

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES IN THE BISTRA STREAM AREA, (FIRST HALF OF THE 1ST MILLENNIUM A.D.)

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Abstract

The work shows a series of archaeological findings in the Bistra stream area in the Bihor County dating back to the 1st century B.C. until the 6th century A.D. In the area of the Dacian fortress at Sacalasa, there is an impressive range of discoveries that seem to belong to a silver Dacian thesaurus dating back to the 1st century A.D. The archaeological findings at Voivozi – Cilogos show the existence of free Dacians along the Bistra stream at the Roman epoch. This living level dates back to the 3rd century A.D., or probably the beginning of the 4th century A.D. We notice the influence of provincial Roman ceramics on the ceramics of free Dacians in the area and in Crisana in general. In 1970, an important thesaurus was discovered at Tauteni. It is made up of two silver cups. It was published in 1973 by S. Dumitrascu and was considered to belong to the Heruli of German origin. In the area, there was a civilisation of locals belonging to Hun and Gepid times, also known as the Biharea – Sânnicolau Român – Florești – Sânmiclăuș – Ipotești – Cândești – Botoșana – Dodești civilisation of Latin and Christian population.

Key words: Dacians, fortress, silver thesaurus, locals, Heruli

The publication of archaeological findings particularly after WWII, when most History and Archaeology Institutes (such as Bucharest, Iasi and Cluj) and County Museums (such as Arad, Oradea, and Satu Mare) were established, brought the Dacian antiquities to the international scientific circuit¹. The archaeological findings belonging to the Dacian epoch in Crisana have been classified from the geographical and geomorphologic points of view as follows:

A. Plain settlements (small towns, villages and helmets): 1. Arad- Micălaca on Mureș; 2. Zerindul Mic, Arad County, on Crișul Negru; 3. Girișul de Criș – Pietroasa, Bihor County, on Crișul Repede; 4. Acâș, Satu Mare County, on Crasna and 5. Pecica, Arad County – an urban settlement (small town, production and market centre, social and political centre of Dacians in Lower Mureș plain area).

B. Piedmont settlements (oppida, small towns, fortresses and citadels): 1. Vărădia de Mureș, Arad County; 2. Săvârșin, Arad County, both on Mureș; 3. Berindia, Arad County,

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¹ S. Dumitrașcu, *Descoperiri dacice din Crișana (sec. II î.e.n. – 106 e.n.)*, in S. Dumitrașcu, *Scieri arheologice privind istoria Daciei Apusene*, Oradea, 2007, pp 163-166, volume edited by L. Ardelean and F. Sfrengeu to celebrate the 70th birthday of the author of the studies. For the contribution of archaeologist S. Dumitrascu to the knowledge on Dacian epoch, the 1st Christian millennium and other epochs, see studies in this volume, where different articles and studies show the contribution of other Romanian and foreign researchers. Also see the *List of scientific and literary works* of the author pp 11-30.

on Valea Crişului Alb; 4. Tăşad, Bihor County, in the piedmont western area of the Pădurea Craiului Mountains; 5. Oradea – Dealul Viilor, Crişul Repede; 6. Marca, Sălaj County, on Barcău; 7. Şimleul Silvaniei, Sălaj County, on Crasna.

C. Mountainous settlements (fortresses, citadels): 1. Clit, Arad County, in the Moma Codru Massif, in the Pleş top area; 2. Săcălăsău Nou, Bihor County, in the Plopiş Mountains, in the Bistra hydrographical basin, an affluent of Barcău; 3. Tusa, Sălaj County, in the Plopiş Mountains massif.²

From Burebista to Decebal, in the 1st century B.C. to the 1st century A.D., the Bistra river area was ruled by the Sacalasa Nou fortress. It lies at the outskirts of the village, in a place called *Dealul cu bani* (*The Money Hill*), on the Corbeni stream, also known as Vanatorul stream, an affluent of the Fanate stream flowing into Barcau, just like Bistra. Surrounded by hills and high tops, the cape where the citadel lies has steep slopes. The area where the plateau penetrates is cut by a ditch probably accompanied by a vallum. Unfortunately, several holes dug by treasure hunters have destroyed most of this important archaeological site. Nevertheless, in 1971, the archaeologist Sever Dumitrascu made a survey in an area of the plateau with only few holes dug by treasure hunters. He revealed a thin layer of artefacts belonging to three epochs. The oldest belongs to the Cotofeni culture during the transition from the Eneolithic to the Bronze Age. It is followed by the Dacian layer. Some are hand-made, some others are pottery. The colour is brick-red or grey with fine aspect, as well as ceramic fragments dating back to the feudal time³.

In the area of the Dacian citadel, there is an impressive range of findings belonging to a great silver Dacian thesaurus dating back to the 1st century B.C. The study⁴ dedicated to the thesaurus discovered in 1972 chronologically shows all findings in the area known at the time that were published by several archaeologists. For example: in 1941, D. Popescu reminded of 23 coins of the Dyrrhachium type and the arc bent of a fibula with nodosities; in the same year 1941, C. Daicoviciu mentioned the Greek and Roman republican coins, as well as a snake-headed bracelet discovered on the *Dealul cu Comoara* (*Dealul cu bani*) (*The Money Hill*); in 1942, M. Roska mentioned the discovery of 20 Apollonia dinars at Sacalasa, yet he provided no more details; in 1953, N. Fettich published a silver bracelet decorated with snake heads belonging to a thesaurus along with five Apollonia coins and three Dyrrhachium coins in the area called *Penzeshegy* (*The Money Hill*); a silver fibula with nodosities and two silver coins belonged to the Sacalasa Vechi primary school collection at the time⁵. The silver jewels thesaurus discovered in 1972 by Anton Furik in Sacalasa Nou on the *Burcarar* hill 300 meters far from the Dacian citadel while ploughing the land comprises the following items: a necklace, two bracelets, three fibulae and a silver item bar. According to some information, it seems that another thesaurus was discovered in the same area 20 years before comprising eight silver fibulae with nodosities. However, none has been preserved. All these items are likely to have belonged to the same thesaurus, although they might have been discovered in the Dacian citadel destroyed by treasure hunters⁶.

Dacian fortresses and citadels in western Apuseni Mountains from Burebista's rule to Decebal's rule in 106 A.D., to which the citadel of Sacalasa Nou in the Bistra stream area belongs, were conquered during the Dacian-Roman wars (101-102 and 105-106) to

² *Ibidem*, p 165.

³ S. Dumitraşcu, *Aşezări fortificate şi cetăţui dacice în partea de vest a Munţilor Apuseni*, in *Crisia*, 1972, pp 135-137.

⁴ S. Dumitraşcu, E. Molnar, *Tezaurul de podoabe dacice de argint de la Săcălăsău-Nou, j. Bihor*, in *Crisia*, V, 1975, pp 45-67.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp 64-65.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p 59, the items saved by Prof. E. Molnar have been studied and photographed. They were largely described in the study mentioned above.

which the Dacians from Crisana participated. Although conquered by the Romans, this part of Dacia lying between the Apuseni Mountains and Tisa was not annexed to the Roman Empire politically and military. A new chapter in the history of rural settlements in Crisana began. It continued throughout the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. It was the time of Roman epoch free Dacians. A silver imperial Roman dinar dating back to the 2nd century A.D. was accidentally found in a place called *Dealul Comorii* (*the Treasure Hill*) belonging to the Popești commune⁷.

The archaeological finding at Voivozi proves the presence of Roman epoch free Dacians along the Bistra stream. In the place called *Cilogos*, on the second living level (the first comprises hallstatt ceramics, whereas the third one comprises settlement remains belonging to the 7th – 9th centuries), ceramic fragments of grey or brick-red pottery belonging to free Dacians have been found. This settlement level dates back to the 3rd century and probably the beginning of the 4th century. There was an influence of provincial Roman ceramics on the free Dacians ceramics in the area and in general on the ceramics in Crisana⁸.

In an unspecified place at Tauteu, 3rd and 4th centuries A.D. ceramics belonging to Roman and post-Roman epoch Dacians has been discovered. It comprises big supply vessels for water, also called jars, probably attesting the existence of a settlement of free Dacians in the Bistra stream area⁹.

In the past years, archaeological research has revealed several settlements belonging to free Dacians in Crisana in the 2nd to the 4th centuries. Their main occupations were shepherding, agriculture and craftsmanship. "Throughout the same broad regions in certain places and areas more or less outlined, we can notice the presence of lazyges and Rhoxolani, as well as of German peoples (Buri, Vandals, Asdings, and early Gepids) with socio-economic, political and cultural connections strongly influenced by the Roman civilisation and political-military interests. As a consequence of the dissolution of the province of Dacia and its borders, there was an expansion of the Roman and Roman speaking province people to the west and north-west, and a relocation of free Dacian communities on the territories of the former province archaeologically attested. We deal with a people's movement in two ways leading to new defining ethno-linguistic, social, economic and political realities at the beginning of the migration epoch."¹⁰

At the end of the 4th century, after crossing the Dniester and defeating the Visigoths, the Huns controlled the regions in eastern and southern Romania until 420. The following belonged to their confederation: the Alani belonging to the Sarmatian tribes, the Ostrogoths and the Gepids of German origin. After reaching Pannonia and the Tisa Plain in 433, under the rule of Attila, Transylvania and the western area underwent a shock. The urban Roman civilisation involuted; there was a generalised process on Middle Danube and the Rhine throughout the 5th century reaching to the disappearance of urban civilisation¹¹.

After the defeat of Attila's sons, the Hun *empire* fell down and the German peoples within the Hun confederation such as the Gepids, the Scirii, the Ostrogoths, and the Heruli became free. The difficulty of determining the origin of thesauruses discovered at Simleu

⁷ *Repertoriul Monumentelor naturii, arheologice, istorice, etnografice, de arhitectură și artă din județul Bihor*, chief editor S. Dumitrașcu, Oradea, 1974, p 56.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p 86; for the history and archaeological findings on Dacians of Roman epoch material culture and other peoples, see: S. Dumitrașcu, *Dacia Apuseană (Teritoriul dacilor liberi din vestul și nord-vestul României în vremea Daciei romane)*, Oradea, 1993, as well as other studies of the author partly published in the volume S. Dumitrașcu, *Scrieri arheologice privind istoria Daciei Apusene*, Oradea, 2007.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p 78.

¹⁰ S. Dumitrașcu, *Dacia vestică și nord-vestică (secolele II-IV)*, in *Istoria românilor*, București, 2001, p 448.

¹¹ M. Bărbulescu, *De la romani până la sfârșitul mileniului I.*, in *Istoria Transilvaniei, I*, coordinators Ioan-Aurel Pop and Thomas Năgler, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, p 189.

Silvaniei and Tauteu (Teuteni) was mainly due to the intricate situation in the 5th century¹².

The important thesaurus discovered on the Bistra stream in 1970 was published in 1973: two silver cups; in 1993, a fragment of another pot was published. In the summer of 1970, archaeologist S. Dumitrascu carried out a research on the Bistra stream. Teacher Valeria Hebristeanu was also involved by questioning her pupils in Ciutelec on antiquities in the area. The result was the fragments of silver dishes subsequently reconstructed. The place where they were discovered was called *Tricer* by the locals. It lies south from the Tauteu commune along the stream bearing the same name towards the vineyards at the edge of the pasture. It neighbours the village of Budoii to the south and the vineyard hills belonging to the inhabitants of Bogeiui and Tauteu to the east. After informing on the findings, the teacher Victor Cristea from Bogeiui and his two pupils, Mihai Cosma and Ioan Baliban, kept searching. They finally found other fragments belonging to the two dishes. In December, new securing diggings were carried out on the site by S. Dumitrascu and Valeria Hrebistean together with students from the Faculty of History-Geography in Oradea thus recovering other fragments belonging to the two pieces of dish that were eventually restored¹³.

The thesaurus was largely described in the monograph published in 1973. It also enumerated certain hypotheses on its ethno-cultural belonging: Vandal, Gepid, Visigoth, Huno-Alano-Ostrogothic, Hun, Ostrogothic, then Heruli. "It seems to be a temple thesaurus stolen by the Heruli (Dexippos) in their Goto-Heruli invasion before the battle of Naissus in the temple of Demeter and Dionysus at Eleusis (the possible meaning of the two inscriptions with Hellenic characters on the two cups found at Tauteni) on the foot of the second cup for the new German owner".¹⁴

In 2000, the historical and archaeological monograph dedicated to the Heruli was published¹⁵. Besides an excellent historic review of this German people and of other peoples, there is further information and clarification. There are also analogies with pieces of dish making up the Tauteu thesaurus. As a matter of fact, the third chapter of the book organically connected with the first chapter describing the history of the Heruli is an *Attempt of chronological and ethno-cultural dating of thesauruses at Tauteni and Șimleul Silvaniei*¹⁶. Those willing to have detailed information on the importance of the thesaurus on the Bistra stream for the history of Romania and Europe will certainly read the abovementioned works. We consider it important to briefly describe the items as shown in the *Heruli* monograph without mentioning the analogies:

„1. TALL SILVER CUP. It is 45 cm tall. It was made of silver foil (1.2-1.3 mm thick) *au repousée* and is adorned with mythological scenes – *Athena, Poseidon, Hercules?* on a winged horse killing the Nemea lion that are set to the foreground. Out of the three levels, only the acanthus leaves belonging to the superior (third) level have been *well* preserved. There are two spots on the foot: *P* and *X*, which could be a mark: *P X (X pounds)*...

2. TALL GOLDEN SILVER CUP (SCHLANKEN KANNE). It is 64.3 cm tall. It was made of silver foil (1-1.5 mm thick) *au repousée* and is adorned on *five levels* out of which three refer to mythological scenes that we will describe in detail below. The lower level (no. 1) is adorned like cup no. 1 at Tauteni (preserved on the superior level) with *acanthus leaves*. The superior level (no. 5) has a *baroque* ornamentation with vegetal motifs. In the middle of the stem, there is a dotted Greek character inscription, while the *bottom* of the stem bears Runic signs (*sgraffito*) slightly *pounded*. (...) *Level no. 2. Nereids, Cupids and*

¹² S. Dumitrașcu, *Atribuirea etno-culturală a tezaurelor de șa Șimleul Silvaniei și Tăuteni (Tăuteu)*, in *Analele Universității din Oradea*, seria Istorie-Arheologie, VIII-IX, 1998-1999, Oradea, pp 17-28.

¹³ Idem, *Tezaurul de la Tăuteni-Bihor*, Oradea, 1973, pp 24-28

¹⁴ Idem, *Atribuirea etno-culturală a tezaurelor de șa Șimleul Silvaniei și Tăuteni (Tăuteu)*, in *Analele Universității din Oradea*, seria Istorie-Arheologie, VIII-IX, 1998-1999, Oradea, p 18

¹⁵ Idem, *Herulii. Monografie istorică și arheologică*, Oradea, 2000

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp 64-114 and tables 1-121

Nereids riding sea monsters (sea Amazonians) are artistically represented on the *second inferior level*. (...) *Level no. 3*. It is the *main level* adorned with a “complete” *bacchanalia* artistically achieved. (...) *Level no. 4* resembles rural scenes on a silver plate in the *Cartagena thesaurus* from the point of view of the rural theme...

3. CONTAINER FRAGMENT (vessel) made of silver and representing a feminine deity with the hair parted on two sides and the *veil* on the left shoulder covering the inferior side of the body. It is almost certain that it is the scene of COMING OUT OF THE SEA (water, bath) of goddess Venus.”¹⁷

In Crisana, like most regions in the country, a local civilisation of Hun and Gepid epoch was set to the foreground. It was also named according to the places of the most important findings: *Biharea – Sânnicolau Român – Florești – Sânmiclăuș – Ipotești – Căndești – Botoșana – Dodești*. It was a population of Latin and Christian origin¹⁸. The 6th century people of Roman origin got in contact with Slavic peoples with rudimentary hand-made ceramics. Under the Roman influence, they adopted the potter’s wheel. The Roman character of local population did not alter although elements of Slavic material culture gradually mingled with the Roman ones¹⁹. It seems that the Bistra river is a Slavic translation of the older name meaning *fast* river. There are also names of localities and waters of Slavic origin in other regions. Most Slavs remaining in Transylvania were assimilated by the more numerous locals throughout the 8th and 9th centuries. Some Slavic enclaves were known until the 2nd century, yet they were subsequently renamed with Romanian names²⁰.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp 67-70

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p 118

¹⁹ M. Bărbulescu, *De la romani până la sfârșitul mileniului I.*, in *Istoria Transilvaniei, I*, coordinators Ioan-Aurel Pop and Thomas Năgler, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, p 196

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp 197-198