

Monte Testaccio

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Monte Testaccio (Italian for “Potsherd Mountain”) is an artificial mound comprised almost entirely of fragments of olive oil amphoras, located in the Emporium district of Rome. This feature appears to have been created by the systematic disposal of containers for oil imported to Rome by the Roman state that was stored in the Horrea Galbana, a state-owned warehouse located immediately to its north.

Monte Testaccio, which rises to a height of ca. 36 m above its surroundings, has a roughly triangular footprint, with east and southwest flanks measuring ca. 250 m long and a northwest flank measuring ca. 180 m long. It covers an area of ca. 22,000 m², with a volume of ca. 550,000 m³.

Surface investigations and excavation have elucidated the structure and history of the mound. It consists of two or perhaps three distinct sections. The original mound was built up from an indeterminate date – though perhaps as early as 74 BCE – through perhaps 149. This involved the construction of terrace walls from amphoras with their bottom removed and packed with sherds, behind which was deposited a fill consisting of sherds. A new terrace wall would then be constructed on top of this, set back from the earlier terrace wall, imparting to this part of the mound the form of a stepped pyramid. From perhaps 149 through perhaps 224 CE sherds were dumped over the exterior of the original mound, filling in the stepped terraces, and then in a restricted area along its western face, creating an irregular and somewhat lower western platform. Then, from perhaps 224 through ca. 265–270 sherds were dumped along the original mound’s eastern face, perhaps forming an irregular eastern platform, largely quarried away in post-classical times. Dumping may have ceased due to the construction of the Aurelian Walls in 271–75.

Monte Testaccio is composed almost entirely of three kinds of amphoras: the Dressel 20, from southern Spain, the African 1, from Tunisia, and the Tripolitanian 2/3, from western Libya (see BAETICA; AFRICA PROCONSULARIS; LIBYA AND LIBYANS). Dressel 20s comprise ca. 80–85 percent of the material by weight, with the other two classes accounting for nearly all of the remainder. Many examples of the Dressel 20 bear a complex set of *tituli picti* – painted packaging labels – that often include a consular date, allowing the detailed reconstruction of the chronology of dumping operations. Recent calculations suggest the mound contains ca. 24,750,000 amphorae, which would have held ca. 173,250,000 kg of oil.

The amount of oil indicated by these calculations, the *tituli picti* on the Dressel 20s, and the proximity of the mound to the Horrea Galbana suggest that the oil held in the amphorae that make up Monte Testaccio was collected and transported to Rome by the office of the *praefectus annonae* as part of the state’s effort to guarantee the supply of food staples for the city’s populace. This same office presumably saw to the disposal of the amphorae employed to package this oil once they had been emptied of their content.

SEE ALSO: Annona; Economy, Roman; Horrea; Olives and olive oil; Tiber.

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