Bulgarian e-Journal of Archaeology
Българско е-Списание за Археология

https://be-ja.org
ISSN: 1314-5088

vol. 16.1, 2026, 81-112
DOI: https://doi.org/10.57573/be-ja.16.81-112
Papers / Статии

Article history:
Submitted 18 February 2025
Accepted 25 March 2026
Available online 12 June 2026

A pit sanctuary desanctified: Cape St Atanas on the western Black Sea coast in the light of transport amphoras (c. 500 BC–AD 50)

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ABSTRACT

Recent archaeological excavations at Cape St Atanas revealed the ruins of a Late Antique town, built over the debris of human activity from the Classical, Hellenistic, and Early Roman periods. Most of the artefacts from these periods were found in pits, dug into the ground and preserved beneath later layers and structures. Following a popular but controversial trend in Bulgarian archaeology, the excavators interpreted the earlier phases of the site as a "pit sanctuary" – a sacred space, where people living around the cape deposited the remains of rituals and feasts in pits. In this paper, I examine the evidence from transport amphoras and their archaeological contexts, and propose that the site was not a sanctuary but a settlement. This settlement was founded around 500 BC and, after a period of prosperity, it was destroyed between 341 and 339 BC by the army of Philip II of Macedon. The cape remained in ruins until around 260 BC, when it was resettled.

KEYWORDS

Thrace, Black Sea, pit sanctuary, transport amphora, Philip II of Macedon

Introduction

Cape St Atanas is a sharp headland jutting into the sea south of Byala, on the western Black Sea coast (fig. 1). Since 2009, archaeological excavations on the cape have uncovered the ruins of a fortified harbour town dating from the late 4th to early 7th c. AD, including an Early Christian basilica, baptisteries, wineries, and a pottery workshop. The Late Antique town was built over much older remains of human activity, dating back to around c. 500 BC. The remnants of these earlier periods are abundant but heavily disturbed by later buildings, and difficult to interpret. Scattered pottery sherds, coins, votive reliefs, and fragments of sculpture suggest that a shrine to Heracles may have existed in the southeastern part of the cape during the 2nd and 3rd c. AD (Yotov, Minchev 2013, 6; Minchev 2021a, 136; 2021b). However, no architectural remains from this period have been identified. Stretches of rubblework walls dated to the Late Hellenistic period near the modern lighthouse have been interpreted as a temple (Yotov, Minchev 2013, 3–4; Yotov 2021, 32). Possibly from the same period are the foundations of a wall, first thought to be a fortification and later a temenos wall (Yotov, Minchev 2016, 333; Yotov 2021, 30–31; the date and the function of this wall remain unclear). No other buildings from the pre-Late Antique phases have been found, but the archaeologists excavated over 140 pits containing objects from the 5th c. BC to the 1st c. AD. They interpreted these deposits as the remains of ritual activities and proposed that a "Thracian pit sanctuary" existed on the site during the Classical and Hellenistic periods (Yotov, Minchev

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Fig. 1. Location of Cape St Atanas and places mentioned in the text (author C. Tzochev)

2013; Yotov 2021; Minchev 2021b).

This article provides an overview of the transport amphoras from the Classical and Hellenistic periods found at Cape St Atanas between 2009 and 2012. By examining this material and its archaeological context, my aim is to contribute to the history of the site and to challenge its current interpretation.

Establishing a chronological framework for the site prior to Late Antiquity

According to published reports, the "sanctuary" at Cape St Atanas existed from the 6th c. BC to the 1st c. AD. This general chronological framework is based on the broad dates of the earliest and the latest archaeological finds and needs to be refined. To begin with, the evidence for human activity before 500 BC is scarce and inconclusive. Among the earliest identified objects are two fragments of painted transport amphoras from Klazomenai (fig. 2.1–2). These small fragments cannot be accurately dated, but they are unlikely later than 499 BC, since production at Klazomenai appears to have ceased in the early years of the Ionian Revolt (Sezgin 2004, 177, note 78; Bîrzescu 2012, 102–103 lists examples from deposits closed as late as 480 BC). Chian "bulging neck" amphoras with glazed rims (fig. 2.6) are common finds at Cape St Atanas, and date to ca 510–480 BC (summaries of the evidence for date in Lawall 2011, 302 and Bîrzescu 2012, 70–71). The absence of earlier Chian types is instructive. Furthermore, the excavations yielded amphoras from the Lesbos region with red fabric and tall, slightly bulging cylindrical necks (figs 2.12; 8.8), produced during the first quarter of the 5th c. BC (Cook, Dupont 1998, 160–63, fig. 23.5; Monakhov 2003b, 47–49, pl. 30–31; Bîrzescu 2012, 36–46). The earlier Lesbos-region types with conical necks are missing. A "Corinthian Type B" amphora rim (fig. 2.3) dates to around 550–480 BC (Koehler 1978, 33–34, pl. 39.214, 216; Lawall 2011, 300–301, fig. I.5.A7). A Thasian "double-

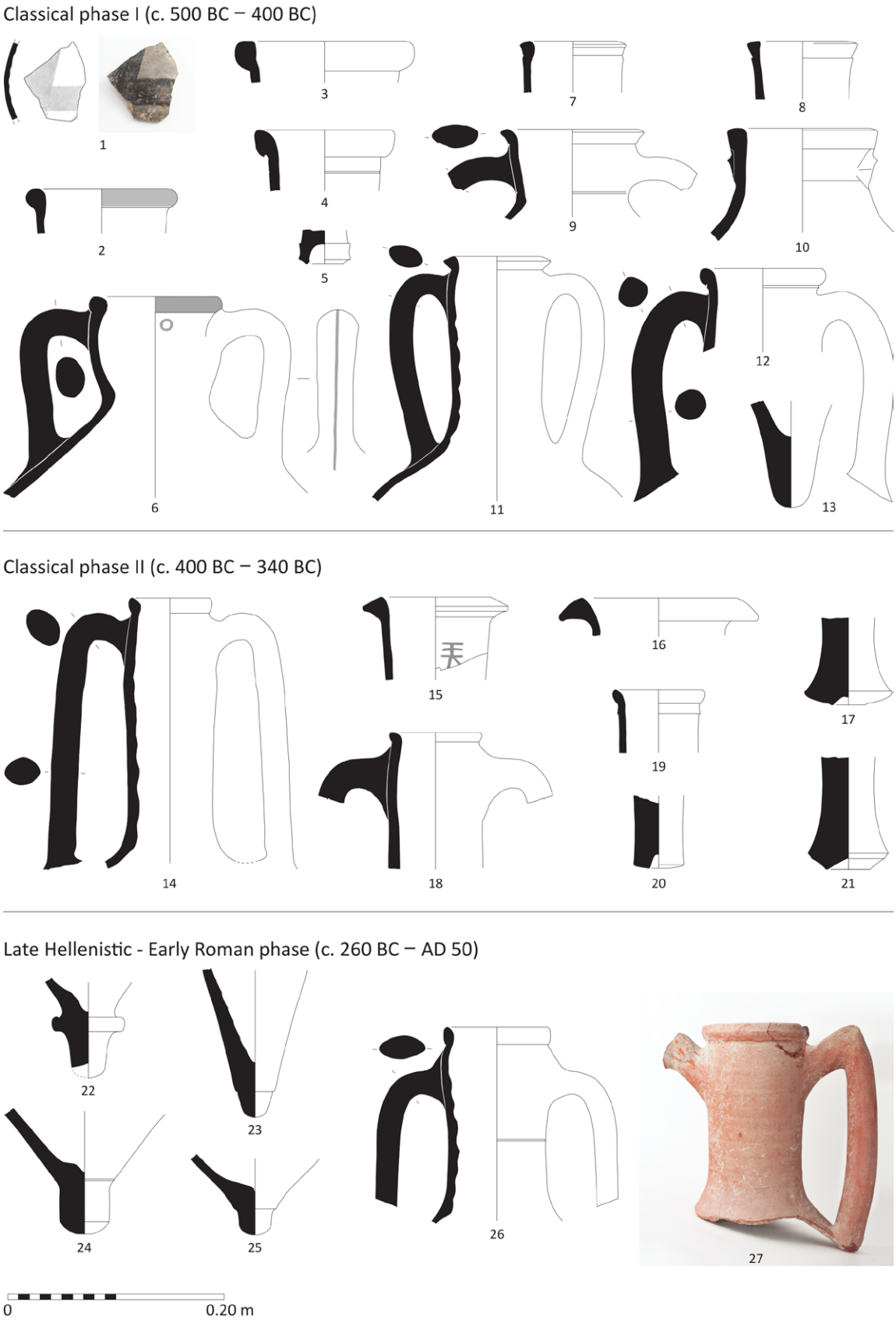


Fig. 2. Selection of transport amphora fragments illustrating the different chronological phases of the site (author C. Tzochev)

band" rim amphora (fig. 2.10) could be as early as the final quarter of the 6th c. BC, but this shape was likely produced well into the 5th c. BC (Johnston 1991, 364–365; Grandjean 1992, 581–583; Monakhov 2003b, 61–62; Chistov, Ilina 2012, 73–79, pl. 87.5). No other fragments dateable before the 5th c. BC were identified.

The evidence from transport amphoras therefore suggests that the site was settled around 500 BC or shortly after, certainly before 480 BC. The very few fragments of black-figure pottery found at the cape (Minchev 2021a, 122.) corroborate this date. Such early finds represent a tiny proportion of the excavated assemblage, and may well have been in use for more than a decade by the time they were brought to the cape. The published handmade vessels (Yotov 2021, 31) fit comfortably in the Classical and Hellenistic periods and are consistent with finds from other settlements on the Black Sea coast (e.g., for Apollonia Pontica, see Nedyalkov 2020).

The abundant presence of Classical-period amphoras – discussed in more detail below – indicates regular imports throughout the 5th and the first half of the 4th c. BC. Imports came to a halt shortly after 350 BC and resumed on a smaller scale almost a century later. None of the 555 diagnostic amphora fragments considered here can be dated with certainty within the period 340–260 BC. Stamped amphora fragments found up to 2015 are as follows:

– Two identical stamps on the handles of a Mendean amphora (Appendix I, no. 1; figs 5.22; 12.1), dateable to 425–400 BC (Lawall 2025, 335, no. 336).

– Four Thasian stamps (Appendix I. 2–5; fig. 12.2–4), including two (probably from the same amphora) from the term of Χαρω(–), one from the term of Θρασωνίδης, and one from the term of Κλεοφῶν. All these eponyms are dated to the 370s–360s BC (Garlan 1999, 112, 182; Tzochev 2016, table 2).

– 27 stamps from Herakleia Pontica (Appendix I. 6–32; figs 12.5–8; 13–14; 15.1–4). 10 of them are single-name fabricant stamps, naming Αἰάκης, Ἀρχέστρατος, Εὐρύδαμος, Καλλίας, Παιριφάνας, Πυθόδοτος, Σωτήρ, Τιμάσανδρος, and possibly, Εὔαρχος. They all date to the period ca 390–360 BC[1]. The rest of the legible stamps mention the eponyms Σῶσις and Πα(υσανίας) I of the 380s BC, Φι(–), Μολοσσός, and Δεινόμαχος of the 370s BC, Καλλίας of the 360s BC, and Λύκων II, Παυσανίας II, Σιλανός, Καρακύδης, Δαμάτριος II of the 350s–340s BC (dates vary across different studies; see, most recently, Kats 2007, 431–432; Balabanov et al. 2016; Tzochev 2024).

– Two Sinopean stamps (Appendix I. 33–34; fig. 15.5–6), naming the *astynomoi* Αἰσχίνης IV and Ζῆνις Ἀπολλοδώρου, both dated to ca 255–244 BC (based on Garlan 2004).

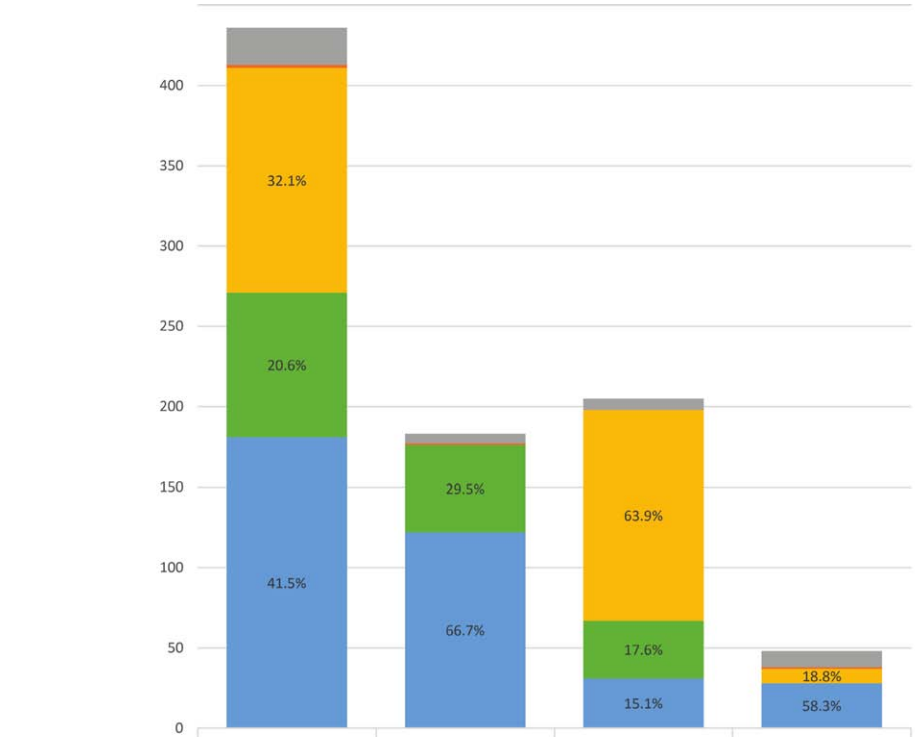
– Eight Rhodian stamps (Appendix I. 35–42; figs 15.7–8; 16.1–5), two of which preserve the name of an eponym: Πολυκλῆς of the late 250s BC, and Αἰνησίδαμος II of ca 179–177 BC (based on Finkielsztejn 2001). The rest name the fabricants Ὀνάσιμος I (ca 262–245 BC), Θεύδωρος (ca 233–199 BC), Ἀντίγονος II (ca 209–186 BC), Σωκράτης II (ca 203–171 BC), and Μίδας (ca 145–120 BC) (based on co-occurrence of these fabricant names with eponyms as presented in Cankardeş-Şenol 2023, 218; 2024, 52, 397; 2025, 75, 187).

– Two Koan stamps (Appendix I. 43–44; fig. 16.6–7), naming Ῥοδοκλῆς and Ἡρακλᾶς(?), can only be roughly dated to the Hellenistic period.

The absence of amphoras that can be dated between ca. 340 and ca 260 BC corresponds to a similar absence of fine wares from this period[2]. The evidence from coins is consistent with that from ceramics: none of the 105 identified coins found at the site can be dated with certainty to the period 340–260

1 Based on Y. Garlan's interpretation that the single-name fabricant stamps coexisted with those naming the earliest magistrates (Balabanov et al. 2016, 69–73, 86–87). An older view considered all these stamps as a separate chronological phase, preceding the magistrate stamping (Kats 2007, 237–238).

2 I am thankful to Aneta Petrova and Desislava Vasileva, who studied the black-glazed and the grey wares respectively, for confirming my observations.



	Classical (total)	Classical I (c. 500 - 400 BC)	Classical II (c. 400 - 340 BC)	Late Hellenistic-Early Roman (c. 260 BC - AD 50)
Unidentified	23	6	7	10
Peloponnese/West Greece	2	1	0	1
Black Sea	140	0	131	9
North Aegean	90	54	36	0
East Aegean	181	122	31	28

Fig. 3. Distribution of fragments by origin and chronological phase (author C. Tzochev)

BC (Valeriev 2021). The latest 4th-century coins are those of Philip II, and the 3rd-century coins were all issued after ca 275 BC. Given the large amount of dateable material considered here, and the fact that this material comes from many different archaeological contexts scattered throughout the site, it is safe to assume that the cape was abruptly abandoned soon after the middle of the 4th c. BC and remained uninhabited for 80–90 years.

Fragments of Hellenistic amphoras are much fewer than those of the Classical period. Therefore, the extent and continuity of the second phase of occupation at the cape remain uncertain. The finds from this period are concentrated in the area of the modern lighthouse. Partially preserved foundations and walls of a building dating back to the 2nd c. BC have been excavated here. Elsewhere on the cape, scattered Late Hellenistic amphoras occur as isolated finds. A small group of fragments belongs to the Early Roman period. Most of them come from Rhodian-type amphoras from the 1st c. BC – early 1st c. AD (fig. 2.27). A toe of an amphora from Sinope (fig. 2.23) dates to c. 50 BC – c. AD 75 (cf. Vnukov 2010, 364, fig. 1.2, variant Sin III). No other amphora fragments from the Roman period have been identified. The latest coins of this period found at the site are issued by King Rhoemetalces II (ca AD 19–38) (Valeriev 2021, 66–67). The excavators' conclusion that the cape was abandoned at the beginning of the 1st c. AD (Minchev 2021a, 136) is therefore reasonable, although the date of this abandonment remains uncertain due to the small number of finds.

In summary, the site at Cape St Atanas had two phases of occupation prior to the foundation of the Late Antique town. The first phase, from ca 500 BC to ca 340 BC, will be referred to as the "Classical" phase. In order to increase the resolution of the following analysis, the Classical phase is divided into two sub-phases, Classical I (ca 500–400 BC) and Classical II (ca 400–340 BC). The date around 400

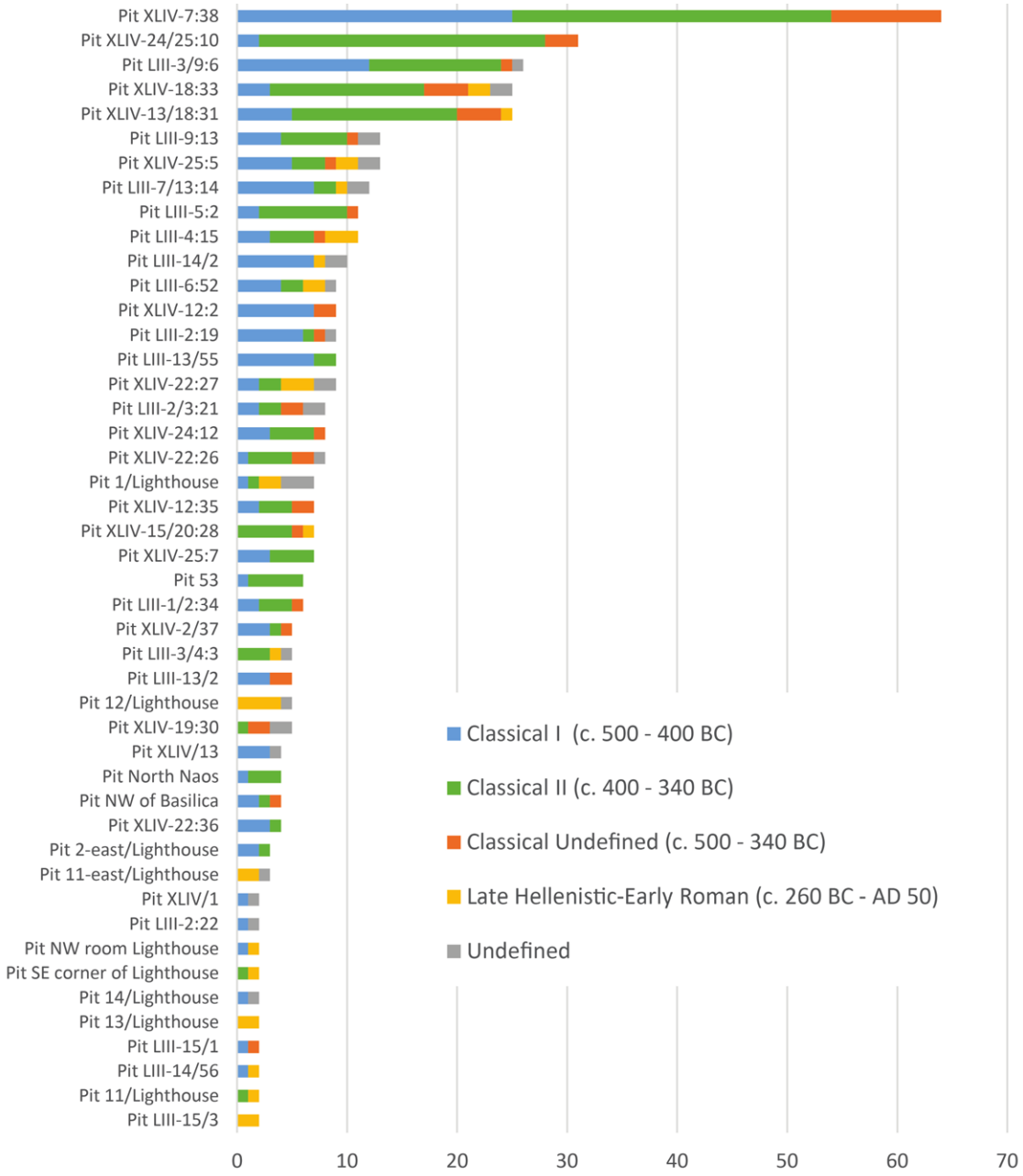


Fig. 4. Counts of transport amphora fragments per chronological phase in each examined pit. Pits with a single collected amphora fragment are excluded (author C. Tzochev)

BC chosen for this provisional division is not based on the archaeology of the site but is suggested by a change in the composition of the amphora assemblage. The second phase, called “Late Hellenistic – Early Roman,” corresponds to the period ca 260 BC – ca AD 50, with the caveat that the continuity and the end date of this phase remain uncertain.

Transport amphoras: provenance and quantitative analysis

The sample considered here consists of 555 diagnostic amphora fragments, collected from 58 pits and various other deposits located across the archaeological site at Cape St Atanas between 2009 and

October 2012[3]. This sample was formed through a two-stage selection process. At the site, the excavators collected the amphora parts that they considered diagnostic. In general, rims, toes, stamped, inscribed, and decorated sherds were collected. Sometimes, amphora parts that looked unusual or seemed to belong together were also kept. The rest of the fragments, mostly uninformative body parts, were discarded. The resulting sample captures the range of amphoras imported to the site and is useful for understanding changes in this range over time. A shortcoming of the selection process was that discarded fragments were not counted and described. The lack of counts of handle attachments is particularly unfortunate as it limits the ability to estimate the number of vessels represented in the deposits and at the site as a whole.

The distribution of amphoras by origin and chronological phase, shown in figure 3, follows a general pattern typical of the Black Sea region:

– Dominant but gradually declining east Aegean imports during the 5th c. BC;

– Strong presence of north Aegean amphoras throughout the same century;

– Sudden increase of Black Sea amphoras starting in the early 4th c. BC;

– Decline of north Aegean and an increase of southeast Aegean imports during the Hellenistic period.

The following paragraphs and figure 3 provide basic information on the range of imports in the different phases of the site.

Classical phase I (ca. 500–400 BC)

Amphoras from the east Aegean dominate the sample of the 5th c. BC (67% of the fragments from this phase) – a trend typical of the Black Sea region in general and inherited from the Archaic period. This tendency was less pronounced after the middle of the century, when north Aegean imports became more common. Among the east-Aegean amphoras, those from Chios (47%) and Lesbos (18%–20%) are the most numerous. Amphoras from Klazomenai, Miletos, and Samos are all represented by only a few fragments. The north Aegean imports (30%) consist mainly of Mendean (10%–11%) and Thasian (7%–9%) amphoras, both attested already in the first quarter of the century (fig. 2.7; 2.10). At least 7% of the fragments of this phase belong to a type of amphora with a wedge-shaped rim and a bulge in the upper part of the neck (fig. 2.11), whose place of production remains unidentified. Only two fragments of the so-called Protothasian amphoras were found (fig. 2.4–5). These amphoras were heavily exported from the Aegean to the Black Sea during ca. 525–450 BC, and their paucity at Cape St Atanas may be a local peculiarity (recent overview of scholarship on the Protothasian class in Lawall 2017, 297–302; typology and chronology in Monakhov 2003a). A single fragment of a Corinthian or, less likely, an Ionian or Adriatic Sea origin (fig. 2.3) is consistent with the relatively rare occurrence of these amphoras in the Black Sea area (summary of debate on places of production in Lawall 2011, 300, and Gassner, Trapichler 2024, 225–227).

Classical phase II (ca. 400–340 BC)

The composition of amphora imports changed significantly in the early 4th c. BC. Amphoras of Black Sea origin rapidly became dominant. They account for 67% of the fragments of this phase, with those from Herakleia Pontica being particularly common (47%)[4]. Another type of Black Sea amphora – a relatively small vessel with a fascia under an outflaring rim and a short stem toe (fig. 2.19–20) – is

3 Among the fragments found between October 2012 and November 2015 only those with stamps are included, because of their importance for the chronology of the site.

4 These figures are slightly overstated (by about 2%) due to the inclusion of stamped neck fragments, which are specific to amphoras of Herakleia Pontica.

also common in this period (15%). The place of production of these amphoras is unknown, but their distribution pattern, similar to that of the Heraklean amphoras, and especially the absence of finds in the Aegean area, indicates a Black Sea origin[5]. Imports from the east Aegean are less common after ca 400 BC (15%). Most of them come from Chios (12%). Southeast Aegean amphoras with "mushroom" rim and knob toes are rare (2%). The proportion of north Aegean amphoras decreases after ca. 400 BC (18%), with Mende (3%) and Thasos (9%–10%) remaining most common (the percentage of the Mendean and Thasian amphoras is possibly slightly underestimated due to the difficulty to distinguish rim fragments of the late 5th and the early 4th c. BC). Amphoras from the north Sporades are rare (figs. 5.16–17; 9.18–19).

Late Hellenistic–Early Roman phase (ca. 260 BC – AD 50)

Only 48 fragments (9%) of the sample date from this period. More than half of these (58%) come from the southeast Aegean, specifically from Kos (31%), Knidos (4%), and Rhodes (19%). This is in line with the general trend in the Black Sea area, with producers from the south-eastern Aegean replacing those from the northern Aegean in the Late Hellenistic period. Relatively rare for the region is a north Peloponnesian amphora of the late 2nd – early 1st c. BC (fig. 9.25. Cf. Opaiţ 2010, 155–156, pl. 87.1–2; Lawall et al. 2010, 403, pl. 300, no. 364). Black Sea amphoras (19%) come almost exclusively from Sinope. The origin of nine fragments from Rhodian-type amphoras of the Early Roman period remains unidentified, but based on the macroscopic appearance of their fabrics, they were probably not made in the Black Sea[6].

Archaeological contexts

Apart from a small number of surface finds and residual objects in Late Roman and Byzantine contexts, the vast majority (89%) of the examined amphora fragments come from pit deposits. More than 120 pits were excavated between 2009 and 2013 (Yotov, Minchev 2013). Excavation diaries up to 2015 mention 80 pits, and some of them are described briefly. The pits are concentrated in the southeast part of the cape. Their shape – occasionally noted, but not drawn in plans or sections – is described as either cylindrical, bell-shaped, pear-shaped, or irregular. Their diameters vary between 1 m and 2 m, and their depths are within the same range. Two exceptionally large pits were about 4 m in diameter. There is no mention of plastering the walls of the pits, and only in one case (one of the two large pits mentioned above), the excavator observed traces of fire. The records mention the contents of nearly half of the pits. Rather than comprehensive lists, these records are selective descriptions of finds, focusing on complete or curious objects. All described pits contained fragments of pottery, usually a mixture of sherds from transport amphoras, plain and cooking wares, imported fine wares, and occasionally, handmade vessels. The proportions between the different categories and shapes of vessels within this mixture remain unknown and would be difficult to calculate, as fragments considered uninformative were discarded without being counted and described. Judging from the sample collected, drinking cups, bowls, plates, mortars, and lamps are all well-represented. Complete vessels are relatively rare, and most of them are small pots, which are less likely to break. Inscribed fragments are few, mostly marked with personal names and numerical notations, and none of the graffiti can be considered a dedication. Fragments of rooftiles were commonly found in the pits. Pieces of architectural terracotta, mudbrick, and wall plaster were documented in several cases. Many of the pits contained faunal remains, mostly seashells and crus-

5 In a number of publications, Sergey Monakhov considers these amphoras (referred to as "type Murighiol") to be of Mediterranean origin, see most recently, Monakhov et al. 2022, 13.

6 I am thankful to Sergey Vnukov for this observation.

taceans, but also bird and mammal bones. Occasional finds include coins, loom weights, spindle whorls, weaponry (arrowheads, sling bullets, a sword), and firedogs, among others (based on the excavation diaries; overview in Yotov 2021, 29).

Transport amphoras are among the most common objects found in the pits at Cape St Atanas. For reasons outlined above, presenting detailed statistics is impossible, but the fact that the sample studied here comes from 57 pits means that at least half of the pits excavated until October 2012 contained amphora fragments. No complete amphoras were discovered at the site, and there is no evidence that whole vessels were deposited. A single pit can contain fragments from 1 to over 60 individual amphoras. Very few pits contain rim and toe fragments positively identified as belonging to the same vessel. In at least one case, fragments from the same amphora were found in two neighbouring pits. The general impression is that the pits contain random mixtures of amphora fragments, the great majority of which are small body sherds[7]. No preference for deposing particular types of amphora parts is observed.

The pits contain fragments of amphoras from different producers and, more interestingly, of vastly different dates. Often, fragments from different chronological phases of the site were found in the same pit (fig. 4). Of the 46 pits containing more than one diagnostic fragment, 25 (54%) contained fragments from both Classical phases. Eight (17%) mix fragments from the Classical I, Classical II, and Late Hellenistic – Early Roman phases. A further 3 (7%) span the Classical II and Late Hellenistic – Early Roman phases. A total of 15 pits (33%) combine material dated before and after the Early Hellenistic hiatus at the site. These 15 pits represent 79% of the pits with fragments from the Late Hellenistic – Early Roman phase. The only pit deposits containing amphoras from a single phase are those that yielded five or fewer fragments, i.e., those for which the sample is unreliably small. Even for some of them (e.g., pit 12/Lighthouse), the difference between the earliest and the latest item is more than a century. In summary, pit deposits at the site commonly contain asynchronous material. To better illustrate this conclusion, figures 5–11 show the diagnostic amphora fragments found in the six pits that yielded the most amphora sherds[8]. All these pits contain amphoras whose production dates span between 75 and 330 years:

– Pit XLIV-7:38[9] (figs 5–6) contained fragments spanning the second half of the 5th and the first half of the 4th c. BC. Among the earliest are a group of Chian fragments (fig. 5.2; 5.25–27) and the short-necked top of a Mendean amphora (fig. 5.18), which could be as early as 450 BC (cf. Boulter 1953, 106–107, no. 161, fig. 5; Grandjean 1992, 563, fig. 10.67; Monakhov 2003b, 291, pl. 61.1–5 for comparable Mendean amphoras). The latest fragments are some 80–100 years younger. The stamped Heraklean necks (figs 6.8; 6.13–14; Appendix I.7–9, 11) date to the 380–360s BC. Two amphoras from Ikos (fig. 5.16–17) are likely among the last jars imported to the site before its abandonment around 340 BC (cf. Monakhov, Fedoseev 2013, 265, fig. 5.1; Monakhov et al. 2022, 118, no. Ik. 13).

– In pit XLIV-24/25:10 (fig. 7), the bulging-neck Chian amphoras (fig. 7.1; 7.18) are at least 75 years older than the stamped Heraklean amphoras naming Καρακύδης and Δαμάτριος II (fig. 7.4; 7.10; Appendix 1.25–26).

– In pit LIII-3/9:6 (fig. 8), this span is at least 130 years. The pit contained fragments of Chian (fig. 8.1–5) and Lesbian red-fabric (fig. 8.8) amphoras dated to before ca. 480 BC, along with early 4th-century fragments. Among the latest items is a tall stem toe from a Thasian amphora (fig. 8.26), no earlier than 350 BC.

– Pit XLIV-13/18:31 (fig. 9) contained amphora fragments from all three phases of the site. A

7 This observation is based on several complete assemblages, examined prior to discarding the body sherds.

8 Excluding pit LIII-9/10:4, which represents several intersecting pits excavated as a single deposit.

9 The pits are labelled in the format "sector-square: pit number", e.g., "pit XLIV-7:38" is pit 38 in square 7, sector XLIV. If a pit is located in multiple squares, this is indicated by a slash separating the square numbers, e.g., "pit XLIV-24/25:10".

painted Chian amphora rim (fig. 9.2) is at least 330 years older than the latest item, a north Peloponnesian "proto-Dressel 25" amphora toe (fig. 9.25).

– Pit XLIV-18:33 (fig. 10) contained fragments of amphoras produced within at least 220 years. Of the two 5th-century fragments, the rim in figure 10.1 is earlier than 425 BC. Most of the remaining fragments date to the early 4th c. BC, but there are also two Late Hellenistic items: the rim of a Knidian amphora (fig. 10.5), and a stamped Rhodian handle, naming the early 2nd-century BC fabricant Σωκράτης II (fig. 16.3; Appendix 1.40).

– Pit XLIV-25:5 (fig. 11) contained several 5th-century BC fragments, including a Thasian amphora neck (fig. 11.1), dated around the middle of the century (cf. Grandjean 1992, 544–545, fig. 1.3; Monakhov 2003b, 265, pl. 35.4–6). Koan amphoras (fig. 11.5–6) are at least 200 years later (cf. Monakhov 2014, 213–215, figs 11–12).

The chronological inconsistencies described above cannot be the result of prolonged accumulation in pits. It is hard to imagine how dugouts of this size could have remained open and collected objects for centuries, especially given the hiatus at the site during the early Hellenistic period. The most likely explanation for the mixture of objects from different periods in the pits is that they were filled up with residual material. Most of the amphoras (and probably of the other kinds of ceramic vessels) were broken and discarded long before they were dumped in the pits. Only the latest vessels attested in a pit may have been in use shortly before deposition. However, it is also possible that a pit contains only much older objects, for example, in the case of dumping debris from an abandoned terrain. Thus, although 41% of the pits examined here contain fragments that can be dated to after 260 BC, the percentage of the pits dug and filled during the Late Hellenistic – Early Roman phase is likely to be higher.

Sanctuary or settlement?

In a series of recent publications, the excavators of the site, Alexander Minchev and Valeri Yotov, maintain that a "Thracian pit-sanctuary" existed at Cape St Atanas from the 6th c. BC to the 1st c. AD (Yotov, Minchev 2013; Minchev 2021a, 120). This sanctuary is thought to have been an open *temenos*, where pits were dug and filled with objects as part of ritual activities. According to Yotov, the pits were *bothroi*, where people living around the cape deposited the remains of the rituals and feasts they had performed (Yotov 2021, 29). Minchev went further, suggesting that in the Late Classical period the sanctuary gained international fame, becoming a "sea sanctuary", and attracting sailors travelling along the western Black Sea coast. These visitors made offerings to the gods worshipped at the sanctuary, which, according to Minchev, explains the variety of imported objects found in the pits (Minchev 2021a, 126–127).

The interpretation of the site as a sanctuary was firmly adopted from the beginning of the excavations. It was based on analogy with other "pit sanctuaries" in the interior of Thrace. None of the publications discusses alternative interpretations of the pits, nor spells out the specifics of the alleged rituals and their relation to the archaeological record. The very presence of a large cluster of pit deposits was deemed sufficient for the site to be considered a sanctuary. This approach follows a popular but controversial trend in Bulgarian archaeology. Since the 1990s, ritual has become a common explanation for ambiguous pit deposits found in the interior of Thrace, and groups of pits have often been considered sanctuaries (overviews in Georgieva 2015 and Bozkova 2016). Critics of this tendency have pointed out that the ease with which the pit-sanctuary model has been applied may have obscured settlements, temporary dwellings, and periodic markets (Popov 2015, 120; Tzochev 2015, 419; Bozhinova 2018, 346–349). While this criticism has so far been mostly general, the issue is best addressed by a thorough re-examination of the evidence from specific sites. The case of Cape St Atanas thus offers a good opportunity to test a "pit sanctuary" hypothesis against the archaeological evidence.

Arguing whether individual pits are "practical" or "ritual" could easily become a pointless intellectual exercise. Without a broader context, one could argue for either or both interpretations, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, identifying a group of pits as the remains of a sanctuary or a settlement should be more straightforward, not least because these two cases do not normally overlap. A sanctuary, whether inside or outside a settlement, is essentially a space set apart and distinct from mundane life. This is how Cape St Atanas was described in publications: as a sacred space, used for ritual purposes by people living elsewhere. And yet, the contents of the pits are no different from those normally found in settlements of the same period. In addition to fragments of transport amphoras, they contain a broad range of ceramic vessels for drinking, eating, and cooking, as well as lamps, pithoi, diverse food remains, textile tools, and various other objects – a mixture typical of everyday life in a settlement. The pits also contain building debris. The excavators uncovered the in-situ foundations of only one building, which they interpreted as a Late Hellenistic temple. But the common presence of rooftile fragments in the pits, including tiles from the Classical phase of the site[10], indicates that the area of the cape was at least partially occupied by permanent structures already before ca 340 BC. The presence of buildings is also suggested by burned fragments of mudbrick and wall plaster found in at least one pit (LIV-21:1), and possibly in others, for which no detailed information was recorded. The excavators emphasised the discovery of several fragments of decorated clay hearths, interpreted as altars (*escharai*) (Yotov, Minchev 2013, 2–3). However, the use of such hearths in domestic contexts in Thrace is well documented (e.g., Dimitrov, Čičikova 1978, 48–49; overview in Krasteva 2011).

The interpretation of the site as a sanctuary is also problematic from the point of view that a ritual implies a regularly performed sequence of activities that is more or less uniform within a community, especially within the same sanctuary. If the pits in question were the remains of an ancient ritual, one would expect them to follow a certain pattern. But apart from the mere presence of pits, there is nothing to suggest a regularly repeated set of actions. The pits have different shapes and sizes. They contain a mixture of artefacts that varies considerably from one deposit to another. There is no particular set of objects, nor is there a preference for particular vessel shapes or parts. There is no evidence of consistent treatment of artefacts, such as inscribing[11], burning, piercing, deliberate breaking, etc.

No human remains were identified in the pits either. The presence of human skeletons in pits, sometimes in circumstances that suggest violent death, has been among the strongest arguments for interpreting sites as pit-sanctuaries (overview in Tonkova 2010; most recently, Bozkova 2025; alternative explanations: Bozhinova 2018, 348). However, at all sites in Thrace where such cases have been documented, pits containing human remains are either unique or represent a tiny percentage of the total number of pits. This raises the same objection noted above: placing humans in pits does not constitute a regular pattern, as would be expected from a ritual performed in a sanctuary.

The present study of the transport amphoras from cape St Atanas provides a solid argument against the pit-sanctuary interpretation of the site. It clearly shows that the pits were filled with residual material. Most of the amphoras had been broken and discarded many years, even centuries, before their fragments were dumped in the pits. This contradicts the idea that the objects in the pits were ritually deposited, unless, of course, one imagines that centuries-old rubbish brought from nearby settlements was ritually buried in the pits.

The remains of weapons – mostly sling bullets and arrows found in and around the pits – also play a role in the interpretation of the site. They could be seen as votive offerings, in the case of a pit sanctu-

10 According to Daniela Stoyanova, who kindly shared her observations with me, rooftiles found in the pits are generally later than the middle of the 5th c., but some of them are clearly earlier than the beginning of the Late Hellenistic phase of the site.

11 The few *graffiti* on sherds found in the pits are mundane rather than votive.

ary, or as evidence of violent conflict, in the case of a settlement. Of particular interest is an inscribed sling bullet, which names a certain Ἕρμιππος, most likely a commander in Philip II's army (Nankov 2023, 78, 140, no. L160). Nankov suggested that this, and several other inscribed projectiles found in Apollonia Pontica, marked the route of the Macedonian army during Philip's Thracian campaign of 342–339 BC. There are at least two occasions on which the Macedonians could have passed by Cape St Atanas: in 341/340 BC during their raid into the lands of the Getae west of Odessos, and in 339 BC, on their way from Perinthos and Byzantion to the Scythian kingdom of Atheas in Dobrudja (summaries of these events in Delev 2015, 50–51 and Damyanov et al. 2021, 113–14). Linking these historical events with the sling bullets found at St Atanas is appealing, especially as the combined evidence of amphoras, fine pottery, and coins indicates that the cape was abandoned around 340 BC. It is hardly a coincidence that another controversial "pit-sanctuary", on the coastal route to the south, near Debelt, was also abruptly abandoned around 340 BC, and also yielded an inscribed sling bullet belonging to Philip's army[12]. Maintaining the sanctuary interpretation of these sites would require a rather unlikely explanation. Consider the probability that Macedonian soldiers paid peaceful visits to Thracian pit sanctuaries to ritually bury their sling bullets shortly before the sanctuaries were abandoned.

I would propose an alternative interpretation. Cape St Atanas was settled around 500 BC, and during the Late Classical period was a prosperous small community with robust buildings and a population that regularly consumed imported goods from the Aegean and the Black Seas. The cape provided excellent conditions for a thriving settlement, as evidenced by the impressive town that developed at the same place during the Late Antiquity. It had a harbour on a major maritime route, and a strategic location near a mountain pass connecting the coastal towns south and north of the Haemus Mountains. This prime location was a great advantage, but it also had its drawbacks. Around 340 BC, the army of Philip II passed by the cape and sacked the settlement. The site remained in ruins until around 260 BC, when it was resettled. During the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman periods, land clearing, construction, and daily activities led to the mixing of debris of different ages and their dumping in pits. Most of the structures from this period were, in turn, destroyed by the densely built Late Antique town.

Conclusions

Cape St Atanas is an important new addition to the map of the western Black Sea coast during the Classical and Hellenistic periods. This previously unknown settlement – if one accepts the interpretation proposed here – was heavily destroyed. And yet it has provided a wealth of evidence for the material culture of its inhabitants, especially for the consumption of products imported in transport amphoras. The sizeable collection of artefacts recovered from the site deserves a full publication, not least because linking the destruction of the Classical-period settlement to a historical event provides an opportunity to test and adjust archaeological chronologies. The significance of the site at Cape St Atanas goes beyond its potential contribution to the archaeology and the economic history of the Black Sea region. It also exposes a problem with the proliferation of controversial "pit sanctuaries" in Thrace, and the need for critical re-examination of such sites.

Acknowledgments

I am thankful to Alexander Minchev and Valeri Yotov for inviting me to study the transport

12 A recent overview of the site Kostadin Cheshma near Debelt can be found in Balabanov et al. 2016, 23–32. The interpretation of the pit deposits at the site as a ritual is set out in Balabanov 1999; see the critical note in Tzochev 2011, 75; for the sling bullet, see: Nankov 2023, 87–8, 115; for the date of abandonment: Tzochev 2024.

amphoras from their excavations at Cape St Atanas. I would further like to thank Valeri Yotov for the helpful discussions about the site and its different interpretations. I examined the material between 2010 and 2016.

Appendix 1: Catalogue of Amphora Stamps

Mende

1. Inv. 895. Pit XLIV-7:38. Figs 5.22; 12.1
Complete upper part preserved down to the lower part of the shoulders. D. rim 11.8 cm. Both handles stamped with the same circular die.
Head in profile facing right surrounded by ivy leaves
Cf. Grace 1956, nos 221–223.

Thasos

2. Inv. 863. Pit XLIV-18:33. Fig. 12.2
Χαρω(–)
Θασι(..)
Μύλ(λος)
Eponym Χαρω(–). Cf. Garlan 1999, no. 243.

3. Inv. 862. Pit XLIV-18:33. Fig. 12.3
head in profile facing right in square field
Supplementary stamp used during the terms of Χαρω(–) and Τι(–). Probably from the same amphora as the previous handle. Cf. Garlan 1999, nos 264–277.

4. Inv. 145. Unknown findspot. Not illustrated
Stamped neck fragment preserving part of rim.
[Κίρω]|ν [Θρασ|ων(ίδης) | Θασι(..)] (?)
cluster of grapes →
Eponym Θρασωνίδης. The reading is restored based on Garlan 1999, no. 379, which appears to be from the same die.

5. Inv. 860. Pit XLIV-15/20:28. Fig. 12.4
[Κλε]οφῶν | Θασίων | Βιτ[ίων]
caduceus →
Eponym Κλεοφῶν. Cf. Garlan 1999, no. 450.

Herakleia Pontica

6. Inv. 845. Pit XLIV-19:30. Fig. 12.5
Letter M painted in red above the stamp.
Αἰάκ-
ητος
Fabricant Αἰάκης.

7. Inv. 875. Pit XLIV-7:38. Figs 6.8; 12.6
Preserves ca 50% of rim, most of the neck and part of one handle. D. rim 9.8 cm.
Ἀρχεστ-
thyrsos
ράτο
Fabricant Ἀρχέστρατος. Cf. Fedoseev 2016, nos 2096–2101 (types without a device).

8. Inv. 896. Pit XLIV-7:38. Figs 6.13; 12.7
Complete upper part preserved down to about 10 cm below the maximal diameter. D. rim 9.5 cm.
Ἀρχεστ-
thyrsos
ράτο
Same type as the previous, but probably made with a different die.

9. Inv. 877. Pit XLIV-7:38. Fig. 12.8
Εὐρυ-
δάμο
Fabricant Εὐρύδαμος. Cf. Fedoseev 2016, nos 2276–2285, 2296–2297 (both illustrated dies appear different from this one).

10. Inv. 031. Pit LXIII-2:70. Fig. 13.1
Εὐρυδ-
άμο
Fabricant Εὐρύδαμος. Cf. Fedoseev 2016, nos 2286–2295.

11. Inv. 876. Pit XLIV-7:38. Figs 6.14; 13.2.
Upper part preserving complete rim, neck, most of shoulders and one handle. D. rim 9/10 cm. Letter M painted in red above the stamp.
Καλ-
λία
Fabricant Καλλίας.

12. Inv. 492. Pit 3/Lighthouse. Fig. 13.3
Παιρι-
φάνα
Fabricant Παιριφάνας. Cf. Fedoseev 2016, no. 1828 (reads the two lines as separate names). Rare fabricant, attested with the magistrate Παυσανίας II (Fedoseev 2016, no. 721).

13. Not inventoried. Pit LIII-3/9:6. Figs 8.18; 13.4
Preserves ca 20% of rim with part of neck wall. D. rim ca 9 cm.
Πυθ-
οδότο
Fabricant Πυθόδοτος. This fabricant is known from very few stamps; it is attested with the magistrate Λυ(–) (Fedoseev 2016, no. 1859).

14. Inv. 726. Pit LIII-13:2. Fig. 13.5
τήρ
Σω-
Fabricant Σωτήρ. The name starts in the bottom line and is carried over the upper line, with the letters inverted. Cf. Fedoseev 2016, nos 2510–2522.

15. Inv. 1097. Pit LIII-6:46. Fig. 13.6
Τ[ιμ-]
α[σάν-]
δ[ρου] [cluster of grapes]
Fabricant Τιμάσανδρος. Cf. Fedoseev 2016, nos 2527–2529.

16. Inv. 101. Pit LXIII-20:74. Not illustrated
Σῶσις
Πόρο
Eponym Σῶσις. Both lines retrograde.

17. Inv. 906. Pit 53. Fig. 13.7
Preserves ca 40% of rim and part of neck with one upper handle attachment. D. rim ca 9 cm.
Εὐάρ-
χο Πα(–)
Eponym Πα(υσανίας) I. Cf. Fedoseev 2016, nos 1389–1394.

18. Inv. 865. Pit XLIV-18:33. Figs 10.8; 13.8
Preserves ca 18% of rim and part of neck wall. D. rim ca 8 cm.

Θεοξ-
ένο Φι(–)
Eponym Φι(–). Cf. Balabanov et al. 2016, 128, no. 52.

19. Inv. 501. Pit LIII-9:13. Not illustrated
Preserves ca 17% of rim and small part of neck wall. D. rim ca 9 cm.
[Θεο]ξ-
[ένο] Φι(–)
Same die as previous.

20. Inv. 383. Pit LIII-3/9:6 or XLIV-25:7. Fig. 14.1
Upper part mended from many fragments. Preserves complete rim, neck, and upper handle attachments.
Μολοσσ̃
Eponym Μολοσσός.

21. Inv. 1053. Pit 5/Winery. Fig. 14.2
Preserves parts of neck, rim, and handle.
Νόσ[σο]
Δεινο(μάχου)
Eponym Δεινόμαχος. Cf. Fedoseev 2016, nos 1782–1793.

22. Inv. 1055. Pit 5/Winery. Fig. 14.3
crescent; Ἐπὶ Καλλία
Δαμοφῶντος
Eponym Καλλίας. Cf. Fedoseev 2016, nos 416, 420.

23. Inv. 1054. Pit 5/winery. Fig. 14.4
Preserves small part of rim, neck wall, and upper handle attachments.
Ἀρίστωνος
ἐπὶ Λύκωνος
Eponym Λύκων II. Cf. Fedoseev 2016, nos 586–591.

24. Inv. 382. Pit LIII-3/9:6 or XLIV-25:7. Fig. 14.5
Upper part mended from six fragments. Preserves ca 90% of rim, most of neck and one handle. D. rim 7.8/8.8 cm. Traces of red paint on the exterior surface under the rim; and of black resin on the interior surface.
Εὔαρχος
ἐπὶ Λύκω(νος)
Eponym Λύκων II. Both lines retrograde. Cf. Fedoseev 2016, nos 608–613.

25. Inv. 864. Pit XLIV-18:33. Figs 10.7; 14.6
Preserves ca 30% of rim, part of neck wall, and one handle. D. rim ca 10/8 cm (compressed by handle attachment).
Ἡρακλε(ί)δα̣
ἐπὶ Παυσ[ανία]
Eponym Παυσανίας II.

26. Inv. 795. Pit LIV-21:1. Fig. 14.7
Σ̣ιλάνο
caduceus
Αἰσιμίδ(ας)
Eponym Σιλανός.

27. Inv. 147. Pits XLIV-24/25:10 and XLIV-24:12. Figs 7.10; 14.8
Two fragments found in neighbouring pits. Preserve ca 75% of rim, most of the neck, and upper part of one handle. D. rim 8.5/9 cm.
ἐπὶ Καρακύδε̣ος Ἰστιε̣[ί]ο
cluster of grapes inscribed in ivy leaf
Eponym Καρακύδης.

28. Inv. 144. Pit XLIV-24/25:10. Figs 7.4; 15.1
Preserves ca 30% of rim, part of neck wall, and upper part of one handle. D. rim ca 8 cm.
[–]Υ ἐπὶ
[Δαμ]άτριος
Eponym Δαμάτριος II.

29. Inv. 981. Pit LIII-5:2. Not illustrated
[– Υ] ἐπὶ
[Δαμά]τριος
Same die as above.

30. Inv. 894. Pit XLIV-24/25:10. Figs 7.9; 15.2
Upper part mended from fragments. Preserves complete rim, neck, most of shoulders and one handle. D. rim 7.5 cm. Traces of red paint on the exterior surface under the rim.
[–]
Διονυσίο
The name Διονύσιος is common on Heraklean stamps. Several eponyms and fabricants bore this name.

31. Inv. 146. Unknown findspot. Fig. 15.3
[–]χος
Εὐάρχο
Both lines retrograde. Εὔαρχος in the lower line is a fabricant. The name in the upper line was stamped separately. It belongs either to the same fabricant, or to an eponym. The date is based on magistrates attested in combination with the name Εὔαρχος.

32. Inv. 907. Pit 53. Fig. 15.4
[–]Ο̣ΛΙ
[–]Ν̣ΟΣ

Sinope

33. Inv. 095. LXIII-25, surface find. Fig. 15.5
[Ἀστ]υνόμου
[Αἰ]σχίνου. cluster of grapes
Ἡφαίστιος
Astynom Αἰσχίνης IV.

34. Inv. 910. Pit 13/Lighthouse. Fig. 15.6
[Ἀστυνόμου]
[Ζήνι]ο̣ς τοῦ statue
[Ἀπολ]λοδώρου.
[Ἀπατ]ούριος
Astynom Ζῆνις Ἀπολλοδώρου.

Rhodos

35. Inv. 974. Pit 11/Lighthouse. Fig. 15.8
Rounded handle arch.
[Ὀν]ασίμου
Fabricant Ὀνάσιμος I. Possibly one of the dies listed in Cankardeş-Şenol 2025, 77, RF-ΟΝΑΣΙΜΟΣ-01-008–010.

36. Inv. 547. Building 2 east of the lighthouse. Fig. 15.7
[Ἐπ‘ ἰ]ε[ρέ-]
ως Πολ-
υκλεῦς
Eponym Πολυκλῆς. Cf. Cankardeş-Şenol 2016, 274, RE-ΠΟΛΥΚΛΗΣ-011.

37. Inv. 006. Pit 16/Lighthouse. Fig. 16.1
[Θεύ]δωρου̣
Ἀρταμιτίου̣
Fabricant Θεύδωρος. Does not seem to match any of the dies listed in Cankardeş-Şenol 2024, 55–57.

38. Inv. 1033. Pit XLIV-15/20:28. Fig. 16.2
Sharply bent handle arch.
Ἀντιγόνου Πεταγειτνύο(υ) [*sic*]
rose
Fabricant Ἀντίγονος II. Cf. Cankardeş-Şenol 2023, 223, RF-ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΟΣ 02-ΠΕΔΑΓΕΙΤΝΟΥΣ-001

39. Inv. 861. Pit XLIV-18:33. Fig. 16.3
Sharply bent handle arch.
Σωκράτευς; burning torch
Fabricant Σωκράτης II. Cf. Cankardeş-Şenol 2025, 194, RF-ΣΩΚΡΑΤΗΣ 02-028.

40. Inv. 148. Unknown findspot. Not illustrated
Sharply bent handle arch.
Ἐπὶ Αἰνησιδά-
μο[υ]
Ὑακι[νθίο]υ
Eponym Αἰνησίδαμος II. Cf. Cankardeş-Şenol 2015, 122, RE-ΑΙΝΗΣΙΔΑΜΟΣ 02-ΥΑΚΙΝΘΙΟΣ-001.

41. Inv. 081. LXIII-18. Fig. 16.4
Sharply bent handle arch.
M[ίδας]; cluster of grapes
caduceus
Fabricant Μίδας. The state of preservation does not allow for identifying which of the many similar dies of this fabricant were used, cf. Cankardeş-Şenol 2024, 397–408.

42. Inv. 089. LXIII-22. Fig. 16.5
Sharply bent handle arch.
Ἐπ’ ἱερεούς
star
[...]ασαγό(ρας)
The name of the priest can be restored as Νικασαγόρας or Τιμασαγόρας.

Kos

43. Inv. 63. LXIII-12. Fig. 16.6
Rectangular stamp with relief borders along the sides.
Ἡρακλα(–)
Probably Ἡρακλᾶς.

44. Inv. 973. Pit 12/Lighthouse. Fig. 16.7
Preserves upper part of handle with double-barrel section.
Ῥοδοκλ(ῆς)
Spearhead(?)

Unidentified

45. Inv. 088. Square LXIII-18. Fig. 16.8
Preserves a very small part of rim, oval in section. Traces of red paint above the handle attachment, including on the stamp field.

Monogram ΠΨ or ΠΑΤ in rectangular field

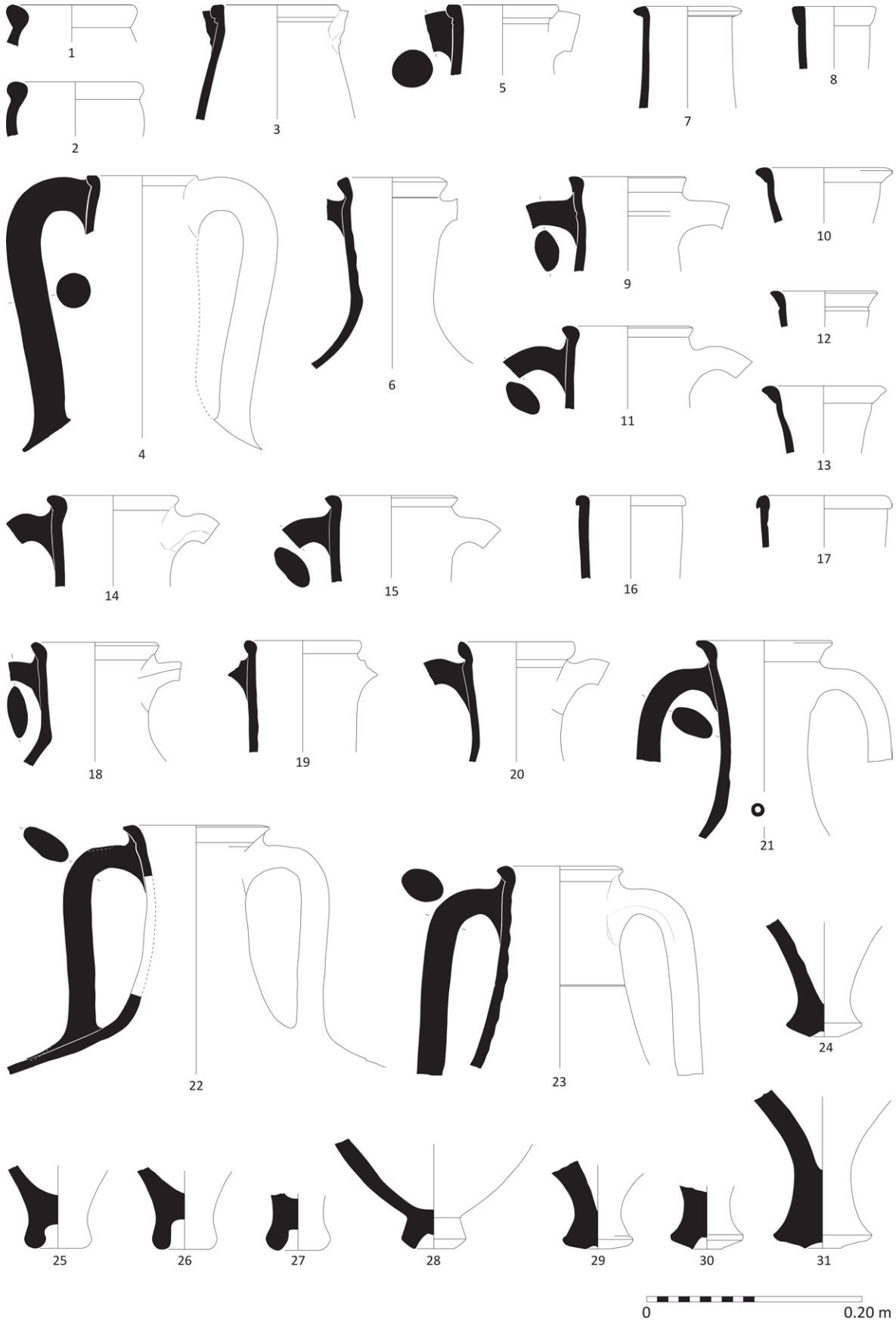


Fig. 5. Transport amphora fragments from pit XLIV-7:38 (author C. Tzochev)

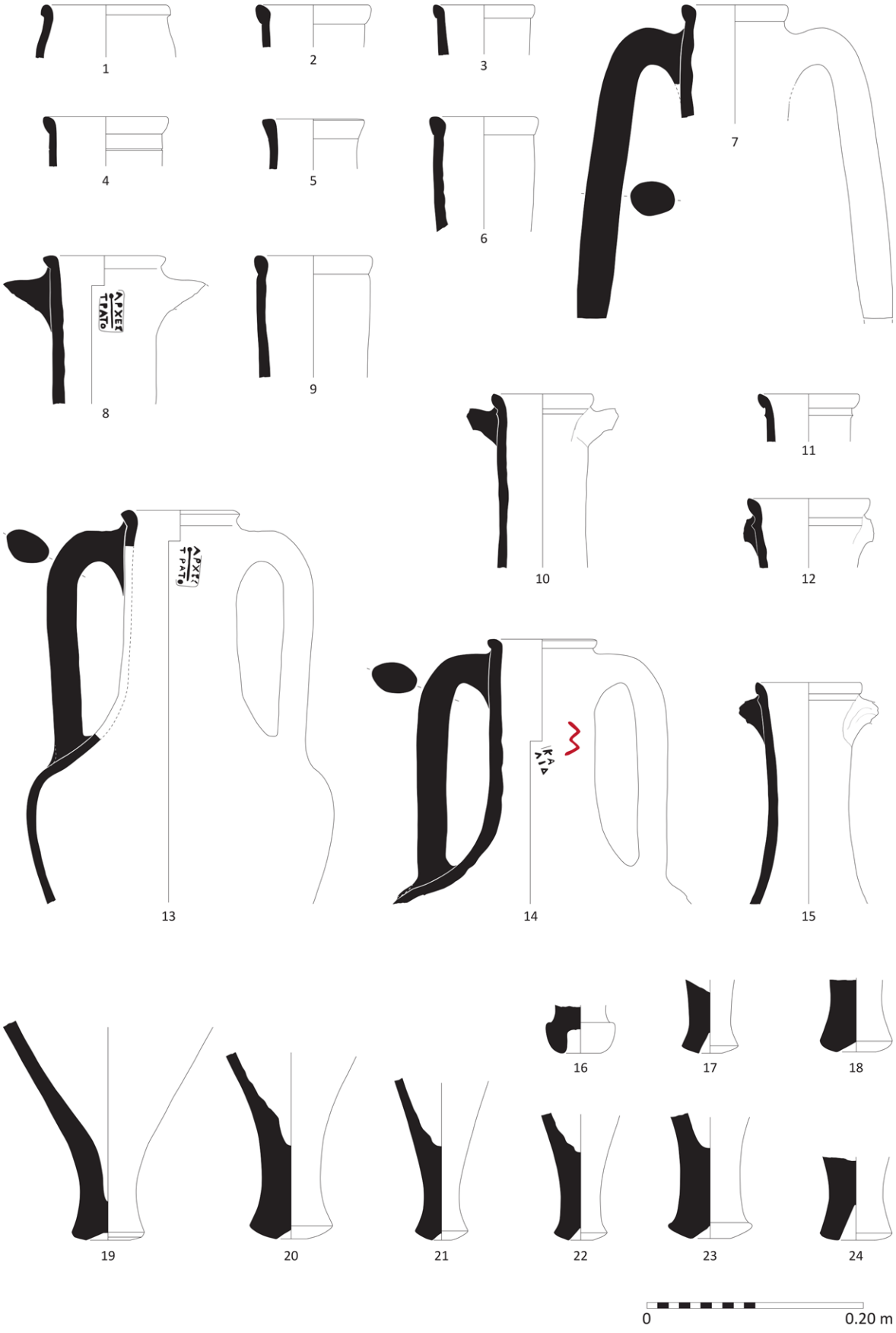


Fig. 6. Transport amphora fragments from pit XLIV-7:38 (author C. Tzochev)

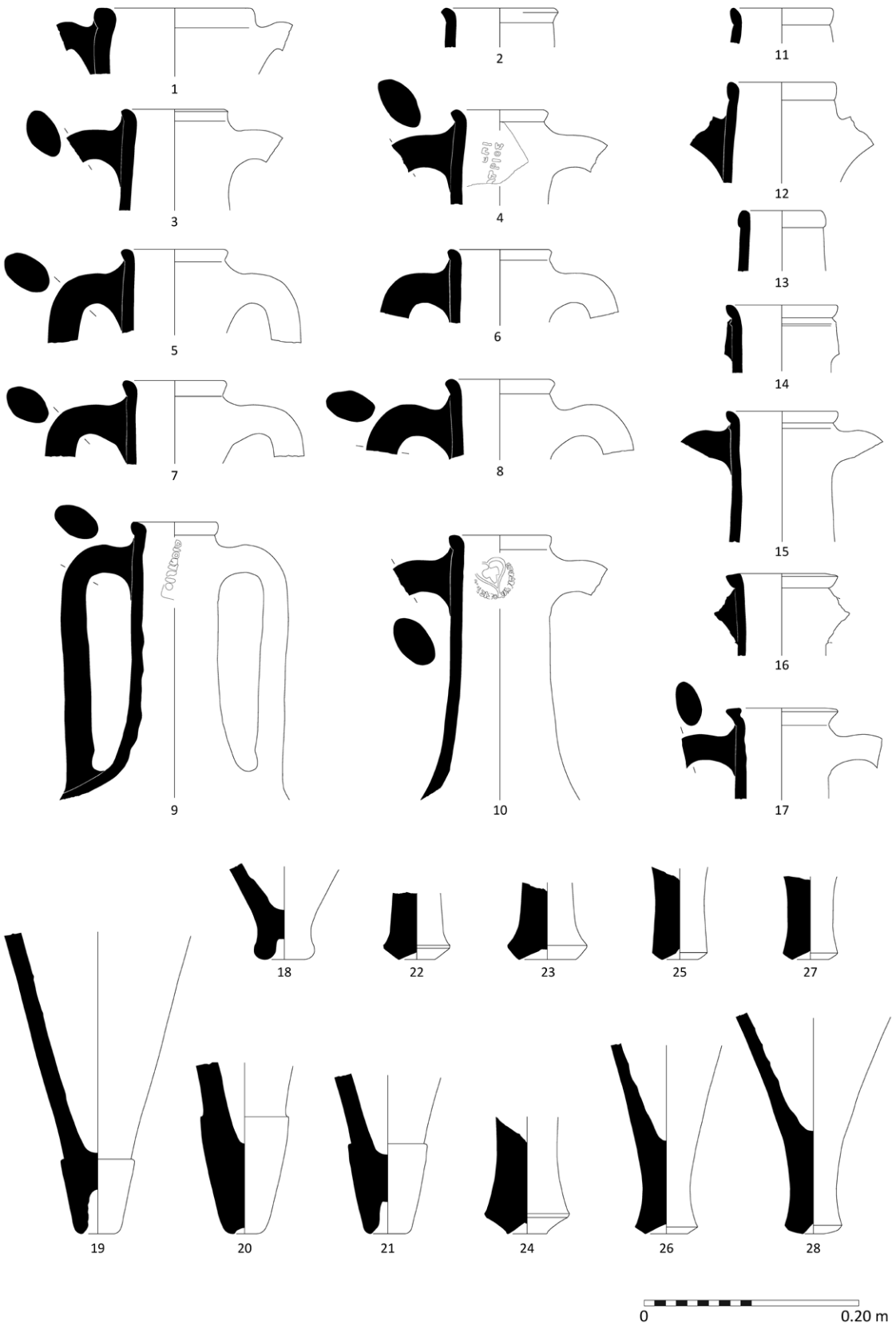


Fig. 7. Transport amphora fragments from pit XLIV-24/25:10 (author C. Tzochev)

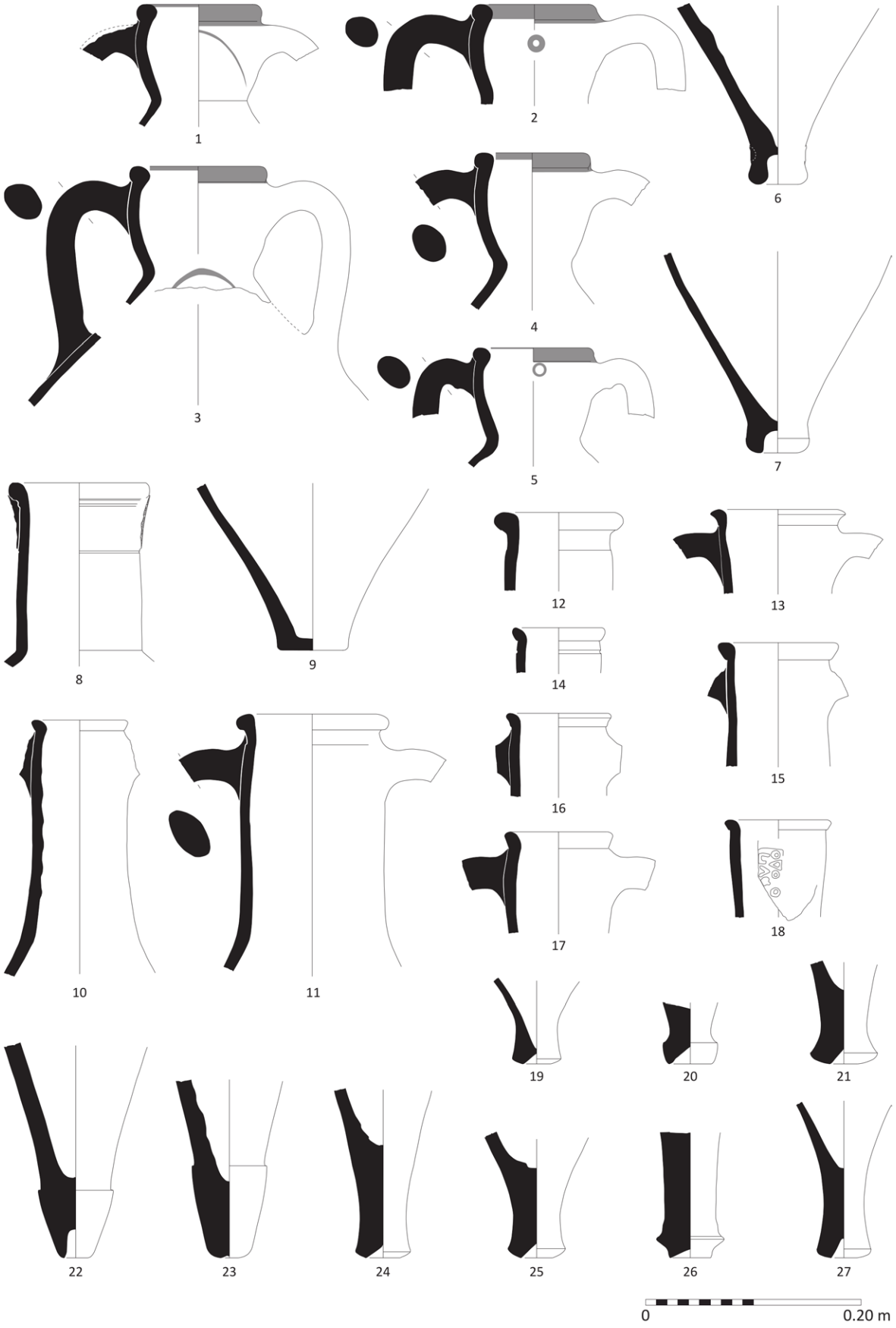


Fig. 8. Transport amphora fragments from pit LIII-3/9:6 (author C. Tzochev)

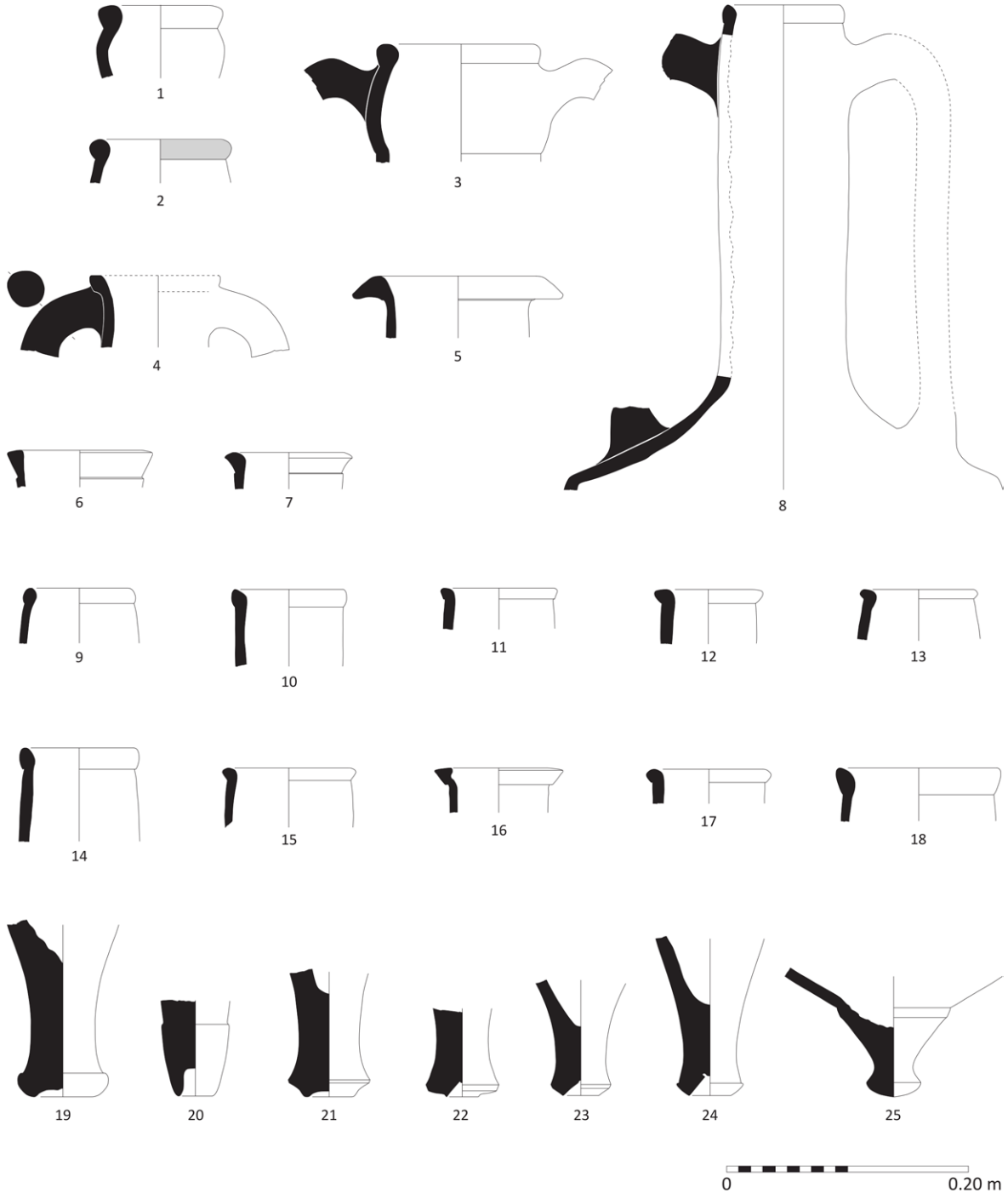


Fig. 9. Transport amphora fragments from pit XLIV-13/18:31 (author C. Tzochev)

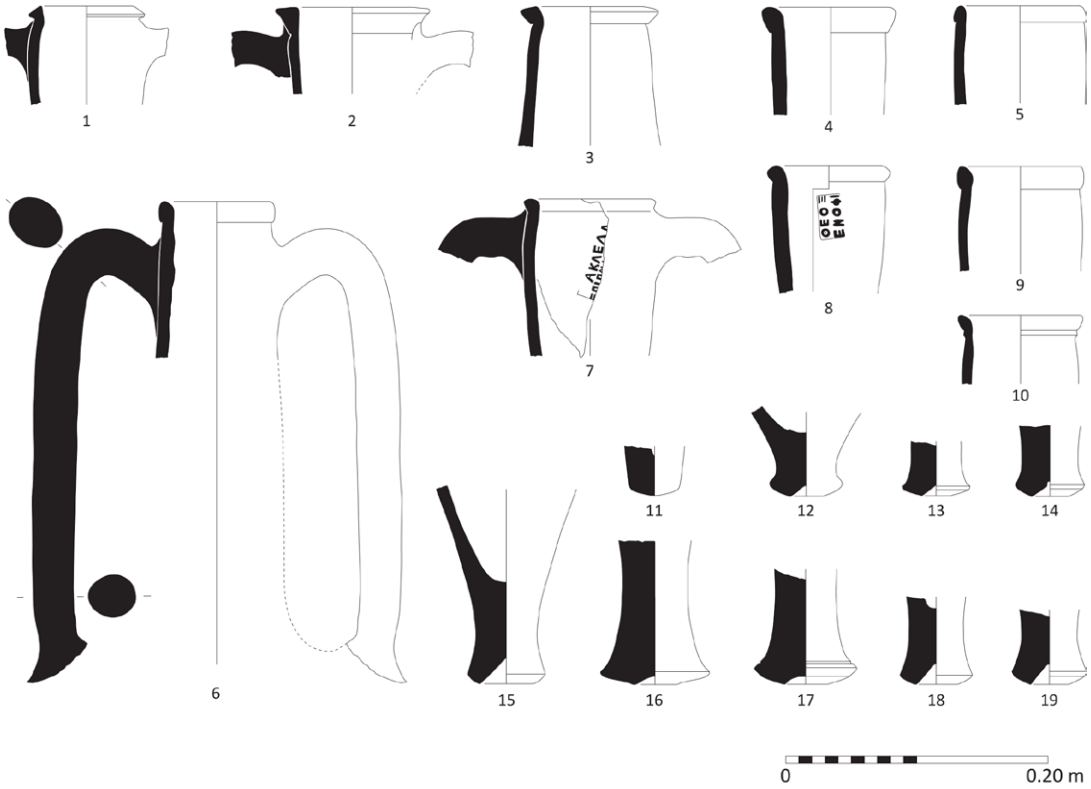


Fig. 10. Transport amphora fragments from pit XLIV-18:33 (author C. Tzochev)

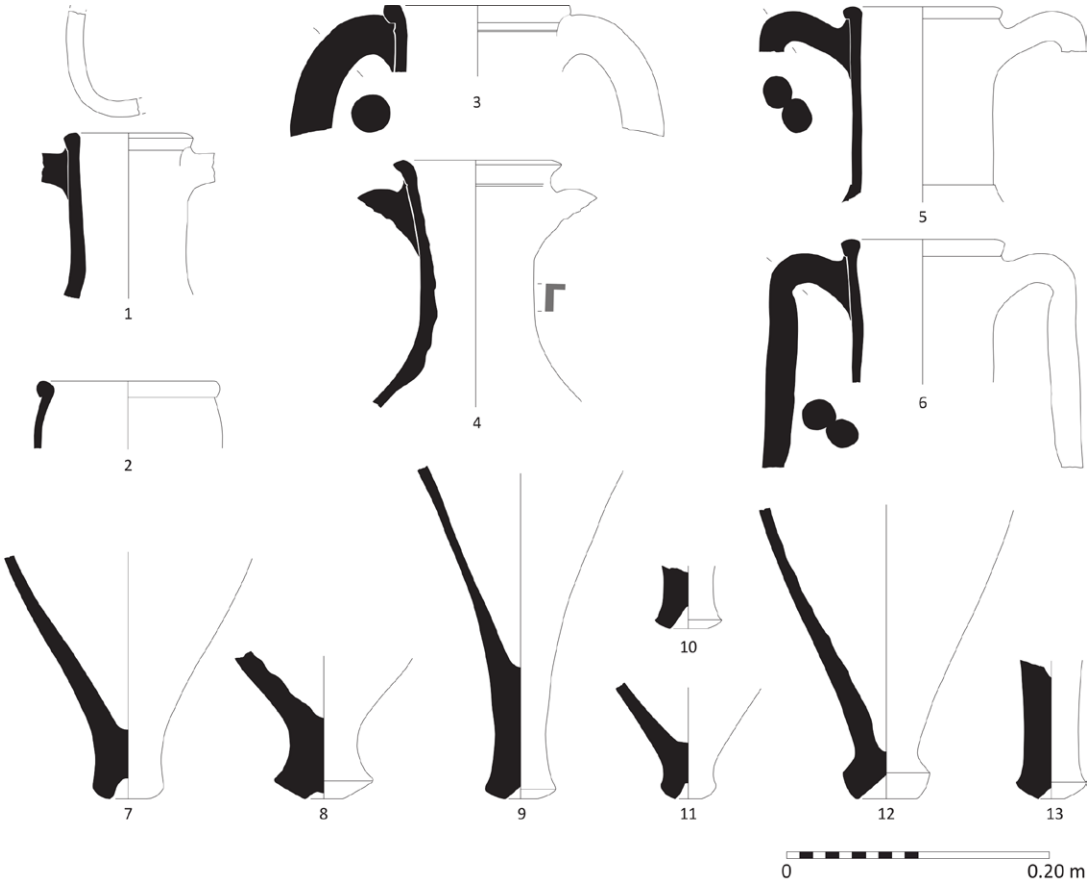
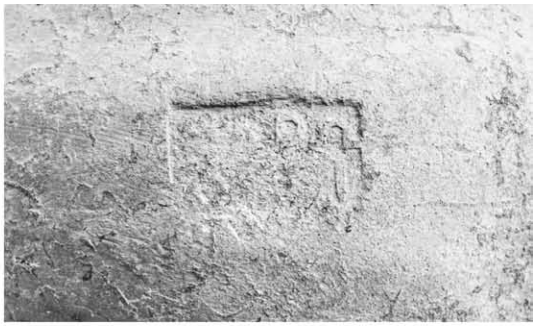


Fig. 11. Transport amphora fragments from pit XLIV-25:5 (author C. Tzochev)



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8

Fig. 12. Stamped amphora fragments from cape St Atanas (author C. Tzochev)

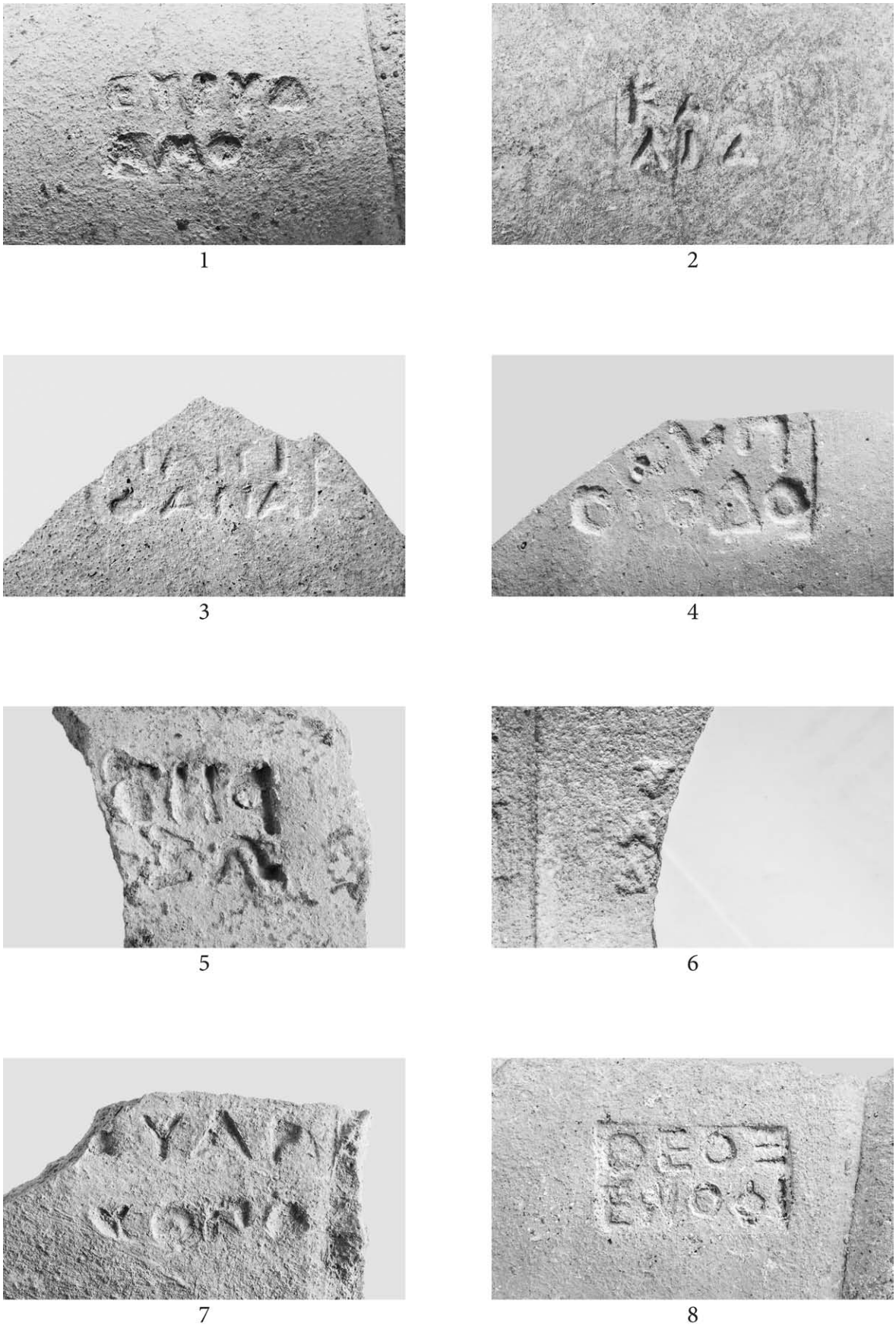


Fig. 13. Stamped amphora fragments from cape St Atanas (author C. Tzochev)

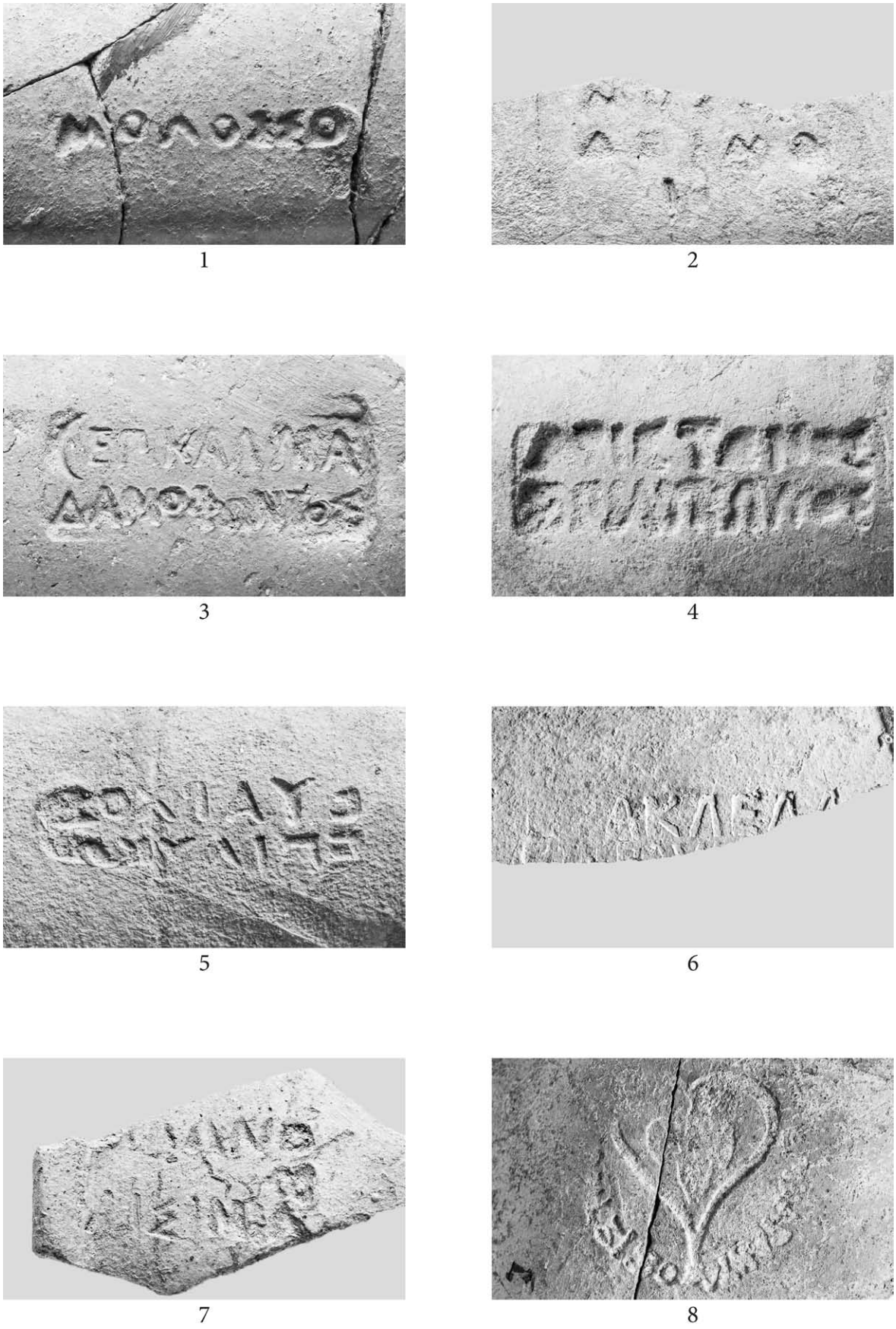


Fig. 14. Stamped amphora fragments from cape St Atanas (author C. Tzochev)

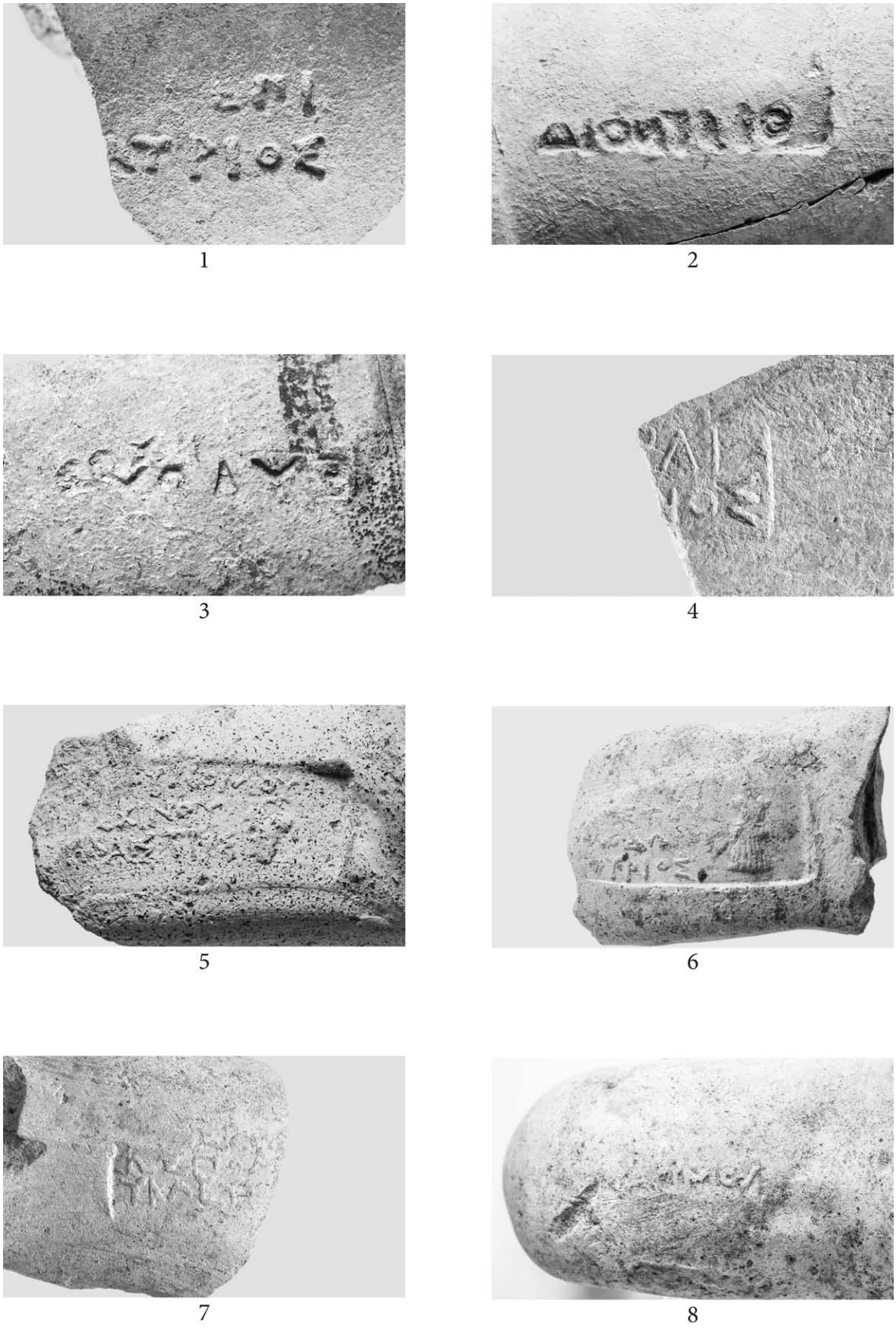


Fig. 15. Stamped amphora fragments from cape St Atanas (author C. Tzochev)

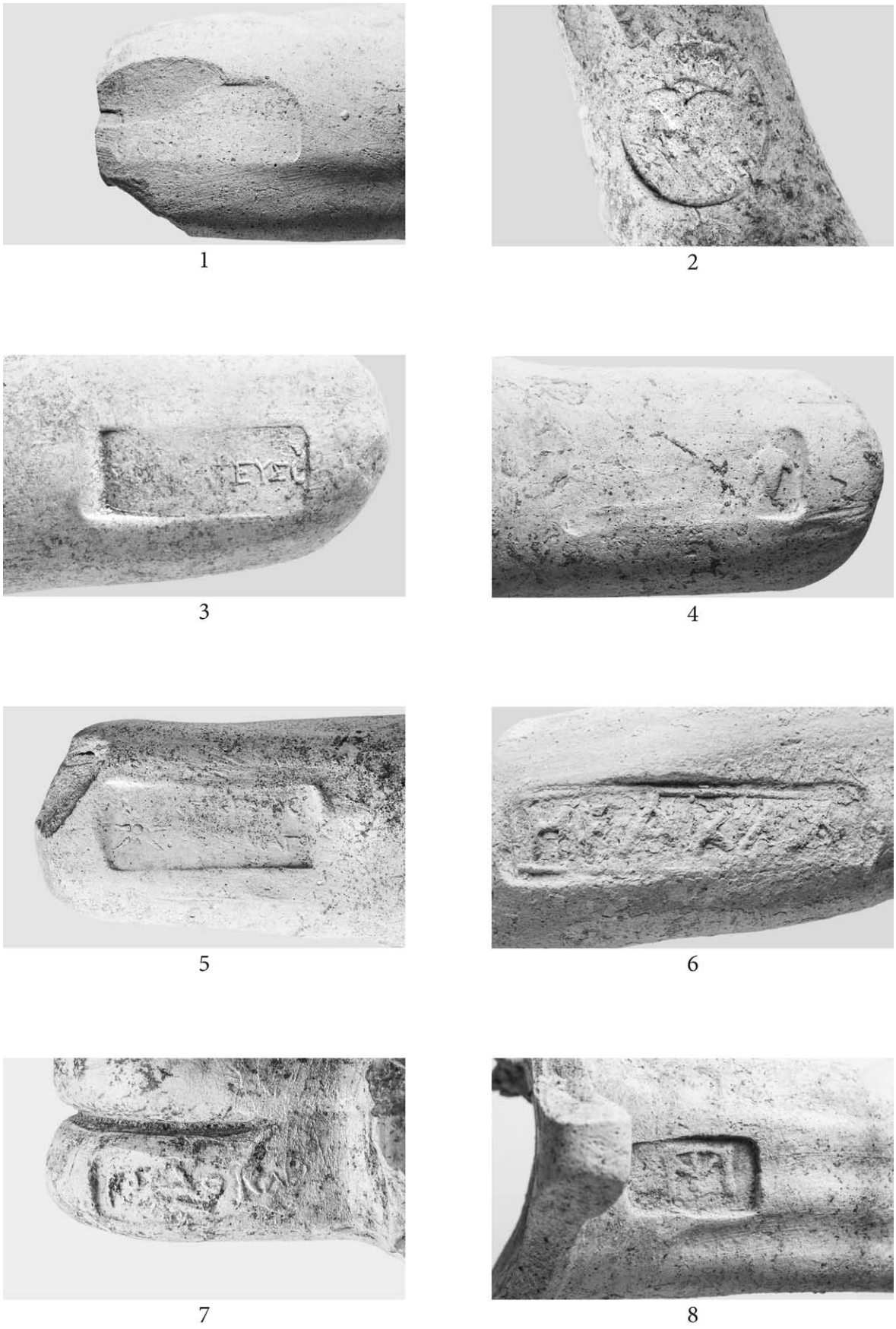


Fig. 16. Stamped amphora fragments from cape St Atanas (author C. Tzochev)

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