

## COMMERCIAL LINKS BETWEEN THE WESTERN BLACK SEA AND WESTERN ASIA MINOR – 4<sup>TH</sup> – 6<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES AD

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### Abstract

An impressive number of lead seals was discovered in Dobroudja, which spans a time period of roughly twelve centuries and covers a variety of functions (commercial, private, imperial etc.). There are over 150 commercial lead seals coming from western Asia Minor, a good indicator of an extensive trade between these two regions, especially in the Late Roman period. In this paper we analyse the Late Roman commercial lead seals based on the provenance, also creating a stylistic classification and briefly discuss the merchandise that those seals might have accompanied.

**Key words:** sigillography, trade, Late Roman, Asia Minor, Dobroudja.

Bordering the western shore of the Black Sea, at the fringes of the Roman Empire, the provinces of Scythia Minor and Moesia Secunda held a special place in the defensive system of the Danube. The important number of troops deployed on this frontier, made this lands a significant place also for commerce, both state and private controlled. This fact is proved, among other finds, by the high number of lead seals discovered all over their territory.

Out of the 620 seals found in Dobroudja until present day, 200 (around one third) are commercial seals and 420 are imperial and private seals. Of these 420, 24 bear the name of an emperor and 396 are private seals, belonging to different employees in the imperial and provincial administration.

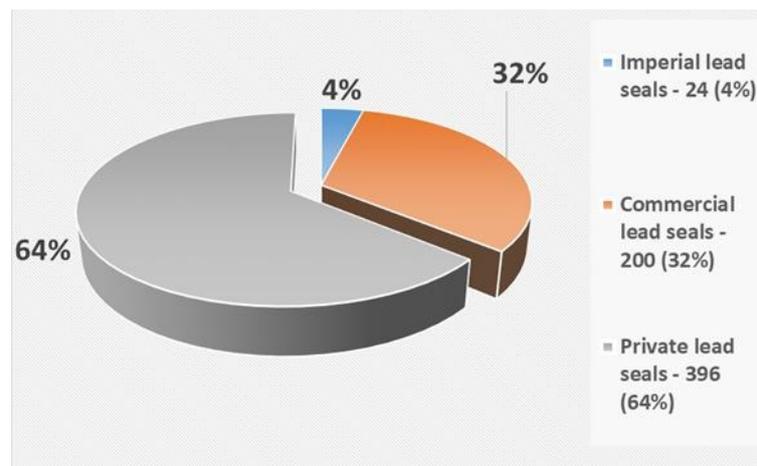


Fig 1 – Chart with the distribution of seals found in Dobroudja according to their type

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Fig. 2 – Distribution of lead seals (numbers and percentages) found in Dobroudja according to their type

Commercial seals appeared to be in use on the Lower Danube beginning with the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and were used on a large scale between the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries. The use of commercial lead seals ceases, at least for this region, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

We can split commercial lead seals into two distinct categories: private seals belonging to cities or individuals (manufacturers or merchants) and imperial seals used for products under imperial monopoly or from imperial-held workshops.

The 179 private commercial seals, dating roughly between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century, were discovered in – or, near the following cities: Tomis (Knechtel 1915 no. 28–35, 37–40; Metaxa 1915 no. 1a; Barnea 1992 no. 3, 4 and 6; Paraschiv-Grigore 2011 no. 9), Altinum (Barnea 1990 no. 3), Noviodunum (Barnea 1975 no. 1; Barnea 1985 no. 4; Barnea 1990 no. 4; Barnea 1995 no. 6; Barnea 1996 no. 3), Sucidava (Culică 1975), Durostorum (Barnea 1966 no. 6; Barnea 1982 no. 2), Cius (Chiriac, Ungureanu 2004 236-238, fig. 4.a-b), Halmyris (Chiriac, Munteanu 2015 no. 8) and Ibida (Chiriac, Munteanu 2015 no. 5); another one comes from the vicinity of Călărași (Bănescu 1938C, no. 7) and ten seals are provenance unknown (Barnea 1969, no. 1–10).

Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to establish the issuer or area of origin for all the seals, due to the discovery circumstances or conservation/deterioration conditions, or the quality of the execution. Only 64 out of 179 seals have been identified bearing information on the issuer or origin, which makes them extremely valuable. The rest are generally anepigraphic or illegible.

Out of those 64 seals, 63 were issued by different cities and one by the monastery (Lavra) of Saint Euthymios the Great near Jerusalem (for more details on the monastery, see Vailhé 1909 140.), as it is known that the monasteries were part of the economic network. The importance of the seals is even greater if we take a look at the variety and the distance covered by the merchandise at the time.

The 63 city seals come from Adramytteion – 1 (Culică 1975, 255, no. 126; Culică 1976, pl. X.117; Culică 1979, 148, fig.5; Still 1995, 330, no. 0361; Chiriac, Munteanu 2014, 309, no. 1), Antandros – 1 (Culică 1975, 255, no. 117; Culică 1976, pl. X.117; Culică 1979, 148, fig. 5; Still 1995, 330, no. 0362; Chiriac, Munteanu 2014, 309, no. 2), Assos – 1 (Barnea 1995, no. 6; Barnea 1997, 354; Chiriac, Munteanu 2014, 309, no. 3), Chersonesus - 2 (Barnea 1966, no. 6; Barnea 1996, no. 3), Dios Hieron - 1 (Chiriac, Munteanu 2015, no. 1), Ephesus - 9 (Barnea 1969, no. 7; Culică 1975, no. 57; Barnea 1982, no. 2; Chiriac, Munteanu 2015, no. 2-4), Hypaipa - 6 (Chiriac, Munteanu 2015, no. 5-6), Hyperechion - 1

(Barnea 1969, no. 9.), Klazomenai - 1 (Chiriac, Munteanu 2015, no. 7), Koloë - 3 (Barnea 1969, no. 4-6), Laodikeia – 1 (Culică 1975, no. 62.), Maiandropoulis – 1 (Barnea 1992, no. 3), Magnesia – 1 (Culică 1975, no. 61), Metropolis - 4 (Barnea 1969, no. 8), Pergamon - 1 (Barnea 1985, no. 4), Sionia – 1 (Culică 1975, no. 63; Chiriac, Munteanu 2014, 317, no. 55), Smyrna - 17 (Barnea 1969, no. 1-3; Culică 1975, no. 49-56 and 116; Barnea 1996, no. 2; Paraschiv-Grigore 2013, no. 9 and other 4 unpublished), Thyaira – 1 (Barnea 1992, no. 4), Tralleis - 2 (Chiriac, Munteanu 2015, no. 8-9) and the province of Pamphylia - 8 (Barnea 1990, no. 3).

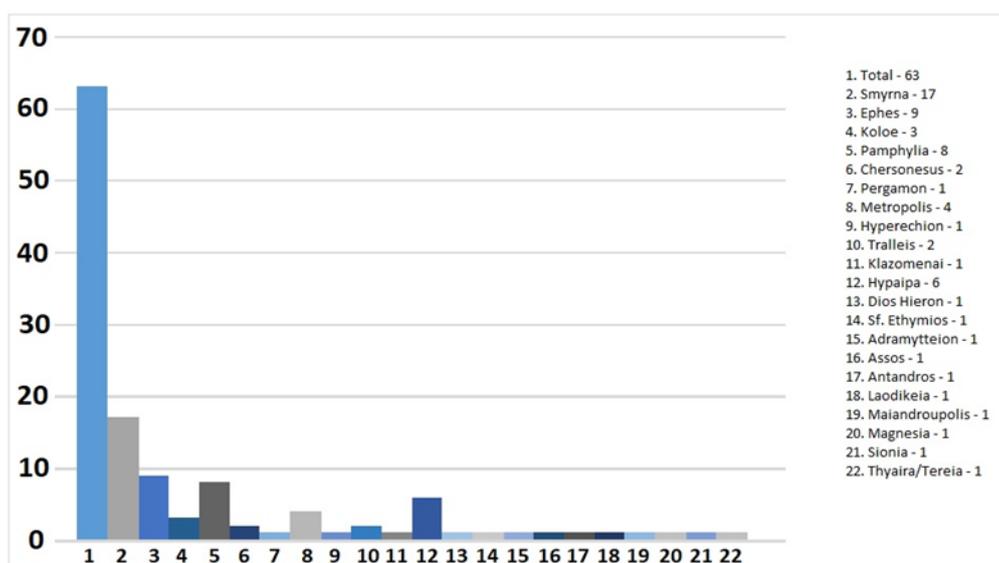
<i>Sucidava</i> (Izvoarele)	<i>Adramytteion</i> <i>Antandros</i> <i>Dios Hieron</i> <i>Ephesos</i> <i>Hypaipa</i> <i>Klazomenai</i> <i>Laodikea</i> <i>Magnesia</i> <i>Smyrna</i> <i>Tralleis</i> <i>Pamphylia</i> <i>Metropolis (?)</i> <i>Sionia (?)</i>
<i>Altinum</i> (Oltina)	<i>Pamphylia</i>
<i>Noviodunum</i> (Isaccea)	<i>Assos</i> <i>Pergamon</i>
<i>Durostorum</i> (Siliștra)	<i>Ephesos</i>
<i>Tomis</i> (Constanța)	<i>Ephesos</i> <i>Koloe</i> <i>Maiandroupolis</i> <i>Metropolis</i> <i>Smyrna</i> <i>Pamphylia</i> <i>Thyaira</i>
<i>Cius</i> (Gârliciu)	<i>Smyrna</i>
<i>Halmyris</i> (Murighiol)	<i>Tralleis</i>
<i>(L)Ibida</i> (Slava Rusă)	<i>Hypaipa</i>

Looking at the distribution maps of these seals, one can notice some interesting facts. First, we can see that, at least for Dobroudja, all the seals are found in cities along the Danube or on the sea shore, the apparent exceptions being Halmyris – which was most probably still a harbour back then – and Ibida, which is situated in a dessicated river valley (that flowed directly into the Black Sea). We have no seals in the interior cities (Pl. 1, Fig. 1). Second, while it is obvious for the seals to be found where the merchandise is unsealed – and we can see that all the cities mentioned above are possible commercial hubs – the highest number of seals comes from Sucidava and Tomis. The lack of discoveries in other well-documented stations along the Danube can be explained either by being a gap in the archaeological research, either the lead seals were melted for reuse. We must mention, in this regard, the discovery of hundreds of lead discs at Sucidava, intended for counterfeiting bronze coins, dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Culică 1972; there were 23 ready-made false coins).

While the discovery of seals in Tomis raises no questions, as it was the main city-port of the province, the unusual high number of seals from Sucidava may point to the existence there of an important trade hub, probably one of the two trade-points established in 369, for the gothic populations north of the Danube, after the end of the war. Although not named by the sources, most likely those points were Sucidava and Noviodunum, and even if from Noviodunum we have only five seals, we have to take into consideration that part of it – that is the harbour - is now underwater.

Third, the high number of seals issued by cities from Asia Minor, along with other archaeological finds, points to this region as the main trade direction, at least for the 5<sup>th</sup> to the end of 6<sup>th</sup> century. These trade routes followed a long standing tradition of contacts between the two regions, connected not only by the exchange of goods, but also of ideas. Literal and archaeological evidence show not only a significant number of foreigners coming from Asia Minor to live and trade here, but also christian martyrs that ended their life on Dobroudjan territory.

Fig. 3 – Chart with the distribution of the seals according to the issuing city



Since the highest number of seals come from Smyrna, Ephesus, Hypaepa and Pamphylia, we chose these for a more detailed analysis.

Looking at the 23<sup>1</sup> seals issued by the city of Smyrna, 17 of which come from Dobroudja and six from other parts of Europe, we found five different types of legends (Pl. 2). The seals were found at Sucidava (10), Tomis (7), Arzus, Bulgaria (4), Lugdunum, France (1) and Ickham, England (1 - Still 1994, 347-348). All the seals have on the obverse a simple metric legend, on two rows. Some of the seals are printed backwards. The reverse is blank. Generally, the seals have a conic section and a tiny central thread channel.

The first type of legend (A) can be found on ten seals, and has six letters on two rows, forming the issuer's name. Five matrices were identified for this type.

The second type (B) is found on two seals, and is similar to the A type, except for the last letter on each of the two rows. Two different matrices were used.

The third type (C) is found on three seals, the legend being imprinted backwards and the reading beginning with the second row. Two different matrices.

<sup>1</sup> Three seals from Tomis were omitted in this analysis due to problems identifying their present location.

The fourth type (D) is found on only one seal, the one coming from Arzus, and it is written 'in the mirror', the reading beginning with the last letter of the second row. The legend is distributed on two rows, four letters on the first and two on the second.

The fifth type (E) is found on a seal from Tomis, and the legend has two rows with only two letters, but there is the possibility of the seal being incomplete.

The nine seals from Ephesus<sup>2</sup> were discovered at Sucidava – 4, Durostorum – 4 and Tomis – 1.

There are three types of legend, each one on two rows (Pl. 3).

The first type (A) can be found on four seals, has five letters on two rows, forming the issuer's name. Four matrices were identified for this type.

The second type (B) is found on four seals, has seven letters on two rows, forming the issuer's name. Four different matrices were used.

The third type (C) is found on a seal from Durostorum, the legend has two rows with only four letters, but the seal might be incomplete.

From Hypaepa, we have six seals<sup>3</sup>, five from Sucidava and one from Ibida, with a similar metric legend, on two rows. There are three types of legend (Pl. 1, Fig. 2).

The first type (A) can be found on three seals, has six letters on two rows, forming the issuer's name. Two matrices were identified for this type.

The second type (B) is found on two seals, has seven letters on two rows, forming the issuer's name. Two different matrices were used.

The third type (C) is found on a seal from Sucidava, and the legend has two rows with only two letters, but the seal might be incomplete.

Of the twelve seals issued in Pamphylia<sup>4</sup>, eight were discovered in Dobroudja and four in other parts of Europe. We can differentiate five different types of legends (Pl. 4).

The first type (A) can be found on two seals, has five letters, forming the issuer's name. One matrix was identified for this type.

The second type (B) is found on one seal, and has seven letters on three rows.

The third type (C) is found on one seal, the legend is on one side of the image.

The fourth type (D) is found on three seals, the legend is on one side of the image. Three different matrices were used.

The fifth type (E) is found on a seal from Sucidava, and the legend has three rows with eight letters and is written with latin characters.

All these different matrices mean different producers, workshops or traders, that were entitled to use the city stamp, so we are looking at quite a variety, and the fact that similar or identical matrices can be found on multiple sites, points that it might be the same trader or workshop that operates in a certain time period, maybe even in the same time.

Unfortunately, the lack of archaeological context makes it almost impossible to differentiate such fine details such as the time frame for each matrix.

In what concerns the goods that these seals accompanied, by looking at the provenance of the seals, we can see that almost all come from an area famous for its

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<sup>2</sup> Three seals from Tomis were omitted in this analysis due to problems identifying their present location.

<sup>3</sup> Three seals from Tomis were omitted in this analysis due to problems identifying their present location.

<sup>4</sup> Three seals from Tomis were omitted in this analysis due to problems identifying their present location.

textile production (Pl. 5). So famous, in fact, that even Arachne is said to be born in Hypaepa.

The large scale production and the quality of textiles coming from this region is probably the reason behind a decree from 377 (CodTh7.6.3) which provides that Asia province was submitted to an annual vestis collatio and also to a military adheratio vestis in 423 (CodTh7.6.5).

Two seals from Sucidava and Durostorum with textile impression on the obverse and the shiploads of clothes that Themistios said were transferred across the Danube are strong evidence that textiles were one of the main merchandises exchanged between Asia and the Lower Danube (Or.X.135-136). Another seal from Smyrna discovered in Kalugerovo – Arzus, also has textile impression on the obverse. Also, Laodicea (ad Lycum) is mentioned in the Edict on Maximum Prices issued by Diocletian with some wool products. Leather goods might have been another commodity, according to the same price edict. The pellis Tralliana, even if it just means the colour or type of leather, was most likely made in the city of Tralleis (probably the one on Meander river). Also, there is no doubt that grains and olive oil were one of the main products sent to the Lower Danube, for all types of trade, be it state or private owned. And also, wine, olives and fish products.

For other possible traded goods, we can look at the great mosaic building on the shores of Tomis. Discovered in 1959, the warehouses and shops of this building sheltered enormous quantities of merchandise, among which over 120 amphorae, marble weights, iron ore, clay lamp moulds, metal anchors etc. and also a huge quantity of table pottery, partly stamped, made somewhere in Asia Minor (Rădulescu 1973; Papuc 1973). Also, various pottery workshops have been identified in western Asia Minor, like in the Troad, Pergamon, Ephesos, Knidos). Indeed, the prevalent imported table pottery in Scythia is the micro-asian one.

The amphorae in Tomis were filled with various goods, from metal nails to different resins like styrax, colophonium, turpentine, mastix, pine resin etc. Some of these resins were without a doubt produced in western Asia Minor.

We must not forget the almost traditional trade with the north danubian people. All kinds of goods were traded, according to the sources. The reduction of the trading points to just two after 369, slowed down the pace, but did not stop the exchange of goods. In fact, after a drop at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup>, the amount of small roman coinage increases north of Danube, with a peak in the times of Justinian and Justin II (Suceveanu, Barnea 1991, Gândilă 2009), which means that the trade with Barbaricum got a new kick in that period. We can just assume that the western Asia Minor traders were taking full advantage of this kind of trade, as their seals might point out.

As for the trading routes, the extensive network of roads in Scythia and Moesia II is well known and studied. For the regular merchandise, the gateway to the province was most likely Tomis. Inscriptions naming foreigners (Barnea 1972), huge number of amphorae of different types, the large mosaic building, the seals, all point to the fact that the products arrived here by sea, and were distributed inland by road or by the Danube. There is even a seafaring route mentioned in Diocletian's Edict on Prices, which departs from Byzantium to Amastris, Sinope and then Tomis.

For the annona, we know from Zosimus that the distribution way was through the Black Sea, then to the mouths of the Danube and transported upstream to the cities there. Most likely that a good part of the civilian merchandise followed the same route, that was probably safer and cheaper.

### **Conclusion**

The intensification of the trade between the Lower Danube and Asia Minor seems to begin with the rise of Constantinople and shows a peak (Gândilă 2009) shortly after the creation of the *quaestura Iustiniani exercitus*, in 536.

Nevertheless, in most cases it is hard to distinguish between the provisioning of the frontier troops and the “real” merchandise, especially that from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards we see a progressive standardisation of the containers used for transport. But we cannot ignore an interesting fact: almost all of the commercial seals discovered in Dobroudja come from areas adjacent to the provinces included in the *quaestura exercitus*. This, in our opinion, could be strong evidence in dating the seals in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, after the creation of the *quaestura*.

If this is true, that leaves us with some questions. Does the lack of seals from the provinces of Caria, Insulae and Cyprus mean that these regions could not support or were not entitled to other forms of trade besides that imposed by the state? Does the presence of seals from the surrounding areas mean that the neighbouring provinces were taking advantage of the *annona* distribution routes to sell their products? Or is it that their goods were complementary products needed by the troops? Then how about the ubiquitous LR 1 and LR 2 amphorae?

We cannot provide an answer to these questions. Yet. But we hope that the publication of all the seals – at least for the Lower Danube provinces – and adding into equation other traded goods, such as pottery – especially amphorae – can shed more light over this interesting subject.

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### **Explanation of the plates**

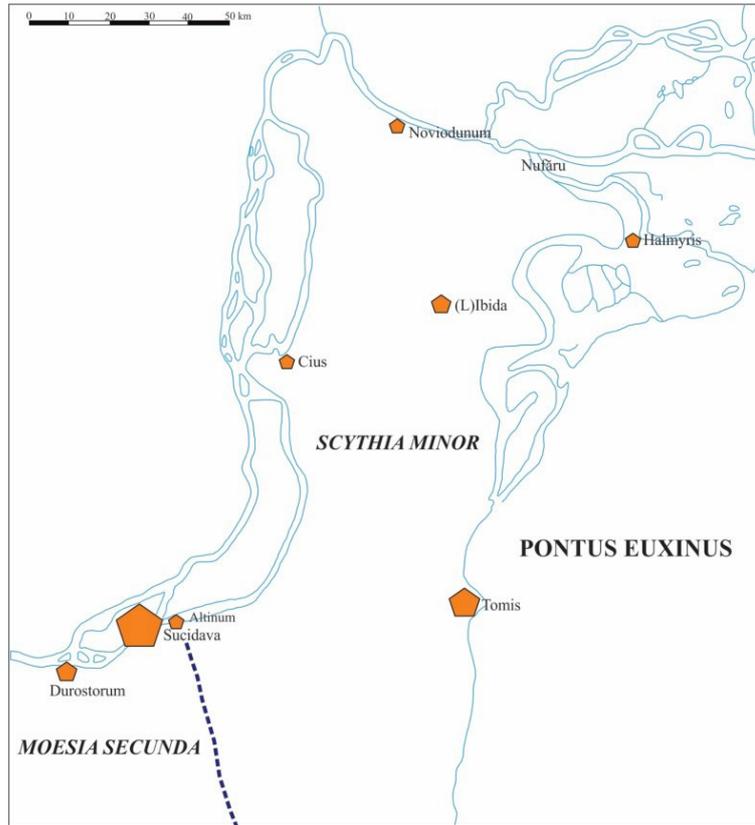
Plate 1 – Fig. 1 - Map of finding places of the seals; Fig. 2 - Lead seals from Hypaepa.  
*Planșa 1 – Fig. 1 – Harta cu locurile de descoperire ale sigiliilor; Fig. 2 – Sigilii de plumb de la Hypaepa.*

Plate 2 – Lead seals from Smyrna.  
*Planșa 2 – Sigilii de plumb din Smyrna.*

Plate 3 – Lead seals from Ephesus.  
*Planșa 3 – Sigilii de plumb din Ephesus.*

Plate 4 – Lead seals from Pamphylia.  
*Plate 4 – Sigilii de plumb din Pamphylia.*

Plate 5 – Map of the provenance of the seals.  
*Planșa 5 – Harta cu proveniența sigiliilor.*



1.

Type	Matrix	Legend	Drawing
<b>A</b>	a1	ΥΠΑ ΙΠΑ (Η)υραίρα Нυраіра	
	a2	ΥΠΑ ΙΠΑ (Η)υραίρα Нυраіра	
<b>B</b>	b1	ΥΠΑ ΙΠΗΑ (Η)υραίρα Нυраіра	
	b2	ΥΠΑ [Ι]ΠΗΑ (Η)υραίρα Нυраіра	
<b>C</b>	c1	[Υ]ΠΑ (Η)[υ]ρα(ίρα) Нυраіра	

2.

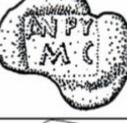
Type	Matrix	Legend	Drawing
<b>A</b>	a1	CMY PNA Smyrna	
	a2	CMY PNA Smyrna	
	a3	CMY PNA Smyrna	
	a4	CMY PNA Smyrna	
	a5	CMY PNA Smyrna	
<b>B</b>	b1	CMV PNA Smyrna	
	b2	CMV PNA Smyrna	
<b>C</b>	c1	PNA CMY Smyrna	
	c2	PNA CMY Smyrna	
<b>D</b>	d1	ANPY MC Smyrna	
<b>E</b>	e1	CM PN Sm(y)rn(a)	

Plate 2

Type	Matrix	Legend	Drawing
<b>A</b>	a1	EΦE CI Ephesos	
	a2	EΦE CI Ephesos	
	a3	EΦE CI Ephesos	
	a4	EΦE CI Ephesos	
<b>B</b>	b1	EΦE CIΩN Ephesos	
	b2	EΦE CIΩN Ephesos	
	b3	EΦE CIΩN Ephesos	
	b4	EΦE CIΩN Ephesos	
<b>C</b>	c1	EΦ[E] CI[ΩN] Ephesos	

Plate 3

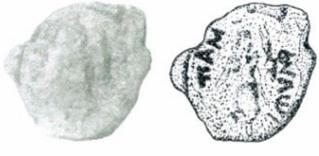
Type	Matrix	Legend	Drawing
A	a1	ΠΑΜΦΥ Lion walking right Pamphylia	
B	b1	ΠΑΜ ΦΥΛ ●Α● Pamphylia	
C	c1	ΠΑΜΦΥ – ΛΙΑC Female bust turned to right, in a chiton, secured by a “Zwiebelknopffibel” on her right shoulder Pamphylia	
D	d1	[ΠΑΜ] – ΦΥΛΩΝ Female figure standing front, holding cornucopiae (?) in left hand and patera (?) in right hand Pamphylia	
	d2	ΠΑΜ – [ΦΥΛ]ΩΝ Female figure standing front, holding cornucopiae (?) in left hand and patera (?) in right hand Pamphylia	
	d3	ΠΑΜ – ΦΥΛΩΝ Female figure standing front, holding cornucopiae (?) in left hand and patera (?) in right hand Pamphylia	
E	e1	PAM FY L[IA] Palm branch in the field Pamphylia	

Plate 4

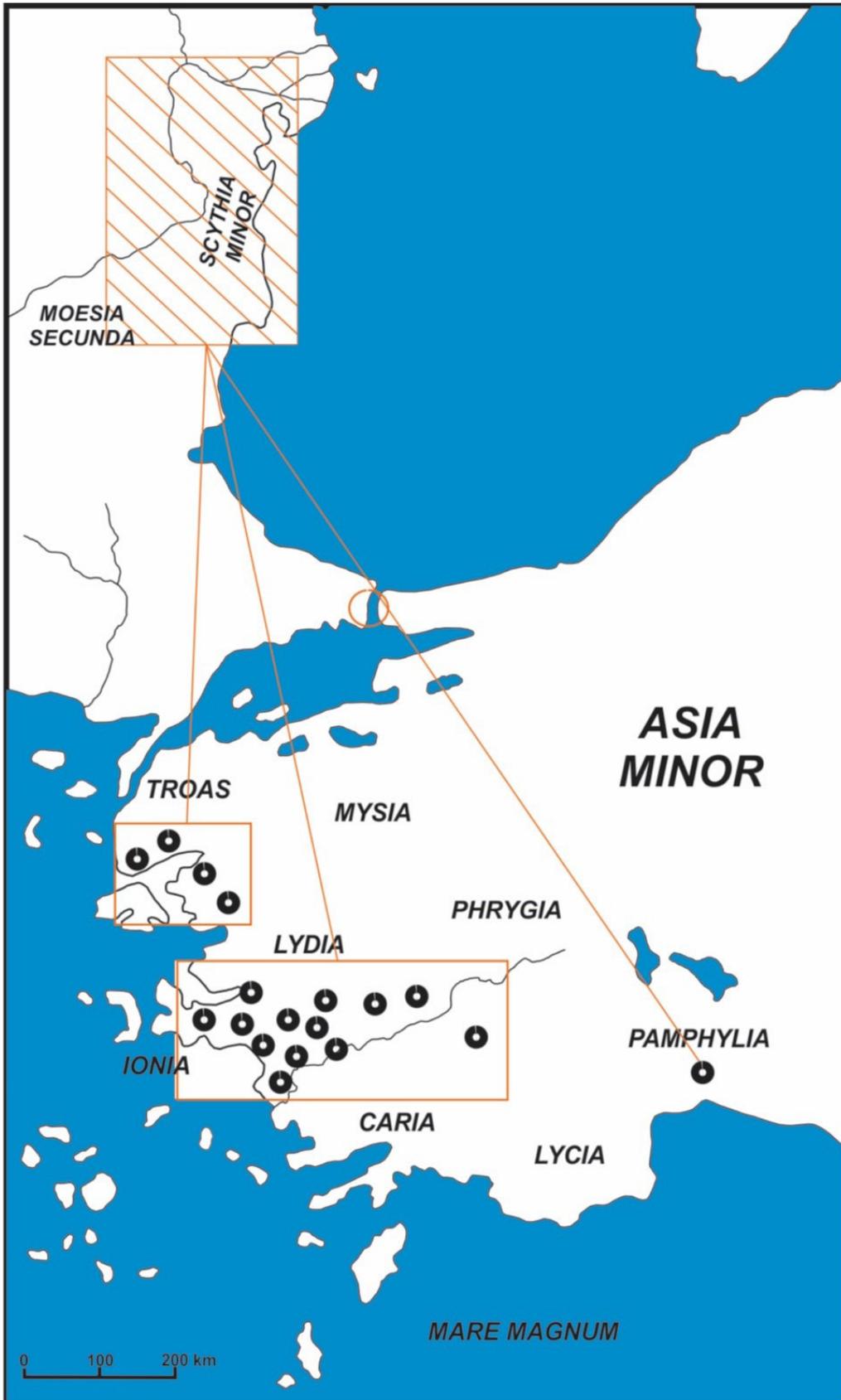


Plate 5