



Wine shipment and grape- growing in Antiquity

WEST APARTMENT



Bas-relief of the Cabrières d'Aigues towing scene.

The towing* scene

Included in the large wall painting, a mold made from a bas relief in limestone presents a towing scene. This “bas relief of the nautes*” is kept in the Calvet Museum (Avignon) and dates from the Gallo-Roman era (late first century, early second century A.D.).

Measuring 148 centimeters long and 58 centimeters wide, the block was placed in a corner of a construction, most certainly a mausoleum (funeral monument), that was about ten meters high. A mausoleum of this size was generally meant for wealthy men, in this case probably a landowner. On the back of this card, you will find a drawing that restitutes its appearance.

This towing scene is associated to two other fragments: a plowing scene representing a man who walks in front of his team and stacked amphorae evoking a storehouse (see photos on back). Thus, the entire chain of producing and selling wine is represented.

What story does this scene tell ?

Two towers (a third one, who leads the group, is missing) pull a boat where the pilot is seated with his oar and rudder. The two men pull on a rope over their left shoulder and use a staff in their other hand as a support for traction. They are dressed in a tunic and wear boots with leather straps and hobnailed soles to ensure a foothold.

The towers are of different ages: the first is beardless and has curly hair; the second is more wrinkled, has a beard and fewer curls. The difficulty of their work is emphasized by their bent silhouettes, straining necks and thick hands.

The boat has a round bottom. The stern and bow are of symmetrical heights, and the short mast is set at the front of the boat with three ropes around it. The boat is less than ten meters long and can carry only a few hundred kilos. Round-bottomed boats (less stable) are rarer than the flat-bottomed boats generally used on rivers. The load is two barrels with strong hoops around them; they are placed crosswise and wedged between the helmsman and the mast.

Above, in the background, there is a tablet with seven flat-bottomed amphorae of the Gallic type. Three of them are covered with wicker weaving. The other four are rounder with very short handles. They suggest a storage area near a river, probably for a wine merchant.

Glossary

Towing : a way of pulling a boat along a waterway. It required the creation of open pathways along the banks, which are called towpaths.

Nautes : this was a guild of wealthy shipbuilders and merchants who navigated on the rivers of Gaul. The term comes from the Greek word *nautês*, meaning “sailor” or “seaman”.



From discovery to restoration



Photograph of the three blocks from the mausoleum (M. Deydier).

The mausoleum from which this towing scene was taken was discovered in 1886 at Cabrières d'Aigues (Vaucluse) by Toussaint Guérin. The towing scene was sealed to two other blocks (plowing team and amphorae) for practical reasons, although these blocks make up a corner of the mausoleum.

In the 2000s, restoration work consisted in detaching the blocks, cleaning them and filling in the missing parts.



Suggested restitution of the mausoleum. Two hypothetical arrangements of the blocks in the monument (J.-M. Gassend).

Amphorae and barrels

Like the amphorae, the barrels were inscribed with their contents and origin. The development of barrel use is due to the fact that they are easy to roll and less fragile than amphorae. By the fifth century, they had replaced amphorae.

The towing scene shows both amphorae and barrels, since the two types of container were used together. Because barrels are biodegradable, their archeological study is more difficult. Remains dating from the first century B.C. have nonetheless been found in Europe.