

Two prestige silver artifacts (Mramorac “Belt”) found at Novi Sad, from 6th-5th c. BC, in the National Museum of Banat (Timisoara)¹

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Abstract

Our aim is to discuss two prestige silver artifacts on whose provenience I have just received information. The origins, usage, ethnic belonging and significance of such artifacts are still under debate. For a long time, such artifacts, made almost completely of silver, rarely gilded, and of gold only as an exceptional occurrence, with geometric, vegetal and, in only one case, figurative motives, have been considered belts. The two endings of the artifact and the absence of any buckles or fixing elements make their use as belts difficult. This is the reason why some researchers consider that these pieces, often found in pairs, with almost identical decorations, were placed on shoulders, with the broad part upfront, indicating the superior rank of their bearer, whether lay or religious. Though improbable, there is also the possibility that they could be deposited in temples as cult inventory. All artifacts whose place of finding is known are from Moravia Valley and the Lower Tisa area, being dated around 6th-5th c. BC. Based on these considerations, we consider that the two pieces in the collections of the Museum of Timisoara could have the same origins and dating, having, naturally, the same purpose and use.

Keywords: silver artifacts, 6th-5th c. BC, prestige/religious purpose.

Rezumat

Ne propunem să analizăm două piese de prestigiu, din argint, despre a căror proveniență abia acum am reușit să primesc informații. Originea, utilitatea, atribuirea etnică și semnificația acestor tipuri de piese sunt încă disputate de cercetători. Multă vreme aceste piese, aproape în totalitate din argint, foarte rar aurite, și doar în mod excepțional din aur, cu decor geometric, vegetal și, doar într-un caz, figurativ, au fost considerate centuri. Terminația celor două capete ale piesei și lipsa oricărui elemente de prindere/atașare face însă dificilă utilizarea lor drept centuri. De aceea, unii cercetători consideră că aceste piese, uneori găsite câte două împreună și cu decor aproape identic, au fost puse pe umeri, cu partea lată în față, ele indicând rangul deosebit al personajului, laic sau religios; nu este exclusă nici posibilitatea, deși puțin probabilă, ca ele să fi fost depuse în temple. Toate piesele al căror loc de descoperire este cunoscut provin din bazinul Moravei ori din regiunea Tisei de Jos și se datează în sec. VI-V a. Chr. Pe baza acestor considerații apreciem că și cele două piese din patrimoniul muzeului timișorean ar putea proveni din aceeași regiune, au aceeași datare și, evident, au avut aceeași utilizare.

Cuvinte-cheie: piese din argint, sec. VI-V a. Chr., prestigiu/semnificație religioasă.

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PROVENIENCE²

In what the source of the artifacts is concerned, the following text translated into Romanian³ has been preserved from the inventory in Hungarian, written before 1918, which has been lost in the meantime (Inventory: I – 3223).

“2 silver mountings to be applied on the harness, made of silver plates, with ornaments produced by hammering. They are strip-shaped, somehow widened towards the endings, being cut as an arc of a circle. On the broader facet there are 14 hemispheric knobs, with a forged palmette above, and on the upper side, near the edge, geometric and thread-shaped ornaments made up of hammered points.

Length = 94.5 cm, maximum width = 20 cm.

The second piece is made up of 4 fragments of 78.5 cm length, 19.7 cm maximum width.

They were found in the *pusta* (steppe, *a.n.*) near Novi Sad (now Serbia), and they are from La Tène period.

They were purchased from antiquarian Rethi Zsigmond from Budapest by the Superior Inspectorate of the National Museums and Libraries for 2,000 (two thousand) kronas. The inspectorate placed them in the museum as state deposit on September 28th, 1907”.

This way, we have information on the source and the way in which these artifacts were brought to the museum from Timisoara. The information regarding the place of finding – Novi Sad – is credible, as this city is at the northern extremity of all the others findings (fig. 9). Also, the

size and succinct description in the inventory are not too far from reality.

DESCRIPTION OF ARTIFACTS

Piece nr. 1 (fig. 1/1; 2-3)

Size: preserved length = 908 mm; maximum width = 196 mm; minimum width = 40 mm; l. swastika area = 150 mm; l. palmette area = 106 mm; swastika = 95×80 mm; weight = 385 g.

Silver plate artifact, fragmented, but relatively well preserved, both on the obverse and reverse, just a tiny piece missing between fragments 4 and 5 and at the thin end. The piece was reconditioned and fixed, most likely, on a wooden mount for its being exhibited as it presents small orifices on the upper edges. It also presents wearing traces, as a result of its use.

The decorations are made *au repoussé* and by impression with geometric forms (rhombs, triangles, swastika) and floral motives (palmette); it also presents 14 large hemispheric knobs, in relief, one placed under the palmette-shaped decoration.

Piece nr. 2 (fig. 1/2; 4-5)

Preserved sizes: length = 726 mm (segments 1-2); Length. Segment 3 = 39 mm; total length = 765 mm; l. max. = 195 mm; l. swastika area = 158 mm (up), 123 mm (down); l. palmette area = 103 mm; minimum width segment 2 = 54 mm; minimum width preserved, on the isolated segment = 38 mm; swastika = 96×79 mm; palmette = 65×65 mm; weight = 344 g.

Silver plate artifact, deteriorated, with missing parts, especially in the upper side. This piece was also straightened and fixed,

2 Information obtained with the help of Dr. Daniela Tănase.

3 The translator's name is either not mentioned or has not been preserved.

most probably, on a wooden mount for exhibition purposes, as proven by the small orifices on the upper edges. It also presents traces of wearing.

The decorations are made *au repoussé* and by impression with geometric forms (rhombs, triangles, swastika) and floral motives (palmette); it also presents 14 large hemispheric knobs, in relief, one placed under the palmette-shaped decoration.

OBSERVATIONS

The two artifacts are almost identical in what concerns their size, techniques, decoration and wearing traces, as well as their deterioration. This is why it can be assumed that they were found together, as it happened with the majority of findings up to this moment, which is, otherwise, obvious from the information preserved in the inventory of the museum from Timisoara.

We will refrain from commenting too much on the matter, all the more that such pieces have vastly been analyzed and commented on, especially on the occasions of new findings⁴. Our aim is, nonetheless, to introduce these two pieces in the scientific debate, as they are special, rare and bear special significance.

FINAL REMARKS

Until 2008, 24 pieces of this type were known, 20 of them of silver, 2 of gilded silver and 2 of gold⁵ (Stojić 2008, 87-94). Adding to them, there is only one of the

two artifacts in the collections of the museum from Timisoara, as there has already been information on the former.

We will further mention just a few of the most important findings. At **Umčari**, in the inventory of a possible grave, there were found a piece, a double needle and a fibula, all made of silver (Garašanin 1960, 86-92), at **Batinac** (fig. 8), in a possible grave, there were two pieces of gilded silver, the only ones with figurative decorations besides the geometric and floral ones (Stojić 2007, 51-65), at **Novi Pazar** (fig. 7), in a grave or a particularly rich hoard, there were also two pieces and two gold earrings (Mano-Zisi, Popović 1972, 191-2008), and at **Rutevac** (fig. 6), in a small pit, there were only two silver pieces, one next to the other, without human bones or other inventory (Stojić 2008, 87-94).

Listed below are the main characteristics of this type of artifacts: a) all known artifacts are made of silver, gilded silver or gold plate, narrowing from one end to the other; b) neither of them has buckles or other fixing elements; c) with one exception (Rutevac), they present wearing traces, many have been reconditioned and even completed with parts with the specific decorations; d) the decorations are made *au repoussé* and by impression, mostly with geometric forms (rhombs, triangles, hourglass shapes, swastikas, windings), floral motives (palmettes), bigger and smaller relief points and, in only one case, at Batinac, with figurative representations; e) in many cases, including in individual graves, two identical or

4 For the most recent analysis, with new interpretations, see Stojić 2008.

5 There is also unverified information that there would be bronze artifacts too, in private collections, but there is no certainty in this respect (Stojić 2008, 88).

almost identical pieces were found, which suggests that they were worn in pairs; f) they are dated 550/525-450 BC.

Numerous and varied opinions have been expressed, both in what concerns the area of manufacturing and use, and their purpose.

If we look at the findings area (fig. 9), we easily note that they all have been found in a relatively limited area, i.e. Moravia Valley and Lower Tisa, which brought forth the assumption that they had been manufactured by Triballi craftsmen, also attested by written sources as living in the Pomoravlje area, although possible imports from the Greek-Macedonian world are also possible (Stojić 2008, 89-90). The reconditioning and completion of the artifacts, in many cases, are considered additional arguments in favor of their being manufactured by the Triballi. The resemblance in style to some artifacts produced in the Thessaloniki area, especially to the artifacts found in the necropolis from Sindos, reflects strong Greek-Macedonian influences (Stojić 2008, 92).

Different opinions have also been expressed with regard to the name and purpose of these artifacts. Until recently, they were termed belts, being widely considered as used with this purpose. M. Stojić (2008, 88-89) rightly notes that these artifacts do not possess the necessary features to be worn as belts (they do not have fixing elements, and there were usually found in pairs, two identical pieces, including the cases in which there was only one buried body). In addition, there is also the fact that some pieces did not have the size to engird the waist, and the fact that the massive silver plate was not flexible would have determined their fast

breaking. This is the reason why, based on characteristics, decorations, and also on the fact that, most often, two identical pieces were found together, they are considered to be decorative straps to be worn on shoulders, with the broad part upfront, for their symmetric decorations to become visible (Stojić 2008, 91).

Who was wearing them? Considering that they are massive artifacts made of silver, gilded silver and even gold, in one case, the logical assumption is that they belonged to the lay or religious Triballi aristocracy, as M. Stojić (2008, 91) believes, and that they were worn during ceremonies. There is also a possibility that they could be cult gear in the inventories of temples or shrines, however, this is less likely, as their presence in the graves would be more difficult to explain, even admitting that the dead were priests (Stojić 2008, 91).

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Many thanks to all.

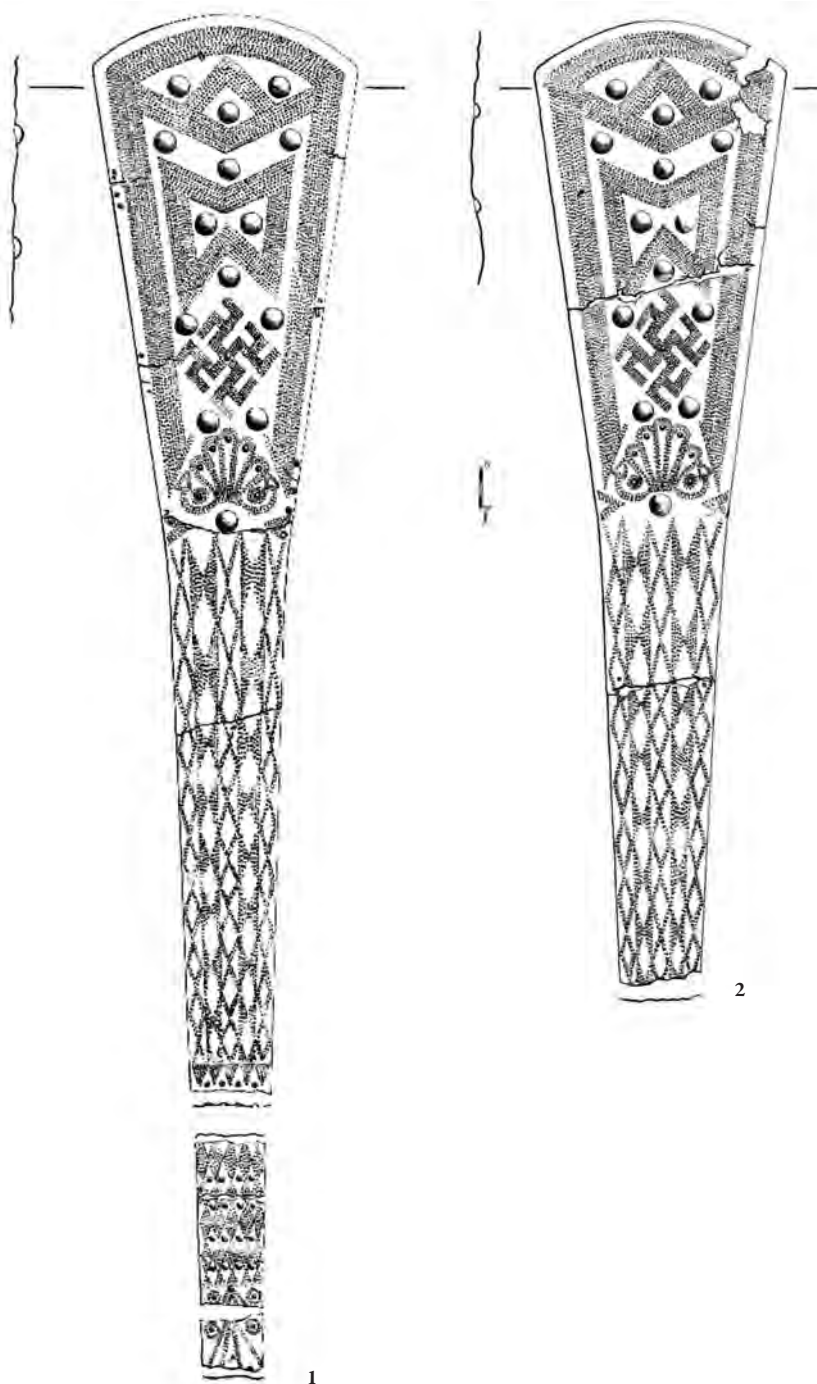


FIG. 1. Decorative artifacts from Novi Sad. 1 - Artifact no. 1; 2 - artifact no. 2.

FIG. 1. Piese decorative de la Novi Sad. 1 - Piesa nr. 1; 2 - piesa nr. 2.

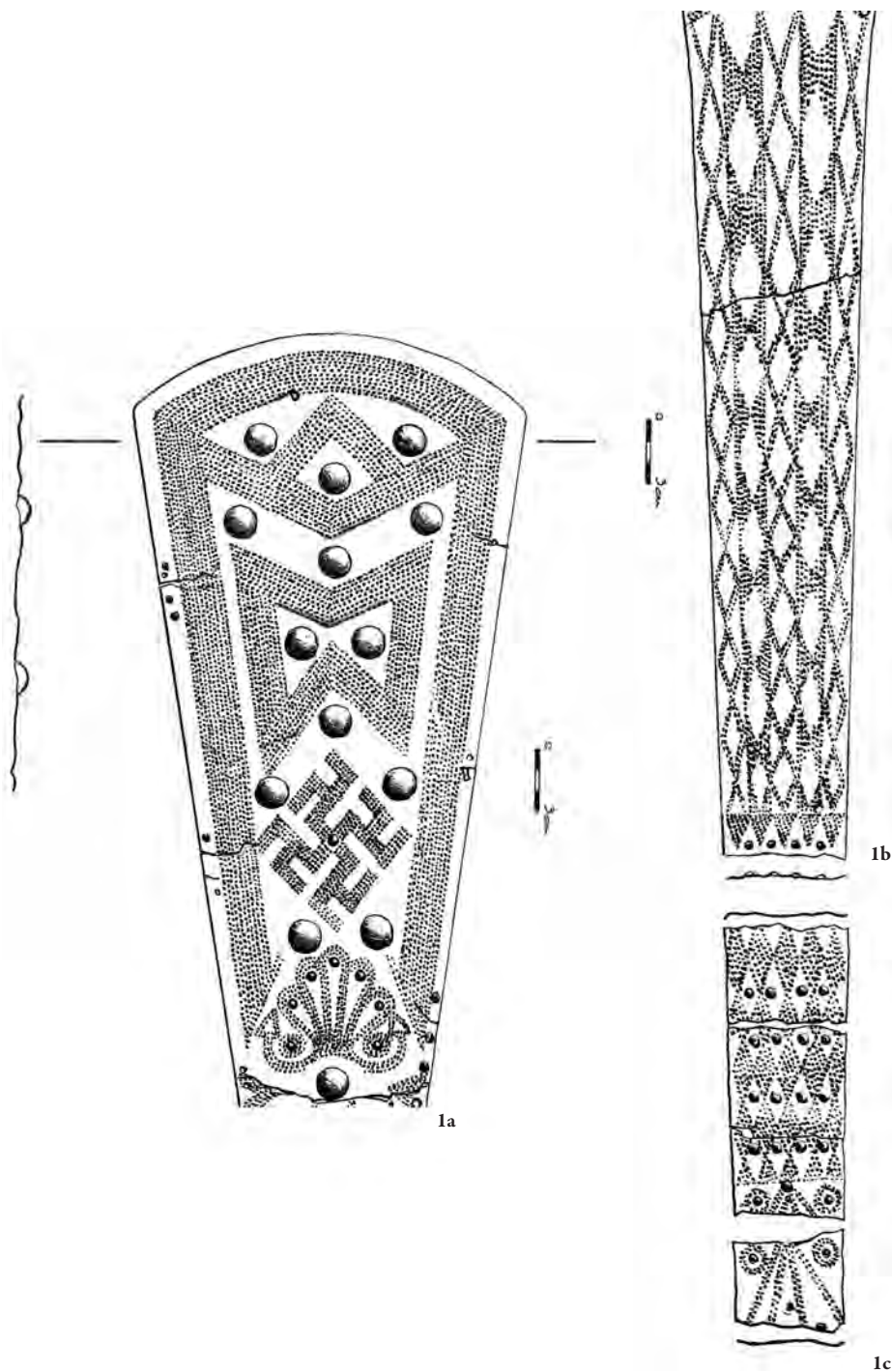


FIG. 2. Decorative artifact no. 1 from Novi Sad.

FIG. 2. Piesa decorativă nr. 1 de la Novi Sad.

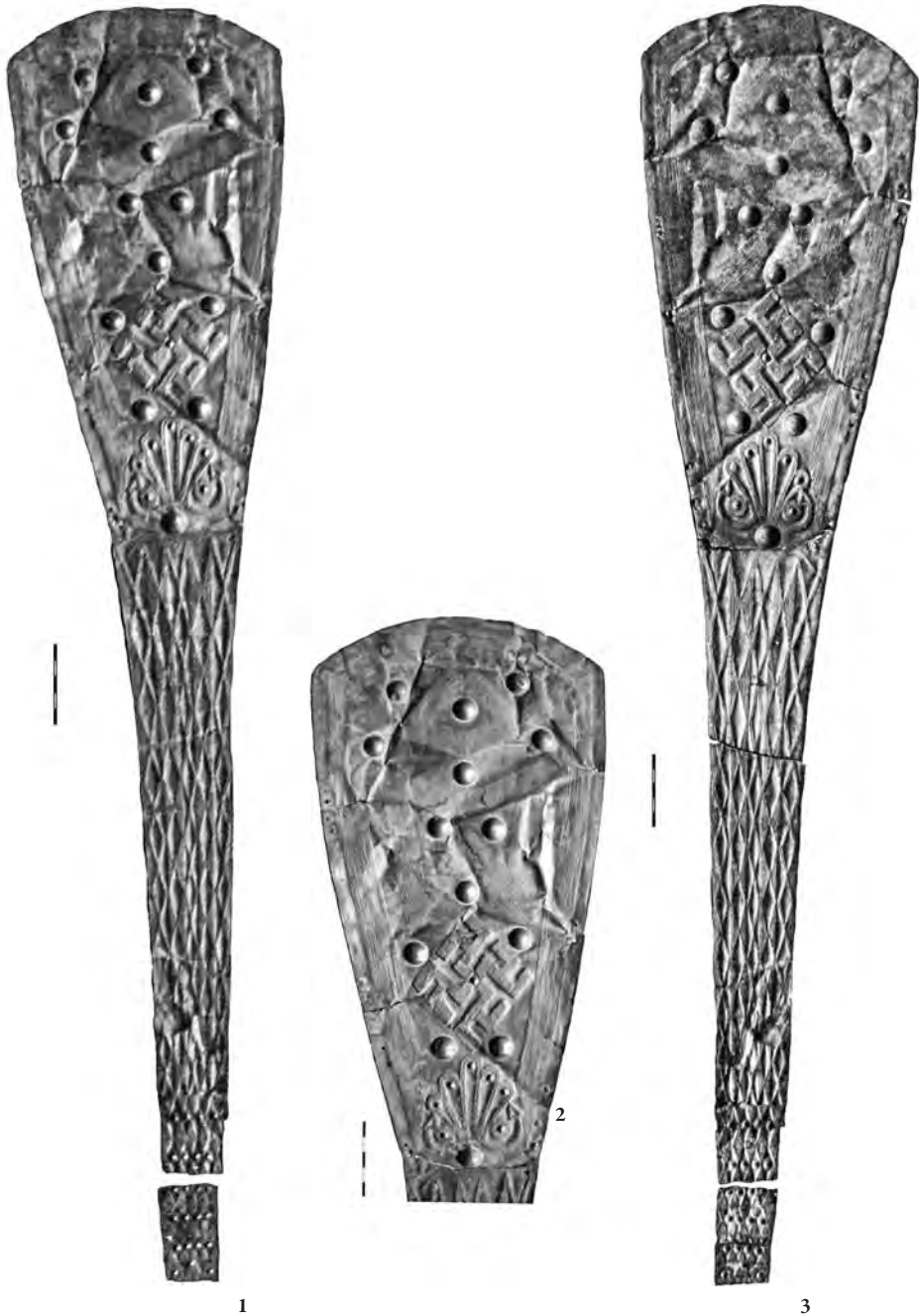


FIG. 3. Decorative artifact no. 1 from Novi Sad.
FIG. 3. Piesa decorativă nr. 1 de la Novi Sad.

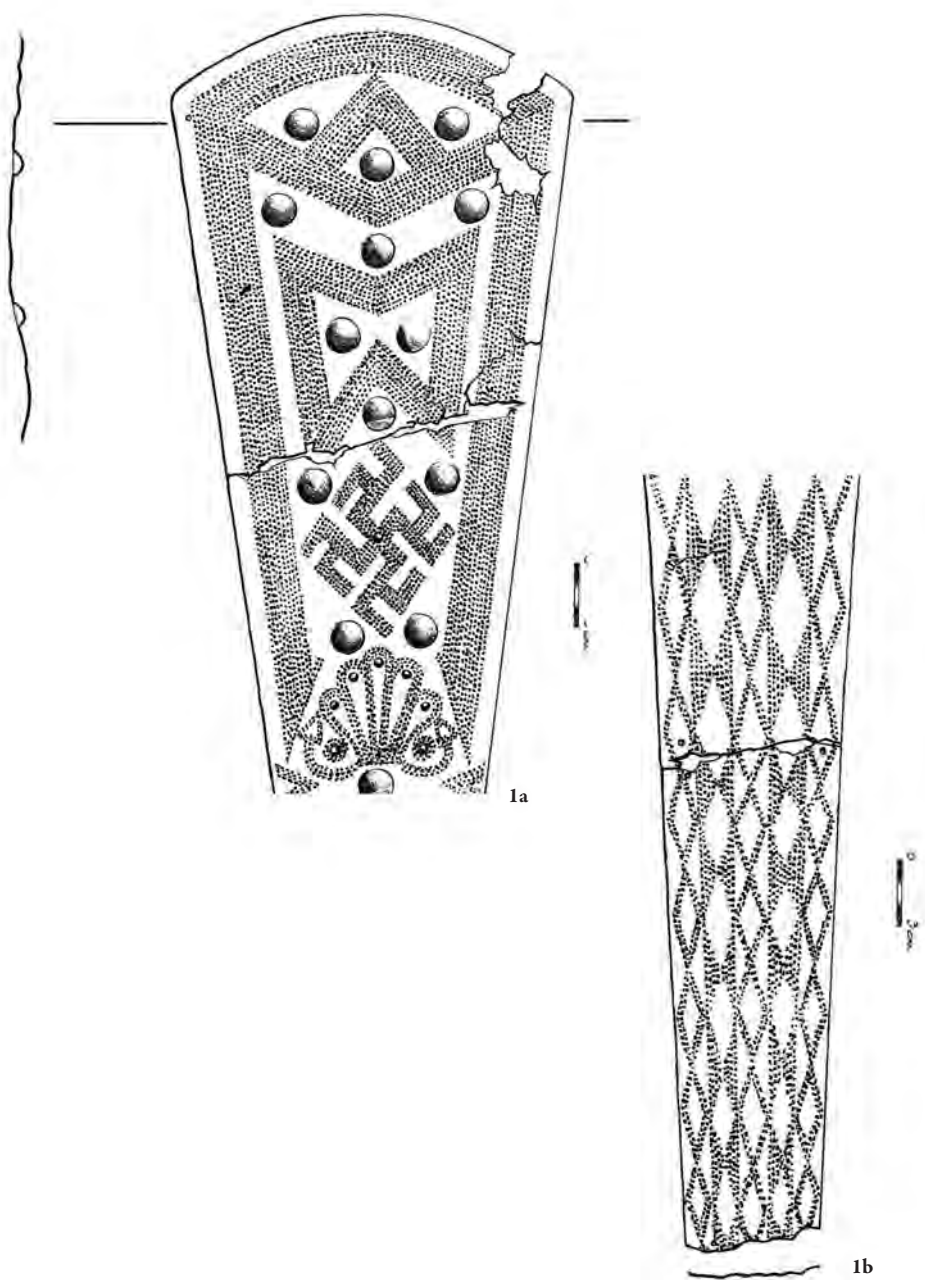


FIG. 4. Decorative artifact no. 2 from Novi Sad.

FIG. 4. Piesa decorativă nr. 2 de la Novi Sad.

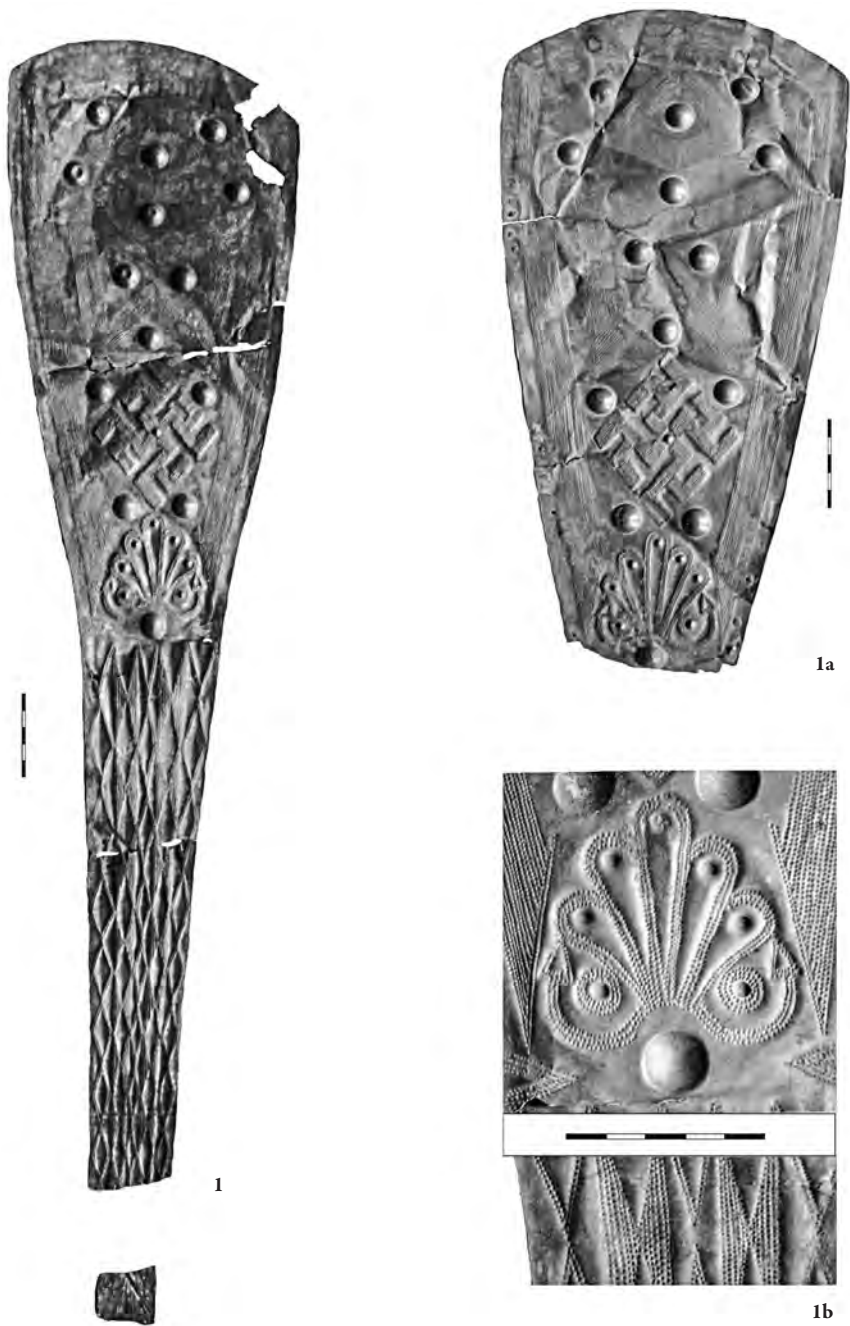


FIG. 5. Decorative artifact no. 2 from Novi Sad.

FIG. 5. Piesa decorativă nr. 2 de la Novi Sad.

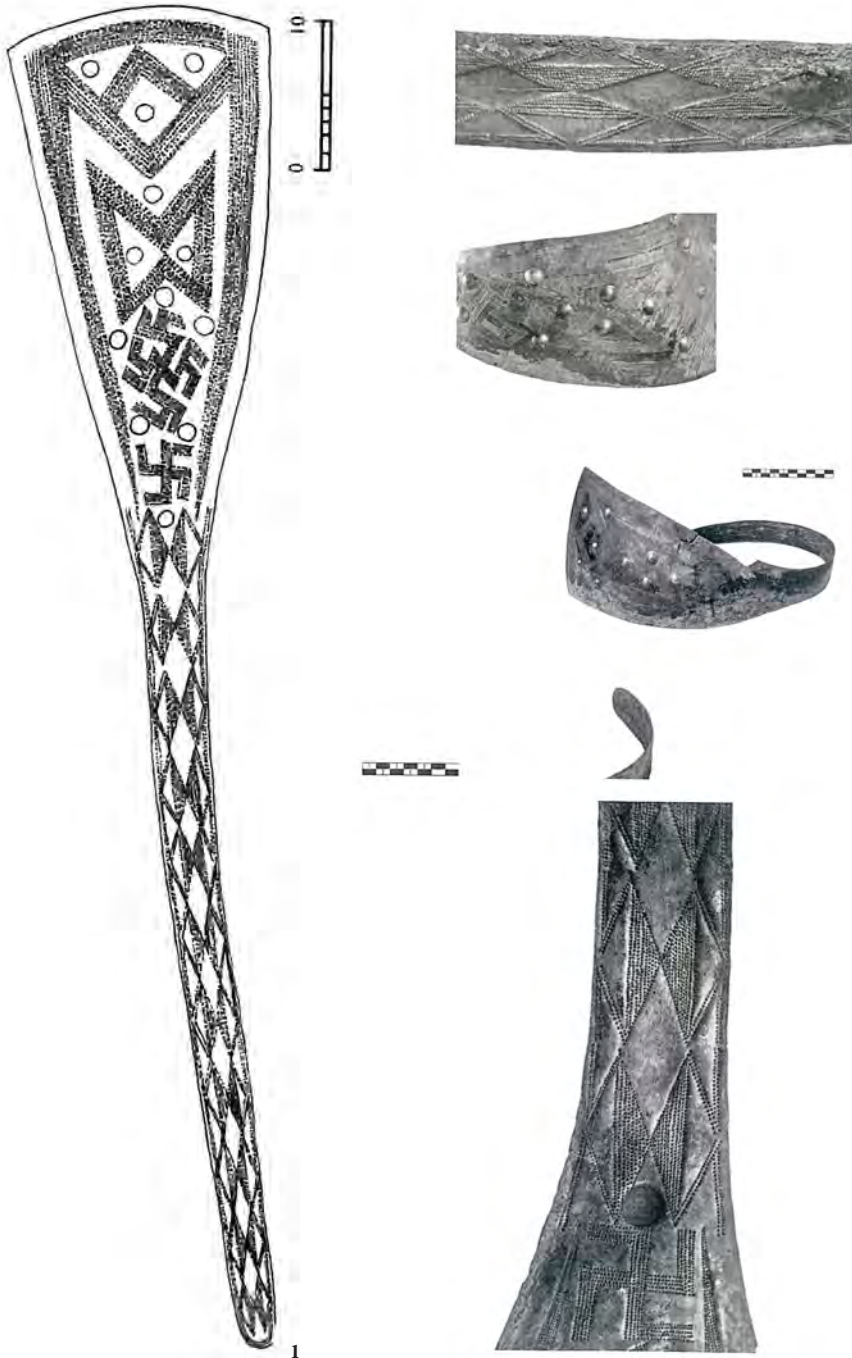


FIG. 6. Decorative artifact from Rutevac (after Stojić 2008).
FIG. 6. Piesa decorativă de la Rutevac (după Stojić 2008).



1



2



1a



3



4

FIG. 7. Decorative artifacts from Novi Pazar (after Mano-Zisi, Popović 1972).
FIG. 7. Piesețe decorative de la Novi Pazar (după Mano-Zisi, Popović 1972).

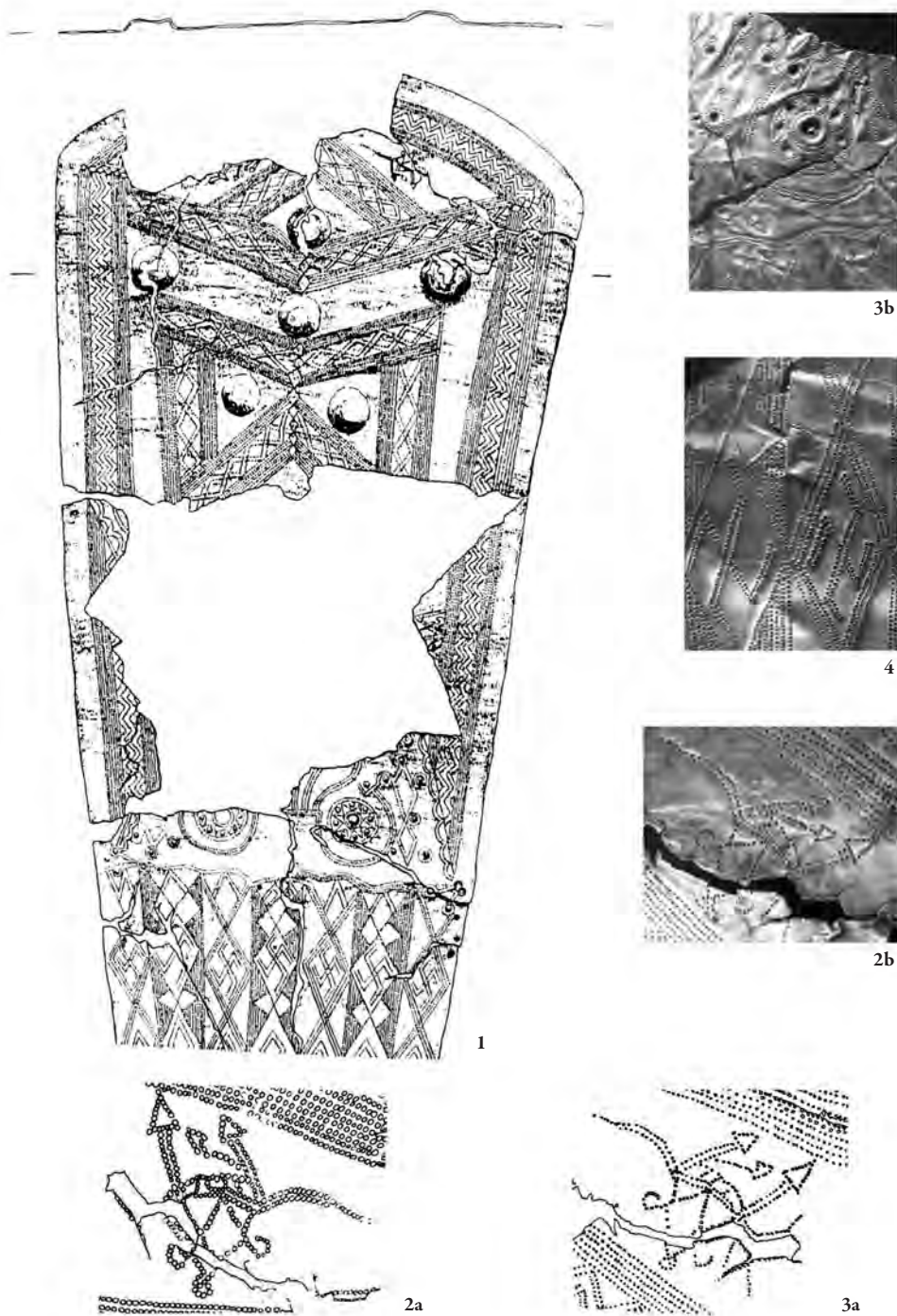


FIG. 8. Decorative artifacts from Batinac (after Stojić 2007).
 FIG. 8. Piesa decorativă de la Batinac (după Stojić 2007).

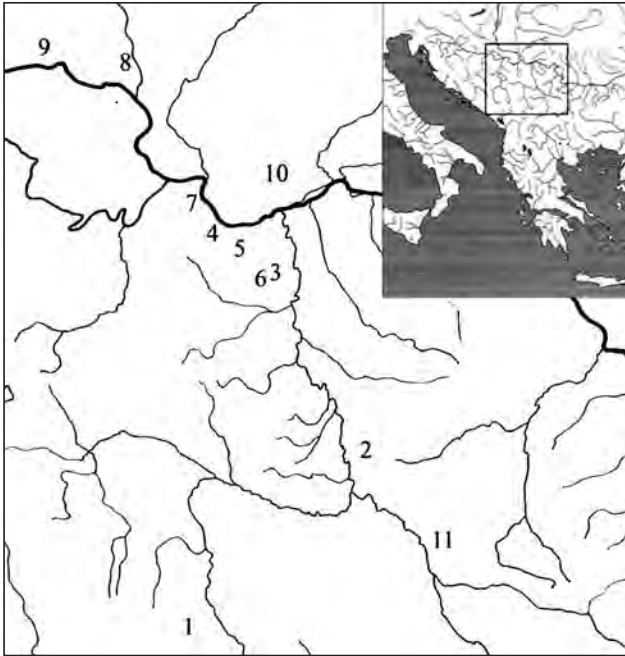


FIG. 9. Diffusion of silver artifacts/silver "belt" type Mramorac (after Stojić 2008).

FIG. 9. Aria de răspândire a pieselor decorative din argint/"centuri" de argint de tip Mramorac (după Stojić 2008).

1 - Novi Pazar; 2 - Batinac; 3 - Mramorac; 4 - Kolare; 5 - Umčari; 6 - Miloševac; 7 - Vinča; 8 - Titel; 9 - Novi Sad; 10 - "Unknown"/ „Necunoscută”; 11 - Rutevac.

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