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**CERAMICS FROM MIDDLE AGE SETTLEMENTS IN BRESTA
LOCALITY NEAR THE VILLAGE OF ALTIMIR
(BYALA SLATINA MUNICIPALITY, NORTH-WEST BULGARIA)**

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In memory of my lecturer Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stefka Angelova

Keywords: *Early Middle Age, ceramics, dwellings - semi-dugouts.*

Abstract: *The article considers ceramics discovered in two Middle Age dwellings, studied in 2001 in Altimir-Bresta site (North-Western Bulgaria). For the time being these two semi-dugouts are the only constructions of this type, described in terms of stratigraphy on the territory of modern North-Western Bulgaria, which confers extraordinary informative value to materials excavated there. The technological, metric and morphological analyses of ceramics show that vessels with slightly pronounced high neck and non-profiled mouth rim drawn outwards prevail in the complex. The vessel silhouette is elongated with maximum widening in the middle of the body and the decoration consists of simple, shallow and irregularly spread motifs. All vessels, with no exception, are produced on slow-turning potter's wheel. Comparative analysis with materials from North and North-Eastern Bulgaria shows that the considered complex may be dated within the frames from the late 7th to the early 9th c. With these characteristics both dwellings and the material therefrom are a good evidence of existence of civil 8th c. settlement in the region of the well-know 'border' ramparts (Hayredin, Ostrov and Lom), accepted in the literature as military protection zone by the early 9th c.*

Bresta locality is 2,5 km to the North of the village of Altimir (Byala Slatina municipality, Bulgaria). The archaeological site is located on a non-flood terrace alongside the left bench of Skat River (altitude 171 m). The works on the site began in 1924 on the occasion of constructing Cherven Bryag-Oryahovo narrow-gauge railway. In 1951 another rail line was constructed in the region and crossed again the cultural deposits. This was the reason to start trial trench studies under the direction of Atanas Milchev. These excavations found out the existence of cultural layers from some ages: Late Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Early Bronze, Thracian, Roman (2nd - 3rd c.) and Late Roman (4th - 5th c.) (Милчев 1957). Later on, in 1961 Bogdan Nikolov reported also the existence of a '7th c. Slav settlement' on the left bench of Skat River (Николов 1961, 14-15).

New excavations in Bresta locality near the village of Altimir took place in 2000-2001 and were directed by Vratsa Regional History Museum and Institute of Archaeology with Museum near Bulgarian Academy of Science (Sofia) on the occasion of repair works upon Vratsa-Oryahovo road. The study covered pits from four different ages (Early Chalcolithic, Early Bronze, Early Bronze, Iron, Late Antiquity), including two Middle Age semi-dugouts, which are the subject of this article (Алтимир – Бреста 2006) (Fig. 1).

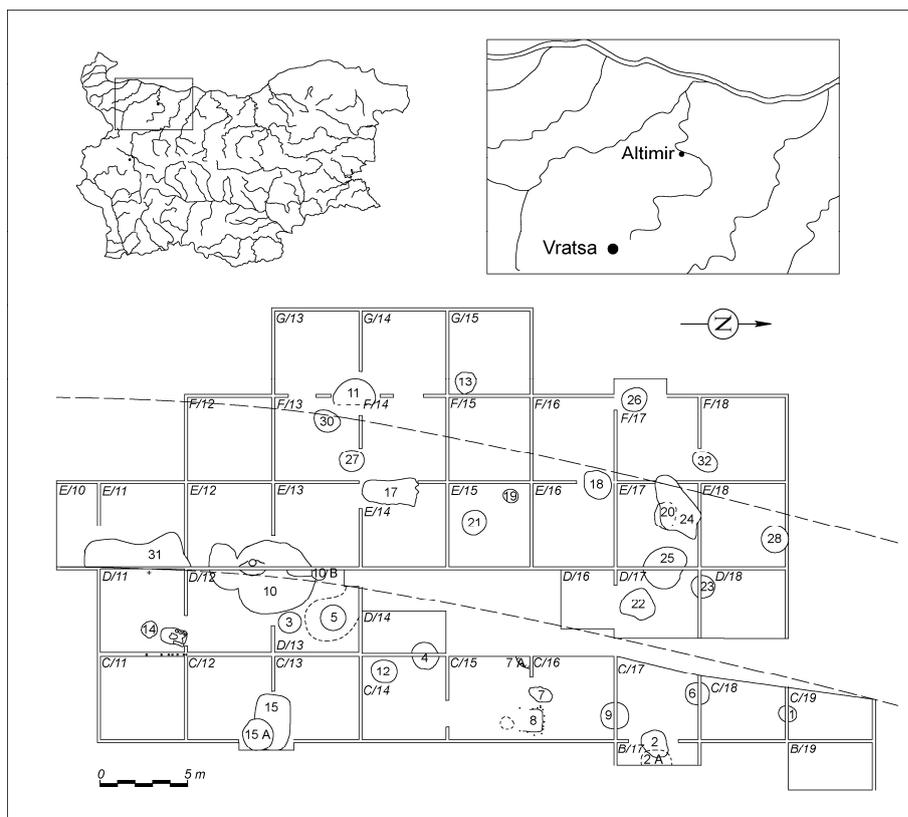


Fig. 1. General plan of excavations in Bresta locality near the village of Altimir, 2000-2001.

Middle Age structures (Nos. 14, 31) were discovered in the southern part of the site. They are two semi-dugouts from which the western one is heavily damaged. It might be presumed that both dwellings had been part of a Middle Age settlement, developed to South and South-East from the site - on the slightly pronounced slope going to the bed of Skat River. The terrain, where most probably the other Middle Age dwellings had been located, is now heavily destroyed as a result of earth works for two now non-operating rail ways (Vratsa-Oryahovo and Oryahovo-Cherven Bryag). It is not clear to what extent the discovered dwellings/semi-dugouts had

been fit together with the Middle Age constructions reported by B. Nikolov (НИКОЛОВ 1961, 14-15).

Dwelling No. 1 (Fig. 2). Heavily damaged as a result of construction and repair works relevant to building Vratsa-Oryahovo road. There are no data about the ground plan. The only thing outlined in grid map (GM) D11 eastern profile is that the construction is dug up to 0,80 m in a whitish earth layer of the ancient surface. On the same place we discovered a row of six posts (Diameter = 0,05 - 0,10 m) and preserved parts of floor coating (thickness up to 0,05 m), burned to black and red in between (**Fig. 2/1**).

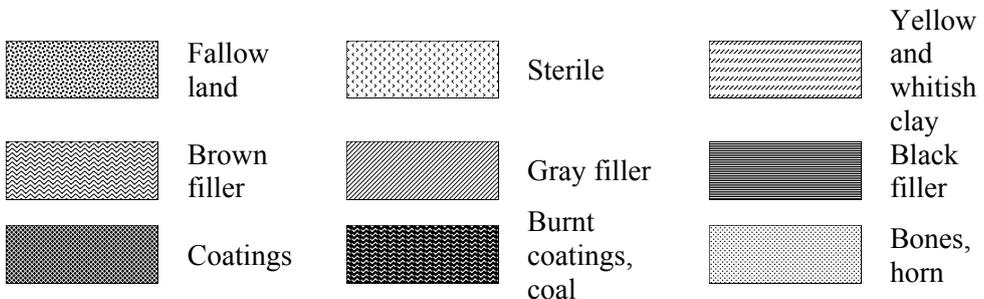
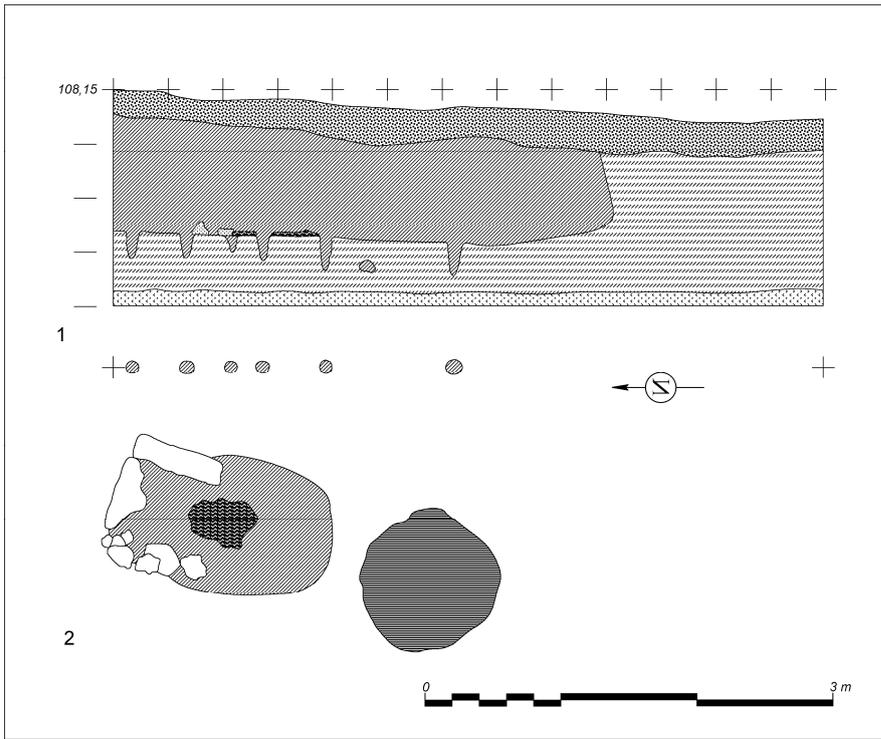


Fig. 2. Semi-Dugout No. 1. 1. Section - western profile of GM D/11; 2. Ground plan of the oven.

The oven of the dwelling was excavated at a distance varying from 0,20 to 0,40 m to the West of the series of posts (**Fig. 2/2**). It had rectangular (almost square) ground plan (0,84 x 0,80 m) and was oriented almost according to the four cardinal points, with opening to the South and a well pronounced pre-oven area. The oven was dug at approximately 0,40 m under the floor of the dwelling and its foundation was shaped with large size stones. The eastern wall of the oven was flanked by a large vertically fixed slab (L = 0,80 m, W = 0,20 m, H = 0,40 m). The vault of the oven, consisting in small broken stones with no traces of mortar, was discovered collapsed on the coating with oval plan, burnt to red and measuring 0,03 m in thickness. Also a pit, presumably meant for evacuating the cinders, was registered immediately in front of the oven opening. It was dug approximately 0,30 m under the oven level and measured almost 1,00 m in diameter. It was filled in with dark brown earth and did not comprise other materials.

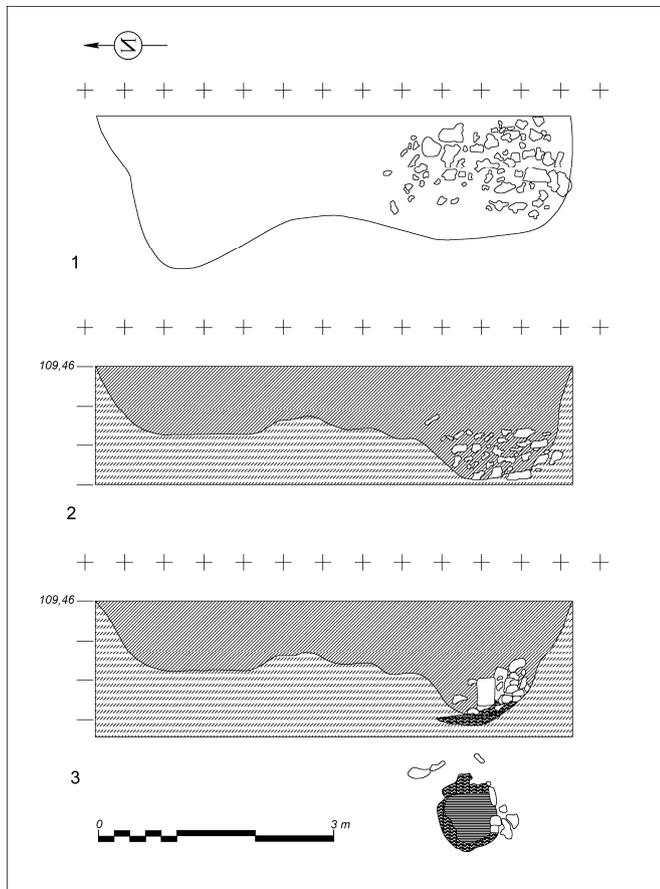


Fig. 3. Semi-dugout No. 2. 1. Ground plan of preserved part of dwelling; 2. Section before clearing up the oven; 3. Section after clearing out the oven and ground plan of the oven floor coating.

Dwelling No. 2 (Fig. 3). Only its western part was excavated since its eastern part falls under the temporary bed of Vratsa-Oryahovo road. The dwelling pit was outlined clearly in GM E11 eastern profile, where its upper part had got destroyed when construction and repair works took place (**Fig. 3/2, 3**). The preserved depth of the dwelling pit is 0,60 m. Neither supporting constructions, nor traces of forming the walls or floor through coating, ramming, etc. were found out. The preserved western part shows the dwelling used to have rectangular ground plan, orientation approximately according to the four cardinal pints and North-South dimension of 4,80 m (**Fig. 3/1**).

The oven of the dwelling was in its south-western corner and its western part was also studied partly (**Fig. 3/3**). It was dug 0,40 m down the level of the dwelling and its foundation was shaped by vertically fixed and closely arranged to each other stones with reused pre-historic millstones in between (maximum sizes: H = 0,55 m, W = 0,40 m). The partial study did not allowed us finding out the shape of the oven as well as to clarify the position of oven opening and the shape of the pre-oven area. The preserved North-South dimension was 2,00 m. The oven vault, consisting of small broken stone and strongly fragmented Late Antiquity and Middle Age home purpose ceramics with no traces of mortar, was also discovered collapsed on burnt to red coating with oval ground plan (dimensions: North-South 0,60 m, East-West 0,80 m, thickness 0,10 m). Partly preserved ceramic vessel (**Fig. 5/44**) and relatively large quantity of chicken bones were cleared up over the coating.

Small quantity of ceramic materials were found out in both semi-dugouts. In dwelling No. 2 the material was concentrated on the floor and used as construction material for building the oven (**Fig. 5**), while in dwelling No. 1 the material was found at a depth, approximately equal to the level of the dwelling pit and the largest concentration of material was close to the oven (**Fig. 4**). In both semi-dugouts the upper part of the filler was mixed with pre-historic and Late Antiquity ceramics (**Fig 5/36, 40, 41**), which decreased in quantity when the depth increased. No such ceramics were excavated at floor level of dwellings.

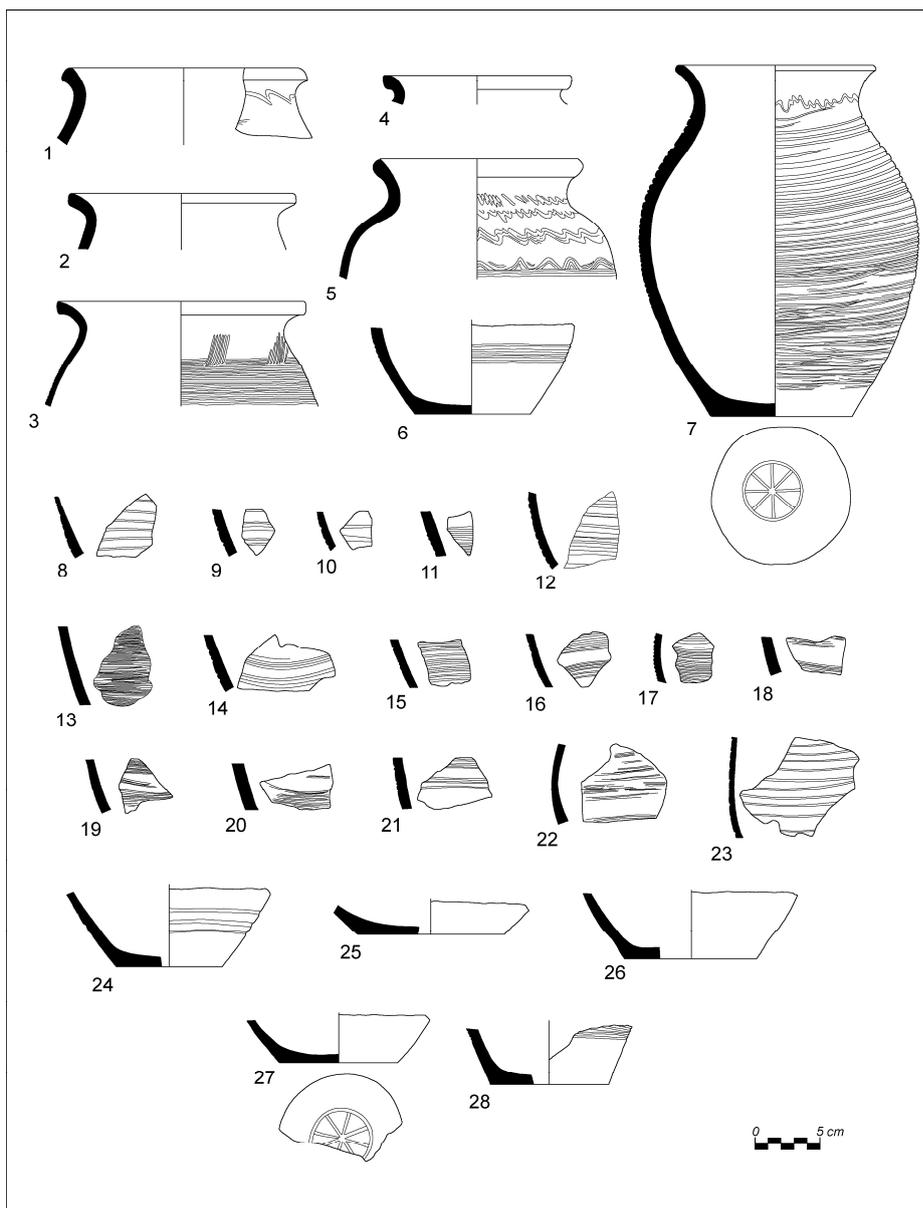


Fig. 4. Ceramics from semi-dugout No. 1.

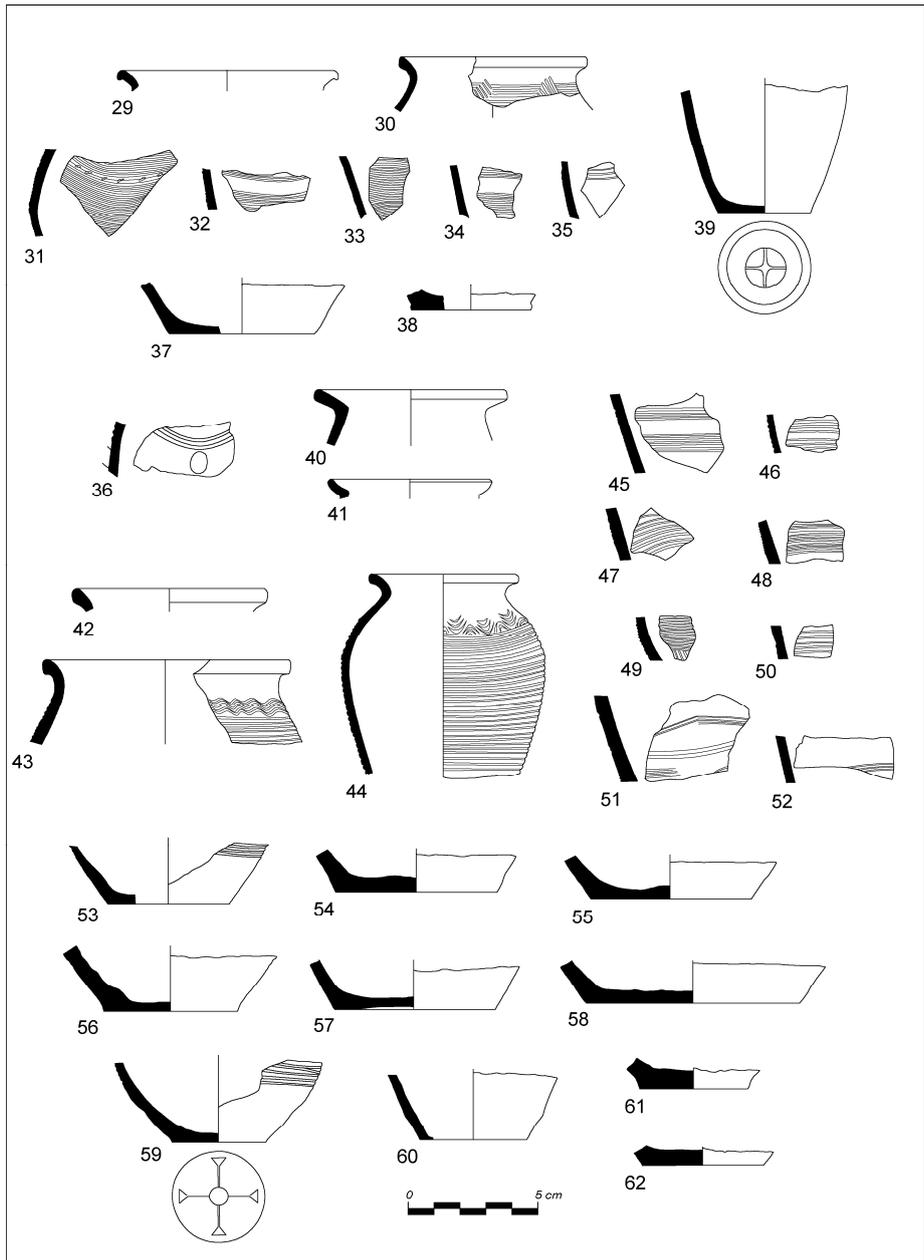


Fig. 5. Ceramics from semi-dugout No. 2.

The ceramics from both dwellings is of one type and consists of mouths and fragments of pots. The vessels were made of micaceous clay (Table 1), mixed with sands, comprising limestone particles and small stones. In most fragments the contents of limestone particles in the clay is either moderate or too high, but with small sizes. Part of the examples comprises large quantity and large size limestone

components (**Table 2**). Almost one half of the fragments do not comprise other admixtures. There are only three cases when the use of organic materials is found out for the purpose of making the clay poorer of greases. When there are stones with greater sizes in the clay, in 20 % of the examples these do not excide 1 mm. However, the material comprises also a large number of fragments when bigger components are found amongst the admixtures (**Table 3**).

Moderate quantity	60 %
Large quantity	18 %
Moderate quantity, small sizes	9 %
Small quantity	5 %
None	4 %
Large quantity, small sizes	2 %
Small quantity, small sizes	2 %

Moderate quantity, small sizes	24 %
Large quantity, moderate sizes	22 %
Large quantity, small sizes	20 %
Moderate quantity, moderate sizes	11 %
Small quantity, small sizes	9 %
Large quantity, large sizes	7 %
Moderate quantity, large sizes	4 %
Small quantity, moderate sizes	4 %

None	46 %
Up to 1 mm	20 %
Up to 2 mm	8 %
Up to 5 mm	7 %
Up to 3 mm	5 %
Small quantity	5 %
Up to 4 mm	2 %
Large quantity	2 %
Up to 6 mm	2 %
Up to 9 mm	3 %

Table 1. Mica contained in the clay.

Table 2. Limestone particles contained in the clay.

Table 3. Small stones contained in the clay.

The wall thickness of ceramic vessels varies from 0,3 to 1 cm. Fragments with thickness 0,5 cm prevail categorically. Presumably due to the purposeful selection of rougher material meant for strengthening the oven construction, the wall thickness of ceramic vessels from dwelling No. 2 is greater. This is the only place where we found fragments with thickness 1,00 cm (**Table 4**).

Total		Dwelling No. 1		Dwelling No. 2		Dwelling No. 2 – Oven	
0,5 cm	31 %	0,5 cm	29 %	0,5 cm	60 %	0,7 cm	24 %
0,7 cm	20 %	0,7 cm	22 %	0,4 cm	20 %	0,5 cm	18 %
0,4 cm	13 %	Uneven	16 %	0,6 cm	10 %	0,6 cm	18 %
Uneven	11 %	0,4 cm	14 %	0,7 cm	10 %	0,8 cm	18 %
0,8 cm	11 %	0,8 cm	11 %			0,9 cm	12 %
0,6 cm	9 %	0,6 cm	7 %			0,4 cm	6 %
0,9 cm	4 %	0,3 cm	4 %			1,0 cm	6 %
0,3 cm	2 %						

1,0 cm	2 %						
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Table 4. Thickness of walls.

The great percentage of ceramics, suffered from secondary burning and found amongst the materials from both dwellings, is also due to the existence of fragments from the oven in dwelling No. 2. As a whole, the pots from both dwellings are fired up to colors, varying in the ranges of red and brown. The firing is uneven and gray and black spots are seen on many of fragments. In some cases the internal surface of the vessels has a different, usually darker color in the ranges of gray and black (**Table 5**). A typical feature of the complex is the large number of fragments with even broken surface (**Table 6**).

Burnt fragments	25 %
Dark red and brown	22 %
Dark brick-red	20 %
Dark gray	13 %
Dark beige	7 %
Light beige	5 %
Beige	4 %
Black	2 %
Light brown to orange	2 %
Uneven color	13 %
Surfaces of different colors	15 %

Table 5. Color of the surface

Even	48 %
Dark gray	21 %
Black	13 %
Dark red	13 %
Brown and red	4 %
Lighter	2 %

Table 6. Color of the broken surface

In terms of shape, the vessels from the site belong to one and the same type of pots with slightly elongated neck and non-profiled mouth rim drawn outwards slightly: cut obliquely (**Fig. 4/1-3; Fig. 5/44**), polished (**Fig. 4/7**) or slightly thickened (**Fig. 4/5; Fig. 5/29-30, 42-43**). The entire profile of the vessels can not be restored, but if we judge on the partially preserved pots No. 7 and No. 44, Bresta mouth fragments belong to vessels with slightly elongated proportions with biggest widening either in the middle or in the upper third part of the body. The metric data show a slightly greater width of the mouths (diameter varying from 11 to 18 cm) as compared to the one of the bottoms (diameters varying within the frames 7-16 cm, although diameters from 9 to 11 cm prevail). However, we can not state that the shape typical for the complex is the one of turned down truncated cone with maximum widening in the upper third part of the vessel, since there are only two vessels with well pronounced shoulders (**Fig. 4/5; Fig. 5/44**). It is more probably to presume that vessels of the type of pot No. 7 used to prevail in the complex - vessels with wall falling obliquely down from the neck, elongated silhouette and maximum widening in the middle of the body.

In terms of technology Breſta fragments of mouths, bottoms and walls show the traces of manufacturing through slow-turning potter's wheel. A great part of the fragments shows clay overlays under the mouth rim and close to the bottom and in some cases these are additionally flattened by means of thin tool. Uneven concentric traces, left by potter's fingers, are seen inside the moth and these are also additionally polished vertically. Flattening the surface through fingers, flat tool or tool with relatively sharp point is seen on a large part of the external and internal walls (vertically, horizontally and diagonally). On the bottoms we can clearly see the additional sticking of the walls to the piece of clay, used as basis of the vessel. This palace is thoroughly polished - most often by means of fingers, leaving concentric uneven traces on the internal walls of the vessels. An interesting feature is the additional polishing on the external lower surface of the bottoms after the items were taken sway from the potter's wheel. Most probably this technique was applied for manufacturing the greatest part of the vessels, although only 25 % of the bottoms bear clear traces of additional polishing (**Table 7**).

Flat, with rough surface	45 %
Flat, additionally polished	25 %
With relief sign	20 %
With sand dusted on the potter's wheel	10 %

Table 7. Technological features of the bottoms.

If we judge on the existing data, almost all vessels had been decorated mainly with shallow incised motifs. The patterns are simple - most often straight, unevenly incised lines, with different thickness and density, which most probably covered almost the entire vessel, reaching as far as 2-4 cm above the bottom. Wave lines or beams of diagonal lines are seen only on necks and upper body parts of the pots.

Specifying the date of the above-described dwellings is difficult because there is no comparative material from the region. Except for the sporadic publications of single fragments, originating from partial archaeological studies (Въжарова 1959; Въжарова 1976, 247; 236-245; Станилов, Александров 1983 а; Милчев 1964, 24; Димитрова 1985, 31; Иванов 1988, обр. 6; Иванов 1998, 28, Обр. 2; Иванов 1996) or visual inspections (Николов 1962, 35, Обр. 4; 36, Обр. 6; 37, Обр. 7-8; Въжарова 1965 б; Рашев, Иванов 1986, 21, Обр. 8; 22, Обр. 9; Ангелова, Колева 1992; Ангелова, Колева 1994), for the time being only some pots, relevant to the Pagan period of the Middle Age settlement on the ruins of ancient Montana, have relatively clear context of discovering (Станилов, Александров 1983 б, 46, Обр. 9; 49, Обр. 11). For this material the investigators admit evolutionary technological development and date the vessels with more precise workmanship later than those, produced manually or on slow-turning potter's wheel, but having greater quantity and rougher admixtures in the clay (Станилов, Александров 1983 б, 48-50). The lack of detailed scientific information for the Middle Age period of the considered region makes possible a relatively free interpretation of the material

published and originating from here. Using indirect chronologic benchmarks, such as historic data, type of burial ceremony, or prevailing ethnic group, is the explanation of differences in dating a great part of the archaeological sites studied in the region. In this respect we have to note the great difference of inventories from necropoleis near the villages Gradeshnitsa and Galiche, both dated within the frames of the second half of 9th-11th c.⁶⁵ (Mašov 1979, 47; Вържарова 1976, 420). The lower limit, comparable with historic source, is not earlier than 9th c. (ЛИБИ 1960, 29-39). The admission that the three earth fortifications (ramparts of Hayredin, Ostrov and Lom) mark the endmost territories, outlining the borders of the Bulgarian state by the early 9th c. (Рашев 1981, 33-34; Рашев, Иванов 1986, 19-20), displace the mass building of civil settlements after this date (Рашев, Иванов 1986, 23). In the same time, dating ceramic materials to the period before 9th c. is also not deprived from evidentiary basis (Вържарова 1959, 22; Ангелова, Колева 1994, 131; 147, Табл. VII/2, 3, 4, 9; Станилов, Александров 1983 b, 46). The opinion of the prevailing Slav character of the population living in the region appears almost well-established (Станилов, Александров 1983 b, 50) due to the lack or limited existence here of ceramics with polished decoration (Вържарова 1965 a, 171, бел.4, 172-173; Дончева-Петкова 1992, 500).

Considered in the light of the so far existing studies, the materials from Bresta locality, regardless their limited quantity, represent an enough representative complex, which by its main features (ceramics produced only on slow-turning potter's wheel, relatively simple morphology and decoration) are comparable with similar materials known from other places of Bulgaria. In terms of shape (mouth rim drawn outwards slightly, cut obliquely or thickened slightly) the vessels belong to one of the most resisting morphological types with relatively long period of existence. The closest parallels, not only based on the mouth rim shaping, but also based on data relevant to entire vessel profiles (oblique shoulders, high and slightly pronounced neck) are pots, originating mainly from the region of the town of Kozlodui (Ангелова, Колева 1994, 141, Табл. I/6; 143, Табл. III/7; 145, Табл. V/13; 147, Табл. VII/9), dated to the 8th - mid 9th c. pursuant to analogies with the settlement near Bucov-Rotari (Ангелова, Колева 1994, 130-131; Comşa 1979, 326, Abb.5, II/6, 7, 51, 92, 116, 118). Some vessels, originating from the non-studied cremation necropoleis in Kalifera locality, near the town of Kozlodui, possess the same characteristics (Ангелова, Колева 1994, 147, Табл. VII/2, 3, 4) and Naklata locality near the village of Dolni Tsibar (Вържарова 1965 b, 233, Обр. 3), as well as fragments from Bossovite Kamani locality near the village of Galiche (Вържарова 1965 b, 237, Обр. 8) and Brestoveshka Padina locality near the village of Hayredin (Рашев, Иванов 1986, 22, Обр. 9/г). Much close to the profile of pot No. 7 are the ceramic vessels from the most earliest Middle Age layers in the settlement near the village of Styrmen (Styrmen 1980, 222, Tabl. XLIII; 233, Tabl. LIV). From the late 7th to mid 11th c. mouths from the above-mentioned type had been used also in the Middle Age settlement Yatrus-Krivina (Wendel 1986, Beilage 3). Similar forms are

⁶⁵ Gradeshnitsa - second half of 9th c. - early 11th c.; Galiche - late 9th - 11th c.

also known from Middle Age settlements in North-Eastern Bulgaria such as Popina-Kaleto (Въжарова 1956, 37, Обр. 28/а), Garvan (Въжарова 1986, 30, Обр. 24; 31, Обр. 23; 31, Обр. 25; 31, Обр. 26; 32, Обр. 27; 33, Обр. 28), Dzhedzhovi Lozya locality near the village of Popina (Въжарова 1965, 97, Обр. 66; 98, Обр. 67; 99, Обр. 68; 100, Обр. 69, Обр. 70), Kladentsi (Ваклинов, Станилов 1981, 46, Обр. 42/3, 6, 8; с. 48, Обр. 43/2, 3, 10; с. 49, Обр. 44/2), Malak Preslavets (Станчев 1952, 290, Обр. 285/1), Durankulak (Меламед 1989, Табл. Ia/A, 1; Б, 1-6), Odartsi (Дончева-Петкова 1999, 75, Обр. 121/1, 9, 13), Middle Age settlement over the ruins of the ancient city of Abritus (Георгиева 1961, 19, Обр. 14; 20, Обр. 15, 21, Обр. 17).

The examples given show that such forms with incised decoration were manufactured over a long chronological period from sandy clay both on fast and slower potter's wheel. However, amongst the materials from Bresta this form is the only one and it refers only to vessels produced on slow-turning potter's wheel. It is worth mentioning that on sites with no materials produced through this technology the lower chronological limit does not go beyond the mid 9th c. (Меламед 1989, 161; Станилов, Рашев 1987, 59-60; Дончева-Петкова 1999, 78). For the time being the vessels produced on slow-turning potter's wheel are dated as a whole to the earlier chronological layers of Middle Age settlements (Въжарова 1965 а, 88-89; 89, Обр. 56; 90, Обр. 57; 96-97; Въжарова 1986, 17, Обр. 9; 18, Обр. 10; 21; 171-172; 172, Обр. 184; 182-183; 183, Обр. 196; Милчев, Ангелова 1971, 25-28; 38-39; Wendel 1986, 137; 141-142; Антонова 1981, 62-63). Amongst the sites, studied more thoroughly and documented in terms of stratigraphy, the chronological frame of this ceramics varies from late 7th to first half of 8th c. (Милчев, Ангелова 1971, 25-27; Въжарова 1986, 77) and 8th - early 9th c. (Styrmen 1980, 297; Wendel 1986, 141-142; Taf. 23/3-7; Taf. 24; Taf. 140/d-h; Антонова 1981, 60-61, Обр. 6/11-12).

The type of ovens in both dwellings is a seldom met construction, which is met sporadically amongst the ground plans of the sites studied. Based of their main characteristics (foundation built of big broken stones and vault built of small broken stones), Bresta ovens may be dated to the earliest type of ovens typical for North-Eastern Bulgaria (Димитров 1975, 220-221). They differ from them by their pits dug under the floor level of the dwellings and may be compared with some dwellings known from Middle Age settlements near Pliska (Георгиев 1981, 190; 191, Обр. I/3), Popina-Kaleto (Въжарова 1956, 13, Обр. 3-а; 34-35), Dzhedzhovi Lozya (Въжарова 1965 а, 20, Обр. 8/1, 2, 3; 86-88), Nova Cherna (Милчев, Ангелова 1971, 30; 160-161, Табл. XX), Durankulak (Тодорова 1989, 43). In the settlement near Huma, the ovens dug under the floor level make a separate group, for which the investigators admit such dating as 8th - mid 9th c. (Станилов, Рашев 1987, 57).

Conclusions. As a whole, the Middle Age dwellings excavated in Bresta locality near the village of Altimir are amongst the few examples illustrating the

material culture in the region of North-Western Bulgaria from the time of the First Bulgarian state. Unfortunately, the scarce stratigraphy data do not allow making more detailed observations about the type of the dwelling constructions. However, the discovered two stone ovens and the ceramics, which may be referred to them, give enough grounds Bresta dwellings to be dated to the period of late 7th - early 9th c. Bresta ceramic material and methods of construction of ovens do not evidence considerable differences from items, already studied in Central North and North-Eastern Bulgaria. Good firing of the vessels and registered deliberate polishing of bottoms, after the vessels are put away from the potter's wheel, may be noted as specific features of Bresta ceramic material. However, the percentage ratio of bottoms with relief signs is comparable with data from other sites, while the potter's signs existing on two vessels (Fig. 4/7, 27) are accepted in the archaeological literature to be ones of the most often spread (Станилов, Рашев 1987, 161, Табл. 60/274; Тотев 1996, Табл. XXI, LXXIV/2, LXXV/A3, A5; Чангова 1992, 115, 117, Обр. 111; 118, Обр. 112; 121, Обр. 114; Въжарова 1956, 38, 39, Обр. 29/а, б; Димитров 1973, 87-88, Табл. XII-II/5, 7, III/6, IV/4).

Furthermore, the simultaneous existence in both dwellings of ovens of a type, with restricted use in other places, may also be accepted as a specific feature of Bresta semi-dugouts. However, we have to note that any more specific conclusions, made based on the data for two partly studied dwellings, would be deprived from grounds. For the time being, there are no data allowing distinguishing Bresta materials from those typical for First Bulgarian state culture. In this respect, there is an interesting find from the region of the same settlement, to the South of the part studied, which may be referred to the well-known in the literature Popina-Garvan ceramic group (Fig. 6/63).

In terms of profile this vessel is very close to vessels found in the settlement near the village of Garvan (Въжарова 1986, 12, Обр. 5), while the features of clay, the method of manufacturing and firing are identical with those of similar materials known from a series of sites in Bulgaria (Тотев 1996, 15; Милчев, Ангелова 1971, 22-24; Антонова 1981, 62-63). Of course, the informative value of single finds of this type is not greater than the one of separate vessels, considered outside the context of their origin (Милчев 1964, 24, Обр. 1; Машов 1980, 43, Обр. 19; Ангелова, Колева 1992, 173-175). Yet taking in consideration the data from both dwellings studied, the fact that there are materials, typical for sites in North-Eastern Bulgaria, is not surprising at all. It is beyond any doubts that further investigations will give more detailed information on the issues. For the time being we can state that the dwellings, excavated in Bresta locality, and ceramics found therein are an eloquent example for the aspect of the Early Middle Age culture of the considered region and the respective data can not be neglected upon interpretation of materials relevant to the culture of the First Bulgarian state in present-day North-Western Bulgaria.

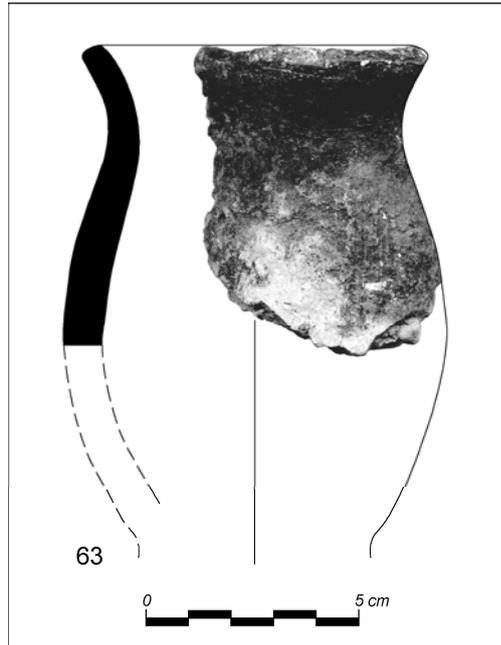


Fig. 6. Handmade ceramic vessel - occasionally found in the region of the village of Altimir

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