

DARIO DEL BUFALO

MURRINA VASA

A LUXURY OF
IMPERIAL ROME

English edition
including italian texts

«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER

DARIO DEL BUFALO

MURRINA VASA

A LUXURY OF IMPERIAL ROME

Un lusso della Roma Imperiale

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FOREWORD

«In my opinion, the material that murrhine vases were made of, was simply brownish agate, of which numerous and well-known ancient vases and bowls have passed down to us, conserved integrally or in fragments in various museums and treasuries, such as in the Treasury of San Marco, the Museo degli Argenti or the Capitoline Museum...

My conviction is strengthened, I believe, by a simple linguistic consideration. To date, no one has noticed that the adjectival form *murrinus*, generally attributed to *vasa* or *pocula*, can, in all likelihood, be linked to a root found in Indo-Iranian languages, *mudrā* in Sanskrit and *muhr* in Middle Iranian, the main meaning being a seal. I don't think I am going too far from the truth to suppose that the adjective *murrinus* alludes to a hardstone (thus chalcedony or agate) that seals were made of.

For the ancients, agate did not always correspond to today's agate, but covered jaspers and fine chalcedony-based materials; nor is it therefore surprising that the very particular brown agate of this costly treasure (and it is without any foundation that it is called Sardonyx by some modern scholars, which for the ancients was something entirely different) was regarded as a mineral species in its own right.

I certainly do not claim with these lines, to have provided a solution to this age-old problem, which would require a detailed analysis of the texts, but I felt it to be an opportune moment to mention it. I will return to the subject on another occasion.»

So Raniero Gnoli wrote in the 1980's on page 230 of the 2nd edition of *Marmora Romana* (1988), promising to go into the subject further in another publication.

Likewise (and more than a hundred years before), Roman lawyer Faustino Corsi, in the draft of the 2nd edition of his *Delle Pietre Antiche* (1828), wrote that he would soon be publishing a work on Murrhine Vases.

Faustino Corsi returned to the topic and in 1830 he published a pamphlet entitled *De Vasi Murrini*, where he identified the Murrhina described by Pliny with Fluorspar (Fluorite), possibly as a response to Ignazio Paternò who in 1781, had published with the same title, a study that was temporally the closest, but the furthest apart in the conclusions.

Prof. Gnoli never returned with a text on this subject (he has investigated and published many others in the meantime) and in many years of knowing each other, we have often discussed the necessity to clarify this theme once and for all, which has been much debated and published over the centuries.

I hope, with this work, to have met my friend Raniero Gnoli's expectations, and to have developed both fully and comprehensively, his initial intuitions.

DARIO DEL BUFALO

PREFACE

I am very pleased with this research by Dario Del Bufalo, with whom I entirely agree regarding the conclusions. Maybe it was actually I who sowed the seed when, back in the 1980's, on the occasion of the second edition of *Marmora Romana*, I wrote a note (MR, II ed., 1988, p.231, note 1; see also I ed., p.197, note 2) saying that in my opinion, the so-called murrha was simply agate cooked in honey. I still remember discussing at length the term murrha with my late friend and colleague, linguist and philologist, Giorgio Cardona, when he suggested a plausible derivation of the word to me: *muhr* – to seal, to imprint, from where the noun imprint comes and by extension, the material of the instrument that makes the imprint, that is in this case, agate.

Thanks to Dario Del Bufalo, this age-old debate seems to me to have been finally resolved. This small seed has grown into a flourishing tree. It is incredible how much has been written on the subject, starting with Giulio Cesare Scaligero to Girolamo Cardano, Michele Mercati to Cardinal Cesare Baronio, Giorgio Agricola to Faustino Corsi (and the author has recorded all the different opinions) and, without any foundation, how many materials have been ascribed as being this ancient murrha: from amber to myrrh, shells to porcelain, coloured glass to fluorite, the latter being the one that even recently, has had the most numerous and surprising adhesions.

So this volume is welcome as it puts an end to one of the most debated antiquarian issues and it is welcome too for its rich photographic apparatus: the author has collected with infinite patience all the examples, either whole or fragmented, of *murrina supellex* that he could trace from public and private collections.

RANIERO GNOLI