

A Byzantine amphora from the eastern Mediterranean – 5th to 7th century AD



The word 'amphora' is derived from a Greek word meaning a vessel carried on both sides, but the distinctive container first appeared well before ancient Greece. Large jars with two handles on the shoulder or neck, tapering to a narrow or even pointed base, first appeared in the 15th century BC, at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, in Canaan, Palestine and Egypt. At this time Egypt was at its peak of power and prosperity and Palestine and Canaan were in its sphere of influence, so it is likely that there was a lot of trade between the Mediterranean ports of these countries.

At first sight it seems an odd design – who would make a container with a base so narrow that it can't stand on its own? However, these jars were made for transport stacked in a boat, several layers deep. The pointed bases of the amphorae (plural of amphora) in one layer were designed to fit neatly into the gaps between the amphorae in the layer below, locking the whole assembly together so that it can ride out storms without movement and breakage.

The pointed base would also have been useful when carrying, together with the handles at the other end by the neck. The typical amphora was probably designed to be the largest container that a single

person could handle when full. Archaeologists have been able to deduce the contents of some amphorae, sometimes directly by analysing the residues left behind, but more often from painted inscriptions on them listing the place of origin, the date filled and the contents. The main contents of the amphorae shipped around the Mediterranean in Roman times were wine, olive oil and fish sauce (garum). Garum was the main condiment in Roman times, made of fermented fish intestines and salt and eaten at all levels in society. Not everyone liked garum though, and the Roman philosopher Seneca described it as 'that expensive bloody mass of decayed fish'.

My amphora, which is about 50 cm tall, comes from a later period than when Seneca was writing, and was probably made between the fifth and seventh centuries AD. At this time the Roman empire in the west had collapsed and the empire in the east, the Byzantine empire, was being run from Constantinople (now Istanbul). This shift prompted increased production of wine in places like Palestine. In particular, Gaza wine (actually made in the Negev Highlands but shipped out of the port of Gaza) became famous throughout Europe and the Middle East. Apparently it was a sweet white wine, not only drunk for its taste but also for supposed medicinal properties. It was also popular as a communion wine, possibly because of its origin in the Holy Land.

Many different shapes of amphorae have been found, reflecting the long period over which they were made and the multitude of places they came from. There have been amphorae with long necks and tall handles or short necks and small loop handles, handles on the neck or on the shoulder, long thin bodies or round fat bodies and even ones the shape of a carrot. It is the shape and design of my amphora which allows me to date it to between the fifth and seventh century AD. The surface, apart from the shoulder, is covered in horizontal ridges, which is an almost universal design feature on amphorae from this period. It is likely that these ridges were made to give greater grip when handling and also possibly to make the vessels more robust – if one of the ridges is chipped, it is less likely that this chip would result in the amphora cracking, compared with a chip in a smooth surface. The makers of amphorae must have had to balance the requirements for robustness and lightness; the heavier an amphora is, the less it can contain and still be carried. My amphora only weighs a bit over 4 kg.

Scanning the literature on amphorae from this period I have found three drawings of amphorae that are similar in shape and design to mine, with a rather squat wide mouth, small handles on the neck and similar body shapes. Interestingly all three were found by archaeologists in North Africa - one from Tunisia, one from Egypt and one (particularly similar to mine) from Libya, so I think it is possible that my amphora was made in Roman North Africa, or was made somewhere where they shipped mainly to North Africa. Egypt was under Roman (Byzantine) rule at the time of my amphora and the emperor Justinian re-established Roman rule over the coastal regions of Tunisia and Libya in 533 AD.

I have one other piece of information that connects my amphora to the eastern Mediterranean. With the amphora came some correspondence relating to the previous owner's purchase of it. The previous owner was Lord Basil Feldman, a British businessman and peer. He bought the amphora from a dealer in Tel Aviv, Israel, in 1968. He was told that it was Greek and dated from 300 BC, which from its shape and design is clearly incorrect.

It is not clear whether most amphorae were made by throwing on the wheel or coiled using a paddle and anvil technique. Throwing was used extensively in Roman times, but large pots made by 20th century middle eastern potters were generally coiled. You might think that the corrugations on the surface of my pot reflects manufacture using coils, but I think it is likely that my pot was thrown. The interior of the vessel is very smooth, the corrugations seem too narrow for coils, their profile would

surely have been flattened during a coiling process and they seem more likely to have been made during throwing.

If the amphorae were used to contain wine or garum, the Romans used to seal their interiors with resin or pitch, to stop the liquid seeping out through the porous clay. The neck would be sealed with a cork bung with a layer of mortar on top. Looking at the inside of my amphora there may be a few small areas which have indications of a surface layer that has peeled off, but generally it looks very clean. It is possible that it was broken where it was made, before it had received its waterproof lining. However, it is clear that my amphora has been reassembled from broken pieces, so it is likely that the inner surfaces of the pieces will have been exposed for centuries and then probably vigorously cleaned by the restorer before gluing the pieces back together.

The decline in the use of amphorae as transport containers, especially of wine, started in the first half of the seventh century AD. Wars in the middle east led to Palestine and Egypt being conquered by the Arabs, and trade in the Mediterranean reduced as a result. Amphorae continued to be made, both in the conquered territories and in the remains of the Byzantine empire, but for some reason they all tended to be of a similar new form which was wider below the shoulder and had a shorter body – often referred to as ‘globular’. In the ninth century people started shipping wine in wooden barrels, which had the advantage that they were more robust, could be handled by rolling and could therefore be made larger. The amphora as a transport vessel was essentially obsolete by the 14th century, though a few potters in the middle east were still making them in the 20th century.

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