

# From the Journal of an Amphora Sleuth

by

Elizabeth Lyding Will

## 2 a.m.,

January 1, 1990. The plane has landed, and I wait for my luggage. From out of nowhere, a smartly uniformed official approaches me with a package. In it is an elegantly bound 1990 desk calendar, its cover padded and gilded. A card reads, "Welcome to India, Destination of the 1990's, and to the Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi." My forty years as a Roman amphora sleuth have taken me to many parts of the world. All over Europe and even in Egypt I have played the self-effacing role appropriate to archaeologists. Now I suddenly find myself called upon, in the middle of the night, to respond to hospitality of a kind seldom encountered in the world's great airports. I look up, searching for words, but the man is gone, as silently as he had come.

Mid-January, 1990. An ordinary work day in the museum at Pondicherry, on the southeast coast of India. I stand by an inlaid, brocade-covered grand piano, on which are arranged amphora fragments found at nearby Arikamedu, an ancient Greco-Roman trading center. Many such centers, mostly unexcavated, are known to lie south of Madras along the coast of the thundering Bay of Bengal. As I measure the fragments and examine their clay (a process essential to accurate identification of type), handsome, dark-skinned Tamil parents watch intently and whisper softly to their children from behind the barrier that keeps them out of the room where I work, a reconstructed French provincial library in the museum. Pondicherry was once the capital of French India and is now the site of the internationally famous ashram of the Mother. The Tamils are used to foreign eccentrics, but they are clearly mystified by me and my work. The same fragments have been on display for some time in cases in the museum, finds from digging carried on in the 1940s, by French archaeologists and by the famed British excavator, Sir Mortimer Wheeler. Those finds from the 1940s, mostly fragments of ancient shipping amphoras, were published in part by Sir Mortimer, but had been largely forgotten until Vimala Begley of the University Museum



Outside the University of Pondicherry (Tamil Nadu), India. Photo by Steven Sidebotham.

in Philadelphia decided to recommence digging at Arikamedu. Funded by the Smithsonian and with the collaboration of her colleague, Steven Sidebotham of the University of Delaware, and K. V. Raman and his team from the University of Madras, Begley is now opening trenches at Arikamedu and trying to clarify the chronology and history of the site. Such Greco-Roman trading centers, established in the wealthy Tamil kingdoms in southern India as early as the first century B.C., and perhaps earlier, were sources of the luxury goods which only the East could provide to Rome and the Mediterranean, the jewels and spices and unguents and transshipped Chinese silks which were in such demand in the West. In return, the Greco-Roman ships took to India quantities of Roman coins and also exotic Mediterranean foodstuffs not avail-

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able there: amphoras full of the best Greek and Italian wines, Dalmatian and Spanish olive oil, even the Spanish fish-sauce, *garum*. Dishes, too, were brought from Italy. Begley's special interest is in the fine Roman pottery dishes revealed by previous excavations at Arikamedu, and also in the later Indian imitations of those dishes. But for me, it is the amphoras that must be studied, here in Pondicherry and (later in the month) in Madras and Delhi. The finds from Arikamedu have been spread about widely, from Paris to Hanoi, but most are still in India. Even as I work, Begley and Sidebotham and the team from Madras are unearthing new amphora finds, study of which must wait until my next visit to India in January, 1992.

Mid-January, 1990. The driver deposits us in front of a building at the University of Pondicherry, where I am to lecture on trade between the Mediterranean and India. A friendly little Indian elephant, one of several that wander the streets of Pondicherry, stands with its keeper in a nearby portico.

A small crowd has gathered, and there is general agreement that I must be photographed with the elephant. Reverting to an archaeological role inside the building, I lecture to an attentive group of scholars who question me closely and at length after I have finished. A few days later, at the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology in Madras, another academic audience is also very responsive and animated. The projector malfunctions, as such machines do all over the world, but it doesn't matter. I talk without slides, my listeners commenting and questioning as I go along. Surely such instantaneous exchange of ideas makes for an ideal relationship between audience and speaker.

Early June, 1990. Ever on the trail of Roman amphoras, I find myself on the island of Crete, in the attractive museum at Agios Nikolaos, a town that has changed dramatically in the thirty-something years since my last visit. Lines of Greek and Roman shipping amphoras stand at attention along the sides of rooms of cases filled with representations of the Minoan mother goddess and of her post-Minoan successors. The mixture of late amphoras and early fertility figures is perhaps unusual. But some of the goddesses are holding to their breasts pitchers that could have been intended to suggest babies. Other Minoan ceramic containers, too, have anthropomorphic qualities that may relate them to the figures of the goddess and to early notions of woman as container. In such a context, amphoras, the universal shipping container in antiquity, seem quite at home.

On another day in June, 1990, I sit in the Stoa of Attalos in Athens, in the office of Virginia Grace, the undisputed international authority on amphoras, and the person most responsible for calling the

attention of the scholarly world to their historical importance. She has been my mentor since 1951, when she persuaded me, fresh from graduate work in Greek and Latin at Bryn Mawr, to study the Roman amphora collection at the American excavations of the Athenian Agora. I was untrained as an archaeologist, but I had worked at Bryn Mawr with, among others, the great Roman historians, Lily Ross Taylor and T. R. S. Broughton. With that background, I was in a position to understand that amphoras might well help to solve some of the mysteries surrounding Roman trade. As my study of the Agora Roman amphoras began to produce useful results and my investigations expanded to include ever more sites, in Greece and elsewhere, Virginia Grace and Homer Thompson, for many years Field Director of the Agora Excavations, became my strongest supporters. The careful excavation of the Agora has provided me with the precious chronological basis for my study of Roman amphoras. Exchanging amphora news at the Agora with Virginia

Grace, and with her associates, the amphora scholars Carolyn Koehler, Maria Savvatiannou-Petropoulakou, and Andreas Dimoulinis, and renewing my ties with them, is a pleasure and an inspiration.

Mid-October, 1990. I enter the new archaeological museum in Lyon, France's second largest city, and am startled to find myself in a spacious, darkened entrance lobby decorated only with Roman amphoras. They stand glamorously under spotlights against the dark

blue walls of the room. The atmosphere is clearly meant to suggest to visitors the bottom of the sea, where these jars could have been found. Their shape shows that they were first century A.D. shipping containers for Spanish olive oil. Had I ever before entered a major museum to find myself immediately surrounded by Roman amphoras? Well, yes, but only in Europe, and never so dramatically as here at Lyon. In Europe, from the British Museum on down, curators are beginning to respond to the public's desire to know how life was actually lived in antiquity, not just about the gold and the sculpture with which rich Greeks and Romans surrounded themselves. Shipping amphoras are the chief finds on Roman sites and are of interest and importance for that reason. But the public is also fascinated by what is *on* the amphoras: the trademarks stamped by the potter or the grower of the contents, the graffiti marked on the jars by ancient customs inspectors, the fingerprints of the potters. Shipping amphoras, and coarse wares in general, allow the museum visitor an immediacy of contact with antiquity that elegant objects often fail to provide.

There are other imaginative displays of amphoras in the museum at Lyon, and as I survey them I review in my mind some of the creative



*Elizabeth Lyding Will on the amphora-covered wall around the museum and excavation house at Cosa. Photo by Elaine Gazda.*

amphora exhibits I have visited in recent years elsewhere in Europe. At Pompeii and Herculaneum, of course, amphoras are omnipresent in the houses and shops, and in a reconstructed shop in the Stoa of Attalos Museum one can see a fine selection of amphoras found at the Athenian Agora. A similar display, reminiscent of the one in the shop of the House of Neptune and Amphitrite in Herculaneum, can be found in Switzerland, at the beautiful site of Augst, near Basel. But my thoughts go now to some less well-known efforts to present amphoras in a meaningful way. Perhaps the most exciting exhibit I have seen is in the Nino Lamboglia Museum on the island of Maddalena, off the northeast corner of Sardinia. There dozens of amphoras from the nearby Spargi shipwreck are arranged herringbone-fashion as if they were in the actual hold of a ship. The visitor can examine the barnacle-encrusted jars from above and, descending stairs, can view a reconstructed cross-section of the hold. Nowhere have I felt more keenly the presence of antiquity: the tragedy which such shipwrecks must have represented, not only for the owners and captains of the ships but also for the sailors, and even the potters and growers responsible for the hundreds of filled amphoras destroyed in the Spargi wreck.

On this occasion, I recall that the archaeological museum at Sassari, on the north coast of Sardinia, also gives space to imaginative displays of amphoras, and there are exciting exhibits in the fascinating museum on the island of Lipari, off the north coast of Sicily. There, amphoras from several shipwrecks are arranged in great pyramidal piles reaching from floor to ceiling. The archaeological museum at Barcelona has a striking collection of amphoras from the important Greco-Roman colony at Ampurias, near the border of Spain and France, and at the beautiful site of Ampurias itself many other amphoras can be studied in attractive arrangements in the small museum. I think, too, of Pula, near the tip of the Istrian peninsula in northern Yugoslavia. Pula was a large manufacturing center for olive oil amphoras. Some of the many jars discovered there have been arranged in a dramatic room located, surprisingly, under the arena of the city's great Roman amphitheater. Near the amphora exhibit are placed oil presses and other farm equipment excavated at the Roman villas near Pula where the olives were grown and pressed into oil.

My thoughts turn also to the new museum at Cosa, where I worked on the amphoras for several summers in the 1970s. There one can inspect at close hand the amphoras produced near that ancient city and its port, some ninety miles north of Rome, an excavation conducted under the auspices of the American Academy in Rome. Cosa was an active center for the production and exportation of wine, primarily to the Celts in Gaul during the period of the Roman Republic. The upper Grand Congloué shipwreck off Marseilles, much publicized by Jacques Cousteau and others in the early 1950s, and the first wreck to be explored with the aid of modern methods of underwater research, had a cargo of hundreds of amphoras from the Sestius factory at Cosa. When in the early 1980s I visited the excavations of the huge Celtic city of Manching, on the Danube near

Ingolstadt to the north of Munich, it was very moving to find amphora fragments from faraway Cosa there. They must have been unloaded at the port of Marseilles and then shipped in barges along the Rhône and later transferred by land or by canal to the Rhine and Danube rivers before reaching their destination at Manching. Transportation by river and by land in antiquity was very expensive, but the wealthy Celtic chieftains clearly wanted wine in the original bottles to fill the cisterns of wine we are told they maintained. It would have been cheaper, at the time of unloading the heavy clay shipping containers at Marseilles, to transfer their contents to lighter receptacles of wood or clay, but money, at least at Manching, was clearly no object. Cicero tells us that the Romans had passed legislation preventing the people of Transalpine Gaul from growing the vine or the olive, and the Celts wanted wine at any cost. I was similarly moved to find at Arikamedu pieces of wine amphoras made out of the distinctive clay of the area of Pompeii. Like Cosa, Pompeii and its environs exported large quantities of wine, especially during the late Republic. The port of Pompeii shipped mostly to the east, the port of Cosa to the West.

Another great port of the period of the Roman Republic, Aquileia, at the north end of the Adriatic, also shipped primarily to the East. It sent the choice olive oil of the Istrian peninsula and perhaps of other parts of present-day Yugoslavia, including Pula, to overseas markets like Alexandria and Delos, and even to India. In the attractive museum at Aquileia, amphoras are not aesthetically displayed but are simply heaped in the courtyard, mute testimony to the



*Examining one of Harold Edgerton's Roman amphoras at MIT, with an amphora class from the University of Massachusetts. Photo by Harold Edgerton.*

masses of jars discovered in the area and to the difficulties small museums throughout the Roman world often have in finding storage space. Verona in northern Italy, in the heart of another production center for olive oil amphoras, has solved its storage problems not by excavating under its amphitheater but by mounting a great and inaccessible display of jars in pit-like areas sunk in the floor of the so-called "Tomb of Juliet," an important tourist attraction.

The displays of amphoras at Aquileia and at Verona are less creative than impressive, attesting as they do to the gargantuan

number of amphoras and amphora fragments already discovered and still awaiting discovery at Roman sites. So many hundreds of thousands of these jars were made in antiquity as containers for the perishable food products that were a backbone of Roman trade. Amphoras are tangible proof of that trade. They tell the story of how the old Republican export and import harbors were succeeded during the Empire by new trading centers. Spain and Africa became the chief areas of production, and Italy, once the center of production, ultimately became the chief import market. The crisscross of trade routes was an almost impenetrable tangle, but somehow a precarious balance of trade was maintained. That fact may have been one reason why the Roman Empire survived so long, so improbably, and against all odds. Study of amphoras is helping to unravel and interpret the difficult mysteries of Roman trade. Like Odysseus, the much-enduring amphora sleuth must, as Homer says, wander afar and see many cities, must track amphoras under water and on land. It is an exciting life, a true detective story.Δ