

THE ROMAN ANTHROPOMORPHIC BRONZE VESSEL FROM STRÂMBĂ (TURCENI, GORJ COUNTY). TYPOLOGICAL, FUNCTIONAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL ASPECTS

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Abstract. *The present paper aims to analyze an artifact well known in the Romanian archaeological literature: the Roman anthropomorphic bronze vessel from Strâmba (Turceni, Gorj County). The purpose is to integrate the vessel in the broad category of anthropomorphic bronze vessels from the Roman Empire. Emphasis is placed on terminological, typological, iconographical and functional aspects. Elements related to production centres, distribution areas and chronology are also discussed.*

Keywords: *Roman bronze vessels, anthropomorphic vessel, balsamarium.*

The anthropomorphic vessel from Strâmba (Turceni, Gorj County) (Pl. I/1a-1b) represents a stray find and it was donated to Oltenia Museum, Craiova by Ion I. Ologeanu. The object is preserved in the same location under the inventory number I 25102 (BONDOC 2000, 47-48, no.: 38; BONDOC 2003, 154, no.: 250). Although in a good general state of preservation, with a surface displaying a green patina, the vessel is fragmentary: the handle, the lid, part of the left loop and the base (restored now) are missing. It measures 11.5 cm in height and it depicts the bust of a young man emerging from a vegetal *calyx*. Only the superior part of the arms, reaching the level of the shoulders, is represented. The head is slightly turned to the left; the hair is thick, composed of curls covering the neck, with a stylized fringe. The eye contour is deepened, the nose flattened and the lips hardly represented. He wears an amulet around his neck.

Terminology. From a terminological point of view, the terms used to denominate this type of vessel vary a lot in the literature. Thus, the following names are generally employed: in the German literature: *Balsamarium in Büstenform* (RAEV 1977, 630), (*anthropomorphes*) *Büstengefäß* (RADNÓTI 1938, 172; GARBSCH 1980; SEDLMAYER 1999, 43; BIENERT 2007, 250), *Kopfgefäß* (SEDLMAYER 1999, 43; PALÁGYI 2002); in the French literature: *balsamaire anthropomorphe* (MAJEWSKI 1963 (1964), 125), *vase anthropomorphe* (MARTI-CLERCX & MILLE 2002), *vase plastique* (EUZENAT 1957, 187), *vase plastique en forme de tête humain* (SZABÓ 1984, 102, type 10); in the English literature: *bust-vessel* (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995, 54 sqq.; NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1999, 132); in the Spanish literature: *balsamario antropomorfo* (POZO 1988); in the Romanian literature: *balsamariu* (BONDOC 2003, 154, no.: 250), *bălsămariu* (BONDOC 2000, 47-48, no.: 38; BONDOC & DINCĂ 2003, 21-22, no.: 12), *balsamarium* (ALFÖLDY-GĂZDAC 2003 (2005), 178, no.: 13). From all these variants, *balsamarium* is the most frequently used, although it represents an improper term to designate this category of Roman bronze vessels. *Balsamarium* is a modern term which was never used in Antiquity by the Latin speakers (MARTI 1996, 979, note 4). It is a technical term, this is why it was not included in *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines* edited by Ch. Daremberg and E. Saglio (DAREMBERG & SAGLIO 1877-1919; MARTI 1996, 979, note 4). For the same reason there is no mention in the Latin written sources of a vessel bearing the name *balsamarium* (see HILGERS 1969). It derives from the Latin term *balsamum-i* which was formed from the Greek term *bálsamon* (ERNOUT & MEILLET 2001, 65, s. v. *balsamum*). The use of the term *balsamarium* implies the attribution of a specific functionality for this type of vessels that of balm containers, whilst in the present state of research such a functional character is extremely debatable (MARTI 1996, 980). A more general name, like anthropomorphic vessel, is much more convenient for the moment because it designates a precise shape, rather than a hypothetical functionality (MARTI 1996, 980).

Typology. Most of the studies dedicated to Roman bronze anthropomorphic vessels limited themselves to grouping the objects based on iconographical criteria, without offering a more detailed typology (see, e.g., POZO 1988). However, there are some attempts of typology made on such vessels from the entire Roman Empire (MARTI-CLERCX & MILLE 2002) or from a specific region (SZABÓ 1984).

From a morphological viewpoint the Roman bronze vessels which contained perfumes, scented creams or olive oil can be grouped in three main categories (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995). The first one includes bottle shaped or spherical vessels with two small handles to which a chain was attached allowing the transportation of the objects on a metal ring, together with the rest of the toilette set (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995, 51-52, Fig. 1). The second category is represented by globular vessels, which can sometimes have a body decorated in relief. They present two appliquéés under the rim which allowed the attachment of the handle, and a lid (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995, 52-54, Fig. 2; BRAUN 2001). The last one comprises the anthropomorphic vessels (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995, 54-57, Fig. 3-5). Regarding the former, the typology made by Klára Szabó can be mentioned here on the toilette vessels from Pannonia. The anthropomorphic vessels are included in types 10 and 11: type 10 comprises vessels in the shape of a human head and type 11 vessels representing a bust with or without a pedestal (SZABÓ 1984, 102, 109/Fig. 7/10-11). A much more precise attempt to classify the anthropomorphic vessels, based on a number of 322 artifacts from the entire Roman Empire, was made by Valérie Marti-Clercx and B. Mille. Three main types were established: type A includes vessels with the body shaped in most of the cases as a bust, but sometimes also as a head or a standing figure, with or without a pedestal, with a circular opening in the middle of the skull covered with a lid fastened in a small hinge and with two loops placed on the head allowing the attachment of a handle (263 objects); type B is composed by vessels with a small

neck and rim starting from the middle of the head (39 objects); type C is represented by head vessels without a pedestal or a handle (20 objects) (MARTI-CLERCX & MILLE 2002, 385-386, Fig. 1). The vessel from Strâmba can be included in a variant of type A, bust shaped vessel depicting a young man emerging from a vegetal *calyx* with only the superior part of the arms represented.

Iconography. The iconography of the anthropomorphic vessels displays a quite diverse repertoire; still the different iconographical types are not conditioned by the typology (MARTI-CLERCX & MILLE 2002, 385). Similar themes can appear e. g., on vessels with pedestal or without pedestal. There are some categories of themes which generally occur (POZO 1988; NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995, 54-56; MARTI-CLERCX & MILLE 2002, 385). The most frequent image represented is that of the Nubian, Ethiopian or Negroid, the so called "ethnographic" types in the literature. Their main characteristic consists in the typical hairdo depicted with strands. Such a vessel is known in Roman Dacia from *Porolisum* (ALFÖLDY-GĂZDAC 2003 (2005), 157/ Pl. 6/1, 2, 169, 178, no.: 13). Another favourite theme includes divinities, from which the most popular were the images of Hercules and those of Dionysos and his *tyasos*. The representations of young, nude, beardless men, resembling depictions of *Antinous*, as in the case of the vessel from Strâmba, were also very common. Most of these characters wear around their neck amulets which prove that we are dealing with depictions of mortals, not gods (see NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995, 55-56; NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1999, 132). As part of the numerous representations of mortal characters we can also mention the images strongly influenced by the iconography of *Faustina Minor* or *Geta* (MARTI 1996, 984), the *Lanternarii*, grotesque characters (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 2000), and children. There are also vessels shaped like human legs, animals or objects (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995, 57).

From an iconographical point of view the best analogy for the anthropomorphic vessel from Strâmba is represented by a vessel preserved in a private collection from Germany which displays greater concern for detail (ART OF THE ANCIENT WORLD 2009, 32, no.: 51). Other similar objects have been found at Trier (the object was initially used as a vessel and at a certain point lead was cast inside it, in order to use it as a weight) (BIENERT 2007, 250-251, no.: 290), at Varbovka (Bulgary - anthropomorphic vessel with pedestal) (MAJEWSKI 1963, 113/Ryc. 28, 121, no.: 44), in Pannonia (preserved in the National Hungarian Museum) (RADNÓTI 1938, 173, Taf. LIV/4). Although all these objects display similar characteristics, they are not identical items, situation which is in general very rare for Roman bronzes even if they are, in most of the cases, the result of a standardized manufacturing process. This is why the identification of the vessel from the Gorj County Museum, Târgu Jiu (Pl. I/2a-2b) comes as a big surprise, especially due to its strong similarities with the piece from Strâmba. The object, preserved, as above mentioned, in the Gorj County Museum, under the inventory number 12845, is considered a discovery made in the Geto-Dacian settlement at Socu-"Cioaca Boia" (Bărbătești, Gorj County). A closer examination of the vessel determined the identification of elements which question its Roman character. As it was shown at the beginning of this article, the object from Strâmba is fragmentary. Part of the base is missing; this is why the object was restored in this area. The piece from Gorj Museum displays an identical fracture in the same area and, without showing any restoration marks; the line of the cast follows the line of the part restored on the vessel from Strâmba. This aspect, the fact that the hole where the lid should have been fastened is covered, the strange colour of the patina, the scratching marks detected on the surface, resulted from the trimming off procedure - in Roman times, sandstone grinders were used in the final stages of the trimming, fact which determined very fine surfaces on the final product (see SERNEELS 1999) - make very plausible the hypothesis that this object is a modern copy of the vessel from Strâmba, made after the restoration process of the latter was completed. Other indirect arguments include the dating of this type: as we will see further on in this article, the beginning of the production can be at best placed at the end of the 1st century AD and, even if there are some exceptions, the type was not exported in *barbaricum*.

Distribution area. K. Majewski's study from 1963 (MAJEWSKI 1963) proved the existence in Europe of three areas with a higher number of such discoveries: the Danube area (Pannonia and Thrace), the Rhine area and the Black Sea area (MAJEWSKI 1963, 96). The further publication of the finds from Hispania showed a great number of discoveries especially in the area of Lusitania (Poza 1988). In the present state of research there are approximately 350 anthropomorphic vessels known, with a higher concentration of finds in Europe in comparison to Asia Minor and Africa. We can talk about a general distribution of the anthropomorphic vessels inside the Roman Empire, with a higher concentration of finds in the *limes* areas, especially on the *Limes Germanicus* (MARTI-CLERCX & MILLE 2002, 386/ Fig. 2). Such finds are exceptional discoveries in the European *barbaricum*.

Production centres. The production of anthropomorphic vessels still remains an unsolved problem. One of the reasons is represented by the fact that out of the approximately 800 bronze vessels with craftsman stamp known, none is an anthropomorphic vessel (see PETROVSZKY 1993). This situation could be explained by a later production of this type of bronze vessels, since starting with the second third of the 2nd century AD, the habit of stamping bronze vessels disappears (PETROVSZKY 1993, 181).

Lacking any direct evidence related to production (moulds, wasters etc.), it is generally considered, that the type was produced in more than one area: Alexandria, Asia Minor, Thrace, Gallia and Pannonia (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995, 57). Due to the "ethnographical" types and to the complex iconography displayed by many of these vessels, they were considered for a long time Alexandrian products or products of workshops from Asia Minor (MAJEWSKI 1963, 126). The low quality ones were attributed to provincial workshops from Gallia or Pannonia (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995, 57). Also, the great number of discoveries from the Danube area was explained through

their arrival here in Severian times as a result of the orientalisation of the army from this region (RAEV 1977, 631). The results obtained in the last decades in the study of anthropomorphic vessels don't sustain these theories. Relevant from this point of view are the metallographic analysis made by Valérie Marti-Clercx și Benoît Mille on this type of objects from both the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire. The results showed that two types of copper based alloy were used in Roman times for producing this type of vessels: a quaternary one (copper-lead-tin-zinc), typical only for the objects discovered in the Western part of the Empire and a tertiary one (copper-lead-tin), from which the vessels discovered in the oriental parts were manufactured. This situation indicates that the presence of zinc could be a "mark" of the western products (MARTI-CLERCX & MILLE 2002, 389-391). Moreover, from an iconographical viewpoint, it was observed that the vessels discovered along the Rhine and Danube include mainly "ethnographical" types, while the ones from the East especially deities and picturesque subjects (MARTI-CLERCX & MILLE 2002, 391-392).

Chronology. One of the most important elements for the dating of the anthropomorphic vessels is represented by their absence from the Roman towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum (see TASSINARI 1993). Also, they don't appear in grave inventories earlier than the 2nd century AD (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995, 57). All these arguments to which we can add the lack of stamped vessels and the similarities with the iconography of *Antinous* or *Faustina Minor* indicate a production that started sometime at the end of the 1st century AD and, as the discovery contexts indicate (see MARTI 1996, 983-985), continued during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD.

Functionality. Although the hypothesis that these vessels were olive oil containers used in the baths for cleaning the skin is generally accepted, the lack of direct evidence to sustain it determined those specialists, who expressed a special interest in the study of the type, to enunciate different theories, sometimes contradictory, regarding possible ways of use. The first hypothesis, sustained by Rossitsa Nenova Merdjanova (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1995; NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1999; NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 2000) considers that the anthropomorphic vessels were oil containers used in the baths. The first argument for this function is indicated by the iconographical elements: the "ethnographical" types are considered to depict slaves who carried the *instrumenta balnei* for their masters at the baths. Also, the representations of nude, beardless young men are related to the iconography of *Antinous* and, implicitly, with the homosexual relations which took place in such locations. Other arguments are the association in graves of this type of vessels with *strigiles* and other pieces of the toilette sets, but also the pendants appearing around the neck, in the cases of young men representations, which were worn by the Romans inside the baths in order to protect them from evil spirits. Such pieces have been discovered inside the drainage system of the Roman baths from York (NENOVA-MERDJANOVA 1999, 132, note 16).

Another point of view, based mainly on practical criteria, was expressed by Valérie Marti (MARTI 1996, 985-1000). The author argues that the anthropomorphic vessels couldn't have contained anything liquid or compact. The liquids are excluded due to the absence, in most of the cases, of a spout and it is considered that the opening covered by the lid was too small to allow the extraction of liquid with the help of a *simpulum*. The presence of solid scented creams or perfumes is excluded because it would have been impossible to extract them entirely, even with the help of a glass baguette, due to the areas around the shoulders which remain inaccessible (MARTI 1996, 986-987). The solution proposed is that of scented powders or grained spices containers which could have been burned. The difficulty in accepting such hypothesis rests in the fact that until now no traces of burn have been observed on these vessels. From an iconographical viewpoint, the same author considers the "ethnographical" types part of the Dionysian cortège, situation which could be explained through a confusion made by the craftsmen between the Ethiopians and the Indians defeated by Dionysos (MARTI 1996, 993). The young men are considered to be house slaves and the conclusion is that the anthropomorphic vessels were used in the house, during the meals, as burning scents containers (MARTI 1996, 987). The problem is that in the present state of research we don't have any element which could sustain such a hypothesis. There is no certainty that such confusion between the Ethiopians and Indians really happened. The fact that these vessels are most frequent in *limes* areas and not in urban ones raises a question mark related to their use during luxurious banquets.

It was also argued that "bust-balsamaria" don't exist in the proper meaning of the term. The poor quality of the cast and of the joints wouldn't have preserved the liquid inside. For the vessels with pedestal, the function of furniture appliqués was also suggested (see the discussion at SZABÓ 1984, 102, 104).

Unfortunately, lacking any written or iconographical sources, there is not enough evidence to sustain any of the above mentioned theories, although the characteristics of the objects make much more plausible the theory that they were used in baths. Vital from this point of view is the analysis of content which has to be done before the restoration of the vessels. Till now, we have knowledge of a small number of objects for which the content was analyzed: one from Kabile which contained vegetal oil, one from Lillebonne containing a substance based on fats and one from Aisley-le-Duc with perfumed powder (see MARTI 1996, 985). Also, a functionality differentiated according to the size of the objects can't be excluded.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Periodicals:

Alba Regia	Alba Regia. Annales Musei Stephani Regis (Székesfehérvár).
Archeologia	Archeologia. Rocznik Instytutu Historii Kultury Materialnej Polskiej Akademii Nauk (Wrocław, Warszawa, Krakow).
ArchEspArq	Archivo Español de Arqueología (Madrid).
BAR	British Archaeological Reports (Oxford).
BerRGK	Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission (Frankfurt am Main).
BullArchMar	Bulletin d'Archéologie Marocaine (Casablanca).
DissPann	Dissertationes Pannonicae ex Instituto Numismatico et Archaeologico Universitatis de Petro Pázmány nominatae Budapestinensis provenientes (Budapest).
EphemNap	Ephemeris Napocensis (Cluj-Napoca).
JRA	Journal of Roman Archaeology (Portsmouth, Rhode Island).
KölnJb	Kölner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte. Römisch-Germanisches Museum und Archäologische Gesellschaft (Köln).
MÉFR	Mélanges de L'école Française de Rome. Antiquité (Rome).
MFBVF	Mitteilungen der Freunde der Bayerischen Vor- und Frühgeschichte (München).
ROB	Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek (Nederlandse Archeologische Rapporten) (Nijmegen).



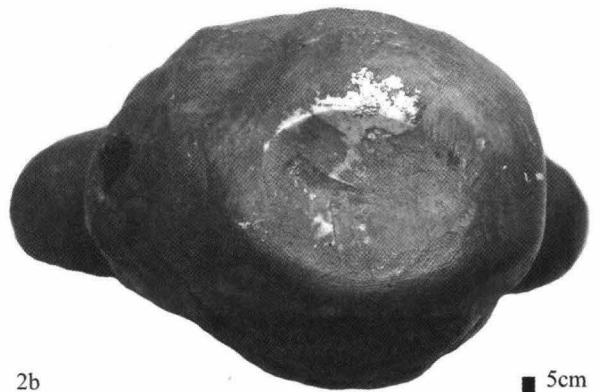
1a



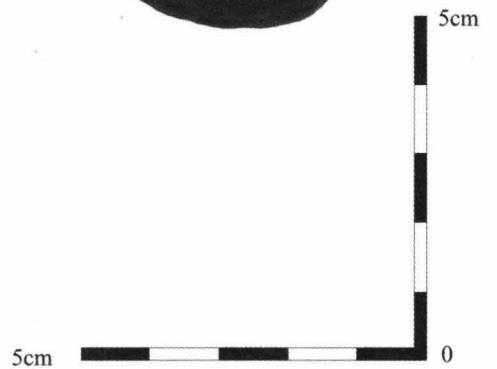
1b



2a



2b



Pl. I. 1a-b. The anthropomorphic vessel from Strâmba (photo: D. Bondoc); 2a-b. Modern copy from Gorj County Museum, Târgu Jiu (photo: Gh. Calotoiu).