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Local and Imported Ceramics from the Early Medieval Era: Examples from the Gözlükule Excavations in Tarsus (Southern Turkey)

This paper is a preliminary study of the Early Islamic ceramics (circa 7-10th centuries) from the site of Gözlükule in Tarsus, Southern Turkey. The pottery finds were discovered between 1935 and 1948 by a team lead by Hetty Goldman of Bryn Mawr College (USA). The excavations were relaunched in 2001 with the cooperation of Boğaziçi University (TU) and Bryn Mawr College (USA). The “Tarsus - Gözlükule Archeological Project” combines now, for instance, Islamic archeology with archeobotanical research.

An important pottery group, excavated in the 1930s and 1940s, is of Early Islamic times (circa 7-10th centuries), although later material (13th century and beyond) is also present. The assemblage can be divided into two main categories: unglazed and glazed wares.

The unglazed wares mostly consist of light utility vessels made of a fine buff fabric. Their shapes include closed pots (such as jugs), decorated on the outside with elaborate molded designs. The other group is a variation of “Brittle Ware” made of a dark brown/red fabric, such as cooking pots with small lug handles

The glazed wares can be divided in four types. These include imports as well as local/regional products of the Abbasid period, among them Lustreware, White and Blue Tin-glazed Ware as well as two groups of local/regional manufactured Lead-glazed Wares: one with a splashed decoration, the other painted in green and yellow designs.

The presence of both local/regional and imported ceramics ties Tarsus to two networks: that of a more global system, generated and controlled by a more centralized power (ruling class?), and that of a smaller distribution system being affluent in a limited zone.

The ceramic evidence of Tarsus, situated in the frontier zone between the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic World, shows a material culture which seems to be specific for the so-called ‘archeology of the frontier’. Consequently, the material refers to a wide range of cultural backgrounds and an ethnic mixed society.