

Ancient Monuments Laboratory  
Report 2/90

ROMAN AMPHORAE FROM SOUTH SHIELDS  
FORT, CO DURHAM.

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Summary

Identification of a new form of Roman amphora with a distinctive almond rim, as yet unrecognized from Romano-British sites. Petrological and other evidence suggests a source in Campania, Italy, possibly as the successor to the Dressel 2-4 type. Production seems to have occurred during the third and fourth centuries A.D.

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ROMAN AMPHORAE FROM SOUTH SHIELDS FORT, Co. DURHAM

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A series of excavations at the Roman fort at South Shields stretching back to the mid 1960's, has produced an interesting group of amphorae sherds. The majority of these sherds, which are mostly in the form of plain bodysherds, are in a very distinctive 'black sand' fabric - caused by numerous small dark-coloured grains of pyroxene scattered throughout the clay (These are listed in Table 1. This table has been mostly prepared by Paul Bidwell. Those sherds personally seen by DFW have been marked accordingly, and unless designated otherwise are definitely in the 'black sand' fabric). This particular fabric is not an especially uncommon one amongst pottery found on Romano-British sites, and is usually associated with the late Republican amphorae forms Dressel 1A and 1B, as well as the later type Dressel 2-4 (Peacock and Williams, 1986, Classes 3, 4 and 10). In addition to amphorae, other types of pottery vessels recovered from Romano-British sites are also found in this fabric, such as Pompeian Red Ware platters and bowls (Peacock, 1977) and flagons of the form Camulodunum 139 (Williams, 1986).

When this fabric is viewed in thin section, as well as green or colourless grains of pyroxene (mostly augite), often present are inclusions of quartz and sanidine feldspar, with somewhat lesser amounts of volcanic rock and glass, brown hornblende, biotite and yellow-brown garnet. There can be little doubt of an Italian origin for this fabric, and although theoretically many areas along the Italian volcanic

tract could be considered, in practice a Campanian source seems by far the most likely. Numerous bricks and tiles in an identical 'black sand' fabric can be seen in the Pompeii - Herculanean region, and rarely outside of this area, and these are items which one assumes would most probably have been made in the locality where they are found (Peacock, 1977). An alternative source in Latium for the 'black sand' fabric has been suggested by Courtois and Velde, in particular the area of the Alban Hills near to Rome, due to small amounts of yellow (malanitic) garnet in the fabric (1978; 1983). However, yellow-brown garnet is also a feature of the sands further south, in Campania, while there is no archaeological evidence for production of pottery or other ceramic materials in the 'black sand' fabric in the region of Rome. Moreover, the inclusion of Etruscan pottery and a Dressel 1A amphorae containing a SESTIUS stamp in the sample group of supposed 'black sand' sherds analysed by Courtois and Velde, casts some doubt on the validity of their results. It is now clear, for example, that the amphorae of Sestius were made close by to the port of Cosa in Etruria (Will, 1987), and examples of these amphorae seen by the writer are certainly not in a fabric which could be described as 'black sand'.

It is also worth drawing attention here to the recent rather peculiar claim by Blakely, Brinkmann and Vitaliano that petrological analysis of eighty four Pompeian Red Ware sherds from Caesarea Maritima in Palestine showed that all but one belonged to a fabric 'that had not been reported in earlier studies of Pompeian Red Ware' (1989). This claim is all the more unusual for two reasons. Firstly, although they mention David Peacock's previous work and fabric descriptions of Pompeian Red Ware (1977), they seem unwilling to accept that the fabric reported in detail for eighty three of the Pompeian Red Ware sherds from Caesarea Maritima is identical to the Campanian 'black sand' fabric. Secondly, Blakely, Brinkmann and Vitaliano have published as an appendix to their paper a short note by the present writer, pointing out the similarities of fabric in the Caesarea Maritima sherds and Peacock's Pompeian Red Ware 'black sand' Fabric 1 (ibid.), and contradicting their extravagant claims for a 'new' fabric. There is little doubt

in this writer's mind that this material from Caesarea Maritima is yet another example of the familiar 'black sand' pottery that was almost certainly made in Campania.

In Britain, when the 'black sand' fabric occurs in diagnostic amphorae sherds, these have in the past tended to be confined to the forms Dressel 1B and Dressel 2-4. A recent find of a rim of the earlier form Dressel 1A from Lake Farm, Dorset, shows that this type was also imported into the country in the 'black sand' fabric. However, amongst the group of 'black sand' sherds from South Shields listed in Table 1 are a number of 'almond-shaped' rims which clearly do not belong to either the Dressel 1 or 2-4 forms. Indeed, the context date for much of the South Shields material is c. A.D. 250-350 and thus far too late for Dressel 1, which went out of production on Italian kiln sites in the last years of the first century B.C., or even its successor the bifid-handled Dressel 2-4, whose terminal date is more difficult to determine but was probably round about the middle of the second century A.D. (see Peacock and Williams, 1986, Classes 4 and 10 for detailed dating references). There is in fact part of a bifid handle (14501) included in the South Shields material which in all probability belongs to a Dressel 2-4 form. In view of the dates mentioned above this find must surely be residual in some way.

Italian wine shipments in amphorae to the western provinces of the Roman Empire were probably in decline by the latter part of the first century A.D., if not slightly before, under increasing competition from the wine-growing areas of southern and north-eastern Spain and, in particular, from southern France. The characteristic amphora from the latter area, Pélichet 47/Gauloise 4 an unusual flat-bottomed type, is for example already found in substantial numbers at Ostia in Flavian levels (Carandini and Panella, 1981). Indeed, by the Hadrianic-Antonine period Campanian Dressel 2-4 amphorae are all but absent at Ostia, surely indicating the decline of large-scale marketing of Campanian wine for

overseas consumption (ibid.).

How far the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79 might have affected pottery production in the Pompeii - Herculanium area, and if so for how long, is difficult to speculate on at present. Commerce and agriculture outside of the immediate area of devastation must have been disturbed to some extent, if only due to the breakdown of communications in this region. However, the wine producing areas in northern Campanian such as the Ager Falernus may not have been affected much, if at all by the tragedy. Viticulture certainly continued to be practised there, for we have a reference to Falernian wine by Galen at the time of Marcus Aurelius, and somewhat later it is mentioned in Diocletian's Price Edict of A.D. 301 (Tchernia, 1980). It is interesting that all of the wines mentioned in Diocletian's Edict are Italian vintages, with the Falernian amongst the dearest priced. However, the amphorae/containers for this wine, much of which may well have been intended for the local Italian market, have been somewhat elusive, leading to speculation that at this time the normal amphorae containers had been replaced for domestic carriage by barrels and/or animal skins, which are of course harder to find in the archaeological record.

Recent fieldwork by Paul Arthur in northern Campania has to some extent modified this view, with the discovery of a number of probable kiln sites which may have been producing amphorae during the third and fourth centuries A.D. (1982). In addition, the top part of an amphora recovered from S. Clemente, Rome, which thin sectioning by the writer suggests came from northern Campania, contained a titulus pictus mentioning the two consuls for the year A.D. 216, P. Cadius Sabinus and P. Cornelius Anullinus (Arthur, 1987). It is also possible that part of the inscription may in fact refer to Falernian wine.

These recent amphorae finds are relevant to the material from South Shields listed in Table 1, because the almond-shaped rim and oval-shaped handles from the S. Clemente vessel and similar forms from potential kilns at Masseria Dragone and

Minturnae illustrated by Arthur from his field survey in the Ager Falernus, can be fairly closely paralleled by some of the sherds from South Shields (ibid., 1987, Fig. 1; 1982, Fig. 5, nos. 7, 8 and 14). Five almond-shaped rims occur at South Shields, all from different vessels (1AZ, 14528, 14687, 15279 and 16000) and four parts of oval-shaped handles (14602, 14539, 15019 and 15220). The spikes normally associated with the Italian finds mentioned above are solid and slightly flared at the base, although no complete almond-rimmed amphora has yet been found (cf. ibid., Fig. 5, 11 and 12). Unfortunately this particular shaped spike is reminiscent of the earlier Dressel 2-4 and, in view of the bifid handle found at South Shields, it cannot be taken for granted at present that all similar spikes from the site automatically belong to vessels with the almond rim (e.g. FI PSG 103 P22, 12072, 14539 and 2405). One of the South Shields spikes has a more 'chunky' appearance and lacks any slight flare (15075). It is difficult to know if this could be a variation found in the almond-rimmed vessels or belongs instead to another form.

The actual fabrics of the almond-rimmed amphorae illustrated by Arthur, both those vessels from his field survey and the one from S. Clemente with the titulus pictus, have been examined by the writer under the petrological microscope (ibid.). They contain a range of volcanic inclusions entirely in keeping with a proposed origin in northern Campania. At South Shields, one example each of an almond-rim (1AZ), oval-shaped handle (14539) and flared solid spike (14539) contain a similar, although not necessarily exact, range of inclusions, and quite possibly come from the same general region. However, the remainder of the diagnostic sherds from South Shields seen by the writer (apart from the bifid handle), are in a 'black sand' fabric that suggests a probable origin in the Pompeii - Herculanium area. If this supposition is correct, then it would indicate the the almond-rimmed amphora type was made in both northern and central Campania. The date-range of this almond-rimmed amphora form from Campania is at the present

time difficult to suggest with any degree of precision. The titulus pictus amphora from S. Clemente indicates that it was certainly in production during the early years of the third century A.D. Paul Arthur's field survey information from northern Campania suggests it may have been in use some time before and some time after this date (1982). The evidence from South Shields points to a date of deposition between A.D. 250-350. Much further it is not possible to go at this time.

In addition to South Shields, the writer has noted other examples of sherds of almond-rimmed amphorae, in some instances with the oval-shaped handle still attached, from Catterick, York (both the Minster excavations and those from the Archaeological Trust) and Clayden Pike, Glos. In most cases the fabric tends to be the 'black sand' one, but in a few cases it contains a range of volcanic inclusions similar in composition to the South Shields non- 'black sand' sherds mentioned above. Details of dating have yet to be worked out, but the general impression so far seems to be that it is likely to be later<sup>rather</sup> than earlier. In this context it is perhaps worth while taking a second look at the 'black sand' handle recently published from Beadlam Roman villa in north Yorkshire (Rigby, 1988). This roughly oval-shaped sherd from the bottom section of handle and body, is also in a 'black sand' fabric and was associated with pottery commonly dated to the late Roman occupation in the north of the country (ibid., Fig. 17.1, and see Ian Freestone's appendix on the petrology of the sherd). This has been identified as coming from a 'Dressel type 1 with a terminus ante quem of 10 B.C.', and as such the most northerly find of this amphora form and the earliest dateable pottery at Beadlam by close on two centuries (ibid., 313). It is often hazardous to venture an opinion on pottery without actually seeing the material in question. However, it is possible that the Beadlam sherd may in fact be an oval-shaped handle belonging to an almond-rimmed amphora. If this is the case, its date would be considerably later than that for Dressel 1, and in consequence more in keeping with the general dating of the site.

In addition to the amphorae sherds in Table 1 seen by the writer, can be included a Dressel 20 rim probably dating to the third century A.D. (15105). This globular form carried olive-oil from the Guadalquivir region of southern Spain, and is a common find on many Romano-British sites (Peacock and Williams, 1986, Class 25). Other finds included a small open foot in a very fine-textured clay with no visible inclusions, possibly from a ?flagon (14732), and a piece of ?tile or ?waterpipe.

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TABLE 1

List of amphorae sherds from South Shields, the majority of which are likely to be in the 'black sand' or associated fabric

<u>Year of Excavation</u>	<u>Context</u>	<u>Weight</u>	<u>Description</u>
1966	KP	65gms	Bodysherd (burnt)
1967	FI PSG 103 P22	275gms	Solid spike, slightly flared (seen by DFW)
1973	AV	170gms	Bodysherd
"	BD	40gms	"
"	CA	75gms	Two bodysherds
"	1AZ	87gms	Almond-shaped rim (seen by DFW. Volcanic fabric, <u>not</u> really 'black sand')
"	1BC	30gms	Fragment of spike
"	1CM	125gms	Two bodysherds
"	1CX	28gms	Bodysherd
"	1DJ	50gms	"
"	Unstratified (Bag 2)	70gms	"
"	" (Bag 3)	28gms	"
"	" (Bag 6)	105gms	"
"	" (Bag 7)	20gms	"
1978	L72	75gms	"
1980	F102	Missing	Spike

TABLE 1 (cont.)

1984	12045	65gms	Bodysherd
"	12072 Room VIII	100gms	Lengthwise section of a solid spike, slightly flared (seen by DFW)
"	12079	150gms	Bodysherd
1985	14500	75gms	Two bodysherds
"	14500	326gms	Part of a solid spike (seen by DFW)
"	187	20gms	Bodysherd
"	189	20gms	"
"	201	70gms	"
"	12736	25gms	"
"	14501	25gms	Bifid handle (seen by DFW. Volcanic fabric, <u>not</u> really 'black sand')
"	14089	25gms	Bodysherd
"	14505	20gms	"
"	14528	153gms	Almond-shaped rim plus beginning of handle-stub (seen by DFW)
"	14539	176gms	Bottom section of a solid spike, slightly flared (seen by DFW. Volcanic fabric, <u>not</u> really 'black sand')
"	14551	175gms	Bodysherd
"	14602	160gms	Top part of an oval-shaped handle plus small section of body (seen by DFW)
"	14605	75gms	Bodysherd

TABLE 1 (cont.)

1985	14539	294gms	Top part of an oval-shaped handle plus small section of body (seen by DFW. Volcanic fabric, <u>not</u> really 'black sand')
1986	5210	80gms	Five bodysherds
"	5238	400gms	Three "
"	5245	80gms	Four "
"	5246	5gms	Bodysherd
"	5251	5gms	"
"	5253	40gms	Four bodysherds
"	5264	120gms	Bodysherd
"	5265	50gms	"
"	5276	5gms	"
"	5281	5gms	"
"	5287	10gms	"
"	5296	10gms	"
"	5490	55gms	"
"	5795	5gms	"
"	5809	10gms	"
"	14501	150gms	" (plus scraps)
"	14621	50gms	"
"	14626	75gms	Two bodysherds
"	14666	30gms	Bodysherd
"	14687	20gms	"
"	14691	5gms	"
"	14702	45gms	"
"	14726	325gms	"

TABLE 1 (cont.)

1986	14687	42gms	Almond-shaped rim (seen by DFW)
1987	1057	10gms	Bodysherd
"	1074	25gms	"
"	6216	320gms	Two bodysherds
"	6285	70gms	" "
"	6294	20gms	Bodysherd
"	7014	88gms	Part of a handle. Difficult to say if it is oval-shaped or bifid (seen by DFW)
"	7046	30gms	Bodysherd
"	7051	25gms	"
"	7058	110gms	"
"	7081	55gms	Three bodysherds
"	7082	55gms	Bodysherd
"	7087	10gms	"
"	7099	95gms	"
"	15019	171gms	Oval-shaped handle (seen by DFW)
"	15057	10gms	Bodysherd
"	15075	340gms	Bottom section of a solid 'chunky' spike (seen by DFW)
"	15088	20gms	Bodysherd
"	15089	25gms	"
"	15105	10gms	"
"	15107	50gms	"
"	15144	2gms	Scrap

TABLE 1 (cont.)

1987	15164	5gms	Bodysherd
"	15179	25gms	" (thin)
"	15220	51gms	Small part of an oval-shaped handle (seen by DFW)
1988	1078	75gms	Bodysherd (burnt)
"	15279	126gms	Almond-shaped rim (seen by DFW)
"	15284	5gms	Bodysherd (thin)
"	15315	50gms	"
"	16000(unstratified)	61gms	Almond-shaped rim, smaller version of 15279 (seen by DFW)
"	16018	5gms	Bodysherd
"	16085	10gms	"
"	2405	224gms	Bottom section of a solid spike, slightly flared (seen by DFW)

Total weight of amphorae sherds 6,997gms

Total number of amphorae sherds 109

Made up of: 7 spikes (plus one fragment)  
 6 handles  
 5 rims  
 90 bodysherds