

Assemblages of Transport Amphoras: From Chronology to Economics and Society: Introduction

Mark L. Lawall

There is a long and important history of research centering on ceramic chronologies that gives a starring role to closed deposits. Carl Schuchhardt's 1895 publication of a mid 2nd century B.C. deposit on the citadel of Pergamon provided a fixed point for Rhodian amphora stamps.¹ His interests were not limited to chronology; he also considered the intensity of Rhodian-Pergamene commerce and the reasons for stamping amphoras in the first place. The papers in this volume follow a current trend in Classical Archaeology towards ever greater interest in contexts, both for chronology and for socio-economic interpretations. Chronological studies depending on close studies of archaeological context remain indispensable. And yet, no less important are the insights that can be gained when detailed contextual studies of transport amphoras examine issues of trade and exchange, the economics of cult, household economies, economic development and collapse, and other such issues.

While there is undeniable value in publishing collections of amphoras or, even more traditionally, collections of those sections of amphora handles that happen to carry stamped impressions; the AIAC panel that gave rise to the present collection sought further conclusions from connections between amphora finds and their broader contexts. The contexts in question varied considerably, from an individual house, to a specific sector of one site, to multiple regions across wide landscapes. Context also depends on the other artifacts associated in one sense or another with the amphoras. Context can also be thought of in terms of the narrow or broad span of events that impacted each artifact – in this case especially the amphoras – as they entered 'the archaeological record'. And perhaps most importantly for both the theme of the AIAC conference and archaeology's contribution to big questions of ancient social history, context includes the broader economic systems in play at the time and place of each amphora's use(s). In defining context in these many different ways – and this list is incomplete – we move from readily observable features (find spot, associated artifacts) to invisible behavior (economic systems).

Our first two papers in Bonn addressed two specific, very different kinds of assemblages: the cult-related assemblage from the Taxiarchis Hill at Didyma presented by Alexandra von Miller (von Miller, paper) and the commercial assemblage recovered from the so-called Punic Amphora Building at Corinth currently under study by Antonio Saez Romero (Saez Romero, paper). Yiftah Shalev and his colleagues presented the imported amphoras from a wide range of different kinds of contexts in the Persian period Levant allowing us to see contemporary variation within a specific region (Shalev et al., abstract). Stella Demesticha's presentation on her excavations at the

Mazotos shipwreck demonstrated the wide range of economic-behavioral conclusions that can be drawn from a carefully studied cargo (Demesticha, abstract). Kostas Filis' presentation of assemblages from two port sites on the south coast of the Corinthian gulf provided us with new, long-term data on commercial assemblages along one the busiest and contentious waterways of Greek antiquity (Filis, paper).

The second half of the session in Bonn spanned the Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods. Gerald Finkielsztejn offered a companion piece to Shalev's survey, again addressing amphora assemblages at a wide range of different kinds of sites. Stella Skaltsa's paper offered our first look at an amphora assemblage at a civic or public building in the city of Rhodes and the potential for a rich assemblage of local amphoras there to inform the interpretation of that building (Skaltsa, paper). Hannah Liedl and Horacio González Cesteros presented a discrete deposit within Terrace House 2 at Ephesus as a window into the socio-economic activity in the area and the city more generally in the Julio-Claudian period, before the construction of that well-known housing complex (Liedl and González Cesteros, paper). Finally, Anna Nagy and György Szakmány presented the amphora finds from a Roman-period, civilian settlement near the military base at Brigetio; their work adds an important data point to the ongoing study of the influence of the Roman state and its military supplies on Mediterranean trade.

Such a wide range of case studies, showing great diversity in terms of both chronology and geography, makes drawing general conclusions very difficult. This fact should hardly surprise given the emerging recognition of complexity and change in ancient economic history. The papers in this panel demonstrate the exciting potential of archaeology to contribute to this complex picture.

The amphora supply at the Didyma sanctuary as attested by the finds on Taxiarchis Hill seems to draw heavily on the immediate region in contrast to the more cosmopolitan fine wares. Other sanctuary-related assemblages, such as those published from the sanctuary of Aphaia on Aegina or Athena at Troy, draw from much wider catchment areas.² The broader economic system in play with the Didyma assemblage may even include amphora production aimed at sacred use much as seems to be the case at nearby Miletos. Such features of cultic use of amphora-borne goods help define both the commonalities and the differences within cultic economies.

The 5th century Punic Amphora Building assemblage and the 4th century Mazotos shipwreck each highlight the links between chronologically and spatially discrete, seemingly commercial assemblages and much broader problems of economic history.

Thanks to the finds from the Punic Amphora Building, we can move beyond the common, broad, aggregate view of imports to a specific site and delve instead into one commercial establishment in considerable detail. The archaeological record preserved at the Building can be reasonably associated with the decisions of one person or at most one family; we can see the material impact of their decisions, their connections, and ultimately their decision (whether voluntary or coerced) to end their business in that particular location.

While such a view of personal agency is rare from land excavations, shipwrecks are often considered along similar lines of individual or small-group agency. Preliminary work on the Mazotos wreck is starting to highlight both the overall structure of the cargo, its origins, its organization on the ship, and the details of the goods. The diversity of olive types recognized so far, packaged in various different amphora types, highlights the problematic links between amphora and contents, and hence potential asymmetries of knowledge for merchants and consumers.

The many stamped amphora handles found in the large portico complex in the city of Rhodes, as discussed by Skaltsa, contribute to our understanding of the function of this enigmatic complex. The mix of honorific inscriptions with hundreds of amphora handles (but not stored amphoras) suggests that amphora-borne goods, likely wine, were consumed in the building on a frequent basis, but the jars were not stored or discarded onsite. Rather than seeing evidence for fluctuation of imports or exports, as we so often consider with assemblages of amphoras, here we are seeing fluctuations in consumption for (we assume) one particular purpose or group of consumers.

The sealed deposit from under Terrace House 2 at Ephesus raises significant challenges in terms of context and interpretation. On the one hand the pit is associated spatially with the later residential quarter of the Terrace Houses; and yet, it clearly predates that activity. Connection to ritual is suggested on the basis of the good state of preservation of many vessels and the unusually high frequency of lids. Liedl and González Cesteros highlight the potential influences of local demand for different kinds of products, whether types of pottery or the contents of amphoras.

Although all of the papers just discussed also address the broader regional setting of their assemblages in terms of the points of origin of the amphoras, the two last papers in this collection focus their attention on patterns of amphora production and trade over very broad regions. In such settings the definition of context broadens considerably, both in terms of chronology and geography. The amphora record across the northern coast of the Peloponnese has expanded greatly in breadth and detail in recent decades. Filis takes into account not only the long standing, westward orientation of commerce along the Corinthian Gulf, but also the very important environmental constraints that could have limited or discouraged amphora production until economic conditions proved most conducive.

An even broader geographical and chronological perspective is used by Shalev and his colleagues. While it was not possible to drill down to the level of specific deposits, their work does draw attention to the changing presence of different amphora classes and, equally important, the absences of certain classes in certain periods. Careful comparisons with contemporary patterns elsewhere in the Mediterranean highlight the very dynamic and diverse nature of ancient economies.

The papers in this panel, both those published in whole or in part here and those to be published elsewhere, illustrate the wide range of issues illuminating aspects of ancient economies that can be addressed by close attention to amphora assemblages.

Challenges remain. A frequent topic both during this panel and others at the Congress was the matter of quantification. Until excavations across the Mediterranean adopt the same recovery, documentation, and storage policies, archaeologists will remain hamstrung by numbers. This panel and others, however, demonstrate the progress that can be achieved both by close observation of qualitative aspects of the archaeological record and by necessarily judicious reference to the admittedly limited quantitative data.

Notes

¹ Schuchhardt 1895

² Aegina: Johnston 1990; Troy: Lawall 2002[2003].

References

Johnston 1990

A. W. Johnston, Aegina, Aphaia-Tempel XIII. The Storage Amphoras, *AA* 1990, 37–64.

Lawall 2002

M. L. Lawall, Ilios Before Alexander: Amphoras and Economic Archaeology, *StTroica* 12, 2002, 197–244.

Schuchhardt 1895

C. Schuchhardt, Amphorenstempel, in: M. Fränkel (ed.), *Die Inschriften von Pergamon. Römischer Zeit – Inschriften auf Thon*, *AvP* 8, 2 (Berlin 1895) 423–498.