

# PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE MEDIEVAL POTTERY FROM CORINTH

## I. THE PROTOTYPE OF THE ARCHAIC ITALIAN MAJOLICA

Among the predominantly *sgraffito* pottery of the Middle Ages at Corinth, painted pieces stand out conspicuously. The most striking of these are patently of one ware, the products, that is, of a single town or district. The whole vases which make up this group are illustrated in Figs. 1–3, and the first seven fragments of Fig. 5 are sherds of similar pots. In brief, the ware has a light buff and distinctly sandy body and is decorated on the upper surface by vitreous colors laid on a thin tin glaze; a closer description of the best pieces will make its characteristics stand out more clearly.

Fig. 1. A plate with a flat rim; the profile is shown in Fig. 4, no. 3.<sup>1</sup> The clay is light yellow in color, very sandy in quality but finely granulated and soft. The inside and the flat rim are covered with a very thin, white tin glaze. The decoration in black (manganese), light blue and brown-orange is laid over the glaze. The lines defining the rim, the outlines of the fish and the ornaments in the field are black; the interlace on the rim and the body of the fish are light blue; the streaks through the ornaments above and below the fish are brown-orange. The exterior of this, and of all other pieces of the ware, is bare. Inside the foot is the potter's mark of Fig. 4, no. 1, painted in matt black.

Fig. 2. A small bowl; the profile is similar to that of Fig. 4, no. 4, except that the rim is notched more sharply.<sup>2</sup> The clay is the same as in the preceding example. On a light green tin glaze is painted an ornament resembling a seashell. The lines on the rim and below the rim are black, the ornament is drawn in black, filled in with blue, and surrounded by several strings of brown-orange dots. On the exterior is painted the potter's mark of Fig. 4, no. 2, in matt black.

Fig. 3, no. 1. A small bowl; the profile is shown on Fig. 4, no. 4.<sup>3</sup> The clay and glaze are similar to those of the plate, Fig. 1. The lines on the rim, the lines below the rim and the circle at the centre are black; the band of chevrons is light blue; the hatching at the centre is brown-orange.

Fig. 3, no. 2. Fragment of a plate showing the head of a boar. The clay is buff at the core. The glaze is yellow with a greenish tinge. The head is drawn in black and

<sup>1</sup> Height: 0.058 m.; diameter of rim: 0.205 m.; diameter of foot: 0.065 m. All the reproductions of the Corinth material are half natural size.

<sup>2</sup> Height: 0.062 m.; diameter of rim: 0.165 m.; diameter of foot: 0.064 m.

<sup>3</sup> Height: 0.058 m.; diameter of rim: 0.154 m.; diameter of foot: 0.067 m.

filled in with a dark brown which seems to be a concentrated application of the usual brown-orange pigment.

Fig. 3, no. 3. Fragment of a bowl showing the snout of a fish. The clay is reddish at the core. The glaze is a light, creamy green. The outline is in black; the fish is

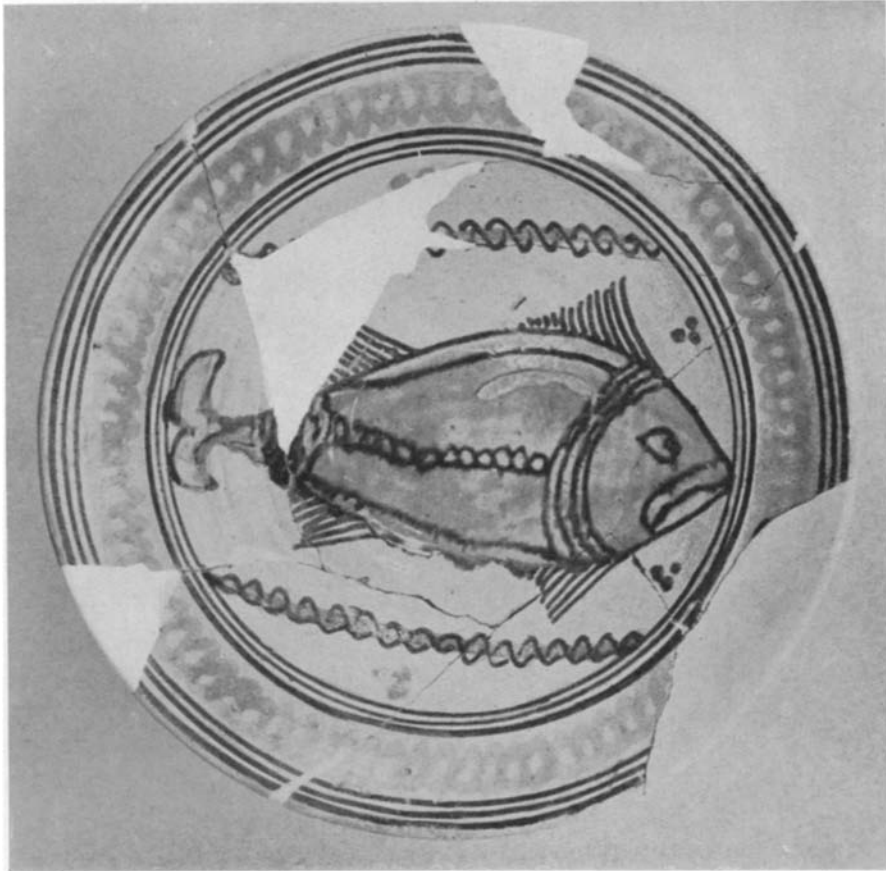


Fig. 1. Painted tin-glazed Plate from Corinth

filled in with a mottled yellow to brown color; the area to the right is a dull, powdery green.

Some of the better pieces of this pottery have a dead white glaze of such thinness that the individual grains of the clay often project under it; the marks of the turning show plainly under that of Fig. 3, no. 2. Naturally so thin a coating has but slight gloss. The black lines were applied rather thick and stand out in noticeable relief; often they remain matt since the glaze was too thin to absorb them. The blue, however, is vitrifiable, apparently a mixture of pigment and the tin glaze. It was applied within the black outlines but occasionally spread over them during the baking, thus causing

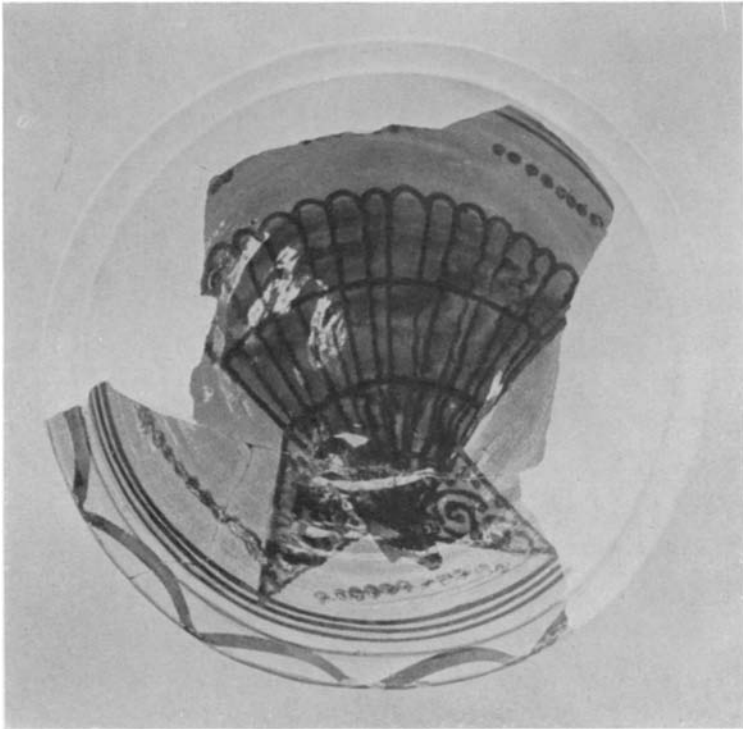


Fig. 2. Painted tin-glazed Bowl from Corinth

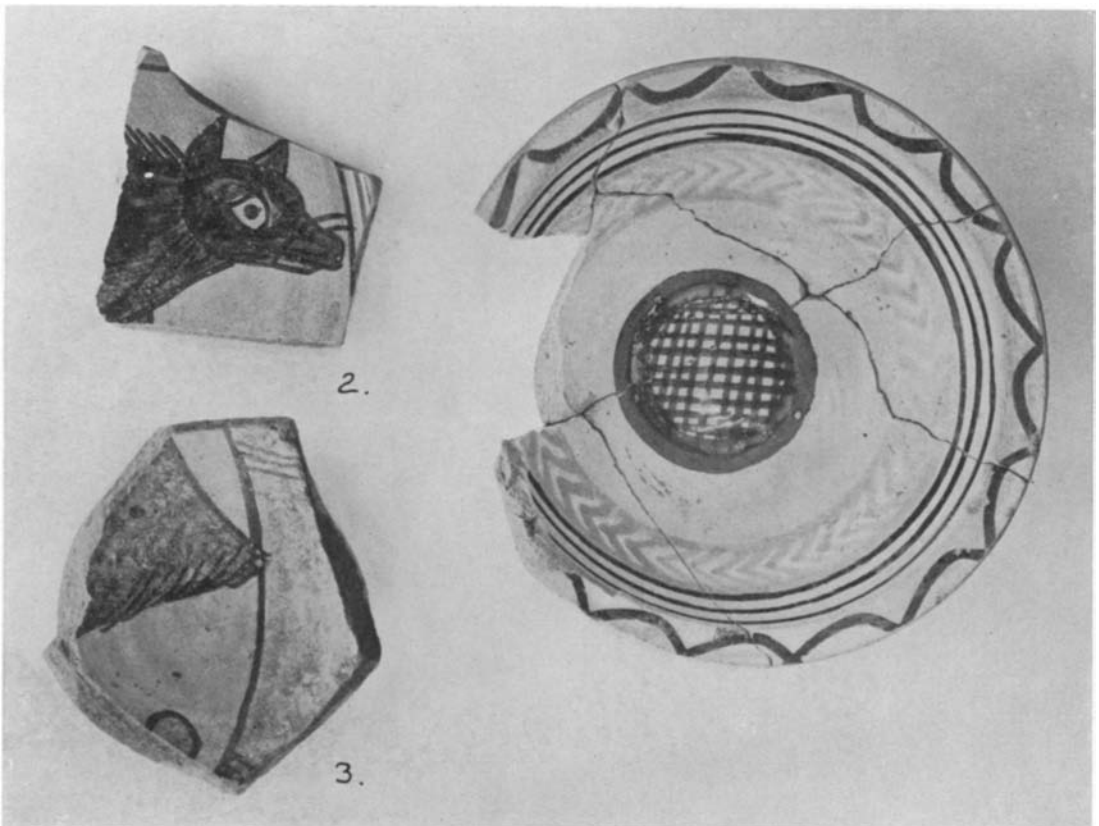


Fig. 3. Painted tin-glazed Ware from Corinth

the otherwise solid black to run and to reveal its manganese content in purple streaks. Usually the blue lies in flat areas lower in relief than the black outlines by reason of its thinner application and spread while in flux. The brown-orange also seems to have been vitrifiable, but its thin and sparing use, except in Fig. 3, no. 2, makes this difficult to determine. In addition to the pieces of Figs. 1–3, the sherds numbered 1–7 on Fig. 5 are similar in all respects; the other fragments of Fig. 5 exhibit peculiarities of one kind or another which will be mentioned later.

After an extensive but fruitless search for exact duplicates of this pottery elsewhere, I wrote an article describing it, noting the patent similarities to the archaic Italian majolica,

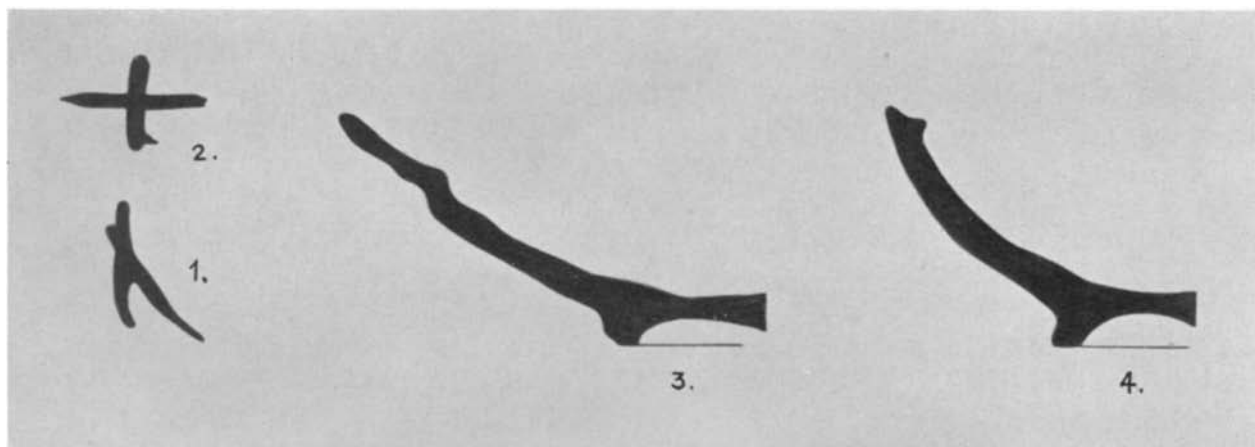


Fig. 4. Potter's Marks and Profiles of tin-glazed Ware from Corinth

and also the differences between them, concluding with the observation that it represented either a hitherto unknown branch of the Italian pottery or,—and this was suggested somewhat timidly,—its actual prototype. For several months other duties prevented the final revision of the manuscript and just as that was about to be undertaken, the latest number of the *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine* came to hand. Therein, in an article on medieval pottery from 'Atlit, I saw to my amazement the blood-brothers, not to say, the identical twin, of the "archaic majolica" from Corinth.<sup>1</sup> The occurrence of the ware in Palestine, as early as the thirteenth century, changed the aspect of the problem entirely by justifying the cautiously ventured suggestion and so necessitated a complete rewriting of the report.

The identity with the 'Atlit pottery as it is described rests on decoration, shape and clay. The common source of the decoration is so evident even from a casual comparison that a brief mention of the mutual characteristics will suffice. Plates (compare Figs. 1

<sup>1</sup> C. N. Johns, *Medieval Slip-Ware from Pilgrims' Castle, 'Atlit, Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine*, III (1933), p. 136; the painted pottery is illustrated on pls. XLIX–LIII.

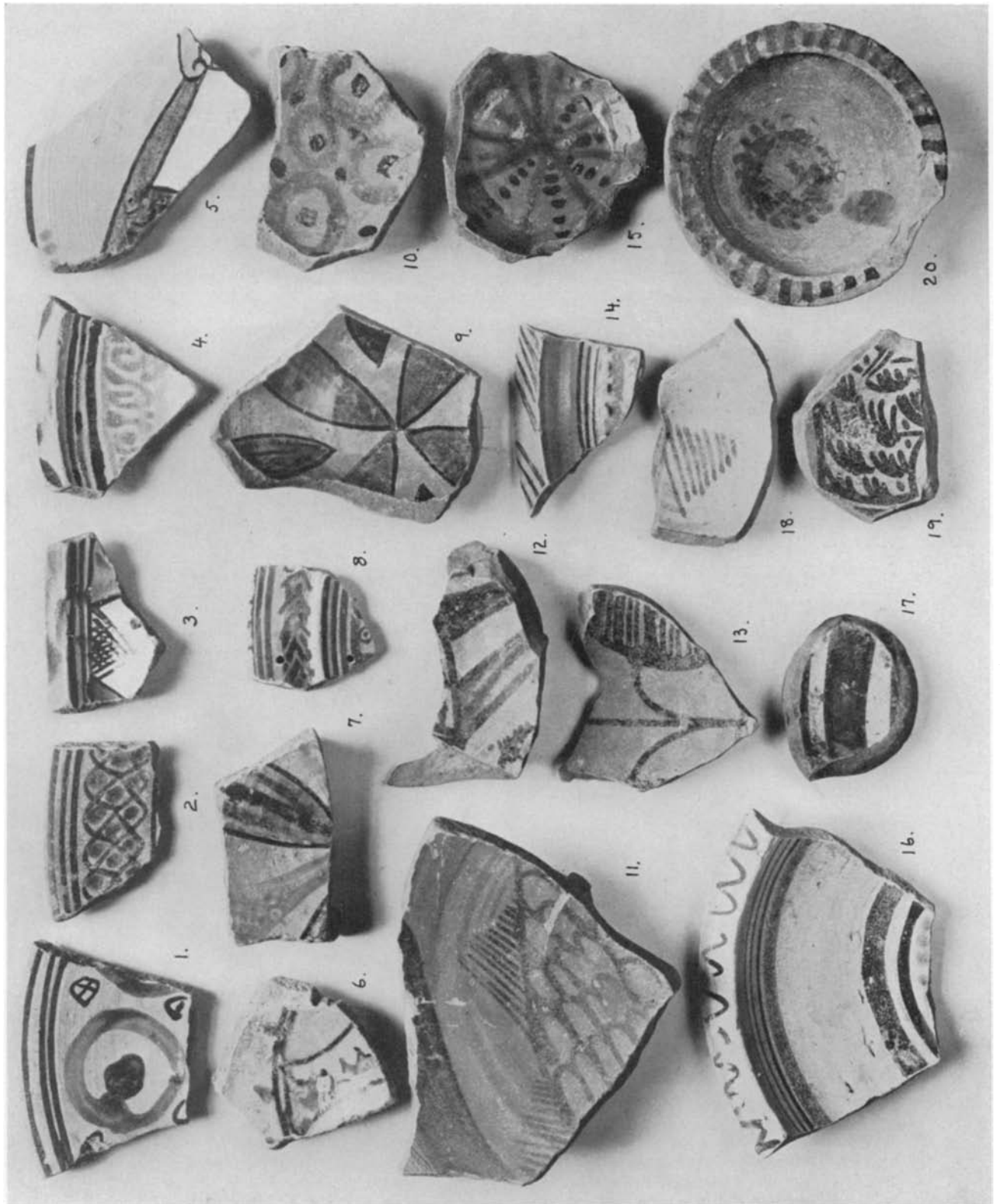
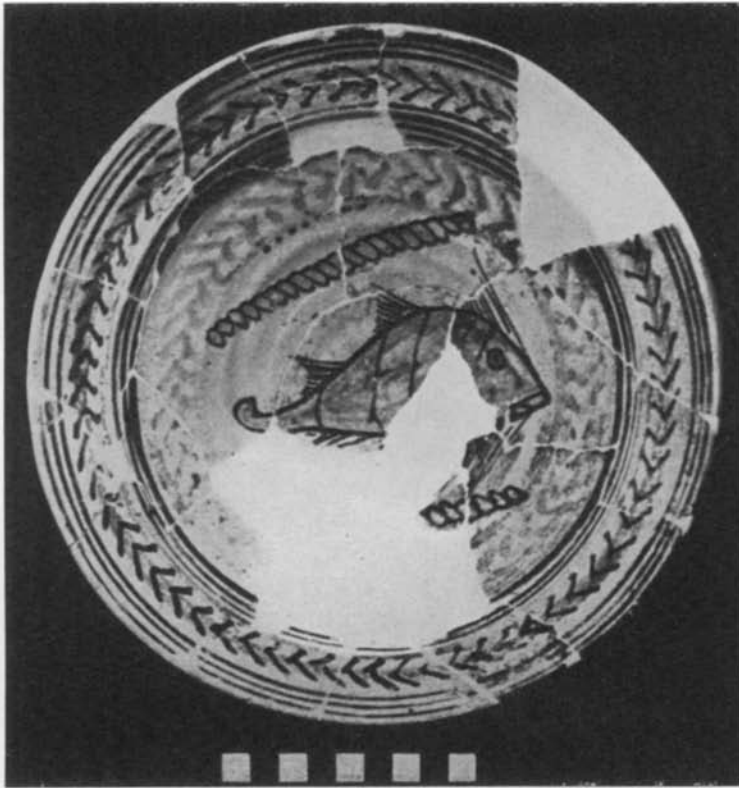


Fig. 5. Tin-glazed Sherds from Corinth (except no. 19)

and 6, no. 1) have the rim and the interior marked off by groups of three concentric lines; the rim is decorated by one of the two stock decorative bands, the interlace or the chevron, and the interior is usually given over completely to the main design. Bowls (compare Fig. 2, Fig. 3, no. 1 and Fig. 6, no. 2) have three lines marking off the interior from the rim; the latter is ornamented with short curved lines along its circumference and the former is usually filled by the main design. One notes particularly the identity in the choice and treatment of the subject matter and in the decorative elements. Fish and animals are the most popular and are treated with a naturalism, the simplicity of which renders them pleasingly decorative. Floral designs seem to be rare and suffer considerable stylization. Less common too are human figures and simple geometrical designs. Most convincing of all are the common decorative elements whose minor importance in the design increases their significance in proving relationship. The following occur most frequently and are found at both 'Atlit and Corinth: the three lines bounding the rim and the interior; black chevrons in a row around the rim with a streak of color through them; an enclosed band of chevrons in blue around the centre design; curved lines on the rims of bowls; bands of black interlace above and below the fish on the plates illustrated, a design which tends to break up into rows of hooks; the multiple interlace in black on rims of plates with a colored dot in each interstice; a band of alternately plain and hatched triangles on or below the rim. In view of the fact that we have for comparison a mere dozen of more or less complete pots and about the same number of sherds to represent a century or more of production, these points of resemblance between the decoration of the 'Atlit and the Corinth pottery would in themselves be conclusive of a common origin.

But other factors join to prove their identity. At Corinth, two of the three shapes from 'Atlit have exact counterparts, the plate with a broad rim and the bowl with a narrow rim, and other forms do not occur.<sup>1</sup> Then the clay of the 'Atlit pots is variously described as "light, whitish," "buff . . . coarse and sandy in texture," terms which exactly fit that of the Corinth pieces; even the occasional burning of the clay to a red color is found on a few sherds from Corinth. Furthermore there is an identity in the use and nature of the colors employed, "purple-black" for outlines, "cobalt blue" for filling in, "brown" and "dull orange" for accessory touches; only the rarer "copper green" and the "dull red" are absent on the better Corinth pieces, although they are found on certain inferior and probably later sherds. In view of this correspondence on so many points, it is natural to be suspicious of the one element of difference, namely, that the Corinth pots are painted on a tin glaze while those from 'Atlit are described as "slip-ware" painted under a "colourless glaze." It is extremely likely that this description errs and that Johns, influenced by the abundant slipped *sgraffito* ware found with the painted pottery, has divided a good tin glaze into a white slip and a colorless

<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 138, fig. 1, a and c; compare our Fig. 4, nos. 3 and 4. It is possible that some of the sherds from Corinth, Fig. 5, nos. 1 and 2, belong to the third shape, a bowl with a broad rim. The forms are very constant and the only variations at Corinth are in the greater breadth of the rims of plates.



1.



2.



3.

Fig. 6. Painted Pottery from 'Atlit, Palestine. Late twelfth and thirteenth Centuries

(lead) glaze. Note his admission that the presence of the slip cannot be detected.<sup>1</sup> Even the lack of any remarks about the protrusion of the blue areas and the manganese outlines, or about the occasional matt appearance of the latter, does not invalidate our contention. A very few fragments from Corinth have a glaze of good thickness in which the applied colors sink to form an almost even surface. If the 'Atlit pots have a similarly thick coating of glaze, only close inspection would show that the decoration was over, not under, the glaze.

In view of all these considerations, therefore, the identity of the Corinth and the 'Atlit painted pottery may be accepted. Fortunately a date for the ware is indicated by the coins which were found with the fragments at 'Atlit. They cover the whole period of the Crusader occupation and the time immediately thereafter and so include the late twelfth and the thirteenth centuries. There is no external evidence to show that the Corinth pieces are of different date than those from 'Atlit and it is natural to suppose that the bright plates and bowls which caught the fancy of the Crusaders in Palestine were attractive as well to their Frankish kinsmen in the Peloponnese. Yet there is this possibility, that the thinness of the glaze on most of the Corinth pieces and its tendency to be tinged with green or yellow are signs of a slightly later date. Certain fragments from Corinth, which will be described below, indicate that the glaze became thinner and less vitreous as time went on.

The similarity of this Near Eastern ware with the archaic Italian majolica is striking, particularly since most of the specimens of the latter which are available for comparison are not only later but of a different shape. A very little of this Italian pottery, usually assigned to the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, has been published and most of the pieces are jugs, the *boccale* so indispensable to the Italians.<sup>2</sup> But a few plates and bowls are accessible for comparison and in them the connection is most evident (Fig. 7). First of all, little time need be wasted in discussing similarities of technique; the old story of the Italian invention of tin glaze is now recognized as a patriotic fabrication and the early use of this glaze in the Moslem east has shown whence it was derived. In both wares the colors used are the same, with this exception, that, in the pottery from 'Atlit and Corinth, blue is common and green is rare but in the Italian the opposite is true. The scarcity of the blue until about the second quarter of the fifteenth century

<sup>1</sup> Except in the case of the two pots of light red clay, *loc. cit.*, pl. LIII, nos. 1 and 2 (the latter is illustrated in our Fig. 6, no. 3), which are "coated with a buff slip" (p. 143). On p. 138 it is said of these that "the whole vessel was coated with a smooth buff slip." This may be quite correct, but I have seen a large number of sherds, prehistoric to medieval in date, the very surface of which, although certainly not slipped, is yellow, cream or buff, while the rest of the body is much darker. This light surface color, which is brought about in the firing, is noticeable on the exterior of these painted fragments from Corinth whenever the body is oxidized to a darker buff or reddish color.

<sup>2</sup> The following comparative material has been available: F. Argnani, *Le Ceramiche e Maioliche Faentine*, Faenza, 1889, chiefly pls. I, III and VII; W. Bode, *Die Anfänge der Majolikakunst in Toskana*, Berlin, 1911, particularly pp. 1-9 and pls. I-IV; E. Hannover, *Pottery and Porcelain I, Europe and the Near East*, New York, 1925, p. 95, fig. 107; Victoria and Albert Museum, *Review of Principal Acquisitions during the Year 1928*, p. 29, fig. 11.



in Italy may very well have been due to the inaccessibility of cobalt whereas the green pigment derived from copper compounds had long been known and was readily obtainable. The shapes of the plates and bowls are identical and the wide flat rim of the plates and the narrow rim of the bowls are occasionally preserved even into the fifteenth century in Italy.

But it is in the decoration that the relationship of the two wares is proved most convincingly. The archaic majolica has the same decorative scheme, that is, a central



Fig. 7. No. 1, Early Majolica Plate from Orvieto in the Victoria and Albert Museum. No. 2, Bowl from Rome in the Kunstgewerbe-Museum, Berlin, about 1400 (after Bode)

design outlined in manganese and filled in with color and accessory ornaments drawn linearly in manganese and color. The same subjects are chosen as motifs,—birds, animals, fish and floral designs,—although, by the time we know it, the majolica has broadened its decorative scope with additions from varied sources. Naturally the style is not identical, for we are dealing with products of the early Italian Renaissance when borrowed elements were assimilated and given an Italian character. Thus it comes as a surprise to see some decorative elements kept unchanged, for instance, rows of triangles alternately hatched, the hatching itself, the bounding of the rim and the interior by groups of two or three concentric lines, the band of chevrons in black, the interlace in

color, the band of hooks in black which is really a broken-down interlace. The interlace and the rows of hooks were especially popular in Italy at all the local centres of manufacture.

In Palestine and the Peloponnese one finds the western Crusaders of the thirteenth century using a distinctive kind of painted pottery. In Italy in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, perhaps going back to the thirteenth, are found pots, some of the same shapes, with a decoration quite similar in technique, subject matter and ornamental detail. There can be no doubt about the conclusion: the Near Eastern ware was brought to Italy and served as the parent and prototype of the Italian. It was not a matter of mere "influence," for the resemblance is too close; the actual pots were imported into Italy, perhaps potters too, and closely imitated in all details. Eastern pottery has already been found in Italy and as late as the fifteenth century foreign wares, in this case Hispano-Moresque, were being reproduced.

The copying of the decoration was not limited to the shapes, plates and bowls, on which it occurred in the Near East, but was applied also to the Italian jugs and pitchers. Soon, however, the native genius made its mark upon the style of decoration and the range of subjects was increased; local centres of production arose, each with its own peculiarities, yet all still bearing the unmistakable marks of the one common source. It is material from this later stage only that we have for comparison and the wonder is that the traits of the parent ware are still so strongly marked in the numerous and several times removed descendants. There can be no possibility of the opposite direction of origin which would make the Crusaders spread the ware from Italy to the East. It is hardly necessary to list the facts which are utterly opposed to such a theory, the earlier date of the Near Eastern ware, the characteristic sandy body which is so common in the Near East and so different from the red, argillaceous majolica, the total absence of the jugs and pitchers so popular in Italy,—there is not one piece of a closed shape among the Corinth fragments,—and finally the fact that, in the thirteenth century and earlier, the East was always the giver, especially in the field of painted pottery. Rather does this discovery of the origin of the archaic majolica explain the enigma of the majolica's existence. No historian of art could accept for a moment the theory of a spontaneous combustion of ceramic genius such as we have been told gave rise to that pottery; more and more students are coming to realize that things do not happen that way. In a land without a steadily evolving ceramic tradition behind it, only sparks from an already glowing culture could kindle such a blaze. Certainly the East, from Constantinople through Persia to Egypt, can claim such a culture and few of its products are more brilliant than its painted pottery.

The problem of the origin and provenience of this Near Eastern ware may take a long time to solve. Johns suggests the Aegean as a possibility and the combination of motives, fish, a boat, a boar, a stag, favor a continental maritime site. Greece can be excluded without hesitation, I think, but in order to present all the evidence on hand a few other sherds from Corinth ought to be described, inasmuch as they are connected directly or indirectly with the ware.

In addition to the pieces from Corinth which have already been discussed, there are two related groups of fragments, one of poorer quality, the other of different kind. The first consists of a few sherds which have the same yellow-buff sandy body but inferior glaze and decoration. Fig. 5, no. 16 is one; the thin cream glaze has some gloss, but the decoration around the missing centre consists of a few concentric bands of brown-black and dull brown-red around green dots. On another sherd the glaze is without any gloss and has become a thin, quite matt slip on which the matt black decoration is drawn. The loose linear decoration of these pieces shows that they are later than the carefully painted plates and bowls and not merely contemporary pieces with a faulty glaze. Therefore they are to be regarded as the later, perhaps the last, products of the centre which made the 'Atlit and Corinth painted ware. If the point is correctly interpreted, it would favor the Aegean, let us say, the Anatolian, origin of the ware, since it is unlikely that inferior pottery would be imported into Greece from any great distance. But then the lack of even the better pieces of this pottery at Constantinople is puzzling, for the painted pottery there shows no influence of it.<sup>1</sup>

As a second group there have been classed together fragments of several kinds which possess the one common factor of a buff to red argillaceous body (Fig. 5, nos. 8-15, 17, 18, 20). Although the decoration of some is not very dissimilar from that of the good pieces of the ware, in several cases it is almost certain that a slip is present and that the drawing lies over it and under the yellowish tin glaze. The material is too fragmentary to be of much value so far, but some of it may represent the products of a branch factory of the good ware and the slipped pieces must indicate an adaptation of tin glaze to lead glaze technique.<sup>2</sup> Further discussion of these homely but interesting bits lies outside the province of this report; for the present we merely note the additional testimony to the influence of the painted tin-glazed ware.

<sup>1</sup> D. Talbot Rice, *Byzantine Glazed Pottery*, Oxford, 1929. The early Polychrome Ware and its late and degenerate survival, the White Painted Ware, are quite different in both technique and decoration.

<sup>2</sup> The clay of two of the pots from 'Atlit is red, *loc. cit.*, pl. LIII, but whether sandy or smooth is not mentioned. Both these plates and the sherds from Corinth seem to be later than the sandy pottery, so, if we are dealing with a secondary establishment, it was set up after the best days of the painted ware were over. One of the red ware pots from 'Atlit is reproduced on our Fig. 6, no. 3.