

Eduard Krekovič

BYZANTINE AND SLAVIC POTTERY – IS THERE ANY INFLUENCE?

For approximately 100 years archaeologists have been finding in the region of Moravia (now the eastern part of the Czech Republic) strange pottery, which seems to be alien there. It is dated to the 9th century AD. During that period the area was the central part of the Moravian kingdom or *Magna Moravia* (fig. 1). The pottery differs from the local Slavic products in both technology and by shapes. It was therefore considered to be Roman, Avar or Byzantine. However, some scholars considered the possibility of a local origin. A review and summary of the previous opinions on this matter were offered 40 years ago by V. Hrubý¹. Because fragments of this pottery had been found together with roof tiles in a pottery kiln, he assumed that both articles were produced by Byzantine craftsmen in Moravia. According to him, they came there in AD 863 together with the Byzantine mission of Cyril and Method². However, he did not support his hypothesis by any finds from the territory of the Byzantine Empire, so I decided to reopen this problem.

Pottery of the type mentioned above is not numerous.³ The collection consists of several undamaged vessels and dozens of fragments from eight sites including settlements as well as cemeteries. The settlements belong to the centres

with stone-built churches, while some of the tombs are situated near village sites. It seems that women and children were buried in these tombs, but the evidence is not representative enough to make more general conclusions. The common characteristic of all vessels is the fineness of the material, though the colour and elaboration of their surface may differ. The surface is yellow to brown, sometimes with a red slip. Some of them are well-fired, others less so.

The shapes of the jugs can be divided to four groups:

1. *Amphora-like jugs with two handles*

The handles begin at the base of the neck, sometimes in the confines between the handle and the body of the vessel. This shape is definitely the most numerous. There are globular (Fig. 2,3,7) and more slender (Fig. 2,5) types, the latter being generally taller (19,5–29,8 cm). The height of the globular jugs is 10,5 to 14,5 cm.

¹ HRUBÝ 1965.

² HRUBÝ 1965, 65.

³ Most pictures of pottery types were published without scales.

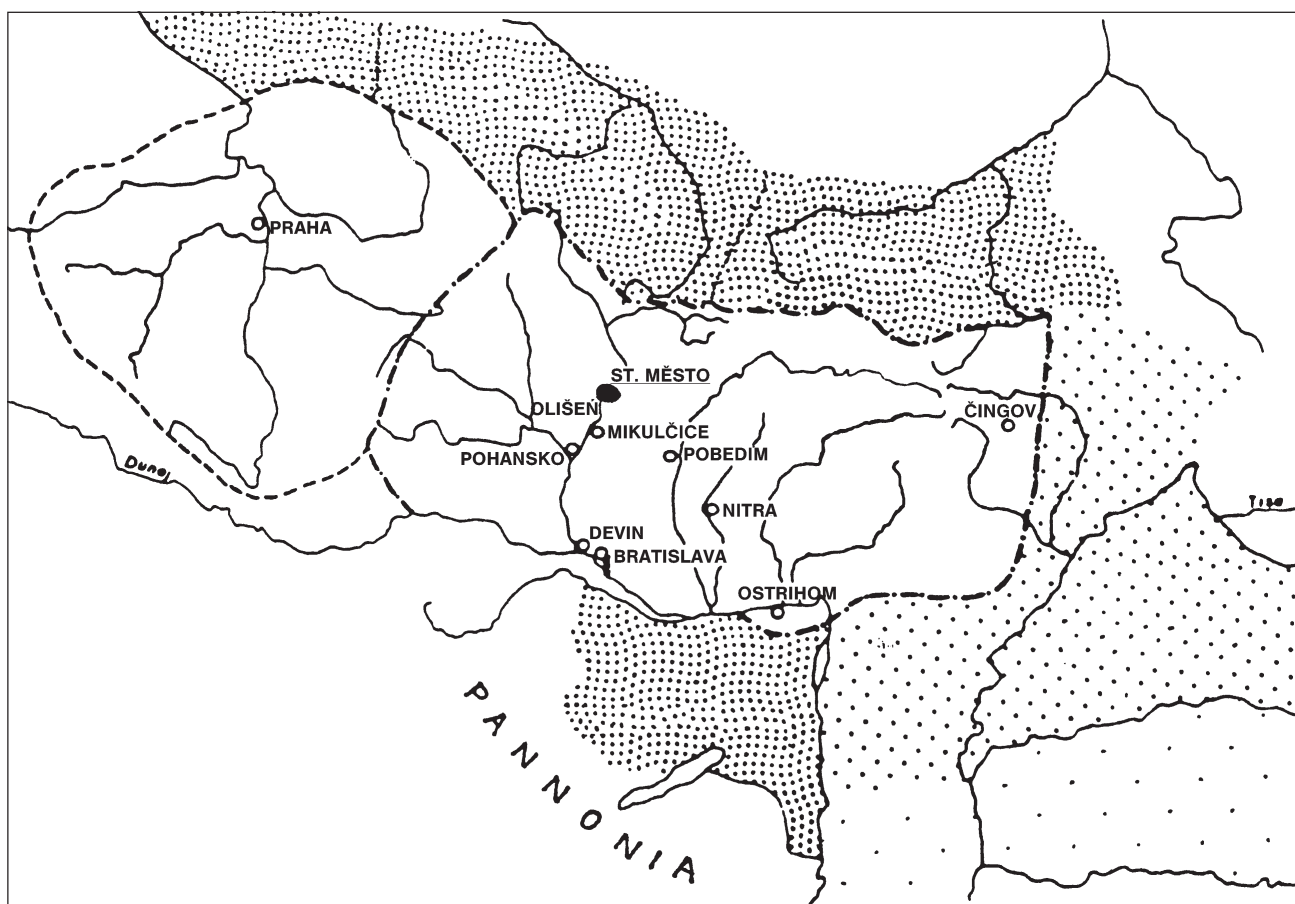


Fig. 1: Moravian kingdom

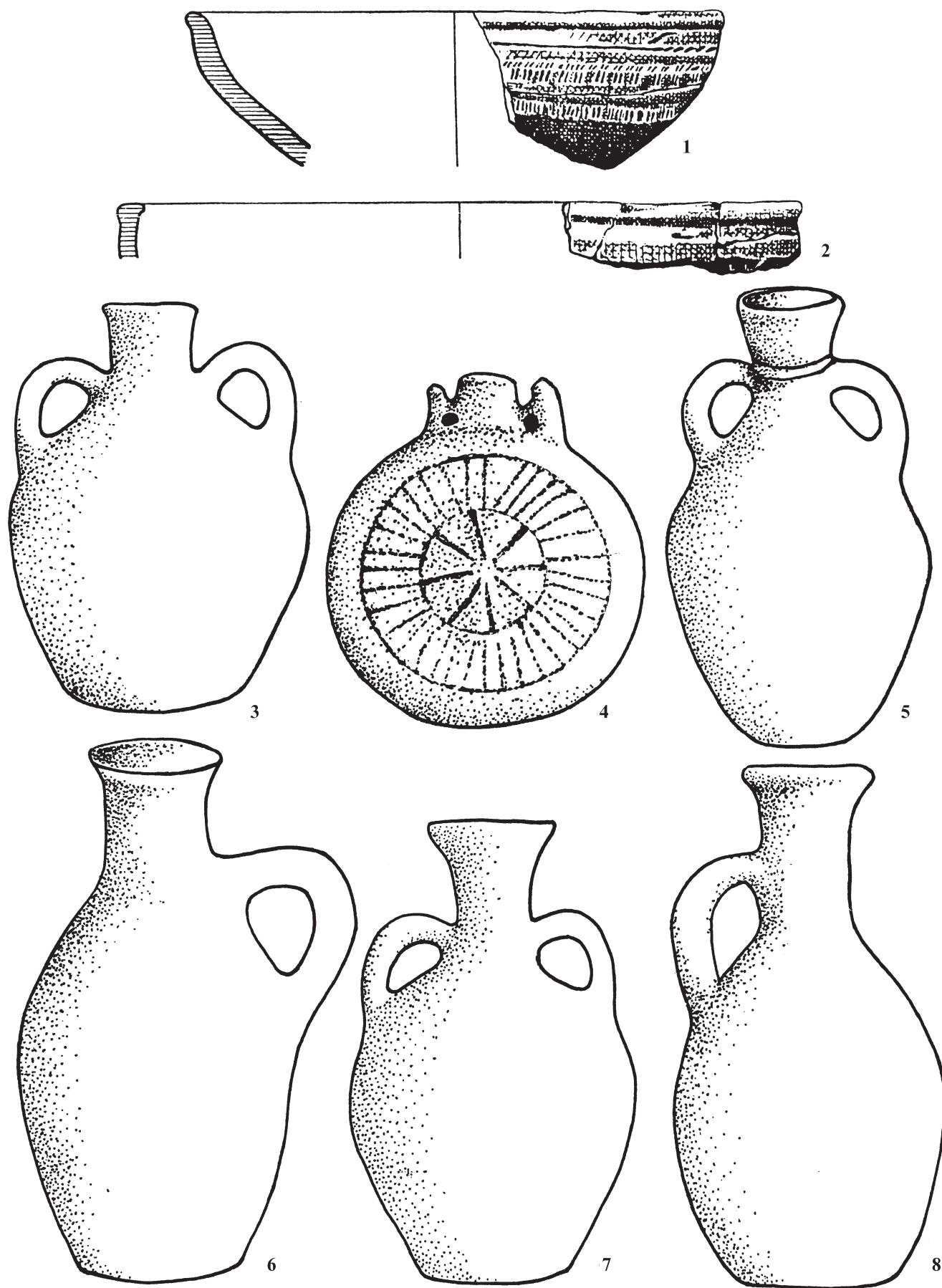


Fig. 2: Byzantine pottery types from Moravia

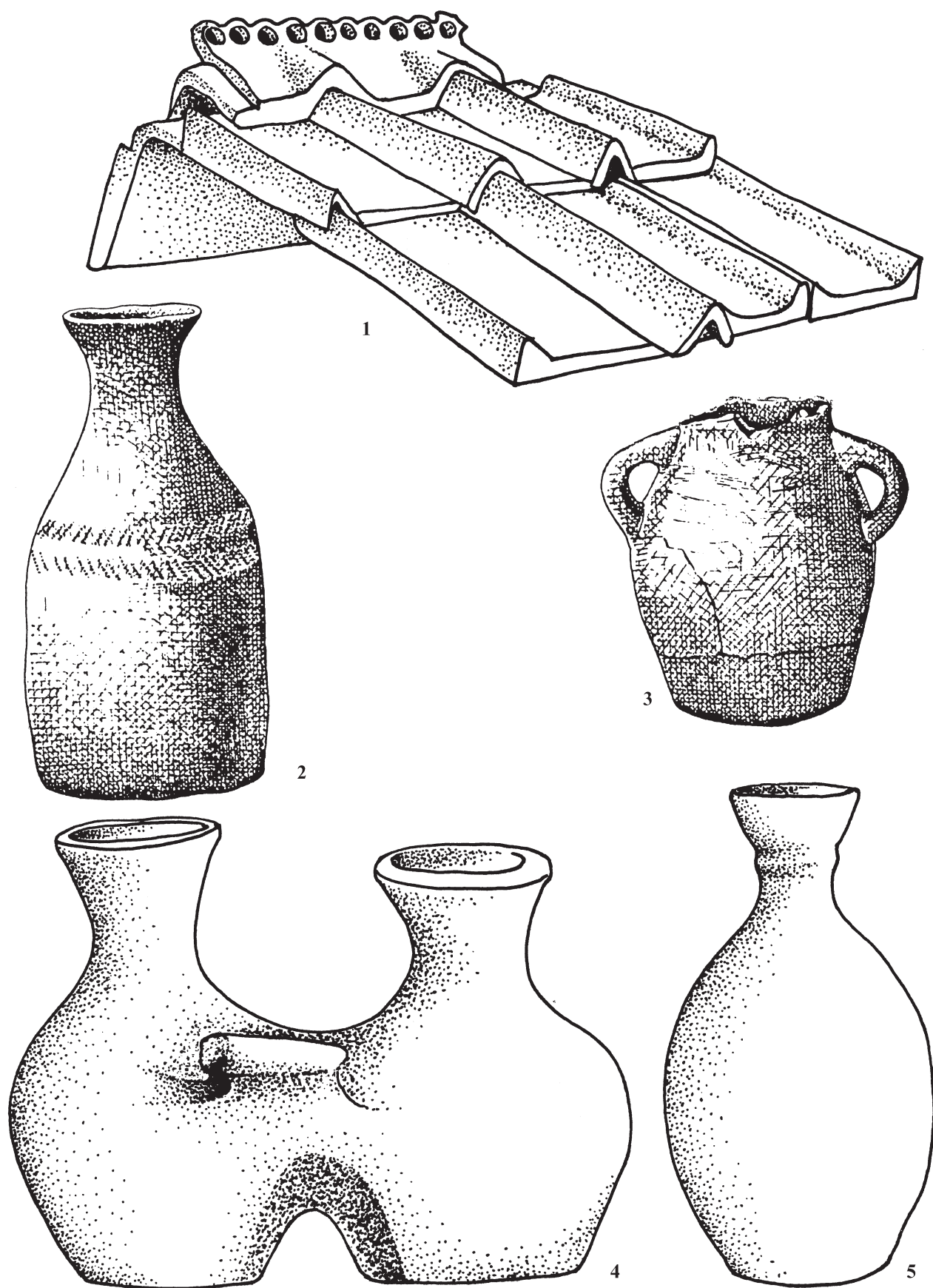


Fig 3: 1 Reconstruction of roof tiles from Moravia. — 2–3 Slavic imitations of Byzantine pottery. — 4–5 Byzantine pottery types from Moravia.

2. *Jugs with one handle*

These are slender vessels with a narrow neck. The handles begin likewise at the base of the neck or in the confines between the handle and the body of the vessel (**Fig. 2, 6.8**).

3. *Bottle-like shapes*

So far only two pieces of this kind have been found (**Fig. 3,5**). Their shapes are similar to the previous group of the jugs.

4. *Bowls*

There are only fragments of two types of bowls – with slightly everted or inturned rim (**Fig. 2,1.2**)

There are also several individual finds, such as a round pilgrim-flask (**fig. 2,4**), or twin-vessel (**fig. 3,4**); fragments of a lid, as well as two ovoid rattles, may be mentioned here. Several roof tiles made from the similar material also have been found (**fig. 3,1**).

Because the quality of firing and surface elaboration of the vessels differ, it is likely that they were made in different workshops. So far only one kiln where such pottery was made – according to V. Hrubý – has been found. He assumed that the fragments of the jugs were in the kiln⁴. However, the jugs were not complete and it is therefore impossible to be certain that they were made there, because the kiln could have served as a refuse pit after it ceased to function. Notwithstanding this, I suppose that this pottery was produced in Moravia (not necessarily in this kiln) although under strong Byzantine influence.

There are relatively few well-dated finds of a coarse pottery similar to the Moravian finds from the territory of the Byzantine Empire. The fact that Byzantine coarse ware from the period 400–1200 AD varies only in small details⁵ also constitutes a problem in the sense that dating the ware to the 9th century AD only is relatively difficult. The situation is even more problematic due to the fact that there were many local workshops which have not been examined sufficiently so far. For these reasons there has been little success in finding analogies to the Moravian finds. An amphora-like jug from Chios⁶ (**fig. 4,4**) or pilgrim-flask from Sardis⁷ (**fig. 4,6**) can be mentioned as examples of such analogies. Closer parallels to our vessels perhaps do not exist, because they may be of local origin and not imported from Byzantium. Later I will return to the question of Moravian pottery producers.

We can find a similar situation in the Balkan region of the Lower Danube. The peculiar mix of Slavic, old-Bulgarian, pre-Romanian and Byzantine cultural elements emerged on the both banks of the river – that is, in northern Bulgaria and southern Romania. The Romanian scholar M. Comşa has named it Balkano-Danubian civilisation. It began to develop at the end of the 8th century AD to the south of Danube and had lasted approximately until the year AD 1000⁸. Alongside the pottery imported from *Byzantium* (mainly amphorae) we can find there its local imitations. The most popular were amphora-like jugs with two handles, like those found in Moravia as well. Very similar finds appear in Bulgaria at Pliska⁹ (**fig. 4,3**), Devne¹⁰ (**fig. 4,5**), Devnja¹¹ (**fig. 4,9**) and in Romania at Fintinele¹² (**fig. 4,7**) or Sultana¹³ (**fig. 4,8**). There

was an important pottery workshop in Romania in the village of Bucov, where even glazed pottery of Byzantine type was produced¹⁴. One-handled jugs and bowls similar to Moravian ones have been found in Bulgaria where the pottery of these shapes belongs to the so-called table ware¹⁵. The most important centres of its production included Pliska and Preslav, centres of the 1st Bulgarian Kingdom¹⁶, where even roof tiles – like in Moravia – were produced¹⁷.

Bottle-like jugs, exclusively with two handles, have been found also in Slavic sites near the lake Balaton in *Pannonia* (Hungary). Here they have been considered as imitations of the late Roman jugs, which were made during the late Avar period in the 8th century AD¹⁸. This pottery tradition appeared later in the local Slavic centres near Balaton-Zalavár and Keszthely during the 9th century AD according to Á. Sós¹⁹.

It is possible, however, that the situation there was similar to that in Moravia, where Byzantine craftsmen came with the mission of Cyril and Method to build churches. The production of the roof tiles can support this idea²⁰. The craftsmen could also make vessels similar to Byzantine ones, here as well as in the area of the Lower Danube. In the latter region the production could develop more, because the Byzantine influence there was more direct and had lasted longer. In Moravia the production of the pottery may have lasted only a few years and may have stopped after Method's pupils had left to Balkan in AD 885. The Slavs were not able to make pottery of such a high quality, but sometimes they might try to imitate it. The hand-made two-handled jugs, and especially the bottle-like jugs may be mentioned as examples (**fig. 3,2.3**)²¹. So these vessels represent what we might call Byzantine influence on Slavic pottery.

⁴ HRUBÝ 1965, 44.

⁵ K. DARK, Byzantine pottery (Stroud 2001) 46.

⁶ J. BOARDMAN, The pottery. In: M. BALLANCE ET AL., Excavations in Chios 1952–1955. Byzantine Emporio (London 1989) pl. 23,207.

⁷ J. S. CRAWFORD, The Byzantine shops at Sardis (Cambridge, London 1990) fig. 372.

⁸ COMŞA 1963, 432.

⁹ DONČEVA-PETKOVA 1970, fig. 2,e.

¹⁰ DONČEVA-PETKOVA 1970, fig. 2,v.

¹¹ D. I. DIMITROV, Keramikata ot ranobalgarskite nekropoli vav Varnensko. Izvestija na narodnija muzej Varna 9, 1973, pl. X,3.

¹² M. COMŞA, Ein Begräbnis-Fundverband aus dem 9.–10. Jh. in Fintinele (Kreis Teleorman). Dacia 13, 1969, fig. 5,4b.

¹³ B. MITREA, La nécropole birituelle de Sultana. Résultats et problèmes. Dacia 32, 1988, pl. 18, 158, 1.

¹⁴ M. COMŞA, Die Keramik vom byzantinischen Typus aus den Siedlungen von Bucov-Ploieşti. Dacia 24, 1980, note 2.

¹⁵ DONČEVA-PETKOVA 1970, fig. 3,a–b; 4,z.

¹⁶ L. DONČEVA-PETKOVA, Prabalgarska keramika na teritorijata na dnešnite balgarski zemi. In: Pliska-Preslav 2 (Sofia 1981) 164–165.

¹⁷ S. ANGELOVA, Za proizvodstvoto na stroitelna keramika v severois-točna Balgarija prez rannoto srednovekovie. Archeologija Sofia 13, 1971–1973, 3–24.

¹⁸ A. Sós, Frühmittelalterliche Keramik aus Ungarn in römischer Tradition. RCRF Acta 10, 1968, 43.

¹⁹ A. Sós, Frühmittelalterliche Keramik aus Ungarn in römischer Tradition. RCRF Acta 10, 1968, 47. — A. Sós, Die slawische Bevölkerung Westungarns im 9. Jahrhundert (München 1973) 137–140.

²⁰ HRUBÝ 1965, 56–57.

²¹ HRUBÝ 1965, Fig. 8,2; 9,2.

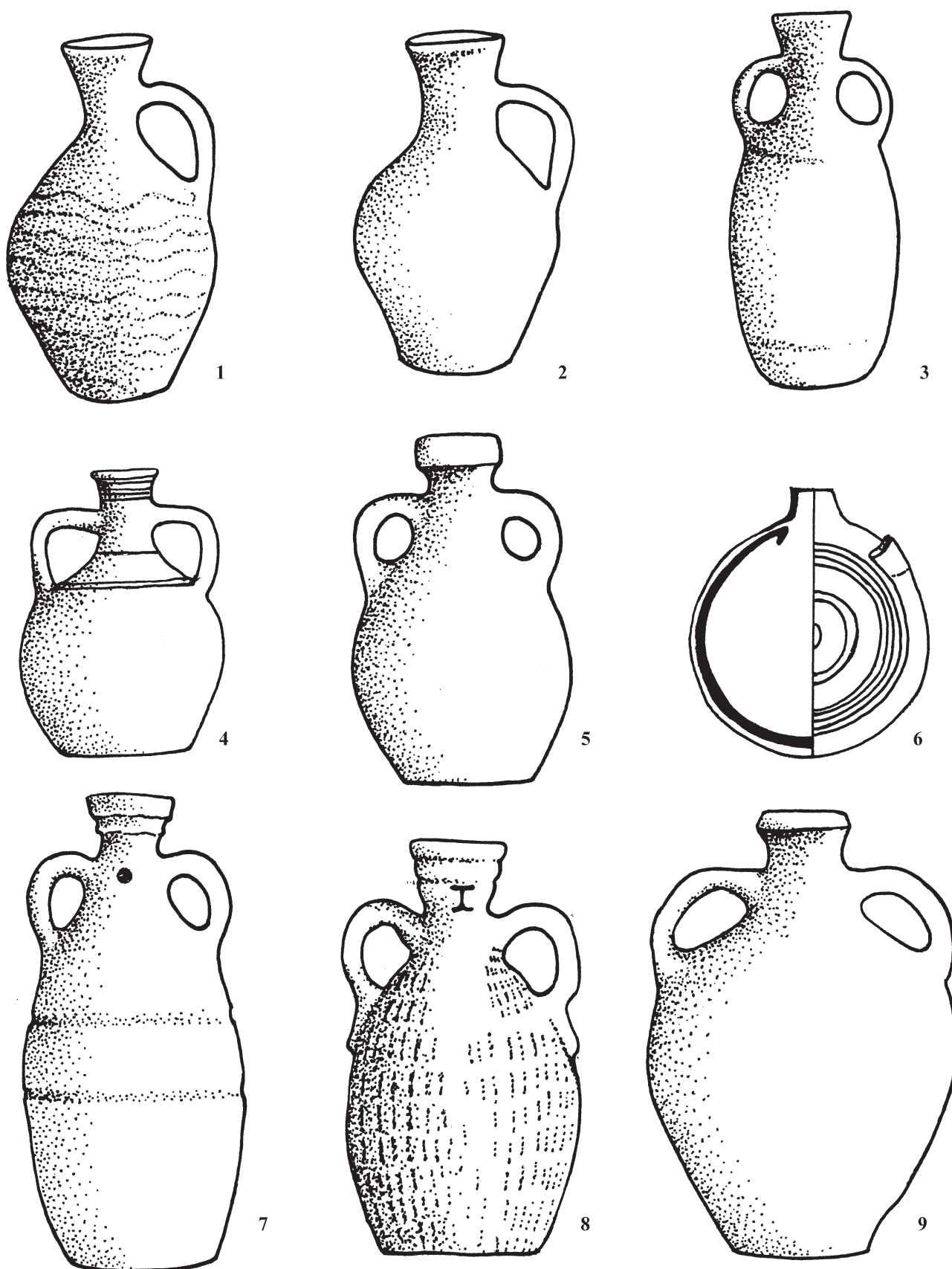


Fig. 4: Pottery of Byzantine character from the Lower Danube region: 1,2 Preslav. — 3 Pliska. — 5 Devene. — 7 Fintinele. — 8 Sultana. — 9 Devnja. — Pottery from the Byzantine Empire: 4 Chios. — 6 Sardis.

Bibliography

COMŞA 1963

M. COMŞA, La civilisation balkano-danubienne (IX^e–XI^e siècles) sur le territoire de la Roumaine (origine, évolution et appartenance ethnique). Étude préliminaire. *Dacia* 7, 1963, 413–438.

DONČEVA-PETKOVA 1970

L. DONČEVA-PETKOVA, Trapeznata keramika v Balgarija prez VIII–XI v. *Archeologija Sofia* 12, 1970, 12–24.

HRUBÝ 1965

V. HRUBÝ, Keramika antických tvarů v době velkomoravské. *Časopis Moravského muzea* 50, 1965, 37–62