

A First Overview of the Rhodian Stamped Handles from a Public Monumental Building in Rhodes: Context, Chronology and Function*

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The paper presents a preliminary overview of the Rhodian stamped amphora handles recovered from a monumental public building in the city of Rhodes. Besides two nearly complete amphoras, the bulk of the amphoric material consists of stamped handles.¹ In this respect, the number of stamped amphora handles presents a relatively representative sample of amphoric material that can be associated with a specific archaeological context on the island of Rhodes itself.²

The site measures ca. 48 × 55 m and comprises a courtyard with a spacious peristyle (fig. 1).³ The complex has not yet been fully published and the present contribution forms a part of the prolegomena to the future publication.⁴ The plan of the complex can be restored from the outline of the foundation trenches cut into rock. More specifically, the east sides are articulated by deep porticoes. The configuration of space in the north part of the complex is not very clear due to extensive damage.⁵ The most interesting find of the investigation was a temple-like structure (7.80 × 4.20 m) in the south-east part of the courtyard, with an E–W orientation.⁶ A large rectangular cistern (inner dimension: 7.70 × 8.60 m) coated with hydraulic plaster and paved with pebbles broken halfway, was revealed adjacent to the trench of the east colonnade of the building.⁷

The building complex was laid out along one of the most important and wide streets (16.10 m wide) – known as *plateiai* –, conventionally designated as P 27 (fig. 2); this runs on a N–S axis, dividing the Acropolis from the lower town.⁸ To the west, the building was defined by the street P 27b.⁹ To the north, we suspect that the building would have extended up to P 10, a street ca. 11.60m wide.¹⁰ The significance of this complex is underlined by the numerous inscribed once supporting bronze statues and the fragments of marble sculptures that were found scattered in the foundation trenches.¹¹ The great majority of the inscriptions, both public and private, are honorific and generally concern state officials, eminent citizens or high-profile individuals. They date to the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods. Eight statue bases were devoted to priests of Helios, the patron deity of the Rhodian State, the complex has become known in scholarship as the ‘temenos of Halios’.¹² Another view proposes that it functioned as the clubhouse of the priests of Helios.¹³ However, it should be noted from the outset that both identifications are highly questionable and need to be revisited. The complex was a public building whose precise function remains to be determined.¹⁴ What can be said with some certainty is that the complex had a long building history, undergoing several building phases which spanned more than six centuries, from the late 4th/early 3rd century BC to Roman times.¹⁵

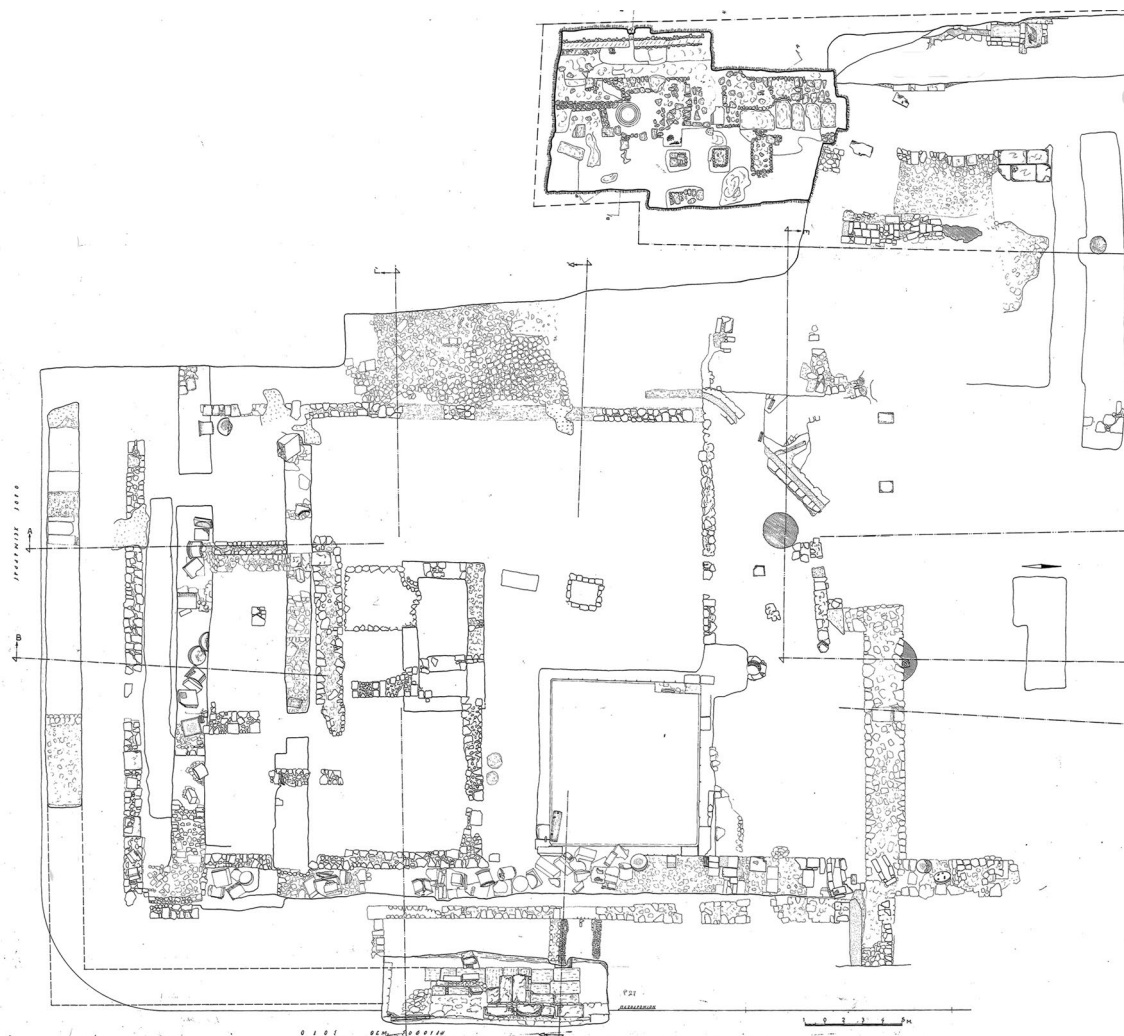


Fig. 1: Plan of the Soichan-Minetou plot.

In total 429 amphora handles have been recovered. 22 handles are unstamped, while 407 are stamped.¹⁶ The material consists predominantly of Rhodian handles (391 in total). Only 38 handles (i.e. less than 10%) can be attributed to a non-Rhodian provenance (fig. 3).¹⁷ The low percentage of imported amphoras from the complex neatly conforms to the general picture of non-Rhodian amphoras in Rhodes, which does not exceed 12% of the registered material.¹⁸ If we look at the Rhodian handles (391 in total), only 5% are unstamped (21 in total) (fig. 4).¹⁹ From the remaining 370 stamped handles, four bear a stamp containing a monogram or the like, with an additional seven bearing just a device. In other words, 358 Rhodian handles preserve stamps in varying degrees of legibility. To be more precise, nearly one quarter of the material (93 stamps in total) is currently illegible or partly legible (sometimes only the month can be read or just a few letters), whereas the remaining three quarters (266 stamps) can be attributed to stamps of eponyms and ‘fabricants’.



Fig. 2: Map of the city of Rhodes with the location of the complex.

Like other ceramic finds, amphora handles were found widely dispersed in the complex.²⁰ Moreover, there is no deposit of amphora fragments that could potentially point to storage facilities once present in the complex. Likewise, finds (e.g. *sekomata*) that would point to commercial activities are absent. In brief, the evidence at hand does not support a commercial or storage use of amphoras. Nevertheless, the sheer number of stamped amphora handles suggests that amphoras did find their way in this building.

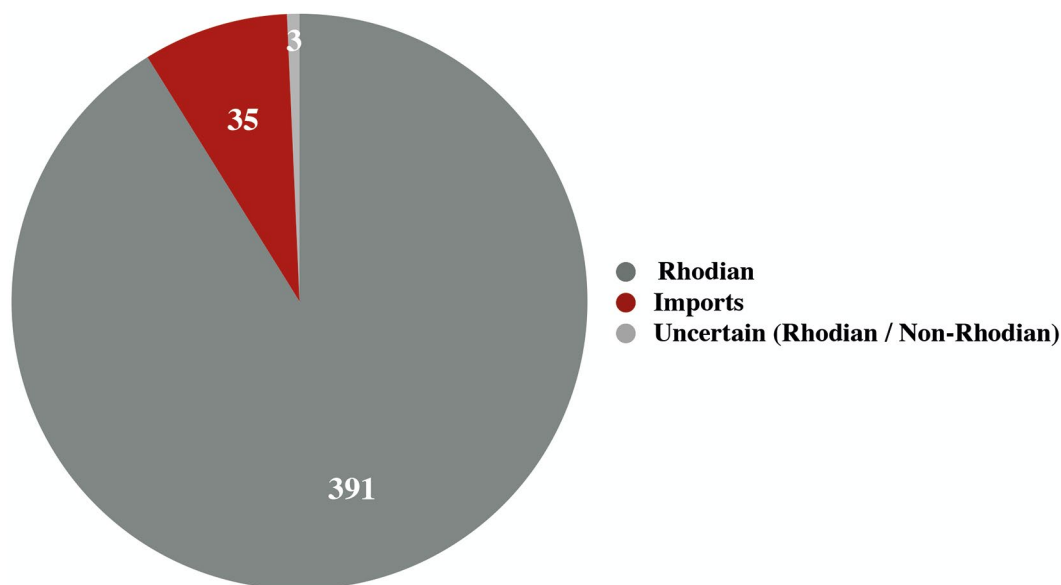


Fig. 3: Provenance of transport amphorae: the evidence from handles.

Their disposal should thus not be viewed as accidental. It was the commodity they carried, in all likelihood wine that was sought after and presumably consumed within the premises.²¹ In this respect, the stamped handles from this complex, as they form a uniform assemblage, can be a useful tool in illuminating patterns of consumption and consequently throw some fresh light on the otherwise poorly understood function of this complex. In what ways, if any, can this type of evidence illuminate aspects of the use of space and ultimately of function? In other words, how can we contextualise this type of evidence?

As the Rhodian stamps are a closely datable class, the material at hand can give us snapshots of the use of space for nearly two and a half centuries, from the early 3rd century BC when the stamping practice was first introduced down to the mid-1st century BC when this practice became obsolete.²² Several interesting patterns emerge if we organise the material by period. The lower chronology of Gerald Finkielsztein has been followed, taking also into account some revisited dates proposed by Nathan Badoud and more recently by Thibaut Castelli.²³ The latter has partly reshuffled the eponyms for period III, which roughly corresponds to the last three decades of the 3rd century BC and the 1st third of the 2nd century BC Castelli proposes a higher chronology by a range of 5–10 years for some of the eponyms.

In particular, less than a fifth of the stamps (44 in total) can be attributed to the 3rd century BC (table 1). Although this ratio can seem fairly negligible compared to the 2nd century BC, it is still quite significant, as stamping was not universally applied to amphorae in the 3rd century BC. The 2nd century BC stands out conspicuously, as more than half of the material dates to this period. This generally agrees with a well-known observation that the 2nd century BC was ‘the heyday of amphora production on the island

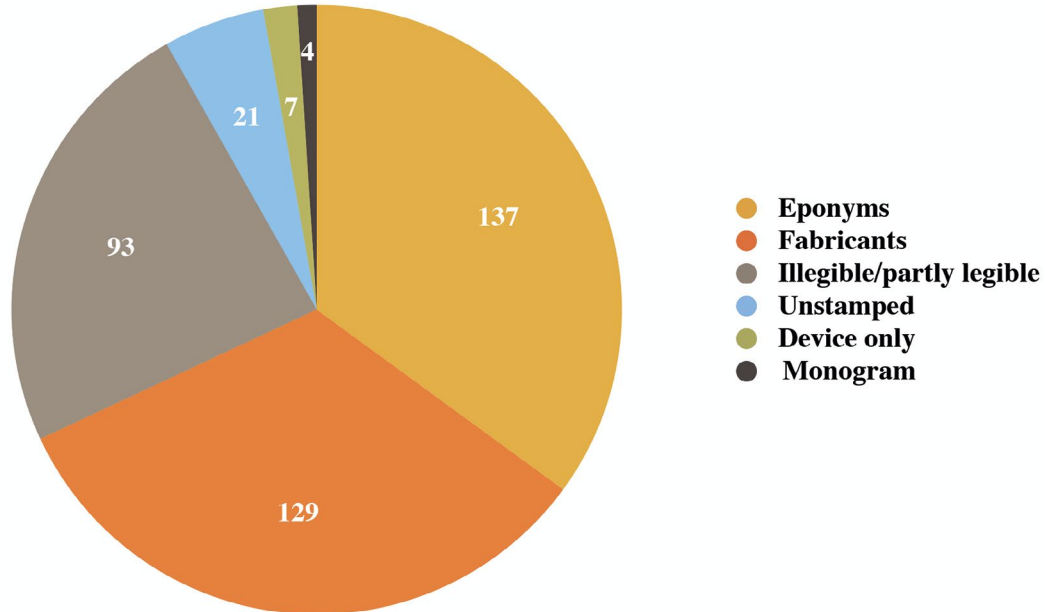


Fig. 4: Categories of stamps on Rhodian handles.

of Rhodes and her territorial possessions in Asia Minor and elsewhere, when all (or nearly all) amphorae were apparently stamped on both handles'.²⁴ A higher attestation of stamped handles, however, can be observed for the 2nd half of the 2nd century BC than the 1st half of this century. In other words, more handles date to period V (79 handles), which spans most of the 2nd half of the 2nd century BC, than in the preceding two periods (periods III and IV: 50 handles), which cover the 1st half of the century. While period V is the best exemplified, period VI is likewise fairly well represented with 58 handles, while an additional 14 handles can be attributed to either periods V or VI. Roughly speaking, this suggests that in the 2nd half of the 2nd century BC and the first decade of the 1st century BC, there seems to be a high concentration of amphoras in the complex: more than half of the (legible) stamped handles (151 out of 266) date to this period.²⁵

How does our sample correspond to other assemblages from the island of Rhodes? In 1999 John Lund quantified the evidence of stamped amphora handles from three assemblages found on the island: those of Lindos, Kalavarda in Kamiros, and Akandia in the city of Rhodes.²⁶ He noticed peaks for the last and 1st decades of the 3rd and 2nd century BC respectively. As Lund's article predates the lower chronology proposed by G. Finkielsztejn, the evidence from his statistics should now be lowered by ca. 10 to 15 years. Even with the adoption of the low chronology, the peak of stamped amphora handles in these three assemblages still falls in the 1st half of the 2nd century BC. Our material, however, does not conform to this picture, as a steep increase in the number of stamped handles occurs in the 2nd half of the 2nd century BC.

If we now move to a comparison between stamps of eponyms and stamps of fabricants, the following can be observed: the names of 82 eponyms and another

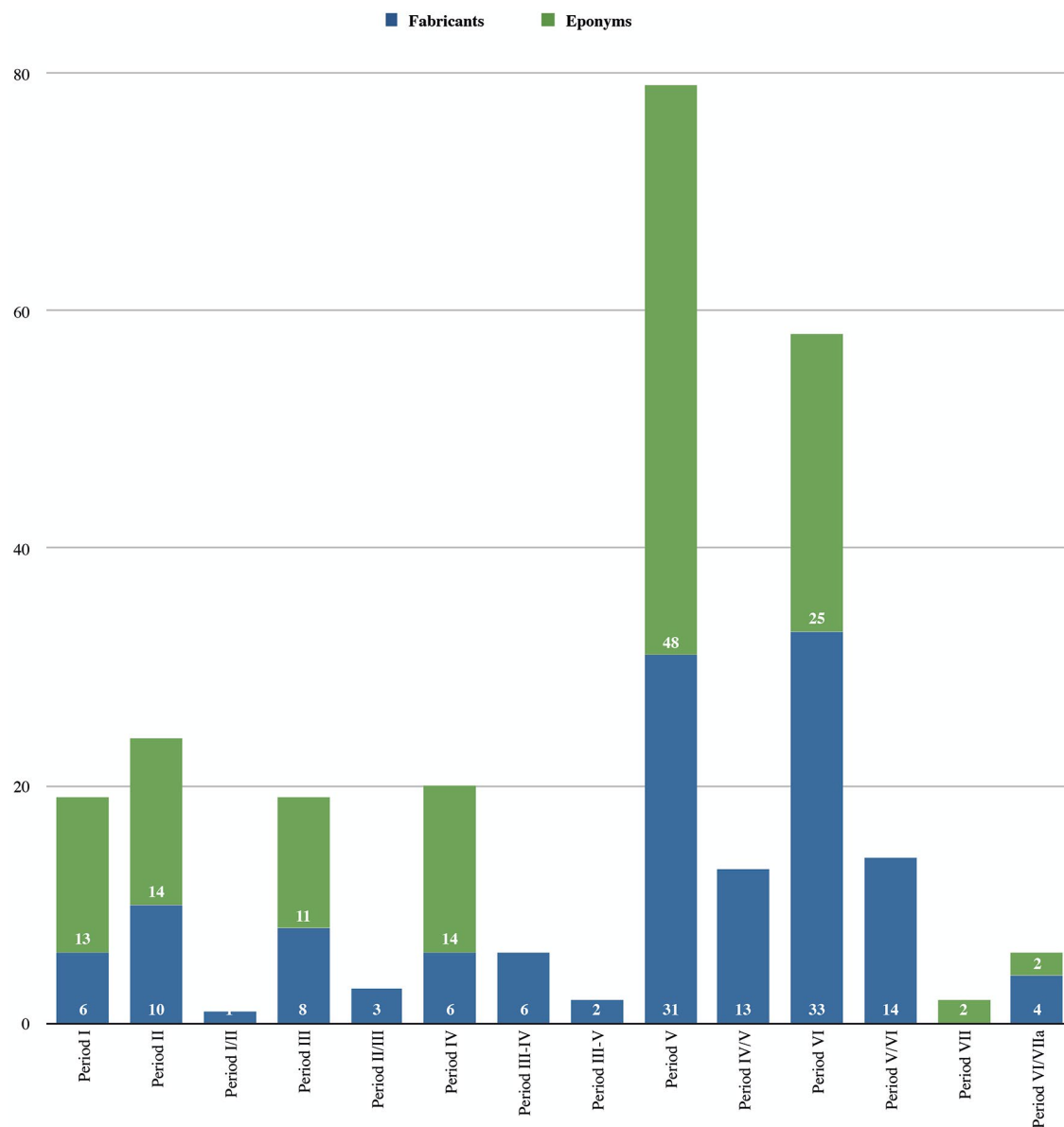


Fig. 5: Chronological distribution of the stamped amphora handles from the Soichan-Minetou plot.

75 names of fabricants have been identified, recorded in 129 and 137 stamped handles respectively (fig. 5).²⁷ Some names are attested on as many as eleven different stamps.²⁸ As can readily be noted from the graphs (figs. 6, 7), stamps of eponyms approximately match in number those of fabricants throughout the periods. There is therefore a close correspondence between the number and chronological distribution of stamps naming eponyms and those naming fabricants, suggesting that the amphora stamps from the Soichan-Minetou plot constitute a representative sample. This relatively equal

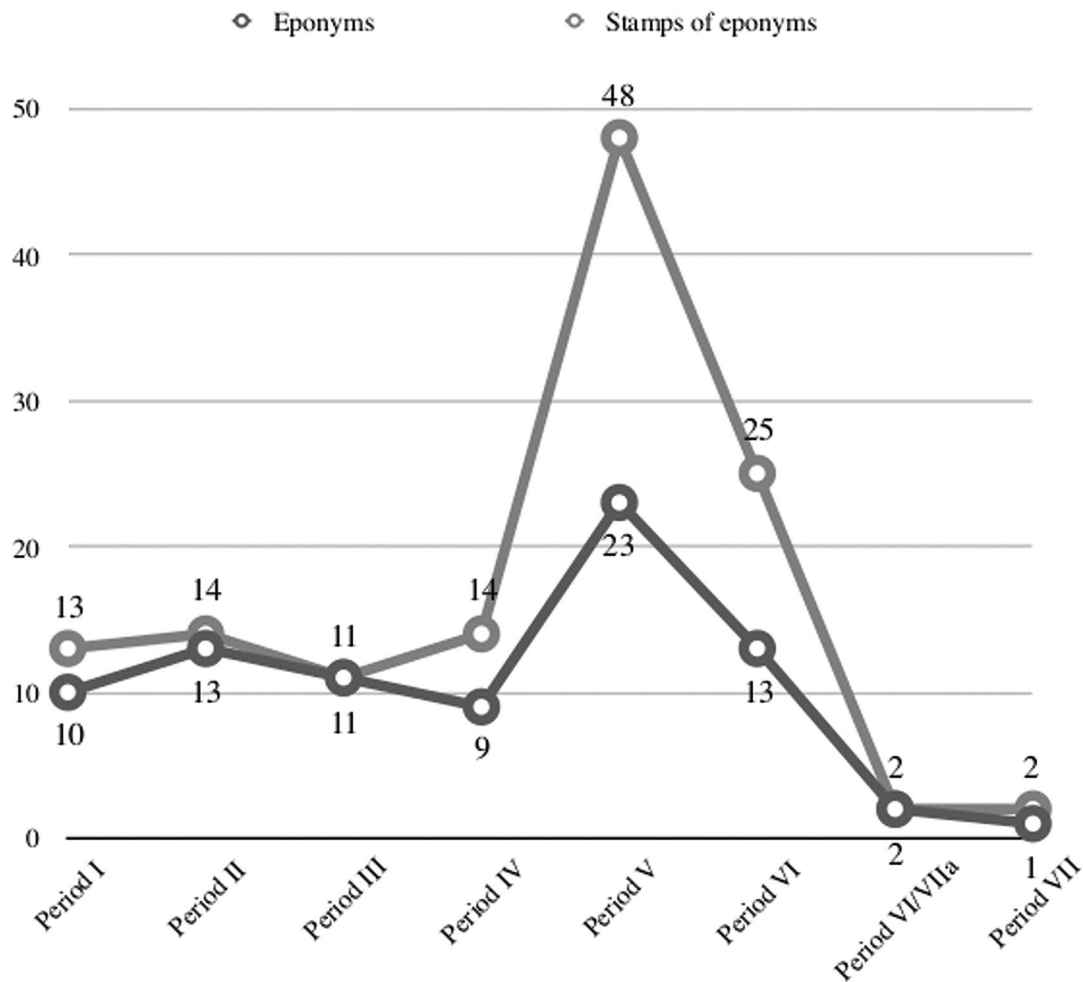


Fig. 6: Chronological distribution of eponymic stamps.

distribution of stamps organised by type (eponyms vs. fabricants) across the different periods is significant. It suggests that the deposition of amphoras in the complex was not accidental, at least not in the form of debris or fill for building. Instead, amphoras must have entered the complex on a regular and consistent basis.²⁹

Further insights can be gained if the material is compartmentalised by decade. Stamps of eponyms allow us to organise the material by decade if not by year for at least one and a half centuries, that is from the mid-3rd century BC down to the late 2nd century BC (fig. 8). For periods Ia–b, VI and VII such a close chronological sequence cannot be established, partly due to the paucity of evidence and partly due to dating problems with regard to eponymic years. For period Ia five eponyms are attested whose names are recorded on six handles in total. Notwithstanding the poor documentation of handles for a period that spans over three decades (ca. 304–271 BC) – the stamping practice was not widespread in this early phase – it is equally poorly understood in

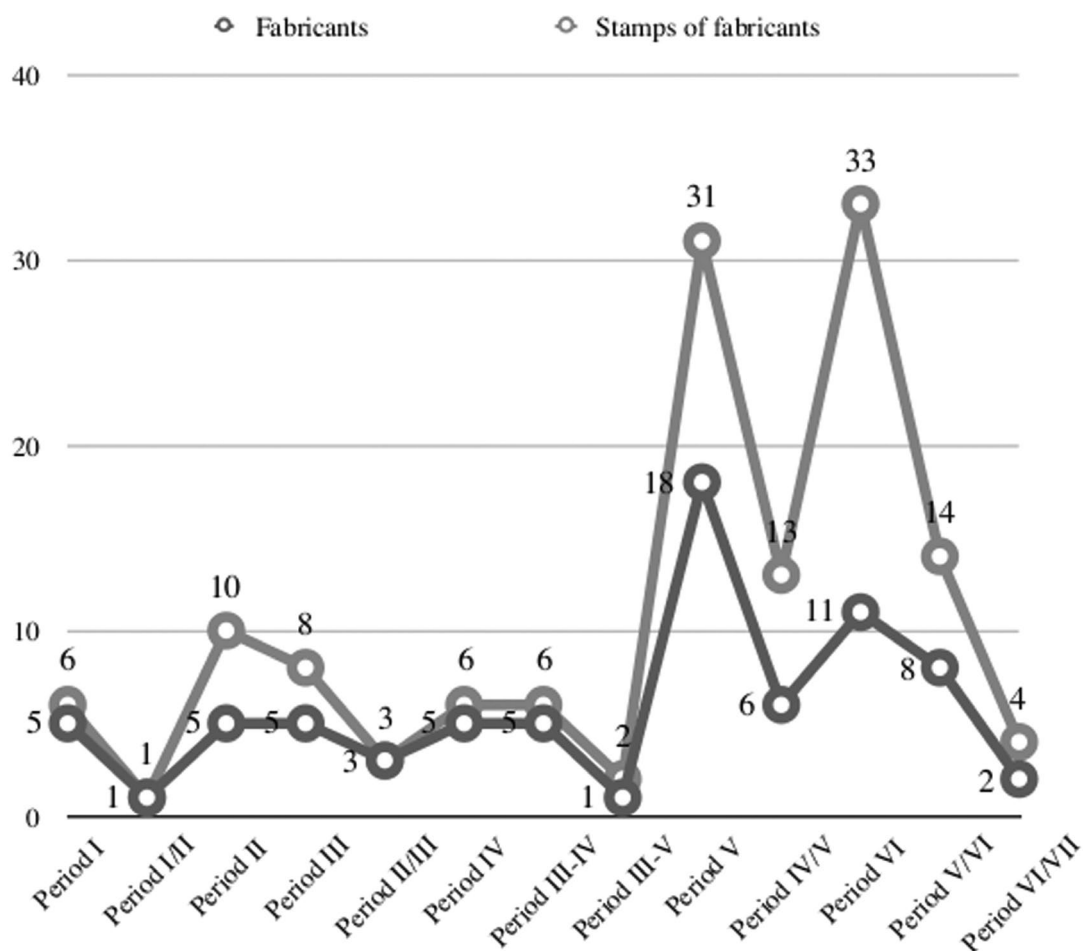


Fig. 7: Chronological distribution of fabricants stamps.

which precise year certain individuals held the priesthood of Helios. For period VI, from the 13 eponyms attested in our record, only Antilochos II's priesthood is securely dated to 100 BC,³⁰ while the priesthood of the remaining eponyms can be dated sometime between 107 and 90 BC. In addition, two recorded eponyms can be associated either with period VI or VII (Aristomenes and Kleudikos). Lastly, only one eponym (Simias), attested in two stamps, dates to period VII. It should also be noted that, in the record, none of the stamps is dated after the 70s BC, though the stamping practice did not cease until the Augustan period. The picture thus outlined by the material for the 1st century BC is that of a concentration of stamped handles in the 1st third of the century, with no currently legible stamped handle dated in the remainder of the century.

For all of these reasons, I focus my attention on the sequence of eponymic amphora stamps for a period that spans the mid-3rd century BC down to the late 2nd century BC (period Ic–period V) (fig. 8).³¹ In particular, it can be observed that from the mid-3rd century BC to the turn of the century (period II), all decades are represented, with

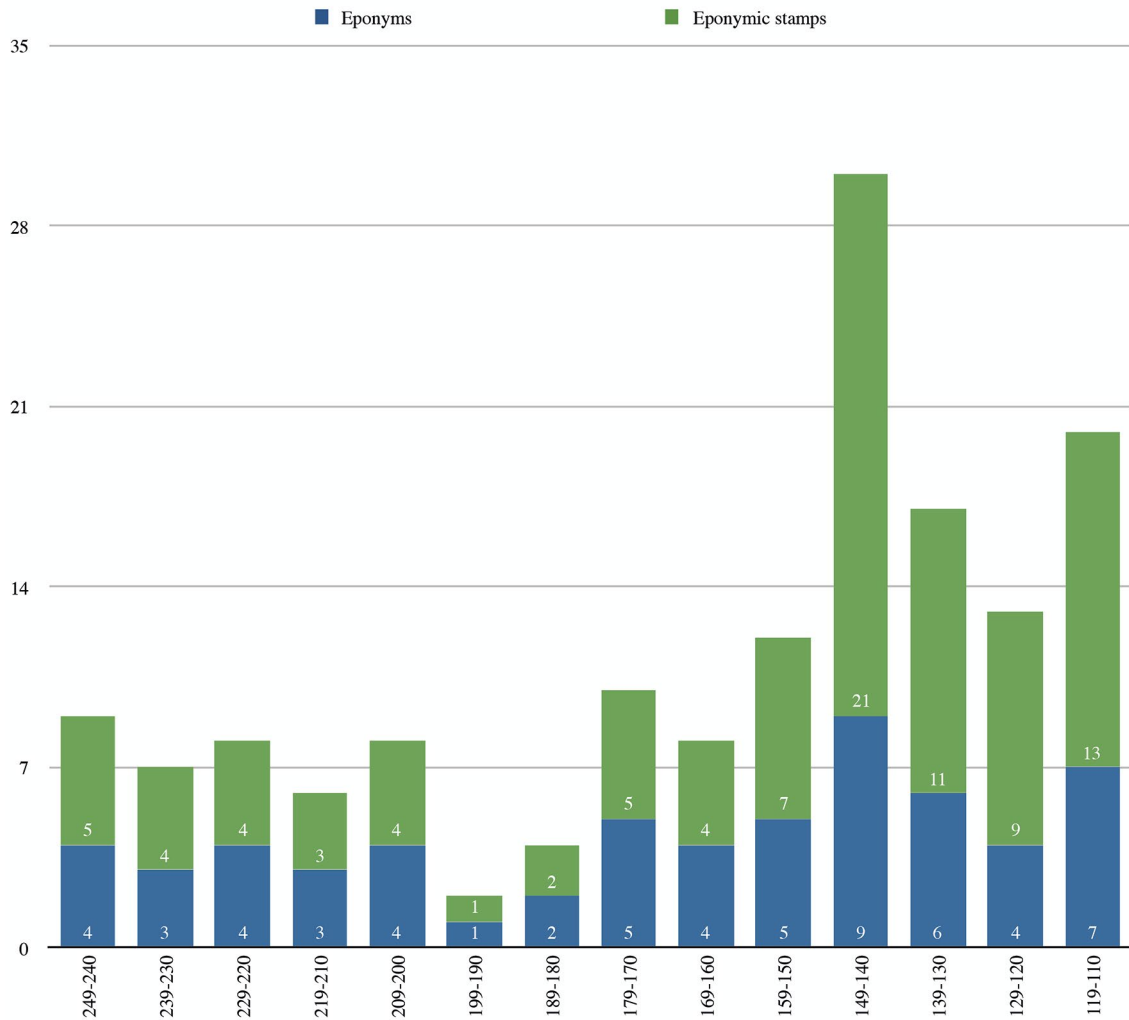


Fig. 8: Number of attested eponyms and eponymic stamps by decade.

a minimum of three recorded names of eponyms and a maximum of four. After a negligible presence of eponymic stamps in the 1st decade of the 2nd century BC (only the eponym Iasikrates is attested on one handle), the remaining decades of the 2nd century BC down to the end of period V (108 BC) are fairly well represented with a minimum of two attested names of eponyms per decade and a maximum of nine. More specifically, nearly all eponyms holding office in the 140s BC are documented in our record (nine out of ten). This is also the best documented decade in terms of the number of stamps per eponym (21 stamps in total), followed by the 110s BC when 13 stamped handles are documented for seven eponyms respectively (fig. 8).

All in all stamps of eponyms as well as stamps of fabricants attest to a steady influx of amphora vessels in the complex already from the early 3rd century BC, when the stamping practice was first introduced in Rhodian amphoras, down to the

mid-2nd century BC when a conspicuous increase in the number of stamped handles is noted. Stamped amphora handles kept being accumulated in sizeable amounts throughout the 2nd half of the 2nd century BC and the 1st decade of the 1st century BC. After the 1st decade of the 1st century BC, however, the number of stamped handles drops dramatically before disappearing completely from the archaeological record a decade later (in the 70s BC).

How can we explain these ‘lows’? Do they reveal a ‘real’ picture or a ‘distorted’ picture? Could the ‘lows’ in the 80s and 70s be related to the Mithridatic wars? Shall we take at face value the absence of stamped handles after the 70s BC, though the stamping practice did not cease for another three to four decades (Augustan period)? These are interesting avenues to explore, but at this stage, we can only advise to read the material with due caution.³² Although the sequence of stamped handles stops in our record after the 70s BC, the complex does not otherwise show any evidence of abandonment.³³

We have seen that amphoras found their way into the complex on a regular basis from at least the 2nd half of the 3rd century BC down to the early 1st century BC. In light of the eponymic stamps, this regular pattern can be tentatively reconstructed as an annual one. More than two thirds of eponyms’ names are represented by one stamp alone (58 out of 82 names). While two stamps per eponym are occasionally attested in our record from as early as period Ia down to period VIIa (nine eponyms in total), from period IV fifteen eponyms in total are represented by three, four or five stamps each.³⁴ In my view, this further substantiates the idea that a steady yet small number of amphoras entered the building on a regular, probably annual, basis.³⁵ By implication, there was a modest but steady need of wine, if we accept that the commodity traded in the amphoras was wine. How can we begin to explain the fact that small quantities of amphoras reached this complex on a regular (e.g. annual) basis over a long period of time?

The regularity in the influx of amphoras must be connected to a recurring activity that would have taken place in the complex over at least two centuries. Moreover, in light of the relatively small number of amphoras entering the complex annually, wine was presumably consumed by a select group of people who would partake in this recurring activity. In other words, the evidence of the stamped handles seems to point to small scale consumption, perhaps within the framework of an event having a selective or exclusive character.

This preliminary overview of stamped Rhodian handles that were retrieved from a public monumental building in the city of Rhodes can shift focus from trade and production to issues of consumption. The presentation of the finds and the statistics which are possible on this basis outline rather modest and selective, yet recurrent consumption patterns for more than two centuries. These remarks pose further questions about the function of the complex as a public building. It is hoped that the ongoing study of the remainder of the finds will further illuminate the picture outlined by the stamped amphora handles.

Period	Dates	Number of stamped handles
I	ca. 304 to ca. 235 BC	19
II	ca. 234 to ca. 199 BC	24
I/II	ca. 304 to ca. 199 BC	1
III	ca. 198 to ca. 161 BC	19
II/III	ca. 234 to ca. 161 BC	3
IV	ca. 160 BC to 146 BC	20
III-IV	ca. 198 to ca. 146 BC	6
III-V	ca. 198 to ca. 108 BC	2
V	ca. 145 to ca. 108 BC	79
IV/V	ca. 160 BC to 108 BC	13
VI	ca. 107 to ca. 86 BC	58
V/VI	ca. 145 to ca. 86 BC	14
VII	ca. 85 BC to the Augustan period	2
VI/VIIa	ca. 107 to ca. 40 BC	6

Table 1: Number of stamped handles by period.

Notes

* I should like to express my sincere thanks to the archaeologist, Mrs Maria Michalaki-Kollia, for her generous permission to study the amphora handles from the Soichan-Minetou plot in the town of Rhodes. She illuminated aspects of the complex and I am most grateful for the valuable information she shared with me. I should also like to extend my thanks to the staff of the Ephorate of Antiquities of the Dodecanese for facilitating my research. The study of this material is being carried out as part of a collaboration between the Archaeological Service of the Dodecanese and the University of Copenhagen ('Rhodes Centennial Project').

¹One of the nearly intact amphoras that have been retrieved from this complex is of Rhodian origin, while the other one is an import, whose exact provenance has not been determined yet. The two nearly intact amphoras from the complex were found lying flat on their belly unlike deposits of amphoras in Rhodes or elsewhere where amphoras are found inverted, lying on their mouths and arranged in rows. For the various views on the purpose of such an arrangement see Koehler 1986, 62, 66; Filimonos-Tsopotou 2004, 62–63 n. 228 with references. A few amphora toes from this complex have been collected, unlike handles which were systematically stored. In the 70s it was common practice to sort out ceramic finds due to the unprecedented number of artefacts accumulated from rescue excavations in the city of Rhodes.

² There are 35 deposits of amphoras from the city of Rhodes (Giannikouri et al. 2017, 106 n. 6 with references). Deposits of amphoras have also been found in several sites in the island of Rhodes, notably the Villanova deposit near Rhodes airport (Maiuri 1921–1922). For a recently published deposit from the city of Rhodes see Bairami 2014.

³ The complex came partially to light during rescue excavations, which first started in 1954. A small scale investigation took place in 1962, while references to the resumption of work are found in the diaries of 1966. The excavation was completed between 1973 and 1976. A small-scale and complementary investigation took place in 1984 to the west of the building. The remains of the complex have not been preserved as the area has been backfilled and built over.

⁴ For a preliminary publication see Konstantinopoulos 1975; Konstantinopoulos 1986, 243–244. See also Michalaki-Kollia 1999 for a new interpretation and identification of this complex (cf. below n. 13). A full publication of the complex is planned for 2022 by M. Michalaki-Kollia and S. Skaltsa.

⁵ It should also be noted that the area to the north has never been investigated. This might have provided additional evidence for the configuration of space in this area.

⁶ This temple-like structure was likewise dismantled and its contours were traced by the orientation of the foundation trenches (90cm wide) cut into the soil. A rectangular precinct, measuring ca. 25 x 30 m and built by rough stones, has been located within the peristyle courtyard. It has been attributed to a farmhouse of the late antiquity (Konstantinopoulos 1975). According to the excavator, Mrs M. Michalaki-Kollia its function should be revisited. It may have enclosed the temple-like structure, as it lies 7.50 m to the east and west, 11 m to the north and 13 m to the south. This view was presented in a lecture by M. Michalaki-Kollia on November 12 at the Danish Institute of Athens.

⁷ For the cistern see Patsiada 2013, 63–64.

⁸ P 27 overlaps with modern Themistokle Sophouli Street. For this street, see Kontis 1954, 340–345; 1955, 267–270.

⁹ On this side, remains of blocks have been interpreted as the east border of the street and consequently the west end of the complex.

¹⁰ P 10 started from the Great Harbour and led all the way up to the Temple of Athena and Zeus built on the highest point of the Acropolis, see Kontis 1957, 128–129.

¹¹ In addition to the inscriptions found in situ during the 1973–1976 excavations, 12 further inscriptions were found in the Turkish house once standing in this plot, whereas several more inscriptions and architectural fragments, also reused, came from the neighbouring Kypriotis and Topaloglou plots, which lie directly opposite, south of P13 (ADelt B, 1973–1974, 954–955; 1975, 369). For the inscriptions, see Konstantinopoulos 1963 nos. 1–12; Kontorini 1989, nos. 53–57, 58–61, 63–84.

¹² Six out of the eight bases were retrieved from the complex (SEG 39, 740–744, 747) while two (SEG 39, 745 and 746A+B) were found reused in nearby plots and attributed to the complex. For an identification with the ‘temenos of Helios’ see Michalaki-Kollia 1984, 311; Kontorini 1989, 129 n. 362, 178–184; Badoud 2015, 157–159.

¹³ Michalaki-Kollia 1999, 73–74; Hoepfner 2003, 43–49. V. Machaira (2016, 90–91) recently endorsed Hoepfner’s view. It should be noted, however, that the existence of an oikos of Haliastai is a pure speculation. First, the priests of Haliost did not form an association (at least in light of the textual evidence); second, the association of Haliadai and Haliastai (IG XII 1, 155 and 156; cf. Gabrielsen 1994) was a private association whose members included foreigners residing in Rhodes as well as women; cf. Badoud 2017a, 41–42.

¹⁴ Michalaki-Kollia, who excavated the complex between 1973 and 1975, has also put forward that this complex may be identified with the hierothyteion, prytaneion or the bouleuterion, see Michalaki-Kollia 1999, 73–74.

¹⁵ A smelting pit that predates the construction of the peristyle building was located under the north portico, see Zimmer – Bairami 2008, 64–66.

¹⁶ This number is based on the material that has been located and processed by December 2018. The number of amphora handles may increase in the future, especially since the finds retrieved from the west side of the complex during the 1984 campaign (see ADelt B 1984, 311) have not yet been located in the storage rooms of the Ephorate. It should also be noted that slight changes in the statistics presented here are to be expected in the future, especially if new readings of the partly illegible stamps become possible. Besides the amphora handles, there are also two stamped handles from a lagynos and a small amphora respectively, which have not been counted among the material presented in this paper.

¹⁷ Handles of Chian, Coan, Knidian and Pamphylian origin have been identified among the record while the provenance of some handles still remains to be clarified. Among the unstamped handles there is one of non-Rhodian origin (A 23585), presumably from Kos on the basis of its double-barrel shape. This material will be fully presented in the publication of the complex.

¹⁸ Although Rhodes was of course a major production centre of transport amphoras, non-Rhodian amphoras are occasionally found in Rhodes, Giannikouri et al. 2017, 105–106, 116 fig. 1.

¹⁹ The number of unstamped handles might be slightly distorted as unstamped handles were not systematically collected and stored. Lund (1999, 188) underlines the problematic ratio between stamped and unstamped handles when it comes to excavation reports, whereas Empereur (1982, 226) has noted that the quantity of unstamped handles is minor in deposits that date after the 240s BC when stamping became more widespread.

²⁰ This is the overall picture drawn from the excavation diaries. Ceramic finds from this complex consist, among others, of tableware, utilitarian vessels and cooking ware. In general, archaeological finds including pottery and coins were found scattered all over the excavated area. The walls of the complex were dismantled probably already in Late Antiquity or in the Early Byzantine period, usually with only the first row of foundations found intact. In other words, the state of preservation of ceramic and architectural finds point to extensive destruction of the complex already in antiquity.

²¹ For the commodities stored in transport amphoras, see Foley et al. 2012. For the variety of goods (e.g. wine, figs, fish, honey, mineral products, pines) stored in Rhodian amphoras in particular, see Panagou 2010, 345–347; 2016, 322 n. 20, 329. There is a general consensus among scholars that Rhodian amphoras carried wine (Koehler 1996, 326; Lund 2004).

²² For an overview of the establishment of the chronology of Rhodian stamps see Lund 2011, 271–272, Badoud 2014, 17–23 and Castelli 2017, 3–4.

²³ For the low chronology see Finkielsztejn 2001. For some revised dates for the priests of Helios see now Badoud 2015 and Castelli 2017.

²⁴ Lund 2011, 271.

²⁵ As the study will progress, the number of handles dating to the late 2nd and early 1st century BC may still increase in the future, given that among the partly legible or illegible stamps are many that can be attributed to period VI on the basis of the shape of the handle.

²⁶ Lund 1999, 187–195.

²⁷ The names of 258 eponyms are recorded in the stamps (Habicht 2003, 542–543; Badoud 2014, 24), while 395 names of fabricants are known from the stamps (Badoud 2017b).

²⁸ Eleven stamps are attributed to the fabricant Mnason from Antiocheia, active in period VI.

²⁹ This remark can be further substantiated if we try to figure out connections between eponyms and fabricants; the material at hand is indicative of possible collaborations between fabricants and eponyms although regrettably no Rhodian amphora with both handles stamped has been retrieved from the complex. The nearly complete Rhodian amphora that has been found in the building preserves only part of one handle, which unfortunately is broken where the stamp would have been placed. At this stage of research no attempt has been made to attribute handles of eponyms and fabricants to individual vessels in the light of possible collaborations. This will entail a thorough and detailed comparison of the shape and fabric of handles before attributions can be made.

³⁰ Badoud 2015, 167 A 11; Habicht 2003, 554, 567.

³¹ Cf. Badoud (2014, 23) who notes that ‘today, the chronology of Rhodian amphora stamps allows the attribution of an approximate term to the eponyms of periods II to V (ca. 270 – ca. 108 BC).’

³² As mentioned earlier, approximately one quarter of the stamped handles are partly legible or not at all. With the assistance of modern technology, we might be able to decipher some more names of fabricants and eponyms in the future, which could potentially change these statistics. However, it is unlikely that the overall picture presented here would be dramatically altered.

³³ The Roman Imperial period is relatively well documented in the archaeological record as indicated by the presence of ceramic finds, coins and inscriptions that date to this period.

³⁴ Two stamps each: Timar(, Peithiadas, Aretakles, Pythodoros, Leontidas, Aristombrotidas II, Iason, Kallixeinos, Simias; three stamps each: Gorgon, Aleximachos, Timodikos, Astymedes II, Aristogeitos, Thersandros, Aristogenes, Klenostratos, Nausippos, Aristoboulos; four stamps: Lapheides; five stamps each: Anaxandros, Aischinas and Archembrotos II.

³⁵ The capacity of a Rhodian amphora has been estimated between 22 and 29 litres with an average capacity in the middle of the 2nd century BC to ca. 261/2 litres (Wallace Matheson & Wallace 1982, 299–301; Wallace 2004).

Image Credits

Fig. 1–2: The Archaeological Service of the Dodecanese. – Fig. 3–8 & Table 1: by author.

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