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**NEW METHODS CONCERNING THE PROBLEM OF APPROACHING THE
POTTER'S MARK "PHENOMENON"**

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Abstract. *The author develops the ways already used for the elucidation of the "phenomenon" of potter's marks (similar to others from other countries – chronologically speaking, and according to the number of pieces) to which we add new methods: making a catalogue of potter's marks discovered in Romania (manuscript); making a map with such discoveries and kilns for burning the pottery in the early Middle Age with the afferent conclusions; the making of a map where the commercial routes and the settlements with such discoveries that go together with them are pointed out.*

Rezumat. *Autoarea abordează metodele deja folosite pentru lămurirea "fenomenului" mărcilor de olar (similare cu cele din alte țări, la același nivel cronologic și cu aceeași reprezentare cantitativă), la care se adaugă noi metode: alcătuirea unui catalog de mărci de olar, descoperite în România (ms.); alcătuirea unei hărți cu aceste descoperiri și cu cuptoarele pentru arderea ceramicii în Evul Mediu timpuriu, cu concluziile de rigoare; alcătuirea unei hărți în care sunt reliefate rutele comerciale și așezările cu astfel de descoperiri de pe aceste trasee.*

The potter's mark phenomenon has been carefully discussed in Romanian historiography, from the moment it came to the attention of the specialists, and one could say that, with a few exceptions, it "enjoys" the same position of "priority" nowadays, too. Few researchers, past and present, on the occasion of discovering such signs in a site, have stopped to draw up a more ample presentation, in order to try to clarify their origin and meaning (COMȘA 1961, 291-305; DIACONU 1983, 290-293; DIACONU 1992, 355-358; SÎRBU 1979, 35-39). There have been and still seem to be uncertainties regarding the culture that defines the 8th–10th centuries. Successive generations have supported or contested the ideas of their predecessors, utilizing, as arguments for their opinions, a lot of studies concerning settlements, dwellings, ceramic categories, rites and rituals etc., necessary and very useful links which help to clarify the general image and not only that. The potter's mark phenomenon represents a still "unwelded" link and, we

dare say, one as important as the others. That is exactly why we have decided to bring it back to the attention of the researchers, without whose informations referring to such discoveries we cannot clarify this phenomenon, as we do not claim to settle it for good.

The great quantity of potter's marks, discovered in the territories inhabited by Slavs, has determined some specialists, initially, to ascribe a Slavic origin to this phenomenon (FLORESCU, FLORESCU, DIACONU 1958, 225-226). But it was ascertained that it was a fallacious conclusion and that this usage is much older, occurring also with the Celts and the Romans (DIACONU 1992, 358), and the late core of the latter race's culture constitutes its means of transmission to the ceramics of the early medieval period (DIACONU 1992, 358; DIACONU, VÎLCEANU 1972, 136; ZAHARIA 1967, 92; TOROPU 1976, 171; COMȘA 1978, 97; SÎRBU 1979, 37; DIACONU 1994, 17). However it is not on this idea that we want to dwell.

The craftsmen that maintained this phenomenon, romanized natives, Slavs and not only them, were, actually, real production "centres" of necessary objects. But the intensity of its practice and of the marked vessel's use differ from one area to another.

On Romanian territory, the highest number of marks, about 530, has turned up at Garvăn-Dinogeția (Tulcea county) (ȘTEFAN, BARNEA, COMȘA, COMȘA 1967, 205), which surpasses any attempt at competition. It is followed by Capidava (Constanța county), with about 100 marks (FLORESCU, FLORESCU, DIACONU 1958, 215), Morești (Mureș county), with about 50 (HOREDȚ *et alii* 1953, 288, fig. 11; HOREDȚ 1984, 44, fig. 24 and 45, fig. 26), Bucov (Prahova county), with about 47 (COMȘA 1978, 96, fig. 87), Dridu (Ialomița county), with about 44 (ZAHARIA 1967, 90; IONIȚĂ 1996-1998, 307, 317 and fig. 15; MIHAI 1983, 442, fig. 2/14), Hârșova (Constanța county), with about 40 (ARICESCU 1971, 360, fig. 9; 361, fig. 10 and 362, fig. 11), Epureni (Vaslui county), with about 31 (TEODOR 1987, 150), Histria (Istria, Constanța county), with about 30 (FIEDLER 1992, Taf. 16-35), Sultana (Călărași county), with about 25 (MITREA 1988, 113 and *passim*; FIEDLER 1992, Taf. 39-41), Obârșia Nouă (Olt county), with 10 (TOROPU 1976, 71) etc.

Relating to percentage, the situation stands thus: in Garvăn-Dinogeția, the marked pots constitute between 50 % (groups I and II) and 90 % (group IV) (ȘTEFAN, BARNEA, COMȘA, COMȘA 1967, 205-206). In Epureni,

35-40 % of all the discovered pots bore such marks (TEODOR 1987, 165), in Chiscani (Brăila county), about 29 % (SÎRBU 1979, 35), while in Păcuiul lui Soare, only 3-4 % (DIACONU, VÎLCEANU 1972, 131; SÎRBU 1979, 38).

It is a well-known fact that the spreading area of the potter's marks transcends the limits of our country¹. For a short comparison, we shall enumerate such discoveries from other regions.

In the Moldavian Republic, the locality that has the largest percentage seems to be Pohârnîceni-Petruha L3, with 15 % (from a total of 200 pot bottoms, 30 bore marks)² (TENTIUC 1996, 113). It is followed by Hansca, with 7 - 10,4 % (217 of the pot bottoms bore marks) (POSTICĂ 1994, 52); Pohârnîceni-Petruha L2, with 8,03 % (from a total of 112 discovered pot bottoms, only 9 were marked) (TENTIUC 1996, 113) and Brăniște XIII, with 2,41 % (from a total of 124 pot bottoms, 3 were marked) (TENTIUC 1996, 113) etc.

From the territory of the former Soviet Union, we can mention the discovery of 306 marked pot bottoms (regarding percentage, in the archaeological campaign of 1936, we have 11,4 %, and in the one from 1937 – 14,4 %) in Kiev (ŠOVKOPLEAS 1964, 56), 200 in Vščija (5 %) (ŠOVKOPLEAS 1964, 57), 108 in Plesnek (KUČERA 1960, 122). From the middle reaches of the Donets (peregrination and research) have been gathered 380 of them (18 % of these, taken from kitchenware, 6,5 % from grey ceramics and 1,5 % from "containers") (KRASIL'NICOV 1999, 175), in Calfa, the percentage of the discovered pot bottoms bearing marks is of 15 % (ČEBOTARENKO 1973, 20), and in the sites of the old Reazan, Pronsk and the old Novgorod, it is about 1 % (ŠOVKOPLEAS 1964, 56).

From the territory of Bulgaria, we can mention the discovery of 39 marked pot bottoms in Blaskovo (30 %)³ (DIMITROV 1967, 141), 27 in Brestak

¹ Pots with mark have been discovered in Russia, the Ukraine, the Moldavian Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, Poland, Sweden etc.

² Because of a regrettable error in the article in Romanian – the one that is going to appear in the "Ialomița" magazine no. IV (Slobozia) – the discoveries from Pohârnîceni-Petruha L3 have been classified in a 1,5 percentage, the real one being 15 %.

³ The author states that, generally, in the early medieval sites from Bulgaria, only 10% of the ceramic vessels had marks in relief on their bottom, Blaskovo being an exception.

(about 20 %) (DIMITROV 1969, 129) etc.

Therefore, we observe that, at least for now, we do not possess information about the discovery, in a site, of a larger number of marks than the one from Garvăn – Dinogetia, which exceeds with about 224 items the next one on the list – Kiev, with about 313 the one from Hansca, with about 330 the one from Vșcija, and with about 419 the one from Blaskovo.

Indeed, regarding the leading sites (settlements with afferent necropoleis), we do not think there should be any hesitations in placing them in the category of the centres producing marked ceramic vessels, but where can we include the ones in which such discoveries do not exceed 20-30 items?

Can we call “pottery centre” a site in which just 20-30 marks have been discovered? Theoretically, not really, 20-30 marked vessels could be brought over time (in 10-15 years, with a maximum of 2 vessels a year), by way of trade, from other settlements, presumed to be the true production centres. But the question is: where from? Because, if we look at the sites around them, with similar discoveries, we observe that, as a rule, they display an even smaller number of marks. So, are these settlements also production centres? It is, in fact, possible, especially if we have approximately 10 items with a certain type of mark, assuming this would constitute the local craftsman’s sign or the sign of the person that ordered the product. But, in this situation, we lose sight of the eventuality that some of these signs might have a symbolical value. In order to try to solve this problem, at least partially, we have drawn up a catalogue of the potter’s marks discovered on Romanian territory. By means of this catalogue, we shall identify the possible production centres and we hope that we shall be able to point out, if need be, the circulation of some mark-bearing pots, at least in the territory that is close to them. So as to complete the information from the catalogue, we shall bring you a map on which we have indicated the settlements where kilns functioning in the early Middle Ages have been identified. Thus, it is confirmed that the practice of marking the vessels was not used by all potters. We have centres, like the ones in Radovanu (Călărași county) (COMȘA 1975, 335; TENTIUC 1996, 110) and Borcea (Călărași county) (PAPASIMA, OPREA 1984, 237), where kilns are present (therefore, they are certain pottery centres), but not marked vessels, too. The same way that in Slobozia (Călărași county)

(RĂDULESCU, IONESCU 1955, 300) and Otopeni (Ilfov county) (LEAHU 1969, 9, 12) we have marked ceramics, but no kilns have been discovered yet.

Then, could it be that these settlements were only "consumers" of such goods, but not also producers? Here is a question that we hope to be able to answer, by corroborating the results obtained after finishing the potter's mark catalogue with the ones referring to the economic life of the initial mediaeval period. Therefore, we consider that another method through which we could clarify certain aspects of the problem would be to compare the map that indicates such discoveries with the commercial routes identified for that specific period.

In 1983, the researcher Maria Comşa was tracing a commercial route that, going along the right limit of the Danube, was connecting the settlements of northern Dobrudja with the ones in the region around Durostorum (Silistra) (COMŞA 1983, 101 and passim). On this route, or in its immediate proximity, we now identify the following settlements and necropoleis where vessels with potter's marks have been discovered (from north to south): Dinogeţia (ŞTEFAN, BARNEA, COMŞA, COMŞA 1967, 205 and others), Hârşova (ARICESCU 1971, 360-362), Capidava (FLORESCU, FLORESCU, DIACONU 1958, 215 and others), Cernavodă (BARNEA 1960, 77), Cochirleni (the commune of Rasova) (DIACONU 1973-1975, 204, 212), Satu Nou (MITREA 1961, 555; MITREA 1962, 644; FIEDLER 1992, Taf. 3-6), Canlia (HARHOIU 1972, 574, fig. 7/1), Gârliţa (the commune Ostrov) (CÂRJAN 1968, 411, 416), Păcuiul lui Soare (DIACONU, VÎLCEANU 1972, 131 and others), Oltina⁴. In other words, 11 of a total of 26 locations, all from Dobrudja, that is 42,30 %. We can find another six of them if, departing from the Danube and heading towards the sea, we go down along the old valley of Carasu: first Cernavodă, already mentioned above, then Țibrinu (the commune of Mircea Vodă) (COMŞA 1957, 326), Dobrogea – on the route of the stone wall (COMŞA 1951, 236), Medgidia (HARTUCHE 1971, 253, 257) Castelu (RĂDULESCU, HARTUCHE 1967, 91-93, 118-125), Medgidia, Basarabi (BARNEA 1962, 355) and Constanţa (CÂRJAN 1969, 389).

We can find another accumulation of such discoveries in Wallachia, along the path that, coming from the lands situated north of the Carpathians, lead to the Danube, on the route: Slon – Bucov – Bucureşti – Olteniţa

⁴ In the archaeological campaigns of 2001-2003, about 20 marked pot bottoms have appeared here. An information from C. Chiriac, whom we thank in this way.

(COMȘA 1983, 101 and others). On it or near it, we find 8 of the 32 locations identified for this region: Bucov (Prahova county) (COMȘA 1978, 94-97), Șirna (Prahova county)⁵, Otopeni (Ilfov county) (LEAHU 1969, 9, 12), București-Băneasa Străulești (CONSTANTINIU, PANAIT, CRISTACHE-PANAIT 1965, 110-112; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 1992, 64), București-Bucureștii Noi (PANAIT 1963, 118 and fig. 22/2, 116; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 1992, 58), București-Curtea Veche (MORINTZ *et alii* 1962, 768 and 769, fig. 7/8), București-Piața cu Flori (PANAIT 1963, 140) and Vadu Anei (Ilfov county) (TEODOR 1998-2000, 169, pl. XII).

The structure of the paper does not allow us to mention anything else, on that. But we note that, on the whole, of the 58 locations identified for the territory of Wallachia and Dobruja (32 and 26 respectively), 42 are placed on or in the vicinity of the commercial routes of those times.

So, were these vessels commercialized or not? The percentage of 72,41 % determines us, at this time, to answer in the affirmative, and the only thing left, after finalizing the catalogue, will be to settle the matter of the production centres and, if the situation permits, of their area of commercialization.

We have seen in what quantity, numerically and in terms of percentage, are marked vessels to be found in the sites of the early Middle Ages; we have observed, succinctly, to what extent were the settlements and necropoleis with such discoveries situated on or near the commercial routes that were utilized in that specific period; we shall focus now on the chronological aspect. The means of transmission of this phenomenon to the ceramics of the beginning of the Middle Ages constitutes an already clarified point (DIACONU 1992, 358). But what are the prime regions in which it has regained a great amplitude, during this time?

On the territory of Romania, the practice of marking the vessels was used over a relatively long period of time: the 8th – 15th centuries A.D. Curiously, in the beginning of this epoch, we come across such discoveries mostly in necropoleis and in isolated graves: Izvoru (Giurgiu county – 8th century) (MITREA 1967, 443-461), Frătești (Giurgiu county – 8th century) (ISĂCESCU 1982, 201-205), Sultana (Călărași county – 8th-9th centuries)

⁵ Unpublished material. An information from Șt. Olteanu, whom we thank in this way.

(MITREA 1988, 110), Șarânga (Buzău county – 8th-9th centuries) (CONSTANTINESCU 1999, 25), Platonești (Ialomița county – 8th-10th centuries) (MATEI, COMAN 2002, 238) etc. Although rare, discoveries from the settlements are not missing completely, and we can mention: Vadu Săpat (Prahova county – 8th-9th centuries) (DIACONU 1978, 291-301), Vladimirescu (Arad county – 8th-10th centuries) (COSMA 2002, 609), Grojdibodu (Olt county – 8th-9th centuries) (DRĂGUȘ 1981, 76, 88), Bucov (Prahova county – second half of the 8th century – 10th century) (COMȘA 1978, 97).

At the opposite end, we have the discoveries from Curtea de Argeș (Argeș county – 12th-14th centuries) (CONSTANTINESCU 1984, 122), Siret (Suceava county – 14th-15th centuries) (CHEPTEA 1972, 348), Piatra Neamț (Neamț county – 14th-15th centuries) (MĂTASĂ, ZAMOȘTEANU, ZAMOȘTEANU 1961, 347), Iacobenii (Cluj county – 14th-15th centuries) (PINTEA 1967, 531) and Florești (Cluj county – 14th century – first half of the 15th century) (RUSU 1993, 291). However, the period of maximum development of this phenomenon is recorded starting with the second half of the 9th century and lasting until the beginning of the 11th century.

In Bulgaria (DONČEVA-PETKOVA 1980, 25) and Moravia (COMȘA 1961, 296), vessels with marks on appear, as in Romania, even from the end of the 8th century A.D., while, in the eastern zones, they are to be found, at the earliest, in the sites from the end of the 9th century A.D. (in the settlements and necropoleis from the middle reaches of the Donets, they are registered starting with the 9th century and lasting until the 10th century (KRASIL'NIKOV 1999, 174); in Kiev, we have marks also on the ceramics from the 9th-10th centuries, but the majority are on the pottery from the 11th-13th centuries (ŠOVKOPLEAS 1964, 57); in Plesnek, they are to be found on the bottoms of the vessels from the 11th-13th centuries (KUČERA 1960, 118)).

Thus, we observe that Romania numbers itself among the first areas of rebirth of this phenomenon.

Another point, which is neither new, nor easy to clarify, refers to the signification of these marks. In the special historiography of this domain, two ideas have been the most prevalent: a symbolical-magical signification and a practical one (craftsman's sign). K. I. KRASIL'NIKOV considers that the marks are protective signs (KRASIL'NIKOV 1999, 176), V. I. Sizov thinks they are religious symbols (ŠOVKOPLEAS 1964, 69), N.V. Tuhtina and B. Polla consider that they are cult signs (ŠOVKOPLEAS 1964, 69). V. Sîrbu (1979, 38)

attributes a magical signification only to certain signs, while M. Comșa and P. Diaconu acknowledge the same meaning only during a first phase of the craft, its development being what transformed them into the craftsman's signs (COMȘA 1961, 299-301; DIACONU, VÎLCEANU 1972, 133-134). M. P. Kučera, B. A. Rybakov and M. K. Karger consider that these marks are signs through which the potters marked their production (ŠOVKOPLEAS 1964, 70), V. E. Kozlovskaja asserts that only the best artisans marked their vessels, but not all vessels (ŠOVKOPLEAS 1964, 70), and A. A. Mansurov asserts that only the vessels which were intended to be commercialized bore a sign (ŠOVKOPLEAS 1964, 70). Z. Kolosówna (1949/50, 452) and S. A. Pletneva (1959, 230) consider that the sign was handed down from father to son, and Z. Kolosówna even identified a "family tree" of the marks. Dan G. Teodor (1987, 151-152) also accepts the hypothesis that they could be signs of the potters, but he is inclined to believe that the little differences between certain marks does not indicate a genealogy of the makers, but the seal of one series of pots baked in the kiln, of one firing. Again, they are considered to be signs, but of the ones ordering the fabrication of the vessels, by G. M. Šovkopleas, K. Ciornogorskii and R. L. Rozenfeldt (ŠOVKOPLEAS 1964, 70), while Z. Kolos-Șafanska, O. L. Mongait, A. Kotlearevskii (ŠOVKOPLEAS 1964, 69-70) and M. Comșa (ȘTEFAN, BARNEA, COMȘA, COMȘA 1967, 206) do not reject the idea that they might be the signs of the regional ruler (kneaz) or of the feudal lord on whose lands the potter's workshop was situated.

On a close analysis, we observe that:

- the practice of marking the vessels has been handed down to the potters of the 8th – 10th centuries A. D. , through the agency of the Romans;
- at least at this stage of the discoveries, Romania is placed among the first areas of rebirth of this phenomenon;
- for the moment, Garvăn-Dinogeția excels, numerically, in terms of discoveries (about 530 marks);
- the catalogue of the potter's marks shall help us, at least partially, to separate the centres producing such goods from the ones „consuming” them;
- the vessels with marks on them were objects that were commercialized on the traditional routes, along with other products;

- the matter of the signification of the potter's marks has not been settled yet;

- the vast chronological analogy with similar discoveries from the territory of Romania and of other countries, the catalogue of the potter's marks, the identification of the routes on which such products were commercialized are all problems whose solution will lead to the clarification of many aspects referring to the potter's mark „phenomenon”.

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