

Anchoring the chronology of amphora stamps from Herakleia Pontica

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ABSTRACT

Transport amphoras from Herakleia Pontica are common finds at sites around the Black Sea. Their stamped fragments are essential for dating 4th-century-B.C. archaeological deposits in the region. Despite various challenges that have hindered the development of a reliable chronology of the Herakleian stamps in the past, recent advancements have been made in establishing the sequence of magistrates mentioned on them. However, the absence of historically fixed points has made it difficult to firmly anchor this sequence in time, leading to considerable uncertainty about the dates of the officials' terms. This article considers two settlements on the west Black Sea coast and suggests that they were abandoned after being attacked by Philip II's armies in 339 B.C. The abandonment provides a historical terminus ante quem for the terms of multiple Herakleian magistrates, whose names appear on stamped amphora fragments found at these sites. This allows for estimation of absolute dates for the magistrate list spanning the first three quarters of the 4th century B.C.

During the 4th century B.C., a class of transport amphoras, commonly attributed to Herakleia Pontica, were abundantly exported in the areas around the Black Sea. Most of these amphoras were stamped, and their stamped fragments are now widely used to date archaeological deposits in these areas. Hence the importance of establishing a reliable and accurate chronology of Heracleian amphora stamps and the officials named on them. Before proposing an improvement to this chronology, it is worth summarising the principles on which it is based.

Most major ancient Greek amphora stamp classes, including those of Herakleia Pontica, Thasos, Sinope, Rhodos and –to certain extent– Knidos, have their chronologies built upon similar principles. In all these cases, the names of annually-changing officials served to indicate the year of production of the amphora. With rare exceptions, these officials are not known from other documents, and their dates cannot be reconstructed directly. However, magistrates can be clustered in groups based on various criteria, including association with fabricants (individuals possibly related to production, also sometimes named on stamps) and die engravers, cases of re-engraved dies, stylistic considerations and archaeological evidence. These groups can be arranged in a chronological sequence and given absolute dates based on historically fixed points. For example, rare cases of officials known from other documents, or attested in archaeological deposits with historical termini, can provide such chronological anchors. This way, once a relatively reliable sequence of magistrates is established, one can estimate the date of any of them by counting from a few fixed points.

While the principles outlined above can be applied in the case of Herakleian amphora stamps, several factors have hindered the development of their chronology. Grouping the Herakleian magistrates based on the style of the stamps is challenging for technical reasons. Herakleian amphoras typically have large-grained sandy

fabric and are stamped with relief dies. The resulting incuse (englyphic) impressions are relatively rough and indistinctive in terms of engraving style compared to the relief stamps of other cities, for example of Thasos, where finely produced lettering and pictorial devices allow for identifying stylistic groups and even individual engravers' hands. Furthermore, unlike Thasos and Sinope, where evidence from kiln sites has helped establish the sequences of magistrates, in the case of Herakleia such evidence is completely lacking. Arranging the magistrates based on their co-occurrence with fabricants is complicated by the potentially long careers of the latter and the difficulty of distinguishing homonyms among them. Last but not least, the absolute chronology of the Herakleian stamps does not rely on historically fixed dates. A single event tentatively suggested as a reference point to the stamp chronology is the death of the Herakleian tyrant Dionysios in 305 B.C. (Балабанов 1982, 12–3). However, the idea that this event is connected to the end of the amphora stamping practice at Herakleia is not based on any evidence. Instead, it is merely inferred from the observation that this practice came to an end around the end of the 4th century B.C.

Despite these limitations, a number of studies have made progress in developing a chronology of Herakleian amphora stamps. Earlier attempts, such as those of Grakov (Граков 1926), Brashinsky (Брашински 1965) and Vasilenko (Василенко 1974), relied heavily on palaeography, syntax and stamp shape to classify the stamps into several consecutive groups, assuming that these criteria had chronological significance. Subsequent research by Kats has adopted a similar approach (Κατ 2003; Κατ 2007, 232–49, 431–33). However, Kats faced challenges in balancing the rigid classification methods of his predecessors with contradicting newly accumulated evidence. As a consequence, he resorted to using loose criteria in forming his chronological groups, resulting in occasionally unconvincing results (Φεδοσεβ 2016, 32–33). Monakhov's publication of amphoras from closed deposits, including many stamped Herakleian amphoras, has contributed to an increasingly archaeological approach to the Herakleian chronology and greater reliance on cross-dating with Thasian and Sinopean amphora stamps (Μοναхов 1999; Teleaga 2003).

More recently, the late Yvon Garlan made significant advances. Departing from the methods employed by Soviet scholars, he clustered the Herakleian officials from the first half of the 4th century B.C. into smaller groups, primarily based on their association with fabricants, the style of engraving, and evidence from closed archaeological deposits (Garlan 2008, 2015; Balabanov et al. 2016). Garlan's prior experience with developing chronologies of the Thasian and Sinopean amphora stamps was instrumental in this regard. One of his main contributions is the explanation of a group of single-name stamps, previously considered to reflect the earliest period of Herakleian stamping, in which only fabricants were mentioned on the stamps. Garlan has shown that at least some of these stamps were placed along the stamps of already known officials. Hence, they should be considered as part of the regular magistrate-based stamping system rather than a distinct and earlier group. This allowed Garlan to propose a sequence of annually changing officials going back to the early 380s B.C., suggesting that the practice of stamping Herakleian amphoras began 25–30 years later than previously estimated. The later date is due not only to removing the early fabricants as a chronologically distinct group, but also to the shortening of the magistrate list. Garlan omitted several of the names listed by Kats, arguing that they either belonged to fabricants, or were misread (Balabanov et al. 2016, 76–8).

The present article accepts Garlan's arguments regarding the relative order of the Herakleian officials with a minor correction. The list should include Λυσίθεος, who is linked to other magistrates from groups D–F on the basis of the list of fabricants he co-occurs with.¹ He most likely held office in the 350s B.C., as an amphora stamped with his name was found in a tomb along with a Thasian amphora naming Κλείτος (Tzochev 2009, 58–9, fig. 2). Another name, Κόας, was probably mistakenly included in Garlan's Group G presentation, despite being argued against earlier in the text (cf. Balabanov et al. 2016, 80, 113; Павличенко 2009).

1 To my knowledge, Λυσίθεος is attested with the fabricants Ἀπολλώνιος, Ἀρίστων, Ἀρτέμων, Ἄττης, Βλάσθος, Δαμοφῶν, Διονύσιος, Εὐφραῖος, Εὐπόρος, Ἰαροκλῆς, Ἰστιάος, Μαλάκων, Μίκκος, Μῦς, Νόσσος, Στασίχορος, Χαίρεσιος. Of these, Χαίρεσιος first appeared with officials from Group D, and Ἀρτέμων, Ἀρίστων, and Νόσσος do not occur after Group F.

While Garlan's research was mostly focused on the relative order the magistrates, he acknowledges that much uncertainty remains around their absolute dates. His estimates are based on relatively few cases of cross-dating with Thasian stamped amphoras found in closed archaeological deposits together with Herakleian ones. This method is far from accurate and cannot make up for the absence of historically fixed points. Here, I will explore a previously unseized opportunity to anchor the chronology of the Herakleian amphora stamps to a known historical event.

Garlan's final work on the Herakleian stamp chronology was published together with a collection of 859 Herakleian stamps found at the site of Kostadin Cheshma, in southeast Bulgaria (Balabanov et al. 2016). This sizable lot includes the names of 31 annual officials, starting with some of the earliest known magistrates (Ὀρθεσίλας and Ἀριστοκλής), and ends –according to the dates given in the book– around 343 B.C. A question that naturally arises is why a community that was such a proliferate consumer of imported goods during the first half of the 4th century, suddenly stopped receiving Herakleian amphoras. Surprisingly, the authors of the publication do not address this question. However, based on the brief presentation of the archaeology of the site, and similar presentations published elsewhere (e.g., Balabanov 2011; for the controversy around the interpretation of the site, see Tzochew 2011, 75), it is evident that the settlement was deserted soon after the middle of the 4th century B.C. Smaller-scale activity was observed only after the mid-3rd century B.C. The lifespan of the 4th century habitation can be estimated based on the latest coins, namely those of kings Kotys I (383–359 B.C.) and Philip II (359–336 B.C.). The latest well-dated 4th century object found at Kostadin Cheshma is a stamped Thasian amphora handle naming Ἀμύντωρ, dated to ca. 339 B.C.² This provisional date for the abandonment of the site should alert anyone familiar with the history of ancient Thrace.

In 342 B.C., Philip II of Macedon launched a military campaign against Thracians and Scythians. The Macedonians captured existing strongholds and established new ones at strategic locations in southern Thrace (for a summary of these events and the related historical sources, see Delev 2015, 50–1). The routes of the Macedonian armies during the first two years of these wars are far from clear, but one of the fortified settlements founded by the Macedonians was Kabyle on the river Tonzos, some 65 km east of the site of Kostadin Cheshma (Demosth. VIII, 44. Fig. 1). In 339 B.C., after unsuccessfully besieging Perinthos and Byzantion, Philip led his troops on a plundering mission to the north, towards the Scythian kingdom of Atheas in Dobrudja (Justin. 9.1–2). A part of his army must have passed close to Kostadin Cheshma on this occasion. That the timing of Macedonian military activity in the area coincides with the estimated date of abandonment of settlement is noteworthy, although it does not necessarily imply causation. Its fate is confirmed by another piece of evidence. A recently published lead sling bullet found at the site names Τύρβακος, a commander in the Macedonian army. Based on the distribution and the contexts of discovery of the projectiles with this name, Emil Nankov proposed that Τύρβακος participated in the Thracian and Scythian campaigns of Philip II in 342–340 B.C. and 339 B.C., more likely capturing the site of Kostadin Cheshma during the latter year (Nankov 2023, 87–8, 115, also discussing previous interpretations of Τύρβακος).

Linking the abandonment of Kostadin Cheshma with the Scythian campaign of Philip II provides a terminus ante quem of 339 B.C. for all Herakleian magistrates attested at the site. The list can be supplemented with that from another coastal settlement, almost certainly destroyed during the same Macedonian campaign in 339 B.C. This site is located at cape St. Atanas, near the modern village of Byala, north-east Bulgaria. It was strategically positioned at one of the few harbors in the area and near a mountain pass connecting the coastal towns south and north of the Haemus Mountains. It very likely stood on the way of the Macedonians, whether they sailed or moved by land to the north. Similarity to Kostadin Cheshma, the archaeological remains at this site show a thriving community during first half of the 4th century B.C. and sudden abandonment around 340 B.C. (Tzochew forthcoming). The abandonment date is attested by transport amphoras, fine pottery and coin finds.

2 The stamped handle, inv. no. TH-161 in the Burgas Archaeological Museum, was omitted from the presentation of Thasian stamps in Balabanov et al. It reads [Δημ]άλκης | [Θ]άσιον Ἀμύντωρ, around a hand device. For stamps from the same die, see Garlan 1999, no. 814. For the date, see Tzochew 2016, table 2.



Fig. 1. Places mentioned in the text.

Arrowheads and sling bullets confirm the violent end of the settlement. One of the sling bullets names a certain Ἐρμιππος. The name probably belongs to another commander under Philip II, involved in an unrecorded siege of Apollonia Pontica in 339 B.C., based on identically inscribed projectiles found in the city (Nankov 2023, 78, 140, no. L160).³ The excavations at cape St. Atanas yielded 27 stamped fragments from Herakleian amphoras, adding to the list of annual officials that must have held terms before 339 B.C. (Table 1).

The list of Herakleian magistrates in Table 1 retains their relative order as proposed by Garlan in Balabanov et al. 2016, with the correction suggested above. The table does not include the Herakleian officials of the last third of the 4th century B.C., because this part of the list still lacks a detailed study of the kind carried out by Garlan for the earlier period. The absolute dates assigned to the groups have been estimated based on the terminus post quem of 339 B.C. for the names attested at Kostadin Cheshma and St. Atanas. The accuracy of these dates depends on the following considerations:

- The calculation assumes that each magistrate held a one-year term, and that no years without an appointed magistrate existed. While the first assumption is very likely to be true, based on the common practice of magistracy in Greek cities, there may have been exceptional cases of terms shorter or longer than one year due to reasons such as death, illness or malfeasance. It is also possible that there were years, when no magistrate was appointed due to extraordinary political circumstances. Two to five such years are conceivable, based on Garlan's interpretation of amphoras stamped with only a fabricant's name (Balabanov et al. 2016, 84).

³ Studies of inscribed sling projectiles found in the interior of Thrace and along the western Black Sea coast commonly link these objects to the movements of Macedonian armies in these areas. While the interpretation of the personal names as commanders of military units is widely accepted and the most likely one, it cannot be proven in all cases. Other roles within or associated with armies cannot be excluded. For a recent overview of possible interpretations, see Boufalis et al. 2023, 1156–159.

Magistrates	Group	Estimated dates, BC	Magistrates	Group	Estimated dates, BC
Ὀρθεσίλας (K)	A	387-382	Εὐγετίων Β (K)	E	358-352
Δαμάτριος Ι			Κερκίνος Β (K)		
Ξάνθος ?			Κῦρος (K)		
Τιμόλυκος ?			Λαίσας		
Ἀριστοκλῆς (K)			Λύκων Β (K, A)		
Σῶσις (A)	B	381-368	Πανσανίας Β (K, A)	F	351-343
Ἴα(ροκλῆς) (K)			Λυσίθεος		
Λύ(κων) Ι (K)			Διονύσιος Β (K)		
Παυ(σανίας) Ι (K, A)			Σάτυρος (K)		
Αἰθήρ (K)			Σιλανός (K, A)		
Διονύσιος Ι (K)			Ἀμφίτας		
Εὐ(γετίων) Ι (K)			Ἀνδρόνικος		
Ἡρ(ακλείδας) (K)			Ἐχεμος		
Θέ(δωρος)			Καρακόδης (A)		
Νίκ(ων) (K)			Μενοίτιος		
Πε(ισίστρατος) Ι (K)			Πυθοκλῆς		
Φί(λων ?) (K, A)			Ἄρχιππος (K)		
Κερκίνος Ι (K)			Δαμάτριος Β (K, A)		
Μολοσσός (K, A)			Ἡρακλείδας Β (K)		
Στύφων (K)			Φιλῖνος (K)		
Δεινόμαχος (K, A)	Εὐρυφών 339 BC				
Ἀγνόδαμος (K)	Εὐφρόνιος				
Ἀλκέτας (K)	Ξένος				
Ἀρίστων (K)	Σπίνθαρος				
Καλλίας (A)	Στρο(-)				
Κρωμνίτης					
Σμίας					
Σκύθας Ι					
Ὅρος					
	D	367-359		G	342-334

Table 1. Chronological list of the magistrates named on Herakleian amphora stamps (excluding names posterior to Galan's group G). The names attested on the stamps found at Kostadin Cheshma and St. Atanas are indicated in bold and marked with "K" and "A" respectively. The two collections have been published in detail in Balabanov et al. 2016 and Tzochew forthcoming.

- The list of magistrates may be incomplete. Certain officials, such as Ξάνθος and Τιμόλυκος, are known from very few dies, which increases the probability that new names will appear in the future.
- The order of the names within the groups is still uncertain, and in cases where evidence is absent, the names are listed alphabetically. It is important to consider this when estimating the dates of individual officials.
- It is possible that some of the magistrates who held office in and immediately before 339 B.C. are not attested at Kostadin Cheshma or St. Atanas. This could shift the sequence back by one or a few years.

Although none of the above is likely to change the estimated dates drastically in the future, it serves as a reminder that the proposed chronology is far from certain and that further research is needed to reduce the margin of error.

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