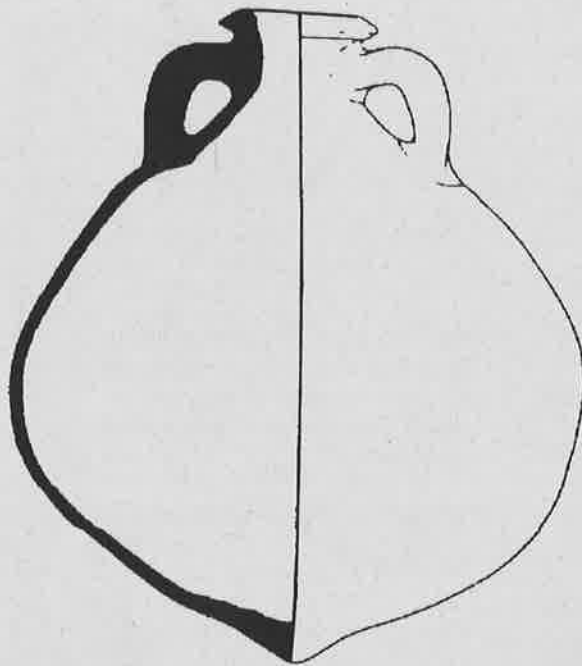

ROMAN AMPHORAE

Alison Jones



CHESTER
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
SERVICE

Newsletter

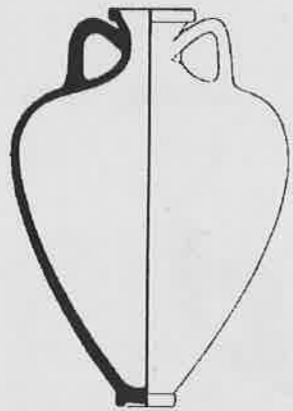
1992/4 Supplement

Amphorae - what, why, where, how?

These unusually shaped vessels have recently become the subject of detailed study. They are a good illustration of the long-distance trade of the Roman Empire

What are amphorae ?

Amphorae are large, two-handled pottery containers which were used in the ancient civilisations of the Mediterranean for storing and transporting bulk quantities of perishable goods such as wine, olive oil and fish sauces.



A flat-bottomed vessel made in Southern France to carry wine.

How old are they ?

The earliest amphorae were made in Palestine in the 15th century BC. They continued to be used in the Eastern Mediterranean until the middle or late 7th century AD, when the Arab conquest of that part of the Roman Empire led to the disruption of organised trade. Trading links between Britain and the continent were established before the Roman invasion in AD 43. Imports of wine amphorae from Italy began in the early 1st century BC. These mainly reached south-east Britain, where they have been found in the graves of Iron Age tribal chieftains. Imports of amphorae greatly increased after the Roman invasion. Wine, olive oil and fish sauces were brought in from other parts of the Empire to meet the new and growing demand.

Why do they come in different shapes and sizes ?

Amphorae were made in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, each suited to the commodity it was to carry. It was the contents of the vessel, not the vessel itself, which

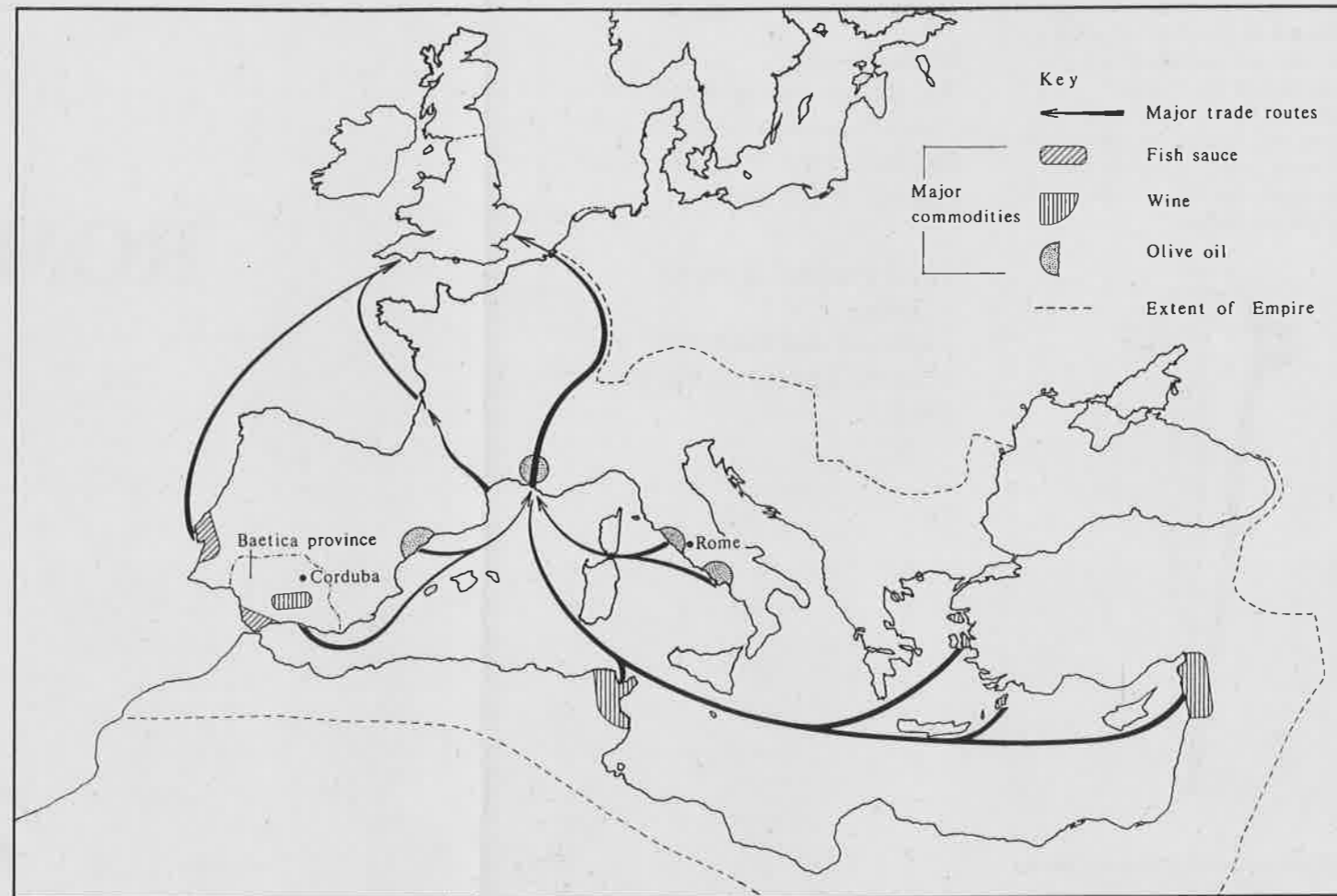
was important. The vessels had to be strong, to withstand the rigours of long-distance transport, and in shapes which were simple and easy to produce.

Why do they have spikes?

Many amphorae have a spike or knob on their base which would have prevented the vessels from standing upright. The spike probably acted as a third handle - something to hold onto when the heavy vessel was tipped up for pouring. Vessels were stored in cellars and were either leant against a wall or had their spikes dug into the soft floor so they could stand upright.

What did they carry ?

Amphorae carried a wide variety of goods, but the three most important were wine, olive oil and fish sauces. Other goods included figs, dates, olives, nuts, pepper, grain



and flour. Once they had been emptied of their original contents they were often re-used. This could be for a variety of purposes. Amphorae were sometimes used for cremation burials or even inhumations. Empty vessels were also commonly used as urinals. (There are two known examples from Chester). Other uses were as hearths, for paving, as water containers, flower pots, money containers, cupboards and boundary marks or even as weapons of war!

Where were they made ?

Amphorae were produced throughout the Mediterranean area at kiln sites in North Africa, Italy, Southern Spain and Southern France. Many of these kilns were located on the estates which produced the commodities carried in the amphorae, especially wine and olive oil.



Amphora with a long hollow spike. It was produced in Southern Spain and carried fish-based products.

Amphorae were also made as a specialist activity by independent potters.

How were they made ?

Methods of forming are not well understood, but many of the larger forms would have been built up in stages with partial drying between each stage to prevent collapse, the neck and shoulders of the vessel being 'luted' onto the body and spike. Many globular vessels appear to have been made in this way, as the marks of the potter's fingers can sometimes be seen where the soft edges have been kneaded together. The bases of many amphorae were probably wheel-thrown with the upper part of the body added as coils of clay, the whole vessel then being finished on the wheel. Other vessels may have been entirely hand-built.

Amphora production centres and trade routes

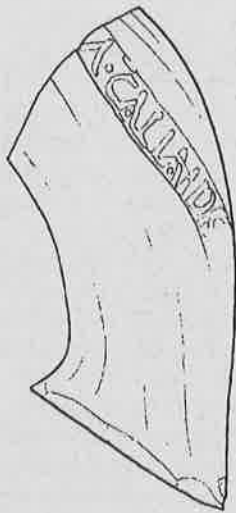
Amphorae were generally made in coarse fabrics with many mineral and rock inclusions. Coarse fabrics have more stability and are less likely to distort during firing. The mouths of the vessels were sealed with stoppers of wood or cork or with plugs of clay which were then covered with pitch, clay or gypsum to make an air-tight seal. If they were being used to transport liquids such as wine the interior surfaces were sometimes lined with a sealant of wood-pitch or resin.

How were they transported ?

Amphorae were especially important as containers for sea-borne goods, but other forms of transport were also used. Land transport was by cart for long distances, but human transport, in which the vessel was suspended from a long pole carried by two men, was used for short distances. During overland and sea transport, the vessels were wrapped in plaited straw and stacked upright, on top of each other, in some form of wooden framework.

What are our sources of evidence ?

Our sources of evidence about these vessels and the goods they contained are the vessels themselves (some have been found with their contents intact; or inscriptions on the vessels, known as *tituli picti*, describe the contents), shipwrecks, depictions in wall paintings, mosaics and carvings and historical evidence. Many amphorae were stamped on the handle, spike or body. The stamp probably represented the owner of the estate which produced the commodity carried in the amphora, rather than the potter who made it. These stamps can sometimes help to date the vessels more closely.



Stamped handle from a globular amphora made in S Spain to carry olive oil. The stamp reads Q M CALLAIDIS - '(from the estate of) Quintus Marcus Callas'. The first two names are Latin, the third Greek. We think that this man lived about the end of the second or beginning of the third century after Christ.

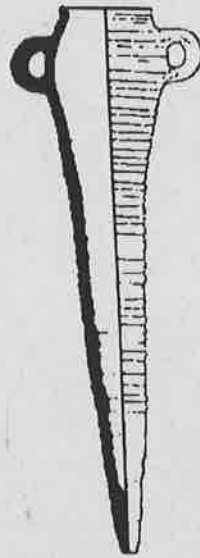
What are the types usually found in Chester ?

A wide range of amphora types have been found in Chester covering the whole span of the Roman occupation. The most common type of amphora found on Romano-British sites is a large globular vessel with oval handles and a short spike. It forms about 70-90% of the amphorae collection at Chester. It was produced at many kiln sites in Southern Spain and its main content was olive oil. It dates between the early 1st and the mid 3rd century AD.

Another common type in Chester is the Southern Gaulish wine amphora, a flat-bottomed vessel with a thin-walled, tapered body. It forms up to 15% of the amphora collections on sites in Chester. It dates from the middle of the 1st century to the early 4th century AD.

The fish sauce amphorae from the coast of Southern Spain form up to 17% of the amphorae collections at Chester. They come in a variety of forms, the date range varying according to form, but date in general from the late 1st century BC to the mid 2nd century AD.

Many other types of amphorae are also found in Chester, including some rare and unusual forms. These include the "carrot" amphorae, dating to the early 1st century AD. We are not sure where they were made - probably in a desert area - but they are thought to have carried dates.



Early first century 'carrot' amphora. These are relatively rare in Chester.

Late Roman cylindrical amphorae from North Africa, dating between the 4th and 6th centuries AD, have also been found in Chester. Many of these carried olive oil or fish sauces. Late Roman amphorae with ridged sides from the Eastern Mediterranean are also sometimes found in Chester but we do not know what goods they carried. They range in date from the 4th to the 6th and 7th centuries AD.

You can see examples of some of these vessels in the Grosvenor Museum. A small selection of amphorae that have been found during excavations in Chester is also currently on display in the City Council Cash Hall in the Forum Offices.

Some books to read

Kevin Greene
The archaeology of the Roman economy. London: Batsford, 1986, especially pages 25-8 and 162-3

David Peacock & David Williams
Amphorae and the Roman economy. London: Longman, 1986