

New evidence for Central Tunisian red slip ware with stamped decoration (ARS style D)

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Knowledge of production sites is of fundamental importance for making a differentiated assessment of long-distance trade in North African fine wares during late antiquity (fig. 1). Our object must be to document and present — on the basis of surveys and/or excavations at the production centers — representative ranges of red-slip vessel forms (including the rarer types), and the characteristic patterns of stamped decoration with their extensive repertoire of stamps, as well as other decoration such as appliqué and mould-made relief. Stamped and relief decoration plays a significant rôle in attributing ARS to different pottery centers on the basis of fabrics, forms and decoration, for it can be assumed that the neatly-cut and for the most part individually-designed motifs on the faces of the clay punches are specific to a workshop or possibly a larger pottery centre. Differentiation is required not only between stamp-types, but also between die-types (= punches) with identical motifs. By contrast, vessel-forms which were produced for a long time may be regional forms belonging to the repertoire of many different potteries.

Work of this kind has been carried out so far only at the pottery centre of El Mahrine in the NE Tunisian lowlands, c.45 km west of Carthage, which I prospected while working on the late-antique pottery of the excavations of the German Archaeological Institute in Carthage from 1981 to 1989, in 1992, and in 1997.¹ This survey was concentrated on El Mahrine and the nearby Henchir el Biar; I only recently (1997) located and surveyed Bordj el Djerbi (fig. 1). In addition D. P. S. Peacock, F. Bejaoui and N. Ben Lazreg have carried out a joint large-scale field survey in Central Tunisia from 1984 to 1988; several potteries of ARS ware and lamps were discovered, not in the coastal area between Sousse, Acholla and El Djem, as had previously been postulated, but further inland in a region extending mainly from southwest of Kairouan to Sbeitla.² For the present, however, an evaluation of the production range of the different Central Tunisian fine-ware potteries must be based on the selection of pottery and lamps published in their important preliminary report.³

The site of Sidi Marzouk Tounsi (or Sidi Merzoug et Tounsi) (fig. 1), situated northwest of Djebel Trozza near El Ala on the Oued el Gattar, seems to be the most important of the known Central Tunisian pottery centres, to judge from the ARS and lamps produced there from about the mid 3rd c., but its character and structures — apart from a partially excavated bath complex — cannot yet be defined from the visible remains. Fine red-slip ware of a high quality was produced on this site up to as late as the early 6th c.⁴ This pottery settlement might have developed in the area of a major private estate (*fundus*) at the Oued el Gattar by around the middle or during the second half of the 3rd c. I have previously pointed to the connection between highly specialized potteries and vast olive-orchards, whose tree cuttings and dried residual pulp from pressings were the chief source of firing material in this region and a prerequisite for pottery production.⁵

1 Mackensen 1993.

2 Peacock and Bejaoui 1990, 59 ff., fig. 1.

3 Ibid. 66ff. A comprehensive study of the plain, stamped and relief-decorated ARS and the lamps is being prepared by F. Bejaoui (cf. *ibid.* 68); see also Mackensen 1993, 33 f.

4 Peacock and Bejaoui 1990, 66 ff. figs. 5-6; 74.

5 Ibid. 83; cf. Mackensen 1993, 53 ff. for prerequisites for the establishment of potteries, such as clay deposits, firing material, water, and good connections with the regional road network.