

Dávid Petruț

# **Pottery and military life**

The ceramic assemblages from the barracks of the  
auxiliary fort at Buciumi, Dacia Porolissensis

**COMISIA NAȚIONALĂ LIMES**

**STUDII ȘI CERCETĂRI ASUPRA FRONTIERELOR  
IMPERIULUI ROMAN DE PE TERITORIUL ROMÂNIEI**

Vol. 4

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EDITURA MEGA  
Cluj-Napoca  
2018

*Această carte a apărut cu sprijinul  
Ministerului Culturii și Identității Naționale,  
Comisia Națională Limes.*



COMISIA  
LIMES  
ROMANIA

Editori volum: Felix Marcu, George Cupcea  
DTP: Francisc Baja

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Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

PETRUȚ, DÁVID

*Pottery and military life: the ceramic assemblages from the barracks of the auxiliary fort at Buciumi,  
Dacia Porolissensis / Dávid Petruț. - Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2018*

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-020-043-7

902



EDITURA MEGA | [www.edituramega.ro](http://www.edituramega.ro)  
e-mail: [mega@edituramega.ro](mailto:mega@edituramega.ro)

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# Preface and acknowledgements

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It may be argued today that the lion's share of sources with regard to everyday life in the military environment of the Roman provinces during the Principate is provided by the archaeological record and material culture. However, in order to claim that we are in fact exploring the relationship between human behaviour and material culture, it is essential to move beyond the traditional positivistic and taxonomic approach which sees the end goal of finds analysis in the setting up of local and global typological classifications. While classification is an absolutely necessary research tool, in order to assume the perspective of the peoples and communities whom we are allegedly studying, it is vital to focus on the use of the respective objects, i.e. their functionality, as well as their origin (together with the supply mechanisms) both at an individual and a quantified level. Indeed, for instance, the fact that public dining, drinking and gaming was taking place just outside the headquarters building of the fort in Porolissum in the upper storey of building C3, would have been impossible to detect without the detailed analysis of the finds in addition to their thorough recording. Moreover, only by interpreting the patterns in material culture can we get closer to the day-to-day life of the people we refer to as 'Roman soldiers' and thus help to unravel the distorting uniformity of our perception of Roman civilisation, and of current antiquity reception as a whole. Asking the right questions will eventually lead to the realization that 'the Roman army is not what we think it is', as Andrew Gardner put it.<sup>1</sup>

The investigation – carried out in the framework of a PhD research programme at the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj between 2010 and 2014 – is focused on the material culture yielded by the barracks of the auxiliary fort at Buciumi on the north-western frontier of Dacia Porolissensis, which emerged between 1971 and 1976, the final period of the systematic archaeological surveys at the site that began in 1963. Given that the only larger pottery assemblage from the fort was published in the monograph of 1972, the bulk of the ceramic material has hitherto remained unprocessed. The fort at Buciumi is to this day among only a handful of military bases in Dacia, where the barracks were subject to comprehensive research. As such, the present book originally set out to offer a new perspective on the daily life of a military community from northern Dacia through the careful analysis of the material evidence it left behind, and thus underscore some of the diverse features which characterize the internal life of the province's garrisons. Needless to say, these goals were only partially met. Due to the strict deadline of the PhD submission, the archaeological evidential base was reduced to the previously unpublished pottery finds from the barracks, i.e. the vessel assemblages and the small finds. Moreover, given the fact that we are dealing with excavations carried out many decades ago, the somewhat sketchy nature of the finds' recording effectively prevented a precise plotting of the material. All in all the adverse circumstances gave way to improvisation, some of the methods and results may prove to be lasting (at least for a while), others less so. The choice to build the current investigation on the evidence of the pottery finds was based on three main aspects: 1) the shortage of pottery studies dealing with the military

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<sup>1</sup> Gardner 2007a, 16–17.

environment of Roman Dacia, 2) the availability of a complete assemblage pertaining to fort barracks, and 3) the intrinsic potential of pottery studies with regard to revealing aspects of everyday life. Beyond the contingency inherent to the forming of the archaeological record and its composition in terms of finds, pottery studies can be a source for a long list of subjects concerning the daily life of the soldiers: supply of goods, use of space, production, military diet and conviviality, daily routine and aspects of military identity.

Given the subject of the book, and the shortcomings of keeping to a monographic perspective, the investigation was extended to include the theoretical aspects and implications of everyday life studies in archaeology as well as the crucial informational base provided by the sub-literary record. Accordingly, Chapter 1, entitled 'Roman provincial archaeology and the concept of "everyday life" with regard to the western frontier provinces and Roman Dacia. A review of prior research and current developments', is meant to be a critical evaluation of the evolution of 'everyday life studies' in Roman provincial archaeology. Chapter 2, entitled 'The daily life of the Roman soldiers during the Principate based on the sub-literary record', is a review of the written record attributed directly to the members of the military communities throughout the Empire, such as the Vindolanda writing-tablets, the wax tablets from the legionary base at Vindonissa, the ostraca from North Africa, and the military papyri of Dura Europos and Egypt. Chapter 3 comprises the review of the research carried out inside the fort at Buciumi, while Chapter 4 contains the analysis of the pottery assemblage, based on the four main functional categories ('tableware', 'utilitarian ware', 'cookware', and 'non-food-related containers'), a review of the assemblage published in the 1972 monograph, and the analysis of functional aspects pertaining to the material. The final section prior to the conclusions, Chapter 5, comprises an analysis of the pottery small-finds, centred on various classes of objects not covered in the previous part, i.e. other than vessels. All drawings and photos were made by the author unless specified otherwise.

For the help that I have received during the work on this volume, throughout my PhD studies period and beyond, I wish to express my gratitude to the following persons and institutions: Professor Nicolae Gudea, one of the excavators of the site and my doctoral supervisor, dr. Mariana Egri, for the indispensable guidance in dealing with the material, to Professor Dénes Gabler from Budapest for the help in the assessment of the terra sigillata, to dr. Małgorzata Daszkiewicz and dr. Gerwulf Schneider (Excellence Cluster Topoi, Berlin) for establishing the provenance of the sigillata assemblage through chemical analysis, as well as the administration of the County Museum of History and Art Zalău and especially dr. Horea Pop for readily providing access to the finds. The financial support for the research was provided by the Sectorial Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007–2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project number POSDRU/107/1.5/S/76841 with the title 'Modern Doctoral Studies: Internationalization and Interdisciplinarity'. The publication of the volume was made possible by the Limes Commission of the Romanian Ministry of Culture, the National Museum of Transylvanian History, and the personal support of dr. Ovidiu Țentea, dr. Felix Marcu and Szilamér Pánczél. During my time as a PhD student I have benefitted from a three-month visiting student fellowship at the University of Cambridge, Faculty of Classics under the advisership of Professor Martin Millett in 2013, and a one-month scholarship at the Hungarian National Museum in November 2011 under the supervision of dr. Ádám Szabó, granted by the Domus Hungarica Scientiarum et Artium, department of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. I wish to thank them both for all their support and guidance. I also want to convey my thanks to Dorottya Nyulas, dr. Silvia Mustață (Babeș-Bolyai University) and Béla Sánta (University of Liverpool) for meticulously proofreading the manuscript and providing indispensable help in enhancing it, and to Emese Apai for the drawings on Pl. 32/3 and 34. Finally, I want to thank all my friends and colleagues in archaeology who are too many to name and from whom I have learned the most throughout the past decade and a half.