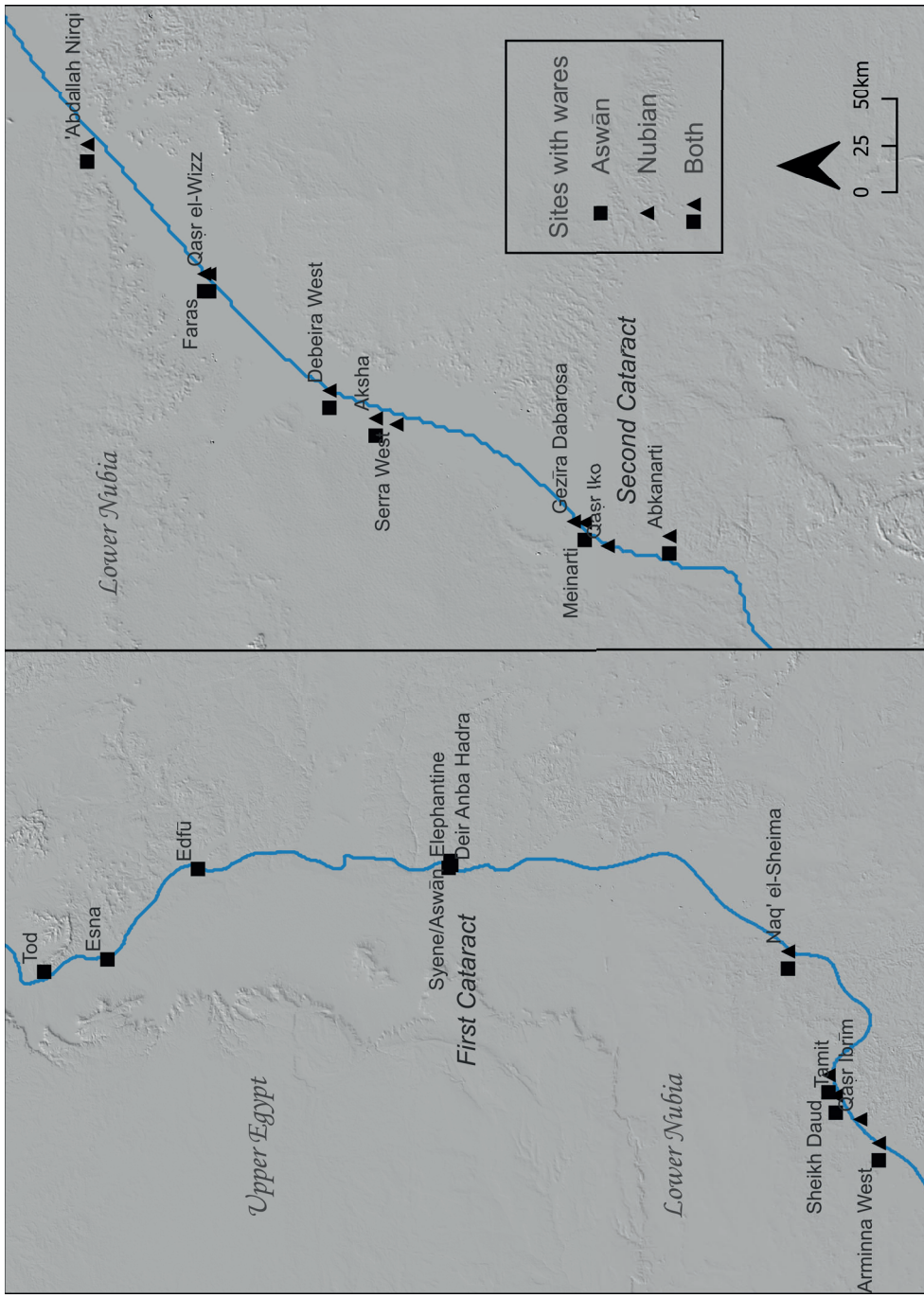
[21] Ballet *et al.* 1991: 140–143.

[22] Mackensen 2006: 213.

[23] Adams 1986: 538–539; Rembart, Betina, Katzjäger 2020: 590.

[24] Adams 2001: 14, Pl. 2: d.

1. Main archaeological sites of Egypt and Sudan mentioned in the text (Processing: K. de Lellis-Danys, L. de Lellis; based on: Google Earth).



2. Distribution of ledged vases in the First and Second Cataract regions (Processing: K. de Lellis-Danys, L. de Lellis; based on Google Earth).

Meanwhile, pottery production emerged in Lower Nubia, merging Egyptian with indigenous traditions.[25]

Military conflicts and political shifts shaped the region's history, including the Sassanian occupation (618–628 CE) and the Arab conquest (639–642 CE) of Egypt.[26] The Arab conquest was gradual, reaching Aswān in 652 CE and then advancing south. The *baqt* treaty[27] was concluded with Makuria after a failed siege of its capital in Old Dongola.[28] By the late seventh century, Nobadia had likely merged into Makuria as the province of al-Marīs.[29] Islamic conversions in Aswān are recorded by 690–691 CE,[30] while Christianity grew in Lower Nubia, with the Faras cathedral built in 707 CE.[31] The Christian *koiné* established ecclesiastical ties between monastic communities in Aswān and Old Dongola.[32] A royal representative of Makuria stationed in Aswān, fostering the trade exchange, linking to Beja-controlled gold mines and Muslim merchants present in Lower Nubia, as attested at Qaṣr Ibrīm from the eighth century CE.[33] Pottery production thrived at Deir Anba Hadra and Faras. This is evident through the presence of kilns and various wares reflecting strong regional craft traditions.[34]

Following the Arab conquest, Egypt underwent political complexity under successive caliphates (Umayyads, Abbasids, Tulunids, and Fatimids). This contrasted with unified Makuria, which retained a province of al-Marīs in Lower Nubia. Each dynasty in Egypt left its marks on the architectural landscape of Fusṭāṭ, as well as distinctive aesthetics of pottery production located in the capital. For instance, the Fatimids introduced styles like 'Fustat Fatimid Sgraffito' (FFS) and 'Fayyumi Ware',[35] exploiting glazing techniques. In contrast, Aswān's potteries retained Byzantine traits of painted decorations.[36] Meanwhile, Old Dongola, the capital of Makuria, exerted influence over other regions within its territory. This influence shaped church architecture[37] and ceramic trends. Dongolese wares were exported beyond the capital.[38] While Fusṭāṭ and Aswān pottery wares exhibit differences in forms and decorations, those from Faras and Old Dongola share similarities in these aspects.

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[25] Adams 1986: 14–16.

[26] Sänger 2011.

[27] Ruffini 2012: 7–8.

[28] Jakobielski, van der Vliet 2011: 30; Schmidt 2022: 210.

[29] Vantini 1975: 69, 130; Łajtar 2013: 129.

[30] Huebner *et al.* 2020: 18.

[31] Godlewski 2005.

[32] Jakobielski, van der Vliet 2011.

[33] For Arabic texts from Qaṣr Ibrīm, see Khan 2024. While Fatimid merchants traded beads, combs and corals (Vantini 1975: 114), Nubians exchanged slaves, gold, ivory, and crops like durra (Welsby 2002: 185–186).

[34] Adams 1961; 2005: 81–83, Fig. 35.

[35] Watson 2004: 200, 253; Saad Abdel Naby, Dixneuf 2011: 28–32. The Fusṭāṭ potteries (Gascoigne, Sheehan 2024) manufactured FFS (Scanlon 1967: 75), 'Fayyumi Ware' (Williams 2012), and domestic wares (Gayraud, Vallauri 2017).

[36] Pierrat 1995.

[37] Danys, Zielińska 2017: 182–183.

[38] Shinnie, Chittick 1961: 29–30.

In the ninth–tenth centuries CE, Aswān grew into a major urban centre with residential areas, mosques, and cemeteries.[39] Mosques supported religious life, and the necropolis reflected the city's wealth. Arabic sources describe Aswān as fertile and populous, with a strong Nubian presence.[40] Trade via caravan routes and with the Beja, who controlled Eastern Desert mines, flourished. The *baqt* treaty formalised Egypt-Makuria relations, making Aswān a key trade hub.[41] However, a 758–760 CE document from Qaṣr Ibrīm reveals trade tensions and violations against Egyptian merchants returning home. Nubians could settle north of the border in the eighth century CE, though later sources, such as Al-Maqrīzī (1364–1442 CE), limit this solely to passing through.[42] The frontier was marked by Al-Qaṣr, identified with the archaeological site of Hisn al-Bāb, south of Philae/Bilāq.[43] Al-Masʿūdī and Al-Maqrīzī noted its role in *baqt* trade and its mixed population. As the southernmost Egyptian garrison,[44] it enabled exchanges of goods, people, and ideas between Egypt and Nubia.[45]

The borderscaping of the First and Second Cataracts become more complex in the ninth century CE when the Arab tribe Rabīʿa migrated to southern Egypt. Descended from this group, the Banū al-Kanz assimilated with the Beja and became influential in mining and trade, ultimately governing Aswān by the eleventh century CE.[46] Marriage documents reveal interactions among Muslim, Christian, Egyptian, Makurian Nubian, and Kenzui Nubian populations.[47] After Makuria's decline, the Banū al-Kanz took control of Old Dongola in 1317 CE, and Kanz al-Dawla Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad became the first Muslim ruler in this part of the Nile Valley.[48]

CASE STUDY: LEDGED VASES WITH PAINTED DECORATIONS

Vessels of Aswān origin

The case study vessels are deep and closed vases with rounded rims, low-ring bases, and a circumferential coil below the rim. Made by Egyptian and Nubian workshops, they were distributed across the regions of the First and Second Cataracts (**Figs 1**–**2**). The earliest examples, classified as Adams R12, Aswān Early Islamic Decorated Red Ware of Group A.III and Class F12, are dated to *c*. 850–950 CE (**Fig. 3**).[49] Their black-painted

[39] Björnesjö, Speiser 2014; Speiser, Nogara 2021; Williams 2022: 17–34, 44.

[40] Vantini 1975: 71; Williams 2022: 27–31.

[41] Arabic sources mention Arab families who owned Nubian estates and paid taxes to the Nubian king. Meanwhile the *baqt* treaty formalised relations between Egypt and Makuria, requiring an annual delivery of slaves (Vantini 1975: 69–71).

[42] Schmidt 2020: 211–212.

[43] Vantini 1975: 119.

[44] Vantini 1975: 270.

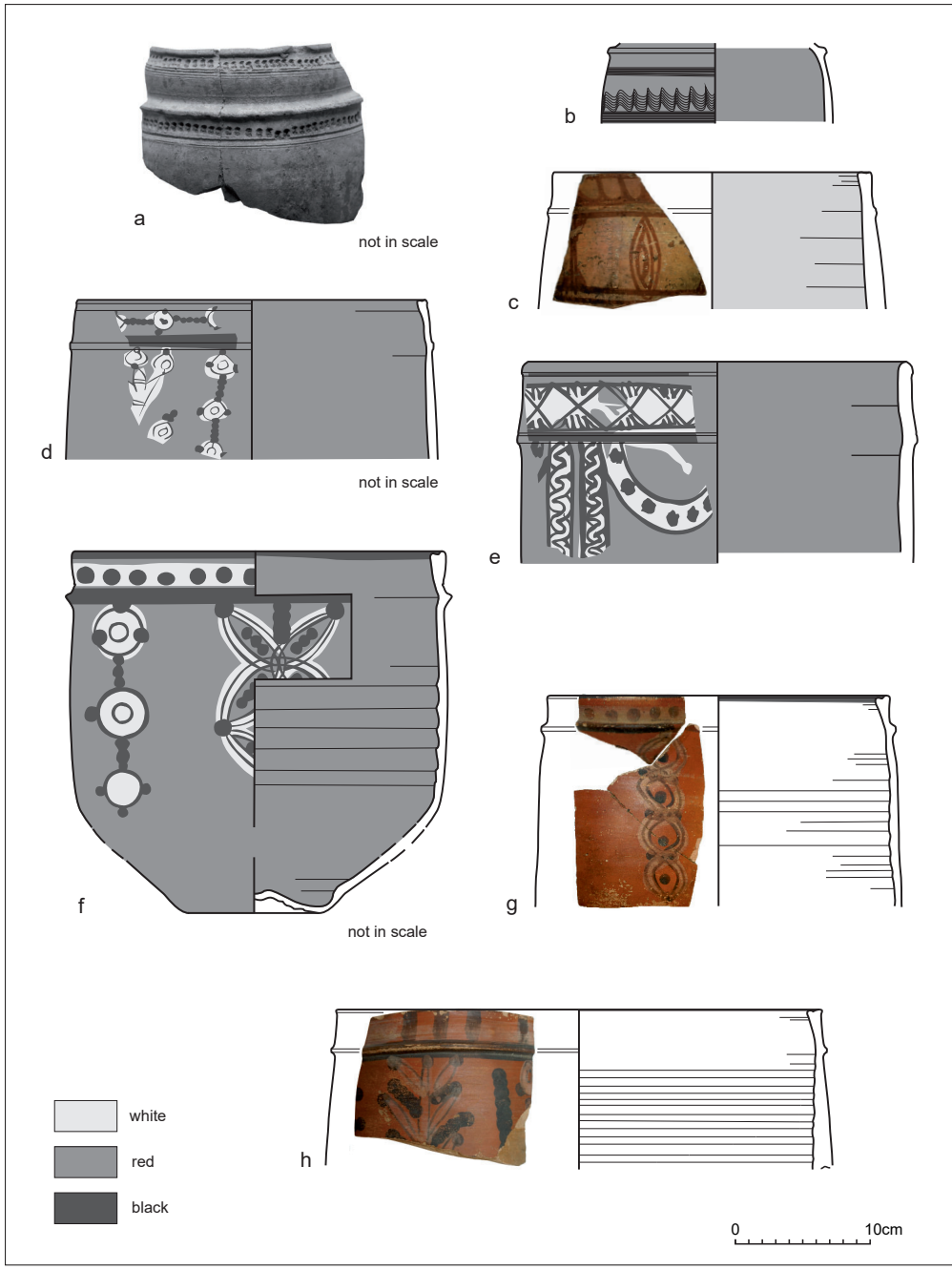
[45] Vantini 1975: 70, 270, 282; Gascoigne, Rose 2012: 84.

[46] Khan 2024: 32.

[47] Williams 2022: 122–123.

[48] Seignobos 2020a: 10–11; 2020b.

[49] Adams 1986: 551, Fig. 308.



3. Ledged vases of Old Dongola (a, e), Qaṣr el-Wizz (b), Faras (c, g-h), Aswān (d), and Aksha (f) origins; wares from the eight(?) and ninth century CE; a. ADd.97.152; b. E41152; c. 234292 MNW; d. without inv. no.; e. HDd.14.012; f. without inv. no.; g. 234453, 234094 MNW; h. 234468 MNW (a. Phot. W. Godlewski, PCMA UW Archive; b-h. Phot. and drawing: K. de Lellis-Danys; b. Museum of ISAC UC; c, g-h. MNW Public domain; d. based on: Gempeler 1992: Fig. 68: 5; f. based on: de Contenson 1966: 57, 61).

decorations of line junctions on a white background link them to the Aswān Spot-and-Line Style A.IIIB,[50] like exemplified by finds from Faras (**Fig. 3g-h**). Finds from Elephantine like type T509d (**Fig. 3d**) are dated to the seventh–tenth centuries, while others like T508 suggest a seventh–ninth-centuries CE range.[51] Recent research supports a ninth–tenth-centuries CE date for Aswān pottery; however, some pottery assemblages include earlier specimens,[52] such as a rouletted bowl[53] resembling late seventh–eight-century CE pieces from Deir el-Naqlūn[54] and Abū Mīna.[55]

Dating Ware R12, including Class F12, is difficult. Their link to the ninth–tenth centuries CE pottery overlooks residuality, as mentioned above. In Aswān, eighth-century CE vessels appear with well-dated glazed wares of the ninth–tenth centuries CE.[56] At Aksha church, R12 ledge vases (**Fig. 3f**) are associated with Phase II (900–1000 CE),[57] while Abkanarti yielded similar examples of a comparable chronology.[58] On the other hand, finds from Tod, dated to the ninth–tenth century CE, also show co-occurrence of R12 with glazed vessels.[59]

Similarities in colour schemes and decorative elements connect Ware R12 to the ornamentation of earlier Aswān[60] and other Egyptian wares[61] of the sixth–seventh centuries CE. Furthermore, Ware W22, Aswān Early Islamic White Ware, of Adams Style A.IIIB,[62] displays reverse colouring to R12, thus red-painted motifs framed in black on a white slip. Egyptian wares of comparable aesthetics are dated to the eighth–ninth centuries CE.[63] Therefore, the author suggests reconsidering the earlier dating for Adams' Ware R12 based on this evidence from Egypt. Last but not least, Ware R12 also resembles the Red Ware Family,

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[50] Adams 1986: 254, Figs 221–222. Elements comprise collar stripes B.1, body borders and friezes EG.14-1, EG.22-1 and EG.22-4, and repeating vertical designs L.22-1–L.22-6.

[51] Gempeler 1992: 120, Fig. 68: 4–7.

[52] Williams 2022: 68–72, 84, Pls 9–15. A bowl of Adams Ware R12 (Williams 2022: Pl. 12: f), featuring Style A.IIIB (elements L.22–3 and L.22–4), has been mistakenly assigned to Aswān Early Islamic and Medieval White Wares W12 and W22. Also, it is unclear which vessels belong to which category in the provided illustration.

[53] Williams 2022: Pl. 12: l.

[54] Danys-Lasek 2014: 223.

[55] Engemann 1991: Fig. 2.

[56] Williams 2022: Pl. 130.

[57] De Contenson 1966: 28, 36, 61–63, nos 57–59, 95, 197, Pl. 7: 1, 2, 6.

[58] Presedo Velo 1965: 45, Fig. 19: 1.

[59] Pierrat 1991: 199, Pl. 64: b; 1995: Figs 1–6, 12, 18a, 18d. Notably, attributing archaeological levels to the ninth and tenth centuries CE is actually based on Adams' chronology of R12.

[60] Adams 1986: 551.

[61] A vase from Kom el-Nana (Faiers 2013: 74, Fig. 2.87: 528) and a basin decorated with a motif akin to Adams' element motif L.22–1 from Kellia (Bonnet Borel, Cattin 2003: 463, Pl. 90: 8).

[62] Adams 1986: Fig. 220.

[63] Vessels produced in Aswān and other Egyptian sites during the eighth and ninth centuries CE display features similar to those of Adams Ware W22 and Style A.IIIB. Similar examples have been found at Tod (Lecuyot, Pierrat-Bonnefois 2004: 158, Pl. 4), Kellia (Bonnet Borel 1999: 543, Pl. 104: 4), and Abū Mīna (Engemann 2016: 49, Pl. 59: E67), indicating shared stylistic trends. Finds from el-Ashmunein, decorated with motifs akin to those of L.221, are dated between the fifth and eighth centuries CE, suggesting that late Antique ceramic traditions persisted into the early Islamic period.

whose decorative elements extended across regions and political boundaries in the Middle Nile Valley during the sixth century CE.[64]

While there is no contemporary Nubian pottery of comparable features to Ware R12,[65] a Class F11 vessel made of Nile fabric from Faras (**Fig. 3c**) is similar to Aswān specimens. It fits Adams W9 – Early Christian Polished White Ware (850–1100 CE).[66] Its hybrid decoration blends Adams Early and Classic Christian Styles N.III's festoons (BE.12-8)[67] with N.IVB's vertical motifs (G.16-1, K.21-2),[68] suggesting a transitional phase. Its uniqueness, evidenced by only a single example of a basin from Ar-Ramāl,[69] supports this hypothesis. Furthermore, an undecorated example from Debeira West is likely no later than the eighth century CE.[70] Such chronological ambiguity stems from grouping ledged vases into one period. For example, at Arminna West, these are vessels labelled Classes G3–5, sharing shapes but differing chronologically: G3–4 around 650 CE; G5 not before 850 CE.[71] Thus, the author proposes a tentative dating of the eighth to mid-ninth century CE for Egyptian Ware R12 and Nubian W9.

The second group of ledged vases from Aswān includes specimens coated in white slip and decorated in red, black, or purple (**Fig. 4**), and found across the First and Second Cataracts and northward. Classified as Adams Class F12,[72] they show evolving aesthetics with consistent shapes. They fall under Adams wares W22 – Aswān Early Islamic White Ware of Group A.III (850–950? CE)[73] and W12 – Aswān Medieval White Ware of Group A.IV (950–1300 CE).[74] The key difference between these two groups is the colour of the decorative motifs: Group A.III and Style A.IIIA feature predominantly red-painted motifs with black or purple elements (**Fig. 4c, e**),[75] whereas Group A.IV displays reversed colouring

[64] Danys, Zielińska 2017.

[65] Except for a single decorative element J.22-1 of Adams Style N.III displaying a shared idea between Aswān R12 and Nubian wares (Adams 1986: Fig. 158).

[66] Adams 1986: 484–485, Fig. 276.

[67] Adams 1986: 244, Fig. 155.

[68] Adams 1986: Figs 158, 176.

[69] Monneret de Villard 1957: Pl. 190: 52.

[70] The Adams Ware W9, Class F12 specimen associated with the phasing of the site suggests 800 CE as the earliest possible *terminus ante quem* (Shinnie, Shinnie 1978: 3–6, 62, Fig. 47: b).

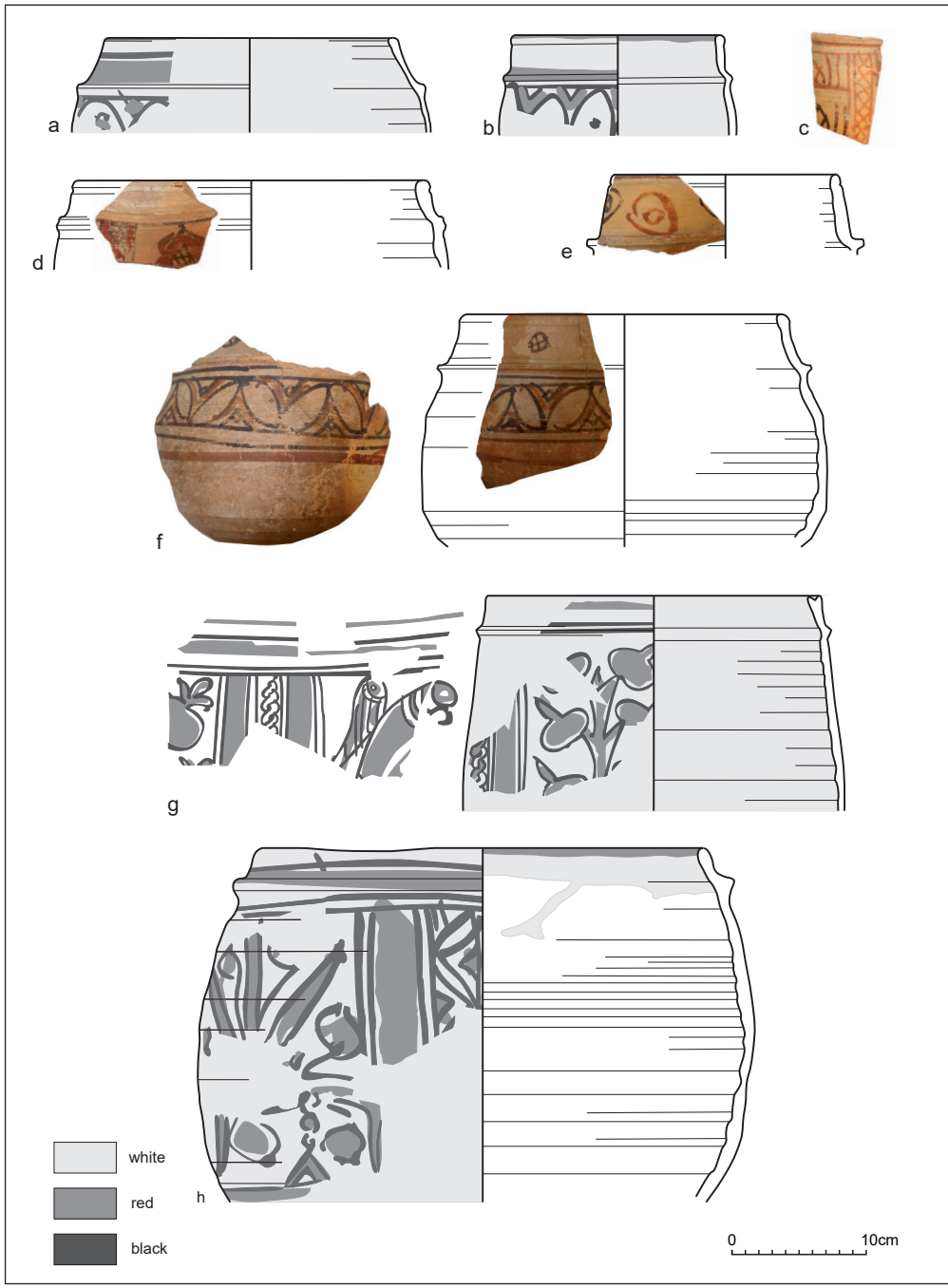
[71] Weeks 1967: 45, Fig. 29.

[72] A single example of Class F11 from Aswān, characteristic of R12 Ware, features decoration typical of the later W12 Ware, including a painted bird motif. This find is associated with a horizon dated to the seventh–ninth/tenth century CE (Pyke 2021: Fig. 3: 21). Comparable depictions of birds are attested on bowls and cups distributed across the Nile Valley, as indicated by a ninth–tenth centuries CE example from Qaṣr el-Wizz (de Lellis-Danys forthcoming c) and find from the ninth–twelfth centuries CE horizon at Deir el-Naqlun (Górecki 1993: 64, Fig. 6).

[73] Adams 1986: 552–551, Fig. 308.

[74] Adams 1986: 558–559, Fig. 311. The dating of Ware W12 may be overly extended. Recent pottery studies in Old Dongola revealed no evidence of W12 appearing alongside twelfth–thirteenth century CE assemblages. A revised dating approach combining stratigraphic data with radiocarbon analysis provided a more precise chronological framework. Thanks to a single-context approach, residual material, which is often introduced to pottery assemblages by mechanical-level excavation methods, has been distinguished to avoid chronological misinterpretation (Dzierzbicka, Danys 2021).

[75] Adams 1986: Figs 216–218.



4. Aswān ledged vases of the ninth–tenth century CE from Faras (a, c-f), Elephantine (b, g) and Deir el-Naqlun (h): a. 234154 MNW; b. without inv. no.; c. 234532 MNW; d. 234586 MNW; e. 234526 MNW; f. 234406, 234381 MNW; g. without inv. no.; h. 238045 MNW (Phot. and drawing: K. de Lellis-Danys; a, c-f, h. MNW Public domain; b. based on: Gempeler 1992: Fig. 67: 7; g. based on: Gempeler 1992: Fig. 68: 3).

(**Fig. 4a-b, d, f-h**).[76] On Elephantine, ledged vases were grouped by form (T509a-d, T640) rather than motif, yet those with Style A.IIIA appeared in large type T509a (**Fig. 4g**), while A.IV styles appeared across multiple types (T509a-d)[77] as exemplified by a nearly complete vase exported to Deir el-Naqlun (**Fig. 4h**), including smaller forms like T640 (**Fig. 4b**).[78] This mirrors Adams' Class F12 having a uniform shape and varied decoration, suggesting that motif changes may mark chronological shifts.

Ledged vases and other vessels with Adams Style A.IIIA were found in Aswān and dated to the ninth–tenth centuries CE.[79] Their impact on the Middle Nile Valley was limited; few examples came from Sheikh Daud,[80] Arafālla,[81] and Faras (**Fig. 4c, e**). In contrast, open forms like plain-walled bowls in similar style[82] were more common, i.e. at ʾAbdallah Nirqi,[83] Faras,[84] and Aksha,[85] and reached as far north as Edfū.[86] Still, distribution remained sparse; Adams noted their export to Nubia occurred 'only in minuscule quantities'.

The most distinct Aswān wares, including ledged vases, feature Adams Style A.IV, with black/purple-painted motifs and red shading. Evolving from A.IIIA and linked to Ware W12, these were exported to Nubia between 950 and 1200 CE.[87] Decoration includes arcades, leaves, and letter 'α' bands (**Fig. 4f**), with less frequent floral and zoomorphic motifs (**Fig. 4g, h**). The finds from Elephantine are broadly dated between the seventh and the tenth centuries CE;[88] however, this chronology appears too early, as evidenced by other Aswān wares, which suggest narrowing the date range to the ninth–tenth centuries CE at this very site.[89] Ledged vases of Adams Group A.IV have been found across the First and Second Cataracts, including Naqʾ el-Sheima,[90] Sheikh Daud,[91] Tamit,[92] ʾAbdallah Nirqi,[93] Qaṣr el-Wizz,[94]

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[76] Adams 1986: Figs 224–228.

[77] Gempeler 1992: Figs 67: 2–9, 68.

[78] Gempeler 1992: Fig. 75: 8–14.

[79] Williams 2022: 70, Pl. 15: a-b. Vessels assigned to Nubian wares of Group N.IV and Ware W6, based on the use of a kaolin fabric different than pink Aswān, align rather with Group A.IIIA. Alternative kaolin clay sources than pink were used in medieval Aswān pottery as attested by Adams Ware U6 – Aswān Medieval Grey Utility Ware (Adams 1986: 559–560) and finds from Debeira West (Shinnie, Shinnie 1978: 61, Fig. 45: e).

[80] Presedo Velo 1964: Fig. 28, bottom left.

[81] Monneret de Villard 1957: Pl. 192: 73. There is no location of the aforementioned site.

[82] Known from Aswān (Williams 2022: Pl. 18: a-f) and Elephantine (Gempeler 1992: Fig. 57).

[83] Török 1975: Pl. L.

[84] Michałowski 1965: Pl. 41: 2.

[85] De Contenson 1966: 65, no. 64.

[86] These bowls are now housed in the National Museum in Warsaw as a deposit of the Museum of the University of Warsaw and studied by the author.

[87] Adams 1986: 254–255.

[88] Gempeler 1992: 120.

[89] Williams 2022: 73, Pl. 20: e-j.

[90] Bietak, Schwarz 1987: Fig. 46: a, no. 76658.

[91] Presedo Velo 1964: Fig. 28.

[92] Bosticco *et al.* 1967: Fig. 32: 1, 3.

[93] Van Moorsel *et al.* 1975: 47, no. 78, Fig. 38: 78.

[94] De Lellis-Danys forthcoming c.

Faras, Aksha,[95] Debeira West,[96] with Abkanarti[97] being the southernmost site. No examples appear in early and classic Christian contexts at Qaṣr Ibrīm[98] or Kulubnarti,[99] nor in Makuria. This suggests the distribution was largely confined to the First and Second Cataracts.[100] The perceived dominance of Aswān decorated wares,[101] including ledged vases, is paired with the tendency to regard Nubian production as less valued in the region.[102] While Aswān potteries undeniably influenced certain pottery types, such as amphorae from Old Dongola, a wider examination of Nubian manufacturing and aesthetics throughout the Middle Nile Valley presents a different narrative. Aswān decorated wares, including ledged vases, are seen as dominant, but finds from sites like Qaṣr Ibrīm[103] and Meinarti reveal a significant presence of local Nubian production and its importance.

Chronological indicators place Adams Style A.IV wares, including ledged vases, mainly in the ninth–tenth centuries CE, with some lasting into the eleventh–twelfth centuries CE.[104] They occur at Upper and Middle Egyptian sites like Esnā, Deir el-Naqlūn, and Fusṭāṭ in contexts dated to the ninth–tenth centuries CE,[105] reaching the twelfth century CE at Fusṭāṭ due to their prolonged period of use.[106] Adams linked their decline at Meinarti to the 1172 CE campaign of Shams ad-Dīn Tūrānshah into Nubia.[107] While this milestone seems plausible as a turning point in pottery production, the continuity of skills and knowledge in later Aswān wares suggests otherwise. Notably, a persistence of ceramic traditions

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[95] De Contenson 1966: 91, no. 171.

[96] Shinnie, Shinnie 1978: Pl. 45: a.

[97] Presedo Velo 1965: Fig. 16: 2, Pls 28, 30–31.

[98] Adams 2010: 87.

[99] Adams, Adams 1998: 22.

[100] The limitations of river transport to the Second Cataract due to the region's topography have been considered a factor in the distribution of Aswān wares (Williams 2022: 139). However, the presence of imported Egyptian and Mediterranean goods, including Aswān wares, at Old Dongola from the sixth century CE onwards challenges this hypothesis. Furthermore, the documentary sources from Qaṣr Ibrīm indicate that Muslim merchants could travel beyond the Second Cataract with authorisation from the eparch of al-Marīs. An account of al-Maqrīzī referring to a location south of the Second Cataract, possibly identified with ʿAkaša, adds to the complexity of the border dynamics. According to his account, Egyptian merchants required permission from the Makurian king himself to use this crossing point (Khan 2024: 89–90).

[101] Aswān Ware W12 is reported as 'the single most popular ware in Nubia between 950 and 1100'. According to Adams, Aswān Ware W12 'Between about 950 and 1100 AD […] was the single most popular decorated ware at Meinarti, largely displacing the Nubian-made wares of Family N' (Adams 1986: 559). Of the registered vessels, six are specimens of Ware W12 and two are contemporary Nubian W5 – Classic Christian Fine White Ware. The number of recorded potsherds of the aforementioned Egyptian and Nubian wares is 48 and 96, respectively (Adams 2001: 22–23, 29, Pl. 25f: 2–4). Furthermore, at least 39 handmade jars from the early and classic Christian phases at Meinarti were 'unregistered' (Adams 2001: Pl. 7a), which biases the general proportions between Egyptian and Nubian vessels at the site.

[102] Williams 2022: 136–139.

[103] Adams 1996: 113.

[104] Bailey 1998: 36–37, Pl. 28, 28 (bowls and cups, though no ledged vases).

[105] Jacquet-Gordon 1972: Pl. 223: 4; Kubiak, Scanlon 1989: 36, Fig. 58; Danys-Lasek 2014: Fig. 22: A; Godlewski *et al.* 2016: Fig. 12.

[106] Kubiak 1990: 82.

[107] Adams 2001: 31. The campaign into Nubia responded to the siege of Aswān by Nubian forces.

despite historical disruptions, including the Mamluk wars and partial city destruction, is evidenced in Old Dongola.[108] Thus, ceramic traditions persisted, challenging assumptions of a clear break in production and underscoring the resilience of local craftsmanship in the face of political disruption.

Vessels of Nubian origin

Ledged vases of Nubian origin, primarily produced in Faras and Old Dongola, became one of the most distinctive wares in the Middle Nile Valley during the Classic Christian period (850–1100 CE). These vessels, linked to Adams Classes F1, F10, F12, F14, and F24, fall under Ware W5 – Classic Christian Fine White Ware (850–1000 CE)[109] and were possibly exported further to locations like Soba.[110] Production likely occurred at smaller centres like Gezīra Dabarossa, Meinarti, and Abkanarti.[111]

Ledged vases from the First and Second Cataracts featured elaborate painted ornamentation, which became one of the most characteristic traits of Nubian pottery in the medieval period. The prevalent style is Adams Style N.IVA, though N.IVB was also recorded in association with ledged vases, particularly in W10 Ware. The most frequently observed motifs from both Styles N.IVA and N.IVB include 'guilloche' patterns, interconnected leaves and circles, 'plume' panel designs or other geometric elements like strokes (**Fig. 5a-f**). Less commonly, zoomorphic elements such as birds and ungulates[112] are also represented (**Fig. 5g-i**).

Ledged vases, likely originating from Faras, were distributed along the Nile between, the First to the Third Cataract, reaching sites like Naqʾ el-Sheima,[113] Tamit,[114] Sheikh Daud,[115] Qaṣr Ibrīm,[116] Arminna West,[117] ʾAbdallah Nirqi,[118] Qaṣr el-Wizz,[119] Debeira West,[120]Aksha,[121] Serra West,[122]

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[108] Godlewski 2013: 12.

[109] Adams 1986: 492, Fig. 278. Other wares, including ledged vases in Lower Nubia, are W6 – Matte Yellow (850–1100 CE), W7 – Heavy White (850–1100 CE), and W10 – Polished Yellow (850–1100 CE) (Adams 1986: 492–495, Figs 280–281).

[110] Welsby, Daniels 1991: 206, Figs 112: 168–176, 117: 1. Ledged vases are categorised as Class R Type 1 and linked to northern wares (Old Dongola) but are rarely attested at Soba.

[111] Adams 1986: 23. For example, ledged vases from Gezīra Dabarossa featured a limited repertoire of decorative motifs, but falling into the stylistics of other vessels produced during the classic Christian period in Lower Nubia (Lister 1967: 33, Figs 14: c, 15: d).

[112] Adams 1986: Figs 163–169, 173, 177.

[113] Bietak, Schwarz 1987: Figs 45 (nos 76742, 76736, 76657), 46a (no. 76759). Some specimens were mistakenly classified as Aswān wares.

[114] Bosticco *et al.* 1967: Fig. 32: 2, 4.

[115] Presedo Velo 1964: 15: 6.

[116] Adams 1996: Pl. 17: a.

[117] Weeks 1967: Fig. 4.1: A-U-2.

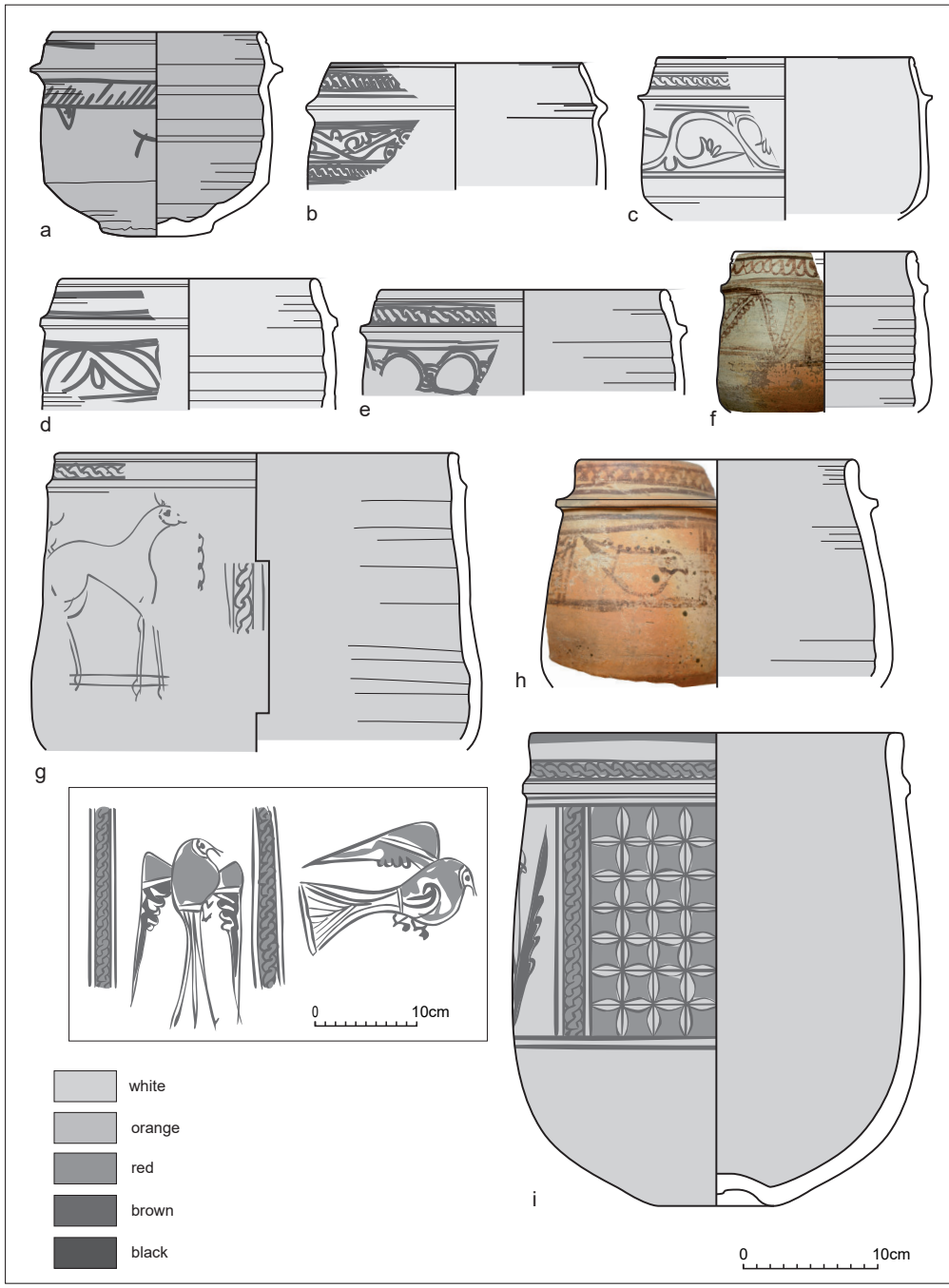
[118] Van Moorsel *et al*. 1975: 46, 52, cat. no. 69.

[119] De Lellis-Danys forthcoming c.

[120] Shinnie, Shinnie 1978: Pls 74, 92.

[121] De Contenson 1966: 80, no. 120; 81, nos 122–126; 93, no. 190.

[122] Fuscaldo 2011: Fig. 18, cat. nos 126, 129.



5. Ledged vases of Old Dongola (a-b) and Faras (c-i) wares of the ninth–tenth centuries CE from Old Dongola (a, b), Qaṣr el-Wizz (c, g, i), and Faras (d-f, h): a. HDd.17.241; b. HDd.16.202; c. E41353; d. 234223 MNW; e. 234277 MNW; f. 234456 MNW; g. E41346; h. 234502 MNW; i. E42001 (Phot. and drawing: K. de Lellis-Danys; a-b. PCMA UW Archive; c, g, i. Museum of ISAC UC; d-f, h. MNW Public domain).

Meinarti,[123] Qaṣr Iko,[124] and Abkanarti.[125] The southernmost attestation of the Lower Nubian ledged vases is Kulubnarti,[126] at the Dal Cataract, between the Second and Third Cataract. While Adams suggested Ghazali as another production centre,[127] Old Dongola remained a key pottery production centre in the heart of Makuria.[128] Faras potteries ceased around 1000 CE, yet production likely continued in Lower Nubia.[129] Vessels classified as Adams Class F9 and F12 from Group N.V, dated to 1000–1200 CE, demonstrate the continuity and transformation of earlier forms and decorative motifs.[130] The final phase of ledged vases falls within Adams Group N.VI of late Christian pottery and R19 – Heavy Decorated Ware, orange-coated and dated to the thirteenth century CE.[131]

While Faras potteries declined, Old Dongola, Makuria's capital, remained a major production centre. Though pottery types and decorations were shared across the Middle Nile, regional adaptations varied.[132] Dongolese wares resembling Lower Nubian W5 and R21 featured black, rather than brown (**Fig. 6**), painted decoration, and often bore pre-fired painted potters' marks, distinctive to post-1000 CE Dongolese ceramics.[133] Recent research using radiocarbon dating and stratigraphy has refined the chronology by providing a sequence for Dongolese pottery from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries CE. Notably, ledged vases dated to the ninth–tenth centuries CE were virtually absent in contexts later than the eleventh century CE, marking their likely *terminus ante quem* of production endpoint.[134]

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[123] Adams 2001: Pl. 25: 2f.

[124] Presedo Velo 1963: Fig. 10: 7.

[125] Presedo Velo 1965: Figs 14–15, 16: 1, 3, 17.

[126] Adams, Adams 1998: Figs 4.1: b, 4.3: a.

[127] Adams 1986: 23; Shinnie, Chittick 1961: 34, 66, Figs 13, 74, 92; Obłuski *et al.* 2017: 391, Fig. 14. Although none of the archaeological investigations have confirmed pottery production within the monastery, the possibility that it took place at one of the nearby settlements cannot be ruled out. The fabrics of Ghazali pottery are consistent with the geology of the Wadī Abū Dom and the Fourth Cataract regions. This hypothesis remains to be tested through the planned XRF analysis (author and Małgorzata Korzeniowska, personal communication).

[128] Pluskota 2001: 363–365. Dongolese ledged vases are known from Old Dongola itself (Żurawski 1999: Fig. 10) and nearby sites like Banganarti (Phillips 2003: Pls 65: a, 76: a; Cedro 2021: Pl. 17), and Abkur (Phillips 2003: Pl. 65: b).

[129] The pottery assemblage from Faras, dated after 1000 CE, includes wares that differ from contemporary specimens from Old Dongola, Banganarti, Ghazali and Soba. The fabrics of the Faras vessels are consistent with vessels associated with the local production. Furthermore, Adams suggested continuation of pottery production in this region after abandonment of Faras centre (Adams 1986: 493).

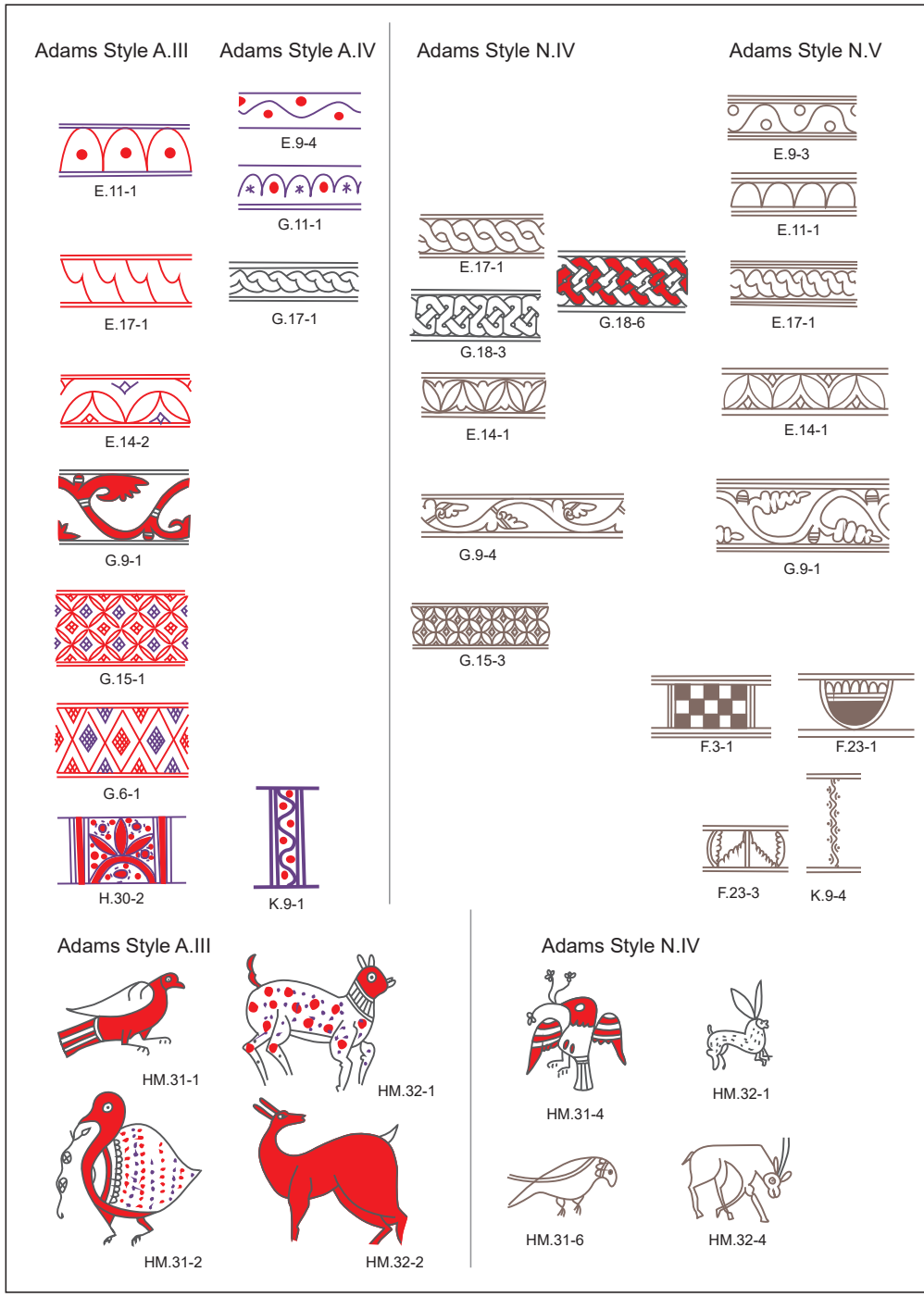
[130] Adams 1986: 498–500, Fig. 282. They fall under Post Classic Wares R21 (Christian Orange Polished) and W23 (Matte White), co-occurring with pottery likely imported from the south, possibly from Old Dongola (Adams 1986: 498–500, Fig. 282).

[131] Adams 1986: 284, Figs 504–503; Presedo Velo 1965: Fig. 14: 4.

[132] Pluskota 1994.

[133] Pluskota 1992.

[134] Several ledged vases of Adams Group N.IVA are associated to the mid-eleventh and twelfth century CE (Dzierzbicka, Danys 2021: 17, Fig. 6), although they were residuals, resulting from collapsed vaulting in which they were reused as construction elements.



6. Comparison of the characteristic decorative elements of Aswān (A.III and A.IV), and Nubian (N.IV and N.V) wares (Drawing: K. de Lellis-Danys; based on: Adams 1986: Figs 164–166, 168, 182–184, 216–219, 225–228).

DISCUSSION

The production and widespread use of ledged vases in the First and Second Cataracts peaked in the ninth and tenth centuries CE, but it likely began in Aswān as early as the eighth century CE. This innovation spread to Lower Nubia, as seen in Adams Class F11 of aforementioned Ware W9 attested in Qaṣr el-Wizz, with modifications in slip colour and decoration, as exemplified by specimens of Adams R7 – Classic Christian Fine Red Ware from Old Dongola. However limited, these specimens suggest the introduction of ledged vases into Lower Nubian pottery repertoire as early as the eighth century CE. Therefore, the adoption of this new vessel shape was a borderscape phenomenon, transcending the political boundaries of Umayyad Egypt and the Kingdom of Makuria.

Dynamic and conscious choices marked the process of adaptation in pottery-making. While the shape of ledged vases became familiar, the earliest examples in the Middle Nile Valley featured dichotomise adjustments in decorations. An example from Qaṣr el-Wizz, featuring Ware R5 – Early Christian Polished Red of Adams Group N.III (**Fig. 3b**), is decorated with incised wavy lines, similar to decorative element R.9-6 dated 650–975 CE,[135] with parallels in northern Egypt,[136] reflecting possible Umayyad influences on the Faras potteries, and representing another aspect of borderland aesthetics. In contrast, a specimen from Old Dongola (**Fig. 3e**), white-coated and decorated with date stones impressions,[137] shares the same chronological horizon and reflects indigenous pottery traditions of Old Dongola.

These specimens from Qaṣr el-Wizz and Old Dongola illustrate the dynamic introduction of new ideas in pottery-making. The development in the ninth century CE of decorative motifs shifted toward painted elements associated with contemporary illuminated manuscripts, highlighting their significance in shaping visual expressions of Classic Christian Style in Nubia.[138] They showcase an exploration of decorative solutions, preferring elaborate painted motifs rooted in a shared visual vocabulary associated with Christian decorative traditions, which likely inspired artisans in their vessel decoration.

Various manuscript folios from the Nile Valley, found in both Egypt and Sudan, highlight a Christian *koiné* that connected communities across borders. The ninth–thirteenth century CE parchment from Faras (**Fig. 7a-b**)[139] features motifs similar to Adams A.III G.9-1 and N.IV G.9-4 (**Fig. 6**). Similarly, a folio from a Coptic manuscript (**Fig. 7c**)[140] exhibits aesthetic elements characteristic of illuminated manuscripts and a shared design language. Other contemporary crafts in Egypt, such as textile making (**Fig. 7d**), also

[135] Adams 1986: 481–482, Fig. 159.

[136] De Lellis-Danys forthcoming b. Such phenomenon has been well-documented in the Levant (Walmsley 2022: 91, 99, Fig. 2).

[137] Adams Style N.III as element V.2 of Group N.III (Adams 1986: Fig. 159).

[138] Adams 1986: 254; 2016: 322–323.

[139] Jakobielski, Sulikowska-Bełczowska 2021: 463.

[140] The folio (third–twelfth centuries CE) is now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (no. 19.196.4); see website *MetMuseum*.

7. Selected examples of shared visual vocabulary on parchment from Faras (a-b), Coptic folio (c), and textile (d) from Egypt: a, b. 234289 MNW; c. 19.196.4; d. 200381 (a-b. Phot. P. Ligier, MNW Public domain; c. MMA Public domain; d. Phot. A. Oleksiak, MNW Public Domain).

employed similar aesthetics.[141] The use of contrasting colours, like red and black or purple, in Aswān wares mirrors the bichromatic text styles in manuscripts, where primary script is black and ligatures or additional elements are red (see **Fig. 7c**). A similar custom may

[141] The Coptic textile (ninth–tenth century CE) is now the National Museum in Warsaw as inv. no. 200381 MNW (Urbaniak-Walczak 2003: 39, cat. no. 27).

also have been associated with the use of red filling in the N.IV style of Nubian wares (see **Fig. 6**). This phenomenon exemplifies bridging different crafts and sharing similar aesthetic language. It offers insight into the conceptualisation of designs and transcending them.

The comparisons of decorative elements, as distinguished by Adams (see **Fig. 6**), reveal the dynamics of interaction and individual development influenced by both potters and customers. While motifs like continuous arcades with dots[142] were common in Aswān wares, they were less prominent in Nubia, where their variations prevailed. The 'guilloche' motif, highly characteristic of Faras pottery, showcased Nubian artistic skill and creative elaboration of a basic concept, but appeared in a simpler form in Aswān wares.[143]

Connected leaf motifs[144] were shared between the two traditions, with Aswān pieces consistently bichromatic. The 'plume' motif[145] followed similar patterns. Elaborate friezes featuring overlapping circles that resemble four-pedalled rosettes were also common.[146] While panel friezes with vertical elements were similar, specific motifs differed: Aswān wares featured geometric, floral, and zoomorphic designs,[147] while Faras potters favoured distinct decorative choices.[148] The depiction of animals on Aswān vessels reflects a 'borderscaping' concept, though this artistic tradition was more deeply rooted and widely spread in Nubia. Notably, vessels from Old Dongola and Ghazali also exhibited comparable decorative elements.

The adoption of shared ornamentation, influenced by manuscript illustrations, highlights the permeability of borderscapes in the First and Second Cataract region. The widespread Christian *koiné*, the use of Coptic language[149] and the connections between monasteries along the Nile likely facilitated the flow of artistic ideas. Other crafts, such as scribal practices, may have been shared between Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia.[150] Textual evidence attests to the presence of Nubian monks among the residents of the Egyptian monasteries, such as St. Macarius in Edfū and Anba Hadra in Aswān.[151] A commemorative epitaph of Makurian King Giorgios further illustrates the connection through the Christian *koiné.* Giorgios may have lived and died in exile at the Monastery of the Syrians in Wadī Natrūn, Egypt, around 1132 CE.[152]

The presence of Egyptian potters in Nubia is another possible explanation for sharing similar ornamentation concepts.[153] However, the pottery tradition in Faras shows that local potters made independent artistic choices within a shared cultural framework, adapting

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[142] Adams motifs E.9-4, E.11-1, G.11-1 of Aswān and E.9-3 and E.11-1 of Nubian wares.

[143] Adams motifs E.17-1, E.18-2 and G.18-6 of Styles N.IV and N.V, and E.17-2 and G.17-1 of Styles A.III and A.IV.

[144] Adams motifs E.14-2 of Style A.III, and E.14-1 of Styles N.IV and N.V.

[145] Adams motifs G.9-1 of Style A.III, and G.9-4 and G.9-1 of Styles N.IV and N.V.

[146] Adams motifs G.15-1 of Style A.III and G.15-3 of Style N.IV.

[147] Adams motifs G.6-1, H.30-2, K.9-1 of Styles A.III and A.IV.

[148] Adams motifs F.3-1, F.23-1, F.23-3, K.9-4 of Style N.V.

[149] Although Greek was used in Christian liturgy and dominated other spheres of life in Nubia, Coptic texts have also been found, along with Old Nubian accounts. The presence of Coptic texts is greater in Lower Nubia, decreasing toward the centre of Makuria (Łajtar 2015: 147–148). Notably, Qaṣr Ibrīm appears as main location for Coptic literacy culture in Nubia (van der Vliet 2011: 175).

[150] Ochała 2011: 161–164.

[151] Monneret de Villard 1927: 128; van der Vliet 2015: 277.

[152] Van Gerven Oei 2011.

[153] Adams 1986: 458–467; Edwards 2014: 416–17.

designs to local tastes and needs. Adams hypothesised that these decorative wares served only an ornamental purpose. As attested by abrasive use marks on their insides, food-serving vessels had functional roles. At the same time, their decorative motifs, which resembled those found in illuminated religious texts, conveyed Christian symbolism and visual representation. The presence of Christian symbols, including crosses and Solomon's seals, challenges this interpretation and warrants reconsideration. The vessels' decorations likely combined practicality with symbolic meaning.

While politically divided, the Fatimid caliphate and the kingdom of Makuria were connected through an eparch of the al-Marīs province who acted as an intermediary between a governor in Aswān and a king in Old Dongola. This facilitated commerce, integration and communication within the region between the First and Second Cataract.[154] Although the political and religious border between Egypt and Nubia in the tenth and ninth centuries CE suggest a sharp division, Christian *koiné* facilitated relations across the border, as mentioned earlier. The Aswān social landscape is characterised by a population of Muslim and Christians, with the latter holding a strong position in society.[155] The area to the north, including Esna and Edfū, was inhabited by Nubians. The Esna-Edfū hoard of manuscripts, dating to 960–1060 CE and originally part of a monastic library in Edfū, was created through a Nubian foundation, possibly for Nubian monks residing there.[156]

The permeability of the Egyptian-Nubian frontier regarding craft exchange should be reconsidered in light of pottery production in political capitals. While potters from Fūstāt focused on vessels' functionality and used glazing technology, those from Aswān adorned their wares with painted, highly aesthetic ornamentation. Also, the Egyptian pottery exhibits relative similarities between regions, except for Aswān. On the other hand, Old Dongola played a significant role in spreading ceramic traditions and decorative concepts across the kingdom of Makuria, sharing both functional and decorative elements with Faras and other regions. Therefore, the Nubian pottery industry appears heterogeneous, suggesting exchange of concepts and experiences between potters.

The stark contrast between Fūstāt and Aswān implies that political and cultural divisions within Egypt were more significant than those between Egypt and Nubia. As a case study, the analysis of ledged vases from Aswān and Faras highlights the multidimensional nature of borderscaping. The long-standing historical connections between the First and Second Cataract regions, dating back to the first century CE, show how the movement of populations, whether voluntary or forced, contributed to a diverse cultural heritage. Continuous exchanges of goods, people, and ideas, reinforced by a shared Christendom identity, fostered cooperation in pottery production and the development of a common aesthetic language.

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[154] Khan 2024: 89.

[155] Williams 2022: 127.

[156] Van der Vliet 2015. According to van der Vliet, the same religious texts were available to Nubians inhabiting areas between Edfū and Old Dongola.

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by K. de Lellis-Danys).

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