Sasanians in the Persian Gulf
According to Archaeological Data
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Archaeological investigations in the northern coast of the Persian Gulf and in few sites in Khuzistan have yielded evidence for the use of amphorae in Iran, in the Parthian and Sasanian period, in burials as well as trade. No evidence for production centers of amphorae in Iran has yet been found. Nonetheless, given the paucity of excavations and surveys on the coastal regions of Iran and the lack of chemical analysis of the available evidence, the possibility that at least some of the consumed amphorae where made locally must not be ruled out. The amphorae found in these southern regions are mainly of “Torpedo” type. The present paper summarizes the most significant finds of amphorae in the ancient ports of Persian Gulf including discoveries in the course of underwater investigations of Rig Port in 2001.

I. Summary of finds from ancient ports of Persian Gulf and off-coast sites

As early as the 2nd millennium BCE, amphora jars were used in the Eastern Mediterranean; it was produced and used in most commercial centers of Mediterranean world in the two millennia afterwards. The remarkable varied typology of these vessels provides a good basis for the dating of other materials which are found along with amphorae. In general, the so-called Greek amphorae have relatively wide bases enabling them to stand alone while the Roman type has pointed bottom and need a support. Roman amphora was highly popular in the period from 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE and its geographical distribution in the Near East reached as far as ancient Indus. The amphorae to be discussed below are mainly a category of this type, named Torpedo Jars (after their shape) or Persian Gulf amphorae (after their geographical distribution).

The chronological and spatial distribution of finds around Persian Gulf proves their use in the maritime trade through this critical economic route, at least from the beginning of Parthians dominion (3rd century BCE) up to the first two centuries of Islamic era (9th century CE). The Torpedo jars are similar to the Mediterranean type in their elongated body and pointed bottom, but differentiated in the lack of neck and handle and for their relatively wide openings. Their economic use mainly concerns transportation of valuable liquids such as olive oil and wine, thus a good number of complete vessels or sherds are found to have had bitumen coating inside. However, other goods such as cereal and fish were too transported in this type of container. In Iran, the remains of amphorae are found both on the coast and under sea, the latter case often understood to be associated with shipwrecks.
Finds by the sea:
Several sites in the Bushehr Peninsula, such as “Radar” (one km south of Tel Pey Tel) and Jalali coasts have revealed remains of Torpedo Jars all coated with bitumen (fig. 1).

![Fig. 1 find from the Jalili Coast](image1)

Also, some sites in southern coast of the Persian Gulf in UAE have also yielded amphorae of the same type dated to the Sasanian period (Kennet 2007). A summary of evidence from the Rig Port, retrieved by the author follows:
The modern day port of Rig is a small town located 25 km southeast of Genaveh. In 2001, reports of pottery and metal objects found by local fishermen lead to the discovery and investigation of an under-water site near the old port-town of Rig. The site is about six hectares, not far from the coast, and the finds are collected from the depth of 3-10 meters (Fig.2).

![Fig. 2](image2)
Beside the sherds and complete pieces of Torpedo jars used as liquid containers, finds include glazed blue ceramics, a helmet, a knee cap and a shield, as well as pieces of plain coarse ware and semi-coarse ware in the form of storage jars, bowls and pots. (Amir Chaichi, 2005) (Fig. 3, 4). Concentration and distribution of many amphorae on the site and a large amorphous stone anchor among the deposited objects suggests a shipwreck as the reason for deposition of material. A similarity in typology of jars from Rig and those collected on the coasts of Bushehr is observed.

Off-coast finds:
A complete amphora of the so-called Greek type is kept in the National Museum of Iran; the assumed find spot is Susa. Many Parthian and Sasanian sites around Haft Tape, identified by Robert Wenke between 1970-77, yielded amphorae sherds. The sherds were provisionally dated to the middle and late Parthian period. Amphorae sherds were found by Moghaddam, in his survey of “Mianab” plain in Shushtar (Moghadam. A., 2005). Also from Shushtar are sherds found in Golalak, excavated by Rahbar (1966). Remains of a bitumen coated burial amphorae were found on the ground in the survey of (Kuhmand region) Botol, a site in the Bushehr province in 1995. Several amphorae sherds along with other Parthian ceramics and Seleucid coins were found in the survey of Kuzaran region by Motarjem (1997). Also Amphorae sherds along with architectural remains and other pieces of ceramics were retrieved from a stepped trench in the Parthian site of Bistone.

Burial
Several Torpedo jars containing bones were found in a cemetery in the Shoghab region, near Bushehr, on a rocky hill; jars are of the same type but different in size (Fig. 5). Some jars were broken and restored after accommodating the bones (unpublished report, Rahbar and Mir Fattah 1966). These Jars were similar to the finds from royal cemeteries of Susa and the Canaanite type, all bitumen coated, with long pointed bottoms.
In the Bushehr region, several other burial amphorae containing bones have been found by local people while digging for different purposes. Several Parthian amphorae have been found in Susa and other archaeological sites in Khuzistan in burials. Parthian burials were mostly placed in the defensive walls of both Acropole and Ville Royale. A shaft dug in the mud brick wall led to an underground tunnel and several chambers. Some amphorae, all of Torpedo type and bitumen coated, were found in these graves, all broken in the upper part. A few Parthian coins found in the graves were the basis of their dating. One torpedo jar with assumed burial function is kept in the national museum of Iran (fig. 6). This jar is of the kind retrieved from Shogab and Susa cemeteries; its exact place of find is not known.

The Persian Gulf (Torpedo) jars found up to now are comprised of Parthian and Sasanian amphorae. The retrieved Parthian amphorae do not show significant variety in their form and size and were solely used in the burials. The Sasanian amphorae, however, are much more varied in form and size and were used both in burials and for trade. The distribution of
amphorae on the sites far from the sea in the non-burial context primarily comes from Khuzistan and the coastal provinces of Persian Gulf. This is an indicator that they were used both on land and in the sea trade between the Mediterranean world and the Near East. A comparative study of typology of amphorae over in the wider regional context, in particular between Iran, Mesopotamia and the southern regions of Persian Gulf could tell much about the cultural and economic interactions of these communities. Nonetheless, our knowledge of the use and distribution of these jars is limited at the moment.

Bibliography


