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Is imitation the sincerest form of flattery? New light on local productions inspired by Cypriot wares at Tell el-Dab'a

Sarah Vilain

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The Enigma of the Hyksos
Volume I

Contributions to the Archaeology
of Egypt, Nubia and the Levant

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Edited by Manfred Bietak

Volume 9

2019

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Is Imitation the Sincerest Form of Flattery? New Light on Local Pottery Inspired by Cypriot Wares at Tell el-Dabʿa

by Sarah Vilain ¹

Abstract

Excavations from 1966 revealed that Tell el-Dabʿa, identified with ancient Avaris, was a major harbour town and a trading centre of international importance. The city was strategically located on the Pelusiac branch of the Nile and benefited from a direct access to the Mediterranean Sea.² As testimony to these extended connections, the site yielded the broadest corpus of Cypriot pottery in Egypt.³ From the 13th Dynasty already, specific links with Cyprus were suggested by the discovery of Tell el-Yahudiyeh juglets in Nile clay,⁴ modelled according to a Cypriot technique.⁵ These juglets were created by potters familiar with the Cypriot tradition or by Cypriots living at Tell el-Dabʿa.⁶ The contacts developed during the Second Intermediate Period and intensified under the Hyksos rule. As a result, excavations uncovered a unique corpus of vessels imitating Cypriot prototypes or influenced by them. Particular attention was given by local potters to White Painted Pendent Line Style jugs and juglets, whose both shape and decoration were a source of inspiration. Therefore, the ceramic assemblage of Tell el-Dabʿa is an ideal candidate to investigate the complex relationship between imports, imitations and pottery influenced by this specific Cypriot ware.

The White Painted Pendent Line Style

White Painted Pendent Line Style (WP PLS) vessels were created in eastern Cyprus, probably in the area of Kalopsidha.⁷ This ware developed during Middle Cypriot III⁸ and disappeared after Late Cypriot IA.⁹ Its fabric is fine and homogeneous with a buff, yellowish or reddish colour; the surface is covered with a light slip cautiously burnished to a faint lustre. As indicated by its

name, the characteristic decorative motif of this ware is composed by groups of vertical straight lines alternating with wavy lines, either thin or thick, executed in red or black paint.¹⁰ The most common shapes are jugs and juglets with an everted rim, a cylindrical neck, a globular body and a strap handle attached at the rim and at the shoulder. However, more unusual vessels, such as bottles or zoomorphic askoi, were also created.

At Tell el-Dabʿa, WP PLS appears in Phase G/1–3, alongside WP CLS vessels,¹¹ also produced at Kalopsidha¹² (Graph 1). This ware is scarcely attested during the pre-Hyksos period. Its presence increases under the Hyksos rule, until reaching a climax in Phase D/3. The rarity of WP PLS in Phase D/2 coincides with its decline in Cyprus. The repertoire of shapes uncovered at Tell el-Dabʿa is limited to jugs and juglets, which should have been researched for their content. The care devoted to the decoration and to the finish of these vessels implies that they contained likely a valued product, such as scented oils or another kind of fluid dedicated to body care.¹³

Towards the Development of Local Imitations

A first corpus of local vessels related to Cypriot wares was gathered by L. Maguire under the general denomination of ‘imitations’ (Tab. 1).¹⁴ Thus, at this stage, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the terms that we are using. In this paper, a vessel is considered as an imitation when both shape and decoration are borrowed from a Cypriot model. This imitation process implies a voluntary action by the potter, who is likely familiar with the original product. This category needs to be distinguished from vessels ‘influenced’ by Cypriot imports, which will be detailed in the following section.

1 Austrian Academy of Sciences, Sarah.Vilain@oeaw.ac.at.

2 BIETAK 1996, fig. 1.

3 MAGUIRE 2009. Almost 400 vessels were recorded and studied by L. Maguire from Phase G onwards.

4 ASTON and BIETAK 2012, 302, Groupe N ‘Handmade Globular Group’, 531–546.

5 These juglets are handmade and the handles are inserted through the wall of the vessels. This technique, also known in Crete (BETANCOURT 1985, fig. 26.D), is characteristic of Cypriot wares. For more examples, see MAGUIRE 2009, fig. 26, DAB 1, DAB 7.

6 BIETAK 2018, 82, fig. 11.

7 ÅSTRÖM 1966, 82–83.

8 ÅSTRÖM 1972a, 198.

9 ÅSTRÖM 1972b, 700.

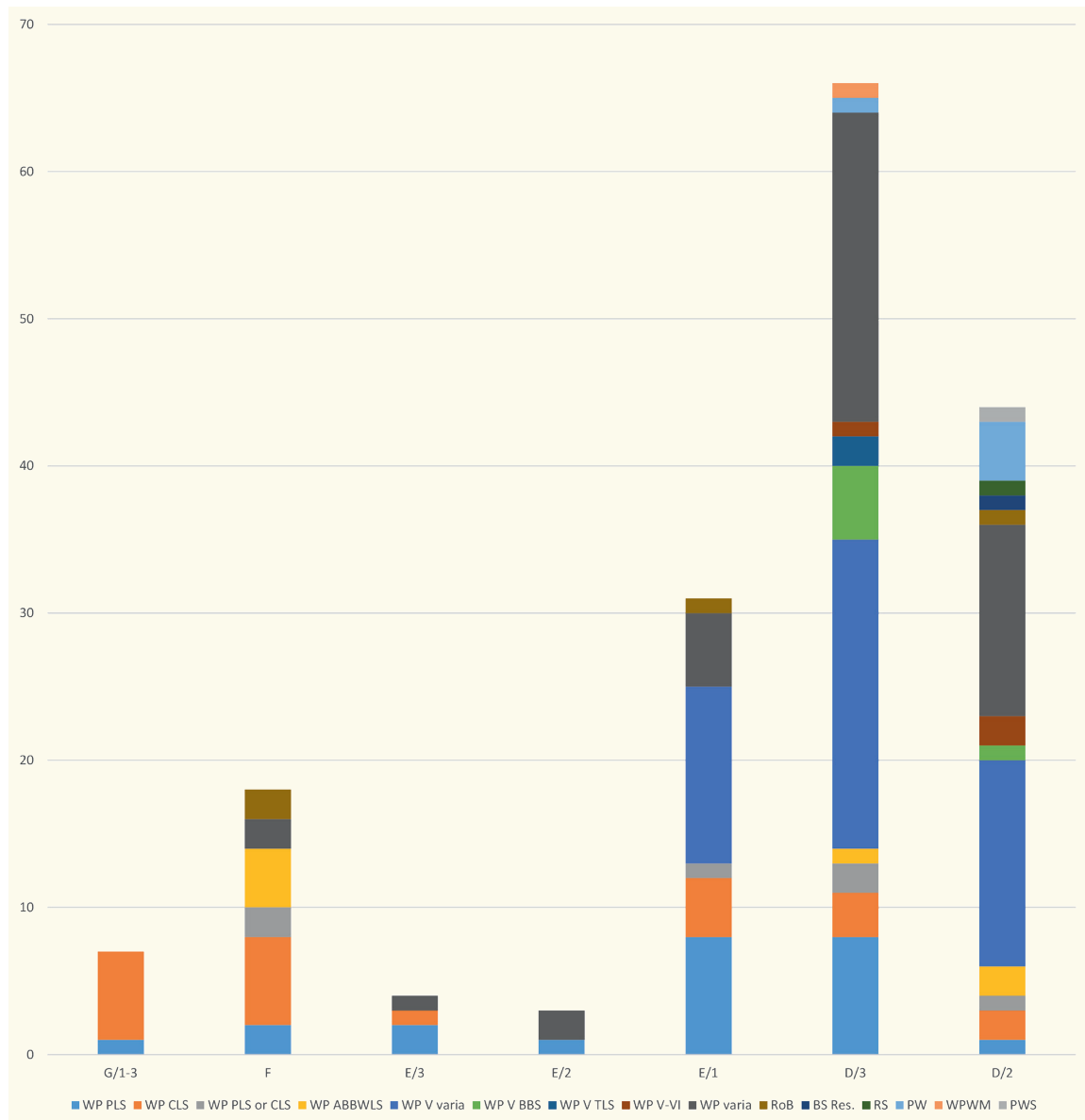
10 ÅSTRÖM 1972a, fig. IX. 3-9.

11 The earliest WP PLS identified at the site is a shoulder fragment of a jug from Area A/II (MAGUIRE 2009, DAB 10, fig. 26). In the same phase, other fragments of Cypriot ware were discovered in Area F/I (WP CLS in MAGUIRE 2009, 107, DAB 76, fig. 30, but published as WP PLS in KOPETZKY 2010, 296, no. 2407; WP CLS, MAGUIRE 2009, DAB 81) and Area A/IV (WP CLS, MAGUIRE 2009, 103, DAB 57, 59, 60, 61).

12 ÅSTRÖM 1966, 83–86.

13 MAGUIRE 2009, 55.

14 MAGUIRE 2009, 37–39. The author did not distinguish between imitations and other types of vessels related to WP PLS.



Graph. 1 The stratigraphic repartition of Cypriot wares at Tell el-Dab'a (Minimum number of vases, data from BIETAK 1991b, HEIN and JÁNOSI 2004, FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2008, MAGUIRE 2009, KOPETZKY 2010). Only Cypriot vessels from securely dated contexts were taken into consideration

Henceforth, nine more vessels identified as imitations (Pls. 1, 2, 3a–c) can be added to Maguire's study.¹⁵ They were lying on the preserved part of the floor of Locus 1421, among the remains of a heavily burnt complex, located below the northern part of the Hyksos palace (Stratum c/2–1) of Area F/II.¹⁶ This complex was intended for storage as evident by its dimensions, the organization of space and the materials that were discovered, such as lumps of quartz, obsidian, ochre and Egyptian blue.¹⁷ The

presence of numerous looters' pits suggests that these store-rooms once contained precious materials.

The shape of these vessels is characteristic of Cypriot WP PLS juglets: they display an everted rim, a cylindrical neck, a globular body and a strap handle from the mouth to the shoulder. The surface treatment as well as the painted decoration are carefully executed. The back of the handle and the bottom of the jugs are painted according to the Cypriot tradition (Pl. 3b). However, all of them are made from a fine Nile clay mixed with limestone particles (Nile I-d). A cautious examination shows that they were produced according to the usual

15 VILAIN 2018.

16 BIETAK and FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2009, 109, figs. 25–26.

17 MATH 2012/2013, 32.

Phase	N°	Context	Bibliography
E/3	2510a	A/II-n/15 Pl.3/4 K 386	Maguire 2009, DAB 824, fig. 50
E/2-E/1 (str. b/1)	3301A	F/I-j/21 Pl. 1, Pit. 1	Maguire 2009, DAB 832, fig. 50
E/2	7653B	A/II-k/14, Tombe 8	Forstner-Müller 2008, p. 225, n°12 ; Maguire 2009, DAB 833, fig. 11.6, fig. 50 (wrongly attributed to Grave 7)
E/1-D/3	3138	F/I-j/21 Tombe 8	Bietak 1996, pl. 26, 26B (misidentified as Cypriot import) ; Maguire 2009, DAB 828, fig. 50
E/1	6115	A/II-k/17 Tombe 30	Bagh 1988, fig. 45e ; Forstner-Müller 2008, 249, n°13; Maguire 2009, DAB 822, fig. 11.2, fig. 50
D/3	2307	A/II-m/15 Tombe 3	Bagh 1988, fig. 42a; Forstner-Müller 2008, p. 313-314, pl. 234; Maguire 2009, DAB 829, fig. 50
D/3	4113	A/II-1/17 Tombe 12	Maguire 2009, DAB 831, fig. 11.4, fig. 50
D/3	6460U	A/II-i/11 Pl. 5/6	Maguire 2009, DAB 820, fig. 50
D/2	6114S	A/II-i/11 Pl. 6-7	Bagh 1988, no fig. (42b); Maguire 2009, DAB 830
D/2	6460T	A/II-i/11 Pl. 5/6	Maguire 2009, DAB 819, fig. 50
D/2	6855E	A/V-n/17 Pl. 0/1	Maguire 2009, DAB 826, fig. 50
Surface	4918	F/I-k/23	Maguire 2009, DAB 825, fig. 50
Surface	6461V	A/V-p/18 Pl. 1-2	Maguire 2009, DAB 827, fig. 50
Surface	6856K	A/V-o/18 Pl. 1/2	Maguire 2009, DAB 818, fig. 50
Unknown	6114R	A/II-l/17	Bagh 1988, fig. 49a ; Maguire 2009, DAB 823

Tab. 1 Imitations and local vases influenced by the WP PLS according to MAGUIRE 2009, 225–2262

Egyptian technique (Pl. 3c).¹⁸ Some discrepancies in the painted decoration can also be noticed: the space between the vertical lines is wider and the presence of ticks on the rim is a detail unknown in genuine WP PLS.¹⁹

All the jugs from this locus bear a red-painted decoration. Their production could be the result of a specific request, as suggested by their discovery context. The aesthetic and technological homogeneity of the vessels suggests that they were made by the same potter, or at least by the same workshop. In Cyprus,

PLS jugs bear either a red or a black decoration. At Tell el-Dab'a, red painted imitations seem to have been favoured, maybe for aesthetic reasons. As suggested by the development of imitations, the content of the Cypriot jugs could certainly be replaced by one or more local equivalents.

In Egypt, other imitations of the PLS were identified at Tell el-Yahudiyeh²⁰ and Tarkhan.²¹ In the southern Levant, another example was discovered in Tomb 4107 at Megiddo (Stratum XII).²² Even if the general aspect of these vessels is quite accurate, some features such as the shape of

¹⁸ These juglets are wheel-made, contrary to Cypriot juglets, which are handmade, and the handles are not inserted through the walls of the vessels.

¹⁹ VILAIN 2018. For examples of genuine Cypriot PLS, see ÅSTRÖM 1972a, fig. IX.3–9.

²⁰ MAGUIRE 2009, 38.

²¹ Tomb 1895, second half of the Second Intermediate Period. MERRILLEES 1968, 145–146; 2002, figs. 3–4.

²² MAGUIRE 2009, RF 38.994 (MEG 754), pl. 15.3.



Pl. 1 Local imitations of Cypriot WP PLS juglets from L1421, Area F/II, a. 9556 ; b. 9557 ; c. 9559 ; d. 9560



Pl. 2 Local imitations of Cypriot WP PLS juglets from L1421, Area F/II; e. 9561 ; f. 9562 ; g. 9582 ; h. 9583

the rim, the colour of the surface or the clumsiness of the painted decoration allow to identify them instantly as imitations. Contrarily, the high quality of the juglets from L1421 and the adroitness perceptible in their creation make them look like faithful copies.

Vessels Influenced by the PLS

In this study, we consider a vessel as influenced by Cypriot wares when only punctual elements of shape or decoration are borrowed from the prototype. This process could be either consciously or unconsciously followed. Indeed, some decorative patterns became so common that the potters were likely not always aware of their origin.

This category includes a specific group of five juglets,²³ each displaying a folded rim, a concave neck, a piriform or biconical body and a button base (Pl. 3d). Their shape is obviously borrowed from the Tell el-Yahudiyeh (TEY) juglets of the Piriform and Biconical groups, locally made at Tell el-Dab'a from Phases E/2 to D/2.²⁴ In contrast, the decorative motif, composed of vertical straight and wavy lines, was influenced by the Cypriot PLS. The earliest examples, attested in Phase E/2, are made of a Levantine clay (7653B and 3301A). The others, from Phase D/3, are made of Nile clay I-d, as were the imitations that were previously discussed.²⁵

Thus, the potters who created these vessels used a well-known TEY shape and chose to combine it with the PLS decoration, suggesting that this Cypriot ware, and its content, were particularly valued. It is likely that the selection of some elements of shape and decoration was sufficient to associate them with the originals in the acquirer's mind. These products are associated with TEY juglets in funerary contexts;²⁶ but it is noteworthy that, until now, no imitation or vessel influenced by WP PLS was discovered alongside genuine Cypriot imports.

Juglet 6115 (Pl. 3e) is another example of interactions between different traditions. It was uncovered in a female's grave in Area A/II, in Phase E/1.²⁷ The juglet has a globular body and the rim displays the same ticks as the ones that were previously noticed on imitations. However, its decoration is unique: a horizontal wavy line is painted on the upper part of the body, and below it, a straight horizontal line. The

rest of the motif is similar to the one of the PLS. The use of a horizontal wavy line is a detail that is mostly inspired from another product: the Painted TEY. Indeed, two of these vessels were discovered in the same burial as juglet 6115.²⁸

Painted TEY ware was first created in the Levant and imported to Tell el-Dab'a.²⁹ This style begins to be imitated in Phase F and, from Phase E/1, most of the Painted TEY is locally made. In Egypt, it is also attested at Tell el-Yahudiyeh, Tarkhan, Sedment, Rifeh and Buhen.³⁰

Painted TEY and WP PLS vessels share some similarities, as the white background and the use of alternating straight and wavy lines. However, the decorative pattern of the Painted TEY is horizontal, a layout likely inherited from the Levantine Painted Ware. The climax of the Painted TEY in Phase E/1 of Tell el-Dab'a is concomitant with the increase of PLS vessels on site.³¹ It seems that both products benefited from each other's growing popularity.

Particularly significant are the discoveries from Tomb 2, in Area A/II (A/II-p/20). This grave yielded eight painted TEY juglets in Nile I-d clay, including one with a globular body (Pl. 3f).³² Even if globular shapes are also known from the Levantine tradition, the popularity of PLS juglets probably favoured the use of this shape in Painted TEY. The emulation between Egyptian, Levantine and Cypriot traditions leads to new experimentations that make the pottery repertoire of Tell el-Dab'a a *unicum*.

Tell el-Dab'a and Cyprus during the Second Intermediate Period

In the current state of the research, the earliest example of imitation was identified in Phase E/3.³³ Vessels influenced by PLS seem to develop later, from Phase E/2,³⁴ suggesting a progressive appropriation process of the motif. Hence, both imitations and vessels influenced by WP PLS are elaborated during the Pre-Hyksos period, when genuine imports are barely attested on site.

Graph 1 displays the general development of Cypriot wares at Tell el-Dab'a until the end of the Second Intermediate Period.³⁵ The first appearance of WP PLS and CLS in Phase G/1–3 is followed by both an increase and a diversification of imports in

23 Ibidem, DAB 825, DAB 829, DAB 832, DAB 833, DAB 835.

24 ASTON and BIETAK 2012, fig. 253.

25 For examples of Painted TEY juglets, see BAGH 2013, figs. 27–28.

26 For example, in A/II-k/14, Tomb 8, Phase E/2 (FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2008, pl. 146) and A/II-m/15, Tomb 3, Burial 1, Phase D/3 (FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2008, pl. 234).

27 MAGUIRE 2009, fig. 50; FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2008, 249, no.13.

28 FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2008, fig. 184, nos. 2–3.

29 BAGH 2013, 59.

30 Ibidem, fig. 14.

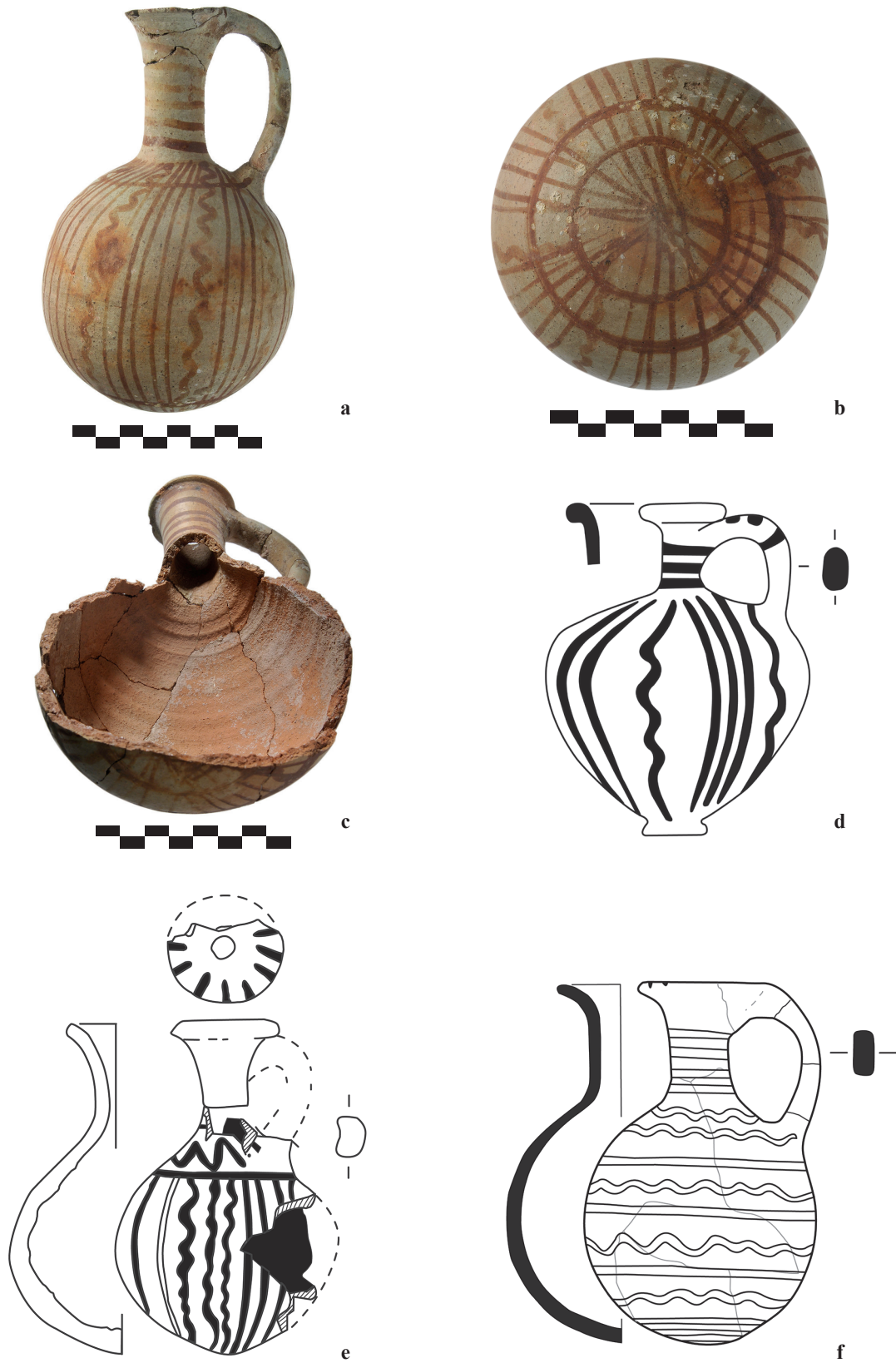
31 BAGH 2013, 59.

32 Ibidem, fig. 28.

33 MAGUIRE 2009, DAB 824.

34 MAGUIRE 2009, DAB 833, A/II-k/14, Tomb 7.

35 Only Cypriot vessels from securely dated contexts were taken into consideration for this study. The data were gathered from BIETAK 1991b; HEIN and JÁNOSI 2004; FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2008; MAGUIRE 2009 and KOPETZKY 2010.



Pl. 3 a. 9558, profile. H. 15,3 cm ; b. 9558, detail of the bottom; c. 9557. H. : 15,9 cm (photographs : Tell el-Dab'a mission) ; d. 2307. H. : 10,4 cm (from Maguire 2009, fig. 50) ; e. 6115. H. : 9,3 cm (from MAGUIRE 2009, fig. 50); f. 9667. H. : 11 cm (from BAGH 2013, fig. 28i)

Phase F. By contrast, only a few Cypriot vessels were recorded from Phases E/3 and E/2. It is noteworthy that a concomitant decline of Levantine imports was observed by K. Kopetzky from Phase E/3.³⁶

Excavations have shown that Phases E/3 and E/2 coincide with a period of deep transformations at Tell el-Dab'a. Changes are visible in the settlement as well as in the material culture. Thus, in Area F/I, the villas are enlarged and the living quarters are moved by some distance, along the enclosure wall. This modification could indicate a more assertive hierarchy and a new social evolution process.³⁷ One can also notice the disappearance of specific pottery types in the local repertoire.³⁸ According to Ryholt, the end of the 13th and the 14th Dynasties are marked by ephemeral kings with short-term rules,³⁹ suggesting a general climate of instability. Therefore, the political issues of the period, with the destabilization of a unified Egyptian administration, may have led to disturbances in trading connections.

In this context, the discoveries from L1421 in Area F/II are particularly significant. The concentration of imitations in the storerooms of a palatial complex, where one could have expected genuine imports, may suggest interruptions in trade or problems in supply. The large burnt layer implies a particularly violent destruction, maybe due to internal troubles. It is likely that the scarcity of Cypriot imports in Phases E/3 and E/2 stimulated the development of imitations as well as experimentations combining TEY shapes and PLS decoration, in order to meet the demand.

From Phase E/1, the number of Cypriot products increases again, before reaching a peak in Phase D/3, as opposed to Levantine imports, which continuously decline in number and are gradually replaced by locally made Middle Bronze shapes.⁴⁰ The two different patterns could indicate a shift in trade that benefited Cyprus. Thus, the TEY vessels, which are best attested on the island, belong to the Late Egyptian group, made of Nile clay I-d and particularly well represented between Phases E/1 and D/2.⁴¹ These TEY juglets were discovered in eastern and south-eastern Cyprus, the region of origin of most of the Cypriot wares encountered at Tell el-Dab'a.⁴²

Outside the Delta, the upper part of a WP PLS was discovered at Kahun.⁴³ The occasional presence of WP VI vessels was also recorded at Saqqara, Dishasha

and Abydos,⁴⁴ but Cypriot vessels are poorly attested before the 18th dynasty. This concentration of Cypriot imports at Tell el-Dab'a supports the idea that only little communication existed between the Delta and the rest of Egypt. The political situation may have encouraged the Hyksos rulers to develop new connections oriented towards the Mediterranean. Henceforth, this shift in trade benefitted Cypriot wares, which progressively gained in popularity and constituted a growing part of the pottery assemblage of the site until the end of the Second Intermediate Period.

Conclusion

The archaeological site of Tell el-Dab'a distinguishes itself through its unparalleled corpus of imitations and local vessels influenced by Cypriot wares and, more particularly, by WP PLS. Our initial question – Is imitation the sincerest form of flattery? – could be affirmatively answered at Tell el-Dab'a, as it might reflect an appreciation for this specific ware that was sought after during the Second Intermediate Period. However, questions remain about the perception that Egyptians had of these products. We can ask ourselves if they were observant of differences between genuine Cypriot jugs and juglets, their imitations and local vessels influenced by them. Furthermore, it seems likely that the decorative motif characteristic of the PLS was progressively associated with the vessel's content in the acquirer's mind. In this case, the alternating straight and wavy lines could have been perceived as a signal for a particular kind of product, whether imported or not. It is probable that the potters did not need to create exact copies to sell them, as suggested by the creation of juglets combining a TEY shape with a PLS painted decoration. Local and imported ceramics could have been associated in the acquirer's mind, who, perhaps, did not distinguish between the origins of these different vessels, or at least not in the way that archaeologists currently do.



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36 KOPETZKY 2010, fig. 52.

37 BIETAK 1991a, 40.

38 ASTON 2004, 341.

39 RYHOLT 1997, 300.

40 KOPETZKY 2010, fig. 52.

41 KOPETZKY 2010, 439–515.

42 ASTON and BIETAK 2012, figs. 142–199.

43 MERRILLEES 2002, figs. 142–199; MERRILLEES 1968, 146; MAGUIRE 2009, 173, KAH 391.

44 MERRILLEES 1968, 146. Egyptian juglets painted in this style were also identified by the author at Tell el-Yahudiyeh, Abusir al-Malaq, Gurob, Sidman, Esna and Aniba. Other possible imitations could come from Sedment and Tarkhan (MAGUIRE 2009, 173, SED 393, TAR 394–395).

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