

Pots, paintings and perfumes

The Ancient Greeks stored oil, and most liquids, in vases. As oil was precious, most oil containers have a small mouth to stop too much pouring out. The main types of Greek oil containers were **lekythoi**, **alabastra** and **aryballoi**. By studying where these containers were found and then looking at the shape of each vase and pictures on them we can work out the uses of each vase.



Slave girl offering an alabastron to a woman, on an Attic red-figure pyxis (ca. 450-425 bc) in Paris (Louvre).

Lekythoi are one-handed jugs with long necks. Large numbers of lekythoi have been found in and around graves. The images of tombs on many of them suggest that they were used in burials [[Citizenship 11](#); [Death 21](#)]. **White ground** lekythoi are only found in graves [[Household 2](#); [Citizenship 11](#); [Death 21](#)]. The white (back)ground is made of a fine clay painted to the surface of a pot after it had been fired (cooked in a **kiln** or oven). As a result the white chips off easily. Artists painted brightly coloured figures on the white ground, but the delicate paint was not fired so most of the colour has worn off, making it difficult to see the scenes showing aspects of death [[Citizenship 11](#)]. These vases would only be used once, when they were given to the dead, so the fading paint did not matter to the Ancient Greeks.

Alabastra had cylindrical bodies with pointed ends [[Citizenship 4-6](#)]. Most could not stand on their own but some vase paintings show them being hung on the wall by a string when not in use (the string would go through the alabastron's tiny handle). **Aryballoi** worked the same way but

they were round. Some vase paintings show men carrying **aryballoi** while involved in athletics, but **alabastra** in vase paintings are usually being held by women [[Citizenship 17b](#)]. Scholars think that **aryballoi** held men's perfumed oil and **alabastra** held women's perfumed oil. Some scientists have even found chemicals that prove oil was once in the vases.

The scenes painted on the **alabastra** themselves can tell us a lot about life in Ancient Greece. Many scenes on alabastra include the subject of love. One shows a boy and a girl together with **Eros**, the god of love, above them [[Household 4](#)]. Another alabastron shows Eros with a woman holding a crown, which could mean she is a bride [[Body Beautiful 56](#)]. The vase paintings also show domestic scenes of women seated in the household holding everyday objects [[Citizenship 17b](#)]. Sometimes we see another female opposite the woman holding an alabastron. Their hair, dress and pose suggest that these women might be servants or slaves. This also suggests that the alabastron is a sign of high status.

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