

In Part II of our look at ancient Greek wine production, we were introduced to some of the vessels used for mixing and serving the “golden elixir” at both dinner parties and ceremonial events in ancient Hellas. While many of these vessels were very ornate and beautiful masterworks of art, it is the more robust, utilitarian clay vessels which actually served as the main mode of transport to and from the dinner tables and markets throughout the ancient world.

These transport vessels were generally *amphorae* which came in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, varying from region to region throughout the Near East, Greece, Rome and beyond. While examples of large, clay transport jars have been found throughout the ancient Near East from very early on, the “birth” of the Greek amphora can be traced back to the late eighth century in Corinth on the Greek Peloponnese (see Figure 1). As centuries passed, the Greek versions of these well-designed and well-suited transport vessels changed considerably to accommodate changing transport and storage methods as well as regional peculiarities (see Figures 1 through 4). Each city-state or region tended to have a slightly different shape and style to their amphorae, making them easy to recognize among the markets and merchants hawking their wares. Relief stamps on the amphorae handles helped not only the ancient wine connoisseurs distinguish vintages and regions, but also help archaeologists today in the same way.

From at least the fourth century onward, these identification stamps were usually pressed into the soft wet clay of the handles of the amphorae prior to their firing in the ancient kilns and marked the vintage, quality and date of the wine within. The proliferation of these vessels is clearly seen from the more than 20,000 handle fragments that have been found to date in the Athenian Agora alone. Through style and stamping, these handles can often be dated to within a few years of their manufacture and provide an invaluable source of information to archaeologists on not only the date of the area in which they are found but also the provenance of the vessel itself. In the Agora, for instance, the majority of the wine amphorae found came from the regions of Knidos and Rhodes. Amphorae from Kos, Thasos, Chios, Lesbos and Corinth were also found there, attesting to the wide-spread trade in wines in ancient Greece.

Despite their varied shapes, the shipping amphorae all have the same basic design - averaging about 76 cm high and carrying about 7 gallons of wine, the amphorae weighed in at 35 kilos when full and had a small, rimmed mouth at the top, two handles on the shoulders of the jars and a tapering, inverted teardrop body ending in a pointed toe which was often used to help lift and carry the vessel. Because of these pointed toes at the base of the amphorae they were not able to stand upright by themselves. Instead, their shape was intended (and lends itself very well) for transport in the holds of ships, where hundreds of them have been found in-situ in archaeological excavations of underwater shipwrecks in the Mediterranean. During transport these wine jars were stacked layer upon layer against the hulls of merchant ships, but when they arrived in port and were stored in shops and houses they were supported in tripod stands (as museums still do today) or simply in a hole in the ground.

The extent of this trade in Greek wine is amply evident from numerous wine jars (and their tell-tale stamps) which have been found throughout the ancient Greek world. The areas around the Black Sea, for instance, have yielded archaeological evidence for extensive Greek wine trading and shipping activities by sea from the islands of Rhodes, Thasos, Paros and Lesbos. The first century BC historian Strabo references the trade and sale of Greek wine from Lesbos to the Greek colonies in the Nile delta region of Lower Egypt, in particular Naucratis (Geography, XVII.1.33). The ancient Greek wine trade is mentioned in other more fanciful literature as well - in Homer's Iliad (9.71), Nestor says to Diomedes, the tamer of horses, “full are your huts of wine that the ships of the Achaeans bring you each day from Thrace over the wide sea.”

Even before the seventh century BC, the Greeks had adapted their agricultural technology so well to the land around them that wine, together with olive oil and their exquisite pottery, quickly became their major export. They traded these three main commodities throughout the Mediterranean and Black Sea areas, and brought back to Greece with them such products as ivory from Ethiopia, glass from Egypt, perfumes from the Near East, rugs from Carthage, and cheese and pork from Sicily.

The Greeks' reputation for their wine was well deserved and came from the controls and regulations which they imposed upon its production. Inscriptions from the island of Thasos tell us that in at least the fifth century BC, "purchasing wine in *pithoi* (large, wide-mouthed jars) is legal as long as the *pithoi* are sealed", but the wine "may not be watered" for trade. These and other regulations were for the protection of the consumer so that a cheap wine vinegar could not be passed off as quality wine and so that the wine's properties could not be watered down to increase profit at the expense of quality. The stamps and seals placed on the transport vessels were intended to insure a pure quality, similar to the safety seals on many of today's products. Other regulations addressed the sizes and types of vessels which could be used to store, transport and serve Greek wine and while some of these regulations may have been an attempt at prohibition and government control, they were more likely an attempt to maintain some sort of standard or quality control on a trade which could easily and quickly have fallen to sub-standard and corrupted levels through illegal import/export, distribution and production mismanagement. The dozens of ancient kilns found throughout Greece for the production of the wine transport vessels were no less regulated and controlled to maintain a quality assurance. These various bureaucratic devices provide us with a wealth of archaeological knowledge through the multitude of handle stamps and seals, mentioned earlier, which have been found. These stamps and amphorae not only date the wine production for us, but also trace their trade throughout the Mediterranean region.

By following these threads back to their production sites in Greece, we are given a window on the economic and manufacturing centers and trends of ancient Greece and her colonies which otherwise would have dried up long before now. The mountains of wine amphora shards found throughout Greece attest to the scale of wine production and home-trade of this commodity merely within the country itself and between its city-states. The vast evidence found abroad of the Greek mainland strengthens the case that the Greek wine trade was probably the greatest in ancient history, challenged and perhaps superseded only by the Roman production which followed closely on its heels and which we will begin to look at in the next issue of *Labyrinth*.