



Byzantine pottery in the Black Sea region

Summary :

Byzantine pottery was commonly in use in the coastal towns of the Black Sea, where the culture and the lifestyle remained Byzantine through the Middle Ages. The import was supplied directly from the best market of the Empire – that of Constantinople. Therefore, products of different origin have been unearthed. Eleven classes of Byzantine pottery, dating to the 8th c. onwards, are considered to have been distributed quite intensively within the Black Sea region. These are mainly glazed table wares, as well as some amphorae types.

Date

8th c. - early 14th c.

Geographical Location

Black Sea region

1. Historical background

The vast distribution of the Byzantine pottery throughout the Black Sea area owed greatly to its geographical proximity to Constantinople, as well as to the intense [commercial activity](#) between different parts of the region. Byzantine pottery was commonly in use in the coastal towns, where the culture and the lifestyle followed the byzantine model. Items were imported directly from [Constantinople](#), the best market of the Empire for every commodity available. Therefore, ceramic objects of different origin have been found.

A great deal of Byzantine pottery from the [Crimean peninsula](#), the west coast of the Black Sea and the Northern part of Dobrudja, has been published. Still, information concerning the finds along the Eastern and the Southern coasts of the Black Sea can not yet be considered sufficient.

2. Glazed pottery

2.1. Glazed White Ware

The **Glazed** White Ware (GWW) made of light-coloured **fabric** with the various embellishment bore **incised**, stamped or painted decoration. The majority of these vessels were of [Constantinopolitan origin](#), although some imitations were manufactured in various workshops of southern Greece and in western Asia Minor.¹

Glazed White Ware was imported into Crimea and the [Taman peninsula](#) as early as in the 8th c. and early 9th c.² In the same period, Glazed White Ware vessels appears in certain settlements along the western Black Sea coast.³ The imports were scanty; they included cooking pots with matching lids, bowls and dishes. The surface of the vessels was washed with a thin **slip** and an olive-green to sepia coloured glaze. The dishes are decorated with simple geometric patterns that were be incised into the fabric by means of a sharp tool (figs. [1A](#) and [1B](#)). In the unslipped GWW vessels the fabric is white with greenish or yellowish glaze. The dominating forms, that is the chafing dishes and the "fruit stands" with tall pedestal bases, bear incised or impressed decoration of geometric and floral motifs or imaginary creatures and human figures (figs. [2A](#) and [2B](#)).

After the 9th c. the distribution of Glazed White Ware in the Black Sea region became far more intensive and is attested in various excavations in Crimea,⁴ in Northern Dobrudja⁵ and on Bulgarian territory.⁶ From the early 11th c. up to the beginning of the 13th c., the markets of the coastal towns around the Black Sea were flooded with imported plain and painted cups, bowls and dishes of a gritty micaceous white-yellowish or pink fabric. Generally they are adorned with two main patterns, either they bear marbled decoration in green and/or sepia colour or blurred dot decoration painted in green and/or black colour.



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A few ceramic objects, that might date to an even later era, are painted in blue. Quite a lot of vessels of the aforementioned group are attested in a number of sites throughout the Black Sea coastal area.⁷([fig. 3](#))

2.2. Polychrome Ware

The fabric of the Polychrome Wares is soft, slightly sandy, white or grayish. The fine and smooth surface of the vessels bears a painted polychrome decoration of three or more colours. The whole surface of the vessel is covered with a thin transparent glaze. Designs that comprise geometric, floral and “pseudo-kufic” motifs, as well as realistic representations of human and animal figures, is the usual decoration. Polychrome pottery had been produced principally in the region of Constantinople.⁸ From the 9th until the 12th c. the Polychrome Ware was exported in limited quantities to Crimea, the Taman peninsula,⁹ Northern Dobrudja¹⁰ and the west coast of the Black Sea (figs. [4A](#) and [4B](#)).¹¹ During the 10th c. polychrome tiles and vessels were produced also in Preslav;¹² however, those vessels were exclusively used in the city and its surroundings.

2.3. Slip-Painted Ware

The Slip-Painted Ware comprises dishes and bowls of a fine orange or pinkish-buff fabric. The group is distinguished by its decoration, applied with a white slip beneath the pale yellow glaze. Motifs are generally simple: dots, circles, curvilinear, spirals and palmettes. These impressive vessels of the late 11th and the 12th c. are considered to have been manufactured either in Corinth or in Central Greece.¹³ Such slip-painted ware hardly ever reached Crimea. Only one dish unearthed in [Cherson/Chersonesos](#) has been published,¹⁴ whereas a few fragments come from the sites of the Northern Dobrudja region;¹⁵ relatively more are the finds of Slip-Painted Ware in the towns along the Western Black Sea coast ([fig. 5](#)).¹⁶

2.4. Green and Brown Painted Ware

The Green and Brown Painted Ware forms a group of cups and dishes of a soft orange-red fabric. The interior of the vessels is covered with a thick white slip. Decoration is applied over the slipped surface with different shades of brown and green. They are covered with a thin transparent glaze. The motifs range from simple lines, stripes and dots to spirals and broad floral patterns. Vessels with green and brown painting are registered in the 12th- and the 13th-c. layers of some settlements in the Northern Black Sea area,¹⁷ the Northern Dobrudja area¹⁸ and the Bulgarian coastal area ([fig. 6](#)).¹⁹ The imports most probably came either from the workshops of Corinth or of Central Greece.

2.5. Fine Sgraffito Ware

The Fine **Sgraffito** Ware group consists of dishes of a soft orange-red fabric. The interior and occasionally the exterior of those vessels are covered with a thick layer of white slip and transparent glaze. The decor is delicately scratched through the slip. The motifs, that are generally arranged into horizontal bands or medallions in the center of the vessel, include rinceaux, zigzag, palmettes, pseudo-kufic, interlaces, spirals and representations of animals. In the 12th and early 13th c. various decorative classes of Fine Sgraffito Ware from Corinth and Constantinople, but from elsewhere as well, were imported on a large scale into the Black Sea region. Considerable quantities have been excavated in every coastal site of the Crimean²⁰ and the Tamanian peninsulae,²¹ in the Northern [Dobrudja](#) area²² and on Bulgarian territory ([fig. 7](#)).²³ This ware must have been considered of value, as the rivet holes for reparation indicate.

2.6. Painted Fine Sgraffito Ware

Painted Fine Sgraffito dishes were imported into the Black Sea area during the second half of the 12th c. Like the class of the Fine Sgraffito Ware, the decoration of the Painted Fine Sgraffito group is thinly scratched through the white slip and consists of interlace medallions at the bottom and horizontal bands of scrolls, spirals or tendrils. These engraved patterns are artistically combined with



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spirals, lines or simple geometric and floral motifs painted in green and/or in brown. The latter are usually arranged between the central medallion and the zones of scrolls or at the rim of the dish. Ware of this class has been excavated in a number of sites in South Russia,²⁴ Northern Dobrudja²⁵ and the Bulgarian region ([fig. 8](#)).²⁶

2.7. Aegean Ware (Incised Sgraffito Ware)

A group of shallow thick-walled dishes belongs to a class of the Incised Sgraffito Ware, that is also called the Aegean Ware. The interior of the vessels is covered with a thick whitish slip. The decoration, roughly gouged through the slip, consists of various kinds of floral and vegetal motifs, which are arranged in central medallions and concentric bands or they are engraved freely all over the surface of the vessel. An exceptional theme occurs: a human figure (a warrior?, a hunter?) armed with his shield, spear and sword.

Some items of the Aegean Ware class were probably imported into the Black Sea coastal region during the second half of the 12th c., although most of the finds are registered in the late 12th- and early 13th-c. layers. Both fragmented and intact vessels that could be assigned to the Aegean Ware class from the Crimean peninsula²⁷ and the west coast of the Black Sea have been published ([fig. 9](#)).²⁸

2.8. Champlévé Ware

Champlévé Ware is poorly distributed throughout the Black Sea region. A few fragments are known to have been unearthed in the settlements located along the north²⁹ and the west³⁰ Black Sea coast. Most of them come from the late 12th- and early 13th-c. layers. They are fragments of dishes of orange-red fabric with yellowish glaze over a thick layer of whitish slip. ([fig. 10](#))

2.9. Zeuxippus Ware

Zeuxippus Ware comprise vessels of a very hard and fine fabric with an orange-brown colour. A thick layer of white or cream slip and shiny glaze cover the surface of the items. The decoration is cut into the slip, not through it and into the body, and it includes various motifs: concentric circles around the base; rouletted patterns (i.e. decorated with a wheel-like tool to give a continuous pattern impressed into the surface); broad gouged bands; S-shaped motifs; medallions with palmette, trefoil and spirals; triangular pattern on the rims; finely incised birds, human figures, animal figures and imaginary creatures. This group is considered to be the most qualitative products of 13th c. [Byzantine pottery](#). The most splendid dishes come from the Crimean peninsula,³¹ although some fragments are today exhibited in the museums of Varna and Nessebar, i.e. at the west Black Sea coast. ([fig. 11](#))

2.10. Elaborate Incised Ware

The Elaborate Incised Ware consists of small hemispherical bowls with a ring foot. The hard, fine fabric of those pots is gray-buff or red. The whole surface is covered with a white slip and green or yellow glaze. The decoration was incised through the slip and then painted, usually with dark brown glaze, before the firing. The decoration includes geometric ornaments, animal figures and occasionally human figures, some very elaborate scenes, crosses and monograms. Elaborate Incised Ware that was imported in considerable quantities into the Black Sea coasts during the second half of the 13th and in the 14th c., probably came from Constantinople. Numerous items, from every excavated settlement in the Crimean peninsula,³² the Northern Dobrudja area³³ and the Bulgarian coast, have been published.³⁴

3. Amphorae

Intense Early Byzantine commercial activity brought a diversity of amphora types within the Black Sea coastal region. More than twenty forms have been described in various classifications.³⁵ The majority belongs to the 5th – 7th c. period and came from different parts of the Byzantine world – Egypt, Palestine, Antioch district or the Aegean islands. Later on, during the Middle Byzantine period, this diversity was considerably diminished.

Four classes of amphorae were most commonly used in the Black Sea trade during the Middle Byzantine period. The [first class](#)



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comprises vessels of a round-shaped body, a short wide neck and two D-shaped hands attached to the rim and the wide sloping shoulder. This type has been excavated in Crimea,³⁶ in Southern Russia,³⁷ as well as in Northern Dobrudja,³⁸ and is found in the 9th-, 10th- and 11th-c. layers. Some unpublished amphorae from the museums of Varna and Balchik could also be associated with the type.

Amphorae of the second class were widely spread within the Black sea region from the late 10th - early 11th c. until the early 12th c. This class includes amphorae with a pear-like shaped body and a round base. Two slightly upwards-sloping handles are attached to the body and the narrow neck. The type is attested in Cherson/Chersonesos,³⁹ in certain Western Black Sea coastal sites and in the Northern Dobrudja region.⁴⁰

A characteristic form dated to the 12th and the 13th c. is the tall pear-shaped amphora with the heavy, high-slung handles attached to the tall neck and the shoulder. Such vessels have been found in the Bulgarian coast,⁴¹ in Romania,⁴² in Southern Russia and in Ukraine.⁴³ During the same period, the large amphorae with conical body, short neck and massive upward-sloping handles were also in use all along the Black Sea coastal area.⁴⁴

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Glossary :

	champlevé ware Impressive Byzantine ceramics. Their decoration (oftenly figurative themes) was executed with the removal of portions of the slip so as whole areas of the fabric could be seen below the glaze. The light-coloured figures were set against a darker background. This decorative technique is introduced to Byzantine pottery in the 12 th c. and by the first decades of the 13 th c. is already established.
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	fabric (pottery)
The clay of a vessel or tile, as seen in cross-section if the vessel is broken.	
	Glazed Pottery
Glaze: vitreous material applied to vessel or tile prior to firing in a kiln, in order to give a glossy surface after firing.	
	incised
(pottery) Decoration technique using broad lines cut through the slip into the clay of the vessels.	
	Kufic script
Old Arabic script, its name taken from the city of Kufa where the first copies of the Koran were written. Motifs imitating its elements were used as decorative pattern on the outer walls of Byzantine churches as well as on Byzantine ceramics.	
	sgraffito
(pottery) Decoration technique which uses thin lines scratched through the slip into the surface of the vessel. Ware with such decoration is usually glazed.	
	slip
Thin wash of liquid clay applied to the vessel or tile prior to firing in a kiln, in order to win a smooth surface after firing.	
	Zeuxippus ware
Vessels of fine hard fabric with decoration cut into the slip and shiny colourless or coloured glaze. The main shape is a bowl with a ring foot. The incised decoration of floral motifs or figurative themes was usually arranged in a central basal metallion. The high quality of this ware and the great quantities that were found during the excavations at the Baths of Zeuxippus in Constantinople encouraged a strictly constantinopolitan attribution of the production; however, ample distribution of such ware from Egypt to the Black Sea region and Bulgarian territory contradict such an attribution.	