

THE STORY OF A SARMATIAN GRAVE RESCUED BY FLORIN MEDELEȚ AT GELU (VARIAȘ COMM., TIMIȘ COUNTY)

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Abstract: In the spring of 1972, the late archaeologist Florin Medeleteș rescued a funerary structure belonging to the Sarmatian period. Following the reorganisation of the deposit that bears the name of the last great encyclopaedist of Banat, the inventory of this grave caught our attention. The anthropological analysis has shown that the deceased was a female that passed away in her 30's, and suffered from a mild foot condition. The grave inventory dates this discovery around the end of the 3rd century AD and the first half of the following one. The assemblage of artefacts is characteristic for this period in the Banat region. The time span we refer to is characterized by a cultural mixture brought on by new waves of population coming from the Black Sea region and their interactions with the Roman Empire.

Keywords: Sarmatian grave, Roman period, *Barbaricum*, funerary archaeology, rescue excavations, Florin Medeleteș.

It is not uncommon for museum deposits to be stacked with unpublished material recovered during earlier excavations. The analysis of these finds is often difficult due to the lack of details concerning the context of discovery. Nevertheless, their publication is necessary, contributing to the better understanding of certain cultural aspects. Such is the case of a Sarmatian period grave, discovered by Florin Medeleteș in the village of Gelu. The grave was unearthed by chance in 1972, but was never published until now.

1972. THE DISCOVERY

Since we came across the inventory of the grave, we have tried to recreate the story of the discovery using F. Medeleteș's personal notes. The grave was found on March 28th, 1972, south of the Gelu village. The discovery was made when an excavator was trying to extract clay for the construction of a confectionery store in the village. The history teacher, Marius I. Moga (son of the former Banat Museum director, Marius Moga) reported the discovery to the archaeologists from the Banat

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Museum. When F. Medeleț arrived at the site, the grave was partially destroyed. Even so, he was able to recover most of the inventory and recreated parts of the funerary ritual. We found out from his personal notes that the grave had an East-West orientation and that only the upper body was preserved. The total length of the preserved body was 70 cm from the head to the pelvis. Several rows of beads, bronze rings and a bronze brooch were found in the chest region. The dossier of the discovery also contained a sketch map (fig. 3/3), photos of the grave (fig. 2) as well as photos of two bronze box-type brooches (fig. 3/1–2). It also contained references to an article that presented items similar to the ones from Gelu. The photos of the brooches were dated 1973 and were marked with the word Gelu on the back (fig. 3/1b, 2b).

2015. THE REDISCOVERY

The box which contained the inventory of the grave was found while reorganizing the former office of F. Medeleț, which, after the passing away of the archaeologist, became known as the “Medeleț Deposit”. The grave-goods and fragments of human bones found here are:

- 1) Human bone fragments¹. It was mentioned in the personal notes of the discoverer that, at the time of his arrival, the lower part of the skeleton had been already removed. However, the anthropological analysis showed that the right femoral diaphysis, three tarsal bones and fragments of metatarsals and phalanges were also recovered². This could be an argument that some of the finds were recovered from the spoils. Traces of bronze corrosion were found on a vertebra and on the mastoid part of the temporal bone. These traces indicate that some adornments were worn on the chest (as it can be seen in the pictures and in Medeleț’s description) and that the deceased had at least one earring³. The remains belonged to a female whose death occurred between the age of 30 and 40⁴. She suffered from a mild foot condition that was caused by an anatomical variation of the navicular bone⁵.
- 2) Bronze ring with a sharp end while the other is wrapped on the first one, Ø = 2 cm, thickness of the wire = 0.20 cm (fig. 6/1a, 2a).
- 3) Bronze ring with a bulge created by corrosion at one end while the other one is shaped as a coiled loop, Ø = 2 cm; thickness of the wire = 0.21 cm (fig. 6/1b, 2b).

¹ For the detailed anthropological analysis, see Gârleanu 2015.

² Gârleanu 2015, p. 796.

³ Gârleanu 2015, p. 796.

⁴ Gârleanu 2015, p. 797–798.

⁵ Gârleanu 2015, p. 798–799.

- 4) Simple bronze ring without a closing system, $\varnothing = 2.5$ cm, thickness of the wire = 0.25 cm (fig. 6/1d, 2d).
- 5) Fragmentary bronze ring, with one sharp end (fig. 6/1c, 2c).
- 6) Fragment from a semi-circular necklace made from twisted bronze wire with a bulge created by the corrosion of one of the loops. \varnothing of the wire = 0.35 cm (fig. 8/1).
- 7) Fragmentary bronze brooch of the *Dösenformigefibeln/Kapselfibeln/Scheibenfibeln* type with a maximum \varnothing of 5.5 cm (fig. 4/1–5). The surface of the brooch was probably decorated with globular glass beads as revealed by one such fragment found among the rest of the inventory (fig. 4/6–7).
- 8) Fragmentary bronze brooch of the same type as no. 7. This brooch is slightly smaller in diameter than the previous one, having only 4 cm (fig. 5/1–2).
- 9) Two springs, made of bronze wire, belonging to the two brooches. The first one has a nine coils spring (fig. 5/3) while the second one has 11 coils (fig. 5/4).
- 10) A snail shell of the *Cypraea pantherina*⁶ type, length = 7.5 cm, maximum width = 3.7 cm, maximum height = 4.2 cm (fig. 7/1a–b).
- 11) An iron fragment, circular in profile, strongly corroded.
- 12) 96 beads made from amber, carnelian, chalk, glass, bone and clay (see details in Table 1) (fig. 7/2).
- 13) A wheel-made cup, of bi-conical shape and one handle. The colour of the fabric is light grey and contained sand and small shard fragments as temper. One side of the cup has a dark spot. The vessel has a rim diameter of 5.5 cm, a base diameter of 4 cm and a maximum diameter of 8 cm. The cup is 10 cm tall (fig. 8/2).

ANALYSIS OF THE GRAVE

Several aspects of the funerary ritual can be reconstructed using Medeleteț's documentation. Firstly, he mentioned that the skeleton had an East-West orientation. Secondly, we can note from the pictures that the body was laid in a supine position. The right hand was positioned near the body, while the left one, missing in the pictures, was probably laid in the same way. Such funerary rituals are commonly associated with circular earrings with loop-and-hook fastening, many beads and good fabric wares, being dated between the end of the 3rd century and the first half of the 4th century AD⁷.

⁶ The species determination was made by the authors and was based on its slender shape and longer anterior side (see Kovács 2008, p. 60–61, fig. 44).

⁷ Grumeza 2014b, p. 47.

Correlating the items found in the deposit with the grave description and the rest of the documentation available, we immediately noticed some contradictions. F. Medeleteș mentioned only one brooch in the grave. This is also visible in the grave photos. Yet the documentation of the grave contains pictures of two box type brooches, both photos being tagged with the name “Gelu 1973”. We were able to identify that the brooch with filigree decoration is a silver fibula discovered at Biled (Timiș County) (fig. 3/2a) and kept in the deposits of the Banat Museum. The other brooch photographed represents the piece that was found in the grave (fig. 3/1a). Another disparity with the information provided by Medeleteș comes from the fact that in the box, where the grave inventory was kept, two bronze brooch springs (fig. 5/3–4) were found, as well as the bottom plaque of another box type fibula (fig. 5/1–2). This brooch was smaller in diameter than the one that was recorded as being found in the grave. It could be possible that the fragments from the second brooch were recovered from the soil that had been already excavated, along with some bones and other items. It may be due to these conditions of recovery that these finds were not properly documented. Box type brooches are characteristic for the late 2nd century – early 5th century AD⁸. They are made either of bronze or of silver. Sometimes, these fibulae were decorated with a glass intaglio that was either plain or had decorations depicting human masks⁹. S. Petković considers them as being typical for the southern Banat region¹⁰. Similar brooches were found at Vršac – *Dvorište Eparhie Banata* graves 9, 10 and 16¹¹, Klárafalva – *B* grave 40¹² and Hunedoara Timișană¹³. These artefacts / graves are dated in the second half the 3rd century and first half of the 4th century. In all of these cases, the deceased was considered to be a female and the grave inventory contained two brooches. It is therefore not unusual for graves with plated brooches, dated in this period to contain more than one such dress accessory. Considering the conditions of discovery and the fragmentary and poor preservation of the second brooch from the grave found at Gelu, we could assume that F. Medeleteș might have not noticed the second fibula placed in the grave.

Bronze rings are frequently found in grave assemblages dated to the 3rd and 4th century. They have different roles, being used as earrings, pendant hangers or for decorating the body. Two of the rings found in the grave from Gelu have some similarities with earrings type III in L. Grumeza’s typology¹⁴. Similar rings were also found at Tiszadob-Sziget, grave 22¹⁵, Hunedoara Timișană, grave 3¹⁶,

⁸ Grumeza 2014a, p. 77.

⁹ Grumeza 2014a, p. 77.

¹⁰ Petković 2010, p. 169.

¹¹ Barački 1961, p. 120, T. XII/1–17, T. XIII/1–13, T. VIII/1–26.

¹² Párducz 1950, p. 143–144, T. LIII; LIV; LV/2, 4–7.

¹³ Grumeza 2014b, p. 200, pl. 39.

¹⁴ Grumeza 2014b, p. 55, fig. 11.

¹⁵ Istvánovits 1993, p. 105, Abb.11.

¹⁶ Grumeza 2014b, p. 200, pl. 39.

Giarmata – *Site 10*, grave 23¹⁷, Kiszombor – *B*, grave 73¹⁸ or Pecica – *Site 4R*, graves 1 and 2¹⁹. They are generally dated between the 2nd and the 4th century. Out of the four rings found at Gelu, two were placed on the body as seen in the photo taken by F. Medeleț. Traces of bronze corrosion were also found on one of the vertebrae²⁰. One ring was probably used as a hanger for the *Cypraea* shell pendant, while another one was likely to have been used as an earring as shown by the marks of copper corrosion found on the skull of the deceased²¹.

The bronze twisted semi-circular wire necklace is quite common in the Sarmatian environment. Its presence in funerary contexts from the Carpathian Basin can be traced from the 2nd century until the 5th century²². Similar discoveries were recorded at Arad – *Barieră*, CX 08²³, Kiszombor – *B*, grave 112²⁴ or Sânpetru German – *Fântâna vacilor*, grave 2²⁵.

Another interesting item found in the grave from Gelu is the *Cypraea pantherina* shell pendant. This species of gasteropod is originating from the Red Sea²⁶. These pendants are considered markers of migration from north Pontic areas, appear in the mid and late Sarmatian period and are placed in graves belonging to women²⁷. In the Banat region, they appear more frequently in the late Sarmatian period from the end of the 3rd century and the beginning of the 4th century²⁸. This is the case with the discoveries from Kiszombor – *B*, grave 112²⁹, Klárafalva – *B*, grave 54³⁰, Lovrin grave 1³¹, Vršac – *Dvorište Eparhie Banata*, graves 9, 11, 16³².

The grave from Gelu also contained at least 64 beads, made of different materials and having various shapes (Table 1). Beads are frequently found in Sarmatian graves. They were sewn on different clothing items, representing a trend spread throughout the entire Sarmatian period. However, their fashion peaks during the Marcomannic wars³³. Medeleț mentioned in his personal notes that the beads were found in the chest area of the skeleton. This is also visible on one of the field

¹⁷ Grumeza 2014b, pl. 34/1–5.

¹⁸ Párducz 1950, p. 139–140; T. XXXIV/28, XXXVI/1–7, XXXVII/1–10.

¹⁹ Kapcsos 2014, pl. 4, 7.

²⁰ Gârleanu 2015, p. 796.

²¹ Gârleanu 2015, p. 795.

²² Grumeza 2014b, p. 60.

²³ Grumeza, Ursuțiu, Copos 2013, p. 64, pl. XV/2.

²⁴ Párducz 1950, p. 142, T. XLV/3–7, 12; XLVI/2–24; XLVII/1–6.

²⁵ Grumeza 2014b, p. 255, pl. 84/4.

²⁶ Kovács, Vaday 1999, p. 248.

²⁷ Kovács, Vaday 1999, p. 248.

²⁸ Kovács, Vaday 1999, p. 272–273.

²⁹ Párducz 1950, p. 142, T. XLV/3–7, 12; XLVI/2–24; XLVII/1–6.

³⁰ Párducz 1950, p. 144, T. LVI/1–17.

³¹ Párducz 1950, p. 149, T. LXIX.

³² Barački 1961, p. 120, T. XII/1–17, T. XIII/1–13, T. IX/1.

³³ Grumeza 2014b, p. 93–94.

photos (fig. 2/2). Almost half of the beads were made of amber. This type of beads appeared in the Carpathian Basin from the 2nd until the 5th century. However, in the Banat region they are only encountered in the late period (last third of the 3rd century – early 4th century)³⁴. They are usually found in small numbers so the 31 (plus other small fragments) amber beads found at Gelu stand out of the ordinary. A similar case was recorded in grave 26 from Giarmata – *Site 10*, were 42 amber beads decorated a head dress³⁵. The deceased was considered to be of high social status³⁶. Amber beads are thought to be proof of commercial contacts between the Sarmatians and the northern areas³⁷.

Wheel-made cups are frequently present in Sarmatian graves starting with the 2nd century until the 5th century. Similar cups with the one found at Gelu were also unearthed at Banatski Despotovac – Kollinger kerte, graves 2, 4 and 6³⁸ and are dated at the end of the 3rd century and the beginning of the next one.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the presence of the Iazyges in the Banat region has never been denied, their role and time of arrival has always been up for debate³⁹. Recently published, the grave from Sânnicolau Mare – *Seliște* brings into discussion the presence of a Sarmatian population in the Banat region in the aftermath of the Roman-Dacian wars⁴⁰. At this point the ethnic and political configuration of the Banat plain region on the eve and aftermath of Trajan's wars is still unclear. However, it is without a doubt that a strong wave of new populations occurs in this area as a result of the Marcomannic wars⁴¹. A new series of migrations can be traced in the late Sarmatian period. The later one has been divided in two stages⁴². The first stage, dated in the late 3rd century and the first half of the 4th century, is characterized by graves with inventories similar to the one found at Gelu.

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³⁴ Grumeza 2014b, p. 103.

³⁵ Grumeza 2014b, pl. 35/3.

³⁶ Grumeza 2014b, p. 103.

³⁷ Vaday 2003, p. 212.

³⁸ Grumeza 2014b, p. 160–161, pl. 5/10, 12.

³⁹ Daicoviciu 1942; Dörner 1971; Medeleț 1971; Tănase, Mare 2000; Grumeza 2015.

⁴⁰ Bejan, Măriua, Tănase 2011 consider the possibility that the grave could be dated in the 1st century AD, while Grumeza 2014b, p. 143 dates the feature in the early 2nd century AD.

⁴¹ Grumeza 2014b, p. 143.

⁴² Grumeza 2014b, p. 149.

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DESPRE UN MORMÂNT SARMATIC RECUPERAT DE CĂTRE FLORIN MEDELEȚ (GELU, COM. VARIAȘ, JUD. TIMIȘ)

REZUMAT

În primăvara anului 1972, regretatul arheolog bănățean Florin Medeț salva un complex arheologic funerar aparținând perioadei sarmatice. În urma reorganizării depozitului ce poartă numele ultimului mare enciclopedist al Banatului, inventarul mormântului ne-a atras atenția și am considerat că este necesară introducerea în circuitul științific a acestei descoperiri. Analizele antropologice au arătat că mormântul a aparținut unei femei, care a murit în jurul vârstei de 30 de ani și care suferea de o afecțiune ușoară a unuia dintre membrele inferioare. Inventarul funerar plasează această descoperire la sfârșitul secolului al III-lea sau în prima jumătate a celui următor. Ansamblul obiectelor este caracteristic pentru zona Banatului în perioada menționată, marcată de efervescență culturală în Bazinul Carpatic, cauzată de valuri noi de populații venite din nordul Mării Negre și de interacțiunile acestora cu Imperiul Roman.

Cuvinte-cheie: mormânt sarmatic, *Barbaricum* în epoca romană, arheologie funerară, cercetări de salvare, Florin Medeț.

EXPLICAȚIA FIGURILOR

Fig. 1. 1. Poziția sitului în hotarul satului Gelu; 2. imagine detaliată asupra amplasării sitului (1. stația C.F.R. Gelu; 2. zona în care a fost făcută descoperirea).

Fig. 2. Fotografii ale mormântului, realizate de F. Medeț.

Fig. 3. 1. Fotografie a fibulei descoperite în mormânt: a. față; b. verso; 2. fotografie a fibulei de la Biled: a. față; b. verso; 3. schiță cu situarea descoperirii (realizate de F. Medeț).

Fig. 4. 1–5. Fotografii și desene ale uneia dintre fibulele descoperite la Gelu; 6–7. detaliu cu perla de sticlă care, probabil, decora această fibulă.

Fig. 5. 1–2. Fragmente din cea de-a doua fibulă descoperită în mormânt, dar nedocumentată de F. Medeț; 3–4. resorturi din bronz aparținând celor două fibule.

Fig. 6. Inele din bronz (fotografii și desene).

Fig. 7. 1.a. Pandantiv din cochilia unei scoici *Cypraea pantherina*; b. detaliu cu partea anterioară a scoicii (fără scară); 2. mărgelă descoperită în mormânt.

Fig. 8. 1. Colier fragmentar din bronz; 2. cană lucrată la roata olarului.

Table 1

Description of the beads recovered from the grave

Material	Shape	Colour	Diameter	Length	Width	Height
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1.6			0.4
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1.6			0.4
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1.2			0.4
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1.6			0.7
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1.4			0.6
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1.3			0.4
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1.2			0.7
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1			0.4
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1.1			0.5
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1.1			0.4
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.8			0.5
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.9			0.3
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.8			0.3
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1.2			0.3
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.8			0.3
Amber	Tube	Brown	0.8			1.6
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.9			0.3
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1.1			0.2
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.8			0.2
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.9			0.3
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.8			0.3
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.6			0.5
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.4			0.1
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.6			0.3
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.8			0.3
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	1			0.4
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.8			0.2
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.9			0.1
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.8			0.5
Glass	Biconic	Blue	0.8			0.4
Glass	Biconic	Blue	0.8			0.5
Glass	Biconic	Blue	0.6			0.4

Material	Shape	Colour	Diameter	Length	Width	Height
Glass	Biconic	Blue	0.6			0.5
Glass	Biconic	Blue	0.7			0.5
Glass	Cylinder	Orange?	0.9			0.6
Glass	Cylinder	Orange?	0.6			0.8
Glass	?	Translucent				
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.7			0.7
Amber	Cylinder	Brown	0.7			0.7
Glass	Flower	Blue	1.2			0.8
Glass	Flower	Blue	1			0.8
Glass	Flower	Blue	0.9			0.8
Glass	Flower	Blue	1			0.6
Glass	Flower	Blue	0.9			0.6
Glass	Flower	Blue	0.9			0.8
Glass	Flower	Blue	0.8			0.7
Glass	Flower	Blue	0.9			0.7
Ceramics	Paralelipipedic	Brick Red		0.6	0.6	0.4
Ceramics	Paralelipipedic	Brick Red		0.5	0.5	0.4
Ceramics	Paralelipipedic	Brick Red		0.5	0.5	0.5
Ceramics	Paralelipipedic	Brick Red		0.5	0.5	0.4
Bone	Paralelipipedic	Yellowish		0.5	0.4	0.4
Glass	Cylinder	Blue	0.8			0.5
Glass	Cylinder	Blue	0.6			0.6
Glass	Paralelipipedic	Ocre		0.6	0.4	0.5
Glass	Paralelipipedic	Ocre		0.6	0.5	0.4
Glass	Paralelipipedic	Ocre		0.6	0.6	0.5
Glass	Cylinder	Ocre	0.6			0.4
Glass	Paralelipipedic	Ocre		0.6	0.5	0.4
Glass	Cylinder	Green	0.8			0.4
Glass	Cylinder	Green	0.7			0.5
Glass	Cylinder	White	0.7			0.5
Glass	Cylinder	White	0.8			0.5
Glass	Cylinder	White	0.6			0.5

Material	Shape	Colour	Diameter	Length	Width	Height
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.8	0.5	0.3
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.9	0.7	0.3
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.8	0.4	0.3
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		1	0.4	0.4
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.9	0.6	0.4
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.8	0.7	0.4
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		1.1	0.9	0.4
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.9	0.7	0.4
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		1	0.6	0.4
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.9	0.6	0.3
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		1	0.6	0.4
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.8	0.7	0.3
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		1.1	0.7	0.5
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.7	0.6	0.6
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.8	0.4	0.4
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.9	0.7	0.4
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		1	0.6	0.2
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.8	0.5	0.4
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.9	0.5	0.3
Carnelian	Prism	Dark Red		0.6	0.5	0.3
Limestone	Tube	White	1.2			1.5
Limestone	Tube	White	1.2			1.5
Limestone	Tube	White	1.4			1.6
Limestone	Tube	White	1.2			1.5
Limestone	Tube	White	1.2			1.9
Limestone	Tube	White	1.5			1.1
Limestone	Tube	White	1			1.4
Limestone	Tube	White	1.2			1.4
Limestone	Tube	White	1.2			1.5
Limestone	Tube	White	1.1			1.7
Limestone	Tube	White	2			2.5



1



2

Fig. 1. 1. The location of the site within the boundaries of the Gelu village; 2. details of the site locations (1. the Gelu railway station; 2. the area where the discovery was made).



1



2



3

Fig. 2. Photos of the grave taken by F. Medeleț.

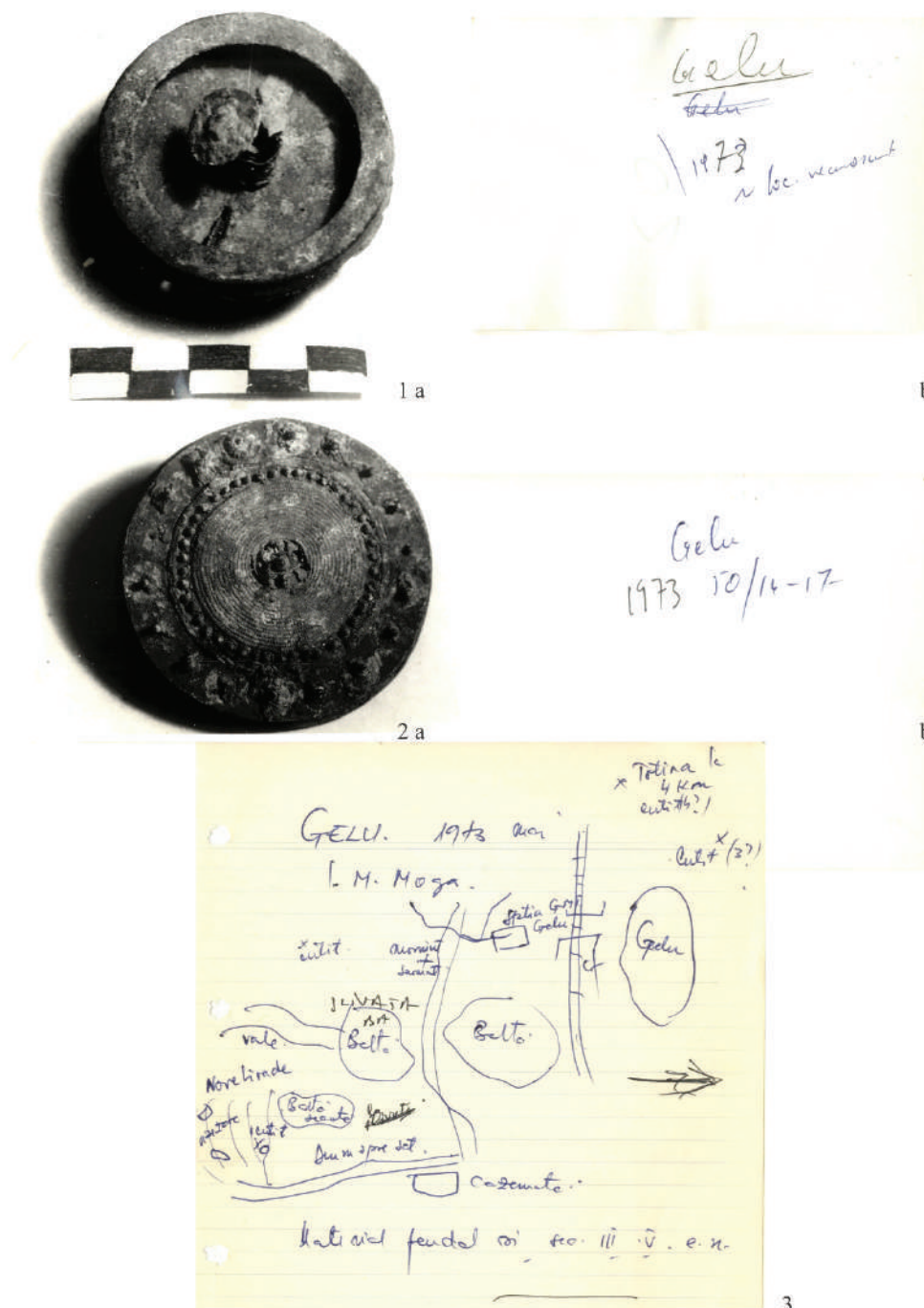


Fig. 3. 1. Photo of the brooch found in the grave: a. front side b. back side; 2. photo of the brooch from Biled: a. front side b. back side; 3. sketch map of the site location; (made by F. Medeleț).

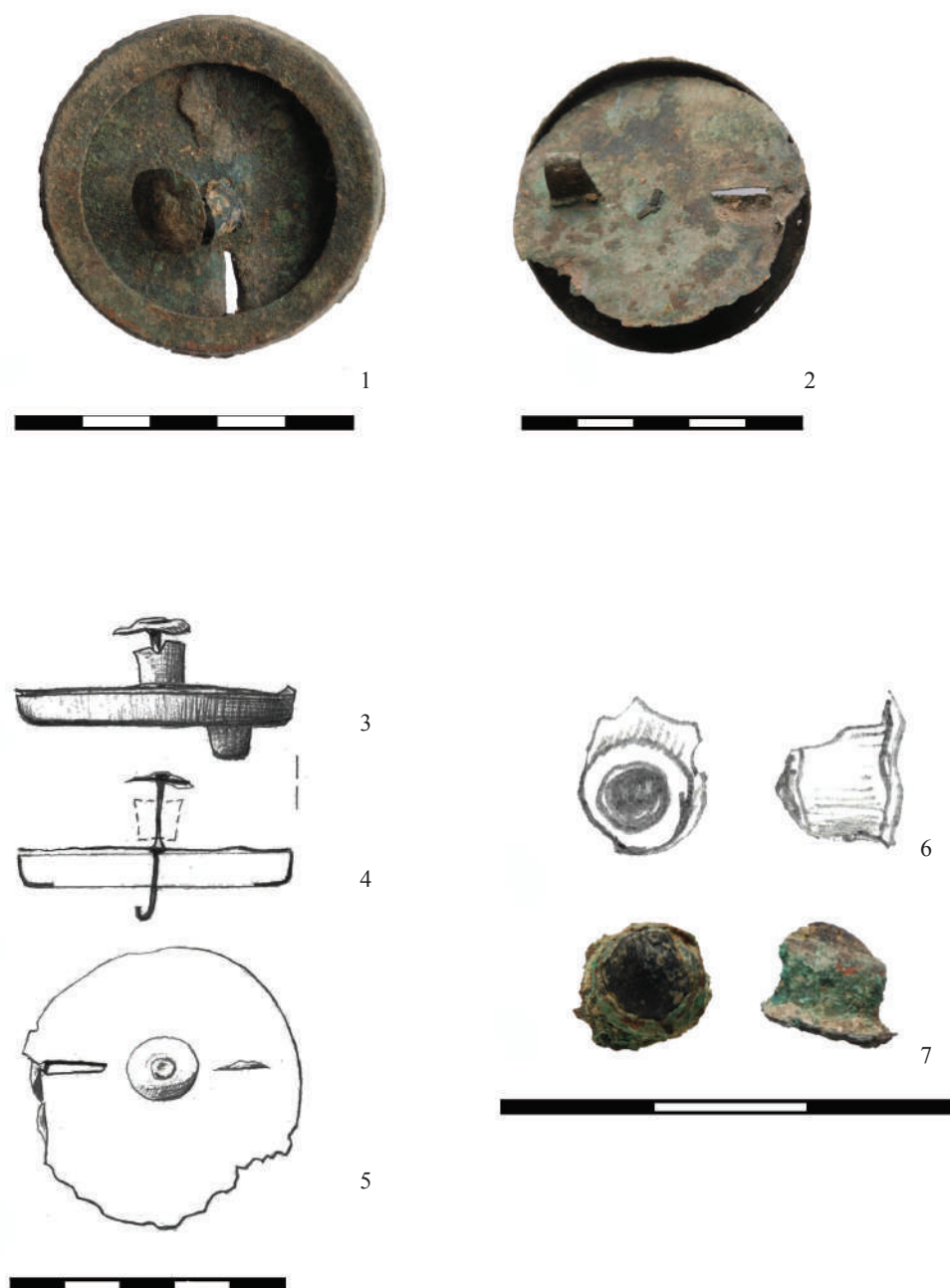


Fig. 4. 1–5. Photos and drawings of one of the brooches discovered at Gelu;
6–7. detail of a glass pearl that probably decorated the brooch.

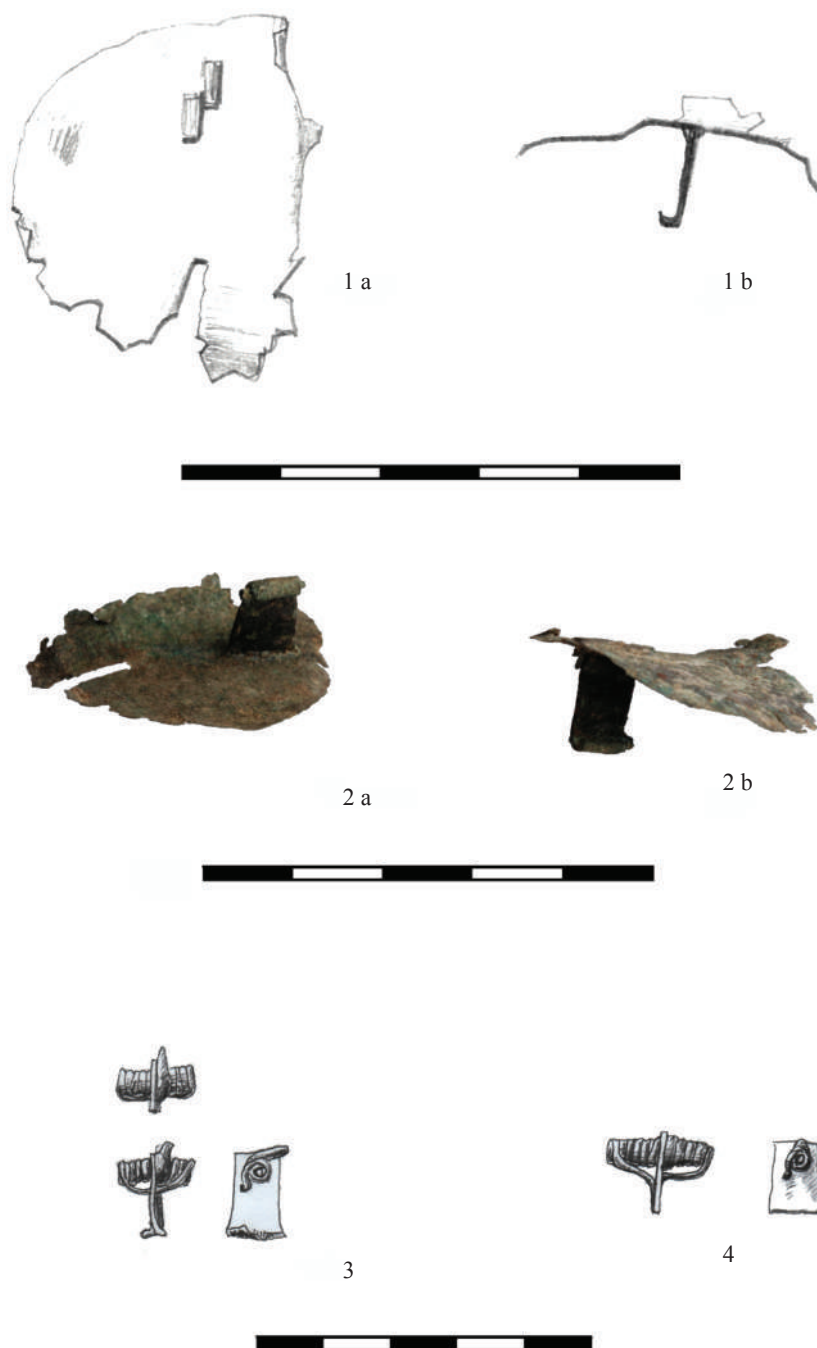


Fig. 5. 1–2. Fragments from the second bronze brooch found in the grave, but not documented by F. Medeleț; 3–4. bronze springs belonging to the two brooches.

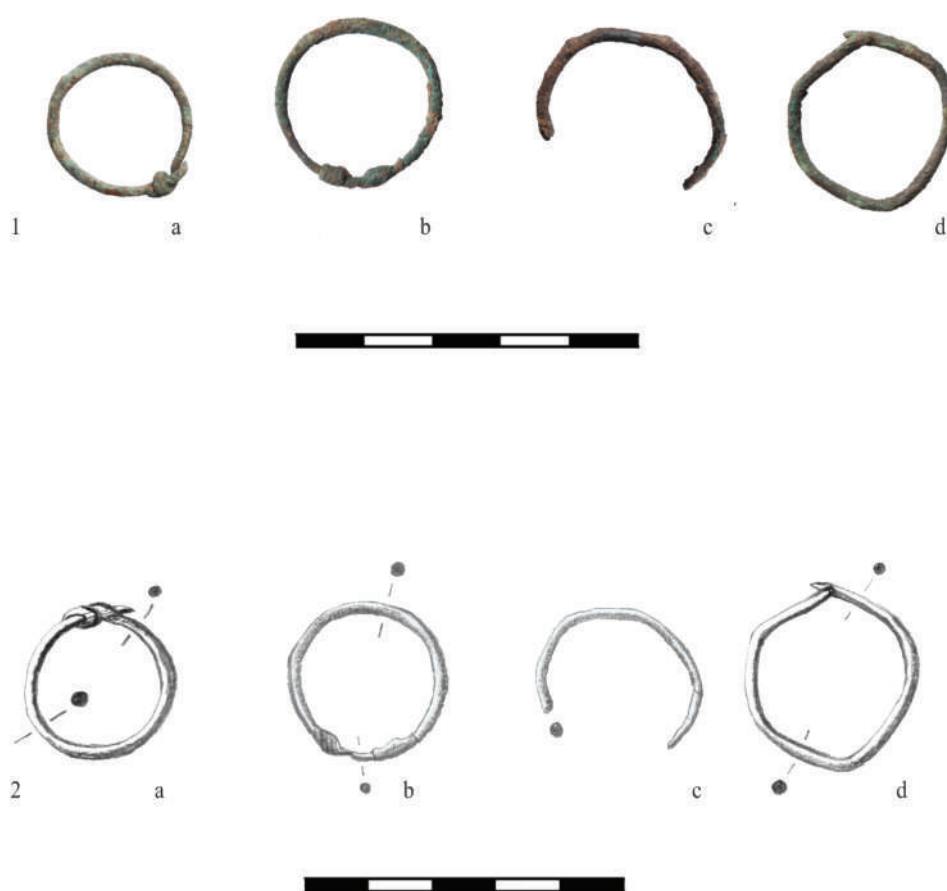


Fig. 6. Bronze rings (photo and drawing).



Fig. 7. 1.a. *Cypraeida pantherina* pendant; b. detail of the anterior end of the shell (not at scale); 2. beads found in the grave.



Fig. 8. 1. Fragmentary bronze necklace; 2. wheel-made cup.

