



Two Hadra Hydriae in the Collection of the Patriarchal Sacristy in Alexandria

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Introduction

Hadra hydriae have been seen by many scholars as being emblematic of the necropolis of Alexandria, since they represent a type of funerary urn that was widely used in the Hellenistic city. Their name refers to the site of the Hadra cemetery, situated to the east of Alexandria. This was one of the earliest sites to be systematically excavated (1883–1884), resulting in the discovery of a substantial number of funerary urns of this type¹. Since then, Hadra hydriae have been discovered in other cemeteries in the western and eastern parts of the city. However, they are not exclusive to Alexandria. Hadra hydriae have been found in several places across the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean—in Cyprus, Rhodes, Athens and also Crete, which appears to have been a major centre of production for this type of urn². Still, there is a strong association with the history and society of the city of Alexander, based on written evidence inscribed on the surface of a few dozen Hadra hydriae, indicating name, status or even profession of their occupants³. On the basis of the inscribed examples, Hadra hydriae are dated to the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE. Other hydriae-type urns were used in Alexandrian cemeteries throughout the Hellenistic period.

Hadra hydriae are divided in two main categories⁴: 1) White Ground hydriae, identified by the whitish layer of clay slip applied to the porous surface of the urn, which serves as a ground for painted decoration in a wide range of colours; and 2) Clay Ground hydriae, which are made of harder, granulated pinkish clay, which is glazed in variations of ochre. They typically bear monochrome decoration – from reddish brown to black – with floral motifs such as laureated wreaths, vine and ivy tendrils, in a few cases combined with scenes featuring human and animal figures.

1 NEROUTSOS 1887, 61–68; NEROUTSOS 1888, 1–2. 102–116. The term ›Hadra hydriae‹ was introduced by Merriam in 1885, upon the study of a large group of Hadra hydriae, which had been transferred to New York the previous year.

2 See CALLAGHAN – JONES 1985.

3 For examples, see BRECCIA 1911, 188–205; COOK 1966a; FRASER 1953; SEG 15 no. 856; 21 no. 1761; 32 no. 1972; 39 no. 1692; 41 no. 1610; 44 no. 1443; 46 no. 1044; 48 no. 1973 and 2038bis; 49 no. 2124; 51 no. 2107–2109; 52 no. 1761; 53 no. 1601; 53 no. 1942; 55 no. 1780–1805. In a few cases, information is included for other non-funerary uses of these vases, before they ended up in the cemeteries, see CALLAGHAN – JONES 1985, 2. For a comprehensive catalogue and study of Hadra hydriae, see the unpublished thesis of A. Enklaar (ENKLAAR 1992).

4 This basic division was established by Merriam (MERRIAM 1885). It is still widely accepted by the scholarly community.



Fig. 1. Hydria A. – a. Front; b. Back; c. Left side; d. Right side; e. Top; f. Bottom; g. Plaster-cover; h. Neck; i. Base; j. Shoulder.

The two Hadra hydriae presented in this paper are the only two artefacts from the Hellenistic period that are held in the collection of the recently inaugurated *Sacristy of the Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa*⁵. Unfortunately, no information is preserved regarding the context of their discovery, yet their Alexandrian provenance seems more than probable, as this is the origin of the majority of the Sacristy's exhibits⁶. Both of them belong to the category of the Clay Ground hydriae, sharing some shape characteristics: the mouth is straight; the neck is set off from the ovoid body; the body has a vertical handle, which extends from the middle of the neck to the shoulder, and two horizontal handles, curved slightly upwards and round in section. Both hydriae are preserved in a complete state, and only some minor conservation treatment was needed before their exhibition in the museum. Also, they share similar decoration, details of which will be described in the individual sections below.

A. Hadra Hydria of the Clay Ground Type (fig. 1)

H. 36; D. of body 22; D. of lip 9; D. of foot 13.5.

Date: 3rd century BCE, according to dated inscribed examples⁷.

The hydria is in a good state of preservation. There is minor sporadic denting on the surface, with more substantial damage to the right of the left handle. Also, there is a large oval dent at the lower part of the body under the left handle, revealing the inner colour of the clay. Most of the original plaster seal on the mouth of the hydria is preserved.

The decoration, one of the simplest versions of the kind, is applied in maroon. Thin striped bands encircle the top surface of the lip and the inside of the neck. Short diagonal lines decorate the side edge surface of the lip as well as the surfaces of the three handles. On the neck, there is a thin stripe at the height of the upper junction of the vertical handle; the middle part of the neck is encircled with a single spray of ivy. On the shoulder of the vase, at the junction with the neck, there is a round necklace with dots.

Two double stripes form a horizontal band around the body of the urn, demarcating an area that is as broad as the height of the two horizontal handles that they interlink. Two decorative registers are formed between the horizontal handles, at the front and the back of the vase respectively. The front side features a wreath made of two thin laurel branches, which usher from two rectangles of trellis work, positioned next to each handle and joined at the centre. The rear side is decorated with an indistinct motif, positioned beneath each vertical handle, which is reminiscent of a garland, or a deep frill of fabric. Finally, the base is encircled with a wide painted zone, interleaved with bands of undecorated surface on its upper and lower edges.

B. Hadra Hydria of the Clay Ground Type (figs. 2–3)

H. 43.5; D. of body 20.5; D. of lip 14.5; D. of foot 9.5.

Date: 3rd century BCE; according to dated inscribed examples⁸.

5 The Sacristy (archaeological museum) is situated in an impressive underground cistern, discovered during the course of undertaking renovation work in the premises of the Patriarchate in the 1990s. It was Patriarch Theodoros II's initiative to convert the cistern into an impressive museum, which would display the Patriarchate's remarkable collection of antiquities, dating from the Pharaonic to the Islamic periods. The inauguration of the Sacristy took place November, 27th, 2013.

6 The Sacristy collection consists of donations made by Greek Alexandrian nobles mainly during the 19th and 20th centuries. Some of these people were known for being active members of the Archaeological Society of Alexandria, as well as collectors of Alexandrian antiquities – including Hadra hydriae – who had also made major donations to the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria. See SEIF EL-DIN 2010, 94–95.

7 Compare, Metropolitan Museum access. no. 90.9.50; COOK 1966b, no. 21.

8 Compare, Metropolitan Museum access. no. 90.9.13; COOK 1966b, no. 8.



Fig. 2: Hydria B. – a. Front; b. Back; c. Left side; d. Right side; e. Detail of decoration; f. Mouth; g. Bottom; h. Base; i. Lid.



Fig. 3: Hydria B.

The hydria is preserved in complete form, apart from its lid, of which only the bottom is preserved. The body is slightly more oblique, compared to A. The decoration is applied directly on the natural clay in a blackish-brown colour, mostly preserved in good state. Even in parts where the painted decoration has been eroded, the ›riverbed‹ of the black paint is still detectable allowing the reconstruction of the original decoration. Black circles run around the edge and on the underside of the lip. On the neck, there is one black stripe at the height of the upper junction of the vertical handle. A wreath of two laurel branches runs horizontally around the neck, meeting at the centre of the front face. This element might be seen as painted imitation of some rare examples of actual bronze wreaths, which were placed around the neck of Alexandrian funerary urns. There is some indication that such wreaths are likely to have

borne the head of the deceased during the cremation process⁹.

On the shoulder of the vase, at the junction with the neck, there is a round ›necklace‹ with dots. Also, a black band, combined with a zone of arches with dots, runs around the lower part of the shoulder. This black band corresponds to another thicker black band between stripes on the body, which runs just under the two horizontal handles. Thus, two decorative registers are formed between the horizontal handles, at the front and the rear side of the vase respectively. On the front side, the register is further framed with two sections filled with dots (horizontally) and two indistinct radiated motifs (vertically). Within the frame runs a slender vine ornament. On the rear side, there is a simplistic motif recalling garlands or a deep frill of fabric. The base was painted in black, apart from a stripe of clay surface, running next to the lower edge of the foot.

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⁹ See for instance, the funerary urn with a bronze wreath on its neck found in the Chatby cemetery: Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 16152; BRECCIA 1912, XXXVII, 47.

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