

Magic sword pendants

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Since the publication of Joachim Werner's "Beiträge zur Archäologie des Attila-Reiches", the so-called "Magische Schwertanhänger" – magic sword pendants, have become a group of artefacts frequently mentioned in the literature devoted to the Roman and Migration Periods. The most often discussed question is to what degree the magic pendants can be considered as evidence for long-distance contacts between the Asian steppe cultures and the European Barbaricum, stretching from Western Siberia to Western Europe, and what role the armament, equipment and customs of Roman soldiers played in this process (WERNER 1956. 26–56, HAGBERG 1967A., HAGBERG 1967B., MÉRI 2000., KOVÁCS 2001., CARNAP-BORNHEIM 2003., ŠAROV 2003., ISTVÁNOVITS–KULCSÁR 2001.). Much less attention has been given to the function of the magic pendants. These are small, round, discoid, semi-spherical or nearly spherical artefacts, usually 50–70 mm in diameter, with a centrally placed aperture of a diameter ranging from a few to several millimetres. They are made of glass or semi-precious stones – jade, chalcedony, jet, rock crystal, or, sometimes, amber. It should be noted that at some of them one surface is flat (Fig. 1). Among these diverse forms, one can particularly distinguish a group of glass specimens decorated with a motif known from Kauri shells (Fig. 2).

As it was mentioned, magic sword pendants occur in the area stretching from Western Siberia to Western and Northern Europe, in a very broad time span encompassing about six centuries beginning from the 2nd century AD. However, our interest is limited only to the European finds dating from the Roman Period and the early phase of the Migration Period. Most pieces come from the Carpathian Basin occupied by the Sarmatians and from the moor-finds of Northern Europe.

However, the majority of the discoveries provided no direct clues as to the function of the artefacts in question. It was only one of the Sarmatian burials from Hungary, at Tiszalök, that



Fig. 1

Thorsberg (Archäologische Landesmuseum Schleswig)
(Photo M. Biborski)

1. kép

Thorsberg (Archäologische Landesmuseum Schleswig)
(M. Biborski felvétele)



Fig. 2
Vimose (after SIEG 2003.)

2. kép
Vimose (SIEG 2003. alapján)



Fig. 3
Tiszalök (Hungarian National Museum, Budapest)
(Photo M. Biborski)

3. kép
Tiszalök (Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, Budapest)
(M. Biborski felvétele)

allowed to claim that a certain group of magic sword pendants served in fact as decorative fittings of sword hilts (Fig. 3). The find from Tiszalök was discussed in detail by László KOVÁCS (2001.) and next by Claus von CARNAP-BORNHEIM (2003.), who noticed that the analysed artefacts should probably be connected with sword hilts.

The interpretation of magic sword pendants as elements of hilt assemblies has been unambiguously confirmed by recently published jade and rock crystal finds from Dura-Europos (JAMES 2004.) (Fig. 4: a–c). Such a function is also suggested by certain details of their construction. In some specimens, the central aperture's shape resembles a cone with the base on the pendant's flat side. One can suppose that the opening was made to match the narrowing form of the tang. In the case of a decorative artefact found near Odessa in Ukraine (GUDKOVA–REDINA 1999.), four small apertures placed next to the central one attract attention. Most likely, shafts fitted in these apertures immobilised the pommel, preventing it from turning (Fig. 5). The question arises as to what kind of workshops manufactured sword hilts with such fittings? The available data suggest that they were Roman products. This is certainly the case with the Dura-Europos find. The specimen from Tiszalök is a Roman product too, as is indicated by the damascene-forged blade. Present-day advanced studies on the manufacture of Roman Period swords show that in the 3rd century this technique was used within the Empire but was unknown beyond the European borders of the Roman state (BIBORSKI–KACZANOWSKI 1989., BIBORSKI–KACZANOWSKI–KĘDZIERSKI–STĘPIŃSKI 2003.). It is also worthwhile noticing that in North European moore-finds of that period, for example, at Vimose, Illerup and Thorsberg, the alleged magic sword pendants are accompanied by swords of unquestionably Roman origin, which is attested by Roman workshops' marks on their blades, incrustations representing Roman deities and highly specialised technology.

The artefacts discussed here were dated to the 3rd century, when ceremonial scabbard fittings came into use in the Roman army and among the tribes of the North European Barbaricum. Some changes may be noticed when compared with the preceding centuries. The lavishness of swords was previously manifested primarily at the decoration of their scabbards. The best examples are scabbards of the gladius type swords.

From the first half of the 3rd century we have no evidence for the Romans bearing as spectacular scabbards as those used during the 1st and the early-2nd century (with the exception of incusted or niello decorated ‘box’ chapes (German: Dosenortbänder), which appeared at that time. The situation was different in the North European Barbaricum, where a number of diverse, very richly ornamented scabbard fittings were in use beginning from the early-3rd century. Approximately at the same time, swords topped with a new pommel type appeared in the Roman army equipment. The appearance of very decorative scabbards of Silistra type is dated to the second half or to the late-3rd century. The same tendency is recorded in the finds from the territory of the Barbaricum. It was manifested, among other things, by the use of swords with decorative pommels made of various materials, including rock crystal, jade or multicoloured glass, showing relationship with the alleged magic sword pendants.

Hilts with hard but at the same time fragile pommels make one wonder about the functionality of such weapon. However, it seems that properly fitted elements, fixed by a specially chosen glue mass, were stable enough to prevent fragile elements from being damaged.

Usually, most hilt assemblies consisted of three parts: a pommel, a grip and a hilt-guard.

Fig. 5
Gradeshka, Ukraine
(after GUDKOVA–REDINA 1999.)

5. kép
Gradeshka, Ukrajna
(GUDKOVA–REDINA 1999. alapján)

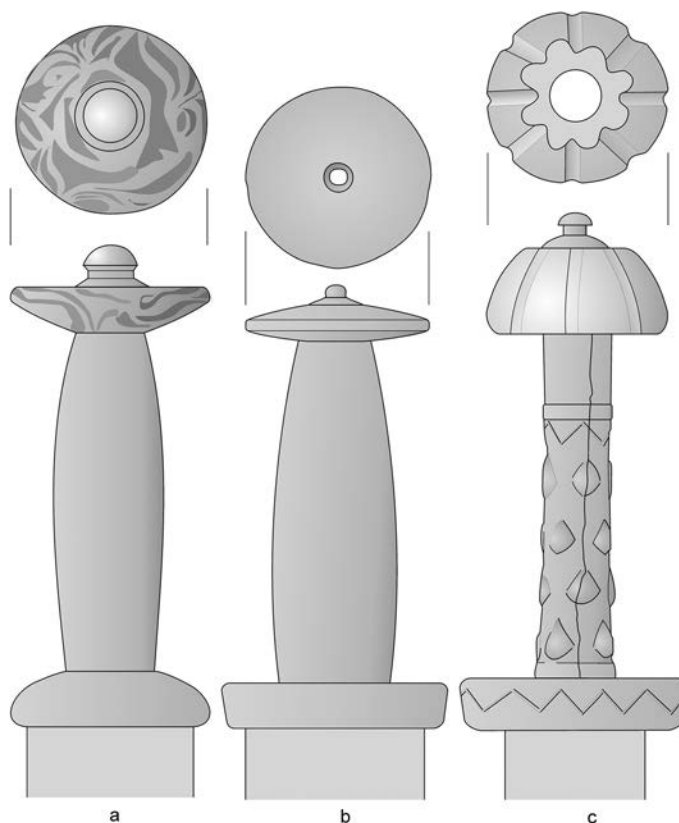


Fig. 4
Dura Europos. Reconstruction on the base
of data by JAMES 2004.

4. kép
Dura Europos. Rekonstrukció JAMES 2004. adatai alapján



These pieces were attached to the tang by rivets. Compared to the specimens widely used by the Romans towards the end of the 2nd century, hilts from the 3rd century underwent a modification. Apart from spherical pommels still in use, made of organic materials and similar to those found at gladius swords, pommels of slightly flattened ovoid appearance emerged (e.g. a pommel from Mainz: LINDENSCHMIT 1882. Pl. XI: 5; from Chur-Welschdörfli: FELLMANN 1966. Fig. 3). The forms of guards also changed. Beside less popular but still in use semi-spherical forms, new types appeared: flattened, oblong or trapezium-shaped ones (BIBORSKI–ILKJÆR 2006. 192, OLDENSTEIN 1977. Pl. 10: 14). Grips remained generally unchanged, with cylindrical shape and transverse or oblique ribs for better grasp.

A separate group consists of hilts whose guards and pommels are crescent-shaped and are made of organic materials, usually cow bones or ivory (e.g. hilt from Stuttgart-Bad Cannstadt: KEMKES–SCHEUERBRANDT 1997. 71, Pl. 5, Fig. 1). Hilts made of bone discovered at Vimose can be included into this category (ENGELHARDT 1869. Pl. 6, Fig. 1: 3) and Illerup (BIBORSKI–ILKJÆR 2006. Bd. 11, 232; Bd. 12, 145, Inv.no. DLI). It is worthwhile mentioning here that the parazonium hilts were of the same shape (LOË 1937. 113, Fig. 44, BÉAL–FEUGÈRE 1987. 96).

In the second half of the 2nd century, or perhaps in the early-3rd century, swords with metal hilts came into use. They reminded the above-mentioned wooden forms, namely those with spherical pommels and semi-spherical guards. These hilts were constructed using a wooden core plated with non-ferrous metals.

The greatest diversity of the 3rd century hilt forms is recorded for finds from the Barbaricum area, particularly for those discovered at moor-sites where numerous specimens with elements made from organic materials were preserved. This partially applies to finds dated to the next century as well. Apart from the forms known from the Roman Empire, other types also occur there, some very similar and others different in shape and construction. It is very difficult and sometimes simply impossible to say which items are products of Roman manufacturers and which are imitations produced in barbarian workshops. One of the hints suggesting Roman origin is the use of ivory. However, this criterion can be deceptive for two reasons. Firstly, macroscopic analysis does not always allow to distinguish ivory and walrus tusk. Secondly, we should take into account that local manufacturers could make the hilts using imported resources such as ivory or possibly glass elements too (i.e. magic sword pendants). Sword hilts from Illerup, with ivory guards and pommels serve as an example here. Metal (most often silver) plated wooden hilts, may be recognised as products of workshops operating in the Barbaricum, manufactured according to local stylistics without clear references to the Roman forms. Examples are the finds from Illerup and slightly younger forms from Kragehul and Nydam. They are dated to the first (Illerup) and second (Kragehul and Nydam) half of the 3rd century (BIBORSKI–ILKJÆR 2006. Bd. 11, 231–235, Bd 12, 169–170, ENGELHARDT 1865. Pl. 6: 3, BEMMANN–BEMMANN 1998. 53, Pl. 39: 55, IVERSEN 2010. 75, Pl. 40–41). A similar hilt type is represented by the specimens in which a grip, a pommel and a guard were made of some organic material, most likely leather and wood. The assembly was reinforced with metal rings.

From moor-sites there are also known the already mentioned wooden hilts of Roman type swords, with spherical pommels and semi-spherical guards, which probably were produced or reworked in “barbarian” workshops. They are decorated by metal (usually silver) studs, regularly arranged at the pommels and guards (RADDATZ 1987. Pl. 6: 1). So far, such finds are unknown from the territory of the Roman state. There is no evidence or reason to believe that local manufacturers used magic sword pendants for producing hilts. Discoveries from the barbarian territory, primarily from moor-finds, seem to indicate that swords with hilts decorated with these pendants, so-called “magische Perlen”, were relatively common finds and that they were Roman imports. They belonged to local elite, who emphasised their social position not only by the decoration of sword hilts and

scabbards but also by other, local elements of armament and equipment (e.g. lavishly decorated silver bosses of Lilla Harg–Herpály–Thorsberg type).

Referring to the remarks from the first part of this paper it should be concluded that in the 3rd century the armament of the Romans and of the elite of some peoples inhabiting the Barbaricum included swords with hilts manufactured using decorative elements made of glass or semi-precious stones. However, there is no evidence that magic pendants were attached to the scabbards in that period.

It is difficult to identify the factors which accounted for the appearance of the hilts in question. The impulse came most likely from the East, as it is evidenced by finds from the territories occupied by Sarmatian tribes. In particular, one can mention grave inventories of the Sarmatian elite in the Pontic area which included swords with decorative pommels of the discussed type (ŠAROV 2003.). The above impulse might have reached Roman soldiers in Pontic garrisons and then spread into other provinces of the Empire. Undoubtedly, it reached the North European Barbaricum as well (ANKE 1998. 99–100, CARNAP-BORNHEIM 2003. 373). It was most likely under these influences that Germanic elite started to use swords with decorative hilts, including swords with the pommels which have so far been interpreted as sword pendants, so-called “Schwertperlen”. One cannot exclude that oriental influences, especially at the transition between the 3rd and 4th century, are also reflected in more and more refined and lavish techniques of ornamentation, applied to decorate swords as well. A good example is a sword in a scabbard from Silistra, lavishly decorated in niello, filigree, granulation and with framed semi-precious stones (cabochons) (DUMANOV 2005.).

It should also be mentioned here that the discussed hilts with pommels made of semi-precious stones, glass and amber were still in use among steppe peoples in the 4th and 5th centuries, while in the European Barbaricum they were phased out in favour of new forms. These comprised hilts made from profiled metal bands, the younger forms, often cast, hour-glass shaped, or wooden and horn forms at the Nydam-Evebo type (BEMMANN–BEMMANN 1998. Pl. 56: 445). Beside them, the assemblages from graves or from moor-finds yielded the original magic sword pendants as well. They were recorded, among other places, in sumptuous elite graves from the 5th century containing Goldgrifspatha type swords, for example, from the cemetery of Basel-Kleinhüningen, grave 63 (GIESLER 1997. 219). At least some of them may probably be connected with Hunnic influences (Jakuszowice) (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6

Jakuszowice (Muzeum Archeologiczne w Krakowie) (Photo M. Biborski)

6. kép

Jakuszowice (Krakkói Régészeti Múzeum) (M. Biborski felvétele)

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Mágikus kardcsüngők

Joachim Werner „Beiträge zur Archäologie des Attila-Reiches” c. munkája óta az ún. „magische Schwertanhänger”, a mágikus kardcsüngők gyakran szerepelnek a római és népvándorlás kori régészeti irodalomban. A leggyakrabban tárgyalt kérdések között említhetjük azt, hogy ezek a tárgyak mennyiben jelentik az ázsiai sztyepei kultúrák és az európai Barbaricum közötti távoli kapcsolatok bizonyítékát, és azt, hogy milyen szerepet játszott ebben a folyamatban a római katonák fegyverzete, felszerelése és szokásai.

A III. században a rómaiak és az egyes barbaricum népek elitjének fegyverzetében találunk olyan kardokat, amelyek markolatát üveg- vagy féldrágakő végződésekkal díszítettek. Ugyanakkor nincs olyan leletünk ebből a korszakból, amely arra utalna, hogy a kardtokokra „mágikus” csüngőket erősítettek volna. Nem világos, mi váltotta ki az ilyen markolatvégek megjelenését. Az impulzus minden jel szerint keletről érkezett, amire a szarmata törzsek által megszállt területről származó leletek utalnak. Különösen a Pontus-vidék szarmata elitjének sírjai tartalmaznak ilyen típusú díszes markolatgombokat. Ugyanez az impulzus érhetett el a pontusi helyőrségek római katonáit, és innen terjedhetett tovább a Birodalom más tartományaira. Kétségtelen, hogy az észak-európai Barbaricumba is eljutott. Valószínűleg ennek hatására kezdett a germán elit díszes markolatgombos kardokat használni, köztük olyanokat is, amelyek esetében egészen eddig kardcsüngőkre („Schwertperlen”) gondolt a kutatás. Nem zárhatjuk ki, hogy ugyancsak keleti hatásokat sejtethetünk a III–IV. század fordulóján további – egyre kifinomultabb és gazdagabb – a kardok ékítését is szolgáló díszítő technikákban. Az V. századi északi germán kardoknál valóban megjelennek a kardcsüngők, egy részük valószínűleg hun hatásra.

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