

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 84/90

LATE REPUBLICAN ROMAN AMPHORAE FROM
THE AIRPORT CATERING SITE,
STANSTEAD, ESSEX.

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Summary

A small group of amphorae sherds, possibly representing some 6-8 vessels, were recovered from pre-Roman contexts at Stanstead. Included were rims of the late republican Italian wine-amphorae forms Dressel 1A and 1B. It is uncommon for the earlier of the two types, Dressel 1A, to be found north of the Thames. The group as a whole may possibly date before 15 B.C.

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LATE REPUBLICAN ROMAN AMPHORAE FROM THE AIRPORT CATERING
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Introduction

The small group of amphorae sherds recovered from Stanstead, 79 in total, have been classified by fabric and form, and in order to consider the material quantitatively were then weighed and counted. The classification of types is based on Dressel (1899) with additions by Lamboglia (1955).

TABLE I : SHERD TOTALS

Dressel 1A rims	210gms	2
Dressel 1A handle	83gms	1
Dressel 1B rims	422gms	2
Dressel 1B handles	656gms	4
Dressel 1sp bodysherds	5,278gms	65
?Dressel 2-4 bodysherds	275gms	5
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	6,924gms	79sherds

Comments

This is a significant group of amphorae sherds to be found in this country in pre-Roman contexts, including as it does parts of rims, handles and shoulders, as well as plain bodysherds. Four separate rims are present which quite clearly belong to late republican amphorae forms. Two of them come from the earlier Dressel 1A type with triangular-rim, generally dated from about 130 B.C. until around the middle of the first century B.C., and two from the later Dressel 1B form which has a collar-rim, and was made from shortly after the first quarter of the first century B.C. until the last decade of the century (Tchernia, 1986; Sealey, 1985; Peacock and Williams, 1986, Classes 3 and 4). The five parts of handles recovered, all roughly oval-shaped in section, also belong to the Dressel 1 form. The smaller-sized example (724) may well belong to the Dressel 1A variety, while the larger 'chunky' nature of the remaining four pieces of handles suggests that they probably came from the heavier Dressel 1B form (Stockli, 1979). The overwhelming majority of the plain bodysherds, invariably thickish-walled, undoubtedly also derive from the Dressel 1 form, though it is difficult, if not impossible, to say if an individual sherd belongs to the A or B variety, especially as many are relatively small in size.

The Dressel 1 amphora was made in vast numbers in Italy, more especially in Campania, Latium and Etruria, and almost exclusively was used to transport the local wine from these regions. Something of the large scale of

production of this form can be gauged by Tchernia's (1983) estimation that 40,000,000 Italian Dressel 1 amphora may have been exported to Gaul during the second and first centuries B.C. It was once thought that the Dressel 1 form was made solely in Italy, although this does not now appear to have been the case. In recent years there has come to light evidence for the making of Dressel 1A in southern France (Sabir *et al*, 1983) and for Dressel 1B in the Tarraconensis region of north-east Spain (information from Dr. Simon Keay). However, all the available evidence points to a very small production in the latter areas, possibly combined with a fairly local distribution.

All of the Dressel 1 material from Stanstead is almost certainly Italian. The vast majority of the Stanstead sherds are in a reddish fabric throughout, and where a fresh break occurs inclusions of a scoriaceous nature consistent with an origin in the region of the Italian volcanic tract can often be seen under a binocular microscope (x20). In addition, selective thin sectioning and study under the petrological microscope was also carried out. This showed in greater detail the volcanic nature of the fabrics involved, and they compared well with Italian Dressel 1A and 1B vessels which have been sectioned by the writer over a number of years. A further result of this petrological and mostly macroscopic examination of the fabrics involved, was to estimate the number of individual Dressel 1 vessels likely to be present. Including the four separate rims, it seems quite

possible that there are a minimum of between 6-8 vessels here.

Apart from the thickish walled bodysherds attributed above to the Dressel 1 form, there are five considerably thinner-walled plain bodysherds present (one unstratified) which may just possibly belong instead to the later and less heavy Dressel 2-4 amphora. This form with its bead-rim, bifid handles and eastern Mediterranean antecedents, is the direct successor on Italian kiln sites to the Dressel 1B type (Peacock, 1977a). It may have been in production at a slightly earlier date than at the very end of the first century B.C. as was originally thought (Sealey, 1985; Peacock and Williams, 1986, Class 10). Four of these sherds from Stanstead are in similar fabrics to the Dressel 1 material discussed above. The exception is in a distinctive 'black sand' fabric, the result of numerous small dark-coloured grains of augite scattered throughout the clay (725). This particular fabric, easily recognized in the hand-specimen, is fairly regularly encountered when examining Dressel 1, and more especially Dressel 2-4 amphorae from Iron Age and Romano-British sites, albeit in small amounts. It is generally accepted that it originates from the area of Campania around the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum, where the local pottery, bricks and tiles are in a similar fabric (Peacock, 1977b; Peacock and Williams, 87-88).

Dressel 1A and Dressel 1B amphorae are not commonly found together, especially on sites north of the Thames.

v

Indeed, some twenty years ago the geographical division between these two forms north and south of the Thames seemed more clear cut than it does today (Peacock, 1971). Since then, in addition to Stanstead, Dressel 1A has been found north of the Thames at Gatesbury Track near Braughing (Williams and Peacock, 1979) and at Baldock, while finds of Dressel 1B are even commoner in the south of the country and have been found at a number of sites including Hengistbury Head (Williams, 1987), Silchester, Fishbourne (Cunliffe, 1971, fig. 100, no. 159, plus another from more recent excavations), Chichester, Pulborough and more easterly at Canterbury (Arthur, 1986; together with more finds from recent excavations). In essence though, the broad pattern of geographical division between the two forms probably still holds good, especially as it now looks as if there may well have been some chronological overlap in the production of the two Dressel 1 varieties (Peacock, 1984; Williams, 1989).

Due to the normally long length of production for most Roman amphorae forms, they are as a consequence notoriously difficult to date closely. However, there are a number of points to consider for the Stanstead amphorae which may greatly help to narrow the likely date-range for the group as a whole. Firstly, the vast majority, if not all of the Dressel 1 amphorae found north of the Thames should be post-Caesar in date (*ibid.*). Secondly, the Stanstead group is made up of Dressel 1A and 1B vessels, and just possibly Dressel 2-4, all seemingly in Italian fabrics. No other amphora forms are present.

Particularly noticeable is the lack of Spanish amphorae types which are found on British Iron Age sites from about the turn of the millennium (Peacock, 1971; Peacock, 1984; Williams, 1989; Williams and Peacock, 1983). The group of amphorae from the Lexden Tumulus, near Colchester, a late Iron Age burial dated about 15 to 10 B.C., consisted of approximately six Dressel 1B vessels and eleven, perhaps thirteen Dressel 2-4 (Williams, 1986). On that basis, the Stanstead group which contains two examples of the earlier Dressel 1A and may or may not include Dressel 2-4 in small numbers, could well be slightly earlier than that date.

Catalogue

Dressel 1A rims:

501(82gms), 778(128gms).

Dressel 1B rims:

644(192gms), 28(230gms).

Possible Dressel 1A handle:

724(83gms).

Probable Dressel 1B handles:

778(17gms), 163(242gms), 778(139gms), 501(258gms).

Probable Dressel 1sp bodysherds:

685(199gms), 778(142gms), 1008(72gms), 1008(542gms),
 713(376gms), SMF 0013 272 shoulder sherd (233gms),
 487(197gms), 1008(112gms), 763(93gms), 1008(103gms),
 713(129gms), 1025 shoulder sherd (172gms),
 1008(150gms), 1008(676gms), 624(129gms), 523(36gms),
 1008(75gms), 545(8gms), 713(2-38gms), 1008(34gms),
 683(23gms), 1008(117gms), 1008(85gms), 778(79gms),
 1008(3-76gms), 713(32gms), 721(2-30gms), 523(8gms),
 644(3-112gms), 1008gms(8-62gms), 306(4-108gms), 721(14-
 possibly one shoulder sherd-302gms), 847(24gms),
 847(17gms), 722(9gms), 272 shoulder sherd (678gms).

Possible Dressel 2-4 bodysherds:

778 neck sherd (142gms), unstratified (18gms),
 1008(42gms), 644(18gms), 725(55gms).

Undesignated

306 (8gms - not sure if amphora or not), 778 (140gms -
 not amphora), 728 small natural stone. 778 (45gms - not
 sure if amphora or not)

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