

A CERAMIC FRAGMENT WITH INCISED DECORATION FOUND AT DUMBRĂVENI (SUCEAVA). A SOLAR OR AN EARLY-CHRISTIAN SYMBOL?¹

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Rezumat: În această notă se prezintă un fragment ceramic cu decor incizat găsit la Dumbrăveni (jud. Suceava), într-o așezare din sec. al IV-lea (fig. 1) și se discută semnificația simbolului marcat pe vas înainte de ardere. Autorul s-a străduit să adune informațiile privind astfel de descoperiri din spațiul carpato-dunărean. După cum se grupează acestea, din punct de vedere temporal (în sec. IV și VI-VII) și corologic (numai în spațiul extracarpatic), ele nu pot fi interpretate ca simboluri paleocreștine, ci ca svastici, însemne ale credințelor solare, așa cum sunt și alte atestări în diferite arii culturale din nordul sau estul Europei.

The present note resumes another presentation of a small archaeological discovery included some time ago in the specialty literature. It is about a decorated ceramic fragment with a incised mark, considered an Early-Christian symbol. The first recording of this archaeological piece belongs to Dan Gh. Teodor², an eminent teacher in Iași; later, his recordings were taken over by other research workers³.

During the investigation process, that took place four decades ago, the signer of this research had the opportunity to study and draw the ceramic fragment, gathering information regarding the conditions of its discovery. The fragment was kept in the school's archaeological collection from Dumbrăveni, made by Paul Șadurschi, teacher and former director of the school⁴.

The piece was found at the surface of a vast settlement belonging to the *Sântana de Mureș-Cerneșov* culture, situated on the medium platform from Dumbrăveni. This area is very rich in priceless vestiges included in the same culture. North to this area, but on the same medium platform, at Siminicea, there is another settlement where pottery kilns were discovered⁵. Over the Siret River, at Huțani (Botoșani), research workers made the same discoveries⁶.

The ceramic fragment is part of a small sized vessel, made with a pottery wheel, from a dark-grey paste with almost no impurities. It has a rounded, flaring border, and a very visible bottom hull (fig. 1). Between the bottom hull and the border there is a incised decorative pattern, formed by a winding line and other two straight oblique short lines. Between the lines, there is a symbol, a mark that drew attention upon this artifact. Judging by the size of this artifact, there is a possibility that the mark was repeated three or four times on the vessel's outer surface. Mentioning that the decorative pattern and the symbol were incised before the pot was burnt; it seems that the potter had a clear intention to mark the vessel in this way. It is, however, rather uncertain what the potter wanted to manifest or express. What was his intention? To engrave a *crux gammata* or a *swastika*?

It is a well-known fact that, dating back to the 3rd century (but under no circumstances sooner⁷), *crux gammata* is discovered on various kinds of Early-Christian monuments or memorials. The noted research worker from Cluj N. Gudea states that the symbols representing different types of crosses carved on vessels could be Early-Christian symbols, and not just pottery marks or ownership marks⁸. Moreover, it is considered that these crosses made after burning suggest the “christening” or “purification” of the pot⁹. Contextually, having in mind the documentary attestation of several Christian congregations in the external-Carpathian areas, the possibility that the ceramic fragment from Dumbrăveni illustrates the mark of a *crux gammata* can be accepted.

It is also certain that the *swastika* is a symbol of the solar culture (religion) or of the fire culture (in Egyptian culture representing the revival) and it was found on different objects dating from the Aeneolithic, within the areas in Eurasia and Ancient Orient. It persists in time, even up to the Romanian Middle Ages, assumed to various ethno-linguistic origin peoples such as Indo-Europeans and Semites. In the Dacian area, the symbol is found on artifacts belonging to the Poieniști-Lukasevka pottery culture (2nd and 1st centuries B.C.)¹⁰.

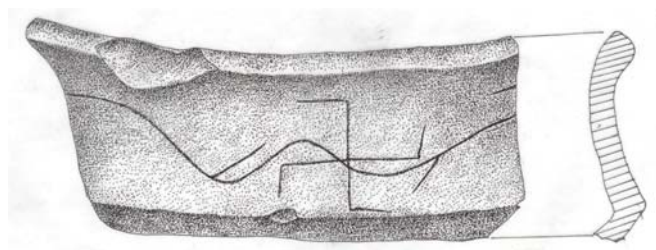


Fig. 1 Dumbrăveni. Ceramic fragment with incised decoration

Which would be the verisimilar interpretation between these two approaches? The attestations' evaluation referring to symbols dating back to the first half of the 1st millennium A.D. offered two establishments: one was regarding their vast dispersion over the Romanian areas and another concerning the chronology of the discoveries. Speaking about the chronology, the findings are grouped into two different temporal sequences: the 4th century (even the beginning of the 5th) and the 6th and 7th century. Subsequent to these periods, the symbol is no longer present or it is found in some other special situations.

The 4th century discoveries' index (aiming to be a complete catalogue), made by us, which also includes the ceramic fragment that was previously described, contains six pieces. One of them (a jar used as funerary urn¹¹) was found at the necropolis in Dănceni (Moldavian Republic). The other five fragments belong to the Sântana de Mureș-Cerneahov culture (one found at Tăcuta¹² – Vaslui county– and another at Dumbrăveni and Cernaucă¹³ – Ukraine) or to the Carpathian Tumulus (the other two hand-made pieces, discovered in the 6th dwelling at Hliboca, Ukraine)¹⁴. All these artifacts were found in the area between the Carpathian Mountains and the

Nistru river. Referring to the 6th and 7th century discoveries, they are more various and cover a wider area, all being found within settlements. Thus, three ceramic artifacts were found in Muntenia, in three different locations¹⁵ and the other five found in Basarabia¹⁶. Moreover, a pendant was discovered inside the Rașkov III¹⁷ settlement and a vessel inside the Horecea II settlement¹⁸, both located near Czernowitz, Ukraine. Therefore, there are 18 artifacts found in ten locations, dating back to the 6th and 7th century. Their significance depends upon the temporal sequences or their location. It seems very interesting the fact that within the Dacia province there is no record of these kind of discoveries¹⁹, the territory being Romanized and the vestiges being doubtless²⁰. In this case, the hesitation regarding the Early-Christian interpretation of the symbol is rather justified. Also, both of the interpretations can be taken into account (the Rașkov III and the Tăcuta artifacts being marked with a cross and a *swastika*), keeping in mind the other discoveries with an unquestionable Christian value. Therefore, the only thing that can be stated is that history is unique while its interpretations are numerous.

The *swastika* is certified through northern-area discoveries, within the German Przeworsk and Wielbark²¹ cultures, near the Dniester River, up to the Northern Caucasian²² necropolis, and locations where the Christian culture could not have spread so early. This *swastika* symbol marked on the 18 fragments discovered within our area (4th-7th centuries) should be seen most likely as a solar symbol.

It is certain that in Muntenia and Moldavia lived some Christians (Goths and other natives), but their archaeological traces are poor. The future should be able to reconstruct the Christian history, depending on these archaeological traces. The research workers' skepticism is quite real, contrasting with others' enthusiasm, especially of the clerics²³.

¹ Work presented at the VIII-th edition of the *Alma Mater Sucevensis* session, March 2008.

² Dan Gh. Teodor. *Cele mai vechi urme creștine din Moldova*, în "Mitropolia Moldovei și Sucevei", L, 7-8, 1974, p. 563; idem. *Creștinismul la est de Carpați de la origini pana în secolul al XIV-lea*, Iași, 1991, p.158.

³ Al. Madgearu, *Rolul creștinismului în formarea poporului român*, București, 2001, p. 66 and 119 – there are quoted the documents that reproduced the D. Gh. Teodor's information.

⁴ I express my gratitude towards Paul Șadurschi, who offered me the following information. Unfortunately, I do not know what happened to the piece afterwards.

⁵ The author's field work

⁶ Mariana Marcu, Napoleon Ungureanu, *Cercetările arheologice de la Huțani (județul Botoșani)*, în "Hierasus", VII-VIII, 1989, p. 223-233.

⁷ Fr. Tristan, *Primele imagini creștine - De la simbol la icoană, sec. II-VI*, București, 2002, p. 441-443, 496.

⁸ N. Gudea, *Semne informă de cruce pe vase romane de la Porolissum. Despre semnele în formă de cruce incizate sau zgâriate pe obiecte de uz comun în epoca preconstantiniană*, în "Acta MP", XVIII, 1994, p. 95-110.

⁹ N. Gudea, I. Ghiurco, *Din istoria creștinismului la români. Mărturii arheologice*, Oradea, 1988, p. 45-46; N. Zugravu. *Geneza creștinismului popular al românilor*, București, 1977, p. 179-180.

- ¹⁰ M. Babeș, V. Mihăilescu-Bîrliaba, *Germanische latènezeitliche "Feuerböcke" aus der Moldau*, în "Ber. RGK", 51-52., 1970-1971, p. 176-196. We can't omit the mark on a 2nd-3rd century wheel-made dacian cup, from the Poiana-Dulcești site. (Gh. Bichir, *Cultura carpică*, București, 1973, p. 89, pl. CLI/3). It shows a *swastika*, with the corrugated arms; its isolated appearance can't be explained.
- ¹¹ A. I. Rafalovic, *Dančeny. Mogil'nik černjahovskoi kul'tury III-IVvv. n.e.*, Chișinău, 1986, p. 60, pl. 29/1.
- ¹² I. Ioniță, *Sondajul arheologic de la Tăcuta (județul Vaslui)*, în "ArhMold.", XX, 1997, p. 99-104, fig. 10.
- ¹³ Pihovarov, the one who discovered it considers the mark as an Early-Christian one, while Mihajlina interprets it as a solar symbol (Mihajlina, *Simbolistica de cult pe obiecte ceramice din cultura Luka-Rajkovetskaja*, în "Interacademica", II-III, 2001, p. 131) v. și M. Andronic, *Teritoriul nord-est carpatic în a doua jumătate a primului mileniu creștin*, Suceava, 2005, p. 193-194.
- ¹⁴ L.V. Vakulenco, *Pam'jatki pidgir'ja Ukrain'skich Karpat peršehoj poloviny I tys*, Kiev, 1977, p.25, pl. IX/6-7. The author considered them as solar signs
- ¹⁵ București - Cățelul Nou (V. Leahu, *Raport asupra săpăturilor arheologice efectuate în 1960 la Cățelul Nou*, în "Cercetări arheologice în București", I, București, 1963, p. 41); București - str. Soldat Ghivan (S. Dolinescu-Ferche, M. Constantiniu, *Un etablissement du VI-e siècle à Bucarest (Decouverte de la rue Soldat Ghivan)*, în "Dacia" N.S., XXV, 1981, p. 306, fig. 9/6); Dulceanca (S. Dolinescu-Ferche, *Așezări din secolele III și VI e.n. în sud-vestul Munteniei. Cercetările de la Dulceanca*, București, 1974, p. 65, fig. 52/2).
- ¹⁶ Alcedar-Odaia (Igor Corman, *Contribuții la istoria spațiului pruto-nistrian în epoca evului mediu timpuriu (sec. V- VII d. Chr.)*, Chișinău, 1998, p. 159, fig. 63/2); Dânceni (IA Rafalovic, N. N. Goltzeva, *Ranneslavjanskoe poselenie V-VIIvv. Danceny I*, în "Arheologiceskie Issledovanij v Moldavii (1974-1979 gg)", Chișinău, 1981, p. 131, fig. 4/8 și 10; 5/5); Hansca (I. A. Rafalovic, *Slavijane VI-IX vv. v Moldavii*, Chișinău, 1972, 205-206); Hucea (*Ibidem*, p. 204-205, fig. 36); Seliște (*Ibidem*, p. 205, fig. 32/13).
- ¹⁷ Igor Corman, *op. cit.*, p.147, fig. 54/4, near the location being discovered a little cross.
- ¹⁸ Mihajlina, *op. cit.*, p. 131, fig. 3/1; there is a mention about a 6th - 7th century site, on the left side of Dniester, at Luka-Kavetčinskaia, where has been discovered a similar ceramic fragment, with a *swastika* and corrugated arms (L.V. Vakulenco, O. M. Prihodniuk, *Problema preemstvennosti Cernia hovskuh u rannesrednevekovih. Drenosti v svete novih issledovanii na Srednem Dnestre*, în "Slovenskâ Archeologia", XXXIII. 1, 1985, p. 90, pl. 22/12).
- ¹⁹ As an exception, only at Bratei (E. Zaharia, *La station no. 2 de Bratei, d&p. de Sibiu (VI-VIII-e siècles)*, în "Dacia", N.S., 38-39, 1994-1995, p. 323, fig. 13/7). The cup with *swastika* mark was dated to the 8th century, as an isolated appearance; it can't be considered an Early-Christian piece.
- ²⁰ N. Gudea. I. Ghiurco, *Din istoria creștinismului la români. Mărturii arheologice*. Oradea, 1988, *passim*.
- ²¹ I. Ioniță, *op. cit.*, p. 103, where crucial findings are mentioned. The pieces from Dânceni, Dumbrăveni and Tăcuta can be connected with the old Germanic beliefs, but *swastika* mark appears also in another culture areas (see the next note)
- ²² Igor Corman, *op. cit.*, p. 60. (*Ibidem*, p. 159-161). The author situates them among the eastern-influence discoveries, such as the Alan one.
- ²³ N. Zugravu, *op. cit.*, p. 325-356.