

## CERAMICA, MARMI E PIETRE. NOTE DI ARCHEOLOGIA TRA SICILIA E CRETA

A cura di Fabiola Ardizzone Lo Bue



A cura di FABIOLA ARDIZZONE LO BUE Ceramica, marmi e pietre. Note di archeologia tra Sicilia e Creta.

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Impaginazione - arch. GIUSEPPE NISI Stampa - Fotograf ISBN - 978-88-97373-32-2

# CERAMICA, MARMI E PIETRE. NOTE DI ARCHEOLOGIA TRA SICILIA E CRETA

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## PRODUCTION AND CIRCULATION OF PALERMITAN AMPHORAS IN MEDIT VAL MEDITERRANEAN

(Fabiola Ardizzone Lo Bue)

production of amphoras, used for the transportation of commodities and preservation of liquids, is recorded in Palermo from the first half of the Tenth Century to the end of the Twelfth. In recent years we have been able to reconstruct a picture of the circulation of these containers in the Mediterranean area, which clearly shows the important commercial role that Sicily played in the period spanning Islamic and Norman rule of the island. (Ardizzone 1997-98; Ardizzone 1999; Arcifa and Ardizzone 2009; Ardizzone 2010).

This production concerns a series of around 12 types of amphorae used for transportation or storage, characterised by sides with *cannelures* and decorated with patterns painted in red-brown or white, depending on the background colour of the vase. On occasions, the surfaces appear lightened, on others they are darkened as a result of firing, or covered by a dark *ingobbio*.

This Palermitan production, previously identified only on the basis of the presence of numerous kiln rejects in the vaults of some Norman buildings in Palermo, has now been confirmed following archeometric analysis (Alaimo, Giarrusso and Montana 1999).

In fact, lithic elements are present in the composition that relate to the rock formations of Palermo's surroundings; in particular, the samples analysed have compositional characteristics similar to those of the 'clays of Ficarazzi', which are characterised by the presence of abundant fauna fossils. These deposits of clay surface at different points on the plain of Palermo, in particular near the coast on the final stretch of the river Oreto. The use of this clay is recorded in archived documents from at least the Fourteenth Century. Furthermore, the presence of ceramic workshops in Palermo is known from both the archived sources and archaeological research. As early as the Tenth Century, the Arab traveller Ibn Hawqal cites jar-sellers and potters located in the 'Harat al gadida' area. The Di Giovanni, a document from the year 1213 which witnesses the sale of a casaleno, records that "situm extra Cassarum Panormi in contrata quae dicitur hakbitilfacha", from the Arabic agabat al-fahhar, or 'ascent of the jar'. This informs us that in Thirteenth Century Palermo there was an entire district of this name where ceramic was produced. The Di Giovanni then pinpoints this area as stretching between Santa Maria la Grutta and the Jewish Synagogue, in an area rich in water due to its vicinity to the river Kemonia, and it identifies this as the location of an artisan centre from the Eleventh Century, where terracotta vases were produced. This statement is based on a document from 1094 in which the Arab toponomy 'Phachaer' appears: "luogo dè forni e fabbriche di terre cotte", equivalent to the Sicilian term stazzuni, the current name for a street in that area. The same place is recorded in later documents from the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries as Quartariorum from the term Quartara, meaning jug or amphora. At the end of the Fourteenth Century the kilns attested to in the documents were outside the city walls, along the banks of the river Oreto, near the quarries where clay for ceramic activity was collected, as we have already mentioned.

Up to this point, the information is inferred from documentary sources; archaeological recordings of the kilns used for ceramics are limited to certain rare and sporadic signals, such as the occasional discovery of kiln rejects along the road that runs along the port of Palermo, all of which date back to the first half of the Eleventh Century. These findings support the existence of a kiln in the vicinity of the old port of the city. Meanwhile, recent archaeological research along the river Kemonia, in the

area by Porta Mazara that was still *extra moenia* in the Eleventh Century, has detected the presence of a kiln active between the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries that produced glazed ware and common ceramics, including vessels with filters and with decorations painted in white on top (Arcifa 1996).

Other kilns have been identified along the river Kemonia, although relatively further to the North, in the vicinity of Palazzo Lungarini and the Theatre of Santa Cecilia (D'Angelo and Gioia 2007; D'Angelo 2005; Spatafora 2005). These produced glazed ware, and were active from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century to the Twelfth. We can now move to analyse in detail the production of amphorae, starting with analysis of the earliest vessels.

The earliest examples found thus far were recovered in Palermo in the excavation of Rione Castello San Pietro in a layer dating back to the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century (**fig. 1, 6-9**) (Arcifa 1997, 407-408). The findings consisted of amphorae classifiable in three forms, characterised by walls with larger *cannelures* in comparison with later specimens, and by a painted decoration. These decorative patterns are made up solely of vertical strokes that alternate with continuous, sinuous lines. Only one of the examples amongst those found shows a pattern painted with loops, which L. Arcifa compares to similar decorative patterns found on contemporaneous jugs in Southern Italy and Eastern Sicily.

The general morphology of these amphorae, barely clear due to the lack of entire specimens, shows the peculiar characteristic of an omphalos base with a greater diameter compared to those of the ovoid amphorae more frequently observed in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Therefore it is probable that in this earlier phase the amphorae had a globular form, similar to the PPA 102 type recorded on the same site from the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century to the first half of the Eleventh (**fig. 1, 10**).

In the period spanning the end of the Tenth Century, and all of the Eleventh, the morphological range of the containers produced in Palermo notably grew. As well as the globular amphorae of the previous period, amphorae with a large mouth and a short neck appeared, characterised in this period by the presence of an embossed rib at the connection between the rim and the shoulders, and by rims that were moulded or covered by concentric grooves (fig. 2).

These vessels, as with those previously described, display motifs painted in red or brown. The motifs, according to L. Arcifa, show a progressive simplification, in particular going from sinuous lines to a series of sloping strokes (**fig 3**).

This observation concurs with what was revealed on examining the archaeological findings discovered in the layers pertaining to the Islamic-age Sicily in Contrada San Nicola in Carini, in Castello della Pietra along the Belice and via Torremuzza in Palermo. During this period one of two decorative schemes would be used: the first involving a pattern of sinuous lines drawn vertically and alternating with broad vertical lines; the second, which can be interpreted as a simplified version of the first, involved a vertical series of short sloping strokes, again alternating with broad vertical lines.

The presence of both decorative patterns among the findings of the site of S. Nicola, dated between the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, supports the conclusion that this was the period of transition occurring just before the definitive affirmation of the simplified design of short sloping dashes which progressively replaced the sinuous lines. The simplified pattern became the only one used on the amphorae, which can be dated between the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the Twelfth.

It is possible to follow the evolutionary progression: in the oldest examples of vessels, possibly made before the 10<sup>th</sup> century, there is the previously mentioned looped design of Byzantine origin. In the following period we find the first decorative scheme described above in which broad vertical lines are alternate with sinuous lines. This decoration covers all the surface of the vase without notable variations.

The jugs covered in sinuous lines that were abundant in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century were still used in the second half of the century but less prevalently, leading to their complete disappearance from the 11<sup>th</sup> century levels.

The transitional phase between the two forms, that is to say between sinuous lines and sloping dashes, is evident in some fragments belonging to layers which can be dated to the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

In fact, in these examples, long sloping lines drawn close to one other are linked by with transversal dashes, suggesting a sinuous line becoming rigid and sclerotic and transforming itself in a series of diagonal strokes. This particular decorative motif is used only in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century as an interim between sinuous lines and sloping strokes and becomes rarer before its complete disappearance in the following century.

Towards the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and mainly in the 11<sup>th</sup> the second type of decoration, sloping dashes alternated to vertical broad lines, becomes predominant. It would become a characteristic of all the local production of painted vessels to the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. This standardised type of decoration was used without significant variations for all vase forms. An exception is the globular amphora, which presents on its shoulder broad horizontal lines linked by subtle vertical lines drawn close to one another (Fig. 1,10). This type of decoration seems to be used only for this particular type of vessel.

Between the earliest productions, and those from the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, a certain continuity in the morphologic tradition can be observed, with the tendency towards the progressive simplification of the finer details and of the decorative patterns, a tendency which is even more evident in the containers from the heart of the Norman age.

In particular:

- the handles, ribbed on the vessels of the Islamic layers, now show the characteristic grooves of the handles of Norman-age amphorae;
  - the moulded rims of the Islamic-age containers become simpler over the course of the 12th Century;
- The embossed rib between the neck and shoulder, present in the forms with short necks, is no longer found in the specimens of this type that are dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century.

But let us now consider the function of these vessels.

From the Medieval documentary sources it appears that amphorae continued to be used for the transportation of food products, despite the tendency away from terracotta vessels.

In Sicily, under Arab and then Norman rule, the foods that were primarily exported in this type of vessel were: salted fish, olives, legumes, dry fruit, cheese, honey, sugar, and to a lesser extent oil; wine was also exported, but specially during the Norman period.

From the map of distribution of these amphorae it has been possible to identify certain forms used mainly for the transportation of food products, as well as the containers such as type A (Fig. 1.5), which would be used in larders for the conservation of liquids, particularly wine and water.

Until after the second war, terracotta *quartare* of a very similar form to that of type A were used in Sicily to keep drinking water cool and clean, even for several days; the liquid, absorbed by the permeable body of the vase, would seep through to the surface, and on evaporating would cool the contents of the vase. In fact, type A, with the characteristic narrow neck particularly suitable for liquids, has not been found outside of Sicily. Its variants A1 and A2 are only present in Palermo, whilst the A3 variant, practically without any morphologic changes of embossment, was very common among the earthenware of everyday use in rural areas of Sicily, with its life being prolonged to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century (Corretti 1995: 100, A34; Isler 1995: 135, A68). On this point, the discovery in Segesta of numerous amphorae of this form, that were clearly used as storage containers for the preservation of food between 1220 and 1250, is significant (Molinari 1997: 127, fig. 170-171). This space in which they were found is thought to have been the storage area of the kitchen in the Medieval castle. Local productions of this type of amphorae were also documented in small, rural areas like Piazza Armerina and Sofiana (Alaimo, Gasparini, et al. 2010; Fiorilla 1990).

Types B (**fig. 4**), C (**fig. 5**), D (**fig. 6**), E **fig. 7**), L (**fig. 8**), M (**fig. 9**) and N (**fig. 10**), on the other hand, were most likely intended for the transportation of foodstuffs, as underwater findings as well as the discovery of vessels related to this form in places outside of Sicily seem to confirm. Amphorae

of types B and E were present among materials abandoned by boats in difficulty by Mondello, along the Palermitan coast, and in the shipwrecks at San Vito lo Capo and at Marettimo. Meanwhile a type L amphora, with an indication of the weight of its content, was among the findings in the shipwreck in Marsala (Ferroni and Menacci 1995-1996, 314-315). In the Marsala and San Vito lo Capo shipwrecks, the load was mainly made up of type N amphorae (Faccenna 2006).

Lastly, with regards to the large 'jars' of form D, it has been hypothesised on the basis of archived documents that these transported tuna, or more generally speaking, salted fish. The use of these jars in this way appears to be confirmed by the morphology of the vessel, with its broad neck. The production of salted tuna in Sicily is also documented by archival sources that record the presence of active tuna fisheries along the coast of Palermo in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century.

As well as underwater findings (**fig. 11**), Sicilian-produced amphorae were found in Tropea, Otranto, Napoli, Salerno, Capaccio Vecchia, Pisa, Genoa and Savona on mainland Italy. They were also found in the Sardinian towns Geridu, Torres and Sassari (end of Tenth to Eleventh Century) where 81% of amphorae had been produced in Western Sicily. Furthermore they were present in Southern France in Marseilles and Arles, and in North Africa in Qal dei Banu Ammad and in Sabra al-Mansuriya (Ardizzone 2010). This provides further confirmation of the existence of the commerce of foodstuffs from Sicily, first under Islamic and then Norman rule, with and through these maritime cities.

## Sicily and the Islamic world. The rebirth of international commerce

In the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, Sicily's entry into the Islamic sphere of influence would likely have caused several changes; however Sicilian archaeology has not yet been able to collect sufficient data up to the Tenth Century in order to follow the transformation and evolution of the island in the time of its passing from the Byzantine sphere to that of the Maghreb. Recently, A. Nef and V. Prigent have hypothesised that the island lost its centrality and economically regressed during the Aghlabid period (Nef and Prigent 2006: 41-42). It was only after the Fatimid conquest of Egypt, and the start of the caliphate of the Umayyad in Spain, that Sicily regained a strategic function in the Mediterranean.

In this period, a resumption of shipping took place. This is attested to in written sources as well as being supported by analysis of the distribution of shipwrecks in the Mediterranean (Parker 1992) (**fig. 12**).

From contemporaneous Christian written sources emerges the continuation of commercial relations with the Tyrrhenian area, also after the Islamic conquest of the island. This is suggested by the presence, in certain parts of the island, of fragments of Forum Ware from the Campania region that can be dated between the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries (Cacciaguerra 2009: 295-296). In fact, in the year 836 Palermo entered into an alliance with the cities of Campania, particularly Naples. This alliance, which lasted for around half a century, was seemingly formed in order to confront the expansionist aims of the Lombards; it would have also preserved commercial relations between the Tyrrhenian coast and Sicily.

One episode, reported by Christian written sources from the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, suggests the intensity of the commercial exchange that involved the island. In fact, Byzantine chronicles from 880 recount that on the occasion of the great victory of the Byzantine fleet over the Muslims, obtained near Milazzo, several merchant ships heading towards Sicily were plundered. The haul of oil was so great that it brought about a reduction in the price of oil in Constantinople.

However, the two primary sources of our information about the trade relations of the island during Islamic rule are the private letters of Gheniza, written by the Jewish merchant families of Palermo, Mazara, Kairouan and Alexandria, and the *Fatwas*, the legal opinions, given by the experts in the law of Kairouan, following requests by the local Maliki community on various private issues, some of which concerned commerce with Sicily. Although these collections are insufficient, they are first-hand, belong to two different commercially active communities, are contemporaneous, and are unconditioned by political interests or bias.

H. Bresc compared the facts inferred from these two sources (Bresc 1993). In the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, two Sicilies coexisted: the Sicily of grain and sugar, recorded mainly by Tunisian *Fatwas*, and the Sicily of coral, silk and quality goods, mainly documented by the Geniza letters (Simonsohn 1997, XXIX). Each of these realities, as H. Bresc observed, imply completely different commercial models. The picture of the Sicilian economy that emerges from the legal opinions is one characterised essentially by modest Muslim merchants that transported grain from Mazara and Marsala to Capo Bon, Mahdiyya and Iqlibiyya, both in times of famine and times of plenty. They would navigate by coasting in small boats. The commercial reality described by these sources is modest, rather unlike the more complex commerce carried out by the Jewish communities. In fact, the letters of the Geniza portray a productive system made up of large artisan hubs, linked by a network of commerce and exchange, created by well-organised Jewish merchants. These networks provided for the demand for agricultural produce in North Africa, and made use of Sicily as a base for their international commerce.

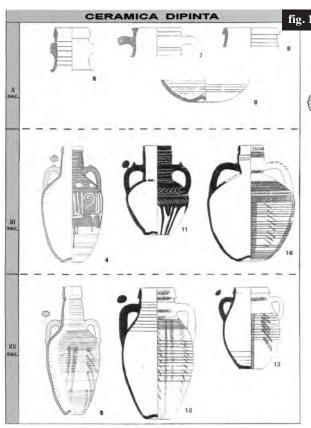
In the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, the main ports of the island were in Palermo and Mazara. Mazara, in fact, was where many of the goods arrived from Egypt and Tunisia, and was also the port that linked Alexandria and Almeria. Goods headed East would also make stopovers at this port. However, in this period, it was the port of Palermo that played the dominant role in the island's commerce. It was considered the fulcrum of mercantile routes in the Mediterranean; economic activity prospered there, and it was a place were goods were exchanged and stopovers were made by travellers from all over the Mediterranean. That foreign merchants visited the island can be deduced from the Geniza letters, which record the presence of Byzantine traders in Palermo in 1064.

Between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the main routes of the Sicilian merchant economy, as reported by the sources, were still those traditionally used for commerce. One of these routes was that towards Africa and the East, and the other towards the Tyrrhenian Sea and Spain. In fact, the Geniza letters document daily connections between Palermo and the North African ports of Tripoli and Alexandria, and with Palestine. Long before the Norman conquest, in the Islamic age Sicily acted as the market of fruit and wine for the Campania region, and people from Amalfi used Sicilian coins as currency. Regarding the Italian peninsula, the cities recorded in the Geniza letters are Amalfi and occasionally Salerno, ports where the Jewish merchants could spend the winter if their business required it.

We do not have any information about the families of Muslim merchants that certainly populated the city of Palermo. Chronicles from the year 947 report the existence of a powerful patrician family of Persian origin active in Palermo: the Banŭ at Tabarĭ (Amari 1933-39, 240-247; Amari 1880-1881, I, 416-419 and II, 193-195); H. Bresc claims that this was a family of merchants. In reality, the written sources do not enlighten us on the activities of the Banŭ at Tabarĭ. The only element on which to base the hypothesis of their role as merchants is the presence of "mates" in various countries. This would suggest a scenario mirroring that of Jewish merchants in the documents of the Geniza; from these the presence of a wide network of partners can be inferred. Indeed this type of organization was at the base of the exchanges in the Mediterranean sea in that period.

The letters of the Geniza also report a massive emigration from Sicily to Egypt during the civil wars plaguing Sicily in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century; these events would be a cause of the Norman conquest of the island a few years later.

During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, under Norman rule, the mercantile role of Sicily and of Southern Italy became increasingly marginal. Ships from Spain, France and northern Italy began to have direct relationships with Egyptian markets without the intermediation of the ports of the Southern Tyrrhenian Sea. Exchange with Egypt and North Africa that had flourished in the previous two centuries considerably diminished, although they did not cease completely.



Palermo, Rione Castello San Pietro. Anfore (da ARCIFA 1997).

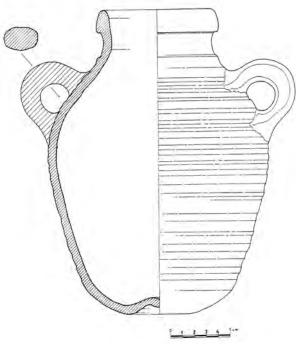
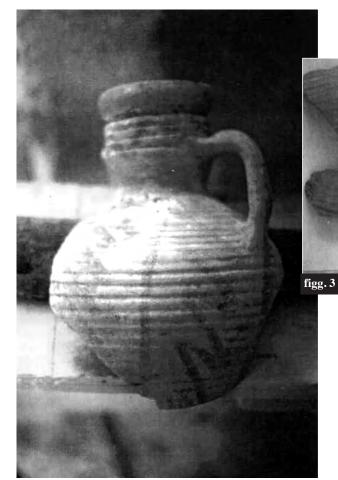


fig. 2 Anfora MV 350 recuperata.



*a sinistra* Anfora da Palazzo Rostagno a Palermo.

sopra
Carini (PA) c.da S. Nicola,
pareti di anfore con decorazione dipinta.

fig. 4 Palermo, Palazzo della Zisa.

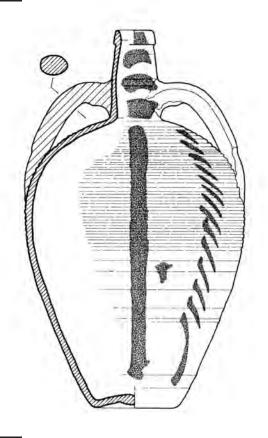
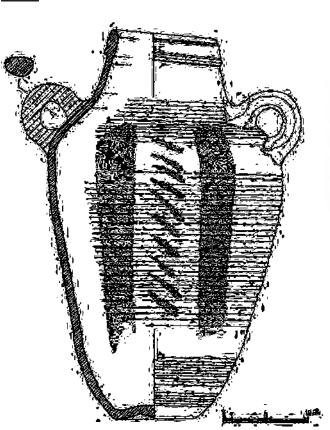


fig. 6 Palermo, Palazzo Abatellis.



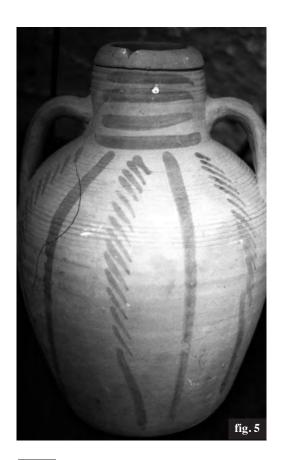
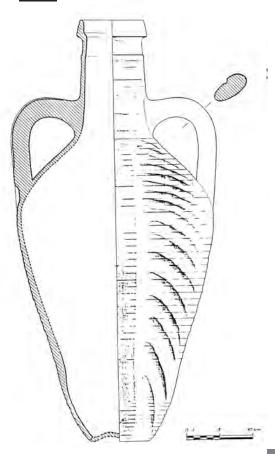


fig. 7 Palermo, Zisa Anfora Tipo E1.



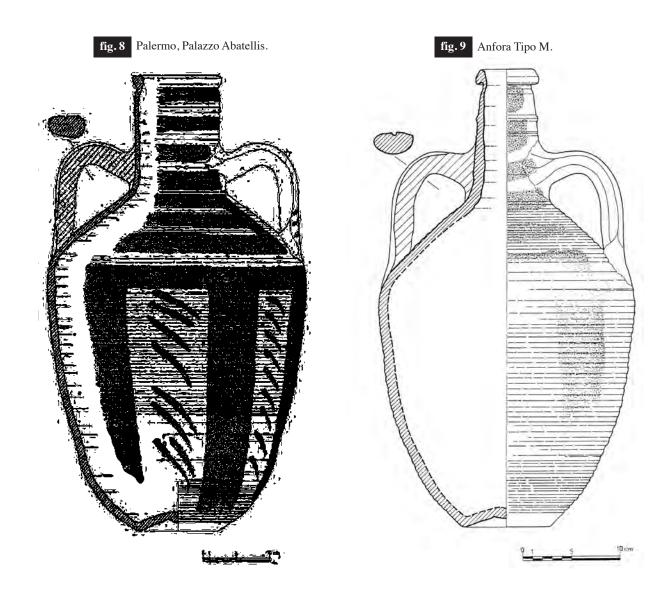
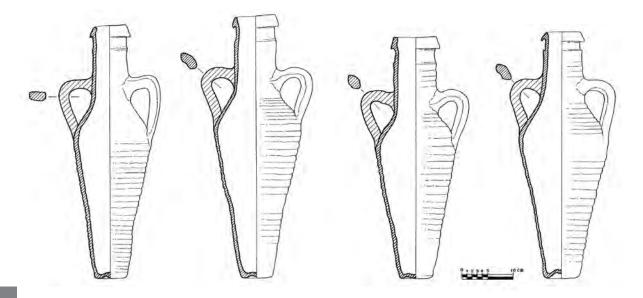
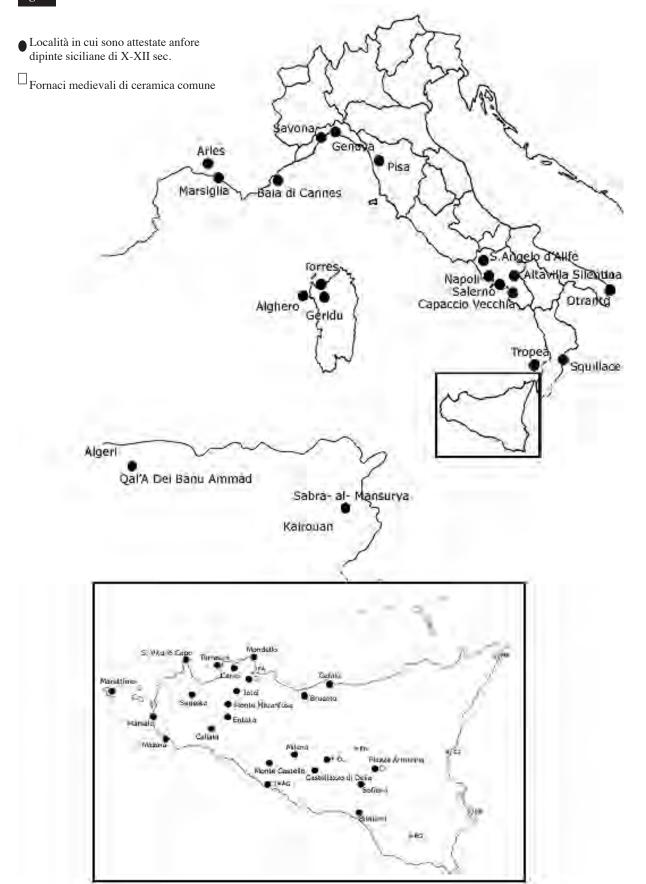


fig. 10 Marsala, Anfora Tipo N.





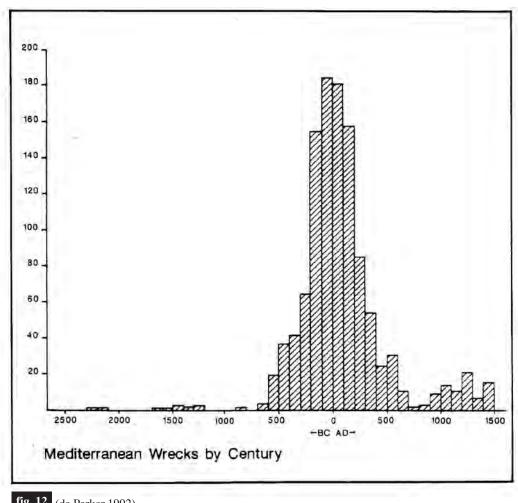


fig. 12 (da Parker 1992)

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Finito di stampare novembre 2012