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SOME FEATURES OF POTTERY PRODUCTION OF THE SIXTH TO FOURTH CENTURIES BC IN THE CENTRAL BALKANS

In archaeology, it is mostly in terms of typology that we think about pottery; it is on its forms that we base our attempts to determine, chronologically, culturally, even ethnically, its makers and users.

The invention of pottery provided man with a means to solve some of his everyday problems, which acquired a new dimension in the process of cultivating crops and domesticating animals. The first vessels made of fired clay finally provided a recepient which could hold water or liquid food without leaking, be put into an open fire in order to cook food or protect stored aliment against insects and rodents.

The vexed question remains as to how our ancestors arrived at the invention, but as it is beyond the interest of this paper, we shall not venture at raising it.

The question we are dealing with, however, concerns the place of pottery within the set of values of prehistoric man, as well as the reasons which caused a steady decline in its quality, from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. Certain aspects of this problem will be considered here.

Being susceptible to the influence of our contemporary experience, any quality evaluation of a prehistoric artifact may be a subjective category, which, in turn, may result in misinterpretations. This is not necessarily the case with pottery. First of all, the parameters to be taken into account (composition of clay, temperature of firing) are exact. Secondly, from an insight into pottery production throughout prehistory the need has arisen for an esthetic comparison, although the question may well be asked what it is that we really know about prehistoric man's aesthetic criteria. I think we know enough to be able to say that Iron-Age handmade pottery had gradually lost significance to its users, both in terms of symbolism and prestige, and basically retained its utilitarian function.

What reason had made the members of palaeo-Balkan tribes in the course of their ethnogenesis – from the Eneolithic to the Iron Age – become neglectful of one of the products so important for them, whatever made them give up a "baroque" sumptuousness of forms and even more that of decoration, typical of Vatin and Žuto Brdo vessels, for usually rough and carelessly made pots, often deprived of any decoration? What was it in their lives that changed?

Let us first take a look at the situation in the Balkans at the time.

In the period between 600 and 300 BC Greece witnessed a sequence of historical and social changes (from the Archaic period and the Classical age of polises to the Hellenistic states; Persian and Peloponnesian wars; rise and fall of the Macedonian state) which must have affected the Balkan mainland and definitively formed palaeo-Balkan tribes, some of them so big that they were able to establish the states of their own. All kinds of contacts (from wars to trade) were intensively maintained among these tribes themselves, as evidenced by written sources. From the late 7^{th} to 5^{th} c. BC the Autariates penetrated towards the east, whereas the Triballi and Dardanians were pushed back. All those events must have also affected everyday life of the Balkan population regardless of their ethnic origin.

The economy constituted another and no less important determinant of the development of the palaeo-Balkan tribes; namely, it was generally conditioned by the choice of lifestyle – sedentary, nomadic or semi-nomadic.

A review of the central Balkan sites containing pottery finds of the period shows that a total of 87 registered sites consists of 60 settlements and 27 necropolises. From their situation, built structures (if there are any remains) and sorts of finds, the settlements can be classified as plain and hillfort types. A number of hillforts with built fortifications and with structures within the walls, such as those in the highly Hellenized areas of the Southern Morava valley (Krševica, Oraovica) or in Kosovo (Hisar, Gadimlje, Belaćevac, Cernice), may be considered as proto-urban centres. The rest of them, rural in type, are situated along fertile river valleys (Morava, Danube, Kosovo) and, often, on elevated ground, which allowed better control of the surrounding areas and facilitated defence. Western parts of the central Balkans are exclusively characterized by hillfort settlements, mainly due to the configuration of the terrain. Both of the settlement types abound

in pottery finds, the quality of which varies from one site to another. Although no exact data are available concerning the total amount of pottery finds or the incidence of individual types, there is a clear prevalence of rough, handmade, thick-walled pottery, with bowls and pots as predominant forms. Low but frequent occurrence of grey, wheel-thrown pottery has been recorded in the settlements situated in the Morava valley.

In the necropolises of the period, most numerous in the western parts of the central Balkans, both forms of burial practice have been registered: inhumation and cremation. Being dependent on the ethnic origin of the deceased, these variations in burial practice and grave constructions permit a more precise differentiation. The graves are usually those under mounds, the most representative among them being the so-called princely graves. Pottery finds from the necropolises are relevant to the problem under scrutiny, first of all because of a number of occurrence of imported vessels, but also because of a number of wheel-thrown vessels which may be considered local products, such as several fragments found in the princely grave at Pilatovići. The composition of clay these fragments were made of as well as the colour achieved by firing relate them closely to the handmade earthenware from the same mound.

Let us return to the question posed at the beginning. Which factors lay behind the deteriorating quality of pottery in the period?

To the best of our knowledge, the technology of pottery making in the territory of the central Balkans had not changed throughout prehistory, all the way to the sixth century BC. Clay was mixed with various substances, such as fine sand, quartz, calcite, straw, chaff, ground sea-shells or chipped shards. Vessels were made by hand, either of one piece or coils, and then fired in kilns or in an open fire, their quality being dependent on the quality of clay, on the skill of the potter and on proper firing.

As for the pottery of the period, the range of forms had become reduced to the most functional and not much decorated ones. It means that potters were only satisfying the essentials, while the dilapidating fragments and uneven colouring of the breaks suggest inadequate firing.

Possible increase in the mobility of cattle-breeding communities, which constituted the majority of the palaeo-Balkan population, might have downgraded those heavy and fragile pieces of earthenware, especially if some other material (e.g. metal) was gradually taking their place, which, in turn, might have resulted in reducing household pottery to the indispensable minimum. When and how were those vessels made? Throughout the year all members of a cattle-breeding community were engaged with grazing or shearing sheep, making cheese, an important article in the world of Antiquity (D. Antonijević 1982, 40), spinning, weaving etc., which means that pottery making constituted an additional duty which seems to have needed to be reduced to the bare minimum. The making of a ceramic vessel requires time (to dig and prepare clay, shape, dry and fire the vessel) and, consequently, a longer stay in one place. As for nomads, the seasons at their disposal were either summer, when their herds grazed and many other chores were to be attended to, or winter, when the weather is unfavourable for pottery making (even today bread-pans are not made before May 14, Day of St. Jeremiah, patron saint of soil). In any event, constantly moving nomadic communities carried with them what was necessary alone. The best example may be that of the Saracachans, the last survival of the palaeo-Balkan nomads. This example, however, does not offer the possibility to study pottery because of its almost negligible use, but it is precisely this piece of information that may tell us something about this perplexing problem. Within their modest inventory the Saracachans have copper and wooden vessels, and, naturally, goatskin bags. Researchers have observed that they only seldom use pottery but, unfortunately, have not provided any further information about it (D. Antonijević). We can only assume that a similar inventory might have been in use of the palaeo-Balkan tribes, with the remark that metalware, quite a luxury at the time, could not have had as distinguished place in their households as it has today. Although an amount of earthenware is to be expected in their households, the dwellings of palaeo-Balkan nomads are practically "uncatchable". Constantly on the move in search for grazing-land, they left few traces behind which could be registered today. A small part of the pottery finds of the sixth-to-fourth-centuries BC may be related to them, although it is hard to tell which. Besides the fact that their dwellings (wattle huts at summer stations or tents while on the road) were built of decayable materials, they are likely to have buried their dead right there where they died, just as modern nomads still do. Although we cannot expect to find necropolises of the nomadic communities, perhaps a few individual graves in the mountains, on the tops of hills, might be ascribed to them (D. Antonijević 1982, 133).

Semi-nomadic communities practising transhumant animal husbandry left more traces behind, due to their permanent winter dwellings. They might have used a wider range of vessels. Western parts of the central Balkans offer particularly favourable conditions for such a lifestyle. From the large number of

princely graves and of other necropolises under mounds, with an analogous number of hillfort settlements, it may be inferred that it was there that semi-nomadic communities must have lived. Pottery from these sites is mostly of coarse temper and manufacture, with bowls, pots and goblets as dominant forms, which suggests that other materials (wood, leather) also served for the making of vessels, easier to carry around, but not as durable.

Agricultural communities must have been the richest in pottery owing to their settled way of life. Indicative of such communities is a large number of densely distributed settlements in the Morava valley, where flint sickles and millstones have been discovered (M. Stojić 1986, 88). These settlements may, however, well be seen as winter dwellings of nomadic herdsmen, especially if we accept the hypothesis that this territory was during the period in question inhabited by the Triballi and Autariates as well, well-known for their mobility (M. Stojić 1986, 103; F. Papazoglu 1968). A significant statement is to be found in Milorad Stojić's monograph on *The Iron Age of the Velika Morava Valley*: "Although a number of fortuitous metal finds have been classified as grave offerings, not even one Early-Iron-Age grave has so far been investigated in the Velika Morava valley" (M. Stojić 1986, 65). It should be noted that the Saracachans used to spend winters in rent houses (L. Žunić 1958, 6). From all these data, it may be inferred that in the Velika Morava valley there were agricultural settlements which used to give shelter to nomads or seminomads during the winter.

All these settlements abound in pottery, usually handmade, although an occurrence, and not negligible one, of grey wheel-thrown vessels has also been registered. Their features, first of all the quality of clay, suggest their being local products. The dating of these finds into the end of the sixth and the fifth centuries BC suggests that the use of the potter's wheel might have reached the central Balkans at an earlier date than has been expected.

The latter idea leads to yet another hypothesis about the reasons which led to the decline in quality of handmade pottery. It is not unlikely that it was the appearance of wheel-thrown pottery – both imported and that shaped in domestic workshops after the model of Greek ceramic and metal vessels, which were increasingly reaching the Balkan mainland – that made handmade pottery underrated, reducing it little by little to crude types. This hypothesis would above all apply to the hillfort settlements in the Southern Morava valley and in Kosovo, where the highest incidence of such pottery has been registered. A good example is offered by Krševica, a fortified hillfort settlement with three outlying hamlets, which had came into being by the end of the fifth century and was at its apex towards the middle of the fourth century BC.

At its southwestern bottom, pits have been registered abounding in pottery material. The excavations in 1966 have confirmed their funerary purpose (I. Mikulčić – M. Jovanović 1968, 356). As the exact, or at least approximate, number could be established of the vessels discovered both in the settlement and in the burial pits, the pottery material has been typologically divided into three basic groups: Greek import, Hellenized grey pottery and coarse handmade pottery. The material thus published has allowed a statistical analysis.

Of a total of 302 registered vessels most are wheel-thrown – 252 or over 80%. Among them, most frequently occur grey earthenware vessels (213), considered by the researchers to be of local manufacture. Only 39 of these wheel-thrown vessels have been identified as Greek import.

Among the 50 pieces of coarse handmade pottery only pots occur, varying from belly- to barrel-shaped in form, the clay being of coarse temper containing sand and fine gravel, which is quite understandable and reasonable. To make pots capable of enduring changes in temperature and uneven heating in the open fire one must improve clay by adding stone (hence fine gravel), which is to secure hardness. This hypothesis is corroborated by the pots still made by means of the hand-driven potter's wheel in the village of Zlakusa near Užice. The usual ratio of clay and stone (calcite) in this case is 1:1, although the amount of calcite sometimes exceeds that of clay (B. Đorđević-Bogdanović 1996, 7–12).

Far greatest in number, grey pottery reflects the point in technological development of the craft reached at the site of Krševica. Besides being wheel-thrown, these vessels are also well-fired (with few exceptions), and by the method of reduction, which implies a strictly controlled supply of oxygen. Among the forms that occur are bowls, oinchoe, hydria, kylix, skyphos and other Hellenized forms (I. Mikulčić – M. Jovanović 1968, 367–369).

The conclusion can be drawn in the end that handmade pottery was gradually losing its significance within the set of values of prehistoric man, an expression of which was the decline in its quality, the process that reached its peak in the period between the sixth and fourth centuries BC. Such a process may have been the result of various factors. Beyond any social analysis, only two of them have been taken into account here: a possible increase in the mobility of cattle-breeding population and the emergence of

wheel-thrown pottery, either imported or local. Whether the hypotheses put forward in this paper are correct will be shown by further research, which should involve a more comprehensive approach to pottery than commonly applied. The archaeological study of pottery which pays more attention to the technology, the assessment of diverse parameters (the weighing of all the material already classified by temper being one of the essential) and, certainly, the publication of the data thus obtained, could help us get a clearer picture of the problem which has only been outlined in this paper.

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