WHAT`S IN A NAME? A STAMPED SHIELD-BOSS FROM GRĂDIŞTEA DE MUNTE - SARMIZEGETŮSA REGIA

Abstract. Everybody has a name. Some are proud of their name, some are not. Those who are so pleased with their names, from the desire to last forever, are writing it on different buildings, walls, architectural complexes or even archaeological monuments. On the other side, there are some people who are ashamed with their names and desperately want to change it. For sure, names are one of the most definitive markers of individuality. In this paper, together, we will discover what`s in a name stamped on a shield-boss from Grădiștea de Munte-Sarmizegetusa Regia (Romania).

Keywords: Grădiștea de Munte-Sarmizegetusa Regia, shield-boss, stamp, name, identity

Everything and everybody has a name. We need names to work with or to communicate to each other: `... I’ve gotta use words when I talk to you` (Sweeney, in T. S. Eliot, Fragment of an Agon). Encyclopaedia Britannica defines name as `one or more words designating an individual identity`. Because in this paper we will discuss only the personal names, some additional help has been sought in sociology, psychology and semiotics in order to gain a multi-perspective over the power of names.

From a psychological and sociological point of view, names can be considered labels which at the same time identify and distinguish an individual from other individuals. Just like for example, in the case of totemism, Claude Lévi-Strauss has demonstrated that it was used to differentiate and forge relationships among individuals and associative groups, names can be said to act in the same way. For sure, as it can be seen in humanistic literature, name is one aspect that contributes to individuality and uniqueness. In this context, we see them written or painted on different buildings, walls or other architectural complexes and even archaeological monuments (FIG. 1). On the other side, when name becomes a reason for jokes, people might end up feeling ashamed of their name, and desperately want to change it. Leaving for the moment the discussion regarding names, we will focus on the most important aspect of present-day archaeology, the material culture, but first, we propose a short discussion about Grădiștea de Munte-Sarmizegetusa Regia and its archaeological features.

The archaeological site of Grădiștea de Munte-Sarmizegetusa Regia

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(Hunedoara County, Romania) stands in the mountains at over 1000 metres altitude, at the edges of an area densely inhabited in the Late Iron Age. The first news about the ruins from the woodlands date back to the Early Modern Period and became more frequent beginning with the 19th century when some archaeological excavations began to be conducted. Real systematic excavations however, began only after the Second World War and continued out ever since.

As it has already been stated in the specialized literature, the culture-historical approach was embraced by the Romanian archaeology and the discoveries from this site were linked with the ancient written records. Bearing in mind this perspective, the site of Grădiștea de Munte was identified with Sarmizegetusa (Basileion or Regia in Latin transcription), the central point of the Dacian Kingdom, as it is mentioned by the Greek man of letters, Ptolemy. As it has been suggested more recently, in a very plastic manner, the Dacian hillforts from the Orăștie Mountains and especially Sarmizegetusa Regia, were invested by the general public with a very strong identity connotation, eventually leading to their perception as places of memory.

The archaeological excavations seem to indicate the organisation of the site in three distinct functional parts (FIG. 2). First of all, the fortification built from limestone blocks on the highest parts of the landscape, encloses the first five terraces within an area of almost three hectares. Close to the fortification, the ‘sacred area’ takes shape under the form of several temples, five rectangular and two circular and an andesite rock altar. These edifices, some of them multi-phased, are constructed on two large terraces, the 10th and 11th ones. West and East from the fortification and the ‘sacred area’, lays the undefended civilian settlement, which is the largest sector of the site. Also in this case, archaeological excavations have revealed complex buildings or more mundane ones. The general chronology of the site stretches from the first century BC until 106 AD, followed by a short Roman occupation, most probably until the beginning of Hadrian’s reign, but as it has already been remarked, plans to refine this chronology remain a major priority.

1 For what signifies and still signifies culture-historical archaeology, we strongly recommend: JOHNSON 2010, cap. 5, Culture and Process; JONES 1997, passim; TRIGGER 2006, cap. 6, Culture-Historical Archaeology;
2 FLOREA 2014, 64; FLOREA 2017, 363; LOCKYEAR 2004, 35;
3 MATEESCU 2012, 83-117;
4 FLOREA 2014, 64; FLOREA 2017, 363;
5 FL OREA 2014, 65; FLOREA 2017, 364;
6 In this aspect we refer especially to the ’Plateau with six terraces’ considered the ‘aristocratic’ quarter of Grădiștea de Munte-Sarmizegetusa Regia. For more information about this complex see: DAICOVICIU et alii 1955, 195-204;
In the present day the majority of the researchers agree that the big enclosure constructed on the highest parts of the landscape is in fact a Roman fortification but this state of affairs was not the same from the beginning. In most of the cases, the interpretation of the fortification was started from the historical events – the Dacian Wars of Emperor Trajan, corroborated with other information offered by ancient sources. To put it in other words, the archaeological results were modelled to fit into a bigger picture described by the ancient scholars, following a scenario played during the wars at the beginning of the second century AD.

But these were the times and just like in other parts of Europe the way of doing archaeology gave birth to a multitude of divergent paths and local particularities in the practice of the discipline. Basically, ‘the past was uncovered, described, compared to other accessible samples of human behaviour, valorised and offered to the public in the form that enabled the audience to make sense of its present condition’. So, in a short time after the start of the excavations in the mountains, Constantin Daicoviciu and his research team considered the big enclosure brought to light as a refuge fortification, a shelter for the civilian population from the surrounding areas, idea that was further perpetuated by Constantin Daicoviciu’s son, Hadrian. Ion Horaţiu Crişan adhered to the same conclusion as well, stating that, due to a lack of discoveries in the enclosed area, the fortification cannot be a ‘princely residence’, being most likely a refuge fortification.

Today, the majority of the researchers agree that the big fortification seen at Grădiştea de Munte-Sarmizegetusa, which encloses almost 3 hectares is in fact a Roman fortification. Practically, it is a camp that owes its irregular shape due to the natural conditions of the landscape. Based on his excavations, professor Ioan Glodariu, considered that the present fortification is in fact the Roman reconstruction of a former pre-Roman fortification. According to him, the initial form of the fortification was that of a much smaller ‘Dacian’ hillfort, with an inner surface of only 1 hectare that enclosed with limestone blocks the first three terraces, corresponding to the highest area of the site.

The idea of a Roman reconstruction of the fortification is not new in the archaeological literature. More than 40 years ago, in a paper dealing with the chronology of the Orăştie Mountains’ settlements, Hadrian Daicoviciu and Ioan Glodariu considered that the big fortification was rebuilt twice: firstly by the indigenous population before the wars from AD 105, and secondly by the Romans, after partially destroying it during the wars.

On the other side, based first and foremost on the historical events, Alexandru Diaconescu envisaged his own scenario which he then overlapped over the archaeological records. He accepted as well the hypothesis of a smaller fortification i.e. a ‘Dacian’ one, considering however that this...
Fig. 3 – Shield-boss from Grădiștea de Munte-Sarmizegetusa Regia (photo. R. Mateescu).

Fig. 4 – Bronze plaque from Grădiștea de Munte-Sarmizegetusa Regia (photo. R. Mateescu; drawing, R. Gaciu).
one was replaced by a Roman camp in AD 102, immediately after the first war, a military garrison being installed in the interior of this camp. The author found his assumptions confirmed by ancient references kept in the works of Cassius Dio. Continuing his scenario, Diaconescu believed that after being attacked by the ‘Dacians’ a new camp would have been built after AD 106, corresponding to the one that can be seen today in the local landscape.

After exploring the inaccuracies from the specialised literature and especially from the archaeological research, Coriolan Horăţiu Opreanu reached the conclusion that the big fortification was in fact constructed from the beginning as a Roman camp in AD 102, and in this matter he brings forth several analogies from other parts of the Empire. Opreanu’s idea is certainly interesting but his arguments in defending his case raise some misunderstandings. He cited Hadrian Daicoviciu, Ştefan Ferenczi and Ioan Glodariu who all stated that the fortification from Grădiştea de Munte-Sarmizegetusa Regia is not placed in a dominant position, but is rather dominated by the surrounding heights. Based on this supposition expressed by the authors, Opreanu extrapolated and concluded that the fortification was inferior from a military point of view in comparison to the rest of the ‘Dacian’ fortifications from the area. However, this idea that the fortification on the Grădiştea hill is dominated by the surroundings was expressed earlier by Hadrian Daicoviciu in 1974. He concluded that precisely on these grounds, the placement of a Roman garrison would have been impossible due to the vulnerability of the landscape.

Despite this, as we stated earlier, nowadays the majority of researchers agree that the visible fortification is the result of Roman activities in the local landscape. Older proofs – limestone blocks with Roman legion units, stone reliefs, excavations made in the 1950s and 1960s – or newer proofs, strengthen the hypothesis of a Roman fortification.

As it has been stated before, real systematic archaeological excavations were conducted only after the Second World War. It was in these first years of research into the mountains that a rather interesting object was brought to light. As it seems to result from the ‘discovery note’ the artefact, a bronze shield-boss, was discovered 139 m north of the Western Gate and 1.3 m from the interior side of the wall.

The object of our study has a circular shape, having the outer diameter of the flange 18.4 cm and that of the bowl 11.6 cm (FIG. 3). Although the flange is cracked in one place and distorted, we can presume that its original form was a flat one. The surface of the flange has been endowed with four circular holes necessary for the attachment to the shield, which was made through rivets punched to the flange. The height of the shield-boss is 6.6 cm. On the top of the bowl another circular hole can be seen, bearing proof that the weaponry object was made on a lathe. The shape of the bowl, a conical one, is yet another indication of this late statement.

The most accurate analogies for our object come from Dura-Europos (present-day Syria) and Doncaster (United Kingdom), where similar round shield-bosses with conical bowls and four holes attachments can be found. Various examples of conical shield-bosses are to be found especially in the ‘Germanic’ areas of the Roman Empire.

As it can be seen, the bowl of the shield-boss was cracked and together with this object, the same ‘discovery note’ signalled the presence of a bronze plaque (FIG. 5; length 15 cm, width 12.8 cm.). In some parts the plaque was cut straight most probably with a pair of scissors for the possible repairs of the shield-boss that but never made. There remains only one question, why was this object so important? One clue is offered by the most interesting element of the bronze piece – the stamped inscription (length 1.2 cm) with a rectangular cartouche very close to the rim of the flange. The name inscribed on it, Sextii (FIG. 6), represents most probably the name of the artisan, being practically a marker stamp.

The only other stamped shield-boss (FIG. 7) that we know about until now, was discovered in the interwar period in London, United Kingdom. Initially entering the records of the British Museum as a « bronze vessel with flat rim, latter cracked and bowl badly damaged », this rather interesting object has undergone revision when Ralph Jackson stated in the specialized literature that the bronze vessel is in fact a bronze shield-boss of auxiliary type. Two things should be mentioned regarding this object. First of all, we notice the absence of the holes on the flange. In fact the lack of any other flange attachment systems must have been the reason that led to the interpretation of the piece as a bronze vessel. The second notable feature regarding the London boss is the stamp, a crescent-shaped cartouche near the rim of the flange. The stamped inscription enables the reading COCIL(V)S F(ECIT) or COGILL(V)S F(ECIT). Archaeological discoveries have shown that there are cases in which different military equipment, weaponry or even horse gears – helmets, shields, pendants or dolabrae – have been inscribed or pierced with the name of the owner, the legion, the unit or even that of the emperor. On the other hand, marker’s stamps on military objects are not commonly encountered. In this context we could mention

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20  DIACONESCU 1997, 24;
21  DIACONESCU 1997, 24-25;
22  OPREANU 1999-2000, 151-159; OPREANU 2000, 79-86;
23  OPREANU 1999-2000, 164-165; OPREANU 2000, 87;
24  OPREANU 1999-2000, 152; OPREANU 2000, 80;
25  DAI COVICIU/ FERENCZI/GLODARIU 1989, 71;
26  OPREANU 1999-2000, 152; OPREANU 2000, 80;
27  DAI COVICIU 1974, 114;
30  DAI COVICIU et alii 1991, 103, pl. V, nr. 18; DAI COVICIU et alii 1983, 233; GLODARIU 1965, 128-129, fig. 7-4; GLODARIU 1966, 430
32  DAI COVICIU et alii 1991, 103, pl. V, nr. 18; DAI COVICIU et alii 1983, 233; GLODARIU 1965, 128-129, fig. 7-4; GLODARIU 1966, 430
33  FLOREA et alii 2013, 112;
34  For the local topography and toponyms see especially MATEESCU 2017, 357-362;
two gladii scabbards of Mainz type found at Vindonissa and Strasbourg. In the first case the inscription reads C. COELIUS VENUST(US) LUGUD(UNO), revealing us significant information about the artisan, who was a Roman citizen from Lugudunum (Lyon, France), that was also the place of manufacture of the aforementioned weapon. On the second example, the inscription tells us that Q. NONIENVS PVDE(N)S AD ARA(M) F(ECIT). In other cases only the artisan’s name is known, like for instance the Mainz type gladius from Rheingönheim (Germany), inscribed L. VALERIVS F(ECIT) and the puggio from Oberammergau (Germany), stamped C. ANTONIVS F(ECIT). Another significant example can be seen on a Mainz type gladius from Bonn, bearing not one, but two workshop stamps: on the hilt tang it can be read SABINI, while the blade was inscribed SVLLA F(ECIT).

As it has been suggested by Ramsay MacMullen in his pioneering paper *Inscriptions on Armor and the Supply of Arms in the Roman Empire* military objects bearing stamps could say more about this complex mechanism. Jürgen Oldenstein has developed an explanatory model that integrates the range of production levels from private to self-sufficient and finally to centralised production. In Oldenstein’s model, supplies

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41 NICOLAY 2007, 130, fig. 4.1, nr.3; 42 MACMULLEN 1960, 36, no. 51; NICOLAY 2007, 130; 43 MACMULLEN 1960, 38, no. 74; NICOLAY 2007, 130, fig. 4.1, nr.1; 44 NICOLAY 2007, 130, fig. 4.1, nr. 2;
of weaponry to the frontier zones of the state evolved in a rather uniform model with four stages of development. Given the fact that our object can be dated in the beginning of the Dacian province we will present only the first stage.

This model, supposes that after the Roman troops occupy a particular region the newly conquered lands are not in the position to provide large-scale manufacture labour of military equipment, weaponry or horse gears, therefore the necessary items are imported from Italy or Southern Gaul. This general explanatory model, which can be connected to the World-System Theory (WST) umbrella, can be applied also to our shield-boss from Grădiştea de Munte-Sarmizegetusa Regia. But because present-day archaeology has shown disapproval towards these general models, we cannot exclude from the equation the most important aspect of social archaeology, the individuals behind the material culture. For instance, there are epigraphical evidences of private weapons producers, while in other cases archaeological discoveries from army camps speak about self-sufficiency. Also, some pieces of military equipment or weapons seem to have been transmitted from generation to generation. Fifty years ago G. R. Watson stated with certainty that in the early empire the new recruits had to buy their weapons and armour.

Returning to our shield-boss from Grădiştea de Munte-Sarmizegetusa Regia and the name stamped on it, Sextvs or Sextivs, until now this name has neither been attested on bronze vessels nor weaponry. To follow the origins of the artisan, some of the remarks given in Richard Petrovsky’s work should be useful. He suggested that stamps which present names in the genitive case are to be found especially in Northern Italy. Therefore, bearing all the precautions in mind that are needed when it comes to interpreting such pieces, we propose that the origins of the artisan should be searched within the northern Italian peninsula. However, we are neither excluding out the possibility that this artisan could have been an itinerant one, travelling from place to place, using his craftsmanship for himself or satisfying others demands.

In the beginning of this paper with the help of sociological literature we were saying that names are labels which both identify and distinguish a person from other persons and serve as an anchor point for identity. Now we will try to interpret the name stamped on the shield-boss in a semiotic context, in a model in which the name is not static, but it rather depends on the interpretant. From this semiotic perspective, the name of the person, in our case Sextvs/Sextivs is a SIGN which identifies a person, the OBJECT of the action. For sure we don’t have the necessary tools to observe all the past because we, as archaeologists, uncover only ‘residues of the past’ and we don’t have any idea about the meaning or sense of the name for the person.

But this meaning and sense is always re-constructed by us, in the present day through this semiotic prism. In this case, the name Sextvs/Sextivs triggers an association with a profession, the artisan work. Concluding we state that when we see a marker stamp on an artefact, we are exploring only one part of past people identity or localized history of personhood, in this case the work of the artisan.

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