Terms for Vessels in Arabic and Coptic Documentary Texts and Their Archaeological and Ethnographic Correlates

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Introduction

Both papyri and material remains provide insights into the consumption and construction of pottery in early Islamic Egypt by various members and groups of the population. This paper will focus on terms for jars in Arabic and Coptic documentary papyri in the early Islamic period (7th–10th centuries) and their possible archaeological correlates in pottery, metal, glass, and parchment. There have been previous attempts to link jar terms, particularly in Greek papyri (and occasionally in Coptic) with actual objects, but the Arabic evidence has remained largely unstudied in this regard. Archaeologists, however, have tried to link pottery from all periods found in their Egyptian excavations with ethnographic examples and to provide the pottery with Arabic names that come from nineteenth- and twentieth-century pottery.

This paper will try to remedy this by offering a comparison of actual objects with contemporary Arabic and Coptic names for vessels in order to better understand consumption patterns in the early Islamic period in Egypt. First, the archaeological evidence for different types of jars and containers from early Islamic Egypt will be examined. Then the papyrological evidence will be compared with the ethnographic attestations of jars. Early Islamic period Arabic papyrological terms for jars will subsequently be discussed in detail, including, where it is possible to determine, the types of material from which these jars were manufactured and what types of objects they contained. Finally, the Arabic, Coptic-Arabic, and Coptic papyrological and ethnographic evidence will be combined in order to provide possible names for the archaeological objects.

Archaeological Evidence for Vessels

When one begins to examine vessels from early Islamic Egypt, one is presented with a bewildering array of different forms, types, and materials, scattered
through a variety of publications in different languages. The types of jars that will be examined here are storage jars, as the references in papyri are generally to these kind of containers which are either being sent by the writers of the documents or being received by them. This limits the research to vessels that were sealed in some way and excludes therefore wide mouthed jars. The vessels could be made from different types of materials including pottery, glass, metal, and parchment. The vessels contained different types of goods (both edible and non-edible) and were shipped in boats\(^1\) and by pack animals\(^2\) to their destination. Sturdier vessels were tied with rope to attach them to saddles of pack animals, while more fragile items were carefully packed in cloth sacks or baskets.\(^3\) References in the Coptic ostraca to “camels of wine,” “camels of dates” and “camels of wheat” suggest that items were transported in sacks that weighed very little.\(^4\)

The most common type of jar used in the early Islamic period was made of the clay amphora. The ubiquity of amphorae in the early Islamic period is not surprising, since they had been the primary transport jars used throughout the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods. Their use simply continued in the early Islamic period. Amphorae could contain a wide variety of liquid, semi-liquid, and solid objects, including grain, olive oil, wine, *garum*, cheese, and honey, which were transported on a wide scale throughout the Mediterranean. The majority of the goods shipped in the amphorae have not survived in the archaeological record, although there is some evidence of oil residue, grape seeds, and pitched interiors. Determining the contents of these vessels remains a challenge for archaeologists. Trace analysis has been applied to some vessels, particularly to amphorae. It has usually been assumed that if an interior of a pottery vessel is pitched, it would have contained wine or wine vinegar, while non-pitched vessels would contain other liquids such as olive oil or dry

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1. For depictions of boats carrying amphorae from early Byzantine Syria and Palestine, see Decker, *Food* 77, fig. 4.5; Kingsley, *The economic impact* 52, 61, no. 48.
3. For an example of this type of packing, see Petrie Museum UC65051, two glass bottles wrapped in textile. For the difficulties in shipping these types of objects see, for example, *OMon.Claud.* 128–129 (early 2nd century C.E.) In the first ostracon the writer asks for baskets to protect water skins. Apparently he did not get them as he explains in the next letter that the skins have become useless. In *P.Oxy.* 1294 (late 2nd/early 3rd century C.E.) the writer asks for a bread basket with a lock that contained four flasks. Shipping objects was not without a certain amount of risk, however. Individuals could and did injure themselves when loading full wine amphorae (Mango, *Beyond* 96).