

News about a Greek Vase used to transport and conserve Honey

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Introduction

Honey, with its different traits and uses, was a commercialized good, on par with other important foodstuffs. The first evidence of containers to transport honey date to the Bronze Age, as is recorded on Egyptian frescos of the fifteenth dynasty (middle of the second millennium BC) and on some Mycenae Linear B tablets (second half of the 2nd millennium BC). Other types of containers used to transport honey are referenced in papyrus of the Ptolemaic era¹. The containers recovered by archaeology are of roman and Byzantine time. Identifying them is possible due to the inscriptions (sgraffito and tituli picti), mostly present on amphorae forms used to transport wine.

The containers used for transporting and conserving honey: honey pots

As well as selling honey in amphorae and in other medium-long distance transport containers, this product was also stored and sold at a local or regional level, in *instrumenta domestica*, mostly in multifunctional containers or secondary re-usage without specific features that made it possible to distinguish according to functionality. Although it is difficult to recognise the containers used to transport and conserve honey, some specific forms are known, specifically adapted for this purpose, known as honey pots. These vessels are notable due to a particularly pronounced shoulder (rarely two) in the shape of a brim or “eyelash”, generally placed at about one third of the superior part of the vessel or near the mouth.

According to ethnographic parallels documented in the Iberian Peninsula and in Crete, this particularity seems to be due to two practical reasons: to create a channel of water around the superior part of the belly to prevent insects such as ants from reaching the product and to avoid leakage down the sides of the vessel.

The oldest examples known are from the pristine civilisations of Mesopotamia, as a number of pre-elamite vases seem to report, dated from 3000 to 2800 a.C.².

Later on, this tradition spread to the Aegean sea, found in Thera (currently Santorini)³, in the Center North of Italy (in the region of ancient Etruria), and also in the Iberian Peninsula.

¹ Bortolin 2008, 119-122.

² CVA, Paris, Louvre ii, pl. I-4; Louvre iii, pl. 6-8.

³ CVA, Sevres, pl. 6, n° 1.

An unpublished case study of greek vases

Greek vases have been found in their thousands by archaeology. It is possible to observe them in the main European museums, such as the British Museum, the Louvre, the National Museum of Athens, the Vatican Museum, the States Atiquities collections of Munique, in the Museums of Berlin, the Hermitage of Saint Petersburg, or out of Europe, in New York, or at the Fine Arts Museum of Boston. Artistic value apart (the main reason they are so admired) we cannot forget the practical use for which they were made. As such it is natural that a great diversity of forms with different functions and uses are known.

In the classic book by Gisela M. A. Richter and Marjorie J. Milne, entitled *Shapes and Names of Athenian Vases* (1935), the main forms of Greek vases made in Athens in the 5th century A.C. are described by the authors. As is referred, each form is the result of an individual creation, well proportioned and adapted for different usages, and the creation of new types is rare. The original name of many forms is unknown, even though some of them are mentioned in written sources and described and represented on painted vases.

The colonial productions of Magna Grecia and Sicily have a great formal variety, although great part of the canonical, standardised forms of Attic fabrication are imitated. To our surprise, we found in the *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum* a Greek vase (referred to as "Jar"), that due to its formal characteristics, specifically the existence of the distinctive prominent shoulder in the shape of a brim or "eyelash", situated at about one third of the superior part of the vessel, indicate that this is, in fact, a honey pot (Fig. 1).

According to the indication found in the volume of the Michigan University⁴, it is a orange paste, black varnish vase, with 25,9cm of height and 22,7 cm of width, classified as italiot. This vessel, most probably dated to the 4th century a.C, is referred to as belonging to the old Margur collection, and is said to be from Tarcentum, a small locality situated at about 20kms from the city of Udina, in Northeast Italy.

The north-italic provenance of this example should not be odd to us, as we have already identified honey pots in Etruscan necropolises. However, this would be the first known example of Greek vases production that could have been intentionally produced intent of containing and storing honey.

Conclusion

The existence of a Greek vase destined to transport and preserve honey is extremely interesting due to the problematic it raises. The chemical analysis of honey pots from roman period found in current Portuguese territory, from well known archaeological sites such as Bracara Augusta (Braga), Monte



⁴ CVA USA 3, 36, pl. XIX, n° 15.

Castêlo (Matosinhos), Aquae Flaviae (Chaves) and Conimbriga give us proof that they were meant for transporting honey, as the ethnographic parallels that exist in the peninsula suggest⁵.

At this moment we cannot evaluate if the italiot vase from Tarcentum is an isolated event or if we are before a lack of investigation related to this type of vases in Greek pottery. It is possible that the years to come will document more examples with these characteristics, revealing that, as well as transporting traditional products, Greek vases were also destined to transport honey, one of the most important goods in antiquity.

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⁵ Delgado 1996-1997, 149-165; Morais 2006, 149-161; 2011, 75-90.