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Syracuse: Preliminary Insights into the Fabric of Archaic Architectural Terracottas

How to cite: Bechtold and Ferlito 2026. "Syracuse: Preliminary Insights into the Fabric of Archaic Architectural Terracottas." In FACEM (version 03/2026) (https://doi.org/10.25365/phaidra.781)

Introduction

Within the broader framework of a research focused on western Greek amphorae series – primarily documented at production and consumptions sites in Sicily[1] – a sampling campaign was conducted in 2021 at the Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi in Syracuse.[2] A total of forty-seven samples were taken from presumably locally manufactured artifacts, including roof tiles, architectural and figural terracottas, small altars, mortars, amphorae, and *pithoi* all dating from the Archaic to the Late Classical period.[3] This initiative aimed to provide an initial archaeological characterisation – based on the standardised methods implemented in the FACEM database[4] – of the principal macroscopic features of pottery potentially produced in *Syrakousai*, a Corinthian foundation established in 734/3 BCE and one of the earliest colonies in Sicily.

With particular regard to the aforementioned online repository, ceramic fabrics associated with Archaic to Classical period production in the Greek colonies along Sicily's eastern and northeastern shores are yet not represented. The publication in FACEM of a ceramic fabric manufactured in Syracuse represents a first step toward the integration of pottery series from one of the main production sites situated in the eastern part of the island.

1. Previous Studies on Ceramic Fabrics and Archaeometric Research in Eastern Sicily

Three previous papers report preliminary results from archaeological fabric studies conducted on various selections of transport amphorae – mainly of the western Greek type – recovered from thirteen sites in the modern province of Catania.[5]

Archaeometric investigations of raw materials outcropping in the outskirts of Syracuse, along with a first batch of sixty-three samples – including Hellenistic pottery, misfired fragments, and a spacer – have been carried out by Germana Barone's team. Based on these analyses, two petrographic micro-fabrics, "fine F1" and "medium-fine MF1", have been defined. Both

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[1] The main results are in Bechtold and Vassallo 2025. The Sicilian productions are published in the 8th release of FACEM (2020).

[2] We thank Giusy Monterosso (Parco archeologico e paesaggistico di Siracusa, Eloro, Villa del Tellaro e Akrai) for sampling permission.

[3] Ferlito et al. 2025.

[4] http://facem.at/project/about.php.

[5] Bechtold et al. 2020 (for materials sampled in Edera di Bronte, Paternò, Tre Portelle/Mineo, Santuario dei Palici/Rocchicella, and Monte Catalfaro); Bechtold and Ferlito 2023 (for western Greek amphorae found in Ramacca); Bechtold et al. 2024 (for materials sampled in Adrano, Catania, Licodia Eubea, Terravecchia di Grammichele, Monte Iudica, and Monte San Mauro di Caltagirone).

are characterised by a micaceous and fossiliferous groundmass, which appears compatible with the petrographic and chemical markers of the Plio-Pleistocene clayey raw materials most likely used by potters in Hellenistic-Roman Syracuse.[6] The artisanal quarters of this latter period, all located in the northeastern part of the city, have already been identified, and a wide range of ceramic products is currently being studied.[7]

Figure 1: Syracuse. Map with localisation of Apollonion situated at the northern edge of Ortigia (reworked from ©GoogleEarth).

A couple of additional contributions concerning minero-petrographic research on pottery production in eastern Sicily can be mentioned. First, ongoing excavations at the fishing industry establishments in Portopalo, located at the southeastern tip of the island, have yielded significant quantities of amphorae fragments dating from the Classical to the Roman period.[8] Minero-petrographic analyses provide evidence for the likely local production of transport containers with almond-shaped rim and with bifid rim, possibly dating from the Roman period.[9]

[6] Barone et al. 2014; previously Barone et al. 2005. For the supposed extraction of raw materials in the valley of the river Anapo and along the borders of the Epipoli plateau, see also Malfitana and Cacciaguerra 2016, 92, fig. 4.

[7] For a synthesis, also of ongoing research within the framework of the project "Archeologia dell'artigianato e degli insediamenti produttivi", see Malfitana and Cacciaguerra 2016, esp. 77, 90, fig. 1 with the indication of the artisanal areas of Santa Lucia, Casa del Pellegrino, Villa Maria, Vigna Cassia, and Predio Gentile and with earlier references. For an overview, see also Olcese 2012, 491, 498-507.

[8] Bernal-Casasola et al. 2021.

[9] Fantuzzi et al. 2021, esp. 436-49, fig. 5C-D; Bernal-Casasola et al. 2021, 525-30, fig. 60.

Second, the work of Claudio Capelli and Carmela Franco on Sicilian flat-bottomed amphorae offers evidence for the manufacture of this type in eastern Sicily, specifically near Catania (Santa Venera al Pozzo), in Naxos, and in the Caronia-Pantano area on the northeastern coast.[10]

B.B.

2. A Fabric of Archaic Architectural Terracottas Presumably from Syracuse

This brief contribution focuses on the three samples from the selection at the Paolo Orsi Museum (see above, introduction) that have already undergone minero-petrographic and chemical analyses. These investigations, conducted by Germana Barone's team, strongly suggest local manufacture for the three items.[11]

Specifically, we discuss the new fabric SYR-AT-1, represented by three fragments of painted architectural terracottas unearthed in the 1920s by Antonino Cutrera at the urban sanctuary of the Apollonion (Fig. 1).

The samples belong to *listello* (Fig. 2.a)[12] and *cassetta* (Fig. 2.b-c)[13] fragments dated between the end of the 7th and the first quarter of the 6th century BCE.[14]

Our contribution therefore provides first insights into the macroscopic characteristics of a ceramic fabric produced in Archaic Syracuse.

B.B.

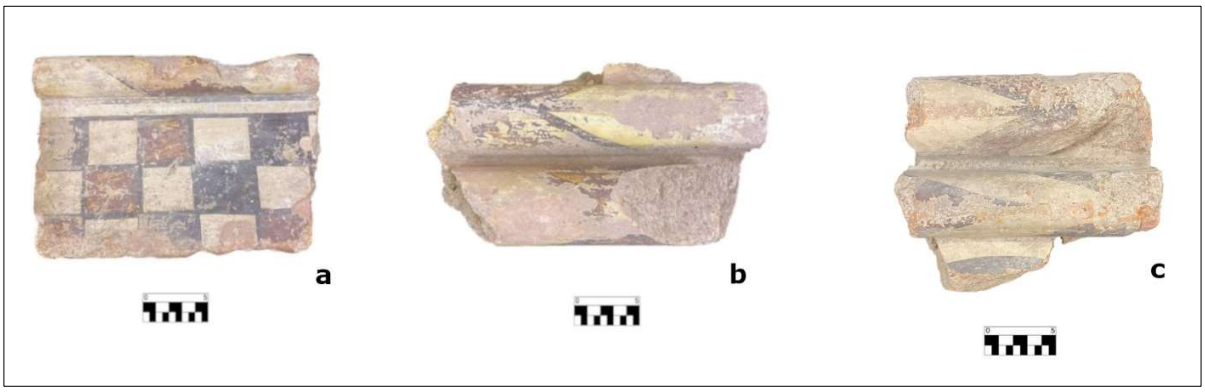

Figure 2: Architectural terracottas submitted to archaeometric analyses: **a**. STCA1 (M 277/17) **b**. STCA2 (M 277/18) C. STCA3 (M 277/20) (photos by G. Monterosso)

3. Macroscopic Description of Fabric SYR-AT-1

The present fabric is represented by samples M 277/17, M 277/18, and M 277/20 (fig. 3). They belong to "Group 2," recently discussed in a multi-authored publication focused on a preliminary autoptic assessment of Syracusan productions, based on the analysis of fourty-seven samples refering to several ceramic categories and coroplastic material recovered from several urban contexts.[15]

[10] Capelli and Franco 2016.
[11] Barone et al 2018.
[12] Published in detail in Ferlito et al. 2025, cat. 16.
[13] Published in detail in Ferlito et al. 2025, cat. 17-18.
[14] Previously, see Barone et al. 2018, 989, fig. 2.
[15] Ferlito et al. 2025.

The fabric appears fairly hard to the touch. Its color is orange-reddish in sample M 277/20; in the other two samples, the hue – of a yellowish-pink tone –is not homogeneous, with the two shades appearing distinct yet patchy. Voids are well attested in all samples (0.04-1.2 mm), with variable concentration, and mostly occur in the form of holes, channels – sometimes thin and rather elongated – and chambers. The temper varies in size (0.04-1.3 mm) and nature. The calcareous component of the clay matrix is evident in all three samples, appearing as small whitish particles with a spherical to rounded shape, or more conspicuously as whitish-yellow micritic clots, that are generally subspherical-spherical/rounded-subrounded in form.

The most distinctive feature of this fabric is the abundant, predominantly coarse temper. The inclusions mostly consist of large fragments of volcanic temper, blackish or dark grey in color; they are generally of considerable size and subspherical/subrounded-subangular in shape, with some elongated or subelongated examples. Rare specimens, however, exhibit an amorphous appearance. Other types of inclusions, of small to medium-large size, are quartz grains, recognizable by their typical whitish to greyish translucent appearance and mostly sub-angular to sub-spherical/sub-rounded–sub-elongated shapes. Finally, reddish inclusions, of varying intensity and size, are also visible, of subspherical/subrounded shape.

F.F.

Figure 3: Macrophotos of the SYR-AT-1 samples.

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