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# Italian sigillata from Agios Donatos

Janne Ikäheimo

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of Italian sigillata finds pertaining to the 2005-2009<sup>1</sup> survey and excavations of the Thesprotia Expedition at the site of Agios Donatos.<sup>2</sup> Italian sigillata was the dominant Roman red-slipped tableware during the first century AD and was able to infiltrate to fairly remote places through the extensive communication and trade networks of the Empire.<sup>3</sup>

The primary aim here is to describe and interpret the Italian sigillata assemblage according to usual standards adopted in Roman pottery studies. This includes a catalogue of the most common vessel forms present at the site and an overview of applied and moulded decorations present in the assemblage. The only category of evidence excluded from the article is pottery stamps, which has already been extensively discussed by the author in the first volume of the Thesprotia Expedition reports.<sup>4</sup>

The secondary goal of the article is to serve as an introduction to archaeological pottery evidence regarding human-artefact relationships at the Agios Donatos site. This evidence consists of few but unmistakable signs of vessel reparation and personalization (i.e. graffiti). In the concluding chapter, this evidence will be further contextualized to briefly discuss some aspects of the daily lives of the people who once used this pottery at the site.

## The assemblage

### *Overview*

The Italian sigillata assemblage of Agios Donatos comprises in total 367 sherds weighing 1.834 kg.<sup>5</sup> The number of diagnostic finds in this group is considerably high with 77 rim and 30 base fragments. In addition, many body sherds of Italian sigillata bear quite easily

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork also took place at Agios Donatos in 2009 and more Italian sigillata was found. As the author has not been able to review this material in person, the finds of the 2009 field season are excluded from quantitative data presented in this article. The information regarding these finds, including two fragmentary *planta pedis* stamps and two dolphin appliqués, is based on section drawings and photographs kindly provided by Anna Patteri and Mikko Suha. The author acknowledges here his debt to them for these services.

<sup>2</sup> The site of Agios Donatos is discussed in several articles published in the first volume of the Thesprotia Expedition report series; see Forsén 2009. See also Forsén *et al.*, this volume.

<sup>3</sup> The other two major tableware classes identified at Agios Donatos are Eastern Sigillata B and Campana C, which will be dealt with in the forthcoming, third volume of the Thesprotia Expedition reports together with other classes of Roman slipped tablewares recognized in the assemblage.

<sup>4</sup> Ikäheimo 2009. Two new fragmentary *planta pedis* stamps were found in Agios Donatos during the 2009 field season. Due to the poor state of preservation which defies their identification from photographs taken during the field season, these examples have been excluded here from further analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Italian sigillata was only found at one other site surveyed by the Thesprotia Expedition. See Forsén *et al.*, this volume, site E 9.

recognizable diagnostic features like rouletted decoration or complete or fragmentary clay appliqués. Body sherds with preserved point of carination or another type of abrupt change in vessel profile can also be fairly distinctive when identifying the vessel form.

Of the other Italian sigillata finds, circa 0.18 kg equalling 63 finds are flat sherds belonging to the bottoms of plates, with some examples showing one or two concentric grooves on the plate interior and others even more complex patterns of decoration, like rouletting. Some of these pieces show traces of carination point or the attachment point of a ring foot. A dozen sherds (0.026 kg) belong to the mid-section of a plate bottom, while 16 fragments (0.044 kg) can be attributed to plate carination points. Just 0.006 kg equalling no more than six sherds belong to the carination zone of small cups similar to Fig. 5.22, but showing just a simple decoration at the outmost protruding edge. Cups are also present with 25 sherds (0.039 kg) from the lower vessel body, and a single body sherd (0.001 kg) preserving carination and traces of applied volute decoration.

The assemblage also includes 13 rim sherds (0.012 kg) too small and fragmentary to be identified as to precise vessel form, and this comment also applies to two base fragments (0.001 kg). Finally, the total of 36 sherds (0.031 kg) can be only generally assigned to the group of Italian sigillata without more precise identification. The fact that this last group of finds makes up only 10 % of the total Italian sigillata assemblage reflects the long research tradition of this pottery, which has led to the creation of pinpointed vessel typology and chronology.<sup>6</sup>

### *Forms and find catalogue*

The form repertoire of Italian sigillata present at Agios Donatos consists of two main groups, plates and cups. These two forms were also the backbone of the Italian sigillata production, and the production of Roman tablewares as well. Therefore, their dominance in the find material is hardly a surprise. Also from a quantitative point of view, the assemblage is fairly evenly split between the two vessel forms, and they make up most of the examples presented in the following catalogue. The catalogue is not intended to illustrate every small variation in form encountered in the assemblage, but rather to give an idea of the form and size variability of the vessels in this group.

Regarding provenance and date, all the finds are of Central Italian origin with the majority dating to the early first century AD. Some early examples may pertain even to the last decades of the first century BC. This notion is supported by the presence of small cups with hand-formed volute appliqués (Fig. 7b.22-26), while appliqués formed in separate moulds became common during the Tiberian era.<sup>7</sup> The use of some forms, on the other hand, like the plates with plain vertical upper wall, might have extended to the mid-first century AD or even to the Flavian era, but clear late Italian sigillata forms<sup>8</sup> are absent from the assemblage.

1. Medium-sized plate with vertical upper wall ending in a slightly thinned rim with pointed tip (cf. *Conspectus* forms 20.5.2 and 21.4.1). Exterior profiled with alternating ridges and grooves. Carinated transition to the horizontal lower wall. Diam. 18 cm.  
Find context: A2, Loc. 9.

<sup>6</sup> On the research history of Italian sigillata in brief, see e.g. Peacock 1982, 114-128; Hayes 1997, 41-64; Menchelli 2005, 155-156.

<sup>7</sup> *Conspectus*, 149.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Mazzeo Saracino 1985; Medri 2005.

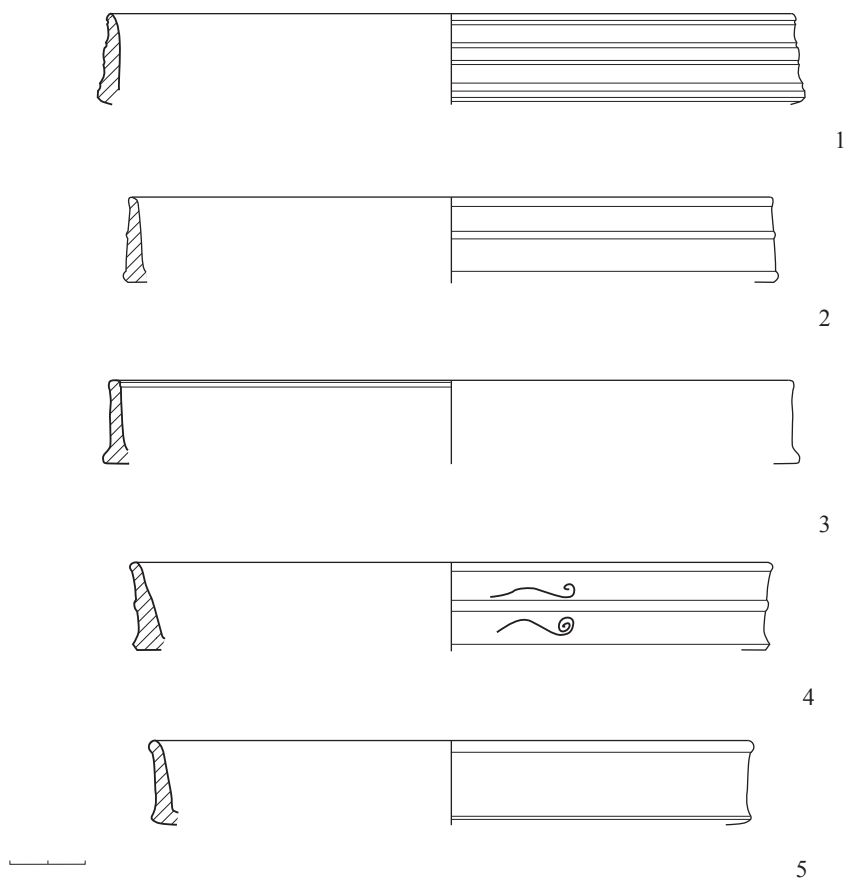


Fig. 1. Sigillata plates from A1, A2 and A5 (Nos. 1-5). Scale 1:2.

2. Medium-sized plate with vertical upper wall ending in a slightly thinned rim with rounded tip (cf. *Conspectus* form 20.5.2). Exterior profiled with two protruding ridges. Slightly protruding carinated transition to the horizontal lower wall. Diam. 17 cm.

Find context: A1, Loc. 10.

3. Medium-sized plate with vertical upper wall ending in an even rim with slightly angular tip. Plain exterior surface with partially preserved dolphin appliqué (Fig. 7a.2). Heavily protruding carinated transition to the horizontal lower wall. Diam. 18 cm.

Find context: A1, Loc. 11.

4. Medium-sized plate with slightly outward-inclining upper wall ending in a slightly thinned rim with rounded tip. Exterior profiled with two protruding ridges and a slightly protruding carinated transition to the horizontal lower wall. Applied volute decoration between the ridges (Fig. 7b.26). Diam. 17 cm.

Find context: A2, Loc. 16.

5. Medium-sized plate with slightly outward-inclining upper wall ending in a slightly thickened rim with rounded tip. Plain exterior surface with a boy's-head appliqué (Fig. 7a.5). Pointed, carinated transition to the horizontal lower wall. Diam. 16 cm.

Find context: A5, Loc. 5.

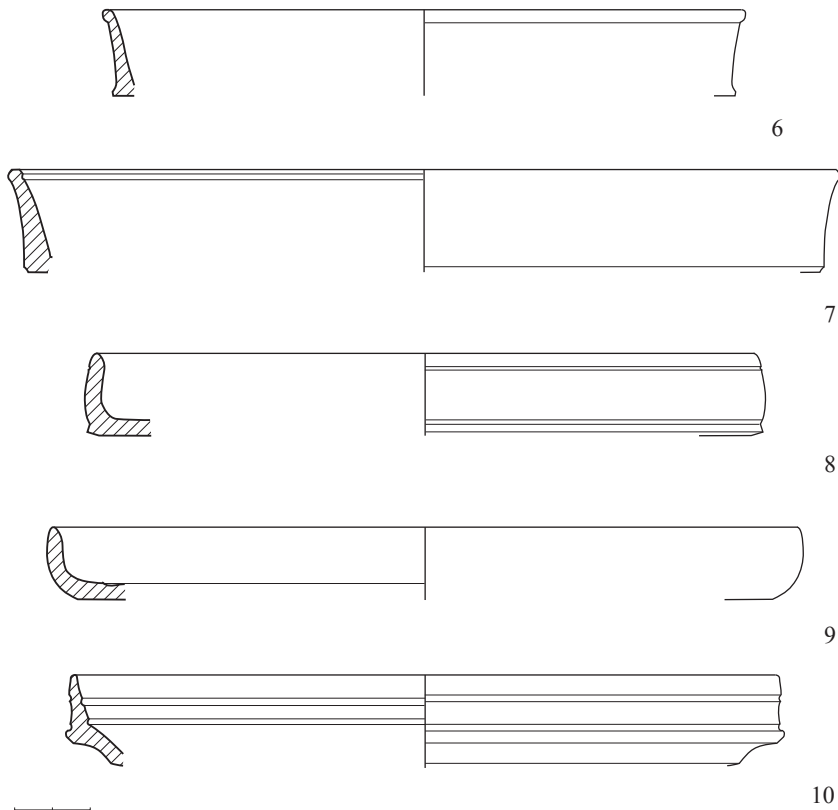


Fig. 2. Sigillata plates from A2, A4-A6 (Nos. 6-10). Scale 1:2.

6. Medium-sized plate with slightly outward-inclining upper wall ending in a slightly thickened rim with rounded tip (cf. *Conspectus* forms 20.4.4 and 21.3.1). Plain exterior surface with an appliqué showing the profile of an erote playing aulos (Fig. 7a.6). Pointed, slightly angular transition to the horizontal lower wall. Diam. 17 cm.

Find context: A2, Loc. 10.

7. Large plate with slightly outward-inclining upper wall ending in a slightly thickened rim with somewhat angular tip and an underlining groove on the interior. Plain exterior surface with angular transition to the horizontal lower wall. Diam. 22 cm.

Find context: A5, Loc. 5.

8. Medium-sized plate with slightly convex wall ending in a thinned rim with pointed tip (cf. *Conspectus* form 4.4.1). Rouletted decoration on exterior bordered by two grooves. Sharp, carinated transition to horizontal lower wall. Diam. 18 cm.

Find context: A5, Loc. 5.

9. Medium-sized plate with shallow vertical upper wall with even rim and pointed tip turning quite smoothly into horizontal lower wall (cf. *Conspectus* form 4.4.2). Plain vessel surfaces. Diam. 20 cm.

Find context: A2, Loc. 10.



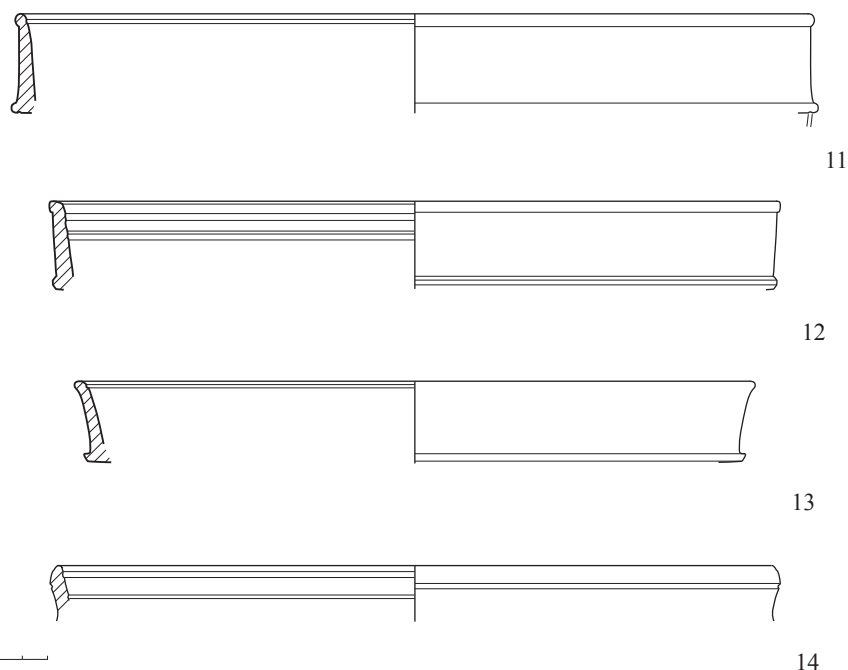


Fig. 3. Large sigillata plates from A2 and A6 (Nos. 11-14). Scale 1:3.

10. Medium-sized plate with vertical upper wall ending in a slightly thinned rim with pointed tip (cf. *Conspectus* form 21.2.1). Two grooves on both the exterior and interior. Angular, protruding carination forms the transition to inward-inclined upper wall. Diam. 19 cm.

Find context: A4, Loc. 5.

11. Large plate with tall vertical upper wall ending in a slightly thinned rim with rounded tip and an underlining groove on the interior (cf. *Conspectus* form 20.4.1). Plain exterior surface with a corn ear appliqué (Fig. 7a.17). Strongly protruding, angular carinated transition to the horizontal lower wall. Diam. 32 cm.

Find context: A6, Loc. 3.

12. Large plate with slightly outward-inclining upper wall ending in a slightly thickened rim with angular tip. Plain exterior surface with a fragmentary appliqué showing a draped youth (Fig. 7a.9); two shallow grooves on the interior surface. Slightly protruding, angular carinated transition to the horizontal lower wall. Diam. 29 cm.

Find context: A2, Loc. 9.

13. Large plate with slightly outward-inclining upper wall ending in an even rim with somewhat angular tip and an underlining groove on vessel interior. Plain exterior surface with a palmette appliqué (Fig. 7a.20). Pronounced, protruding angular carination to the horizontal lower wall. Diam. 27 cm.

Find context: A6, Loc. 4.

14. Large plate with slightly convex rim with pointed tip (cf. *Conspectus* form 18.2.1). Groove on the exterior, two on the interior rim. Diam. 29 cm.

Find context: A2, Loc. 4.



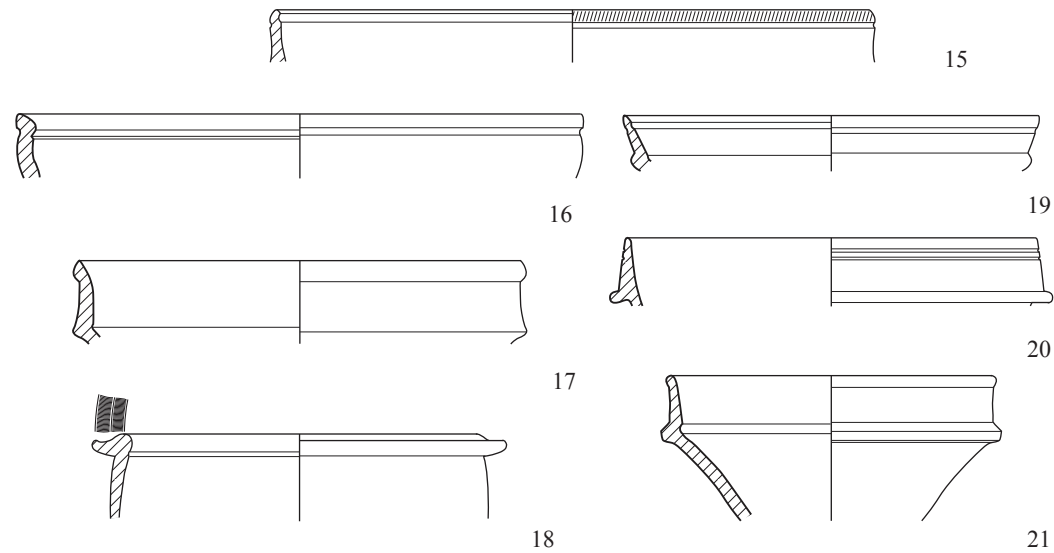


Fig. 4. Sigillata bowls and cups from A2, A4, A5 and B1 (Nos. 15-21). Scale 1:2.

15. Medium-sized vessel with vertical upper wall ending in a thinned lip with pointed tip undercut on both the exterior and interior. Rouletted decoration on exterior lip. Diam. 16 cm.

Find context: B1, Loc. 3.

16. Medium-sized bowl with a slightly convex upper wall ending in an even rim with angular lip and undercutting grooves on both surfaces (cf. *Conspectus* form 9.1.2). Diam. 15 cm.

Find context: A5, Loc. 3.

17. Medium-sized vessel with vertical upper wall ending in a rim with pointed tip thickened on the exterior. Pointed, carinated transition to lower vessel wall. Diam. 12 cm.

Find context: A2, NE-profile.

18. Small hemispherical cup with convex upper wall ending in a flanged rim with concave top and slightly thinned lip (cf. *Conspectus* form 37.1.1). Radial rouletting on the rim top. Shallow groove underneath the rim on the interior surface. Diam. 10 cm.

Find context: Square 25/14 in the survey.

19. Small vessel with outward-inclined, heavily thinning upper wall ending in a small rim with pointed tip limited by a groove on both surfaces. Protruding carination with rouletted decoration on the outermost point. Diam. 11 cm.

Find context: -.

20. Small cup with elongated, triangular rim with pointed tip and two grooves on otherwise plain exterior surface (cf. *Conspectus* form 34.2.1). Rounded protrusion on the exterior separating the rim from upper wall. Diam. 11 cm.

Find context: A4, Loc. 5.

21. Small conical cup with a slightly thickened rim with rounded lip (cf. *Conspectus* form 23.2.2). Vertical upper wall turning into inward-inclined lower wall through protruding, angular carination. Plain surfaces. Diam. 9 cm.

Find context: A2, Loc. 10.

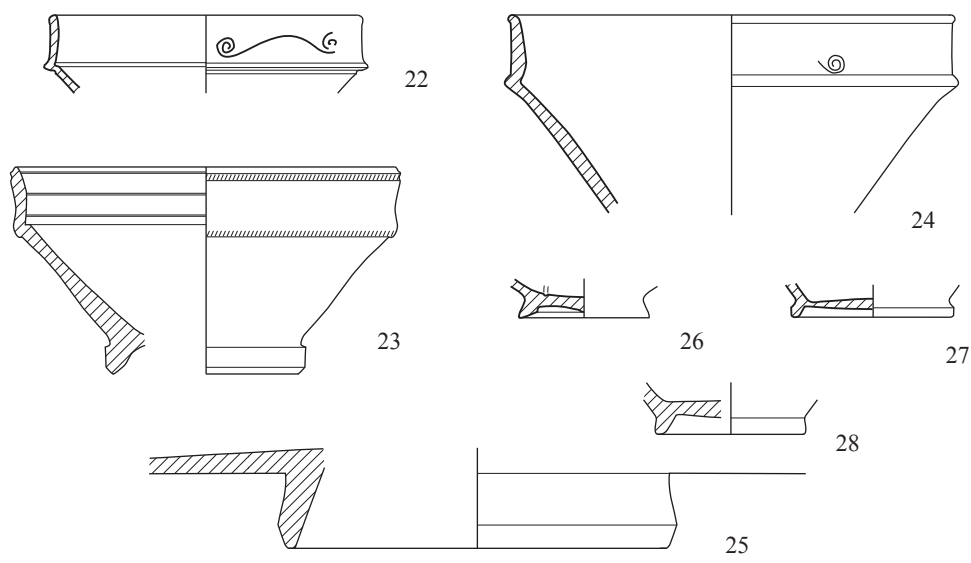


Fig. 5. Pieces of sigillata from A1, A2, A4 and D (Nos. 22-28). Scale 1:2.

22. Small conical cup with an even rim with rounded lip and vertical upper wall turning into inward-inclined lower wall through protruding, pointed carination. Applied volute decoration on upper wall (Fig. 7b.22). Diam. 8 cm.

Find context: A1, Loc. 10.

23. Small conical cup with an even rim and pointed lip (cf. *Conspectus* form 22.1.2). Vertical upper wall turning into inward-inclined lower wall through rounded, slightly protruding carination. Rouletted decoration on vessel lip and carination, three shallow but sharp grooves on inner upper wall. Diam. 10 cm.

Find context: D, Loc. 7.

24. Medium-sized conical cup with a thinned rim and slightly out-splayed pointed lip. Vertical upper wall turning into inward-inclined lower wall through slightly protruding pointed carination. Diam. 12 cm.

Find context: A4, Loc. 5.

25. Angular ring foot of a large plate (cf. *Conspectus* base form 2.7). Slightly inward-inclining angular ring foot joining the horizontal lower wall in a sharp angle. Diam. 10 cm.

Find context: A2, Loc. 9.

26. Small ring foot of a cup. Angular foot-ring with pointed tip turning into shallow bottom cone. Two letter graffito, MR (Fig. 8.4), scratched underside the vessel bottom; CN•ATEI *planta pedis* stamp (Ikäheimo 2009, 158, fig. 1a) on the top. Diam. 4 cm.

Find context: A1, Loc. 11.

27. Small ring foot of a cup. Angular foot-ring with turning into thin, substantially flat base with L•TITI *planta pedis* stamp (Ikäheimo 2009, 159, fig. 1g) on the top. Diam. 4 cm.

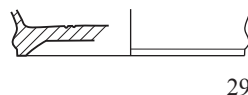
Find context: A1, Loc. 10.

28. Small ring foot of a cup. Rounded foot-ring. Diam. 4 cm.

Find context: survey, Square 9.

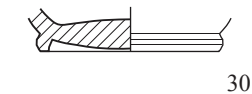
29. Small ring foot of a cup with profiled exterior. Angular foot-ring with turning into flat base. Diam. 6 cm.

Find context: A5, Loc. 6.



30. Small ring foot of a cup. Shallow angular foot ring turning into bulbous vessel bottom. L•AV *planta pedis* stamp (Ikäheimo 2009, 158, fig. 1d) on the top. Diam. 5 cm.

Find context: A2, Loc. 10.



31. Small ring foot of a cup. Shallow angular foot ring turning into bulbous vessel bottom. Two letter graffito, IIA (Fig. 8.2), scratched underside the vessel bottom; [...]L *planta pedis* stamp (Ikäheimo 2009, 158, fig. 1e) on the top. Diam. 6 cm.

Find context: A1, Loc. 8.

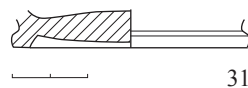


Fig. 6. Terra Sigillata from A1, A2 and A5 (Nos. 29-31). Scale 1:2.

## Appliqués

Slightly over thirty sherds in the assemblage show evidence of decoration that has been applied to the vessel surface in a separate stage of the production sequence. The state of preservation of these appliqués is quite heterogeneous. An especially challenging sub-group regarding the identification of decoration is formed of sherds preserving only a small part of the appliqué, or where the appliqué has been badly worn out either in pre- or in post-depositional context. In the most extreme case, only the outline of the appliqué on the vertical upper wall indicates where it was once attached (Fig. 7a.1). On the other hand, the assemblage includes several complete appliqués, which are therefore substantially easy to identify.

The motives in the appliqués can be divided into five broad categories: human figures, animal figures, objects, vegetal or floral motives and decorative elements. Human figures include a boy's head (Fig. 7a.5), a boy playing aulos (Fig. 7a.6-7), Eros and a bow<sup>9</sup>, a bearded man's head (Fig. 7a.12) and an appliqué showing the lower part of a draped human torso (Fig. 7a.9). Animal figures comprise a lion's head (Fig. 7a.8), a dolphin (Fig. 7a.2-4), a cock (Fig. 7a.10). Kantharos (Fig. 7a.13) and caduceus (Fig. 7a.11) – the staff of Hermes – are the two object appliqués present in the assemblage. Floral and vegetal motives show most variability as they include palmettes (Fig. 7a.14-15), rosettes with either sharp (Fig. 7a.20) or rounded petals (Fig. 7a.16), corn ears (Fig. 7a.17), and festoons (Fig. 7a.18-19, 7b.21). The only purely decorative element is a volute (Fig. 7b.22-25) that occasionally occurs also in double arrangement (Fig. 7b.26). The rest of the assemblage is composed of badly worn and/or fragmentary pieces that are virtually unidentifiable.

Most of these appliqués are attested in Roman legionary encampments along the Rhine area, which dates them to the early first century AD.<sup>10</sup> The significance of the seemingly wide repertoire of motives for the inhabitants of Agios Donatos will be touched upon in the concluding part of this article.

<sup>9</sup> See Ikäheimo 2009.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Schindler Kaudelka *et al.* 2001, *passim*.

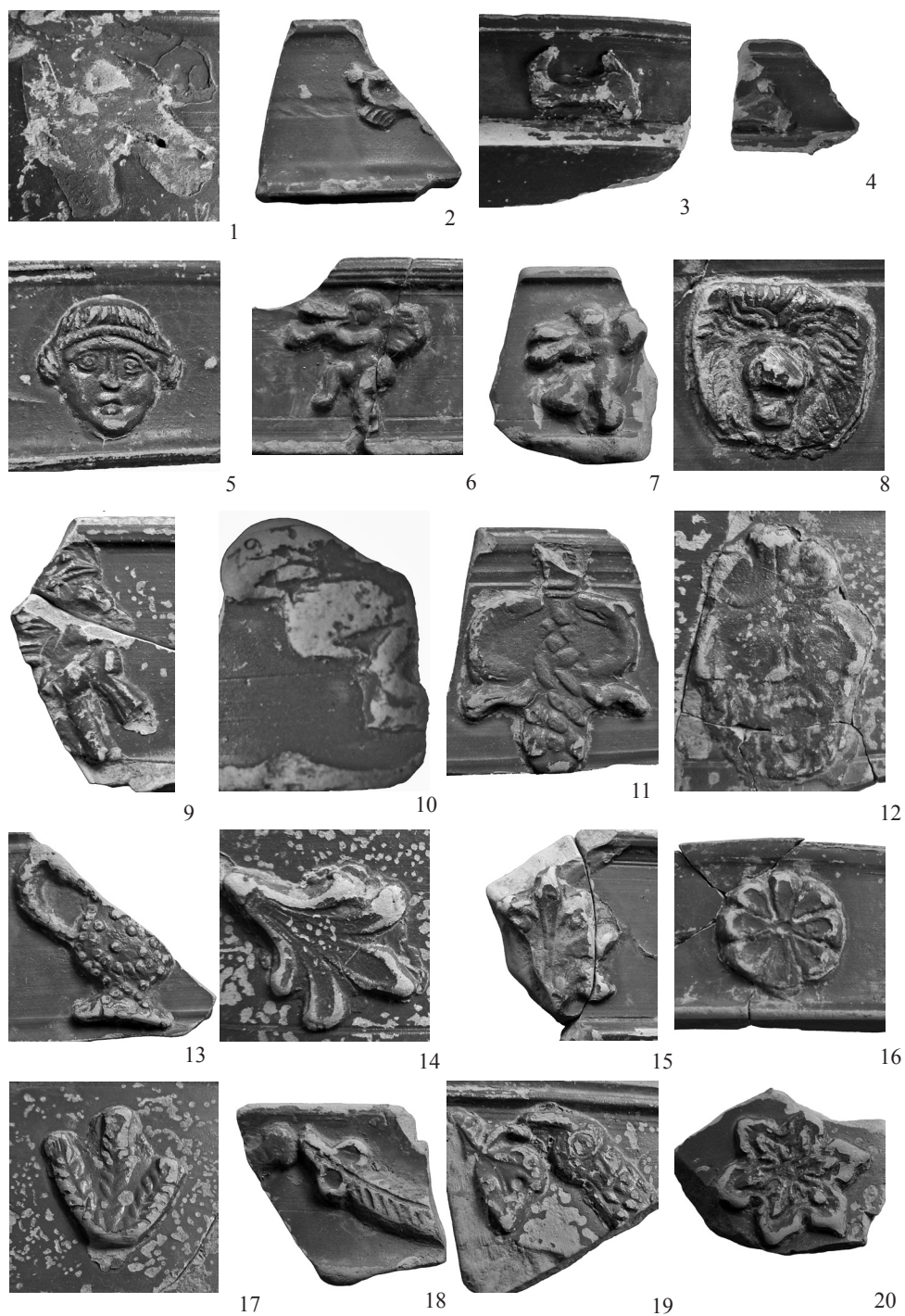


Fig. 7a. Sigillata appliqués (Nos. 1-20).

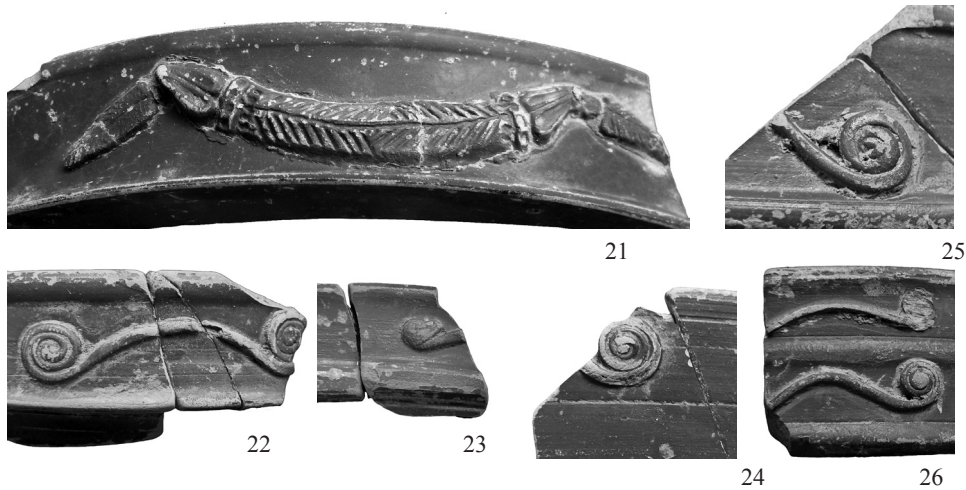


Fig. 7b. Sigillata appliqués (Nos. 21-26).

## Graffiti

The Italian sigillata assemblage of Agios Donatos includes eight examples of graffiti executed *post-cocturam* (i.e. after firing) on the bottom of the vessel. Half of them are completely preserved with clearly legible markings ranging from one to three letters, while the rest are either fragmentary or ambiguous by their very nature. This leaves in several cases plenty of room for several equally probable interpretations. The existence of graffiti in both the Greek and Latin alphabets is an interesting feature regarding the remoteness of the site. This issue will be dealt with in more detail, in addition to short remarks put forward in the concluding paragraph of this contribution, in a forthcoming publication of the Thesprotia Expedition.<sup>11</sup>

Three out of eight examples are executed in the Greek alphabet and consist of 2-3 letters: ΚΠΑ, ΠΑ and ΙΘ (Fig. 8.1-3); all of them are very likely owner's marks. The same interpretation can be put forward for a similar short marking in Latin alphabet: MR (Fig. 8.4). The remaining four examples include a fragmentary graffito with, possibly, the upper part of an AE-ligature in Latin (Fig. 8.5), an obscure mark possibly incorporating the Greek letter Π (Fig. 8.6), the letter A or the Latin number IX or XI or alternatively an anepigraphic mark (Fig. 8.7) and, finally, a graffito (Fig. 8.8) too fragmentary to be identified at all.

The fact that these graffiti are more often found on cups than on plates corroborates their presumed use as owner's marks. The cup was certainly a personal belonging, whereas large plates were items more often utilized in collective dining. The custom of scratching initials or an anepigraphic mark intended to identify the owner refers to the use of these vessels in a context where the chance that they might have gotten mixed was substantially high. On the other hand, the custom of scratching a graffito on the underside of the vessel bottom reveals that ownership was not to be actively manifested.

<sup>11</sup> The author wishes to thank Kalle Korhonen for his valuable help in the identification and interpretation of these graffiti. The full discussion of their significance will be included in a forthcoming article by Björn Forsén.



This implies that the odds of getting these cups mixed in use were not too high, while the occurrence of owner's marks in both Greek and Latin speaks on behalf of a bilingual community with equal access to resources.

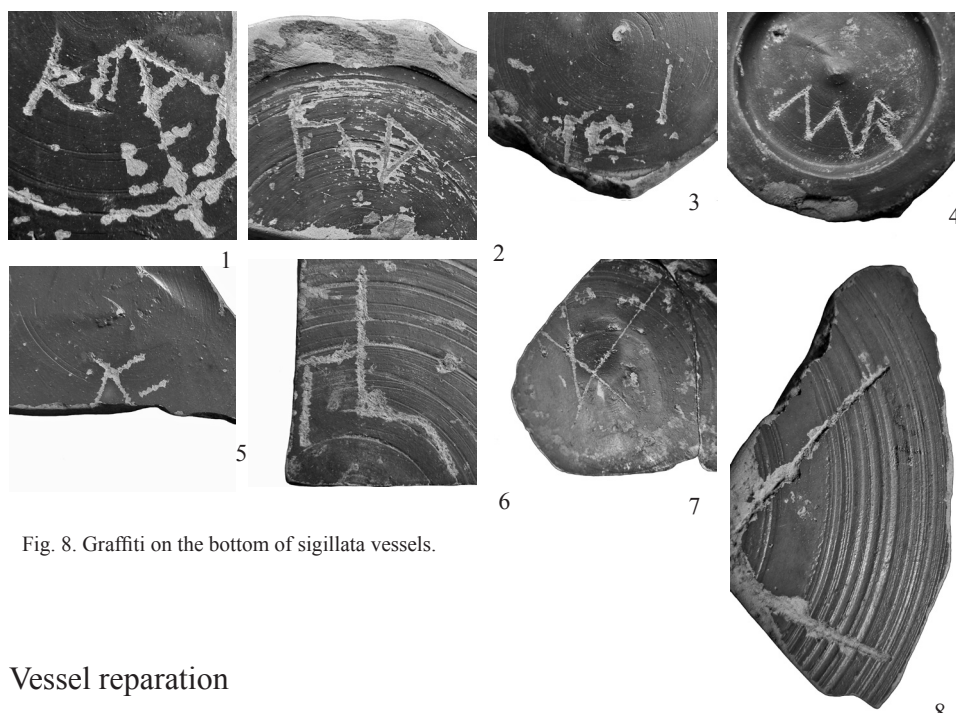


Fig. 8. Graffiti on the bottom of sigillata vessels.

### Vessel repairation

The only unambiguous example of a repaired vessel is a fragment of a large plate that had been mended with a lead clamp (Fig. 9). The clamp bonded the vessel through holes drilled on the opposite sides of a crack. The reparation as a procedure has been recently described by Peña<sup>12</sup> and its occurrence on a large plate is hardly a surprise: it was a vessel form used in communal dining. Due to evident difficulties related to transportation, large plates were not only more expensive but, more importantly, also more difficult to replace than small cups, especially in the context of a Roman villa located in inland northwestern Greece at a considerable distance from major routes of transportation.

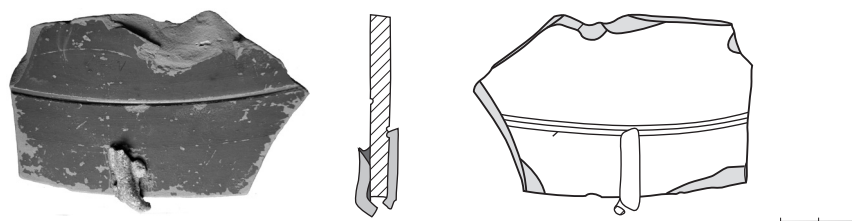


Fig. 9. Repaired vessel. Scale 1:2.

<sup>12</sup> Peña 2007, 232-249.

## Discussion

The substantial amount of Italian sigillata recovered from the survey and excavation of Agios Donatos can be used to explore some aspects related to the nature and the type of the settlement. Firstly, this tableware bears witness to connections that this fairly remote site was able to maintain with the surrounding Roman world. Whether the pottery in question was specifically obtained by the inhabitants of Agios Donatos through the existing trade networks, or whether it was supplied to the site, may at first seem to be a difficult question to tackle. Had the site served for military defence during the late first century BC, the occurrence of imported tableware *per se* would represent the same phenomenon that has been observed in other Roman military encampments e.g. in Britain and Germany. But as the site of Agios Donatos had by then been turned into a Roman villa, the significance of this pottery is somewhat different.

Firstly, it is obviously quite impossible to estimate either the quality or the quantity of perishable imports that found their way to the site of Agios Donatos through trade or exchange. Based on the influx of extra-regional pottery, however, the existence of such provisions is more or less evident. Questions to be asked in this context are then: how were these decorated pots perceived by their users, and did the imagery applied to the side of a plate or a cup have any effect on them? The answers depend at least in part on how slipped fine wares were supplied to this area.

Supposing that Italian sigillata and related pottery were just another provision reaching the site from time to time with other necessities, the imagery hardly reflects personal preferences. This is not to say, however, that the imagery was completely insignificant. It may have equally provided aesthetic pleasure or food for conversation through familiar or unrecognized motives. On the other hand, these pots were not of such value or prestige that the inhabitants of the villa would have actively sought certain decorations or vessels from a particular user.

That the pottery was not totally insignificant to its users is indicated by the custom of using owner's marks on cups, as well as by attempts to mend cracked or otherwise slightly damaged vessels. It may reasonably be presumed that mending was not necessitated as much by commercial value as it was by availability and use value. The appreciation shown towards finely executed and decorated pottery is further underlined by the absence of modifications related to ownership or repair amongst all other classes of Roman pottery recovered from Agios Donatos.

The final aspect related to the presence of red-slipped fine ware pottery at Agios Donatos is its importance as a psychological signifier. A product that was markedly Italian and produced fairly near the centre of the Empire was a constant reminder of mental networks that extended even to the remotest places. To its user, a red gloss cup or a plate was of course primarily a utensil, a utilitarian item for everyday use, but on the subconscious level it signified attachment to the values of a strong political and economic power – the Roman Empire which, by the early first century AD, had been present in Epirus for a substantially long time.



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