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POTTERY AT OSTIA (4TH TO 8TH CENTURIES) THE EVIDENCE FROM THE AAR-DAI EXCAVATIONS

Introduction

Between 1998 and 2001 the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom and the American Academy in Rome carried out a series of small sondages throughout the previously unexcavated areas of Ostia as a follow-up to geophysical surveying, which gave a very detailed plan¹. The aim of the project was to clarify the urbanistic development of the city, and the excavation was designed to provide dating for key points rather than to discover significant ceramic contexts. Nevertheless, the material found can shed light on Ostia, particularly for the later periods, the evidence for which was discarded in the great excavation campaigns of the first half of the 20th century AD: the finds themselves indicate the evolution of Ostia's pottery supply from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages and their distribution suggests a progressive contraction of the inhabited area of the city.

Pottery Supply

The 4th and 5th century AD contexts are mostly fill layers with abundant material. Their composition is typical of Roman urban Mediterranean assemblages: an overwhelming predominance of amphorae at well over 50% and standardized fine wares from production centers with wide distributions, together with a few lamps and cooking and coarse wares. Here most of the amphorae and all the fine ware come from Africa. The latter consists of various types of African red-slip ware D from northern Tunisia. Where they are identifiable, the African amphorae belong to such types as Keay XXV and XXVI. Alongside the African amphorae there appear examples of containers from two other important areas: the area of the Strait of Messina with Keay LII amphorae and the eastern Mediterranean with Kapitän I and II amphorae and the Carthage Late Roman Amphora 1–7 range. The supposed contents of Keay LII and most of the eastern amphorae is wine, unlike the African containers, which are attributed to oil or fish sauces.

The 6th century AD layers are more difficult to analyze. The only rich context, fill associated with the raising of the apsidal area of the episcopal basilica (Sondage 1), gave more than 20 crates of pottery, but the date depends on a couple of lamp sherds, while a handful of pieces could be contemporary with that date and all the rest is re-deposited material typical of the 4th century AD fill under the basilica. Most of the 6th century AD contexts are layers with limited quantities of material. A particularly interesting discovery was that of a sunken-floor structure leaned against the south wall of the basilica (Sondage 3), as its roof collapsed and buried the contents. It can be dated to the very end of the 6th century AD or even the early 7th by a Hayes 109 plate in African red-slip ware (**Fig. 1**). A number of amphorae from various

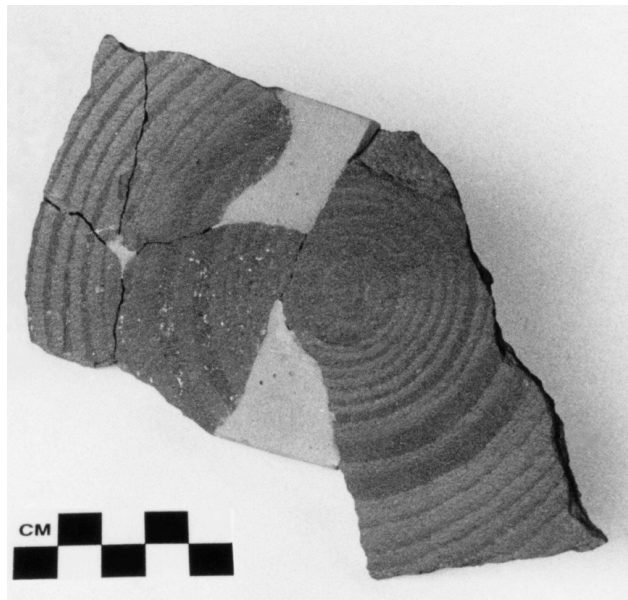


Fig. 1

parts of the Mediterranean range in date from the 4th–5th centuries to the 6th: African containers including a Keay XXV (**Fig. 2**); several Keay LII (**Fig. 3**) and a Crypta Balbi 2 (**Fig. 4**) from the area of the Strait of Messina; an Almagro 51/Keay XIX from the Iberian peninsula (**Fig. 5**); two Carthage LRA 3 (**Fig. 6**) and a Carthage LRA 4 (**Fig. 7**) from the eastern Mediterranean, Asia Minor and Gaza respectively. Obviously some, if not all, these vessels must have been in secondary usage at the time of the collapse. Aside from the Hayes 109 plate, the African red-slip ware (the only fine ware represented) consisted of four examples of Hayes 91B (**Fig. 8**) and one of Hayes 104A (**Fig. 9**), once again with a surprisingly broad chronological range. Associated with these finds were also an imported hand-built cooking-ware casserole (**Fig. 10**) and a couple of pieces of local coarse ware, including a mortar (**Fig. 11**). Other 6th century AD layers, such as a structure with a hearth in the atrium of the basilica (Sondage 6) and late interventions in a domus to the west of the basilica (Sondages 13 and 14) show a similar array of pottery, whose connections with the Roman tradition are obvious. Clearly in the 6th century AD and as late as c. 600 Ostia was still participating in a Mediterranean system of supply of pottery and amphora-borne foodstuffs recalling that of earlier centuries, although the quantities may not be

¹ For the project and previous bibliography see A. MARTIN/M. HEINZELMANN/E. C. DE SENA/M. G. GRANINO CECERE, The Urbanistic Project on the Previously Unexcavated Areas of Ostia (DAI-AAR 1996–2001). *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 47, 2002, 259–304.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

the massive ones of before and there may have been an effort to preserve vessels longer than is usually imagined.

The late 8th century AD is documented by contexts of abandonment and spoliation of the basilica and the associated buildings (Sondages 4, 7, 8 and 9). The contrast with the preceding centuries is enormous. Importations have practically ceased: the only possible exception is an amphora of a type known to have been produced in various parts of southern Italy, although it is not yet certain that this example is not local or regional (Fig. 12). The pottery making up these assemblages shows an almost complete break in the ceramic tradition. It is easiest to trace continuity in the typical lamps called *lucerne a ciabatta* (Fig. 13), which derive ultimately from late-antique African models by way of Sicilian imitations and local imitations of the African and Sicilian products. However, the lead-glazed fine table-ware (Fig. 14), known as Forum Ware or *ceramica a vetrina pesante*, obviously has nothing to do with the Roman tradition of sigillata and red-slip wares but also little in common even



Fig. 7

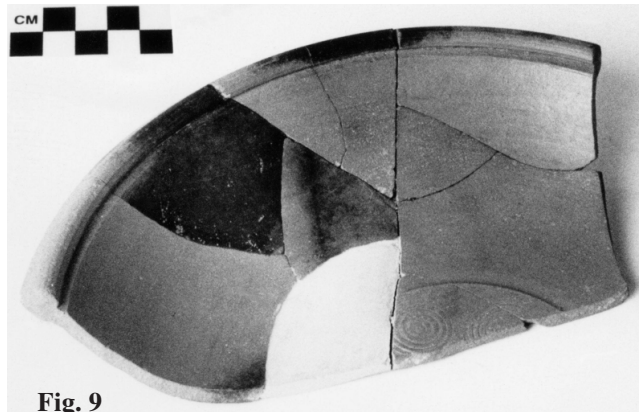


Fig. 9



Fig. 12



Fig. 8



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

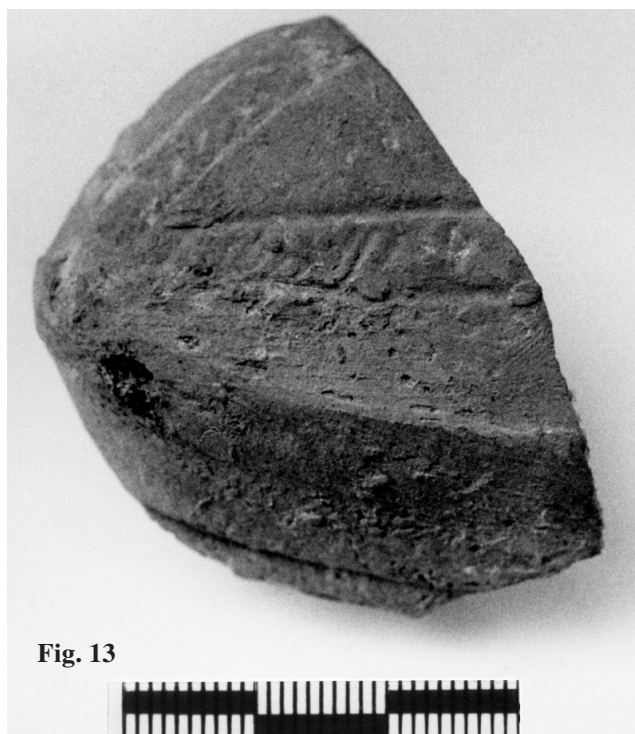


Fig. 13



Fig. 15

with the lead-glazed ware of the imperial period. The relatively frequent cooking vessels have an extremely reduced repertoire of distinctive types with little in the way of Roman parallels (Fig. 15). We are in a completely different world with regard both to the pattern of supply and the vessels attested.

Contraction of the Inhabited Area

Mapping the sondages by the century of the latest levels they contained is instructive for the history of Ostia (Fig. 16). A

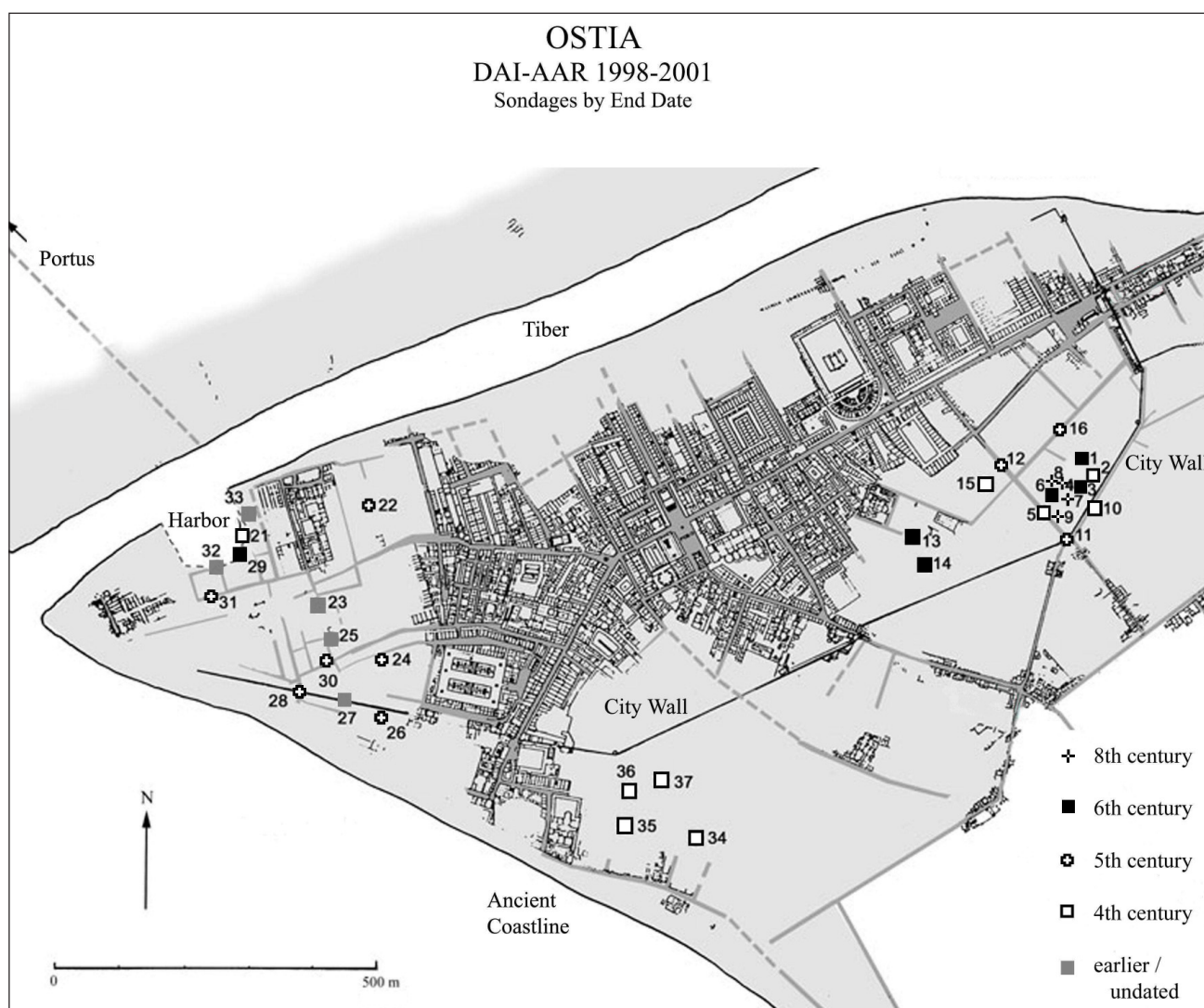


Fig. 16

**Fig. 14**

number of sondages have end dates in the 4th century AD. In some cases this was determined by the nature of the sondage. For example, Sondage 2 has an end date in the first half of the 4th century AD because it investigated the huge fill under the Constantinian episcopal basilica, for which we have later

dates for a remodeling and the abandonment. However, the lack of any building activity after the 4th century AD in the seaside villas outside the walls (Sondages 34–37) seems significant. The 5th century AD sees the end of almost all the sondages in the area of the mouth of the Tiber. The exception

contains a layer with a sherd attributed to a Samos Cistern Type amphora. Otherwise all the sondages with layers lasting into the 6th century AD are located in the area around the basilica. This is also the area of the only sondages with late 8th century AD layers.

Of course, we will never have comparable data for the already excavated part of the city, and it would be desirable to have more from the rest of the site. However, a pattern of successive contraction of habitation does appear to emerge.

It begins with an outlying suburban area in the 4th century AD. In the 5th wider areas are abandoned, even within the city walls. Indeed, 6th century AD layers are attested only in one sondage by the harbor and in the area around the episcopal basilica. It is to be wondered whether the city at this time was a spotty fabric of inhabited and abandoned areas rather than a single built-up area. In the late 8th century AD even the basilica and its surroundings were abandoned.