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A new Late Bronze Age sceptre-pestle discovered at Limanu,
Constanța County (SE Romania)

Sorin-Cristian AILINCĂI¹, Florian MIHAIL², Carmen ȘUȘMAN³

Abstract: *Late Bronze Age stone sceptres/pestles are a category of artefacts enjoying a certain distinction, found across a vast area, from the western Black Sea to Central Asia. On this instance, we publish one such object discovered in Limanu, Constanta County (south-eastern Romania), which can be attributed to type II according to the typology established by Nikolaus Boroffka and Eugen Sava. Such sceptres/pestles are mostly made of local rock and can be assigned to the Noua-Sabatinovka-Coslogeni cultures. The low wear and tear of the pieces indicates usage. This may imply that the objects stopped being used shortly after their allocation or that they were used for ceremonial purposes for a short period.*

Rezumat: *Sceptrele/pisăloage din piatră de la sfârșitul epocii bronzului reprezintă o categorie de obiecte considerate de prestigiu ce se regăsesc pe un spațiu larg, din vestul Mării Negre până în Asia Centrală. Cu această ocazie publicăm un astfel de obiect descoperit la Limanu, județul Constanța (sud-estul României). Acesta poate fi atribuit tipului II după tipologia stabilită de Nikolaus Boroffka și Eugen Sava. Astfel de sceptre/pisăloage pot fi puse pe seama culturilor Noua-Sabatinovka-Coslogeni, au fost de cele mai multe ori confecționate din roci locale. Gradul de uzură al pieselor este unul redus, ceea ce denotă o folosire nu foarte intensă. Această observație poate presupune ieșirea din circuitul funcțional la scurt timp după debutul folosirii sau o utilizare de tip ceremonial de scurtă durată.*

Keywords: *Dobruja, Limanu, Late Bronze Age, sceptre-pestle, Coslogeni culture.*

Introduction

Foremost, we would like to convey our esteem, consideration and best wishes to our friend and colleague Neculai Bolohan. As his work is mainly related to the study of Bronze Age civilizations in the Carpathian-Balkan area, we consider it appropriate to mark this anniversary by publishing a new stone sceptre-pestle from southern Dobruja specific to this period.

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The piece we publish on this occasion was discovered by chance in 1983 by Micleuș Nicolae, east of Mangalia, on the northern shore of Limanu Lake, Constanța County, near a stone quarry (Fig. 1). The territory of Mangalia is well known for the large number of archaeological remains dating from the Neolithic to the medieval period⁴.

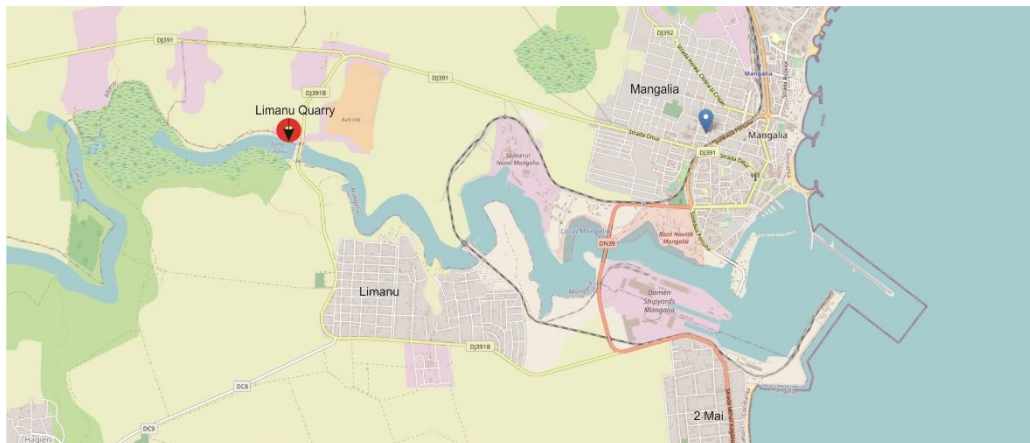


Fig. 1. Area where the sceptre was discovered.

Description of the object

The sceptre-pestle is in good state of conservation. It has the following dimensions: height - 227 mm; diameter of the proximal end - 47 mm; diameter of the distal end - 68 mm; diameter of the neck - 37 mm; weight - 1228,8 g. It was made of magmatic rock, most probably basalt (Fig. 2). The nearest source for basalt is in the north of Dobrogea, in line with the localities Niculițel - Valea Teilor - Dealul Consul⁵.

The analysed object has a truncated cone-shaped body, the section is circular and the diameter increases progressively from the neck towards the distal end, where it reaches its maximum value (Fig. 2-3). The proximal end is well contoured, with an intensely flattened surface (Fig. 4/1). Its edge is circular and slightly chipped on some segments. Immediately below the body narrows sharply (the minimum diameter) (Fig. 4/2-3). Below this sector, the body thickens slightly in the form of a shoulder. This feature is found in several sceptres discovered in the eastern and northern Black Sea.

The middle area has been intensively and uniformly finished using the abrasion technique (Fig. 4/4), while the distal end has a flattened surface, due to grinding occurred during usage.

⁴ SAUCIUC-SĂVEANU 1924; PEDA 1965; VOLSCHI, IRIMIA 1968; BĂRLĂDEANU-ZAVATIN 1977; PEDA 1980; AVRAM 1991; IONESCU, PAPUC 2005; PĂSLARU, COLESNIUC 2004-2005; TALMAȚCHI 2006; BEM 2011, 41-42; BUZOIANU, BĂRBULESCU 2011; ALEXANDRU, CONSTANTIN, IONESCU 2012; RADU 2013; RADU-IORGUȘ, RADU, IONESCU 2013; MĂRGINEANU CÂRSTOIU 2015; RADU 2016; LUNGU 2017; ALEXANDRU *et alii* 2018; SÎRBU, ȘTEFAN, ȘTEFAN 2021; etc.

⁵ HAITĂ 2011, 83.

Its edge has an irregular circular appearance. There are visible negatives created by the detachment of flakes during the shaping of the block of raw material, carried out by the percussion technique. The contours of these negatives have been partially regularised by the finishing carried out in the last stage of processing.

The distal end presents certain peculiarities compared to the rest of the surface. This segment of the tool's body functioned as an active part. As already mentioned, its surface is worn (Fig. 3; 4/5-6), in contrast with the rest of the piece. On its length, fine and organized grouped striations were observed. Such marks could have been the result of firm contact between the active part of the piece and another object with a hard structure, such as pressing friction movement, which gradually detached microscopic fragments from the surface of the distal end, thus giving it a flattened and smooth appearance. Similar usage was also observed in other pieces of relatively similar shape found in the northern Dobruja area⁶. The wear and tear is moderate and corresponds to brief or episodic use.



Fig. 2. The sceptre-pestle discovered at Limanu.

⁶ MIHAIL, AILINCĂI 2013.

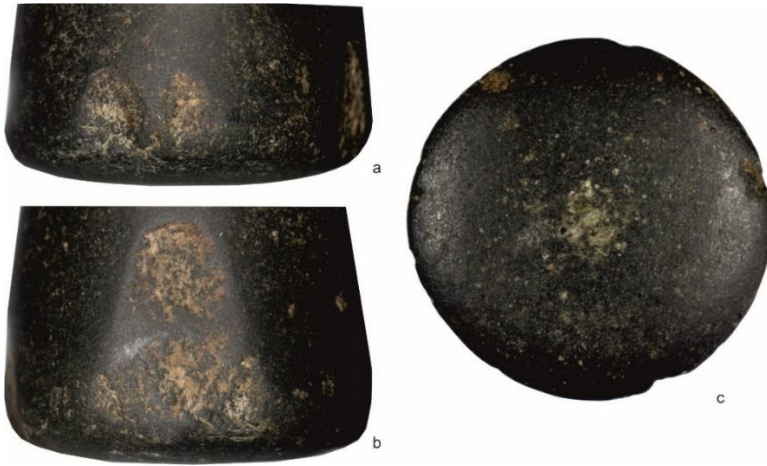


Fig. 3. The sceptre-pestle from Limanu. Details of the active part.

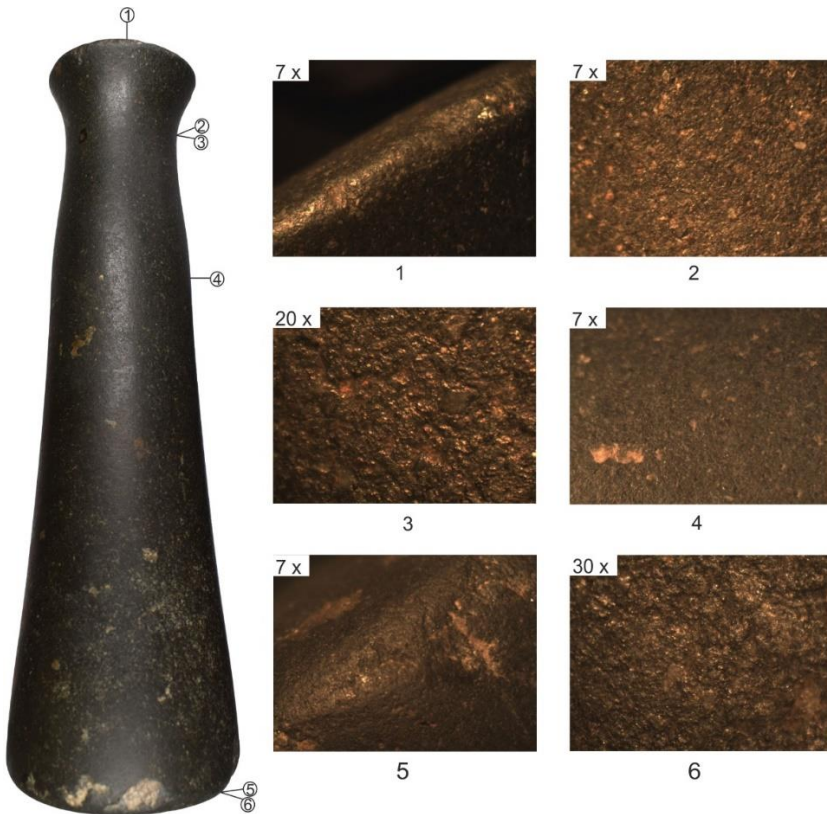


Fig. 4. Microscopic details of the proximal (1) and distal (5-6) extremities, neck (2-3) and midline (4).

Such motions and marks correspond to grinding or milling activities, a hypothesis whose validity is increased by the fact that surfaces of active parts with similar morphology have been noted on the grinding tools identified in prehistoric sites⁷. As already mentioned in the case of other objects of this type, the slightly convex shape of the surface and the rounded edges indicate contact with a piece with a honeycombed surface (the bottom of a vessel or a grinder with a strongly scooped active part)⁸. The increased attention paid to the manufacturing process, far beyond that observed in the study of other tools with such role⁹, may indicate the usage in contexts other than domestic.

About the area, context of discovery and chronology

Although this type of finds has been known for a long time over a vast area between Eastern Europe and Central Asia¹⁰, the first attempts at typology and chronology for the north-western Pontic area occurred as late as the 1980s¹¹. Nikolaus Boroffka and Eugen Sava published the only work synthesizing the entire range of these artefacts in the late 1990s¹², also proposing a flexible typological scheme, based on five types of sceptre/pestle, with several variants each (Fig. 5).

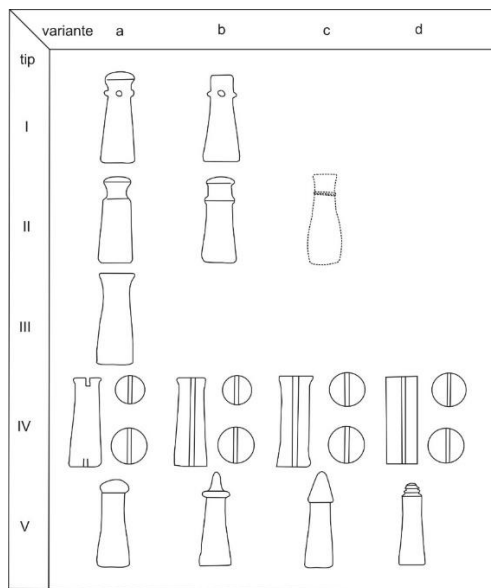


Fig. 5. Types of stone sceptres/pestles (according to BOROFFKA, SAVA 1998).

⁷ MIHAIL, AILINCĂI 2013, 64; MIHAIL, MICU 2018, 12-14

⁸ MIHAIL, AILINCĂI 2013, 64.

⁹ MICU, MAILLE, MIHAIL 2005, 232; MICU, HAITĂ, MIHAIL 2005-2006, 15-16.

¹⁰ BOROFFKA, SAVA 1998.

¹¹ ČERNJAKOV 1985; SAVA 1987.

¹² BOROFFKA, SAVA 1998.

According to this typology (Fig. 5), the Limanu stone sceptre/pestle, with its slender silhouette and the existence of a slightly thickened area in the upper zone, can be attributed to type II according to Boroffka and Sava. This type has a truncated cone shape, a pronounced shoulder and a mushroom-shaped upper part. Our piece can be classified as type II.b, the shoulder being a slightly protruding "coil" with a semi-circular profile¹³.

The two researchers have included in this type a fairly consistent series of pieces from the north and north-west of the Black Sea, such as those from Chiperceni, Mihajlovka, Nikonij, Pivdennoe and Vlădiceasca (*variant Ila*), Fitionești¹⁴, Găiceanca¹⁵, Kodyma¹⁶, Măcin¹⁷, Mihajlovka¹⁸, Novo-Kizganovo¹⁹, Veremievka²⁰, Voinești²¹ and those in museums in Kiev and Krasnodar²² (*variant I Ib*). To these we can add the more recent finds from Măgura, Bacău County²³, Bârlad²⁴, Dănești, Vaslui County²⁵, Babino²⁶ and possibly Rasova–Malul Roșu or Satu Nou–Valea lui Voicu, Constanța County²⁷. Other sceptres that somewhat respect the morphology of type II, of relatively small size and less slender shape, have been found in the Noua culture settlements of Șuletea–Șipot²⁸ and Giurcani²⁹. They are similar in appearance to another specimen with protuberances on the body (type I) from another Noua settlement identified at Rai–Gura Hulubăț³⁰.

The area where finds of this type have been reported has also extended southwards, especially following the publication of several pieces found on Bulgarian territory³¹, of which the specimen from Popovo is very similar to the one from Limanu, while the one from Kubadin is missing the upper part. The Meden Rudnik sceptres, although they have the prominent shoulder characteristic of Type II, have the lower part shaped in a manner typical of many sceptres attributed to Type III, with the maximum diameter above the active part. A few years

¹³ BOROFFKA, SAVA 1998, 19-20, fig. 6/1-7, 7/1-8.

¹⁴ MITREA 1969, 314; OANCEA 1976, 220; MORINTZ 1978; SAVA 1987.

¹⁵ BASOC 1981, 24; ȘERBĂNESCU 1993, 158; BOROFFKA, SAVA 1998, 81, Abb. 7/7.

¹⁶ SAVA 1987, fig. 2/13.

¹⁷ SAVA 1987, fig. 2/13.

¹⁸ SAVA 1987, fig. 2/10

¹⁹ SAVA 1987, fig. 2/19-20.

²⁰ SAVA 1987, fig. 2/11.

²¹ MITREA 1969, 311, fig. 1; SAVA 1987, fig. 1/10; BOROFFKA, SAVA 1998, 20, fig. 7/2, 41/3.

²² BOROFFKA, SAVA 1998, 20, fig. 6-7.

²³ DIACONU, ISTINA 2011, 53-62.

²⁴ ROTARU 2009, 160, fig. 3/3.

²⁵ This information was kindly provided by Ciprian Lazanu, whom we thank on this occasion as well.

²⁶ ZIDAROV, AGULNIKOV 2016.

²⁷ IRIMIA 2008, 81, 84, fig. 1/2-3; 6/2-3.

²⁸ ROTARU 2009, 160, fig. 1/1.

²⁹ ROTARU 1998, 126-127.

³⁰ ROTARU 2009, 159, fig. 2/3.

³¹ LICHARDUS, ILIEV, CHRISTOV 1999; HRISTOV, ILIEV 2000; DILOV 2011; ALEKSANDROV, TANEVA 2012.

ago, based on these observations, we proposed to complete the Boroffka&Sava typology with type II.c³² (Fig. 5). In addition to the above-mentioned findings, there is also a piece made in a similar manner from the Noua culture settlement at Murgeni-Oiţa³³.

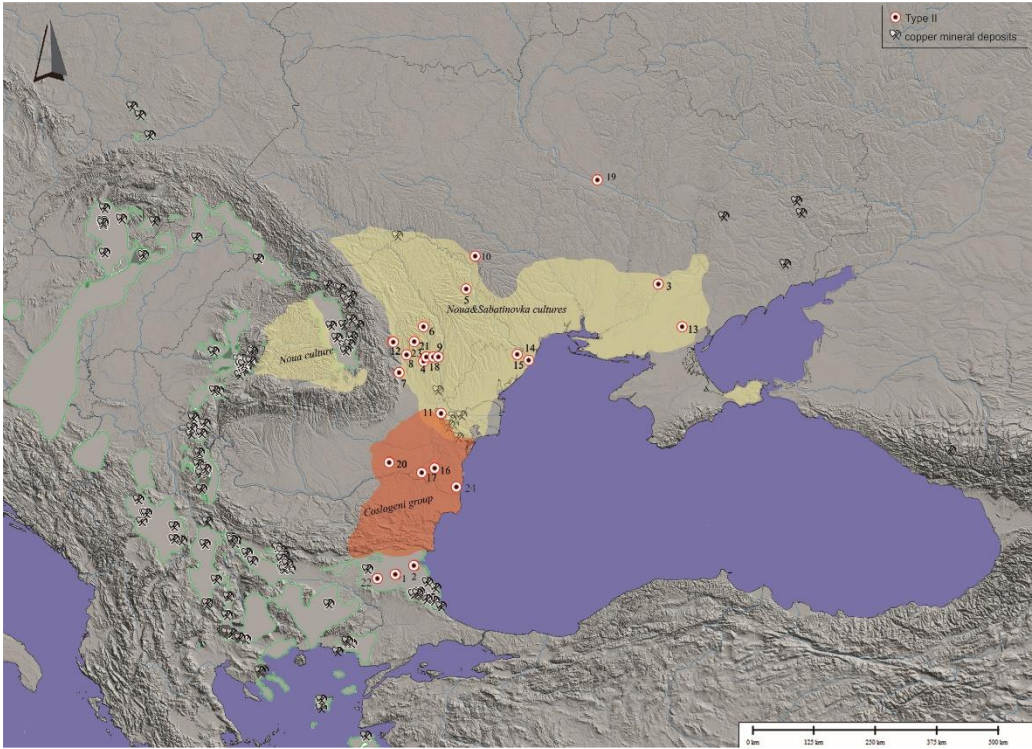


Fig. 6. Distribution map of type II sceptre-pestle: 1. Kubadin; 2. Meden rudnik; 3. Babino; 4. Bârlad; 5. Chiperceni; 6. Dăneşti; 7. Fiţioneşti; 8. Găiceana; 9. Giurcani; 10. Kodyma; 11. Măcin; 12. Măgura; 13. Mihajlovka; 14. Nikonij; 15. Pivdennoe; 16. Rasova; 17. Satu Nou; 18. Shuletea; 19. Veremievka; 20. Vlădiceasca; 21. Voineşti; 22. Popovo; 23. Murgeni; 24. Limanu (according to ZIDAROV, AGULNIKOV 2016).

The type II sceptre-pestles have been found in the north-west and west of the Black Sea³⁴, with a noticeably concentration in the western part of this area, probably indicating the area of origin of these artefacts (Fig. 6). Although most specimens were found by chance, there are instances where we have data about the context of discovery. This is the case of the specimen from Fiţioneşti, which comes from a Monteoru culture settlement, phase IIb³⁵. The sceptres from Voineşti³⁶ can also be attributed to a Monteoru (or Noua culture) settlement. The pieces

³² MIHAIL, AILINCĂI 2013, 66.

³³ ROTARU 2009, 160, fig. 2/1.

³⁴ BOROFFKA, SAVA 1998, 57, Abb. 34.

³⁵ MITREA 1969, 314, fig. 3/2; OANCEA 1976, 220.

³⁶ MITREA 1969; MITREA 1989.

discovered in Moldavia at Șuletea-Șipot³⁷ and Giurcani³⁸ are linked to the Noua culture, too. Later dating also indicate the finds from Novo-Kizganovo in a settlement of Andronovo culture³⁹ and possibly those from the Dobrujan sites of Rasova–Malul Roșu or Satu Nou–Valea lui Voicu which can be linked to a Coslogeni⁴⁰ settlement or one of Babadag culture (10th-9th century BC)⁴¹. Although the contexts are relatively few, most scholars consider that the north-west Black Sea sceptre-pestles can be attributed to the Noua-Sabatinovka-Coslogeni horizon and to neighbouring and contemporary cultures⁴².

Final considerations

The Limanu sceptre was discovered in the area of Coslogeni culture. In fact, ceramic fragments of Noua-Coslogeni type⁴³ have been reported since the 1950s south of the locality. As it can be observed from Fig. 6, there is a rather high density of these objects in Moldova, but also in a perimeter between the Lower Danube and the Strandzha Mountains.

In this article, we have highlighted the main information on the typology, chronology, area of distribution and cultural attribution of type II (after Boroffka & Sava) sceptre-pestles. Referring to all the pieces in this category, we must mention that they were often considered prestigious objects, used by a distinct social group or linked to certain metallurgical practices⁴⁴.

In a recent study, Petar Zidarov and Sergei Agulnikov have mapped Type I-III sceptres in a context, marking also the copper deposits of the north-western and western Black Sea⁴⁵. The map (Fig. 6) shows that most of the sceptre-pestles were not found in the copper ore mining areas⁴⁶. However, this observation does not exclude their use in the metallurgical process.

In fact, at least our observations on the sceptre-pestles from Parcheș, Măcin⁴⁷ and Limanu, highlighted the existence of traces on the distal (active) side that could result from the firm contact between the active part of the artefact and another object of hard structure. The rounded edges indicate contact with an item with honeycombed surface (such as a grinder with a strongly scooped active part or a grinder)⁴⁸.

³⁷ ROTARU 2009, 160, fig. 1/1.

³⁸ ROTARU 1998, 126-127.

³⁹ BOROFFKA, SAVA 1999, 87.

⁴⁰ IRIMIA 2008, 86; IRIMIA 2010.

⁴¹ Although invoked on the occasion of the publication of research from the two sites, the settlement attributed to the Coslogeni culture is in our opinion insufficiently supported by the published material.

⁴² See BOROFFKA, SAVA 1998; ZIDAROV, AGULNIKOV 2016.

⁴³ FLORESCU 1991, 150, Fig. 91/2-3.

⁴⁴ SAVA 1987; BOROFFKA, SAVA 1998; IRIMIA 2008.

⁴⁵ ZIDAROV, AGULNIKOV 2016; BOROFFKA 2009.

⁴⁶ ZIDAROV, AGULNIKOV 2016, Fig. 4.

⁴⁷ MIHAIL, AILINCĂI 2013.

⁴⁸ SAVA 1987, Fig. 2/21-24; ALEXANDROV, TANEVA 2012, Fig. 2/2.

At the same time, the low wear and tear indicates little usage. This may imply that the piece stopped being used shortly after its allocation or that it was used for ceremonial purposes for a short period. The low wear and tear, as well as the attention paid to workmanship and appearance are arguments in favour of the latter case. Usually, throughout prehistoric times, pieces intended for friction purposes, whether for processing grain⁴⁹ or ore⁵⁰, took various forms (circular, rectangular, prismatic, etc.). The technological process was not complex, sometimes preferring the use of stone blocks in their natural form, using the entire surface, often with several active areas along the surface⁵¹. Considering all these elements, we believe that the attention paid to the elaboration of these pieces, with a clear specification of both the active and the handling part, may indicate a special purpose, different from the domestic use. However, our observations need to be verified on a larger batch of such artefacts.

Acknowledgements

Special acknowledgement is due to dr. Alexandra Dolea, for translating this paper to English.

⁴⁹ See, for example MICU, MAILLE, MIHAIL 2005, 231-232; MICU, HAITĂ, MIHAIL 2005-2006, 15-16.

⁵⁰ AMBERT 1996, 24; BARGE 1997, 105.

⁵¹ MICU, MAILLE, MIHAIL 2005, 232.

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