

The Mazotos Shipwreck Cargo, 4th Century BC

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The Mazotos shipwreck, located 1.5 miles off the south coast of Cyprus, lies on a flat sandy seabed and consisted of an oblong concentration of transport amphorae (approximately 17.5m long by 8m at its widest section) partly or totally visible before any excavation took place.¹ Between 2010 and 2018, six excavation seasons were conducted by the University of Cyprus, in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus.

The Cargo

The excavation has focused on the two extremities of the site, which, as suspected, were the fore and rear parts of the ancient ship. The vast majority of the cargo containers belong to a widely traded type, from the island of Chios (fig. 1). None of them was found stamped and they all present a high typological uniformity: a long cylindrical neck with a rounded rim and a sharp-edged shoulder that continues to a conical body, ending in a truncated cone – shaped, hollowed toe. These are typical features of the series' variants that are dated to the first half or the middle of 4th century BC.² Although no fabric analysis has been conducted thus far, three groups have been distinguished macroscopically, with very uneven percentages among the finds: the vast majority of the amphorae were made of the standard Chian fabric, reddish brown in colour with abundant pale grey to white inclusions, but sporadic cases have also been recorded, made of a grey flaking fabric or an orange-light brown one.

Two sizes have been distinguished, based on their linear dimensions and capacities, the large ones constituting 90% of the total. Their height ranges between 91–98 cm, but values cluster around 94 cm. Their capacities, all measured up to the bottom of the neck with polystyrene beads, seem consistent: they ranged from 19.6–22.5 litres clustering around 20–21 litres. The smaller amphorae held between 9 and 10 liters, i.e. slightly less than half of the mean value of the large ones. This high degree of standardisation is also known from the Zenon archive where the term 'ἡμι-χία' denotes such half-sized Chian amphorae.³

The second commonest amphora type in the cargo is the 'Solokha I' or 'Mushroom-Rim', of diverse provenance, mainly from the southeastern Aegean.⁴ No more than nine containers that could be classified under this broad family were found, most in the fore part of the ship. They belonged to different variants and their small numbers as well as their find spots, on the surface layers of the hold or at the ship extremities, do not provide secure evidence for their role as cargo or crew provisions. The third amphora group is comprised of six northern Aegean examples, similar to the Mendean type.⁵ Five of them were found stowed in the bottom layer of the rear part of the hold, under and among the amphorae from Chios (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Chian amphorae in north part of the Mazotos shipwreck. In the middle of the lower tier, one North Aegean type can be distinguished.

The Mazotos ship was also carrying tableware: at least 55 jugs were excavated, all in the aft part of the hold, stowed on top of the amphorae. Their fabric is similar to that of the standard Chian amphorae and they were found pitched on the interior. It seems very unlikely that they were used as some sort of measuring unit because, despite the fact they all belong to the same type, their volumes ranged considerably, from 1.7 to 3.2 litres (measured up to the bottom of the neck).

Content

Chian wine was praised by the ancient authors,⁶ so since almost all Chian amphorae had traces of resinous residue on their interior walls, it seems plausible to assume that the Mazotos ship carried a cargo of wine. Some of the amphorae, however, might have carried other commodities, as well. Olives were found inside four Chian and one Mushroom-rim amphora. Carbon stable isotope analysis indicated diverse provenance for all tested olives, i.e. those found in the Chians and the Mushroom-rim one. Before the final percentage of the olive amphorae is known, with the completion of the excavation,

it is not possible to determine whether the olives were cargo or crew provisions. Still, these finds add meaningfully to the discussion about the relationship between specific commodities and amphora types.

Conclusions

The last journey of the Mazotos ship was definitely a long-distance venture. The homogeneity of the cargo containers implies that this was a large shipment of the same product – most probably wine – that was loaded at Chios, i.e. its production place or the closest maritime centre to it, and was not sold or exchanged before the ship wrecked, off the coasts of Cyprus. This cargo assemblage has also provided a unique opportunity to study the typological attributes of a large number of Chian amphorae. Preliminary results of their metrology indicate a high degree of standardisation, both in style and size, indicative of elaborate trade mechanisms of Greek cities, active in seaborne trade, like Chios.

Notes

¹Demesticha 2011; Demesticha 2017; Demesticha et al. 2014.

²Anderson 1954, 170; Grace – Savvatianou-Pétropoulakou 1970, 259–260; Lawall 1998, 80–81.

³Kruit – Worp 2000, 94–97.

⁴Avram 1989; Vaag et al. 2002, 60–62; Lawall 2004, 451.

⁵Papadopoulos – Paspalas 1999; Lawall 2004; Filis 2012.

⁶Salviat 1986, 187–192.

Image Credits

Fig. 1: Andonis Neophytou © MARELab, University of Cyprus.

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