

# AN EARLY IRON AGE CLAY *PINTADERA* FROM BERNADEA, MUREȘ COUNTY

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In 1996, during the systematic excavations in the multi-layered settlement from Bernadea, point *Dâmbău*<sup>1</sup>, in trench no. VI/1996, meter 5, at a depth of 1.10 m, corresponding to the Basarabi dwelling, a clay seal (*pintadera*)<sup>2</sup> has been unearthed. The Basarabi horizon from this settlement is chronologically assigned to the late stage of this culture, i.e. 7<sup>th</sup> c. – beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. for this site.

The instrument is made of good quality clay, tempered with fine sand, displays a reductive, uniform burning and a dark grayish color. It has a length of 9.8 cm and a width of 5.5 cm on the maximum diameter of the coils (plate I/1). A double divergent spiral, with each part made of three relieved coils, represents the active surface. The impressing area is slightly convex, curved toward the extremities. The two spirals were successively imprinted, as to avoid high pressure upon the whole surface, which could have brought its deterioration. On the opposite part a rectangular handle is placed, slightly flattened, of relative small dimensions, which could be grasped with the fingers. The outer part of one of the spirals has been deteriorated during the excavations and the missing fragment could not be recovered.

A recent, synthetic study on the culture of the Scythian peoples from the Carpathian basin in the 6<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. deals with this type of instruments<sup>3</sup>. These artifacts have been divided according to their dimensions into two categories, the first one comprising pieces between 5 and 10 cm and the second one those pieces having 1 to 4 cm<sup>4</sup>. If, according to this criterion the *pintadera* from Bernadea belongs to the first category, represented by relatively few pieces, the spiraled motif is rare for this type of instruments. Only three such seals display this motif, two from Piliny and one from Pomaz<sup>5</sup>, all of them belonging to the second category. In these cases, the spirals have only one coil, of irregular shape and carelessly

represented. Their handle, completely different from that of our piece, is much larger, has the shape of a truncated cone and belongs organically to the body<sup>6</sup>.

A seal from Rudi, in Bessarabia, assigned to the Basarabi culture, displays certain analogies, but it has active surfaces at both ends, one of them having an S – shaped motif and the other a triangular one. The dimensions of this seal are 4 by 1.3 by 0.7 cm<sup>7</sup>. On account of the associated ceramics, it has been dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.<sup>8</sup>.

The motif of the double divergent spiral is a well-known presence in almost all the cultural and chronological horizons of the prehistoric Carpathian basin. Its presence in the decorative repertoire of the Basarabi culture is one of the main reasons in asserting the beauty of the Basarabi ceramics. We must mention nevertheless that the divergent spirals located on the outward rims of the vessels (especially bowls) but also on the belly of the pots or cups assigned to the Basarabi culture have been made not by means of impression but usually using fine successive incisions. The spirals are the central motif of the pottery decoration, being defined by these incisions and associated with the “false cord” technique and encrustation with a white substance, which only enhance the spiral motif<sup>9</sup>. One should mention also the presence of this motif in the decorative repertoire of the Ferigele group, located on the bowls and cups. Their origin in this case is associated with the Basarabi culture<sup>10</sup>. Not even in this horizon had the spiral motif been realized by means of impression.

On the other hand, the clay tools used for decorating the Basarabi ceramics are well known, but given their dimensions and shape and also the resulted decoration<sup>11</sup>, they do differ from our item. The pieces from the Scythian horizon also lack any practical use in ceramic ornamentation<sup>12</sup>. In addition, the *pintadera* from Bernadea, fragile as it is, could not support repeated pressures, such as those involved by the ornamentation of vessels' wet clay or even wall or hearth daub<sup>13</sup>. The double spiral motif is also recorded on the well-known hearths from the eponymous settlement from Sighișoara – *Wietenberg*<sup>14</sup> and on hearths from Gradina na Bosutu or Popov Salas<sup>15</sup>, assigned to a Basarabi type horizon. In the first case, the motif had been realized by using fine incisions while in the other cases is a channeled or plastic decoration.

The motif of the double divergent decoration in our case can easily be recognized, even if one considers only its dimensions, in the spectacle fibulae without an 8-shaped connection of Santa Lucia type (*Brillenfibeln ohne Achterschleife*)<sup>16</sup>. This kind of fibulae had been in use along the entire Early Iron Age (Ha A1 – Ha D)<sup>17</sup>. Within the archaic Scythian graves horizon in Transylvania (Ha D) these items had been found in the

necropolises from Ozd and Ciumbrud. One supposes that their wearing as fibulae (given the fact that north of the Black Sea they were used as pendants) should be connected with the local influences<sup>18</sup>. Despite the identity between the motif on both the fibulae and the *pintadera*, in our opinion the only reasonable connection that can be done concerns the symbolic significance of the spiral. We do not believe that the mark left by this “seal” on clothes or cloths did represent a substitute of the spectacle fibulae.

The spiral as a symbol has numerous antecedents in cultural milieus all over the world and extremely varied connotations. It has been regarded as an open, optimistic representation, reflecting the cyclic character of the evolution<sup>19</sup>. The double “S” spiral is a symbol of moon movements and changes and a symbol of thunder, thus a *graphic expression of the fecundity symbolism, connected with the storm – thunder – lightning complex*<sup>20</sup>.

As for the utility of such a *pintadera*, numerous hypotheses have been devised. One hypothesis asserts that they were used for body embellishment. J. Dechelette has issued this idea as early as 1924, having in mind the South American areas<sup>21</sup>. The motif was imprinted on the skin, having magic, and prophylactic and decorative role<sup>22</sup>. In analyzing a large set of 137 of such pieces belonging to the 6<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. Scythian horizon, J. Kisfaludi clearly associates the presence of such seals in the funerary inventories of women and children. In some cases, the association with small vessels containing natural dyestuff can only reinforce the idea of their using for body and face embellishment<sup>23</sup>. They could have been also used for cloths and clothes decoration<sup>24</sup>. One does not exclude the paste decoration<sup>25</sup>, an idea we deem that it should rather be associated with medieval civilization.

Antique sources repeatedly mention the Thracian custom of body painting and tattooing. Herodotus (V, 6) says: *The tattoo is considered the sign of the chosen people, the one not wearing one being considered as common man*. Aristophanes, in his comedy *The Babylonians* mentions that ... *the inhabitants along the Istros tattoo themselves and wear coloured clothes and that when someone among the Istrians is called ‘the white one’ it is ironically called so, as he would have a white and clean forehead; on the contrary, you must understand that it is tattooed*. As for the filiation of this custom, Clearh from Soloi (2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 4<sup>th</sup> c.) gives an interesting information (Fr. 8): *The Scythians’ wives have tattooed the body of the Thracian women – of those [Thracians] living in the neighborhood, west and north – making a draw with pins. After that, for many years, the Thracian women thus offended had wiped [the marks] of their misfortune in a special way, by marking other signs on the rest of the body, for the sign of shame on their skin, as part of the [ornamental] drawing to wipe the insult by means*

of embellishment. Referring to the familiar character of body decoration through drawings and tattoos of the barbarians from the Balkan area, Strabo' *Geography* mentions (VII, 5, 4): [The inhabitants near Adriatic Sea] are tattooing themselves as all the Illyrian and Thracia peoples. Plutarch, in *On the late divine vengeance*, 12, associates this custom mainly with the women: ... we do not praise the Thracians, which tattoo their women even today, to revenge Orpheus.

Even if most of these quotations refer to tattoos, sometimes even mentioning the using of pins, one can not exclude the body decoration by means of impression, a much less painful technique, repeatable, giving the possibility of mixing the colours and decorative motifs, which have not in this case a definitive character. Two explanations can be offered for such an option. On one hand, we assume a magical, religious dimension and possible apotropaic connotations and on the other hand, a pure decorative dimension. These dimensions do not reciprocally exclude one another, as the simultaneous presence of the pragmatic and the esthetic can be considered natural. At the same time, tattooing as a form of social distinction<sup>26</sup>, later documented in the Thracian world, serves completely other claims, totally different we assume, of those of the cultural and chronological context in which the *pintadera* from Bernadea had been found.

On the other hand, technically speaking, the irregularities from the active surface of the piece allow the uniform impression only on soft, flexible surface, like the human epidermal tissue (see Plate I/2). This fact reinforces the idea of a likely destination for this piece. The lack of analogies in the funerary inventories of this cultures, differentiated on social categories, age, gender, enables us to consider that this kind of items were no common, everyday artifact for the Basarabi communities and that the *pintadera* from Bernadea is a new emergence in this horizon. Subsequently, in the 6<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C., the custom of imprinted decoration had a larger spreading in the Scythian area from the Carpathian basin but, quite unusual, lacked completely in contemporary Transylvania<sup>27</sup>.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A. Ursuțiu, in *Cronica cercetărilor arheologice*, Brăila, 1996, nr. 9, p. 9-10; for more data regarding the site stratigraphy, see also V. Lazăr, *Repertoriul arheologic al județului Mureș*, Târgu Mureș, 1995, p. 54-55, nr. VII.2.A and the older references.

<sup>2</sup> The word had adopted in the archaeological literature from the Spanish chronicle of the conquistadores, which had met such implements at South American natives. See J. Dechelette, *Manuel d'archeologie prehistorique, celtique et gallo-romaine*, Paris, 1924, I, p. 569.

<sup>3</sup> J. Kisfaludi, in *Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae*, 1997, p. 75 and next.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *op.cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, *op.cit.*, p. 96, Pl. 9/17,18,20.

<sup>6</sup> A seal from the same chronological horizon comes from Ilieni, Covasna County, but has a different decorative motif and lacks data concernint the discovery context. See V. Pârvan, *Getica. O protoistorie a Daciei*, București, 1982, p. 217, fig. 268.

<sup>7</sup> M. Romanovskaja, in *SA*, 1, 1980, p. 291, Fig. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, *op.cit.*, p. 301.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Al. Vulpe, in *Dacia, N.S.*, IX, 1965, p. 109, Abb. 1/11 or H. Ciugudean, in *Apulum*, XIV, 1976, fig. 8/7.

<sup>10</sup> Al. Vulpe, *Necropola hallstattiană de la Ferigele*, București, 1967, p. 56, Fig. 18/8.

<sup>11</sup> M. Jevtić, in *Banatica*, 12, 1993, p. 113 and next, T. I – IV.

<sup>12</sup> J. Kisfaludi, *op.cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> No marks left by this implement had been found on the pottery from Bernadea or marks left by similar tools.

<sup>14</sup> I. Andrițoiu, A. Rustoiu, *Sighișoara – Wietenberg. Descoperirile preistorice și cetatea dacică*, București, 1997, p. 16-17 and the bibliagrahy.

<sup>15</sup> P. Medović, *Naselja starijeg gvozdenog doba u Jugoslavenskom Podunavlju*, Beograd, 1978, T. V,1, CXVI,3,4.

<sup>16</sup> T. Bader, *Die Fibeln in Rumänien*, PBF, XIV/6, p. 58 and next.

<sup>17</sup> Idem, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> V. Vasiliev, *Sciții agatârși pe teritoriul României*, Cluj Napoca, 1980, p. 108-109.

<sup>19</sup> J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrandt, *Dicționar de simboluri*, București, 1995, III, p. 250.

<sup>20</sup> Idem, *op.cit.*, p. 251-252.

<sup>21</sup> J. Dechelette, *op.cit.*, *loc.cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *Enciclopedia dell'arte antica classica e orientale*, VI, Roma, 1965, s.v. *Pintadera*, p. 174.

<sup>23</sup> J. Kisfaludi, *op.cit.*, p. 79, 80.

<sup>24</sup> J. Chochorowski, *Die Vekerzug-Kultur. Charakteristik der Funde*, Warsawa-Krakow, 1985, p. 81-82, apud J. Kisfaludi, *op.cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>25</sup> R. Florescu, H. Daicovicu, L. Roșu, *Dicționar enciclopedic de artă veche a României*, București, 1980, p. 194.

<sup>26</sup> I.H. Crișan, *Spiritualitatea egto-dacilor*, București, 1986, p. 94

<sup>27</sup> J. Kisfaludi, *op.cit.*, p. 81; V. Vasiliev, *op.cit.*, p. 113-119.

## O PINTADERĂ APARTINÂND ETAPEI MIJLOCII A PRIMEI VÂRSTE A FIERULUI DE LA BERNADEA (JUD. MUREȘ)

### *Rezumat*

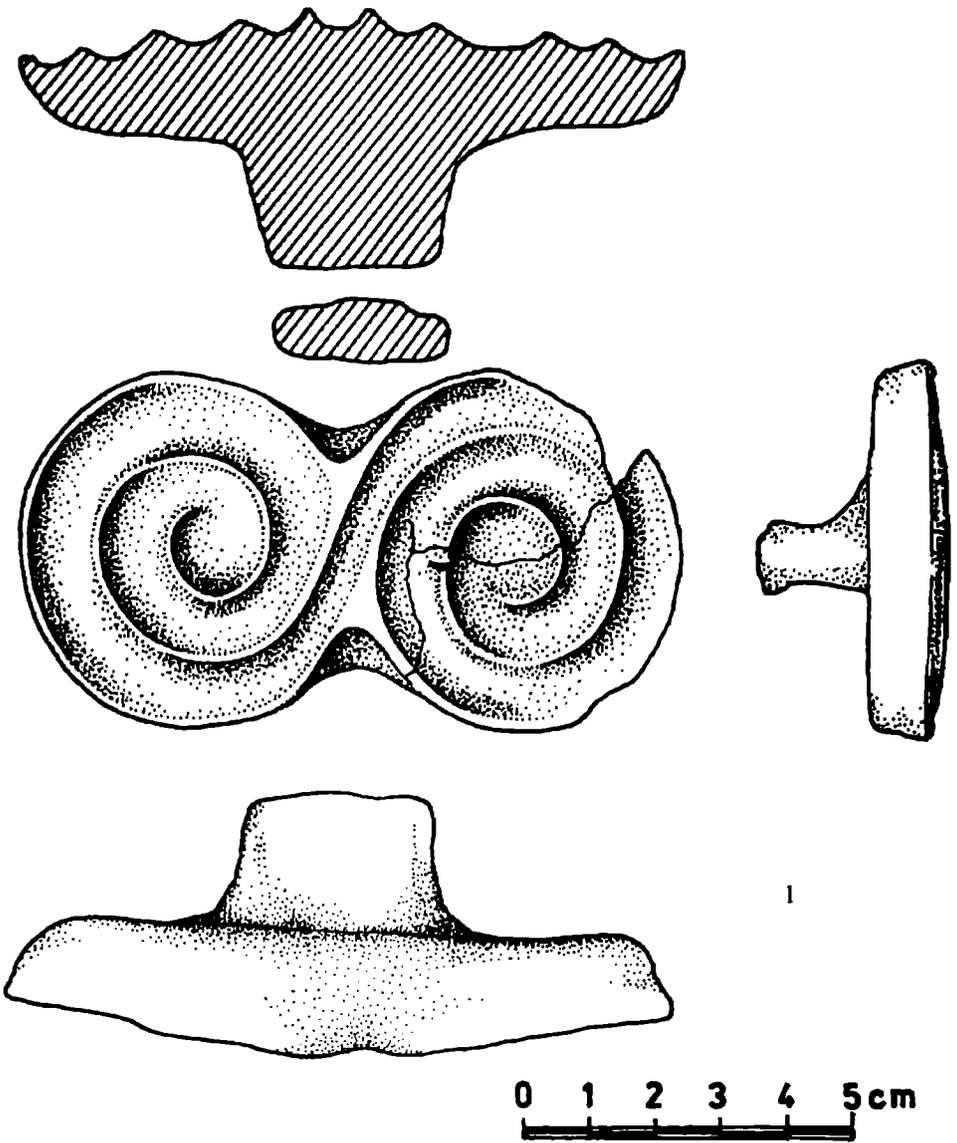
Pintadera a fost descoperită în 1996, în cursul cercetărilor arheologice de la Bernadea, într-un nivel datat în secolul VII – începutul sec. VI a.Chr. și atribuit orizontului Basarabi.

Obiectul, cu un ornament deosebit, în formă de spirală divergentă din câte trei spire, realizate în pozitiv nu are analogii în epocă și mediul cultural căruia îi aparține. Artefacte similare chiar și din punct de vedere al

decorului, sunt frecvente în mediul scitic din bazinul carpatic în secolele VI – V a.Chr. Spirala este prezentă în repertoriul motivelor decorative ale ceramicii Basarabi, dar în acest caz este realizată prin alte tehnici.

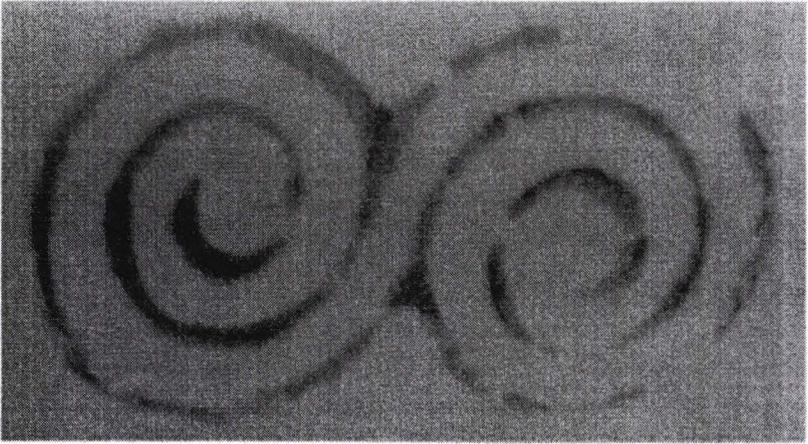
Se pare că pintadera a fost folosită pentru decorare corpului uman, nu a ceramicii. Ireregularitățile de pe suprafașa sa activă indică o folosire a sa pentru imprimare („ștampilare“) pe o suprafață moale și flexibilă (piele umană sau poate materiale textile).

Pentru epoca scitică este bine documentată utilizarea pintaderelor pentru decorarea pielii corpului uman, obicei menționat de izvoarele antice din secolele VI – IV a.Chr.

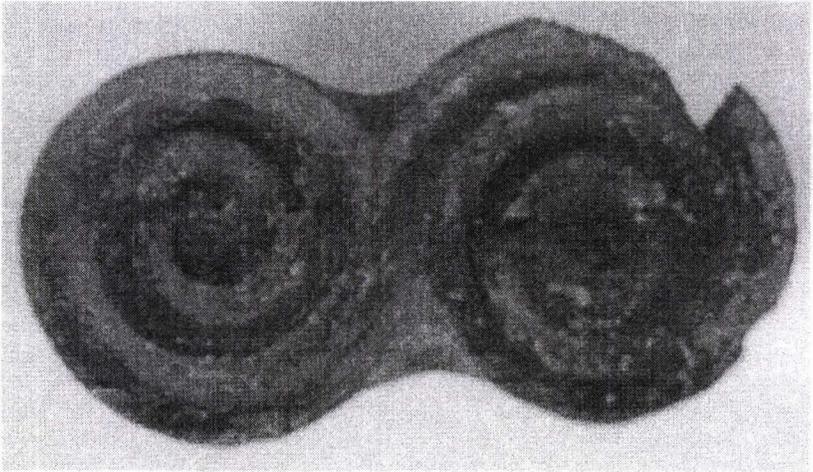


Pl. I: 1 – Pintadera de la Bernadea;

Plate I.: 1 – The *pintadera* from Bernadea;



2



3

2 – Negativul imprimat pe piele al piesei; 3 – Fotografia piesei  
2 – The negative of the motif, as imprint on human epidermal tissue; 3 – The photography of the object