

# BACK ON TRACK: THE SO-CALLED “CAPRICORN SIGNUM” FROM ORTELEC

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**REZUMAT:** O figurină de bronz cu tub de înmănuşare, descoperită pe raza localităţii Ortelec (la periferia oraşului Zalău, de asemenea în apropierea sitului de la Porolissum), a fost publicată în 1977 ca fiind un *signum* militar. Cel mai puternic argument invocat pentru a susţine această funcţie era acela că figurina reprezenta un capricorn, făcându-se aluzie la legiunea a XIII-a Gemina. Ulterior, s-a observat că piesa reda în realitate un hipocamp, dar interpretarea iniţială a fost păstrată. Deşi au apărut unele sugestii privind un rol alternativ, acela de garnitură de car, varianta respectivă nu a fost niciodată analizată în mod real. Scopul notei de faţă este acela de a aduce în discuţie această posibilitate şi de a propune o interpretare clară. În acelaşi timp, vor fi oferite atât o ilustraţie adecvată, cât şi o descriere completă, întrucât unele detalii semnificative au fost omise în publicările anterioare.

**CUVINTE-CHEIE:** Dacia romană, bronzuri romane, *signum* militare, transport, garnitură de car, capricorn, hipocamp

**SUMMARY:** In 1977, a copper-alloy figurine perched on a socket, discovered some years earlier in the locality of Ortelec (at the outskirts of Zalău city, also near the ancient site at Porolissum) was published as a military *signum*. The strongest argument in favour of this function was the fact that it illustrated a capricorn, mythical creature which was thought to be connected with legio XIII gemina. Later it turned out to represent a hippocamp, but the initial interpretation was maintained. Although there were some suggestions that it might, in fact, be a carriage fitting, it was never seriously analysed. The purpose of the present note is to discuss this possibility and at the same time provide adequate and complete description and illustrations, as some significant details were omitted in the previous publications.

**KEYWORDS:** Roman Dacia, Roman bronzes, *signum* militare, Roman transport, vehicle mount, capricorn, hippocamp

In 1962, a zoomorphic figurine (pl. I), found at Ortelec (a suburb of Zalău city), entered the collections of the County Museum of History and Art from Zalău.<sup>1</sup>

Description: copper-alloy statuette depicting a *hippocampus* perched on a short cylinder, placed in turns on top of a hexagonal socket; on one side, the cylinder is incised with an X and four circles arranged around it; two finger-shaped hooks (one of which is almost completely missing) stem from the socket; on one side the socket is ripped open; the hippocamp is represented advancing forwards with the front legs outstretched; the fishtail is coiled in two volutes; details of the mane and tail are rendered with incised lines; total height: 14.6 cm; maximum width: 11.5 cm; cylinder height: 1.3 cm; cylinder diameter: 2 cm; socket height: 7.3 cm; socket diameter: 4 cm; finger height: 3 cm; maximum finger diameter: 0.8 cm.

Literature: Lucăcel, Pop 1977, 79–80, fig. 1–3; Pop 1977; Gudea 1989, 593 no. 20, pl. CLXXXII/20; Pop 1998, 115–116, 378–379, no. 7, pl. LXXII/6; Töpfer 2011, 82, 430, NZ 4.8, Taf. 148/NZ 4.8

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## PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

The artefact was published in 1977, without further details on its context of discovery. Primarily basing their interpretation on its alleged rendering of a capricorn, V. Lucăcel and C. Pop presented it as a Roman military *signum*, indicating as analogies a pair of capricorn statuettes from Wiesbaden and Fürstenroth<sup>2</sup> (in reality, one and the same object, found in the 'Fürstenroth' district and on display in the Wiesbaden museum).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, they suggested a possible connection with a detachment of *legio XIII gemina*,<sup>4</sup> although the capricorn is not attested as its symbol.<sup>5</sup> Any other function, such as that of a carriage or furniture fitting, was summarily dismissed.<sup>6</sup> The description and interpretation are repeated in the article written in the same year by Pop about *signa militaria* from Dacia, adding yet another parallel (a capricorn appliqué from Emlichheim),<sup>7</sup> and also in the next year, in a paper dealing with figural bronzes from the collection of the museum in Zalău.<sup>8</sup> The piece is also included in the 1989 monograph of N. Gudea dedicated to the site at *Porolissum*, where, following the initial publishers, the piece is considered a capricorn *signum* related to the 13<sup>th</sup> legion.<sup>9</sup>

Despite its formal similarities with a well-known series of vehicle mounts (see below), Ch. Röring does not include it in his catalogue of such finds, even though he refers to Pop's 1977 article, but with respect to another object.<sup>10</sup> In 1996, a monograph on the Roman customs office from *Porolissum* appeared, authored by N. Gudea. With this occasion, the scholar collected all of the fittings related to means of transportation known from Dacia, but the 'capricorn' is left out.<sup>11</sup> A shadow of doubt is finally expressed in the 1997 booklet written by the same author about the Roman fort at *Porolissum* – Pomet with the occasion of the *Limeskongress* in Zalău. The piece is not described, nor mentioned in the text, but it is illustrated. In the explanation of the figure an alternative use is cautiously voiced: '*Bronzeteil eines Militärbanners (oder eines Wagens)*'.<sup>12</sup>

In his unpublished Ph.D. thesis from 1998, C. Pop reassesses the statuette and corrects his previous error: it does not represent a sea-goat, but another imaginary creature, a sea-horse. Nevertheless, its function as a *signum* is maintained.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the *signum* hypothesis is dismissed in two recent works touching upon, respectively directly concerning Roman military standards. First, C.-G. Alexandrescu mentions it in a list of furniture or wagon fittings mistakenly identified as standards.<sup>14</sup> Then K. Töpfer, in his monograph study on *signa militaria*, although citing it as a '*Capricornfigur*', considers it simply too small to be a *signum*. The author also remarks the striking similarity with a series of functional vehicle fittings, although he is inclined to believe that it is too frail for that purpose.<sup>15</sup> The other capricorns which had been pointed out as analogies by the Romanian authors are also shown not to be *signa*.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Lucăcel, Pop 1977, 79–80, fig. 1–3.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the discovery context and the current housing of the figurine, see Pinsker 1999, 1–3, Abb. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Lucăcel, Pop 1977, 80–81.

<sup>5</sup> The authors cited the entry in DA, s.v. *signa militaria* (1311), where the capricorn is assigned to *legio XIII gemina* on dubious grounds, as the reference given does not appear to make sense. The representative animal for this legion is the bull (see Moga 1985, 15).

<sup>6</sup> Lucăcel, Pop 1977, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Pop 1977, 119–120, fig. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Pop, Matei 1978, 82, no. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Gudea 1989, 593 no. 20, pl. CLXXXII/20.

<sup>10</sup> For the catalogue, see Röring 1983, 102–168; Pop 1977 is cited by Röring 1983, 119, no. XII. 5.

<sup>11</sup> See Gudea 1996, 111–117, 172–183, fig. 38–44.

<sup>12</sup> Gudea 1997, 88, S. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Pop 1998, 115–116, 378–379, no. 7, pl. LXXII/6.

<sup>14</sup> Alexandrescu 2010, 232, n. 1850.

<sup>15</sup> Töpfer 2011, 82, 430, NZ 4.8, Taf. 148/NZ 4.8.

<sup>16</sup> Töpfer 2011, 80–82; cf. Alexandrescu 2010, 232, 379, ST 17 concerning the Wiesbaden capricorn.

It should be mentioned that such animal symbols could also constitute decorative elements for other types of ensigns, usually in the form of protomes situated in the lower part of the shaft, but occasionally also topping it.<sup>17</sup> However, the *hippocampus* does not appear amongst the known legionary animal symbols.<sup>18</sup> It could, hypothetically, be representative for some auxiliary troop,<sup>19</sup> but, since the object in question is not a military emblem (fact which will become obvious in what follows), there is no point in further speculating in this direction. Furthermore, no representations or actual surviving components of military standards display finger-shaped hooks.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, despite some views that the piece from Ortelec could be regarded as a wagon or chariot mount, an actual explanation is still missing. Some confusions remain and the idea of it being a *signum* continues to lurk in the literature. Therefore, although the use of the above mentioned class of carriage fittings is well-known and documented, a brief summary of the subject was deemed useful. This will enable the subsequent discussion of the hippocamp mount in the context of the rich *corpus* of analogous finds, as well as glean as much information as possible regarding the vehicle it belonged to.

### ONE- OR TWO-ARMED STRAP HOLDERS FOR VEHICLES

Among vehicle fittings of the Roman period, there is a series of copper-alloy artefacts that display the same basic features, despite their great variation in other respects. They all comprise of a hollow socket, circular or polygonal in section, crowned by an either figural (e.g. human or animal protome) or abstract (e.g. sphere, pawn-head) decoration; also, one or two hooks stem from the lateral side(s) of the socket. These were early on recognized as part of chariots or wagons, being discovered in closed contexts (i.e. burials).<sup>21</sup> However, their function was far from clear. For a long time they were thought of as purely decorative, and only in the 1960s I. Venedikov finally elucidated their rôle in the suspension of the vehicle body.<sup>22</sup> This observation, made on the basis of archaeological evidence, is confirmed by a small number of reliefs which illustrate similar objects in a position just above the vehicle wheels (as seen from the profile).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Töpfer 2011, 63–64.

<sup>18</sup> However, note that on a legionary coin from Gallienus a hippocamp seems to be associated with *legio I Italica* (RIC V/1, 93, no. 321), although perhaps a capricorn was in fact intended. Notwithstanding some questionable ideas regarding their origin, useful listings of legionary animal symbols can be found in v. Domaszewski 1909 and Renel 1903, 197–233. For attestations on military equipment, see Garbsch 1978, 31–32.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. since on a series of breastplates the animal emblem of one or another legion whose name is inscribed on the respective pieces of equipment is illustrated (see previous note), it has been suggested that a sea-panther appearing in the same position on a couple of breastplates from the Axel Guttman collection could signify either simply a decorative element, or an unknown emblem of some legion or auxiliary troop (Born, Junkelmann 1997, 132–135, AG 713–714, Abb. 84–85, Taf. XII–XIII). Evidently, not all the real or imaginary creatures depicted on the so-called parade equipment necessarily represent animal insignia. Hippocamps and other sea creatures observed on said equipment can be regarded as alluding to the funerary domain (Garbsch 1978, 31).

<sup>20</sup> The crossbars used for hanging pendants, ornamental strips or cloth were either shaped like simple hooks or provided with terminal rings (for the different components and decorations comprising Roman military standards, see Töpfer 2011, 13–70).

<sup>21</sup> Apart from the publication of individual chariots and wagons from funerary contexts or reconstruction proposals, too many to mention, there are numerous works dedicated to either these specific artefacts, or to bronze chariot fittings in general, which include this type of mounts: e.g. Héron de Villefosse 1908; v. Mercklin 1933; Alföldi 1936; Alföldi, Radnóti 1940; Fernández de Avilés 1958; Radnóti 1963; Boube-Piccot 1980; Ruprechtsberger 1988; Molin 1989; Schleiermacher 1996; Bolla 2010 etc. Most of the pieces discovered prior to the 1980s are included in Ch. Röring's catalogue (see Röring 1983, 102–168), but quite a few new finds have since surfaced. Many of them were discussed several times, so, unless the original publication includes details that have not been subsequently recalled, only the latest references will be indicated in this paper.

<sup>22</sup> Venedikov 1960, 83, 241–249, Taf. 93, 97. For a summary of their various interpretations, see Röring 1983, 12, n. 40; Menzel 1985, 166; Molin 1989, 70–73.

<sup>23</sup> Röring 1983, 13–15, Taf. 8/ Abb. 1 (Arlon, Belgica), 2 (Maria Saal, Noricum), 3 (Tök, Pannonia Inferior); Taf. 9/ Abb. 1 (*Intercisa*, Pannonia Inferior). The Pannonian reliefs can also be seen in Visy 1997, nos. 66 (Tök), 67 (*Intercisa*), and probably no. 65 (Felsőörgicse) should also be added to the list.

Essentially, this type of suspension system involved pairs of vertical brackets or stake-braces (Ger. *Kipfen, Überachsen*) fixed perpendicularly on the axles, towards their ends. Atop were mounted the copper-alloy fittings in question, strap holders (Ger. *Gurthalter*), their hooks aiding in the suspension of the wagon body which was effected by means of ropes or leather straps (**pl. II/1**). Evidently, two wheeled vehicles required just one pair of such iron brackets; in the case of four wheeled carriages, both the front, and the rear axles were usually provided each with a pair brackets, often made of wood, sometimes plated with bronze sheet.<sup>24</sup> As the four-wheeler from Radlovci (south-western Bulgaria) shows, the *Kipfen-Gurthalter* binomial could be just one element of a more complicated suspension system, entailing additional shock absorbing and stabilising components.<sup>25</sup>

Surely, not all the wagons and chariots benefited from suspension. Contraptions that would reduce the effect of road bumps were especially desirable for travel carriages, although not everyone could afford them.<sup>26</sup> Usually, the number of suspension mounts is equated to that of the wheels,<sup>27</sup> but a few discoveries prove that this was not always so. The body of the above-mentioned wagon from Radlovci was truly suspended only in front, whereas the back of the box was secured to the rear axle. Despite this, it appears to have been provided with two pairs of strap holders.<sup>28</sup> However, the four wheeled wagon from Kozármisleny was suspended only from the rear, lacking the front pair of brackets and their associated mounts.<sup>29</sup>

Leaving aside the basic, shared characteristics of these objects, there is great variety in terms of size, decorative repertoire, socket and hook form and diameter. Based on the number and shape of the hooks or 'arms', Ch. Röring classified the *Gurthalter* in five types: A. with a single, opened arm (e.g. **pl. III/1–4**); B. with a single, closed arm; C. with two opened arms (e.g. **pl. III/5**); D. with two closed arms (e.g. **pl. III/6**); E. with two arms stemming directly from the top of the socket; the third and fourth types were deemed most suitable candidates for vehicle body suspension.<sup>30</sup> A brief comment on the shape of the hooks is particularly relevant for the artefact from Ortelec. These came in various forms, from simple, undecorated hooks or rings to goose or swan necks, dolphins, snakes, feline protomes, vegetable elements etc.; a common shape is that of human fingers,<sup>31</sup> perhaps a playful allusion to their function. In fact, the strap holder illustrated on a detailed relief from Arlon possesses exactly this type of finger-shaped hooks.<sup>32</sup>

J. Meschekov described in detail the two ways in which the suspension mounts could be used in the case of four wheeled vehicles. The first involved the provision of the wagon body with four sets of side rails (**pl. II/2**). Two independent leather bands passed through the hooks of each *Gurthalter* and were also attached to the rails via a pair of rings which could freely glide on these as the front axle turned. Especially the richly decorated suspension mounts with figurines adorning directly the socket demanded such a use.<sup>33</sup> The other system is simpler: a continuous piece of rope passes through the hooks of the bronze fitting and also through two rings fixed on the wagon body so as to form a triangle (**pl. II/3**). Thus, as the front axle

<sup>24</sup> Boube-Piccot 1980, 16–21, fig. 8–9; Röring 1983, 12–17, Plan 1–4.

<sup>25</sup> Meschekov 2007, 12–15, Abb. 5–6, Abb. 10/a.

<sup>26</sup> Molin 1989, 75–77. According to Visy (1997, 63–65), the carriages with suspension illustrated on the Pannonian funerary monuments are of the types *carpentum*, *raeda* and *cisium*. Schleiermacher (1996, 213) considers the vehicle featured on the Maria Saal monument a *carruca dormitoria*. For details on these and other types of travel carriages used by the Romans, see the corresponding entries in DA and also the notes by Boube-Piccot (1980, 1–13) and Schleiermacher (1996, 212–214).

<sup>27</sup> Röring 1983, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Meschekov 2007, 13–14, Abb. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Kiss 1989, 29–30, Abb. 42–48, 50. A reconstruction based on the finds from Kozármisleny and Neupotz was made for the *Römerhaus* in Augst (see Haser, Maise 2003). A four-wheeler from Szomor-Somodorpuszta also appears to use just a pair of *Gurthalter* (see Gaul 1889, 202; cf. Bónis 1987, 107, Abb. 3).

<sup>30</sup> Röring 1983, 27, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Boube-Piccot 1980, 19. See, for instance, the entries in the catalogues comprised by Boube-Piccot (1980, App. I) or Röring (1983, 102–168).

<sup>32</sup> Röring 1983, 13–15, Taf. 8/ Abb. 1; Haser, Maise 2003, 204, Abb. 13; Molin 1989, 71, fig. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Meschekov 2007, 14, Abb. 7/a, 8. Such a suspension system can be seen, e.g., on the reconstruction of the four-wheeled Vardar wagon which is on display at the Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Köln (see Schleiermacher 1996, 205–221).



turns, the rope slides through these three points.<sup>34</sup> According to Meschekov, the first system could only work for fittings with two closed arms (Röring’s type D), while the second, simpler system was also suitable for mounts with two opened arms (so, both for types C, and D).<sup>35</sup> But *Gurthalter* were not always used as they were supposed to. This is at least suggested by the remains of a wagon discovered at *Intercisa*: it appears that only one arm of the two-armed pieces corresponding to the front axle was used for suspension; furthermore, the figurines adorning the sockets were facing backwards.<sup>36</sup> The use of massive, one-armed pieces for four-wheelers is also documented.<sup>37</sup> In the case of two wheeled vehicles, which did not pose the problem of a pivoting front axle, a system very similar to, or the same as the second described above could be used.<sup>38</sup>

Some mounts, especially from the one-armed class, appear too small to be able to withstand the weight of the wagon body and, in addition, show no marked traces of wear. Therefore, alternative functions have been convincingly put forward (e.g. their use as rein guides or suspension mounts for lighter means of transportation, like palanquins).<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, some of the smaller specimens could still have been used for carriage suspension. Metallographic analyses suggested that even strap holders with arms of 0.7 cm in diameter could theoretically support a 200 kg charge, the estimate weight of a two-wheeler carriage box.<sup>40</sup> Also, it is important to stress the fact that, although the hanging of the body could rely solely on massive hooks (as instanced by the first suspension system mentioned above), this was not always the case. For instance, one-armed pieces were mounted with the hooks outwards from the carriage, so the weight of the vehicle body was substantially transferred over to the iron or wooden brackets on which they were fitted, the hooks mainly preventing the ropes or leather bands from sliding; the same principle is basically valid for two-armed specimens as used in second system.<sup>41</sup> The wide variation observed in the size and weight of these objects seems to justify the idea that they were not all used for the exact same purpose (i.e. carriage suspension). Anyway, since even some really small pieces are attested in wagon burials,<sup>42</sup> this links them (whatever their exact function) with transportation.<sup>43</sup>

### COMMENT ON THE PIECE FROM ORTELEC

Considering the discussion above, it becomes obvious that the copper-alloy hippocamp from Ortelec was clearly related to transportation. Even the place of discovery favours this interpretation. The imperial road that connected *Potaissa* – *Napoca* – *Porolissum* passed through Ortelec (where traces of it were observed on the field) after making its exit from *Porolissum* and heading into *barbaricum* (pl. IV).<sup>44</sup> It is certainly not the first time that a vehicle mount was mistaken for some kind of military insignia.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, the *signum* hypothesis should be completely renounced. Once this is done, we can turn our

<sup>34</sup> Meschekov 2007, 16, Abb. 7/b.

<sup>35</sup> Meschekov 2007, 16. Actually, the cited author states the other way around, but this appears to be a typographical error, also seen in the numbering of systems in Abb. 7, which does not correspond to the numbering used in the text.

<sup>36</sup> Visy 1985, 176, 179, Abb. 6.

<sup>37</sup> E. g. the carriage from Kozármisleny (Kiss 1989, Taf. 9–10).

<sup>38</sup> E.g. the two-wheeler reconstruction on display in the Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum in Budapest.

<sup>39</sup> Röring 1983, 22–25; see also Painter 1971, 324–325.

<sup>40</sup> Ruprechtsberger 1988, 13–14. The weight of a two-wheeler is computed from Röring’s calculations for four-wheeled carriages (see Röring 1983, 57–58). For the metallographic analyses mentioned by Ruprechtsberger, see Preßlinger 1988.

<sup>41</sup> Haser, Maise 2003, 203–204.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. three one-armed pieces of 6.2 cm in height and 3 cm in diameter, with a maximum finger diameter of 0.7 cm, discovered in an incomplete funerary inventory from Moesia Inferior. Apparently, two of them display rivet holes and thus were fixed on wooden poles, whereas the third specimen appears to have been placed on an iron rod (Harțuche 1967, 244–247, fig. 8/1–2, fig. 14/1 = Röring 1983, 120, nos. XIII. 1–3). N. Harțuche does not believe that they had anything to do with the vehicle suspension, but they might have (see above).

<sup>43</sup> Röring 1983, 22–31.

<sup>44</sup> Fodorean 2006, 145–147

<sup>45</sup> See Menzel 1985, 165.

attention to the (admittedly limited) information this piece can disclose about the carriage it was presumably mounted on.

First of all, despite its rather modest size, chances are the fitting was indeed used in the suspension of a carriage. Recalling the two main systems described by Meschekov and summarised above, and bearing in mind that this *Gurthalter* is of the type with two opened 'arms', it can be surmised that it was involved in the simpler suspension system, which required a continuous rope (**pl. II/3**). Thus, the weight was partially supported by the stake-brace on which the mount was fitted (see above), which means that the latter need not be so massive. A reconstructed wagon from Augst nicely exemplifies this and it should be noted that the one-armed suspension pieces used are comparable in size to the hippocamp.<sup>46</sup> In practice, however, things could go wrong. The finger-hook on the Ortelec piece might have snapped, rendering it useless. Whether this actually happened, or the damage was subsequent to its discard, we cannot know. However, some mounts do show traces of repair, as, e.g. a find from Derderwindeke (Belgica) which had one of its massive arms soldered in antiquity.<sup>47</sup>

The next observation follows logically: we are dealing with a (long distance) travel carriage, as the suspension had the purpose of ensuring a comfortable journey. Because both vehicles with one, and two axles could be provided with suspension with the help of either one-armed or two-armed strap holders, and even the latter carriages could employ medium-sized mounts, it is not possible to propose a number for the wheels. However, if the tear in the socket started from a weak point such as a rivet hole, it would mean that it was fixed to a wooden pole, which would suggest its use on a four-wheeler.<sup>48</sup> The side with the tear also appears to be worked less carefully. If this is truly so, then it is likely that this part faced the carriage; provided that the *hippocampus* was pointing in the travelling direction, then the placement of this strap holder would have been on the left of the vehicle.

The *Gurthalter* from Ortelec can also be briefly analysed from an artistic point of view. Considering the numerous copper-alloy fittings derived from Thracian chariots, I. M. Cholakov drew attention to three types of decoration: imported luxury, locally produced luxury and mass produced.<sup>49</sup> The considerable variety encountered in the repertoire of fittings is explained by the fact that these represented a way of advertising social standing, as pointed out by the situation in Thrace, where just one quarter of the unearthed carriages displayed copper-alloy decorations.<sup>50</sup> The wagon was, in itself, a status symbol. Consequently, the array of fittings was in accordance with the taste and financial means of the owner and, furthermore, they could be re-used on other vehicles.<sup>51</sup> This 'secondary decoration' was shown to be quite common for Thracian chariots of the Roman age, resulting in a heterogeneous style quite contrasting to some Pannonian examples which followed a more unified stylistic concept.<sup>52</sup>

The low number of pieces from Dacia is not entirely surprising considering that the practice of chariot burials did not extend into this province. Furthermore, it seems that the track was lost for some of the artefacts. Consequently, while for other areas some trends could be cautiously singled out (like the preference

<sup>46</sup> Furger et al. 2003, 31, Abb. 23; Haser, Maisse 2003, 203–204, Abb. 14. Only the rear part of the four-wheeled wagon was suspended. The replica strap holder used for this (although slightly larger and with a square socket) was based on an original find of 9.8 cm in height, with a socket diameter of 3.7 cm. The diameter of the supporting finger-hook, although not stated, appears to measure circa 1 cm. Furthermore, in the case of the replica, this single hook was hollow cast.

<sup>47</sup> Cumont 1907, 293–295, pl. I (= Röhring 1983, 131–132, no. II. 1).

<sup>48</sup> According to Röhring (1983, 17), iron *Kipfen* were used only on two-wheeled vehicles, while wooden *Kipfen* reinforced with iron and bronze elements were used in four-wheelers. However, the four-wheeled carriage from Kozármisleny, with its box suspended only in the rear part, used a pair of iron stake-braces (Kiss 1989, 29–30, Abb. 42–48, 50). The lack of a rivet hole in the socket of the strap holders does not necessarily mean they were fitted on iron *Kipfen*, as even those mounted on wooden brackets could simply be jam-packed, as is the case of the Vardar valley carriage (see Schleiermacher 1996, 236).

<sup>49</sup> Cholakov 2004, 108.

<sup>50</sup> Cholakov 2004, 105.

<sup>51</sup> Molin 1989, 74–75.

<sup>52</sup> Cholakov 2004, 105, 114–115.

for horse figures in Hispania)<sup>53</sup> or production centres determined (such as for Thracia, with its provincial repertoire),<sup>54</sup> similar observations are impossible to make on the basis of the extremely limited Dacian lot.

The clumsy rendering of the hippocamp from Ortelec does by no means point to a luxury product, and this holds true for the majority of the Dacian finds, almost all employing simple, abstract decorations. The exception is the suspension mount from Gherla (**pl. III/5**).<sup>55</sup> This bears a resemblance to the pair discovered in the wagon burial from Frenz (Germania Inferior), which displays a human head (not bust) emerging from a flower chalice, but the hooks are finger-shaped and the socket is quadratic.<sup>56</sup> Also somewhat similar are the two specimens from the Nagylók (Pannonia Inferior) cart burial.<sup>57</sup> The strap holder from Gherla can be possibly viewed as a luxury piece, and most certainly an import. There is, as yet, no evidence of a production of chariot fittings in Dacia, so the other finds, although more modest, could have been imported as well. The best represented class is that of the small-sized, one-armed holders (Röring's type A), with seven examples, but there are some problems regarding their exact shape. At least one piece, from Dolj county (the south of the province) takes the form of an eagle head (**pl. III/4**).<sup>58</sup> Such eagle-headed *Gurthalter* were thought to concentrate in the Rhine and Danube regions,<sup>59</sup> but an important number is now also known from North Africa.<sup>60</sup> A pair from *Romula* displays simple, spherical crowning (**pl. III/1–2**),<sup>61</sup> while a strap holder from *Porolissum* is topped by a pawn-head (**pl. III/3**).<sup>62</sup> These small sized objects are similar to some finds from North Africa, Moesia Inferior and from elsewhere within the Empire.<sup>63</sup> For the remaining three (if indeed three!), two from *Drobeta* and one from *Apulum*, the reports are contradicting, but they most likely feature geometrical (spherical) crowning.<sup>64</sup> The only strap holder with two closed arms from Dacia (**pl. III/6**) was found at *Potaissa*,<sup>65</sup> but is now lost. The dimensions are not known but, judging from a few photographs of the collection in which it was included, it appears to have been rather large.<sup>66</sup> A good analogy is provided by two pieces from Italy, nearly identical, save for the fact that the sphere on top appears to represent an apple or a pomegranate and the socket is decorated with a garland.<sup>67</sup>

As representations of full animals (not just protomes), a few strap holders adorned with horses and with a panther can be mentioned.<sup>68</sup> Although the piece from Ortelec is of much lesser quality, it is still rather similar to the capricorn figurine from Wiesbaden,<sup>69</sup> so the confusion encountered in the initial publication is understandable. The theme chosen in this particular case is rather uncommon, as it does not fit in the usual wagon fittings repertoire (Bacchic procession, major and minor deities, human and animal – panther, lion, griffin, eagle – protomes etc.).<sup>70</sup> To my knowledge, the hippocamp does not feature among any other

<sup>53</sup> Molin 1989, 78–79.

<sup>54</sup> See Cholakov 2004.

<sup>55</sup> Protase, Gudea, Ardevan 2008, 77, pl. XXIII (= Röring 1983, 135, no. VIII. 1).

<sup>56</sup> Lehner 1923, 39–41, Taf. II/b1–2, Taf. IV/20 (= Röring 1983, 131, nos. I. 1–2).

<sup>57</sup> Gaul 1890, Táb. C. I/4a–b, Táb. C. II/1a–b (= Röring 1983, 134, nos. VII. 3–4)

<sup>58</sup> Gudea 1996, 111, no. 4, fig. 38a/3.

<sup>59</sup> Alföldi 1936, 266–267.

<sup>60</sup> Boube-Piccot 1980, 68–70, nos. 32–38, Pl. 17–18/32–38 (*Volubilis*), 217, no. 346, pl. 74/346 (*Banasa*).

<sup>61</sup> Gudea 1996, 112, nos. 1–2, fig. 38a/1–2.

<sup>62</sup> Gudea 1996, 112, no. 3, fig. 38b/2.

<sup>63</sup> E.g. Boube-Piccot 70–73, nos. 39–40, Pl. 19 (*Volubilis*), although some analogies indicated by the cited author are rather massive; Hartuche 1967, 244–247, fig. 8/1–2, fig. 14/1; Furger et al. 2003, 31, Abb. 23 (Augst) etc.

<sup>64</sup> Röring (1983, 119, nos. XII. 1–3) lists them as *balusterförmigen* (*Apulum*) and *knopfförmigen* (*Drobeta*), citing a note from Alföldi, Radnóti (1940, 309, n. 4, nos. 9–11) where they are indeed described as such. Gudea (1996, 111, nos. 1–3) on the other hand (citing Röring!), sees them as eagle-headed. Given these inconsistencies, one wonders if the pair of *Gurthalter* from *Romula* and that from *Drobeta* are not, in fact, referring to the same artefacts.

<sup>65</sup> Gudea 1996, 111–112, no. 1.

<sup>66</sup> See Ardevan, Rusu 1979, fig. 8–9.

<sup>67</sup> Héron de Villefosse 1908, 280, no. 12, fig. 4 (= Röring 1983, 151, nos. VIII. 3–4)

<sup>68</sup> Molin 1989, 59–64, nos. 4–11.

<sup>69</sup> See Pinsker 1999, Abb. 2.

<sup>70</sup> On the repertoire, see Alföldi 1939 (although the idea of 'funerary chariots' is outdated); Boube-Piccot 1980, 28–29; Cholakov 2004 etc.

*Gurthalter* decorations. However, it suits the transportation theme: the *hippocampus*, more of an artistic creation than a proper mythical creature, is illustrated drawing the vehicle of miscellaneous sea gods.<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly, an identical specimen has recently come to light during the excavations at the *principia* of the legionary fortress at *Potaissa* (Turda), garrisoned by *legio V Macedonica*.<sup>72</sup> Incidentally, this is not an unusual context of discovery, as strap holders were also found inside the legionary bases at *Lauriacum* and *Lambaesis*.<sup>73</sup> Undoubtedly, the two hippocamp *Gurthalter* from Dacia were manufactured in the same place, but, of course, whether they were at some point fitted on the same vehicle is impossible to know. Given the places of discovery, virtually along the same imperial road that linked *Potaissa* to *Porolissum*, it would be tempting to see in this situation an echo of military officials travelling between the two sites, though this would involve more imagination than actual evidence.

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<sup>71</sup> See *Lexikon Roscher* Bd. 1/2, s.v. *Hippokamp* (2674–2677). For instance, the *hippocampus* is among the beasts appearing in a coin series from Gallienus, on which it signifies Neptune (*RIC* V 1, 152, no. 246).

<sup>72</sup> I wish to thank Dr. Sorin Nemeti for this information.

<sup>73</sup> Ruprechtsberger 1989, 17–18.



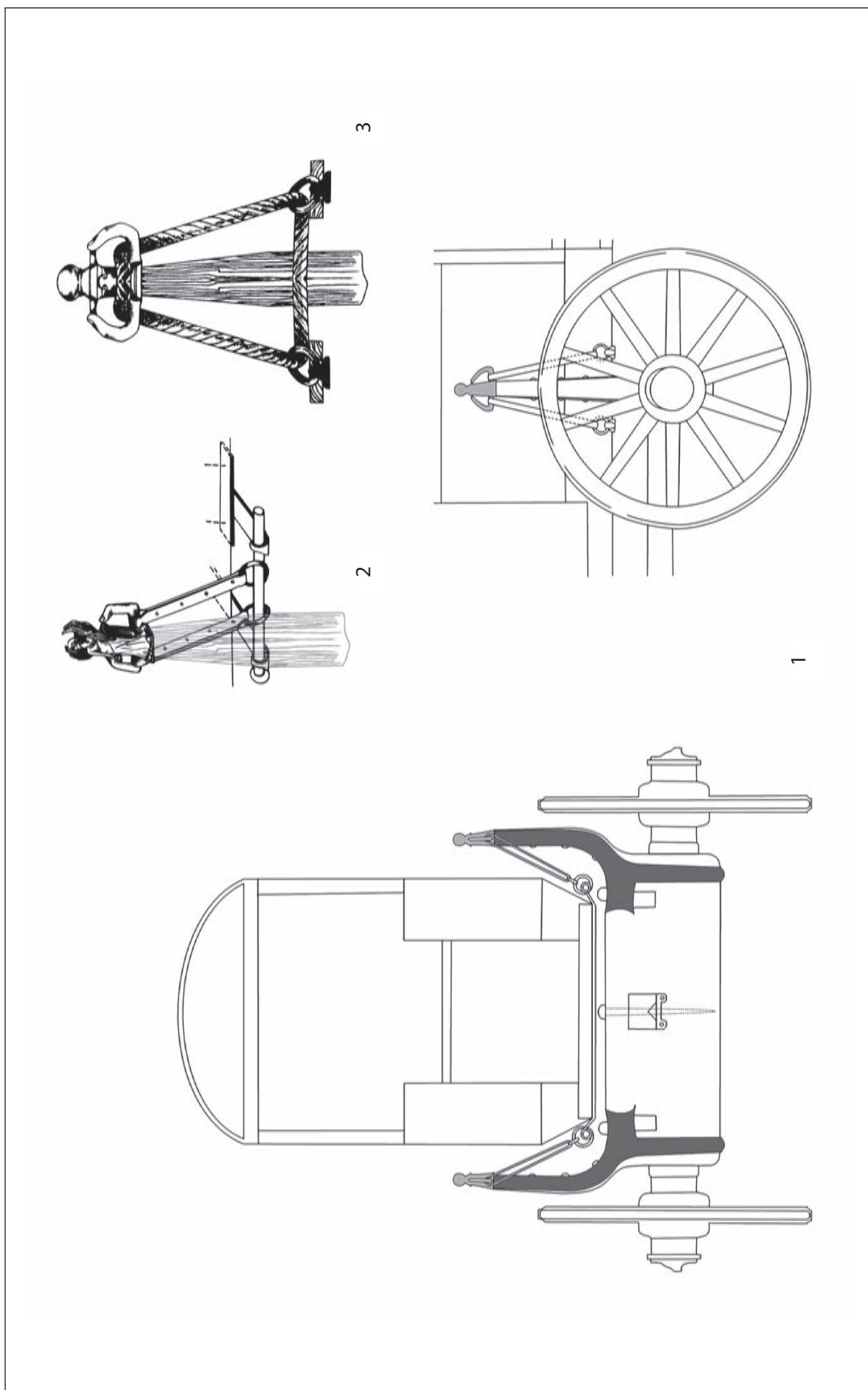
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#### ABBREVIATIONS

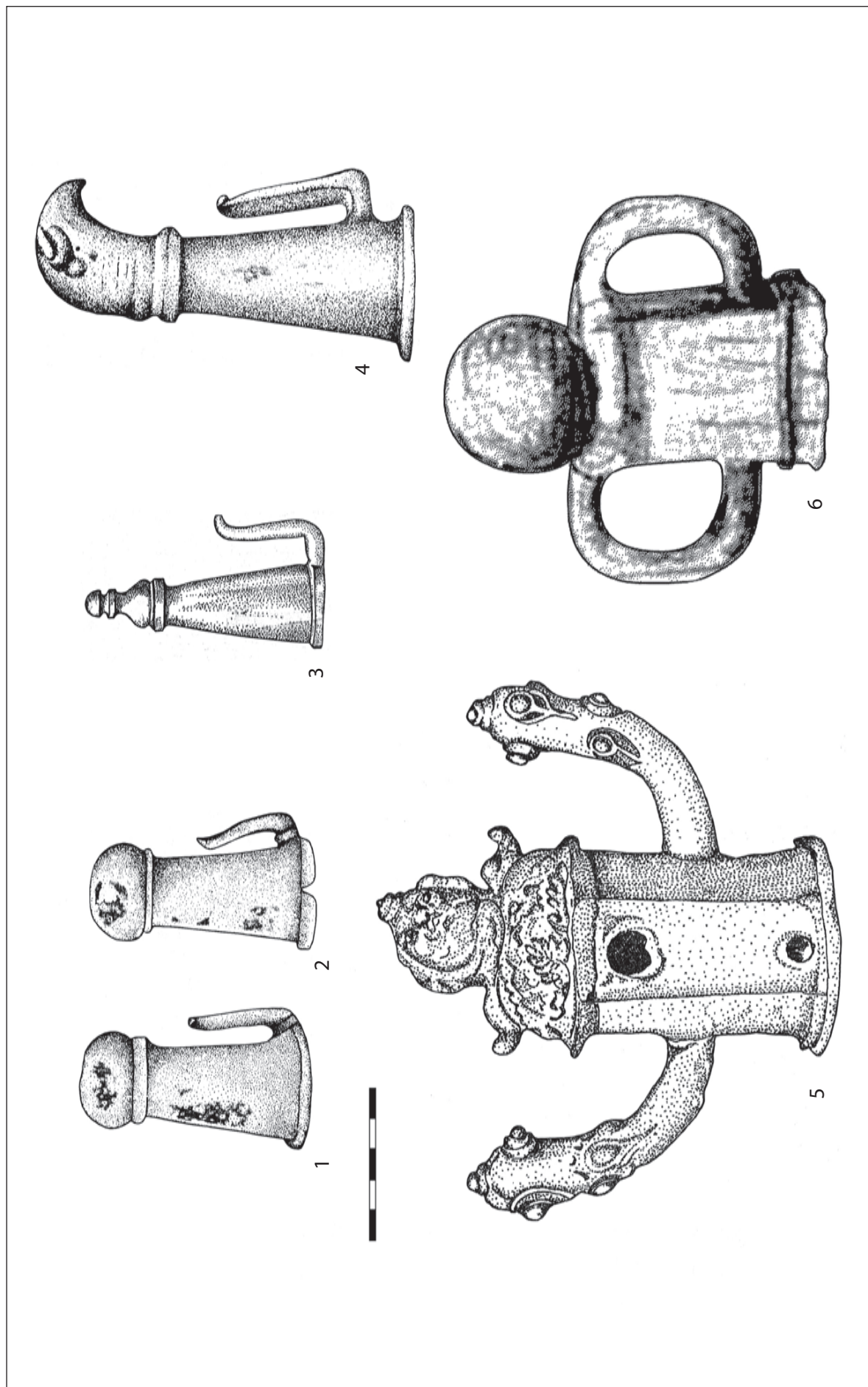
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Pl. I. The hippocamp figurine from Ortelec (photo: the author, courtesy of the County Museum of History and Art in Zaláu).

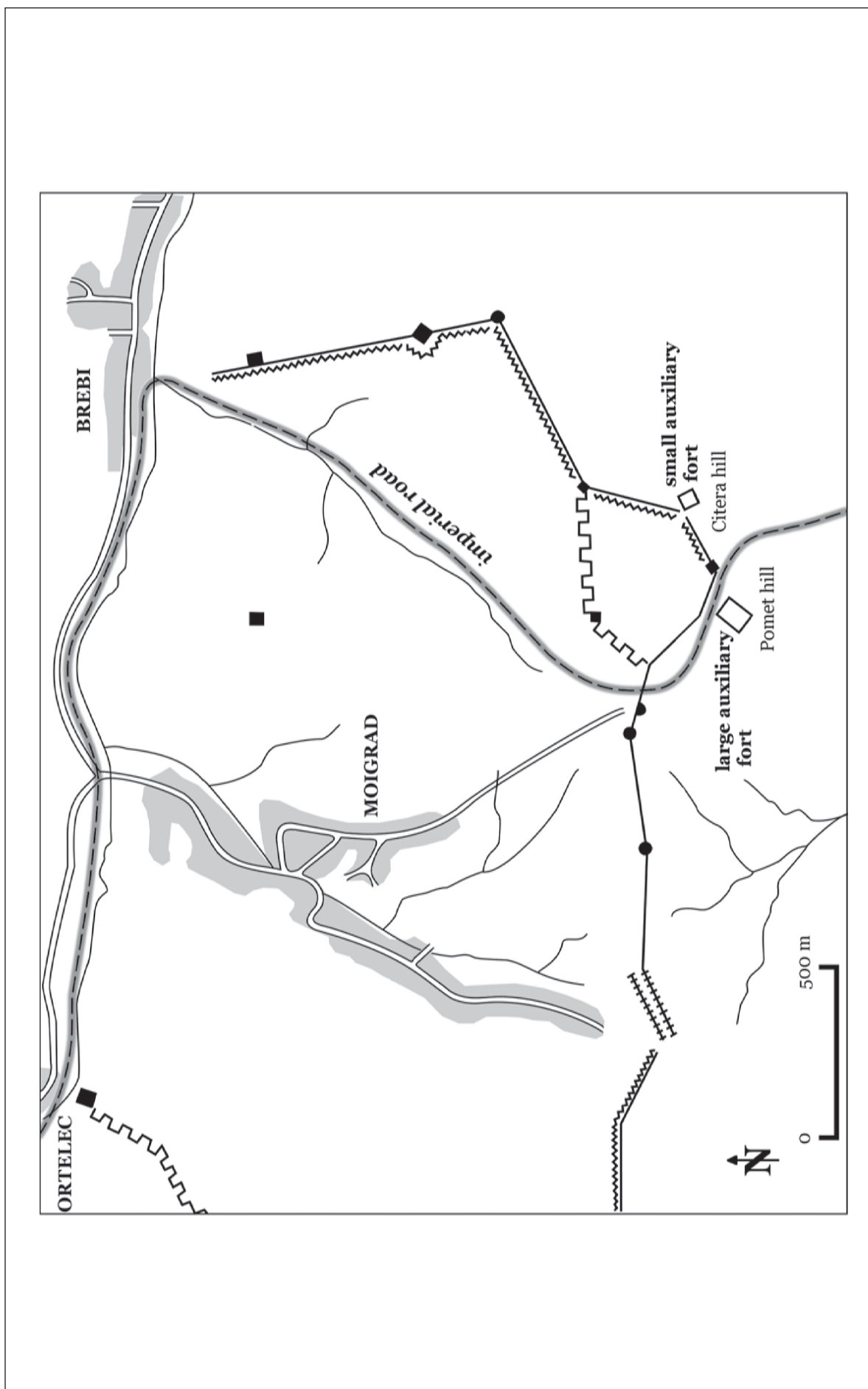


**Pl. II. 1.** Carriage suspension with strap holders (after Röring 1983, Plan 1, 3); **2.-3.** Modes of suspension (after Meschekov 2007, Abb. 7/a-b).



**PL. III.** Strap holders from Dacia: **1.-2.** *Romula*; **3.** *Porolissum*; **4.** *Dolj* – not to scale (after Gudea 1996, fig. 38a/1–2, fig. 38b/2, fig. 38a/3); **5.** *Gherla* (after Protase, Gudea, Ardevan 2008, Pl. XXIII); **6.** *Potaissa* – not to scale (after Ardevan, Rusu 1979, fig. 5).





Pl. IV. The Roman imperial road in the environs of *Porolissum* (after Gudea 1996, fig. 2).