

# THE BRONZE AGE PRESTIGE AXE FROM VINȚU DE JOS

**Abstract:** In 1996, the research team in the archaeological site from Vințu de Jos – *Deasupra Satului* was presented with an ornate sandstone axe that had been found by accident. The item was whole, naviforme, approximately centrally perforated and its sides had rich spiralling incised decorations. Another, more rudimentary decoration that was probably made subsequently is still visible on its upper part. It is most likely an imported item, possibly from the south-Danube or Aegean region, used by its owner as a prestige good. The axe is a unique item for the current Romanian space and it must have belonged to the Wietenberg II Bronze Age settlement that was documented both as a rich settlement and as a necropolis which was located in its vicinity.

**Keywords:** *Bronze Age, Wietenberg, stone axe, spiralling decorations, sceptre.*

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### INTRODUCTION

During the systematic surveys carried out in the broad archaeological site belonging to the Wietenberg culture from Vințu de Jos-*Deasupra Satului*<sup>1</sup> (Transylvania, Romania), in the summer of 1996, a villager a stone ornate axe to the research team. The item was kept to be studied and drawn, after which it was returned to the discoverer<sup>2</sup>. Due to the fact that it is a unique item, we shall focus particularly on it.

### ITEM DESCRIPTION

The axe is made of grey sandstone. It is naviform, perforated approximately in the centre and its surfaces are relatively flat. One of its ends has a small scruff, approximately 1 cm wide; the opposite, end is more elongated in relation to the perforation, it is sharp and it bears marks of deterioration. The sides are ornate with different motifs made by incising the soft rock. One of its sides (conventionally regarded as “1”) bears the motif of a chained spiral (Fig. 1/d). From the largest loop, located at one of the ends of the motif, the spiral continues with a line that fringes it on the lower part and unites with the first spiral from the other end. On the opposite side (“2”) there is a motif made of “aquatic”, chained spirals that form a frieze, framed above and below by an incised line (Fig. 1/b). One of its facets was incised with a strip of zigzag lines in the shape of the letter “M” (Fig. 1/c). The quality of the execution, inferior to that of the spiralling motifs, led us to believe that it was the work of a different person, but it still originated in the Bronze Age. Dimensions: length = 12,5 cm; maximum width = 4,6cm; girth = 2,5 cm,

<sup>1</sup> For older discoveries, see GOOSS 1876, 414; REPARHALBA 1995, 145 (included in Pianu de Jos), 213; for the Wietenberg culture, see PAUL 1995, 164-197, and for the research conducted between 1994-1998, see ANDRIȚOIU/POPA/SIMINA, 141-192.

<sup>2</sup> The axe was presented to the archaeological site coordinator from Vințu de Jos-*Deasupra Satului*, Ioan Andrițoiu. The photographs were made by Radu Totoianu.

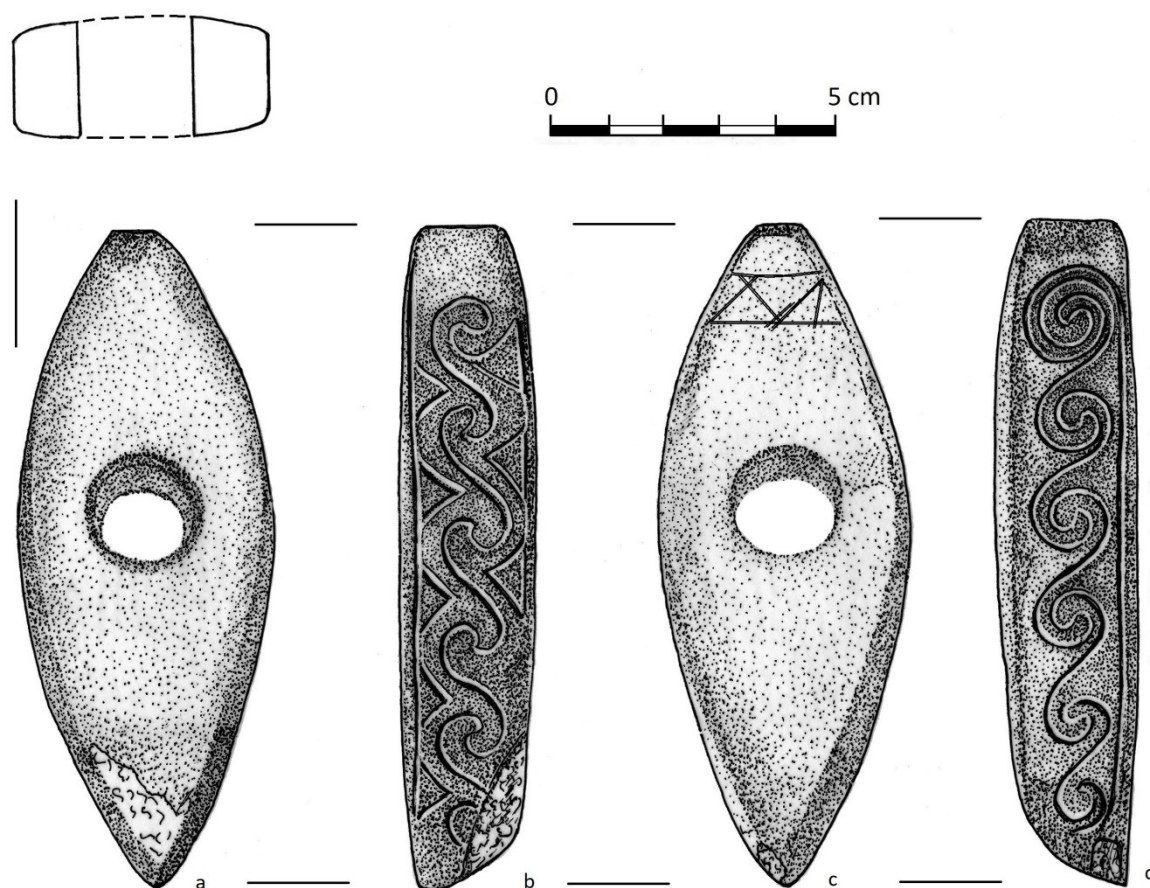


Fig. 1. Ornate stone axe from the Wietenberg settlement from Vințu de Jos-Deasupra Satului (drawing)

perforation diameter = 2cm (Fig. 1, 5).

### ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION POSSIBILITIES

The stone axe can be classified as part of the category of items found in the Wietenberg culture area. In Nikolaus Boroffka's typology, it belongs to the SD2 ("Doppelaxt") type, which includes the items found in Cetea<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 8/2) and on level I from Derșida<sup>4</sup> (Romania), the difference being that they had symmetrical ends and the perforation in the centre. A similar axe also originated from the inventory of a tumulus from Helmsdorf (Germany)<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 8/1). In the case of the axe from Vințu de Jos, the perforation is slightly eccentric and the ends are different – one is sharp, the other is severed. However, much more similar in shape is an axe that originated from the eponymous cemetery of the Komarov culture (tumulus 48)<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 8/3), contemporary with the evolution of the Wietenberg site from Vințu de Jos. There were similar discoveries from the Hatvan culture<sup>7</sup>.

Axes in the shape of the one from Vințu de Jos, richly decorated, small clay models of axes were frequently found in the Gârla Mare-Žuto Brdo culture<sup>8</sup> area (Fig. 9). In this cultural environment, their presence is accompanied by clay

models of boats, as are the ones from Orsoja (Bulgaria)<sup>9</sup> and Darda (Croatia)<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 10/4-6), providing hints of the "naviform" shape of the stone axes. Both from above and from the side, the item from Vințu de Jos looks like a boat.

Although the axe originated from one of the most typical Wietenberg culture sites, it is somewhat surprising that the two types of spirals on it cannot be identified exactly in the decorations on the ceramic vessels of this culture. The spiral with a single coil ("1") (Fig. 1/d) has practically no perfect analogies on the Wietenberg artefacts. Something similar can be identified in the (double lined) spiral on a Wietenberg bird shaped vessel from Uroi-Sigheti (Romania)<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 11/1). The other spiral ("2") (Fig. 1/b) has a few analogies in the Wietenberg pottery, particularly in phase III<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 2/2-5).

As part of the possible decryption of the significance of the item, one must first of all interpret the rich decorations incised on its surface. The delved ornament depicts two types of spirals found in the "pan Indo-European" space of the Bronze Age, widely spread. We must note that these two motifs can be found on objects that bear significances of worship, which thus shows their significance in relation

<sup>3</sup> BOROFFKA 1994, 217, Taf. 24/15.

<sup>4</sup> CHIDIOȘAN 1980, 61, Pl. 38/26, the axe is made of quartzite.

<sup>5</sup> DAVID 2002, Taf. 278/13.

<sup>6</sup> KLOCHKO 1993, 9, Fig. 1/7.

<sup>7</sup> KALICZ 1968, Pl. 79/8.

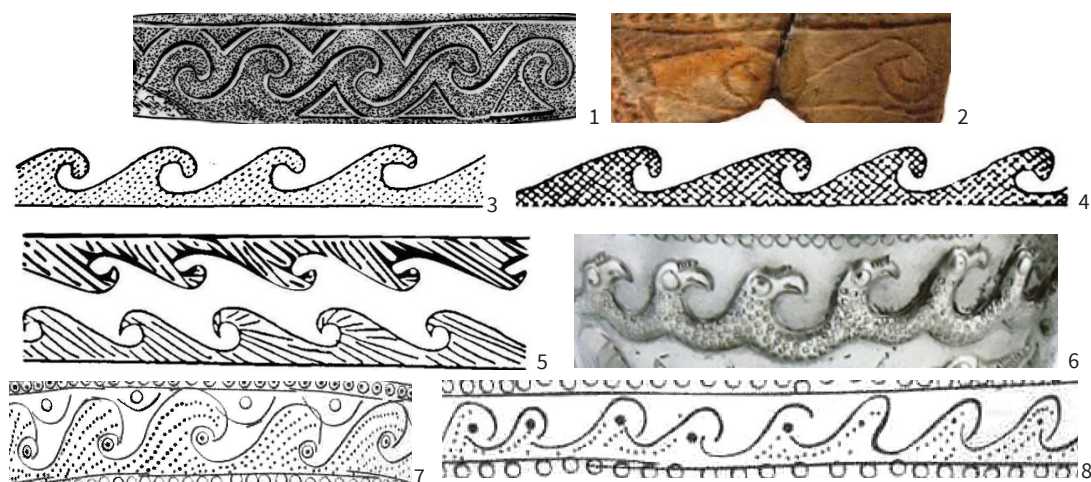
<sup>8</sup> HAMPEL 1896, Pl. CIII; MÜLLER-KARPE 1980, Taf. 282/A5; SHALGANOVA 1995, 300, Fig. 4/65; 5/81, 84.

<sup>9</sup> KISS 2007, 121, Fig. XXIV/e.

<sup>10</sup> KISS 2007, 121, Fig. XXIV/d.

<sup>11</sup> The vessel was interpreted as an *askos* (MARC *et alii* 2015, 82-83, Pl. II). C. Kacsó (KACSÓ 2014, 14-15, Fig. 4/2) also pleaded for its classification as an *askos* type vessel, but we believe that it is more likely that it was a *rython*. This idea is supported by the Mycenaean boat shaped *rython* from Lapithos (TASSIOS 2008, Fig. 36).

<sup>12</sup> BOROFFKA 1994, Typentafel 15/26-27; 23/29; GOGĂLTAN/MARINESCU 2018, 32, Fig. 22.



**Fig. 2.** Types of spirals present on the stone axe from Vințu de Jos (1), on the Wietenberg ceramic vessels (2-4) and on the Getae-Dacian silver vessels (4-3 centuries BC – 5 and 1<sup>st</sup> century BC – 6-7) (after GOGĂLTAN/MARINESCU 2018 – 2; BOROFFKA 1994 – 3-5; SPĂNU 2012 – 7-8)

with these artefacts. Thus, the type “2” spiral can be found in different versions on the bronze items from Scandinavia. For instance, it can often be found on the late Danish Bronze Age razors, forming boat shaped motifs<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 12/1-4). The influence of this symbolism can be found in the case of the Hajdúsámson-Apa-Ighiel-Zajta type bronze axes from the Carpathian Basin (for example, in Hajdúsámson, Săpânța and Gaura)<sup>14</sup>, which, together with the local spiralling ornaments, also depict ship representations<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 12/5-6).

In the Balkan space, they appear in the decorations of the disks of the same period from Vulchitrun (approx. 1300 BC)<sup>16</sup>. In Greece, different types of spirals, sometimes similarly shaped, were carved into one of the funerary stelae

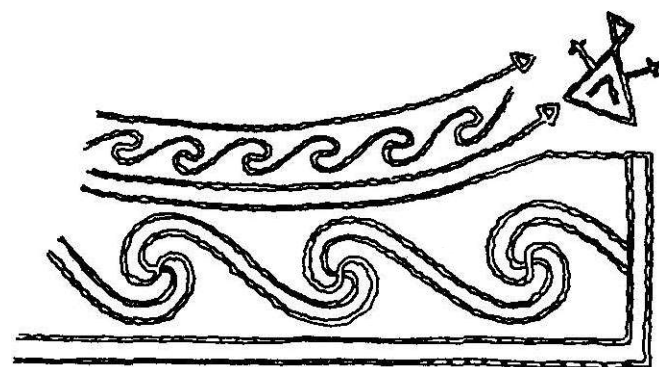
in time, or perhaps even at that time there were different interpretations of the same symbol. A good example is given by the meaning held in time by the two types of spirals on the axe from Vințu de Jos. A clay item from the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC (8<sup>th</sup> century BC) was discovered in Yunatsite (Bulgaria)<sup>19</sup> – it bears zoomorphic protomes and depicts the two spiralling motifs that can also be found on the axe from Vințu de Jos. This discovery shows the perpetuation of the combination between the two types of spirals on the artefacts of the Iron Age. focus has also been put on the survival of certain Wietenberg motifs in the ceramic decorations of the Basarabi culture vessels from the first Iron Age and it was explained through their presence



**Fig. 3.** Spirals on the stone axe from Vințu de Jos (1) and on the *rython* from Uroi (2) (after MARC *et alii* 2015 – 2)

from Mycenae<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 13), or painted on the stone sarcophagi from Hagia Triada, Larnakes and Palaikastro<sup>18</sup>.

However, the interpretations depend on the limits set by the study of prehistoric symbolism. We can only surmise what these symbols meant to the owners of such an axe. The interpretation of certain symbols changed



**Fig. 4.** Part of the symbolic ornaments on a religious item from Yunatsite, from the Early Iron Age (Bulgaria) (after BONEV 1995)

on the bone and wood artefacts, as well as on textiles<sup>20</sup>. The importance of the symbolism of this type of spiral (also known as “aquatic” spiral) also resides in the fact that it can be found a millennium later in the decorations of the sacred silver vessels from the Getae-Dacian world, in Săncrăeni (1<sup>st</sup> century BC)<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 2/7-8). The same decoration may be found on the Sarmatic phaleræ, dated to 2nd - 1st century BC<sup>22</sup>,

<sup>13</sup> KAUL 1998, I, 11-12, 23, 30, 46, 52, 153, 161, Fig. 3-4, 40, 62, 101, 115, 308, 375; KAUL 1998, II, 213, Fig. 84, 139 ș.a.; JENSEN 2003, Fig. 61; KAUL 2004, 129-130, Fig. 14/10-11.

<sup>14</sup> VULPE 1970, Taf. 20/301-302; 69/3; DAVID 2002, Taf. 11/2-4; 27/1-3; 117/3.

<sup>15</sup> KAUL 1998, II, 177-180, Fig. 175-176; KAUL 2004, 124, Fig. 14/4.

<sup>16</sup> BONEV 1995, Fig. 2, 7.

<sup>17</sup> FIELDS 2006, 24 (photo).

<sup>18</sup> MÜLLER-KARPE 1980, Taf. 207/1-4.

<sup>19</sup> BONEV 1993, 73, Fig. 22/1 = 35/4.

<sup>20</sup> VULPE 1965, 129.

<sup>21</sup> SPĂNU 2012, Fig. 26/1.3c, 2.2; 26/18; 115/1-2; 117-118, 121-124; EGRI/RUSTOIU 2014, Fig. 2/6-7; 3/8, 15; 4/10-13.

<sup>22</sup> BĂRCĂ 2002, Fig. 5-6; BĂRCĂ 2006, 223-224, Fig. 132-133; BĂRCĂ 2006a, 144-146, Fig. 5/1; 5a/1; 35/7; 35a/1-3; 37/3; 37a/3; BĂRCĂ/SYMONENKO



and helmets of the Montefortino type A-B<sup>23</sup>. Daniel Spănu calls this motif a “broken wave” and he includes it among the abstract motifs from the Hellenistic world<sup>24</sup>. We must however consider the connection with the “vulture” motif present on the great chalice from the princely treasure from Aghighirol and on the one from the Metropolitan Museum in New York<sup>25</sup>, as well as on the one from Rogozen<sup>26</sup> that greatly diminishes its dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC, which also changes the possible interpretation. Therefore, if in the case of the Bronze Age we are tempted to understand this type of spiral as “aquatic”, suggesting the waves of water, in the Iron Age the symbol transforms into a chain of “waves”, which could equally illustrate a ripple of clouds<sup>27</sup>, on the upper part ending in vulture heads (Fig. 2/6). Thus, the following question arises: is the “aquatic” spiral not also a stylised zoomorphic representation of a symbol that only in the Iron Age was revealed to be that of vulture heads?

On one of its facets, the axe from Vințu de Jos also bears a secondary incised ornament (Fig. 1/c; 7/1). It was made after the beautiful spiralling ornamentation and it is greatly inferior, from the viewpoint of technique. However, it can be included in the typology of motifs known in the Bronze Age and it therefore belongs to the same time period, but it is the work of a much less skilled craftsman. We have not found analogies for this motif, as a whole. In the case of the ornaments incised in the shape of the letter “M”, on the incised strip, there are certain similarities. For instance, one can compare it to the decorations present on the axe from the Bronze Age found in Giurgești (Romania)<sup>28</sup> (Fig. 7/3), which have some good analogies with the incised ornaments of an axe from Bulgaria<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 7/2). Similar motifs are embossed on the blade of the exquisite stone axe from Năeni-Zănoaga, from the Monteoru culture area<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 7/4), on the one from the catacomb culture<sup>31</sup> (Fig. 7/4) or from Lozna<sup>32</sup>, all of which belonging to the Bronze Age. The symbol of the letter “M” or “W” also appears on other artefacts from the Bronze Age. The closest example to the site from Vințu de Jos is the one from Craiva-Piatra Craivii, where it can be found depicted using the Furchenstich technique on a ceramic fragment that was made in the Wietenberg manner, with Nordic influences (Fig. 7/6). The sign “M” or “W” was identified as a symbol of Cassiopeia and it is often reproduces on religious artefacts and buildings. Its presence is attested, for instance, in the

buildings bearing religious symbols in Tiszaug (Hungary)<sup>33</sup> or on the Gârla Mare-Žuto Brdo culture artforms<sup>34</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

Until this discovery, in the Wietenberg culture area ornate stone axes had not appeared. We believe that the stone axe from Vințu de Jos can be included in the Wietenberg II phase. This is the moment in which the spiral plays the dominant role in the ornamentation of ceramic and metal artefacts; there are categories of unique items for this phase (as are the beautiful *Tonröhren*) decorated with this motif<sup>35</sup>. Unfortunately, the absence of a context does not allow for the possibility of opening the discussion to other aspects that could prove to be important. We cannot even note whether the item originated from the settlement (as it is very likely), or from the necropolis.

Is the axe a local item or an imported one? This would be more than a rhetorical question. More recently, the Wietenberg culture spirals and the meanders were analysed and they were compared to those from the Mycenaean world. The conclusion drawn by the authors of the study is that the “authentic” Mycenaean spiral<sup>36</sup> is not present on the Wietenberg ceramics. The Wietenberg spirals more likely indicate a possible abstracted zoomorphic symbolism. Therefore, the ornamenting practices of this culture appeared and developed independently from the Mycenaean one. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that there had been contact at the level of the elites and the prestige goods could have come from the Mycenaean world towards Transylvania<sup>37</sup>. The absence of similar items, not only in the Wietenberg culture area, but also in the areas of other neighbouring and contemporary cultures, the *quality* and *shape* of the symbolic ornaments made of spirals led us to the conclusion that we are faced with an imported artefact. The linear scratched ornaments on the face of the axe seems to support our stance, since it must have been the work of a local member of the Wietenberg community from Vințu de Jos, after it had come into his possession. What could the origin of the axe be? An answer in this sense is rather difficult, but we believe that its origins must be sought in the South-Danube or Aegean areas, from where it came to Transylvania by the same means as other goods dedicated to the local elites – either as gifts, as imported goods or spoils of war.

The Wietenberg prestige goods discovered in the settlement from Vințu de Jos are not limited to this item. Another exceptional discovery is the ornate horn sceptre placed in a grave that can be dated to the Wietenberg II phase<sup>38</sup>. Such status symbols in the intra-Carpathian prehistoric world were part of the sacred set of values, some of which, as is the case of the sceptres, were intergenerational transferrable goods. This is clearly stated in a passage of the Homeric *Iliad* (II, 45-46), in which Agamemnon takes his “abiding sceptre of his forefathers and with haste he sets

2009, 87-88, Fig. 24/1-2, 6; SÎRBU/BĂRCĂ 2016, Fig. 9.4/1, 3; 9.6/3; 9.9/1.

<sup>23</sup> BĂRCĂ 2006, 208, Fig. 146/2; BĂRCĂ/SYMONENKO 2009, 290-291, Fig. 117/1, 5; SIMONENKO 2009, 139, 146, Fig. 113.

<sup>24</sup> SPĂNU 2012, 102.

<sup>25</sup> SÎRBU/FLOREA 1997, 81, Fig. 10/4-5; 11/1-3; CONSTANTINESCU *et alii* 2014, 652, Fig. 9-11.

<sup>26</sup> SÎRBU/FLOREA 1997, Fig. 25/2.

<sup>27</sup> This idea was inspired by the photograph published by DIETRICH/DIETRICH 2011, Fig. 6.

<sup>28</sup> NICULICĂ/BUDUI/MAREȘ 2004, 276, 286, 291, Fig. 4/5; DIACONU 2010, 7-8, Fig. 2/1.

<sup>29</sup> NIKOLOV 2010, 96, Fig. 3/2. The axe, in the absence of a context, comes from a local collection from Krivodol.

<sup>30</sup> MOTZOI-CHICIDEANU/ȘANDOR-CHICIDEANU 2017, 69-77, Pl. 5.

<sup>31</sup> KOŠKO 2002, 60, Fig. 19/5; MINKOV 2015, Fig. 6; MOTZOI-CHICIDEANU/ȘANDOR-CHICIDEANU 2017, 74, Pl. 10/6.

<sup>32</sup> DIACONU 2010, 7, 18, Fig. 5/6. Other stone axes bearing incised ornaments in the Romanian space are very different from the symbolism under scrutiny, as is the case of the item from Bordei Verde; see MUNTEANU 1991, 408-409, Fig. 14.

<sup>33</sup> CSÁNYI/STANCZIK 1992, Fig. 76; LAZAROVICI 2002, 173-180, Fig. 10.

<sup>34</sup> BIEHL 2008, Pl. 2/2.

<sup>35</sup> KACSÓ 1998.

<sup>36</sup> See DIETRICH/DIETRICH 2011, Fig. 7.

<sup>37</sup> DIETRICH/DIETRICH 2011, 67-82.

<sup>38</sup> ANDRIȚOIU/POPA 1999, 106; POPA/SIMINA 2004, 27.

off”.

The sacred value of an object must not be understood as limited to a certain raw material<sup>39</sup>. In the use of metal, stone or horn, we should probably also see a direct connection with the specific ceremonies of the annual cycle that implied certain materials and shapes<sup>40</sup>. For instance, a plane stone axe was “endowed” with two signs from the Linear A writing, incised on one of the axe’s facets<sup>41</sup>, which is relevant to the importance given to these objects in the Bronze Age, even if the raw material was cheap and easy to procure. At the same time, we can surmise a certain conservatism characteristic to the Iron Age, in which stone was still being used, despite the fact that bronze was accessible. The axe from Vințu de Jos completes the list of apparent exceptions which, as we can see, today are gradually and more evidently becoming part of the rule.

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<sup>39</sup> For the bone and horn sceptres from the Bronze Age, see DIACONU 2014.

<sup>40</sup> An interesting case is represented by the Eneolithic stone axe that was rediscovered in Sucidava-Celei, after it had first been discovered in the Roman period; it bears an incised inscription (TUDOR 1969) that was later interpreted as having most likely been dedicated to the god Jupiter Dolichenus (IDR II, 122, nr. 233).

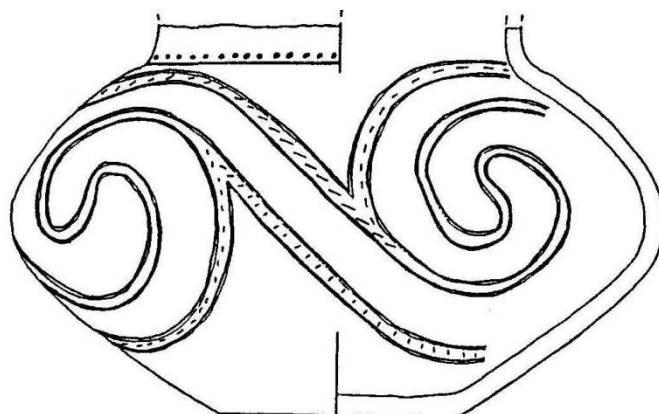
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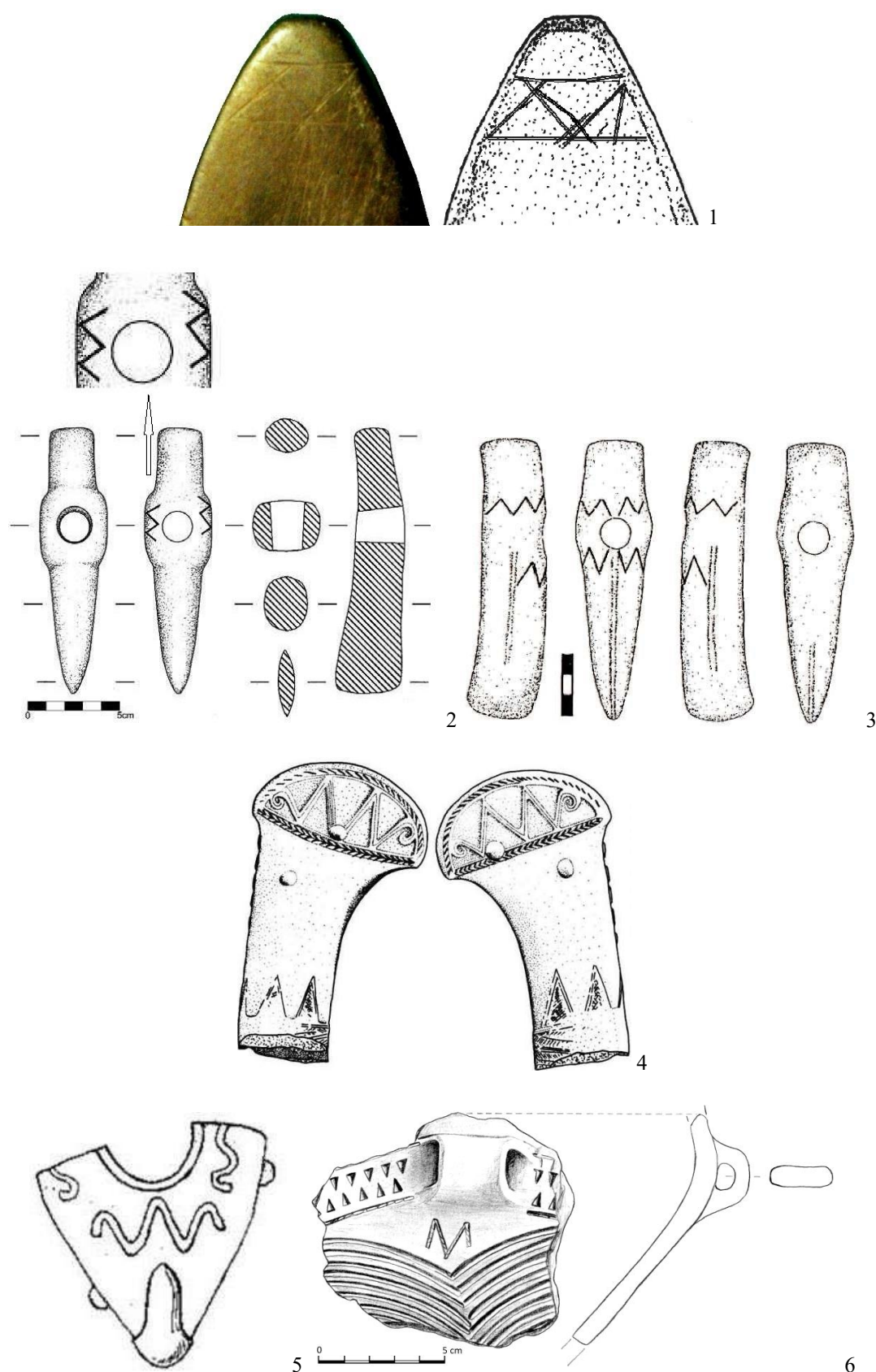




**Fig. 5.** Ornate stone axe from the Wietenberg settlement in Vințu de Jos-Deasupra Satului (photo Radu Totoianu)

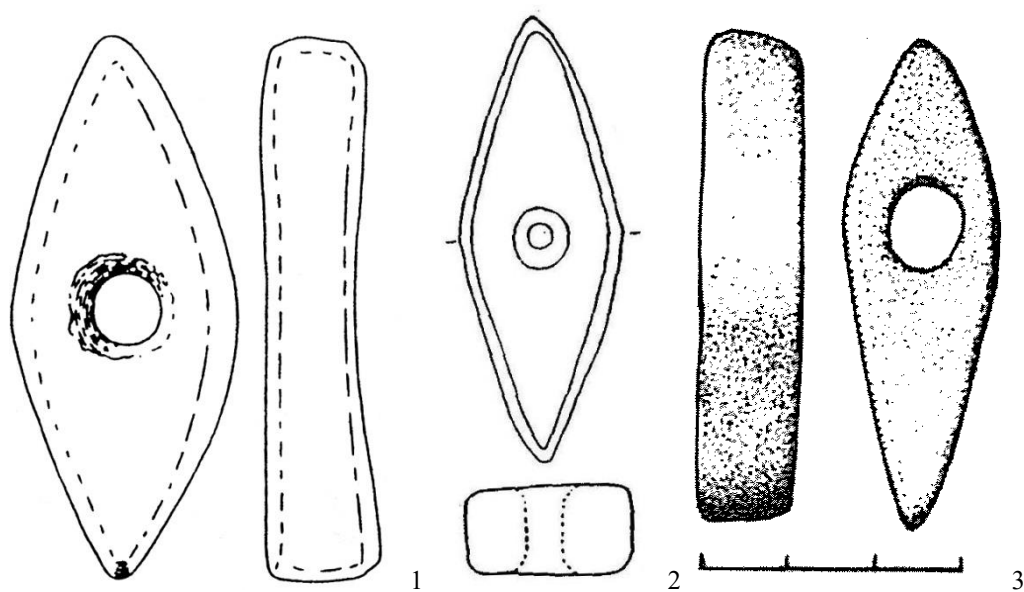


**Fig. 6.** Funerary vessel from the Wietenberg necropolis in Vințu de Jos-Deasupra Satului, decorated with Wietenberg spirals (after PAUL 1995)

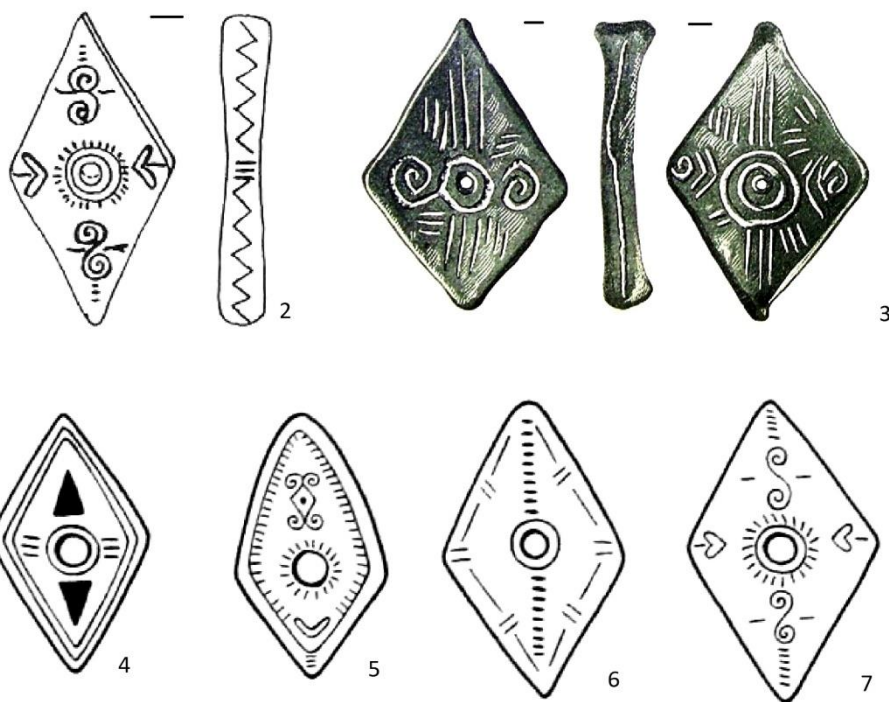
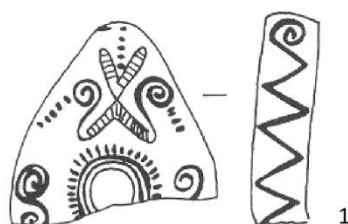


**Fig. 7.** Detail of the later incised decorations on the axe from Vințu de Jos (1); the zigzag motifs in the shape of the letter “M” on the Bronze Age axes from “Krivodol” (2), Giurgești (3), Năeni (4) and in the catacomb culture (5) and on the Wietenberg pottery from Crai-va-Piatra Craivii (6) (apud NIKOLOV 2019 – 2; NICULICĂ/BUDUI/MAREȘ 2004 – 3; MOTZOI-CHICIDEANU/ȘANDOR-CHICIDEANU 2017 – 4-5; unique - 5)

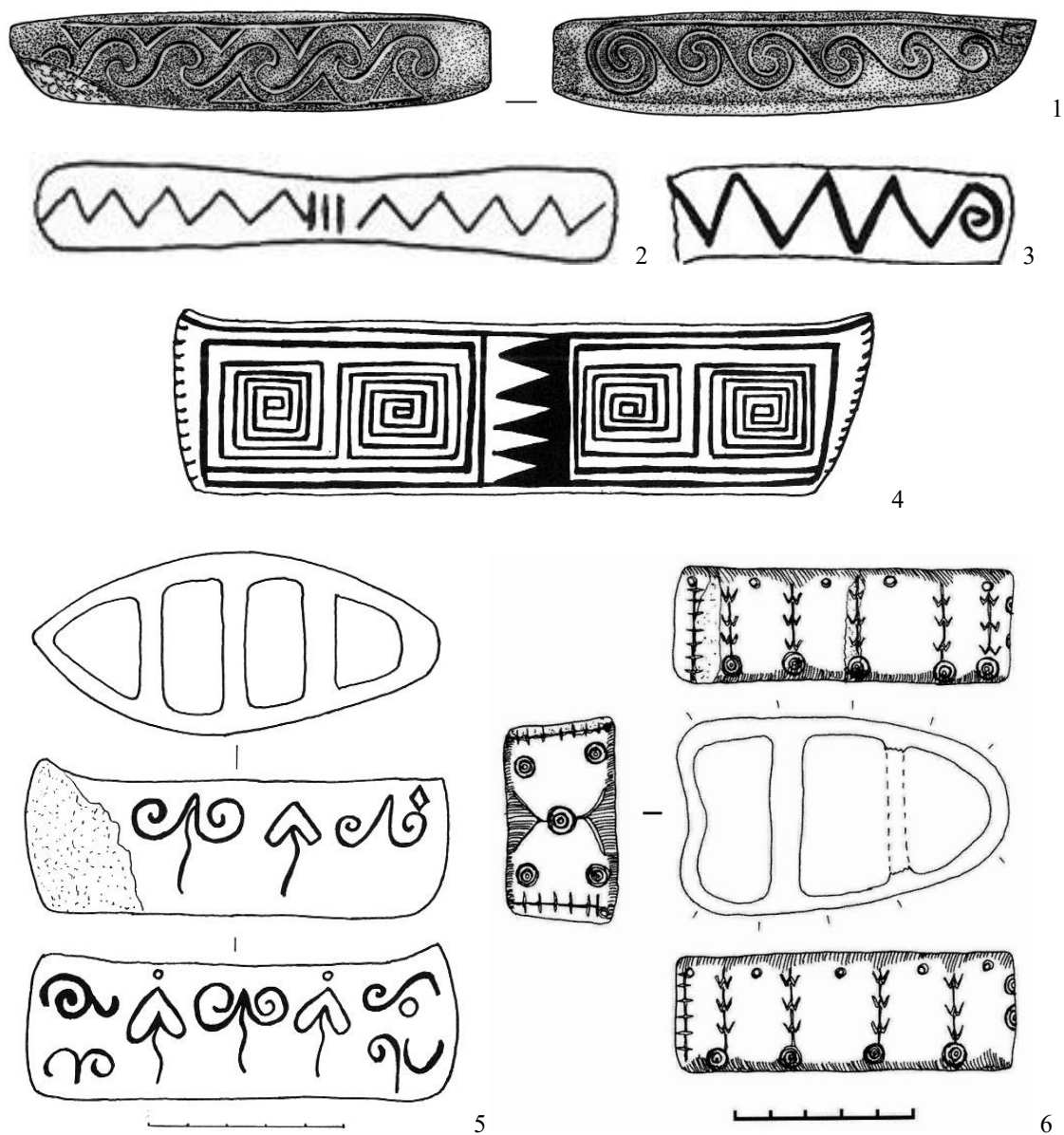




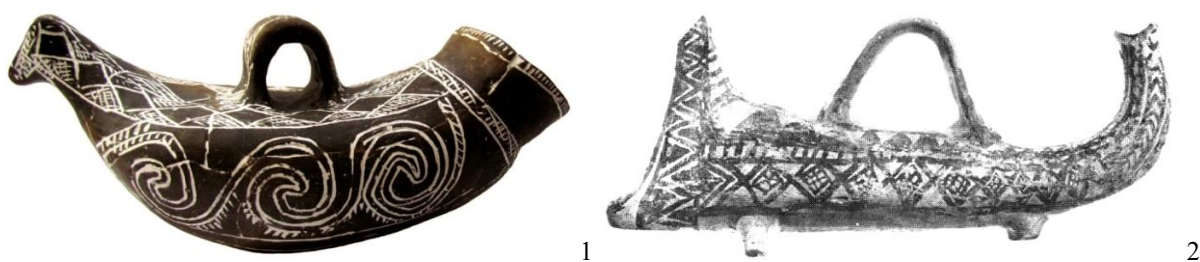
**Fig. 8.** Stone axes discovered in Helmsdorf (1), Cetea (2) and Komarov (3) (after DAVID 2002 – 1; BOROFFKA 1994 – 2; KLOCHKO 1993 – 3)



**Fig. 9.** Clay model of axes form Gârla Mare-Žuto Brdo culture (after SHALGANOVA 1995 – 1-2, 4-7; HAMPEL 1896 – 3)



**Fig. 10.** Sides and profiles of the stone axe from Vințu de Jos (1) and the sides of the clay models of axes (2-3) and of the clay boat models belonging to the Encrusted Pottery Culture (4-6) (apud SHALGANOVA 1995 – 2-3; KISS 2007 – 4-6)



**Fig. 11.** The Wietenberg bird-shape vessel Uroi-Sigheti (1) and rhytons in the shape of Mycenaean ships, Lapithos (2) (after MARC *et alii* 2015 - 1; TASSIOS 2008 - 2)





**Fig. 12.** Razors from the Bronze Age in Denmark (1-4) and Hajdúsámson-Apa-Ighiel-Zajta type bronze axe (5-6) (after KAUL 1998, I – 1-4; VULPE 1970 – 5-6)



**Fig. 13.** Tomb stelae (LH 1-118) from Shaft Grave V, Grave Circle A, Mycenae (LH I-II B)