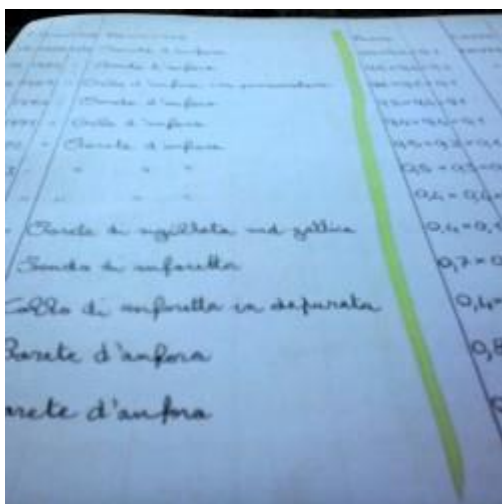


# DIGGING FOR ROMAN POTTERY

July 26, 2013 Stefano Costa Day of Archaeology 2013, Finds, Italy, Roman archaeologist, Archaeology, Excavation, pottery, Terra sigillata

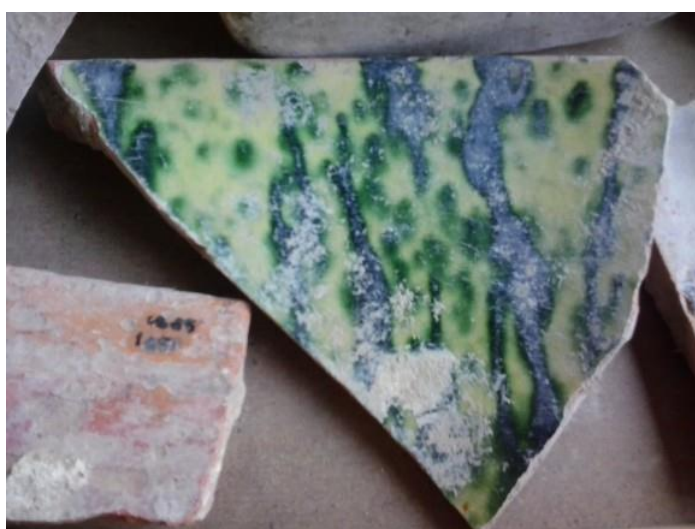
This year's day of archaeology starts more or less where I ended [last year](#). I have spent the past 13 months working in *Albintimilium*, the archaeological site of the ancient city at the frontier of Italy. The work is a mixture of several things: on weekends, the site is open to the public and with my colleague I guide visitors through the small introductory exhibition, the Roman baths (with mosaics, too), the city walls and the Roman theatre. We could have more people visiting us, admittedly, but in April and May we had many schools. As you can imagine, 10 years old kids are much smarter at understanding the Romans than most adults, let alone archaeologists, will ever be, so there's some satisfaction in it.

On weekdays, the work is different and it varies from coding [open source databases for archaeological finds](#) to cataloguing of Early Medieval architectural decoration. And, of course, Roman pottery. Lots of Roman pottery, as in *two entire buildings filled with more than 5000 crates of stuff*. Some of these finds date back to 1915! The vast majority is resulting from the more than 30 years of excavation by Nino Lamboglia, who pioneered stratigraphy and chrono-typology in Roman archaeology starting as early as 1938. All this material needs reviewing, reordering, cleaning etc. on a regular basis. For some reason, the recent finds are the ones who need the most work. This month I am going through some 140 crates from excavations carried out in the 1980s at the Late Roman and Medieval site of *Costa Balenae* ([gallery of images](#) from Wikimedia Commons), some 30 km away from Ventimiglia.



*An older inventory. Note that it was written entirely on paper records.*

From a general inventory done some years ago we already know that 90% or even more of these finds is made of bricks and tiles, and I am separating actual pottery and amphorae into smaller and more manageable bags. Bricks and tiles need to be stored separately, and the best approach to quantification is probably by using weight. One may also suggest that, once a quantification is available and no particular differences can be seen in fabrics or shapes, they can be disposed of, allowing us to save a lot of space in the ever-crowded building. The remaining pottery will be processed in further detail, even though at a first look its breakage rate is very high and that will pose serious identification problems, not to speak about functional interpretation. Quite surprisingly for a site that has Late Roman phases, I could not see but one small piece of African Red Slip (or *terra sigillata chiara* as Lamboglia labelled it in the 1950s) so far. I have only reviewed 15% of the material however.



*Not Roman! 19th or 20th century glazed pottery.*

What is perhaps most interesting is that there are some pottery finds that are not Roman, such as this big sherd of a late 19th or early 20th c. basin. There is little evidence of stratigraphic contexts for these so I assume they came from the topsoil cleaning done before the actual excavation. I have [written before](#) about the need to adopt a less mechanical approach to work done on finds, without forgetting that storage facilities are not separate from the real world and they tell stories that should be very familiar for an archaeologist. For example, at least 3 different people must have been doing some kind of work on these finds before myself, based on the different handwritings I can see on the finds, on the labels, on the inventory. There should be a record of who they are, but I couldn't find one yet.



*Instagram filters will make anything look beautiful. Almost anything at least.*

Is this the best time of the year for this kind of work? Not really, as the temperature is constantly above 30 °C during the day. However during the winter it would be much less comfortable (cold, rain, not enough natural light) and spring is always busy with schools as I said above. There is also a lot of dust in the bags, so I need to wear a dust-mask. Not a good item to wear in the summer if you ask me. The other reason for doing this right now is that there are new excavations ongoing (since a few years actually) at the site and reviewing the extent of older excavations together with their finds is very important. What I forgot to mention, but it should be obvious by now, is that this material was never published – as happened for many other excavations done in that period. Nowadays the situation is slightly better, even though in general there is a lower detail in the short reports that get regularly published. My day of archaeology was dedicated to making these finds easier to manage and study.