



Greek Pithos

A *pithos* (plural: *pithoi*) is a very large earthenware jar which was used by the Ancient Greeks for storing liquids such as oil, wine and water or for holding food such as grain and olives. Because of their large size they were also used as coffins for the burial of the dead.

Pithoi were almost always made from earthenware because it helped to keep things cool, repelled water, dirt, insects, and rodents. Most *pithoi* were as tall as or taller than a human! This particular piece is a small copy of an original found in Greece.

The bases of the *pithoi* were flat so that they could be placed in rows or lined up along a hallway, walkway, or staircase. Some *pithoi* were set into holes in the floor. Some had handles but others did not and were believed to have been handled the use of ropes. *Pithoi* with pointed rather than flat bases such as this one, and with narrow, sealable mouths were made specifically for shipping: a *pithos*, however broad-based, had no chance of staying upright in an ancient ship; therefore *pithoi* with pointed ends were laid on the bottom of the ship, packed tightly together and secured with ropes around their necks for the duration of the sea voyage.

A *pithos* containing oil could easily be turned to the advantage of an enemy. They only had to knock over a *pithos* full of oil and touch a torch to it to produce a major fire.

Most of the palaces of the *Bronze Age Aegean* were burned at one time or another in this way.

The size of a *pithos* also made it a convenient coffin, especially where wood was in such short supply. It also appears in Ancient Greek Mythology: The fabled 'Pandora's Box' was in fact a *Pithos*, but was mistakenly translated into English to the form we are familiar with today.

