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Portoscuso-Type Amphorae as an Indicator of a Commercial Circuit

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Abstract

The Portoscuso-type amphorae, identified for the first time in 1990 when the necropolis of San Giorgio was discovered, testify to a Phoenician presence in southwestern Sardinia starting from the eighth century B.C. This type of amphora is similar to the T-3.1.1.1. classification made by Ramon Torres and to the B2 described by Bartoloni. A new approach based on ceramic paste analysis through macrophotography will be necessary to better identify this pottery type and outline with more precision one of the commercial circuits in the Mediterranean during the eighth century BC.

Keywords

Sardinia, Portoscuso-type amphorae, Ceramic paste, Macrophotography, Commercial circuit, Mediterranean eighth century BC trade.

Introduction

In the past, studies related to trade in antiquity often focused on what was imported and exported, with less emphasis on how these transactions took place (Bartoloni, 1988: 15). This trend is also evident in the tendency to associate a specific ceramic type with a particular product. While transport containers owe their characteristics to the goods they were designed to hold, it's essential to remember that their form is greatly influenced by the cargo space of the ship in which they were to be accommodated. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how this trade was conducted, who produced the goods, the various associated reasons, and, consequently, the cultural context in which they took shape.

This work is motivated by the belief that examining a particular type of amphora with a combination of all of these factors allows one, in a broad sense, to better understand/witness the past of an area. Building on this premise, the main evidence has been collected and the main characteristics of the Sulcis-produced Protoscuso-type amphorae have been identified in order to ask broad-ranging questions and formulate initial hypotheses.

In the first section, the focus is on the Sulcis context which includes the earliest successful Phoenician settlements as well as later Punic influences. The discussion then moves to a brief analysis of the necropolis of San Giorgio di Portoscuso, which lends its name to the amphora type under examination. The morphology and distribution of Portoscuso-type amphorae are explored in the second section, while in the third section the focus will be on ceramic paste analysis conducted through macrophotography. Finally, the distribution area of the Portoscuso-type amphorae and their hypothetical filling will be examined.

The Archaeological Context



Figure 1 South Sardinia, area of Portoscuso-type amphorae production. (Dr. Sara Porru)

Portoscuso-type amphorae were first identified among the finds from the necropolis of San Giorgio di Portoscuso (Fig.1). The necropolis of San Giorgio, as well as the general region of Portoscuso, are part of the broader area of Sulcis, characterized by an early Phoenician presence. In this region, we recognise some of the earliest layers attesting to Phoenician occupation on the island of Sardinia.

The southwest of Sardinia, with its extensive wetlands, including the Boi Cerbus lagoon, and the islands of Sant'Antioco and San Pietro, presents itself as a geomorphologically strategic territory resembling Phoenician landscapes in the Eastern Mediterranean (Fletcher, 2006: 175). Fertile lands, abundant fisheries (Bartoloni and Guirguis, 2017: 15–19), and strategic harbors undoubtedly contributed to the foundation of Phoenician settlements such as Sulky, one of the earliest Phoenician colonies in the Western Mediterranean (Bondi et al., 2009: 100). Monte Sirai, and the settlement likely associated with the necropolis of San Giorgio, which includes burial T10 (Fig.2), dates back to the mid-eighth-century BC, making it one of the oldest on the island (Finocchi, 2009: 381).



Figure 2 Amphora from burial T10. (Dr. Sara Porru)

Within this wealth of evidence of a Phoenician presence in Sulcis, we can now recognize a common thread determined by the material culture that often recurs in various contexts (Pompianu, 2010: 6–12). This material culture testifies to the presence of a subregional ceramic style within the broader ceramic region that we can identify with Sardinia itself (Guirguis, 2010: 173–174).

Necropoli of San Giorgio - Portoscuso

The small necropolis of San Giorgio of Portoscuso, with its eleven burials (Guirguis, 2012: 56), was accidentally discovered in 1990 during construction work in the southern area of the industrial complex of Portovesme (Bernardini et al., 1997: 19). The archaeological evidence, promptly investigated by the Soprintendenza dei Beni Archeologici (Fletcher, 2006: 174–175), emerged during the excavation of a dune (Guirguis, 2012: 56–57).

For the small burial ground under analysis, a nearby settlement somewhere between Portovesme and Porto Sa Linna can be hypothesized, which is an area that currently extends over much of the industrial complex and where, some time ago, a structure with possible residential use (Finocchi, 2009: 380) was found. This structure can be hypothetically associated with the ancient occupation of the area (Finocchi, 2009: 380). In the past, this geographical area was characterized by several watercourses, giving the area a distinctly lagoon-like appearance. This includes the Boi Cerbus lagoon, which must have extended further north at that time (Fletcher, 2006: 175) and the marshy area of Su Stangioni (Fletcher, 2006: 175).

The burials found in the necropolis of San Giorgio bear witness to the exclusive use of the secondary incineration ritual, with the deceased placed inside stone cists (Finocchi, 2009) or in transport amphorae, which, in turn, were by squared sandstone slabs (Bondi et al., 2009: 418). The grave goods, often composed of two ritual jugs placed next to keeled cups (Guirguis, 2012: 57), could be arranged outside or inside the stone cists, finding significant parallels with other Sulcis contexts where the single-handled pot, also made of clay, is recorded in some of the graves of this burial ground.

The presence of wine amphorae used as urns associated with drinking vessels (Guirguis, 2017: 361) and the discovery of artifacts such as an iron lance point and heel lead us to hypothesize that a funerary custom for this diachronically compact necropolis seeks to “heroize” the deceased through the ritual of feasting and wine drinking. We can assume that the community to which these deceased belonged, who were probably of aristocratic status, had a heroic conception of life, which was manifested through the consumption of wine and the practice of incineration in amphorae (Bernardini, 2004: 131–135), both of which are reminiscent of the traditional and ancient funeral banquets (*marzeah*) of Eastern origin (Guirguis, 2012: 57).

Another noteworthy presence is the discovery of two handled pots with brown clay rich in quartz inclusions, typical of Nuragic pots. Considering that the excavation did not yield other materials belonging to this culture or other clearly prehistoric or protohistoric evidence, this find is quite significant. It is not entirely unlikely that, with the perspective of at least an initial coexistence and integration of different cultures, some deceased individuals in the necropolis of San Giorgio around 750 BC were placed in containers such as Nuragic pots as funerary urns (Bernardini, 2000: 36).

Portoscuso-Type Amphorae

Although trade was practiced long before the production of fixed transport containers, these containers are now an important guide for us, allowing not only the reconstruction of specific trade circuits but also insights into the integration of a particular territory into these circuits (Bartoloni, 1988: 15–17). Portoscuso-type amphorae, from this perspective, speak to us about the commercial vocation of Sulcis, since it is the region where they are produced and widely attested.

The essential factor allowing us to hypothesize their production in Sulcis is primarily the clay mixture, which appears “[...] rojo rosado fuerte por el interior y marrón anaranjado en la cara externa. Presencia de minerales blancos, posiblemente calcite [...]”,¹ characteristics found in the clays of undeniably Sardinian amphorae but of a later period (Torres, 2000: 284–285).

¹ 1 The translation of Ramon Torres’ citation is: Deep pink on the interior and orange-brown on the outer surface. Presence of white minerals, possibly calcite.

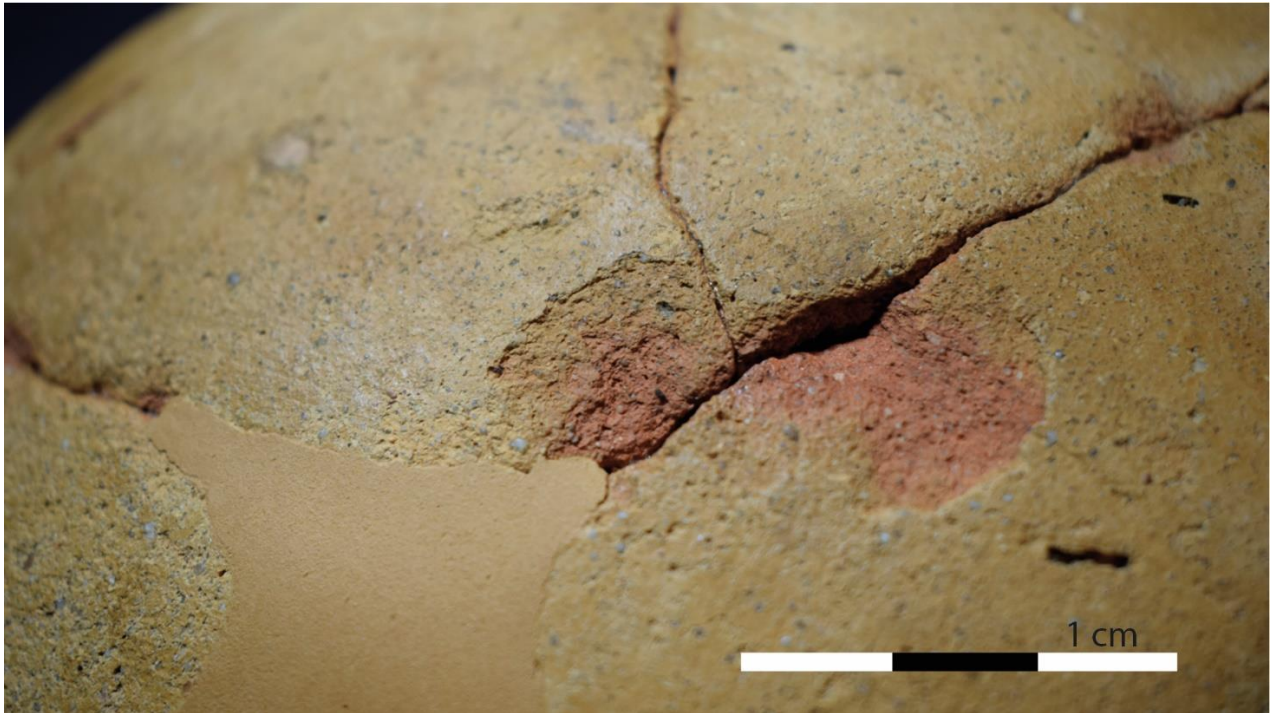


Figure 3 Border profile of Portoscuso-type amphorae. (Dr. Sara Porru)

Morphologically, Portoscuso-type amphorae are very similar to T-3.1.1.1. in the classification by Ramon Torres (Torres, 1995: 180–182) and B2 as described by Bartoloni (Bartoloni, 1988). Just like B2 amphorae, we encounter a sub-ellipsoidal amphora from the eighth century BC with a capacity of around 20 liters and two small handles, which are attached above the shoulder and at the body where it is widest. A distinctive element is the shape of the rim, which is straight on the inside and slightly shaped on the outside, along with an external groove, almost hinting at a short neck. It is worth noting that even for B2 amphorae, which have a rounded rim, an occasional groove under the rim is reported, which is also sometimes interpreted as an embryonic neck (Bartoloni, 1988: 33). Therefore, we believe that these subtle differences have led to the classification of many fragments of Portoscuso-type amphorae as B2 or T-3.1.1.1 (Fig.3).

Furthermore, as Bartoloni points out, “[...] è da ritenere che le anfore fenicie di Sardegna, classificate sempre con la sigla B2, appartengano a una forma che precede di qualche decennio quella attribuita a Cartagine, che, del resto, è anch’essa testimoniata in terra sarda. In conclusione, il vecchio tipo B2 sarà da dividere in due diversi tipi sfalsati cronologicamente. Quindi si avranno il primo, più antico, presente a San Giorgio, a Sant’Imbenia e a Sulcis, classificabile con la sigla B0 [...] e il secondo, leggermente più tardo, presente tra l’altro a Cartagine, Pithekoussai e a Sulcis, inquadrabile invece nella forma 3.1.1.1. di Juan Ramon.”² (Fig.4) (Finocchi, 2009: 381).

² The translation of Bartoloni’s citation is: It is to be considered that the Phoenician amphorae from Sardinia, always classified under the code B2, may belong to a form that predates by a few decades the one attributed to Carthage, which, moreover, is also attested in Sardinian territory. In conclusion, the old B2 type will need to be divided into two chronologically staggered types. Therefore, there will be the first, older type found in San Giorgio, Sant’Imbenia, and Sulcis, classifiable under the code B0 [...], and the second, slightly later type, found among other places in Carthage, Pithekoussai, and Sulcis, instead falling under the category 3.1.1.1. as defined by Juan Ramon.

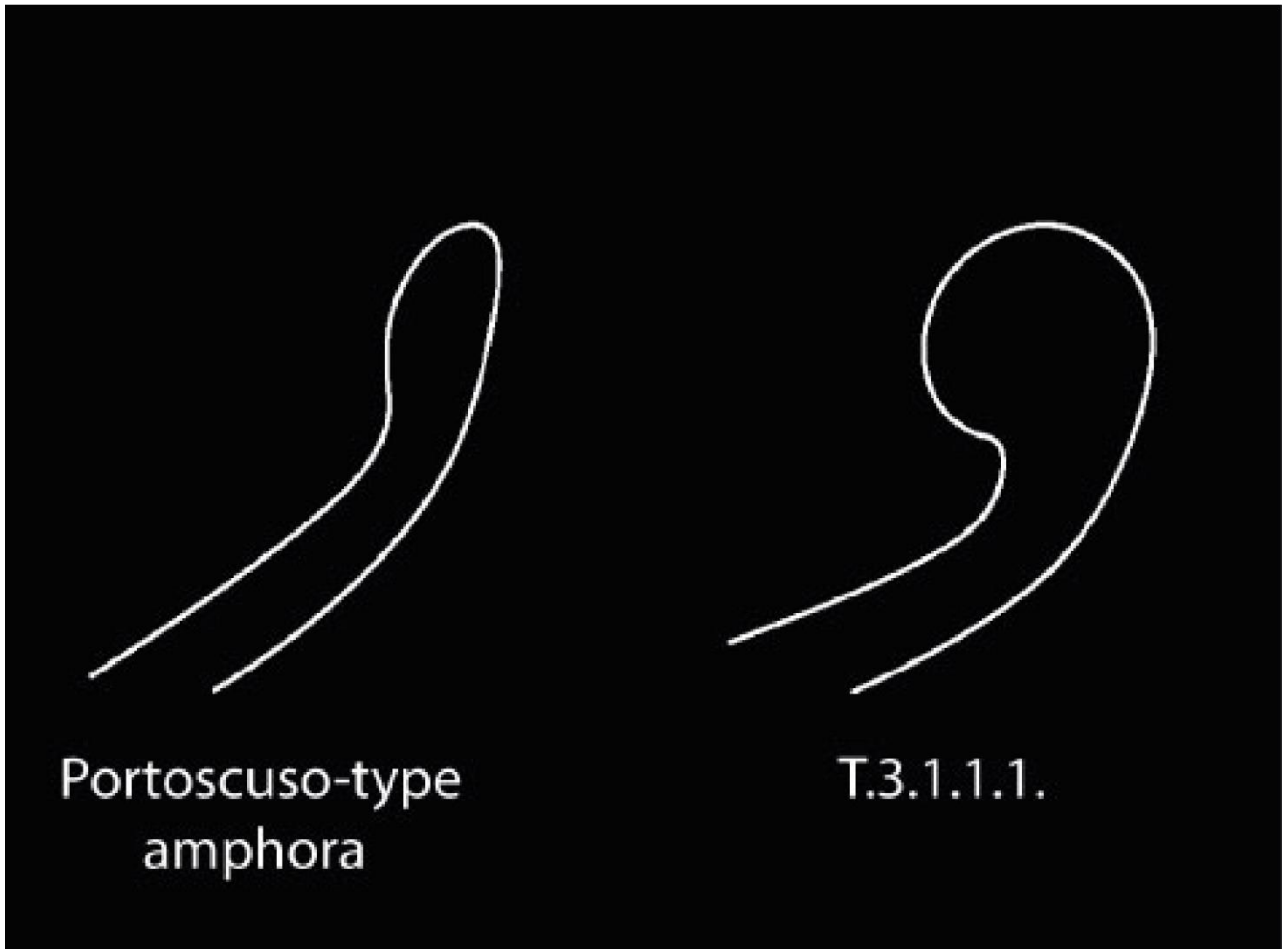


Figure 4 Detail of amphora from burial T10. (Dr. Sara Porru)

Ceramic Paste Analysis

Only a more accurate study of the ceramic paste, carried out through the use of macrophotography on the specimens found in the site of San Giorgio in Portoscuo, as a non-invasive analysis, can be decisive for a more precise recognition of this ceramic class.

The goal of analyzing the ceramic paste of an amphora fragment that came from San Giorgio's site is to try to outline a typology and give a specific method to identify this kind of amphora in the future (Vidale, 2007). Macrophotography was done on a small number of pottery samples from the same archaeological context, which will be useful in defining the subregional pottery from the lowlands of Sulcis. The parameters that will be used are the color of the paste, the dimensions, the quantity, and the shape of the vacuoles, as well as the inclusions used in the ceramic paste (Levi, 2010).

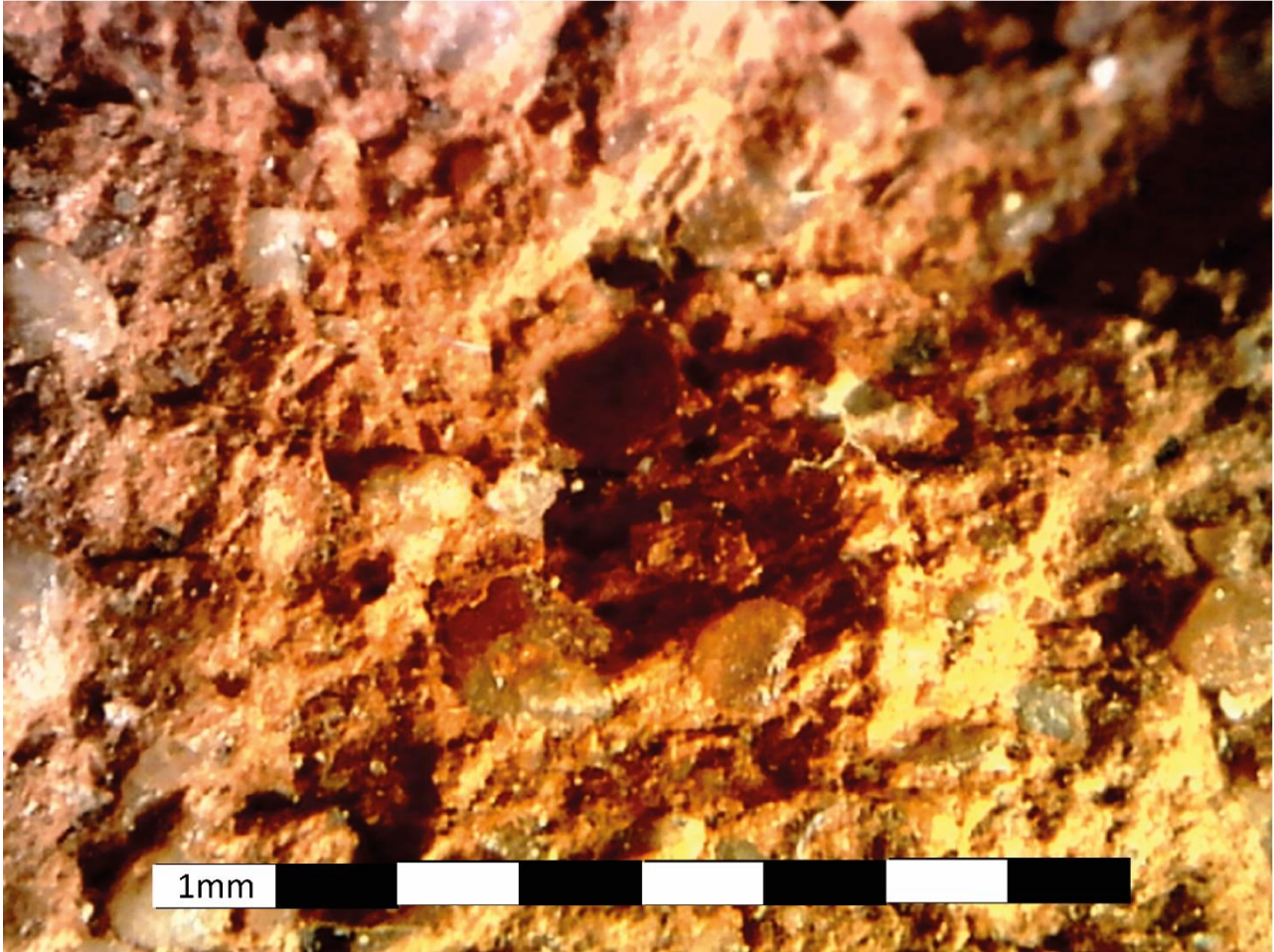
Amphora T10 Ceramic Paste

Figure 5 Macrophotography of ceramic paste of amphora from burial T10. (Dr. Sara Porru)

The amphora belonging to burial T10 presents a ceramic paste matrix characterized by a bichromatic clay-like component, taking on an external color of 10YR8/6 and an internal color of 10R 6/6.

The paste is distinguished by the presence of slightly oriented vacuoles, which can be attributed to the use of a slow wheel, and numerous homogeneous inclusions in terms of lithic type, color, morphology, and size (around 1 mm in diameter). In the absence of systematic studies on Sulcis clays, it seems appropriate to focus on siliceous inclusions, with a typical oblong shape, which is reminiscent of sandy accumulations of aeolian-marine origin, the dunes, abundant in the Sulcis region (Fig.5).

Dispersal Area

The specimens and fragments of Sulcis-produced Portoscuso-type amphorae mostly come from the necropolis of San Giorgio and Sulky, where a miniature amphora with the same characteristics was also found. Other contexts where fragments belonging to this amphora type have been identified include Monte Sirai and the more distant Nora. However, these amphorae are not exclusive to the Sardinian context, as evidenced by the specimen found at the San Rocchino site, the late eighth-century BC amphora from tomb 15 of Castel di Decima, and a sporadic example of a rim, with the same characteristics, preserved at the National Archaeological Museum of Viterbo (Fig 6).

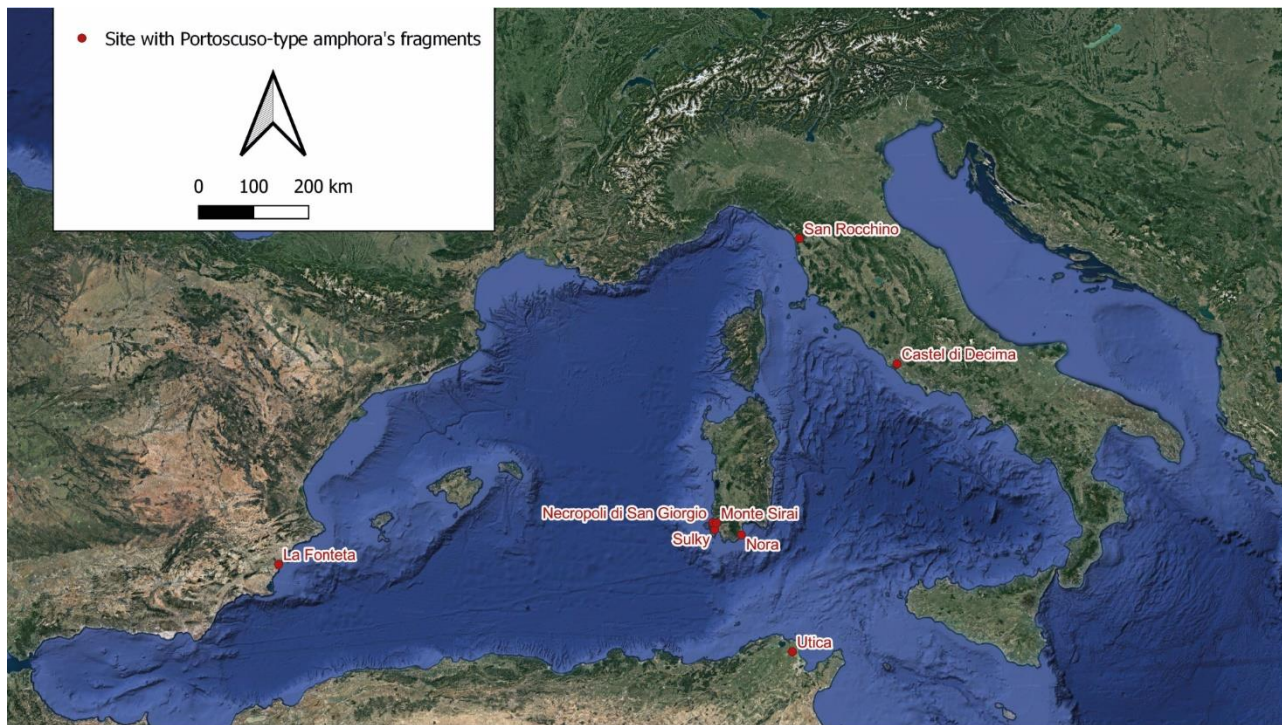


Figure 6 Dispersal area of Portoscuso-type amphorae. (Dr. Sara Porru)

Another interesting discovery is a fragment of a rim of a Portoscuso-type amphora dating back to the third phase of Utica's habitation. In this phase, fragments of Sant'Imbenia-type amphorae (Ben Jerbania, 2020: 40), also of Sardinian production but related to the northwest of the island, have not been identified. In the same horizon we have one fragment of Portoscuso-type amphorae in La Fonteta, Spain (González Prats, 2011). These finds lead us to hypothesize that Phoenician settlements in southwestern Sardinia were able to culturally influence orientализing Etruria and be an integral part of commercial circuits with the Tyrrhenian (Finocchi, 2009: 381) area and North Africa.

It is worth noting that in some cases, the amphorae found in the necropolis of San Giorgio di Portoscuso are recorded as belonging to type B2 or T-3.1.1.1. (Finocchi, 2009: 380), and, consequently, many amphorae found elsewhere and classified under these two types might actually belong to the Portoscuso-type. This possibility raises the prospect that Portoscuso-type amphorae may be present in many other Mediterranean sites, suggesting that the commercial networks involving southwestern Sardinia were broader than we currently believe.

Hypothetical Contents of the Amphorae

The Portoscuso-type amphorae emerge as one of the main sources of information on the commercial economy of southwestern Sardinia, exporting its products overseas. This amphorae production, emphasizing the existence of a Sulcis ceramic subregion, is what remains of the commercial drive of an area that evidently produced a surplus that was big enough for export (Guirguis, 2010: 173–174). The production area of these containers was indeed rich in natural resources that could be exploited both for the needs of the local population and in a commercial context (Guirguis, 2010: 177–178). It is worth noting the strong viticulture focus in Sulcis, traceable back to the earliest phases of Phoenician colonization (eighth to seventh century BC), a production likely connected to viticulture and winemaking practices carried out not only in the same areas but also by the Nuragic civilization. This productive activity, closely linked to the ritual consumption of wine in funerary banquets and a heroic conception of life, which are closely reflected in the artifacts of the necropolis of San Giorgio di

Portoscuso and those of Bithia, likely manifested itself early on in a commercial context (Botto, 2004: 17–18).

Although the commercialization of wine seems plausible, given the morphology of the containers in question, it cannot be excluded that this type of amphora could have been used to contain and transport other products abundant in Sulcis.

In the economy of that era, as well as the settlements in close proximity to the mines in Iglesias, they all must have contributed significantly. We have evidence of their exploitation from at least the Punic period (Lilliu, 1986: 15). It's worth mentioning that a Sant'Imbenia amphora, morphologically like Portoscuso-type amphorae, was found with metal ingots inside, suggesting that, although not their primary intended use, could also be hypothesized for the containers under study. (Sanciu, 2010: 4-5). Another significant resource seems to be the fisheries, specifically tuna fishing, as tuna seasonally frequents the coasts of southwestern Sardinia (Bartoloni and Guirguis, 2017: 59–60). From an archaeological perspective, fishing and the subsequent processing of the catch can be hypothesized, as seen in the presence of submerged structures on the island of Sant'Antioco compatible with fish processing facilities (Bartoloni and Guirguis, 2017: 64–65 and Muscuso, 2016: 409–438) and the discovery of scales and vertebrae with signs of butchery in the Phoenician and Punic phase of Sulky (Bartoloni and Guirguis, 2017: 61). It is plausible that this production, like the aforementioned ones, could have been flourishing enough to constitute part of the productive surplus that was commercialized and then shipped/transported inside Portoscuso-type amphorae. It doesn't seem unreasonable to hypothesize that a locally produced amphora type, although particularly suitable for containing liquids like wine, could have also been used to transport various types of goods.

Conclusion

Sulcis' area appears as a region with numerous resources that were heavily exploited. From this perspective, the sea itself, seen as a trade route, becomes a significant resource for the human groups settled in southwestern Sardinia. A better identification of a local amphora-type production is essential in order to better define the commercial circuits that involved southwestern Sardinia and better understand the commercial relationship of the western Mediterranean during the eighth century BC.

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