



## Notes on a Hellenistic Milk Pail

*Yannis Chairetakis*

Thanks to excavations, their findings and related studies, quite significant data on Hellenistic plain pottery has been gathered. Within this framework some unusual plain vessels are also incorporated, and recently Susan Rotroff offered an important identification of such an unusual plain vessel from the Athenian Agora and Kerameikos as a milk pail<sup>1</sup>. In this short text, I want to take the topic a little further, adding some notes on the shape, the name and the function of these vessels<sup>2</sup>.

Their shape can be deduced from several almost intact or fragmentary specimens found in the Athenian Agora<sup>3</sup>, the Kerameikos<sup>4</sup>, Salamis<sup>5</sup> (**fig. 1**) and Macedonia<sup>6</sup> (**table 1**). In spite of the absence of more samples, it is obvious that the vessels have adopted some common morphological features, such as the globular body, the wide neck/lip and the long tubular spout, while the variants from Macedonia to Attica and from Athens to Salamis show that we have to do with many different workshops. Given that only three samples were known

1 ROTROFF 2016.

2 I am grateful to folklorist Panayiotis Veltanisian for our long and stimulating discussions.

3 According to Rotroff (ROTROFF 2016, 407) the vessel »...is a large squat, cylindrical container, about 34 centimeters in diameter and 24 centimeters high. The bottom is flat and the walls vertical, curving in at the top to produce a slightly constricted opening. A wide, tubular spout emerges from the wall somewhat below the rim and curves up to a flaring mouth. ... Two heavy horizontal handles, round in section, are attached just below the rim and perpendicular to the spout ...«. See also ROTROFF 2006, 117 nos. 327–328.

4 The vessel from Building Z3 at Kerameikos has »a flat bottom, nearly vertical sides, and a tubular spout« (ROTROFF 2016, 414–415), and also »zwei seitlichen, schräg stehenden Rundhenkeln und einem senkrechten Bandhenkel zwischen Ausguß und Rand« (KNIGGE 2005, no. 911).

5 The vessel derives from the oikos or the kitchen of a house at Ambelaki (CHAIRETAKIS 2011, 26; CHAIRETAKIS 2018, 150–152). It has a flat bottom, globular body, a wide tubular spout emerging from the wall, and two rectangular lugs. For the city at Ambelaki, Salamis see DEKOULAKOU 2008; CHAIRETAKIS 2018. – I thank Panayiotis Dedevesis for the conservation of the vessel. The conservation of the pottery material from the Salamis' excavations was funded by Psychas Foundation (Greece).

6 The vessel, somehow more delicate from the other ones, derives from a sanctuary at Mesimeri, in the prefecture of Thessaloniki in Macedonia. Kefalidou (KEFALIDOU 2012, 455 fig. 15) gives the following description: »Ring-form base, wide neck and nearly vertical walls with a wide, bulbous body, on which a long cylindrical spout with truncated rim was opened. The handle root begins immediately above the projection of the spout. The handle was attached to the rim, forming a plastic lug on the interior at the point of junction.« Kefalidou (KEFALIDOU 2012, 433) also reports that »a similar vase was found in the excavation of the Metroon at Lefkopetra, Imathia«.

to Rotroff<sup>7</sup>, we realize the importance of her contribution. However, it must be pointed out that, although the Hellenistic vessels were identified on the basis of the Ottoman-Modern Cypriot vessels as milk pails<sup>8</sup>, there are many other similar milk pails from the Aegean, dated from the early Byzantine to the Modern Greek period. Early Byzantine vessels derive from Athens<sup>9</sup>, Spata in Attica<sup>10</sup> (**fig. 2, a**), Samos<sup>11</sup>, Thasos<sup>12</sup> and elsewhere<sup>13</sup>. A Middle Byzantine (12–13th c. CE) sample came to light at Akraiphnio, Boeotia<sup>14</sup> (**fig. 2, b**). Incidentally, there are many more samples dated to the Ottoman-Modern Greek period from Naxos<sup>15</sup>, Siphnos<sup>16</sup>, Amorgos, Samos<sup>17</sup>, Rhodes<sup>18</sup> (**fig. 2, c**) and elsewhere<sup>19</sup>. The Ottoman-Modern Greek vessels – similar to those from Cyprus – have almost vertical walls without neck, like the Hellenistic ones from Attica. On the basis of this analogy linking the late Classical-Hellenistic vessels with the Byzantine-Modern Greek milk pails, we can see that all these vessels share many common features<sup>20</sup>, and the differentiations are due to local traditions rather than function. Besides, we have to accept changes in form over so many centuries, and I believe that the Byzantine and Ottoman-Modern Greek variants give us the confirmation we need for the development and the survival of a more ancient form.

We now need to name the ancient vessels, and there are three ancient Greek words which correspond to the function of our vessel, as pail suitable for the procedure of milking. These words are πέλλα<sup>21</sup>, ἀμολγεὺς<sup>22</sup> and γαυλός<sup>23</sup>, words which also survive in Byzantine

- 7 Rotroff was aware of the samples from the Athenian Agora and Kerameikos and not of that from Macedonia. The vessel from Salamis is presented in my PhD Thesis (CHAIRETAKIS 2018) for the first time.
- 8 ROTROFF 2016, 411–414.
- 9 LIAGKOURAS 1973–1974, 38 fig. 47, b, late 4th –first half of the 5th c. CE.
- 10 PAPANIKOLA-BAKIRTZI 2002, 131 no. 136 (E. Gkini-Tsofopoulou), late 4th – first half of the 5th c. CE.
- 11 GEROUSI 1992–1993, 259–260 no. 8048, 6th – early 7th c. CE.
- 12 BLONDÉ ET AL. 2010, 410 fig. 16, 7th c. CE.
- 13 Similar vessels originate from the Athenian Agora (ROBINSON 1959, M 300, early 6th c. CE), Chios (BALANCE ET AL. 1989, 105 nos. 208–209, 6th–early 7th c. CE) and Yassi Ada (BASS – DOORNINCK 1982, 173–175 nos. P 35, P 38, early 7th c. CE).
- 14 KOILAKOU 1998, 108; ANAGNOSTAKIS – PAPAMASTORAKIS 2008, 223–226. See also: [https://www.medievalroutes.gr/el/syloges/antikeimena/4360\\_el/](https://www.medievalroutes.gr/el/syloges/antikeimena/4360_el/)
- 15 PSAROPOULOU 2005, 59.
- 16 KORRE-ZOGRAFOU 1995, 252.
- 17 KORRE-ZOGRAFOU 1995, 273.
- 18 IMELLOS – POLYMEROU-KAMILAKI 1983, 86. 329.
- 19 Like those from Cyprus (ROTRUFF 2016, 411–414). More samples from Naxos, Siphnos, Patmos, Rhodes can be seen in the Facebook page »Potters and Pottery of Greece«, supervised by Yorgos Kyriakopoulos.
- 20 ROTROFF 2016, 412–414, for the comparison of the form.
- 21 LSJ 2: πέλλα; *Athen. Deipn.* 11, 91: πέλλα ἀγγεῖον σκυφοειδές, πυθμένα ἔχον πλατύτερον, εἰς ὃ ἡμελγον τὸ γάλα.
- 22 LSJ 2: ἀμολγεὺς, ἀμόλγιον, ἀμέλγω; *Theokr. eid.* 8, 85–87: αἱ δέ τι λῆς με καὶ αὐτὸν ἄμ' αἱ πολέοντα διδάξαι, τήναν τὰν μιτύλαν δωσῶ τὰ διδάκτρα τοι αἶγα, ἀτις ὑπὲρ κεφαλᾶς αἰεὶ τὸν ἀμολγέα πληροῖ; *Theokr. eid.* 25, 106: Ἄλλος ἀμόλγιον εἶχ', ἄλλος τρέφει πίονα τυρόν; *Anth. Gr.* 9, 224: αἶγά με τὴν εὐθηνον, ὅσων ἐκένωσεν ἀμολγεὺς οὐθατα πασάων πουλυγαλκτοτάτην, γευσάμενος, μελιηδὲς ἐπεὶ τ' ἐφράσσατο πῖαο. See also: SEG 42:818: ἐν ἀμολγῶι [λ]ιξ αἶγα βίαι ἐκ κήπο. ἐλαύνει.
- 23 LSJ 2: γαυλός; *Hom. Od.* 9, 223: γαυλοὶ τε σκαφίδες τε, τετυγμένα, τοῖς ἐνάμελγεν. For the word σκαφίς see ANAGNOSTAKIS – PAPAMASTORAKIS 2008, 223.

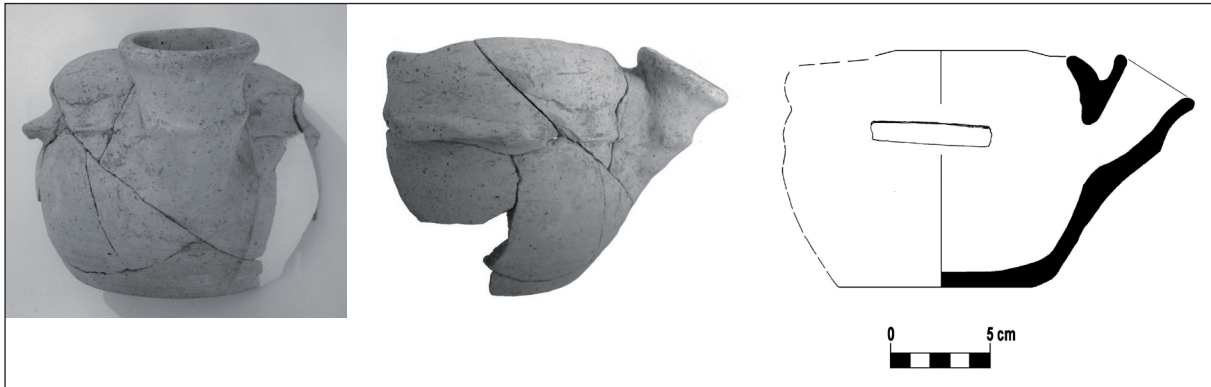


Fig. 1 : Hellenistic milk pail from Salamis, Attica

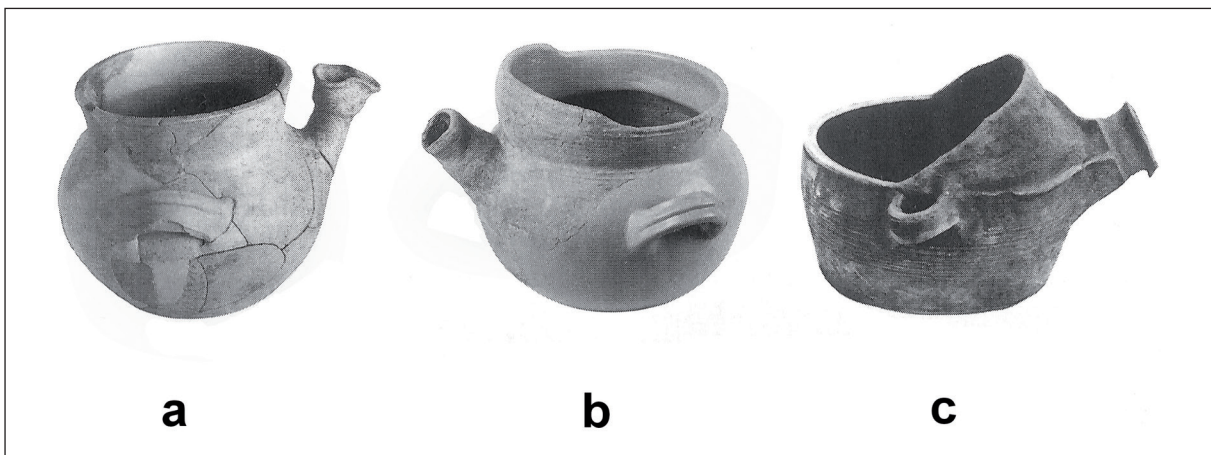


Fig. 2 : a. Early Byzantine milk pail from Spata, Attica; – b. Middle Byzantine milk pail from Akraiphnio, Boeotia; – c. Modern Greek milk pail from Rhodes (ANAGNOSTAKIS – PAPAMASTORAKIS 2008, figs. 27–29).

literature<sup>24</sup>. The examination of the Byzantine sources, as well as the depictions in mosaics, frescoes etc., led scholars to conclude that pella is a wooden round vessel and gaulos a wooden or metal one<sup>25</sup>. Furthermore, pella and amolgeus are used exclusively for the milking of the animals<sup>26</sup>. As a consequence, the Byzantine clay vessels (fig. 4, a–b) were identified as amolgea<sup>27</sup>. What is more interesting is that the most common word for the Ottoman-Modern Greek vessel is αρμεός, a word deriving from the verb αρμέγω/ἀμέλω as well<sup>28</sup>. Consequently, it seems reasonable to use the ancient Greek name amolgeus for the late Classical-Hellenistic vessel.

24 ANAGNOSTAKIS – PAPAMASTORAKIS 2008, 223–228.

25 ANAGNOSTAKIS – PAPAMASTORAKIS 2008, 223.

26 ANAGNOSTAKIS – PAPAMASTORAKIS 2008, 223.

27 E. Gkini-Tsofopoulou (in PAPANIKOLA-BAKIRTZI 2002, 131 no.136) associated the Byzantine vessel with the Modern Greek armeos, while ANAGNOSTAKIS – PAPAMASTORAKIS 2008, 223–226, recommended the word amolgeus after the study of the Byzantine literature.

28 SKANDALIDIS 2015, 112: αρμεός<αρμεγός/ αρμογός / αμολγός<αρμέγω/ἀμέλω. Several other relevant words come from this verb too: αρμεγάρι in Crete, αμουργ(κ)ι in Rhodes; SPEIS 1995, 94; ANAGNOSTAKIS – PAPAMASTORAKIS 2008, 235 note 39. In a Greek folk song for sheep keeping in Naxos the armeos is mentioned ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r\\_fR0rSLfiA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_fR0rSLfiA)). Many thanks are due to Naxian Yannis Kritikos for the notice.

**Table 1**  
Late Classical – Hellenistic milk pails

Provenance	Height	Diameter		Date
		Base	Body	
Kerameikos (Building Z3)	19,5		20	late 4th c. BCE
Mesimeri (Sanctuary)	24,8	17,2		second half of the 4th – late 2nd c. BCE
Salamis (House)	12	10/11	~16/17	second half of 2nd c. BCE
Athenian Agora, (ROTROFF 2006, no. 328)		27		late 2nd – early 1st c. BCE
Athenian Agora, (ROTROFF 2006, no. 327)	24,2	32	34,2	late 2nd c. BCE – early 1st c. CE

Approaching the function of our vessel, we can observe that the spout served for the transfusion of milk to a bigger vessel<sup>29</sup> and, as a result, such a vessel was not suitable for the transfer of milk from a place to another. Rotroff supports that these vessels were more likely used primarily in rural areas and not in a city, while in cities the vessels were in storage<sup>30</sup>. Indeed, according to ancient sources, during Classical and Hellenistic times the use of milk in diet was limited and was preferred only by the people living in the countryside<sup>31</sup>. Thus, the finding of this vessel only in urban contexts – in the Athenian Agora, the Kerameikos (Building Z3) and Salamis – is a matter of big concern. Can we infer the possibility of keeping an animal – probably a goat – within the house enclosure in cities by some families? The small size of the vessel from Salamis, suitable for milking one goat<sup>32</sup>, may be a possible answer<sup>33</sup>. Undoubtedly, we need more proofs for such an interpretation, and, more importantly, we have to define how the ancient houses looked like with other noisy and stinking structures, such as olive presses, kilns etc., included. Furthermore, such an interpretation does not necessarily undermine the first possibility. On the other hand, the known sample from Macedonia comes from a sanctuary<sup>34</sup>. In antiquity there were ›sacred herds‹, and animals belonging to a sanctuary, especially sheep and goat, satisfied the needs for milk, wool, hair and manure instead of victims in sacrifices<sup>35</sup>. Milk was essential to various kinds of libations too<sup>36</sup>. However, I do not concur with the identification of this heavy vessel as a ritual vessel, especially when other smaller spouted vessels, like the kantharoi with phallus-shaped spout<sup>37</sup>, could better serve as such.

29 ANAGNOSTAKIS – PAPAMASTORAKIS 2008, 223–226; ROTROFF 2016, 417.

30 ROTROFF 2016, 416–417.

31 VALAVANIS 2008, 90–91. ROTROFF 2016, 417 note 33.

32 For the bigger ones from the Athenian Agora Rotroff (ROTROFF 2016, 417) says that »the capacity of the vessels, perhaps close to 10 liters, is easily sufficient for more than one animal«.

33 On the basis of what we know for other occupations in the ancient cities; for example, Rotroff (ROTROFF 2006, 130–131) and more recently Mayrofydis (MAYROFRYDIS 2015) have suggested the urban beekeeping.

34 The sanctuary at Mesimeri is probably a chthonian sanctuary of Demeter and Kore (KEFALIDOU 2012, 440).

35 JAMESON 2014, 220–222.

36 EKROTH 2002, 61. 65. 67. 70. 75. 109. 278. 325.

37 PAPPAS 2012.



In conclusion, the identification of this unusual vessel as a milk pail poses some new questions that need answers. The form of the milk pail finds parallels in the ceramic repertoire of the Aegean throughout the ages, and the ethnographic parallels can often lead to approach many unknown aspects of the daily life in the ancient Greek world. Besides, pottery is not a monolithic cultural product, and the search for the function and way of use of some clay vessels is more complex than we usually think.

## Bibliography

- ANAGNOSTAKIS – PAPAMASTORAKIS 2008 I. Anagnostakis – T. Papamastorakis, Ἀγορευοῦντες καὶ ἀμέλγοντες, in: *Η Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Γάλακτος και των Προϊόντων του, Ι' Τριήμερο Εργασίας, Ξάνθη 7–9 Οκτωβρίου 2005* (Athens 2008) 211–237
- BALANCE ET AL. 1989 M. Balance – J. Boardman – S. Corbett – S. Hood, Excavations in Chios 1952–1955, Byzantine Emporio, *BSA Suppl.* 15 (London 1989)
- BASS – DOORNINCK 1982 G. F. Bass – F. H. van Doorninck, Yassi Ada I. A Seventh-Century Byzantine Shipwreck, *The Nautic Archaeology Series* 1 (College Station TX 1982)
- BLONDÉ ET AL. 2010 F. Blondé – A. Muller – D. Mulliez, Terra Sigillata et céramiques communes de la fin de l'antiquité à Thasos, le cas de DOM5, in: D. Papanikola-Bakirtzi – D. Kousoulakou (eds.), *Κεραμική της Υστερης Αρχαιότητας από τον Ελλαδικό Χώρο (3ος–7ος αι. μ.Χ.), Επιστημονική Συνάντηση, Θεσσαλονίκη 12–16 Νοεμβρίου 2006* (Thessaloniki 2010) 402–420
- CHAIRETAKIS 2011 Y. Chairetakis, Το οικοπέδο Ζούργη στο Αμπελάκι Σαλαμίνας: στρωματογραφία και χρονολόγηση, *Akamas* 5, 2011, 25–27
- CHAIRETAKIS 2018 Y. Chairetakis, Οικιστική οργάνωση και χωροταξία στη Σαλαμίνα από τον 6ο ως τον 1ο αι. π.Χ., *Αθήμ. Διδακτορική Διατριβή* (Athens 2018)
- DEKOULAKOU 2008 I. Dekoulakou, Ανασκαφές στη Σαλαμίνα, 1985–2007, *Akamas* 2, 2008, 10–13
- EKROTH 2002 G. Ekroth, The Sacrificial Rituals of Greek Hero-Cults in the Archaic to the Early Hellenistic Periods, *Kernos Suppl.* 12 (Liège 2002)
- GEROUSHI 1992–1993 E. Gerousi, Κεραμικά παλαιοχριστιανικών χρόνων από την περιοχή του «Επισκοπείου» της Σάμου, *ADelt* A 47–48, 1992–1993, 251–268
- IMELLOS – POLYMEROU-KAMILAKI 1983 S. D. Imellos – A. Polymerou-Kamilaki, Παραδοσιακός υλικός βίος του Ελληνικού λαού (Athens 1983)
- JAMESON 2014 M. H. Jameson, *Cults and Rites in Ancient Greece. Essays on Religion and Society* (New York NY 2014)
- KEFALIDOU 2012 E. Kefalidou, “From pre-war Mesimeri”. A Sanctuary of Ancient Krousis and Other Finds from the Collections of the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, in: M. Tiverios – P. Nigdelis – P. Adam-Veleni (eds.), *THREPTERIA. Studies on Ancient Macedonia* (Thessaloniki 2012) 414–462
- KNIGGE 2005 U. Knigge, *Der Bau Z, Kerameikos* 17 (München 2005)
- KOILAKOU 1998 Ch. Koilakou, 1η Εφορεία Βυζαντινών Αρχαιοτήτων, *ADelt* B1 53, 1998, 93–108



- KORRE-ZOGRAFOU 1995 K. Korre-Zografou, Τα κεραμικά του ελληνικού χώρου (Athens 1995)
- LIAGKOURAS 1973–1974 A. Liagkouras, Αθήναι-Αττική, *ADelt* B1 29, 1973–1974, 31–82
- MAYROFIDIS 2015 G. Mayrofidis, Αστική μελισσοκομία, *Melissokomiki Epitheorisi*, November-December (2015) 404–406
- PAPANIKOLA-BAKIRTZI 2002 D. Papanikola-Bakirtzi (ed.), Καθημερινή Ζωή στο Βυζάντιο (Athens 2002)
- PAPPA 2012 V. Pappa, Κάνθαροι με φαλλόμορφη προχοή από το ιερό στην ακρόπολη της Μινώας Αμοργού, in: P. Adam-Veleni – K. Tzanavari (eds.), Διηέσσα, Τιμητικός τόμος για την Κατερίνα Ρωμιοπούλου (Thessaloniki 2012) 315–322
- PSAROPOULOU 2005 B. Psaropoulou, Η χρηστική κεραμική του χθες στη Νάξο (Rethymno 2005)
- ROBINSON 1959 H. S. Robinson, Pottery of the Roman Period. Chronology, *Agora* 5 (Princeton NJ 1959)
- ROTROFF 2006 S. I. Rotroff, Hellenistic Pottery. The Plain Wares, *Agora* 33 (Princeton NJ 2006)
- ROTROFF 2016 S. I. Rotroff, An Ancient Milk Pail in Athens, in: M. Giannopoulou – Ch. Kallini (eds.), Ήχάδιν. Τιμητικός τόμος για τη Στέλλα Δρούγου (Athens 2016) 406–418
- SKANDALIDIS 2015 M. E. Skandalidis, Λεξικό του Ιδιώματος της Νισύρου (Athens 2015)
- SPEIS 1995 G. Speis, Παραδοσιακές τέχνες και επαγγέλματα (Athens 1995)
- VALAVANIS 2008 P. Valavanis, Το γάλα και τα προϊόντα του στον αρχαίο ελληνικό και ρωμαϊκό κόσμο, in: Η Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Γάλακτος και των Προϊόντων του, Ι' Τριήμερο Εργασίας, Ξάνθη 7–9 Οκτωβρίου 2005 (Athens 2008) 89–96