

Miniature vessels from the Neolithic site at Čatež-Sredno polje. Were they meant for every day use or for something else?

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ABSTRACT – Archaeologists use models based on ethnographic analogy and theory to recreate the meanings of symbols, but rarely can the archaeological data by itself provide us with a story. The extensive excavation at Neolithic Čatež-Sredno polje provided us with new information concerning Neolithic society in the first half of the 5th millennium B.C. in Slovenia. The abundance of pottery finds offered a huge opportunity to explore several aspects of pottery production. In this article a closer look at one group of pottery finds will be presented. A detailed picture of the symbolic aspects of miniature vessels will be presented in terms of their production, use, function, and distribution.

IZVLEČEK – Arheologi pogosto uporabljamo modele, ki temeljijo na etnografskih analogijah in teoriji, da bi z njimi pojasnili pretekli simboličen pomen, saj arheološki podatki sami le redko lahko ponudijo razlago. Obsežna izkopavanja na neolitskem najdišču Čatež-Sredno polje so ponudila nova spoznanja o neolitski družbi iz prve polovice 5. tisočletja B.C. v Sloveniji. Obilica odkritih keramičnih najdb je ponudila izjemno priložnost opazovanja različnih aspektov keramične produkcije. V prispevku podrobneje predstavljamo segment odkritih keramičnih najdb iz najdišča Čatež-Sredno polje. Predstavljen bo oris simbolnega pomena miniaturnih posod z ozirom na njihovo produkcijo, uporabo, funkcijo in distribucijo.

KEY WORDS – Neolithic; Slovenia; pottery; miniature vessels

INTRODUCTION

Miniature vessels are a part of material culture that has usually been quite insufficiently studied. There are probably several reasons for this, but the most important is undeniably hidden in the traditional approach to handling and interpreting prehistoric pottery.

Pottery studies almost certainly have the longest tradition in archaeology. Yet only in recent years have pottery studies begun to move beyond a mere concern for typology, chronology, and cultural definition. Most recent developments in pottery studies have changed the way archaeologists deal with and interpret pottery. The technology and use of pottery, the symbolic and social implications of the pot itself,

are considered as anthropological phenomena. So called 'Symbolic archaeology' forms one of the most productive parts of the general movement in archaeology towards a more sophisticated understanding of how material culture was perceived and manipulated in ancient cultures (*Jameson 2002a.556*).

Our current interest in miniature vessels is connected with the fact that miniature vessels are a rather common find at the Neolithic site Čatež-Sredno polje. However, their quantity is not the only issue that drove our attention. Various questions arose in connection with different aspects of their production in terms of technology, use, function, distribution and discard during our investigation.

ČATEŽ–SREDNO POLJE

The Čatež-Sredno polje site is located on fields along a regulated stream in the lowland beneath the settlement of Čatež, in the southeastern part of Slovenia, and at present it is fairly distant from the Sava River (Fig. 1). The site was first identified during a field survey in 1998. According to the field report, Bronze Age and Roman settlements were foreseen (*Djurrić et al. 2000*). The extensive rescue excavation, conducted in 2002, exposed a huge prehistoric settlement, with archaeological finds dated to the first half of the 5th millennium BC. The excavation of the site provided us with important information concerning different aspects of Neolithic society in Slovenia (*Guštin 2002; Guštin, Bekič 2002; Guštin 2003a; Guštin 2003b; Guštin 2004*).

It is also important to emphasize that Čatež-Sredno polje is a rather exclusive site, not merely in Slovene surroundings, but also in broader terms.

Firstly, it is a rather large site, where the settled area covers approximately 31 ha, all of which was thoroughly investigated (Fig. 1). With an estimated settlement area, Čatež-Sredno polje represents the largest excavated Neolithic site in Slovenia and adjacent areas.

Secondly, more than 24 larger and nearly 40 smaller well-defined Neolithic structures were discovered beneath the plough-soil (Fig. 2). Twenty-three of these were also ¹⁴C dated, the majority of dates ranging between 4800 and 4600 BC cal. (*Guštin 2004. 255*).

Thirdly, approximately 13 000 flakes and 2000 cores were discovered at the site. The excavated material suggests that stone tools were manufactured on the site. Čatež-Sredno polje thus represents the only known site in Slovenia which might be described as a quarry site (*Kavur 2003.117*).

The next issue of importance is the ceramics finds. In total at Čatež-Sredno polje more than 68 000 pottery fragments were discovered, including complete vessels. At this point we have to mention that results offered in this article form part of an extensive research programme of the archeological record from Čatež-Sredno polje which is still in progress. Never-

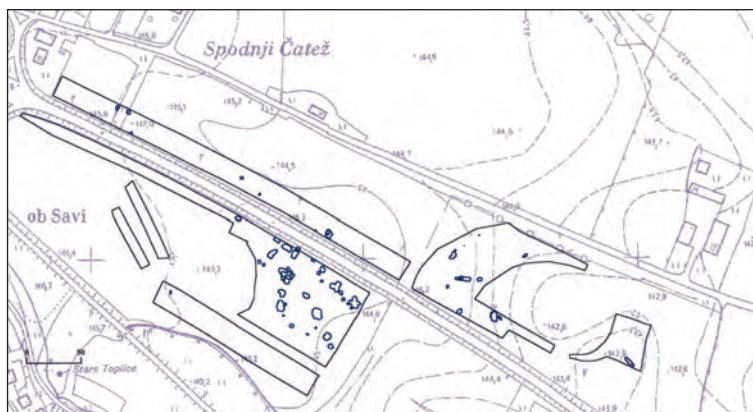


Fig. 1. Čatež-Sredno polje. Location of the site with spatial distribution of Neolithic structures.

theless, as for now in a broader sense the pottery assemblage seems quite homogenous in terms of technological, typological and ornamental indicators. The pots are all handmade. According to macroscopic observation of the 1482 sherds from two different structures (093 and 055), the greater part of the pottery assemblage was made from medium-grained and fine-grained fabrics, while coarse-grained and very fine-grained fabrics are rather uncommon. The surface of the pottery is generally burnished, and in some cases smoothed. Only in rare cases was red slip applied. Decoration of the pottery is relatively frequent and dominated by impressions, particularly of fingernails; in some structures more than 70% of decorated sherds are decorated in this manner. The pottery assemblage comprises several different shapes, including bowls, pedestal bowls, dishes, pedestal dishes, jars, beakers, ladles, lids, miniature vessels, and some other ceramic objects (Fig. 3). The variations of particular basic shape are rather numerous, meaning that almost each vessel is in fact unique, when taking into consideration all its detailed characteristics. Numerous variations of the same basic shape are within prehistoric pottery not unexpected, since all the pots were handmade and there-



Fig. 2. Čatež-Sredno polje. Neolithic structure.

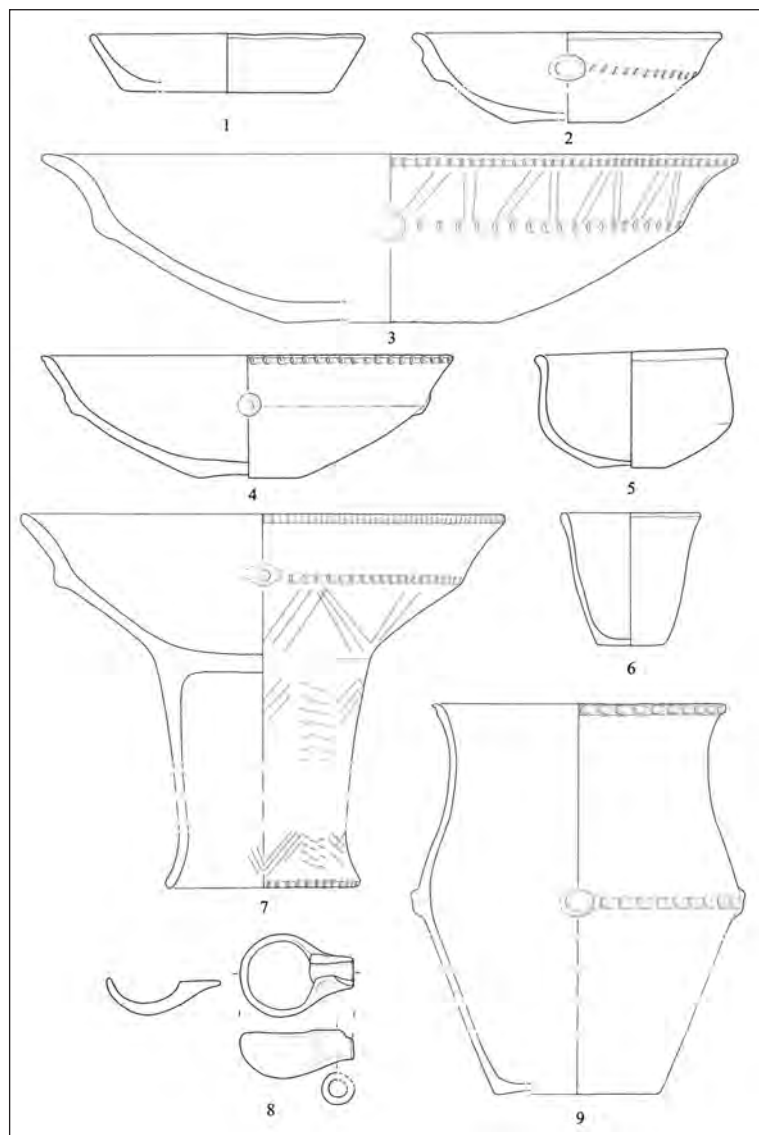


Fig. 3. Čatež-Sredno polje. Neolithic pottery (1:5).

fore unique (Tomaž 1999.97). The distribution of the basic shapes in different settlement structures, and particularly their frequencies, indicate that different areas of the settlement were used for different activities, but these are issues still to be studied.

MINIATURE VESSELS

Our first question topic is: 'What precisely is meant by 'miniature vessel'? We can safely argue that miniature vessels are, in comparison to regular pots, relatively small sized. They usually do not exceed 6 cm in diameter or height. A further question is: 'What is a vessel?' The immediate and most direct answer is that vessel is a hollow container in which food may be stored, cooked or served. And to explore further: 'How do we recognize a vessel?' The

most probable answer is: 'The vessel must have firm body parts and a volume, some space that can be filled with various substances'.

In our opinion, this is a rather fine example of how material culture is perceived today. Our first thought is usually connected with the function of an item and only later does the material aspect of the same follow. So, if we accept that a symbol is usually defined as a signifier that is entirely arbitrary in its connection to the signified - that is, the connection is formed by social convention (usage) only (Jameson 2002b. 527) - this would mean that vessels can function symbolically. And we have to recognize them as such.

But are these perceptions also permissible when dealing with Neolithic societies? Pottery has an undeniable practical quality, but at the same time it can provide information about technologies applied in a society, and it can function as social-symbolic information. Urem-Kotsou, Kotsakis and Stern argued that whether vessels are viewed as an exchange or symbolic object, non-utilitarian or utilitarian artefacts, the majority of them were produced for a certain purpose. Their morphological, technological and stylistic characteristics are correlated to the practical task for which they were manufactured, and are closely related to the social context of their makers and their users. Elements such as fabrics, morphology, decoration and surface treatment all structure affect the way the pot is socially perceived and will determine how it is used in specific social contexts (2002.110). In this regard, miniature vessels are no exception.

The archaeological evidence for social/symbolic interpretations is the objects themselves and their archaeological context. We will try to demonstrate how social and symbolic indicators can be traced in the archaeological record with reference to the miniature vessels from Čatež-Sredno polje. In doing so, a closer look at production technologies, distribution and frequency of miniature vessels will be presented.

As we have already mentioned, miniature vessels are quite numerous at Čatež-Sredno polje in contrast to other Neolithic sites in Slovenia; altogether, twenty-eight of them, or parts of them, were found.

Production technologies applied in making miniature vessels are similar to those used in the making of other ceramic items. Production is similar in terms of manufacturing technique, fabric and surface treatment. The greater number of miniatures was made from medium-grained and fine-grained fabrics. The surface of the vessels is generally burnished, and in some cases smoothed. Their production is also similar to that of other ceramics in terms of decorative techniques, although it should be said that decoration of miniature vessels is fairly rare.

One characteristic of miniature vessels kept attracting our attention: their shape. The 'miniature assemblage' comprises several different basic shapes, including bowls, dishes, pedestal dishes, jars, beakers, and ladles (Fig. 4). What we find interesting is that all the basic shapes of miniature vessels in some way match those of pots that are usually viewed as everyday, utilitarian items. Each miniature vessel has its 'bigger version', as seen in Figure 5. An important difference between the items is that miniature vessels do not have a characteristic that traditionally defines vessels, i.e., volume great enough to contain substances.

Important observations were also made in relation to their spatial distribution. Miniature vessels were discovered in several Neolithic structures, but not in all (Fig. 6). Their appearance at the centre of the site clearly demonstrates a slightly central preference for their deposition. In our opinion, duality in the spatial distribution of miniature vessels on the one hand and utilitarian pottery on the other demonstrate that the principal modes in which each group of pottery was used at the site were different.

The next important issue is the frequency of miniature vessels within individual Neolithic structures. In contrast to other pottery finds, their frequency in individual structures is relatively low. Nevertheless, we established that evident micro-variations in proportions are by no means influenced by the size of an assemblage, as demonstrated in Figure 7. According to existing data, we can assume that miniatures

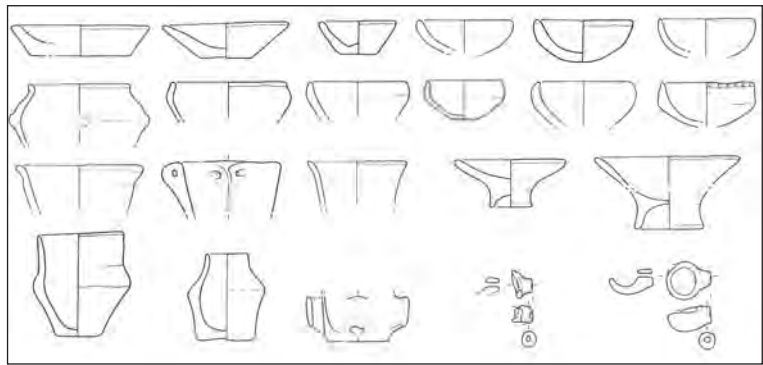


Fig. 4. Čatež-Sredno polje. Basic shapes of miniature vessels (1:5).

might have been special items within an individual settlement structure and also in broader terms. Their place in the socio-economic organization of the set-

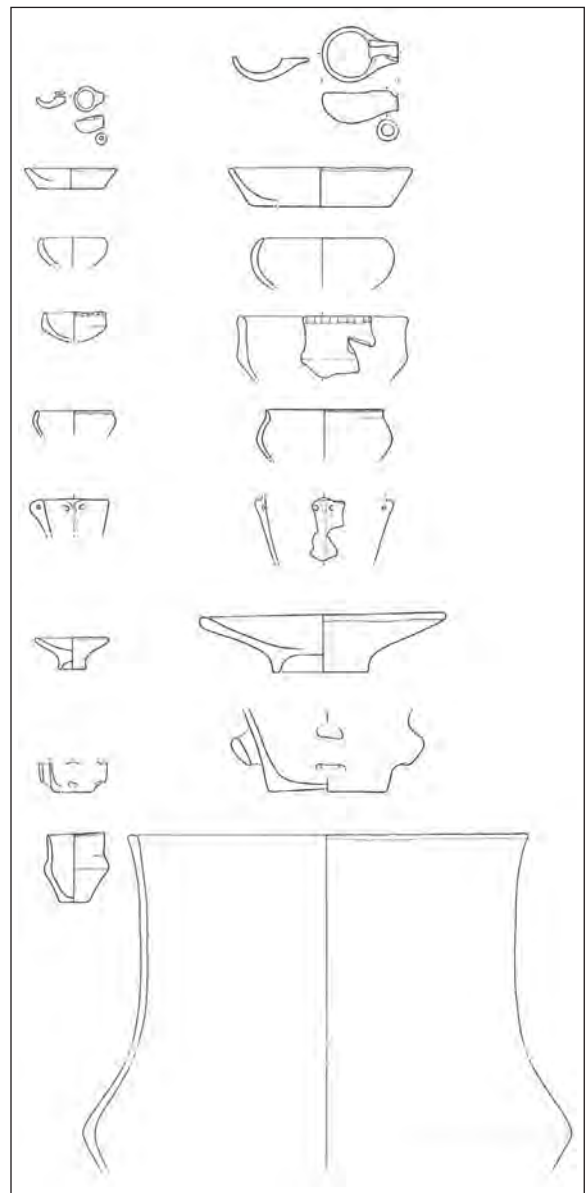


Fig. 5. Čatež-Sredno polje. Basic shapes of miniature and common sized vessels. (1:7).

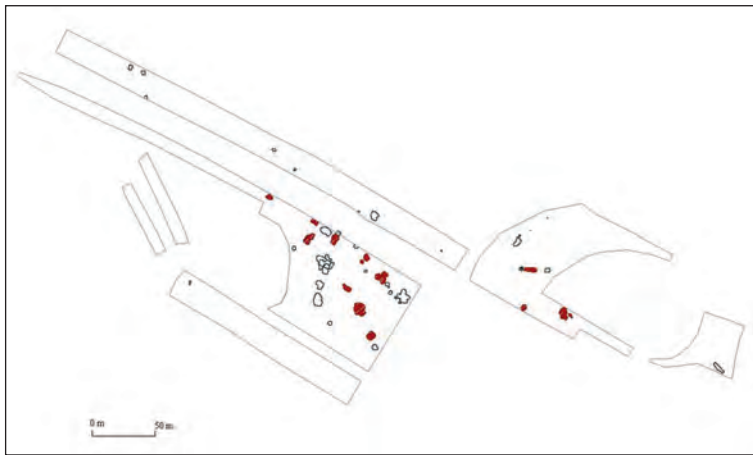


Fig. 6. Čatež-Sredno polje. Site plan with spatial distribution of miniature vessels.

tlement and, consequently, their symbolic meaning, most definitely differed from other ceramics.

CONCLUSIONS

As Clive Gamble (2004.99) puts it in his 'Archaeology. The Basics', written for a broader audience: "There is nothing self-evident about the past. The enterprise of archaeology is not simply confined to the things of our past, but more importantly, deals with questions, approach and interpretation. The archaeological debates and disagreements are not just about the dates of this pot and that city. Rather they are more fundamental. They concern approaches to gain knowledge about human action

in the past. The outcome produces expectations about what is known, and can be known, of activities in the past. Because such activity is invisible, objects are crucial to all our debates. The way we investigate and interpret them is therefore important..."

This article has attempted to explore the potential social-symbolic character of miniature vessels within the pottery assemblage from the Neolithic site of Čatež-Sredno polje.

From the archaeological record it is evident that social-symbolic implications of miniature vessels can be traced in archaeological artefacts themselves, and also in their archaeological context. Visible elements for social and symbolic interpretation can be observed in different features of miniature vessels. Attributes such as vessel size and fabric composition might easily shift back and forth between 'functional' and 'symbolic' significance over time (Thomas 1999.97). In our case, the size of miniature vessels evidently supports the symbolic significance of the item, since the practical one is reduced due to the lack of volume for containing substances, which traditionally defines a vessel. Important evidence for the social and symbolic interpretation of miniature vessels can also be traced in their spatial distribution on the site and in their frequency within individual Neolithic structures. The difference, between the spatial distribu-

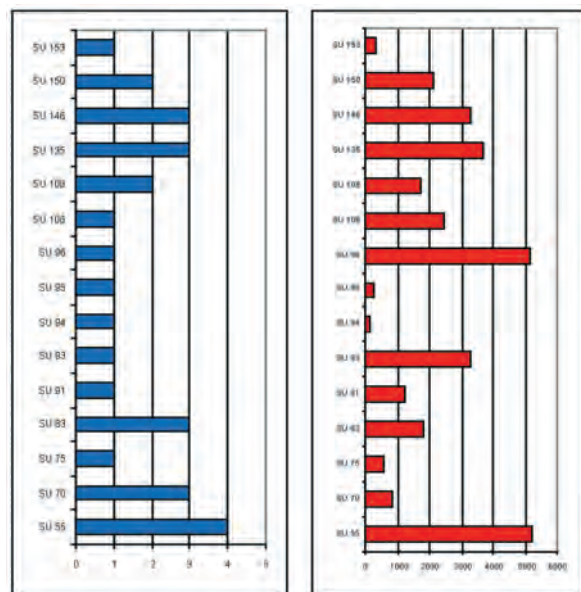
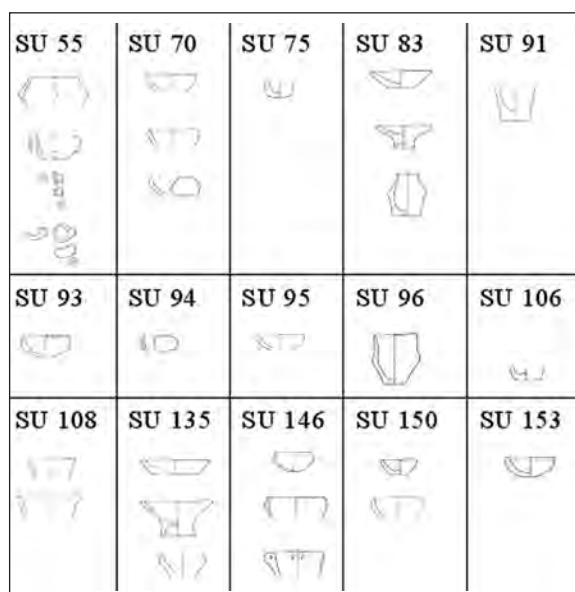


Fig. 7. Čatež-Sredno polje. Frequencies of miniature vessels in individual Neolithic structure in correlation to the size of their pottery assemblages.

tion of miniature vessels and so called every day pots suggests that the modes in which they functioned in the socio-economic organization of the settlement were different. Thus the social and symbolic implications of both ceramic groups could not be alike. This is also confirmed by observing frequencies of miniature vessels within different individual Neolithic structures.

To conclude, we wish to explore some suggestions for interpreting the potential function and use of miniature vessels. In doing so, we are aware that defining a pot's function can become very complex because vessels could have had multiple uses or been reused after being considered not suitable for their primary function (Rice 1987; Urem-Kotsou, Kotsakis, Stern 2002.111). Nevertheless, in many cases it is suggested that miniature vessels should be interpreted as children's toys (Balen-Letunić, Rendić-Miočević 1982; Karmanski 2005.67). It has also been suggested that some were manufactured by children and some by adults (Balen-Letunić, Rendić-Miočević 1982). For the first part, we agree that miniature vessels could function as toys, although we should

not exclude other possibilities. Moreover, we think that on such occasions we must be extremely cautious with interpretations, since many items with different primary functions can be used as toys. Therefore, our primary task in the future will be to explore all ranges of possible interpretations, including different methods of analysis. As for the other part of the statement, we assume that miniature vessels from Čatež-Sredno polje were most probably made by adults, if their quality of manufacturing is taken into consideration, and also the fact that potting skills are relatively difficult to learn (Thomas 1999. 97).

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