Etruscan Genucilia Ware: A Discussion on Its History and Past Scholarship

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Etruscan Genucilia plates were first discussed and classified by Sir John Beazley in his 1947 work Etruscan Vase-Painting. A decade later, Mario A. Del Chiaro established a typology for this family of ceramics, in addition to charting their distribution, identifying production centers and providing a chronological sequence (The Genucilia Group: A Class of Red-Figured Plates. Los Angeles 1957). Fifty seven years later, Del Chiaro’s publication remains accurate in most of its conclusions and well-respected by scholars of ancient ceramics; however, since his publication, significantly more Genucilia plates have been discovered due to the rise of greater systematic excavations along with the increased documentation of artifacts in their context.

This paper aims to shed greater light onto the function of Genucilia plates, and also to revisit Del Chiaro’s proposed typology, centers of production and chronology. Emphasis is placed not only the Genucilia plates themselves, but their overall provenience and the artifacts found alongside them. Attention is paid to the excavations that occurred after 1957 and the Genucilia plates discovered as a result. Genucilia plates discovered after this date have been well-published in their respect site monographs, but rarely have they been related back to Del Chiaro’s seminal work.
Introduction: What is Etruscan Genucilia Ware?

Etruscan Genucilia ware was first classified by Sir John Beazley, a pioneer in the field of ancient pottery, in his work *Etruscan Vase-Painting*.

Beazley's name for this class of pottery was determined by the dipinto, *P. Genucilia*, applied before firing and located beneath the foot of an individual red-figured plate (fig. 1). With a diameter of 15.6 cm and height of 5.1 cm, it contains a carefully painted female head in profile within the medallion-shaped field. She looks towards her right and wears a cross-hatched half-sakkos, diadem, an earring and a beaded necklace (fig. 2). This is one of the two principal iconographic schema that typically adorn Genucilia plates. Surrounding the tondo, on a flared rim, are 11 finely painted waves. This name plate of the Genucilia group is now situated in the Rhode Island School of Design.

The dating of Genucilia pottery remains the subject of debate, but safely ranges from the first half of the fourth until the early third century B.C.E. This ware was distributed throughout the Mediterranean and has been found in larger quantities in Caere, Falerii and Rome in funerary, religious and domestic contexts.

Other examples of Genucilia contain a geometric star pattern in the medallion, although atypical decoration does exist as well (fig. 3). The shape of Genucilia tends to consist of a shallow bowl, a flared rim, and projecting lip supported by a short stem and widened foot. The number of painted waves and their quality tend to decrease over the history of Genucilia ware. The earliest examples of Genucilia plates, such as those Mario Del Chiaro associates with the Berkeley Genucilia Painter, have around 14 waves per plate and each are carefully rendered. Later Genucilia plates, in both the Caeretan and Faliscan branches, tend to only have five, or at minimum four waves. The painted waves in these later examples lack consistency with one another and often scarcely resemble waves at all.

This paper will build on past studies to analyze more recently uncovered Genucilia. This will include a discussion of past scholarship on Genucilia ware, its shape, evidence of writing, and the meaning of its iconography all to determine the most likely function of this class of pottery.

History of Scholarship of Genucilia Ware

Comparable to most early studies of ancient Greek and Etruscan vase-painting, the history of Genucilia ware can be traced back to the scholarship of Sir John Beazley. Beazley’s study classified only 43 Genucilia plates that he saw and studied in person. Although 27 of his examples have a listed find spot of a town or city, none contain a record of the precise archaeological provenience; however, Beazley’s brief classification of this ware, introduced scholars to this interesting group of pottery. Early scholarship primarily examined the origin and production of Genucilia. Beazley believed that all examples of Genucilia plates were of Faliscan origin and manufactured in central Italy at Falerii. Inez Scott Ryberg, an expert of Roman religion, considered Falerii to be the main center of production, but admitted that imitation in other areas of Italy was a possibility.
Mario A. Del Chiaro, in his seminal work *The Genucilia Group: A Class of Etruscan Red-Figured Plates*, was the first to examine in depth this category of ceramics. Through an examination of roughly 600 Genucilia plates, Del Chiaro established a typology for this group of pottery, in addition to charting its distribution, identifying production centers and providing a chronological framework. Del Chiaro takes a traditional typological approach by closely examining iconographic trends and details of Genucilia ware. The goals of his typology were fourfold: first, to determine the location of centers of Genucilia production; second, map the distribution of this pottery; third, to date the wares; and fourth to organize them in stylistic groups based on iconography and shape. In his discussion of individual specimens of Genucilia, Del Chiaro touched upon the question of the pottery's function, but this topic was not of prime importance in his study.

Del Chiaro's hypothesis that there were two major production centers of Genucilia at Falerii and Caere still remains accepted today and serves as the basis of his typology. His typology divides Genucilia plates into three groups based on manufacture center: Falisco-Caeretan, Caeretan and Faliscan. He defines only five plates as Falisco-Caeretan. This identification is based on their early date and provenience in the area of the Ager Faliscus, which he sees as the original production site of Genucilia ware, before vase painters migrated south into the region of Etruria, specifically Caere. He does admit that Falisco-Caeretan Genucilia hold close resemblance in its iconography to examples in the Caeretan class. Contemporary scholarship on Genucilia plates tends to only differentiate between the Caeretan and Faliscan classes, based on the typological observations described by Del Chiaro.

The two predominant iconographic motifs – a female head in profile and geometric star pattern - adorn both Caeretan and Faliscan Genucilia. Del Chiaro observed that each branch of Genucilia plates contained unique decorative elements as part of the overall iconographic design. In plates adorned with a woman's profile head, the most accepted and easiest way to differentiate between the classifications is to examine the design of the sakkos (plural sakkoi), a head covering worn by Greek women. The sakkos of the Caeretan Branch contains a cross-hatched, almost net-like pattern, or in rare occurrence, a star motif. Painters of Faliscan Genucilia tend to depict the sakkos with palmettes, although some early versions still are adorned with a net pattern (fig. 3). Differentiating between the Caeretan
and Faliscan Branches, when the iconography depicts a geometric motif, is more challenging. Caeretan Genucilia have a geometric star (a central dot with four lines coming from it), either with a dotted chevron (literally a three dotted triangle), dot rosettes, or chevrons, painted in the quadrants (fig. 4). The Faliscan Branch is more varied in its geometric design. A Faliscan Genucilia plate either includes a rosette, quatrefoil, or cross in the medallion, with a variety of shapes acting as filler within the quadrants.

The vast majority of Genucilia plates analyzed by Del Chiaro come from museum collections, lack proper context and come from the Italian mainland. Since the publication of his study, there have been significantly more Genucilia plates recovered because of the rise of more systematic excavations, along with the increased documentation of artifacts in their context. It is not my intention here to conduct an analysis comparable in scope to Del Chiaro’s, but rather to examine Genucilia discovered in excavations that took place after 1957. On the Italian mainland this has been the case at Artena, Alba Fucens, Caere, Rome and Tarquinia. Of particular interest, however, are the Genucilia uncovered at sites outside Italy proper at Elba, Aleria, Carthage and Cyrene. An analysis of more recently discovered Genucilia, will shed greater light onto a variety of topics addressed in detail by Del Chiaro such as distribution, but also onto less touched upon subjects such as writing on Genucilia, and the origin of its iconography. In doing so, this paper aims to better determine the previously under addressed function of this pottery.

**Function Based on Form**

The unique shape of Genucilia plates have introduced questions concerning the vessel’s function, whether utilitarian or ritualistic. While the size of Genucilia slightly vary from piece to piece, on average the diameter is between 13.5 and 15.5 cm, with a height of 4.0-6.5 cm. At first glance, the shape of Genucilia ware resembles a kylix, an ancient Greek wine cup, especially in the base and foot. An obvious difference between them is the lack of handles on Genucilia ware and the shallow depth of the bowl, a trademark of Genucilia ware, in comparison to the deep bowl of the kylix. The shallow nature of the bowl and flared rim make it nearly impossible for Genucilia to hold any form of liquid without spillage. It would simply be impractical for Genucilia to have served as a holder of liquids, either in a ritual or everyday setting.

What is more probable is that this class of pottery was intended to hold a solid foodstuff of small quantity, since the diameter of these plates dictates the amount they could contain. Scholars have proposed a variety of foodstuffs that could have been used in conjunction with Genucilia, ranging from raw meats and fishes to cereals, plants, and cooked items. The significance and purpose of whatever item, if any, was placed on Genucilia ware, cannot be determined based solely on form, but rather is reliant on further research, such as residue analysis. The shape of Genucilia, unfortunately, can only provide a limited amount of certainty concerning function before descending into pure speculation.

![Figure 4 – Faliscan Genucilia plate. Museo Nazionale Romano: Terme di Diocleziano. Courtesy of Daniel Diffendale.](image)
Etruscan Genucilia Ware

Function Based on Graffiti and Dipinti

Most Genucilia plates lack writing; however, the rare instances where graffiti or dipinti exist provide scholars greater clues as to the functions of these plates. In 1913, Raniero Mengarelli discovered three Caeretan Genucilia plates with the Greek dipinto HPA written on the rim amongst the traditional wave pattern. These pieces were discovered at Caere in the area of Vigna Parrocchiale, located on the urban plateau. All three plates contain a version of a geometric star motif. Mengarelli believed the dipinti referred to Hera and the context of these plates identified a sanctuary to her. Del Chiaro also adopted this hypothesis and proposed that Genucilia, in this case, served a votive function in a sanctuary of Hera.

In 1985, Mauro Cristofani proposed a new hypothesis concerning these dipinti. He suggested that the dipinti, HPA, did not identify a temple to Hera, but rather a sanctuary to Herakles. These three Genucilia plates are not the only examples of pottery bearing these dipinti. Discovered amongst them were Caeretan black-glazed cups painted with either the exact same dipinto (HPA), a digram (HP) or an abbreviation (H). If Mengarelli’s hypothesis is accepted, that the dipinti referred to Hera, why do all the specimens lack her full name? The most peculiar instances are the ceramics with HPA dipinti, since a dedicatory votive would either have Hera’s name in the genitive (HPAΣ) or the dative case (HPAI). Since the Genucilia plates and the Caeretan black-glazed cups contain sufficient space for a proper dedication to Hera to have been inscribed, perhaps these dipinti do not refer to this goddess at all, but another deity, whose longer name needs to be abbreviated, such as Herakles.

This trio of Greek markings resembled the Latin dipinti that adorned a series of black-glazed cups from Rome. These cups, excavated in the foundations of the Mitreo near the Circus Maximus, contain the dipinti H, HV or HVL. The context of this discovery was recognized in ancient times as a space devoted to the cult of Hercules. This provenience aided Pietrangeli’s interpretation that the dipinti served as abbreviations for H(erculi), H(erculi) V(ictori), and H(erculi) V(ictori) I(nvicto), and likely were dedicated in the third century B.C.E. The function of the plates adorned with this dipinti likely served a votive function in the cult of Hercules Victor, whose temple still stands in the Forum Boarium. This cult certainly was not restricted to Rome at this time, as pottery with the dipinto H has been discovered in Ostia, Alba Fucens and Ariminum.

Etruscan worship of Herakles, which has been linked to sources of water, is made visible by bronze votive statuettes of Herakles found at Mount Falterona, Poggio Castiglione and Villa Cassarini in Bologna. Objects related to Herakles from Caere extend beyond Genucilia plates and black-glazed cups. At the necropolis of Banditaccia, in Tomb 155, archaeologists discovered a libation cup containing a stamp with an image of Herakles. Furthermore, during the 1984 excavations of Caere, in the area of the so-called Temple of Hera, archaeologists discovered a fragmentary clay statue that they associated with Herakles because of the lion skin wrapped around its shoulders. These finds help to establish that worship of Herakles existed not only at Caere,
but in other Etruscan settings. It seems likely that the Genucilia plates discovered at Caere, adorned with HPA, functioned at one point as votive offerings to Herakles, a god whose many followers were soldiers, veterans, or perhaps even Greek mercenaries.  

Another example of Genucilia containing writing suggests that this pottery was not restricted as votive gifts to one deity. Excavations from the Temple of Castor and Pollux in Rome yielded a fragment of a Caeretan Genucilia base that Birte Poulsen believes has no less than three inscriptions, which were scratched on after the piece was fired.  

The smallest graffiti consists of three forward slashes (///) near the edge of the base, perhaps some sort of inventory mark. The other two graffiti are of Latin letters. The shorter inscription contains three characters, but due to the fragmented nature of the base there is no certainty as to what word it might represent. The first two characters might be either an I or an L and the last one the top of an A. It is only the third and longest graffiti that informs us about the function of this Genucilia plate.

The longest inscription on this same Caeretan Genucilia base consists of six Latin characters, of which the first four are clearly MATR. Only a small vertical line appears for the fifth letter, but it is likely an I, and the last letter a poorly written T. If these letters are read as one word it would be MATRIT, but Poulsen argues that it should be divided to make the dative MATRI, “to the mother” and T, an abbreviation of the object dedicated to the mother goddess, emphasizing the votive function of this Genucilia plate. The cult of the Magna Mater, the most well-known Roman mother goddess, was not introduced into Rome until 205/204 B.C.E., in the midst of the Second Punic War. Livy accounts for why the cult of the Magna Mater was brought to Rome: “At that time religious scruples had suddenly assailed the citizens because in the Sibylline books, which were consulted on account of the frequent showers of stones that year, an oracle was found that, if ever a foreign foe should invade the land of Italy, he could be driven out of Italy and defeated if the Idaean Mother should be brought from Pessinus to Rome” (Livy 29.10.4-6). Even the latest examples of Genucilia ware in Italy predate the introduction of the cult of the Magna Mater by nearly 100 years.

The only mother goddess who was worshipped in Rome at the time that Caeretan Genucilia plates were being manufactured (mid fourth to early third century B.C.E.) was the Mater Matuta. Her festival, the Matralia, took place on July 11 and only wives of Roman citizens could partake. Dedications to the Mater Matuta could take place both publically at her temple located in the Forum Boarium and privately in domestic contexts. The primary votive offering given to the Mater Matuta was a small cake called a testuacium that was baked in earthenware vessels called testu. What is known about these cakes comes from Varro’s and Ovid’s description of them (Varro, De Lingua Latina 5.106. Ovid, Fasti 6.475). Poulsen suggests that the T on the Caeretan Genucilia base could stand for testuacium. Perhaps Genucilia plates, whose size remained relatively consistent, served both a ritualistic and utilitarian function by holding these dedications. The discovery of Genucilia plates not only in Roman domestic contexts, but also in the area of Sant’Omobono, the supposed location of the Temple of Mater Matuta, further hint at a relationship between this pottery and its use during the Matralia.

Although the examples of Genucilia containing graffiti or dipinti are few and far between they suggest this class of pottery served primarily a ritualistic function, but not for a single deity alone. The fact that the graffiti MATRI T was scratched on, indeed rather haphazardly, after the Genucilia plate was fired suggests this class of pottery was not used solely for this purpose. This fact is made clear by the wide distribution of Genucilia outside of areas where the Mater Matuta was worshipped. It still remains unclear whether the Genucilia plates from Caere with the dipinti HPA held a votive offering, but the context and dipinti safely associates them
with a votive function, likely to Herakles. Determining what Genucilia plates held, if anything, will remain an uncertainty since any food item dedicated and placed upon Genucilia plates would have been removed quickly once the dedication was concluded.

**Origin and Explanation of Iconography**

The iconography of Genucilia ware has led to questions concerning this pottery’s function, but also the origin and meaning behind the decoration itself. Although examples of Genucilia with unusual decorations in the medallion do exist, the female profile head and the geometric start motif are by far predominant. Iconography of a female profile head was certainly not restricted to Genucilia, but rather was a common decorative motif in south Italic, specifically Apulian, pottery. This decorative motif dates back to the seventh century B.C.E. in Greece, before it reached popularity in Apulia in the late fifth and fourth century B.C.E., where it adorned bell-kraters, pelikai, lekanides, and skyphoi. Connections have been made between this iconography and the female heads seen on Attic vases that portray the anodos of Aphrodite or Kore, but such significance likely disappeared by the fourth century B.C.E. The question of whom the female profile head represents, whether a specific deity or personification, still lacks a definite answer. Most Apulian pieces with female heads lack distinguishing features and contain varied treatments of the hair and head-gear, which suggests the unlikelihood that one deity is being depicted. Furthermore, it appears unlikely that the female head represents only one goddess, since the distribution of Genucilia ware extended throughout Italy and outside the mainland, where religious beliefs never were identical. Perhaps such iconography was simply a recognized religious symbol, whose presence on Genucilia plates emphasized that this pottery had a sacred function.

The geometric decoration of Genucilia plates rarely appears on any preceding branch of pottery. The geometric star motif sometimes appears as the decoration on the sakkos adorning the profile of a female head. Examples with this iconography are uncommon and Del Chiaro groups them under the work of the Copenhagen Genucilia Painter. Vincent Jolivet suggested that the geometric star decoration could be interpreted as a synecdoche, representing a small part of the entire female profile head. His is an intriguing analysis, but the significant lack of sakkoi on pottery adorned with this star pattern hinders one’s ability to read more into it.

The medallion of a plate might bring to mind the round shape of a coin. Mario Torelli and Del Chiaro both suggested that Roman coinage perhaps served as inspiration for the geometric motif found on some Genucilia plates. There are certainly iconographic similarities between the geometric star motif that adorns the medallion of Caeretan Genucilia plates and that of aes grave, a third century B.C.E. bronze cast coin used in Italy. Torelli sees parallels with aes grave from Luceria that are of a six rayed star. But, I believe that closer iconographic similarities exist between the geometric pattern of Genucilia ware and the four-spoked wheel, seen on aes grave from Etruria. Although iconographic parallels exist, it appears highly unlikely that aes grave could have influenced the decoration of Genucilia ware, since this class of coinage dates to the early third century B.C.E., after most, if not all, Caeretan Genucilia had already been manufactured.

The geometric star found on Faliscan and Caeretan Genucilia could also have served as a religious symbol. The poet Martianus Capella describes how the Etruscans believed that the sky was divided into 16 parts, with each region watched over by a deity. The star motif of Genucilia ware with its four rays divides the medallion into quadrants, which parallels the four basic divisions of the sky: regiones summae felicitatis, regiones minus prosperae, regiones minus dirae and regiones maxime dirae. This symbol, which recalls the act of taking auspices, perhaps stood as an alternate and simpler way to contact a god. Furthermore, this image, when paired with a votive food offering (as appears to be the case
with the testuacium36) could have established a link between the dedicant and the deity. The act of burying Genucilia plates along with the deceased, which is apparent from excavations at many sites and in the greatest magnitude at Aleria, aided in continuing that link between mortal and immortal beyond life and into death.56 Therefore, both the predominant motifs of the female profile head and geometric star draw connections with the divine realm and subsequently link it to a religious and votive function. Ultimately, the primary method to better understand and perhaps determine with certainty whether the function of Genucilia ware was utilitarian or ritualistic is to examine the context of the plates themselves.

Function Based on Provenience

The majority of Genucilia plates with precise provenience were discovered in funerary contexts such as at Aleria and Tarquinia.37 The Etruscan colony of Aleria, located on the island of Corsica, alone yielded 118 Caeretan Genucilia plates from 22 tombs.58 The high quantity of Genucilia plates at Aleria shows that as the Etruscans colonized outside of mainland Italy, their pottery followed. There are a handful of instances where Genucilia have been discovered in non-funerary contexts such as at Ostia,59 Artena,60 Cori,61 and Locri.62 At Ostia, Genucilia plates were discovered during excavations of the Castrum, the oldest settlement at the site, in the fill material. Thirteen total Genucilia plates were found during excavations at Artena inside two wells, which were traditionally a place where votive offerings were deposited. The Genucilia found at Cori and Locri were attributed to sanctuaries of Hercules and Persephone, respectively. At Rome only Caeretan Genucilia plates have been found. This pottery has been discovered at the Temple of Castor and Pollux,63 in Forum Boarium64 and in the area of the Regia.65 All these areas served as religious spaces and the function of the Genucilia discovered here likely reflected that nature.

At Elba, a group of Genucilia plates were found in situ within a cellar of a house in what was identified as a food deposit.66 This context has suggested that Genucilia plates might have also served a domestic utilitarian function. And while it is possible that Genucilia could have held some food items for a meal, this location does not rule out the possibility of them having a ritualistic function unto themselves. There are cases where Genucilia have been found in places that lacked a public cultic center, such as at the Etruscan fortress of Rofalco.67 In these instances, Genucilia were likely utilized inside homes for private domestic worship either to deceased ancestors or the Lares. The rise of more systematic archaeological excavations has resulted in better understanding of the contexts in which this pottery was employed.

Conclusion

Genucilia plates are among the most common type of pottery in Italy during the mid-Republican period. Although it appears that only two production centers existed, at Falerii and Caere, this class of pottery spread throughout the Italian mainland, into cities in Africa, Corsica, Greece, France, and even Spain. The few examples of Genucilia that contain dipinti or graffiti utilize writing to help invoke a god, whose sanctuary often lay in close proximity to the provenience of the plate. When no writing existed, the iconography of the female head the geometric motif served to impart a sacred quality to the piece, whether it was dedicated in a sanctuary, used for household worship or buried with the deceased. With the continuation of more detailed excavations and the subsequent publication of excavation reports, greater understanding concerning the chronology, distribution, production, and significance of Genucilia ware will follow; however, based on the current research available this pottery appears to be of ritualistic function.
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Endnotes:

1 Beazley 1947.
2 Providence, Inv. 27.188.
3 Del Chiaro 1957, 246, pl. 18.
4 Del Chiaro 1957, pl. 22.
5 Del Chiaro 1947; Del Chiaro 1975; Ryberg 1940.
6 Beazley 1947, 175.
7 Ryberg 1940, 101-2.
8 Del Chiaro 1957.
9 Del Chiaro 1957.
10 Del Chiaro 1957, 244.
11 Del Chiaro 1957, 244.
12 Del Chiaro 1957, 244.
13 Del Chiaro 1957, 246.
14 Del Chiaro 1957, 246-50.
15 Del Chiaro 1974, 63.
16 Del Chiaro 1957, 247.
17 Del Chiaro 1957, 283-7.
18 Del Chiaro 1957, 288-92.
20 Jolivet 1982, 164; Pianu 1985, 79.
21 Ambrosini 2014.
23 Mengarelli 1936, pl. XXVI, 4.
24 Mengarelli 1936.
26 Cristofani 1985.
27 Mengarelli 1936.
28 Cristofani 1985, 22.
30 Pietrangeli 1940, 144; Chelotti, Morizio and Silvestrini 1990, 80.
32 Pfiffig 1975, 342.
33 Cristofani 1985, n. 15.
34 Morel 1965, 94-95; Morel No. 1534.
40 Translation of Livy is by Frank Gardner Moore 1949.
41 For information the cult of the Mater Matuta see Turcan, 2001, 34; Heldring 1985, 68-75.
43 Turcan, 2001, 34.
45 As far as I am aware, there are 11 Genucilia plates whose medallions are not of a female profile head or a star motif. For a brief description of them see Torelli 2014, 419 and Ambrosini 2014, 430.
46 Apulian pottery with iconography appears throughout Trendall, 1978 V.2. See specifically Chapter 22, which examines pieces within the circle of the Darius and Underworld Painters and 24, which deals with the Amphora Group.
47 Trendall 1978 V.2, 648.
48 Torelli 2014, 420.
49 Del Chiaro 1957, 261-2.
50 Jolivet 1984, 89.
51 Torelli 2014, 421; Del Chiaro 1974, 67.
52 Syndenham 1926, 123-5, pl. 21-2.
53 Edlund-Berry 2006, 118.
54 Maras 2014, 484-5.
55 Turcan, 2001, 34.
64 Roma 1973, 105-7, 111-12.
66 Poulsen 2002, 85.
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