

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 30/90

A DRESSEL 20 TITULUS PICTUS FROM
ALCESTER, WARWICKSHIRE.

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Summary

During excavations at Alcester, Warwickshire, in 1965, most of a globular amphora was found which contained on the outer surface a titulus pictus in black paint and a graffito which had been scratched into the clay before the vessel was fired in the kiln (Alc 65 DII 29a). The inscription and graffito were published the following year (White, 1966; see Note 1). Since this date our knowledge of the typology of the Dressel 20 form and the range of inscriptions associated with it have increased considerably (Martin-Kilcher, 1983; Rodriguez-Almeida, 1986; Funari, in press). It is therefore the purposed of this brief note to re-examine both the inscription and graffito and the actual amphora itself, in the light of our present understanding of these matters. The writers would like to express their gratitude to Alcester Archaeological Unit for kindly providing for study detailed drawing of the amphora, inscriptions and graffito and for making available a small sample for petrological analysis.

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A DRESSEL 20 *TITULUS PICTUS* FROM ALCESTER, WARWICKSHIRE

by

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Introduction

During excavations at Alcester, Warwickshire, in 1965, most of a globular amphora was found which contained on the outer surface a *titulus pictus* in black paint and a graffito which had been scratched into the clay before the vessel was fired in the kiln (Alc 65 DII 29a). The inscription and graffito were published the following year (White, 1966; see Note 1). Since this date our knowledge of the typology of the Dressel 20 form and the range of inscriptions associated with it have increased considerably (Martin-Kilcher, 1983; Rodriguez-Almeida, 1986; Funari, in press). It is therefore the purposed of this brief note to re-examine both the inscription and graffito and the actual amphora itself, in the light of our present understanding of these matters. The writers would like to express their gratitude to Alcester Archaeological Unit for kindly providing for study

detailed drawings of the amphora, inscriptions and graffito and for making available a small sample for petrological analysis.

The Amphora (DW)

The amphora from Alcester is of a type normally referred to today as Dressel 20 (Peacock and Williams, 1986, Class 25). This form of amphora is one that is commonly found on a wide variety of sites in Britain from the pre-Roman Iron Age until the late third century A.D. (Williams and Peacock, 1983). It was made in very large numbers along the banks of the River Guadalquivir and its tributaries between Seville and Cordoba, in the southern Spanish Roman province of Baetica, where many production sites have been recorded (Bonsor, 1931; Ponsich, 1974; 1979). There is no evidence that the Dressel 20 amphora was made in any other region of the Roman world, unlike certain other amphora types which were made in many areas, the Dressel 2-4 shape for example (Peacock and Williams, 1986, Class 10). In Roman times, the region of the River Guadalquivir was famous for its production of good quality olive-oil, as it still is today (Mattingly, 1988). There seems little doubt that the main shipping container for this olive-oil was the Dressel 20 amphora.

The Dressel 20 form shows some typological variation over the 300-odd years of its production, mainly in the

shape of the rim and to a lesser extent that of the handles and the 'globular' shape of the body (Martin-Kilcher, 1983; Funari, in press)). Unfortunately, the Alcester vessel is lacking its rim, but taking into account the short handles, circular in section, and the well-rounded body, a date about the middle to the end of the second century A.D. might be suggested. The fabric of the body and handles is hard, rough and sandy, with dark buff coloured surfaces (Munsell 7.5YR 7/4) and a light brownish-buff core. Thin sectioning and study under the petrological microscope shows a fairly fine-textured matrix containing a scatter of large subangular grains of quartz, quartzite and potash felspar, with lesser amounts of chert, sandstone, quartz-mica-schist and flecks of mica, all set in a anisotropic matrix of fired clay. The fabric associated with Dressel 20 amphorae is a fairly standard one, although given the large number of known production sites scattered over a relatively wide area, some nuances of fabric are to be expected and these can sometimes be recognized in the hand-specimen. This has been confirmed by a small method-testing programme of petrological analysis based on stamped Dressel 20 material, much of which can be fairly confidently allocated to suspected kiln sites strung out along the banks of the River Guadalquivir (Pieksma, 1982).

A comparison of the fabric of the Alcester vessel with

this material shows a close similarity with a group of sherds centred on the region around the villa site at Berro II (Cortijo de), which is situated on the north bank of the River Guadalquivir, about halfway between Seville and Cordoba (*ibid.*; Ponsich, 1979, 91). However, at this stage it is probably best to regard this result as no more than a possible indication of origin rather than anything more. It should be emphasized that the original number of stamped sample sherds analyzed by Pieksma was relatively small, and more work will have to be done before undesigned Dressel 20 sherds can be more confidently allocated to specific kiln sites.

The Inscriptions and graffito (PF)

Dressel 20 amphora normally display a standard scheme of *tituli picti* which refer: (1) to the weight of the vessel in Roman pounds, (2) to the weight of the olive-oil they invariably carried, also in Roman pounds, (3) to a tradesman (in capital letters) and (4) to a control or customs point (in cursive script) which mentions a consular date, plus sometimes other information (Rodriguez-Almedia, 1986, 207-260).

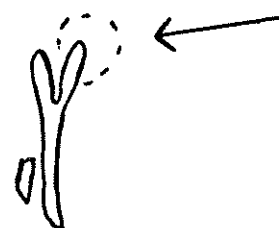
The Graffito (PF)

This was cut into the clay before the vessel was fired,

and was thus accomplished in Baetica. The inscription covers two lines of clearly cut letters and reads *SVRINAE* / *VIRILIS* (Note 2). This possibly refers to a Surina Virilis. The genitive may not indicate the owner or producer of the vessel (*officinator*), as is the normal interpretation (Dressel 1978, 212; Rodriguez-Almedia, 1986, 254). In this case it could simply indicate the owner of the inscription itself, thus giving a reading of the 'graffito of Surina Virilis' (*titulus Surinae Virilis*) (Note 3).

Titulus Pictus (PF)

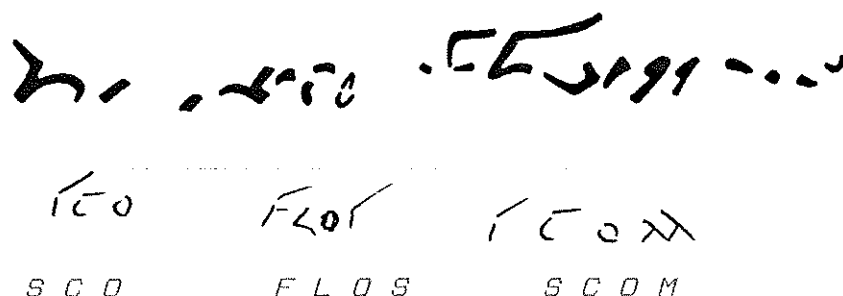
There are two inscriptions, published originally as *CAVS* and *SCO. FLOS SCOM(BRI)* (Wright, 1966). The first, written in capital letters, probably reads *CXVS*. The second letter should not be an *A*, for then it would be difficult to explain the right apex:



It seems more reasonable to suppose that it is an *X* (cf. *CIL* XV 4340; Rodriguez-Almedia, 1979, 921-922, no. 31A). It could thus refer to a number *CXVS(emis)* or *CXVI* or to a number *CXV* followed by *S()*. Such a number, which may possibly have been written in Britain (Hamp, 1975), could refer to a batch of amphorae, or to a sequential

number relating to this particular vessel. It might, for example, refer to the weight of a possible product put inside the vessel once the original contents were removed.

The cursive inscription that runs down vertically from the lower junction of one handle was originally read as *SCO. FLOS. SCOM(BRI)* and translated as 'prime extract of mackerel' (Wright, 1966). However, this appears to be untenable on both paleographical and semantical grounds. Indeed, the proposed shape of the letters is completely unparalleled, as the following examples will show:



The only clearly recognizable letter is *C*, while the identification of the others is somewhat speculative. Last, but not least, although the published photograph is not particularly clear, it does seem that the last visible letter at the right end is probably an *S* or a *T*, adding to the difficulty of paleographically interpreting this inscription.

On semantical grounds the published reading is even less convincing for the following reasons:

- 1). The normal order of these inscriptions seems to be *flos scombri*, not the other way round (cf. CIL IV 2574 to 2578), although we do find some *garum scombri flos* (CIL XV 4687, 4692, 4697), but always preceded by *garum* ("fish sauce").
- 2). The ordinary abbreviation used is *f* for *flos* (CIL XV 4722; CIL IV 2574 *inter alia*; cf. Zevi, 1966).
- 3). The repetition of *sco* is unparalleled.
- 4). The use of stops, as after *sco* and *flos*, is most unusual in these inscriptions.
- 5). Similar inscriptions are normally written with capital letters, not with cursives as we have here (CIL XV 4687-4731, CIL IV 2562-2738).
- 6). As *scomber* is a mackerel, a fish, there would be no reason to refer to "the best kind" (= *flos*) of mackerel, for it was not the fish that was very good, but the fish source or *garum*. The absence of the word *garum*, always quoted both in inscriptions and the literary sources, makes no real sense in this context (Note 4).
- 7). The use of a Dressel 20 amphora to hold fish sauce would be surprising, taking into account that *garum* was usually exported inside amphorae of different forms to Dressel 20, and it would not be usual to transfer it from its original vessel to one already used for a different purpose.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to propose an alternative reading given the fragmentary nature of the inscription.

Notes

1). The original report on the *titulus pictus* and graffito was published by Wright in *JRS*, 1966, p.224. It is quoted in full here to allow a better understanding of the remarks made in this note.

"Globular amphora restored from several fragments found in 1965 at Alcester. (a) A black 'dipinto' in cursive letters 3/4 in. high runs vertically downwards to the left of one handle and reads: *CAVS*. (b) A second black 'dipinto' in cursive letters 1/4 in. high runs down vertically from the lower junction of one handle and reads: *SCO. FLOS SCOM(BRI)*. (c) With the vessel inverted a graffito has been cut before firing near the knob of the base reading: *SVRINAE/VIRILIS*.

Note 59. (a) No interpretation has been found for *CAVS*, recorded at Pompeii, *CIL* IV 5989. In (b) *FLOS SCOMBRI*, 'prime extract of mackerel', is well attested, e.g. *CIL* IV 2576, 5679, 9397-9399; XV 4687. The terminal mark which resembles a large T on the photograph seemed on inspection to be due to chance. (c) For the 'nomen'

SURINUS see CIL V 483, 544. The second name seems to be *VIRILIS* although the writer of it cut III instead of ILI. It is not clear whether the genitive case marks this vessel as the product or the property 'of Surina Virilis'".

2). All the letters are very clear (contra Wright, 1966, quoted above at note 2), as CIL XV 3616 shows beyond dispute.

3). This is an unverifiable supposition, but it is based on the existence of graffiti written on Dressel 20 walls with names in the genitive and which are difficult to interpret (CIL IV 8813, 8893, 8957).

4). Cf. Pliny *Naturalis Historia*, 31, 94: "*garum nunc e scombro pisce laudatatissimus in Carthaginiis spartariae ceteriis; sociorum id appellatur*". Martial, 13, 102: "*Experantis adhuc scombri de sanguine Accipe fastosum, munera cara, garum*".

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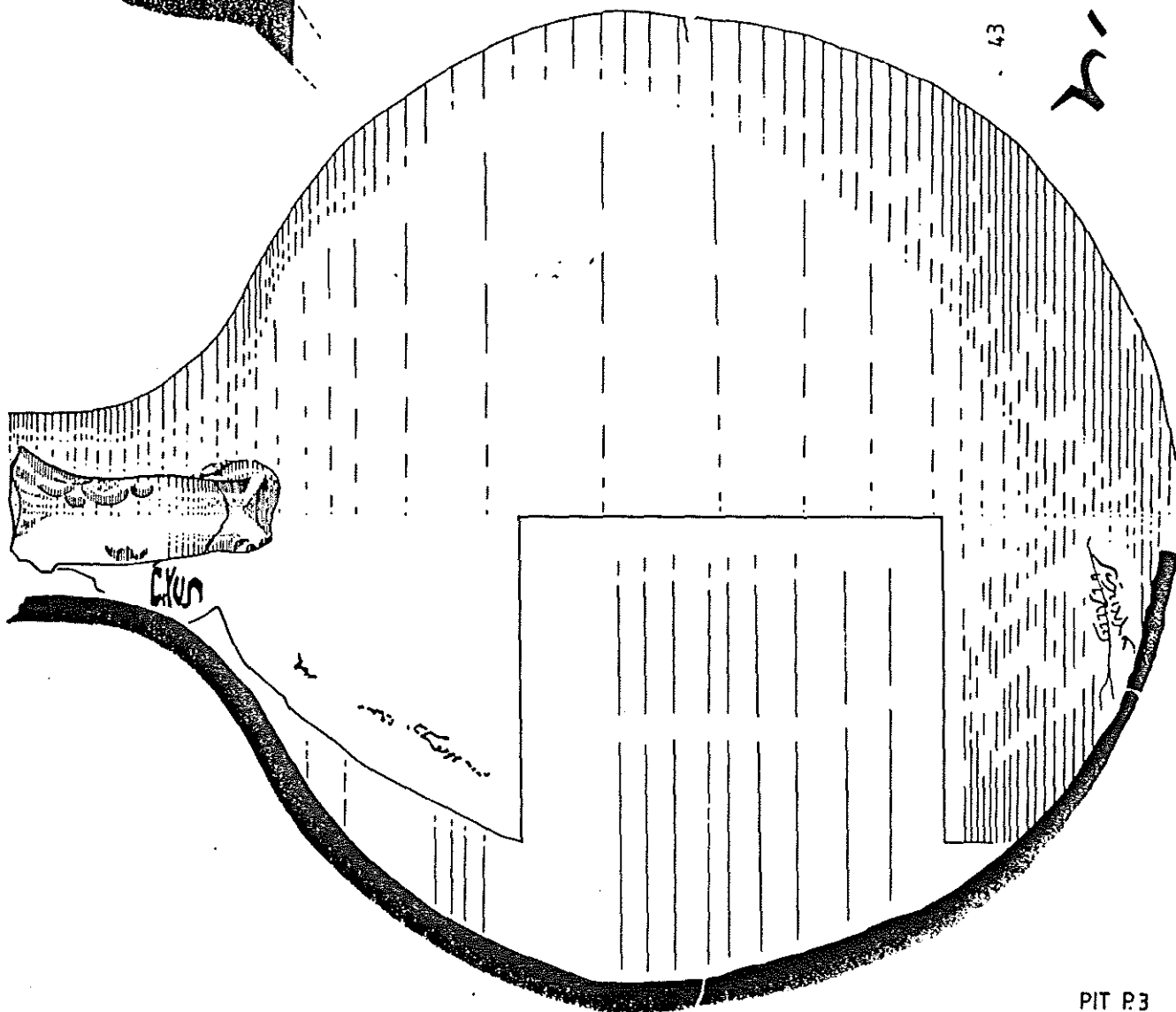
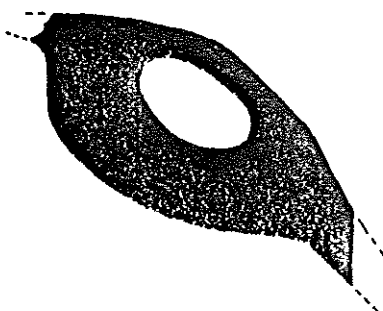
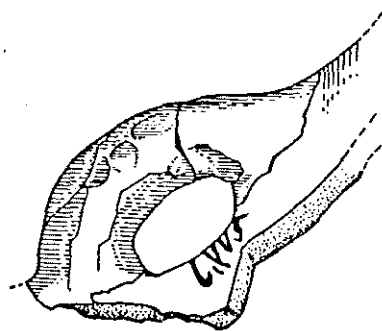
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