

Tear Bottle History

It's difficult to say exactly when the first tear bottles came into being, however, we can be certain that the legends began in antiquity. The Old Testament of the Bible (KJV) references collecting tears in a bottle in Psalm 56:8 when David prays to God, "Thou tellest my wanderings, put thou my tears in Thy bottle; are they not in Thy Book?" The reference predates the birth of Christ by over 1000 years.

For the purpose of this discussion, we'll think of antiquity as the time significantly before Christ. In fact, discoveries of ancient objects made near the time of Christ continue to guide our perspective on history.

It's difficult to say exactly when the first tear bottles came into being, however, in the Old Testament of the Bible (KJV), a reference to collecting tears in a bottle appears in Psalm 56:8 when David prays to God, "Thou tellest my wanderings, put thou my tears in Thy bottle; are they not in Thy Book?" David lived from 1055-1015 B.C. and wrote Psalm 56 about 1020 B.C. Tear bottles of the time might be made of glass, pottery, or sardonyx stone. Wineskins or animal skins were also a common vessel for carrying fluids.

One might speculate that tear bottles were common enough during these times that David would make reference to the concept of collecting tears in a bottle so that his audiences would understand his message. Perhaps not. The Psalm reference may have purely metaphorical, only to inspire later use of tear bottles. Interestingly, tear bottles dating from 100 A.D. are still in existence today and are occasionally sold by antiquities dealers. However, I've yet to photograph tear bottles that date earlier than about 100 A.D.



When Middle Eastern tomb raiders around 100 A.D. found small ceramic bottles in tombs of the wealthy, they believed them to be lachrymae. It was common for nobility to be buried with precious items, sometimes gold, but often jewelry. Middle class citizens were occasionally buried with pots and pans.

Because so many small bottles were found in tombs, the theory was developed that they were part of the mourning ritual. The theory was that mourners would cry into the bottles as a sign of respect. It was also been held that mourners would be paid to attend the funerals

of the wealthy: filling tear bottles and wailing loudly to create dramatic impact.

The items called tear bottles were rare in most burials, but common among the wealthy. Egyptian pharaohs were buried with hundreds of these small decorative items. It is still unclear if they developed the theory of tear bottles or lachrymatory out of the blue, or if there was historical precedent.



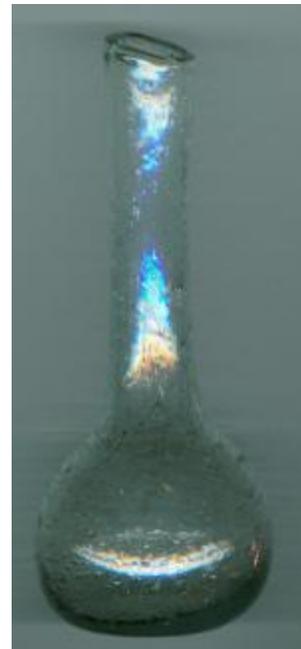
Many scholars today believe the ancient bottles were used for perfumes or medicinal oils (both considered valuable and necessary in the afterlife). Size is an important indication of the use. Many bottles dated to the Hellenistic Period (c. 300 B.C.) are quite large (11-25 cm tall) and would not be practical tear bottles. The only way to know for sure how the bottles were used would be to test the residue in historic bottles to determine if they were used for tears or fragrances. This will certainly happen eventually, but until then, each of us can choose our own belief.

The Roman Period

The Roman period saw the invention of glass blowing around 100 A.D. This new technology allowed thousands of glass bottles to be produced and made bottles more accessible for medicine and perfumes. The tear-drop shape was easily produced and quickly became a common style. More information on apothecary bottles can be found at the Glass Museum.

The confirmed use of bottles during this period by apothecaries lends credibility to the argument that lachrymatory were actually never used to capture tears. The problem with this argument is the reference to capturing tears in the Bible. Regardless of the version or interpretation, it is clear that the concept of capturing tears existing in the popular culture of the time.

Roman lachrymatory are available through a variety of antiquities dealers and auction houses. More info



on these pieces can be found in the collecting section.

Interestingly, the art of glass blowing was largely lost, along with many other things, during the Dark Ages. An interesting perspective on why the Dark Ages began is offered by [Professor Mike Baillie](#). Unfortunately, the tear bottle tradition was also lost for a millennium.

The Victorian Era

The Victorian era is known for many things, including the distinctive art and architecture that flourished during the period. The period is named for Queen Victoria of England. When she came to the throne, a time of sentiment and self-indulgence was ended. By setting a new standard for virtue, she returned respect to the throne and spurred a worldwide movement, The Victorian Era. The Era lasted 63 years, from 1837 to 1901.

The Victorian era is also known for its fascination with death. Elaborate rituals surrounded the everyday occurrences of dying and grieving, and it was in this environment that tear bottles re-surfaced as a popular icon of grief and grieving.



Cigar like styling would make this vial more acceptable to men.

During Victorian funerals, men and women alike would shed tears for the deceased. A more upscale ceremony would distribute lachrymatory for the guests to capture their tears and aid in their mourning.

A most common story of Victorian times is that mourners would shed their tears into a lachrymatory that used a special stopper. When the tears had finally evaporated, the mourning period would be complete. This measured approach may have been an alternative to the structured mourning rituals that are better documented.

Popular references to lachrymatory were apparently common during the period. One subtle, but accurate reference is found in *The Living Age*, a literary journal, in 1898. In the story, *A Fateful Dinner Party*, by H. Meyer Henne, the character Major Blythe discusses consoling a

friend with Mrs. Samuels, "Lady Sloane won't need to go shares with the tear bottle."

The following is an especially poignant poem, also from 1896.

<p>In January of 1896, <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i> published a poem by Frank Dempster Sherman (1860-1916) called "A Tear Bottle." As you will see, the author references the tears of a Greek girl -- which supports the belief that the tear bottle played a part in ancient Greek culture.</p> <p>Reference:</p> <p><i>The Atlantic Monthly: A Magazine of Literature, Science, Art, and Politics.</i></p> <p>Vol LXXVII – January, 1896 – No. CCCCLIX, pages 186-187.</p> <p>An image of the original text can be viewed at Cornell University's Library collection.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">A Tear Bottle</p> <p>Glass, wherein a Greek girl's tears Once were gathered as they fell, After these two thousand years Is there still no tale to tell?</p> <p>Buried with her, in her mound She is dust long since, but you Only yesterday were found Iridescent as the dew, —</p> <p>Fashioned faultlessly, a form Graceful as was hers whose cheek Once against you made you warm While you heard her sorrow speak.</p> <p>At your lips I listen long For some whispered word of her, For some ghostly strain of song In your haunted heart to stir.</p> <p>But your crystal lips are dumb, Hushed the music in you heart: Ah, if she could only come Back again and bid it start!</p> <p>Long is Art, but Life so brief! And the end seems so unjust: This companion of her grief Here to-day, while she is dust!</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Frank Dempster Sherman.</i></p>
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It was also during the Victorian Era that archeology began to take on a new fervor. An interesting view of "contemporary" perspectives can be found in "The Explorations of Di Cesnola in Cyprus", by Hiram Hitchcock. Published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in July 1872. What makes the article so interesting today is the "oneness of the race in all ages." That is, the discovery that each human civilization developed with more commonality than difference. In the record of this discovery is "a white lachrymatory with very delicate incrustation; and a curious one with a long neck." Like many excavations over time, a tear bottle, or sometime ascribed to be one, was part of the find.

The Cornell Library collection contains an original manuscript of this interesting article.

The U.S. Civil War

The U.S. Civil War brought new levels of sorrow to the Victorian era. For example, on June 3, 1864, one of the bloodiest days in the war, nearly 16,000 casualties were reported. In the battle at Cold Harbor, General Ulysses Grant's troops assaulted those of General Robert E. Lee. Battles pitted family, friends, and neighbors against one another. Throughout this period of American history, Victorian traditions of mourning and loss were both helpful for healing and nearly impossible for many to closely follow.

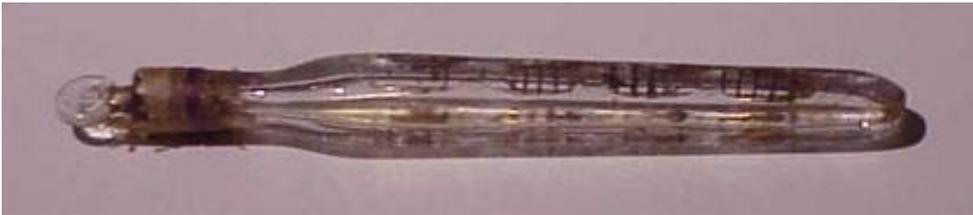


Image courtesy of www.CollectMedicalAntiques.com

Stories of soldiers leaving their wives or new brides with a tear bottle can be found in literature of the day. Some husbands are said to have hoped that the bottles would be full upon their return, as an indication of their wives devotion. Sadly, many of these men never made it back home.

Historical references also indicate that tears were saved as a remembrance of loved ones or to pass along to future generations.

Contemporary Times

Today, tear bottles are used as symbolic gifts of emotion -- for joyous occasions like weddings and birthdays, as well as for the more historic reasons such as mourning and loss. In times of sorrow, a lachrymatory is the perfect gift to share your feelings.

The powerful symbolism behind the tear bottle continues to provide today's writers, musicians and artists with content for their poetry, song and painting.