Pottery Production In the Pontine region, Central Italy
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Introduction

The Groningen Institute of Archaeology (GIA) has conducted field campaigns in the Pontine region since the 1970’s, when it became a partner in the excavations of ancient Saturnia. Since then, it has extended its scope with field surveys, intensive site mappings, targeted excavations and ge-archaeological examinations throughout the region, within the context of the Pontine Project Region. In the project’s current phase, the role of minor settlements in the rural economy of Roman central Italy is being examined. Such ‘Minor Centres’ include all kinds of rural settlements that were centres of craft production and exchange, and where religious feasts and administrative tasks were carried out (Tol et al. 2014). Three case-study sites have been selected (Athora, Forum Appii and Ad Medias), which are being studied by a combination of non-invasive archaeological techniques (field walking, geophysical prospection, coring).

In studying the relationships between these minor centres and their immediate surrounding areas we adopt above all a ceramic approach, which combines typo-morphological classifications with thin section petrography, and we confront material from prospection, coring).

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Pottery production in the Pontine Region

The Pontine region is situated 60 km south of Rome. It consists of a large coastal plain, which is bounded by the Alban Hills and the Lepini and Ausoni Mountains to the north and east, and by the Tyrrhenian Sea to the west. The innermost part of this plain is an infamously wetland, the Pontine marshes, that was reclaimed and opened up with the construction of the Via Appia in the late 4th-3rd BC (fig. 1). The discovery of physical evidence for ceramic production in the Pontine region is very important, given that it provides secure reference material for local fabrics. Until now production activity have been identified at four different locations in the Pontine plain: At Forum Appii an area with four kilns was mapped northwest of the confluence of the Cavata river and the Decennovium canal, whereas an industrial zone was identified northeast of the Rio Martino canal, which drained the lower Pontine plain to the lagoon. At Ad Medias a kiln and numerous waster fragments were identified, comprising tiles, cover tiles, coarse ware and amphorae (fig. 2a). The recovered fragments suggest a date in the late 2nd or 1st c. BC (fig. 2b). In addition, a small rural site (12317) yielded evidence for pottery production. The site is located in the interior plain near the Rio Martino canal, which drained the lower Pontine plain to the Tyrrhenian coast (fig. 1). A pottery kiln and several clay pits were identified (fig. 3), and surface finds include kiln fragments and wasters, which production is tentatively dated to the late 2nd or 1st c. BC, based on associated surface ceramics.

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Sampling strategy and method

A total of c. 120 ceramic samples were selected for the purpose of cross-period fabric comparisons. All the ceramic samples were prepared as standard 30 µm sections, and analysed under a polarscopic light microscope at the Groningen Institute of Archaeology. The ceramic thin sections were grouped in fabrics, based upon the nature of the clay matrix, inclusions and voids, with the underlying aim of identifying evidence for both technological processes and provenance (Quinn 2013, 73–79). Sixteen clay samples were collected near the sites where pottery wasters were identified, and where geophysical research indicated the presence of infrastructure related to pot-making activities. The clay sourcing campaign targeted specific areas around the production sites, and took into account the minerals and raw materials identified in the ceramic thin sections (figs. 4, 5).

Conclusions

The first results of the petrographic analysis show that the pottery from documented production sites in the Pontine plain can be used to identify potters’ technological traditions: whilst potters exploited the same landscape for suitable raw materials, they preferred different materials depending upon their technological traditions. More specifically, it is likely that they explored a red firing colluvial clay for tile production at the sites of Forum Appii and Ad Medias. They used both coarse and fine recipes for the production of tiles and cover tiles, which suggests that there was no strong link between fabric and form. In addition, they may have used a fine, levigated version for the manufacture of amphorae. As for site 12317, potters seem to have used marine sediments for the manufacture of dolia. In order to further our understanding on the types of raw materials that may have been used in ancient times, in a next stage of the project, the sourced geological deposits will be compared with the identified ceramic fabrics.

Further information:

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