Wine and Fish? A Preliminary Report on the Punic Amphorae from a Specialized Tavern of the Classical Period at Corinth

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Introductory Note

The main goal of this preliminary article is to provide an overview of the Punic amphora assemblage found in excavation of the Punic Amphora Building (PAB) at Corinth. In doing so, the paper also considers the rest of items, the stratigraphy, the building itself and the historical facts that may be connected with the creation and abandonment of this famous Corinthian site. The rest of the amphorae, mostly Greek, will be studied in forthcoming papers. After a few essential data about the old excavations of the late 1970s and the latest research carried out since 2014, the western Punic and Carthaginian amphorae found in the two phases of the building will be examined. Finally, I will raise some preliminary conclusions and ideas concerning the function of the site, its historical context, and Corinth's connection with the Punic West and Carthage in the Classical and late Classical periods.

Previous Research and the Ongoing Project (2014-2018)

The PAB is one of the most cited places concerning the study of the ancient fish processing and fish consumption in the Classical Mediterranean.¹ Charles Williams and the American School of Classical Studies at Athens first excavated the building from 1977 to 1979, and soon published preliminary reports in Hesperia.² Subsequently, other researchers such as Carolyn Koehler³ and Mary Lou Zimmerman-Munn⁴ included material from the site in their research on Corinthian amphorae and the commercial links established among Corinth and the central and western Mediterranean.

The first reports and the more recent synthesis published by Zimmerman-Munn⁵ describe the structure as a mid-5th century BC commercial building located in the intersection of two major roads (fig. 1). Although excavation of the building was incomplete, its basic design is apparent: multiple rooms, including one with a hearth (kitchen), distributed around a central courtyard, and an upper floor. According to the available stratigraphic data, preliminary reports defined two successive phases: Phase A, when it was a house or establishment with some commercial dealings, dated shortly after 470s BC; and a second stage, Phase B, that included two strata and was the period in which the building was renovated and turned into a prosperous business devoted to the merchandising of commodities. This second phase was dated in the central decades of the 5th century and the place was in operation at least until the 430s BC.⁶

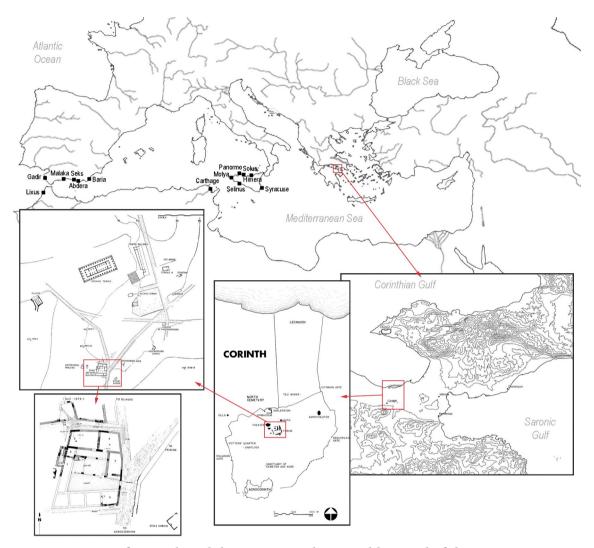


Fig. 1: Location of Corinth and the Punic Amphora Building and of the main Punic sites mentioned in the text.

The initial publication of the excavations of the PAB underlined the commercial role of the building and emphasized the great quantity of transport amphorae found, particularly in the courtyard. Hundreds of western Punic and Carthaginian amphorae for fish products and Greek wine amphorae were found in the open backyard and in the surroundings, in some cases connected to well-preserved fish remains such as fillets still preserving the scales, vertebrae and spines. A first archaeometric analysis on the western Punic amphorae was published briefly after the material was unearthed, providing a first reference for the Punic amphorae from the west. Conditioned by the scarce evidence available about Punic pottery workshops in the



Fig. 2: View of the main façade of the Punic Amphora Building according the plan published by Williams (1980) and the data collected in seasons 2014–2018.

early 1980s, the authors suggested that the Atlantic coast of present Morocco and undefined cities of southern Iberia would have been the main production centers for the finds recorded at Corinth. Unfortunately, no thorough study of the fish remains was published; the preliminary reports only briefly noted that there were fishbones of tuna and sea bream.

Since 2014 a new project intends to complete the publication of the site and the systematic research of the items, introducing new technological tools (such as 3D digital models developed for the building and the pottery) (fig. 2), reviewing thoroughly the stratigraphy and the field notebooks, and finishing the study of the faunal remains. Support from the American School of Classical Studies at Athens and the University of Seville has facilitated this combination of fieldwork (with summer seasons at Corinth during which thousands of sherds have been examined, sampled and digitally processed) and laboratory studies. The Fitch Laboratory of the British School at Athens is currently developing a specific project, under the direction of E. Kiriatzi and L. Fantuzzi, focusing on the Punic and Carthaginian amphorae. This project compares petrographic and chemical analyses of hundreds of samples from both Corinth and the western Punic pottery workshops excavated in the last decades. The first results confirm our hypotheses based on macroscopic examination that the Bay of Cadiz was the main production area but also that many other western sites were involved in the overseas maritime trade routes of the Classical period.

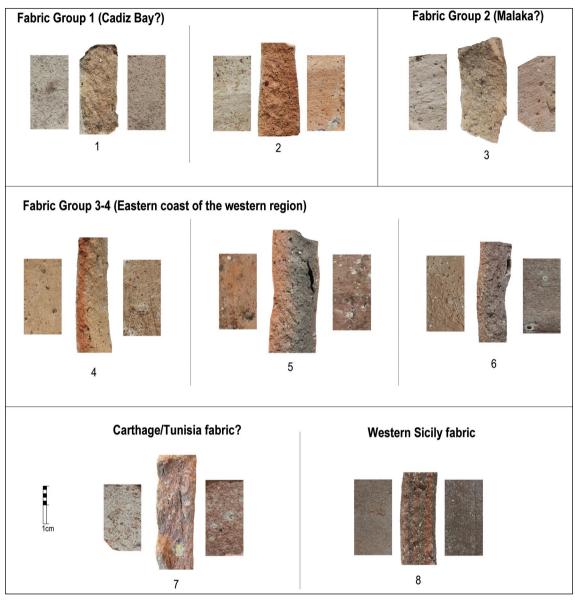


Fig. 3: Macrophotographs of the main fabric groups identified for the western Punic and the Carthaginian amphorae of the 5th Century BC contexts of the PAB (macroscopic classifying after season 2016).

The Amphorae Assemblage of the PAB: The Punic Amphorae

The western Punic vessels were mostly found in the overlapping floors of the courtyard, crushed and mixed with other pottery groups and faunal remains. The latest research completed to-date indicates that more than 67% of the total (fragments representing at least 249 of a total estimated 369 amphoras studied so far) belong to the macroscopic

"fabric group 1", probably coming from the Bay of Cadiz or in general terms of the Atlantic port cities of the Strait of Gibraltar area. Just 16 (4,3%) can be linked to "fabric group 2" (possible Malaga or Cerro del Villar area) and 88 (23,85%) to "fabric group 3–4" (the later, with light brownish [group 3] and/or grey [group 4] sections, both with abundant schist inclusions, which were produced in diverse port cities of the Mediterranean coast of the region (perhaps both in the Iberian but also the Mauritanian shore) (fig. 3).

The Carthaginian imports are a minority group (parts of at least 16 jars, 4,3%). These show more homogeneity in terms of clay fabrics, as all of them seem to match with the patterns described for the amphorae produced in Motya or the Solunto/Palermo area in western Sicily. All fragments found in the contexts connected with the decades of activity of the PAB can be classified as T-1415 (Sol/Pan 4.3), generally dated 450–400 BC. A few fragments found in later contexts attributed to 4th century disturbances or new building activity belong to types T-4226 and T-4227, and these fragments illustrate the continuity of the consumption of Punic fish products at Corinth through the 4th and possibly the early 3rd century BC even after the PAB went "out of business".

This sample must be considered just as a part of the total number of vessels that were consumed by the owners and clients of the PAB, as it seems reasonable to imagine that the ones not used to renovate the courtyard would have been discarded elsewhere in or around the city.

The differences observed between fabric groups, as defined by color, inclusions, firing temperatures or petrographic composition, correspond with variation in the typological features of the amphorae. The different morphological variants of the T-11210 group can be linked to the fabric clusters: T-11213 are mostly connected with Group 1 (from the Atlantic port of Gadir), T-11216 variant matches with fabrics from Malaga (Group 2), and T-11214/5 amphoras are almost exclusively included in Groups 3–4. This fact will be very helpful for the typological research in the west as the PAB provides a snapshot of a specific moment in the central stretch of the 5th century BC illustrating the regional variation of the T-11210 group. The evidence from Corinth alongside research in the western Mediterranean indicates that the initial homogeneity in the late 6th century BC was gradually turning into a diversified scenario full of local artisanal traditions with their own personality.

The Punic Amphorae (Group 1)

Most of the T-11213 vessels were linked to the Cadiz (Gadir) area workshops and their characteristic fabrics, with medium-high firing temperatures and many inclusions of quartz grains (sand).¹² There are many fragmentary individuals assignable to group 1 (fig. 4, 1–4), but unfortunately no one has been completely mended and there are not complete profiles available (except for the two amphorae found in a pit nearby in the

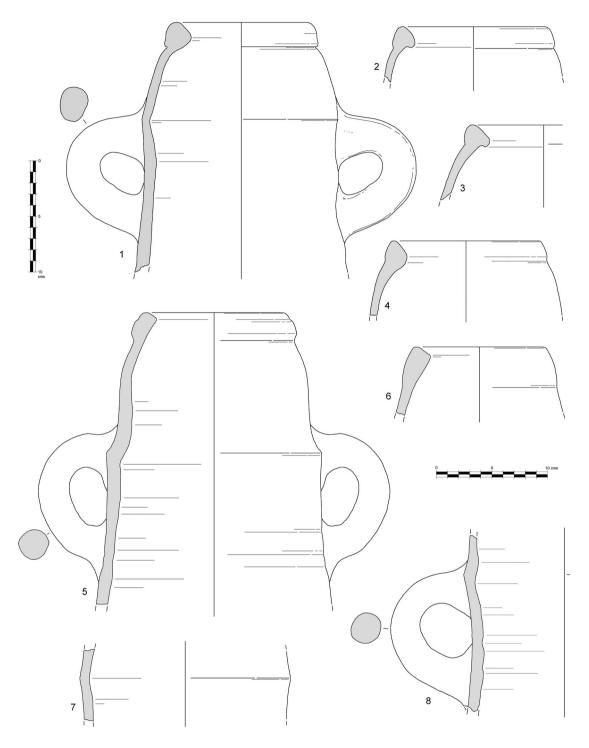


Fig. 4: Amphora fragments from the Punic Amphora Building contexts: T-11213 upper parts and rims of Fabric Group 1 (1–4) and T-11216 rims of Fabric Group 2 (5–8).

1975 season). Gadir probably was the most popular of the western Punic cities among the Classical Greeks, and the production of fish products was one of the main pillars of its economy at least since the late 6^{th} century BC.¹³

The Punic amphorae (Group 2)

Almost all sherds, mostly rims and handles, attributed to the T-11216 and the fabric Group 2 were probably produced in workshops located in the coast of Malaga or Malaka itself (fig. 4, 5–8). The clay sections and surfaces show a quite characteristic fabric, with big inclusions and medium-low firing temperatures (fig. 3, 3). Significantly, most of the fragments of rims and upper parts of the body in this group still preserve lines painted in red. Sadly none of these *dipinti* or *tituli picti* are preserved in good condition, and it has not been possible to determine whether the signs were written in Greek or Punic. These are, so far, the oldest painted inscriptions identified on T-11210 amphorae in the Mediterranean. It seems that Punic Malaka was called by the Greeks Mainake, and that (as Gadir) the city was one of the most prosperous ports in the West during the 5th century BC.

The Punic Amphorae (Groups 3-4)

The transport vessels included in fabric Groups 3–4 show more diversity in shape and fabric (fig. 5), so it seems reasonable to think that many secondary workshops were also producing amphorae and salted-fish to supply the Greek markets. There is, up-to-now, no evidence of fish processing facilities or amphorae workshops dating to the 5th century BC in key sites such as Seks (present-day Almuñécar), Abdera (Adra) or Baria (Villaricos),¹⁵ but we can assume that these and other coastal settlements in the southern coast of Iberia were producing these variants of the T-11210 group.¹⁶ Most of the samples present darkbrown or grey fabrics with plenty of metamorphic particles, a profile that matches with the geology of the Mediterranean river valleys of southern Spain. In contrast to Groups 1 and 2, some individuals of T-11214/5 have been mended and a few complete or almost complete profiles are available. They all show a substantial homogeneity in their design, but not in the clay recipes and firing atmospheres or temperatures.

The Carthaginian Amphorae

Just a few Carthaginian amphorae have been found in the contexts linked to the PAB, dating to the 5th century BC, but they provide important evidence for the maritime

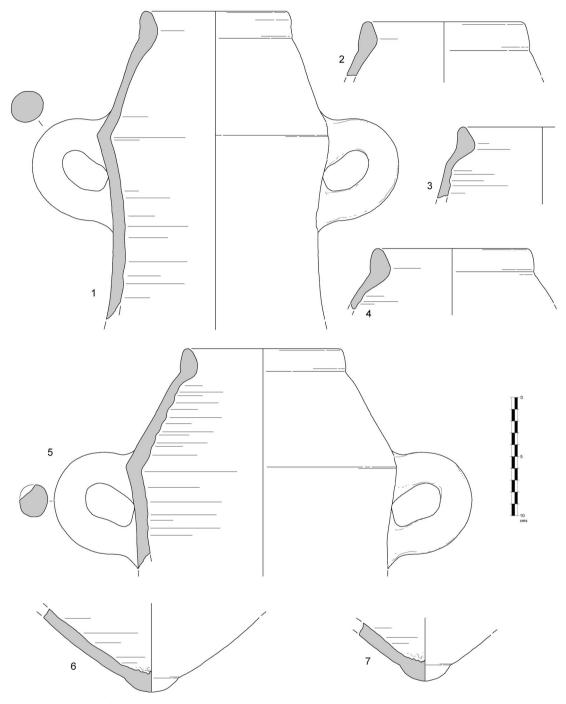


Fig. 5: Amphora fragments from the Punic Amphora Building contexts: T-11214/5 upper and bottom parts of Fabric Group 3–4 (western Punic).

routes that the western amphorae followed on their way to mainland Greece. They can be classified as variants of the T-1451 type, and although there are at least three

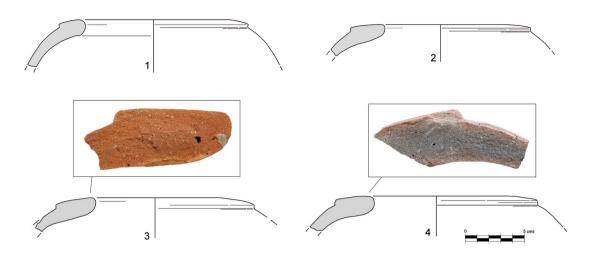


Fig. 6: Amphora fragments from the Punic Amphora Building contexts: Carthaginian T-1451 amphorae rims and photographs of two of the most characteristic types of fabrics.

different fabrics (fig. 6), they all can be connected with the rise in western Sicily of a powerful fish processing and pottery production infrastructure during the 5th century BC. In particular, it seems that at least some of the jars found at the PAB were produced in Motya, Panormo and/or Solus,¹⁷ and probably were also carrying fish byproducts to Corinth.¹⁸

Conclusions and Future Research

To conclude this brief overview of the Punic imports, we offer a few remarks about the ongoing studies to contextualize the consumption of the western salted tuna fillets (*tárichos*) of the PAB and its historical context. First, the project focuses on the study of the items connected with the PAB and its surroundings in the southwestern area of the Roman Forum, and after four seasons more than 3,600 items have been inventoried, classified, drawn and photographed. A significant part of the material corresponds to pottery finds, and particularly to Greek amphorae (among them, numerous Chian, Mendean and "Samian" vessels, and also some "Ionian" pear-shaped amphorae produced in southern Italy or eastern Sicily). Secondly, we are working on the 3D model of the building and its surroundings, which will be very helpful to analyze both the changes in the urban plan of the area from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period, and the functions of the rooms and open areas of the structure. Our publication plan includes a 3D digital analysis of the distribution of artefacts, and educational pictures of the feasts held at the PAB during the Classical period (fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Digital recreation of Room 4 of the Punic Amphora Building, showing the possible distribution of the furniture used for wine and fish consumption.

What was the PAB?

Although the study of the finds is still in progress, we are pretty sure that the PAB was built, used and abandoned during the central quarters of the 5th century BC as a commercial facility, probably a specialized tavern, where local elites would have eaten exclusive fish products and popular wines from overseas. If the establishment included in the menu other kinds of entertainment is not possible to tell, based on the archaeological record, but the great quantity of local and Attic finewares suggest that feasting was a regular activity within the walls of the PAB.

The PAB and the Far Punic West

The increased consumption of western *tárichos* in the Greek society of the late Archaic and Classical periods, both in the central and eastern Mediterranean, opened a very profitable market to the Punic communities of the Strait of Gibraltar region and can be considered as a key factor for the development of a "salt fish-based economy" in the western area of the Mediterranean.¹⁹ The prosperous western cities of Gadir, Malaka and many others in the Punic West found, in the exportation of salted fish packaged in

amphorae, a pillar for their non-monetized economies, as these products were relatively cheap to be produced but fetched exorbitant prices in the overseas markets (and above all in the Greek sphere). Corinthian, Athenian and other Greek elites paid a lot to consume exotic fishes that were at the same time affordable to the lower social strata of the western Punic communities.²⁰

The result of decades of this connection, whether it was direct or indirect (via Sicily or Carthage), was that the western elites became very rich and were promptly hellenized, purchasing luxurious commodities such as anthropoid sarcophagi probably made in Levantine workshops and similar to those found in the royal tombs of Sidon. The 5th century necropoleis excavated at Cadiz, Malaga, Seks and Baria, and even Lixus on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, show clear signs of a rising upper class that was intimately related with the "fishy business", maritime trade, and a Classical Greek lifestyle. Tombs recently excavated at Cadiz have provided new evidence of the connection established between local elites and the Greek world and of their increasing purchasing capacity in the 5th century BC, as can be perceived in some of the jewelry used as grave goods.²¹

The Chronological Timeframe

The reasons that led the owner of the PAB to end this lucrative international business and abandon the site still remain unclear. The Athenian naval blockade of the Gulf during the Peloponnesian War, along the last three decades of the 5th century BC, was first proposed as a possible cause for the end of the arrival of the western tárichos to Corinth. 22 Nevertheless, other internal and external, political and military factors could have had a key role in the end of the business. In the late 5th century the area where the PAB was located underwent a major renovation that included the construction of a new internal road network, the so-called Centaur Bath and the South Stoa; the shop may have been forced to move elsewhere in the city. Carthage was rising as dominant power in the central Mediterranean and was fighting against the Greek cities in Sicily, particularly Syracuse, almost continuously until the early 4th century BC. Important cities involved in the routes that helped connect east and west were destroyed during these wars or suffered harmful effects, such as Motya, Selinus and Himera.²³ These wars would have created an unstable setting for maritime trade and a decrease, at least for a few decades, of the purchasing power of the elites in the central and western Mediterranean. The western imports at Corinth suddenly disappeared and were replaced by Sicilian fish products. At the same time, cities on either side of the Strait of Gibraltar were forced to refocus towards the Atlantic and the regional markets, resulting in a general decline in living standards in the area.24

Punic Imports after the PAB Stage

During the 4th and 3rd centuries BC the consumption of Punic fish products did not cease at Corinth and the Aegean. ²⁵ Several contexts at Corinth show that Carthaginian amphorae from western Sicilian workshops are the most common items (T-4226, T-2212/4), and particularly the so-called T-4227 amphorae produced in Solus or Panormos. ²⁶ As the Athenian archaeological record confirms, after the end of the 5th century BC only the central Mediterranean Punic imports were shipped towards the east, and the western fish amphorae disappeared from this profitable markets until the 1st century BC. It seems that Carthage and the Levantine cities replaced the western products by their own commodities, and cut the connection with Gadir and the Punic west. In this case, it is possible that Carthage itself and her allies in Sicily were not only selling fish to the western Greek retailers, but also progressively extending their trade routes to the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean (as it is suggested by some still scattered finds²⁷). Nevertheless, these questions and forthcoming projects are far beyond the scopes of this paper and the study of historical problems linked to the Punic transport vessels of the Punic Amphora Building in Classical Corinth.

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Notes

¹Lawall 2006; Mylona 2008; Botte 2009; Docter - Bechtold 2013.

² Williams 1978, 1979 and 1980; see also Williams – Fisher 1976.

³ Koehler 1978 and 1981.

⁴Zimmerman-Munn 1982 and 1983.

⁵ Zimmerman-Munn 2003.

⁶ Williams 1980; Zimmerman-Munn 2003.

⁷Sáez – Theodoropoulou 2021.

⁸ Maniatis et al. 1984.

⁹Fantuzzi et al. 2020.

¹⁰ Bechtold 2015, 8.

¹¹Ramon Torres 1995.

- $^{\rm 12}$ Some key references for the workshops in Cadiz area can be found in Ramon Torres et al. 2007; Sáez Romero 2008a.
- ¹³ Literary references and recent archaeological research can be found in Sáez Romero 2014.
- 14 Sáez Romero 2018a.
- ¹⁵ Moya Cobos 2016.
- ¹⁶ Martín et al. 2006; Sáez Romero 2008b; Mateo Corredor 2016.
- ¹⁷ Bechtold 2015, types Sol/Pan 4.1-3.
- ¹⁸ See Botte 2009; Docter Bechtold 2013.
- 19 Sáez Romero 2014.
- ²⁰ Mylona 2008; García Ferrer 2012.
- ²¹ Belizón Sáez 2016.
- ²² Williams 1980; Zimmerman-Munn 2003.
- ²³ Vasallo Bechtold 2018.
- ²⁴ An updated overview of the process in the West in Sáez Romero 2018b.
- ²⁵ Wolff 2004: Lawall 2006.
- ²⁶ Bechtold 2015.
- ²⁷ See Göransson 2007; Johnston et al. 2012.

Image Credits

Fig. 1: Williams 1980. – Fig. 2: R. Belizón Aragón, ARQ-TECH for the PAB Project. – Fig. 3–6: by author. – Fig. 7: R. Belizón Aragón, ARQ-TECH for the PAB Project.

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