

Hellenistic bronze pitcher from Tazha and some notes on the Early Hellenistic toreutics

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ABSTRACT

The article examines a chance find pitcher, discovered in 1934 in the region of nowadays village of Tazha, Kazanlak municipality (probably from destroyed burial mound). The item is clearly of local manufacture and most fascinating – it is made from copper alloy. Although heavily damaged, from 1 to 7 equal ornaments from three different types are preserved, positioned in horizontal rows. They are all embossed, worked in repoussé technique using a stamp, outlined, and several details are added with free hand afterwards. On the lowest row there is a single image of fish and just above it there are seven birds, probably ducks. Most interesting are the partly preserved bull heads, ornaments known from many metalworking tools, especially in Northwestern Bulgaria, but attested on much fewer Thracian metal vases.

This study aims to propose a clear date for the pitcher and determine its role in Hellenistic Thrace. With the archaeological context lost, a formal-typological analysis is conducted, which points to a date in the late 4th or the first half of 3rd c. BC.

With the closest geographical and chronological parallel being with another chance find – a silver pectoral from somewhere in Stara Zagora region, a question stands for the localization of workshop or group of closely related workshops (using similar tools), working on different types of items and materials, but with similar decoration. This atelier is probably located in Seuthopolis or in its vicinity, where, during the political upsurge during the Early Hellenistic period, probably a local bronze workshop for vases was in operation.

KEYWORDS

Bronze pitcher, Early Hellenistic Thrace, Thracian art.

Introduction

In 1934 an interesting pitcher was published in “New found Antiquities” in the Bulgarian Archeological Institute periodical (Велков 1934, 463-464). It was found near the present day village of Tazha (former Golyamo Selo), Pavel Banya district, probably from destroyed burial mound. The item is of copper-alloy workmanship, and it is preserved in two fragments – an upper one, consisting of the rim and the neck, and a lower fragment – the bottom portion of the vessel with rich zoomorphic decoration on the walls. Today the artifact is restored and kept in the Historical Museum “Iskra” – Kazanlak (Inventory № 479). The first mention of the item is the cited work above. Iv. Velkov gives a basic description, and publishes a drawing (Велков 1934, 463-464, Table I.2 here).). It was later included in the fundamental work of I. Venedikov and T. Gerasimov on Thracian art (Venedikov, Gerasimov 1973, cat. 158, 161, fig. 158). A date towards the end of 4th or beginning of 3rd c. BC is proposed, although no arguments are drawn for this. The next comment on the pitcher is in the catalogue of Thracian art (Gold der Thraker 1979, cat. 352 – without picture), as it was included in expositions in Germany, given the same date, again without arguments.

The item is commented on by I. Marazov (Маразов 1980, 10, fig. 8; Маразов 2011, 92-93). He focuses on the mythological interpretation of the zoomorphic decoration, accepting the date of Ivan Venedikov. This narrow approach to research on the pitcher, and several problems that it poses, that are not commented upon (such as decoration and material used) are the main focus of this article.

Place of find and its archaeological environment

According to the location of the find, the only thing we know for certain is that it comes from the area west of the nowadays Tazha – in Doykova Niva country. This small village is well known for a settlement and tumular necropolis, which are situated in the same country and close one in “Atanastza” region. Those partly excavated burial mounds and the material from the synchronous village are dated to the end of the Iron Age and the Roman Principate (Домарадски 1994). Black glazed cylix, local gray pitcher and curved blade were kept in the village collection, which indicate earlier period of inhabitation of the area (Домарадски 1994, 267, 283, обр. 3). The items are whole and well preserved which might point that they were found in graves (flat or in mounds). Sadly M. Domaradzki didn't express any opinion on the date of the bronze pitcher or its connection with the site. Probably closely related is a cult place or fortress in Paunov Kamak peak, with a Hellenistic inscription (IGBR III2, 1730). Here pottery from the Late Iron age and a coin of Alexander III were found (Домарадски 1994, 267), although I. Hristov reports materials with wider chronology (Христов 2003). According to M. Domaradzki part of another inscription can be found in Tazha – Домарадски 1994, note 7). The geographical position of Tazha is interesting as the village is huddled at the northwestern end of Kazanlak valley, situated next to a river with the same name. A mountain pass starts at this river, crosses Haemus between Botev and Triglav peaks and reaches the Northern Thrace in the region of present day town of Apriltsi. If this difficult path is indeed used, as proposed by I. Hristov (Христов 2003; Христов 2007, 46), Tazha seems to be placed on important road connecting the North and the South of Ancient Thrace. Otherwise the area is somewhat isolated, “hidden” between the spurs of the mountain. The most important site in the Kazanlak valley¹ is Seuthopolis (Dimitrov, Čičikova 1978) which dominates the settlement system in the area in the Early Hellenistic period.

Description

The picture in the initial publication² (Велков 1934, 285; here Table I.2), is representing the pitcher somewhat sketchily, too grounded and bloated, and is not very precise, something that can be seen on the photos (Маразов 1980, fig. 8). A few years ago (in 2012) the author had the occasion to work with the item and to make new photos and drawing, which are used here (Table I.1, 3). The pitcher has an ovoid body, slender neck with concave walls, with reverted rim to outside. Rich zoomorphic decoration is situated in the medial and lower part of the body. It consists of three roughly organized registers. Highest on the vessel are two partly preserved heads of bulls. Beneath them is one fully preserved depiction of a fish, pictured from above with fins which are visible on both sides. Lowest

1 About the archaeological sites in Kazanlak area see Домарадски 1991; Табакова-Цанова 1991.

2 The drawing is made by Dimitar Chorbadzhiyski (Chudomir).

are seven (partly or fully preserved) depictions of diving water birds (ducks/mallards or swans), placed somehow in a zigzagged row. The identical depictions of the three types of zoomorphic ornamentation indicate the use of stamps for their production.

The pitcher's dimensional data is as it follows: rim diameter 7.2 cm, bottom diameter 5.3 cm and height (reconstructed) 13.3 cm. The height of the repoussé decoration is between 0.2-0.3 cm. The images of birds have dimension 2.3 x 2.6 cm; fish – 2.6 x 1.1 cm and bulls – 1.1 x 1.8 (maximum preserved).

It should be mentioned that the pitcher is lacking a handle – it was probably attached where there is now a hole, visible above one of the bird images (Table I.1). The upper part, most likely, was hitched onto the rim, although there are no visible traces of alloy for soldering. The most frequent mutilations of metal vases are the handles which were reattached and often repaired. This tradition is visible in Thrace in the hoard from Malko Tranovo (Тонкова 2010). Broken handle (without the vessel) is placed in a grave near the village of Pletena (Георгиева 1965).

Dating the pitcher

With the archaeological context lost, as noted above, only a formal-typological approach can be applied to establish a chronology of the pitcher.

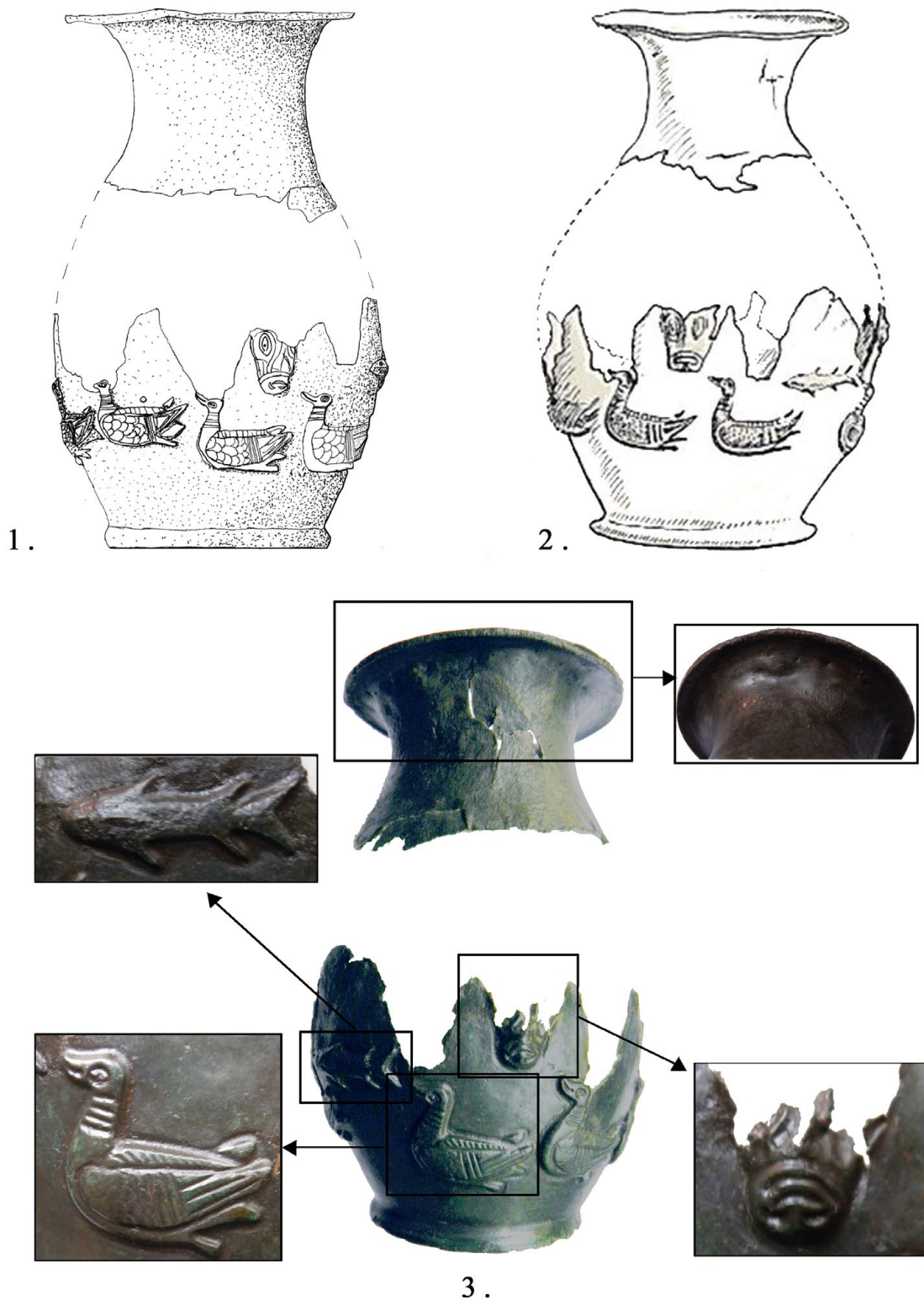
Formal parallels. The ovoid body and curved rim to the outside, although in general, it is possible to find several analogies in the Early Hellenistic period. It is similar to the popular pottery jugs from Thrace – Seuthopolis type 29 (Чичикова 1984, 36-38) and Apollonia type V, variant a (Иванов 1963, 163-164), both types are dated in the middle or last quarter of 4th c. BC and early 3rd c. BC. Similarity can be found in form of some metal jugs from Macedonia and Thrace, dated to the first half/middle of 4th c. BC – first half of 3rd c. BC (Stoyanov 2005, 235-236), although with different decoration. Close in shape are Macedonian pitchers type A, after St. Drougou, dated in 3rd c. BC (Drougou 1991). In comparison with the known forms of bronze vessels from Italy, the Tazha pitcher is roughly close to type I.b of M. Castoldi, which is dated in the last quarter of 4th c. BC until the first quarter of 3rd c. BC (Castoldi 2001).

The decoration offers much more saturated analogies, although the author is not aware of any item that combines the three animals seen on Tazha pitcher. Examining them separately, several analogies can be pointed out. The basic arrangement of the motifs is somewhat similar to other Early Hellenistic vessels from Thrace (examined in Стоянов 2003), although the lack of anthropomorphic images is to be noted.

The fish image is unusual as it is depicted from above, with fins on the both sides. The most important parallel that can be stated is a partly preserved stamp on a pithos (Чичикова 1984, 54, обр. 29a) – where the fish is again depicted from above, with fins visible on the two sides of the body. Although the fish appear commonly in Thracian art, especially in the North – for example from Rogozen, Agighiol, Peretu and two items now located in the United states³ (Farkas 1981), the iconography is quite different as the fish is usually depicted as a “victim” in the beaks of predator birds.

Bird images can be traced in Thrace back to the pottery from the Archaic period (Ников 2002). During the Classical period they can be observed on a golden pectoral found in Mushovica mound (Филов 1934, Табло II.3). In the 4th c. BC they appear on the above

3 One of them probably from the Iron gates area.



Captions

Fig. 1. 1. Drawing of the pitcher (by the author); 2. Drawing of the pitcher by D. Chorbadzhiiski (Chudomir) (after Велков 1934, обр. 285); 3. Photo of the pitcher (by the author)
Обр. 1 1. Рисунка на каната (от автора); 2. Рисунка на каната от Д. Чорбаджийски (Чудомир) (по Велков 1934, обр. 285); 3. Снимка на каната (от автора)

cited items with fish in their beaks – Rogozen (Николов 1987, fig. 3), Agighiol (Sirbu 2008, fig. 7.1), Peretu (Moscalu 1990, Pl.41-64) and Metropolitan and Detroit museums (Farkas 1981), but rarely ‘calm’ as on the Tazha pitcher. However, it must be noted that all of the cups (gobelets) have a wavy frieze on the upper part which ends with a bird’s head – something probably similar to the zigzagged birds from the pitcher considered here. Most likely the difference is due to the preference of the south Thracians to “more Greek-looking art” (Farkas 1981, 35). Similarity can be noted for the Sveshtari prometopidion for the depiction of the wings (Venedikov, Gerasimov 1973, cat. 257), dated after the middle of 4th c. BC by T. Stoyanov (Stoyanov 2000, 91-92). A good analogy is offered by a find from the nearby Seuthopolis where water diving bird, probably a duck, is sitting on a lid (Огненова-Маринова 1984, кат. 266), although this depiction is presented in higher relief. At the end of the 1st millennium BC similar representations appear on the locally produced relief-decorated bowls (of the so called “Megaro-Delian” type), but much more stylized (Vulpe, Gheorghita 1976, 193, Pl. 6.1). Several analogies outside Thrace should be mentioned. Somewhat similar are the images of two birds on the second Daors matrix (Maric 1979, 48-51, Tabla VI)⁴ where the birds are straining their legs backwards, as seen on Tazha pitcher. Here, the author considers the tools to be manufactured at the end of 4th c. BC, to be an earlier part of the hoard, as suggested M. Treister (Treister 2001, 280-296). Looking at the tools from the late 4th c. BC two heads of mallards similar to the ones from the village of Tazha can be seen on the matrix №1 from G. Ortiz collection (Treister 1996, 172-176). An interesting combination of the motifs is represented by the famous gorit from Macedonia, found in Vergina tomb II (Andronicos 1984, 180-187)⁵. Here beneath the soaring mallards, bull heads are depicted, which are the final ornament seen on the Tazha pitcher and examined below. The appearance of both motifs on the two items should be noted.

The bull heads are the most common motif of the group. The closest analogy that can be found are the heads of bulls from two bowls from the Rogozen treasure – phiale №94 and №95 (Василев 1987, figure 3-4), for which a date in the second half of 4th c. BC is assumed here, according to D. Antonov (Антонов 2007, табло XLIX, 1, with date and reference on the previous page). Recently a silver pectoral was published that bears similar images (Пировска 2014), dated in the first half of 4th c. BC. This dating is highly unlikely. The observations of M. Tonkova are that silver pectorals appear in Thrace in the Early Hellenistic period and replace the earlier types which are made of gold (Димитрова 1988, 20-21). This opinion is accepted by more recent studies (Любенова 2016, 84), and a *terminus post quem* in the middle or third quarter of 4th c. BC should be established for the Stara Zagora pectoral. A dating in the Early Hellenistic period is suggested by the rest of the parallels of the bull head which are examined below.

Bull heads are the most commonly encountered motif on craftsman’s tools found in Northwestern Bulgaria. They can be found on eleven pieces, all dated mostly in the Early Hellenistic period or later (Антонов 2007, 79, Table XIX-XX), although a possibility for the first half of 4th c. BC is tolerated (*passim.*) as probably suggested by the Craiova treasure (Venedikov, Gerasimov 1973, 385).

Similar images, but as skulls (*βουκράνιον*) displaying the same idea, appear in the two

4 The item is published as “kalup” which should be translated as mould – something unlikely, because the item was obviously used for hammering motifs in repoussé.

5 As the date of tomb II is controversial, here a date in the late IV c. BC is accepted, as recently argued convincingly by D. Gill (Gill 2008)

most famous tombs from Thrace – Ginina mogila near Sveshtari and Kazanlak tomb. They are both dated to the end of the first and beginning of second quarter of 3 c. BC. (Чичикова 2012, 75-76, note 121; Стоянова 2008). Several other examples come from the West Pontic coast and are all dated to the Hellenistic age (from 3rd c. BC onward) – The Pontic mother temple from Balchik (Лазаренко et al. 2013, 11-28) and Messambria (Господинов 2005; all summarized in Пировска 2014, 66).

The popularity of the bull head motif during the Hellenistic age is attested by the Balchik (anc. Dionysopolis) earrings, dated to the middle or more probably to the late 3rd c. BC/beginning of 2th c. BC (Tonkova 1997, 87). This dating corresponds well with similar items discovered throughout the Hellenistic koine, where the earliest examples are dated in the second quarter/middle of 3rd c. BC (Pfrommer 1990, OR496, Tafel 30 – for general development). Following the examples from the Mediterranean the famous *θυμιατήριον* from Tarent should be mentioned, which is dated between 270-246 BC (Pfrommer 1987, KT52, Tafel 32).

Looking at the West Pontic coast several types of objects should be pointed out as suitable analogies. Firstly, several lead bucranium amulets are known, mostly from Apollonia (present day Sozopol), dated to the second half of 4th c. BC (Конова 2002; Meijden 2007, cat. №114-114.a – although early 3rd c. BC is possible). Such item was recently discovered in the Getic center near Sveshtari in an archaeological context of first half of 3rd c. BC (Стоянов et al. 2016, 266, обр. 3.5). Similar depictions appear as ceramic appliquéés at the same time (Тавитян 2014, 46, fig. 31A-B – dated to the second half of 4th c. BC). Bull head can be seen also on emblemata during the first half of 3rd c. BC – for example in Aspalatos/Split (Jovanović, Vladović 2015, cat. 12). A necklace with bull's head pendant was discovered in Odessos and dated to the Early Hellenistic period (Tonkova 1997, 84, Pl. I.1).

The bull's head or skull motive (as the bird images) remain popular until the end of the Late Iron age – they resemble on a recently published pithos shard (with appliquééd bucranium, local production) from Pharmakida (Hristov, Pantev 2016, Table IV.2.5) and locally produced relief decorated bowls (Vulpe, Gheorghita, 1976, pl. 6.2, cat. 169), but again, as the ducks, much more stylized.

The proposed decorative parallels suggest a certain wide date for the manufacture of the pitcher somewhere between the second half of 4th c. BC and first half of 3rd c. BC, supporting the proposed chronology by Ivan Venedikov. A more precise (although risky) date in the first half of 3rd c. BC seems very probable, following the better researched development of jewelry and architecture in Early Hellenistic Thrace. This date is supported by the general analogies of the form which were examined at the beginning of this paper.

Discussion: copper-alloy vessels in Thrace during the Early Hellenistic Period

Probably the most fascinating feature of the pitcher is the material used for the manufacture – copper-alloy⁶. During the Late Iron age in Thrace vessels, made of this substance are chiefly imported wares from Aegean/Mediterranean centers⁷. The author wishes to

6 The author refers here to the material used as “copper alloy” since no chemical analyses were conducted to determine the composition, although the item is most likely made of bronze

7 This is a result of the author's unpublished master's thesis: „Рудодобив, металургия и металообработка в южна Тракия (V – средата на III в.пр.Хр.), Sofia University, 2015. 455 metal items from

stress the results of V. Bonev, who examined different copper-alloy items from Thrace, dated to the Early and Late Iron age. According to him, the proportion of tin is relatively low in the Late Iron age examples (Бонев 2011, 25). Contradictive are the results of M. Vasileva of similar analyses conducted on bronze fibulae from Seuthopolis, which reveal a content of up to 25% tin in the alloy (Василева 2012, 21). One could suggest that if a certain “hunger” or shortage of tin existed in Hellenistic Thrace, the Seuthopolis region didn’t experience it – at least in the late 4th and the first half of 3rd c. BC. To this conclusion also points (although not very firmly) the large coinage (Димитров, Пенчев 1984) and the casting of large statue (Димитрова 2015, 119-127, with further reading⁸). Bearing in mind the coinage the author notes that only two dynastic coinages of Thrace are considered large scale – Seuthes III (330/323–297 BC) and Rhoemetaces I (12/11 BC–12 AD) (Paunov 2015, 275). Probably the “Seuthes state” had strong economical connections, accompanying its political upsurge during the Early Hellenistic age. The native production of bronze vessels is certain indication for strong Hellenisation taking place during this period and seems well in place in the region Seuthopolis.

The appearance of similar motif on another item nearby – the Stara Zagora pectoral, on which the author assumed a close chronology here at end of 4th or beginning of 3rd c. BC, puts forward the question about the workshop that manufactured these two items. Two possibilities can be proposed – that they were produced by one atelier or two that worked with similar tools and fashion. Sadly, the uncertainty accorded to the context of find of the pectoral makes impossible to solve this question and hopefully objects with similar decoration, and firm context, will be found in the future.

In conclusion, looking at the broader region – the western part of Upper Thrace valley, three areas, concerned with artistic metalworking are “well attested” (meaning that they yield different types of data about production) – (1) near Hebrus river with Septemvri (anc. Pistiros?); (2) Kazanlak valley with Seuthopolis (or a satellite site nearby), of which the problems discussed here are only a portion, and (3) the Northern Rhodopes outskirts. The latter region is discussed briefly, and few notes should be mentioned here. A stamping tool (Василев 1978) was discovered in vicinity Dolnoslav (more probably) or Gornoslav village⁹ (around 30 km south from ancient Philipopolis, Plovdiv). What scholars often neglect to mention is that with it two stone hammers (for pulverizing ore?) were found with it¹⁰. A possible connection exists that they come from the site where furnaces, parts of jewelry, slag, lead and gold drops were found and have been considered to indicate the site of an ancient workshop (Авдев 2005, 275), but the lack of excavation on the site leaves this only as an hypothesis. Dolnoslav, with its position near Philipopolis (present Plovdiv), where almost no traces of metalworking are reported, at least for the Early Hellenistic period (generalized in Попов 2002, 93-111, with comprehensive literature; some slag reported in

Southern Thrace dated between V and III c. BC were analyzed – from them 164 are considered imports. From these imported objects 45% are made of copper alloy.

8 The analyses of “casting earth” suggest manufacture in Southern Thrace, Macedonia or North Greece

9 V. Vasilev publishes the find from “Arbanas”. Both villages – Gornoslav and Dolnoslav were called Arbanas in the recent past – the first Gorni (Upper) Arbanas, and the second – Dolni (Lower) Arbanas. The distance between them is around 3 km. The item was recently dated in the Roman period – II c. AD (Minkova, Jankov 2003, 321) – M. Minkova and D. Jankov are mistaken in that they refer to another tool, which was found in the roman municipium Augusta Traiana. The Arbanas stamp is definitely a production of the late IV c BC.

10 The hammers were lost sometime after the group of finds was granted to the Archaeological museum in Sofia, and therefore they were never published.

Кисъов 2004, 28; Мартинова 1990), provokes a supposition that a connected (satellite?) site or sites, near the Rhodopian ores, existed here.

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Елинистическа бронзова кана от с. Тъжа и няколко бележки върху ранноелинистическата торевтика

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(резюме)

През 1934 г. е обнародвана интересна бронзова кана, открита в местността Дойкова нива/поляна край с. Тъжа, вероятно произхождаща от разрушен гроб. Селището е известно с некропол и селище от края на желязната епоха и римския период, като само отделни предмети (случайни находки), се отнасят към класическата и ранноелинистическата епоха. Тази твърде интересна кана почти не е коментирана в специализираната литература през изминалия почти цял век. Тя има богата зооморфна украса, изработена в техника репусе, която се състои от еднакви изображения – две частично запазени глави на бикове, седем, цялостно или частично запазени, водоплаващи птици и едно цяло изображение на риба, изработени с отделни поансони (печати). Възстановената височина на каната е 13,3 см, диаметърът на устието е 7,2 см, а този на дъното – 5,3 см. Височината на релефната зооморфна украса варира между 0,2 и 0,3 см. Каната има закръглено (яйцевидно) тяло, стройна шия с вдлъбнат навътре контур, а горната част е със силно профилирано навън устие.

Поради безвъзвратната загуба на информацията за археологическия контекст, предметът е подложен на формално-типологически анализ с цел уточняване на неговата хронология. Паралелите на формата, иконографията и композицията на украсата (съпоставена с декорация по архитектура, паметници на торевтиката и ювелирството, керамични изделия и известни инструменти) насочват към дата за производство на каната в ранноелинистическата епоха (втората половина на IV в. пр. Хр. и първата половина на III в. пр. Хр.), дата предложена, но не и аргументирана от Ив. Венедиков.

Особен интерес представлява изработката на предмета от медна сплав (бронз), което е изключително рядък пример на използване на този материал при направата на местни съдове. Твърде вероятно е предметът да е продукция на местно ателие, което е функционирало в района на Севтополис през ранноелинистическата епоха, към което насочва и един наскоро публикуван сребърен нагръдник от Старозагорско, който има сходна украса от бичи глави, за когото тук е предложена дата в края на IV – първата половина на III в. пр. Хр. Трябва да се отбележи, че местното производство на метални съдове от медна сплав (бронз) почти не е засвидетелствано в предримска Тракия. Разглежданият предмет, предполага производството на подобни изделия в района на Севтополис през късния IV и първата половина на III в. пр. Хр., като следствие от силната елинизация и икономически възможности на района през този период.

В заключение са разгледани данните за функционирането на работилници в западната част на Горнотракийската низина и прилежащите ѝ райони. Данни за по-значителна продукция, освен в района на Севтополис, има и за околностите на днешния гр. Септември (предполагаемият емпорион Пистирос) и северните склонове на Родопите – в района на днешното с. Долнослав. Последната област е най-слабо изследвана, като е важно да се отбележи, че оттам са известни един ювелирен инструмент, чукове и останки от работилница, за жалост с непрецизирана хронология.