

Investigating the Relationship Between Spiritual and Artisanal Practices in Etruria: The Case of Cetamura del Chianti

Courtney Miller
Department of Classics
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Laurel Taylor

Abstract

The Late Etruscan (3rd-1st centuries BCE) site known as Cetamura Del Chianti is saturated with vital information regarding Etruscan religious and utilitarian culture. Cetamura is unique among known Etruscan settlements because a center for the manufacture of utilitarian goods exists within the boundaries of a clearly delineated sacred space. In addition to this, Cetamura hosts the best preserved of all excavated Etruscan kilns, and thus is able to provide archaeologists with the most accurate information possible regarding the process of the manufacture and firing of ceramics in the Etruscan world. Its location at the site, moreover, serves as the connection between the respective realms of profane and spiritual. This suggests that Etruscan religion is closely related to craft, and close examination supports that the process of molding and firing ceramics was of profound spiritual significance to the Etruscans. The inextricable link between craft and worship observed here has important implications for our understanding of the relationship between Etruscan cosmology and daily life. The main objective of this research involves the documentation and analysis of objects, ranging from basic utilitarian wares to finely manufactured gloss coated objects, which were previously excavated from the kiln for the purpose of understanding the production of ceramics and its associated religious implications. These objects explain the significance of Etruscan ritual concerning ceramics, and how this influenced the interactions between the individuals and the spiritual world, ultimately reflecting their worldview. The findings provide insight on the Etruscan spiritual relationship with objects and their physical environment, demonstrating the significance of religion to all aspects of Etruscan existence.

Keywords: Etruscans, Ceramics, Ritual

1. Background

During what is known as the Late period, the 3rd through the 1st centuries BCE, Etruria encountered the growing influence of Republican Rome in its efforts to conquer the entirety of the Italian peninsula, and as a result many of the political, social, and economic institutions which previously united the Etruscans began to disintegrate. The Roman military and cultural presence caused a growing sense of alienation within Etruria due to mounting internal social tensions, and the Etruscans collectively turned toward spirituality as a means to reconcile this uneasiness with their unpredictable and oftentimes hostile social and political environment and their daily lives.¹ This, in turn, encouraged the construction of sanctuaries and the practice of religious ritual throughout Etruria as religion was an integral aspect in experiencing and functioning in one's physical environment. The sanctuary at Cetamura del Chianti, located in Tuscany outside of the commune Gaiole in Chianti about 35 miles northeast of Siena, has features typical of sanctuaries constructed at this time, yet it is unique because within the defined borders of its sacred space exists an artisans zone where individuals undertook the production of a variety of crafts including the production and firing of ceramics.²

The location of the site itself is geographically unique in the context of Etruscan settlement patterns. Found at the summit of a steep knoll, this has meaningful implications for the spiritual context of the sanctuary, since an object's or place's position relative to the landscape of its physical environment is significant in Etruscan religion. The natural disposition of the land upon which Cetamura was settled was therefore designated intrinsically significant because it was chosen for the location of a ritual space. Ingrid Edlund-Berry refers to a ritual space in Etruscan religion as a space that possesses physical evidence denoting ritual activity such as the the remains of votive goods or presence of one or more altar.³ Thus, it is not

necessary for any apparent evidence of institutionalized religious architecture to be present in the confines of a location for it to be considered a sacred space. This implies that any natural location can qualify as being a sacred space as long as evidence of ritual is apparent. These findings demonstrate that there is an obvious disparity between the idea of a space designated as sacred and utilized for activities that are in themselves sacred with spaces where secular, quotidian affairs happened. Cetamura presents a conflation of these two ideas since structures indicating the pursuit of a mundane industry are found immediately within the confines of a sacred space. The presence of the artisans' zone indicates that the secular and sacred were inextricably linked.

The site itself consists of two separate self-contained areas separated by a steep escarpment. Zone I, the acropolis, and Zone II, located down-slope from Zone I, where the sanctuary and artisan's quarter is located as well as numerous instances ritual religious contexts.⁴ One of these contexts is the space within the kiln itself (Structure K of Phase I), where there is evidence of rituals having been executed (Figure 1). The purpose of this research is to understand the nature of the rituals having taken place in accordance with the context of the crafting and firing of ceramics through the examination of artifacts, mostly shards of utilitarian wares, left within the kiln. Groups of shards are related through the context of the strata from which they were extracted. From this context one can understand the findings' temporal relationship with the site as a whole, and thence understand their historical and cultural significance.



Figure I. A map of the artisans' zone and sanctuary complex located on Zone II. Structure K is located in the northeastern corner of this map, denoted by the letter K (K) (Source: Nancy de Grummond, *The Sanctuary of the Etruscan Artisans at Cetamura del Chianti: The Legacy of Alvaro Tracchi*, Florence, 2009).

2. Structure K

While the period for the most activity at Cetamura are attested to have occurred between 300 to 150 BCE (phase 1) and 150 to the 1st century BCE (phase 2), site context and the presence of carbon and debris associated with firing ceramics in strata near the kiln suggests that the kiln itself was constructed around 300 BCE and was in use for roughly 150 years.^{5 6} The evidence that Structure K provides the archaeological community is invaluable because it is the most well-preserved of all Etruscan kilns excavated to date, more structurally intact than any other examples that have been previously unearthed. Constructed of rough-hewn sandstone blocks, Structure K is rectangular in shape (Figure 2). The exterior dimensions measure 3.85/87 by 2.67/3.00 m. The interior combustion chamber dimensions measure 2.62 by 1.53 m, and is divided down the center by a *mastio*, a structural support for the upper floor upon which goods rested while being fired, measuring 0.32/0.34 m in width.⁷ The *mastio* and interior of the firing chamber is constructed from refractory brick, a type of brick that has been subjected to high heat multiple times and is suitable building material for such structures that encounter high temperatures as furnaces and kilns. In addition to the central *mastio*, two smaller *mastini* lay to the east and west of the central support, undoubtedly for the purpose of providing extra stability for the large and heavy batches that were fired within Structure K. Upon the *mastio* and *mastini* rested the floor of the baking chamber, which evidence shows would

probably have consisted of rows of pan tiles. The size and shape of the kiln, according to Italian ceramics specialist Ninina Cuomo di Caprio's Roman kiln structure dichotomy, in addition to the findings of various indicators of brick and tile by products, such as unfired clay and refractory materials, indicate that its primary purpose was for the production of brick and tile rather than utilitarian ceramics. The structure of the north wall of Structure K is interrupted by two openings for *prae furnia*, the stoking chambers by which the internal combustion chamber can be accessed to add fuel.⁸



Figure 2. Structure K in excavation. The central *mastio* and the walls and their dimensions are apparent, revealing the size and shape of the kiln. The photo was taken after the removal of the *mastini*.

The height of Structure K is preserved to about 1.25 m with the south interior corner of the west wall resting on bedrock. Although the precise form and height of the superstructure is unclear, evidence of the corbelled *prae furnia* openings in addition to the remains of the south wall indicate that the roof was likewise corbelled and constructed from overlapping stones, brick and tile fragments, and large pieces of *dolio*.⁹ From these findings Don Davis, professor of ceramics at East Tennessee State University, built a full-scale replica of the conjectured superstructure of Structure K using modern techniques and materials to attempt experimental firings so that the process could be better understood, allowing individuals to understand the physical structure of the kiln three-dimensionally (Figures 3).



Figure 3. View of Professor Davis' reconstruction of Structure K from side with *prae furnia*.

3. Religious Context

There are several obvious examples of evidence for ritual behaviors that occurred within the confines of Structure K that have been previously documented. A small cup made of a fine fabric coated with a black gloss finish that has a heavily chipped rim was extracted from the west *prae furnium*, and shards of two black-gloss *paterae*, dishes used for pouring libations, were found throughout the east and west firing chambers are the most obvious indicators.¹⁰ Other indicators of ritual within Structure K include the remains of an entire vase that was possibly broken intentionally which was extracted from the lowest layers of carbon; this vase was interpreted by Nancy T. de Grummond as being in accordance with the category of foundation rituals, as designated by Bonghi Jovino as a type of ritual that enacts founding ceremony. Also, it seems that the kiln was closed with a ritual since the excavators encountered several heavy rocks when unearthing the upper strata of Structure K. These rocks must have been placed intentionally, as no forces of nature could have moved rocks of that size nor is it plausible that they were part of the roof structure due to their size and cumulative weight (Figure 4).¹¹ This

evidence demonstrates that there is a clear connection between certain aspects of ceramic production and ritual behavior in this specific location.



Figure 4. Structure K with large, flat rock serving as ritual covering (Source: de Grummond, 2011).

Within the context of the sanctuary at Cetamura, references two specific gods, Lur and Leinth, have appeared in inscriptions found about 2 m north of Structure K.¹² Lur is a minor god of a funerary nature whose various references indicate that he functions both oracularly and protectively.¹³ References to Leinth have only previously occurred as designs on the back of mirrors, but may function as a god of fortune in this context. A mirror from Perugia depicts Leinth alongside Hercle, the Etruscan assimilation of Herakles, and the goddess of victory Mean (Figure 5). Other mirrors show Leinth in scenes related to life and death, showing that this god is also funerary in nature.¹⁴ Although there is no explicit connection between the inscriptions and Structure K, the depiction of Leinth alongside the heroic figure Hercle and a goddess of victory strongly implies that it had a connection with fortune. In the context of firing ceramics, good fortune is essential in having a successful firing, and it makes clear sense to appease a god who controls the fortune or outcome of events.

It is not an uncommon practice to perform some kind of act of appeasement to supernatural forces before initiating the firing cycle in a kiln. Throughout the world, various stages of history offer examples of propitious invocations to ensure a successful firing. For instance, as a reminder of the Cyclopes or demon attendants of Haphaistos, the blacksmith god, Ancient Greek potters would place deformed heads on top of kilns in an apotropaic measure. Additionally, a Greek hymn written in the Homeric style dating to the fourth century BCE invokes the goddess Athena to protect a batch of wares that are about to be fired from spirits named *Abestos*, the Unquenchable, *Smaragos*, the Crasher, and *Suntris*, the Smasher.¹⁵ In a passage providing instructions on how to light a kiln, the Italian Renaissance ceramicist Piccolpasso encourages the reader to pray to God with one's whole heart and to make sure to pay close attention to the various stages of the moon since it affects the quality and brightness of fire.¹⁶ In this way, it is apparent that both successes and misfortunes in firing were attributed to supernatural forces. When an artisan places wares inside of a kiln he or she revokes any agency for their creation and surrenders to the uncontrollable and somewhat unpredictable transformative nature of fire. In order to have a sense of assurance for this unsettling lack of agency, the artisan turns to the supernatural powers that are responsible for creating order from the chaos of nature.



Figure 5. Mirror depicting Hercle with Kerberos in the background (left), Mean (middle), and Leinth (right) (Source: de Grummond, 2011).

4. Methodology

Although the obvious instances of ritual activity have been previously appraised and documented, there was still an abundance of significant finds extracted from within Structure K that had not yet been seriously analyzed. In order to fully understand the connection between the crafting and firing of ceramics and religious activity, these fragments needed to be documented, analyzed, and organized in a way that one could see evidence and recurring patterns of ritual activity. A total of 125 diagnostic shards excavated from within Structure K were presented to be cataloged. The finds were organized by the seasons when they were extracted so that they would be analyzed near other chronologically relevant finds. All finds cataloged were from the 1995, 1996, and 1997 seasons at Cetamura when excavations on Structure K were undertaken. Each find was organized according to its fabric and form, numbered according to the season from which it was found and the order in which it was processed at the lab when it was originally unearthed, and its provenance on site per unit, locus, and day was listed. Their physical dimensions were measured, including height, width, maximum thickness, and diameter. They were also weighed and given a Munsell reading to determine color. Finally, each individual piece was given a brief but detailed description highlighting its individual formal aspects and dated. Once each find was cataloged, an Excel spreadsheet was made for distribution of fabrics in each locus and distribution of loci for each fabric. The final step was to photograph each find; photographs were taken of the front and the back or top and bottom depending on the form of the shard, as well as of any additional decorative elements. A photo log is saved in an Excel spreadsheet format.

5. Results

Diagnostic finds were most abundant from the 1997 season, with a total of 101. The numbers of finds from 1996 and 1995 are 13 and 5 respectively. The finds from the 1995 season pertain to topsoil loci, so they are not diagnostic in this study and will be disregarded; the first architectural feature of the kiln, the *mastio*, was uncovered in Locus 7.¹⁷ Among all of the finds were various forms of Cetamura fabrics (CF) 1-4, black gloss, and a variety of multi-cultural wares including Roman thin wall ware, Roman red gloss, and greenware. The most abundant wares are CF 3 with a total of 39 diagnostic finds and black gloss also with a total of 39 diagnostic finds. CF3 is characterized by its rough, grainy texture with numerous types of inclusions of sandstone, quartz, calcite, and mica (Figure 6). It was mainly used for storage vessels because it maintained structural integrity without being too cumbersome or heavy. It was also often used for the production of hydria. Black gloss was made from an extremely refined clay and was used as tableware. It is coated by a shiny, buffed black gloss paint and is often embellished with a variety of decorative patterns. The paste is usually a very pale tannish-pink color with a powdery texture (Figure 6).

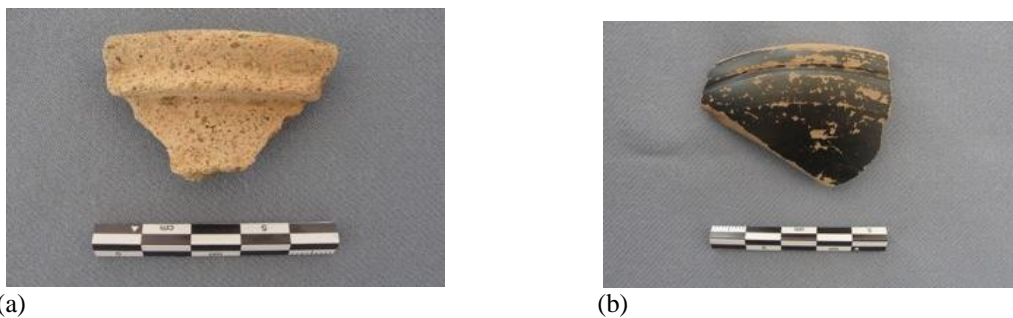


Figure 6. (a) Example of CF 3 rim, find C-96-99, front. (b) Example of black gloss rim of shallow bowl, find C-97-101, front.

The next most abundant type of ware is CF 2 with a total of 30 diagnostic shards. CF 2 is a rough and unrefined fabric used mainly for cookware characterized by its deep red paste and large sandstone inclusions (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Example of CF 2 rim, find C-97-30, front.

The loci providing the most finds were the south balk with 28 finds and Locus 31 with 22. The south balk had been left intact since the 1995 season to support and define the south wall of the kiln and was removed in 1997.¹⁸ Thus from it are finds that span the strata from the topsoil until the date of the stratum of its removal, and it makes sense that there would be an abundance of finds that encompass the entire stratum-range of the kiln. Because of this, it is not entirely diagnostic but still holds finds informative of the activities within Structure K. Table 1 shows a distribution of the different types of fabrics found within the south balk. A number of these finds appear to be burnt or exposed to high heat for an extended period of time, having evidence of charring or discoloration.

Table 1. distribution of fabric types in south balk

Fabric Type	Number
Black Gloss	10
CF 2	8
CF 3	8
Black-Coat Ware	1
CF 1	1
Total	28

Locus 31 spanned the western half of the interior of the kiln beneath all of the internal structural supports. Beneath the thick clay Locus 29, the Locus 31 is characterized by a thick layer of carbon with lenses of red soil. A batch of partially fired bricks was also found within this locus.¹⁹ It was one of the last loci excavated before attempting to reach the kiln floor. Table 2 shows a distribution of the different types of fabrics found in Locus 31. Almost all of the finds show evidence of charring or other discoloration that indicates the finds have been exposed to high heat for an extended period of time.

Table 2. distribution of fabric types in Locus 31

Fabric Type	Number
Black Gloss	8
CF 3	7
CF 2	6
Unidentified fabric	1
Total	22

The majority of the black gloss finds in Locus 31 are from small shallow bowls, and there is one find that is strongly suggestive of a votive miniature bowl. There is also a black gloss handle and a ring base with palmette stamp designs (Figure 8).

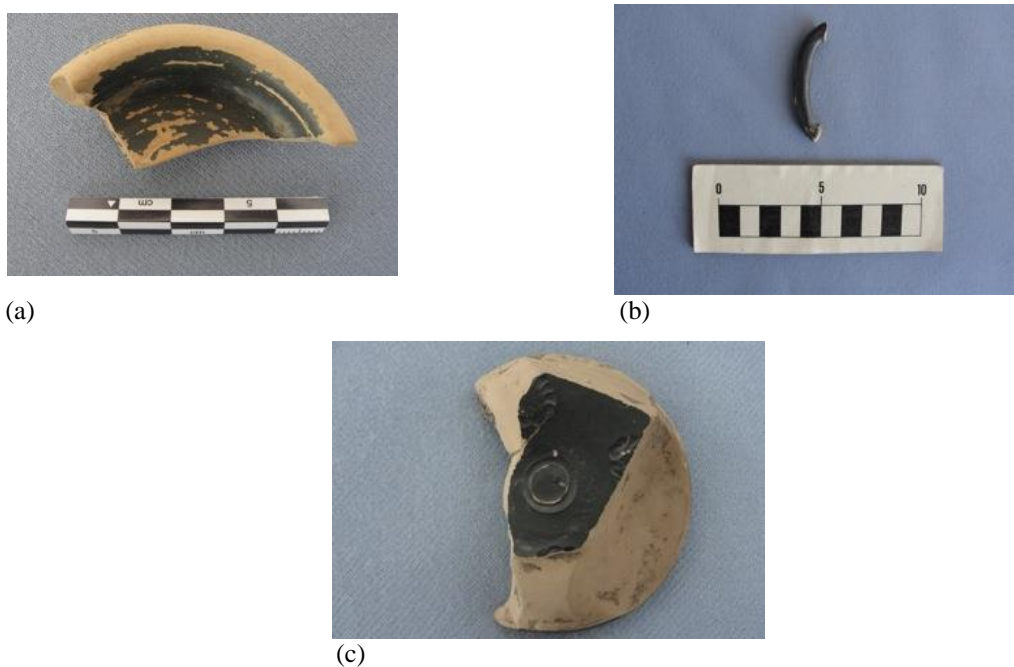


Figure 8. (a) Black gloss miniature votive bowl, find C-97-113. (b) Black gloss handle, find C-97-99. (c) Detail of palmette decoration on black gloss ring base, find C-97-100.

Besides the loci with the greatest abundance of finds, Locus 29 provides interesting evidence of 3 heavily burnt shards from black gloss wares; two are shallow bowl forms and one is an almost fully intact ring base. Finds of black gloss and CF 3 were distributed proportionately throughout all of the loci.

6. Conclusion

Throughout the 32 loci excavated within Structure K the regularity of various black gloss and CF 3 hydria fragments indicates clear evidence of ritual activity. Since Structure K was used strictly for the production of brick and tile, it is atypical for such ample amounts of various wares of pottery within it. Black gloss is a fine and usually decorated fabric, so it makes sense that it would be used in a special ritual context. The prevalence of small bowls, especially the votive miniature bowl, of this fabric indicates a type of offering. In addition, water is an essential aspect in the molding process of the production of brick and tile, and the presence of CF 3 hydria fabric within the kiln is a product of this aspect. The offering of a hydria to the gods might be a measure of appeasement to ensure that the wares within would not crumble or misfire. Since the majority of the diagnostic finds show signs of discoloration typical of burning or exposure to high heat over an extended period of time, this means that the offerings were placed within the kiln before the initiation of a firing cycle. This could be to appease the gods for a successful firing. The non-burnt pottery shards within the kiln are probably a product of the two filling cycles that Structure K underwent. The prevalence of shards indicating ritual behavior shows that ritual was a regular practice, as the previously documented *paterae*, votive cup, and vase mark significant single instances of ritual activity. As mentioned above, Structure K is the most well preserved Etruscan kiln in existence, and because of this, the results of the analysis of ritual behavior is instrumental to understanding the Etruscan's relationship between the phenomenon of crafting and the creation of wares and their cosmological beliefs.

7. Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express her appreciation to Dr. Laurel Taylor, faculty advisor from the Department of Classics at UNC Asheville and field director of Cetamura del Chianti, for extending the opportunity to work on this project and for giving the author excellent direction in executing this project. She also wishes to express appreciation toward Dr. Nancy de Grummond, M. Lynette Thompson Professor of Classics at Florida State University and field direct of Cetamura del Chianti, for offering and allowing her to undertake this project. She would also like to express gratitude to Dr. Charles

Ewell, professor at Syracuse University in Florence and New York University in Florence and field director at Cetamura del Chianti, for offering instrumental advice and aiding my understanding about Structure K itself. The author would also like to thank Dr. Lora Holland, Chair of the Department of Classics at UNC Asheville, for taking time to help with research and revision of various aspects of this project. The UNCA Department of Classics has been excellent in supporting and encouraging the author throughout the course of this project. The author would finally like to express her gratitude toward the UNC Asheville Department of Undergraduate research for providing the necessary funding.

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