

## TO HAVE AND TO HOLD... THREE HANDLES FROM THE BUCHAREST MUNICIPALITY MUSEUM

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**Keywords:** *patera, patella, Medusa, ram, XRF spectrometry.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *patera, patella, Medusa, berbec, spectometrie XRF.*

**Abstract:** *The handles discussed in this paper belong to the collections of the Bucharest Municipality Museum. All three come from Roman ritual vessels, two from paterae, while the third could have belonged to a patella type of vessel. Although two of the items have been previously published, this paper adds new information regarding their chemical composition and general description.*

**Rezumat:** *Cele trei mânere prezentate în această lucrare fac parte din colecțiile Muzeului Municipiului București. Toate cele trei obiecte provin de la vase de cult din perioada romană, două de la paterae, iar al treilea ar fi putut aparține unui vas de tip patella. Două dintre mânere au fost publicate anterior, dar în această lucrare adăugăm noi informații referitoare la compoziția lor chimică și descriere.*

### Introduction

The three handles included in this paper are currently part of the “Maria and George Severeanu Collection” (no. 1-2) and the Archaeology Collection (no. 3) of *Bucharest Municipality Museum* (MMB), but with no place of discovery marked on the artefacts. Two of them (no. 1-2) have been previously published<sup>1</sup>, while the third has not, to our knowledge. The paper aims both at completing the information available on the published items and introducing the previously unknown item to the discussion on the fabrication and use of this particular type of cult objects, by means of their additional compositional analysis.

*Patera* is a ritual vessel in the form of a shallow pan with a long handle, used in sacrificial ceremonies involving libations, such as offerings of wine or other liquids to the gods. The vessels continue the tradition of the Greek *phialae* and were mainly produced out of metal hammered into shape, after which a wax cast handle was attached<sup>2</sup>. Mentions of such vessels are scarce in ancient literature, but there is one text where the object is of importance to the plot, Plautus’ play *Amphitruo*<sup>3</sup>. In the storyline, king Pterelas brings a *patera* as a war trophy that would later be used by Amphitruo and Sosia to emphasize the victory. The vessel is stolen by the god Jupiter who disguises himself as Amphitruo in order to impress and woo Alcumena, Amphitruo’s wife. The

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\* Bucharest Municipality Museum.

<sup>1</sup> Ștefănescu 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Vassilika 1998, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Bolt 2013.

latter accuses his wife of being unfaithful, but she defends herself using the *patera* as proof, which could have only been given to her by her husband. Mentions of this vessel appear in other literary texts belonging to Varro<sup>4</sup> and Macrobius<sup>5</sup>.

The term for a smaller, similar vessel is *patella*<sup>6</sup>, also a small bowl with one handle, mentioned by Varro<sup>7</sup>, who said that this particular item was used for household rituals and by Ovid<sup>8</sup>, in honour of the goddess Vesta and the Lars. The libations were part of the ritual practices performed both publicly and in a domestic environment. The people in charge of performing them were priests/priestesses, magistrates and the emperor or his wife<sup>9</sup>.

The *paterae* are frequently depicted in various forms in iconography, from representation in architecture to coins, emphasizing their role in the religious life of the Romans. In architecture, for the province of Dacia, where most of the similar items were discovered, the representations were quantified at 24% of all representations of vessels. Usually the vessel is depicted in a funerary or votive context, placed on the ritual table, *mensa*, along with other objects sometimes it is held by a female. In the votive context, the *patera* is associated with the gods Jupiter, Aesculap, Hygeia, Fortuna, Juno, Mithra, Stata Mater, Pan, Persephone, Genius nautarum and Cybele<sup>10</sup>. A ritual involving the use of a *patera* is depicted in Scene VIII of Trajan's column, where the emperor, as *pontifex maximus*, is officiating the purification of the army, *lustratio exercitus*, by pouring on a flame in front of an altar. The same use of the *patera* by the emperor is depicted in scenes LXXXVI, XCI, XCIX of the same column<sup>11</sup>. In Roman Dacia, bronze *patera* discoveries with animal *protoma* are not uncommon, they were attested in the capital, Ulpia Traiana Sarmisegetusa and other military and civilian sites, at Gilău, Tibiscum, Buciumi, Inlăceni, Porolissum, Drobeta<sup>12</sup>. In sites such as Micăsasa<sup>13</sup>, Apulum<sup>14</sup> and Romula<sup>15</sup>, in modern Oltenia, ceramic variants were discovered, always from fine fabric and with a red slip or green glaze, in the latter case presumably

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<sup>4</sup> Varro *De ling. lat.*, Lib.V. 26 : *Praeterea in poculis erant paterae, ab eo quod late patent ita dictae. Hisce etiam nunc in publico convivio antiquitatis retinendae causa, cum magistri fiunt, potio circumfertur, et in sacrificando deis hoc poculo magistratus dat deo vinum. Pocula a potione, unde potatio et etiam posca. Haec possunt a potoi, quod potos potio Graece.*

<sup>5</sup> Macr. *Sat.* 5.21: *Sed Plautus insuetum nomen reliquit, atque in fabula Amphitryone pateram datam, cum longe utriusque poculi figura diversa sit. Patera enim, ut et ipsum nomen indicio est, planum ac patens est, carchesium vero procerum et circa mediam partem compressum, ansatum mediocriter, ansis a summo ad infimum pertingentibus.*

<sup>6</sup> Matthews 1969, p. 32, photo of a bronze *patella* from Nubia with a human head at the end of the handle.

<sup>7</sup> Varro *De ling. lat.* 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ovid, *Fasti*. II, 310 (Vesta), 630-635 (Lares).

<sup>9</sup> Morelli 2005, p. 178-179.

<sup>10</sup> Rusu-Bolindeț 1994, p. 120.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion see Vulpe 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Ștefănescu 2004, p. 422.

<sup>13</sup> Rusu-Bolindeț 1997, Taff.2, no.6

<sup>14</sup> Rusu-Bolindeț 1997, Taff.3 Zylindrische Griffe 1-3.

<sup>15</sup> Hayes 1997, p. 72, Pl.29 Knidian relief ware; Zhuravlev 2002, fig.29 Knidian Relief Ware/Panticapeum; for a recent discovery in Romania see Negru, Schuster 2016, Pl.84/1611 ceramic handle with brown glaze from Romula.

attempting to imitate metal. In one of the sites, at Micăsasa<sup>16</sup>, a cast was discovered for the ceramic variants, leading to the suggestion that local production existed here.

### **Typology. Description. Composition.**

Usually, the handles are decorated with an animal *protoma* (ram, lion, dolphin, etc.) or a human face. In the case of our three handles, we encounter both types. It is difficult to assess the typology of the dishes to which they were applied, as we have no indication regarding them. The same can be stated for an accurate dating, as none have a place of origin. In general, such vessels were largely produced starting with the 1<sup>st</sup> until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. Although there are noticeable similarities between our items and other discoveries on the Romanian territory, given dr. Severeanu's proclivity for enhancing his collection and the fact that this type of vessels follows very similar patterns in a very standardized production in the empire, it is not impossible for the three fragments to originate from other provinces. It seems that specialized workshops also appeared in the Danubian lands, both for repairs and for production<sup>17</sup>, making it again more difficult to identify a point of origin for the items.

The handle with the Medusa head has been considered to belong to type G of the Canterbury *paterae*, in H.U. Nuber's typology. Vessels with such decoration were made starting with the Flavian dynasty in Italian, Gallic, Britton, German and Black Sea workshops<sup>18</sup>.

The handles decorated with the ram's head are fairly common and such items were also discovered in Drobeta, Buciumi, Tibiscum<sup>19</sup>. These *paterae* were categorized as type E – Millingen/Eggers 154-155 and thought to be the standard for production for a long period<sup>20</sup>.

All three handles have ribbed shafts for a firmer grip and are also decorated at the end to be applied on the dish. However, apart from the iconography, other differences stand out: first, the style of the Medusa is cruder, while the ram benefits from a more detailed representation. Secondly, the Medusa handle (no. 1) shows two perforated holes made for fixating it onto the dish.

The composition analysis was performed using ED-XRF spectrometry within the 45 kV, 36 mA parameters, 38 kV, 30 mA, 60 seconds for acquisition, in the Bucharest Municipality Museum laboratory<sup>21</sup>. All three artefacts have been cleaned and the measurements taken once on three points selected on the front, rear and centre. As noticed from the results, the two handles from the Severeanu collection are both bronze and share similar characteristics, but it is their morphological similarities that make it easy to assume they were produced using similar techniques. No. 1 shows a higher percentage of lead in its composition, entering the category of leaded tin bronzes containing little or no zinc<sup>22</sup>. However, this higher percentage can also be explained by

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<sup>16</sup> Rusu-Bolindeț 1997, p. 330.

<sup>17</sup> Ștefănescu 2004, p. 423-425; Nuber 1972.

<sup>18</sup> Ștefănescu 2004, p. 423, no.7, Pl.III.1.

<sup>19</sup> Ștefănescu 2004, p. 423, no.11, no.12

<sup>20</sup> Nuber 1972, p. 45; Eggers 1955; Ștefănescu 2004, p. 423-4; Dieudonné-Glad *et alii* 2013, p. 191.

<sup>21</sup> The analysis was performed by chemist Ingrid Poll, Bucharest Municipality Museum.

<sup>22</sup> Waldbaum 1983, p. 173, no. 513 in Sardis.

the lead bar still preserved within the shaft. The third object, from the Archaeology collection, is made from copper alloy. Although only one handle preserved the lead bar, the results show the presence of this metal in the composition of all three. This is not enough evidence to assume that similar bars were inserted in the other two shafts, although they are now void and such a procedure would have assured balance of a larger dish.

1. Handle with a Medusa head (Plate I.1, a-b).

*Inv. no.:* 19221

*Preservation state:* Fragmentary, good.

*Dimensions*<sup>23</sup>: L = 11.6 cm, L of the Medusa = 3.7 cm, Diam. of shaft = 1.8 cm, W = 275 gr.

*Description:* Fluted, ribbed handle with a shaft preserving a lead bar inserted, and the end attached to the dish. The end towards the dish ends with a collar. The end plate is decorated with *ovae* and waves and shows two perforated holes for applying with the use of pins. The head of the Medusa is rather sketchy, the features are depicted with simple lines, surrounded by a depiction of the ram and fleece.

*Composition (%)*:

Mn	Fe	Ni	Cu	Zn	Sn	Sb	Pb	Obs.
0	0.07	0.08	83.4	0.1	11.7	0.3	4.3	bronze

*Reference:* Gramatopol 1982, 187, pl. XXVII, 3; Ştefănescu 2004, 428, no.13, Pl. IV.

2. Handle with a ram's head (Plate I. 2, a-b).

*Preservation state:* Fragmentary, good.

*Inv. no.:* 19210

*Dimensions:* L = 14 cm, L of the ram 3.8 cm, Diam. of shaft = 2.4 cm, W = 312 gr.

*Description:* Fluted, ribbed, handle with a void shaft, still preserving the end applied to the dish decorated with floral motifs. Each end of the shaft shows a collar and the one towards the dish is decorated with beads. The ram is carefully depicted, the features and the fleece are clear and detailed and the years stand out.

*Composition (%)*:

Mn	Fe	Ni	Cu	Zn	Sn	Sb	Pb	Obs.
0	0.04	0.02	90.4	0.02	8.4	0.2	0.8	bronze

*Reference:* Gramatopol 1982, 187, pl. XXVII, 2.; Ştefănescu 2003, 426, no.7, Pl. IV.

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<sup>23</sup> L = Length, Diam. = Diameter, W = Weight.

3. Handle with a ram's head (Plate I. 3, a-c).

*Preservation state:* Fragmentary, good.

*Inv. no.:* 17905

*Dimensions:* L = 12.35 cm, Diam. of shaft = 2.24 cm, L. of ram = 5.3 cm (including the collar).

*Description:* Fluted, ribbed, handle with a void shaft, not preserving the end applied to the dish. The preserved end of the shaft is decorated with collars, two with incised vertical lines and one in between with incised dots. The features of the animal are unclear, barely incised, but the ram itself is detailed and the years stand out.

*Composition (%):*

Fe	Ni	Cu	Zn	Sn	Sb	Pb	Obs.
0.2	0.1	87.8	10.3	1	0	0.4	Copper based alloy

### Discussion and concluding remarks

From an iconographic point of view, the head of Medusa, also called *Gorgoneion*, used as an apotropaic image, draws its symbolism from the original myth: after Perseus cuts off her head, her blood got the ability to resurrect the dead and heal the wounded<sup>24</sup>. It is said that the magical horse Pegasus was born from the blood resulted after the beheading<sup>25</sup> and the blood-drops from the head spawned deadly serpents<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, the head is a powerful apotropaic symbol for repealing evil since the legend tells us that anyone who gazed at her was turned into stone, including Dionysus/Bacchus's wife, Ariadne<sup>27</sup>. The use of this symbol could also be related to the idea of transformation, since initially, Medusa was a beautiful young woman violated by Poseidon in the temple of Minerva. The goddess then punished Medusa by transforming her hair into snakes<sup>28</sup>. Considering that the liquid selected from the ritual was poured from a pitcher, *oinochoe*, the notion that it undergoes a symbolic transformation when passed onto the *patera* is not too far-fetched. Since these vessels were used for libation, given the legend, the choice for the Medusa decoration could lead to the assumption that the vessel was even used for pouring blood, not to exclude other liquids used during ceremonies.

As mentioned before, the *paterae* with handles ending with a ram's head are common in the empire. The ram is also considered one of the symbols of the god Dionysus and presumably the vessels were used for wine libations. It is also one of the most famous Greek symbols and the Golden Fleece myth is the centre of the Argonauts' journey. According to the legend, re-told by a roman author<sup>29</sup>, Theophrastus, the god

<sup>24</sup> Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 2. 4; Vassilika 1998, p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> Hesiod, *Theog.* 270; Strabo, *Geogr.* 8. 6. 21; Ovid, *Met.* 5. p. 254.

<sup>26</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 4. p. 770.

<sup>27</sup> Strabo, *Geogr.* 10. 5. 10; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4. 653, 4. p. 740; Nonnus, *Dionisyaca.* 25. 80; 47. p. 665.

<sup>28</sup> Ovid *Met.* 6.119, 4. p. 770.

<sup>29</sup> Pseudo-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 188.

Neptune took a beautiful maiden with many suitors to the island of Crumissa. She was followed there by the suitors, but to deceive them, the god turned the maiden into an ewe, himself into a ram and the people of the island into cattle. When the suitors arrived on the island and saw only animals, they began to slaughter the cattle for food. Feeling sorry for the people he turned into animals, Neptune turned the suitors into wolves. While still in a ram's form, Neptune lays with Theophane and from their union is born the *Chrysomallus*, the Golden-Fleeced ram. A connection to Dionysus is mentioned by the same author when retelling the story of how Phrixus was supposed to be sacrificed to Zeus, but rescued by his mother, Nephele, who sends him the Golden-Fleeced ram to fly away on. Phrixus and his sister, Helle, were thrown by the Dionysus in a state of madness and while lost in a forest were again rescued by Nephele. Helle fell into the sea, which hereafter became the Hellespont, but Phrixus arrived in Colchis where he sacrificed the ram which had carried him<sup>30</sup>. Such an iconographic symbol could have been used due to its magical attributes, like in the use of the Gorgoneion, and reference to the sacrifice, but the main connection with Dionysus remains the liquid contained by the vessels during libations: the wine.

One of the most famous vessels with a ram head handle was discovered in Cambridge in 1709, as part of a two - piece deposit known as the "Dam Hill bronzes" (*patera* and *oinochoe*). This handle is solid, cast separately and soldered into place, that seem to have an Italian origin. The handle ends in a ram's head and is similar to our two items and the discovery of the dish can paint the image of how the complete vessels looked like<sup>31</sup>. Several other bronze *paterae*, often in connection with a jug, have been discovered in England, in elite burial contexts from the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., and the association between the two types of vessels (*patera* and *oinochoe*) has been attested by further discoveries made in Greece and the Balkans<sup>32</sup>. One particularly interesting vessel was discovered in Pompeii and crafted out of cameo glass by means of a special technique of etching and carving through fused layers of differently coloured glass. This dish also has a flute handle terminating in a ram's head and depictions of Dionysus' cortege with a satyr and vine leaves<sup>33</sup>.

In the eastern provinces, items decorated with the ram's head find analogies to a discovery in Zeugma, made out of bronze, with a cylinder diameter of 2.8 cm and a very naturalist depiction of the animal<sup>34</sup>. Another handle, this time with a very detailed representation, was discovered and analysed in Sardis. Analysis showed that it was made out of a leaded tin bronze, with little or no Zinc, like our items, and the shaft was apparently formed over a core of other material, maybe a casting core<sup>35</sup>. Another similar item was discovered in Nubia, this time a *patella*, smaller than a *patera*, but as discusses before, the main difference between the two types is that the first was used in a household environment, although with the same purpose of performing libation to the gods.

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<sup>30</sup> Hyginus, *Fabulae* 3 ; Pausanias, *Grec.Descr.* 1. 24. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Burn, Moore 2011, Fig.2-3.

<sup>32</sup> Burn, Moore 2011, p. 411-412.

<sup>33</sup> Grasso, Lista 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Dieudonné-Glad *et alii* 2013, no. 1089.

<sup>35</sup> Waldbaum 1983, p. 91, no. 513, Pl. 33.

As concluding remarks, there is a difference in size and weight between the ram terminated handles and the Medusa handle, so the assumption that the latter came from a *patella* is not too far-fetched. The Medusa handle preserved the lead bar inserted into the shaft and given its weight, by comparison, could sustain a rather large dish. Even without the lead bar, the other handles are heavier and could have sustained as such a dish larger and heavier than the Medusa handle. We could presume that lead bars were inserted in the shafts at the moment of fabrication as lead residue was detected during the chemical analysis, indicating the possibility of a sizeable dish attached to each of them. These observations seem to support the hypothesis that the Medusa handle belonged to a *patella*, while the other two came from *paterae*, but this issue could only become resolved with the discovery of the dishes.

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**Plate I.** *Paterae/patella* handles (photos).

**Planșa I.** Mânere de pateră/patelă (fotografii).



Plate I. *Paterae/patella* handles: 1. 19221, 2. 19210, 3. 17905