

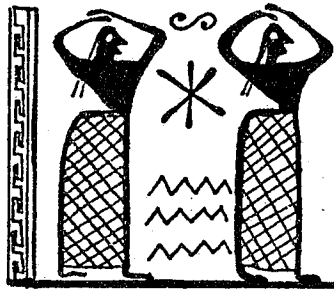
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VITA COTIDIANA
ANTIQUA

ROMAN AMPHORAS

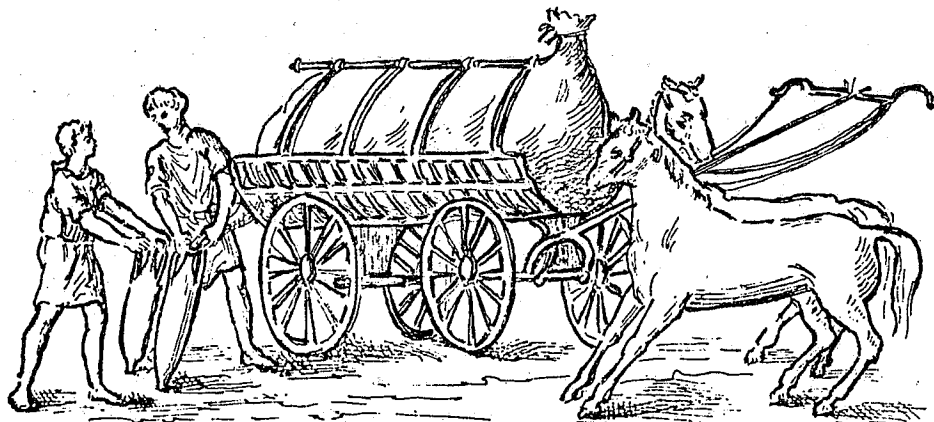
Sit tumulus lenae curto vetus amphora collo
(Propertius 4.5.75)

This line is usually read as a wish on the poet's part that the lena's tomb be marked by a short-necked or broken-necked amphora, but Propertius may actually be proposing that the lena be buried in an amphora, a frequent enough practice in Roman times. Certain types of commercial amphoras, especially those designed for the transport of olive oil, were large enough to accommodate a child or a small adult, like Propertius' shriveled crone. The cylindrical "Large African" amphora regularly attained a height of over 110 centimeters and a diameter of 35 centimeters, and globular Spanish jars had a diameter of about 55 centimeters. However we choose to interpret Propertius' (perhaps intentionally ambiguous) lines, they are an illustration of a pressing ecological problem for the Romans: the reuse or disposal of the massive, heavy commercial amphoras, the clay containers used for bottling and shipping liquids such as olive oil, wine, and fish-sauce from one end of the Roman world to the other. These two-handled jars were used throughout antiquity, in fact, as the standard commercial export containers for liquids and perishables. In Roman times, amphoras either took Italian products abroad or, especially during the Empire, carried the exports of the Roman provinces. During the first century B.C., for example, the best wines and oils of central and southern Italy were in demand in Greece, Egypt, France, and as far away as India. During the second century A.D., olive oil

from Spain and Africa was, because of the dole, in heavy demand in Rome. Spanish fish-sauce, revolting as the recipes for it indicate it would be to the modern palate, was a staple of the Roman diet. From the second century B.C. onward to the end of the Empire, the seas were crisscrossed by trading ships, and part of their cargo was almost always a consignment of amphoras. These were bulk containers, disposable but not easily disposed of, designed to transport with the least possible wastage of space and to cool and protect large quantities of liquids in their sea-journey. Owing to the high cost of land-freight in Roman antiquity, the amphoras were manufactured close to the point where they were to be filled and loaded onto ships. So too they were emptied, to be reused or broken, close to the warehouses where they were unloaded. Some of them could be reused as storage containers in shops or houses. Others found careers as flower-pots, coffins, acoustical aids in buildings, or in foundations for buildings and bridges, or as packing behind the tiles of wells and cisterns. If the jars could not be reused, they were broken near the docks. Monte Testaccio in Rome rises 150 feet above the Tiber. It is a hill made up of broken amphoras, and it developed at the point where sea-going ships unloaded their wares.

Fragments of amphoras carpet every Roman site. Hundreds of jars, and hundreds of thousands of fragments, have been found at such cities as Ostia, Pompeii, Cosa, Alexandria, Corinth. The American excavations of the Athenian Agora have produced a fine series of datable Roman jars covering, with few gaps, the entire history of this kind of pottery. Amphoras that can be called Roman had a history covering six or seven centuries. These jars had distinctive shapes that were adapted from the smaller Greek and Punic types. Dozens of shapes are known, and for some of them we now know enough to construct "family trees." The shapes evolved slowly, and from them we are often able to determine date and provenience. Analysis of the clay gives us further information. Roman amphoras also regularly bore stamps or dipinti or graffiti in Latin letters, marks referring to manufacture or to contents, marks serving both to identify and to guarantee, much as is the case with our commercial labels today. Such marks give us valuable information about places and methods of manufacture and about some of the individuals (usually otherwise unknown) who did the manufacturing. In spite of the massive amount of material that will have to be studied before it is ready, a definitive corpus of Latin amphora-stamps will some day greatly clarify our picture of Roman trade.

The development of underwater archaeology has given new energy to research on Roman amphoras. Amphoras are found in vast numbers in underwater wrecks, and interest in them has been stimulated on both scholarly and popular levels. There is in any case among classical archaeologists an increasing feeling that coarse pottery in general may offer a heretofore unsuspected, or at least not generally appreciated, source of knowledge about the past. "Total retrieval" is now coming to be accepted as a goal of archaeological investigation. Our information about amphoras ought to grow as a result. It is already clear that Roman amphoras are a major avenue to knowledge about the economic and social history of the Roman world.



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