

Towards the identification of newly discovered kitchen tools at archaeological excavations from the Renaissance period (1450-1600) in Hungary

Hygiene. The accessories of dish washing.

The identification of a new type of item in Hungary

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Introduction

My article on the possible identification of excavated kitchen tools at archaeological excavations of the Renaissance period in Hungary (1450-1600) was published in this periodical in December 2015 (Kohári 2015b. This article explores one aspect of this topic).

As referred to in my previous article, the majority of the assemblage was found in a fragmentary state in the archaeological excavations, moreover, as will be discussed below – certain objects would have had a secondary function.

I shall now discuss general questions of hygiene, and in particular the topic of dish washing. Previous experience made people realise that unclean tools and pots could cause various infections and poisonings. Besides the actual cooking, the washing of dirty cooking pots, by servants or dishwashers was important and dish washers were sometimes listed in the courts (Benda 2014, 73).

The writer of *Cook Science* (the royal cookbook of Transylvania) one of the few cookery books or extant fragments emphasised that the first and most important task of the cook in the morning was flushing or rinsing the clean pot. „When you get up in the morning, firstly praise your God, then have a fine wash and flush your clean pot” (Radvánszky 1893, 11).

During the history of mankind the cleaning of dirty tools and pots during food preparation and consumption was very similar at different times. The basic accessories were: a bowl used for dish washing, water at different temperatures, mechanical and chemical instruments to help with the cleaning, and tools for making the washing up more effective.

We can identify certain accessories of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance by looking at the traditional sources (written, pictorial and actual objects).

Looking at the main processes involved in these traditional resources we can make the following conclusions:

Objects, used in the process of dish washing:

- Preparation: cauldron – for heating water, a wooden bucket, water-bearing vessel or ceramic jug/pitcher for carrying the water;
- Washing-up: hot water – grease elution ⁽¹⁾ – removal of solid particles, rinsing;
- Finishing: draining, drying (using a dishcloth), greasing metal pots and metal tools (for prevention of rust).

Tools

- bucket for carrying water (several variants: with wooden handle, straight handle, metal handle, raw handle etc.);
- wooden dish washer tub, tub for storing water;
- tools for making the process more effective: rag, wisp, wood chips, sponge, etc. (using of regular and improvised tools, knives, bones etc.);
- using of mechanical or chemical solutions to help

the cleaning: sand, ash, potash (washing-up liquid, mixed with sand – scrubbing instrument), vinegar ⁽²⁾.

The identification of excavated objects can be difficult due to their fragmentary condition or unusual contexts.

Organic objects are rarely found „in situ”, and unequivocally in connection with the kitchen or with dish-washing. It is necessary to investigate the entire site and the full assemblage, which helps to date the objects. Information can be sought using interdisciplinary studies (dendro-analysis, chemical analysis, etc.) for identification of the function of the object. These types of finds often turn up in secondary situations (eg. in water wells or in anaerobic deposits).

Assemblage

Biodegradable organic materials cannot be preserved in the ground for long in normal circumstances. In exceptional cases the catabolic processes are blocked and the structure of the object is preserved for centuries. Under specific circumstances (carbonization by fire, immersion in water, permafrost, saline compounds, extraordinarily dry microclimate, etc.) they can be preserved ⁽³⁾.

Tools made of wood or other organic materials (textile, „washing-up grass”, wisp) belong to this category.

A worn fragment of textile from a cesspit or well could have been used in a kitchen, probably for washing up or drying crockery and utensils, in two circumstances. *Circumstantial evidence* for the usage of a tool is when it is found among kitchen debris, from a contemporary context, with kitchen pots, rubbish, and animal bones, etc. The contextual evidence can support our supposition of function or the results of more costly chemical analysis can confirm this.

For example in the anaerobic layers of a well, part of the ritual bath (*Mikvah*) in Sopron dating from the 15th century, were preserved the staves and sockles of two broken tubs and other tools made of wood (wooden plates, wooden salt-box (?), coal-rake, etc.) and an entire trough (Gömöri 1979, 50).

We know of plates, a dish, a comb, knife with wooden grip, trough, a barrel stave from Buda Nyékelyi 2003, 39). The most unusual aspect of the assemblage was the discovery of three hair-pencils, unknown from other Hungarian water well excavations (Nyékelyi 2003, 41).

Another medium, which preserves organic materials well, was seen at the excavations of Imre Holl in Kőszeg. The preservation of wooden objects is due to the effect of the black-brown stable-dung layer: examples of smaller milk buckets, fragments of wooden boards of barrels, tubs, buckets, wooden water-bearing vessel, fragments of platter, small wooden spoon were preserved in the dung (Holl 1992, 21, 62).

There are several problems with the preservation of metal tools (because of recycling, melting, remoulding), so these objects are typically found in fragments in archaeological excavations.

Pictorial sources

There are only a few Hungarian examples among the iconographic evidence, but on the other hand there is much foreign evidence for the use of kitchen implements. These images and engravings assist with the identification of the archaeological assemblage (form, material, method of usage), and in addition they can suggest the probable function of tools which have not been preserved or have survived only in part, because of their material (organic material, metal, re-use of metal).

The following is an image supporting the kitchen use – in this case for washing-up – of a tool made of organic material which is not frequently encountered or identified in archaeological excavations:



Fig. 1 — Washing-up, with a tool conducting the cleaning: the illustration of the usage of the „dish mop”. Source: *Kuchenmeister*, 1485 (woodcut) <http://www.medievalists.net/2015/11/26/for-the-kny%CA%92htys-tabyllle-and-for-the-kyngges-tabyllle-an-edition-of-the-fifteenth-century-middle-english-cookery-recipes-in-london-british-library-ms-sloane-442/> Download: 16.07.2016.

Written sources

Among the written sources we can find useful additional data and information from contemporary chronicles, descriptions, account books, wordlists, dictionaries and certifications.

We can discover the date at which the name of an object appeared in a given area in a national language, in this case, Hungarian.

These include: the *tub* [scaphium, orea, Schaff, Kübel, scheidung] in 1520: Schapeum wlgō desa. (MOSZ 152); the *water-carrying vessel* [Schaffel, sermisorium, fiscella, mulctram orca, melkgeschirr, schönpfgeschirr] about 1395 sýmhomum: *sajtar* (RMG 605), the *bucket for scooping* in 1590 Antila: *Viz mero sajtar* RMG 605; the *bucket* [Hama, urna, hydria, eimer, wassereimer] about 1405 idria: *veder* (RMG 784.); in 1597 *Viz hordó* bodon aliter *vödrczke* (MOSZ 1073).

Additionally there is the *washing-up grass* [hippuris vulgaris; kannenkraut, zinnkraut, Equisetum arvense] ⁽⁴⁾ from 1544 *Vöttem tal moso fiuet* (MOSZ 953.); the *cloth* (here as a dish mop) [kleid, kleidurig, vestis, vestimentum] about 1395 dos: *yeg ruha* (RMG 601).

And few words on the dishwashers: In the reign of Vladislav II. (1490-1516) it was written: „*János Harami, the honoured dishwasher, was warned not to make clash, does not break the pots and take care of the equipment*” (Fógel 1917, 125-126).

„Cherchez la femme! Look for the woman!” The connection of creativity and ergonomics at the actuation of the kitchen

The identification of a special object: „The medieval scrub-sponge” (metal scrubber) „Steel wool dishwashing of medieval art”.

Doris Fischer notes in her book published in 2015 (Fischer 2015) that the investigator often finds palm-sized pieces of chain mail beside the personal objects of women (scissors and combs) in early medieval female tombs, located around the belt of the buried person.

In 1997 similar pieces of chain mail were found during the excavations of the ruined area of the early medieval settlement of Müllerenhütte beside the settlement Melchsee-Fruitt in the Swiss Alps. It was conjectured that these objects were used for cleaning pots made of metal (cauldrons, kettles, casseroles) (Fischer 2015, 64).

In Hungary previous archaeological excavations of the motorway M6 recovered „in situ” a similar object from a building identified as a house from the 14-15th centuries at the investigation of the site Nr. TO 18 Paks-Cseresznyépuszta by the archaeologist Zsófia Ács:

„North of the church at the upper end of the site, a large house (SU 1098) was uncovered during the mechanical stripping of the topsoil. Similar to the two houses described above, this house also burned down, its ruins appeared on a 5.5 x 7 m area. A large amount of 14th-15th c. pottery was found during the removal of the rubble, as well as the well preserved, palm-sized fragments of chain mail, and knives” (Ács 2010, 203).

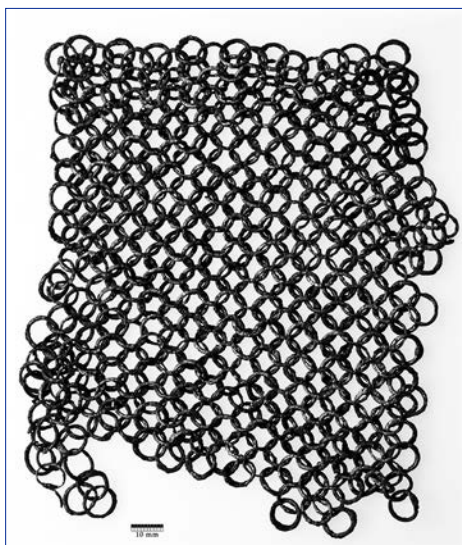


Fig. 2 — Fragment of chain mail. Paks – Cseresznyés (motorway M6, archaeological site TO18, Snr 1098 object) (Photo by Zsófia Ács; Source: Zsófia Ács, Ács 2010, 203).



Fig. 3 — Chain mail-fragment. Secondary usage: mechanical removal of impurities (Sources: after Doris Fischer 2015, 64).

There is probably another example for this secondary usage in Kőszeg, where a piece of chain mail turned up in a secondary position during the excavations between 1960-1962 of Imre Holl in the area of Kőszeg castle and this may have had the same function. The piece of broken chain mail was in a 15th century rubbish layer. The diameter of the small rings, made of wires with a circular section, is 8 mm. (Holl 1992, 69. and 178. picture 4).

The investigation, the collection of finds, the review, the discovery of the written sources and pictorial sources of such an everyday activity as washing-up, which „sours” women’s and men’s life even in the 21st century, help us to understand better Hungarian Renaissance culinary practice. The objects listed above can be identified by investigating the various sources which give information about the workings of a kitchen, the culinary processes, hygiene, tools and equipment.

The context and its date suggest that the foreign example could have been used in Hungary. This type of practical approach can advance our understanding of the identity and use of objects from archaeological excavations formerly known as ‘strange and incongruous’.

Many thanks for Zsófia Ács (Forster Center, Budapest) archeologist for putting the unpublished material at my disposal.

Post scriptum: The several thousand years survival of the objects shows that it is produced and used nowadays (in 2016!) as well in the United States ⁽⁵⁾.

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Notes :

(1) This „eco-friendly” method is timeless. I saw an example with my own eyes at the beginning of the 2000s at the farm-house of my grandmother who used exclusively hot water for the „black washing-up”. It is an ancient art of recycling when the hot and dirty water was given a secondary use for the feeding of animals (pigwash) after the grease removal.

(2) Ash: The ash after burning wood contains numerous rich mineral salts. It has a strong basic reaction (its pH-value is between 10-13). The cleaning effect of the base depends on its potassium content, that is why the strength of the base of the ash is different after burning different sorts of wood. It is an excellent purificant, and was also used mixed with sand for scrubbing.

(3) The environmental properties in Hungary do not allow the conservation of tools made of wood and other organic materials. Of course there are some positive examples than it certifies foreign examples and the findings of the water wells in Buda. Among the excavated kitchen equipment made of wood there are wooden spoons, platters, wooden plates, wooden cups, wooden tubs, wooden salt cellars. (Írásné Melis 1973 ; Holl 1992 ; Holl 2005).

(4) Horsetail.

(5) <http://www.ausgraeberei.de/kochbuch/panzerfleck.html>.

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Afin de faciliter le fonctionnement du Comité de Lecture et le travail de la Rédaction (vérifications linguistiques en particulier), les dates de dépôt des manuscrits pour le Bulletin sont : **au plus tard, le 1^{er} mars** (pour le numéro de juin) et **le 1^{er} septembre** (pour le numéro de décembre).

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