MORE LIGHT?

Some Remarks on the Function of a Roman Mortarium from the ‘Princely’ Grave in Poprad-Matejovce

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The article discusses the presumed functions of the provincial Roman mortarium discovered in the ‘princely’ grave in Poprad-Matejovce. The vessel may have served as a container for some unspecified food, as a component of a feast accompanying a funeral ceremony, or it may have been used as a lamp. In both cases, the strong influence of Roman culture on the population of the southern zone of Barbaricum at the end of antiquity is evident.

Keywords: Slovakia, Spiš region, Roman Period, ‘princely’ grave, mortarium, funerary rite, romanisation.

INTRODUCTION

The ‘princely’ grave from Poprad-Matejovce (Poprad distr., Slovakia), dated to the early phase of the Migration Period, is undoubtedly one of the most spectacular archaeological discoveries made in Central Europe in this century. The find was made by chance at the foot of the High Tatra mountains, in the area covered by the Northern Carpathian group in the above-mentioned chronological section, from which no other sepulchral sites of the people of the mentioned unit are known so far.1 A lot of attention has already been paid in literature to the impressive construction of this tomb, consisting of two wooden chambers, as well as to traces of its reopening and robbery, which probably took place shortly after the funeral ceremony. Studies have also been undertaken on the surviving elements of its inventory, among which the numerous objects made of raw materials of organic origin deserve special attention (Lau 2013; 2017; Lau/Pieta 2010; 2017; Pieta 2009).

The furnishings of the ‘princely’ burial also included eight ceramic vessels, found between the walls of the inner and outer chambers of the tomb, in the vicinity of a bucket made of brass sheeting, a basket woven from bast containing, among other things, silver-plated iron scissors, and near a cluster of animal bones accompanied by an iron knife (Lau 2013, 17, 19; Lau/Pieta 2010, 350, fig. 8; 2017, 258, fig. 3; Pieta 2009, 116, fig. 14). Seven of the clay vessels mentioned derive from the local, i.e. barbarian cultural environment. These include a hemispherical, hand-made bowl of considerable size (with a spout diam. of ca. 37 cm) and six small specimens that can be described as bowls or dishes. Three of them are hand-made, while another three were made using a potter’s wheel. All the vessels show technological and stylistic features of the late Roman and early Migration Period, i.e. phases C3-D, in the area of the Przeworsk culture, south-western Slovakia and Moravia, as well as in the Chernyakov culture. By far the greatest number of stylistic references to the above-mentioned examples can be found among the ceramic inventories of the Przeworsk culture (Rodzińska-Nowak, forthcoming). Thus, the existence of influences coming from these directions, which have long been noticed in the studies on the ceramics of the Northern Carpathian group (Mączyńska 2005, 157; Madyda-Legutko 1996, 97, 98; Pieta 1991, 383; 2009, 119; cf. Madyda-Legutko/Tunia 2008, 246) was once again confirmed.

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Typological affiliation and chronology

In addition to the above-mentioned seven ceramic vessels from the barbarian environment, the grave in Poprad-Matejovce contained one provincial Roman glazed mortarium, which is the subject of the present study (Fig. 1). It is a specimen made on a potter’s wheel, resembling an inverted, truncated cone, with a crescent-shaped rim and a gutter-shaped

1 The only exception is perhaps the sepulchral site at Rajbrot, małopolskie voj. (PL; cf. Biborski/Zagórska-Telega 2008).
Fig. 1. Poprad-Matejovce. The Roman mortarium (drawn N. Vašová).
spout (dimensions: total height 10 cm; spout diam. 26 cm; bottom diam. 8.3 cm). The outer surface, pale greyish in colour with small dark glaze patches, is smooth but slightly rough, while the inner surface is intentionally roughened, also with traces of a green-yellowish glaze, the remains of which were also preserved on the surface of the crescent-shaped rim (Rodzińska-Nowak, forecoming).

Similar specimens have been included in the 13th group of Roman form mortaria according to the classification system of R. P. Symonds (2012). The author classified conical vessels occurring in the 2nd and 3rd c., mainly in Moesia and Dacia, as well as in Pannonia, into the above-mentioned group. It was from these forms in Moesia Superior and Pannonia that mortaria characteristic of the later period, covered with lead glaze, were to develop (Symonds 2012, 184–188, fig. 11; 12). The presence of traces of glaze inside the vessel, as in the case of the mortarium from Poprad-Matejovce, is considered to be a feature indicating a late antique metric (Bru Calderón 2011, 25). This specimen finds analogues among mortaria known, among others, from the Zlechov settlement in Moravia (Zeman 2006, 462, fig. 7: 17, 2008, 68–71, fig. 17: 1–3) and from the St. Pölten-Rathausplatz site in Lower Austria (Bru Calderón 2011, pl. II: 4, 5).

It is reasonable to believe that the vessel in question comes from Pannonia, where glazed mortaria were produced on a large scale from the mid-4th c. onwards. It is probably from there that they reached the southern Barbaricum zone, where they enjoyed considerable popularity (Groh/Sedlmayer 2002, 303; Grünvald 1979, 68; 1992; Krekovič 1973; Rodzińska-Nowak, forecoming; Zeman 2008, 70, 71).

Glazed mortaria are found in large numbers in the provinces of the Roman state at sites dated to the end of the 3rd c. and the 4th c., and their presence is considered to be an indicator of the degree of acculturation of the local population, manifested among other things in the adoption of typically Roman models in the culinary arts. These vessels were in fact mainly used for grinding foodstuffs, e.g. herbs, spices, seeds, fruits, salt, etc., as well as for grinding sauces, preparing flour dishes or dairy products, such as moretum – a type of herbal cheese eaten with bread mentioned in Roman written sources (Apicius, De re coquinaria, I, 35; Cramp/Evershed/Eckardt 2011, 1341; cf. Bru Calderón 2011, 25). Finds of vessels of this type are known, as mentioned, also from the southern zone of central European Barbaricum, where they occur both on settlements and in sepulchral contexts. Mortaria were discovered, among others, on settlements in Branč, Nitra distr. (SK; Kolník/Varsk/Vladár 2007, pl. 24: 12; 68: 6; 145: 3, 4), Štúrovo, Nové Zámky distr. (SK; Beljak/Kolník 2008, 78), Drslavice and Zlechov, Uherské Hradiště distr. (CW; Pasohlávky, Brno-venkov distr. (CW; Tejkal 2002, 355; Zeman 2006, 2008, 68–71), Maiersch, Horn distr. (A; Pollák 1980, 66, pl. 44: 4; 59: 8) and Ringelsdorf, Gänserndorf distr. (A; Allerbauer/Jedlicka 2000, 660, fig. 788). The chronological position of glazed mortars from the above-mentioned settlements has been usually fixed to the second half of the 4th c. and the first half of the 5th c. (Krekovič 1973, 102; Tejkal 1999, 229; Varsk 1998, 50, 85; 2004, 262; Zeman 2008, 68–71). Finds of such vessels are also attested in cemeteries, including Pohořelice, Brno-venkov distr. (CW; Čižmář 1997, 26, fig. 7: 13) or Abrahám, Galanta distr. (SK; Kolník 1973, 386, fig. 29: 4a–c).

The assemblage of ceramics of barbarian origin discovered in the ‘princely’ tomb at Poprad-Matejovce is chronologically consistent and can be dated to phases C3–D, and the chronological position of the imported mortarium fully confirms the above dating of this assemblage.

**Alleged function during a funerary ceremony**

All the above-mentioned ceramic vessels forming part of the equipment of the grave at Poprad-Matejovce, including the mortarium in question, were discovered, as already mentioned, between the walls of the inner and outer chamber of the grave in the vicinity of a Hemmoor bucket, a basket made of bast and a cluster of animal bones accompanied by a knife (Lau 2013, 17, 19; Lau/Pieta 2010, 350, fig. 8; 2017, 258, fig. 3; Pieta 2009, 116, fig. 14). A detailed analysis of the traces associated with the reopening and robbery of a tomb in antiquity by N. Lau and K. Pieta proved that the pottery, together with the objects in its vicinity, was probably in situ at the time of discovery in 2006, i.e. it did not bear any signs of displacement, although five vessels, including the mortarium in question, had been broken, probably during the robbery of the tomb (Lau/Pieta 2017, 258; Pieta 2009, 116). It is therefore possible to speculate that the vessels were located in a zone where gifts of food intended for the deceased were deposited, which seems to be supported in particular by the presence of the aforementioned animal bones, among which were the remains of a piglet and possibly a deer. It should also be noted that the presence of hazelnuts was recorded within the inner chamber, which may have both been a source of food and may have had some symbolic significance in funerary rituals (Lau 2013, 19; Pieta 2009, 116; cf. Andrzejowski 2011, 187, fig. 7; Dąbrowska 2008, 145; Niewęgowski 1993; Schuster 2014, 36).

We may risk a statement that a hand-made bowl of considerable size together with six small vessels...
(bowls), three of which are also hand-made, and three more made by means of a potter’s wheel, constitute a service for a communal consumption of an alcoholic beverage. A large hemispherical bowl probably served as a container for storing this drink (Rodzińska-Nowak, forthcoming). Based on the results of the analysis of the contents of some vessels known from other graves of representatives of barbarian elites, it can be assumed that the beverage could have been, for example, beer sweetened with honey or mead, although the presence of wine or fruit wine cannot also be categorically excluded (cf. Crane 1999, 515; Jahns 2001; Hellmund 2010, 252, 253, 261; Körber-Grohne 1985, 121, 122; Rodzińska-Nowak 2018, further literature therein). Looking at the set of six different, not always carefully crafted, bowls accompanying the large bowl, however, it is hard to resist the impression that they fit neither the grandiose form of the grave at Poprad-Matejovce nor, still less, the colloquial notions of ‘princely’ tableware. This observation leads us in this case to consider the validity of H. Steuer’s conception that sets of dishes and fragments of animal carcasses found in the burials of elites were not originally intended for the deceased, but are a trace of a feast accompanying a funeral ceremony (Totenkmahl). This feast was intended, among other things, to reflect the existing hierarchy in the community, i.e. the division between rulers and ruled, and any remains of it were ritually deposited in the grave (Steuer 2006, 14, 20; cf. Schuster 2014, 29). If we assume that the aforementioned concept accurately explains the situation observed in the case of the grave from Poprad-Matejovce, the question arises what function the imported provincial Roman mortarium could have had in the funerary rites?

The manifestations of strong Roman influence evident both in the form of the grave from Poprad-Matejovce and in certain elements of its furnishings have already been repeatedly pointed out in the literature. In particular, the construction of the inner chamber, topped with a gabled roof modelled on some Roman tombs and sarcophagi (Lau/Pieta 2010, 350; 2017, fig. 6, 8, 10), was pointed out, as well as the presence of a wooden bed, finding analogies among luxurious Roman furniture, depictions of which are known from iconographic sources from the turn of the 4th and 5th c. (Lau 2017). Following this line of thought, is it possible to think that the mortarium placed in the burial proves the reception in the deceased’s immediate environment of Roman customs related to the preparation of meals?

According to some authors, the relatively numerous presences of imported provincial Roman mortars in the settlements of the barbarian population settled in the Danube zone can be regarded as a sign of their romanisation and seems to support their adoption, to some extent, of Roman culinary customs (cf. Kohn 1994, 250). However, it should be stated that, based on the currently available sources, both archaeological and biological, it is very difficult to assess what might have been the scale of the influence of Roman patterns in terms of dietary patterns or ways of preparing meals on the population of the aforementioned zone of the Barbaricum (cf. Hajnalová/Varsik 2010). According to some scholars, however, the presence of mortaria can be interpreted not as a direct reflection of the ‘romanisation’ of dietary modes, but rather as a manifestation of a more complex process of cultural adaptation of this type of vessel, both within and outside the kitchen (cf. Cramp/Evershed/Eckardt 2011, 1350).

On the other hand, it has to be said that Roman patterns of behaviour were sometimes followed by representatives of the upper strata of barbarian communities. This can be confirmed by a case recorded in Thuringia, where in Haarhausen, Ilm distr. (D) a pottery workshop was discovered, dated to the second half of the 3rd c., producing, probably for the needs of the local elite, pottery according to Roman models, including mortaria (Dušek 1984; 1992). It is worth noting that at the same time in the mentioned area there is evidence of a different structure of herds of cattle, and presumably also of sheep, which shows characteristics of the Mediterranean circle (Benecke 1994, 151; Rodzińska-Nowak 2012, 116). This seems to further support the thesis that the local elite adopted Roman patterns in the field of economy and perhaps even diet. It is worth emphasising that so far, no mortaria have been found in the Odra or Vistula basins. An isolated and unexpected discovery, however, is a fragment of such a vessel, encountered at the Vorbasse settlement in central Jutland (DK) (Lund Hansen 2014).

Coming back to the discussed mortarium find from the grave in Poprad-Matejovce, it should be stated that among the wooden objects preserved inside the mentioned grave, no remains of a club, with which foodstuffs were usually crushed or ground in a mortar, were found. We also do not have the results of specialist analyses, which could provide a basis for inferring its contents. In view of the above, we can only assume that the mortarium placed in the ‘princely’ tomb, near the set of vessels intended for the consumption of alcoholic beverages and fragments of animal carcasses, contained a dish (e.g. cheese, meat sauce, flour dish?) which was part of the feast accompanying the funeral ceremony. Given the use of a mortar, it seems likely that the recipe for this dish may have been more or less borrowed from Roman culinary tradition.
Considering the above-mentioned manifestations of the Roman culture influence visible both in the construction of the tomb from Poprad-Matejovce and in certain elements of its furnishing, it is worth considering yet another possible interpretation of the function of the discussed mortarium during the funeral ceremony. It should be remembered that the use of these vessels in the Roman world sometimes went far beyond the kitchen function. Among other things, they were useful for making medicines and cosmetics, for grinding dyes, but they were also used as containers for burning incense, and as lamps (Droberjár 2005, 67; Kolník 1973, 386; Krekovič 1973, 99, 100; Symonds 2012, 169–172, 187, 188).

Both the results of the analysis of ancient written sources and the results of the study of archaeological artefacts suggest that light played an important role in Roman funerary customs (cf. Madyda-Legutko 2017, 412, 417; Menzel 1953; von Schnurbein 1977, 54–72; Winniczuk 1983, 465). Light sources in the form of olive lamps were therefore a common element of tomb furnishings in the Roman world, and they also occur in large numbers in archaeological contexts indicating that they performed various ritual functions, including votive gifts and magical objects (Diosono 2020; Diosono/Cinaglia 2016). The presence of imported Roman olive lamps is also attested in Barbaricum, but they are among the relatively few finds. Clay specimens predominate among them, although specimens described in the literature as bronze are also known. The artefacts of the discussed category are found on settlements and sometimes also on sepulchral sites, which allows us to believe that they were given a certain symbolic meaning also in the native, i.e. barbarian funerary ritual (cf. Madyda-Legutko 2017, 417). Finds of these imports are concentrated in the near-limes zone, in the middle Danube basin (south-western Slovakia, Moravia, Lower Austria), on the Rhine, between the Rhine and the Weser, and on the Lippe River (Hrnčiarič 2013a, 166, map 77; Jančo 2001, map 2; Krekovič 1996, fig. 1; Madyda-Legutko 2017, 411). In other areas they occur in dispersion, although there are areas so far completely devoid of finds of these monuments. This observation applies, for example, to Scandinavia (cf. Lund Hansen 1987).

The presence of imported olive lamps is also attested in the Slovak part of the Carpathians. Two lamps are known from the settlement area of the Púchov culture, which should most probably be associated with the eponymous settlement of this unit in Púchov (SK) on the Váh river and dated to the second half of the 2nd c. AD (Hrnčiarič 2013a, 167; 2013b, 142, inv. no. 2102, 2103; pl. XC: 2102, 2103; Krekovič 1983, 512, 513, 515, pl. I: 8, 9; 1996, 142; Madyda-Legutko 2017, 415). In addition, several fragments of North African lamps come from a settlement of the Northern Carpathian group population at Kežmarok-Vrbov, Kežmarok distr., dated to the end of the Late Roman period and the early phase of the Migration Period (Giertlová-Kučerová/Šohák 2005, 114, 123, fig. 3: 2; Hrnčiarič 2013a, 167; 2013b, 163, 164, inv. no. 2369–2372; pl. XC: 2369–2372; Pieta 1991, 378, fig. 2: 27, 28), of which three fragments, from a workshop in central Tunisia, are dated to 330–370 (Hrnčiarič 2013a, 167; Madyda-Legutko 2017).

In the context of the present discussion, the find of a bronze two-burner lamp of the Mahdia type discovered in a ‘royal’ grave in Mušov, Mikulov distr. (CZ), in the southern part of Moravia, dated to the period immediately before the Markomanic Wars, deserves particular attention. Inside the lamp, linen fibres were found, probably originally constituting its wick, which allows us to conclude that it was used for its intended purpose (Künzl 2002, 581, 583; Opravil 2002, 490). The lamp represents a type dated to the reign of Augustus, so its chronological position is much older than the date it was placed in the grave (Künzl 2002, 471, 472; Peška/Tejral 2002, 502).

The inventory of this burial included other objects of an ‘antiquarian’ nature, which suggests that they were collected over a longer period of time by representatives of the local elite (Peška/Tejral 2002, 509, 510). The placement of the lamp in the grave may support the view that the surroundings of the deceased adopted certain beliefs and eschatological ideas, borrowed from the provincial Roman environment. The presence of yet other imports in the inventory of this burial also seems to testify to the adaptation of Roman patterns of behaviour (Madyda-Legutko 2017, 417, 418; Peška/Tejral 2002, 502).

Relatively little is known about the light sources of native origin used by the people of Barbaricum (cf. Hegewisch 2005, 93; 2006, 269; 2009; 2010; Wunderlich 2002). There are indications that rooms were lit using wax or tallow candles,2 which were known in the ancient world (Hegewisch 2010, 194–197; Madyda-Legutko 2017, 413; Wunderlich 2000, 83–86). Some researchers suppose that the function of lamps could have been performed by some forms of ceramic vessels (cf. Hegewisch 2009; 2010). There is a view in the literature that the so-called Dacian bowls, found not only in areas inhabited by the Dacians, but also in areas where contacts with this cultural milieu are attested, may have been used as lamps. These bowls, characterised by a specific form, are found throughout

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2 In the ‘princely’ grave in Poprad-Matejovce, a wooden disc was found, which was interpreted as a candlestick in the catalogue of artefacts forming part of the monograph on this grave that is being prepared for publication.
the Roman period (Egri/Rustouï 2008, 84; Istvánovits/ Pintye 2011, 103; Madyda-Legutko 2017, 414). It is worth mentioning that very similar forms of ceramic vessels found in Gaul are clearly interpreted as lamps (cf. Delor-Ahüi/Kasprzyk 2006, 59, fig. 5).

In view of the above, it is possible to speculate that the provincial Roman mortarium discovered in the ‘princely’ grave at Poprad-Matejovce could have been used as a lamp, as was sometimes the case in the Roman world (cf. Droberjar 2005, 67; Krokovič 1973, 99, 100; Symonds 2012, 169–172, 187, 188). For example, a vessel is known from Apulum (Moesia Superior), like the specimen from Poprad-Matejovce representing the 13th mortar group in the classification according to R. P. Symonds (2012), with clear traces of soot inside, probably used as a light source or possibly as a container for burning incense (Bjelajac 1992–1993, 139, 140; Symonds 2012, 187, 188, fig. 12: 135). In order for the mortarium to serve as a lamp it seems likely that it will be filled for this purpose with beef tallow, fish fat or vegetable oil, e.g. linseed oil. The wick could have been made of plant fibres, e.g. flax, analogous to the lamp from the burial at Mušov (Hegewisch 2010, 194–197; Hrničiarik 2013a, 168, 169; Opravil 2002, 490). However, we should caveat that so far, we do not have the results of analyses that would certify the presence of residues of burnt fat inside vessels known from the Barbaricum site (cf. Madyda-Legutko 2017, 413). This remark also applies to the mortarium in question, broken during grave robbing.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it should be stated that the magnificent form of the ‘princely’ grave at Poprad-Matejovce, as well as some of its preserved furnishings, such as the wooden bed, undoubtedly prove the strong influence of Roman culture on the elite population living in the southern zone of Barbaricum at the end of antiquity (cf. Lau 2017; Lau/Pieta 2010, 350; 2017, fig. 6, 8, 10). The presence of a glazed mortarium is one of the manifestations of the aforementioned interactions. This vessel can most probably be interpreted as part of the tableware used during the feast accompanying the funerary ceremony (Totenmahl). It presumably contained a dish, the recipe of which may have been related to Roman culinary customs to some extent. However, bearing in mind the numerous and varied uses of Roman mortars, some of which were completely unrelated to the culinary arts, we cannot categorically exclude the possibility that the vessel may have served as a source of light during funeral ceremonies. Indeed, light played an important role in Roman funerary customs, and the presence of imported lamps in some graves of the Barbarians is interpreted as one of the evidences of the adoption by this population of certain eschatological imagery originating from the provincial Roman culture (cf. Józefów 2009; Madyda-Legutko 2017, 413; Rodzińska-Novak 2006; Rodzińska-Novak/Zagórska-Telega 2007, 269, 270; Witteyer 1993).

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