

Re-examination and Contextualization of Late Roman Jewish Finds on the Island of Lipari, Italy

Housed in the regional archaeological museum for the Aeolian Islands are two objects displayed from the Jewish hypogeum on Lipari, one amphora and one tombstone lid incised with a seven-branched menorah. While these objects are among the few related to the Late Roman period, there is no context offered about why these objects were chosen for display beyond the assumption that the presence of Jews or even a small Jewish community seems out-of-place on this tiny island. Previous work for the Aeolian Islands has been focused predominantly on the Bronze Age settlements and their connections with Italy and the Aegean world, but current excavations at San Vincenzo, Stromboli, one of the smaller islands, have initiated a new comprehensive study for the Aeolian Islands during the Late Roman Period. Beyond the original excavation reports (Bernabo Brea 1994) and conference proceedings that dealt with predominantly the Medieval periods (Vanaria 2002), there has been no attempt to address the Late Roman period generally or to look further at these two objects. This paper seeks to contextualize the Jewish objects and look at them in light of the new study of Late Roman connectivity for the Aeolian Islands. By placing the two objects in their context of the broader Jewish community, they can be used as a case study for connectivity for the islands with the rest of the Mediterranean.

The Aeolian Islands are a small volcanic archipelago in the South Tyrrhenian Sea, with Lipari as the largest and with most human activity. Although the islands were not ideal for settlement in antiquity as they were devoid of sources of water and their volcanoes were active, they were home to several periods of occupation beginning as early as the Neolithic period. Their location just north of the Straits of Messina provided a strategic location for monitoring and interacting with ships crossing through that route. The islands flourished in both the Bronze Age

and Greek periods, which have been the focus of past archaeological works on the Aeolian Islands. Archaeological evidence, however, points to continued utilization of islands during the Roman and Late Roman periods, and only recently have these phases been seriously undertaken.

Ceramics thus far have been the primary objects studied for the Late Roman period on the Aeolian Islands. The museum offers only a few examples, while excavations at Stromboli have yielded some others. While the ceramic evidence is limited, it shows that vessels range in origin from Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, and southern France, indicating that this island group was connected to the rest of the Mediterranean. When considering the potential origin locations for the Jewish objects, this adds yet another potential layer of connectivity. Thus, through this analysis, I will demonstrate that while the Jewish finds in the museum are interesting, they are not necessarily unique, but rather part of the widely connected Mediterranean world during the Late Roman period.

Bibliography

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