

# Stamps on Terra Sigillata Found in Excavations of the Theatre of Aptera, Crete

Martha W. Baldwin Bowsky



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## Introduction

The ancient city and archaeological site of Aptera lies on a low hill above the Bay of Souda in northwestern Crete. The city's *chora* included not only two ports at Minoa and Apteraian Kissamos – one on each side of the entrance to the bay – but a fertile hinterland along the Pyktos River to the east and at the foot of the White Mountains to the south.<sup>1</sup> The city was founded in the 8th century BCE; a Hellenistic *floruit* began in the 4th century BCE.<sup>2</sup> A new period of prosperity can be dated to the 1st-2nd centuries – just when Italian sigillata was produced, distributed and consumed – and also the 3rd century, before the catastrophic earthquake of 365 destroyed many monuments.<sup>3</sup> The site continued to be occupied, albeit to a limited extent and with fewer signs of prosperity, until the 7th century; it was finally abandoned until the construction – utilising many of the *disiecta membra* of the ancient city – of the 11th century Monastery of St. John the Theologian at a central point in the ancient urban fabric, possibly the agora.<sup>4</sup>

The first publication of stamps on terra sigillata from Aptera included 40 stamps, 28 of them found in excavations of the theatre at Aptera in 2008-2009.<sup>5</sup> There a brief introduction to the city of Aptera and its monuments presented information on phenomena of the 1st-2nd centuries: a heroön at the main western entrance to the city; two baths (Bath I and the Roman Bath Complex) supplied with water from two cisterns (the gamma-shaped and tripartite cisterns, respectively); a peristyle villa; and the Greco-Roman theatre.<sup>6</sup> More recent excavations have continued to explore the main western entrance to the city with its paved road and gate into the city as well as a fortified tower by the entrance and part of the eastern fortification wall of the city; entire stretches of the 3480 m long city wall enclosing the hill on which the city was built are now visible.<sup>7</sup> Renewed excavations in the peristyle villa northwest of the theatre revealed the *fauces* and *atrium* as well as the peristyle of the villa and ancillary areas.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Baldwin Bowsky and Niniou-Kindeli 2006: 412-15; Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 127.

<sup>2</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 127.

<sup>3</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 128.

<sup>4</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 128.

<sup>5</sup> Baldwin Bowsky 2014: 531-35, nos 2, 4-6, 8; 537-49, nos 10-13 and 16-17; 542-43, nos 19-20; 545-54, nos 23-30, 33-35, 37-40; see Appendix 1.

<sup>6</sup> Baldwin Bowsky 2014: 504-06; see now Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 127-29.

<sup>7</sup> Tzigounaki, Niniou-Kindeli, Binaki, Flevari, Chatzidaki, Chatzidakis, Manganas, Bountrogianni, Grammatikaki, and Lingeridou 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Niniou-Kindeli forthcoming 1.

STAMPS ON TERRA SIGILLATA FOUND IN EXCAVATIONS OF THE THEATRE OF APTERA, CRETE

**Crete**

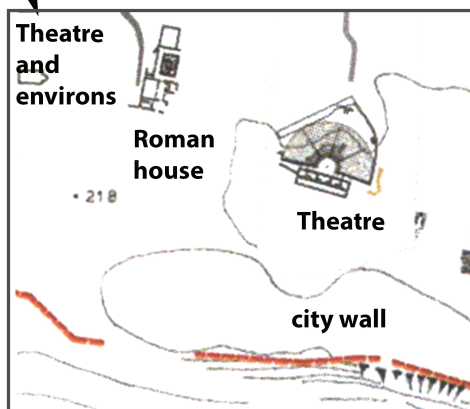
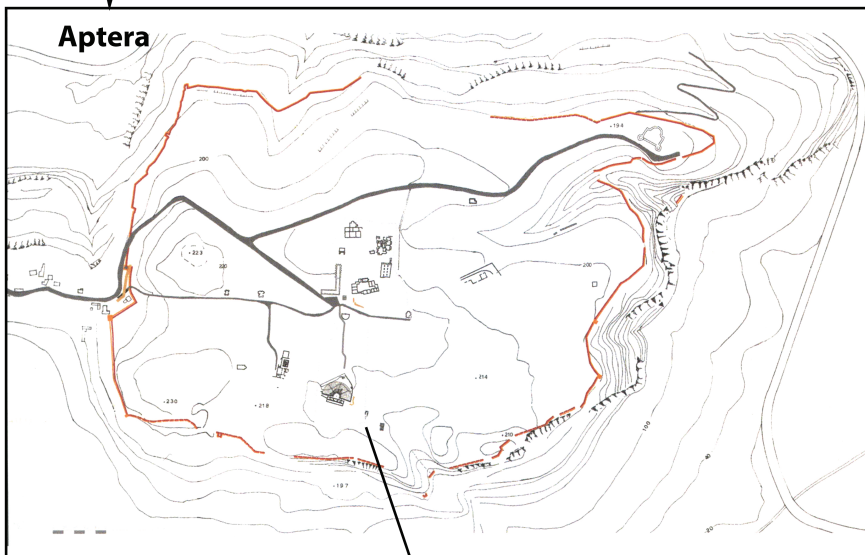
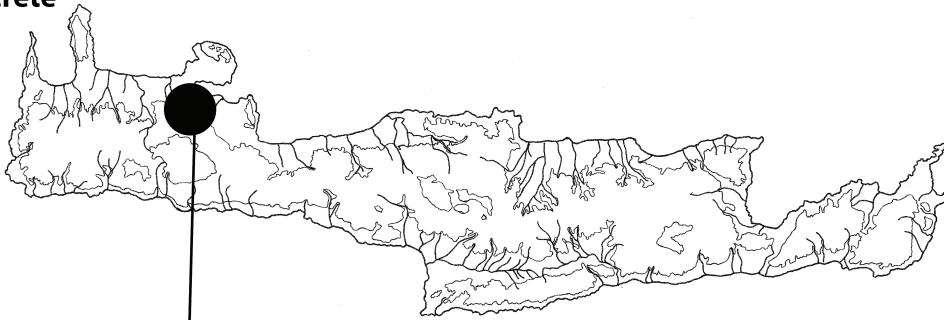


Figure 1. Crete, Aptera, and Aptera's theatre quarter

Many, many more stamps on terra sigillata came to light when excavations of the theatre at Aptera resumed in 2012-15. Preliminary reports of these excavations showed a rounded *koilon* characterized by five radiating staircases and 26 rows of seats, of which the upper rows are not preserved.<sup>9</sup> Another preliminary report shows that the street east of the *koilon* had been excavated up to and including one of these staircases.<sup>10</sup> Further excavation revealed that the eastern street swung to the northwest where the *koilon* was not rounded but interrupted and buttressed by a long, rectangular 'stepped construction' – of Hellenistic date but later than the theatre itself – on its northern side; this construction terminated above the western *parodos* of the theatre.<sup>11</sup>

By now 258 stamps on terra sigillata – Italian and Eastern – have been found in excavations of the theatre and its immediate environs, nearly a nine-fold increase over what was known before 2012. This surprisingly large number is evidence of a correspondingly large number of vessels, a number not likely to be only from the theatre itself but also from the area around the theatre (Figure 1). Roughly four-fifths of the stamped sherds found in excavations of the theatre come from layers that are not closed. West of Aptera's theatre lay an upscale residential area, one that included the Roman villa being excavated by V. Niniou-Kindeli, where yet more stamped sherds of Italian sigillata have been discovered.<sup>12</sup> It is tempting to compare the area to the east of the theatre with that east of Corinth's theatre, where a road ran between the theatre and buildings, which included two food shops catering to theatre goers.<sup>13</sup> A large temple is known to have lain east of the theatre at Aptera,<sup>14</sup> but the area to the immediate east of the east street there has not been excavated. To the south of the theatre no structures were located between it and the city wall, some 100 m away.<sup>15</sup> The area to the north of the theatre and the stepped construction perhaps connected with a shrine, the *prytaneion* of the city, or both – remains unexcavated.<sup>16</sup>

Ancient and modern interventions brought pottery of several types and dates into the theatre of Aptera, waiting to be found in 21st-century excavations. Since the mid 4th-century earthquake that destroyed the theatre – from the Byzantine period onward and particularly in the 19th-20th century – agricultural interventions and a limekiln constructed in the midst of the *koilon* obscured and even destroyed parts of the theatre.<sup>17</sup> In the mid 1st century the Hellenistic theatre – originally constructed in the first half of the 3rd century BCE – was rebuilt after a destructive earthquake<sup>18</sup> and took the form known as its first Roman phase.<sup>19</sup> During remodelling to serve new spectator needs, the *koilon* was made much steeper than in the Hellenistic theatre and acquired its final form; the floor of the orchestra was lowered; the stage acquired a new, more impressive appearance, and the *parodoi* also acquired their final

<sup>9</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2012: 548.

<sup>10</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 130, Figure 10.4.

<sup>11</sup> Tzigounaki, Niniou-Kindeli, Flevari, Chatzidaki, Chatzidakis, Vasilakopoulou, Karadimos, Chrysanthakopoulou, Lytra, Kanellakis, and Bountrogianni 2015: 105, Figure 1; Niniou-Kindeli forthcoming 2.

<sup>12</sup> Niniou-Kindeli forthcoming 1; Baldwin Bowsky forthcoming 1.

<sup>13</sup> Williams and Zervos 1986: 146-48.

<sup>14</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 152.

<sup>15</sup> V. Niniou-Kindeli, pers. comm.

<sup>16</sup> V. Niniou-Kindeli, pers. comm.; Niniou-Kindeli forthcoming 2.

<sup>17</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 143-44.

<sup>18</sup> Most likely the one that struck the island in 66 (Ambraseys 2009: 117-18).

<sup>19</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 150-51.

form.<sup>20</sup> Inside the *skenion*, pottery included plates and bowls of Italian sigillata, as well as other pottery types.<sup>21</sup> In the west *parodos*, Roman pottery included mostly everyday items but also Italian sigillata.<sup>22</sup> In the 2nd century another earthquake struck the theatre, necessitating repairs; blocks from the *koilon* retaining wall were not cleared from the east street, which was abandoned.<sup>23</sup> Before its ancient destruction in the mid 4th century, the theatre was remodelled again in the 3rd century and took the shape known as its second Roman phase.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 161.

<sup>21</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 145.

<sup>22</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 144.

<sup>23</sup> V. Niniou-Kindeli, pers. comm.

<sup>24</sup> Niniou-Kindeli and Chatzidakis 2016: 151.