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ROMAN POTTERY DISCOVERED ON THE DACIAN SITE OF RĂCĂȚĂU (BACĂU COUNTY, ROMANIA)

The case of Pontic Sigillata¹

The Geto-Dacian site of Răcătău is located on a terrace on the left bank of river Siret, on the spot called “Cetățuie” (The Fortress), at about the mid distance between the villages of Păncești and Răcătău (fig. 1). Archaeological research started there in 1968 and continued almost without interruption until the end of the 1990s; it allowed specialists to identify three distinct areas inside the La Tène site: a higher terrace, fortified during certain periods, generally called “the acropolis”, a civilian settlement, and a tumular necropolis.²

Pottery discovered on this site, either imported or locally produced, is significant through both quantity and quality (technical characteristics, unique shapes). Unfortunately, it was only published selectively,³ and one still awaits a general overview of the material. Hellenistic and Roman tableware discovered in Răcătău, just as the entire archaeological material found on the site, is preserved in the patrimony of the “Julian Antonescu” Museum Complex in Bacău. I was first allowed access to this pottery in 2006 while performing research for my doctoral dissertation, and then again in 2009⁴ when I was also allowed to study glass items dated to the 2nd century BC–1st century AD.⁵ The lot of Hellenistic and Roman pottery I was given permission to study consists of ca. 240 items, most of them preserved in fragments. The majority of them were discovered in archaeological sections excavated on “the acropolis”, as indicated by the identification of their find-contexts marked on the items and data retrieved from inventory registers and by correlating such information with published excavation ground plans.⁶ Unfortunately, I was unable to access the onsite archaeological documentation. The same observations on the publication of the pottery discovered in Răcătău apply to Hellenistic and Roman pottery there. The items that were discovered until 1969 inclusive were employed by I. Glodariu and included in his study of the Dacians’ relations with the Hellenistic and Roman world;⁷ other items were mentioned and illustrated in articles or stud-

ies focusing on the site, either because they were retrieved intact or because they were special through their decoration.⁸ Pottery with appliqué, Hellenistic mouldmade bowls, and items with West Slope decoration were recently published.⁹

Almost 180 items out of the entire lot under research could be attributed to certain groups of Roman pottery produced in Asia Minor, the Pontic region, or Western Europe: Eastern Sigillata B, Pontic Sigillata, Çandarlı, Pergamum Sigillata, pottery with sanded or multi-faceted decoration. Among them, Pontic Sigillata is best represented, through both quantity and the variety of its shapes.

The term ‘Pontic Sigillata’ is accepted for the time being for a ceramic category that includes wares sharing certain general characteristics; they are often found in the area around the Pontus and are sparse outside it; the production centers remain unknown. Based on the publications of Russian specialists of the material discovered in the North Pontic region, J. W. Hayes established the first typology of Pontic Sigillata.¹⁰ Recently, in a study focusing on “red slip pottery” discovered in graves of necropolises Belbek III and IV in Southern Crimea, D. Zhuravlev published a large quantity of Pontic Sigillata and suggested a preliminary classification of shapes and identification variants.¹¹ The Russian researcher maintained his previous classification of Pontic Sigillata into three distinct groups: Pontic Sigillata A, B, and C, with minor chronological adjustments.¹² Even if this latter typological order naturally contains several forms and variants, it does not replace Hayes’ classification, but the two systems are complementary: certain forms that feature in Zhuravlev’s classification are not included in Hayes’ and the other way around.¹³ One must note that the forms published by Hayes and dated to the first half of the 1st century AD – e. g. Hayes X (A and B),¹⁴ encountered on Dacian sites¹⁵ – are not among those identified in the necropolises of Belbek III and IV.

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² CĂPITANU/URSACHI 1969; CĂPITANU 1976; id. 1979; id. 1986; id. 1992.

³ Id. 1976, 55–61 fig. 5–38; id. 1992 fig. 2–18.

⁴ I am grateful to V. Căpitanu, director of the archaeological excavation site in Răcătău, who kindly allowed me to study the Hellenistic and Roman pottery.

⁵ CĂPITANU ET AL. 2010.

⁶ CĂPITANU 1976 fig. 2; id. 1992, 135–144.

⁷ GLODARIU 1974, 217–219.

⁸ CĂPITANU 1969, fig. 28; id. 1976, fig. 38/1,3; id. 1992 fig. 45,1a–b.

⁹ POPESCU 2010, no. 3 fig. 1 pl. 1; no. 18–21 fig. 2 pl. 2; EAD. 2011, no. 6–7 pl. 2.

¹⁰ Atlante II, 92–95 tav. 22–23.

¹¹ ZHURAVLEV 2010, 40–69.

¹² Id. 2002, 256–261; id. 2010, 40; 67.

¹³ For examples, shapes Hayes II, VIII, and X are not among those identified in the necropolises of Belbek III and IV, just as shapes 24, 26–28 established by Zhuravlev are not among those in Hayes’ typology (Atlante II, 93–95 tav. 23; ZHURAVLEV 2010, 57–59 pl. 26, 181–187, 189–190, 27, 191).

¹⁴ Atlante II, 95 tav. 23.

¹⁵ POPESCU 2009, no. 40–92; 21, pl. 3,40–41; 4,42–65.

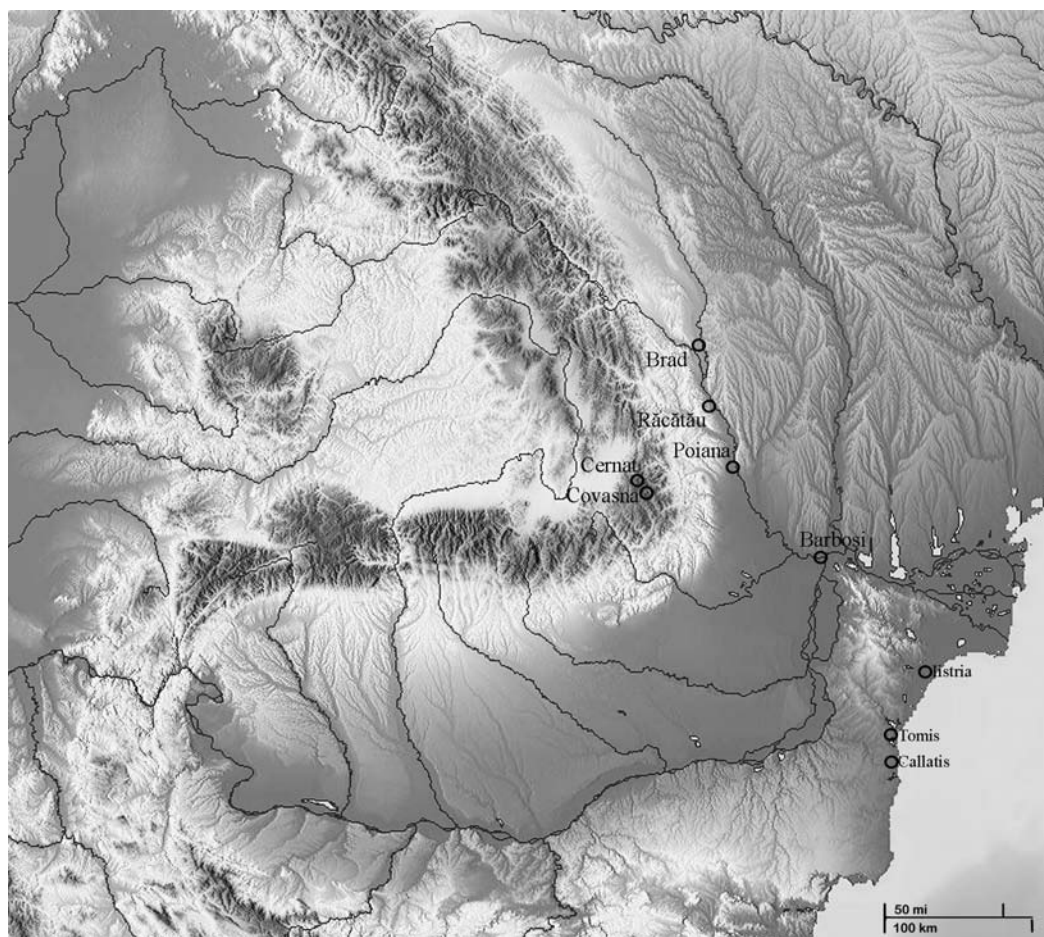


Fig. 1. Map of Romania showing Dacian settlements where Pontic Sigillata has been discovered.

Despite the rigor of the two abovementioned works that represent reference stages in the research of Pontic Sigillata, the definition of the production and typical forms of such wares is far from definitive. Also, one can still not discuss its North Pontic center or centers of production since they have not yet been identified¹⁶ and there is no data on the production of fine wares during the Roman period in the Greek cities on the western and southern shores of the Black Sea.¹⁷

From pre-Roman Dacia, only Pontic Sigillata discovered on the site of Poiana – the village of Nicorești, Galați County – has been published so far¹⁸; a wider study based on the material discovered on several Dacian sites (**fig. 1**) is forthcoming.

Pontic Sigillata discovered in Răcătău, amounting to ca. 135 items out of the 180 pieces of Roman tableware identified on the site, includes both forms present in Hayes' typology and those identified by Zhuravlev in the necropolises of Belbek III and IV, but there are also several new forms. I separated Pontic Sigillata from other Roman tableware starting from the clear forms included in Hayes' and

Zhuravlev's classifications; considering these certain forms and considering similarities in fabric and slip, I identified, as will be shown subsequently, shapes that are not included in either of the two typologies.

Forms

The Pontic Sigillata identified in Răcătău can be grouped according to its function in two categories: service tableware (plates, bowls) and drinking vessels (cups, skyphoi and cup-skyphoi). The separation of items according to form was based on the most characteristic traits of each item.¹⁹

Plates

- ca. 15 fragments of plates (**fig. 2,1; 5,5b**) with deep concave floor and vertical rim, concave on the outer face with mouldings above and below: the upper one rounded and the lower one faceted; rounded lip, obliquely faceted on the inside, more or less outturned; the connection between floor and rim is angular, with a fine groove on

¹⁶ ZHURAVLEV 2010, 67–68.

¹⁷ For example, on the base of existing publications, one still cannot define a Histrian production of fine Roman pottery (SUCEVEANU 2000, 179). One must also take into account the fact that there is no data available on south Pontic sites (Atlante II, 92).

¹⁸ POPESCU 2009, 17–46.

¹⁹ I avoided the presentation of shapes as part of a strict typology. I will employ such an approach for Pontic Sigillata known so far from several Dacian sites, part of a wider study of Hellenistic and Roman pottery from pre-Roman Dacia during the 2nd century BC and the 1st century AD.

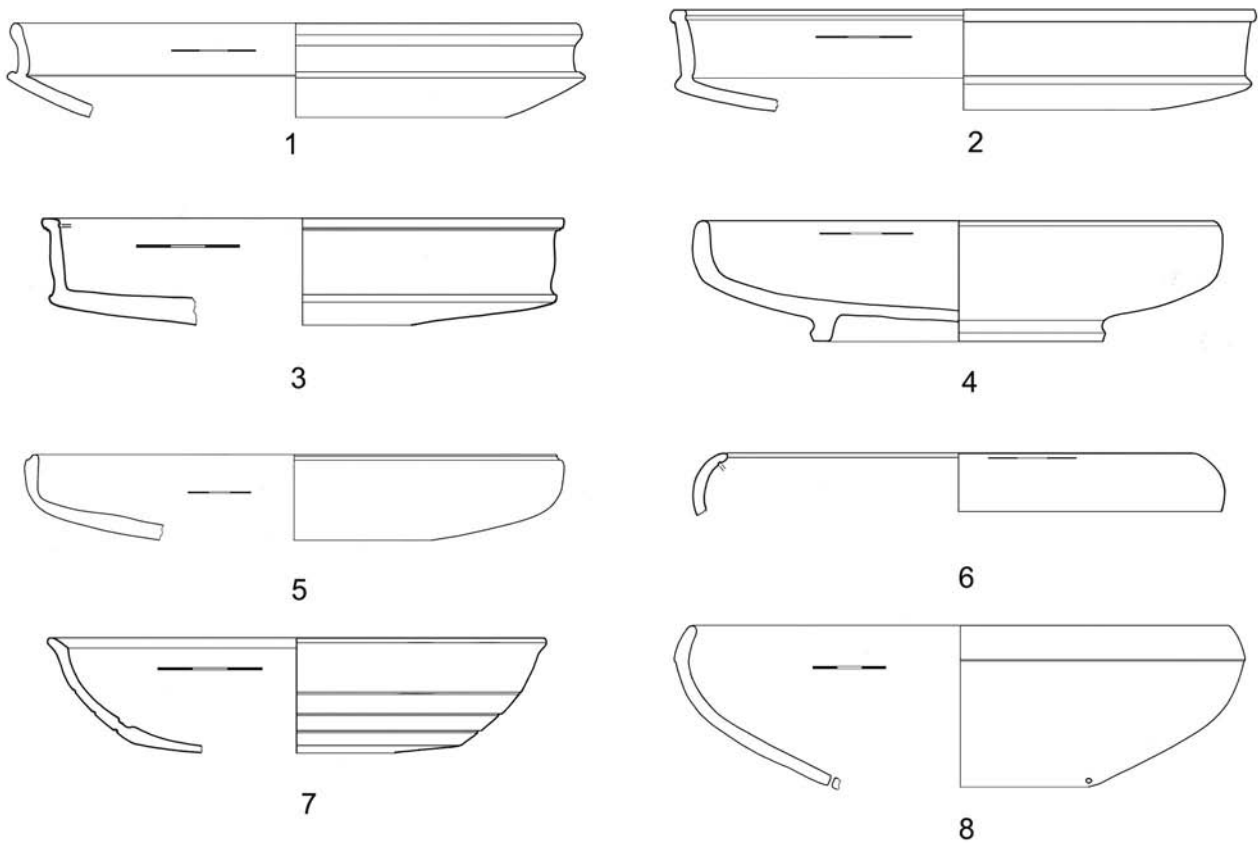


Fig. 2. Pontic Sigillata: 1–6 plates; 7–8 bowls.

the inside; narrow faceted ring-foot; bands of grooves or rouletting – or both of them – on the floor.

The items identified in Răcățău are of medium size, with the rim diameter measuring between 12 and 20 cm. They are similar to forms Hayes I²⁰ and 2.1.1 in Zhuravlev's typology.²¹

- ca. three fragments of plates (**fig. 2,2–3**) with vertical slightly outturned rim, simple or slightly thicker on the outside in the middle area and framed by two faceted moldings; straight cut lip; concave, more or less deep, floor; in the case of some items the floor becomes progressively thicker towards the center; the rim meets the floor at an angle; fine grooves under the rim on the inside, in certain cases there can be fine grooves under the rim on the outside and a fine groove at the junction between rim and floor on the inside; the upper diameter equal (or almost equal) to the maximum diameter of the body.

The plates thus described are of medium size, with opening diameter between 15 and 18 cm. I was able to identify similarities in the shape of the rim and mouldings with items no. 68, 72, and 96 presented by Zhuravlev.²²

- four fragments of plates (**fig. 2,4–6**) with short curved wall, vertical or strongly incurved rim, rounded in the area where the wall joins the floor; rounded lip, simple or with a groove on the outer or inner face; shallow floor,

concave on the inside; when the foot-ring is preserved, it is narrow, faceted with a groove on the outside, at the junction with the floor. In some cases, as one can see on the fragment illustrated in **figure 2,5** the meeting between wall and floor is thinner and rounded, while the floor gradually thickens towards the center.

Plates of this shape are of medium and large size, their upper diameters measuring between 15 and 24 cm. A similar item was published by Zhuravlev.²³

Bowls

- one fragment of a small-size bowl (rim diameter 14.3 cm, **fig. 2,7**), with curving body, concave on the inside; rounded, outturned rim, obliquely faceted on the inside; slightly concave floor with straightly cut underside; three fine grooves placed on the body, on the outside, at almost equal distance; one wide groove on the inside, at the junction between wall and floor.
- one fragment of a deep bowl (**fig. 2,8**) with rounded, strongly incurving wall; rounded lip (with a diameter of 21 cm), curved inwards; slightly thicker margin, delimited externally from the wall through a small angle; deep, concave base. More or less similar with item no. 167 published by Zhuravlev²⁴.

²⁰ Atlante II, 93 tav. 22,8.

²¹ ZHURAVLEV 2010, pl. 13,73–74.

²² Ibid. pl. 12,68; 13,72; 16,96.

²³ Ibid. pl. 22,145.

²⁴ Ibid. pl. 24,167.

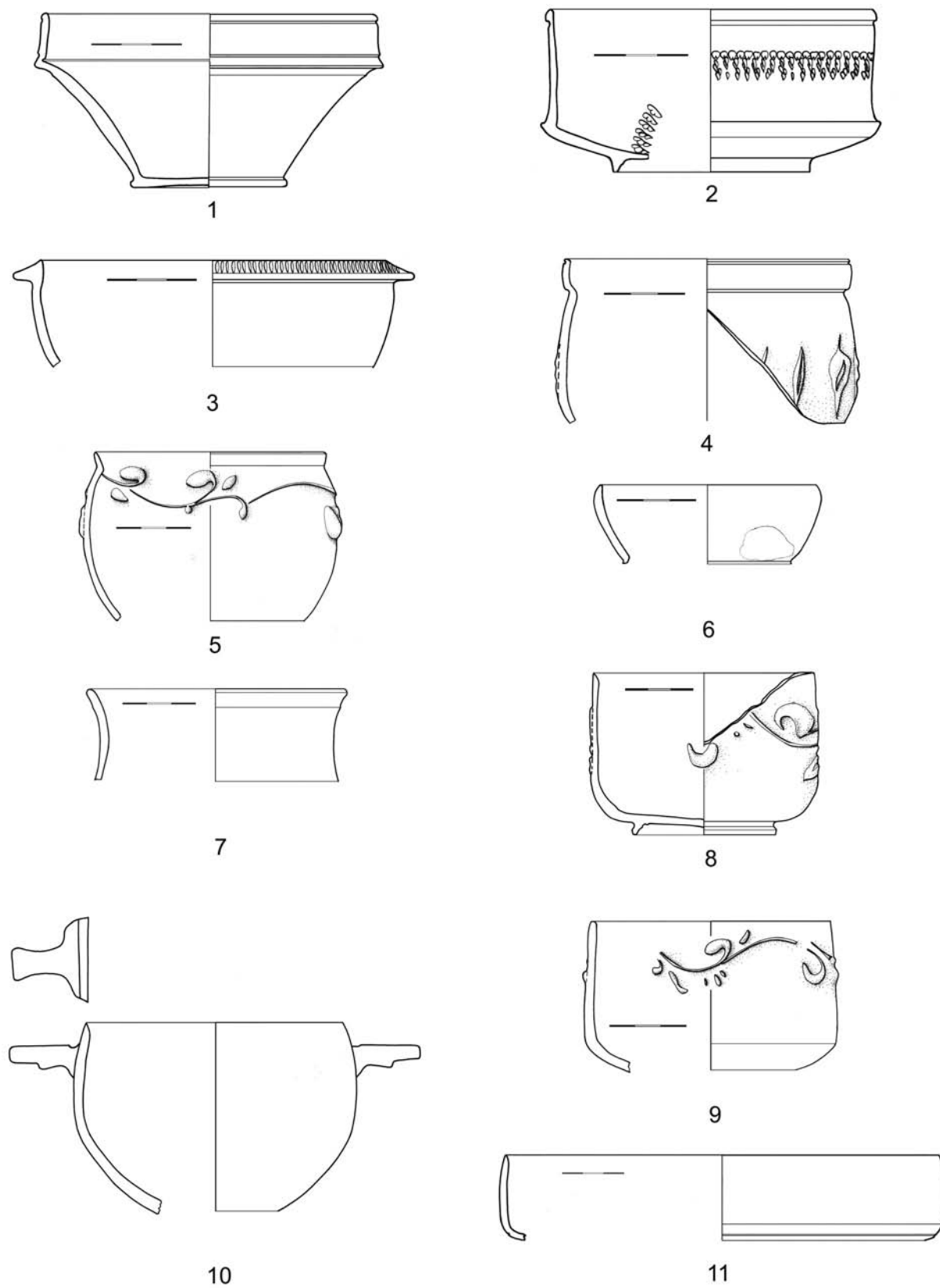


Fig. 3. Pontic Sigillata: 1–7.11 cups; 8–9 skyphos; 10 cup-skyphos.



Fig. 4. Pontic Sigillata: 1–3 cups; 4 skyphos; 5. cup-skyphos.

Cups

- two fragments of conical cups (**fig. 3,1**) with narrow inward-sloping rim, straight or slightly concave on the outside with mouldings above and below, separated from the wall by grooves; floor flat or slightly concave on the outside; straightly cut resting surface; on the outside, rounded base-ring pulled directly from the fabric of the body, delimited from the rest of the body by a fine groove. The two items identified in Răcățău are similar to form Hayes V²⁵ and also to form 30.2 in Zhuravlev's typology.²⁶
- one fragment of carinated cup (**fig. 3,2**) with vertical rim framed by two mouldings: the upper one rounded, separated from the wall by a fine groove, and the bottom one faceted; sloping deep concave floor; low foot-ring with rounded resting surface; a triple band of rouletting inside on the floor, and another one outside on the wall. Except for certain details of shape, the item is almost similar to Eastern Sigillata B form Hayes 65²⁷; nevertheless, its fabric, slip, and technical details – slip applied in a uniform layer on the inside and on the outer side of the wall and more diluted on the floor – that are similar to Pontic Sigillata identified on the site represent strong arguments for my inclusion of the item in this category of sigillata.
- one fragment from a hemispherical cup (**fig. 3,3**) with articulated rim, slightly concave on the upper surface; rouletting band on the upper surface of the rim. It is similar to form 24.2 in Zhuravlev's typology.²⁸
- one fragment of globular cup (**fig. 3,4**) with smooth vertical articulated rim framed by fine grooves, slightly concave on the inside and rounded wall; barbotine decoration on the body: row of stylized inverted leaves.
- 84 fragments or entire items of globular cups (**fig. 3,5; 4,1–2**), with plain or lightly faceted body; fine, thicker or faceted rim, delimited or not from the wall through a fine groove, straight or flared; straight or concave foot, simple or with nipple on one or both sides, with fine foot-ring, pulled directly from the body's fabric, faceted, sometimes with rounded resting surface; two little rounded vertical handles, attached to the upper part of the body; undecorated or with barbotine decoration: simple row of drops or vegetal, stylized, simple garland. The majority of them are similar to form 32.5 in Zhuravlev's typology.²⁹

²⁵ Atlante II, 94 tav. 23,5–6.

²⁶ ZHURAVLEV 2010, pl. 27,197.200.

²⁷ Atlante II, 66 tav. 14,15.

²⁸ ZHURAVLEV 2010, pl. 26,186.

²⁹ Ibid. pl. 30,234–236.238.

- one fragment of cup (**fig. 4,3**) with hemispherical low deep body and outside concave rim; rounded lip, lightly faceted on the outside. The only one fragment identified at Racatau might be part of a cup form 26 in Zhuravlev's typology.³⁰
- five fragments from rims of cups (**fig. 3,6**) with bi-truncated body and vertical articulated rim, separated from the body through a fine groove; inside concave floor and low, faceted or rounded ring-foot; two vertical rounded handles, slightly surpassing the rim, attached to the rim and the upper part of the body. They are similar to form 31 in Zhuravlev's typology.³¹
- two fragments from cups (**fig. 3,7**) with (probably) bi-truncated body with the upper part of the walls concave on the outside; narrow outturned rim, delimited from the rest of the body by a fine cordon.
- one fragment from the rim of a cup (**fig. 3,11**) with vertical plain rim; junction area between rim and floor vaguely rounded, faceted, with a fine groove on the outside. The fragment might have been part of a cup similar to form 28 in Zhuravlev's typology.³²

Skyphoi

- ca. ten skyphos fragments (**fig. 3,8–9**) forms Hayes X³³, both variant A, with rounded junction between body and foot, and variant B, with angular junction between body and foot; on the outside, the fragments are decorated with simple, stylized vegetal garlands.
- one fragment of a skyphos (**fig. 4,4**) with bi-truncated body; rounded, outturned lip; vertical incurving walls; floor concave on the inside, angular junction between floor and wall; strap-handle, slightly elevated, connected to the lower half of the body.

Cup-skyphoi

- two items (**figs. 3,10; 4,5**), one preserved in fragments and one entirely, with globular body; vertical lip, obliquely faceted on the inside; foot concave on the inside; low, faceted foot-ring; junction between foot and body marked on the outside by a groove; two round vertical handles, with thumb-plate on top, placed on the body, right under the lip (Zhuravlev form 32.1).

As one will be able to note throughout the presentation of shapes, the proportion between the two functional categories is strongly in favor of drinking wares; among them, cups with globular body, undecorated or with barbotine decoration, are the most numerous.

The *fabric* of the Pontic Sigillata identified in Răcățau is rather well prepared; as for its consistency, it can be: (a) hard,

porous with white specks, and, in a few cases, with inclusions of mica; (b) compact and homogenous; (c) hard with inclusions of sand; or (d), in a few cases, fine and soap-like. The color of the fabric varies between pink, orange and red (5YR 7/8; 7.5YR 8/4, 8/6, 7/4, 7/6, 7/8, 5/6; 10YR 8/6, 7/6, 7/8).

The slip can be dull or shiny, varying between orange, red and brown (5YR 5/8; 7.5YR 7/8, 6/8, 5/6, 5/8; 10YR 8/8, 7/8, 6/8). It may be applied on the entire surface of the body; only inside and on the upper half of the outside; or only on the outside, on the upper half of the body. The first two situations are generally encountered in the case of plates and skyphoi, while the latter way of applying the slip is typical of cups with globular body and two handles. There are cases where the slip has acquired a fine pearly sheen and this can be typical of vessels with inclusions of sand in the fabric. One must note the outer finish of a group of items including a cup, a bowl, and a skyphos cup. These items are completely covered in slip on the inside, but the outside is only covered in a layer of brick red-yellowish or opaque slip down to above the base. On the outside, in the upper part of the body, there are dark-brown shadows due to the firing process.

The *decoration* of the items presented here is typical of Pontic Sigillata. *Incised circles* and simple, double, or triple *rouletted bands* are usually encountered on the inside of plates (**fig. 5,1–5**). On a single cup one finds a band of rouletting on the inside of the base and on the outside of the wall (**fig. 3,2**). *Barbotine decoration* can be seen on the outside of drinking vessels: simple rows of “drops”, stylized vegetal garlands, or stylized leaves (**fig. 3,4,5,8,9; 4,2**).

No entire stamps were identified. Two fragments from bases of plates (**fig. 5,4–5**) display fragmentary stamps: on one fragment one can see a rectangular cartouche containing four dots in relief, while a fragment of *planta pedis* stamp is preserved on the other fragment, in the center of the base.

Date

The identified items are typical of the group of Pontic Sigillata A. As previously mentioned, I was unable to consult the onsite archaeological documentation, just the markings on the items and data from the inventory registers, thus one cannot discuss the issue of a *terminus post quem* for Pontic Sigillata discovered in the settlement of Răcățau. One can presume that Pontic Sigillata appeared in this settlement during the 1st century AD. Admitting that the site was abandoned due to the Roman conquest, then the *terminus ante quem* might be the first decade of the 2nd century AD.

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³⁰ Ibid. pl. 26, 189.

³¹ Ibid. pl. 29, 221.

³² Ibid. pl. 27, 191.

³³ Atlante II, 95, tav. XXIII/10, 11.

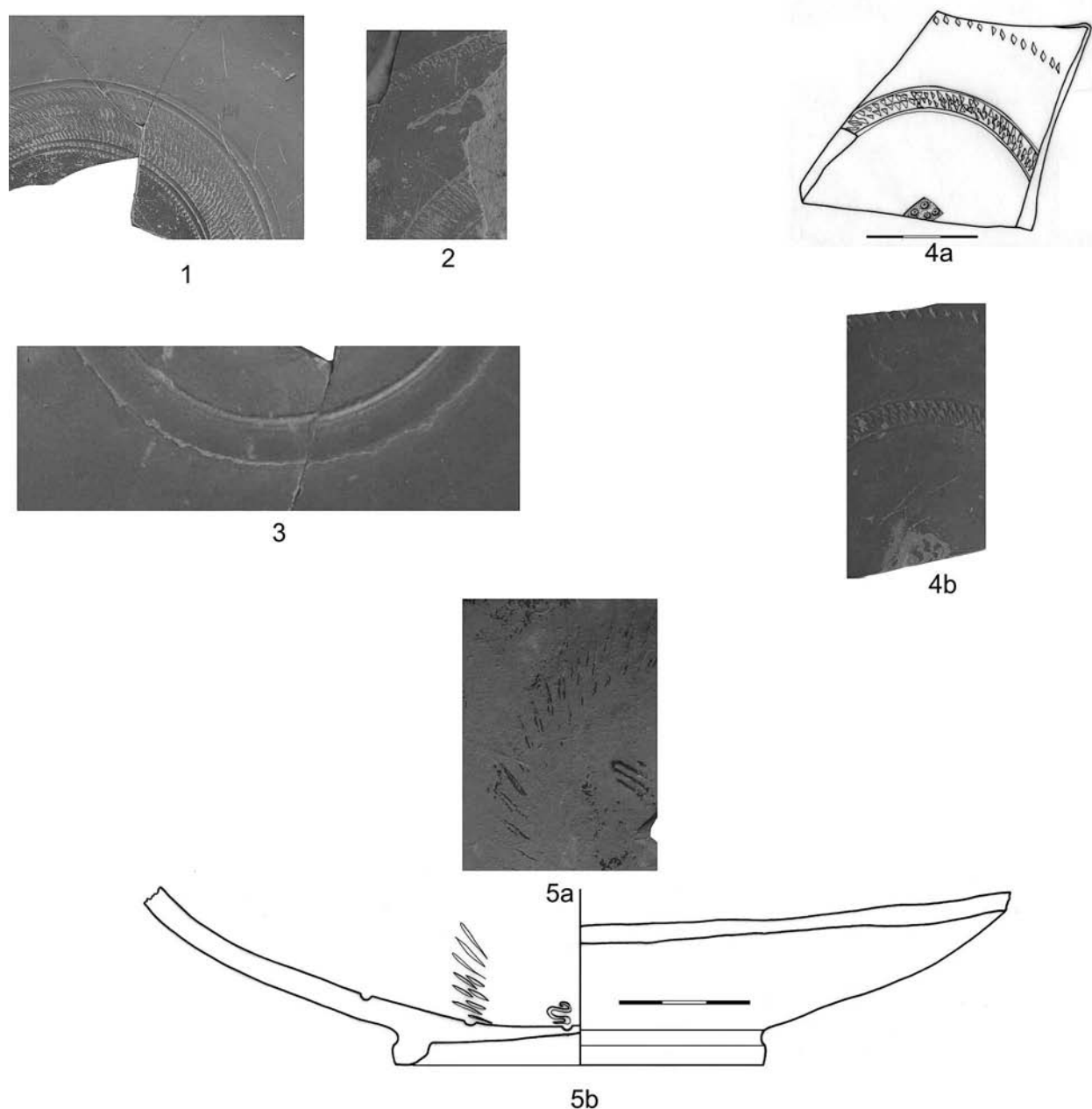


Fig. 5. Pontic Sigillata: 1–3 details of decoration on plates; 4a.b–5a.b fragments with stamps(?).

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