

Late Roman Tableware from Argamum – ‘Faleză Est’. African, Cypriot, Egeean and Pontic wares

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Abstract. *The archaeological excavations of the ‘Faleză Est’ sector have extended over twenty years. Their result was the discovery of a large quantity of ceramic fragments from the Hellenistic and Roman eras. This article analyzes the tableware from the late Roman period, imported from North Africa, Cyprus, the Aegean basin and the Pontic region. Most of the imported tableware comes from North African workshops. The ceramic fragments discovered in the ‘Faleză Est’ sector are dated in the 5th–6th centuries.*

Rezumat. *Săpăturile arheologice din sectorul „Faleză Est” s-au întins pe o perioadă de douăzeci de ani. În urma acestora a fost descoperită o cantitate mare de fragmente ceramice din epocile elenistică și romană. În acest articol este analizată ceramic de masa din perioada romană târzie, care a fost importată din Africa de Nord, Cipru, bazinul egeean și regiunea pontică. Majoritatea ceramicii de masă importată provine din atelierele nord-africane. Fragmentele ceramice descoperite în sectorul „Faleză Est” sunt date în secolele V–VI.*

Keywords: Argamum, Scythia, western Black Sea, imports, tableware.

Argamum is one of the most important Greek-Roman archaeological sites near the Danube Delta (Figure 1/1). Modern archaeological excavations began in 1965, and have held every year ever since. However, the results of the research, especially those for the Roman era, are mostly unknown. In recent years different researchers have published a series of articles on Roman ceramics from Argamum, and I have presented a brief history of them in a recent paper dedicated to tableware discovered in the Central Sector of the city of Argamum.²

The archaeological researches of the “Faleză Est” Sector were carried out between 1981 and 2001, being conducted by Mihaela Mănucu-Adameșteanu and Lucrețiu Bîrliba. The excavations took place near the cliff of Lake Razelm, in the south-eastern part of the late Roman fort (Figure 1/2). Apart from the specific discoveries of the Archaic and Hellenistic epochs, were unearthed the ruins of some late Roman buildings dated between the 4th and the 7th centuries.

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² MOCANU 2018, 336.

Since the archaeological excavation spans 20 years, the amount of pottery discovered is substantial. For this reason, in this article, I will present only tableware imported from North African, Cypriot, Aegean and Pontic workshops. The Phocaean fine ware will be presented in a later publication.

The presence of North African wares in the West-Pontic area is not a novelty. In all late Roman sites from the region is found this type of pottery, whether we are talking about the ones on the Black Sea shoreline,³ inland the province of Scythia⁴ or the Danube limes.⁵

Tableware imported from North Africa at Argamum, was discovered in the ‘Central Sector’ and at ‘Basilica II’.⁶ The earliest African form identified in the ‘Faleză Est’ sector is H 62B (Figure 2/1). The two fragments are extremely small in size and did not allow the completion of entire vessels profile. Currently, Form H 62 is almost unknown in the West-Pontic area. Eight pottery fragments from Halmyris were classified by F. Topoleanu in the form H 62, although these exemplars, according to A. Opaîţ, are products of pontic workshops.⁷

The traditional spreading area of the H 62 form is the Mediterranean basin, and the specific chronological interval is between the middle of the 4th century and the first quarter of the 5th century.⁸ The H 76 form represent a novelty in the repertoire of North African ceramic imports from Argamum (Figure 2/2). Its presence in the province of Scythia is sporadic, with a few specimens attested at Aegyssus.⁹ These large dishes are dated back to the middle of the 5th century, mainly being common in the western Mediterranean area.¹⁰ Some examples can be decorated by stamping or by making some incisions in the raw fabric, especially in the upper area of the rim. The shard from Argamum does not retain any decorative elements. From a typological point of view, form H 76 is followed by form H 87, this being present in the studied group by three pottery- shards.

One belongs to variant H 87A, and two are specific to variant H 87C (Figure 2/3–4). In the west-pontic area the bowls H 87 are found in settlements such as Halmyris, where it was discovered in specific archaeological contexts from the end of the 5th and 6th centuries,¹¹ Ibida¹² or Capidava.¹³ The presence of the H 87 form is not an absolute novelty at Argamum;

³ ILIESCU, BOTTEZ 2018; SUCEVEANU 1982.

⁴ GĂMUREAC 2009, 251–252, 266–267; MOCANU 2011, 227–229.

⁵ OPRIŞ 2003, 145–150; TOPOLEANU 2000, 69–79.

⁶ MOCANU 2018, 337–338.

⁷ TOPOLEANU 2000, 171–172, pl. 17/142–146, versus OPAÎŢ 1991, 165, pl. 44.

⁸ HAYES 1972, 107–109, fig. 18/14.

⁹ MOCANU, NUŢU 2017, 125, fig. 6/1.

¹⁰ HAYES 1972, 124.

¹¹ TOPOLEANU 2000, 73–74, pl. 18/151–152.

¹² MOCANU 2011, 228, pl. 2/1–3.

¹³ OPRIŞ 2003, 145–146, pl. 50/339 şi pl. 54/340.

similar ceramic fragments were discovered in the “Basilica II” area.¹⁴ The same is true for the H 91 form, in addition to the specimen known in “Basilica II”, a ceramic fragment has also been identified in the “Faleză Est” sector. It belongs to variant H 91B (Figure 2/5). The only known analogies in the vicinity of the fort at Argamum are in Histria¹⁵ and Ibida.¹⁶ The dating of form H 91 is between the second half of the 5th century and the first half of the 6th century.

The most common North African form at Argamum is H 99. In the “Faleză Est” sector 14 ceramic fragments have been identified, eight belong to the H 99B variant, and six correspond to the H 99C variant (Figures 2/6–10; 3/11–12). Form H 99 represents the North African ceramic tableware that entered the West-Pontic area in the most extensive cellars during the 6th century. The closest known analogies are at Histria¹⁷ or Halmyris.¹⁸ From the ‘Faleză Est’ sector, there are also two floors of North African plates that have stamped decoration (Figure 3/13–14). Variations of the same decorative motif is present on both ceramic fragments, which is the dotted concentric circle. This motif is undoubtedly part of a more sophisticated setting. Chronologically, the two shades could be framed in the second half of the 5th century or the first part of the 6th century.

The Cypriot tableware constitute a significant element of novelty for the entire West-Pontic area (Figure 3/15). The only known specimen so far, apart from the one discovered at Argamum, is the one from Histria, dating to the middle of the 5th century.¹⁹ Hayes did not classify the form found at Argamum in its typology. Still, similar vessels were discovered in the Athenian Agora in contexts dated to the end of the 3rd century and the beginning of the 4th century.²⁰ The rarity of Cypriot ceramics is an intriguing element. At the moment, the explanation may be that the stage of archaeological research and the publication of ceramic material in the West-Pontic area is not sufficiently advanced to bring to light more Cypriot imports. However, the regional diffusion of Cypriot workshops is a factor to be considered.

Another little known ceramic category in the West-Pontic area is the so-called Light-coloured. The presence of this type of dishes has been reported so far in Aegyssus,²¹ Halmyris²² and Topraichioi.²³ In the ‘Faleză Est’ sector, two typical fragments (Figure 3/16–17) have been discovered, belonging to bowls and five atypical shards from plate floors, some

¹⁴ MOCANU 2018, 337, fig. 2/1.

¹⁵ SUCEVEANU 2007, 208–209, pl. 75/29–31.

¹⁶ MOCANU 2011, 228, pl. 2/4.

¹⁷ ILIESCU, BOTTEZ 2018, 156–158, pl. 1/8–10, pl. 2, pl. 3/23–31.

¹⁸ TOPOLEANU 2000, 75/157, pl. 18/157.

¹⁹ BĂJENARU 2014, 240, pl. 1/1.

²⁰ HAYES 2008, 249, fig. 142/1420.

²¹ MOCANU, NUȚU 2017, 130, fig. 7/1–2.

²² OPAIȚ 1991, 166, fig. 45/312–313.

²³ OPAIȚ 1991A, 230, fig. 41/4–5.

of them decorated by incision with the toothed wheel. This type of pottery that seems to come from the Aegea area is specific to the 5th century.

The last category of table ceramics discussed in this article is Pontic Red Slip Ware (Figure 3/18). Although its presence south of the Danube is considered an exception, an increasing number of archaeological sites confirm the existence of this category in the province of Scythia, during the 5th century and in the first part of the 6th century. The only ceramic fragment found in the ‘Faleză Est’ sector comes from a bowl specific to form 7, plus four plate floors. Form 7 is attested in the ‘Central Sector’ of Argamum, but also in Ibida.²⁴

In the ‘Faleză Est’ sector from Argamum, we have inventoried a total of 27 pottery-shards from the geographical areas discussed in this article. In the first place is the North African pottery with 23 exemplars, followed by the Aegean workshops with two light-coloured ceramic fragments and the Pontic and Cypriot workshops with one specimen. Chronologically, except for the ceramic shard from Cyprus, the group from the ‘Faleză Est’ sector is homogeneous, falling between the limits of the 5th and 6th centuries.

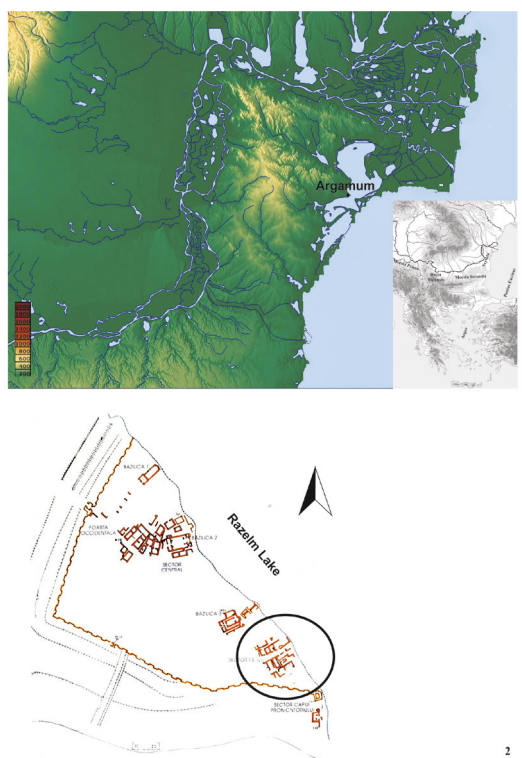


Figure 1. Location of Argamum (1) and ‘Faleză Est’, the area of excavation in the south-eastern part of the late Roman fort (2)

²⁴ MOCANU 2011, 230, pl. 2/9; 2018, 338, fig. 2/12–16.

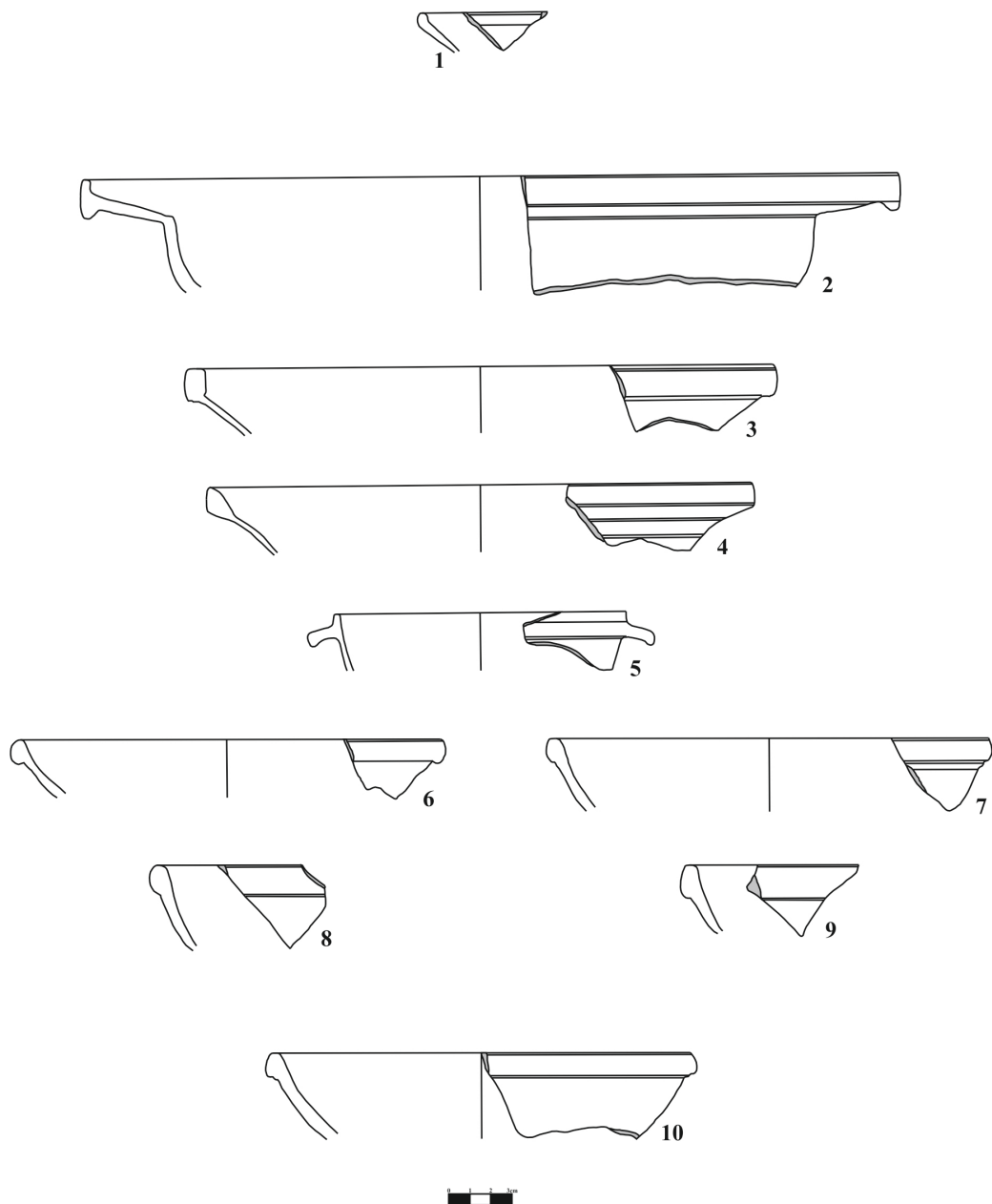


Figure 2. H 62B (1), H 76 (2), H 87C (3-4), H 91B (5) and H 99C (6-10) from Argamum – ‘Faleză Est’

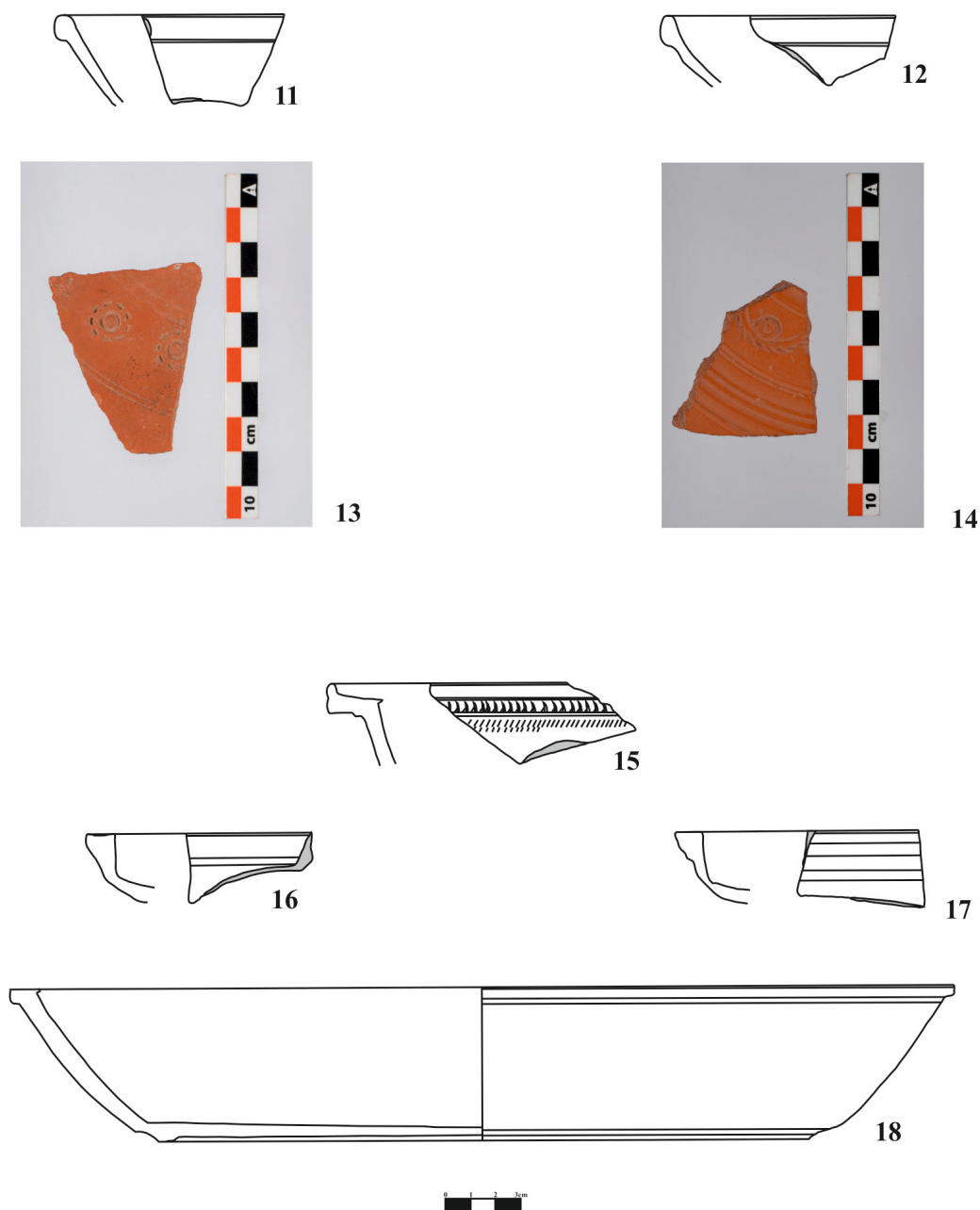


Figure 3. H 99C (11–12), floors with plates with stamped decoration (13–14), Cypriot tableware (15), light-coloured dishes (16–17) and Pontic Red Slip Ware (18) from Argamum – ‘Faleză Est’

Selective catalogue

African Red Slip Ware

Form H 62B

1. Dish. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 2001, FE, C8, -0.70 m. Dm: undeterminable; Hp: 0.9.
Bright-brown fabric (2.5 YR 5/6), reddish-brown slip (2.5 YR 4/8).

Form H 76

2. Dish. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 1990, FE, Dm: 39, Hp: 5.5.
Orange fabric (2.5 YR 6/8) with limestone, orange slip (5 YR 6/8).

Form H 87A

3. Dish. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 1986, FE, -1.50 m. Dm: 28; Hp: 3.2.
Dark-reddish-brown fabric (5 YR 3/2) with impurities, very dark-reddish-brown slip (2.5 YR 2/2).

Form H 87B

4. Dish. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 2001, FE, C8-10, -0.90 m. Dm: 26; Hp: 3.2.
Orange fabric (2.5 YR 6/8) with some impurities, bright orange slip (5 YR 7/8).

Form H 91B

5. Bowl. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 1990, FE, -0.70 m. Dm: 14; Hp: 2.8.
Orange fabric (2.5 YR 6/8), bright brown slip (2.5 YR 5/8).

Form H 99B

6. Bowl. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 2001, FE, C6, -0.30 m. Dm: 10; Hp: 2.8.
Bright brown fabric (2.5 YR 5/8), bright orange slip (5 YR 6/8).
7. Bowl. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 1996, FF, C 15. Dm: 21; Hp: 3.5.
Dark reddish-brown fabric (2.5 YR 3/6), bright brown slip (2.5 YR 5/8) dark shades.
8. Bowl. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 2001, FE, C6-10, -0.60 m. Dm: undeterminable; Hp: 4.1.
Bright brown fabric (2.5 YR 5/8), orange slip (5 YR 6/8).
9. Bowl. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 1993, FE, C4, -0.40 m. Dm: undeterminable; Hp: 3.4.
Very dark reddish-brown fabric (2.5 YR 2/3), reddish-black slip (2.5 YR 2/1).

Form H 99C

10. Bowl. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 2001, FE, C6, -0.40 m. Dm: 20; Hp: 4.1.
Orange fabric (5 YR 6/8) with some impurities, orange slip (5 YR 7/8).
11. Bowl. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 1990, FE, C4, -1.05 m. Dm: undeterminable; Hp: 3.7 m.
Bright brown fabric (2.5 YR 5/8), orange slip (5 YR 7/8).
12. Bowl. Rim fragment and upper part.
Argamum 2001, FE, C1, -0.70 m. Dm: undeterminable; Hp: 2.8.
Bright reddish-brown fabric (5 YR 5/8) with limestone particles, orange slip (5 YR 7/8).

Shards with stamped decoration

13. Plate. Small flor fragment.

Argamum, FE, passim. Dimension: 4.6 x 5.4.

Dark reddish-brown fabric (5 YR 3/6), reddish-brown slip (5 YR 4/8)

Concentric circles, part of more intricate decorative style.

14. Plate. Small flor fragment.

Argamum 1991, FE, C3. Dimension: 4.5 x 4.1.

Bright brown fabric (2.5 YR 5/8) with some impurities, orange slip (5 YR 6/8).

Concentric circles combined with crescents, part of more complex decorative style.

Cypriot Red Slip Ware

Form not classified

15. Bowl. Rim fragment and upper part.

Argamum 1991, FE, Ci5, -0.45 m. Dm: undeterminable; Hp: 3.3 cm.

Reddish-brown fabric (2.5 YR 4/8), dark reddish-brown slip (2.5 YR 3/6). The exterior surface of the rim and wall are decorated with toothed wheel.

Light Colored Ware

Form not classified

16. Dish. Rim fragment and upper part.

Argamum 1981, Trench E. Dm: undeterminable; Hp: 2.9 cm.

Light grey fabric (7.5 YR 8/2), dark reddish-brown slip (5 YR 3/6).

17. Dish. Rim fragment and upper part.

Argamum 1981, Trench E. Dm: undeterminable; Hp: 2.7 cm.

Light yellow-orange fabric (7.5 YR 8/4), bright brown slip (2.5 YR 5/6).

Pontic Red Slip Ware

Form 7

18. Dish. Rim, entire wall and part of the floor.

Argamum 1995, FE, C9, -1.30 m. Dm: 38; Hp: 6.2.

Bright brown fabric (2.5 YR 5/8), dark reddish-brown slip (2.5 YR 3/6), partially applied on the exterior surface.

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