

Two groups of *tituli picti* from Pompeii and environs: Sicilian wine, not flour and hand-picked olives

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This article reviews the evidence for the contents of two groups of amphorae recovered in the excavations at Pompeii, Herculaneum, and the villas in their environs, arguing that the *tituli picti* appearing on these vessels have been misinterpreted, and that they point to their use as containers for wine or wine-related products imported into the Vesuvian region from Sicily, rather than their local re-use for the packaging of flour and hand-picked olives.¹

Background

The evidence regarding the function of Roman amphorae indicates that they were employed primarily as containers for the packaging of four categories of foodstuffs:

1. wine (*vinum*), wine-related products,² and various types of cooked or concentrated must;³
2. olive oil (*oleum*);
3. salted fish preserves (*salsamentum*) and various kinds of fish sauce;⁴ and
4. t205 cherries, and dates.

There is, however, scattered evidence that amphorae were sometimes used (and, in some cases, re-used) for the packaging and/or simple storage of a wide variety of other foodstuffs and non-food substances (what we may term “irregular substances”), including honey, olives, figs, nuts, cheese, sweetmeats, brine, grain, beans, pitch, resin, alum, ointments, hardware, and construction materials.⁵

Tituli picti (labels executed in red and/or black paint, generally on the neck/shoulder area of an amphora) represent one of the more important forms of evidence for amphora contents.⁶ These texts, sometimes present on containers belonging to some (but by no means all) amphora classes, differ in their format and content from class to class and, not infrequently, even within a class. They are often poorly preserved, and in many cases are composed largely of cryptic abbreviations, points that frequently render their transcription, expansion, and interpretation problematic. In cases where they can be understood with reasonable certainty, *tituli picti* generally provide some or all of the following information: the identity and/or the point of origin of the container’s contents; the quantity of the contents measured in terms of weight or volume; the year in which the container was filled; and/or the name of one or more individuals, presumably persons who owned the container and its contents and/or who were involved in its filling and/or distribution. In most cases, *tituli picti* were probably “packaging labels”, labels which recorded information of interest to persons concerned with the distribution of the container and its contents. In cases in which a text is limited to the identity of the container’s contents, however, it may be that it functioned simply as a “storage label”, a label that permitted persons using or re-using the container as a storage jar to determine what was inside.

1 *General note:* All dates mentioned are A.D. Latin texts are rendered according to the standard conventions employed for *CIL*, detailed in Krummrey and Panciera 1980, except that all *tituli picti* are presented in uppercase letters, with V employed in the place of U, ligatures indicated by rendering the relevant letters in bold, and letters of problematic reading indicated by underlining.

2 Sweetened wine (*mulsum*), vinegar wine (*acetum*), and must (*sapa*).

3 *Caroenum*, *defrutum*, and *decoctum*.

4 *Garum*, *liquamen*, *allec*, and *muria*.

5 For a review and discussion of this evidence, see Peña 2007, 61-118, 123-33. Packaging is here understood to involve the use of containers for bulk transport over appreciable distances. Storage includes the use of containers for storage and/or small-scale local transfers.

6 The other forms of evidence for amphora contents include preserved remains of the contents itself (e.g., fish bones, olive pits); residue absorbed into the vessel wall, which can sometimes be identified by chromatography; the presence/absence of a pitch lining (pitch is assumed to preclude a contents of oil); and arguments based on the dimensions, capacity, and/or morphology of the container, associations with other containers, location of production sites, literary sources, and so on.