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CERAMICS PRODUCTION IN LATE HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN SYRACUSE: THE SEARCH FOR THE POTTERY QUARTER

By Stephan Hassam, *University of Loyola-Chicago*



Arcadia University offers a field school at the Catacombs of St. Lucy in Syracuse, Italy under the scientific direction of Dr. Davide Tanasi (The College of Global Studies, Arcadia Sicily Center). Apart from the didactic function of the excavation, it also brings to light important information on the archaeology of ancient Syracuse. Indeed, the excavation has yielded information not only about the early Christian use of the site (3rd to 6th century A.D.) but also Late Hellenistic and Early Roman Syracuse in the context of a pottery manufacturing quarter (3rd century B.C. – 1st century A.D.). Though largely ignored in the past, this period following the conquest of the island by the Romans has slowly become an increasingly popular period for the study of Sicily. Unfortunately, despite Syracuse's prominence in antiquity as a political, military and economic center¹, it has still been given remarkably little attention and many of the excavations in the area remain unpublished. The author took part in the 2013 and 2014 seasons of Arcadia University's aims to contextualize the university's excavation plans by summarizing the available data provided by previous excavations at the catacombs and to connect them with the current state of knowledge on Late Hellenistic and Roman Syracuse. Before discussing the excavation and finds, however, it is important to provide some general historical context for the city of Syracuse and the site.

Syracuse was founded in South Eastern Sicily by Corinthian colonists in the 8th century B.C. in the first wave of Greek colonization of the island that would come to dominate Eastern Sicily (figure 1). Over time Syracuse became the largest, most powerful, and arguably most aggressive city-state in Sicily. It is famed for its long history of tyranny, violent wars with the Phoenician, native, and Greek neighbors, and its defeat of Athens during the Peloponnesian war, bringing the naval empire to its knees. It was perhaps the most influential Greek city in the Western Mediterranean until its sack by the Arabs in 878 A.D., making its dominance over the island some 900 years long². Even after the sack of the city by the Romans captured in 212 B.C., during the Second Punic War, the city became the capital of Rome's *prima provincia* and enjoyed a great deal of wealth and success³. It is this period just after the Roman conquest that we are primarily interested in. Syracuse was a very Greek city for most of its existence and would remain so well into the Roman period and beyond⁴. This period of Syracuse's history thus receives the somewhat confusing, yet necessary, name 'Late Hellenistic - Early Roman period' in order to explain the persistence of Greek culture throughout centuries of Roman rule. In the 2nd and 1st century B.C., the city had recovered from its conquest by Rome, and though no longer completely a sovereign city-state, it was still an economic powerhouse, with the backing of many noble Romans who lived there⁵. While we know that Syracuse must have had a large scale pottery quarter, where ceramic production was centralized, somewhere in the northern suburb known as 'Akradina', its exact location is still unknown (see figure 2 for the layout of the ancient city). Though it is not currently possible to date the occurrence, the abovementioned area of the city was eventually abandoned and was reutilized as funerary spaces⁶. As dictated by Roman law, burials could not occur

¹ Wescoat, Bonna D. *Syracuse, the fairest Greek city*. Roma: De Luca edizioni d'arte, 1989.

² Evans, R. J. *Syracuse in Antiquity*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2009.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Wilson, Roger. *Sicily Under the Roman Empire*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd., 1990.

⁵ Cicero, Verrines 2.4.117-119

⁶ Wilson, *Sicily Under the Roman Empire*.

inside a city, so an extensive system of catacombs and hypogea were excavated in this part of the city from the 3rd to 6th centuries A.D., including the catacombs of St. Lucy⁷.

The catacombs of St. Lucy represent one of the most important and complex contexts of Christian ritual and cult practices in the province of Syracuse. The underground cemetery (3rd to 6th century A.D.) incorporates preexisting structures from the classical period of both cult functions (pagan shrines), as well as of a productive ones (pottery workshops) and it documents a continual use of the site through even the medieval period. Sometime after the catacombs cease to serve burial purposes, they became a place of pilgrimage and new cult spaces (oratories and *itinera ad sanctos*) were created for the veneration of the Syracusan martyr Lucy and other saints, radically modifying the aspect of some of the cemeterial regions. A series of traumatic events in the site's history have rendered the explorations of the site, nearly at a standstill since the 1950s, particularly complex⁸. Much of the catacombs were filled by cave-ins and landslides caused by earthquakes. Some of the catacomb galleries were also gutted for use as air raid shelters during the Second World War. As of 2011, however, the Vatican Committee for Sacred Archaeology initiated new archaeological explorations of the site, first with the University of Catania, and then with Arcadia University in 2013. These explorations pertain particularly to region C of the catacombs, which was explored by the excavations of the 1950s but has remained in large part unpublished. The nearly total absence of documentation (written, drawn, or photographic) of the preceding excavations, the lack of ancient or post-ancient deposits, the survival of sporadic fragments of archaeological stratigraphy, and the abundance of decontextualized ceramic finds makes this site an exemplary case study for the process of recontextualization. The research strategy was devised with the purpose of uniting both the didactic and scientific needs of the excavation and the involved institutions. The systematic excavation of the floor level made it possible to recover precious information regarding the readaptation of preexisting classical structures in the Christian cemetery and to their relative phases of use. The excavation has also brought to light the difficulties of an anthropological excavation in looted and disturbed contexts while trying to form a realistic picture of the *status vivendi* of the community that the cemetery served.

The catacombs of St. Lucy are separated into four different regions (A, B, C, and D), and Arcadia University excavates in region C (figure 3). This region came into being sometime during 4th century A.D. when Christianity was well established in Syracuse. During the field school's excavations (2013-2014), our students were able to excavate a total of 17 tombs, finding, among the abundant skeletal remains, fragments of glass, ceramics, frescoes, as well as coins and metal remains.

Though this may seem to be the last place that one would find evidence for the 2nd and 1st century B.C. kilns, we have actually found a great deal of evidence suggesting a pottery workshop near our area of excavation, which affirms the findings of other Italian archaeologists that excavated nearby in the 1970s⁹. Our findings can also be directly comparable to a large complex of un-contextualized objects allegedly collected in the Catacombs of St. Lucy and stored for a long time in the *antiquarium* of Vigna Cassia in Syracuse. The recent reappraisal of these finds has shed light on the strategic importance of the ancient district of Akradina to our knowledge of the transition between the Greek and Roman periods, and suggests the presence of an important pottery production center in the area later occupied by the catacombs of St. Lucy¹⁰.

⁷ Sgarlata, Mariarita. "Dai Cimiteri ai Luoghi Santi: Le Trasformazioni del suburbio siracusano." *Atti del secondo seminario sul Tardo Antico a l'Alto Medioevo in Italia Meridionale, Foggia-Sant'Angelo, 27-28 Maggio 2006*. Bari: Edipuglia, 2010. 253-273.

⁸ Agnello, Santi Luigi. "Recenti esplorazioni nelle catacombe di Santa Lucia I." *Archeologia Christiana*, 1954, 7-60. Agnello, Santi Luigi. "Recenti esplorazioni nelle catacombe siracusane di Santa Lucia II." *Archeologia Christiana*, 1955, 7-50.

⁹ Malfitana, D. "The View from the Material Culture Assemblage of Late Republican Sicily." By Colivichi (ed.), 185-201. Rome, 2011.

¹⁰ Malfitana, D., and G. Cacciaguerra. *Archaeologia Classica in Sicilia e nel Mediterraneo*. Catania, 2014.

We know that cave-ins were especially prone in Region C, according to the first explorations of the area, and that these often brought ancient pottery in with them¹¹.

These tombs, violated *ab antiquo* and thus no longer covered with the characteristic ceramic slab, contained pottery from cave-ins that bore with it a mix of ceramics from the 3rd century B.C. at the earliest to the 1st century A.D. at the latest (further study on the material needs to be carried out to specifically determine more exact dates). More importantly, among the mixed cave-in layers were found kiln wasters, i.e. over fired or poorly fired ceramics that would have been thrown away, and kiln spacers (figure 4)¹². These logically would not have been transported a great distance from the original site of the firing to be disposed of. In addition, this site has yielded a great deal of raw clay suggesting the existence of pottery quarter nearby. All that is missing now is the actual location of the kilns.

In addition to these suggestive finds, among the fine ware, several examples of Campanian pottery have been found. This class of pottery was a fine yet cheap tableware, generally simply-decorated or undecorated and slipped entirely in black¹³. The examples of the sub-type Campana C, pottery created in Sicily itself, found at the site, are directly comparable with those recently published from the same part of the city (figures 5-6)¹⁴.

The site yielded a complicated *mélange* of forms and ceramic fabrics and more study is required to draw conclusions from them. As most of the ceramics from this area of the city are from unknown contexts, our materials are especially important as they will supplement the relatively scarce published material on contextualized ceramics of this period. Among these, can be distinguished African Red Slip, plenty of examples of simple table and cookware, as well as examples of Arretine pottery, suggesting that there was trade with the suburbs of Rome in the early first century A.D., though much study remains to be done before further conclusions can be drawn. The results of the 2013-2014 excavations of Arcadia University at the Catacombs of St. Lucy have already contributed to the re-contextualization of the until recently forgotten complex of findings stored at Vigna Cassia and provided new data towards a probable identification of a Late Hellenistic-Early Roman pottery quarter later incorporated into the catacombs.

The excavation will continue to make field archaeology accessible to undergraduate students in the years to come and bring more material to light. There remains much work to be done to complete the qualitative analysis of the pottery found. For example, the more exact classification of the finds from layers below the Christian layer will provide a *terminus post quem* for the site prior to its cemeterial function. Just as importantly, however, the elaboration of this project will finally provide another vital contextualized source of materials for the research on the material culture of Sicily in the Late-Hellenistic period, a topic that has justly begun to receive much needed attention in recent years.

¹¹ Agnello, "Recenti esplorazioni nelle catacombe di Santa Lucia I."

¹² Amato, Paolo, and Alberto Branca. "Gli Scarti di Fornace e gli Strumenti per la produzione di ceramica." In *Archeologia Classica in Sicilian e nel Mediterraneo*, by D. Malfitana and Cacciaguerra G., 53-62. Catania, 2014.

¹³ Hayes, John W. *Handbook of Mediterranean Roman Pottery*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997.

¹⁴ Gullotta, Valerio. "Le Ceramiche a Vernice Nera con Impasto Grigio Tipo "Campana C"." In *Archeologia Classica in Sicilia e nel Mediterraneo*, by Malfitana D. and Cacciaguerra G., 71-72. Catania, 2014.

FIG. 1: Map of Roman Sicily (Digital Atlas of the Roman Empire, accessed 20th December 2014: <http://imperium.ahlfeldt.se/>)

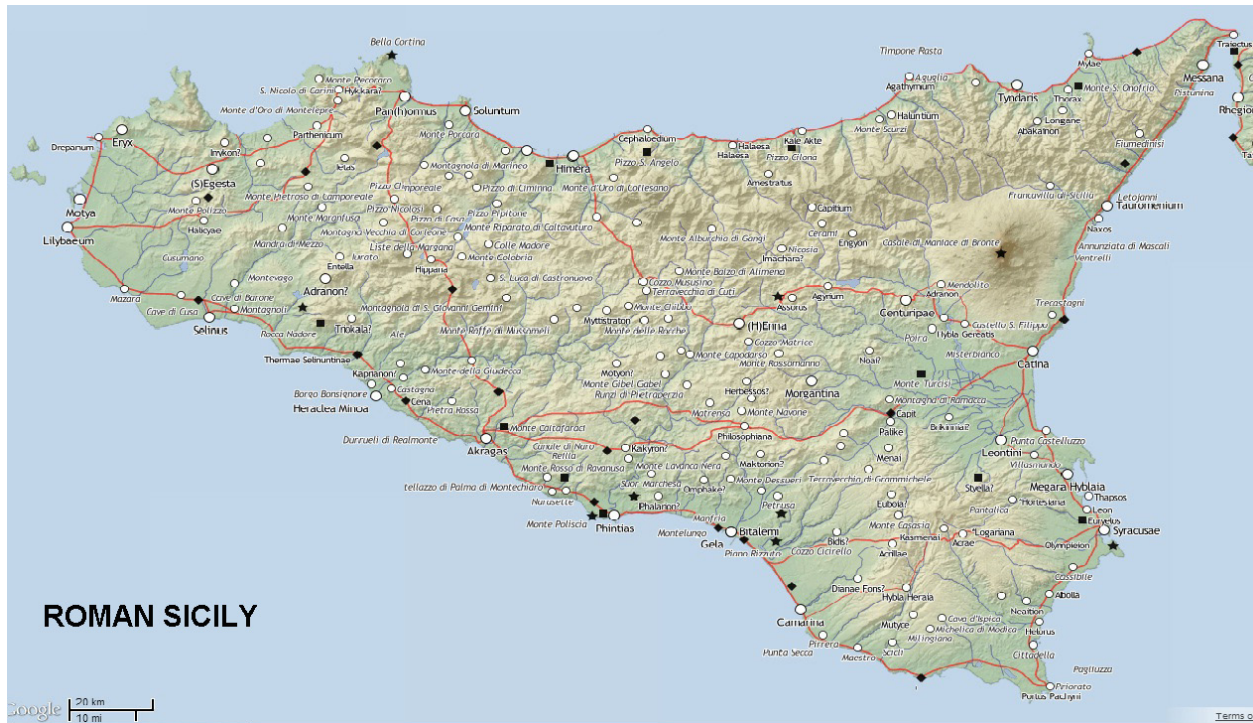


FIG. 2: Map of Roman Syracuse (Wilson 1990).

134.1 (upper left) **Syracuse (Syracusae):** 1 sixth-century-B.C. temple of Apollo; 2 sixth-century-B.C. Ionic temple; 3 fifth-century-B.C. temple of Athena; 4 paleochristian church of S. Pietro, ?fourth century A.D.; 5 Fountain of Arethusa (Fig. 135); 6 Piazza Pancali (find-spot of statues of Hades and Hygieia); 7 Castello Maniace, whence the bronze rams (Fig. 289) came (?site of the provincial governor's palace); 8 agora/forum; 9 theatre-temple complex known as the 'Gymnasium'; 10 Hieronian theatre; 11 Altar of Hieron and adjacent piazza; 12 amphitheatre; 13 Piazza della Vittoria excavations (temple of Demeter); 14 square at Piazza Adda; 15 square near the amphitheatre; 16 honorific arch; 17 'Sessanta letti', ?Roman house or public building (Fig. 279); 18 via d'Arsenale, Roman house; 19 baths on Corso Gelone; 20 house near the railway station; 21 house where the Venus Landolina (Fig. 251) was discovered; 22 S. Nicola reservoir; 23 aqueducts; 24 mithraeum; 25 S. Lucia catacombs; 26 Vigna Cassia catacombs; 27 S. Giovanni catacombs; 28 Villa Maria district; 29 Madonna delle Lacrime excavations; 30 Grotticelli necropolis; 31 late Roman tomb with frescoes (Politi or Landolina tomb). Ancient shoreline shown solid; modern shoreline, where it diverges, is shown dotted.

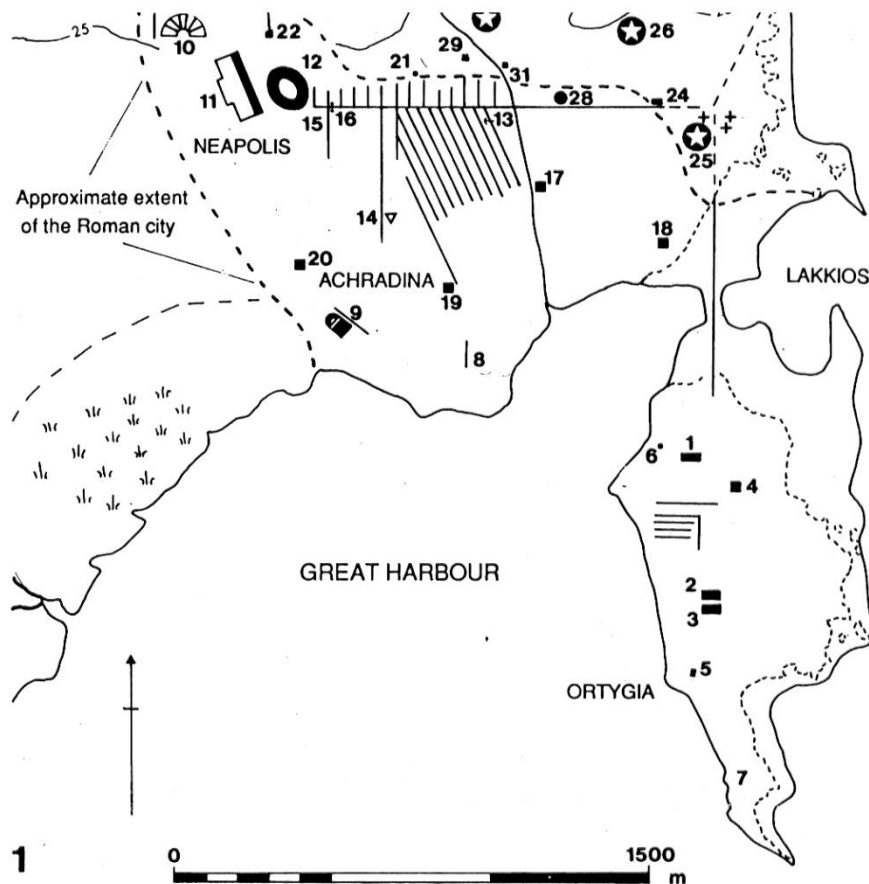


FIG. 3: Map of the Catacombs of St. Lucy, Region C. Excavation areas marked in red. Possible location of kiln marked in black (Sgarlata 2010).



FIG. 4: Kiln waster from the decontextualized complex of materials from Vigna Cassia (Amato and Branca 2014).



FIG. 5: Campana C plates from the decontextualized complex of materials at Vigna Cassia (Gullotta 2014).

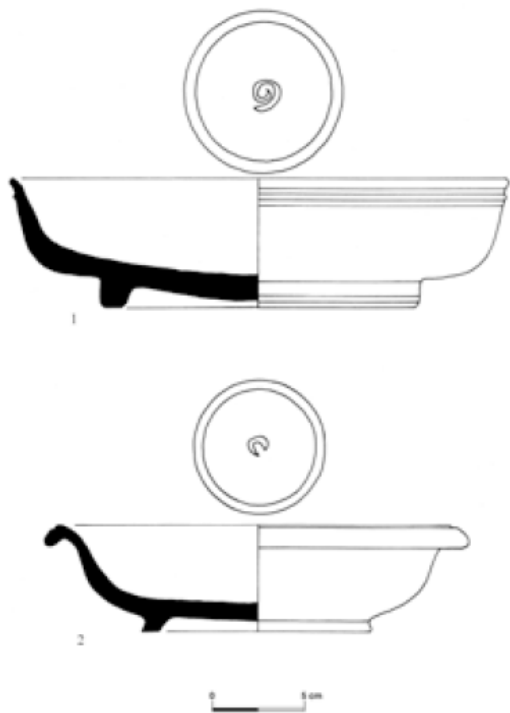
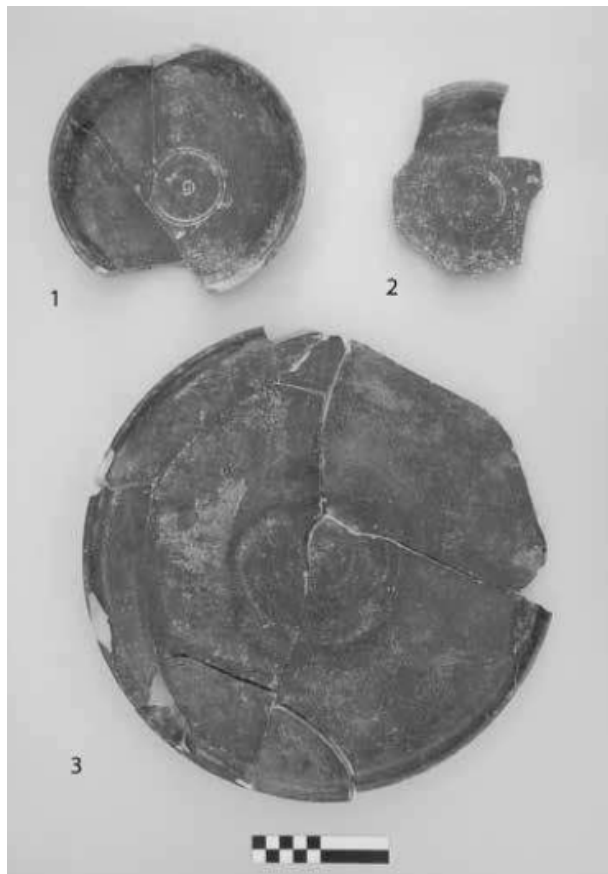


FIG. 6: Campana C plates from the decontextualized complex of materials at Vigna Cassia (Gullotta 2014).



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