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IWONA ZYCH

*A wooden pyxis lid from far away?*

Making a connection between a pyxis lid found in a Medieval monastery in Egypt and the Black Sea littoral is based on the flimsiest of observations and may well be totally ungrounded. Even so, it merits a note in the hope that it will prompt more attention to this category of objects coming from dated excavation contexts.

The object was discovered in the fill of one of the rooms (D.22) of a monastic building erected at the site of a monastery in Naqlun in Fayum Oasis in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested that the ground floor rooms of this complex had been used as workshop facilities, meeting the needs of a *scriptorium* located on the upper floor. In view of the mixed character of the fill, it is difficult to say whether the lid had fallen from above or had been part of the assemblage of the room below. In any case, it forms part of a group that also included a saucer-like bowl-turned-lamp, three carved pieces of furniture decoration and a number of keys and locking devices. The excavators believe that the complex, which was erected sometime in the 10th century, remained in existence until the end of the 13th century, after which it was abandoned and gradually fell into ruin.<sup>2</sup>

The lid was made of fairly hard wood, the exact species of which remains to be examined. It is conical in shape with an outer diameter at the base of 5.0 cm. The overall height is 4.6 cm, but only 2.4 cm when measured inside to the underside of the top. The walls are rather thick with an instep cut into the rim on the inside to hold the lid in place. Two shallow concentric grooves run around the outside of the lid, nearer to the top. Otherwise plain, the lid was painted all over with a dark red-brown over a white primer coat. The very tip of the lid above the grooving was made a dark green (?), while the collar rim was a brownish green color with golden-yellow reflexes. Splashes of paint reached inside the rim, but otherwise the inner surface retained the natural color of the wood.

The lid was obviously turned on a lathe. Traces of rotation are observable and spindle attachment holes are still in evidence: on the top and on the underside. The woodcarver even left a protruding knob on the underside, with the spindle attachment hole visible in its center (Fig. 1a, b). Indeed, it is this technological feature that makes the connection, however precarious, between the pyxis lid from Naqlun and the Black Sea littoral.

In a recent study, Paola Pugsley noted that this particular technique of producing turned pyxis lids with a knob left on the underside seems to be limited to woodworkers from the Black Sea region.<sup>3</sup> She based her opinion on a pyxis coming from a tomb in Kertch and

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<sup>1</sup> The monastery and nearby hermitages have been investigated since 1986 by Włodzimierz Godlewski and his team from the Polish Center of Archaeology of Warsaw University. I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Godlewski for permission to study and publish the worked wood from the site. I would also like to take this opportunity to say how indebted I am to Professor Zofia Sztetyło, who patiently supervised my MA diploma work and has remained a source of inspiration and encouragement ever since. Mr Artur Błaszczuk kindly prepared the plates for publication.

<sup>2</sup> W. GODLEWSKI, Excavating the Ancient Monastery at Naqlun, in: Christianity and Monasticism in the Fayoum Oasis, Acts of the Conference in Fayoum, February 2004, ed. Gawdat Gabra (in press).

<sup>3</sup> P. Pugsley, personal commentary, cf. also EAD., Roman Domestic Wood, BAR S1253, London 2003, p. 90, Fig. 4.43 (*non vidi*).

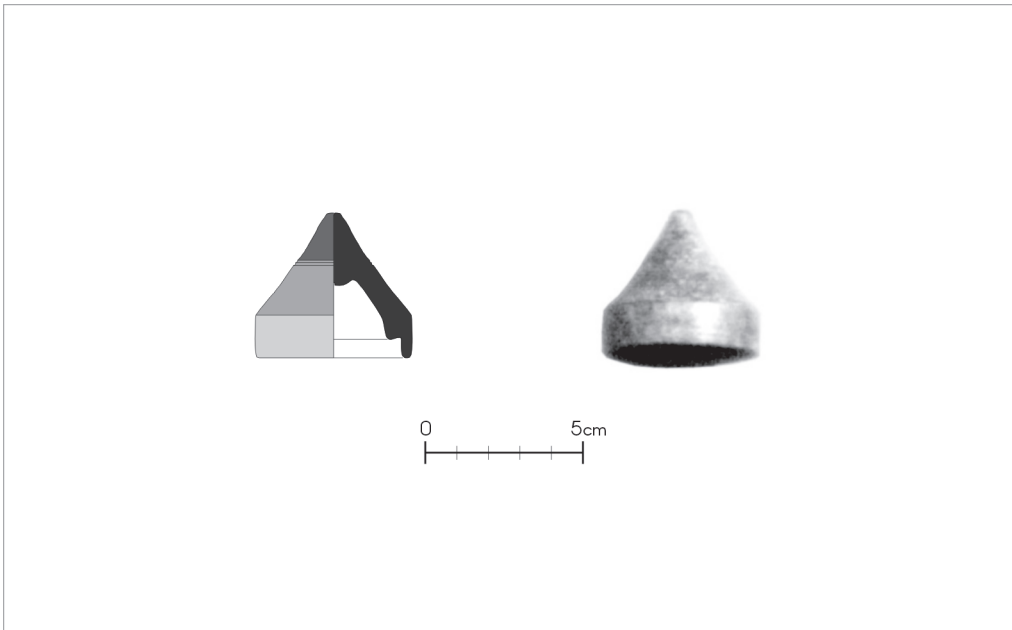


Fig. 1a, b: Pyxis lid from Naqlun (Nd.93.134). Phot. W. Godlewski, Drawing I. Zych, Polish Center of Archaeology.

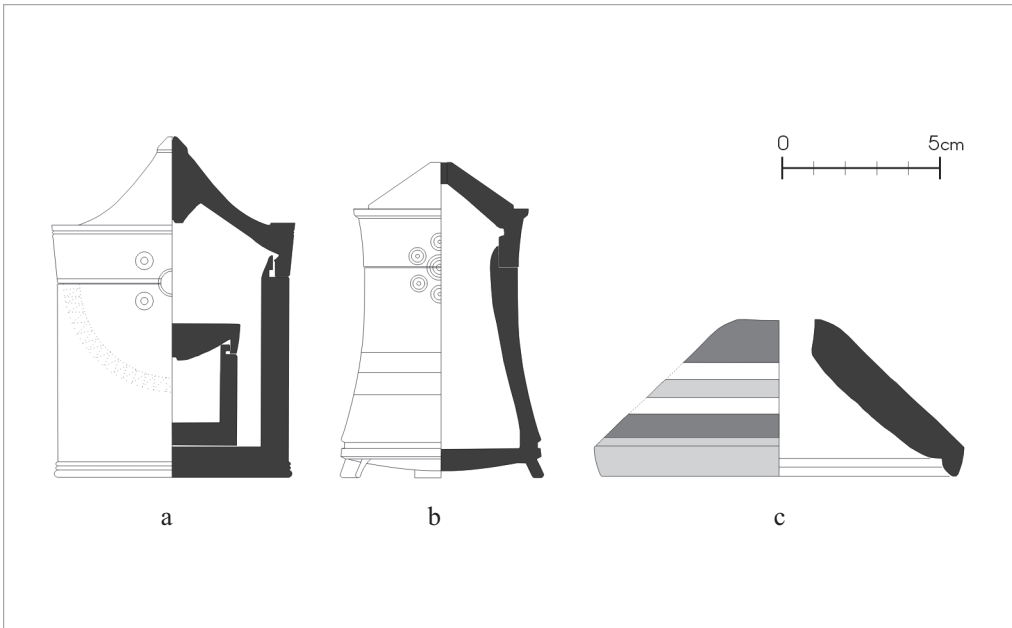


Fig. 2a: Pyxis from Kertch. after: VAULINA, WĄSOWICZ, *Bois grecs et romains*, pp. 145 ff, esp. No. 73, Pl. CXXVIII.  
 Fig. 2b: Pyxis from the Louvre. P. PINELLI, A. WĄSOWICZ, *Musée du Louvre. Catalogue des bois et stucs grecs et romains provenant de Kertch*, Paris 1986, Pl. II, No. 70.  
 Fig. 2c: Pyxis lid from Quseir, Quseir al-Qadim 1978, Preliminary Report, Princeton-Cairo: American Research Center in Egypt 1979, eds. D.S. WHITCOMB, J.H. JOHNSON, Pl. 71j.

believed to represent local production<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 2a) and on a batch of very small pyxides from an unpublished wreck in Italy, off the coast of Tuscany, said to have come from the East.<sup>5</sup> These examples of pyxis lids with knobbed profiles are, however, of early date. The wreck has been assigned to the 2nd century B.C., while the piece from Kertch can be dated securely to the 1st century A.D. by the grave goods from the burial of which it was part.<sup>6</sup> Another example of a conical lid, but without the knob on the underside, is provided by a pyxis from the Louvre (Fig. 2b), also dated to the 1st century A.D. by analogy with the Kertch find.<sup>7</sup> Finally, there is a conical lid, which is morphologically the nearest to the object from Naqlun, found in Islamic levels at Quseir (Fig. 2c).<sup>8</sup> Apart from the specific design of the rim, it has horizontal bands painted on the surface, which also brings it closer to the Naqlun piece. However, the fragmentary state of the fragment precludes any determination as to the knobbed or knobless underside of this piece.

None of the cited parallels is entirely close. The Kertch piece, and even more so the piece from the Louvre, despite being knobless, differ in the appearance of the collar around the rim. The piece from Quseir might be a very close parallel, but unfortunately, until a whole example is found, we must remain in the sphere of probability. The vast majority of other pyxides, Roman, Coptic and Islamic, feature more or less flat lids.

The time gap between the Kertch lid and the find from Naqlun is thirteen hundred years – much too much, even if as a treasured heirloom, it was kept for a long time. The other question of how it could have gotten from a distant land to Naqlun is much easier to answer hypothetically. Trade relations between Egypt and the Black Sea littoral have been confirmed for both the Roman and Islamic periods. Indeed, if the Arab traveler Ibn Batuta could have journeyed within viewing distance of Kertch around the middle of the 14th century, what was there to stop other merchants or pilgrims in this or earlier periods from bringing back small gifts from their travels to Constantinople and the Black Sea? And what better intention than to place such an object in a monastery as a votive offering?

I. Zych

Centre d'Archéologie K. Michałowski  
Université de Varsovie

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<sup>4</sup> M. VAULINA, A. WAŚOWICZ, *Bois grecs et romains de l'Ermitage*, Ossolineum 1974 [= *Bois grecs et romains*], pp. 145ff, esp. No. 73, Pl. CXXVIII (reproduced by PUGSLEY).

<sup>5</sup> P. PUGSLEY, pers. comm.

<sup>6</sup> VAULINA, WAŚOWICZ, *Bois grecs et romains*, pp. 148, 109.

<sup>7</sup> P. PINELLI, A. WAŚOWICZ, *Musée du Louvre. Catalogue des bois et stucs grecs et romains provenant de Kertch*, Paris 1986, Pl. II, No. 70, p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> Quseir al-Qadim 1978, Preliminary Report, Princeton-Cairo: American Research Center in Egypt 1979, eds D.S. WHITCOMB, J.H. JOHNSON, Pl. 71j, p. 203.