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Late Roman Coarse Wares, Cooking Wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean

Archaeology and archaeometry

The Mediterranean: a market without frontiers

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**THE AMPHORAE IN THE ROMAN VILLA AT AIANO-TORRACCIA CHIUSI
(SAN GIMIGNANO, SIENA-ITALY)**

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Since 2005 a Belgian-Italian research team has undertaken an archaeological excavation on the site of a villa longinqua, a building erected between the late 3rd and the early 4th centuries AD. The research project was funded by the Université catholique de Louvain and was part of the international project VII Regio. Valdelsa during the Roman Age and late Antiquity. This site shows monumental features, and at the end of the 4th century AD underwent major restoration. It was then abandoned one century later, when it was ravaged and most of the marble building-material was taken away. Between the 6th and the 7th centuries AD, the site was occupied by craftsmen, who established several workshops for metal manufacturing (including iron, gold, lead and probably bronze), as well as glass and ceramics kilns. These craftsmen used the building material of the villa as raw materials.

The majority of the amphorae recovered during the excavation dates between the beginning of the 5th century and the early 7th century AD, but only spatheia amphorae were found in layers dating to the period during which these objects were actually produced and circulated. All the other amphorae (and perhaps the spatheia also) might have been reused in the workshops. The shapes of these amphorae imply commercial contacts with Hispania and Africa, placing the villa within a Mediterranean trade network.

KEYWORDS: VILLA, RE-USE, SPATHEIA, HISPANIC, NORTH AFRICAN.

Environmental and Archaeological Context

Since 2005 a Belgian-Italian archaeological team funded by the *Université catholique de Louvain* has been excavating an archaeological site located in a marginal area of the *Ager Volaterranus*. During the last five campaigns, this area, well known for the number and significance of the discoveries dating to the Roman age, has proved to be the site of a complex, organised settlement. This settlement consists of a *villa longinqua*, probably built between the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th centuries AD. The *villa* shows monumental features, and it was decorated with marbles and mosaics. During this early phase, which we identify as Phase 1, a hall with six apses was built. This hall was framed by a monumental *ambulatio* with five apses, and it was accessible through a rectangular vestibule. Apart from the specific functions of each single room, the communication between different parts of the building should not be considered as a secondary feature. Similar building dating to the same period are known, such as the villa in Cazzanello near Tarquinia. A further feature, typical of this kind of building, is the presence of coaxial openings at the two ends of the same hall (Cavalieri 2009a).

Later on – 375-400 AD, according to stratigraphical dating – the *villa* underwent major restorations, probably as the consequence of a disastrous natural event. In particular, the hall with six-apses was radically transformed, both in terms of architectural aspect and of function: the floor was lowered to a remarkable degree, three of the six apses were destroyed and in their place rectangular rooms were built. The new arrangement gave to the building the unusual form of a trilobate hall on a triangular basis, with exedras and rectangular rooms alternating. Thus, we are talking about a building very different from the classic *trikonchos*: the result of complex architectural history. The new floor of the hall consisted of *opus signinum*, a pavement with geometric decoration in the centre of the hall and in the apse opposite the vestibule, while the other two apses show a central ornamental *emblema* used as decorative pattern (Cavalieri 2009b).

During this phase the hall lost its function as a passage, as the openings were fully closed and it became a room destined to leisure (*otium*), but the external *ambulatio* maintained its function.

During the 5th century AD, presumably late on, the structure started to be abandoned and to fall apart: some

parts (like the hall with three apses) were abandoned and progressively hidden because the panels covering the walls and the roof collapsed. Other parts of the buildings were despoiled: the marbles were re-used for making lime.

It was only in a later period that the *villa*, then a ruin, was turned into an area where various materials such as iron, copper, gold and glass paste were collected and stockpiled. These materials were then used to produce small objects like pins, bracelets and necklace beads. During this phase, the rectangular rooms, built outside the trilobate hall, housed small workshops dealing with gold (room L), bronze (room I) and pottery (room H), while the south rooms are used as workshops for manufacturing glass and iron objects (respectively vestibule-room A and room B; Fig. 1) (Cavalieri, Giumlia-Mair 2009).

The part of the structure excavated seems to have been definitely abandoned during the second half of the 7th century AD. Even so this area shows signs indicating that it was frequented during the late Middle Ages. Perhaps this event should be linked to a nearby diversion of the *Via Francigena*, as stated in a text written by Sigeric, the Archbishop of Canterbury who travelled in this area at the end of the 10th century.

Ceramics in Context

The ceramic assemblage from *Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi* includes coarse-ware (*acroma grezza*), fine-ware coated with red/brown slip (*ceramiche rivestite di rosso*), fine-ware, semi-fine ware, oil lamps, *amphorae* and *opus doliare*. In addition, sherds of African *terra sigillata* and soapstone (*pietra ollare*) were found, even though in much smaller quantities. Some residual elements and ceramic sherds produced in different centers were recovered in different layers. These sherds include a fragment of Kelebe from Volterra, dating to the early decades of the 3rd century BC, several sherds of black-glazed pottery dating between the 4th and the 2nd centuries BC, sherds of proto-historic ceramics (*impasto*) and a few small fragments of Italian *terra sigillata*. Thus, further research is needed, not only on the phases prior to the building of the *villa*, but also on the role that this *villa* played during the stage that preceded its abandonment in the beginning of the 7th century AD.

The largest amount of the ceramic sherds recovered date between the second half of the 5th century and the beginning of the 7th century AD, and more specifically between the mid-5th and the mid-6th centuries AD, that is to the time when the *villa* was pillaged and several rooms started to be used for different craft-activities.

Amphorae

Containers dedicated to foodstuff transport were found in small quantities on the site of *Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi*: slightly less (2-3%) than the other ceramic classes. Coarse-ware and fine-ware coated with red/brown slip represent the largest amount of sherds.

A low percentage of certain ceramic types can be accredited to the small portion of excavated site (1400m²), which is only a tenth of the entire site according to geophysical analysis. Furthermore, this excavated part of the site is likely to be related, because of its magnificent architectural structures, to the *pars dominica* of the *villa*. Thus, it is not surprising that such a small quantity of *amphorae* was found in a spot not specifically meant to be a storage place, neither during the first phase, when the site was inhabited, nor later on, when it became an area for craft-activities.

Due to subsequent re-arrangements of the site, these containers were reduced to fragments and dispersed. Significant structural alterations occurred within a relatively short time: these, together with the major changes in the use of this area during the following centuries, have caused upheavals in the stratification, so greatly complicating the interpretation and the analysis of the site. As a result, sherds of the same *amphora* are often scattered over a large area. Moreover, they may not be found in a coherent chronological sequence due to the reversal of layers caused by these upheavals. Despite extensive efforts to identify and, wherever possible, to reconstruct these objects, it was not possible to classify a number of sherds, as they did not show any specific feature.

However, these sherds, though small, are well preserved, with their surface in good condition, and their edges sharp: these features suggest but a short exposure to the elements. The preliminary results of this on-going research on the *amphorae* discovered during the first three excavation campaigns (2006-2008) are discussed below.

The largest part of the *amphorae* recovered on the site of *Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi* was produced in North Africa (64%). The most frequent type (57%) can be recognized as the so-called *spatheion* (type Keay XXVI/Bonifay 31-32 - Table I, Figs. 1-4 and 6; see Keay 1984, 212-219; Keay 1998, 141-155; Bonifay 2004, 124-127; Bonifay 2005, 452-453). These *amphorae* were produced between the end of the 4th and the late 6th centuries AD: their dating varies according to sub-types (Keay E, I, M). In fact, the amphora type XXVI M Keay, as well as the Iberian *amphora* Almagro 51 C, which will be analysed below, are the only two types of *amphorae* recovered from a few contexts within the site, and only from within a certain sequence of layers. Thus, these *amphorae* are well defined in terms of space and timeframe. We have also recovered two sherds of Bonifay 33 *amphora* ('*Spatheia* miniature' - Table I, Fig. 5) (Bonifay 2004, 127-129) dating between the late 6th and 7th centuries AD (Bonifay 2004, 129; Keay 1998, 148). This *amphora* type was produced in *Zeugitana* and *Byzacena* (today Tunisia) and was spread throughout the whole Mediterranean area, into the Black Sea and along the Danubian *limes*. These containers were used for different foodstuffs (wine, oil and olives, fruits and vegetables). Smaller vessels of the same type could be used to contain precious ointments, spices or fish sauce: products that perhaps had become rarer in late Antiquity (Arthur-

Peduto 1989, 869; Reynolds 1995, 53; Saguì 1998, 312-314). Unfortunately, the sherds recovered at *Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi* have not provided any information concerning the goods they contained.

In terms of quantity of sherds, the next class to be discussed is the type Keay XXV/Africana III (Keay 1984, 184-212; Bonifay 2004, 119-122; Table II, Figs. 7-10), produced between the 4th century and the first half of the 5th centuries AD, and extremely widespread in the western Mediterranean. These *amphorae* were used mainly for wine, *salsamenta* and fish products, although further foodstuff cannot be excluded (for example, oil and olives oil as in the Dramont E wreck, Santamaria 1995, 51). Unfortunately, it has not been possible to identify more specific variants, because three of the sherds are fragments of tips, and the fourth sherd has no rim.

The other *amphorae* imported from North African are present as single sherds. These *amphorae* include a Keay XXXV B type amphora (Table II, Fig. 11, see Bonifay, Pieri 1995, 98; Keay 1998, 144; Bonifay 2004, 135) dating between the late 4th and mid-6th centuries AD, and were perhaps used for transporting wine or fish products (Bonifay 2004, 135). There is also an *amphora* Keay XXXVI (Keay 1984, 240-245) (Table II, Fig. 12), a type produced mainly during 5th century AD, whose content is unknown, but probably it is capable of containing different goods. Both *amphora* types are mainly present along the western coasts of the Mediterranean.

There are also several types of Iberian *amphorae* that are present only as single sherds.

One can be identified as an Almagro 51C/Keay XXIII *amphora* (Table II, Fig. 13) (Almagro 1953-1955, 312 Estruch 21 fig. 289; 409, n. 21; Keay 1984, 172-178, fig. 22, nn. 69-72). It is a kind of *amphora* produced in the Iberian Peninsula between the first half of the 3rd and the mid-5th centuries AD, and used to transport fish products. It was spread along the western Mediterranean coasts and in *Germania*. Another sherd, identified as Dressel 23/Keay XIII A group (Beltran Lloris 1970, fig. 206.3; Keay 1984, 140-146) (Table III, Fig. 14), was used to hold oil. This kind of *amphora* was originally made in *Hispania Baetica* from the mid-3rd and up to the late 5th and early 6th centuries AD. It is a type known in Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Britain (Carreras Monfort 1992, 12-14), Algeria (Manacorda 1977, 138) and in the Eastern Mediterranean (Tomi) (Scorpan 1977, 272, fig. 5, n. 39).

Finally, two *amphorae* were found in the late occupation of the site. These sherds are different in terms of the clay used and form: it is possible that their production had been influenced by the *Empoli amphorae* (Table III, Figs 15-16). This hypothesis is worth further investigation within this context. Even though it can be said the form of these *amphorae* recalls that of the *amphorae* produced in Empoli, yet it should also be stated that it is significantly different too, showing their own particular features (especially when it comes to the form of the handles). It can thus be concluded that the Empoli

amphora cannot with surety be considered as the model for this production.

The *spatheia* recovered at *Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi* are the only vases contemporary with the production area. All the other *amphorae* date at least fifty years earlier than the archaeological layers they were found in¹. A possible explanation is that they were reused in the workshops. *Amphorae*, in fact and unlike different kinds of objects, can become part of an archaeological assemblage a long time after they ceased to be manufactured. Their presence next to the kilns can be explained by their being in secondary use – perhaps for the transport of raw materials (Pesavento Mattioli 2000, 107). The lack of *amphorae* from the Eastern Mediterranean is indeed of interest. In fact, it is surprising when we consider how extensively these objects circulated throughout the Mediterranean between the 5th and the 7th centuries. The location of the *villa* inland from the Tyrrhenian Sea could be a possible explanation for this scarcity. The *amphorae* of type Late Roman 1, for instance, were traded only by sea, and thus they are found mainly along the coast or in sites related to maritime trade. In this way, these *amphorae* arrived in Lucca along the river Auser (Ciampoltrini *et al.* 1994, 620).

The Hispanic *amphorae* are related to the residential phase of the *villa*; they reflect the last imports of oil and fish sauce from the Iberian Peninsula, prior to their being replaced by African *amphorae* such as Keay XXV. From the 5th century onwards, imports from the North African provinces started to replace the Iberian ones, as is seen in most of the sites dating to this period. Even though the *amphorae* Keay XXV/Africana III might have survived the introduction of new *amphorae* from the Iberian Peninsula, other objects were replaced by the *spatheia*, which remained the most frequent ceramic type used also during the final phases of this site, at a time when Italian ceramics – more easily accessible and probably less expensive – started to be used.

The distribution of these *amphorae* suggests that, at least from the 5th century AD onwards, the *villa Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi* was involved in an inter-provincial trade network, linking the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa. During its last phase, the site was included in an exchange network involving mainly Tunisia, operating at an inter-regional scale. The low number of *amphorae* recovered so far, can be explained because of the function of the rooms excavated up to now. Furthermore, it is highly probable that items could have been re-employed. This limits the correct understanding of the volume of

¹It should be noted, however, that in the early Christian cemetery of Tarragona the type Keay XXXVB is present until the late 6th - early 7th centuries AD (Keay 1984, 240). Thus the chronological framework at Tarragona is the same as that of the *amphora* of this same type we have recovered during the excavation. In addition, in Lyon Dressel 23 *amphorae* (Becker *et al.* 1989, 658) are recovered more frequently in the layers dating between the second half of the 5th and first half of 6th centuries AD. Although they are considered as residual, Villa (Villa 1994, 375, footnote 134) argues that to consider all containers of this phase as such is an over-simplified view.

imported foodstuffs during the phase when the site was inhabited. So far, the sherd amount stresses the presence of small quantities of food, totally inappropriate for the size of the villa. During the following period, after the villa was deserted, the site seems to have been re-used in one way only. There are no traces of dwellings; thus it was not possible to reconstruct the site context as we wished to do. As for the later phases of the site (dating to the late 6th - early 7th centuries AD), we may assume that it was inhabited by a small group of people, who still had, somehow, access to a trade route serving not only the local environment, but also more widely still.

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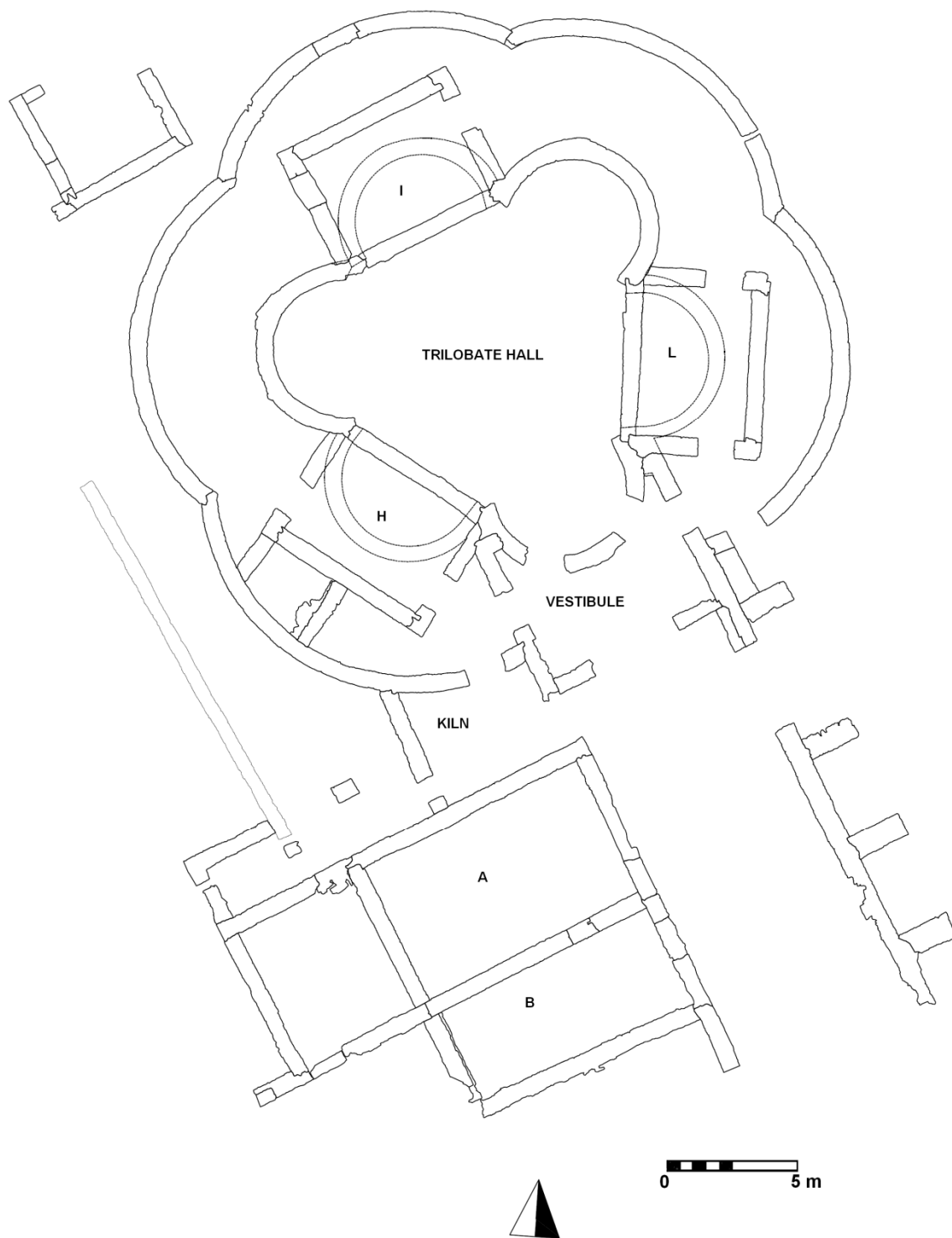
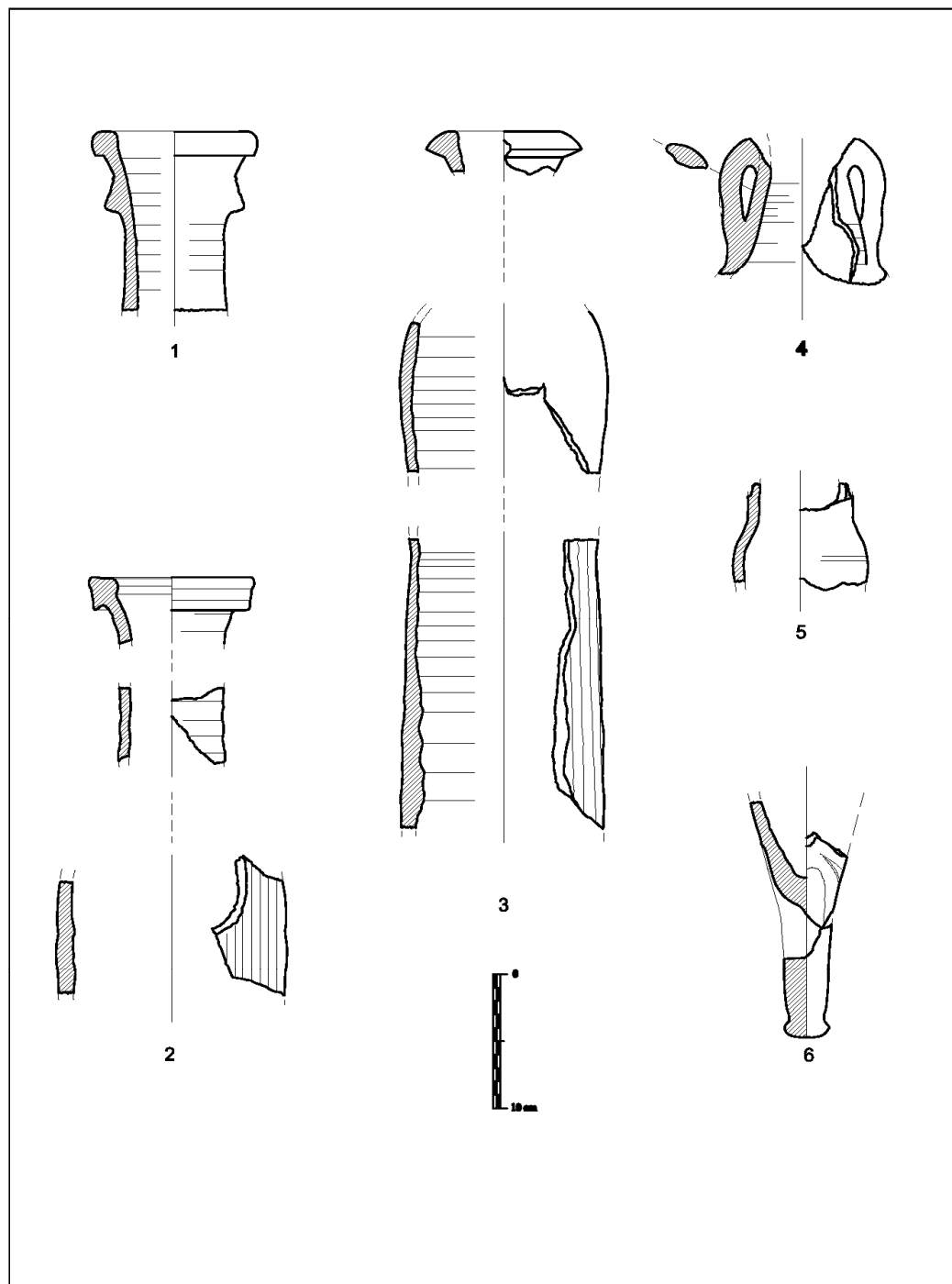
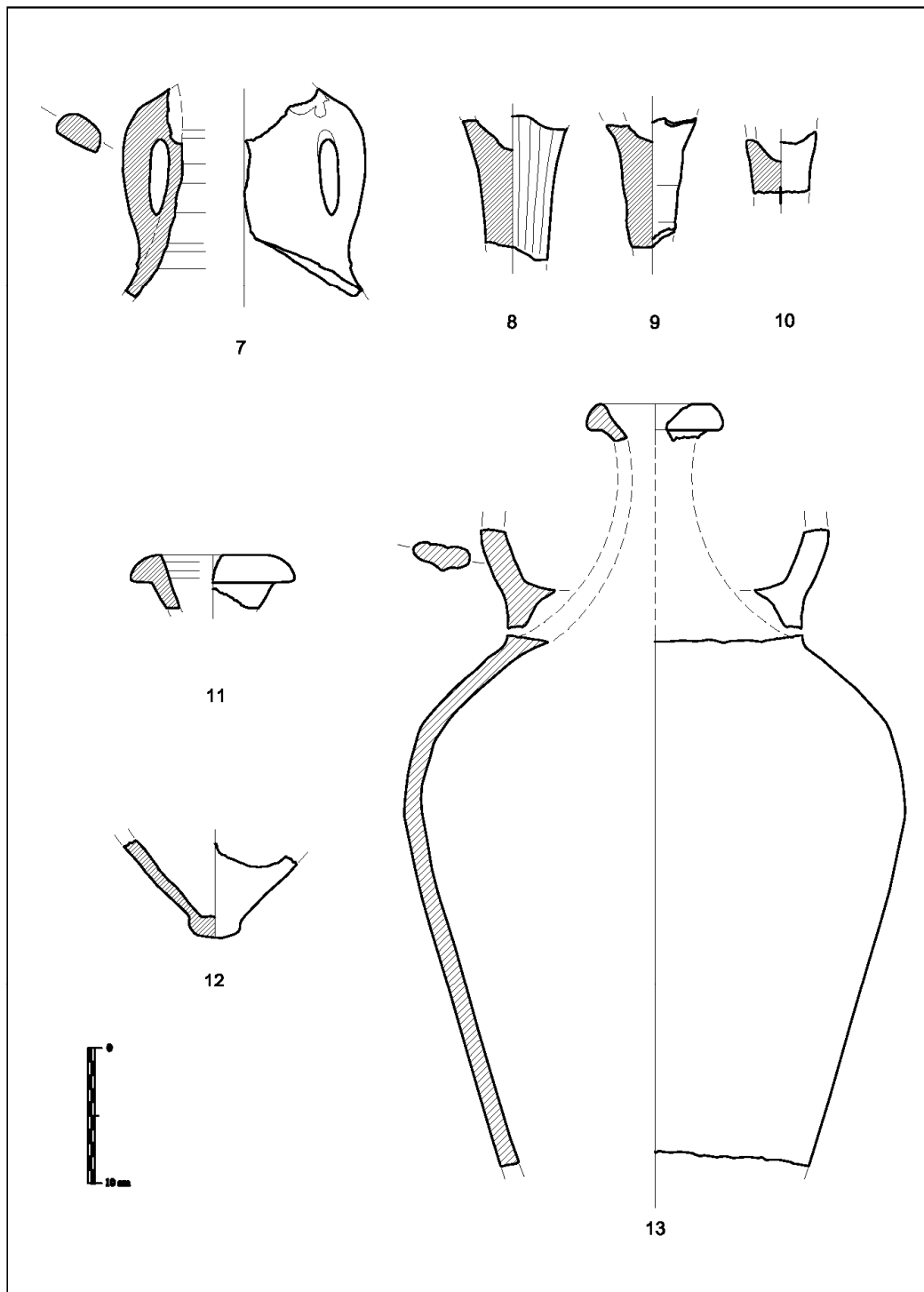


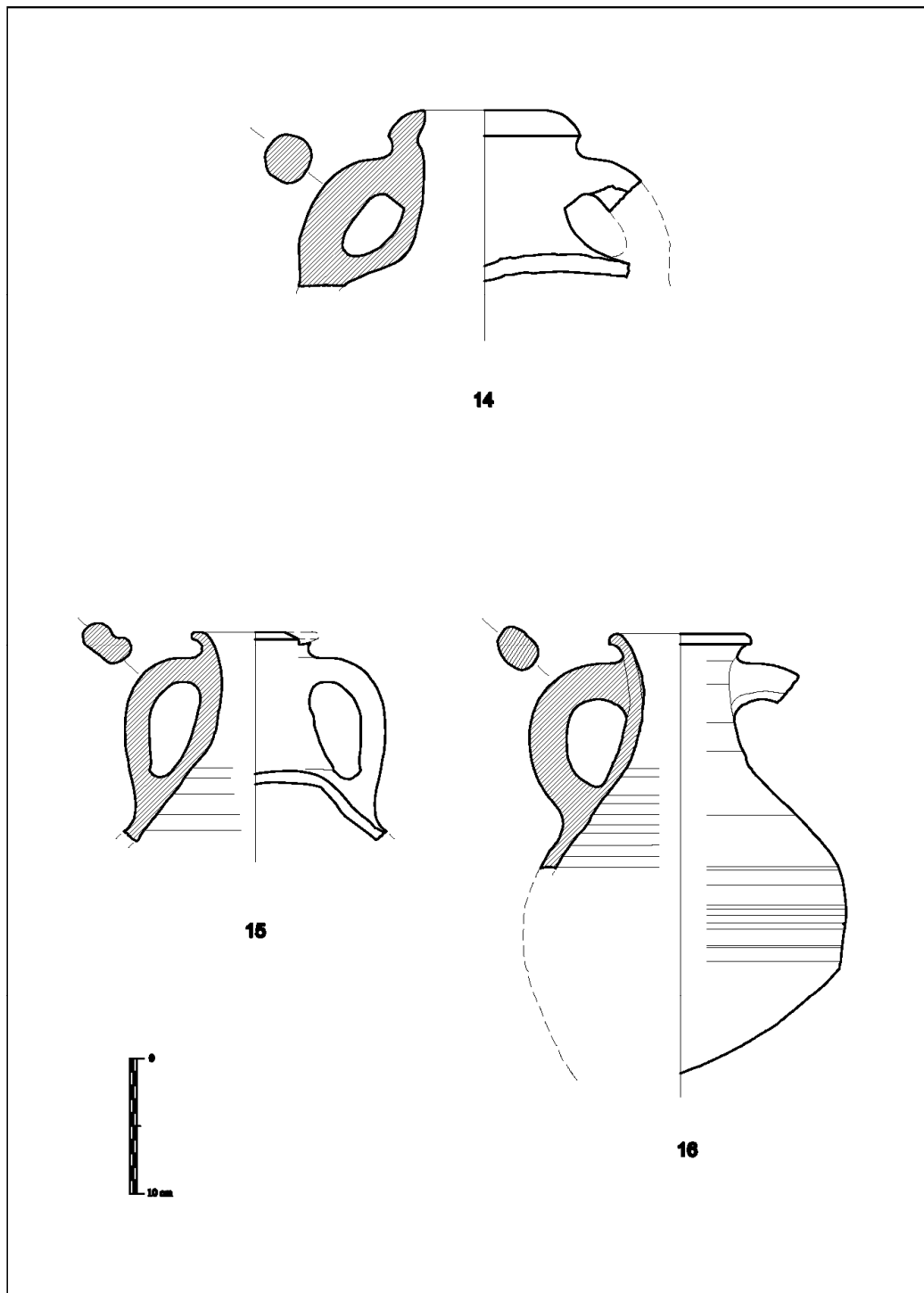
Fig. 1. Map of the archaeological site in the summer of 2009 with the indication of rooms' names



Tab. I, Fig. 1. Keay XXVI E Tab. I; Fig. 2. Keay XXVI I; Fig. 3. Keay XXVI M; Fig. 4. Keay XXVI; Fig. 5. Keay XXVI/Bonifay 33; Fig. 6. Keay XXVI



Tab. II, Figs. 7-10. Keay XXV; Fig. 11. Keay XXXVB; Fig. 12. Keay XXXVI; Fig. 13. Almagro 51C/Keay XXIII



Tab. III, Fig. 14. Dressel 23/Keay XIII A; Figs. 15-16. Amphorae influenced by the Empoli amphora tradition