

Economy and Trade on Monte Iato (Sicily) in the Roman Period – the Example of the Tavern

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Introduction

The settlement of Ietas is located approximately 30 km southwest of Palermo, in the interior of Sicily. It lies on a hill plateau overlooking the passes to the north and the valley of the river Belice, the ancient connection to the south coast of Sicily. The site has been inhabited since the Archaic period until its destruction by Frederick II in 1246 AD. In this paper, however, the focus is on the early Roman Imperial period. At that time, according to Pliny the Elder,¹ Ietas was a *civitas stipendiaria* (i.e. a tributary town).

The building analysed in this study (fig. 1) is located south of the Roman city's forum. The Institute of Archaeology of the University of Zurich has excavated the site between 1992 and 2007.

It is a long rectangular building with a dimension of 4,10 by 21,00 metres, and comprises two rooms. The excavations revealed numerous fragments of eating, drinking and cooking vessels as well as a masonry counter, various animal bones, and a baking oven (fig. 2). Therefore, the building can be interpreted as a tavern selling simple meals and wine (Latin: *popina*). Room A can be understood as the taproom, which was equipped with an area for the customers (the part with the paved floor), and has a working space for the staff behind the counter. In contrast, room B was presumably used for food preparation or for storage. This is implied by the butchery marks on the animal bones found in this area as well as by the rotary quern located in the western part of room B.

The examined findings come from a massive destruction layer present inside both rooms of the tavern. The building collapsed probably as a consequence of an earth-



Fig. 1: Ietas (Monte Iato, Sicily), ground plan of the tavern.



Fig. 2: Baking oven and remains of the counter, from the west.

quake that happened around 50 AD and affected several parts of the Roman city.² The respective damages have been attested in a number of Roman contexts on the Monte Iato. This closed context permits the reconstruction of the tavern's inventory and in part of its facilities.

Pottery forms the majority of the findings³ (72,8%, 1,190 minimum number of individuals). It can be divided into tableware and common ware (20,8% and 52,0% of the findings, respectively). In addition, the inventory was mainly composed of objects made of iron (9,5%), glass (2,0%) and bronze (3,5%), as well as oil lamps (7,0%) and coins (2,4%).

Food and Beverages on Sale

Several categories of the findings can indicate the range of food and drinks that were sold in the tavern of Ietas.

First of all, the *popina* was furnished with an oven made of tiles, which was adjacent to the counter. It is a horseshoe-shaped baking oven, which was used to bake bread or possibly pastry. It was presumably equipped with a tapering clay tube that served as a chimney.⁴ Compared to baking ovens in Pompeii, the oven in Ietas was quite small (baking space only 0,65 by 0,70 m) and not as massively built.⁵

Secondly, the analysis of the animal bones showed that beef, pork, mutton/chevon and venison were on the menu.⁶ Pigs were prevalent with 39,1%, whereas cattle were represented by 29,6% of the total quantity. Deer constitute 18,7%, while sheep/goats occur more rarely (10,8%). According to the representation and distribution of the skeletal parts of the animals (mainly upper limbs, which are rich in meat, and cranial fragments), the meat was served as roast, stew or barbecued. Pig's head and sheep's head was presumably offered additionally. Moreover, pork and venison were possibly available in the form of ham.

On top of this, the finding of 6 shells indicates the consumption of seafood.

Among the pottery there were several amphorae (fig. 3). 23 specimens belong to the form Dressel 2–4 and contained wine.⁷ Part of this wine was from the Tyrrhenian coastal region (10 specimens), whereas some of the Dressel 2–4 amphorae were produced in *Hispania Baetica* or *Hispania Tarraconensis* (6 and 2 examples respectively). Fish sauce was imported from the Iberian Peninsula, confirmed by 5 examples of Dressel 7–11 amphorae.⁸ Pickled fish, mainly tuna, was brought in at least 17 amphorae of the form Dressel 21–22 (type Botte 1 b) from other cities in western Sicily (Alcamo Marina and Solunto have been suggested as production sites), or rarely from Calabria or Campania (2 examples of the type Botte 2 or 3).⁹

As far as other food is concerned, we may gain an idea from the Imperial edicts dating to the 1st century AD regarding the ban of certain comestibles in taverns. These sources mention for example, pastry,¹⁰ vegetables in general,¹¹ peas, beans¹² and warm water.¹³

Furthermore, the *dolia*, that were part of the masonry counter,¹⁴ should also be considered. As these vessels were too porous to hold liquids and no traces of pitch have yet

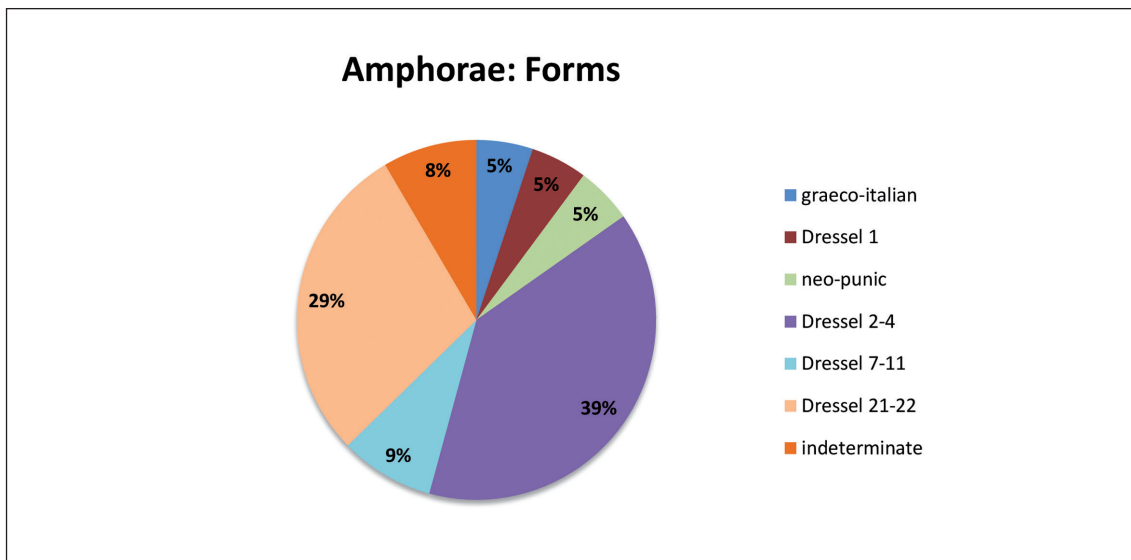


Fig. 3: Frequency of the amphorae forms from the *popina*.

been discovered on any *dolia* in Pompeii or elsewhere, they must have contained solid food, such as grain, nuts, dried or smoked fruit or vegetables.¹⁵ This is also confirmed by carbonised remains from several taverns of Herculaneum that were found still inside the inset *dolia*.¹⁶ Therefore, such comestible goods are likely to have been served in the *popina* of Ietas.

Taverns in Pompeii Compared to the Tavern of Ietas

In order to find out if the tavern on the Monte Iato was a standard Roman bar, I chose to compare the tavern in Ietas with several examples in Pompeii: until today, there are only two securely identified examples from Roman Sicily (Agrigentum and Calacte).¹⁷ Even though taverns are attested in several regions of the Roman Empire (e.g. Italy, Iberia, Gaul, Africa, and the eastern provinces),¹⁸ Pompeii is an appropriate site for analysing inns, as there are various examples and the premises can be studied in the context of their town planning. Moreover, Pompeii and Ietas are both dated to the 1st century AD, which is why the taverns' inventory should be comparable.

An L-shaped masonry counter like the one in Ietas is very common in Pompeii, where 72% of the counters show this form.¹⁹ In most cases the tavern counters are aligned in such a way that they block part of the entrance. Thus, they were clearly visible from the street and the guests did not have to enter the tavern to be served. The counter in Ietas, however, is located inside the building next to the door, probably because the entrance was too narrow (width: 1,22 m) and had to remain unobstructed.

About half of the Pompeian counters were embellished on the surface with reused marble fragments embedded in mortar.²⁰ In Ietas, however, the counter top was decorated with terracotta slabs. The sides of the counter were presumably plastered and painted, which is attested by the coloured plaster fragments that were found in the destruction debris next to it.²¹ Comparably, similar decoration of counters was found in Pompeii. Yet, these paintings were often figured. In contrast, in Pompeii, terracotta slabs or tiles have only rarely been used for the facing of counter tops.

Pompeian taverns are usually furnished with stone thresholds with a distinctive groove across much of their frontage.²² This allowed for the installation of wooden shutters at the close of business. The *popina* in Ietas, on the contrary, was provided with a threshold that consists of *opus spicatum* in the northern part and of trampled earth in the southern part, respectively.

Evidence for wooden shelves or racks in the form of nails with broad nail heads, which was found in the tavern on Monte Iato, also is attested in some cases in Pompeii. Such nails (diameters between 1,0 and 5,5 cm, mostly between 2,0 and 3,0 cm) were probably used for the construction of wooden furniture, which has not survived.

In most of the taverns in Pompeii, wall paintings have been preserved. As the stucco fragments from the destruction layer show, the walls of both rooms of the tavern on

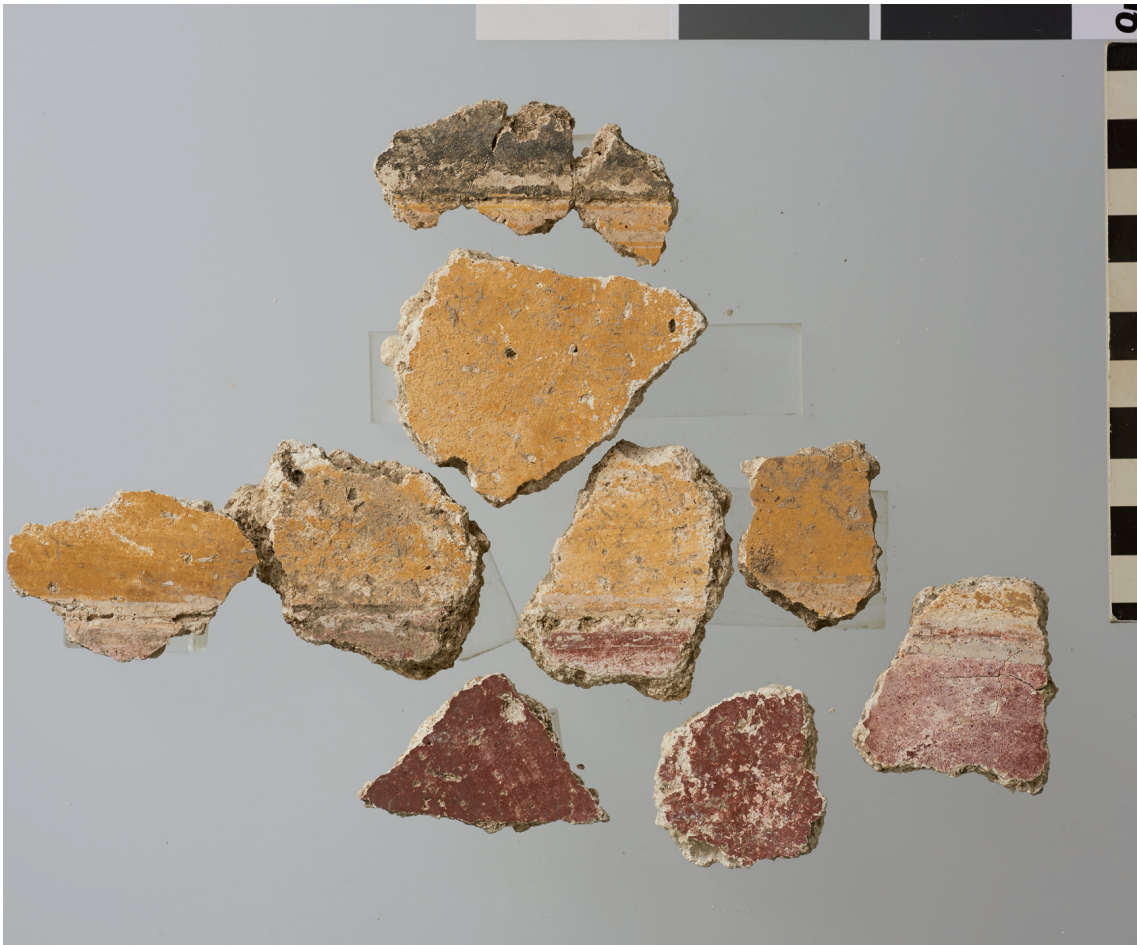


Fig. 4: Painted stucco fragments from the destruction layer.

Monte Iato were at least partly plastered and painted (fig. 4). The preserved colours are largely red, but there are traces also of yellow and black. As no figural motifs are recognizable, a geometrical design seems to be most likely.

In Pompeii, a *lararium* seems to have been part of the usual facilities of a tavern. In Ietas, in contrast, no structural remains were found that would indicate such a shrine. Nevertheless, there were single findings from the *popina*, like certain lamp forms (stand lamps and wheel-turned lamps with several nozzles), and *thymiateria*, which are normally interpreted as belonging to cultic contexts.²³ These could suggest that a *lararium* nevertheless existed in the tavern in Ietas.

The Pompeian bars usually comprised two or several rooms. In addition to the tap-room, there typically was a dining room. As I already mentioned, however, room B of the tavern in Ietas presumably had a different function.

Regarding the range of findings, in addition to those objects that are to be expected in a tavern – like tableware, amphorae, cooking vessels, coins, oil lamps and animal

bones – one can observe tools (e.g. two sickles, a saw and a chisel), jewellery (e.g. belt buckles) and toilet implements (e.g. strigils and mirrors) both in Pompeii and on Monte Iato. Possibly, these items belonged to the staff or the guests of the tavern.²⁴

In summary, it can be stated that there are common features among the taverns in Pompeii and the bar in Ietas, but also several differences.

Significance of the Tavern in the Urban Context

The prominent location of the *popina* of Ietas, situated close to the edge of the forum of the town, is very conspicuous. Though the tavern is not situated directly at the forum square, which is located on a higher level, it is positioned immediately to the west of a ramp that leads to the forum. The excavation in 2017 revealed that the ramp was not the main access to the forum from the south (as was believed until recently), but rather that the tavern was located on a small open square, therefore presumably in a residential area of the town.²⁵ The ramp was apparently not part of the original plan of the forum (which dates to the Hellenistic period), but was built at the same time as the tavern that gave direct access to it. Since it was provided with a direct link to the forum, the *popina* must have been fairly important for the residents of Ietas. Moreover, the tavern's immediate vicinity to the *oikos* temple, located on the higher level of the forum directly to the north, further emphasises its significance within the city plan.

This location is particularly interesting as it stands in contrast to the presumption of many scholars up until recently, namely that there were no taverns located near civically important areas of a Roman city, such as the forum. This theory originated in the descriptions of taverns and bars by Roman authors, which are mostly in a pejorative context. The clients of these establishments are characterized as belonging to the lowest stratum of society, and their behaviour depicted as immoral or even illegal. Juvenal, for instance, mentions cutthroats, sailors, thieves, runaway slaves and the like.²⁶ They are furthermore contrasted with the honourable members of the nobility for whom it was improper to be seen in such a place.

Remarkably though, the analysis of the distribution of taverns and bars in Pompeii by Steven Ellis has showed that five taverns were once located close to one of the main entrances of the forum and another eight were situated nearby, within one block of a primary entrance.²⁷ This distribution reveals that the location of a bar is not determined by a “moral geography” but rather by a demand of the majority of the inhabitants of a town. The services of taverns – offering food and drink – were indispensable for many of the residents of a Roman city. The majority of people were members of the lower class and lived in rented flats where they had no dining rooms, kitchens or sometimes not even basic facilities for cooking.²⁸

The results from Ietas point in the same direction. In this town, however, we have no evidence for tenements at present. At any rate, it should be taken into consideration

that the written sources may not apply to a town in the interior of Sicily and that the everyday life here might have been quite different from the one in Rome.

Other commercial zones on the forum of Ietas, besides the *popina*, are the forum square itself and the porticoes that surrounded the forum on the west, north and east sides, which could have been used for temporary commercial purposes. Moreover, another important commercial zone was located behind the east portico, where a row of shops²⁹ has been discovered.

Trade

Commercial questions regarding the imported goods found in the tavern of Ietas have already been presented elsewhere.³⁰ In summary, it can be said that several categories of goods were imported to Ietas for use in the *popina*. From Central Italy, *terra sigillata* vessels, wine amphorae and single examples of thin-walled ware were brought in, whereas the Campanian orange ware vessels and one amphora came from southern Italy. On the Italian Peninsula in general, the examples of Pompeian red ware, the mould-made Roman Imperial lamps, and probably some specimen of common ware were produced. Amphorae containing fish sauce and wine, respectively, as well as one example of thin-walled ware, originated from the Iberian Peninsula. Furthermore, one specimen of Eastern Sigillata A and a few single bottom sherds of amphorae³¹ even point to trading connections with the eastern Mediterranean and northern Africa. The remainder of the tavern's inventory was produced in other cities in Sicily (very likely the rest of the thin-walled ware, most of the Dressel 21–22 amphorae, and Sicilian wheel-turned lamps) or in Ietas itself.

Summary

As a summary, it can be observed that a rather wide range of food and drinks were available in the tavern of Ietas. The building and its furnishings show many similarities to bars in Pompeii, but differences can be detected as well. Moreover, the tavern occupied an outstanding location within the city plan of Ietas, whereas the analysis of the imports revealed several trading connections. Undoubtedly, the examined tavern was an important part of the economy of Ietas and of the everyday lives of its residents.

Notes

¹ Plin. nat. 3, 91.

² Some parts of the building were already constructed in the Hellenistic period, when the agora (or forum) was built. However, it was only used as a tavern from middle Augustan period onwards. This is indicated by several categories of findings, which can be dated accordingly.

³ In total, the destruction layer contained 1,635 objects.

⁴ Cat. no. 1645. This object was discovered in room A, in the western part of the area with the paved floor, in the destruction debris.

⁵ Monteix 2013, 19–22.

⁶ My sincere thanks to Jasmin Zellweger (former student of IPNA Basel), who analysed the animal bones.

⁷ Bertoldi 2012, 26. 32. 76. 85. 93. 99–101. 111. 149. 188.

⁸ Bertoldi 2012, 28 f. 46–49.

⁹ Botte 2009, 5–7. 160. 171.

¹⁰ Suet. Tib. 34.

¹¹ Suet. Nero 16.

¹² Cass. Dio 62, 14, 2.

¹³ Cass. Dio 60, 6, 7.

¹⁴ Fragments of at least three such vessels were found in the destruction debris behind the counter. They were originally built into it.

¹⁵ Mac Mahon 2005, 78–82. Moreover, the shape of these vessels was unsuitable for cleaning.

¹⁶ Maiuri 1958, 402. 434.

¹⁷ Ellis (Ellis 2018, 16–18) additionally lists a tavern in Morgantina and Selinunte. These buildings however are not furnished with a counter, which is why I do not interpret them as taverns.

¹⁸ Ellis 2018, 15–18.

¹⁹ Ellis 2018, 51.

²⁰ Fant – Attanasio 2009, 1.

²¹ The fragments from this area were mainly red with one exception, which was yellow.

²² Ellis 2018, 38–40.

²³ DNP XII (2002) 522 s.v. Thymiaterion (R. Hurschmann).

²⁴ When reconstructing inventories of Pompeian taverns, one has to bear in mind that many excavations at this site have been conducted decades or even centuries ago and thus, not by modern standards. For that reason some findings were not retained and/or not even (fully) recorded.

²⁵ Mohr et al. 2018, 89–92.

²⁶ Iuv. 8, 171–176.

²⁷ Ellis 2004, 376 f.

²⁸ In Pompeii, 42% of the households were rentable, whereas in Herculaneum rentable households amounted to 53% (Pirson 1999, 162).

²⁹ Isler – Spatafora 2004, 15.

³⁰ Riediker-Liechti 2018, 413–419; Riediker-Liechti 2016, 11 f.; Riediker-Liechti 2015, 48.

³¹ Possibly 2 fragments of Dressel 5 and 2 fragments of Tripolitana I amphorae (Bertoldi 2012, 139. 190).

Image Credits

Fig. 1: Ground plan: Ietas excavation project, Zurich. – Fig. 2: Photo: Ietas excavation project, Zurich. – Fig. 3: Diagram: Eva Riediker-Liechti. – Fig. 4: Photo: Eva Riediker-Liechti.

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