

# Use and Function of Greek Bronze Vessels in Indigenous Societies

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## Abstract

In Greek craftsmanship, bronze vessels take a special position, for the value of the metal, which makes them immediately meaningful and precious: their use restricted to more rich people makes these pieces a clear expression of richness and power. In the Greek world, bronze vessels were early used during aristocratic convivial banquets and *symposium*, establishing a close relation between the objects and their function, and were frequently dedicated as votive offerings in sanctuaries. The spread of these social practices among the indigenous societies, with which Greeks came in contact, is well attested since the Archaic period by imports of Greek bronze vessels: generally coming from funerary contexts of different indigenous areas, from Southern Italy to the Black Sea, they continue to represent wealth, power and identification with the Greek aristocratic culture and society.

In Greek craftsmanship, bronze vessels take a special position, for the value of the metal itself, which makes them immediately meaningful and precious: their use restricted to more rich people always made these pieces a clear expression of richness and power. Early used during aristocratic convivial banquets and *symposia*, they established a close relation between the objects and their function, and for their value they were frequently dedicated as votive offerings in sanctuaries. Early Greek bronze vessels exported out of Greece to ethnic groups living in a pre-urban system, without their own written sources (that is, what we call “indigenous societies”), attest, together with the more widespread figured pottery, the diffusion of these social practices: found generally in funerary contexts from southern Italy to the Black Sea, they represented wealth, power and identification with the Greek aristocratic culture and society. The study of the specimens exported during the Archaic and early Classical periods allowed to expand the picture of the Greek trade in the Mediterranean, integrating what already observed from the more numerous studies on the distribution of Greek pottery. It is now possible to highlight the role of the bronze vessels, exported in various regions in different ways, certainly reflecting the diversity of the carriers, who took care of the distribution of the goods, of the periods, in which these trades occurred and of the different taste and interests of the buyers. In this paper, I would like to concentrate on the question of the meaning and function that during the Archaic and early Classical periods these Greek bronze vessels had for the indigenous societies in central Europe, inner Balkans, northern regions of the Black Sea and mainly in southern Italy: in all these regions most of the finds come from funerary contexts, allowing to reach interesting conclusions about the number

and shapes of imported Greek bronze vessels, their association with other materials and objects, and the possible meaning, that all this stuff had for the local people.

Compared to a previous synthesis of ten years ago about the Greek bronze vessel distribution,<sup>1</sup> new discoveries and new studies did not substantially change the general picture, giving more evidence to the already highlighted topics. In central and northern Italy, that means further north of Castelbellino on the Adriatic coast and of Cuma on the Tyrrhenian one, we can confirm the lack of Greek bronze vessels, in front of complete Etruscan bronze banquet sets and conspicuous imports of Greek pottery, mostly Attic. Etruscan cities of the Tyrrhenian and of the Po Valley area acted as a filter, blocking the imports of Greek bronze vessels to promote their own products. In southern Italy, the picture is supplemented by some funerary sets in the meantime published<sup>2</sup> and by some pieces recently found<sup>3</sup> or recognized as coming from a definite center.<sup>4</sup>

To these updates, we can add new observations about the possibility to attribute some pieces to defined productions. If recent chemical analyses suggest Aegina as production center for one of the kraters from Trebenischte,<sup>5</sup> observations about style and distribution of the Athenian bronze vessels allow now to review the percentages of pieces attributable to this production,<sup>6</sup> re-evaluating their presence in Italy, Balkans and in the northern Black Sea region from the middle of the sixth up to the end of the fifth century<sup>7</sup> (fig. 1). Among all these funerary contexts, there are obviously important regional differences, but common to all is the presence of Greek metal (mainly bronze) and pottery vessels, that in Greece are generally connected to the *symposium* and/or to sacred ceremonies. Generally, it is enough easy to define the function, these vessels had in Greece, thanks to the many representations on figured pottery; more difficult is to recognize the meaning, that these objects had for indigenous peoples. Does the association of various shapes reflect their daily use? Or were these associations specifically created for their funerary destination? Were these objects normally used before becoming part of a funeral outfit? And was this use the same as in Greece? The difficulty in answering these questions is due to the fact, that we don't have written sources or figured representation helping us in understanding the original meaning of these objects in indigenous societies, so we can start from the use of these vessels in Greece.

The more common shapes of bronze vessels found in indigenous funerary contexts are basins, *lebetes*, *oinochoai*, *hydriai*, strainers, *phialai* and exceptionally *kraters*.

Only *phialai* are specifically connected only with religious practices, as on Greek figured pottery they are always represented in scenes of sacrifice or libation. Bronze examples have been found in several burials in southern Italy<sup>8</sup> and inner Balkans,<sup>9</sup> all pieces that should be used during funeral libation and sacrifices.<sup>10</sup>

Strictly related with the *symposium* were kraters, attested by extraordinary, complete examples or just by handles<sup>11</sup> (fig. 2), *deinoi* or *lebetes*<sup>12</sup> and strainers,<sup>13</sup> whose presence in burials is a clear reference to the Greek habit of drinking wine.

Other shapes were used in both contexts, sacred and symposiastic, as they seem to indicate the many depictions recurring on figured pottery, especially Attic, and the



presence of bronze examples among the votive materials offered in Greek sanctuaries. This is the case of the *oinochoai*, used for sacred libations, when associated with the *phiale*, and to pure wine during *symposia*. In indigenous burials, *oinochoai* are one of the most widespread shapes of bronze vessels, often associated with a bronze basin or with a complete banquet set<sup>14</sup> (fig. 3).

More uncertain is the use of *hydriai*: normally a container for water, they were used in Greek the world for many and different purposes, as banquets, games prizes, votive objects in sanctuaries (related to the use of water during sacrifices), cinerary urns in burials.<sup>15</sup> Bronze *hydriai* are well attested among all indigenous contexts, from southern Italy to inner Balkans and northern Black Sea area<sup>16</sup> (fig. 4), with just one piece found in central Europe, the famous *hydria* from Grächwill.<sup>17</sup> Usually richly decorated, the *hydriai* have been found normally together with other pieces of the *symposium* set, clearly attesting the deceased's richness.

Basins, because of the generality of the form, lend themselves to many different uses: for those with fixed handles, generally associated to a tripod base, called "*podanipteres*", representations on figured pottery indicates a function generally related with the personal cleaning in different contexts, one of which is the *symposium* (fig. 5). This shape, generally with molded handles, is very well attested in indigenous burials, in southern Italy, Balkans, Black Sea area, always associated with shapes related with wine consuming<sup>18</sup> (fig. 6).



Fig. 2: Kraters.

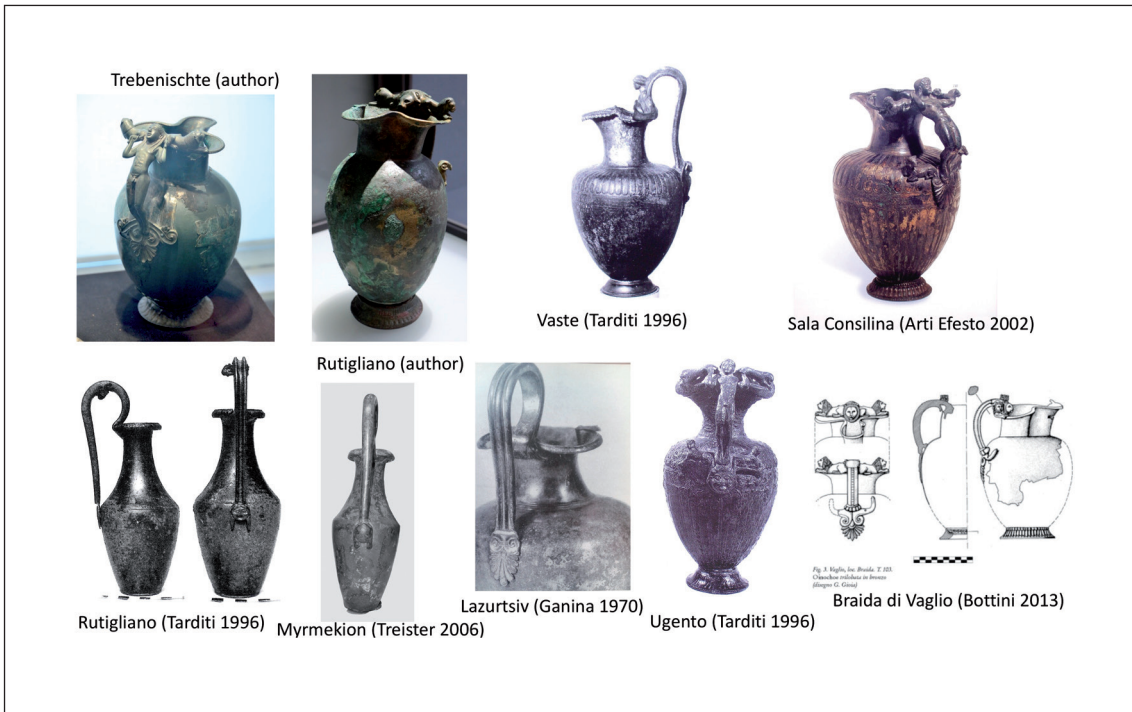


Fig. 3: Bronze *oinochoai*.



Fig. 4: Bronze *hydriai*.



Fig. 5: *podanipter* use on Athenian figured pottery.

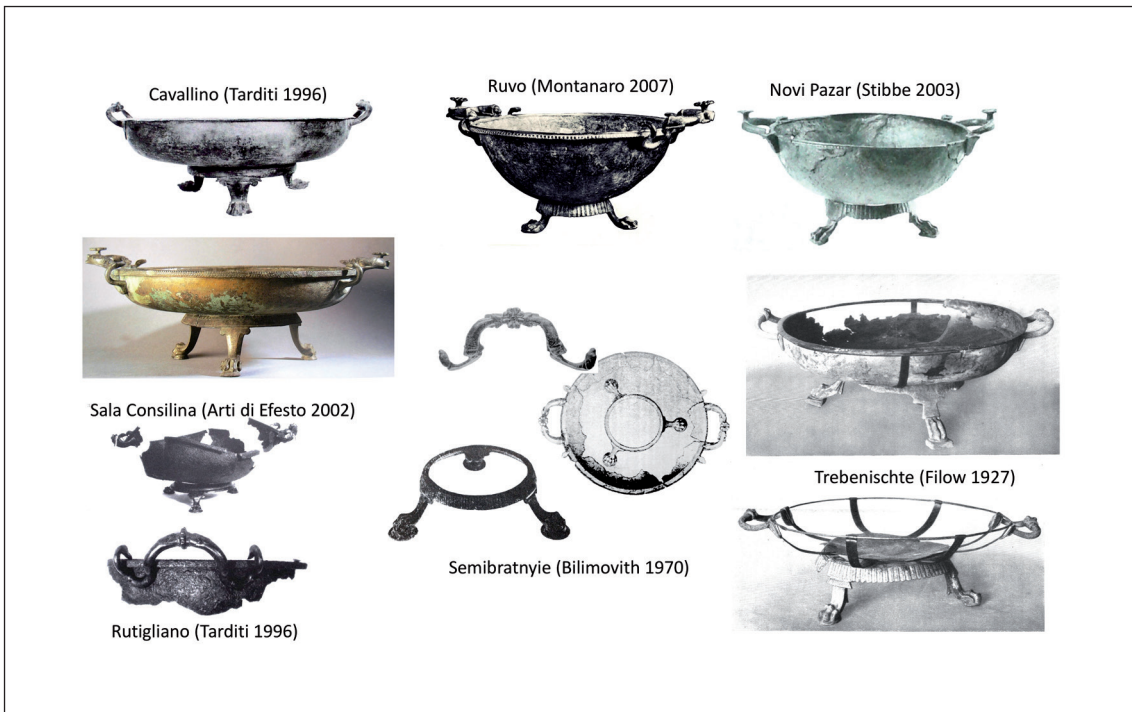


Fig. 6: Bronze *podanipteres*.

A specific kind of basins with fixed handles of triangular shape is clearly recognizable on some Attic red figured vases used, at least in fifth century Athens, as “*chernips*” for the ritual hands washing before the sacrifice (fig. 7). The huge number of handles of this type found among the materials of the Athenian Acropolis (several hundred) seems to confirm this relation and their Athenian production.<sup>19</sup> Well-known examples of basins with this kind of handles have been found also in some indigenous burial contexts in southern Italy,<sup>20</sup> Balkans<sup>21</sup> and Black Sea area.<sup>22</sup> It is possible that their original use was not received in these contexts, as they have been found associated with elements connected to the *symposium* set: in indigenous area, they were probably sold (and purchased) as “normal” bronze basins, usable as *podanipter*, container for food or other stuff during a normal banquet.

Another shape often found in indigenous burials, mainly in Italy, is the low basin with long handle known as “*Griffphiale*” in archaeological literature<sup>23</sup> (fig. 8). The main characteristic is the handle, plain or molded, often in anthropomorphous or lion’s shape.



Fig. 7: *chernips* representation and bronze handle from the Athenian Acropolis.

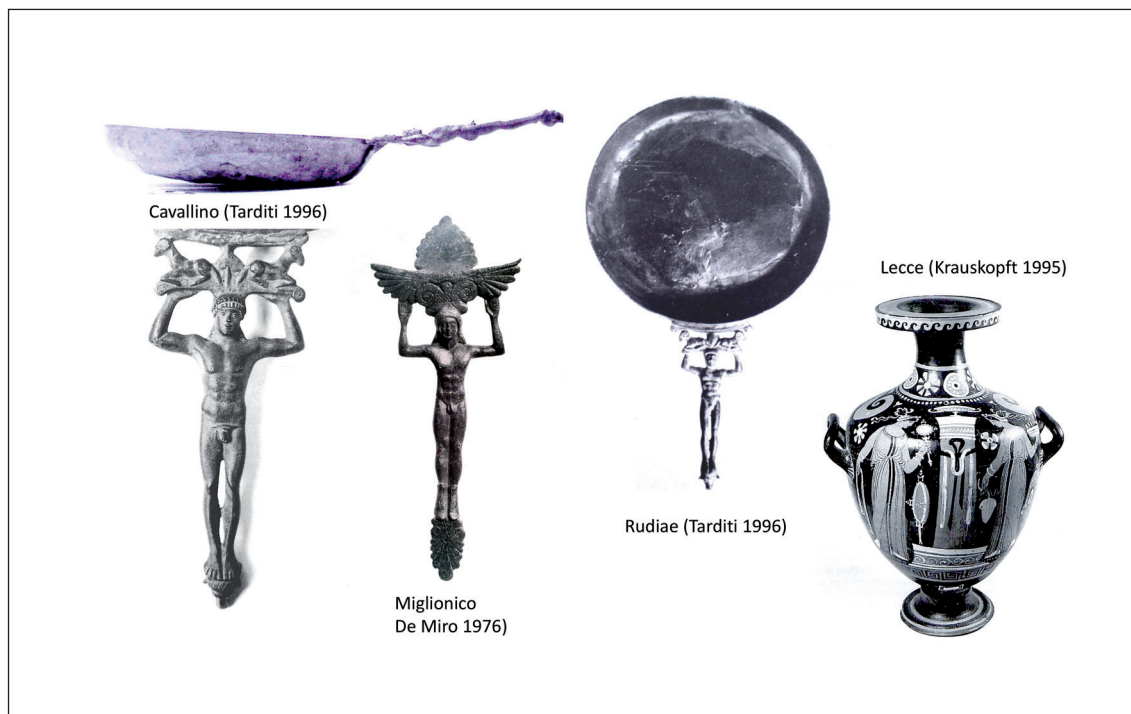


Fig. 8: *paterae* with anthropomorphic handle.

This kind of vessel recurs on some figured southern Italian pottery of late Classical period, where it is generally vertically kept by the handle: that it is a vessel and not a mirror is made clear by the concave rendering of the bowl.<sup>24</sup> Normally, it is represented in scenes connected to sacred or funeral contexts, as the *naiskos* suggests, sometimes together with grapes or *hydriai*, but there is no explicit indication of its use or of its ancient name. The long handle and the shape, so close to modern pans, would suggest a use related to cooking or heating some food or drink: and one immediately thinks of the Greek habit of drinking hot wine. The recurrence of these “*paterae*” in funerary sets together with other objects related to the wine consumption (*oinochoai*, cups) could be an element in favor of this interpretation. When offered as votive objects in Greek sanctuaries,<sup>25</sup> probably they could be used during sacred *symposia*. The recurrence on late Classical southern Italian painted pottery could be explained as a reference to the wine consumption during funerary libation or rites, perhaps even related with late classical Dionysian cults.<sup>26</sup> The success of this shape in southern Italy is well attested by some local production, stylistically well characterized, as that attributed to the Peucetia.<sup>27</sup>

All these bronze vessels, in Greece connected with wine consuming, when found in indigenous burial contexts of the Archaic and early Classical period, often with pottery vessels or *instrumenta* used for cooking meat (*kreagra*, *lebetes*, *obeloi*, etc.), clearly reflect the deceased’s adoption of the Greek style in consuming wine and food. The use and the exhibition of these objects can be seen as expression of wealth and of the wish of feeling



themselves as part of an elite, comparable to the Greek aristocracy, of whom *symposium* was originally expression. The deceased thus qualifies himself as a prominent figure, rich and used to the prestigious social rituals peculiar of the culture then considered as a point of reference. In addition to this interpretation, often suggested by several scholars, it was proposed also that the reference to the banquet, represented mainly by the set of *oenochoe* and basin, could be allusive, at least for southern Italian indigenous people, to the unearthly life, as in the Etruscan world, where in tomb paintings scenes of banqueting have been read not so much as a reference to the wealth and status of the deceased, but as an allusion to the blessed perennial banquet.<sup>28</sup> One wonders, however, how plausible are, at least for the Archaic and early Classical period, these modern hypotheses about afterlife conception in southern Italian indigenous societies and how much are believable so sophisticated reconstructions of the meaning, that some associations of materials found in tombs should have. We ask if it isn't more believable from the historical point of view to consider these pieces and the reference to the *symposium* just as expression of the richness of the deceased, of his will to fell part of the Greek culture, for indigenous people represented mainly by precious imported objects, even better if related to the social practice that more than any other characterized the Greek aristocratic society, the banquet followed by the *symposium*. As weapons alluded to the deceased's role as a warrior, the strigils to his acceptance of the athletic model, expression of the Greek *paideia*, and as women's jewels represent their wealth and social status, so, the banquet bronze tableware, Greek but also Etruscan, should reflect richness and high social level, indicated by the adoption (or exhibition) of a truly Greek social ritual, the banquet and the following *symposium*.<sup>29</sup> This social and behavioral model, initially linked to the aristocratic world, progressively was extended to all levels of the society, also to the less eminent people of the community, as the Testo development of local, more ordinary productions attests.

In Archaic and Early Classical time, among the indigenous societies of southern Italy, mainly in Apulia and Lucania, and inner Balkans, enough frequent are complete and "ordinary" *symposia* sets of Greek bronze vessels, while in central Europe there are just single, exceptional pieces, as the *krater* from Vix,<sup>30</sup> the Graechwill *hydria* and the Hochdorf *lebes*, in all cases the only Greek bronze vessel in each tomb. So, for these areas, it doesn't seem appropriate to think to the adoption of the *symposium* practice, with all its cultural meanings: found in some cases together with Etruscan vessels, these Greek bronze vessels were certainly used as prestigious symbols, in context of local convivial practices, maybe adapted to the local habit of drinking and eating, which could also have in the collective consumption of alcoholic beverages (not necessarily wine) the main moment of social aggregation and celebration of the rituals of power. These precious and exceptional vases, together with rich objects of different kind but always related with the Greek *symposium*, as the more common painted pottery cups or the rare and precious *klinai* with amber and ivory decoration,<sup>31</sup> can be interpreted as loot from raids or, preferably, as prestigious gifts made by Greek traders to indigenous

chiefs, to favor the regular trades of Greek figured pottery or fine foods, as wine or olive oil, in exchange of metal supplies (rude or metal scraps), slaves, etc.<sup>32</sup>

The situation changes significantly starting from the late Classical period: in southern Italy, burial finds show a huge increase in the quantity of the offered objects, in the most rich tombs with hundreds of pieces and a multiplication of examples of the same shape, gorgeous manifestation of wealth, now often combined with the reference to the athletic model (attested by strigils), this too expression of deep acceptance of the Greek *paideia* and culture (fig. 8). If in central Europe we do not have more Greek bronze vessels, in the northern Black Sea area the strict relations with Macedonia, the presence of Greek colonies and the better organization of indigenous settlements increase usage, importation and perhaps local production of bronze and silver vessels in Greek style.<sup>33</sup> In this region, the frequent deposition in burial contexts of basin and *oinochoe* seems to indicate a use conscious of their original meaning in the Greek world.<sup>34</sup> The exceptional finds at Peschanoe of a ship cargo with old pieces of different times<sup>35</sup> attests that local buyers appreciated Greek products even if they were not updated to the most recent style.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tarditi 2007.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Matera, tomb 2 of Piazzetta Canosa (Colucci 2009); Braida di Vaglio (Bottini – Setari 2003).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Baragiano, tomb 35 (Russo 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Reconstruction of funerary assemblage of tomb 103 at Ruvo di Puglia (Montanaro 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Bottini 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Tarditi 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Tarditi 2017.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. from Conversano, Altamura, Oria (Lo Porto 1996), Bitonto, Rocavecchia, Rudiae (Tarditi 1996, 170), etc.

<sup>9</sup> Trebenische, t. VI (Filow 1927, 75–76) and at least other six pieces from sites north from there (Stibbe 2003, fig. 73).

<sup>10</sup> Same function had also silver *phialai*, found they too in several contexts: just one from central Europe at Vix (Krausse 2003), rare examples in Italy, at Sirolo (Landolfi 2001, 357) and Filottrano (Rocco 1995), and many examples from some extremely rich Bulgarian treasures, as those of Rogozen, Duvanlii, Basova, etc. (see web site “Bulgaria’s Thracian Heritage”: <www.omda.bg> 26.06.2020) and from burials in modern Ukraine and Southern Russia, as from Soboleva Mogila or Chmyreva Mogila (Treister 2007; Treister 2010), where the Achaemenid influence was stronger.

<sup>11</sup> Exceptional pieces from Vix (Rolley 2003), Capua, Ruvo di Puglia (Montanaro 2007), Trebenische (Filow 1927), Martonocha (Tarditi 2019).

<sup>12</sup> *deinos* from Amandola (Tarditi 2007, 27–28) or *lebes* from Hochdorf (Biel 1985).

<sup>13</sup> E.g. from southern Italian burials (Rutigliano, Cavallino, Valenzano, etc.: Tarditi 1996, 140–142).

<sup>14</sup> See pieces from Sala Consilina Princely Burial or tombs from Rutigliano, Ugento, Cavallino in Southern Italy (Tarditi 1996, 146–149), Trebenischte in inner Balkans (Filow 1927), Lazurtsiv and Myrmekion in Black Sea area (Butyagin – Treister 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Sowder 2009, 327–412.

<sup>16</sup> We can mention the *hydriai* from Sirolo, Castelbellino, Sala Consilina, Randazzo in Italy (bibliography in Tarditi 2007), Trebenischte and Novi Pazar in inner Balkans (Stibbe 2003), Peschanoe from modern Ukraine (Tarditi 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Complete bibliography in Sowder 2009, 512.

<sup>18</sup> Tarditi 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Tarditi 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Lavello and Valenzano (Lo Porto 1996, 21).

<sup>21</sup> Trebenischte, Tomb I (Filow 1927, 74).

<sup>22</sup> Ezerovo (Filow 1927, 74, 78, fig. 92).

<sup>23</sup> Tarditi 1996, 172–179; Tarditi 2016, 286–287.

<sup>24</sup> Cassimatis 1988, 307.

<sup>25</sup> For the many pieces from the Athenian Acropolis, see Tarditi 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Krauskopf 1995, 523–526; Schneider Hermann 1962, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Tarditi 1996, 175–178, 204.

<sup>28</sup> Montanaro 2007, 174.

<sup>29</sup> Russo 2013, 247–248; Lippolis 2007, 7 “Con gli oggetti si veicolano anche i comportamenti e a questo proposito associazioni e tipologie possono mostrare le diverse forme di adesione o di adeguamento ai modelli originari”.

<sup>30</sup> We can add also the handle’s fragment from the Point Lequin shipwreck near Massalia (Rolley 2003, 84).

<sup>31</sup> *Kline* in Grafenbühl and fragments of at least other two from two tumulus burials in the same region (Naso 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Tarditi 2007; Sheffton 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Treister 2007; Treister 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Boltrik et al. 2011, 273–274, figs. 7–8.

<sup>35</sup> Ganina 1970; Treister 2010.

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