Amphoras: Use and re-use
By Joyce Compton

Of all the vessel classes, there is one for which the function can be stated with some confidence; the amphora, whose primary function was as a container for the transport of bulk commodities, such as wine, olive oil, fish products and fruit syrup. This function is borne out by epigraphic evidence in the form of painted inscriptions on many of these vessels, which provide details of their contents and/or destinations. Amphoras, and their contents, were imported into Britain from early in the 1st century BC until late into the Roman period, and also into post-Roman Britain. At Heybridge, small numbers of Dressel 1 wine amphoras first appeared in contexts dated *c*.50-30BC [ref. amphora report and pottery supply] and increased greatly in quantity from *c*.25BC. It is thought that these vessels may have had a particular status or significance in the late Iron Age, beyond their function as containers for wine, or perhaps, as an extension of that function. This status may have been conferred upon the vessel because of its origins and content, with its symbolic significance as a commodity central to social and political aspirations.

In order to establish whether there is such a status attached to Dressel 1 amphoras, their deposition was examined mainly in relation to that of Dressel 20 amphoras. These were globular carriers for olive oil, and were generally later in date, found in larger numbers from the late 1st century AD. Deposition of the intermediate form Dressel 2-4, mostly used for the transport of wine, was also examined. These vessels superseded Dressel 1, although their numbers at Heybridge are low compared to either Dressel 1 or Dressel 20, as is the case elsewhere [ref. amphora report]. Data are drawn from the stratified assemblage, which includes residual material, but excludes that from cleaning and machining layers. For all pottery types deposition throughout occurred principally in pits, and as the southern settlement zone is characterised by pitting, this is where the highest percentage of pottery was deposited. Very few amphoras were found in positions suggestive of continued or secondary vessel use following their primary function as transport containers, which may be surprising given the number of storage jar ovens recorded (ref.).

Dressel 1 and Dressel 2-4 amphoras
As can be seen from the charts below (Tables 00), the deposition pattern for both Dressel 1 and Dressel 2-4 is similar. Both appear in the same number of feature types (twelve) and a similar percentage of amphoras occur in each feature. A difference can perhaps be seen in the percentages deposited across the settlement. A slightly higher percentage of Dressel 2-4 occurred in the hinterland, due in part to the presence of three of these vessels in pyre-related features. Deposition in all types of funerary feature for both vessel forms is almost identical at 6% for Dressel 1 and 5% for Dressel 2-4.

Conversely, the graph showing deposition by Ceramic Phase (Fig.00) indicates that Dressel 1 was entering the archaeological record much later than its postulated period of importation. These vessels were imported into Britain during the 1st century BC with a terminal date for their import of *c*.10BC. As can be seen, many of the vessels were deposited in the late 1st century BC (CP1) but deposition in equally large numbers occurred at least until the mid 1st century AD (CP3). This is unlikely to be accounted for fully by the factors governing deposition and residuality. It is

noteworthy that a similar situation occurred at *Camulodunum*, where a large number of Dressel 1 amphoras were found in contexts dated to as late as *c*.AD61 (Hawkes and Hull 1947, tables, pp.277-81). The graph for Dressel 2-4 (Fig.00) shows the expected pattern, with maximum deposition occurring during the currency of the form. It is possible that their contents were not always immediately consumed, but it also seems plausible to suggest that once the vessels had been emptied, Dressel 1 amphoras, and to some extent Dressel 2-4, still held a special significance resulting in continued or secondary use as containers.

Direct evidence for Dressel 1 re-use, though, is sparse, with just two potential examples. Firstly, there is an abraded handle stub from pit 15049, although this is residual, probably accounting for the abrasion. The second is an amphora spike in pyre-debris pit 15417, the broken tip of which has clearly been smoothed in antiquity (Fig.00). This may indicate continued use as a container, following the original loss, or deliberate removal, of the spike tip. The presence of this vessel, along with two others, in a pyre-related deposit [ref. burials] might also indicate a degree of reverence, whereby the amphora was made to look new again before incorporation into the funerary rite. Only the pyre sites and their related pits appear to attest directly to the importance of Dressel 1 amphoras and their contents. Re-use need not have been restricted to funerary or similarly revered instances. Continued secondary use simply as a liquid container is feasible, and not necessarily for wine alone, although wine could also have been decanted into the vessel for the purposes of display/status. Import of wine in barrels along with amphoras is attested, but perhaps wine proffered from amphoras was more highly regarded.

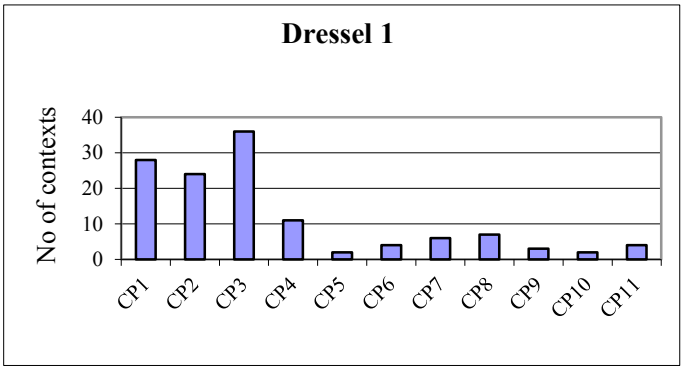

Fig.00 Deposition of Dressel 1 by Ceramic Phase (Sample size, 1157 sherds, 76kg)

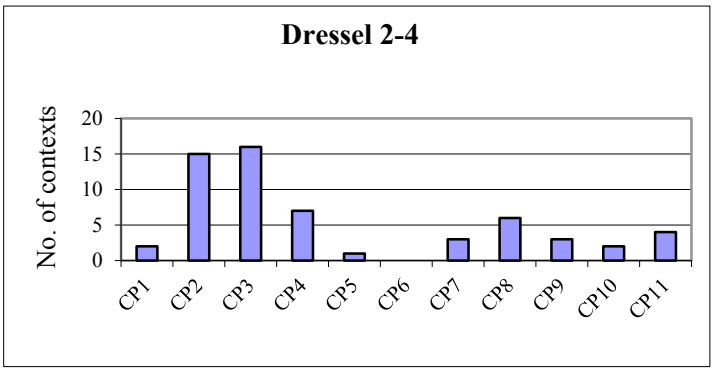

Fig.00 Deposition of Dressel 2-4 by Ceramic Phase (Sample size, 218 sherds, 8kg)

	Northern	Central	Southern	Hinterland	Total	%
Ditch	7	2	5	-	14	10
Layer	2	10	9	-	21	15
Pit	21	9	54	-	84	59
Well	1	-	-	-	1	<1
Funerary	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pyre feature	-	-	7	1	8	6
Others	2	3	9	-	14	10
Totals	33	24	84	1	142	100
% by zone	23	17	59	<1		

Table 00. Dressel 1 amphoras: Number of context occurrences by feature type

	Northern	Central	Southern	Hinterland	Total	%
Ditch	3	-	7	2	12	15
Layer	-	4	4	-	8	10
Pit	12	3	28	3	46	56
Well	-	-	2	-	2	2
Funerary	1	-	-	-	1	1
Pyre feature	-	-	-	3	3	4
Others	6	-	4	-	10	12
Totals	22	7	45	8	82	100
% by zone	27	9	55	10		

Table 00. Dressel 2-4 amphoras: Number of context occurrences by feature type

Dressel 20 amphoras

As can be seen from the chart below (Table 00), the deposition pattern for Dressel 20 is unlike that for either of the above types (Tables 00). Dressel 20, at twenty-five examples, appeared in twice as many feature types as Dressel 1 (twelve), although this is probably a reflection of the nature of later occupation at Heybridge. Ground disturbance increased through the Roman period, thereby increasing the number of places in which pottery could be deposited and redeposited. This has had the effect of masking the trends of pottery deposition, so that there is difficulty in establishing the length of time vessels remained in circulation. Fewer Dressel 20 amphoras were recovered from pits than either Dressel 1 or 2-4, and consequently more appeared in other features including hearths and foundation deposits. In addition, a higher percentage of Dressel 20 was recovered from the central settlement zone. The reasons for the differences in deposition are not clear.

It is possible to infer that re-use of Dressel 20 might include more mundane activities than for early wine amphoras, besides storage of either liquids or dry goods, including use as hardcore. The fact that Dressel 20 appears in many more feature types, coupled with an atypical chronological deposition pattern, lends weight to this suggestion. Fig.00 indicates that minimal amounts of Dressel 1 amphoras were being deposited after CP3, whereas Fig.00 shows a steady higher level of Dressel 20 deposition with peaks occurring in CP4, CP8 and CP11. The graph for Dressel 2-4 (Fig.00) accords with that for Dressel 1. It could also be inferred that both Dressel 1 and Dressel 2-4 amphoras were deposited in features that subsequently remained deliberately undisturbed. The location of pyre-debris pit 15417, in particular, seems to have been respected throughout the Roman period (ref. strat. text).

Amphora body sherds, mainly Dressel 20 types, with large drilled holes are frequently found on Roman sites, although only a single example, a spindle whorl, was identified at Elms Farm. These drilled holes are generally considered to have been tapping holes whose purpose was to make easier the extraction of the contents. While many holes may have been made for just this purpose, it is beginning to be recognised that repair of amphoras was also taking place. Sherds with *in situ* lead plugs were discovered in the civil settlement at Caerleon (Evans 2000, 296, nos 179,181). In his discussion, Evans cites an example from London (Marsh 1981, 227), where a vessel comprising 289 sherds held together with 613 rivets was still found to hold water. Amphoras were perhaps designed for storage of liquids, wide-mouthed storage jars being less useful and therefore not selected if amphoras were available. Conversely, amphoras could presumably also have been used to store dry goods.

Evidence for Dressel 20 vessel re-use at Heybridge is also sparse, other than the occurrence of the top half of an amphora buried upside down in pit 4582. The rim had been carefully trimmed off before the top half of the vessel had been placed inverted in the pit. The purpose to which this amphora had been put is not clear, but examples have been recorded elsewhere (Crummy 1984, 135). As many of those vessels had probably been inverted in the ground, it has been suggested that they may have been utilised as soakaways. Another vessel found at Colchester had been placed upright, minus the neck, in a pit excavated in the passageway between two houses (Crummy 1992, 105; fig.3.54). A further example from Colchester was discovered in 1959 during excavation of the kilns (Hull 1963, 38; figs 10, 15; 134, fig.74.2). The top half of a Gaulish amphora (*Cam* 188) was found buried upside down in the west bank of the stoke-yard wall. Its neck had been plugged with lead, and Hull surmised that 'it had no doubt been placed there as some convenience to the potters in their work', although nothing in the contents gave any clue as to the purpose. However, the insertion of a lead plug in the neck might preclude its use as a soakaway. A further published example occurred at Causeway Lane, Leicester (Clark 1999, 122; fig.66.118), although this vessel seems to have been finally discarded in the back-filled remains of a ditch after re-use (Clark 1994, 10). That it had once been inverted was inferred from the internal staining (Clark 1994, 11).

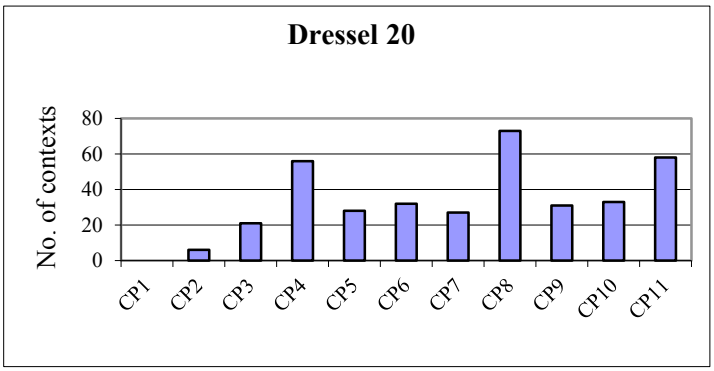

Fig.00 Deposition of Dressel 20 by Ceramic Phase (Sample size, 1546 sherds, 116kg)

	Northern	Central	Southern	Hinterland	Total	%
Ditch	34	15	12	7	68	17
Layer	13	41	20	1	75	18
Pit	49	27	104	5	185	45
Well	8	2	3	-	13	3
Funerary	2	-	-	-	2	<1
Pyre feature	-	-	-	-	-	-
Others	12	34	18	5	69	17
Totals	118	119	157	18	412	100
% by zone	29	29	38	4		

Table 00. Dressel 20 amphoras: Number of context occurrences by feature type

Discussion

Consideration of the deposition of amphoras in funerary features (Tables 00) highlights some differences. There are five occurrences of Dressel 1 in pyre-related features, although three of these appeared in the fills of the pyre-debris pit 15417. In contrast, the appearance of Dressel 20 in funerary features is confined to extraneous sherds, one with inhumation 10776, and another in Roman cremation pit 9665. In all of these occurrences the amphoras are represented in the main by burnt sherds. Complete and unburnt Dressel 1 amphoras were interred with Welwyn-type burials, at for instance, Welwyn Garden City (Stead 1967) and Hertford Heath (Hüssen 1983), both in Hertfordshire. Stead sees these Welwyn-type burials as the graves of Celts impressed and enriched by their contact with Roman (more likely Gallic) merchants (1967, 49). Three amphoras included with the Dorton Mirror burial, Buckinghamshire (Farley 1983) were incomplete; all had had their necks removed in antiquity and the edges had been smoothed. In addition, the broken spike of one vessel had been worn smooth. This treatment is echoed on the spike of the vessel in pyre-debris pit 15417, although this deposit is not an example of a conventionally-defined Welwyn-type burial (Stead 1967, 44).

The presence of burnt amphora sherds in funerary features is virtually unrecorded in late Iron Age Britain (P. Sealey, pers. comm.), although the practice is attested on the continent, for instance, at Clemency (Metzler *et al*. 1991). Numerous amphora sherds were recovered from the Lexden tumulus (Foster 1986, 124), although there is no indication in the published report that these had been burnt. The other grave goods were fragmentary, with the appearance of having been through the pyre; further detailed examination of the amphoras might reveal more clues. The single definite

British example of burnt amphoras in a funerary context occurs at Folly Lane, Verulamium (Niblett 1999, 51), although these are from a later burial (*c*.AD55) and are Dressel 2-4 (Williams 1999, 193).

If, as seems to be the case, Dressel 1 was often associated with funerary activities, then this practice continued with Dressel 2-4. As the latter was current at the peak of funerary activity at Heybridge, this is unsurprising, but it is all the more notable that Dressel 1 was present in such features. There are two definite occurrences of Dressel 2-4 in pyre-related features (pyre sites 2490, 2908) at Elms Farm. In both cases only well-burnt fragments were recovered, and each pyre site produced a different vessel. Dressel 2-4 occurs elsewhere in funerary contexts, besides the ceremonial site at Folly Lane, Verulamium. At least eleven vessels of this form were recovered from the Lexden tumulus (Williams 1986, 131) and two from the Dorton Mirror burial (Farley 1983, 291), both alongside Dressel 1 types. Further discussion of the presence of amphoras in funerary features at Elms Farm can be found in the amphora report (Sealey, p.00).

Deposition of Dressel 1 in contexts much later than the currency of the vessel has been discussed in detail by Sealey (1985, 101-8) to explain the occurrence of numbers of these vessels at Sheepen, a site founded more than a decade after the demise of the form (Sealey 1985, 26). Several reasons have been proposed, including use as a prestige item for gift-exchange and the ageing of the contents to produce a vintage. All the reasons given are plausible, since occupation in the late 1st century BC at Sheepen can be discounted (Sealey 1985, 105). The problem was also considered by Hawkes, who proposed secondary storage of liquids in order to explain the later deposition of Dressel 1 at *Camulodunum* (Hawkes and Crummy 1995, 73).

The number of vessels found in funerary contexts is too few to fully account for the phenomenon; just seven, representing approximately 10% of the total Dressel 1 and Dressel 2-4 amphoras found at Elms Farm. At least twelve Dressel 1 amphoras occurred in Welwyn-type burials (Stead 1967, table 11; Rodwell 1976, appendix IIA), with a further nine occurring in less well-defined burials in Essex (Rodwell 1976, 318-20). Examples of both Dressel 2-4 and south Spanish amphoras from similar burials are also listed. Inclusion of amphoras in burials is one manifestation of the high regard these vessels (or their contents) seem to have commanded. This manifestation is highly visible, but does not tell the whole story. Dressel 1 amphoras, in particular, must have had many highly-regarded roles for so many to be found in contexts as much as half a century beyond their currency. These roles remain archaeologically undetectable. The evidence at Heybridge, with a start date of *c*.25 years before the foundation of *Camulodunum*, parallels the situation there. The reasons applied at *Camulodunum* (Sheepen) to explain the phenomenon are equally valid at Heybridge.

Similarly, re-use of Dressel 20 remains archaeologically undetectable, although examples, when found, perhaps demonstrate the more mundane nature of such re-use. Few instances were recovered at Elms Farm, but the pattern of deposition (Fig.00) indicates that Dressel 20 amphoras were not being deposited during the currency of the vessel. A large Dressel 20 body sherd was recovered from shallow pit 13845, unfortunately poorly recorded, but apparently partly lining the cut. The location of the pit (in the central zone) and the absence of other finds, apart from a few iron

objects, give no clues as to the purpose. Dressel 20 sherds were utilised as a hearth at *Camulodunum* (Hawkes and Hull 1947, 107), and the bottom of a globular amphora had been re-used as a hearth or furnace base at Causeway Lane, Leicester (Clark 1994, 11). The sherd from Heybridge does not appear to be burnt, however, but is badly fragmented and has shattered and laminated. This could more easily be seen as the result of frost damage.

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that amphoras were likely to have been put to secondary uses once the original contents had been consumed. In the absence of definite examples, it may be inferred that Dressel 1 and Dressel 2-4 had more significance as containers for wine, and their deposition in funerary features reflects this status. Whereas all amphoras might have been re-used as containers, either for liquids or for dry goods, Dressel 20 seems not to have had the same importance as Dressel 1 and Dressel 2-4. None was found in funerary features, nor in contexts associated with religious activity - in the temple area for instance. On the contrary, the highest incidence of Dressel 20 amphoras was in Area H, which was the area with the largest concentration of storage jar ovens (ref.). That the re-use of Dressel 20 involved functions of a more mundane nature could also be inferred from the evidence.