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A Sword from afar

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Abstract: More than 20 years ago a sword of the Early La Tène form was discovered in the river Cetina in Dalmatia in Croatia. The scabbard of the sword was decorated with a dragon pair and the chape clamps of the heart-shaped chape ends were decorated with triskeles ending in the form of dragon's heads with widely open beaks. It was the first discovery of such a find in Croatia and the detailed discussion of its form and decoration demonstrated that that it was produced in the workshops of Northern Italy and most probably brought across the Adriatic by the Adriatic Celts – the Celtic mercenaries employed by the Sicilian Greeks.¹ But the presented sword was not the only find...

Key words: Croatia, Cetina River, Early La Tène, Celts

What do we have?

In the archaeological literature several times was clearly indicated that the bed of the river Cetina, running through Sinjsko polje, in central Dalmatia (Croatia) was a well known archaeological site from the 19th century on. But the situation changed dramatically at the end of the 1980^s when the quantity of archaeological finds deriving from the river unexpectedly increased. It was not only the quantity, but the typology of the finds and their state of preservation that was most intriguing – amongst the later most attention was drawn towards numerous ritually destroyed elements of military equipment.² Consequently attempts were undertaken to precisely locate the origins of the finds – in the early '90^s the area in which the research focused was between the confluence with the stream Ruda and the bridge in Trilj. The main objective was to determine the origin of the artifacts, but the archaeological survey in the river did not yield any finds or structures and consequently it was considered that the finds discovered in the riv-

er Cetina, might have actually derived from the river Ruda.³

Amongst other prehistoric finds kept in the private property of Milan Gilić, was also an Early La Tène style sword. It was briefly mentioned by Ante Milošević and published in a preliminary report in 1992,⁴ a few years later it was mentioned again in the *Archeological topography of the Cetina*.⁵ In another preliminary presentation in 1999 it was mentioned that the sword was discovered in 1990 at the site of Mali Drinić in the river Cetina below the confluence with the stream Ruda⁶ and the known photograph of the find was reproduced again in the exhibition catalogue *Numini Hippi Fluvii*.⁷ In 2013 the owner allowed Martina Blečić Kavur and Boris Kavur to examine and illustrate the find. It was published in 2014 to be used as the source for interpretation of earliest Celtic contacts with the territory of the Eastern Adriatic and its hinterlands.⁸

But this was not the only Celtic, or to be more precise La Tène style, find in the private

¹ Kavur / Blečić Kavur 2014.

² Milošević 1992a, 46; 1992b, 88; Blečić Kavur / Pravidur 2012.

³ Milošević 1992a, 46; 1992b, 88.

⁴ Milošević 1992b, 87, Fig. 2.

⁵ Milošević 1998, 291, Fig. 482.

⁶ Milošević 1999, 208, Fig. 6.

⁷ Milošević 2003, 27.

⁸ Kavur / Blečić Kavur 2014.



Fig. 1. Sword fragment from river Cetina. Front and back side of the chape end

collection of M. Gilić. Amongst others was also a smaller fragment of another sword – actually just its chape end and the tip of the scabbard preserved in (Fig. 1, 2). The heavily corroded iron fragment is 6.5 centimeters long and 4.3 centimeters wide. According to the typological characteristics it could be ascribed to a scabbard of a Hatvan-Boldog type sword. The preserved scabbard consists of two cambered plates – the front plate overlaps the reverse one with edges of the wider plate being folded over the edges of the narrower one. The overlaps extend to the point of the sheath. The chape end is annular of the short open ring-shaped type. The chape clamps are round – on the front side they are bulged and on the back side they are (Fig. 1, 2).

Discussion

The Hatvan-Boldog type swords are one of the most intensively discussed forms of ancient armament. Due to their distribution across a wide

area of Europe and their chronological position, they were interpreted as the major change in weaponry which caused the development of military superiority underlining the process of Celtic migrations. In their historical presentation of the controversy around the naming and the dating of the Hatvan-Boldog type swords, Éva Petres and Miklos Szabó proposed a further typological division based on the form of the discovered chape ends from the cemetery of Kosd (Fig. 3) where all the known variants were present. They termed the scabbards with a circular chape end as Kosd A type and further subdivided the group into Kosd A 1 and A2 according to the width of the chape end.⁹

A decade later in an analysis of the development of Celtic weaponry André Rapin focused on the eminent role of these swords in the typological and stylistic development of the Early La Tène style. He exposed the formal change which led to the introduction of shorter swords with big-

⁹ Szabó and Petres 1992.

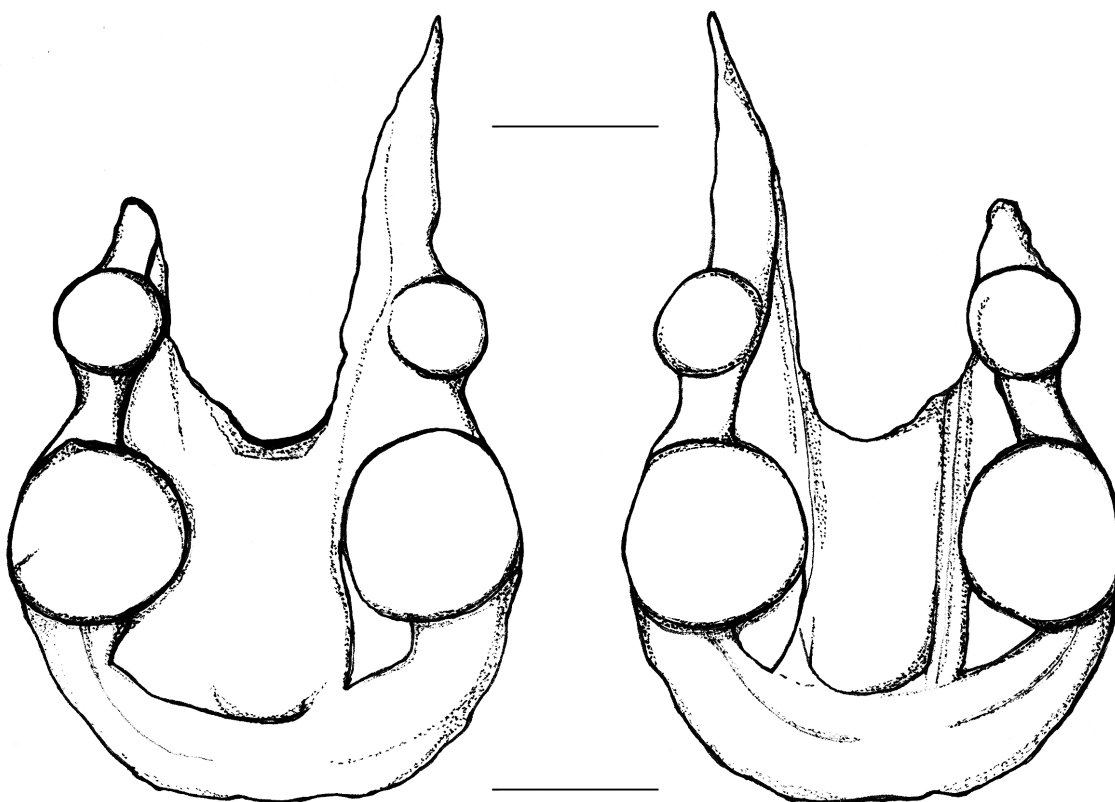


Fig. 2. Sword fragment from river Cetina. Front and back side of the chape end (Drawing: M. Blečić Kavur)

ger and circular cape ends – the Hatvan-Boldog / Münsingen sword type and included them in a group denoted as A2.¹⁰ A few years later analysing the decoration of the scabbards, he included the proposition of Éva Petres and Miklos Szabó¹¹ and proposed that two variations in forms and style of decoration of the group A2 should be termed after the Hungarian examples as Kosd A1 and Kosd A2. The scabbards of the first group are often decorated with floral motives and have two buttons attached to the frontal reinforcement while the swords are of a rhombic cross-section and have a larger pommel on the handle. In the second group are swords with a central rib on the upper plate of the scabbard decorated with a pair of dragons while the swords have a central rib and lack a larger pommel on the handle.¹²

Another major contribution to the understanding of their typological evolution as well as a detailed tool for the stylistic division was the discussion of Jean-Jacques Charpy who focused

exclusively on the development of the circular chape ends.¹³ Again previous perspectives were summarized and supplemented with an analyses of a larger number of scabbard's elements such as suspension loops and frontal reinforcements performed by Thierry Lejars who in 1994 proposed his division of the scabbards discovered at the French sanctuary of Gournay-sur-Aronde.¹⁴ To conclude – the preserved chape end from the private collection of Milan Gilić, originating from the river Cetina (Fig. 3), could be despite its bad preservation but due to its formal and stylistic characteristics included into the Kosd A1 group of sword with a wide circular chape end which is the most popular form in period of Lt B.¹⁵

In other terms it could be included into the group of scabbards with a short circular chape end or Variant 1 according to T. Lejars and in to the Type 1A according to J.-J. Charpy.¹⁶ Thomas Stöllner demonstrated that these swords originated in the Lt B1 period on the territory be-

¹⁰ Rapin 1995, 276-277.

¹¹ Petres / Szabó 1985, Abb. 7.

¹² Rapin 2000, 99-104.

¹³ Charpy 1987.

¹⁴ Lejars 1994.

¹⁵ Ramsl 2002a, 79.

¹⁶ Lejars 1994, 19-21.

tween the Marne, Southern Germany, Switzerland and Austria, and spread later as the typical weapon of the migrating Celts into the Carpathian Basin and Italy.¹⁷ Ludvig Pauli demonstrated at Dürnnberg that they were initially rather uniform and short – the lengths of the blades varied between 53 and 55 cm.¹⁸ Yet based on the finds from Pottenbrunn (Fig. 3) Peter Ramsel was able to demonstrate two groups where with the second one were included longer examples varying between 68.5 and 75 cm in length.¹⁹ There the swords with scabbards with a wide circular chape end were discovered in cremation graves, dated to the end of Lt B1²⁰ and all of them were violently destroyed before positioned in to the grave. Unfortunately the radiocarbon dates for the cemetery at Pottenbrunn demonstrated the inability of the method to determine the exact age in the period between 440 and 200 BC due to the oscillations of the calibration curve – in two of the three cases the results showed two peaks (within the 68.2% confidence interval).²¹ In the case of the grave number 1005 with the first peak between 380 and 350 and the second one between 320 and 200, the author proposed the first one to be more relevant since he dated the grave due to the presence of a fibula of the Duchcov type in to the phase Lt B1b.²²

On several occasions these swords were used as the illustration of Celtic migrations – when T. Stöllner wrote his article, he concluded, that they could be considered as a reflection of a North Alpine-Central European cultural connection.²³

What does it mean?

The first finds demonstrating cultural and economic contacts between the communities of the “prehistoric” Alpine area and the “cultures” of the central and eastern Mediterranean world can be dated back to the Early Iron Age. In recent years it was demonstrated that not only artifacts from the western Mediterranean were discovered in

central Europe, but that also finds demonstrating the opposite directions of contacts and cultural flow were discovered in Greek and Sicilian sanctuaries.²⁴ In most important Pan-Hellenic sanctuaries such as the Heraion of Perachora were discovered elements of female attire dated to Ha D1. And the archaeological record even demonstrated that this was a tradition obviously sustained in the following centuries as demonstrated by the finds from the sanctuaries in Isthmia²⁵ or Dodona²⁶ and Delos. One of the most discussed items in this context was the fibula of Middle La Tène scheme from Delos. Discussing it M. Szabó formulated several hypotheses regarding its origin, but favored the interpretation that it was a present from the “Celtic world” since he noted that the majority of isolated La Tène style artifacts originating from the Balkan territory were discovered in sanctuaries of the Greek world.²⁷ Further in his discussion Ferdinand Maier observed that the majority of these finds could be included in a consistent chronological horizon encompassing the end of the Early and the beginning of the Middle La Tène and he linked it to the events of 279 and 278 BC, interpreting the presence of such finds in sanctuaries as parts of *trophæa* following the Celtic defeat.²⁸ To support his claim he included among the later also the Early La Tène style sword from Dodona and the anklet rings from Isthmia, although M. Szabó demonstrated that the context of their discovery predated the event.²⁹

At the time being the sword from Dodona (Fig. 3) was the only known weapon – it was an old discovery kept in the National Museum in Athens and originating from the collection of Constantin Carpanos³⁰ with the only information about its origins that it was discovered in Dodona in the Epirus.³¹ Discussing it almost half a century ago Vincent Megaw interpreted it in connection with the armament of Celtic mercenaries, whose military service diffused their artifacts all across the eastern and central Mediterra-

¹⁷ Ibid., 39-42; Stöllner 1998; Rustoiu 2008; Lubšina Tušek / Kavur 2009.

¹⁸ Pauli 1978, 221.

¹⁹ Ramsel 2002a, 75.

²⁰ Ibid., 139-146, Tab. 34, 1; 72, 4; 73, 5; 76, 11; 80, 7.

²¹ Ramsel 2002b, 359.

²² Ibid., 359-361; Ramsel 2002a, 147.

²³ Stöllner 1998, 111; Rustoiu 2008, 102.

²⁴ Verger 2003; 2011.

²⁵ Caskey 1960; Krämer 1961.

²⁶ Megaw 1968, 187-8; 2004, 100.

²⁷ Szabó 1971, 514.

²⁸ Maier 1973, 477.

²⁹ Szabó 1971, 503.

³⁰ Ibid., 504.

³¹ Meier 1973, 464.

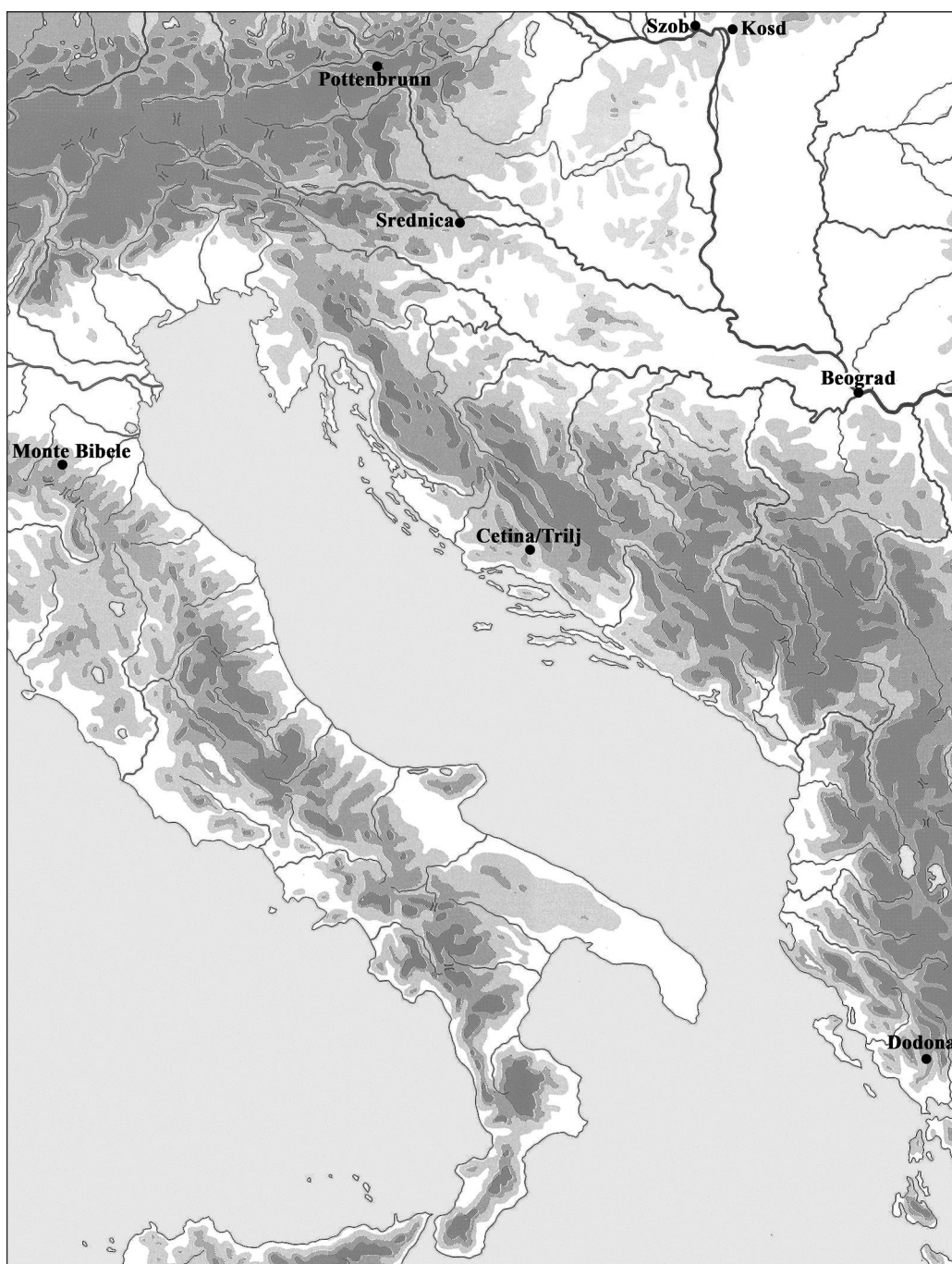


Fig. 3. Map presenting the major sites mentioned in the text

nean.³² When returning to this problem decades later, he mentioned the fact that these artifacts were discovered in ritual or sacred places recalling also the Celtic habits for depositions of weapons. Taking into consideration the question of Celtic mercenaries, he was asking the question whether these finds were deposited there by

their original owners³³ – a position accepted by B. Kavur and M. Blečić Kavur discussing the first sword from Cetina river (Fig. 3).³⁴

To illustrate the historical events we should look across the sea and to some other actors. It was in the years 369–368 BC that Dionysius the Elder from Sicily had deployed Celtic mercenar-

³² Megaw 1968, 191.

³³ Megaw 2004, 97-104

³⁴ Kavur / Blečić Kavur 2014.

ies as assistance to Sparta in their battles against the Thebes.³⁵ The short description of this action in the *Hellenica* of Xenophon is the first incontestable description of Celtic people in ancient sources.³⁶ The inclusion of Celtic mercenaries in to service was just one of the elements of the greater plan to build up a maritime empire in the Adriatic to act as a counterpart to the Carthaginian empire in the Western Mediterranean. These mercenaries were Celts from northern Italy collaborating with Syracuse even before Dionysius the Elder presumably coordinated them in the military action that finally led to the sack of Rome.³⁷ They remained in service in the next decades as they were active as mercenaries of Syracuse in their campaigns against Kroton and Locri³⁸ and against Corsica, when Sardinia and Pyrgy were also taken.³⁹

This relation, or actually admiration, led that far that Dionysius the Elder was accused of being a barbarian-lover since the propaganda machinery of Syracuse coined a myth explaining that Poliphemus and the nymph Galatea were the parents of Keltos, Galata and Illyros – of founding fathers of their favorite mercenaries. With this act they were introduced into the mythology of the Mediterranean cultural circle and were bestowed with their constructed genealogy.⁴⁰ This was a period when they, armed with their own equipment and fighting in their own tradition, entered the Mediterranean to be employed in the distant parts of the *oikumene*.⁴¹

Although included in to the political, economic, military and mythological trends of the Mediterranean they were, upon the decision of Dionysius the Elder, supplied with their traditional weapons in order to be able to preserve their identity.⁴² Consequently, as noted by many classical authors, their identity and reputation for toughness in battle remained unchanged and ensured that, in the centuries to come, no ruler would start a military campaign without

the employment of Celtic mercenaries.⁴³ In this context the Celtic long sword did not represent only a progressive and efficient weapon but also a symbolic object designating the status of its carrier and his affiliation with a group of warriors identifying themselves as being “Celts”. The later were group of mercenary warriors keeping their privileges in the Mediterranean, but most important sustaining their contacts with prehistoric communities in Central, Eastern and Western Europe.

And for this, with symbolism laden weapon, decorated with unique symbols, strange and incomprehensible in the Mediterranean, seemed as if it was living a life of its own. When its owner passed away it was removed from public display and violently destroyed – whether added in to a grave, deposited in a temple or thrown in to a river, it was removed from the realm of the living and passed over into the imaginary constructed community of the dead.

Conclusion

In recent years were published several proposals to revise the absolute dating of the relative chronology for the central Balkan – especially the earliest dating of the Celtic presence.⁴⁴ In accordance with the later as well as the chronological observations of Celtic finds in northern Italy,⁴⁵ the swords from Cetina near Trilj predate the catastrophic events in the Balkans in 279 BC. Taking into consideration its general shape, the same could be assumed also for the sword from Dodona. It seems that the earliest deposition of Celtic weapons in Greek sanctuaries, as confirmed by the epigraphic evidence from an inventory list from the treasury of the old temple of Athena on the Acropolis in Athens, took place much earlier than previously assumed – even before the middle of the 4th century BC.⁴⁶

Act of the ritual deposition of these weapons, loaded with numerous levels of symbolism, should be observed as an integral part of the ideological changes and adjustments of the larger

³⁵ Occhipinti 2006, 79; Sordi 2002, 496; Treister 1996, 245.

³⁶ Xenophon 1921, 7. 1. 20-22; Banderet 1919, 91; Freeman 1996, 20.

³⁷ Zuffa 1978, 139; Bridgman 2003, 49.

³⁸ Bouzek 2002, 55; Szabó 1991, 333.

³⁹ Sordi 2002, 494.

⁴⁰ Bridgman 2003, 49-50.

⁴¹ Treister 1996, 248.

⁴² Lejars 2006, 91.

⁴³ Freeman 1996, 21.

⁴⁴ Blečić Kavur / Kavur 2010, 73-76; Kavur / Guštin 2011; Kavur / Blečić Kavur 2014.

⁴⁵ Vitali 1987.

⁴⁶ Freeman 1996, 20.

process taking place in the 4th century BC when the Celts from Northern Italy, and Central Europe, entered the Mediterranean cultural area. Engaged as mercenaries they were included in to the political ambitions of Dionysius the Elder from Syracuse, and since transferred back and forth across the Adriatic they became the “Adriatic Celts”.⁴⁷ Although the presented fragment of the sword, a circular chape end, presents a general and widely distributed form,⁴⁸ it, together with the already discussed sword from Mali Drinić,⁴⁹ subtly suggest that we should look for their origin on the territory of “Celtic” Northern Italy.

These two swords were discovered in the river Cetina in Dalmatia in Croatia far away from any other Celtic sword discovered in the region⁵⁰ and represent currently the most southern known examples of their types (Fig. 3). Originating from the area of Northern Italy, they were fabricated in a workshop in the region around today’s Bologna. But they were discovered in Dalmatia in southern Croatia in an area where these specific weapons were not used in the Late Iron Age. Even more – they were ritually deposited together with several other Celtic artifacts in a river at a place where similar sacrifices had already been performed over several centuries.⁵¹ We cannot be sure whether they were deposited as a war trophy or by their owners, but we can be pretty sure that they were brought across the Adriatic by Celtic mercenaries in the 4th century BC.⁵²

⁴⁷ Guštin 2005a, 112-113; 2005b, 50-52.

⁴⁸ Stöllner 1998, Beilage 3.

⁴⁹ Kavur / Blečić Kavur 2014.

⁵⁰ Guštin 1984, 343, Fig. 28.

⁵¹ Milošević 1999, 206-210; Blečić Kavur / Pravidur 2012, 77.

⁵² The author would like to thank Milan Gilić (Trilj) who was kind enough to allow publishing the sword fragment. The author acknowledges the project (Contact of Civilizations J6-6837) was financially supported by the Slovenian Research Agency. Most of all I would like to thank Martina Blečić Kavur for her valuable comments and immeasurable help and support.

Sažetak

Mač izdaleka

Posljednjih godina objavljeno je nekoliko prijedloga za reviziju apsolutne datacije relativne kronologije središnjeg Balkana – posebice glede najranije datacije prisutnosti Kelta na tome prostoru. U skladu s novijim kronološkim razmatranjima keltskih nalaza u sjevernoj Italiji, mačevi iz Cetine kod Trilja pripadaju razdoblju prije *katastrofalnih* događanja na Balkanu 279. god. pr. Kr. Isto bi se moglo pretpostaviti i za mač iz Dodone u Epiru, ukoliko općenito vrednujemo njegov oblik. Izgledno je kako se najranije polaganje keltskog oružja u grčkim svetištima, što potvrđuje i epigrafski zapis iz popisa inventara riznice starog hrama Atene na Akropoli u Ateni, događalo već mnogo ranije nego što se pretpostavljalo – čak i prije sredine 4. st. pr. Kr.

Način ritualnog odlaganja takvog oružja, ukrašenog mnogim simbolima, valja promatrati nedjeljivo od ideoloških promjena i prilagodbi unutar većeg procesa koji se odvijao u 4. st. pr. Kr., kada Kelti iz sjeverne Italije i srednje Evrope ulaze u kulturni prostor Sredozemlja. Kao plaćenici bili su uključeni u političke ambicije Dionizija Starijeg iz Sirakuze, a budući da su se kretali oko i preko Jadrana u literaturi su stekli status “Jadranski Kelti”. Premda ulomak mača s kružnim zaključkom predstavlja opći i široko rasprostranjen oblik, zajedno s već predstavljanim mačem iz Malog Drinića, suptilno sugerira da bismo njegovo porijeklo također trebali tražiti na području “keltske” sjeverne Italije, vjerojatno u radionicama uokolo bolonjskog kulturnog kruga.

Ta dva keltska mača nađena u rijeci Cetini u Dalmaciji, daleko od bilo kojeg drugog keltskog mača zabilježenog u regiji, u ovome trenutku predstavljaju najjužnije poznate primjere njihovog tipa. Riječ je o prostoru gdje se tako posebno oružje nije koristilo u mlađem željeznom dobu. Štoviše, oba su bila ritualno odložena, zajedno s drugim predmetima latenske provenijencije, u rijeku na mjestu gdje su se srodna “žrtvovanja” ili “davrivanja” provodila tijekom nekoliko stoljeća. Ne možemo biti sigurni jesu li ti mačevi bili odloženi u rijeku kao ratni trofeji ili su ih ostavili njihovi vlasnici, ali možemo biti prilično uvjereni da su ih preko Jadrana donijeli keltski plaćenici tijekom 4. st. pr. Kr.

Resources

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