CHAPTER 13

The Role of Overseas Export and Local Consumption Demand in the Development of Viticulture in Central-Adriatic Italy (200 BC–AD 150). The Case of the Ager Potentinus and the Wider Potenza Valley

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1 Introduction

The history of Italy’s wine industry between the end of the Second Punic War (218–201 BC) and the High Imperial period (late 1st–2nd century AD) has long been described in terms of a boom-and-bust cycle, driven mainly by overseas exports and provincial import replacement. In a now classic narrative, Rome’s progressive conquest of the Mediterranean in the Late Republican period (200–30 BC) generated enormous markets in both East and West that consisted not only of Roman colonists and military men on campaign, but also of local elites, keen to emulate the new fashions, habits and status symbols introduced in their regions by Italian merchants and businessmen. This very favourable conjuncture offered financially robust farmers and other entrepreneurial individuals in central Italy the opportunity to specialize in the production of highly profitable ‘cash crops’ such as grapes (and olives), and thus to intensify their cultivation through the introduction of a comprehensive system of more systematic land management. Viticulture in particular was in that context a highly remunera-

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1 Studies on the development of Italian viticulture in the Late Republican and Early Imperial period have traditionally focused on the well-known central-Tyrrhenian transport containers, embodied by the types Graeco-Italic, Dressel 1, and Dressel 2–4 (Tchernia (1986, 42–53); Hesnard et al. (1989); Maza (1998)). On the other hand, the role of the central-Adriatic amphorae has long been neglected. For instance, the Lamboglia 2—now seen as one of the most representative of the central-Adriatic wine amphorae—was long considered to be an oil container from Apulia (Tchernia (1986, 53–56 and 68–74)). In recent years, however, our knowledge has much improved, and it is now clear that they, too, are an important group of transport containers, reflecting a major wine trade which existed along the eastern coast of the Italian peninsula (Panella (2010, 17–21, 90–94, with cited bibliography)) (see infra).
tive activity which—by intensive exploitation of good agricultural land and by means of massive investments—could generate substantial surpluses of which a part could be shipped to external markets; a process for which the widespread occurrence of central-Italian amphorae across the Empire is ample evidence.\(^2\) When, from the Augustan period onwards, some of the provincial markets began to produce the wine (and oil) they had previously imported, a gradual decrease of Italian transmarine exports occurred. At the same time, ceramic assemblages, especially from Ostia and Rome, attest to the increasing importance of wine imports from the provinces. This has led some scholars to believe that provincial import replacement and competition during the Early Imperial period caused a crisis in Italian viticulture.\(^3\)

Over the years, other studies have provided more nuanced explanations for these observed developments.\(^4\) In particular, it seems unlikely that the decrease of amphora exports directly mirrors the end of Italian commercial wine production, but rather more likely that it reflects the reduction of a particular sector of the wine trade that had always been more oriented towards overseas rather than local markets.\(^5\) The possible role of this domestic market as a driving force for agro-economic change in general—and for viticulture development in particular—has remained largely unexplored.\(^6\) One key reason for this over-emphasis on provincial surplus extraction whilst underestimating the role of intra-regional consumption is archaeological representativeness. While amphorae in general are good indicators for viticulture intensification and expansion, they are only conspicuous in the archaeological record because of their durable nature. As these earthenware containers were rather designed for sea and river trade, their distribution was mostly restricted to coastal areas, or inland areas that were serviced by large navigable rivers. On the other hand, their fragility and shape undoubtedly rendered them less suitable for transporting goods overland by cart or pack animal. Perishable packaging materials such as sacks or barrels would have provided a more suitable solution. As the carriage of wine (and oil) produced in the territories of the many Italian towns and intended for local consumption frequently must have involved overland transport, much of this type of intra-regional provisioning is not clearly man-

\(^2\) Rosenstein (2008); Launaro (2011a, 168–169).

\(^3\) For central-Tyrrhenian Italy, see Carandini (1980); Panella (1981). For central-Adriatic Italy, see Panella (2010). For an overall synthesis, see Tchernia (2006).

\(^4\) Morley (1996, 10–11) provides a good overview.


\(^6\) For exceptions, see Hopkins (1978a); Patterson (1987); Morley (1996).