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RURAL CERAMIC WORKSHOPS IN ROMAN THRACE (SECOND HALF OF THE 1ST – END OF THE 3RD CENTURY)

This contribution explores the archaeological evidence for local ceramic production in the province of Thrace during the Principate. Until now, fourteen sites, including villae, villages and presumed artisanal establishments, have provided secure data for the development of this craft.

Five ceramic workshops were founded in the last decades of the 1st and the first half of the 2nd century. From the last quarter of the 2nd and until the mid-3rd century the total number of the potteries became twelve. After the Gothic invasions in ca. AD 248-251 there was a noticeable reduction in the number of known ateliers. Only two new sites were established during the second half of the 3rd century, while no more than five of the previous twelve remained operational.

The majority of the rural workshops in Thrace was involved in the production of tableware, kitchenware and ceramic building material. Manufacture of flat-bottomed amphorae, oil lamps and terracotta figurines is less frequently documented.

Most of the rural kiln sites were probably in operation only through the warm time of the year, given that only three have produced data for installations, which could have enabled the year-round production activities.

Roman Thrace – ceramic production – rural settlements – workshops

1. Introduction

Provincia Thracia was established in c. AD 45-46 on the territory of the last Thracian kingdom (Lozanov 2015: 76). The borders of the province and the one with *Moesia Inferior* in particular were changed several times during the Principate, the most noticeable of the latter made during the reigns of Hadrian and Helvius Pertinax (Gerov 1979: 212-240; Boteva 1996: 173-176; Tatscheva 2000: 59-78).

In the course of the first three centuries AD production of ceramic artefacts was developed in a number of rural settlements in Thrace, comprising agricultural estates (*villae*), agrarian and artisan villages (*vici*). Fourteen sites have been taken into account in the present study (fig. 1), leaving outside its scope some separately discovered kilns of uncertain date or designation. Furthermore, due to the current knowledge on the precise location of the border line between *Moesia Inferior* and *Thracia*, which is not securely established along its entire section between the river valleys of Osam and Yantra, the production centre at Butovo is also left out of this contribution.

The said centre is one of the supposed locations of the *Emporium Piretensium* and according to B. Gerov was situated within the limits of Thrace since its foundation (Gerov 1979: 223-224), while others have argued that it was part of Lower Moesia (Tatscheva 2000: 64). What is certain is that there is a border stone with inscription (CIL III, 12407), dated to AD 136, found in the vicinities of Butovo or the neighbouring village of Nedan (for the *horrothesia* of *Antius Rufinus*, *legatus Augusti pro praetore Moesiae Inferioris*, see Gerov 1989: 197-198, no. 429; Tatscheva 2000: 63-65), thus confirming the incorporation of the sites at Varbovski livadi and Pavlikeni within the territory of Thrace after that year, at the latest. The last two sites, along with the one at Hotnitsa,

were probably part of this province until the reign of Helvius Pertinax (AD 193) when the towns of *Nicopolis ad Istrum* and *Marcianopolis*, together with their hinterland, were transferred to the territory of *Moesia Inferior* (see Boteva 1996: 173-176). As for the site at Madara, if we consider the opinion of B. Gerov, its region should have been part of *Thracia* also until AD 193 (Gerov 1979: 225-228), while if we take into account the arguments of M. Tatscheva, it was probably within this province only until the time of Hadrian (Tatscheva 2000: 68-76), while after that it was most likely situated very close to the border, but in *Moesia Inferior*.

2. Ceramic production in Roman villas

So far, excavations at five Roman villas in Thrace have produced evidence for developed ceramic production.

The first one was situated in the Chatalka locality, 18 km to the south-west of the Roman town of *Augusta Traiana*, modern day Stara Zagora (fig. 1, 1). Excavated during the 1960s, this rural agglomeration comprised a large villa with separately built *pars urbana* and *pars rustica*, another smaller villa, a satellite *vicus* and two tumular necropoleis (Nikolov 1984: 5-73; Dinchev 1997: 60-67).

The larger villa, which is the subject of the present study, was established in the second half of the 1st century AD and existed until the late 4th century. Two major construction periods were attested for that time, with a margin around the mid- 3rd century AD. A post-villa occupation in the form of a simple village existed during the end of the 4th and the first half of the 5th century (Nikolov 1984: 54-55; Dinchev 1997: 63). The estate in question was most likely owned by the family of a Roman citizen of noble Thracian origin, one Titus Flavius Dinis, an *archiereus* of the Thracian *koinon*



Fig. 1. The province of Thrace, AD 136-193 (after Tatscheva 2000: 76, Obr. 2, with additions by A. Harizanov).

in the early period of its foundation (see Tatscheva 2004: 191-197; for other supposed members of his family, see Sharankov 2015: 69).

Installations for ceramic production were discovered on three locations within the estate. Probably the earliest kilns were unearthed beneath and near burial mound no. 4, where the excavated graves were dated to the late 2nd-early 3rd century. The kilns were most likely in operation from the end of the 1st until the middle or the second half of the 2nd century (Buyukliev 1986: 18-20). Only one of the structures in question has been found partly preserved. It had a circular floor plan and vertically arranged ceramic tubes, used as support for the perforated floor (Nikolov 1984: 40).

A pair of tile kilns dated to the mid-3rd century was discovered to the south-west of *pars rustica*. The better preserved of the two structures had a circular combustion chamber with an impressive diameter of ca. 4 m (Nikolov 1984: 39-40).

The third section of the estate with traces of ceramic production was located in the eastern part of *pars rustica*, in the Delimyonova niva locality (fig. 2). Divided of the rest of the complex with a stone wall, it consisted of a workshop

building, one large water basin, living quarters for the potters and another building, supposedly designated for the manager of the artisanal activities. The workshop building comprised four premises. The largest one was the actual workshop, where two kilns, few clay pits, a channel for running water and stone platforms, used as bases for potter's wheels, were found. The second and third premises had floors on suspension, while in the fourth a *praefurnium* was located. The described hypocaust system, situated in the last three rooms, was used for pre-fire drying of the manufactured items (Nikolov 1984: 29-38; Harizanov 2016b: 34).

According to D. Nikolov, the entire *pars rustica* was erected simultaneously with the living quarters of the *villa* during the 1st century. After devastation in the mid-3rd century, the entire complex was rebuilt. During the second period the larger of the two indoor located kilns and the water basin were constructed (Nikolov 1984: 38-39). However, the discovered coins, only one of which predates the 160s, indicate that it is much more plausible for this part of the estate to have been established after the Costoboci incursion in AD 170 (Harizanov 2019: 125). It was probably in operation until some point in the second half of the 4th century at the latest.

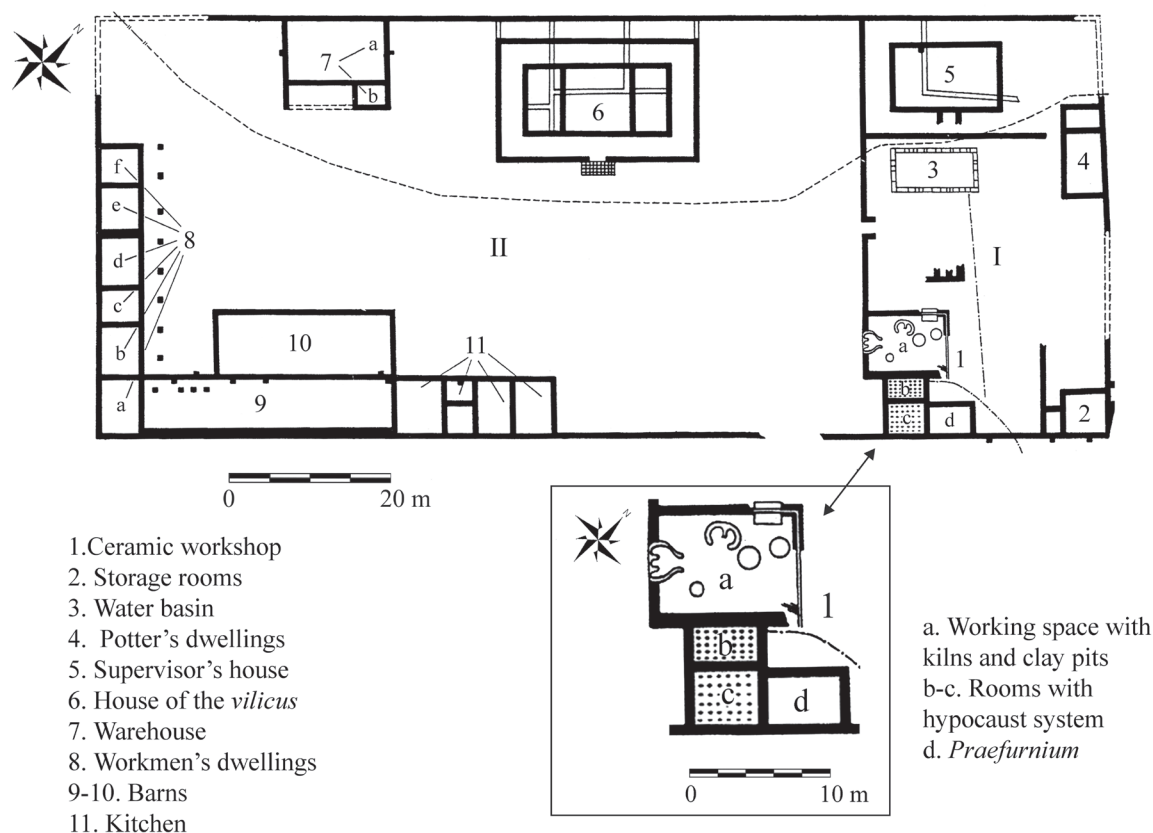


Fig. 2. The Roman *villa* in the Chataalka locality: *pars rustica* and the ceramic workshop (after Nikolov 1984: 30, Obr. 36, with additions and corrections by A. Harizanov).

Unfortunately, no publication concerning the locally made ceramic items exists. When describing the kilns beneath mound no. 4, the excavators wrote that the pottery found there consisted of fine tableware, namely cups, bowls, plates and pitchers, with light coloured surface (Nikolov 1984: 40; Buyukliev 1986: 19). The separately located tile kilns were most probably used for the firing of architectural terracotta during the rebuilding of the estate in the 250s (Nikolov 1984: 39-40).

The *pars rustica* workshop was involved in the production of fine tableware, as could be judged by the model for relief-decorated trays found within premise A (Nikolov 1984: 35). It could also be suggested that most of the kitchenware, table *amphorae* and pitchers, discovered during the excavations of the *villa*, the *vicus* and the two necropoleis (see Buyukliev 1986: 64-140) were likewise locally made.

The rural complex (*villa rustica*) in the Varbovski livadi locality, located 3 km to the west of the modern town of Pavlikeni (fig. 1, 2 and fig. 3), was explored during the 1970s by B. Sultov, who discovered three clusters of buildings and production facilities (Sultov 1985: 22-24), consecutively named Central, Western and Southern sectors by P. Vladkova in her more recent work on the same site (Vladkova 2011). Almost all of the crafting installations, including at least 40 of the 51 discovered kilns, were employed in ceramic manufacture. As for the rest, some were more likely used for domestic purposes or had other artisanal designation, such as pitch production (see Harizanov 2019: 138-139; 546-584).

The excavator divided the site's habitation period into four phases, with the last one connected to a post-*villa* settlement. The first three phases occurred between the beginning of the 2nd century and AD 170 (First: beginning of 2nd century – AD 120; Second: AD 120-138; Third: AD 138-170), when the estate suffered a major destruction during the Costoboci incursion. Simple dwellings belonging to a *vicus* were built after AD 170 and were used until the mid-3rd century AD (Sultov 1985: 22-24).

A re-examination of the finds and excavation results led to the said monograph of P. Vladkova, who studied in detail the discovered coins and established a new chronological frame for the estate, with two major construction periods: First – probably from the reign of Domitian to AD 170 and Second – from AD 170 to the late 230s. The said post-*villa* settlement existed from the last decades of the 3rd century until the 360s (Vladkova 2011: 45-49; 137).

The landlord of the Varbovski livadi *villa* is still unknown. According to P. Vladkova, initials of his name could be seen in the letters T F G, fashioned on two branding irons, found in a context from the first construction period (Vladkova 2014: 14). An inscription, found upon a votive plaque, discovered less than 20 km to the south-west of the estate, near the modern village of Kramolin, could shed light on his identity. The inscription (CIL III, 12419) is made by Herculanus, an *actor* of the estate of (Titus) Flavius Gemell, probably a veteran (see Gerov 1988: 45; 122; Gerov 1989: 187, no. 403). In my

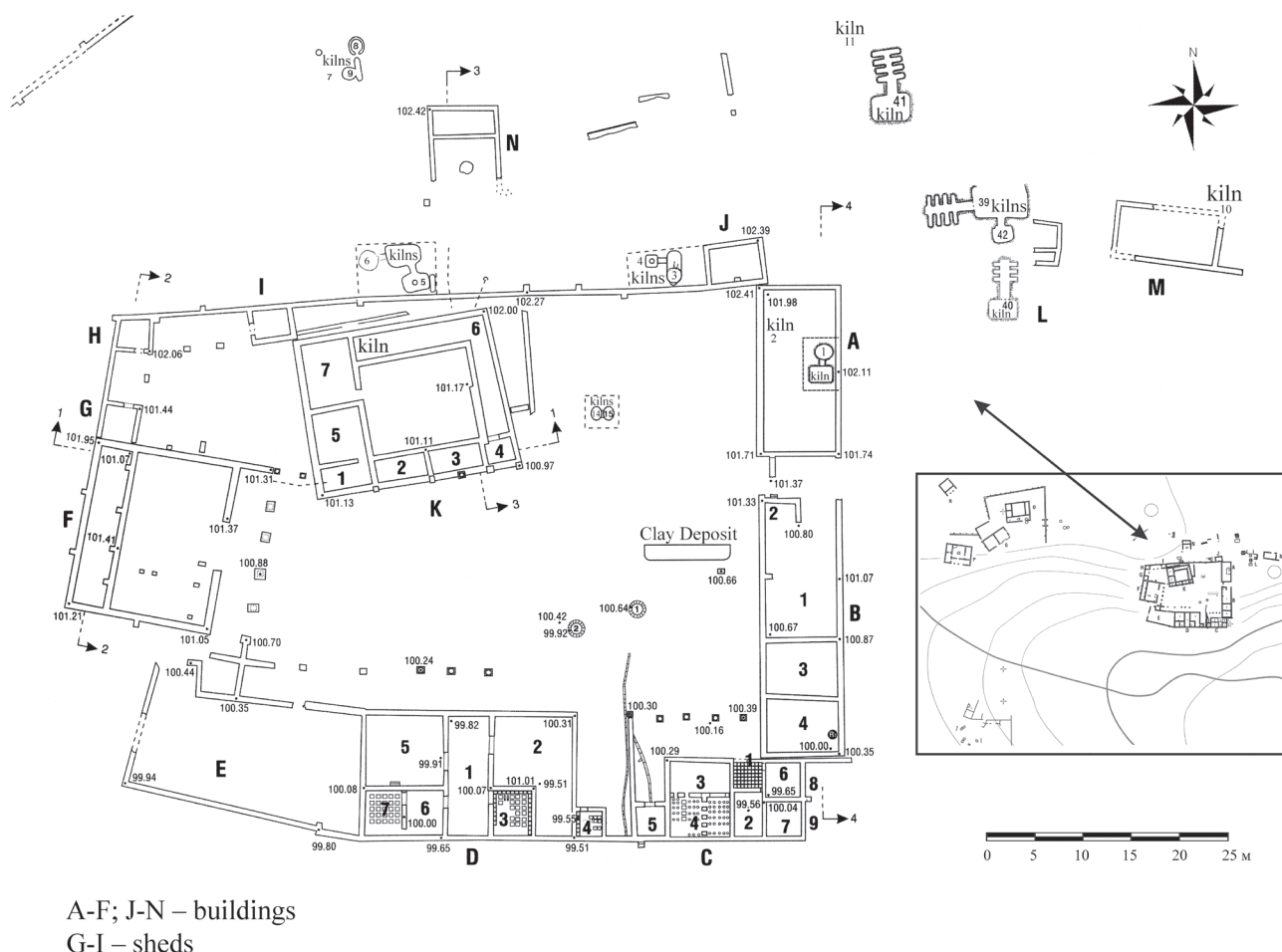


Fig. 3. The Roman villa in the Varbovski livadi locality: Central sector (after Vladkova 2011: 24-25, with additions and corrections by A. Harizanov).

opinion, both the name of this Titus Flavius Gemell and the fact that he owned an estate, managed by a *vilicus* (*actor*), in the nearby region point him as a suitable candidate for a landlord of the Varbovski livadi villa. Furthermore, the said person had probably acquired his citizenship and lands under the Flavian dynasty (see Gerov 1988: 45), at the same time in which the villa was most likely founded (see Vladkova 2011: 137).

As for the production repertoire of the Varbovski livadi workshops, it was chiefly dedicated to red slipped fine wares, mainly tableware (plates, bowls, cups, table amphorae and pitchers), also ritual vessels (crater-shaped vessels, *paterae*) and kitchen or storage wares (sifters and pots). Ceramic building material, grey-black kitchenware (cooking pots, pans, bowls, lids), oil lamps, terracotta figurines and so-called medallions were also manufactured, but in smaller quantities (Sultov 1985: 22-25; 61-94; Vladkova 2011: 51-136; Ivanov 2019: 2-3).

Sultov stated that fineware production began in the first decades of the 2nd century, while that of grey-black coarse wares started after AD 170 (Sultov 1985: 22-25). Vladkova argued that ceramic building material was produced from the start of the site's occupation but the manufacture of both fine and coarse pottery was developed after AD 170 (Vladkova 2011: 39; 137). More recently she wrote that

the latter happened around the mid- 2nd century (Vladkova 2014: 13). A recent study on the Varbovski livadi red slip vessels led to another dating of this part of its production. The author claimed that such items were produced only in the time between the reigns of Hadrian or Antoninus Pius and the Costoboci incursion of AD 170 (Ivanov 2019: 26). However, St. Ivanov restricted the active period of the fineware workshops, and its starting date in particular, on the basis of finds, discovered mostly at sites, established after the beginning of the 2nd century (for example *Nicopolis ad Istrum*, *Augusta Traiana*, the settlement at Butovo, the production site at Ostrov, near *Durostorum*, etc.) and thus predated by the villa in question with at least two or three decades (for the sites, see respectively Gerov 1988: 116-120; 154-159; Sultov 1985: 25-29; Harizanov 2019: 142-144; 164-165 and the cited literature). Additionally, the most frequently cited parallels from the nearby necropolis of Butovo were found there with coins of Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, while those from the town of *Nicopolis ad Istrum* came from contexts of the first three quarters of the 2nd century (see Sultov 1985: 61-94; Ivanov 2019: 3-21). Given this fact, the said finds could serve only as a *terminus* for the use of such vessels within the boundaries of the mentioned sites, but not

as a reliable chronological factor for the lifecycle of the forms in the nearby region. Moreover, the graves from the Butovo necropolis, where coins of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180) were found, could be dated well after AD 170 (the extent of usage of the coins in question is not mentioned) and cannot be related only to the time prior the said Barbarian raid.

Looking at the manufactured ceramic forms, some of the Varbovski livadi fine wares show a strong resemblance with similar vessels of Eastern and most of all Pontic origin, primarily dated to the second half of the 1st century and the first quarter of the 2nd century AD. Analogies could be seen, for example, in forms 1-3 of the Pontic *sigillata* plates with vertical rim (Zhuravlev 2010: 41-45) and their Varbovski livadi equivalents forms Sultov 1 / Ivanov V-VI (Sultov 1985: 62-63; Ivanov 2019: 7); also in forms Hayes V / Zhuravlev 30 of the Pontic *sigillata* or Hayes 41 and 70 of the Eastern *sigillata* B (Hayes 1985: 94; 61; 63; Zhuravlev 2010: 60) and bowl form Sultov 3 / Ivanov XIII (Sultov 1985: 68; Ivanov 2019: 13); in addition, forms Hayes A6b and A7 of the Eastern *sigillata* C and Hayes VI / Zhuravlev 29 of the Pontic *sigillata* (Hayes 1985: 73-74; 94; Zhuravlev 2010: 59) in comparison to bowl form Ivanov IX (Ivanov 2019: 7; 13), etc.

Taking into account also the location and stratigraphic position of the excavated and preserved *in situ* kilns, it could be suggested that the artisanal activities in the *villa* began immediately after its foundation in the late 1st century AD with brick and tile manufacture. The production of fine wares probably started after that, but, in my opinion, no later than the beginning of 2nd century. The major part of the red slipped items were produced until AD 170, however there isn't sufficient data for the secure setting of the time for the total abandonment of this branch of the artisanal activity. As for the grey-black coarse wares, they were most likely manufactured during the 2nd and the first decades of the 3rd century, while some of their forms could have been produced during the post-*villa* occupation of the site (Harizanov 2019: 139-140).

One of the largest agricultural estates in Thrace was located near the modern day village of Madara (fig. 1, 3). Built in the second half of the 1st century AD, it functioned until the late 4th or the early 5th century. During the 5th and the 6th century a simple village existed on the same spot (Dremsizova-Nelchinova 1984: 74-124; Dinchev 1997: 74-79).

The estate comprised residential quarters, bathhouses, dwellings, winery, *horrea*, and more buildings with agricultural and/or artisanal designation. The accepted opinion is that it was a centre of imperial domain (Dremsizova-Nelchinova 1984: 74-124; Gerov 1988: 75-77).

During the late 1980s, a kiln site was discovered between two small rivers, to the south-west of the *villa*. It comprised seven circular two-chambered kilns with central supporting pillars, also clay depots, shed(s) and probably a levigation tank. According to G. Atanasov, the structures were involved in the manufacture of *amphorae*, kitchen and table wares, and oil lamps, with the former being made as containers for the wine and grain produced at the estate. The earliest coins from the kiln site were minted in AD 141, while the latest were issued in the 360s (Atanasov 1989: 106-107; Atanasov 1990: 221).

The most recently discovered Roman *villa* in Thrace, with developed ceramic production, was excavated near the

village of Pokrovnik, close to the town of Blagoevgrad, during construction work for the Struma highway in 2017 and the spring of 2018¹ (fig. 1, 4). Nor less than twelve ceramic kilns were found among the ruins of a Roman and Late Roman *villa* (3rd – mid- 5th century) and adjacent Roman *vicus* (second half of the 2nd / 3rd – 4th century) (Dimitrov, Raycheva and Rusev 2019: 380-382). Given the preliminary state of the available information, for now it could be said that most of the kilns were in operation during the 3rd and 4th centuries, while some were probably functional as early as the second half of the 2nd century. More than half of the installations, including several of the earlier structures, were used for the production of ceramic building material.

The last *villa* with traces of local ceramic production was found close to the Bulgarian capital Sofia (the Roman *Serdica*), near the village of Dragovishtica (fig. 1, 5). One ceramic kiln of quadrangular plan was excavated next to an architectural complex, identified as living quarters of a rural estate. The site was occupied from the second half of the 3rd until the beginning of the 5th century (Hristov and Taneva 2016: 539-542). The kiln was probably built and used during the initial construction of the estate.

3. Ceramic production in artisan's villages

From the early 2nd century onwards, ceramic production in Thrace was also developed in what appear to have been separate artisanal establishments. The sites in question have produced limited amount of data for spaces used for permanent habitation (which however could have been the result of the limits of the archaeologically studied area), together with an overall large number of discovered production installations.

The site near modern Hotnitsa was discovered during the 1960s, to the south-west of the present day village (fig. 1, 6), in an area close to a small river and in proximity to large stone quarries, exploited during the Roman period (Sultov 1985: 18-19).

Twenty kilns and a workshop building were excavated (fig. 4). The latter had three adjoining rooms. A ceramic kiln and a clay pit were discovered in the central premise, while a stone platform, probably for a potter's wheel, was found in the eastern one. A domestic oven was excavated in the western room, which might have been used as a living space. The building had a roof made of tiles, some of which had ventilation openings (Sultov 1985: 19).

Most of the kilns had a circular floor plan and sunken or semi-sunken firing chambers, with central pillar(s) and tongue wall(s) being used as supports for the perforated floors. Several of the installations were grouped around common working platforms, while some had stoke pits surrounded by stone walls and placed under wooden sheds (Sultov 1969: 12-16; Sultov 1985: 19-20).

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to the Dig Director, Dr. Zdravko Dimitrov (Assoc. Prof., NAIM-BAS), for the opportunity to study the kilns and publish the results of this research. I also thank my colleague Dr. Nikolay Rusev for the cooperation and the additional information on the pottery finds.

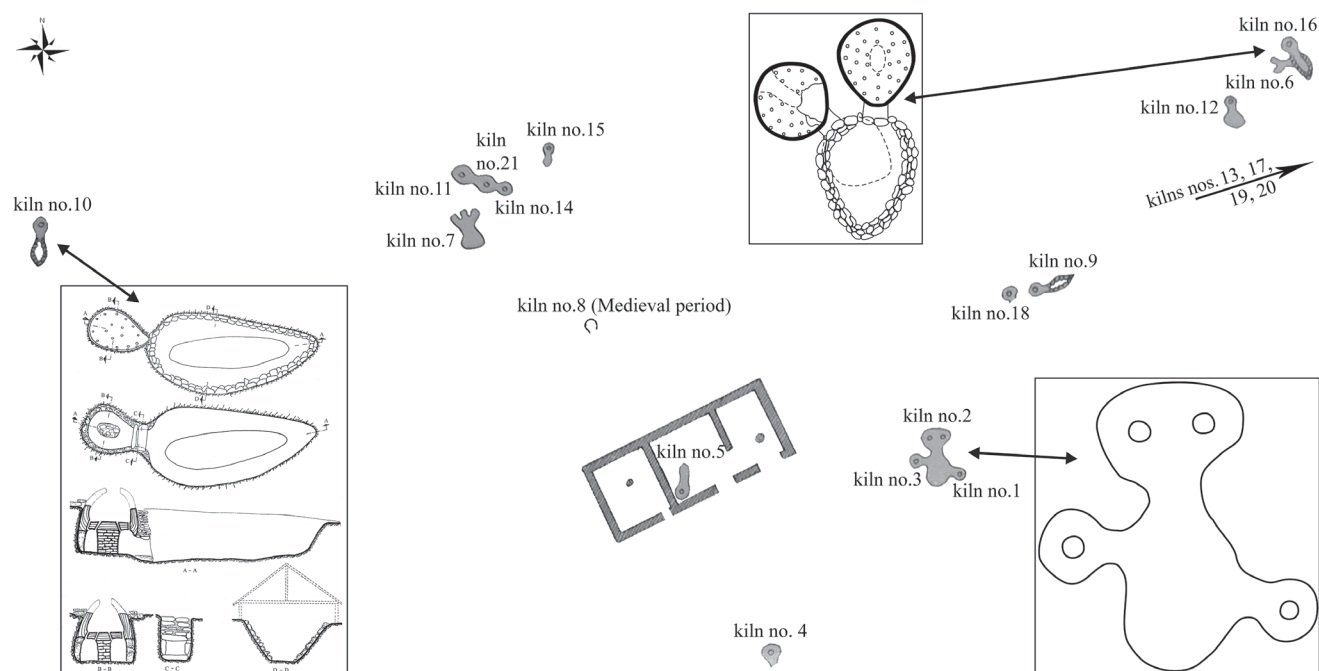


Fig. 4. The kiln site at Hotnitsa (after Sultov 1969: 13, Obr. 2; Sultov 1985: Tables II.1, II.3, XII.1, with additions and corrections by A. Harizanov).

Grey-black kitchenware was the main item in the repertoire of the Hotnitsa workshops. It comprised mostly baking pans, bowls, cooking pots and lids. Among the vessels with special function were *kernoi* and *turibulae*. Several varieties of flat-bottomed vessels (mostly red slipped) were also produced on the site. Common forms among the red slip tableware were cups, bowls and dishes, probably also crater-shaped vessels and sifters (Sultov 1983: 17-27; Sultov 1985: 21; 61-94; Ivanov 2018: 10-45).

According to B. Sultov, the kiln site at Hotnitsa functioned from the beginning of the 2nd century until the mid- 3rd or the beginning of the 4th century. Grey-black kitchenware was produced throughout the entire period, while the manufacture of fine tableware was practised for a short time around the mid- 2nd century, under the influence of the centre at Varbovski livadi (Sultov 1969: 22-23; Sultov 1985: 21; 30; 91-94). Similarly, St. Ivanov stated that fine wares were produced around the second quarter or the second half of the 2nd century (Ivanov 2018: 55). It seems plausible to suggest that most of the kilns at the site were in operation until the mid- 3rd century, while some could have been used up to the beginning of the 4th century (Harizanov 2019: 147).

The site at Nova Nadezhda was discovered in 2013 close to the right bank of the Maritsa River (fig. 1, 7). Five kilns, three clay pits, two ovens and a possible shed or a house were discovered (Harizanov 2016a: 581).

Three of the kilns had circular combustion chambers, while the fourth had a floor plan close to a rectangle and a double *prae-furnium*. The fifth structure, initially described as a domestic oven (Harizanov 2016a: 581-585), was proved a kiln after the combined results of archaeometric analyses showed that it was fired in higher temperatures, similar to the ones

achieved inside ceramic firing installations (Harizanov 2019: 156-157). The mentioned clay pits were discovered close to the kilns, with one of them being reused as a temporary dwelling after the end of clay extraction (Harizanov 2016a: 585).

Ceramic building material and mould-made terracotta figurines were among the earliest items produced at the site. However, the major part of the output of the Nova Nadezhda workshops was dedicated to table and kitchen wares. Most common among the former were cups, bowls and dishes, while the latter were represented mostly by cooking pots, deep bowls and pitchers (Harizanov 2016a: 586-589).

The site was in operation from the time of Antoninus Pius (around the mid- 2nd century) until the mid- 3rd century at the latest (Harizanov 2016a: 589-592).

In 1958 an industrial site was explored to the west of the town of Malko Tynovo (fig. 1, 8). According to the researcher, it was involved in the extraction and purification of copper ore between the 2nd and the 6th century. The vast quantities of metal slag, found close to the excavated production facilities, were described as a proof for this artisanal activity (Velkov 1965: 76-97). However, the discovered installations were very similar to ceramic kilns and drying sheds, which led to the hypothesis that they were actually used in ceramic manufacture (Harizanov 2016b: 36-37).

The remains of ore extraction are a certain indication for this type of activity, which however have been probably practised in the nearby area, but in other, undiscovered during the excavations facilities. On the other hand, the ceramic building material, coarse wares and oil lamps, found in large number during the archaeological research, could have all been manufactured at the site. Furthermore, an overview of the discovered coins allowed the suggestion that the latter arti-

sanal activity took place from the beginning of the 3rd century until the beginning of the 4th century (Harizanov 2016b: 37; Harizanov 2019: 154-156).

4. Ceramic production in villages and other rural sites

The other major category of rural settlements, where ceramic production in Thrace was attested for the Roman period, is the one where kilns were discovered in more or less inhabited environment. Still, the exact nature of some of them remains uncertain, due to stage of the digs progress and/or the size of the excavated area.

During the 1950s remains of buildings and grave monuments were found beneath the modern day town of Pavlikeni (**fig. 1, 9**). The researcher assumed that they were part of a Roman settlement, dated to the time between the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Gordian III. Due to the finds of pottery and a terracotta mould, B. Sultov suggested that pottery was manufactured within the settlement (Sultov 1962: 7-20).

In 2015 and 2016, in the course of construction work in the same, north-western part of the modern town, nine pottery kilns and remains of few stonewalled buildings were uncovered. The kilns were dug into a clayish layer of soil, in proximity to a small stream and were clustered in two groups, approximately 150 m apart. The installations had circular floor plans, with central pillar or without an additional support for the perforated floors. Some of them had sunken or semi-sunken firing chambers (Chakarov 2017: 49-77). According to St. Ivanov, the discovered fine wares resembled those produced by the Butovo workshops (Ivanov 2018: 54-55).

According to P. Vladkova, a Roman road station could have existed beneath the modern town of Pavlikeni (Vladkova 2011: 7-10). K. Chakarov complied with her hypothesis, adding that the local artisans have probably specialised mainly in the production of ceramic items. Similarly to the finds of B. Sultov, the coins from his excavations comprised single example issued under Antoninus Pius, while the rest were minted during the Severan period. The kiln site was dated to the last decade of the 2nd and the first three decades of the 3rd c. (Chakarov 2017: 52).

The rural complex near the modern day Georgi Dobrev, Lyubimets municipality, was most likely part of a Roman *vicus* (**fig. 1, 10**). Three buildings and two ceramic kilns were excavated in the course of a rescue archaeological research. The first kiln had a quadrangular combustion chamber and a central supporting pillar, while the second had a circular floor plan and again central supporting pillar. A clay depot was also found nearby (Pencheva 2014: 3-17).

The kilns in question were exploited for the production of tableware, kitchenware and ceramic building material from the end of the 2nd until the mid-3rd century, simultaneously with the use of the uncovered buildings (Pencheva 2014: 17-25).

The site near the modern village of Poletto, Simitli district, was discovered during the 1980s (**fig. 1, 11**). One lime kiln, a water fountain and a ceramic kiln were excavated. The latter had quadrangular combustion chamber and support

for the perforated floor made by cross walls. According to I. Kulov, it was used for the production of ceramic building material (Kulov 2007: 132-142). However, his hypothesis was probably based mostly on the shape of the kiln, since no production waste was mentioned. It could be assumed that the large quantity of fragmented and discarded ceramic vessels, found near the three installations (see Kulov 2007: 136-139, Figs. 9-11) and outside their usual household context, were also part of the workshop's repertoire.

The site was situated in the vicinity of a Roman *vicus* and its production was probably designated for the inhabitants of the settlement. According to the discovered coins, the former was in operation from the end of the 2nd until the middle or the third quarter of the 3rd century, at the latest (Kulov 2007: 132; 139-140).

The complex near the modern day town of Breznik has been excavated since 2016 (**fig. 1, 12**). It was part of a rural settlement that functioned from the second half of the 2nd century until the 370s (Paunova and Trendafilova 2017: 510-513; Paunova 2018: 435-438).²

Three ceramic kilns of quadrangular floor plan were discovered during the excavations (Paunova and Trendafilova 2017: 510-511; Paunova 2018: 438). Kiln no. 2 was used in the course of the first construction period of the site, which lasted until the 260s (for the chronology and construction periods of the site, see Paunova 2018: 438). The combustion chamber and the stoke pit of the installation were dug into the bedrock. The walls of the chamber, the two central supporting pillars and the perforated floor were all built of mud bricks.

The other two kilns (nos. 1 and 3) were found to the west of the first one. Kiln no. 1 was built after kiln no. 3 was abandoned, with the southern section of the latter being reused as a part of the stoke pit of the former. Kiln no. 3 was probably used during the first stage of the second construction period of the site (from the 270s to the 320s or the 330s), while kiln no. 1 was most likely in operation in the second and/or third quarter of the 4th century.

The three installations were most probably used for the production of tiles, bricks and loom weights (Paunova 2018: 438).

The site at Kaleto was situated on a rocky hill in the vicinity of the modern day town of Mezdra, close to the Iskar River (**fig. 1, 13**). A Roman fort existed on the spot in the third quarter of the 2nd century. During the early 3rd – early 4th century a pagan sanctuary functioned among its ruins, while in the Late Antique period a fortified settlement was founded at the same place (Torbatov 2015: 153).

In the course of the excavations of the sanctuary, a set of ceramic moulds for the production of vessels with applied decoration was discovered. The four moulds, representing deities (Heracles, Silvanus and Athena), were found in a context dated to the second quarter of the 3rd century and were supposedly locally made (Luka 2006: 161-170). A proof of the presence of an atelier in the nearby area was the discovery of a partly preserved pottery kiln, filled with

² I would like to express my gratitude to the Dig Director of the site, Vasilka Paunova (Regional Historical Museum - Pernik), who invited me to supervise the excavation of the three kilns and to publish the results of their research.

discarded table wares, in the western part of the modern town (Luka 2006: 163).

According to S. Torbatov, a still anonymous semi-urban settlement, from the territory of *Serdica*, existed beneath nowadays Mezdra, simultaneously with the Kaleto site (Torbatov 2015: 153). The supposed workshop, related to the discovered kiln, was probably situated on the outskirts of this *vicus* and most likely functioned during the 3rd century.

Two pottery kilns from another workshop were discovered in the vicinities of a Roman settlement, located to the north-west of the present day village of Karanovo, Nova Zagora district (fig. 1, 14). The main output of this atelier was directed towards kitchenware, mostly cooking pots, also plates, baking pans and lids. The fine wares produced at the site included mainly cups and bowls. Flat-bottomed amphorae were the last major category of manufactured items. According to B. Borisov, the workshop was active during the second half of the 3rd and probably the beginning of the 4th century (Borisov 2013: 281-336).

5. Discussion

5.1. Chronology

The chronological distribution of the described workshops allows the distinguishing of three phases of active ceramic production in Thrace during the Principate, which coincide with the first three phases of the First period of the development of the ceramic production in the territory of Bulgaria, after the Roman conquest (see Harizanov 2019: 194-197).

The first one took place from the establishment of the province until the Costoboci incursion around AD 170. The second phase lasted from ca. AD 170 to ca. AD 250. The last phase could be set in the second half of the 3rd century, with an end around the late 3rd or the beginning of the 4th century, in the first decades of the Dominate.

Five workshops were established during the first phase. The sites at Chatalka and Varbovski livadi were founded by people with Roman citizenship probably during the Flavian period and their workshops were active from the last decades of the 1st century onwards.

The site at Hotnitsa was set up after the beginning of the 2nd century, while those at Madara and Nova Nadezhda started their activity during the second quarter or the middle of the same century. In provincial scale, they could be all described as middle to large scale enterprises.

During the second phase the workshops at Georgi Dobrev, Pavlikeni, Polet, Pokrovnik, Breznik, Mezdra and Malko Tyrnovo were also established, while the previous five continued their production activities (the one at Varbovski livadi *villa* functioned until the 230s at the latest).

The Gothic invasions of the mid-3rd century were devastating to many of the rural sites in Thrace (see Boteva 2001: 37-44). The workshops at Georgi Dobrev and Nova Nadezhda were abandoned. The sites at Mezdra and Pavlikeni were probably also active until the middle of the century, while Hotnitsa reduced noticeably its output. Only two new workshops were founded in the second half of the 3rd century,

in the village near Karanovo (where there is also possibility for an earlier starting date) and the *villa* at Dragovishtitsa.

The site at Polet functioned until the third quarter of the 3rd century at the latest. Around the end of the 3rd or the early 4th century the workshops at Hotnitsa, Karanovo and Malko Tyrnovo were also abandoned. Only the sites at Chatalka, Madara, Breznik and maybe Pokrovnik remained active (with some interruptions) until some point in the second half of the 4th century.

5.2. Production repertoire

Fine wares, mostly table wares, were one of the major categories of products of the rural workshops in Thrace. They were certainly manufactured at nine sites (Chatalka, Varbovski livadi, Hotnitsa, Madara, Nova Nadezhda, Georgi Dobrev, Pavlikeni, Mezdra, Karanovo) and possibly also at three more (Polet, Pokrovnik, Malko Tyrnovo). Only the sites at Breznik and Dragovishtitsa have failed until now to supply evidence for such a production.

Coarse wares, and most of all kitchenware, were another of the major categories of manufactured items. They were produced at the same sites where fine wares were made, excluding the ones at Mezdra and Pavlikeni, for which there is no sufficient information.

Oil lamps and/or terracotta figurines or medallions were surely made at Varbovski livadi, Madara and Nova Nadezhda, and probably also Chatalka, Pavlikeni and Malko Tyrnovo.

Ceramic building material, mostly tiles, less frequently bricks and tubes, was part of the assortment of eight kiln sites (Chatalka, Varbovski livadi, Nova Nadezhda, Georgi Dobrev, Polet, Pokrovnik, Breznik, Dragovishtitsa), with the ones at Karanovo and Malko Tyrnovo being also possible producers. It should be noted that despite the lack of archaeological data for big rural manufacturers of building ceramics during the Principate, they were probably located precisely in the countryside of the province. So far, the evidence for the urban workshops in Thrace indicates that this part of the artisanal activity wasn't developed there in larger scale until the Late Roman period (see Harizanov 2018: 299-308).

5.3. Seasonal vs. year-round production activity

Most of the described workshops were active only during the warmer months of the year. Facilities, which could have allowed year-round manufacture of ceramic items, were discovered at only three of the sites in question – the villas at Chatalka and Varbovski livadi, and possibly at the artisanal establishment near Malko Tyrnovo (see Harizanov 2016b: 31-37).

6. Conclusion

The present state of archaeological research does not allow us to estimate the outreach of most of the rural potteries in Thrace. Nevertheless, products of some of the workshops have been identified at other settlements, so it is possible to make

comments on the development of their distribution routes.

The site at Varbovski livadi was most likely one of the largest producers in Thrace at the time. Its products were identified at the necropolis at Butovo and the nearby region (Sultov 1985: 61-103; Vladkova 2014: 13; Ivanov 2019: 27), as well as at the legionary camp of *Novae* (Vladkova 2014: 13; Klenina 2016: 426; 430-431) and probably also to south of *Haemus mons* (Ivanov 2019: 27).

Hotnitsa coarse wares were likewise supposedly found at *Novae* (Sultov 1985: 84; Klenina 2016: 433-434), while according to B. Sultov, most of the workshops' production was designated for the villages of the stonemasons, who worked at the closely located quarries (Sultov 1985: 21; 93).

The site at Nova Nadezhda, on the other hand, seems to have benefited from its location near the Central road and the large Maritsa River. A possible indication for the outreach

of its products is the discovery of similar items at the site at Georgi Dobrev (see Pencheva 2014: 4; 9), situated near the same road, about 40 km to the east – south-east of the former.

Being one of the earliest ceramic workshops in Thrace, and north of the *Haemus mons* in particular, the site at Varbovski livadi was most likely able to exploit the increasing demand for cheap and easily accessible fineware by the Roman soldiers and immigrant settlers in the province, attested in the region since Flavian times (see Gerov 1988: 45-46). The usually locally distributed coarse wares of the Hotnitsa workshops, on the other hand, could have been transported and traded in more distant places like *Novae* as a side product of other local goods, most likely stone material from the nearby quarries, which was used for construction projects in the military camp during the 2nd and the first half of the 3rd century (see Biernacki, Skoczylas 2003: 197-203).

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