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A NOTE ON OLIVES AND OLIVE OIL FROM
PICENUM (MARCHE, NORTHERN ABRUZZO)
AN OBSCURED FOOD PRODUCT WITHIN
THE ECONOMY OF CENTRAL ADRIATIC ITALY
IN ROMAN TIMES?

Our knowledge on olive oil presses in *Picenum* (Marche and northern Abruzzo) has long been of a very disparate and unsystematic nature. Reasons include the inequality of archaeological investigations, the limitations of field surveys and surface finds, combined with a minority of excavated rural sites and their fragmentary state of preservation due to the use of more perishable and less noble building materials in antiquity. This situation – together with modern day environmental conditions limiting large-scale oleoculture – has made researchers consider the role of olives in the economy of central Adriatic Italy in Roman times of a rather modest nature, mostly aimed at personal consumption and only occasionally exploited for commercial purposes¹.

¹ See references in BUSANA *et al.* 2009. It is indeed true that, also today, the central Adriatic part of Italy is an area lying at the limit of the suitable cultivation radius, coinciding with what is labelled nowadays as the medium and cold sub-areas. Practically speaking, the inclusion of the region in these sub-areas means that – while the oil can be of good quality – it is difficult to attain high levels of productivity, with olive trees often suffering damage from recurrent cold weather conditions, especially in the cold sub-area. The small coastal section of the region falling under the medium sub-area has somewhat better circumstances, but irrigation is nevertheless required to attain maximum productivity (ALFEI *et al.* 2004; FONTANAZZA 2005).

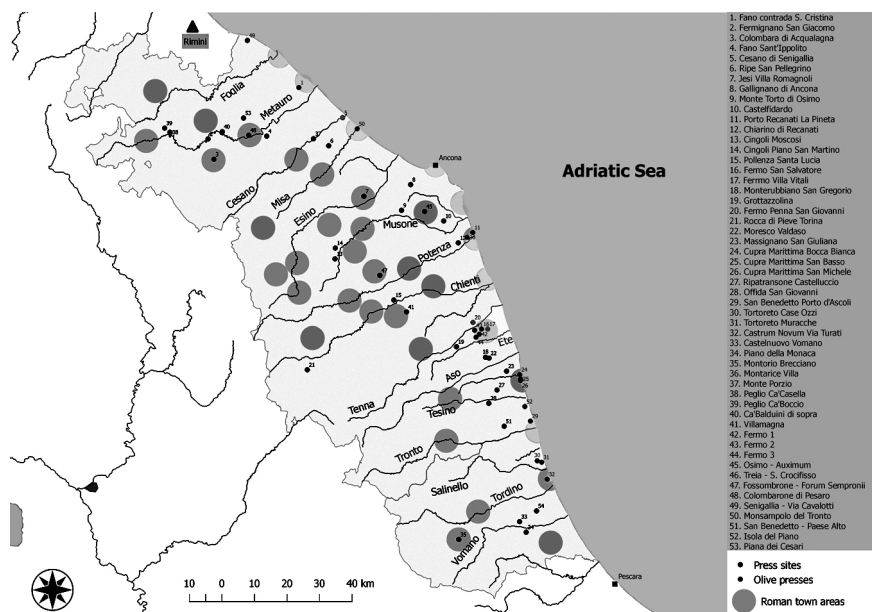


Fig. 1 – Press sites, identified olive presses and wider Roman town areas (town + immediate hinterland) in the Marche region and northern Abruzzo (*Picenum et Ager Gallicus*) (Map author).

Recently, however, systematic overviews and reappraisals of published material – as well as an update of some of the unpublished evidence from the archives of the Soprintendenza Archeologica delle Marche in Ancona – have significantly enhanced our picture of the oil producing facilities in this central Adriatic region². In addition, limited personal fieldwork by the author on rural and urban sites located in central Marche have resulted in the identification of previously unknown presses. Thanks to these efforts, some 53 sites now prove to contain evidence that points towards the existence of one or several press installations in Roman times (Fig. 1).

Despite the progressive attrition of many press features since the Roman period and the difficulty with which absolute indicators for on-

² BUSANA *et al.* 2009; VAN LIMBERGEN 2011; 2014; 2015; and 2017 (forthcoming).

site olive processing may be established – for the majority of the sites (38/53) the processed product cannot be determined with certainty – it seems that for ca. 18.9% of all sites (10/53) olive oil production was the primary economic activity. These sites include: Cesano di Senigallia (5), Ripe San Pellegrino (6), Monte Torto di Osimo (9), Castelfidardo (10), Pollenza Santa Lucia (15), Villa Vitali di Fermo (17), Penna San Giovanni (20), Villamagna (41), SS. Crocifisso di Treia (46) and Isola del Piano (52) (Fig. 1)³. Production process determinable elements were: olive millstones belonging to the category of rotary mills (a widely recognized type of olive crusher throughout Mediterranean history); double or triple decantation tanks used for separating the oil from its watery lees and residues (Fig. 2); indications for erosion as a result of a repeated and frequent contact with the olives' oily acid during processing (Fig. 3); and chemical residue analysis.

From the available archaeological evidence, it is clear that these installations are remnants of constructions that demanded a substantial financial input from their owners. Suitable stone blocks for millstones, counterweights and base blocks needed to be traced down, acquired and often transported from their place of manufacturing to their place of use; oil tanks needed to be built, *opus spicatum* press floors and press beds needed to be laid out; a sufficient amount of pricey *dolia* were to be acquired for storing the produced liquid; etc. Especially stone olive crushing mills were an expensive piece of equipment and the millstones had to be made by specialized stone masons. Also the press with its lever and driving mechanisms required the use of suitable pieces of wood and its construction was necessarily a work of specialists. All this made the building of olive presses a rather costly affair, whose use only proved economical when olive oil was produced on a substantial scale⁴. Our evidence is thus a good indicator for regional olive processing transcending purely domestic needs.

The available – although limited – chronological information for these sites suggests that the production of olive oil in the area gained

³ For discussions of these and other press sites in central Adriatic Italy, with references, see VAN LIMBERGEN 2011; 2014; and 2017 (forthcoming).

⁴ MATTINGLY 1988, p. 157; FOXHALL 2007, pp. 178-179.



Fig. 2 – Multi-tank decantation system for olive oil at Monte Torto di Osimo (photo auteur).

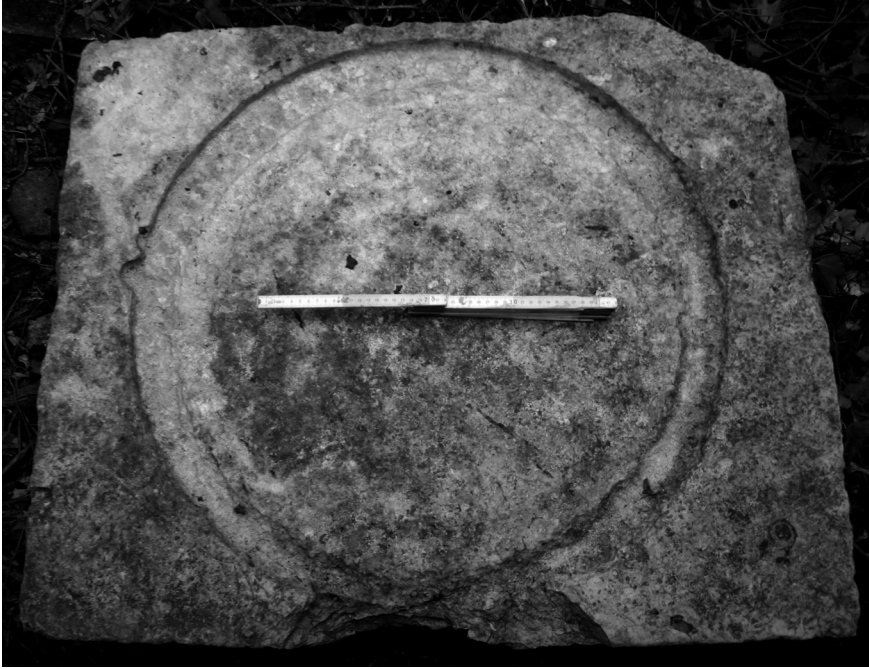


Fig. 3 – Stone press bed with indications for olive processing (erosion) at SS. Crocifisso di Treia (photo auteur).

importance from the mid-1st century BC onwards, peaked in the 1st century AD, and remained present in some capacity until the 3rd-4th century AD⁵. In this way, our archaeological documentation corroborates some of the literary and epigraphic evidence, which points towards the fame of Picenian table olives in Italy in the 1st century AD and their export as far as north-eastern Gaul until at least the 3rd century

⁵ Based on the available evidence, the following chronological data are known: SS. Crocifisso di Treia (3rd-4th century AD); Fossombrone (3rd-5th century AD); Monte Torto di Osimo (end 1st century BC - beginning 2nd century AD); Ripe San Pellegrino (beginning 1st century AD - end 3rd/beginning 4th century AD); Pollenza Santa Lucia (1st century BC - 4th century AD); Cesano di Senigallia (mid-1st century BC - mid-1st century AD); Villamagna (end 1st century BC - 4th/5th century AD) (VAN LIMBERGEN 2011; 2015, 2017 (forthcoming)).

AD⁶. At the same time, these data increasingly unfold the presence of an oil producing activity, left unmentioned by Pliny in his 1st century AD overview of important olive regions in Italy (HN, 14.3.16). Still, the small archaeological sample size on which this pattern is based should always be kept in mind.

In recent years, however, advancements have also been made with regard to the amphora evidence. In Late Republican times, a series of ovoid olive oil containers was produced in a variety of places along the Adriatic coast. For the central Adriatic area in particular, their manufacturing probably started in the last fifty years of the Republic and seemingly had a rather limited circulation, causing it to cease production quickly around 30-25 BC⁷. The following Dressel 6B olive oil amphorae were produced between the end of the Republican and the beginning of the 3rd century AD. Their production area was mainly confined to northern Italy and *Istria*, but the earliest variant of the type was also produced in *Picenum*. Because of their close resemblance to the Istrian exemplars, the distribution of these containers is unclear, but probably not that noteworthy. The practice of manufacturing Dressel 6B does not seem to have surpassed the mid-1st century AD in the central Adriatic area and its production halted around the mid-1st century AD⁸.

One container that may have filled the void left by the disappearance of the Dressel 6B is the so-called ‘Portorecanati’-type – named after its first place of attestation – or the ‘anfora con collo ad imbuto’;

⁶ Authors like Martial (*Epigr.* 1.43.7-8, 4.46.12-13, 4.88.7, 5.78.17-21, 7.53.4-5, 9.54.1, 11.52.11, 13.36.1-2), Silius Italicus (*Pun.* 6.648-650) and Ausonius (*Epist.* 3.1) all refer to the exquisiteness of Picenian olives, while Martial also literally mentions the ‘*trapeta*’ (olive mills) of *Picenum*; for a discussion, see PACI 2005; and VAN LIMBERGEN 2011. For finds of 3rd century AD inscribed storage jars filled with Picenian olives in Bliesbruck and Wiesbaden, see ALBRECHT 1998; PACI 2005; 2009; VAN LIMBERGEN 2011; and 2015, 65-66.

⁷ Known workshops in the central Adriatic area are Cologna Marina (CIPRIANO - CARRE 1989), and Acquabona (MONSIEUR 2009; CARRE *et al.* 2014; VAN LIMBERGEN *et al.* 2016 (forthcoming)). Outside Marche, examples of ovoid amphorae are for example known from Vercelli (FACCHINI 1996, p. 195).

⁸ Identified kiln sites in the Marche region include Acquabona (MONSIEUR 2009) and La Pineta (TCHERNIA 1986, pp. 54-55) in the lower Potenza valley.

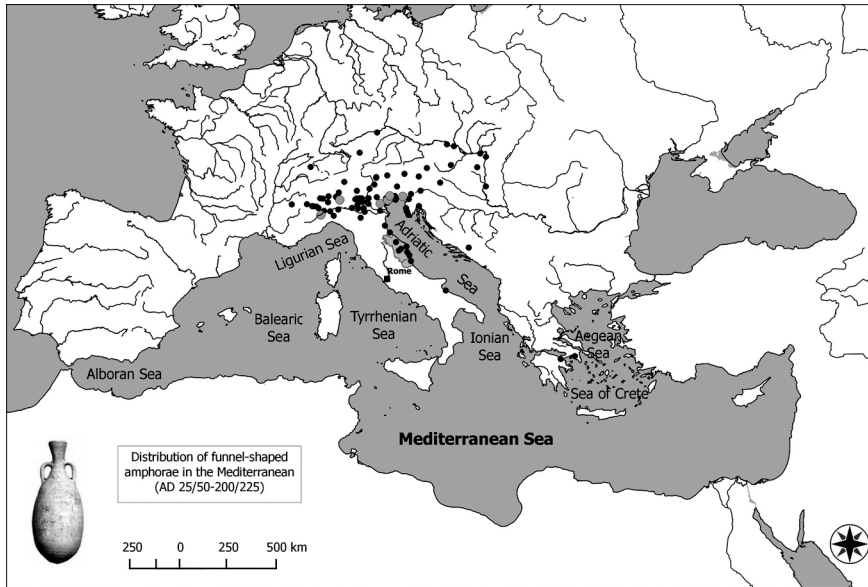


Fig. 4 – Findspots of funnel-shaped amphorae in the Mediterranean (the yellow spots indicate findspots of high concentrations) (Map author).

the latter term being a direct reference to its typical long funnel-shaped mouth. The type began circulating at the beginning of the 1st century AD and reached its maximum circulation between the last quarter of the 1st century and the first quarter of the 2nd century AD⁹. They circulated mainly in the northern Adriatic area – with a heavy presence in the Po plain and *Venetia et Histria* – and more along the Danube river in *Noricum* and *Pannonia* (Fig. 4). While no actual production kilns have until now been identified, most of the archaeometric analyses seem to point towards a considerable production in the middle Adriatic area, and maybe in particular in *Picenum*¹⁰.

⁹ CIPRIANO 1992; PESAVENTO MATTIOLI *et al.* 1993; MAZZOCCHIN 2009.

¹⁰ This clay composition has become known as the so-called ‘Porto Recanati’ fabric, a hard fine-textured fabric that is reddish yellow to yellowish orange/bright or yellow hazelnut/pinkish or bright reddish brown/dark brown in colour. Inclusions are mainly white calcite/limestone and quartz (both small and medium

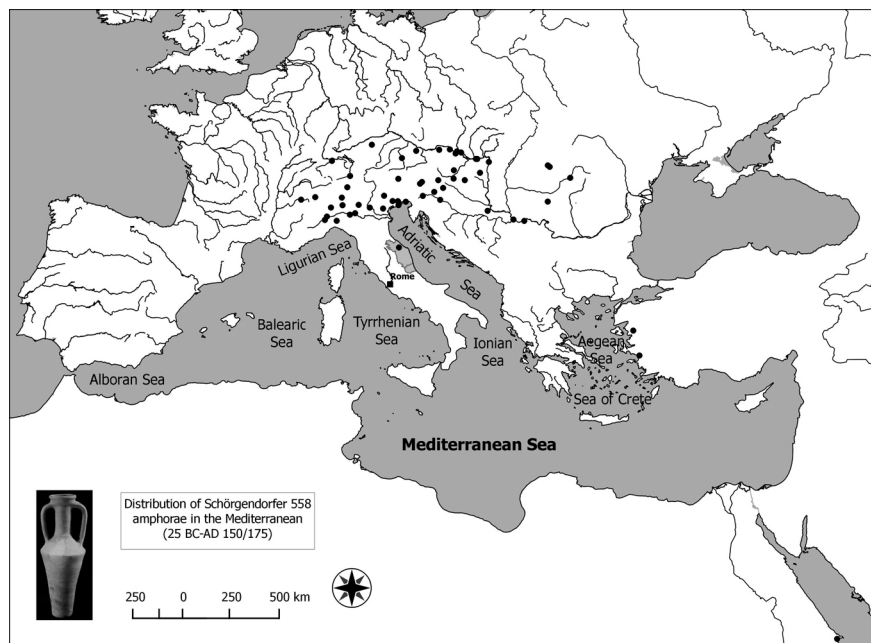


Fig. 5 - Findspots of Schörgendorfer 558 amphorae in the Mediterranean (Map author).

A third transport container that deserves our attention is the Schörgendorfer 558, a small flat-bottomed amphora type that began circulating in the Augustan period and ended its run in the second half of the 2nd century AD. Quantitatively speaking, the distribution of these containers is not that noteworthy, as only some 120 exemplars have been found. Within Italy, their diffusion is confined to the north; outside Italy, they are found mostly in the Danubian provinces. It occasionally reached the Eastern Mediterranean, where it has been attested in Turkey and Egypt (Fig. 5). As has been proposed by Marie-Britte Carre in 1985, the rather small-scale distribution of this amphora type should probably be interpreted as the limited circulation

inclusions); frequently mica is attested in very small dimensions; in some cases medium inclusions of chamotte are also present (MAZZOCCHIN 2009).

of a somewhat luxurious food product; confirmed as being olives by the red-painted inscriptions¹¹. The precise origin of these amphorae is still a matter of debate. Based on the available literary evidence, Stefania Pesavento Mattioli has recently proposed that these amphorae carried the olives from *Picenum* in Early/High Imperial times.¹² An exemplar from Brescia has been subjected to petrographic analysis, which established that the fabric showed a large resemblance to that of the Picenian Dressel 6A wine amphorae¹³.

Despite all the uncertainties inherent to our archaeological and ceramic documentation, these data should encourage us not to underestimate the importance of olive (oil) production in the central Adriatic area of Italy in Roman times, and especially from the mid-1st century AD onwards. Even if it is clear from the amphora evidence that the central Adriatic olive (oil) business never attained the high levels of the region's wine trade, olive cultivation was not totally insignificant in the area. In fact, recent multidisciplinary research in both town and countryside in the area has indicated the presence of a flourishing urban and rural population in the 1st and 2nd century AD, and it is possible that much of the locally produced oil was consumed by these entities¹⁴. The recurrent correlation between identified olive presses and more inland situated towns seem to confirm this hypothesis (Fig. 1). Some better quality oil probably found its way to the extra-regional market too, with the large production site of Cesano di Senigallia being located ideally along the coast for provisioning overseas consumers (Fig. 1). Finally, the export of the region's excellent table olives seems to have developed itself from the 1st century AD onwards as a niche market that retained its value until at least the 3rd century AD.

¹¹ CARRE 1985, p. 232.

¹² PESAVENTO MATTIOLI 2008.

¹³ PESAVENTO MATTIOLI 2011.

¹⁴ VAN LIMBERGEN 2015.

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ABSTRACT

This contribution briefly addresses the supposedly marginal role of olive oil production in ancient Picenum (Marche and northern Abruzzo). By reviewing some of the key advancements made in recent years with regard to the regional press and amphora evidence, it provides the basis for looking at this issue with fresh eyes. The author hereby pleads for reassessing the nature of oleoculture in this central Adriatic region in Roman times.

Olives, presses, amphorae, economy, Picenum.

RIASSUNTO

Questo contributo si propone come una riflessione breve sul ruolo presumibilmente marginale della produzione olearia nelle Marche romane. Passando in rassegna alcuni avanzamenti chiave fatti di recente a proposito dei dati regionali sui torchi e sulle anfore, il lavoro offre lo spunto per una visione alternativa. L'autore si dichiara a favore di una revisione dell'oleocoltura nell'Italia centrale adriatica romana.

Olive, torchi, anfore, economia, Picenum.