

THEY WERE TAKEN FOR JUGS

Jean-Pierre Brun – Our story begins in the eastern desert of Egypt, that is to say in the area located between the Nile valley and the Red Sea, and therefore between the Roman Empire and India. This desert is traversed by caravan routes, which are guarded by fortresses of the Roman army, which a team of French researchers from the CNRS and the French Institute in Cairo has been excavating for twenty years. In the fort of Didymoi, we unearthed large quantities of ceramics, many wine amphoras, which the soldiers obviously drank, and among this large quantity of ceramics there was a discreet quantity of small containers with a flat base and two handles which I believe to be locally made jugs. These jugs were mainly dated between the Flavian period, i.e. between the 80s AD and the beginning of the Antonine period, i.e. 110-120 AD.

When I found these jugs, therefore, I classified them among the Egyptian ceramics, until the day when we had the opportunity to visit the museum of Lipari, organized by Madeleine Cavalier and Luigi Bernabò Brea and I stopped in front of the material from a wreck containing both wine amphoras produced in Campania and a fairly notable quantity of my little jugs with two handles, which adorned the first row. I realized that this wreck dated from the Flavian period, so I thought that if these amphorets were associated with large amphorae from Campania, there was still a good chance that they contained wine from Campania too. Thus, since we had some in the Flavian period, there must have been some in Pompeii. And so I went to look in the store rooms of Pompeii if there were any, and in fact I found large quantities of them but they had gone unnoticed until then because we believed that they were jugs, not so worthy of interest.

But since this was about containers of wine, the case took on another dimension and I was led to investigate where this wine came from. It could not have come from the region of Vesuvius, because the fabric of these amphorets was not Vesuvian, but more probably from the interior of Campania and I gradually approached the area of Alifae, which is in the middle valley of the Volturno, where we can probably confirm the production area of both these amphorets and the wine that went into them. This led us to two conclusions, on the one hand we may have the name of these containers thanks to the ostraca of the Nicanor firm which was a firm of camel drivers who, under Nero, crossed the desert, and in these ostraca we have slips which indicate to us that the company of camel drivers transported amphorae known as *italica*, and which are large amphorae, and amphorets probably called *aminea*, which must therefore have been our small containers. And on the other hand it allowed us to reinterpret a text of Horace's satires where two banqueters empty *alifanae*,

so we thought for a long time that these *alifanae* were glasses, but in reality the banqueters, who are drunkards, empty these amphorets directly into their mouths and therefore down, in a way, bottles of about six litres, which obviously indicates a certain capacity.

The history of these amphorets tells us how research is progressing, since we started from the misconception that they were jugs, mundane, made in Egypt, and we arrive at a container of high quality wine, which was very widely exported from central Campania to Egypt and India on one side, and to Germany and Great Britain on the other.

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