

This is the first page only. On how to acquire the full article please click this link.

Roman pottery production in central Tunisia

D. P. S. Peacock, F. Bejaoui and N. Ben Lazreg

INTRODUCTION

It has long been established that Tunisia was a major centre of the Roman ceramic industry and that certain products such as amphorae and African Red Slip ware were widely distributed in the Mediterranean region and sometimes beyond. In recent decades pottery has become extensively used as an index of economic interaction and as such it is important to know the source of a type as well as its date. In this, production sites are particularly important, for they furnish incontrovertible indications of origin.

Unfortunately, until recently very few kilns were known from Tunisia and of these only two (Henchir es Srira and El Mahrine) had been studied to anything approaching modern standards (Stern 1968, Mackensen 1985). In view of this, in 1984 the Institut National d'Archéologie et d'Art in Tunis and the Tunisia Committee of the British Academy established a joint project to locate and study Roman production sites in the field. The work was undertaken by the writers on behalf of their respective institutions. The programme commenced in the Sahel around the Roman towns of Sullectum and Lepti Minus and for a very modest outlay revealed some 14 new sites concerned with the production of amphorae. A report has been published, in which new data are presented, prefaced by a full discussion of the problem and the approaches adopted (Peacock, Bejaoui and Belazreg 1989). A major result was firm indications of a disruption in production during the early 5th c. as urban coastal centres gave way to amphora manufacture on rural inland estates.

The success of this preliminary campaign gave rise to a number of important questions: in particular, whether the pattern of amphora production was typical of other regions, and also the location of Red Slip ware production which, it has been supposed, was sited along the Tunisian coast.

We considered that these questions could best be addressed by examining a broad region, albeit more superficially. In consequence, the area chosen is encompassed by roughly a rectangle joining Sousse, Maktar, Sbeitla and La Chebba. More precisely, it is the region covered by sheets LIII to LVII, LXI to LXXIV, LXXVII to LXXXII, and LXXIV to XC of the 1:50,000 topographic survey of Tunisia. This is an area of nearly 20,000 square km. and obviously the detailed strategy of the first survey would be impossible. The region was sampled by searching the 1:50,000 maps for place names with the elements "chekaf", meaning "potsherd" and "guellal", "potter", in the hope that these would lead to the discovery of heaps of sherds indicative of the manufacture of ancient pottery. Enquiries were then made of local inhabitants with an intimate knowledge of the surrounding countryside. Of 12 localities targeted in this way, 7 proved positive and in 1 case (Aioune ech Chekaf on the southern shore of the Sebkhet Sidi el Hani), the initial clue led to the discovery of 4 new sites.

Fig.1 is a map of the region studied, showing the sites considered in this paper. The stippled areas indicate the region which we consider to have been tolerably well covered by our enquiries. It is abundantly evident that our map cannot be regarded as complete, and clearly more detailed studies are required preferably by those based permanently in the region. However, we may have located the largest and most important sites, and it is perhaps a reasonable sample on which to base broad discussion of ceramic production in central Tunisia.

The new evidence is presented in 3 sections:

1. the coastal zone, in which we made an attempt to pursue the theme of our work at Sullectum;
2. the Sebkhet Sidi el Hani region, where we discovered a group of amphora production sites similar to those in the coastal region; and
3. the interior, comprising 8 sites largely concerned with Red Slip manufacture.