



GREEK IMPORTS UNEARTHED AT THE SAITE-PERSIAN CEMETERY AT ABUSIR

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ABSTRACT

Although the archaeological excavations of a cluster of shaft tombs in the Late Period necropolis at Abusir are far from being complete, this paper will present in detail recently unearthed Greek imports as evidence for fairly close Graeco-Egyptian relations during the end the Saite Dynasty, i.e. from the middle of the 6th century BCE to the Persian occupation of Egypt in 525 BCE, when commercial contacts were maintained with great enthusiasm by Greek merchants from the coastal areas of Asia Minor.

INTRODUCTION

Many sites dated to the first millennium BCE in Egypt, either necropolis or settlement, have a significant occurrence of Greek imports or more precisely, the East Greek transport amphorae.¹ Thus, it is no wonder that an impressive assemblage of Greek transport amphorae was also discovered in the Saite-Persian cemetery at Abusir. The site dates to a relatively short era when huge shaft tombs that are probably connected with the so-called Saite “Archaism” were built within the Memphite necropolis.² Generally, the subterranean parts of these tombs seem to imitate the architectural disposition of the burial chamber under the famous Step pyramid of King Djoser at the nearby site in north Saqqara. The ceramic collection as a whole is quite homogenous in date; all finds cover the time span from about the beginning of the 6th century BCE to the very end of that century. The transport amphorae discussed here come from several archaeological excavations carried out by the Czech mission at Abusir during the last three decades, namely the huge shaft tombs of Udjahorresnet, Iufaa, Menekhibnekau and the anonymous tomb R3 (Figure 1).

Large transport amphorae appeared in Egypt already towards the end of the 7th and beginning of the 6th century BCE. They were mostly imported from Samos, Lesbos, Chios, and Clazomenae, but also from Greek mainland Laconia, Attica, and Corinth, albeit in significantly smaller amounts. Among the East Greek sites, Lesbos and Chios were the dominant wine exporters, producing wine that was highly respected and favored in ancient times. Also prized was oil from Samos, and of course, Clazomenae was famous for its wine and oil. Within Egypt, the greatest number of transport amphorae comes from the Greek *emporion* Naukratis,

where their occurrence spans the entire period of interest (and beyond).

However, after the amphorae had fulfilled their primary task as transport vessels, they were often not discarded straightaway but employed for various secondary uses. They were thus filled with cheese, pickled fish, honey, or beer, typical Ancient Egyptian products. The famous Greek historian Herodotus (III, 5-7) mentions wine amphorae, which served as water storage jars for caravans traveling the desert between Egypt and Syro-Palestine. Whole or, more often, fragmentary amphorae were very often used as fill material in various building projects (commonly for massive mud-brick enclosure walls) all around Egypt.³ However, more interesting is another use (or better re-used) of this pottery in funerary architecture. This phenomenon is has recently been intensively discussed among ceramists.⁴ It is the so-called building pottery – vessels that are directly connected with the building process of the tomb. They consist of plaster-filled vessels, mostly marl/silt beakers, jars, pots or large sherds of amphorae, especially Greek imports, which were preferred for the better quality of their fabric.⁵ In the case of Abusir, this is based on the author’s personal observation made shortly after opening the intact burial chamber of Iufaa, where all vessels of this category were found lying haphazardly in the uppermost layers of the debris covering the bottom of the burial chamber, with traces of fingers in the mass of plaster, together with crumbled mud-bricks and fragments of limestone blocks. Indeed, there is no apparent reason to doubt that the vessels were directly connected with the building process of the tomb, even more so, when we can add to this special assemblage several examples of completely preserved medium-sized beakers used as (plaster) containers for sealing the sarcophagus and the tomb entrance.

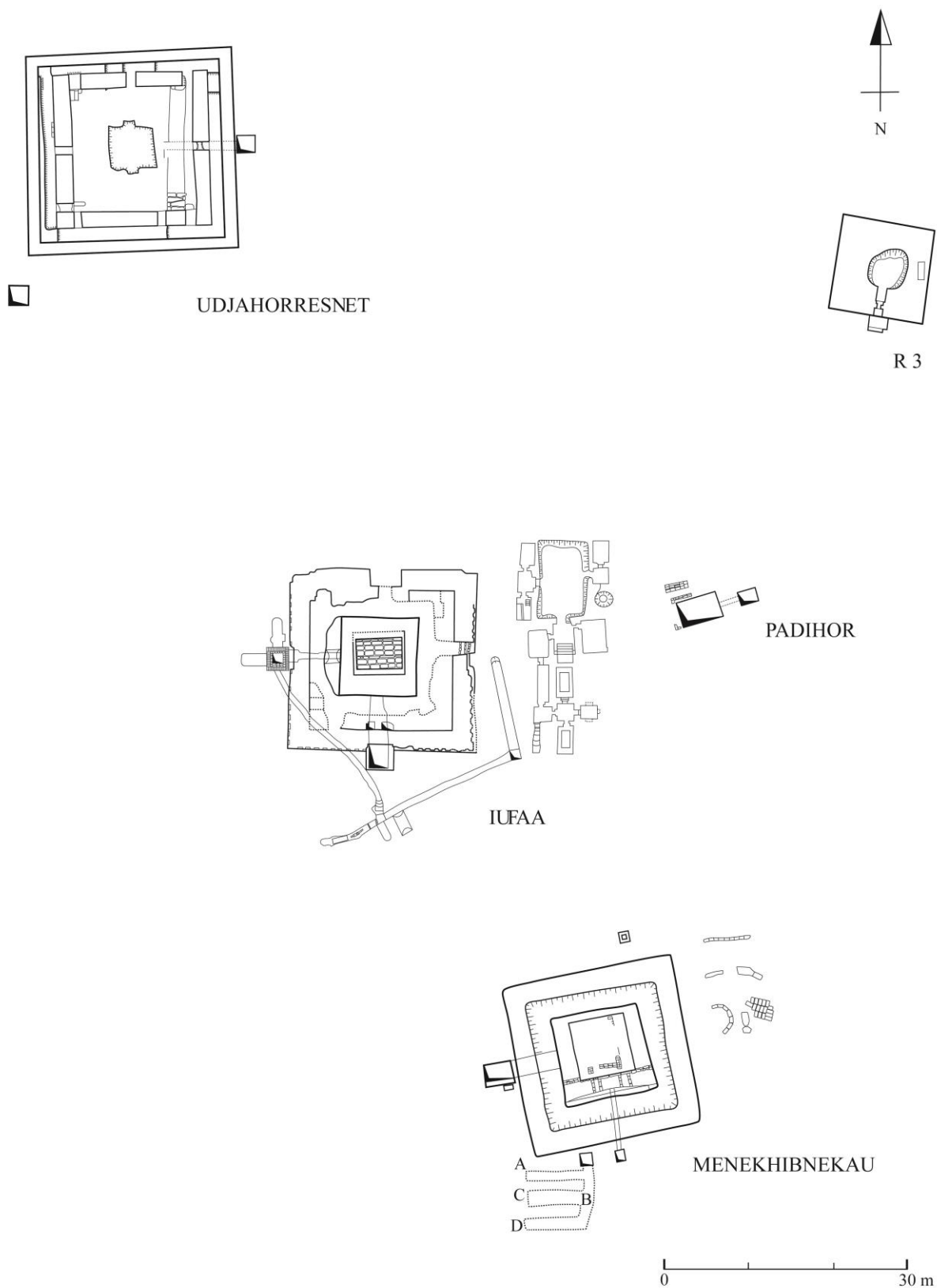


Figure 1: Saite-Persian Cemetery at Abusir

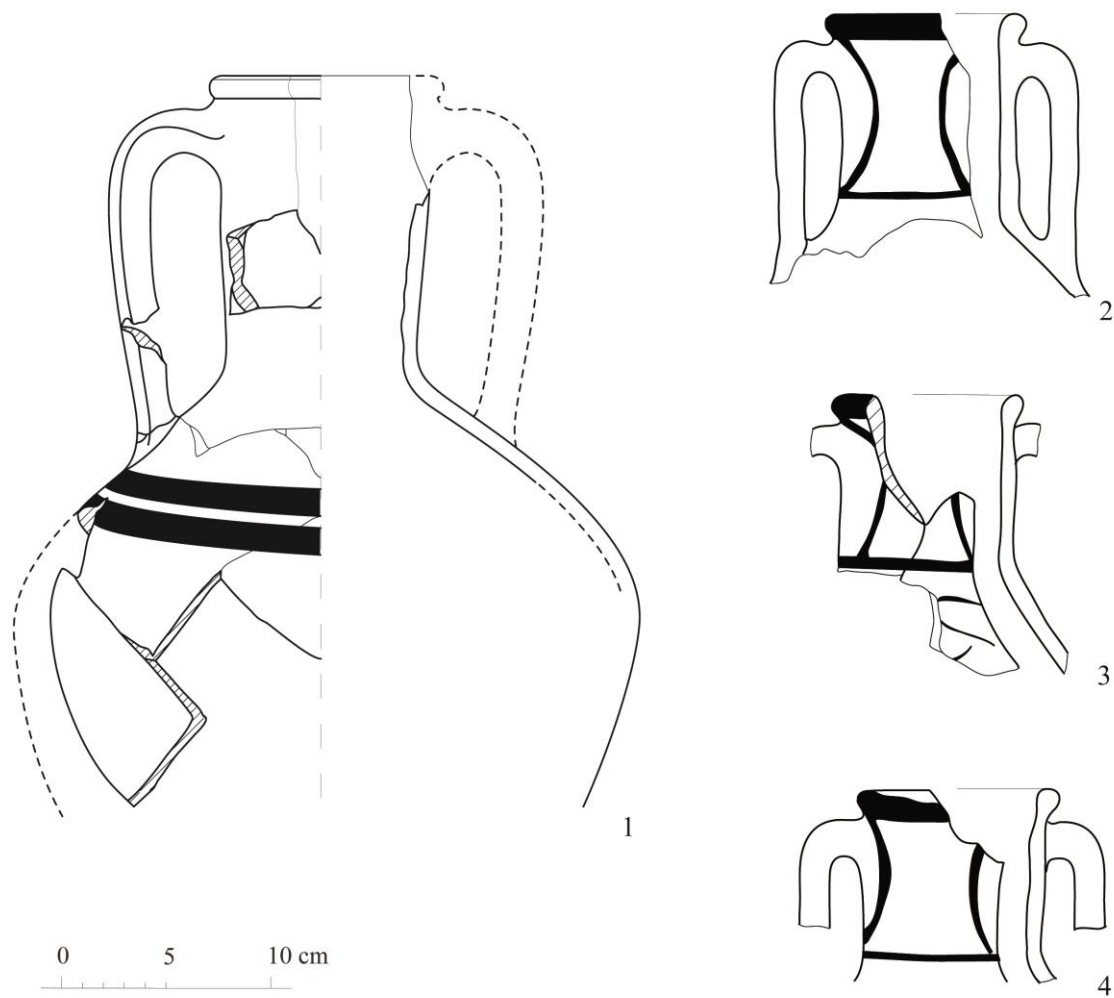


Figure 2: Chian Amphorac

THE SHAFT TOMB OF UDJAHORRESNET

From the huge shaft tomb belonging to the well-known Chief Physician of Upper and Lower Egypt Udjahorresnet were retrieved fragmentary preserved Chian and Clazomenian amphorae.⁶ They were scattered across the whole area of the heavily disturbed tomb and were consequently in a secondary position, mainly due to the intensive tomb robbers' activities. Curiously enough, a couple of finds can be connected with them, large pottery fragments with smoothed edges, certainly used as shovels and unearthed directly in the burial chamber. All the diagnostic Chian fragments – rims, handles and painted body sherds – came from at least three amphorae and were decorated with red to brown bands over a relatively thin layer of cream slip, typical for the third quarter of the 6th century BCE.⁷ Their texture is fine, slightly porous; the fabric is the most distinctive among the East Greek imports and is characterized by inclusions of white limestone grits of varying size and shape, fine sand, mica, and red-brown particles, occasionally also black rock particles.

Many body sherds can be ascribed to a Clazomenian provenance, including the partly reconstructed upper section of an amphora decorated with thick dark red bands on the rim, handle and upper part of belly applied directly on the unslipped surface, dated to the mid-6th century BCE.⁸ The fabric is fine and dense in texture and has a great number of inclusions, which have created a relatively homogenous fabric of clay tempered with numerous small and medium sized quartz, fine sand, red-brown particles, fine mica and dark grog, with a dark brown-black core and light brown-reddish layers. The surface is a rather uniform reddish-brown.

THE SHAFT TOMB OF IUF AA

Situated at a distance of about 40m from the shaft tomb of Udjahorresnet, there is another shaft tomb, perhaps of the same date or somewhat younger, which belonged to the otherwise unknown priest Iufaa.⁹ Its superstructure consists of a massive mud-brick enclosure wall (24m x 24m) that is very badly damaged. Much of the inner space is taken up by the 25m deep shaft

orientated east-west with the limestone burial chamber at the bottom. One of the small subsidiary shafts was situated in front of the southern wall and here, at a depth of 14m, fragments of a series of Lesbian amphorae were unearthed in the sand fill. In the fill of another, smaller subsidiary shaft lying in front of the western wall, a perfectly preserved Samian amphora was discovered. Further fragments of East Greek amphorae, i.e. of Chian, Samian, Clazomenian, Lesbian and Milesian provenance, came predominantly from the lower layers of the original sand fill of the main shaft. This broad range of amphorae is very common in our Abusir repertoire but the majority of them were found broken rather than complete.

Chian amphorae in this tomb were represented by large amounts of sherds which were scattered both inside the tomb and in the sand around it. In regards to chronology, the occurrence of Chian imports in the tomb of Iufaa covers almost the whole 6th century BCE. The examples from this tomb can be dated to the period extending from the end of the 7th to the third quarter of the 6th century BCE, which means that some of them are the earliest East Greek amphorae to be identified at the site. At least two pieces of the upper part of amphorae with preserved handles and numerous body sherds were covered with a thick creamy slip and

painted over with red to brown thin lines and circles on the shoulder and neck. These date to the first half of the 6th century BCE. Only a few body sherds exhibited the characteristic band decoration painted directly on the unslipped body, a style typical for amphorae of the second half of the century. Of interest is a shoulder of a Chian amphora decorated with a lying S, re-used by the Egyptian workers as a palette for plaster, found directly in the burial chamber; thus, it is an excellent example of the so-called building pottery. At least three Chian amphorae were found scattered throughout the rooms of the mortuary cultic area of Iufaa comprising the upper parts of neck and handles and numerous painted body sherds. Their surface was covered with a chalky white slip on which red to brown painted bands were applied (Figure 2.2-2.4). Another three Chian amphorae, at least, came from the subterranean corridor in front of the southern enclosure wall.¹⁰

Clazomenian amphorae occurred in smaller quantities and can be dated to the middle or second half of the 6th century BCE. Among identified fragments of necks, handles and other parts of amphorae was a lower part of an amphora¹¹ found in the southern section of the main shaft which was completely filled with white plaster.

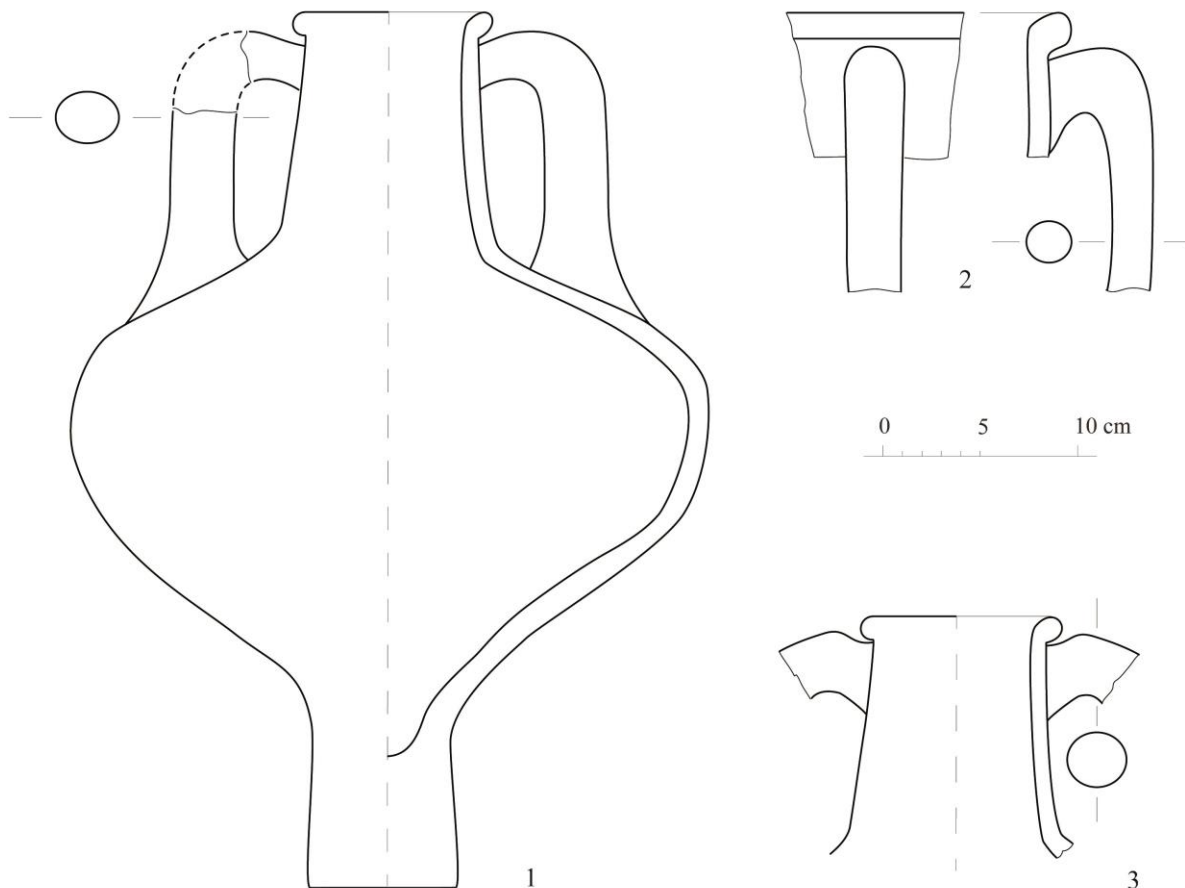


Figure 3: Lesbian Amphorae

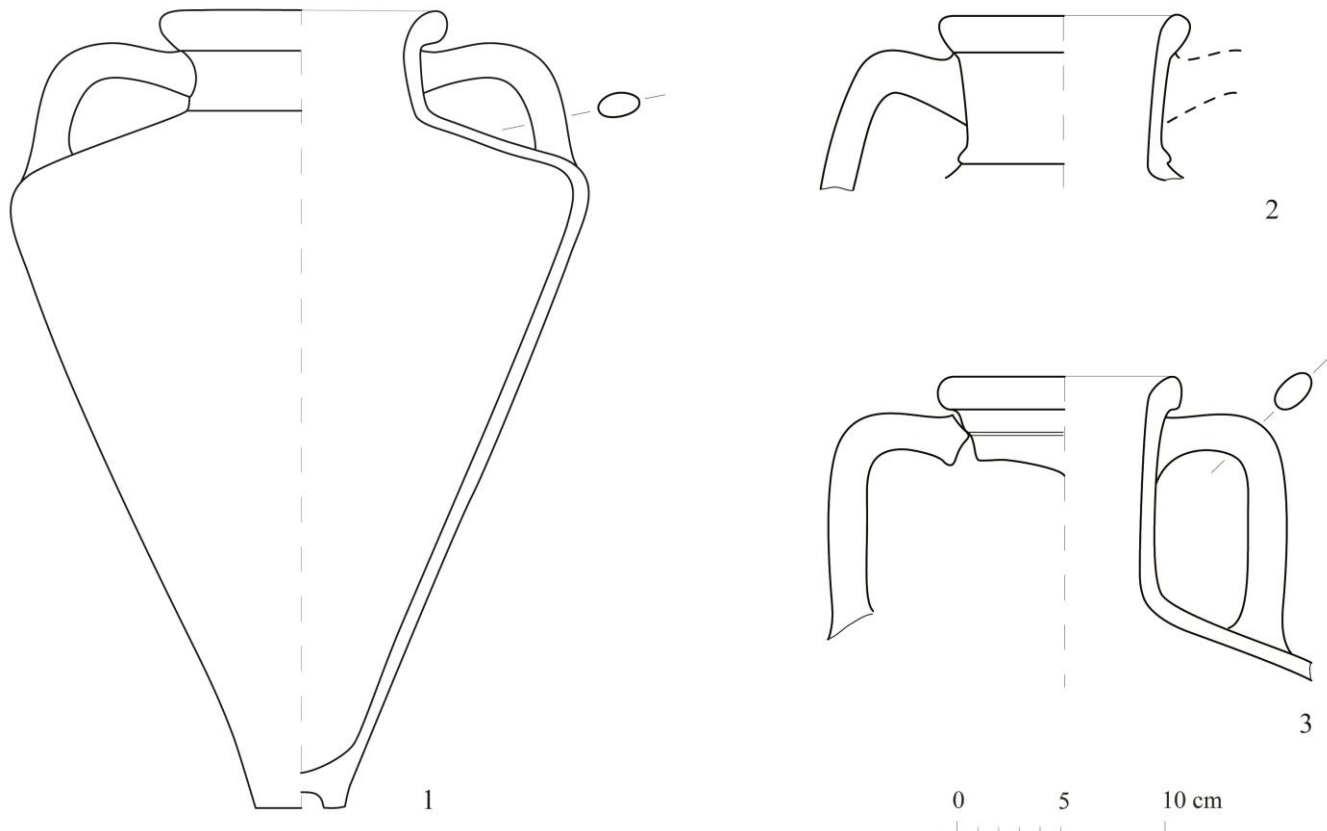


Figure 4: Samian Amphorac

The bulk of East Greek transport amphorae found in this tomb came from the island of Lesbos. Despite the rather considerable thickness of their walls (ca 2.0-2.5 cm), which may imply a lesser breakage rate than thin walled vessels, mostly fragmentary preserved items of this grey ware were unearthed. Characteristic is their fine and dense texture, with scattered fine and medium-fine quartz, limestone particles and fine mica. The fresh break has a black core and greyish layers around it. A large number of sherds belonging to this fabric, representing about 6 amphorae, were recovered in the original contexts of the main shaft at a depth of ca. 22m, close to the burial chamber (Figure 3.2-3.3). However large this collection may be, only one piece (Figure 3.1) was almost completely repaired, and could be without hesitation ascribed to the small variant of the type “en phi”, clearly dating to the second half of the 6th century BCE.¹² The second type, not so lavishly represented and identified mostly on the basis of toes of broken amphorae, was significantly larger and has a broader flat base. This type is usually dated to the 3rd quarter of the 6th century BCE. On some of the bodies, there are still visible traces of red markings, especially around the rims and on the shoulder. According to V. Grace they could have been left by cords that had tied sealings tightly over the mouth.¹³ The occurrence of Lesbian amphorae in the immediate vicinity of the entrance to the burial chamber may indicate that they and their contents (wine) were left behind after the burial ceremonies had been completed and the

mummy of Iufaa had been deposited in his sarcophagus (cf. discussion below).

Samian amphorae are quantitatively well represented (about 7-8 pieces) and date throughout the entire 6th century BCE. One complete small pear-shaped amphora (height c. 38cm) was found in the original fill of the western subsidiary shaft (Figure 4.1). Its fabric is very hard and dense and was fired to light buff. Inclusions consist in fine grains of mica, limestone particles, red-brown and dark rock inclusions. The neck is short, set at a sharp angle with the shoulder, and completed with a massive echinus edge. On the shoulder, the sign ‘M’ was incised after the firing. A close parallel was found at West Saqqara where this sign was also incised on the shoulder of a Samian amphora after firing,¹⁴ probably by a wine producer, or a dealer; however, several pieces are known with pre-firing graffiti.¹⁵ This type can be dated to the first half of the 6th century BCE. The main shaft also yielded at least five further fragmentary preserved pieces of Samian amphorae (Figure 4.2-4.3). From a chronological point of view they belong to the mid-second half of the 6th century BCE.¹⁶

THE ANONYMOUS TOMB R3

To the east of the shaft tomb of Udjahorresnet, at a distance of ca 70m, a mud-brick structure with each side measuring about 11.5m was discovered. The burial chamber and the substructure as

a whole were mostly unfinished and the name of the owner is unknown (therefore it was simply dubbed R3).¹⁷ Here, the assemblage of imports does not come from the tomb itself but curiously from a rather shallow pit located in the immediate vicinity of the tomb entrance and used to deposit rubbish. The filling of this pit was rather homogenous and contained a large amount of pottery that can be dated to the second half of the 6th century BCE and the beginning of the 5th century BCE. Besides the Egyptian and Phoenician vessels, the majority of the ceramic material consists of imported East Greek amphorae comprising five fragmentary amphorae. Only one Chian amphora of Lambrino's A1 type¹⁸ dated to ca 560-530 BCE could be satisfactorily reconstructed. This amphora has a slender neck, long handles, an ovoid belly, an un-slipped surface bearing a painted red double band around the shoulder and a single band on the lower part of the body (Figure 2.1). From another Chian amphora of the same type, only body sherds and the lower part of the vessel were preserved. A rim and a couple of painted body sherds with very fine, thick white slip on the surface and red colored band applied on the rim and body can be assigned to the first half of the 6th century BCE.

Numerous fragments, mostly body sherds, of Lesbian origin were identified, but all were too heavily damaged for reconstruction. Thus, only a typical tubular neck suggests that they derived from the "en phi" type, dated to last quarter of the 6th century BCE. The rims and body sherds of other amphorae discovered in the pit were extremely weathered and could not be identified with certainty. Surprisingly, the content of the pit was not contaminated with later intrusive specimens; hence, it appears to be strongly and solely related to the building of this anonymous tomb and the funerary activities conducted in it, and consequently all vessels come from an original context. They can be considered both as containers for wine used during the burial ceremonies and vessels for liquids (water?) which were used by the builders during their work in the tomb and then subsequently thrown behind the walls of the small courtyard that bordered the southern part of the tomb.

THE SHAFT TOMB OF MENEKHIBNEKAU

The last huge but severely disturbed shaft tomb where ample imported amphorae were identified and studied belonged to general Menekhibneka.¹⁹ Here several large fragments of amphorae were discovered in destruction layers in the area in front of the eastern enclosure wall. Predominant among them were three Chian amphorae with cylindrical neck and rolled rim, a surface covered with a thin cream slip, and red to brown painted bands around rim and handles. These features, namely a cream slip and the painted decoration, suggest a date in the mid-6th century BCE. Large amounts of body sherds of Lesbian and perhaps Samian (?) provenance from the surface layers were badly weathered and thus cannot be studied closely. From the embalmer's deposit which was an integral part of the funerary complex of Menekhibneka comes a completely preserved Samian

amphora (from the first/second third of the 6th century BCE), which was later packed with pieces of charcoal after use.²⁰ This curious case clearly shows an uninterrupted circulation of complete Greek amphorae for a rather long time after their original content (wine or oil) had been consumed,²¹ or better the fact that they could have been recycled, emptied and refilled.

DISCUSSION

It is not without interest that our collection of Greek amphorae closely corresponds to the large assemblages of well-preserved imports coming from the Saite fortresses of Migdol – T.21 (Tell el-Qedwa) and Tell el-Herr in the eastern Nile Delta, not only based on the origin of the vessels but also their dates.²² Further significant parallels can be found in the recently published ceramic material from the British excavations carried out at the Late Period capital Sais,²³ while Buto²⁴ and Gurna²⁵ provide very good parallels for Abusir as well. Actually, there are many archaeological excavations all over Egypt in which pottery finds, particularly imports, were studied in order to establish their cultural, chronological and historical contexts. Some with this valuable information includes Tell Defenneh, Naukratis, Tell el-Maskhuta, Bubastis, Memphis, and Thebes. These are broadly the sites where Greek material might indicate the presence of Greek/Ionian mercenaries or colonies of East Greek merchants. On the other hand, the Egyptian elites also enjoyed foreign wines and, especially in the Late Period, the Greek wine from Chios and Lesbos had an excellent reputation across the Mediterranean as suggested by contemporary texts.²⁶ In this light, the use of Greek amphorae (and their luxurious contents as well) offers a significant range of possibilities for their importance in Egypt. The occurrence of a considerable number of East Greek amphorae at Abusir (e.g. their aforementioned identification in the vicinity of the entrance to the burial chamber of Iufaa) and recently at Sais (in the Temple of the goddess Neith) might indicate that the former could be used as offerings during the burial ceremonies and the latter (from the temple of Neith) in festivals or daily offering rituals – the wine would have been regarded as a fitting tribute for the goddess.²⁸

The Late Period or more precisely the Saite era was exactly the time when Graeco-Egyptian relations achieved their peak within the context of the still changing situations in the region. During the first millennium BCE Egypt was confronted, more than at any time before, with powerful and military aggressive eastern empires such as Assyria, Babylonia and later Persia. However, its ambitions in the area remained strong, especially in relation to the coastal Phoenician cities, its partners in maritime trade. Relatively calm and stable periods, so important for international trade, were frequently interrupted with military confrontation, shifting alliances, as well as local ethnic rivalries. Apparently, the former ambitious (Ramesside) imperial policy of Egyptian kings lost its credibility but the Egyptian creative spirit continued and helped the country in another, less glamorous style to participate in crucial international affairs. The more so that Egypt remained

surprisingly strong economically: Persian rule had not closed the country off from trade, and ships continued to arrive from Phoenician cities, Cyprus, and the Greek islands.

In this respect, we must keep in mind that both archaeological and historical data proves that at the beginning of the first millennium BCE the Phoenicians were the real pan-Mediterranean traders but later – around the mid-7th century BCE – competing Greeks had surpassed the Phoenician trade and even replaced them in many places. It is also true that the Saite kings favoured Greeks over Phoenicians in commercial and settlement activities in their well-known philhellene policy; but mainly, they were highly generous employers of Greek (Ionian) mercenaries. The Greeks were able to manufacture a considerable quantity of goods, mainly wine and oil of high quality which were then exported abroad through the means of an already existing and/or newly founded distribution network. Egypt was not left out. On the contrary, there is hardly a site free of East Greek amphorae and frequently they occupy a very prominent position in the pottery corpus of the time involved.

There are numerous individual sites in the Nile Delta that contained an incomparably greater amount of Greek imports than any other site in Upper Egypt. Besides the often mentioned sites of Naukratis, Tell Defenneh, and Memphis, recent archaeological excavations in the eastern Delta as well as on the coastline have revealed further spots with a surprisingly rich economic history and large assemblages of Greek pottery; we can mention Tell el-Ghaba, Qedwa and Héracléion-Thônis.²⁸ Their higher concentration in the most open and thus also the most endangered

part of Egypt is comprehensible considering the type of people that were coming to the country. They were above all mercenaries and merchants; the former soon became an indispensable part of the Egyptian army, while the latter strengthened Egypt's economic connection with other commercial centres of the Mediterranean area.

CONCLUSIONS

The occurrence of East Greek transport amphorae in Egyptian tombs, temples, urban settlements and military locations shows that not only Greek communities, both commercial and military, but also that the Egyptian elite appreciated various kinds of Greek goods, including famous wine and oil. Assemblages of amphorae from Chios, Lesbos, Samos, Clazomenae and Miletus, confirm intensive and mutually profitable relations between the Egyptian state and the Greeks. Moreover, judging from the results of numerous archaeological excavations all over Egypt it has become clear that, after the amphorae had fulfilled their primary task as transport vessels of luxurious commodities, they were almost immediately, thanks to the high quality of their fabric, employed for secondary uses, e.g. as containers for liquids, welcomed temper material for huge mud-brick enclosure walls or as building pottery. For detailed analysis, the latter phenomenon will need in the future more comparative material, mainly because this secondary use of pottery was for a long-time neglected by both archaeologists and ceramicists.

NOTES

¹ Květa Smoláriková, *Greek Imports in Egypt. Graeco-Egyptian Relations during the First Millennium BC. Abusir VII* (Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, 2002).

² Květa Smoláriková, "The Step Pyramid – A Constant Inspiration to the Saite Egyptians," in Miroslav Bárta, Filip Coppens and Jaromír Krejčí (eds.), *Abusir and Saqqara in the Year 2005. Proceedings of the Conference held in Prague (June 27-July 5, 2005)* (Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, 2006), 42-49.

³ Alan J. Spencer, *Brick Architecture in Ancient Egypt* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd, 1979).

⁴ Clear identification of plaster-filled pottery did not escape ceramicists attention at the Giza necropolis for tombs dating to the Old Kingdom, in Thebes for contexts dating to the New Kingdom or Late Period; for further evidence and a short discussion see Julia Budka, "The use of pottery in funerary contexts during the Libyan and Late Period: A view from Thebes and Abydos," in Ladislav Bareš, Filip Coppens, and Květa Smoláriková (eds.), *Egypt in Transition. Social and Religious Development of Egypt in the First Millennium*

BCE (Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, 2010), 22-72.

⁵ Pierre Dupont, "Une approche en laboratoire des problèmes de la céramique de Grèce de l'Est," *Les Céramiques de Grèce de l'Est et leur Diffusion en Occident* (1978): 290-297.

⁶ Květa Smoláriková, "Pottery," in Ladislav Bareš (ed.), *The shaft tomb of Udjaborresnet at Abusir. Abusir IV* (Prague: Universitas Carolina Pragensis, 1999), 90-98, figs. 17/26, 27; 65.

⁷ Robert M. Cook and Pierre Dupont, *East Greek Pottery* (London: Routledge, 1998), Fig. 23.g-h.

⁸ Cook and Dupont 1998, Fig. 23.3e.

⁹ Ladislav Bareš and Květa Smoláriková, *The shaft tomb of Iufaa, Vol. I: Archaeology. Abusir XVII* (Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, 2008).

¹⁰ Květa Smoláriková, "Pottery – R, R2," in Ladislav Bareš and Květa Smoláriková (eds.), *The shaft tomb of Iufaa, Vol. I: Archaeology. Abusir XVII* (Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, 2008), 199-200, figs. 51/55, 56, 57, 56/43, 44, 45.

¹¹ Cook and Dupont 1998, fig. 23, 3b-c.

- ¹² Cook and Dupont 1998, fig. 23.4h-i.
- ¹³ Virginia Grace, *Amphoras and the Ancient Wine Trade* (Princeton NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1961); idem, *Hesperia, Suppl.* VIII, 1949, 175, n. 3, here she speaks about the red marking on Thasian and Rhodian transport amphorae and only occasionally on other provenances.
- ¹⁴ Teodozja Rzcuska, "Amphorae from the Upper Necropolis at West Saqqara: 1996-2003. Preliminary Report," *Cahiers de la céramique égyptienne* 8 (2007): 213, fig. 33.
- ¹⁵ Alan Johnston, "The Delta: From Gamma to Zeta," in Alexandra Villing and Udo Schlotzhauer (eds), *Naukratis: Greek Diversity in Egypt*. British Museum Research Publication Number 162 (London: British Museum Press, 2006), 23-30.
- ¹⁶ Smoláriková 2002, 37.
- ¹⁷ Filip Coppens and Květa Smoláriková, *Lesser Late Period tombs at Abusir. The Tomb of Padihor and the Anonymous Tomb R3. Abusir XX* (Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, 2009), 99-104.
- ¹⁸ Cook and Dupont 1998, 150, Fig. 23.2a.
- ¹⁹ Ladislav Bareš and Květa Smoláriková, *The shaft tomb of Menekhibnekau, Vol. I: Archaeology. Abusir XXV* (Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, 2011), 116, 315; figs. 308, 315/q-s.
- ²⁰ Cook and Dupont 1998, Fig. 23.6d.
- ²¹ Herodotus III, 5-7.
- ²² Eliezer D. Oren, "Migdol: A New Fortress on the Edge of the Eastern Nile Delta," *Bulletin of the American Schools Oriental Research* 256 (1984): 7-44, figs. 22; 23/5,6; 24/1. Ossama Hamza, "Qedwa," *Cahiers de la céramique égyptienne* 5 (1997): 81-102.
- ²³ Penelope Wilson and Gregory Gilbert, "Sais and its Trading Relations with the Eastern Mediterranean," in Panagiotis Kousoulis and Konstantinos Magliveras (eds.), *Moving Across Borders. Foreign Relations, Religion and Cultural Interactions in the Ancient Mediterranean*. Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta 159. (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 251-265.
- ²⁴ Janine Bourriau and Peter French, "Imported Amphorae from Buto Dating from c. 750 BC to the Early 6th Century AD," *Cahiers de la céramique égyptienne* 8 (2007): 115-133.
- ²⁵ Karol Mysliwiec, *Keramik und Kleinfunde aus der Grabung im Tempel Sethos' I. in Gurna* (Mainz am Rhein : Philipp von Zabern 1987), 75-79, figs. 804-821, 833-841.
- ²⁶ Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* (Loeb Classical Library, 1951), I 28, 29, 33.
- ²⁷ Penelope Wilson and Gregory Gilbert 2007, 261.
- ²⁸ Franck Godio and David Fabre, *Trésors engloutis d'Égypte* (Seuil: Paris, 2008), 194-271.