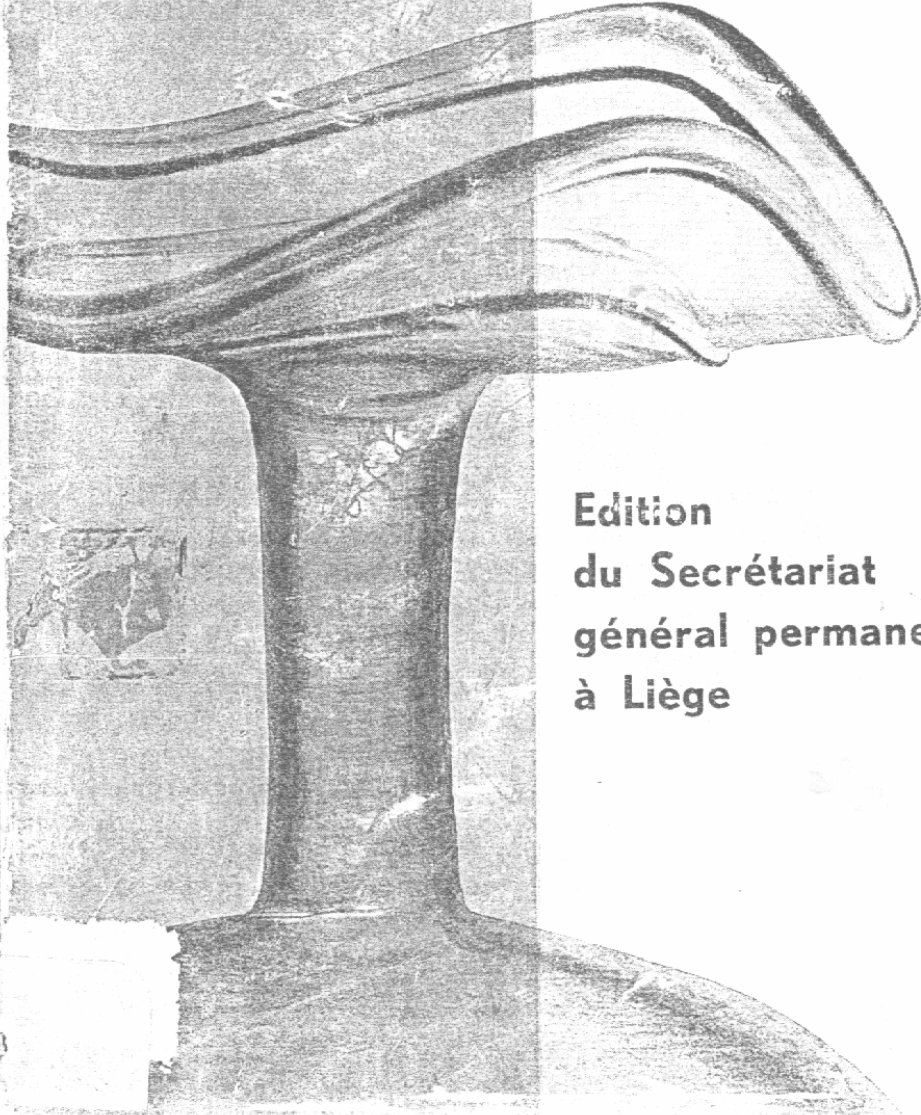


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# ROMAN GLASSMAKING IN THAENAE (Tunisia)

by Mohamed FENDRI

It is not without a certain hesitation that I go so far as to approach such a well-informed assembly, in field in which I am not very familiar and for the study of which the specialized documentation of our local archaeological libraries is particularly limited.

Until now, the problems relating to glassmaking by the ancients do not seem to have attracted the attention of the successive archaeologists in Tunisia; what has attracted more is the study of mosaics, statues, currencies or more recently ceramics, which constitute, to tell the truth, the essence of our museographic collections.

No doubt that explains the scarcity and insufficiency of information concerning Roman glass that has been discovered in our country, and whose archaeological context is too often lost or imperfectly known.

## **Origin of the collection - Bibliographical sources - Indices of dating.**

However, since a few years ago, when I was entrusted with the installation of the archaeological museum of Sfax, I have been impressed by the quality of the glass objects intended for display. Although they are restricted in number, the glass pieces, having been brought together on display, offered a fair sampling of varied forms. One finds there, alongside extremely common objects such as *balsamaïres*, goblets or funerary urns, productions of a type much common and always indicating an unquestionable mastery of glass craftsmanship.

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Some common characteristics emerge from this ensemble. The technique used is almost always that of blowing with free air; the colour of glass is generally greenish and sometimes bluish. The sides are generally smooth or are provided with a very simple decoration, limited to *godrons* [ed. gadroons, decorative curved edging] or simple engraved lines. We have only two cases of filaments applied, always of the same colour as the glass itself <sup>(1)</sup>. The handles, bent at a right angle or acute, are provided with strong fasteners and ribbed on their external face. The general lines of the most original parts evoke forms which are still employed and borrowed such as the current crockery in pottery or metal <sup>(2)</sup>.

Disparity of forms, uniformity of techniques, and the good state of conservation of the glass can be explained by their source. All were exhumed in the course of the excavations performed at the beginning of the century in a Roman necropolis with mausoleums which extended on the northern side of the town of *Thaena*, located 12 km to the south of Sfax.

The authenticity of the discoveries is guaranteed by a certain number of reports appearing in the files of the Institute of Archaeology, or by reports published in various reviews. The most complete appeared in 1908. in the *Archaeological Bulletin* of the Committee, under the signatures of Lieutenants Barrier and Benson <sup>(3)</sup>. In spite of a conscientious examination of this literature, dating from a time when the retrieval of the object preceded any other consideration, it has proven impossible to locate with precision the source of glasses in relation to the explored tombs.

As it happens, this omission was not very serious because, and on this point the indications agree, all the glasses appeared in the Massigli Inventory <sup>(1)</sup> of which some were transferred to the Bardo Museum, were found in a well delineated sector: that of the tombs with mausoleums. The census of the objects collected by the various diggers, the architectural standard of the monuments, the frequency of the burials with incineration, whose practice was gradually abandoned at the beginning of 3<sup>rd</sup> century <sup>(2)</sup>, allow us to consider together these vaults with mausoleums as part of the oldest section of the necropolis. Their period of use would be end of the first to the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The latest dates are provided by a series of lamps to with a scrolled nozzle <sup>(3)</sup> and also some currency of Marcus Aurelius.

### **Excavation of September-October 1964 - New discoveries.**

Wishing to confirm this information from an already old source and to contribute my own share to the study of glassmaking in Thina, I thus considered it useful to return to the place and proceed to do some verification surveys. I had good fortune to release in the first days an important tomb with a mausoleum, very similar to those described under type E by MM. Barrier and Benson <sup>(4)</sup>. The architectural description of the monument would exceed the framework of this study, but I am able to provide the statement to those who would be interested in the question (fig. 6).

Although the sepulchral room received, in antiquity, the visit of the treasure hunters, the excavation gave results that were altogether rather satisfactory, It delivered indeed:

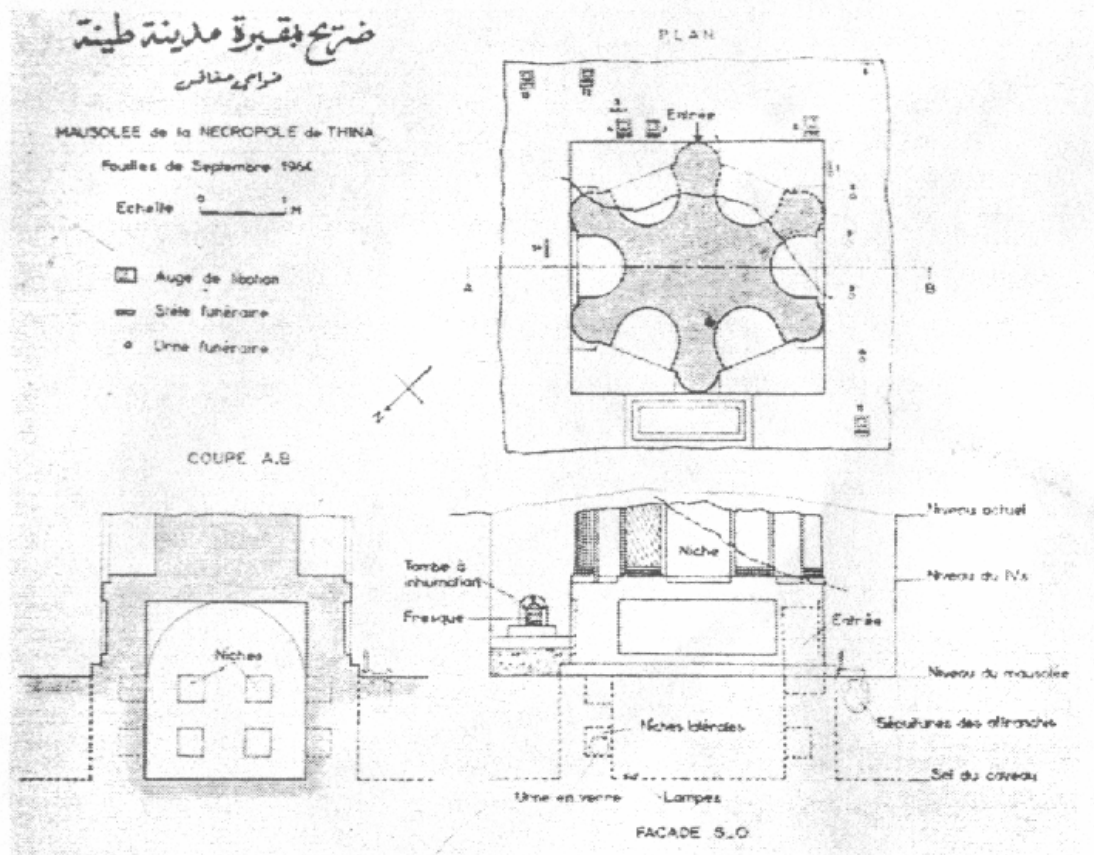
*The Exterior:* several funerary steles mentioning the name of freedmen whose burials surrounded the mausoleum of their former Master.

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*The Interior:*

1) A series of lamps belonging to the type III B1 of Ponsich of which one carried the mark C.IVN.DRAC, which is very frequent in Thina <sup>(1)</sup>.

2) Two spherical funerary urns out of glass, unfortunately irreparable because of their advanced state of decomposition, but which were similar to those found in the other tombs, as revealed by the prints they left in the clay.



3) Lastly, a stemmed glass of a remarkable smoothness.

All of these objects, undoubtedly neglected by the tomb plunderer in the search of jewels of a higher commercial value, constitute chronological indices as sure as if they were in place in the niches arranged in the internal walls of the vault. The

typology of the lamps and the penmanship of the funerary inscriptions in particular, bring us at the latest to about the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, a dating which will agree with the lesson drawn from the comparative study of glasses.

p41 → In addition, during the excavation, currencies of Constantin and Maximin Daza, were found hidden close by, one meter above the original level. Connected to the presence of Christian burials also installed at this higher level, this detail makes it possible to think that the necropolis had to be abandoned rather early, probably during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Otherwise, what different explanation could be given for the importance of the embankment and the violations of tombs which seem to be systematically practised in ancient Thina <sup>(1)</sup>.

### **The necropolis compared to the town of Thaenae.**

The archaeological history of the site of Thaenae still remains to be written, because until now the excavation campaigns carried out here were very fragmentary and generally limited to the roadbases. The monuments brought to light, thermal baths or villas, belong to a later period than that which saw the development of the necropolis which interests us today. It is known only that the city was already in full bloom at the end of the second century <sup>(2)</sup>. The dwellings, of a vast extent and always paved with sumptuous mosaics or frescos with bright colors, reveal a taste of luxury which appears a well established tradition in Thina. The monumental style adopted very early for the “houses of the dead”, the care taken to their construction <sup>(3)</sup> and the quality of funerary furniture in it are a new proof.

### **Presentation of glasses (fig. 7).**

Glasses of which I now will make you disbelieve your eyes from the photographs, can be classified in two series: those which are attached to the rites of incineration, and those which belong to the furniture placed at the disposal of death.

p42 → 1) THE FUNERARY URNS.

A characteristic common to the funeral urns found in the necropolis of Thina is the absence of handles, as opposed to what one can observe, for example, in the urns exhumed in the “*Officiales*” of Carthage and probably of the same period <sup>(1)</sup>. The

preference appears to be for the spherical forms of which we present some examples. The belly is almost perfectly round, the flattened bottom, very slightly concave, The thickness of the sides is from 1½ mm to 3 mm, the lip is generally folded back towards the outside and folded up on itself.

The dimensions and state of conservation of largest of the urns deserves to be underlined (fig. 7. a). The pale bluish glass preserves all its transparency. The diameter reaches 28 cm. Among the many containers of this kind, generally allotted to 2<sup>nd</sup> century, another one like it does not exist, I believe, that is this important.

On a purely comparative basis, one can add to the specimens already published, an urn coming from the punico-Roman cemetery of Gightis <sup>(2)</sup>. The tomb from which this part comes, is of a design totally similar to those of Thina, and could not be dated beyond the second century, the latest date of use of the necropolis.

The funerary urns in cubic form are rarer. The glass is thicker and less translucent, the bluish colour very accentuated, the dimensions reduced. The walls are slightly convex. The opening is bordered by a lip folded back on itself (fig. 1, b) or by a triple fold forming a circular ring. One of these had carried a lid that today has disappeared.

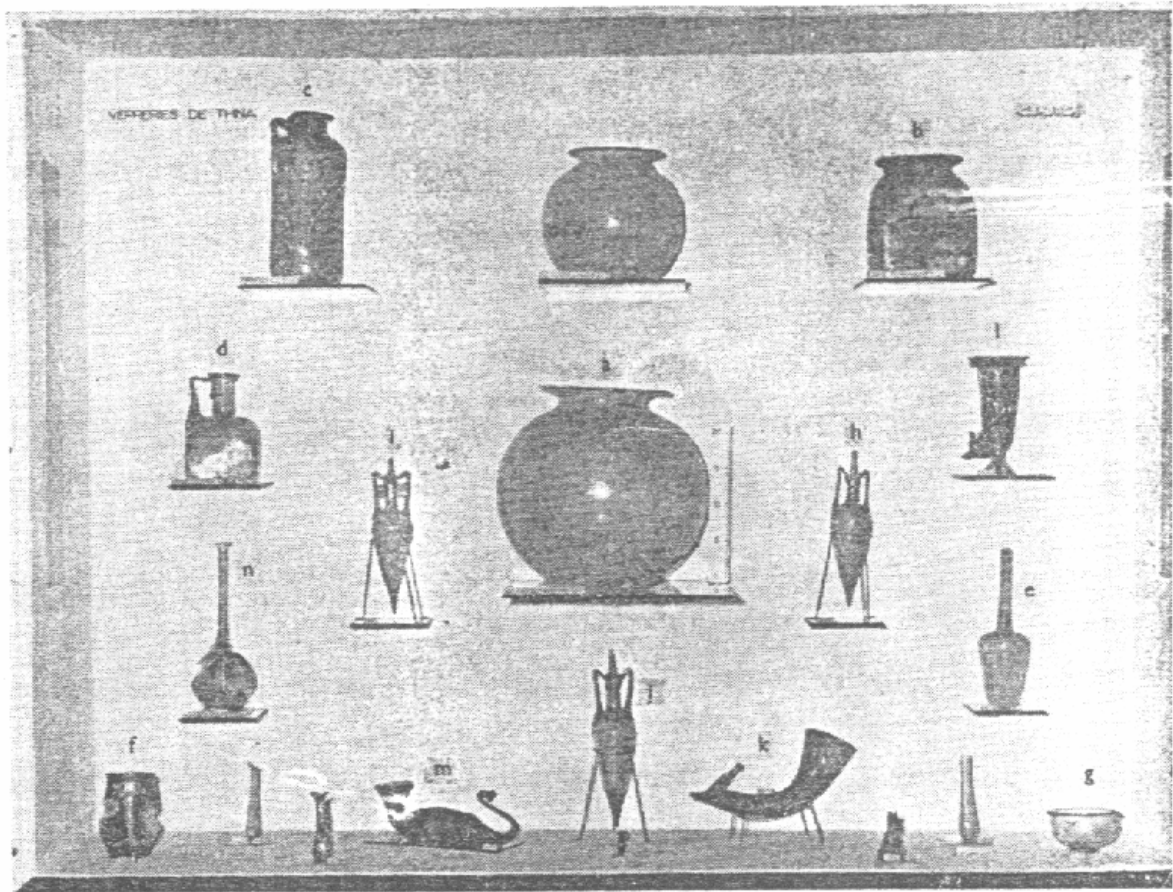
## 2) THE BOTTLES.

Two well-known types of bottles are represented in our collection: The first is a wine bottle, prototype of the Italian “fiaschetta”, with the very lengthened cylindrical body, completed by a short neck; the lip, thick, is folded back towards the outside (fig. 7, c). The handle, broad and squat, is bent at a right angle and comprises three points of attachment at its lower part. The glass is of a greenish blue colour, strongly iridescent, and not very translucent.

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The use of this container, placed in its sleeve of braided straw, is attested in Tunisia, by its representation on a well-known mosaic from El-Djem as well as on a fresco found in Carthage <sup>(1)</sup>.

The comparative parts in the Curtius Museum are dated from the end of 1<sup>st</sup> to the first half of 2<sup>nd</sup> century <sup>(2)</sup>. It is the same for the similar objects displayed elsewhere (museums of Tripoli, Cagliari, ...) <sup>(3)</sup>.



p44 → The important series of square bottles in the Curtius Museum <sup>(4)</sup> or the specimens of the Museum of Leyden <sup>(5)</sup> are known to all the representatives. The bibliography relative to this type of bottles generally refers to discoveries ascribable to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> and the beginning of 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The bottle coming from Thina resembles the above mentioned pieces (fig. 7, *d*). At most can one note a quite marked lengthening of the collar, the circular ring formed by a fold of the lip and the double right angle of the broad handle, striated on three sides which, at the base, extend to three points of attachment on the shoulder.

An absolutely identical glass, assigned to the 1<sup>st</sup> century, was found in the necropolis of Coudiat-Aty, close to Constantine <sup>(1)</sup>.

For the following bottle, we could find no absolutely satisfactory parallel. It seems to be a bottle with a pyriform belly decorated with godrons and concentric circles engraved at the beginning of the shoulder (fig. 7, *e*). The collar, long and narrow, narrows gradually until coming to a sharp stop at the opening. The bottom is convex.

The only similar specimens that have come to our knowledge are mentioned by Eisen as coming from Pompeii <sup>(2)</sup>.

### 3) GOBLET AND CUP

Next comes a rather common goblet, with sides decorated with four concave depressions (fig. 7, *f*). A glass similar in all points, ascribable to 1<sup>st</sup> century, exists notably in the museum of Cagliari (Sardinia) <sup>(3)</sup>.

The cup which you have under your eyes does not bring anything very new (fig. 7, *g*). It is similar to a whole series of glasses of which the majority of the museums have various specimens, and which were being manufactured parallel to similar ceramics bowls known as *sigillée* [ed. signed, or marked with the stamp or die of the manufacturer]. <sup>(4)</sup>.

### 4) AMPHORA.

Of a type much less widespread are the three amphora found in Thina and for which we would be happy if you could suggest parallels to us (fig. 7, *h, i, j*). The frayed aspect of the ends will be noticed; also the acute angle formed by the fine grooved handles, bisected at the lower point of attachment and folds up to the height of the stopper. This last forms a unit with the amphora and was bored with a hole, just at the extreme point of the belly. Incised threads grouped in pairs decorated one of these flasks (5).

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Can the very Greek form of these objects be regarded as a sign of seniority? We present on a purely comparative basis a small very fine red ceramic amphora, also bored at its two ends and provided with an irremovable stopper. Undoubtedly this piece, like those of Thina, a perfume flask used with a pipette, comes from the "Official" from Carthage. Its supposed dating would be placed in the 1<sup>st</sup> or the beginning of the second century.

### 5) RYTHONS.

The following part, a rython [ed. pouring vessel, often in the form of an animal head] of a very traditional form, we found absolutely intact (fig. 7, *k*). The rather thick glass, strongly iridescent, has lost its transparency. The lower end is decorated with two embellished horns, offering the aspect of a head of a snail as one can also

observe on the rythons which support the two *Lares*, in a fresco of Herculaneum representing a domestic scene of sacrifice <sup>(1)</sup>.

One can approach this glass as follows: a rython with a stem which ends with the head of a snail (fig. 7, *l*). It will be noted that the widened part of the horn is returned to the vertical, forming a funnel. A moulding in the throat encircles the opening.

This approach corresponds to the discoveries of Begram <sup>(2)</sup> and the rython of Corfou currently in the British Museum. The fragments of a rython discovered in a Roman tomb in Siphnos and dated by a coin of Vespasian (69-79) has - it is known - also been published <sup>(3)</sup>.

#### 6) FLASK DERIVED FROM ASKOS.

The strangest part of our collection is without question this vaguely ichtyomorphe [ed. fish-like] flask, which has undergone several restorations in consequence of the brittleness of glass (fig. 7, *m*).

An almost identical specimen appears in the Collection of Clercq <sup>(4)</sup>. It was acquired in Syria, in Tortose. The dimensions are similar, but, while on the glass of Thina the tail is decorated with a sealed triangular appendage, that which extends the fish-vase of the Clercq Collection has an opening bored in it. This is undoubtedly the reason which persuaded this author, followed by Mr. Kisa, to regard this bottle as a pipette <sup>(5)</sup>.

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For our part, we rather see there a late and whimsical evolution of the flask inherited from the Greeks and introduced in Tunisia by the intermediary of the Punic trade. In support of this assumption, we show two examples; a Roman askos [ed. flask, often for refilling oil lamps] contemporary with our glasses that comes from the "*Officials*" of Carthage: it is made of glass, the other of a very light red glazed pottery.

#### 7) GLASS WITH FOOT - RECENT DISCOVERY

The last glass presented will be one which was found in the mausoleum exhumed during our recent excavations. It was broken in several pieces that almost me being able to reconstruct. The time – too brief – that I had before the Congress, prevented me beaing able to make a color slide of this very beautiful piece. I regret even more that the glass, of an incomparable, perfectly colourless smoothness

originally, has during the centuries has taken on an iridescence so marked that I believed, one moment, I could see traces of gilding there!

The lengthened and bent form of the glass which supports a slightly profiled hollow foot seems to me rather rare. Very thick filaments that the artist ran around the walls in a carefully organized network, contributes to the ornamentation of the glass, at the same time as it ensures it more stability.

The approximate dating of this object is given to us by the lamps: between 50 and 150 at the latest.

### **Conclusion.**

It is not very probable that at that time there existed in the area of Thina or even in Tunisia, a glass craft industry likely to manufacture products of such a quality. With regard to fine ceramics, which one can regard as a parallel production, the most recent research tends to prove that if the luxury pottery began to be manufactured in Byzacène earlier than was believed, one could not however go beyond the end of the second century <sup>(1)</sup>.

In addition, whereas the pottery furnaces or indications of a provincial ceramic craft industry are rather frequently found, until now a glass installation has not been discovered.

One is therefore reduced to supposing that the glass of Thaenae, at least those whose forms and quality are not current, are imported products.

Several times the comparative study has brought us, as we have seen, to establish parallels between the most interesting parts of our collection and glasses of the Eastern tradition <sup>(2)</sup>.

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Commercial currents in Roman Tunisia at the beginning of the imperial period render account of the intense traffic which was done between the cities of the South and Syria or Egypt. In this respect, the necropolis of Thina has sometimes delivered revealing epitaphs to us. The names of the dead have Eastern consonances: IVLIA ALEXANDRINA, MARCUS IVLIVS SVRIACVS for example <sup>(1)</sup>.

The vogue that Alexandrine art knew during the Sévérienne period is well known. In particular one finds testimony of it on a certain number of pavements with

Nilotic decoration coming from sites that thus far were localised in Byzacène: such as the mosaics d' El-Alia, Sousse or El-Djem <sup>(2)</sup>.

In addition, the Alexandrine influence is also found in the religious field. The worship of Isis and Sérapis were practised for a long time in *Sabratha* and *Gigthis* as well as in *Thaenae* <sup>(3)</sup>.

Syrian influence, Alexandrine importation, the problem arises once more, irritating and inevitable for anyone who approaches, for the first time, questions concerning the glass work of classical antiquity.

Footnotes :

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(1) The first case is that of a glass with feet found in the interior of a mausoleum excavated in September 1964. The filament that is placed to form a lattice pattern is thick. Cf. *infra*, p. 46. The second case is seen on a bottle with long collar, a slightly widened opening and spherical bands decorated with a very fine filament, rolled up in spirals (fig. 7, N). The bottom is concave. This glass, although belonging to the collection displayed in the Museum of Sfax, is not mentioned in the Massigli inventory. It is thus not possible to know if it comes from the necropolis or was found during the surveys performed elsewhere in the old city. The dating of this object remains to be specified but I would be tempted to regard it as one of latest of the collection. Indeed, in Thina, I myself discovered fragments belonging to an absolutely identical bottle, at the time of the excavation of the Thermes des Mois, whose archaeological context is of 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. The shape of this bottle can be compared with that of a small carafe half filled with wine, placed on the table in front of the guests, as seen in a mosaic of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century representing a banquet scene.

The 'Thermes des Mois' were described by myself at the Sousse Archaeological Colloquium (April 1963).

(2) We have limited ourselves to presenting comparative pieces in pottery for certain glasses of not very common forms: pierced amphora, [fiolle ichtyomorphe]. Cf. *infra*, pp. 44-46, fig. 7, h-k.

(3) *Fouilles à Thina (Tunisie.)*, in *B.A.C. (Bulletin Archéologique du Comité)*, 1908, pp. 22-58, pl. IV-VIII.

On the north-east necropolis, cf. finally: G.-L. FEUILLE, in : *B.A.C.*, 1936-37, pp. 215-219 and 1938-40, pp. 640-653. This author announces the discovery of a single funerary urn in glass.

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(1) R. MASSIGLI, *Musées d'Algérie et de la Tunisie, Musée de Sfax*. Ed. Ernest Leroux, Paris, 1912.

(2) Cf. on this topic the conclusions of L. FOUCHER, in regard to the tombs of incineration exhumed in the necropolis of Sousse, in *Hadrumetum*, Doctoral Thesis, Tunis, 1964, pp. 196-197.

(3) The lamps of *Thaenae* are the object of an article published by L'ESPINASSE-LANGEAC, in : *B.A.C.*, 1898, pp. 192-193. I will add those described in *l'Inventaire Massigli*, *supra* note 4.

(4) *Art. cit.*, p. 32, fig. 2.

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(1) This trademark, of which there are 22 specimens in Thina, is also met on lamps from Sardinia, Italy and, generally, on all the coast of the Western Mediterranean basin.

Cf. *Corpus des Inscriptions Latines*, VIII. n<sup>os</sup> 22644 à 62, and Michel PONSICH, *Les lampes romaines de Mauritanie Tingitane*, Rabat, 1961, fasc. 15, p. 72 and map of distribution of the manufacturers known by the trademarks.

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(1) Most of the mausoleums explored by MM. BARRIER et BENSON, had also been plundered during antiquity. The authors attribute, without clear proof, these acts of pillage to the Vandals. Cf. *art. cit.*, p. 31.

(2) The antiquity of the Roman town is attested by its mention in *l'Histoire Naturelle* de PLINY (V, 4, 24-25). According to this author, *Thaenae* marked the end of the fosse separating *l'Africa Petits* de *l'Africa Nova*. Hadrian elevated the city to the rank of colony.

If the golden age of Thina took place during the second or the middle of the third century, the excavations performed these last years seem to show that the city knew a renewed activity from the 4th to the beginning of the 5th century. Our conclusions on this point agree with those of J. THIRION, *Un ensemble thermal avec mosaïques à Thina*, dans : *M.E.F.B. (Mémoires de l'Ecole Française de Rome)*, 1958, p. 208.

(3) Two details notably illustrate this comment and testify of some research into the architectural decoration of the mausoleum exhumed last September: the monument was entirely covered with a very smooth white stucco; the columns which flanked the four niches show different types: some are grooved, the others twisted or smooth.

p42

(1) In addition to the *Officiales*, cf. P. GAUCKLER, *Découvertes archéologiques en Tunisie. Fouilles dans le premier cimetière des Officiales à Carthage*. in : *Mémoires de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France*, LVI, 1897, pp. 83 to 123.

(2) G.-L. FEUILLE. *Sépultures Punico-Romaines de Gighti*, in: *Revue Tunisienne*, n° 37, 1st quarter, Tunis, 1939. pp. 1 to 62, notably pp. 16 and 27, fig. 4.

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(1) P. GAUCKLER, *Catalogue du Musée Alaoui, Supplément*, p. 39, B 84 is the inventory number carried by the fresco.

(2) Michel VANDERHOEVEN, *Verres Romains (I<sup>er</sup>-III<sup>e</sup> s.) des Musées Curtius et du Verre à Liège*, 1961. n<sup>os</sup> 72-73, pp. 68-69. pl. XVI and XVII.

(3) Gustavus A. EISEN, *Glass*. New-York. 1927, I, p. 265 and p. 314. pl. 66.

(4) Michel VANDERHOEVEN. *op. cit.*. note 15, chap. XV, n<sup>os</sup> 51 to 66. pl. XI to XV.

(5) On the square bottles found at Heerlen and acquired in 1930 by the Rijks-museum of Oudheden, Leiden, cf. J.H. HOLWERDA. *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen*, XI (1930). The sarcophagi from which the glasses came are attributed to the second part of the second century. Cf. finally, W.C. BRAAT, *The glass collection of the Rijksmuseum, Oudheid Med....*, XLIV, 1963. p. 109 et pl. XXXVIII. On a square bottle in greenish-blue glass, originating from Alexandria and raised in a wooden mold, cf. DAREMBERG et SAGLIO, *Dictionnaire des Antiquités*, p. 942, § IV.

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(1) Marchand, *Catalogue du Musée de Constantine*, series I, X, pl. XIV, n° 15.

(2) G. EISEN, *op. cit.*, I, p. 291. fig. 129 : fourth type of bottle in the upper range.

(3) G. EISEN, *op. cit.*, I, p. 267, pl. 67; 13<sup>th</sup> goblet on the right.

(4) For comparison, a glass drinking cup from Pompeii acquired by the Museum of Tripoli, in EISEN, *op. cit.* 1, p. 261, pl. 64. See also the bowls of the Curtius Museum, of which however

the lip is larger than that of the cup presented here, Michel VANDERHOEVEN, *op. cit.*, n<sup>os</sup> 41 and 42, pl. IX.

(5) An amphora of a form equally flaked but smaller, without handle or stopper, (next is broken), part of the *Collection de Clercq*. Cf. A. of RIDDER, *Catalogue publié par l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, Paris, 1909, Tome VI, n°332, pl. XV. The author refers to other amphora acquired in Syria, of which some have the L'auteur se réfère à d'autres amphoriques toutes acquises en Syrie, et dont certaines avaient la bande décorée avec des lignes parallèles gravées. No date is proposed.

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(1) R. GAGNAT and V. CHAPOT, *Manuel d'Archéologie Romaine*, 1920. II. p. 191, fig. 442.

(2) J. HACKIN, *Recherches archéologiques à Begram*, Chantier n°2 de 1937. Seen in Paris in 1939, pl. IV, fig. 7, pièce n° 158 (9).

(3) See *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, 44, 1949, p. 89, pl. 32, 2.

(4) A. de RIDDER, *op. cit.*, p. 293, n°293, pi. XIII.

(5) KISA, *Das Glass im Altertum*, II, p. 352.

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(1) See on this subject. L. FOUCHEK, *Hadrumetum...*, pp. 193-195.

(2) Regarding the fame of Egyptian glasses at the time of the first Roman emperors, cf. M. ROSTOVZEFF. *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenic World*, 1941, pp. 370-374.

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(1) A. MERLIN, *Inscriptions Latines de la Tunisie*, P.U.F., 1944, n° 43 (SYRIACVS) – n° 44 (ALEXANDRIA)].

(2) L. FOUCHER, *Hadrumetum...*, pp. 182-183.

(3) In excavating the 'Thermes des Mois' (cf. *supra*, note 1), I also found a series of lamps on which were figured the busts of Sérapis et d'Isis, an archaeological indicator which comes to confirm the prolonged survival of the oriental cults, in particular in the cities of southern Tunisia.

One can consult on this subject : L.A. CONSTANS. *Mission à Bou Ghrara, Nouvelles Archives des Missions*. XXI, fasc. 14, pp. 31-32, regarding a boat-lamp with the bust of Isis and the head of Serapis. This lamp has been the object of a number of publications, notably: P. GAUCKLER. *Nouvelles Archives des Missions*, XV, p. 55 sq.; HAUTECŒUR, *Catalogue, Supplément*, p. 229, no 1281.