The deposits of reddish impasto olle: archaeological reality and possible interpretations

Tomaso Di Fraia – *Former professor at the University of Pisa*

Francesco di Gennaro – *Former Soprintendente del Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo (Italy)*

For a long time, reference has been made to the so-called giacimenti a olle rossicce, hypothetically linking them to the production of salt through briquetage or to some treatment with salt of particular products. Such an interpretation of this class of archaeological records, presumptively considered to be homogeneous, has been proposed (Pacciarelli 1991) and then accepted by many scholars without a rigorous analysis. In archaeological terminology olla (current Italian: pentola) is a container for fire for liquids or semi-liquids; cylindroid or barrel or ovoid in shape, with generally poorly developed rim. However, with regard to the deposits in question, several scholars have grouped under this denomination very different forms, which cannot be traced back to a single function, much less if one suppose that this is the briquetage. From a technical point of view, to obtain a block of salt as large as the total volume of medium-large olle (the most represented size in these sites), boiling times would be very long; furthermore, the blocks would be too large, heavy and uncomfortable for transport. If, on the other hand, one wanted to obtain a block smaller than the total volume, the use of unnecessarily large containers would result in a waste of work and of raw material to produce them.

Above all, however, the hypothesis of the use of medium-large olle for the production of salt by boiling brine is not reflected in the sites where the briquetage is certainly attested, while conversely the peculiar elements of the latter are completely absent in our deposits of reddish olle. The intentional breaking of the containers has never been demonstrated on archaeological ground and contrasts with the results of some experiments, which have shown that the breaking can already occur during cooking (Aranguren et al 2021) or not occur at all (Campo 2012: experimental production of salt crystals). Furthermore, we would not explain accessory elements such as cords reliefs and handles for containers intended for a single boiling cycle. Finally, colour does not seem a significant aspect, much less a decisive one.

Once the briquetage hypothesis has been excluded, the possible interpretative scenarios must take into account the fact that the pottery, produced locally (as it has been demonstrated in cases where component analyses have been carried out and in those in which remains of furnaces have been found), was intended for use on site, both for containers to be used for cooking or treating particular products, and for the storage of such products and probably of the same salt obtained by natural evaporation, and finally as full containers to be delivered to transporters or final consumers.

With regard to the increase of the above contexts in the peninsular Early Iron Age, it is necessary to take into account the geographical position of the evidences. The "reddish olle deposits" are situated along the coasts; many of the cases in which the deposits of potsherds are attested in the hinterland, following the evaluation of the variations of the coastline, appear to have flourished in the coastal environment.

As for the mid-Tyrrhenian coasts, the evidence of installations with handicraft activities that involve the discarding of the fragments of olle (as the prevalent but not exclusive class) manifest themselves with a

sudden increase in the initial period of the Early Iron Age, which corresponds to the phase of consolidation of the proto-state units of Etruria.

The activities of producing clay containers and in particular those of processing the contents, seem to be linked to the new articulated organization of the spaces and of the service and livelihood activities of the large communities concentrated for the first time in vast settlements with stably structured territorial hegemony.

In this framework of anthropic geography, articulated according to criteria of rupture with the past and of organization projected towards the secular stability of the city-states, the presence of "reddish olle deposits" marks - with the generic nature of contexts not yet fully understood but on which it is necessary to investigate in order to deepen its nature - the birth of a production system adequate to the state dimension of the new system. In this scenario, salt must have assumed a central importance, both for all the needs of the internal territories, and for its use in coastal sites in the preservation industry. A "canning" industry not necessarily oriented solely on sea products, but also on vegetable, dairy and meat products, certainly also processed inland.

The consequent traffic now runs along the radial lines that connect the central poles to the peripheral functional systems, located either at the border nodes or along the coast.

From the moment in which the urban and state system made it possible to organize the maritime traffic finally in a stable and propulsive way, a not insignificant destination of food preparations, treated or not with salt and certainly handled in the clay containers that in many cases had allowed their preparation in the coastal installations, was that of food supply on board for the nutritional needs of the crews.

References

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