

AN UNUSUAL FUNERARY PRACTICE IN THE NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT FROM GLIGOREȘTI-HOLOAME (CLUJ COUNTY)

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Abstract: Neolithic funerary practices are still insufficiently known today. A discovery made during the systematic excavations conducted at the site in Gligorești-Holoame (Cluj County) offers new data regarding the funerary customs of the Neolithic communities in Central Transylvania. A ceramic vessel containing extremely fragmented remains of a child skeleton (under 3 years old – Infans I) was discovered here. This practice, previously undocumented in Transylvania, illustrates an unusual funerary custom according to which the human remains (not cremated) were placed in a funerary urn, following a ritual which resembles, through its final aspect, the cremation rituals. The funerary urn was discovered close to a habitation structure, both on the same archaeological layer. This unusual practice demands, certainly, an explanation. Two assumptions can be advanced: a funerary custom involving ritual dismemberment (cannibalism?) or a secondary manipulation of an inhumation grave discovered by the Neolithic community while building the nearby house, reburied in a funerary urn, following practices associated with cremation.

The custom of child urn burials is known throughout the European Neolithic and Chalcolithic. It is encountered especially in the Balkans, relating to similar discoveries from Anatolia and Levant. However, the discovery from Gligorești is, for the moment, singular on the territory of present day Romania.

The Neolithic site from Gligorești is characterized by cultural elements similar to finds from the settlements located in north-western Romania (Suplacu de Barcău, Pișcolt), such as pottery painted with red, white, or bitumen pigments (and a different aspect from the pottery encountered in central Transylvania), polished stone axes (last type), and houses with gravelled floors. The artistic motifs visible on the urn from Gligorești illustrate similarities with the Lumea Nouă type painted pottery from Alba-Iulia. Nevertheless, the cultural assignment of the Neolithic settlement from Holoame is difficult to establish without processing all the data recovered from the site. The imports are represented by Lumea Nouă type pottery, as well as by the fragments attributed to the Music-Note Linear Pottery and the Szalkahat type ones. Most likely, the site is the result of a north-western intrusion (possibly from the Pișcolt Group area), generated by bitumen trade.

Rezumat: Practicile funerare din epoca neolitică sunt încă insuficient cunoscute. O descoperire ce provine din cercetările sistematice efectuate în situl arheologic de la Gligorești-Holoame (jud. Cluj) vine să arunce o nouă lumină în domeniul funerar al comunităților neolitice din centrul Transilvaniei. Aici a fost descoperit un vas ceramic în care au fost depuse resturile, foarte fragmentate, ale unui schelet de copil, cu vârsta sub 3 ani (Infans I). Această practică inedită ilustrează un obicei funerar neobișnuit, în care oasele defunctului, neincinerate, au fost depuse într-o urnă, după un ritual similar, prin finalitatea sa, incinerării. Urna a fost descoperită în apropierea unei locuințe, la același nivel de călcare. Această practică funerară aparte cere, desigur, o explicație. Pot fi emise două ipoteze: fie ne aflăm în fața unui obicei de dezmembrare rituală (canibalism?), fie avem de-a face cu un mormânt de inhumație descoperit de comunitatea neolitică ce a construit locuința în vecinătatea căreia a fost găsit, fiind reînhumat după obiceiul incinerării, prin depunerea oaselor umane într-o urnă.

Obiceiul înhumării copiilor în vase ceramice se întâlnește în neoliticul și calcoliticul european, mai cu seamă în Balcani, fiind în relație cu descoperiri din Anatolia și Levant. Descoperirea de la Gligorești este, deocamdată, unica de pe teritoriul României.

Situl neolitic de la Gligorești se caracterizează printr-o cultură materială ce în apropiere de așezările din nord-vestul României (Suplacu de Barcău, Pișcolt): existența unor vase ceramice pictate cu bitum, roșu și alb, cu o factură diferită de cea întâlnită în centrul Transilvaniei, topoare de tip calapod și locuințe cu podină de pietriș. Motivistica urnei de la Gligorești prezintă asemănări cu ceramica pictată de tip Lumea Nouă de la Alba Iulia. O încadrare culturală a așezării neolitice de pe Holoame este totuși greu de realizat, fiind posibilă abia după prelucrarea integrală a descoperirilor de aici. Importurile în așezare sunt din aria ceramicii de tip Lumea Nouă, a ceramicii liniare cu capete de note muzicale și Szalkahat. Cel mai probabil, situl este rezultatul unei pătrunderi nord-vestice (posibil din aria grupului Pișcolt), pe fondul unui comerț cu bitum.

Keywords: inhumation grave, urn burial, pottery bitumen paint, Neolithic.

Cuvinte cheie: mormânt de inhumație, mormânt în vas, pictură cu bitum, neolitic.

INTRODUCTION

Gligorești (Cluj County) is located in western Transylvania (Fig. 1). The archaeological site *Holoame* developed on a small island (maximum altitude of circa 270 m) situated in the Arieș floodplain, on the left side the river, 2 km upstream from its junction with the Mureș River. The archaeological excavations conducted here in 1900 and between 1994 and 1997 have revealed a diverse cultural and chronological succession, dominated by prehistoric deposits¹.

The first and oldest habitation phase of the site was assigned to the Neolithic period. The wide settlement is marked by a relatively uniform habitation layer, with a thickness varying between 5-10/20 cm. The yellowish habitation layer had formed right on top of the alluvial pebbles and sand. In some areas of the site, this layer is absent while around features it becomes more consistent, up to 30-35 cm in thickness. However, only a few dwelling structures are known, from which two surface houses with gravelled floors and simple layout were fully investigated².

The main subject of this paper, already presented in the archaeological literature, is represented by a ceramic vessel containing human remains³. Through its significance, we consider that this discovery deserves a detailed presentation, as well as some considerations regarding funerary customs specific to the cultural milieu from which it originates.

The vessel, a globular bowl, was found approximately 70 cm away from a house in S 1/1994, on the same occupation level (-1.10 m). Extremely fragile human remains were placed inside. No potential burial pit was identified in connection to this urn. Nevertheless, the pit might have not existed at all, considering that the vessel was found on the occupation level linked to the nearby house.

According to the anthropological examination, conducted by Alexandra Comșa, the fragility of the bones is also reflected by the large number of fragments (372 minuscule bone fragments), most of them indeterminable. The majority of determined bones were part of the skull (*frontal*, *temporal*, *parietal*, and *occipital*) and long bones (*tibia*, *femur*, *humerus*, *radius*, and *ulna*); other identified bones are a fragmentary vertebra (*atlas*) and several small rib fragments. Metric data established that the skeleton belonged to a child under 3 years old – *infans I*⁴. In addition to the human remains, a few pebbles were also found inside the vessel.

¹ For these investigations see, especially, Gogâltan, Florea 1994, 9-38; Gogâltan et al. 2004, 61-101.

² Gogâltan et al. 2004, 65, 68-69.

³ Gogâltan et al. 2004, 70-71, fig. 3 (the ceramic vessel was represented with a *mirror* view).

⁴ Comșa, *mss.*; Gogâltan et al. 2004, 70-71.

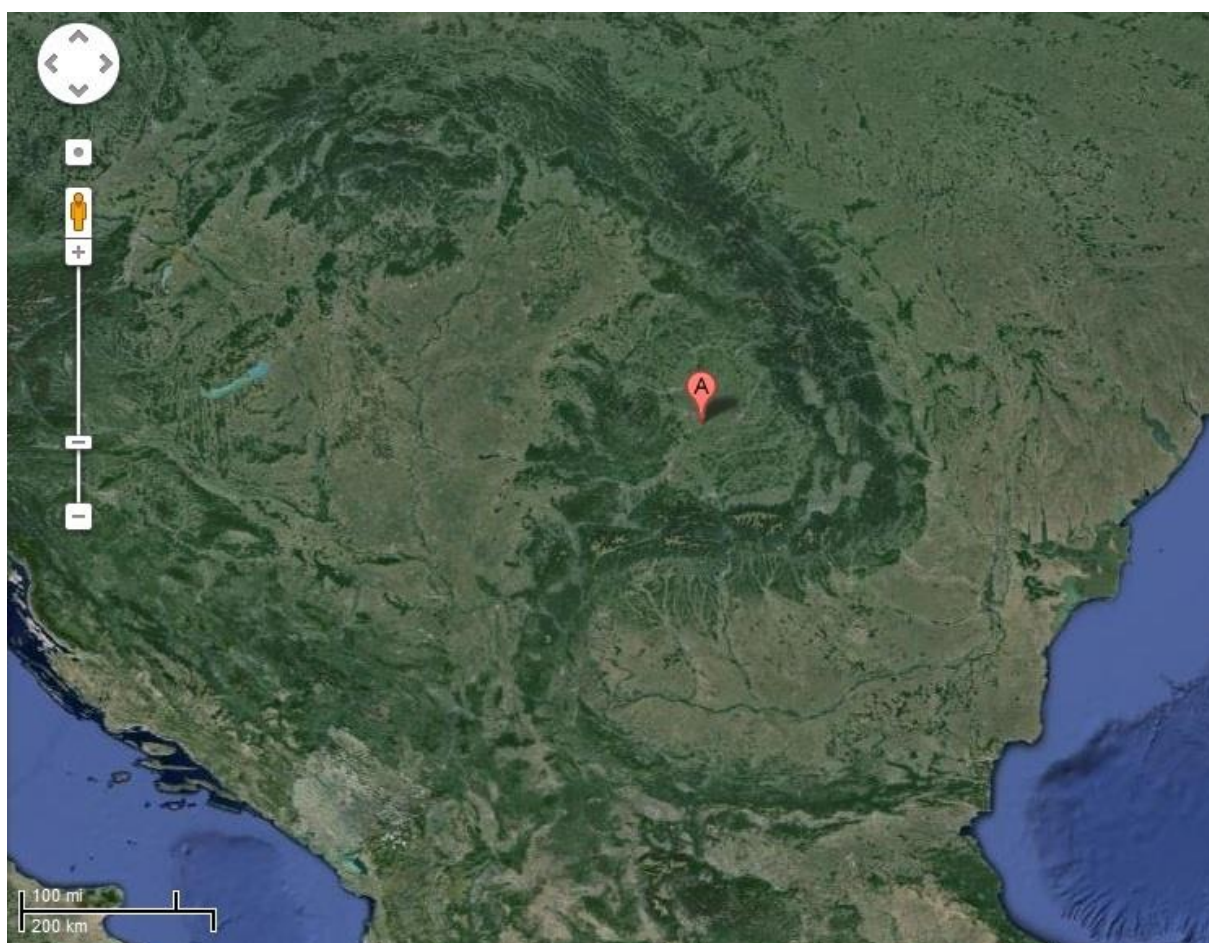


Fig. 1. Map with the location of Gligorești.

The ceramic vessel, with a semi fine aspect, (dimensions: h = 12.5 cm; rim diameter = 12 cm; maximum diameter = 15.2 cm; bottom diameter = 5.8 cm) has a scarlet-yellowish colour. Sand and organic materials were used as temper. Its surface is painted with black bitumen stripes, applied directly on the clay. In some areas, the paint was not preserved, but the imprint of the bitumen is still visible. Regarding the ornaments, groups of oblique or arched stripes can be identified. An interposed *ladder* motif can also be noticed, constructed from oblique lines. The upper part of the ladder is considerably wider, while the interior lines are not horizontal straight lines, but rather arched, giving the impression of garland segments (Fig. 2).

INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION REGARDING THE CULTURAL ASSIGNMENT

This funerary discovery presents several particularities, which will be highlighted in the following. First of all, it should be stated that, even if at the moment of its discovery the hypothesis of an urn cremation burial was considered, the subsequent anthropological analysis invalidated this possibility. Nevertheless, its funerary character was not challenged, but rather strengthened, since the skeletal remains were confirmed as human. Therefore, the discovery is indeed a funerary urn, but resulted instead from an inhumation ritual.

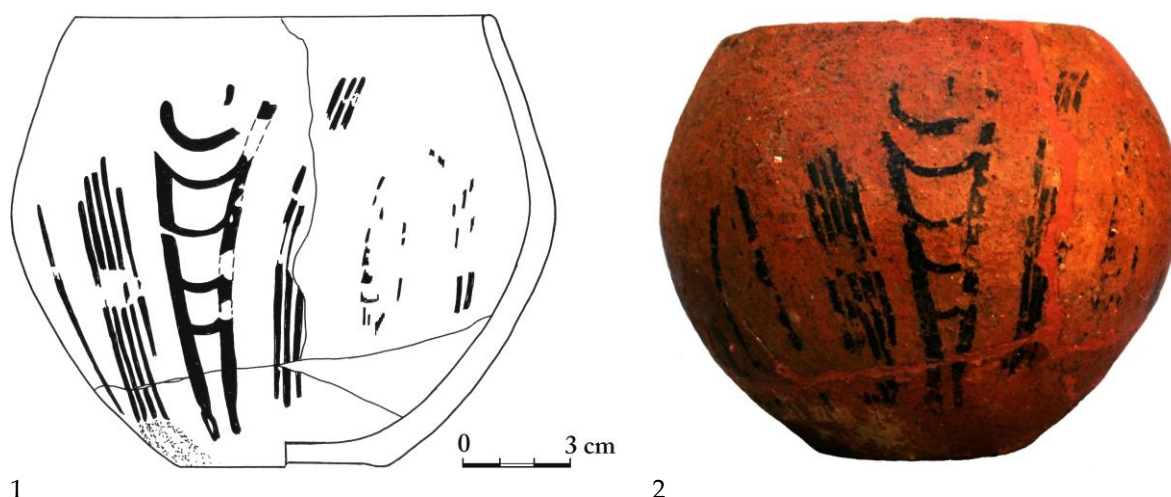


Fig. 2. The Neolithic vessel with human remains from Gligorești–Holoame.



Fig. 3. The ornamental motif of the Neolithic vessel from Gligorești–Holoame (1) and stylistic analogies on *Lumea Nouă* type pottery fragments from Alba Iulia–*Lumea Nouă* (2-3) (2-3. according to Gligor 2009).

Considering the small dimensions of the vessel, it is rather obvious that the inhumation occurred after a decaying or defleshing process. Two possible explanations are considered regarding this issue:

1. Dismemberment during a ritual practice which would be difficult to recreate (ritual cannibalism? excarnation?⁵). However, in this case, the assumption is not supported by any other evidence.

2. Re-inhumation of a skeleton. This supposition seems supported by several facts relating to the context of its discovery. As stated before, the urn was found close to a Neolithic house, both on the same occupation level. The authors of the preliminary report advanced the theory that the original grave was found when the nearby house was build and that the human remains were collected and placed inside the urn⁶. We notice that no grave pit was identified under the mentioned house. However, it is possible that a potential pit was destroyed as the gravelled floor of the house was constructed. Interesting, as well, is the lack of a pit relating to the urn itself.

The possibility of a disturbed burial beneath the floor of a house should not be excluded, as well, as the practice was widely encountered for children at that time, including

⁵ For discussions regarding Neolithic defleshing rituals, see Lazăr, Băcuet-Crișan 2011, 15-16, 33-34, 37, 47.

⁶ Gogâltan et al. 2004, 71, note 25.

in Transylvania⁷. In this case, the skeletal remains would have possibly been exhumed during a renovation phase of the house.

The second hypothesis, implying reburial, seems more plausible. In such a case, it should be considered that a sufficient amount of time had passed between the original burial and the secondary one, as the remains would have been in an advance stage of decomposition. It is also possible that the potential grave marker or memory of a burial also faded by the time of the exhumation carried out by the Neolithic communities. This scenario would explain the presence of highly fragmented bones inside the urn-vase. It should also be considered that the vessel was, in fact, part of the inventory of the original grave. Its deposition close to a house, therefore inside the habitation space, should not come as a surprise, as burial inside settlements are common for this period⁸.

Regarding the funerary customs, we consider that the reburial from Gligorești was conducted in a manner similar to the last episodes of a cremation burial, when the bones of the deceased were placed inside a ceramic urn. Through this perspective, the Neolithic grave from Gligorești illustrates a funerary practice which might be called *situational*, different from the common funerary traditions existent at the time in Transylvania, but which has Neolithic analogies in other European areas.

Inhumation of skeletons or skeletal parts inside urns was not an entirely new practice. Other examples are encountered in the Early Neolithic in Thracia (Bulgaria), at Kovačevo (Fig. 7/1), Rakitovo, Anzabegovo (Fig. 7/2), Ezero, Durankulak⁹, which are linked to the ones from Macedonia and Greece, and from here, with analogies in Anatolia¹⁰ and Levant (the latter with such discoveries in the tell settlements from Sotto, Khazna II¹¹, and Byblos¹²). With a more isolated character, a similar burial was found in Transdanubia, within the area of the Lengyel culture¹³, and on the Upper Tisa, within the area of the Linear Pottery culture¹⁴ (Fig. 8). This funerary custom was perpetuated in the Balkan prehistory, being encountered at the beginning of the Bronze Age, as it is the case in the tell settlement from Yunatice¹⁵.

In Transylvania, a possible case of re-deposition of human bones was signalled at Iclod. Here, in pit 92, the cremated human remains of a male adult were discovered, together with a rich inventory¹⁶, but the overall aspect was not a *classical* one. If the archaeologists conducting the excavation deemed the pit as a *sacrificial* one, more recent opinions suggested the possibility of a funerary context or a simple re-deposition¹⁷.

⁷ For this practice during the Neolithic, see Bačvarov 2003, 291-293.

⁸ Bačvarov 2003, 294-295.

⁹ Bačvarov 2003, 296; Bačvarov 2004, 153, fig. 1/1-3; 2; Bačvarov 2008, 62-63.

¹⁰ Hopwood 2008, 118, fig. 13.6.

¹¹ Bačvarov 2004, 153, fig. 3; Bačvarov 2008, 64-65.

¹² Artin 2008, 79-85, fig. 9.2-9.4.

¹³ Mórágý-Tűzkódomb și Alsónyék-Kanisza- dúlő (Bačvarov 2008, 63, fig. 7/2).

¹⁴ Polgár 7 (Bačvarov 2008, 63-64, fig. 7/2).

¹⁵ Mishina 2008.

¹⁶ Regarding the discovery context, without the osteological examinations, see Lazarovici et al. 1995, 509-510, 518.

¹⁷ Lazăr, Băcșeț-Crișan 2011, 6-7, 30-31, 36-37 (incorrectly, some authors made constant remarks to pit 88 from Iclod).

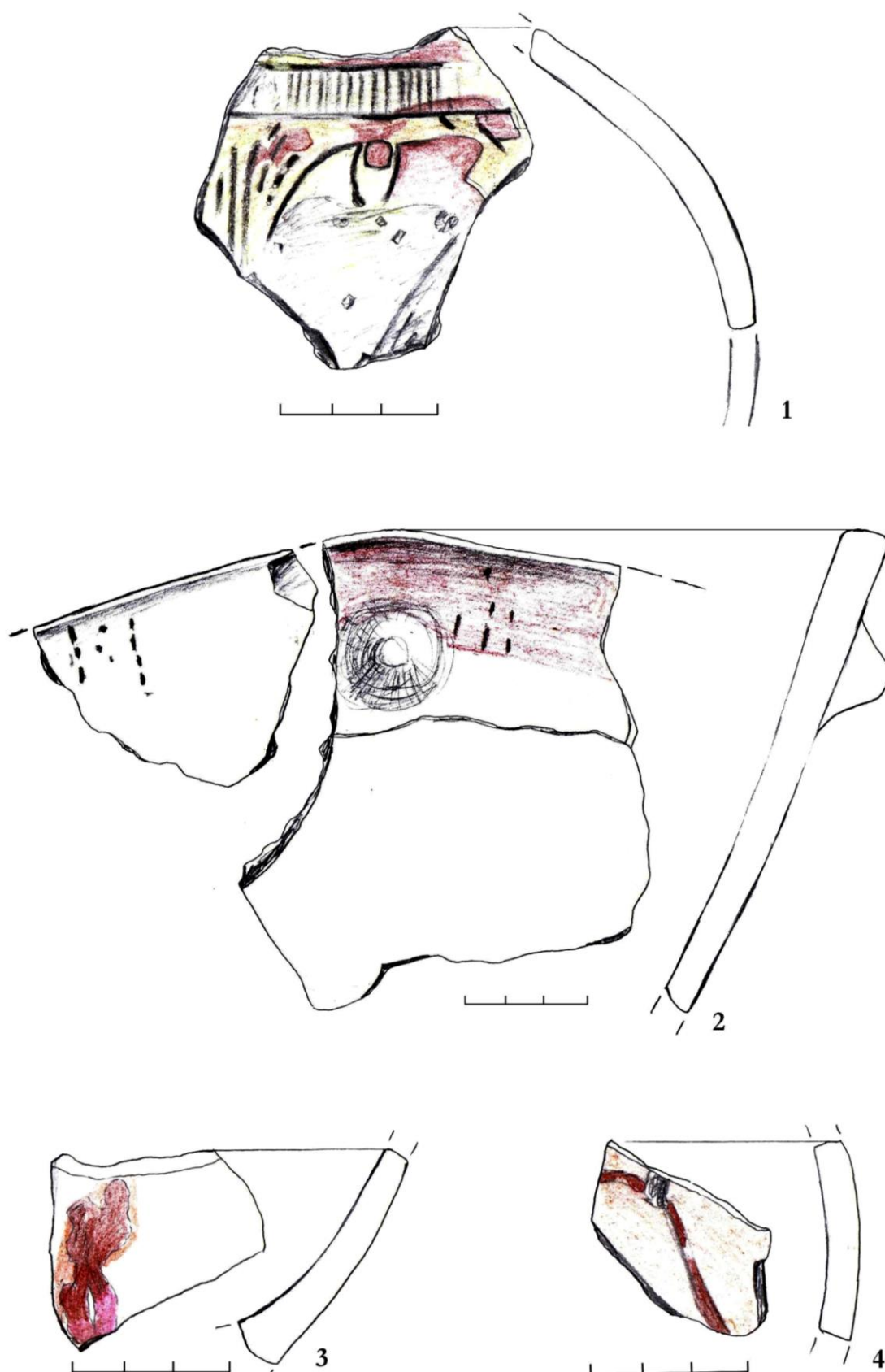


Fig. 4. Neolithic painted pottery from Gligorești-Holoame

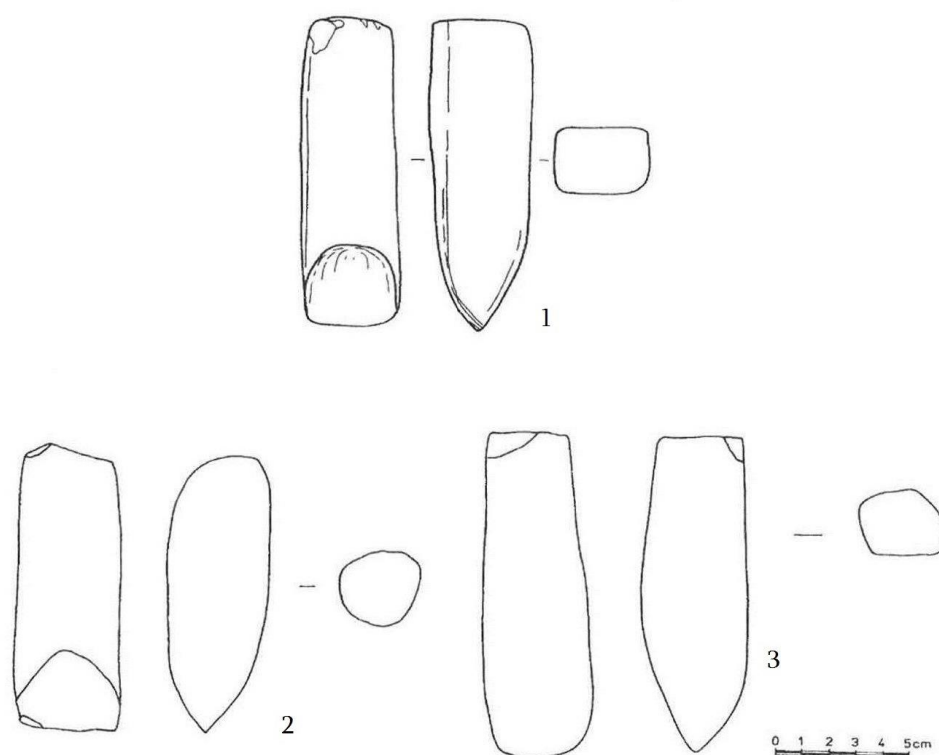


Fig. 5. Polished stone axes on the floor of a Neolithic house in Gligorești (according to Gogâltan et al. 2004 – A; photo from the site archive – first print)

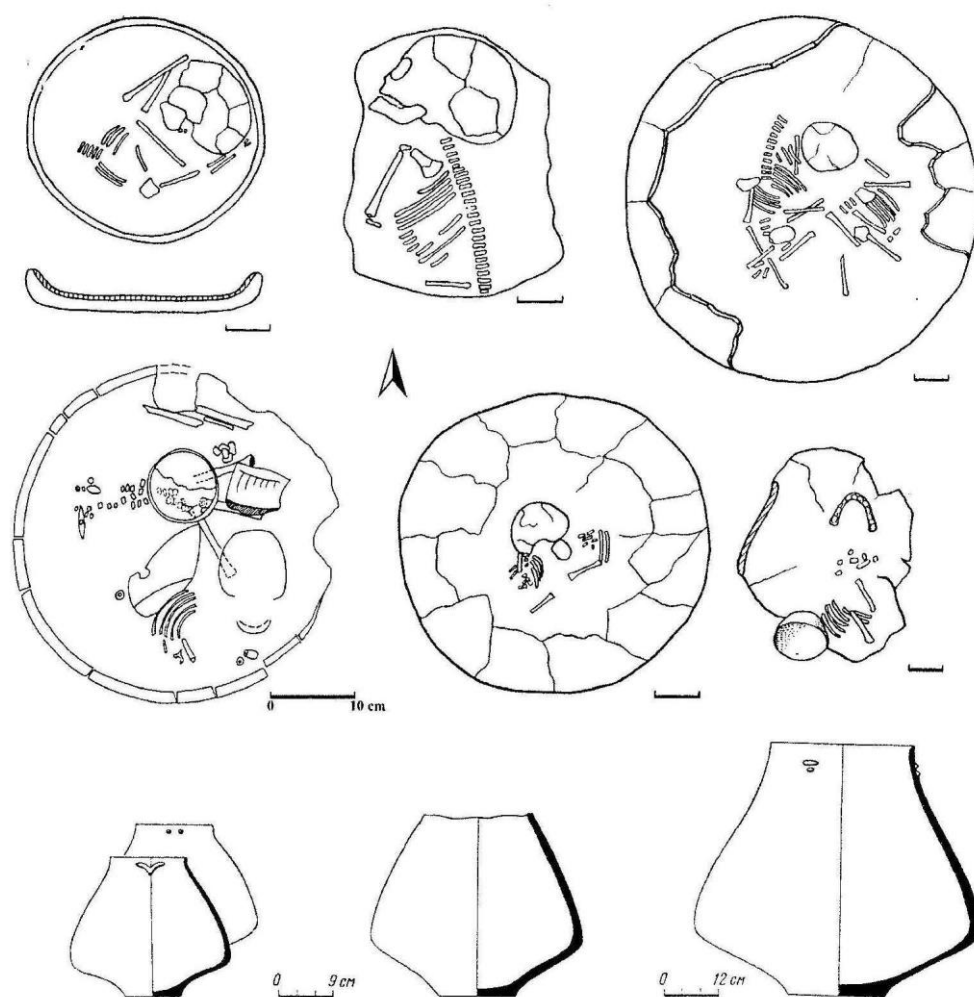


Fig. 6. Neolithic urn inhumation burials from Levant, in the tell settlements from Sotto and Khazna II (according to Bačvarov 2004, 159, Fig. 3).

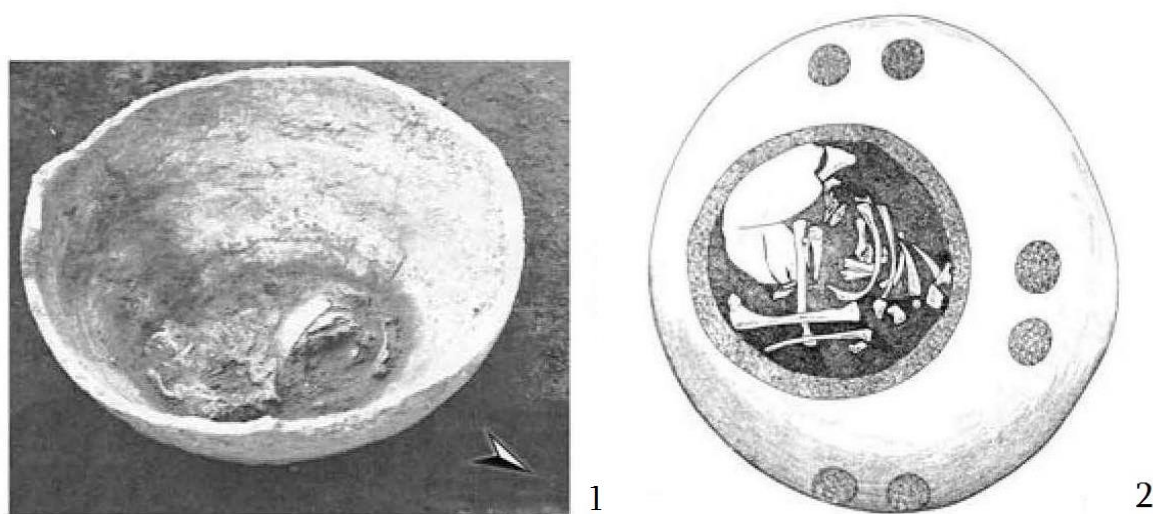


Fig. 7. Neolithic urn inhumation burials from Kovačevo (Karanovo I culture) (1) and Anza (Kremenec-Anzabegovo culture) (after Bačvarov 2004, 158, Fig. 1/2-3).

Therefore, the deposition of human bones inside ceramic vessels (urns) does not characterise solely cremation burials, but might illustrate, as well, variations within inhumation Neolithic practices. The discovery from Gligorești represents an isolated case in the north-Danubian area. We are dealing with a child inhumation which implies the deposition of bones inside an urn, funerary custom specific, as far as we know, to the Balkan area. If the theory of a grave disturbed by the construction of the nearby house and followed by the collection and deposition of bones inside the vessel is accepted, then we are dealing with a re-inhumation. Regardless of the motives which stood behind this re-inhumation, it is certain that it was preceded by another inhumation (or excarnation) which allowed the introduction of the poorly preserved bones through the small opening of the vessel, with a diameter of only 12.5 cm. Even if we are not able to undoubtedly specify that the bones were deliberately inserted inside the vessel, the examples found within the Balkan area suggest a conscious practice.

The cultural assignment of the Neolithic settlement from Gligorești, to which the discussed grave was attributed, is difficult to be established with certainty. It is clear, however, that the Neolithic community was in contact with cultural groups which used bitumen for pottery decoration. Notable is the fact that the majority of archaeological finds in *Holoame* is represented by porous dark-red ceramics, painted with bitumen straight on the clay or after applying a white slip. Red pigment paint is also encountered in some cases. As most of the pottery is covered with thick calcium depositions, the paintings and artistic motifs were rarely well preserved. In addition to painted decorations, few other ornamental techniques are encountered, with a slight predominance of applied elements¹⁸. The *Lumea Nouă* type pottery is represented in this cultural milieu only by a few typical fragments¹⁹, considered as imports. As well, the fragments attributed to the *Music-Note Linear Pottery*²⁰ and, most likely, the *Szalkahat* type ones, can also be counted amongst imported goods.

There are few discussions regarding the Neolithic materials from Gligorești²¹, situation explained mostly by the lack of an exhaustive publication of the finds recovered here. Therefore, serious efforts to establish a cultural background for this settlement were avoided²². The numerous attempts to redefine the cultural groups characterised by the production of painted pottery in Transylvania and north-western Romania bring further challenges regarding the cultural framing of the habitation from Gligorești, implicitly for the burial discovered here. The theory which implies the existence of the Suplacu de Barcău group as an individual cultural manifestation²³ - where analogies for the Neolithic settlement in Gligorești were also sought-after²⁴ - calls for the search of a north-western correspondent. This correspondent might have been the Pișcolt group, where analogies for ceramic forms are present, including for the discussed funerary urn, as well as the large settlement from Suplacu de Barcău/Port-Corău – regardless of the names given to the

¹⁸ Gogâltan et al. 2004, 70, fig. 3-6.

¹⁹ See Gogâltan, Florea 1994, 11; Gogâltan et al. 2004, 70.

²⁰ Gogâltan, Florea 1994, p. 11; Gogâltan et al. 2004, 70.

²¹ See, for instance, Gligor 2009, 158.

²² Gh. Lazarovici (Lazarovici 2009) hesitated to introduce the site from Gligorești in his discussion regarding the Zau culture.

²³ Luca 2001, 42-43; Virag 2005, 23.

²⁴ Gogâltan et al. 2004, 71.

cultural manifestation which succeeded in this site - which probably controlled the trade with bitumen extracted at Derna²⁵.



Fig. 8. Map illustrating Neolithic and Chalcolithic urn inhumation burials in Europe: 1. Alepochori; 2. Lerna; 3. Kephala; 4. Rachmani; 5. Mandalo; 6. Ezero; 7. Durankulak; 8. Mórógy-Tűzkődomb; 9. Alsónyék-Kanisza-Flur; 10. Polgár (according to Bačvarov 2008, Fig. 7/2); 11. Gligorești.

²⁵ For a view of bitumen sources in Bihor county, and its trading and use in pottery decoration in Transylvania, see Ignat 1998, 64-65; Maxim 1999, 93.

The decorative motif illustrated on the urn (Fig. 3/1) is not easily identified on vessels attributed to contemporaneous cultural groups, but it is, nevertheless, present. Appropriate analogies, still unnoticed in the specialised literature, are offered by two *Lumea Nouă* type pottery fragments, found in the eponym site. In these cases, the painting is not made with bitumen, but with red pigments applied over a white slip. On one of the fragments the motif is sufficiently well preserved to allow noticing its striking similarity to the one from Gligorești. The *ladder* is flanked by similar bands, composed of dense, painted lines²⁶ (Fig. 3/2). On the second fragment, the partially preserved motif suggests the presence of an identical ornament²⁷ (Fig. 3/3). A resembling or close pattern is visible on a fragment recovered from level 3b from Zau de Câmpie²⁸. The rarity of this decoration, as well as its presence only in a restricted geographic area, raises some difficulties regarding possible interpretations in terms of style and influence.

CONCLUSION

The Neolithic burial from Gligorești belongs to a specific type of inhumation burials: namely child urn burials. The origins of this practice, unusual in the north Danube area, must be searched in the Balkans. From there, it reached Transdanubia and Transylvania, infiltrating the cultures characterised by the production of painted pottery. Nevertheless, the particularity of the burial in Gligorești remains. Obviously, one 3 years old child could not simply be buried in such a small vessel, therefore the burial from Gligorești is different from the presented analogies, as it illustrates a re-inhumation practice.

For the moment, only a few observations will be considered, capable of connecting in an unambiguous manner the pottery style from Gligorești with neighbouring, contemporaneous groups. Most of the finds recovered from the Neolithic level in Gligorești, especially through the aspect of the pottery and the use of bitumen paint in decoration, have analogies in the material culture of the Pișcolt and Suplacu de Barcău groups, in north-western Romania²⁹. The lithic industry, with unperforated polished stone axes (a cluster of such axes was found in Gligorești, on the floor of a house³⁰) (Fig. 5/ A–B), as well as the manner of constructing gravelled floors³¹, point towards the same cultural milieus present in north-western Romania. Regarding funerary customs – as long as we consider the burial from Gligorești as an urn burial – similarities are to be found in the same areas characterised by the use of painted pottery. The funerary discoveries from Suplacu de Barcău/Port and other related sites attest a bi-ritual approach; therefore, both cremation and inhumation were used at the same time³². However, it should be mentioned that inhumation practices were older or, at least,

²⁶ Gligor 2009, 65, pl. CLXXIV/11. The author included the motif, incorrectly in our opinion, among spiralled motifs (Gligor 2009, 67, 225).

²⁷ Gligor 2009, 65–66, pl. CLXXVI/9. The *ladder* motif is present on another bitumen painted vessel from the same site, associated with garlands. However, the style is very different (Gligor 2009, pl. CLXVI–CLXVII).

²⁸ Lazarovici 2009, fig. 36/6; Lazarovici 2010, fig. 16/9.

²⁹ See, especially, Ignat 1998; Băcuet-Crișan 2008.

³⁰ Gogâltan et al. 2004, 70, fig. 7.

³¹ Gogâltan et al. 2004, 65, pl. I (statigraphic profile).

³² Ignat 1995, 270–272; Băcuet-Crișan 2004; Băcuet-Crișan 2008, 62–65; Lazăr, Băcuet-Crișan 2011, 43; Băcuet-Crișan et al. 2012; see also Ignat 1998, 56–61.

predominant in earlier phases. On the other hand, only inhumation burials were found within the Pișcolt group³³, aspect which should be highlighted in relation to the burial from Gligorești.

These characteristics define a world different from that of the communities which used pottery of the *Lumea Nouă* type. The ceramics present in the latter communities had, undoubtedly, a superior quality. The existence of the Neolithic habitation at *Holoame* could be explained by the prosperous bitumen trade. In this scenario, the settlement at *Holoame*, a *colony* surrounded by Vinča communities which used *Lumea Nouă* type pottery, would have been a trading outpost of the north-western communities.

³³ Astaloș, Virag 2006-2007, 74-75, 78, 80-83.

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