THE MODENA WELL-HOARDS: RURAL DOMESTIC ARTEFACT ASSEMBLAGES IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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Abstract

This article discusses a number of late antique well-hoards found in the vicinity of Modena, which the author investigated in an earlier work published in 1994. Here, the coherence of this group, the nature of the finds from each hoard, the identity of their possible owners and their dating are re-considered. The author also questions his earlier supposition that the hoards were deposited as a result of generalised crisis, and an argument is presented that they reflect the rural material culture of a more continuous transitional period.

THE MODENA WELL-HOARDS:
THEIR LOCATION AND HISTORY

“L’anno 1839 procedendosi a tagliare le annose Quercie del Bosco di Sgolfô, nell’atterrarne una si avvenne il contadino in un pozzo pieno di rottami e terra”.¹

It was with these words that the history of the artefacts known as the Modena Hoards began. The well in question, emptied in 1841, contained an unexpected archaeological haul: over 100 pieces of pottery, around 15 bronze vessels, some wooden items, lead weights, fragments of soapstone vessels, and other objects besides.² From the name of the property on which it is located, this well came to be called ‘Sgolfô’.

The first expert to examine the material subsequent to its discovery, C. Pancaldi, believed that the hoard dated to the Etruscan period. Noting that the deposition of the hoard was intentional, he assumed that it held a ritual significance, and linked the material to Bacchanalian rites that he assumed had occurred in the region. This idea was suggested by the ‘signati’ pots’, vessels that bore incised marks in their clay, which

¹ Pancaldi (1841) 13–14.
² Gelichi (1994a) 15.
were used to mark the measurements for the quantities of oil, wine, and other liquids used for libations.

At the time, the find was considered in some respects exceptional for the quantity and range of objects, but some years later a similar hoard came to light nearby. This second well, named ‘Casini’ after its owner, was excavated in 1867 by an archaeologist named Arsenio Crespellani, and fortunately we possess more information about the nature of the actual excavation than was the case for the Sgolfo discovery. This second cache of objects also contained numerous ceramic pots, iron utensils, bone, wooden objects, and bronze vessels (fig. 1). Crespellani, like Pancaldi before him, noted that the material appeared to have been deliberately deposited, but he interpreted its age as somewhat later than the Etruscan period. He felt that the reason for the deposition of the vessels was linked to their original sacred ritual context: they had been deposited in the hope that they might avoid desecration. Thus, he reasoned, the objects perhaps came from a time when there were threats from both Christians and invasions.

The haul from the region’s wells was not yet complete, however. Three years after the publication of Crespellani’s volume, during excavations at the Bronze Age settlement of Gorzano, a new well came to light. The excavation, led by F. Coppi, revealed a hoard similar to the two earlier finds: numerous ceramic vessels, along with agricultural tools and several bronze vessels (fig. 2). This find essentially brought to a close what might be considered the first phase of research into the so-called Modena well-hoards. Of all those who studied the hoards during the period, only Crespellani devoted particular attention to the function and chronology of the material, or speculated about their significance. Other researchers were content with the stylistic analysis of individual pieces from specific sites, such as the finely decorated bronze jugs.

Interest in the well-hoards was reignited in the early 1970s, when, on the banks of the River Panaro in the region of San Cesario, a new well was excavated that apparently contained items similar to those discovered in the Sgolfo, Casini, and Gorzano wells (fig. 3). The discovery at San Cesario afforded a fresh opportunity to re-examine the three sites uncovered in the 19th c., alongside other subsequent discoveries made during the interim (such as the Spilamberto well), and to make a full

3 Crespellani (1875); Casini (1878).
4 Coppi (1879).