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SOME REMARKS ON THE EARLY IRON AGE CEMETERY AT VAJUGA-PESAK

Abstract. – The paper provides basic information about a necropolis with inhumation burials that belong to the Basarabi cultural complex dated to HaB3–C1 (late 8th – early 7th c.). Attention is focused on grave goods, especially jewelry, and their typological and chronological relationship with material from neighbouring and culturally close cemeteries (in the Iron Gates region and southwest Oltenia).

In a recently published paper, Nikola Tasić emphasized that the provenience of pottery decorated in what is known as the Basarabi style "is to be sought in the southern Carpathian region and the Romanian and Yugoslav parts of the Danube Basin".¹ The theory, which has been around for quite a while, is being more and more precisely defined in spatial terms.² This has been significantly strengthened by the results of recent research in the Iron Gates region, where the Vajuga–Pesak necropolis is an important site. In addition to bronze and iron grave goods, mainly jewelry, a large quantity of Basarabi-style pottery was unearthed there.

During protection works in the area affected by the Djerdap II hydroelectric plant between 1980 and 1989, a necropolis containing 22 inhumation burials was studied at Pesak, a locality between Korbovo and Vajuga (905–906 km from the mouth of the Danube).³ In an area of 3,000 m² two platforms of irregular shape were discovered, made up of two or three layers of larger and smaller pebbles. They could have consisted of flattened and interconnected

¹ N. Tasić, 1991: 240, 244.

² Cf. A. Vulpe, 1981: 179–187; 1986, 49–89; M. Guma, 1983: 93.

³ An area of some 5,000 m² was excavated; in addition to an Early Iron Age necropolis there was also Bronze Age material and material from the transition period between the Bronze and Iron Ages, as well the late La Tène period and the Middle Ages. Cf. A. Premk, P. Popović, Lj. Bjelajac, 1984: 118–124; P. Popović, M. Vukmanović, N. Radojčić, 1986: 168–183.

tumuli which formed two distinct wholes. Beside the platforms were two smaller surfaces constructed of pebbles and containing a single grave each.⁴ The entire complex, situated on a sand bank along the Danube, has by now been partly destroyed by fluvial erosion and the new reservoir.

This is obviously a very complex site, presenting us with several problems and requiring far more thorough study. Here we shall only point to some main features of the grave goods, in the first place jewelry worn by the deceased at the time of burial. A few representative graves where material was found in situ will serve as examples.

The dead were almost invariably buried beneath a row of pebbles (30 to 50 cm from the surface) and laid onto a layer of pebbles. Owing to soil subsidence and humidity the skeletal remains were largely in a poor state of preservation: sometimes they consisted of fragments of skulls and long bones, sometimes of negligible traces only. In a few cases, the position of the skeleton could be ascertained only on the basis of the position of the grave goods and remains of shin-bones in places where bronze and iron anklets once stood.⁵ The results of anthropological analysis are, therefore, limited, and do not provide the invaluable data that would facilitate interpretation and resolve some dilemmas regarding the relationships between these complexes and individual graves within them.⁶ The orientation of the skeletons varied little: from east/southeast (head) to west/northwest (feet). Among the grave goods, jewelry was habitual while weapons (spears, knives) were far less frequent. We shall deal with the finds according to their position on the bodies of the deceased, i.e. the head, neck, breast, and feet; our aim is to describe the main elements of attire that the members of the population buried there carried to the other world. There will be no attempt at the relative dating of individual graves or individual finds, as that would require a detailed analysis of all the material, that is of minor importance for us here because, between other things, we believe at present that there are no significant typological and chronological differences among the grave goods.

In a few cases, fragments of coiled, often beaten out bronze wire – saltaleoni – were found by the head and elsewhere within the tomb or just outside it. In a single grave a double row of saltaleoni was found above the head; it had probably been fastened to the hair or attached to a kind of head-dress. A horizontal loop near the top of one of the rows held a conical bronze button with concentric ridges (Pl. II 1).

Beneath the head, on either side (below the ears?) there were several pairs of hair rings of coiled bronze wire ending in pseudo-eights figure (Pl. II 4, 5).⁷ Apparently, they used to be attached to the hair, possibly plaited hair. This is

⁴ P. Popović, M. Vukmanović, N. Radojčić, 1986: 170 f, fig. 7–10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Fig. 3. 4.

⁶ The analysis was rendered more difficult both by the poor state of preservation of the osteological material and by ignorance of the population's degree of robustness/gracility. The analysis was carried out by Zs. Zoffmann (Nemzeti Múzeum, Budapest).

⁷ P. Popović, M. Vukmanović, N. Radojčić, 1986: Fig. 3. 3, 7. 1–4.

best illustrated by the situation in grave 8, rich in grave goods that had, for the most part, remained in their original position (Pl. I, 1).

In only two cases was there a torque round the neck. Grave 8 contained a bronze torque with a twisted middle and smooth, curved ends (Pl. I, 1; II, 2). The other torque is smooth and, apart from the size and a wider opening, in no way differs from some anklets from the same grave (Pl. II, 3).⁸ On the breasts was a fibula, sometimes two. A common type is the double-looped arc fibula made of iron, with triangular or hourglass catch-plate (Pl. III 1, 2). Another type is also a double-looped arc fibula made of bronze and iron: the ribbed bronze bow has an iron core that ends in an hourglass catch-plate (Pl. III 3, 4). Frequently, only the ribbed bronze bow has been preserved, while iron parts have corroded away. The fibulae in grave 8 had pendants attached to them with bronze wire (Pl. III 3, 4). It is interesting to note that no bracelets were found at all. This is all the more surprising as several pairs of anklets were found in more than one grave. The anklets were made of bronze or iron, and their number varied from tomb to tomb.⁹ In grave 8, for instance, there were three bronze anklets and two iron ones on the right leg, with three bronze and one iron anklet on the left leg (Pl. IV 1, 2). In grave 17, there were 9 bronze anklets and 4 iron anklets on each leg. The bronze anklets, of somewhat smaller diameter, were apparently worn above the iron ones. Graves containing weapons were, as we have already noted, very few. One of the best-preserved skeletons had a spear by its side, to the right of the head. On the lower right of the breast there was a fibula (of the same type as Pl. III 3, 4), while a fragment of a badly corroded knife was by the right flank. On the legs and beneath them there were three bowls of varying sizes (Pl. I, 2; IV, 3). All three were of the same shape, with a slightly turned-in and horizontally faceted rim, decorated with garlands and suspended triangles.

This is the only grave containing rich pottery finds. Elsewhere, pottery is rare and consists chiefly of bowls laid beneath the legs. In any case, it is hard to speak of pottery as part of the grave goods, since potsherds were frequently found within the graves or in the immediate vicinity, as well as on the platform parts containing no skeletal remains. In some cases pots or potsherds were distributed in smaller concentrations, often on the platform periphery. Most pottery finds came from the upper layer of pebbles, where a large part of the material was very fragmented and often crushed by soil subsidence and pressure. It should also be noted that most vessels were made of impure and poorly baked clay. Since the platforms lay not very deep, in a permeable terrain consisting of sandy soil, subsidence and drastic changes between dry and wet had significantly contributed to the disintegration of bones, iron and pottery alike. However, though fragmented, the ceramic material is rich both in shapes and in decorative techniques and ornaments typical of the Basarabi style: "S" stamps, incision, the

⁸ *Ibid.*, Fig. 3. 3, 7. 5, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Fig. 3. 4, 7. 9-15.

cord ornament, facets, fluting, hatched triangles, the Maltese cross, garlands, running spirals, ornithomorphic images, etc.¹⁰

Close analogues to the material found at the Vajuga–Pesak necropolis have been registered at culturally related cemeteries in the immediate neighbourhood and further afield, in the Danube Basin and the Balkans at large. The bronze button used as a head-dress ornament in combination with saltaleoni has a close analogue in a grave from the Balta Verde necropolis (mound XVII/4), though similar shapes are also found among Late Bronze Age material.¹¹ The twisted torque closely resembles an artefact from the same necropolis (grave 4 in mound XII).¹² Similar torques are found in a number of hoards in east Serbia, the Danube basin at large, and the central Balkans: Šarbanovac, Brusnik, Rujište, Vintu de Jos, Janjevo, Široko, etc.¹³ These hoards have been dated to Ha B3–C1, while the Balta Verde grave belongs to the earliest burial horizon at that site.¹⁴ The smooth torque belongs to atypical class of annular ornament, just like the bracelets and anklets unearthed both at Vajuga–Pesak and at other culturally and chronologically related cemeteries and hoards (Balta Verde, Basarabi, Rujište). A similar torque was found in a hoard from Budišić, in northwest Serbia, dated to HaB3–C1.¹⁵

Hair rings were found chiefly in east Serbia and the Danube basin, from Moldova Veche, via Boljetin, Vajuga and Gruia, to Sofronievo, and in the Šarbanovac and Rudovci hoards.¹⁶ The westernmost find of this type came from the settlement of Feudvar near Mošorin.¹⁷ It is interesting to note that similar ornaments were found in the Balta Verde grave described above (grave 4 in mound XII), but the ends in the shape of pseudo-eights figure were lacking.¹⁸ Similar forms were also unearthed in chronologically earlier complexes (HaB3) such as the group burial at Gomolava¹⁹ or the Sarengrad hoard.²⁰

Double-looped iron fibulae with hourglass-shaped catch-plate are very common among the grave goods at cemeteries in the immediate neighbourhood (Balta Verde, Ostrovu Mare, and Gogosu).²¹ Fibulae of the same kind with triangular catch-plate have not been found at these cemeteries and are chiefly to

¹⁰ A. Premk, P. Popović, Lj. Bjelajac, 1984: Fig 103. 1–3; P. Popović, M. Vukmanović, N. Radojčić, 1986: Fig. 4, 8, 9.

¹¹ D. Berciu, E. Comsa, 1956: 116, Fig. 94. 1, 74. 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 100, Fig. 74. 1, 76.

¹³ R. Vasić, 1977: Pl. 9A. 1, 2; 9B. 1, 2; 14B. 4, 5; 15. 2; 17. 9; M. Petrescu-Dîmbovita, 1977: Pl. 392. 8–10.

¹⁴ B. Teržan, 1987: 9; 1990: 73.

¹⁵ R. Vasić, 1977: Pl. 6. 10.

¹⁶ R. Vasić, 1989: 10, Fig. 7; M. Guma, 1990: Pl. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸ D. Berciu, E. Comsa, 1956: Fig. 77. 1, 2, 3, 6.

¹⁹ N. Tasić, 1972: T. V/13; 1973: Fig. 55, 58, 72.

²⁰ K. Vinski-Gasparini, 1973: T. 131, 24.

²¹ T. Bader, 1983: T. 26. 166, 173–175.

be encountered in the western Balkans. On the basis of known analogues, this type of ornament can be dated somewhat later, to HaC1.

Fibulae with ridged bronze bows are similarly dated; they are so frequent in this area that their origin is probably to be sought here as well. Many have been found not only at Vajuga but also in the cemeteries of Balta Verde, Ostrovu Mare, and Basarabi.²² The cruciform pendant found alongside one of the fibulae has no close analogues in the region, but can be related to similar Late Bronze Age shapes that remained in use during the Iron Age. Another pendant resembles an element of the composite pendant from the Vintu de Jos hoard, dated to the 7th century B. C.²³

The most popular kind of annular ornament at Vajuga–Pesak are anklets; they were also unearthed, though not in such great numbers, in the cemeteries of Balta Verde²⁴ and Basarabi.²⁵ Objects of a similar shape found in the hoards of Vintu de Jos, Rujište, etc. should, judging by their size, be classified as ornaments of the same type.²⁶ Regarding of the proposed chronological framework, which is at present seen as relevant for the Basarabi complex both in Banat and in the Iron Gates region,²⁷ and considering the more archaic shapes whose analogues date back to horizon HaB3, the Vajuga–Pesak necropolis should be earlier in date than the Balta Verde (with the exception of mound XII)²⁸ and Basarabi cemeteries. It should, therefore, be dated to HaB3–C1, i. e. the last decades of the 8th and the early 7th century B. C. It seems that a much closer relationship should be established between these and territorially close but insufficiently studied finds from the necropoles of Moldova Veche, Svinita, Ostrovu Mare, etc.,²⁹ that indicates a degree of concentration of Basarabi sites in this comparatively restricted area. A comprehensive interpretation of the site is beyond the scope of this paper, but some elements of importance for cultural and chronological interpretation have to be singled out: one of the main features of Vajuga–Pesak is the relative abundance of female graves and scant number of male burials. Weapons are lacking, especially swords; a few spears and knives, specially small knives that were found in both male and female graves, being objects of everyday use, are all that was found.

Anthropological analysis, which was limited by the very poor state of preservation of the skeletal material, revealed the complete absence of certain age groups: children and subadults. The ages 40–60 predominate. There is a marked absence of the most active part of the population – young male warriors

²² *Ibid.*, T. 27. 186–194; T. 28; T. 29. 217–220, 222, 223.

²³ *Ibid.*, T. 59A. 9.

²⁴ E. g. mounds XII/1, 3 and XVII/2.

²⁵ V. Dumitrescu, 1968: 191.

²⁶ T. Bader, 1983: T. 58. 9–16; A. Lalović, 1975: T. III; T. IV/1–4.

²⁷ M. Guma, 1983: 98.

²⁸ For the dating of mound XII, esp. grave 4, see R. Vasić, 1977: 12; B. Teržan, 1987: 8;; 1990: 73.

²⁹ M. Guma, 1983: 70; T. Bader, 1983: 80; A. Vulpe, 1986.

and women of working age – which means that burial was not practised within family communities but based on another principle, that of age and status. According to this principle, members of the same population are buried in different places and within separate complexes. This might go towards explaining why there are few weapons at Vajuga–Pesak compared with Balta Verde and Basarabi, while swords are not found at all.³⁰ There could, however, be other reasons for this. For instance, excavations along the river bank at Vajuga–Pesak revealed more pebble platforms in several other spots, nearly all completely destroyed by erosion. Only Basarabi pottery was found there, and a single spear, which might mean that there weapons were rare too. It is possible that the absence of T-swords at Vajuga might be important chronologically: in this case the horizon of graves with T-swords from Balta Verde and Basarabi would represent a new phenomenon that was not known at Vajuga. It remains uncertain, therefore, whether the necropolis at Vajuga–Pesak was meant only for older members of the population, while warriors (and their wives?) with their weapons were buried apart, or whether the T-swords were a novelty that the population buried here simply never lived to see.

НЕКА ЗАПАЖАЊА О НЕКРОПОЛИ РАНОГ ГВОЗДЕНОГ ДОБА СА ЛОКАЛИТЕТА ВАЈУГА – ПЕСАК

Резиме

Приликом заштитних радова на подручју хидросистема Ђердап II на потесу Песак, који се налази између Корбова и Вајуге (905–906 km од ушћа Дунава) од 1980. до 1989. године испитана је некропола са 22 инхумирана покојника. На површини од око 3000 m² откривене су две платформе неправилног облика које чине два до три реда речних облутака местимично помешаних са шљунком. Могле су бити формиране од заравњених и међусобно спојених „тумула“ који чине две посебне целине. Покојници се, скоро по правилу, налазе испод једног реда облутака (30–50 cm од површине) и положени су на слој облутака и шљунка. Већина скелета има приближно исту оријентацију која варира исток–југоисток (глава) и запад–северозапад (ноге). Уобичајене прилоге у гробовима чине накит док је оружје далеко ређе заступљено. Накит је доста разноврстан и чине га украси за главу и косу (салталеони, двострука завијена бронзана жица), затим торквеси (тордирани и глатки), фибуле (гвоздене двопетљасте лучне фибуле са ногом у облику троугла или пешчаног сата и двопетљасте лучне фибуле од бронзе и гвозђа: наребрени лук од бронзе има гвоздено језгро које се завршава ногом у облику пешчаног сата), као и навогаице од бронзе и гвозђа, отворених крајева и сасвим једноставног облика (Т. II, Т. III/1–4, Т. IV–1, 2). Од оружја заступљена су само копља и ножеви од гвозђа (Т. III/5).

У неколико гробова као прилог налазиле су се и посуде од керамике обично једна а ређе два или више примерака, увек у нивоу ногу покојника. У неким случајевима делови посуда или целе посуде налазили су се распоређени у мањим групама, најчешће по ободу платформе. Највише керамике нађено је у горњем нивоу облутака где је услед слегања и других оштећења велики део материјала веома фрагментован, посебно имајући

³⁰ M. Guštin, 1974: 77.

у виду да је већина посуда израђена од лоше пречишћене и слабо печене земље. У сваком случају, без обзира на фрагментованост, керамички материјал обилује како формама тако и техникама и мотивима који се везују за Басараби стил: „S“ жигови, урезивање, шнур, дуборез, фасете, канелуре, шрафирани троуглови, малтешки крст, гирланде, текућа спирала, орнитоморфне представе итд. (Т. IV/3).

Материјал откривен на некрополи Вајуга–Песак има блиске аналогије на културно сродним некрополама из непосредног суседства али и са налазима са ширег простора Подунавља и Балкана. На основу предложених хронолошких оквира који се сматрају релевантним за Басараби комплекс како у Ђердапу тако и шире у Подунављу, и с обзиром на архаичније форме које имају аналогије још у хоризонту На В3, некрополу Вајуга–Песак требало би сматрати старијом од некропола Балта Верде (изузев тумула XII) и Басараби. Стога би је требало датирати у период НаВ3–С1, односно у последње деценије VIII и почетак VII века пре наше ере. За сада се чини да би далеко већи степен сродности требало тражити са територијално блиским некрополама Moldova Veche, Svinita, Ostrovi Mare итд. што указује на изврстан степен концентрације Басараби локалитета у одређеном временском периоду на овом релативно малом простору.

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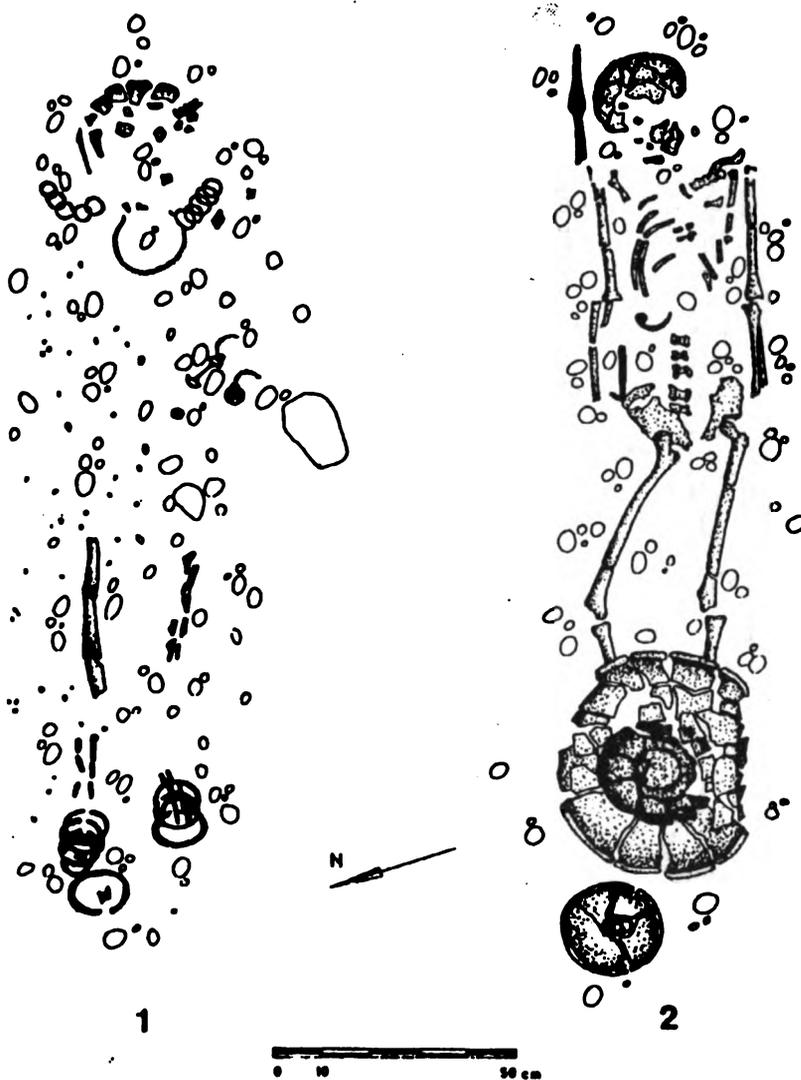
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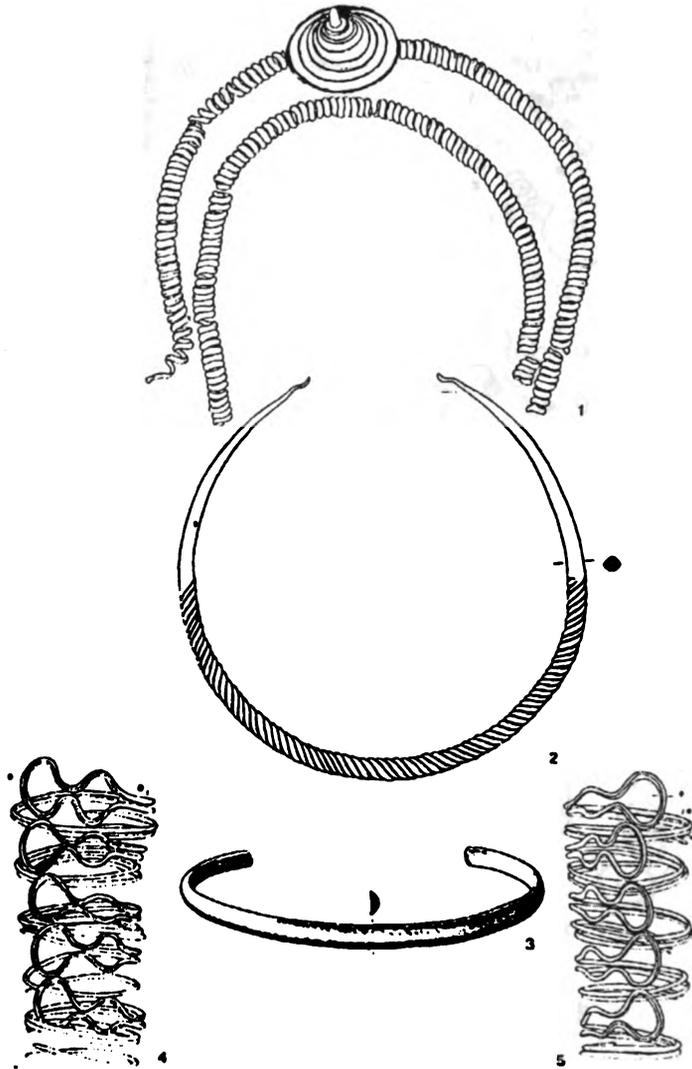
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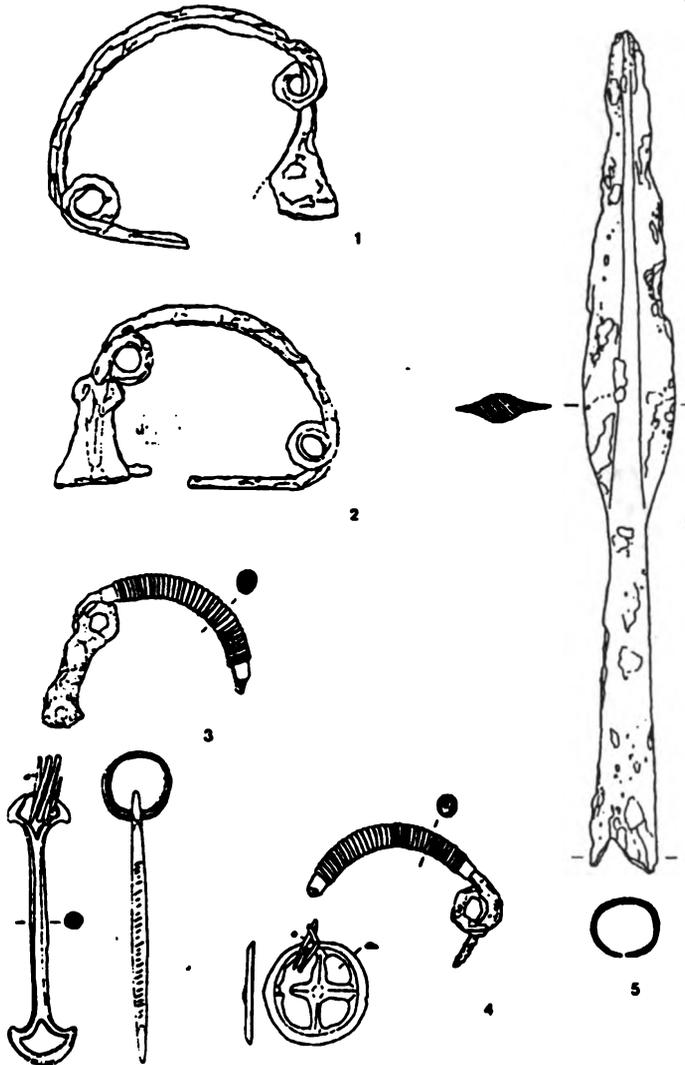
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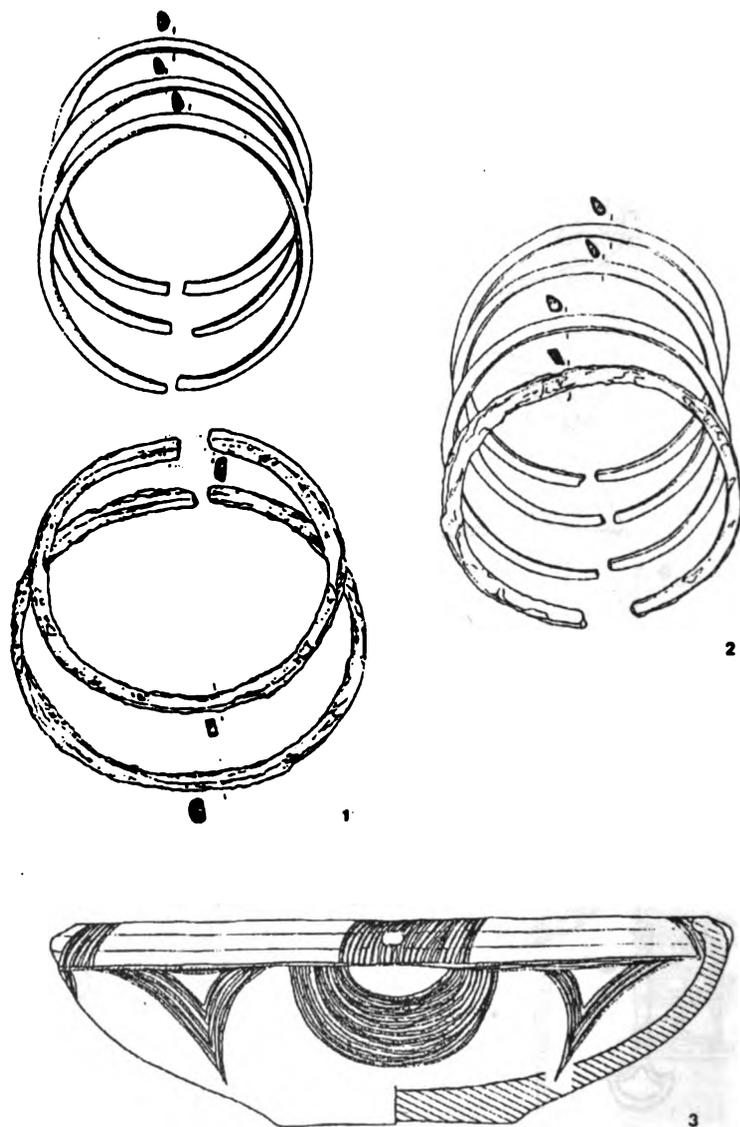
Pl I



PL. II



Pl. III



Pl. IV