

SUB SEMNUL ARTEI

Studii în onoarea academicianului
MARIUS PORUMB la 80 de ani

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Editura MEGA



ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ FILIALA CLUJ-NAPOCA
INSTITUTUL DE ARHEOLOGIE ȘI ISTORIA ARTEI CLUJ-NAPOCA

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CUPRINS

Tabula Gratulatoria	11
Cuvânt înainte	14
Acad. prof. dr. Marius Porumb. Curriculum vitae și evocare în imagini	16
Acad. Marius Porumb. Bibliografie selectivă	44

EVOCĂRI

IPSS Andrei , „Iubește neamul nostru” (Luca 7,5)	58
PSS Iustin , Academicianul Marius Porumb prestigios istoric al artei sacre din Transilvania și Maramureș și mare iubitor al valorilor creștine românești	60
Georgeta STOICA , Academicianul Marius Porumb octogenar	64
Teodor ARDELEAN , Marius Porumb - Academician al Maramureșului	67
Doru PAMFIL , Academicianul Marius Porumb - un Cavaler al Artelor și Literelor	73
Friedrich GUNESCH , Marius Porumb - „Greavul” de la Câlnic	75

STUDII

Tiberiu ALEXA Stratigrafia culturală - un model alternativ de abordare a evoluției artelor în epocile modernă și contemporană	81
Susana ANDEA Episcopul Sava Brancovici și societatea transilvăneană	97
Grigore ARBORE Le cavalcate cosmiche degli arlecchini	111

Ioan BOLOVAN Mituri și falsuri despre idealul unității naționale la 1848	129
Claudia M. BONȚA Tentația clasicismului: subiecte mitologice și literare în gravuri de Angelica Kauffman	139
Aurel CHIRIAC Arhitectura de cult românească în Bihorul interbelic. Considerații generale	153
Alexandru Constantin CHITUȚĂ Când, unde și cine a început pictarea icoanelor pe sticlă din Transilvania? Noi considerații.	161
Constantin I. CIOBANU Schițe inspirate de capodopere ale artei universale în creația Valentinei Rusu Ciobanu	179
Sorin COCIȘ, Vlad-Andrei LĂZĂRESCU, Sergiu-Traian SOCACIU Date despre o nouă teracotă votivă de tip <i>Dominus et Domina</i> recent descoperită la <i>Optatiana/Sutoru</i> , jud. Sălaj	197
Călin COSMA Obiect de podoabă din bronz argintat unicat în arheologia avară din Transilvania, descoperit în cimitirul avar de la Șpălnaca (jud. Alba).	205
Maria CRÎNGACI ȚIPLIC, Ioan-Marian ȚIPLIC, Corina CIOLTEI-HOPÂRTEAN Mănăstirile medievale mendicante ale Sibiului și peisajul lacustru din jurul lor	213
Daniela DÂMBOIU Cana „David și Goliat” sau cana „cu Licornul”, operă a doi aurari sibieni: Sebastian Hann și Michael Hossmann	243
Emil DRAGNEV Ciclul „Vieții Sf. mucenic Nichita” în picturile murale de la Arbore. Coordonate iconografice și textuale	255
Andreea DRĂGAN Semne grafice pe situlele ceramice ca dovadă a relațiilor interregionale. Un exemplu din așezarea de a doua epocă a fierului de la Divici-Grad	285
Ana DUMITRAN, Oksana SOMAK Icoana <i>Sfântului Ioan Botezătorul cu scene din viață</i> de la Budești-Josani	293

Mariana EGRI	The so-called ampullae oleariae from the area of the Liber Pater sanctuary at Apulum (Alba Iulia, Romania)	303
Elena FIREA, Ciprian FIREA	Icoanele „de la Mănăstirea Plosca” (jud. Hunedoara) și legăturile lor cu arta Moldovei (sec. XV–XVI)	313
Ligia FULGA, Ioniță ANDRON	Arhitectura vernaculară din Țara Bârsei. Studiu de caz privind istoria unei gospodării săsești din Cristian	333
Ovidiu GHITTA	Coriolan Petranu și drumul lui spre titlul de profesor agregat	343
Adrian-Silvan IONESCU	Carol Storck în Lumea Nouă	379
Bogdan LĂPUȘAN	Lion’s head mounts from Roman Dacia	395
Christoph MACHAT	Settlement Patterns of the German Colonization in Transylvania	405
Stelian MÂNDRUȚ	Școala doctorală clujeană de istoria artei. Repere prosopografice (1971–2010)	419
Iulia MESEA	Artă și document - considerații asupra atribuirii portretelor conducătorilor răscoalei din 1784: Horea, Cloșca și Crișan	435
Marina MUSTEAȚĂ	A roman cremation grave from the cemetery at Apulum-Dealul Furcilor	455
Ramona NOVICOV	Under the Sign of Ana Lupaș. Atelier 35: A Shockwave in the Romania of the 80s	469
Coriolan Horațiu OPREANU	Un capitel cu mască umană din templul lui Bel de la Porolissum	479
Maria ORDEANU	Arheologia unei imagini: orașul Cluj în 1595 și 1617	487
Ioan-Aurel POP, Alexandru SIMON	Almoș, ucis în luptă „la hotarul Ardealului”: semnificația unei mențiuni cronicărești din secolul al XV-lea	499

Saveta POP	
Dumitru Zugravul. Un pictor transilvănean din secolul al XVIII-lea	513
Ștefana POP-CURȘEU, Ioan POP-CURȘEU	
Vrăjitoria la Judecata de Apoi: o poveste fără sfârșit	533
Vasile PUȘCAȘ	
Iuliu Maniu și mișcarea memorandistă	547
Aurel RUSTOIU	
Spectacolul cerului: comete și simboluri astrale în reprezentări preistorice și antice. O schiță de imaginar celest	553
Ioana RUSTOIU	
„Un lucru prețios pe sama bisericei”, „un picur viu în marea de frați greco-orientali ce ne înconjoară”. Tablourile episcopilor Inochentie Micu Klein și Ioan Bob pictate de Octavian Smigelschi pentru biserica din Bucium-Șasa	565
Marina SABADOS	
Biserica de lemn Sfânta Troiță a schitului Draga, Piatra Neamț	585
Mihaela Sanda SALONTAI	
Așezăminte religioase ale terțiarelor franciscane din Transilvania în secolele XV–XVI	597
Adriana STROE, Aurelian STROE	
O ctitorie a lui Miron Cristea pentru eroii Marelui Război: Mănăstirea Toplița	609
Cornel TATAI-BALTĂ, Anca Elisabeta TATAY	
Câteva mostre referitoare la influența moscovită asupra xilogravurii din cartea românească veche (sec. XVII–XIX)	623
Răzvan THEODORESCU	
La broderie moldave postbyzantine entre « sarmatismes » polonais et « turqueries » de Stamboul	633
Veronica TURCUȘ	
Mecanisme de integrare a artei și patrimoniului artistic din Transilvania în cadrul României Mari	643
Mihaela VLĂSCEANU	
Pictura de altar a bisericii catolice din Slatina-Timiș (jud. Caraș-Severin). Studiu de caz: J. Vincenz Fischer (1729–1810)	655
Abrevieri	667



The so-called ampullae oleariae from the area of the Liber Pater sanctuary at Apulum (Alba Iulia, Romania)

Mariana EGRİ

Abstract. The article is analysing a particular variant of the so-called ampullae oleariae that is quite frequently discovered in sites from Roman Dacia, starting from some examples discovered in the area of the Liber Pater sanctuary at Apulum (Alba Iulia, Romania). Despite being commonly identified as lighting devices belonging to the Loeschke XIII type, two other hypotheses regarding their possible function have more recently been proposed. The analysis is examining all of these hypotheses, taking into consideration the morphological and technological details of the artefacts in question, as well as their contexts of discovery.

Keywords: Roman Dacia, Apulum, tallow lamp, candle-holder, ampulla olearia.

Introduction

The article is discussing a group of ceramic artefacts discovered in the area of the Liber Pater sanctuary at Apulum (Alba Iulia, Romania), whose precise function is still debated in archaeological literature. Morphologically, these small wheel-made containers are broadly defined by a number of particularities: a squat carinated body with a wide flat base, a more-or-less wide central filling hole, and a small triangular horizontal handle attached to the maximum diameter and perforated (Fig. 1).

In Romanian archaeological literature, they are frequently grouped together with other quite similar small containers whose main morphological differences are the taller, more-or-less globular or pear-shaped body, the usually wider filling hole and the vertical perforated handle

(Fig. 2). The latter are encountered in many civilian and military sites across most of the Roman Empire, though are more common in the north-western provinces and along the middle and lower Danube, being identified as “tallow lamps”. The majority of them are dated to the 2nd or 3rd century AD, though earlier finds that are dated to the second half of the 1st century AD are also attested¹.

The former variant with a horizontal handle and a carinated body is far less common. Besides the finds from the Liber Pater sanctuary, other identical pieces were previously discovered at Apulum (Fig. 1/8)². Some are also known from other sites in Roman Dacia, for example at Tibiscum, Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, Porolissum (Fig. 1/4, 6), Buciumi (Fig. 1/5), Napoca, Ilişua (Fig. 1/2), Căşeu (Fig. 1/7), Romita and Micia³, being dated to the 2nd or 3rd century AD. Another example is known from Pannonia, being published as a tallow lamp⁴.

Regarding the functionality of this heterogeneous group, three main hypotheses have been put forward since the publication of Loeschcke’s ceramic lamps typology more than a century ago. When analysing the discoveries from Vindonissa, he identified them as wheel-made nozzle-less lamps which burned tallow or animal fat instead of oil, and classified them into the type XIII, with three variants (Fig. 2/1)⁵. However, it is worth noting that no example with a horizontal handle was present among the finds from Vindonissa. Another more detailed classification, which split the Loeschcke XIII type into seven variants based on the body shape, was proposed by Goethert-Polaschek, this time using the finds from Trier and its surroundings (Fig. 2/2)⁶. Again, no example with a horizontal handle was identified. Nowadays it is largely accepted in archaeological literature that the variants with a vertical handle and a globular or pear-shaped body were used as tallow lamps.

Another hypothesis suggested that the carinated pieces with a horizontal handle were in fact used as ampullae oleariae – small containers for ointments and other wax or animal fat-based cosmetics or medicine – on the account of being quite frequently discovered in public baths⁷, though no evidence was actually provided for such contexts of consumption.

Lastly, the third and most recent hypothesis suggested their use as candle-holders, since very few of them bear the sooty traces which are commonly encountered on other types of ceramic lamps⁸, though one has to note that this kind of detail is seldom registered systematically in archaeological reports.

Most discussions regarding the more likely function of these artefacts have usually taken into consideration their primary morphological features, while other aspects, for example the use traces or the contexts of discovery, have seldom been examined. That being said, the aim of this paper is to explore the validity of the aforementioned hypotheses on the basis of a case study – a group of six small ceramic artefacts discovered in the area of the Liber Pater sanctuary at Apulum, in Roman Dacia.

¹ Goethert-Polaschek 1987, 164; Eckardt 2002, 239; Regep-Vlascici 2008, 341.

² Băluţă 1983, 37, pl. 53/4–6; 1989, 260, nos. 107–108; Moga et al. 2000, 165, pl. 16/c.

³ Regep-Vlascici 2008, with previous bibliography; Neagu, Bocan 2017, 113–114, 123, no. 36, pl. IV/36.

⁴ Iványi 1935, 20, pl. 56/2.

⁵ Loeschcke 1919, 305–308, Abb. 12 and Taf. XX/1037–38, 1042–1043.

⁶ Goethert-Polaschek 1987, 164–183.

⁷ Băluţă 1989, 260.

⁸ Roman 2006, 49–50, nos. 188–192; Isac, Roman 2008, 154, pl. 115/20.

The archaeological site

The sanctuary was first identified in 1989 in the Colonia Aurelia Apulensis (modern neighbourhood of Partoş in Alba Iulia) by an archaeological team directed by Alexandru Diaconescu (Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca). The site was partially unearthed in 1991 and 1992, while further extensive interdisciplinary investigations were carried out between 1998 and 2003 by an international archaeological team co-directed by Alexandru Diaconescu, Ian Haynes (then at the Birkbeck College London) and Alfred Schäfer (then at the Humboldt Universität Berlin)⁹.

Aside from the sanctuary and its ancillary structures (buildings, courts and cult-related pits), the investigations also brought to light an earlier-dated manufacturing area and parts of the surrounding street network. All these archaeological contexts produced an outstandingly rich and diverse inventory, including more than 4500 small finds made of ceramic, glass, bone, stone, iron, bronze and lead, which were analysed in different specialist reports for the forthcoming monograph¹⁰. Archaeological evidence indicates that the sanctuary was more likely used between the late 2nd century and the middle of the 3rd century AD.

The six artefacts included in this case study were discovered in the sanctuary and its nearby cult pits containing refuse from the sanctuary's activities.

The finds

Just one of these small containers is complete, while the other five are fragmentary preserved, though their shape can be easily recognized. The catalogue below lists their main morphological, technological, chronological and contextual characteristics:

1. SF no. 2951

Description: a squat carinated body with a quite large central filling hole, a wide flat base, and a small triangular horizontal handle attached to the maximum diameter, which is perforated.

Dimensions: D = 54 mm; H = 17.5 mm

Fabric: light grey, fine, well fired (APFR1)

Preservation: complete

Burnt traces: no

Context of discovery: sanctuary

Dating: late 2nd – early 3rd century AD

2. SF no. 2714

Description: a squat carinated body with a wide flat base, and a small triangular horizontal handle attached to the maximum diameter, which is perforated.

Dimensions: D = 55 mm; Hp = 13 mm

Fabric: light grey, fine, well fired (APFR1)

⁹ Schäfer, Diaconescu 1997; Diaconescu et al. 2005; Haynes 2005.

¹⁰ Höpken 2004; Ciauşescu 2004; Egri 2005; 2016; 2019–20; Fiedler 2005; 2014; Schäfer 2014; Haynes 2014.

Preservation: fragmentary
Burnt traces: no
Context of discovery: cult pit
Dating: early 3rd century AD

3. SF no. 4249 / 4257 (Fig. 1/1)

Description: a squat carinated body with a wide flat base, and a small triangular horizontal handle attached to the maximum diameter, which is perforated.

Dimensions: D = 75 mm; H = 28 mm
Fabric: grey, fine, well fired (APFR1)
Preservation: fragmentary (broken in two halves, top side missing)
Burnt traces: no
Context of discovery: cult pit
Dating: early 3rd century AD

4. SF no. 4389

Description: a squat carinated body with a small triangular horizontal handle attached to the maximum diameter, which is perforated.

Dimensions: D = 70 mm; Hp = 12 mm
Fabric: grey, fine, well fired (APFR1)
Preservation: fragmentary
Burnt traces: no
Context of discovery: cult pit
Dating: early 3rd century AD

5. SF no. 5024

Description: a squat carinated body with a narrower central filling hole and a wide flat base; the horizontal handle is missing.

Dimensions: D = 70 mm; H = 29 mm
Fabric: grey, fine, well fired (APFR1)
Preservation: fragmentary (half preserved)
Burnt traces: no
Context of discovery: cult pit
Dating: early 3rd century AD

6. SF no. 4580

Description: a squat carinated body with a flat base.

Dimensions: D = 70 mm; Hp = 10 mm
Fabric: grey, fine, well fired (APFR1)
Preservation: fragmentary
Burnt traces: no
Context of discovery: cult pit
Dating: early 3rd century AD

Discussion

In order to identify the more likely function of these six artefacts, a number of features have to be discussed. From the morphological point of view, there are important differences between the circular tallow lamps originally included by Loeschcke in his type XIII and the artefacts in question¹¹. The former have a taller, more-or-less globular or pear-shaped body and a vertical perforated handle attached to the maximum diameter. On the other hand, the latter artefacts have a flatter, strongly carinated body with a wider base and a small triangular horizontal perforated handle attached to the maximum diameter.

The different positioning of the handles probably made Băluță to identify the pieces with a horizontal one as ampullae oleariae, the perforation apparently facilitating their suspension on a carrying string or chain¹². This could have only been possible if the content was viscous enough and a kind of sealing was also used. On the other hand, Regep-Vlascici considered that the perforation allowed the “lamps” with a horizontal handle to be affixed on a flat surface using a nail, though no other type of Roman lamp was secured in place in this way; after all, with a few exceptions, lamps were largely made to be portable. As a matter of fact, the perforation greatly improved the user’s grip given the quite small size of the handle, thus minimising the risk of dropping the container, spilling out the content and perhaps starting a fire, irrespective of the vertical or horizontal positioning.

Among these so-called “tallow lamps” from Roman Dacia, one example discovered in the rural manufacturing centre at Cristești stands out due to the absence of any handle (Fig. 1/3). Instead, the artefact has three symmetrically placed perforated knobs around the central hole¹³, resembling the knobs which are regularly appearing on the shoulder of the lamps belonging to the Loeschcke IX and X types. Their position indicates that the artefact in question was more likely made to be suspended using strings or chains, but is not automatically meaning that it was used as a lamp, since small ampullae oleariae were also commonly suspended on strings or chains to be carried more easily.

The most recent hypothesis suggests that the artefacts in question could have been used as candle-holders, mostly based on the near total absence of any burnt traces or soot deposits on the finds from Dacia Porolissensis, only the example from Cășeiu displaying this kind of traces¹⁴. Likewise, none of the finds from the Liber Pater sanctuary bears any traces of being used as a lamp. It is important to note though that such important details are rarely registered in archaeological reports or studies.

On the other hand, this would be a rather unusual shape for a Roman provincial candle-holder. A number of variants of the ceramic candle-holders were used during the 2nd–3rd centuries AD, their defining morphological feature being the central cylindrical socket that is slightly higher than the shallow bowl on which it was set, which was most likely meant to collect the melted tallow or wax for reuse¹⁵. The enclosed body of the tallow lamps or of the pieces from the Liber

¹¹ Loeschcke 1919, 305–308, Abb. 12.

¹² Băluță 1989, 260.

¹³ Man 2000, 62, no. 45, pl. XV/45.

¹⁴ Roman 2006, 144, no. 191.

¹⁵ Goethert 1988, 487–495.

Pater sanctuary would not have been able to do this. At the same time, the central filling hole is almost always wider (25 to 32 mm) than the diameter of the central cylindrical socket (20 to 24 mm) of the candle-holders.

Concluding remarks

Summarising the above discussion, the first important observation is that the small wheel-made containers with a squat carinated body, a wide flat base, a more-or-less wide central filling hole, and a small perforated triangular horizontal handle attached to the maximum diameter should be classified separately from the different variants of the Loeschcke XIII type.

Based on the available evidence, it seems that the type in question is primarily present in Dacia Superior, with a very small number of examples in the surrounding regions. They are only attested so far in urban and military centres, though this could be a consequence of the state of research, which favours this kind of sites. While some of the finds are associated with cult or bathing contexts, others come from regular houses or military barracks. The six finds included in the case study come from archaeological contexts directly related to the Liber Pater sanctuary, so they were most likely used in cult-related activities, but this is not really helpful since both lighting devices and ointment containers could have been used in this kind of contexts.

Their more likely function is difficult to ascertain based just on their morphology or contexts of discovery. They could have equally been used as lamps or/and ointment containers; after all, their shape is versatile enough to adapt to both functions. On the other hand, their use as candle-holders is less likely mainly due to the absence of an important feature, namely the ability to collect the melted tallow or wax.

A clear answer to this problem could be provided by a systematic analysis of the organic residue recovered from the interior of a significant number of similar containers coming from different contexts of consumption.

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Abbreviations

- APFR1 – ceramic fabric code (Apulum Fine Reduced no. 1)
- D – diameter
- H – height
- Hp – preserved height
- SF no. – small-find number in the site inventory

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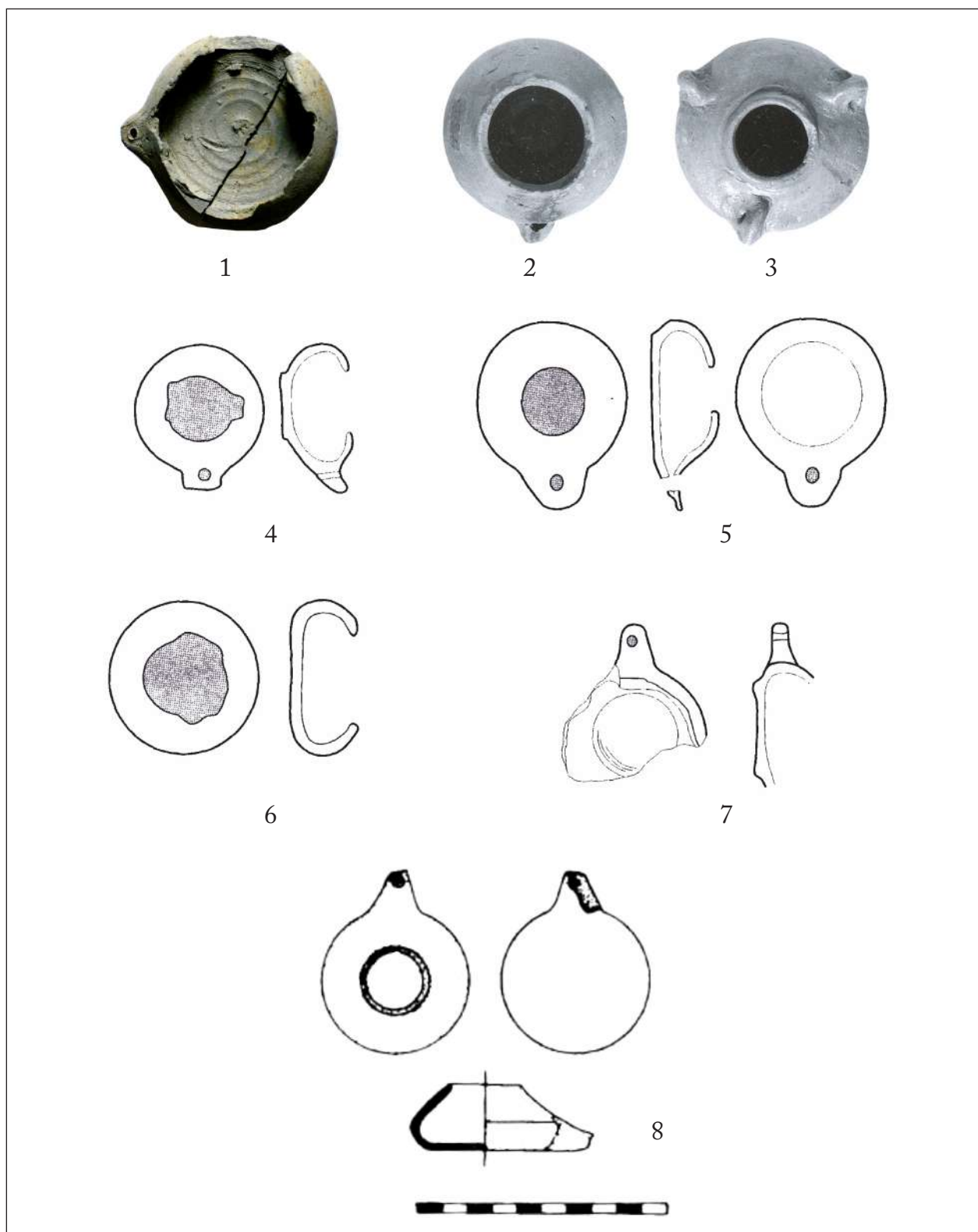


Figure 1. “Ampullae oleariae” from: 1. Apulum-Liber Pater (photo M. Egri); 2. Ilișua; 3. Cristești (both after Isac, Roman 2006); 4. and 6. Porolissum; 5. Buciumi; 7. Cășeiu (all after Roman 2006); 8. Apulum-Partoș (after Moga et al. 2000)

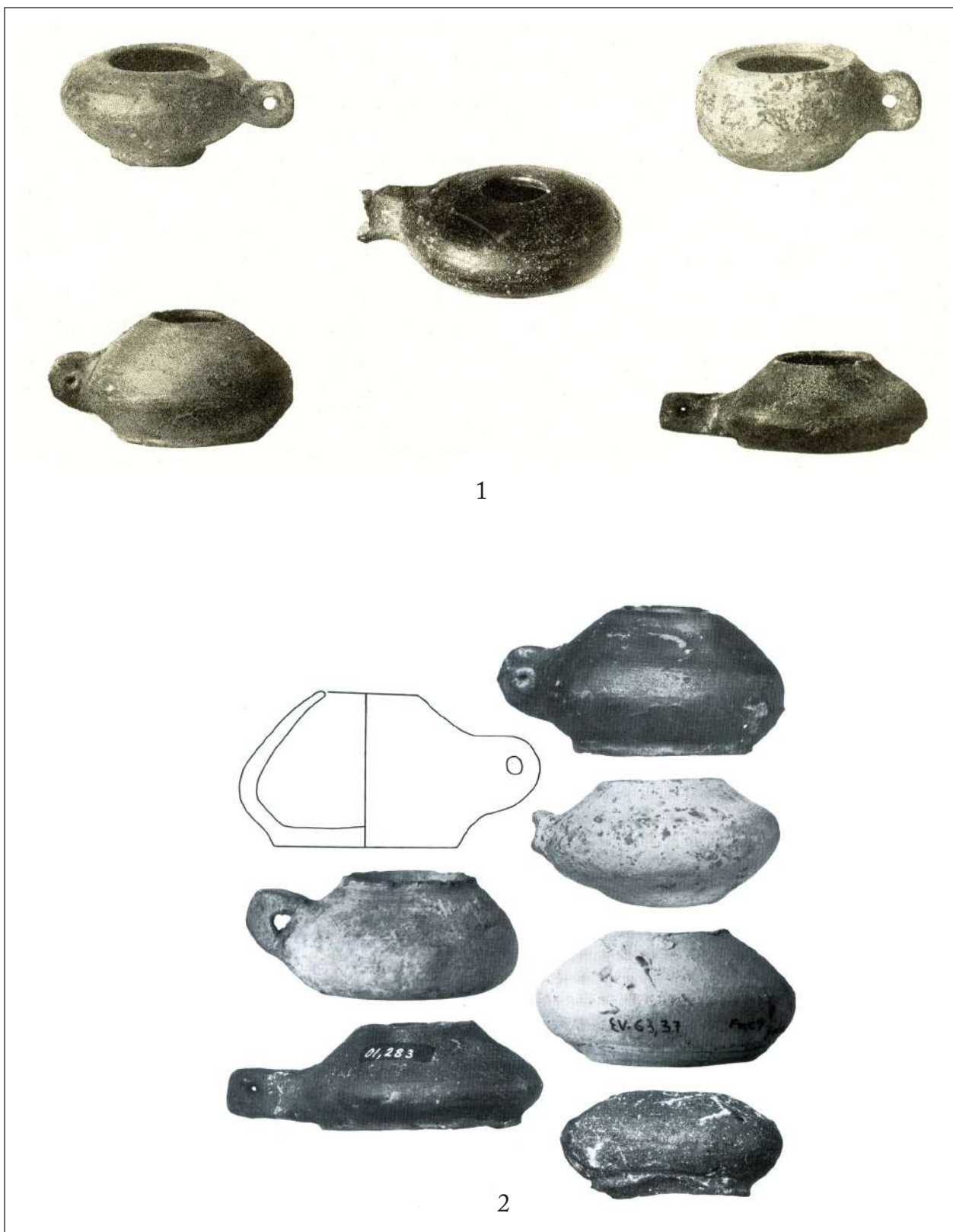


Figure 2. Ceramic tallow lamps of the Loeschcke XIII type: 1. Geneva and Vindonissa (after Loeschcke 1919); 2. Trier (after Goethert-Polaschek 1987)