

POTTERY FROM THE VALETUDINARIUM AT NOVAE

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Novae is an archaeological site lying on the Danube in the territory of modern Bulgaria, near the present-day town of Svištov¹. In the past it formed a strategically important element of the defense system of the Roman province of Moesia Inferior. From ancient sources we know that the First Italic Legion, the "falangx. of Alexander the Great" mentioned by Suetonius (Nero, 19) was stationed there. Longterm research conducted at Novae by the Warsaw University's Center for Archaeological Research has led to the discovery of many buildings belonging to both the military and the later civil architecture of the town. The legionary past of Novae is of particular importance for the subject at hand. Fortifications with gates and the most important buildings have been identified. Of special interest among the latter is the military hospital – *valetudinarium*² (fig. 1). It is an unique structure, primarily because it is the only army hospital from anywhere in the Roman Empire to be so well preserved. Thanks to this a provisional computer reconstruction has been possible - of the general form as well as the appearance and furnishing of some of the rooms. Some of these rooms yielded sherds of pottery of various kinds. Since the hospital was in operation from the times of Trajan to those of Caracalla and since during this period the sand floors inside the hospital were repeatedly repaired, the ceramic material found in these layers covers a period from the 1st to the 3rd century AD, with a concentration, understandably, in the last period of functioning.

Archaeological work in the hospital at Novae is ongoing - the excavation area covers 1 ha in area - hence the presented ceramic material is statistically representative, nonetheless it does constitute a full presentation.

The hospital plan exhibits a few characteristic features that are of importance for our discussion. Foremost, it had an extensive central courtyard, in the center of which there was a *sacellum* dedicated to the healing deities³. For this reason, among others, it did not yield many ceramic finds, merely single pieces of amphorae and hardly numerous fragments of small bowls, presumably used in making offerings to the gods.

Lining the courtyard on all four sides are two sets of lined-up rooms, separated by a circuitous corridor. The rooms form characteristic sets of three - a small vestibule opening onto patients', rooms. Since the biggest concentration of potsherds comes from these vestibules, we

¹ Dyczek *et al.*, 2001

² Dyczek 2000, 113-128. - Idem, 2000 a, 89-103.

³ Dyczek 1999, 495-500.

have come to believe that these rooms had served as handy stores of pottery used by the patients. Wooden shelves found in one of the units confirm our theory. In another unit two structures made of *tegulae*, sunk below floor level and plastered inside, were discovered. On top they were covered with whole *tegulae*. The fill of these structures yield many fragments of bowls *en barbotine*, plates, cooking pots containing poultry bones and the bottom of an amphora of class 35 according to Peacock/Williams classification⁴. The amphora contained pieces of pine tree resin. We think that the described structure was used as small store for food. The pieces of pine resin were found in reused bottom of amphorae type Kapitän II. We suppose that it was burned in order to maintain hygiene (to drive away insects and flies).

Investigations in other vestibules and less often in the patients' rooms brought to light vessel fragments mostly of *terra sigillata* (fig. 2), bowls and cups *en barbotine*, bowls with roulette decoration, cooking bowls, jugs, small *pithoi*⁵ and amphorae of different types.

Terra sigillata vessels found in the valetudinarium are not common. Recorded to date are eight pieces of Western *terra sigillata* and two fragments of the so-called Moesian *terra sigillata* produced in local pottery centers in Pavlikeni and Butovo⁶ (fig. 3). Since these fragments are usually of small size, their classification into types is hardly easy. Only seven vessels are preserved sufficiently for the form to be determined. They represent Drag. 15/17, 24/25, 30, 34, 35, 37 – two vessels⁷. These are simple shapes, the one exception being a sherd with a simple floral motif executed in the *en barbotine* technique running along the edge. Other examples are not decorated in any way. The two fragments of so-called Eastern *terra sigillata* appear to be examples of local production, which is well known from Dacia, where it has been dated by G. Popilian to the 2nd century AD⁸. These fragments may have been copies of *terra sigillata* – Drag. 39.

The number of original *terra sigillata* vessels is indeed insignificant, but far-reaching conclusions should not be built upon this fact. We are in the right to think that these chiefly Gallic products could have been used by patients of higher army rank – considering that the standard of patients' rooms was uniform (mentioned by A. Dimitrova-Milčeva pieces of Rheinzabern were not found in valetudinarium). However, if we take an overall look at the quality of other ceramic vessels found in these assemblages, we shall find that many of them were no worse than the imported wares. The shapes, while handmade, frequently imitated *terra sigillata* forms. The surfaces of the vessels were not glazed, but the slip was of the highest quality. Very often, too, fine *en barbotine*

⁴ D.P.S. Peacock, D.F. Williams, *Amphorae and the Roman economy*, an introductory guide, London 1986, 158-165.

⁵ Dyczek 1996, 57.

⁶ Dyczek 2000 a, 93.

⁷ Dyczek 1997, 46. – Dimitrova-Milčeva 2000, 9-11, 65.

⁸ Popilian 1976, 57-66. – Sultov 1985, 93. – Poulter 1999, 84, 233, Pl. 9.45, no 919. – Dimitrova-Milčeva 2000, Taf. 29, 30.

ornaments decorated these vessels⁹

A definite majority of the identified vessels belongs in the tableware group. Once we look at these vessels as the furnishings of a hospital and not a private *villa*, for example, and keep in mind that in all likelihood they were purchased centrally for the purposes of the hospital - and not mainly as the private possessions of the patients - we shall deem them luxurious beyond reason¹⁰. Yet the reason for this state of affairs is quite obvious. Some 60 km south of *Novae* there were in the 2nd century AD many ceramic centers, which we know to have produced also for the army, the repertoire including vessels and part of the building ceramics. The great centers in Butovo, Hotnica, Pavlikeni and Bjala Cerkva (fig. 4) were established near sources of very good clay¹¹. Products from the above-mentioned centers are found not only wherever Roman army units were stationed, but also in civil towns and settlements on the Black Sea coast, in Dacia and Moesia Superior. Most of pottery types found in the *valetudinarium* were produced in above-mentioned centres.

The first type of vessel, plates represent simple forms (see Soultov 1985, pl. 27, 4-5). Some have straight edges, others outturned, still others a torus-like body like in *terra sigillata* examples. Inspiration from *terra sigillata* shapes is evident. Decorative elements are rare. Even if a plate was decorated, the motifs were modest, most of the time ribbon. On floors there are concentric rouletted rings, more rarely *planta pedis*.

The small bowls of different size found in the hospital fall into generally three kinds. The first kind, mostly plain, refers to shapes typical of *terra sigillata*. If there is any kind of decoration, it is also modeled on *terra sigillata* prototypes, e.g. ribbon, stylized vegetal motifs on the edges (see Soultov 1985, pl. 31, 2-4). The vessels were wheel-turned with care and technological traces carefully polished away. The slip is thick and recalls in color glaze used on *terra sigillata*. In many instances some glazing of the slip surface was achieved, making the vessels even more like *terra sigillata*¹².

The second group of bowls also corresponds to *terra sigillata* shapes in form and size, but their outer surface bears two types of ornament. The first of these ornaments is a roulette motif, the second appliques of all shapes¹³.

The third group is constituted by bowls that are characteristic of the above-mentioned pottery centers. Decorative *en barbotine* motifs appear on the outer surface (see Soultov 1985 pl. 28,8). They are relatively simple for this class and although they clearly refer to floral motifs, they

⁹ e.g. Dimitrova-Milčeva 2000, 9.

¹⁰ Dyczek 2002, 687 f.

¹¹ Sultov 1985, 18-30.

¹² Sultov 1985, 62-65. - G. Kabakčijeva, *Keramika ot villa pri Ivailograd II-IV v. Razkopki i Proučvanija* 15, 1986, 12. - Poulter 1999, 76, 184, fig. 9.26, nos 484-489.

¹³ Sultov 1985, 66.

are so stylized that no identification of models can be suggested¹⁴.

The next group of vessels is characterized by greater decorative freedom. These are small two-handled cups for drinking wine. Their shape is also a characteristic form for the Lower Moesia workshops, distinguishing them from other centers and frequently imitated there. Motifs executed in the *en barbotine* technique were placed on an elongated or conical body. They represent stylized bunches of grapes or a scales-motif (fig. 5). These vessels were very well-made and presumably belonged to the more luxurious type. They were produced of very good quality clay and are thin-walled. The surface is covered with a brown or tawny slip. In the latter case they were often made to have a metallic sheen. All these morphological and technological characteristics suggest prototypes among metal vessels¹⁵.

A less luxurious kind of these vessels was also found in the *valetudinarium*. These cups differ in shape, size and decoration, but all possess two handles. Their surface is left unslipped and for the most part they were made of kaolin. Decoration is rare and when it does occur it is a *spatula*-shaped herring-bone pattern¹⁶ (fig. 6).

A similar decoration technique was used in the case of pitchers¹⁷. If it were not for the quality of the clay and decoration that resembles faceting on the surface of glass vessels, the form itself would suggest a kitchen character of these containers. They may have been used for water.

One vessel - found in the *valetudinarium* -form turned out to be unique (fig. 7). It is presumably part of the tableware set. It has a tawny-colored slip. This single-handled vessel has an interesting incurving rim.

Jugs of all shapes constitute a large proportion of the containers (see Sultov 1985, pl. 29,1). Some are slipped, others are not. None is decorated in any way¹⁸. Merely a small percentage of these vessels represents *oinochoe*¹⁹.

While other types of jugs are made of clay in different shades of brown, the *oinochai* are always fired in a reduced atmosphere, making them gray in color. The treatment may have been intended in order to make them resemble more closely metal jugs. It is noteworthy that the prevalent form of bronze vessels found in the hospital is the *oinochoe* jug. These types of vessels were also produced in the Lower Moesian pottery centers.

In one of the hospital rooms a ram's head of kaolin clay was discovered. Upon analysis, it was found to be part of a ceramic vessel handle, a clay copy of *Griffschalle*, which are well known from legionary fortresses²⁰. Taking into consideration the uniqueness of the form and the character

¹⁴ Popilian 1974, 50; Sultov 1985, 66.

¹⁵ Sultov 1985, 78-79 - E.g. Poulter 1999, 80, 212, fig. 9.27, no 511.

¹⁶ Sultov 1985, 76.

¹⁷ Sultov 1985, 71.

¹⁸ Sultov 1985, 70-71.

¹⁹ Popilian 1974, 100-101. - Sultov 1985, 86-87.

²⁰ Dyczek 2000 a, 94.

of the clay, we may consider this as being an import.

A separate group of vessels is constituted by *pithoi* found in many hospital's rooms (fig. 8). They were also produced in Butovo and Pavlikeni. Despite being vessels of everyday use; they were made with care using good clay. The upper part down to the biggest circumference of the body is always slipped. Presumably, this was an additional way of insulating the vessel, which must have been used as a handy water container.

Novae is a site where a typologically varied assemblage of amphorae is present. 36 principal types have been distinguished, covering the period from the 1st to the 3rd century AD²¹. It is all the more interesting to know whether and to what extent the repertoire of amphorae from the hospital differs from that recorded in other legionary structures. Research to date has shown that the assemblage from the *valetudinarium* is specific²². We explain it with the specificity of the structure. Amphorae were discovered in practically all the vestibules and, in larger numbers, in two hospital rooms. In one of these two a canal was uncovered, suggesting to my mind that it was here that the contents of the amphorae was poured into smaller containers. The prevalent forms are wine amphorae, originating from Pont - Zeest 94²³, the Aegean - Kapitän II, presumably Asia Minor -LR3, as well as from local centers. No sherds of amphorae from the western parts of the Roman Empire have yet been found. It is from there, however, that *salsamenta* must have been imported in amphorae of types Dr 7 -11. All of the olive oil was transported in amphorae identified Zeest 90 (fig. 9), also originating from Asia Minor²⁴. Considering the average volume of particular vessels, it may be assumed that the ratio of oil to wine and *salsamenta* in the case of the hospital was 3:2:1. This is different from what is commonly assumed. These proportions, however, must have reflected the needs of the hospital, which were different from regular consumption. We know that various kinds of wine and *salsamenta* could have been used in the process of medical treatment. Also, the diet of the sick legionaries was different.

There is an exceptionally big number of amphorae of the Zeest 90 type. It is commonly agreed that they were used to transport olive oil. In a hospital, the oil, besides being consumed, could have been used in treatment, for example, to prepare some of the medicine and ointment. These amphorae are also interesting because they often bear on their surface *dipinti* in Latin, and the handles are frequently stamped with the stamps of Greek producers²⁵. This has also been observed at *Novae*, where one of the surviving amphora handles bears the stamp of KOAAPTOY²⁶. This producer is known also from stamps on amphorae found at Plovdiv in Thrace,

²¹ Dyczek 2001 a, 39, Fig.10.

²² e.g. Dyczek 1997, 81-94.

²³ I.B.Zeest, *Keramičeskaja tara Bospora, Materiali i Issledovanija po Arheologii SSSR* 83, 1960, 118.

²⁴ Dyczek 2001 a, 182-183.

²⁵ Ibidem, 184-192.

²⁶ Dyczek 2001 a, 186.

Ulpia Trajana in Dacia and even in Knossos²⁷.

Another interesting type of amphora is a small vessel of type Zeest 94, whose origins are thought to be in Pont. Overall, *Novae* appears to have been supplied with products coming from the southern and eastern regions of the Empire.

This direction of imports appears to be confirmed by the *dipinti* preserved on the surface of sherds. The character of these is threefold. Sometimes the place of production was indicated. Sometimes the buyer. In our case it was the First Italic Legion, hence the name of the legion found on some of the amphorae. Also the name of the product was placed on the amphora occasionally, especially if the container was uncharacteristic for such a product. This was the case of one of the type Zeest 90 amphorae. The inscription in Greek on its surface reads "*almostra*", that is, oysters in brine (fig. 10)²⁸. We cannot be sure whether this is a new kind of *garum* or a different kind of product altogether. To date, it is the only inscription of the kind found on amphorae. Despite the problems of interpretation, one thing is certain: oysters were an excellent supplement of the diet of sick legionaries²⁹.

Seldom on the surfaces of these vessels we find *graffiti*. They are limited to a single letter: R, M, or some other non-graphic sign.

While binding conclusions cannot be made before the excavations are completed, some tendencies are already observable. With regard to vessel repertoire, amphorae are definitely in the majority. This is hardly strange considering that the hospital could hold at any one time about 300 patients, who were quite evidently supplied with food centrally. Taking into account the relatively big number of amphorae for wine, one cannot be surprised to find such quantities of jugs and drinking cups. Vessels used for eating: plates and bowls are found in proportions not differing significantly from the other legionary structures.

As for as the amphora repertoire is concerned, Zeest 90 is the prevailing type and it is the only exception to the proportions known from other places in *Novae* and other sites. A differentiation of the wine imported for use at the hospital is also evident. The share of local wine is substantial, it having been used presumably for ordinary consumption.

Future research should fill out this presentation, adding more details which will more fully explain the specific character of military hospitals, their methods of supply and, combined with data from other finds, the staple diet of sick legionaries.

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²⁸ Dyczek 1996, 59. - T. Derda, *Deir el-Naqlun. The Greek Papyri*, Warszawa 1995, 141-146.

²⁹ Poulter 1999, 176; Curtis 1999, 8, 35, 138, 165, 189.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1 The plan of *valetudinarium* at Novae.
- Fig. 2 Western *terra sigillata*.
- Fig. 3 Eastern *terra sigillata*.
- Fig. 4 Location of pottery centers in Lower Danube, near to Novae.
- Fig. 5 The cup with *en barbotine* decoration from Novae.
- Fig. 6 Vessel of caolin end with herring-bone pattern from Novae.
- Fig. 7 Vessel from Novae with profiled rim.
- Fig. 8 Small *pithos* from Novae.
- Fig. 9 Amphora of Zeest 90 type.
- Fig. 10 *Dipinti* from Novae.

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NOVAE VALETUDINARIUM SECTOR IV 1:100
TRAIANUS - CARACALLA

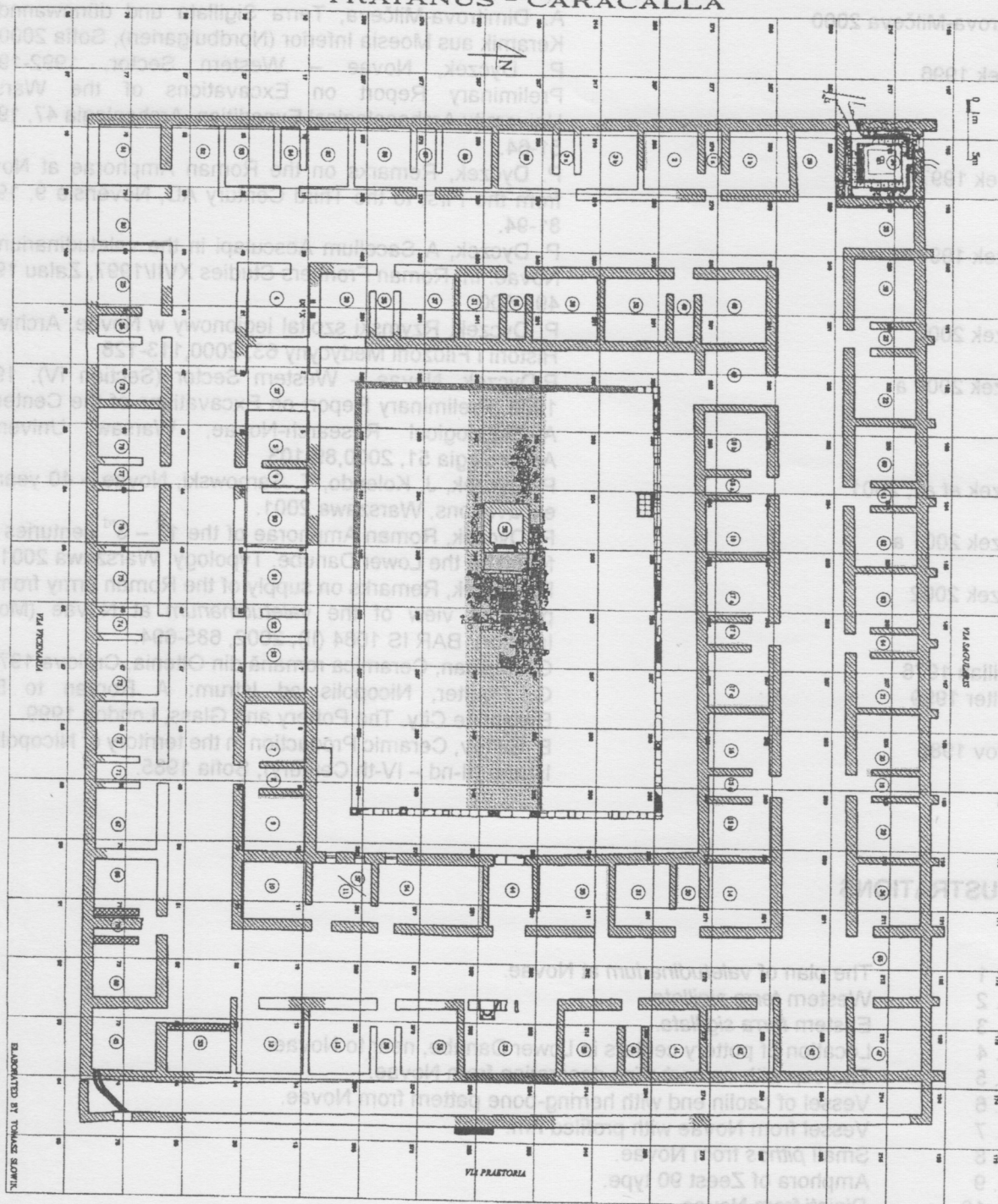


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

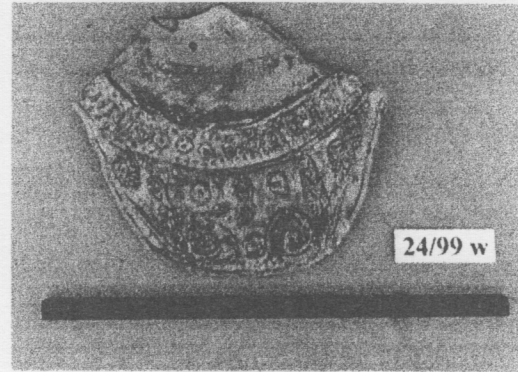


Fig. 3

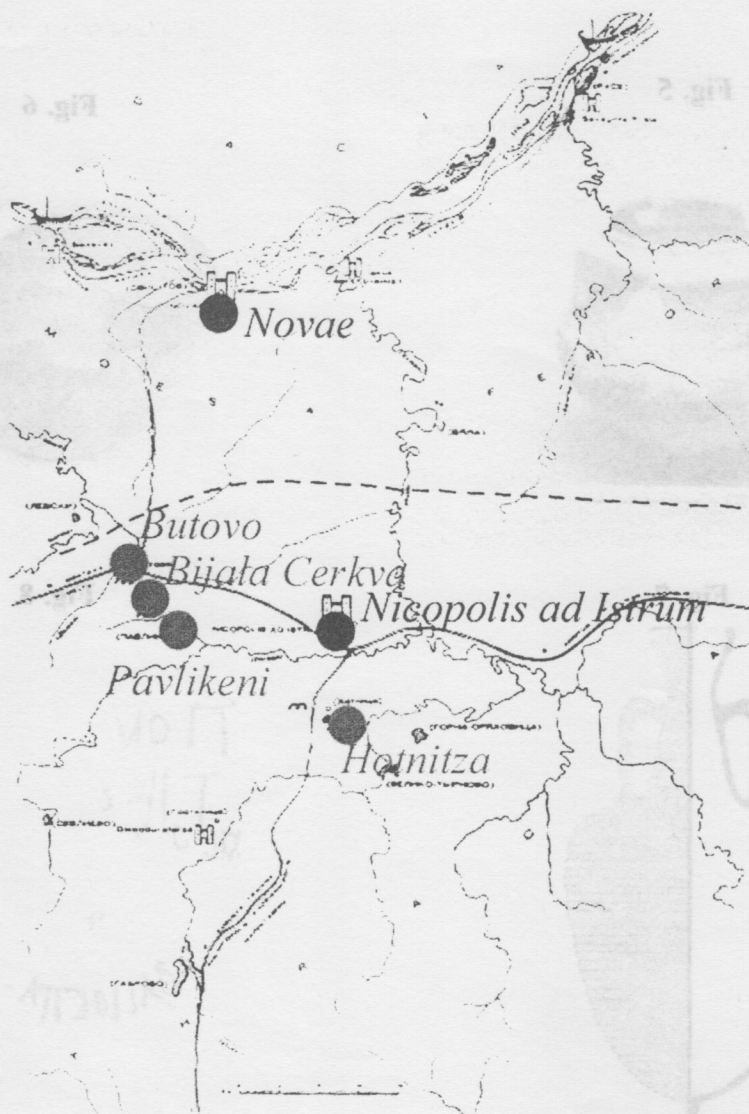


Fig. 4

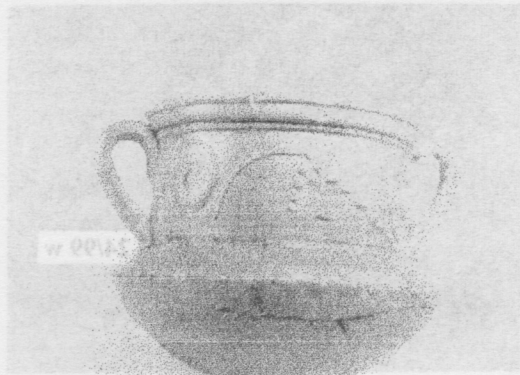


Fig. 5

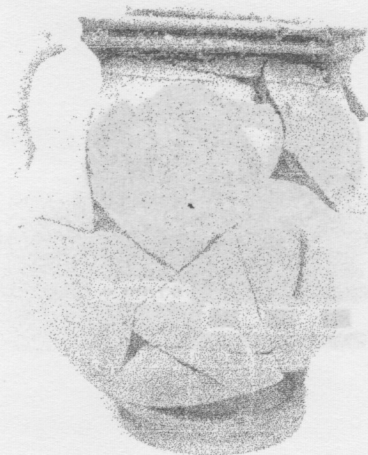


Fig. 6



Fig. 7

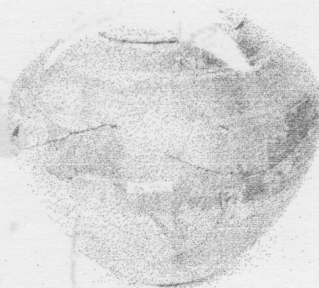


Fig. 8

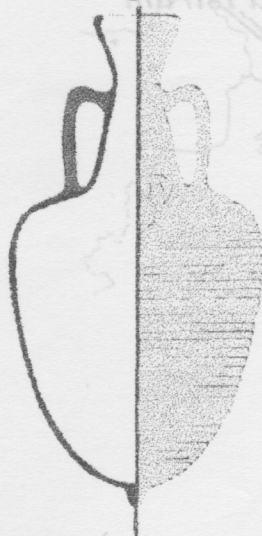


Fig. 9

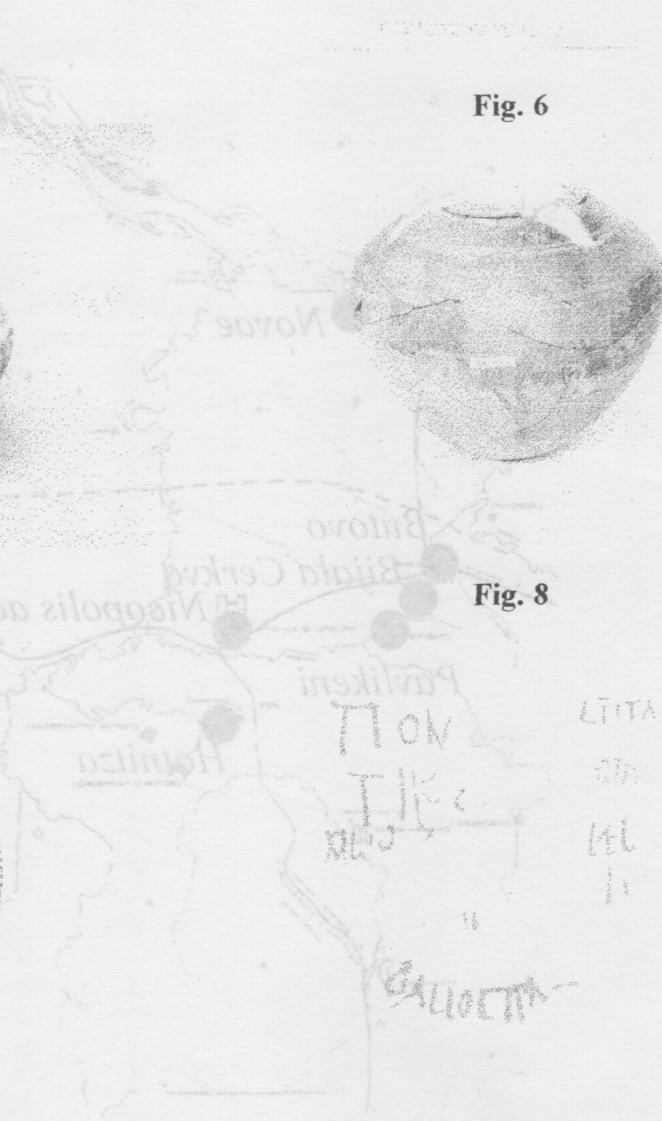


Fig. 10