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**A PECULIAR ROMAN CONTEXT IN VICENZA****A new approach on Pottery and Amphorae****Introduction**

The analysis of the amphora contexts recovered in Vicenza (**fig. 1**) allows to understand which foodstuffs were imported and consumed in the town, and also which were the different conditions of use of the amphoras for draining and stability purposes<sup>1</sup>. Among all the contexts found in Vicenza, Contrà della Piarda (**fig. 2**) allowed to examine the relationship between an earthwork and the artefacts, with the intent to find out information on earthwork chronology.

**The context**

The Roman town of *Vicetia*, in eastern *Cisalpina*, is located at the intersection of the rivers Astico and Retrone and the *via Postumia*. The *via Postumia*, built in 145 BC, is the principal urban axis of the town, which in Augustan time had a general rearrangement, with the construction of the *forum*, the theatre and the city walls<sup>2</sup>.

The eastern part of the town, naturally protected by the rivers, was exposed to river floods and for this reason it required a particular defence.

In 1993 in Contrà della Piarda an archaeological excavation brought to light part of an earthwork (width 19 m, height 6,80 m) made of different horizontal layers. With the same alignment, a few meters nearer to the town, the medieval city walls are still visible. The lower part of the earthwork was made of a double layer of amphoras and pottery, covered in turn by layers without pottery and, eventually, by less regular layers with pottery (**fig. 3**).

The basis of the earthwork was constituted by horizontal levels which cover a surface which at the increase of the height becomes narrow. Layers rich in archaeological finds were overlapped to others devoid of finds, or made of clay or sand.

At the bottom of the earthwork the amphoras were placed on two overlapped layers: in US 145 there are 153 amphoras, in US 155 there are 158 amphoras; in total the amphoras were 311.

In the lower layer the amphoras are mainly upside down, arranged in parallel lines; in the southern part of the archaeological site some amphoras are sloping, with the rim downward (**fig. 4**); only two amphoras, in the central area, have the rim upwards. The upper level seems to be more articulate and almost all the amphoras have inclined or horizontal position (**fig. 5**).

The amphoras different position, upside-down or horizontal, is probably related with their function in the earthwork; the two opposite positions of the amphoras reinforced the foundation of the structure.

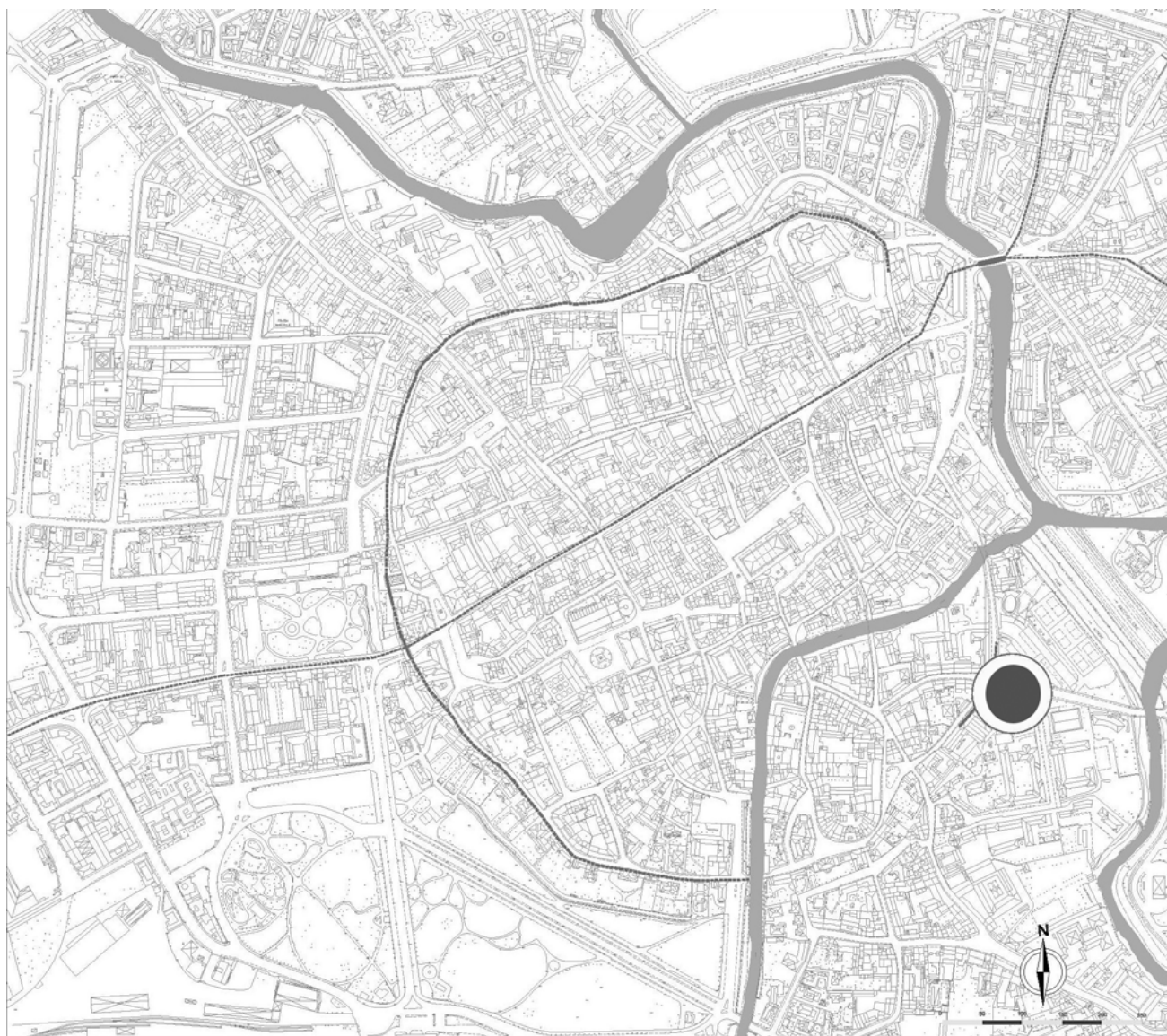
The number of the amphoras employed in the two levels is the comparable, similarly the typology of the amphoras is equivalent.



**Fig. 1.** Localization of Vicenza, in north-east Italy.

<sup>1</sup> MAZZOCCHIN 2013: the publication is a PhD thesis discussed at Università degli Studi di Padova, in collaboration with Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici del Veneto. Le immagini presentate in questo contributo sono edite su concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo, riproduzione vietata.

<sup>2</sup> For the chronological and morphological setting of the town see: RIGONI 1987; ID. 1987b; BONETTO 2009 and lastly MAZZOCCHIN 2013.



**Fig. 2.** Map of roman *Vicetia* with the rivers Astico and Retrone, the *via Postumia* and the city walls. The black dot shows Contrà della Piarda (map elaboration: A. Scarpa).

### The amphoras and the pottery

On the whole, amphoras are 311; they are largely made of Adriatic and nord-Italic products (82,64 %, especially Dressel 6A and Dressel 6B), with substantial contributions of eastern Mediterranean materials of great typological variety (12,54 %, in particular Rodian amphoras, Dressel 25, AC3 and AC4 from Crete); only 3,54 % of the amphoras comes from Spain (Dressel 7–11) (**fig. 6**). The concurrent presence in Contrà della Piarda context of these types of amphoras suggests that the assemblage was formed around the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

A total of 53 stamps were recovered mostly on Dressel 6A and Dressel 6B amphoras; on Dressel 7–11 amphoras were recovered two *tituli picti* and eventually on a Lamboglia 2 amphora was recovered a *graffito* (**fig. 7**).

The Dressel 6A amphoras with the stamps of *gentes Ebidia* and *Ebidiena* come from the Cisalpine area, others,

characterized by *Herennii*, *T. Helvius Basila* and *Bar(---)* stamps, come from *Picenum*.

The stamps on Dressel 6B amphoras suggest that the oil comes from Cisalpine or Po valley and from *Histria*, less from Luron workshop, further from Fasana<sup>3</sup>. The stamps can be dated from the Augustan period to the half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

The pottery recovered among the amphoras consists of 1289 fragments (**fig. 8**). The grey pottery (cups, bowls and pots)<sup>4</sup> and part of the coarse ware (especially pots and lids) represent the Venetic traditional pottery (**fig. 9**). This kind of pottery was widespread in Cisalpine between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. The grey pottery and the coarse ware were

<sup>3</sup> An in-depth analysis of the stamps is in CIPRIANO/MAZZOCCHIN 2011a and in MAZZOCCHIN 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Grey pottery is the typical element of 'romanization'; it is particularly common during the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC and it is still present, with late productions, until the 1<sup>st</sup> c. AD: SANTORO BIANCHI 2005, 105–106; CASSANI ET AL. 2007, 249–254.

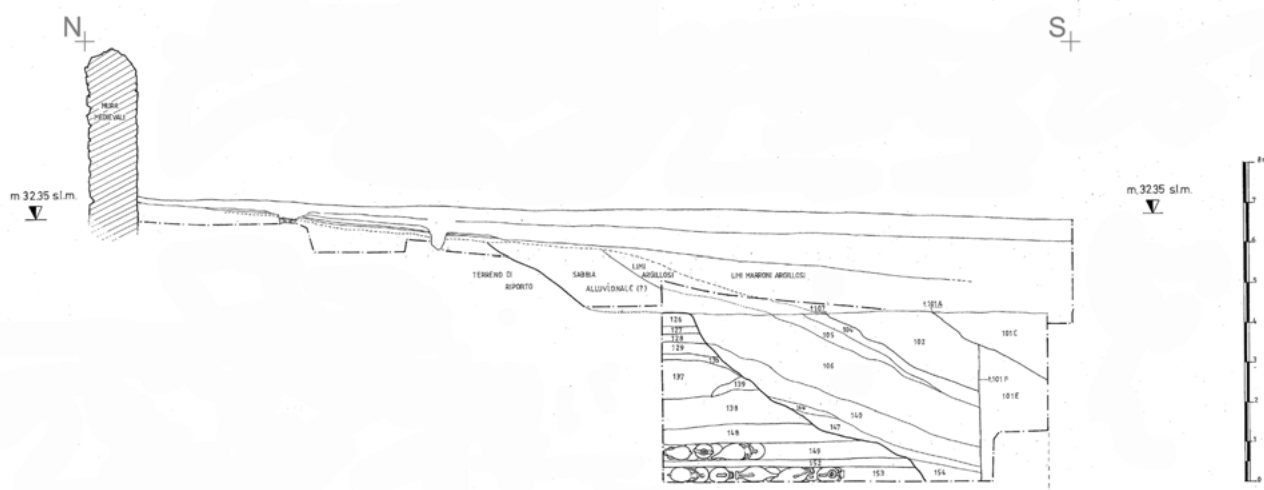


Fig. 3. The excavation section with the earthwork profile and context numbers.

produced in different kilns, such as the via Montona kilns in *Patavium*, whose activity is dated between the second half of 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and the half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD<sup>5</sup>.

All the typical Roman pottery classes are attested, as such as black glazed pottery, table ware, thin walled pottery, sigillata aretina, italic sigillata, Padana B and C sigillata, along with a few fragments of ESA (fig. 10,1–7).

22 stamps were recovered on terra sigillata specimens, 11 on aretina sigillata, eight on Padana B and one on an eastern sigillata cup; eight stamp-frames are rectangles, 11 are *planta pedis*, and only one stamp has a flower shape (fig. 11). On aretina sigillata were recovered the names of *Gellius*, *L. Gellius*, *C. Murrius*, *Perennius* and *M. Perennius*

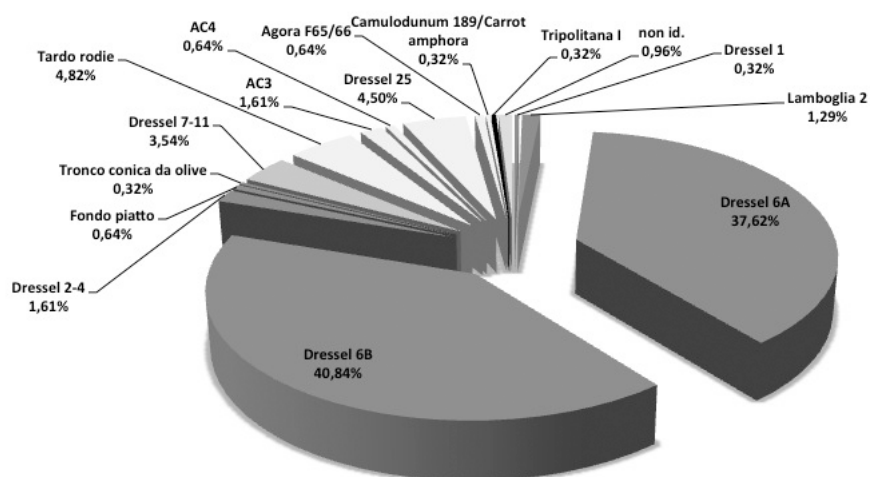


Fig. 4. The lower level of amphoras during the excavation.

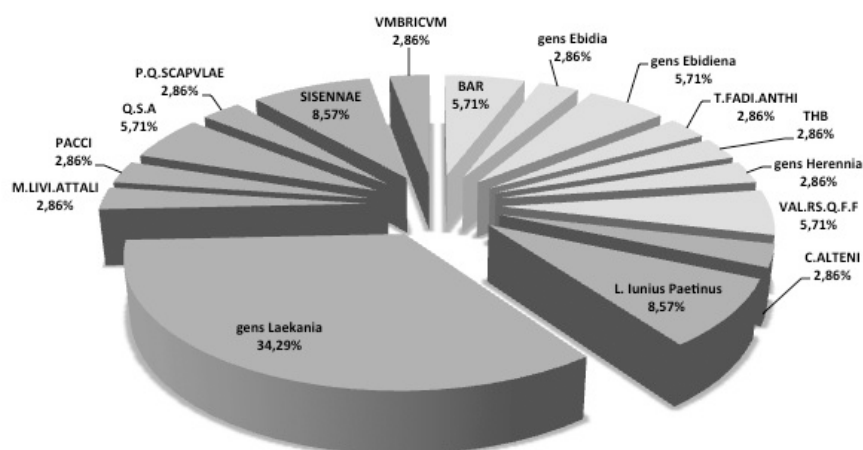
<sup>5</sup> I colori della terra 2007, 84–90; 106–125 tav. 14,15–16; 22; CIPRIANO/MAZZOCCHIN 2011b, 193–195 fig. 5; for archaeometrical analysis on pottery see in particular: CIPRIANO/MAZZOCCHIN/MARITAN 2014.



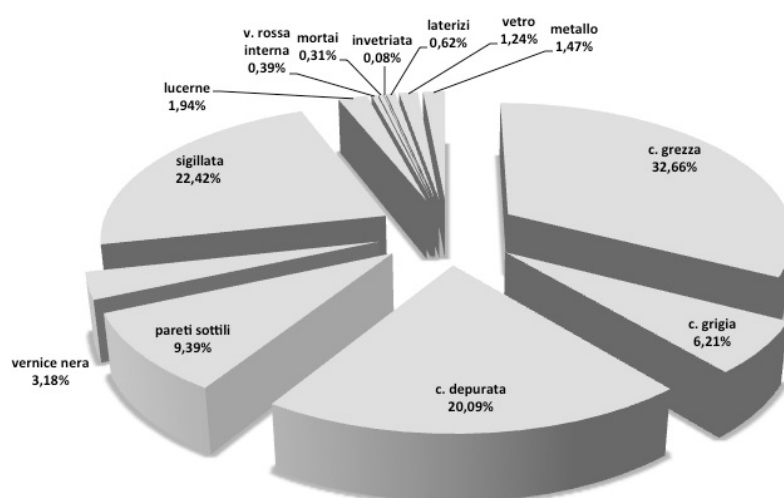
Fig. 5. The upper level of amphoras during the excavation.



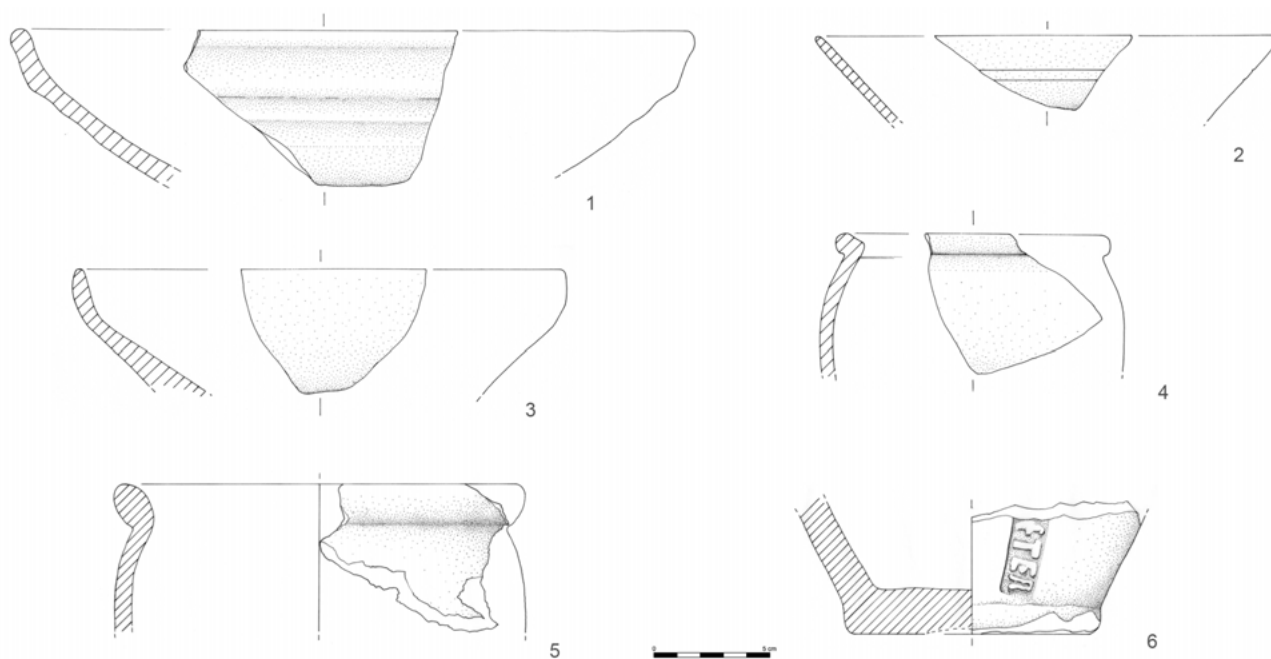
**Fig. 6.** The amphoras recovered in the earthwork: proportions and typology.



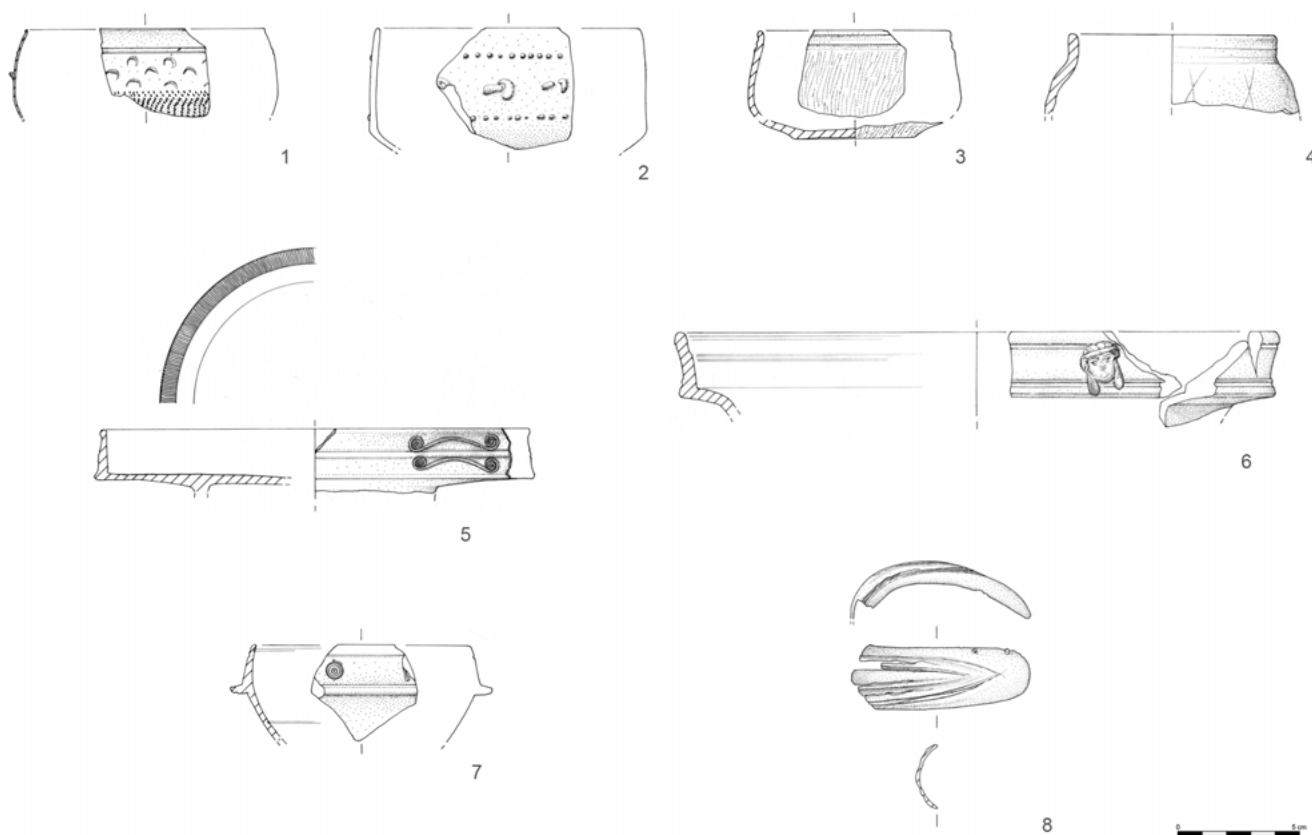
**Fig. 7.** The amphora stamps.



**Fig. 8.** The pottery recovered in the earthwork: proportions and typology.



**Fig. 9.** The pottery: 1–3 grey pottery; 4–6 coarse ware (drawings: S. Tinazzo, M. Quarello).



**Fig. 10.** The pottery: 1–4 thin walled pottery; 5–7 terra sigillata; 8 strigilis (drawings: S. Tinazzo, M. Quarello).

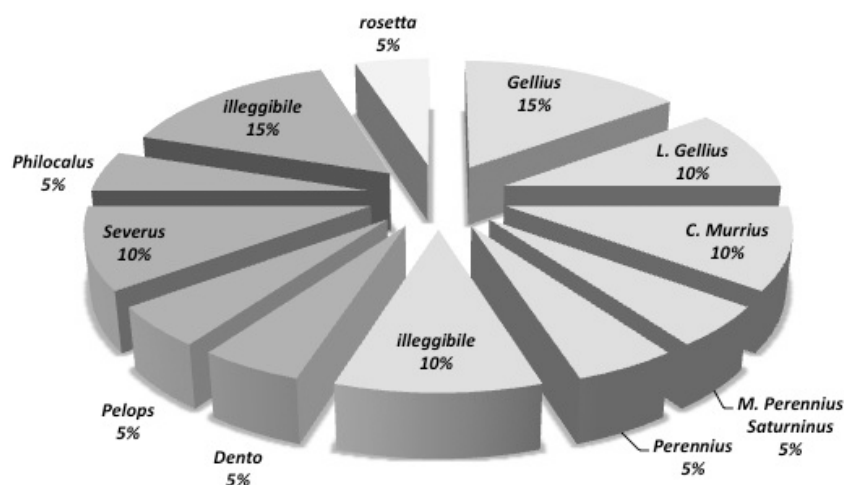


Fig. 11. Terra sigillata stamps.

*Saturninus*; on Padana B were recovered the names of *Dento*, *Pelops*, *Philocalus* and *Severus*. The stamps can be dated from 15 BC to 50 AD.

Among the small finds there are some iron and bronze *fibulae* and a *strigilis* (fig. 10,8); two mosaic glass cups and one displaying a polychrome ribbon decoration were also recovered.

The analysis of the re-used amphorae and the pottery associated reveals that the structure was not erected before the second quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD; the type of structure is closely related with a public authority, in condition both to plan the collection of the amphorae present in the town and to direct in this place quantities of pottery daily discarded. These objects were immediately used to stabilise the amphorae, apparently without any selection, as among them there are small amounts of metal and glass objects, which were usually recycled.

S. M.

### Notes on the earthwork formation and dating

Before examining the context as a whole, some observations have to be devoted to the issue of possible intrusions; the section of the earthwork which has been excavated is likely to have been built in a relatively short time lapse (say far beyond the common accuracy of our archaeological observations), thus the bulk of the sediments and materials which form it were not exposed for long (I will go back to this point later). Furthermore, there is no reported evidence concerning later robbing activities or similar processes which may have affected the deposit (after all, it is not located in the central area of the settlement). Eventually, the natural degradation of the eastern slopes of the embankment seems to have produced the removal of some materials more than the addition and mixing of new volumes of matter. Although there is no data for assessing the role of bioturbation, we can conclude that the bulk of the deposit (particularly the deeper strata) is substantially well sealed.

Given this, a first step consists of trying to date when the embankment was built, which is, in itself, a very interesting point from an historical point of view. For doing that, it seems

convenient starting with the strata which seem more reliable and which may lead to some *ad quem* dating, moving then to the rest of the evidence and checking its consistence with the provisional conclusions drawn.

Although amphorae do not seem to be the most accurate dating artefacts, their peculiar depositional context suggests in this case to start with them, *i.e.* with US 145 and 155. As anticipated above, the two contexts are made up exclusively of complete or subcomplete vessels, which were intentionally employed for evident draining and stability purposes. It is then worth asking how the amphorae turned out to get embedded within the earthwork. Given their physical state and their large availability in Roman times, in this case the vessels were already part of the archaeological record (say buried); most probably they were simply picked out from the circulating or provisionally stored ones. Of course before being eventually reused for building the earthwork, they may have lived a more or less long life, passing through further reuse, storage and so on. Nonetheless, in general, amphorae, because of their use and availability, were not particularly curated and lived a life usually shorter than our higher time definition (10, 25 years?) when dating a given deposit; indeed T. Peña tentatively estimated the length of an amphora primary use in five years<sup>6</sup>. Concluding, the amphorae recovered were part of the same systemic context (surely palimpsestic) in which the earthwork was built and it follows the possibility of some *ad quem* dating.

The chronological profile of the recovered specimen turned out to be incredibly coherent, thus strengthening the hypothesis that they were mainly systemic. The residuality or false residuality rate was indeed very low. The main problem which follows is with no doubt the very large range which usually represent the date of most amphora types. In our case a group of stamped specimens provided a lucky and important chance for narrowing some dates and proposing a more precise *terminus post quem*, which can be safely put at the beginning of the Claudian age (41–54 AD). Eventually, the vast majority of the recovered amphorae was not diffused

<sup>6</sup> PEÑA 2007, 325–327.

anymore after the beginning of 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, thus a dating to the period 41–100 AD for the construction of the embankment section investigated seems by far the most probable, with the first decades of this period (say before 60 AD) being the best option, given the common use-life of an amphora, the status of the deposit and the overall chronological distribution of the specimens forming the assemblage.

It is now possible to turn the rest of the deposit: first of all it has to be stressed that among the remaining studied assemblage there were no artefact dates in contrast with the date proposed for the construction of the earthwork. Some vessels of samian ware, whose distribution is generally dated starting from 30–40 AD, provided a very consistent *terminus post quem*, while only one specimen of coarse ware has been generically dated to the second half of the century. Given the unquestionable chronological and functional unity of the layers forming the earthwork (at least of the lower ones) the same date (41–100/41–60 AD) has to be advanced also for the formation of US 149, 152, 153, made of redeposited sediments and artefacts remains (fig. 3).

In its entirety, the assemblage of the three contexts (the vast majority of it is produced by US 149 alone) could be divided into three different chronological groups: a first group represented by materials more or less contemporary with the embankment construction (i.e. the most recent ones), a second group made of slightly older materials, which may have been false residuals, and a third group consisting with no doubt of residuals. The last one raises, in this case, fewer interpretive problems, as residual sherds were most probably already present within the sediments (re-)deposited for filling the empty spaces.

Although no detailed record is available, at first sight, this group display a general high level of fragmentation.

Some more stimulating conclusions can be drawn from the other two groups. False residuals are those items which are generally curated and preserved for some time before being discarded, i.e. they lived a particularly long life<sup>7</sup>; this may be due to their use (a *dolium* for instance, once buried, is likely to get used for long with no substantial changes) or their value (heirlooms, high status artefacts etc.). This process of curation is documented also for Roman times, in particular concerning samian ware/terra sigillata<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, in our case, it has been observed that a great part of the materials which are slightly more ancient than the earthwork is represented by items of some value such as terra sigillata, thin walled pottery, black glazed pottery and bronze and glass objects. These items seemed to show a lower level of brokenness and, although curated for some time, they were probably still systemic just before the earthwork was built. In this sense their final history may well have been the same of the ‘fully contemporary’ items. These were present in a good number and seemed also to show a low degree of brokenness.

At this point, the main question is: ‘how were the artefacts of the first two groups embedded within the earthwork?’

Three main points has to be considered when answering the question:

1. they were systemic (‘alive’) just before the earthwork was built;
2. they seem to display a low level of fragmentation;
3. they are largely present in the lower levels, i.e. among the amphorae, but rare in the upper levels.

These elements suggest the fact that these items were deliberately discarded where they were eventually recovered, probably for filling the space among the amphorae. In particular their abundance in the upper layer (the one with worse preserved amphorae) seems to suggest that, after having laid down a layer with the most suitable vessels, the upper one was put together with ‘second choice’ materials.

Given the most probable public nature of the infrastructure, it is likely that the town waste stream was at least partially redirected to the building site for some time, thus providing freshly discarded items for the drainage area. This mechanism is not entirely unknown, having been suggested in the case of London Roman embankment<sup>9</sup>; it is likely to have occurred also in the case of Adria, via Retratto<sup>10</sup>, where tens of almost intact vessels were discovered as part of the bank rearrangement, thus, again, on the riverside.

Some final observations are due to the presence of very few particularly valuable items, such as the bronze and glass objects. Their low number does not surprise, as they were usually extensively reused or recycled, thus picked out from the waste stream before being dumped. Anyhow one could ask why these few items eventually turned out to get dumped. I suggest that in this case a key role may have been played by a peculiarity which discriminate this context by a common dump, that is the fact that the lower levels were substantially sealed off in a very short time with the deposition of further amounts of sediments. In a few words the dumped materials remained exposed for a very short time; this entails that the last agent in the ‘chain of waste’, that is scavenging, did never have the chance to play a substantial role. This may explain the presence of the low amount of valuable items recovered: they may have narrowly passed through the main filters of the stream without facing the last one.

Concluding, a closer examination of the assemblage from a formative point of view allowed a structured proposal of dating for the earthwork (thus providing an important historical element) and casted some light on the processes involved in its construction, particularly on waste management and on the very evanescent activities of scavenging, which for sure sadly occurred in ancient cities in the same way it happens today. The effect of these processes on the record produced by Roman towns is usually underestimated and poorly evaluated; this case study clearly shows how these topics can be profitably tackled and exploited.

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<sup>7</sup> See in particular Rizzo 2003, 21; id. 1998, 811–812. See also Zanini/Costa 2011; Schindler-Kaudelka/Zabehlicky-Scheffenecker 2007; Schiffer 1995. The case of coins long circulation is peculiar: see Gorini 1999/2000; Guest 2007; Lockyear 2009; id. 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Mogetta/Terrenato 2007, 118; Wallace 2006; Giot/Languet 1984, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Miller/Schofield/Rhodes 1986.

<sup>10</sup> Mantovani 2014.

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