

# Pottery Production for the European Market – the Roman Potter’s Workshops of Weißenthurm

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On the left bank of the Rhine, in the middle of the Neuwied basin the modern village of Weißenthurm is located between the cities of Koblenz and Andernach (fig. 1). Through its fluvial location, the place is perfectly connected to the long-distance trade network. In Roman times the so-called Urmitz ware was produced there. From the Roman potter’s *vicus* almost 20 pottery kilns are known up to now. Its extension was recorded by compiling all the finds from the past decades (fig. 2).

In this production centre of supra-regional importance high-quality coarse ceramics were made. Particularly plates, bowls and pots for daily use were produced there, which differ clearly in appearance and design from other ceramics. Characteristic features of this ceramics are a hard firing, a rough surface in varying shades of colour and a leafy break with a reddish tempering (fig. 3). These characteristics make the Weißenthurm products easy to recognise in other localities.

When in 1914 Franz Oelmann worked on the pottery from the Niederbieber fort, he noticed that he knew the ceramics from a production site that was then located in the Urmitz district. Consequently, he called these vessels “Urmitzer Ware”.<sup>1</sup> Due to territorial shifts, the site lies now in the municipality of Weißenthurm. In research, nevertheless the naturalised name “Urmitzer Ware” remains because it has been an important name in archaeology since a long time.

Still today the type classification of the Urmitz ware submitted by Oelmann is used to characterise Roman vessels. Furthermore, up to the most recent literature this product has been considered a chronologically guiding fossil of the so-called Niederbieber horizon (end 2<sup>nd</sup> to the second third of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century).<sup>2</sup> The production has been supposed to have ceased with the so-called “Limes decline”. However, according to my results, the traditional research opinion, which regards the Urmitz ware as a criterion for dating is no longer sustainable and needs to be reviewed. The same applies to the product range.

In 1974/75 the largest contiguous *vicus* surface, of 220 × 110 m, was excavated by the “Staatliches Amt für Vor- und Frühgeschichte” Koblenz (fig. 4). Pottery kilns and cellars of buildings are scattered throughout the area. In the southwest of the excavation area pottery kiln 1 was found. The rectangular kiln, of standing type, was filled with municipal waste, including numerous animal bones and the demolition debris from the kiln. Even if the ceramics recovered from the kiln filling were not the last load of the kiln, by the quantity and similarity of the potsherds it can be considered that the waste of previous fires was thrown into the kiln. The ceramics are typical Urmitz coarse ware (fig. 3). From the ash layer remaining in the oven, four samples were taken for scientific analysis. The samples had to be cut with great force because the burnt fragments were extremely hard and sharp-edged. As the finds from the ash layer indicate, the production span



Fig. 1: Location of the Weißenthurm potteries.



Fig. 2: Extension of the potter's vicus of Weißenthurm.



Fig. 3: Appearance of the typical Weißenthurm coarse ware.

of kiln 1 was middle to second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> This means the Weißenthurm production started earlier than it was expected before.

New information on the product range yielded the double kiln 2/3 on the western edge of the excavation area (fig. 4). The production span of the double kiln cannot be dated more precisely than second half 2<sup>nd</sup> / beginning 3<sup>rd</sup> century. While in the larger kiln 2 the typical Urmitz ware was fired, the later added smaller kiln 3 was used for the production of fine, thin-walled vessels (fig. 5). A total of 15 waste potsherds of both productions were selected for sampling. In both cases the sherds were so hard that the samples had to be broken off with the pliers. We found out that, despite the significant macroscopic differences, the compositions of the coarse ware and the fine ware are identical.

The fact that the production of the Urmitz ware did not end in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century is shown by finds from the backfilling of cellar 6, to the east of the excavation area (fig. 4) from which kiln debris could be recovered. The mineralogical analysis of two fragments of pots Alzei 27, fused with the remains of the kiln, proved a production of that late Roman type in Weißenthurm.<sup>4</sup> Altogether, all the samples taken from the kilns and the vicus area can clearly be classified in a group called “Weißenthurm” (fig. 6). On the basis of this result, a continuation of production is documented until the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

As the Weißenthurm sherds could be clearly classified chemically and mineralogically, samples were also taken from the right bank of the Rhine. During the investigations, the author had the opportunity to see sherds from sites in the Barbaricum, whose macroscopic aspect pointed to Weißenthurm. By the samples taken in Leverkusen-Rheindorf, Leverkusen-Schlebusch, Niederkassel-Lülsdorf, Düsseldorf-Stockum and Kamen-Westick,<sup>5</sup> capturing the export area of the Urmitz ware turned out to take a completely new direction in time and space. In the cemetery of Leverkusen-Rheindorf

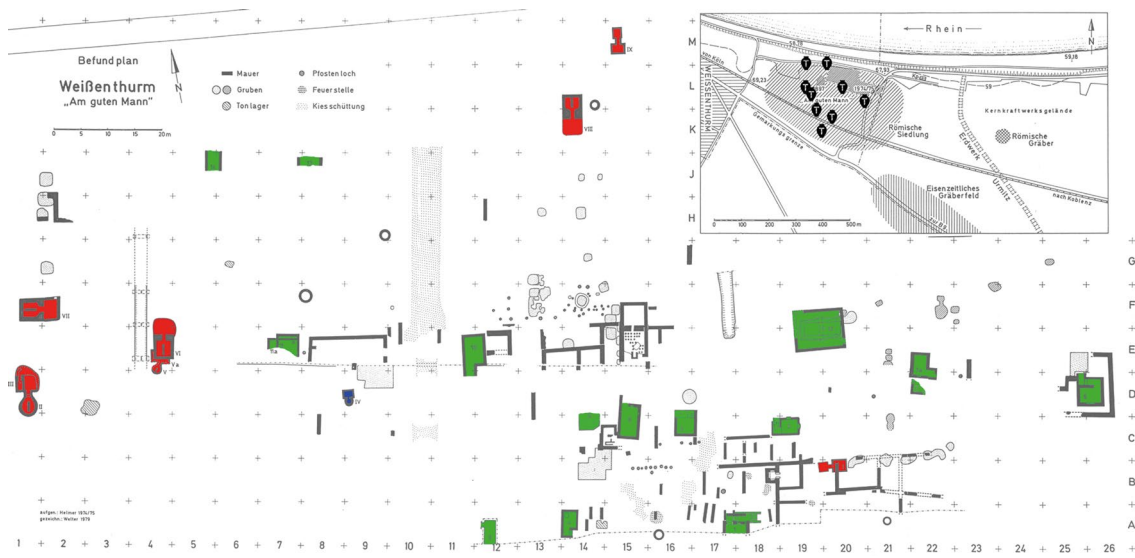


Fig. 4: Plan of the Weißenthurm excavation area 1974/75. The pottery kilns are marked in red, the cellars are coloured in green.



Fig. 5: Fine ware from Weißenthurm kiln 3.

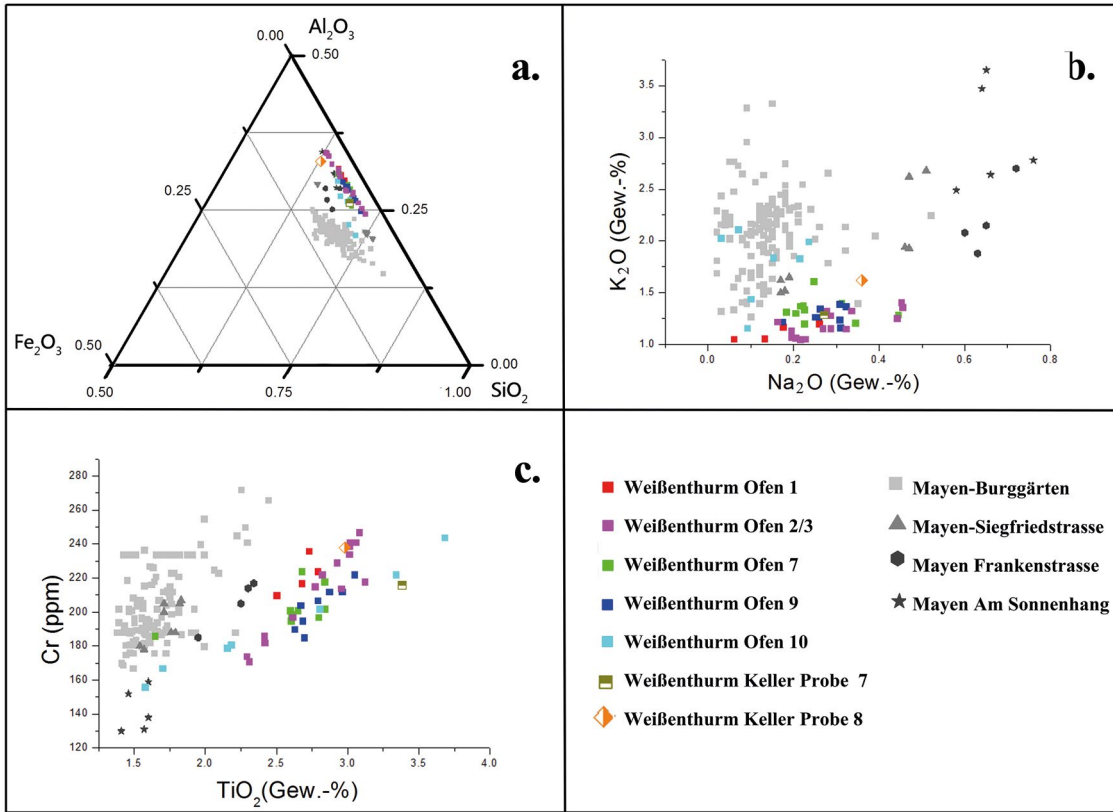


Fig. 6: Chemical analysis of Weißenthurm samples in comparison with Mayen sample.



Fig. 7: Sherd from Leverkusen-Rheindorf.



Fig. 8: Pottery waste from Koblenz “Bürresheimer Hof”.

a sample was taken from grave 35, which dates to the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 7). But in contrast to all the samples taken in Weißenthurm, the sherds of the jar from Rheindorf were so soft that the sample could simply be broken off by hand.

This fact leads to a recent excavation in the city of Koblenz. For a couple of years, voices became louder that doubted the exclusivity of the production site of Weißenthurm.<sup>6</sup> However, a review of the surrounding Roman settlements revealed no indication of further production sites in the Neuwied basin.<sup>7</sup> Then at the “Bürresheimer Hof” in the old town of Koblenz below the late antique city wall a pit filled with pottery waste was excavated. The ceramics, coin-dated in the years 275, resembled the classical Urmitz ware (fig. 8). Because of this similarity, the author initiated a sampling of the sherds.<sup>8</sup> To take the samples, again it was not necessary to use a pair of pliers. The soft consistence of the sherd is reminiscent of the sample from the grave 35 from Leverkusen-Rheindorf.

The sherds from Rheindorf and Koblenz could be distinguished from Weißenthurm only haptically and not macroscopically. For this reason the question arises once again whether Weißenthurm was the only production site for the Urmitz ware. Therefore, it

was decided to expand the sampling radius in order to create a comprehensive database. Samples were also taken in Andernach and Bonn down the Rhine.<sup>9</sup>

Especially the last facts show how cautious we should use the term “Urmitz ware” and its use as a dating criterion in the future. The results of the pending mineralogical analyses will show whether we can talk about THE “Urmitz ware” at all.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Oelmann 1914, 70

<sup>2</sup> Doubts in this regard: Heising 2010, esp. 65–66

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich 2015

<sup>4</sup> Xu 2015

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank all the contacts for their extensive support. Leverkusen-Rheindorf, Leverkusen-Schlebusch, Niederkassel-Lülsdorf: Erik Classen and Klaus Frank, Landschaftsverband Rheinland, LVR-Amt für Bodendenkmalpflege im Rheinland – Außenstelle Overath; Düsseldorf-Stockum: Michael Schmauder and Katarzyna Kus, LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn; Kamen-Westik: Michael Baales, Eva Cichy, Robert Fahr, LWL-Archäologie für Westfalen, Außenstelle Olpe.

<sup>6</sup> Kiessel 2008, 399–407; Brüggler 2009, 143

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich 2012

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