

# WE SEE IT TODAY, BUT WHAT IS IT? AN INTRIGUING FIGURAL IMAGE ON A CERAMIC VESSEL FROM HISTRIA

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**Abstract:** The paper brings to the foreground a ceramic artefact discovered in 2023 in Histria, in the “Basilica with Crypt” Sector, in a trench located in the vicinity of the Christian monument. The item was discovered in a 6<sup>th</sup> century AD context in a fragmentary state of preservation. It belongs most probably to a large-sized plate and stands out for its decoration consisting of a partially preserved anthropomorphic representation and a *graffito*. The authors propose a contextual, typological and stylistic analysis of the fragment, which aims not only to reconstruct the technological and functional aspects of the ceramic fragment, but also to discuss the archaeological context that delivered it.

**Rezumat:** În lucrarea de față este adus în prim-plan un fragment ceramic descoperit în anul 2023 la Histria, în Sectorul *Basilica cu Criptă*, într-o secțiune aflată în vecinătatea monumentului creștin, piesă care provine dintr-un context databil în sec. VI p.Chr. Artefactul fragmentar aparține cel mai probabil unui platou de mari dimensiuni și se remarcă prin decorație, constând într-o reprezentare antropomorfă și un *graffito* parțial păstrate. Autorii propun o analiză contextuală, tipologică și stilistică a acestui fragment, care vizează nu doar reconstituirea aspectelor tehnologice și funcționale ale piesei ceramice, ci și discutarea contextului arheologic din care aceasta provine.

**Keywords:** Late Antiquity, tableware, stamped decoration, province of *Scythia*, Christian symbols/iconography.

**Cuvinte cheie:** antichitatea târzie, veselă de masă, decor ștampilat, provincia *Scythia*, simboluri creștine.

## INTRODUCTION

The “Basilica with Crypt” Sector represents the only active research in recent years in the perimeter of an *intra muros* Christian monument at Histria. The Christian edifice itself is significant for the *Main Gate/Main Square* urban microzone of Late Roman Histria and gained scientific attention starting with the fourth decade of the last century, with the excavations carried out by Marcelle and Scarlat Lambrino in *Sector*

A<sup>1</sup>, which allowed the almost complete unveiling of the basilica and the extensive research of the area north of it<sup>2</sup>.

The monument covers the eastern part of the open space in front of the Main Gate and is connected to the urban space through a complex network of streets, whose configuration is partially known and verified in the field<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 1). Since 2018, research has been undertaken outside the Christian complex, in the area adjacent to it to the north and west, in order to investigate the road network that links the edifice to the surrounding area.

One of the few structures placed to the north of the Christian Basilica was identified by A. Petre in 1958-1959 and represents a north-south street (named by the author *street A*) at the eastern limit of the buildings on the north side of the Main Square<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 1).

The investigations were conducted between 2018 and 2023 in the perimeter of street A and its adjacent buildings to the west, near the only vehicular gateway into the city. Street A was excavated in two campaigns<sup>5</sup> (2018 and 2022) with a total length of about 12 m being uncovered. In the form in which it has survived, the street seems to be the result of a continuous activity, but in successive stages, as is the case with the neighbouring structures (Fig. 1). Its pavement is made of extremely rare green schists and limestones bound with compact yellow silt. This *battuto* is preserved on a continuous surface, has a slight slope to the south, and has yielded rich ceramic and numismatic material. A recent study on the ceramic finds from the perimeter of street A

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<sup>1</sup> The unpublished archaeological documentation of the Lambrinos, held in the archives of the "Vasile Pârvan" Institute of Archaeology, permits the reconstruction of the rhythm and manner in which the field research progressed in September and October 1931, in the area of the basilica – see Archive IAVP (copies), S. and M. Lambrino, *Recent Field Notebook 1929-1931* (commencing on 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1931), Sector A and *Histria – Album no. 6*, f. 242 (for the plan of the monument).

<sup>2</sup> Achim 2014, 265-266, note 3, Fig. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Oppermann 2010, 75-76, Pls. 5, 2 and 9, 1-2; Achim 2012, 141-145, Figs. 15-18; Born 2012, 84-90, Figs. 84-87; Achim 2014, in particular 270-272, Figs. 4, 16, 18-19 (for the Christian monument), and Mărgineanu-Cârstoiu 1984, 303-314, Figs. 3, 5; Stefan 2019, 72-78, Figs. 35-37 (for ancient urban setting and the road network).

<sup>4</sup> For the street A and the neighbouring buildings westwards see Petre 1962, 389-390, 392-393, Pls. III-IV. For a new discussion based exclusively on A. Petre's research about this group of buildings, their chronology and relationships with nearby monuments see Munteanu 2011, 237, 242-248, Figs. 1-4.

<sup>5</sup> Achim, Dima 2019; Achim *et alii* 2023, 194-195, Figs. 3-4.

shows that the material is in an advanced state of fragmentation, but extremely varied in terms of chronology and functionality<sup>6</sup>.



Fig. 1. "Basilica with Crypt" Sector and the surrounding area – drone view (photo: L. Cliante, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Streinu, Achim 2021, in particular 151-152, Fig. 32. The analysis offered by A. Streinu highlighted the main functional ceramic categories and determined that transport amphorae for wine have a significant share in the assemblage, in proportions almost equal to those of tableware. This data can represent further evidence to understand the functionality of these spaces and the street next to it.

The interior of Room 1 from the Group I identified by A. Petre on the northern side of the Main Square was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.84 m, but no coherent built structures have been found. The ceramic fragment in question comes from a compact yellow clay floor unveiled in 2023 inside Room 1<sup>7</sup> (Figs. 2-3). The large amount of rubefied adobe present in this layer indicates the violent destruction of a lightweight structure which was oriented towards street A (Figs. 4-5). The rich ceramic assemblage, characterised by a very fragmentary preservation state and broad chronology, found together with three coins dating to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>8</sup> and a Greek countermarked coin of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC are further arguments for the successive reconstructions/repairs of the last living surface, with materials from other areas. It is also worth noting that in the layers overlying this level (at depths between 1 m and 1.60 m), 6<sup>th</sup> century coins are found alongside other currency, ranging from the Early to the Late Roman period<sup>9</sup>.

The chronological diversity of the material is also reflected in the ceramic inventory, where one finds vessels belonging to the Greek (Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic), Early Roman and Late Roman periods. Among the pottery specific to the first group one can mention *lekanai* with two horizontal and high handles (Fig. 6/1), containers for storing and pouring liquids (including Hellenistic pitchers *à une anse pastillée*<sup>10</sup> – Fig. 6/5; Hellenistic mould-made bowls with relief decoration<sup>11</sup> and even a fragmentary mould for producing this type of vessels – Fig. 6/6), and tableware (such as Archaic bowls with dull reddish slip – Fig. 6/2; or black-glazed fish-plates and bowls – Fig. 6/3-4). The next horizon is represented by 2<sup>nd</sup> century wine amphorae (e.g., Dressel 2-4 type of Coan origin<sup>12</sup> – Fig. 7/1; Aegean “carrot” type<sup>13</sup> – Fig. 7/2),

<sup>7</sup> Achim *et alii* 2024, 197-198, Fig. 5a-c. Our warmest thanks go to Bianca Profiran, who took part in the 2022-2023 archaeological campaigns and whose technical skills were a great asset to the team.

<sup>8</sup> The numismatic analysis of Mihai Dima (National Bank of Romania Museum) reveals the presence of following specimens: M.121 – Justin II and Sofia, ½ follis, Thessalonica, year 10 (AD 574-575); M.122 – Justin II and Sofia, ½ follis, Nicomedia, illegible year; M.123 – Justinian I, follis, Constantinople, off. €., AD 527-538. We are very grateful to Dr. M. Dima for his numismatic insights, feedback and constant assistance.

<sup>9</sup> For example, M.107 – Bronze coin issued at Istros to Claudius I (very rare); M.108 – Justin II and Sofia, follis, Constantinople, off. Δ, year 9 (AD 573-574); M.110 – Licinius I, nummus, Heraclea, off. Γ, beginning of 313 (RIC, VI, 541, no. 73); M.111 – Constantius II, AE3, FEL TEMP REPARATIO type, AD 351-361.

<sup>10</sup> Coja 1979, 47, cat. nos. 30-33, Pl. 5.

<sup>11</sup> See more finds and considerations in Domăneanțu 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Peacock, Williams 1986, 105-106, Class 10.

<sup>13</sup> Opaît, Grigoraș 2022, 59, inv. no. 450, Pl. 13/450.

cooking pots of Honcu 2017, Type I<sup>14</sup> (Fig. 7/3), and tableware in a wide variety of 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries bowls (e.g., Pontic thin-walled bowls with rouletted decoration on the outside – Fig. 7/4; carinated bowls with wavy bands of Suceveanu 2000, Type XVIII/31-32<sup>15</sup> – Fig. 7/5; or local conical bowls with incurved rim<sup>16</sup> – Fig. 7/6). A significant discovery for the Late Roman period is a fragmentary deep bowl belonging to the so-called „Foederati ware”<sup>17</sup> decorated with burnished bands on the inner surface, both wavy and simple, and dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 8/6). The last functioning phases are represented by 6<sup>th</sup> century wine amphorae of Late Roman 1<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 8/1-2), Late Roman 4<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 8/3) or Kuzmanov XVI<sup>20</sup> types (Fig. 8/4), as well as by LRCW Form 10 B plates<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 8/5).

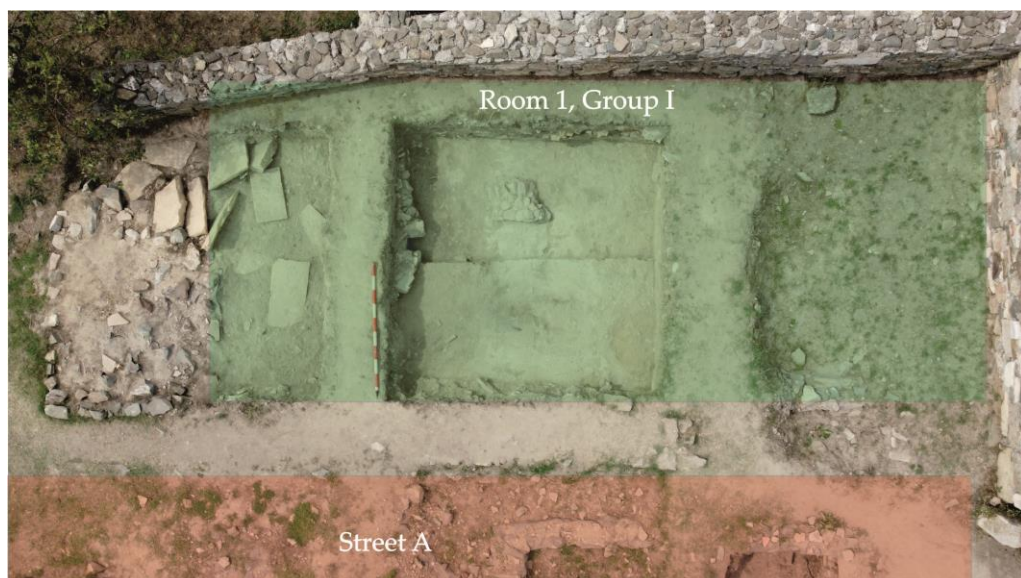


Fig. 2. Detail of Room 1, Group I – drone view (photo L. Cliante, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Honcu 2017, 43-50, type I.

<sup>15</sup> Suceveanu 2000, 74, cat. nos. 31-32, Pl. 27/31-32. For a similar find from this sector see Streinu, Achim 2021, 144, cat. no. 93, Fig. 18/93.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discussion regarding this type see Streinu, Achim 2021, 141.

<sup>17</sup> See an in-depth discussion at Swan 2019, 457-476.

<sup>18</sup> Pieri 2005, 70-77.

<sup>19</sup> Pieri 2005, 105-107.

<sup>20</sup> Кузманов 1985, 22-23.

<sup>21</sup> Hayes 1972, 343.



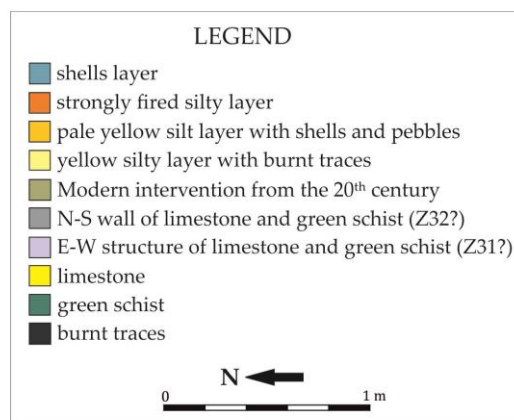
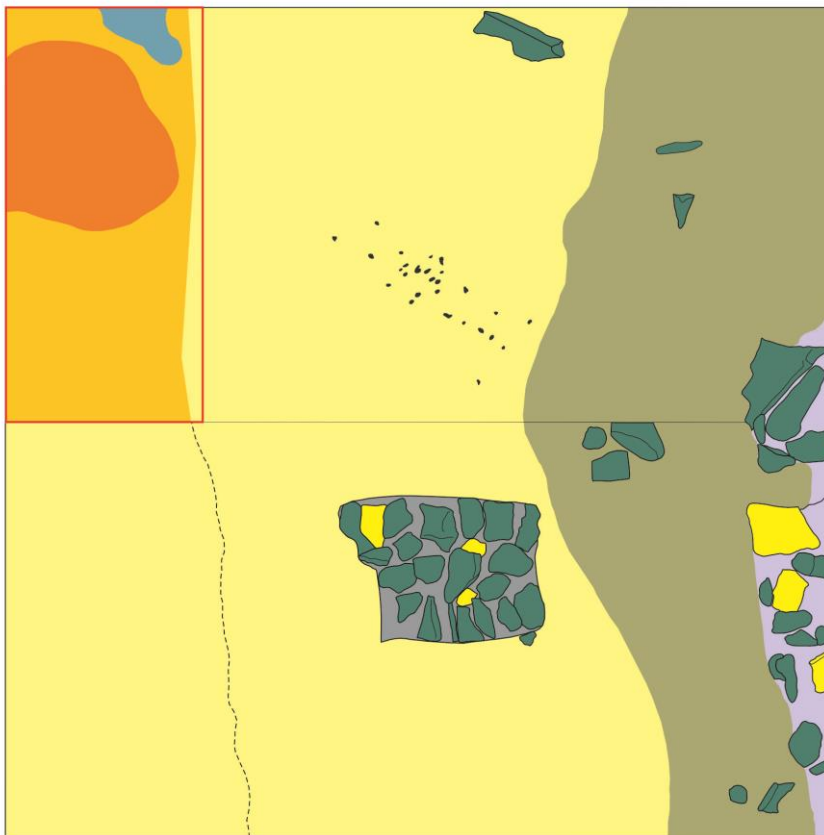


Fig. 3. Plan of Trench B4 with the discovery area of the ceramic shard (drawing by B. Profiran and I. Achim, 2022).



Fig. 4. View over the Eastern (1) and Northern (2) profiles of Trench B4 (photos by I. Achim, 2023).

### THE FIND IN QUESTION

The piece of interest for the current study is a pottery shard found in a fragmentary state of preservation, as only a small segment of the base has survived (Fig. 9/1-2). Although there are no morphological elements that would allow us to estimate its original dimensions, there are certain indications, like the circular incisions on the outer surface of the base made during wheel-throwing, that suggest it was a large-sized open vessel, with the rim diameter exceeding 30 cm. The macroscopic analysis enabled to determine several aspects of the vessel's technological process: it was made of semi-fine fabric in which

quartz, mica and iron oxides are present (Fig. 9/2). The vessel was wheel-thrown and, even though no slip was applied, it is very likely that it was smoothed before firing. All these features indicate that the piece belongs to tableware and represents a large-sized platter. What must be emphasized, however, is that the fabric characteristics distinguish this vessel from the main Late Antique tableware productions (*i.e.*, African Red Slip Ware, Late Roman C Ware, Late-Roman Light-Coloured or Pontic Red Slip Ware), being most likely the product of a provincial workshop. Based on the decorative elements that will be presented below, the fragment can be assigned to the Late Roman horizon, most probably to the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Unfortunately, the decoration is incomplete, a small segment composed of several elements being preserved, each of which fragmentary. The most visible element is a stamped anthropomorphic representation, followed by two unclear motifs made in the same technique, seen in the upper part of the fragment, and a *graffito post cocturam*.

The anthropomorphic figure is rendered as a human bust in profile, preserving the rear half of the head and the shoulders: as for the facial features, a small part of the character's exophthalmic eyes, short neck and hair can be seen. This manner of representation is very similar to that found on North-African tableware produced in Late Antiquity, as exemplified by several busts stamped on 6<sup>th</sup> century plates<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 10/1-2). The other stamped motifs are very difficult to interpret because of their very advanced state of fragmentation. One educated guess is that the vertical line, which, although interrupted, seems to continue upwards, represents the lower arm of a Latin cross, an element similar to another commonly found on African Red Slip wares and which is part of a more complex motif – a standing figure holding close against body, in the left hand, a “cross on staff”<sup>23</sup> (Fig. 10/3). Another hypothesis is that the line is part of an upturned spear, which is another motif quite frequently used in this period, also on North-African tableware<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 10/4-6). If these assumptions are taken into account, then the tiny stamp preserved in the left corner of the fragment could be interpreted as the lower part (the feet) of a second anthropomorphic representation, since both the cross and spear are usually associated with human figures holding them (saints and warriors, respectively)<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Hayes 1972, 269, Type 252, Fig. 52/252i (on a Form 104A vessel); Cardarelli 2022, 338, FU.15.2, Tav. 91/2 (on a Form 104A vessel).

<sup>23</sup> Hayes 1972, 265, Type 234d, Fig. 51/234d (on Forms 103B and 104); Cardarelli 2022, 326-327, FU.1.4, FU.1.5A, FU.1.8, Tav. 75/1, 3-4, and 77/1 (on Form 104A plates).

<sup>24</sup> Cardarelli 2022, 330-331, FU.3.2-5, Tav. 81/2-3, 82/1-4, and 83/4SNI.

<sup>25</sup> Hayes 1972, 227.



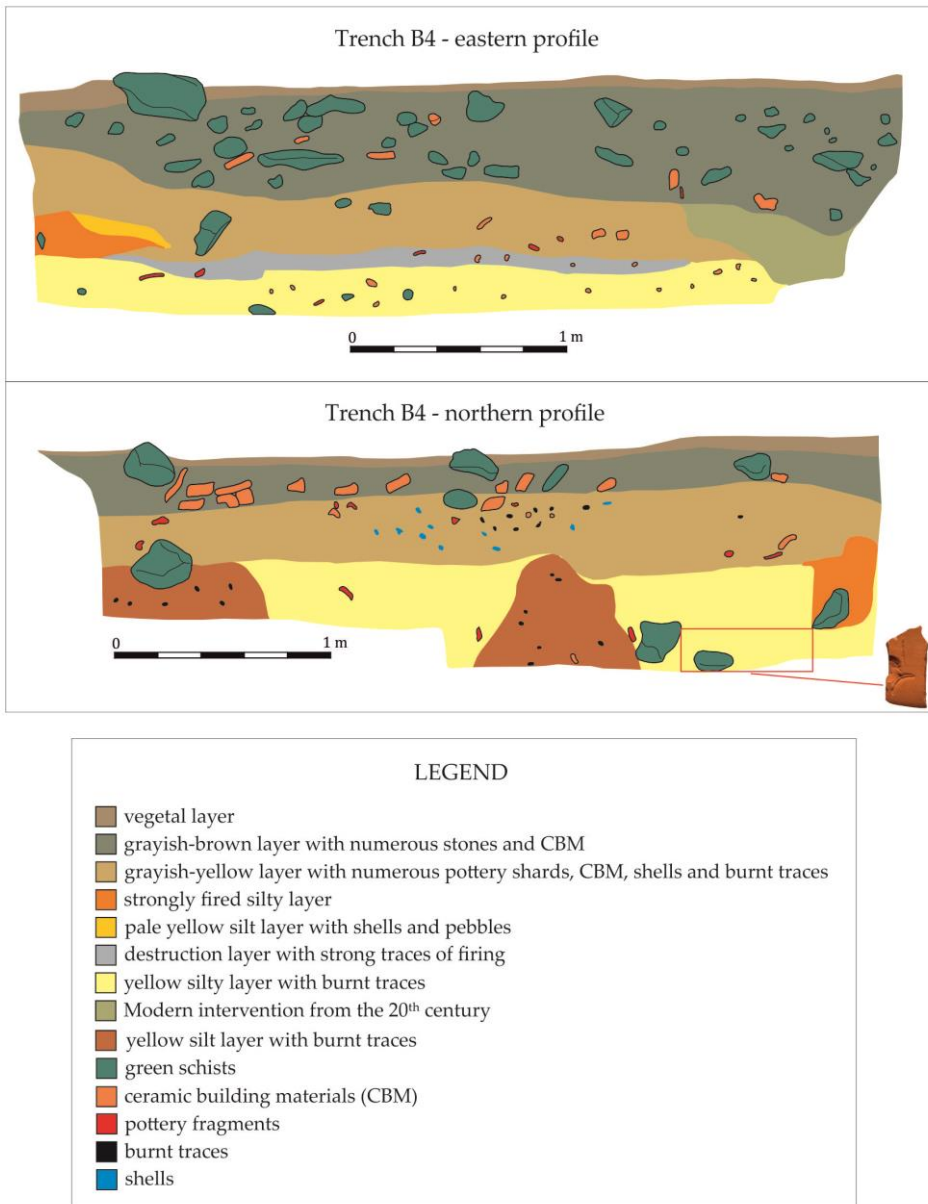


Fig. 5. Stratigraphy of Trench B4 – Eastern (1) and Northern (2) profiles (drawings by B. Profiran, I. Achim and I. Iliescu).

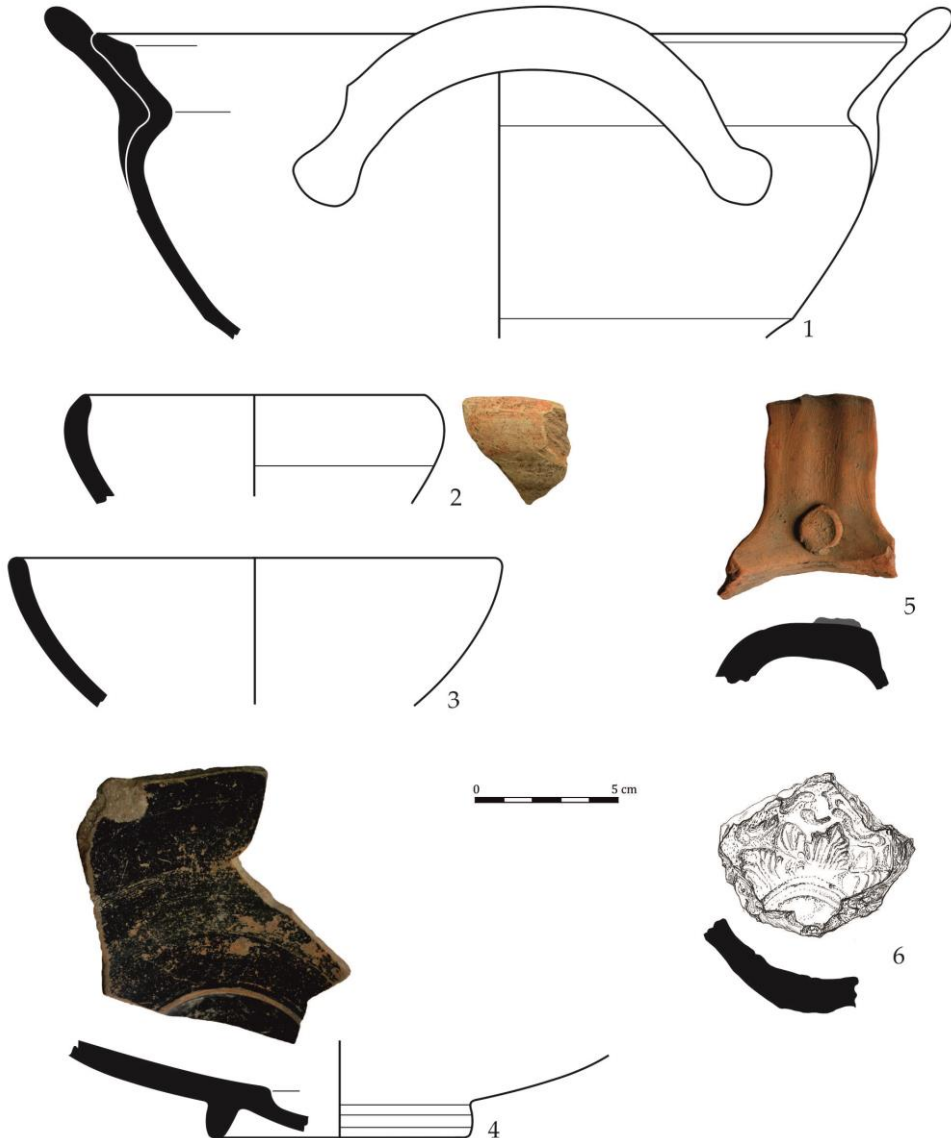


Fig. 6. Greek pottery from Trench B4  
(1-5. drawings and photos by I. Iliescu; 6. by B. Profiran).

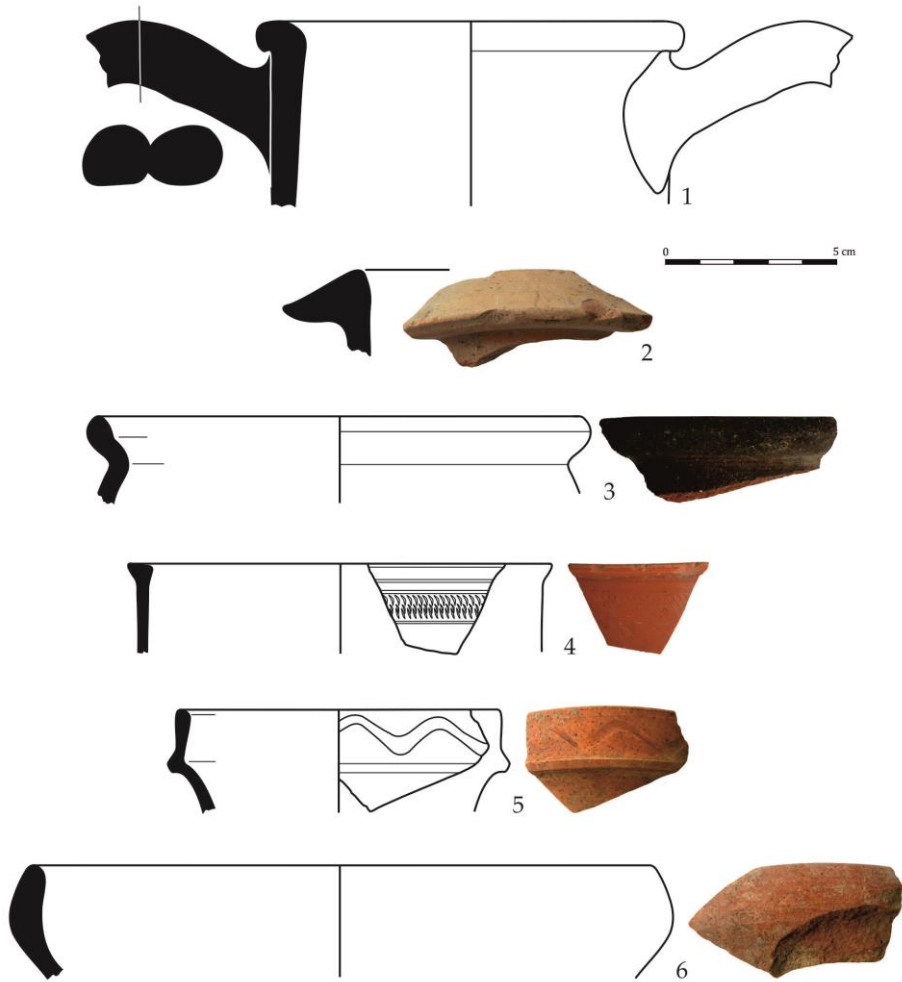


Fig. 7. Early Roman pottery from Trench B4 (drawings and photos by I. Iliescu).

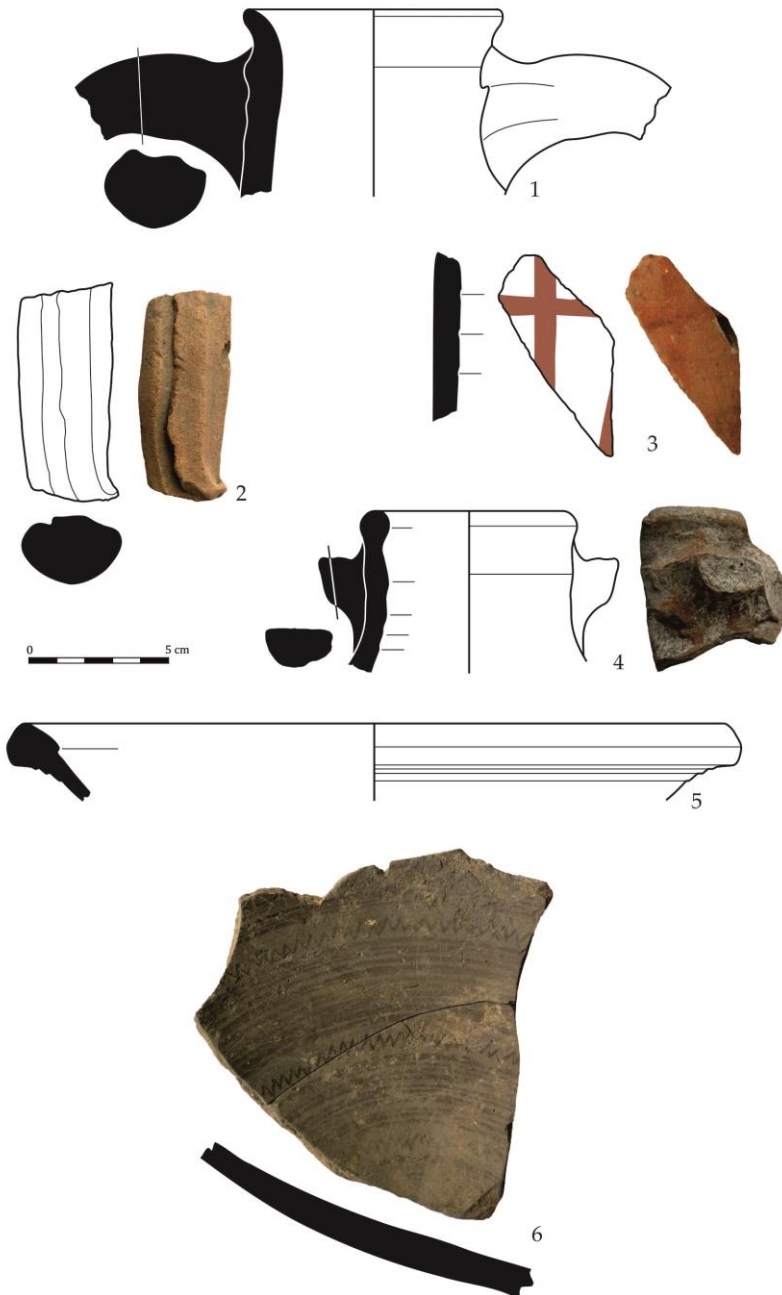


Fig. 8. Late Roman pottery from Trench B4 (drawings and photos by I. Iliescu).

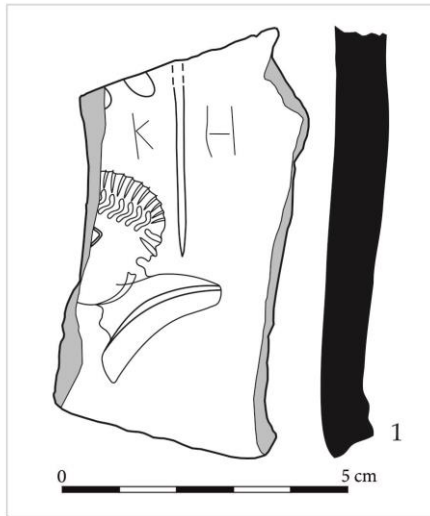


Fig. 9. The ceramic shard under scrutiny (drawing and photos by I. Iliescu).



Understanding the piece is made even more difficult by the *graffito* written on either side of the vertical haste, which has been preserved in an equally fragmentary manner. The only two visible letters are K H (Fig. 9). In the current context, their meaning is difficult to decipher, as there are several variations of terms or names from which they could come. The closest parallel so far, both in terms of the letters and the way they are arranged, is the mention on a 13<sup>th</sup> century Engolpion cross found at Păcuilul lui Soare, which refers to Virgin Mary<sup>26</sup>. Another possible reading, proposed by Dragoş Hălmagi after direct observation of the object, could be Κ(ΥΡΙΕ) Η(ΣΟΥ)<sup>27</sup>.

The two letters, together with the poorly preserved decoration, are therefore insufficient to reconstruct the written reference on the shard. However, if one considers the Christian significance of these letters, the likelihood that the stamped vertical haste represents the arm of a cross is reinforced, as numerous examples are documented on different media in which religious messages are written on either side of the cross arms<sup>28</sup>.

#### DISCUSSION / INTERPRETATION

The find is as interesting as it is problematic. In analysing the fragment, one could not help noting the fairly high similarities with the African Red Slip Ware: human busts in profile, with exophthalmic eyes and short hair, are a recurring motif in North-African ware, and are often used to border a central motif, be it an anthropomorphic representation or other symbols related to the sphere of Christian religion. Examples from the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century are very suggestive in this respect, in which the human bust is repeated twice, on either side of a saint<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 11/3-4) or a cross<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 11/1-2). Other representations that further help to understand the shard are those found on large-sized plates also belonging to the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, in which the busts placed both frontally and in profile accompany a fully rendered figure in military dress holding a spear in the right hand with the tip upwards and a globe in

<sup>26</sup> IGLR, no 185.

<sup>27</sup> For a similar inscription see Bull. ép. 1987, 677 = SEG 35, 736 (Paleochristian funerary inscription from Macedonia – same letters flanking a cross). We would like to thank Dragoş Hălmagi for his epigraphic insights and valuable comments.

<sup>28</sup> See for instance IGLR, nos. 64a (for silverware), 80a-d and 132 (for tableware), 130 (for *dolia*), 146, 148 and 153-154 (for amphorae), 198 (for bricks), 211 (for limestone), etc.

<sup>29</sup> Waagé 1948, 51, Fig. 32/1; Bejaoui 1997, 171-172, nos. 102-103, Figs. 102-103; 174, no. 105, Fig. 105; Cardarelli 2022, 325, FU.1.2, subtype A; 327, FU.1.8; 328, FU.1.11, subtype A, and FU.1.12.

<sup>30</sup> Waagé 1948, 51, Fig. 32/5; Bejaoui 1997, 198, no. 128, Fig. 128; Cardarelli 2022, 355, CR.11.5; 357-359, CR.12.3, FU.12.5 and FU.12.10.

the left hand<sup>31</sup> (Fig. 11/5-6). Thus, they are commonly used to form elaborate, composite decorative patterns that cover a large part of the vessels' floor.



Fig. 10. Decorative motifs on North-African tableware: 1-2. Human busts in profile; 3. Anthropomorphic representation with a cross; 4-6. Anthropomorphic representations with spear (after 1-2. Cardarelli 2022, Tav. 91/2-3; 3. Cardarelli 2022, Tav. 75/1; 4-6. Cardarelli 2022, Tav. 81/3 and 82/3-4).

However, the specific features of the piece in terms of fabric, shape (slightly curved towards the area where the base ring would have been applied) and decoration (tightly packed motifs in a *horror vacui* style) distinguish it from all Late Antique tableware. This raises the question of whether it can be considered an inspiration after

<sup>31</sup> Cardarelli 2022, 330-331, FU.3.4 and FU.3.5, subtypes A and B.

external prototypes and, more specifically, a regionally made product trying to follow the fashion imposed by the North-African tableware. This would not be a singular case, as the strong influence of this ware on other productions has been discussed on several occasions by the scholars. Due to its outstanding quality, as reflected in its intricate shapes and superb, elaborate decorations, African Red Slip Ware was very prestigious and enjoyed great popularity, but it was not as affordable as other tableware groups. This has led, on the one hand, to the development in different regions (Hispania, the Italian Peninsula, Greece or Egypt) of cheaper derivatives resembling these products, in which specific shapes are reproduced<sup>32</sup>. On the other hand, some of the vessels made in the North-African workshops influenced other major Late Antique tableware productions from the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea basin: for example, in the case of Phocaean Red Slip Ware, some morphological features, decorative motifs and patterns are adapted<sup>33</sup>; for the Pontic Red Slip Ware, a recent study brings into question the morphological connections between the most popular African shapes and the emblematic forms of Pontic production<sup>34</sup>.

In fact, this tendency to faithfully reproduce or incorporate specific North-African features was also observed in other categories of goods, such as amphorae, cooking vessels<sup>35</sup> or lighting objects. Of these, the impact of North-African lamps seems to have been much stronger: being made of the same high-quality fabric as the African Red Slip Ware and displaying complex decorations on the shoulder and discus, they genuine products are not as numerous as the lamps, which imitate or are inspired by these prototypes. Imitating North-African lamps seems to have been a global phenomenon, attested in numerous regions of the Late Roman world, such as the Aegean basin<sup>36</sup> and, more recently, the Ionian-Adriatic basin<sup>37</sup>. The West Pontic region joins the other areas in which such copies have been produced, since in many settlements in the province both faithful imitations and inspirations are attested<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Aquilué 2008; Fontana 1998; Bonifay 2004, 460; Bonifay 2014, 80.

<sup>33</sup> See Hayes 1972, 328 for the discussion regarding the influence of ARSW Form 59 on LRCW Form 2; 346, for the similarities in decoration.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Domžalski 2021, 164-168.

<sup>35</sup> Bonifay 2014, 76-79, and 84-85; Castaldo 2020, 264-268.

<sup>36</sup> Karivieri 1996, 39, 57-59; Petridis 2019.

<sup>37</sup> De Mitri 2023, 382-384, Fig. 5.

<sup>38</sup> See Iliescu, Bottez 2021, 219, note 122. More recent finds are attested at Capidava – Petcu, Georgescu, Petcu-Levei 2022, 328-329, cat. nos. 6-8, Fig. 8/6-8 – and Dinogetia – Grumăzescu 2023, 134-135, cat. no. 2, Figs. 2/2 and 3/2; 139-140, cat. no. 8, Figs. 2/8 and 3/8.

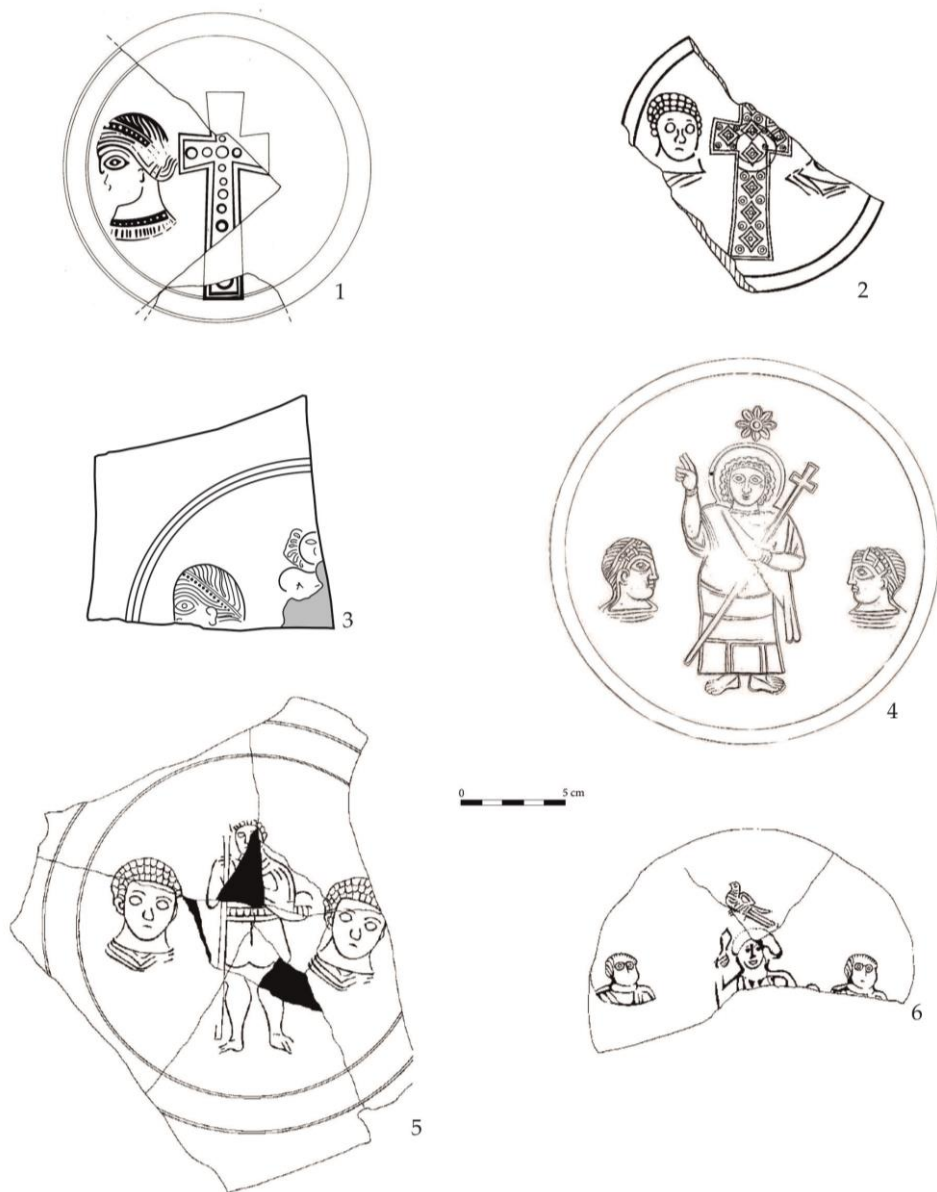


Fig. 11. Iconographic patterns involving human busts: 1-2. Bust(s) flanking a central cross; 3-4. Busts flanking a Christian representation; 5-6. Busts flanking a central motif with no religious connotation (after 1. Cardarelli 2022, Fig. 62/1; 2. Opreș 2003, Pl. V/1; 3. IAVP Archive (copies), S. and M. Lambrino, *Histria. Field Notebook no. 1 (1928-1929)*, f. 89, cat. no. 192bis; 4. Cardarelli 2022, Fig. 64/3; 5-6. Opreș 2003, Pls. IV/2 and V/2).

Coming back to the piece under analysis, given this cultural framework that characterises the Roman world during Late Antiquity, the vessel can be considered as an attempt by regional/local craftsmen to produce a lower quality and therefore cheaper tableware, reminiscent of the original products. On the other hand, there are several technical features which impede the full acceptance of this hypothesis. One argument in this respect is related to the decorative pattern, which is composed by too crowded motifs, unusually arranged to produce a complex scene: even though it is impossible to determine the complete decoration, which would certainly have covered much of the floor, one can notice that the preserved motifs are disposed towards the edge of the base, not in the centre, and some of them almost overlap. Also, the orientation of the scene(s) is inappropriate, being totally opposite to the other productions mentioned above; it seems that the whole scene is oriented from the inside to the outside, and not the other way around. Finally, the depth of the stamp, especially visible in the head area, led us to try to look at the piece also from the perspective of a production tool (a possible mould for relief decorated vessels), but there are a few elements that do not support this hypothesis either.

To conclude, we once again emphasize the particular character of this discovery from Histria, which raises many questions which cannot be answered for now. At this stage, based on its preservation state and the absence of other helpful elements (conditions of discovery, absence of similar finds), overinterpretation is redundant, and hopefully future finds will help clarify its meaning.



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