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OUT OF ORDINARY OR COMMON HOUSEHOLD TURNED PIT? CONTRIBUTIONS REGARDING THE LATE NEOLITHIC PERIOD IN THE CRIȘ/KÖRÖS RIVERS BASIN

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this article is to further our understanding of the relationship between the Oradea-*Salca* site and the Late Neolithic sites of the North-East Pannonian Plain. The main aspects discussed here focus on an overview of the Herpály world in Hungary and a comparison between Oradea-*Salca* and the Herpály sites west of the border. A short overview of the *Salca* “OMV-Petrom” excavation with a statistical presentation of the ceramic material from the 03 B complex is also given.

Keywords: Late Neolithic, Neolithic settlement, pit-dwelling, Herpály ceramic style.

First of all, this paper is a part of the master's thesis *Out of ordinary or common household turned pit? Contributions regarding the Late Neolithic period in the Criș/Körös Rivers basin*, coordinated by CS I dr. habil Florin Gogâltan and defended in 2025 at “Babeș-Bolyai” University in Cluj-Napoca.

The archaeological site of Oradea-*Salca* is widely recognized as one of the most prominent archaeological sites in western Romania, with discoveries spanning nearly all prehistoric and historic periods, being known since the end of the 19th century¹.

The issue of the Late Neolithic in the Criș/Körös Rivers² basin is a topic that at first sight has benefited from in-depth research. But this research, at the Oradea - *Salca* site, has mainly been done through preventive archaeological excavations and, therefore, there are still a lot of gaps in our knowledge regarding this particular period in time in this region.

The archaeological excavation at the Oradea - *Salca* site, namely, the “OMV-Petrom” point was conducted by Adrian Ursuțiu and took place in 2021 due to the refurbishment of the gas station. Research Unit B yielded three habitation complexes of varying sizes, CX 03, CX 13 and CX 14-15, and 25 domestic pits of varying sizes and shapes, all belonging to the Late Neolithic³.

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¹ Ardos 1936; Rusu *et al.* 1962; Chidioșan 1974; Chidioșan 1981a; Chidioșan 1981b; Emődi 1981; Ignat 1981; Marta, Ilieș 1994; Ghemiș, Bulzan 1998; Bulzan, Băcuet-Crișan 1999; Luca *et al.* 2000; Ilieș, Bulzan 2002; Bulzan *et al.* 2003; Bulzan *et al.* 2007; Bulzan 2015; Fazecaș *et al.* 2015a; Fazecaș *et al.* 2015b; Băcuet-Crișan *et al.* 2017; Fechete-Porsztner 2018; Fechete-Porsztner 2019; Bodea *et al.* 2019; Oana 2023.

² The term “Crișurilor Basin” refers to the eastern portion of the Criș River Basin within Romanian territory, where the Crișul Alb, Crișul Negru, Crișul Repede, Barcăul, and Eriul are not yet confluent (Fazecaș 2019, 45-46).

³ Oana 2023, 14.

In the following, I would like to present the ceramic material that was unearthed from the complex 03 B at *Salca* “OMV-Petrom” point, as well as the results of the analysis conducted on them. I have analyzed a total number of 3461 pottery fragments, out of which, 1521 were atypical (Fig. 1). That leaves us with 1940 typical pottery fragments that I separated into different categories such as: painted and incised pottery, functionality, and source of the fragments or body part of the vessel that it belongs to.

Just as in the pottery set from the Berettyóújfalu-*Herpály* site⁴ (Fig. 3), in the ceramic assemblage from the complex 03 B in the *Salca* site, the conical and hemispherical bowls were in minority, with only 19 fragments, which represents 0.98% out of the total number of typical pottery fragments (Fig. 2).

The medium-sized pieces featured tall pedestals that are the most frequent type found here, with 96 fragments or 4.95% (Fig. 2), and are often decorated with black linear and/or dots painting (Plate 6).

The next most frequent type of vessels found here are the cups/globular shape vessels, which are 83 fragments or 4.28% out of the total number of typical pottery fragments found (Fig. 2). Four of the cups are nearly whole, as in they are represented by usually one or more fragments that consist of the rim, the neck, the body and the bottom of the cup. In regard to the decoration, some of the cups have incised lines and/or dots filled with white paste (Fig. 6), and others have plastic ornamentation, like buttons or small handles.

Other types of ceramic materials are represented by lids, but unfortunately only one fragment was found here that has notches or small grooves on the rim. There are also various miniatures such as a spoon and a few cups, out of which one has vertical incised lines on its body and another one is a fragment of the bottom of a four-legged miniature cup. The number of miniatures together are 11, meaning 0.57% (Fig. 2).

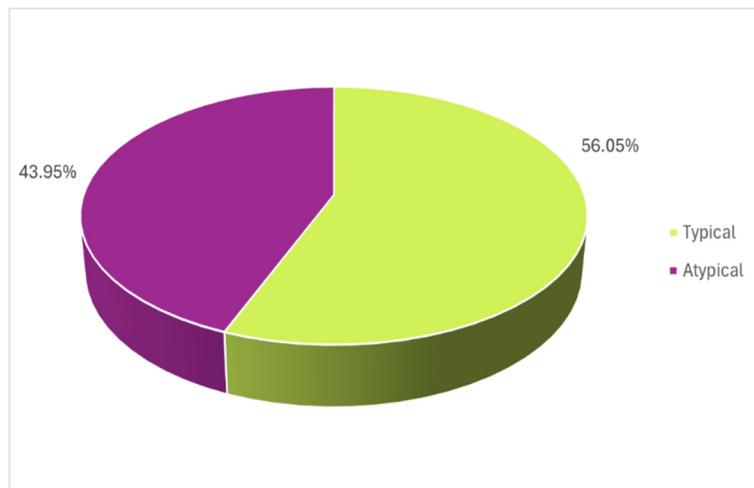


Fig. 1. The ratio of typical and atypical ceramic fragments from *Salca* “OMV-Petrom”.

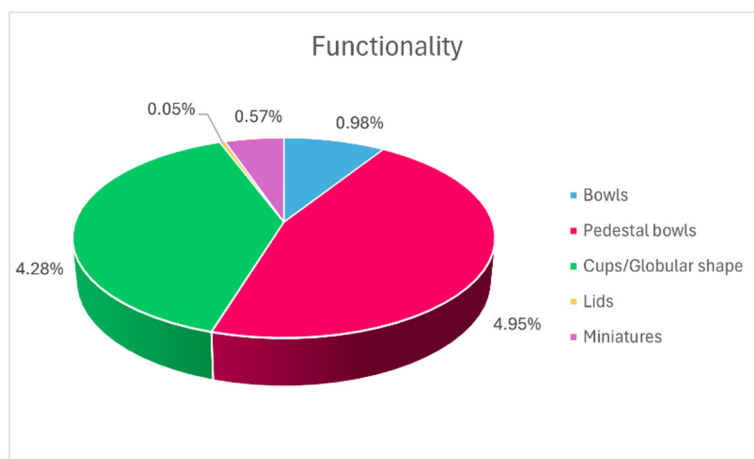


Fig. 2. Typological share of pottery fragments from *Salca* “OMV-Petrom” by functionality

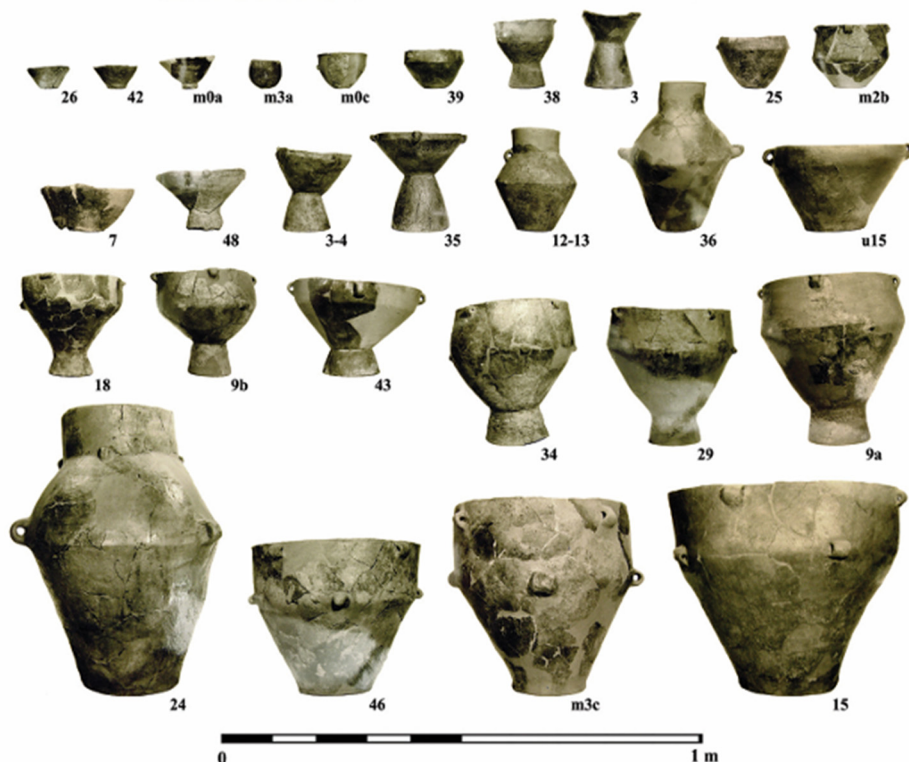


Fig. 3. Pottery composition from the Berettyóújfalu-*Herpály* site (after Füzesi 2022, 226).

Next category is represented by the source or part of the vessel each fragment belongs to (Fig. 4). These are the rim, with 562 fragments and 28.97% out of the total number of typical pottery fragments, handles, with 85 fragments and 4.38% out of the total, neck/body, with 1112 fragments and 57.32%, and bottom fragments, with 177 fragments and 9.12%.

Another important aspect is the decoration of the pottery fragments. Ceramic fragments without any painting or decoration are in a number of 2700 fragments or in percentage, 60.77%, while painted and incised pottery are 761 fragments or 39.23% (Fig. 5).

Most of the decoration from the Oradea *Salca* “OMV-Petrom” point, CX 03 B, is represented by black painting with a variety of types from lines and circles (Plate 2) to dots and even a swastika motif on the inside of a bottom fragment (Oana 2023, 24, Pl.III/6). The lines themselves appear in different sizes and orientations such as vertical, horizontal or diagonal, from thin to thick (Plates 1, 3, 4, 5, 7). There are also the incisions and circles filled with white paste (Fig. 6).

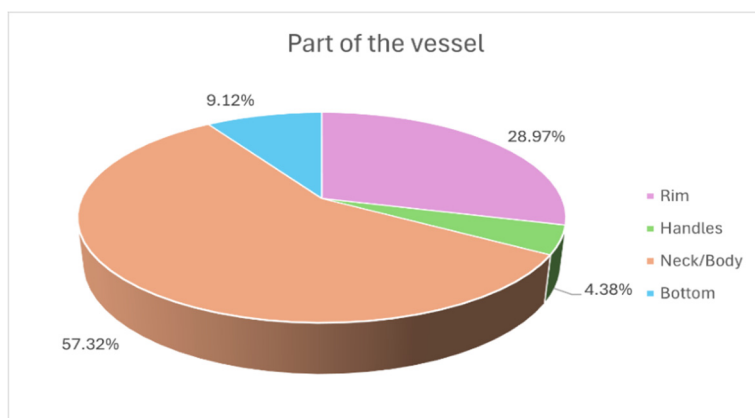


Fig. 4. The percentage of the vessel's components that have been found in Salca “OMV-Petrom”

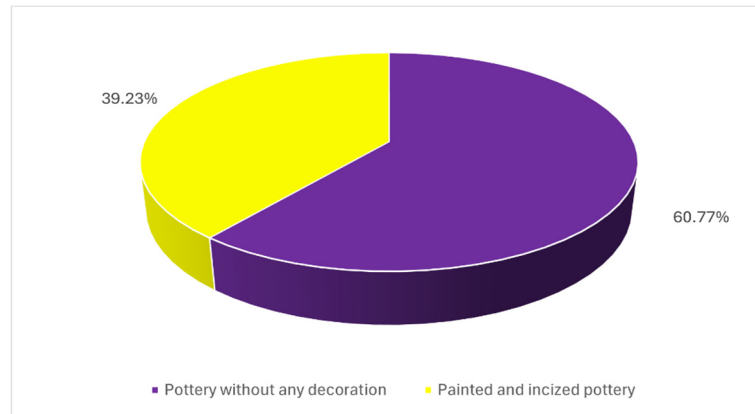


Fig. 5. The ratio of undecorated to decorated ceramics at Salca "OMV-Petrom"



Fig. 6. Pottery fragments with incisions and circles filled with white paste from the Oradea-Salca settlement, "OMV-Petrom".

The decoration of the vessels at Berettyóújfalu-Herpály settlement are mostly done with black, white and red painted patterns applied after firing⁵. They also conducted chemical analysis of the pigments that revealed that black was obtained from birch and pine tar. The black geometric designs, painted on a white base, covered the entire vessel and were divided into fields filled with diverse motifs⁶. The painted designs mostly covered the exterior of pedestalled bowls, with simple bowls occasionally having a painted design in the interior⁷.

The following analysis will attempt to interpret the CX 03 B pit-dwelling specimen through the lens of ceramic material analysis.

⁵ Kalicz *et al.* 2011, 52

⁶ Kalicz *et al.* 2011, 53.

⁷ Kalicz *et al.* 2011, 53.

At Berettyóújfalu – *Herpály*, house 11 demonstrated a transition from nuclear and communal inventories⁸. With sizes varying from miniature vessels to remarkably large ones, the ceramic vessels represent the characteristic formal range of the *Herpály* culture. The proportion of open types, which were mostly represented by conical, semispherical and pedestalled bowls, and closed types, cups, pots and amphorae, was roughly the same. The pedestalled bowls were commonly decorated with white and black linear and hatched patterns⁹.

The assemblage included generic shapes, primarily simple geometric forms, as well as culture-specific types. The earlier ones were made for basic functions; therefore they were relatively simplified forms and were utilized throughout the Neolithic period with few modifications. Conical and hemispherical forms were used for food preparation, whilst globular forms were used for preparation, transformation, and storage. Culture-specific shapes could have originated from simple forms, employing a distinguishing shape feature (e.g., a fault line), or including an extra element, like a pedestal. These vessels were frequently decorated in distinctive styles, emphasizing their representational value, because they were significantly associated with consumption, particularly feasts and communal activities¹⁰ (Fig. 7).

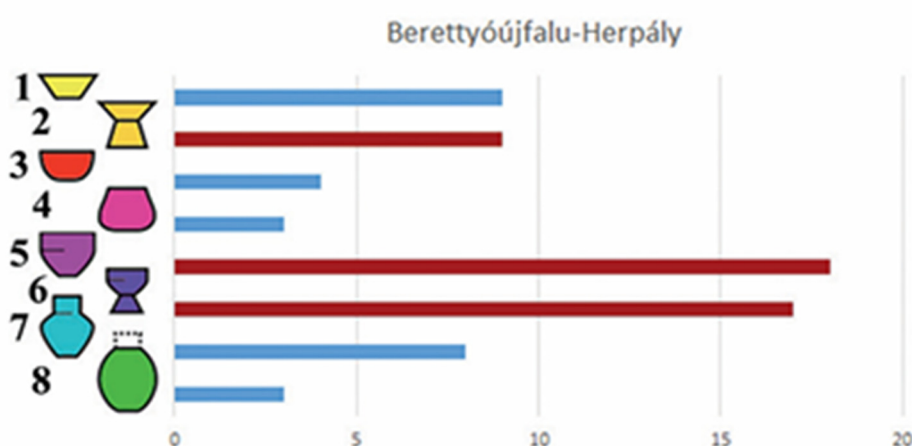


Fig. 7. Main ceramic forms of the Berettyóújfalu-*Herpály* assemblage: blue-generic forms, red-culture specific shapes (after Füzesi 2022, 249).

Besides a few pottery sherds, mostly all the painted ceramic finds from the *Salca* “OMV-Petrom” point, from the 2021 campaign, belonged to the CX 03 B pit-dwelling. This particular dwelling was also the biggest and most impressive one found.

With this being said, of course we can’t really compare House 11 from Berettyóújfalu-*Herpály*, with CX 03 B pit-dwelling from *Salca* “OMV-Petrom”, but could we assume a similar interpretation?

The decorations on the ceramic material from the Oradea *Salca* site, CX 03 B, represents an important aspect in any kind of research involving pottery. The paintings on the vessels can do more than just indicate the culture the people that made them belonged to. They can indicate micro-regional characteristics that could have developed in a specific geographical area through influences from the previous populations or the cultures around them. On the other hand, they

⁸ Kalicz *et al.* 2011, 254.

⁹ Raczky *et al.* 2020, 445.

¹⁰ Füzesi 2022, 248.

can also be a reflection of how women marrying into a particular community may have, perhaps, continued making vessels according to the ceramic traditions of their birthplace¹¹.

The ceramic material identified in the CX 03 B pit-dwelling was not the household ceramic set. The pottery discovered here, although it is good quality and painted on the outside, and some of them on the inside as well, they were most likely discarded in this pit dwelling that transformed into a disposal-pit. By the number of different vessels found in this dwelling that were represented by only one or a few pottery fragments it's clear they were just discarded here. But why are there so many painted fragments? And why did the other dwellings contain almost no painted pottery fragments? Was all the painted pottery discarded in the CX 03 B dwelling? Is there a continuity of the site? A continuity of local development based on ceramics?

In the beginning I believed that it was a possibility that this pit-dwelling could represent some sort of ritualic pit based on the amount of painted ceramic materials found here. But, after I started working with the pottery itself, I realized that with most of them I was not able to restore them, they were different pottery fragments from many different vessels. In conclusion, the answer to the question in the title of this paper, given the absence of other ritually oriented objects, is that this pit-dwelling most likely represents a common practice of turning an out of used dwelling into a disposal pit, rather than it being a ritualic pit.

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¹¹ Kalicz *et al.* 2011, 55.

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Plate. 1. Painted pottery from Oradea-Salca "OMV-Petrom" point.



Plate. 2. Painted pottery with black circles and lines
from Oradea-Salca "OMV-Petrom" point.



Plate. 3. Painted pottery from Oradea-Salca "OMV-Petrom" point.



Plate. 4. Painted pottery from Oradea-Salca "OMV-Petrom" point.



Plate. 5. Painted pottery from Oradea-Salca “OMV-Petrom“ point.



Plate. 6. Painted pottery from Oradea-Salca “OMV-Petrom” point.

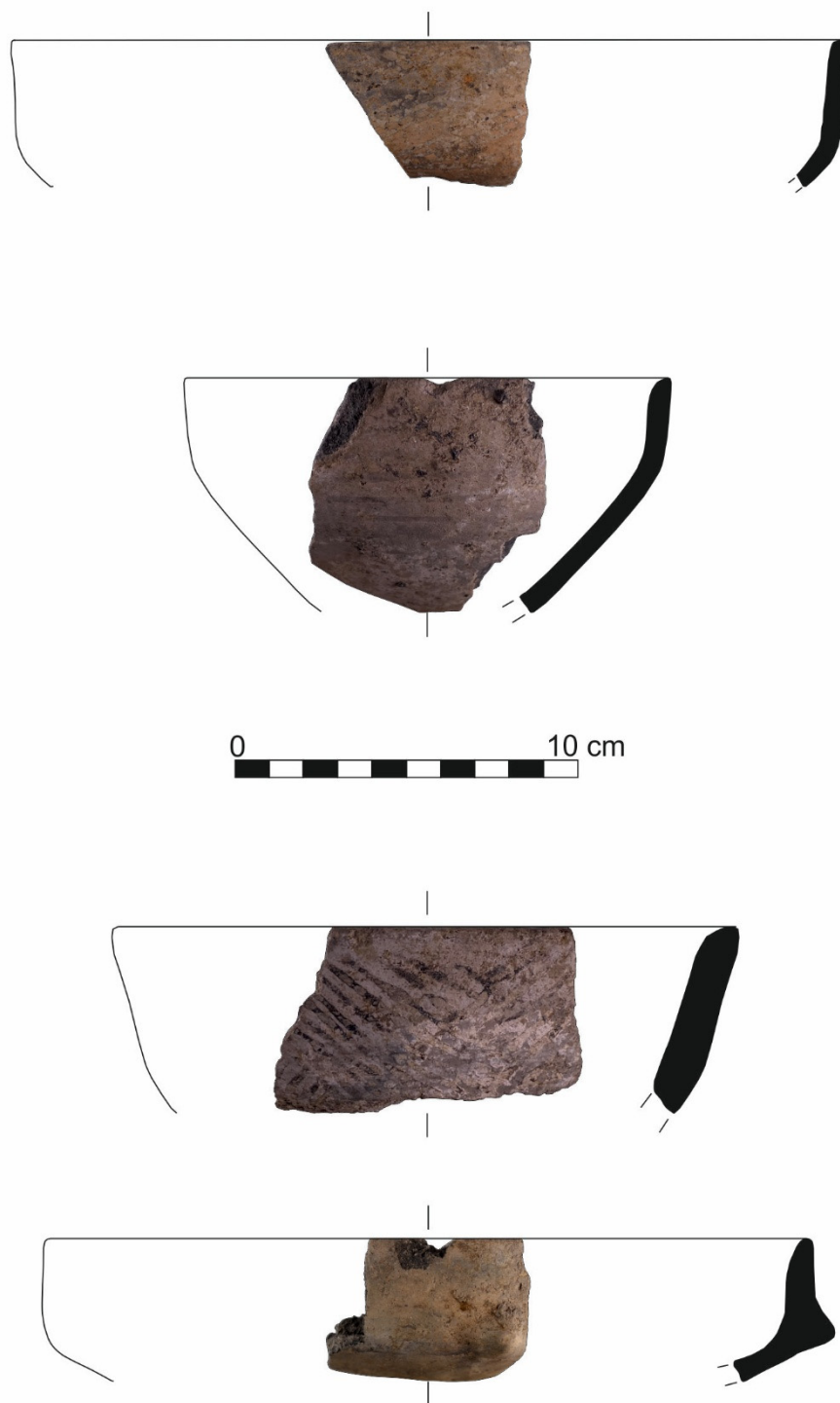


Plate. 7. Painted pottery from Oradea-Salca "OMV-Petrom" point.