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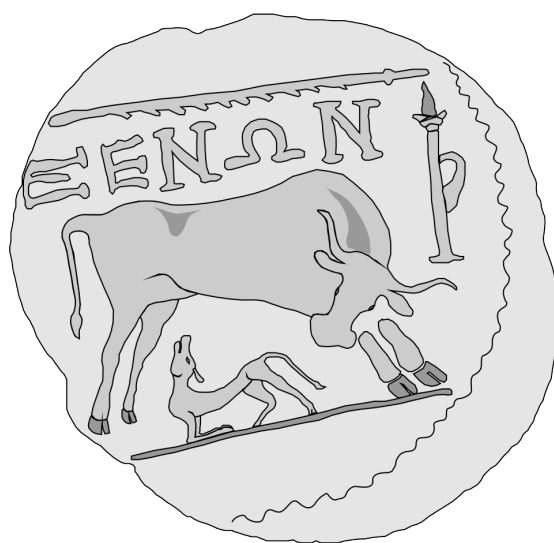
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This volume is dedicated to Florin Draşovean at 70 years

Acest volum este dedicat lui Florin Draşovean cu ocazia împlinirii a 70 de ani



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Less Discussed Aspects in the Research of Early Medieval Wares from Romania: Purpose, Use, Re-use, and Recycling. Theoretical Interpretations and Archaeological Realities

Dan Băcuet-Crișan

Abstract: The international archaeological literature has addressed these issues for a long time, pinpointing the magnitude and diversity of the scientific data “baggage” that a pot may store. We have noticed that in Romanian archaeology, the information value of potshards yielded by various archaeological sites (early medieval or of other periods) has been often belittled. In the foreign literature, such views have been contested and the variety of results obtained subsequent to the study of the ceramic wares has been highlighted. That being said, we propose here to draw attention to a number of aspects less discussed in the Romanian archaeological literature focused (in this case) on the study of early medieval pottery: the purpose, use, re-use and recycling of ceramic wares. Past theoretical interpretations, we explore the known/published archaeological repertoires for the territory of Romania and evidence respective aspects via contexts and artefacts that originate from various investigations. Undoubtedly, the research of early medieval pottery, issues related to purpose, use, re-use and recycling must be investigated in-depth. It is certain that, despite massive presence in the inventories of excavated archaeological features, the ceramic containers (regardless their shape) remain still (at least in the Romanian archaeological research) artefacts with insufficiently harnessed information value!

Key words: early medieval pottery; purpose; use; re-use; recycling.

Reason and goals of this approach. Methodological specifications

The international archaeological literature has addressed these issues for a long time, indicating the magnitude and diversity of the scientific data “baggage” that a ceramic pot may store¹. We have often noted (on the part of several Romanian archaeologists) the somewhat belittling of the information value that potshards discovered in various archaeological sites (early medieval or of other periods) hold. In the foreign literature, such outlook was opposed, evidencing the various results obtained through the study of ceramic wares².

Starting from the above, this approach³ aims to draw attention to certain less discussed aspects in the Romanian archaeological literature focused (in this case) on the study of early medieval pottery. Past theoretical interpreting, we explore the known/published archaeological inventories for the territory of Romania, evidencing respective aspects via contexts and artefacts yielded by various archaeological investigations.

It is known that the archaeological materials discovered during the research concerned with early medieval habitation (in different geographical and cultural environments) is mainly composed of ceramic tableware, in varied quantities, more or less fragmentary. In general, the analysis of pottery lots pursues readily detectable aspects like for instance, the modelling technique, colour, fabric and temper, formal features (on the basis of which forms are identified), the decoration technique and used ornaments. Often, typo-chronological series (formal or decorative) were suggested for various pottery forms⁴ (a few examples in Fig. 1).

¹ Duckworth, Wilson 2020; Vuković, Bikić 2022.

² For instance, Skibo 2022, 351-362.

³ This article has also been published in romanian language (see Băcuet-Crișan 2024, 559-574).

⁴ A few cases from north-western Romania: Băcuet-Crișan 2009, 69-87; Băcuet-Crișan 2013, 281-294; Stanciu 2019, 13-46.

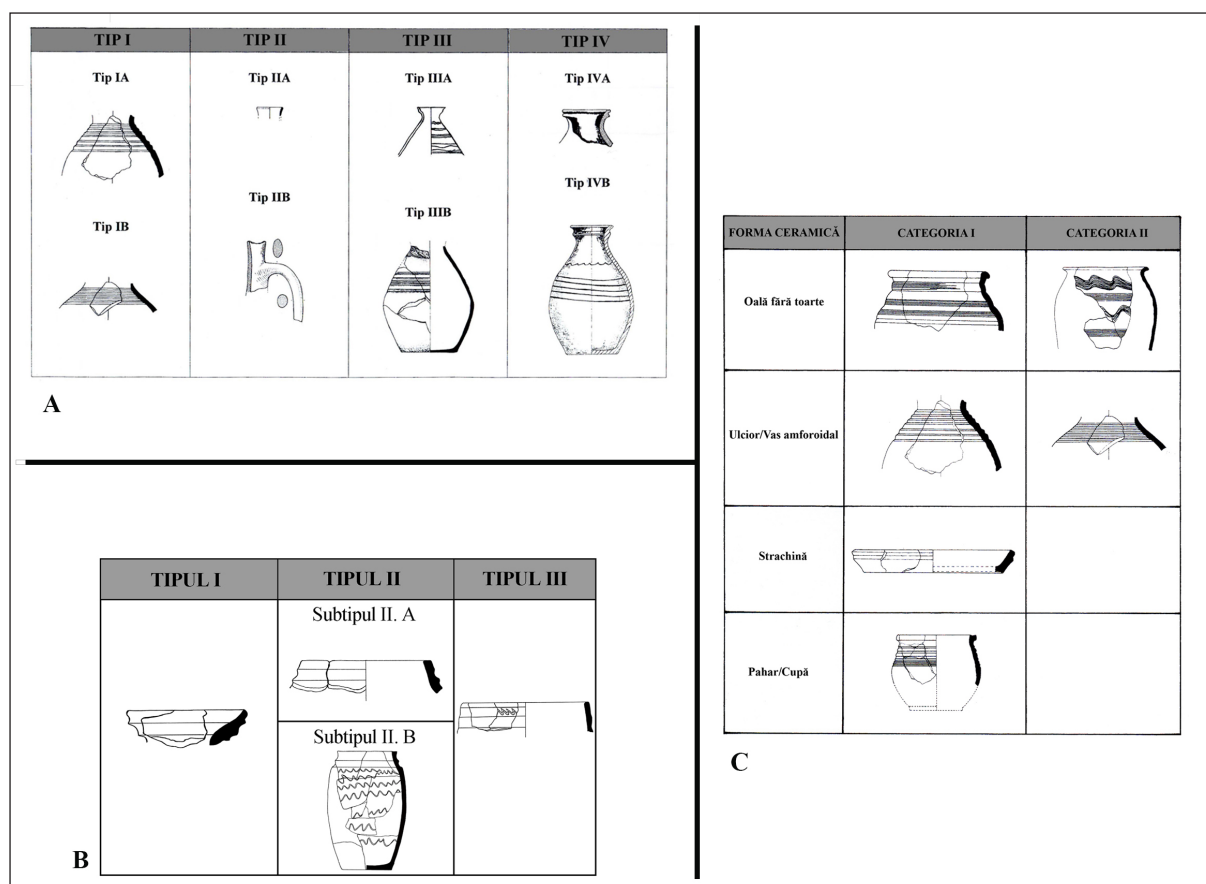


Fig. 1. Example of classifications (formal/typological) suggested for some of the ceramic wares of the Sylvanian Basin (A – source Băcuet-Crișan 2009; B – source Băcuet-Crișan 2013; C – source Băcuet-Crișan, Bejinariu 2020).

Nevertheless, occasional errors have emerged regarding the identification of recipients' modelling technique⁵, misunderstood connections between the pottery form and its purpose (for instance deep bowl *versus* shallow bowl)⁶, inexistence of a standard system of denominating the pottery forms⁷, inadequate/improper terms being still used for some ware forms⁸, inaccurate classifications and methodologies⁹.

Each ceramic vessel form emerging from the potter's hand had a clearly intended purpose in terms of use: for cooking, baking, drinking, eating, storing, carrying, lighting or playing. Despite these clear purposes, respective vessels had multiple usages in the day-by-day life, more difficult to detect. In general, formal and typological analyses of ceramic tableware track these artefacts for only the duration of their "operation", disregarding yet the "post-operation" phase! Archaeological realities have often shown that "the life" of a ceramic contained did not always end when broken, these being often repaired and then re-used. Other examples show that parts of a broken vessel were utilised to make various objects for diverse purposes.

The ceramic recipient should not be regarded only as a mere component of the assemblage of goods in the possession of an individual/family/community, as it was concurrently a message conveyor (be it artistic or religious/cult-related, for communication or social, economic, identity-related). Unfortunately, such aspects are not commonly discussed in the Romanian archaeological literature referring to early medieval pottery. We proposed to address these topically below.

⁵ An example, the pottery discovered in the pottery firing kiln of Sighișoara Dealul Viilor. Amended interpreting see: Băcuet-Crișan 2017, 189-209 and Stanciu 2024, 303-310.

⁶ View on this type of errors see: Băcuet-Crișan, Bejinariu 2020, 69.

⁷ We have often noted that multiple terminologies were in use to designate the same pottery form. For exemplifications and critical views see: Băcuet-Crișan 2020; Băcuet-Crișan et al. 2021, 325.

⁸ The "classical" term of *vas borcan* (or *oala borcan*)/"ovoid jar" further used in the Romanian archaeological literature. Examples are numerous, we mention only a few: Popa, Simina 2004, 85 and subsq.; Andronic 2005, 51 and subsq.; Corbu 2006, 136, 141-141.

⁹ Typo-chronological analysis of burial wares in 7th – 10th century Transylvania (Cosma 2011).

Form, purpose and use of ceramic wares

The classification of early medieval ceramic tableware (and not only!) is impossible without understanding that the vessel shape is firstly determined by its purpose. Furthermore, one must agree that differences between the purpose and use/uses of the containers in daily life existed. A “classical” example is the pot that was not only used for cooking, but also for transport or storage, its content varying depending on product type, either liquid or solid.

Sometimes, the difference between the purpose and the manner in which a ceramic vessel was used is surprising, we mention here (we have discussed this elsewhere¹⁰) an unusual use of a pot: a ludically use (in a game), where, an blindfolded individual, must hit and break (with a stick) a mouth downwards placed pot (Fig.2).

Drafted ceramic tableware typologies have shown that each ware form was produced in various sizes. Undoubtedly, individual/family/community necessities and use frequency in daily life had determined the quantity in which each ceramic form was produced.

Re-use of ceramic wares

The breaking of a ceramic vessel could occur intentionally (for a certain reason) or by mistake, thus becoming useless (being most likely discarded). Nonetheless, archaeology has also supplied examples of reused wares after breaking, we reference here those vessels with “repairs” (perforations made in order to “glue” the broken piece/pieces) which thus extended their “life” (Fig. 3). We mention some examples from the Silvania Depression, found in the settlements of Cheud *Sub Hij*¹¹ and Popeni *Pe pogor*¹².

Beside recipients with “repairs”, in the European archaeology are also known pots that following to broken rim/lip were cut (horizontally) in the neck or belly area and turned into beakers/cups or shallow bowls.

Recycling pottery

Another aspect entirely ignored in the Romanian archaeological literature is that of recycling early medieval wares (or parts of these), after breaking (either intentional or not). In this respect, the archaeological finds offer a variety of examples. A first class is represented by recycled pot bases:

- Pot bases (in which one or several perforations were made) (Fig. 4) used as censers, weights for the loom or for



A



B

Fig. 2. Medieval game: blindfolded figures must hit vessels set with mouth downwards (Flandres, 14th century)

(source <https://www.facebook.com/MedievalAdvisor> and Băcuet-Crișan 2022).

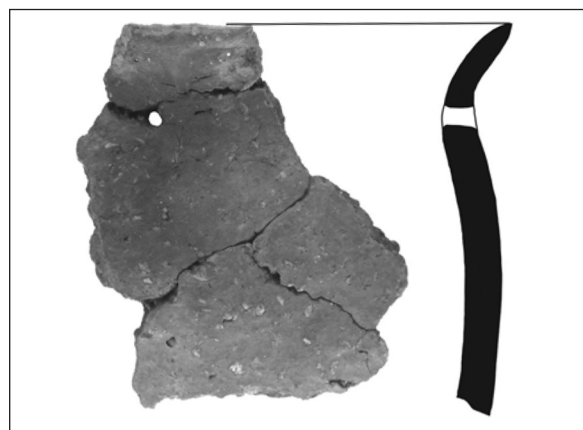


Fig. 3. Cheud *Sub Hij*. Example of “repaired” ceramic vessel (after Culic, Băcuet-Crișan 2009).

¹⁰ Băcuet-Crișan 2022, 10, Fig. 3.

¹¹ Culic, Băcuet-Crișan 2009, Pl. IV/2

¹² Băcuet-Crișan 2006, Pl. 15/1.

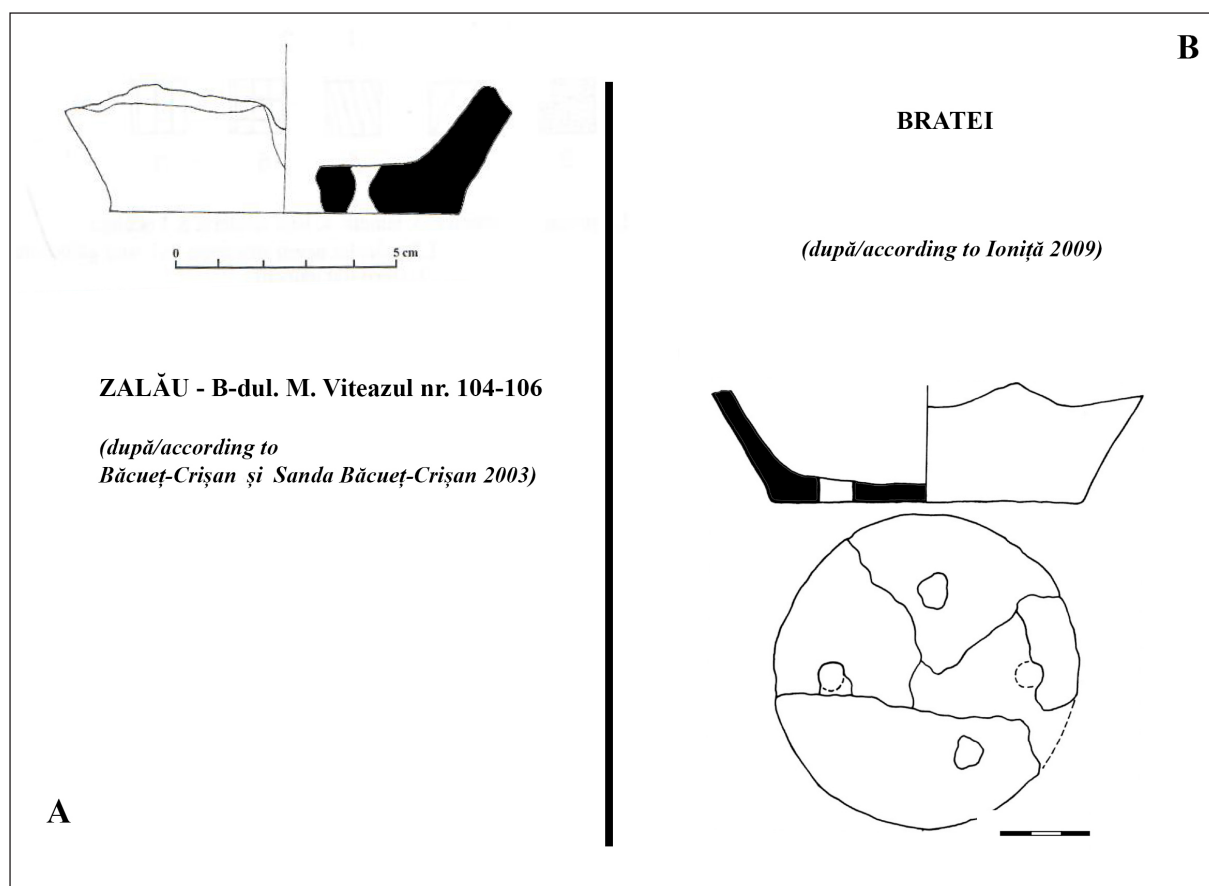


Fig. 4. Examples of pot bases with perforations
(A – source Băcuet-Crișan, Sanda Băcuet-Crișan 2003; B – source Ioniță 2009).

fishing. We exemplify two cases: the centrally pierced pot base found in the settlement of Zalău B-dul. M. Viteazul nr. 104-106¹³ and the pot base with four perforations (a censer?) discovered in the 12th-13th century settlement of Bratei¹⁴.

- Pot bases (or lower vessel part) used as lighting implements (lamps), an example at Zalău (Ortelec quarters) Cetate/Dealul Bisericii¹⁵.

Another class is represented by recycled fragments/portions of vessel walls:

- Rounded/polished and pierced potshards used as loom weights (Fig. 5), like the case of the specimen at Aghireș Sub pășune¹⁶.
- Rounded/polished potshards used as tokens for various games (Fig. 6), like the exemplars discovered in the *extra muros* area of the Ulmetum citadel (Pantelimonu de Sus, site Cartăș-cuptor Panaitescu)¹⁷.

Still as recycled must be considered the cases when vessel fragments were used to set up kiln hearths (for increased heating). For Sylvanian Basin, we mention a kiln provided with a hearth (in clay)

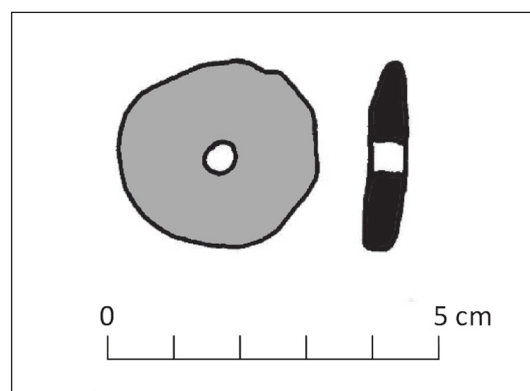


Fig. 5. Aghireș Sub pășune. Example of loom weight made of a pot wall
(source Băcuet-Crișan, Csók 2011).

¹³ Băcuet-Crișan, Sanda Băcuet-Crișan 2003, Pl. 46/6.

¹⁴ Ioniță 2009, Pl. 129/37.

¹⁵ Recent investigations (2022-2023). Archaeological inventory under analysis/scientific processing.

¹⁶ Băcuet-Crișan, Csók 2011, 262, Pl. VI/2.

¹⁷ Paraschiv-Talmățchi 2014, Pl. XIII/6-11.

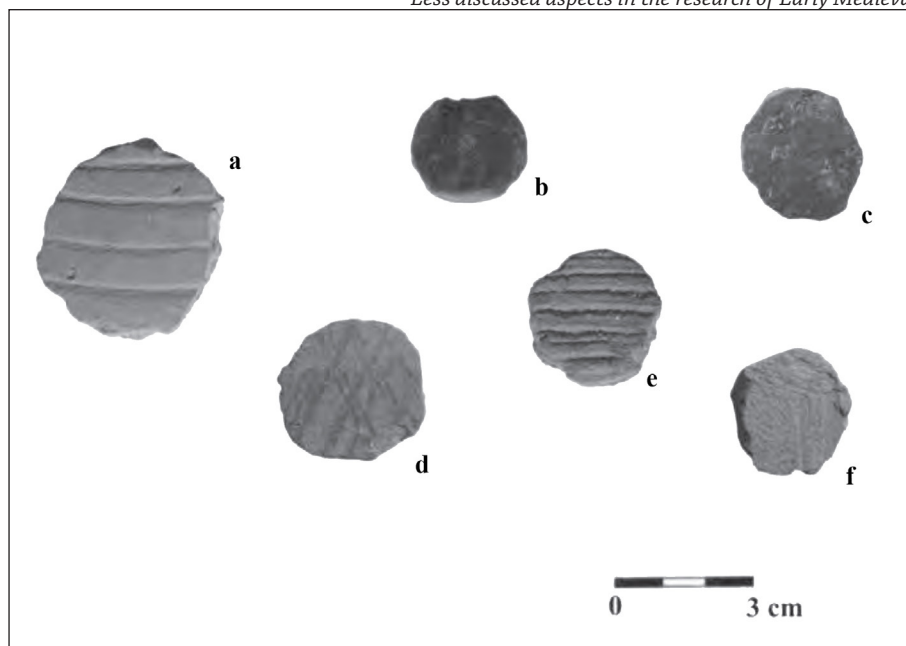


Fig. 6. *Ulmetum*. Examples of ceramic tokens made of pot walls (source Paraschiv-Talmațchi 2014).

cremations or inhumations (Fig. 8), as components of the burial ritual²⁰.

The ceramic vessel as support/bearer of an artistic, cult/religious, communication, identity message

Wares should not be regarded only as food containers. They are concurrently supports/bearers of a lay or ecclesiastic/cult message. The richness of decorative elements and their skilful making in contrast with the minimalist and coarse decoration stand proof for the artistic skills of the artisan/artisans yet also the owner/owners²¹ sense of beauty. The formal features, decoration techniques and decorative elements may be indicative of various origins and cultural environments²².

¹⁸ Băcuet-Crișan 2018, 178, Pl. 5.

¹⁹ Băcuet-Crișan, Bejinariu 2020, 51.

²⁰ One example: inhumation Gr. 2/2001 at Zalău Valea Răchișorii/Pălvăr (Băcuet-Crișan 2015, 40, Fig. 11).

²¹ A stylistic analysis of incised decorative elements on pot lots of Capidava, see: Cursaru 2007, 115-120

²² For instance, pottery with burnished decoration (see the analysis on the Saltovo-Majaki type finds in: Bálint 1990).

placed on a potshard bed (Fig. 7). The kiln was investigated in 2017, at Pericei Calău/Kalló¹⁸.

Further evidence of recycling is represented by the use of potshards (crushed) as temper in the vesselfabric, especially in the case of handmade pottery¹⁹. Recycled materials may also be considered the ceramic fragments placed in some graves, either

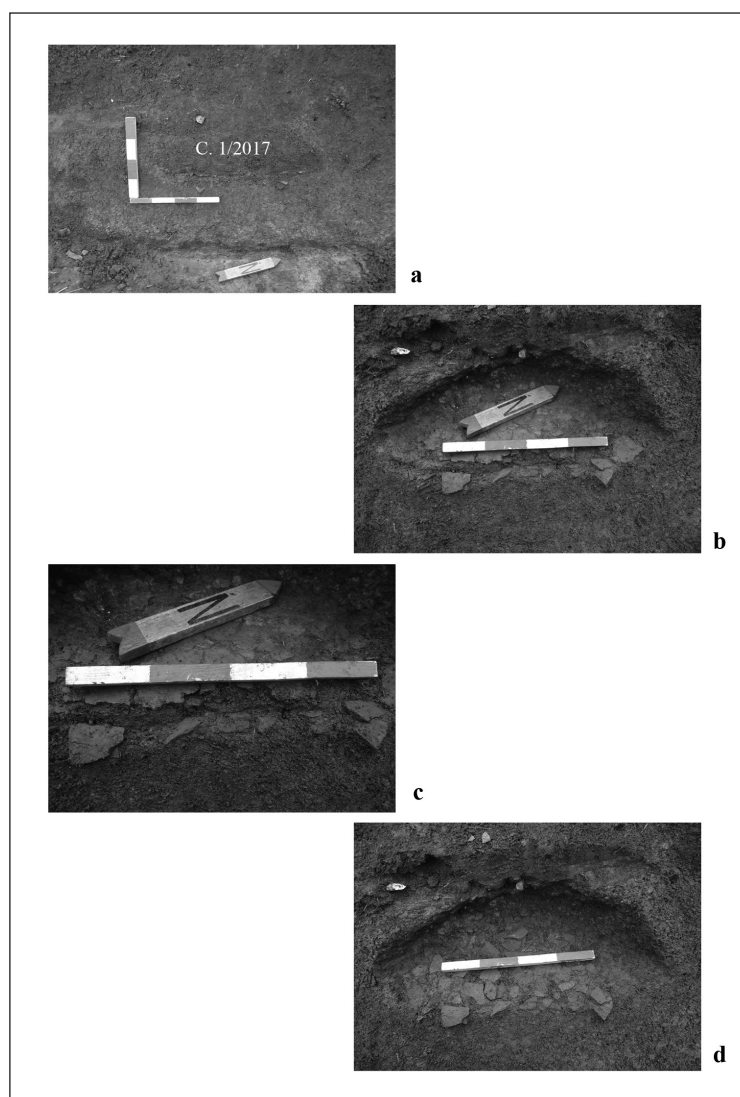


Fig. 7. Pericei Calău/Kalló. Example of kiln with hearth made on potshard bed (9th-11th century) (source Băcuet-Crișan 2018).

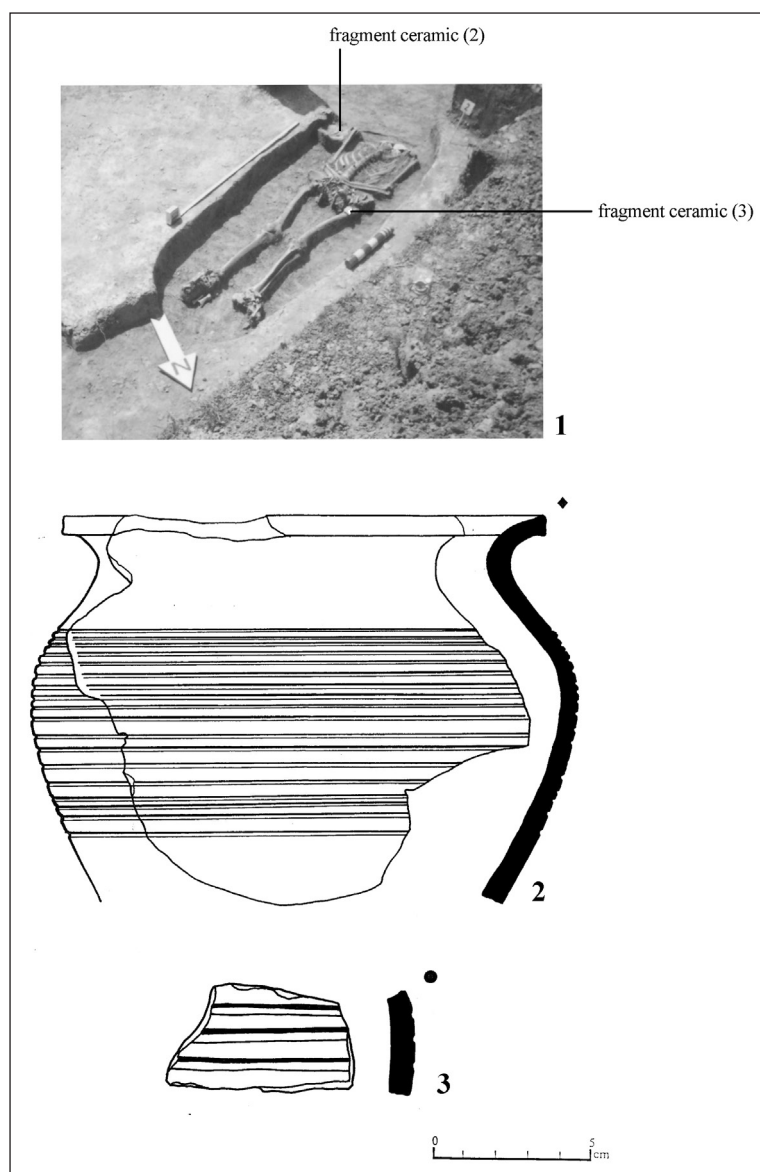


Fig. 8. Zalău Valea Răchișorii/Pălvăr. Grave Gr. 2/2001
(source Băcuț-Crișan 2015).

letters²⁷.

Among support-vessels of identity-related messages may be included vessels with the potter's mark/symbol on the base, as it is known these are most likely a recording manner of the potter/workshop or beneficiary²⁸ (Fig. 10).

²³ László 2019, Pl. 2.

²⁴ Popescu 1976; Teodor, Stanciu 2009, 129-155; Stanciu 2018, 307-354; Paraschiv-Talmațchi et al. 2020, 152, Fig. 107.

²⁵ Dragotă 2023, Pl. XV.

²⁶ Paraschiv-Talmațchi et al. 2020, 150, Fig. 106a-c.

²⁷ Paraschiv-Talmațchi 2006, 61-84.

²⁸ Paraschiv-Talmațchi 2006, 85-88; Băcuț-Crișan 2016, 873-892.

The presence in cremations and inhumations (during certain chronological phases) of the ceramic vessel (with varied forms and sizes), used as keeper/protector of the human cinerary remains or as container of a solid or liquid food product (vessel with offering) necessary in the afterlife, confirms the profound involvement (of this “ordinary” object!) in the spiritual universe of respective human communities.

Ceramic vessel walls may convey religious messages via inscribed cult-related or religion defining symbolic marks/elements (Fig. 9). We refer here to vessels incised with (*graffiti*) or painted: cult symbols²³, cult associations, crosses and texts referencing biblical messages²⁴. Among written message vessel-bearers may also be included exemplars that may be indicative of the language spoken by the vessel manufacturer or owner, namely vessels with letters, letter groups or sentences incised in the soft fabric (or painted) like the specimen of Alba Iulia *Stația de Salvare* (Phase I)²⁵ or the jug of Capidava²⁶. To these cases also add potter's marks in the form of

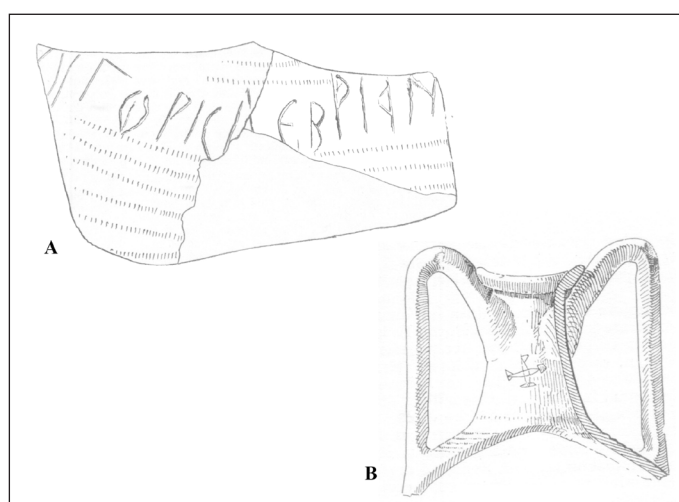


Fig. 9. Dinogetia (Bisericuța-Garvăn). Examples of vessels with graffiti (source Ștefan et al. 1967).

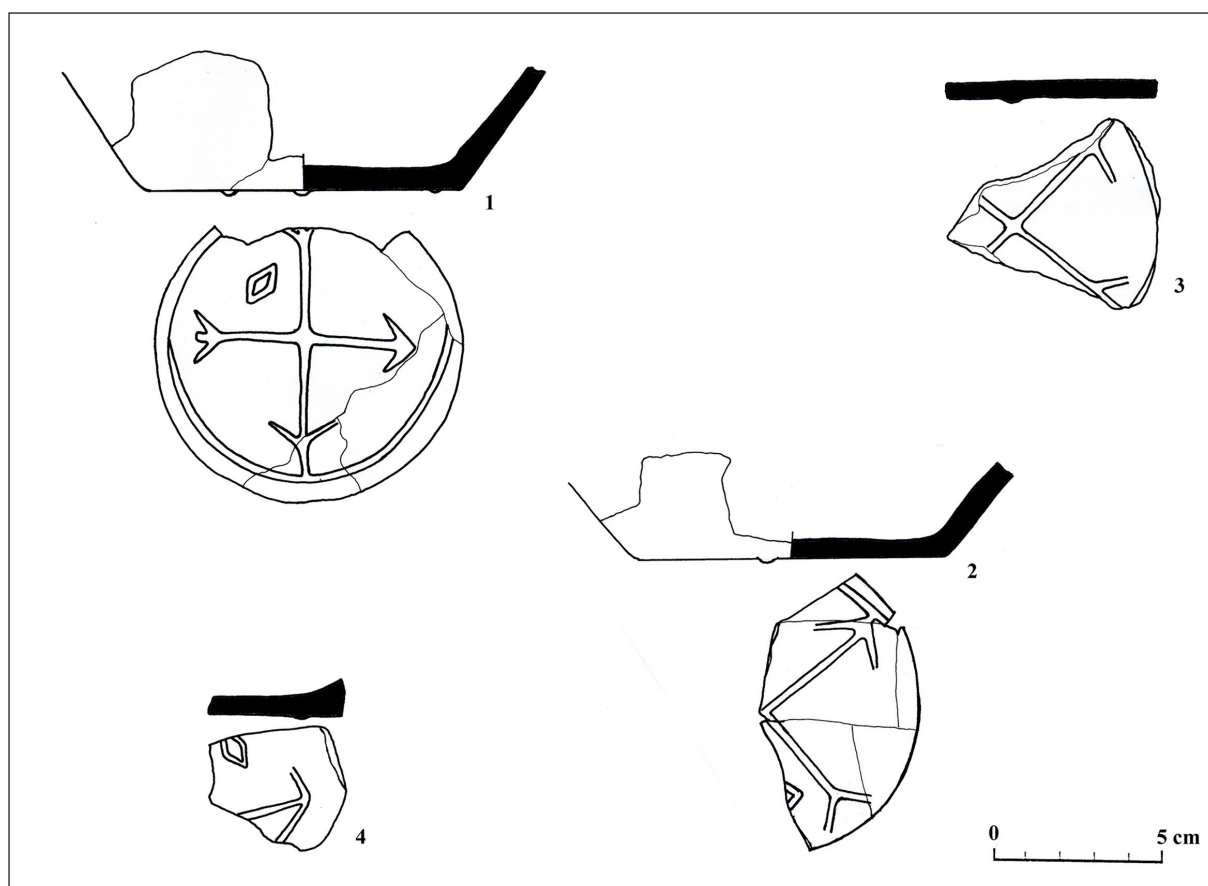


Fig. 10. Aghireș Sub pășune. Examples of identical potter's marks/symbols (source Băcuet-Crișan 2016).

Ceramic vessel as social status indicator

We have argued elsewhere that, particularly in burial setting, yet in the case of settlements as well, the rareness and quality of certain vessel forms suggest possible social stratification, of existing elite/elites in the respective community/communities²⁹. For instance, we reported cases of the sort in the cemetery at Alba Iulia *Stația de Salvare* (Phase I)³⁰ (Fig. 11).

Ceramic vessel as indicator of trading relations and economic power

Evidently, pottery production occurred in pottery centres, by artisans who were either travelling or not, their production circulating on more or less wider areas, on known trading routes. Owing to formal and decorative uniformity of pottery, it is difficult to identify the area of origin of a specific vessel type and its dissemination area. The identified archaeological contexts document the existing long-distance trade (in which pottery was also involved) through vessel exemplars particular to a certain production/cultural environment, identified in other cultural environments. For instance, for the Sylvania Depression, such a case is represented by the find in the *Marca Sfârâuș I* settlement (Fig. 12) of amphorae (worked on the fast-wheel) manufactured by the Lower Danube, arrived in the area (most likely) with olive oil or wine, which suggests a certain economic power of the community there³¹.

Ceramic vessel as bearer of absolute chronological data

The suggested typo-chronologies of different pottery lots (together with other artefact classes) do not always provide a restricted and secure dating. The ceramic vessel may supply such data via C14 analyses or of other type. Chronological framing propositions based on formal and typological

²⁹ Băcuet-Crișan 2012, 279-299.

³⁰ Băcuet-Crișan 2014, 111, Pl. X.

³¹ Csiky 2015, 333 and subsq.; Băcuet-Crișan, Bejinariu 2020, 70.

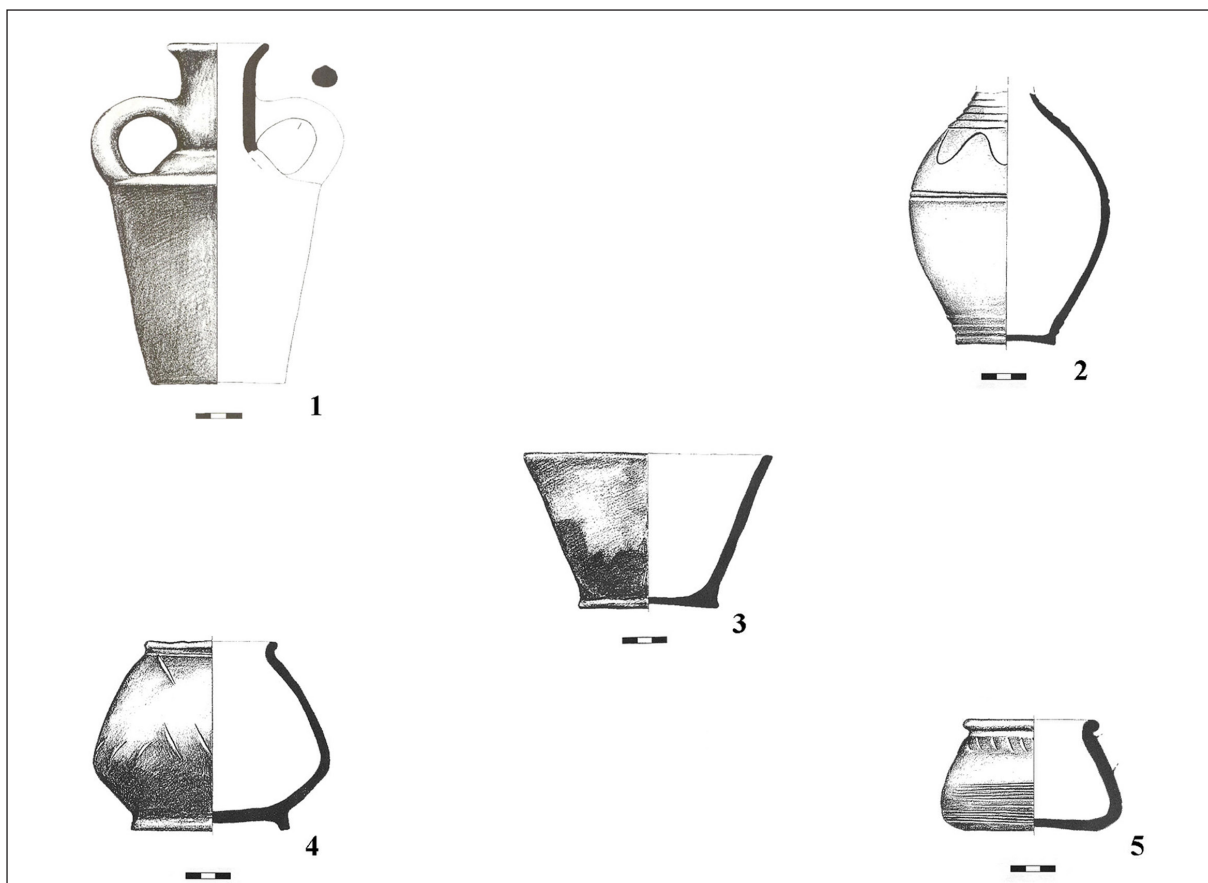


Fig. 11. Alba Iulia Stația de Salvare (Phase I). Examples of rare pottery forms (source Băcuet-Crișan 2014).

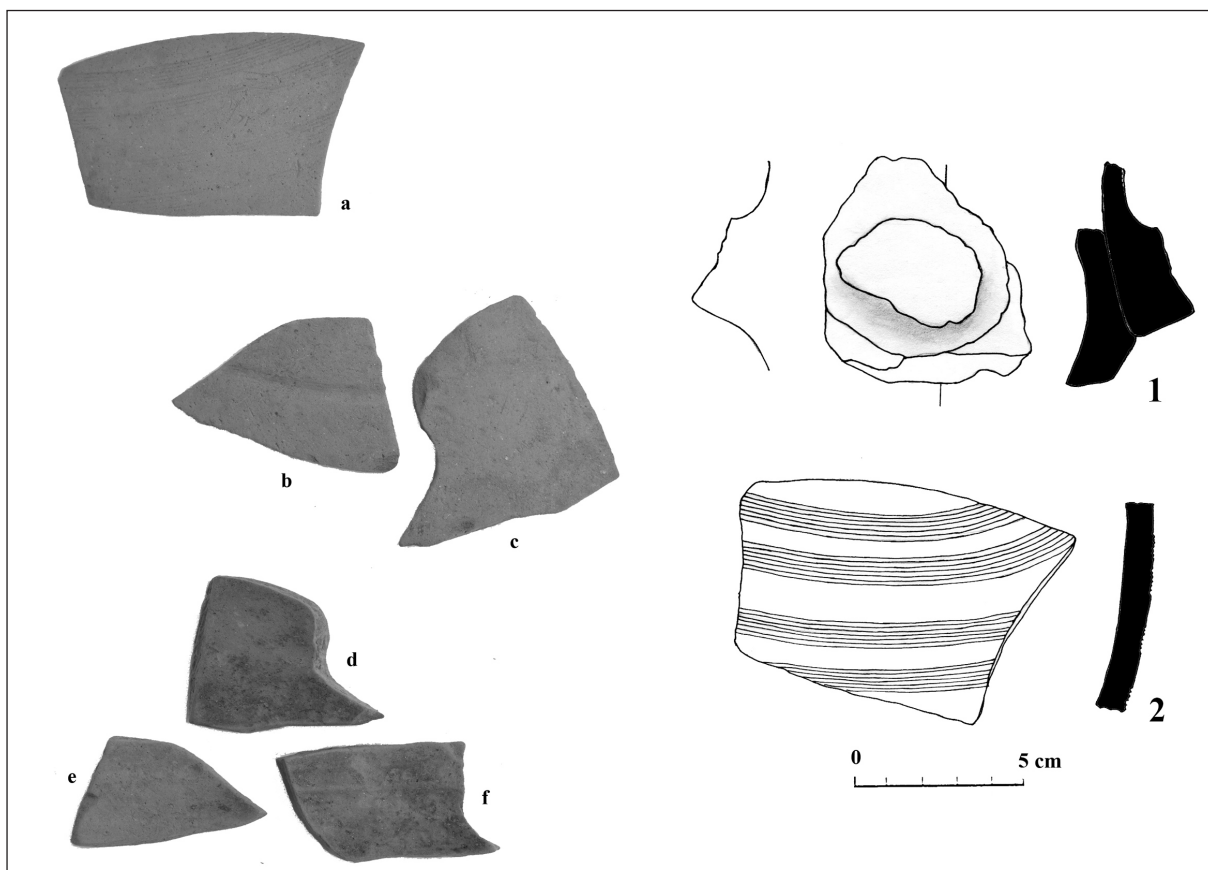


Fig. 12. Mark Sfârâuș I. Fragments of Byzantine amphorae (source Băcuet-Crișan, Bejinariu 2020).

analyses only may however be misleading, like for instance the case of fast-wheel thrown pottery identified in the Sylvania Basin dated to the 9th-10th century (re-dated to the 8th-9th century)³², C14 analysis offering a much earlier chronological date!³³

Ceramic vessel as indirect indicator of other daily realities

The pottery analysis process tackles as well the manner in which vessel surfaces were finished/coated. Many of these recipients preserve (especially on the interior) traces of potterfingers. Specialised analysis of human fingerprints (well preserved/imprinted in the soft clay) could supply precious information on the potter's gender and age. An example of detailed surviving of the potter's fingerprints originates from the early medieval stronghold of Şimleu Silvaniei *Observator*³⁴ (Fig. 13). The fingerprints' study of the sort may lead to important data on the potter's/potters' gender (males and females), as well as the age classes of those involved in the pottery-making phases (modelling and decoration).

It is known, at least in the Romanian archaeology, that there are few cases of surviving fabrics, any information on fabric types used in the period being highly useful. Indirect data on this topic may be supplied by the clay recipients with fabric remains preserved on the base (Fig. 14), onto which these lay to dry prior firing^{35 36}.

The manner in which some implements/assemblages were assembled may be detected

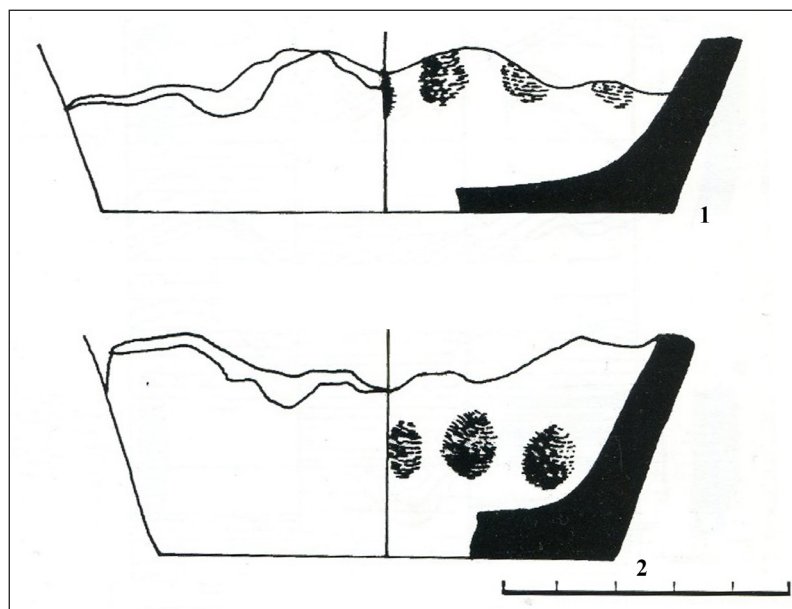


Fig. 13. Şimleu Silvaniei *Observator*. Vessels with fingerprints (source Pop et al. 2006).

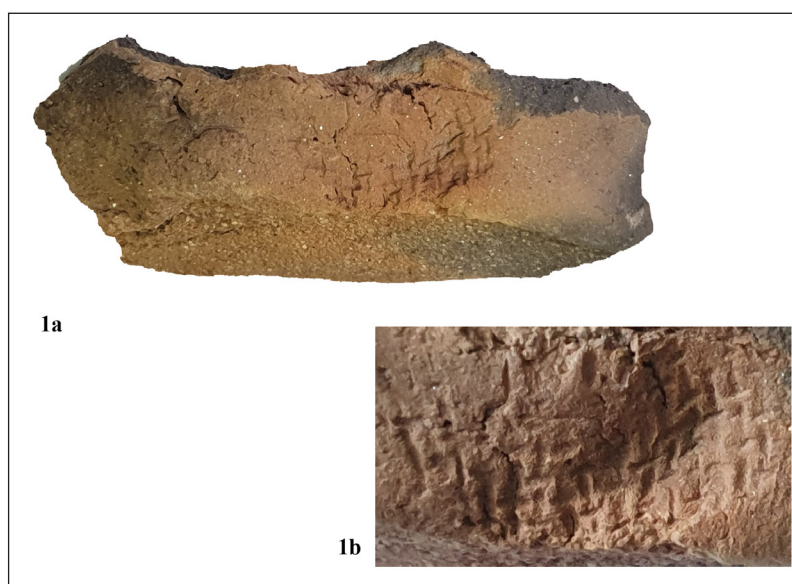


Fig. 14. Oltina *Capul dealului*. Vessel base with fabric print (photo C. Paraschiv-Talmaţchi)

³² Stanciu 2000, 156; Stanciu 2016, 215, 218, 261.

³³ Băcuet-Crişan, Bejinariu 2020, 85.

³⁴ Pop et al. 2006, Pl. 23/2-3.

³⁵ Fabric prints were also identified on some of the coating/adobe fragments discovered in the settlement of Bucov *Rotari* and Bucov *Tioca* (Comşa 1978, Pl. XIII).

³⁶ Vessel base discovered at Oltina *Capul dealului* in 2016. Unpublished find. We thank our colleague dr. Cristina Paraschiv-Talmaţchi this way too, for information on the artefacts and its photos.

(indirectly) through the analysis of the prints they left on ceramic vessel surfaces. This is supported by a series of vessels (the 6th-7th century) from north-western Romania (Fig. 15), whose bases preserve the print of the central rod of the potter's wheel, on which vessels were thrown³⁷.

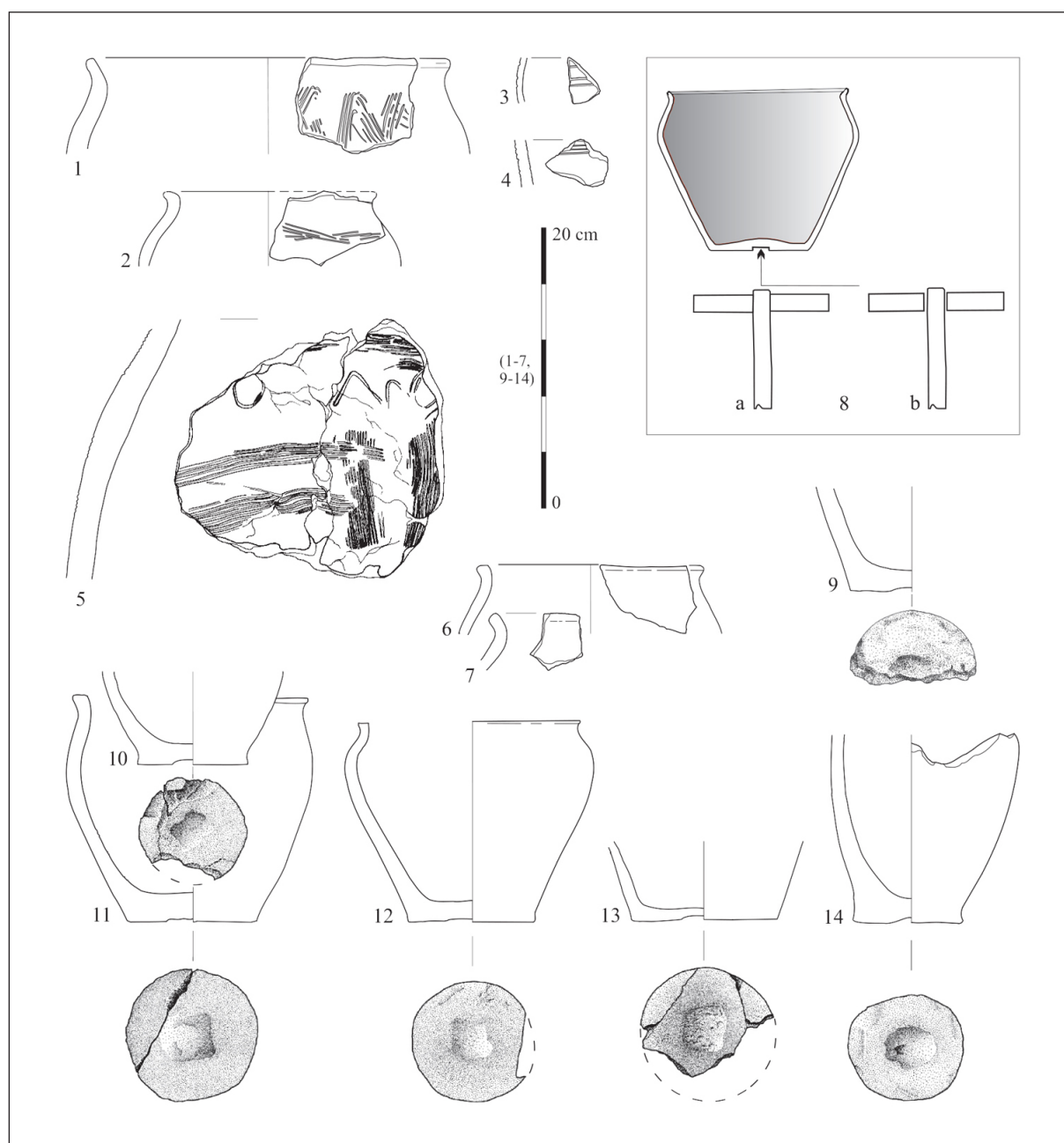


Fig. 15. Examples of vessel bases (8-14) with the print of the potter's wheel assemblage (source Stanciu 2021).

Another age marker of some community members is represented by the miniature vessels (in various forms) interpreted as possible toys (used by children), like the exemplars discovered in Sylvania Basin³⁸ (Fig. 16).

The tools kit that the potter/potters used to finish vessel surfaces³⁹ and accomplished various decorative elements is approximated, yet rarely identified archaeologically. A detailed analysis of the decoration may complete the data on the implement types utilised to make the incised or imprinted

³⁷ Stanciu 2021, Fig. 5.

³⁸ Băcuet-Crișan 2022, 34-39.

³⁹ An interesting case is that of slow-turning wheel vessels whose internal surface displays those *innenrilling* (wheel-throwing traces). Detailed analysis of the issue at: Stanciu 2021, 83-97.

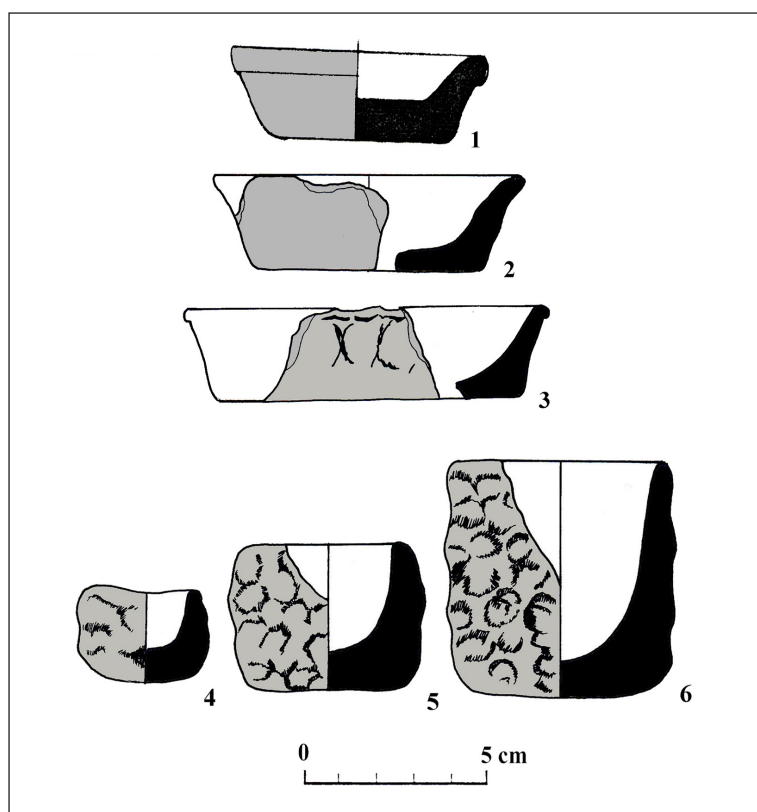


Fig. 16. Examples of miniature vessels (toys)
(source Băcuet-Crișan 2022).

The composition of vessel fabric may offer data on certain plant cultures (the clay used in the making of handmade recipients is mixed with straws/husk) or aquatic fauna (vessel fabric containing with snail shells or crushed shells, used as temper)⁴².

The indirect information “baggage” (on the daily life of a human community), which a ceramic vessel may provide, should be completed by crucible and clay mould specimens involved in the metalworking activities, as it is known that chemical analyses may identify the metal (alloy) and working temperature⁴³.

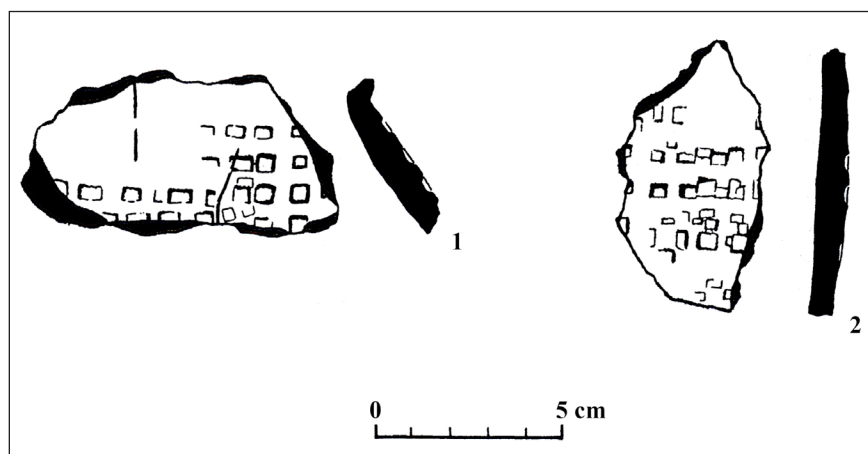


Fig. 17. Nușfalău Țigoiul lui Benedek. Pottery decorated in relief by impression
(source Băcuet-Crișan 2014a).

elements: straight or wavy lines (comb-made), short incisions (a sharpened tool was used), rows of impressions. An interesting example of decorative elements and tools used to make these is provided by the ceramic fragments decorated in relief (by impression) from the settlement of Nușfalău Țigoiul lui Benedek (Fig. 17)⁴⁰.

While examining ware forms and their purpose, we attempt to deduce their content as well, at least in the case of wares used to cook food and tableware. More specific information (regarding what was cooked/carried/stored in respective wares) may be supplied by the physical-chemical analyses of vessel walls. Furthermore, data on the clay source (the vessel's production location) and firing temperatures in the potter's kiln⁴¹ may also be obtained.

⁴⁰ Băcuet-Crișan 2014a, Pl. 14/1-2.

⁴¹ For instance, for north-western Romania, a first argument of an extant local production (of fast-turning wheel made pottery) was provided by the XRF and FTIR type analyses performed in 2018 on pottery and soil samples (Băcuet-Crișan, Bejinariu 2020, 82).

⁴² For instance, such finds in the Bobota Pe vale/Ierțaș settlement (Băcuet-Crișan 2010, 25).

⁴³ We exemplify with two settlements from Banat where crucibles and clay moulds were discovered: Susani Săliște (Tănase 2019, Pl. 3/6) and Remetea Mare Gomila lui Pituț (Tănase 2021, Pl. 3).

Instead of conclusions: early medieval pottery ...Queen or Cinderella?

Obviously, not all lay and spiritual facets of daily life involving ceramic wares have been detailed here, however we believe that we have successfully drawn attention to such aspects. Our argument relied on references to only some contexts and artefacts, with the belief they are much more numerous. Undoubtedly, in the research of early medieval pottery, issues related to purpose, use, re-use and recycling should be investigated in more depth.

The topic of re-use and recycling (what and how much was recycled in the early medieval pottery?) was briefly discussed here, however the accurate/real magnitude of this aspect is obscure for now. In what the purposes and functions of pottery wares are concerned, unless forms are securely differentiated/identified, in the future we shall still rely on abstract, unrealistic and useless typologies. It is certain that despite their massive presence in the inventories of the investigated archaeological features, pottery wares (regardless their shape) will remain (at least in the Romanian archaeological research) artefacts with insufficiently harnessed information potential!

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