

# Ligurian Tablewares of the 13th to 15th Centuries. New Archaeological and Thin Section Data

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## SUMMARY

*This paper presents a chronological overview of the different wares produced during the 13th to 15th centuries in the centres of Genoa and Savona and the surrounding area, and considers some of the influences governing the evolution and distribution of the different wares within the broad traditions of Savona Archaic Graffita, Proto-Maiolica, Archaic Maiolica and Monochrome Graffita. For each ware the most common forms are described and the fabrics summarised. The final section presents the results of ongoing scientific research into the pottery fabrics, which now has a databank of c. 5000 thin-section samples from the major production centres Mediterranean area.*

## INTRODUCTION

The first detailed typology of Ligurian medieval pottery was established in 1975 by Tiziano Mannoni. It was based on the results of some twenty years of research carried out in medieval archaeology in Italy. Since then, there has been an increase in archaeological research and ceramic studies; of particular importance for the study of late medieval pottery have been the excavations of some deeply stratified sites in the cities of Genoa and Savona, and of settlements in the surrounding countryside, such as Casteldelfino, San Fruttuoso di Camogli and the Castle of Andora (Fig. 1). This work, supported by archaeometric analyses of the finds, has permitted a better understanding of some specific local wares, such as the *archaic graffita* industry (Lavagna and Varaldo 1986) and the imported wares from the Byzantine and Islamic worlds (Gardini 1993). Some aspects of this work are presented below<sup>1</sup>.

### 1. THE 12TH AND 13TH CENTURIES

#### **Savona Archaic Graffita**

Between the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th century in Liguria, and more precisely at Savona, the creation of a type of pottery known as '*Tirrenian Archaic Graffita*' led to the development of a remarkable production process for tablewares. In fact in Liguria, as in other parts of the Italian peninsula, and particularly in the 13th century, new forms emerged which differ markedly, both as regards technology and decoration, from those which had existed previously.

*Savona Archaic Graffita*, as it would be more correct

to call this new ware, appeared at a time when on the one hand the local pottery production was both limited and in decline, while on the other hand a considerable quantity of imported wares from the Islamic and Byzantine worlds was arriving in Italy. Thus at Savona and in Liguria a radical change took place in the existing patterns of pottery production and consumption, and the introduction of *Savona Archaic Graffita* must be seen as an entrepreneurial operation in which the participation of Genoese capital cannot be ruled out. The enterprise was probably developed by using craftsmen imported from the eastern Mediterranean, with which Savona, and in particular Genoa, had close links. The discovery of some six thousand kiln wasters from excavations in Savona (Lavagna and Varaldo 1986) and the great abundance of finished products found outside Liguria, mainly in the Tirenian area (Provence, Tuscany, Lazio, Corsica, Sardinia and Sicily), make *Savona Archaic Graffita* one of the most popular and widely distributed table wares of the 13th century.

The fabrics, which are usually soft, vary in colour from brick-red to leather-brown; the clays are refined, but are characterised by the presence of recognisable inclusions. The slip, of varying thickness, is whitish-grey, sometimes tending towards pink; it was applied over the internal surface of the vessel only. The *graffita* decoration, made with a thin point under a clear or yellow glaze, was enlivened by brush strokes of copper green and iron yellow.

Research carried out on the kiln wasters has identified a range of at least twenty decorative motifs used on flanged rims, which were associated with a series of at least ten other central designs appearing inside the vessel. The most frequent pattern, both

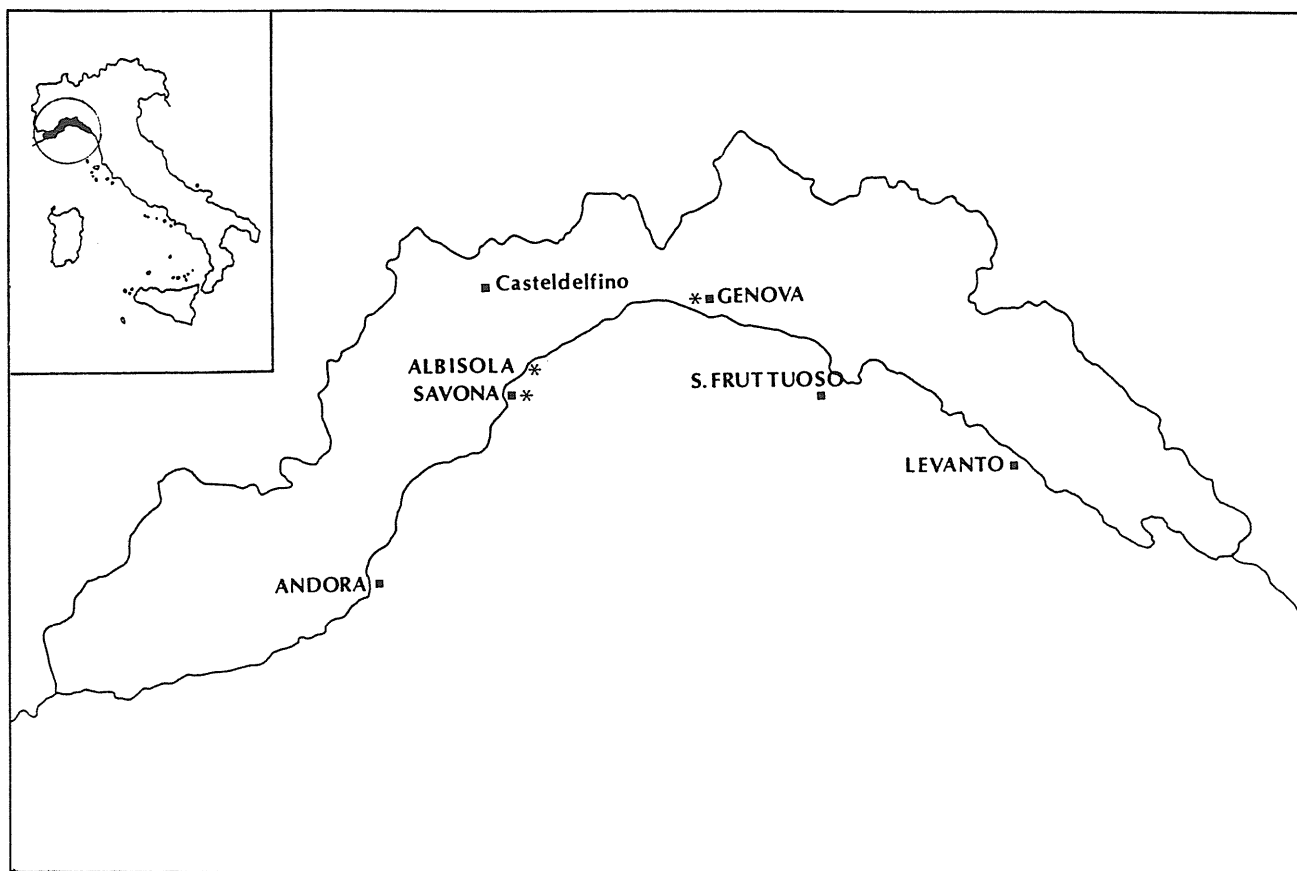


Fig. 1. Production centres (marked \*) and sites of interest (marked with a square).

inside and on the rim, is the lattice design (Fig. 2, No. 1). Also common are vegetal-geometric motifs (Fig. 2, No. 2), comprising four or five basic designs on which a number of variants are based. Animal motifs are also present: fish (Fig. 2, No. 3) and birds (Col. Pl. 2a) are most common, while those depicting fantastic beasts or tortoises are rare or unique. Heraldic motifs, all purely decorative in intent, are well represented. They are fairly simple, derived in most cases from oriental designs present on Islamic and Byzantine wares.

The known forms comprise plates and dishes (diameter 180–240 mm), carinated and hemispherical basins (diameter 240 mm and 260–320 mm respectively), and large tronconical bowls (diameter 240 mm). The most common form is the dish.

The production of *Savona Archaic Graffita* continued throughout the 14th century and seems to have lasted, although on a very limited scale, until the mid 15th century (Varaldo 1981). In this period the decorative motifs were influenced by those on Ligurian tablewares coming in from trade with the Po valley and Tuscany.

### Proto-maiolica

Alongside the *graffita* pottery, other monochrome and

painted, slipped and glazed wares were produced by the Savona potters, which share the same technology and forms (Gardini and Mannoni 1991). During the 13th century the workshops which produced *Savona Archaic Graffita* and its derivatives began to make a new ceramic type which on the basis of its technical and formal characteristics can be defined as *Proto-maiolica*. The forms (plates and dishes with footring bases), correspond to those of the *Savona Archaic Graffita*, but the finish which is applied to the internal surface of the vessels is different. This comprises a slip applied over the biscuit-fired body, over which was then applied a 'smalto' or tin glaze containing only a low percentage of tin. This particular process may be explained as a compromise between two different methods of working. The Savona potters had made a technical choice and opted for the use of a slip beneath the glaze, a technique they were familiar with, rather than a tin glaze alone. The scarcity and high cost of tin in Liguria during the 13th century must also be taken into account.

The painted decoration on *Proto-maiolica* is limited to two colours: copper green and manganese brown. The sole motif used on the rim is a characteristic continuous sequence of intersecting arcs between concentric green and brown bands. At the centre of the plates and dishes are geometric, vegetal or zoomorphic

motifs such as fish and birds (Fig. 3, Nos. 1–3; Col. Pl. 2b), which are taken directly from those used on the *Archaic Graffita*. This particular type of pottery, which on the basis of current research seems to have been limited to Liguria, developed and became more widely distributed during the 13th century, together with the best and most important products of *Savona Archaic Graffita*.

Production of *Savona Proto-maiolica* ceased at the end of the 13th or early in the 14th century. It does not seem to have had any influence on the later tin-glazed products of Savona, which imitate the forms of *Pisan Archaic Maiolica* (see below).

## 2. 14TH AND 15TH CENTURIES

The problems of the *Archaic Maiolica* of northern Italy were discussed during the international conferences on pottery held at Albisola in 1990 and 1991 and entitled '*Proto-Maiolica and Archaic Maiolica from its origins to the 14th century*' and '*From Archaic Maiolica to the Maiolica of the early Renaissance*'. The presentation of new data at these meetings has allowed us to up-date the published information on Ligurian ceramics (Mannoni 1975) and to outline a sufficiently broad framework for the importation, production and distribution of *Archaic Maiolica* in the region from the mid-13th until at least the mid-16th century (Benente 1991).

### Tuscan Archaic Maiolica

The use of tin glazes in Ligurian tableware production is attested from the 13th century by the manufacture of *Proto-maiolica*. The dating of *Archaic Maiolica* is less clear cut. At the regional level, a single fragment of an *Archaic Maiolica* jug found in excavations at Casteldelfino in the province of Savona is as yet unique. The publication of this piece, which was dated to the first quarter of the 13th century and attributed to a source in the Savona area (Milanese 1982, 108), indicated that Savona was one of the earliest production centres of *Archaic Maiolica* in northern Italy, a theory which has been generally accepted and repeated in subsequent studies (Nepoti 1986, 409–18). However, analyses of stratified material from Ligurian excavations which are already published or which are in preparation do not support this early date: the *Archaic Maiolica* present in levels datable to between the mid 13th and first half of the 14th century comprises almost exclusively closed forms, the fabric and decoration of which indicate that they are of Tuscan production. The controversy over the 'Savona' jug from Casteldelfino prompted a new petrological examination of the sample (see below). This excluded a local provenance, and suggested that the fabric is more like that of the alluvial clays which characterise the Tuscan wares.

The *Archaic Maiolica* present in Liguria between the mid-13th and first half of the 14th century, therefore, was imported from Tuscany. This trade was limited almost exclusively to jugs, which came to accompany the open forms of the existing *Savona Archaic Graffita* and which thus complemented the range of tablewares available<sup>2</sup>.

### Ligurian Archaic Maiolica

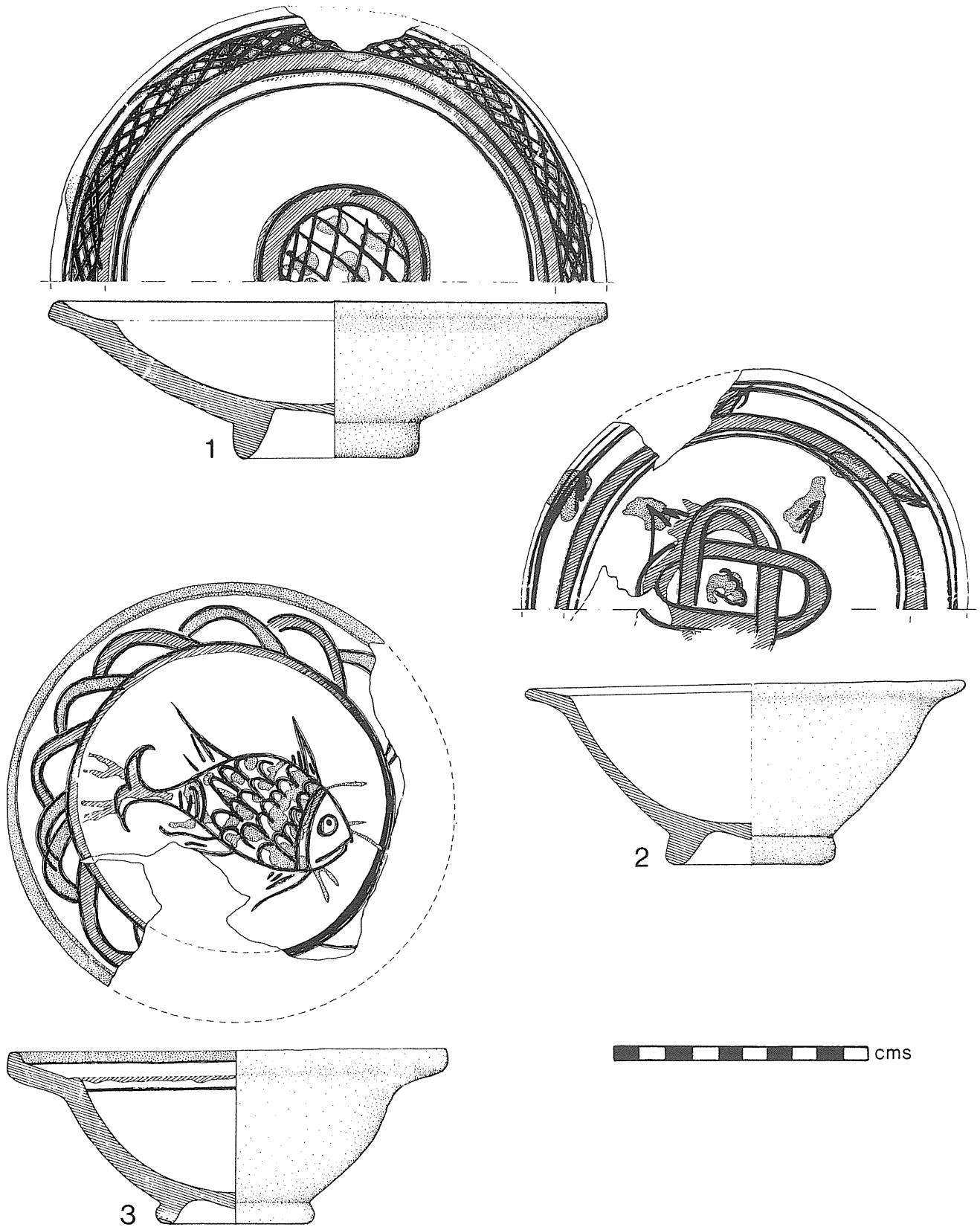
Finds of kiln wasters show that the production of *Archaic Maiolica* in Liguria and at Savona only started to take off in the second half of the 14th century. This industry has for some time been termed '*Pisano-Ligure*' to emphasize the extent to which its morphological and decorative characteristics were influenced by the *Archaic Maiolica* attested at Pisa in the second half of the 14th/early 15th century; the latter was distributed throughout Liguria, either as imports from the production area, or as imitations by local potters, or as a direct result of Tuscan potters working in the Savona area.

*Savona Archaic Maiolica* is characterised by a very distinctive soft, reddish-orange fabric with large inclusions of pink or violet grog; the latter is found in other local products such as the slipped and glazed wares and the monochrome and polychrome *graffita*. The decorative motifs and the forms are copied, with little modification, from the Pisan originals, but the quality is always inferior to that of the Tuscan products.

Almost all the functional form types are present; the tablewares comprise basins (Fig. 4, No. 1) and bowls with decoration '*a croce raggiata*' (Fig. 4, No. 6), dishes and cups (either monochrome or with decoration in brown) and sub-cylindrical jugs with linear decoration (Fig. 4, No. 7).

In 15th-century contexts monochrome forms are especially common, comprising both large dishes with slightly flaring flanged rims (Fig. 4, No. 5) and in particular small dishes (Fig. 4, Nos. 3, 4), perhaps the '*senaveria*' mentioned in legal documents. Alongside the usual forms with footring bases are smaller dishes with pedestal bases and narrow flanged rims, which are present in many late 15th-century archaeological contexts (Fig. 4, No. 2).

A more complex and much debated problem is that of the chronology of the late or final phase of Ligurian *Archaic Maiolica* (Gardini and Milanese 1978, 95–108; Milanese 1980). Milanese (1990) has recently presented a number of studies involving comparisons of the percentages of different wares from stratified contexts on various excavated sites in Genoa. The quantified presence of *Archaic Maiolica* in diverse datable groups has enabled him to demonstrate that this ware continued in use until the mid-16th century. At the Albisola conference of 1991 (Benente 1991) a large number of excavated groups dating from between the



*Fig. 2. Ligurian Archaic Graffita from S. Fruttuoso di Camogli, Genoa.*

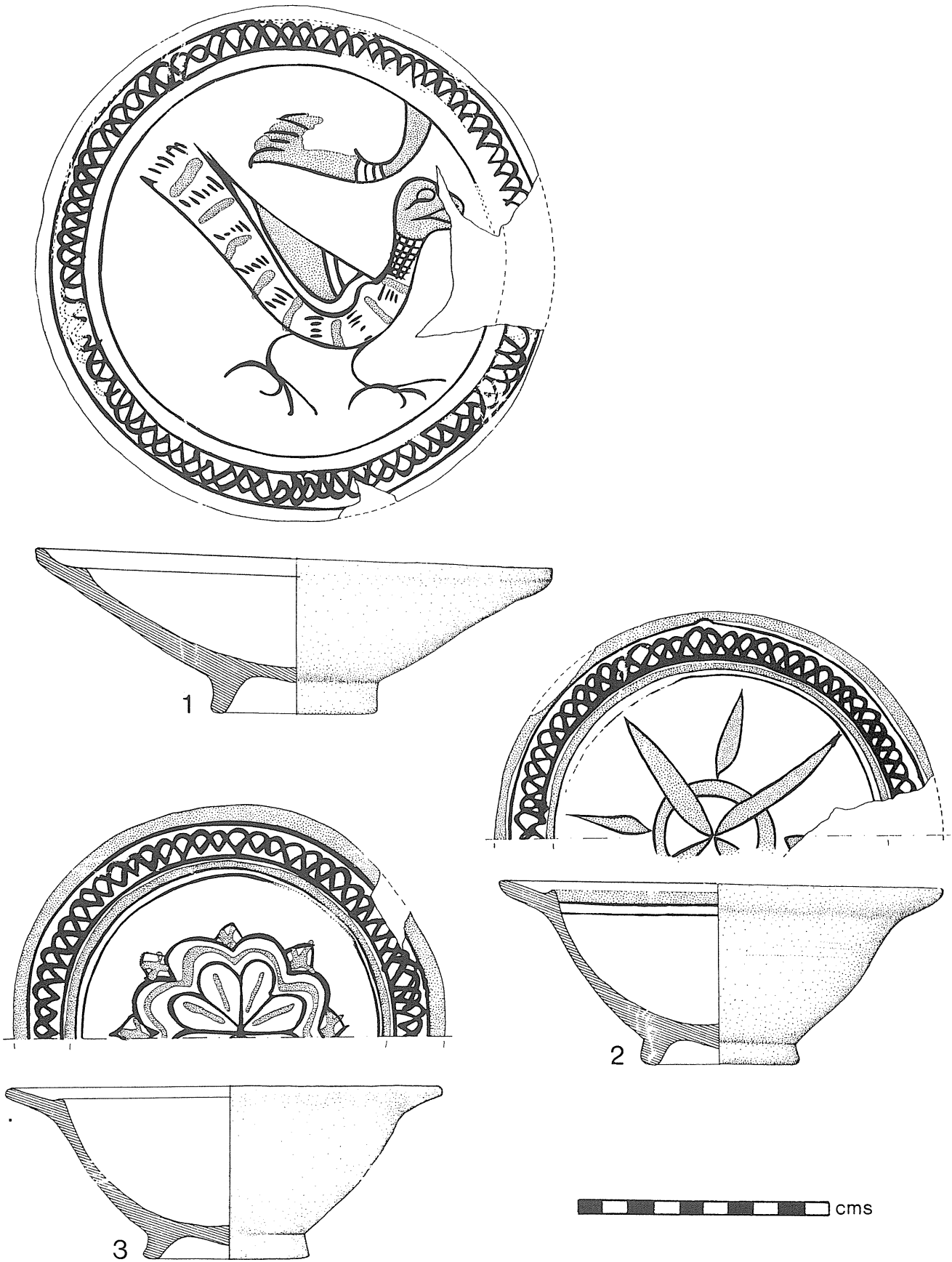


Fig. 3. Ligurian Proto-maiolica from S. Fruttuoso di Camogli, Genoa.

TABLEWARES OF THE 13TH TO 15TH CENTURIES

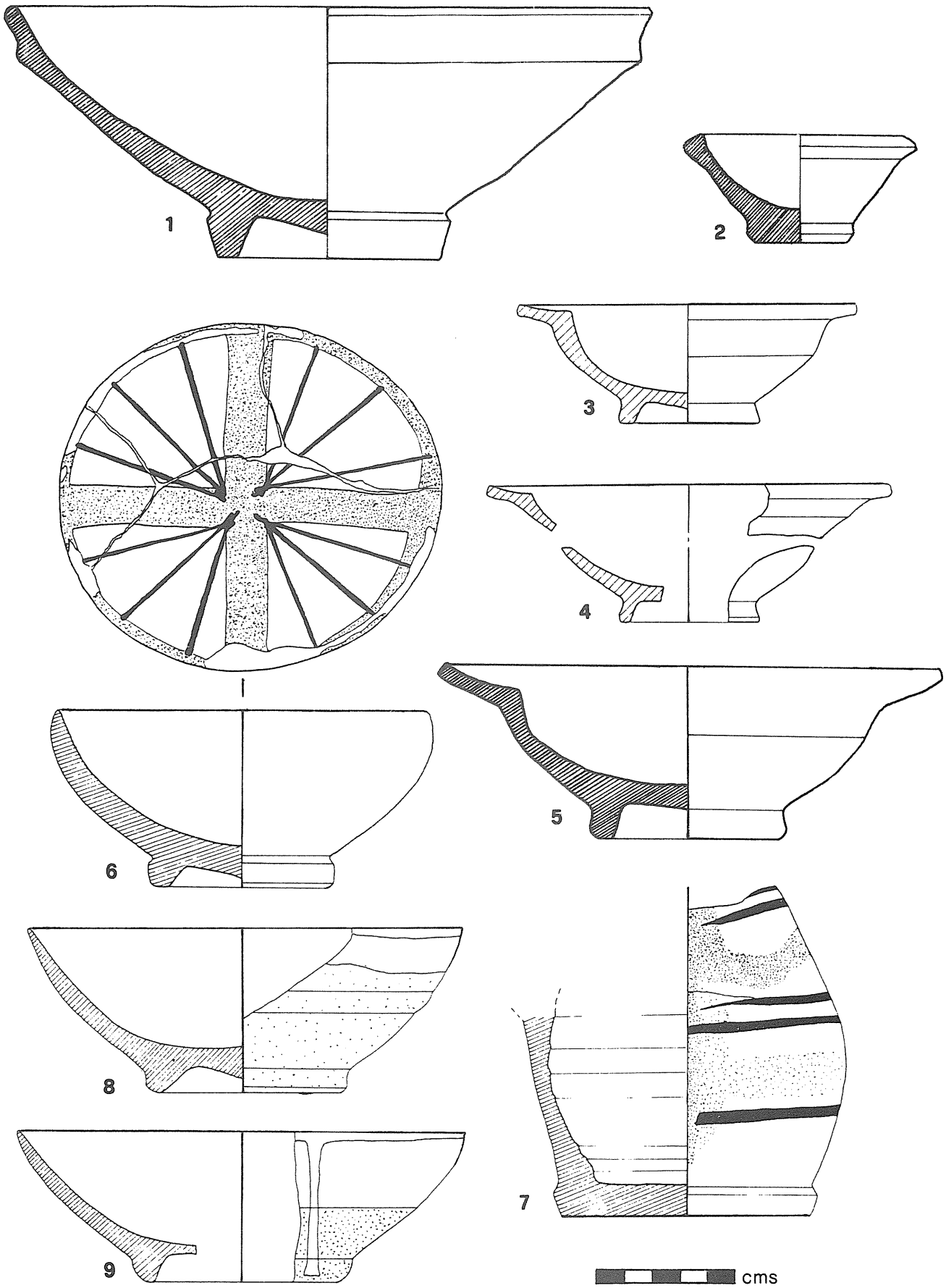


Fig. 4. Archaic Maiolica from Priamar, Savona (Nos. 1 – 7) and Archaic Maiolica, tipo Commenda di Prè (Nos. 8, 9).

TABLEWARES OF THE 13TH TO 15TH CENTURIES

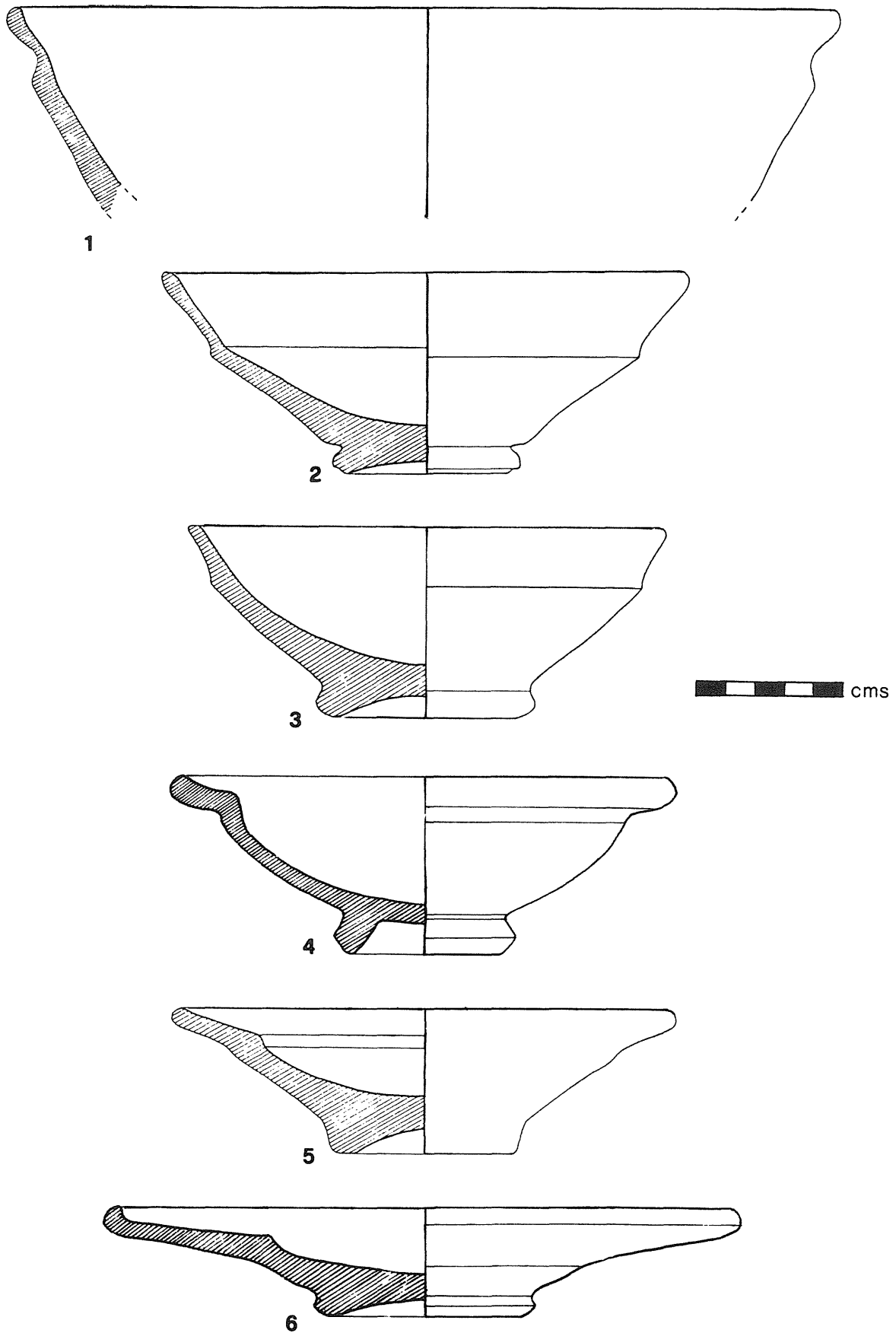


Fig. 5. Ligurian Monochrome Graffita from Priamar, Savona.

TABLEWARES OF THE 13TH TO 15TH CENTURIES

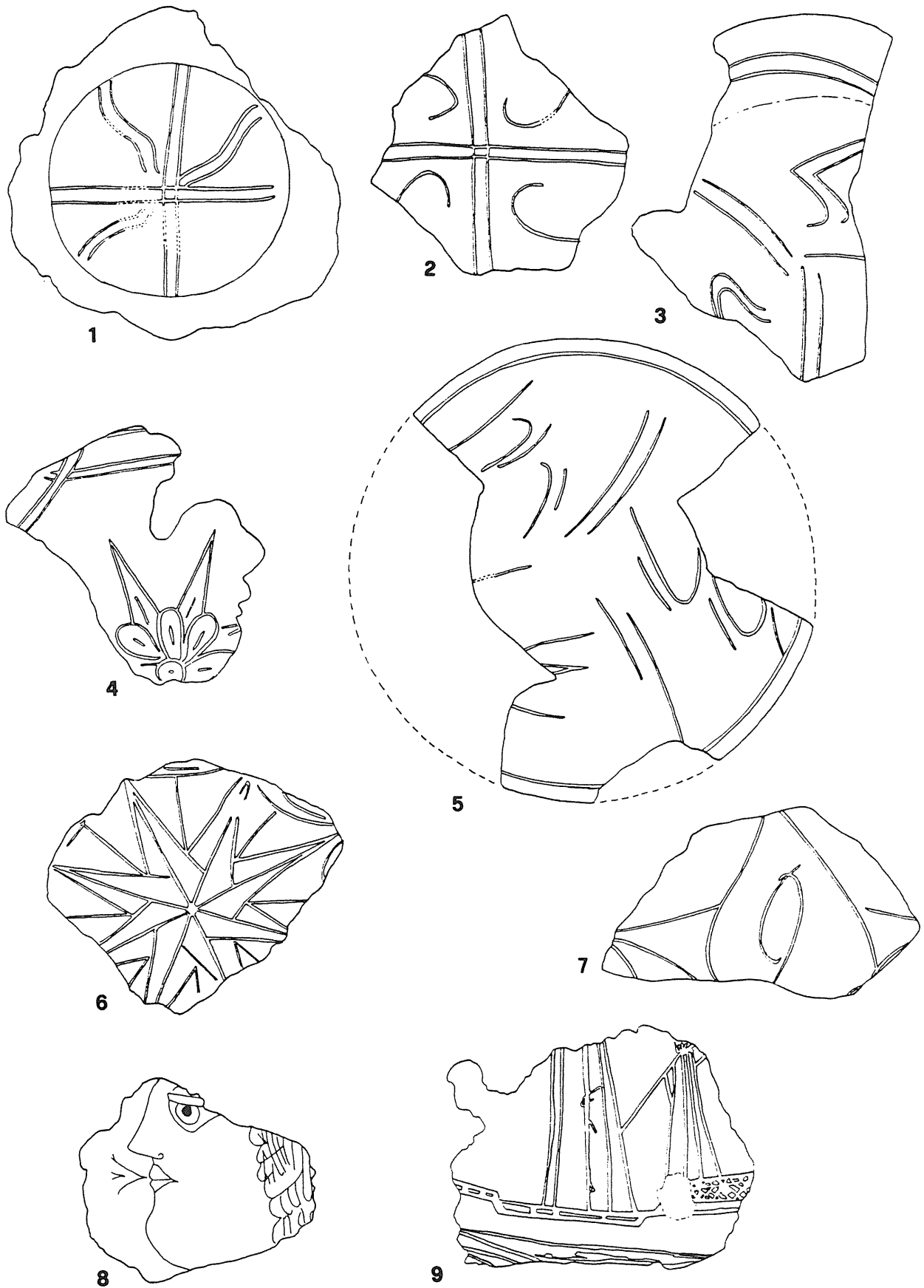


Fig. 6. Ligurian Monochrome Graffita from Priamar, Savona.



late 15th and early 16th century were examined in an attempt to study the demise of Ligurian *Archaic Maiolica* from a typological viewpoint. This study showed not only that the Savona production continued, albeit on a reduced scale, until the beginning of the 16th century, but also that it was at this time that a new variant was produced.

This new form, for which the name '*tipo Commenda di Prè*' has been proposed, is a hemispherical bowl (Fig. 4, Nos. 8, 9) with a fairly low footring, or in some cases a flat base. The walls are always quite thin, while the hard brown or orange fabric is always refined and compact, with a clean or conchoidal break. The inner surface has a monochrome tin glaze, greyish in colour, which although thin, adheres well. A distinctive feature of this ware is the external finish, which comprises a band of fairly thick lead glaze (generally brown, but in one case greenish). This is limited to a few centimetres below the rim; the lower part of the vessel and base are always unglazed. This variant is particularly common in excavations in Genoa (Gardini and Milanese 1978, 101–20), where it was probably produced<sup>3</sup>, but it has also been recognised in eastern Liguria (Gardini 1993, 151) and western Liguria (Benente 1991, Table 6).

### Monochrome Graffita and other wares

Other wares present in 15th-century Ligurian contexts include slipped and glazed wares or *graffita*, the forms of which are similar to those of *Savona Archaic Maiolica*. Made of the same clay and perhaps by the same potters, they may have supplied different markets. This is the case with the polychrome slipped and glazed ware which imitated *Archaic Maiolica*. It has a slip covered by a colourless lead glaze and is decorated in copper green and iron yellow. In the 16th century this tradition also extended to jugs decorated in a hasty fashion in copper green only (Mannoni 1975, 59–60; Varaldo 1978, 17).

*Monochrome Graffita*, with a brown, yellow or green glaze (Mannoni 1975, 87–90) is usually represented by basins (*bacini*) with a more or less accentuated carinated rim (Fig. 5, Nos. 1–3), dishes with slightly concave bases and virtually horizontal flanged rims (Fig. 5, Nos. 4, 5), and plates with small diameters, the central inner surfaces of which are noticeably flat. The decoration generally consists of a central cross with undulating rays, incised using two equidistant points (Fig. 6, Nos. 1, 2). On the flange or rim of the *bacini*, the decoration often comprises double oblique lines enclosed within circles. Later, the cross became a tripartite motif, with three undulating rays (Fig. 6, No. 3; Gardini 1993, 146–8). Less common central designs are stylised heraldic arms, floral motifs (Fig. 6, Nos. 4–7), human faces (Fig. 6, No. 8) or ships (Fig. 6, No. 9).

*Monochrome Graffita* is generally found in 15th-century contexts; it continued into the 16th century,

although the forms are less well-executed (Fig. 6, No. 5). In the second half of the 15th century a monochrome 'conventual' *graffita* became popular in the religious houses of Genoa. This is characterised by cups with the symbols of the Eucharist or with the motif of the passion incised at the centre of the interior (Gardini 1993, 146–48).

### 3. FABRIC ANALYSES

Research into the sources of different wares using minero-petrological analyses was begun in 1968 (Mannoni 1969, 251–72; Mannoni 1971, 439–67) and since 1985 the Laboratory for Archaeometrical Research (LARA) has also actively participated in this work. The analyses comprise both thin section studies and X-ray diffraction, the latter to identify the crystalline phases not identifiable under the optical microscope.

These techniques have allowed production areas to be indicated or defined through the study of the clays used for the pottery (Sfrecola 1992). X-ray diffraction analysis has frequently been used to reveal the crystalline composition of the surface treatment; it is especially useful for the identification of tin dioxide or other opacifiers, such as kaolin, or quartz inclusions, and to identify the nature and quantity of the newly formed *fillosilicati* for devitrification.

Since precise indications of production areas are only possible with the analysis of all ceramic types and clays present in the regions involved in commercial exchange during the period in question, a databank of some 5000 thin section samples has been built up over the last twenty years at Genoa; this is subdivided by period and is representative of the major production centres of the Mediterranean (Fig. 7).

The results of the chemical and petrological analyses carried out on the medieval pottery of Liguria (from the late 12th to the 15th century) over the last twenty years are mainly published in the '*Atti del Congresso Internazionale sulla Ceramica Medievale nel Mediterraneo Occidentale*' of Valbonne, Toledo, Siena (D'Ambrosio, Mannoni and Sfrecola 1986), Lisbon and Rabat, and of the conferences in Albisola. The following summarises the archaeometric information obtained so far, with particular reference to the kiln wasters from the area of Savona.

The ceramic types examined comprise *Savona Archaic Graffita* and other painted slipped and glazed wares, Ligurian *Proto-maiolica*, *Archaic Maiolica*, monochrome and polychrome slipped and glazed wares. These were made of clays taken from two different clay basins in the Savona area, both of which are characterised by inclusions of metamorphic origin of the *Masiccio Cristallino savonese*.

The fabrics of *Savona Archaic Graffita* and the painted and slipped wares of the 13th century are detailed overleaf:

## TABLEWARES OF THE 13TH TO 15TH CENTURIES

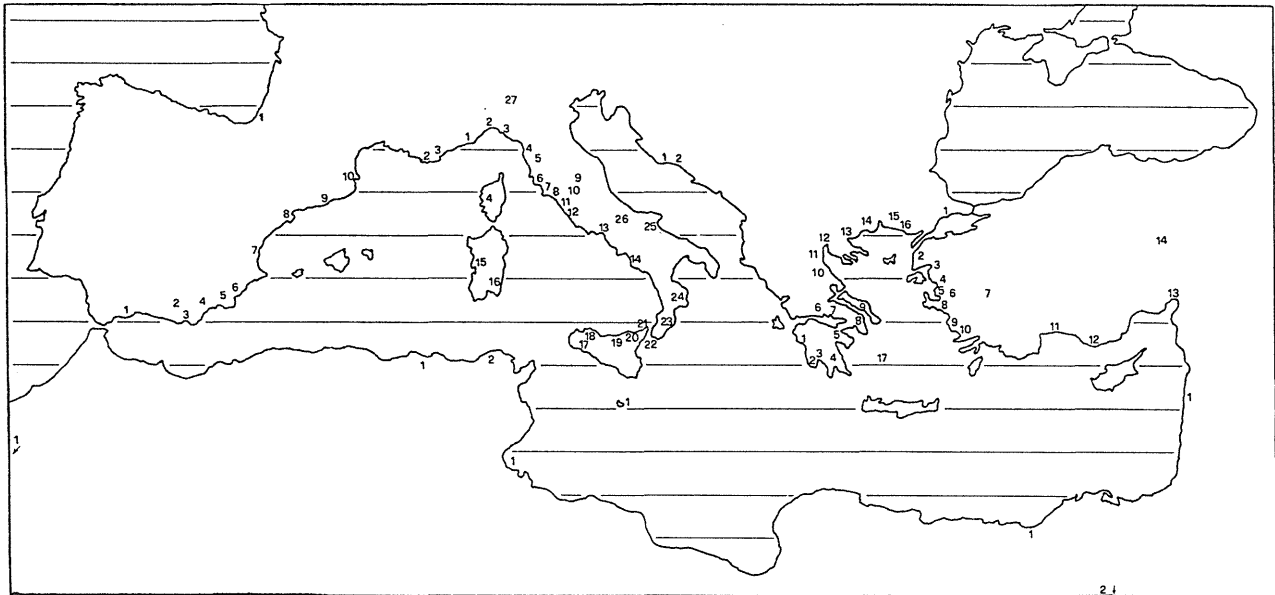


Fig. 7. Geographical distribution of some clay samples in the databank at Genoa.

1. Brownish-yellow clay from a marine deposit rich in calcium carbonate, with the presence of microfauna and a few grains of fossiliferous limestone.

2. Reddish-orange alluvial clay rich in iron oxides, also containing fine-grained temper, but lacking limestone and microfossils.

The internal finish of all samples consists of a thin layer of slip characterised mainly by quartz and kaolin clay, covered by a lead glaze. These results clearly demonstrate the importance of archaeometric analysis for ceramic finds, since they have distinguished between superficially similar wares, and have confirmed Mannoni's proposal of 1970, before the discovery of a large quantity of wasters from the excavations of Priamar at Savona, that the probable source for Tirrenian *Archaic Graffita* was in the Savona area.

The samples of Ligurian *Proto-maiolica* have a thin layer of white or rose-coloured slip consisting of quartz and clay (mainly of the kaolin type), covered by an opaque glaze with a low percentage of tin dioxide. These wares have also revealed two different fabrics, similar to those of the *Archaic Graffita* and the 13th-century wares, but refined and characterised by a few, sometimes large, grains of acid crystalline schists.

1. Brownish-yellow and marly, or orange, with a few iron oxides, and carbonaceous; it contains limestone, abundant grog and fine quartz.

2. Red alluvial clay rich in iron oxides; no limestone.

The fabrics of *Savona Archaic Maiolica*, of the *Monochrome Graffita* and of the slipped and glazed wares of the 15th to 16th centuries are characterised by an alluvial clay which is petrologically similar to that of

*Archaic Graffita*. This fabric is distinguished from the Pisan wares by the large grain size and by the presence of a few inclusions of metamorphic origin, as well as by a higher ratio of muscovite to biotite mica. With the broadening of the database and related studies, it has been possible to prove that an early 13th-century jug from Casteldelfino, previously ascribed to Savona (see above) is in fact of Tuscan origin (Milanese 1982, 100; note 133).

### Footnotes

1. This paper derives from that presented at the annual conference of the Medieval Pottery Research Group at Southampton, March 1993. It was prepared jointly by all three authors, but the first section was written by A. Gardini, the second by F. Benente, and the third by S. Sfrecola.
2. One must not undervalue the commercial importance of *Savona Archaic Graffita*, which, saturating the Ligurian market and becoming widely exported between the 13th and 14th centuries, could have had a negative influence on the introduction, manufacture and development of a competitive product by the Savona workshops.
3. This ware has not been identified outside this region; the petrological analyses carried out on samples from various provenances excluded an origin in the Savona area and suggested that they were produced in Genoa.

### Acknowledgements

The pottery drawings are the work of Laura Tomasi (Figs 2–3) and Sonia Gobatto (Figs 4–6).

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Resumé

Cet exposé présente une vue d'ensemble chronologique des différentes sortes de céramiques fabriquées du 13<sup>ème</sup> au 15<sup>ème</sup> siècle dans le centre ainsi que dans les environs de Gènes et de Savona. Sont examinées de même certaines influences qui ont gouverné l'évolution et la distribution de différentes céramiques appartenant aux traditions céramiques plus répandues de Savona, par exemple: "Graffita archaïque", "proto-Maiolica", "Graffita monochrome". Les formes les plus communes de céramiques y sont présentées ainsi qu'une description de leur pâte. La dernière partie de cet article présente les résultats actuels des recherches scientifiques effectuées sur les pâtes. Ces analyses ont produit une banque de données d'environ 5000 échantillons sous forme de lames-minces provenant des grands centres de production de la Méditerranée.

Zusammenfassung

In chronologischem Überblick werden eine Reihe von Töpfereierzeugnissen, die während des 13. — 15. Jhs in und um Genoa und Savona herum hergestellt wurden, vorgestellt. Es wird auch auf die Einflüsse eingegangen, die die Entwicklung und Verteilung der verschiedenen Töpferwaren innerhalb der breiten Traditionen (Savona Archaic Graffita, Proto-Maiolica, Archaic Maiolica und Monochrome Graffita) bestimmt haben. Jede Ware wird in ihrer gebräuchlichsten Form beschrieben und das Tonmaterial zusammengefaßt. Der letzte Abschnitt schildert die Ergebnisse der laufenden, wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten über Tonmaterialien. Die Datenbank enthält jetzt etwa 5.000 dünn geschnittener Muster von den größeren Produktionszentren des Mittelmeerraumes.

