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UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL IDENTITIES THROUGH THE CERAMIC EVIDENCE: THE CASE OF THE “QUARTIERE DEGLI ARTIGIANI” IN CALVATONE-BEDRIACUM¹

The site of *Bedriacum* is located in the modern municipality of Calvatone, between the cities of Mantova and Cremona, in the province known as Cisalpine Gaul in Roman times. It owed its existence to its strategic position along the *via Postumia*, the road constructed by *Spurius Postumius Albinus* in AD 148 stretching through the Po Valley, and enjoyed a good level of prosperity as a crossing point of the river Oglio (fig. 1).

Tacitus, referring to *Bedriacum* as a *vicus*, a village, connects its fame to the two battles fought in AD 69 between the armies of Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian to assume the imperial power after Nero's death.² Among the written sources mentioning the site, Plutarch labels it *polichne*, a small city.³ *Bedriacum* is known to have reached its peak of prosperity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD though it seems it remained inhabited with various fortunes until the 5th century.

Past research

The excavations in the site have been mainly limited to the small hilltop, *Costa di S. Andrea* located few kilometers south-east of the modern Calvatone (fig. 2). The first systematic excavations in the area were conducted by Mario Mirabella Roberti, *Soprintendente alle Antichità della Lombardia*, in 1957–1961. The investigations brought to light a considerable portion of the *Domus del Labirinto* (House of the Labyrinth) located in the northern sector of the hilltop.⁴ The house shows a certain degree of wealth in the use of mosaic floors, painted plasters and imported marbles. It owes its name to a mosaic, an *emblema*, featuring a labyrinth with a dying Minotaur in the centre. The *emblema* was inserted into a floor made of fine Roman concrete in one of the two *triclinia* of the building.

The research of the *Università degli Studi di Milano* under the patronage of *Regione Lombardia* and *Comune di Calvatone* directed by G. Sena Chiesa started only a couple of decades later, in 1988. The main efforts of these

excavations were directed to two areas of the hilltop, namely *Scavo Sud* (South Excavation) 1988–2000⁵ and *Saggio Nord* (North Sounding) 1994–1995⁶ (fig. 2). At the same times, the *Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Lombardia* carried out several archaeological campaigns in 1988–1990 under the supervision of L. Passi Pitcher in the area of *Campo del Generale* (General's Field), immediately east of *Costa di S. Andrea*.⁷ The results of these first excavations have shown that the plan of the *vicus* was entirely oriented along a main axis north-east/south-west.

The excavations of M. Roberti of *Domus del Labirinto* were resumed only after almost half a century in 2001 by M. T. Grassi. The aims of these new excavations were to better clarify the chronology of the building, as well as its plan and connections with nearby structures.⁸ The research resulted in updating the plan provided by M. Roberti's building, which now consists of five rooms, dating its main phase to the first half of the 1st century AD and unearthing a new sector adjacent to the main building on the west. The latter, *Ambiente C* (Room C), lacks the typical lavish decorations characteristic of the *Domus del Labirinto* (fig. 3). The main phase of life of *Ambiente C*, consisting of a room rectangular in shape and flanked on the north by an open courtyard, has been dated to the mid 2nd–mid 3rd century AD (Phase III), thanks to pottery and numismatic evidence⁹. Thus, the area appears to have been in use when the *Domus del Labirinto*, was already abandoned. Many clues bring to the conclusion that this particular sector was used without major interruption at least for one century with a productive/storage function. The presence of a large amount of grindstone fragments made of lava stones imported from Lazio and a beaten earth floor where a Dressel 6 A or B amphora was deliberately inserted vertically and cut horizontally in the body to form a sort of basin support this hypothesis.¹⁰ In the open courtyard, a layer interpreted as the decomposed remains of a wooden low shelf is also telling. The layer was rich in ceramic material, especially local Common Ware of everyday use.¹¹

¹ I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor M. T. Grassi (Università degli Studi di Milano) for her precious help in preparing this paper and her constant support to my research showed throughout these years.

² Tac., Hist. II.23.

³ Plut., Oth. 8,1; for a comprehensive list of textual sources on *Bedriacum* see CORSANO 1991.

⁴ MIRABELLA ROBERTI 1972.

⁵ See recently GRASSI 2001; SENA CHIESA 2003; SENA CHIESA 2007; GRASSI AND SLAVAZZI 2007.

⁶ SENA CHIESA ET AL. 1997.

⁷ PASSI PITCHER 1996.

⁸ GRASSI 2007; GRASSI 2008.

⁹ ALBENI 2008a; SPERTI 2008.

¹⁰ ALBENI 2008a, 6; ID. 2008b.

¹¹ SPERTI 2008.

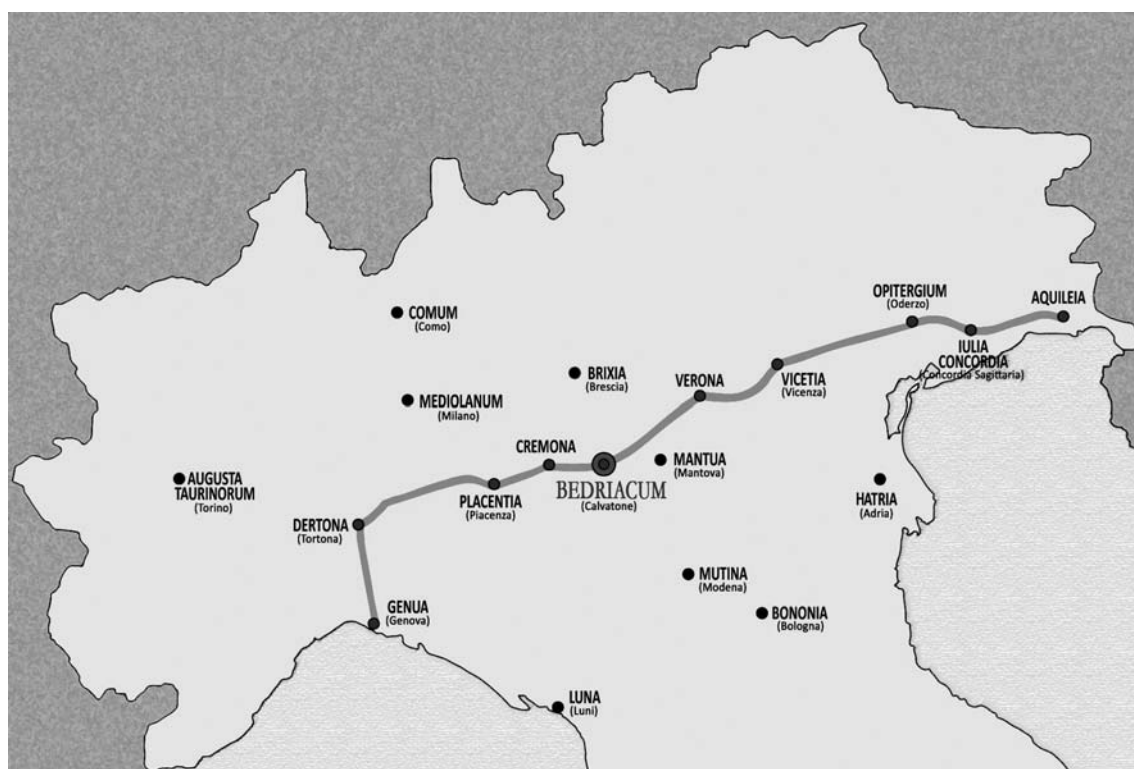


Fig. 1. *Bedriacum* along the *Via Postumia* (S. Nava).

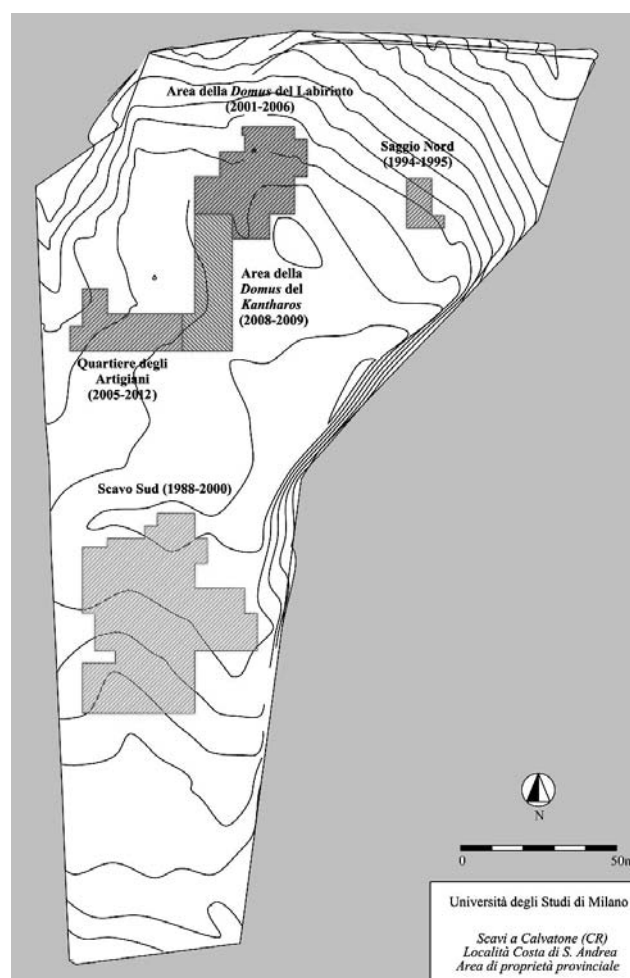


Fig. 2. Costa di S. Andrea and the area covered by archaeological investigations by Università degli Studi di Milano.

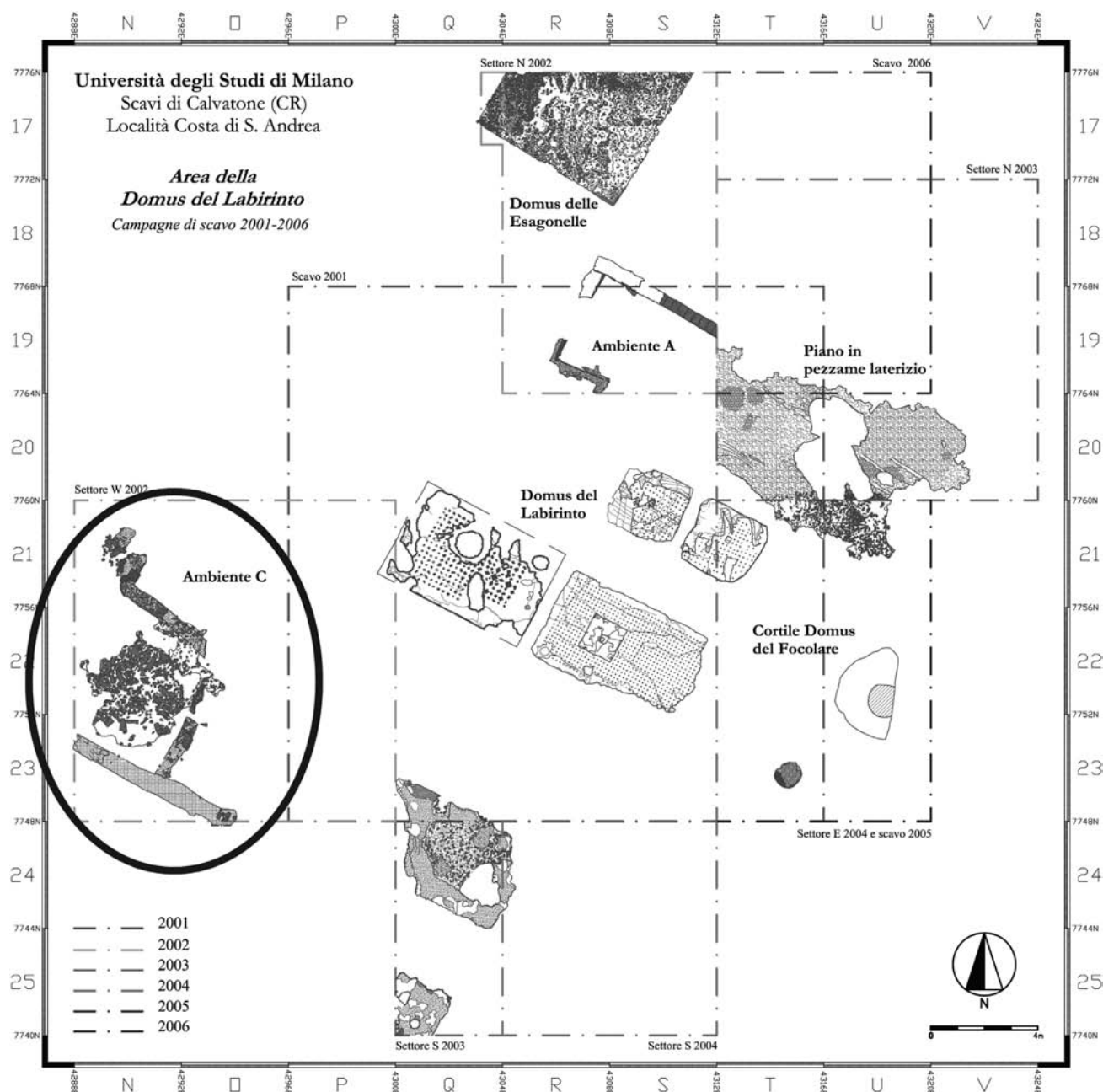


Fig. 3. Area of the Domus del Labirinto. Encircled is Room C.

The study of the Common Ware of this and other ceramic assemblages has proved to be invaluable for the understanding of the chronology of the area. Recently, the study carried out by Cl. Orsenigo on the Common Ware from the area of Room C resulted in isolating a chronological marker pot named *Olla tipo Calvatone* (Calvatone Pot), frequently attested in productive and storage areas dating to the mid 2nd–mid 3rd century AD¹². This wheel-made pot presents a very simple profile with an out-turned rim, raised shoulder and a tronco-conical body ending with a flat base. It must have been extremely versatile, being used both for cooking and storage purposes. At least four different sub-forms have been identified (I.S.1–4, I.S.1 being the commonest; fig. 4).

No chronological boundaries have been attributed to these sub-forms so far, which are thought to be all roughly dated to the same time span, mid 2nd–mid 3rd century AD. Differences in shape tend to correspond to the use of at least three different types of clay (A–C). Sub-forms I.S.1 and I.S.2 seem to have been always produced with clay C – a hard and compact fabric with several calcite, mica and chamotte inclusions; sub-form I.S.3 is always produced with clay A – abundant chamotte and mica inclusions; clay B – halfway between clay A and C – is a constant in I.S.4¹³. Future thin-section analyses will hopefully confirm these associations.

¹² ORSENIKO 2008.

¹³ Ibid. 7–8.

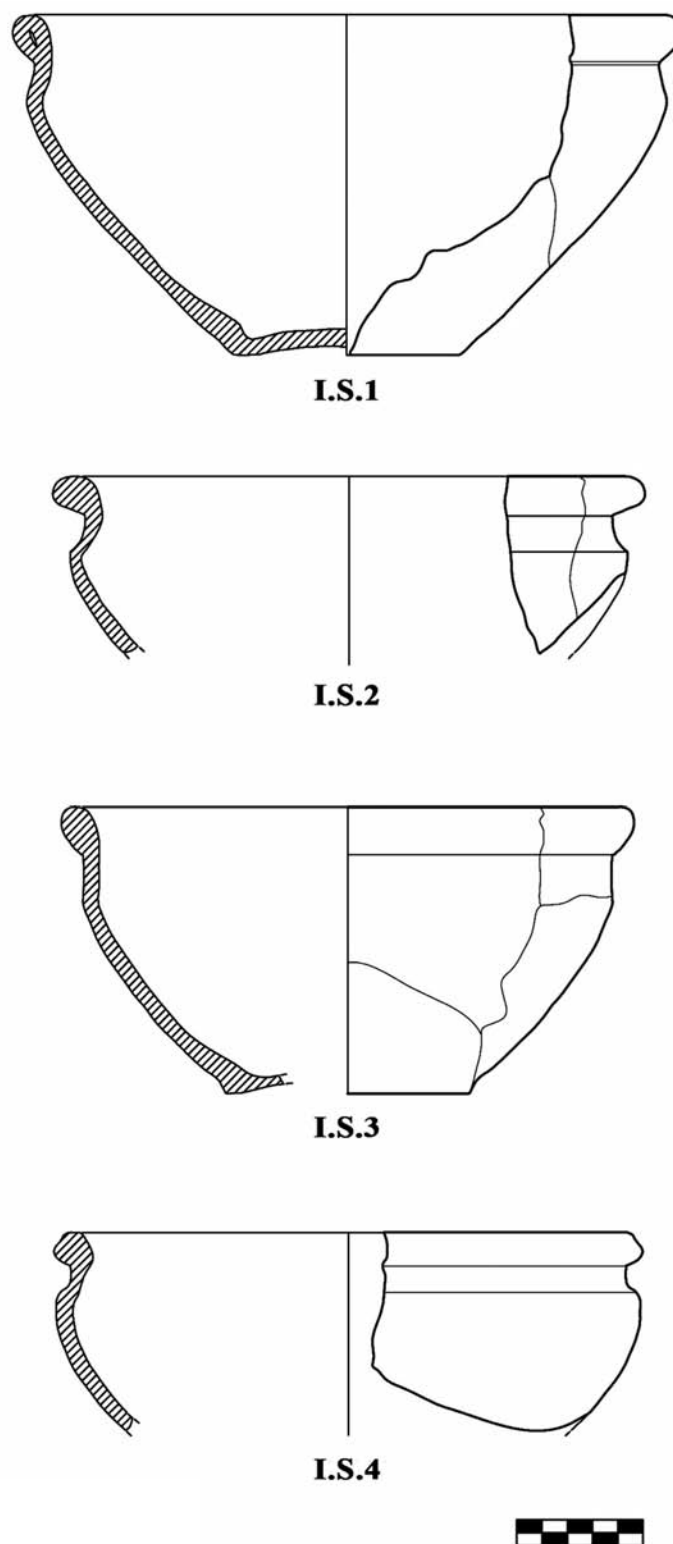


Fig. 4. Subforms of Olla tipo Calvatone (see ORSENIGO 2008). – Scale 1:3.

New research in the *Quartiere degli Artigiani*

Since 2005 new excavations were conducted in an area located between the *Domus del Labirinto* and *Scavo Sud* (figs. 2; 5)¹⁴. The occupational history of this newly explored sector consists of several stages which still need to be

exactly defined and its main features are similar to the ones encountered in *Room C*. Its general plan, which shows an alternation of open and closed spaces, strongly suggests a productive function for this area. The structures in this sector lack the typical lavish decorations of residential buildings. The floors are made of beaten earth or fine Roman concrete, which point once again to a productive and storage function as in the case of *Room C* previously discussed. Among the

¹⁴ For an overview of excavations conducted in this area see BACCHETTA 2009.

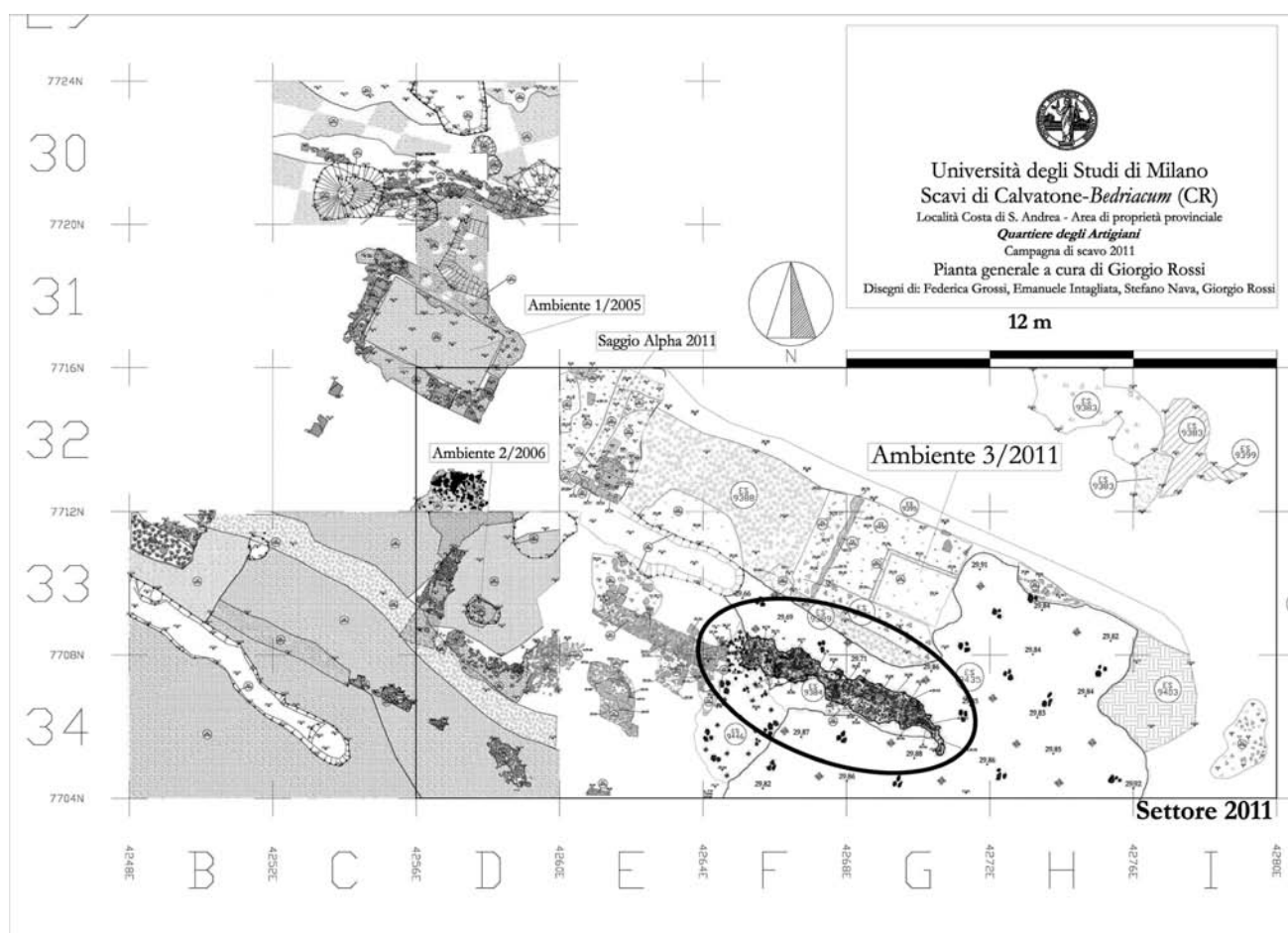


Fig. 5. Quartiere degli Artigiani (2011). Encircled is the low wooden shelf ES 9384.

finds it is noteworthy to mention the presence of decomposed remains of two low wooden shelves on which numerous potsherds of different nature have been found¹⁵. The area has also yielded numerous fragments of grindstone made of lava rocks. However, the predominant type of artifact found in the area is pottery, especially Common Ware. In layers dating between the mid 2nd to mid 3rd century, *Olla tipo Calvatone* is always attested in large numbers, representing an important chronological marker for one of the latest phases of life of the area.

The low shelf ES 9384

A representative – and problematic – case study is given by a ceramic assemblage brought to light in 2011 in the *Quartiere degli Artigiani*. This was found in a layer which was black-to-gray in colour with a thickness comprised between 5 and 1 cm, 6.20 m long by 90 cm wide (figs. 5–8). The layer runs parallel to the southern wall of Room 3/2011, which was later removed in antiquity by means of a trench to recover building material. The assemblage was sealed by a very thick layer of collapse from nearby structures. The colour of the soil, the

extensive presence of charcoal, its shape and position suggest that this layer is the decomposed remains of a low wooden shelf. Before removing the artefacts, the area covered by the layer was divided in seven sectors or “squares” (A-G from east to west) each 1m x 1m in size, and the positions of the most significant sherds were recorded. Every potsherd was then given an inventory number beginning with the letter of the square where it was found.

Though the material of the assemblage is heterogeneous¹⁶, pottery seems to be predominant. The quantity of pottery found within this thin layer – the study of which is still in progress – is outstanding. Among 3357 pottery sherds of bodies, rims, bases and handles, Terra Sigillata is represented by only 74 samples (2.2%), 0.15 % of the total is Thin Walled pottery, whereas around 98% is Common Ware (fig. 9).

Several preliminary conclusions can be drawn from a first macroscopic analysis of this material. It has been noticed that the majority of the fragments of Common Ware rims have roughly the same dimensions (between 2 and 11 cm). Most of the rims were deliberately detached from their body

¹⁵ One of these supports (ES 9384) will be shortly presented at the end of this paper.

¹⁶ Among the significant finds one should mention 7 fragments of lamps, one of which carries a stamp impressed on its disk, 7 iron fragments, one fragment of grindstone and a few fragments of glass. The presence of a small amount of building material (4 fragments of mortar and 5 fragments of bricks) is residual, possibly pertaining to the upper layer of collapse of nearby structures. Some of them are visible in fig. 7.



Fig. 6. The low wooden shelf ES 9384.
Photograph taken from SE.

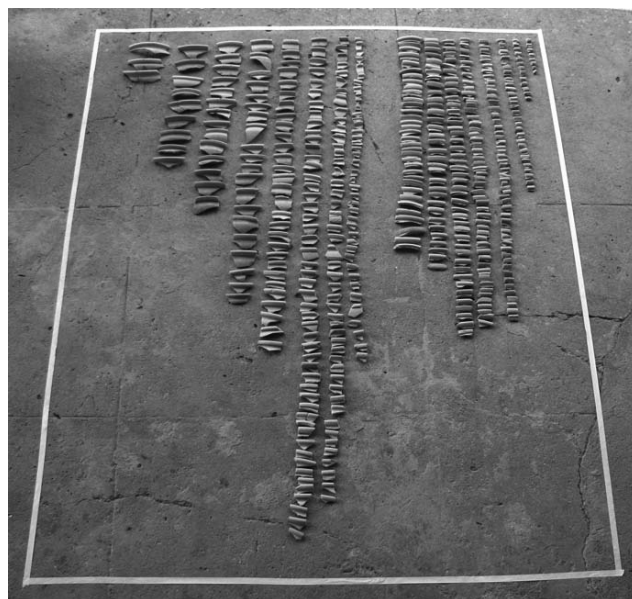


Fig. 8. Common Ware rim sherds from the assemblage
ES 9384 divided by size.



Fig. 7. The low wooden shelf ES 9384 (detail). Photograph taken from SE.

with a few strikes to find some uses which still need to be clarified (fig. 8)¹⁷. Moreover, it is impossible to reconstruct entire vessels from these fragments, thus the hypothesis for this layer of being a storage support for *Olle tipo Calvatone* must be excluded. These preliminary considerations would lead to the conclusion that potsherds were put on the shelf in an already fragmentary state. This hypothesis is supported by the parallel example of the low wooden support for pottery unearthed in the open courtyard in Room C and, possibly, a recently excavated layer, found in the *Quartiere degli Artigiani* and located parallel to our assemblage.

All these contexts have also another important feature in common. A preliminary analysis of the Common Ware rims in our assemblage, 703 in total, has shown that at least more than 50% of the specimens (52%) are of *Olla tipo Calvatone*, proving the absolute predominance of this particular vessel and pointing to a rough mid-2nd/mid-3rd century time span (fig. 10). A larger percentage of this pot (around 90%) has been attested in the low shelf unearthed in the open courtyard of *Ambiente C*.

Defining identities: *Olla tipo Calvatone* as a Social Identity Marker

The concentration of *Olla tipo Calvatone* in the *Quartiere degli Artigiani* is not surprising. The entire sector is characterized by the presence of humble buildings, possibly houses and/or workshops of local craftsmen, and the high quantity of this particular kind of pot was expected, considering the excavations carried out in *Ambiente C*. In Calvatone, this type of structure is closely linked with the presence of this

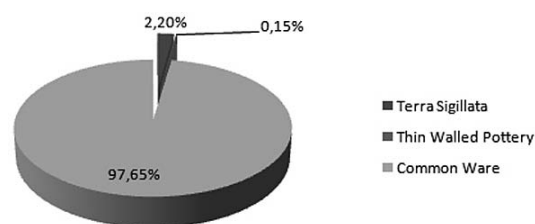


Fig. 9. Terra Sigillata, Thin-Walled Pottery and Common Ware in the assemblage ES 9384.

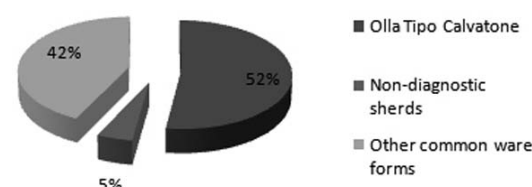


Fig. 10. Rims of *Olla tipo Calvatone* in the assemblage ES 9384.

pottery, which has never been attested in layers excavated in wealthy residential buildings. The case study of the low shelf ES 9384 is representative of the mid 2nd/mid 3rd century phase of the *Quartiere degli Artigiani*, reflecting a pattern which is extremely common in the area. In other words, *Olla tipo Calvatone*, beside its chronological importance, is first of all a *Social Identity Marker* the study of which will surely shed more light on the group of artisans and craftsmen living in the *vicus* between the mid-2nd/mid-3rd centuries AD.

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¹⁷ See ORSENIGO 2008.

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