

Terracotta *unguentaria* in the far west of the Roman Empire: an overview

Elisa de Sousa, Carlos Pereira and Ana Margarida Arruda

Abstract: Excavations carried out in several domestic and funerary areas across the Portuguese territory have resulted in the retrieval of a significant number of terracotta *unguentaria*. So far, studies concerning this specific type of vessel are very rare in this western region of the Roman Empire, and a wider reading concerning their characteristics, typology, function and chronology is necessary. In this chapter, the available data on Roman terracotta *unguentaria* retrieved in the Portuguese territory are presented, in order to enable further readings focused on the commercial dynamics and importance of the adoption of this type of artefact in the western area of the Roman Empire.

Keywords: Iberian Peninsula, Portugal, Atlantic, terracotta *unguentaria*, Roman period.

Introduction

In the Portuguese territory, the use of terracotta *unguentaria*, also known as *balsamaria*, was relatively frequent during Roman times.

To this day, we know of several fragments (103 MNI) retrieved both in domestic and in funerary areas scattered throughout the geographical limits of ancient Lusitania, dating mostly from the late second century BCE until the late first/early second century CE (Fig. 12.1).

Morphologically, the great majority of these fragments are integrated into the two most popular types of *unguentaria*:¹

- fusiform profile, with slender or rounder bodies, long tubular neck and a high foot, which corresponds mostly to Michel Py's type B (1993), and is particularly characteristic during the Roman Republican period (second and first century BCE);
- bulbous or 'pear-shaped' profile, with tubular neck and flat base, which corresponds mostly to Michel Py's type D (1993), and appears during the mid-first century BCE, lasting until the late first century CE.

Considering the high state of fragmentation generally observed in the assemblages of terracotta *unguentaria*, it is sometimes difficult to attribute a more specific morphological classification to most pieces.² The actual relevance of some of these typological variations may be questioned, especially as concerns chronological validity, considering that different shapes were used simultaneously.³ To establish a specific and useful

evolution of *unguentarium* shapes we should first determine the production kilns, to identify or evaluate the usefulness of highly detailed morphological criteria in the framework of a single production.

Terracotta *unguentaria* were primarily used as containers for liquids, viscous and/or powdered/granular substances (incense, powder cosmetics, perfume oils, unguents, medicinal compounds and even specific alimentary products, as proposed by some researchers), and seem to be directly associated with sumptuary and cosmetic functions.⁴

It is still under discussion whether these vessels were transported empty or whether they already contained their primary products during shipping.⁵ In this matter, an important element to take into consideration is the rarity of some of the substances traced by archaeometric analyses,⁶ which could indicate that their content, more than the shapes themselves, were the primary purpose of this trading. These same analyses have also showed a preference for resinous essences that were more resistant to ephemeral perfumed extracts (such as calamus root, cardamom, cassia, cinnamon, labdanum and opoponax),⁷ which could be directly related to its higher durability inside the vessels themselves.

Nonetheless, at their final destination, these *unguentaria* were used mainly as part of a 'cosmetic kit', in domestic environments, or as ritual elements, in funerary contexts (either as offerings for the deceased, as part of the ritual itself, or even in order to mask more offensive odors, a

¹ Anderson-Stojanović 1987.

² In this matter we advise the reader to consult the table presented by Camilli 1999, with the equivalences between the various typological proposals for the classification of terracotta *unguentaria*.

³ Anderson-Stojanović 1987, 109.

⁴ Anderson-Stojanović 1987; Nikolić and Raičković Savić 2006; Mortensen 2014.

⁵ Anderson-Stojanović 1987, 115; Camilli 1999; Huguet Enguita and Ribera i Lacomba 2013.

⁶ Mortensen 2014.

⁷ Mortensen 2014, 81.

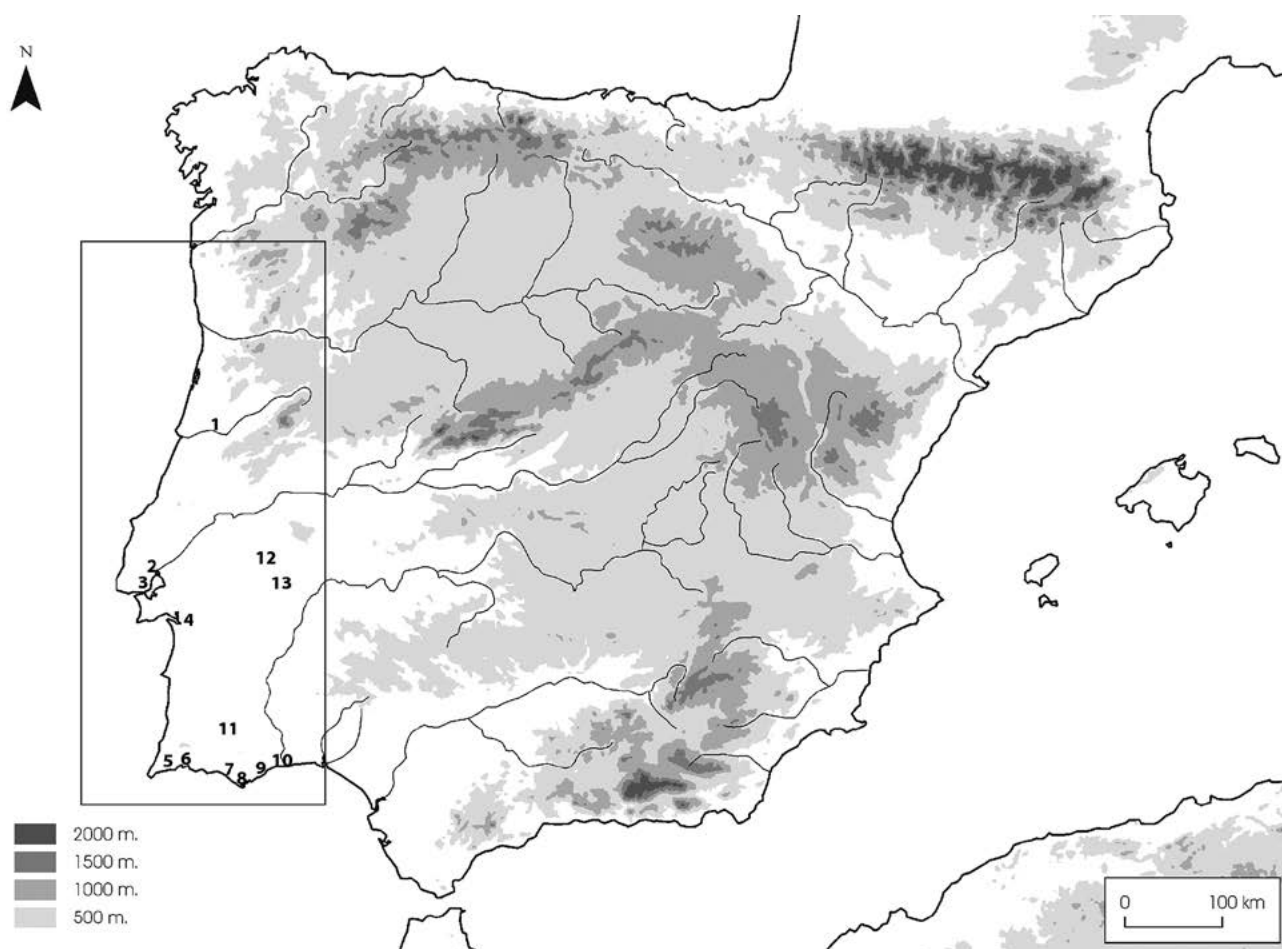


Figure 12.1: Sites in the Portuguese territory with terracotta *unguentaria*: 1. Conimbriga; 2. Alcáçova de Santarém; 3. Lisbon; 4. Alcácer do Sal; 5. Monte Molião; 6. Silves; 7. Loulé; 8. Faro; 9. Balsa; 10. Castelo de Castro Marim; 11. Mesas do Castelhinho; 12. Cabeça de Vaia Monte; 13. Serrones – Elvas (by E. de Sousa, 2018).

hypothesis that is problematic concerning the presence of *unguentaria* in cremation burials).

After the mid/late first century CE, these ceramic vessels practically disappear from the artefactual repertoire, as they were systematically replaced by glass reproductions.⁸

12.1. The use of terracotta *unguentaria* in domestic contexts

Finds of roman terracotta *unguentaria* in domestic contexts are relatively rare in the Portuguese territory. Nonetheless, the number of sites in which they have been documented has been growing during the last few years.

The case of the assemblage recovered in Alcáçova de Santarém is to be highlighted, considering it is the Portuguese settlement that provided the largest number of this type of vases, with 65 fragments – 30 MNI,⁹ all of which seem to be imported from the Italic Peninsula. Although the set is considerably fragmented, the high representation of these vessels may be due mostly to

the well-conserved layers of the site's roman phases of occupation, dated between the first century BCE and the first century CE,¹⁰ a period in which the production and distribution of terracotta *unguentaria* across the western areas of the Roman Empire reached its peak.

The two main morphological types of these vessels are represented in the site.¹¹ The fusiform type (Py's type B – some specifically from type B6 and B8) is the most popular, with 17 MNI, while bulbous *unguentaria* (Py's type D) are rarer, with only 5 MNI. Other fragments (5 MNI) offer doubts concerning their classification and may belong to either type. It is also important to highlight the presence of one fragment of a large-sized *unguentarium* (Fig. 12.2.5), similar to others found in Arles, Pompeii and Valentia.¹²

It is also interesting to highlight the fact that a significant number of these *unguentaria* (12 MNI – Fig. 12.2.5, 11, 13, 15–16, 18–20, 22, 24–25, 29), including the large-sized *unguentarium*, were retrieved in the area of the

⁸ Anderson-Stojanović 1987.

⁹ Sousa and Arruda 2018a.

¹⁰ Arruda and Viegas 1999; Viegas 2003; Almeida 2008.

¹¹ Sousa and Arruda 2018a.

¹² Huguet Enguita and Ribera i Lacomba, 2013.

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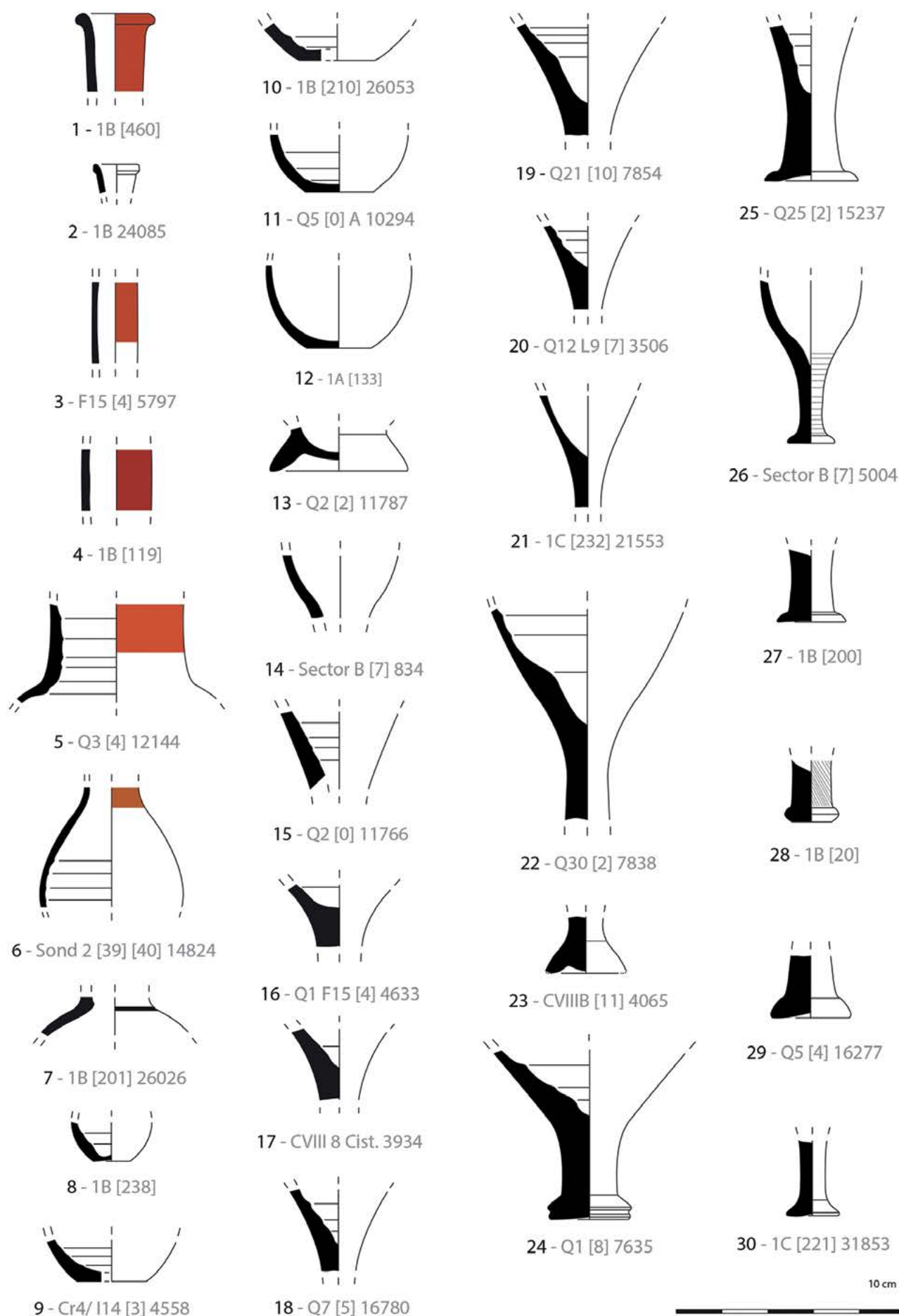


Figure 12.2: Terracotta *unguentaria* from Alcáçova de Santarém (after Sousa and Arruda 2018; by E. de Sousa, 2018).

Roman Temple of Santarém, built during the last quarter of the first century BCE,¹³ and therefore could be related to offerings or rituals performed in this sanctuary (Fig. 12.2). In Portugal's southern area, on the western coast of the Algarve, terracotta *unguentaria* were also identified in Monte Molião (Lagos), belonging also to Italic but mainly to South Iberian productions, probably from the Cádiz area (Fig. 12.3.1–10). In this site, all of the finds seem to belong to the fusiform type (9 MNI), although two fragments (2 MNI) offer some doubts concerning its classification.

Four fragments were recovered in primary archaeological contexts dating from the late second to the early first century BCE.¹⁴ They all seem to have been produced in the Cádiz area,¹⁵ corresponding to the fusiform *unguentaria* (Fig. 12.3.5–8).

One other fragment, from Py's type B, was recovered from a later layer, dating from the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, and was probably imported from the Italic Peninsula, exhibiting a black coating on its interior surface (Fig. 12.3.4).

Four other fragments of terracotta *unguentaria* were retrieved from layers dating from the late first century to the first half of the second century CE, and are quite probably residual artefacts (Fig. 12.3.1–2, 9–10). Two are bases of fusiform *unguentaria*, one of which was produced in the Cádiz area or in the Lower Guadalquivir Basin (Fig. 12.3.10), while the other exhibits a grey fabric (Fig. 12.3.9), making it difficult to pinpoint an exact origin. The other two fragments correspond to rims. One of them, probably produced in the Cádiz area (Fig. 12.3.2), has a triangular profile, which could belong either to the fusiform or bulbous *unguentaria*. The other rim, which is also difficult to classify, is probably an Italic production, and exhibits a black-glazed coating on both surfaces (Fig. 12.3.1). It is also important to highlight the recovery of a fragment of a large-sized *unguentarium*,¹⁶ probably also of Italic origin (Fig. 12.3.3), found in a layer dating from the late second to the early first century BCE.

Another important site on the coast of the Algarve is the Castle of Castro Marim, located in the estuary of Guadiana, near the Spanish frontier. Terracotta *unguentaria* are relatively rare in this settlement, with only five fragments (5 MNI) identified so far (Fig. 12.3.11–15). Fortunately, all of them were retrieved from primary archaeological layers dating from the second half of the first century BCE, belonging to Py's type B. Most of them correspond to products probably manufactured in the Cádiz area (Fig. 12.3.12–15), with only one exception. In this case (Fig. 12.3.11), the production seems to be of Italic origin, although its morphological classification is ambiguous.

However, considering its archaeological context, the probability of its being part of a fusiform *unguentarium* is fairly high.

A similar situation occurs in Faro, where four fragments of fusiform *unguentaria* were retrieved from Roman Republican layers excavated in Quintal da Judiária (late second/first century BCE). According to the publication, all of them seem to have been produced in the Cádiz area.¹⁷ However, the presence of painted bands and interior slip in these fragments, as well as the description of the fabrics itself, could indicate an Italic origin (see discussion in section 12.4).

Terracotta *unguentaria* are considerably rarer in other major settlements occupied during Roman times, although this scenario may be due mainly to the scarcity of published data.

In Lisbon, we know only of a fragment from a fusiform vessel, probably of Italic origin, recovered in a context dating from the third quarter of the second century BCE.¹⁸ From the later chronologies, from the mid-first century CE, we know of another two fragments of bulbous *unguentaria*, probably also of Italic production, recovered during an excavation that took place in Rua dos Remédios.¹⁹

In Alcácer do Sal, located in the Sado estuary, the only available data concerns a fragment recovered in the habitation area.²⁰ Unfortunately, we do not know either the type (fusiform or bulbous) or any information concerning its production.

In the interior, in Mesas do Castelinho, only one fragment of a fusiform *unguentarium* was identified, probably of Italic origin,²¹ as in Cabeça de Vaia Monte, where the published sherd, produced in grey ware, may also belong to a similar morphology.²²

In Northern Lusitania, in Conimbriga, we know only of two fragments belonging to bulbous *unguentaria* (Py's type D), dated to the mid-first century CE.²³ No information concerning their production is available.

12.2. The use of terracotta *unguentaria* in funerary contexts

Most *unguentaria* from Portuguese funerary contexts are glass productions.²⁴ However, we know of at least some fragments of ceramic types, recovered mainly from coastal *necropoleis*.

Some of these vessels were identified in funerary areas dating from the late first century BCE to the early first

¹³ Arruda and Viegas 1999.

¹⁴ Arruda and Pereira 2010; Arruda and Sousa 2013; Sousa and Arruda 2014.

¹⁵ Sousa and Arruda 2014.

¹⁶ Sousa and Arruda 2018a.

¹⁷ Gomes 2016, 111–12.

¹⁸ Mota et al. 2015.

¹⁹ Silva 2015.

²⁰ Sepúlveda et al. 2003.

²¹ Fabião 1998, 338, figs. 93–98.

²² Fabião 1998, 338, fig. 112, no. 2.

²³ Alarcão et al. 1976.

²⁴ Pereira 2014.

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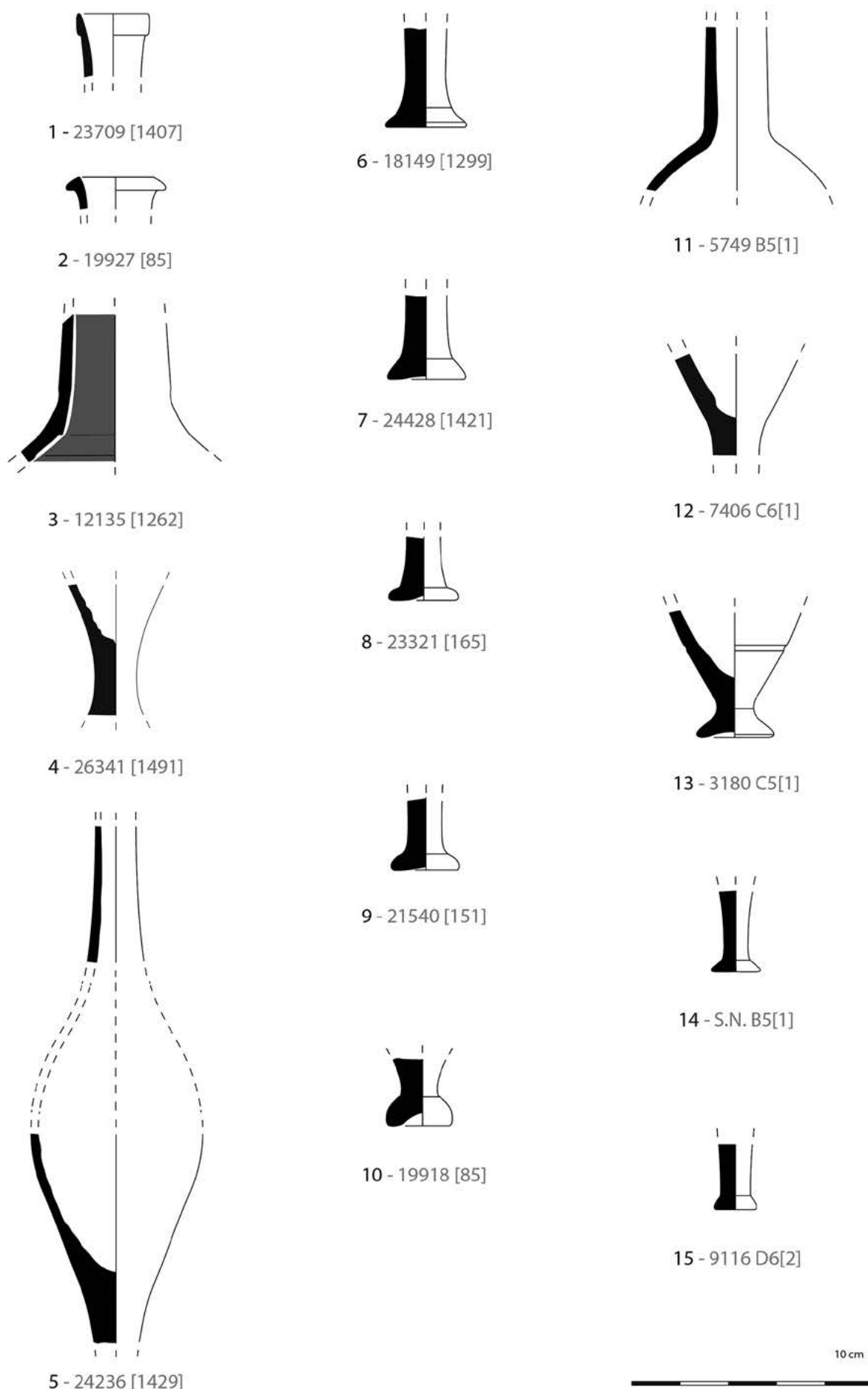
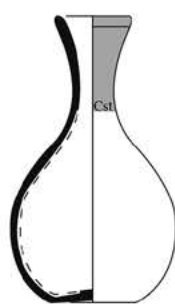
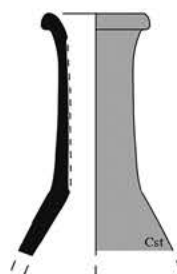


Figure 12.3: Terracotta *unguentaria* from Monte Molião and Castelo de Castro Marim (by E. de Sousa, 2018).



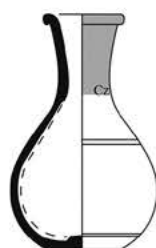
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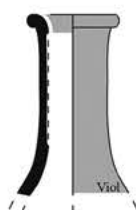
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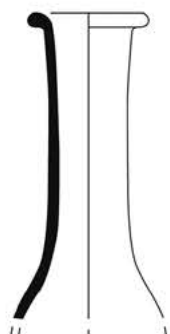
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11 - 7318



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10 cm

Figure 12.4: Terracotta *unguentaria* from Rua dos Correeiros, Lisbon (after Bugalhão et al. 2013; by E. de Sousa, 2018).

century CE. The two most important sets were retrieved in Lisbon (Rua dos Correeiros) and in Balsa.²⁵

In the first case, in Rua dos Correeiros, the assemblage incorporates 18 vessels (18 MNI), probably produced in the Italic Peninsula, corresponding mostly to Py's types D1 and D2 (Fig. 12.4). They were associated with a necropolis used during the last quarter of the first century BCE and early first century CE, in which the rituals of inhumation and cremation coexist.²⁶ It is important to highlight that, in this case, only bulbous *unguentaria* were identified.

As for Balsa, a necropolis in the Algarve used from the late first century BCE until the second century CE, which also provided a significant number of these vessels (11 MNI), the fusiform (2 MNI) and bulbous (9 MNI) shapes coexist, even if they probably correspond to different phases of its use (Fig. 12.5). These ceramic vessels are related to Italic productions,²⁷ and were replaced by glass *unguentaria* during the first century CE.²⁸

Also in the Algarve, another bulbous *unguentarium* (Py's type D), probably produced in the Italic Peninsula, was recovered in the necropolis of Monte Molião,²⁹ although no information concerning the exact archaeological context is available.

In a nearby area, in Silves, three bulbous *unguentaria* were retrieved, all of which are apparently of Italic origin.³⁰ Unfortunately, we have no data concerning their archaeological context either, although their excellent conservation seems to indicate a funerary environment. The same situation occurs with the fusiform *unguentarium* retrieved in Loulé, which appears to be also of Italic production.³¹

Another case worth mentioning is the Alcácer do Sal necropolis, where 18 fragments of terracotta *unguentaria* (11 MNI) were recovered. Fusiform *unguentaria* are more frequent (7 MNI), while the bulbous type is rarer³² (4 MNI). The fabric description could enable their correspondence with Italic productions, particularly considering the presence of interior coatings and exterior painted bands.

The presence of terracotta *unguentaria* in the innermost *necropoleis* is considerably rarer. As a matter of fact, we know of only a single case, the necropolis of Serrones (Elvas), where two bulbous vessels were recovered.³³

12.3. Production

Considering the available data and the nature of the studies carried out so far, it is quite difficult to establish

with precision the origin of terracotta *unguentaria* found in the Portuguese territory. So far, the insufficiency of data related to the characterization of specific production kilns hinders a determination of a more exact origin for this type of vessel.

If in fact these vessels were traded not by their morphology, but mainly by their content, as seems likely, this would involve an even wider geographical range, considering the exotic nature of some of the identified contents (such as spikenard – *Nardostachys jatamansi* – and myrrh).³⁴ It is probable that specialized workshops, like for example the ones found in Pompeii,³⁵ assembled the raw materials and subsequently manufactured the essences, which were then exported in ceramic vessels (especially in *unguentaria*) across the Roman Empire.

The fragments that we considered of Italic origin show identical fabric characteristics to the thin-walled pottery produced in the same area,³⁶ which is relatively frequent in these western settlements.³⁷ They normally exhibit thin clay, mostly with red or brownish tones, and a smooth texture on the exterior surface. The great majority of these vessels exhibit an interior slip coating, probably destined to make them impermeable. Another characteristic feature is the presence of red or black bands that decorated the rim or the neck area of these terracotta *unguentaria* (Fig. 12.6).

Hispanic productions have already been identified in other studies.³⁸ The vessels we considered specifically of South Iberian production exhibit coarser production, with rougher textures, and pale-yellow fabrics. They are very similar to the common wares manufactured in the Cádiz area,³⁹ which is quite abundant in Southern Portugal, both in Roman Republican and Roman Imperial phases.⁴⁰ So far, in all the vessels showing these fabric characteristics, we have not found any trace of interior coatings (Fig. 12.7).

A final remark should be addressed to the grey *unguentaria* productions, which are relatively rare, and very difficult to ascribe to a specific area. In some cases, they could be related to local or regional manufactures, but in others, they may have been imported from more distant areas. The particular tone of these examples may be due to variations in firing processes, making it difficult to establish a comparison with other potsherds.

Considering these premises, it is interesting to highlight the predominance of Italic productions in the Western Atlantic settlements (Fig. 12.8). The only area where

²⁵ Bugalhão et al. 2013; Nolen 1994; Pereira 2014.

²⁶ Bugalhão et al. 2013.

²⁷ Nolen 1994.

²⁸ Nolen 1994; Pereira 2014.

²⁹ Pereira 2014.

³⁰ AAVV 2001.

³¹ AAVV 2017.

³² Gomes and Alves 2017.

³³ Nolen 1985.

³⁴ Mortensen 2014, 80–85.

³⁵ Borgard et al. 2005; Brun 1998; Brun and Monteix 2009; Ribera et al. 2011.

³⁶ Marabini 1973; Mayet 1975; Ricci 1985.

³⁷ Among others, Arruda and Sousa 2003; López Mullor 1990; Mayet 1975; Morais 2010; Sousa and Arruda 2018b.

³⁸ Forti 1962, 143–57; Saraçoğlu 2011, 4; Jovanović 2014, 90.

³⁹ Sáez Romero 2008.

⁴⁰ Sousa and Arruda 2014.

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Figure 12.5: Terracotta *unguentaria* from Balsa (after Nolen 1994 and Pereira 2014; by E. de Sousa, 2018).

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Figure 12.6: Terracotta *unguentaria* from Alcáçova de Santarém, probably produced in the Italic Peninsula (by E. de Sousa, 2018).



Figure 12.7: Terracotta *unguentaria* from Castelo de Castro Marim, probably produced in Southern Iberia (Cádiz area) (by E. de Sousa, 2018).

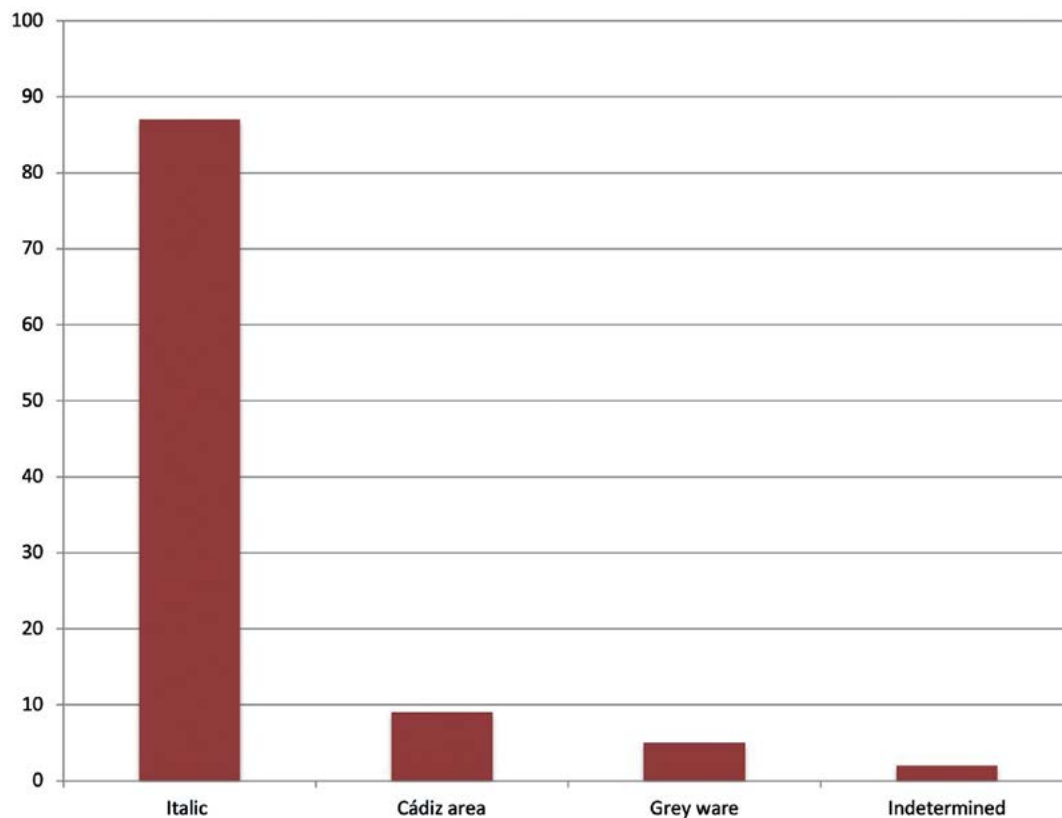


Figure 12.8: Distribution of terracotta *unguentaria* from their assumed production area (base MNI) (by E. de Sousa, 2018).

Table 12.1: Table of terracotta *unguentaria* recovered in the Portuguese territory (by E. de Sousa, 2018).

Site	Type	Frgs.	NMI	Types (Py 1993)	Production	Chronology	References
1- Conimbriga	Habitat	2	2	D (2 MNI)	?	Mid-first cent. CE	Alarcão and Etiènne 1976
2- Alcáçova de Santarém	Habitat	65	30	B (17 MNI); B/D (7 MNI); D (5 MNI); Large sized (1 MNI)	Italic (30 MNI)	First cent. BCE/First cent. CE	Sousa and Arruda 2018
3- Lisbon (Correiros)	Necropolis	18	18	D (18 MNI)	Italic (18 MNI)	Last decades of the first cent. BCE/First half of the first cent. CE	Bugalhão et al. 2013
3- Lisbon (Castelo de São Jorge)	Habitat	1	1	B (1 MNI)	Italic (?)	150-125 BCE	Mota et al. 2014
3- Lisbon (Rau dos Remédios)	Habitat	2	2	D (2 MNI)	Italic	Mid-first cent. CE	Silva 2015
4- Alcácer do Sal	Habitat	1	1	B/D (1 MNI)	?	First cent. CE	Sepúlveda et al. 2003
4- Alcácer do Sal	Necropolis	18	11	B (7 MNI); D (4 MNI)	Italic (?) (11 MNI)	Late second cent. BCE/First cent. CE	Gomes and Alves 2017
5- Monte Molião	Habitat	9	9	B (6 MNI); B? (2 MNI); Large sized (1 MNI)		Late second cent. BCE/First cent. CE	Sousa and Arruda 2014, 2018
5- Monte Molião	Necropolis	1	1	D (1 MNI)	Italic (?)		Pereira 2014
6- Silves	Necropolis (?)	3	3	D (3 MNI)	Italic (?) (3 MNI)	Late first cent. BCE/First cent. CE	AAVV 2001
7- Loulé	Necropolis (?)	1	1	B (1 MNI)	Italic (?) (1 MNI)	Late first cent. BCE/First cent. CE	AAVV 2017
8- Faro	Habitat	4	4	B (4 MNI)	Italic (?)	Late second/late first cent. BCE	Gomes 2016
9- Balsa	Necropolis	11	11	B (2 MNI); D (9 MNI)	Italic (?) (11 MNI)	Late first cent. BCE/First cent. CE	Nolen 1994; Pereira 2014
10- Castelo de Castro Marim	Habitat	5	5	B (5 MNI)	Italic (1 MNI); Cádiz area (4 MNI)		
11- Mesas do Castelinho	Habitat	1	1	B (1 MNI)	Italic (?)	First cent. BCE	Fabião 1998
12- Cabeça de Vaia Monte	Habitat	1	1	B ? (1 MNI)	Grey ware (?)	First cent. BCE	Fabião 1998
13- Elvas (Serrones)	Necropolis	2	2	D (2 MNI)	?	First/second cent. CE	Nolen 1985

there is any significant presence of southern Iberian manufactures is southern Portugal, particularly in the Algarve. This scenario is not, however, exclusive to the *unguentaria* assemblages, and is probably related to the strong commercial and cultural links that connect these two areas from the Late Iron Age and continue during the Roman occupation.⁴¹ Nonetheless, it is important to remark that these observations are based on macroscopic observations, and therefore must be verified in the future through analytical data.

12.4. Distribution

The distribution of this type of vessel across the Portuguese territory occurs mainly in coastal areas and is considerably rarer in the interior (Table 12.1). In fact, and so far, the only two sites which have provided these vessels are Mesas do Castelinho and Cabeça de Vaia Monte, both of them from the Roman Republican period, the necropolis of Serrones, in Elvas, dated to the first and second centuries CE, and the Roman city of Conimbriga, located in the north. This distribution may reflect the impact of maritime trading, which is naturally mostly represented in coastal areas, while the distribution of the corresponding products to the innermost areas occurs with less intensity.

Nonetheless, we must also take into consideration the fact that studies carried out specifically upon terracotta *unguentaria* are relatively rare in the Portuguese territory. Therefore, the probability that many of these vessels remain to be properly identified in the artefact assemblages of the Roman period is considerably high. We can only hope that future publications may provide a more real assessment of the use of these particular vessels in the western areas of the Roman Empire.

Conclusion

The use of terracotta *unguentaria* in the Portuguese territory was relatively frequent during the Roman period. The available data shows an even distribution of these vessels in domestic (56 MNI) and funerary (47 MNI) environments, indicating that they were equally important in everyday and liturgical activities.

Nevertheless, a pattern of higher concentrations of these vessels in coastal areas clearly reflects that their acquisition is directly related to maritime trading. As a matter of fact, the significance of what we consider Italic productions is overwhelming in the global overview of terracotta *unguentaria* in this western area, the circuits of distribution of which were necessarily linked with this type of commerce. So far, we have no data indicating the existence of productions in the innermost areas, with the possible exception of the grey ware *unguentarium* of Cabeça de Vaia Monte.⁴²

As for the morphology, we also observe a considerable balance between the two main shapes of *unguentaria* in this western area, fusiform (42 MNI) and bulbous (46 MNI). In most habitation areas and *necropoleis* occupied during the Roman Republican and High Roman Empire, such as Alcáçova de Santarém, Lisbon, Alcácer do Sal, Balsa and Monte Molião, both types have been identified, a situation also observed in other areas of the Roman Empire.⁴³ The only exceptional case worth mentioning is the necropolis of Rua dos Correeiros, in Lisbon, dating from 30 BCE to CE 50,⁴⁴ when one could expect the presence of both fusiform and bulbous *unguentaria*, but curiously only the latter type is documented. This may be due to some selective procedure or trend that could be explained in the framework of regional funerary practices,⁴⁵ although only the publication of new data concerning these specific assemblages can enable a development of this theme.

So far, we have no archaeometric analysis that can indicate the contents of the terracotta *unguentaria* found in the west. It is possible that the vessels imported from the central Mediterranean may have contained more exotic essences, which could be related either to cosmetic⁴⁶ and medicinal use,⁴⁷ particularly in domestic environments, or to use as offerings and products related to funerary rituals. As for the Hispanic productions, to this date, there is no indicator of their content, but their very existence points to the production of some type of *unguentaria* during Roman times.

As a final consideration, we believe it is important to highlight the presence of fragments of large-sized *unguentaria*, which were recovered in Monte Molião and Alcáçova de Santarém. This type of terracotta *unguentarium* is considerably rare across the Roman world, and has so far been identified only in Arles, Pompeii and Valentia.⁴⁸ The Portuguese data contributes to extending the geographical distribution of this specific type towards the westernmost areas.

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⁴³ Anderson-Stojanović 1987, 113.

⁴⁴ Bugalhão et al. 2013.

⁴⁵ Sousa and Arruda 2018a.

⁴⁶ Vizcaino Sánchez 2018, 477.

⁴⁷ Mortensen 2014.

⁴⁸ Huguet Enguita and Ribera i Lacomba 2013.

⁴¹ Arruda 1999–2000; Sousa and Arruda 2010 and 2014; Sousa 2009 and 2017.

⁴² Fabião 1998, 338, fig. 112, no. 2.

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