

EPHEMERIS NAPOCENSIS

XXIV
2017



EDITURA ACADEMIEI ROMÂNE

EPHEMERIS NAPOCENSIS

XXVII

2017

ROMANIAN ACADEMY
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În țară revista se poate procura prin poștă, pe bază de abonament la: EDITURA ACADEMIEI ROMÂNE, Calea 13 Septembrie nr. 13, sector 5, P. O. Box 5–42, București, România, RO–76117, Tel. 021–411.90.08, 021–410.32.00; fax. 021–410.39.83; RODIPET SA, Piața Presei Libere nr. 1, Sector 1, P. O. Box 33–57, Fax 021–222.64.07. Tel. 021–618.51.03, 021–222.41.26, București, România; ORION PRESS IMPEX 2000, P. O. Box 77–19, București 3 – România, Tel. 021–301.87.86, 021–335.02.96.

EPHEMERIS NAPOCENSIS

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DTP și tipar: MEGA PRINT
Coperta: Roxana Sfârlea



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Calea 13 Septembrie nr. 13, Sector 5, București 76117
Telefon 021–410.38.46; 021–410.32.00/2107, 2119

ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ
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EDITURA ACADEMIEI ROMÂNE

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STORAGE VESSELS OR CHAMBER POTS?

Angelina Raičković Savić¹, Ana Bogdanović²

Abstract: *During the past decades, researchers have directed their attention to some previously neglected topics. One of these deals with hygiene maintenance in ancient times.³ In accordance with that trend, some ceramic vessels that, until recently, were considered and classified as for storage purposes, are now interpreted as chamber pots and hygiene maintenance pots. This paper presents the prevalence of these pottery in Viminacium, striving to supplement the current interpretations and change some of them.*

Keywords: *Viminacium, ceramics, pot, chamber pot, typology, hygiene, Roman period.*

Introduction

The decades of exploring Viminacium have enabled the creation of numerous and various typologies of the ceramic vessels discovered in its area. Particularly interesting to researchers were the utensils that, for years, were considered deep pots for food storage, but are now classified by many authors⁴ as chamber pots.

Until now, more than 350 vessels with this shape have been found in the region of Viminacium. Direct analogies with the Viminacium ceramics can be found in the Danube region, the Rhine provinces, Gaul, and sites throughout the Mediterranean.⁵ Due to the conditions of the findings, they were dated to the period from the first to the middle of the third century. Despite the new opinions, we consider that not all of those wares can be classified as chamber pots, and that their multipurpose usage should not be excluded.⁶ One of the confirmed functions is for storage, because they were found in silos with the remains of cereals,⁷ another is for storing water, since they were found in and around wells and water supplies,⁸ then that they were used as urns,⁹ and there is yet another assumption that they were located in toilets as the vessels for storing the long handled sponge that was used for hygiene maintenance.

In the Roman period, apart from the facilities that were used for hygiene maintenance, such as public and private toilets,¹⁰ there were portable, mobile items that functioned as chamber

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³ SCOBIE 1986, 400, et al.

⁴ B. PETZNEK, S. RADBAUER, N. SAVIĆ, PASQUALINI, ET AL. 2014.

⁵ See map of this type's prevalence according to current research in: PETZNEK, 42.

⁶ According to the conditions of findings, they deviate from the given schemes for the location of the sites of the containers with this shape, whereas according to their numbers in Viminacium, they surpass the total sum of all others published from the other sites so far.

⁷ SAVIĆ 2012, 29.

⁸ This is the case at Viminacium in the region of Amphitheatre and Thermae.

⁹ This is the case at Viminacium in the Pećine necropolis, where a container of this shape was used as an urn.

¹⁰ RAMSEY 2009, 2.

pots. In a number of antique sources, they were just mentioned in summaries,¹¹ but they have been analysed using the latest technology, which has led to attributing a new function to a variant of deep pots. It was precisely in Viminacium that the greatest number of the mentioned multi-purpose large pots was discovered.

The Viminacium ceramic production was confirmed by the excavation of the workshop centre back in the 1980s. It was exactly on that area and the necropolis within which it has been explored that deep containers – pots, with elliptical rims, with or without applied striped handles, were detected. They came in two forms: with a conic and cylindrical shape, and a slightly indented bottom. These vessels were made of semi-purified, red fired clay¹² (10R–5/8; 2.5YR–6/8; 5YR–6/6) and an untreated outer surface. The diameter of their rim varies from 22.5 to 41 cm and the diameter of their bottom from 12 to 16 cm. Their height ranges from 19 to 30.5 cm and their volume from 4,500 to 7,000 ml.³ On the basis of the sample taken from the area of Viminacium, the pottery mentioned above can be primarily divided into two types according to the size of their recipient: either deep or shallow. The latter are represented by only one specimen, while the already mentioned deep pots are present in much greater quantities, with variations where the body walls sharply curve to the bottom or they are rounded (Pictures no. 1–4).¹³ They are characterised by both wide horizontally flared rims and applied striped handles. Certain authors consider that this signifies two development stages,¹⁴ whereas we believe that these are actually two different functional vessels.

Chamber pots are known to us from antique sources, where they are mentioned as *lasanum*¹⁵ or *lasanus*. Analysing the content on the walls of the ceramics, the remains of calcined urine were discovered,¹⁶ which led to the conclusion that they used to be chamber pots. They were discovered around urban settlements, cities, military centres, and villas, and were also found in the central parts of households, around water supplies, storage buildings, and public toilets. In Viminacium, the situation is different. This is primarily conditioned by the locations where the excavations were performed, but also by the fact that of all the discovered pottery, we can, in only one instance, confirm with certainty that it was used for urination, while we can only suggest for the others that they had a secondary function of a chamber pot. Most of the discovered vessels with a deep conic recipient are from the area of the necropolis and the amphitheatre. In the workshop centre, 57 pots were discovered in the oven furnaces and in all the waste pits.¹⁷ In recent years, the area of the explored part of the amphitheatre has taken the primacy in terms of numbers. The pots have been found in several sections, but they are the most numerous in the north-west part of the Amphitheatre,¹⁸ in the vicinity of the well, in which 20 amphorae made in the local workshops were also discovered.¹⁹ The second location where they were discovered in great numbers is the Thermae. The pottery was not discovered

¹¹ The epigram on chamber pots: CIL IV 4957: MAXIMVS IN LECTO FATEOR PECCAIVMVS HOSPES SI DICES QVARE NVLLA MATELLA FVIT, then at Juvenal on the night town walk and about being careful not to get on the head the contents of the chamber pots: Juvenal 3, 268–277; or that the pots were made from different materials from gold to onyx, which we can find at Martial: Marcial I-XXXVII: Quae ad Bassum transierat. *Tu repone excretionem absque pudore miserum in vas aureum et bibis vitro mundo. Illud opus ergo est magis carus.*

¹² Only a dozen pots were made from semi-purified clay with grey baking colour, while there is only one recorded container made from the so-called Kaolin clay.

¹³ The drawings are made in the ratio 1: 6, drawn by Dragana Rogić, foto by A. Bogdanović.

¹⁴ PETZNEK, RADBAUER 2012, 54.

¹⁵ HILGERS 1969, 209.

¹⁶ From Carnuntum and Petrovaradin.

¹⁷ RAIČKOVIĆ 2007, 26.

¹⁸ 26 rims and bodies that are parts of 18 dishes in that group, totalling to over 100 containers on the area of Amphitheatre, so far.

¹⁹ BJELAJAC 1996, 99.

in the part with *latrines*, but in the part where there was a canal, together with a large number of amphora and jug fragments. Large pots had a role in funeral practices as well, which can be concluded from the vessel discovered in the area of the necropolis, which functioned as an urn containing the skeletal remains of a new-born child. The authors that dealt with the typology of pottery classified these pots as part of a mandatory assortment of objects present near an army, but they were attributed storage roles.²⁰

In the area of one metropolis, which Viminacium used to be, we could expect to find chamber pots, but to date we have been able to classify only one pot into that group with any certainty. It is a shallow and wide vessel with functional tubular handles and a flat wide bottom. The height of the vessel is 16 cm, the width of the horizontally built rim is from 4 to 8 cm, while the elliptic rim follows the body's physiognomy. It was made from semi-purified, light red, fired clay (Munsell 5YR-6/6) and has an untreated outer surface. It was found during excavations in the south-east Viminacium necropolis, at the location of Više Grobalja, in 1978.²¹ (Picture no. 5) It is the only vessel that has traces of calcination on the inside of the ceramic.²² The others do not carry such traces, even though they were found in facilities which could suggest they were used for hygiene purposes. The context of the discovery of ceramic deep pots did not influence some authors to change their opinion that they are exclusively chamber pots, although in one case a pot was found in an excavation with charred cereals, the remains of animal bones and fragmented ceramic material.²³ Analysing the situation in Viminacium, we can conclude that it does not support this claim. New questions are arising, including the issue of the urination place of the Viminacium inhabitants. We must take into consideration that, in a developed city, there are public toilets constructed either from wood or stone, with a system for their drainage and cleaning, but there is nevertheless the issue of the urination of the poorest members of the society. If we follow the antique sources, according to which there were no toilets in large facilities such as amphitheatres, theatres, and other public buildings, but they instead used deep pots, why haven't we found that? If urine was so precious that it was collected and sold,²⁴ as well as excrement that was used to fertilise fields, there is still no evidence of that. There are a huge number of deep pots that have been discovered in Viminacium, but there are no traces of calcination. These vessels are not related with location, so we cannot talk about their function that is based on it.

The issue of whether these pots were used as chamber pots is quite debatable. Following the analogies on other sites from the same time frame, the question arises regarding hygiene maintenance in a large space such as Viminacium. Perhaps the lack of chamber pots can be attributed to the existence of a large number of toilets built from other construction materials, rather than classifying all these pots as chamber pots. Future research will likely provide the answers to these questions, but according to the current state of exploration, we cannot say with certainty where the private toilets of Viminacium were,²⁵ where the urine landfills were, or whether these pots were chamber pots.

Summary

According to Roman sources, deep pots with the *lasanum* shape had the function of a chamber pot. In Viminacium, over three hundred pottery vessels have been classified into

²⁰ BRUKNER 1981, 109.

²¹ Analogies: PASQUALINI 2002, 271 fig 10.

²² Analogies: QUERCIA 2008, 222 Fig 1/1i.

²³ SAVIĆ 2012, 28.

²⁴ WILSON 2009, 96.; COLUMELLA X.81-85.

²⁵ In Roman villas, the room layout is standard, which makes latrines easier to be found, more about that in JANSEN 1998, 301.

this shape. The traces of urine calcination were determined only in one case, on a shallow shaped pot. The reason for this situation probably lies in the state of its exploration, since the necropolises were mostly explored. In private villas, 13 of which have been explored so far in Viminacium, there were numerous fragments of these vessels, but not necessarily in areas that could be classified as toilets. We can presume that lack of this type of the toilets can be explained by the fact that they have not been recognised, and the lack of calcination on them could be the result of their limited usage for that purpose or because the inhabitants of Viminacium had different hygiene habits that we have yet to confirm.

The existence of chamber pots is not in doubt, but the issue of their discovery and their precise classification among the abundance of ceramic material is somewhat harder to resolve. Deep pots with an oval rim or wide horizontally built rims have been discovered in all explored sites at Viminacium. The most numerous are in the Amphitheatre (around the well) and in the Workshop centre (in waste pits near the furnace). They were made from semi-purified clay, usually baked, in shades of red and with an untreated outer surface, with or without any applied striped handles. Even though the rim line follows the physiognomy of the human body, we do not share the opinion of other authors that all the pots were used, and made specially, for physiological needs. Some of them can be attributed that hygienic purpose, but we would hold to the opinion that they used to be storage pots. What all authors agree on is that their duration was from the first to the middle of the third century.

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