

## A SPECIAL CERAMIC TYPE: THE LATE AVAR YELLOW POTTERY<sup>1</sup>

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*In the late Avar period (from the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century) there was a special ceramic type in the Carpathian basin which is only known from the Avar area.<sup>3</sup> The production technology and the quality of this pottery are different from those of the typical Avar handmade and slow-wheel potteries (Fig. 1). By processing the whole material,<sup>4</sup> we shall be able to identify where and how, for whom and on what models the yellow pottery was made.<sup>5</sup>*

### WHY DO WE CALL THIS TYPE OF POTTERY YELLOW?

The yellow pottery is a quite good quality ware, which means that it was made of well-prepared clay by highly experienced potters on fast wheel. Its colour became yellowish, brownish, or reddish during firing. This is the reason why this type of pottery was named yellow in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the yellow ware is clearly defined, it has several types and subtypes.

In its production, two technological methods and one decoration style, all uncommon in late Avar pottery making, were used. When the clay was leather-hard,<sup>6</sup> the pottery would be carved with a wooden knife below its widest or at its lowest three-centimetre part (Figs. 2–3). This way, the form of the vessel became slimmer. Also in the leathery green state of the pottery, it could be coated with dilute clay (slip/varnish) in order to achieve a softer surface without



Fig. 1: Vágsellye, grave 153



Fig. 2: Jánoshida, grave 108

Fig. 3: Felsőnyék, stray find

<sup>1</sup> It is the theme of my doctoral thesis under preparation at the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest.

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<sup>3</sup> Today Hungary, Southern Slovakia and Northern Serbia.

<sup>4</sup> My research is based on the study of relevant literature and on a systematic survey of museum materials.

<sup>5</sup> At the present stage of research, this is a research hypothesis.

<sup>6</sup> It is the phase of pottery making between shaping and firing. At this stage, the clay has already lost its plasticity but has not dried yet completely.

flaws. The vulnerability of this slip varies, sometimes just the thicker part remained (*Fig. 4*), while often only small pieces flaked off (*Fig. 5*).

In case of around 5% of the yellow ware (35 pieces), remnants of painting are still visible (*Figs. 6–7*). The reason for this vulnerability may be that the pottery was not painted before but after firing. The painted patterns are limited, with only a few motifs repeated.<sup>7</sup> Pearl bands or pearl roundels<sup>8</sup> were mostly decorated with figural (anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, e.g. maned head<sup>9</sup> or bird) or geometrical motifs (*Figs. 8–10*).

The late Avar yellow pottery is considered as a rare type of ware. While altogether more than 10,000 items are known from late Avar graveyards and settlements, only 1,100 pieces of yellow ware have been excavated. In the late nineteen-sixties, the yellow ware was described as grave pottery (*Fig. 11*); after the systematic survey of the material, however, it seems to have been used in settlements too.



*Fig. 4: Komárom-Hajógyár, grave 11*



*Fig. 5: Nagyharsány, grave 26*



*Fig. 6: Székkutas-Kápolnadűlő, grave 90*



*Fig. 7: Boldog-Téglaházpart, grave 5*

<sup>7</sup> Due to the vulnerability of the pigments, it is often impossible to identify the motifs.

<sup>8</sup> Lines of black and/or white painted dots around motifs.

<sup>9</sup> It has been called a boar head but I prefer the maned head terminology, which is more neutral.

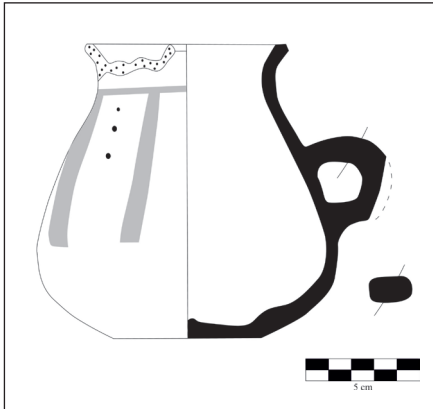


Fig. 8: Ároktő-Csík-gát, grave 227

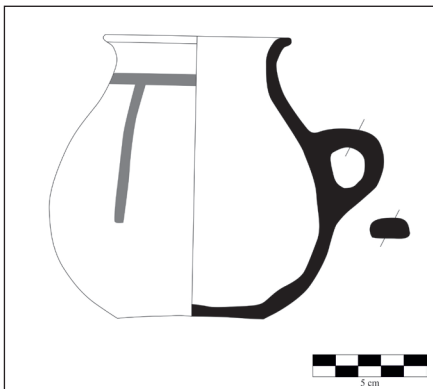


Fig. 9: Besnyő-Fácános, grave 35

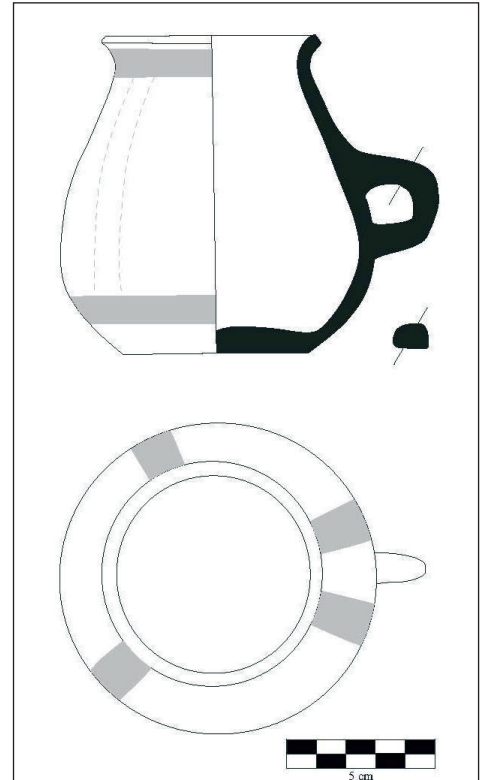


Fig. 10: Csorvás-Kossuth TSz



Fig. 11: Yellow pottery from the graveyard of Szébény

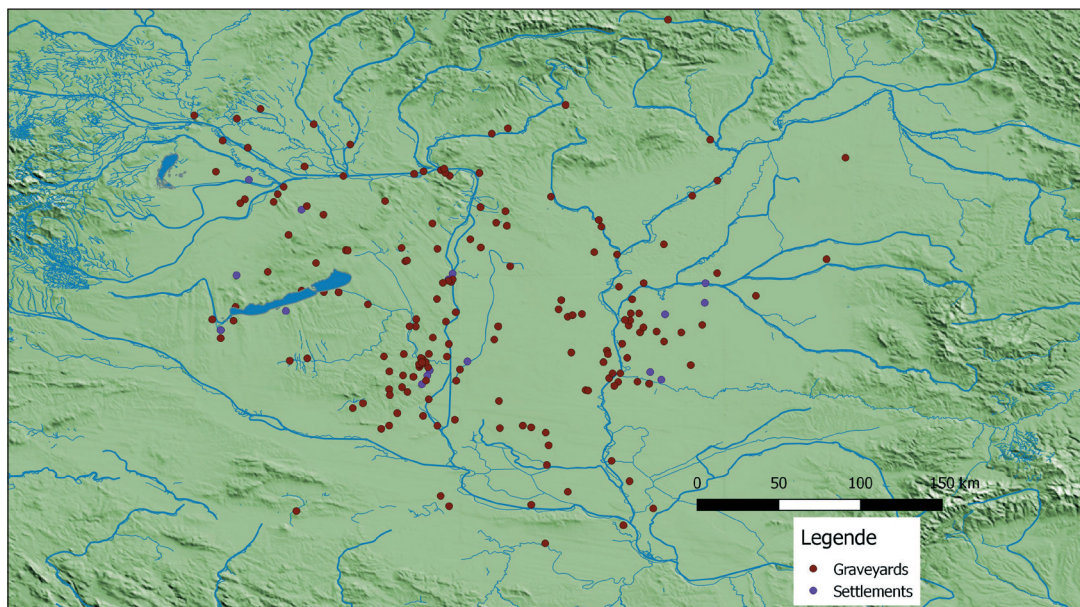
## WHERE AND HOW DID THE YELLOW POTTERY EVOLVE?

It is a complex question, since the yellow pottery does not have direct models in the Carpathian Basin. Darina Bialeková and Éva Garam found its closest analogies in nomadic metallurgy and Sogdian pottery.<sup>10</sup> Tivadar Vida, in his recent article, confirmed its close relationship with late antiquity and Byzantine culture.<sup>11</sup> It is to be emphasized that the yellow pottery production technique is very similar to that of the early Avar grey pottery (e.g. in the carving of the clay body) and of the black pottery (e.g. in its using well-prepared clay) too.<sup>12</sup>

The yellow pottery seems to be a special local ware, which originated in local tradition but was influenced by several cultures. The local production of the yellow pottery is evidenced by the fact that one of its production centres was situated near Szekszárd, which is a traditional centre for pottery making (e.g. early Avar grey pottery).

## CONTACTS DETERMINATION BASED ON A POTTERY TYPE

Late Avar regional and interregional contacts may be determined based on the yellow pottery. From its spread, its possible contacts can be inferred (*Fig. 12*). Most yellow pottery items came to light in the region between the Danube and Tisza rivers. The number of finds increased around Szekszárd (Tolna county), Szeged (Csongrád county), and Újvidék (Novi Sad, Backa, Northern Serbia). Therefore, we can conclude that the yellow pottery workshops were located in the neighbourhood of these cities.<sup>13</sup> Since the yellow pottery was more common in the southern part of the Carpathian basin than in the north, the two rivers may



*Fig. 12: Distribution of yellow pottery*

<sup>10</sup> Garam, Éva: Die spätaawarenzeitliche gelbe Keramik. *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve* (1969)/2, 151–162; Bialeková, Darina: Žltá keramika z prohrebisk avarskej ríše v Karpatskej kotline (Die gelbe Keramik aus der awarenzeitlichen Gräberfeldern im Karpatenbecken – resumé). *Slovenská Archeológia* XV (1967)/1, 40–47.

<sup>11</sup> Vida, Tivadar: Zur Frage des gelben Tafelgeschirrs der frühmittelalterlichen Eliten im mittleren Donaubecken. In: „*Castellum, civitas, urbs*”: *Zentren und Eliten im frühmittelalterlichen Ostmitteleuropa*, ed. Heinrich-Tamáska, Orsolya – Herold, Hajnalka – Straub, Péter – Vida, Tivadar (Budapest–Leipzig–Keszthely–Rahden/Westf.: Verlag Marie Leidorf GmbH, 2015), 313–328.

<sup>12</sup> Vida Tivadar: Újabb adatok az avar kori „fekete kerámia” és a korongolatlan cserépbográcsok kérdéséhez. *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve* 1984–1985 (1991)/2, 386–387.

<sup>13</sup> To my knowledge, no yellow pottery workshop has been excavated to date. That is why we have to infer its place of making from its spread.

have been used as trading routes, with the places of production as their starting points. Moreover, the painted yellow pottery was not only distributed along the Tisza, but also to the north of it (Boldog in Heves county, Ároktő in Borsod county).<sup>14</sup> Based on these evidences, we can say that the Transdanubian workshops did not decorate their yellow pottery with painting. Furthermore, animal motifs were only typical of the southern reaches of the Tisza (Székkutas-Kápolnadűlő and Szeged-Kundomb in Csongrád county and Csenej in Backa, Northern Serbia) (Figs. 13–14).

Examining the parallels of yellow pottery, we get an insight into the interregional contacts of late Avar society. As mentioned above, the late Avars had contacts with the Asian nomadic cultures as well as with the late antique and the Byzantine world. This can be confirmed by analysing the analogies of the painted motifs, mainly occurring along the Silk Road. The pearl pattern was the main ornamental motif of Sogdian and Sasanian art; moreover, later it became a recurrent motif used on clothes, metal ware, furniture, wall paintings, etc. in the Chinese and the Byzantine Empire alike (Fig. 15).<sup>15</sup>

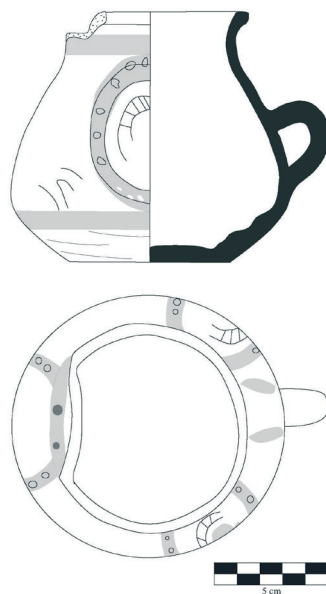


Fig. 13: Székkutas-Kápolnadűlő, grave 90

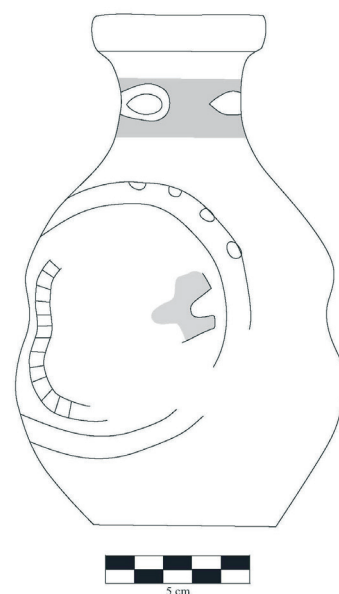


Fig. 14: Szeged-Kundomb, grave 130



Fig. 15: Wallpainting from Samarkand (Guitty, Azarpay: *The Afrasiab Murals: A Pictorial Narrative Reconsidered*. *The Silk Road* 12 (2014), 49–57: Fig. 4, 51 (accessed 02.10.2016)

### WHO USED THE YELLOW POTTERY?

As pointed out above, the yellow ware only constituted a small part of late Avar pottery, and its quality was higher than the average quality of the latter. Therefore, we could probably say that this type of ceramics was only used by a small segment of late Avar society. At the present stage of research, however, we are not able to determine who constituted that small segment. In late Avar cemeteries, graves with or without yellow pottery are the same. It means that a grave with yellow pottery is a typical Avar grave (with typical Avar

<sup>14</sup> It should be mentioned that there are two exceptions, both from Southern Transdanubia (Vörs-Papkert B, Somogy county).

<sup>15</sup> Matteo, Compareti: The role of the Sogdian colonies in the diffusion of the pearl roundels pattern. In: *Ēran ud Anērān. Studies presented to Boris Ilich Marshak on the Occasion of His 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, ed. Matteo, Compareti – Paola, Raffetta – Gianroberto, Scarcia (Venice: Libreria Editrice Cafoscarin, 2006), 149–174.

grave goods) and could have equally been the burial of a rich or of a poor person, of a man, a woman or of a child. Based on the grave goods, the yellow pottery is late Avar, which means that it appeared in the Carpathian Basin around the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and disappeared around the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup>. However, the chronology is not clear, since the grave goods became increasingly simple and poor.<sup>16</sup> Although some centres and tendencies of its distribution can be observed, the yellow pottery was used throughout the entire late Avar settlement area. Based on the above, we can only assert that the yellow pottery was used by a group that was divided in space, time, and social status.

### AFTERLIFE OF THE YELLOW WARE

One of the most difficult problems is to determine the impact of the yellow ware on contemporaneous pottery. At the current stage of research, suffice it to mention that the closest analogy of the yellow pottery is from Pliska (Eastern Bulgaria), which is presumed to postdate the late Avar yellow pottery (Fig. 16–17).<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Carolingian polished ware are similar in form and colour to the late Avar yellow pottery (Fig. 18).<sup>18</sup>



*Fig. 16: Yellow pottery from Pliska (1) (Joachim, Henning: Catalogue of archeological finds from Pliska. In: Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantine. ed, Joachim Henning. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007, 661–704, Taf. 4–5)*



*Fig. 17: Yellow pottery from Pliska (2)*

<sup>16</sup> In my Phd study, I attempt to set up an internal chronology based on the grave goods.

<sup>17</sup> Verbal communication of Vassilena Petrova and Yanko Dimitrov.

<sup>18</sup> It was polished in the leather hard stage of the pottery.



Fig. 18: Polished pottery from Zalavár (Szőke Béla Miklós: *A Karoling-kor a Kárpát-medencében*. Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, 2015, figures 104, 92)

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