

Ivan Šestan  
Ethnographic Museum  
Zagreb  
Croatia  
isestan@emz.hr

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## ***Bilikum* – Mysterious Jug Prolegomenon to the Problem of Three-Part Pots for Giving Toasts of Welcome**

*The article provides a systematic overview of the questions on the shape and symbolism of a three-part pot - bilikum, which was used in Northwestern Croatia and Northeastern Slovenia as a pot from which wine was drunk in honor of the guests who were visiting a house for the first time. Even though any pot suitable for wine drinking could be used, only three-part bilikum was used only for that purpose. That fact gives bilikum the character of a ritual pot, and logically raises questions on its possible link with the similar Bronze and Iron Age pots. Besides the symbolism of number three, which comes from its shape, the mystery surrounding the pot is enhanced by the legend of three brothers – Čeh, Leh and Meh, which is connected to it.*

**Key words:** bilikum, pots, giving toasts, symbolism of pot, ritual pot

**B**ilikum belongs to the rich inventory of multi-part pots whose beginnings should apparently be sought for in different periods of the Bronze and Iron Age. Pots made up of several smaller pots which are connected were well known in archeology for their various shapes, however, only a small number of them existed in the inventory of the so-called *traditional culture*. Moreover, the ones coming from *traditional culture* were usually made up of only two or three parts, while archeological pots could be composed out of ten or more parts (Picture 1).

The archeologists used the technical term *kernos* to refer to several mutually connected pots, usually added around one central pot. They were not connected only at their outer surface, but just as *bilikum*, by the openings in their respective bodies. They were found in archeological sites in the Middle East, Central Asia, in Southeastern Europe and only occasionally in Central Europe. Characteristic example of one such finding was the one from the Metropolitan Museum in New York which originated from the Cycladic culture (2300-2200 BC) and which was made up of 25 interconnected pots (Picture 2). Almost all archeologists agree that those pots were used for ritual drinking. However, data from an Iranian archeological site Yarim Tepe, suggested that the cylindrical funnel on the belly of one of the three pots pointed to the conclusion that it was not used for drinking, but for pouring (maybe sacrifice?) (Picture 3).

The pots which were connected only with their bodies and not the openings, the archeologists referred to as *pseudo-kernos*<sup>1</sup> and their ethnographic pair would be the two-part pots used for carrying food to peasants working in the fields, suitable for carrying two types of food without getting mixed (Picture 4).

A superficial look at *bilikum* would lead us to the conclusion that it was not suitable for drinking. It could be found only in the enclave which included the Northwestern Croatia, i.e. the region of Hrvatsko Zagorje, Prigorje, area around the towns of Koprivnica and Križevci and Northeastern Slovenia. Marijana Gušić claimed that the pots with three faces should also be included into this group, as well as the ones with three anthropomorphic characters, one of which was found in Gosposvetsko polje and kept in the Museum of the Town of Klagenfurt, Austria (Gušić 1967:58).

The described shape as well as the ritual function of the pots, justify the idea on the link between this ethnographic object and its archeological pair. Hence, for example, the pots from the archeological sites from the Northern Iran exhibited in 2000/2001 in Vienna at the exhibition titled *7000 Jahre persische Kunst* and later at the same exhibition held in 2004/2005 in Zagreb, displayed a remarkable similarity to 'our' *bilikum*. This fact, as well as the Bronze and Iron Age archeological findings from numerous Greek and other Balkan sites, raised a number of questions, the most important of which was: was there any link between our *bilikum* and similar pre-historical three-part pots?

The aim of this article is to formulate the questions arising from the features of this pot and to point to the possible directions of the future research. With that goal in mind, I will use archeological and ethnographic data. In analyzing the role of the legend on Čeh, Leh and Meh linked to the jug, I will use the book by Marijan Tenšek titled *Krapina i priče o Čehu, Lehu i Mehu*, which systematized different variants of the legend.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my colleague Sanjin Mihelić, the senior curator of the Archeological Museum in Zagreb for his help with archeological terminology.

## Bilikum

The custom of giving toasts, especially to the guest who arrived to a house for this first time, was a crucial segment of the wine drinking culture in the region of North-western Croatia. The name *bilikum* (from the German word *willkommen* = welcome) referred to the custom and also to the jug itself. Different pots could be used for that purpose – from three-part jugs, jugs of different shapes, elaborately decorated or shaped pots, to the common, roughly designed pots called *srabljivci* (Picture 5). However, what was specific for *bilikum* was that it was used for drinking wine especially during the ritual of extending welcome to a new guest – *prihodnik*.

Next to *bilikum*, commonly used name was also *trilikum*. It was the result of popular etymology which interpreted it as being of Latin and not German origin.

In Northeastern Slovenia the names *trojka* (triple) and *Čeh, Leh i Meh* were also used. Taking into account the shape of the jug, the name *trojka* does not require additional explanation. The name *Čeh, Leh i Meh* was used in Croatia also and it was linked to the legend on three brothers and their sister Vilina. The legend is unknown in Slovenia today, even though Valvasor in his most famous book *Die Ehre des Herzogthums Crain* (Tenšek 2005:26) mentioned *Čeh* and *Leh* as the founders of Czech Republic and Poland.

A zealous follower of the Illyrian movement, Slovene writer Janez Trdina, in his idealized descriptions of Croats and their customs which he encountered during his service in Croatia at the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, also included the description of the custom of drinking from *bilikum*. Even though his sympathies for the customs he documented were generally significant, he did not seem to like this custom very much. According to him, *bilikum* was drunk in one gulp from a large pot (sometimes a half liter pot) close to the end of the party at which people had already drunk substantial amounts of wine. Trdina claimed that drunkenness was the inevitable consequence of drinking *bilikum*, and hence, after his experiences as *prihodnik*, after lunch he would, *in a French manner*, grab his hat and disappear unnoticed.

His explanation on the name and the origin of this custom was completely in accordance with the social atmosphere characterized by the resistance to German dominance and in which all the societal difficulties of the time were ascribed to the Germans. In that respect, his interpretation, which he probably heard from his Croatian friends, linked the custom to the time when German troops were arriving to Croatia in order to help fight off the Turks. Mercenaries were, however, quite often wild, they were pillaging and mistreating native inhabitants. In order to calm them down and appease them, the Croats would give them plenty of food and drink.

The custom whose origin was interpreted this way was, quite logically, not looked upon favorably by the Illyrians, but since it was quite popular among people, they at least tried to give a Croatian name both to the custom and to the jug, and so Trdina claimed that ‘...now (*bilikum*) is usually called ‘*dobrodošlica*’ ( *welcome*)’ (Trdina 1980:32).

Due to its specific shape, drinking from a *bilikum* was not easy, and today we could rarely find it in everyday use. However, the memory on its usage in the past is still vivid, even though in recent times its function has been changed and today it is a souvenir which emphatically symbolizes regional identity and has all the characteristics of a phenomenon known in ethnology under the term *survival*.<sup>2</sup> *Bilikums* which today can be seen on fairs, souvenir shops or on the shelves of many homes, are usually small. On some of them we can find one of three names, Čeh, Ler or Meh, or just the initials, written on the bodies of the three respective jugs.

Sometimes the necks of those jugs were rather high positioned and slightly tilted towards the outer side, displaying a great similarity with the archeological findings from North Iranian site Marlik Tepe. Iranian archeologists assumed that the specific shape was inspired by the shape of the flowers, one type of tulips, which grew at the beginning of spring near that archeological site (Picture 6). Unfortunately, neither the Viennese nor Zagreb exhibition catalogue provides more information on the pot.

On another type of the pot, the neck was low and funnel-like, with the edges bend outwards and reminiscent of the findings from the second large North Iranian archeological site, Yarim Tepe.

In the upper part, the handles of the *bilikum* were often intertwined which, according to Slovene ethnologists Janez Bogataj, symbolized unity.<sup>3</sup> In Croatia they were usually made in the potteries of larger manufacturing centers and in major rural centers of pottery (for example Jerovec and Globočec) or even in factories, like for example in the famous stoneware factory from the town of Krapina which was working from 1800 until 1886.

My current findings on the phenomenon on *bilikum* point to the framework under which the research topics and aims could be outlined in the following way:

1. the analogy of the three-part pots in geographic areas (distribution)
2. the analysis of the function of the pot
3. the analysis of symbolism
  - the shape of the pot (i.e. number three)
  - legends on Čeh, Leh and Meh (elements: ox/bull, golden horns, golden apple, mountain tunnel, etc.)

## ***Distribution***

Since, according to my knowledge, the existence of three-part jug for drinking wine was known only in Northeastern Slovenia and Northwestern Croatia, it seemed logi-

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<sup>2</sup> Cultural phenomenon from the past which has been preserved until present day with a different function.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Prof. Janez Bogataj from the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Ljubljana, for this information which I have received from him as an answer to my e-mail.

cal for me to direct my search, on the ethnographic level, towards, on one hand, central Europe and on the other hand, Southeastern Europe as well as other Slavic cultures.

The similarities with the above mentioned Iranian three-part pots (Marlik Tepe 1200-1100 BC and Yarim Tepe 1200-1000 BC) pointed to the conclusion that further research should be directed at confirming the existence of those pots among other Slavic peoples, since, while establishing the analogy, we should take into account the possibility of transfer of this phenomenon through cultural contacts which the Slavs undoubtedly had with the cultures of Iran and Central Asia. This thesis was, however, contradicted with the fact that Lubor Niederle, who was, in his works, trying to reconstruct the material culture of the old Slavs, did not mention this type of jug at all.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, we should not neglect the similar archeological findings from the region of Montenegro and Greece as well as the wider region of Southeastern Europe belonging to the same period of the Iron Age. That could, however, point to other origins and ways of transfer of the shape of our *bilikum*, and hence we should not completely reject the thesis by Marijana Gušić on the Celtic origin of the jug. That thesis has been confirmed by numerous archeological findings of three-part pots dating back to the Iron Age which in Europe started with the Celts (Gušić 1967:58).

In her analysis of the ethnic group *Bezjaci*, Marijana Gušić mentioned the problem of *bilikum* and used the interpretations of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century experts in the field, to point to the elements which could link this phenomenon with the Bronze Age Celtic culture spread over the area from the Black Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. Gušić noticed that the ritual expressions of hospitality, inclination to feasting and collective drinking were characteristics of the Celtic culture, but also ancient customs of the region of Prigorje and Hrvatsko zagorje which were renewed in the period of late feudalism. For the *bilikum* itself, she wrote that it had (...) *preserved the ancient magical image of the various three-face objects which had their origin in Celtic religion... Obviously, the triple name Čeh-Leh-Meh used for bilikum, was a Slavic linguistic supplement for the ritual assonance which used to contain the formula of the Celtic triad...* (Gušić 1957:58).

The confirmation of this thesis we could find in the following analogies: Celtic triads – three-part jug, three brothers, three cities; Celtic ideas on the underworld – underground path under the mountain of Strahinjčica, the symbolism of the apple, drinking, especially ritual drinking... Of course, when it comes to drinking, it has to be mentioned that the custom was common with all ancient peoples, depending on the economic situation (and the status of an individual or the group) and that it did not have to be specially renewed, not even during late feudalism.

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<sup>4</sup> Surely, the fact that Niederle did not mention the three-part jug could not be taken as an evidence that the Slavs did not know it before the great migration. For the final conclusion on this matter, one should consult the specialized literature by other prominent authors.

### ***Function***

Drinking wine from an unpractical vessel, on a special occasion, accompanied by a formal speech expressing welcome, good wishes and friendly intentions, all reveal symbolic elements of a ritual. The popular explanation which could be commonly heard was, however, rather prosaic. That was supposedly only a trick played on the guest who was supposed to drink up the wine from only one of the three jugs, but ended up drinking the triple amount of wine (Tenšek 2005:198). A very similar explanation came from the description which interpreted the departure of the three brothers Čeh, Leh and Meh up north as the consequence of a quarrel which was initiated by drinking wine from one such jug. It was, allegedly, made with the intention that each brother should drink wine out of one of its three joint parts, as a sign of unity and brotherly love. The first one, as the eldest, was Čeh. Since the jugs were conjoint, he emptied the pot. That caused the quarrel because of which the brothers separated and went up north.

Moreover, since one of the rules required that the wine should be drunk in one gulp (bottoms-up), this type of construction presented an additional problem to the guest who had to, in order not to spill the wine, drink it very slowly, which amused the present company. If we interpret the function of the three-part pot as an entertaining one, we could compare it to the so-called *mudrijaš* (*wise-guy*), a jug with the decorative perforation in the neck, which required from the person drinking from it, to guess which openings on the edge of the jug he/she has to close with the fingers, in order to be able to drink wine through one of them (Picture 7). However, those two jugs should be distinguished due to the fact that the purpose of drinking from *mudrijaš* was exclusively the amusing provocation of the unsuspecting guest which was without any ritual elements and which never had the characteristics of a ceremonial act.

### ***Symbolism***

#### *Number three*

In the search for the possible explanations of the symbolic meanings, it seemed the most logical to analyze firstly the symbolism of the number of three, which could be directly linked to the shape of the jug.

In different cultures that number was attributed complex symbolism. It was considered the basic number, the number of intellectual and spiritual order and it frequently carried many other symbolic meanings. Even though the multilayered symbolism of this number had been familiar already in the pre-Christian beliefs, religious and philosophical systems, it acquired its central position in Christianity (for example the Holy Trinity, the Magi) and in other big religious systems. We should remind ourselves that we frequently use that number, even without the awareness of its symbolism, in popular sayings, sometimes humorous. Thus the saying '*third time lucky*', allows us to give it a third try after the two previously failed attempts without being ridiculed, we count from three backwards to mark the beginning of a simultaneous

action of more people, in a certain type of jokes the punch line becomes clear only after the third situation and there is also a whole series of jokes where two characters exist only to emphasize the role of the third one (for example... 'an American, Frenchman and...').

However, we should bare in mind that many triads (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1989:715) have their origin in prehistorical periods. In that we should be aware of numerous elements which could lead us to the conclusion that we are talking about analogies, however, their possible links have to be discussed very carefully.

### *Legend on Čeh, Leh and Meh*

The basic elements of the legend on Čeh, Leh and Meh could be recognized in many of its numerous variants. However, the details which could be very important for its interpretation were not always the same – in one variant we find something that's missing from the other, certain details were not the same, etc.

The story as known today is mostly linked to the version written by Ljudevit Gaj in the text *Vjekopisni moj nacrtak*, published in 1875 by his son Velimir. The text outlined that the story was documented from the oral account of the old servant working in the house of Gaj's parents, but Maja Bošković-Stulli discovered that Gaj had published that story as a translation of the Latin text written by a Franciscan Friar from the town of Krapina in 1826, in the book titled *Die Schloesser bei Krapina*. The story on 'Slavic forefathers', Čeh, Leh and Meh was transferred for centuries through the works of chroniclers and historians (Bošković-Stulli 1997:87). In this context it was important to take into account her claim that this was the case of a 'learned tradition', transferred through written tradition and retold with ... *folkloric supplements*, and it seemed that Gaj himself also included certain amendments.

In short, the story went that in the town of Krapina and its immediate surrounding lived three brothers – Čeh, Leh and Meh (in some variants the third brother is not called Meh, but Mosk or Rus) with their sister Vilina. The legend was situated at the time of the Roman conquest. The brothers were organizing a rebellion against the Romans, but their intentions were thwarted by their sister who was in love with a Roman Commissary and who told her lover of their plans. The rebels had, however, managed to kill the Commissary, and the Romans gathered a strong army to revenge the death of their nobleman. Vilima and her son born out of her relationship with the Roman, were protected from her brothers' vengeance by the fairies. According to one version, the brothers have taken advantage of the fairies' absence and they abducted their sister from the cave, and according to another one they bought her off from the fairies and bricked her up in the city walls. After that, they fled north, where Čeh founded Czech, Leh Poland and Meh founded Russia. Vilina's child, while playing with the golden apple in a cave, was attacked by a wild ox which carried him on its horns under the mountain peaks Hajdinsko zrno and Veliki Žleb across to the other side of the mountain of Strahinjčica, where a hermit buried it on the spot which is today called Lepoglava, after the baby's pretty head.

This plot was repeated in most of the versions, however, there were several inconsistencies for which it remained unclear whether they were the result of reckless writing down or whether the story was told that way. The most questionable in that respect was the one regarding the central symbolic characters, 'wild ox'. Since ox exists only as a domestic animal, the question arises whether the original character of the bull ('wild bull') has been accidentally supplemented by the ox through the long years of legend transfer, or whether the ox was used because its symbolic imagery was more suitable to the main point of the story, and hence the opposition to the natural had to be neglected.

The differences in the symbolism of those two types of cattle were not always easy to discern, and hence the point of the legend or a belief in which they appeared was changed depending on the meaning which we chose in the analysis. Cattle (bull, ox, cow, buffalo, wiscent) was often part of many beliefs, religious and philosophical systems. The difficulty is that in different contexts the same animal can have different symbolic meanings. Hence both ox and bull are sometimes lunar and sometimes solar symbols (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1989:42-45; 716-718).

Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski approached the story of Čeh, Leh and Meh with scientific caution. In his book *Vile*, published in 1851, he outlined two, in this context, very interesting details. He said that he had heard from Gaj that the brothers bought off Vilina from the fairies with an ox with golden horns between which a baby was sitting carrying a golden apple (Tenšek 2005:81). Gaj's description did not mention golden horns and hence the question remained whether he simply failed to write this detail down, whether he learned about it latter from another informant, or whether he was, as an educated man, familiar with Greek and Roman mythology<sup>5</sup> and added this detail to deliberately expand the content of the legend for one reason or another. If we take the latter into the account, we can think of the symbolism of the apple which denotes authority, immortality, renovation; gold as the symbol of the Sun, i.e. fertility and the horns as the symbols of power Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1989:211, 762, 793). One such example was the Greek image from the myth on Odysseus, about the Sun which possessed white oxen with golden horns.

The role of the baby also remained unclear. In one version it appeared as Vilina's child playing in the cave with the golden apple and in another both the baby and the apple were situated between the ox's horns which the brothers offered to the fairies as the ransom for their sister. Considering the two different contexts in which the baby appeared, the symbolism of its character could also be differently interpreted (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1989:120).

Sakcinski considered the legend a folk tale, while Pavao Ritter Vitezović thought of it as ... *the holly truth* and it was him who introduced into the story of three brothers the part on the tragic love between Vilina and the Roman Commissary, so the story would obtain a romantic note (Tenšek 2005:79).

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<sup>5</sup> In this context, Egyptian as well as Celtic myths could have been used.



In his analysis of the legend, Natko Nodilo recognized the elements of the folk tale on the battle between light and darkness. Three brothers represented the three suns, and Vilina was Dawn, Sun's sister, who betrayed them to the darkness and who was therefore killed by the Sun (Tenšek 2005:91). However, those elements are rather frequent in beliefs of various cultures and hence this interpretation, although it could be easily accepted, lacks a more precise framework of the origin of the story, the conditions under which it has been created and the patterns of distribution.

It seems that the legend on Čeh, Leh and Meh has been added to the object and the custom of *bilikum* at a later period. Its oldest element, the idea on the great movement of the Slavs from south to the north was documented by the Monk Nestor Chronicler (1056-1114). His writings contained the basis of the legend on three brothers through whose help the Slavs migrated from the Danube valley up north, amended and expanded in the following centuries before it was linked to the three-part jug, probably on the analogy and symbolism of the number of three.

## Conclusion

*Bilikum*, which has recently been used for drinking wine, can still be found on fairs, in souvenir shops or as a dusty and surplus object on somebody's shelf reminding the owner on the person who has presented it as a gift or maybe on the place where the person has bought it him/herself. And when we decide to raise the question on its shape, name or legend linked to it, we have to conclude that we are faced with a complex cultural phenomenon the research of which requires an inter-disciplinary approach. Every such complex problem has to be analyzed in all its details, which demands a specialist expertise. However, this is just half of the task. After outlining all the aspects and related details, they have to be analyzed in a common context and in relation to each other. In this case, the problem of *bilikum* has to be approached primarily inside the disciplines of ethnology and archeology, while further research will undoubtedly point to the need of including other scientific disciplines.<sup>6</sup> If the thesis on the pre-historical origin of this phenomenon proves to be valid, some questions will probably remain unanswered. This especially refers to the questions of such limited distribution of this pot and on the relationship between its pre-historical symbolism and later legend on Čeh, Leh and Meh.

By regarding *bilikum* as a phenomenon of cultural heritage we can conclude that at this stage of research we have more questions than answers. However, notwithstanding all the unanswered questions, it undoubtedly belongs to the objects which confirm the unjustifiableness of the attempt to divide cultural heritage on tangible and

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<sup>6</sup> 'We have learned this from Descartes...to divide a problem on so many smaller parts which take for this problem to be conquered... An explanation is valid only if it is holistic. When searching for a solution of a problem, we seek advice from this or that scientific discipline, or from law, moral, religion, art...' (Levi Strauss; Eribon:124).

non-tangible, which has been UNESCO's persistent and unnecessary agenda in the last few years. Both tangible and non-tangible aspects of the phenomenon of *bilikum* are equally important and it itself justifies the unjustifiableness of such division. Every 'firm object' starts from an idea – from its non-tangible aspect which is inseparable from tangible. If we would thus follow the recommendations of UNESCO on the protection of non-tangible heritage, with *bilikum* we would thus separate the idea on the technology of its production from the material from which it was made – the process of mixing clay, conditions under which the pots were baked, the design of the three-part pot, its function, legend on Čeh, Leh and Meh from clay, pottery wheel and oven, wine... This division is not only unnecessary, but it also harmful, because it is clear that the pot of this type without its non-tangible aspects makes little sense. I believe that Claude Lévi-Strauss had such objects in mind when he said that they should be looked upon as thoughts transformed into firm objects.<sup>7</sup>

*Translated by Tanja Bukovčan*

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<sup>7</sup> 'From the moment you start looking at these objects as thoughts which were transformed into firm objects, the thought you have outlined (...that ethnology is primarily 'psychology') starts making sense' (Levi Stros; Eribon 1989:121).