

BRONZE OLPES FROM THE REGION AROUND THE GREAT LAKES



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Abstract. – This study examines a distinct group of bronze olpes unearthed at Hellenistic necropolises in the region surrounding Lake Ohrid, particularly Lychnidos (modern-day Ohrid), highlighting their typological, chronological, and cultural significance. Among a variety of bronze vessels found in this region, the olpes stand out for their unique craftsmanship, decorative elements, and frequency of occurrence. By analyzing well-documented examples from key necropolises – Trebeniško Kale, Crvejnca, Deboj, Gorna Porta, and Samuel's Fortress – the paper classifies these olpes according to established typologies (Kelheim, Ornavasso-Ruvo, and Gallarate), while also identifying a new, region-specific variant, proposed here as the Lychnidos-type. This new type is distinguished by its smaller dimensions, characteristic pear-shaped bodies, detailed and varied handle decorations, and superior craftsmanship. Contextual analysis of associated grave goods places these vessels predominantly in the late 3rd to early 2nd century BC. The study also explores two theories regarding the provenance of this vessel form: either as a cultural import from Etruscan traditions during the Macedonian-Roman conflicts or as an indigenous innovation that spread into the broader Roman world. Ultimately, the concentration and distinctiveness of these vessels in the Ohrid region point to the possible existence of local toreutic workshops and suggest a more significant role for the Great Lakes region in shaping Hellenistic material culture than previously acknowledged.

Key words. – Bronze olpe, Lychnidos-type, Hellenistic period, Great Lakes region, ancient metallurgy.

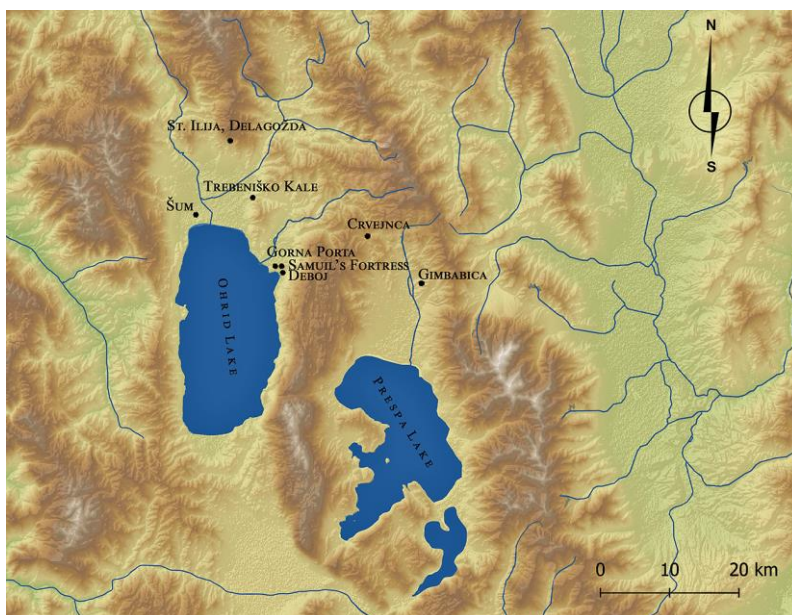
Introduction

In the region north of Lake Ohrid, several necropolises from the Hellenistic period have been investigated, including Trebeniško Kale,¹ Deboj,² Crvejnca near the village of Opejnca,³ St. Ilija near the village of

¹ Лахтов, 1959, 11–77.

² Арцанлиев 2013.

Delagožda,⁴ the Arab cemeteries near the village of Šum,⁵ Gimbabica near the village of Izbišta,⁶ the Lychnid necropolis near Gorna Porta,⁷ and part of the Hellenistic necropolis near Samuel's Fortress (Map 1).⁸ Some of these sites have been systematically excavated and the materials published, while others have only been explored through rescue (protective) archaeological research, and, unfortunately, the materials from these investigations have not yet been published.



Map 1. Distribution of Hellenistic necropolises in the Great Lakes region
(by †S. Iliev & P. Ardjanliev)

The rich findings from these necropolises suggest that the population in the region lived in prosperity during the Hellenistic period. In addition to luxurious jewelry – mainly made of gold – and various ceramic vessels, which are the most common grave goods, particular attention is drawn to the bronze vessels found in these necropolises, especially at the Lychnid necropolis. Based on certain characteristic elements, several types of bronze vessels can be identified: *lebes*, bronze bowls, *oinochoai*, *olpai*, and *situlae* (Fig. 1).

³ Bitrakova Grozdanova 2001, 61–71.

⁴ Битракова Грозданова 1980, 63–68; Bitrakova Grozdanova 1993, 166–177.

⁵ Not published.

⁶ Арджанлиев 2025 (in print).

⁷ Кузман и Кузман Почуча, 2014.

⁸ Kuzman 2020, 279–311.

This text focuses on the bronze *olpai*, which are among the most distinctive bronze vessels found in the Ohrid region. These vessels are made of bronze sheet and feature a wide, pear-shaped body. The rim flares outward, and they stand on a flat foot. The handle, crafted separately from solid bronze, is particularly notable. At the upper attachment point to the rim, stylized swan heads are depicted, while at the lower attachment to the body of the vessel, a realistically rendered head of the young Dionysus is portrayed (Figs. 1–3).

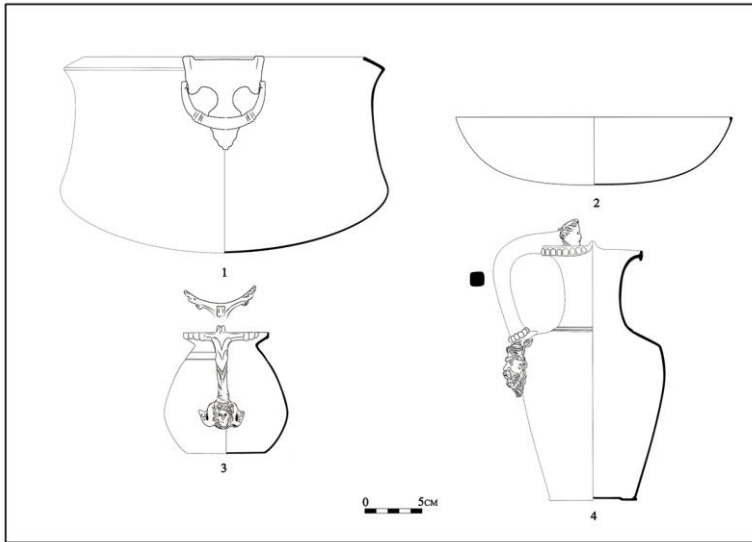


Fig. 1. Types of bronze vessels from the Lychnidos necropolis (after Ardjanliev 2013)

Typology of bronze olpes

Bronze olpes are the most characteristic form of bronze vessels in the Ohrid region. Scholarly discourse has resulted in a typological system that distinguishes these vessels on the basis of body morphology, and, thus, defines several distinct types: the Kelheim type,⁹ then, the Piatra Neamt or Gallarate type,¹⁰ and the Ornavasso type with its subtypes¹¹ (Fig. 2). Given the large concentration of vessels discovered so far in Central Europe,¹² the prevailing theories suggest that they originated in either northern Italian or Campanian workshops.¹³

⁹ Werner 1954, 68–107.

¹⁰ Boube 1991, 24, Fig. 2.

¹¹ Boube 1991, 33, Fig. 10.

¹² Boube 1991, 23–45, with distribution maps.

¹³ Boube 1991, 23–45, with references.

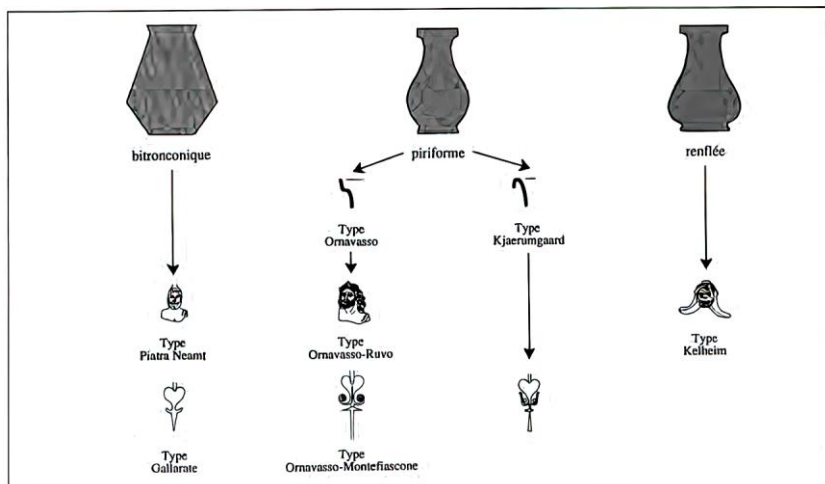


Fig. 2. Types of bronze olpes (after Boube 1991)

Conversely, there is a notable prevalence of bronze olpes in the Ohrid region. Specifically, two have been documented at Trebeniško Kale,¹⁴ one at Crvejnca¹⁵ and two at Deboj.¹⁶ In addition, the inclusion of olpes unearthed during extensive excavations at the Upper Gate and Samuel's Fortress¹⁷ – sites previously confirmed as integral parts of the ancient necropolis of Lychnidos – adds to this tally, resulting in approximately ten examples within the Ohrid region alone. The widespread popularity of this vessel type in the region is confirmed by the discovery of two ceramic olpes of identical form and decoration at Crvejnca.¹⁸

In this section, we will take a look at the different forms of olpes found in the Ohrid region, with the aim of categorizing them into known types. Their recovery from grave units allows us to determine their precise chronological assignment. Starting with the olpes already documented, we will focus on two bronze olpes from the Hellenistic necropolises of Trebeniško Kale, near the village of Trebenište, and Crvejnca, near the village of Opejnca,¹⁹ both in the Ohrid region. The bronze olpe found in Grave No. 5 in the necropolis of Trebeniško Kale is of the “Kelheim” type (Pl. 1. 1)²⁰ based on its shape, dimensions, and representation of the handle. However, despite the fact that it was found together with other grave goods, different dates have been proposed. While the necropolis researcher Lahtov

¹⁴ Лахтов 1959, 39, TXVI-2, 49, TXXIII-1.

¹⁵ Bitrakova Grozdanova 1999, 256–286.

¹⁶ Арджанлиев 2013, 119.

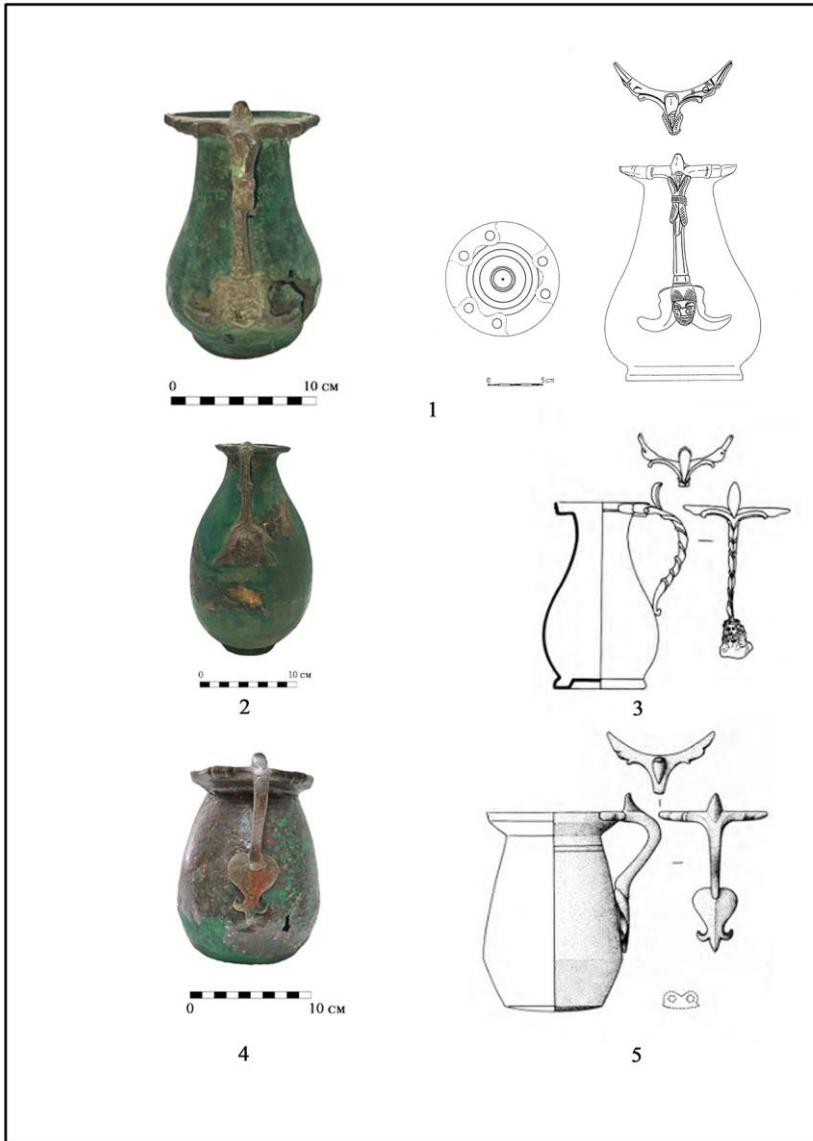
¹⁷ Kuzman 2020, 279–311.

¹⁸ Bitrakova Grozdanova, Kuzman Počuča, 2004, 81–86.

¹⁹ Лахтов 1959, 49, TXXIII-1; Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1999, 256–286, Figs. 1 and 3.

²⁰ Božić 1983, 90; Битракова Грозданова 1999, 256–286.

PL.1



Pl. 1. Various bronze olpes from the Ohrid region: 1. Trebeniško Kale (photo D. Taneski, drawing after Bitrakova 1999); 2. Crvejncja (photo D. Taneski); 3. Ornavasso-Ruvo type (after Boube 1991); 4. Olpe from Grave No. 61 from Gorna Porta (photo K. Balev); 5. Gallarate type (after Boube 1991)

suggested a date between the 4th and 3rd centuries BC,²¹ Bitrakova-Grozdanova initially placed it at the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 2nd century BC.²² In a later study, the dating was extended to the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 1st century BC,²³ in line with proposed dates in Central Europe. Taking into account the rest of the grave inventory, such as the presence of the Megarian cup, gold earrings with dove motifs, and a Hellenistic amphora, the most plausible dating for this olpe is between the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd century BC.

The olpe discovered in Grave No. 131 in the Crvejnca necropolis, near the village of Opejnca, presents a considerable challenge. Concerns about this olpe arose during its conservation, where the previously described Kelheim-type olpe from Grave No. 5 in the Trebeniško Kale necropolis served as a reference for its appearance. However, discrepancies between the two olpes were observed, particularly in their dimensions and the representation on the underside of the handle.²⁴ Acad. Bitrakova-Grozdanova raised pertinent questions about these differences, speculating whether they were the result of different workshops or of different chronological attributions. While possible answers to these questions are explored in the same article,²⁵ I argue that the dissimilarities are likely due to the olpes belonging to different types. In order to determine the type to which the bronze olpe from Crvejnca belongs, we have to rely solely on confirmed dimensions that have not been altered by conservation. Specifically, the diameter of the mouth, the diameter of the base, and the height of the handle are reliably measured at 7.8 cm x 7.6 cm x 12 cm, respectively. These dimensions correspond to those proposed for the Ornavasso-Ruvo type of olpes.²⁶ Furthermore, the shape of the base, characterized by a ring with a central indentation, suggests that it belongs to this olpe type. Although this feature could possibly also correspond to the Kelheim type, as other types typically have flat bottoms, the dimensions given preclude classification within the Kelheim type, as noted by acad. Bitrakova-Grozdanova.²⁷

Therefore, the plausible classification for this olpe is within the Ornavasso-Ruvo type. A distinguishing feature that supports this classification is the configuration of the rim of the olpe, which is characterized by a horizontal eversion that curves upwards at a right angle, consistent with the Ornavasso-Ruvo typology.²⁸ A notable deviation from previously docu-

²¹ Лахтов 1959, 48–49.

²² Битракова-Грозданова 1987, 144–145.

²³ Битракова-Грозданова 1990, 71–72; Битракова-Грозданова 1999, 258.

²⁴ Битракова-Грозданова 1999, 260.

²⁵ Битракова-Грозданова 1999, 265–270.

²⁶ Boube 1991, 35.

²⁷ Битракова-Грозданова 1999, 261.

²⁸ Boube 1991, 23, Fig.1.

mented Ornavasso-Ruvo olpes, however, lies in the representation adorning the lower part of the vessel's handle. While conventional examples typically depict a bust of Jupiter with a beard (Pl. 1. 3), the olpe unearthed at Crvejnca shows the bust of a beardless youth, adorned with lush hair and foliage, often interpreted as a youthful Dionysus (Pl. 1. 2).²⁹ Similar olpes have been excavated at Lleshan, near Elbasan, Albania, where two bronze olpes were used as storage for coins dating from the 2nd century BC.³⁰ In addition, an olpe with a similar body profile, but without a preserved handle, was discovered in Antigone in Epirus, dating to no later than 167 BC.³¹

In the necropolises of the Ohrid region, specifically at the site of Gorna Porta, as described belonging to the Lychnidos necropolis, another olpe was discovered that corresponds to the established typologies as described by Boubé.³² This particular olpe, taken from Grave No. 61, belongs to the Gallarate type of olpe (Pl. 1. 4). With a height of 16.5 cm, a mouth diameter of 11.1 cm and a base diameter of 9.1 cm, its dimensions correspond to the prescribed parameters for this category of olpe. An analogous olpe of undetermined origin is displayed in the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz (Pl. 1. 5).³³ Considering the contents of the grave – a gold pendant with a rosette, dog-head earrings, an amphora, a Megarian cup, a lagnos, two unguentariums, a bronze plate, and a bronze spoon – the Gorna Porta olpe can be tentatively dated to the end of the 3rd century BC and the beginning of the 2nd century BC.

Other olpes discovered in the Lychnidos necropolis have characteristics that differ from those of previously catalogued types. These include olpes from Grave Nos. 21 and 100 in the Hellenistic necropolis of Deboj, olpes from Grave Nos. 84, 107 and 120 at Gorna Porta, and an olpe from Grave No. 203 in the area of Samuel's Fortress.

The olpes under consideration have a consistent morphology, characterized by a spherical body, similar to the carinated forms, but without the distinct edge marking the transition from the first to the second conical part, as seen in the olpes of the Piatra Neamt or Gallarate type. Their bodies taper gently to a slightly convex rim, resting on a flat base. In particular, the handles are individually cast with stylized swan heads that serve as attachments to the rim of the vessel. It is noteworthy that these handle representations are consistent with the iconography observed in previously documented bronze olpe variants.

²⁹ Boubé 1991, 35; Битракова Грозданова 1999, 262.

³⁰ Korkuti, Petruso 1993, 713, Fig. 8; Gjongecaj 1998, 170, Fig. 2; Fig. 4; Božič 2003, 263, Fig. 4; Gjongecaj 2007, 101–140.

³¹ Budina 1972, 311–316, 332, Fig. 46; Bitrakova Grozdanova 2001, 61–71.

³² Boubé 1991, 23–45.

³³ Boubé 1991, 28, Fig. 5.

PL.2



Pl. 2. 1. Bronze olpe from Grave No. 100 from the Deboj necropolis (photo P. Ardjanliev, drawing D. Petrevski); 2. Bronze olpe from Grave No. 21, 3–5. Grave inventory from Grave No. 21 from the Deboj necropolis (photo P. Ardjanliev)

PL.3



Pl. 3. Grave inventory from Grave No. 84 from Gorna Porta
(photo D. Taneski, archive Ohrid museum)

Of particular interest are the different representations that adorn the lower parts of the handles. For example, in Grave No. 100 in the Deboj necropolis, there is a depiction of a bearded boy with floral motifs in his lush hair (Pl. 2. 1), reminiscent of the depiction of Dionysus on the Crvejna olpe. However, there are notable differences in the realistic depiction and the obvious mastery of the craftsman. Similarly, the depiction on the olpe from Grave No. 21 in the same necropolis appears similar in execution, although it is obscured by significant damage to the olpe, which makes the depiction of the handle less visible (Pl. 2. 2). Meanwhile, on the olpe from Grave No. 84 at Gorna Porta, the lower part of the handle depicts the face of a beardless boy. In the lower part of the face, a stylized flare is presented, which alludes to the fact that it could be a representation of the god Apollo or Helios, but this claim should be taken with a grain of salt, as we have not yet found a suitable similar portrayal to support this (Pl. 3. 1).

The lower part of the handle of the olpe from Grave No. 107, located at the Gorna Porta site, depicts the face of a girl with flowing hair, accompanied by an unmistakable depiction of wings, a clear allusion to a depiction of Medusa (Pl. 4. 1). On the other hand, the representation on the lower part of the handle of the olpe from Grave No. 203, located in the Hellenistic necropolis of Samuel's Fortress, shows a visage characterized by a grotesque expression, with short, dishevelled hair and strikingly pointed ears, suggesting a representation of Pan (Pl. 5. 6). It should be noted that similar representations have not been observed on olpes found in Central Europe. It is also worth noting that the depictions on the Lychnidos olpes show a higher degree of realism, indicating the superior skill of the craftsman.

The dimensions of these vessels typically range from 10.1 cm to 13.9 cm in height, the diameter of the mouth from 7.6 cm to 9.9 cm, and the diameter of the base from 5.6 cm to 7.7 cm (Tab. 1). It is noteworthy that a similar olpe with an identical body structure was found in Trebeniško Kale in Grave No. 1, but unfortunately the handle is missing.³⁴

Grave No. and Site	Height	Mouth Diameter	Base Diameter
21, Deboj	/	/	/
100, Deboj	12.3 cm	8.2 cm	6.9 cm
84, Gorna Porta	11 cm	7.9 cm	6.1 cm
107, Gorna Porta	10.1 cm	7.6 cm	5.6 cm
120, Gorna Porta	10.4 cm	7.9 cm	5.9 cm
203, Samuel's Fortress	13.9 cm	9.9 cm	7.7 cm

Tab. 1. Dimensions of the bronze olpes of the Lychnidos type (by P. Ardjanliev)

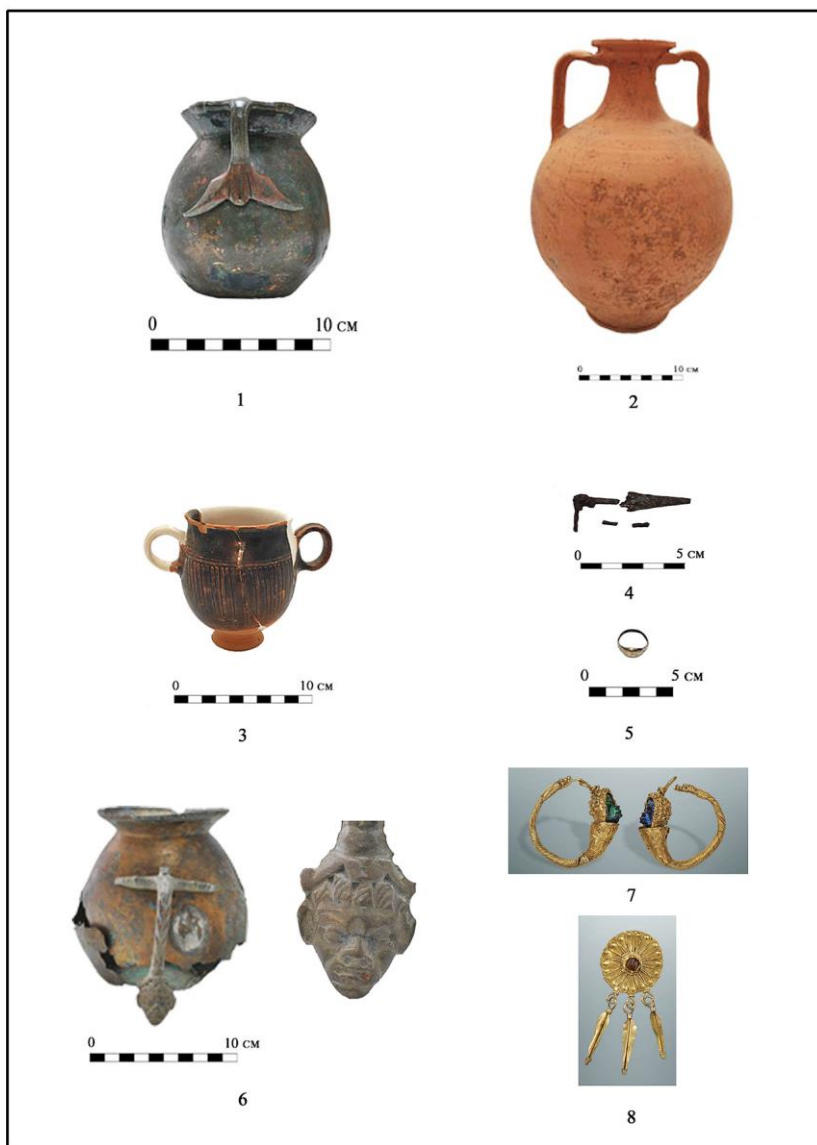
³⁴ Лахтов 1959, 39, TXVI-2.

PL.4



Pl. 4. Grave inventory from Grave No. 107 from Gorna Porta
(1–5. photo by D. Taneski; 6. after Kuzman, Kuzman 2014)

PL.5



Pl. 5. 1–5. Grave inventory from Grave No. 120 from Goma Porta (photo D. Taneski); 6–8. Grave inventory from Grave No. 203 from Samuel's Fortress (6. photo D. Taneski; 7–8 after Kuzman, Kuzman 2014)

Chronology and provenance of the Lychnidos-type olpes

In order to establish the chronological placement of the bronze olpes, a comprehensive examination of the accompanying grave goods is essential. In addition to the bronze olpe, fragments of a bronze lebes, a plate, and an oinochoe, all in a deteriorated state, were found in Grave No. 21 of the Deboj necropolis. Other finds included an unguentarium, an oinochoe, a skyphos, and a bronze medallion (Pl. 2. 2–5).³⁵ Based on the dating of the ceramic vessels, this grave can be dated roughly to the second half of the 3rd century BC.

Similarly, in Grave No. 100 (Pl. 2. 1) of the same necropolis, the bronze olpe was found among a rich assortment of grave goods. Two bronze lebetes with handles were discovered, together with an iron spear and other smaller iron objects, including remains of soot. Next to these vessels were an unguentarium, a kantharos and a cup, with an iron spear placed between the lebetes. The grave also contained a bronze bowl and fragments of an amphora and a lucerne (Fig. 3).³⁶ Taking into account the inventory of the tomb, a more precise dating places it at the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd century BC.

At the Gorna Porta site, a bronze olpe was unearthed in Grave No. 84, along with other significant finds including a bronze lebes, a bronze plate, a bronze simpulum, an amphora, a Megarian cup, an unguentarium, and a bronze appliqué. (Pl. 3).



Fig. 3. Grave inventory from Grave No. 100 from the Deboj necropolis *in situ* (photo V. Malenko)

³⁵ Арцанлиев 2013, 28, Т.VII–VIII.

³⁶ Арцанлиев 2013, 52–53, Т.XXX.

Considering the context of these finds, the tomb can be roughly dated to the late 3rd and early 2nd centuries BC. Another bronze olpe was discovered in Grave No. 107 at the same site, accompanied by grave goods such as a bronze lebes, an amphora, a Megarian cup, an unguentarium, a gold earring with an African head, and a fibula needle (Pl. 4). This grave also fits into the chronological framework of the late 3rd and early 2nd centuries BC, mainly due to the presence of the gold earring (Pl. 4–6). The last olpe from the Gorna Porta site, discovered in Grave No. 120, was accompanied by grave goods including an amphora, a kantharos, an iron knife, an iron spear, a fibula, and a silver ring (Pl. 5. 1–5). As in the previous graves, the finds suggest a date between the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd century BC.

Lastly, in the Hellenistic tombs of Samuel's Fortress, a bronze lebes, a plate, an iron knife and spear, gold earrings with African heads, and a gold pendant in the shape of a rosette were found together with the olpe in Grave No. 203 (Pl. 5. 6–8).³⁷ This grave is also consistent with the dating of the late 3rd and early 2nd century BC.

An examination of these tombs and their associated finds shows that the olpes of the region share a common chronological framework. This applies to the olpes from the region belonging to the other types, such as the Kelheim type olpe from Trebeniško Kale, as well as the Ornavasso-Ruvo type olpe from Crvejnca and, of course, the Gallarate type olpe from the Gorna Porta site. Despite their similarities to previously known types, the bronze olpes from the Ohrid necropolises display unique characteristics that suggest the emergence of a new type I, therefore, propose that this distinct type should be called the “Lychnidos-type” olpe, in view of its earlier date, its specific features, and its concentration in this region.

The origin of the new type of olpes found in Lychnidos prompted an investigation into their origin. Boube presents bronze olpes from the Louvre Museum in Paris and the Museum in Bonn that have no known provenance. Nevertheless, he postulates that they are older forms of bronze olpes of Etruscan origin, dating from the 5th to the 3rd centuries BC (Fig. 4).³⁸

If we compare them with the Lychnidos-type olpes, we can see that they have the same body shape, but have different representations on the handles of the vessels. For example, older olpes, particularly those in the Louvre (Fig. 4. 1),³⁹ have small figures of reclining lions on the upper part of the handle, while the lower part is decorated with wavy lines, possibly indicating floral motifs. Unlike these older olpes, the olpes of the Lychnidos type follow the example of other types, as Boube suggests, and trace their

³⁷ Кузман 2020, 279–311.

³⁸ Boube 1991, 41–42, Figs. 21, 22.

³⁹ Boube 1991, 43, Figs. 21–1.

origins back to these older iterations. Another difference lies in the dimensions of the vessels – the Lychnidos olpes are significantly smaller, with a maximum height of around 14 cm compared to the 21 cm height of the Louvre olpes.

I would like to propose two theories for the origin of these vessels. Firstly, given the dating of the Lychnidos olpes to the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd century BC, and assuming that the prototypes originate from the Etruscan culture, it is plausible that the olpes were introduced into the Great Lakes region as a fashionable item during the Macedonian-Roman wars (215–168 BC), which coincides with their dating.



Fig. 4. Bronze olpes from the Louvre Museum in Paris and the Museum in Bonn
(after Boube 1991)

Conversely, the unknown origins of the older olpes in museums such as the Louvre and the one in Bonn suggest that this vessel fashion spread in the opposite direction, from the Great Lakes region into the wider Roman Empire after the conquest of the Balkan Peninsula. This hypothesis is supported by the dating of olpes discovered in central Europe. These considerations lead to speculation that the concept for this type of vessel may have originated in the region. Macedonian toreutic workshops, which flourished during this period, could be suggested as possible production sites. This type of vessel may have found acceptance among the population of Central Europe, where it later seems to have gained popularity. However, further research is needed to substantiate this theory.

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