

Selling Tiles by the Thousands. Roman CBM Cargoes in the Mediterranean

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In recent years, there has been a welcome increase in studies of the economy of ceramic building material (CBM). Most importantly, the data on the CBM are now studied in the field at the moment of discovery, unlike in the past when historical interpretation was based largely on an epigraphic analysis of the brick stamps or a stylistic analysis of the decorative parts.

Moreover, the field of economic history is establishing a new way to evaluate the results of data relating to CBM by shifting the focus to networks of production and consumption, placing emphasis on building materials as a unified economic phenomenon rather than simply a collection of individual elements, and by considering the social, organizational and economic impact of their transport from production site to construction site.

I have myself stressed the existence in Roman Italy, but also elsewhere, of basically two different types of Roman plain rooftiles (the “*tegola con risega*” and the “*tegola con incasso*”, i.e. with a recess that affects the entire lower end of the flange for about half of its thickness, or with a cavity of roughly trapezoidal shape in the outer part of the lower end of the flange). These types point to different geographical and cultural areas of production in the countries of the Central-Western Mediterranean but can, albeit more rarely, be found in the same contexts; however, they also require different construction practices in the laying of the roof.¹

From an archaeological perspective, the analysis of the chronological and geographical distribution of the two types reveals that the *risega* type from the Roman period is derived from the archaic tiles of central-southern Etruria, and parts of Lazio and Campania; while the *incasso* type is widespread in Magna Graecia and mountainous central Italy. From the 4th c. BC Roman colonial expansion southward reached the areas where the *incasso* tiles were used: from that point this was the type of tile introduced by the Romans during their colonization and also the one introduced by the military after their conquests. Epigraphy tells us that the Roman magistrates charged with managing the new foundations made sure to include among the colonists their own clients and workers from territories where they owned land in central Italy. These people spread the typical “building style” of their own tradition – the use of the *incasso* tile is thus the result of this system of colonization and expansion by the Romans.

From an engineering perspective, the choice to use the *incasso* tile was based mainly on technical and functional criteria. The essential purpose of the roof was to guarantee resistance to snow, rain, wind, frost and to protect the wooden roof structure; the *incasso* tile was better suited to resist snow loads, water infiltration and high winds because of the “locking” action of the interconnected tiles. Roman colonization followed

an arc around the Adriatic and the Alps and then spread into the northern territories: from a technical standpoint, this is the same geographical area of the greatest snowfall, another explanation for why the most rigid and self-locking tile is the one that settlers and the military decided to employ.

However, the pattern we have just outlined must be corroborated by examining the “closed context” of CBM cargoes from shipwrecks, twenty-six of which have been found in the Mediterranean. It is widely accepted today that some of them (9, dated between late 1st c. BC and the mid 2nd c. AD) are in fact specialized consignments for specific building projects and not simply return cargoes (or even ballast), as was commonly thought in the past. Also the interconnection between these wrecks, epigraphic data, and land finds can shed light on the trend of commercial activities. For example, tiles produced ca. 50 BC–50 AD by the *gens Arria*, a family from Campania who owned factories and ships engaged in trade with Gallia, reveals that the family supplied the military annona and its associated negotiators with their own *incasso* type roof tiles.

Another example is provided by the presence in Tunisia of *risega* tiles with urban stamps of the *Domitii* brothers, *Lucanus* and *Tullus*, who were among the largest producers of brick along the Tiber valley and who also held magistracies in North Africa (under emperor Domitian, late 1st c. AD). The tradition of *risega* tiles imported from Rome must have taken root locally, as in the first half of the 5th c. the Scauri wreck (near Pantelleria) was carrying a load of the urban *risega* tiles that archaeometric analysis has identified as Tunisian products – the *risega* tiles apparently had been adopted in Africa and had then become an export item, on a reverse route to Rome, where tile production was by then limited and its transmarine export had ended.

The study of CBM finds offers great potential for our understanding of production, commercial dynamics, and even cultural transmission in the Roman world. In order to continue this line of research, it is important to record information regarding CBM finds, including typological characteristics and archaeometric data, and even to revisit the material from previous excavations.

Notes

¹ Shepherd 2015.

References

Shepherd 2015

E. J. Shepherd, Tegole piane di età romana: una tipologia influenzata dalle culture “locali”, una diffusione stimolata dall’espansione militare, in: E. Bukowiecki – R. Volpe – U. Wulf-Rheidt (eds.), *Il laterizio nei cantieri imperiali. Roma e il Mediterraneo – Atti del II workshop “Laterizio” Rome 27–28 Nov. 2014*, *Archeologia dell’architettura* 20 (Florence 2015) 120–132.