

LATE ROMAN PIECES OF MILITARY EQUIPMENT FROM HALMYRIS

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Key words: Roman infantry, cavalry helmet, lamellar plate, iron strips, girdle.

Abstract. Weaponry and pieces of equipment are surprisingly amongst the rarest finds at Halmyris, although the fort had a key strategic position to the mouths of the Danube and there is good evidence for a strong garrison both in early and later Roman period. The pieces of equipment presented below were found during the 1982 excavations. The entire lot is part of the collection of The National Museum of Military History.

Cuvinte cheie: infanterie romană, coif de cavalerie, platoșă lamelară, infanterie, centură.

Rezumat. La Halmyris s-au găsit extrem de puține arme și piese de echipament, deși fortul a avut o poziție strategică la gurile Dunării și deși există dovezi că aici a funcționat o puternică garnizoană din perioada romană timpurie până la sfârșitul perioadei romane. Piese de echipament prezentate în acest material au fost găsite în anul 1982 în timpul săpăturilor de la Halmyris (Murighiol commune, Tulcea County) și se află la Muzeul Național de Istorie Militară.

I. ROMAN INFANTRY HELMET

Archaeological context: the piece was found in 1982, in the E-W trench, in □ 67, at -1.50m, together with other two smaller iron fragments which belong to the same component in a trash hole dug into the Xth level by the occupants of the next one XIth level. The Xth level is dated on the basis of coin finds and pottery in first half of the 6th century and seems to have ended very likely by 559 when the Kutrigurs routed the province of Scythia. The XIth level is datable roughly between 559 and 584/585¹.

Material: iron.

Location: The National Museum of Military History. Inv. C 1287.

State of preservation: The hemispherical skull-piece (calotte) is in a fragmentary state (Fig. 1a, b). The left part is totally missing; the right half shows a large break at the upper part of the hemisphere. The front part of the skull piece is missing, although one of the smaller fragments seems to fit into the lost spot.

Description: The piece has a diameter of ca. 23 cm and a height of 17 cm. The skull-piece consists of a solid 4 cm wide iron strip at the base reinforced with a 6 cm wide transversal top low crest with broadened ends soldered at the interior of the base strip (Fig. 2). Two hemispherical halves, of which only the right one is partially preserved, are joined at the interior of the transversal crest.

The transversal low crest shows traces of repair. A top rivet appears to have joined the broken crest (Fig. 1b), while a visible strip of iron reinforces the link at the interior (Fig. 3).

Date: The Halmyris helmet was found in a 6th century archaeological context. The fact that the piece was found in a trash pit pertaining to the XIth level that pierce the Xth means that the helmet was in use certainly in a period after 559. The obvious repair operation at the transversal crest might indicate a previous use of the piece, possibly in the first half of the 6th century, if not earlier. The repair of the crest must have followed a serious damage of the helmet.

¹ Al. Suceveanu, M. Zahariade, Fl. Topoleanu, in: Al. Suceveanu, M. Zahariade, Fl. Topoleanu, Gh. Poenaru Bordea, *Halmyris I. Monografie arheologică*, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, p. 27-42.

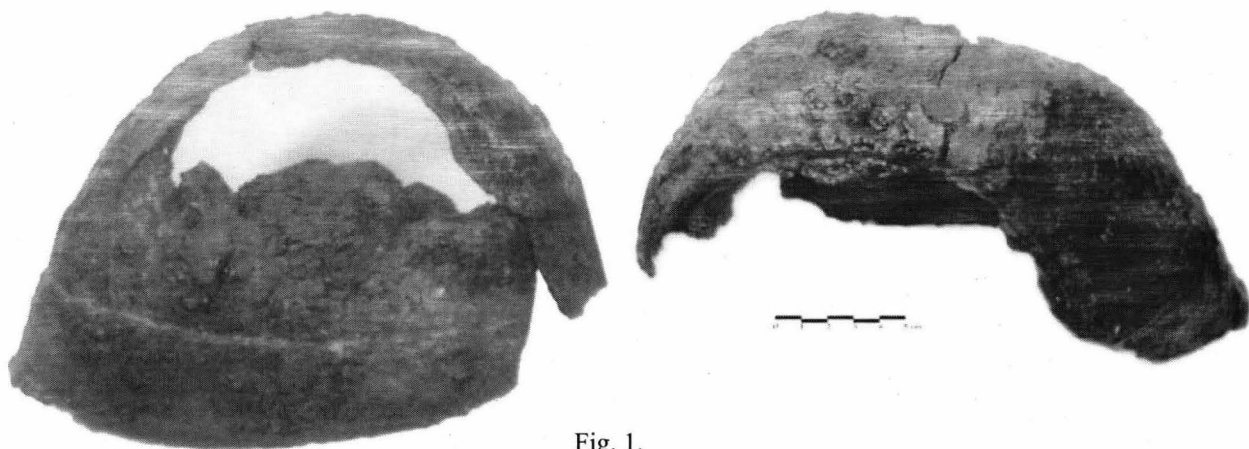


Fig. 1.

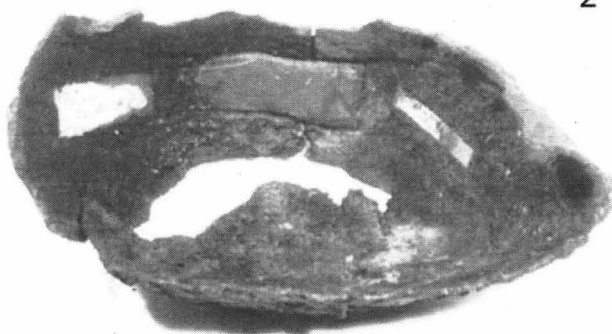
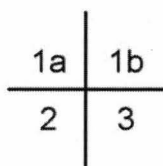


Fig. 2.

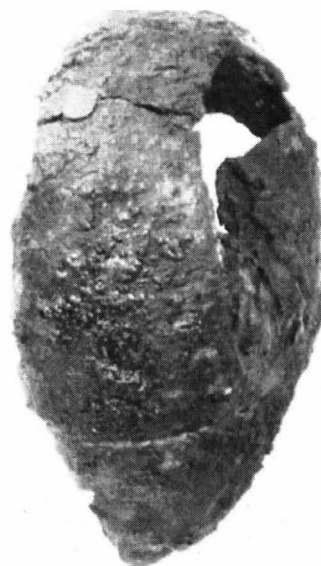


Fig. 3.

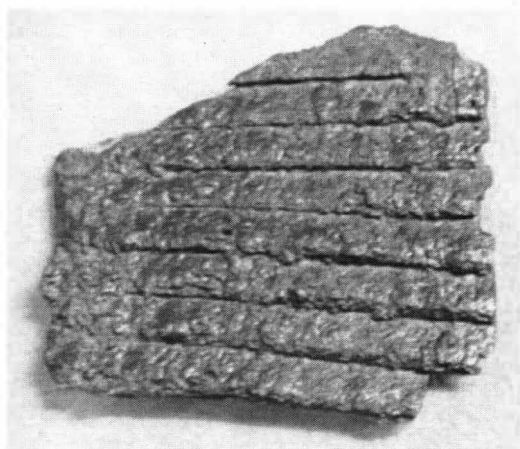


Fig. 4.

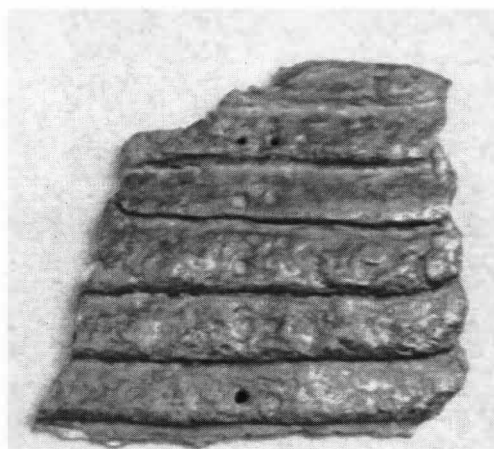


Fig. 5.

Pl I – Fig. 1a-b. Back and left side views of the helmet. Figs. 2-3. Overturned and right side view of the helmet.
Figs. 5-6. Fragments of lamellar armor.

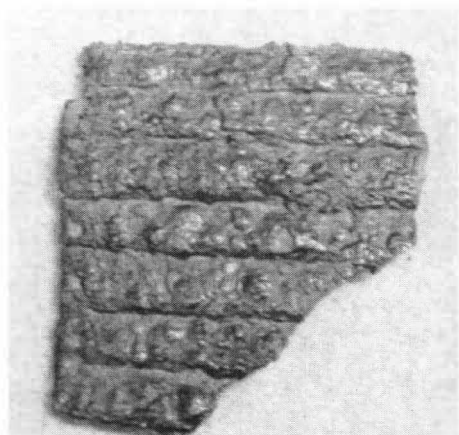


Fig. 6.

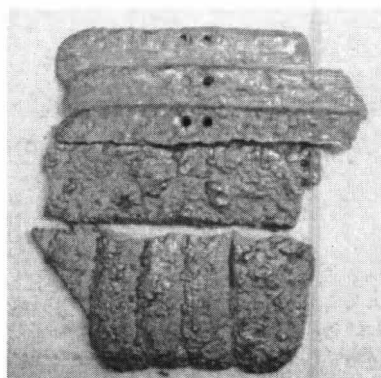


Fig. 7.

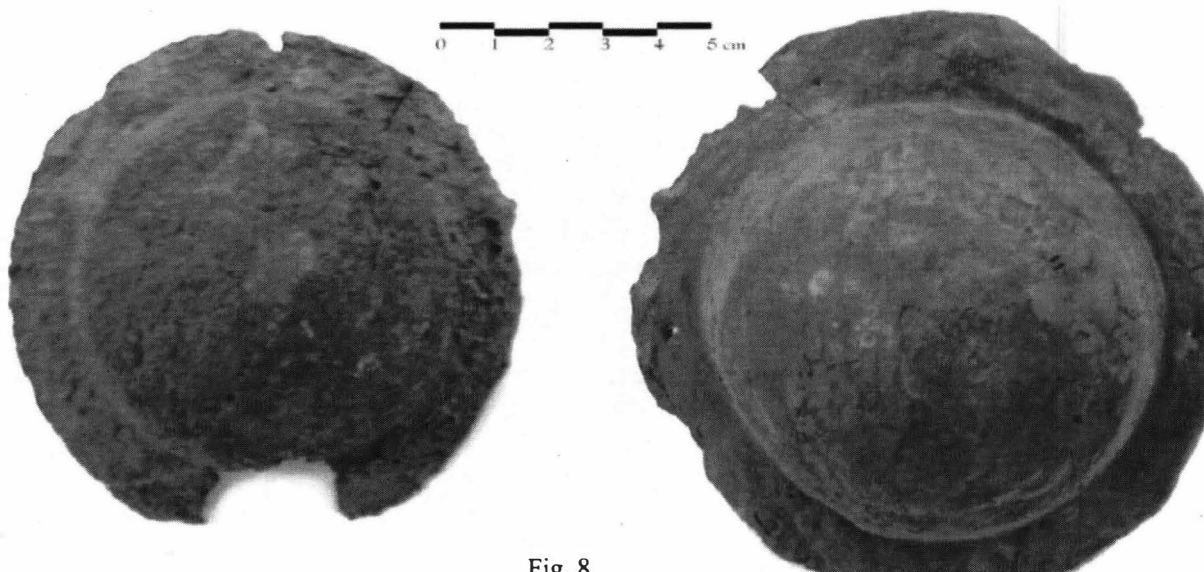


Fig. 8.

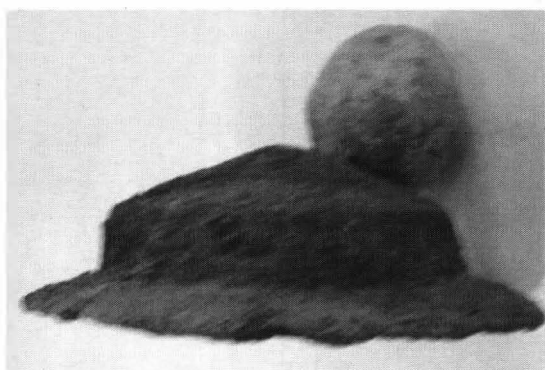


Fig. 9.

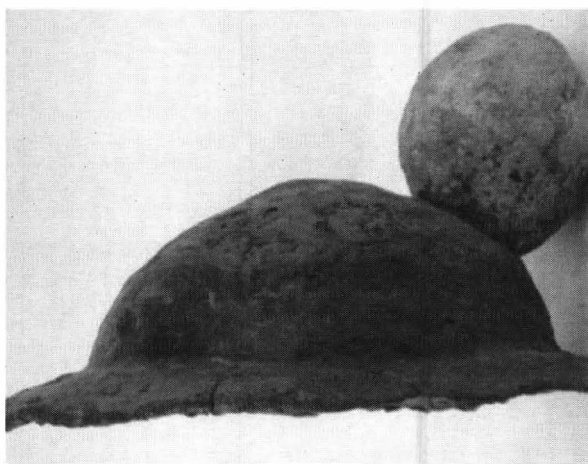


Fig. 10.

Pl. II – Fig. 7. Fragments of lamellar armor. Fig. 8. 6th Century *umbones*. Front view. Fig. 9. 6th Century *umbones*. Fig. 10. Profile view.

The skull piece is simple, without the high crest topping it, characteristic to some known cases at Intercissa 1-4 helmets². Although it must have been largely spread as a 6th century infantry or cavalry helmet, the Halmyris piece can not be yet allotted to any known so far type and seems the simplest type of helmet assigned to ordinary soldiers (very likely infantry troops).

Date: late 5th – mid 6th century.

II. FIVE FRAGMENTS OF BREAST PLATE

No. 1 : Dimensions: 9.00 cm × 8.00 cm. NMMH. Inv. C 1288

No. 2 : Dimensions: 8.00 cm × 9.30 cm. NMMH. Inv. C 1289

No. 3 : Dimensions: 8.50 cm × 9.00 cm. NMMH. Inv. C 1290

No. 4 : Dimensions: 8.50 cm × 5.00 cm. NMMH. Inv. C 1291

No. 5 : Dimensions: 7.50 cm × 3.50 cm. NMMH. Inv. C 1292

Archaeological context: the fragments were found in the E-W trench, in □ 69, at -1.58m, on the Xth occupation level dated in first half of the 6th century.

Material: all the five pieces are made of iron.

State of preservation: The pieces are in relatively good condition. The metal structure is well preserved. The iron shows visible marks of expansion due to the long term chemical reactions with natural elements in the soil.

Description: The fragments show different ways of joining that suggest that they belonged to several lamellar plates. In general, the fragments consist of vertical laminated iron strips set in a slightly overlapping sequence. Fragment no. 1 (Fig. 4) preserved eight lamellas of 9mm in width. It shows no traces of fastening holes. Fragment no. 2 (Fig. 5) has six preserved 1.04 cm wide girdles. One fastening hole appears on the first girdle, while two others are inserted into the fifth. Fragment no. 3 (Fig. 6) is a compact seven 1cm wide lamellas, without any holes. Fragment no. 4 (Fig. 7a) shows four 1 cm wide holed lamellas and a fourth one to the left, 2cm in width, possibly as a linkage piece. The last piece (Fig. 7b), fragment no. 5 has five 1.3 wide girdle that show no traces of holes.

The holes were pierced for fastening the girdle units in order to connect them and create the breast plate very likely worn over an internal leather or linen coat. The widths of the straps indicate the existence of at least two or three different laminated plates.

Lamellar armor was used frequently in Late Roman Eastern and Early Byzantine Empire³.

Date: First half of the 6th century.

III. SHIELD BOSSES (*UMBONES*).

Inv. C 1293-1294

Two complete shield bosses where found in 1981 (no. 1) and 1982 (no. 2).

Archaeological context: Shield boss (*umbo*) nr. 1 was found in the E-W trench, □ 9, – 1.33 m, on the XIth occupation level dated between 559-584/5; shield boss (*umbo*) no. 2 was found in the E-W trench, □ 23, – 1.60 m. on the IXth occupation level dated in second half of the 5th century.

Material: Iron.

Dimensions: Shield boss no. 1: diameter 19 cm; height: 7cm; shield boss no. 2: diameter: 21 cm; height: 5 cm (Fig. 8).

² E.B. Thomas, *Der Helmfund von Intercissa*, in H. Klumbach (ed.), *Spättrömische Paradehelme*, München, 1973, p. 103-109, tab. 45-57.

³ H.R. Robinson, *The Armour of the Imperial Rome*, London, 1975, p. 162-163; 184-186.

State of preservation and description: The two pieces are in a good condition. The iron shows slight traces of natural corrosion, but the metal structure is still well preserved and solid. A small part of the rim of the shield boss no. 1 is missing; it is slightly broken in the opposite side. At least one hole for the spikes is visible. The rim of the shield boss no. 2 shows multiple breakings. The four holes for the spikes are plainly visible.

The shield boss no. 1 shows a combination of protruding cylindrical bottom and cone like upper part profile (Fig. 9). The profile of shield boss no. 2 is hemispherical (Fig. 10).

The pieces presented above belong to the equipment specific to infantry troops. The 6th century epigraphic and literary sources are completely silent on the Halmyris garrison thus far. However, some hints on its structure, like in other late Roman forts on the Danube, are offered by the archaeological discoveries, among which the pieces of equipment remain a decisive argument.

