

Who in Antiquity Sealed Amphorae and Stamped Stoppers? An Attempt to Understand the Process Based on Examples of Finds from Berenike (Egypt) and Risan (Montenegro)¹

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In Antiquity, ever since the beginnings of maritime transport, there existed the need for the hermetic sealing of containers. From a very early period, plugs of various kinds are known to have been made of timber, ceramics, natural cork, textiles, grasses or leaves and to have been sealed with plaster, organic mixtures, or resin.

In Roman Egypt, local wine designated for international trade was closed by different organic and nonorganic plugs, sealed by plaster, and sometimes stamped. Seals made from wet clay were popular in local small-scale trade during the Hellenistic and late Roman period. In the Adriatic region, wine produced in amphorae during the last two centuries of the Republic was sealed by ceramic stopper produced on the potter's wheel or formed in a mould. The sealing substance was used probably only to seal thin breaks between the stopper and inner walls of the amphora's neck. These kinds of stoppers carry inscriptions and decorations created during the production of the entire stopper. I would like to focus on examples from two sites: Berenike in Egypt and Rhizon in Montenegro (fig. 1).

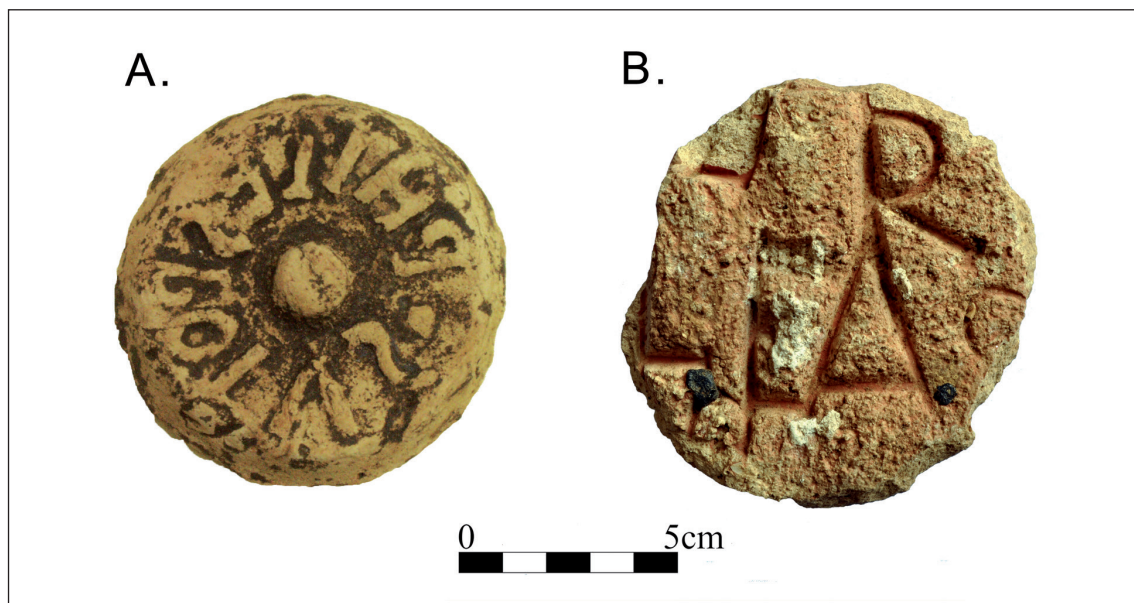


Fig. 1: A. Ceramic stopper with an inscription made in a mould, Risan, Montenegro; B. Plaster stopper with monogram, Berenike, Egypt.

Berenike Troglodytica,² a harbor city, was founded in the early 3rd century BC by Ptolemy II Philadelphos on the Red Sea coast. The city grew very fast and became one of the most important coastal centers responsible for long distance trade with Arabia, South Africa, and India. The city was connected by a road network with the Nile Valley and the towns located there.³

During years of excavations, 496 elaborate jar and amphora stoppers⁴ have been found. Among the used materials were: wood, natural cork, shell, reef, reed, palm fibre, textile, pottery lids, bowls, fragments and sherds, and as a sealing substance: plaster, resin, and unfired clay. The largest group consists of plaster stoppers and was found in an early Roman context. The plaster stoppers were characteristic of far-reaching trade and usually sealed Egyptian wines.

Similar finds were discovered in the whole area of the Eastern Desert. The most numerous stoppers were excavated at the sister ports of Myos Hormos and the Mons Claudianus quarry, with single ones known from Mons Porphyrites and Sikait.⁵

Greek, Egyptian or Roman names appeared on the stamps. The names belonged to individuals. Some of them are connected with traders known from ostraca or papyri.⁶

Present-day Risan (Montenegro) was known in ancient times as Greek Rhizon and Roman Risinium and was one of the most important centres in Sinus Rhizonicus (Kotor Bay). The settlement was situated in an area called Iliria, then the Roman province of Dalmatia. Rhizon was mentioned by Pseudo-Scylax in the second half of the 4th century BC. But his *Periplus* probably described the previous situation.⁷ Since 2001, Polish-Montenegrin excavations have been carried out in Risan.⁸ More than 1500 stoppers were found during 18 years of excavations. Stoppers had a distinctive disk shape and were made from a mould (with one or two parts), on a potter's wheel, or were cut out from bigger vessels or tiles. Decorations, individual letters, or entire words turn up only on disks made from moulds. Inscriptions were made in both Greek and Latin alphabets. Among the decorations are also linear, solar, or geometric motifs.

In most cases, stamps at stoppers from Risan and Berenike were commercial wine stamps, which provide information about the estate, producer, or merchant who sold these goods. In Egypt, individuals known from other documents related to trade appear on plaster stamps. Analogies for names can be found on ostraca and papyri, and in Risan mostly only on amphorae.

Notes

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² More about the city: Sidebotham 2011.

³ Sidebotham et al. 2008, 329–343.

⁴ Bos 2007; Bos – Helms 2000; Cashman 1999; Dielman 1998; Gates-Foster forthcoming; Mulder 2007; Sundelin 1996; Zych 2011.

⁵ Thomas 2011, 32.

⁶ Thomas 2011, 27. For example, some names were identified in the Nikanor Archive, see Fuks 1951.

⁷ Lemke 2017, 489.

⁸ Dyczek et al. 2014; Dyczek et al. 2007; Dyczek et al. 2004.

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Fig. 1: A. Photo J. Reclaw, B. Photo S. E. Sidebotham, Digitizing M. Bajtler.

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