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Campanian wine, Roman Britain and the third century A.D.

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Whereas the 1970s saw an apparent confirmation from archaeological evidence of a quantitative decline in Italian viticulture during the 1st c. A.D. and a progressive disappearance of Italian amphorae as long-distance commercial wine containers, the 1980s witnessed the identification of 'new' Italian amphora types which showed that wine was still being exported — though in lesser quantities and on a regional basis — into the 3rd c. and beyond. In an important paper, Panella (1989, 162) stated that "the so-called Empoli amphora, produced from Severan times in inland Etruria, constitutes, up to the end of the fourth century, the only remaining evidence for transportation of Italian wine in ceramic containers". New evidence is beginning to show that the story is probably much more complicated, and that certain ideas about Italy's economic decline will need to be reassessed. Through his work on papyri from Egypt, Rathbone (1983, 94) remarked that "documentary evidence from the III century A.D. is of particular interest because it puts a question mark against the growing view, based primarily on archaeological evidence from Italy, that Italian viticulture had suffered a terminal decline by roughly the mid-II century A.D., and that thereafter Italy, far from exporting wine, was importing it furiously from the western provinces".

The 'Italian view' is largely due to the great efforts of members of the Università di Roma, thanks to whom we possess the data-base from the Terme del Nuotatore at Ostia. For the last 20 years this information has been used principally to delineate a picture of the Italian economy through much of the imperial period. Yet the risk of using one site for the assessment of Italy's economy — no matter how fundamental Ostia may have been for the well-being of Rome, the main consumer-centre — is considerable. The risk may be exemplified. A number of production sites have recently been discovered for the late Roman amphora types known as Bii or LRA 1, principally along the Cilician coast and around the Bay of Iskenderun (Peacock and Williams 1986, class 44; Empereur and Picon 1989). Excavations at Caesarea Maritima, a major port only 300 km south of the production area of Bii, has shown that that form is represented by only 0.5% of the amphora fragments in the early 6th c., the time when this particular type appears to have reached its maximum diffusion (Riley 1979, 214). Yet at Berenice (Benghazi) 1500 km distant, and probably a less important city than Caesarea, Bii sherds constituting 36.5% are found in near-contemporary deposits (Riley 1979). These two percentages, taken at face value, could easily lead to quite different reconstructions of the patterns of production, marketing and consumption of the Bii type and its contents.

Until a representative sample of deposits in Italy has been excavated and published, we can produce only somewhat speculative models about the state of Italy's agricultural economy and its relationship with the provinces. Our models are still susceptible to significant changes of information, as will be shown below.

The amphora evidence

It has been shown that the wine amphora form Dressel 2-4, first produced in Italy c.50 B.C., continued to be manufactured in Italy into the later 2nd or early 3rd c. A.D. This can be demonstrated by stamped and unstamped examples of Dressel 2-4 found in a 3rd-c. context at a rural site on the Via Gabina east of Rome (Freed 1989),¹ now paralleled by finds from Saint-Romain-en-Gal (Desbat, Savay-Guerraz & Picon 1990).

1 Unstamped examples also appear from time to time in 3rd-c. contexts in Italy and elsewhere, but are often summarily dismissed as residual.