

The Red-lacquered ceramics of the Late Antique-Pre-Byzantine period

Discovered in the Gonio-Apsaros area in 2018-2022

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Abstract

The article explores red-lacquered ceramics discovered in Gonio-Apsaros in recent years. The southwestern Georgia has yielded many diverse red-lacquered ceramics from the ancient and late antique periods, less from the early Byzantine era. However, recently more have been discovered, forming an intriguing category within the kitchenware. Being imported goods, they provide insights into the region's interactions with the world.

The fragments of bowls (Late Roman C) including mouth, body, base, mouth-wall, fit into three distinct forms (10A, 10C, 3G/F) identified by Hayes. They are defined by orange, fine-grained ware, flared body and a mouth of varying cross-sections, separated by a delicate groove, traces of reddish varnish on the inside. A bowl fragment bears a cross-shaped mark with rings and can be associated with the types 67 and 68 of Hayes (LRC), with thickened, upturned mouths of polygonal or quadrangular cross-sections, light reddish-brown and fine-grained ware with occasional admixtures, sometimes remnants of pinkish-reddish varnish.

Due to the Byzantine Empire's expansion eastward, parts of Lazica became influenced by Byzantine economy, culture, politics. Apsaros fell within the Byzantine borders from the late 5th century. The growing discovery of materials near the Roman castle highlights the newfound significance of Apsaros increasing interest in it.

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keywords

Late Antiquity-Early-Byzantine period, South-west Georgia, Ceramics, Red-lacquered ceramics,

General overview

Ceramics, known for its durability and wide variety, plays a pivotal role in archaeological research. It is the most accessible source for numerous archaeological periods, including the Late Antiquity-Early Byzantine period, which is the focus of our investigation.

A significant quantity of ancient red-lacquered ceramics has been discovered throughout the South-West Georgia region, displaying a diverse array of shapes. These ceramics have undergone thorough study and have been documented in previous publications (Ebraliidze, 2005: 53-66; Mamuladze, Khalvashi, Kakhidze E., 2009: 410). As for the red-lacquered ceramics of the Late Antiquity-Early-Byzantine period discovered in recent years, some of them are included in the annual reports of archaeological works. The present article aims to study and present to a wide scientific audience the samples of red-lacquered ceramics found in the Byzantine layers as a result of the research carried out in different areas of Gonio-Apsaros in 2018-2020.

The transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages in Georgia was marked by various characteristics. The IV-VII centuries AD, serving as a transitional period, hold particular interest for research due to their regional political-economic, social, and cultural aspects. The Byzantine expansion towards the east exerted its influence on the south-western part of the Lazica kingdom, encompassing the Byzantine economy, culture, and politics (see Map 1). Apsaros itself, located within Byzantium's borders since the 5th century AD, assumes greater significance as evidenced by the growing discoveries of early-Byzantine materials in the vicinity of the Roman Castellium of Apsaros. Historical and archaeological sources indicate that the Romans constructed the fortress in the latter half of the 1st century AD to safeguard the empire's north-eastern borders. Roman garrisons were stationed there until the latter half of the 4th century, after which

signs of active life diminish. This is evident not only in the scarcity of written sources but also in the lack of archaeological material from that period (Mamuladze, Kakhidze E., Khalvashi, 2012: 237). From the 6th century onwards, Apsaros evolved into an auxiliary military logistics point and a fortified border, with its significance growing significantly during the Great Lazica War, particularly following the fall of Petra.

The recent discoveries from Gonio-Apsaros

The group of red-lacquered ceramic products stands out as a fascinating category within the table and kitchen inventory. These artifacts provide valuable insights into the fortified military garrisons during Late Antiquity and the Early Byzantine era. They offer clues about the supply networks connecting the surrounding settlements and shed light on the region's interactions with the wider world.

In recent years, a significant number of red-lacquered ceramic products have been discovered in the Gonio-Apsaros region, specifically within the Late Antiquity-Early Byzantine layers. Among these findings, there are intriguing fragments of red-lacquered bowls from the Late Roman period. These fragments include sections of the mouth, body, base, mouth-wall, and two bases (G.A.2021.34,61) (Mamiseishvili, 2023: 7), (Mamuladze, Rogava, 2023: 10). Detailed descriptions of some of these fragments are provided below.

A fragment of a red-lacquered bowl mouth, body and base (LRC, shape 10C), (NW-XII, G.A.2021/120), reddish-brown ware, with fine impurities; A groove separates the mouth from the body, while the mouth itself is corrugated. The base is flat, the heel is low. Notably, the inner edge of the base features a mark of a cross at the center, adorned with four rings (Fig. 1). With a mouth diameter of 30 cm, it is evident that the bowl must have been relatively deep.

Another large red-lacquered bowl mouth and wall fragment (LRC, Form 10C), (NW-XII, G.A.2021/109) pink-ware, with fine inclusions; Cleanly angobed, mouth corrugated, ware thickness - 0.4 cm. Mouth diameter - 31.5 cm. (Fig. 2).

Red-lacquered bowl mouth and body fragments (LRC, form 10A) (NO – I, G.A. 2018/150), orange-red fine-grained ware, flared body culminating in a thick, irregular cross-section mouth, which is separated from the body by a thin groove on the inside. Traces of reddish varnish remain on the inner surface. The diameter of the mouth is 19 cm, the thickness of the ware is 0.6 cm, the thickness of the mouth is 1.3 cm (Fig. 3).

A fragment of the mouth of a red-lacquered bowl (LRC, form 3G/F) (NO – I, G.A. 2018/241. Similar, also from the same site: G.A. 2018/127,132; G.A. 2019/97,131, 268.), has an orange fine-grained ware; The flared body shape ends with a thickened mouth, the cross-section of which is angular and irregular. The mouth is separated from the body by a thin groove on the inside, and by a thin ridge on the outer surface. Mouth diameter - 24 cm. The thickness of the ware is 0.4-0.5 cm, the thickness of the mouth is 0.8 cm (Fig. 4).

One fragment of a red-lacquered bowl (LRC, form 10C), (NO-I, G.A.2019/168), which has a triangular cross-section mouth, is different from the described samples. It has a corrugated line on the outer shoulders, mouth and body. It has a brown-orange ware. The diameter of the mouth - 30 cm, the thickness of the ware - 0.6 cm, the thickness of the mouth - 1. cm (Fig. 5).

The samples we have presented primarily exhibit a reddish-brown ware with fine impurities. The distinctive feature is the corrugated mouth, which is separated from the body by a groove. The base is flat and has a low heel. As previously mentioned, one of the bowl base fragments (G.A.2021/120) showcases a cross-shaped mark with decorative rings. Similar markings can be found on the inner sides of bases of similar bowls discovered in the Northern Black Sea, specifically Tiritaka and Bosphorus (Domzalski, Smokotina, 2020: 621), (Смокотина, 2009: 169-170). Additionally, a comparable monogram is present on a red-lacquered pottery fragment found in the acropolis of Istros in the western Black Sea region (Țârlea, Iliescu, Bottez, 2022: 155-156). These monograms, in terms of their shape, can be associated with types 67 and 68 as identified by Hayes in the vessels of the LRC group (Hayes, 1972: 364, Fig. 78- i, k, l).

Red-lacquered bowls reached their peak during the initial phase of Justinian I's reign, around the mid-6th century. Production of these bowls continued until the middle of the 7th century, with Phocaea being considered the main production center (Nayes, 1972: 364-365). However, copies of these bowls were also made in other regions (Vaag, 2005: 132-138). These vessels are characterized by thickened, upturned, polygonal, or quadrangular cross-section mouths. The ware used is a light reddish-brown with a fine-grained texture and occasional admixtures. Some of the utensils exhibit traces of pinkish-reddish varnish.

The material studied on the other monuments of south-western Georgia

Petra-Tsikhisdziri stands as a significant site from the Late Antiquity-early Byzantine period in southwestern Georgia. The excavation of the fortress's acropolis led to the study of fragments from a red-lacquered plate and bowl. The plate discovered exhibits rounded sides and thick walls. It possesses a rough

brownish ware, with a surface covered in dark red lacquer. The red-lacquered bowl, on the other hand, is represented by a fragment of the base and side. Observations reveal a vessel with a wide and flat base, with a narrow and low heel. The ware of the bowl displays a reddish-brown hue, while the inner surface is coated with dark red paint. These described materials date back to the 4th to 6th centuries AD (Inaishvili N, 1993: 134-135).

Between 1983 and 1988, during the archaeological study of the Tsikhisdziri plain area, N. Inaishvili identified four main types among the red-lacquered vessels. Type I encompasses bowls with straight or slightly convex-profiled sides, separated from the low and wide heel by a groove. These bowls possess a flat wide base and an incurved mouth. The ware is fine and light yellowish-pink. Traces of dark reddish varnish covering the vessel's surface are visible, with partial painting on the outer surface and typically unpainted bases. The fragments available for this type consist of side-mouth and base fragments. Based on better-preserved specimens, the mouth diameter ranges from 18 to 29 cm, the base diameter from 19 to 21 cm, and the height from 6 to 8 cm.

Type II is characterized by large bowl fragments, featuring a thickened-walled mouth that has a triangular-shape in cross-section. The surface is adorned with ridges encircling the body between grooves, while the heel is separated from the wall by a light groove.

Type III includes two fragments of bowl mouth-walls, showcasing a horizontal, slightly convex-profiled, and flat blade edge. The wall of the bowl tapers toward the base. The ware exhibits a pinkish-brown color, and the varnish is dark red.

Type IV is represented by a fragment of a plate made from fine-grained clay with a light brown ware. It possesses a wide and flared mouth, rounded sides, and a flat, low heel. The plate's dimensions are measured at a 29 cm mouth diameter, a 19.2 cm base diameter, and a plate height of 5 cm (Inaishvili N, 1993: 59-60).

In the archaeological site of Pichvnari, known primarily for its antiquity period remains, fragments of red-lacquered ceramic products from the Late Antiquity-Early Byzantine period were discovered. During this period, the site experienced a resurgence of settlement. The red-lacquered ceramic artifacts found in Pichvnari consist of fragments from the mouths or bases of bowls. These fragments are coated with a pale red varnish and exhibit a pinkish ware. They are adorned with notched parallel lines on the outer sides, a faint relief ridge along the mouth, and a groove on the inner surface (Chkhaidze, 1980, p. 49).

In a burial complex at the site, a red-lacquered dish was uncovered alongside other contemporary materials. The dish features a flared mouth with a light groove along its edge. It possesses low, thick, and straight walls that slightly widen near the mouth. The base of the dish is wide and flat, with a wide, ring-shaped, low heel. The vessel's ware is fine-grained and light-yellow in color, with an unevenly applied dark red varnish that has been preserved. Since this dish is one of the fully intact artifacts, it is worth noting its physical parameters as well. The dish has a mouth diameter of 27.5 cm, a heel diameter of 20 cm, and a height of 4.5 cm. Based on the contemporaneous materials found, the red-lacquered dish discovered in Pichvnari can be dated to the late 4th century and early 5th century AD (Kakhidze A., Vickers, Mamuladze, 2000: 75).

A noteworthy group of artifacts found in Tsikhisdziri, specifically within the Acropolis of Petra, are the red-polished kheladas. These clay jugs were discovered during archaeological excavations conducted in the 1960s. The kheladas belong to a small-sized jug type characterized by a narrow and tall neck, a flared mouth, sloping shoulders, and a pear-shaped body. On the upper part of the neck and shoulder, a small oval-shaped ear is sculpted. The jugs are crafted from a coarse-grained ware with a pinkish hue, which is then covered with dark red paint. These jugs display distinctive ornamentation (Inaishvili N, 1993: 133).

The red-polished kheladas were also found on the territory of the Tsikhisdziri plain. These jugs exhibit variations among them. For instance, one features a narrow neck that gradually widens towards the mouth, while another has a cylindrical neck. Furthermore, one fragment shows a distinct ridge at the transition from the neck to the body. These variations extend to the color and paint of the jugs as well. The ware color ranges from light brown to dark brown, and the paint differs too. Some fragments display a straw-colored paint, while others exhibit a reddish-brown hue (Inaishvili N, 1993: 58).

Conclusion

The territory of southwestern Georgia has yielded a diverse array of ceramic artifacts. Among them, we find both locally crafted items, such as incurved-bodied amphorae, as well as imported products. The origin of these imported goods suggests that the study region engaged in active trade and economic relations with the eastern provinces of the late Roman Empire and, later, the Byzantine Empire. Notably, these relations extended to prominent urban centers in Syria-Palestine, Asia Minor, and Anatolia. It is natural that we see the economic and cultural ties with the Black Sea coast cities as well.

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Description of illustrations

Map 1



Map. 1

Figures

