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EASTERN *SIGILLATA* VESSELS FROM THE ROMAN CISTERN AT SPOLETINO (CIVITELLA D'AGLIANO, VITERBO, ITALY)

The paper presents some unpublished Eastern Sigillata vessels (chiefly Eastern Sigillata B) that were uncovered during the excavation of a Roman cistern carried out from 2014 to 2018 at Spoletino (Civitella D'Agliano, Viterbo, Italy), a site in the Middle Tiber valley. The cistern was filled up in two different phases (mid-1st century AD, and mid-4th century AD) with the discarded furnishings of a – not yet identified – villa located in the vicinity. The occurrence of imported Eastern Mediterranean tableware – even if in a very limited quantity if compared to Italian Sigillata and, for the later phase, to African Red Slip Ware – in an almost remote site is significant. An overall reconsideration of lifestyle in “rural” villas scattered in the Italian countryside can be traced through the analysis of these imported vessels, that were considered as valuable products, and that illustrate the wealth and the long-distance connections of their owners.

Eastern *Sigillata* – Spoletino (Viterbo, Italy) – Middle Tiber Valley – Roman Villas – Early Imperial Age

Introduction

This contribution aims at presenting a group of unpublished Eastern *Sigillata* vessels (chiefly, but not only ESB) that were uncovered during the excavation of a Roman cistern carried out from 2014 to 2018 in the present day site of Spoletino (Civitella D'Agliano, Viterbo, Italy) in northern Lazio (fig. 1)¹. We are dealing with a rural site, located on the hills sloping gradually towards the Middle Tiber valley, on its western bank. In the Roman period, since the Late Republican age, this region was intensively exploited for agricultural purposes and was dotted with Roman villas, some of which were provided of both the *pars urbana* and the *pars rustica*. The results of an intensive survey that was conducted recently (and is still on-going), under the direction of M. Spanu, demonstrated that the occupation of this territory was denser than it was expected, and that a large number of villas no more that 2-3 km apart from one another existed (Spanu 2014; Spanu 2020; Spanu 2021). Much probably this intense agricultural use was aimed at supplying Rome itself that was easily reachable through the fluvial way offered by the Tiber.

Coming to the issue under discussion, the cistern at Spoletino revealed to be a very important archaeological context, and it was certainly connected to a Roman villa located in the vicinity, maybe to the west of the water reservoir (Spanu 2021: 162-166) (fig. 2). Unfortunately the remains



Fig. 1. Map of the northern province of Viterbo with localisation of Civitella D'Agliano.

¹ The excavation at Spoletino was carried out under the direction of prof. Marcello Spanu, Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Roma, Italy, to whom I am grateful for having assigned me the study of *Terra Sigillata*. My deepest gratitude goes also to the staff of the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la provincia di Viterbo e l'Etruria Meridionale (in particular to Maria Letizia Arancio and Oliverino Arcangeli) for their collaboration, and to the major of Civitella D'Agliano, Giuseppe Mottura, for his constant support.

of the villa were not identified yet, and much probably it was largely destroyed by recent agricultural activities. The open air water reservoir, one of the largest known in a rural context in Latium (14,06 x 42,12 m), was preserved up to an



Fig. 2. Aerial view of the cistern at Spoletino, from west.



Fig. 3. The Neronian filling of the cistern during excavation.

average height of 1,20 m and was found completely filled up. The filling up – that was made on purpose – occurred in two different chronological phases. The northern portion of the water reservoir, after the building of a transversal wall that divided the cistern into two dissimilar portions, was obliterated in the mid-1st century AD, more precisely in the late Neronian age by a unitary filling occurred almost simultaneously. The filling contained the furnishings of the nearby villa that were thrown more or less complete (fig. 3). Among these, pottery, pertaining to all the classes in vogue in that period, was predominant. The southern portion of the cistern was filled up a few centuries later, in the mid-4th century AD. In this latter case the filling was composed not only of pottery, glass and remains of furniture, but also of a large quantity of building materials (such as plaster fragments, bricks, tiles, mosaic tesserae, etc.) and this reveals that the villa was partially or completely dismantled in this moment.

Both the fillings of the water reservoir can be precisely dated by stratigraphic information. The study of the whole context (both of the early Imperial and of the late Imperial phases), encompassing a total of more than 110.000 shards, is on-going: among the represented classes we can include amphorae, fine and coarse wares, cooking wares, Italic, African and Eastern *Sigillata*, thin walled wares, lamps, opus doliare. It is worth underlining that, at the present time, no comparable excavated contexts are known in this area of the Middle Tiber Valley. Therefore the findings from Spolefino are the only clues giving us an overview of the Imperial and Late Imperial situation of this territory, whose location – with a direct and easy connection to Rome itself via the fluvial route – was actually very strategic. During the excavation, all the uncovered pottery fragments were collected, without discarding any undiagnostic piece.

This allows for a thorough and reliable quantification of the presence of Eastern *Sigillata* wares (for an overview on Eastern *Sigillata* see, particularly, Hayes 1985; Hayes 2001; Malfitana 2005; Bes 2015) in this context that represent anyhow a very small percentage if compared with Italian *Terra Sigillata* and, in the later context, with African Red Slip Ware. So, even if tablewares are first and foremost seen as chronological markers, we aim at interpreting them under another perspective as well, as objects that reflect ancient socio-cultural and economic activity.

Eastern *Sigillata* from the Roman Cistern

As far as the Early Imperial filling of the cistern is concerned, only one single dish in Eastern *Sigillata* B1, form Hayes 1, was uncovered (Hayes 1985: 53) (fig. 4). The dish was fragmented in 25 pieces, but it is possible to argue that it was almost intact when it was thrown away in the cistern (no. inv. 150). Its bad state of preservation does not allow for the identification of a potential stamp. As, in this period, the competition of high quality native Italian *Terra Sigillata* was unquestionable, a single imported vessel can be considered as an exception of a certain value. It was certainly different – and maybe had different functions – from the abundant services of Italian *Terra Sigillata* found in the same context (the total number

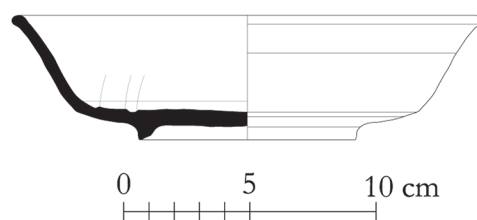


Fig. 4. Dish in Eastern *Sigillata* B1, form Hayes 1 (n. inv. 150).

of fragments of Italian *Terra Sigillata* found in this context is 2711), attested by morphologically and chronologically associated vessels, sometimes produced in the same centres, many of which located in the Tiber Valley itself.

A more fundamental question entails the presence of this plate in the analysed context that is dated in the late Neronian period. Can it be considered as a “rare” and “old” vessel used in the villa alongside mid-1st century locally produced Italian *Terra Sigillata* ware or must it be considered as residual? If we take into account that a not irrelevant number of potters’ marks on Italian *Terra Sigillata* found in the same layers dates also to the Augustan or Tiberian age, the residual nature of the Eastern *Sigillata* B pot looks inconvenient. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that, in a rural context as the villa of Spolefino, the life-span of some “valuable” vessels could extend well beyond their production date and that they could have been used for more than one generation.

Turning to the Late Imperial filling of the cistern, where a total of 127 fragments of Eastern *Sigillata* were uncovered, an introductory remark is anyhow necessary. Even if undoubtedly dated to the mid-4th century AD through the analysis of pottery and of a coin struck under Constans I, the layers composing the filling also contained a large quantity of pottery datable mainly to the 2nd or early 3rd century AD. Even if it is not impossible that some of these “old” vessels were still in use, anyhow this hypothesis is not very plausible, as it is hard to conceive that services produced in the 2nd century AD were largely intact so as to be employed in the villa in the early 4th century. It is far more likely that dumps pertaining to various periods (all of which probably connected to the villa) were used to fill up the cistern, when the villa or at least a portion of it were abandoned and demolished. We must then consider these elements as residuals: they include, apart from the Eastern *Sigillata* fragments, amphorae, common wares, Italian *Terra Sigillata* (2265 fragments), African Red Slip Ware (4061 fragments), and African cooking wares (for which see the contribution by Mara Elefante in this same volume).

In the context from Spolefino, among Eastern *Sigillata* vessels, Eastern *Sigillata* B is certainly the prevailing class, as far as quantity and variety of shapes. This is not surprising as this class was the most widespread along the main commercial routes in Italy in the late 1st-mid-2nd century AD (Menchelli and Pasquinucci 2000; Cipriano and Sandrini 2003; Maggi 2007; Dobrev and Griggio 2021: 202-222). The principal identified forms are Hayes 53, 60, 62A, 63, 74B, 75, 78, and 80 (fig. 5). These are among the most common forms

produced in Eastern *Sigillata* B that are attested in Italy (see, for instance, their wide presence at Altino, cp. Sandrini 2003, and at Aquileia, cp. Dobrev and Griggio 2021: 202-222). But also Eastern *Sigillata* A and Eastern *Sigillata* C (Çandarlı) are attested, even if in smaller numbers. More or less, all the identified pieces date to the mid-Imperial period (late 1st to early 3rd century AD). It is worth mentioning that NAA analyses are planned on some samples of Eastern *Sigillata* vessels from Spoleto; they will be carried out by Johannes Sterba at the Institute for Atomic and Subatomic Physics of the Vienna University of Technology. The expected results will be significant in order to identify, whenever possible, the exact production sites, and to fill some gaps in our knowledge on minor workshops.

As it is well known, Eastern *Sigillata* B becomes the major terra *sigillata* in the Eastern Mediterranean after the mid-1st century AD (Hayes 2001: 148-149; Malfitana 2002; Bes 2015; cp. Dobrev and Griggio 2021: 190, fig.1), but export to the West was still very limited, and suffered from the competition of Italian *Terra Sigillata* (this happens also in the East). The late 1st and 2nd century witness the further dwindling of Eastern *Sigillata* A and Italian *Terra Sigillata* (for a preliminary study on distribution of Eastern *Sigillata* A in Italy, Malfitana, Poblome and Lund 2005). Both Eastern *Sigillata* B and Eastern *Sigillata* C saw quantities increase in the East and started to be exported to Italy and the Western provinces in the same period.

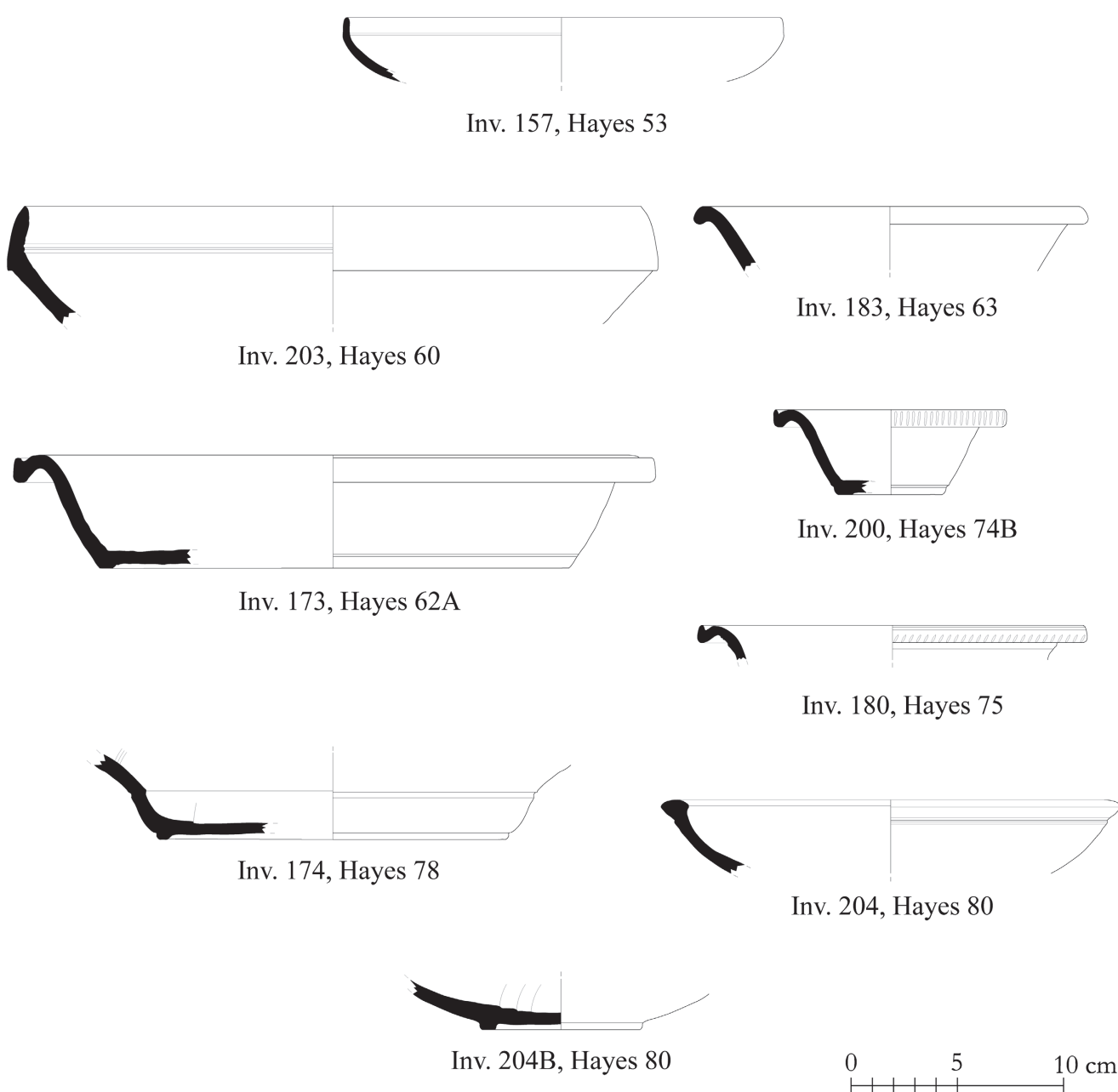


Fig. 5. Selected types of Eastern *Sigillata* B wares from the mid-4th century context.

The great part of the *sigillata* vessels of Spolefino that were imported from Asia Minor and from the East are cups or dishes, having simple forms and without decoration. A small cup in Eastern *Sigillata* B (Form 74B, no. inv. 200) has blackish colour and the rim is decorated with rouletting; this is common for the transitional period between the productions B1 and B2 in the '70s of the 1st century AD (for a direct comparison from Loron, see Maggi 2001: 152-153). The handle of a jug in Eastern *Sigillata* A is the only attestation of a closed form. Almost all the analysed fragments pertain to one single vessel or to a small number of individuals of the same form, and this testifies for the presence in the villa of a reduced number of pieces of imported Eastern *Sigillata*.

Anyhow a comprehensive analysis of the 'waves of fashion', concerning reciprocal influences between Italian *Terra Sigillata* and Eastern *Sigillata* in Italy is still lacking, and it is worth considering not only commercial contacts but also other factors, such as tastes and specific requests (Bes 2015: 65-66). Given the information presented above, and even if considering the limited number of attested fragments of Eastern *Sigillata*, the resulting picture of tableware selection in a countryside villa of the imperial period in the Middle Tiber valley is more flexible than expected, with the composition of a household's tableware collection being dependent on personal choice or taste, social context, and not only on the proximity of production centres (and thence on costs). As far as the study of Eastern *Sigillata* wares, the case under examination is almost unique, as other excavated sites in the Middle Tiber Valley – that are really very rare – never revealed consistent quantities of Eastern *Sigillata* wares. We can infer that some of them were not studied nor published yet, and this makes it difficult to be able to delineate a reliable framework of the real distribution of these imported vessels. What is astonishing is that, when studied, Eastern *Sigillata* wares known in Italy are mainly attested in coastal cities (such as Ostia and Portus) or in big centres, such as Rome itself, and only seldom reach inland sites, normally those located along the main river-routes. We can cite, for instance, the north-eastern Adriatic area (Maggi 2006), the northern Tyrrhenian coast (Menchelli and Pasquinucci 2000) or the villa at Settefinestre (Besutti 1985). Not astonishingly at Scoppieto Eastern *Sigillata* is not attested, whereas at Lugnano in Teverina only one fragment of Cypriot *Sigillata* was identified (courtesy of Archer Martin).

Final remarks

To conclude, the occurrence of Eastern Mediterranean tableware – even if in a very limited quantity – in an almost isolated and remote site reveals to be really significant. This is even more remarkable as, in the 1st and 2nd century AD, this was an area of production of Italian *Terra Sigillata*. The well-known manufacture of Scoppieto (see the volumes edited by M. Bergamini, in particular Bergamini 2013; Bergamini 2014; Bergamini 2016) is located at approximately 12 km as the crow flies from Spolefino, to mention only the most famous and accurately studied site in the vicinity. So, imported pottery from Eastern Mediterranean can be considered as "exceptional" and must be probably interpreted as a mark of wealth and prosperity of the owners of the villas, but also as a testimony of overseas contacts held by Roman aristocracy. In some coastal areas, such as the already mentioned north-eastern Adriatic (Maggi 2006: 183), it is possible to infer that in the last decades of the first century AD Eastern *Sigillata* B became a competitor or a real alternative to Late North-Italian *Sigillata*. Anyhow, this same model can be hardly transposed to an inland region as the one under consideration, even if located along a major commercial axis along the Tiber. Thence it is better to be cautious, following John W. Hayes, who suggests a more reasoned reflection on the concept of "marketing areas", of "areas of secondary distribution" and lastly, on the "sporadic finds in distant lands" (Hayes 1994: 112). Our case may probably fit within the second or third category, and could be connected more to the movement of individuals, than to the result of long-distance trade contacts.

Besides these reflexions, an overall reconsideration of lifestyle in "rural" villas in the countryside can be traced also through the analysis of a small number of imported vessels, like the one analysed here, that were probably considered as valuable products, illustrating the wealthy situation and the international connections of their owners. More importantly, one could start to comprehend the role played by tablewares in the economy and daily life of the Roman Mediterranean.

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