

# THE BLACK-SLIPPED POTTERY FROM HERACLEA SINTICA (1ST – 4TH C. AD)

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## Introduction

The following research presents all of the black-slipped vessels found during the excavations of the ancient city of Heraclea Sintica in 2007 – 2013. The head of the scientific research is Dr. L. Vagalinski (NAIM-BAS). I owe him special gratitude for the opportunity to work with the ceramic complex.

## Historiographical review

As a separate group, the "gray Macedonian pottery" was first identified by Hayes in 1972. He states that it is most widely distributed in the region of Thessaloniki. As the author describes, the vessels were made of fine gray clay, sometimes with inclusions of small sand grains and mica. The clay seems local, but the shapes and the decorations, according to Hayes, sometimes have influences from the North. The vessels' surfaces have a thin gray or grayish-black slipped satin or rather metallic texture. Hayes suggests that the production center of this pottery type is somewhere in Macedonia and that these vessels were mainly for local use, and not widely spread to the North (Hayes 1972, 405). He is surprised by their remarkable resemblance to the so-called Aeolian *Bucchero* from the Greek Archaic period. Hayes argues that the exact relationship, if any can be found at all, between the Gallic and Macedonian gray pottery cannot yet be detected. He dates "the

gray Macedonian pottery" in the late 4<sup>th</sup> to early 5<sup>th</sup> century (Hayes 1972, 405-407). That late dating is probably due to the fact that his study considered only the Late Roman pottery.

In 1981, O. Brukner published her thesis, devoted to the ceramics from the Roman province of Lower Pannonia. According to her, the black slipped pottery there occurs only in a limited number of forms. She attributes its presence to the influence of Hellenistic pottery, which was covered with black slip, known to her from the Archaic period forward, and was revived in 1st century North Italic workshops. The vessels from Lower Pannonia are made from clay, which, after firing, acquires a gray or red color, passing through all the tones from orange to grayish-black. The slip has a metallic luster, though it lacks the saturation of the Greek one. The vessels are ornamented with barbotino or other appliquéd and incised decoration. Brukner dates the black-slipped vessels in the middle of 1st to the end of 2nd century. She connects their appearance with the early stages of Romanization, together with the penetration of Italic imports (Brukner, 1981, 30).

Vaitsa Malamidou published a thesis on Roman pottery from Northeastern Greece in BAR in 2005 (Malamidou 2005). The author examines the ceramic complex of five sites (Amphipolis, Philippi, Kepia, Abdera and Thasos) within an area that, until this study,

was outside the interests of scientists working with Roman pottery. Here it should be noted that three of these sites are free cities, one is a colony, and the fifth is a sanctuary. Malamidou highlights the problem that in Greece, the Roman period is largely ignored by local archaeologists, and so its layers are removed in haste to reach the "real material" that lies below (Malamidou 2005, 1). For this reason, there are only a few published Roman black-slipped fragments from the Athenian Agora, Corinth and Stobi (Malamidou 2005, 52).

Malamidou repeats Hayes' thesis that the tradition of the gray vessels is grounded in Hellenic influence and that their production continued in the early Roman period. The Roman layers in these five sites are dated mainly in the 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The author mentions that the black-slipped ceramics decrease in number in the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century and considers that, at this time, this type is no longer popular. She mentions only one fragment from Thasos, dated in the 4th century, and, quoting Hayes, says that the latest period in which fragments of such vessels were found is the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Malamidou 2005, 52).

Hayes's report on ceramics produced in the region of Roman Athens was published in 2010. He notices a significant change in the production of local pottery, visible most clearly in the period around AD 10-60, a time when the Western Roman and Italic products were very fashionable. At that time, the source of impact on ceramic forms shifted from Asia Minor to Central Italy. During these decades, there is a complete remodeling of the ceramic complex of the Athenian Agora. This process of strong Roman influence ends with the Flavian dynasty, at which time the local ceramics begin to copy the forms of Eastern Sigillata B once again. As an example of this, Hayes shows cup types covered with brilliant black and sometimes red slip that first appeared around the year AD 100 (Hayes 2010, 26).

In Bulgarian literature the publications mentioning pottery with black slip are few. Examining the ceramic complex from the

hill Krakra near the town of Pernik, Venetsia Lyubenova shows only two photographs of black slipped cups, dated in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. She finds similarities in the "gray Macedonian pottery" from Thessaloniki, dated by Hayes to the 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> century (Любенова, 1981, 127).

In 1989, L. Staykova published an article about the production and distribution of so-called "Macedonian" gray terra sigillata on the upper valley of the Struma river. The author says that the pottery products from Pautalia are the highest quality examples of the group. She distributes them according to their shape into dishes, bowls, cups, jugs and containers with three handles (Стайкова 1989, 139). She mentions that almost all the shapes have an analogue in red-slipped ceramics from the region. A few examples of the above-mentioned types are included in her tables. She cites an analogy with the pottery from Krakra Hill near Pernik and with the typology of O. Brukner (Стайкова 1989, 141-142). A separate table displays the types of stamped and incised ornaments used for decoration (Стайкова 1989, 145). The author draws attention to the fact that some of the vessels are made of homogeneous and well-purified clay, but most of them are with admixtures in the clay dough (Стайкова 1989, 148). She suggests that this intensive pottery production is closely linked to the economic progress of the city in 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Стайкова 1989, 149). Unfortunately, she dates all the forms by analogy, and so they fall into the general chronological framework of the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The black-slipped fragments found in Nicopolis ad Istrum number 244. Because many of the forms are similar to red-slipped vessels, it is believed that these fragments represent a local variation of the red-slipped types. Some of the red-slipped fragments copy the gray Macedonian pottery, as distinguished by Hayes. The black-slipped vessels appear in Nicopolis ad Istrum in the 2nd century. They are found *en masse* in the 3rd century, and less frequently up to AD 450-600. R. Falkner concludes that in the 2nd – 3rd century, the black-slipped vessels are probably

locally produced, and that the Late Antique vessels are imported (Falkner 1999, 85-86).

Speaking about the production of the luxury ceramics in Thrace and Moesia between 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, A. Milcheva cites the pottery from Pautalia, mentioned above. The author says that this is a typical ceramic phenomenon in the region (Милчева 2008, 149). She reiterates L. Staykova's thesis and shows her tables with drawings, published in 1989 (Милчева 2008, 150-151).

In her publication of the ancient ceramics from the village of Yakimovo (municipality of Montana, NW Bulgaria), K. Luka (Лука 2011, 358-374) points out that there is a relatively large amount of black-slipped pottery. According to her, this technological group occurs at different times in the Roman settlements in modern Bulgaria: at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> – beginning of 3<sup>rd</sup> century in the region of modern Mezdra, at the beginning of 3<sup>rd</sup> century in Nicopolis ad Istrum, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in Pernik fortress, and at the end of 4<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Nicopolis ad Nestum (Лука 2011, 363). The way in which Luka dates the site in Yakimovo is unclear, but she distinguishes two periods of "stratigraphic concentration of ceramic material": the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> – early 5<sup>th</sup> century. Luka attributes the presence of forms typical of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC – 1<sup>st</sup> century AD to "impaired stratigraphy" or "imprecise documentation." In this regard, I must emphasize that Vagalinski identifies a ceramic group on this site near the village of Yakimovo as dating to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC – 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. The parallels that Luka gives for the black-slipped pottery are cited incorrectly.

In the 2005 publication of the ceramics of Castra Martis, G. Kabakchieva presents most clearly the black-slipped Roman pottery, although only one bowl was found on the site. Kabakchieva explains that Roman pottery of fine gray clay covered with gray or gray-black slip is very common during the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Balkans and Pannonia, including the lands around the Middle Danube, the western parts of present-day Bulgaria, and

in the South along the rivers Struma, Mesta and Vardar. Kabakchieva contradicts Hayes and Brukner, positing that the production of black-slipped Roman pottery started first in Pannonia, where it exists in several versions: Pannonian terra sigillata, pottery with stamped decoration, and others. The big center for ceramic production in Pannonia is Acvincum, where a large sigillata workshop is located. The Pannonian terra sigillata and stamped vessels produced there are made of fine gray clay. Again, according to Kabakchieva, gray Roman pottery with gray or gray-black slip is known from Lower Moesia and Thrace in the period from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. She argues convincingly that the production of black-slipped ceramics flourishes in the area of Western Thrace (Serdica, Pautalia and Nicopolis ad Istrum) and concludes that the insufficient study on this subject in modern Bulgaria has led to the introduction of the limited territorial definition "gray Macedonian pottery." Further, Kabakchieva summarizes that the poor and uneven study of gray-slipped Roman pottery in the Balkan Roman provinces has created an unrealistic picture of its distribution. Often the shapes duplicate those of red-slipped vessels or imitate metal Roman vessels. For example, in the latest period of the ceramic center in Butovo (near the town of Pavlikeni), the workshop produced platters with embossed decoration, covered with gray-black slip; in form and decoration, these platters do not differ from the red-slipped type. Kabakchieva separates the black-slipped ceramic from the terra nigra group, explaining that "it differs from terra nigra as much as the local red-slipped – from terra sigillata" (Kabakchieva 2005, 91 – 92).

This historiographical analysis shows that both the chronology and spatial distribution of the black-slipped pottery in the Roman Balkans are poorly studied, and no typology of this ceramic group is available. So far, the conclusions for this type of pottery are utterly hypothetical because they are based on single vessels and even separate fragments.

### Analysis of the black-slipped ceramics from Roman Heraclea Sintica

From Heraclea Sintica we have nearly 120 stratified diagnostic fragments, which allow for an initial typology of the forms that could serve as a basis for future studies on the topic. The vessels are made always from very well-purified clay. The most common color of the clay after baking is gray and grayish-black, but there are black and red-brown fragments. The paste in most cases is hard- or very hard-fired. The slip can be gray, grayish-black or shiny, thick black in color. Sometimes there are vessels covered with two slips (black and brown), two surfaces are coated with different slip, or the slip flows from one to the other color.

Whenever one makes a formal-typological definition of a small number of fragments, there is a high risk that the forms will be broken into too many types. Despite this threat, there are also clearly understood dependencies: all forms are table wares and belong to only three categories – bowls, pots and lids. In order to avoid over-interpretation, I have not yet done a further internal breakdown of forms.

The bowls are the most common form. They are divided into four major types.

Bowls type I (Fig. 1). This is the most widespread shape, featuring a slightly turned inward rim edge. In a single fragment is possible to see the bottom, which is stepped on a low ring.

Bowls type II. Features an expressed inverted rim edge. They are divided into 4 different variants (Fig. 2), according to the profiling of the rim edge.

Bowls type III have an outturned rim edge. They are divided into 8 variants (Fig. 3-5), according to the complexity of the rim edge profiling and the decoration.

The bowls type IV (Fig. 6) also have an outturned rim edge. The type is determined by the clearly articulated crinkle at the bottom of the vessel. It is divided into three variants.

The bowls from type V (Fig. 7) have a Г-shaped rim edge. They are divided into three variants according to the slope of the rim edge and the decoration.

The pots are 6 types.

Type I (Fig. 8), with outturned rim. There are three variants, determined by the length of the neck of the vessels.

Type II has a Г-shaped rim edge and a long neck. This group is divided into 4 different variants (Fig. 9) according to the decoration and the rim shaping.

The pots types III – VI (Fig. 10) have no variants. They are determined according to the complexity of rim profiling.

The lids (Fig. 11) are of two types, designated according to the complexity of the profiling of the lower edge.

The fragments are from bases – with decoration or with covering from different in black or brown slips—and from body sherds with a distinctive decoration (Fig. 11).

### Conclusion

Black-slipped Roman pottery is still poorly researched. Scholars often define it as Hellenistic and explain its presence at Roman sites by reference to a reversed or disturbed stratigraphy. The advantage of the ceramic complex presented here is that it comes from archaeological excavations. The black-slipped pottery is stratified reliably and has convincing chronology based on the small finds associated with these layers, which include 397 coins. On the basis of accumulated stratigraphic data, it can be argued that the black-slipped pottery is used (it is early to state that it was produced on site) in Heraclea Sintica between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Further excavations of the site should reveal how the tradition of the black-slipped pottery passes from the Hellenistic to the Roman period.

I hope that the present research is a positive step forward in the study of this typical and long-lived ceramic group in the Balkans.

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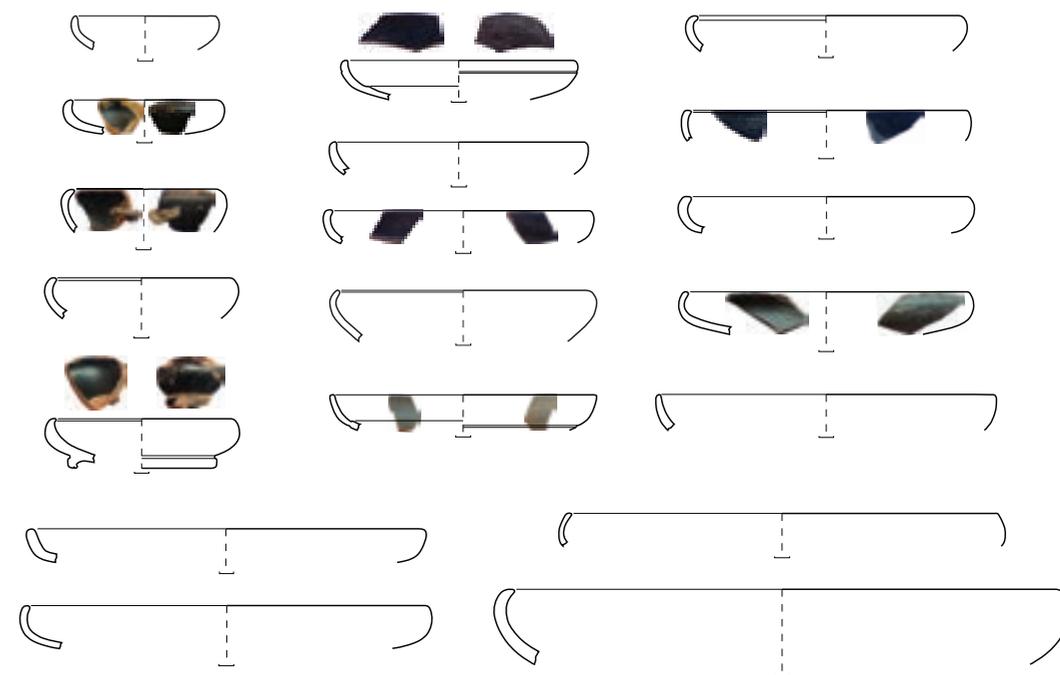


Figure 1. Bowls type I

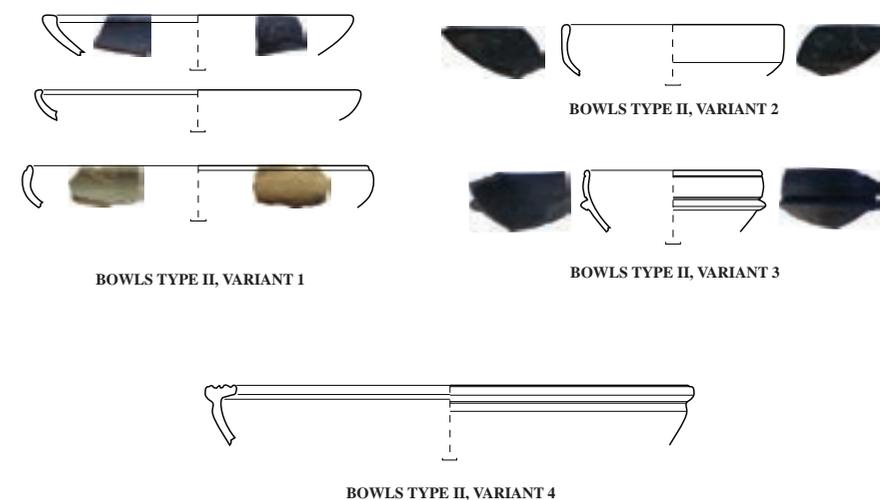


Figure 2. Bowls type II, variants 1 – 4



Figure 3. Bowls type III, variants 1, 2

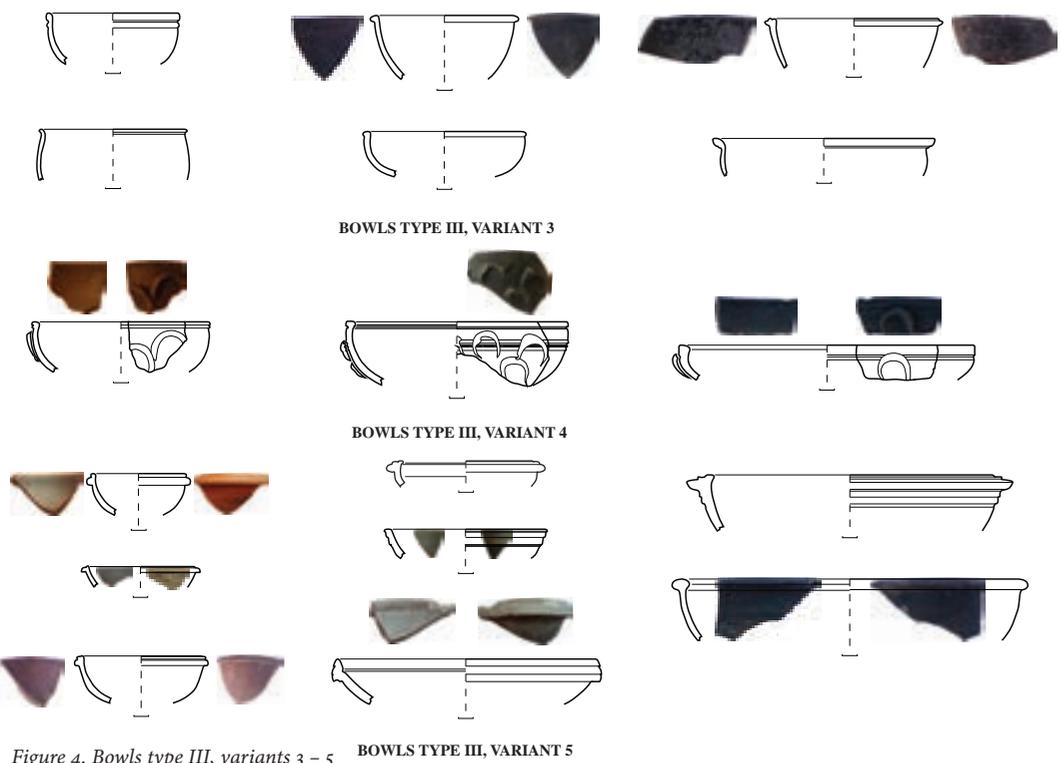


Figure 4. Bowls type III, variants 3 - 5

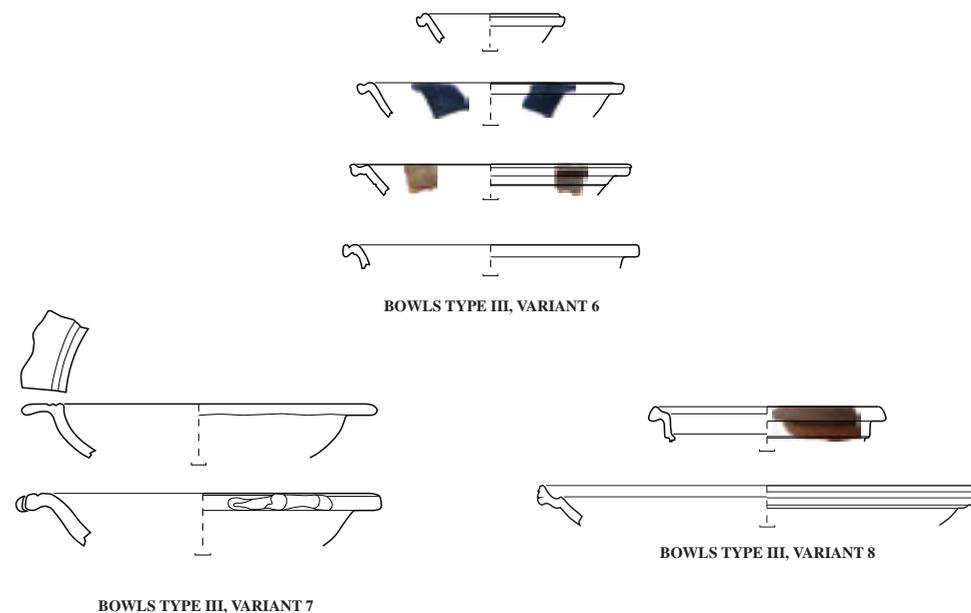


Figure 5. Bowls type III, variants 6 - 8

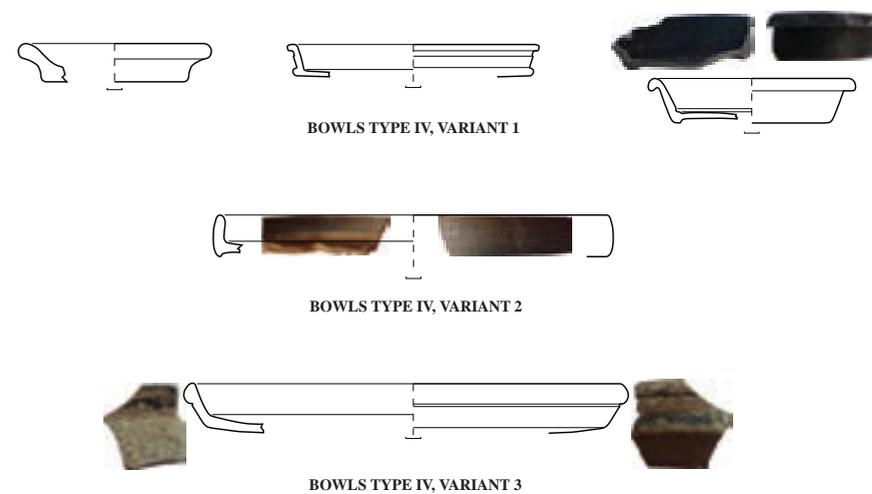


Figure 6. Bowls type IV, variants 1 - 3

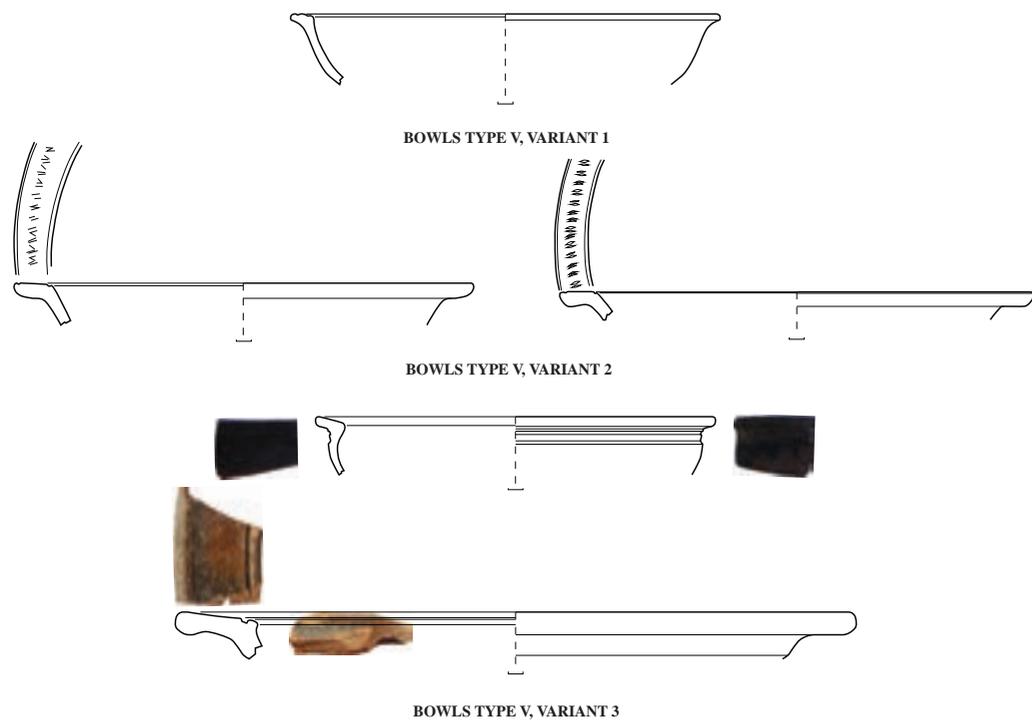


Figure 7. Bowls type V, variants 1 - 3

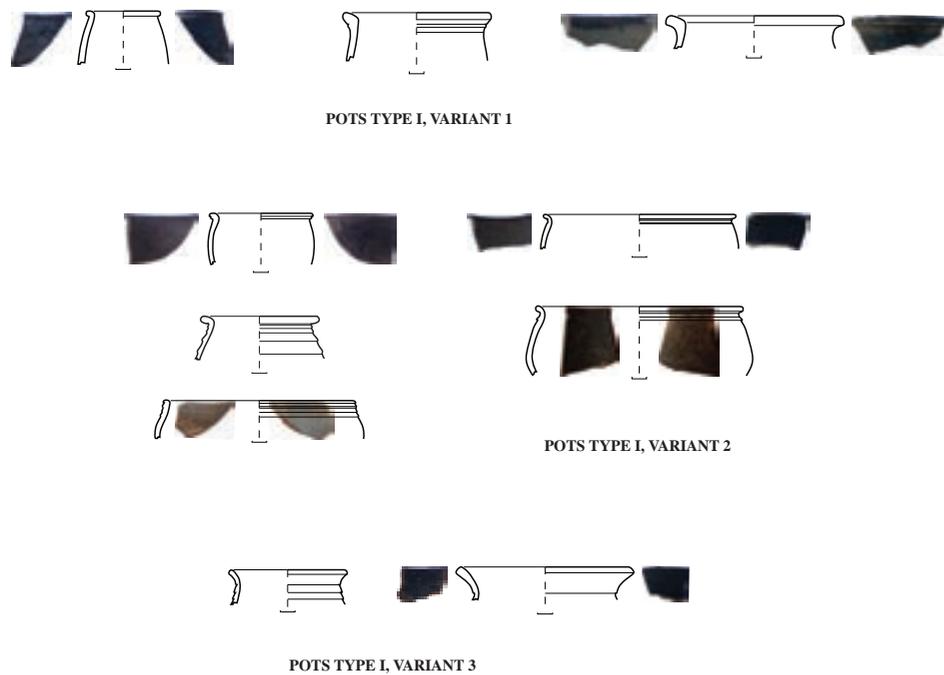


Figure 8. Pots type I, variants 1 - 3

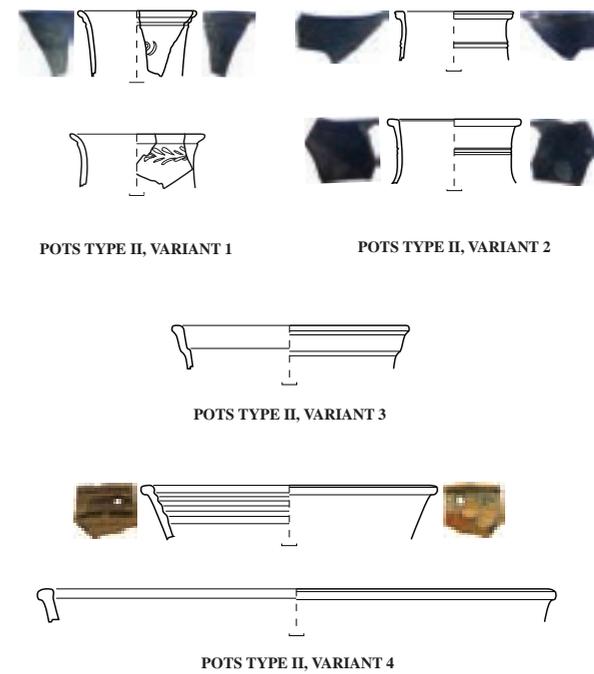


Figure 9. Pots type II, variants 1 - 4

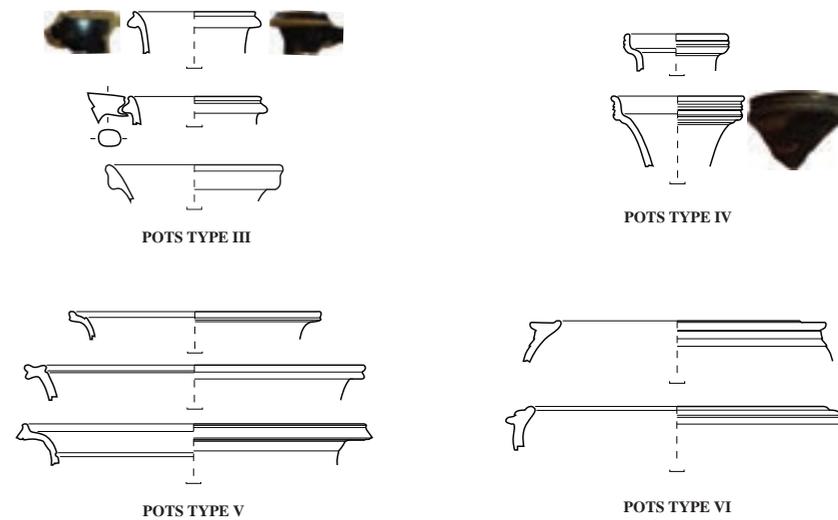


Figure 10. Pots types III - VI

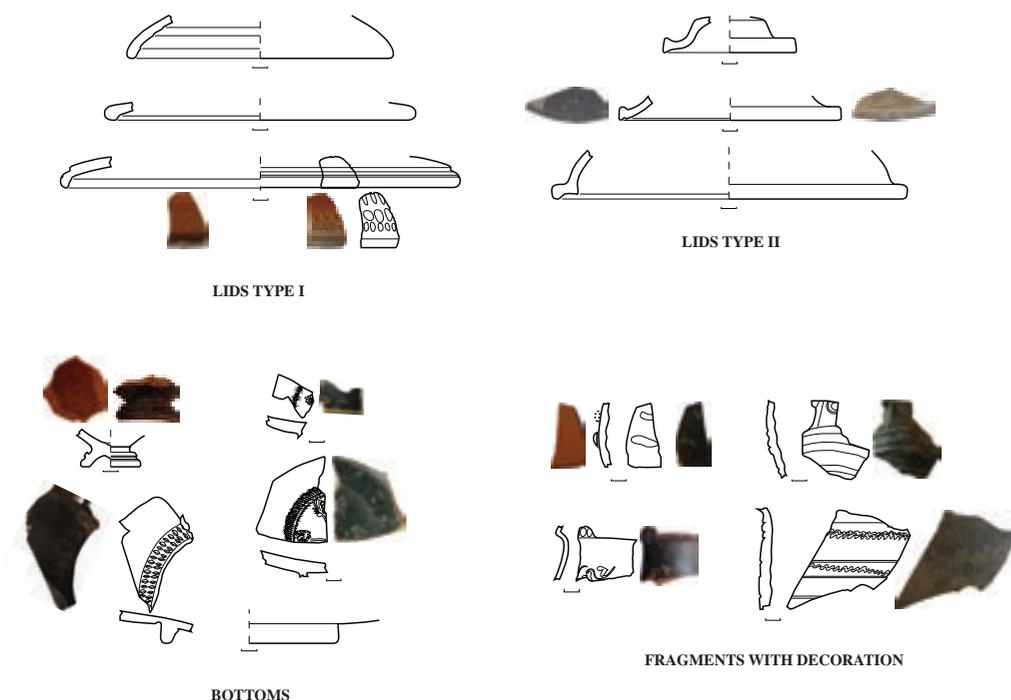


Figure 11. Lids types I – II, bottoms and fragments with decoration

## ЧЕРНОЛАКОВА КЕРАМИКА ОТ РИМСКА ХЕРАКЛЕЯ СИНТИКА (I–IV В. СЛ. ХР.)

Сирма Александрова

/резюме/

Настоящото изследване представя съдовете, покрити с черен лак, открити по време на разкопките на античния град Хераклея Синтика през 2007 – 2013 г. Научен ръководител на проучванията е доц. д-р Л. Вагалински (НАИМ-БАН). На него дължа и специалната благодарност за дадената ми възможност да работя с целия керамичен комплекс на обекта.

Историографският анализ показва, че както хронологията, така и териториалното разпространение на чернолаковата керамика в римските Балкани са слабо проучени. Липсва и каквато и да е типология на тази керамична група. Досега направените изводи за нея са твърде хипотетични, защото се основават на единични съдове и дори на отделни фрагменти.

От Хераклея Синтика разполагаме с близо 120 стратифицирани информативни фрагмента, които позволяват да бъде направена начална типология на формите, която би послужила за основа на бъдещите проучвания по темата. Съдовете са изработени винаги от много добре пречистена глина. Най-често срещаният цвят на глината след изпичането е сив и сиво-черен, но не липсват и фрагменти с черен и червено-кафяв цвят. Глиненото тесто в повечето случаи е твърдо или много твърдо изпечено. Лакът е от сив, през сиво-черен до блестящ, плътен и черен на цвят. Понякога има съдове, покрити с два лака – черен и кафяв като или двете повърхности са покрити с различен лак, или лакът прелива от единия в другия цвят.

Винаги, когато се прави формално-типологично определяне на малък брой фрагменти, съществува голям риск формите да бъдат разбити на прекалено много типове. Въпреки тази опасност ясно се открояха зависимости – всички форми са трапезни и попадат само в три категории – купи, гърнета и капаци. Засега не съм правила понататъшна вътрешна разбивка на формите, именно за да избегна свръхинтерпретация.

Купите са най-често срещаната форма. Разделени са в четири основни типа. Гърнетата са 6 типа. Капаците са два типа, определени според сложността на профилиране на долния им ръб. Разгледани са и фрагменти от съдове като дъна с украса или с покритие от различни на цвят лакове – черен и кафяв и стени на съдове с характерна украса.

Изследваната група римска чернолакова керамика е слабо проучена. Често колеги я определят като елинистическа и обясняват наличието ѝ в римски обекти с обърната или нарушена стратиграфия. Предимството на представения тук керамичен комплекс е, че той произхожда от археологически разкопки, надеждно е стратифициран и има убедителна хронология въз основа на откритите в пластове дребни находки, сред които са водещи 397 монети. Въз основа на натрупаните стратиграфски данни може да се твърди, че чернолакова керамика се използва (рано е да се каже дали е и произвеждана на място) в Хераклея Синтика и в периода I – IV в. Следващите разкопки на обекта би трябвало да разкрият как традицията на чернолаковата керамика преминава от елинистическия в римския период.

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