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PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON THE PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF TERRA SIGILLATA EXCISA IN NORTHERN ITALY

New data from recent excavations at Calvatone-Bedriacum

Calvatone-Bedriacum: digging a Roman *vicus*

The *vicus* of *Bedriacum*, a small Roman site in Northern Italy identified two kilometres away from the modern town of Calvatone (about 35 km east of *Cremona*)¹, has been under investigation since 1986 by the University of Milan, in collaboration with the Superintendency for the Archaeological Heritage of Lombardy, expanding the research carried out by the Superintendency in 1957–1961². The synergy between the two institutions has allowed the systematic exploration of that part of the Roman *vicus* which is located within the limits of the so called “area di proprietà provinciale”, a rural area purchased in 1964 by the Province of Cremona after the notification by the Superintendency of its archaeological interest³ (fig. 1).

The archaeological excavations carried out at the site, known to the ancient sources as the «*vicus infaustus*» near which took place the battles of AD 69 for the possession of the imperial power after Nero’s death⁴, have provided a picture of a lively trading centre, founded in the second half of the 2nd century BC in the middle of the Po Valley, at the intersection between the consular *via Postumia* and the Oglio river, a left-side tributary of the Po river (fig. 2). The University of Milan has carried out over the years an impressive research program, bringing to light a *vicus* characterized by an articulated town-planning (fig. 3)⁵. Luxury houses have been identified in the southern residential quarter (“Scavo Sud”, 1988–2000)⁶ and in the north-eastern residential quarter, which consists of the area of the House of the Labyrinth (“Area della *Domus* del Labirinto”, 2001–2006)⁷ and the area of the House of the *Kantharos* (“Area della *Domus* del *Kantharos*”, 2008–2009)⁸. Between 2005 and 2013 the excavations were carried out in the Artisans’ Quarter (“Quartiere degli Artigiani”), a quarter



Fig. 1. The modern town of Calvatone and the “area di proprietà provinciale”, where the *vicus* of *Bedriacum* has been identified (UniMI archive).

that shows all the characteristics of an artisan and productive zone, located between the two residential areas⁹. Up to now only a public building has been identified, a porch with a commercial function (“Saggio Nord”, 1994–1995)¹⁰, but the presence of public and commercial areas in the *vicus* is also demonstrated by the discovery of important artefacts related to them¹¹. The latest explorations (2014) carried out in the north-western area have revealed perhaps a new residential quarter¹².

The flow of goods across the *vicus*, which is oriented to the Adriatic market because of its geographic position, is uninterrupted until the Late Roman period (4th–5th century AD), attested in particular by coins and North-African products¹³.

The key-role of “transit centre” for goods that supplied the economy of Northern Italy allowed *Bedriacum* to develop

¹ GRASSI 2013a, 16–18: discovery and identification of the Roman *vicus*.

² Since 2005 the research project has been directed by Prof. Maria Teresa Grassi (University of Milan), to whom I express my gratitude for giving me the opportunity to study the pottery presented in this paper and for supporting me in the research.

³ Between 1957 and 1961 the Superintendent of Lombardy, Mario Mirabella Roberti, carried out archaeological excavations in this area, finding some structures related to the ancient settlement. GRASSI 2013a, 18–19.

⁴ TACITUS, *Historiae* 2,23,5.

⁵ See www.progettocalvatone.unimi.it.

⁶ SENA CHIESA 1998.

⁷ GRASSI 2013b.

⁸ GRASSI/PALMIERI 2011.

⁹ BACCHETTA 2009, INTAGLIATA 2014.

¹⁰ SENA CHIESA ET AL. 1997.

¹¹ We mention only the bronze statue of the Winged Victory, dedicated between AD 161 and AD 169 and destined to a public area (GRASSI 2013a, 16–17), and the “*mensa ponderaria*”, destined to a public and commercial area (GRASSI 2007).

¹² GRASSI/ZENONI/PALMIERI 2014.

¹³ Note that the conspicuous presence of African Red Slip Ware in the *vicus* has allowed *Bedriacum* to be considered one of the most significant sites in the framework of the distribution of this pottery in Northern Italy (GRASSI 2002).

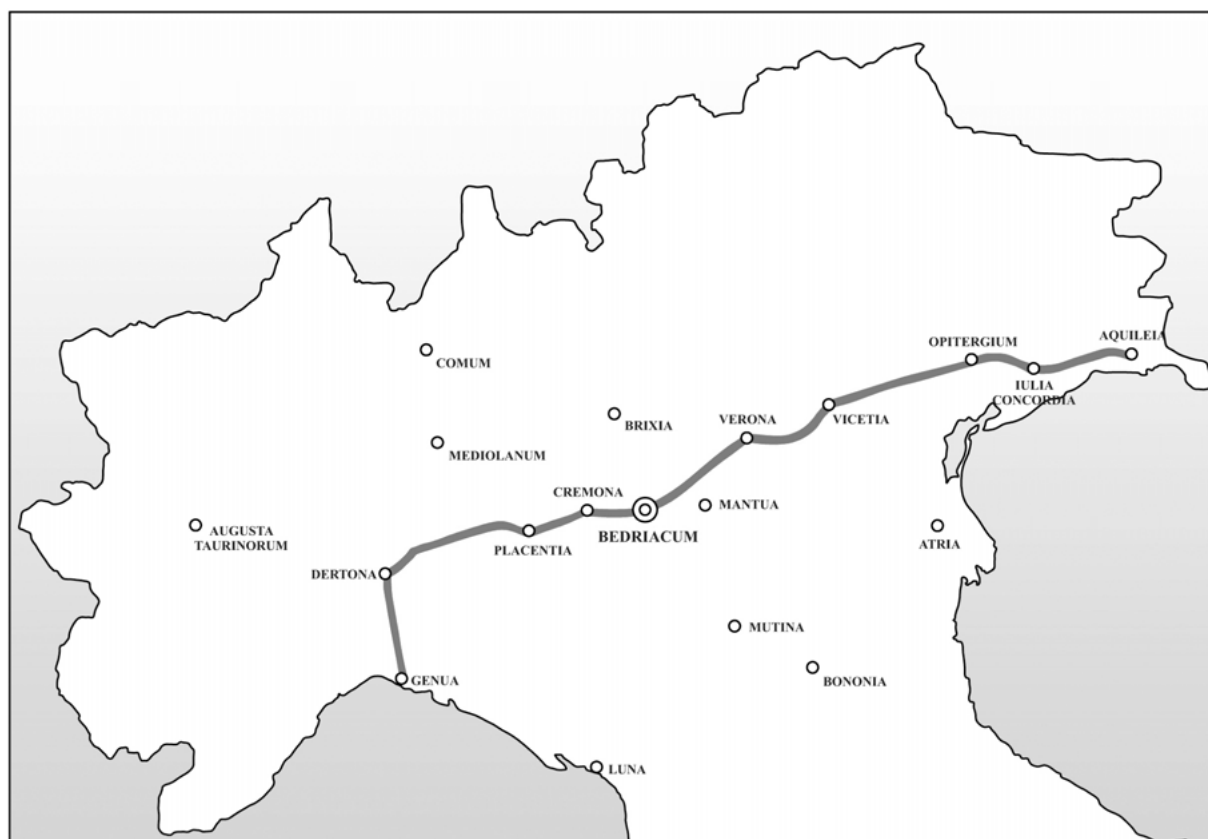


Fig. 2. The *vicus* of *Bedriacum* and the *via Postumia* (UniMI archive).

over the centuries a great commercial activity, marked by the presence of artefacts and products not widespread throughout the Roman empire.

Terra sigillata excisa from Calvatone-Bedriacum: forms and decorations

Thanks to the new excavations carried out in the last fourteen years in the northern residential area and in the Artisans' Quarter, the evidence of *terra sigillata excisa*¹⁴ at Calvatone-Bedriacum has been multiplied with the discovery of 21 new sherds, moving from three to ten vessels and adding to the framework already known six completely new vessels. Although the sherds are of great interest because of their morphological and technological features, we must point out that this production represents a very small percentage of the total of *terra sigillata* found in the *vicus* (e.g. Artisans' Quarter = 0.6 %).

Up to now, we know from *Bedriacum* only two forms of vessels, a type of beaker and a type of cylindrical bowl, whilst we can find more variety in the decorations, characterized by different decorative schemes.

The only example of an entirely reconstructed vessel of *terra sigillata excisa* from the *vicus* was found in the old excavations of Calvatone-Bedriacum (1957), coming from

a pit located near a public building used as landfill for commercial activities. It is a beaker Déchelette form 72 (fig. 4,1), with an everted rim and a distinct and upper rounded lip, two horizontal incisions on the shoulder, a globular body and a footring¹⁵. On its wall there are lozenge patterns which form triangles arranged alternately with the vertex at the top and the bottom. Because of its technological features – hard light red fabric and polished red slip – the beaker was attributed to the Rhenish production of the 3rd century AD¹⁶.

The new excavations carried out in the Artisans' Quarter have provided five new sherds belonging to this form, all unpublished. The sherds belong to two different beakers and come from the abandonment layers of the area dated to the 3rd century AD. These are two sherds of wall (fig. 4,2)¹⁷ decorated with lozenge patterns combined together, perhaps to form triangles arranged alternately with the vertex at the top and the bottom, and two horizontal incisions on the

¹⁴ With the expression “*terra sigillata excisa*” we mean “*incised sigillata*”, according to OSWALD/PRYCE 1920, 223–226.

¹⁵ Inv. 5765. Dimensions: rim Ø 5.8 cm; foot Ø 4.8 cm; h 11.5 cm. Fabric and technology: hard light red fabric (Munsell 2.5YR 6/8) with polished red slip (Munsell 2.5YR 5/8). The beaker is preserved at the archaeological museum “Museo Archeologico Platina” of Piadena. I would like to thank Marco Baioni, curator of the archaeological museum, for giving me the possibility to study the vessel.

¹⁶ MIRABELLA ROBERTI 1972, 116; CERRI 1990, 249; ID. 1996, 237. In addition to this vessel we mention another published sherd of beaker Déchelette form 72 from the old excavations of Calvatone-Bedriacum, which at present has not been possible to verify. See FAVARO 1996, 269.

¹⁷ Inv. 122735; 124914. Fabric and technology: hard light red fabric (Munsell 2.5YR 6/6) with dull red slip (Munsell 2.5YR 5/8).

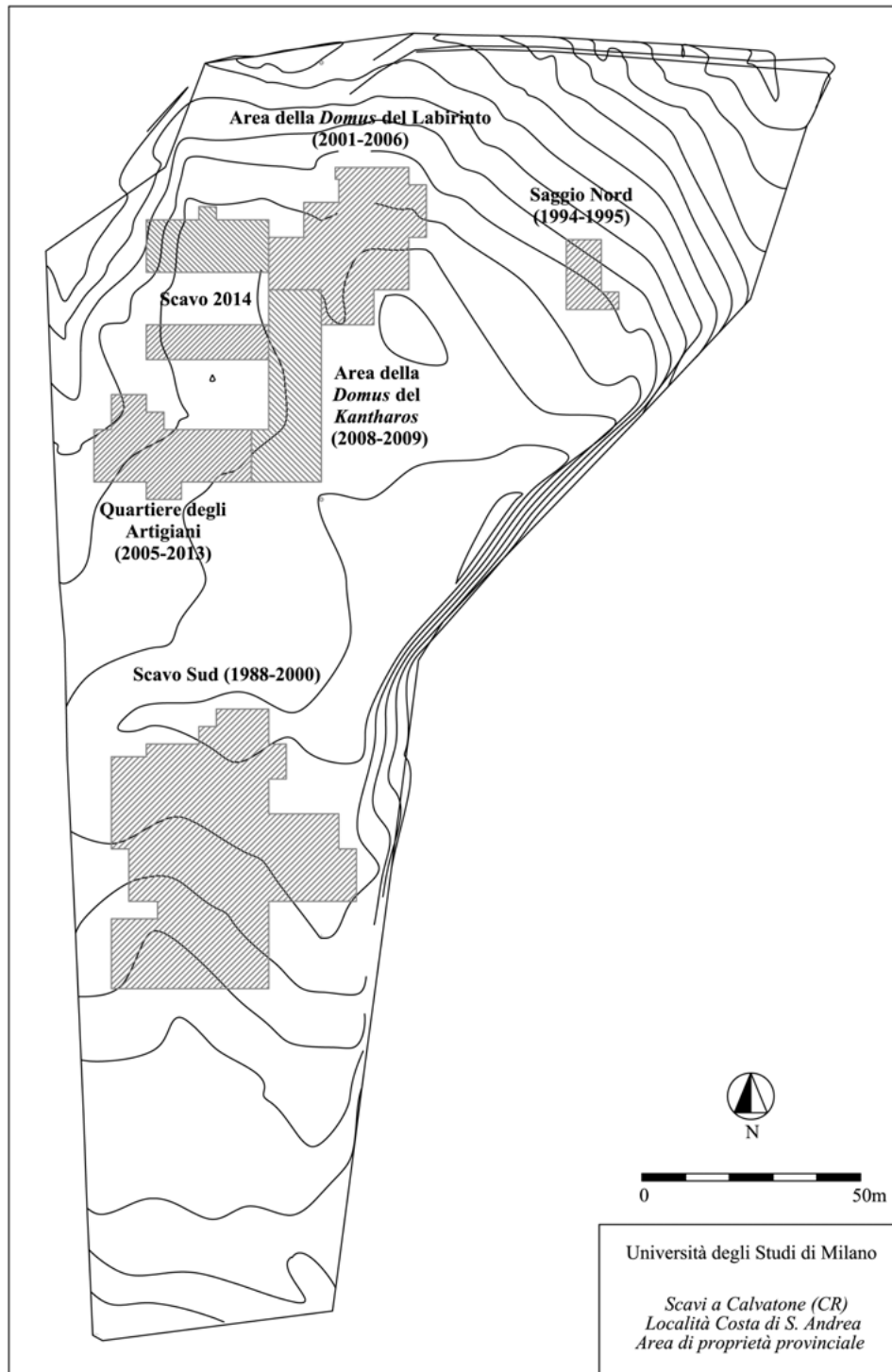


Fig. 3. The archaeological excavations of the University of Milan at Calvatone-Bedriacum, within the «area di proprietà provinciale» (UniMI archive).

shoulder and three sherds of footring (**fig. 4.3**)¹⁸ with three parallel vertical incisions. If the technological characteristics of the two sherds of wall, with a hard light red fabric and a dull red slip, allow us to suppose that the vessel could

come from a central Gaulish workshop, the features of the footring, characterized by a sandy pink fabric and a dull red slip preserved only within the vessel and partly on the foot, suggest a local production.

To the preceding vessels we must add another published beaker found at *Bedriacum* and perhaps belonging to this

¹⁸ Inv. 111810_01; 111810_02; 111810_03. Dimensions: foot Ø 5 cm; h 3.8 cm. Fabric and technology: sandy pink fabric (Munsell 5YR 8/4) with dull red slip (Munsell 2.5YR 5/8), preserved only inside the vessel and on the footring.

form¹⁹. It is a sherd of wall (fig. 4,4)²⁰ decorated with elongated lozenges embedded into one another. The hard red fabric and the polished red slip, together with the refined decoration, allow us to suppose that the vessel was produced in north-eastern Gaul, perhaps at Rheinzabern²¹.

A group of 16 sherds can be attributed to the same form, that is a bowl characterized by a vertical rim, a carinated body that narrows slightly upward and a massive footring. This bowl, which was compared with the cylindrical bowl form 15, group 59 of the Trier black-slipped ware²², can be considered as a derivation of the Gaulish form Drag. 30. The sherds of *Bedriacum* belonging to this form are of great interest because of the morphological characteristics of the rim, variously shaped, and the different technological features. A unique sherd (fig. 4,5)²³ comes from the area of the House of the Labyrinth, found in the layer beneath the courtyard belonging to an artisan workshop dated to the middle Imperial age (AD 150–250): this is a sherd with an ovoid rim, distinguished from the wall by a slight step, and wall decorated with a floral motif. Because of the hard reddish-yellow fabric and the dull light red slip, the sherd was published as a product of the central Gaulish workshops²⁴.

Thanks to the new excavations in the Artisans' Quarter we can now add to this form 14 new unpublished sherds belonging to four different vessels, all found in the abandonment layers of the area dated to the 3rd century AD. The new cylindrical bowls have highly standardized dimensions, but they are distinguished by the morphology of the rim and the decorations on the walls. The first bowl (fig. 4,6) is composed of six sherds²⁵ and has a triangular rim and a wall decorated with lozenge patterns combined together to form triangles arranged alternately with the vertex at the top and the bottom. The technological features of the bowl, characterized by a hard reddish-yellow fabric and a dull red slip, lead us to suppose that it may be an import from a Gaulish workshop. The second bowl (fig. 4,7)²⁶, with a thickened rim and a wall decorated with a floral pattern, and the third bowl (fig. 4,8)²⁷, represented by six sherds and characterized by a rectangular rim and a lozenge decorative pattern combined

in horizontal rows, show the same technological characteristics – a sandy reddish yellow fabric with a dull light red slip only preserved inside the vessel – and suggest a local production. Another sherd of wall (fig. 4,9)²⁸ from this area of the *vicus* and decorated with a floral motif could belong to the same production.

The latest sherd²⁹ to be analysed (fig. 4,10) was found in a trench of the north-western area explored in 2014 and shows all the technological characteristics belonging to the central Gaulish production of the 3rd century AD³⁰. The morphology of the wall, without a curvature and characterized by a certain verticality, allows us to attribute this sherd also to the cylindrical bowl and we find once again a decoration with lozenge patterns which form triangles arranged alternately with the vertex at the top and the bottom.

Terra sigillata excisa from Northern Italy: an overview

The vessels of terra sigillata excisa found in both civil settlements and funerary contexts of Northern Italy and pertaining to Gaulish and local productions are not very numerous. The most common form is the beaker Déchelette form 72, of which there are at the present two fragmentary vessels at Milan³¹ and few sherds at *Augusta Praetoria*³², *Clavenna*³³, *Comum*³⁴ and *Aquileia*³⁵. The discovery inside a female tomb located in the necropolis of Pioltello, near Milan, of the unique beaker found still intact is of extraordinary interest. The vessel is decorated with a refined floral pattern and it was produced by a central Gaulish workshop at the beginning of the 3rd century AD³⁶.

An interesting group of terra sigillata excisa was found at *Brixia* within the area of the *Capitolium*³⁷. The group consists of 73 sherds belonging to nine different vessels³⁸. We can recognize as pertinent to the cylindrical bowl with a vertical rim, a carinated body that narrows slightly upward and a massive footring, 29 sherds corresponding to four bowls. If the first bowl is decorated with lozenge patterns and the second is decorated with floral patterns, the third bowl has a decorative scheme that results from the combination of lozenge and floral patterns and the fourth shows a double decorative method, with incisions and excisions. The globular beaker Déchelette form 72 is represented by 11 sherds corresponding to three vessels. All the vessels are decorated with lozenge patterns combined together to form triangles arranged alternately with the vertex at the top and the bottom. The last two vessels are very particular and not so common,

¹⁹ CORSANO 1990, 64.

²⁰ Inv. MC 1246 (S4). Fabric and technology: hard red fabric (Munsell 2.5YR 5/6) with polished red slip (Munsell 2.5YR 5/8). The sherd belongs to the 19th century collection of pottery from *Bedriacum* of the archaeological section of the "Museo Civico Ala Ponzone" of Cremona. I would like to thank Marina Volonté, curator of the archaeological section of the museum, for giving me the possibility to study the sherd.

²¹ A comparison can be found with a beaker Déchelette 72 form made at Rheinzabern. See OSWALD/PRYCE 1920, 224.

²² According to JORIO 2002, 326.

²³ Inv. 021692. Dimensions: rim Ø 9 cm; h 3.1 cm. Fabric and technology: hard reddish-yellow fabric (Munsell 5YR 7/8) with dull light red slip (Munsell 2.5YR 6/8).

²⁴ ORSENIGO 2013, 301–302.

²⁵ Inv. 110493_07; 110496_03; 110496_05; 110497_01; 110497_02; 110498_10. Dimensions: rim Ø 8.1 cm; h 8 cm. Fabric and technology: hard reddish-yellow fabric (Munsell 5YR 7/6) with dull red slip (Munsell 2.5YR 5/8).

²⁶ Inv. 111649. Dimensions: rim Ø 8.3 cm; h 3.8 cm. Fabric and technology: sandy reddish yellow fabric (Munsell 5YR 8/4) with dull light red slip (Munsell 2.5YR 5/8), only preserved inside the vessel.

²⁷ Inv. 121525_01; 121525_02; 121528_01; 121528_02; 121528_03; 111619_01. Dimensions: rim Ø 8.3 cm; h 7.3 cm. Fabric and technology: sandy reddish yellow fabric (Munsell 5YR 7/6) with dull light red slip (Munsell 2.5YR 6/8), only preserved inside the vessel.

²⁸ Inv. 123880. Fabric and technology: sandy reddish yellow fabric (Munsell 5YR 7/6), slip not preserved.

²⁹ Inv. 141384. Fabric and technology: hard reddish yellow fabric (Munsell 5YR 7/6) with dull red slip (Munsell 2.5YR 5/8).

³⁰ PALMIERI 2014, 154.

³¹ JORIO 1991, 77.

³² MOLLO MEZZENA 1975/1976.

³³ BERGAMINI SIMONI 1979, 53–57.

³⁴ PISANO BRIANI 2005, 25.

³⁵ MASELLI SCOTTI 1981, 248.

³⁶ BORDIGONE 2009.

³⁷ JORIO 2002, 326–328.

³⁸ In addition to this group, there is another sherd of beaker Déchelette form 72 from *Brixia*, found in the excavations of S. Giulia. See JORIO 1999, 91.

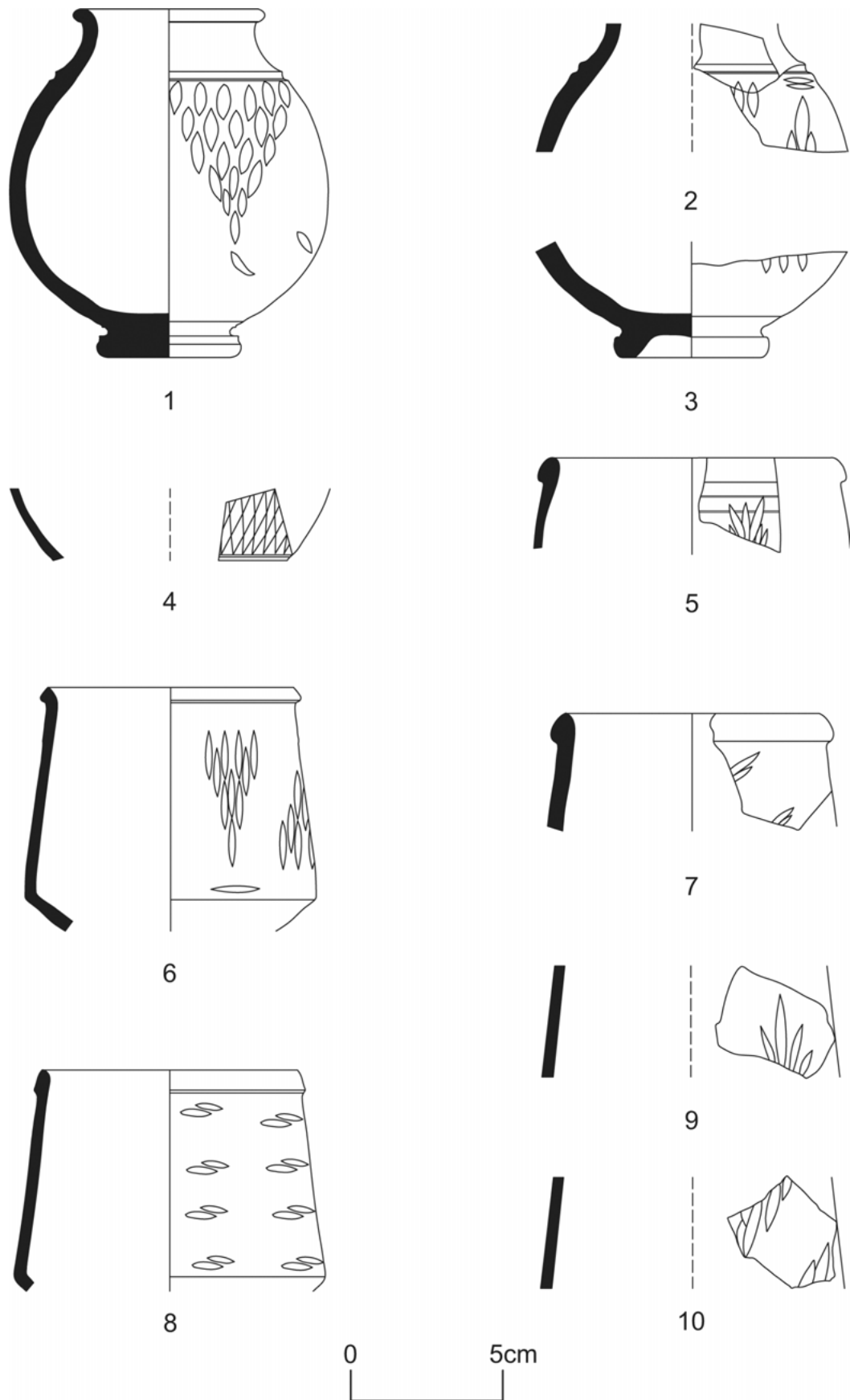


Fig. 4. Terra sigillata excisa from Calvatone-Bedriacum. – Scale 1:2 (drawings L. Palmieri).

a two-handled bottle, composed of 23 sherds and decorated with lozenge patterns combined together to form triangles arranged alternately with the vertex at the top and the bottom separated by diagonal excisions, and a lid composed of 10 sherds with excised and rouletted decoration.

Most of the vessels are dated to the 3rd century AD and thanks to archaeometric analysis we know that they belong to the local production. This fact is even more interesting if we consider that some sherds of terra sigillata excisa were thought at first glance to be imports from the Rhône valley.

Conclusion

At present the *vicus* of *Bedriacum*, together with *Brixia*, is the site that has yielded the largest number of occurrences of vessels of terra sigillata excisa in Northern Italy, despite this production representing a very small percentage of the total of terra sigillata found in the *vicus*.

The new excavations carried out in the Artisans' Quarter have provided the most numerous group of sherds of terra sigillata excisa coming from Calvatone-*Bedriacum*, with 19 new sherds belonging to six different vessels related to

two forms. There is a prevalence of cylindrical bowls over beakers and of decoration inspired by geometric schemes over phytomorphic patterns, in particular lozenge patterns combined together to form triangles arranged alternately with the vertex at the top and the bottom.

The vessels of *Bedriacum* can be closely compared with the pottery of *Brixia*, in particular the form of the cylindrical bowl and the lozenge decorative patterns. This comparison becomes even more important if we consider that the vessels of *Brixia* were subjected to archaeometric analyses, which confirmed a local production even for those sherds of terra sigillata excisa thought to have been imports. This fact demonstrates the existence of a central Po Valley production during the 3rd century AD, which imitates the Gaulish prototypes in morphology and technology.

We cannot exclude, therefore, the pertaining of the sherds found in the *vicus* of *Bedriacum* to this central Po Valley production, except for the sherd of wall decorated with elongated lozenges embedded into one another (fig. 4,4) belonging to a vessel certainly made in north-eastern Gaul.

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