

Aegean Amphorae in the Southern Levant during the Persian Period: A Synthesis of Distribution Patterns

Yiftah Shalev – Ayelet Gilboa – Gunnar Lehmann

The Persian period in the Levant witnessed one of the most significant cultural, economic and political transformations the region underwent in early antiquity. Amid these changes, the region's involvement in the Mediterranean maritime trade flourished dramatically, reaching previously unattested intensity.

This paper is the first fruit of an extensive study that reexamined the distribution of transport amphorae prevalent in the Levant in the 5th–4th centuries BC and reassessed their significance for charting cross-Mediterranean contacts during this period. For many years, the study of Greek amphorae in the Levant had focus on those dated to the 7th–6th centuries, as indications for the first Greek-Levant connections, or on later Hellenistic types as indications for the so-called 'Hellenization' phenomenon. The study of Persian-period jars was usually limited to chronology and typology. The common notion was that during this period there was a massive transport of amphorae from all Aegean manufacturing centers to the Levant, and that imports gradually increased in volume from the late 6th century onward.

Our research includes amphorae from ca. 40 south Levantine sites. It involved a typological, distributional and chronological reexamination of these amphorae, preliminary sorting of fabrics using a stereomicroscope, and provenience analysis using petrography, instrumental neutron activation and x-ray fluorescence.

Greek amphorae turned up in every Persian-period southern Levantine coastal site, and a few even farther inland, in areas ruled by the Phoenicians in the Shephela, the Jezreel valley and the Galilee. They are known from large towns to small villages, in domestic, military and commercial contexts, and are usually found together with local containers such as the basket-handle and Phoenician jars.

Variety however is narrower than thought before, limited to southeastern Aegean and Ionian production centers (Chios, Samos and Miletus) as well as to some northern Aegean ones (mainly Mendes and Thasos). Other types, e.g., Lesbian and Corinthian, which are mostly common in the Aegean and the western Mediterranean, are totally absent. This is a clear indication of two different intra-regional trade networks: one operating in the eastern Mediterranean and one in its western basin.

During the early 6th century BC, following the Babylonian destructions, transport of Greek Amphora to the Levant ceased and did not revive prior to the early 5th century, with the import of Chian C1 type, dated ca. 510–480 BC. Earlier types (e.g. the white-slipped Chian amphorae), though well known in Cyprus, Egypt and northern Sinai, are totally absent in the Levant. The lack of late Archaic Clazomenian amphorae also seems to indicate that trade did not restart before ca. 500 BC.

During the early 5th century, the most common types were from Chios, Samos and Miletus. In the mid-5th century, when the import of transport amphorae reached its zenith, the Samian and Milesian imports were still dominant but imports from Chios diminished. Imports start to dwindle during the 1st half of the 4th century, when north Aegean amphorae begin to dominate. In the 2nd half of the 4th century, the transport of amphorae to the Levant is on the rise again, especially mushroom-rim types from the southern Aegean. Quantities, however, are a still far cry from those in the 5th century BC.¹

The reasons for the decrease in the early 4th century are uncertain. Several scholars relate it to the unstable relations and struggles between Persian and Greeks.² This, though, seems unlikely, especially since between ca. 450–400 BC, when clashes between these two forces were at their peak, trade only increased. More likely we should relate these changes to several local events during the 4th century that clearly disturbed daily life: the Egyptian revolt at the very the end of the 5th, the Phoenicians' involvement in the two failed attempts to re-conquer Egypt in 383 and 373, and the Egyptian conquest of parts of the Levantine coastal plain by pharaoh Tachos in 360 BC.

Most amphorae probably reached the Levant on ships sailing from the eastern Aegean via the southern coast of Cyprus, where similar variation of amphorae was noted, including all Ionian, south and north Aegean types. The very same route was used also to distribute Attic pottery,³ and it seems that this network had a wide commercial infrastructure.⁴ In Egypt on the other hand, the distribution of east Greek amphorae is different than in the Levant / Cyprus, including many northern Aegean types and very few eastern Aegean.⁵ Egypt was connected to the east Aegean via a different network.

This systematic study revealed that amphorae distribution in the Levant was much more complex than previously thought, involving several regional and intra-regional networks. Furthermore, it proves that maritime trade between the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean might not have been so intense, contrary to common assumptions, and that during the 4th century BC trade with the Aegean declined rather than increased.

Notes

¹ Shalev 2014, 370–374.

² Mook – Coulson 1995, 99; Demesticha 2011, 49.

³ Stewart – Martin 2005, 87–89.

⁴ Lawall 2013, 57.

⁵ Shalev 2014, 389–390.

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