

THE CEREMONY HELMETS - MASTERPIECES OF THE GETAE'S TOREUTICS AND FIGURATIVE ART

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In the 5th century B.C. the Greek historian Herodotus (V, 3) said the following: "The Thracians are the most numerous people in the world, after the Indians. Had they only one leader or got they along well, they'd be invincible and much more powerful than all the other peoples, I'd say."

In some graves and hoards, the rich inventory is a proof of a Getic elite comparable with the Macedonian or the Scythian one, not only where the resources are concerned, but also for maintaining their authority, through a "sacred history", with a glorious past, marked by memorable deeds (Kull 1997, 197-466; Sîrbu 2002, 374-393). For example, the dynast buried at Agighiol (Berciu 1969, 33-76) may be compared with the king buried at Vergina (Andronicos 1997) if we take into account the wealthy inventory and the desire of showing his glorious past.

In the 4th – 3rd centuries B.C. it was a period of prosperity for the Getic society, while the aristocratic elite were connected to the mentalities of the Odrysian, Macedonian or Scythian royal courts.

In order to maintain, ideologically, their domination, the Getic basilei created their own mythology, esoteric, probably, represented by a common patrimony of objects, representations and decorative compositions made, mostly, by local craftsmen in a specific manner and a high artistic level. The syntagma "gold and silver kings" is well proved by the numerous treasures found on the Thracian territories (Sîrbu 2002, 370-388).

In presenting these objects, we intend to show they are masterpieces of the Getae craftsmen, but also a means of knowing their mythology and religion. It is beyond any doubt that the analysis will be made according to the figurative representations in the Thracian world as a whole.

The helmet is a typical Getic creation and its importance is special, by its position (on the head, it represented the "vault", the "superior"), as well as by the great number of items and the significance of their exceptional decoration (the helmets found at Băiceni (Petrescu-Dâmbovița 1995, 171-185), Agighiol, Peretu (Moscalu 1989, 129-190, pl. 41-64), Poiana-Coțofenești (Berciu 1969, 77-82), and the one presently exhibited at Detroit Institute of Arts (Berciu 1969, 83-88).

The area of diffusion

The 5 helmets have been found in the area between the Danube, the Carpathians Mountains and the Black sea, the region in which the written sources locate the Getae, the Thracians Nordic branch.

Chronology

All the helmets are dated in the 4th - 3rd centuries B.C., maybe only between 350-275 B.C.

The discovery contexts

The helmets come from two tumular tombs (Agighiol, Peretu), a hoard (Băiceni), an isolated discovery (Poiana-Coțofenești) and an unknown place (the helmet of Detroit Institute of Arts). All the helmets are parts of ceremony ensembles for the riders and their horses, uncovered in royal tombs and hoards.

Materials

All the helmets are made of gold (Băiceni, Poiana-Coțofenești) or gilded silver (Agighiol, Peretu and Detroit).

The gilding of certain parts of the figurative representations (fur, feathers, horns, mane) proves to be not only a decoration technique, but also a means of stressing mythological phrases such as: “the golden fleece ram”, the “golden horned stag”, the “golden mane lion” (Marazov 1994).

There is, no doubt, a connection between using the gold as a material and the owners of such objects social status and we must think, on one hand, they come from a period of an intense process of creating the state forms, and on the other, the helmets, the cnemids and the jugs with figurative representations are in particular made of gold or are gilded.

Shape

The calotte of the helmets is conical in shape, lower or higher, the cheek cover and the back head cover are fixed; the helmets from Agighiol and Peretu have the front part of the cheek cover looking like the teeth of a saw.

Workshops

We can state, beyond any doubt, that these helmets have been made in local workshops, because of their discovery only in the region inhabited by the Getae, and their unique iconography made of original scenes and decorative compositions (animals procession, the unicorn bird with a fish in its beak and a rabbit in the claws etc.) (Berciu 1969; Alexandrescu 1974, 273-281; Venedikov, Gherasimov 1979; Crișan 1993 (II), 5-77; Sîrbu, Florea 2000,; Sîrbu 2004). As a matter of fact, a number of objects, images and decorative compositions, as well as some inscriptions on certain objects stand for the existence of the workshops in the Thracian territory. According to Petre Alexandrescu, the term “workshop” is used when one speaks about objects which, through a number of specific elements, could be placed in the same category. We shouldn't necessarily understand these workshops as being sedentary, as there were some craftsmen going to the royal courts with their specific sets of tools (matrix, “models notebook” and other devices) (Alexandrescu 1983, 51-54). Relying on the characteristics of these toreutics objects, the same Petre Alexandrescu found some workshops like: “Agighiol”, “Băiceni”, “Letnica”, “Borovo”, “Lukovit” (Alexandrescu 1983, 51-54).

The exceptional discovery made at Rogozen (Bulgaria) brought the answer to many questions: 18 of the 165 silver items, some of them gilded, bear inscriptions mentioning the craftsman's name (Disloias) and the production centre or the owners residence (Beo or Beos, Apro or Apri, Geiston), as well as the recipients' names (Kotys, Kersebleptes, satokos) (Nikolov, Mašov, Ivanov 1987; *Der Thrakische...* 1989; Marazov 1996, 256-263).

Favorite figurative scenes

The horsemen

In the 4th – 3rd centuries B.C., the scenes render a horseman moving, to the left or to the right, with no helmet or shield, sometimes with armor, keeping the spear in the right or the left hand, ready to attack while the other hand is on the bridles or the horse (Sîrbu, Florea 2000₂, 23-43), as it is on the Agighiol helmet (*Fig. 1/1; 4/3; 6*) and six appliqués of Letnica (Venedikov 1996). In other scenes, the rider attacks a lion with the spear, such as at Lukovit (Čičikova 1980) (*Fig. 4/6*), a bear, such as at Letnica (*Fig. 4/5*) and a wild boar at Rogozen (Marazov 1996, 160-179) (*Fig. 4/1*) On a Letnica appliqué, the horseman holds a bowl in his right hand while on the Agighiol no. 1 cnemid, he presents the bow and on the Letnica appliqué we can see the quiver.

A few general remarks: there is no deity name under any of these horsemen representations; no fight, so no human confrontation is ever rendered (Sîrbu, Florea 2000₂, 35-40).

That's why we consider the majority of the scenes as rendering the high aristocrats hunting; hunting big, even ferocious beasts, as the lion, the bear, the wolf, was a courage trial for those who aspired at the highest rank in society and the immortality in the "other world" as well; the beasts are always hunted with a spear (Marazov 1995, 353-364; Sîrbu, Florea 2000₁, 109-114)

Enthroned characters

On the right cheek cover of the Băiceni helmet, one can see a male character sitting on a throne, holding in the right hand a phiala and in the left hand a drinking horn; on the back of the throne, there is a bow, and at the legs, a snake. We consider the enthroned male characters - the Băiceni helmet (*Fig. 2/1; 5/3*) and the Agighiol no. 1 cnemid (*Fig. 5/4*) - represent the basilei; the objects surrounding them expressing their rank (the throne, the bow), and their sovereignty over their territory (the bird, the snake), as well as one of the important ritual acts they had to accomplish, that is libations with the rhyton or the phiala (Sîrbu, Florea 2000₁, 117-118; Sîrbu 2004₁, 59, 75-76). On the Agighiol no. 1 cnemid, the mounted character and the enthroned one are similarly rendered and if we add the representations on the helmet (*Fig. 1/1*), of the same ceremony ensemble, we are entitled to state we are dealing with the king buried here during three of his solemn hypostasis: mounted, holding the spear, mounted holding the bow and enthroned with the "unicorn" bird and the drinking horn, consequently three essential moments of the basileus life: hunting, before the investiture and as a basileus with all the signs of power (the throne and the ritual vases) (Sîrbu 2004₁, 76).

The sacred feature of these representations is well defined by the throne, the symbol of the centre of the universe, hence the power and the authority, the vases with cult significance they hold in their hand (rhyton and phiala) and the "horned" bird.

The sacrifice

On the golden helmet of Poiana-Coțofenești (Berciu 1969, 77-82), there are two compositions unique in the Thracian toreutics: on the cheek cover, an explicit scene of an animal sacrifice and on the back head cover, on two levels,

metaphorical creatures: anthropo-demons and fabulous creatures with a mammal leg in the mouth (*Fig. 2/2; 8*). According to the archaic mentalities, the sacrifice was meant to eliminate the tensions in the society and reestablish the relations with the gods. The sacrifice of the ram must have had the purpose of chasing the chaos, the fear and the terror, as suggested in the scene with metaphorical creatures, on the back head cover, and rebalancing, this way, the society (Marazov1978, 81-101).

Throwing the javelin

The most frequent weapons on the Thracian toreutics are the spear and the javelin - for ex., the Agighiol helmet (*Fig. 4/3*), the Letnica (*Fig. 4/5*) and Lukovit (*Fig. 4/6*) appliqués, the Rogozen jugs (*Fig. 4/1*) - and in the painted hunting scenes (Alexandrovo) (Kitov, Dimitrova 2003), but the rider never attacks a human with this weapon; all we can see is either the moment of throwing it, the weapon directed to the beast, or already poked in it. It is worth remarking that in toreutics and painting as well, the spear/javelin is the only weapon the Thracian riders used when hunting (Sîrbu 2004₁, 60).

Presentation of the bow

In the Thracian toreutics there is no character drawing the bow - neither in the battle, nor at hunting - consequently, we think the scenes where this weapon can be seen represents rather the basilei during their solemn moments or even deities; the only thing they do is to hold the bow in their hand, to receive it or to keep it near them; sometimes the only thing one could see is a flying arrow (Sîrbu 2004₁, 60). There is a confirmation of this hypothesis, that is the Băiceni helmet (*Fig. 2/1; 5/3*) and the Agighiol no. 1 cnemid, where the male characters are sitting on a throne and holding the power signs in their hand; on the Rogozen jugs no. 155 and 157 (*Fig. 4/2*) the female characters mounted or in ceremony chariots are represented holding bows in their hands.

These models are inspired from the Greek imagery, the amphora stamps (Avram 1996, nr. 259-268) and the Thasos coins in particular, which represent Heracles drawing the bow, very common scenes in the Thracian territory; still, we must admit that the Thracians have borrowed only the bow motive and not the gesture.

“The animal procession”

In the ancient peoples' mentality the importance and role of animals, implicitly, the animal decoration motifs, were due to their qualities that humans don't have: flying, living in the water and under the earth, and then, the power, the ferocity, forecast of weather and the natural disasters etc. (Priour 1988).

In the Thracian toreutics, real and metaphorical animals are present as well (Haimovici 1992, 179-193).

The creation of the Agighiol workshop, “the animal procession” is represented on the goblets found at Agighiol (*Fig. 3/1-2*), Rogozen (*Fig. 3/4*) and the Iron Gates (*Fig.3/3*), on the helmets from Peretu (*Fig. 1/3;7*) and on the one exhibited at the Detroit Institute of Arts (*Fig. 1/2*); on the last two objects, some animal representations are missing (Alexandrescu 1984, 91-97). Showing a certain ideological and iconographic unity, the scene renders a unicorn bird, grasping a fish in the beak and a rabbit in the claws, followed by a stag, an eight legged metaphoric animal and a goat; in front of them, there is a small prey bird, while on

the bottom of the goblets, there is a voracious creature grasping an animal between the claws and a mammal leg in the mouth - two cases (*Fig. 3*).

The scene with a horned bird-rabbit-fish may suggest the domination of the basileus over his territory, the three animals indicating the area that belongs to him: the air, the earth, the sea (Sîrbu 2004₁, 79-80).

It is more difficult to decipher the composition stag-metaphorical animal-hegoat, but the lots of qualities attributed to these animals - even by creating a metaphorical one speak for themselves about the scene: the stag - a permanent regeneration, the eight-legged and winged animal - the possibility of reaching inaccessible places, and the he-goat - the receptacle for chasing the evil and demons ("scapegoat") (Sîrbu 2004₁, 79-80).

The scenes made on the goblets bottom, where a metaphorical, voracious beast attacks other mammals, illustrates, through the place and iconography, the underworld and is meant to inspire fear.

Petre Alexandrescu (1984, 91-97) and other scholars consider the iconography of the four goblets on three levels, suggesting the three parts of the Cosmos: the air, the earth - water and the subterranean world. But we'd like to draw your attention about the unicorn and antithetical bird being just at the middle level, hence the most eloquent elements of the air, which are breaking the link, consequently this hypothesis is not fully maintained.

"The exophthalmic eyes", with waving eyebrows, meaning the master "sees everything" on the earth and in the "world beyond" as well; these objects have been found in complexes made with a funerary purpose (Sîrbu 2004₁, 104) (*Fig. 1-2, 6-8*). That's why this kind of motive is found only on gold and silver helmets with a rich and significant iconography.

Ideology and iconography

The aristocratic elite becoming more hierarchical, the royal institution led to an ideology and a mythology to legitimate their power and authority, a phenomenon pointed out by a series of prestige objects, through which they showed their noble origin, they exhibited their wealth and bravery. The toreutics representations illustrate the supreme values cultivated by the Thracian aristocratic elite, such as prestige and personal accomplishments, the aspiration towards an over human status, by heroic rites (Sîrbu, Florea 2000₁, 204-206).

Their efforts of building (tumuli, funerary chambers, bas-reliefs and paintings) as well as the sacrifices accompanying the deceased suggest the fact that the grave was considered the ultimate home, but also a power center, an *axis mundi* for the contemporaries and descendants as well (Gergova 1996; Russeva 2000; Kitov 1999, 1-20; Sîrbu 2002₂, 374-393).

These objects being buried by the deceased side in the grave means that the social scale in the "world beyond" was considered similar to that in the earthy life. Thus, and only this way, we could understand why the community was giving up such values, because only a strong religious motivation could lead to these acts, without creating a feeling of frustration among the alive. This way, we could demonstrate that the sacrifice institution at the Getic, Thracian elite was very

strong, if they slaughtered, for the deceased benefit, humans (the favorite wife?) (Sîrbu 1997, 198-199), the favorite animals (horses, hunting dogs) (Sîrbu 1993, 53-54, 101-102; Kitov 1999, 1-20; Sîrbu 2004₂, 735-754) and valuable objects. The wealthy goods and the iconographic scenes, glorifying their traditions were meant to ensure a prominent place and protection in the “other world” too.

One can remark, in the Thracian art, a balance between the anthropomorphic and the zoomorphic representations, the organicity of the faces, the ferocity of the animals is pointed out, while their monstrosity is rejected, the refusal of a morphic union between the vegetal and the animal kingdom, a moderate geometry of the motives (Gramatopol 1982, 33-45).

We haven't, so far, enough proofs to speak about zoolatry, as long as neither the written sources, nor the archaeological discoveries tell us whatsoever about the beasts being the subject of a cult or some deity substitute (Sîrbu, Florea 2000₁, 136-141; Sîrbu 2004₁, 107). What we can state insofar is that animals codify certain qualities of the deities, the heroes or the basilei, they have been represented just to suggest, to point out and to multiply their powers.

In considering the part played by the figurative representations in the Thracian world, it's necessary to take into account the fact that there was an illiterate society, where the image speaks better than the word, and the metaphorical language expresses the best a message issued from a mythical mentality (Sîrbu, Florea 2000₁, 203-204).

We haven't found the name of a local deity, mentioned or not in the written sources, under the toreutics representations, and this is not to be explained by their ignorance in writing, since, whenever they considered the information was worth to be written, they did it so (see, for example, the Rogozen hoard - Marazov 1996, 254-294).

The Thracian art is narrative, as it “tells a story” and, being symbolized, initiatory as well, so it is addressed only to those knowing the codes. Deciphering it is a difficult approach, because not only the written sources are missing, but the images, the decorative compositions are arranged according to the internal logistics of myths, rites, legends etc., let alone the fact that today we cannot restore the initial arrangement of the objects in hoards and graves (Sîrbu 2004₁, 82).

It is beyond any doubt that these treasures have a social determination, because only the basilei could have kilos of gold and tens of kilos of silver, and they were the only persons allowed to appear at ceremonies wearing such objects and figurative representations.

The important part played by the helmets found in the Getic territory is proved by their material, some precious metals and by their exceptional iconography as well (*Fig. 1-2; 6-8*). It is obvious nobody could wear such helmets in the battle, as they couldn't protect the warrior and, the most serious thing, they would have drawn the enemy's attention at the high rank of the bearer. There is still an unanswered question why no character represented in the toreutics or on the pottery wears a helmet; that's why we consider them as being exclusively made on funerary purpose (Sîrbu 2004₁, 55).

Because of the poor written sources and the multi meanings iconographic representations, our interpretations could never be complete or beyond any doubt, but we have to take the chance, if we want to understand the Thracians' mythology and religion. Thus, let's figure out these "golden and silver princes" in ceremonial processions, where the sumptuous equipment and the decorative scenes were meant to impress the audience by the wealth and heroic traditions of their owners, by the magical powers of the representations, ensuring them, this way, authority, prestige and a prominent place in the society (Sirbu, Florea 2000₁, 197-210).

The toreutics is the expression of an ideology and a mythology specific to the Getic aristocracy, rendered on objects made, most of them, by local craftsmen, in a well known region (between the Balkan and the Carpathian Mountains) and during a relatively short span of time, more than a century and a half (middle of the 4th-end of the 3rd centuries B.C.).

Beyond the uncertainties concerning the interpretation of some figurative representations, the archaeological discoveries attest, with no doubt, the existence of a "Thracian patrimony" of objects, images and decorative compositions, that is a distinct "voice" of the Antiquity, created for internal reasons and to serve their own cause.

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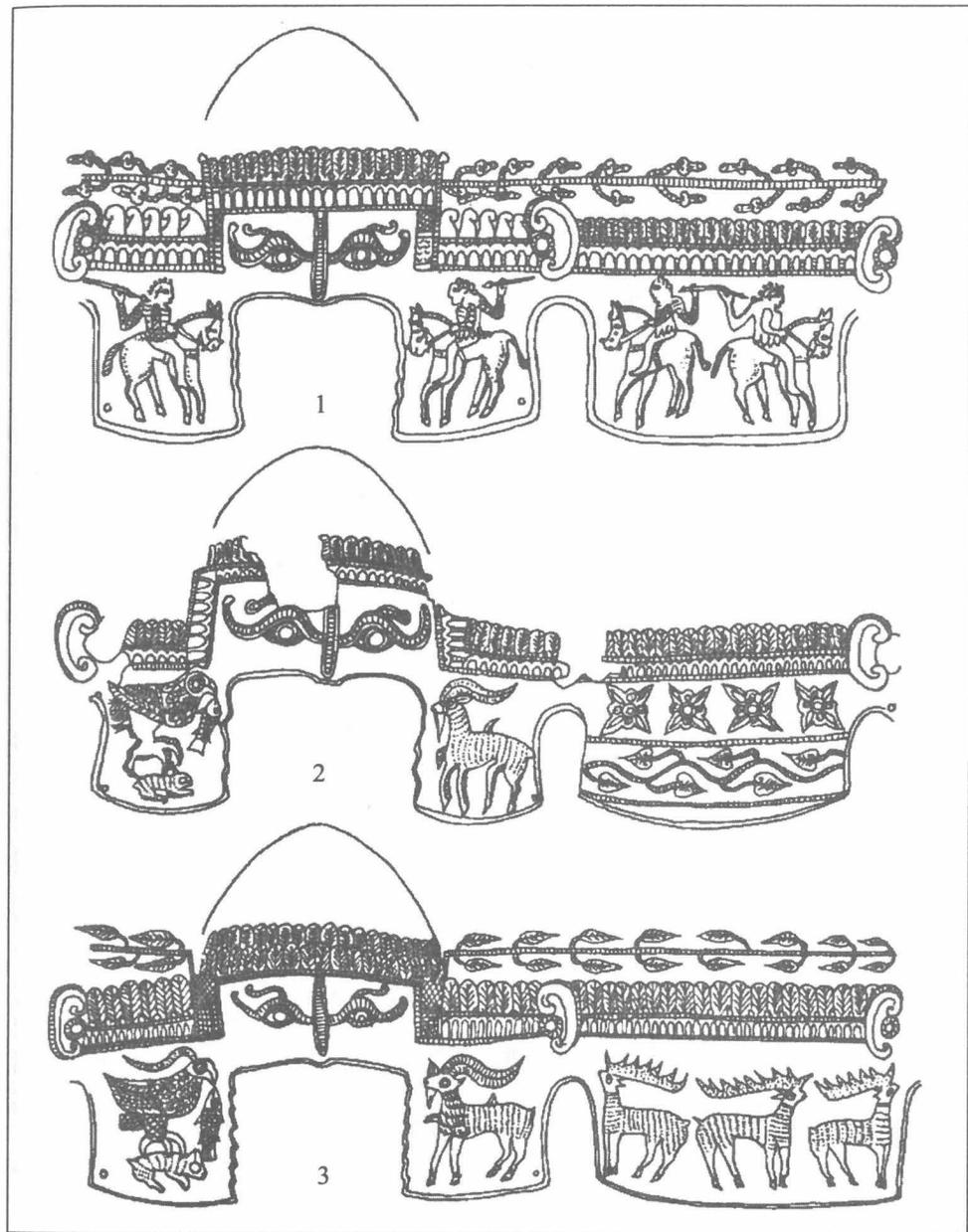


Fig. 1. Helmets. 1. Agighiol; 2. Detroit Institute of Arts; 3. Peretu (after P. Alexandrescu 1983)

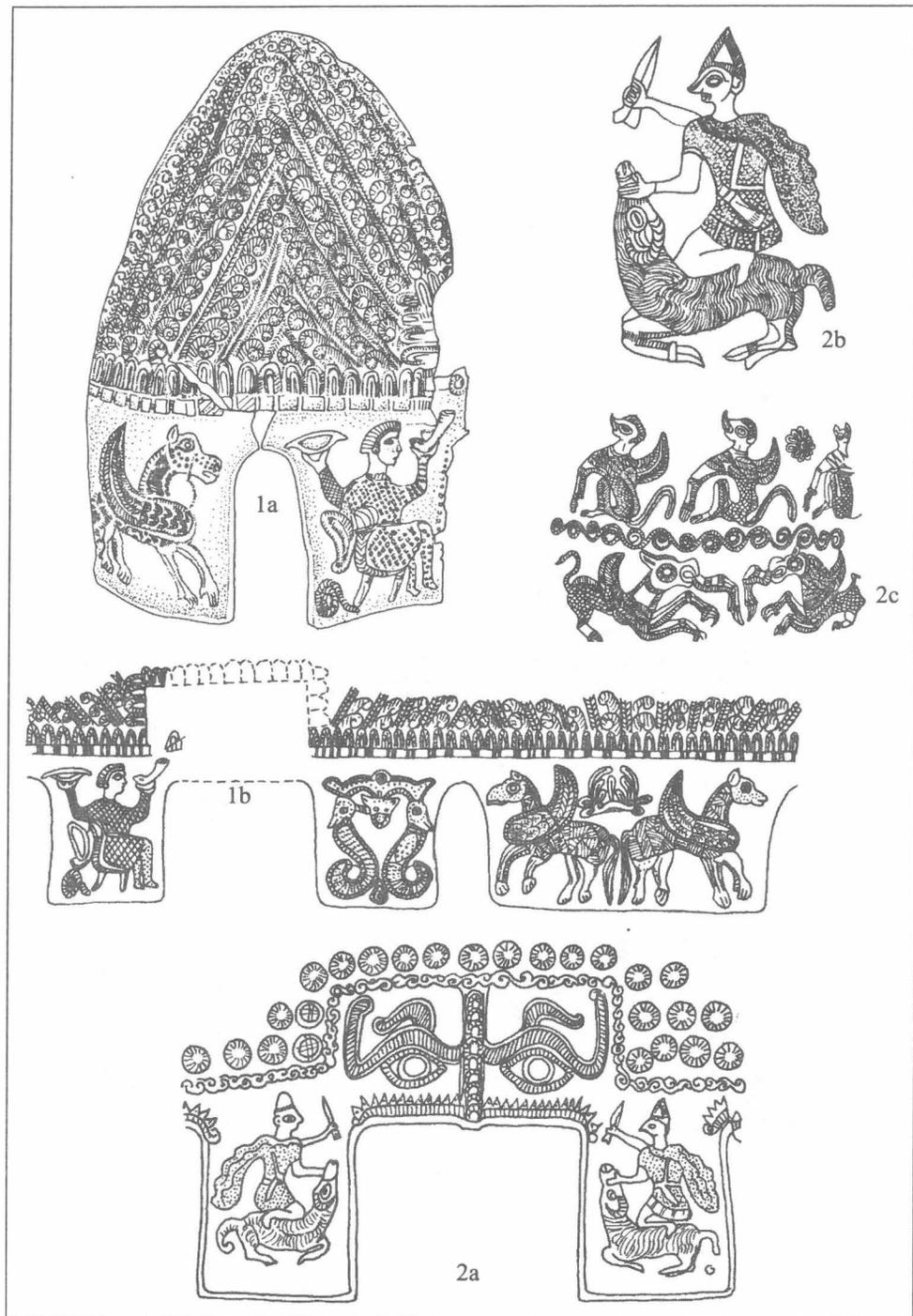
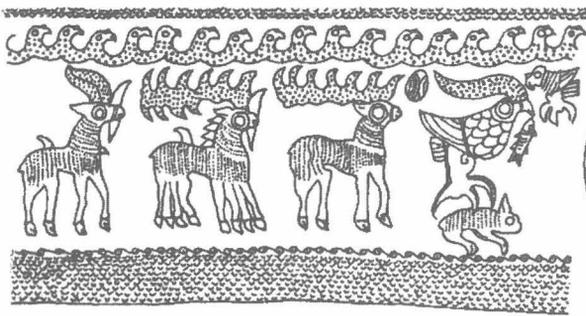
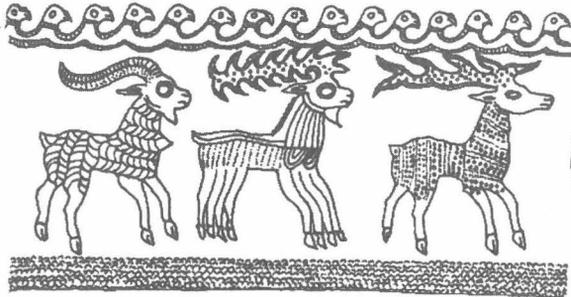


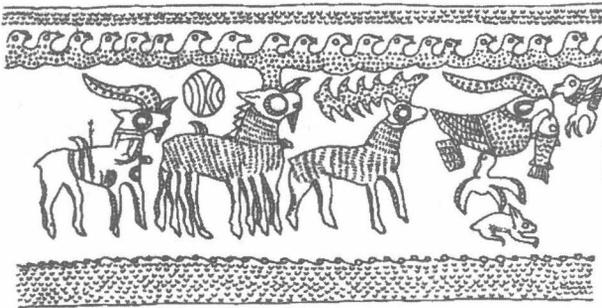
Fig. 2. 1. Băiceni. 2. Poiana-Cotofenești. Helmets (after D. Berciu 1969).



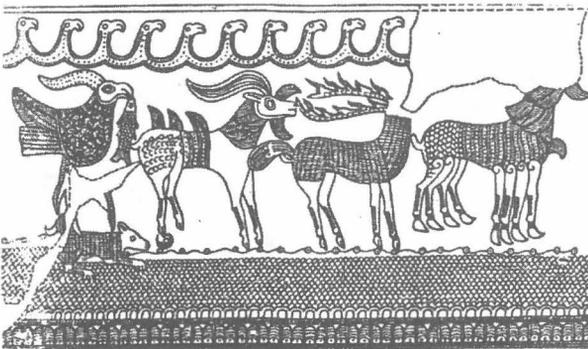
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Fig. 3. Goblets. 1-2. Agighiol; 3. Metropolitan Museum of Arts - New York; 4. Rogozen (after P. Alexandrescu 1984; I. Marazov 1996).

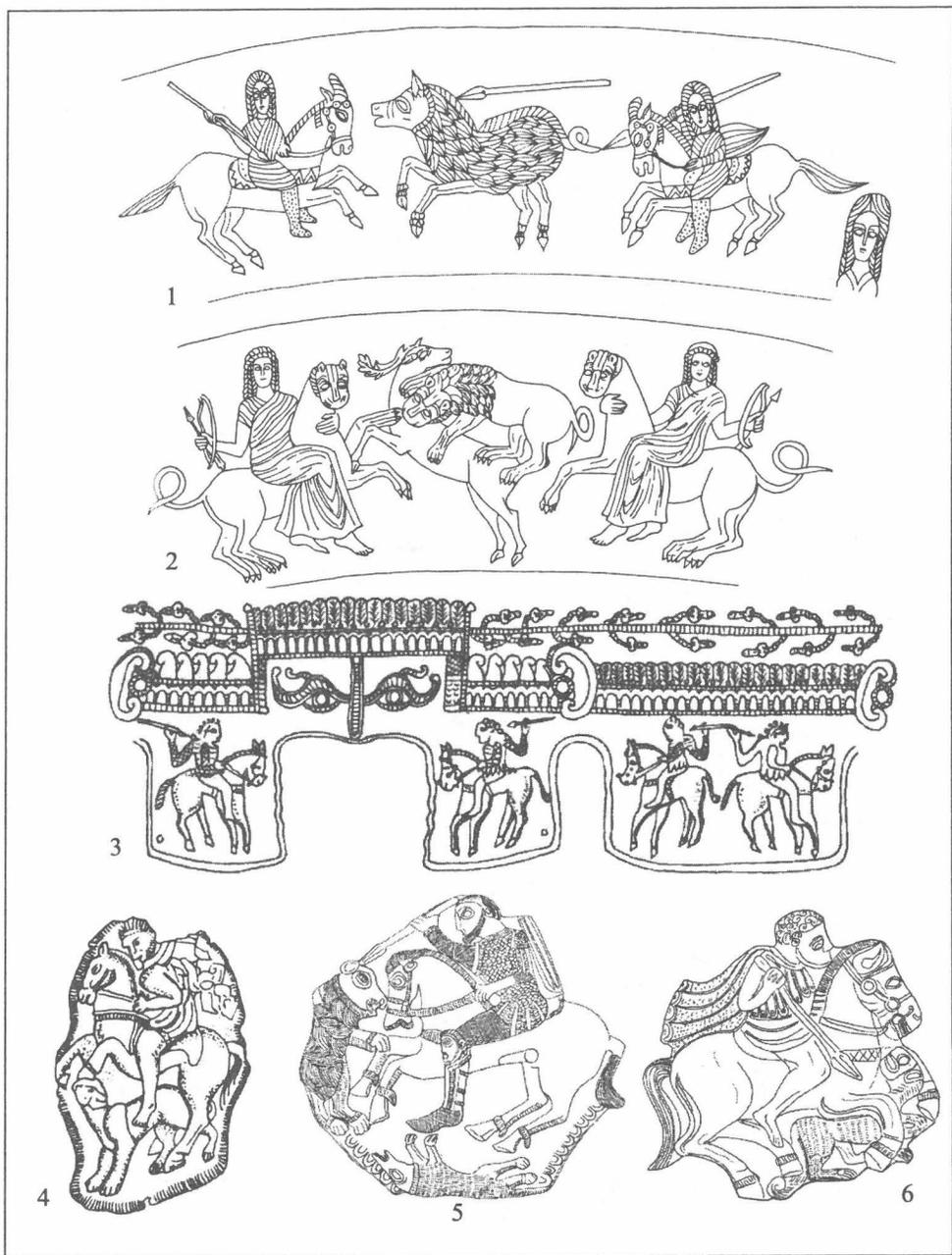


Fig. 4. Hunting scenes. 1-2. Rogozen; 3. Agighiol; 4. Oguz; 5. Letnica; 6. Lukovit (after I. Marazov 1996; P. Alexandrescu 1983; E.E. Fialko 1995; B. Kull 1997).

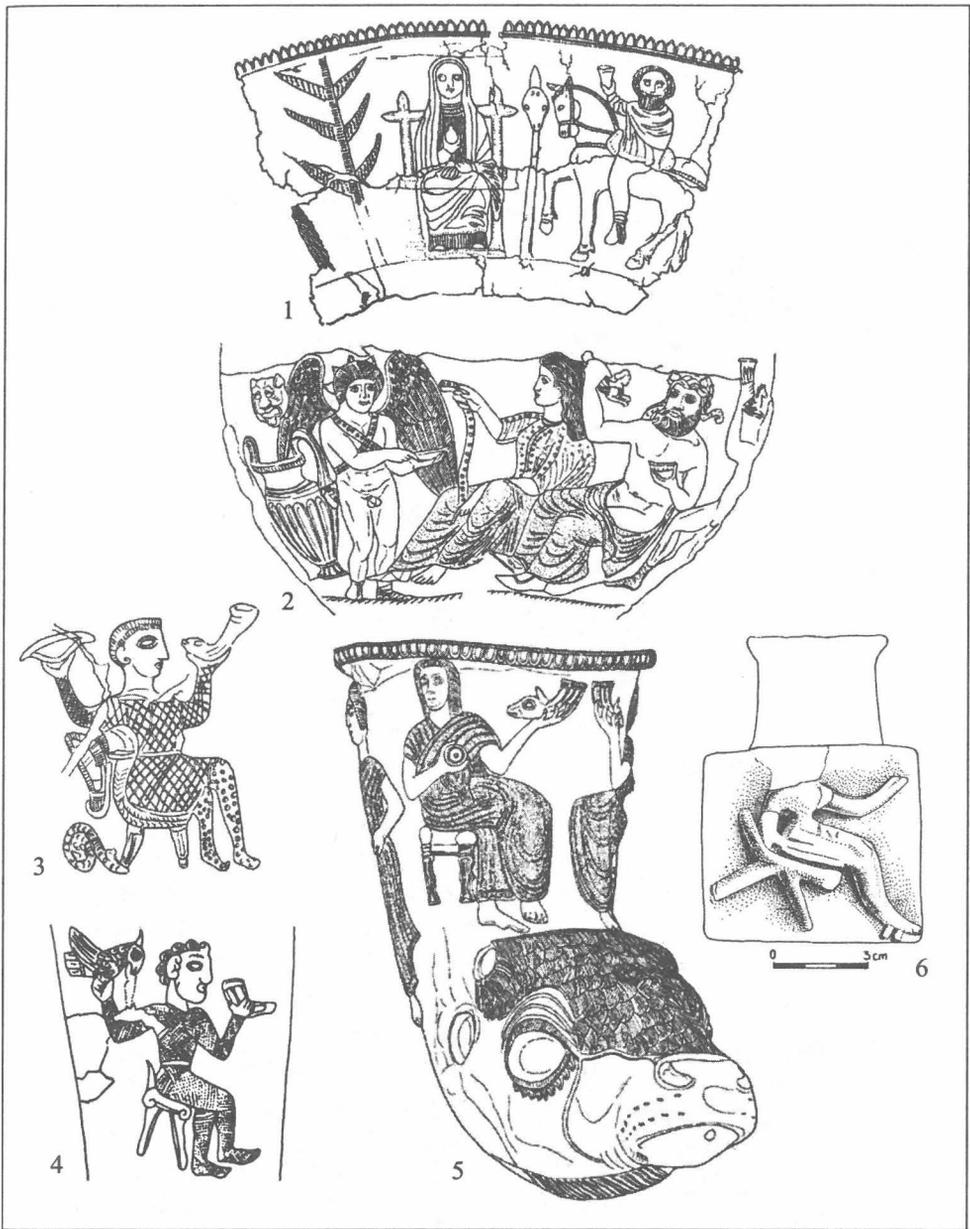


Fig. 5. Female (1-2, 5-6) and male characters (3-4) sitting on the throne.
 1. Merdjani - rhyton; 2. Borovo - jug; 3. Băiceni - helmet; 4. Agighiol - helmet; Poroina - rhyton; 6. Răcățâu - parallelepipedic vase. 1-2, 4-5 silver, 3 gold, 6 pottery (after B. Kull 1997; P. Alexandrescu 1983; S.S. Bessonova 1983).

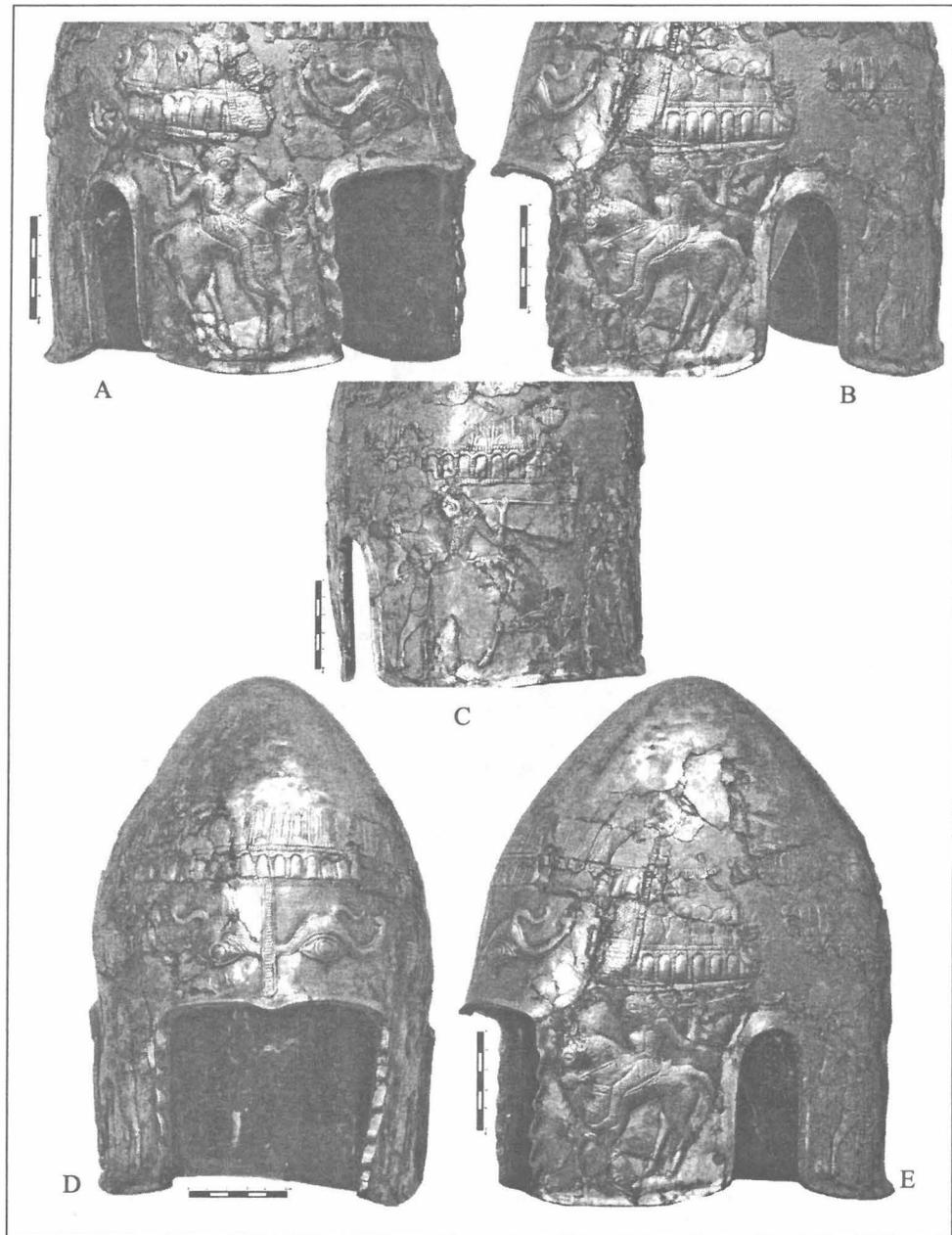


Fig. 6. Agighiol. Helmet.

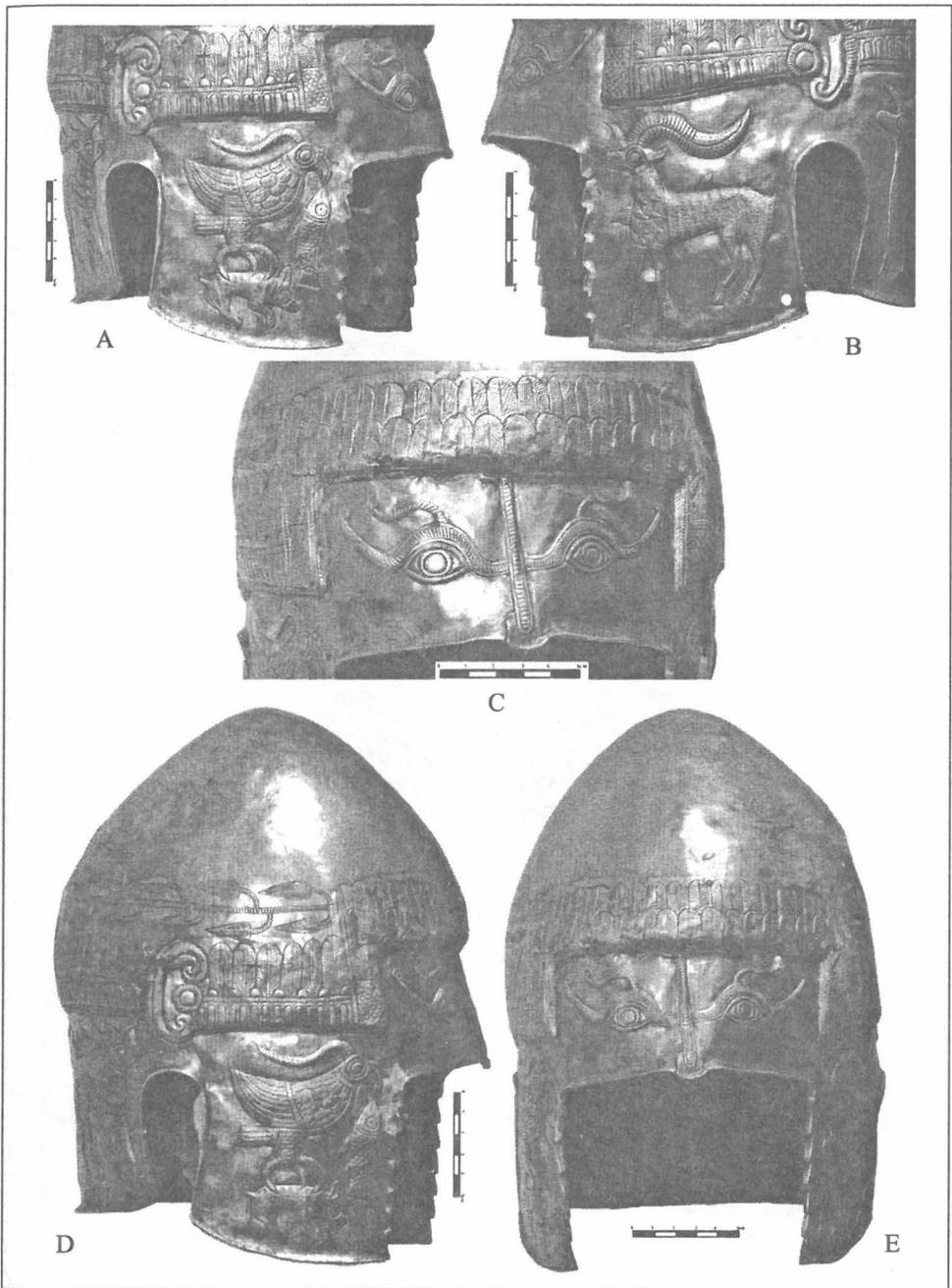


Fig. 7. Peretu. Helmet.

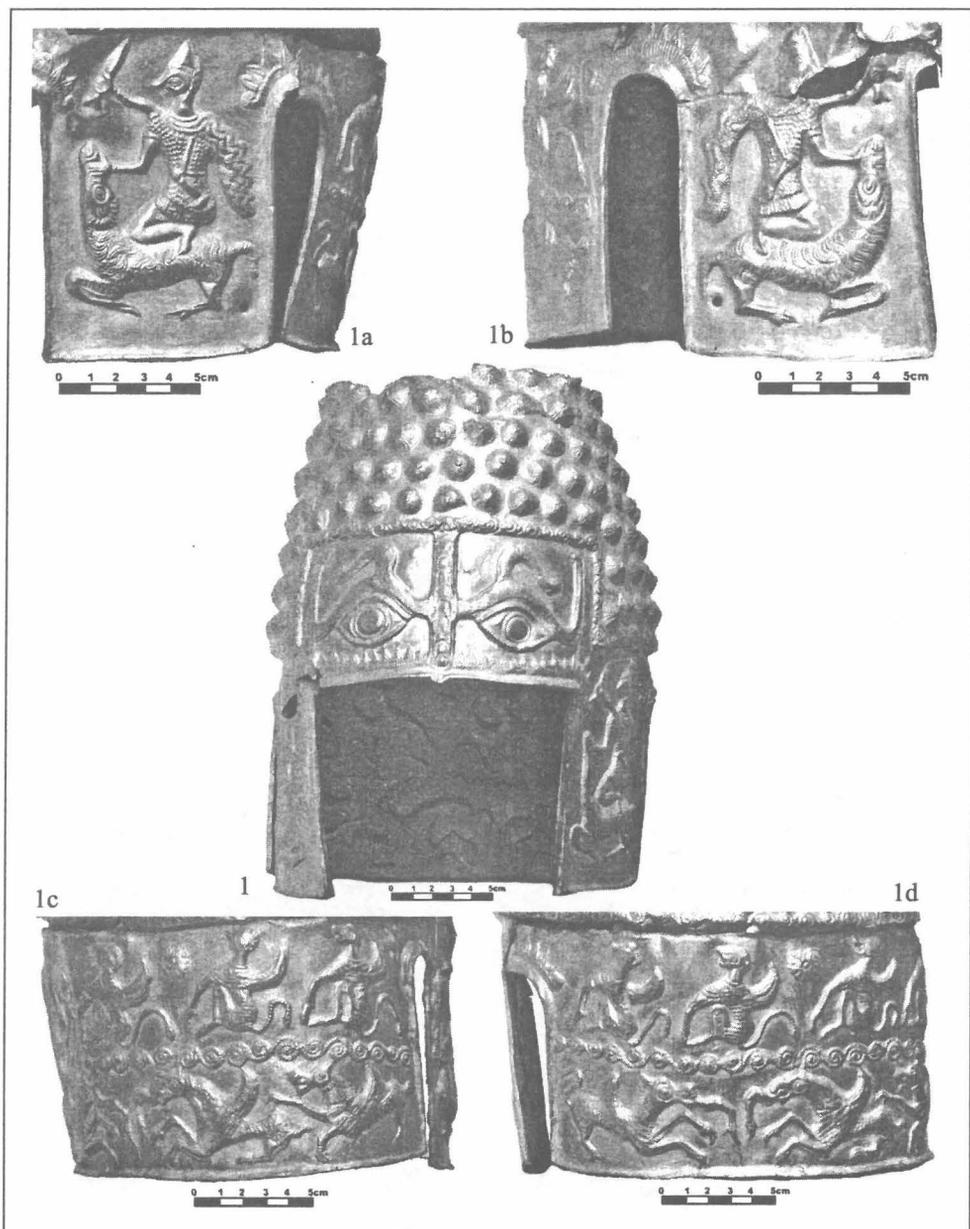


Fig. 8. Poiana-Cotofenești. Helmet.