

Ceramics in Context from the Forum of Ostia - Sacrifices, Feasts, and Ritual Deposits

Preliminary Research and Findings

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Introduction

In ancient Roman cities, the forum was a center for politics, trade, and religion, and was the home of several temples and areas of worship. This is also the case of the Forum of Ostia. Ostia was a Roman colony, by some believed to be the first Roman colony.¹ The founding of the city is highly debated, with conflicting ancient text giving different years and events connected to the city, and archaeological remains, which so far have given no definite proof to fully establish a chronology for the city. However, Ostia was a city with a strong connection to Rome, both culturally and politically. Ostia was one of the main harbor cities of Rome, connecting the capital to its many conquered provinces and bringing in trade from far and wide. This also meant that Ostia was a hub of cultures from the entire empire, mixing traditional Roman ideals with new outside influence. In large part, the religion of the Roman empire was a result of cultural exchange. Religions inherently do not grow out of nothing and Italy, with its easy access to the sea and central location in the Mediterranean basin, was a hub of cultural exchange even predating the rise of the Romans. Throughout the existence of the empire, its religion was influenced by many different cultures, not just the ones already there, but also those that came with consistent exposure to the world.² As one of the largest and most well-preserved Roman sites in mainland Italy, Ostia is an ideal opportunity to examine Roman religion in an urban context.

My thesis will examine the practice of religion on the Forum of Ostia from the Republican to the Imperial period. In the thesis, I will primarily explore the ceramic material found in votive deposits in the north-western part of the Forum, excavated by the Ostia Forum Project (OFP) between 2016-2019. I will examine the deposits both as a collected context, as well as establishing a classification of the individual objects. This will provide new insights into the continuity and the development of the cult practice on the Ostian Forum and give a new understanding of Roman urban cult. The following report will introduce the preliminary results and theories, as well as the plan for the future study of these contexts.

Defining a Votive Deposit – Sacred Trash and Treasure

One of the crucial steps in my thesis will be to decide how to identify a votive deposit and what a votive deposit is. A votive is usually defined as an object which has been dedicated to a god or goddess. Votives come in a wide variety from large statues to tiny miniature pottery. However, where do we draw the line between what is sacred and what is not? Is it just the connection to something cultic that makes it votive or should it be defined as something else? The deposits unearthed by the OFP consisted in large part of

¹ Pavolini 2006, 20-22.

² Rüpke 2011, 1-7.

cooking vessels and vessels used for storage. The vessels are mostly not fine ware but have still been deposited purposely inside the sacred area. Can the placement and the structure of the deposit and not the contents define it as votive? Previously, in archaeological research, votive deposits have not been ignored as a subject, but have often been studied in a way that ignores the context. In archaeological research, objects are mostly classified based on the type and not context. This is because the classification of individual objects is essential to archaeological research, especially when creating a relative chronology, which has always been a vital part of understanding a site. However, ignoring the identification and classification of votive deposits as a collected context limits the information we can collect from the sanctuary.³ In this thesis, I want to treat the deposits both as a context, while also making a classification of the individual objects. A classification of the deposits themselves, their placement on the site, the way they are structurally defined (or not) as well as the contents, will give an interesting insight into the repetitiveness and the development of cult practices in the area.

Preliminary Results – The Pottery of the Votive Deposits

The deposits were found in a room named TFR2 in the north-western porticus of the forum. The rooms in this area were in the late antiquity used for a lime kiln and the area was therefore filled with fragments of marble. Under the many marble fragments and late antique floor level, structures predating the construction of the porticus were found. The area unearthed a well, drains, and a larger stone structure, which seems to be the foundation of an altar. The votive deposits were found spread out in most of the area, however, a majority of them were found in the area around the structures, especially the drains and the altar, which I will comment on later. The date of the deposits ranges from the republican period to the imperial period. The earliest material dates around the middle of the third century BCE and the latest to the end of the second century CE. The material from the votive deposits is mainly ceramics but also holds a few objects of metal and a good number of bones and mussels.

Unfortunately, due to the circumstances affecting the world at the moment (November 2020), the project has been off to a bumpy start. The worldwide lockdowns and requirements for social distancing caused by Corvid19, has meant that the Ph.D. projects of the OFP have been delay considerably. Because of the restrictions, I have not been able to access all the material relevant to my research. This means the following results and research has been made without the ability to study all the vessels in person.

³ Osborne 2004, 2-3.

However, I do feel confident that this preliminary introduction will give an understanding and overview of the types of vessels found in the deposits of the TFR2 and an overview of the deposits themselves.

Republican Material

The vessels found in the republican deposits can, in general, be divided into three main groups: fine ware vessels, cooking ware, and "storage vessel". There are also a considerable number of lamps in the contexts, however, these will be discussed at a later time.

Fine Ware

The fine ware group is here defined by vessels of a fine make or with thinner walls, such as cups, plates, and smaller bowls. In this group I have included both vessels made from clay I would define as "fine", meaning it has very few or no inclusions and air pockets, and vessels with thinner walls, which might be made from clays that are outside the "fine" category.

In the earliest deposits, there is a fair amount of Black Gloss vessels. Black Gloss pottery was produced in many places in Italy between the middle of the fourth century BCE through the second half of the first century BCE. Black gloss often imitates Athenian black glazed pottery and has many of the same decorations, such as rouletting, west slope, and stamped pelmets. The black gloss vessels found in the TRF2 deposits are fairly well preserved with many near-complete vessels and have been deposited with care. The vessels are not very varied in shapes, with three repeating shapes: plates, bowls, and smaller bowls (salt cellars). A number of the black gloss vessels from one deposit also have stamps.

In the assemblage of the earlier deposits, there is a collection of thin-walled vessels, possibly cups, which have an off-set and convex rim. These cups are not made of a typical "fine" clay fabric, such as the black gloss, but is of a rough fabric of a darker red color, closer to the fabric of cooking ware. Some of the cups have been made from the same fabric as most of the cooking vessels, as they have the same gold/bronze mica fragments in the clay. This fabric might be from a local production; however, this cannot be said for sure at the moment. There are very few cups in the assemblage except for these.

Among the vessels in the earlier deposits was also a small number of miniatures. Miniatures are vessels that give a clear indication of ritual practice since they have no other purpose

than being devoted to deities. The miniatures from the TFR2 seem to repeat the vessel types of the full-sized vessels. Especially cooking ware.

The amount of miniatures found in the deposits indicates that they were not a prominent part of the religious practice of the cult. However, as the entire sacred area has not yet been excavated there might be more miniatures to find elsewhere. The lack of miniatures can be because the area of the sanctuary the TFR2 covers was not the "main" dedication area.

Cooking Ware

In both the republican and imperial deposits, the amount of cooking ware is apparent. The vessels are both larger cooking vessels like the *pentola* (stew pot) and the shallower *terrina* (skillet pan). There are also many *ollas* in the assemblage. The olla is a vessel that is deeply connected with cult in Latium and was used to transport meat from the home to the sacred site where it was prepared. Nearly all the cooking vessels show signs of use, with some of them being too secondarily burned to distinguish the clay color.

Among the assemblage there is a large number of cooking ware lids, as many lids as there are rim fragments of the vessels themselves. Comparative to digging in a domestic context, where the occurrence of lids is scarce, the amount of lids in the deposits is apparent. Like the other fragments of cooking vessels, the majority of the lids show clear signs of use, with secondary burning on the rim.

Storage Vessels

The last of the vessel-groups of the republican deposits I have decided to define as "storage vessels". These vessels are most likely jugs of the same general type made of similar clay. Especially in deposit 050 a large amount of these vessels all have similar rims. Unfortunately, we have few examples of this type's foot and handle, with only two different foot types and one handle type. The fabric of the clay is one of the most distinctive features of this type. The fabric is powdery, light, and fine to medium in the number of inclusions. The rim is downturned or thickened, the base is either a raised base or a small ring foot and the handle is a flat oval shape. The amount of these jugs in the assemblage makes it one of the main vessel types of the republican deposit and the fact that they all are made of very similar clay is apparent.

Imperial Material

Like the republican deposits, the imperial deposits are also collected around the well and the drain. Among these deposits are 040a/b and 006 among the larger along with 003. Like in the republican deposits the vessels can be divided into three main groups, fine ware, cooking ware, and storage vessels. However, the distribution and vessel types has changed.

Fine Ware

Like in the republican deposits there is a fair amount of oil lamps in the imperial contexts. These will require more study before I can conclude anything based on them. However, the continued presence of lamps in both the republican and imperial deposits are noteworthy. Most of the lamps seem to be of Roman production, with a few examples of imported Corinthian lamp fragments.

There are fewer fine ware vessels in the imperial deposits and almost no sign of cups of any kind in these contexts.

In the imperial deposits, there are still examples of black gloss pottery. The vessel types do not differ from those from the republican period and are mostly plates and bowls. In these contexts, some vessels also have stamps.

A new type of fine ware replacing the black gloss in many of the imperial deposits is Terra Sigillata. Terra Sigillata is a red glossed roman pottery type, which was mass produced in several areas of Italy and the Roman provinces from around 50 BCE to around the third century BCE. However, even though the fine ware types change, the shapes mostly remain the same. The Terra Sigillata vessels are mostly plates and bowls, with a few well-preserved jugs. The decoration is mostly rouletting, which is on the interior of the plates and the exterior of the jugs. The vessels seem mostly to be of Italian production, with a few examples of African Red Slip.

Miniatures are also present in the imperial deposits. Even though there are more miniature vessels in the imperial assemblage than in the republican, the amount is small and miniatures do still not seem to have played a big part in the religious practice of this sanctuary.

Cooking Ware

Like in the republican deposits the imperial deposits contain a large amount of cooking ware. The assemblage is very similar to that of the republican; however, the olla shape seems to have been far more popular in the imperial period than in the republican. The olla is the most numerous vessel shape among the imperial cooking ware, and like the republican cooking ware, they all show signs of use.

Lids in the imperial deposits are just (if not more) as plentiful as in the republican. There are more well-preserved lids in the imperial context, which shows a wider variety of shapes than in the republican period.

Storage Vessels and "Gebrauchskeramik"

The imperial deposits have a larger variety of shapes belonging to this category than the assemblage from the republican deposits. Firstly, the imperial deposits have a larger amount of amphoras, with one of the deposits containing mostly amphoras. They are mostly of Italian production and used for wine. Light clay jugs type are not found in the imperial deposits.

The Deposits – Placement, Structure, and Contents

To study the deposits, I have chosen to focus on three defining elements: placement, structure, and contents. The placement, meaning where on the sacred site was the deposit located and where they placed in connection to something. The structure, meaning was the deposits structurally defined in some way. As in closed off or walled off, but also the way the vessels were placed in the deposit. And lastly, the contents, which I have already introduced.

Placement

The placement of the deposits seems to change with the renovation of the area in the late republican /early imperial period.⁴ The earlier deposits seem to be placed in the northern half of the room. The deposits do not seem to be placed in connection to any structure, however, one was placed very close to the well in the north-east corner. The deposits dated to the imperial period are primarily located in the

⁴ For more on the stratigraphy of the area please see the work of Ms. Sophie Menge.

area around the altar foundation and the drain. The current interpretation of the altar and connected drain is that it was used for animal sacrifice and that the drain was for blood. The placement of the imperial deposits in relation to the altar suggests that they are connected to the cultic practices performed in the area.

Structure

The deposits of TFR2 are often structurally defined; this is true for both the republican and the imperial deposits. In many of the deposits, fragments of large vessels, such as the walls and handles of transport amphoras, have been used to define and enclose the objects within the context. In several cases, the deposits have also been closed off by stone slabs. Some of the deposits are also "closed off" by a larger pot, which has been buried upside down. A notable find here is a near-complete olla from an imperial deposit, which was buried upside down with bones inside the pot. The size of the deposits changes a lot from deposit to deposit. Some contain many vessels, while others might only be one or two objects. The vessels from the smaller deposits are often more well preserved. The smaller deposits also often consist of fine ware pottery or lamps rather than cooking ware.

Theories and Preliminary Interpretations

It is important to note that the room TFR2 only covers a small part of the presumed sacred area. Based on the placement of the temple connected to the sanctuary, the excavated area of TFR2 is located towards the back of the sanctuary. So, what was the purpose of this back area in this sanctuary, and what religious practices were carried out here? Firstly, the sanctuary seems to have been renovated around the late republican period⁵, which also might have changed the purpose of the area. One of the changes of the area was the addition of a stone altar, a corner of which was unearthed in TFR2. The placement of the deposits was influenced by the addition of the altar. Because the altar is placed at the back of the sanctuary, it can be argued that it is probably not the main altar of the sanctuary. But what purpose did it serve and is this reflected in the deposits? The addition of the altar changes the placement of votive deposits in the area. In the republican period, the deposits were mostly placed in the northern part of the room, while after the altar was installed the deposits were placed near the altar and the drain. As mentioned above the drain was probably a blood drain, used for redirecting the blood of sacrificed animals. The sacrifice of animals is not surprising in a Roman cult, but is still an interesting and important aspect of the ritual of the sanctuary.

⁵ For more on this subject please see the work of Sophie Menge and Prof. A. Gering.

That animal sacrifices were conducted in the area is also evident from the find of three deposits containing the heads of pigs. Two of these were found in the TFR2 and one was found in the adjoining room TFR1. The proximity of the deposits and the alter suggests that they are connected. Vessels are consistently found in the deposits in both the republican and imperial deposits. Cooking ware is present and abundant in most of the deposits and is also found in large quantities in the layers of the area. However, the republican deposits also have a large amount of fine ware and the light clayed jugs, which does not continue in the same amount in the imperial deposits. As mentioned above, the cooking ware all showed signs of use. This could indicate that the area was used to prepare food. This is also consistent with the large amount of charcoal that was found in the area.

There is thus evidence that the area was used for food preparation both before and after the renovation of the area. However, there is no concrete proof of animal sacrifice conducted in the area before the addition of the alter, and the lack of fine ware in the imperial deposits suggests that the area might have changed function. It seems fair to conclude that the area after the renovation of the sanctuary was used for sacrificing and cooking animals, possibly in connection with feasts and festivals conducted in the forum. However, if this was also the purpose of the area in the republican period or if the area was even part of the sacred area is still unsure.

In the future research of this subject, I am investigating comparative sites and depositions, focusing mainly on urban cult sites in mainland Italy and preferably located in the region of Lazio. I am hoping to find comparable sites which show similar deposits. I am especially hoping to find comparatives to the deposits with the pig heads and urban sanctuaries with confirmed cooking facilities connected to them. At the moment I am, however, also working on a database for both the deposits and the vessels in them. Finishing these are a top priority at the moment, since they make future research much easier.

List of Literature

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