

COME DOWN TO THE RIVER! THE EARLIEST CELTIC PRESENCE IN DALMATIA

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Abstract: *Several La Tène style artefacts were discovered in the river Cetina in Dalmatia (Croatia) far away from any other similar contemporary finds. Weapons – two swords and a belt chain originated most probably from the area of Northern Italy or were produced in a workshop working under the technical and stylistic influence of the Boii from the region around today's Bologna. They were discovered in an area where these specific weapons were not accepted in the local Late Iron Age. Taking into consideration the broader political circumstances in the 4th century BC as well as the local development we can assume that these items belonged to the Adriatic Celts – the highly mobile mercenary force organized and managed by the Syracusan Greeks.*

Keywords: *Croatia, Cetina river, Late Iron Age, Early La Tène, Celts, long-distant contacts.*

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SIĐI DO REKE! NAJRANIJE KELTSKO PRISUSTVO U DALMACIJI

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Apstrakt: *U reci Cetini u Dalmaciji (Hrvatska), daleko od bilo kojeg drugog sličnog suvremenog nalaza, pronađeno je nekoliko predmeta latenskog stila izrade. Oružje – dva mača i ulomak gvozdenog pletenog pojasa, potiču najverovatnije iz područja severne Italije ili su proizvedeni u radionici koja je radila pod tehničkim i stilskim uticajem Boja, iz regiona oko današnje Bolonje. Otkriveni su dakle na području gde ta specifična oprema nije prihvaćena u lokalnom mlađem gvozdenom dobu. Uzimajući u obzir šire političke okolnosti u IV veku pre n. e., kao i lokalni razvoj, možemo pretpostaviti da su ti predmeti pripadali jadranskim Keltima – izuzetno pokretnim snagama plaćenika koje su organizirali i kontrolirali sirakuški Grci.*

Ključne reči: *Hrvatska, reka Cetina, mlađe gvozdeno doba, ranolatensko razdoblje, Kelti, kontakti na duge udaljenosti.*

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INTRODUCTION

There were only a few narratives from antiquity, which so profoundly influenced our perception of the past. Unimaginable horrors, reflected through the words of ancient authors, echoed through the centuries and became one of the most intensively discussed episodes of Greek (and European) history – the Celtic invasion to the south. Depicted by the greatest artists of their time, images of these barbarians addressed so directly our imagination that even the romantic paintings seemed like a real historical source. Like if breathing the same air as the ancient Greeks, historians would write history declaring compassion with the keepers and expressing their disgust towards the destroyers of civilization. As if driven solemnly by an almost animalic greed these plunder hungry hordes caused previously unimaginable chaos on their way to the south... However, was it really so? Was this violent episode, which changed the course of Greek (and Macedonian) history, the first and the most dramatic episode in the clash of cultures?

In the last decades, the perspectives changed. Modern archaeological interpretation demonstrated that these events were just an episode (and not even the final one) in a long-lasting series of intensive contacts based not on unilateral, but reciprocal relations. Not only finds of Greek (and Macedonian) origins in Europe were interpreted anew, the quantity of prehistoric (and stylistically Celtic) material, preceding these dramatic events, started to build upon the borders and within the Greek world. Detailed observations demonstrated different patterns of deposition clearly showing the nature and contexts of these social and economic contacts. Further north Greek and Macedonian artefacts were discovered in graves, but in the south, Celtic items were mostly discovered in sanctuaries or contexts connected with religious activities (Blečić Kavur and Kavur 2010; Kavur and Blečić Kavur 2018). This is just a short story about one of such contexts, about an amazing site, unique and outstanding not only in the region but also much broader. This is the story about just three items discovered in one of the richest archaeological sites in Europe, in one of the sanctuaries, which, despite lacking the shining glamour of white marbles attracted people for millennia – this is a single stone from the colourful mosaic of archaeological finds discovered in river Cetina.

JUST THREE PIECES



Figure 1. The geographical position of Trilj area in the Sinj Field with the inflow of the river Ruda into the Cetina river (based on *Google Earth* 2019).

The river Cetina in central Dalmatia (Croatia) (Fig. 1) was a well-known archaeological site from the 19th century, but at the end of the 1980s, the quantity of archaeological finds deriving from the river increased. Although coming mostly from the area between the confluence with the stream Ruda and the bridge in Trilj the archaeological survey in the river did not yield any finds or structures and consequently it was considered that the finds discovered in the river Cetina, might have derived from the river Ruda (Milošević 1992a, 46; Milošević 1992b, 88)(Fig. 1). Today housed in several museums, the collections are a result of decades of systematic and opportunistic gatherings, performed not only by specialists but also by interested local inhabitants.

Amongst other prehistoric finds kept in the private property of Milan Gilić are three extraordinary elements of Celtic weaponry – an Early La Tène style sword, a fragment of the chape end and scabbard from a second sword and a fragment of a belt chain. The first sword was several times briefly mentioned by Ante Milošević (Milošević 1992b, 87, Fig. 2; Milošević 1998, 291, Fig. 482; Milošević 1999, 208, Fig. 6). Its photograph was reproduced in the exhibition catalogue *Numini Hippi Fluvii* where it was for the first time mentioned that the prehistoric finds might have been ritually deposited in the river (Milošević 2003, 27). Finally, the sword was discussed in details by the authors in 2014 (Kavur and Blečić Kavur 2014). A few years later, in 2018, also the second sword was presented (Kavur 2018).

More than 20 years after its discovery the preserved sword is still covered with corrosion (Fig. 2). The scabbard is almost completely preserved – the upper edge of the mouth is decorated with a barely-visible hatched band running between two incised lines and the front plate is on the top decorated with a depicted dragon pair. The short chape-end is open and heart-shaped with two circular clamps on the upper, and a slightly concave bridge on the lower side. On the point of rupture, where the chape-end widens are two circular, slightly flattened buttons tapped into the inner side. The concave rods of the chape end between the circular buttons and the chape clamps are decorated with incised transverse lines. The larger chape clamps are circular – on the reverse side, they are plain and decorated only with a thin circular line running along the edges, while on the front side they are decorated with a motive of a triskele ending with open-beaked dragon heads. The rods forming the end of the chape are a little bit convex and thickened towards the curved tip (Fig. 2).

Swords scabbards with an open reinforced chape end of deltoid shaped were termed as Kosd D (Petres and Szabó 1985, 91) and by mapping them Peter Ramsel observed that their occurrence is concentrated in the Carpathian basin (Ramsel 2003, 256, Fig. 12). This statement was later supplemented by the authors demonstrating their occurrence outside of this region – in Northern Italy and Dalmatia, in the river Cetina (Blečić Kavur and Kavur 2010, 71) and later on the territory between France and Romania (Kavur and Blečić Kavur 2014, 266–267). Generally, we would agree that it would be better to describe the chape ends as „heart-shaped” (Ramsel 2002, 79) and we can divide them into two groups – the first group including swords with more curved and shorter chape end and the second group with more pointed and elongated chape ends (Kavur and Blečić Kavur 2014, 266–267). In to the first group could be included, beside the find from Cetina, swords from France (grave 21 in Gourgançon and the find from the vicinity of Chalon-sur-Seine), Italy (graves 121 and 94 from Monte Tamburino at Monte Bibele, the old Rilli collection from Numana and grave 8 from Trivio di Serra S. Quirico), Austria (grave 520 from Pottenbrunn) and Hungary (grave 3 from Novajidrány-Sárvár)(Fig. 2) (Kavur and Blečić Kavur 2014, 266).

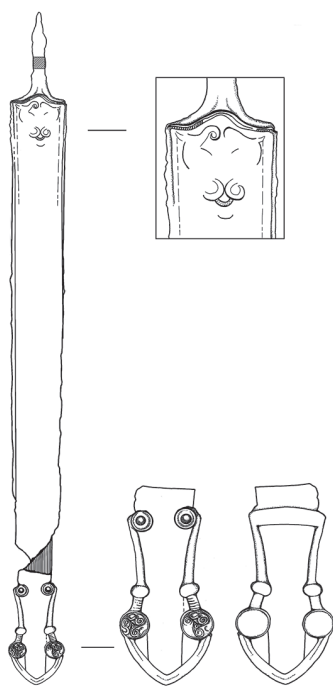


Figure 2. Finds from Cetina river – Kosd D type sword (according to Kavur and Blečić Kavur 2014).

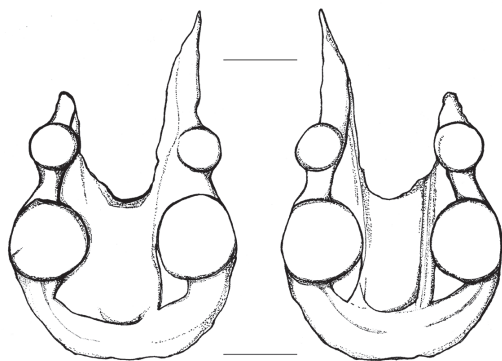


Figure 3. Finds from Cetina river – fragment of a Kosd A2 type sword (according to Kavur 2017).

clamps with its triple spiral finishing in the form of the dragon's head on the sword from Cetina. It seems that triskeles made in plastic style and composed of dragon heads may be dated to Lt B2, while later in phases Lt B2/C1 and C1, the stylistic development of the dragon's heads become reduced and deconstructed (Kavur and Blečić Kavur 2014, 268–269).

Only a short annular chape end of the open ring-shaped type with the remains of a scabbard is preserved from the second sword (Fig. 3). The chape clamps are of a round type and on the front side, they are convex while on the backside they are flat. Although only a small fragment is preserved, we can observe that the scabbard consists of two cambered plates where the front plate overlaps the reverse one with edges of the wider plate being folded over the edges of the narrower one to the point of the sheath. According to its shape, the fragment could be included into the group of Hatvan–Boldog style swords, which were according to the form of the chape end divided into several types termed Kosd A to D (Petres and Szabó 1985, 91, Abb. 7). It was demonstrated that swords of this type originated in the Lt B1 period on the territory between the Marne, Southern Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, to be exported later, with the Celtic migrations, into the Carpathian Basin and Italy (Lejars 1994, 39–42; Stöllner 1998; Rustoiu 2013, 223, Fig. 8). Several authors focused on the classification of these swords (Petres and Szabó 1985; Charpy 1987; Rapin 1995; 2000) – their interpretation was supplemented with analyses of individual elements of scabbards such as suspension loops and frontal reinforcements of the scabbards (Lejars 1994). Taking into consideration these classifications, the fragment of the scabbard from the Cetina river should be included in the Kosd A2 group according to É. Petres and M. Szabó, Variant 1 according to T. Lejars and Type 1A according to J.-J. Charpy.

In an analysis of scabbards with open chape ends of a non-circular form, Thierry Lejars demonstrated that they should be dated to the last horizon of the Early La Tène period (Lt B2)(Lejars 1994, 44–47). The same conclusion was reached by M. Szabó and É. Petres (Szabó and Petres 1992), demonstrating that the swords from Kosd D group could be still included in the period Lt B2. We came to the same conclusion by observing the plastic decoration of chape

The third piece discovered is a fragment of an iron belt chain consisting of a large iron ring with a diameter of some 6cm and the 14cm long remains of the belt chain (Fig. 4). It belongs to the rarest group of iron chain belts – the so-called loop-in-loop type. These belt chains were discussed in detail by M. Schönfelder, A. Rustoiu and D. Repka (Schönfelder 1998; Rustoiu 2008, 105–116; Repka 2015) who concluded that they were produced only in small numbers, in a short period during the Celtic migrations. Chronologically dated to the end of Early La Tène period (Lt B2) they were interpreted as an item of material culture created after the Celtic immigration to Northern Italy. Their distribution was viewed because of contacts and communications of these populations with Celtic communities in their places of origins in North-Eastern France (Schönfelder 1998, 84–87).



Figure 4. A fragment of a loop-in-loop type belt chain (courtesy of Milan Gilić).

The general form of the best-preserved sword subtly suggest, that we should look for its origin in workshops of Northern Italy, while the plastic decoration of the chape clamps with its triskeles, finishing in the form of the dragon's heads are, according to their form, elaboration and semantic meaning, closely comparable to the decoration of the younger group of Kosd A type swords from the Carpathian basin dated to Lt B2. Still, these swords demonstrate a wide distribution similar to the general distribution of Hatvan–Boldog type swords (Stöllner 1998, Beilage 3; Rustoiu 2013, 223, Fig. 8), the type into which could be included the second preserved fragment of the scabbard. The discovered belt chain suggests the same connection – relation between Northern Italy and the Celtic „core” territory in North-Eastern France also. Although there are no known relations between the three items, which were discovered as isolated finds, their typological characteristics and stylistic features demonstrate approximately the same age and strongly suggest that northern Italy is most probably their place of production.

ACROSS THE SEA

Economic and cultural contacts between communities from Central Europe and cultures of central and eastern Mediterranean could be traced back to the Early Iron Age. These contacts are not only demonstrated by artefacts from the western Mediterranean discovered in prestigious contexts in central Europe, but also by discoveries illustrating the opposite cultural flow – elements of mostly

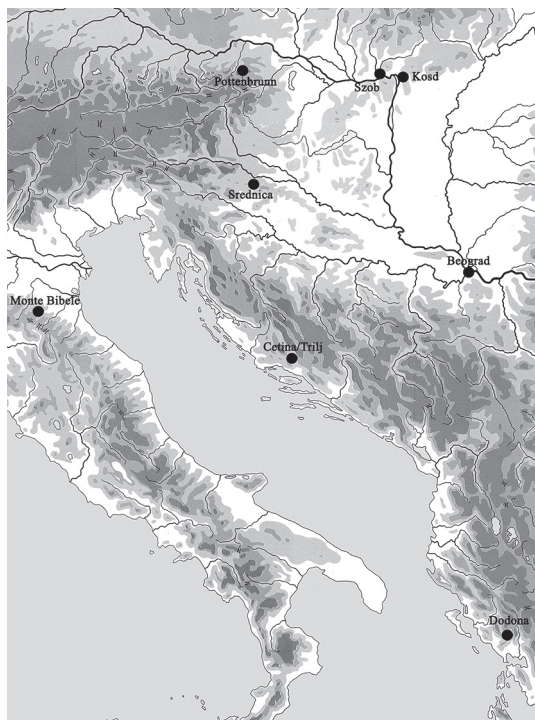


Figure 5. Map showing major sites mentioned in the text (according to Kavur and Blečić Kavur 2014).

female attire originating from „prehistoric” Europe were discovered in Greek and Sicilian sanctuaries (Verger 2003; Verger 2011). Coming from the most important Pan-Hellenic sanctuaries, such as the Heraion in Perachora where anklet rings, bracelets and decorative discs that could be dated to the 6th century BC. These contacts persisted for centuries as demonstrated by the presence of walnut-shaped anklet rings in Isthmia (Caskey 1960; Krämer 1961), fibulae of the Middle La Tène schema from Dodona (Megaw 1968, 187–188; Megaw 2004, 100) and the sanctuary of Apollo in Delos (Kavur and Blečić Kavur 2018)(Fig. 5). It seems that majority of isolated Celtic artefacts originating from the Balkan territory were discovered in sanctuaries of the Greek world (Szabó 1971, 514)

in a consistent chronological horizon encompassing the end of the Early and the beginning of the Middle La Tène period. Traditionally this was considered as being linked to the events of 279 and 278 BC – mostly since the presence of finds in sanctuaries was interpreted as if they were parts of *trophaia* (Maier 1973, 477). However, several finds, such as the Early La Tène style sword from Dodona and the anklet rings from Isthmia predate the assumed historical event (Szabó 1971, 503)(Fig. 5). On the other hand, the analysis of Macedonian artistic products in prehistoric contexts in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe demonstrated that intensive diplomatic contacts, accompanied by a flow of luxury goods, also predated the famous events (Blečić Kavur and Kavur 2010; Kavur and Blečić Kavur 2018). Recently authors began focusing on burials of warriors and interpreting them in different circumstances – as mercenaries coming from the Celtic world and diffusing their artefacts all across the Eastern and Central Mediterranean (Rustoiu 2013; Blečić Kavur and Kavur 2017)(Fig. 5). As such were interpreted also the artefacts from ritual or sacred places raising the question of whether they were deposited there by their original owners (Megaw 2004, 104).

Still, these events should be contemplated in a broader scope of historical events in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean. It was in the years 369–368

BC that Dionysius the Elder from Sicily had dispatched Celtic mercenaries to assist Sparta fighting the Thebans (Sordi 2002, 496; Occhipinti 2006, 79; cf. Treister 1996, 245). This strategic decision was a part of Dionysius plans to build up a maritime empire in the Adriatic. By reporting about this campaign Xenophon authored in his *Hellenica* the first incontestable description of Celtic mercenaries in ancient sources (Freeman 1996, 20). These Celts were collaborating with Syracuse even before the sack of Rome (Zuffa 1978, 139; Bridgman 2003, 49) and continued in their service, as mercenaries in their campaigns against Kroton and Locri (Bouzek 2002, 55; Szabó 1991, 333). It was a period when they entered the Mediterranean to be employed in the distant parts of the *oikumene* (Treister 1996, 248) but several authors noted that the decision of Dionysius the Elder to supply his mercenaries with their traditional weapons enabled them to preserve their identity (Lejars 2006, 91) and reputation for toughness in battle (Freeman 1996, 21). In this perspective, all La Tène style artefacts, not only armament, were symbolic object designating the special status of these individuals and their affiliation with a social group of warriors identifying themselves as being „Celts” – a group of mercenary warriors keeping their privileges across the Mediterranean.

Taking into consideration the proposed chronological revision of Celtic presence in central Balkan (Blečić Kavur and Kavur 2010, 73–76; Kavur and Guštin 2011, 129–130) and chronological observations of Celtic finds in northern Italy (Vitali 1987), the finds from Cetina river near Trilj predate the dramatic events in the Balkans in 279 BC. Celts were present in the Southern Adriatic/Aegean area much previous as suggested by the earliest deposition of Celtic weapons in Greek sanctuaries known for example from the old temple of Athena on the Acropolis in Athens dated before the middle of the 4th century BC (Freeman 1996, 23). Besides, most importantly – these Celts did not come from the Carpathian Basin. The ritual deposition of their weapons, loaded with symbolism, should be observed as a part of the processes taking place in the 4th century BC when the Celts from Northern Italy entered the Mediterranean as mercenaries engaged in the political ambitions of Dionysius the Elder from Syracuse. Becoming the „Adriatic Celts” (Guštin 2005a, 112–113; Guštin 2005b, 50–52) which, dispatched across the Adriatic, were actively involved in ritual activities in temples and sacred sites in and on the fringes of the Greek world. Their weapons were ritually deposited in a sacred place in a river where similar sacrifices had already been performed over several centuries (Milošević 1999, 206–210; Blečić Kavur and Pravidur 2012, 77; Blečić Kavur 2017). These artefacts, whether spoils of war or precious gifts, demonstrating not only the concordance in ritual manipulation but also most important the acceptance and the inclusion of these Celtic mercenaries and their symbolism into the broader ideological and religious frameworks of the Greek world and its marginal territories.

Fascinated with stories presented by our teachers and armed with the knowledge they helped us to acquire, it is the role of our generation to continue

with the research of these processes. Not only new discoveries of finds but also new interpretations of artefacts long known are enabling us to shift away from historical determinism and to sight the multitude of historical and economic trajectories which led to the establishment of Celtic cultural and political dominance on the territory of central Balkans. In his multitude of interests, Miloš Jevtić constantly returned precisely to the (silver) shining heritage of Celtic contacts with the Mediterranean civilizations. This is just a humble dedication...

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SIĐI DO REKE! Najraniji keltsko prisustvo u Dalmaciji

Rezime

Dalmatinska reka Cetina već je dugo vremena poznato, bogato arheološko nalazište. Brojni nalazi, uključujući praistorijsko oružje, potiču iz njezina korita, između ušća reke Rude i mosta u Trilju. U privatnoj kolekciji Milana Gilića nalaze se tri izuzetna predmeta keltskog naoružanja – potpuno sačuvani ranolatenski mač, ulomak zaključka i korica drugog ranolatenskog mača te ulomak gvozdenog pletenog pojasa.

Najvažniji nalaz je zasigurno ranolatenski mač s koricama ukrašenim parom zmajeva i sa zakovicama doteranom stilizovanom trostrukom spiralom

koja završava u obliku zmajeve glave sa otvorenim raljama (sl. 1). Tipološki, s obzirom na oblik i stil izvedbe ukrasa, svrstava se u grupu ranolatenskih mačeva tipa Hatvan-Boldog, a zajedno sa zaključkom drugog ranolatenskog mača (sl. 2) predstavlja najjužniji poznati nalaz te vrste naoružanja mlađeg gvozdenog doba (sl. 4). Treći izuzetan predmet je ulomak gvozdenog pletenog pojasa sa većim gvozdenim obručem za pripinjanje (sl. 3). Spada u vrlo retku grupu gvozdenih, tzv. „loop-in-loop” pletenih pojaseva, koji su karakteristični za centre u kojima su se keltski spajali sa mediteranskim kulturološkim uticajima. Iako između tri spomenuta predmeta ne postoji bliska veza, tj. nisu nađeni u zajedničkom kontekstu, tipološke ali i stilske analize ukrasa pokazuju da njihovo poreklo najverovatnije možemo tražiti na prostoru današnje severne Italije.

Interpretacije sahrane keltskih ratnika na periferiji i izvan granica keltskog kulturnog miljea tek su nedavno postale konkretnija tema mnogih istraživača. Naime, počeli su da ih shvataju kao plaćenike, odnosno kao vojne najamnike, koji su, poreklom direktno iz keltskog kulturnog prostora, prenosili predmete izrađene u latenskom stilu po centralnom i istočnom Mediteranu. Kao posledice njihovog delovanja, možemo donekle rastumačiti i predmete koji potiču iz ritualnih, tj. posvećenih mesta. U toj perspektivi, ne samo oružje, već i svi latenski predmeti na neki su način bili simbolični predmeti s dodeljenim posebnim statusom. A, status je zapravo bio odraz pojedinaca i njihove pripadnosti društvenim zajednicama, u ovom primeru ratnika, koji su zadržali svoja osnovna prava na celom Sredozemlju, identifikirajući sebe „Keltima”.

Prihvatajući predloženu hronološku reviziju prisustva Kelta na centralnom i južnom Balkanu, kao i interpretacije keltskih nalaza u severnoj Italiji, možemo se složiti da su ulomak gvozdenog pletenog pojasa i mačevi tipa Hatvan-Boldog iz reke Cetine stariji od 279. godine pre n. e. kada je pokrenut val keltske invazije prema jugu, u tzv. helenski svet. Sve veći broj arheoloških zapisa sa šireg područja Balkana upućuje na zaključak da ove predmete treba razmotriti u praksi ritualnih odlaganja koja su toliko značajna za procese tokom IV veka pre n. e. Naime, tada su Kelti iz severne Italije ušli u Mediteran kao sirakuški najamnici, pa uključeni u političke i vojne ambicije Dionizija Starijeg postaju tzv. „jadranskim Keltima”, izvršiocima obrednih aktivnosti u svetištima čitave jadranske oblasti.

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