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THE RELIGIOUS AND ADMINISTRATIVE STAMPED AMPHORAE OF LATE ANTIQUITY

A systematic interest in stamps from the Late Roman/Early Byzantine to Late Byzantine periods has arisen only in the last two decades. This paper concerns a comprehensive presentation of all the Late Roman stamped amphora types and both the religious and administrative stamps they bear. We focus on the stamps with administrative content and meaning, found on LR 1 and LR 13 amphorae. In particular, we will present, as a case study, an overview as well as new information on the production of LR 13 amphorae, which were often double stamped by the state, with a 'main' stamp bearing the bust of the emperor and the inscription of the eparch of the islands and a 'secondary' stamp which included official inscriptions, monograms and interesting abbreviations, such as the '8' ligature of the ounce (ὀγγία), as we suggest.

Stamps – Late Roman Amphorae – LRA 13 – Ounce-‘ὀγγία’ – Double stamping

A systematic interest in stamps from the Late Roman/Early Byzantine to the Late Byzantine period has emerged only in the last two decades. As we have mentioned elsewhere, “Today there is an increasing need for the creation of a Corpus of Byzantine Amphora Stamps, which will allow the research of the different types of stamps and the different needs they served in all the historical periods of the Byzantine Empire to be promoted” (Diamanti and Todorova forthcoming).

This paper attempts an overview of all types of stamped Late Roman/Early Byzantine amphorae. These stamps, are quite rare in number comparing with other periods, but are found, as we shall see, in a wide range of the amphora types of late Antiquity (LRA 1, LRA 2, LRA 5/6, LRA 13 etc).

Based on their shape, the stamps are usually round (only a few are cross shaped) and executed on the neck and /or on the handles of the amphorae. Based on their content, the amphorae stamps can be classified in two main categories, the religious and the administrative ones. We will pay more attention to the stamps with administrative content and meaning and we will specifically present, as a case study, an overview and new information on the content of the stamped LR 13 amphorae. Our research over the last twenty-five years has been devoted to them and led to a forthcoming monography where we present a catalogue as well as an analytical overview of all the known administrative stamps on Late Roman amphorae. Some of our results are presented here as well.

The stamps can provide quite direct information about the economic history of their period regarding the following questions: Why did the state ask for them and which was the administrative pyramid of officials charged with carrying out the required process? But before we attempt to answer these questions, we must think in reverse and first look at the general historical conditions and the archaeological context to which the Late Roman stamped amphorae belonged and

ask: What were the historical reasons that prompted the state and, most probably, the church, to control the production and distribution of amphorae?

Let us recall some of the historical events that affected the needs in agricultural goods and, consequently, the production and stamping of their containers, the amphorae: In AD 536, Justinian systematized the supply of his army for the defense of the Black Sea and the Danube from the Aegean islands, Cyprus and Caria, including all these geographically remote areas under joint administration, the well-known *quaestura Justiniani exercitus*. Justinian's successors were pressed even further to ensure the supply of these areas due to the Avaro-Slav conflicts and invasions, the main threat to Byzantium's northern borders for about sixty years (AD 562-626) (Patoura-Spanou 2008: 52-53; Gkoutzioukostas and Moniaros 2009: 127-129, 134-137; Diamanti 2019: 205-206; Diamanti 2023: 273-274, 286, 291). Moreover, a few years after the creation of the *quaestura* administrative unit, the Great Plague broke out (AD 541/2) which caused the death of thousands of taxpayers and the delayed payment of soldiers, part of which at least should have been paid in kind by then (Treadgold 1995: 16, 165; Laiou and Morrisson 2007: 24, 38-39; Diamanti 2019: 209, note 32; Diamanti 2023: 291). Thus, the main concern for the state and the emperor, was the supply of the capital and the army, and the main income was the agricultural products, which were usually transported in amphorae (Oikonomides 2002: 979; Treadgold 1995: 19, 158, 187; Haldon 1995 VI: 140-142, VII: 14, VIII: 120-122; Diamanti 2019: 209-210, notes 34-35, 38, where the previous bibliography; Diamanti forthcoming). Therefore, one can assume that these special regulatory amphora stamping mechanisms were used from the state and the church to address some of the above historical events and crises through the control of the economic circulation of agricultural goods.

The stamps with religious content, symbols, and inscriptions on amphorae – in addition to the large number of known incised and painted inscriptions of the same kind – indicate the participation of the church, religious communities and institutes in the Byzantine trade network and can be found in relatively small numbers but on quite a wide variety of amphora types (Bernal-Casasola 2010; Bernal-Casasola 2019: 575-577).

Of great interest is the group of examples of the Keay LII type amphorae, dating mainly to the 5th century, produced in Calabria and found at the Basilica Hilariana on the Caelian Hill in Rome and at a Jewish community settlement at Bova Marina in southern Calabria, with their handles stamped with the menorah symbol (Pacetti 1998: 197, 199, fig. 8.3-4; Arthur 1989b: 135, 138-139, fig. 1.8; Bernal-Casasola 2010: 21-22; Bernal-Casasola 2019: 576-577, fig. 12.D). It is also highly indicative that the stamp of a Keay LII amphora type of the same period, found in Palatine Hill in Rome, was again of religious content, a Christogram (Panella et al. 2010: 63, 73, fig. 3.41).

As Paul Arthur suggested, the existence of the stamps is “archaeological documentation of institutionalized directional or tied trade”. Thus, the menorah stamps are associated with the Jewish community that produced food for its own people in specific ways and in a type of permitted containers, while the Christogram ones are associated with an ecclesiastical authority in Calabria (Arthur 1989b: 139; Pacetti 1998: 199).

In a 6th-century Byzantine shipwreck in Varna, two stamped specimens of an MR5/Zeest 80 type amphora, dated to the late 5th century, were found. The stamps were cross-shaped and applied on the neck of the amphorae. They contained a religious inscription which was read as Θ[EOTOK] E BOHΘEI TΩ TOY TΩ EΠΓΩ (H[oly Mothe]r, help to the deed [of] this [person]) (Minchev 2011: 150-156, fig. 14-15). We suggest that inscription could be read as Θ[EOTOK] E BOHΘEI TΩ TOYTΩ EΠΓΩ or Θ[EOTOK] E BOHΘEI TΩ EΠΓΩ TOYTΩ (Mother of God, help to this deed). Thus, we argue that it is not so likely that these stamps are associated with a person, a local anonymous potter who sought the protection of the Mother of God for his business. For us, the second suggestion is more likely, i.e. that these stamps indicate the connection of their workshops with ecclesiastical authorities engaged in the trade for which they sought the protection of the Mother of God.

Another very interesting kind of religious stamp of this type is represented by an example found at Yenikapi, Istanbul (the Port of Theodosius in Constantinople). It contains the image of an equestrian saint. It has been supported that it is Saint George and the inscription around it refers to a Theodora (Kara 2015: 249). However, the name on the inscription is masculine and the saint is Saint Theodore (for the early sphragistic evidence concerning the iconography of Saint Theodore as the first warrior saint to be depicted as an equestrian dragon slayer, before Saint George, see Cotsonis 2020: 111).

There are LR 5/6 type amphorae found in one of the auxiliary rooms of Ramat Rahel monastery, outside Jerusalem, dating to the 6th-7th centuries. They bear stamps with the symbol of the cross, either simple or of the Maltese type, on their handles. The complex of rooms that was found consisted

of an area of probable workshops and industrial installations, including an olive-press. The production of these amphorae at the monastic complex and the parallel production of oil confirms the systematic involvement of the church in trade (Aharoni 1964: 16, fig. 9.4-5; Arthur 1989a: 85, fig. 6).

A cross shaped monogram, on a late version of LRA 2 found in Saraçhane, was interpreted until now as a name, ‘Themistou’ (Hayes 1992: 77, no. 1, pl. 13.1). Since then, similar examples were found at Yenikapi and Bathonea (Kara 2015: 244-245, fig. 2a-b; Kara 2017: 278, 281). According to Katerina Chamilaki another similar example was found at Kastri, a Late Roman settlement in Boeotia (personal communication: Chamilaki forthcoming). In our opinion the suggestion of the specific name, based on the letters of the monogram, is not so strong. Furthermore, this would be almost a unique instance in Late Roman Amphorae stamps to bear just the name of an individual. For us, in combination with the correct reading of the letters and the existence of the letter ‘Θ’ which could refer to ‘Θεός’ or ‘Θεοτόκος’, it is more likely that it has a religious meaning for the protection of the people and the goods involved in the specific trade (a suggestion among the many one could propose is: XAPITI ΘEOY EIMI (O EIMI) (1 Corinthians 15:10. By the grace of God, I am what I am).

Finally, before we proceed to the administrative stamps found on amphorae of LRA 1 type, we must mention the few known and very interesting LRA 1 examples which are stamped on the neck with the symbol of the Maltese type cross, and which were found at Antinoopolis and Yenikapi. Dominique Pieri suggests the connection of this kind of cases with church workshops (Pieri 2012: 45-46, fig. 2.13.3, end of the 6th century; Kara 2015: 248, fig. 7a-b, dated at 5th-6th centuries). It is also very interesting that a series of plaster stoppers found in Egypt, which are often associated with this type of amphorae, are stamped with religious symbols (cross, Christogram) and inscriptions, and offer another strong indication of the activities of the church and monasteries in trade (Egloff 1977: 180-184, pl. 20; Pieri 2005: 77-78, fig. 37; Bernal-Casasola 2010: 24; Thomas 2018: 17-18).

The stamps with administrative content and meaning are found exclusively on the two well-known types of amphorae of the period: the LRA 1 and 13. Thus, our presentation of the research on administrative stamps begins with the small group of LR 1 amphorae stamps that have simple or cross shaped monograms of cities. The LRA 1 city stamps (for an analytical catalogue and discussion of these examples see Diamanti, forthcoming), refer to cities of Cilicia, namely Corycos and Elaioussa Sebaste (Popescu 1976: 170, no. 151, 313, no. 306; Toropu and Tatulea 1987: 132, fig. 41.7-9; Opaït 2004: 295, fig. 4; Gherghe and Amon 2011: 24, fig. 1.B, 2; Opaït 2017: 596; Kara 2015: 247-248, fig. 5-6. For a new, very interesting example coming from an archaeological context of Limyra, see Bes, Diamanti and Dolea 2023). The region of Cilicia is well known as the first and largest known production center of this type of amphora. This is testified not only by the archaeological research, but also by the epigraphical sources. In other words, these stamps probably indicate the annona related services and the privileges of these Cilician cities and their *navicularii*, information which

we have from the well-known *Abydos* inscription (Durlat and Guillou 1984: 590; Decker 2005; Diamanti 2008: 20-23; Diamanti 2010a: 164-165, 221-222; Diamanti 2010b: 4). It seems that most of these stamps date earlier than the middle of the 6th century. Indeed, an example of an imported LR 1 stamped amphora from Halasarna on the island of Cos, from the excavation of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, belongs to a context that dates well before the middle of the 6th century (Diamanti forthcoming; Bes, Diamanti and Dolea 2023). Moreover, although Halasarna co-produced both LR 1 and 13 amphorae, stamps were found only on amphorae of the LRA 13 type and not on any of LRA 1 type. This is very important evidence of absence which, in combination with the earlier date of most, if not all, of the Cilician LRA 1 stamped examples, confirms the early date of this administrative city stamping mechanism. Indeed, we support that, right afterwards, in the second half of the 6th century the standardized mass production of the LRA 1 in many smaller production centers such as Halasarna, indicates

changes in the trade system they served. These changes are also confirmed by the fact that the new production centers do not appear to be producing any stamped examples of the type.

Moreover, we support that in the second half of the 6th century, the pre-existence of city-stamps led the state to the need for a new type of amphora, the LRA 13, which bears stamps of the emperor himself. This signifies, visually as well, the state control over this marine economic network, which was no longer organized at a 'city' level, but at the highest administrative level, by the state itself (Diamanti, forthcoming).

We proceed to the stamps on the LR 13 type of amphorae, which we have chosen as a characteristic case to present the progress of studies concerning the stamped amphorae of Late Antiquity. Of course, our intention in the context of this paper is not to catalogue and analyze all their known examples, since this is the subject of a monograph (Diamanti, forthcoming). Instead, we are going to provide an overview of our research and highlight some new results, always keeping two important factors in mind:

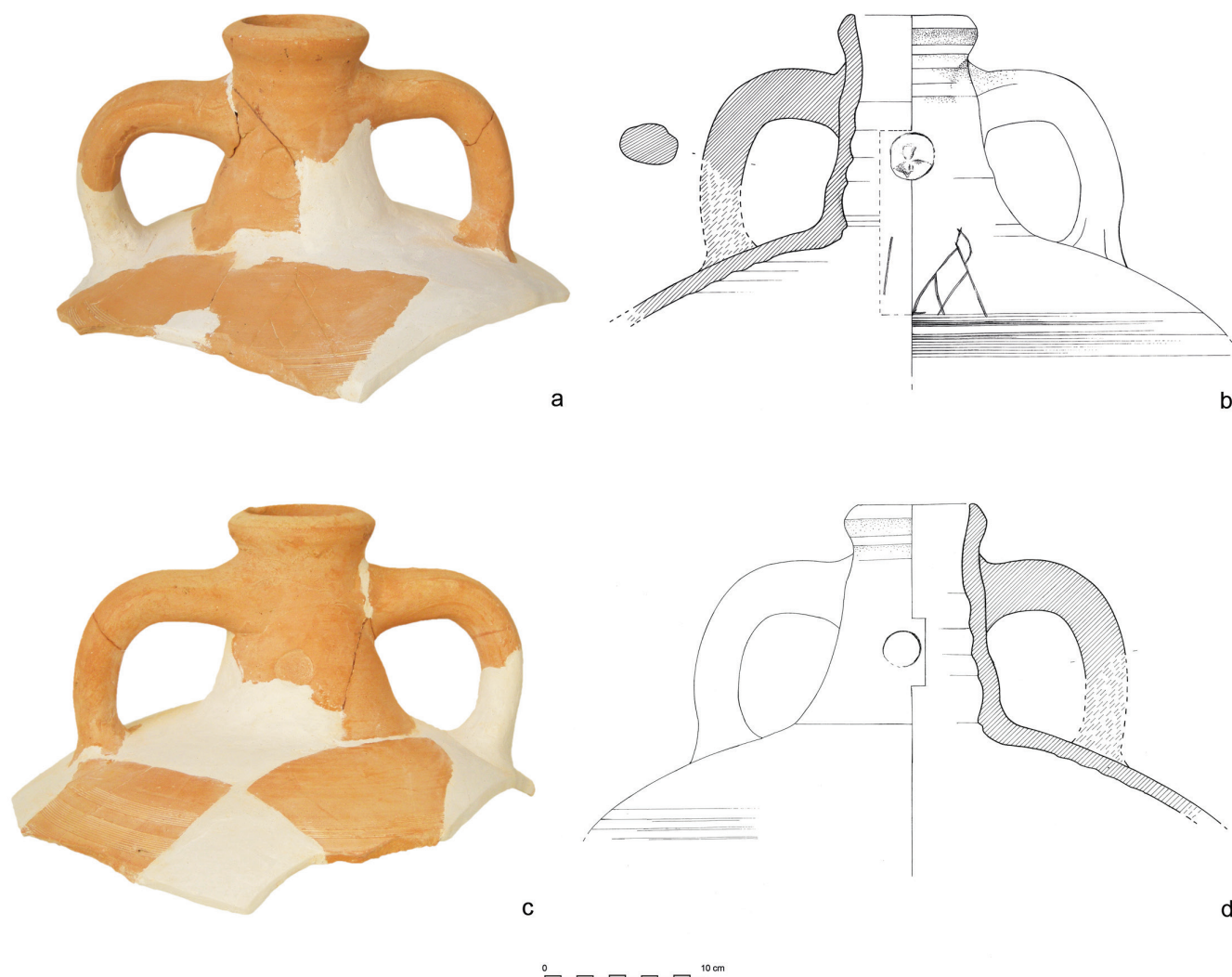


Fig. 1. Coan double stamped LR 13 amphora. Halasarna workshop, Cos, second half of the 6th century (rec. no Θ7/A38, area B/1995). National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA) and Charikleia Diamanti archives; drawings by Aspasia Drigopoulou.

The Coan workshop of Halasarna (Diamanti 2010a) excavated by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Kalopissi-Verti and Panayotidi-Kesisoglou 2020) is currently the only known and systematically excavated production center of the LR 13 stamped amphorae and could serve as a useful tool for examining them and their similar examples in a contextual corpus. The archaeological contexts and the historical data known for Cos allow us to analyze their production in a fairly safe archaeological and historical frame between the second half of the 6th and the first decades of the 7th century. In addition, as we supported a few years ago, in the Halasarna cases where the whole neck of stamped LR 13 examples is saved, there are two stamps, on both front sides of the neck. In this double stamping practice, based on the stamps of the workshop, as well as on other similar examples of bibliography which we will discuss later, we have distinguished a “main/heads” (fig. 1a-b, 2) and a “secondary/tails” stamp (fig. 1c-d, 3-4) as the two sides of a ceramic “coin”, even more since these stamps adopt iconographic motifs of contemporary coins (Diamanti 2012: 2; Diamanti 2019: 206-207; Diamanti forthcoming). Indeed, the “main/heads” stamps bear the imperial bust, the state emblem of the period, in the same way as on contemporary coins, as well as surrounding inscriptions which refer to an *Eparch*. The “secondary/tails” stamps contain monograms, Greek inscriptions and, most importantly, indications of weights, as we have recently supported, interpreting these indications of weight more specifically as the ligature of the ounce, the Byzantine *ὀγγρία* (Diamanti and Todorova forthcoming; Diamanti forthcoming). Since not many necks of stamped LRA 13 have been preserved in whole, we cannot confirm the scale of this standardization. Moreover, this “rule” we see in the Halasarnian workshop has several variations on similar examples found elsewhere but it is by now quite clear that in most cases the two kinds of contents of these stamps usually co-existed in one or the other way.

Let’s see them in detail:

“Main” stamp - Who is in the bust (Fig. 1a-b, 2)? The stamped Late Roman amphorae, in general, were never the point of interest in the publications of the 20th century. The first references, to our knowledge, were by Virginia Grace in 1949 and 1956 (Grace 1949: 188, no. 14; Grace 1956: 171, no. 214). For the example found on the Pnyx she supported, based on iconographic similarities with contemporary coins, that the depicted bust belongs to an emperor, and she noticed that another four similar unpublished examples were found in the Agora of Athens (Opaiț and Diamanti 2014; it is worth mentioning here that our recent research into them has given us the opportunity to confirm the high probability of a Coan origin for two of them: Diamanti forthcoming). In 1992, John Hayes (Hayes 1992: 77, no. 3, pl. 13.3) refers to a state stamp which he also compares with busts of emperors on Byzantine coins. This theory was discussed again in the publication of the first known Aegean workshop for the mass production of LR 1 and LR 13 amphorae at Halasarna, on the island of Cos (Diamanti 2010a: 215). It remains, after 13 years, the only known workshop of Late Antique stamped amphorae. These stamps were a kind of ‘ceramic currency’ in the frame of the *quaestura exercitus*. Indeed, soldiers were paid in kind

with amphorae, the stamps of which were iconographically the same as on the coins with which their wages were paid as well. They carried the effigy of the emperor himself, propagandizing the imperial economic policy everywhere. During the same period, the emperor was also depicted on lead seals of *Kommerkiarioi* (Diamanti 2010a: 88-107, 209-216; Diamanti 2012: 2,4; Diamanti 2019: 207).

Inscription of the “main” stamp - Who is the eparch mentioned in the inscriptions of the amphora stamps surrounding the imperial bust?

He should, obviously, be the one who had the amphora production centers under his jurisdiction. We know one production center, that of Halasarna on the island of Cos, and we have dated it to a period when Cos was administered by the *Eparch of the Islands*, the *Quaestor Exercitus*, whose unit Cos belonged to at exactly the same period the stamped amphorae were produced (late 6th century). The main duty of the *Quaestor Exercitus* was precisely the channeling of the agricultural goods of the wealthy members of his southern administrative unit to the army camps in need on the northern frontiers of the empire (Diamanti 2019: 207-210). We know the names of two of them: Ptolemaios and Innocentios who appear on two of the Agora stamps (for detailed photographs and drawings, see Diamanti forthcoming). Another opinion suggested for the first time in the late 1980s for a stamped LR 13 amphora found in Alexandria was that the depicted bust was that of the eparch of Constantinople (Sztetyło and Borkowski 1986; for a similar opinion: Papanikolaou 2014). This interpretation cannot be easily accepted today after all the advancements in research since then. We are going to briefly mention only two points about this suggestion here: (i) it is unhistorical, since it does not take into account the iconography of the coins of the same period, where the emperor is depicted as on the amphorae stamps and with the insignia which belonged by then only to him (Diamanti 2012: 2, notes 10-11; Diamanti 2019: 206, note 14; Diamanti forthcoming), and (ii) the eparch of Constantinople would not be in control of the production of amphorae that belonged administratively to another eparch.

“Secondary” stamp (Fig. 1c-d, 3-4). In many of the preserved examples of secondary stamps at Halasarna we have recognized that a symbol that was thought to be a monogram, must instead be the ‘8’ ligature of the ounce (*ὀγγρία*). In comparison with similar examples from elsewhere we realized that this ligature is usually followed by the letter K which then stands for the number 20: ‘8 K’, *ὀγγρίαί εἴκοσι* (twenty ounces; for a further discussion of it, see Diamanti forthcoming). As it was mentioned previously, in most cases the two kinds of contents of the “main” and “secondary” stamps co-exist in various ways. We should first refer to a double stamped LR 13 amphora from Kellia which is a perfect representative example of the main and secondary stamps and their arrangement (Bonnet-Borrel and Cattin 1999: 538-539, 565, fig. 489, no. 158) as seen on the Halasarna workshop examples described above. Two other interesting examples found in Myndos bear indications of the ounce inscription (‘8 K’) (Gülsefa 2016: 113, no. 40) together with the imperial bust: in the first case as a double stamping on the same side of the amphora’s neck and in the other case in the same stamp.

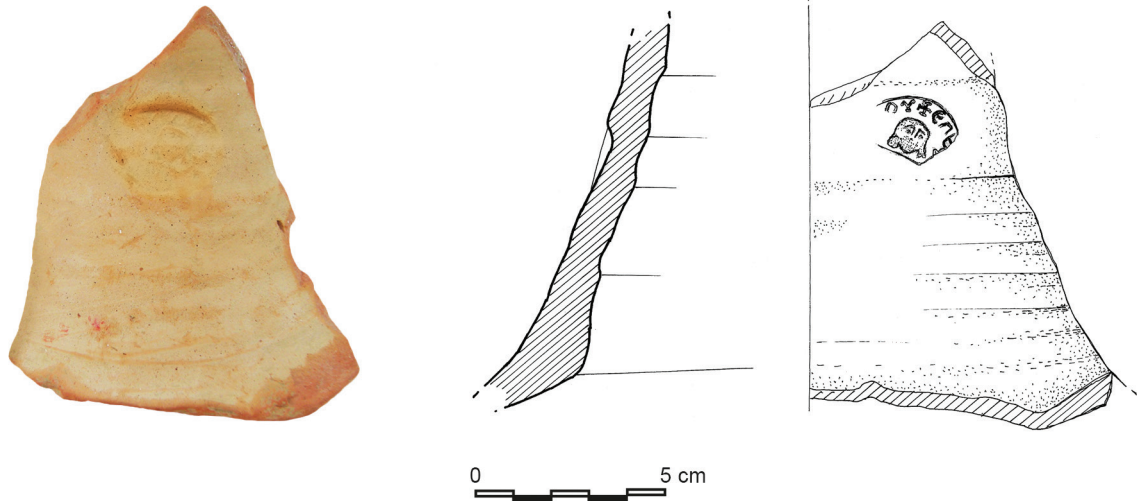


Fig. 2. Bust of emperor on a Coan LR 13 amphora stamp. Inscription + ΕΠ<Ι> Ε[---] [ΕΠΙΛ]ΧΟΥ. Halasarna workshop, Cos, second half of the 6th-first quarter of 7th century (rec. no Z27/A176/1996). NKUA and Charikleia Diamanti archives; drawing by Aspasia Drigopoulou.

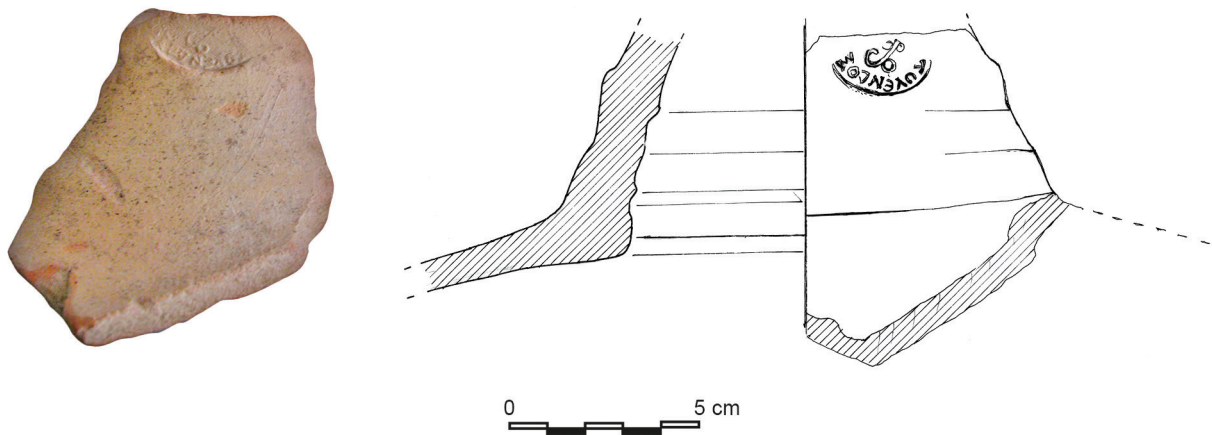


Fig. 3. LRA 13 stamped neck with the ounce ligature '8'. Inscription [---] [ΕΠΙΛ]Χ(?)ΟΥ ΕΝΔΟΞΟ[ΤΑΤΟΥ]. Halasarna workshop-Cos, c. 578-first half of the 7th century (rec. no K23/A41/2002). NKUA and Charikleia Diamanti archives; drawing by Aspasia Drigopoulou.

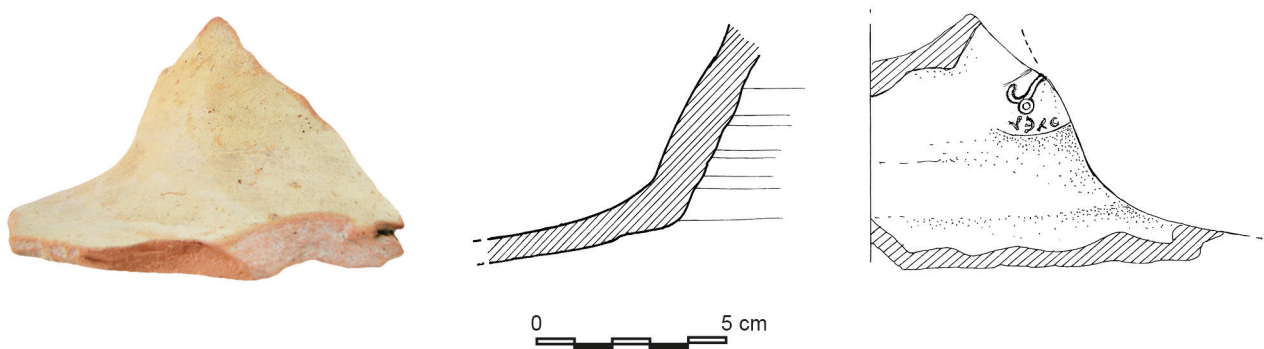


Fig. 4. LR 13 stamped neck with the ounce ligature '8'. Inscription [---]ΟΥ ΕΝ[---]. Halasarna workshop, Cos, c. 578-first half of the 7th century (rec. no Z26/A46/1997). NKUA and Charikleia Diamanti archives; drawing by Aspasia Drigopoulou.

We suggest that they are of Coan origin (Diamanti forthcoming). Another example of a stamped LRA 13 with the ounce ligature under the bust of the emperor, which was found at Knidos in a chapel complex, was very well published into its context and co-finds during 2018 and 2019. According to the authors, the amphora is of Coan origin, and we agree (Doksanalti, Mimiroğlu and Karaoğlu 2019: 136, fig. 7, 139, 142). Another example with double stamping was published from Yenikapı (Kara 2015: 245, fig. 3a-c) where the ounce ligature exists as a separate stamp ('8 K') but also as a detail in the "main" stamp of the emperor's bust. Finally, in one example found in Comacchio, Italy, the amphora is stamped on one side with the well preserved ounce ligature (Negrelli 2021: 244, fig. 46.4, 266-270, fig. 54).

In the forthcoming monography, the cataloging of the Coan state stamps of the late 6th c. Halasarna workshop, and all the similar state stamped LRA 13 published elsewhere together, provides the opportunity to make suggestions as to the Coan origin (or not) as well as the date of the latter, and thus the distribution of the Coan production: the Halasarna workshop, as already mentioned above, is currently

the only one to offer a unique large group of stamped LR 13 amphorae of known origin and date, and it could serve as a useful tool for studying all the rest similar examples as a corpus in context. Also, the collection of all known examples, provides the opportunity to recognize common patterns of enigmatic inscriptions more easily and contributes to their explanation (e.g., the ounce inscriptions), while it enables us to make iconographic comparisons. For example, technical and iconographic similarities give us the opportunity to distinguish groups of stamps which come from the same seal and can offer interesting information in the future about their circulation during a specific period (Diamanti forthcoming).

We hope in a future of collaboration and petrographic analyses as well as the locating of more Late Roman stamped amphora workshops, so that we can decipher even more secrets of this very interesting area of the economic and administrative history of Late Antiquity.

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