

# Pottery Vessels with Graffiti Discovered in the Roman Fort from Orheiu Bistriței

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**Abstract:** New invasive archaeological investigations from the inner areas of the Roman fort from Orheiu Bistriței conducted in the summer of 2019 have yielded thirteen pottery vessels with graffiti. The inscribed texts discovered at Orheiu Bistriței are, without exception, written in Latin and were incised after the pots were fired (*post cocturam*). Generally, these depict the name of the owner with one exception, which might depict a number.

**Keywords:** Roman fort, potsherds, graffito

**Rezumat:** Noi cercetări arheologice în interiorul castrului roman de la Orheiu Bistriței din vara anului 2019 au dus la descoperirea a 13 fragmente ceramice cu *graffiti*. Textele scrise de la Orheiu Bistriței sunt, fără excepție, redactate în latină și au fost incizate după ce vasele au fost arse (*post cocturam*). În general redau numele proprietarului vasului, cu o singură excepție, care poate reprezenta un numeral.

**Cuvinte cheie:** castru roman, fragmente ceramice, graffito

## Introduction

The Roman fort from Orheiu Bistriței (fig. 1), located in the north-eastern frontier area of Roman Dacia, has benefited from little archaeological investigations so far<sup>1</sup>. The historical data regarding the

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fort, its civilian settlement, necropolis or other elements are thus parsimonious. One can outline with certainty the presence of the military unit named *cohors I Hispanorum milliaria*<sup>2</sup>, without advancing any other relevant pieces of information regarding the unit's prosopography or its encampment duration in this fort<sup>3</sup>.

New invasive archaeological investigations from the inner areas of the fort conducted in the summer of 2019 have yielded thirteen pottery vessels with graffiti which represent the focal point of this paper (fig. 2)<sup>4</sup>. Judging by the archaeological contextualization – which will be discussed in detail on a different occasion – one can state that the pottery shards with graffiti can be dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.

*Graffiti in Roman Dacia. A short incursion*

The first *corpus* of inscribed pottery vessels discovered in Roman Dacia was created in 1992, comprising of 123 pieces, which were made in both Greek and Latin<sup>5</sup>. Subsequently, a series of new pottery vessels with graffiti have been discovered in the area of Dacia Porolissensis, inscribed either in Latin, Greek or Aramaic at: *Arcobara/Ilișua, Certiae?/Brusturi-Romita; Porolissum/Moigrad-Jac, Buciumi, Gilău, Napoca/Cluj-Napoca* and *Potaissa/Turda*; all these substantially contribute to a better understanding of important aspects related to Roman provincial life, such as the vernacular Latin language spoken on the frontier, onomastic, military prosopography or religion<sup>6</sup>.

the map of Dacia Porolissensis created by him. All mistakes or misjudgements are however our own.

<sup>1</sup> See recent research on the fort in Protase 2008; Marcu 2009, 86-87.

<sup>2</sup> See Petolescu 2002, 111-112, no. 45 for the historical date and the prosopography of this military unit.

<sup>3</sup> For the types of stamped bricks and tiles with the name of the military unit see ILD II 1025 (where a graffito is also mentioned on a pot), respectively IDR App. I XLIV/1-3 and XLV/1. Furthermore, one single epigraphic funerary monument is known so far as being discovered at Orheiu Bistriței: CIL III 7624 = Zăgreanu 2014, 235, O. IF.1, pl. XCVII/ O.IF.1. See also ILD I 805. In regard of the ancient name of the Roman settlement from Orheiu Bistriței, Sorin Nemeti theoretically advanced the idea that it should have been *Triphulum* (see Deac 2013, 265-266 with the previous bibliographic references; Nemeti 2014, 66).

<sup>4</sup> The archaeological investigations were carried out by Radu Zăgreanu, the scientific coordinator of the excavations and Angelica Moldovan (Museum Complex Bistrița-Năsăud), between June and July.

<sup>5</sup> Gudea, Cosma 1992, 201-247. For the paleography of these texts see Voloșciuc 2007, 57-68.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Deac, Dana 2019, 114, n. 13 for an overview of these occurrences. To this one should add Beu-Dachin, Isac 2019. For pottery vessels with graffiti from other parts of Dacia, recently discovered or reinterpreted, see for example: Dana 2013-2014, 47-48, no. 4; Bondoc 2015, 68, 110-111, nos. 309-411, pl. LVII-LVIII (photos and drawings); Dana 2015, 93-98; Dana 2016, 96-97, no. 6 = AE 2016, 1337; Dana, Tuțulescu 2017, 197-206 = AE 2017, 1197-1199 with the relevant bibliographic references.

### Observations related to the earthenware inscribed with graffiti discovered at Orheiu Bistriței

The inscribed texts discovered at Orheiu Bistriței are, without exception, written in Latin and were incised after the pots were fired (*post cocturam*). Generally, these depict the name of the owner with one exception, no. 13, which might depict a number. Given the context of the discoveries all these individuals are likely to have been of peregrine status<sup>7</sup>. One can notice that the names are rendered either in nominative (cat. no. 1, 2 and 5) or in genitive (cat. no. 3, 6, 7 and possibly 9), in the cases where such assertions can be testified. As a general rule one can observe that the chosen method of writing was that with capital letters, nicely shaped and outlined. From a paleographic point of view one can draw a series of conclusions. The form of the letter “E” is cursive, rendered with two vertical parallel lines each time when the letter is encountered (cat. no. 2 and 5 and possibly cat. no. 12)<sup>8</sup>. The “A” letter is rendered without the horizontal stroke (cat. no. 4 and 6). On the other hand, even though there are some similarities in the different graffiti, one can observe that the “S” has slightly an alternating *ductus* different in each of the occurrences (cat. no. 1, 2, 5 and possibly 10) either cursive or capital in style. Thus, one can trace the existence of several handwritings which actually made the incisions. The rather simple or “mechanical” form (e.g. “I” or “N”), the rare occurrence or partial visibility in order to distinguish similarities or differences (for examples “R”, “L”, “B” or “M”), lack of parallels between Orheiu Bistriței and near-by discoveries, do not argue however for a proper paleographic analysis of the aforementioned letters<sup>9</sup>.

The high concentrations of such pottery vessels incised with graffiti discovered practically in the same context raises the question whether it was a common practice or an accident that so many of these finds were located in the *retentura dextra* of the fort. A similar high concentration can be encountered at *Porolissum* in the edifice conventionally labeled as C4, localized in the *latus sinistrum* of the Pomet hill fort, a building which is believed to have functioned as a *fabrica*, or a

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<sup>7</sup> See in detail Varga 2014.

<sup>8</sup> As a closely located analogy one can point to a jug incised with the name of the owner – *Crescentis* – discovered in the Roman settlement at Cristești, Mureș County (IDR III/4 163 = Gudea, Cosma 1992, 215, no. 80 = Man 2011, 208, no. 1, pl. CLIV/1).

<sup>9</sup> In the north-eastern area of Dacia Porolissensis few Latin graffiti have been discovered so far in military contexts, just at *Arcobara*, located near-by, slightly to the west of the fort from Orheiu Bistriței (see Gudea, Cosma 1992, 216, nos. 86-89); Dana et al. 2012, 49-56 = AE 2012, 1201). For a graffito in Greek on a piece of pottery from the same settlement see CIGD 56.

*valetudinarium*, or a (part of a) *praetorium*<sup>10</sup>. It is followed by the headquarters (*principia*)<sup>11</sup>, the personal residence of the fort commander (*praetorium*)<sup>12</sup> or by the isolated discoveries from the *praetentura*, especially from the area of the barracks<sup>13</sup>. In any case, the need of the military to incise their names on the pots indicates that in the case of Orheiu Bistriței, just like at *Porolissum*, the location speaks for an intensively used and circulated area.

Finally, it should be concluded that the ceramic vessels incised with graffiti discovered in the fort from Orheiu Bistriței enhanced our knowledge on the military prosopography and paleography from the north-eastern area of Roman Dacia, both disciplines being in an incipient status at Orheiu Bistriței for the time being.

### Catalogue<sup>14</sup>

1. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: h = 12 cm, l = 8.5 cm, w = 0.7 cm; h<sub>letters</sub> = 2.5 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26724 (pl. I/1).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the inferior register of the pot; fine fabric, traces of slip distinguishable; reddish color, the inscription being near the bottom of the pot.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S1, feature 1, depth = 140 cm.

Text: [---]nus, (centuria) Vu[---].

Observations: the sign of the *centuria* is rendered with the typical mark made like an elongated sign shaped like „>“; few of the letters from the end part of the name of the soldier and the beginning of the centurion are visible, resulting in more possibilities and variants when reading the names<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> See Gudea, Cosma 1992, 218-219, nos. 107, 109, 110, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116. For the edifice conventionally named C4 see Marcu 2009, 92-93; Opreanu, Lăzărescu 2016, 75, 263 (with previous bibliographic references).

<sup>11</sup> Gudea, Cosma 1992, 217-218, nos. 93, 94, 96, 98, 99.

<sup>12</sup> Gudea, Cosma 1992, 218-219, nos. 105, 108, 111.

<sup>13</sup> Gudea, Cosma 1992, 218, nos. 100, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121. Of course, in every of these occurrences one has to bear in mind the hazardous way discoveries of pottery vessels incised with graffiti were made give the methodology of the archaeological research. One can conclude that in reality, such discoveries are purely fortunate.

<sup>14</sup> The technical abbreviations used in the catalogue are: S = archaeological trench; m = meter; h = height; l = length; w = width; h<sub>letters</sub> = height of letters. Furthermore, the photos and drawing were made by the authors.

<sup>15</sup> For the name of the centurion and varieties of reading it, most likely of a Latin origin, consult Solin, Salomies 1994, 214 (*nomina*) 425 (*cognomina*). For the occurrence consisting of the name of soldier – sign of *centuria* – name of centurion see another example from Dacia

2. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: h = 8 cm, l = 7 cm, w = 0.7 cm. H<sub>letters</sub> = 2.5 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26727 (pl. I/2).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot, the inscription being placed above the maximum diameter of the pot. Fine fabric, yellowish color.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S2, m = 4, at 9 m from the western profile, depth = 160 cm.

Text: [T?]eres.

Observations: "E" is incised through two parallel and vertical lines just like cat. no. 5. The left stroke of the first "E" is only partially preserved in its lower side. "R" has a typical form in Latin paleography, with the right stroke slightly elongated and slightly wavy, while the "S" is very neatly done. Teres is a very commonly encountered Thracian name<sup>16</sup>.

3. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: h = 9 cm, l = 19.5 cm, w = 1.4 cm. H<sub>letters</sub> = 4.5 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26735 (pl. I/3).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot; fine fabric; traces of paint are visible; reddish color; the inscription is placed above the maximum diameter of the pot.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S1, m = 1-3, depth = 30-80 cm.

Text: *Luci*.

Observations: The horizontal stroke of "L" is broken off, being initially slightly elongated similarly to cat. no. 8. The Latin *praenomen* Lucius is commonly attested in Roman Dacia or in other provinces of the Roman Empire, bearing sometimes the role of a *nomen* or *cognomen*<sup>17</sup>. In this particular case the name is in genitive.

4. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: h = 8.5 cm, l = 11.5 cm, w = 0.5 cm. H<sub>letters</sub> = 2 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26734 (pl. I/4).

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Porolissensis from the fort of Buciumi, Sălaj County, in Dana, Petruț 2015, 19-24, pl. 4 (photo and drawing = AE 2015, 1165; cf. Petruț 2018, 60 and 165, pl. 7.1 (drawing)).

<sup>16</sup> See Dana 2014, 355-361, with fig. 45 (map of the occurrences of the name). For the Thracians acting in the auxiliary of the Roman Empire see Zahariade 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Solin, Salomies 1994, 107 and 354. Such an example is found in Roman Dacia close-by Orheiul Bistriței at *Samum*/Cășeu where the name of one of the *beneficiarii* stationed there is Scantius Lucius (ILD 771-773 = Piso 2019, *passim*).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot; fine fabric; traces of color visible; reddish color; the inscription is placed above the maximum diameter of the pot.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S1, m = 1-3, depth = 120 cm.

Text: [---]manī sive [---]manī[---].

Observations: Given the fact that the last vertical stroke is rendered parallel with the previous one there is a more likely possibility that the letter should be read as "I" instead of "V". The "A" is rendered without a horizontal stroke just like cat. no. 6. The name has most likely a Latin origin<sup>18</sup>.

5. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: h = 9.5 cm, l = 8.5 cm, w = 0.6 cm. H<sub>letters</sub> = 2.5 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26728 (pl. I/5).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot; fine fabric; reddish color with traces of red paint; the inscription is placed above the maximum diameter of the pot.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S2, area of the pedestal no. 2, m = 9, at 6 m from the western profile; depth = 180 cm.

Text: [---]mes.

Observations: The "M" letter is partially preserved. "E" is rendered through two vertical and parallel strokes as in the case of cat. no. 2, while the final "S" is incised through an irregular, oblique stroke, which continues to be elongated in the lower part, a common feature in the cursive Latin writing. Judging by the position of the letters the name was incised in nominative. This aspect considerably limits the possibilities of reading the name, with two options previously encountered in Roman Dacia: [*Her*]mes<sup>19</sup> or [*The(i)*]mes<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, the *nomen* Romanus, is encountered in Dacia at *Apulum* or *Sarmizegetusa* (see IDR III/5, 162, 452 respectively IDR III/3, 209). Consult also Solin, Salomies 1994, 156 and 392; OPEL IV 31. Of course, there are numerous other versions of reading the name, for instance Germanus, Primanus, Romanus, etc. In the case where the letters form the beginning of the name, then it should be read as Manius, unknown previously in Roman Dacia and a rarely encountered name elsewhere (for this Latin name see Solin, Salomies 1994, 112 and 357).

<sup>19</sup> The name is found at *Apulum* (IDR III/5, 42, 380, 452, 489; ILD 457, 458) and *Sarmizegetusa* (IDR III/2, 219).

<sup>20</sup> Consult Piso 2015, 199 for this name, followed by relevant bibliographic references.

6. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: h = 6.5 cm, l = 12 cm, w = 0.6 cm. H<sub>letters</sub> = 3.5 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26731 (pl. II/6).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot; fine fabric; light brown color, the inscription is placed above the maximum diameter of the pot.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S1, in the area of the western profile of the archaeological trench; depth = 100 cm.

Text: *Fabi*.

Observations: After the last partially preserved stroke, which renders "I", a considerable space was left which alludes to the fact that the name was incised in genitive. Fabius is a Latin name very often encountered in Roman Dacia and everywhere else in the Roman world<sup>21</sup>. The "F" letter is partially preserved on its left side and was made in a cursive manner, while the "A" does not have a horizontal stroke, similar to the case of cat. no. 4.

7. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: h = 6 cm, l = 11 cm, w = 0.7 cm. H<sub>letters</sub> = 4.5 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26730 (pl. II/7).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot; semi-fine fabric; traces of reddish paint are visible; yellow-reddish color; the inscription is placed above the maximum diameter of the pot.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S3, m = 10, at 13-14 meters from the western profile of the archaeological trench; depth = 60 cm.

Text: [---]VI sive [---]VI[---].

Observations: there is a considerable chance that the text gives the name of the owner, more precisely the end part of it just like cat. no. 11; due to the low number of letters a coherent reading is at the moment impossible.

8. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: h = 5 cm, l = 5 cm, w = 0.3 cm. H<sub>letters</sub> = 4.5 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26732 (pl. II/8).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot; broken in two pieces. Fine fabric with traces of engobe applied in

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<sup>21</sup> Solin, Salomies 1994, 76.

a thick layer. The inscription is placed above the maximum diameter of the pot.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S1, in the area of the western of the archaeological trench; depth = 100 cm.

Text: [---]VL[---].

Observations: One can observe the neat form of the letters. Only the inferior part of the letter "V" is preserved, while the "L" is made in an elongated manner but, just like the "V", it is broken in its superior part. The reading options are diverse. Some examples could be advanced, without excluding other possibilities, such as: [I]ul[ius; -i]; Ul[pius; -i] etc.

9. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: h = 14.5 cm, l = 12 cm, w = 0.6 cm. H<sub>Iletters</sub> = 6 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26733 (pl. II/9).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot; fine fabric; reddish color; the inscription is placed above the maximum diameter of the pot.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S1, m = 1-3; depth = 120 cm.

Text: [---]NI sive [---]NI[---].

Observations: We are faced again with a name representing the ownership of the pot without being able to tell precisely if the segment belongs to the beginning, middle or the end of the name (in genitive). Thus further remarks cannot be advanced for the moment. Beneath the letters a series of thin scratches are visible.

10. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: h = 12 cm, l = 5 cm, w = 1.5 cm. H<sub>Iletters</sub> = 4 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26729 (pl. II/10).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot; brownish color; the inscription is placed above the maximum diameter of the pot.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S2, m = 1-3; depth = 130 cm, at approximately 5.5-7 m from the western profile of the archaeological trench.

Text: [---]+S(?)R(?) sive S(?)B(?) [---].

Observations: Both letters are partially preserved. One can observe a stroke prior to the "S" (?) letter while after the second letter the oblique line is the result of damage. Other relevant pieces of information cannot be asserted given the fragmentary state of preservation, except for



the fact that, most likely, we are dealing with letters forming the middle part of the name.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

11. Clay vessel incised with graffiti. Dimensions: h = 5.3 cm, l =

7.5 cm, w = 1 cm. H<sub>letters</sub> = 2.2 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26725 (pl. II/11).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot; fine fabric; traces of reddish paint visible; the inscription is placed above the maximum diameter of the pot.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S2, depth = 180 cm.

Text: [---]ni.

Observations: Only the upper part of the letter "I" is partially preserved. As in the case of cat. no. 7 we are most likely dealing with the final part of an owner's name, written in genitive.

12. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: fragm. a) h = 3.5 cm, l = 4.3 cm, w = 1.4 cm. H<sub>letters</sub> = 3.5 cm; fragm. b) h = 4 cm, l = 6 cm, g = 1.4 cm. H<sub>letters</sub> = 4 cm. Letters incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, inv. no. 26736 and 26737 (pl. II/12).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot; fine fabric brown-reddish in color.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S1, m = 1-3; depth = 30-80 cm.

Text: fragm. a) N? sive II; fragm. b) [---]VIN[---] sive [---]VE[---] etc.

Observations: The two fragments were discovered in the same context; there is a high possibility that both were part of the same vessel. In the case of fragment a) two possibilities regarding the interpretation emerge, either reading it as an "N" or the number two, made through two vertical and parallel lines crossed by an oblique one. For the case of fragment b) the reading of the two vertical lines might be interpreted as an "E" letter, rendered cursively just like in other occurrences such as cat. nos. 2 and 5.

13. Clay vessel incised with graffito. Dimensions: h = 11 cm, l = 7.5 cm, w = 1.2 cm. H<sub>litere</sub> = 2 cm. The letters were incised after firing the pot (*post cocturam*). Complexul Muzeal Bistrița-Năsăud, inv. no. 26726 (pl. II/13).

Description: Earthenware shard belonging to the superior part of the pot; fine fabric; reddish color; the inscription is placed above the maximum diameter of the pot.

Location of discovery: fort, *retentura dextra*, S1, feature 1, next to the wall of the edifice, 5.5 m away from the western profile of the archaeological trench; depth = 160 cm.

Text: [---]X̄.

Observations: The text inscribed most likely mentions a number with a horizontal stroke rendered above X, having a value of nine or another ending in ten.

**List of illustration:**

Fig. 1. Map of Dacia Porolissensis (courtesy of Dan Dana, modified by the authors with the location of Orheiu Bistriței).

Fig. 2. Aerial photography of the archaeologically excavated area of the fort (photo R. Zăgreanu).

Plates 1 and 2. Photos and drawings of the graffiti (authors).

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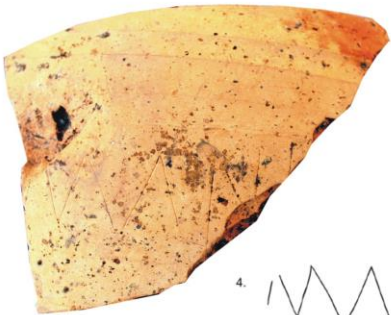
1. JYV>L



2. IIR IIS



3. INCI



4. IIMNI



5. III

Pl. I





Pl. II

