

## AN ASKOS-TYPE VESSEL FROM RADOVANU-LA MUSCALU, ROMANIA

Cristian Eduard Ștefan

"Vasile Pârvan" Institute of Archaeology, Romanian Academy, Henri Coandă str., No. 11, Bucharest  
E-mail: [cristarb\\_1978@yahoo.com](mailto:cristarb_1978@yahoo.com)

### Introduction

The archaeologist Eugen Comșa researched the Chalcolithic settlement of Radovanu-*La Muscalu*, Călărași County, in southern Romania for over 30 years (1960-1990), producing impressive results (Comșa 1974; 1990). The main settlement is marked by a short occupation of the Vidra phase and four evolving stages of the Spațov phase of the Boian culture (5200-4550 cal. BC). Radovanu-*La Muscalu* is in fact an assemblage consisting of a settlement positioned on a high terrace, a second one eastward at the foot of the hill, a weaving workshop and the necropolis both situated westward (Figures 1 and 2).

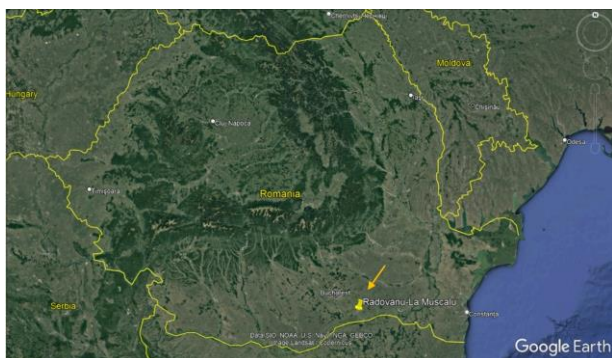


Figure 1. The topographic position of the settlement at Radovanu-*La Muscalu*, Romania (Google Earth).

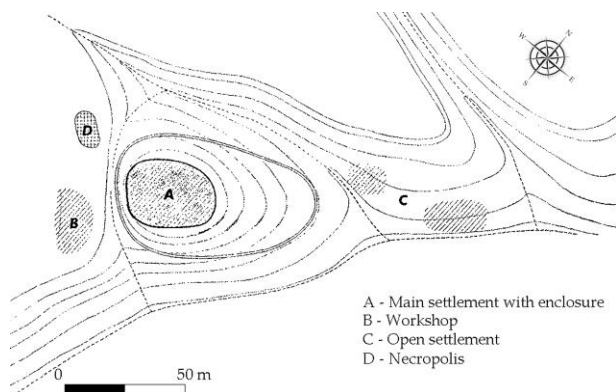


Figure 2. The settlement at Radovanu-*La Muscalu* (after Comșa 1990, modified).

The excavation of this settlement yielded rich archaeological material comprising pottery, figurines, miniaturist models of dwelling units, flint, bone and antler tools, and jewellery, mostly still unpublished and currently under study. Within the framework of this re-examination of the material from this important site, a particular focus has been to address the study of aspects concerning pottery making traditions at Radovanu (Ștefan 2019, 144-155).

During the excavations, a large amount of pottery was collected (roughly estimated to 15,000 fragments), most of which remains unpublished. The assemblage includes footed vessels, 'amphorae', bowls, lids, storage vessels, cups, box-shaped stands, beakers, jars or strainers. A diverse range of shapes includes three main categories of fabric, identified according to their coarseness: fine, intermediate and coarse. The main decoration styles consisted of incisions, excision and filling with white paste, channelling, graphite painting, red ochre painting or plastic applications (Comșa 1990, 51-67).

### Description of the vessel

In this contribution we analyse a special type of vessel coined as *askos* in the literature. The item was defined as a "vessel, originally shaped like a leather bottle (*uter*) for holding water or wine. It was furnished with a handle at the top, and had sometimes two mouths, one which served to fill, the other to empty it. Later on, the *askos* assumed the form of an earthenware pitcher" (Mollett 1996, 26; see also the discussion in Marinescu-Bilcu 1990, 5).

The vessel was discovered in the last habitation layer of the settlement at Radovanu-*La Muscalu*. This layer could be dated in absolute chronology sometime in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC towards the final stage of the Spațov phase of Boian culture. Unfortunately, the precise context of the vessel is unknown, aside from the label "Layer 1". The fact that it was found almost complete could suggest an activity area or maybe was covered by the crumbling walls of a burnt dwelling in the external part of the structure.

The vessel was not decorated and its surface was burnished inside and outside; the firing evidence shows a reducing atmosphere, the fabric is semi-fine and it was tempered with grog<sup>3</sup>. The vessel colour is brown-greyish and in the extension of the handle shows an embossed plastic application that ends with a short tail, the whole assembly suggesting a stylised bovine. Seen from above, the *askos* is slightly domed on the sides, while the base is perfectly flat and

<sup>3</sup>Grog was here determined by macroscopic examination.

shows signs of friction, most likely due to the heavy use of the container.

The vessel dimensions are the following: mouth diameter – 9 cm, base maximum length – 18.5 cm, base maximum width – 11.5 cm, maximum height – 13.7 cm, capacity – ca. 1350 ml (Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3. The askos vessel from Radovanu-La Muscalu (photo C.E. Ștefan).

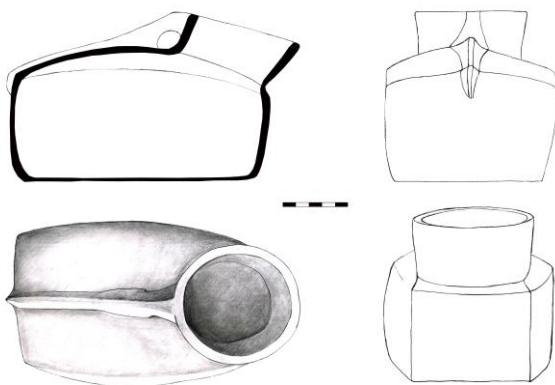


Figure 4. The askos vessel from Radovanu-La Muscalu (drawing C. Georgescu).

### Discussion

The closest analogies for this vessel can be seen in the settlements of Mălăieștii de Jos (Paveleț 2010, Fig. 16/1) and Seciu (Frînculeasa 2011, Pl. 36/3), both in Prahova County and belonging to the Stoicani-Aldeni cultural aspect (Figures 5 and 6). This cultural aspect was defined as a mix between

Cucuteni-Ariuşd and Gumelnița cultures, its position and material culture suggest a buffer zone (Dragomir 1983). Both settlements mentioned above benefitted from radiocarbon dates which are synchronous between ca. 4340-4220 cal BC (Frînculeasa 2016, 68-69, Tab. 1, Fig. 4). Vessels of this type were previously known in the Stoicani-Aldeni area at Vulcănești, Suceveni, Dodești or Sudiți (Dragomir 1983, 165, Figs. 41/5, 6; 45/2; Paveleț and Grigoraș 2011, 23, Fig. 61/6).

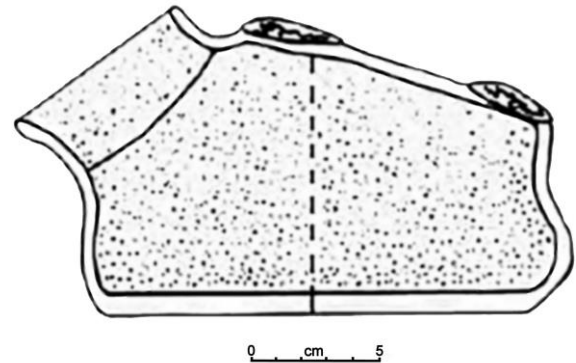


Figure 5. The askos vessel from Mălăieștii de Jos (after Paveleț 2010).

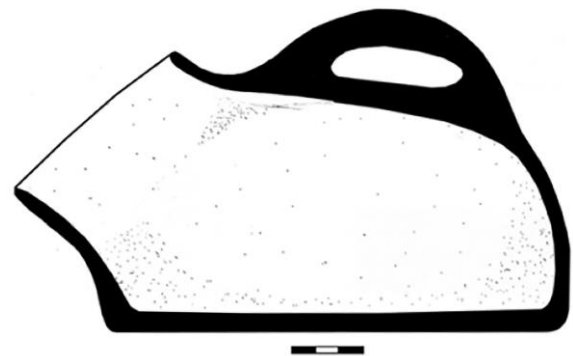


Figure 6. The askos vessel from Seciu (after Frînculeasa 2011).

Other vessels of this type were discovered in Gumelnița-Karanovo VI and Sălcuța-Krivodol areas, showing different shapes, sizes and decorations (Figure 7). The oldest *askoi* of Căscioarele belonged to A2 phase of the Gumelnița culture (Marinescu-Bîlcu 1990, 6; Voinea 2005, 46-47, Pl. 97), which is dated between 4450-4250 cal BC in Greater Wallachia (Bem 2001, 43). On the other hand, *askos* type vessels were discovered in earlier contexts south of the Danube, such as those attributed to the Marica culture, which is roughly contemporaneous with Boian at the north of the Danube (Todorova 1986, 99, Fig. 23/6).

In general, these vessels were discovered in domestic contexts, either in dwellings amongst debris, or in the habitation layer, possibly indicating some activity

areas. A special case was that of the Mălăiești *askos*. The vessel was found amongst the debris of a burnt dwelling (dwelling no. 5) and a fragmentary flat bone figurine and an animal bone were found inside it, which led to the hypothesis that the *askos* was used in some sort of cultic ceremonies (Paveleț 2010, 39).

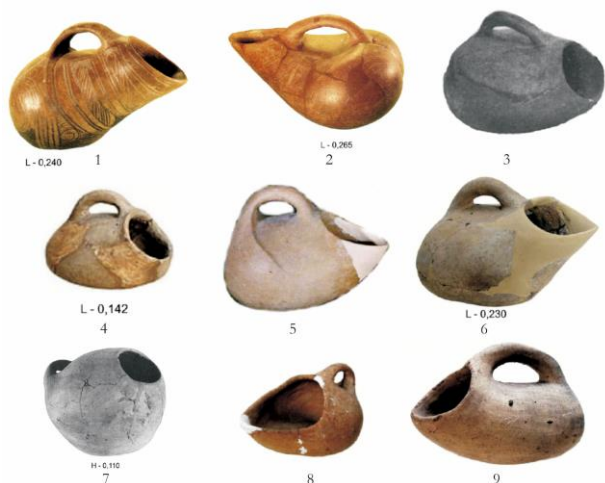


Figure 7. *Askos* type vessels from Gumelnița-Karanovo VI area (after Voinea 2005, different scales).

The capacity of the vessels from Căscioarele, is quite different, 150 ml, 250 ml, 1400 ml and 1800 ml respectively, which ruled out from the starting point any hypothesis concerning a possible unit (Marinescu-Bîlcu 1990, 6). According to Marinescu-Bîlcu their role was not cultic, rather practical: either large spoons for pouring flour or grains, either containers for serving or storing liquids (Marinescu-Bîlcu 1990, 16). On the other hand, we know the spectacular anthropomorphic figurine from Liubcova-Ornița with a mask in one hand and a vessel in the other. The pot was interpreted as an *askos*, so the figurine represented an individual that was involved in some kind of ceremony (Luca 1989, 229-234; Schier 2005, 71, no. cat. 25). A second anthropomorphic figurine discovered later in the same settlement has also an *askos* type vessel represented on the belly, the item being interpreted as proving the libation act in ceremonies related to the cult of fertility and fecundity (Luca 2002, 18-20, Fig. 1, Photo 1, 2).

It is interesting to note that first definitions of the *askos* type vessels from dictionaries and lexicons are linked with animals: either they relate explicitly to animal leather, or are defined as “duck-shaped vessels” (Marinescu-Bîlcu 1990, 5). If we take a closer look at the Radovanu-*La Muscalu* vessel, we can observe that it could represent a very stylised ox or bull. The withers line is obvious on the upper side of the vessel and we can see also a short tail at the end.

This fact can strengthen the animal body/clay vessel metaphor which we tried to analyse a few years ago with some Vinča materials from Șoimuș-*La Avicola* (Ferma 2), Hunedoara County (Ștefan 2014, 14-22; Ștefan *et al.* 2015, 183-209).

## Conclusions

Sometime in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC a new vessel shape emerged in the Lower Danube, a shape that survived somehow until the Classical Period of Greece. Most probably it was used for transporting, serving and storing liquids, having as a model some prototypes made of animal leather. This fact is strengthened by the burnished surface (interior and exterior) of some of the *askoi*, which is very useful in reducing the walls porosity and better preventing the evaporation of liquids.

The practical and cultic role of such vessels are not mutually exclusive. Although they are mainly found in domestic contexts, they could have been used in ceremonies whose significance escapes us today; this thought is suggested by artifacts such as the anthropomorphic figurines from Liubcova-Ornița (Lazarovici and Lazarovici 2006, 505-506).

A better conclusion is the paragraph of a well-known professor after years of experience in the field: “...the question is not so much to determine where function stops and symbol (or style) begins, but to be aware of their remarkable intricacy. Indeed, making pottery and ‘making sense’ are two compatible, entangled, and above all, complementary processes?” (Gosselain 1999, 221).

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