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RAC IN ROME

*Atti della 12a Roman Archaeology Conference (2016):
le sessioni di Roma*

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a cura di

Maria Teresa D'Alessio e Chiara Maria Marchetti

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NORTH AFRICA AND PORTUS THROUGH THE AMPHORA. QUANTIFYING TRADE RELATIONSHIPS

PINA FRANCO

Keywords: *Portus*, Ostia, Rome, trade, *annona*, Tripolitanian amphorae, Africana 1, Keay 25, *Sullecthum*, Tarhuna, *Lepcis Magna*, Tripoli

Abstract:

This paper focuses on some important results from the study of North African amphorae from Portus. It firstly defines the main periods of commercial activity of the port of Imperial Rome and its relationship to the original harbour of Ostia. It emphasises the importance of the Severan Tripolitana 3 amphora at the site and also of the Keay 25 and Keay 25-26 as the last vessels to reach the port on a large scale. In addition, it quantifies the importance of different Tunisian and Tripolitanian production centres in supplying Portus through a method based on Peacock's approach to archaeological ceramics. It is the first time that North African workshops are distinguished through fabrics and typology at a consumption site such as Portus.

Portus was the 'other' port of Rome. It was an artificial port built 3km to the north of Ostia by AD 46 by the emperor Claudius, and it was subsequently enlarged by Trajan in the second decade of the 2nd century AD, in order to accommodate growing trade and secure food supply to the people of Rome¹ (**fig. 1**). The recent excavations at the site were started in 2007 by the University of Southampton, in collaboration with the British School at Rome, the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma and the University of Cambridge, under the main direction of Prof. Simon Keay. The excavations focused on the area of the 'Palazzo Imperiale', which is located between the two basins: the 'Porto di Claudio', and the 'Porto di Traiano', the hexagonal shaped basin. Since the start of the project in 2007, the ceramic evidence has challenged traditional views of the port, as well as adding new information on the port site itself, and on trading relationships between Rome and ports across the Mediterranean in antiquity. In particular, it was felt that *Portus* was mainly built to receive food supplies from Egypt and other parts of the eastern Mediterranean. This hypothesis was based on documentary evidence, notably a letter written in AD 173 by the traders of Tyre, in which they complained about the loss of importance of *Puteoli* (modern Pozzuoli) as a port due to the diverting of the important granary ships from Alexandria to Ostia-*Portus*². In fact, the excavations at *Portus* have revealed the dominance of North African material at the site, with east Mediterranean imports in smaller quantities. While final quantification of all of the pottery from four years of excavation (2007-2008-2009 and 2011) is moving towards its completion, the importance of North Africa to *Portus* and Rome, in particular *Tripolitania* under the reign of *Septimius Severus*, and the role played by this emperor towards the *annona* to Rome, has now been documented by the archaeological evidence³.

The amphora data presented here formed part of a doctoral thesis on the African amphorae⁴. More specifically, the materials taken into account are those from the excavations from 2007 to 2009 (the core material of the PhD) and 2011⁵.

The aim of this paper is to present a preliminary statement of some important results from this study. These include evidence of a clear commercial dominance at the port of North African amphorae, and the particular importance of the Severan 'Tripolitana 3 amphora', which has been documented on a

1. KEAY *et alii* 2005, p. 1, KEAY, PAROLI 2011, p. 11.

2. MEIGGS 1973, p. 60.

3. The Tripolitanian amphorae from *Portus* testifies to the *Historia Augusta* (s, 18, 3) informing us on the care of the emperor *Septimius Severus* in providing Rome with free Tripolitanian olive oil, a task carried out also by *Alexander Severus*. PANELLA 1973, pp. 570-571 who also mentions other sources on the matter of Tripolitanian olive oil to Rome. MANACORDA 1976-1977, pp. 555-563, MANACORDA 1977, p. 156.

4. FRANCO 2012.

5. The doctoral thesis included a small sample from the 'Portus Duca Area' and did not include the amphorae excavated in 2011.

much greater scale than at the neighbouring port of Ostia. Another achievement of this study was a first attempt at the quantification of material from Tunisian and Tripolitanian workshops at a consumption site, such as Portus, through a methodology taking into account the correlation of fabric, typology and ceramic variables, such as technological features, including firing conditions. Such a methodology is built on Peacock's method for the visual characterization of inclusions⁶, combined with ceramic petrology⁷, which carefully considers the strict correlation of vessel type to fabric from a given workshop, a correlation supported by petrography⁸. The North African amphora assemblage includes 595 rim fragments, 668 handles, 357 bases, and 207 'diagnostic body sherds', the latter being mainly broken fragments of large single vessels, all accounting for 1335 vessels. Rims, handles and bases accounted for 1273 different vessels, and the diagnostic body sherds for 62 vessels⁹.

The analysis of the North African amphorae from *Portus* reveals a very clear trend. They date mainly from the end of the 2nd century AD and the beginning of the 3rd century AD to the mid 5th century, with very little material dating to the 6th century (fig. 2)¹⁰. Additionally, the amphorae represent a uniform range of materials, and fall within a well-established typology¹¹; very few examples have no comparative evidence, and these are dated mainly to the 5th century. The Africana 1, Africana 2 and in particular the Tripolitanian amphorae and the Keay 25 amphora series, are the most attested at the site. Within the Tripolitanian amphorae, the greatest proportion is classified as Tripolitana 3 (fig. 3). Also, the data shows a clear decline of African goods in the mid 5th century AD. No examples of Keay 62 and Keay 61 have been excavated at the site and the amphora data indicates that the Keay 25 and Keay 26 (spatheion type 1) were the last mass-produced amphorae to reach *Portus*.

The Tripolitanian amphorae, together with the Africana 1A, were excavated mainly from two contexts: 1024 and 3122; dump-deposits of soil

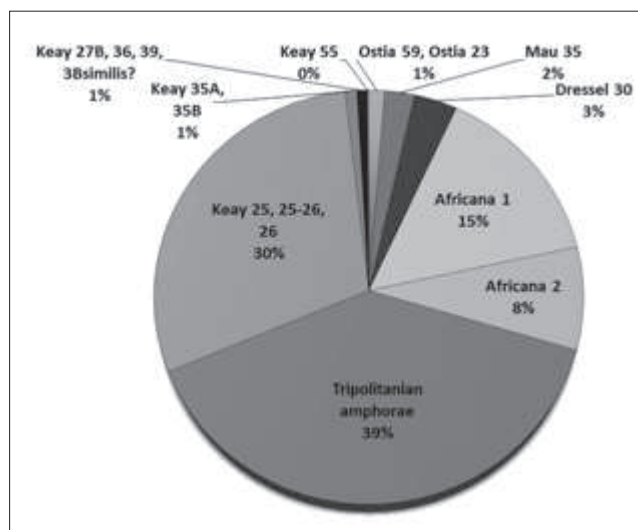
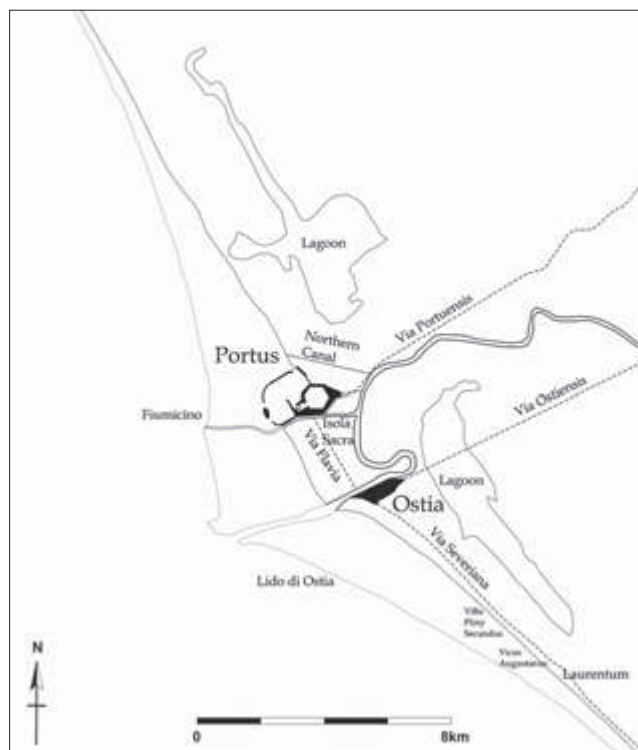


Fig. 1. Location of *Portus* (KEY et alii 2005, p. 273).

Fig. 2. Share of N. African amphorae from *Portus* (986 N. of vessels).

6. PEACOCK 1977.

7. PEACOCK 1984.

8. BONIFAY 2004; for example CAPELLI, BEN LAZREG, BONIFAY 2006.

9. The methodology is illustrated in FRANCO 2012, chapter 4.

10. The pie chart illustrates only the most traded amphorae at *Portus* to ease visualization of what occurred at the port.

11. PANELLA 1973; MANACORDA 1977; KEAY 1984; BONIFAY 2004.

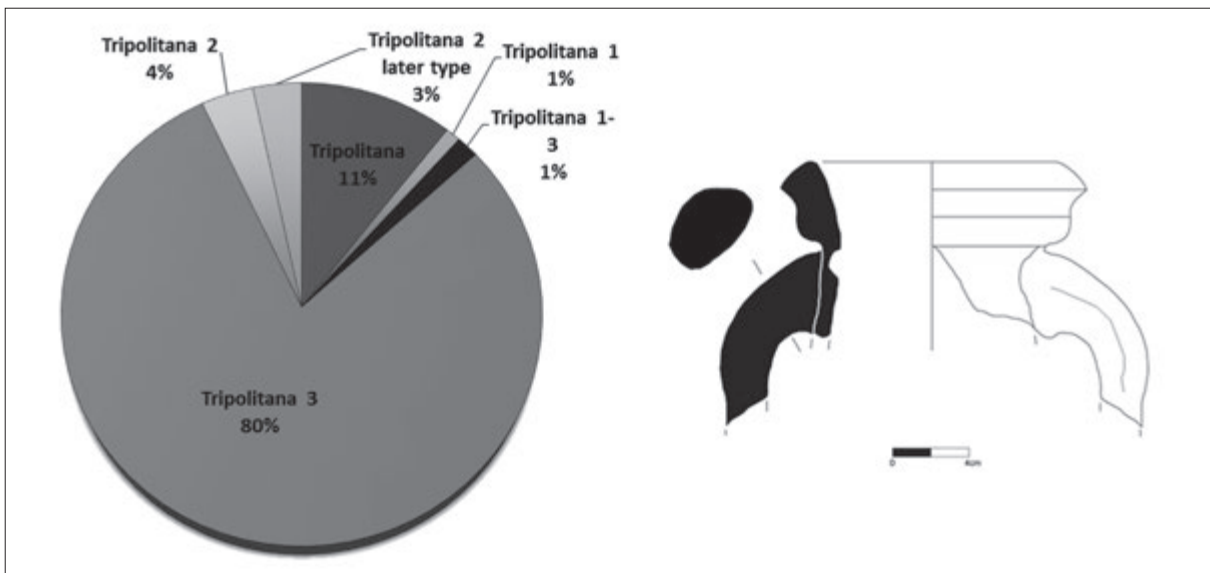


Fig. 3. Share of Tripolitanian amphorae from *Portus* (385 N. of vessels).

and pottery sherds used as hard core for filling depressions to provide level surfaces for the construction of a *ludus* and adjacent quayside. The 'Tripolitane' from the two contexts have been dated to the beginning of the 3rd century AD. Beside the association with the Africana 1A, context 1024 included a bowl of Hayes 9A form¹². In addition, contexts 1024 and 3122 contain examples of amphorae classified as Tripolitana 1-3 because of the clear distinction between neck, vessel body, and handles just below the rim, or their smaller size. In particular, consideration of the pattern of breakage of the amphorae from context 3122: sherds coming from the same vessel (according to the fabric-type method), indicates that the dumping of soil and ceramic material was an intentional action, which occurred at the beginning of the Severan period. By comparing the data from *Portus* with data from neighbouring *Ostia*, differences between the sites can be identified and they may help us to better understand commercial relationships between these two ports. The share of olive oil amphorae from the 'Area NE of the Terme del Nuotatore' at *Ostia*, dated from 140 to 189/190 AD¹³ shows a larger proportion of *Ostia* 59 and *Ostia* 23 and a smaller proportion of Tripolitanian 1, 2 and 3. Rizzo's more recent study of North African amphorae from the 'Area NE of the Terme del Nuotatore' dated to 160-180/90 AD (Period 5) shows a very similar pattern, with a large majority of *Ostia* 59 and *Ostia* 23 amphorae and a much smaller sample of Tripolitanian and Africana 1A amphorae¹⁴. Also, African amphorae from 'Strato I Ambiente 16 of the Terme del Nuotatore' dated to the 230-250 AD, show a higher proportion of Tunisian vessels over the Tripolitanian amphorae¹⁵ (fig. 4). Such comparisons seem to suggest that *Ostia* retained its commercial importance up to the 2nd century AD, and that the share of Tripolitanian amphorae at *Ostia* represented what was actually consumed there. By accommodating the increased trade of Tripolitanian amphorae, *Portus* developed its own commercial characteristics by the end of the 2nd century AD.

Analysis of the fabrics in order to quantify the shares of different North African workshops at a consumption site was one of the main objectives of the doctoral research (fig. 5). Thus, within the Tunisian amphorae, the workshops of *Sullecthum* were differentiated from those of *Leptiminus* and from 'unknown' workshops. The *Sullecthum* fabric is characteristic because it is often fired to produce red and grey colours or otherwise can be reddish throughout, while it is rather rough to the touch. It is also noted for its fine limestone inclusions and for its wide occurrence on the Africana 1¹⁶. The *Leptiminus*

12. ZAMPINI 2011, p. 93.

13. PANELLA 1983.

14. RIZZO 2014, p. 279, tabella 38, p. 284, tabella 39.

15. MANACORDA 1977.

16. Fabrics are discussed in FRANCO 2012, chapter 6.

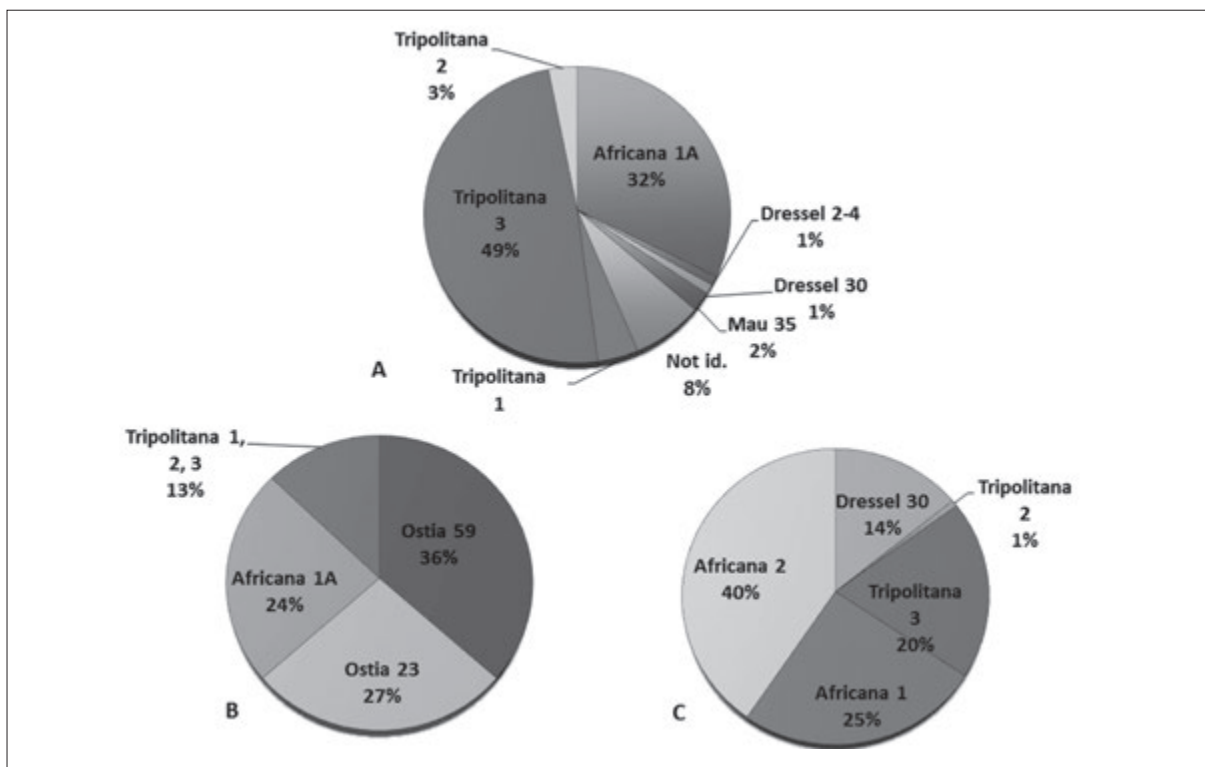


Fig. 4. Pie chart showing - A. Share of N. African amphorae from context 1024 dated to the beginning of the 3rd century AD (96 N. of vessels) - B. Share of N. African amphorae from the 'Area NE Terme del Nuotatore' (383 rims) (PANELLA 1983) - C. Share of N. African amphorae from 'Ambiente XVI Terme del Nuotatore' (148 rims) (MANACORDA 1977, pp. 129-131, 250).

fabric tends to be buff in colour with a light peach core and creamy external edges; a white skin is present on the external surfaces. Beside limestone, it shows quartz grains, the coarser of which (0.5mm and >0.5mm) tend to be very rounded in shape. Within the Tripolitanian amphorae, five major fabric groups were differentiated from 'unknown' workshops, and associated with five major production centres. It was noted that a correlation existed between sherds of Tripolitanian amphorae of similar fabric and Tripolitanian amphorae with inscriptions (one vessel), stamps (three vessels) and graffiti (one vessel). This correlation emphasized the importance of a production area within *Tripolitania*. The so-called Tripolitania Group 1 (TripG1) and Tripolitania Group 2 (TripG2) represent fabrics associated with vessels with epigraphy at *Portus*. In hand specimens, they are both characterized by the very fine nature of the quartz (not visible at x20 power magnification), fine and white rounded lumps of limestone, and very fine metasediments/argillaceous inclusions, generally elongated in shape, reddish or black in colour, poorly sorted, and which are very hard to scratch with metal. It shows fired colours that are not so strong and bright, and very often it presents a darker line in the core or along the edges. It is very hard fired and it is rather difficult to sample a fracture.

The two fabric groups have been separated only because of the fired clay being extremely compact in TripG2. Petrologically, the main features of the fabric are the presence of very fine quartz grains, metasediments, and the rare occurrence of characteristic lenses of silt. The origins of these two fabrics have been suggested to be in the fertile region of Tarhuna in the Gebel of *Tripolitania* on the basis of; consideration of a correlation of fabric to vessels with epigraphy at *Portus*; rims with similar fabric from the Tarhuna area were illustrated in a recent doctoral thesis¹⁷; similar Neo-Punic symbols from two of the amphorae from *Portus* find comparative evidence on epigraphy from masonry blocks of oily villas in the Tarhuna area; for example those from the 'large farm-villa' at Sidi Eysawi¹⁸.

17. AHMED 2010, p. 255, amphora Tel 102.

18. AHMED 2010, p. 145. drawings of amphorae from *Portus* with similar neo-punic symbols are illustrated in FRANCO 2012, pp. 323-324.

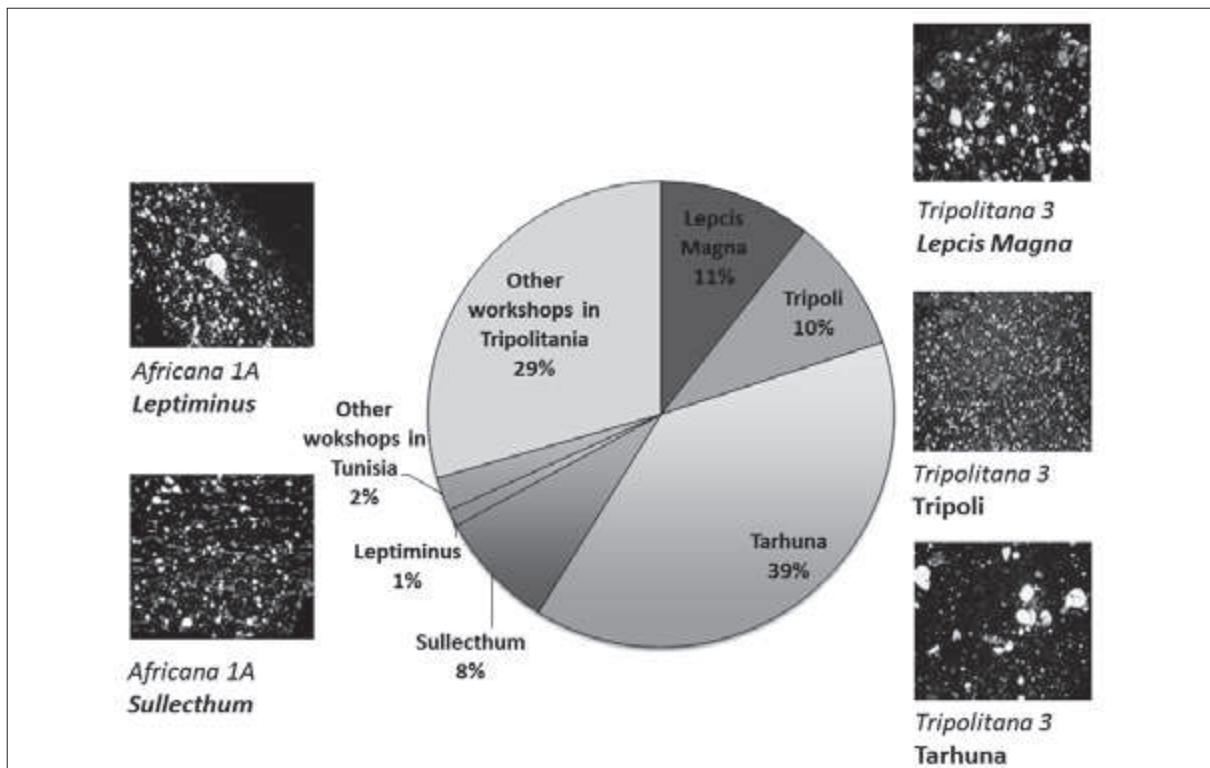


Fig. 5. Share of the suppliers of olive oil amphorae to *Portus* from context 3122 (85 N. of vessels).

Tripolitania Group 6 (TripG6) is characterized by the same type of inclusions as TripG1 and TripG2, but these are on a coarser scale. Petrologically, the fabric shows abundant very fine background quartz against which there is a smaller proportion of coarser sub-rounded and rounded quartz, and by the occurrence of lenses of silt. This has been assigned to the same production area as the previous two fabrics: Tarhuna. Tripolitania Group 3 (TripG3) is a fabric produced in the *Lepcis Magna* area and is characterized by the coarseness of its inclusions, quartz and limestone, and by dark red and dark brown fired colours, conferring to it a characteristic sandwich effect¹⁹. Tripolitania Group 5 (TripG5) is instead light-brown beige in colour, with a smooth powdery feel to the touch, and it is softer fired. It is fine grained, and it may contain greyish material identified as shell fragments. A similar fabric characterizes the Mau 35 vessel that was noticed in the Tripoli area²⁰. By quantifying fabrics from context 3122, the largest proportion of vessels was manufactured by the so-called 'major suppliers' in Tripolitania, and from *Sullecthum* in central Tunisia (fig. 5). These vessels, which are the outcome of standardised production, as in the case of *Africana 1*, where there is a clear association between fabric and vessel type, and of major suppliers in Tripolitania, may indicate a degree of coordination over production.

In conclusion, the results from the study show a clear picture of the main period of commercial activity between North Africa and *Portus*, which lasted for about 250-300 years. By acting as a major destination for North African trade at the end of the 2nd century AD and beginning 3rd century, *Portus* defined a major aspect of its commercial character. In this context, its major trading partners were *Sullecthum* in Tunisia (*Africana 1A*) and the producers located in the fertile region of Tarhuna, *Lepcis Magna* and Tripoli. Later, the amphorae Keay 25 and the spatheion type 1 represent the last vessels to be traded at *Portus* on a large scale.

It is to be stressed that these results are based on a sample of amphora sherds from a small excavated portion of the overall area of *Portus*. However, having said this, other excavations at *Portus* have also revealed a change occurring in the mid to later 5th century AD, including the abandonment of ware-

19. See BONIFAY 2004, p. 523.

20. FELICI F. pers. comm. 2009.

houses²¹, and the construction of defensive walls²². Such developments can very likely be related to historical events, such as the Vandal conquest of Africa in AD 439 and the sack of Rome by the Vandals in AD 455. The first meant that the traditional channels of trade and the supply of foodstuffs to Rome changed²³, while the second may have played a role in the disappearance of African products from the Roman market. Besides this, further consideration is needed on the nature of the formation of the excavated deposits, to better understand, for example, the large presence of Tripolitanian amphorae at *Portus*. One explanation advanced was that the shape and size of the vessel itself made it difficult to be transported along the Tiber to Rome, and that olive oil was decanted into different kinds of container at the port. Also, a comparison of the fabrics and vessel epigraphy of the Tripolitanian and Africana 1 amphorae from *Portus* and Monte Testaccio²⁴ will further our understanding of the nature of North African trade towards Rome.

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21. COCCIA 1993; COCCIA 1996.

22. PAROLI, RICCI 2011.

23. KEY 1984; PANELLA 1993, PANELLA 1999, PANELLA et alii 2010.

24. REVILLA CALVO 2007.

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