

SOME SPECIAL CLAY ARTIFACTS FROM ȘOIMUȘ-LA AVICOLA (FERMA 2), HUNEDOARA COUNTY, ROMANIA

Cristian Eduard Ștefan

“Vasile Pârvan” Institute of Archaeology, Romanian Academy, Henri Coandă str., No. 11, Bucharest
Email: cristarh_1978@yahoo.com

Introduction

During the construction of the A1 Motorway route, the segment located between Deva and Orăștie, a joint team of archaeologists from “Vasile Pârvan” Institute of Archaeology (Bucharest), Roman and Dacian Civilization Museum (Deva) and Romanian National History Museum (Bucharest) conducted preventive archaeological research in the settlement of Șoimuș, from 16th August until 16th November 2011 (Figure 1). The settlement is positioned in the Șoimuș commune, between this locality and Bălata Village, Hunedoara County, in the place called *La Avicola (Ferma 2)*, on the middle sector of the first terrace of the Mureș river (East-West direction) (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Aerial photo of the site during excavations (Courtesy of Carmen Bem©).

On the maps of the Military Topographic Department from the 1970s the area of study is called *Dumbrava* (Figure 2).

Considering the size and archaeological complexity of the excavations, the site was divided in two sectors: “zone A”, the Eneolithic core, investigated by the specialists of the Institute of Archaeology and Romanian National Museum in Bucharest, and “zone B”, a Bronze Age settlement, investigated by the specialists of Deva Museum. From “zone A” ca. 700

features were identified, belonging to the Eneolithic, Bronze Age, Roman, post-Roman and early medieval periods.

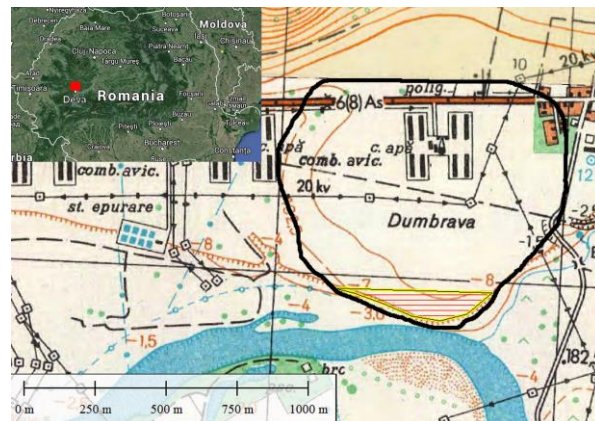


Figure 2. The settlement from Șoimuș-La Avicola (Ferma 2). The area delimited by the circled area represents the whole settlement and the hatched area represents the excavated surface.

Based on preliminary field reports and previous surveys carried out in this area (Andrițoiu 1979, 15-34; Drașovean and Rotea 1986, 9-24), we can confirm the existence of an Eneolithic settlement with two main habitation levels attributed to the Turdaș tradition (*sensu* Tilley 1982, 5). In terms of stratigraphy, the first stage corresponds to a settlement with pit-huts, followed by a leveling of the site with a brown-ash sediment discovered in the upper part of the fill in many features. The second stage of habitation corresponds to a settlement with surface dwellings and appears at a depth of 0.40 m (measured after the removal of the overlying vegetation). Here, a substantial destruction level was observed, consisting of burnt debris spread all over the surface (some of the daub fragments still bearing wattle traces), hearths, a clay floor and below this there was a thin layer of gravel, some negative impressions of poles and a large quantity of archaeological material (pottery, bones, lithic items). The majority of the prehistoric features is represented by a variety of polyfunctional pits: for storage, for clay extraction (which were later used as “refuse pits”), and pit-huts and internal ditches (enclosures?); the last two categories were discovered mainly in the western part of the settlement.

A preliminary conclusion that can be drawn by researching “zone A” of the Șoimuș site is the fact that in the Eneolithic period an intense habitation on this Mureș terrace existed, proved by the impressive quantity of archaeological material discovered here,



Figure 3. Anthropomorphic vessel from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2; C. E. Ştefan).

e.g. coarse and fine ware (166 whole vessels and other numerous pottery fragments), zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines, over 200 whole and fragmentary clay weights, lithic tools (flint and obsidian blades and bladelets, querns, ca. 150 polished stone axes and chisels, whole and fragmentary), worked bones (pins, awls, spatulae, pendants, 10 fishhooks), “cult” items (miniature “altars” with three or four legs and incised decoration). A large quantity of animal bones was also collected (for further details see Petcu *et al.* 2012, 291-292; Ştefan *et al.* 2013).

Artifacts and contexts

The following items were of particular interest:

1) An anthropomorphic vessel, depicting a pregnant woman with hands on her belly (Figure 3). Its maximum height and width are respectively 14.8 and 9.6 cm. Her eyes and nose are marked by incisions, the same tooling being applied where the fingers are suggested. The neck area was also covered with angular incisions, possibly suggesting a necklace; these incisions are also present on the right side of the back and on the head/rim of the vessel. The bottom of the vessel has a broken part suggesting that the piece was probably fixed onto something bigger, possibly a pedestal. The vessel has a beige-greyish colour, is well-fired and the fabric is fine, probably tempered with sand and rock fragments (these were identified only macroscopically).

The artefact was found in the archaeological layer among debris, in the second habitation level from Şoimuş, at a depth of 0.30-0.40 m.

2) An anthropomorphic vessel in a fragmentary state, with the eyes and mouth marked by incisions and an applied nose, which was modelled from a piece of clay (Figure 4). Its maximum height and width are respectively 10 and 9.2 cm. The beige-greyish artefact has some incisions carved in the soft paste before firing, and it was made of a fine fabric probably tempered with sand. The vessel was discovered in **Feature 239** at a depth of 0.40 m. **Feature 239** is a ditch with a length of 54 m, a maximum width of 4.1 m and a maximum depth of 2.2 m. It was filled with debris, pottery fragments, anthropomorphic figurines, daub with traces of wattle, clay weights, obsidian and flint tools, a quern, human bones, animal bones, bone and antler tools, shells, miniature vessels. The ditch was oriented NE-SW, and it had three phases, probably its initial function being for water drainage and after that for enclosing an area or a household (see Figures 16-18).

3) A prosopomorphic lid in a fragmentary state (Figure 5). The eyes are marked by two horizontal incisions, and the nose is clearly shaped and has two small perforations in the lower part. The lid is decorated with pinched bands and includes two perforations on the top. The fabric is coarse, probably tempered with sand and rock fragments, and has a reddish-grey colour. The maximum height and width of the lid are respectively 10.2 and 12.4 cm. It was found in the second habitation level in the archaeological layer, among debris.

4) A small grey clay “altar” of a triangular shape, in a fragmentary state, with a human head in one of the corners; it stands on three legs (Figure 6). Its maximum height and length are 8.4 and 8.6 cm; it is made of a fine fabric probably tempered with sand; it



Figure 4. Anthropomorphic vessel from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2; C. E. Ştefan).

is decorated with incisions organised in bands of three lines. It was found in the second level of habitation, in the archaeological layer at a depth of 0.40 m.



Figure 5. Prosopomorphic lid from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2; C. E. Ştefan).



Figure 6. Small clay "altar" from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2; C. E. Ştefan).

5) A small grey clay "altar" of a triangular shape, in a fragmentary state, decorated with bands of three incisions (Figure 7). Its maximum height and length are 5.2 and 6.4 cm. The altar was made of a fine fabric, which was probably tempered with sand and originally had three legs. It was found in the second level of habitation, in the archaeological layer, at a depth of 0.30-0.40 m among debris.



Figure 7. Small clay "altar" from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2; C. E. Ştefan).

6) A small grey clay "altar" of a triangular shape, in a fragmentary state, decorated with bands of three incised lines (Figure 8). Only an animal head positioned in one of the corners was preserved. It was possibly the representation of a wild animal, probably a fox. The altar was made of a fine fabric probably sand-tempered and was found in the

archaeological layer, in the second level of the settlement. Its maximum height is 4 cm.



Figure 8. Small clay "altar" from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2; C. E. Ştefan).

7) A small grey clay "altar" of a triangular shape, in a fragmentary state, decorated with incised lines (Figure 9). A wild animal (most probably a fox) is depicted in one of the corners; the fabric is fine, probably tempered with sand and it stands on three legs. Its maximum height and length are respectively 5.9 and 7 cm. It was found in the second level of habitation in a surface dwelling (**Dwelling 6**). **Dwelling 6** had a rectangular form, with a length of 11 m and a width of 10 m. It was constructed with the wattle-and-daub technique and was affected by ploughing. The filling of the dwelling consisted of heavy debris and had a 0.50 m thickness. During the excavations, foundations trenches or poles could not be observed due to the soil colour, but the inventory was rich: pottery, anthropomorphic figurines, clay weights, stone, obsidian and flint tools.



Figure 9. Small clay "altar" from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2; C. E. Ştefan).

8) A small grey clay "altar" of a triangular shape, in a fragmentary state, decorated with groups of incised lines (Figure 10). A human head is represented on a corner of the triangle; its fabric is fine and probably sand-tempered. The maximum height and length of the "altar" are respectively 7 and 5.8 cm. It was found in the second level of habitation in a surface dwelling (**Dwelling 6**).



Figure 10. Small clay "altar" from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2; C. E. Ştefan).

9) A small clay table of a rectangular shape, in a fragmentary state, decorated with incised lines on the exterior surface (Figure 11). The artefact is made of fine clay, probably sand-tempered and its interior surface and bottom were burnished. Originally it had four legs, but only two survived. The four corners of the table were slightly higher than its sides, giving it an elegant shape.



Figure 11. Small clay table from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2; C. E. Ştefan).

The maximum length, width and height of the table are respectively 9.2, 6.5 and 5.4 cm. This artefact was found in **Feature 59** at a depth of 0.25 m. **Feature 59** is a storage pit with dimensions of 4.6 x 3 m and a maximum depth of 1.2 m. It contained pottery, daub fragments, flint and obsidian tools, animal bones, worked bone artifacts (unburnt and burnt). The pit had an ovoidal, irregular shape with a filling consisting of two layers: the upper one was grey with ash and adobe fragments, and the lower one, thicker, had a darker colour, greyish-black, with a few adobe and charcoal fragments (Figure 12).

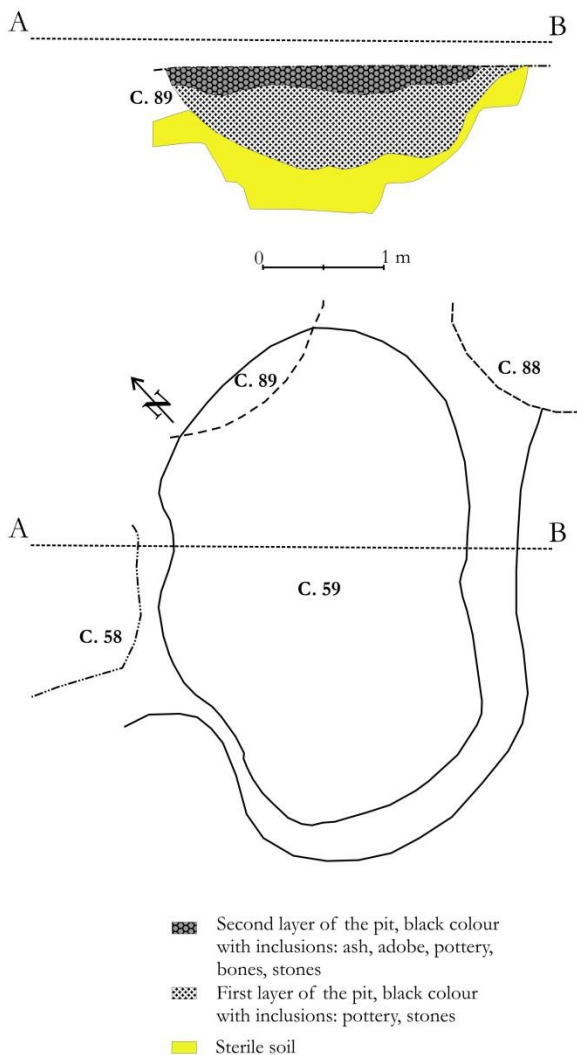


Figure 12. Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2): Feature 59.

10) A small clay table of a rectangular shape, in a fragmentary state, decorated with incised lines on the exterior surface (Figure 13). The altar is made of a coarse fabric, probably tempered with sand and rock fragments and the interior and bottom surfaces were smoothed. It had four legs of which only two remain today. The maximum length, width and height of the

table are respectively 8.6, 9.2 and 5.2 cm. It was found in the first level of the habitation, in the archaeological layer, at a depth of 0.80 m.



Figure 13. Small clay table from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2; C. E. Ştefan).

11) A small clay table of a rectangular shape, in a fragmentary state, decorated with incised lines in a meander-shape on the exterior surface (Figure 14). The item is made from fine clay, probably sand-tempered and it was smoothed on the bottom and interior side. Originally it had four legs, only three of which survived. The maximum length, width and height of the table are respectively 9.6, 7.4 and 4 cm.



Figure 14. Small clay table from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2; C. E. Ştefan).

It was found in the second level of habitation, in **Feature 357**, at a depth of 0.20-0.30 m. **Feature 357** represents a storage pit with dimensions of 2.25 x

2.12 m and a maximum depth of 0.90 m, consisting of six filling layers (Figure 15). It contained pottery fragments, anthropomorphic figurines, a clay weight, animal bones, bone artifacts - burnt and unburnt.

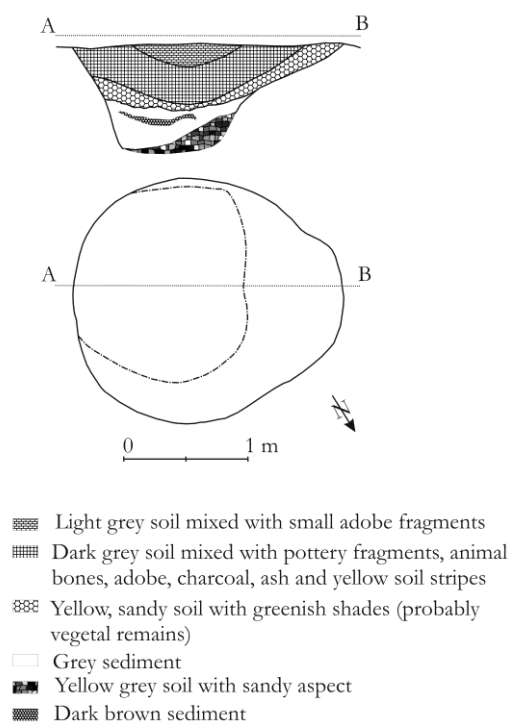


Figure 15. *Şoimus-La Avicola (Ferma 2): Feature 357.*

The anthropomorphic vessel depicting a pregnant woman is very interesting as these types of artifacts are rare in archaeological sites. Although it was found in an archaeological layer, we cannot exclude it was moved by ploughing and its original context is unknown. I mentioned earlier that the artefact has a strange bottom, as if it was detached from something (a pedestal?). This fact may strongly suggest that it could have originally been within a dwelling or a pit-house from the settlement. Significantly, an anthropomorphic representation of a woman giving birth in **Dwelling 1** was also discovered in this settlement (Ştefan *et al.* 2013, 51, Pl. IV/3).

Another interesting discovery is the small triangular “altars” in the same context in **Dwelling 6** (Figures 9 and 10). In my opinion, the presence of various cult objects at the site is not a coincidence, but it may be interpreted as the witness of ritual activities similar to those linked with totems (van Gennep 1920). The two items are strikingly similar, the only difference being that of the head: one is depicting a human head and the other one is clearly a wild animal, perhaps a fox. We can imagine here some ritual activities linked with increased success in hunting.

The human face or body represented in clay is not an unusual item in the Vinča-Turdaş tradition. Some analogies for this type of artefacts can be found in different sites belonging to the Vinča-Turdaş pottery style (Lazarovici 1981, 174, Abb. 2).

The representation of a pregnant woman as a clay vessel may suggest rituals connected to fertility. It is well-known that an intimate relationship exists between clay and the human body in all cultures and places (most famous being the Chapter of Genesis where the Adam was created from dust). The pot-human body analogy is clear even only through the notion used to describe pottery (neck, body, bottom, foot), all these being also parts of the human body (David *et al.* 1988, 371; Dragoman 2009). If we look at the bigger picture *homo-humus* binomial is present in almost all archaic cultures: people are alive because they originated from the Earth and they will return in Terra Mater (Eliade 1992, 240-241). On the other hand we have some ethnographic analogies concerning this topic. For instance, the Mexican potters claim that jars are like men, closed and vertical, while cooking pots are like women, open and submissive. Also, it is a common practice in these communities that pregnant women eat clay, in a communion sense: the new life is “nourished” through clay (Kaplan 1977, 35). For other authors the vessel with feminine traits represents “a space that receives and contains, and also a space that enables foodstuffs to be stored” (Naumov 2008, 99). The ability of women to nurture and regenerate is metaphorically projected on this type of container. The old excavations in the Vinča eponymous site, recently reinterpreted, revealed two very interesting vessels: one with an anthropomorphic shape depicting a woman and another with two faces arranged symmetrically (Janus type). Both were discovered in a context suggesting cult activities in a period of the Late Neolithic when new traditions emerged and the inhabitants of Vinča tried to keep their own traditions alive (Nikolić and Vuković 2009, 64-66).

The three small clay tables are also very interesting. They are decorated with incisions in the Turdaş style and are in a fragmentary state. The functionality of this type of items is far from being clarified. Some scholars considered that they have a cultic function and they called them “altars” or “cult tables”. Other specialists interpret them rather in terms of domestic use (Mirea 2011, 42; Nikolov 2007; Schwarzberg 2005, 247-368). This problem cannot be resolved

until we have some residue analyses collected from the interior surface of these items.

Of high importance in interpreting the possible meanings of archaeological artefacts is the context of their discovery. For six of the artefacts (more than 50 %) discussed here, the context is broad – an archaeological layer, one was found in a ditch (Feature 239, Figures 16 - 18), another two in a surface dwelling (Dwelling 6) and two in storage/refuse pits (Features 59 and 357).

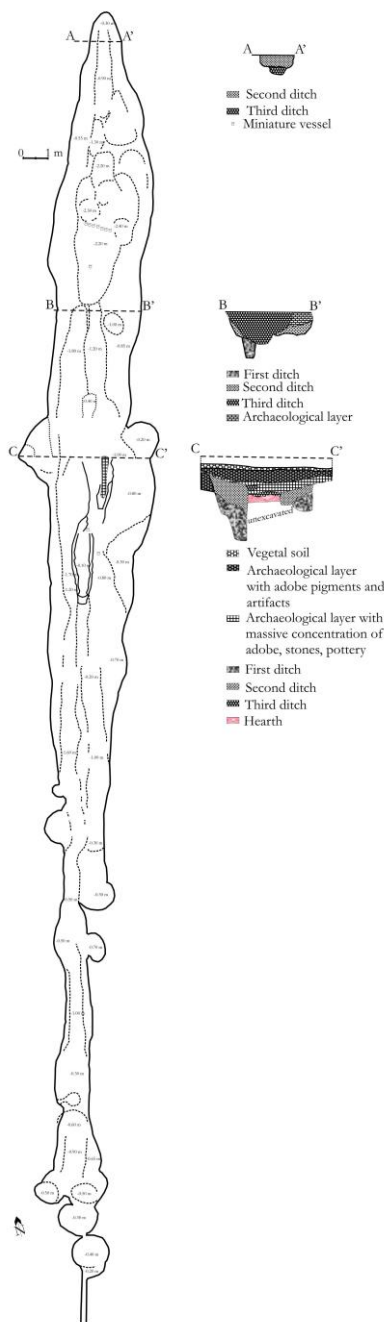


Figure 16. Şoimus-La Avicola (Ferma 2): Feature 239.



Figure 17. Şoimus-La Avicola (Ferma 2): Feature 239.

I already discussed the implications of finding two of these items in the same context in Dwelling 6 (see *infra*). It is also a very significant fact that these two items were found very close to each other, in the same excavated area. The ditch is also important since it had three phases and a row of seven miniature vessels was found in it at the same depth (Figure 16). In its central part, a combustion structure was found (hearth or oven) also suggesting another type of functionality, beside the role of enclosing different areas of the settlement.

Sometimes special structures are excavated and they reveal to a certain extent the possible function of these small clay tables. Though, the burnt house from Vrbjanska Čuka (Macedonian Pelagonia) interpreted as a sanctuary is such a case, here many of these small clay tables are being discovered inside the building (Pavúk and Bakámska 2014, 70).

Concerning small triangular “altars”, analogies for this type of item are hard to find. I know of a very similar find belonging to the Early Copper Age from Azmashka, near Stara Zagora, Bulgaria (Kalchev 2005, 53; Merlini 2007, 96, Fig. 28) and another one, not so similar, from Gradešnica, Neolithic, Bulgaria (Nikolov 1974, Fig. 74; Merlini 2007, 96, Fig. 29).



Figure 18. *Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2): Feature 239.*

Prospomorphic lids and clay tables were also discovered in other Vinča sites like Hodoni (Draşovean 1996, Pl. XIX/5, 6, 8), Liubcova (Draşovean 1996, Pl. XXIV/7, 8, 11-13), Sânanđrei (Draşovean 1996, Pl. XXVII/6, 7), Živanićeva Dolja (Marinković 2010, 31, Kat. No. 20) or Parţa (Gimbutas 1974, 115/Fig. 73, 117/Fig. 81) to give only a few examples. Not far from our settlement of Şoimuş, a few Turdaş style sites were discovered and researched, namely the ones from Turdaş-*Luncă* (von Roska 1941; Luca 2001) or Orăştie-*Dealul Pemilor (punct X2)* (Luca 1997). These three settlements (Şoimuş, Turdaş and Orăştie) are quite close to each other, between the first two being a distance of 25 km as the crow flies, between Turdaş and Orăştie ca. 6 km and between Şoimuş and Turdaş ca. 20 km. Some close parallels to our archaeological material can be found in the old researches from Turdaş. Here many prospomorphic lids were discovered (von Roska 1941, Taf. CII, CIII) and two very interesting triangular “altars”, similar to a certain extent with those discussed here (von Roska 1941, Taf. XCVIII/15 and Taf. CIV/12). Both are decorated with incisions and have animal and/or human heads in the corners. From the same settlement some small clay tables, decorated with incisions similar to our artifacts, were also collected (von Roska 1941, Taf. XCVIII/4-6, 8, 9, 11-13).

Conclusion

Scholars have always been fascinated by the so-called ‘special artifacts’ found at prehistoric sites and they try to explain their significance in different ways. Some of them attribute this type of artefact in the controversial area of cult practices, while others deny any separation between sacred and profane in archaic cultures.

One of the most influential works on this topic is that of Ian Hodder with the famous distinction between *domus* and *agrios* and the artifacts associated with these two concepts (1990, 69, Fig. 3/5). Other scholars deny any opposition between material culture and culture: for instance a flag is both an object and an abstract symbol at the same time. Thus, this item “transcends the opposition between matter and mind that is at the basis of the concept of material culture” (Düring 2006, 26).

To conclude I will cite the significant phrase of Christopher Tilley (2003, 39): “To write better archaeology we need a better understanding and awareness of the role metaphor and metonymy plays in our reconstructions”.

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