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BRINGING ROMAN COARSE WARE TO THE POINT: AN INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has had the opportunity to excavate urban archaeological contexts or rural settlements has necessarily come across so-called coarse ware, that is products that were often locally made and not widely distributed, but were also sometimes relatively widely traded, accompanying and overlapping with fine tableware, such as black glaze or *sigillata*, in scope of use.

The last few decades have witnessed a considerable increase in interest in these materials¹: the knowledge of the production networks of the Western and Eastern provinces of the Roman empire has improved² and a relevant research on the production and diffusion of pottery in Roman Italy, including coarse wares, is also ongoing³. Nonetheless, it is obvious that every excavation may uncover new material which is not always easy to compare to that which is already known. Add to this the facts that the degree of reconstruction of local and regional networks is far from uniform across the entire ancient world and that the knowledge of these networks often does not reach scholars based or active in different areas to the same extent. Instead of coming closer, the goal of equipping ourselves with all-encompassing tools to frame and manage the phenomenon of the production and distribution of common pottery is receding with the increasing number of finds excavated.

¹ In general see BATS 1996 (*ibid.* PANELLA 1996); GANDOLFI 2005 (*ibid.* CORTESE 2005; SANTORO BIANCHI 2005); OLCESE 2006, partic. pp. 531-532; PASQUALINI 2009; ESPOSITO, ZURBACH 2015; GANDOLFI 2019; GASSNER 2020. See also the publications of the *LRCW* (*Late Roman Coarse Wares*) series, the result of the conferences of the same title.

² See the pioneering attempt to map pottery fabrics from Britain: TOMBER, DORE 1998. More recently BES *et al.* 2019; also <https://potsherd.net/home/> (last access march 15th, 2024); the website contains the Atlas of Roman Pottery and a useful bibliography updated until 2020; however, “Many, or perhaps most, of the external links that were once on the Atlas pages on the individual wares have either disappeared completely or are now hidden behind complicated web code and cannot be referred to individually. All such items have now been removed (11/2022)”.

³ Notably <https://www.immensaequora.org/> (last access may 12th, 2023; database inaccessible); also OLCESE 2003; OLCESE 2011-2012.

The precise aim of the papers collected in the next few pages under the title *Bringing Roman Coarse Ware to the Point: The Challenge of a Common Approach*⁴, is to bring together various case studies on local and regional contexts or networks in a single editorial space. They are distant from each other in time and space but significant from a methodological point of view and enable a glimpse into the current state of research in different areas and periods. Thanks to the combination of the traditional typological approach with the development of innovative methods and technologies and the increasingly complex web of communication represented by the Internet, these studies will hopefully provide many stimuli for dialogue and mutual understanding.

It is well known that the identification of widespread cooking or kitchen pottery has definitively excluded an exclusively local character from the particular features of coarse wares⁵. However, in a few cases has it been possible to identify features common to different products which enable the delineation of circuits of circulation of forms and techniques⁶: this is one of the limitations that we propose to challenge in these contributions.

Precisely because of their character as products with variable diffusion, from the local context and the local-regional network, all the way up to “international” distribution, common wares are also suitable to test for broader dynamics and analyses. The still ongoing debate on the nature of the ancient economy, dating back to the opposition between “primitivist” and “modernist” perspectives, has in recent years become increasingly complex and refined in order to overcome this binary opposition, born in late nineteenth-century Europe⁷, which can no longer adequately account for the ever-increasing mass of data or provide the larger geographical perspective necessary for the most current approaches⁸. New paradigms have been proposed, such as those inspired by the concept of networks, which have caused an intense scientific debate⁹, or that based on a specific interpretation of the economy regulated by the mechanism of bazaars¹⁰.

The nature of common pottery, at the same time an object of extensive trade, regional distribution and local consumption, may well serve to illustrate an economic system differentiated in chronological and geographical terms, in which “modern” features of the organisation of production and export coexisted with “primitive” manufacturing and commercial conditions.

The contributions include the investigation of a late Roman suburban context, which allowed an evaluation of pottery production and trade dynamics during the late imperial and early medieval periods at a relevant site on the bank of the river Tiber, a few meters from Ponte Milvio and the *Via Flaminia*, with the prevalence of *Latium* clays and some evidence of wider circuits (Ciarrocchi).

An earlier context is provided by a group of early imperial pottery from a centre in ancient *Latium*, *Fabrateria Nova*, which still needs to be fitted into a regional network that recent

⁴ These are some of the contributions in session 346 organised by the Directorate General for Education, Research and Cultural Institutes (Ministry of Culture), the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio (Department of Human, Social, and Health Sciences) and the German Archaeological Institute in Rome, within the 28th Annual meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists, held in Budapest in 2022, and edited by the authors of this paper together with Maria Taloni and Caterina Paola Venditti: <https://www.e-a-a.org/EAA2022/Programme.aspx?Program=3#Program>. The English text of this introduction was revised by James Jones of Deutsches Archäologisches Institut - Rom.

⁵ See footnote 1; consider, for example, the widespread use of so-called “Africana da cucina”: CARANDINI *et al.* 1981; GANDOLFI 1994.

⁶ See, for example, GASSNER 2020; GIGLIO, TONIOLO 2022; for late antiquity in general LAVAN 2015; see also the aforementioned volumes of the *Late Roman Coarse Wares (LRCW)* series.

⁷ The progenitors of the two opposing trends are generally considered to be BÜCHER 1893 and MEYER 1895.

⁸ For an updated summary see REDEN 2020-2023.

⁹ In general, BRUGHMANS *et al.* 2016; RAJA, SINDBÆK 2018.

¹⁰ BANG 2008; for the ensuing debate see BRUGHMANS, POBLOME 2016; VAN OYEN 2017; BRUGHMANS, POBLOME 2017. For a traditionally modernist approach see instead TEMIN 2013.

research has shown to be more dynamic than expected (Venditti, Taloni)¹¹.

The middle and late imperial period is represented in an essay on finds from Aquileia, which draws an interesting and partly new picture of the short- and medium-range trade network of the capital of Regio X (Riccato). A contribution devoted to a specific region on the Atlantic side of the Iberian Peninsula details the production and circulation of late antique and early medieval common pottery in that area, filling a substantial gap in the research (Quaresma, Lopes). A final article illustrates the work of a team engaged in the study of the circulation of common pottery in a large regional network in Gallia Belgica. This study uses cutting-edge technologies and methods, including the now ubiquitous artificial intelligence (Willems, Chaidron, Borgers). We, the editors, would like to emphasise the importance of and express the need for an increasingly effective interaction between groups and methods working on this topic.

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¹¹ For a characterization of the local circuit see LAUNARO, LEONE 2018.

T. FRÖHLICH, E. POLITO, Bringing Roman Coarse Ware to the Point

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