

Denis Zhuravlev & Dmitriy Khmelevskiy

PLASTIC VESSEL IN THE SHAPE OF A MALE AFRICAN HEAD FROM *OLBIA PONTICA*

A plastic vessel in the shape of a male African head found during the excavation in Olbia Pontica in 2016 is described in the article. This vessel dates to the 2nd-3rd century AD and was probably used for the transportation of perfume.

Olbia Pontica – Roman pottery – plastic vessel – depictions of Africans

In 2016 a large fragment of a plastic red slip vessel, made as a bust of a young African man (**fig. 1-2**) was found in the course of excavations of the Olbian citadel. Due to the fact that such finds, especially coming from regular excavations, are considered to be quite rare, we decided to devote a special investigation to this vessel. The following is a revised version of a paper originally published in Russian language in 2018 for giving it a wider circulation in English (Zhuravlev and Khmelevskiy 2018: 198-214).

1. Description of the vessel

The fragment belongs to the frontal part of the plastic vessel, manufactured in a relief mould, which looked like a face of a male representative of a black African. The facial features are formed well. The eyes of the person (only one is preserved) are open, but squint a little bit with a round eyeball distinctively noticeable in the centre; over them there are high eyebrows. The nose is broad and flat, the lips are full. Cheek bones and dimples stand out. One ear, situated close to the head, is preserved. The head is surrounded with curly hair and each curl has an additional incision at the end. The back part of the vessel, the throat and the base are not preserved. Height: 15,5 cm; width (frontal): 10,1 cm; width of the side part: 9,5 cm. The slip is red (10R 4/8 – main colour, but there are some shades of 10R 4/6), of high quality, and covers evenly the whole surface of the vessel. The clay is light brown, without any noticeable inclusions.

In general, while African faces on the vessels from the collections of the State Hermitage museum and the Odessa archaeological museum have 'funny facial expression' (Gertsiger 1976: 91), our character is mocking rather than funny.

2. Archaeological context of the find

The Roman citadel is situated in the southern part of the upper settlement of Olbia and is well marked topographically, as it dominates the lower part of the settlement. The Olbian citadel is an important part of the architectural and building remains of the ancient site and is connected with Roman troops which were stationed there from the middle of the 2nd to the middle of the 3rd century AD.

The first archaeological investigations of the central and north-eastern parts of the northern fortification line of the Olbian citadel were carried out by B.V. Pharmakovskiy in 1904, 1905 and 1924. Building remains were found in the course of these excavations, which made it possible to determine the position of the gates of two *courtines* – the central and the north-eastern one and of the so called barracks, joined with *courtine*.

Since that time some parts of building remains described above have been completely destroyed, other have disappeared due to two World Wars while some of them have been covered again with soil. As the remains of the citadel are important as museum objects, it was decided to carry out further archaeological investigations which were essential for the expositional project. These works started in 2005 and continue until today.

As the result of these investigations the central *courtine*, the north-eastern *courtine* and the building of the so called barracks were unearthed once again and the location of the supposed gates was determined.

Discovery of a part of the north-west wall became the main achievement of the excavations of 2011-2015. Besides this, several hearths and their remains as well as household pits were found on different layers of additional trenches mainly in central and eastern parts (Khmelevskiy 2016: 555-561).



Fig. 1. Plastic vessel in the shape of a male African head from *Olbia Pontica*.

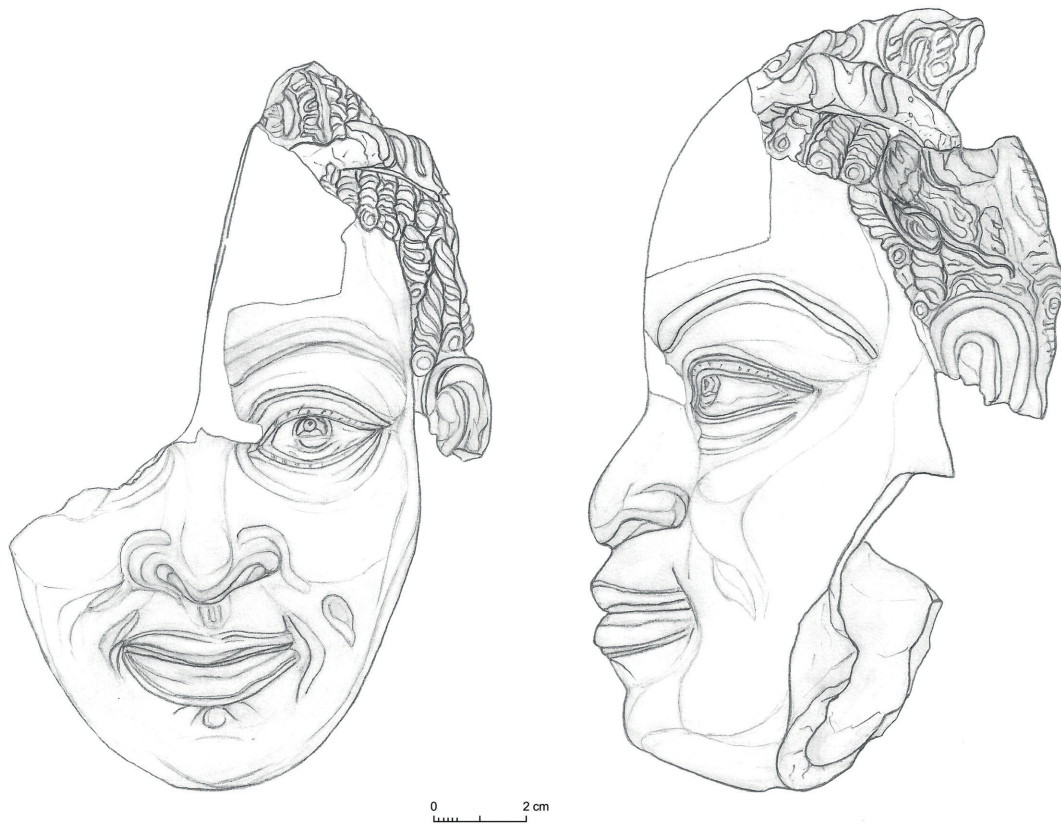


Fig. 2. Plastic vessel in the shape of a male African head from *Olbia Pontica*.

In the north-western corner of the trench to the west of the pit N 92, a limestone lid (probably of a cistern) was found. Later the pit N 93 was found under the lid. The pit was round in plan and its western part was destroyed in antiquity. In the northern part of the pit at a depth of 0,40 m large pieces of limestone were situated. The filling soil at this depth consists of grey clay and is loose with inclusions of ash, coal and fragments of burned mud constructions. In the eastern part of the pit it is possible to determine its borders. Finds from this layer are only few, mainly pottery fragments dating to various periods (4th century BC-3rd AD). The most typical fragments dating to the Roman time were represented by Eastern *sigillata* C and Pontic *sigillata* fragments. It was there where the fragmented plastic vessel, which is being briefly analysed in our article, was found.

3. Vessels made in bust shape

Plastic relief vessels belong to an interesting group of high quality ceramics, to which a lot of special investigations have been devoted. The study of plastic vessels from the North Pontic Area started off with the work of M. I. Maximova which is now considered a classical one (Maximova 1927). Later on, many researchers dealing not only with the North Pontic Area (see for example: Sorokina 1997; Gertsiger 1976; Gertsiger 1981; Buiskikh 2006: 206-230; Zhuravlev 2017 with bibliography), but with other regions as well

(see, for example: Mandel 1988; Gabler and Márton 2008; Sguaitamatti and Leone 2015), made them the topic of their investigations. According to calculations of D. S. Gertsiger (1976: 85), about 40 plastic vessels of different forms had been found in Olbia by 1976. It should be noted, that the majority of these vessels come from necropolis burials and others do not have any provenance at all, therefore the find of a fragment of a so-well-preserved vessel in the course of regular excavations of the settlement is really important.

Vessels made in the shape of a human bust were well known since the Archaic period (East Greece: Ducat 1966: 7-49, pl. I-II, IV-VII; Richter 1967: 33-37; Vacano 1976: Abb. 7-8; Herdejürgen 1989; Schlotzhauer 2006, with bibliography. Attica: Gorbunova 1960; Gorbunova 1962; Croissante 1973; Biers 1973; Reeder Williams 1978: 397, pl. 102). In the Hellenistic period some vessels of this type even copied portrait features of some famous people, for example, Arsinoe II and III, wives of kings of the Ptolemaic dynasty (Yon 1985), or Mithridates-Heracles (see for example such a vessel from Pantikapaion: Pharmakovskiy 1916: 311-327; Gertsiger 1981). Several vessels with depictions of mythological heroes – for example Odysseus or Achilles – date to the Roman period (Greifenhagen 1967: 532-534, Taf. XXII-XXIII). In the late Hellenistic and Roman periods popularity of such luxury vessels increased and they started to be produced in different centres (Salomonson 1968: 136, fig. 47, 3; 139, fig. 50; Johnson 1970: 39-42, fig. 1-3, 5; La Baume and Salomonson 1976: 170-172, Taf. 66, 625, 626,



Fig. 3. Plastic vessels from *Olbia Pontica*. 1. Odessa Archaeological Museum (from: Cat. Odessa. 1983, N 105); 2-3. State Hermitage Museum (from: Gertsiger 1976, fig. 2, 3-4).

628; 67, 627, 629, 630; Mandel 1988: 228-230, Taf. 20-22). Apart from ceramic ones, glass vessels in the shape of human head are known (Fremersdorf 1961: 55-56, Taf. 104, 106-107; Sorokina 1968: 181-189; Kunina 1997: 122-123, N 86-90, etc.). Some finds of vessels of this shape come from the North Pontic region (Johnson 1970: 40-41, fig. 5).

In Roman times vessels made in the shape of a head or ones with the depiction of a human face were especially popular, which caused the appearance of facial urns and of vessels, made for other uses (Mitova-Dzhonova 1972; Ricci 1985: 347, tav. CXIV, 1-3; CXXXIX, 6; Braithwaite 1984; Braithwaite 2007; Nolić and Raičković 2008). We know only one vessel of this shape in the Northern Pontic area (Kostromichev 2011: 34-35, fig. 18, 2). A fragment of a plastic flask with the body made in the shape of a male head comes from the territory of Chersonesos Taurica (Klenina and Soznik 2004: 67-68, fig. 16, Cat. 153). It is extremely difficult to ascertain the anthropological type of this head, as the picture in the publication is very schematic. A plastic vessel in the shape of a Silenos head with the throat made in the shape of a Demeter or Kore (Persephone) head of Knidian production was found in Ust' Alma necropolis (Puzdrovskiy 2012: 201-206, fig. 2-3). Anthropomorphic vessels come also from the territory of Moesia and Thracia (Nenova-Merdzhanova 1994).

4. Plastic vessels with the image of African men

We should note that depictions of male heads of the black African type can be found on plastic vessels dating as early as to the 5th century BC (Beardsley 1929: 23-41; Snowden 1976:

142-143, fig. 153-154; 172-173, fig. 208-211). Vessels of this shape were widely distributed in the Roman period. Plastic vessels with the image of a youth of the black African type come quite often from North Pontic Area sites: for example, a vessels made in the shape of a sitting African belongs to the famous collection of A. Vogell (Cramer 1908: 53, N 523, Taf. VIII, 12). Three vessels made in the shape of busts of Africans were published by D. S. Gertsiger – two are preserved in the collection of the State Hermitage museum (**fig. 3, 2-3**), one comes from the collection of the Odessa archaeological museum (**fig. 3, 1**) (Gertsiger 1976: 89-91, fig. 2, 3-4).

One vessel in the shape of a black youth is preserved in Baltimore (collection of Robinson) (Beardsley 1929: fig. 22; Fontana 1995: 88, fig. 8). Two plastic vessels of the 2nd – 3rd centuries AD in the shape of African heads are preserved in Houston (Snowden 1976: 236-237, fig. 327-328; Parlasca 1986: Taf. 38, 1) (**fig. 4, 2, 4**). A similar vessel was found at excavations in Cyprus (Karageorghis 1988: 52-53, N 49; cf. Snowden 1976: fig. 328). Two almost complete vessels in the shape of a black youth and one fragment of a similar object come from the Samothrace necropolis and date to 25 BC (Dusenbery 1998: 779-780, N SP-2, S152-1, S151-A). The most complete selection of Hellenistic plastic vessels in the shape of African heads from Magna Graecia and Sicily was recently published by M. Sguaitamatti and R. Leone (2015: 21-24, pl. 11-16, B34-B52).

According to the manner of production, our vessel resembles a terracotta head of an African from Agrigento, which dates to the late 6th or early 5th century BC (Snowden 1976: 148-149, fig. 163; Sguaitamatti and Leone 2015: 23, B49). However, the latter has a totally different purpose. Ceramic balsamaria of African production made in the shape of an



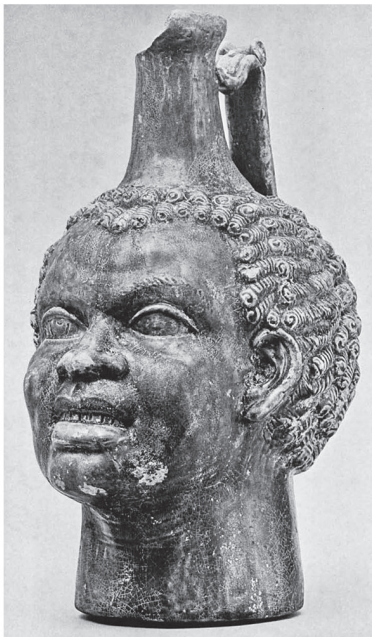
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Fig. 4. Plastic vessels in the shape of male African heads. 1. Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum (from: Hausmann 1962, Beil. 76. 1); 2 and 4. Houston, 2nd-3rd century AD (from: Snowden 1962, N 327-328); 3. Museum in Chemtou (form: Fontana 1995, fig. 10); 5. Bronze bust. Ostia, 2nd century AD. Vatican museums. (from: Leglant 1976, fig. 372); 6. Bronze bust. Museum Providence, 2nd-1st century BC (from: Snowden 1962, fig. 239).

African head were widespread in the 3rd-4th centuries AD (Fontana 1995: 83-91). Nevertheless, they slightly differ from the published vessel.

5. The origin of the shape of red slip vessels

It is highly likely that the shape of the clay vessels, found in Olbia and in other places, derives from bronze vessels-busts of various sizes (fig. 4, 5-6). These come not only from

several sites of the Eastern Mediterranean (Goessler 1928; Bilimovich 1967; Snowden 1976: 192, fig. 241-242; Majewski 1963; Marti 1996), but also from Begram (Afghanistan) (Coarelli 1961: 168-179). F. Coarelli considers them objects of Alexandrine production (1961: 176). Bronze vessels of this type are thought to have been used as containers for various types of incense (Majewski 1963: 100; Gertsiger 1976: 92). It is also possible that red slip vessels in the shape of African heads were viewed as cheaper transport containers to supply less demanding consumers with incense.

6. Images of Ethiopians/Africans in ancient art and literature

Depictions of Africans were extremely popular in Greek and Roman times. The earliest ones date to the Minoan period. It is difficult to say whom exactly they represented – mythological *Aethiopes* or real Nubian warriors. Their images can be found, for example, on frescoes on Thera or in the palace of Nestor in Pylos (Snowden 1976: 136-140).

In ancient literary tradition the Ethiopians played a noticeable role. The king of Ethiopians Memnon as the leader of the troops took part in the Trojan War against the Greeks. Menelaos visited Ethiopia after the Trojan campaign. The Greeks believed the Ethiopians to be inhabitants of the Southern edge of the Earth, who lived on the shores of the Ocean. As the Ethiopians offered rich sacrifices to the Gods, the Gods were glad to be feasting 'with them and presented them their favour' (Hom. Od. I 21-25; II.I. 423; XXIII, 206).

However, it is difficult to speak about resemblances between of the Ethiopians described by early ancient authors and the black populations of Africa. There are many reasons to suppose that the *Aethiopes* of Homer and other authors belonged to an idealized light-skinned people (in contrast, for example, to Euribados, a companion of Odysseus, who was described purposely as black-skinned) (Ivantchik 2005: 23).

Later Herodotos was describing Libyan warriors with curly hair serving in the Persian army (VII, 70). Citizens of the Greek city of Naukratis met black inhabitants of Northern Africa on several occasions (see the publications about ancient literary sources: Beardsley 1929; Snowden 1976; Ivantchik 2005: 23-25). However, it was favour of the Olympic gods towards these people which caused the fact that depictions of Ethiopian heads and later on, of all the Africans, became a symbol of prosperity.

In Roman times a part of the citizens of the Empire had black skin, that's why images of black Africans were well known and generally understandable by everyone.

Depictions of Africans were widespread in vase painting (Beardsley 1929: 42-66; Snowden 1976: 141, fig. 150-152; 144-145, fig. 155-158; 150-151, fig. 165-166; etc), and on mosaics as well (Snowden 1976: 186-187, fig. 234-235; Karagheorghis 1988: 56-57, N 52). Black people were shown on valuable objects as well – for example, on a golden *phiale* with images of Ethiopian heads from the hoard in Panagurishte (Snowden 1976: 180-181, fig. 221-222), and on other pieces of jewellery (Snowden 1976: 194-195, fig. 244-246), as well as on coins since Classical time (Snowden 1976: 192, fig. 186-193). There are numerous images of the Africans on terracotta masks (Snowden 1976: 190, fig. 238; Karagheorghis 1988: 54-55, N 50-51), and terracotta figurines (Snowden 1976: 234-235, fig. 317-323; Karagheorghis 1988: 42-45, N 34-39).

Lamps made in the shape of a male head of the black African type were also widespread (Hausmann 1962: 255-281, Beil. 80, 1-2; Snowden 1976: 192, fig. 240; 235, fig. 324; Desanges 1976: 260-261, fig. 352-354; Karagheorghis 1988: 48-49, N 45-47; Kuzmanov 1992: 67, N 44-45; Zhuravlev, Bykovskaya and Zheltikova 2007: 265-267, N 95, described as satyr). Besides that, statues of black people in stone (Snowden 1976: 202-205, fig. 256-258) and bronze (Snowden 1976: 197-201, fig. 251-255, 259-261) are well known. There are some interesting small plastic vessels in the shapes of African children, for example, sitting with a vessel or a bird (Hausmann 1962: Beil. 76-78; Snowden 1976: 182, fig. 223, 226), sleeping next to an amphora (Snowden 1976: 206, fig. 262-263) or vessels with depiction of fight with crocodile (Beardsley 1929: 38-41, fig. 9; Snowden 1976: 174-175, fig. 213-214; see also the depiction of a black acrobat on the back of crocodile: Snowden 1976: 228, fig. 299). Several glass vessels made in the same shape are also well known (Price 1974; Snowden 1976: 221, fig. 287). One of the most interesting is a series of grotesques (Richter 1967: Abb. 30; La Baume and Salomonson 1976: 172-173, Taf. 67, 631; 68, 632; Salomonson 1979: 136, fig. 14 (in the center); Salomonson 1980: 117, Abb. 18-20; 118, Abb. 21, ab), representing heads of Africans. It is obvious that our list is not full and there are many more well-known depictions (Snowden 1976, with the most complete examples of images of African people in Greek and Roman art).

For clear reasons the popularity of such images in the Roman Northern Africa (Desanges 1976: 246-268) and Egypt (Leclant 1976) was extremely high. There is a point of view that such a popularity was connected with African legionaries serving in remote corners of the Empire (Leclant 1976: 269-285; Swan 1992: 15-22, fig. 6), although this supposition is not entirely accepted.

7. Conclusion

The published vessel could be dated very wide, to the 2nd-3rd centuries AD, according to the chronology of the context, which included no materials later than the 3rd century AD. We have no closed parallels with exact date to specify the date of manufacture of our vessel. The centre of its production is not clear, however, it is unlikely that it was made in an African workshop, especially, if one takes into account the almost complete absence of African ceramic imports of the 1st-3rd centuries AD in Olbia, Chersonesos and at the Bosphorus. It must have been produced, as most plastic vessels from the North Pontic Area, in one of the workshops of Asia Minor. There are no grounds to connect this find with Roman troops in Olbia; the vessel must have got to the Bug river basin owing to trade connections.

Denis Zhuravlev

State Historical museum, Department of archaeology, Moscow, Russia
denzhuravlev@mail.ru

Dmitriy Khmelevskiy

Institute of archaeology, Ukrainian Academy of science, Kiev, Ukraine
hmelevskij68@mail.ru

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