

THE HIDDEN MESSAGES OF CELTIC SYMBOLS. A DECORATED BROOCH FROM THE LA TÈNE CEMETERY AT FÂNTÂNELE – DÂMBU POPII

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Abstract: *The Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii cemetery represents a reference site for the Celtic horizon in Transylvania. The grave no. 49 from the Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii cemetery has revealed, aside from the funerary rite and rituals specific to the middle La Tène period in the Carpathian Basin, a series of practices belonging to the magical domain. On one hand, a linchpin included in the inventory of the grave had a magical purpose. On the other hand, the miniature decoration of a middle La Tène type brooch suggest that such costume accessories bearing „hidden messages” were invested with apotropaic qualities.*

Keywords: *brooches, vegetal ornaments, weapons, linchpin, chariots, La Tène, Transylvania.*

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SKRIVENE PORUKE KELTSKIH SIMBOLA. JEDNA UKRAŠENA FIBULA SA LATENSKE NEKROPOLE U FNTNELE – DMBU POPII

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Apstrakt: *Nekropola Fntnele – Dmbu Popii predstavlja referentan lokalitet za keltski horizont Transilvanije. Pored brojnih aspekata funerarnog ritusa i rituala specifičnih za srednjelatenski period, grob govori i o nizu različitih praksi vezanih za domen magijskog. Sa jedne strane čivija pronađena u grobu ima magijsku ulogu, dok sa druge strane minijaturna dekoracija srednjelatenske fibule sugerise da ovakvi delovi nošnje nose „skrивene poruke” sa apotropejskim značenjem.*

Keywords: *fibule, vegetabilni ornament, oružje, čivija, kola, laten, Transilvanija.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

I had the opportunity to meet Miloš Jevtić on many occasions starting with the 1990s, mostly at archaeological conferences and congresses in Romania, Serbia or elsewhere. On each occasion we exchanged ideas about various problems of the Iron Age archaeology in our part of the world. I'm still remembering with great pleasure our meeting in 1998 at Vršac, during a symposium dedicated to the Late Iron Age in the Danube's Iron Gates region. While sharing a bottle of local vinjak, I learned about a lot of fascinating details regarding the settlement at Židovar, which were later published



Figure 1. Miloš Jevtić and Mitja Guštin at Židovar during the visit in November 2007 (photo A. Rustoiu).

by Miloš in the proceedings of the symposium (Jevtić and Sladić 1999). Ten years later, we met again in the same location, during another symposium, this time also enjoying a visit to the major archaeological site in Banat which Miloš was investigating together with his collaborators from Belgrade and Vršac (Fig. 1; see the proceedings of the symposium in Guštin and Jevtić 2011). These friendly exchanges allowed me to note the wide range of scientific subjects which interested my colleague and friend from Belgrade, and how many of them we shared. This is the case, for example, of the various problems regarding the Late Iron Age jewellery. The discovery and publication of the Židovar hoard is just one of the many remarkable contributions of Miloš Jevtić to the field of ancient jewellery manufacturing (Jevtić et al. 2006). Therefore, it is appropriate to choose for the volume honouring the scientific activity of Miloš Jevtić to discuss an ornament discovered in the Late Iron Age cemetery at Fântânele-Dâmbu Popii, in Transylvania (Romania). Due to its unusual decoration, the artefact raises some questions regarding the manner in which decorated costume accessories were used to signal various symbolic meanings.

2. THE BROOCH FROM FÂNTÂNELE – DÂMBU POPII: CONTEXT, DESCRIPTION, DATING

The cemetery at Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii (Bistrița-Năsăud County) is located in a region in which other similar sites have been documented, demonstrating an intensive Celtic presence during the La Tène B2–C1 (see Vaida 2006). The site was accidentally discovered in 1961 (Dănilă 1978), but extensive investigations have been carried out only between 1969 and 1974 by I. H. Crișan. Some 84 burials have been added to the previously identified ones, of which eight are inhumations and the remaining ones are cremations. From the chronological point of view, the cemetery covers the La Tène B2–C1 periods. Due to the large number of burials and its long-lasting existence, the Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii cemetery represents a reference site for the Celtic horizon in Transylvania. However, most of the results of archaeological investigations led by Crișan remained largely unpublished (see short notes in Crișan 1975 and Crișan 1977, 75–77, 79–82). Some preliminary studies regarding individual burials from this important cemetery have been published more recently (Rustoiu 2008a, 55, 76–78, 121–123, Fig. 22, 35, 59; Rustoiu 2008b, 26–27, Fig. 2; Rustoiu 2009, 10–11, Fig. 2/4–5; Rustoiu 2011, 164–165, Fig. 2; Rustoiu and Egri 2010, 25–27; Rustoiu 2018 etc.).

The brooch which is discussed below comes from grave no. 49. The grave displays a series of particularities of the funerary ritual which are less common in the Carpathian Basin. Among these is the presence of one iron linchpin.

This is a cremation grave in which the remains were laid into a pit having a rectangular shape with rounded corners. The burial pit is oriented NE–SW; its maximum depth is 0,75m, while the dimensions are 2 x 1,35m (Fig. 2).

The cremated human bones were laid in the south-western side of the pit in a compact pile and on top of them was placed the meat offering (several pig bones were recovered). Some iron objects were found among the cremated bones: two rivets belonging to the shield-boss (one is now lost – Fig. 2/4), one ring (Fig. 2/7), one tube made of iron sheet (Fig. 2/6) and one large brooch with spheres on the foot (Fig. 2/10). When the cremated bones were lifted, it was noticed that the same pile of burnt remains also contained two other iron brooches and fragments of a bronze brooch (Fig. 2/8–9, 11). These artefacts were not added to the drawing of the grave.

One iron spear head (Fig. 2/1) placed perpendicularly to the long axis of the pit and one shield-boss (Fig. 2/2) placed on top of it were found in the north-eastern side of the grave. Both artefacts showed burnt traces when they were discovered. The iron linchpin having a crescent-shaped head (Fig. 2/3) was laid next to them, at 0,1m to the west.

According to the existing analogies, the weapons and other elements of the military equipment can be dated to the middle La Tène period (Rapin 1988; Lejars 1994; Dizdar 2013). The four brooches found among the grave goods are important

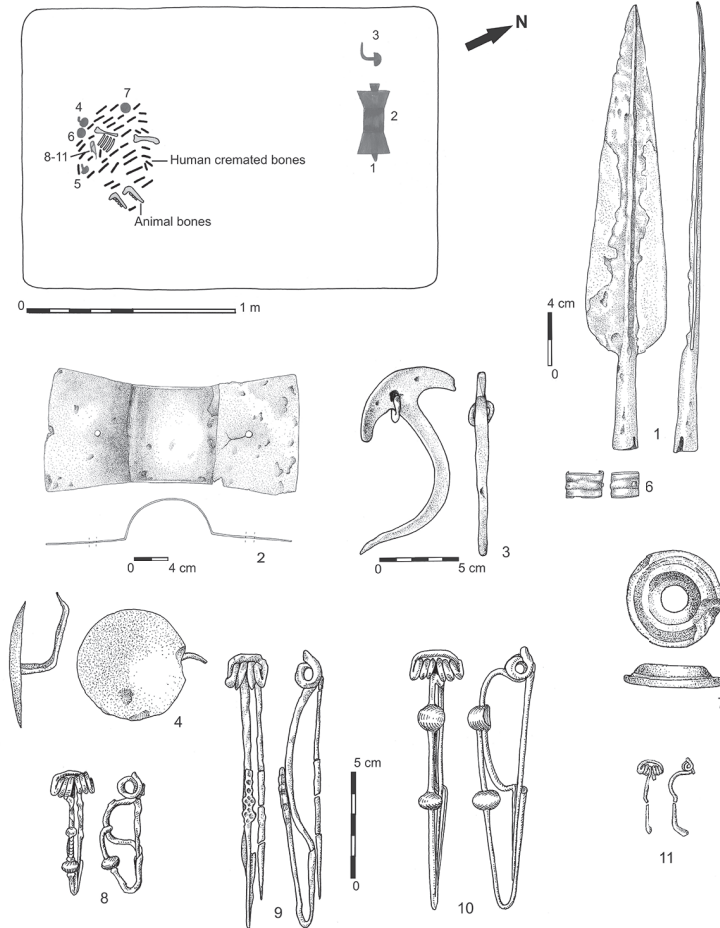


Figure 2. Grave no. 49 at Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii: plan and inventory.

elements of dating. The small iron brooch (Fig. 2/8) belongs to the series of finds specific to the end of the La Tène B2 and the beginning of the C1 sub-phase in the Carpathian Basin (Németi 1992, 104, type A13; Bujna 2003, Fig. 65, type C10–C11). Similar brooches, sometimes decorated on the sphere and the foot, were made from bronze (Bujna 2003, 51–53, Fig. 13) or iron (Bujna 2003, 72–73, Fig. 48–49).

The large iron brooch with large spheres on the foot (Fig. 2/10) belongs to a type that was frequently encountered throughout the entire Carpathian Basin (Bujna 2003, 81, type EF-K-A; Popović 1994, 54, Map 1, for the Scordiscian area; Németi 1992, 105, type A20 etc.). Similar brooches are also known in Central Europe, for example in southern Bavaria (Gebhard 1991, 15–17, type 14). They were found not only in female graves, but also in others containing

weapons (graves with weapons having similar brooches are known from Chotin in Slovakia: Gebhard 1989a, 85, Fig. 27/18). Chronologically, the iron brooches with large spheres on the foot are common in the La Tène C1 (Gebhard 1989a, 85–86, 91–92, 119, is dating them to the horizon 6, La Tène C1a; Bujna 2003, 106, prefers instead a dating towards the end of the La Tène C1c sub-phase).

Lastly, the small bronze brooch (Fig. 2/11) is too fragmentary to be classified typologically. It belongs more likely to one of the small variants that are specific to the middle La Tène period (see the comments in Bujna 2003).

It has to be therefore noted that the brooches from grave no. 49 at Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii, as well as the remaining grave goods, are dating the archaeological context to the La Tène C1 phase.

Returning to the fragmentary iron brooch in question (Fig. 2/9; 3), it has to be said that it belongs to the middle La Tène scheme type. The bilateral spring consists of four coils with an external holding wire. The fragmentary foot (the part that was attached to the bow is missing) is flattened on the upper side and decorated with punched dots that form a vegetal decoration, which was probably enamelled. Its total length is 13,2cm.

Typologically, the artefact belongs to the series of iron brooches having large dimensions (over 10–15cm), specific to the La Tène C1 (Bujna 2003, 81, Fig. 60/A). Such iron brooches, usually having different types of spheres on the foot, are commonly discovered in a poor state, fragmented and heavily corroded, so a detailed typology is difficult to make (Németi 1992, 105, type A19).

3. DISCUSSION

The brooch from Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii stands out among the majority of the finds of this type due to the flattened, decorated foot. The ornamentation consists of punched eight-shaped, curved motifs. One pair of motifs forms a lyre in the middle and other motifs are arranged in a row perpendicularly to this central element. The entire decoration was probably enamelled (Fig. 3).

Analogies for this vegetal decoration can be found in the same cemetery at Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii (Fig. 4/2). In grave no. 62, without weapons, one iron bracelet was almost similarly decorated, including the enamelling (Rustoiu and Megaw 2011, 229–233, Fig. 6–7. J. V. S. Megaw analysed the bracelet from the decorative point of view). The finds from Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii, together with other artefacts decorated in the same manner, like the disk of the chain-mail from Ciumești (Fig. 4/3) (Rusu 1969; Rustoiu 2008a, 14, Fig. 1/4) or the beaker from the grave with a helmet found at Apahida (Fig. 4/1) (Zirra 1976; Rustoiu 2008a, 48, Fig. 17/8), raise some questions regarding the survival of this style in the eastern periphery of the Celtic world until the middle La Tène.

As already discussed on another occasion (Rustoiu 2016, 238), some of the communities established in Transylvania around the middle or the end of the 4th century BC preserved certain practices and elements of material culture from their homeland over a longer period of time as a way of appealing to their ancestral identity. These habits could explain the perpetuation of certain funerary practices in Transylvania long after they were abandoned in their homeland, or the persistence of some visual symbols, for example elements of the Vegetal Style, in LT C1 contexts. In the same way can be explained the persistence of burials containing two-wheeled chariots in the LT C1 (Ferencz 1996; Rustoiu 2015; Berecki 2018). The longer-lasting use of the two-wheeled chariots in comparison with Western and Central Europe was also noted in other peripheral areas of the „Celtic world”, for example in the British Isles or Asia Minor. Their use is attested in ancient literary sources, as well as on figurative representations like the so-called „frieze of arms” from Pergamum, or in archaeological discoveries. The incorporation of some LT B jewellery in costume assemblages of the LT C1 also belongs to the same phenomenon (Rustoiu and Megaw 2011; Rustoiu 2013).

Returning to the decorated iron brooch from the Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii cemetery, its general features and decoration could also be interpreted from the perspective of symbolic visual language. In this context, it has



Figure 3. Iron brooch with Vegetal Style decoration from grave no. 49 at Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii.



Figure 4. Objects decorated in the Vegetal Style dated to the La Tène C1 in Transylvania. 1 – Apahida (after Zirra 1976); 2 – Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii (after Rustoiu and Megaw 2011); 3 – Ciumești (after Rustoiu and Megaw 2011).

to be noted that bodily ornamentation is a significant symbolic means of social communication that allows the visual expression of ethnic or social belonging (see, for example, Eicher 1995; Aldhouse-Green 2004a, 40–53; Aldhouse-Green 2004b; Arnold 2008, 375–379; Wells 2008, 64–84). T. S. Turner has remarked that „Man is born naked but is everywhere in clothes (or their symbolic equivalents)... The surface of the body, as the common frontier of society, the social self, and the psychobiological individual, becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted, and bodily adornment (in all its culturally multifarious forms, from body-painting to clothing and from feather head-dresses to cosmetics) becomes the language through which it is expressed” (Turner 2012, 486).

Accordingly, jewellery and decorated costume accessories, and especially those worn on the chest or torso, are meant to be easily observed in order to convey a certain message (see further on this subject in Wells 2008). However, in the case of the brooch in question, the elusive vegetal motif is too small to be observed from distance. One had to be very close to the wearer to see properly the decoration. It can be therefore presumed that the motif actually had a „hidden” meaning which was mainly relevant for the owner of the brooch and was perhaps destined to be „seen” by entities beyond the world of the mortals. This might suggest that the motif more likely had a magical or apotropaic meaning, offering protection against the malevolent beings, who were able to actually „see” it.

4. CONCLUSIONS

It can be therefore concluded that grave no. 49 from the Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii cemetery has revealed, aside from the funerary rite and rituals specific to the middle La Tène period in the Carpathian Basin, a series of practices belonging to the magical domain. On one hand, the linchpin included in the inventory of the grave had a magical purpose, as already demonstrated (Rustoiu 2019). On the other hand, the miniature decoration of the brooch discussed above suggest that such costume accessories bearing „hidden messages” were invested with apotropaic qualities. These artefacts point to the domain of spiritual manifestations of the communities from the Carpathian Basin, dealing with the magical practices and beliefs, a subject which was largely neglected in archaeological literature so far.

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The hidden messages of Celtic symbols. A decorated brooch from the la Tène cemetery at Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii

Summary

The cemetery at Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii (Bistrița-Năsăud County) is located in a region in which other similar sites have been documented, demonstrating an intensive Celtic presence during the La Tène B2–C1. Due to the large number of burials and its long-lasting existence, the Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii cemetery represents a reference site for the Celtic horizon in Transylvania. However, most of the results of archaeological investigations led by I. H. Crișan remained largely unpublished. The brooch which is discussed below comes from grave no. 49. The grave displays a series of particularities of the funerary ritual which are less common in the Carpathian Basin. Among these is the presence of one iron linchpin.

This is a cremation grave in which the remains were laid into a pit having a rectangular shape with rounded corners. The cremated human bones were laid in the south-western side of the pit in a compact pile and on top of them was placed

the meat offering (several pig bones were recovered). Some iron objects were found among the cremated bones: two rivets belonging to the shield-boss (one is now lost), one ring, one tube made of iron sheet and one large brooch with spheres on the foot. When the cremated bones were lifted, it was noticed that the same pile of burnt remains also contained two other iron brooches and fragments of a bronze brooch. One iron spear head placed perpendicularly to the long axis of the pit and one shield-boss placed on top of it were found in the north-eastern side of the grave. Both artefacts showed burnt traces when they were discovered. The iron linchpin having a crescent-shaped head was laid next to them, at 0,1m to the west.

According to the existing analogies, the weapons and other elements of the military equipment can be dated to the middle La Tène period. The four brooches found among the grave goods can be also dated to the middle La Tène period, more precisely to the La Tène C1 phase.

The fragmentary iron brooch in question stands out among the majority of the finds of this type due to the flattened, decorated foot. The ornamentation consists of punched eight-shaped, curved motifs. One pair of motifs forms a lyre in the middle and other motifs are arranged in a row perpendicularly to this central element. The entire decoration was probably enamelled. Its general features and decoration can be interpreted from the perspective of symbolic visual language. In this context, it has to be noted that bodily ornamentation is a significant symbolic means of social communication that allows the visual expression of ethnic or social belonging. Accordingly, jewellery and decorated costume accessories, and especially those worn on the chest or torso, are meant to be easily observed in order to convey a certain message. However, in the case of the brooch in question, the elusive vegetal motif is too small to be observed from distance. One had to be very close to the wearer to see properly the decoration. It can be therefore presumed that the motif actually had a „hidden” meaning which was mainly relevant for the owner of the brooch and was perhaps destined to be „seen” by entities beyond the world of the mortals. This might suggest that the motif more likely had a magical or apotropaic meaning, offering protection against the malevolent beings, who were able to actually „see” it. It can be therefore concluded that grave no. 49 from the Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii cemetery has revealed, aside from the funerary rite and rituals specific to the middle La Tène period in the Carpathian Basin, a series of practices belonging to the magical domain. On one hand, the linchpin included in the inventory of the grave had a magical purpose, suggesting a *pars pro toto* practice. On the other hand, the miniature decoration of the brooch discussed above suggest that such costume accessories bearing „hidden messages” were invested with apotropaic qualities. These artefacts point to the domain of spiritual manifestations of the communities from the Carpathian Basin, dealing with the magical practices and beliefs, a subject which was largely neglected in archaeological literature so far.