

Ulrike Ehmig, **Die römischen Amphoren im Umland von Mainz**. Frankfurter Archäologische Schriften, Band 5. Publisher Dr. Ludwig Reichert, Wiesbaden 2007. 357 pages, 104 plates.

The volume presents Roman amphorae from the regions surrounding ancient Mogontiacum, modern Mayence. The author is well known to the scientific audience in this field, as she has already published a profound study on the containers from the capital of the upper Germania: *Die römischen Amphoren aus Mainz* (Möhnesee 2004). More than nine thousand amphorae were studied, coming from selected sites in

Rhenish Hesse, South Hesse and the frontier area north of the River Main. Doctor Ehmig carried out the research thanks to a grant by the German Science Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). The archaeological material comes from a variety of sites, such as *civitas* capitals (Wiesbaden, Worms, Hedderheim, Dieburg), forts and related settlements (Rödgen, Höchst, Hofheim, Mayence-Kastel, Alzey, Gernsheim, Groß-Gerau, Hanau, Heldenbergen, Grosskrotzenburg, Altenstadt, Kleiner Feldberg, Holzhausen), rural settlements among others. Overall, seven thousand five hundred amphorae from seventeen sites are presented and compared.

At first, the analysis of imported Mediterranean ware led the author to consider that it was not possible to differentiate patterns of consumption in relation to different types of sites, between civilian and military ones, with the exception of the high proportion of wine amphorae found in Roman *villae rusticae*. However, it was possible to establish that far fewer amphorae for fish sauce and olives are found in complexes from outlying areas rather than at the central site of Mayence. The author does not try to explain the observed differences in consumption patterns and this is explained by two different features in her analysis: the lack of historical and anthropological interpretive models and the disregard for the information from the producing areas in the Mediterranean.

There is no direct access to the past, and the only way to explain data, archaeological or otherwise, is to use an interpretive model. The author does not produce anyone as such and directly rejects historical and anthropological ones, championed by a host of scholars in different countries, even though Ehmig centres her attack toward José Remesal and his followers. Remesal established a series of interpretive procedures grounded on a historical approach, linking archaeological, literary and epigraphic evidence, in order to propose a more articulate understanding of the ancient supply. Several other authors projected a variety of historical approaches. Others added to this kind of access an anthropological one, considering identity issues, in line with social theory discussions in the last twenty years or so. In this context, olive oil consumption has been linked to market and military supply, *annona*, *societates mercatorum*, and beyond. The use of such items as olive oil, wine or fish sauce has been taken as a part of much broader identity issues, as cultural pledges. Ehmig pays no attention to theoretical models, does not study literary and epigraphic evidence. Unsurprisingly, the author stresses the supposed limitations in the interpretations of Roman amphorae and emphasizes that no conclusions are possible about the developments of potteries, the volume of production or the intensity and direction of trade. There is no comprehensive study of the producing areas, no map of the potteries manufacturing the imported amphorae included in the volume. The absence of theory explains the lack of interpretation and this ultimately explains why meaning is often uncertain

(»Deutung eindeutig«, p. 73). This is crystal clear in the study of the so-called Dressel 20 imitations. With no anthropological or historical interpretive model in mind, the author considers those amphorae could be used for wine, beer or even be sold as empty vessels.

The overall emphasis is to prove that amphorae cannot be used as an indicator for consumption of foodstuffs. However, painted inscription mentioning olives (»*olivae*«; *olivae*; »*oliva picena*«, plate 103) lead the author to question whether eating habits were different in the provincial capitals and the legionary fortresses on the one hand and the rural surroundings on the other. What are the evidences for the supposed similar consumption patterns in capitals, military sites and the countryside? In the absence of an anthropological interpretive model explaining this counterintuitive suggestion, the reader is left guessing how a few inscriptions referring to olives can be considered so informative. It is also difficult to conciliate her claim that few epigraphic evidence is enough, whilst she denies amphora stamps in the hundreds, studied as part of a historical and anthropological approach, can produce valid interpretations.

In chapter six, a series of considerations on the study of amphora stamps from Southern Spain is in a way a tribute to the scholarly endeavor, since the 1980s, of such authors as Michel Ponsich, Emilio Rodríguez-Almeida and José Remesal, whose reasoning has been increasingly (»mehr und mehr«, p. 87) incorporated by those studying consumption patterns in the Roman world. In the absence of historical and anthropological models, the author prefers to use an axiomatic vocabulary, using such adjectives as »false« archaeological premises and such nouns as »deficits«, to refer to a plethora of scholarly studies focussing on consumption and supply in the Roman Empire. Contrary to those studies, the author does not propose any interpretive model and rather prefers to stress the supposed limitations in the analysis of Roman amphorae from settlement contexts. The apodictic tone pervades the whole volume, complementing the lack of historical and anthropological models. As warned Thomas Aquinas, the argument from authority is always the weakest.

Unlike the author though, I think it is important to acknowledge the contributions and merits of the endeavour of others, and this volume is no exception. First and foremost, the collection of archaeological material from the area around Mayence is praiseworthy, as are the very useful drawings of hundreds of amphorae, stamps, painted inscriptions and graffiti. The analysis of remains of pitch and lime provide indications about the primary and secondary use of amphorae. Gas chromatography analyses contribute to a better understanding of production and preparation of amphorae before they were filled. Overall, the volume is a useful collection of amphorae from the Mayence hinterland.