

A New Silver Shape of a Hellenistic Askos

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses a relatively small wine container called an askos, which is part of a ‘treasure’ of silver vessels allegedly found in central Thrace. The askos is compared to several clay parallels excavated thus far exclusively in Thrace. These clay askoi occur in three different ceramic fabrics: banded ware, a fabric with painted floral and geometric motifs, and monochrome ware. Our silver exemplar is dated to the very end of the 4th century BC and attributed to a workshop most plausibly located in a Greek colony of the western Black Sea coast.

KEYWORDS

Silverware; treasure; askos, toreutics; banded ware; monochrome ware; Thrace; Hellenistic period; Black Sea workshop; Chian standard.

THE SILVER ASKOS FROM A ‘TREASURE’

A group of twenty silver vases, said to have been found together in central Thrace (allegedly between Kazanlak and Gabrovo), and acquired by the Vassil Bojkov Collection in Sofia (hereafter VBC), comprises various shapes of calices, a plate, a kantharos, an oinochoe, and an askos. One of the calices bears a toreut’s signature, which led me to conventionally name after him the entire group of silver vases *The Agatharchos Treasure*, although not all its pieces are made by the same silversmith, nor even issued from the same workshop.

The askos is registered in the VBC under the inv. 2663 and measures the following: total height 9 cm, height of the body 7.4 cm, length of the vase 15.2 cm, length with the chain 16 cm, body diameter 11.2 cm, lid diameter 5.6 cm, base diameter 6.6 cm, gilded medallion diameter 7.9 cm, chain length 13 cm, weight 284.38 g.¹

The vase has approximately the shape of a strongly oblate sphere and is made of six hammered pieces and a chain assembled by soldering and riveting (**Figs. 1a–e, Pl. 3/1a–e**). Clear hammer marks are still visible inside the neck, while the outer surface has been thoroughly burnished (**Fig. 1a**). The body is made of two roughly hemispherical halves joining at mid height. The lower half has a raised base marked with a chiselled line at both edges and a centring dot under the somewhat concave bottom (**Fig. 1b**). Its top edge is slightly narrowing so that it can be inserted in the upper half of the body. This part of the vase bears at its top a large embossed and leaf-gilded medallion consisting of three concentric zones (**Fig. 1e**). The central one is a rosette of eight round-tipped petals with a raised and dotted outline, separated by as many diamonds. This area of the medallion is slightly raised creating thus a sort of omphalos. The second zone is a band of successive three-leaf motifs, while the outermost and wider zone

1 I am indebted to Marina Kalpachka for providing the basic measurements and to Vladimir Alexeev for the pictures of the askos, from which I have inferred some secondary measurements. I would also like to thank my friend, Dr. Ruja Popova, for mediating the transfer of information.



Fig. 1: The silver askos VBC inv. 2663. a - before restoration; b - bottom view; c - front view; d - side view; e - top view. Photo VBC/V. Alexeev.

bears a well-designed wreath with twenty-four lanceolate leaves. The cylindrical neck is made separately and soldered at an angle of 45° degrees to the shoulder of the vase. Its top flares to a wide horizontal mouth with a short back-turned and hanging rim. Its base widens graciously to embrace the convex surface of the shoulder. Two strap handles are attached on either side of the neck, fastened with large round-headed silver rivets. The long edges of each handle are slightly sunken and emphasized by a chiselled line. The strap of the grip terminates in small attachment plaques, round on the side of the neck and heart-shaped on the side of the body (**Fig. 1d**). The lid is circular, with a short vertical rim that matches that of the mouth, and it has a small protuberance at its centre. Two small holes on this protuberance serve to secure a ring attached to a two-fold double loop-in-loop chain, the other end of which is soldered in the middle of the outer surface of one of the handles (**Fig. 1c**). Apart from some very light scratches all over the surface, the vase is preserved in almost intact condition.

POTTERY PARALLELS

This shape of an askos has thus far been unattested in metal. The silver and bronze exemplars of the Late Classical and Hellenistic periods document different forms: some bronze ones are closer to the oinochoe or decanter shapes,² while the silver variants belong either to the 'loaf-shaped' form with a single high-arching handle known better in Attic red figure pottery,³ or to the guttus type.⁴ However, the form of the VBC example is relatively well known in pottery, exclusively in the area of Thrace,⁵ where it is either called a 'lentoid askos',⁶ precisely because some of the exemplars have a fully lentoid profile, or *Pilgerflaschen* and 'Pilgrim-bottle askos',⁷ because it resembles the so-called pilgrim-flasks. The latter is a shape already known from the Mycenaean times, but established under this term in the Late Roman period. Many of the clay askoi are closer to an oblate sphere, often provided with a ring base and exceptionally with a separate ring-stand. They occur in at least three different pottery fabrics, several examples of which have been collected by Emil Teleaga, but worthy of further investigation.⁸

2 FILOW 1937, 28–30, 56–57, cat. 19, figs. 57–58 (Mezek); DESCAMPS-LEQUIME 2011, 405, cat. 258/2 (Pydna); KAKAVAS 2013, 96, cat. 72 (Dodona); DIMITROVA 2015, 199–201, 286–289, cat. 42, figs. 160–161, 224–227 (Golyamata Kosmatka); PFISTERER-HAAS 2019, 127–128, cat. 213–214, 252, figs. 9.51–9.54 (one said to be from Pyrgos/Elis, but both believed to be Etruscan by the author).

3 THEMELIS – TOURATSOGLU 1997, 69, cat. B3, pl. 72 (silver exemplar), 38, 106, cat. A34, Δ66, pls. 46, 118 (red figure exemplars); DROUGOU 2005, 40–42, 51, 152–153, figs. 23, 30–31, 167 (Vergina, red figure exemplars); ZIMI 2011, 45.

4 ANDRONIKOS 1984, 208, fig. 171 (Vergina); TOULOUMTZIDOU 2011, 309–310, pl. 17γ–δ (Vergina and Trichonio); SIDERIS 2021, cat. 265 (said to be from Thrace); ZIMI 2011, 45–46.

5 The 'askos' reported from Vergina by Teleaga (2008, 226, no. 30) is a false entry. In reality, what Kotaridi (1994, 26, fig. 3) publishes is a regular amphora of a well-known type of the 2nd century BC.

6 BOZHKOVA 2017, 85.

7 TELEAGA 2008, 224; BOUZEK 2002, 175, 177.

8 TELEAGA 2008, 224–227, 431–432, cat. 881–897. He does not distinguish the three fabrics; instead, he classifies the askoi according to their size in a main group comprising exemplars of smaller dimensions and a subgroup of larger size (*Hauptgruppe* – *Untergruppe*). To his list should be added at least nine more exemplars. Four additional exemplars come from Pistiros and two from Zone. For the Pistiros finds see BOUZEK 2002, 170, nos. 6, 8, 10, figs. 6.11:3, 6.11:8, 6.14:1–2, plus no. 9, illustrated by a drawing in fig. 6.15 and mentioned by Teleaga; the same in colour picture in ARCHIBALD 2007, pl. 25.10; TANEVA 2013, 29, pl. 6:4. A fragment from a similar askos comes from Halka Bunar near Stara Zagora, and an almost intact grey ware exemplar from Kaloyanovo near Sliven. Finally,

The first fabric, which I call conventionally ‘banded ware’, shows wide concentric circles or a wide spiralling band of darker colour painted directly on the clay of the upper surface of the vase. Three such exemplars come from Zone (formerly Mesembria) in Aegean Thrace (Figs. 2-3), all found in domestic contexts of the 4th century BC.⁹ Another similar clay askos is also part of the VBC.¹⁰ It belongs among the largest exemplars of this shape (Fig. 4). Its body has a clearly oblate spherical profile, not a lentoid one, and there is a knob at its top. The outer surface of the mouth and the handles are painted black. A wide spiralling brushed band of the same colour starts from the knob and terminates at the handle-root. The vase sits on a separate hand-made ring-stand of roughly semi-circular cross-section. These vases date most probably from the second half of the 4th century BC and may represent some sort of North-Aegean continuation of the earlier Ionian banded ware, which apparently continued into the early Hellenistic period as is demonstrated by finds from Priene.¹¹



Fig. 2: Banded ware clay askos from Zone (formerly Mesembria). Photo Arkhaiologiki Etaireia.



Fig. 3: Banded ware clay askos from Zone (formerly Mesembria). After TSATSOPOULOU 1987.



Fig. 4: Banded ware clay askos, VBC inv. 1077. Photo A. Sideris.

a piece with spiral-band decoration is in the VBC; for the remainder of the additional exemplars see the below notes 9-10, 15, and 18.

9 VAVRITSAS 1983, 23, pl. 24a-b (one of them, here Fig. 2, in addition to the circular bands bears a circle of brushstrokes); TSATSOPOULOU 1987, 473, fig. 8. For the identification of the city formerly believed to be Mesembria as Zone, see TSATSOPOULOU-KALOUDI 2001, 9-10.

10 Unpublished, said to be from central southern Thrace: VBC inv. 1077.

11 BOUZEK 1990, 38; BOARDMAN 1998, 149; HEINZE *et al.* 2018.

The second and most widespread fabric comprises exemplars of both larger and smaller size, most of which bear some painted red, brown, or black decoration on the top of the body. The regular motifs are concentric circles thinner and more numerous (up to five) than those of the previous fabric (Chirnogi-Rudari, Kazanlak, Malkata tumulus),¹² motifs of radially disposed bands and dotted lines (Chirnogi, Kolmen, Odessos),¹³ and – most characteristically – simple rosettes encircled by one to three lines (Banovo here **Fig. 5**, Sboryanovo here **Fig. 6**, Pistiros).¹⁴ Such vases are known only from central and northern Thrace, including the territories immediately north of the Danube, but they are not attested thus far in the south or in the west of the Hebros/Maritsa valley.¹⁵ Such a distribution makes more plausible the localization of their workshop in a Greek colony of the Black Sea coast, most probably in Odessos as has already been suggested.¹⁶ These vases date between the last quarter of the 4th and the first half of the 3rd centuries BC.



Fig. 5: Clay askos with a painted rosette from Banovo. After TELEAGA 2008.



Fig. 6: Clay askos with a painted rosette from Sboryanovo. After TELEAGA 2008.

12 ŞERBĂNESCU 1999, 232, fig. 4.2; TSONCHEV 1959, 102, nos. 17–18, figs. 20–21; KITOV – THEODOSSIEV 1995, 325, fig. 11.

13 TURCU 1979, 177, 214–215, fig. 31:2, pl. 42:1; DREMSIZOVA-NELCHINOVA 1970, 221, pl. IV:5; MINCHEV 2007, fig. on p. 98.

14 TELEAGA 2008, 431, nos. 883–884, pls. 98:5, 128:1, 189:6 (Sboryanovo listed as Sveshtari); CHICHIKOVA 2015, 58, nos. 24–26, fig. I.1:37; STOYANOV *et al.* 2015, 258, fig. II.1:14; BOUZEK 2002, 170, no. 9, fig. 6.15

15 A sherd with red paint comprising part of the neck and the beginning of the handles, from a similar askos found in a domestic context (sector XI, square 125) at the settlement of Halka Bunar in the Stara Zagora region, as yet unpublished. For the settlement and the sector see TONKOVA – SIDERIS 2013.

16 TELEAGA 2008, 224; CHICHIKOVA 2015, 52 (the identification is based on the colour and texture of the clay).

Finally, there are some exemplars produced in the local monochrome clay fabrics (grey and beige/orange). These are mostly undecorated (Pistiros, Kazanlak, Kabyle here **Fig. 7**),¹⁷ except for one example, from Buzovgrad in the Kazanlak district (**Fig. 8**). On this askos, three incised concentric circles encircle the top knob, creating the illusion of a false lid with a grip, similarly to that of a silver askos from Derveni.¹⁸ These vases were made, no doubt, in the same workshops, where the rest of the Late Classical and Early Hellenistic monochrome ware production took place, in coastal and inland Thrace, and can be dated between the second half of the 4th and the first quarter of the 3rd centuries BC.



Fig. 7: Brown clay askos with concentric circles from Kabyle. Photo A. Sideris.



Fig. 8: Grey ware askos from Buzovgrad. Photo Iskra Regional Historical Museum of Kazanlak.

It is noteworthy that clay flask-askoi come from funeral contexts, tombs and necropoleis, (21 sites with 26 examples) twice as numerous as the domestic contexts (11 sites with 23 examples, including Seuthopolis),¹⁹ but with marginal overlapping of the two groups in only two cases (Sboryanovo and Odessos). The rest are either chance finds or come from unidentifiable contexts (at least 8 exemplars). To my knowledge, there are no flask-askoi documented from Macedonia and southern Greece thus far, where the closest parallels to this form are either the simple flasks with neck and mouth set vertically on the edge of a lentoid body, or a type of body-warmer (askoi for medical use), with a flat or slightly concave back side.²⁰

17 TANEVA 2013, 29, pl. 6. 4. TABAKOVA-TSANNOVA 1961, 55, no. 4, fig. 2Г (probably inv. 145 of the Iskra Regional Historical Museum of Kazanlak) and no. 8, fig. 3B; further askoi in the Kazanlak Museum: inv. 957, 1193, 1529, 1551. GETOV 1991, 170, no. 5, fig. 12 (this piece is painted black around the mouth).

18 TABAKOVA-TSANNOVA 1961, 55, no. 5, fig. 2Д. Derveni askos: THEMELIS – TOURATSOGLU 1997, cat. B3, pl. 72. The same motif appears as well on an exemplar from Kazanlak.

19 CHICHIKOVA – DIMITROV 2016, 72, fig. 80 on p. 177.

20 ZAOURI – MELAIU 2000, 98, fig. 91 (Larissa); EGGLEZOU 2005, pl. 99b (Crete); BAZIOTOPOULOU-VALAVANI 1994, pl. 23 (Aetolian Kallipolis); HADJIDAKIS 1997, pl. 227 a-b (Delos).

DATE AND WORKSHOP

To return to the silver askos in the VBC, one can find certain technical and stylistic affinities with various pieces of silver ware and jewellery attributed to the Macedonian court workshops. The rendering of the rosette, for instance, resembles that of one made of filigree and granulation inside a silver kylix in the same collection, bearing a donor's inscription from Mesembria.²¹ The strap-handles and the chained lid recall those on the two silver amphoriskoi from the Tomb II of Aigai/Vergina.²² The specific type of two-fold double loop-in-loop chain is known in Macedonia already since the late Archaic period, while in Thrace it appears in the late 5th century. By the late 4th century BC, this type of chain has spread around the entire Hellenistic world.²³ The VBC askos, though, may be dated to around the turn of the 4th century BC. The use of the metal askoi, and of their clay parallels, was to store and serve wine at banquets. Given, however, the reduced size of the VBC example, it could have contained a stronger or specially flavoured drink, of which only smaller quantities were consumed.

The case of the present silver askos illustrates perfectly the kind of problems encountered in relation to the transfer of forms from metal ware to pottery and exceptionally vice-versa, to the distribution patterns, and to the circulation of artefacts. It highlights also some phenomena of cross-cultural merging, especially in the areas of intensive contact between different cultural domains, such as between Thrace and the Greek world during the Late Classical and Early Hellenistic periods. The shape of our askos was thus well known in pottery, found in relatively large numbers in north-eastern, central and Aegean Thrace.²⁴ Some of these clay askoi may date even earlier than the silver example (the three exemplars from Zone and the one in the VBC, inv. 1077), and one may legitimately wonder if these clay exemplars provided inspiration for the creation of the silver *unicum*. Taking, however, into consideration the high value of the silver and the gold, the rarity of these luxury objects, the difficulty in their preservation through the centuries and the established social practice of imitating forms in materials of lesser value, as often proven by skeuomorphism, one can only admit that the artefacts made of precious metals, such as the VBC silver askos, ranking high in the value hierarchy, gave birth to the local pottery imitations.²⁵ Many of these imitations are trying to be as faithful as possible to their metallic archetype, including the floral decoration on its top. This may signify that the potters were very familiar with the silver creations but does not indicate where our askos originates from.

Its weight may be expressed as 75 drachmae of 3.79 g, which corresponds to the Chian weight standard (nominal weight of the unit 3.8 g), widely adopted in Thrace, Bithynia, and the Propontis during the 4th century BC.²⁶ These regions are therefore the most plausible candidates for the creation of the VBC silver askos. A Greek colony on the Black Sea coast (Mesembria or Odessos?) may seem even more probable given the origin and distribution of the clay version with a rosette, but one must be very cautious when dealing with the relation

21 SIDERIS 2016, 278–281, cat. 114, figs. 114:5–6.

22 ANDRONIKOS 1984, 149, 153, 157, fig. 118; ZIMI 2011, 188–190, cat. 17–18.

23 DESPOINI 2016, 127–130, cat. 203–207, figs. 222–227; MARAZOV 1998, 199, cat. 140; DESCAMPS-LEQUIME 2011, 356, cat. 225; WILLIAMS – OGDEN 1994, 52, 100–103, 206, cat. 6, 54–55, 137.

24 There are as well two exemplars from south-eastern Thrace: FIRATLI 1964, 211, 215, pl. 42:1.

25 This issue, although occasionally discussed by several scholars, was first systematically approached by Michael Vickers and David Gill in the 1980s and 1990s. For an overview of their ideas, arguments and their scholarly acceptance together with some criticism, and a basic bibliography, see SIDERIS 2015, 56–59.

26 MEDOWS 2011, 283–284; PSOMA 2015, 168–169, 181; SIDERIS 2021, 59, 62.

between metal ware and pottery in Thrace. We observe there some phenomena unknown elsewhere in the Greek world, such as the use of more expensive metal for toreutic shapes known also from Greece ('material upgrade'), and the occurrence of several shapes more frequently in metal than in clay.²⁷ The cultural 'globalization' of the Early Hellenistic period, materially documented in Thrace, goes in tandem with a still strong regionalism. The toreutic artefacts imported from the colonies or from other regions of the Hellenic world stimulated both, imitations, and free adaptations in the same or other media, and the boundaries between Greek and Thracian often dissolved into what quickly became the Hellenistic *koine*.

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27 SIDERIS forthcoming on material upgrade. STOYANOV 2007, 564–565, SIDERIS 2016, 122, 191 and SIDERIS 2021, 69 on frequent toreutic shapes rare in pottery.

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Pl. 3/1: The silver askos VBC inv. 2663. a - before restoration; b - bottom view; c - front view; d - side view; e - top view. Photo VBC/V. Alexeev.