

RITUAL POTTERY SET FROM VINČA

Nenad N. Tasić

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

Abstract: *During the Vinča 2006 excavations, in Feature 03/03 a unique pottery set of ritual character was discovered. It consisted of a conical drinking bowl decorated with eight modeled protomes, a carinated jug, and three amphorae. Analysis of the vessel shows the functional correlation among them. The bowl with protomes – a centerpiece of this set – is associated with a ritual which involves the male-female relationship. As far as the stratigraphy is concerned, the pottery set belonged to the late Vinča culture, i.e. the Vinča-Pločnik phase. The only contents of Feature 03/03 is the named pottery assemblage, which also indicates a special function for this structure.*

Key words: *Vinča, Late Neolithic, ritual pottery set, male-female union, protomes.*

The passion of the general public for sensational discoveries has followed archaeological work since its very beginnings. One could easily say that this urge was the main impetus for the development of archaeology as an independent scientific discipline. While archaeology has developed in its methodological and theoretical sophistication since the early days of treasure hunters and the elegantly furnished drawing rooms of the 18th century, there is still an overwhelming emphasis on unique objects and exceptional discoveries when presenting the past to the public. It seems that not much has changed since those early days of archaeology. Once directed by the requirements of a class of rich and well educated people, today archaeological work is often influenced by media requirements which seek interesting stories that will attract the attention of the general public. The Neolithic archaeology of the Balkans, which predominantly consists of “unattractive” finds, is such that the craving of the public for spectacular and sensational discoveries will seldom be fulfilled. It is highly unlikely that we shall have enough of the gold finds or well preserved sanctuaries that so often provoke sighs of admiration from the public. The distinction between a “cultural public” and occasional consumers of cultural heritage should be their understanding of the process of scientific work, but also their recognition of the importance of “ordinary” objects, which occasionally have a tremendous impact on our understanding of the past. Thus, one of the

important tasks for archaeologists is to adequately present their research in ways that are accessible and understandable to the general public.

The Vinča 2006 excavation campaign will be remembered for the exceptional Vinča culture pottery assemblage that was uncovered on the floor of Feature 03/03 (pl. I). Discovered in the horizons of the late Vinča culture, (*i.e.* the Vinča-Pločnik phase), the context of these finds is so-far unique and incomparable. Two later horizons with buildings of the Vinča culture have been previously excavated just above where this pottery group was recovered. The pottery assemblage consisted of a conical bowl, a jug and three amphorae.

The most striking feature of this discovery is the impeccably preserved conical bowl (pl. II; fig. 1) of very fine fabric whose reddish-brown color, as it appears, does not originate from secondary burning. The base of the pot is flat, and the rim is simple and unpronounced. What makes this bowl unique is eight modeled protomes which resemble the heads of contemporaneous Vinča culture figurines (the phase Vinča-Pločnik II a-b; *cf.* Garašanin 1979). Two types of these heads can be distinguished here: the ones with protrusions (horns) and those without. The heads are organized in pairs and placed on the rim symmetrically. The bowl dimensions are: height with plastic protrusions 7 cm, height to the rim 5.5 cm, inner diameter at the rim 10.3 cm, diameter of the base 3.8 cm, max. depth (nose tip to rear) of the protomes with protrusion is 2.3 cm, max. depth of protomes without protrusion is 2.2 cm. The bowl's capacity is 0.2 liters. On the interior it is decorated with burnished straight lines which start from the rim and end in the base. Crescent-like lines which also start from the rim form four groups of lines related to the pairs of plastic heads. The decoration is not applied particularly carefully. On the exterior of the bowl there are two small plastic lugs which are placed ergonomically. If the bowl is lifted with both hands, the lugs will be placed between the index and middle fingers, making the manipulation of the pot extremely safe and natural.

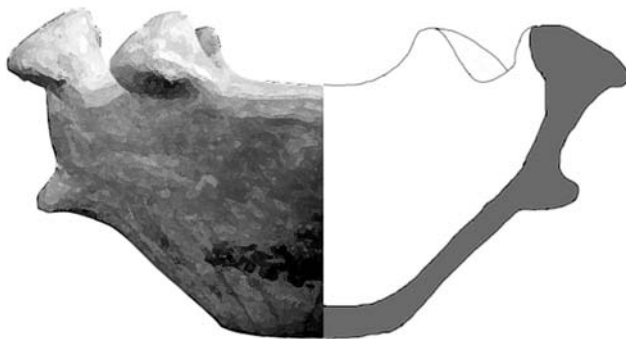


Fig. 1. The bowl with protomes, height 7 cm.

Holding it in this manner, the pot is directed towards the one holding the pot exactly to the point where the protrusions are positioned somewhat more widely apart. Pairs of identical heads are positioned on the left and right side related to the person holding the pot. The places for drinking are identical on both sides, and have heads with horns on the left side and those without horns on the right.

Plastic applications placed on the rims of vessels are not rare in the Vinča culture. They appear in different forms. Sometimes they are simple spheres, while in other instances they appear as anthropomorphic or zoomorphic modeled heads. However in most cases, finds of this kind are fragmented so we have not been in the position to reconstruct and comprehend their disposition. The most frequent reconstructions have been evenly or symmetrically distributed protomes on the rim of pots. Based on the present example we can see that different strategies must have existed. The placement and characteristics of the plastic heads on the rim of this bowl speaks in favor of the assumption that this is not an ordinary pot intended for everyday use. The fact that it is only one of a kind, without apparent analogies, supports this hypothesis.

Another exquisite vessel, discovered here (pl. III/1) is the jug of reddish brown color, which is almost identical to the bowl with protomes in its fabric and production. It is carinated in shape with a cylindrical neck and one handle shaped in the form of a head standing up from the shoulder of the jug. The rim is simple and unpronounced. The dimensions of the jug are: height 8 cm, rim diameter 7.8 cm (on the outside and 7.2 cm inside), base diameter 4 cm, the handle is 2.8 cm high and 1.7 cm wide. The capacity of the jug is 0.2 liters. The jug was discovered next to the bowl on the floor of Feature 03/03. The ergonomics of the jug are remarkable. If the handle is placed between the thumb and index finger it fits perfectly in the palm of the hand. One can drink from it or ladle with it. It is worth mentioning that the capacity of the jug corresponds perfectly with the volume of the bowl.

Along with the bowl and jug, three amphorae were also discovered inside Feature 03/03, one of which is almost intact (pl. III/2).¹ The amphora was discovered during the 2003 excavation campaign while excavating in the house rubble that was thoroughly examined later on – in the 2006 campaign. It is made of refined clay with a smooth outer surface. Unlike the previously mentioned pots, the reddish brown color of this amphora is the consequence of secondary burning. This amphora has a carinated body, cylindrical neck and a slightly everted rim. The shoulder of this vessel is decorated with the typical “Vinča type” channeling. The amphora dimensions are: height 17.3 cm, rim diameter 16.7 cm (outside, inside diameter 15.4 cm), base diameter 9 cm. Three simple plastic lugs (height 3.2, width 3.2 cm) are placed on the lower portion of

¹ This form is frequently found in the inventory of the Vinča culture.

the shoulder of the pot. This wide opening of this vessel makes it closer to the form and function of the crater than to classic amphora. Due to its wide mouth one can easily scoop the contents of the amphora using the jug as a ladle. Fragments of two more amphorae have been discovered in the Feature 03/03. One of them is of larger dimensions and has a narrow cylindrical neck.

It seems that all the vessels discovered in Feature 03/03 correspond with one another. They probably represent a set used for the storing, pouring and drinking of a liquid of some kind. Although there can be no definite answers until the results of the analysis of the contents of these vessels are finished, a few general interpretations can be made.

First, the quality of the clay, as well as the treatment of the surface for the bowl and jug is identical, which implies that they were locally produced.² Second, the ergonomics of the bowl and jug are highly pronounced and represent the exceptional craftsmanship of the pottery of this phase. The lugs on the bowl fit superbly in the hands and point unmistakably to the mouth. The lug on the jar, as described above, is modeled and placed in such a way that when being used as a ladle, it can be held firmly. When the jar is taken out of the amphora (crater), excess liquid runs off, leaving the exact quantity needed to fill the bowl entirely. The shape of the rim of the bowl and the disposition of the protomes, suggests that it could be used as part of a ritual involving two people. They would have been positioned facing each other drinking from the same bowl. The ritual of alliance, amply described in the anthropological literature (*e.g.* Lévi-Strauss 1971: 479) is of course the most obvious. It is also important to mention that from the perspective of both persons involved in the ritual, the bowl looks identical, which could simply be caused by the articulated symmetry of the bowl or the fashion of the time, but also by some egalitarian concept tied to the ritual itself.

The context of this find also seems to be interesting. Feature 03/03, where the pottery set was discovered, is rectangular, almost square in shape and rather small in size (3 x 2.8 m) without inner divisions (pl. I). The orientation of Feature 03/03 is similar to other houses at the Vinča site, which are generally pointed to the north-east, with the longer wall exposed to the south-east. The entrance to Feature 03/03 was, according to the present state of research, in the south-western wall. It was made in the wattle and daub technique. The postholes are rather thin (average diameter is 10 cm), so the walls are not more than 15 cm thick. At some points, the walls are preserved up to 35 cm in height. The thin walls suggest that this was a non-permanent structure which could have been erected by a few members from within the community. On the other hand, the presence of a well-prepared and plastered floor, probably with

² I owe many thanks for these preliminary results to J. M. Matsunaga, Graduate student of the University of California, Berkeley. His preliminary analysis of the chemical composition of this pottery set, confirmed our assumption that bowl and jug were locally produced.

a foundation of wooden beams (a question to be resolved in the next round of excavations), demonstrates the attention and care which the ancient builders expended on this structure, and is consistent with its supposed ritualistic function. Another significant fact is that there is no kiln, fireplace or other kind of fire installation inside. Mobile heating installations, discovered in earlier phases of Vinča by Vasić (Васић 1932: 12, сл. 9), might have been used, but have not been detected in the horizon that this structure belongs to. So far it seems that Feature 03/03 could not have been used as a dwelling during the winter. Apart from the absence of fire installations, the lack of evidence for everyday activities is also striking – the almost complete absence of flint, bone, stone artifacts and macro botanical remains. The only contents of Feature 03/03 are the mentioned pottery assemblage, which would also indicate a special function for this structure.

Feature 03/03, represents an exception from other discoveries made at Vinča, and therefore we could hypothesize that this special building was made for a special occasion, probably ritualistic in character. If this is correct, then the rite could have been performed in the structure itself or in front of it. If we accept the first possibility, due to the dimensions of the structure (less than 9 m²), not more than ten people could have participated in or directly witnessed the ritual at one time. However, the volume of the amphorae, which totals 10 liters, would allow for an even larger number of participants, so it is possible that Feature 03/03 may have been used for the preparation, storage, or serving of ritualistic beverages. Another possibility for the nature of this ritual involves a number of couples drinking from the bowl by passing it to one another. It is also possible that there was one person who distributed the bowl with its contents among the participants. However, bearing in mind that the capacity of both the bowl and jar are only 0.2 liters each, we can suppose that the ritual either involved only two people at a time or that the consumption of the beverage was purely symbolic. The amphora with the wide rim suggests the refilling of the service set, which further points to the possibility of more participants being involved in the rite and the probable location of the ritual in the open. Two additional amphorae for storage have also been found in this context, but it is still not clear whether they contained the same beverages or not.

The stage, as it appears, has been preserved in its entirety, but the actors are absent – as one of our archaeology professors used to say. For that reason we may never be in a position to grasp the details and liveliness of this and other rituals that must have been performed in this society, with its rich and long-lasting traditions. We can imagine and propose hypotheses which will be more or less plausible depending on the degree to which they acknowledge the archaeological material and its context. One possible reconstruction of the meaning of the ritual which involves the archaeological materials and objects described above is based on the difference of the plastic heads at the rim of the bowl. The difference between the two types of protomes involves the presence

or absence of small protuberances which resemble horns. Horns are frequently presented in Neolithic cultures and have special meanings. Although there are some other interpretations (*e.g.* Gimbutas 1991: 400), horns are almost exclusively associated with male individuals. Examples come from vast regions, reaching from Anatolia to the Pannonian plain. Bucrania, or bulls' heads, were discovered as part of Neolithic architecture during Vasić's excavations at Vinča (Vasić 1936: 50–51). But one other example seems more adequate for this comparison. According to the shape of the horns and the fact that it had the similar function to that of a decanter, we cannot help but recall the famous Hyde vase (pl. III/3) discovered in 1930 during Vasić's excavations at a relative depth of 7.5 meters. The recipient is formed in the shape of a bird, but on its long neck there is a pentagonal face with protrusions similar to those from our ritual bowl. It is important to note there is a lack of female attributes and that this head can be regarded as male. Another example comes from Parța (Lazarovici 1979; Lazarovici, Drașovean and Maxim 2001: 226–227, 391, figs. 184, 186), the Late Neolithic sanctuary where, according to the reconstruction, a divine couple is represented (pl. III/4). The male figure/principle is represented with horned bull's head. Based on analogies we can suppose that the bowl with protomes from Feature 03/03 actually depicts a male-female union, and that the ritual described above may be some sort of a wedding ceremony. Unfortunately, apart from the dimensions of the dwellings, there are no sources for the reconstruction of family organization and kinship. It is also true that the discussion of marital customs and rituals in the very distant past is fraught with difficulty, but in spite of that, the pottery assemblage and its archaeological context gives us possible insights into social organization. In any case, however compelling we find the hypothesis offered here that this pottery set was used during a marriage ritual, or some other ceremony such as worship, rites of passage, or oaths of allegiance, the fact remains that we have a unique and valuable piece of information before us, which, to a degree, illuminates and animates the "silent" archaeological record.

REFERENCES

- Garašanin, M.
 1979 Centralnobalkanska zona. Str. 79–212 u *Praistorija jugoslavenskih zemalja II: neolitsko doba*, ur. A. Benac. Sarajevo: Svijetlost i Akademija nauka i umjetnosti Bosne i Hercegovine.
- Gimbutas, M.
 1991 *The Civilization of the Goddess*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Lazarovici, Gh.
 1979 *Neoliticul Banatului*. Bibliotheca Musei Napocensis 4. Cluj-Napoca: Comitetul pentru Cultură și Educație Socialistă al Județului Cluj.

- Lazarovici, Gh., Draşovean, F., and Maxim, Z.
 2001 *Parţa*. Monografie arheologică, I.1. Bibliotheca Historica et Archaeologica Banatica 13. Timişoara: Waldpress.
- Lévi-Strauss, C.
 1971 *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Васић, М. М.
 1932 *Преисторијска Винча 1*. Београд: Државна штампарија.
 1936 *Преисторијска Винча 2*. Београд: Државна штампарија.

НЕНАД Н. ТАСИЋ

РИТУАЛНИ КЕРАМИЧКИ СЕТ ИЗ ВИНЧЕ

Резиме

Археолошка ископавања у Винчи 2006. биће упамћена по керамичким налазима до сада јединственим у винчанској култури, као и по контексту у којем су откривени. Хоризонт којима налази припадају везује се за фазу Винча-Плочник II. Керамички сет откривен је на поду објекта 03/03 (т. I/1–2), који је готово квадратног диспозитива, димензија 3 x 2,8 m, без унутрашње поделе, а у њега се, према распореду рупа од стубова, улазило са северо-западне стране. Изграђен је у техници плетера и лепа, танких зидова, али са квалитетно рађеним подом. У објекту нису откривени ни пећ ни ватриште, а упадљив је и недостатак трагова радних активности, кременог и коштаног материјала или макро-ботаничких остатака, што сугерише просторију посебне намене. Сет се састоји од зделе са протомима (т. II; сл. 1), врча (т. III/1) и три амфоре, од којих је једна сачувана готово цела, а две су фрагментоване. Оно што издваја пронађену зделу јесте осам пластично моделованих протома који изгледају као главе винчанских фигурина, типичних за најмлађе фазе ове културе. На посуди се разликују две врсте протома – главе са стилизованим рошчићима и главе без икаквих детаља са „птичјим лицем” – који су наспрамно постављени. На странама посуде налазе се две језичасте дршке. Врч, откривен непосредно поред зделе, такође је у целости сачуван. Реч је о биконичној посуди, смеђецрвене боје, вертикалног цилиндричног врата и непрофилсаног обода. Краси је дршка постављена на прелазу трбуха у раме суда, која представља стилизовану главу са рошчићима, не тако различиту од оне са зделе коју смо описали. По запремини од 0,2 l, здела и врч у потпуности одговарају једно другом. Квалитет глине и обрада спољне површине зделе и врча указују на то да су посуде локалне провенијенције. Наглашена је ергономија посуде, односно прилагођеност људској руци. Језичасте дршке на здели непогрешиво је у шакама постављају у положај за испијање. У случају врча, дршка у облику протома постављена је тако да се пуна посуда приликом извлачења из амфоре сигурно држи, садржај се прелије и исцури тачно до нивоа када

остаје запремина која сасвим напуни зделу са протомима. Амфора, типично винчанска, из објекта 03/03, која је, као што смо рекли, сачувана готово цела (т. III/2), израђена је од фино пречишћене глине, углачане спољне површине. Црвеносмеђе је боје, која је, за разлику од зделе и врча, највероватније последица секундарног печења. Амфора је биконичног реципијента са цилиндричним вратом и благо разгрнутим ободом и одликује је широк обод кроз који лако пролази рука која држи врч. По рамену је украшена плитким укосо постављеним винчанским канелурама. На амфори су три једноставне, функционалне дршке. Од две фрагментоване амфоре, једна је нешто већих димензија и има знатно ужи цилиндрични врат.

У неолитским културама није редак случај да се мушкарац асоцира са биком или неком другом животињом са роговима. Букраниона има од Анадолије до Панонске равнице, а има их неколико и на Винчи. Према облику рошчића и чињеници да је и она била коришћена за изливање течности, упутно је присетити се Хајд вазе (т. III/3), где је на птичјем телу приказано петоугаоно лице са стилизованим роговима. Важно је нотирати да у овом случају на грудима дефинитивно изостају женски атрибути, те се глава са Хајд вазе може сматрати мушком. Паралеле налазимо и у светишту из Парце, где је мушки принцип представљен са роговима, а женски без њих (т. III/4). Претпостављамо да се и у случају зделе са протомима ради о симболичном приказу мушко-женског споја. Будући да је комплетан керамички материјал из иначе несвакидашњег објекта 03/03, намењен чувању, сипању и испијању течности, а како се на здели за испијање наглашава мушко-женски принцип, нећемо пуно погрешити ако ову керамичку групу вежемо за неки ритуал посвећен сједињавању мушкарца и жене. Осим димензија кућа и унутрашње поделе простора, нема никаквих података о организацији породице у винчанско доба, али без обзира на то да ли је керамички сет био коришћен приликом ступања у брак, гозбе, добродошлице или неке иницијације, остаје чињеница да се ради о вредним и ретким налазима, који својим контекстом омогућавају и један нов угао гледања.

Received: 27 April 2007

UDC 903.23(497.11 Vinča)“6347”



1. Plan and orthogonal photograph of Feature 03/03.
2. Amphorae, bowl and a jug *in situ*.



The bowl with protomes, height 7 cm, inner diameter at the rim 10.3 cm.



1



2



3



4

1. A jug with a handle shaped in the form of a head, height 8 cm. 2. One of the three amphorae that have been discovered in Feature 03/03, height 17.3 cm. 3. So-called Hyde vase, discovered in 1930 Vinča excavations. 4. Late Neolithic Sanctuary 2 in Parța, where double statue, according to the reconstruction, represent a divine couple. The male figure/principle is represented with horned bull's head (after Lazarovici, Drașovean and Maxim 2001: fig. 186).