

Imports of Northern Italian coarse ware on the eastern Adriatic – a first survey of the evidence

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INTRODUCTION

Recent field research in the area of the Kvarner (NE Adriatic, Croatia), allowed to recover a great amount of Late Roman coarse ware from stratified contexts. Typological and morphological analyses of part of this assemblage stemming from the excavations of the Roman rural site at Podšilo Bay on the island of Rab (Fig. 1), coupled with a still ongoing programme of archaeometric analysis, has shown that at least one part of this corpus conceivably belongs to northern Italian productions. This new evidence sprung a wider survey of previously published material and preliminary research within museum depots of the eastern Adriatic coast. These studies have shown that among the Late Roman coarse ware from the eastern Adriatic, there are at least two more securely identifiable coarse ware productions - the so-called Classe type ware and Northern Italian Burnished Ware (*ceramiche grezze lisciate a stecca*).

MATERIALS

The project has so far documented and macroscopically and microscopically analysed coarse ware from the Tar Stancija Blek site in Istria, Podšilo and the islet of Lukovac on the island of Rab, and Danilo-Gradina near Šibenik. Moreover, published assemblages from more than 30 sites on the eastern Adriatic coast, from the Koper Capuchin Garden in the north to the Ošlje-Gradac in the south, have been typologically considered.

METHODS

All coarse ware pottery assemblages included in the study, published and unpublished, were analyzed for vessel morphology, typology, and analogies. The following vessel features were taken into account: firing method (oxidation, combined or reduction atmosphere), hardness, manufacturing method, dimensions, surface treatment (e.g. burnishing, levigation, decoration), colour, break colour, fabric (mineral inclusions, other inclusions, porosity), type, shape. The closest analogies for each fragment were found, from which tentative chronologies were built, coupled with data obtained from 14C dates of the excavated layers.

For the four analysed sites mentioned above, in addition to the morphological and typological analysis, a preliminary analysis was carried out using an optical microscope (magnification 20x and 40x), in order to make a preliminary determination of the fabric's structure and approximate their mineral composition. The following features were examined and documented: mineral inclusions (their shape, size, relative amount/frequency, texture), other inclusions (e.g. organic, fossils), clay matrix and porosity.

RESULTS

The typo-chronological analysis of the collected material showed that, in the case of the assemblages of Late Roman coarse ware from Istria and Kvarner, many vessels have morphological analogies in north-eastern and northern Italy (Fig. 2). These can be classified into the Classe type ware (Fig. 3) and the Northern Italian Burnished Ware (*ceramiche grezze lisciate a stecca*) (Fig. 4).



Fig. 2. Preserved part of the Classe type pot Belli Grad N-81 reconstructed from fragments.

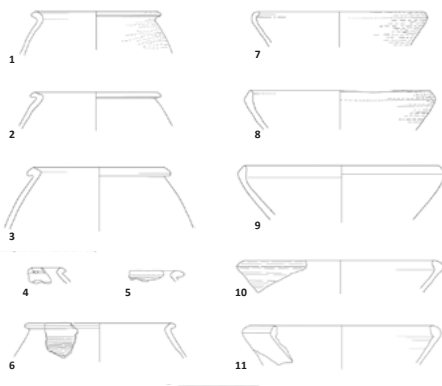


Fig. 4. Vessels from the eastern Adriatic coast classified as Northern Italian Burnished Ware. Školarice (1, 2, 7, 8), Piran (3), Tar Stancija Blek (4, 10), Marić Bay (5), Podšilo/Rab Island (6, 11), Loron (9).

Attribution to Classe type pottery was also confirmed by microscopic analyses of the fresh breaks and preliminary analyses of the thin sections made from the Podšilo pottery (Fig. 5, 8) showing that the primary coarse admixture is grains of crushed calcite and slightly less numerous grains of limestone.

Studies of published assemblages of Late Roman coarse ware from other sites on the eastern Adriatic coast have revealed that Classe type pottery - mainly specific pots with decoration in the form of multiple wavy lines - is found at numerous sites (see Fig. 6).

On the eastern Adriatic coast, fragments of biconical pots and bowls with inturned rim of the Northern Italian Burnished Ware type have also been found at several sites (see Fig. 7).

DISCUSSION

So far, the identification of Classe type pottery and Northern Italian Burnished Ware is based for almost all sites solely on morphological and macroscopic analyses. Only in the case of vessels from Podšilo, preliminary archaeometric analyses have also been conducted, showing that the fabric of the presumed Classe type vessels from Podšilo (Fig. 8) closely resembles the mineral-petrographic and chemical composition of Classe type vessels from the Classe, San Pietro di Castello and Rome sites (Patterson 1998), Potentia/Porto Recanati (Verreyke 2007) and Canusium/Canosa San Pietro (Gliozzo et al. 2024).

Ongoing mineralogical, petrographic, and chemical analyses will confirm whether the samples from Podšilo have the same fabric as the Classe type pottery from Italy. Archaeometric analyses of Northern Italian Burnished Ware samples from the eastern Adriatic coast will be conducted in the future.



Fig. 1. Podšilo Bay in the N part of the Lopar Peninsula, Rab Island - Belli Grad site - trench 52.

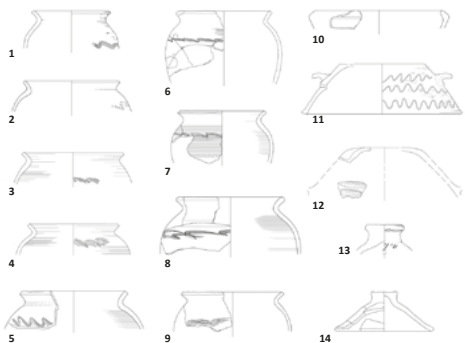


Fig. 3. Vessels from the eastern Adriatic coast classified as Classe type. Koper Capuchin Garden (1, 11, 13), Piran (2), Guran St. Cecilia (3-4), Nezakcija/Nesactium (5), Podšilo/Rab Island (6-8, 10, 12), Biran near Kaštela (9), Tar Stancija Blek (14).

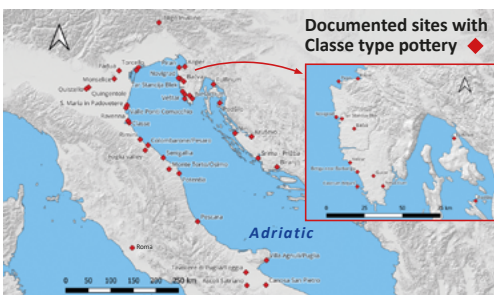


Fig. 6. Sites where Classe type vessels were discovered.

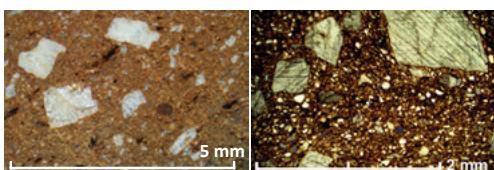


Fig. 5. Calcite grains and a reddish-brown grain visible in the break photo of a fragment of a Belli Grad N-100/1 Classe type baking cover from the Podšilo site.

Fig. 8. Calcite inclusions visible in a thin section of a fragment of a Belli Grad N-81 vessel Classe type pot from the Podšilo site in an image taken with a polarizing microscope, crossed nicols.

In the case of the Podšilo, 17 of the 66 diagnostic fragments (26%) were assigned to the Classe type on the basis of stylistic features, and 2 fragments (3%) to the Northern Italian Burnished Ware. However, it should be noted that 41 other diagnostic fragments (62%) from Podšilo, although they do not have such characteristic shapes and decoration, have the same or very similar fabric as the fragments identified as Classe type. Therefore, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that up to 90% of the Late Roman coarse ware from Podšilo may have come from Northern Italy.

For most sites from the eastern Adriatic coast, Late Roman pottery is dated only vaguely to Late Antiquity. At Podšilo, pottery classified as Classe type comes mainly from layers dated to the mid-6th to mid-7th centuries.

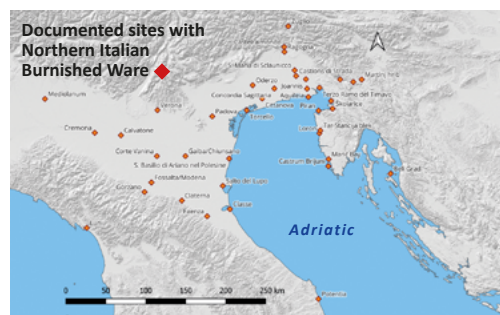


Fig. 7. Sites where examples of Northern Italian Burnished Ware were discovered (based on Riccato 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

Imports of African Cooking Ware dominated the eastern Adriatic assemblages in the 4th and up to the middle of the 5th century, when its influx gradually diminished. Later, coarse ware most likely produced in the central and northern Adriatic region, began to appear in increasing numbers. From the 5th century onward, Northern Italian Burnished Ware vessels were first imported, appearing in Istria and the Kvarner islands. From the second half of the 6th century, Classe type pottery is distributed in even greater quantities, at many sites in Istria, the Kvarner islands, and as far south as central Dalmatia and the Salona region.

This is most likely evidence of the lively contacts of northeastern Italy, with its main center in Ravenna and the northern part of the eastern Adriatic. These contacts continued at least until the middle of the 7th century.

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