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TERRA SIGILLATA FROM THE VICUS AT KONTICH (PROV. ANTWERP, BELGIUM)

Kontich is situated between two major cities, Antwerp and Mechelen, and can boast of a rich historical past. Excavations by the Antwerp Society for Roman Archaeology (AVRA) and the Institute for the Archaeological Heritage of the Flemish Community (IAP, now VIOE) have brought to light several rural settlements situated upon and around the 23,5 m high Alfsberg from the Middle Iron Age onwards¹, and a possibly Late Iron Age Celtic *fanum* some 800 m to the north².

From the middle of the 1st century AD onwards, Roman occupation is attested, and in the late Flavian period a small *vicus* developed more to the southeast (fig. 1). The structures consisted of a number of wooden houses and workshop buildings, all aligned along two streets, and a Gallo-Roman

fanum with *cella*, *porticus* and *temenos*³. At the end of the 2nd century AD the temple itself was destroyed, but occupation continued at least until the middle of the 3rd century AD.

Fragments of white terracotta figurines found on the temple site can be identified as representations of Minerva (fig. 2) and Venus⁴. They attest of a local cult for a female deity. An intaglio (fig. 3) in light



Fig. 2: Terracotta head (Minerva).



Fig. 3: Intaglio in agate.

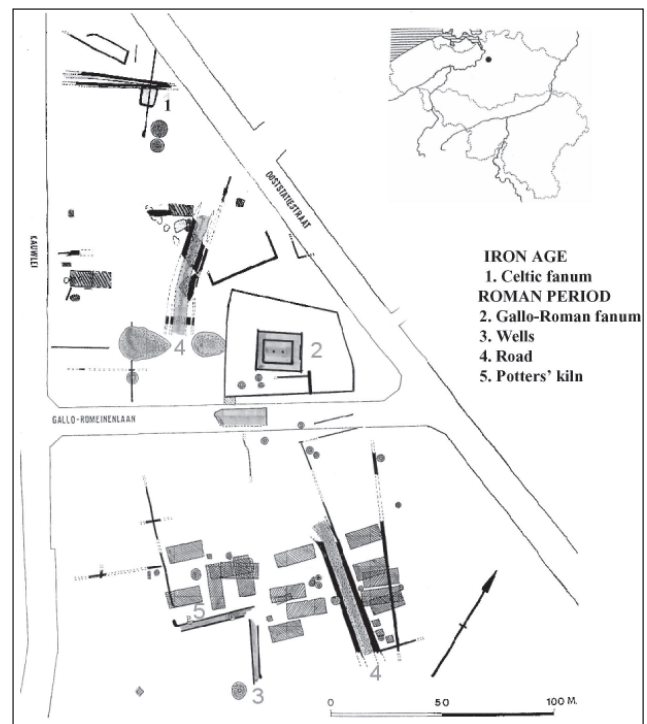


Fig. 1: The Gallo-Roman *vicus* at Kontich-Kazerne.

brown agate showing ears of corn, a cornucopia and a raven sitting upon a small altar or column can be related to the oriental cult of Apollo – Sol/Helios⁵.

In order to give a quick overview of the bulk of the terra sigillata finds, the authors aim to classify all sherds in regard to three attributes: form, fabric and date⁶.

Considering that most of the sigillata studies are based on the characterisation of decorated and/or stamped wares only, neglecting small and/or plain sherds, it takes a lot of time before results are known. Moreover, as such studies rely on incomplete information, they give a wrong over-all view of the sigillata supply to a particular site.

At present some 1523 items (MNE = Minimum Number of Vessels) have been digitally classified (see figure 4, which shows separately all forms with a minimum representation of five exx.). One sixth of these wares are decorated vessels, most of them belonging to form Drag. 37 (81%) and a minority to form 29 (14%). Rather exceptional are the moulded forms Drag. 30, Déchelette 67 and Knorr 78. There are also

¹ ANNAERT 1999.

² LAUWERS 1974.

³ VERBEECK et al. 1986. — VERBEECK/LAUWERS 1987. — ANNAERT 1995. — VERBEECK 2001.

⁴ DE BEENHOUWER 2001.

⁵ SAS 2001, 11; 15; 23–24.

⁶ The selection of the contexts was made by H. Verbeeck; the study of the sigillata was carried out by H. Thoen.

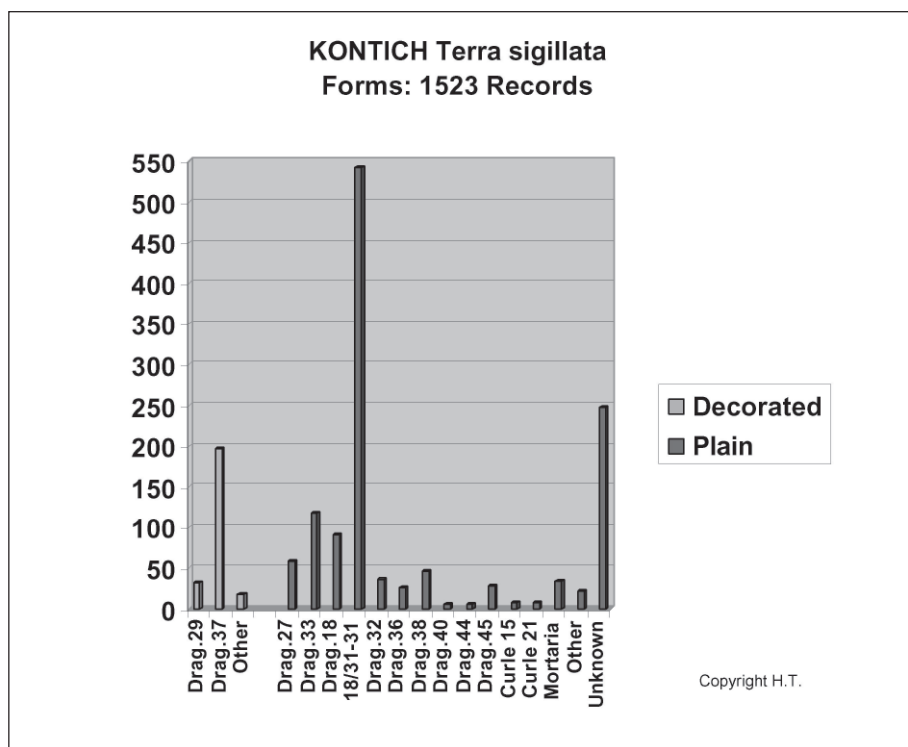


Fig. 4: Breakdown by forms.

a few examples with barbotine (Drag. 54 and Ludowici SM), rouletted (Drag. 37) or incised decoration (Drag. 41).

Not less than 56% of the plain ware consists of dishes; cups (14%) and bowls (12%) were clearly not the most popular forms in Kontich. As for the decorated vessels, early forms amongst the plain wares are also exceptional. There are a few Drag. 17 and 15/17 dishes, but the diagram shows a marked amount of Drag. 18/31 and 31 (542 exx. = 36% of the total amount of plain vessels), and a relative high representation of dishes Drag. 18 (91 exx.) and 32 (37 exx.), cups Drag. 27 (58 exx.) and 33 (117 exx.), bowls Drag. 38 (46 exx.) and *mortaria* Drag. 45 (minimum 28 exx.).

Figure 5 shows the relationship between decorated and plain sigillata. Only 15% of the sigillata belongs to decorated vessels and nearly half of the total sigillata bulk (48%) is composed of dishes⁷. The quite high representation of un-

known types (15%) amongst the plain wares is due to the numerous small burnt and scattered fragments found in Roman road layers and re-built settlement structures.

The distribution of fabrics between South, Central and East Gaul is shown in figure 6. The high representation of East Gaulish wares in Kontich, as well as the much smaller amount of Central Gaulish vessels, contrasts with the traditional date of the greatest prosperity of the vicus at Kontich during the *pax romana*, i.e. the 2nd century AD.

Form and fabric are of course reflected within the chronological data (fig. 7). The earliest sigillata can be dated to the middle of the 1st century AD, and the latest pieces are from the third quarter of the 3rd century AD.

⁷ As shown in fig. 4 due to the increasing amount of Drag. 18/31 and 31 forms.

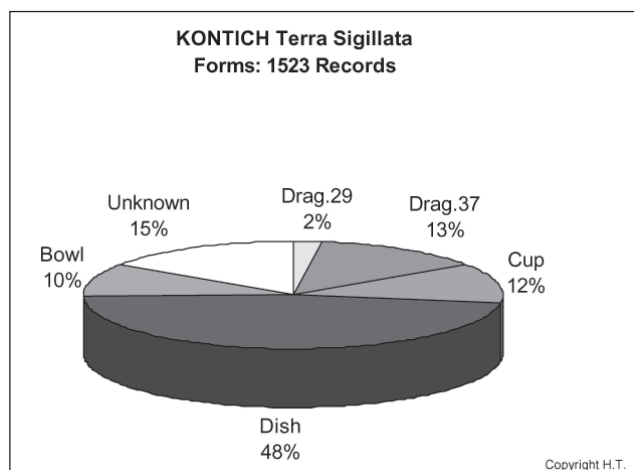


Fig. 5: Percentages of decorated and plain vessels.

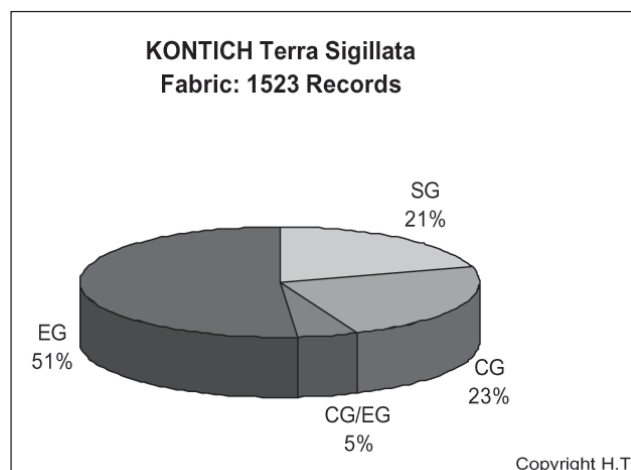


Fig. 6: Breakdown by fabric.

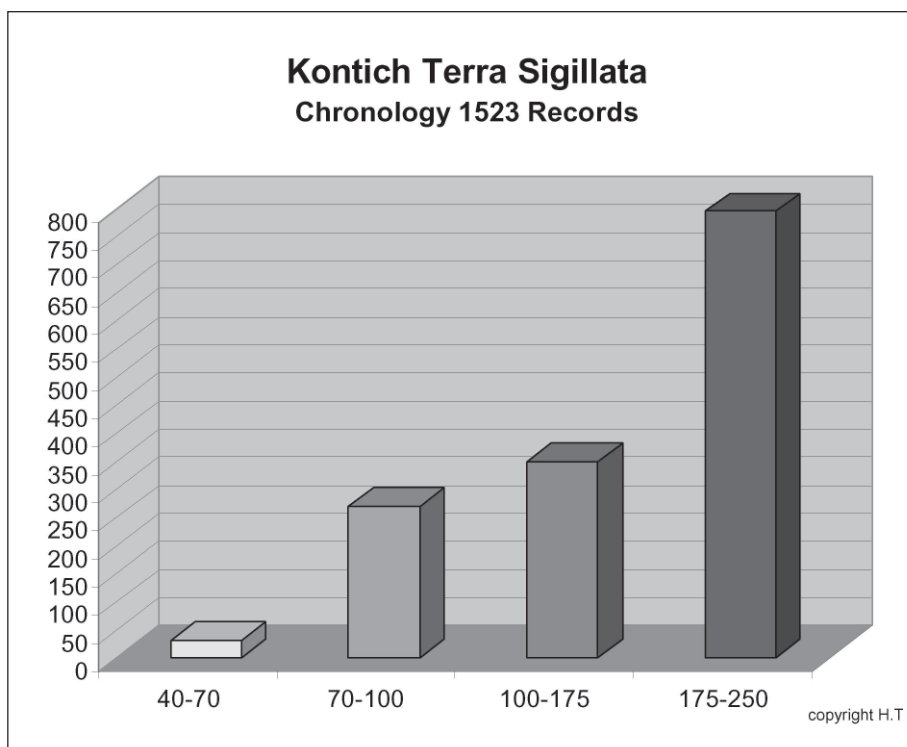


Fig. 7: Histogram showing chronological overview of sigillata supply.

The histogram, marking two major breaking points around AD 70 and AD 175 respectively, shows that Roman economy was clearly conditioned by historical-political events, in this case the Batavian revolt from AD 69/70 and the Germanic incursions during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180). Indeed, after a rather slow start with 2% during the Claudian-Neronian period (AD 40–70), the Flavian period (AD 70–100) shows a first but clear increase of the sigillata supply to 19%, even rising to 24% during the Trajan-Antonine period (AD 100–175). With more than half of the total sigillata amount (55%) attributed the final period,

it is clear that greatest prosperity of the *vicus* is to be placed at the end of the 2nd century AD, continuing into the first half of the 3rd century AD. As mentioned before, the latter data were rather surprising, as most of the information published hitherto proposes an earlier collapse of the site at the end of the 2nd/beginning of the 3rd century AD. From the middle of the 3rd century AD onwards there was a sudden decline of the sigillata supply, which can be related to the political and economical troubles in Northern Gaul during the reigns of Gallienus (AD 253–268) and the Gallic emperors (AD 260–274).

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