

Cypriot basket-handle amphorae

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The so-called basket-handle amphorae were common in the Eastern Mediterranean from the seventh century BC until the early Hellenistic period. The shape was originally characterised by a biconical body, which later evolved into a cylindrical form, with an elongated base or toe. The rim is vertical or rolled and the handles, which often are rounded in section, are arched vertically above the rim. Basket-handle amphorae are considerably larger than the typical Greek transport amphora, and could contain some 65 to 80 litres. A filled amphora may have weighed around 100 kg. Given the way in which the handles are positioned, these amphorae must have been carried by two persons with the help of a pole stuck through the handles, as is shown on a Cypriot-Phoenician bronze bowl.

Basket-handle (or 'loop-handle', as they also are known) amphorae have mainly been found in Cyprus, Rhodes, the coast of Asia Minor, along the Syro-Palestinian coast and in Lower Egypt. There are also examples of such amphorae found at sites in the Negev and as far west as the Greek city of Euesperides in Cyrenaica. The question of where they were produced has been the subject of much scholarly debate, but most would agree that they originated in Cyprus. In 1960, Einar Gjerstad published a study of Cypriot pottery including basket-handle amphorae, and traced the origin of these vessels to earlier Cypriot amphorae. However, Gjerstad was not certain that all basket-handle amphorae were actually made in Cyprus. He noted that although the majority of them were found in Cyprus they were also known in Rhodes, Egypt and the Levant. Gjerstad suggested that in the Levant there were probably non-Cypriot, local workshops producing such amphorae. Given the variety of shapes and clay, and the fact that this particular type of amphora was in use for hundreds of years, it is very likely that there were many production sites in various parts of the Eastern Mediterranean, which were independent of each other. A comprehensive petrographic research project currently being undertaken by Samuel R. Wolff and Justin Leidwanger will hopefully increase our knowledge of where the different types of basket-handle amphorae were manufactured.

The morphology of these large and heavy vessels and the fact that they have been found at so many coastal sites – as well as at underwater sites – strongly indicate that they were used for maritime trade in olive oil. Their findspots often correspond to places in the Eastern Mediterranean where olive oil was produced in antiquity, but they are also numerous in Egypt, in particular in the Nile Delta at important *emporía* such as Naukratis. It is well known that much of the olive oil surplus from the Eastern Mediterranean was exported to Egypt and the archaeological evidence supports this. It has, however, also been established that olive oil was produced in the area around Alexandria and Fayyum, and geochemical analysis of basket-handle amphorae found at Mendes in the delta indicate a local origin of the amphorae. The hypothesis is that they were filled with the local oil and traded on the Egyptian market where the oil for example could have been used in the perfume production for which Mendes was known.

A secondary use in antiquity for coarse vessels of the size of basket-handle amphorae was for the practice of *enchytrismos*, when a deceased person, often a child, was buried in a ceramic

jar. There are several such examples in tombs excavated in Cyprus and Rhodes, but also on the Syro-Palestinian coast.

There also exist miniature versions of basket-handle amphorae, typically found in sanctuaries or burials, such as the group from the 7th century BC found at the sanctuary of Apollo Hylates at Kourion. These and similar vessels can be interpreted as votives and may have contained small amounts of oil as an offering to the deity or to the deceased.

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