

Trade and Consumption of Mediterranean Perfumes in the Iron Age Iberian Peninsula: An Overview

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Abstract

The study of the different types of Mediterranean perfume containers documented in Iron Age contexts of the Iberian Peninsula – Phoenician “oil bottles”, Archaic Corinthian, eastern Greek, Naucratic and Attic vessels, as well as Mediterranean Group 1 core-formed glass vessels – indicates there was a continued demand for Mediterranean scented substances in this area throughout that period. Despite the ebbs and flows suggested by available evidence, which can be correlated to the different historical contexts covered by the time span considered here, this continuous demand suggests that Mediterranean perfumes became an integral part of local social and representational practices, which sustained demand even in the face of probable supply breaks.

1. The Introduction of Mediterranean Perfumes in the Iberian Peninsula: A Brief Introduction

The introduction of the use of perfume and/or scented substances in the Iberian Peninsula seems to have taken place at the beginning of the Iron Age, and can therefore be correlated with the advent of Phoenician colonization. Although we cannot exclude that some natural products were used at earlier times for aromatic and/or medicinal purposes, no direct evidence of systematic production, consumption and trade of perfumes and unguents has in fact been documented for the preceding late Bronze Age.

The situation began to change with the foundation of the first Phoenician colonial settlements and the establishment of systematic social and political relationships with the local communities. In the framework of such relationships those communities adopted a number of oriental prestige goods and their associated practices, adapting and repurposing them in the context of their own social discourses.

Among these was the use in several different contexts of perfumes and unguents, which would become part and parcel of local social and representational practices.¹ Despite the continued absence of interdisciplinary approaches to such a use, the demand for Mediterranean perfumes and unguents can still be traced in the archaeological record by a succession of containers, which can be related to the trade and consumption of scented substances.

2. Perfume Containers in the Early Iron Age of the Iberian Peninsula: An Overview

The earliest in this series of container types are the so-called Phoenician “oil bottles”. These vessels are present in colonial settings since the early 8th century BC, becoming relatively common both in Phoenician and, to a less extent, in indigenous contexts from the late 8th/early 7th centuries BC on (figs. 1, 2); they remained the most common perfume containers up until the mid-6th century BC when they gradually disappear from all Mediterranean contexts.²

The available data regarding the production centers of these containers remains limited and a large part of the currently known containers have not been definitely assigned to a specific workshop. Nonetheless, the image currently available suggests that the earliest “oil bottles” were imported from the Phoenician motherland, as was to be expected, but also that local Iberian production started early on.³

The local Iberian production of “oil bottles” is further attested in the workshop of La Pancha (Málaga), dated in the late seventh and early sixth centuries BC.⁴

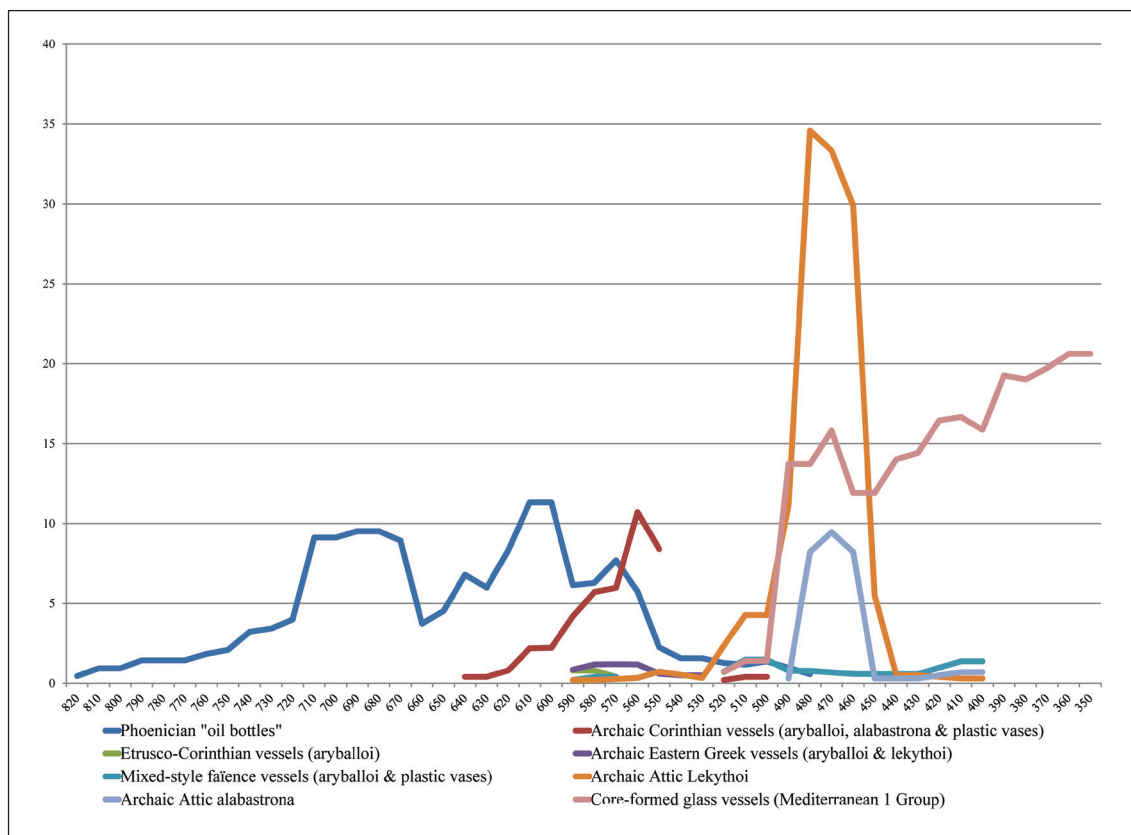


Fig. 1: Diachronic evolution of the trade of Mediterranean perfumes in the Iron Age Iberian Peninsula (average volume per decade).

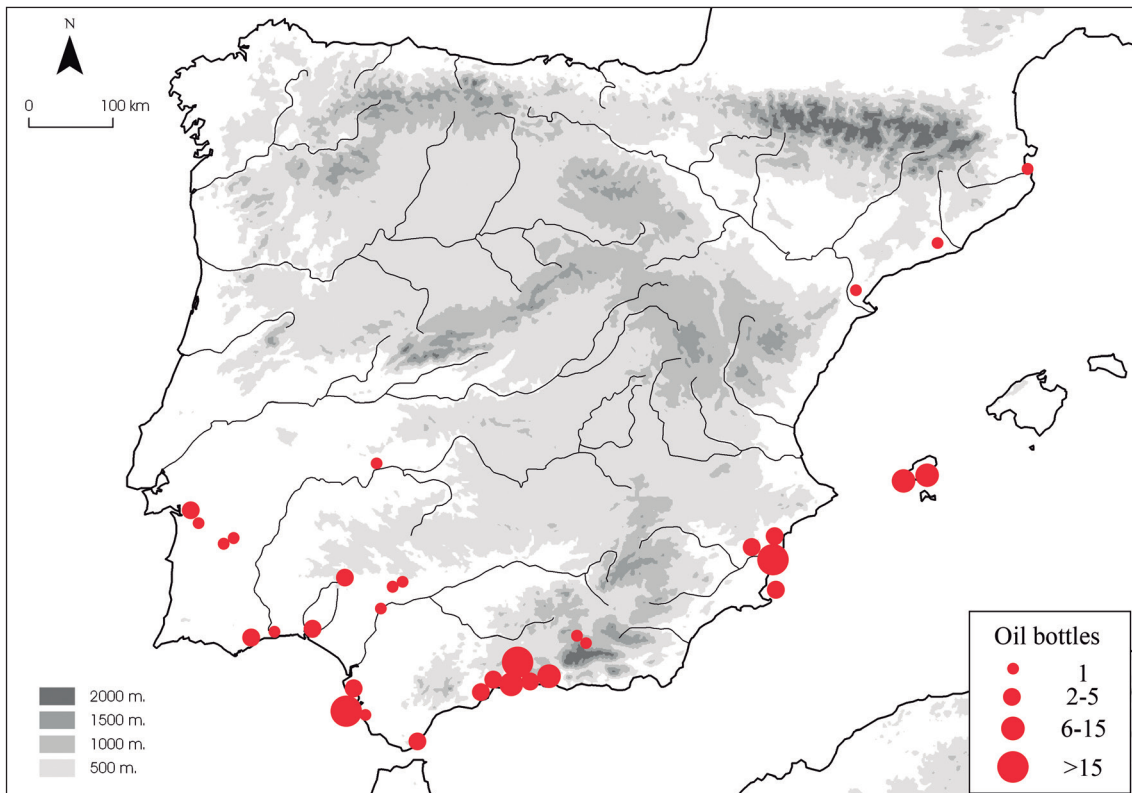


Fig. 2: Distribution of Phoenician “oil bottles” in the Iberian Peninsula.

Products hailing from other production centers, namely in the central Mediterranean, are also documented in the Iberian Peninsula, with some examples of “oil bottles” having been attributed to Carthaginian and Sardinian workshops.⁵

In any case, there is a pronounced retraction in the production and circulation of “oil bottles” starting in the second quarter of the sixth century BC (fig. 1). Meanwhile, as the trade of these vessels was waning, other types of perfume containers were gradually introduced.

The most common were the Corinthian *aryballoi* and *alabastra*.⁶ Although never as abundant as “oil bottles”, middle Corinthian and in particular late Corinthian vessels are well documented in Iberian contexts, actually surpassing the number of “oil bottles” by the second quarter of the 6th century BC (figs. 1, 3).

Although quantitatively residual, other Greek and Greek-type perfume containers are also documented around this period. These include a certain number of faïence *aryballoi* and plastic vases, usually attributed to the workshops of Naucratis, in Egypt⁷ and some *aryballoi* attributed to eastern Greek workshops⁸ (fig. 3).

This relative diversity of perfume containers in the early 6th century can be seen as a reflection of the continued demand for scented products. No longer being fully met by “oil bottles” and their contents, this demand seems in part to have been fulfilled by

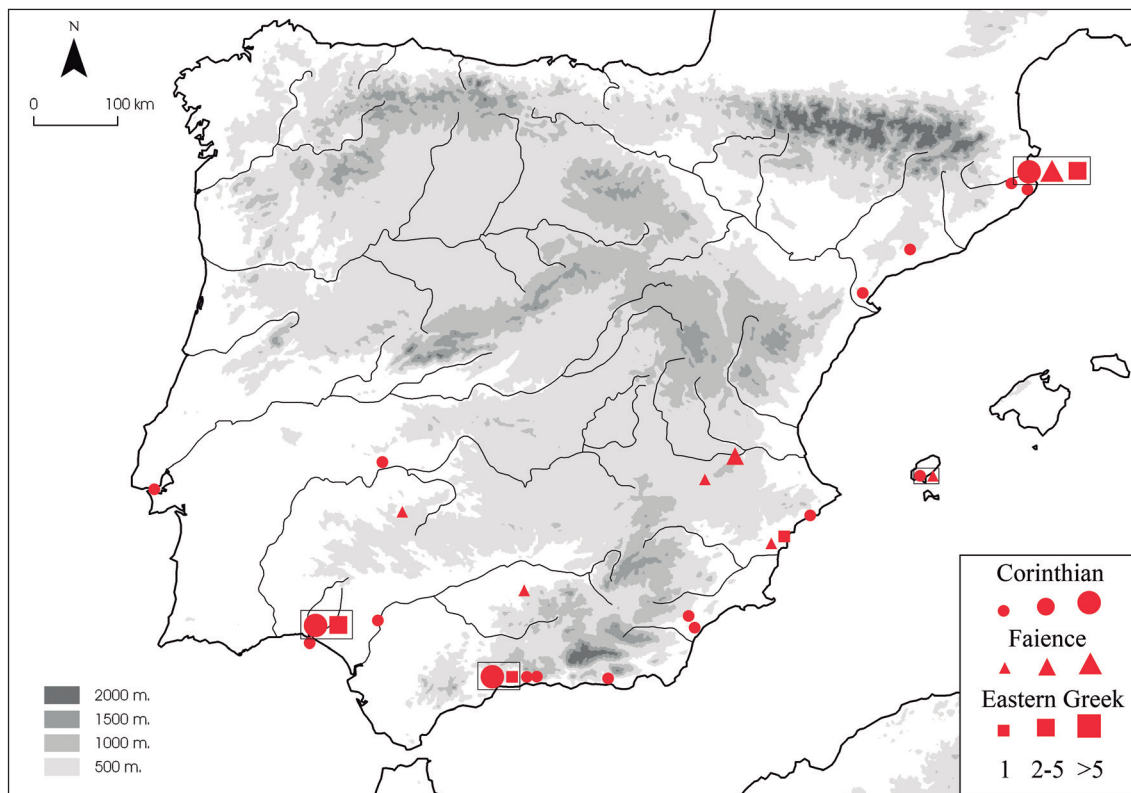


Fig. 3: Distribution of Archaic Corinthian, Eastern Greek and Naucratic perfumes containers in the Iberian Peninsula.

Greek products, either distributed through the Phoenician trade network or directly through Greek, and particularly Phocaeen merchants.⁹

In the third quarter of the 6th century BC, however – very likely as a result of Mediterranean geo-political circumstances – there seems to have been a break in the supply of perfumes to the Iberian Peninsula. This shortage only seems to have been surmounted towards the late 6th and particularly the 5th century BC with the introduction of two new groups of containers.

On the one hand, in the eastern part of the Iberian Peninsula, where Greek trade networks – with the Greek colony of *Emporion* in northeastern Spain as an important hub – were gaining ground, we find a certain number of Archaic Attic *Lekythoi* and, to a lesser extent, *Alabastra*.¹⁰ These were indeed very abundant in *Emporion* and its immediate hinterland,¹¹ but remained very rare outside this properly Greek context (figs. 1, 4), as did later Classical Attic perfume containers.¹²

Beyond the limited scope of distribution of these Archaic Attic vessels and their contents, the demand for Mediterranean perfumes and scented substances seems to have been met primarily by the products transported in the core-formed glass vessels of

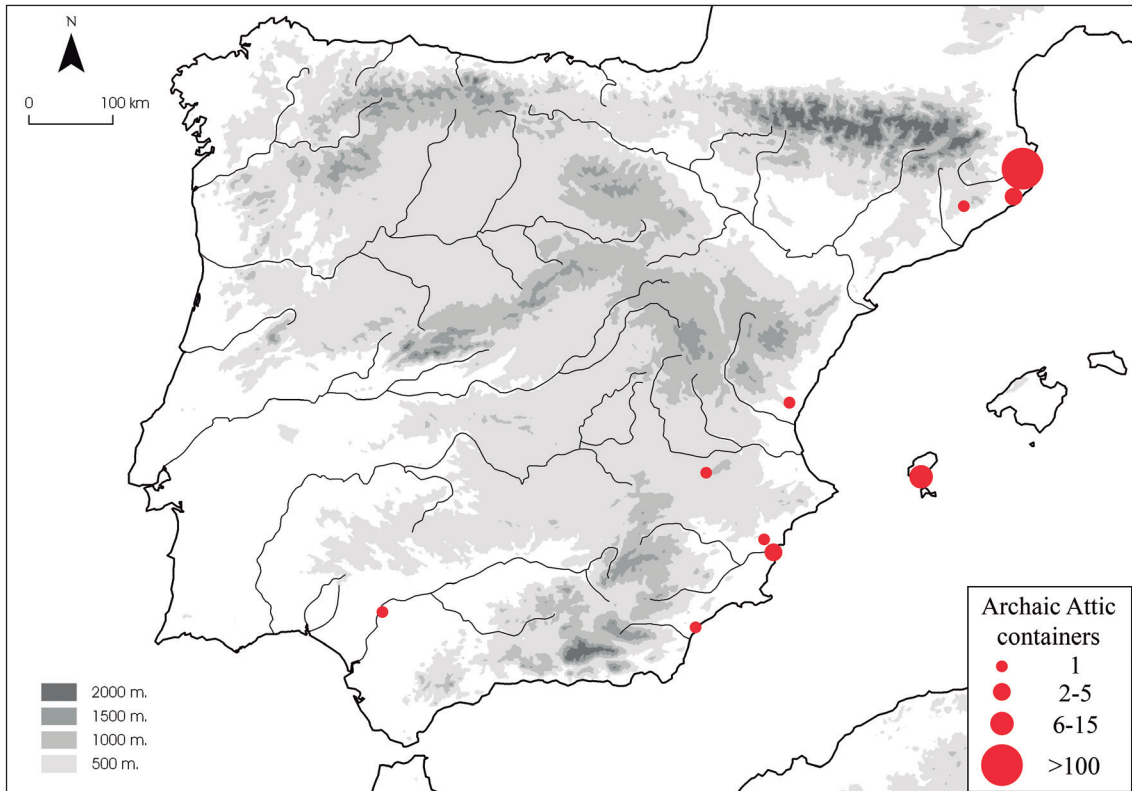


Fig. 4: Distribution of Archaic Attic perfume containers in the Iberian Peninsula.

Donald Harden's Mediterranean Group 1,¹³ which, from the late 6th and especially the early 5th century on, seem to have flooded the Iberian markets¹⁴ (figs. 1, 5).

The exact provenance of these vessels is still a matter of some debate, despite the general consensus that they originate in the Greek world, possibly in the workshops of the island of Rhodes.¹⁵ Other production centers may, however, have existed: some vessels with a white ground and purple decorations,¹⁶ for instances, have been tentatively attributed to a western workshop, possibly *Emporion* itself,¹⁷ although no direct evidence for this attribution has so far been produced.

Given the very widespread distribution of these vessels, which seem to have been incorporated in sites with very different cultural backgrounds, it is difficult to specify the agents behind the distribution networks through which they circulated in the far west.

However – and besides a possible Punic distribution network, which may explain some of the examples documented in the southern and western coasts of the peninsula – the circulation of these vessels seems to have been intimately connected with Greek trade. This connection may have been a direct one – as in the case of *Emporion* and its hinterland, or indirect, operated through local sub-networks which redistributed

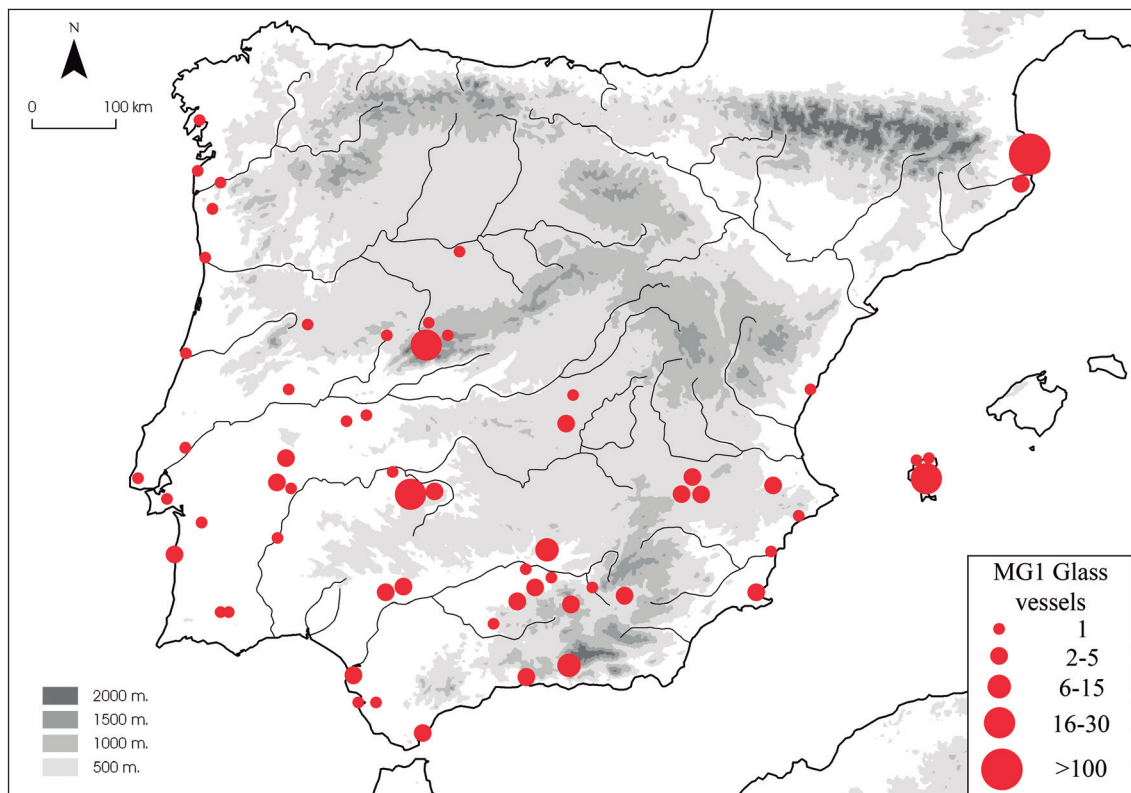


Fig. 5: Distribution of Mediterranean Group 1 core-formed glass vessels in the Iberian Peninsula.

Greek products to the interior of the peninsula and whose protagonists may have been the Iberian groups of the Levant and the southeast of the peninsula.

This lends further support to the idea that these glass vessels were produced, during this period, in essentially Greek workshops. The volume of the consumption of these vessels and its evolution could, on the other hand, point in the same direction, as these glass vessels seem to disappear from the archaeological record rather abruptly in the mid-4th century BC (fig. 1).

This seems to echo the situation of classical Attic pottery, which also disappears rather abruptly from the generality of the western markets around 350 BC at the height of its popularity.¹⁸

As with later Greek/Hellenistic pottery productions, D. Harden's Mediterranean Group 2 vessels are very rare in the Iberian Peninsula, and show a very restricted geographical distribution, essentially confined to the Mediterranean coasts.¹⁹

3. The Trade and Consumption of Mediterranean Perfumes in the Iron Age Iberian Peninsula: Preliminary Conclusions and Research Outlooks

The image we get from the combined analysis of the evolution in the trade and consumption of these different classes of vessels is one of continued demand – and, obviously, supply – of Mediterranean perfumes throughout the earlier centuries of the first millennium BC. There are obvious ebbs and flows throughout the considered time span, which, as briefly indicated throughout this contribution, can more or less be correlated to specific historical processes and conjunctures, but the image of continuity is quite striking.

It seems therefore safe to state that these Mediterranean perfumes became an integral part of the consumption habits of the communities of the Iberian Peninsula due to their incorporation in local regimes of value and social, ritual and representational practices.²⁰ Only by accepting this premise can we understand the nearly continuous demand for these products, which to a large degree transcended specific historical contexts and conjunctures.

With this data in hand, the future task facing research is to break down the trade aggregates presented here in order to better understand how the existence of different distribution networks but also of different local/regional consumption choices shaped the overall patterns we can glimpse from the archaeological record, thus generating a more context-specific analysis, which will allow for a finer characterization of the uses and social meanings of these substances.

As this brief overview attempted to demonstrate, the data from the Iberian Peninsula holds a great deal of potential for the study of the trade and consumption of Mediterranean perfumes throughout this period, and can be a privileged laboratory for the analysis of the changing fashions of different Mediterranean workshops and products, thus contributing for an ever growing understanding of the interconnectedness of the ancient Mediterranean world.

Notes

¹ López Rosendo 2005.

² Orsingher 2010, with bibliography.

³ See, e.g. González Prats 2014.

⁴ Martín Córdoba et al. 2006, 271.

⁵ See, for instance, Ramon Torres 1982; Belizón Aragón et al. 2014; González Prats 2014.

⁶ Trías 1967; Rouillard 1991; Domínguez – Sánchez 2000, with previous bibliography.

⁷ Jiménez Ávila – Ortega Blanco 2004, 90–93.

⁸ Domínguez – Sánchez 2000, with previous bibliography.

⁹ See Cabrera Bonet 1988/1989.

¹⁰ Trías 1967; Rouillard 1991; Domínguez – Sánchez 2000, with previous bibliography.

¹¹ See Trías 1967.

¹² See Algrain 2012.

¹³ Harden 1981; Grose 1989.

¹⁴ Feugère 1989; Jiménez Ávila 1999/2003; Almagro Gorbea – Alonso Cereza 2009.

¹⁵ Harden 1981; Grose 1989.

¹⁶ Grose's Class I:A – See Grose 1989, 111–112.

¹⁷ Carreras i Rossell – García i Rodríguez 1985.

¹⁸ See Trías 1967; Rouillard 1991; Domínguez – Sánchez 2000.

¹⁹ Feugère 1989.

²⁰ López Rosendo 2005.

Image Credits

All figures by author.

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