

# THE ROMAN BRONZE VESSELS FROM *DACIA POROLISSENSIS*

## -Abstract-

**KEY WORDS:** Roman Dacia, bronze vessels, imports, economical history, military consumption, everyday life.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The bronze vessels are imported items in the Dacian provincial environment. Such goods were manufactured in certain workshops from the Empire and distributed on very large areas. In the current state of the archaeological research, they represent a very important source, because of the rich information they provide, regarding chronological, economical and everyday life aspects within the borders and outside the Roman Empire. In addition to this, the study of Roman bronze vessels from Roman Dacia has not constituted yet a priority for the Romanian researchers. Although the topic itself has a great potential for research, most of the finds are still unpublished.

Under these conditions, the publication and analysis of the Dacian finds is a necessity. One of the main reasons for this enterprise is the short existence of Dacia as a Roman province, if one is to compare it with the neighbouring areas. The bronze vessels discovered here reflect the demand and consumption of such goods in a Roman province, within a short time span of maximum 170 years.

The choice of analyzing the finds from *Dacia Porolissensis* was conditioned by a series of factors. An exhaustive research, which would have considered the entire province, although desirable, could not have been accomplished within the limited time of completing the present thesis, since most of the finds analyzed here have not been published before. For this reason, the author considered more appropriate to study the finds discovered in a narrower area, namely Dacia Porolissensis. Hopefully, the present will be followed in the future by a more extensive analysis which will encompass the bronze vessels from the entire territory of Roman Dacia.

The aim of the thesis is to analyze, revalue and make accessible for the scholars the finds from *Dacia Porolissensis*, seen not as a separate entity, but as part of the Roman social

and economic system. Thus, integrating the Dacian finds in the general framework of bronze vessels distribution system from the Roman Empire was of great importance, in order to provide a better understanding of both the Dacian realities and the Roman bronze vessels industry.

The paper is not exhaustive, since, due to objective reasons (the restructuring of the museums' storage places, the publication of the finds), is based only on a part of the known information. Still, the analyzed finds (119 objects), discovered on ten different sites (Bologa/*Resculum*, Buciumi, Cluj-Napoca/*Napoca*, Florești-Șapca Verde, Gherla, Gilău, Ilișua, Moigrad/*Porolissum*, Orheiu Bistriței, Turda/*Potaissa*) and coming from thirteen different discovery points, from private collections, or from unknown discovery places, should be representative for *Dacia Porolissensis*, as long as most of the finds were included in the analysis.

The paper was structured on five chapters accompanied by four annexes, a list of figures and plates, abbreviations and bibliography, and plates.

Chapter I (Introduction) covers the general aspects related to the manner in which the paper was conceived, like the aim and importance of the subject, the sources on which the research was based, the method and methodology and the criteria which allowed the establishment of a proper terminology into Romanian. It includes as well, a more detailed discussion regarding the appropriate usage of the Latin terms, when designating vessels shapes and the manner in which these names have been used by the scholars, since most of the terms are still used in the specialized literature without questioning their real meaning.

This discussion justifies the usage of a descriptive contemporary terminology in order to designate the finds analyzed in the paper (included as a table in Annex III). The author established her choice on the basis of the terms which have been used for naming each shape, type or sub-type in the German, English, French, and Italian literature.

Chapter II (The industry of the bronze vessels in the Roman Empire. General considerations) was structured in two main parts and presents general aspects regarding the Roman bronze vessels industry. The first part deals with the information offered by the literary and iconographic sources referring to the subject, while the second one discusses the main aspects of the technological process (alloys, production phases), the elements which indicate the existence of the workshops as well as the structure of the latter. Despite its general character, this chapter allowed a detailed analysis of a series of aspects related to the subject which are of major importance when analyzing the finds from *Dacia Porolissensis*.

The presentation and analysis of the literary and iconographic sources was by considering the high degree of subjectivity which surrounds them. Thus, with respect to the literary sources, it was emphasized their partial and inconsistent character, while regarding the iconographic ones, it was underlined their dependency of certain depiction models which are not always reflecting the realities of the period when a certain representation was made. Part of the discussion focusing on the iconographic sources treated the types of vessel shapes which can be considered “metallic”, represented on the sculptural monuments from Roman Dacia and their relevance in the attempt of establishing the functionality of certain types of bronze vessels. Such an approach proved to be useful, since an important part of these depictions was unanimously interpreted in the Romanian literature as vessels used for libations, hypothesis which is not confirmed by the archaeological finds, or by the iconographical tradition of the scenes. It was also emphasized in many cases, the impossibility of distinguishing the “metallic” shapes, since some of them were imitated in different materials (glass, pottery etc.) and the intention of the stone carver was not always that of depicting the precise shape of the objects existing in reality. Regarding the votive altars with depictions on the lateral sides from Roman Dacia, their distribution rather indicates the preference of the stone workshops around Apulum for this type of representation, than a personal choice of the person who dedicated the monument. This discussion was based on a list of the main votive and funerary monuments from Roman Dacia with this type of representations, included in Annex I.

The second part of the chapter covers issues related to the production technology of the Roman bronze vessels. Starting from the types of alloys used and the importance of establishing their composition, the analysis is focused on the main discoveries from the Empire (moulds, semi-finished objects etc., included in Annex II), which indicate the existence of the workshops. The discussion is relevant for the Dacian finds as long as they are imported items.

Also, the small number of such discoveries hinders the possibility of identifying with certainty the production centres. Some aspects regarding the structure of the workshops and the production phases of a bronze vessel, from the state of alloy to the one of final product, were also treated in detail, in order to emphasize the complexity of the process and of the production phases as well as the technical knowledge required.

Chapter III (The Roman bronze vessels from *Dacia Porolissensis*. Typological and chronological analysis) includes the typological and chronological analysis of the bronze vessels from *Dacia Porolissensis*. The finds were classified according to shape, each of the shapes being accompanied by a discussion regarding the terminology used to designate it. Within each shape, the types and the subtypes were provided with a chronological discussion/

analysis. Each type benefited from a detailed presentation which included the description of the type, the technological aspects, the typology, the distribution areas, the production centres, the chronology, and the functionality. The author considered more suitable this kind of presentation as opposed to one based on functional categories, as long as the usage of certain types is still questionable and others were used in more than one type of activities. Of course, the possible ways in which the vessels could have been used are discussed for each type. The 119 finds analyzed in the paper were grouped in 12 different shapes: saucepans, dippers and strainers, jugs with spout, amphorae, jugs, bowls with cylindrical handle, shallow bowls with flat handle, bowls with raised handles, basins, buckets, balsamaria, and anthropomorphic vessels, together with three separate categories dedicated to vessel feet, to fragments of bronze vessels which cannot be attributed to a certain shape or type, and to fragments for which it is not certain if they belong to bronze vessels.

A special attention was given to the typological problems. As long as the finds from Dacia are imported items, it was not necessary to create a new typology, since one of the main aims of the paper was that of integrating the material from *Dacia Porolissensis* in the general frame of the Roman bronze vessels. Therefore, the main typologies established for the bronze vessels from the Roman Empire were used.

In order to ensure an easier access to the information referring to each object, the catalogue of the finds was included in this chapter. It was organized according to shape and type, and within each of them the finds were presented in an alphabetic order, taking into consideration the place of discovery. The objects were numbered continuously and the catalogue number corresponds to the number accompanying the drawings and the photos illustrated on the final plates. The finds belonging to a certain type were presented at the end of the discussion referring to it.

Chapter IV (The Roman bronze vessels from *Dacia Porolissensis*. Analysis of the discovery contexts) discusses the finds according to the places of discovery. Such a discussion was needed, since it provides a clearer picture of the distribution of the bronze vessels in *Dacia Porolissensis* and on each site. The finds did not always allowed an elaborate analysis of each site included in this study, but whenever such an approach was possible, the information offered by the functionality, typology, chronology and contexts of discovery was combined by means of tables. In some situations, like the Roman forts from Buciumi, Ilișua, Moigrad/*Porolissum*-Pomet Hill, it was possible to isolate several phases during which the bronze vessels arrived.

The conclusions were presented in chapter V. The bronze vessels analyzed in the paper were grouped in 31 different types, accompanied by the fragments which could not be identified according to type, but only according to shape, the vessel feet, the fragments which could not be attributed to a certain shape or type and the ones for which it is not certain if they belong to bronze vessels.

Considering the finds which were typologically identified, one can notice the predominance of saucepans with handle ending in a disc pierced by a round hole, dippers and strainers Eggers 160 and 160/161, provincial variants of sheet bronze jugs used for boiling the water, different types of steep-walled basins, and different variants of the Eggers 36 buckets. Of course, this picture is purely quantitative, without any significance regarding the chronology of the entry phases or of the usage periods of bronze vessels in *Dacia Porolissensis*.

Instead, if one considers the production period of the identified types, period which also determines the interval within which the vessels could have been acquired, it is possible to identify a series of entry phases for this category of imports.

The first phase is connected to the first waves of civil and military population who arrived in Roman Dacia. The types which can be related with certainty to this constitute more than a quarter of the bronze vessels discovered in Dacia Porolissensis which can be attributed to a certain type (saucepans with handle ending in a disc pierced by a crescentic hole, saucepans with handle ending in a disc pierced by a round hole, including the Gødåker type, sheet bronze jugs belonging to “Pompeii” type, globular amphorae, and shallow bowls with flat handle). Most of these types were produced until the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and they appear in discovery contexts, which were dated in many instances during the first decades of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. This is precisely why they could not have been acquired from the Dacian market as a result of commerce with other areas of the Empire. More probably, they should be interpreted as part of the luggage of persons who arrived here after the conquest of the province. From a functional viewpoint, the types present in this phase were part of the sets used for preparing and serving drinks.

The second phase is represented by types which were produced until shortly before or around the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. It mostly consists of dippers and strainers Eggers 160 and 16/161, jugs with narrow mouth and spout belonging to the Canterbury type, jugs with richly ornamented handle, bowls with raised handles, hemispherical basins with omega-shaped handles, and, possibly, buckets with appliqué shaped as human masks. Taking into account that most of these types were produced starting with the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, it is not



certain whether they arrived in Roman Dacia as a result of commercial activities. Some of them could have been brought here by their owners, but, lacking any information regarding the context of the discoveries, it is not possible to establish better the period in which they were used. Functionally, most of them were part of the sets used for preparing and serving drinks or they were used for washing in general or as part of the hand washing sets.

The third phase can be placed in time after the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, when in *Dacia Porolissensis* arrive types like dippers and strainers Eggers 161, sheet bronze jugs with heavy mouth cast in one with the handle (types Bolla I and Bolla II), bowls with cylindrical handle belonging to the Canterbury type, and buckets Eggers 36 and their variants.

The last phase which can be established based on the information provided by the typology dates to the last decades of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and it certainly consists of different types of steep-walled basins and by buckets with bell-shaped body.

Certain types identified among the analyzed finds could not be included in one of the four entry phases described above, since they were produced during longer periods of time or because of the scarce information available in this state of the research, related to the production periods.

The bronze vessels are imported items in *Dacia Porolissensis*. There is no evidence testifying the existence of workshops which could have produced locally this type of objects. The production centres where they were made are the ones active during the period when Dacia was part of the Roman Empire and the analyzed finds were overwhelmingly produced in the Western provinces, in workshops which functioned in Gaul and in the Rhine Valley. The western commercial orientation of *Daciei Porolissensis* in what concerns this category of goods is only natural, since it reflects the changes produced in the Roman bronze vessels industry after the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. The only types produced with certainty in the Italic Peninsula mostly belong to the first entry phase and are represented by items which were still in use at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Regarding the later types, the buckets with bell-shaped body with appliqués decorated with Bacchic scenes are products of workshops which functioned in the northern area of the Italic Peninsula, starting with the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.

The number of bronze vessels produced until the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, which arrived in *Dacia Porolissensis*, is equal with the one observed after this chronological interval. From a functional viewpoint, the types used for preparing and serving the drinks or for personal care are predominant before the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, while after this period the types used in the kitchen for mixing the wine, and those pertaining to the toilette

are more frequent. The number of vessels used in the kitchen (dippers and strainers Eggers 161, sheet bronze jugs used for boiling the water) is higher after the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. This phenomenon is conditioned by the period in which the types were produced and it reflects a general process of formal and functional transformation undertaken by the Roman bronze vessels starting with the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. After that time, it was noticed a decline of the bronze vessels industry, which from a technical viewpoint consists of the partial usage of the lathe and by final products made of shaped bronze sheet. The functional aspect gained ground on the aesthetics of the final products and it can be noticed a preference of the workshops for producing vessels used in the kitchen at the expense of the ones forming the drinking sets. These transformations can also be noticed with respect to the size of the vessels which became larger. The causes which determined this change are not clear in the present state of the research, since it is not sure whether one should argue for a “barbarization” of the usage or just for a replacement of the pieces forming the drinking sets with similar items made from different materials. In this general context, the types of bronze vessels used in the kitchen are poorly represented in *Dacia Porolissensis*. The absolute values are high because of the significant number of sheet bronze jugs discovered here. However the cooking vessels are few and, excepting the sheet bronze jugs, they only consist of three fragments of dippers and strainers Eggers 161.

It is important to emphasize that the analyzed finds mainly reflect a military consumption of such goods and that high quality bronze vessels were used in the everyday activities of the soldiers from *Dacia Porolissensis*, especially if one is to consider that an important number of finds were discovered in the barracks of the forts. Moreover, they were used in the forts from the first years of their existence, in activities which required the adoption of a Roman way of preparing and drinking the wine or of cleaning and caring for the body.

This study represents a first step in analyzing this category of imports. Hopefully, it will encourage the scholars to take into account new groups of bronze vessels discovered in *Dacia Porolissensis* or in the rest of the province.