

WEAPONS AS IDENTITY SYMBOLS DURING THE EARLY ROMAN PROVINCIAL PERIOD. A THEORETICAL APPROACH

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SUMMARY: Archaeological investigations carried out in several early Roman provincial cemeteries from Pannonia identified a series of funerary inventories which include weapons and other categories of military equipment having various origins. The presence of weaponry in these provincial funerary contexts was previously discussed mostly from the perspective of the enrolment of some indigenous men in Roman auxiliary troops immediately after the establishing of the new province. The article is proposing a more nuanced interpretative model, using some case-studies and bringing into discussion the social and cultural significance of this category of artefacts in the local context and their role in the construction and reiteration of individual and collective identity at the end of the Late Iron Age and the beginning of the Roman provincial period.

KEYWORDS: Pannonia, Roman weapons, indigenous weapons, graves, tradition

REZUMAT: Cercetările arheologice efectuate în ultimele decenii într-o serie de necropole provinciale timpurii din Pannonia au identificat o serie de inventare funerare care includ piese de armament ofensiv și defensiv cu origini diverse. Anterior, prezența acestor arme în contexte funerare provinciale a fost discutată mai ales din perspectiva înrolării unor membri ai populațiilor locale în trupele auxiliare romane după înființarea provinciei. Prin urmare, articolul de față propune un model interpretativ mai nuanțat, pe baza unor studii de caz, care ia în considerare semnificațiile sociale și culturale ale acestor categorii de artefacte în context local, precum și rolul acestora în exprimarea identității individuale și colective la sfârșitul celei de-a doua epoci a fierului, dar și la începutul perioadei provinciale.

CUVINTE-CHEIE: Pannonia, arme romane, arme locale, morminte, tradiție

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological investigations carried out in several early Roman provincial cemeteries from Pannonia identified a series of funerary inventories which include weapons and other categories of military equipment having various origins¹. A few archaeological contexts of the same kind were also discovered on the territory of Roman Dacia, for example the isolated tumulus grave from Viscri (Brașov County). Its funerary inventory consists of a Dacian curved sword (*falx*), a long sword of “Germanic” origin, a fragmentary iron *situla*, two iron rings and four fragmentary ceramic vessels².

The presence of weaponry in these provincial funerary contexts was previously discussed mostly from the perspective of the enrolment of some indigenous men in Roman auxiliary troops immediately

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¹ See, for example, Márton 2002; Mráv 2006; 2013; Gaspari 2008; Gaspari *et alii* 2015; Egri 2012; 2016; Dizdar, Radman-Livaja 2015.

² Horedt 1958, p. 14–16, fig. 2/4; Rustoiu 2007, p. 73, note 48, fig. 9. The grave was discovered in 1898, so archaeological evidence is rather scarce. However, the recovered inventory more likely suggests a dating to the end of the 1st century or the first decades of the 2nd century AD (see Egri 2008, p. 122–123).

after the establishing of the new province. In many studies the tendency was to correlate the available archaeological evidence with mentions of this practice in the works of various Roman authors or in epigraphic sources. Along the same line, the occasional presence of weaponry having an indigenous origin together with Roman military equipment was usually used to identify the presumed ethnic identity of the owner.

However, recent detailed analyses of some early provincial cemeteries from the regions in question have revealed the persistence and sometimes the manipulation of certain funerary practices which characterized different social groups within the indigenous populations before the Romans' arrival³. One particular situation involves the resurgence of proper burial in areas where such practices disappeared toward the end of the Late Iron Age. In several cases, the traditional funerary rite and ritual was largely preserved even if non-local artefacts were also included. At the same time, the existence of a significant degree of variability and frequency of these practices from one community to another and also within the same community, points to significant differences in what concerns the impact of Roman conquest on the status, structure and functioning of various social groups. Accordingly, each of these groups or at least certain members developed several coping mechanisms which enabled them to adapt to the new conditions, sometimes speculating them to advance their own agenda.

Thus, the presence of weaponry in early provincial graves should be discussed by taking into consideration the particularities of the contexts of discovery, as well as the social-political, economic and cultural ambiance of this period in the regions in questions. The article is going to propose a more nuanced interpretative model, using some case-studies and bringing into discussion the social and cultural significance of this category of artefacts in the local context and their role in the construction and reiteration of individual and collective identity at the end of the Late Iron Age and the beginning of the Roman provincial period.

EASTERN ALPINE REGION AND THE UPPER SAVA VALLEY

In this region, the earliest dated burials containing Roman military equipment appeared at the end of the Republican period and the beginning of Augustus' reign, and such grave goods continued to appear until the middle of the 1st century AD⁴. These funerary inventories include mostly *gladii*, with or without their scabbard belonging to different variants of the Mainz type, spearheads with a short blade and faceted socket, metal fittings of some shields, *cingula* and a few helmets of the Weisenau type. At the same time, Roman army daggers or other kind of equipment are rarely encountered.

One interesting particularity of this period is the quite frequent association of Roman and indigenous weaponry in the same burial. For example, cremation grave 3 from Reka near Cerkno, in Slovenia (Fig. 1), contained a Celtic sword specific to the LT D2 phase, a *gladius* scabbard of the Mainz type, two spearheads and one shield-boss of local origin, and metal fittings of two belts – a *cingulum* and a sword belt of local origin⁵. Aside from weaponry, the funerary inventory also included a bronze *situla* specific to the Roman military environment. One interesting feature is the shortening of the sword, which allowed it to fit into the Roman scabbard, which normally could only be worn attached to the *cingulum* and not to the local belt. However, both belts were laid into the grave, suggesting a possible double adaptation of the military equipment. At the same time, both the sword and the scabbard were ritually bent, a practice which is frequently encountered in Late Iron Age cemeteries from this region, being related to the perception of offensive weapons, especially the sword, as an intrinsic part of the warrior's persona. Accordingly, the ritual would have contributed to the safe "travel" of the deceased from the world of the

³ Egri 2012; Dizdar, Radman-Livaja 2015.

⁴ Istenič 2013; Gaspari 2008, p. 36–38; Gaspari *et alii* 2015.

⁵ Guštin 1991, p. 25–26 and 131–133.

living to that of the ancestral spirits, and at the same time, would have prevented an illicit reuse which would have severed the symbolic connections between the deceased and his primary marker of social status.

Another interesting example is cremation grave 1 from Verdun near Stopiče in Dolenjska, also in Slovenia (Fig. 2), whose inventory contains weaponry with a more diverse origin: one Weisenau helmet, metal fittings of a shield of “Germanic” origin, a local iron knife, a *gladius* of the Mainz type with a *cingulum*, aside from a pair of brooches and an Italic bronze *simpulum*⁶. Once again, the sword was ritually bent before being laid into the grave. Unfortunately the Verdun cemetery remains largely unknown, since only a few burials containing spectacular inventories with many Italic imports (including weapons, glass and metal vessels and sigillata) were published so far. All of them have been ascribed to indigenous people who got in contact in one way or another with the Roman army. Other contemporaneous cemeteries from the Dolenjska region, for example those at Novo mesto⁷, Bela Cerkev⁸ or Pristava near Trebnje⁹ are better known. They consist of burials with similar characteristics of the funerary rite and ritual, many of them containing weaponry and other artefacts of Mediterranean origin. These cemeteries were ascribed to a local population, the Latobici, which apparently became an ally of the Romans at the beginning of the Augustan period and contributed with troops to the Illyrian campaigns of the late 1st century BC and later to those northward the Drava and on the middle Danube¹⁰.

On the other hand, cremation grave 1042, recently unearthed at Ljubljana (Fig. 3), was slightly later dated, to the late Augustan or Tiberian times¹¹. In this case the military equipment included in the funerary inventory would have been standard in a Roman unit, consisting of a *gladius* of the Mainz type, a shield of “Germanic” origin, a *cingulum* and two spearheads with faceted sockets. The single weapon that stands apart is a massive knife of local origin which seems to have replaced the regular *pugio*. When first published, it has been presumed that the deceased was a local man recruited in a Roman auxiliary unit, because the funerary rite and ritual are similar to those identified in indigenous burials dated to the LT C2 and LT D1 phases from the same region.

At the same time, in the first two presented cases from Reka near Cerknem and Verdun near Stopičah, it has been presumed that the deceased more likely belonged to some warlike troops organized by local chieftains, who were allies of the Romans perhaps during the Augustan Illyrian campaigns¹². Consequently, the alliance could have provided access, in one way or another, to the supply system of the Roman army in campaign. It has to be noted that in the same period the Roman military equipment, both legionary and auxiliary, went through an experimentation phase mostly in what concerns the swords, shields and helmets, and the process of standardization only began towards the end of Augustus’ reign¹³.

In this context, A. Gaspari recently suggested that at least some of the Roman weapons from the eastern Alpine region, mostly swords with *cingula*, could have been given as diplomatic gifts to the local chieftains for providing military support as allies, since the local populations were not recruited as proper auxiliaries during the late Republican period¹⁴. The interest of these chieftains for such goods could have stemmed from their desire to be perceived as equals of the Roman officers with whom they got in contact. At the same time, they could have displayed the newly acquired Roman weaponry to symbolically

⁶ Breščak 1989, p. 3–4, 10; 1995, p. 18–21; 2015, p. 79, pl. 1–6.

⁷ Different burial grounds, see Knez 1992; Božič 2008.

⁸ Dular 1991.

⁹ Knez 1969; Slabe 1993.

¹⁰ Guštin 1984, p. 349; Breščak 1995, p. 21; Gaspari 2008, p. 36–43; Egri 2012, p. 506–507.

¹¹ Gaspari *et alii* 2015, p. 131–144, pl. 1–2, fig. 5–7.

¹² Istenič 2013, p. 26–27.

¹³ Feugère 2002, p. 87–93.

¹⁴ Gaspari 2008, p. 41–43.

strengthen their authority within the local community by alluding to their valuable contacts with the dominant power in the region.

THE LOWER SAVA BASIN AND THE SCORDISCIAN AREA

In this region, the graves containing Roman weaponry appeared slightly later, at the end of the Augustan or the beginning of the Tiberian times, while the latest can be dated to the middle of the 1st century AD¹⁵. Their appearance is part of a wider phenomenon – the resurgence of the practice of interring cremated human remains in properly set up graves, which was abandoned during the LT D2 phase. The motivations behind this resurgence were usually related to the imposition of Roman rule, combined with the gradual appearance of mixed families and communities and that of various new forms of social aggregation, which together influenced the local mortuary beliefs and practices, besides other things. At the same time, it has already been noted that societies experiencing rapid and socially stressful changes tend to resort almost instinctively to real or invented traditions that had a significant impact on communal solidarity as shared points of reference and justification, and these frequently included the funerary practices¹⁶.

Among the earliest dated discoveries is the cremation grave 5 from Ilok, in Croatia (Fig. 4), which contains a *gladius* of the Mainz type with its scabbard and *cingulum*¹⁷. The funerary inventory also includes local and Italic ceramic vessels, bones from the meat offering and one fragmentary olive oil amphora of the Dressel 6B type. Although these grave-goods have a diverse origin, the funerary rite and ritual, as well as the functional structure of the inventory, resemble those found in graves dated to the LTC2 and LTD1 from the same region, which have been ascribed to the local warriors¹⁸. The latter included food offerings, tableware and feasting implements, as well as the military equipment of the deceased; some of these inventories were associated with the local chieftains.

Further down the Sava valley, four graves (no. 10, 32, 44 and 145) from the cemetery at Belgrade-Karaburma, in Serbia (Fig. 5), which are dated to the first half of the 1st century AD, also contain weaponry of Roman and indigenous origin¹⁹. In all four cases the functional structure of the funerary inventory is identical, each assemblage consisting of a drinking vessel (frequently with two handles) and one or two spears usually accompanied by a knife or dagger, though in grave 10 it was replaced by the scabbard of a Mainz *gladius*. Some of the recovered spearheads belong to different local variants, while others have a short blade and faceted socket specific to those used by Roman auxiliary units at the end of the Republic and in the 1st century AD²⁰. At the same time, each knife belongs to a different Late Iron Age variant, the one found in grave 145 being a *sica* – the curved dagger usually associated with the Dacians²¹. Thus also in these cases from Belgrade-Karaburma, the functional structure of the funerary inventories resembles those of the graves dated to the LT C2 and LT D1 which have been unearthed in the same cemetery and ascribed to regular warriors²².

Accordingly, a similar process also occurred in the Scordiscian environment, in which some grave-goods of local origin were gradually replaced with the foreign ones, very often of Roman provenance, having the same practical and symbolic functions, at least in funerary contexts. However, it is difficult to say whether this is the same community who used the burial ground at Karaburma until the end of the

¹⁵ Egri 2016, p. 346–349, with further bibliography.

¹⁶ Egri 2012, p. 515–517.

¹⁷ Dizdar, Radman-Livaja 2015, p. 219–221, fig. 9–12.

¹⁸ See the funerary inventories from the Belgrade-Karaburma cemetery discussed in Egri, Rustoiu 2008.

¹⁹ Todorović 1972; Egri 2016, p. 346–349.

²⁰ Drnić 2015, p. 117–118.

²¹ Rustoiu 2007; 2008, p. 142–158.

²² For the social and functional hierarchy of the local warriors, see Egri, Rustoiu 2008, with further bibliography.

LT D1 period, or a new one which took it over during the first decades of the 1st century AD. Either way, the persistence of LT D1 funerary rites and rituals and the inclusion of certain identity-relevant grave-goods suggest an indigenous community having an interest in preserving several funerary practices that were at least perceived as traditional, namely cremation and offerings consisting of food, feasting implements and weaponry.

Returning to the presence of weapons in the aforementioned graves, it has to be noted that some ancient authors mention the Scordisci as allies of the Romans, first during the Augustan and then the Tiberian times. Along the same lines, archaeological evidence seem to suggest that some of the local chieftains were enrolled in a system of regional control in south-eastern Pannonia, which was ultimately subordinated to the Roman military authority at least until the *Bellum Batonianum* of AD 6–9²³. The system was abandoned afterwards, when supplementary troops were brought over to enforce the defensive system along the lower Sava valley. These chieftains were probably able to organize troops consisting of local warriors, capable to control efficiently a certain area and maintain the order. Their equipment more likely followed the traditional functional structure, including spears and shields in the case of regular warriors, and a more complex panoply also containing swords in the case of their leaders, even if some Roman weapons, mostly spears, were occasionally adopted. The latter could have been received from the Romans as part of the military agreement, whereas the chieftains perhaps received *gladii* with *cingula* together with other prized goods like metal and glass vessels, wine and even money. The same practice was already presumed in the case of Late Republican bronze vessels discovered in some LT C2 and D1 graves from Belgrade-Karaburma and other Scordiscian cemeteries, where these were often included in local feasting assemblages²⁴.

CONCLUSIONS

It can be therefore concluded that in both the eastern Alpine region and the Sava valley the weapons continued to be perceived as an important symbol of status which was incorporated into the construction and reiteration of both individual and collective identities during the rather turbulent period of the late 1st century BC – middle of the 1st century AD. This phenomenon was very probably related to the active implication of various local leaders in controlling militarily the respective regions under the watchful eye of the Roman power.

Ideologically, the weapons (especially the offensive ones) contributed to the consolidation of the owners' social status, offering an impression of continuity and authority at the community level, at least in what concerns the preservation of social equilibrium. At the same time, the more-or-less direct association with the Roman army, the main controlling force in these regions, could have enhanced both the perception of warlike worthiness and the source of authority within the respective community, which these funerary inventories had tried to convey by also appealing to real or invented traditions.

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²³ Dizdar, Radman-Livaja 2015, p. 217–219.

²⁴ Rustoiu 2005, p. 75–81; Egri, Rustoiu 2008; Mihajlović 2014, p. 199–207; Egri 2017, p. 544.

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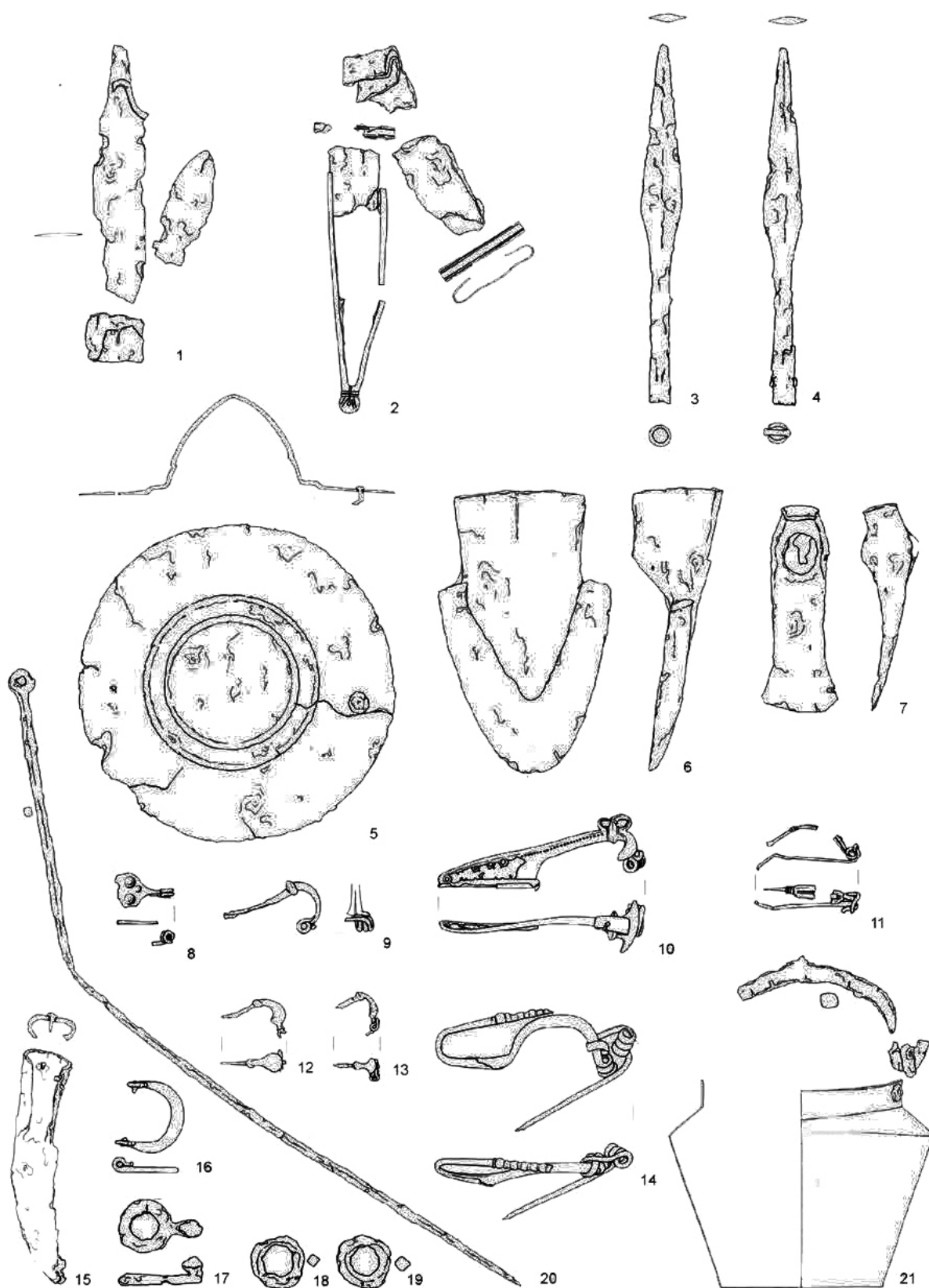


Figure 1. Funerary inventory from grave 3 at Reka near Cerkno, in Slovenia (after Guštin 1991)

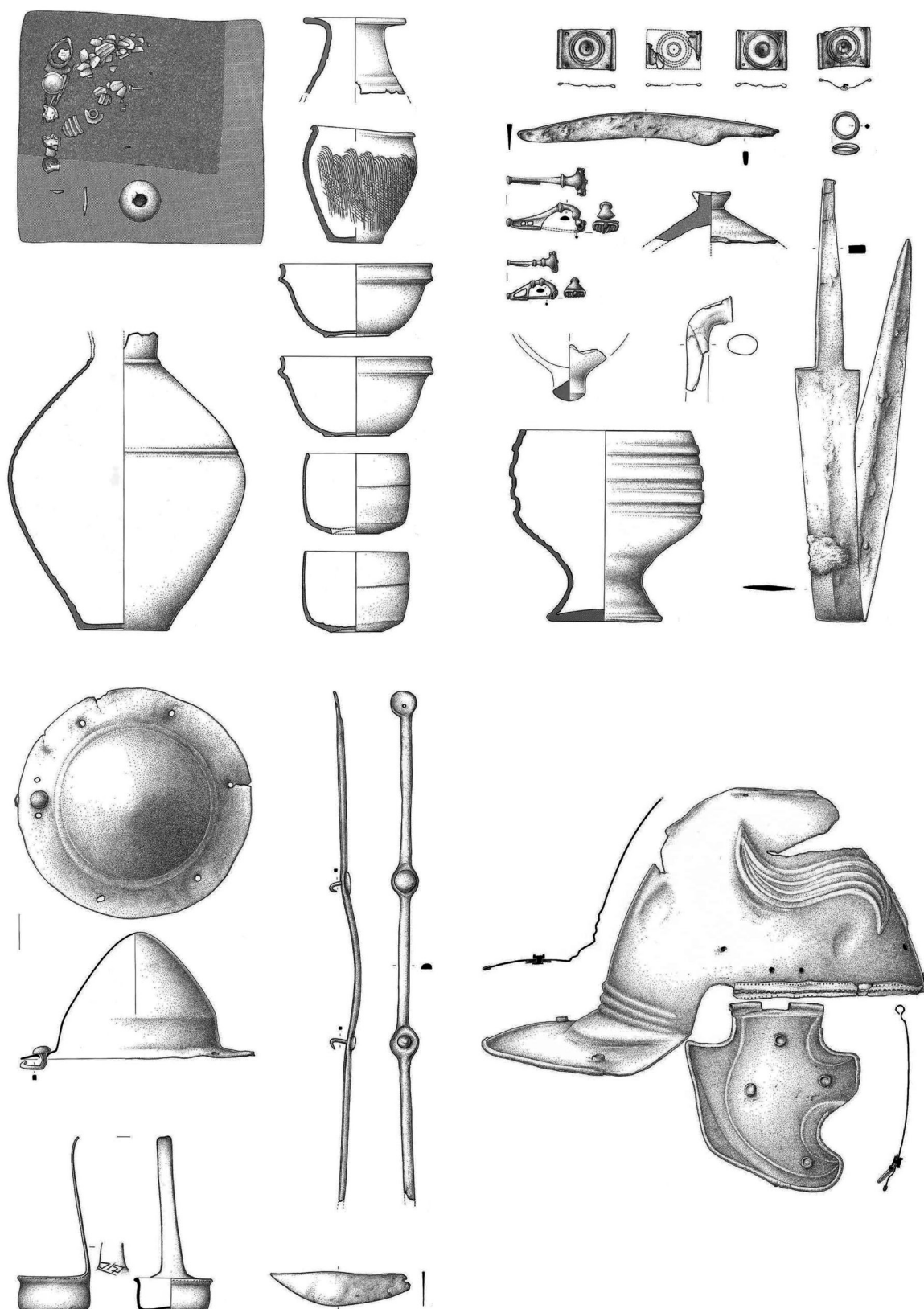


Figure 2. Funerary inventory from grave 1 at Verdun near Stopiče, in Slovenia (after Breščak 2015)



Figure 3. Funerary inventory from grave 1042 at Ljubljana, in Slovenia (after Gaspari *et alii* 2015)



Figure 4. *Gladius* and *cingulum* from grave 5 at Ilok, in Croatia (after Dizdār, Radman-Livaja 2015)

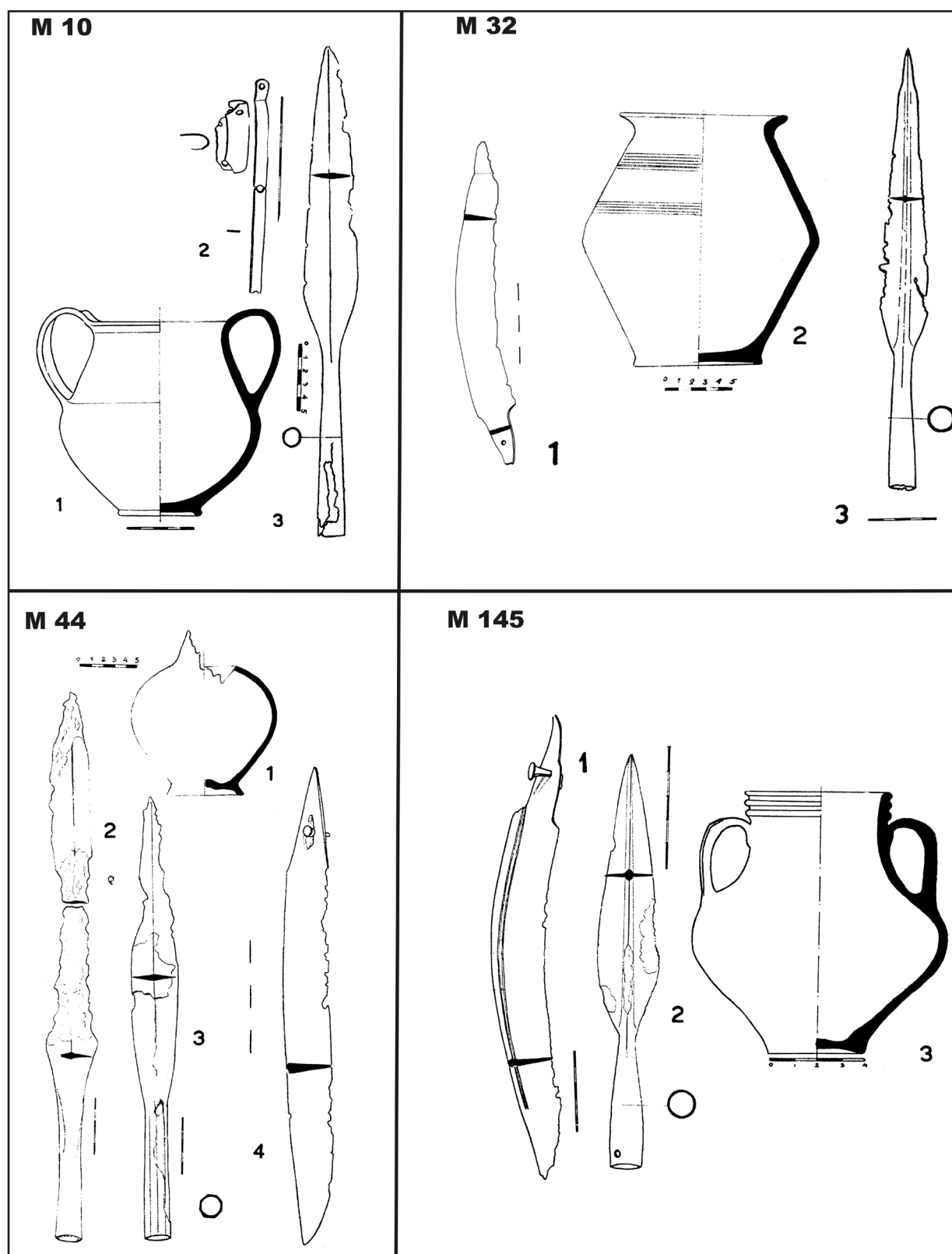


Figure 5. Funerary inventories from graves 10, 32, 44 and 145 at Belgrade-Karaburma (after Todorović 1972)