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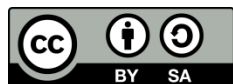
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Table of Contents

ARTICLES

Andrea DEMJÉN, Florin GOGĂLTAN	
Contumatz Pricске. A study of Historical Archaeology.....	1
Alexandru SIMON	
<i>Imperator et dux</i> : On the Churches and the Fortresses of <i>Dracula</i>	31
Radu BĂJENARU	
The early metal daggers in the Carpathian-Danubian area: contexts, significance, and functionality.....	61
Oliver DIETRICH	
Hortfund - Einzelfund – Einstückhort. Versuch einer Begriffsschärfung anhand des Beispiels der rumänischen Tüllenbeile.....	71
Tudor MANDACHE, Adrian ADAMESCU, Sorin Cristian AILINCĂI	
A forgotten cemetery at the edge of Lake Brateş. Funerary finds unearthed in the area of Vînători- <i>La Jolică</i> archaeological site.....	84
Casandra BRAȘOVEANU, Radu-Alexandru BRUNCHI	
New discoveries concerning the end of the Bronze Age in Jijia catchment.....	104
Alexandru GAFINCU, Vasile DIACONU	
Guarding what? A Middle Bronze Age fortification near Moldova River Valley.....	131
Vasile DIACONU	
A Drajna type bronze axe (<i>NackenknauŃăxte</i>) from Eastern Romania.....	142
Ana DROB, Neculai BOLOHAN, Bogdan RĂȚOI, Sebastian DROB	
Same or different? Interdisciplinary analyses on the Costișa and Monteoru pottery from Siliștea- <i>Pe Cetățuie</i> settlement.....	158

Florica MĂȚĂU, Vasile DIACONU, Mitică PINTILEI, Ovidiu CHIȘCAN

Insights into the production technology of Late Bronze Age pottery identified at

Topolița (Neamț County)..... 194

The early metal daggers in the Carpathian-Danubian area: contexts, significance, and functionality

Radu BĂJENARU¹

Abstract. *The author discusses the problem of prehistoric metal daggers discovered in the Carpathian-Danubian area. Particular attention is paid to the contexts from which these daggers come, observing a certain differentiation during the Chalcolithic, Bronze and early Iron Age. Thus, in the Chalcolithic, early and middle Bronze Age, most daggers come from settlements and graves, a very small number being found in hoards and single depositions. On the contrary, in the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, the ratio changes significantly, with most daggers being found in hoards and single finds. It is very likely that this differentiation will also reflect changes in the meaning and functionality of daggers within those prehistoric societies.*

Rezumat. *Autorul discută problema pumnalelor de metal din eneolitic, epoca bronzului și epoca timpurie a fierului descoperite în spațiul carpato-dunărean. Se acordă o atenție deosebită contextelor din care provin aceste pumnale, observându-se o anumită diferențiere pentru epocile respective. Astfel, în eneolitic, bronzul timpuriu și bronzul mijlociu, majoritatea pumnalelor provin din așezări și morminte, un număr foarte mic fiind găsit în depozite și depuneri izolate. Dimpotrivă, în bronzul târziu și epoca timpurie a fierului, raportul se schimbă semnificativ, majoritatea pieselor fiind găsite în depozite și depuneri izolate. Este foarte probabil ca această diferențiere să reflecte totodată schimbări în ceea ce privește semnificația și funcționalitatea pumnalelor în cadrul societăților respective.*

Keywords: Chalcolithic, Bronze Age, Early Iron Age, Romania, Metal Daggers, Contexts, Significance, Functionality

Introduction

The metal daggers from the Carpathian-Danubian area were the subject of many synthesis volumes, mostly authored by non-Romanians². In the Romanian archaeological literature, the interest for metal daggers appears to be reduced, despite the fact that the important number of such discoveries and their contexts would allow for a series of observations regarding their role and significance within the prehistoric societies. At the present moment there exists a catalogue of the Chalcolithic and some early Bronze Age daggers from Romania³ and two rather substantial studies on the Peschiera⁴ and the Oriental types from the late Bronze Age and first

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² NOVOTNÁ 1982, 311-319; VAJSOV 1993, 103-145; MATUSCHIK 1998, 207-261.

³ MAREȘ 2002.

⁴ KACSÓ 1993, 39-45.

The early metal daggers in the Carpathian-Danubian area: contexts, significance, and functionality Iron Ages. It should be also mentioned the study about tanged daggers from the early and middle Bronze Age in the Carpathian-Danubian area⁶.

The majority of the debates on daggers concentrated exclusively on the chronology and typology of such items. The functionality of prehistoric items remains both intensely disputed and controversial. In many cases, the functionality of various types of prehistoric metal artefacts was established based on their use in modern times (tools, weapons, adornments). This also applies in the case of metal daggers, seen most of the time as offensive weapons used on body combat. In the present paper the author will discuss the role, significance and functionality of the prehistoric metal daggers from the Carpathian-Danubian area, taking into consideration both their contexts of origin and the comparison with other categories of items considered weapons (axes, swords, spearheads)⁷.

Definition, origin and typology of prehistoric daggers

The definition and typology of the prehistoric daggers originated in the characteristics observed at the modern items of a similar type. Thus, at present it is considered that any double-edged blade with a length shorter than 30 cm can be considered a dagger⁸. It is very probable that the prototype for the metal daggers is to be found the sharp-edged flint blades. The earliest metal daggers in the Carpathian-Danubian area occur during the Chalcolithic, chronologically during the Gumelnița A, Cucuteni A, Tiszapolgár (approx. the middle of the 5th mill. BC). These were simple copper blades, biconvex in section, with two edges and a rounded tip.

In fact, the typology of prehistoric daggers was established based on the manner the blade was attached. Thus, apart from the blades attached to the hilt in a simple manner, from the Chalcolithic appeared blades with a plated hilt and rivets, a type that would be produced and used, with variants, during the entire Bronze Age. The second main category is the tanged blade. This occurred in the Carpathian-Danubian area during the Bronze Age and continued to be used until the early Iron Age⁹; during the late Bronze Age appear tanged daggers with rivets.

The contexts of the daggers

Generally speaking, many of the prehistoric metal items (of various types) were chance finds and thus had no secure contexts. Daggers are an exception, with a substantial number having been found during systematic excavations. Of course, there still are cases of unknown

⁵ POPA 2000, 61-87.

⁶ BĂJENARU, POPESCU 2012.

⁷ A part of the ideas and conclusions of the present study were defined briefly in BĂJENARU (2010) and BĂJENARU, POPESCU (2012).

⁸ BADER 1991, 2; a historical approach in ZIMMERMANN (2007, 4), and bibliography.

⁹ BĂJENARU, POPESCU 2012.

contexts when the chronological determination is problematic. On the other hand, the series of items which do have secure contexts allows us to observe the way daggers were manipulated during various time periods that enter our discussion.

The Contexts of the Chalcolithic Daggers (5th - first half of 4th mill. BC).

The present author is familiar with over 30 dagger blades from the Carpathian-Danubian area that can be attributed to the Chalcolithic period. Most of them are connected to various settlements from the period, four comes from funerary contexts and another one came from a hoard. It follows that almost 90% of the items that are datable to the Chalcolithic could be related to the settlement contexts.

Another category of Chalcolithic metal finds – frequently seen as weapons – are the axes, both the hammer type and the axes-adzes. In comparison to the daggers, the situation of their contexts of origin is totally different: over 90% of the various categories of Chalcolithic axes from the Carpathian-Danubian area came from hoards or as single finds¹⁰.

The contexts of early Bronze Age daggers (second half of 4th - 3rd mill. BC).

The contexts for the daggers and the shaft-hole axes from the early Bronze Age were already discussed in detail elsewhere¹¹. Apart from a typological diversification when compared to the Chalcolithic, during the early Bronze Age one notes an important change in the percentages of the dagger contexts. On one hand, the percentages for the items found in funerary contexts (ca. 17%) and single finds (ca. 13%) increased significantly despite the fact the majority were found within settlements or could be linked to certain ones (70%).

On the other hand, the shaft-hole axes from the early Bronze Age, specific to the Carpathian-Danubian area, came from hoards and as single finds (97%)¹².

The context of middle Bronze Age daggers (first half of 2nd mill. BC).

Out of the ca. 55 daggers that can be contextualized in the middle Bronze Age in our area, the percentage of those found in funerary contexts is quite similar to the one for the early Bronze Age (ca 18%). On the other hand, a certain balance can be noted between the percentages of items found in settlements and the single finds/deposits (46%, respectively 36%).

The percentage of axes datable to the middle Bronze Age that occurred as chance finds (isolate discoveries or hoards) remains as high as during the previous periods. With the middle Bronze Age, two new categories of items appeared in the military equipment: the swords and the spearheads.

Approximately 90% of the swords datable to the middle Bronze Age came from hoards or were single finds¹³. In what the spearheads are concerned, lacking catalogues and synthetic

¹⁰ For these categories of pieces see Vulpe 1975; Mareş 2002.

¹¹ Băjenaru 2010.

¹² For the axes discovered in the Carpathian-Danubian area see Vulpe 1970.

¹³ For the Bronze Age swords in the Carpathian-Danubian area see Bader 1991.

The early metal daggers in the Carpathian-Danubian area: contexts, significance, and functionality studies, it is difficult to estimate percentages for the archaeological contexts. The known data indicates that the majority were known from deposits and as single finds¹⁴.

The contexts of late Bronze and early Iron Age daggers (second half of 2nd – first centuries of 1st mill. BC).

From the over 200 Bronze daggers datable to the late Bronze and early Iron ages, approximately 90% came from hoards and as single finds, with less than 10% of them connected to settlements or funerary contexts. Similar or close percentages exist for the other weapon types (axes, swords, spearheads) that can be dated to the same chronologically interval.

The evolution of contexts for the daggers from the Chalcolithic to the early Iron Age is illustrated in Table 1. A constant gradual decrease in the number of daggers found within settlements can be observed, from ca. 90% during the Chalcolithic, to only 6% during the late Bronze/early Iron Age. Simultaneously, there is a constant gradual increase in the number of daggers found in hoards or as single finds, from ca. 4% during the Chalcolithic, to ca. 90% in late Bronze/early Iron Age. The presence of daggers in funerary contexts does not surpass ca. 6% for the Chalcolithic and the late Bronze/early Iron Age and almost 20% during the early and middle Bronze Age (Table 1).

Daggers	Chalcolithic	EBA	MBA	LBA / EIA
Settlements	90%	70%	46%	6%
Graves	6%	17%	18%	4%
Hoards / Single Finds	4%	13%	36%	90%

Table 1: Evolution of dagger contexts in the Carpathian-Danubian area

Compared to other types of pieces considered to be weapons, one notes a clear difference in the archaeological contexts during the Chalcolithic, early and middle Bronze Age; the majority of the daggers came from settlements and funerary contexts, while the axes, swords and spearheads were found in deposits or as single finds. During the late Bronze/early Iron Age a uniformization of the contexts is observed, with ca. 90% of such items (daggers, axes, swords, spearheads) having been found in hoards or as single finds (Table 2).

¹⁴ PETRESCU-DÎMBOVIȚA 1977; PETRESCU-DÎMBOVIȚA 1978.

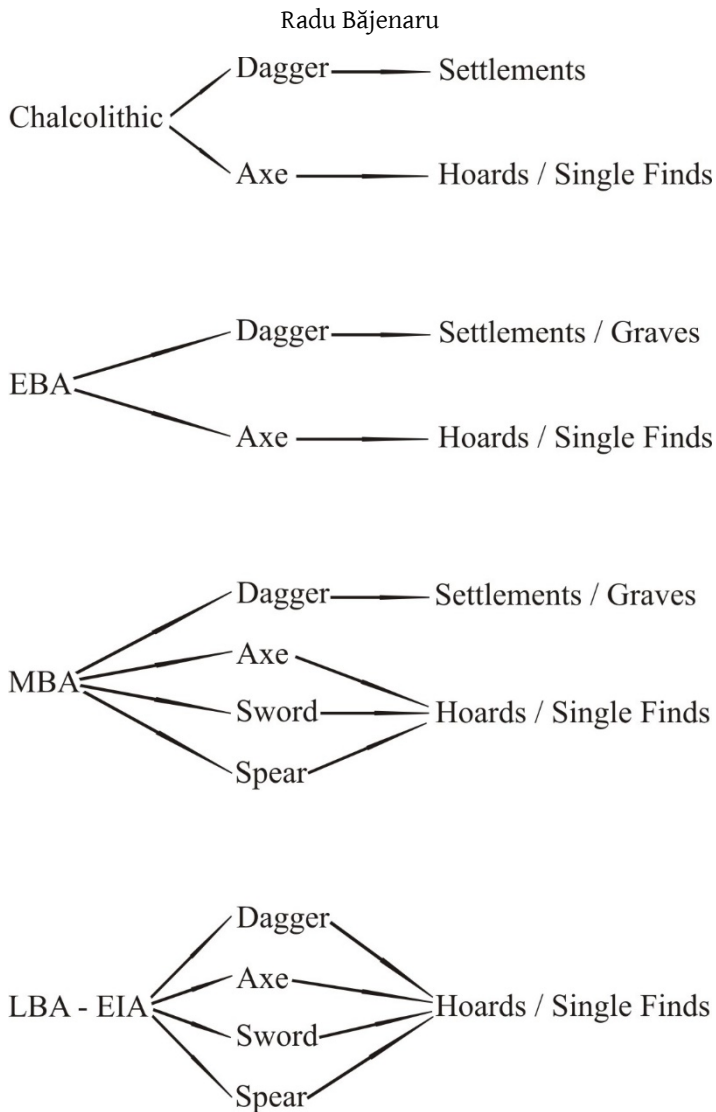


Table 2: The main types of contexts for the various weapon types in the Carpathian-Danubian area

Significance and Functionality

The opinions on function and functionality of daggers during prehistoric societies are numerous and relatively diverse, ranging from “the daggers used as weapons” (the most frequent interpretation) to those of daggers used as instruments of sacrifice or as a tool for cutting and cleaning¹⁵. These explanations should not be seen as divergent but rather as complementary. It is difficult to believe that the dagger, with its multitude of typological

¹⁵ A brief review of the various interpretations on the functionality of daggers in SKAK-NIELSEN (2009, 351 and following).

The early metal daggers in the Carpathian-Danubian area: contexts, significance, and functionality varieties had only one and the same functionality during the prehistory, no matter where and no matter when. John Chapman saw such artefacts as having multiple functionalities, both as weapons and as tools¹⁶ while Anthony Harding suggested a transformation through time for the role and functionality of a dagger, from a cutting instrument (knife) to weapon, at the moment the warrior elites appeared in most parts of Europe, during the 3rd millennium BC¹⁷. Taking as a starting point the discoveries from Transylvania, Tudor Soroceanu saw the dagger as a weapon with a character more symbolic than a military efficient one¹⁸.

Interpreting the dagger as a stabbing weapon, used in one-to-one fights, is the most common interpretation¹⁹. In a recent study Skak-Nielsen argued - in a convincing manner in the present author's opinion - for the use of the daggers in stabbing and chopping the animals during sacrificial ceremonies. The Danish researcher used as a main argument - other than just the lack of efficiency of the dagger during a battle - the association between people, daggers and animals in the cave representations from the Valcamonica - Monte Bego area²⁰. And in fact, on rock engravings in north-western Italy and south-eastern France, dating sometime during the first part of the 3rd millennium BC, the dagger makes a frequent appearance, in many cases associated with horned animal herds²¹. The association dagger-animal (domestic or wild) appeared also in various iconographic representations in the Near East, during the early and middle Bronze Age²².

A strong argument in favour of Skak-Nielsen interpretation is undoubtedly the discovery of a cist inhumation burial at Ashgrove (Scotland), part of the Wessex culture²³. Among the grave goods was a dagger with horn hilt-plates. Microscopic observation revealed that some animal hairs from a large bovine were preserved between the hilt-plates and the body of the dagger, thus suggesting the dagger had been used for the stabbing/cutting of such an animal.

Their quick spread and the large number of daggers in most of the world toward the middle of the 4th millennium BC can be connected to the increasing importance of animal breeding at the time. When considering the populations in the north-Pontic area during the early Bronze Age (Yamnaya and Katakombnaya) traditionally seen as mobile and pastoral, one observes this is where the largest number of daggers concentrates on the entire Eurasian continent. The use of the dagger for sacrificing and cutting the animal explains the size and shape of some such items, that would have been of no use during a battle or a duel.

¹⁶ CHAPMAN 1999, 108.

¹⁷ HARDING 2007, 54.

¹⁸ SOROCEANU 2011, 233.

¹⁹ MAI RECENT JOCKENHÖVEL 2005; THRANE 2006, 492; ZIMMERMANN 2007.

²⁰ SKAK-NIELSEN 2009, 353.

²¹ ANATI 2009.

²² BOEHMER 1965; AMIET 1980.

²³ HENSHALL 1964.

We also note a differentiation between the daggers and the other categories (axes, spearheads and swords) during the Chalcolithic, the early and middle Bronze Age in what their archaeological contexts are concerned. It is very likely that this differentiation also reflected a differentiation of the type's functionality²⁴. Thus, the possibility that the discussed daggers might represent sacrificial, stabbing or cutting instruments used during community ceremonies, performed by characters of a recognized rank and social status, is worth taking into account.

Things are changing significantly during the late Bronze and early Iron Age, mainly in what the contexts of the daggers are concerned. Their majority came from deposits and single finds. In the same time, there is typological diversification of daggers and a change in the item morphology.

It is probable that such morphological and contextual changes during the late Bronze Age reflected a modification in the role and functionality of the dagger. Its use in battle during this period is plausible when taking into account the Mycenaean iconography mentioned above, but it is also likely that the dagger was a weapon of a secondary rank²⁵, a helping weapon during duels. As the image from a Mycenaean²⁶ seal shows, the dagger was used to give the final blow to the wounded adversary.

²⁴ HARDING 2006.

²⁵ SOROCEANU 2011, 233.

²⁶ JOCKENHÖVEL 2005, Fig. 4/7.

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The early metal daggers in the Carpathian-Danubian area: contexts, significance, and functionality

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