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CONNECTIONS BETWEEN AFRICA AND CRETE IN THE LATE ROMAN AND PROTO-BYZANTINE PERIODS ATTESTED IN THE SOUTH BUILDING AT GORTYNA

This paper analyses material evidence from recent archaeological excavations of the South Building of the Byzantine Houses District at Gortyna.

For the period under exam the presence of goods of African provenance testifies to a constant flow and trade relations between the two geographical areas, despite the significant variations over time.

Crete – Africa – Fine ware – Amphorae – Byzantine period

1. Introduction

Since 2007 the University of Macerata,¹ within the activities of the Archaeological Italian school of Athens, has carried out excavations in the Byzantine Houses district at Gortyna (**fig. 1-2**), in particular in the South Building (Di Vita 2010: 243; Fabrini 2009; Perna 2016 and Perna 2014; **fig. 3**).

The exam of pottery in connection to the stratigraphic analysis of the find contexts is still in progress; nevertheless a few interesting information on the economic and commercial exchanges between Gortyna, Crete and in particular Africa can be offered (Rendini 1985; Bonifay 2004; Panero 2015; Bonifay 2020; Cau, Reynolds and Bonifay 2012). It is important to consider that the typo-chronological series cannot now be clearly defined and that the analysis of some residual formation processes is often problematic. Moreover, some important variants, such as the complexity of the circulation routes, the absence of linear flows of pottery between centres of production and use and the condition of regional trends, have to be considered.

The area occupied by the South Building is located in the southern area of the Byzantine Houses district. It overlooks the West Road, at the corner of this road and the road that, to the south, comes from the temple of Apollo, connecting to the block of the *Praetorium* (Di Vita 1992-1993: 457-461).

The front, facing the West Road, is 21,61 m long; the building is 13,92 m wide and consists of a series of rooms that are articulated left and right with respect to the axis of the entrance on the road itself.

Access was assured by an entrance that allowed to descend a slight difference in height towards the vestibule (Room 52a/b), long and narrow (3,72 x 12,71 m). From this it was possible to have access through two symmetrical entrances to two small rooms (Rooms 52 and 59), or alternatively, to two large rooms (Rooms 51 and 58) symmetrically arranged to flank a large central hall (Room 53).

The original flooring is not preserved. It was probably removed on the occasion of a systematic reorganization, dating perhaps during the 7th century AD.

As far as the dating of the building, the analysis of the contexts associated with it produced LR3 amphorae and fragments of ARSW (GO'15.1269.2 and GO'15.1258.1), a bowl (D1 prod.) of Lamboglia 51 and a bowl of Hayes 57 (C3 prod.), dating within the 4th century AD, in a phase probably following one or more earthquakes, which disrupted the island of Crete in circa 365 AD (Perna 2014).

The function of the structure is more problematic. According to the data in our possession, it is likely that this building, perhaps of a multifunctional purpose, might have been also used as the seat of the *Koinon* of the Cretans or as the *Curia*. Because these were the two main assemblies documented in Gortyna at the end of the 4th century AD, it is possible that the city, being both the provincial capital, i.e. seat of the *koinon*, and an administrative autonomous urban centre, uses the same urban and perhaps architectural spaces (Perna 2014; Perna forthcoming a; Perna forthcoming b). The *koinon* probably continued to function until the beginning of the 7th century AD (Rouanet-Lisenfert 1994: 7-25; Tsoungarakis 1988: 161).

This is a preliminary study, thus any attempt to give an outline of the economic and commercial relations between Africa and Crete cannot avoid a substantially typological approach of the study of materials, regardless of the complexity of the methods of arrival and circulation, but also of the

¹ First under the direction of Prof. G. M. Fabrini, from 2012 under my supervision. Dr. M. Rossi, Dr. M. Giuliadori, arch. G. Montali and Dr. S. Cingolani, and numerous other collaborators and students of the University of Macerata, that I would like to thank, were part of the research group. For what concerns the study of the fine wares and amphorae I would like to thank, in particular, M. Giuliadori e S. Marcolini.

consideration of the material which has been found as residual material in anthropic levels.

The first consideration is consistent with what is already known for the city, in particular as for its relations with the African world.² The relationships between Gortyna and the north-African coast appear already consolidated from the 3rd century AD. ARSWA, uncommon in Gortyna, as already noted in the investigation at the *Praetorium* (Dello Preite 1997; Rizzo 2001), is not in our contexts, where, on the contrary, late ARSW C (Hayes 1972: 317) appears, significantly in the stratigraphy of the South Building, as documented by ARSW C2 and C3 from Byzacena. Among these, the bowl Lamboglia 40, with its variations, is the main shape, dating from 230 AD until the mid 4th century AD and beyond. Nevertheless, dish Hayes 57 in C3, dating from 325 AD to the beginning of the 5th century is also attested.

Bowls Hayes 50 and dishes Hayes 58A in ARSW C/E document the arrival of products from the workshops of Southern Tunisia. Hayes 50 is the first type systematically spread in Gortyna (Dello Preite 1997: 132-135; Rizzo 2001: 45-46).

ARSW, imported from the workshops located in modern Tunisia, seems to document good relations with the Proconsular African markets up to the 4th century AD.

These data are confirmed by the study of amphoras, among which there are Africana II from *Zeugitana* and *Byzacena* (2nd/3rd-beginning- 5th century AD), Tripolitanian 3 from Tripolitana (2nd/3rd-beginning of the 4th century AD), Dressel 30/Keay IB from *Mauretania* (2nd/3rd -3rd/4th century AD).

The data in our possession confirm how the urban life, at least up to the Diocletian time, was characterised by a continuous growth (Harrison 1988: 136-155; Harrison 1993; Baldwin Bowsky 2001: 31-72; Baldwin Bowsky 2004; Di Vita 2004), although from the end of the 3rd century AD there was an evident contraction – until depletion of the exports in the 4th century AD. In this period should be noted the contraction of presence of local products, even if these remains predominant compared to imported materials.

From the end of the 4th to the beginning of the 5th century AD, ARSW D1 and D2 from Northern Tunisia become absolutely prevalent, compared to ARSW C, such as the Hayes 32/58 bowls – apparently fewer in the excavations of the *Praetorium* (Rizzo 2001: 45-46) – Hayes 58B, Lamboglia 51 and 51bis, Hayes 61 in forms A and B, Hayes 67, Hayes 50B n. 60, Hayes 76, Hayes 87B and dishes 50B/64 and 89B. It is also worth mentioning the presence of the flanged-bowl Hayes 91, extremely common at Gortyna, which is widespread in the *Praetorium* excavations (Dello Preite 1997: 132-135; Rizzo 2001: 45-46) and attested, as the only form, in significant quantities between the end of 5th century and the middle of 6th century AD in the *Praetorium* district (Lippolis et al. 2009: 107-108) and appears in the early decades of the 5th century AD and lasted until the middle of the following century.

As for the amphorae, dating to the end of the 4th century AD, Keay XXV (4th century) and, especially, *Spathaia* LR8b,

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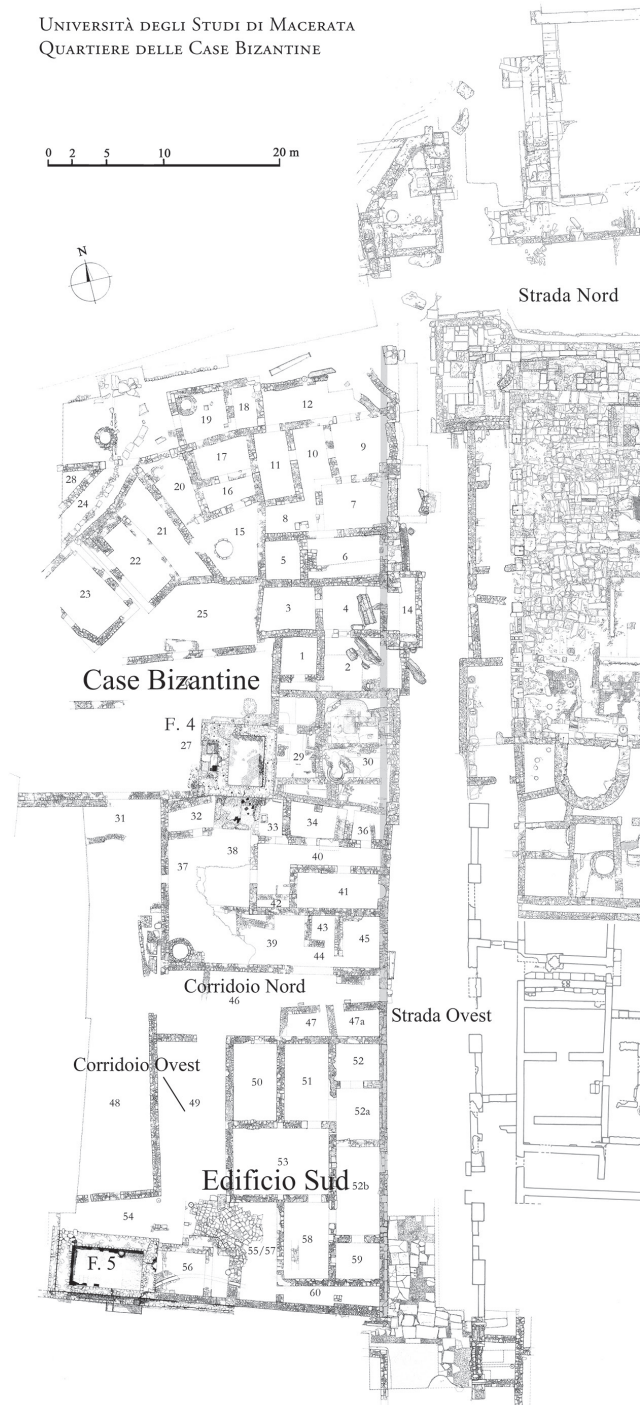


Fig. 1. The District of the byzantine Houses of Gortyna.

widespread from the end of the 4th to the first half of the 6th century AD (Portale and Romeo 2001: 279-289 and Portale 2011: 142-146) from *Zeugitana* and *Byzacena*, are attested. The presence of these two types is a clear sign, for this phase, of the low incidence in Gortyna of oil containers of African production, as well as in the Baths: (D'Aloe 2009) and in the *Praetorium* (Portale and Romeo 2001: 396).

The abundant arrival of ARSW and amphorae, although these do not provide a majority of the total imports, which include Aegean and Syro-Palestinian amphorae (Portale

² For the characteristics of the Gortynian contexts of the *Praetorium* and of the Byzantine Houses District (Di Vita 2000. See also Di Vita and Rizzo 2011; LANX 2009; Zanini and Costa 2011).



Fig. 2. Excavation area.

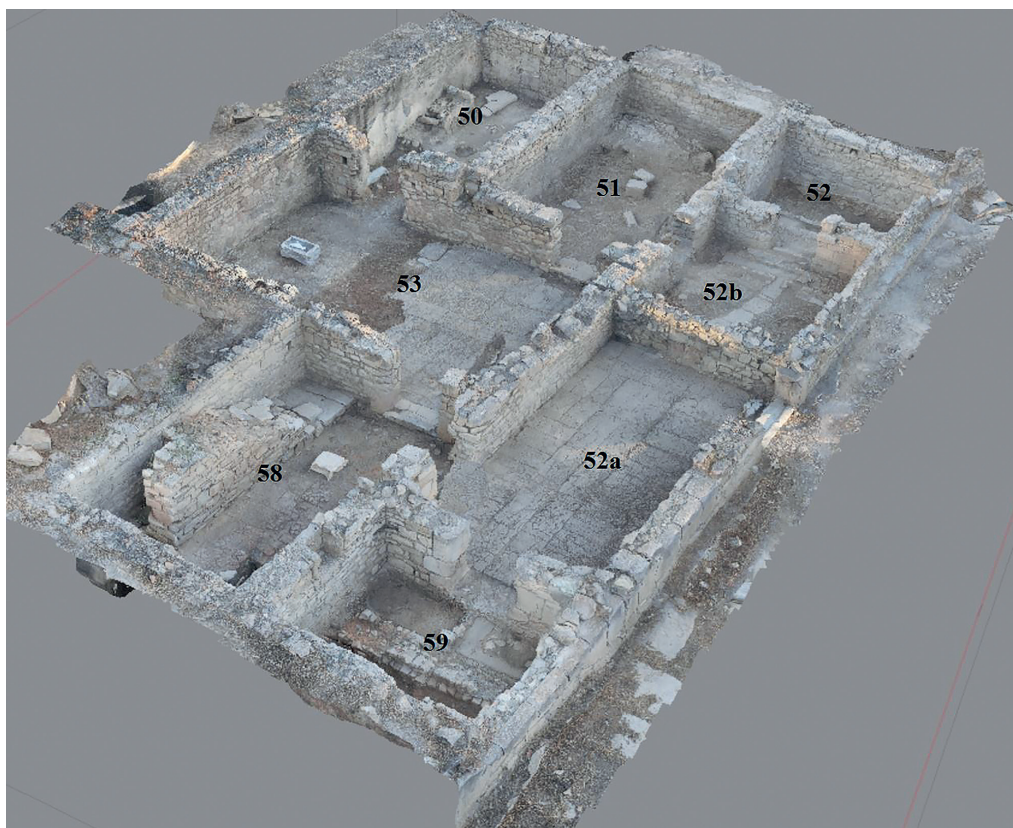


Fig. 3. The South Building of the District of byzantine Houses with numeration of the rooms.

and Romeo 2001: 393-406), confirms, for the period, the existence of maritime relations with the African world and the Proconsular Africa markets, and in general, the inclusion of Gortyna in a more articulated system of contacts and exchanges. The development of this trade is evidently linked to the changed historical-economic and political situation of the late Roman and proto-Byzantine age due to the foundation of Constantinople: Crete is at the centre of the new routes. The local economy, despite its significant production capacity, remained strongly depended on imported agricultural products; at the same time, the island became an important centre of redistribution of these goods, as documented by the presence of ARSW and the African amphorae (Portale and Romeo 2001: 384-406; Portale 2011: 170-179).

2. The reorganization of the building at the beginning of the 7th century AD

Later, the building was reorganized: room 50 was added between rooms 53 and 51. In the room 58 a drain was probably created and covered by a terracotta floor made of bipedal bricks.

ARSW D bowls Hayes 104C (GO'15.1305.1; mid the 6th-mid of the 7th centuries AD; **fig. 4**), and ARSW D1, Hayes 50B, no. 60 (GO'15.1242.7; see M. Giuliadori in this volume) come from this drain and the preparation of the floor.

On the basis of stratigraphic data these interventions date reasonably to the beginning of the 7th century AD and were followed by the construction of two small rooms (47 and 47a) which occupy a large part of the North Corridor area. A *caisson* tomb, now without the cover, was also built (T1; **fig. 5**) in the same area. These type of tombs (*cupae* or *cupulae*) appear at Gortyna, with the dead deposited in a pit deeply dug in the earth, covered with slabs and, higher, with, as a marker of the grave, a semi-cylindrical trunk (Rendini 2004b: 86-97; 322-325; Di Vita 2010: 349; Di Vita 1990-1991: 479-480). This type of burial relates to the African world, in particular to *Tripolitania* and Algeria; according to L. M. Stirling (2007) are rarely used by the highest ranks of society. It is a type widespread throughout the whole Western Mediterranean basin, not much in Greece. In Gortyna, there are a few significant examples dating to the 6th-7th centuries AD. In some cases the presence of conduits for libations, documenting an equally widespread practice in Africa, highlights these close relations and the ability to implement cultural models and funerary practices, perhaps linked to the presence of people of African origin. Within the material related to these interventions, among the most recent finds there is a LR8a *spatheion* (GO'14.1077.1) and ARSW D. The formation of such levels cannot, however, date before the mid 7th century AD.

The transformation of the South Building and its accessory parts may be linked to the start of a new administrative reorganization of the city with changes in the urban layout, which perhaps the earthquake in 618 AD may have accelerated, but which is still, chronologically and politically, at a stage in which the Emperor of Constantinople, Heraclius, was the determinate holder of a large kingdom that extended from North Africa to Egypt, and to Syria.

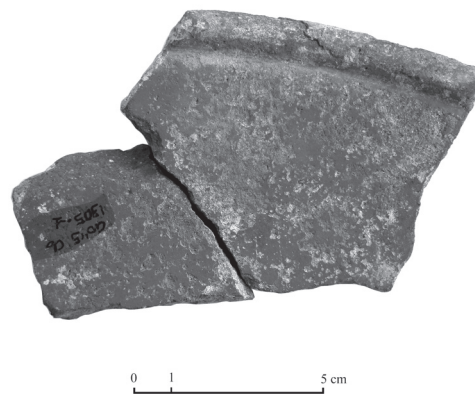


Fig. 4. Gortyna: fragment of Hayes 104C.

3. The functional reorganization of the Building at the end of the 7th century AD

The subsequent phases of life of the South Building are linked to its reorganization and re-functionalization. The construction of a wall (US636), divided the entrance corridor into two rooms (52b to the south: 3,76 x 7,62 m and 52a to north: 3,76 x 7,62 m), that perhaps formed two separately functioning areas.

Room 58 is now characterized by the presence of a work surface made of stones, architectural fragments and calcareous plates; the oldest channel was reused. The central room, 53, perhaps open at this stage, was probably characterised only by the presence of a small canopy. It might have formed a courtyard for farm animals/poultry. At its centre a small basin and, to the south, leaning against the perimeter wall, a rectangular arrangement highlighted by a narrow edge of stones was found.

Room 50, as the others, was reused for production and handicraft activities.

The material groups related to these phases are limited in number and not very noteworthy, with the exception of some later pieces of evidence, along with LRC productions dating between the 6th and 7th centuries AD, ARSW D2 items, which contribute to date these transformations at the end of the 7th century AD, are attested. According to Di Vita there was an earthquake in 670 AD (Vita 1979-1980: 435-440; Di Vita 1996: 45-50; Di Vita 2010: 87). In the second half of the 7th century AD, these changes could also have been promoted by the new role of Crete that, after the fall of Egypt and the first Arab raids, became a border province governed by local magistrates based in Gortyna.

The analysis of the materials shows the persistence of the good relationship between Gortyna and some of the main Byzantine markets, with foodstuffs coming mainly from the Aegean and Eastern areas; at the same time, it is also attested some trade with the African market, through the find of several ARSW D imports.³ In the 6th century AD, the repertoire of imported vases was reduced to a few recurring forms: the South Building excavations document, from Northern Tunisia,

³ As for these and the following phases, see M. Giuliadori in this volume.



Fig. 5. Caisson tomb in the North Corridor.

bowls Hayes 88, 101, 102, Hayes 104 / Bonifay 56A2, Hayes 104A, var. Atlante tav. XLII, 4, the flanged-bowl Hayes 91 and the cup Hayes 99A. The form Hayes 104 also recurs frequently in the *Praetorium* (Dello Preite 1997: 132-154; Rizzo 2001: 45-54; Lippolis et al. 2009: 107-108).

The period from the end of the 6th onwards is characterized by a more articulated and widespread presence, in particular of ARSW D production from Northern Tunisia, of dishes Hayes 90B, Hayes 109 (**fig. 6**) (type A of the end 6th-half 7th century AD, and C with *décor lustrée* of the second half of the 7th century AD), Hayes 111, bowls Hayes 104C (found particularly in 7th century layers of the Pretorium: Rizzo 2001: 45-54) and Hayes 105, which is the most widely attested vessel, both in the *Praetorium* (Lippolis et al. 2009: 107-108) and the Agora (Rizzo 2011: 86-87), and with almost 40 specimens in the Bonifay type 57A (**fig. 7**), datable between the end of the 6th and the first half of 7th century AD and the Bonifay type 57B, from the central decades of the 7th century AD. There are also cups of Hayes 106, Hayes 99B and C, Hayes 107, Hayes 108, and the flanged-bowl Hayes 91, in particular in the 7th century versions. This commercial dynamism is also confirmed by the conspicuous discovery of small *spatheia* (**fig. 8**), LR8a of the Berenice area, which replaced the previous LR8b, in Gortyna up to the mid 6th century. The small version LR8a increased in Gortyna after the second half of the 7th century. In fact, during the age of Heraclius as for the transport containers, i.e. the small *spatheia*, which, at least numerically replaced the others, indicate a continuity of relations with the African centres.

After an apparent weakening of trade relations, there is no doubt that the increase and greater variety of sealed

productions and, therefore, the increase of *spatheia* are connected to the new conditions following the re-conquest of Africa by Justinian.

Spatheia are used in the late-Justinianic age for the construction of some underground water pipes. The vessels, truncated at the bottom to guarantee their conjunction, were only in some areas of the city, as the *Praetorium* (Di Vita 2010; Rendini 2004a), so to represent a proof of a renewed commercial relationship with Africa after the Justinianic conquest.

Crete is therefore, even in the last Byzantine age, the meeting and redistribution point of goods and men, within the axis that connected Byzantium and the Byzantine Empire through the province of *Carthago Proconsularis* and the Exarchate of Africa. The island played a significant role when, in 698 AD, it hosted the troops returning from Africa to the capital after the failed attempt to gain Carthage. The overall increase of the *Spatheia* at the end of the 7th century probably was connected to these factors. It is likely that the fleet in Crete had refueled before returning to the North. For this reason, it is not possible to exclude the participation of Crete, especially its capital Gortyna, in the mechanisms of the military mandate in the 6th and 7th centuries, by supplying the food transported from containers produced in the island to troops stationed in the Northern *limes* (Portale and Romeo 2001: 384-406; Baldini et al. 2012: 280-290).

Although the island was not properly militarized (Baldini et al. 2012: 243-248), in the course of the 8th century AD it had a significant role in several military operations, probably hosting military contingents, so to increase necessarily its function as a node for the exchange of goods between North and South.



Fig. 6. Gortyna: fragment of Hayes 109.

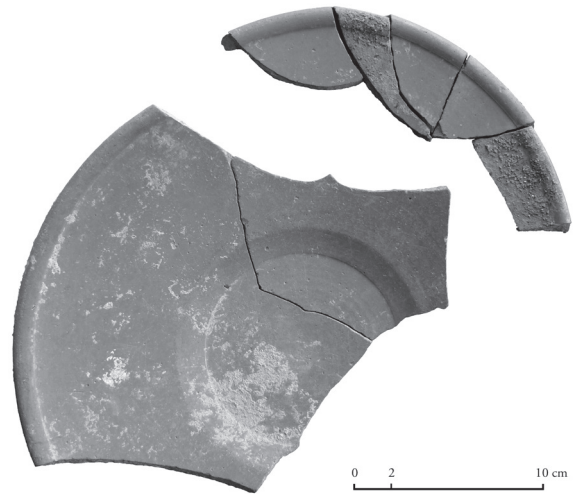


Fig. 7. Gortyna: fragment of Hayes 105 in the Bonifay type 57A.



Fig. 8. Gortyna: fragments of small *Spatheia*.

4. The reuse of the South Building

The previous phase of life seems to end after a ruinous earthquake: collapses are detected in all the rooms, rich in building material found in an earthy matrix with a lot of lime; the rooms are also characterised by extensive rearrangements and subsequent unloading of collapsed materials. The front facing the West Road was probably deprived, during this phase, of the calcarenite blocks of the cladding.

In particular, in some of the rooms, building materials have been identified as coming from nearby buildings. These were unloaded here in a disordered manner after the seismic event. Other rooms, more closely connected with the West Road,

document a more significant continuity of their function, as probably reused as a very poor housing, which alternated with non-settled and abandoned areas.

Extremely heterogeneous architectural fragments, by type, chronology, material, and building provenance are widely documented among the unloaded material.⁴ Among these, notwithstanding the general diffusion of African marbles, typical of this phase, and the large quantity of imported marbles, only one fragment of African origin has been identified: it is a piece of an yellow marble slab of Tunisian origin

⁴ The study of architectural fragments and stone has just been started by G. Montali.

(*marmor numidicum*). Apart from it, and perhaps an Algerian alabastrine with sheep and Greek script, which might come from Macedonia (Lazzarini 2001; Bonarrigo et al. 1987), African marbles are almost completely lacking at Gortyna.

Even taking into account the presence of Greek and micro-Asian marble workers, who operated from their regions (Pensabene and Lazzarini 2004), these data match with the study of ceramic productions for these phases of the middle imperial age, and confirm a reduced presence of African products and therefore a scarce relevance of the commercial relations between the two areas.

The material contexts linked chronologically to these dumping have given back, among the dating material, a significant quantity of over-painted pottery. It is a regional ceramic production with a very limited diffusion and attestations also at Apodoulou, Iraklion and the islet of Mochlos in the North, on the sea of Africa Gaudos.

Its production starts from the end of the 6th century up to the 9th century AD. The overpainted decorations consist mainly of stylized geometric or phytomorphic elements, but also zoomorphs. The relationship between this type of pottery at Gortyna and other painted productions attested from the end of the 7th century in the Mediterranean have to be investigated. On the morpho-typological analysis of the production see Vitale 2008, Vitale 2001: 86-113; Vitale Magnelli 2004: 1001-1011; Rizzotto 2009. Concerning the cup from Pseira Poulou-Papadimitriou 1995: 1122; about the two fragments from Gaudos, Κόσσυβα et al. 2004: 406; about the fragments from Apodoulou Di Vita 1988-89: 458, note 28. Finally, concerning the dish from Iraklion Poulou-Papadimitriou 2001: 236 and Poulou-Papadimitriou 2008: 153, fig. 1).

Along with the over-painted pottery and, among the African materials, numerous *spatheia* and ARSW D (GO'14.1225.1; GO'14.1234.2; GO'15.1262.177; GO'15.1263.1; GO'15.1262.15; GO'15.1263.8), both in the late form Hayes 109 and in ARSW D4 (Atlante XLI, 4 var. tarda/Bonifay 49.1; **fig. 9**), dating from the end of the 7th century onwards. In addition, late ARSW D4 and late red-slipped ware, dating to the 7th-early 8th century AD, are attested as well as kitchen glazed pottery, whose production starts from the end of the 7th century AD.

The materials from these layers, analysed as a whole, refer to contexts of the end of the 7th century AD, characterised by the presence of materials whose diffusion – on the basis of current know-ledge from the Gortynian contexts – also continues in the 9th century AD. In particular, together with flask oil lamps, numerous late Aegean amphorae (GO'12.975.25; GO'14.1225.35; GO'14.1225.68; GO'14.1234.28; GO'14.1234.29; GO'14.1234.30; GO'08.930b.37; GO'08.930c.7), dating between the 7th and 8th centuries AD, TRC7 (GO'15.1256.45; GO'15.1263.52; GO'15.1263.59; GO'15.1304.72) and Saraçhane types (GO'08.930a.19; GO'08.930b.32), dating from the end of the 7th to the 8th century AD are attested.

In these layers there is also a significant quantity of over-painted pottery, which is likely the most widespread fine ware in these contexts (Vitale 2008). Few shapes are identifiable as some fragments belonging to the Vitale IIA carinated cup, variant 1. Numerous goblet glasses are also attested.

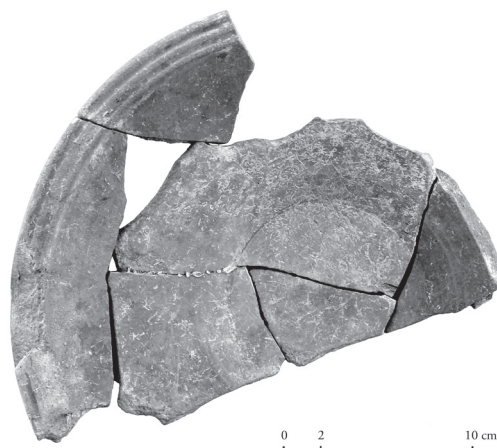


Fig. 9. Gortyna: ARSW D4 *Atlante XLI,3-4* type.

The most recent data, therefore, allow us to hypothesize that the destructive event and the definitive abandonment of the Building may be subsequent to a date around the 8th century AD, perhaps linked to the earthquake of 720 AD (Guidoboni 1989: 707-708. Cf. also Perna 2014).

5. The later occupation

It is difficult to analyse the following phases of use as the building collapsed and disjointed into several units, of one or two rooms each, as evidenced by the infilling of some doors. Seemingly, the Eastern area remained more uncluttered.

From the material contexts, among the most significant materials, connected chronologically to the collapse and of African origin, are the over-painted Byzantine pottery, Byzantine lamps, *spatheia* LR8a (GO'15.1294.32; GO'15.1301.25; 1301.32; GO'15.1304.83), ARSW D1 bowl Hayes 106 (GO'15.1296.4.) and ARSW D Hayes 109B (GO'12.US 1039.2; GO'12.1200.4, 6).

In the area of the Northern Corridor, thick layers of rubbish dump, made of bone, coal, but above all ceramics, were subsequently accumulated, with numerous almost-complete pieces of amphorae, lamps and common ware forms; this could be due to a seismic event, perhaps that in 796 AD (Teofane, 470, 5-10) since it contains materials in circulation, as ARSW D dishes (GO'12.1004.12-17), and fragments of late red-slipped ware (GO'12.1004.28) dating between the end of 7th and the beginning of 8th centuries AD.

A high percentage of the materials coming from the excavation of the Southern Building is, therefore, linked closely to these last phases and destruction of the District. As highlighted by M. Giuliadori in this volume, the analysis of the material contexts testifies to the existence of relationships with the African, the Aegean and Eastern markets, and, in particular, with the later artefacts of internal and coastal Tunisia, to the so-called D4 production.

The presence of this pottery in these contexts demonstrates how in the late period the contacts with the African world were

still alive as confirmed by the discovery of small *spatheia* LR8a (GO'15.1294.32; GO'15.1301.25; 1301.32; GO'15.1304.83). The diffusion of these last examples in the 8th century AD, along with the study of other ceramics of the same chronological context, still ongoing, would offer interesting information.

For these phases a large quantity of Byzantine oil lamps, in some cases in association with ceramics from Saraçhane and Glazed pottery, was also found. Among the later materials, we can list TRC7 amphorae (GO'15.1294.28; GO'15.1304.72; GO'07.1002.9, 10) and the fine ware as a fragment of Cypriot Red-Slipped ware of late form 9B and C (GO'12.1200.11; 12; GO'07.1007.16). The latter is considered characteristic of the 7th century AD but, on the basis of recent studies (Poulou-Papadimitriou and Nodarou 2007: 755-766), might have been produced also throughout the whole 8th century AD; in particular with regard to the form 9B-C, accompanied by derivative amphorae from the LR1 and LR2 types/ Yassi Ada 2, already attested to Gortyna.

Among the fine productions there is also a dish, belonging perhaps to the cream-slipped ware (GO'12.1202.2) and, so, dating beyond the end of the 7th century AD. Noteworthy the presence of a glazed spout (GO'12.1201.13), which finds morphological comparisons with coarse products widespread in particular after the end of the same century.

Likely, there was a contraction of imports, perhaps only a regionalisation and a partial closure of the markets

according to a phenomenon already attested in the 7th and 8th centuries AD (Veikou 2013: 133). This corresponds both to an increase in fine local productions, as the over-painted Byzantine ceramics being the most typical fine ware for these phases and gradually replacing imported productions. The frequency of this pottery, although attested throughout the area of ancient Gortyna, increases in the stratigraphy of the *Praetorium*, especially near the Byzantine Houses, i.e. the only conserved area of the 7th-9th century settlement methodically investigated in the superficial layers of the last abandonment. Among the findings, it is worth mentioning a single-handled jug type C (GO'12.1039.14) and a single-handled cup (GO'12.1004.31).

The presence of hand-made pottery, as the small 'olla' (Perna 2016: 580-581), attests the gradual deterioration of quality of the coarse ware production. In sum, after the collapse and the filling, the analysis of the data from the archaeological excavations, although still ongoing, demonstrates that the site continued to be in use in the 8th century AD, despite the fact that the settlement reduced in size and the surrounding area underwent to process of progressive and advanced ruralisation. Public activity was no longer performed there, but was likely transferred to the Acropolis (Perna 2012: 167-178), in line with the words spent by *Andrea Damascus*, who writes about the withdrawal, albeit temporary, of the population to a hill (*Vita Andreae hierosol.* 8, 177).

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