

The material culture in the re-use phase (V-Earlier VII A.D.) on the site Aiano-Torraccia Chiusi (San Gimignano-Siena-Italy). Preliminary notes



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The villa at Aiano (Torraccia di Chiusi, San Gimignano, Siena-Italy) (Fig.1-2-3)

Since 2005 a Belgian-Italian mission of the *Université catholique de Louvain* directed by Prof. Marco Cavallieri, part of the international project "VII Regio: The Elsa Valley during Roman Age and Late Antiquity", had the license from the Italian Ministry for the Cultural Heritage and Activities (*Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali*) for the excavation of an archaeological site, that is placed in a marginal section of the *Ager Volaterranus*. During the last six campaigns, this area, well known for many and significant discoveries dated to the Roman Age, has shown an articulated settlement. It consists of a *villa longinqua*, probably built at the end of the 3th – beginning of the 4th century A.D., provided with a monumental architecture and decorative apparatus. To this first phase belongs a six lobes hall, framed externally by a monumental *ambulatio* with five lobes that is accessible by a rectangular vestibule. Within the specific functions of these rooms, the communication among the different parts of the building seems to be not secondary, as testified in other contemporary structures (for example the *villa at Cazzanella* near Tarquinia) and by the coaxial openings at the ends of the same hall. In a later period – dated by stratigraphic dates to the last quarter of the 4th century A.D., the *villa* was interested by heavy restorations, even not real reconstructions. In particular, the exalobate hall was radically transformed, both architectonically and functionally: the floor was remarkably lowered, three exedras were alternatively destroyed and the same number of rectangular rooms was built. The new arrangement gave the unusual form of a trilobate hall with a triangular basis, very different from the classic *trikonchos*, result of complex architectural history. The new floor of the hall is set up by an *opus signinum* soil with geometric decoration in the centre of the hall and in the apse fronting the vestibule, while the other two apses have a central ornamental *emblemata* (the best preserved represents a flowered goblet placed in a *guilloche* framed by a denticulate arch).

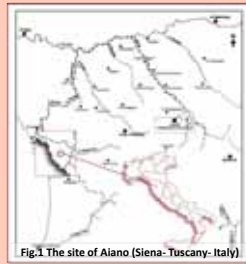


Fig.1 The site of Aiano (Siena-Tuscany-Italy)



Fig.2 Excavation 2010

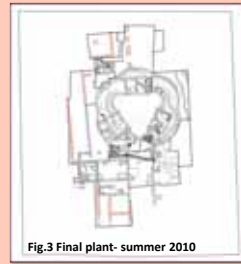


Fig.3 Final plant- summer 2010

Even if during this phase the hall lost the function as passage – the openings are definitely closed – becoming a room destined to the *otium*, the external *ambulatio* that has to be supposed covered by the brick collapses, maintains its function.

During the 5th century A.D., presumably at the end, the structure shows the first traces of disuse and collapse: some parts (like the trilobate hall) are abandoned and progressively hidden by the collapse of the parietal panels and covering. Other parts are instead subjected to the first depredations that have the purpose of recovering marbles for re-employment.

Only in a later period the *villa*, reduced to a ruin, turned into an area where heterogeneous material is collected and conserved (iron, copper, gold, vitreous pastes) that is destined to the production of small objects like pins, bracelets, necklace beads. During this phase the rectangular rooms, built outside of the trilobate hall, house small workshops for the manufacture of gold (room L), bronze (room I) and pottery (room H), while the south rooms are destined to workshops for the manufacture of glaze (vestibule, room A) and iron (room B).

During the second half of the 7th century A.D. the excavated part of the structure seems to be definitely abandoned, even if the area shows traces of frequentation along the late Middle Ages, maybe for the presence of a deviation of the Francigena Road, as testified by the Canterbury's Archbishop Sigeric, who travelled at the end of the 10th century.

Characters of the ceramic context

Actually we have analyzed ceramic from 2006, 2007 and 2008 excavations; the context is composed of 10.000 fragments, subdivided among coarse ware, red coated ware, refined and semi-refined domestic ware, besides lamps, amphoras, *dolia*, African Red Slip vessels - just in little fragments and in very lower quantity - rare tiny fragments of Italic *sigillata*, some fragments of soap-stone (*pietra ollare*), and, in addition, singles residual elements, not connected to the context and pertinent to pre-roman periods.

The most relevant nucleus of this restitution belongs to the frequentation of the ruined *villa* with the intent to despoil, but also to settle various workshops and, finally, to the final phase, when we have the abandonment of these artisanal structures and, perhaps, another period of depredations with the purpose of some re-employment of the materials. The chronological range of these complex and compressed activities is comprised from the II half of 5th c. A.D. and the beginning of 7th c. A.D. and, probably, around the mid 6th c. we have the most intensive and articulate frequentation of the area, connected to the workshops in action.

These *data*, already displayed by our taxonomic study and by comparison with analogous contexts, are confirmed and strengthened by petrographic analyses of a lot of coarse ware samples, which have shown the presence of marbles*, in several frameworks; these marbles are similar to the fragments recovered in excavation, pertaining to decorative facing of the *villa*.



Ceramic Kiln in Aiano

From African Red Slip Ware to its imitations. Continuity in change

Morphological and functional references given by African Red Slip Ware were still present to the craftsmen who produced, probably in Aiano too, refined domestic, red coated and coarse ware. Production and circulation of this pottery, even if with simplified techniques and briefer executions, is clearly due to demands of a market which still use a domestic equipment various enough, but by then drawn towards a deep economical and cultural change, that will become clear from the full 7th c. In the context of Aiano we can see forewarning signals of this change that we'll show in next box.

To follow this phenomenon of imitation and transformation in Aiano we can use preferential indicators in ceramics, such as open forms (cups, flanged bowls and large dishes) red coated, but also open coarse ware although these forms (casserole, flanged-bowls and *testi*) are only 3% of vessels in this class (Fig.4).

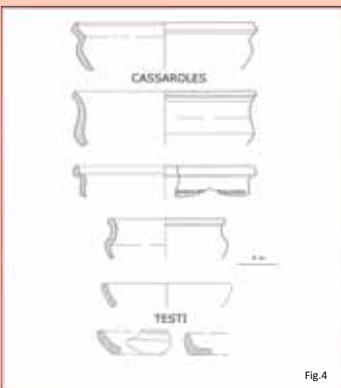


Fig.4

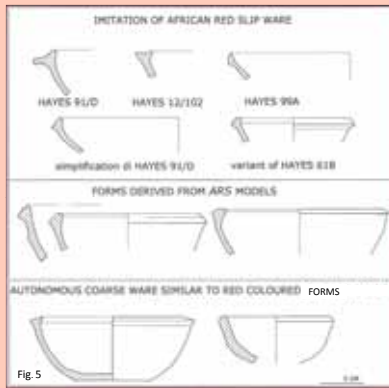


Fig.5

Some forms of coarse and red coated bowls in our context directly come from African Red Slip Ware models (such as Hayes 61A and 109)(Fig.5); some simply have an assonance with African products but others deviate from these models to get autonomous and local characters, with close morphological relations between classes.

Flanged bowls ((Fig.5), very rare among coarse ware, are a duplicate of African Red Slip products and are much more represented in refined domestic and red coated productions; these last, in particular, imitate Hayes 91 C and D forms and have characteristic flanges, with few protruding rounded rims; the flange too, in these cases, is very little and not hooked.

Testi and casseroles are going to fill the functional gap left by African cooking pottery, significantly absent in Aiano (fig.4).

We can suppose that coarse cups and flanged- bowls were used not only for cooking, but also on the table, just because they, with other signals, set the stage for transition towards multi- functionality of vessels, which, in a few time, with a drastic reduction of the forms, will be typical of Early Medieval period.

Another indicator for imitation of African red slip ware is the red coated large dishes. In our context these forms are strongly connected with African products, such as Hayes 42 and 45. Their decorative stamp motifs are often similar to those of geometrical style, typical of ARS first period production (320/460 A.D.). Afterwards, decorations on dishes become careless till the complete disappearance or just restricted to two folds.

Some new forms (Fig.6)

Most coarse ware consists of fast-wheel made *olle*, well-finished by hand or by some cloth, but we have to point out the presence of little pot-bellied jugs, with few sagged handle at the same plane of the rim. These jugs are slow-wheel or handmade and, with other indicators, are the evidence of household or very low-level artisanal and local production, coexistent with a medium level artisanal industry, characteristic of the total context.

There are other indicators of this more *autarchic* economy which will prevail between 7th and 9th c. in these internal and rural areas. They are unique - at the moment - vessels, heirs of an ancient tradition, witnesses of a domestic *karstic* culture, destined to show up during market crisis: *clibanus* and portable ovens, large *ciotole-coperchio* for familiar use; furthermore we have to point out the presence of single forms related to a big *caldron* (with linear string and vertical base for an handle), to a multifunctional double cup (similar to a *saltcellar* too), cups with central cordon, undeniably connected with pre-roman heritage, and finally simply lamps "a *ciabatta*" (with open basin), feed by tallow and not by oil.

Moreover, among red coated closed forms (jugs and two-handled jugs, bottles, flasks) we can point out the presence of original variants, with characteristic combed wavy decorations, which probably start to appear at the same time as dishes, with African style stamped motifs, are gradually going to disappear.

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Fig.6

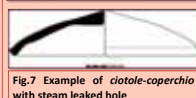


Fig.7 Example of *ciotole-coperchio* with steam leaked hole

The ciotole-coperchio (Fig.7)

The corpus of *ciotole-coperchi* discovered on the site *Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi* (Survey, excavation campaigns 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008) represents 170 fragments for a minimum vessel count equal 103, which corresponds to 22% of cooking lids identified on the site.

The Italian term *ciotola-coperchio* refers to a dish used as lid. As a ceramic cooking, they should therefore be used to cover containers to undergo the action of fire. This hypothesis is reinforced by the use of silica clays which can withstand thermal shocks and the blackening of the walls (due to exposure to flames) on many examples. In addition, two of them have a side with a hole for steam leaked, this last element leaving no doubt as to their use as lid. The evidence of the systematic use of this form as cooking lid, however, are not observed in all cases; we can also assume a double function for this type of shape (dish and/or lid) without impact on technology or morphology of the objects found.

Concentrations of major *ciotole-coperchi* are located in the stratigraphic units which correspond to two phases of the site: the reoccupation of the Roman villa by craft workshops (VIth and VIIth centuries AD) and the final abandonment of them (beginning of VIIIth century AD.). The abundance of traditional lids (other than *ciotole-coperchi*) in the same phases can say that the site presents a situation as this time horizon (VI-VII century AD.) since these traditional lids disappear in the central centuries of the middle Ages.



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