

## New evidence for a Roman fort and vicus at Mizda (Tripolitania)

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### Abstract

The existence of a Roman military fort at the town of Mizda, about 150 km south of Tripoli, has long been assumed, in spite of scarce archaeological indications. A field survey, conducted recently in the area around the old town of Mizda, yielded an assemblage of pottery dating to the mid and late Roman periods. The pottery provides the first unequivocal evidence for a Roman settlement around (and beneath) the old town, most probably in the form of a fort and *vicus*.

According to the *Itinerarium Antonini* (73–77), the term *limes Tripolitanus* refers to the route from *Tacape*/Gabes in the west to *Lepcis Magna*/al-Khums in the east, running on the ridge of the Gebel Nefusa

and Gebel Garian mountains via *Tentbeos*/Edref near Zintan and *Thenadassa*/Ain Wif (Fig. 1). However, several milestones, dating to AD 216 in particular, indicate that the frontier east of Edref was marked by the upper Wadi Sofeggin road since the Caracallan period, and probably as early as the reign of Septimius Severus. This road is recorded as *limes Tentbeitanus* in an inscription from Gasr Duib (IRT 880) from AD 246/247 and connected *Tentbeos* with the oasis of Mizda, about 120 km to the south-east, whose ancient name is unknown (Goodchild 1948, 14–24; Mackensen 2009, 80–82; Mattingly 1995, 67). At that point it joined the central Tripolitanian north–south route from *Oea*/Tripoli via Garian and the fort of Gheriat el-Garbia (built in AD 198/201) down to Fazzan. Furthermore, a route coming from the middle and lower Wadi Sofeggin in the east terminated at the site. The boundaries of the *Macae* and *Phazanii* tribal territories have also been assumed in

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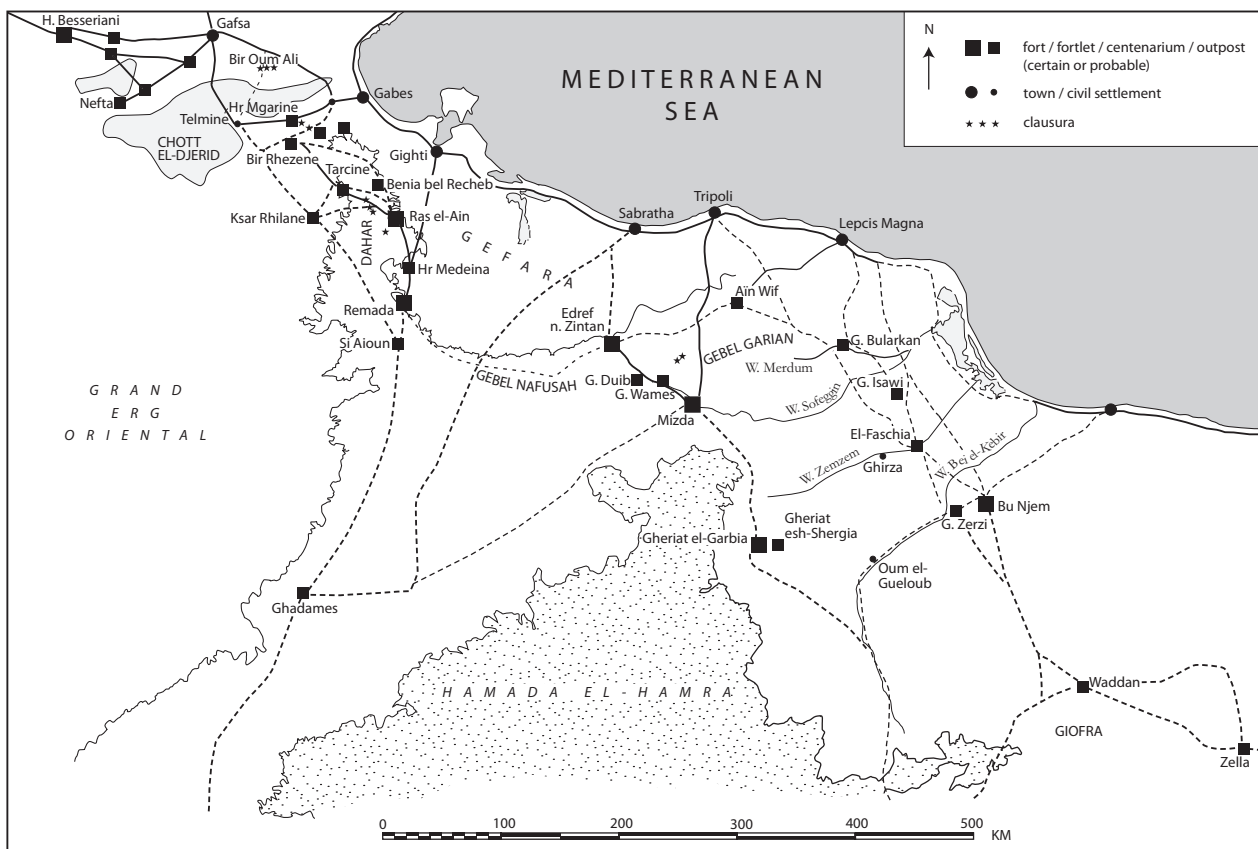


Figure 1. Roman Tripolitania with forts, fortlets, centenaria and outposts of the second to fourth centuries AD (after Mackensen 2012, fig. 1).

the area of Mizda (Mattingly 1995, 80). In contrast to the upper Sofeggin road and the ‘central route’ north of Mizda no milestones are known along the route from Mizda to Gheriat el-Garbia and it remains uncertain if this latter route, probably an ‘unmarked *piste*’, could have been used by wheeled traffic (Mackensen 2010a, 377; Mattingly 1995, 67).

No Roman fort has been located at Edref to date. The same applies to Mizda, though the particular geographic and infrastructural situation of this site as junction of four important road connections has prompted scholars to postulate a military garrison there in the middle or second half of the second century AD or even earlier (Goodchild and Ward-Perkins 1949, 92; Mackensen 2009, 80; 2010a, 377; Mattingly 1995, 78; 97; 1996, 324; Reynolds and Ward-Perkins 1952, 215). D. Mattingly regarded the western village in the oasis, first described by H. Barth in the mid-nineteenth century and corresponding to the old town, as the most probable locality for the fort (Barth 1857, 109–110; Mattingly 1995, 97). However, neither structural remains nor epigraphic evidence of a Roman military installation have been identified, even though a fragmentary civilian funerary epitaph and a building inscription from Mizda or the upper Sofeggin area were re-used in the walls of the Italian fort (IRT 883–884). References to Roman remains are also missing in Barth’s descriptions (Barth 1857, 107–111) and in those of the early twentieth century (Petragnani 1928, 93–94).

On the other hand, there are some indications for a Roman settlement at Mizda. In 1966 A. Di Vita

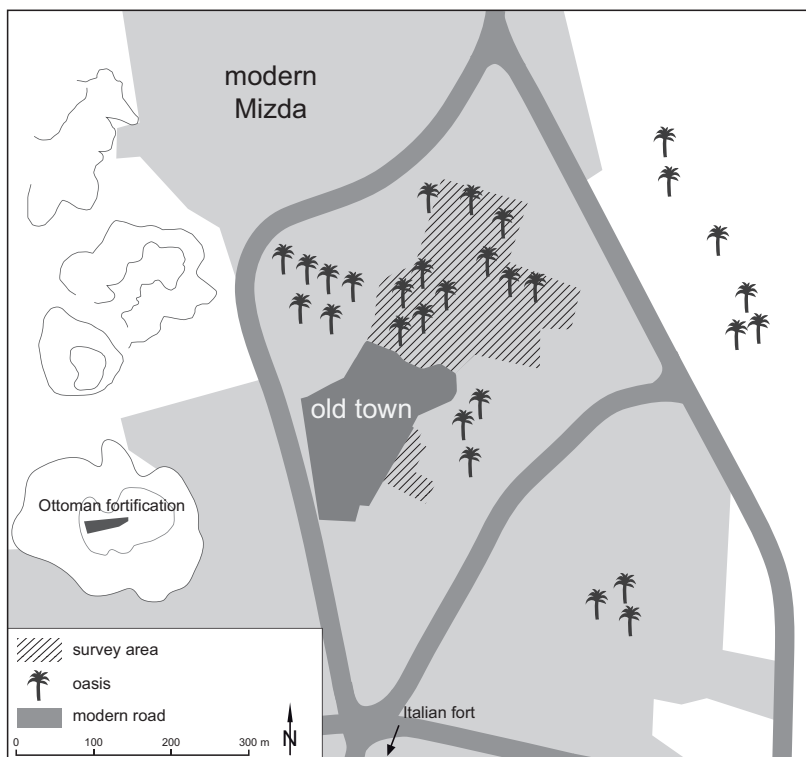
mentioned traces of ‘*tombe terragne*’ (graves covered with a slab) discovered in 1963–1964 at the northern entrance of the village, and dated them to the Roman period based on ceramic evidence from the site (Di Vita 1966, 111). A relief block, found in 1949 near the Italian fort and possibly from Mizda or its surroundings, was published by S. Fontana a few years ago (Fontana 1997). According to Fontana, the block, whose relief shows a group of persons including an armed equestrian as well as a dromedary moving towards a tower-like building (*gasr?*), may have served as the architrave of an entrance. It probably dates to the first half of the third century. In addition, some Roman (?) architectural remains can be identified in several houses of the old town of Mizda.

In the autumn of 2009 and spring of 2010 a Roman field survey was conducted by the author and members of the German-Libyan field project at Gheriat el-Garbia in the surroundings of the old town, including parts of the oasis and covering an area of more than 4 ha (Fig. 2). The finds comprise exclusively pottery, specifically North African red slip and cookware.

The red slip wares include four examples of the so-called A/D fabric and can be assigned to forms that are primarily in use during the first half of the third century (Fig. 3.2–4; Hayes 1972, 49–56, 289). A production centre of this fabric has been identified at Henchir el-Guellal near Djilma in central Tunisia, but a northern Tunisian and, most notably, a Tripolitanian provenance have also been suggested (Mackensen and Schneider 2006, 173–174; 177–175; Schmid and Weber 2010, 405).

The rim of a Hayes 3C dish (Fig. 3.1), a form more commonly known in fabric A and dated to the early to mid-second century (Hayes 1972, 25; Kenrick 1985, 343) or to the end of the second and third century (*EAA Atlante I*, 24), shows an identical fabric as the other A/D-vessels, which might indicate a similar origin of production. A bowl with a band of feather rouletting beneath the outer rim (Fig. 3.2) may be compared to forms Hayes 44 or Berenice B 624 (Kenrick 1985, 352–353). Further dishes are represented by two rims of Hayes 31 (Fig. 3.3) and 32/33 (Fig. 3.4), whereas the classification of a dish-base (Fig. 3.5) remains uncertain.

Figure 2. Plan of Mizda with old town and survey area.



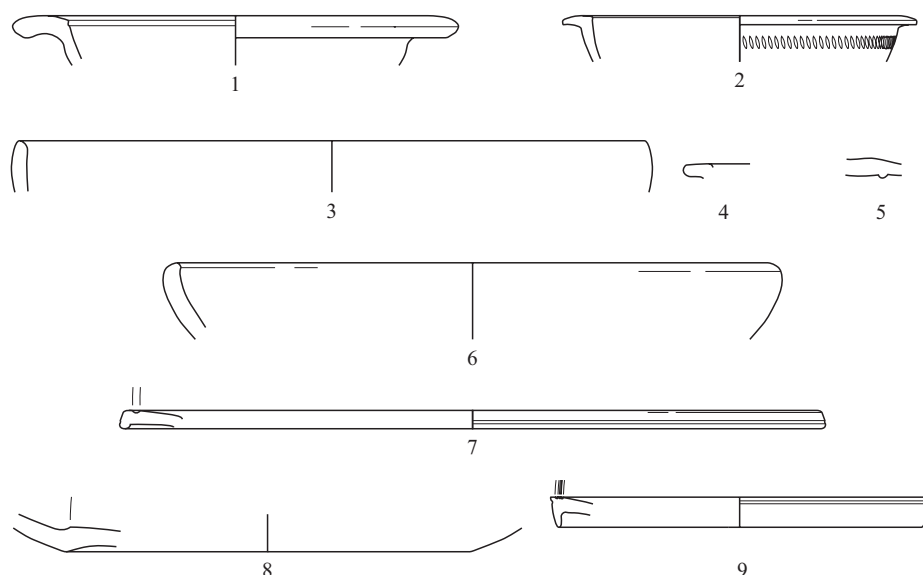


Figure 3. Mid Roman Sigillata A/D (1–5) and late Roman Tripolitanian red slip ware (6–9). Scale 1:3.

The remaining red slip examples can be assigned to late Roman Tripolitanian Red Slip Ware/TRS (Fig. 3.6–9). Although there is no doubt about the Tripolitanian origin of this fine ware, only one production site has been located in the hinterland of Leptis Magna (Felici and Pentiricci 2002; Munzi *et al.* 2004–2005, 458–460). The forms attested at Mizda include Hayes 3 and 4A/C dishes (Fig. 3.6–8) as well as probably a Hayes 7 bowl (Fig. 3.9). They can be dated to the fourth and fifth centuries (Hayes 1972, 304–309; Kenrick 1985, 390–393; Mackensen 2010a, 408).

The cookwares include both slipped and unslipped vessels. The first group is represented by dishes with curved walls, Hayes form 181 (Fig. 4.10–11) as well as several lids, Hayes forms 182 (Fig. 4.12–15) and 185? (Fig. 4.16) which show a burnished slip on one face only, a characteristic feature of M. Bonifay's *céramique culinaire B* (Bonifay 2004, 67, 213–217). Production centres are known in Byzacena, but the abundant occurrence of these vessels at sites like Gheriat el-Garbia may indicate additional workshops in Tripolitania. The dishes (Hayes 181) and lids (Hayes 182) from Mizda show parallels to Bonifay's Variants B and C, dating primarily to the late second and third centuries (Bonifay 2004, 214–217). However, it remains to be proven if the supposed Tripolitanian vessel forms show a similar development as their Byzacenian equivalents.

The unslipped cookwares comprise casseroles Hayes 183 or Sabratha 58 (Fig. 4.17) and Sabratha 59/61 (Fig. 4.18) respectively, as well as a form similar to Sabratha 64 (Fig. 4.19). The first two examples show a typical Tripolitanian fabric comparable to certain amphorae with numerous quartz grits, causing a 'pimply' surface, and may be dated to the third century (Bonifay 2004, 229). Production of both

amphorae and casseroles is attested at Sidi as-Sid in the Gebel area south-west of Tarhuna (Arthur 1982). A regional provenance may also be suggested for the third casserole (Fig. 4.19), a large lid, Sabratha 104 (Fig. 4.20) and two smaller lids of uncertain typology (Fig. 4.21–22).

The pottery assemblage from the area around the old town provides the first unequivocal evidence for a Roman settlement in this part of Mizda. It supports Mattingly's assumption that the postulated fort may be located there, most probably underneath the old town which covers an area of roughly 2.5 ha (Fig. 2). If we also consider the important strategic position of Mizda, I would consequently suggest a fort of c. 1.2 – 2.0 ha for a unit of quingenary size which seems more probable than a small fortlet of only up to 0.5 ha. If the old town was built over the fort, the survey area itself certainly belongs to the adjacent *vicus*, which may have extended for at least 250 m to the north-east.

The red slip ware and some of the cookwares attest an occupation from the (later?) second century onwards. The lack of earlier forms should not be over-emphasised in view of the small number of vessels; a pre-Severan origin of the site is very likely. It seems plausible that the fort was constructed during the reign of Commodus, when the military base of *Bezereos* or *Vezerei*/Bir Rhezene and the fortlet of *Tisavar*/Ksar Rhilane were established on the western part of the *limes Tripolitanus* (Mackensen 2005, 70; 2010b; Mattingly 1995, 81, 98, 100–101). However, the possible fortlet of Medina Ragda north-west of Mizda and a few probable outposts along the route to Fazzan with ceramic evidence dating to the (late) first and second centuries may indicate an even earlier origin of Mizda (cf. Mattingly 1995, 78). On the other

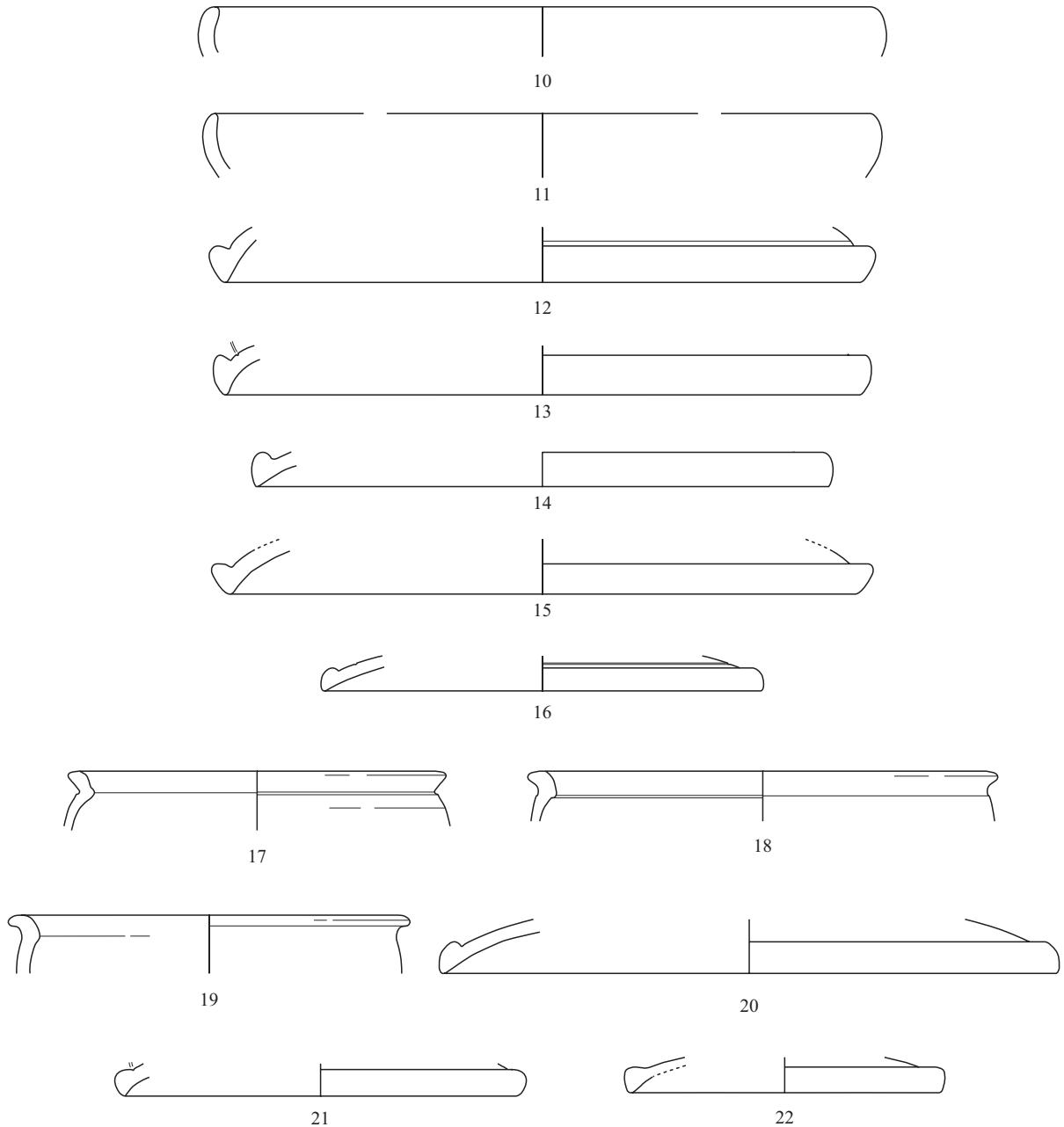


Figure 4. Cookware with burnished slip on one face only (10–16) and unslipped (17–22). Scale 1:3.

hand, the range of TRS-forms shows a (continuous?) occupation from the third to the fourth and even into the fifth century.

The question remains which military unit(s) were garrisoned at the postulated fort of Mizda. Mattingly considered that the *cobors I Syrorum Sagittariorum* may have been stationed at *Tentheos* in the reign of Septimius Severus or possibly slightly earlier. This is based on an early third century inscription from *Auru/Ain el-Auenia*, which possibly housed a detachment of this unit. Nevertheless, he pointed out that, despite the proximity of *Auru* to *Tentheos*, this *cobors* may alternatively be located at Mizda (Mattingly 1985, 70–74; 1995, 86–88). A fragmentary

inscription from Gheriat el-Garbia, dated to AD 239 (AE 1973, 573; IRT 896; cf. Lorient 1971), probably refers to the same unit (Le Bohec 1981, 131–132 no. 11; 1989, 89; Mattingly 1985, 70–71) and demonstrates its presence there in the 230s. It has therefore been suggested that the *cobors I Syrorum Sagittariorum (Gordiana)*, which probably gained *milliaria* strength in the third century (Le Bohec 1989, 89; Mattingly 1991, 80), was divided between Gheriat el-Garbia and *Tentheos/Edref* after the disbandment of the *legio III Augusta* in AD 238 (Mattingly 1995, 87). The function of Mizda as a military base remains speculative in this period. Maybe the garrison was changed or reduced in size when the frontier was moved c. 150 km

to the south under Septimius Severus, which led to the establishment of the oasis-forts at Ghadames, Gheriat el-Garbia and Bu Njem. On the other hand, it is hard to believe that no military unit was stationed at Mizda during the first three-quarters of the third century. The *centenarium* of Gasr Wames in the upper Wadi Sofeggin, which may be contemporary with Gasr Duib (AD 246/247; Mackensen 2009, 97), was probably an outpost of Mizda (Mattingly 1995, 106). A secondary enclosure wall around the Gasr Wames fortlet has recently been interpreted as a later reinforcement of Aurelian date (Mackensen 2009, 97–98). According to Mattingly, a milestone found south of Garian (*IRT* 943) and dating to AD 275 demonstrates that Mizda or Gheriat el-Garbia still housed a garrison in this period (Mattingly 1995, 95). The latter has been confirmed by new coin finds from Gheriat el-Garbia, suggesting a garrison there until AD 275/280 (Mackensen 2011, 358).

With regard to the late Roman period, none of the *limes* sectors of the *provincia Tripolitana* listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum* (Occ. 31) could be related to Mizda with certainty, but there is little doubt about a military presence at the site (Mattingly 1995, 189). Mizda clearly remained a strategic key site during the fourth and fifth centuries, especially concerning the pre-desert route to the south. Recent research at Gheriat el-Garbia has yielded evidence of an unexpected mid-fourth to sixth century

occupation which sheds new light on this part of the *limes Tripolitanus* and its development in this period (see Mackensen in this volume). In this context, Mackensen suggested the deployment of *limitanei* at Gheriat from c. AD 360/380 at the earliest, possibly as a consequence of the incursions of the *Austuriani* into Tripolitania in AD 363 and later (Mackensen 2011, 364). A new (building?) inscription from Gheriat el-Garbia is of particular interest as it can be related to repairs or construction works due to severe flooding, most probably along the route to Mizda (and beyond) in the later fourth or fifth century (Haensch and Mackensen 2011). It is also noteworthy that fragments of late Roman jars, form Berenice 711, found at Gasr Wames point to a (re-)occupation of this *centenarium* during the same period (Mackensen 2009, 99–100). The same may apply to Gasr Duib where repairs of late Roman date have been assumed (Mackensen 2009, 86–87).

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## Appendix – Catalogue of pottery forms

### Mid Roman Sigillata (fabric A/D)

1. Rim of a bowl, Hayes 3C. Diameter 18 cm. Clay 2.5YR 6/8, slip 10R 6/8.
2. Rim of a bowl, similar to Hayes 44/ Berenice B624 with feather rouletting. Diameter 14 cm. Clay 2.5YR 6/8, slip 2.5YR 5/8.
3. Rim of a dish, Hayes 31. Diameter c. 25 cm. Clay and slip 2.5YR 6/8.
4. Rim of a dish, Hayes 32/33. Diameter ? Clay and slip 2.5YR 6/8.
5. Base of a dish. Diameter ? Clay 2.5YR 6/8, slip 2.5YR 5/8.

### Late Roman Tripolitanian Sigillata (Tripolitanian Red Slip Ware)

6. Rim of a dish, Hayes 3. Diameter 24 cm. Clay 2.5YR 6/8, slip 2.5YR 6/6.
7. Rim of a bowl, Hayes 4A/C. Diameter 28 cm. Clay 2.5YR 5/8, slip 2.5YR 4/8.
8. Base of a dish, Hayes 3 or 4. Diameter c. 16 cm. Clay and slip 2.5YR 5/8.

9. Rim of a bowl, probably Hayes 7. Diameter 15 cm. Clay and slip 2.5YR 4/8, unslipped beneath the rim.

### Cookware

Slipped on one face (central Tunisia or Tripolitania?)

10. Rim of a dish, Hayes 181, Bonifay Variant B/C. Diameter c. 30 cm. Clay 2.5YR 4/6, white and few dark inclusions, quartz grains, slip 2.5YR 4/8.
11. Rim of a dish, Hayes 181, Bonifay Variant B/C. Diameter ? Clay 2.5YR 5/6, slip 2.5YR 4/8. Fabric similar to 10, but less white inclusions.
12. Rim of a lid, Hayes 182, Bonifay Variant B. Diameter 32 cm. Clay and slip 2.5YR 4/6, whitish-grey on the outer rim. Fabric similar to 11.
13. Rim of a lid, Hayes 182, Bonifay Variant B. Diameter 32 cm. Fine clay 2.5YR 4/6, slip 2.5YR 4/8.
14. Rim of a lid, Hayes 182, Bonifay Variant B/C. Diameter 26 cm. Clay 2.5YR 5/8, limestone and several tiny quartz grains, slip 10R 5/8, whitish-grey on the outer rim.
15. Rim of a lid, Hayes 182, Bonifay Variant C. Diameter c. 30 cm. Clay 2.5YR 4/6, limestone, quartz and dark inclusions, slip 2.5YR 4/8.

16. Rim of a lid, similar to Hayes 185. Diameter c. 20 cm. Fine clay 2.5YR 4/6, quartz and red inclusions, slip 2.5YR 5/8.

*Unslipped (local/regional?)*

17. Rim of a small casserole, Hayes 183/Sabratha 58. Diameter c. 12 cm. Clay 5YR 7/8 (core: 7.5YR 6/3), quartz grains and occasional dark inclusions, ‘pimply’ surface 5YR 6/2.

18. Rim of a casserole, Hayes 183/Sabratha 59/61. Diameter c. 20 cm. Fairly fine clay 5YR 5/1 (core: 5YR 5/3), quartz, limestone and tiny red inclusions, ‘pimply’ surface 5YR 6/4.

19. Rim of a small casserole, similar to Sabratha 64. Diameter c. 18 cm. Fine clay 2.5YR 4/6, some limestone and quartz, dark inclusions, smooth surface 2.5YR 5/6.

20. Rim of a lid, Sabratha 104. Diameter c. 28 cm. Porous clay 2.5YR 6/8 with grey core, quartz and dark inclusions, surface 2.5YR 7/6, greyish on the outer rim.

21. Rim of a lid. Diameter c. 18 cm. Fine clay 2.5YR 6/6, dark inclusions and quartz, surface greyish on the outer rim.

22. Rim of a lid. Diameter c. 20 cm. Fine clay 2.5YR 6/6, sporadic limestone grains and dark inclusions, surface greyish on the outer rim.

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