

Plaster Amphorae Stoppers Impressed with Coptic Symbols (Unpublished Collection)

Dr. Ahmad Mohamed Khalaf Mohamed

Lecturer of Tourist Guidance, Tourist Guidance Dep., Minia University

Abstract:

Plaster stoppers were among several types of plugs used to close the jars throughout history. In the case of foreign trade, plaster stoppers were employed to plug the amphorae. The study publishes sixteen imprinted plaster stoppers. Their designs had a Christian significances and symbols such as; crosses, Greek inscriptions, figural, and animal forms. They are preserved in El Ashmonin Museum Store in Mallawi city, Middle Egypt. The study aims to publish this collection for the first time and to reveal the Christian symbols applied. So, a descriptive and analytical methods of research are adopted.

Keywords: Plaster, amphora, stopper, seal, impression, Coptic, trade, Antione.

سدادات الأواني الجصية المختومة برموز قبطية (مجموعة غير منشورة)

د. أحمد محمد خلف محمد

مدرس بقسم الإرشاد السياحي، كلية السياحة والفنادق، جامعة المنيا

الملخص

أستخدمت أنواع عديدة من السدادات عبر التاريخ لإغلاق الجرار ومنها السدادات الجصية، وكانت تستخدم تحديداً في حالة التجارة الخارجية لإغلاق جرار الأمفورا، تنشر هذه الدراسة ستة عشر سدادة جصية مختومة، تحتوي تصميماتها علي دلالات ورموز قبطية مثل اشكال صليبان وكتابات يونانية وتصاوير آدمية وحيوانية، وهذه المجموعة محفوظة بالمخزن المتحفي بالأشمونين التابع لمدينة ملوي في منطقة مصر الوسطي، وتهدف الدراسة إلي نشر هذه المجموعة لأول مرة وإظهار الرموز القبطية المستخدمة، ولهذا تم إتباع المنهجين الوصفي والتحليلي في الدراسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجص، الأمفورا، السدادة، الختم، طبعة الختم، قبطي، تجارة، أنتينوي.

Introduction

Sealing artefacts, particularly for jars, was one of the most unique marking methods employed in the ancient world. The context of the seal imprint reveals a great information about the location where they were discovered and date of their manufacture.¹ Jars were frequently sealed or placed inside sealed containers in the transportation of commodities during the Greek and Roman periods. The sender's information is frequently included in the seal. This was significant for two reasons: first, it let the depositor to identify the sender of goods, and second, it allowed the sender to identify his products in the event of a return through his seal.²

There were two types of plaster sealing discovered: gypsum plaster and lime-based plaster. To distinguish them, various types of examinations must be used. The plaster was treated with red watercolor after the seal process had solidified. They were then poured on top of the jar. In general, the purpose of using plugs to seal jars served two purposes: the first was to securely close the jars to save its contents, and the second was to write information about the owner, origins, and contents.³

Closing amphorae with plaster plugs was widely spread in Egypt and north Africa during the Roman period and commonly used by wine traders to close the amphorae. An example shows plaster stopper while it's still found attached to the amphora' neck.

¹ Aurelia Masson-Berghoff, "Seals and Seal Impressions", in *Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt*, (British Museum online Catalogue, 2018), 19.

² Katelijn Vandorpe, "Seals and Stamps as Identifiers in Daily Life in Greco-Roman Egypt" in *Identifiers and Identification Methods in the Ancient World*, eds. Mark Depauw and Sandra Counsment (Paris: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oosterse Studies, 2014), 145.

³ L. Blue, R. J. Whitewright and R. I. Thomas, "Roman Vessel Stoppers in Myos Horms- Quseir al-Qadim. Roman and Islamic Ports on the Red Sea 2: Finds from the 1999-2003 Excavations," in *BAR International Series 2286*, eds. D. P. S. Peacock and L. Blue, (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011), 13.

Plaster Amphorae Stoppers Impressed with Coptic Symbols (Unpublished Collection)

Dr. Ahmad Mohamed Khalaf Mohamed

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

It was discovered in Antinoe and dates back to late fourth and mid fifth centuries AD. Its imprint is unclear (Fig. 1).⁴



Fig. 1: Plaster Stopper closes amphora' neck. After; J. Dowler et al., Catalogue of British Museum Objects, 487.

The commercial seals were larger in size than the local seals, with a diameter ranging from 3 to 8.5 cm. They might be rectangular or circular in shape. Inscriptions and figural themes are included on the seals. The papyri and ostraca revealed prominent names of wine traders participating in the wine trade in the eastern desert. They were exceedingly wealthy and belonged to high social class. Seal identification is essential for both producers and businessmen in order to be handled through agents in commercial circuits, despite the fact that it was not implied by law.⁵

One of the most prevalent seals forms was the round stamp. If the commodities were beer or wine, it usually contained small holes and a pitch which were essential for fermentation process. It

⁴ J. Dowler et al., Catalogue of British Museum Objects from the Egypt Exploration Fund's 1913/14: Excavation at Antinopolis (Antinoe), in *Antinopolis II, Scavi e Materiali*, eds. Guido Bastianini and Rosario Pintaudi (Firenze University Press, 2014) 485-7.

⁵ Vanderpe K., "Seals and Stamps as Identifiers in Daily Life", 146 -7.

is used to be stamped by the merchants' names and occasionally a symbol. Names were frequently written in Greek.⁶ In case of rectangular seals long inscriptions are applied while, shorter ones used to be applied on circular seals. Although, the inscriptions are mostly difficult to be ascertain at this time, abbreviations and monograms were clear to people involved in trade. A layout and common design of circular seals that was applied on plaster stoppers (Fig. 2).⁷

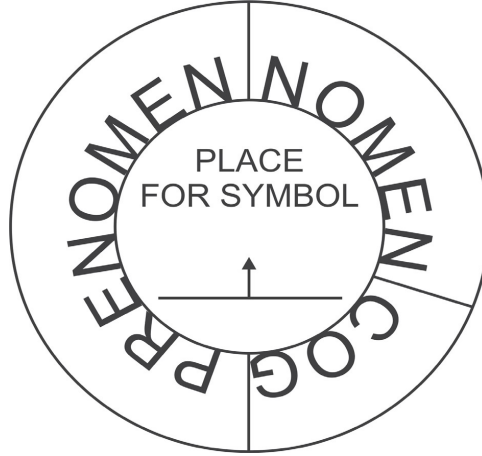


Fig. 2: Layout of Commercial wine Seal. After; Ross Thomas, Roman vessel stopper, 23

⁶ Thomas R., *Roman Vessel Stoppers*, 23.

⁷ Vandompe K., "*Seals and Stamps as Identifiers in Daily Life*", 145.

Plaster Amphorae Stoppers Impressed with Coptic Symbols (Unpublished Collection)

Dr. Ahmad Mohamed Khalaf Mohamed

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

The city of Antinoe

Antinoe was a central trade center, its importance increased when Emperor Hadrian turned the Hindi trade routes to the city. The city was established in Greek style of Greek cities in 130 AD. It was a central trade for many manufactures like; wine, agriculture of vine, and pottery.⁸ By the fourth and fifth century the city was flourished and was the capital of Thebaid Division of Egypt.⁹

A number of clay stoppers were discovered at Antinoe city. They are preserved in the museum store at El Ashmunin now. Their function was to close the amphorae in case of local trade. Most of them are conical in shape. They carry different Christian significances and symbols.¹⁰

Descriptive study

The collection of plaster stoppers is kept at El Ashmounin Museum store. Their record numbers are 250, 251, and 989. Based on their impression seal design; the researcher arranged them into four groups; the first includes five seal impressions with geometrical decorations. The second group shows four seal stoppers with inscriptions. The third group includes four stoppers with floral based impressions. The fourth group present three plaster stoppers impressed with figural and animal forms.

The First group

The stamp imprint shows various geometric-based decorations; the cross is the most common. The first plaster stopper is impressed

⁸ زبيده محمد عطا، إقليم المنيا في العصر البيزنطي في ضوء أوراق البردي، الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب، ١٩٨٢، ٢٩.

⁹ Rene-Georges Coquin and Maurice Martin, S.J., "Antinoopolis" in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* I, ed. Aziz S. Atiya (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991), 144.

¹⁰ Ahmad Mohamed Khalaf, "Publication of Coptic Nile Mud Jar Stoppers Preserved in El Ashmounin Museum Store" *Journal of Faculty of Tourism and Hotels Mansura University*, (June 2022): 1.

with a cross with equal sides inside a circular form (Fig. 3). The second plaster stopper is imprinted by a rectangular form with a cross inside (Fig. 4). In the backside the straw is still found in lower part which was used as a valve in wine amphorae (Fig. 4a). The third one is partly broken, and its imprint is faint, but traces of a cross inside a circle can be recognized (Fig. 5).



Fig. 3: A cross imprint. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.



Fig. 4: A cross imprint. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.



Fig. 4a: A cross imprint. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.



Fig. 5: A cross imprint. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.

Plaster Amphorae Stoppers Impressed with Coptic Symbols (Unpublished Collection)

Dr. Ahmad Mohamed Khalaf Mohamed

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

The fourth and the fifth stoppers are also made of lime plaster or mixture of lime plaster and gypsum. Both of them are impressed by a circular form seal. A Greek cross occupied the center with four arms and small decorative elements in the four corners of the imprint are applied (Fig. 6). While, the last stopper had many seal impressions applied shows many imprints of the same cross design (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6: A cross imprint. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.



Fig. 7: A cross imprint. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.

The second group

Two circular plaster stoppers are impressed with both inscripational and geometrical forms. The first shows eight-sided rosette in the center and surrounded by a Greek inscription; letters may a part of name can be read (... ARIC) (Fig. 8)). The second plaster stopper includes a cross in the middle of the seal and is surrounded by an inscription in Greek in the outer circle. It's probably a part of a name (Fig. 9).



Fig. 8: circular seal imprint with inscription. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.



Fig. 9: circular seal imprint with inscription. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.

Plaster Amphorae Stoppers Impressed with Coptic Symbols (Unpublished Collection)

Dr. Ahmad Mohamed Khalaf Mohamed

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

The other two plaster plugs are made of lime-based plaster and imprinted with inscriptions. The first impression has faint traces; only the Greek letter (W) can be read. The hole on the side maybe was left by a string to remove the stopper, or it could have been drilled to allow wine fermentation (Fig. 10). The other shows inscriptions and the letter (A) also can be identified in the upper part (Fig. 11).



Fig. 10: circular seal imprint with inscription. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.



Fig. 11: circular seal imprint with inscription. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.

The third Group

The third group includes four plaster stoppers imprinted with floral design impressions. Eight and six-sided rosette and branch of plant are the most applied floral imprints on plaster stoppers. The first plug reveals eight-sided rosette (Fig. 12). The second shows six-sided rosette inside a circle (Fig. 13). The third stopper also imprinted by a small rosette from in the middle inside circular floral design (Fig. 14). The outer part of the fourth one presents a branch in the outer circle with a letter inside (Fig. 15).



Fig. 12: circular seal imprint with eight-sided rosette.
Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.



Fig. 13: circular seal imprint with six-sided rosette.
Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.

Plaster Amphorae Stoppers Impressed with Coptic Symbols (Unpublished Collection)

Dr. Ahmad Mohamed Khalaf Mohamed

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)



Fig. 14: circular seal imprint with six-sided rosette. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.



Fig. 15: circular seal imprint with a branch of plant. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.

The Fourth group

Three plaster stoppers have animal and figural-form impressions. Two animals are shown inside a circular form. The first shows quadruped animal may be its a donkey or a horse (Fig. 16). The back side of the same stopper shows irregular design and straw is still present. The second plaster plug depicts also an animal probably a horse (Fig. 17). Circular plaster seal imprinted with

figural design. It can be identified as St. Abu Mina, based on his figural theme surrounded by two camels on both sides (Fig. 18).

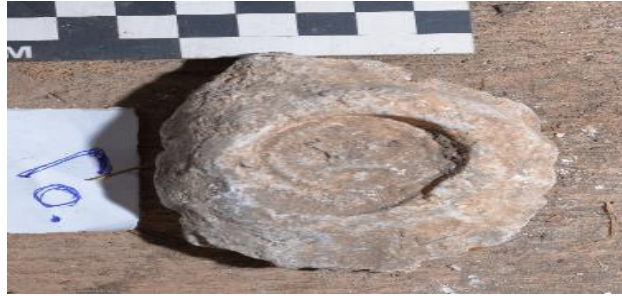


Fig. 16: Animal form impression. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.



Fig. 16a: backside of stopper. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.



Fig. 17: Animal form impression. Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.

Plaster Amphorae Stoppers Impressed with Coptic Symbols (Unpublished Collection)

Dr. Ahmad Mohamed Khalaf Mohamed

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)



Fig. 18: circular seal imprint with figural imprint.
Photographed by the author in 2-8-2021.

The Competitive study

The provenance of the studied plaster stoppers collection preserved in El Ashmunin museum store is unknown. Furthermore, their exact date is unknown. As a result, a comparison study with similar stoppers of the same material and same Christian symbols must be conducted. Many sealed stoppers had been excavated in Coptic archaeological sites in Egypt. Antionopolis "Ansina" is the closest archaeological Coptic site to El Ashmunin museum store. It is located in Mallwi city on the eastern bank of the Nile. The site reveals large numbers of plaster stoppers. So, four sealed plaster stoppers are presented to be compared with those preserved in EL Ashmunin museum store. They are made of the same material which is plaster and had similar imprints.

The samples were excavated by British Museum exploration fund in 1913/14 at Antione. They provide variety of plaster seal impressions. The first stopper dates back to the fourth till the seventh century. It is made of lime plaster and painted in red color pigment; it was once used to close a wine amphora. The imprint depicts a cross surrounded by a Greek text. The second sample is a lime plaster amphora plug dates back to the fourth till the seventh century. A hole is drilled to the right side to allow fermentation of

wine and to remove the plug. Its impression shows an earliest form of Christogram is surrounded by an inscription.¹¹



Fig. 19: Seal impression from Antinoe, after; A. J. Dowler et al., Catalogue of British Museum Objects, 489.



Fig. 20: Seal impression from Antinoe, after; A. J. Dowler et al., Catalogue of British Museum Objects, 490.

¹¹ A. J. Dowler et al., "Catalogue of British Museum Objects from the Egypt Exploration Fund's 1913/14: Excavation at Antinopolis (Antinoe)," in *Antinopolis II, Scavi e Materiali*, eds. Guido Bastianini and Rosario Pintaudi, (Florence: Istituto Papirologico G. Vitelli, 2014), 485.

Plaster Amphorae Stoppers Impressed with Coptic Symbols (Unpublished Collection)

Dr. Ahmad Mohamed Khalaf Mohamed

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

The other two examples of wine amphorae stoppers are made out of lime plaster or lime plaster mixed with gypsum. It had been imprinted with circular stamp; the center shows a cross flanked by initials MK, and Greek inscription in the outer part. The fourth stopper is stamped with circular seal. It is made out of lime plaster. A cross is shown in center of the seal and in the upper quadrants are letters α and π . May it refers to the initials of a name. The lower quadrants include the letters A and ω .¹²



Fig. 21: seal impression from Antinoe, after; A. J. Dowler et al., Catalogue of British Museum Objects, 490.



Fig. 22: seal impression from Antinoe, after; A. J. Dowler et al., Catalogue of British Museum Objects, 491.

¹² A. J. Dowler et al., "Catalogue of British Museum", 490-91.

The Analytical Study

The studied collection of jar stoppers is sealed with variety of Christian motifs and designs; among them Geometrical decorations, floral, inscriptional, animal, and figural decorations. Among the most imprinted geometrical decoration is the cross. The cross is considered Christian religion's primary sign and symbol. It has repeatedly been discovered as a religious or quasi-religious emblem in various religions, both before and after Christianity. Jesus the Christ holds the cross as indication of the Christian people whom followed the Christianity.¹³

The cross sign was commonly impressed on many Coptic objects. The sign was cross was constantly used by the Early Christians as a means of recognition. The cross had a variety of forms used for both ornamental and particular purposes.¹⁴ The cross in different designs is shown in plaster stoppers (Figs. 3, 4, 5, 6,7, 9).

Inscriptions imprinted on plaster stoppers are written in Greek language. Various letters were used in early Christianity to refer to Jesus the Christ; among them is A and w. They are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.¹⁵ it refers mainly to Jesus the Christ. These two letters are depicted on sealed plaster plugs (Figs. 8, 9, 10, 11).¹⁶ Among the floral decorations applied on the plaster stoppers; eight and six-sided rosette are commonly used (Figs. 8, 12, 13, 14, 15).

¹³ "Then Said Jesus unto his disciples, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his Cross, and follow me" Matthew 16: 24.

¹⁴ Henry Jenner, *Christian Symbolism* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & co., 1910), 46- 50.

¹⁵ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 149.

¹⁶ "I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last." Revelation 21: 6, 22:13.

Plaster Amphorae Stoppers Impressed with Coptic Symbols (Unpublished Collection)

Dr. Ahmad Mohamed Khalaf Mohamed

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

Saint Abu Mina, a third-century Christian martyr, is the figural theme that is often imprinted on the plaster sealed stoppers. A church was built over his tomb in Alexandria. On the 15th of Hatour, the church celebrates his martyrdom. His church, south of Alexandria, has become a popular pilgrimage destination.¹⁷ He theme with two camels on both sides can be identified on faint seal stopper (Fig. 18).

Conclusion

- In comparing these plaster stoppers with the similar stoppers excavated in Antinoe city. We can deduce that plaster stoppers preserved in El Ashmunin museum store once were discovered in Antinoe. Their date of manufacture ranges between the fourth till the seventh century.
- The city of Antinoe was a major commercial center in middle Egypt during the fourth and till seventh centuries, where large numbers of sealed amphorae stoppers were discovered.
- In the case of international trade, amphorae were usually closed with lime plaster or plaster mixed with gypsum.
- The hole at the side of the amphora stopper suggests that it once held unfermented wine or beer when it was transported.
- Circular seals were the most popular type of seal used to imprint the plaster stoppers.
- The common decorative elements applied on plaster stoppers are the Cross, the two letters A and W, and figural theme of St. Abu Mina are the most applied Christian symbols in plaster stoppers.

¹⁷ René Basset, "*Le Synaxaire Arabe Jacobite (Mois de Hatour et de Kihak)*", in *Patrologia Orientalis, III*, eds. R. Graffin and F. Nau (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1909), 203-208. Also see; Peter Grossman, "The Pilgrimage Center of Abu Mina," in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. D. Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 286-287.

Bibliography

1. A. J. Dowler, Frances Pritchard, St John Simpson, Ross I. Thomas and Andre J. Veldmeijer. "Catalogue of British Museum Objects from the Egypt Exploration Fund's 1913/14: Excavation at Antinoupolis (Antinoe)," in *Antinoupolis II, Scavi e Materiali*, eds. Guido Bastianini and Rosario Pintaudi. Florence: Istituto Papirologico G. Vitelli, 2014.
 2. Basset, René "Le Synaxaire Arabe Jacobite (Mois de Hatour et de Kihak)", in *Patrologia Orientalis, III*, eds. R. Graffin and F. Nau (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1909), 203-208.
 3. Coquin, Rene-Georges and Maurice Martin, S.J., "Antinoopolis" in *The Coptic Encyclopedia I*, ed. Aziz S. Atiya (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991).
 4. Ferguson, George *Signs and Symbols in Christian art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).
 5. Grossman, Peter "The Pilgrimage Center of Abu Mina," in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. D. Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 1998).
 6. Jenner, Henry *Christian Symbolism* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & co., 1910).
 7. Khalaf, Ahmad Mohamed "Publication of Coptic Nile Mud Jar Stoppers Preserved in El Ashmounin Museum Store" *Journal of Faculty of Tourism and Hotels Mansura University*, (June 2022).
 8. L. Blue, R. J. Whitewright and R. I. Thomas, "Roman Vessel Stoppers in Myos Hormos- Quseir al-Qadim. Roman and Islamic Ports on the Red Sea 2: Finds from the 1999-2003 Excavations," in *BAR International Series 2286*, eds. D. P. S. Peacock and L. Blue, 11-34, (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011).
 9. Masson-Berghoff, Aurelia "Seals and Seal Impressions", in *Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt*, (British Museum online Catalogue, 2018).
 10. The Bible; Old and New Testaments.
 11. Vandorpe, Katelijn "Seals and Stamps as Identifiers in Daily Life in Greco-Roman Egypt" in *Identifiers and Identification Methods in the Ancient World*, eds. Mark Depauw and Sandra Counsement (Paris: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oosterse Studies, 2014).
١٢. زبيده محمد عطا، إقليم المنيا في العصر البيزنطي في ضوء أوراق البردي، الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب، ١٩٨٢.