Urban Ceramic Workshops in the Province of Thrace during the Principate: The Archaeological Evidence from Bulgaria

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Abstract: This article explores the archaeological evidence of urban ceramic workshops in the Roman province of Thrace, discovered in the modern territory of Bulgaria. Three major types of data are taken into account – the overall location, the internal organisation and the production repertoire of the potteries in question. The analysed information is then compared to published material about urban ateliers in other provinces of the Roman Empire. In conclusion some general remarks are made on the scale and chronology of the ceramic manufacture in the towns of provincia Thracia.

Key words: provincia Thracia, towns, ceramic workshops, Bulgaria.

INTRODUCTION

Urban ceramic production in the province of Thrace during the Principate (fig. 1) is attested indirectly in most of its towns. However, direct archaeological proof is still limited and seldom published. Several workshops are excavated in the modern territory of Bulgaria, most of them located on the sites of the city of Philippopolis (nowadays Plovdiv) and the town of Augusta Traiana (nowadays Stara Zagora). The available data for the presence of this craft in the rest of the urban settlements in this part of Thrace is based mostly on secondary proof.

The archaeological evidence from the territory of Bulgaria

So far, no secure evidence for ceramic production in the towns of Deultum and Nicopolis ad Nestum has been published and although several ceramic centres were studied in the territory of Nicopolis ad Istrum (Sultov 1985), none of them has been excavated inside or near the town. Still, 21 magnetic anomalies, detected during a survey of the northern extra muros area, have been identified precisely as ceramic kilns (Falkner 1999, 112, note 2).

While the town together with its hinterland has been pointed out as a possible major producer of the so-called Macedonian terra sigillata (Staikuva 1991, 275-284), the small number of kilns found in Pautalia was dated to Late Antiquity (Caçarova 2003, 105-111). The kilns and workshops discovered during archaeological research in the towns of Serdica (see Dinchev / Gatchev 1999, 49-61; Kozarev 2004, 87-90), Anchialos (Karayotov / Boneva 1989, 86-87), Mesambria (Bojkova et al. 2008, 304-307) and Apollonia (Leshakov et al. 2015, 76-78) were also used in the time between the 4th and the 6th c. AD.

1 Although the title of the article implies that only information about urban workshops in Thrace dating to the period of the Principate (27 BC – AD 284) would be included, some of the potteries described below are dated to the 3rd – 4th c. AD or to the second half of the 3rd – 4th c. AD. This is due to the possibility that they had been established before the reign of Emperor Diocletian.

2 Mesambria became part of provincia Thracia around AD 193, while at the same time the towns of Nicopolis ad Istrum and Marcianopolis were transferred to the administrative territory of Moesia Inferior – see Taneva 2004, 42.
During the 1950s, a pottery workshop of an unspecified date was uncovered outside the northern fortification wall of the Roman city of Marcianopolis, but the results were not published (Мирчев / Тончева 1956, 69-79). A collective find of ceramic lamps discovered inside the fortified area of the settlement in the 1970s was supposedly locally manufactured during the first half of the 3rd c. AD (Минчев / Georgiev 1991, 223).

Ceramic kilns were studied at two different locations in Marcianopolis – inside the city and near the outer face of the southern fortification wall. The two sites in question were dated to the 4th – 5th c. AD (Минчев / Georgiev 1991, 223-244).

Four workshops dated to the 2nd – 4th c. AD were excavated on the site of Roman Philippopolis (fig. 2). The first one (fig. 2.1) was located in the southeastern part of the city, adjacent to the inner face of the later built southern fortification wall. It comprised several kilns, clay depot, waste pits and two wells, all situated in and near one building with a central yard. Domestic pottery, terracotta figurines and lamps were produced in this workshop from the beginning of the 2nd until the beginning of the 3rd c. AD (Мартинова-Кютова 2011, 341-342) or up to the 170s (Харизанов 2015, 39), when the new city’s fortification wall was built (see Topalilov 2012, 375).

The second officina (fig. 2.2) was discovered not far from the first one, near the outer face of the same part of the city’s fortifications. It was organised on top of the ruins of private houses around the end of the 2nd c. AD. Three kilns situated around a common working platform, two wells and an area with ceramic wasters were uncovered (Колев 1973, 4). This workshop probably functioned until the mid- 3rd c. AD, when the city was besieged and ransacked by the Goths (for the latter see Topalilov 2012, 375). At least one part of its production output was dedicated to table wares (see Чернева 2006, 285-286).

The third atelier (fig. 2.3) was located close to the outer face of the eastern fortification wall and was also established on the remains of private houses and a street, after they were both ruined, probably during the abovementioned Gothic siege of Philippopolis. The production facilities preserved in situ comprised one pottery kiln (with two building periods), basin for clay preparation, ceramic pipeline, clay depot, two sheds and several waste pits. Kitchenware, flat-bottomed amphorae and amphora stoppers were certainly produced on the site, possibly together with terracotta figurines, lamps and tableware (Боспачиева 1991, 87-109; Bospatchieva 2004, 89-104). According to the researcher of the site, the workshop was in operation during the 3rd and early 4th c. AD (Боспачиева 2004, 93).

The fourth workshop (fig. 2.4) was excavated in the vicinity of the Roman city, south of its habitation area. Four kilns (one from the first and three from the second building period on the site), two wells, two waste pits, clay depot, clay extraction pits and possible sheds were studied. The production repertoire included mostly kitchenware, with smaller quantities of tableware and flat-bottomed amphorae (Божинова / Христева 2014, 390-393). According to the dating of the discovered coins (see Божинова / Христева 2014, 393), this officina probably functioned from the second half of the 3rd c. to the second half of the 4th c. AD at the latest.

I would like to express my gratitude to Elena Bozhinova for providing me with additional unpublished information for the site. A more exhaustive study of the excavation results is currently in preparation by the same colleague and her team.
Fig. 1. The Roman province of Thrace (AD 136-193). Provincial border after Tacheva 2004, 40, obr. 2; additions by A. Harizanov

Fig. 2. Ceramic workshops in the city of Philippopolis. General plan after Bospačieva 2005; with workshops location, additions and corrections by A. Harizanov
Four kiln sites were studied within the margins of the Roman town of Augusta Traiana (fig. 3). The first one (fig. 3.1) was located in the southwestern necropolis, where seven kilns and two waste pits were excavated. Tableware, lamps and kitchenware were produced there from the beginning of the 3rd to the first decades of the 4th c. AD, more or less simultaneously with the use of the graveyard (Kalčev 1991, 245-247).

The second site was found in the territory of the eastern necropolis (fig. 3.2), where a pottery kiln and a water basin were uncovered. These structures were employed in the production of table and kitchen wares, in the time between the rule of Septimius Severus and that of Constantine I (Kalčev 1991, 247-248).

Remains of another atelier were excavated inside the fortified area of the town, close to its southern gate (fig. 3.3). The discovered kiln was also used for the firing of table and kitchen wares, at some point between the beginning of the 3rd and the third quarter of the 4th c. AD (Kalčev 1991, 248).

The last workshop was found in the western part of the fortified zone (fig. 3.4). One kiln, few pits and a building with stone walls were excavated. The site was dated to the 3rd – 4th c. AD (Камишева 2007, 302-304). In 2005, a large number of ceramic lamps dated to the middle and the second half of the 3rd c. AD were discovered to the west of the same workshop, near the inner face of the town's western fortification wall. The close proximity of the two excavation sites led to a suggestion that the abovementioned kiln was part of a production centre, specialised (but not exclusively) in the manufacture of oil lamps (Камишева 2010, 242).

Results

The complex analysis of the presented data on the urban ceramic workshops in the province of Thrace, excavated in the modern territory of Bulgaria, led to the following results.

Location and dating

The earliest urban officinae in Thrace were situated within or in the immediate vicinity of the towns’ living quarters. For now, the only known example is the first described workshop from Philippopolis, established around the beginning of the 2nd c. AD.

Later on, after the fortification of Thracian towns in the time of Marcus Aurelius (see Lozanov 2015, 87), the production activities during the last quarter of the 2nd and the first half of the 3rd c. AD were carried out on the outskirts of the populated areas, often near or within necropoleis. The second workshop from Philippopolis was built close to the outer face of the southern fortification wall around the end of the 2nd c. AD, while the first kilns in Augusta Traiana, dated to the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd c. AD, were located within the limits of the Southwestern and the Eastern necropoleis of the town. Having the latter in mind, the kilns and workshops localised outside the northern fortification walls of Marcianopolis and Nicopolis ad Istrum could most probably be dated to the same time period.

After the devastating Gothic invasions of the mid-3rd c. AD (see Boteva 2001, 37-44) the ceramic ateliers in some of the towns were moved inside their fortified zones, which was probably the case with
the two intramural workshops excavated in Augusta Traiana and a 4th c. AD kiln site excavated in Marcianopolis (for the latter see Mînčev / Georgiev 1991, 224). On the contrary, according to the available evidence from Philippopolis, it could be suggested that the southern and eastern outskirts of this city were its most important areas for ceramic manufacture during the second half of the 3rd c. and at least the first half of the 4th c. AD.

**Layout and production facilities**

Two types of internal organisation were attested in the potteries of Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana. According to the first one the production facilities were situated in or near a permanent building, which might have been also used as a dwelling. Two or three of the excavated workshops were settled in this manner – workshop # 1 from Philippopolis, the fourth and probably also the third of the mentioned ateliers from Augusta Traiana, dated to the 3rd – 4th c. AD.

The production process at the rest of the excavated kiln sites in the two urban settlements was organised in more or less open areas, separated of the potters’ living spaces. At these locations the indoor-related activities were most probably carried out under wooden sheds. Remains of such constructions were found in the last two potteries in Philippopolis, dated to the second half of the 3rd – 4th c. AD.

The workshops in the two settlements comprised also pottery kilns (from one to several), clay pits, clay preparation basins, clay depots and waste pits. Wells, pipelines and basins were used for water supply and storage. The discovered kilns had more often circular combustion chambers, while the several structures with rectangular ground plan had overall modest dimensions, similar to those of the circular ones.

**Production repertoire**

The repertoire of the abovementioned urban ateliers in Thrace included table and kitchen wares, lamps, smaller amounts of flat-bottomed
amphorae and terracotta figurines, which satisfied most of the daily needs of the town dwellers.

The workshops at Philippopolis produced mostly tableware and kitchenware, also lamps, terracotta figurines, and flat-bottomed amphorae. Similar was the output of the potteries at Augusta Traiana where the most attention was paid to the production of table and kitchen wares, supplemented in at least one or two of the known ateliers with the manufacture of oil lamps.

**Discussion**

When compared to urban potteries from other provinces of the Roman Empire, the ateliers from Thrace show similar lines of development in terms of location, internal organisation, types of used production facilities and manufactured items.

**Location and dating**

Workshop location attested in Thrace was also common in the rest of the Roman provinces. Similar to the case of the workshops 1 and 2 in Philippopolis is for example that of the two 1st c. AD workshop facilities in Pompeii, located next to the populated areas of the town, in its intra- and extramural part (see McCallum / Theodore Peña 2010, 229-238). Almost identical is the situation with the ceramic ateliers of Oppidum Ubiorum (the pre-dating Colonia Agrippinensium Roman town, underneath nowadays Cologne), which were active during the first half of the 1st c. AD (Carrol 2004, 75-88).

So far, almost no evidence was found for an intramural location of production facilities during the period from the end of the 2nd to the end of the 3rd c. / beginning of the 4th c. AD, demonstrated by the last two potteries at Augusta Traiana. This fact could be attributed both to common safety regulations or to the small amount of published archaeological data for urban ceramic workshops of that time, as in the cases of the ones at Lugdunum (see Desbat 2010, 56), Cologne (see below), etc.

The peripheral position, more or less separated from the habitation zone, of the other ateliers in Thrace was much more popular in the territory of the Roman Empire. The 1st c. BC – 1st c. AD workshops at Pergamon (Bergama) were grouped in a potters’ quarter, located in the valley of the river Ketios, immediately to the east of the town (Poblome et al. 2001, 151-156). At Lugdunum (Lyon) most of the excavated workshops, dated to the last decades of the 1st c. BC – beginning of the 2nd c. AD, were located on the bank of the river Saone, to the north / northeast of the habitation area of the settlement, while the only known workshop of later date (the 4th c. AD) was found further to the north (Desbat 2010, 56-63). The potteries of Colonia Agrippinensium, dated to the second half of the 1st and the 2nd c. AD, were situated to the west, south and north of those of the oppidum, in relation to the growth of the city during the same period. The major part of the production activities at that time were carried out on its western outskirts, where the main deposits of clay were located. Only two sites of a later date were discovered in Cologne – one from the 3rd and one from the 4th c. AD (Höpken 2001, 133-136). The manufacture of pottery at Camulodunum (Colonia Claudia Vitricensis, nowadays Colchester) during the second half of the 1st c. AD and until the first
decades of the 4th c. AD was also organised in the extramural parts of the settlement, to the northwest, southwest and most of all to the west of its fortified zone (Hull 1963). The Roman town of Romula (modern day Reșca) had its ‘Industrial quarter’ situated outside the northern fortification gate, along the road to Acidava. The pottery workshops there were active between the middle of the 2nd and the middle of the 3rd c. AD (Popilian 1997, 7-8).

**Layout and production facilities**

The two types of internal organisation demonstrated by the urban workshops of Thrace were also conventional for the ateliers in the rest of the Roman provinces during the Principate.

The described potteries from Pompeii were situated within permanent buildings, where all of the production facilities were located. The latter comprised pottery kilns (two in each workshop), areas for forming and drying of the production, clay preparation basins and pits, stores for pottery display and trade. Water was supplied through pipelines and wells (McCallum / Theodore Peña 2010, 229-233).

The Potters’ quarter of Pergamon included individual ateliers surrounded by stone walls. Within these enclosures most of the used pottery kilns (at least two and no more than four or five) were located, together with clay preparation basins, depots, paved areas for forming / drying of the production and store rooms. *Pithoi*, pipelines and cisterns were used for the supply and storage of water (Poblome et al. 2001, 151-156).

Also within stone wall enclosures, but with less covered areas available, were organised some of the better preserved potteries at Lugdunum. The production facilities consisted of pottery kilns (one to four), clay preparation areas, basins and depots, places for forming and drying of the manufactured items. Wells and pipelines were used for water supply (Desbat 2010, 56-63).

Parallel to the organisation of the extramural workshops in Thrace, the ones at Cologne, Camulodunum and Romula were also settled in more or less open areas, while in contrast to the former most of the production facilities of the latter were clustered in groups.

Kilns, clay depots / pits, waste pits and remains of wooden sheds were amongst the preserved structures found in Cologne. Apart from the sites where a single kiln or only wasters were discovered, the rest of the areas with traces of ceramic manufacture comprised mostly clusters of kilns (up to 19 at one site) which might have belonged to more than one workshops (Höpken 2001,133-135; Carrol 2004, 75-81).

The discovered facilities at Camulodunum also included clusters of kilns, with the addition of clay pits / depots, one ‘stone building’ waste pits, ovens and possible sheds. Some of the kilns were situated within stone wall enclosures (Hull 1963).

The workshops excavated within the Industrial quarter of Romula comprised clusters of two to four kilns, also clay pits and waste pits. Permanent buildings, identified as workshops facilities, were situated near two of the kiln groups. Another stone wall building with central yard and a room with hypocaust system was discovered nearby. It was identified as the ‘villa suburbana’ of the owner of the potteries (Popilian 1997, 7-11), but it would be much more plausible to suggest that it was used as a potter’s atelier.
Production repertoire
The two major categories of ceramic vessels – tableware and kitchenware – produced by the Thracian urban workshops were likewise the most common items manufactured in the other Roman officinae, situated in towns and cities. Lucernae, amphorae and terracotta figurines were also made there in overall large quantities, while the production of dolia and mortaria was much less frequent.

The potteries at Pergamon were specialised in the production of fine wares, including the so-called Eastern Sigillata C (Poblome et al. 2001, 156-158). A small number of pottery items was made by the ones in Pompeii – coarse / cooking wares by the extramural workshop, oil lamps and fritilli (used as dice cups) by the intramural one (McCallum / Theodore Peña 2010, 237). Terra nigra, colour coated and coarse wares were part of the production repertoire of the workshops at Cologne, together with dolia, oil lamps, thin-walled cups and Gallo-Belgic ware (Höpken 2001, 134; Carrol 2004, 82-84). The ateliers at Lugdunum manufactured various kinds of fine wares (sigillata, sigillata imitations, thin-walled vessels etc.) supplemented by domestic wares, lamps, mortaria, amphorae and terracotta figurines (Desbat 2010, 57). While a major portion of the industry at Camulodunum was also dedicated to Samian ware, its workshops were producing other fine wares, kitchenware, lamps, amphorae and mortaria as well (Hull 1963). One of the workshops at Romula was involved in the fabrication of building ceramics, while in the rest fine wares, domestic pottery (wheel- and handmade), terracotta figurines and lamps were made (Popilian 1997, 12-14).

Conclusions
While the so-called urban nucleated industries appear to be more common in the Roman Empire, the individual workshop (see Peacock 1982, 90-103 for the terminology) proves the most popular mode of production amongst the urban officinae in provincia Thracia.

In general, the potteries of Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana could be characterised as small to middle scale enterprises with regard to occupied area, number and types of used production facilities. However, the variety of manufactured pottery items together with their supposed output was probably almost equivalent to that of the large ceramic centres located in the countryside, especially during the 3rd c. and the first half of the 4th c. AD.

The production of building ceramics on the other hand seems to develop as an urban industry in the region much later, during the 4th or in some cases even the 5th c. AD. The occasional discoveries of tile kilns of an earlier date in such context should be attributed most of all to activities initiated by the city or the state authorities, as for example was the fortification of the Thracian towns during the 170s.
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