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THROUGH THE DARKNESS OF PREHISTORY. THE PYXIS OR THE COȚOFENI OIL LAMP FROM GHEJA

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Key words: lighting, *pyxis*, oil lamp, Coțofeni culture.

Cuvinte cheie: iluminat, pixidă, opaiț, cultura Coțofeni.

Introduction.

We are often compelled to ascertain that archaeological research does not provide answers to apparently simple questions. One such question is: how was the issue artificial lighting resolved in the area of the Coțofeni culture? The prehistoric settlements and dwellings are often studied with no special consideration given to the means through which they benefited from the natural or artificial lighting. The image of thousands of villages buried in darkness after nightfall seemed to have not been an issue that would arouse a continuous preoccupation among archaeologists¹, but rather among ethnologists or anthropologists.

First of all, we must note the absence of authentic oil lamps in an extremely vast Coțofeni area, in spite of the fact that the repertoire of types of ceramic vessel was highly diverse. Since each vessel had a practical use, we must ask ourselves why this impressive production of ceramics did not contain vessels that would have been used for lighting purposes. The current discoveries support this observation, but they probably also offer an answer, even a singular one.

Research History.

So far, the only Coțofeni discovery that can be brought into discussion in this sense is a vessel from Gheja (Hung. Marosgezse, Mureș County), preserved in the collections of the National Museum of Transylvanian History from Cluj-Napoca (inventory number 1937 = P. 601). It is part of the older collections, due to the fact that it was discovered and catalogued at the end of the 19th century. Since there is no other data regarding its context, we can only describe it as

¹ From the Romanian historiography, see an introduction in this subject and its possible approaches in Gogâltan 1994.

having been found in Gheja, allegedly in the sand quarry in front of the Luduș train station².

The vessel was published multiple times and the way in which it had been seen by the ones who presented it also revealed its possible uses. Archaeologist Mór Wosinsky was the first to consider its publication necessary, in 1904, and he also illustrated it photographically (**Fig. 1/1**)³. It was then presented again in other illustrations in 1933 by Hermann Schroller, who provided a new photograph (**Fig. 1/2**)⁴ and again, later, in 1941, by Márton Roska, who published the first drawing of the vessel (**Fig. 1/3**)⁵. The last publication of the vessel belongs to Petre Roman, who offered a sketch (**Fig. 1/4**)⁶. Oddly, other scholars avoided referencing this discovery⁷.

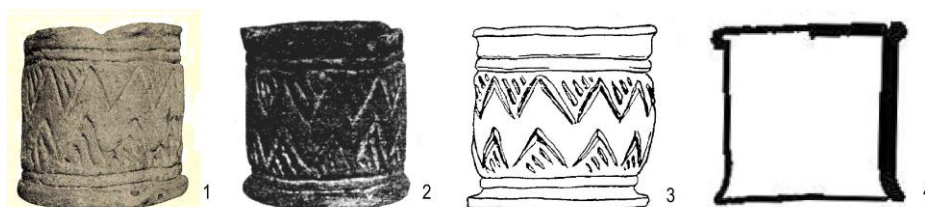


Fig. 1. The vessel from Gheja depicted in different publications (after Wosinsky 1904 - 1; Schroller 1933 - 2; Roska 1941 - 3; Roman 1976 - 4).

Description and Possible Functionality.

As we shall see, the vessel's descriptions and, implicitly, its typological and functional classifications established throughout more than a century are either incomplete, or subjective – inexplicably, essential details were ignored. M. Wosinsky described it as a cylindrical vessel and noticed strong burn marks on its upper rim⁸, Hermann Schroller considered it to be a “jar/cruse” (“Dose”, *din German*) and noted the absence of analogies in this sense⁹. M. Roska also considered it to be a “Dose” (Germ.) / “agyagedény” (Hung.)¹⁰. Petre Roman was also in a position of uncertainty, considering it to be a “Pedestal vessels” – actually, a lid or a cylindrical vessel” from Gheja and he practically included it

² Lazăr 1995, p. 176.

³ Wosinsky 1904, p. 32, Pl. VII/5.

⁴ Schroller 1933, p. 31-32, 74, nr. 28; Pl. 26/6.

⁵ Roska 1941, p. 69, Fig. 21; see also *idem* 1942, p. 161.

⁶ Roman 1976, p. 24, Pl. 34/8.

⁷ We first and foremost mean Horia Ciugudean's monograph, in which the author takes no stance regarding this discovery (Ciugudean 2000).

⁸ Wosinsky 1904, p. 32.

⁹ Schroller 1933, p. 31-32.

¹⁰ Roska 1941, p. 69.

in three different categories (!)¹¹. More recently, Valeriu Lazăr regarded the vessel to be a “cylindrical lid”¹².

Due to the study and direct drawing of the vessel conducted in 2007, we were able to make the following observations. The vessel is cylindrical in shape; it has a slightly convex mid-section and a slightly outward curving rim; it has a flat, foot-like base, with a rounded, embossed edge. Two, diametrically opposed perforations vertically pierce the “foot”. Two grooves that, in time, worn out the vessel’s rim are present alongside the perforations, which suggests there is a direct connection between them. The entire body of the vessel was symmetrically decorated using the *Furchenstich* technique. Under the rim and near the base, two parallel lines enclose a zigzagged motif made of two rows of connected triangles with hashed sides. It is semi-fine in nature, brick-red both on the outside and on the inside; its core is black and it was skimmed using sand and pebbles. The upper edge bears traces of secondary firing. Dimensions: lip diameter = 9 cm; base diameter = 8.8 cm; body diameter = 8.5 cm; height = 8.4 cm (**Fig. 2**).

If we were to compile a list of the functional interpretations made so far by scholars, we would notice a very wide variety: *cylindrical vessel, jar/cruse, holder, lid*. Essentially, the vessel is obviously cylindrical in shape, but its shape does not directly indicate its functionality. As we have seen so far, it could either be a cylindrical vessel (a “Dose”), or a cylindrical lid, which is something else altogether. Therefore, its correct classification must be established. The only researcher who published it upside down was Petre Roman, which explains the functionalities he established for the vessel: lid or holder. Probably inspired by Petre Roman, Valeriu Lazăr also considered the vessel to be a “cylindrical lid”. However, we believe that arguments in favour of this functionality are nonexistent¹³. In what follows, we shall see why.

The two diametrically opposed perforations that obliquely pierce the soft clay of the vessel play an important role in our interpretation. Two deep grooves are present alongside the perforations, on the rim. Their presence can be explained by the idea that a string had been inserted through the perforations. The purpose of the two grooves was to guide the string in the area of the rim, which implicitly indicates that the string was then extended and stretched. This idea was neither necessary nor possible if the vessel had been a downwards

¹¹ Roman 1976, p. 24, the German summary only contains the syntagm “der Deckel von Gheja” (Roman 1976, p. 97).

¹² Lazăr 1995, p. 176.

¹³ We do not as of yet know with certainty what the Coțofeni culture ceramic lids looked like, since such discoveries have not been published. During my doctoral research, I identified one single (unique) ceramic fragment in the museum from Deva that could have been part of a lid; its place of discovery was unknown.

facing lid. The need for the grooves that were made after the vessel had been fired in the kiln can, however, be motivated only if the vessel had been hung and the string played the role of holding the vessel in balance.

Therefore, in our opinion, we are faced with a vessel that was meant to be hung. From this viewpoint, other details arise, namely details that could help us understand the possible way in which the item had been used. We cannot overlook the fact that, on one side, the string was obliquely inserted through the perforation and the groove on the rim. How can we explain such an artifice, since it diverted the string away from the axis that would have kept the vessel in balance? We believe that the decisive answer is given by another important detail: the strong, visible traces of secondary burning, particularly on the vessel's rim. This, we believe, was caused by a type of fuel that had been burned over time inside the vessel. The string that held the vessel had to be diverted above the mouth, so that it would not catch on fire (**Fig. 2/b-c**).

Therefore, the most probable use for the vessel from Gheja was that of an oil lamp. All clues point to this plausible hypothesis, thus disproving certain unsubstantiated opinions that consider the item to be a lid, a jar or a holder.

Another item from the Coțofeni cultural space, namely a fragmented vessel from Deva - *Dealul Cetății*, has a similar "foot", perforated in a manner that would guide the string on which the vessel was hung (**Fig. 4**). The vessel was dated to subphase Coțofeni IIIb¹⁴. It is possible that the functionality of this item was similar to that of the vessel from Gheja. We intentionally did not mention other discoveries of Coțofeni vessels that had orifices for hanging on the rim or on the maximum diameter¹⁵, since they are typologically different from the item under scrutiny.

The Coțofeni culture also contained a series of so-called "saucers", among which there were a few that had perforated handles, so that they could be hung. We recently discussed the possibility of these vessels discovered in Vințu de Jos and Gračanica - Gladnice to have been oil lamps, but it is more likely that they had had a different functionality¹⁶.

Contemporary with the Coțofeni culture, in the Early Cycladic I (Grotta - Pelos Culture) (3200-2800 BC), a series of vessels that archaeologists named *pyxides* (**Fig. 5/2-3**) are constantly present and they can be easily compared to the item under scrutiny. Since the vessel from Gheja had been repurposed, it is possible that its initial function was that of a *pyxis*. There is a similar vessel from the Central European Bronze Age from Ludwigshafen - Mundenheim, from the

¹⁴ Rișcuța 1999-2000, p. 206, Pl. I/8.

¹⁵ Roman 1976, p. 23, Pl. 27 (type IX); Ciugudean 2000, p. 25-26, Pl. 83/20; 89/5-6.

¹⁶ Popa 2016, Pl. 1/1; 2/1.

Adlerberg culture¹⁷ (**Fig. 5/1**) and both of their evolutions extended to the Iron Age¹⁸.

Cultural framing.

Regarding the item's cultural and chronological affiliation, things could not be clearer. We must obviously take Petre Roman's doubts out of discussion, since he was unsure whether the vessel from Gheja belonged to the Coțofeni culture¹⁹. M. Roska was adamant about including it among the Corpadea I (Kolozskorpád I) type discoveries, as the author called the Coțofeni type items from Transylvania²⁰. H. Schroller, surely due to the technique used in decorating the vessel – with successive jabs –, included it among the Transylvanian *Fuschentischkeramik* discoveries²¹.

Both the type and the technique used in decorating the vessel indicate that the find belongs to the Coțofeni culture. The motifs are also characteristic to this culture and they support the dating of the item to the Coțofeni III phase, no earlier than subphase Roman IIIb.

The discovery was made by accident, which is why its context is unknown. We must, however, mention the fact that the area, the “train station” / “sand quarry”, is a Coțofeni site that also contained characteristic potsherds or fragmented vessels²².

Conclusions.

There are too few concrete items by which we can intuit the system of prehistoric natural or artificial lighting. Spread out from riverbanks to the higher areas or in caves, the Coțofeni communities surely felt a need that needed to be met in respect to artificial lighting. The main source of artificial lighting was the fireplace. However, there are numerous situations in which dwellings did not contain fireplaces, thus other light sources must be considered, such as torches or oil lamps that have not yet been identified among the Coțofeni discoveries. We believe that the vessel from Gheja represents the proof that supports such an assumption. Since it is a small vessel, the fuel (oil or animal fat) ignited a small flame and, as such, it was probably used in closed spaces (**Fig. 3**).

¹⁷ Probst 1996, p. 81.

¹⁸ See Jugănaru 2003, p. 63-70, Fig. 1-3.

¹⁹ The author discusses it either within the category of “those with very doubtful affiliations with the Coțofeni culture” (Roman 1976, p. 24), or as part of a category of vessels with “features that are not typical to the Coțofeni culture” (Roman 1976, p. 134, Pl. 34).

²⁰ Roska 1941, p. 69.

²¹ Schroller 1933, p. 31-32, 74.

²² Schroller 1933, p. 74, nr. 28; Pl. 26/6; Roska 1941, p. 69, nr. 176, Fig. 21; idem 1942, p. 161, nr. 91; Vlăsa 1964, p. 353, nota 5; Lazăr 1975, p. 30; idem 1995, p. 176; idem 1998, p. 46; Ciugudean 2000, p. 71, nr. 278.

As we have tried to demonstrate above, we consider that the vessel from Gheja was used in lighting and played the role of an oil lamp. However, it is possible that the vessel had a different functionality during the first phase of its use: that of a *pyxis*. Later modifications, the results of which were the grooves on the rim, prove a different use, namely that of an oil lamp. Since there is little data regarding such artefacts, the importance of this item is that much greater. For now, it is unique in the Coțofeni culture, in spite of the fact that an impressive diversity and quantity of ceramic items was discovered.

PRIN ÎNTUNERICUL PREISTORIEI. PYXIDA SAU CANDELA COȚOFENI DE LA GHEJA

REZUMAT

De multe ori suntem nevoiți să constatăm că cercetarea arheologică nu ne oferă răspunsuri la întrebări aparent simple. Una dintre acestea este: cum era rezolvată problema iluminatului artificial în arealul culturii Coțofeni? Adeseori așezările și locuințele preistorice sunt studiate fără a se manifesta vreun interes special privitor la modul în care acestea beneficiau de iluminatul natural ori de cel artificial.

Un posibil răspuns îl poate oferi un mic vas ceramic descoperit cu mult timp în urmă la Gheja (jud. Mureș). Acesta are toate caracteristicile pentru a putea fi discutat în rândul candelor preistorice: formă, mod de perforare destinat suspendării, urme de ardere secundară rezultate în urma folosirii sale. În același timp este prezentată și problema întrebunțării sale inițiale cu o altă destinație, posibil de pixidă, fiind singurul vas din aria culturii Coțofeni de acest tip.

EXPLICAȚIA FIGURILOR

- Figura 1.** Vasul de la Gheja ilustrat în diferite publicații (după Wosinsky 1904 - 1; Schroller 193 - 2; Roska 1941 - 3; Roman 1976 - 4).
- Figura 2.** Vasul - candelă de la Gheja (a – desen C. I. Popa; b-c – detalii privitoare la uzura marginilor și unghiul de înclinare a sferei în timpul atârării).
- Figura 3.** Candelă de lut Coțofeni III de la Gheja (reconstituire C. I. Popa).
- Figura 4.** Vas fragmentar Coțofeni III de la Deva - *Dealul Cetății* (after Rîșcuța 1999-2000).
- Figura 5.** Vas din cadrul culturii Adlerberg, de la Ludwigshafen - Mundenheim (1) și pixide din cadrul culturii Grotta - Pelos (Ciclade) (2-3) (after Probst 1996 - 1; <https://www.colorado.edu/classics/exhibits/GreekVases/images/200638abt%20copy.jpg> - 2; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hellenic_Museum,_Melbourne_-_Joy_of_Museums_-_Cycladic_Pyxis.jpg - 3).

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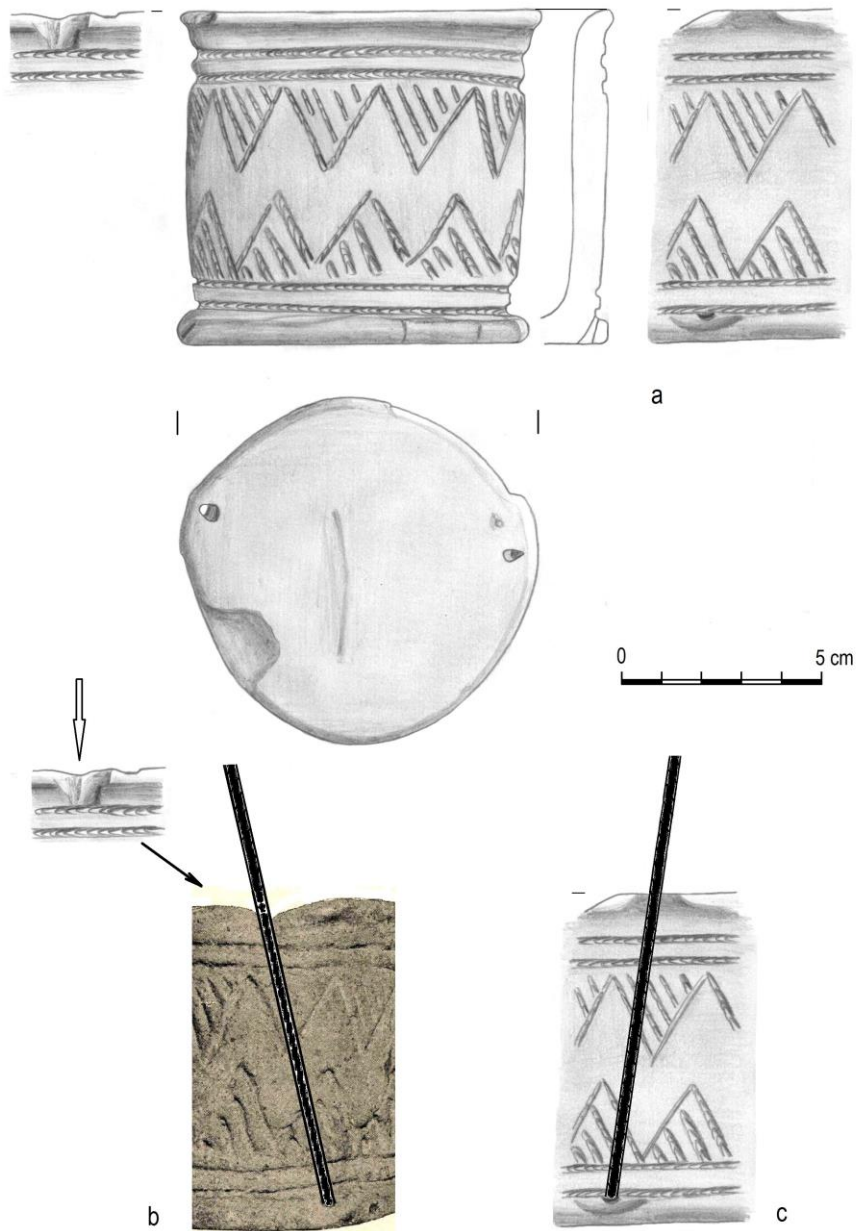


Fig. 2. The oil lamp-vessel from Gheja (a – drawing by C. I. Popa; b-c – details regarding the wear of the margins and the inclination angle of the string while hanging).



Fig. 3. The Coțofeni III clay oil lamp from Gheja (reconstruction by C. I. Popa).

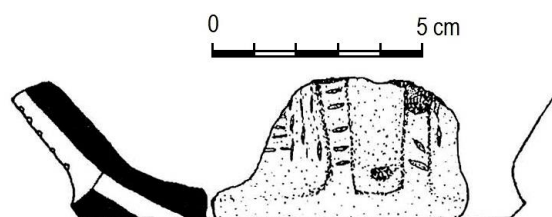


Fig. 4. Fragmented Coțofeni III vessel from Deva - *Dealul Cetății* (after Rîșcuța 1999-2000).



1



2



3

Fig. 5. Vessel from the Adlerberg culture, from Ludwigshafen - Mundenheim (1) and *pyxides* from the Grotta - Pelos (Cyclade) (2-3) (after Probst 1996 - 1; <https://www.colorado.edu/classics/exhibits/GreekVases/images/200638abt%20copy.jpg> - 2; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hellenic_Museum,_Melbourne_-_Joy_of_Museums_-_Cycladic_Pyxis.jpg - 3).