

TRANSPORT AMPHORAE AND ECONOMIC INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

In Mediterranean maritime archaeology, the transport amphora is often the class of artifact that provides the most immediate information as to the date and possible route of the vessel under investigation. What information could these ancient containers have provided to the ancient consumer? Information is increasingly recognized as a fundamental variable in any economic system. As the quality and precision of information that could have been gained from ancient commercial containers changed over time, so too the economic systems that used such containers must have changed. This paper surveys three sorts of information that could be provided by amphoras: point of origin, capacity, and contents.

From the very earliest studies of ancient amphoras, researchers realized that the jars carried information about their place of origin. Stamps on handles might provide this information; shapes of certain amphoras advertised specific place of origin. Now, for the Archaic through Hellenistic periods in the Aegean basin there is a growing realization that, in many cases, shape alone would not have given very precise indications of origin. Instead broader regional styles were the norm and this continued to be the case – at times with ever-larger regions using relatively consistent forms – well into Late Antiquity. If one wanted precise information, further investigation (perhaps costly, perhaps not in the interests of the seller to provide) would have been required.

A second sort of information that might be gained from an amphora was the amount of the commodity it might be carrying and hence the approximate size of the shipment in question. The study of amphora capacities has a long, rigorous, and often quite fruitful history in the INA tradition with an emphasis on direct, repeatable measurements. An equally long Pontic tradition places more emphasis on calculations of capacity based on linear measurements and the proposal of theoretical standards of major classes of Aegean and Pontic amphoras. The degree of uniformity (or lack thereof) revealed by the ‘INA approach’ informs the difficulty an ancient consumer would have had in insuring he got what he paid for; the range of different theoretical standards emerging from the Pontic approach might inform the ease or difficulty in converting standards and rapidly estimating the size and value of a given cargo. The other papers in this session address questions of capacity and standardization.

Finally, what would the ancient consumer have known of the amphora’s contents? Particularly in terms of the first-use of the vessel, there is a general assumption of consistency of the relationship between amphora type and its contents. And yet finds from shipwrecks in particular have introduced a much greater range of products in amphoras than was assumed to be the case. Modern transparent containers, with labels, with tamper-proof lids, and a rarity of re-use, solve many of the problems of content-knowledge that would have plagued ancient amphora consumers.