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STAMPED LATE ROMAN/PROTO-BYZANTINE AMPHORAS FROM HALASARNA OF KOS

This paper examines the unique group of stamped local amphoras that was brought to light by the excavation of the University of Athens, at a Late Roman settlement (5th–7th c.) at Halasarna of Kos, in the south-east Aegean Sea¹. During the systematic study of about 5000 examples of amphoras² a large amount was discovered to be of local production. It consisted of two types of amphoras³, the types LRA 1 and 13 according to the typology of Riley⁴ (**fig. 1a–b**). They have been dated from the middle of the 6th until the first half of the 7th c. Their local production was proven by the large amount of misfired and distorted pieces which could never have been used. The clay of both types is reddish-orange to brownish, comparatively fine, with few and small inclusions and moderate mica⁵. As far as their shape is concerned, the Koan LR 1 amphoras, with a maximum height of 45 cm and a diameter of 25 cm (mouth external diameter c. 8.5 cm), are characterized by their small dimensions as well as by their peculiar handles, which have deep rounded grooves, and the ribbed cylindrical body which is concave at its middle. The maximum height of the Koan LR 13 amphoras is 55 cm and diameter of the ovoid body around 35 cm, while the external diameter of the mouth reaches 8,5cm. The upper part of the body, apart from the characteristic combed decoration, often has two to three series of drop-like incisions. At the shoulders of both Koan amphora types there are painted or more often incised inscriptions in Greek, all of which were made after the vases were fired and they mainly have religious content (**fig. 2a–b**).

But besides the Koan origin of these amphoras, it was very interesting to discover that they were quite often stamped. As it is well known, stamps and especially the inscribed ones are rarely retrieved on Late Roman amphoras. This is why the discovery of this group of stamped amphoras, unique until now, is so important. In fact, it is the first time that a workshop of stamped Late Roman/proto-Byzantine amphoras has been located with certainty, as far as the Aegean Sea is concerned at least.

The stamps, mainly on the necks of the amphoras, are round in shape containing cross-like monograms at the center and inscriptions around the perimeter (**figs. 2c; 3a**): for example “[. . .]COY ENΔOΞOT[ATOY]” (OF YOU/or end of a name EXCEEDINGLY GLORIOUS). Where the perimeter of the neck is complete, it is proved that there was one stamp on each side. These amphoras are dated from the

second half of the 6th until the first half of the 7th c. according to their excavation data and archaeological contexts.

We have tracked down only a few published parallel examples; of these even fewer are dated and their place of production has not been defined with certainty. One can categorize them as those that carry cross-shaped monograms (as the ones of Halasarna), busts and official titles⁶. Most of them seem to be of the type LRA 13, dating from the end of the 6th until the late 7th c. as the following examples.

In a dump deposit at Kameriye Ada, off the Turkish coast, to the north of Rhodes, a stamped neck of a “globular Byzantine amphora” was found, which according to the published photograph is clearly a LRA 13⁷.

There are also three similar examples of stamped amphoras from Sarāḡhane in Istanbul which have been dated from the late 7th c. until 700⁸. Two of them carry a monogram, one of which is readable as “ΘΕΜΙΣΤΟΥ” (? , **fig. 3b**) and belongs to the type 28 of J. Hayes, a variety of LRA

¹ The excavation is directed by the professor of Classical Archaeology G. Kokkorou-Alevra and by the professors of Byzantine Archaeology S. Kalopissi-Verti and M. Panayiotidi-Kessissoglou: see KOKKOROU-ALEVRAS/KALOPISSI-VERTI/PANAYOTIDI-KESSISOGLOU 2006, where there is all the earlier bibliography.

² This research was done in the framework of a doctoral dissertation which was supported at the department of History and Archaeology of the University of Athens in 2007 with the title “Late Roman/Proto-Byzantine amphoras from Halasarna of Kos. Production and Circulation. The contribution of the amphoras from the Holy Summit at South Sina”: DIAMANTI 2007.

³ For a detailed presentation and description of the production and the local types of Late Roman Amphoras at Halasarna, see DIAMANTI 2006.

⁴ RILEY 1979, 212–216; 231–232.

⁵ The naked eye archaeological remarks about the clay of the local amphoras types were confirmed by the petrographic and chemical analysis, which was performed in co-operation with the director of the Center of Rock, chemist Dr. K. Kouzeli. The final results will be published soon.

⁶ There is also one category of stamps which does not bear inscriptions which we do not examine at length in this paper: the stamps with only religious symbols which have to be connected with the involvement of the church in commerce (for example see AHARONI 1964, 16 fig 4,2; 9,4–5; ARTHUR 1989, 86 fig. 6). This role of the church is proven not only by the archaeological data but also by sources, such as for example the Life of John the Merciful: A. J. FESTUGIÈRE, *Vie de Syméon le Fou et Vie de Jean de Chypre* (Paris 1974) 353–354; 552.

⁷ ROSLOFF 1981, 284 fig.14.

⁸ HAYES 1992, 77 fig. 27; 47,197 pl. 13.

13 dated to the late 7th c.⁹. The third stamp of circular shape was found on a handle, depicting a bust surrounded by the inscription “ΙΙΙΠΤΟC”. It is dated to c. 700 (fig. 3e).

One example found at Pnyka, Athens and dated at the first half of the 7th c.¹⁰ pictures the bust of a “Byzantine emperor” surrounded by the inscription “ΙΤΟΛΑΙΜΕΟΥ”. From the published photograph of the handle, one can presume that it is similar to the LRA 13 type (fig. 3f).

One stamped neck of an amphora found in Alexandria depicts a bust with an inscription around it, read as “ἐπί Πτολεμαίου ἐπάρχου”¹¹ (fig. 3g).

Only one example of a stamped amphora (of type LRA 13) from the Yassi Ada shipwreck of the 7th c. is mentioned that bears one stamp on each side of the neck. According to the information published, we suggest that it is identical to the LR 13 amphoras of Halasarna, due to the distinctive characteristics of the shape, decoration and clay¹² (fig. 3c). In detail: It is mentioned that this particular amphora has a yellow red slip (Munsell 7.5 YR 6/6), which is unusual for the shipwreck amphoras but very usual for the Halasarna ones. This slip appears only on one more amphora (of type LRA 13 also) from the shipwreck, which according to van Doorninck is unusual for its decoration as well which consists of three groups of straight combed lines on the shoulders and the upper part of the body (fig. 3d)¹³. It is obvious that this combed decoration in groups is identical with that of almost all Koan LR 13 amphoras. Moreover, its shape confirms the connection with the Halasarnian examples (fig. 1b). So, one can support the Koan provenance of at least those two amphoras of the 7th c. Yassi Ada shipwreck, which took place so close to the island of Kos. This accords with the theory that the amphoras of this shipwreck were collected from different places¹⁴.

But how can one interpret the presence of these stamps on the amphoras of the 6th and 7th centuries? There has not been any overall study of them until now. The explanation that was given for the amphora stamp that was found in Alexandria was that the bust represents the Eparch of Constantinople and that the amphora was produced at the time and place of his jurisdiction¹⁵. Even if in my opinion, this is a venturesome theory, I will not deny this possibility for the specific example. Moreover, it is interesting to mention here *The Book of the Eparch*, by Leo VI, a collection of regulations of the 10th c. (which however echoes older ones as well) for the guilds in Constantinople. In this we can see that the Eparch of Constantinople, who had the title exceedingly glorious “ἐνδοξότατος”¹⁶ (the same as that found on the example of Halasarna: “[. . .]COY ENΔΟΞΟΤ[ΑΤΟΥ]”), made sure with the help of his assistants, who were called “sealers” (“βουλλωταί”) ¹⁷, that the vases of the wine-shop keepers¹⁸ were stamped. It is also clear that the assistants of the Eparch had the right to visit the various workshops and conduct inspections¹⁹.

However, the stamped amphoras from Halasarna offer us secure proof about the place, time and nature of their production. They are Koan amphoras, they are dated with security, through the data provided by a systematic excavation and study, to the second half of the 6th until the early 7th c. and finally they are obviously evidence of a mechanism

that served specific needs: they are many enough to prove that they served a system and the stamps were impressed before the firing of the amphoras and their marketing, which is the opposite case to all the painted and incised inscriptions of Halasarna (fig. 2a–b). Besides, the monograms and the inscriptions on them (“EXCEEDINGLY GLORIOUS”) testify solemnity. In my opinion it is all about a method of control by the State of the commercial activities of Kos, conducted via Koan amphoras. So, although Constantinople is not the center of production of those amphoras, as the administrative and financial center of the empire, it is the most probable center of organization of state control exercised through stamping the local amphoras with monograms and inscriptions with official character. They must have been impressed by authorized officers, such as commercial inspectors, the proto-Byzantine Kommerkiarioi. I suggest, with whom the inscriptions on the stamps must be connected. They stamped only some of the amphoras, because otherwise it would be a time-consuming procedure condemned by failure: the presence of a stamp on an amphora could be a certification for permitting the circulation of a group of unstamped amphoras which it was accompanying. They were of the same type and dimensions, which means of a known maximum quantity of transported product²⁰. Of course the final resultant quantity in total was not absolutely controlled. But this did not cause special problems: as has been ascertained for amphoras of other periods, we believe that for the amphoras of the Late Roman/proto-Byzantine period as well, the bigger the number of amphoras which were bought/sold the more negligible was the fluctuation of quantity between amphoras of the same type. In this case it would also be possible to explain the small number of surviving stamped amphoras relative to the unstamped ones.

The fact that there are published stamps on amphoras (except those of cities or symbols) depicting busts of officials, in my opinion of emperors, supports the theory I suggest, that these Late Roman stamps on the amphoras are a proof of central state financial control. At this point it is

⁹ HAYES 1992, 66; 71. This type is represented only by the mentioned example and is connected with the types 10 and 29 which J. Hayes identifies with the “globular” amphoras of the 7th c. Yassi Ada shipwreck.

¹⁰ GRACE 1949, 184; 188 Pl. 20, 14 and GRACE 1956, 171 Pl. 75, 214. V. Grace says that there are four other stamps of the same type in the Agora.

¹¹ SZTETYLLO/BORKOWSKI 1986. It is compared with the example from Pnyka which bears the inscription “ΙΤΟΛΑΙΜΕΟΥ” (iid. 649–650).

¹² VAN DOORNINCK 1989, 250 fig. 1, 2; 1, 9.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ ARTHUR 1989, 87.

¹⁵ SZTETYLLO/BORKOWSKI 1986, 653.

¹⁶ CHRISTOPHILOPOULOS 1935, 42–43 footnote 3 (see KODER 1991, 1.3, 1.4, 1.13).

¹⁷ KODER 1991, 6.4, 11.9, 12.9, 13.2, 16.6; CHRISTOPHILOPOULOS 1935, 44.

¹⁸ KODER 1991, 19.1 and 19.4: “Οἱ τὸν οἶνον πιπράσκοντες κάπηλοι εἰ φωραθεῖεν ἀγγεῖα ἰχοντες μὴ τὸν τοιοῦτον σταθμὸν ἰχοντα ἢ βούλλη τῇ εἰθισμένῃ ἐσφραγισμένα, τυπτόμενοι καὶ κουρευόμενοι ἐκδιωκέσθωσαν τοῦ συστήματος.”

¹⁹ KODER 1991, 8.3.

²⁰ On the other hand, this would not apply when the amphoras were bought separately: WALLACE 2004, 429–431.

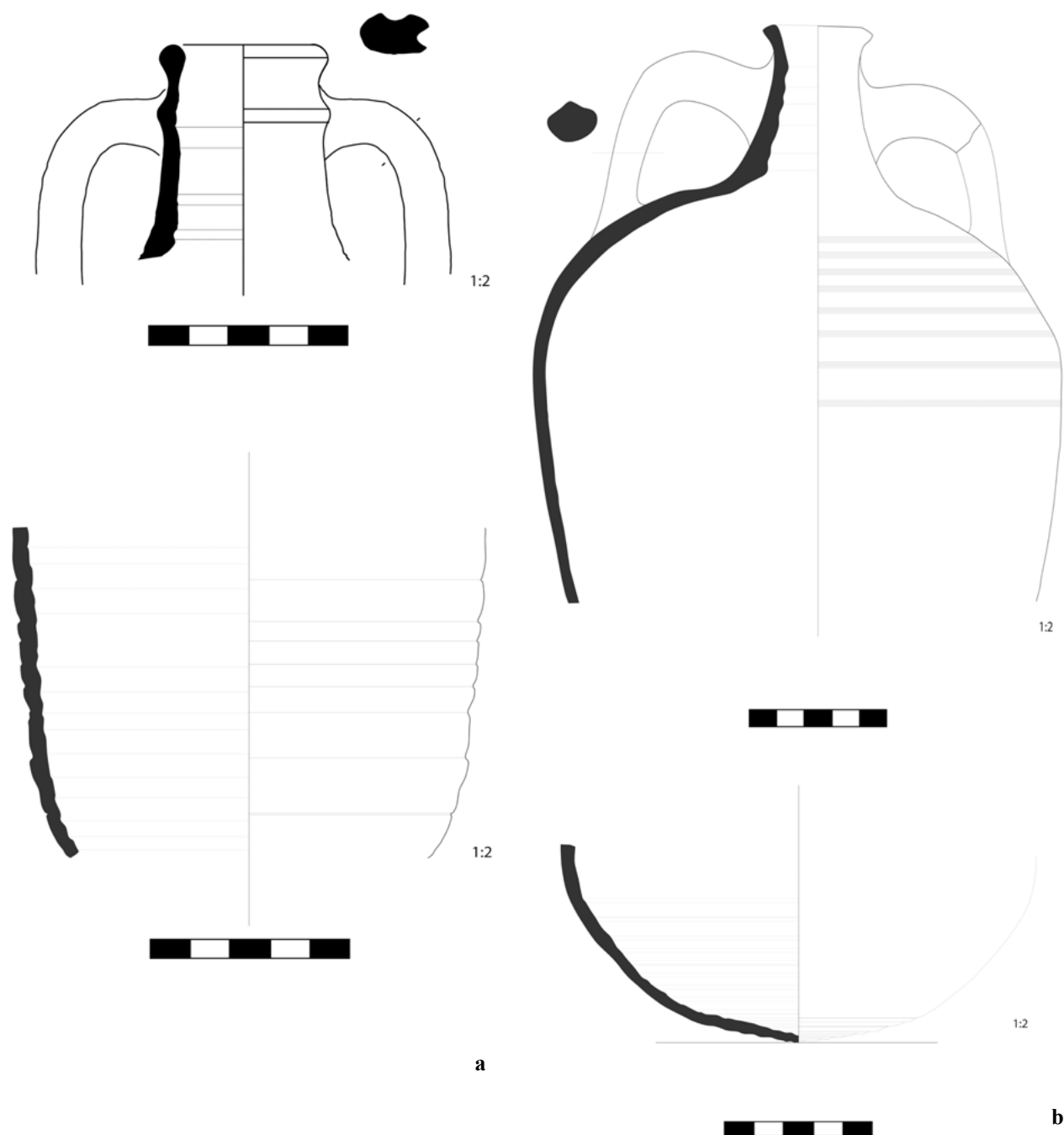


Fig. 1. Local Production of Amphoras at Halasarna-Kos (6th–7th c.): **a** Koan Type 1 (LRA 1); **b** Koan Type 2 (LRA 13).

very important to mention that, by the 6th c., the practice of stamping appears in connection with two more groups of commercial activities as well:

(a) *The stamping of silver vessels²¹ fabricated in state workshops²² until the 7th c. which also carry busts of emperors (fig. 3i).*

It is interesting to note that in the case of the stamped silver vessels, there was one similar system of stamping, which was operated at centers outside of Constantinople as well. This system was aimed at the acquisition of income for the state. Moreover, the silver vessels offer a useful clue for the better understanding of the similar amphora stamping system: since between stamped and unstamped silver vessels there are not marked differences in the quality of the material or their artistic workmanship, it is obvious that the occurrence of stamps was not necessary as a guarantee of quality. We argue in the same way that the stamps of the Late Roman/proto-Byzantine amphoras from Halasarna served mainly as means of state control and not as a guarantee of a workshop, of provenance or quality of the product they were carrying (without excluding the possibility that they can indicate them²³).

(b) *The stamping of commercial packages by the seals of Kommerkiarioi²⁴ since the late 6th c.*

Indeed, on some of their early seals, Kommerkiarioi are called “EXCEEDINGLY GLORIOUS” (fig. 3h)²⁵, as in the inscription of the amphora stamp from Halasarna. These seals, which also bear images of emperors, as Professor Oikonomides argued²⁶, were used as warranty and as a license of circulation for the stamped commodities.

Summarizing my suggestion, I argue that:

- 1: the stamps of the Koan Late Roman Amphoras of the 6th/7th c. from Halasarna were part of a state-control financial mechanism operated by Kommerkiarioi, which provided an easy, quick and secure way of control: one stamped amphora could secure the circulation of a number of unstamped ones.
- 2: in general, the monograms on the Late Roman Amphoras of the 6th/7th c. refer to the Kommerkiarioi while the busts depict the symbol of the state, the Emperor himself.

At Halasarna, from the end of the 6th c. until the first half of the 7th, amphora-workshops of LR 1 and 13 types were set up to store and transport at least two local agrarian products. It is the first and only example in the Aegean Sea until now, of parallel production of those two types²⁷. Both of them, because of their distribution around the Asia Minor coast, the islands of the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea and the Lower Danube area²⁸, have been connected with the tax in kind (*annona*) which the agricultural producing centers were to shoulder so the state could support the civil populations (mainly in Constantinople) and the army. Those tax payer areas must be sought to the amphora production centers of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, such as Cilicia, Cyprus and Kos. More specifically, the frequent importation of LRA 2 and 13 to the Black Sea and the Lower Danube has been connected with the annonic supply of the army²⁹ while the diffusion of LRA 1 in the Aegean Sea has been connected with the *annona* and the supply of Con-

stantinople’s population³⁰. I also support this theory, based among others, on an inscription found in Abydos³¹. Abydos was the control center of every commercial activity reaching Constantinople. This inscription of 492 contains specifications of the tolls³² which should be paid by the various categories of *naukliroi* (captains, skippers) or merchants of wine, oil, grain and other “annonic” products. Cilicia especially (which was the biggest production center of LRA 1) is proved to have been producing wine, which was exported to Constantinople – probably because of the annonic tax – and had a privileged status obviously due to the significance and frequency of this annonic relationship with the Capital³³. Kos situated on these “annonic” sea roads of Asia Minor and the Aegean Sea, possibly sustained also a state tax in kind and would give its amphoras to the “Cilician *naukliroi*” during their travels to Constantinople, not only for trading purposes but because of the tax as well. (Note the Koan origin of the unique stamped amphora from the Yassi Ada shipwreck we suggested.³⁴) Moreover, in the case of Halasarna the state interference in the production and diffusion procedures of the amphoras is proved uniquely for now by the location of a workshop with stamped amphoras in a well-dated context.

²¹ DODD 1961, 1–35.

²² The silver vessels were entirely produced and stamped at the imperial workshops so they would bring income to the state. However, these workshops were not only in Constantinople but in other places as well. This seems to be the case for the stamped vessels of the proto-Byzantine treasure of Kaper Koraon from Syria, which were produced at imperial workshops of Antioch: MUNDELL-MANGO 1986, 14–15.

²³ We refer to the sherd of an amphora of the LR 1 type of the 6th c., stamped with a monogram on the neck which had been read as ΚΩΡΥΚΟΥ(ς); POPESCU 1976, 170 (no.151). OPAIT 2004, 295.

²⁴ They appeared during the reign of Anastasius I, and are considered successors of the *comites commerciorum*, who supervised the frontier commerce for the state. Their new responsibilities turned them also into collectors of the κομμέρκιον, the fees of circulation and the taxes of marketing of the products. ANTONIADIS-BIBICOU 1963, 159.

²⁵ ZACOS/VEGLERY 1972, no. 130 and 130 bis; 212–214; CHEYNET/MORRISON/SEIBT 1991 pl. 9,144.

²⁶ OIKONOMIDES 1986, 37 note 27.

²⁷ DIAMANTI 2006.

²⁸ See BASS 1982, 155–160; VAN DOORNINCK 1989, 247; STECKNER 1989, 57–71; OPAIT 2004, 306–308, where also the relative role of the administrative unit *Quaestura exercitus* of 536 is underlined.

²⁹ See STECKNER 1989, 65.

³⁰ ABADIE-REYNAL 1989a, 52; 54–56; ABADIE-REYNAL 1989b, 158–159; ABADIE-REYNAL/SODINI 1992, 53–56; 88–89. This theory is supported by archaeological and epigraphic evidence: See DIAMANTI 2008, 20–30.

³¹ DIAMANTI 2008, 20–23.

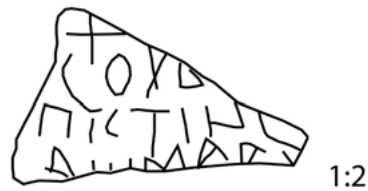
³² OIKONOMIDES 1991, 241; AHRWEILER 1961, 240–243; DURLIAT – GUILLOU 1984, 590.

³³ GRÉGOIRE 1968, 4–5, no. 4. The Abydos inscription comprises in two parts which have a chronological difference of “twenty and twenty two” years (DURLIAT/GUILLOU 1984, 586. See also ANTONIADIS-BIBICOU 1963, 76–95). The first part mentions that the inscription is one of a total of steles with the same content, which were erected at the shores so that it could be possible to be informed and protected by peremptorinesses so the claimants (ἀπαιτούντες, officers of Abydos), so the payers (ἀπαιτούμενοι, meaning the commercial boats that were passing the straits of Hellespont) of the fees which are specified at the second part of the inscription.

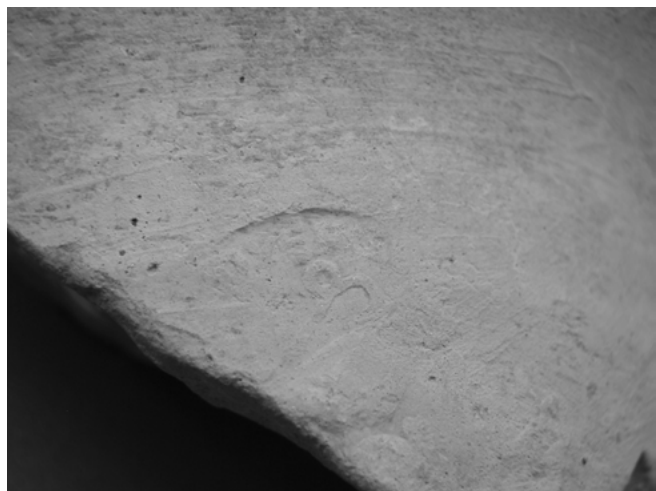
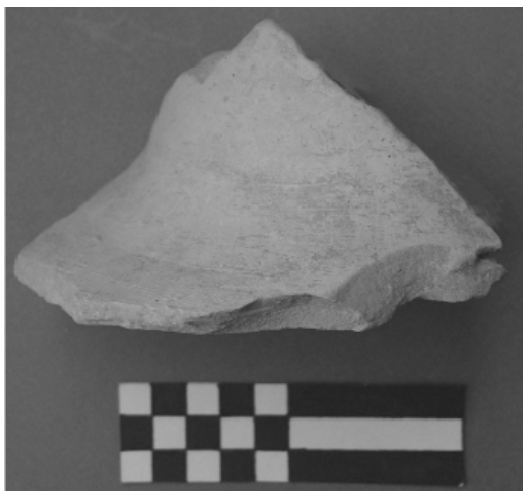
³⁴ Supra p. 2.



a



b



c

Fig. 2. Painted, incised and stamped inscriptions on local LR 1 and 13 amphoras (6th–7th c.) at Halasarna-Kos: **a** Painted Christogram; **b** Incised “+ / [...]**COY**[...] / [...]**ΠΙΣΤΙΝ**[...]” = “OF YOU/ or part of a name or word ... FAITH...”; **c** Stamped Koan amphora with monogram and inscription.

But one last important fact has to be examined as well. The study of the Koan amphoras from Halasarna confirmed the always small proportion of stamped compared to the huge number of unstamped amphoras circulating around the empire. As we argued above the presence of a stamp on an amphora was a license for the circulation of a number of unstamped amphoras³⁵. But maybe there were, in parallel, more reasons for this phenomenon. First of all we saw that many of the similar examples have been found in the East Mediterranean and especially the Aegean Sea. Also, most of the examples belong to the type LRA 13, which was produced par excellence in the Aegean area. I strongly suggest that the location and careful publication of more workshops of this type from that region would bring to light more and more cases of stamped amphoras. Until the discovery of the Halasarna stamps presented in this paper, there was not a sufficient quantity of stamps and they had received little attention, while often they are worn, latent and overlooked. Finally, it is possible that the practice of stamping Late Roman/proto-Byzantine amphoras did not flourish for long. So, maybe their small proportion reflects an experimental phase which was never successful or which served a need for only a small period of time³⁶.

Hopefully, the example of Halasarna will encourage the researchers of the Aegean Sea in particular to concentrate more of their attention on the neck sherds of the Late Roman amphoras in order to identify the indistinguishable stamps, which can easily be ignored, especially since they are nothing more than a few sherds between thousands of amphora pieces at the excavations. Although they presuppose a hard and systematic work, they deserve our attention because, as the case of Halasarna has shown, the location and the systematic study of the Koan Late Roman amphoras, and especially the stamped ones, contributes essentially to the research of the economic history of the Late Roman/proto-Byzantine Aegean Sea.

³⁵ Supra.

³⁶ It will reappear with some density around the 9th–11th c. See BAKIRTZIS 1989, 76. – It is interesting to note that the situation was not much different even for the famous Hellenistic Koan amphoras: the surviving unstamped handles are always much more numerous than the stamped ones. See GEORGIOPOULOU 2005, 217.

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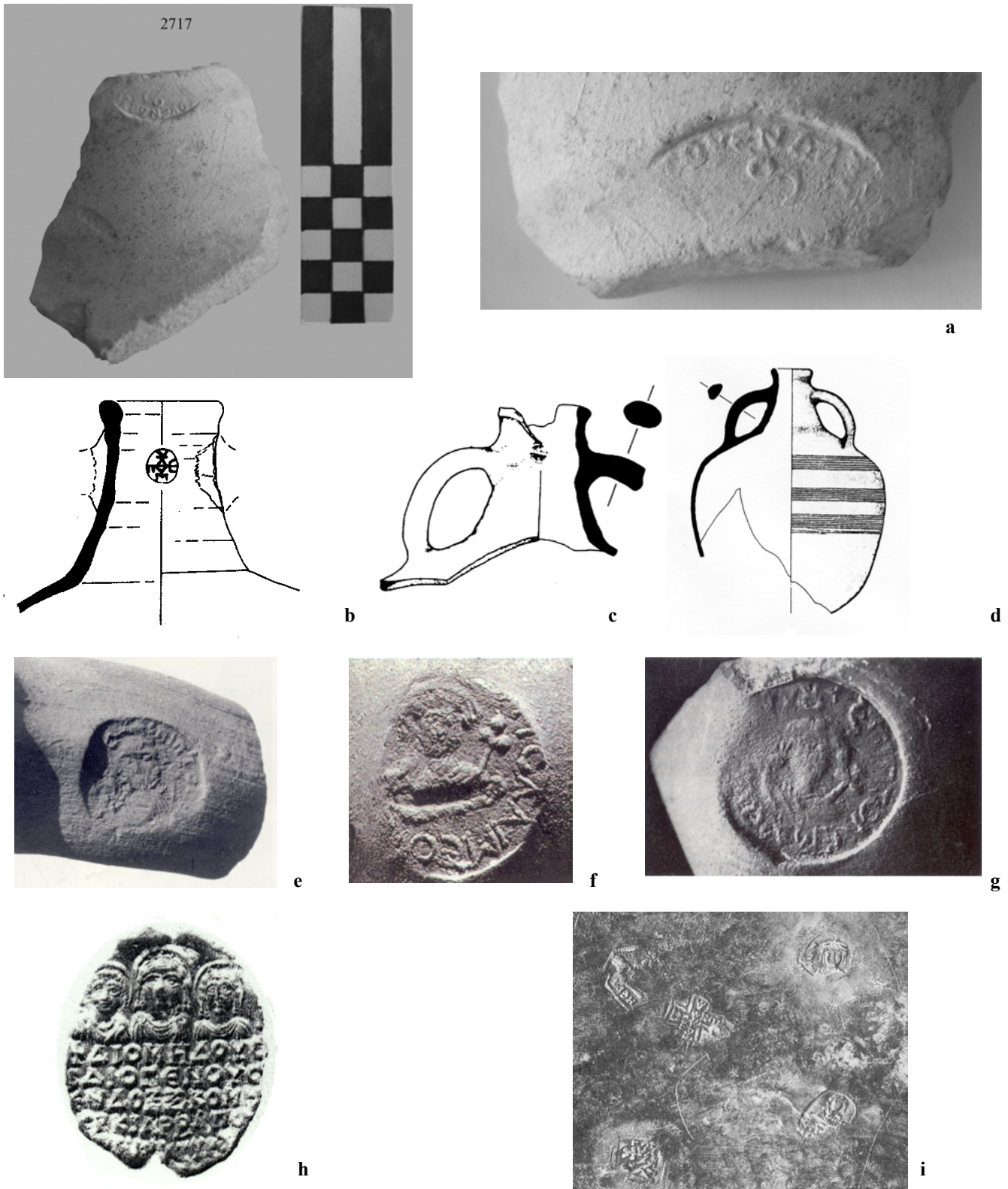


Fig. 3. Three types of commercial Late Roman/proto-Byzantine stamps: **a–c, e–g** Stamps on amphoras; **h** seal of the Kommerkiarioi; **i** Stamps on silver vessels. – **a** Stamped Koan amphora with monogram and inscription “[...] COYENΔOΞOT[ATOY]” (Halasarna, end of 6th–first half of 7th c.); **b** Monogram “ΘΕΜΙΣΤΟΥ(?)” (Saraçhane, Constantinople, late 7th c.: HAYES 1992, 77); **c–d** Stamped and similar unstamped amphoras from the Yassi Ada shipwreck (7th c.: VAN DOORNINCK 1989, 250); **e** Bust and inscription “ΠΙΠΤΟC” (Saraçhane, Constantinople, ca. 700: HAYES 1992, 77); **f** Bust and inscription “ΠΤΟΛΑΙΜΕΟΥ” (Pnyca-Athens, first half of the 7th c.: GRACE 1949, 184, 188; GRACE 1956, 171); **g** Bust and inscription “ἐπὶ Πτολεμαίου ἐπάρχου” (Alexandria, 7th c.: SZTETYLLLO-BORKOWSKI 1986, 649); **h** Seal of “EXCEEDINGLY GLORIOUS” Kommerkiarioi depicting the busts of Justinian II, Tiberius and Sophia (565–578: CHEYNET/MORRISON/SEIBT 1991 no.144); **i** Silver plate bearing incised cross and “imperial” stamps (second half of 6th c., probably during the reign of Tiberius II, 578–582: DODD 1961, no. 29).

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