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Dorota Dzierzbicka  
d.dzierzbicka@gmail.com

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# Local Amphora Stoppers from Old Dongola as Sources in the Study of Toponyms

Dorota Dzierzbicka<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The finds

The aim of this paper is to present stamped amphora stoppers as a source for the study of Nubian toponyms. The reference point will be a unique group of objects of this category excavated in 7th-century contexts in Old Dongola. My objective is not to offer a ready list of toponyms attested on Dongolese stoppers; rather, it is to draw attention to this category of finds, often neglected as archaeological and epigraphic material, and to show their potential value as sources in the study of toponyms.

Excavations in Old Dongola have yielded hundreds of vessel stoppers whose dating spans from the 6th to the 14th centuries.<sup>2</sup> The objects of interest to us were found on the Citadel, in a storage and service area of palatial building SWN.B.I, which contained dump layers and latrine deposits rich in pottery and other finds.<sup>3</sup> The ceramics from these stratigraphic units point to their dating in the 7th and early 8th centuries CE. The context in which the stoppers were found is remarkable not only for its established chronology, but also

1 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this paper, whose comments helped improve it in several places.

2 For a presentation of 64 fragmentary stoppers from early Makurian (7th-century) contexts excavated in seasons 2008–2013, see DZIERZBICKA, “Amphora stoppers of the 7th century from Old Dongola.” In the 2001 and 2003 seasons a fairly homogeneous assemblage of 45 stoppers was recovered from the fill of the palace latrine (SWN.B.I.15), which was contemporary and adjacent to the spaces that yielded the material discussed in this paper. These finds, as well as other stoppers from Dongola, were the object of studies of Anna Jaklewicz presented in the form of an unpublished MA thesis defended at the University of Warsaw in 2003. The latrine deposit also yielded empty amphorae imported from Egypt and Palestine, as well as containers of local origin (GODLEWSKI, “Old Dongola, Kom A, 2001,” pp. 208–10).

3 GODLEWSKI, “Dongola 2008–2009,” pp. 293–99; GODLEWSKI et al., “Palatial Building SWN.B.I and earlier relics of Buildings SWN.B.IV and SWN.B.X,” pp. 80–81.

for its evident post-consumption character. The layers contained amphorae that are likely to have been sealed with these stoppers.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the archaeological deposits from the palace storerooms offer a rare opportunity to place amphora stoppers in a historical context and to trace their provenance based on the accompanying ceramic material.

The objects here discussed are sealings formed over the rims of amphorae after they had been filled. In order to seal the vessels, their necks were first closed off with plugs that served as preliminary stoppers. The plugs, in the case of Dongolese stoppers usually made of vine leaves, were supposed to protect the contents by preventing wet mud sealant from falling into the vessel. Leaf impressions are often found on the bottom sides of stoppers formed over these plugs and shaped either by hand or using a sort of mold, as can be suspected in the case of pieces displaying a smooth surface and regular form.<sup>5</sup> After the mouths of the vessels had been covered, the stoppers were smoothed and left to dry. The stoppers' wet surface was often marked with impressions of wooden, stone or ceramic stamps.<sup>6</sup> These were sometimes dipped in pigments (usually red in Dongolese material) meant to improve the legibility of the markings.

Dongolese stoppers are made of fine-grained, sandy river mud with few organic inclusions. They are slightly spindle-shaped and cover the tops of handles, the rims, and the necks of the vessels. Stamps are impressed on two sides and across the tops, flattening the slightly domed upper surfaces. Stoppers of this type also tend to bear distinctive finger impressions over the handles.

One group of stoppers in the assemblage was remarkably homogeneous in appearance and could be matched to locally produced amphorae, which were also found in the same archaeological context. The tentative association between this group of stoppers and Dongolese amphorae was initially made on the basis of rim, neck, and handle impressions preserved in the dried mud.<sup>7</sup> These consistently indicate an amphora with a rim diameter of ca. 7–8 cm, handles (ca. 3 cm in width) whose upper attachments are located 1.5 cm below the rim, and a ribbed neck, c. 5.5 cm in length, sharply flared out at the shoulder. The above parameters correspond to amphorae locally produced in Dongola. In addition, one stopper contained a small piece of a rim identified as Dongolese amphora Type B, dated to the 7th–8th centuries CE.<sup>8</sup> The amphora production center in

4 DANYŠ-LASEK, "Dongola 2009: Pottery from Building I (Kom A)," pp. 321–22, 325–27; DANYŠ, "Amphorae from Building SWN.B.I in Dongola."

5 HOPE, *Malkata V*, pp. 6–7.

6 See, e.g., RUTSCHOWSCAYA, *Catalogue des bois de l'Égypte copte*, pp. 72–77.

7 JAKLEWICZ, *Zatyczki do naczyń z Cytadeli w Starej Dongoli*, pp. 56–57.

8 Katarzyna Danyš, pers. comm.

Dongola is the only identified and systematically researched kiln site south of the Third Cataract.<sup>9</sup> Its products are common among material from the Christian period throughout Upper Nubia. The content of the amphorae produced in the kilns found at Dongola was most likely wine.

The stoppers bore stamp impressions that were primarily rectangular in shape.<sup>10</sup> They were consistently ca. 3 cm in width and several centimeters in length and featured borderlines along the top, bottom or all sides. The stamps were impressed three times into the surface of the stopper: on top and on two longer sides. Several stoppers also bore impressions of small, oval signet seals (ca. 1.4 × 1.1 cm) dipped in red pigment.

The interpretation of inscriptions on stoppers from Dongola is problematic due to their fragmentary state of preservation. In most instances, we are left with only two or three Greek letters on a small fragment of the stopper; some inscriptions were also poorly impressed or obliterated. In addition, in each case the inscriptions or individual letters could have been mirrored, which multiplies interpretations. Nonetheless, the fact that the same stamp was impressed three times on each stopper aids the reading in some cases. On some stoppers the text began and/or ended with a cross. The laconic and possibly abbreviated character of the inscriptions leaves one struggling to grasp the sense of the text, but some conclusions can be drawn based on what is legible and relying on comparative material.

## 2. Toponyms on stamped amphora stoppers – Egyptian evidence versus Dongolese material

In order to grasp the meaning of the inscriptions found on Dongolese amphora stoppers one must look to a much larger group of similarly dated objects of this category excavated on sites throughout the entire Nile Valley. Close parallels, if at all present, are scarce. Only a handful of published stoppers found on Nubian and Egyptian sites bear inscriptions that are legible, complete, and possible to interpret.<sup>11</sup> Somewhat instructive in this respect are inscribed stamps in museum collections.<sup>12</sup> The archaeologically attested exchange of goods and ideas between Egypt and the Makurian capital, and more specifically the import of Egyptian wine to Dongola in the period in

9 PLUSKOTA, "Amphorae of Old Dongola," pp. 227–32.

10 A small group bore cruciform stamps (see DZIERZBICKA, "Amphora Stoppers of the 7th Century from Old Dongola"), but for the purposes of this paper I will focus on the much more numerous group of rectangular stamps.

11 Of these, particularly useful are WINLOCK & CRUM, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes*, p. 80, fig. 33; QUIBELL, *Excavations at Saqqara*, Pl. XLVII.

12 See, e.g., NACHTERGAEL, "Sceaux et timbres de bois d'Égypte I," pp. 153–70; also id., "Sceaux et timbres de bois d'Égypte III," pp. 277–93; RUTSCHOWSCAYA, *Catalogue des bois de l'Égypte copte*, pp. 72–77.

question,<sup>13</sup> permits to treat Egypt as a source of parallels in interpreting the Dongolese material.

The production and consumption of wine in the region have a long history.<sup>14</sup> After conversion to Christianity, wine was essential for liturgy in the churches and monasteries in and around Dongola. The elite and the court also apparently adopted the Mediterranean custom of wine-drinking, which boosted demand. Wine shipments from Egypt, presumably from the Aswan region, travelled up the Nile to the Makurian capital.<sup>15</sup> Local wine production soon emerged as well, offering an alternative to imports and some degree of independence from transports coming up the river. Self-sufficiency became especially crucial after the mid-8th century, when shipments from Egypt virtually ceased to arrive. This process can be traced in the development of the local amphora production workshops, which catered to the regional wine industry by producing amphorae which, notably, are modeled on Egyptian vessels that carried wine from Aswan to Dongola.<sup>16</sup> It is not to be excluded that expertise from Egypt (for instance Aswan, an important wine-making region) was also of use in the vineyards and wineries around the Makurian capital, attested in literary sources.<sup>17</sup>

The group of Dongolese stoppers with inscriptions is remarkably uniform and distinctive, which begs the question of the tradition they followed. The answer is by no means obvious; stoppers from Aswan found in the palace deposits alongside the Dongolese specimens carry round stamps with figural representations or monograms.<sup>18</sup> Some contemporary Egyptian mud stoppers bear rectangular inscriptions,<sup>19</sup> but photographs of whole stoppers show that unlike in Dongola the rectangular inscription stamps were placed vertically along the side of the stopper. As far as the layout and color are concerned, the closest parallels to the stamp impressions from Dongola were found on stoppers of Aswan amphorae imported to Nubia from the mid-4th to the mid-6th century: such an amphora found in Qasr Ibrim<sup>20</sup> had a stopper impressed with three rectangular stamps tinted with red pigment. It can therefore be considered

13 DANYs, "Amphorae from Building SWN.B.I in Dongola."

14 For wine consumption and production in Nubia, see ADAMS, "The Vintage of Nubia," pp. 262–83.

15 DANYs, "Amphorae from Building SWN.B.I in Dongola."

16 PLUSKOTA, "Amphorae of Old Dongola," pp. 227–32.

17 For instance in a description of the kingdom of Makuria by al-Ya'qûbî, dated to 872–889 CE: VANTINI, *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia*, pp. 70–71.

18 DZIERZBICKA, "Amphora Stoppers of the 7th Century from Old Dongola," pp. 162–64.

19 Primarily stoppers from the monastery of Epiphanius (WINLOCK & CRUM, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes*, p. 80, fig. 33 and pl. XXIX), Saqqara (QUIBELL, *Excavations at Saqqara*, pl. XLVII), Antinoopolis (O'CONNELL, "Catalogue of British Museum Objects," pp. 486–87) and Bawit (LYON-CAEN, "Bouchons d'amphore," pp. 66, 71–73; for a brief overview of various Egyptian amphora stoppers, see DIXNEUF, *Amphores égyptiennes*, p. 202.

20 Inv. no. 162.13, MILLS, *The Cemeteries of Qasr Ibrim*, pp. 66–67, pl. LXXXIV.

likely that wine producers in the region of Dongola followed earlier Egyptian models in their stopper-stamping practices.

Now let us turn to the meaning of the inscriptions. The markings on 7th-century stoppers from Egypt seem to identify the wine producer, estate owner or the place of the wine's origin. Even ostensibly anonymous images or pious formulas could have served as sigils of producers, although to us their meaning may be lost. Arguably the most compelling evidence of this usage was found at the monastery of Apa Jeremias in Saqqara: it is a rectangular wooden seal, which reads ΑΠΑ ΙΕΡΗΜΙΑC and matches an impression on a stopper also found on the site.<sup>21</sup> In this case the identification of the producer of the wine can also be considered an indication of its provenance. Apa Jeremias can be interpreted as "the estate of the monastery of Apa Jeremias" rather than just a name, and can thus serve as topographical information. Toponyms also appear in more explicit form on other Egyptian stoppers. A completely preserved inscription stamp on another stopper found in Saqqara<sup>22</sup> reads "Bouto,"<sup>23</sup> providing a clear attestation of the presence of toponyms in this category of epigraphic finds.

The tradition of stamping toponyms on wine amphora stoppers in Egypt goes back to the Roman period. The most evocative example of this practice is a group of wooden stamps identified by Georges Nachtergaele as belonging to the famous Appianus estate in the Fayum.<sup>24</sup> Based on information found in papyri of the Heroninos archive, Nachtergaele<sup>25</sup> deciphered the abbreviated information on the stamps and concluded that a part of them conveyed, i.e., names of villages (e.g., Theadelphia, Moithymis), as well as names of vineyards written in abbreviated form (e.g., κτή(ματος) Χαίρ(έου) – from the vineyard of Chaireas).

The study of stamps and papyri associated with the Appianus estate offers some insights into the practice of naming vineyard plots (*ktēmata*) in Egypt. The name of a *ktēma* was often derived from the name of an individual. Some vineyard-related toponyms in the mid-3rd-century-CE Heroninos archive date back more than two centuries. For instance, the abovementioned Theadelphian *ktēma* of Chaireas is attested already in the time of Augustus. There is no reason to suppose that this manner of referring to vineyards became obsolete in later centuries. Thus, two conclusions can be ventured

<sup>21</sup> QUIBELL, *Excavations at Saqqara*, pl. XLVII.13 and LV.

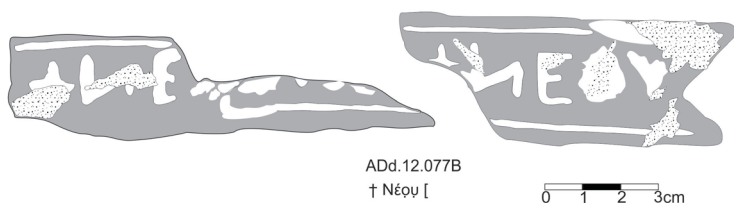
<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pl. XLVII.7.

<sup>23</sup> There are three homonymous places named Bouto listed in Trismegistos Places database (<http://www.trismegistos.org>); this one may be identifiable with the site of Tell el-Fara' in (GeoID no. 3685, Barrington Atlas 74 D2), but there is also a χωρίον Βουτώ (GeoID no. 474) attested in the Memphite nome, closer to the monastery.

<sup>24</sup> For the Appianus estate and the Heroninos Archive, see RATHBONE, *Economic Rationalism*.

<sup>25</sup> NACHTERGAEL, "Sceaux et timbres de bois d'Égypte I," pp. 153–70; *id.*, "Sceaux et timbres de bois d'Égypte III," pp. 277–93.

Figure 1. Amphora  
stopper Inv. no.  
ADd.12.077B.



for 7th-century Egypt: first, vineyards often bore the names of individuals; second, after some time in use these personal names ceased to be understood as designations of specific individuals and began to function as toponyms.

### 3. Inscriptions on Dongolese stoppers – some examples

There is little sense in re-publishing here the catalogue of inscriptions read thus far on Dongolese stoppers, all the more so that it is still a work in progress, with dozens of objects awaiting study and publication.<sup>26</sup> Instead, I offer three examples merely to illustrate the case in point.

#### 3.1.

Inv. no. ADd.12.077B [Fig. 1]

The stopper is relatively well preserved. It bears imprints of vine leaves covering the rim and handles of the amphora and two rect-

<sup>26</sup> For 26 Dongolese stoppers with rectangular inscription stamps, see DZIERZBICKA, "Amphora Stoppers of the 7th century from Old Dongola," pp. 155–62, where the three examples presented below (3.1, 3.2, and 3.3) are published respectively as cat. nos 5, 3, and 9 (with Fig. 11–3.d, b and h). All photographs and drawings in this paper are by the author.



angular impressions made with the same stamp. The inscription stamps have top and bottom border lines. Both carry traces of reddish pigment. The one on the side is upside down.

† Νέου [ (top)  
† Νε... [ (side)

In both impressions, the text is preceded by a cross. The *nu* is mirrored. The side stamp impression shows traces of at least three letters following the *epsilon*, two of which can be restituted as *omikron* and *upsilon* based on the top stamp. The third remains illegible. The stopper may have been stamped with a toponym that started with Νέος in the genitive: such toponyms are common in Egypt, where we find Νέου Ἐμβόλου χωρίον, Νέου Ἐποίκιον, Νέου Κτήματος Τόπος, etc.<sup>27</sup>

A similar naming practice for hamlets and plots could have existed in the vicinity of Dongola. It would be overly simplistic to transpose Egyptian toponomastic practices onto Nubian soil, as the Dongola region may well have had other, local practices in designating land plots. However, it is important to consider – as already mentioned above – that wine production, amphora manufacture and stopper stamping practices were likely introduced in the area with the help of specialists from Egypt, who may have also brought with them the Egyptian practice of naming newly planted vineyards in the vicinity of the Makurian capital.

### 3.2.

Inv. no. ADd.10.003 [Fig. 2]

Upper part of a stopper with a rectangular inscription stamp and a signet ring impression tinted with reddish pigment. The inscription stamp has top and bottom border lines. The inscription is complete, very clearly impressed and well preserved. The final omega is somewhat skewed, as if to fit. It begins and ends with small raised crosses.

† Αλεκω †

The word can be interpreted in several ways. It may be a personal name related to the Greek Ἀλεκᾶς or the Coptic Παλληκη, the latter being attested in a contemporary Theban ostrakon (O. Medin. Habu

27 Νέου Ἐμβόλου χωρίον: SB XVIII 13265, 1; SPP X 79, 7 (both 7th–8th c.); SPP XX 229, 6 (650–799 CE); SPP X 120v, 1–4; SPP X 60, 3 (both 8th c. CE); Νέου Ἐποίκιον: SPP X 295, 11 & 14; SPP X 296v, 5; SPP X 297, 12; SPP X 298, 1; SPP X 298v, 10 (all 7th–8th c. CE); CPR IX 75, 2 (7th c. CE); CPR XXX 1, 20 & 61 (643–644 CE); Νέου Κτήματος Τόπος: P. Lond. IV 1421, 11, 15, 23, 46, 74, 77 (705 CE); P. Lond. IV 1420, 231 (706 CE); P. Lond. IV 1422, 60, 64 (707–708 CE).



Figure 2. Amphora  
stopper Inv. no.  
ADd.10.003



ADd.10.003  
† ΑΛΕΚΩ †

Copt. 42, 7th–8th c. CE). However, in such a case the final *omega* is difficult to explain. Alternatively, we could be dealing with a female name Ἀλεκῶ in the nominative, except no such name is attested.

It is also possible to interpret this as the verb ἀλέκω, a spelling variant of ἀλέξω, “I ward off.” One would be tempted to see this as an apotropaic measure, but the rarity of the verb and the lack of parallels for protective measures of this type on stoppers make this interpretation less plausible.

Last but not least, we may be dealing with a hitherto unattested place name similar in form to several Nubian toponyms ending in o/ω, such as Emeo, Moukdakko, Pouko, etc.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.3.

Inv. no. ADd.13.052 [Fig. 3]

Upper part of stopper with a bung impression on the bottom side and a rectangular inscription stamp tinted with reddish pigment on

<sup>28</sup> Emeo: LAJTAR, “New finds of Greek epitaphs at Dongola,” no. 3, l. 15; Moukdakko: id., “Late Christian Nubia through visitors’ inscriptions from the Upper Church at Banganarti,” pp. 327–28, l. 2, cat. no. 684; Pouko: LAJTAR & VAN DER VLIET, Qasr Ibrim, no. 22, l. 10.

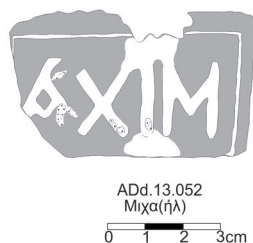


Figure 3. Amphora stopper Inv. no. ADd.13.052.

the top. The stamp has borderlines along the top, right and possibly left sides.

Μιχα(ήλ)

The mirrored inscription on the stamp reads MIXA from right to left and it seems to be complete, indicating an abbreviated form of the word. However, it cannot be excluded that the two remaining letters simply did not become impressed into the surface of the stopper.

The text on the stopper may refer to Archangel Michael, a figure very popular in inscriptions from Christian Nubia and well-attested in material from Dongola. However, here the archangel does not seem to be called upon for apotropaic reasons, as is often the case. It seems that if it were so, the occurrences of this name on stoppers would have been much more frequent.

Rather, this inscription can be interpreted like the Jeremias stopper stamps from Saqqara, where the personal name stands for the “estate/vineyard of the Monastery of Apa Jeremias.” The stamp on the stopper may, therefore, allude to a monastery or church of Archangel Michael, which may have owned a vineyard somewhere in the vicinity of Dongola.<sup>29</sup>

29 Churches of Archangel Michael are attested in Nubia, e.g., see ŁAJTAR & VAN DER VLIET, *Qasr Ibrim*, pp. 94–97 and ŁAJTAR & VAN DER VLIET, “Rich Ladies of Meinarti and Their Churches,” pp. 41, 49; the ones recorded in the inscriptions from Banganarti may well have been located in the vicinity of Dongola (ŁAJTAR, “Late Christian Nubia through Visitors’ Inscriptions from the Upper Church at Banganarti,” p. 325).

#### 4. Concluding remarks

One can suspect on the basis of finds from Egyptian sites that inscriptions on amphora stoppers are primarily identifiers of wine-producing estates. They seem to feature mainly toponyms, sometimes ones derived from personal names (plots named after their current or past owners, monastic and ecclesiastical estates referred to by the name of their holy patron, etc.). Such an interpretation can also be adopted for the inscriptions on Dongolese stoppers. Toponyms and personal names identifying vineyard estates on other fragmentary inscriptions are not immediately recognizable, but this seems to be due to our still limited knowledge of toponyms and personal names occurring in Dongola and vicinity.

In sum, stamped vessel stoppers from 7th-century contexts excavated in Dongola seem to bear the names of localities in which the wine was produced, as attested on contemporary stoppers from Egypt. Personal names on Dongolese stoppers, in addition to being names of individuals in the strict sense (possibly owners/producers of the wine), can be interpreted in two ways: 1) as designations of landed property belonging to a church or monastery (as in the case of the monastery of Apa Jeremias in Saqqara); 2) as names of vineyards (as in the case of the *ktēma* of Chaireas).

More data is needed in order to make sense of the plethora of inscriptions on stoppers found in Dongola. New, more complete objects may provide parallels to help with the reading of the inscriptions. As more information becomes available, the locally produced stoppers could serve as source material for the study of toponyms and ultimately even help in tracing local patterns of land tenure.

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