CONSUMPTION PATTERNS AT THE EDGE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE:
THE IMPORT OF AMPHORAE IN OLISIPO (LISBON, PORTUGAL)
BETWEEN THE 2ND CENTURY BC AND THE 2ND CENTURY AD

The aim of this work is to provide a synthesis of the study of the roman economy and trade in Olisipo (Lisbon, Portugal) between the Republic and the end of the 2nd century AD, based on an extended set of finds from various archaeological excavations in the ancient city of Lisbon.

From the imported amphorae and its manufacturing region characterization, we will try to obtain a representative framework of the rhythms and patterns of consumption, with some brief comparisons to other cities in the province of Lusitania, during the same period.

Overall, this text contributes to our understanding of the economic, social and urban conditions of the city of Olisipo, outlining the importance that it could potentially have had, at that time, in the context of the Atlantic façade and in the Roman Empire.

Introduction

The roman city of Olisipo (Lisbon, Portugal) had a particularly important role in the trade of food supplies in the Western part of the Roman Empire and in the Atlantic route, being, probably, the most important city in the Atlantic façade of the Iberian Peninsula. Nevertheless, consumption patterns of amphorae and foodstuffs transported in amphorae are still poorly known in Roman Lisbon, primarily due to a lack of in-depth studies.

Research and publication of studies on Roman amphorae from Olisipo is important not only to understand the historical dynamics of the city itself but also in order to provide a comparison of consumption patterns in relation to other cities and regions of the Roman Empire.

The current study presents the consumption patterns in Olisipo between the third quarter of the 2nd century and the end of the 2nd AD, based on the study of the republican and principe imported amphorae.

Geographical contextualization

About the city’s geographical context we can briefly say that it is located on the Atlantic coast, on a hill, at the entrance and on the right side of Tagus River, which was extensive and navigable, and gave access to a vast inland region. It has good natural defence conditions and an ample visual control, especially of the river’s entrance and its access to the inland. It also has excellent harbour conditions and an ideal environment for the exploration of abundant natural resources, notably maritime resources, such as fish and salt, but also mineral resources, such as gold from the Tagus sands.

Roman Olisipo

Olisipo was already an important urban centre before the arrival of the romans. The oldest Roman presence in the city dates from the third quarter of the 2nd century BC, in the context of the military conquest and affirmation of the power of Rome in the west of the Iberian Peninsula. According to Strabo (III,3,1) Olisipo was fortified by Decimus Junius Brutus in 138 B.C., under the military campaign undertaken against the Lusitanians.

The oldest archaeological remains of the Roman presence, scattered throughout the city but especially on the top of the hill, are consistent with this date. Although the Praetor established his headquarters in Scallabis, up in the Tagus valley, Olisipo could also have played an important role in the military operations carried out by Julius Caesar in 60–61 B.C. against the Lusitanians, though this has yet to be demonstrated in the archaeological record.

The city obtains the municipium civium romanorum between 31 and 27 BC and the designation of Felicitas Iulia Olisipo, which is an indication of the importance it held at the time.

During the principality of Augustus and until the mid-1st century AD the city undergoes strong urban restructuring and the construction of many public buildings, such as the theatre, the baths and the cryptoporticus, as well as a city wall.

1 Special thanks to Artur Ribeiro for revising the English.
4 Pimenta 2005.
The implementation of several fish processing units in the suburban area of Olisipo also dates from the 1st century AD, which would have reached its phase of greater strength and development by the end of the 1st and, especially, by the 2nd century. The city’s circus was probably constructed during this century, which indicates some economic wealth.

In the transition of the 2nd century to the 3rd and in the first decades of the later, there’s a panorama of general disturbance in the fish export flows, with likely repercussions on the economy, verifiable in some Olisipo fish production units and in the pottery of the tagus valley.

Composition of the sample

The analysed amphora sets come from 38 sites located in the pomerium and suburbia of the ancient roman city. Some of these sites were recently excavated and are archaeologically well documented, but there are also some older interventions, which have provided virtually no stratigraphic records. These archaeological excavations were carried out by archaeology companies, the City Council, Guardianship professionals, and also by private archaeologists, both within contract archaeology and scientific projects.

The amphora sets comprise a wide range of sites and realities in terms of locations within the city as well as in terms of urban functionality – domestic area, necropolis, roads, public buildings and fish production units, or even under the ancient river level.

All the amphorae from the Republic to Late Antiquity were inventoried and classified: the sample is c. 12.000 classifiable amphorae sherds and around 5.000 individuals (MNI = Minimum Number of Individuals). This study only includes the amphorae from the Republic to the end of the 2nd century/early 3rd century AD, and comprises around 3.900 individuals, which, from a statistical point of view, can be regarded as a highly reliable sample. Around 16% of the total sample refers to republican amphorae, 80% to the Principate and the remaining percentage to indeterminate types.

MNI analysis was given precedence in the quantification process, as established in the Mont Beuvray protocol.

The analysis of the amphorae sample took into consideration morphological aspects and the characteristics of the fabric, which served as the basis for chronological adscription into two main groups (Republic and Principality).

Republic

As has already been stated, the first contacts with the romans occurred in the third quarter of the 2nd century BC in the context of the military campaign of Junius Brutus and it is testified, among others, by the presence of the regular
amphorae that, in this period, used to accompany military contingents. The ones that carried the Italian wine, Grecocrude and Dressel 1 types, and fish products from Southern Hispania, type Ramón T-7.4.3.3., were imported in great quantities during the 2nd century BC. The olive oil carried in ovoid amphorae from Brindisi and Tripolitania (Ancient Tripolitanian/African), the wine from Ibiza (T-8.1.3.2.) and from the Eastern Mediterranean (Rhodian and Dressel 4 from Kos), as well as the fish products from North Africa (T-7.4.3.1.), were imported in much lesser amounts. This new data does not change much of what is already known about Olisipo during the republican period12, but, on one hand, it does confirm previously analysed patterns and, on the other, it also provides more amphorae types and provenance regions into the map of republican imports of Lisbon.

From Kos), as well as the fish products from the Southern coast, mainly in ovoid amphora types like Dressel 1214. From the mid 1st century there’s a gradual “economic rise of the Iberian Peninsula”, as Carlos Fabião has stated, which is demonstrated in the significant increase of imports from Baetica province, namely, olive oil and wine from Guadalquivir in various types of ovoid amphorae, and fish products from the Southern coast, mainly in ovoid amphora types – Ovoide gaditana, Dressel 7–11, but also other non-ovoid types like Dressel 1214.

During the last quarter of the 2nd century BC there seems to have started around the middle of the 1st century BC24, an increase of con- sumption of regional products can be observed. Within the framework of imports, the relevance of Baetican products is highlighted, prevailing the “principle of geographical proximity in the import criteria”26. From Augustus onwards, there is significant import of wine and olive oil from Guadalquivir, and fish from the coastal area of Baetica keep on arriving in considerable quantities, now transported primarily in ovoid amphorae27. These products were imported in great quantities and transported in many amphorae types, notably in Obedran 83, Haltern 70 and Dressel 7–11, all of them well represented in our sample.

Besides the geographical relevance, this important presence of Baetican products should also be associated to the existence of a regular institutional supply network, originating in Baetica, which ran through the western coast of the Iberian Peninsula, destined for the northern military establishments of the Germanic times and, later, to Britannia, as well as to the North-western Hispania27. These amphorae are particularly well documented all over the Tagus valley, especially in Scalaibus and Olisipo.

In the first decades of the 1st century AD a gradual decrease in the import of Baetican fish (Dressel 7–11) can be observed, stabilizing temporarily from the middle of the century onwards, and decreasing even more in the 2nd century. This is directly related to the emergence of Lusitanian fish products28 which seems to have started around the middle of the 1st century BC29,

Principate

In general terms, from the last decades of the 1st century BC until the end of the 2nd AD a clear predominance of consumption of regional products can be observed. Within the framework of imports, the relevance of Baetican products is highlighted, prevailing the “principle of geographical proximity in the import criteria”26. From Augustus onwards, there is significant import of wine and olive oil from Guadalquivir, and fish from the coastal area of Baetica keep on arriving in considerable quantities, now transported primarily in ovoid amphorae27. These products were imported in great quantities and transported in many amphorae types, notably in Obedran 83, Haltern 70 and Dressel 7–11, all of them well represented in our sample.

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Fig. 2. Republic and Principate extra province imports.
becoming more visible in the archaeological record especially from the Augustus principate onwards.

From the second half of the 1st century and throughout the 2nd century, Lusitanian fish products transported in Dressel 14 amphorae are preponderant, even though the Baetican fish is still imported during this whole period. The import of olive oil reached its highest values in the mid-1st century, decreasing from the beginning of Vespasian until Hadrian, and stabilizing under the Antonines.

In a similar vein, by the mid-1st century AD there is also a decrease of Baetican wine imports which are transported in Haltern 70, Dressel 28 and Dressel 2–4. From the beginning of the 2nd century the wine consumed is essentially regional, transported in the Lusitana 3 type, although wine from all over the Mediterranean was imported on significant levels, most notably from the Guadalquivir valley in Baetica province. Apart from the Baetican wine, the wines from Gaul (Gauloise 4) and the Eastern Mediterranean (Rhodes) tend to stand out in terms of import, which supplant the italic wines (Dressel 2–4).

The olive oil (Dressel 20) was almost exclusively provided by the province of Baetica, Guadalquivir valley, with African oil in significantly lesser quantities.

Looking at the consumption patterns of Olisipo and other cities from Lusitania one can see some similarities with AlcácER do Sal25, which, taking into account its geographical position, could have had a comparable role in the redistribution of foodstuffs carried in amphorae to the inland through the Sado valley, and, possibly, also to Augusta Emerita. If we consider the data of other places also situated in the Sado River, like Setúbal26 and Tróia27, we can observe that its import patterns diverge from those of AlcáER do Sal and Lisbon, mainly with regards to Baetican imports, due to fewer Guadalquivir amphorae.

Also, if we compare it with some cities from the south of Lusitania, like Lagos28, Faro29 and Balsa30, the main diffe-

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29 Viegas 2011.

Fig. 5. Localization of the provenance regions of imported amphorae from Lisbon in the Roman Empire and evolution of the foodstuffs carried in amphorae.
The broad and diversified set of amphorae from Lisbon, coming from several different parts of the Mediterranean, reveals the evident cosmopolitanism of Felicitas Iulia Olisipo, which then played an active and central role in the complex commercial exchanges in the West of Iberian Peninsula, which underlines its importance as a trading post in the Atlantic coast.

This outlook of the city had already been recognized long ago by Vasco Mantas and Carlos Fabião, but with the publication, in the past years, of a greater amount of data, we have started to gain a better overview of Olisipo and, above all, it has finally become possible to define in more meticulous way how Olisipo was economically and socially shaped.

Its location and its condition as a maritime city, facing the ocean and in the contact area between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, as part of a full Atlantic route, would have been determinant in its rise towards the “maritime capital” of the province, where merchandise arrived from several geographic regions of the empire and from where they were redistributed into the territory, including Emerita Augusta, the capital of the province. Furthermore, not only was Olisipo a place for importing, it also held a crucial role in exporting fish products and wine which were produced in the Tagus valley.

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32 Silva 2012. 753. It should be noted that these refer only to the stamps of samian ware and that the analysed sample comes from a considerably smaller number of sites than the amphorae sample.
34 Fabião 2011.
37 Mantas 1990; Mantas 1999.