

The popularity of the Ricci C type wheel-made lamps in southeastern Sicily: questions and hypotheses



Abstract: At Akrai in southeastern Sicily, the University of Warsaw excavations have unearthed a huge quantity of small, wheel-made, beige-slipped lamps belonging to the Roman Republican type Ricci C. The most important conclusions from the research concern the functionality of these lamps, both as devices used for lighting in everyday life and as unused elements of votive deposits, as well as their enduring presence in southeastern Sicily when they had all but disappeared elsewhere in the Roman world. The type is a derivative of an old form and peaked in popularity in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC. The last examples of this type seem to have been produced in the reign of Augustus.

Keywords: Akrai, southeastern Sicily, Roman Republican period, wheel-made lamps, Ricci C type

The ancient town of Akrai (Greek Ἄκραϊ, Latin Acrae, Agris, Acrenses)¹ was founded about 664/663 BC by settlers from the Dorian metropolis of Syracuse (Thuc. 6.5.2). The archaeological site is located on the southeastern outskirts of the modern town of Palazzolo Acreide, on one of hilltops (770 m asl) in the Hyblaean mountain range in the southeastern part of Sicily. The town de-

1 Mentioned by Diodorus Siculus (23.4.1), Pliny the Elder (*HN* 3.8.91) and Livy (24.35–36), and indicated on maps of Claudius Ptolemy (*Geog.* 3.4.14), the *Tabula Peutingeriana* and *Itinerarium Antonini*.

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veloped in the shadow of the metropolis, Syracuse, one of the most important cities of the ancient Greek world, and acted as a “shield” of the western Syracusan territories until the 3rd century BC (Chowaniec 2015: 43–78, with earlier reading). The town started to develop intensively in the mid-3rd century BC, during the reign of the Syracusan king

Hiero II (Chowaniec 2017: 68–77).² After the fall of Syracuse in 212/211 BC, it came under Roman provincial administration as a *civitas decumana*. It continued to function well enough in the new political structures, as suggested by the fact that it was able to cover the costs of the *decuma* to Rome (Chowaniec 2017: 126–130).



Fig. 1. Center of ancient Akrai and location of the Hellenistic–Roman house excavations of the University of Warsaw; inset, location of Akrai in Sicily (University of Warsaw Mission at Akrai | processing R. Chowaniec)

2 Hiero II was credited, for example, with the so called *lex Hieronica*, innovations in Sicilian architecture, fortifications, waterworks, agriculture, a new method for tiling roofs and making high-end jewelry, see Wilson 2016: 80–90.

The most extensive exploration of Akrai's history has been undertaken by the University of Warsaw, working in collaboration with the Soprintendenza dei Beni Culturali e Ambientali di Siracusa (2009–2015) and the Polo Regionale di Siracusa per i siti e musei archeologici Museo Paolo Orsi (since 2016). Regular excavations (since 2011) were preceded by non-invasive prospection (including topographical surveying, aerial photography, and field surveys). Household complexes built in the late Hellenistic period (second half of the 3rd century BC) with evident late Roman and Byzantine occupation layers were discovered (Chowaniec 2017: 106–145). The wealth of archaeological evidence demonstrates a vigorous and productive town life over the course of centuries. Several phases of rearrangement, redesign and reuse were identified. The original house plans, consisting of rooms surrounding three sides of a courtyard with scant remains of a portico and a cistern, started to be redesigned most possibly as early as the late 3rd century BC/beginning of 2nd century BC, already under formal Roman administration. New divisions of the domestic spaces were introduced, new and statelier rooms added (for instance, with *opus signinum* mosaic floors),

and changes made in the painting decoration as a result. Further work is needed to determine the exact function of these spaces (Chowaniec 2018).³

The complex fulfilled its residential function until the mid-4th century AD, when it was drastically damaged by a natural disaster, most probably an earthquake, as attested by characteristic architectural deformation, collapse of structures in one direction as a consequence of the tremors, and breaks in the walls.⁴ At the end of the 4th century AD, after a few decades of stagnation, the ruined area was adopted for domestic craft production and other activities, rather likely by the new Christian inhabitants.

The late Roman and Byzantine structures are marked by building sloppiness and careless choice of reused elements, often using not only architectural details, but also whole fragments of stone mortars or olive oil presses. These secondary structures roughly followed the original orientation of the late Hellenistic–Roman walls. The rebuilding is exemplified by entrances being blocked with salvaged cornerstones or lintels. A cistern originally located in the central part of a small courtyard was also reused (Chowaniec et al. 2017). [RC]

3 Archaeometric studies accompanied traditional archaeological research; these laboratory techniques included multidisciplinary reconstruction of ancient diet, ancient local landscape and regional geology, as well as elaboration of the relationship between humans and their environment, see Chowaniec, Dotsika, and Gręzak 2018.

4 This period and this region are characterized by intensive seismic activity. The most significant earthquakes were noted around the AD 350s–370s, which resulted in great devastation in many places not only in Sicily, due to the varying locations of epicenters. It should also be kept in mind that the region of the Hyblaean Mountains could have had its own small earthquakes (e.g., we need to take into account the microseismicity of the Monte Lauro volcano), see Bottari, Coltelli, and Monaco 2015.



Fig. 2. University of Warsaw excavations: top plan of the Hellenistic and Roman house complex and general view looking north (Courtesy of University of Warsaw Mission at Akrai)

LYCHNOLOGICAL FINDS AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR SICILY AND BEYOND

The few years of non-invasive field surveys, started in 2009, followed by regular excavations, since 2011, by the University of Warsaw Mission of an extensive complex of Hellenistic and Roman houses, unearthed more than 600 identifiable lamps, most of them fragmentary, and five times more fragments useful for quantification of types and dating purposes.

A glimpse of the richness of the Akrai lychnological assemblage over the centuries was given in a publication of the most relevant lamps found until 2014 (Chrzanowski 2015). The study framed the finds in the *status quaestionis* of what we know and what has been published on this topic from the island, hence providing the most complete bibliography possible. Another article focused on the period extending from the last part of the Hellenistic period to the very first decades of the Roman Empire (Chrzanowski 2018).

From the beginning it was clear that we were dealing with a site shaped by multiple influences, gathering both high-quality imports, macro- and micro-regional copies as well as local production, and this over a long period of time. Recently, a few lamps clearly from the 5th century were found and there is no discontinuity from the Classical period to the early medieval period, the latter yielding slightly under 20 “Sicilian lamps”, most of them discovered in surface layers.

Of greatest relevance is the discovery that from the times of the Hellenistic *floruit* of Syracuse through the 6th cen-

tury AD, Akrai—a veritable “Iron Gate” in the hinterland—was supplied with a range of lamps: the finest devices from the “mother city” as well as, from the late Republican period to late antiquity, copies of Italian and African lamps made in the broader area of southeastern Sicily, perhaps even not far from the town.

Examples of lamps illustrating this phenomenon include a huge and extremely rare acanthus-handle from late Republican times, covered with lead-glazed green slip in imitation of bronze and made exclusively by the best Campanian workshops (Chrzanowski 2015: 184, Cat. 11) as well as a large number of *Vogelkopflampen*, not only original Italian imports, but also two types of imitations made in Syracuse. The imitations are both adorned with supplementary motifs in relief, such as satyr masks coming from a Hellenistic tradition launched in Asia Minor more than two centuries before, and their main difference lies in the color of the slip: some of them are still black glazed, in conformity to the Greek fashion, while others adopt the orange-to-light-brown slip typical of the new Roman-dictated fashion (see examples in Chrzanowski 2018: 243, Figs 11–12).

Later, we find at Acrae not only original lamps of Loeschcke VIII type made by the most renowned Tunisian manufactures of the 2nd century AD (MNO-VIVST, IVNIALEX, CIVNDRAC), but also their Sicilian imitations, and, in the 4th century AD, quite a few Tripolitanian lamps, both original and local copies.

Last but not least, following the *flo-ruit* of the late Roman African lamps—the imported ones being the subject of an exhaustive atlas, together with other late African ceramics found on the island (Malfitana and Bonifay 2016)—the excavations delivered a huge number of canonical types of Tunisian lamps and their corollary of Sicilian-made copies, from the finest to the crudest. Here are not only transitional types almost absent from Sicily except for its main centers and ports, but also some fragments of very ‘eclectic’ subtypes, barely known outside Tunisia, more likely to be found in a huge Mediterranean sea harbor like Syracuse than at a mountain site in the hinterland.

The diversity of the lamps from Akrai/Acrae reveals the importance of

the market for lychnological devices in the city with merchants bringing the latest types in fashion at Syracuse or made by its workshops, even as local workshops supplied imitations made by lampmakers in the area, who remained attached to specific lamp types. Thus, the site has every opportunity to deliver new data but also to raise new questions and formulate hypotheses, if not for the whole island, then at least for its southeastern part.

The lamp type considered in this paper, Ricci C, attested *in situ* since its appearance in Italy and its subsequent expansion in the Tyrrhenian world, continued to be intentionally local-made long after it had completely disappeared from all known contexts, both in Sicily and in the rest of the Mediterranean.

LAMPS OF TYPE RICCI C: DEFINITION AND PREDECESSORS

The small-sized wheel-made lamps belonging to the Roman Republican type Ricci C (Ricci 1973: 212–213) are charac-

terized by a rounded body and flat, circular base or slightly raised foot, rounded shoulder and a biconvex profile with



Fig. 3. Typical example of a Ricci C type lamp from a 3rd century BC context (University of Warsaw Mission at Akrai | photo R. Chowaniec)

a very short nozzle, sometimes obtained by pinching the shoulder and piercing the wick-hole [Fig. 3]. Their dimensions, at Akrai, are generally a standard 4.5 cm to 5.5 cm diameter and height rarely more than 3.5 cm.

Most of the lamps from Akrai have a nice, light beige slip, distinguishing them from the Italian production which generally has no slip. This type constitutes the bulk of late Hellenistic/Republican lamps found at Akrai, with more than 30 complete examples and a huge number of fragments.

The shape of these lamps is reminiscent of several Athenian products, such as the 5th century BC type Howland 16B (Howland 1958: 31–33 and Pl. 32) or the later type Howland 28B (Howland 1958: 31–33 and Pl. 41), introduced slightly before Ricci's C type, during the early 3rd century BC. The Greek archetypes need to be recalled here as the lamps were all found at Akrai either on the surface or in

heavily mixed deposits, and can be dated only by parallels, which places them in the 4th century AD. Consequently, their appearance at Akrai predates late Hellenistic/Republican times.

The lamps were originally intended for ritual or votive purposes, because they appear either on a high foot or as ornaments of more complex artifacts, *kernoi* or other kind of vases to the shoulder of which the lamps were added [Figs 4, 5, 6]. Moreover, the clearly ritual significance is emphasized by the decoration of some of them, all pertinent to undefined vases, which were adorned, after firing, with stripes of red paint on the traditional beige slip [see Fig. 5].

The *kernos* fragment (No. 2015/384) [see Fig. 6] with one, almost intact lamp and another fragmentary one is the only piece helping us to define a chronology, even if on the grounds of parallels coming from the opposite side of the island. As a matter of fact, in Sicily, the closest

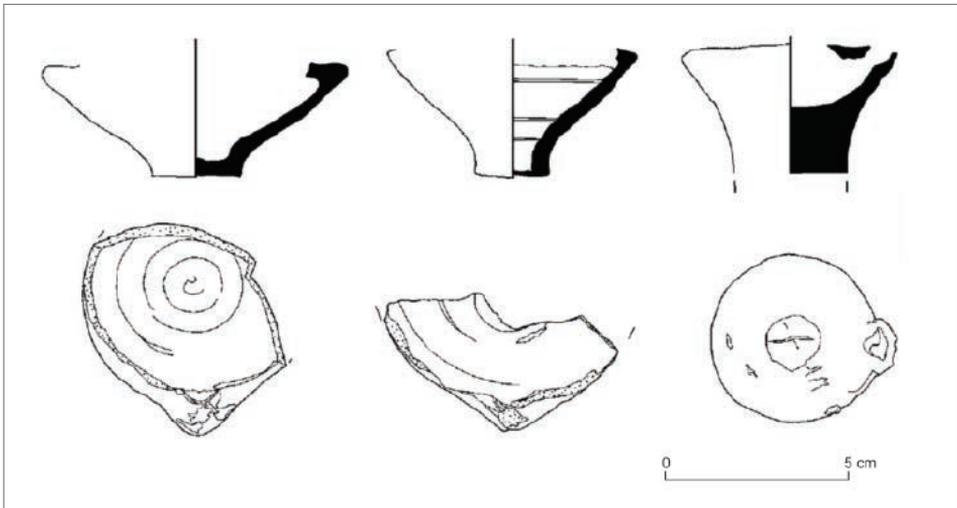


Fig. 4. Examples of lamps with high foot (surface finds, 2013) (University of Warsaw Mission at Akrai | drawing R. Chowaniec)

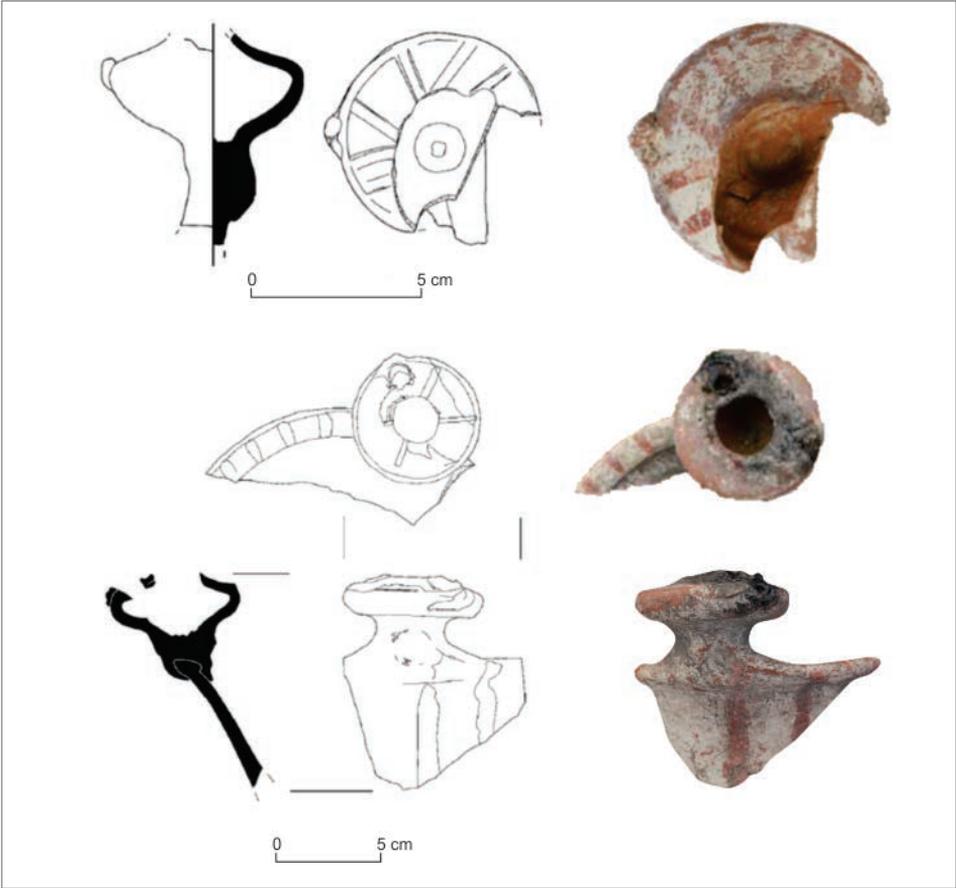


Fig. 5. Red-striped lamps, parts of vases (surface finds, 2013) (University of Warsaw Mission at Akrai | drawing and photo R. Chowaniec)

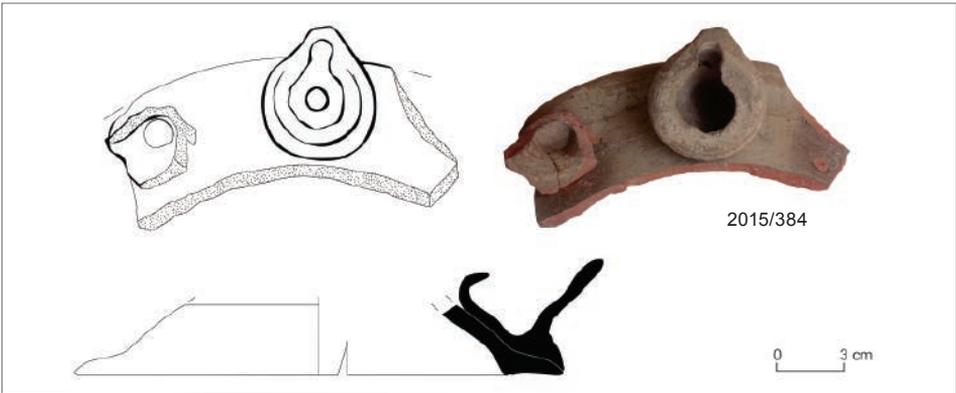


Fig. 6. Part of a *kernos*, from a heavily mixed context (proposed dating from the 3rd century BC to the 6th century AD) (University of Warsaw Mission at Akrai | drawing and photo R. Chowaniec)

published parallels for our fragmentary artifact come from a group of different kinds of multi-nozzled lamps and *kernoi* preserved in the Regional Archaeological Museum of Palermo. They were all discovered in the Sanctuary of Demeter Malophoros at Selinunte. This collection, recently re-examined by Marcus H. Hermanns (2004: Fig. 9, Pl. 4) within the frame of his exhaustive work on Selinunte, offers an intact piece that is very close to our piece. It is a high, large

conical *kernos* (Hermanns 2004: 166, NI 6398, H. 32 cm, W. 17.8 cm at the base) adorned with four crowns of lamps fixed by the potter on the shoulder of the vase. In his study of the type, Hermanns remarks on the rareness of this shape in Sicily, finding it to be usually more common in the Eastern Greek world. He proposes a date around 350 BC for the *kernos* from Selinunte (Hermanns 2004: 71–72, *Kranzlampen*, with extensive bibliography).

TYPE RICCI C AT AKRAI/ACRAE

The excavations unearthed a sealed stratigraphic unit (SU₅₁) dated to the 3rd century BC with three lamps, two of them with combustion traces [Fig. 7], and, above all, two votive deposits (T₁ and T₂), precisely dated to the end of the 3rd century BC, containing numerous in-

tact lamps and quite a few fragments, all belonging to type Ricci C and none with traces of combustion [Figs 8, 9]. The contexts emphasize ritual use of this specific type during the last years of the reign of Hiero II and the renewed *floruit* of the city.



Fig. 7. Lamps of type Ricci C from a sealed context SU₅₁ from the 3rd century BC at Akrai (University of Warsaw Mission at Akrai | photos R. Chowaniec)

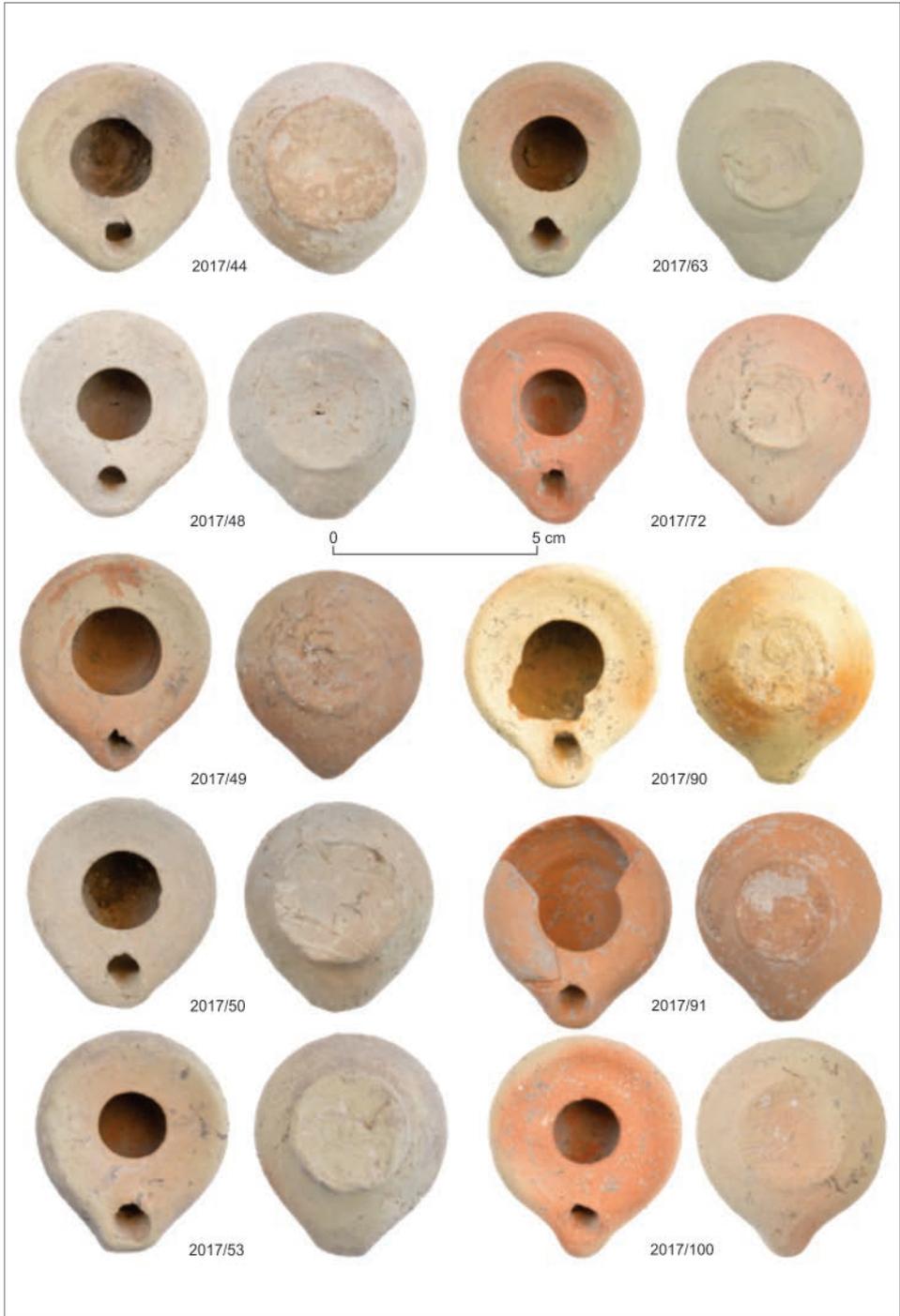


Fig. 8. Lamps of type Ricci C from votive deposit T1 found at Akrai (end of 3rd century BC) (University of Warsaw Mission at Akrai | photos R. Chowaniec)

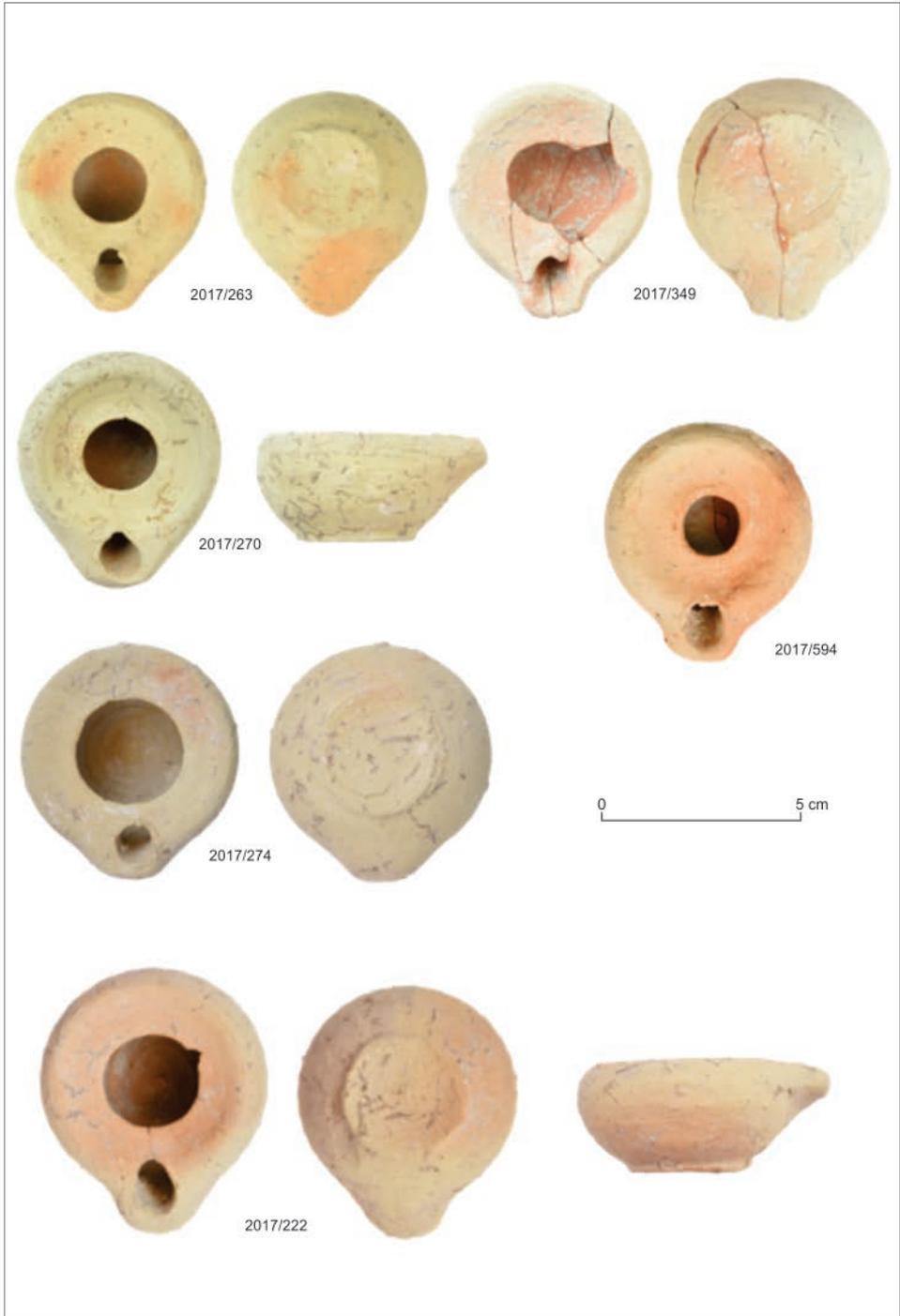


Fig. 9. Lamps of type Ricci C from votive deposit T2 found at Akrai (end of 3rd century BC) (University of Warsaw Mission at Akrai | photos R. Chowaniec)

As a matter of fact, in recent Sicilian literature lamps of this type have been nicknamed “lucerne ionicane” in view of their abundance during the reign of this king. Even if one cannot agree to adopting this new typological name for all of Sicily, mainly in view of the immense differences

between the island products, the definition has in fact been used also to classify northern and western Sicilian lamps with anvil-shaped nozzle, as the example of Monte Iato will demonstrate further on.

For our area, this historical nickname was devised after one very important



Fig. 10A. Ricci C type lamps from Akrai: SU67 (3rd to 1st century BC), SU15A (3rd–2nd century BC to 1st century AD), SU36 (mid 3rd century BC to Augustus), SU31 (3rd to mid 1st century BC) (University of Warsaw Mission at Akrai | photos R. Chowaniec)



Fig. 10B. Ricci C type lamps from Akrai: SU45 (2nd to 1st century BC), SU54, SU59, SU63 (end of the 3rd century BC to beginning of 1st century AD, even later into the 1st century AD for the last SU), SU53 (2nd/1st century BC to Augustus), SU46 (mid 3rd century BC to 1st century AD) (University of Warsaw Mission at Akrai | photos R. Chowaniec)

discovery made a long time ago and recently reconsidered. This is the material from the old excavations in the Syracusan workshop area of Santa Lucia, where several lamp-makers were active through the centuries, starting with this period. Furnace waste containing lamps from the Ricci C category is evidence of this production.

The Akrai assemblage attests to the introduction of the Ricci C type in the mid 3rd century BC and its growing popularity which explained its continued production, without any hiatus, until the very first years of the Roman Empire, even if in minor quantities compared to the numbers from the century when they were first introduced [Fig. 10A-B].

Even if wheel-made and so simple, they “competed” and were found with most of the known types from the Republican period, whether wheel-made (Ricci B and F, very small quantities for each type) or moldmade (Ricci G, Dressel 1 and 2, *Vogelkopflampen*, Dressel 4a and 4b, Loeschke 1, very small number of specimens for each type up to Dressel 2, then a consistent number of specimens from *Vogelkopflampen* onward).

Without any noticeable change in their dimensions, shape, slip (at Akrai, very few of these lamps are without slip), lamps belonging to the type Ricci G, half used, half never used—hence possibly votive—will continue to be present in the Hyblaeian city until shortly before Tiberius’ ascension to imperial power.

TYPE RICCI C IN SICILY AND THE ROMAN WORLD: NEW DISCUSSIONS AND RECENTLY PUBLISHED COMPARATIVE CONTEXTS

This short paper does not propose to be a panoptic list of sites where lamps of Ricci C type were discovered. Instead, it shall focus on some highly relevant papers from the past 10 years, discussing the recent excavations at Monte Pallano (Abruzzo), Rome and Pompeii.

A review of research in the Adriatic area shows this type of lamps to be popular almost only in the Tyrrhenian area, discoveries peaking in Latium and Campania. If their *floruit*, from Tuscany to Calabria, can be dated to the late 3rd and the 2nd century BC, it is now certain that their production extended, at least in Rome, until the 1st century AD.

Quantitatively speaking, even if oil lamps were not as commonplace

in Monte Pallano and Abruzzo as in the coastal areas, all the Republican and Imperial types are still represented, and the wheel-made Republican lamps, including some type Ricci C specimens, are on the whole second in number only to the Imperial discus-lamps, meaning that wheel-made lamps are the most important group by far for the pre-Augustan period (Martin 2018: 316).

As regards Rome, recent investigations at the Horti Lamiani (Ferrandes 2014: 362–366) have shown instead a predilection for moldmade lamps with small globules (Dressel 2, 51%), co-existing with wheel-made lamps, with a notable 9% of type Ricci C specimens.

As far as Campania is concerned, a recent analysis of material from excavations at Pompeii demonstrated not only that lamps of the Ricci C type were produced *in situ*, but that they constituted, together with the Esquiline type lamps, 51% of the Republican lamps discovered there (Cottica and Tomasella 2019: 23). The morphology of Pompeian lamps, dated 3rd to 2nd century BC, is identical to that of lamps from Akrai with one huge difference: all the lamps found in the city under the Vesuvius were fired and sold without slip.

Coming back to Sicily, due to lack of publications, the corpus of lamps from the old excavations of Luigi Bernabò Brea on the neighboring island of Lipari (Bernabò Brea and Cavalier 1965) is still a milestone for starting research on pre-Roman types. There, as well as in northern and western Sicily, the Ricci C type of lamps was attested, but in minor quantities. Sometimes, they are rendered exactly as the lamps of Akrai, like seven specimens dated between the 4th and the 3rd century BC, found in the area of Trapani and preserved in the regional museum there (Famà and Pecorella 2009: 220, Nos 21–22).

The extensive publication of a corpus of lamps from the Swiss excavations at Monte Iato in western Sicily is one of a kind for the island as a whole, sharing a huge amount of information, hypotheses and research possibilities from the first lamps to late Roman times. Four lamps from this site, similar to ours but with an anvil-shaped nozzle, are included by the author in the “tipo ieroniano” or “kitchen lamps” and dated to the 3rd century BC (Käch 2006: 87–88, Nos 400–403, Pl. 323 listing all known par-

allels, mainly from Entella and Termini Imerese); wheel-made lychnological artifacts are scarce after this, being replaced by moldmade products belonging to the Greek types in fashion during the next two centuries.

An interesting phenomenon can be observed at Monte Iato starting from about 50 BC: a spectacular revival of wheel-made lamps, with more than 200 examples that are somehow similar to the previous type—always with an anvil-shaped nozzle but with a flat discus and an applied handle—occurring concurrently with the moldmade lamps from the mid-1st century BC to the third quarter of the 1st century AD (Käch 2006: 149–172, Nos 724–941, Pls 13–19, with a full list of parallels covering all of western Sicily, but also Sybaris, Taranto and Lipari).

With regard to southeastern Sicily, lamps of this type were produced in the above-mentioned workshops of the Santa Lucia neighborhood of Syracuse. Showcases of the “Paolo Orsi” Regional Museum abound in type Ricci C lamps from almost every archaeological site of the macroregion, alas all unpublished, with the exception of a drawing of the most common ceramics found during the 1950s excavations of the votive *fossae* situated around the Ara of Hiero II (Gentili 1954: Fig. 19).

The abovementioned information, even if scarce and mostly unpublished, confirms the popularity of type Ricci C lamps in southeastern Sicily, and the Akrai evidence is the first published data to further an understanding not so much of 3rd-century BC reality as of the persistence in the region of these simple wheel-made lamps that had already disappeared elsewhere. [LC]

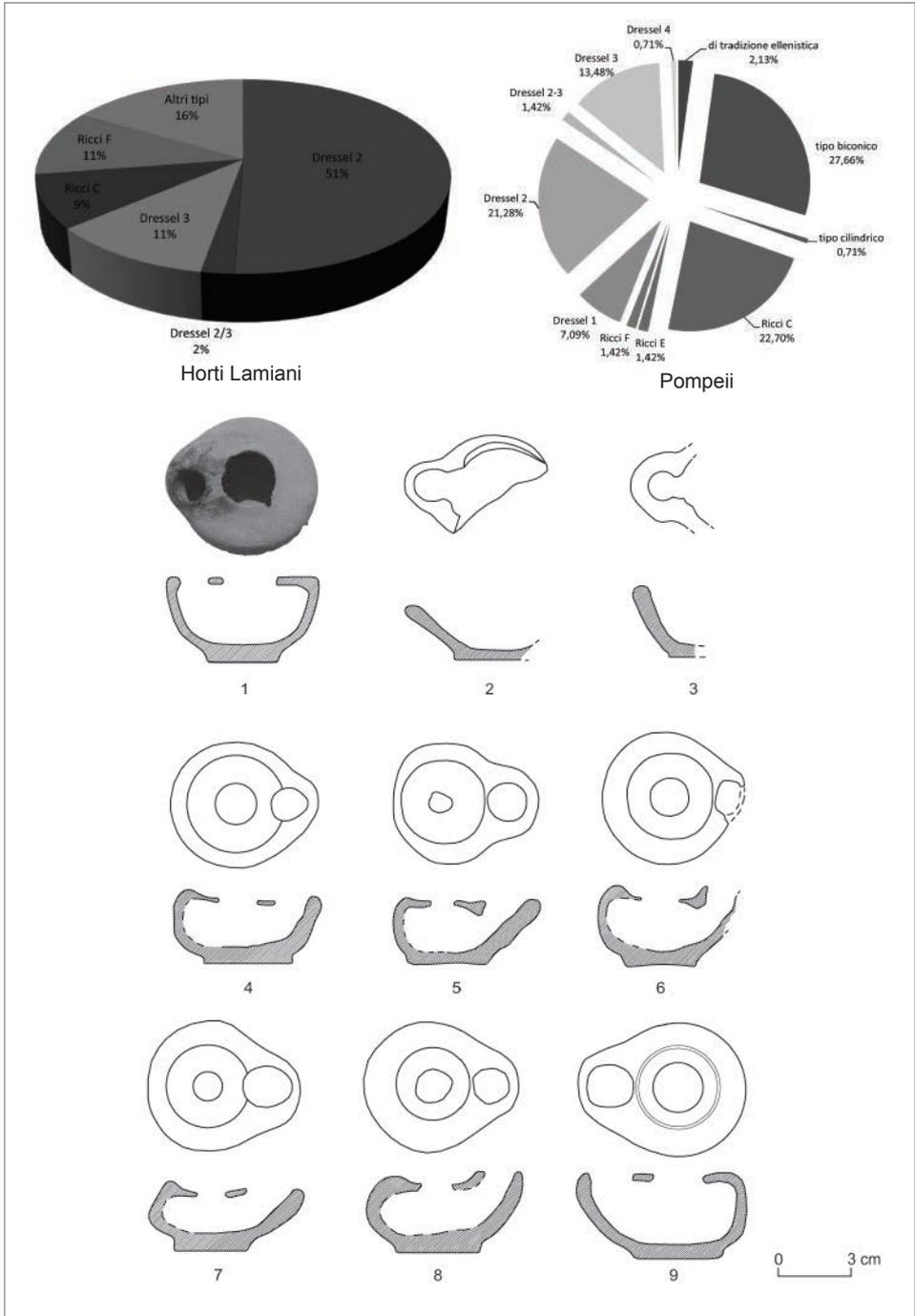


Fig. 11. Ricci C lamps from Italy: top, typological distribution of lamps from Horti Lamiani (left) and Pompeii; below, some of the lamps of this type from Pompeii (After Ferrandes 2014: 361, Fig. 9 [top left] and Cottica and Tomasella 2019: 26, 29, Figs 1 and 6)

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