

Seal Impressions of 'Prophylactic' Symbolism on Pithoi from the Fortress of Boukelon Near Adrianopolis

Mariela Inkova & Panayat Antonov

National Museum of History, Bulgarian Lands in the Middle Ages (7th–17th c.) Department, Sofia, Bulgaria

Abstract

The subject of this study are two seal impressions on fragments of pithoi (fig. 1). The artefacts have an irregular, slightly concave shape. The authentic edges are missing. The outer surface of the fragments is pinkish brown after firing, while their inner surface is light gray; they are made of evenly fired sandy clay containing many small pebbles. There is a relief decoration on the outer surface, immediately below the mouth rim, featuring a wide horizontal strip with uniform punctures, probably imitating a rope. Below the strip, two impressions of a circular relief shape were stamped with a seal before firing. A plastic equal-armed (Greek) cross with expanding edges and one relief bud in the inter-arms is impressed in the centre of the field. The composition is inscribed in a round frame of plastically arranged trapezoidal motifs, imitating rays (?). The impressions are partially preserved – one lacks part of the frame, while about half of the second has survived. Dimensions: 16x12.5x4 cm; 16.8x13.9x4 cm. Restored dimensions of the seal: 6.00 x 6.00 cm.

Keywords: Boukelon fortress, Late Antiquity, Early Byzantine period, pithoi, western Black Sea coast, early Christian symbolism, 'radiant cross', prophylactic stamps and inscriptions

1. Introduction

The fragments were discovered in 2022 during the planned archaeological excavations of the *Boukelon* fortress near the village of Matochina, Svilengrad region, Southeastern Bulgaria¹. The fortification is located on a high, steep-sided plateau (fig. 2), the latter being situated between the south-eastern slopes of the Sakar Mountain and more precisely between the Derwent Heights and the valley of the Tundzha River (ancient name *Tonsus*). The flat area of the plateau has approximate dimensions of 150 m in length and 65 m in width.

In the 3rd–6th century period the fortress fell into the immediate hinterland of *Hadrianopolis* (present-day Edirne in Eastern Thrace, Türkiye) and together with the fortresses *Probaton* (present-day Sinanköy village, Türkiye) and *Skutarion* near the village of Shtit, Svilengrad region, Southeastern Bulgaria, were part of the protected zone of the capital of the province of *Haemimontus*. The fortress is off the *Via Diagonalis* road, but falls along the route of the meridional road already mentioned in the *Itinerarium Antonini Augusti*², which connected the provinces of *Moesia Inferior* (later *Moesia Secunda*) and *Haemimontus* in the Diocese of Thracia with the city of *Byzantion* (later the imperial capital of Constantinople), and during the Middle Ages – the Bulgarian State and the Byzantine Empire (fig. 3) (Wendel, 2005: 191–193, Karte 13 f; Tapkova-Zaimova, 1958: 66–67; Tapkova-Zaimova, 1979: 167–168; Ayanov, 1946: 96–97, Fig. 38; Beševliev, 1971: 125–129; Gagova, 1983: 89–100; Gagova, 2002: 105–107; Dintchev, 2018: 36–37, fig. 1–2; Spiesler, 1992: 27, fig. 2).

The brothers Karel and Hermann Škorpil (Bratya Shkorpilovi, 1888: 75–76) and Konstantin Jireček (Irechek, 1974: 659) were the first to identify the fortification with the name of the fortress,

inscribed on a column – *Boukéλ[ou]* (Beshevliev 1979: 146, Cat. No. 28). The column itself, today housed in the Regional Museum of History in Shumen, Northeastern Bulgaria, evidences the conquest of the fortress in 813 by the Bulgarian ruler Khan Krum (803–814). Historical sources testify that in the 9th and in the 15th centuries Boukelon was the seat of a bishop.

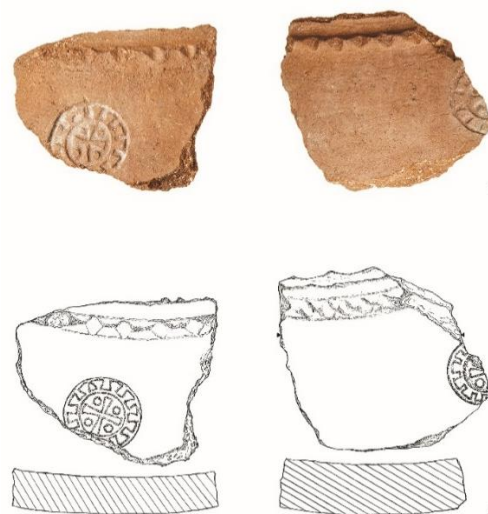


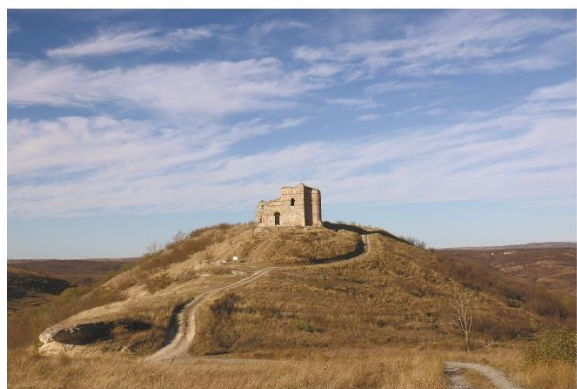
Figure 1 Stamps on pithos fragments from the excavations at the Boukelon fortress, Southeast Bulgaria (Photo: T. Dimitrov, NMH; Drawing: S. Todorov).

¹ Field specimen number 648. They are now kept in the National Museum of History, Sofia, under inventory no. НМ 67794 in Boukelon collection.

² *Itinerarium Antonini Augusti* (Cuntz), 175, 1–5 (Cuntz, 1929: 23; Tapkova-Zaimova, Velkov, 1958: 30).



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Figure 2 The plateau with the remains of the Boukelon fortress near the village of Matochina, Svilengrad region, Southeast Bulgaria (Photo: S. Aleksandrova, M. Inkova).

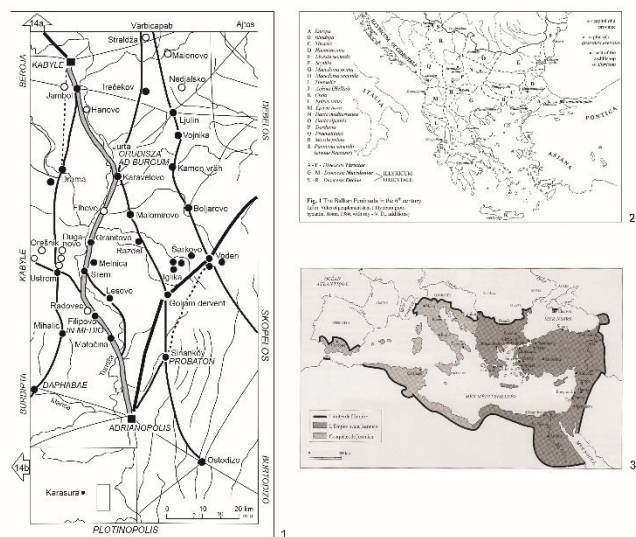


Figure 3 Maps showing the location of the Boukelon fortress (1. after Wendel, 2005: Karte 13 f; 2. after Dinchev, 2021: 37, Fig. 2; 3. after Spiesler, 1992: 27, fig. 2).

From the *Notitiae Episcopatum Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* it is known that in the 10th–12th centuries, the diocese of Boukelon belonged to the metropolis in Adrianople (Darrouzès 1989: 209–237). The town of *Voukelon* is mentioned several times in the *Historia* of John Kantakouzenus on the occasion of the Bulgarian-Byzantine relations and the participation of the Bulgarian Tsar Mikhail III Shishman (1323–1330) in the civil war between

Andronicus III Palaeologus and Andronicus II Palaeologus in 1324 and 1328.³ (Gagova, 2002: 67; Voeva, 2015: 607–621). The same chronicler mentions *Voukelon* again in 1344 as the temporary seat of the governor of Adrianople, Manuel Apokaukos.

It is assumed that after Adrianople was conquered, the fortresses of Boukelon and Probaton fell under Ottoman rule in the late 60s or early 70s of 14th century. During the Ottoman period, the settlement was renamed *Fikle* and included in the Ottoman military-administrative system (Dimitrov 2020: 305–306). Under this name it is recorded in the first studied Ottoman register from 1485 as the centre of an eponymous *nahiye*; it belonged to the endowment (*waqf*) of Sultan Mehmed II's *imaret* in Istanbul. In 1519, a change in the status of the settlement took place – this time the registers mention it only as the village of Fikle. In 1530–1570, it belonged to the *kaza* of Edirne. Ottoman registers note an increase in the number of both Muslim and Christian families, which is explained by the *waqf* tax reliefs. An interesting fact is that the heads of some of the Muslim households are recorded as 'sons of Abdullah', i.e. Christians who converted to Islam. One of the last written mentions is a note in the diaries of Sultan Mehmed IV (1648–1687) from 1664, saying that he spent time hunting in the Fikle area (Voeva, 2015: 607–621).



Figure 4 Floor level of a room of a building (dated to the 6th c.) adjacent to the late antique fortress wall, where the pithos fragments were discovered in 2022 (Photo: M. Inkova).

It seems that the fortress of Boukelon has remained out of the sight of the Bulgarian medieval archaeology for many years as a monument belonging to the cultural heritage of the Byzantine Empire. The studies of the site were limited to fieldwork (Bratya Shkorpilovi, 1888: 75–76; Irechek, 1974: 659; Velkov, 1933: 185–187; Boyadzhiev, 1965: 2–8; Boyadzhiev, 2005: 91–103; Aladzhov, 1997: 153–155, Table LXXIII, Fig. 51; Aladzhov, 2001: 107–111; Voeva, 2015: 607–621). Regular archaeological excavations were undertaken as late as 2017. Within 5 years, the stratigraphy of the cultural layers was established (Inkova, Antonov, 2018: 503–506; Inkova, Antonov, Sengalevich, Yordanova, 2019: 529–531; Inkova, Antonov, Velkovski, Tzankov, 2021: 189–217; Inkova, Antonov, Sengalevich, Ruseva, 2020; Inkova, Antonov, Sengalevich, Ruseva

³ Ioannis Cantacuzeni, *Historia*, II, 3 (Jončev, 1980: 259–262).

(in print). The earliest traces of life date back to the Early Iron Age, Hellenistic and Roman periods. The fortress wall was probably built in the 4th–5th centuries and repaired in the 6th century. Clay-bound repairs carried out in the Middle Ages have also been recorded. When the cultural contexts in two test trenches were exhausted, two late antique buildings were uncovered. The one, whose construction we attribute to the 4th–5th centuries, was built in the *opus mixtum* technique. Immediately below their floor levels, in the levelling layer above the bedrock, fragmented Late Roman kitchen and red-slipped ware from the 3rd–4th centuries prevailed, as well as burnt coins from the second half of the 3rd century. The numismatic material indicates almost uninterrupted habitation of the terrain from the Hellenistic to the Ottoman period. The importance of the fortress during the Middle Ages is also confirmed by several *molybdobullae* from the 11th–13th centuries, including an anonymous seal, probably belonging to Avrampaks, a person of Seljuk origin, who converted to Christianity and at the end of the 13th century was appointed to Byzantine service as the chief falconer of the Byzantine emperor (Yordanov, Inkova, 2020: 253–271).



Figure 5 Images of crosses decorated with dots on bread stamps (prospora): 1. Horbat Ma'on, Palestine; 2. Chersonesus, Crimea; 3. Kerch Peninsula, Crimea; 4. Eski-Kermen, Crimea; 5. Aluston, Crimea (1. after Di Segni, 2014: 32, fig. 1; 2.–5. after Mayko, 2021: 25, fig. 1:7, 10, 13; 26, fig. 2:15).

The fragments commented on here were discovered in 2022 in the fill of one of the rooms of a building adjacent to the late antique fortress wall (fig. 4). In the course of digging, two floor levels were identified, which we attributed as broadly ranging from the 4th to the 6th century (Inkova, Antonov, Sengalevich, Ruseva (in print)).

The same provenience of the artefacts, the identical composition of the clay with a lot of coarse sand admixtures, the same thickness of the walls, the characteristic of the colour indicating the same firing conditions, the identical horizontal relief line applied below the mouth rim on both fragments, suggest that both of them belonged most likely to the same pithos. It can be assumed that the seals were applied at equal distances from each other.

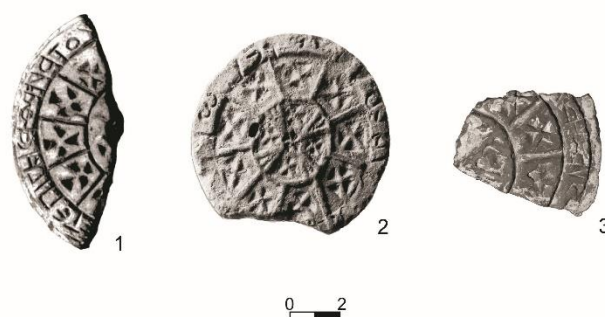


Figure 6 Bread stamps with frames with relief trapezoidal ornaments: 1.–2. Chersonesus, Crimea; 3. Belinskoye, Crimea (1.–3. after Mayko, 2021: 25, fig. 1:9, 12; 26, fig. 2:1).

2. Discussion

The iconography of the design in the central field – an equal-armed cross with dots, one between each of the arms of the cross – was widespread since Late Antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages. We find it in a variety of alternative forms on stone sculpture: a 5th–6th century relief from Corinth (Scranton, 1957: 104–105, Pl. XIX, 11; Pl. XX, 6), a relief from Athens from the 12th century (Grabar, 1976: Pl LXXX, d), on tableware from the 5th–6th centuries (Hristov, 2024: 246, Fig. IV.5, Fig 33:4), on amulets, bread stamps (Mayko, 2021: 19), etc. It is mostly inscribed in a circle. A bread stamp from Horbat Ma'on, Palestine, bearing the Greek inscription +ECVTEFAN [Εὐλογ(α) Σμεράν[ου]], translated as 'Blessing of (Saint?) Stephen', depicts a cross on one side, framed by two rows of dots in the space between its arms (fig. 5: 1a–1b). The interpretation is in the spirit of Jewish-Christian theology concerning the supernatural light sparkling around the cross (Di Segni, 2014: 31–32, Fig. 1). The dots may represent 'Christ, as the greatest of the seven archangels, surrounded by the six companion archangels', as is told in Isaiah's prophecy⁴. According to other researchers, the dots on such liturgical objects are an abbreviated formula, schematic representation of IC XC NI KA or of the apocalyptic letters A and Ω. Sometimes, four smaller crosses inscribed in circles are depicted between the arms. A similar composition is known on four prosphora seals from the ancient city of Chersonesus on the Crimean Peninsula (fig. 5:2), and from Kerch Peninsula, Crimea (fig. 5:3), dated to the 6th century, as well as from the towns of Eski-Kermen (fig. 5:4) and Aluston (fig. 5:5) in the south of Crimea, dated to the 10th century (Mayko, 2021: 19, 20, 24, 25, 26, 30, Fig. 1: 7, 10, 13, Fig 2: 15; Galavaris, 1970: 67). According to V. Zaleskaya, they

⁴ Isa. 11:1–2.

symbolize the Christian blessing *χριστὸς χριστιανοῖς χαριζέται χάριν*, translated as *Christ bestows grace on Christians* (Zaleskaya, 1988: 206, Note 12). However, in other images, such as in mosaics, fruits (pomegranates) are depicted between the lower arms of the cross and flowers or birds between the upper ones. The common symbolism, according to early Christian interpretations, is the idea of the rebirth of nature, fertility, resurrection and salvation. Most likely, it is this iconography and meaning that generated the schematic image, executed on a limited space.

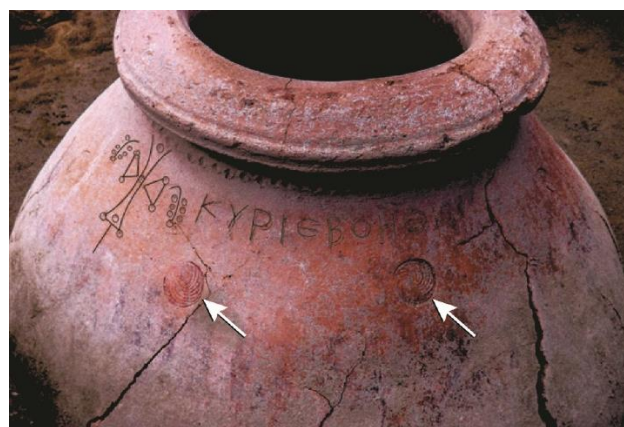


Figure 7 Some of the sites commented in the present article, where pithoi from the 5th–7th c. with stamped and incised decoration and inscriptions with Cristian symbolism were found. From the ancient city of Chersonesus only bread stamps are commented, while from Ulmetum in Northern Dobrudzha region in Romania we point to a lid for a hydria vessel (Map: P. Antonov via Google Earth)

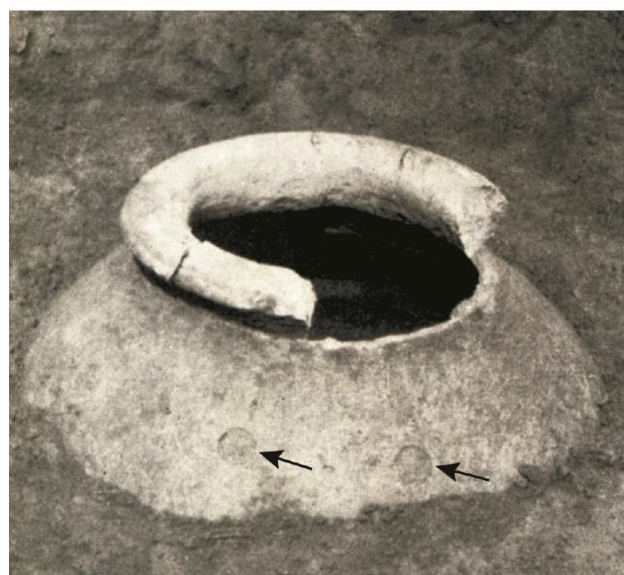


Figure 81. Stamps from Boukelon fortress; 2.–3. Stamps on fragments from a pithos from the Hrisosotira fortress; 4. Floor mosaics from the church in Shavei Tzion, Northern Israel (2.–3. after Hristov, 2024: 242, fig. IV.5.28–IV.5.29; 4. after Belyaev, 2015). No scale.

The composition features a very interesting combination – a round frame with plastic trapezoidal motifs inscribed. The starting point for the interpretation could be the early Christian *prosphorai*, on which a text, most often of a soteriological or blessing meaning is inscribed along the frame. That is, the design of the commented seal stamps from Boukelon represents an imitation of a prototype with a text. This interpretation is possible, but is not sufficiently substantiated. Although of a later dating, three *prosphorai* are worth noting – from Chersonesus, of unknown origin (fig. 6:1), from the reservoir in Chersonesus (fig. 6:2) and from the settlement of Belinskoye, Crimea, dated within the broad range from the 8th to the 9th/10th centuries (fig. 6:3). Here the frame around the central medallion with the cross is divided into identical trapezoidal segments with inscribed crosses. Regarding one of the *prosphorai* from Chersonesus V. Zaleskaya suggests that ‘the sectors with crosses could symbolize the twelve apostles’, while the liturgical text around them on one of the seals suggests influence from the Monophysite Church of the East (Mayko, 2021: 23, 25, 26, Fig. 1: 9, 12; Fig. 2: 1; Zaleskaya, 1988: 204–207).



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Figure 9 Pithoi with circular stamps from late antique and early byzantine fortresses on the western Black Sea coast in present day Bulgaria: 1. Byala, Varna region; 2. Shabla, Dobrich region (1. after Yotov, Minchev, 2018: 462, fig. A, 2; 2. after Bobcheva, 1974: 69, Cat. No 69). No scale.

The closest parallel to the iconography of the artefacts, and subsequently to the symbolism embedded in it, is found in several seal impressions on fragments of a pithos originating from the late antique and early medieval fortress of *Hrisosotira* (modern Bulgarian town of Chernomorets) on the Western Black Sea coast (fig. 7) (Hristov, 2024: 197, Fig. IV.2.151, 310–311, 242, Fig. IV.5.28–5.29). The impressions are round, featuring relief crosses with expanding arm ends in the central field and triangular motifs in the space between the arms, with a round frame filled with triangular motifs, the only difference being that their vertices point towards the periphery (fig. 8:2–3). Below the mouth, the pithos has an identical decoration of a horizontal relief line, probably imitating a rope. The preserved fragments allow us to reconstruct their place on the pithos – probably they were stamped in the two parallel belts girdling the shoulders of the vessel. They come from Building No. 28, whose habitation is defined by both the discovered coins of the Emperors Justin II (565–574) and Phocas (602–610) and the synchronous household ceramics. The same composition is found on a representative Christian monument dated a century earlier – the floor mosaic from the church in *Shavei Tzion* in northern Israel, dated to the 5th century. It represents a Latin cross with expanded arm ends, inscribed in rows of circles of triangular motifs as a radiant glow, and with pomegranates and flowers depicted in the space between the arms (fig. 8:4) (Belyaev, 2015: 540–558). The first written evidence of such a radiance is found in the work *Vita Constantini* by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, from the first half of the 4th century. The historian describes Emperor Constantine's vision – 'up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, 'By this conquer'⁵, with the help of which he achieved his victory over Maxentius in 312 in Italy (Belyaev, 2015: 540–558; Popov, 2014: 671–729). The canonical source provides the basis for the widespread distribution of the motif in the early Christian environment – on elite monuments, but also in everyday environment. According to G. Galavaris, the second belt suggests the idea of a wreath reflecting the glow of the radiant cross (Galavaris, 1970: 67). During the early Christian period, the motif of the 'radiant/glowing cross' had different iconographic varieties.

As an illustration of the most common variant, we can point to the mosaic images from Thessaloniki: from the *tribelon* of the Church of Panagia *Acheiropoietos* ('*Not Made by Hands*') from the second half of the 5th century, the scene with the Theotokos ('*Mother of God*') and St. Theodore from the church of St. Demetrius dated to the mid-7th century and from the *bema* of the church of St. Sophia, representing a cross with radial rays between the arms. Another variant, close to the motif discussed in the article, are the ornaments on the *chlamys* of St. Sergius from the church of St. Demetrius in Thessaloniki, featuring a radiant cross inscribed in a circle, around which there are quadrangular forms, reminiscent of the ends of the rays. The genesis of the motif should probably be deduced from the syncretic radiant images symbolising the sun god Helios from the formation period of the early Christian iconography. A typical example is one of the mosaic scenes from the Rotunda in Thessaloniki (Bakirtzis, Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, Mavropoulou-Tsioumi, 2012: 116, Fig. 73, 163, Fig. 42, 164–165, Fig. 43, 45, 212–213, Fig. 19–22, 249, Fig. 16). In our commentary on the genesis and spread of the motif defined as 'cross inscribed in alternating circular (radial) (?) medallions of triangular and trapezoidal motifs', we should point out the relief decoration on a lid of a pithos, again from the early Byzantine fortress of *Hrisosotira*.

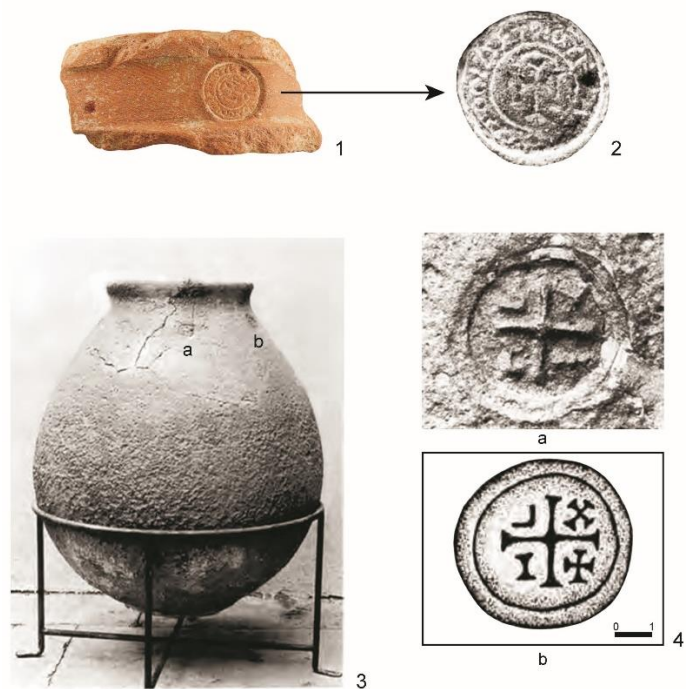


Figure 10. 1.–2. Stamp on the neck of a pithos from the early Cristian Basilica at Stamata, Attica region, Greece; 3.–4. Pithos with stamps from the same site (1.–2. after Ghini-Tsofopoulou, 2002: 352, Cat. No 407; 3.–4. after Ghini-Tsofopoulou, 1995: 73, fig. 3, Pl. 32, δ). No scale.

The pithos is fragmented therefore we are not quite sure about the central image, but from the centre to the periphery it is decorated with two rows of triangular and trapezoidal/quadrilateral patterns (Hristov, 2024: 243, Fig. IV.5.30). Lids with similar decoration are also known from other early Byzantine sites. The examples cited illustrate the widespread distribution of a religious idea in the 5th–6th centuries, both in the elite sacral culture and its transformation through combination of geometric shapes in the mass everyday culture. Judging by the numismatic material, the fragments of the pithoi from *Hrisosotira* date to the second half of the 6th–7th century. Actually because of their size and method of production (choice of raw materials, need for kilns for firing and the final stages of the technological process such as glazing, burnishing, transportation), pithoi were an impressive investment for their owners (Françoise, 2014: 168). Produced only to order, they were a long-term investment, sometimes being used over centuries. Therefore, we can assume that they were possibly produced earlier. As to the fragments from Boukelon, the stratigraphy, as well as the absence so far of stationary structures and numismatic material allowing to date them to the 7th century, we can assume the 6th century as the upper boundary of their production time.

In addition to the commented fragments, pithoi from today's Bulgarian lands decorated and stamped with seals are known from the early Byzantine fortresses near the modern towns of Byala and Shabla on the west Black Sea coast (fig. 7). The fragment from Byala was found in the two-story building No. 2, which according to V. Yotov can be associated with wine production. A great number of the excavated buildings are determined as having been part of an *ergasterium*, which functioned from the 6th to the beginning of the 7th century, when it was burned down during one of the Avar raids

⁵ Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini*, I, 28 (Cameron, Hall, 1999: 80–81).

in 614 (Yotov, 2013: 426–439; Yotov, Minchev, Valeriev, Rusev, Dryanovski, Parushev, 2021: 22–23, 162). The stamped impressions have a round shape, filled with radially arranged relief arcs (fig. 9:1) (Yotov, Minchev, 2018: 461–462, Fig. A.2.; Yotov, Minchev, Valeriev, Rusev, Dryanovski, Parushev, 2021: 22–23, 162). The ornament is typical of the early Byzantine ornamental system, found on stone sculpture from the same period. The seals are applied onto the shoulders, seemingly at an equal distance from each other. On the shoulders of the second pithos, discovered next to the lighthouse near the town of Shabla (northern part of the Western Black Sea coast), round seals were stamped at equal distances (fig. 9:2) (Bobcheva, 1974: 69, 128, Cat. No. 69). We have no specific information about the context and dating of the pithos. Considering the fragments of amphorae found nearby, we date it to the 5th–6th centuries. According to the archaeological research carried out in recent years, the site falls within the area of the Roman and early Byzantine fortress of Karia, evidencing traces of life from the 5th century BC to the 6th century AD (Totev, Dobrev, Varbanov, 2020: 782–784). In this regard, we will also mention one of the pithoi from Pergamon, Türkiye, housed in the city museum. Round impressions bearing a relief image of rosettes are stamped onto its shoulders, in a horizontal line and at a relatively equal distance from each other (Lafli, Buora, 2024: 25–26, Fig. 2a–b).



Figure 11 Crafting wine in pithoi: 1–2. Mosaics on the ambulatory vault of the Mausoleum of Augusta Constantina/ Church of Santa Costanza, Rome, mid-4th c.; 3. Mosaics from the ancient city of Patras, 3rd c. (1.–2. after Web Gallery of Art, accessed May 18 2024, https://www.wga.hu/support/viewer_m/z.html; 3. after Gantsev, 2022: 159, fig. 4:3).

The third example is a stamped neck of a pithos. The impression has a circular shape, with a relief Latin cross of forked ends set in the centre and under an arch supported by columns. The frame around the motif bears an inscription in Greek 'The blessing of the Lord [be] upon us' (fig. 10:1–2) (Ghini-Tsofopoulou, 1995: 71–73, Pl. 32 α–β; Ghini-Tsofopoulou, 2002: 352, Cat. No. 407). The impression has identical dimensions to the one from Boukelon – 6

cm in diameter. It was found in a room of economic functions in the early Christian Basilica in Stamata, Attica. H. Ghini-Tsofopoulou dates it to the 6th–7th centuries, noting that two bread seals are identical to it, one kept in the Byzantine Museum in Athens, and the second being of unknown origin. Two other fully preserved pithoi, one of which has six circular seal impressions stamped around the shoulders, come from the same context. In the centre is a relief cross, with the letters I, X, A (?) and a cross between its arms (fig. 10:3–4) (Ghini-Tsofopoulou, 1995: 73, Fig. 3, Pl. 32, δ).

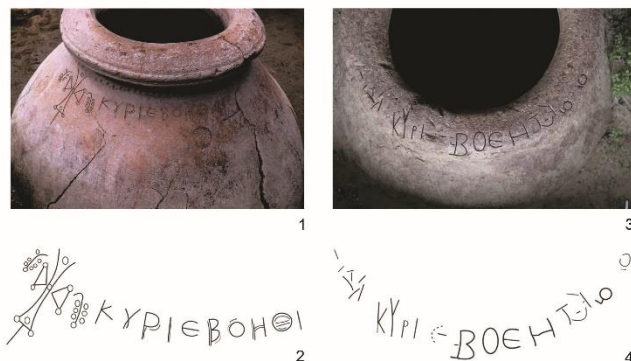


Figure 12. 1.–2. Incised inscription on a pithos from building No 7 from the early byzantine fortress near the town of Byala, Bulgaria; 3.–4. Incised inscription on a pithos from building No 2 from the same site (1.–4. after Yotov, Minchev, 2018: 463, fig. A, 1–2). No scale.

Book VI of the *Geoponika* agricultural encyclopaedia, compiled in the first half of the 10th century, based on earlier treatises, including the treatise by Cassianus Bassus from the 5th or 6th century, describes in detail the technology of producing pithoi intended for storing and fermenting wine (fig. 11:1–3): the selection of proper raw material, the mixing of different clays, the shaping of the body, drying, firing in suitable kilns, coating with pine resin while the vessels are still warm and burnishing the surface. Recommendations are given for the appropriate place for their installation in the cellars, according to the orientation of the room, etc.⁶, but there is no information about stamping⁷. The production technique of these large storage vessels is extremely conservative, preserved until the 19th centuries⁸. Ethnographic data from the territory of Cyprus, however, testify that the practice of chiselling and stamping with crosses, writing apotropaic inscriptions for protecting the food stored in the pithoi, is alive (François, 2014: 167). The situation is identical on the island of Chios, one of the Greek centres of the 18th and 19th centuries, known for the production of pithoi. According to the research of Nikos Liaros, the roots of the tradition of their production, stamping and decorating should be sought in the previous centuries. An interesting example is the pithoi with three seals, stamped next to each other, interpreted by the researcher in the spirit of Orthodox religiosity as a symbol of the Holy Trinity (Liaros, 2016: 69). In his opinion, wooden seals specially made for the purpose were used for the stamping.

The inscription on the Stamata seal hints at the function and

⁶ A mosaic from Patras, dated to the 3rd century, illustrates the pouring of the primary juice from crushed grapes into pithoi (Gantsev, 2022: 147, 159, рис. 4:3). The mosaic from the Mausoleum of Augusta Constantine in Rome represents the of wine-making process in the mid-4th century: accessed May 7 2024, https://www.wga.hu/support/viewer_m/z.html.

⁷ *Geoponika*, VI, 1–19 (Lipshits, 1960: 124–133; Dalby, 2011: 135–144).

⁸ On the different techniques for making pithoi, types of decoration, drying, firing, etc. see the book M. Giannopoulou (Giannopoulou, 2010).

symbolism of seals with a cross stamped on the pithos. Even in the early stages of the spread of Christianity, in his homily *On the Cross and the Thief* John Chrysostom postulated the widespread distribution of the cross as a symbol of salvation and a 'trophy' [of victory] against the demons' (Беляев, 2015: 540–558). The cross is included in the decoration of the temple space, placed most often around the pilasters, 'entrances and exits', on church plate and on objects of everyday life – 'on the walls of houses, in cities, villages, in abandoned and populated areas', on building ceramics, vessels and others, emphasizing the rescuing and apotropaic function of the symbols (Belyaev, 2015: 540–558). Commenting on the great popularity and apotropaic meaning of the cross sign in the 5th and 6th centuries Beatrice Caseau draws attention to another important point: the visibility of the cross, as opposed to the amulets with magic spells, which remain hidden (Caseau, 2012: 128). That is, for the mentioned early period in the spread of Christianity, the very representation of the cross also had religious-propaganda and didactic functions, including the crosses depicted on the open, visible part of the pithos, namely on its shoulders, the mouth rim and less often on the neck. We also find the Christian rhetoric about the power of the cross included in one of the catechisms of Cyril of Jerusalem, which is especially relevant for this particular case: 'Be the Cross our seal made with boldness by our fingers on our brow, and on everything; over the bread we eat, and the cups we drink...' (Belyaev, 2015: 540–558). Several graffiti with divine blessing on storage vessels clearly define the use of the cross sign in this context. On the already commented pithos from the *ergasterium* in the town of Byala a cross was shaped before firing the vessel, flanked by grapes (?), followed by a text in Greek *Κυριε βοηθι*, translated as 'Lord help' (fig. 12:1–2) (Yotov, Minchev, 2018: 461–462, Fig. A,2.; Yotov, Minchev, Valeriev, Rusev, Dryanovski, Parushev, 2021: 22–23, 162). The same invocation is present on another pithos from Byala, however, scratched after firing and without a cross (fig. 12:3–4) (Yotov, Minchev, 2018: 461–462, Fig. A,1; Yotov, Minchev, Valeriev, Rusev, Dryanovski, Parushev, 2021: 21–22). The extent to which this is a stereotypical practice is confirmed by the rich repertoire of crosses and birds in round medallions, incised by a sure hand on a pithos, discovered in the area of the present-day town of Obzor (fig. 13), again on the Bulgarian Western Black Sea coast¹⁰. Many examples dated to the 5th–6th centuries and coming from the area of Northern Dobrudzha in modern Romania can also be cited on this point. Pithos bearing graffiti with a cross sign or with a chrism and the letter H (Christ), as well as a lid for a pithos with the chrism and the formula *Κυριε βοηθι* have been discovered in the ancient city of *Histria* (fig. 14) (Popescu, 1976: 158–159, no. 126–128; Opait, 2004: 2–3). On a *hydria* lid from *Ulmetum* (present-day village of Pantelimon, Constanța District) a cross is depicted, accompanied by the apocalyptic letters A and Ω (Popescu, 1976: 230, no. 219). The examples given imply the apotropaic functions of the cross¹¹, inlaid or stamped on the pithoi, respectively in relation to the products stored in them – cereals or wine. This tradition is inextricably linked to the production of pithoi from the late periods. Crosses are the most common symbol not only on the pithoi from the island of Chios, but also on their lids. It is worth noting that most, for functional reasons, have an opening in the middle. Almost always cross signs are stamped or incised around the opening, which, according to N. Liaros, are expected to protect the stored produce from 'evil spirits sneaking into the basements of houses' (Liaros, 2016: 62, 65, 69). Chapter 14 of Book VII of *Geoponika*, however, also points to its other, 'practical', function. The advice to winemakers is

the following: 'An efficacious inscription, that wine may not turn ... The wine cannot turn [sour] if you write on the vessel or the pithoi these pious words: 'Taste and you will see that the Lord is good.'¹² That is, in the minds of the believers the blessing, respectively the cross sign, also has a 'prophylactic' function in relation to the stored produce.

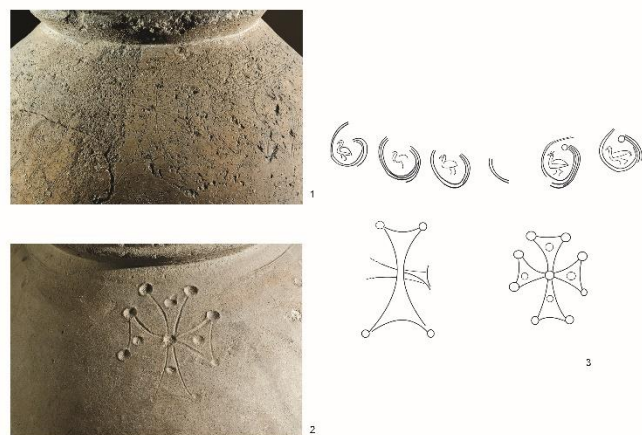


Figure 13. 1–3. Pithos with incised decoration with crosses and medallions with birds from the early byzantine fortress near the town of Obzor, Bulgaria (Photo and drawing: V. Yotov). No scale.

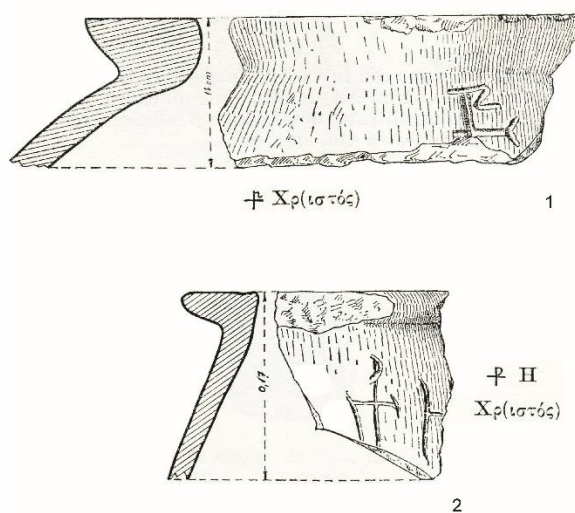


Figure 14. 1–2. Fragments of pithoi from the ancient city of Histria, North Dobrudzha region, Romania, with incised Christian symbols and inscriptions dated to the 4th–7th c. (after Popescu, 1976: 158, no. 126–127). No scale.

We will also draw attention to another important point related to the production of the seals themselves. H. Ghini-Tsofopoulou mentions two prosphora seal stamps of identical iconography on the neck of a pithos from Stamata. The presence of identical seal impressions on various objects of identical iconography, namely storage vessels and liturgical objects of the Christian cult, suggests

⁹ Cyril, archbishop of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, XIII, 36 (Gifford, 1894: 92).

¹⁰ We express our gratitude for the information shared by my colleague Valeri Yotov.

¹¹ For more on the theology of the cross, see Walters, 1997: 213–214.

¹² *Geoponika*, VII, 14 (Lipshits, 1960: 140; Dalby, 2011: 153).

the existence of centralised production, probably at some church centre that handled a certain repertoire of standardised symbols. G. Galavaris also comes to a similar conclusion based on artefacts bearing identical seal impressions, found, however, in different places (Galavaris, 1970: 81).

The author emphasizes one of the functions of the seals – as evidence of the origin, quality or authenticity of the stored foods. They are also a means of control over production or trade by church figures (Grünbart, Lochner-Metaxas, 2004: 177–189). We will note that seal impressions with crosses are known on amphorae from the same period as well. D. Pieri, P. Petridis and E. Parshina also suggest their origin from a production centre associated with a church institution (Pieri, 2007: 612, 619, Fig. 3:1; Petridis, 2012: 88–89; Parshina, Soznik, 2012: 19–20). However, can this be applied to the production of pithoi? Several premises from different periods have been studied near the Early Christian Basilica in Stamata, some of which had economic functions, storing food products, but there is no information about pottery production (Ghini-Tsofopoulou, 1995: 71–75, Σχέδ. 2). The architectural centre in the fortress on Cape St. Athanasius near the town of Byala comprises an Early Christian Basilica, a priest's residence, baptismal font, a holy spring (*aghiasma*), and nearby – *ergasteria*, three wineries, a kiln for ceramic vessels, a public bath, etc. (Yotov, 2013: 426–439; Yotov, Minchev, Valeriev, Rusev, Dryanovski, Parushev, 2021: 92–164). Can it be assumed that for the needs of wine production, the vessels necessary for storing the finished product were also made nearby? At this stage, however, we have no evidence for such a hypothesis. Ivan Hristov, the researcher of the Hrisosotira fortress, suggests that in the eastern part of the peninsula there existed most likely a large monastery complex, of which only the pavement leading to it has been uncovered. It is worth mentioning that the Hrisosotira Peninsula is also known under the name of 'The Monastery', a toponym that is rarely misleading. This information should also include the numerous intact and fragmented pithoi discovered during the excavations of the late antique fortified settlement (Hristov, 2024: 302–303, 317, Fig. VI.25–VI.26, VI.27–VI.29, 317). At this stage of the research, information on the 5th–6th century life and livelihood of the inhabitants in the Boukelon fortress is very scanty¹³. The similar iconography and the rather identical principle of combining the individual motifs of the two seals from Boukelon and Hrisosotira – a Greek cross, inscribed in a frame of geometric motifs, probably an allusion to 'radiant glow', indicate a stylistic similarity. It can be assumed that the two stamping tools were made in different church centres, working with a similar repertoire of Christian symbols. Traceological observations on the relief of the seal impressions indicate that the stamping tools were in negative. Although stamping was carried out before drying and firing of the pithoi, some pressure was required onto the still soft wall of the vessel, due to its thickness, to render the ornament clear. This suggests that the stamping tools were most likely wooden or metal.

Despite the proposed hypotheses, we hope that the two artefacts from Boukelon will expand the empirical base of stamped impressions on pithoi and will in the future suggest answers to the many questions related to their production, transportation, to the livelihood of the population, but also to the believers' mental imagery during Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

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¹³ Winemaking in the area of the ancient Boukelon is evidenced by a discovered large fragment of a *sharaptash* (a stone chute for draining grape juice), now kept in the Information centre in the village of Matochina.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS&PHOTO CREDITS

- Fig. 1. Stamps on pithos fragments from the excavations at the Boukelon fortress, Southeast Bulgaria (Photo: T. Dimitrov, NMH; Drawing: S. Todorov).
- Fig. 2. The plateau with the remains of the Boukelon fortress near the village of Matochina, Svilengrad region, Southeast Bulgaria (Photo: S. Aleksandrova, M. Inkova).
- Fig. 3. Maps showing the location of the Boukelon fortress (1. after Wendel, 2005: Karte 13 f; 2. after Dinchev, 2021: 37, Fig. 2; 3. after Spiesler, 1992: 27, fig. 2).
- Fig. 4. Floor level of a room of a building (dated to the 6th c.) adjacent to the late antique fortress wall, where the pithos fragments were discovered in 2022 (Photo: M. Inkova).
- Fig. 5. Images of crosses decorated with dots on bread stamps (prosforai): 1. Horbat Ma'on, Palestine; 2. Chersonesus, Crimea; 3. Kerch Peninsula, Crimea; 4. Eski-Kermen, Crimea; 5. Aluston, Crimea (1. after Di Segni, 2014: 32, fig. 1; 2.-5. after Mayko, 2021: 25, fig. 1:7, 10, 13; 26, fig. 2:15).
- Fig. 6. Bread stamps with frames with relief trapezoidal ornaments: 1.-2. Chersonesus, Crimea; 3. Belinskoye, Crimea (1.-3. after Mayko, 2021: 25, fig. 1:9, 12; 26, fig. 2:1).
- Fig. 7. Some of the sites commented in the present article, where pithoi from the 5th-7th c. with stamped and incised decoration and inscriptions with Christian symbolism were found. From the ancient city of Chersonesus only bread stamps are commented, while from Ulmetum in Northern Dobruzhza

region in Romania we point to a lid for a hydria vessel (Map: P. Antonov via Google Earth).

Fig. 8. 1. Stamps from Boukelon fortress; 2.–3. Stamps on fragments from a pithos from the Hrisosotira fortress; 4. Floor mosaics from the church in Shavei Tzion, Northern Israel (2.–3. after Hristov, 2024: 242, fig. IV.5.28–IV.5.29; 4. after Belyaev, 2015). No scale.

Fig. 9. Pithoi with circular stamps from late antique and early byzantine fortresses on the western Black Sea coast in present day Bulgaria: 1. Byala, Varna region; 2. Shabla, Dobrich region (1. after Yotov, Minchev, 2018: 462, fig. A, 2; 2. after Bobcheva, 1974: 69, Cat. No 69). No scale.

Fig. 10. 1.–2. Stamp on the neck of a pithos from the early Cristian Basilica at Stamata, Attica region, Greece; 3.–4. Pithos with stamps from the same site (1.–2. after Ghini-Tsofopoulou, 2002: 352, Cat. No 407; 3.–4. after Ghini-Tsofopoulou, 1995: 73, fig. 3, Pl. 32, δ). No scale.

Fig. 11. Crafting wine in pithoi: 1.–2. Mosaics on the ambulatory vault of the Mausoleum of Augusta Constantina/ Church of Santa Costanza, Rome, mid-4th c.; 3. Mosaics from the ancient city of Patras, 3rd c. (1.–2. after Web Gallery of Art, accessed May 18 2024,

https://www.wga.hu/support/viewer_m/z.html; 3. after Gantsev, 2022: 159, fig. 4:3).

Fig. 12. 1.–2. Incised inscription on a pithos from building No 7 from the early byzantine fortress near the town of Byala, Bulgaria; 3.–4. Incised inscription on a pithos from building No 2 from the same site (1.–4. after Yotov, Minchev, 2018: 463, fig. A, 1–2). No scale.

Fig. 13. 1.–3. Pithos with incised decoration with crosses and medallions with birds from the early byzantine fortress near the town of Obzor, Bulgaria (Photo and drawing: V. Yotov). No scale.

Fig. 14. 1.–2. Fragments of pithoi from the ancient city of Histria, North Dobrudzha region, Romania, with incised Christian symbols and inscriptions dated to the 4th–7th c. (after Popescu, 1976: 158, no. 126–127). No scale.