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► **To cite this version:**

Michel Bonifay, Dominique Pieri. Merovingian Gaul and the Mediterranean: Ceramics and Trade. Bonnie Effros; Isabella Moreira. The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World, Oxford University Press, pp.860-882, 2020, 97801902334188. halshs-03092548

**HAL Id: halshs-03092548**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03092548v1>**

Submitted on 31 Jan 2022

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# MEROVINGIAN GAUL AND THE MEDITERRANEAN: CERAMICS AND TRADE

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Borrowing the title of a recent book (Reynolds 2010), this essay provides a short overview of trade relations between Merovingian Gaul and the Mediterranean. This survey is based on the ceramic evidence, without, however, forgetting links with contemporary texts and other categories of artifacts that convey additional information relative to this question such as coins and glass. In chronological terms, Merovingian Gaul is understood here to include the period from the beginning of the fifth century to the first half of the eighth century; this broad framework allows consideration of the present subject within the context of the lengthy transformation of the late antique economy. Geographically, however, it is important to recognize that the state of the available evidence favors the southernmost parts of the territory progressively occupied by the Franks.

To address the question whether it is legitimate to use pottery as a measure of the directions, nature, and intensity of trade in late antiquity, we rely on the response of Simon Loseby, who has noted that: “the ubiquity and volume of the ceramic data, when combined with the possibility of assigning much of them an approximate provenance and date, opens up a host of comparative possibilities, whether diachronic or synchronic”. He adds that: “the *general* comparative potential of the ceramic data is greatly in excess of that afforded by the contemporary textual evidence”, and concludes that: “it is reasonable to interpret the ceramic data as general indices of potential economic complexity” (Loseby 2007). Indeed, although

the ceramic evidence does not obviate the importance of extant literary sources, it would be unwise to study the late antique economy without taking into account the evidence for and distribution of amphorae and tableware, cooking ware, and lamps. Amphorae, in particular, were the primary containers for the transport of liquid and semi-liquid foodstuffs across the Mediterranean, including oil, wine, and fish products. In addition, these observable remains serve as proxies or indicators of trade in articles that are largely invisible in the archaeological record like grain and clothing.

To achieve these objectives, this survey of the ceramic evidence is divided into three different periods: from the beginning of the fifth century until 536, the date at which the Frankish kingdom obtained direct access to the Mediterranean Sea; from 536 until the middle of the seventh century, the period during which Merovingian Gaul was largely open to the Mediterranean world; and from the late seventh century to the first half of the eighth century, a phase that reflected the gradual disappearance of Mediterranean imports from Frankish Gaul. In order not to burden the text, we largely avoid giving specific bibliographic references to the artifacts attested to at different archaeological sites, but instead refer to more general essays on these topics that provide the relevant bibliography for anyone interested in engaging in further study of specific finds.

## **THE DOMINANCE OF AFRICAN IMPORTS IN THE LATE FOURTH CENTURY**

At the end of the fourth century, as was the case elsewhere in the western Mediterranean (Panella 1993), markets in southern Gaul were dominated by African imports of what was likely oil and *salsamenta* (salted fish) transported in medium-sized cylindrical amphorae of type Keay 25/Africana III (Bonifay and Raynaud 2007). In addition, local evidence reveals that a significant number of these amphorae also carried wine. By contrast, imports of Spanish

amphorae were not rare in some cities like Arles and others mainly in the vicinity of Spain like Narbonne and Toulouse, which received Baetican oil (type Dressel 23), and fish sauces from Baetica (southern Iberia) and Lusitania (southwestern Iberia) (types Almagro 50, 51a-b, 51c). Sicilian wine is also attested in late examples of MR1 amphorae, along with the first arrivals of Calabrian amphorae Keay 52. In addition, wine from the eastern Mediterranean is present in modest quantities, as was the case during the previous centuries, having been imported from Crete and Asia Minor in one-handled MR3 containers.

By contrast, Mediterranean amphorae were far less abundant in more northern regions. However, their periodic discovery in these areas suggest that they did travel via two main trade routes. The first one was through the Rhône valley, where the context of a river port in Lyons dated to circa 400 contained about 30% African amphorae (Lemaître *et al.* 2011), including both types Keay 25 and Keay 1B with wine possibly from Algeria. The same types of amphorae are also found much further to the north, for instance in Augst, Metz, and Tournai. The second trade route followed the terrestrial and fluvial route of the “Gallic isthmus”, from Narbonne to Bordeaux, via Toulouse. Along this route, and particularly in Toulouse, the representation of African amphorae in urban contexts reaches 38% (Amiel and Berthault 1996).

This model of interpretation based on amphorae is nonetheless less than ideal if one seeks to gauge the amount of foodstuffs transported in perishable containers. It is important to keep in mind that wine from Gaul and even from Italy might be imported in wooden barrels rather than ceramics. Moreover, one must recall that archaeology is generally unable to testify to the trade of grain, since it was transported in bags or even in bulk, first by boat and then, of course, by cart.

With respect to fine ceramics across southern Gaul, African Red Slip (ARS)<sup>3</sup> tableware, the interest of which has long been highlighted in economic history (Fentress *et al.*

2004), dominates all the archaeological contexts dated to the fourth century (for more detail, see Bonifay and Raynaud 2007). This situation was well established as early as the mid-second century with inflows of ARS ware from the region of Carthage (the so-called category A), which was soon followed in the mid-third century by central Tunisian ARS ware (the so-called category C, for more details on this classification, see Bonifay 2004). From the mid-fourth century onward, however, the ceramic production from the lower Mejerda valley (area of El Mahrine, northern Tunisia) invaded the markets. This was true even in a city like Arles, which also saw the abundant arrival of tableware (*sigillée luisante*) from Gaul, mainly from the region of Savoy through the Rhône valley (Bonifay and Raynaud 2007). By contrast, distribution patterns of ceramics are quite different in northern regions of Gaul, which continued to be supplied by a variety of regional productions deriving from the mid-Roman period such as Argonne ware (for more details on the classification, see Brulet, Vilvorder, and Delage 2010).

Nowadays, it is generally assumed that African Red Slip Ware did not normally travel from Africa along with amphora cargoes, and that grain was the main product with which ARS traveled (Bonifay and Tchernia 2012). It is also thought that the seminal distribution of ARS throughout the Mediterranean did not move directly from Africa to the different provinces or towns, but was largely dependent upon the phenomenon of return cargoes from Rome. Indeed, the eternal city was the general hub of most of the Mediterranean trade in the Roman period, through both the imperial supply system (*annona*) and private inter-provincial trade. These observations support current understanding that by the start of the fifth century, the territories that progressively came under the control of the Frankish kings were still completely integrated in the Roman economic system.

## **PERIOD 1: FRANKISH EXPANSION IN A TIME OF ECONOMIC CHANGE (CIRCA**

**400 TO 536)**

We propose two distinct phases in the period between circa 400 and 536: one of upheaval during most of the fifth century, and a second of partial recovery at the beginning of the sixth century.

**THE GROWING POPULARITY OF EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AMPHORA IN THE FIFTH CENTURY**

More specifically, as early as the beginning of the fifth century, the percentage of African amphorae clearly decreased. This drop reflected the increase of Spanish containers (Dressel 23, Almagro 51a-b) in the western part of Narbonensis, which came under Visigothic rule at this time, as was the case for most of the Iberian Peninsula. However, this drop in the trade of African amphorae mainly mirrored the arrival of numerous and geographically diverse amphorae from the eastern Mediterranean. Throughout the fourth century, the commercial attractiveness of Constantinople had promoted the emergence of new productive regions, which were scarcely active until then, but were henceforth distinguished by their “export-oriented” production. These developments followed a proliferation of production centers in continental Greece, some of the Aegean islands (Samos, Chios, Thasos), Crete, Cyprus, the western and southern edges of Asia Minor, the southern coastline of the Black Sea, the Levant, and Egypt (Pieri 2012). In southern Gaul, the impressive quantities of eastern Mediterranean ceramic imports arriving are reflected in their very high percentages in statistics for ceramic finds during a large part of the fifth century: they represent up to an average of 30-45% of the amphorae recorded in the stratigraphies of Narbonne, Arles, and Marseille (Pieri 2005). Elsewhere in the western Mediterranean, like Rome, Tarragona, and Carthage, imports from

the eastern Mediterranean seem to follow the same trend in similar proportions (Reynolds 2010).

During the fifth century, the distribution of eastern Mediterranean amphorae in Gaul was irregular. They were very diversified in Narbonensis, with a multiplicity of types (including LRA 1A, 2A, 3, 4A, *bag-shaped* 1-2, Agora M273, Agora M334), while the morphological panorama was more limited in northern Gaul, with the nearly exclusive presence of type LRA 1 from Cilicia and LRA 4 from Gaza-Ashkelon (Le Bomin, forthcoming). Eastern wine, which seems to have been the main foodstuff transported in these amphorae, was well known and celebrated by numerous fifth-century authors, including some as famous as Sidonius Apollinaris (*Carmina*, 17.15) and Venantius Fortunatus (*De Vita S. Martini* 2). Such wine generally was of good quality and very expensive. Among the most appreciated vintages was Palestinian white wine produced in the Gaza region, which was reputed for its gustatory qualities as well as its medicinal properties and vaunted by the Greek physician Oribasius (*Collectionum Medicarum Reliquiae, libri IX-XVI*), the North African physician Cassius Felix (*De medicina* LXII), and Byzantine physician Aetius of Amida (*Libri medicinales V-VIII*).

It is true that if we take into account the differing capacities of amphorae, our calculations allow for a more equilibrated ratio of eastern Mediterranean and African products. Nevertheless, even if the quantity of foodstuff transported by small eastern Mediterranean amphorae and gigantic African cylindrical containers was more or less the same in mid-fifth-century Marseille (Bonifay 2004), the nature of the African imports was probably more diversified: possibly fish sauces (type Keay 35B), possibly olive oil (type Keay 35A), and pickled olives (type Keay 25 and *spatheia*), as shown by the cargo of the fifth century Dramont E shipwreck (Santamaria 1995). Finally, throughout the fifth century, Italian wine remained well attested, particularly in Marseille, with high percentages of Keay 52 amphorae

from Calabria.

## **DECLINING IMPORTS OF AFRICAN RED SLIP WARE TABLEWARE IN THE FIFTH CENTURY**

Ceramic surveys have demonstrated generally that from the start of the fifth century, the distribution of ARS tableware, which reflected ongoing demand from the end of the first century CE due its high quality, decreased everywhere in the Mediterranean (in the West: Fentress *et al.* 2004). This drop was particularly noticeable in Marseille in the middle and the second half of the fifth century. In addition, it is important to observe that there was a change in the sources for this supply, namely the products from the region of Carthage (ARS ware D1 from the El Mahrine area) were progressively replaced on the markets in the south of Gaul by those of equivalent quality coming from central Byzacena (ARS ware C5) and northern Hammamet gulf (Sidi Khalifa workshop) in eastern Tunisia. In addition, finds of these tableware imports were not regularly distributed over the territory. Well attested in major towns, in some large rural estates (La Gayolle and Eyguières, near Aix-en-Provence), and even in some hill-top settlements (Saint-Blaise, between Marseille and Arles, and Constantine, near Aix-en-Provence), they disappeared almost completely from certain regions, for instance in eastern Languedoc (Bonifay and Raynaud 2007).

The decline of evidence of African Red Slip Ware imports, which may be explained by a change in the general organization of trade in the western Mediterranean, was accompanied by a process of “import substitution” or “replacement”, which found its most evident expression in the development of the local tableware known as “*Dérivées-des-Sigillées Paléochrétiennes*” (literally, early Christian derivatives of early Roman relief ceramics), first in Languedoc at the very end of the fourth century, and then in Marseille in



the first half of the fifth century. Another more marginal phenomenon was the sudden appearance on the markets in the south of Gaul of tableware from the eastern Mediterranean, including most prominently “Late Roman C ware” from the region of Phocaea in western Anatolia, and “Late Roman D ware” from Cyprus or southern Anatolia.

### **OTHER EVIDENCE OF MEDITERRANEAN TRADE IN GAUL IN THE FIFTH CENTURY: GLASS AND COINS**

As early as the second quarter of the fifth century, alongside a few imports of finished glass vessels from Egypt and Asia Minor, most of the glass commonly found in southern Gaul is characterized by its olive-green or yellow-brown coloration. These glass artifacts were produced from a new raw material coming into the region, about which the nature of the transport is completely unknown, which was shaped locally into previously existing forms like cut-rim goblets and cups. Chemical analyses of the glass suggest that ingots of this material were imported from Egypt, and then manufactured in secondary workshops of southern, and in some cases, northern Gaul (see also Pion, et al., this volume). In this period, there were not large distinctions between the glass of the southern and the northern regions of Gaul, and this custom prevailed until the period between the 480s and 530s, when the production and distribution of glasses with opaque white trails prevailed in both regions (D. Foy in Bonifay and Raynaud 2007).

Along with the ceramic and glass evidence, the analysis of numismatics for the purpose of the history of trade continues to be a difficult issue (see Strothmann, this volume), but a stratigraphical survey of about hundred coins found in the excavations of Marseille harbor shows that two monetary practices were common in this city, as well as in Africa, during the fifth century. First, old minted coins were systematically reused, provided that their

size corresponded to that of contemporary coins. Second, a good portion of the coins used in the fifth century were molded on top of contemporary coins that had been struck, for example, under Valentinian III. They were then used in this fashion until the end of the century. The sustained use or reuse of older coins probably resulted from the increasing rarity of official mints (Brenot in Bonifay, Carre and Rigoir 1998).

With respect to Mediterranean trade, extant texts are virtually silent in this period, with the exception of some of the letters of Sidonius Apollinaris. The Gallo-Roman aristocrat indicated in his correspondence that traders came to Marseille for business purposes, and in order to make a profit (*Lib. VII, Epist. VII*), an observation that corroborates the ceramic evidence.

## **THE EARLY SIXTH-CENTURY REVIVAL OF AFRICAN IMPORTS AND THE DIVERSIFICATION OF EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN IMPORTS**

Before either the Byzantine reconquest of Africa or the Frankish annexation of Provence, the import of ceramics from North Africa throughout southern Gaul recovered. This revival may be seen in the arrival of new generations of amphorae (types Keay 55 and 62), whose percentages balance with imports from the eastern Mediterranean, roughly 30% for each at the start of the sixth century, whereas the remaining 40% are of Italian or unknown origin (Pieri 2005). These amphorae, well attested both in ports (Marseille and Toulon) and inland cities (Nîmes), are also present in finds at some rural sites (Eyguières and Camargue), and even in hill-top settlements (Saint-Blaise and Constantine) (Pieri 2005; Bonifay and Raynaud 2007). They are also noted in western Gaul, for example in Bordeaux and in the *villa* of Séviac (Gers) (Amiel and Berthault 1996). The content of these amphorae still is debated, but they may have contained oil, fish sauces, or wine.

At the same sites, the proportion of African Red Slip Ware rose again in the sixth century. This tableware is particularly well attested in some hill-top settlements which were then abandoned in the 530s. It made up, for example, more than half of the fine ware documented at Sainte-Propice, near Aix-en-Provence (Bonifay and Raynaud 2007). The origin of these imports shifted once again from central Byzacena and the northern Hammamet gulf to the Carthage region (Oudhna and 'X' workshops). Similar products were not completely absent from northern contexts, as may be seen in the case of the Oudhna cup Hayes 97 of Godorf, south of Cologne (Hayes 1972, p. 150), which provides evidence of the revival of African imports.

As far as eastern Mediterranean amphorae are concerned, it seems that the sources of supply multiplied in the sixth century from what was observed previously: products from continental Greece (type LRA 2) and Syria-Palestine (*bag-shaped* 3 type from Caesarea and Jerusalem; for more details on the typology, see Pieri 2005) complemented the types already attested from Asia Minor and Gaza. The early sixth century was characterized by quite a large territorial distribution of these amphorae not only in Mediterranean regions, but also in western Gaul, with examples in major cities (Toulouse, Bordeaux, and Poitiers), and to a lesser extent in small towns and rural areas of the same regions (Amiel and Berthault 1996; F. Berthault in Bonifay and Raynaud 2007). This period was also characterized by the heightened distribution of eastern Mediterranean tableware ('Late Roman C ware' from Phocaea) and cooking ware, including cooking pots and frying pans of Aegean origin, which testifies to the movement of substantial numbers of both goods and people.

## **INTERPRETATIONS AND QUESTIONS REGARDING THE PERIOD CIRCA 400 TO 536**

Review of the ceramic documentation suggests that changes in Mediterranean trade did not follow but preceded the slow territorial dismantling of the Roman empire over the course of the fifth century. Southern Gaul, even before being divided among the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, and Burgundians, did not escape this economic shakeup. How can we explain this modification in the quantity and origin of goods arriving in late Roman Gaul? One of the possible central causes was that Rome ceased to be the oversized and dominant port of redistribution in the western Mediterranean. Indeed, there was likely a global drop in demand from inhabitants of the city, which may possibly be explained by a progressive decline in population from the 410s, and then by collapse of the *annona* system circa 455. Second, this change was probably also boosted by the new “liberal” economic policy of the eastern Roman empire under the initiative of Theodosius, from the 390s onward. These important developments, and no doubt other complex microeconomic factors, may have caused a complete reorganization of Mediterranean trade networks. These changes had an impact on supply sources at the Mediterranean level leading to a sudden upsurge in the number of eastern Mediterranean imports, the reorganization of production within Roman provinces (e.g., products from central Byzacena replacing those from Carthage), and the rise of a multitude of direct commercial shipping routes that replaced the complex network of the return cargoes from Rome.

Moreover, the penetration of Mediterranean imports into the markets of central and northern Gaul – as far as the ceramic evidence is concerned – appears to have been less frequent and more haphazard than in the past. It is plausible that insecurity affected inland roads, thus explaining these difficulties. For instance, the revival of the Atlantic shipping route may reflect the decision of traders to bypass possible obstacles blocking traditional terrestrial and fluvial routes in the second half of the fifth and the first third of the sixth century. This situation might explain the spectacular development of the port of Vigo, in

southwestern Galicia, a possible transshipment or intermediate port on the way to the British Isles and their tin and lead mines (Fernández 2014).

Unfortunately, however, the present state of ceramic typologies makes it difficult to incorporate these observations into a precise chronological portrait. For instance, the merchant ship that sank in the 430s at Cap du Dramont near Saint-Raphaël, in what is now the French Riviera (Santamaria 1995), held a cargo of ARS plates and at least six different amphora types. All of these originated from the Nabeul region in northeastern Tunisia, and can be considered either “Late Roman” or “Vandal” depending upon whether they date to before or after 439, a level of precision that is obviously impossible to reach via the ceramic evidence. Similarly, the ship that sank in the 530s in the bay of La Palud near the island of Port-Cros (one of the Hyères islands in the Var) (Long and Volpe 1998), while transporting a mixed cargo of African amphorae and eastern Mediterranean amphorae, may be interpreted as either “Late Vandal” or “Byzantine” depending upon it sailed before or after 533. For the latter, if the final destination of the shipment was Marseille, we do not know whether this city was still ruled by the Ostrogoths, or was controlled already by the Franks since it is unclear whether it sank before or after 536. In the same way, it is difficult to assign a series of prestigious large ARS plates Hayes 89B/90 found in Augst (pers. comm. S. Fünfschilling), Orléans (pers. comm. P. Dupont), and Ponthévrard (Barat, Séguier and Van Ossel 2011, fig. 4.2-3) to either period one (fifth and early sixth century) or period two (mid sixth to mid seventh century).

## **PERIOD 2: THE FRANKISH KINGDOM AND THE MEDITERRANEAN 536 TO CIRCA 650**

With the annexation of Provence in 536, the Merovingian kingdom reached its maximum size and gained access to the Mediterranean Sea for the first time. Limited to a narrow corridor

between Rhone and Alps, this coastal strip had its main harbor at Marseille, which, to all intents and purposes, became the kingdom's gateway to Mediterranean trade.

## **MARSEILLE**

Simon Loseby has described the city of Marseille as a late antique success story (1992), a characterization that sums up the historical triumph of the city over its former rival Arles during the course of the fifth century. The latter was, from the end of the first century BCE, the main maritime and fluvial port of Roman Gaul. Marseille's wealth in the second half of the fifth century made possible the construction of a group of impressive episcopal buildings, including one of the largest baptisteries of the Roman world (larger than even that of Milan, an imperial capital). In the absence of the demographic and architectural contraction that affected so many other urban centers in Gaul in this period, Marseille also saw the erection of a new defensive wall that supplemented the older Hellenistic one, which was still standing at this time. Unlike Arles, moreover, Marseille did not suffer of repeated sieges, and became an urban refuge for a number of contemporary scholars like Paulinus of Pella and Salvian, whose presence raised the intellectual standing of the city in the fifth century. A last, but certainly not least important, difference with Arles may be found in the ceramic evidence. While contexts post-dating the mid-fifth century are rare in Arles, Marseille's archaeological record attests to massive arrivals of Mediterranean amphorae and table- and cooking wares throughout the fifth and the early sixth century. At this date, Marseille was undoubtedly the main Mediterranean port of Gaul, and remained so under Merovingian rule.

While it is difficult or impossible to distinguish between the imports made before and after the Frankish annexation of Provence, the Merovingian kingdom's continued engagement in Mediterranean trade in the late sixth century and the first third of the seventh century is demonstrated by the large number of archaeological contexts found in both Marseille and a

few other regional semi-urban and rural areas (such as the hill-top agglomeration of Saint-Blaise). During this period, more substantial shipments of ARS wares arrived in Marseille than had been the case previously. These ceramics displayed a new panorama of forms (Hayes 91D, 105, 106, 107, 109A), and diversified origins, coming from the region of Carthage as well as Byzacena. The percentage of African amphorae (types Keay 62E, 61C, Bonifay 47, mainly from coastal Byzacena) equaled or even surpassed that of Eastern Mediterranean containers (LRA 1B from Cyprus, LRA 2B from Argolid, LRA 4B from Gaza/Ashkelon, bag-shaped amphorae from Syria-Palestine, and LRA 7 from Egypt). African lamps and eastern Mediterranean cooking wares were also present, the latter even more numerous than in the past. The supply of Byzantine African and eastern Mediterranean goods in Frankish southern Gaul during the years 575-625 was comparable to that found in contemporary Byzantine towns and strongholds in the Western Mediterranean like Cartagena, Naples, Sant'Antonino di Perti, and Koper (Reynolds 2010).

When taking possession of Marseille, the Franks maintained the active minting of silver and copper coinage that had been initiated by the Ostrogoths at the beginning of the sixth century; this low-value coinage was probably necessitated by the growth of small-scale retail trade. Moreover, between circa 575 and 670, Marseille seems to have been one of the only cities in Merovingian Gaul to strike gold coins, first in the name of the eastern Roman emperor, and subsequently in the name of the Frankish kings. These high-value coins were no doubt intended for major transactions (Loseby 1992).

Finally, the glass of the mid-sixth to mid-seventh century, probably blown in numerous regional workshops including Marseille, is characterized almost exclusively by a single form, the stemmed goblet (Isings 111; for more details on glass typology, see Foy in Bonifay and Raynaud 2007). In this case, even if the end-products were locally manufactured, the raw material was still imported from Egypt or Syria-Palestine. Moreover, the morphology

of these vessels was common to all of the Mediterranean regions (Foy in Bonifay and Raynaud 2007).

The archaeological evidence for this period corresponds with the textual data, which led Henri Pirenne to consider Marseille the Mediterranean gateway of Merovingian Gaul (Pirenne 1939). Gregory of Tours clearly shows the critical importance of this port for the Franks. The fratricidal struggles of succession that pitted the Merovingian princes against one another for possession of the harbor, demonstrate “the jealous care with which they watched over this gateway to the East” (Baratier 1969). Gregory’s *Histories* also testify to imports that are invisible to archaeology, including spices, aromatics, skins and leather, papyrus, and slaves for which Marseille was one of the principal markets (*Hist. Franc.* V, 5).

In some instances, however, the historical and archaeological sources contradict one another. According to Gregory, in 591, a ship arrived in Marseille from Spain with its usual cargo; despite this important historical witness, Spanish imports to Marseille are not indicated by contemporary ceramic evidence. The same text (*Hist. Franc.*, IX, 22) also tells us that the plague was introduced at this time into the city, while contemporary archaeological evidence suggests to the contrary that habitation and population experience growth at roughly this same date.

## **MEDITERRANEAN GOODS IN NORTHERN GAUL**

In northern Gaul, available archaeological data, mostly from cities and monasteries, provide a few examples of eastern Mediterranean amphorae in the sixth century (LRA 1 and LRA 4). The quantity of these goods is always very small in contrast to cities like Lyons and especially in Bordeaux, where the supply was larger and more diversified. These finds include a couple of eastern amphora types (LRA 2 and bag-shaped), some African types (Keay 61), and an



ARS assemblage dated to the late sixth century or early seventh century. This distribution is very similar to that found in Marseille.

It appears that the distribution of Mediterranean goods preferably followed the course of the rivers (including the northern Loire and Seine), given the fact that land routes were not always practical and could be taxed heavily. In the case of Bordeaux, we do not know exactly how Eastern and African goods reached the city (that is, whether by the Atlantic route or through the “Gallic isthmus”), but some differences with patterns seen in the Gallician port of Vigo could lead us to favor the second hypothesis.

The second half of the sixth century is the moment when early medieval texts mention Eastern wine the most frequently. Authors like Corripus (*In Laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*, III, 87-89), Gregory of Tours (*De gloria confessorum*, LXIV, LXV), Venantius Fortunatus (*Vita Sancti Martini*, 2), and others make reference to its presence in Gaul. The use of this wine during the sixth century is attested as having been consumed by elites and was used in liturgical settings by high-ranking ecclesiastics. Thus, it seems that the same foodstuff was only the perquisite of elites in northern Gaul, while it was affordable for many more people in southern Gaul, in accordance with the customs inherited from the Roman past.

Sixth-century trade appears to have been largely in private hands. The involvement of the church was hardly noticeable in Gaul, despite the fact that bishops played an active role in the economic management of the territories and the strong likelihood that some portion of the imported Mediterranean foodstuffs were produced on ecclesiastical estates, whether in the eastern Mediterranean or in Africa. By contrast, the texts made numerous references to private traders, especially of eastern European origin, including Syrians and Jews, who were described as specialists in business (see Drews, this volume). They appear to have lived sometimes in “colonies” installed inside major commercial cities, and had their own communal activities (for more details, see Pieri 2005).

## THE ROLE OF REGIONS OF PRODUCTION BETWEEN 536 AND 650

The period 490-560 is considered the “golden age” of the proto-Byzantine economy (Pieri 2012). In the eastern Mediterranean, from the late fifth century, major economic reforms boosted trade and increased significantly the opulence of the empire. Anastasius introduced two fundamental reforms: the abolition of the *chrysargyron* (a tax impacting those who earned their incomes from sale and trade), and the introduction of a new copper coin, the *nummus*, which was favorable to trade (on Merovingian coinage, see Strothmann, this volume). Even after this, during the reign of Justinian, the economy was still in full expansion despite the fact that the empire had to face a series of challenges including earthquakes, plagues, and a war with Sassanid Persia. Some Eastern cities like Constantinople, Antioch, and Alexandria, the population of which reached or exceeded 300,000 inhabitants, supported expanded trade in luxury goods and facilitated the interregional and regional exchange of crucial foodstuffs. Rural areas likewise experienced significant demographic increases, and in certain places the free peasants succeeded in accumulating surpluses as a consequence of adapting their production to the demand of urban markets.

By contrast, interpretations of the situation in Byzantine Africa is less clear. Some scholars have interpreted the period from 536 onward as a time of stagnation, or even of downturn, due in particular to the oppressive taxation of the production (on this question see Wickham 2005: 724). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Arab conquerors, as recorded by the chroniclers, found an incredibly rich land endowed with prosperous olive groves and grain fields. In the course of their early raids in the 640s, they profited from their pillage of large quantities of foodstuffs and gold (Mrabet 1995).

Marseille, too, made important contributions to the Mediterranean economy which was closely linked not just to trade but also to diplomatic and pilgrimage traffic, all of which

were closely linked. For one, the Merovingian kings conducted foreign policy from this port, and it was the point of departure of most of their Mediterranean embassies. In addition, the harbor was the point of departure of numerous pilgrims, who made use of regular shipping routes. In turn, pilgrims played a significant role in the promotion of the Palestinian wines from the Holy Land (especially Gaza-Ashkelon) in Gaul. The archaeological evidence of pilgrimage is weak, but it can be perceived in glass medals, and ceramic eulogy *ampullae* bearing the image of saints.

Yet, if access to the Mediterranean afforded by possession of the port of Marseille was such an advantage for the Merovingian kingdom(s), why do we not see more evidence of Mediterranean ceramic imports in northern Gaul? The fact that ARS tableware was not diffused north of Provence from the mid-sixth century to the mid-seventh century was nothing new: the lack of distribution of Mediterranean goods in the north differed little from the situation during the Roman empire. More significant, perhaps, was the low level of distribution of stemmed glass goblets in the north of Gaul. It perhaps signaled the existence of some cultural divisions between north and south, and simultaneously confirmed the complete integration of the south in the Mediterranean world.

However, it is important to bear in mind that many of the more profitable exchanges that transpired in early medieval Gaul did not leave any archaeological traces. For instance, trade in luxury goods - such as spices - attested in the written record for northern Gaul and production places is hard to identify through material remains. Nevertheless, one may surmise that some portion of Mediterranean foodstuffs, when arriving in Marseille, could have been transferred into perishable containers such as barrels. Although barrels were more easily transportable on rivers and roads, they only exceptionally leave traces in the archaeological record. In this scenario, it is possible to imagine that only elites purchased Mediterranean products in their original containers.

### **PERIOD 3: DID MEDITERRANEAN TRADE IN THE FRANKISH KINGDOM END CIRCA 650-C. 750?**

The most dramatic improvements in our understanding of late antique ceramics concern the late seventh century. Any hesitation that scholars once felt about dating western Mediterranean archaeological contexts containing ARS, African, and eastern Mediterranean amphorae to the very end of the seventh century, disappeared with the discovery of the spectacular deposit at the Crypta Balbi in Rome, which the stratigraphy and coinage dated to the 690s (Saguì 1998). Some contexts in southern Gaul (see below) that have recently been surveyed have proved to be of very similar composition. By contrast, Mediterranean ceramic evidence in northern Gaul during this period remains as invisible as ever.

In southern Gaul, four examples are offered here to highlight various facets of the late Merovingian economy. The first example comes from Marseille. Our knowledge of ceramic presence in Marseille has significantly increased as a consequence of the excavations conducted during the 1990s at the Place Jules-Verne, the Place Villeneuve-Bargemon, and the music-hall Alcazar (Bien 2007). Dating of a series of contexts at these three urban sites was made possible by assessment of the stratigraphy and coin finds (*folles* of Constantine IV): they pointed to the second half of the seventh century. The other chronological markers consist in the latest forms of the ARS tableware (Hayes 80B/99, 105B, 108, 109B), associated with the latest types of African amphorae (Keay 8A, 50, 61A), and some rarer Eastern late types (LRA 1C, 4C). Contacts with Egypt still are attested by the discovery of some bag-shaped amphorae from the Mariout area, while the link with Constantinople, not evidenced until now in the ceramic record, is made clear by a series of cooking wares of type Saraçhane 3. The latest assemblages, with similar imports (including some African and perhaps Italian globular

amphorae) seem to be dated to the first third of the eighth century, according to the chronology of certain local potteries (Bien 2007).

The second example comes from Arles where excavations in the episcopal group of structures at Saint-Cesaire have recently revealed a context that appears very similar to the ones of Marseille, so often seen as exceptional. Very late, and partially unclassified, ARS tableware is present (variants of Hayes 105), along with a large quantity of African amphorae (Keay 50, 61A and 8A), and some unidentified containers. The chronology of this context can be pushed well into the first third of the eighth century, following  $^{14}\text{C}$  (Carbon 14) analysis and their association with numerous local grey wares characteristic of the eighth century regional patterns (Mukai *et al.*, forthcoming).

Our third example is the shipwreck “Saint-Gervais 2” at Fos-sur-Mer (Bouches-du-Rhône), which provided many artifacts, the majority of which were African in origin. These include the same African amphorae type Keay 8A, a *spatheion* 3B, some sherds of ARS forms Hayes 108 and 109B, and an ARS lamp. However, the ship’s main cargo was grain, as attested by the remains trapped in a gangue of pitch that spilled over when the vessel sank (Jézégou 1998). Besides the irony that this is almost the sole grain cargo that has been verified in the Mediterranean despite being of such a late date, in contrast to the historical evidence for robust trade in grain during the Roman period, the question must be raised as to the origin of the ship. Was it a coastal vessel supporting regional trade, or an off-shore vessel involved in some direct transaction between North Africa and Gaul? However, the most important question is not the origin of the ship, but the origin of the wheat. Even if the dominant hypothesis of “cabotage” (transport between two points by a ship of different origin) seems convincing, it is impossible to reject the hypothesis that this grain was imported from overseas, possibly Sicily or North Africa.

Finally, at Mont-Bouquet (Gard), in the eastern Languedoc scrubland, a burnt

stronghold or house has been excavated, the cellar of which was found to hold a large number of amphorae. These included African amphorae of the same type as those found in Marseille, Arles, and Fos, globular amphorae of various origins, and a clay (possibly commercial?) seal with Arabic characters, the latter dating between 650 and 750 (Pellecuer and Pène 1996). Christophe Pellecuer has proposed that this possibly aristocratic house may have burned during the events of the 730s, which brought conflict between Childebrand, Charles Martel's nephew, and the local aristocracies who were perhaps tempted to take the side of the Arabs against the burgeoning power of the Carolingians.

The ceramic evidence documented in recent research thus gives us a glimpse of the possible continuity of Mediterranean imports, even of basic foodstuffs like oil and grain, in southern Gaul as late as the end of the first third of the eighth century. However, it is impossible to gauge the real quantities of these arrivals, since our evidence is still relatively meager. Glass evidence, for instance, seems to back the idea that the level of imports were high. It appears that the practice of recycling broken glass became more frequent from the late seventh century onward, which may indicate a reduction in the import of raw material for glassmaking from overseas (Foy in Bonifay and Raynaud 2007).

Whereas discoveries of Mediterranean amphorae and tableware are rare in northern Gaul for the mid-sixth to the early seventh century, they are completely non-existent, in current research, from the mid-seventh century onward for these regions. This observation is even more surprising given that, at the same time, the distribution of central Gallic "bistre" (yellowish-brown) coarse ware through the Rhône valley to southern Gaul is well attested (Bonifay and Raynaud, 2007). In addition, the glass locally produced throughout Frankish Gaul once again became similar in color (blue) and morphology ("palm cups") (Foy in Bonifay and Raynaud 2007).

However, written texts from this period provide more relevant information. A series of

surviving documents (see Loseby 2000) reveal that two northern monasteries, Saint-Denis and Corbie, were granted annual rents by the Merovingian kings. This income permitted them to purchase Mediterranean commodities useful to the monastic life, including oil for lighting purposes, papyrus, and different kinds of exotic herbs and fruits. Some scholars like Loseby have doubted that these goods were still easily available in the fiscal stockrooms (*cellaria fiscali*) of Marseille or Fos at time that the privileges are supposed to have been written (716 in the case of Corbie). They thus suspect these Merovingian *tractoria* were in fact literary archaisms, or simple statements of intent, or even royal propaganda (Loseby 2000). However, recent discoveries in Marseille and Arles now make clear that these lists of goods may have been realistic for the early eighth century and could have been sourced from Marseille or Fos. However, it is worth bearing in mind that the quantities in question were not so enormous, considering that the 10,000 pounds of oil for Corbie represents the average volume of only forty African amphorae Keay 61 or 8A, if oil in fact was the real content of these amphorae. This figure represented just a tiny part of the normal load of a medium-sized late antique vessel.

## **INTERPRETATIONS AND QUESTIONS REGARDING THE PERIOD 650 TO 750**

From the mid-seventh century onward, existing problems with dating artifacts from the Mediterranean are far from being resolved. Whereas dates for seventh century sites are more easily secured, it is often impossible to identify secure eighth century contexts. It is important to recognize that scholars do not unanimously accept the absolute chronology of ceramic evidence for the first third of the eighth century suggested for some contexts in the south of Gaul. The solution will probably come from advances in research on ceramic production areas since the question of the disappearance of Mediterranean imports in southern Gaul cannot be

separated from the question of the collapse of the traditional production of amphorae and tableware in the main regions of production.

The ceramic evidence of the late seventh century and perhaps of the beginning of the eighth century in southern Gaul raises interesting issues about the effects of the Arab conquest on Mediterranean trade. The contexts of Marseille, Arles, and Mont-Bouquet show that Syro-Palestinian and Egyptian wine continued to arrive after the Battle of Yarmouk (636) and the foundation of Fustat (Cairo, Egypt) in 641. Moreover, African oil, fish-sauces (the *liquamen* of the Corbie charter), possibly wine, and ARS tableware were still imported after the foundation of Kairouan (Tunisia) circa 670, and perhaps even after the fall of Carthage in 698/699. It is remarkable, in particular, that the latest African amphorae of type Keay 8A originate from regions like coastal Byzacena, which was conquered by the Arabs in the 670s. It is quite clear that this political change, similar to earlier ones like the Vandal conquest, hampered but did not break the continuity of trade, even if it is not yet understood how this trade, and the production of the goods entailed, were organized.

Extant charters of the late seventh century and the beginning of the eighth century show that the sophisticated organization of taxes and custom-dues imposed by Merovingian authorities on the cargoes arriving in the Mediterranean ports and transiting through the Rhône corridor. One of the most interesting elements of this very lucrative activity for the Frankish kings was the *cellarium fiscali*, understood as a warehouse in which the goods levied by agents of the king from the cargoes arriving from overseas were stored in Marseille and Fos. Probably this system already existed in an earlier period, but it is only described in detail, including its northerly manifestation, when it was close to its end.

## CONCLUSION

Ceramic evidence, with the added witness of contemporary texts, confirms the



continuity of trade between Merovingian Gaul and the Mediterranean until at least the first half of the eighth century. However, what was at stake on the eve of the “Dark Ages” is not the continuity of trade, but its *intensity* and *directions*, and also *when* or *if* it ended. In fact, reflecting on relations between Merovingian Gaul and the Mediterranean on the basis of the ceramic evidence means reconsidering once more the validity of historian Henri Pirenne’s thesis (1939 [1937]), from an archaeological perspective. There has been much debate on this subject during these last decades. In particular, archaeologists Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse (1983), provided a new “current orthodoxy” (Loseby 1998: 204) by demonstrating that the end of the exchange-networks of antiquity were not due directly to the rapid and unexpected advance of the Arabs onto the southern shores of the Mediterranean. They argued that the latter only gave the “*coup de grâce*” to a system which was in progressive decline from the early fifth century.

In this debate, the case of mainly southern Merovingian Gaul suggests a scenario that is both compatible with and different from the latter hypothesis. On the one hand, it seems clear that great migrations, whether of the Franks, or the Arabs, were not directly responsible for breaking up the unity of the ancient world. On the other hand, the decline of the Roman economy was perhaps not as continuous as was once thought. At the root of this irreversible evolution was probably dysfunction within the imperial economic system by the early fifth century, well before the end of the Roman empire itself. Perhaps this owed to the collapse of its main driver, demand, followed by a phase of stabilization on partially new footing at the beginning of the sixth century. This new organization of trade, characterized in southern Gaul by a change in the direction of flows of cargo and perhaps also growth of these exchanges, became increasingly rigid in the course of the first half of the sixth century. This inflexibility owed to the territorial reconfiguration of the western Mediterranean into three main blocks: the Byzantine empire in Italy, Africa, and southwestern Spain, the Visigothic kingdom in the

remainder of Spain and Languedoc, and the Frankish kingdom(s) in the rest of Gaul. The situation changed again in the course of the first half of the seventh century, with the arrival of the Lombards in northern Italy, the loss of Byzantine territories in Italy and Spain, and general economic downturn in the eastern Mediterranean. From the mid-seventh century onward, ceramic evidence in southern Gaul showed a continuous retraction of imports until their assumed end in the 730s. Only at this moment does a true rupture seem to have occurred. However, the question remains whether this supposed collapse of trade between the Merovingian Gaul and the Mediterranean was “caused by a failure of production and distribution-networks in the Mediterranean [or] by a failure of demand on the Frankish market” (Loseby 2000).

It is likely that Mediterranean trade in this period did not offer the same quantity of production surpluses as in the past. The rarefaction of eastern amphorae in southern Gaul in the late seventh century can probably – at least in part – be related to a drop in wine production both in the regions that passed into Umayyad rule, and the regions that remained under Byzantine control. In Africa, we are ill-informed about the first part of the Islamic period. However, amphorae there, the production of which was almost industrial, and the large-scale manufacture of traditional foodstuffs like oil, *garum* (fish sauce), and wine, that presumably accompanied it, probably ceased to be made in the course of the first half of the eighth century. So, whereas in the earlier instance the failure of production seems to have preceded the rupture of trade, in the later instance in the first half of the eighth century, the failure of production and demand seem to have been contemporary to one another.

By contrast, if we consider that the fire of the house at Mont Bouquet was actually contemporaneous to the disorder that accompanied or preceded Childebrand’s campaigns in the southern Rhône valley, it is legitimate to ask whether the mayors of the palace deliberately sacrificed the openness of their kingdom to the Mediterranean for the sake of security against

the Arab advance and political considerations like the struggle against the aristocracy of Provence. If they did so, it was perhaps because their nascent empire had already forged new exchange-networks, more local and/or more northern ones, in which ancient roads no longer played a considerable role. As a matter of fact, within the framework of the Carolingian economy, the empire favored the riverine outlets of western and northern Gaul, where new types of trading posts were constructed like Nantes, Rouen, Quentovic, and Dorestad, mainly in contact with the British Isles and the Scandinavian and Slavic worlds (see Fleming, Hardt, and Tys essays, this volume), and would remain in contact with the Mediterranean mainly through Russian rivers to the Baltic axis and Alpine passes (McCormick 2001).

When trying to explain the supposed end of Mediterranean trade in Merovingian Gaul, it is difficult to give priority to either a failure of the production of available goods or a drop in demand. We can only observe that the match between supply and demand, which boosted the tremendous development of “Roman” trade, even in its later phase at the start of the sixth century, did not exist anymore. Perhaps it was a sort of divorce by mutual consent.

Nevertheless, the idea of rupture is not unanimously accepted. Did long distance exchange collapse in the 700s (Wickham 2005), or was a certain connectivity maintained (Horden and Purcell 2000)? This question leads to two others: is ceramic evidence actually suited to making us aware of the realities of exchange-networks in the “Dark Ages”? Or, are ceramics only able to teach us which kinds of foodstuffs ceased to be imported (Eastern wine, African oil, and *garum*)? And, are they incapable, as for the previous periods, of offering evidence for a lot of other highly valuable goods such as those on the list of the Corbie charter, or the foodstuffs that were transported in perishable containers like wine in barrels? As a matter of fact, textual references to sea crossings starting from, or arriving to Marseille, were not rare during the second half of the eighth century and the main part of the ninth century (Ganshof 1938). For the time being, we still have to wait for new archaeological approaches

suitable to checking these alternative thesis issues, as was the case in 1983, when Hodges and Whitehouse revisited Pirenne's Thesis (on this question, see Effros forthcoming).

## CAPTIONS

Fig. 1. Map of Frankish Gaul in the 560s and principal sites mentioned in the text.

Fig. 2. Map of the Mediterranean in the 560s and principal sites mentioned in the text.

Fig. 3. Principal amphora types mentioned in the text.

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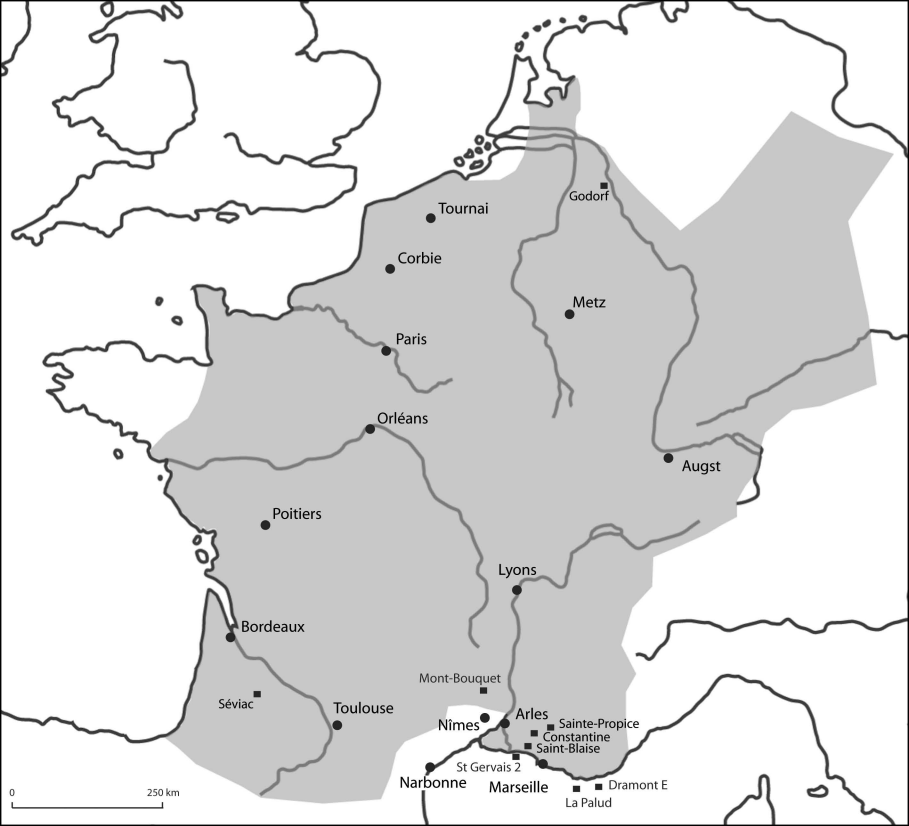
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<sup>3</sup> African Red Slip Ware (ARS) is one of the most widely distributed forms of tableware throughout antiquity. It is found from Scotland in the north to Egypt in the south, and from Portugal in the west to Crimea in the east. Produced in the Roman provinces of Africa, mainly in the part of *Africa proconsularis* that today form part of Tunisia, ARS was made from the end of the first century CE to the end of the seventh century. This tableware is characterized by a smooth light red to orange slip and a very standardized panorama of forms (bowls, dishes, jugs, etc.), bearing various types of decoration: rouletted, molded, appliquéd, stamped, and so on.



Tournai

Godorf

Corbie

Metz

Paris

Orléans

August

Poitiers

Lyons

Bordeaux

Mont-Bouquet

Séviac

Toulouse

Nîmes

Arles

Sainte-Propice

Constantine

Saint-Blaise

St Gervais 2

Narbonne

Marseille

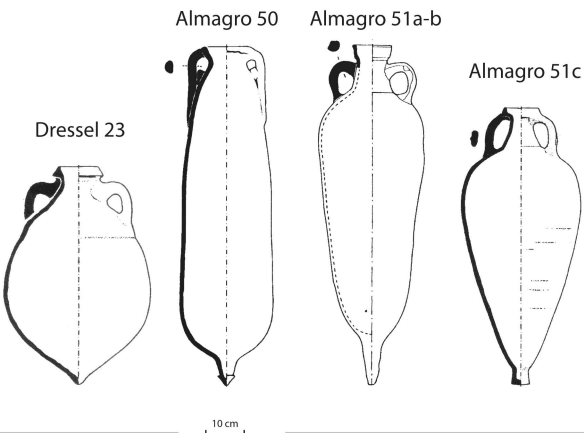
Dramont E

La Palud

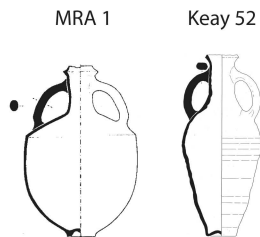
0 250 km



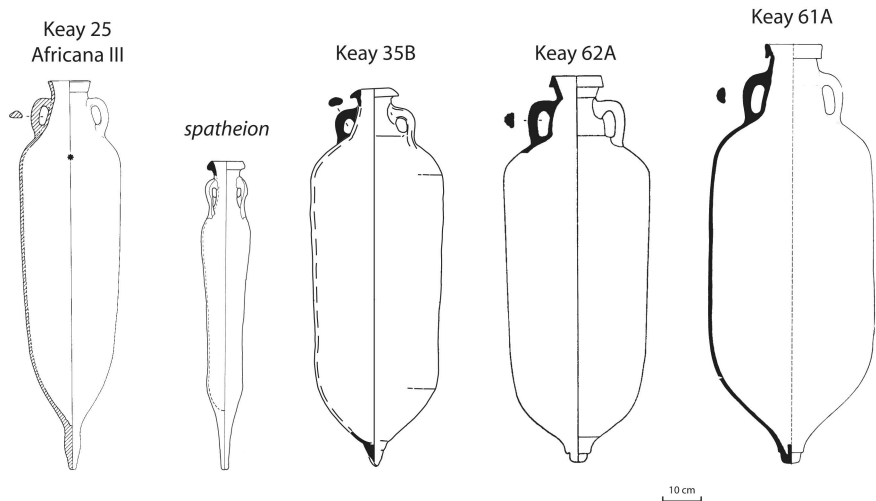
*Spanish*



*Italian*



*African*



*Eastern Mediterranean*

