

SNAKE VESSELS FROM DIANA

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Among vast ceramic evidence from Diana, one of the most significant fortifications in the Iron Gates limes system (Rankov 1980, 61-69; Rankov 1984, 11-13; Rankov 1987, 16-36; Kondić 1987, 45-47; Kondić 1989/90, 261-270; Kondić 1996, 81-86), fragments of the specific class of pottery known as snake vessels (Schlangengefäße) draw special attention. Widespread particularly in the Western Roman bordering provinces, from Britannia to Dacia, they have become focus of various specialists, but still represent a phenomenon needing scientific attention.

Snake vessels commonly belong to the fine or semi-fine red wares (bright red to dark red or brownish-red colour), red colour-coated or seldom green or olive green glazed. Their typology comprises several forms: high ovoidal or spherical pot; ovoidal beaker; pot with two projecting neck-like ornaments; spherical or ovoidal crater (urn) with cylindrical or conical neck, with three handles or with three handles and three projecting neck-like ornaments; large cantharos (urn) with two handles; vessels of uncertain form - probably kernos (Amand 1984 - *Belgium and Germania*, 40-53, fig. 9.1-9.4, 10.1; Gassner 1990 - *Carnuntum*, fig. 1, 2; Schmidt 1991 - *Augst und Kaiseraugst*, 13-27, Abb. 2, 12, Taf. 25; Bolindeţ 1993 - *Dacia*, 134).

Snakes are applied on a wall of a pot, starting from the rim, vertically or slightly sloped, with different head endings. In a case of vessels with handles, snakes are twisted around handles (and projecting neck-like ornaments) with raised head placed on the rim or they zigzag on a handle, rim and upper part of recipient. Usually snake-like ornament is combined with stamped or incised geometrical decoration or occasionally with complementary relief decoration, i.e. anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or vegetal representations (Ulbert 1963, 57-66 Abb. 1-7; Popilian, Poenaru-Bordea 1973 Pl. IV/3, 4; Alicu 1980, 718 seven techniques and combinations of ornaments; Amand 1984, fig. 10.1; Gassner 1990, 651-656; Schmidt 1991: group A, Abb. 6 group C, Taf. 24; Bolindeţ 1993, 134-136 fig. 1, 2).

The vessels are attributed to the long time span from the first half of the 1st century to the first half of the 3rd century, the earliest being simple high pots with a single applied snake originating from Augst and Kaiseraugst (Schmidt 1991, 54, the first half of the 1st century - the first half of the 2nd century). Craters with three handles and three projecting neck-like ornaments, like those from Augst or Vindonissa, are dated to the Flavian period (Schmidt 1991, 54). The appearance of craters with three handles as well as cantharoi is contemporary, but they are most common for the 2nd and 3rd centuries, particularly the second half of the 2nd century and the first half of 3rd century (Amand 1984, 108; Schmidt 1991, 54; Bolindeţ 1993, 138).

Snake vessels from Diana, on the whole, have similar morphological characteristics and chronological attribution, but fabric of several fragments is what distinguishes them from other parallel finds. Nine of fifteen fragments recorded till 1996 are made of coarse china clay, i.e. white or buff sandy clay (Cat. 1-9, figs. 1, 2). As far as we know, although this fabric is common for the 2nd and 3rd centuries especially in Middle and Lower Danubian provinces (Bojović 1977, 35-26, cat. 518-523; Popilian 1976, 90 Pl. XXXVII; Brukner 1981, 41 type 7 T. 101; Garašanin et al. 1984, 60-71; Jevremović 1987, 59-68; Ivanišević, Nikolić-Đorđević 1997, 102, fig. 33; Nikolić-Đorđević 2000, 197-198), there are no documented sacral wares of this structure, with probable exception of two fragments discovered at Romula and Orlea, in Dacia (Popilian 1976, 68 cat. 293, 296 Pl. XXVII, XXVIII).

Fragments of the coarse white snake wares belong to the large vessels in a form of an ovoidal or spherical crater (urn), with slightly conical or cylindrical neck, with two or three

handles (Diana type XI/9 fig. 4.16). Only one fragment of triangularly thickened rim is found; other are wall and handle pieces. Relief moulded single snake, with small dense incised circles representing skin, is applied meandering on a rim, upper part of the recipient or on a handle. In one case there are two snakes applied along a handle. This decoration is combined with tree or leaf-like ornament incised on the upper part of the vessels: the fragments of the rim and neck (Cat. 1, 5) illustrate the pattern and basis for classification of the other fragments in the group of the snake vessels (Cat. 3, 7). One fragment (Cat. 2) bears additional relief decoration along with incised ornament: a schematized representation (a bull's head?). They were found in the layers attributed to the Early Roman period, from the end of the 1st century to the middle of the 3rd century.

Fine, and in one case coarse, red snake wares are represented by three fragments of large vessels, most probably also of crater (fig. 3). Snakes are precisely moulded, twisted around handle or zigzagged on the wall. In one case snake-like ornament is combined with other relief ornament (leaf with venation), very similar to the type of decoration of the terra sigillata production. They were also found in the layers from the end of the 1st century to the first half of the 3rd century.

A number of snake vessels' finds at Diana should not be surprising in respect of its abundant and various ceramic evidence. The significance of Diana extends over it being solemnly military site: it is an important statio with port and could be seen, with adjoining settlement, as significant trade center (Rankov 1987, 24; Kondić 1987, 46; Kondić 1996, 156 n. 20). Along with common Early Roman pottery, both imported and of local production (Jevremović 1987, 54-70; Cvjetičanin 1996, 93-99), there were also found numerous specific and rare objects, some of them sacral wares like Drag. 39 vessels (Cvjetičanin 1996a 178 fig. 9), and other distinguish by its fabric, like the Early Roman glazed wares (Cvjetičanin 1999, 731-742). Attention should also be drawn to several fragments classified by form into a group of closed vessels with handles, like XI/13 and II/56. Those are fine red wares, red colour-coated, with elaborated features that are suggesting their specific purpose. Large spherical pot of a dolium form with triangular rim and lavishly decorated handles (Cat. 13 fig. 4) is recognized as particular type. Other is urn with cylindrical neck and triangularly on the inside thickened rim with specifically moulded handles (Cat. 14 fig. 4). Moreover, among coarse red wares a bifurcated pseudo-coiled handle decorated with relief presentation (male head - Pan?) was also recorded. Distinct features of these vessels allow assumption about their specific function and similarity with certain characteristics of the snake wares (Popilian 1977, cat. 292 Pl. XXVIII cat. 298 Pl. XXIX; Bolindeț 1993, fig. 2.1; Nikolić-Đorđević 2000, 183, other vessels cat. 1) suggests that they could be treated as types of the aforementioned group. All fragments were found in layers attributed to the period of the 2nd and the first half of the 3rd centuries.

Vessels with applied snake-like decoration are considered to be sacral wares, usually ascribed to certain aspects of Mythraistic cult (Ulbert 1963, 65; Popilian, Poenaru-Bordea 1973, 248; Benea 1976, 55-61; Popilian 1976, 66-74; Amand 1984, 107; Rupp 1987, 230 Taf. 52; Gassner 1990, 653; Bolindeț 1993, 128), or to the cult of the other Eastern god, Sabazios (Ulbert 1963, 65; Popilian, Poenaru-Bordea 1973, 249; Schmid 1991, 68; Bolindeț 1993, 128). Based on particular finds in Dacia they were lately connected to the cult of Liber Pater also (Alicu 1980, 725; Gassner 1990, 653). The find from Landol, in Upper Moesia, opens up another possibility: these vessels could also appear in funeral cult, with indirect relation to Mythra or Sabazios-Dyonisios circle (Jovanović 1995, 113). Connection with Dyonisios is also pointed out for vessels recorded outside the mentioned most dense area, like a small number of vessels found in Greece. These are recognized as sacred recipients for ritual meal-offering in Dyonisios' or Demethra's cults (Marty 1991, 351-354). Recently the emphasis is also given to their use in a private, domestic cult: the belief that snake is bringing protection for a house and

for a family members is often in pre-Roman indigenous mythologies (Schmidt 1991, 62-68).

In this perspective interpretation of incised decoration on the coarse white snake vessels is of interest. Incised ornament like branch or tree (evergreen oak) is structured and its repetition suggest particular purpose and meaning. May perhaps we recognize in this decoration a symbol of aerial, i.e. above ground space filled up with vegetation, as a reading is for similar ornament appearing on pottery from different prior and later cultures in this region (Marjanović-Vujović 1987, 149-150 fig. 1, 2). These vessels could be related to indigenous beliefs of a renewal and fertility and to rituals for a rainfall (i.e. watering of vegetation). We would like to point out that even if relief decoration prevails over incised one (Negru 1997, 98), comparable ornament could be identified on a number of Dacian vessels from Roman period (Bichir 1984 Pl. XI.9; Nikolić-Đorđević 2000, 79-80 type II/34), several of them found at Diana in strata of the 1st and 2nd centuries (Jevremović 1987, 61 type II/7). In the case of coarse china clay vessels it seems to us that this native cult found its expression in a new form. The choice of a crater with snakes is understandable in relation to local familiarity with a serpent, its power and aspect. Representations of snake are common in pre-Roman and Roman period in this area. One of apparent examples is jewelry, whereas autochthonous tradition, in which snake symbol appear, existed from the 5th century B.C. till the 3rd century A.D. (Cvjetičanin 1994, 86; Popović 1994, 89-94; Popović 1996, 53-57) Hence, snake vessels were easily recognizable and acceptable, comprising capability of protection also.

A number of gods from Roman pantheon as well as of those of Eastern origin possess snake as a feature. But to accept it like a manifestation of a local cosmogony deity should be endowed also with power of reproduction. Among gods discussed in context of snake vessels Liber is one of those divinities, one in our case preferred: he is a god of fertility (both of crops and meadows, but of livestock and people too and of minerals, i.e. subsoil), but also of a vine and vineyards, a guardian of a picking and of a feast. Former role and attributes are those acquired from Dionysus. It should be emphasized that in the Roman Imperial period he was frequently related with Oriental deities also, as Mythra, Sabazios, Isis (Bruhl 1953, 250-256). Then again, in Roman provinces Liber often take over the function of native cults and deities, in particular of a local god of vegetation and fertility (Bruhl 1953, 220).

The evidence of a variety of cults in the Early Roman period was discovered during long lasting excavations at Diana, usually of god and goddesses of the Roman pantheon, as bronze statuettes of Mercury, Neptune, Jupiter, Minerva and the like (Kondić 1996b 153-159; Janković 1969 T. LX, LXI; Kondić 1996a, cat. 17, 18, 20). But items were found indicating worship both of gods of Eastern and of local origin. Remains of one temple dedicated to Jupiter Dolichenus were discovered outside the fortification, on the nearby Danube bank (Rankov 1980, 61). Votive inscription dedicated to the Egyptian god Tot, from the very beginning of the 3rd century, was also found (Kondić 1987, 46). A marble head of goddess, probably Romula-Malva (Kondić 1996a, cat. 6, 3rd C.) as well as Drag. 39 plates with representations from Liber Pater - Dionysus circle (Cf. Ivanisević, Nikolić-Đorđević 1997, 106 fig. 38) indicate worship of syncretistic divinities of both Roman and local origin. However, neither Mythraistic cult nor the cult of Sabazios has been confirmed at Diana so far. Are snake vessels the first evidence of the existence of these Eastern cults, or we should recognize it as sacral objects of other cult, the plausible assumption being of the Liber Pater cult.

On the territory of Upper Moesia, on account of the published items, these vessels are scarce. Colour-coated vessels with snake decoration appear, save for Diana, at Singidunum (Nikolić-Đorđević 2000, 183, other vessels cat. 1, fine gray ware) and Viminacium (Rankov 1980a, cat. 302, 2nd-3rd centuries) and glazed specimens appear in Singidunum and Landol (Bikić, Ivanisević 1996, 258 fig. 5/6; Jovanović 1995, 113-114 fig. 3)(1) Coarse white snake vessels are a characteristic of Diana, excluding one example from Čezava (Pribaković 1969 T. XXX 2 with the relief presentation of deer) and one from Viminacium. It could be argued that

there is no pattern in their distribution, but while red colour-coated and glazed vessels are spread along whole Upper Moesian border, the second group is concentrated in the Iron Gates region (region of indigenous Dacian pottery). In our opinion both groups are sacral vessels attributed to the Liber Pater cult, but with a difference with whom is he merged with. Coarse white snake vessels could be related to the cult of Liber combined with local deity and fine wares could be from the Liber Pater-Sabazios circle.

Production centres of snake vessels from Diana could only be presumed. Fine red wares may possibly be manufactured at Viminacium or Singidunum workshop, as similar fabric indicates. Coarse white snake vessels could be of the same origin, but concerning their distribution the alternative is also Dacia. It could be argued that snake wares of similar fabric, with regard to published items, were not recorded among vessels found on 22 sites in Dacia (Bolindeţ 1993, 123-141). However, movements of auxiliary troops from Dacia to Upper Moesia (Garašanin et al. 1980: 80-83; Petolescu 1997, 82, 89, 94-95, 97-100, 107-108, 110), in particular the one recorded at Diana (Kondić 1994, 74 cohort V Gallorum, the end of 2nd and the beginning of 3rd C.) as well as strong connections between this part of the Iron Gates limes with Drobeta in particular (Garašanin et al. 1980, 79), indicate possibility that one of several listed production centers (Bolindeţ 1993: 136, Micăsasa, Cristeşti, Apulum, Ampelum, Potaissa, Porolissum; Popilian, Poenaru-Bordea 1973, 256, Romula) is a source of coarse snake vessels.

In favor of this suggestion are also finds of the cult of Liber (and Libera). They are not that frequent in the Middle and Lower Danubian provinces as for example in Dalmatia (Bruhl 1953, 213-215, 220-223), but more than a few examples were found especially in Dacia (Bruhl 1953, 215-218). Usually, Liber Pater is amalgamated either with Dionysos or with Sabazios, and a number of inscriptions mention dedicators from the East (Hellenophonic region). In Upper Moesia Liber Pater monuments are discovered at Mt Kosmaj (Mirković, Dušanić 1976 cat. 170), Singidunum (Mirković, Dušanić 1976 cat. 16, 17), Vincea (Mirković 1986 cat. 27), Viminacium (Mirković 1986 cat. 28), Pontes (Vasić, Jovanović 1987, 130-132; Petrović 1996, 199-201), Naissus (Petrović 1979 cat. 25) and in the vicinity of Leškovać (Petrović 1979 cat. 109).

The appearance of wares with applied snake decoration was initially ascribed to the presence of troops recruited in the Eastern part of the Empire (Ulbert 1963, 66; Bence 1976, 5-61), respecting estimation that they are more common at military sites. Recently, as it was established that those vessels equally occur at both military and civil sites, their appearance is, in general, related to the presence of the Hellenophonic population ordained in mystical Oriental cults (Schmid 1991, 68). Without doubt, initial impulse for diffusion of these cults in Upper Moesia is of the same character and can be ascribed to the immigrants from the East, both civilian and military(2). But, in our opinion, its spreading and manifestation could be accredited partly to the local population.

Snake vessels from Diana represent highly significant ceramic assemblage. They are considered to be sacral wares ascribed to Liber Pater cult, in use from the end of the 1st till the middle of the 3rd century. Distinction in fabric and additional decoration is seen not only as an outcome of different production centres but also as an expression of Liber Pater's relationship with other deities. Further research of Upper Moesian snake vessels as well as detail research of this class in whole Middle and Lower Danubian region could provide additional evidence for this supposition. It seems that snake vessels on this territory, along with Drag. 39 plates, represent special phenomenon.

NOTES

1. Liber Pater cult is connected also with mines where he was worshipped also as a deity of fertility of nature, both green and mineral (cf. Dusanić 1999, 130-131) It should be emphasized again that one of the peculiarities of the Upper Moesian pottery is strong connection between mining regions and its population with an appearance of certain pottery classes (cf. Cvjetičanin 2000, 319-321)¹.
2. For the Eastern Mediterranean influences on Upper Moesian pottery production see Cvjetičanin 2000, 319-327

CATALOG

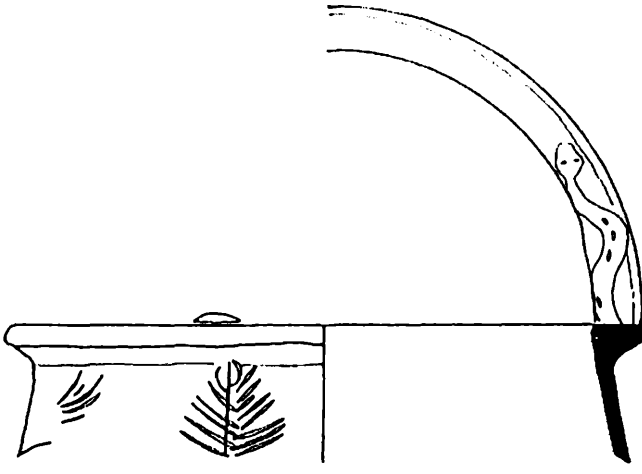
1. Rim and wall fragment, A: 94-1370 (B 133/94) fig. 1.1
Coarse white clay
Centre of fortification, S 54/85 room 1 under level IV, light brown soil, 3rd C.
2. Wall fragment, A: 94-4974 (B 281/94), fig. 1.2
Coarse white clay
Centre of fortification, S 67/89 under level IX- level X, yellow-brown soil, 1st-1st/2nd C.
3. Wall fragment, A: 94-4941 (B 280/94) fig. 1.3
Coarse white clay
Centre of fortification, S 67/89 level X, yellow-brown soil, 1st-1st/2nd C.
4. Wall fragment, A: 94-2570 (B 184/94) fig. 1.4
Coarse white clay
Centre of fortification, S 67/89, street, sandy brown soil with pebbles, 2nd-3rd C.
5. Wall fragment, A: 913 (B 10/81) fig. 2.5
Coarse white clay
South rampart, S 29/81 inside fortification, about foundation zone, yellow soil, 2nd-3rd C.
6. Wall fragment, A: 1947 (B 46/84) fig. 2.6
Coarse white clay
Centre of fortification, S 44/84 under level VIII, 2nd-3rd C.
7. Wall fragment, A: 181 (11/81) fig. 2.7
Coarse white clay
South rampart, S 29/81 yellow hard soil, 2nd C.
8. Handle fragment, A: 93-3693 (260/93) fig. 2.8
Coarse white clay
Centre of fortification, S 69/89 under level VII yellowish-brown soil along wall 9, 3rd C.
9. Handle fragment, A: 5470 (B 10/84) fig. 2.9
Coarse white clay
Northern gate, S 47/84 outside fortification, street, 2nd C.
10. Wall fragment, A: 13288 (90/64) fig. 3.10
Fine red ware, red colour-coated
Barracks, S 64/88 under level VI, light brown soil, 3rd C.
11. Wall and handle fragment, A: 94-2567 (B 184/94) fig. 3.11
Fine red ware, red colour-coated
Centre of fortification, S 67/89 street, brown sandy soil with residue, 2nd-2nd/3rd C.
12. Handle fragment, A: 94-4918 (B 280/94) fig. 3.12
Fine red ware, red colour-coated
Centre of fortification, S 67/89, level X, yellow-brown soil, 1st-1st/2nd C.
13. Handle fragment, A: 5954 (31/centre) fig. 3.13
Coarse red ware
Centre of fortification, 1987 room 1, light brown soil, 2nd-3rd C.

14. Rim and handle fragment, A: 2925 (B 9/52), II/56 type, fig. 4.14
 Fine red ware, red colour-coated
 Northern rampart, S 52/85 under level III, 2nd C.
15. Rim and handle fragment, A: 94-6708 (B 367/94), XI/13 type, fig. 4.15
 Fine red ware, red colour-coated
 Centre of fortification, S 69/89 under level X, brown with ashes along section ad, 2nd C.

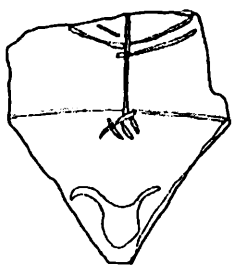
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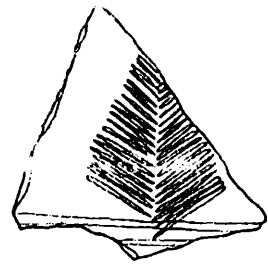
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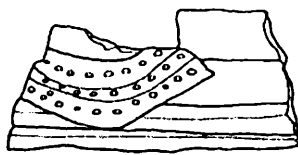
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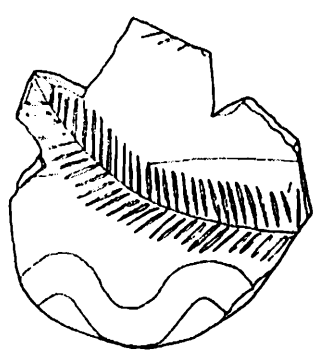
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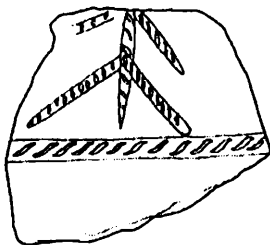
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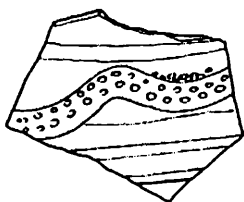
Fig. 1



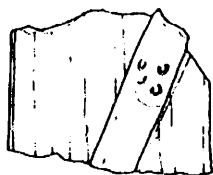
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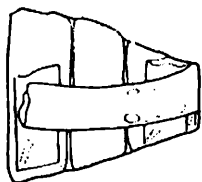
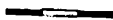
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6



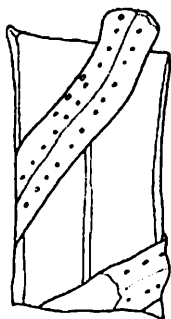
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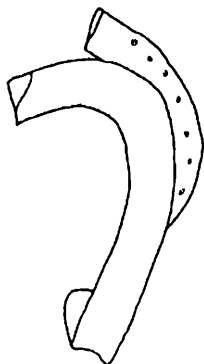
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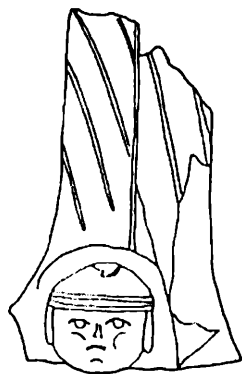
Fig. 2



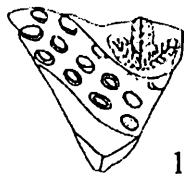
12



11



13



10



Fig. 3

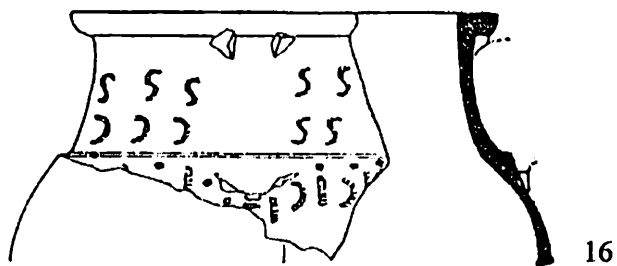
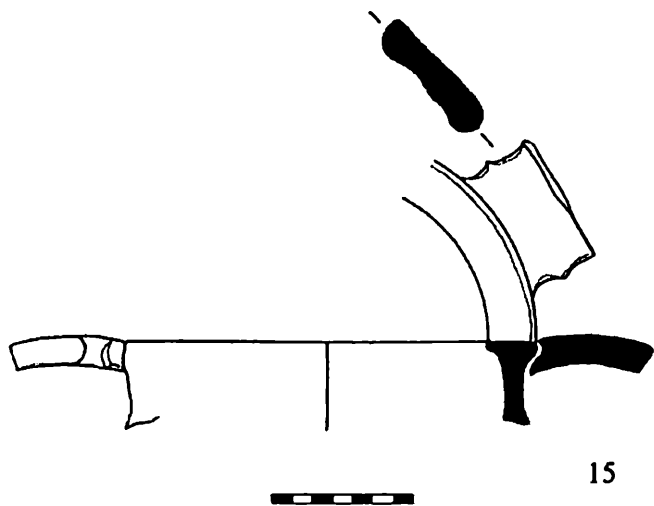
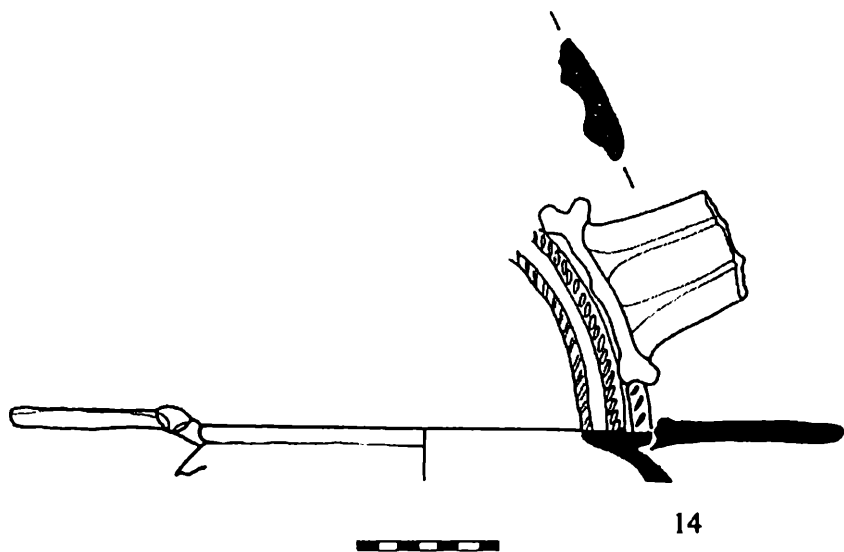


Fig. 4