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# Relief-Amphoras of Archaic Crete



1. Cretan relief-amphora in Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Photo courtesy Ashmolean Museum.

One of the characteristic aspects of Minoan Crete is the use of terracotta storage jars. No Minoan palace was complete without extensive magazines containing these large vessels. The storage jars, or *pithoi*, held such commodities as wine, olive oil and grain; they were usually decorated with painted floral designs and occasionally with geometric patterns in relief or impressed into the surface of the jar.

After the brilliance of the Minoan era many traditions lingered on in the island, and foremost was that of making and using large storage jars; the form now changed to one with a high cylindrical neck and two large handles, an amphora rather than a pithos. The decorative motifs changed with influence from other parts of the world reaching Crete, and yet many Minoan qualities were retained. During the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. Cretan art experienced a brief renaissance in which the decoration of great storage jars played an important role.

The amphora of the seventh century is a large terracotta vessel 1.25-1.50 m. tall

(Fig. 1),<sup>1</sup> having a high foot which splays slightly to a flat bottom so that it could be set up without any additional support. From this foot the body of the amphora rises in an inverted piriform shape, contracting gently at the shoulder. Separated from the shoulder by an overhanging moulding, the neck rises vertically to a heavy rim; the mouth is large. Two large band-handles running from neck to shoulder are usual; decorative roundels often flank the upper attachment of the handle.

Such amphoras were constructed in sections and the joining lines were strengthened and concealed by added bands of clay; these were often decorated with impressed or stamped designs. Ridges were also used as a purely decorative element where no join was involved.

The relief-amphoras of the seventh century B.C. represent one of the last Cretan wares of any distinction. Some of the geometric motifs which the seventh-century artists used, such as spirals, rosettes and knobs, are reminiscent of those seen on Minoan pithoi. However, the figural repre-

sentations, including such mythical creatures as griffins and sphinxes, separate the amphoras from their predecessors.

During the seventh century the decoration of amphoras was composed of applied figural reliefs, applied strips of clay and impressed patterns of geometric design stamped directly onto the surface of the amphoras or onto some of the applied strips. The vases are divided into three classes according to the nature of the decorative motifs. The first group comprises vases whose decoration is generally borrowed from the earlier Minoan repertory; the second, forming a transition into the Archaic period, is characterized by the adoption of motifs borrowed from the East, termed "Orientalizing"; the third displays an unusual trend, unique in the history of ceramic relief, that of imitating certain architectural elements. It is with amphoras of the Orientalizing class that we shall be dealing here.

The decoration on the storage jars generally consists of two different types of reliefs, in addition to designs stamped directly onto the surface of the vessel. The first type of relief is that formed in a mould and then applied to the amphora; the second type involves strips of clay which are applied and then modeled or impressed. The reliefs were joined to the body of the vase either by using a little water or dilute slip as an adhesive or by scratching the surface of the vessel and then using water or slip. After the appliqué was in place, details were added by hand.

The figural decorations are in the so-called Daedalic style, first characterized by Jenkins<sup>2</sup> as embodying a departure from naturalism to a rigid mathematical conception, especially evident in the treatment of planes in the very triangular human faces, which are nearly always rendered frontally. But material recently published from the sanctuary on the acropolis at Gortyna in Crete<sup>3</sup>, which has yielded a complete sequence of development, illustrating Daedalic art from the Late Geometric phase through Late Daedalic to Early

Archaic representations, shows that Jenkins' earlier statement of a departure from naturalism does not seem quite accurate. The whole of Daedalic art appears to be a progression from the abstract qualities of Geometric art to a greater naturalism.

Such relief-amphoras from Crete have been known for a long time; no less than seventy-six items are included in Schaefer's catalogue of 1957.<sup>4</sup> But of these there is but one fairly complete amphora (his No. 6) among the forty-seven pieces belonging to his first three groups and four complete amphoras in his fourth group (Nos. 48-51), which are later than those we shall be discussing here. However, the picture has been drastically changed by recent large finds of relief-amphoras, entire or fragmentary, believed to have been found mainly at Aphrati, the ancient Arkades; these have been widely scattered, and the seven fragments published here seem most likely to have been part of this large group. A large number (forty-four) of amphora fragments were gathered for the exhibition *Daedalische Kunst auf Kreta im 7. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* recently held in Hamburg, Germany, at the Museum fuer Kunst und Gewerbe;<sup>5</sup> of these no less than three are fairly complete amphoras of Schaefer's first three groups. A fourth amphora, in the Ashmolean Museum (see Fig. 1),<sup>6</sup> a fifth, in the Metaxas Collection in Crete,<sup>7</sup> and a sixth, in Salonica,<sup>8</sup> have been published, while two others, in Basel and Paris,<sup>9</sup> have only been mentioned. Yet many of the latest finds are still not noted in any publication. It is possible that, in the dispersion of this large body of material, pieces from a single amphora may have found their way to widely separated places. Only the publication of all the pieces will show if this is so, and to this end the seven fragments in the Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri (two in its possession, the others on loan)<sup>10</sup> are presented here. One of these fragments is from the body of a relief-amphora, extending from the thick neck join to the point at which



2. Fragment of relief-amphora with griffins and sphinxes, in the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia (Acc. No. 67.49).

the body tapers toward the base; the other six fragments are all from the vertical portion of the offset necks of various amphoras. The neck fragments all show the same central decorative motif: two sphinxes heraldically positioned upon a platform supported by volutes.

The griffin-sphinx fragment (Fig. 2) is the largest of the pieces in the collection.<sup>11</sup> It is made of rather coarse clay containing much grog, and the fabric is light orange in color. The thick moulding which forms the shoulder-neck join is decorated with spirals (eleven of which are preserved) impressed in a very uneven manner. Triple-ridged bands run horizontally beneath the shoulder edge and just above the heads of a band of crouching sphinxes. In this upper shoulder zone there are six such sphinxes facing left, their heads facing front

(Fig. 3). They were made in a mould and all are remarkably similar except for a few body details which were added later. The sphinxes are separated by vertical rows of four impressed spirals, except for the sphinx farthest right, which is flanked by vertical rows of five lozenges.

Another triple-ridged band separates the zone of sphinxes from that below containing griffins, which is composed as a triglyph-and-metope frieze (Fig. 4). The outer bands of the triglyphs are composed of two vertical applied strips of clay, each stamped with lozenges, usually five on the left strip and six on the right; the areas between the strips are decorated with three large impressed hexafoil rosettes. Each of the four metopes preserved is filled with a griffin walking to the left; at the right end the metope is delimited by only a single



3. Left: detail of sphinx from vase in Figure 2.

4. Above: detail of relief-amphora in Figure 2, showing griffins and triglyph-metope frieze.



vertical strip, there is no triglyph, and the area beyond is left blank. The griffins are mould-made; the body of each is delineated by incised lines showing muscle patterns; the wing feathers and the mane are elaborately detailed. The griffins are larger than the metopes and extend up into the triple band, interrupting its two lower ridges.

The triglyph-and-metope frieze is bordered below by another triple-ridged band; beneath this band the body of the amphora begins to taper slightly towards the base. The zone below is decorated with alternating raised circular knobs and impressed hexafoil rosettes; this is the lowest preserved zone of this amphora fragment.

The other six fragments are all from the high, cylindrical necks of amphoras and all have in common decoration with pairs of sphinxes in heraldic opposition. The lar-

gest fragment preserves the full height of the rim from the heavy mouth moulding to the shoulder join and even a bit below (Fig. 5).<sup>12</sup> The clay is soft and pale red in color; the soft fabric of the appliqué is rather badly worn. The high decorated zone in this instance contains three of the heraldic sphinx groups, here placed very close together, beginning from a handle attachment at the right; there were only three groups between the handles. Each of the sphinxes has three feet on a voluted platform and one on the groundline; they are in profile with their heads turned frontally; their wings are turned back and meet their elaborate voluted headdresses. A stamped rosette is located in the small section of the shoulder of the amphora which remains below the shoulder ridges on the left.

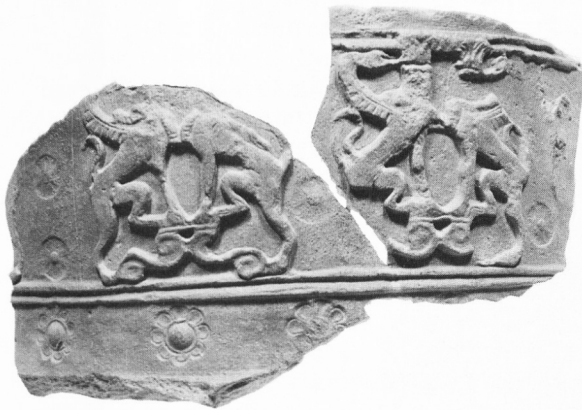


5. Rim and neck fragment of relief-amphora, Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia (Acc. No. 70.343). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Cedric H. Marks.

The other neck fragments are smaller and vary in quality of craftsmanship. The clay is coarse in all cases, ranging in color from light red to pale orange. The composition of the neck zone varies in each case, always using the same central motif. On one fragment (Fig. 6)<sup>13</sup> vertical rows of impressed octafoil rosettes divide the pairs of sphinxes, while a single rosette fills the space between the right group and the handle attachment. While very badly worn, the sphinx groups can be seen to be very like those on the previous fragment. On another piece (Fig. 7)<sup>14</sup> the sphinx groups are separated by two vertical strips of applied clay stamped with six hexafoil rosettes; the narrow space between the strips is free of decoration. In essence, this is a triglyph-and-

metope composition with the triglyph abbreviated. A rope pattern appears above the single pair of sphinxes preserved on another piece (Fig. 8);<sup>15</sup> above the rope is a band of alternating impressed rosettes and discs. On still another fragment (Fig. 9),<sup>16</sup> only a pair of sphinxes is shown, with no accompanying geometric designs preserved.

The last piece in the group bearing the heraldic motif has been singled out because of the excellent quality of the decorative motifs as well as their exceptional state of preservation (Fig. 10).<sup>17</sup> Here the triglyph-and-metope scheme is fully carried out, much in the manner of the griffin frieze on the shoulder fragment (see Fig. 2). The single preserved triglyph is formed of two raised strips of clay stamped with hepta-



6. Left: fragment of neck of relief-amphora.  
Marks Collection.



7. Right: fragment of neck of relief-amphora.  
Marks Collection.



8. Left: fragment of neck of relief-amphora in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem (Acc. No. 71.19). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Cedric H. Marks.



9. Right: fragment of neck of relief-amphora. Marks Collection.



10. Left: two joining fragments of the neck of a relief-amphora; below, left: the lefthand fragment; right: the righthand fragment. Marks Collection.





foil rosettes, while the space between is filled with a vertical running spiral impressed onto the surface of the vessel. Below this zone is a series of alternating circular knobs and rosettes. Better firing was most likely responsible for the harder fabric and the beautifully preserved surface, both of the vessel and the applied ornament. Nowhere among the Missouri fragments or any of those published can the details of the heraldic sphinx group be seen better than in this fragment; the "Etagenperuecke," that is, the elaborate headdress with two large plumes rising and ending in spirals and a third plume extending to either side and meeting the tip of the wing, the wing feathers, the details of body musculature, the double spiral volutes that form either side of the platform, all are perfectly formed in these impressions; the impressed ornaments are equally carefully done and well preserved.

The heraldic motif common to the six fragments is related to the "Sacred Tree" cult. In the Minoan-Mycenaean religion, not only were growing trees objects of worship, but branches and boughs were also. The "Tree" is often represented as merely a bush, or even stylized into an ordinary palmette. In the glyptic art of the Minoans it also became a column standing on an altar. When animals are shown with the "Sacred Tree" the tree becomes symbolic of the shrine of the god guarded by the animals, if the animals are fantastic creatures, or else it may indicate that the shrine contains sacrificial animals, if the animals are the more usual bulls or goats.<sup>18</sup> The column indicating the "Sacred Tree" may be omitted, leaving only the altar.<sup>19</sup> Thus the heraldic sphinx groups seen on the relief-amphoras of Archaic Crete may represent the shrine of a god guarded by two sphinxes.

Just as the group of antithetic sphinxes is most common in the fragments published here, so too it is found very often on other Cretan relief-amphoras in al-

most identical form and similar compositions, always on the neck zone.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the crouching sphinx on the shoulder fragment (Fig. 3) is much less common. A neck fragment in Tokyo, exhibited in Hamburg,<sup>21</sup> has an almost identical figure in an upper neck band, and four parallels are cited.<sup>22</sup> The griffin from the same shoulder piece in Missouri has no published parallel but is very like one in the identical position on an unpublished amphora in Basel, as well as in a metope in the neck zone of another unpublished amphora in Paris. Schaefer did not know the motif, which occurs only in the amphoras most recently found.

The Daedalic style of art, as presented by Jenkins, was divided into three phases: Early Daedalic, dated ca. 670-655 B.C., Middle Daedalic ca. 655-630 B.C., and Late Daedalic ca. 630-620 B.C. The changes from phase to phase involve largely the treatment of the head. From Early to Middle Daedalic the temples broaden and the face becomes fuller; three-dimensionality increases during the Middle Daedalic period.<sup>23</sup> This scheme was later changed somewhat by Schaefer, and with slight variation this was adopted in the catalogue of the recent exhibition, *Daedalische Kunst*.<sup>24</sup> The most recent chronological scheme is that proposed by Rizza for the material excavated at Gortyna,<sup>25</sup> but after thirty years the changes from Jenkins' original scheme are slight.

By any of the chronological schemes, the relief-amphoras first appear in the second quarter of the seventh century B.C., reach their zenith in the next quarter-century and show a final, declining phase in the last quarter of the seventh century. The large griffin-sphinx fragment in Missouri (see Figs. 2-4) would seem to be the earliest piece in this group, to judge from the quite angular faces of the sphinxes, with features of little depth. A date late in the Early Daedalic period (ca. 670-655 B.C.) is probable. The groups of heraldic sphinxes show less shallow relief and the faces are more oval than triangular. All would seem

to belong to the Middle Daedalic style, ca. 650-625 B.C.

Crete declined once again during the sixth century B.C. This time there was no renaissance, as there had been in the eighth and seventh centuries. In the relief-amphoras of the seventh century, "we see the last flight of imagination of the old civ-

ilization of Crete before it settles into the darkness of its exhausted, lethargic sleep."<sup>26</sup> As Daedalic stylization gives way to more natural representations in art, the focus of attention shifts from Crete to mainland Greece.

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<sup>1</sup>Thanks are due to the authorities of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, for permitting the reproduction of this photograph.

<sup>2</sup>R. J. Jenkins, *Daedalica* (Cambridge 1936) 14.

<sup>3</sup>G. Rizza and V. Santa Maria Scrinari, *Il Santuario sull'Acropoli di Gortina* (Rome 1968) 160-188, 213-244. The vast quantity of material in the Daedalic style is all dated by the excavators within the seventh century B.C.; it is divided into four groups: 1) *protodaedalico* and 2) *dedalico antico*, both belonging to the years 700-670 B.C., 3) *dedalico medio*, from 670 to a little after 640, and 4) *dedalico tardo*, to about 620 B.C.

<sup>4</sup>J. Schaefer, *Studien zu den griechischen Relief-pithoi des 8.-6. Jahrhunderts v. Chr. aus Kreta, Rhodos, Tenos und Boiotien* (Kallmunz 1957) 9-44.

<sup>5</sup>W. Hornbostel, "Kretische Reliefamphoren" in *Daedalische Kunst auf Kreta im 7. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (Hamburg 1970) (hereafter *DK*) 56-93. The chronology used here, a variant of that used by Schaefer, with changes suggested by N. Kontoleon, is as follows: 1) first quarter of the seventh century B.C., 2) second quarter of the seventh century B.C., 3) second half of the seventh century B.C., 4) turn from the seventh to the sixth century B.C., 5) 590-570 B.C. Most of the relief-amphoras belong to stage 3.

<sup>6</sup>Ashmolean Museum, *Report of the Visitors, 1969* (Oxford 1970) 16, pl. 3.

<sup>7</sup>*Archaiologikon Deltion* 20 (1965) *Chronika* 550-555, pl. 694a; *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 92 (1968) 995, fig. 6.

<sup>8</sup>*Arch. Delt.* 24 (1969) *Chronika* 293, pl. 301.

<sup>9</sup>*DK* 68 (Basel) and 74-75, No. C 12 (Paris).

<sup>10</sup>The large body fragment was purchased in 1967; the following year the six neck fragments were placed on loan by Mr. and Mrs. Cedric Marks of New York, who kindly permitted their cleaning, study and publication. The seven pieces were the subject of a

thesis for the M.A. degree at the University of Missouri (June 1968) by the author. This paper has been abstracted from the thesis, with additions and changes. The largest neck fragment was donated to the Museum by Mr. and Mrs. Marks, to whom the other five fragments have now been returned. The fragment with the corded band over the heraldic sphinx group (Fig. 8) was subsequently given by the owners to the Israel Museum, Jerusalem (Acc. No. 71.19). See *DK* 68 for a brief mention of this group. The large shoulder fragment was illustrated in *Muse* 2 (1968) 6, (before cleaning).

<sup>11</sup>Acc. No. 67.49. Max. width 1.15 m.; max. height 46 cm. The sphinxes measure 13.2 cm. x 9.4 cm.; the griffins 15.6 cm. x 16.3 cm.

<sup>12</sup>Acc. No. 70.343. Max. width 49 cm.; max. height 38 cm.; thickness of rim 7.8 cm. The sphinxes are ca. 17 cm. high.

<sup>13</sup>Max. width 52 cm.; max. height 27 cm.

<sup>14</sup>Max. width 29 cm.; max. height 26 cm.

<sup>15</sup>Max. width 21 cm.; max. height 16 cm.

<sup>16</sup>Max. width and height 17 cm.

<sup>17</sup>Max. width 56 cm.; max. height 32 cm.

<sup>18</sup>M. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion* (Lund 1950) 294.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.* 255.

<sup>20</sup>*DK* Nos. C 26-29, pls 25 and 27a. Here (page 83) five other examples are cited besides those published here, making fifteen in all; at least one other unpublished example exists.

<sup>21</sup>*DK* 74 No. C 11, pl. 27b.

<sup>22</sup>*DK* 74.

<sup>23</sup>Jenkins, *op cit.* 59-65.

<sup>24</sup>*DK* 56.

<sup>25</sup>See note 3.

<sup>26</sup>D. Levi, "Early Hellenic Pottery of Crete," *Hesperia* 14 (1945) 18.