

Stamping Around in Italy: A New Arretine Stamp from the Villa del Vergigno

The Villa del Vergigno is an ancient Roman villa built originally in the first century BCE and occupied through the fifth century CE. Three seasons of excavation (2013-2015) have been undertaken by an American Field School to understand the nature and extent of agricultural and ceramic production at the site. During the 2013 season, two pieces of stamped terra sigillata were discovered and the area around them was investigated in the subsequent two seasons. The stamp that appears on these sherds does not match any in the current corpus of Arretine stamps (Oxe 1968). In this paper I will make the case that they can be attributed to the workshop of Gnaeus Ateius and will discuss what information this could reveal about trade, travel, and production in northern Italy during the early Roman Empire.

When discussing pottery production and trade in northern Italy there are several important points to consider about the Villa del Vergigno. Though this villa is not large, it was located in a geographically significant and advantageous location for long-distance trade. The site sits on the confluence of two rivers, the Vergigno and the Pesa, with the latter feeding into the Arno River. This location gave the Villa del Vergigno the ability to export inland as well as west to Pisa and the Tyrrhenian Sea. In terms of production, at least one of the kilns on the site was used for the creation of Lamboglia 2 wine amphorae, a type previously thought to have been produced only along the Adriatic Sea (Lindhagan 2009; Peacock and Williams 1986). This shows that the villa was producing for and engaged in long-distance trade.

At the time this villa was active, terra sigillata, a Roman fine ware, was being extensively produced and traded. Terra sigillata was originally produced in Arretium (modern Arezzo) in northern Tuscany during the 1st century BCE and CE before a high demand, notably in the northern provinces, caused production centers to expand throughout the empire, primarily in

southern Gaul (Kenrick 1993). The two pieces of stamped terra sigillata from the Villa del Vergigno were uncovered in a waste area adjacent to a kiln that was discovered in the same season. Each stamp is the letters “AT” in a rectangular frame with rounded corners. The stratigraphic unit in which both were discovered has been dated to the 1st century CE. In addition, stamps placed in a rectangle were most common during the early 1st century CE (Fulle 1997). This allows the possible source of the stamp to be narrowed to those potters and workshops active during this time.

One of the most prolific and widely traded masters of terra sigillata at this time was Gnaeus Ateius. His workshops were active starting around 25 BCE with the first in Arretium, the second at the mouth of the Arno near Pisa, and the third at Lyon in France (Kenrick 1993). His basic stamp was “ATEIVS” and as his influence expanded, due in no small part to his 23 identified assistants, variations on this stamp appeared (Oxe 1968). It is likely from trade with one of these workshops, or possibly during the travel from Arretium to Pisa, that the Villa del Vergigno acquired these two pieces of stamped pottery.

Consequently, the possible routes that this stamp followed are important for tracing the spread of this pottery type and the dispersion of the potter’s skills and workshops. These stamps followed one of two likely routes to get to the Villa del Vergigno: either using the Arno River to trade with the factory near Pisa or moving north using roads from Arretium (Kenrick 1993). Determining these routes and the types of goods they carried will help us understand the prosperity of the region and its function in the larger Roman economy. In particular, these realizations will help us to grasp the effects of the region’s settlement by veterans of Sulla’s legions. The identification of this stamp as belonging to the workshop of Ateius will lead to a

better comprehension of trade and the role of villas in both the region and in the Empire as a whole.

Bibliography

- Fulle, Gunnar. 1997. "The Internal Organization of the Arretine Terra Sigillata Industry: Problems of Evidence and Interpretation". *Journal of Roman Studies* 87:111-115
- Hayes, John W. 1997. *Handbook of Mediterranean Roman Pottery*. University of Oklahoma Press: Norman.
- Kenrick, Philip. 1993 "Italian Terra Sigillata: A Sophisticated Roman Industry". *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 12(2):235-242
- Lindhagen, A. 2009. "The transport amphoras Lamboglia 2 and Dressel 6A: a central Dalmatian origin?" *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 22: 83-108.
- Oxe, August. Ed Comfort, Howard. 1968 *Corpus Vasorum Arretinorum*. Bonn, Habelt Press
- Peacock, D.P.S. and D.F. Williams. 1986. *Amphorae and the Roman economy: an introductory guide*. Longman: London.