The house that burned with the table set

About 2,600 years ago, at Remetea Mare near Timișoara, a house caught fire. The roof collapsed onto the vessels in the room, and archaeologists found them broken on the clay floor, among charred beams and pieces of burnt wall. The dwelling was excavated in 1988 by the archaeologist Florin Medeleț at "Gomila lui Gabor", a natural mound on the bank of the Bega.

The room measured about 3 × 3 m and had been rebuilt twice after earlier fires. Beneath one of the floors, in a corner niche, a group of eight carefully placed vessels survived. Together, the vessels on the floor and those beneath it tell a story about food, drink and guests.

- *When?*

The vessels most likely date to the late 7th and first half of the 6th century BC. Florin Medeleț originally dated them much earlier, to the 10th–9th centuries BC. In 1993, however, Marian Gumă showed that the dwelling is later than the Basarabi culture, which dominated the Banat in the preceding centuries.

The evidence is the vessels themselves: a miniature urn and the horned handle (ansa cornuta) have almost identical counterparts at Remetea Pogănici and Ilidia, while the fluted cups have parallels in northern Serbia. Remetea Mare thus illustrates the beginning of the "Late Hallstatt" in the western Banat plain, open towards the Middle Danube world. This is the last stage of the Early Iron Age, before the arrival of the Celts and the La Tène culture.

- *What was in the house?*

At the time of the fire, the room held at least 17 vessels, from storage jars 74 cm tall to 5 cm toy pots. The fine wares were gathered mainly in the south-west corner, as if on a shelf or a table. By function, they group as follows:

- For storage: a large ovoid vessel, black and burnished, a medium-sized one of the same type and two sack-shaped jars over 60 cm tall. The largest had cracked and been repaired in antiquity, with pairs of holes through which the pieces were tied together; it could not hold liquids, so it probably stored grain.
- For serving: a bowl over 50 cm in diameter and four wide dishes (24–46 cm) with inturned rims and four knobs on the shoulder. One has a fluted cross and spirals on its base.
  https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/strachina-43f5605776114412976e5301781695a9

- For drinking: fine grey or blackish cups and small cups, with handles rising high above the rim https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/vas-cu-o-toarta-bdb4024035464831ab0542e9cf69fbb1. Some have a forked, horn-shaped handle - https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/vas-zoomorf-c9bb52a6e2cd4373b12ded4d90ad5464, while others have two handles and recall, as Medeleț noted, the Greek cups called kantharoi - https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/vas-cu-doua-toarte-5bb3c68ccc2242e6a231bdc9ab7da0df
- Miniatures: a small dish and an urn only a few centimetres high, perhaps toys, perhaps cult objects.

The drinking cups are the most carefully made pieces in the house, decorated with fine fluting and knobs. Their tall handles probably allowed them to be dipped into a shared vessel and lifted out full. The large bowls and dishes could serve more people than a single family at an ordinary meal.

- *Why a feast matters*

In societies without money or a state, offering food and drink to others is not just about pleasure: it is a social and political tool. The anthropologist Michael Dietler demonstrated this by comparing traditional communities on several continents. His ideas are outlined below, offering a perspective on social life at Remetea Mare.

- **Hospitality binds people** - whoever receives food and drink is indebted to the host. Friendships, alliances and reconciliations are made around a shared vessel.
- **Generosity brings prestige** - whoever can feed and give drink to many people gains influence. In many communities a leader was expected to be a generous host, and in those without chiefs, people competed for respect by holding feasts.
- **Feasts pay for labour** - where there are no wages, heavy work is done collectively: neighbours come to build a house or bring in the harvest, and the host feasts them. The Romanian village knows this custom well: it is the clacă.
- **How you drink shows who you are** - who drinks with whom, from which vessel and in what order are governed by strict rules. Beautiful, rare or foreign vessels set the honoured guest apart from the others.
- **Drink is also sacred** - because it alters the state of the drinker, drink often appears in religious ceremonies, at weddings, at funerals and in offerings.

We do not know what was drunk at Remetea Mare, but in Iron Age temperate Europe the usual drinks were cereal beer and honey mead. Even so, without analyses of the residues in the vessels, the question remains open.

Florin Medeleț interpreted the group of vessels as a foundation offering that placed the new house under the protection of the gods. Seen through Dietler's ideas, the offering looks like a complete drinking set in miniature: the shared vessel in the centre and the guests' cups around it. Perhaps the gods were offered exactly what people were offered: a place at the feast.

Also at "Gomila lui Gabor", in a ritual pit of the same period, a clay disc divided into four quarters by fluting was found; it too can be seen in the exhibition: https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/disc-remetea-mare-7944abd718014d419f69f79bc1551321

- *What remains open?*

Reading the house as a place of feasting is a hypothesis, not a certainty. The vessels may simply be the household goods of a wealthier family, and the answer could come from analysing the organic residues in the cups and dishes. Nor do we know whether the final fire was an accident or a deliberate end. For now, these remain working hypotheses.

Suggestion: when you rotate in the 3D exhibition a cup with a tall handle or a dish with knobs, see them also as social tools. With them, people 2,600 years ago welcomed their guests, rewarded their neighbours and honoured their gods.

References

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