

NOTE ON A VESSEL OF UNUSUAL TYPE FROM THE ABDERA “TEIAN” NECROPOLIS: MINI-“FALAIIEFF KRATER” OR THYMIATERION?

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Abstract: The Abdera “Teian” necropolis has revealed a Greek vase with unusual morphological features, at first sight recalling those of the so-called “Falaieff kraters” but which might well alternatively represent a variety of portable thymiaterion, issued from a later 4th / early 3rd century BC tumular context.

Cuvinte-cheie: Abdera, Grecia, necropola coloniștilor din Teos, ceramică greacă, „Falaieff-krater”, thymiaterion, perioadă clasică

Rezumat: În necropola „teiană” de la Abdera s-a scos la iveală un vas grecesc cu caracteristici morfologice neobișnuite. Provenit dintr-un context tumular de la sfârșitul secolului IV / începutul secolului III î.Chr., acest vas, care la o primă vedere amintește de kratererele de tip „Falaieff”, ar putea corespunde unei variante a vasului de tip thymiaterion.

Among the finds from the 1990 made in the tumular necropolis of “Teian” Abdera¹, an almost complete vessel² of medium size³ stands out by its unusual morphological features (Fig. 1). The exact location of the find – so-called *Enagismos* XI – corresponds to the offerings area of a group of three tumuli⁴, the pottery assemblage of which⁵ spans the period from the second half of the 4th to the first decades of the 3rd century BC.

In side view the general profile is that of a flat-bottomed straight-sided deep bowl resting on a slightly protruding ring base. Two horizontal handles, diametrically inserted halfway up, and a massive spout, unexpectedly unpierced, vaguely evoke the silhouette of a *lekane*. In upper view, it appears that we are not faced at all with an open shape but with a decked one, the central recessed opening of which being surrounded with a collar pierced through by a row of circular holes, itself edged with a wide flaring lip. The narrow central opening may have received a small conical button-topped lid recovered from the same context, made of similar clay and with a compatible diameter⁶. Both the thick flat bottom and the clay’s soft firing clearly exclude the possibility of an orthodox cooking-pot.

Such morphological features correspond to a portable vessel, the interpretation of which merits further

consideration, above all the exact function of the recessed collar with a row of holes surrounding the rather narrow opening.

At first sight, such a device appears clearly related to the one already reported on the Attic r.f. bell-kraters of so-called “Falaieff type”⁷, the function of which was tentatively linked by Stella Drougou with ritual wine libations, either for a sparkling wine or for preparing various recipes of mulled wine that needed straining before serving. Such an interpretation of a wine content appears quite reasonable in the case of large-sized krater shapes ($\emptyset = 35$ cm or so), *a fortiori* elaborated r.f. ones, intended for ceremonial purposes. In profile, it is quite apparent that we are not faced with a genuine bell-krater, but with a stamnid container that was deliberately disguised as a krater: fitted all around its convex shoulder with an overhanging straightened gutter collar, obviously intended to contain the overflow of a liquid content when carried during a procession, whereas the peripheral row of small holes around the gutter allowed overflowed wine to drain back inside the vessel. In that case, there is no real need to connect the peripheral collar with either the filtration processing of mulled wine or with the bubbles of sparkling wine⁸. The same observation applies to an interesting find from Maroneia, viz. a fragmentary “bell-

¹ See Kallintzi 2004, esp. p. 274–277; Kallintzi 2006.

² Abdera Museum, inv. no. MA 1756.

³ H = 11 cm; \emptyset rim = 14 cm; \emptyset + spout = 17.7 cm; \emptyset base = 6.8 cm; \emptyset opening = 5 cm; \emptyset row of vent holes = 12 cm; \emptyset vent holes = 0.5 cm; handles w. = ca. 5 cm; spout w. = 5 cm.

⁴ Lakkotis plot.

⁵ Ca. 65 vessels.

⁶ Abdera Museum, inv. no. MA 7270. From its size, it is difficult to see what other vessel the small-sized conical lid might have fitted.

⁷ Drougou 1979.

⁸ The case of their assumed smaller Etruscan bucchero predecessors (McPhee 2000, p. 477, fig. 17) appears more questionable, because they seem to have been really intended for straining liquids judging from the numerous rows of holes and opposed pourers.

krater" (stamnoid too) of common ware, presenting the same uncommon morphological features⁹.

Nevertheless, in the case of small-sized models such as those subsequently revealed among the finds from Corinth¹⁰, things appear in a far less clear light, considering their much smaller capacity. As for the Abdera specimen, it hardly reaches 150 ml or so, and the very size of the holes lining the upper collar would clearly be inadequate for any efficient straining of aromatic herbs, thus extending the range of possible interpretations.

A first one, not so anachronistic in fact, would be to identify it as a wash-bowl, of the type found among traditional Berber pottery and put at the disposal of the faithful, topped by a ewer instead by a lid, for performing ritual ablutions¹¹. Against this, one can point to the extreme scarcity of such everyday utilitarian devices both within the ancient Greek repertoire of toilet vessels¹² and ritual iconography, and the fact that the blind spout of our pot appears unfit for such a purpose. Incidentally, similar shapes were still manufactured until recently by modern Djerba potters, either as drinking vessels or steam cooking pots¹³, thereby increasing confusion.

A last hypothesis supporting a liquid content would be to interpret the type of vessel fitted with such a peripheral gutter collar as intended for processing a primitive form of distillation as suggested for some specimens of somewhat enigmatic "vases à collerette" from Tepe Gawra (Mesopotamia), dating back to the El Obeid period (ca. 3500 BC)¹⁴, but hardly convincing indeed in the present case.

Having in mind the offering of both wine and incense associated with sacrificial ceremonies¹⁵, one interpretation of the Abdera vessel would be as a fumigation device, either as a diffuser of simple aromatic herbs or as an incense burner. In the former case, the aromatic herbs may have been placed outside the vessel,

around the wide out-turned rim, just over the vapours emanating from the ring of vent holes; in the latter case the incense or inferior gum resin seeds would be burnt inside the pot on a bed of hot charcoal ashes and the scents produced by the melting resin drawn off through the vent holes. Even if the inside shows some black traces, it would be premature to interpret them as genuine residues of burnt resin¹⁶; conversely, the dark orange colour of the interior surface in comparison to the outside rather points to repeated (post-firing) burnings¹⁷. Thus, the latter possibility seems the more likely, the addition of side handles being intended to enable the vessel to be safely handled when very hot. Similarly, the unexpected thickness of both the bottom and side walls for such a small-sized vessel may have been to prevent cracking when put in contact with live charcoals.

Considering the find location, within one of the offering areas of a tumular necropolis, containing both cremations and inhumations of adults and children, the most probable hypothesis is that it was used for performing specific "*Rauchopfer*" within some funerary ritual. Unfortunately, our knowledge of such rituals remains rather scanty. In addition to the examples of *thymiateria* associated with funerary banquets on Attic reliefs¹⁸, one can point to some funerary scenes in vase-painting, involving a generally pedestalled *thymiaterion*¹⁹. Epigraphic sources are no more instructive either, except for a Hellenistic inscription from Pergamon mentioning the funerary use of incense²⁰ and another from Keos recommending fumigations at home just after a death²¹. Thus, despite its dull unpretentious fabric, our unorthodox pot from the Abdera necropolis would provide direct confirmation of the use of fumigations either of aromatic herbs or by incense burning in ancient Greek funerary rituals²².

⁹ We are indebted to our colleague C. Karadima for this useful piece of information. See also: Karadima 2015, p. 31.

¹⁰ McPhee 2000.

¹¹ Information kindly provided by our Lyon colleague A. Desbat.

¹² See Sutton 2009.

¹³ See Combès, Louis 1967, esp. p. 122, fig. V.14 ("*keskès bu rûhîn*" = kuskus cooker) and V. 16 ("*meşreb mşebbek*" = drinking vessel).

¹⁴ Brun, Fernandez 2015, p. 131.

¹⁵ See Mehl 2008.

¹⁶ Very often, only slight traces of charcoal ashes are preserved on modern incense burners, perhaps due to using refined charcoal, already burnt and quenched to acquire special powers, as described by Plinius XXXVI, 201. Unfortunately, the chemical components of the essential oils going into the incense resin remain poorly investigated. Even if molecules of two new aromatic acids – viz "*olibanic acids*" – have been recently evidenced, it now appears that incense, most probably too expensive, seems to have been, more often than expected, replaced by various substitutes, mainly Chios mastic gum resin (*Pistachia lentiscus*), as was already the case in pharaonic Egypt for cultual purposes with another variety of *Pistachia Terebinthus Lentiscus*, widespread both in Egypt and Nubia (see Loret 1949). Noteworthy too are the abnormally thick walls for such a small-sized pot, assumed to be more resistant to thermal shocks on contact with live charcoals, though the use of the same fire clay as for cooking ware would have been more efficient.

¹⁷ A colour statement of only relative value, as being connected with various factors, such as the position of the pot inside the kiln's firing chamber (opened up or upside-down when stacked, near or distant from the vent openings...), thus affecting the resulting dominant atmosphere inside the pot at the end of firing cycle.

¹⁸ Zaccagnino 1998, p. 94, 156 RT 393–395

¹⁹ E.g. the one depicted on a proto-Lucanian r.f. amphora (Trendall 1970, p. 17, no. 459, by the Creusa Painter). Previously, *thymiateria* were already in common use in Etruscan funerary rituals (see Rasmus Brandt 2015, esp. p. 121, fig. 5.8, 125, 126, fig. 5.11, 130, 137–140, 166 n. 89, 169 note 144). On fumigations *in genere*, see *ThesCRA* I, 1914, 2.c. *Rauchopfer*, p. 255–268, pls. 63–68.

²⁰ Inschr. v. Pergamon 1, 374B.

²¹ IG XII 5, 593.

²² *Contra*: Fritze 1894, for whom "*der Weihrauch bei Totenfeiern späteren Zeiten angehört; auch ist der Gedanke den Toten durch Weihrauch ehren zu wollen [...] nicht ursprünglich hellenisch*", a statement obviously too confidently referring to Pliny's notice, *NH* XII, 82. However, even if incense burning appears rarely attested in funerary contexts in the Ancient Greek world (Massar 2008, p. 202, note 66), it may be no coincidence that the practice of incense burning in funerary rituals seems to have often persisted until modern times, not only in Greece (θυμιατα regularly burnt on burials), but also in all other Orthodox countries of the Balkan realm, e.g. in Romania (*tămâiere* practice).

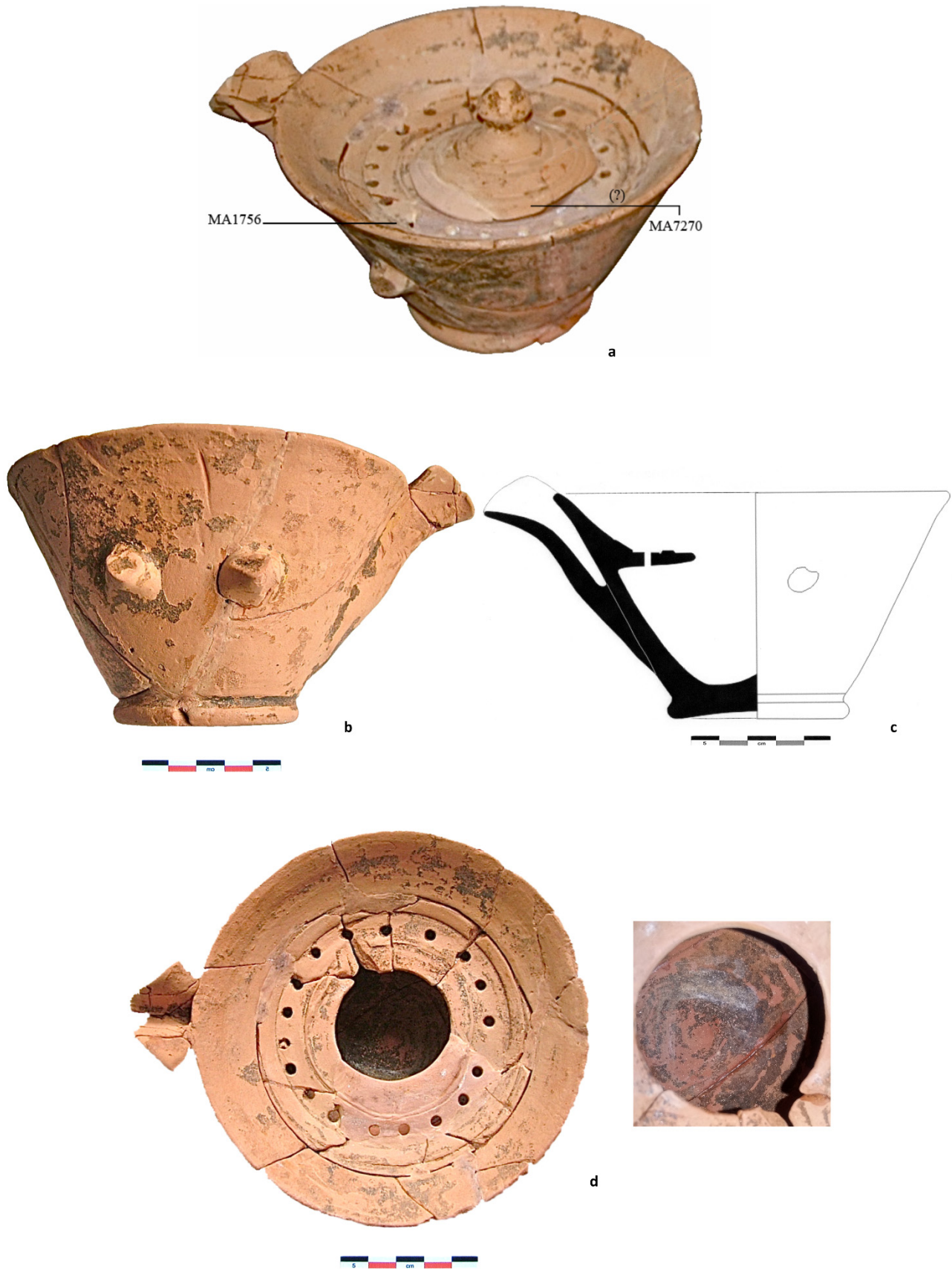


Figure 1. a. Slantwise view of MA 1756, tentatively topped by conical lid MA 7270; b. Side view of MA 1756 with handle attachments; c. Cross section of MA 1756; d. Upper and inside views of MA 1756.

Having identified such an unexpectedly compact variant of *thymiaterion*, the easy option would be to return to Wigand's general classification. Unfortunately, the only vaguely related shapes consist of a range of open vessels referred to as "*Räuchertöpfe*"²³ and all ascribed to Pharaonic Egypt, unless we seek to explain such a disturbing parallel as a casual import by some retired Teian mercenary returning from that country, where both the burning of incense and the pouring of libations were also closely associated with funerary and cultual rituals, either open or lidded²⁴. On the other hand, Zaccagnino's latest typology²⁵ is too simplistic to provide a better reference, in that our *kalathoid* specimen from Abdera would be classed as a *unicum*²⁶. The closest comparanda for such compact handled shapes of portable incense burner are represented by a range of ceramic shapes of Late Roman or Byzantine date commonly found on north-western Palestinian sites²⁷, as well as by some isolated comparanda of Hellenistic or early Roman date such as a richly decorated bronze one from the famous Dionysopolis Treasure in the Varna Museum collection, allegedly presented as a krater, but considering its small capacity (3.2 l) and the oversized heart-shaped holes of its cover sieve, obviously inappropriate for filtrating wine²⁸.

However, another aspect of funerary scenes in Attic vase-painting must be considered, viz. the offering of low stemmed shapes, such as *exaleiptra* and *pyxides*, often topped here with a small-sized conical lid and systematically interpreted as containers for cosmetics (in the case of *exaleiptra*) or trinkets (in the case of *pyxides*), rather than ritual vases. However, if, from an etymological point of view, the former creates no problem²⁹, the latter appellation does, and calls for further comment. The Greek word *πυξισ* appears to be a generic term found in the written sources of the Roman period, whereas the one used during the Classical period was *χυλιχνης*, a shape not only intended as an ointment box, but also reported as a container for incense under the Greek name *λιβανωτίς*³⁰, which is confirmed by numerous representations of women dispensing incense seeds upon altars or even

upon a *thymiaterion* as on one side of the Ludovisi Throne³¹, though seemingly not on a grave³². In this respect, both the assumed small-sized conical lid and the out-turned rim of our Abderitan vessel may well not be accidental, but possibly reminiscent of the generic *pyxis* / *libanotis* shape.

The key question that must be considered is the exact range of devices to be understood under the label "*thymiaterion*". Are the elaborate models of *thymiateria* on funerary scenes in vase-painting and on "*Totenmahlreliefs*", all pedestalled and often lidded, fully representative typologically? Conversely, what about the simple stemmed bowls brought to light on many Northern Black Sea settlements³³, interpreted as "ritual vessels" and allegedly intended for incense burning? Rather than *thymiateria*, they are generally referred to as miniature altars by their excavators³⁴. Four of them are reported to have been found in burials of the Tyrambe necropolis (Taman peninsula) and dated in the 5th or first half of the 4th century BC³⁵. Similarly portable *escharai* more or less used as incense-burners for sacrifices, seemingly without any connection with a particular type of divinity or ritual, are also mentioned in later sources³⁶. Even such simple requisites as terracotta shovels for embers are sometimes conferred a cultual value and set up as "*Räucherpfanne neben den geläufigen gedeckten Thymiaterien*"³⁷.

Incidentally, despite the prevalent role played by the offering of incense and wine within any sacrifice ritual, are we always faced with incense burners³⁸? When intended for cathartic/apotropaic purposes, fumigations, instead of fragrances, rather turn towards malodorous caustic fuels, invariably sulphur³⁹.

Owing to its exceptional occurrence, our assumed portable thymiaterion from the Abdera "Teian" necropolis, of a type which stands out clearly against finds of North Ionian type recorded until now⁴⁰, sheds new light on our scientific approach to these devices. It remains to locate its place of manufacture, whether an East Greek (Teian?) import or a north Aegean product.

²³ Wigand 1912, Taf. I, Nos. 15–23.

²⁴ Ramadan 2005, figs. 1–7.

²⁵ Zaccagnino 1998, pls. 2–3.

²⁶ Unless reinterpreted tentatively as thuribles those ceramic variants of *kalathoi*, shapes of which were often deposited as offerings on top of many grave-monuments (on the connection grave / *kalathos*, see Bundryck 2008 esp. p. 305 and note 65).

²⁷ Taxel, Iserlis 2014.

²⁸ Skorpil 1932, p. 60–63, 87, fig. 43–46. The main scene of the figured frieze is depicting Taurian Iphigenia performing a sacrifice in front of the Artemis temple.

²⁹ As originating from the Greek verb "ἐξαλειφω" (to anoint).

³⁰ Milne 1939, p. 250–251, 253.

³¹ Simon 1959, p. 12, Abb. 3.

³² Although an Attic grave is reported to have contained a whole set of

several pyxides, including one b.g. one, as well as four bronze others of similar type (CVA Denmark 4, Copenhagen 4, pl. 163, 4).

³³ Zaitseva 1997.

³⁴ E.g. in Olbia Pontica (oral information kindly provided by the late V. Krapivina).

³⁵ Zaitseva 1997, p. 41, 42, pl. 4, nos. 59–62.

³⁶ *FGH Hist* 627 F2, 34; Ekroth 2002, esp. p. 47–49.

³⁷ Himmelmann 2000, p. 226.

³⁸ We intend the term as a generic one including both incense proper and the other resin-gums used in antiquity, such as styrax, myrrh, balsam.... See Brun, Fernandez 2015, p. 121–131.

³⁹ Pfister 1914, col. 284–285.

⁴⁰ First of all, contrasting with the hackneyed pedestalled specimen grasped by a herald as depicted on a Clazomenian b.f. sherd reportedly found near Clazomenae (see Zahn 1898, Taf. 6).

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ABRÉVIATIONS / ABBREVIATIONS / ABREVIERI

- AA – Archäologischer Anzeiger. Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Darmstadt, München, Tübingen–Berlin
Acta MN – Acta Musei Napocensis Cluj-Napoca
ActaMP – Acta Musei Porolissensis, Zalău
AJA – American Journal of Archaeology, Boston
Altertum – Das Altertum, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin Sektion für Altertumswissenschaft
Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR Zentralinstitut für Alte Geschichte und Archäologie, Berlin
AnB – Analele Banatului, Muzeul Banatului, Timișoara
Antiquity – Antiquity. A Review of World Archaeology, Durham, UK
ArchBulg – Archaeologia Bulgarica, Sofia
AIGR – Anuarul Institutului Geologic al României, București
AIIA Cluj – Anuarul Institutului de Istorie și Arheologie, Cluj-Napoca
AM – Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung
Apulum – Acta Musei Apulensis. Muzeul Național al Unirii, Alba Iulia
ArchKorr – Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt, Mainz
Argesis – Argesis. Muzeul Județean Argeș. Pitești
ArhMold – Arheologia Moldovei, Iași
BA – Biblioteca de Arheologie, București
BAI – Bibliotheca Archaeologica Iassiensis, Iași
BARIntSer – British Archaeological Reports. International Series, Oxford
BCȘS – Buletinul Cercurilor Științifice Studentești. Arheologie – Istorie – Muzeologie, Alba-Iulia
BICS – Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London, London
Bjb – Bonner Jahrbücher des Rheinischen Landesmuseums in Bonn, Bonn
BMA – Bibliotheca Memoriae Antiquitatis, Piatra-Neamț
BMJT – Buletinul Muzeului Județean Teleorman, Alexandria
BMMN – Buletinul Muzeului Militar Național, București
BMTA Giurgiu – Buletinul Muzeului „Teohari Antonescu”, Giurgiu
BPS – Baltic-Pontic Studies, Poznań
Britannia – Britannia. A Journal of Roman-British and Kindred Studies. Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, Cambridge
BSA – British School at Athens, Athens
BSPF – Bulletin de la Société Préhistorique Française, Paris
CA – Cercetări Arheologice, București
Carpica – Carpica. Complexul Muzeal „Iulian Antonescu” Bacău, Bacău
Carst – Cercetare, explorare, Actualitatea speo, Recenzii, editorial, Știință, Tehnică, Cluj-Napoca
CCA – Cronica Cercetărilor Arheologice din România, București
CCDJ – Cultură și Civilizație la Dunărea de Jos, Călărași
CEFR – Collection de l'École Française de Rome
CercIst – Cercetări Istorice, Iași
Dacia – Dacia (Nouvelle Série). Revue d'archéologie et d'histoire ancienne. Académie Roumaine. Institut d'archéologie « V. Pârvan », Bucarest
Documenta Praehistorica – Documenta Praehistorica, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, Department of Archaeology
EphemNap – Ephemeris Napocensis. Academia Română, Institutul de Arheologie și Istoria Artei, Cluj-Napoca
ERAUL – Études et Recherches archéologiques de l'Université de Liège
ÉtThas – Études thasiennes, École Française d'Athènes, Athènes-Paris
EurAnt – Eurasia Antiqua. Deutsche Archäologisches Institut, Berlin
GodišnikSofia – Godišnik na Sofijaskija Universitet „Sv. Kliment Ochridski”, Istoriceskij fakultet, Sofia
Hesperia – Hesperia. Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Cambridge
IFAO – Institut français d'archéologie orientale, le Caire
JAS – Journal of Archaeological Science

Kernos – Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque antique, Liège
Marisia – Marisia. Studii și materiale. Arheologie – Istorie – Etnografie, Târgu Mureș
MemAnt – Memoria Antiquitatis, Piatra Neamț
MCA – Materiale și Cercetări Arheologice, București
OLBA – Mersin University Publications of the Research Center of Cilician Archaeology, Mersin, Turkey
Paléo – Paléo. Revue d'Archéologie Préhistorique, Les Eyzies, France
Peuce – Peuce, Studii și cercetări de istorie și arheologie, Institutul de Cercetări Eco-Muzeale, Tulcea
Pontica – Pontica. Studii și materiale de istorie, arheologie și muzeografie, Muzeul de Istorie Națională și Arheologie Constanța
Quartär – International Yearbook for Ice Age and Stone Age Research
RCRFAcra– Rei Cretariae Romanae Fautorum
RE – Realenzyklopädie: Paulys realenzyklopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschafts, Stuttgart, 1893
RI – Revista Istorică. Academia Română, Institutul de Istorie „Nicolae Iorga”, București
RESEE – Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes. Academia Română, Institutul de Studii Sud-Est Europeene, București
RevBistr – Revista Bistriței. Complexul Muzeal Bistrița-Năsăud, Bistrița
SAA – Studia Antiqua et Archaeologica, Iași
SCIV(A) – Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche (și Arheologie), București
SlovArch – Slovenská Archeológia, Nitra
SMMIM – Studii și Materiale de Muzeografie și Istorie Militară, București
SP – Studii de Preistorie, București
Suceava – Suceava. Anuarul Muzeului Bucovinei, Suceava
Th-D – Thraco-Dacica, București
Transylvanian Review – Transylvanian Review. Centrul de Studii Transilvane, Cluj-Napoca
Tyragetia – Tyragetia. Anuarul Muzeului Național de Istorie a Moldovei, Chișinău
VT – Vetus Testamentum