

**S**TUDIA  
**A**RCHAEOLOGICA  
**U**NIVERSITATIS  
**S**ERDICENSIS

SUPPL. IV

---

***Stephanos***  
***Archaeologicos***  
**in honorem Professoris**  
**Ludmili Getov**



## THE ENCRUSTED SPATHA FROM DUROSTORUM

BOJAN DUMANOV

The remarkable grave find had been discovered in 1968 in Silistra, when group of builders did some excavation works at the region near the famous tomb with mural paintings (about 150 m southwards). Parts of four-wheel chariot, silver belt elements (probably of *cingulum* and *balteus*), golden cross bow brooch (*Zwiebelknopffibel*) golden ring, tin plates of gold, and two swords with ornamented scabbards have been discovered in the not well documented complex.<sup>1</sup> The subject of the present article is the larger sword, whose handle and scabbard are decorated with semi-precious stones and gilded plates (Tables I–IV, fig. 1 a–d; V–VI, fig. 2 a–e).<sup>2</sup> The scabbard and the grip are wooden. A spherical silver plate is attached to the metal handle's termination. Its periphery is ornamented with a row of large beads. A fragment of profiled vertically situated plate is kept under the beads, as it had been situated over the whole lower length of the handle's end. Three mounts, made of on-edge soldered plates are fitted on the surface of the pommel with two encased red and orange agates. The mounts' periphery is strengthened and thus decorated with two rows of filigree. Two pairs of hearth-shaped ornaments of filigree are put between them. The silver guard is fitted under the blade. Its form and measure are identical with the ones of the pommel. The periphery is incised with nielloed intended ornament and two ornaments like palmetos with gilded central leaf flank the aperture for the blade.

The scabbard is made of wood. A profiled

plate, surrounding its whole diameter is put on its upper end. Four tin plates make a rectangular frame with three oval garnet encrustations (according to the reconstruction of V. Vassilev). Ornamental composition of gilded silver appliques is arranged under the scabbard's mouth. Two silver rivets, ornamented with radial incised lines are situated in the both ends of the composition. Two triangles touch their tops to the rivets. Their faces are outlined with tin plates, similar to the ones of the frame under the scabbard's mouth. Applications with the same form are put into the triangular frames. Their periphery is with embossed ornamentation of horizontal stretches, but in the base of the triangle the motives are zigzag. Oval mount with large incised garnet, surrounded by two rows of filigree is fitted in the application's center. The contrary situated lower triangle has the same ornamentation. Fragmented square application is situated between. Its entirety is ornamented with plates identical to the ones on the triangle appliques. Mount with chalcedony is assembled in the square's center. This element is fitted on a solid iron plate, taken up over the rest, as the space above is empty, making a cramp for the sword's suspending. The next application on the scabbard is rectangular. The frame is outlined with the identical silver plates. In the both parts of the periphery are fitted long plates with perpendicularly incised lines. Three mounts with two garnets and an amethyst and two rows of filigree are arranged between the plates. The composition below is similar to the one on the upper

scabbard's part. The differences are in the central ornament of the triangular elements, which is not an incrustation, but a massive rivet with tiny incised ring of gilded silver wire. The scabbard's end is a silver discus. It is composed of two halves, as the one is smooth, and the face is ornamented with several concentric bands. Oval garnet is incased in the middle. Nine bands of circles in relief, whose surface is ornamented with oblique or vertically incised stretches, follow the central incrustation.

The armament elements often were subject of art working. Most frequently these were the swords and knives or daggers, especially their handles and scabbards. By means of interlacing of iron and steel bands, alternating the colours of metal, the armament masters decorated the blades.<sup>3</sup> The ceremonial sword from the catacombs of "Gospitaljnaja" in Kerch is the only known example of rich decoration, depicted on the blade.<sup>4</sup> The same applies to the knives, independent of their form and designation. The artefacts with barbarian origin got one more element – the magical pearl, which is typical for the Age of the Huns.

The long two edged sword, whose name according to Vegetius' definition is *spatha*, was the main sword type that had been used by the Roman army during the late 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> cc. The annular guard of the earlier short sword is changed with wider and flat one. The grip usually was made of wood or bone with oval or flat pommel. The scabbard was made of wood, reinforced with different metal elements – end and side plates. Sometimes it was covered with leather.<sup>5</sup>

Most frequently the scabbard was object of ornamentation with elements of gold, silver, bronze and mounts with precious stones. Procopius and other later Greek authors used various definitions – *θήκη*, *θηκάριον*, *κουλέος*, and the Latin writers as Vegetius, Ammianus Marcelinus, Isidorus, etc. – *vagina*. According to Ioannis Lydis the making and repair of scab-

bards hired special masters, called *θηκοποιοί* or *vaginararii*.<sup>6</sup>

The form of the sword and the scabbard was well known in the period of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> cc. *Spathae* with length 0.70–0.75 m, connecting with oval endings are known as archaeological finds, but also thanks to some iconographical sources as the funeral *stella* of Aprilius Spikatus from Byzantium.<sup>7</sup> Ornamented endings of iron and silver are known from the grave finds from Nydam, Reichersdorf, Colonia Agripina, etc.<sup>8</sup> but there are not swords of this form and type, decorated with incased precious stones.

Two-edged swords with guards in cloisonné are typical pieces of the late antique polychromatic style of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> cc. Their distribution embraces the lands between the steppes of South Russia and Portugal and Belgium. Usually they were found in rich barbarian complexes as most possibly the swords had been gifts for the princes from the imperial court of Constantinople or made to their order in the workshops with traditions in the ornamentation with cloisonné.<sup>9</sup> The swords' form itself, the grips, pommels and scabbards were typical for the arms, penetrated with beginning of the Hun invasion and as whole do not correspond with the late antique *spathae*. The way of production and ornamentation of the separate elements also was more different than the technique of the sword from Durostorum, which being a product of the polychromatic style belongs to the group of the artifacts, decorated with stones in separate mounts (cabochons). Several works of the plastic arts represent such kind of decorated *spatha*. At first place these are the porphyry sculptures of the Tetrarchs at the San Marco Cathedral in Venice (Table VII, fig. 3).<sup>10</sup> The Augusts and the Caesars hold long handed swords with rich decorated scabbards. Their observable side is covered with couples of oval encrustations in separate mounts. As far as it could be judged by these representations, the mounts are fixed on rectangular plates in equal inter-

vals along the lower scabbards' half. It is possible these plates had been made of gold and had an additional ornamentation, whose explicit representation has been not possible, because of the porphyry hardness. The scabbard's mouth is ornamented with couple of large incrustations and the hanging clamp. The structure of the ornamentation and the way of attachment to the belt of the sword from Durostorum is similar – a wide silver plate with tree stones, dominating with its size over the rest of the elements is fixed under the scabbard's mouth. The clamp is under this application. The difference is in the form of the end – the Tetrarchs' scabbard ends are rectangular, but not with the typical oval ending. According to J. Werner the rectangular scabbard's end is typical for the long swords and originates from Sassanian Persia.<sup>11</sup> Too similar are the swords of the hunting Persian king on the Tag-I Bustani relieves or the warriors on the bone plate from Kurgan-tepe near Samarkand. Their scabbards are covered with incrustations, identical to the ones of the Tetrarchs' sculptures.<sup>12</sup> Another representation of a scabbard with stones, incased in separate mounts is on the ivory carved plate of Flavius Stilicho from Monza (Table VII, fig. 4). The stones, arranged in horizontal rows got various forms. Their composition is too similar to the incrustations of the nomad adornments from the East European steppes and Middle Europe in the Age of the Huns (end of 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> cc.). The Stilicho sword itself possibly is with German origin. Its handle and the scabbard's elements have not any analogies among the typical Roman examples.<sup>13</sup>

Separate incrustations had been rarely used in the ornamentation of armament elements, but there are several famous examples. Typical for the Roman armour are the helmets from Berkasova and Budapest (Table VII, fig. 5).<sup>14</sup> They are made of iron, covered with gilded silver sheet. In the separate mounts are incased incrustations of glass paste. The places where the sheets cover each other are ornamented with various embossed mo-

tives, which are similar to the ones on the plates of the scabbard from Durostorum. The composition of the mounts on the Berkasova helmet bears a resemblance to human face - mask. Their form is various – oval, rectangular and lozenge shaped. These on the Budapest helmet also follow an exact composition. The material is glass as the colour re-creates original precious stones – emerald, agate, sapphire, etc. Greek inscription, containing the names Διζζων and Αβίτος is engraved on the Berkasova helmet.<sup>15</sup> Possibly the first has barbarian origin and the second one belongs to the jeweler, who has made the helmet's decoration.<sup>16</sup> The Budapest helmet has not designations of such kind but the technique and stylistic similarity of the both helmets suggest to common origin in a Middle Danubian workshop in the time of 4<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>17</sup>

The compound conical helmet from Kispek (Kabardino-Balkaria) is identical in its conception of decoration (Table VII, fig. 6). Composition of two rectangular and two spherical carnelians is fitted over the nose. Several bronze belt applications, covered with silver sheet and glasses and carnelians put into bezels also originate from this complex. Possibly its date is about the end of 4<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> cc., as the armament had belonged to Alanian aristocrat.<sup>18</sup>

Series of belt buckles and applications with central composition of mounted stone and embossed ornament originate from the North Pontic area. Some of them, especially the ones from the Chersonesus cemetery (Table VIII, fig. 7 a–b), had been found with objects, indicating a date in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> – first half of 4<sup>th</sup> cc.<sup>19</sup> Other as the pieces from Kopsun-Tolga (Kalmikiya) (Table VIII, fig. 7 f), stanitsa Timoshevskaya, several buckles from Crimea, etc., had been discovered into barbarian context and have the same date, but several (stanitsa Timoshevskaya (Table VIII, fig. 7 e) could belong to the end of 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> cc.<sup>20</sup>

The decoration of the scabbard end is also



unusual. The base of its decoration are the concentric circles, imitating spiral wrapped wire around a central encrustation. Similar scabbard ends, made of gild silver are known from the grave finds by Vemose, Denmark and Simris. Their ornamentation is identical as the objects date back to the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> – begging of 4<sup>th</sup> cc. and belong to graves of barbarian warriors.<sup>21</sup>

The spherical or rectangular encrustations, surrounded by filigree or pseudo-filigree, the embossed motives are the common feature of these artefacts. In many relations this kind of ornamentation is similar with the decoration of real filigree and granulation on various objects. They are typical for the North Pontic area, but also for the centers of the East Black Sea coast as Gorgipia. These objects are result of a synthesis between the Roman culture, the local Hellenistic traditions and several new trends. The gilded with embossed gold sheet bronze or silver adornments are imitations of original objects of high quality – a phenomenon, characterized as *imitatio imperii*.<sup>22</sup> The applications on the scabbard of the sword from Durostorum also belong to this group of ornaments. The logical problem is about the nature of original model – whether a more expensive sword with polychromatic ornamentation of the scabbard had been copied or the scheme is taken from the buckles and other belt elements. The fact that other armament elements also have such kind of decoration points out that encrusted swords are not separate phenomenon. Beyond the objects on the statuary group of the Tetrarchs and the diptych of Stilicho, a sword with encrusted scabbard is depicted on a picture in *Codex Parisinus graecus*, dated in the age of Basilus I, as the sword belongs to Theodosius the Great.<sup>23</sup> The author of "*De ceremoniis*" mentioned the richly decorated armament of the imperial guards and the aristocracy, which indicates that kind of swords had not been possessed by the rulers only.<sup>24</sup>

The sword from Durostorum is not an im-

itation of more richly decorated examples. The pommel and the guard of the handle are made of massive silver. The granulation on the periphery is of high quality. The ornaments around the oval encrustations are also made of real filigree. This high qualitative workmanship indicates that the sword is an expensive object, which belonged to a high-ranging military officer. The price of a scabbard of *spatha* (*bagina spathae*; θήκης σπάθης), determinate in *Edictum Diocletiani* is one hundred of *denarii*.<sup>25</sup> Too expensive is the decoration of the handle with filigree (*χρυσου ενησμένου*), which is among the most valuable activities, fixed in the *Edictum*.<sup>26</sup> The activities and the material of the masters, producing sheets and foil for applications and gilding (*τεχνίτης τοις εις τό πέταλον υ αυρικαισωριβους*) and embossing them (*χρυσελάτης εις λάμνας*) were also costly.<sup>27</sup> The exact price according to *Edictum Diocletiani* could not be calculated since the plates on the scabbard are made of gilded silver. Regardless the imitation of gold, other features as the real precious stones (agate, garnet, chalcidony, but not glass imitations), and the excellent workmanship involve a high total price for the sword from Durostorum.

The technique of ornamentation of the scabbard elements direct the object to the above mentioned analogies, dating mainly to the first decades of 4<sup>th</sup> c. The coin of Probus involves too early date, as its high wear must also be envisaged. The golden cross bow brooch and the silver belt elements direct the whole complex to the early 4<sup>th</sup> c. There are also expressed opinions about the ethnicity of the owner of the sword from Durostorum. It has been considered as a part of the armament of high-ranking officer of barbarian origin, possibly a Sarmatian.<sup>28</sup> An assumption of such kind is determinate by the technique of ornamentation of workmanship and its elements with numerous analogies among the complexes of Alanians and Sarmatians in the North Pontic zone and Caucasus. The helms from

Berkasova and Budapest are also connected with this group of barbarians. The encrusted swords of the Tetrarchs have also eastern analogies. The sword of Stilicho – a barbarian in Roman service, also must be taken into consideration.

The objects, found in the grave from Durostorum are Roman in their entirety and have their analogies among identical complexes from the Empire. The encrusted with precious stones *spatha* indeed directs to barbarian artifacts, but that does not automatically means that its owner was a barbarian. The situation of Durostorum on the *limes* of Lower Danube assumes immediate contacts with barbarians and some taste for polychromatic decoration could be delivered by means of cultural interrelations. The workman-

ship directs an origin from Middle Danubian or North Pontic workshop, where the sword has been ordered and gained to its final owner. The available data determine the North Pontic origin as more probable, since the Middle European analogies have just glass imitations, but not precious stones. The question about the way in that the officer had acquired the sword – private order, gift or spoils of war must be considered separately. The wider blade and the handle pattern are other features, detaching the sword from the typical Roman weapons. It is also not inadmissible that this sword had belonged to a Romanized barbarian, who adopting numerous roman elements, kept some features of the barbarian armament and costume.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Гетов 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Василев, Митанов 1974: 27–43; Atanasov 2001: 132, n. 3, 25–26; Measures: a) sword: grip's length – 11.0 cm; width – 3.2 cm; pommel: length – 6.2 cm, width – 3.4 cm; guard: length – 6.8 cm, width – 3.5 cm; blade: length – 73.0 cm, max. width – 5.5 cm; b) scabbard: length – 76.0 cm, width – 7.8 cm; applications: above to below: a) length – 6.6 cm, width – 4.4 cm, b) length – 18.1 cm, max. width of the squares' bases – 5.6 cm, c) length – 4.9 cm, width – 4.3 cm, d) length – 18.0 cm, max. width of the triangles' bases – 4.9 cm, e) diameter of the scabbard's end – 7.0 cm; Museum of History – Silistra, II 497 (sword), II 498 (scabbard), applications – II 501–507; The illustrations have been done by the author, thanks to the access to the find, granted me by the Director of the History museum of Silistra, Mr. Ivan Bachvarov. Prof. Dr. Ljudmil Getov, whom I am highly grateful, gave me the photos from his private archive.

<sup>3</sup> Southern, Dixon 1996: 103.

<sup>4</sup> Спицын 1905: 115, рис. 48; Behmer 1939: Taf. 11, 5; Засецкая 1968: 54; Damm 1988: 71, 95; Anke 1998: 61, Taf. 60, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Bishop, Coulston 1993: 162; Southern, Dixon 1996: 104.

<sup>6</sup> Kolias 1988: 148.

<sup>7</sup> Coulston 1987: 142, Pl. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Martin-Kilcher 1998: 299, 307, fig. 1; 5; Behrens 1919: 8; Bishop, Coulston 1993: 162, fig. 116.

<sup>9</sup> Kazanski 2001: 411.

<sup>10</sup> Southern, Dixon 1996: Pl. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Werner 1966: 138.

<sup>12</sup> Brentjes 1993: 38, Abb. 44; Domyo 1995: 139, fig. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Behmer 1939: Taf. 17, 5; Davidson 1962: fig. 1112; Southern, Dixon 1996: 109.

<sup>14</sup> Manojlović-Marijanski 1964: 36–38; Klumbach 1973: 15–38, Abb. 1–11; 39–50, Abb. 12–8.

<sup>15</sup> Διζών υγιαίων φορεῖ Αβίτου ἐργον... (Manojlović-Marijanski 1964: 22).

<sup>16</sup> Since the inscription doesn't concern another master's name, except the one of Avito, I think he had done only the ornamentation, but not the helm itself, that's to say he was not an armourer but just jeweler.

<sup>17</sup> The wrong interpretation of the technique and composition of the incrustations and inscription's spelling out gave opportunities for various speculations about the date and the wearer ethnicity of the Berkasova Helm (Ждраков, Делева 2000: 5–15).

<sup>18</sup> Kazanski 1995: 193, fig. 4–5; Anke 1998, 65, Taf. 108–109.

<sup>19</sup> Якобсон 1959: обр. 138; Амброз 1989: 24; Soupalt-Becquelin 1997: 296.

<sup>20</sup> Salin 1904: 113, Abb. 298; Damm 1988: 156–157; Soupalt-Becquelin 1997: 297, fig. 6–9; Anke 1998: 136, Taf. 136.4.

<sup>21</sup> Martin-Kilcher 1998: 301, fig. 13–14.

<sup>22</sup> Soupalt-Becquelin 1997: 294.

<sup>23</sup> Kolias 1988: 156.

<sup>24</sup> Kolias 1988: 158.

<sup>25</sup> Edictum Diocletiani 7, 37, Laufer 1971: 120–121.

<sup>26</sup> Edictum Diocletiani 30, 2, 3, 4, Laufer 1971: 191, 279.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anke, B. 1998. Studien zur reiternomadischen Kultur des 4. bis 5. Jahrhunderts. Weissbach.
- Atanasov, G. 2001. Das römischen Wagengrab von Silistra (Bulgarien). – In: *Daim, F., Th. Kühnreiter* (Hsg.) 2001. *Sein & Sinn \ Burg&Mensch*. St. Pölen, 130–136.
- Behmer, E. 1939. Das zweischneidige Schwert der germanischen Völkerwanderungszeit. Stockholm.
- Behrens, G. 1919. Germanische Kriegergräber des 4.–7. Jahrhunderts im städtlichen Altertumsmuseum in Mainz. – *Mainzer Zeitschrift* 14, 1–16.
- Bishop, M. C., J. C. N. Coulston 1993. Roman military equipment from the Punic wars to the Fall of Rome. London.
- Brentjes, B. 1993. Waffen der Steppenvölker – I. Dolch und Schwert im Steppenraum vom 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr. bis der alten türkischen Zeit. – *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 26, 5–45.
- Coulston, J. C. N. 1987. Roman military equipment on 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD tombstones. – In: *Dawson, M.* (ed.) 1987. *Roman military equipment: The Accoutrements of war. Proceedings of the Third Roman military equipment Research seminar*. Oxford. – *BAR S336*, 141–156.
- Damm, I. G. 1988. Goldschmiedearbeiten der Völkerwanderungszeit aus dem Nördlichen Schwarzmeergebiet. Katalog der Sammlung Diergardt. – *Kölner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte* XXI, 65–210.
- Davidson, H. R. E. 1962. *The sword in Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford.
- Domyo, M. 1995. *Tag-I Bustan*. Tokyo.
- Kazanski, M. 1995. Les tombes des chefs alano-sarmates du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle dans les steppes pontiques. – In: *Kazanski, M., F. Vallet*. *La Noblesse Romaine et les Chefs Barbares du III<sup>e</sup> au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. T. IX des Mémoires publiées par l'Association Française d'Archéologie Mérovingienne. Paris, 189–206.
- Kazanski, M. 2001. Les épées "orientales" à garde closonnée du Ve-Vie siècle. – In: *International Connections of the Barbarians of the Carpathian Basin in the 1–5 centuries A.D.* Aszód-Nyíregyháza, 389–417.
- Kolias, T. 1988. *Byzantinische Waffen*. Wien.
- Klumbach, H. 1973. *Spätromische Gardehelme*. Munich.
- Laufer, S. 1971. *Diokletians Preisedikt*. Berlin.
- Martin-Kilcher, S. 1998. A propos de la tombe d'un officier Cologne (Severinor) et de la quelques tombes à armes vers 300. – In: *Kazanski, M.* *L'Armée Romaine et les Barbares du III<sup>e</sup> au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris, 299–312.
- Manojlović-Marijanski, M. 1964. *Kasnorimski šlemovi iz Berkasova*. Novi Sad.
- Salin, B. 1904. *Die altgermanische Tierornamentik. Typologische Studie über germanische Metalgegenstände aus dem IV. bis IX. Jahrhundert, nebst einer Studie über irische Ornamentik*. Stockholm.
- Soupal-Becquelin, V. 1997. *IMITATIO IMPERII: Le cas des plaques-boucles du style polychrome (du III<sup>e</sup> au IV<sup>e</sup> s. ap. J.-C.)*. – *Germania* 76, 1, 296–306.
- Southern, P., K. R. Dixon 1996. *The Late Roman army*. London.
- Werner, J. 1966. Spätromische Schwertortbänder vom Typ Gundremmingen. – *Bayerische Vorgeschichtsblätter* 31, 134–141.
- Werner, J. 1989. Zu den römischen Mantelfibeln zweier Kriegergräber von Leuna. – *Jahrschriften für mitteldeutsche Vorgeschichte* 72, 121–134.
- Амброз, А. К. 1989. Хронология древностей Северного Кавказа. М.
- Василев, В., П. Митанов 1974. Консервация на находки от гроб от 4 в. в Силистра. – *Музеи и паметници на културата* 4, 1, 27–43.
- Гетов, Л. 1985. Антична гробна находка от Дуросторум. София.
- Ждраков, З., А. Делева 2000. Към интерпретацията на шлем-маска № 1 от Ашман (Беркасово). – *Археология* LXI, 3–4, 5–1.
- Засецкая, И. П. 1968. Полихромные изделия гуннского времени и погребения нижнего Поволжья. – *Археологический сборник* X, 15–17.
- Спыцин, Л. А. 1904. Вещи с инкрустацией из керченских катакомб. – *Известия Российской императорской археологической комиссии* XVII, 115–126.
- Якобсон, А. Л. 1964. *Средневековый Крым*. М. – Л.

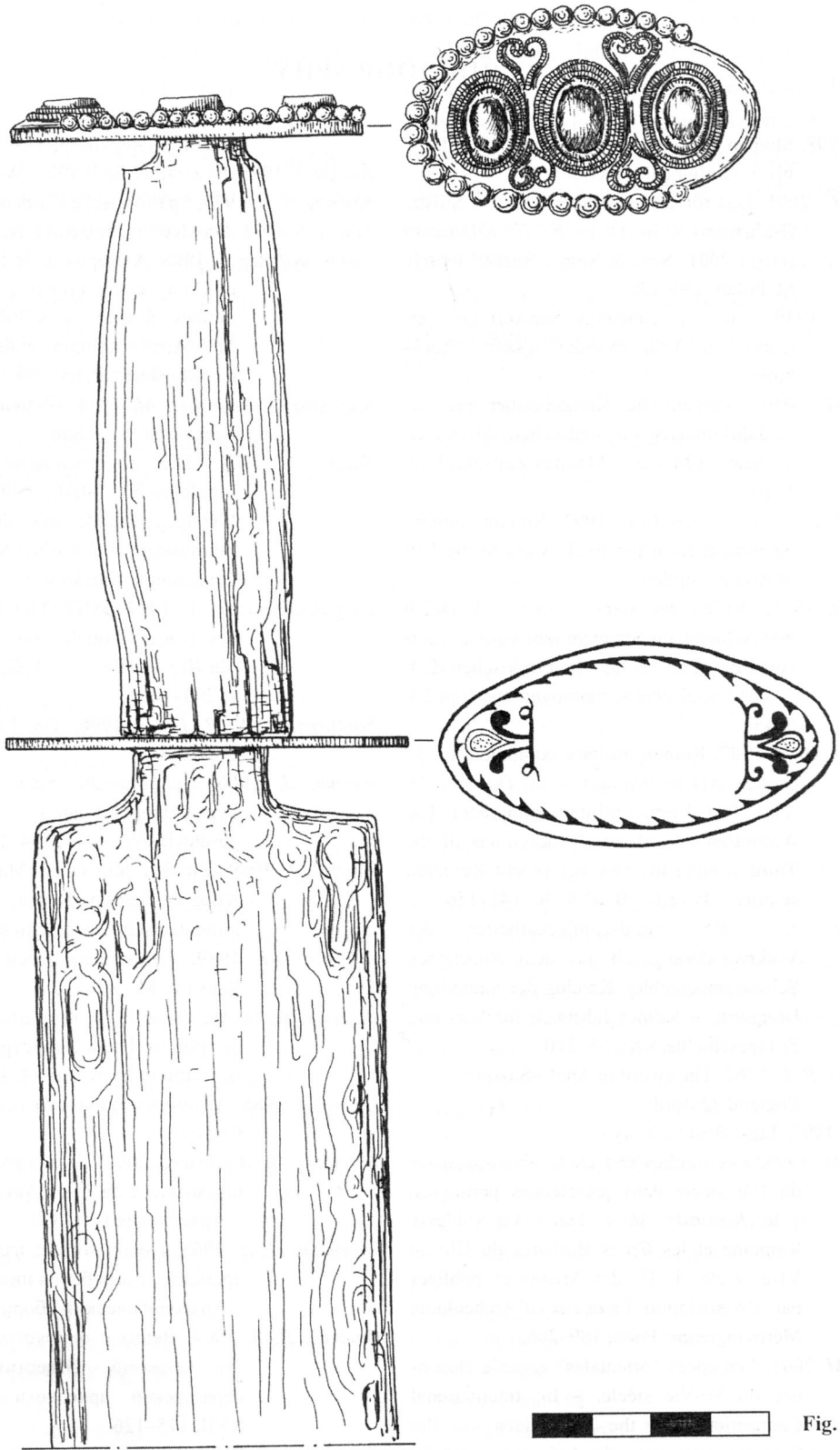


Fig. 1a



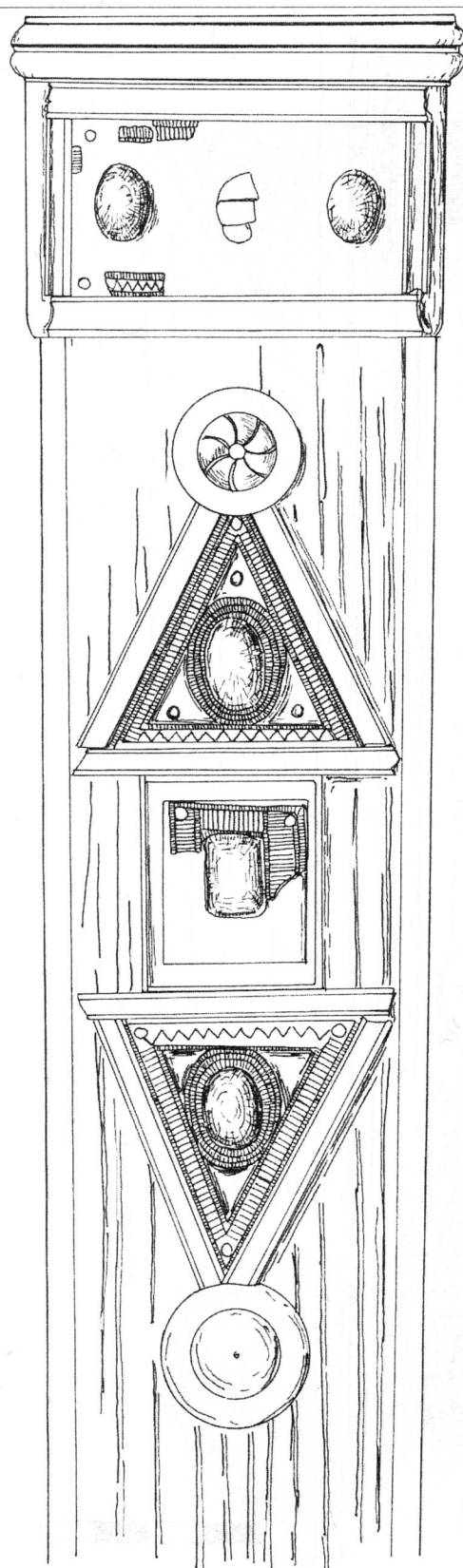


Fig. 1b

H. 1011

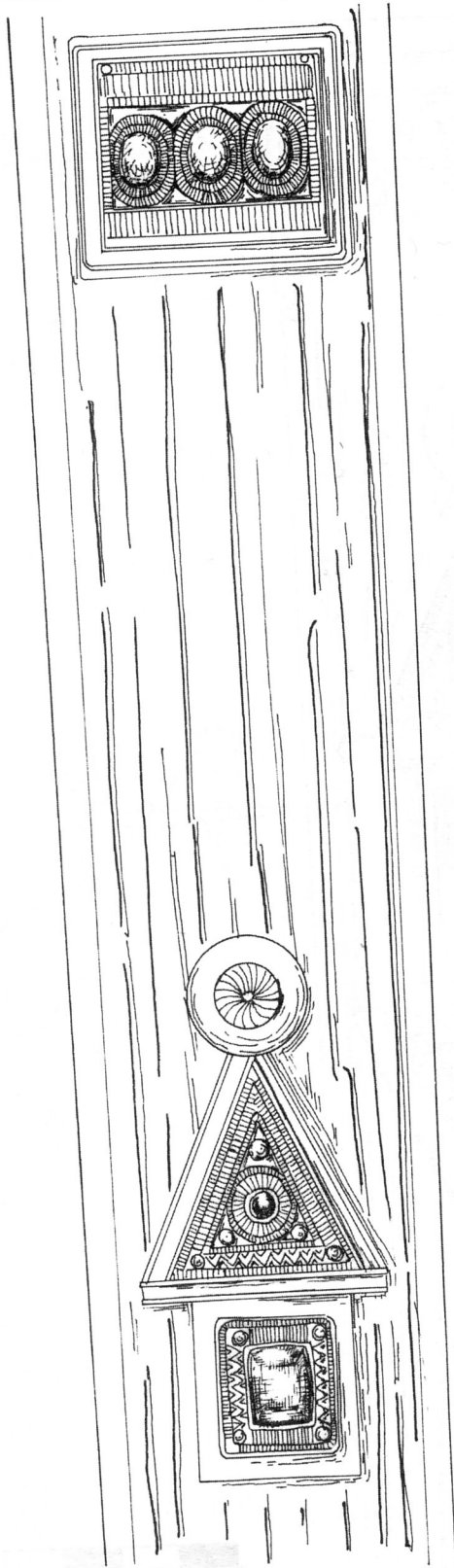


Fig. 1c



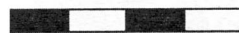
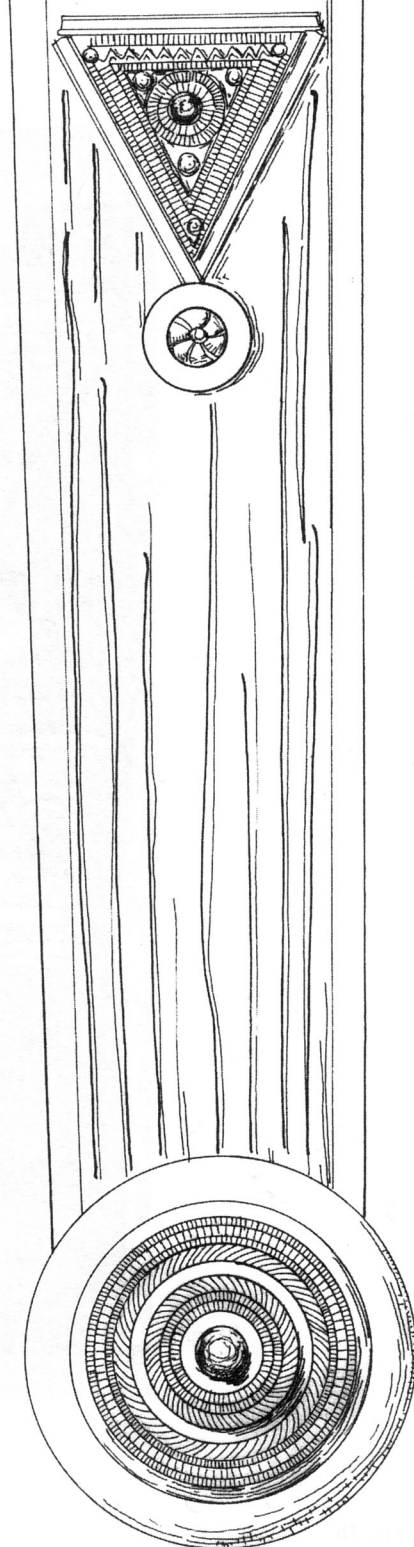


Fig. 1d

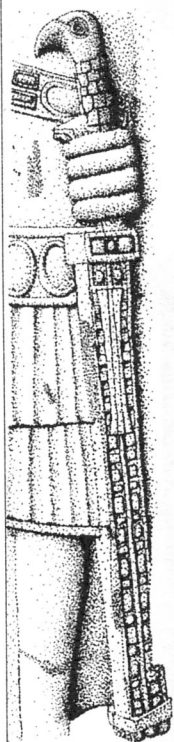


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

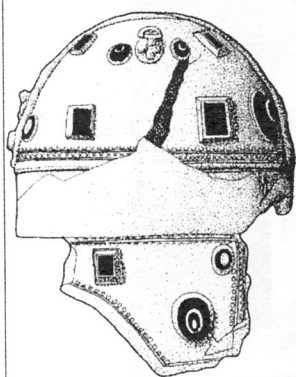


Fig. 5

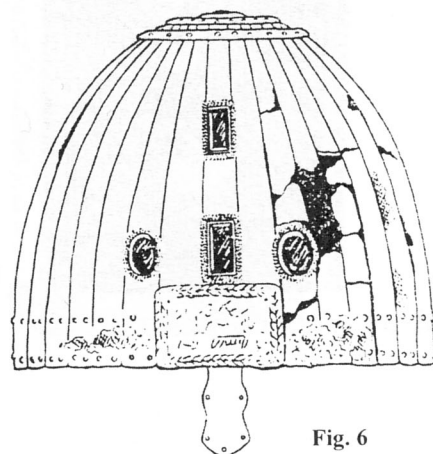
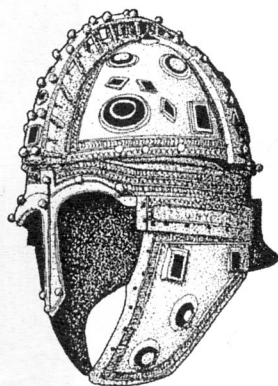


Fig. 6



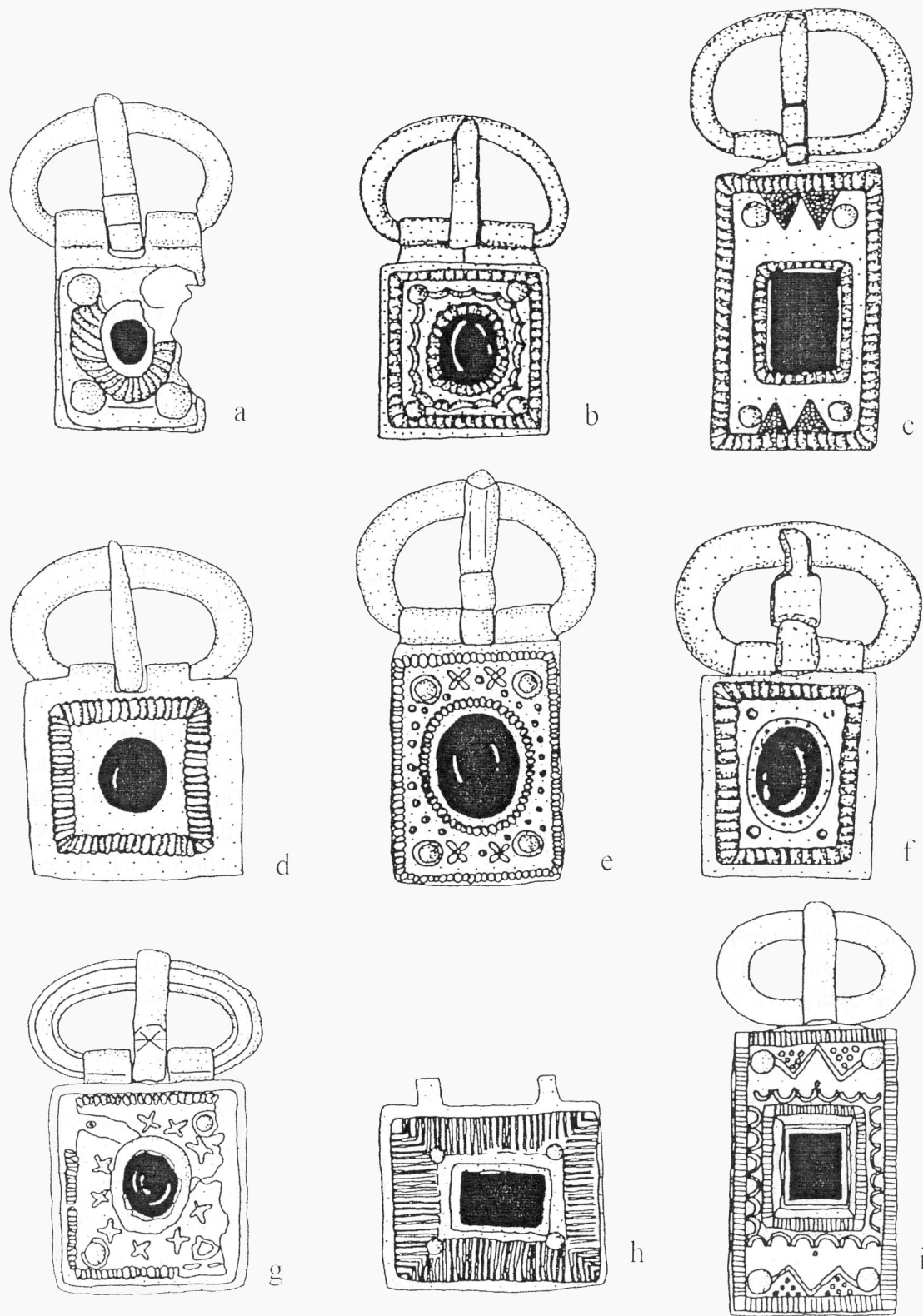


Fig. 7