

A foundation offering at the Roman port of Lattara (Lattes, France): the plant remains

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Abstract Excavations and sampling conducted at the ancient city of Lattara (Lattes, France) have revealed a foundation offering in a small pit situated in a storehouse in the Roman port of the city. This offering, dated to around A.D. 25–60, consisted of pottery vessels, oil lamps, a coin, a pin (made out of bone), an egg and several plant products. The archaeobotanical remains presented in this work are charred seeds, fruits and charcoal. The primary aim of this study is to analyse whether the plant taxa are unusual or the same ones that appear in the contemporary domestic contexts in the city, in order to assess the possibility of a special use of the plants related to, for instance, their symbolic or magical value. The discovery of domestic or public burnt offerings containing plant remains is unknown in the Mediterranean region of France during the Roman period, except for those found in funerary contexts.

Keywords Archaeobotany · Seed/fruit and charcoal remains · Burnt offerings · Symbolism of plants · Roman period · Southern France

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Introduction

In the case of archaeological settlement sites, charred seed and fruit remains as well as charcoal remains come from contexts usually related to consumption, construction, craft industry or other domestic activities. In southern France, the discovery of plant remains resulting from an ideological, religious or ritual act is rare in these sites. On the other hand, during the Iron Age and the Roman period, this practice is well-documented both in funerary contexts (Marinval 1993; André 2001; Bouby and Marinval 2004; Preiss et al. 2005) and by other types of ritual offerings such as pottery, other artefacts and/or animals, including animal products such as eggs (Py 1990; Fiches et al. 1979; Fabre 1990; Dedet and Schwaller 1990; Garcia 1993; Fabre and Gardeisen 1999; Feugère 2007). Moreover, the existence at that time of human inhumations (usually perinatal infants or foetuses) in domestic contexts outside the contemporary usual burial places should also be noted.

The majority of these Iron Age and Roman offerings or deposits are either buried directly in the soil or, in the case of animal or human bones, first placed in a container. The animal bones are sometimes burnt and the skeleton may be complete or partial. Sometimes animal and human bones have been buried together. Earlier hypotheses about human ritual sacrifices are now discounted because of the absence of cutting marks on the human bones. The general explanation given to these offering practices is that they are related to foundation rituals and have a prophylactic value. Chronologically, the practice of these ritual foundation offerings is attested in Languedoc and Provence from the end of the Neolithic period onwards. They certainly reflect local religious cult traditions, even if foreign influences are also detected especially during the Iron Age and the Roman period.

The ritual offering presented in this paper differs from those mentioned above. This offering, found at the archaeological site of Lattara (present-day Lattes, Hérault, France) and dated to around A.D. 25–60, consists of two pottery vessels, two oil lamps, a coin, a pin (made out of bone), an egg and several plant products. All the remains have been burnt and were buried together in a small pit situated in a storage room in the Roman port of the city. This is the first time that plant remains have been found in a ritual offering at Lattara and, to our knowledge, in any domestic archaeological context in southern France.

The ancient city of Lattara was founded around the end of the 6th century B.C. and was occupied until the end of the 2nd century A.D. (Janin and Py 2008). It was a trading post located at the mouth of the river Lez on the edge of the lagoon “*stagnum latera*”, mentioned by Pliny in A.D. 70 (Fig. 1), on the plain within the territory of the current city of Montpellier (Jorda et al. 2008). The geographical location of Lattara allowed its inhabitants to have a wide range of economic and social relations, not only with different Mediterranean peoples, for example, Etruscans, Greeks and Romans, but also with people in their hinterland.

The “*stagnum latera*” is a natural lagoon deep enough to allow ships to navigate and enter from the sea or the river. Furthermore, it is naturally protected from the swell and storms by the coastline. For these reasons, a port was built towards the front of the eastern city wall in the 2nd century A.D. During the 1st century A.D., the port of Lattara consisted of several constructions built along a street leading to one of the city gates (Fig. 2). Apart from the open spaces required for circulation and a lighthouse, the rest of the buildings (mostly stocked with dolia) were used for storage, probably

of wine (Garcia and Vallet 2002; Garcia 2008). Excavations and sampling conducted in one of these storehouses have revealed a foundation offering (noted above) in a small pit (FS26221), buried in the soil and situated against one of the walls of the building (Fig. 3).

Materials and methods

A soil sample with a total volume of 30 l was collected and washed on a set of three sieves, with meshes of 4, 2 and 0.5 mm. All of the resultant fractions were sorted completely. In addition to the carbonised organic remains (seeds and fruits, charcoal and fragments of an egg), some mammal and fish bones were also collected. The fact that they are not burnt leads us to conclude that they probably come from the sediment into which the pit was dug.

The seed and fruit remains were quantified as numbers of individuals represented (complete items, entire cotyledons or half-shells divided by two and fragments presenting an identifiable and single anatomical or morphological characteristic, for example, the hilum in the case of cereals) from fragments (those that do not follow the criteria listed above). In some cases (especially the broken fruit remains) the minimum number of individuals is also suggested.

Results

A total number of 655 seed and fruit remains were identified as nine taxa, all of which were charred and, in general, well

Fig. 1 Location of Lattara in France and reconstitution of the coastline and the lagoons of eastern Languedoc during the Iron Age and Roman period (Jorda et al. 2008)

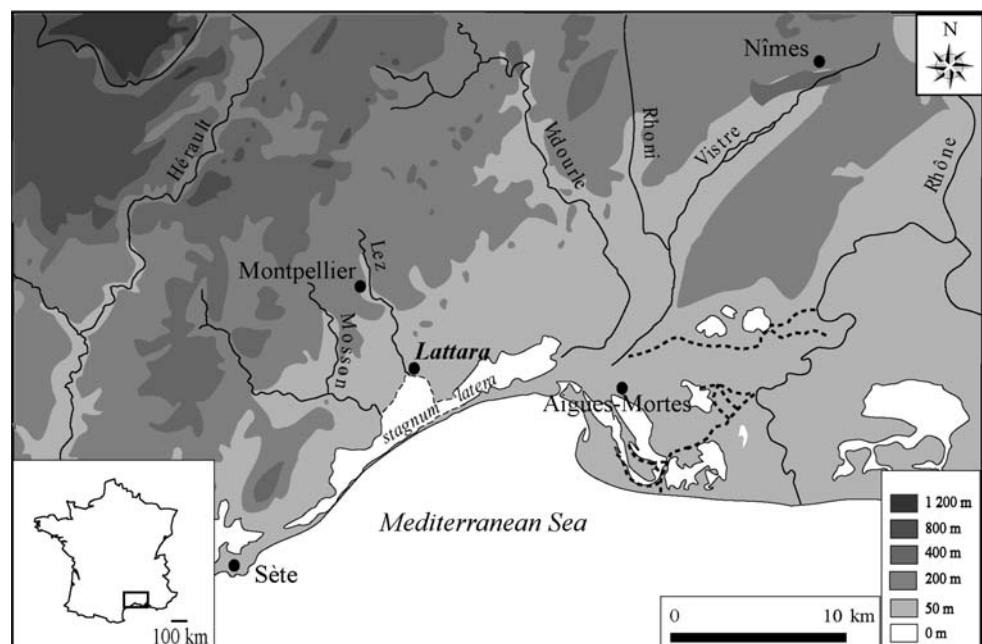


Fig. 2 General plan of the archaeological site of Lattara showing the location of the port (surrounded in *bold*) and of the storehouse (*arrow*). Scale unit = 20 m (DAO: A. Vidal, C. Garcia)

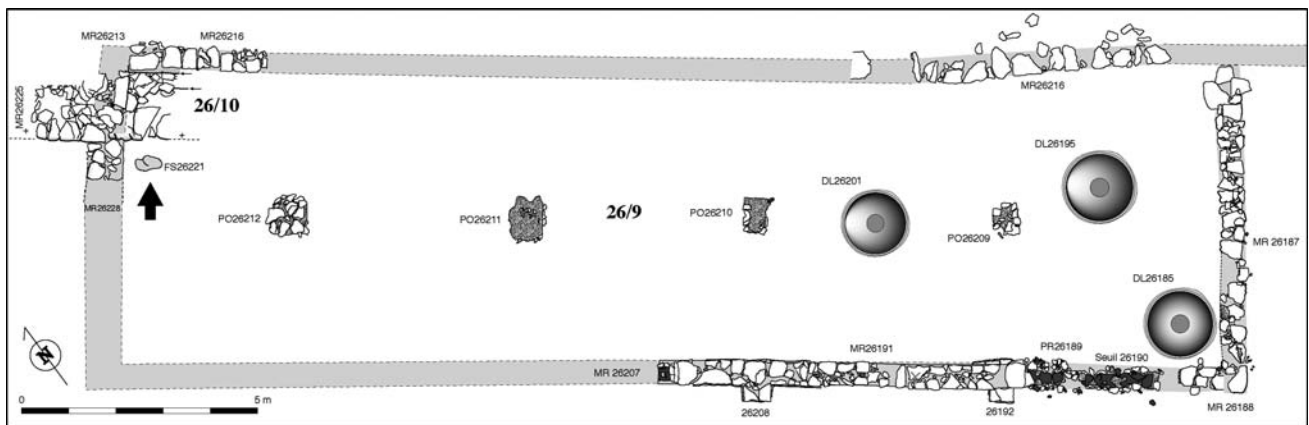


Fig. 3 Detailed plan of storehouse with location of the pit (FS26221) where the offering was found (Garcia and Vallet 2002)

preserved (Table 1). The fruits and seeds burnt in this offering are: 1 *Phoenix dactylifera* (date), 1 *Ficus carica* (fig), 1 *Pinus pinea* (umbrella or stone pine) cone probably containing the nuts, pips of *Vitis vinifera* (grape) and grains of *Hordeum vulgare* (hulled barley), *Triticum aestivum/durum* (naked wheat), *T. dicoccum* (emmer), *Lathyrus sativus* (grass pea), *Lens culinaris* (lentil) and *Linum*

usitatissimum (flax). Only 12 remains, of which four belong to undetermined fruits, could not be identified.

The single date found in the offering was probably offered as a complete fruit, because fragments of flesh, as well as of the stone, have been recovered (Fig. 4a). The same is true of the fig, of which several fragments of flesh (identified by the morphology of the pips and the

Table 1 Carbonised fruit and seed remains from the offering found in the pit FS26221 at Lattara

	Type	Individuals	Fragments
Cereals			
<i>Hordeum vulgare</i>	Grain	12	9
<i>Triticum aestivum/durum</i>	Grain	2	2
<i>Triticum dicoccum</i>	Grain	2	
<i>Hordeum/Triticum</i>	Grain		10
Pulses			
<i>Lathyrus sativus</i>	Seed	11	10
<i>Lens culinaris</i>	Seed	7	
Oil-/fibre-plants			
<i>Linum usitatissimum</i>	Seed	1	
Fruits			
<i>Ficus carica</i>	Fruit		24
<i>Phoenix dactylifera</i>	Fruit		8
<i>Phoenix dactylifera</i>	Stone		5
<i>Pinus pinea</i>	Nut	30	291
<i>Pinus pinea</i>	Cone scales	11	217
<i>Vitis vinifera</i>	Pip	1	2
Total		77	578
Undetermined			
Fruits			4
Undetermined			8

characteristic holes for the pips) have been found (Fig. 4b). The pine remains are represented by the nuts and the cone scales, of which some are complete and others fragmented (Fig. 4c). We presume that a single pine cone, containing the pine nuts, was offered. The role of grapes in the offering is less clear, as only one pip and two fragments have been found, which corresponds to only a single grape!

The main cereal remains recovered in the offering are of *Hordeum* (hulled barley). Only a few specimens of *T. aestivum/durum* and *T. dicoccum* wheat have been found. The preservation of the cereal remains is quite poor and fragmentation is relatively high, possibly as a consequence of the carbonisation process. We do not think that bread was present in the offering, which, in part, could explain the bad preservation of the cereal remains. Actually, the undetermined fragments recovered are neither charcoal nor bread (see Table 1).

The quantity of pulses among the plant products offered is quite high, especially in the case of *Lathyrus sativus*. *Lens* is also present but less abundant. The carbonisation process seems to be responsible for the separation of some of these pulses into two cotyledons. Only one seed of *Linum* was collected, which begs the question of the real role of this plant in the offering.

The analysis of 92 charcoal fragments has revealed four taxa: *Pinus halepensis/pinea* (Aleppo pine and/or umbrella

pine, 64%) and *Buxus sempervirens* (box, 27%) are dominant, whilst evergreen oak [probably *Quercus ilex*, (holm oak, 7%)] and *Phillyrea/Rhamnus alaternus* (1%), two Mediterranean shrubs, are represented only by some fragments. The largest fragments are 3-cm long and belong to *Pinus* but most of the specimens are very fragmented. No traces of work have been observed on their surfaces. Wood anatomy does not permit, in these fragments, discrimination the Aleppo pine from the stone pine. The distribution of the resin canals in the growth rings is not typical. Some fragments have dentate horizontal tracheid walls, which seems to point to the presence of the *Pinus halepensis* (convincingly identified among the firewood used at the site). However, the possible presence of *P. pinea* cannot be firmly excluded in considering other charcoal fragments.

Discussion

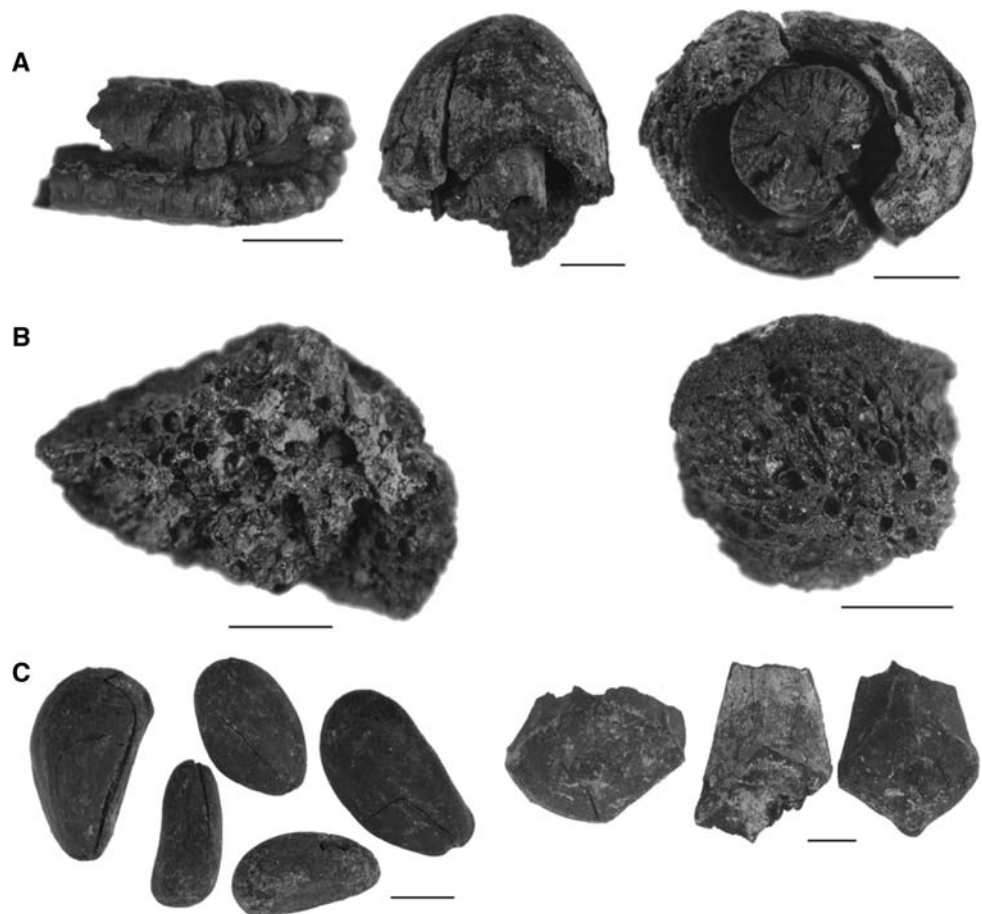
Plant offerings in Mediterranean public and private contexts

In Roman times, the sacred and the profane were strongly involved in all socio-cultural practices (Asirvatham et al. 2001). The public side of religion was organized by the state through the temples or altars devoted to the gods and by colleges of official priests and priestesses. At home, the *paterfamilias* was the person in charge of persuading the household spirits (the Lares Familiares, the Penates, Vesta and the Genius) or the ancestors to favour the requests of the family members. In both cases, worshippers might make offerings to honour the deities, thus ensuring a positive response to their requests (Scheid 2007).

Concerning the offerings, the classical authors have given accurate information about the better staples to offer the gods (Robinson 2002; Ovid, The Fasti). The main plant products offered were cereal grains, *Vicia faba* (broad beans), grapes and small cakes made of cereals. They were accompanied by pieces of meat, preferably pork and chicken, and adorned as well with garlands of wild flowers, quite often *Silene gallica* (small-flowered catchfly), *Rosmarinus officinalis* (rosemary) or *Myrtus communis* (myrtle). In addition, incense and scented wood were also burnt and wine was used in libations. The importance and type of offerings varied depending on their public or domestic nature, as well as the occasion (civic festivals, private or familiar ceremonies), whose dates were precisely noted in the Roman calendar.

The archaeobotanical studies done in several European sacrificial or public contexts (most of them temples to Isis or Mithras) show that pine nuts, cones and scales, dates, *Olea europaea* (olives) and *Castanea sativa* (chestnuts) were the most common offerings, whereas figs, grapes,

Fig. 4 Carbonised seed and fruits remains: **a** *Phoenix dactylifera* (date), stone (on the left) and fruit (on the right), **b** *Ficus carica* (fig), **c** *Pinus pinea* (pine), nuts (on the left) and scales (on the right); scale unit = 1 mm; source: N. Rovira



Prunus dulcis (almonds) and cereals (*T. aestivum/durum*, *Hordeum vulgare* and *Panicum miliaceum*, common millet) were less frequent. Other species found sporadically are: cf. *Malus/Pyrus* (apple/pear), *Linum usitatissimum*, *Vicia faba*, *T. dicoccum* (emmer), *T. spelta* (spelt) and perhaps cf. *Oryza sativa* (rice) (Zach 2002; Megaloudi 2005; Ruas 2008).

There are two examples of charred plant remains from burnt deposits in domestic or private contexts: the House of *Amarantus* and the House of the *Postumii*, both in the Italian city of Pompeii (Robinson 2002). If we consider the results given for the 1st century A.D., we can observe that the burnt plant remains consist principally of fruits and nuts: cones and bracts of *Pinus* spp.; nuts of *Juglans regia* (walnut) and *Corylus avellana* (hazel); figs, pears or apples; *Prunus persica* (peaches), *P. dulcis*, *P. avium* (cherries), *Vitis vinifera* (grapes), *Olea europaea* (olives) and *Phoenix dactylifera* (dates), *T. dicoccum*, *Hordeum vulgare*, *Panicum miliaceum* (common millet) and *Setaria italica* (foxtail millet) and other crops and ornamental plants including *Cupressus* sp. (cypress), *Quercus* sp., *Papaver somniferum* (opium poppy), *Myrtus communis* and *Silene gallica*.

If we now briefly observe the results provided by Roman funerary contexts in France, Bouby and Marinval (2004)

show how two broad areas can be distinguished according to the fruits and seeds used in the offerings: a Mediterranean-Rhone-Rhine area and a north-western-central area. The former area seems to be under stronger and more direct Roman influence than the latter one. The plant products which are predominant in Mediterranean France and the Rhone valley, the area to which Lattara belongs, are usually cultivated fruits (Mediterranean and exotic), bread or pastry. In central France, by contrast, cereals, pulses and collected fruits dominate, which has been interpreted, in part, as a persistence of Iron Age ritual practices.

The status of the plant products found in the offering at Lattara

The majority of the fruits and seeds found in the offering are also commonly found in contemporary contexts in Lattara, mainly as consumption or production waste, in addition to other cereals, pulses and fruits (see Alonso et al. 2008 for a review). However, some products are rare such as fig, stone pine cones and nuts, flax or found for the first time such as date.

The charcoal analysis shows that *Pinus* and *Buxus* are the main taxa found in the offering at Lattara, whilst they

represent less than 1% of the charcoal remains identified as firewood in the city during the same chronological period (Chabal 2005). For this reason, their random use just as fuel seems unlikely. Furthermore, we should note that the pine cone collected in the deposit would have enabled the other plant products to catch fire and burn, making the use of wood as fuel unnecessary. Hence, the reason for burning wood must lie elsewhere.

In this sense, *Buxus* is a hard and precious wood; it could have been presented in the form of small, carved objects. During the Roman period at Lattara, it was used for making combs, pyxids (boxes), small handles and furniture legs (Chabal and Feugère 2005). If we consider the fact that a pin was found in the offering, the presence of other objects is also possible. The Mediterranean *Pinus* spp. are also suitable for hand-working, but we think that in this case the qualities desired were more probably their flammability and the resin odour. The other two taxa are perhaps merely fuel, even if these hardwoods are also suitable for handcrafted objects.

The choice of the plant products: deliberate or accidental

One of the main questions that arise when looking at the taxonomical composition of the offering found in Lattara revolves around the choice of the plant products because, as we have stated above, they can vary depending on the geographical and/or cultural areas. So, why did people choose some and not others?

We have pointed out that the main wood taxa are rather uncommon near the site. Hence, even if part of the wood was used as fuel, it could have been chosen for specific qualities: for instance, *Pinus* for its scent, *Buxus* for its symbolic or technical qualities. Both could have been considered as precious according to their relative rarity in the local environment. The last feature is shared by some of the fruits burnt in the offering, especially the date, the fig and the pine cone (and nuts), whereas the rest of the seeds and fruits are mostly common. Moreover, we would add that other fruits and grains frequently used in Roman offerings (such as olives, walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds, cherries or peaches) are absent from this one, whilst most of them are quite well known at Lattara during the same period (Alonso et al. 2008). If we take into account the fact that this deposit is related to a ritual practice, an answer can be suggested through the properties of the plants.

The plants, thanks to their capacity to heal or to kill (as the gods do), had a direct link with the gods and so became their symbol on Earth embodying and sheltering them. The plants could represent or be related to one or more divine beings, which in turn gave a “personality” to the plants. This is a very important point to note because the use of

plants in any relationship with the gods (such as offerings, medicine or magic) involved a respect and a discipline depending on the personality of each plant and of what was expected from them (Bilimoff 2003, 2006; Ducourthial 2002). On the other hand, plants could also be used for magical purposes in order to obtain a certain effect, usually related to protection or fortune. In ancient times, the boundary between religion, magic and superstition was very slight (Graf 1997; Asirvatham et al. 2001) so the interpretation of the use of plants with one or the other intention is often problematic and, in our opinion, not always possible to elucidate.

What do all the plant products used in the offering have in common from a symbolic and/or magical point of view? In classical mythology, the cereals, the fig-tree, the pine (as well as the figs and the pine cones) and the palm-tree were related to fertility and fecundity, whilst the grapevine, the box and the holm oak, and also the palm-tree, the fig-tree and the pine, were linked to longevity and immortality (Table 2). In addition, cereals and grapes were also symbols of richness and hopefulness (Amigues 2002; Bilimoff 2006). The grains of wheat were also used for divination purposes. *Linum usitatissimum*, *Quercus ilex* and *Rhamnus alaternus* (Mediterranean buckthorn) gave protection against evil, whilst *Pinus* served to mediate between the living and the dead. *Buxus* was thought to bring good fortune (Ducourthial 2002; Bilimoff 2003). We have not found any information about the symbolic meaning of *Lathyrus sativus* or *Lens culinaris* (even if the latter are also found in Roman public offerings), but they may have represented the idea of abundance as did cereals. Finally, it is interesting to note that, in terms of both symbolic and magical properties, the plant products from Lattara are quite homogenous in relation to the possible effect desired by the offering, which seems to show an intentional choice. For instance, people may have rejected the olive or the olive-tree as an offering because of its meaning of chastity, contrary to the main effect of abundance represented by the other plants.

If we now consider the deities concerned by the plant products of the offering, we can observe that the majority are related to Dionysos/Bacchus, Cybele/*Magna Mater*, Apollo and Demeter/Ceres (Table 2). All these gods and goddesses are particularly associated with initiation or mystery cults (also called Oriental cults), similar but different from magical initiation, which became very popular from the 1st century A.D. onwards (Graf 1997; Scheid 2007). No temples or other public cult places dedicated to these deities have been found at Lattara. Actually, only the cult to Hermes/Mercury has been found at one temple situated near the necropolis, on the side of a path, and at the *scholla* of the *utricularii*. However, this does not mean that other temples (or cult places) dedicated to other gods and

Table 2 Principal ancient deities (Egyptian, Greek and Roman) to which the plant taxa found in public or private offerings of the Roman period in Europe are related, as well as the principal symbolic and magical properties of the plants (Ducourthial 2002; Bilimoff 2003, 2006), with no distinction between the chronological periods

	Deities	Symbolism	Magical properties	Public offer	Private offer
Cereals					
<i>Hordeum vulgare</i> ^a	Osiris; Demeter/ Ceres	Richness, hopefulness, fecundity/fertility, resurrection	Divination	1, 2	13
<i>Triticum aest./durum</i> ^a				1, 9	
<i>Triticum dicoccum</i> ^a				1	13
<i>Panicum miliaceum</i>				1, 4	13
<i>Setaria italica</i>					13
<i>Triticum spelta</i>				1	
cf. <i>Oryza sativa</i>				1	
Pulses					
<i>Cicer arietinum</i>					13
<i>Lathyrus sativus</i> ^a					
<i>Lens culinaris</i> ^a				1	13
<i>Lupinus</i> sp.				3	
<i>Vicia faba</i>	Saturn	Generation (souls of ancestors); election of a king	Divination, mediation	1	13
Oil/fibre/drinks					
<i>Linum usitatissimum</i> ^a			Protection against evil	1	
<i>Olea europaea</i>	Isis; Athena/ Minerva		Purification, protection; oil for love charms	1, 10, 11, 12	13, 14
<i>Vitis vinifera</i> ^a (?)	Dionysos/Bacchus				
Fruits					
<i>Castanea sativa</i>				5, 12	
<i>Ceratonia siliqua</i>					13
<i>Corylus avellana</i>				1, 6, 7	13, 14
<i>Ficus carica</i> ^a	Nut, Hathor; Dionysos/Bacchus	Fecundity, immortality		1, 2, 3, 5	14
<i>Juglans regia</i>	Jupiter	Prosperity, fecundity (into marriage)			13, 14
<i>Phoenix dactylifera</i> ^a	Thoth, Hathor, Isis, Horus; Artemis, Apollo/Diana, Apollo	Resurrection		1, 2, 3, 4, 5	13, 14
<i>Pinus pinea</i> ^a (pine cone and nuts)	Dionysos/Bacchus	Fecundity		1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12	13, 14
<i>Prunus amygdalus</i>				10, 12	13
<i>Prunus cerasus/avium</i>					13
<i>Punica granatum</i>	Dionysos, Aphrodite/Venus, Juno	Love, fecundity (into & out of marriage)			13
<i>Pyrus</i> or <i>Malus</i>	Aphrodite/Venus	Death (contrary of apple) Love, immortality, power, beauty, fortune	Divination	12	13
<i>Quercus</i> sp.					13
<i>Vitis vinifera</i> ^a	Dionysos/Bacchus	Longevity, hopefulness		1, 4, 10, 12	13, 14
Trees/shrubs/creepers					
<i>Buxus sempervirens</i> ^b	Pluto, Cybele/ Magna Mater, Venus	Immortality, firmness, liberty	Fortune		

Table 2 continued

	Deities	Symbolism	Magical properties	Public offer	Private offer
<i>Corylus avellana</i>			Divination (magic wands)		
<i>Cupressus sempervirens</i>		Death, resurrection, hopefulness			13
<i>Ficus carica</i>	Dionysos/Bacchus, Mars	Longevity, immortality, richness			
	Romulus and Remus	Foundation of Rome			
<i>Juglans regia</i>	Persephone/Proserpina	Death	Divination		
<i>Olea europaea</i>	Isis; Athena/Minerva	Chastity, virtue, hopefulness			
<i>Phoenix dactylifera</i>	Apollo	Fecundity, longevity			
<i>Pinus pinea</i> ^b	Dionysos/Bacchus, Cybele/Magna Mater	Fecundity, immortality, longevity	Mediation (between living and dead people)		
<i>Phyllirea/Rhamnus alaternus</i> ^b			Protection		
<i>Quercus ilex/coccifera</i> ^b	Jupiter	Robustness	Divination, protection		
<i>Vitis vinifera</i>	Osiris; Dionysos/Bacchus	Hopefulness, resurrection, longevity			
Other crops and ornamental plants					
<i>Papaver somniferum</i>	Hypnos, Thanatos		Sleep, death		13
<i>Myrtus communis</i>	Adonis, Aphrodite/Venus	Beauty, youthfulness	Prophecy of disasters and tragedies		13
<i>Silene gallica</i>					13

The only charcoal data are from Lattara, whilst seeds and fruits also have been collected in the temples of (1) Isis and *Magna Mater* (Mainz, Germany), (2) Fortuna and Mercury (Nijmegen, The Netherlands), (3) Isis (Tarifa, Spain), (4) Mithras and Sol (Novae, Bulgaria), (5) Isis (Pompeii, Italy), (6) Mithras (Carrawburgh, UK), (7) Mithras (London, UK), (8) *Magna Mater*? (Trier, Germany), (9) Sucellus? (Javols, France), (10) Heraion (Samos, Greece), (11) Demeter and Core (Corinth, Greece), (12) the monument to a Messenian Hero (Messene, Greece), (13) the House of *Amarantus* (Pompeii, Italy) and (14) the House of the *Postumii* (Pompeii, Italy) (Zach 2002; Robinson 2002; Megaloudi 2005; Ruas 2008)

^a Seeds and fruits recovered in Lattara

^b Charcoal remains

goddess, as well as their private cult, did not exist elsewhere in the city or in homes.

The other elements of the offering can complete the information given by the plant remains. The egg was also a symbol of fertility and immortality during the Roman period. It was burnt together with the plant remains. Concerning the pottery artefacts, libations with wine might have been made using the drinking cups, whilst oil burned in the lamps. One of these oil lamps is decorated with a winged cupid picking grapes, carrying on his shoulder two buckets fixed to a stick and holding a bunch of grapes in his right hand (Fig. 5). The other oil lamp is decorated with a laurel wreath, a symbol of glory. All these elements seem to show a ceremony directly associated with viticulture or wine. In this sense, the importance of wine at Lattara during feasts related to religious and ritual practices has yet been proposed for the Iron Age period (Dietler 1999). And we cannot forget the type of building concerned: a storehouse, probably for wine.

Conclusion

In summary, we can state that the fruits and seeds chosen for the foundation offering which were found in a storehouse in the port of Lattara are the typical types used for domestic or public burnt offerings in the Mediterranean basin during the Roman period. We can also observe that people used both common staples (cereals, pulses and grapes) and exotic (dates) or uncommon fruits (pine nuts and figs), which indicates, in our opinion, a voluntary act intended to produce a specific effect. The presence of charcoal remains of uncommon taxa, mainly *Buxus* and *Pinus*, may also suggest the use of wood with a specific intention (the odour of resin of the pine wood) and the possible offering of carved objects (for instance, made out of *Buxus*). The location of the deposit shows that it was a private ceremony.

The symbolic and magical properties of the plants burnt in the offering lead us to the conclusion that this act was



Fig. 5 Oil lamps, pottery cups and pin from the foundation offering found in the pit FS26221 at Lattara (Paterno 2002). Detail of the grape-picker cupid with wings

performed in order to produce an effect related principally to abundance, fecundity and longevity. The decoration of at least one of the oil lamps (related to viticulture) and the presence of drinking cups (originally containing wine?) reflect the main activity conducted in the storehouse, the storage of wine, as well as the importance of this product on ritual practices (libations). So, we can presume that the storehouse keepers would have asked the gods, the *Lares* or *Penates*, the ancestors or forces of nature for protection, as well as for the success and longevity of their business. In this sense, we are not able to verify, at the present state of research, if the ceremony was especially dedicated to a specific god such as Bacchus or goddess such as Cybele, or to any other deity. Neither can we identify the person in charge of it whether the *paterfamilias*, a magician or a priest.

Finally, we would like to emphasise the unusual nature of this offering in comparison to the contemporary (as well as earlier and later) foundation offerings or deposits found at Lattara, which mainly consist of pottery, other artefacts and animal and/or human bones. The practice of burning plant products has not yet been found in this type of deposit. So, several questions arise: is this use of plant products directly related to Roman cult traditions, reflecting the foreign origin of the storehouse keepers? Can we argue that the majority of the inhabitants of Lattara did not follow a Roman cult, but more local Iron Age ritual or cultural traditions (noted above)? Or one might even ask if the storehouse keepers were especially superstitious?

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