

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 79/89

A LATE ROMAN AMPHORA SHERD FROM
ST ALBANS, HERTFORDSHIRE.

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Summary

A small amphora sherd was examined from late Roman deposits in the centre of Verulamium. Due to the small size of the sherd it is difficult to be certain of the form of the vessel, but it may well be Almagro 54, thought to have been made in Palestine between the fourth century A.D. and the sixth century. This type is fairly scarce in Britain, and it represents the first late, eastern Mediterranean amphora to be found at Verulamium.

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A small ribbed bodysherd from a fairly wide-girthed amphora, in a hard sandy fabric, reddish-brown in colour (between Munsell 5YR 5/4 and 5/6). This sherd probably belongs to one of the late Roman amphora types from the eastern Mediterranean area. It is difficult to be sure of the exact form involved as various types of ribbed amphorae and smaller vessels are relatively common in that region (see for example H.S. Robinson, The Athenian Agora, Vol. V, 1959, Princeton). However, the ribbing on the Verulamium sherd is quite deeply grooved although unevenly performed, with somewhat ragged edges and small bits of clay left in between the grooves. This is a distinctive feature which is sometimes found on Palestinian amphorae. In view of this, perhaps the most likely form that the Verulamium sherd belongs to is the 'cigar-shaped' type Almagro 54, which has a vertical rim rising directly from the shoulder, two small loop handles and a long cylindrical body with ribbing on the shoulder and between the handles (D.P.S. Peacock and D.F. Williams, Amphorae and the Roman Economy, 1986, London, Class 49). Other examples found on British sites come from Wroxeter (information from D.P.S. Peacock), London (P. Marsden, Roman London, 1930, 181) and Butt Road, Colchester.

Almagro 54 is generally thought to have been made around Gaza in Palestine, and to have carried the famous white wine of the region, though contents analysis on this type have suggested that olive-oil and sesame oil may also have been carried (J. Riley, 'The coarse pottery from Benghazi', in J. A. Lloyd (ed.), Sidi Khrebish Excavations, Benghazi (Berenice), Vol. II, Tripoli, 91-497; S. Passi et al, 'An application of high performance liquid chromatography to analysis of lipids in archaeological samples', J. of Lipid Research, 22(1981), 778-784). The date range of Almagro 54 is from the fourth century A.D. to the sixth century (ibid.).