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The roman pottery discovered at the
auxiliary fort from Gherla

-SUMMARY-

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Summary

The Roman fort from Gherla was built during the reign of Emperor Trajan, sometime between 106-118, shortly after the conquest of the province, and functioned until it was abandoned under Emperor Aurelian in 271. It was strategically placed on the line of intermediate forts linking the legion fortresses of *Apulum* and *Potaissa* and the forts on the Someșul Mare River (Cășeiu, Ilișua, Odorheiu Bistriței, Livezile), the fort also had the role of supporting the garrisons on the north-western *limes*.

The Roman vestiges of Gherla have come to the attention of great scholars since the 18th century. During the following century, the ruins of the fort were recorded in works dedicated to Transylvania's ancient heritage. The first proper archaeological excavations were carried out at the beginning of the 20th century by Josef Ornstein and Endre Orosz. Thirty years later, Gherasim Pinteă also excavated one of the sides of the settlement. In the 1960s, Professor Alexandru Nicula carried out several archaeological surveys in one side of the fort. The results of these excavations are unknown. With the construction of the Wood Processing Factory, the construction of which was to destroy the fortification for good, salvage excavations were organized, which yielded an impressive amount of archaeological material, especially pottery.

This thesis aims to analyze the ceramic material discovered during the rescue excavations carried out in the Roman fort of Gherla between 1981-1983. The material is in the custody of two different museums: the special material (fragments of *terra sigillata*, stamped, glazed and barbotine decorated pottery) is in the possession of the National Museum of Transylvanian History in Cluj-Napoca, while the rest of the material, mostly common pottery, is in the custody of the Museum of History in Gherla. A total of 559 pottery fragments were analyzed; I overlooked atypical fragments, i.e. fragments of undecorated walls, simple handles and bottom rings from which no further information could be extracted. Tableware has been divided into the two major groups specific to Roman-era pottery: fine (or luxury) pottery and common pottery. Since imports are relatively few, we have not resorted to a second division of fine pottery into two other categories, namely imports and locally produced pottery. The only definite imports identified are *terra sigillata* type pots and amphorae. A new group of imported sigillata has also been identified: the Pontic sigillata, identified in Dacia so far only at *Potaissa*.

The group of fine pottery also includes local imitations of *terra sigillata*, stamped pottery and wheel or roulette decorated pottery, barbotine and glazed pottery. The last two

categories are extremely poorly represented, which is a good indication that they may also have been imported, and that the local workshops at Gherla did not produce such vessels. Until further fabric analysis is carried out, this cannot be determined with precision. Common pottery has been divided into categories according to functionality: *vasa potatoria* - drinking vessels; *vasa escaria* - serving vessels; *vasa coquinatoria* - vessels for preparing food; and vessels for pouring, storing and transporting food. Within each group, several groups of vessels were further individualized by shape.

Fine pottery

The *terra sigillata* wares found at Gherla are part of the familiar pattern of imports from Dacia Porolissensis. The number of fragments in the National Museum of the History of Transylvania's patrimony, 110, is quite small. However, an analysis of this category of material is absolutely necessary for a better understanding of the economic life of this settlement, and at the same time they are an important dating tool, due to the diversity of forms, the specific decoration of certain areas, workshops and craftsmen whose activity is extremely well documented. Of the total number of fragments available to us, only 73 could be categorized typologically, one one hand because of the high degree of fragmentation and on the other hand because the fact that most of these fragments are vessel walls, making it impossible to assign them to a typology.

A second noteworthy feature is the absence of *terra sigillata* dishes for cooking and storing food. Most notable is the absence of *mortaria*-type vessels. The most plausible explanation is that they were not left behind by the soldiers, given both the importance of mortarium dishes in Roman cuisine and the status of *terra sigillata* dishes as luxury goods.

The local *terra sigillata* found in the auxiliary fort from Gherla has been framed as follows because, broadly speaking, these vessels share some of the characteristics of Western sigillata. Both the shape, obviously inspired by the vast and rich repertoire of authentic wares, and the quality of the fabric and angobe are close to theirs. The number of local *terra sigillata* fragments is slightly smaller than that of the Western ones, totaling 81 pieces.

Although their number is quite small, some conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the pottery produced at Gherla. Firstly, in terms of typology, they all belong to the category of *terra sigillata* plain wares. So far, no local imitations of *terra sigillata* with relief decoration have been found in the fort, although, as shown above, they do exist and are

produced in other pottery centers in Dacia. From the category of plain wares found here, another category of local vessels decorated in cut-glass technique can be distinguished.

Secondly, the clay used in their manufacture is of good quality; the fabric is fine, compact, with very few inclusions; its color ranges from yellowish to reddish, and the angobe, which covers both the inside and outside of the vessels, is a dull orange-reddish shade. The form repertoire includes tableware such as bowls (Dragendorff 35, Dragendorff 37 and Dragendorff 42), plates (Curle 15) and cups, as well as vessels for pouring and holding liquids (jugs). Of interest are two fragments, one from an Isings 21 cup and another from a plate, made from an extremely fine yellowish-white paste coated with an olive-brown angobe; both belong to the category of locally produced vessels and were decorated in the cut-glass technique, imitating very closely the decoration of glassware. Analogies for both vessels are found at *Napoca*, *Porolissum*, *Arcobadara* and *Cristești*, all dated to between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD.

It is quite possible that the two cut-glass decorated examples come from another workshop in the Dacian Porolissensis area. The small number of local wares, together with an equally small number of stamped vessels, indicates an important aspect of the local workshops at Gherla: it is clear that they supplied only the fort and the surrounding *vicus*, thus covering the needs of a relatively limited number of people. The purpose of the Gherla workshops was not to export on a provincial scale, but simply to supply the local market with the necessities of a modest but Roman lifestyle. Stamped pottery and the local *terra sigillata* pottery also have in common that they were made from the same type of fabric and covered with the same type of angobe. Thus, the Gherla workshops did not produce sigillata with relief decoration, but the stamped pottery probably took the place of this category of luxury vessels.

The auxiliary fort from Gherla belongs to the category of auxiliary forts that most likely had a pottery workshop located in the nearby *vicus*, where stamped pottery was also produced. The number of fragments discovered is not large, with only 71 examples. What can be said about the repertoire of shapes is that it is similar to that of other stamped pottery production centers in Dacia, including imitation of *terra sigillata* vessels, cups and bowls imitating thin-walled pottery, and plates. Missing, however, are pots for pouring liquids (jugs) and cooking vessels (pots). The same lack of some categories of vessels for

preservation, storage and cooking was also noted for *terra sigillata* vessels. Most numerous are bowls imitating the Dragendorff form 37.

The clay from which they were made is fine, the fabric is of good quality, compact, with few inclusions. The angobe, which covers both sides of the vessels, tries to imitate the shiny slip of *terra sigillata* or the black glossy slip of *terra nigra* vessels.

The decoration found on the stamped vessels is similar, but not identical, to that of other Dacian production centers. The repertoire of decorative motifs is narrower than that of *Porolissum* and *Napoca*, for example, but not poorer in terms of quality of representations.

The limited amount of material at our disposal, and its state of fragmentation, makes it impossible to determine the evolution of vessel shapes and decoration. Most of the pieces (30) can be dated on the basis of stratigraphic data as having been made in the 3rd century; for two of them, using dating of coins found in the same place, dating can be done more approximately, namely after 250 BC. Six other coins have been dated to the 2nd century, of which three can be dated to the first half of that century. So, chronologically, it seems that the pottery workshops from Gherla began producing stamped pottery sometime at the end of 2nd century, continuing their activity throughout the following century.

The period of the 3rd century is the richest in such discoveries, from which one can conclude that the slight decline in imported wares that can be observed from this century is due, on one hand, to the supplying of the consumer market with locally manufactured products. The small number of stamped pots discovered in the fort indicates once again that the products of the local workshop in which they were made were intended to cover the needs of the soldiers and was by no means a large production center that also exported its products outside the area of the Gherla settlement.

We have only one example of glazed pottery discovered at Gherla. It is the bottom of a drinking vessel. It was made of a fine, compact, light brownish fabric with a glossy reddish-brown angobe. The uniqueness of this find in the fort is not unusual, this phenomenon has also been noted in other settlements in Dacia, due to the rarity of this type of vessels.

So far, only one barbotine decorated vessel has been discovered in the fort. It is a Drag.36 dish with an S-shaped profile, made of a very good quality fabric, with few inclusions; the dish was covered with a brownish angobe. On the lip of the dish the potter has created a vegetal decoration of lanceolate leaves.

The context in which the piece was found can only indicate that it is an import, dating to the 2nd century BC. The workshop that produced this piece is difficult to identify, as the shape of the vessel is known to all potters and the decoration cannot be a reliable indication of its provenance, as there are no absolutely identical decorative motifs in barbotine decoration; lanceolate leaves are also among the most common decorative motifs used in the decoration of these vessels.

Common pottery

The category of drinking vessels includes all vessels used for drinking liquids. Three main groups have been identified in this category: bowls/cups, cups and beakers. At Gherla, *vasa potatoria*, as in the case of other Roman sites, is the least represented in terms of quantity. We believe that the best explanation for this phenomenon is that there was a preference for glass vessels for drinking. In the case of the bowls/cups group, it is possible that they had a dual function: they could be used both for drinking liquids and for storing various sauces or vinegars, typical of Roman cuisine. Because it is difficult to distinguish between the two functions, they have been treated as part of the drinking vessel.

The total number of *potatoria* vessels amounts to 26. As already mentioned, this is the most underrepresented among the archaeological material found in the fort. Of the three main groups categorized here, namely, cups/bowls, and cups and beakers, the most numerous category is cups (15), followed by cups/bowls (9) and beakers (2). Cups are extremely underrepresented, and it should be recalled that both are part of a typology that clearly mimics such glass containers. This fact must also be the reason for the small number of such vessels found in the fort.

The category of *escaria* vessels includes tableware used for serving food. Four broad categories have been identified: bowls, strainers, platters and plates. In terms of quantitatively, eating dishes is the second most widespread category of dishes at Gherla. This is not surprising, as this phenomenon is also found in other Dacian settlements. The most common are bowls (54 specimens), followed by platters (9 specimens), plates (8 specimens) and straining dishes (7 specimens).

Vasa coquinatoria are defined as those vessels whose functionality is related to food preparation. Thus, included in this category were pots, lids, mortaria, strainers, as well as platters and bowls. These last two categories have been classified as cooking vessels because

the presence of traces of secondary firing on their outer walls indicates that they were used for cooking or heating food. The category of cooking vessels is the third most numerous group, with 67 specimens in total.

Vessels for pouring, storing and transporting food have been categorized as jugs, cups, amphorae, table amphorae and dolia. The total number of these vessels amounted to 109, making them the most widespread. Within this category, vessels for pouring liquids are the most numerous, followed by those for food storage. The small number of amphorae for wine and oil is remarkable, a situation also noted previously by researchers who were involved both in the excavations and in the publication of the monograph dedicated to this settlement. The present work can only reinforce the previous observations, without adding to them either in terms of the number of amphorae, as they have not been identified, or in terms of the reasons why they were not found in the fort. One possible reason for the absence of amphorae could be the fact that the archaeological research concentrated on the barracks and the defensive elements of the fortification, both of which are less likely places for amphorae to be stored.

Another general aspect that applies to the whole province of Dacia should also be noted: amphorae are present in relatively small numbers in the military environment here. This was also the case at Bucium, for example, where only five amphorae were found in soldiers' barracks. The small number of amphorae found in the military environment was also found in *Pannonia*, both at *Carnuntum* and *Vindobona*.

Cult vessels

Turibula are vessels whose functionality is still a subject of debate among researchers. Their name may have originated from the word *tus*, which means ashes, they vessels in which aromatic substances were burned as offerings to the gods.

Turibula are represented by an extremely small number at Gherla: only four specimens have been identified. The specimens are distinguished by the decoration unique to each type.

Face pots were considered a rarity in Roman times, but new evidence from the western provinces shows that they were used more frequently than previously thought. In terms of their appearance, these vessels are distinguished primarily by a main decorative

element, depicting male faces applied in relief, most often done in a very rudimentary manner. Occasionally some of the features may be incised and very rarely painted.

One such vessel was also discovered in the Gherla castrum. It is a beaker with decorative elements applied in relief, which make up a male face can be seen just below the lip of the vessel: an arched, notched eyebrow with the edges pointing almost straight down, forming a semicircle, and a coffee-bean-shaped eye, half-open. The features are modeled by hand, and some elements have been sketched by incising into the soft paste (*ante cocturam*) with a sharp instrument: the hairs of the eyebrow are schematically rendered by short, oblique lines, and the eyelids are also roughly marked by a horizontal line.

The term '*patera*' defines a category of vessels whose morphological characteristics, decoration and functionality distinguish them from the other groups of Roman pottery. They were used primarily for libations, which, according to the criterion of functionality, places them in the category of cult vessels. There is a discussion in the literature on the difference between *paterae* and casseroles, which started from the analysis of these bronze vessels (which pottery vessels copy), and which has been taken up in the field of Roman pottery research.

From the only *patera* discovered at Gherla, a fragment of the lip of the vessel, and part of the flat handle, decorated with an ornamental vegetal motif in the form of a stylized plant, classified in *Napoca* type II.2.c.1, is still preserved. The shape of the vessel is that of a bowl, which is established on the basis of analogy with an entire specimen discovered at *Napoca*. We consider that the *patera* from Gherla could be an import from *Napoca* because, in addition to the identical shape, the decoration on the handle is also part of the ornamental repertoire used by the craftsmen of this center.