

AN EARLY HELLENISTIC GRAVE FIND IN VICINITY OF ODESSOS (VARNA)

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Rezumat: În acest articol, autorul descrie și discută o descoperire interesantă care a fost făcută într-un mormânt găsit din întâmplare în anii 60 ai secolului XX în vecinătatea de atunci a orașului Varna (anticul Odessos). Aceasta constă într-un opaiț cu firnis negru, o cană, un askos și o cupă adâncă de ceramică (calyx) (Pl. I. 1-2; Pl. II. 3-4) care se găsesc astăzi în colecția de artă antică a Muzeului de Arheologie din Varna. Obiectele au fost descoperite întâmplător într-un mormânt simplu de înhumație, construit din lespezi de piatră. De un interes deosebit este cupa adâncă ce pare a fi una din rarele copii în ceramică ale recipientelor de argint de acest tip cunoscut cu numele de calyx (Pl. II. 4). Pe baza vaselor de ceramică și a opaițelor cu forme similare, precum și a cupelor adânci de argint imitate (calyces) în ceramica cu firnis negru, descoperite în Bulgaria și în alte regiuni (Pl. III. 5-7), mormântul a fost datat în prima jumătate a secolului al III-lea a.Chr. Mormântul aparținea unei extensii a necropolei orașului Odessos, situată pe ambele părți ale drumului ce lega această localitate de Dionysopolis (actualul Balcic) și de toate celelalte colonii grecești antice (apoikiai) situate la nord, pe coasta vestică a Mării Negre.

Abstract: In this article, the author described and discussed interesting finds, deposited in a grave discovered by chance in the 60ies of 20th century in the then close vicinity of Varna (ancient Odessos). They consist of a black-glazed Greek lamp; a jug, an askos and a ceramic deep cup (calyx) (Pl. I. 1-2; Pl. II. 3-4) and are now in the Ancient Art collection of Varna Museum of Archaeology. The objects were found by chance in a simple grave constructed by stone slabs, which contained an inhumation burial. Of special interest is the deep cup, which appeared to be a rare ceramic replica of silver vessels of same type known as calyx (Pl. II. 4). Based on similar shaped ceramic vessels and lamps, as well as deep silver cups - calyces, and their imitations, black-glazed and ordinary ceramic calyces from Bulgaria and beyond (Pl. III. 5-7), the grave find was dated to the first half of 3rd century BC. The grave belonged to a continuation of the ancient necropolis of Odessos, which was situated on both sides of the

ancient road that connected this city with Dionysopolis (modern Balchik) and all other ancient Greek cities (apoikiai) located to the north of it on the Western Black Sea coast.

Introduction

In the 60's of 20th century a group of several objects, which belonged to a disturbed ancient grave entered the collection of Varna Museum of Archaeology. It consisted of a black glazed lamp, a ceramic jug, an askos and a deep ceramic cup (*calyx*). For a few decades these finds were kept in the museum storage room with a short note inside one of them, before they were included in the Museum inventory book.

The note was written by the hand of the former curator at the Archaeological Museum of Varna: the late Dr. Goranka Toncheva and it reads: "Finds from a grave constructed by thin stone slabs with inhumation burial, which was found by digging of a ditch near the "Otdikh i kultura" bus station at a depth of 1.30 m"¹. To this set belonged also a glass bead and a ceramic loom weight, which are not available now. One can only guess that the grave was found by workers when digging the ditch and someone – maybe the person in charge of the project informed the Varna Museum authorities. It seems that then the museum curator Dr. Toncheva has visited the site and collected the (surviving?) grave finds, bringing them into museum. Allegedly, the grave was already ruined during the digging and she was not able to do some real research at the site. This must be the reason why there is so little information that survived about this find.

Description

1. LAMP. VARNA MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY, Inv. no II. 6053. **Pl. I. 1.**

Lentil-shaped with flattened biconvex body, round filling hole with slightly raised rim and a ring around it on top. There is a solid conical lug on the right side of the body. The nozzle is elongated and flat on top with angular profile and ellipsoid wick-hole. The base, raised on an wide and flat ring, is concave underside. The lamp is wheel made of fine orange to brownish clay and covered by matt black glaze, partially erased. Intact.

Found along with nos. 2–4 in a grave near the "Otdikh i kultura" bus station in the vicinity of Varna (ancient Odessos), which is now within the modern city.

Length: 9.3 cl; diam.: 6.8 cm; height: 3.3 cm.

Published: Kuzmanov & Minchev 2018, p. 39, no. 75, pl. VI, 75.

2. CERAMIC JUG. VARNA MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY, Inv. No II. 6051.

Pl. I. 2.

It has a slightly flattened globular body with wide cylindrical neck and circular mouth with rounded rim and conical ring base. The remains of a flat handle – now

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¹ There was no date on the note but given that the finds were not written in the Museum inventory book and Dr. Toncheva left the museum in Varna in 1969 to join the staff of the National Institute of Archaeology in Sofia, this must have happened soon before: i.e. in the late 60es of 20th century. Unfortunately, this note was later lost.

missing are visible. Made of fine brownish clay with remains of reddish slip and occasional lime deposits on the surface. There are cracks and small missing parts of the body and base.

Found in the same grave along with nos. 1 and 3–4.

Height: 16.9 cm; diam. of the body: 13.1; diam. of the mouth: 7.4 cm.

Unpublished.

3. ASKOS. VARNA MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY, Inv. no. II. 6052. **Pl. II. 3.**

Mold-made of fine buff clay with additionally made and fixed handles and neck with a circular mouth. The body is elegant ellipsoid with short cylindrical neck divided by an edge from the flanged mouth with triangular rim. The neck is flanked by two flat and thin handles (one is missing), which join the body. There are visible remains of gloss pattern decoration: two (or three?) narrow bands of reddish color on the upper half of the body and there is a bump in its center as well. Big sections of lime deposits occur on the body and handles.

Found in the same grave along with nos. 1, 2 and 4.

Height: 7 cm; diam. of the body: 13.3; diam. of the mouth: 5.4 cm.

Unpublished.

4. DEEP CUP – CALYX. VARNA MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY, Inv. no. II. 6052. **Pl. II. 4.**

The elegant body is globular and slightly flattened, with short conical neck and turned out flaring rim with rounded edge. The small circular base is flat. The vessel is very carefully made of fine beige-orange clay, turned on quick potter's wheel and there is no decoration or glaze but some sandy deposits on the surface. Intact.

Height: 9.5 cm; diam. of the body: 7.9 cm; diam. of the rim: 9.2 cm; diam. of the bottom: 1.30 cm.

Found in the same grave along with nos. 1 and 2–3.

Unpublished.

Discussion

There is no doubt that all items belong to the same grave find because of the lime deposits on their surface and inside of two of them there was still some sand left, which came there obviously from the grave filling. However, we could not be sure that these were the only grave goods discovered: given the missing handles of the askos and the jug, we may suppose that there might have been some other smaller or broken pieces, which were not collected. The following discussion will be based on the available now finds, which supply quite interesting information.

The black glazed lamp is typical for the Greek black glazed lamp production. It belongs to type 28 B of Howland², which suppose an Attic production of the first half of 3rd century BC³, while in Bulgarian classifications it belongs to type XI of Kuzmanov⁴ and type X of Kuzmanov & Minchev⁵, which are dated to the same time.

² HOWLAND 1958, p. 93–94, type 28 B, with discussion.

³ HOWLAND 1958, p. 93, pl. 41, no. 401.

⁴ KUZMANOV 1992, p. 15, type X, nos. 37–38 and bibl.

⁵ KUZMANOV & MINCHEV 2018, p. 37 and bibl.

Similar in shape lamps were produced also in Rhodes – a very close parallel to the piece from Varna is in the British Museum collection, dated in the same period or a little later⁶. Another similar in shape and date lamp comes from Kerameikos⁷. Therefore, our lamp must be dated also to the first half of 3rd century BC or a bit later. Because of the color of the clay and not very fine black glaze, we should not exclude the possibility that it was a locally made imitation of an original Attic piece.

The ceramic jug is a common Hellenistic table ware, which was produced and used in 4th–1st centuries BC and was spread not only in Greece but all around the Black Sea coasts⁸. The type is known in mainland Greece – from the Athenian Agora and beyond⁹. In Apollonia Pontica (Sozopol), it belongs to type XI, version 3, which was most popular in the second half of 4th and early 3rd centuries BC¹⁰ and there are grave finds of same shape and decoration, which were dated to the first half of 3rd century BC¹¹. Similar forms of ceramic ware have been found in Southwestern Thrace¹² and also in the Northern section of the Western Black Sea coast too. A jug of same form was discovered in grave No 4 of tumulus II of the necropolis of Histria, which was and dated to the late 4th century BC¹³. Other (different) variants of this type of jugs continued to be produced in the Western Black Sea region up to the late Hellenistic period as evidenced by a piece found in grave No 58 of the necropolis of Tomis (Constanța, Romania), which was dated to the 2nd–1st c. BC¹⁴. On the other hand, in a pit (possibly a *bothros*), which was excavated in the presumable sacred area of Odessos, there was discovered the same jug as in the discussed here grave find. Based on other finds in the pit, like black glazed pottery fragments and stamped amphoras, it was dated to the early 3rd century BC¹⁵. Therefore, the vessel from the grave at “Otdikh i kultura” locality fits well in the Early Hellenistic period, i.e. between late 4th and first half of 3rd centuries BC, and this is the reason to date it in the same time span too. It must be said in general that judging by the number of finds, this variant of the form was not very popular despite that the original Greek version was copied by local potters even in the coastal cities of West Pontos. Because of its simple shape and relatively fine work, it is difficult to decide without special tests of the fabric composition, did the jug from Varna grave was imported or a locally made one.

The *askos* from the grave at “Otdikh i kultura” locality may be of bigger help in dating the grave find. It belongs to type III, variant 1 according to the classification of locally produced *askoi* from Apollonia Pontica (Sozopol), which were dated to the late 4th– early 3rd centuries BC¹⁶ and 3rd century BC¹⁷.

⁶ BAILEY 1975, p. 176–177, no. 396, pl. 80.

⁷ KUZMANOV & MINCHEV 2018, p. 37, type XI, n. 1.

⁸ MALYSHEV 2007, p. 154, fig. 101, type I and bibl.

⁹ ROTROFF 2006, p. 20, group II, fig. 4/14 and bibl.

¹⁰ NEDYALKOV 2020, p. 78 and bibl.

¹¹ NEDYALKOV 2020, p. 124, fig. 26, no. 76g; p. 124, pl. 7, no. 75e.

¹² BOZHKOVA 2017, p. 85, fig. 23, 3a.

¹³ ALEXANDRESCU 1966, p. 179, , no. II 8, pl. 90, II 8.

¹⁴ BUCOVALĂ 1967, p. 93, d, fig. on p. 92.

¹⁵ TONCHEVA 1972, p. 264, pl. II, fig. 7.

¹⁶ NEDYALKOV 2020, p. 100, pl. 13, no. 198; p. 175–176, pl. 2, no. 13, 31.

¹⁷ IVANOV 1963, p. 139, nos. 233–238.

In the large Thracian city, excavated near Sbornyanovo, Region of Razgrad, which is most probably Helis – the capital of the Getai tribe Kingdom, there was discovered a very similar vessel dated to ca late 4th – early 3rd centuries BC. This *askos* came to light in a house together with another one but of different decoration and other household pottery and it is considered as being an imported Greek ware¹⁸.

Actually, it appears that *askoi* were rather popular wares in Odessos (Varna) because they were often deposited as grave goods in graves (both tumular and plain ones) in the late Classical-Hellenistic necropolises of the ancient city. Several finds of that shape have been published¹⁹ and there are some more unpublished in the collection of Varna Museum of Archaeology. Among them, very similar in shape and decoration is an *askos* discovered along with other grave goods in a grave near the sea coast the “Turna tepe” Hill, which is located not far from “Otdikh i kultura” locality. In the grave was buried one warrior with an iron spear head among the grave finds) and dated to the 3rd–2nd centuries BC²⁰. To the same time (3rd–2nd centuries BC) was dated the *askos* from another grave find in the area. This grave was situated near the sea shore, in east direction from “Otdikh i kultura” locality and was also close to the ancient road leading from Odessos to Dionysopolis²¹. Given all mentioned before similar vessels, the *askos* found in the grave in discussion should be dated to ca 3rd century BC.

The most interesting find in the grave at “Otdikh i kultura” locality is the ceramic deep cup, which is a very rare discovery. It is an exact replica of silver drinking vessels of same – *calyx* form, which were produced in 4th–3^d centuries BC mostly in Greece. There are a few imported finds in Ancient Thrace coming from burials of Thracian nobles²². It is believed that the form has an Achaemenid origin going back to the 5th century BC, which however developed and became popular in the Greek world and the surrounding region in Early Hellenistic time²³. The best one is the silver calyx from Varbitsa, Region of Shumen (Bulgaria), which is part of the rich silver drinking set that belonged to a Thracian warrior of high rank in the local society of North-Eastern Thrace²⁴. It was dated to the second half of 4th century BC²⁵ and lately to the late 4th – early 3rd centuries BC²⁶, which seems more reasonable to me. This elegant and partially gilt vase with incised and in repoussée decoration looks like it was the model used by the potter who produced the calyx cup from vicinity of Odessos: so close are they in shape and almost the same in measures (Pl. III. 5).

Actually, the idea of copying of silver vessels in pottery covered by black glaze was invented by the Greeks very early: this process started at least from late 6th

¹⁸ STOYANOV *et alii* 2006, p. 27, fig. 37 – right.

¹⁹ IVANOV 1956, p. 95–96, pl. V, fig. 1; TONCHEVA 1961, p. 30–32, pl. II, fig. 10; pl. III, fig. 13.

²⁰ TONCHEVA 1961, p. 31, pl. II, fig. 12.

²¹ TONCHEVA 1961, p. 29, pl. I, fig. 4.

²² TONKOVA & STOYANOV 2017, p. 55 no. 46; p. 57, no. 48.

²³ STRONG 1979, p. 99–100, fig. 23 a-c.

²⁴ STOYANOV 2017, p. 13 and bibl.

²⁵ NOYART *et alii* 1987, p. 216, no. 365; p. 55, no. 46 and bibl.

²⁶ TONKOVA & STOYANOV 2017, p. 55, no. 46 and bibl.

century BC and there were various forms that were imitated²⁷. The reason was to make cheaper copies of the expensive ones made of precious metal and in that way to have a larger number of clients. In order to achieve that idea, the masters made the pottery ones to look like oxidized silver. This effect was achieved by the black glaze²⁸, which sometimes was deliberately oxidized by adding more air (= oxygen) in the pottery kiln and longer firing of the vessels there. Among the imitated by Greek potters forms covered by black glaze were also the calyx cups (Pl. III. 6).

In Thrace (as well as in some other peripheral regions of the Greek world like Macedonia and North Pontic coast), this specific pottery production was also applied successfully by some local craftsmen. This has happened in the 5th century BC – i.e. soon after this new trend appeared in Greece²⁹. The reason about the quick adjustment of the Thracian potters to that invention in ceramic production we may search in the drinking habits of their fellow country-men. Unlike the Greeks, who used to drink wine mostly in *kylikes*, *kantharoi* and *skyphoi*, the Thracians preferred instead to use for same purpose in their banquets various types of *phialai* (and occasionally, the king's retinue and the highest members of their society used also *rhytha* made of precious metals). This has been proved by the large number of silver *phialai* and other similar deep cups/bowls (over two hundred) discovered in graves of Thracian nobles or as part of their buried treasures in Bulgaria and a few in Southeastern Thrace (now in Turkey)³⁰. The shape of the calyx cup we may say is in fact a deeper and narrower version of a *phiale*, which made it also preferable by the indigenous people of high rank in the society. I must underline though that there are very few silver finds of that form in the country but this goes also for other parts of Greece and the Mediterranean world³¹. In Late Classical and Early Hellenistic periods, the Athenian and other Greek potters of that time did imitated it in ceramic and usually covered the copies by black glaze (Pl. II. 4), sometimes using additionally made painted decoration. This practice has wide spread in the whole Mediterranean world³² and beyond it, including Ancient Thrace³³. The same did occasionally some of the masters in ceramic workshops based in certain Greek cities/ *apoikiai* located on the Western Black Sea coast. These potters also imitated silver calyx cups but in a more modest way: without black glaze and decoration and the vessel from Varna is the best evidence about that. It is rather plain and with no decoration at all but never the less, it is a very fine piece (meaning as a quality) of this particular shape. It is not the only one that was discovered in Bulgaria too. A more or less similar piece is reported to have been found as well in Apollonia Pontica (now Sozopol)³⁴.

On the Balkans, there are several more imitations of that type of drinking vessels found at sites all around Bulgaria and in some close to it regions of Turkey and Greece³⁵. The largest number of them (fourteen) were discovered in the ancient

²⁷ VICKERS *et alii* 1986, p. 5, pls. 1–19.

²⁸ VICKERS *et alii* 1986, p. 5.

²⁹ STOYANOV 2007, p. 566 and bibl.

³⁰ STOYANOV 2007, p. 561 and bibl. See the map on p. 571, fig. 1 as well.

³¹ PFROMER 1987, p. 53; 253 pl. 43 c; p. 70; 99; pl. 44 a; d.

³² VICKERS *et alii* 1986, p. 5 and pl. 19 [above].

³³ STOYANOV 2008, p. 182–185, figs. 1 4–6.

³⁴ STOYANOV 2007, p. 562 and note 17.

³⁵ PFROMER 1987, p. 65; 46; 215 n. 322, pl. 45 d–h; STOYANOV 2017, p. 561–562, fig. 2 b.

Thracian city near Sboryanovo, Region of Razgrad³⁶. These vessels, which are considered as being produced by local potters are made of various clay (fabric) and were dated to the first half of 3rd century BC. Same or almost the same dating was given as well to more ceramic imitations of *calyx* cups found at other sites in the Thracian hinterland (both north- and south of the Haimos/ Hemus Mountain (Stara planina). They are made of either gray or brown, not always fine clay, and are products of much lower quality than the one discovered in Varna. At least one imitation of metal *calyx* cup dated to the late 4th century BC was discovered by the excavation of Seuthopolis – the capital of the Hellenistic Thracian Kingdom of Seuthes III in South Bulgaria, as well as in little settlements like that near Zgalevo, Region of Pleven – in the Northern part of the country³⁷. The vessels of that type came to light mostly in sites of ancient settlements and as grave goods deposited in rich Thracian graves, as well. A good example of that group is a clay *calyx* (Pl. III. 7) dated to the first half of 3rd century BC, which was discovered in the same grave near Varbitsa, along with the already mentioned above silver cup (here on fig. 3)³⁸. There is no doubt that these two cups together with some other finds: silver, bronze and ceramic vessels, were part of the drinking set used by the buried there noble Thracian warrior or chieftain in his lifetime³⁹.

Coming back to the *calyx* cup from Varna, both the similar (more or less) ceramic finds from the hinterland of Thrace, the parallels available for the black glazed lamp help to date it to the first half of 3rd century BC, maybe to the second quarter of that period. Given the fact that the cup looks not worn (i. e. it was not in use before being deposited in the grave), this must be the date of the burial and the grave find as a whole. The question, whether the ceramic *calyx* was made in Odessos (which is very possible) or it was imported from another region of the Balkan Peninsula or from Asia Minor, is difficult to be answered. In the Hellenistic period (and much earlier too), a variety of wheel made ceramic vessels have been produced in the city and a number of them were fine wares. This production included black-glazed forms – imitations of imported ones too⁴⁰. Therefore, making a fine and not glazed calyx-cup was not a problem for a skilled local potter. On the other hand, a lot of the discovered in the city ceramic vessels were imported from various ceramic producing centers in the Greek world, the Black Sea cities; from many regions in the Mediterranean and even from Egypt⁴¹. That is why, until some real evidence about the origin of the *calyx* cup is found, the question about its origin should remain open for the time being. It is strange that beside the lamp and the drinking set consisting of an ordinary jug, the *askos* and this rather exclusive ceramic vessel, the grave find contained a loom weight and a glass bead (unfortunately lost). The last two objects indicate that this was a female burial and the drinking set found in it is very unusual. However, there still remains the possibility that there were destroyed two burials and the collected grave finds were mixed together by the workers.

³⁶ STOYANOV 2008, p. 562 and bibl.

³⁷ ČIČIKOVA 1963, p. 43, fig. 7 – right and bibl.

³⁸ ČIČIKOVA 1963, p. 55, fig. 47.

³⁹ FILOV 1934, p. 171–180, especially p. 179, fig. 200, b; STOYANOV 2017, p. 13 and bibl.

⁴⁰ See the discussion in: MINCHEV 2003, p. 251–252 and bibl.

⁴¹ MINCHEV 2003, p. 249–250, pl. 4, 6–8 and bibl.

The find place of the grave in discussion is also interesting for our study. It is located about three km to the northeast of the ancient city of Odessos and is not the only one in that area. As it was mentioned before, on the 50ies of 20th century, there were discovered several other Hellenistic graves, which were dated mostly to the 3rd–2nd centuries BC (see note 19) and contained also different grave goods deposited inside. One of them was found by chance also by workers by the construction of the modern road leading to the “Golden Sands” resort. The grave was constructed also of stone slabs and contained obviously an inhumation burial with several ceramic vessels: both wheel-made Greek forms and local (Thracian) hand-made ones, and a black glazed lamp. They were collected and entered the Varna Museum collection, and were later published⁴². There are no traces of an ancient settlement in vicinity of these graves, which means that they did not belong to a local necropolis. The modern road, where around they were discovered is following more or less the road bed of the ancient one, which in ancient times connected Odessos and the next ancient Greek city (*apoikia*) located to the north of it and farther ones that were located on the Western Black Sea coast too. We have to assume that both graves at “Otdikh i kultura” locality were situated along this ancient route, immediately next to it in west direction. Earlier (and later) discoveries of several tombs of Hellenistic and Roman periods on both sides of the ancient road before and after the site of these two graves near the bus station revealed that in ancient times the entire area to the northeast of Odessos was used as a continuation of the city necropolis in that direction⁴³. Therefore, these two graves were not isolated but they were part of this line. We may assume that this continuity has happened in late 4th – first half of 3rd centuries BC: by the time of Lysimachos (ca. 360 – 281/280) and after his death when Odessos enjoyed a period of big rise⁴⁴. Maybe most if not all of these graves were covered by bigger or smaller tumuli, which in course of time that has passed were wiped out by natural leveling of the smaller ones and by agricultural working of the land there for the bigger ones. This may have happened especially in the 19th – early 20th centuries, when in the area around the discussed graves, the citizens of Varna have planted their vineyards and orchards and built their little cottages and summer houses.

Despite its relatively modest content, the discussed grave find from Varna is an important addition to our knowledge about the Early Hellenistic culture and diversity of ceramic forms used in Odessos in that period⁴⁵ and namely in the first half of 3rd century BC.

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⁴² TONCHEVA 1961, p. 30–31, nos. 1–4, pl. II, 8–11.

⁴³ MIRCHEV 2020, p. 3; MINCHEV 2007, p. 80–81 and bibl.

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Pl. I. 1. Black glazed lamp (photo courtesy of Varna Museum of Archaeology, photograph by R. Kostadinova); 2. Jug (photo courtesy of Varna Museum of Archaeology, photograph by R. Kostadinova).



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Pl. II. 3. Askos (photo courtesy of Varna Museum of Archaeology, photograph by R. Kostadinova); 4. Calyx cup (photo courtesy of Varna Museum of Archaeology, photograph by R. Kostadinova).



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Pl. III. 5. Silver calyx-cup from a Thracian grave near Varbitsa, Region of Shumen (after *The silver of the Thracians* 2018, p. 54, no. 46); 6. Black glaze calyx-cup (after Vickers et alii. 1986, p. 6, pl. 19); 7. Ceramic calyx-cup, after *The Silver of the Thracians*, 2018, p. 55, no. 47).