Ceramica in Italia:
VI - VII secolo

Atti del Convegno in onore di John W. Hayes
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* Relazioni

a cura di Lucia Sagui

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Relazioni
Preface

Since its publication in 1972, copies of Late Roman Pottery have become a constant companion of every serious archaeologist working in the Mediterranean. Increasingly battered, they are now lovingly patched with tape, with the supplement glued in and corrections scribbled in the margin. Just like the four-inch WHS trowels whose introduction in Mediterranean archaeology followed hard on its heels, LRP changed the way in which we did archaeology. Pre-LRP sites were ‘Late Roman’ (I have a twelve-year-old’s memory of an excavation at Lepcis Magna in which the excavators cursed ‘the Byzantines’ and shovelled busily until there was no more red pottery). Post-LRP sites were ‘late fourth’, or even ‘last quarter sixth’.

Of course, there were predecessors: Lamboglia, Salomonson and many others were all acutely aware of the material, but John Hayes put it in order and produced a grammar which even the most pottery-illiterate could use. Contemporary open-ended typologies might have been more sophisticated, but LRP was user-friendly. It seemed to stack the real pottery on the shelves of an imaginary late-roman shop with neat labels, as if you could ask for a ‘Hayes 91’ and everyone would know what you meant (although we could then argue about the date like housewives haggling over the price).

The effects of the introduction of LRP were not long in making themselves felt. First, the presence of a clear type-series meant that associated coarsewares and amphorae could be put in order as well: the warehouse of Mediterranean pottery began to have rooms filled with other wares with clear chronological associations. Second, the ability to be precise about dates, even on field survey, increased geometrically our precision elsewhere - what was the Maremma like during the time of Aurelian? What was the effect of the Goths on Central Italy? What was the effect of the Vandals on the economy of Carthage? This precision reflected back on the pottery itself; so that it became possible to ask questions like ‘How does the export of ARS change over time? How does it differ from place to place? What does it mean in terms of the African economy?’. Perhaps the precision was illusory, because the dates might wobble a bit, but trying to answer the questions became a useful pursuit in itself.

In the end, of course, there are dangers inherent in this sort of exercise. ARS is almost infinitely quantifiable, which leads many into temptation. Recently attempts have been made to equate the quantity of ARS sherds with the amount of people in a province, or the amount of direct contact with Carthage, forgetting that statistics of that sort need large numbers and real correlations. African Red Slip wares do not constitute the whole of the pottery universe, although their immediacy often makes it feel that way.

Although LRP gave us a datable find which was in later periods more common than coins, by the sixth century the supply of African Red Slip begins to fail us, while by the seventh century both coinage and imported pottery are so rare as to seem imaginary anywhere else in Italy but the Crypta Balbi. Chris Wickham used to claim that, so rare and obscure were the sources, he was forced to conclude that the seventh century had been invented by eighth-century historians to round off the numbers. Material remains were apparently even rarer than written ones. Unable to recognize the pottery of the seventh century, we began to suppose that it didn’t exist.

In North Africa this is less of a problem, as what seventh century ARS was produced can be trusted to turn up, at least on coastal sites. But elsewhere in the Mediterranean the latest forms of ARS are very rare indeed: out of over 1,500 sherds found while surveying the Albegna Valley only half a dozen can be securely dated to the late sixth or early seventh centuries. ARS is better than nothing, but by the end of the ancient world it was not appearing in sufficient quantities to throw much light on
the sites we find in the field. This conference was thus born in a moment of frustration. Was the evidence which ARS was apparently providing for the sixth and seventh centuries trustworthy? Had everyone died or gone east, or had the pottery-peddler lost his African contacts? What was taking the place of ARS and how, without having an encyclopedic knowledge of the larger early-medieval sites, could we find out about it?

The situation is not without structural difficulties. The increasing interest in the transition between late antique and early medieval Italy has created a rather anomalous situation. On the one hand, classical archaeology in the western Mediterranean used to stop with the period when the western empire collapsed, taking with it all the architecture, epigraphy and sculpture which had not already disappeared. Medieval archaeologists have for a long time been interested in the earliest, pre-masonry, phases of early castles but for the most part these phases stubbornly refuse a date earlier than the ninth or tenth century. Between the Goths and the first 'incastellamento' the gap could only be unsatisfactorily filled by churches. Academically, the centuries between the sixth and the ninth were always someone else's problem.

Over the last decade things have changed considerably as the 'dark ages' became the period of choice for archaeologists precisely because its material culture is more abundant than its written sources. Classicists have found themselves collaborating with medievalists, and excavations aimed at the study of the history of Roman towns have inevitably come to grips with what continuity was present. Types which were originally identified as 'Roman' coarsewares can now be more securely fitted into later centuries, using as a clue the rare finds of late ARS and the materials associated with them. Less often, medieval pottery has been down-dated to fill the same gap. But our knowledge is definitely growing, although in a dispersed and often unpublished way.

It thus seemed in 1994 that the time was ripe to put together the fruits of the myriad, sometimes isolated projects going on all over Italy. The result was intended from the beginning to form a manual. Not, of course, that any resemblance to LRP was either possible or desirable – the material is far too heterogeneous to fit into a typology, whether open or closed. The conference was structured with this aim, however, with a session devoted to the complex topic of the amphorae, another to the finewares which still reached Italy and a final series of papers giving regional syntheses, from north to south. In appendix to each of these are now found individual sites, illustrated during the conference by posters. The only individual site to be discussed during the conference itself was the late seventh century deposit of the Crypta Balbi, excavated under the direction of Lucia Sagui. This material, both because of its richness and because of its unparalleled type series – of pottery, glass, metals and coins – is unique in Italy and finds few parallels in the Mediterranean. Clementina Panella’s conclusions were followed by a round-table discussion, in which scholars from Spain and France commented on the Italian material.

The conference surprised us all, both because of the large number of participants, which filled to overflowing the spaces of the American Academy and the British School, and because of the historical dimension which emerged from the papers themselves. Far more than simple typologies of sherds, the regional papers sketched a picture of sixth and seventh century Italy far more ‘late antique’ and far less ‘medieval’ than anyone had expected. This ability to make history from sherds, and to support historical arguments with archaeological material, is, in the end, the only serious justification for archaeology. As it is people like John Hayes who make this sort of thing possible (and conferences like this fun), we take enormous pleasure in dedicating this volume to him.

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Le abbreviazioni delle riviste sono quelle adottate ne L’Année Philologique. Sono state inoltre usate le seguenti abbreviazioni:

Antigüedad y Cristianismo. Monografías históricas sobre la antigüedad tardía  
Archeologia laziale  
Archeologia medievale  
Archeologia sarda  
Beni culturali e ambientali. Sicilia  
Bollettino dell’Istituto di storia e di arte del Lazio meridionale  
Bollettino dell’Istituto storico italiano per il medio evo e archivio muratoriano  
Bollettino di archeologia  
Bollettino storico della Basilicata  
Bulletin des travaux de l’Institut national d’archéologie et d’art. Comptes rendus  
Cahiers d’archéologie subaquatique  
Corso di cultura sull’arte ravennate e bizantina  
Cuadernos de prehistoria y arqueologia Universidad autónoma de Madrid  
Documents d’archéologie méridionale  
Institute of Nautical Archaeology Quarterly  
Lucania archeologica  
Medieval Archaeology  
Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome  
Memorie storiche forogiulesi  
Quaderni di archeologia del Veneto  
Quaderni friulani di archeologia  
Quaderni del gruppo archeologico ostigliese  
Quaderni della Soprintendenza archeologica del Piemonte  
Quaderni della Soprintendenza archeologica per le province di Cagliari e Oristano  
Quaderni della Soprintendenza archeologica per le province di Sassari e Nuoro  
Rassegna di archeologia  
Rai cretariae romanae fatorum acta  
Rivista di studi liguri  
Rivista di studi marchigiani  
Studi di antichità  
Studi e documenti di archeologia  
Studi misconaleni  

Avvertenze:

Qualora non altrimenti indicato i disegni sono in scala 1:3, ad eccezione delle anfore integrate in scala 1:10.
Introduction
The study of Roman pottery in the Mediterranean:
23 years after Late Roman Pottery

I must start with a mention of the 1992 École Française and Siena conference, which I was unable to attend, and whose published version has only now appeared. Fortunately two colleagues sent me copies of their presentations, which made it clear how out of date I am with recent Italian work on Late Roman Pottery. Now, perhaps, I know a little more of what you knew already in 1992. So I do not propose to give you a lecture which is out-of-date, but rather to offer some general observations based on my experience all around the Mediterranean – to look for a moment beyond Italy and Provence. You will fill in the Italian details far better than I, especially for the latest periods.

I have been told not to concentrate on past history, but, on this occasion, will ignore that advice for a moment and take you back to my early career in the field of Late Roman Pottery in Mediterranean lands, and, more particularly my first experience of the British School at Rome. Two people need to be remembered and thanked for the particular help that they gave me: one, John Ward-Perkins, long-time director of the School, who encouraged me to publish my book (in part his research results) under the School’s imprint; and secondly, Molley Cotton, the doyenne of the Camerone, for her patience and enthusiasm. At the time I was mostly based in the British School at Athens, which, being then largely a Bronze Age establishment, was happy to let me pass my time down the road with the Americans at the Agora excavations. And thus the genesis of a book, which seems to be quoted more and more as it gets more and more out of date.

You will expect from me, I suppose, some learned maxims on the current state of study of the Late Roman fine wares, and whether I have changed my opinions in certain matters, especially regarding dating. First, then, let me remind you what a small body of reasonably excavated material was available in print at the time that LRP was first published. I would guess that the published corpus is now about 10 times as big as it was then, and the unpublished corpus quite possibly the same. I here exclude from consideration poorly recorded examples, or ones that have come to light through the antiquities.

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1 I here wish to express my thanks to the hosts and sponsors of the Colloquium, first for having organized such a gathering in my honour, thus offering an opportunity for me to express my current views on the chosen topic, and secondly for their hospitality and the financing of the present publication. The occasion of the Conference, which offered the chance for pottery specialists and experts in various related disciplines to exchange opinions in a friendly atmosphere, gave me great pleasure and satisfaction, as I hope it did to all present. Possibly other similar meetings of minds will soon follow.

2FRANCOVICH-NOYÉ 1994; see especially the articles of ARTHUR-PATTERSON and WICKHAM. For some recent contributions from Britain to discussions of urbanism, etc. in early medieval Italy, see now also BALZARETTI 1991; MORELAND 1993.

3HAYES 1972; 1980, henceforth cited as LRP and Supplement.