

MUSEUM NOTE

AN ISLAMIC OIL LAMP FROM FUSTAT

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IN THE SOCIETY'S COLLECTION IN THE GREAT NORTH MUSEUM there is an unusual spouted, glazed vessel (Accession Number 1967.8). The very characteristic form and shape (fig. 1) enable its identification as an Islamic oil lamp from the potteries in Fustat, Egypt. Fustat was a city built by the Arabs on the south bank of the River Nile, next to Roman Babylon, after the conquest of Egypt in the seventh century AD (Peterson 1996, 44). It served as a capital of Islamic Egypt from the year of its foundation in AD 641 until AD 969 when the city of Cairo was founded (Chalaby 2000, 21).

DESCRIPTION

The lamp is made from a yellowish compound clay with a wheel-made body and a hand-made nozzle, the latter having been adjusted to fit the surface of the body. The lamp is 9 cm in height. Its current length is 10 cm but its original length would have been greater as part of the nozzle has not survived. It has a globular body. The neck is tall with flaring sides. The maximum diameter of the filling hole is 4.5 cm. The looped handle begins at the shoulder and runs to the middle of the neck. An incision gives the appearance of a double looped handle. A long faceted nozzle (which held the wick) starts just under the shoulder. At the base of the lamp the slightly concave foot has an incised ring. The outer, upper levels of the body and the nozzle of the lamp are covered with a dribbled vitreous dark green glaze which turns to brown as it nears the base. The lower part of the body and the surface of the base show traces of an opaque white glaze. These details confirm that the lamp belongs to Kubiak's Type I (1970, 13–15) and Kawatoko's second group of glazed Islamic lamps, type 6b with a Type 6b3 handle and a Type d base (1987, 28–36).

DISCUSSION

Kubiak (1970) and Kawatoko (1987) both attempted to establish typological classifications of oil lamps from Fustat. Kawatoko (1987), in his article 'Oil Lamps From Al-Fustat', discussed classification and chronological issues, using 1200 examples of excavated oil lamps from Fustat in order to establish his typology. He created four main categories, one of which pertains to Islamic oil lamps. This category is divided into six sub-divisions, according to the shape of the lamps. Both Kubiak and Kawatoko agree on the twelfth century as a starting point for this type of oil lamp from Fustat and see continuity through the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Thousands of similar lamps to the Newcastle specimen have been excavated at Fustat (Bailey 2001, 131), and all are covered by either a turquoise glaze or a dark green glaze.

In addition to being a trade centre, Fustat was also a place for ceramic innovation; indeed, from the ninth century, ceramicists in Egypt were experimenting with new styles of decoration. The primary glazing method during the early period utilised a glaze based on lead



Fig. 1 Islamic oil lamp from Fustat

oxide: 'Lead is used as a flux to lower the melting temperature of quartz, thus enabling it to flow and so form a glaze' (Mason *et al.* 1992, 67). When fired to high temperatures the glaze produces a vitreous effect. The chemical reaction of oxides added to the glaze creates a range of colours depending on the quantity and the degree of oxidation. Copper oxide produces green with no hint of blue and gives a metallic sheen to the surface; this is known as lustreware. This type of decoration was introduced to Fustat during the tenth century (Henshaw 2009, 54). The glaze does not cover the whole surface of the lamp but leaves a 'dribbled' effect.

Although it is difficult to find an exact parallel to the Newcastle specimen's decoration, wares that have been decorated in a similar way are common throughout the Islamic world (Philon 1980). The green colour of the glaze was common in the decoration of lamps from the eleventh century onwards (Henshaw 2009, 79). Lead isotope analyses of Islamic pottery glazes from Fustat (Wolf *et al.* 2003) give very interesting results as they show that the Fustat potters did not rely on ore sources from Egypt but favoured those from more distant areas, such as Iran, Tunisia, Sardinia, Spain and the Taurus Mountains. This discovery led to the

conclusion that the origin of the lead does not necessarily indicate where the pottery was produced (Wolf *et al.* 2003, 419).

As mentioned above, the lamp has been wheel-thrown and hand finished. A tool was used to produce the faceted effect of the nozzle. The fact that the glaze did not cover the whole body of the lamp indicates a firing in the kiln immediately after its application. The lower part has been left unglazed in order to prevent the lamp sticking to the kiln (Taylor and Bull 1986). The dripping effect of the glaze also indicates that the lamp was placed in the kiln right way up. There would be a mass firing of lamps in the kilns to supply the significant demand for lamps in Fustat during the period (Raymond 2000, 42).

The particular shape of this artefact is a combination of vessel and lamp. This special form might have served functional purposes, as it enabled the lamp to contain plenty of oil so the lighting time was extended. The object could also be easily transported as the tall neck of the filling hole would hinder the spillage of fluid. On the other hand, the form might have been the result of a local fashion or taste. Whatever the reason for the ceramicist giving the lamp its shape, its appearance was popular as is shown by the fact that large numbers of this type have been discovered outside Fustat, as for example at Aqaba (Whitcomb 2001), and west and northern Saqqara (Rzeuska 2002; Bailey 2001). Both of the latter examples have been discovered in contexts that indicate that the deposition was accidental, as the medieval users of the lamps were grave robbers.

PROVENANCE AND LATER HISTORY

The provenance indicated on the label of the box containing the Newcastle example is, confusingly, 'Cambo, Northumberland and Mediterranean'. A suggestion as to how the lamp reached the Newcastle Antiquaries, is given by the accession card which refers to the lamp as part of a group of 10 pieces. These all came from a private collection at Wallington Hall, near Cambo, belonging to the Trevelyan family (Trevelyan 2006). The lamp is unlikely to have come from Lady Wilson's Cabinet of Curiosities at Wallington: the house and its contents were donated in 1941 to the National Trust by Sir Charles Trevelyan, whilst the date of the donation of the lamp is 1967, when the papers of the family were deposited in the Robinson Library, Newcastle University. This suggests that the donation came from a family collection which had not been included when the house and its contents were transferred to the National Trust. It is more likely that the group of 10 artefacts came from Sir Humphrey Trevelyan, who was Britain's ambassador to Egypt between 1955 and 1956.

An archaeologist studying a lamp almost 2300 miles from its place of origin could note that the artefact's biography illuminates changes in the way people appreciate material culture. Through its life, an artefact might have served its purpose of creation, but through time an object can change identity and serve a new role. In this case, the utilitarian needs of the Middle Ages were replaced by the antiquarian's curiosity, the collector's interests of the twentieth century and the archaeological observations of the twenty-first century.

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