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Local Black-Gloss pottery from Sardinia: continuity and innovation between Hellenism and early Empire

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Abstract: The studies on Black-Gloss ware developed in Sardinia in recent years show, in an ever more precise way, that local products often represent the most attested classes. Basically, starting from the 3rd century BC, continuing towards the late Republican age to get to the Imperial age, the presence of artifacts that intend to replicate or sometimes only resemble Black-Gloss occurs in different areas of Sardinia, suggesting the possibility of interpreting this phenomenon as an evident and repeated attempt to establish a relationship of cultural proximity with a 'dominant' fashion. In this respect, it is interesting to observe how the study of Black-Gloss ceramics can contribute to highlighting phenomena of cultural mediation and social and economic interaction. Starting from these premises, this work intends to present some case studies that mainly refer to southern Sardinia, trying to clarify some aspects around the times and problems connected with local ceramic production and consequently with the selection mechanisms for local ones, which determine the use and value of the containers.

Keywords: Black-gloss Ware, Sardinia, pottery, Roman Age, Gray paste ware.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a lot of studies have focused on the analysis of the pottery distribution, with the specific aim of making better known the phenomena of manufacture, exchange and use of pottery, which are better understandable in regional or micro-regional realities¹. At these levels of research in fact, there seems that most of the daily exchanges carried out in ancient times concentrated and so pottery is particularly important for understanding the different aspects of interaction among production, distribution and consumption. In the large part of the cases, the materials analyzed are essentially items of domestic use, and so part of what we could call, more latently, an "archeology of consumption" of the ancient world. This issue is linked to more general questions concerning some points of the articulation of the social fabric and the economic processes that have produced and used the artifacts, which are now the subject of investigation². The underlying assumption is based on the belief, now rooted in the socio-anthropological studies, that each human group identifies itself not only in forms and models of artistic value, but also in the stylistic ways of some

¹ TONIOLO 2010/2011, pp. 2-3.

² ROTH 2003, pp. 44-45; ROTH 2013, pp. 93-94.

commonly used tools, above all by virtue of the polysemantic significance that they assume in that particular social formation³. With regard to the table items in this case, the ethnic identification mechanism joins the study of eating habits, which represent the most important expression of identity recognition in many societies⁴.

In addition to these considerations, as is well known, the study of ceramics is connected to the evaluation of the commercial movements, which occurred at a regional and trans-regional level through land and sea routes and which for the Roman world have contributed to increase the complex Romanization system of the annexed provinces. Starting from these questions, this work was conceived with the aim of deepening the value and the role of Black-Gloss ceramic in the social and cultural interaction processes that took place in Sardinia starting from the Hellenistic age, focusing in particular on the knowledge of the real size of the circulation of pottery of local / regional origin, which is linked by technology and morphology to the 'international' Black-Gloss ceramics. As is known, this multi-faceted class of artefacts constitutes a very wide range of table items, that have circulated throughout the Greek Mediterranean and subsequently in the Roman provinces, often accompanying armies and heavy cargo⁵.

³ In this regard, we recall the studies of D. Miller: see MELONI 2013, pp. 353-362. «No single line of study should be considered in isolation, but rather the workshop must be considered as a complex network of social, cultural, economic, and technological interactions that constantly influence and recursively are influenced by each other, and which can be elucidated from the material record» Cit. MURPHY, POBLOME 2011, p. 30.

⁴ LEVI-STRAUSS 1968; GOODY 1982.

⁵ For a summary, see BRECCIAROLI TABORELLI 2019, pp. 17-32 with updated bibliography.

Due to its widespread diffusion, several studies turned their attention on the presence or lack of shapes and decorations recognized as proper of Black-Gloss pottery⁶. In Sardinia, interesting phenomena of cultural interpolations are generated by the pre-existence of a strong Punic substratum which, starting from the 5th century BC, in contact with Greek and Roman culture, gives rise to original production results.

G.D.L., C.T.

2. FROM PUNIC BLACK-GLOSS TO ROMAN GRAY PASTE

A well-established tradition of studies on Punic Sardinia has shown that Attic Black-Gloss was used as an important part of the table service from the 5th century BC, and that it has increased its presence during the following century⁷. This work will quickly take steps right from this period, to highlight some trends that have had important and interesting developments in the Hellenistic period.

The widely attested shapes during the 4th century BC are mainly concentrated on the table service drinking vessels (bolsal and, to a lesser extent, *skyphoi*), on the multi-functional cups helpful to eating semi-liquid and semi-solid foods (incurving rim and outturned rim), flat shapes for solid foods (fish plate and saucer) and small bowls for condiment/sauces (mainly cups L. 21/25). From the end of the 4th century BC, the island began to produce pots inspired by and derived from some of the imported shapes, right now mentioned. These productions begin to be common during the

⁶ One of the most frequently discussed topics is that of the *symposium*.

⁷ TRONCHETTI 2012.

3rd century BC, when Attic imports cease, and continue tiredly until the first decades of the 2nd century BC⁸, when they are progressively supplanted by Italic importations and then, by pottery manufactured in Sardinian workshops that are inspired by the latter. During the 3rd century BC, the "imitation" products of the local Sardinian workshops concentrate only on some forms, with evidence more related to the Punic cultural tradition, and so for example bolsal and *skyphoi* are not manufactured; the repertoire focuses on the outturned rim and on the incurving rim cups (figs. 1.1-1.2), and in the latter, we note the marked tendency to increase the depth of the vase⁹. The L. 21/25 cups, fish plates and saucers (fig. 1.3) are also widely used. These Attic shapes are flanked by vases of local tradition (such as the cup with soft inflection point and, starting from the final decades of the 3rd century BC, the pateras with everted rim (Morel F 1300) of Italic derivation (fig. 1.4).

This Sardinian *facies* falls fully within the broader aspect of the western Punic Mediterranean, as was recently outlined in an overall study made by Josè Perez Ballester¹⁰.

A real break with the existing ceramic tradition occurs during the 2nd century BC, with the massive imports of campanian pottery, a phenomenon which, as is well known, affects the entire western Mediterranean basin. To this fact is related the so-called 'gray paste ware'¹¹, identified by Jean-Paul Morel as local-regional type production¹². This ceramic is a good part of the

⁸ DEL VAIS 2007; TRONCHETTI 2012.

⁹ For example, see TRONCHETTI 2001, tav. VI, 4, from Cagliari.

¹⁰ PÉREZ BALLESTER 2018.

¹¹ About this topic, see TRONCHETTI 2015, with updated bibliography and TRONCHETTI 2018, pp. 13-15.

¹² MOREL 1963, pp. 20-37; MOREL 1981, p. 50.

fine tableware in use from the 2nd century BC throughout the first Imperial Age and is spread, as well as in Sardinia, in many other countries of the Roman world, where it is equally recognized as local or regional pottery. As regards Sardinia, from the end of the 4th century BC, the technology of firing conditions in a reducing atmosphere is attested, but to a very limited extent and without the use of a gloss, that in some way reminds the painting of the vase; specifically, in late Punic age this type of skill is not stated. The change with the past is, therefore, quite clear, even if not absolute.

Besides the technique, a very strong factor of originality is the formal repertoire. Over the course of a few decades, the previous shapes almost completely disappear and new ones are introduced, derived directly from the Italic importations. Only the most sporadic fish plates and the patera Morel F 1300 seem to remain from the oldest kit. It will not be too risky to relate the introduction of this new repertoire derived from Italic pottery with the conspicuous presence of Italic people on the island, well attested by the archaeological documentation¹³.

The problem of the exact chronological classification of the birth of gray-paste ware is not easy to solve and some data, coming both from coastal urban centers and from more internal sites, are equally important (fig. 2). In this regard, a case of great importance can be constituted by a burial kit found inside a trench grave, unpublished and currently in course of studies, located in the rural Punic-Roman necropolis of Mitza de Siddi in Ortacesus (SU, fig. 2.4)¹⁴. The tomb, marked by the excavators as Tomb 36, contained

¹³ Suffice it to mention the two medium-Italic terraced sanctuaries of Cagliari and Sulci, and the documented studies of COLAVITTI 1999, ANGIOLILLO 2012 and IBBA 2015.

¹⁴ The archaeological dig, undertaken in 1995 following the accidental discovery of the site during the excavation for the positioning of water pipes, was conducted by the *Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici per le province di Cagliari e Oristano*, until 2005: COCCO

an articulated kit consisting of two cups, a gray fish plate, a saucer, a goblet, a jug, a *guttus*, a lamp and a coin (fig. 3). Focusing on just some of these items, we need to underline the coexistence, in a closed context, of traditional Punic vases (such as the fish plate in gray-paste) with the coin bearing the effigy of the three ears on the verso, dated on a numismatic basis between 241 and 238 BC. This datum in fact allows us to date probably the burial in the final decades of the 3rd century BC or a little further, and as already said, the fish plate is abandoned in Black-Gloss ceramics with an "international" spread around 150 BC and it is rarely reproduced in gray ceramic, which for obvious chronological disconnections, is not to be considered similar to the most common one of Roman age. However, since the gray paste is attested in very high quantities, both in the necropolis and in the town, both in urban and rural areas, the sporadic presence of the fish plate offers a good indication to place the early chronology of the production around the first half of the 2nd century BC or in the immediately preceding decades, as other closed sites seem to suggest. Also from Ortacesus, Tomb 53 has in fact returned a gray paste cup of the Morel F 2323 shape, in association with a narrow-walled mug Marabini XV, three bottle ointments and other vases, together with an axis dated 225-217 BC¹⁵. Another grave, related to the small rural necropolis, situated in the site of Prascocca in Villanovaforru (SU, fig. 2.3) still of the Punic-Roman age,

et alii 2009. During 2018 a new research project called *Ortacesus Sub Terris* was launched, with the dual objective of carrying out a complete study of the grave goods and performing archaeological surveys throughout the municipal area. The project is coordinated by the Chair of Classical Archeology of the University of Cagliari, in collaboration with the competent authority of the *Soprintendenza*, with the direction of Prof. Marco Giuman and coordination of field work entrusted to Dr. Ciro Parodo and Dr. Gianna De Luca: DE LUCA 2021.

¹⁵ COCCO *et alii* 2009, pp. 48-51.

appears to suggest similar considerations. In this grave, a cup Morel F 2323 is associated with an axis of Q. Marcius Libo (172-151 BC)¹⁶. As is well known, a coin in a burial kit is only a *terminus post quem*, but the set of data only briefly mentioned here, allows to imply the indicated chronological horizon for placing the beginning of production.

Other remarks in relation to the most ancient productions in Sardinian gray pottery can be taken for the patera Morel F 1300, manufactured in late-Punic Sardinian factories with the typical features of the "imitation" workshops of the 3rd century BC. A gray patera F 1313/1314 coming from the Punic and Roman settlement at the nuraghe S'Uraki of San Vero Milis (OR, fig. 2.1) offers the possibility of constructing hypotheses starting from decoration. The patera has a decoration engraved on the inner bottom, reproducing four palmettes grouped around a square with concave sides. A similar decoration was found on a fragment of a patera's bottom found in a Punic-Roman settlement near Carbonia in the Sulcis (SU, fig. 2.10)¹⁷, and another specimen, although not identical, is found on the base of a plate from the excavations of Sulci (Sant'Antioco, SU, fig. 2.9), with four palmettes grouped around a central rosette. This type of decoration is widespread in the Punic Black Gloss ware and this could be the indication of a continuity of the workshop; at least, in the absence of evidence, we are facing a *trait d'union* between the two productions.

Furthermore, another type of quite common decoration, played significantly on the shapes that can be hypothetically placed in the first

¹⁶ TRONCHETTI 1998, p. 373.

¹⁷ DE LUCA 2017, p. 80. In this work, the piece is included among the late Punic productions, but the author informed me that the technical characteristics are absolutely compatible with the gray paste; an autoptic exam confirmed this attribution.

phase of production, is given by the central rosette embossed. In the most common shapes between 1st century BC and 1st AD the only decoration, where present, is given by one or two impressed circles.

It is complex to define in a precise way the end of the fortune of the gray paste, having to keep distinct the problems of the end of production and that of the use of these ceramics. Unfortunately, we have no closed site dated in 2nd century BC with association of dating materials that allow us to have more detailed indications, while these abound for the medium and especially the final phase of production.

The great quantity of burial kits in which the gray paste is associated with well-dated forms of thin walls and Italic sigillata makes us sure of its strong and concrete vitality during the first decades of the 1st century AD at least, but there are situations that could indicate the extension of production even in the first part of the 2nd century AD.

For instance, the Tomb 48 C2 of Villasalto (SU, fig. 2.5)¹⁸, which belongs to a small rural burial ground dated between the 1st and 3rd century AD, contains a gray paste cup F 2567 associated with a pot similar to the Hayes 8 shape, that we could identify as an imitation product of the African Sigillata A. The shape of this pot doesn't go back to the first phase of production, and seems to be closer to the later, to which resemble for the angular profile of the strip under the edge; but, being an imitation, the comparison may not be stringent.

Another useful situation comes from Sant'Antioco, notably from the investigations led in the Roman settlement in the *Cronicario*¹⁹. Here, the

¹⁸ VENTURA 1990, p. 49.

¹⁹ TRONCHETTI 1988a.

SU270, which contained a series of vases resting on the floor almost intact, was interpreted as a layer of weathering of the raw bricks that constituted the high part of the walls. These items were related to thin walls, a patera in Italic Sigillata branded by C. ANNI and a large gray patera F 2286, which could easily be dated in the first half of the 1st century AD. Furthermore, a stratigraphic situation occurs to lead to suppose a later date for its formation. At a distance of no more than 6 meters from the compartment in which the SU270 is located, beyond a narrow road, another compartment showed an identical stratigraphic situation, with the floor covered by the decay of raw bricks, in which it was included, rested intact on the floor, an *askos* Hayes 123 in African Sigillata, which dates back to the beginning of the 2nd century AD. It seems difficult to think that an identical situation found in two different, but substantially close, stratigraphic basins is derived from two distinct phenomena repeated a few decades apart, and which have had the same result, namely non-reuse of the rooms. It has been convincingly believed to be able to propose that the event that led to the decay of the elevated housing took place in a single moment²⁰, dated by the *askos* in the early part of the 2nd century AD and that therefore the gray patera found in SU270 remained in use until on that date.

In conclusion, in confirmation of new data, the most reliable hypothesis is that the production of the gray paste lasts until the 70s of the 1st century AD and there is a subsequent period of continued use for a few decades.

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²⁰ The excavation was led by Paolo Bernardini. The considerations on the stratigraphic situation were discussed and finalized by Dr. Bernardini and by the writer at the time of the excavation.

3. LOCAL PRODUCTIONS AND “IMITATION” PHENOMENA: GRAY-PASTE CERAMIC

If it is possible to indicate the first half of the 2nd century BC as a chronological horizon in which the gray paste production begins in Sardinia, it is different to verify how and to what extent this pottery could help to distinguish any systems of “romanization”²¹. In this perspective, a key role is represented by a new repertoire of forms, which, as already mentioned, abandons the Punic models and now seems to be inspired by the Italic ones, with special reference to the Campanian B, A and C potteries. In fact, in many sites in Sardinia the most recurring shapes include the Morel cups F 2323, F 2567 (figs. 4.1 - 4.2), the F 1122 cups, the pateras of the Species F 2250, F 2280 and above all F 2270 (figs. 4.4 - 4.5), and the large bowls of the form F 2538 and *similis*²² (fig. 4.3).

The acquire of this new repertoire, in conjunction with the progress of the Roman conquest process, may be indicative of the transmission of new cultural and social systems, which manifest themselves through the material culture daily used, while a parallel food change, linked to the new forms adopted in the Roman age, cannot be demonstrated. It is interesting to note that the changeover of the shapes does not seem to vary the function

²¹ In the wake of the studies of J.-P. Morel, various researches related to very different geographical and cultural areas have shown how the gray paste phenomenon is linked to the progressive process of acquiring Roman *habitus*, although not yet specified as regards the identification of the places of manufacture and of the circulation routes of this tableware. In particular, the phenomenon is documented in various lands, of regional amplitude, in a large part of the Romanized world. For a summary, see last DE LUCA 2018b, pp. 45-47.

²² It is interesting to note that this repertoire largely corresponds to those found in many Mediterranean regions affected by the presence of this ceramic class. In this regard, see for examples: PRINCIPAL, SANMARTÌ 2007 for the city of *Pollentia*; YNTEMA 2005 for the *Apulia* region.

of the containers which, as in the Hellenistic age, continue to be set for the individual consumption of liquid or semi-liquid food for the cups and solid food for the dishes²³. However, an exception is the F 2538 bowls which, in consideration of the relevant dimensions documented in many cases, do not seem intended for individual consumption²⁴. At the same time, this change of repertoire, within the same function, undoubtedly has a meaning: in relation to the hypothesis that it indicates an occurred romanization of Sardinia, the maximum diffusion of the gray paste from the second half of the 1st century BC coincides with what can be obtained from the change in the structure of the island in the same period, which shows signs of a sort of transformation (although not very marked) compared to the previous period, where the ways of Punic presence in the territory had remained almost unchanged.

To better understand how the gray paste repertoires in the late Republican and early Imperial ages adapt to models linked to the Italic taste, a good example may be the examination of some contexts found during excavations conducted in southern Sardinia, in sites both urban and suburban. In fact, from a quick *résumé* practicable among the published data from different parts of the island and in many cases already discussed²⁵, it is observed with discrete ease, how this ceramic class is among the most

²³ However, it should be noted that during the 1st century AD, traces of a progressive increase in the use of the dishes to the detriment of the cups could be recognized, as a consequence of food changes that lead to a more substantial consumption of solid foods instead of semi-solid foods, such as traditional *pultes*, consumed in deep containers such as the cups: BATS 1988, pp. 71-75; PRINCIPAL 2006: 41-55; DE LUCA in press, including added bibliography.

²⁴ In the Italian peninsula, they are dated from the 3rd century BC on.

²⁵ MOREL 1963, pp. 20-37; MOREL 1981, p. 50; TRONCHETTI 1987; TRONCHETTI 1996a, pp. 32-34; TRONCHETTI 1998, pp. 373-375; TRONCHETTI 2017, pp. 73-74.

frequent and best documented. This can be seen, for example, in Bithia²⁶, Cagliari²⁷, Tharros²⁸ and, as a more observable case thanks to experience in the field, in Nora (figs. 2.8 - 2.6 - 2.2 - 2.7). The Punic-Roman city in fact, for several decades, has represented an important open-air research laboratory, in which the Missions of various Italian and foreign universities are working together²⁹, producing interesting results in defining the facies of the material culture attested. Thanks to more and less recent works, there is a good amount of data available, which allows us to verify that gray paste ceramic is the most abundant class in different parts of the city, in which circumscribable life phases have been recognized between the 1st century BC and the 1st AD. For example, the results of the analysis of the ceramic assemblies found during the excavations of the *Piccole Terme* district³⁰, the former military area³¹ and *Area A* of the city led to these same results. Specifically in the last quartier mentioned, the investigation of the environment 'a' had allowed to C. Tronchetti to identify the SU 77³², from which it was possible to define the final stages of gray paste production which, thanks to the examination of the materials found in the association, were active up to the third quarter of the 1st century AD³³. Still in Nora, to

²⁶ TRONCHETTI 1988b.

²⁷ LOI 2019, pp. 47-49.

²⁸ From the southern necropolis comes a good number of cups of the Series F 2323 and F 2567: DEL VAIS 1997, pp. 212-213.

²⁹ Archaeological research on the Nora site is carried out by the University of Cagliari, Genoa, Milan, Padua, with the support of the Municipality of Pula and the coordination of the Ministry of Heritage and Cultural Activities: BONETTO *et alii* 2018.

³⁰ COSENTINO 2018, pp. 35-38.

³¹ Within the former military area, the excavation of the 485 land plot of F. 390 of the Municipality of Pula is under concession at the University of Cagliari, under the direction of Marco Giuman and Romina Carboni: see lastly CARBONI, GIUMAN 2018.

³² TRONCHETTI 1996b.

³³ The analysis of fine tableware shows a majority of imported and local thin walls (51%), followed by the gray paste ware (28.60%), the Italic Sigillata (18%), the South Gallic Sigillata

the same chronological stages led the preliminary analysis of some areas of the excavation of the University of Cagliari in the southern quarter of the former Navy base³⁴. Here, the Alpha and Delta areas, relating respectively to housing phases of the 2nd-1st century BC and 1st century BC – 1st AD, have returned large quantities of gray paste pottery in combination with imported Black-Gloss, thin walls and Italic sigillata³⁵ (fig. 5). For example, from the Delta area, around 1000 fragments relate to Black-Gloss ceramics, among which there is a strong presence of gray paste materials, also with low fragmentation indices that allow to highlight very typical shapes of the class, such as the F 2323 cups and the F 2277 pateras (tab. 1). On the other hand, among the lesser known forms found in the Alfa area, the presence of some artefacts made in gray paste is documented as a plausible reproduction of models circulating in Sardinia in Italic Sigillata³⁶. This data, in addition to pushing the chronology for the circulation of the gray paste towards the 1st century AD further on, it also leads to the hypothesis that the gray ceramic realization of some of the most popular shapes may be used as *argumentum ex silentio* to understand how and to what extent this local production could actually represent Roman cultural content and messages. However, it is to be specified that this hypothesis is currently based on a few circumstantial evidences, completely lacking specific studies aimed at identifying the places of production and at the circulation

(0.25 %) and Black-Gloss ware (2.15%). It appears evident that the South-Gallic Sigillata is at the beginning of its attestation, while the Black-Gloss is clearly a residue. The context has as a later element a fragment of Tripolitanian 1 amphora, dating back to the beginning of the Flavian age: TRONCHETTI 1996b; TRONCHETTI 1998, pp. 378-381.

³⁴ SULIS 2016; DE LUCA 2018a; DE LUCA 2018b.

³⁵ ARCA *et alii*, pp. 95-106.

³⁶ DE LUCA 2018b.

dynamics of gray paste ceramic in Sardinia. These data would allow to observe the phenomenon of the use of this tableware in a more timely manner and could be interconnected with a more in-depth study of the methods of receiving and local processing of imported models, both in Black-Gloss and in Italic Sigillata. As has already been observed through the proposed cases³⁷, in addition to urban centers, even suburban sites, identified in Sardinia above all as burial sites, allow to observe a substantial homogeneity of ceramic forms in gray paste and to increase the wealth of available data, thanks to the better degree of conservation of the finds compared to housing sites. In addition to the previously mentioned forms, a single-handled bottle ointment is also widespread in the tombs, dating back to the 2nd century BC advanced, and broadens the spectrum of the use of gray paste tableware from the canteen to the toilet and contributes to qualifying this regional ceramic class as one of the most important, but still unused, markers of economic and cultural phenomena.

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³⁷ See previous paragraph.

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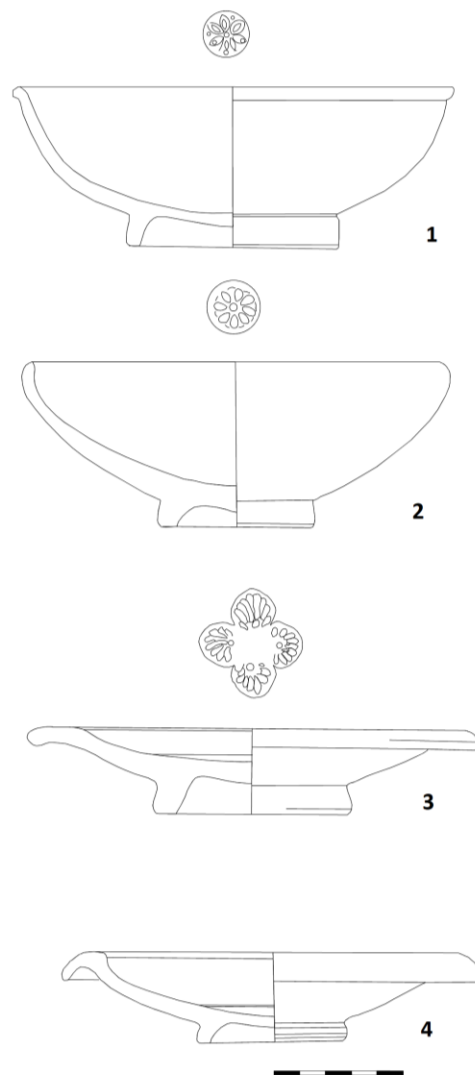


Fig. 1. Main Sardinian forms of Punic black-gloss imitation ceramics. 1: outturned rim cup; 2: incurving rim cup; 3: saucer with a decoration consisting in four palmettes grouped impressed; 4: patera (graphic design made by C. Tronchetti from specimens from Cagliari; reworking by G. De Luca).

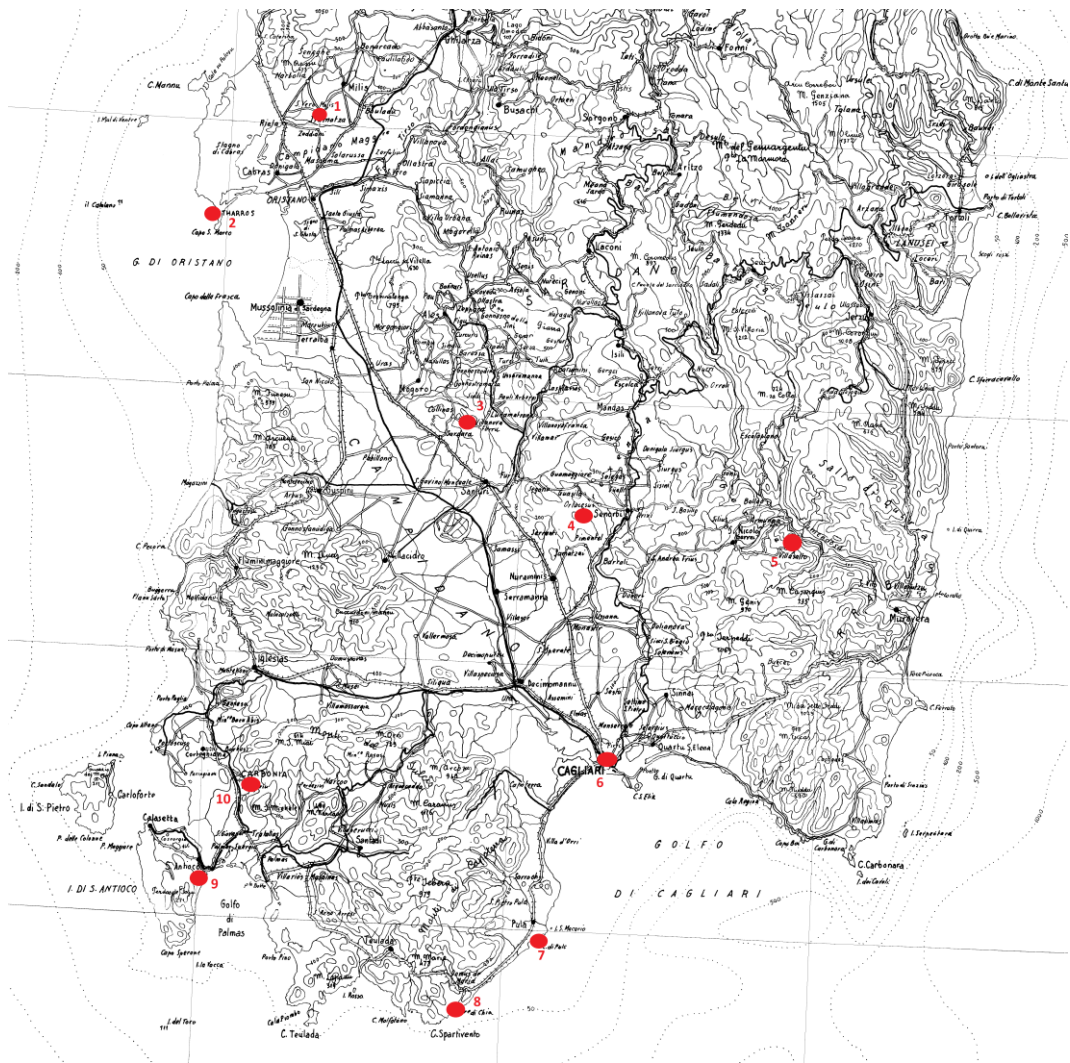


Fig. 2. Map of central-southern Sardinia with the localization of the sites named in the text. 1: S'Uraki, San Vero Milis (OR); 2: Tharros, San Giovanni di Sinis (OR); 3: Villanovaforru (SU); 4: Ortacesus (SU); 5: Villasalto (SU); 6: Cagliari; 7: Nora, Pula (CA); 8: Bithia, Chia (CA); 9: Sant'Antioco (SU); 10: Carbonia (SU). Map Istituto Geografico Militare, 1940 at a scale of 1:25.000 (reworking by G. De Luca).



Fig. 3. Necropolis of Mitza de Siddi in Ortacesus (SU). Funerary equipment of the Tomb 36 (photo credits *Ortacesus Sub Terris Project*, by permission of Soprintendenza A.B.A.P. per la città metropolitana di Cagliari e le provv. di Oristano e Sud Sardegna. Elaboration of G. De Luca).

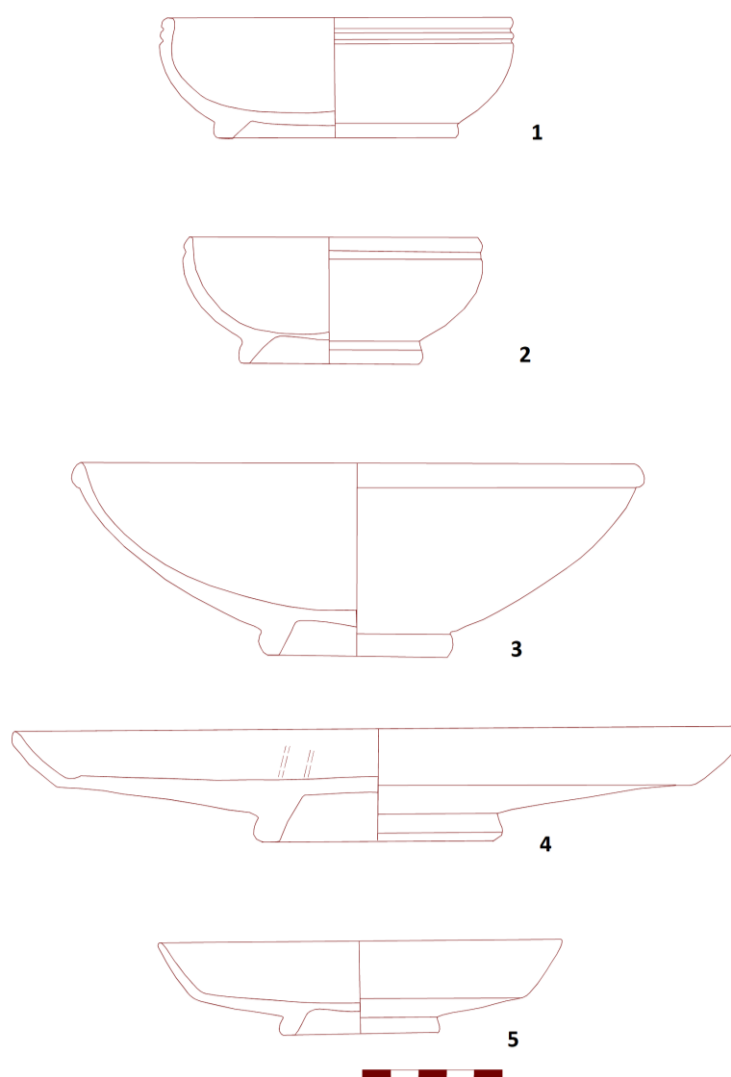


Fig. 4. Main Sardinian forms of Roman black-gloss imitation grey pottery. 1: Morel F 2323; 2: Morel F 2567; 3: Morel F 2538; 4: Morel F 2270; 5: Morel F 2280 (graphic design by G. De Luca).

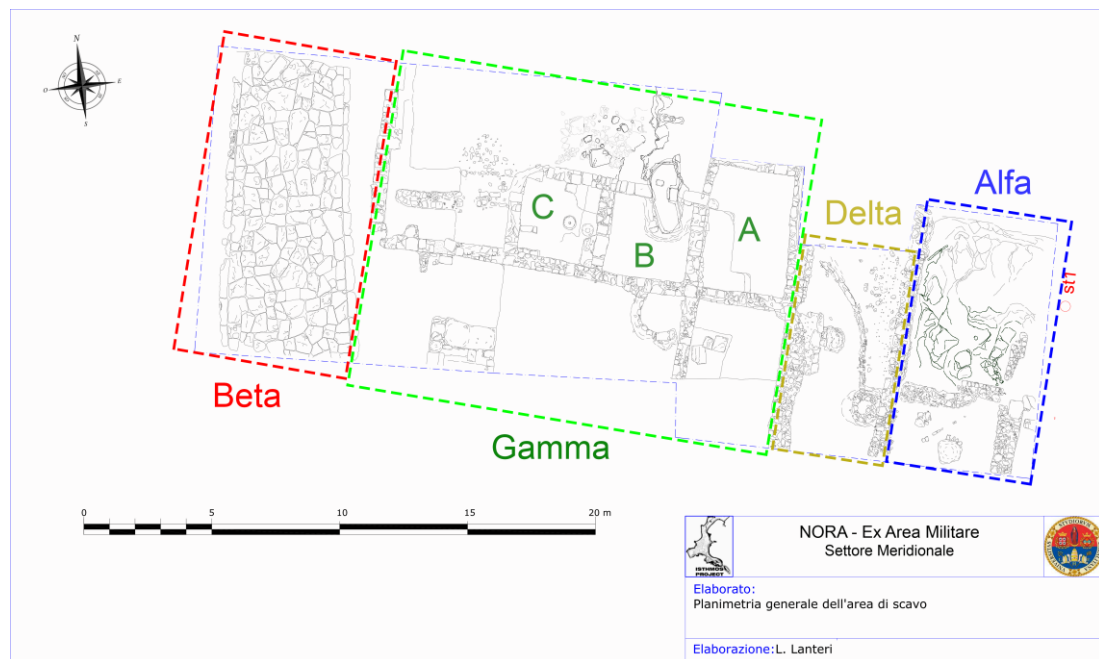
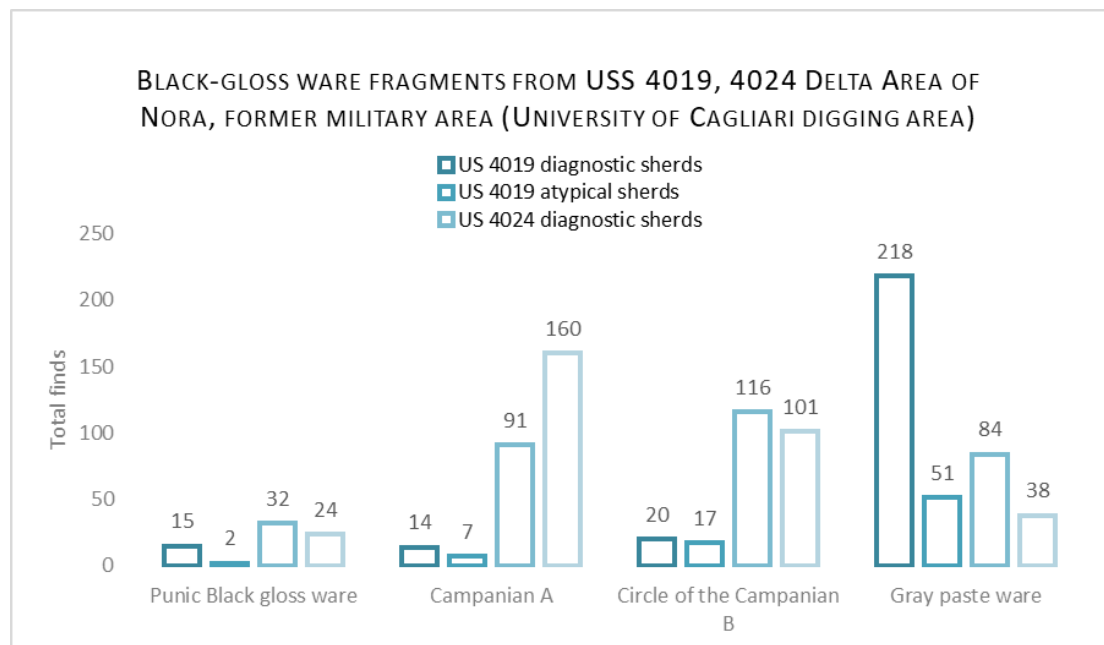


Fig. 5. Nora (Pula, CA). The southern area of the former military area: excavations of the University of Cagliari (ISTHMOS Project, graphic design by L. Lanteri).



Tab. 1. Nora (Pula, CA). Column chart with the percentage of all the Black Gloss ceramic classes found in the Delta area USS 4019, 4024 (elaboration of G. De Luca).