



Hellenistic Net-Pattern Vessels from the Territory of Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses a small group of imports found within the territory of Bulgaria during the last few decades. The so called net-pattern vessels are mostly represented by ceramic hemispherical cups decorated with a network of incised lines. This type of decoration can also be observed on other shapes, such as askos or inkwell. While net-pattern cups are usually wheelmade, there are also moldmade bowls, and such made of glass and silver. It is considered that the pentagon net decoration is inspired by the style of toreutics and that the ceramic vessels imitate the metal ones. Unfortunately, the metal specimens are often without a clear context, which could otherwise help for the identification of their chronology. This type of vessels is widespread over vast territories of the ancient world, but it is comparatively rare in principle, as is the case with the finds from Bulgaria. Up to the present, three whole examples are known - one ceramic and one silver bowl, as well as fragments from a glass vessel.

The analysis of the material indicates that from the second quarter of the 3rd c. to the 1st c. BC a group of vessels with net-pattern decoration made of clay, silver, and glass were spread in the whole Hellenistic world, including Thrace.

KEYWORDS

Hellenistic pottery, Black-glazed pottery; Hemispherical silver bowl

In the course of development of drinking cups in the early Hellenistic period, hemispherical cups without feet or handles appear in several varieties (Rotroff 1997, 107). A specific variation is the so-called net-pattern cup, which is decorated with lines that form a net of pentagons. This ornamentation occurs on vessels made of clay, glass, and metal. The present paper focuses on a few representatives of this tendency found in Thrace.

In the scientific literature, these vessels are most often compared to a tortoise shell, football, net, etc. (Edwards 1975, 90; Lungu 2013, 228; Rotroff 1997, 108, note 103). Identical ornamentation can be seen on other shapes, such as askos, inkwell, etc. (Rotroff 1997, 108, note 104). The distribution of this specific group of vessels can be traced from the second quarter of the 3rd c. BC to the 1st c. BC (Rotroff 1997, 109; Rotroff 1982a, 39).

The metal bowls with net-pattern ornaments are made of silver-gilt. They have similar morphological characteristics – a hemispherical shape, rounded bottom and a straight mouth with a horizontal, thickened and slightly incurved rim. An ornamental band goes along the lip. Under this band, some specimens have engraved or applied plant decorations on opposite sides (Bothmer 1984, 57, No 97; Carter 2015, 172-175, cat. No 38; Guzzo 2003, 53-54, fig. 22). The net ornament begins



Fig. 1. Distribution of the net-pattern vessels in Bulgaria (map by the authors)

Фиг. 1. Разпространение на съдовете с мрежеста украса в България (карта от авторите)

from the bottom, covers the walls and ends beneath the band around the lip. It is outlined by dotted points and/or incised lines (Symonenko 2011, 32, ris. 15, 1-5; Carter 2015, 172-175, cat. No 38; Guzzo 2003, 54).

Of the wheelmade pottery, the hemispherical black-glazed cups are those most often decorated with the net pattern. The ornament is made of lines, incised after the application of the glaze – a treatment characteristic of the West Slope style decoration (Bruneau 1970, 498, No 185.18). Two main approaches to the handling of the area immediately below the rim can be observed. The first consists of one or two horizontal incised lines – a feature characteristic of the net-pattern cups from the Athenian Agora (Rotroff 1997, 109). Other examples are known from Sardis (Rotroff, Oliver 2003, No 135); Ephesos (Gassner 1997, taf. 12, No 187); Pergamon (Schäfer 1968, 117, abb. 10); Tarsos (Goldman 1950, No 113, p. 219, pl. 125); Chaika (Egorova 2007, ris. 2, No 12); Istros (Lungu 2013, pl. 27, No Che 1, 1a, 228), etc. The second common treatment of the zone below the rim is a reserved¹ band, which is considered to hint towards a production in Asia Minor (Rotroff, Oliver 2003, 40). Examples are observed in Sardis (Rotroff, Oliver 2003, No 133, 134); Pergamon (De Luca, Radt 1999, taf. 15, No 433, 434; Pinkwart, Stammnitz 1984, taf. 25, No K41), etc. There are some exceptions, for instance a cup from Delphi with a decorative band below the rim, consisting of incised vertical zigzags and dots made with white paint (Perdrizet 1908, 173 – fig. 733; 174). Another one (from the Athenian Agora) has a similar decoration (Rotroff 1997, No 322). The bottom of the net-pattern cups can be rounded, flat or underlined with a low ridge and a scraped groove, forming a low ring foot (Rotroff 1997, 109). A relative development of the shape has been noted – from hemispherical in the beginning to a more conical profile in the later stages of the production (Lungu 2013, 229).

Later on, the net-pattern decorative scheme occurs also on moldmade bowls. Here the outline

1 Left unglazed

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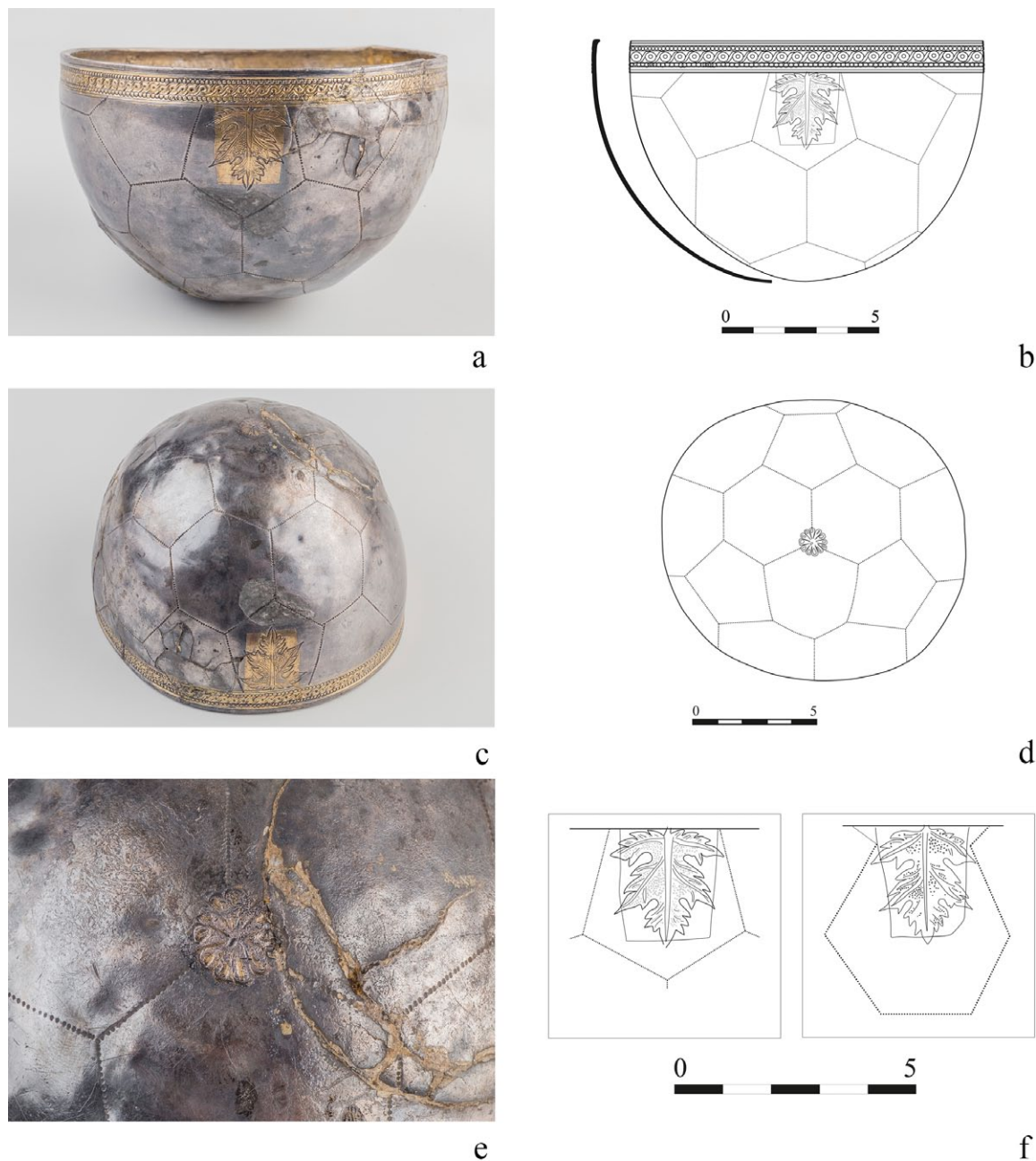


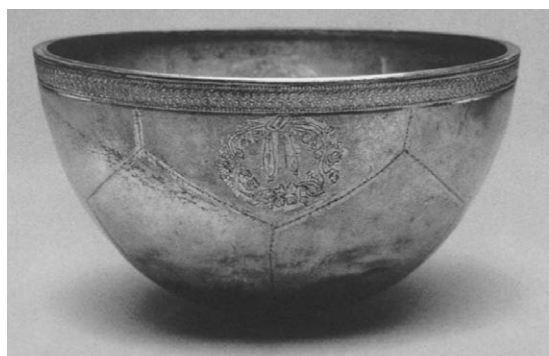
Fig. 2. Silver bowl with gilding from Zareva mound – a, c, e (photo NHM), b, d, f (drawings by the authors)

Фиг. 2. Сребърна купа с позлата от Зарева могила – а, с, е (снимки НИМ), b, d, f (рисушки на авторите)

is made in relief, and the pentagons are separated from each other by pearls, simple lines or double lines (Bruneau 1970, 498, No 185.18; Rotroff, Oliver 2003, 40).

Susan Rotroff (1997, 109), who has worked with the materials from the Athenian Agora and elsewhere, suggests that the net-pattern cups were produced as early as the second quarter of the 3rd c. BC, and their use can be traced to at least the third quarter of the 2nd c. BC. The metal and the moldmade ceramic bowls can be traced to the 1st c. BC as well (Retroff 1982a, 39).

Vessels with net-pattern decoration are comparatively rare in principle, as is the case with the finds from Bulgaria (fig. 1). We know of two ceramic vessels (a cup and an askos), a silver bowl and fragments from a glass cup.



1



2



3



4



5



6

Fig. 3. 1. Bowl from Metropolitan museum (after Guzzo 2003, 54, fig. 22); 2. Bowl from Olbia (after Christodoulou 2015, 88, fig. 70); 3. Bowl from Velikoploskoe (after Mordvinceva, Redina 2013, 392, fig. XV.1); 4-5. Bowls from Kuwait (after Carter 2015, 172, 175, fig. 38); 6. Bowl from Iran (after Pfrommer 1993, 106, fig. 72).

Фиг. 3.1. Купа от Метрополитън музей (по Guzzo 2003, 54, фиг. 22); Купа от Олбия (по Christodoulou 2015, 88, фиг. 70); 3. Купа от Великоплоское (по Mordvinceva, Redina 2013, 392, фиг. XV.1); 4-5. Купи от Кувейт (по Carter 2015, 172, 175, фиг. 38); 6. Купа от Иран (по Pfrommer 1993, 106, фиг. 72).

The silver bowl

A silver net-pattern bowl² is kept in the National Museum of History (NMH) in Sofia. It comes from Zareva mound, southeast of the village of Yasenovo, Kazanlak (fig. 1). The vessel was discov-

² Inv. No 36379

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ered in 1995 in the grave of a warrior who was laid with his horse on a leveled surface in the high layers of the embankment. Among the finds, there is a bronze helmet of the “Thracian” type, armament, metal objects, and ceramic vessels. The bowl was located directly next to the right shoulder of the buried man, placed with the bottom up (Kitov 2008, 77-80; Kitov 2003, 39-40).

The vessel has a hemispherical shape, its height is 7.5 cm and the diameter is 11-12.5 cm³. It is hammered from silver sheets. Individual elements of the ornamentation are gilded (fig. 2.a). The decoration, located mainly on the outside, starts from the center of the bottom, where a 12-leaf rosette is depicted (fig. 2.e). There are traces of leaf-gilt on the leaves of the rosette. Three radially situated hexagons emerge from it. On the next row three pentagons (fig. 2.c-d) are placed between them. Above them, there are hexagons again and the network ends at the mouth with unfinished and irregular polygons. The entire net-pattern ornament is outlined, whereafter pricked dots are superimposed. The decoration under the rim consists of a grainy ornament, which delineates an ornate band of a double braid motif with a dot in the middle. The grainy pattern is made with a punch and some grains overlap. The entire decorative band is gilded with the same technique as the rosette on the bottom. A band with a double braid and grainy ornament, but on the inside of the vessel, is also known from a silver-gilt bowl, coming from the nearby Sashova mound (Bozkova 2013, 125-126; Kitov 2008, 93, fig. 117).

On the two opposite sides of this vessel, just below the band under the rim, two vine leaves are engraved (fig. 2.a). They are gilded with a trapezoidal leaf that does not cover them completely (fig. 2.f). Their presence points to the idea of Wine and Dionysus Worship, which would also determine the purpose of the vessel – for drinking wine.

Several more silver vessels of this type are known to date. They were found in Magna Graecia, the Northern Black Sea coast and Asia. A close parallel to the Zareva mound bowl is a vessel from the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 3.1), which is supposed to originate from Southern Italy or Sicily (Guzzo 2003, 83-86, fig.22). The decoration and dimensions⁴ are similar, but the workmanship is more skilled. The net-pattern ornament of pentagons is gilded, and the lines are incised and pricked. The lip is decorated with a continuous beading and a band of a guilloche motif. As with our vessel, there are engraved motifs of gilded wreaths on both sides (Bothmer 1984, 57, No 97, Guzzo 2003, 53-54, fig. 22).

Two silver bowls with decoration identical to the Metropolitan one were found near the northern Black Sea coast – at Olbia (fig. 3.2) (Christodoulou 2015, 88, fig. 70) and Velikoploskoe (fig. 3.3), Ukraine (Symonenko 2011, 32, ris. 15, 1-3). The decoration repeats the same pattern, but the engraved ornaments on the sides of the vessel are missing. The dimensions of the cup of Velikoploskoe are also similar – a height of 7 cm and a diameter of 14 cm, but the cup lacks gilt. The two bowls were interpreted as Greek imports from the middle of the 3rd – the first half of the 2nd c. BC (Symonenko 2011, 33-34; Christodoulou 2015, 88; Mordvinceva, Radina 2013, 388-390).

Two vessels from the territory of Kuwait have also been placed in the same chronological framework (Carter 2015, 172). They are hammered from silver sheets, and some elements of their decoration are leaf-gilded. Both bowls have applications of acanthus (vine leaves?) on the two opposite sides under the lip, although they have been preserved only on one of them (fig. 3.4-5). These vessels were probably made in a Bactrian or Western atelier (Carter 2015, 172-175, cat. No 38).

In Asia, the tradition of making bowls with net-pattern ornaments continued in the 1st c. BC. From the territory of Iran comes a bowl (fig. 3.6), which, although distinct with its splendid decoration in the interior of the vessel (a characteristic feature of Middle Eastern art), follows the Greek

3 The vessel was broken.

4 The vessel has a height of 7.7 cm and a diameter of about 14 cm (Bothmer 1984, 57).

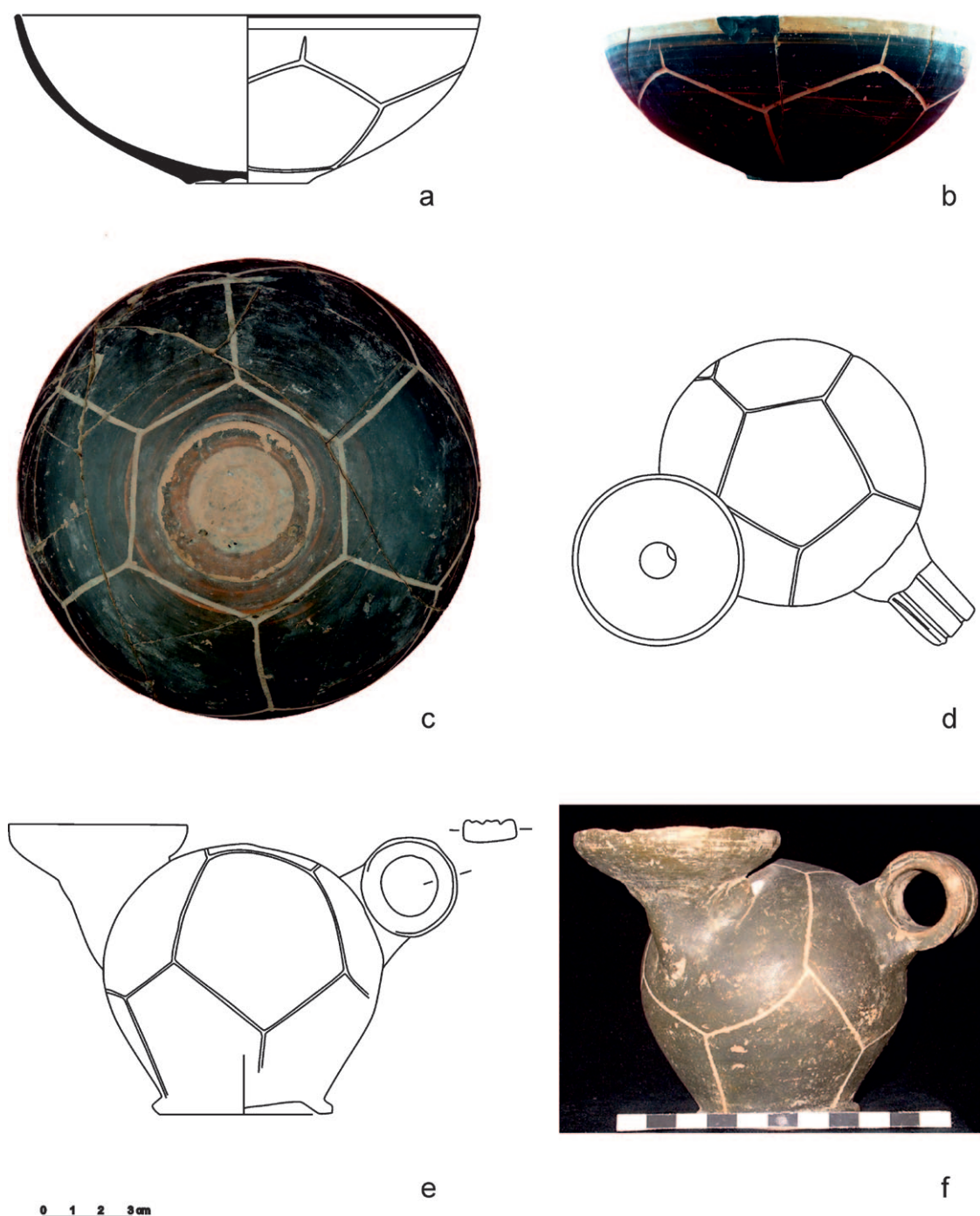


Fig. 4. Clay vessels with net-pattern decoration from Bulgaria. a, b, c – the cup from Nessebar (images by the authors); d, e, f – the askos from Kableshkovo (archive Anelia Bozkova).

Фиг. 4. Керамични съдове с мрежеста украса от България. а, b, c – чашата от Несебър (изображения на авторите); d, e, f – аскосът от Каблешково (архив Анелия Божкова)

model of the Hellenistic Age (Pfrommer 1993, 51-53, 187-188, No 72).

The Zareva mound bowl also has some parallels among the Greek ceramics with net-pattern ornaments found in Athens (Rotroff 1982a, 39, No 403; 1997, 108-109, No 318-323; Thompson 1934, 382-383, fig. 69 a-b), Corinth (Edwards 1975, 102, No 605-607, pls 19, 58; 179-182, No 908-920, pls. 36, 38, 78-80), Pergamon (Piçon, Hemingwey 2016, 171, No 86), the Northern Black Sea coast (Symonenko 2011, 32, ris. 15, 6-8; Usacheva 1978, 103, ris. 2, 5) and Thrace (Nessebar and

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Kableschkovo), whose chronological development coincides with that of the metal vessels.

Although silver vessels with net-pattern ornamentation are extremely rare, they are spread over large territories. The bowls from Ukraine, the Metropolitan, and Kuwait have the same network scheme on the vessel. All five bowls have an uncertain context and place of discovery. Their origin has been sought either in local workshops, where traveling craftsmen worked, or in the Greek poleis, from where they were directly imported (Symonenko 2011, 33-34; Christodoulou 2015, 88; Guzzo 2003, 83-86).

The only vessel that follows the Greek model, but at the same time differs in its composition and decoration, is the bowl of Zareva mound. The irregular polygons that complete the net ornament, the gilding that does not fully cover the elements of the decoration, the overlapping grainy ornament, the placement in two fields of one of the sheets, the unskillful rosette on the bottom, are evidence that the bowl was made in a workshop, probably in southern Thrace, which worked under the influence of Greek fashion, but not to such a high standard. It is the only one from the group of metal finds, cited in the text, discovered in a dated complex in the interior of Thrace. It was originally dated by analogy to the bronze helmet from the grave from the middle of the 4th c. BC (Marazov 1998, 103, 14)⁵ or the end of the 4th – the first half of the 3rd c. BC (Kitov 2008, 80). On the basis of the known vessels with net-pattern decoration, the bowl of Zareva mound can be dated to the middle of the 3rd – first half of the 2nd c. BC. Still, the question remains open, as there is no information about other finds from the grave that would clarify the chronology of the complex.

The ceramic cup

In 1952 in the necropolis of the ancient Mesambria Pontica (today Nessebar) a net-pattern, black-glazed cup was found as a single item in a grave (Kiyashkina, et al. 2012, 52, No 17)⁶. It was restored almost to its entirety from many fragments. Its body represents approximately one third of a sphere, which rests on a low ring foot (fig. 4a-c). The cup is shaped from fine beige clay and is covered with black glaze. On the outside of the vessel there is a reserved band under the rim and one on the bottom. The border line between the former and the black glaze below is emphasized by a thin line of brownish-red color⁷. On the exterior walls a net of pentagons is incised (Kiyashkina, et al. 2012, 52, No 17). As it was mentioned above, the specific reserved band under the rim suggests an East-Aegean origin of the vessel (Kiyashkina, et al. 2012, 52, No 17; Rotroff, Oliver 2003, 40).

The shape of the cup finds parallels at the Athenian Agora, which are dated to the 240-150 BC (Rostroff, 1997 No 318 - 320 – p. 276; pl. 32, fig. 20). An analogous manner of incising the net pattern, as well as the presence of a reserved band under the lip, is observed on specimens from Pergamon – one is dated to the end of the 3rd – the first half of the 2nd c. BC (Picón, Hemingway 2016, 171, No 86); another is dated to the second half of the 3rd c. BC (De Luca, Radt 1999, 84-85, taf. 15, No 433). A third example from Pergamon – a small fragment with a reserved band under the rim, is dated to the first half of the 2nd c. BC (Pinkwart, Stammnitz 1984, 126, taf. 25, No K41).

The ceramic askos

Near the present-day town of Kableschkovo, Burgas district, a black-glazed net-pattern askos

5 In the Iv. Marazov's catalogue the vessel was published as a phiale from Tsvyatkovia mound (Marazov 1998, 103).

6 The same cup has been published also in Bouzek 1990, 155, pl. II, as coming from Apollonia Pontica.

7 It is possible that this was not intended, but nevertheless it adds to the aesthetic value of the vessel.

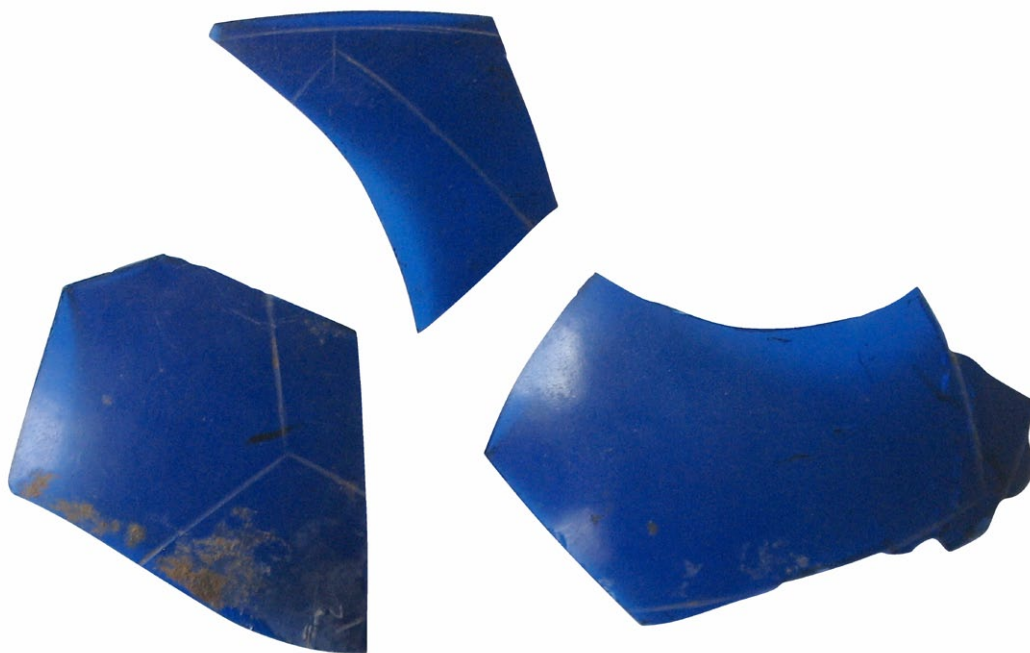


Fig. 5. Fragments from a glass vessel from Neofit Bozvelievo (archive Anelia Bozkova)
Фиг. 5. Фрагменти от стъклен съд от Неофит Бозвелиево (архив Анелия Божкова)

has been found by chance (Gyuzelev 2009, 225, t. 5.4). The vessel has a spherical body, a ring foot, a ring handle and a round lip. It is covered with a blackish-brown glaze. On the entire reservoir of the askos, there are incised lines which form a net of pentagons (fig. 4d-f). Close, though different in detail, parallels come from Corinth. They are dated to 330-150 BC (Edwards 1975, 102-103, No 605-607, pl. 19, 58). Despite the wide date range of the Corinthian vessels, it is most likely that the production of the askoi coincides with that of the cups – from the second quarter of the 3rd c. BC (see Rotroff 1997, 109).

The glass cup

Near the village of Neofit Bozvelievo, Kardzhali district, fragments from another vessel with net-pattern decoration were found in a grave, pried open by treasure hunters. The vessel is a hemispherical cup made of matt blue glass (fig. 5). On the exterior, there are incised lines, forming hexagons (Dimitrov 2016, 60-61). A parallel, although not a close one, is a hemispherical bowl in gold sandwich technique from Gordion, dated to the second half of the 3rd c. BC (Jones 2009, 24, fig. 5; Saldern 1959, 45, fig. 31). In Gordion a vessel with an incised net-pattern decoration was found as well. It is a simpler and cheaper version (Jones 2009, 25), and perhaps it would be a closer parallel to the cup from Bulgaria. In the same context near Neofit Bozvelievo, in the soil dug out by the treasure hunters, apart from the glass cup, fragments from three black-glazed kantharoi were found as well. They are decorated in the West Slope style and date back to the second half of the 3rd c. BC (Dimitrov 2016, 60, tabl. 7).

Conclusions

After the military success of Philip II and Alexander III in the second half of the 4th c. BC, over vast territories in Europe, Asia, and Africa, common cultural and artistic elements were spread, which formed the Hellenistic koine. This influence could be seen in daily life, as well as in the re-

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ligion and culture of the inhabitants of the conquered territories. It appears that in this age the net-pattern vessels were a kind of fashion. It is worth noting that some peculiarities in the spread of the ceramic and metal examples are observed. Those made of clay occur in the Greek poleis (Athens, Pergamon, Corinth, etc.) and in the colonies situated at the north and west coasts of the Black Sea, while the metal ones are found in a non-Greek milieu, even though they are considered to be the work of Greek silversmiths, or some of them even of Greek workshops. Despite being only single finds, these vessels are widespread in territories occupied by a population which was in touch with the highly-developed Hellenistic culture. A possible explanation of the dissimilarities in the distribution can be sought in the different semantics implied in the precious-metal vessels in the “barbarian” nations versus the Greek world (Rabadzhiev 2009, 104-117).

The analysis shows that the net-pattern vessels exist approximately from the second quarter of the 3rd c. to the 1st c. BC. It is considered that the pentagon net decoration is inspired by metalware, and that the ceramic vessels imitate the latter (Lungu 2013, 229; Rotroff 1997, 109; Rotroff, Oliver 2003, 41). Unfortunately, the metal specimens are often without a clear context, which could otherwise help for the identification of their chronology. The sole silver cup found in a closed context is from Zareva mound, but it has some particularities compared to the others. The chronology of the complex itself has not been clarified yet. The clay vessels are better dated, which is helpful when trying to determine the date of the similar metal or glass ones (Retroff 1982b, 330). Precisely because the clay specimens are the only ones with a clarified chronology, the metal cups without a context of finding are dated by analogies with them. On these grounds, all of the metal vessels with net-pattern decoration are dated back to the second quarter of the 3rd c. – the third quarter of the 2nd c. BC. Due to these peculiarities in the dating methodology, the logical presumption that the metal vessels appeared first, and those from clay imitate them, remains unproven for now.

Acknowledgements

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Елинистически съдове с мрежеста украса от днешните български земи

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(резюме)

В ранноелинистическата епоха се появяват съдове с украса от мрежа от петогълници или шестогълници. Тази декорация се среща при полусферични чаши, аскоси, мастилници и др., изработени от керамика, стъкло и метал. Металните купи са изработени от сребро с позлата. Измежду керамиката правена на колело, чернофирнисовите полусферични чаши са най-често декорираните с мрежестия орнамент. Тук украсата се състои от линии, врязани след нанасянето на фирниса – третиране, характерно за украсата в стил West Slope. По-късно тази декоративна схема се среща и при чашите, правени в калъп. Смята се, че тези правени на колело се срещат от втората четвърт на III в. пр. Хр. до третата четвърт на II в. пр. Хр., докато керамичните чаши правени в калъп и металните представители на групата могат да се проследят и в I в. пр. Хр. Съдовете с мрежеста украса са сравнително редки, такава е картината и в българските земи. Известни са два керамични съда (чаша и аскос), купа, изработена от сребро и фрагменти от стъклена чаша. Сребърната произхожда от Зарева могила, югоизточно от село Ясеново, Казанлъшко. Изработката ѝ показва, че тя е изделие на ателие, намиращо се вероятно в Южна Тракия, което работи под влияние на гръцката мода, но не на толкова високо ниво. На базата на паралели, купата от Зарева могила може да се отнесе в периода от втората четвърт на III – първата половина на II в. пр. Хр. Керамичната чаша произхожда от некропола на Месамбрия Понтика. Най-вероятно тя е внесена от Източна Егеида. По аналогии е датирана във втората половина на III – първата половина на II в. пр.Хр. Аскосът е случайна находка, открита до град Каблешково и неговото точно датиране е по-проблематично. Фрагментите от стъклен съд с врязани шестогълници са открити в разбит от иманяри гроб до с. Неофит Бозвелиево, област Кърджали. Заедно с тях са намерени и фрагменти от три чернофирнисови кантароса с украса в стил West Slope от втората половина на III в. пр. Хр.

Направеният преглед показва, че от втората четвърт на III в. пр. Хр. до I в. пр. Хр. група съдове с мрежеста украса, направени от глина, сребро и стъкло са разпространени в целия

елинистически свят. Рядко, в сравнение със съдове с други декоративни схеми, този вид находки се откриват в широк ареал от Велика Гърция, Северното Черноморие и Гърция до Азия. През елинистическата епоха тези територии са част от гръцкото артистично и културно койне, от което без съмнение Тракия е част също.