



**POTS AS MEDIA:  
DECORATION,  
TECHNOLOGY  
AND MESSAGE  
TRANSMISSION**

Edited by

Vesna Bikić and Jasna Vuković



1838

UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE  
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## PREFACE

Pottery decoration and styles, and their meanings are always challenging topics. The book *Pots as media: Decoration, technology and message transmission* is the second edited volume resulting from the research of a group of scholars focused on pottery studies through the series of biennial meetings of BECAP (Belgrade Conference on Archaeological Pottery).

The book brings together fifteen chapters with various approaches to the analysis of pottery designs, from various perspectives, and a wide chronological span and range of geographical areas. The introductory chapter deals with theoretical considerations on the subject (Palaguta). The first section of the volume is dedicated to archaeological approaches to the study of designs (Starkova, Korokhina, Miele), their execution (Svilar et al.), and production (De Mitri). The central part of the book is focused on decoration as a message and its meanings: the origins of zigzag motif in the prehistory of Eastern Europe (Kotova and Radchenko), the hybrids between different technological and cultural traditions (Vuković and Tripković), decoration as an expression of cultural behaviors and boundaries (Agolli), the role of painted designs in the communication systems between communities (Vita), the interconnections between decoration and the formation of politically organized societies (Eriksson), the meanings of peculiar figural representations on the vessels (Bugarski), and the interrelations between pottery decoration and group identities (Bikić). Cultural interactions reflected through decorative styles (Ljuština and Dmitrović, Ninčić) are considered in the last part of the volume.

We would like to thank all the contributors for their inspiring papers, and their patience through the reviewing process. We also wish to express our gratitude to all of the anonymous reviewers who sent us their suggestions and remarks for each paper, but also to our colleagues, the reviewers of the book as a whole. Finally, the book would not have been completed without the support of our institutions – the Institute of Archaeology and Faculty of Philosophy.

The editors



MESSAGE ON THE POT:  
 SGRAFFITO POTTERY DECORATION  
 AND GROUP IDENTITIES  
 IN THE MEDIEVAL BALKANS

Vesna Bikić

*Group identities, like individual identities,  
 are flexible social constructs,  
 which only become salient in specific historical situations  
 for a specific set of social reasons.*

Mac Sweeney (2011: 28)

The meaning of decoration has undoubtedly represented one of the central issues of archaeology since its formative years. It is equally important in pottery studies. The archaeological approach to the classification of decoration, exemplified in the seminal work of Anna Shepard (1956: 255–305), included formal, technical, decorative, and symbolic indicators, thus emphasizing lines of analysis of decoration and a broad platform of interpretation. Over time, the interpretation of designs has been considered from different perspectives, among which the following stand out as constantly current: (relative) chronology, technology, cultural context, and symbolism. All of the above, and more, covered by the term (decorative) style, is are part of a complex *information exchange* process that ultimately leads to the identification of social groups and the determination of their status (cf. Wobst 1977; Sackett 1977; Plog 1983; Pollock 1983; Hegmon 1992; Hoder 2009).

The affinity to decoration analysis is also noticeable in the archaeology of the Middle Ages. It is especially present in the case of glazed sgraffito ware, which is among the most decorative classes of medieval pottery, with the greatest variability of motifs, techniques and colors (cf. Papanikola-Bakirtzi 1999). Today, this pottery class is very well studied thanks,

primarily, to stylistic and typological analyses of archaeological finds, as well as well-thought-out programs of archaeometric investigations that shed light on its technological features. In rare cases, a further step has been taken, towards an understanding of the wider social context of its production and consumption.

Using the framework of previous research on the concept of information exchange as a base, in this paper some aspects of glazed sgraffito pottery, especially its role in the societies of the medieval Balkans, will be considered. Namely, during the High and Late Middle Ages, the area of the continental Balkans emerged as unique in terms of political turmoil, social changes, and cultural background. At the time of the withdrawal of Byzantium at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the production of glazed sgraffito pottery began in the area. However, the rise in production of this luxurious ceramic type is connected with the strengthening of the medieval states of Bulgaria and Serbia. The two countries had a lot in common; apart from sharing space—the continental part of the Balkan Peninsula, they practiced Orthodox Christianity and inherited Byzantine culture. Due to the mentioned political, social and cultural contexts, the production of pottery of a particular style can be labeled with the term *Balkan sgraffito*. Its recognition in the wider family of Byzantine sgraffito, but also its variability in relation to both the original production and to each other, is a reflection of the set of different social processes, which will be discussed further.

## Byzantine sgraffito pottery: the main principles

When the term *sgraffito pottery* is mentioned, the first thing that comes to mind is Byzantine red-bodied, glazed pottery with elaborate incised decoration—a product that was introduced towards the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (or at the beginning of the following century) and lasted practically until modern times. Nowadays, this class of ceramics is very well known in the core areas of the Byzantine Empire and beyond (e.g. Dawkins, Droop 1911; Talbot Rice 1930; Frantz 1938; Morgan 1942; Stevenson 1947; Stančeva 1964; Barnea 1967; 1989; Megaw 1968; Babić 1971; Antonova 1977; Bass and van Doorninck 1978; Bakirtzis and Papanikola-Bakirtzi 1981; Déroche, Spieser 1989; Popović 1989; Papanikola-Bakirtzi, Dauterman Maguire and Maguire 1992; Hayes 1992: 44–48; Sanders 1993; François 1995; Spieser 1996; Bajalović-Hadži-Pešić 1997; Papanikola-Bakirtzi 1999; Bikić 1999; Dark 2001; Borisov 2002; Romančuk 2003; Kuzev 2003; Böhlendorf-Arslan 2004; Vroom 2005; D'Amico 2012; Koleva 2021; Vasileiadou 2018; Manolo-

va-Voykova 2023).<sup>1</sup> Although this is not the place to discuss in detail the characteristics of sgraffito ware, we must nevertheless refer to certain production and aesthetic features that indicate the social aspects of this pottery.

The emergence of sgraffito pottery was the result of interconnected political, economic, and cultural processes and the accumulated ancient craft heritage. The basis of the process was the stabilization of the Comnenian Empire (1081–1185), which spanned three continents and thus connected distant regions, peoples, and cultures in a unique way. When it comes to pottery, the novelties relate to the expansion of the production of glazed sgraffito vessels and the establishment of regional workshops, the improvement of the efficiency of kiln operation (with the help of tripods that were used to separate the vessels during firing), and decorative trends, primarily the combination of incised and painted motifs (Armstrong 2008: 434–435). In technological terms, this pottery is complex and its production involved a number of operational steps, including the preparation of a fine clay paste, forming of the vessel on a potter's kick-wheel, the making and applying of a white slip, decorating, biscuit firing at 850–900° C, the making and applying of a lead glaze, and the second firing at a lower temperature, around 700° C (Megaw and Jones 1983; Tite et al. 1998; Papanikola-Bakirtzi 1999: 18; Moilera et al. 2001; Damjanović et al. 2011; Waksman, Erhan, Eskalen 2009; Waksman et al. 2014; Özçatal et al. 2014a; 2014b; Charalambous 2014; Papanikola-Bakirtzi and Waksman 2015; Waksman 2018). Considerable labor and skill were apparently invested in production, which increased the value and price of each vessel (Sanders 2000).

With this new procedure—by engraving the motif through the white slip to the red body of the vessel and then (occasionally) painting and glazing—an extraordinary aesthetic effect was achieved. The eclectic style of Byzantine decoration, which is basically a combination of Roman pottery tradition and the aesthetics of the Middle East, with their own technical innovations (Papanikola-Bakirtzi 1999: 19–20; Ballian 2013), gave rise to a product recognizable in Mediterranean and European crafts, and among societies of the Middle Ages. At its peak, in terms of variety and scale of production, during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Byzantine luxury goods, including pottery, adopted *Islamic*<sup>2</sup> elements and adapted them to local

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1 The list of references is much longer, but in this work, it is reduced to papers that are illustrative of the topic.

2 The term Islamic pottery (decoration), which is often used by scholars, is part of a wider system of Islamic culture, which equally shaped secular and religious aspects of life of the medieval Middle East, roughly the area of Mesopotamia and Persia during the Abbasid and Seljuq times (11<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries).

technological capabilities and aesthetics (Ballian 2013: 293). Particularly popular were lace motifs, which were rendered in numerous variants, often together with geometric patterns, birds, and animals (Papanikola-Bakirtzi 1999: 19–20).

During its existence, Byzantine sgraffito went through phases; the tripartite chronological division proposed by Demetra Papanikola-Bakirtzi (1999: 18–24) best explains these changes in a concise way. During the course of production, certain differences in technology were noticed and, at the same time, the design of vessels was changing, both in terms of technical and decorative aspects. At first, sgraffito pottery was red, pinkish, orange, or salmon red in color, while later dishes could have been dark red and brown. Despite this, the final effect of the decoration is quite similar to each other. Vessels from the earlier stage, from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup>/beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, are mostly of fine fabric, specially made to meet the requirements of precise drawing. A thin stylus was used for decoration and, therefore, the aesthetics of the Comnenian period looked refined; this was achieved by elegant solutions for the central motif—linear and floral patterns, human figures, animals, and birds, shown in great detail, which are combined with borders composed mostly of spirals (Fig. 1/1, 2) and winding elements that resemble lace. In the second stage, from the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the vessels from individual workshops in the continental Balkans were often sand-tempered, so the surface was slightly grainy; therefore, a thicker tool that “hides” small incision irregularities was used (Fig. 1/3, 4). Due to the use of thicker tools or a combination of incising, cut-slip, and painting techniques, the decoration occasionally seems robust and conspicuous. These are primarily geometric and stylized floral motifs in a number of variants, while significantly fewer animals and human figures are present. In addition, monograms and ligatures are observed (Papanikola-Bakirtzi 1999: Fig. 7, Cat. Nos. 89; Waksman, Erhan and Eskalen 2008: Fig. 3; Manolova 2023: Pl. XLVIII/88–91, LXXXV/165–169, XCVI/12–18, CXIX/1–3, CXX/10, 11, CXXI/12–21). They are interpreted as the names of emperors and particularly saints that are associated with places of pilgrimage or famous shrines. The choice of motifs was conditioned by the size and shape of the vessels—the bowls and plates that prevailed in the assemblages became smaller and deeper, compared to the previous century, which is probably related to a slightly changed diet in the period after the Latin conquest of Byzantium in 1204 (Papanikola-Bakirtzi 1999: 21). The features of glazes should be added as well. Unlike the transparent, almost colorless glazes at the beginning of the production of red-bodied sgraffito pottery, during the late Byzantine period, the shades were medium to dark and reddish-yellow, and also deep green. In the case of a transparent glaze,



Figure 1: Examples of sgraffito decoration: Middle Byzantine period, Ras Fortress (1, 2); Late Byzantine period, Studenica Monastery (3) and Smederevo (4) (Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

the incised decoration is highlighted, most often in green (Armstrong, Hatcher, and Tite 1997; Tite et al. 1998; Özçatal et al. 2014a; Stojanović et al. 2019: 563–566).

### Balkan sgraffito pottery: creative variability

At the time of the broadest range of its production and distribution, during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Byzantine glazed sgraffito pottery was also used in the Balkans. Archaeological evidence reveals that the number of vessels was considerable, primarily in larger urban centers on the Black Sea coast, as well as important military strongholds on the Danube border and in the interior of the Balkan peninsula (Babić 1971; Borisov 1989, 215–247; 2002; Popović 1989; Popović and Ivanišević 1989; Ovčarov, Hadžieva 1992, 74–80; Bajalović-Hadži-Pešić 1997; Kuzev 2003; Daskalov 2010; Bikić 2016; Manolova 2023). The import of Byzantine tableware initiated the processes of the Byzantinization and urbanization of the Balkans, which had an impact on the feudal society in the medieval states of Bulgaria and Serbia, including the stimulus for the production of glazed sgraffito ware. As mentioned above, towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the production began to spread outside the core areas of the Byzantine Empire, accompanied by the development of regional styles

(for a brief overview, see: François, Spieser 2002: 603–605). This was a consequence of the increased circulation of people and the increase in the production of goods in the entire Mediterranean world, as well as in the Byzantine Empire, which, apparently, opened up to the rest of the world to a much greater extent than before (François and Spieser 2002: 606). A significant step forward in this regard was made in the area of the continental Balkans. Against a background of politics, turmoil, and wars, cultural exchange and intensive trade of various commodities took place, which introduced the medieval Balkan states into the Byzantine sphere. The bond with Byzantium was long-lasting, and included almost all aspects of social life. It should be stressed that in both medieval Balkan states, Bulgaria with the Despotate of Dobruja, and Serbia, pottery manufacture was encouraged by a favorable political climate. State and Orthodox Church independences were accompanied by economic growth, especially the expansion of trade. The multi-ethnic environment created then was a nursery for ideas, cultural concepts, knowledge and skills; it encouraged the development of arts and crafts (Bikić 2016b: 167; Manolova 2013: 114–115), among other things.

Favorable conditions for the production of sgraffito pottery were met first in the Byzantine cities on the western coast of the Black Sea (Manolova 2023: 114–116), where the habits of consumption of ceramic dishes survived in the towns. For our considerations, the start of production in Skopje is also of particular importance (Babić 1971; Maneva 2019: 436). During the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the production of sgraffito pottery spread to the interior of the Balkans, first in the centers of the Second Bulgarian Empire, in Tarnovo, Cherven, Shumen, and Varna (Changova 1962; 1972; 1992; Stančeva 1964; Georgieva 1974; 1985; Kuzev 1975; Antonova 1977; Yordanov 2009). Economic prosperity was particularly evident in Serbia thanks to the mining of high-quality silver and its trade; between the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> and the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the whole of Europe would be supplied with Serbian silver (Ćirković 1981).

The first (for now) known workshop for the production of glazed tableware in the area of medieval Serbia was set up approximately at the same time as in Bulgaria, around the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, in the Studenica monastery (Bikić 2015b). A little later, towards the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and until the end of the next century, sgraffito pottery was made in Skopje, the capital of medieval Serbia at the time and the city where King Stefan Dušan was crowned as “Emperor of the Serbs, Greeks, and Albanians” (Maneva 2019: 435–436, Fig. 248, 249, 259, 265, 269, 270, 274, 275, 279). The greatest flourish of Serbian sgraffito pottery belongs to the 14<sup>th</sup> and early



Figure 2: Decoration of Late Balkan sgraffito: Tarnovo (1–3), Kruševac (4, 5), Stalać (6), and Smederevo (7, 8) (Documentation of the Veliko Tarnovo Regional Museum of History and of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

15<sup>th</sup> centuries, with distinctive styles developed in workshops in the Ras (Raška) region, and in the area of the towns of Novo Brdo, Kruševac, and Smederevo: the last two were the capitals of the Serbian late medieval state (Minić 1979; Bajalović-Hadži-Peščić 1981: 105–110, Figs. XXX–XLIV; 2003: 184–190; Bikić 2003b; 2011; 2015a; 2016b; Minić, Vukadin 2007: 68–92; Damjanović et al. 2016: 398; Šarić, Bikić, Erić 2018; Stojanović et al. 2019).

A few selected examples of the late Balkan sgraffito ware illustrated here (Fig. 2) show the main decorative techniques and motifs on tableware from well-known pottery workshops in Tarnovo, Shumen, Raška, Kruševac, and Smederevo. Their mutual similarity, on the one hand, points to the same Byzantine source: at first it is the Middle Byzantine production (Waksman 2018), then sgraffito from the Palaeologan period, primarily from work-

shops in Thessaloniki (Papanikola-Bakirtzis 1987) and Serres (Papanikola-Bakirtzi, Dauterman Maguire, and Maguire 1992). On the other hand, technical and stylistic differences between them indicate peculiarities that may be the result of a number of factors: the proximity of sources of inspiration, that is, Byzantine workshop centers, market demand, and craftsmanship.

The typology of Balkan sgraffito pottery is not too broad—within the table ware class there are only a few basic types of open (bowl, plate) and closed (jug) vessels, with more or less variability in contours. However, what makes this pottery unique is its decorativeness. It is achieved by incising the motifs as a basis, and also by applying other techniques, such as *champlevé* and painting. Even a cursory examination of the material reveals great variability in design and motif execution. Although a wider tool was used more often, so the drawing seems somewhat rough or rustic, there are also examples with finely incised decoration that are more similar to earlier Byzantine examples.<sup>3</sup> The number of motifs is limited, but their number becomes significantly larger when they are combined with each other, as well as with floral motifs and representations of animals and birds in the central field or medallion. The impression of originality is enhanced by the painting in green, yellow, and brown over the incised and *champlevé* decoration, and the colors of the covering glazes. It is important to underline that, in contrast to carefully incised motifs, the painted decoration is performed quite freely, often covering a larger area than the main (incised) motifs, thus achieving a more dramatic decorative effect.

Two main traits in decoration can be observed. On the one hand, the effort to copy Byzantine templates with certain modifications of details can be seen, such as representations of birds and animals (Fig. 2/1; Georgieva 1974: Figs. 71–84, XXIII–XXXIII). On the other hand, original designs composed of individual motifs, mostly spirals, rosettes, leaves, concentric circles, a checkerboard pattern, intersecting circles etc., are also present (Fig. 3). Probably the greatest variability in execution is exhibited with the spiral motif—one of the favorite ornaments of potters from workshops of the continental Balkans—which, when multiplied, often appears in the form of bands (Fig. 3/1–9). The design of the vessel is conceived in relation to the shape of the surface planned for decoration: in open forms it is a concentric or radial arrangement of decorative elements around the central representation (bird, animal, fantastic animal), freely placed in space or in a medallion, while in closed forms they are decorations placed vertically following the shape and curves of the body; in both cases, it is a combination of decorative strips with stylized vines or cross-hatching motifs and

3 The features of the decoration, the clarity and the precision of the drawing above all, depended on the fineness of the surface, that is, the fabric; vessels from regional workshops were often sand-tempered or even with limestone inclusions, which is why the lines in some cases look jagged.



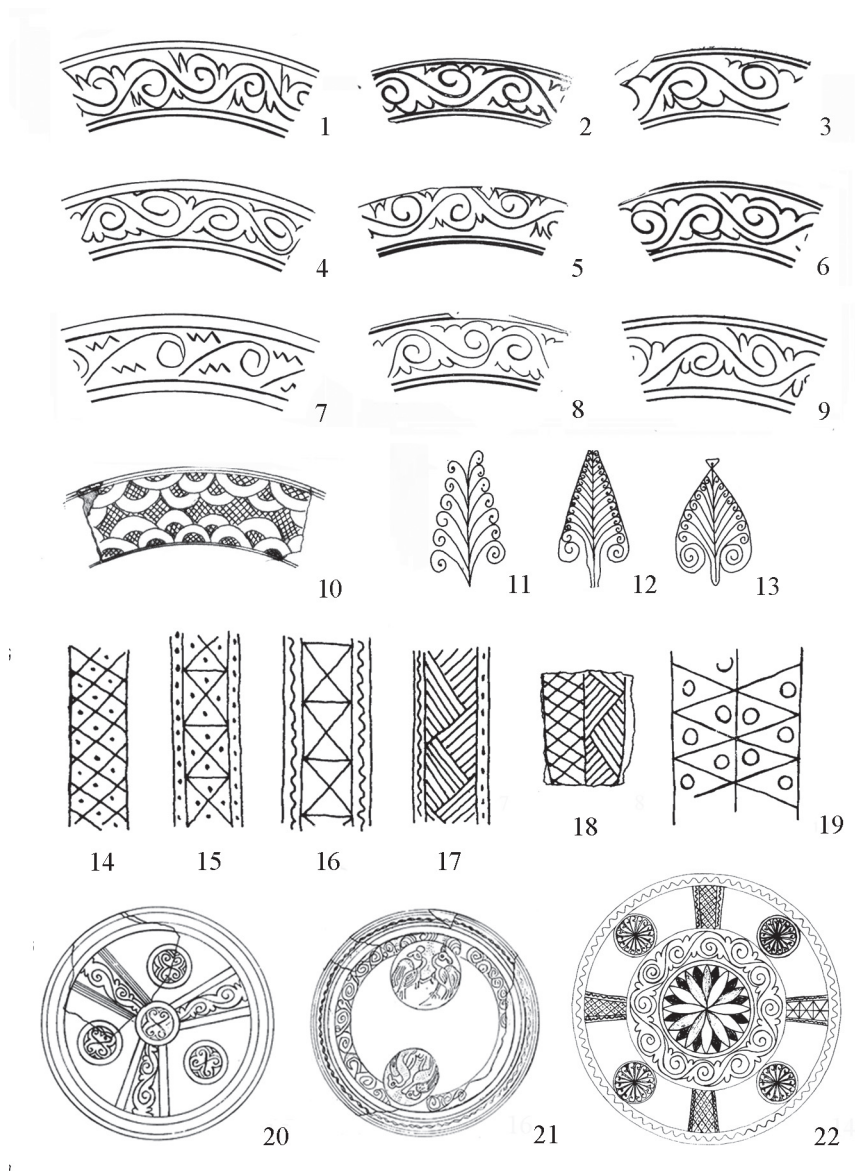


Fig. 3: Examples of Balkan sgraffito pottery motifs, selection from: Georgieva 1974, fig. 65, and Minić, Vukadin 2007: Figs. 51–54, 58, 59, 65

individual elements, most often rosettes and palmettes (cf. Georgieva 1974: Fig. I–XLI; 51–89; Antnonova 1977: 101–102, Fig. 94, 95, 98/14,17, 19–27, 99/1–15, 100/21, 24, 26, 29, 102/8, 14, 15, 23–25; Diaconu, Baraschi 1977:

Fig. 48–75; Minić, Vukadin 2007: Fig. 50–62; Bikić 2015a: Fig. 12–16). In addition, it was noted that bowls with a horizontal handle (they are also called lug-handled bowls; Fig. 4), whose appearance in the repertoire of Balkan table ceramics has not been sufficiently explained,<sup>4</sup> are mostly decorated with concentric circles (Georgieva 1974: Fig. XXXXVII/165; 1985: Fig. 57; Zečević 2003: fig. 1–5, Pl. I–IV; Minić, Vukadin 2007: 1–4); their dominant use in monastery complexes in the area of medieval Serbia, led some researchers to assume their cultic purpose (Zečević 2003: 98).

Considerable variability in the design of Balkan sgraffito pottery, both between regions and in relation to Byzantine models, can be observed. The preference for certain patterns and combinations between different elements indicate a number of regional workshops, while the technical performance and style of decoration reveal the work of a number of artisans who made Byzantine-style sgraffito. Although a relatively small number of late medieval assemblages with a reference quantity of sgraffito ware finds have been published in their entirety (see references cited), the available material provides sufficient data for comparative analysis of decorative styles, both in chronological and spatial terms. While on Bulgarian and Serbian sgraffito pottery we find patterns that are very similar to those from Thessaloniki and Seres, Serbian sgraffito also brings a new view of the Bulgarian interpretation of Byzantine templates. As an example, running spirals and cross-hatching patterns can be mentioned first—they appear on vessels from the Bulgarian capital of Tarnovo from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in almost identical form also on somewhat later vessels from the workshops in the Moravan Serbia capital, Kruševac, and the nearby town of Stalać (Georgieva 1974: Fig. 54/2, 59/1, 64–66, 67/1, 90, 91, IX, XIII–XV, XXXVII; Minić 1980: 45–47; Minić, Vukadin 2007: 102, Fig. 51–55, 58–62, 66; Bikić 2016b: 171; Maneva 2019: Maneva 2019: 435–436, Fig. 259, 265, 269, 270, 274, 275, 279). In addition, the decoration in the form of “scallops” that appears on vessels from Tarnovo, can be observed along with the decades-later material from the town of Stalać, and also Smederevo (Georgieva 1974: Fig. 62; Bikić 2016: Fig. 100).

## Glazed sgraffito ware and group identities in the medieval Balkans

Available data on technological and decorative styles of the Balkan sgraffito, although presented here briefly, indicate the existence of layers of group identities—craft, class, ethnic/national, supranational. In this way, sgraffito vessels reveal the cultural identity of one environment.

4 Similar lug-handled bowls appear among the Spanish lustreware that reached the Balkan region during the 14<sup>th</sup> century; cf. Blake 1972; Manolova-Voykova 2022).

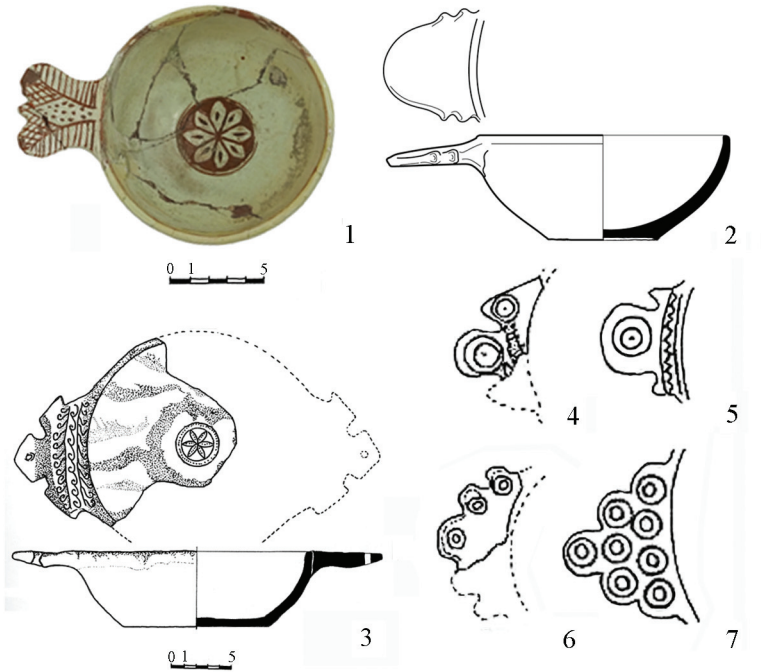


Fig. 4: Bowls with a horizontal handle(s): Veliko Tarnovo Regional Museum of History (1); Belgrade Fortress – Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade (2); and selection from: Zečević 2003: Tabs. I and IX (3–7)

The life of a vessel begins with production and this is why we consider the artisans first. The potters—at that time mostly men—brought their knowledge, skills, and sense of aesthetics to the style and design of the sgraffito vessels. Unfortunately, the production of luxury tableware and its makers were not the focus of medieval chroniclers.<sup>5</sup> The assumed stratification within the potter’s craft in the Balkans, as elsewhere in Europe at the time (Fostikov 2019: 206–207), would include layers of the group identity related to skills (in manufacturing procedures), status (free or unfree), and the place of activity (village or town, ruler’s or landowner’s castle, sacred or secular) (Costin 1998: 6–9; Fostikov 2020: 81–82). The role of the artisan as an active participant in the production process is not questioned; it is reasonable to assume that, in addition to their undoubted skill, those from fortified cities were able to follow craft and decorative

5 In Serbian medieval narrative sources, two categories of artisans who worked with clay are distinguished: potters and brickmakers (Fostikov 2019: 206).

trends and, thus, together with their patrons, become innovative creators of the style of luxury tableware of the given region (Costin 1998: 5–6; Bikić 2016b: 173). In addition, it is reasonable to assume that the master potters were not exclusively local. Given the needs of Balkan landowners and townspeople, the mobility of craftsmen within the Balkans and the surrounding areas of Western and Central Europe would have been considerable (Fostikov 2020: 83–87). Apart from artisans moving to develop their skills, and for economic reasons, they also sought refuge due to the advance of the Ottomans across the Balkans (Bikić 2016b: 171). The mobility of the potters from the Late Byzantine (Thessaloniki and Serres) and Bulgarian (Tarnovo) workshops is perhaps best observed in the previously mentioned close similarity of certain decorative details.

Regional cultural spaces in the area of the main fortified cities and monasteries can be outlined through sgraffito ware. It reflects the taste of consumers from different regions for artistically crafted products. The consumers were mostly local noblemen and wealthy merchants, but also monastic communities. Considering the techniques used and the design of the vessels, we believe that they appreciated these handicrafts, to use the words of Cathy Lynne Costin (1998: 5), ‘for their utility, their prestige value, their political significance, and their symbolic, ritual, and/or ideological associations’. When working on material from Serbia, differences were noticed in sgraffito vessels used by certain social groups. Although variability is observed in the quantity of tableware and variability of the vessel’s shapes, the main differences are manifested primarily in the decoration: vessels with modest decoration in the monastery refectories in contrast to sets of lavish sgraffito tableware in noble households (Bikić 2016b: 173). However, it has been noted that in monastery assemblages some particularly luxurious pieces can be found (Bajalović-Hadži-Pešić 1999: Fig. 2, 6–8, 16/1, 17; Bikić 2016b: Fig. 98), as well as those with letter marks or monograms (Bikić 2015a: 343–344, Fig. 8; Sengalevich 2020; Ginkut 2020); such specimens could have been used on special occasions or for special individuals, church leaders or distinguished guests. Also, it is interesting to point out an exceptional set of more than twenty sgraffito and painted jugs of the same shape, specially made for the last capital of the State of Serbian Despots, Smederevo. Due to all of the above, it can definitely be said that through mutual interaction, producers and consumers became the creators of the sgraffito pottery style in each region (Bikić 2016b: 173).

Regionally organized production covered the needs of rulers and noblemen, while only a small part was the subject of inter-regional and supra-regional trade; at the same time, imported luxury tableware was very rare, even exceptional. In support of the high status of sgraffito ware, the

chronology of workshops in Serbia organized in the most important state centers speaks for itself; in the Studenica monastery, which was the central sacral place of the early Nemanjić state in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Bikić 2015b: 140), and in the capital cities of medieval Serbia: in Skopje from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, in Kruševac from the late 14<sup>th</sup> century to the second decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (after 1371 to 1413) and in Smederevo during the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Bikić 2016b: 172–173). The same holds for medieval Bulgaria. The workshop for making sgraffito ware from the capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire, in Tarnovo, during the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, although not the only one in the country, met the needs of the ruling court and the domestic nobility with its production, and also dictated production and decorative trends.

The presented archaeological data undoubtedly highlights sgraffito pottery as one of the emblems of the material culture of the societies of the late medieval Balkans. So, in the given context, can it also be a reflection of national identity? It is to be believed that it can, given the presented contextualization. The appearance of sgraffito wares in the medieval states of Bulgaria and Serbia, as we have seen, is connected with a series of political and social processes, among which are the stratification of feudal society, and the formation of national<sup>6</sup> and cultural identity. In these processes, authentic artistic and craft expressions were established in both countries, which can be seen on various artifacts, above all else on glazed sgraffito pottery. As has been shown (Plog 1983: 138–139), the variability of decoration (decorative style) acted as a symbol of identity for members of a social group in interaction with social, economic, political, religious, and ideological variables.

Throughout its lifetime, glazed sgraffito pottery was in demand by the elite. Apart from the complex technology and attractive appearance, finds of sgraffito vessels are concentrated in seats of power—castles, fortresses and towns (Sanders 2000; Vionis et al. 2010: 460; D’Amico 2012: 478–479; Bikić 2016b: 172–173). As such, it was “more concerned with social identity than with ethnicity” (D’Amico (2012: 479). However, the phenomenon of sgraffito ware is far more complex. The social groups

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6 The issue of nation and national identity is one of the most important in European historiography, especially in medieval studies. Medieval people believed that they belonged to peoples (*gentes*) and nations (*naciones*). Unlike *people*, who base their individuality on speech, law, customs, clothing and so forth, the collectivity of a *nation* expresses, and at the same time distinguishes it from others, a name as a self-identification, the state as a political creation, and a sense of historical identity, mostly through myths, storytelling and memories (Ćirković 1997: 171–172; Davis 2004: 570–575). Landscape should be added to that—a constant sharing of space can create a strong sense of community (Mac Sweeney 2011: 39).

that participated in the creation and consumption of that luxury product—artisans and landowners, and monastic communities, to single out only the main ones—through it, achieved a commonality and uniqueness that connected them to each other and, at the same time, distinguished them from others, to a greater or lesser extent (Bikić 2016b: 173). Seen from the perspective of late medieval societies in the continental Balkans, sgraffito pottery seems to have had a deeper meaning; it was a medium that conveyed a certain ideological message. With its design, which also appears on wall paintings and architectural decoration, and in manuscripts, it became a commodity that was associated with the artistic program of the state. The presented data indicates that sgraffito pottery played such a role in two medieval states, Bulgaria and Serbia; each of them encompassed the historical landscape and took a specific place in the political, social, religious and cultural system of a given time.

A step further, looking at glazed sgraffito pottery in the wider area of the Byzantine and Byzantinized Balkans leads us to think about the issue of the common cultural and religious identities of its users, which goes beyond the framework of the national category. Namely, with all the variability, not so much in production as in decorative features, sgraffito vessels from regional workshops have plenty of common elements, while, on the other hand, these luxury products differ visually and in every other respect (to a sufficient extent) from the contemporary Western ceramics (Archaic maiolica, protomaiolica, lead-glazed polychrome ware—RMR, graffita arcaica tirrenica, graffita arcaica padana, and Spanish lustre-ware: Rackham 1952; Whitehouse 1980; Patitucci-Uggeri 1985; Berti et al. 1986; Blake 1986; Dufournier, Flambard, Noyé 1986; D'Angelo 1997; Skartsis 2012; Tagliente 2000) and the Islamic pottery from which they drew inspiration (Lane 1957; Grube 1965; Jenkins-Madina 2006; Treptow 2007). A similar thing would happen in the new political reality after the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, which ended with the fall of the last capital of the State of Serbian Despots, Smederevo, in 1459. Balkan sgraffito of the Byzantine style was replaced by the so-called Ottoman sgraffito ware; instead of ornate rosettes and spirals, the decoration consists of large floral (leaf-like) motifs that only in their basic features resemble late Byzantine templates (Bikić 2003a: 166). On the other hand, the undoubted similarity between Byzantine, Balkan, and Ottoman sgraffito wares reflected the new political, social, and cultural context of the Ottoman Balkans (Bikić 2003a: 165–166). For the multi-ethnic (multinational) population of the Balkan towns of the Ottoman era, the new product had enough old elements and seemed familiar to the users, because in terms of design and decoration it did not deviate much from the late Byzantine Balkan aesthetics (Bikić 2003a: 163–164). However, with the further expansion of the Ottoman

Empire to the area of southern Hungary, sgraffito ware represented a cultural marker that, in a peculiar way, identified the Balkan population of the northern border region of the Ottoman Empire.

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