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A FORGOTTEN SHIELD BOSS FROM BRODNO, LOWER SILESIA, POLAND A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF ROMAN INFLUENCES IN ‘BARBARIAN’ ARMAMENT IN THE ROMAN PERIOD

ABSTRACT In the National Archives in Wrocław, in the Department of the Province of Silesia are kept documents about the protection and conservation of historical monuments, and specifically information on archaeological finds from the areas around the town of Środa Śląska (German: Neumarkt). One of those artefacts was an iron shield boss of the Roman period, found at the cremation cemetery belonging to the Przeworsk Culture in Brodno, Lower Silesia. It is most probably of Scandinavian origin, and is closely related to the finds from Scandinavia and the Black Sea coast, but the form of the shield boss confirms the Roman inspiration behind ‘barbarian’ military equipment. Chronologically the boss from Brodno should be placed within phase C1b, i.e. roughly in the mid-3rd century A.D. The analogies from other sepulchral sites suggest that the boss might have been an element in the inventory of a well-equipped warrior, perhaps a member of a travelling band. The presence of such an artefact in a cemetery of the Przeworsk culture in the Oder river basin is proof of intense contacts between various communities which inhabited vast areas of “barbaric” Europe between the Baltic and the Black Sea at that time.

Key words: shield boss, Roman period, armament, Przeworsk culture, Roman influence

ABSTRAKT W Archiwum Państwowym we Wrocławiu, w zespole Wydział Samorządowy Prowincji Śląskiej, znajdują się informacje o znaleziskach archeologicznych z terenu dawnej, niemieckiej Prowincji Śląskiej. Wśród tych danych są informacje dotyczące terenu okolic Środy Śląskiej (niem. Neumarkt). Jednym z artefaktów tam odkrytych było żelazne umbo z okresu rzymskiego. Pochodzi ono z cmentarzyska ciałopalnego kultury przeworskiej, odkrytego w miejscowości Brodno. Artefakt pochodzi prawdopodobnie ze Skandynawii, podobne egzemplarze znane są właśnie stamtąd oraz z wybrzeża Morza Czarnego. Umbo stanowi najpewniej przykład rzymskiej inspiracji w „barbarzyńskim” ekwipunku wojownika. Znaleźisko należy datować na fazę C1b według chronologii względnej Barbaricum, czyli na połowę III w. n.e. Analogie z innych stanowisk sepulkralnych sugerują, że umbo może być częścią inwentarza grobu bardzo dobrze wyposażonego wojownika, być może członka wędrownej drużyny. Obecność takiego artefaktu na cmentarzysku kultury przeworskiej w dorzeczu Odry potwierdza intensywne kontakty między różnorodnymi społecznościami, zamieszkującymi w okresie rzymskim szerokie przestrzenie między Bałtykiem a Morzem Czarnym.

Introduction

The study of the import of Roman weaponry into the European Barbaricum keeps yielding new, interesting results, both due to new discoveries and archival research: the latter being the case with the artefact which is the subject of this article. While conducting research on one of the settlement microregions in Silesia in the pre-Roman and Roman period, I came across certain information concerning a very interesting, and hitherto unpublished, find.

Documents concerning the protection and conservation of historical monuments belonging

to the period when most of Silesia belonged to Germany are kept in the National Archives in Wrocław, in the Department of the Province of Silesia. These archives contain information on archaeological finds from the areas around the town of Środa Śląska (German: Neumarkt). These documents were studied with the intention of analysing the settlement structure of the so-called Przeworsk Culture during the pre-Roman and Roman periods, specifically settlement changes within the microregion situated between the Oder and a chain of hills known as Wysoczyzna Średzka (Średzka Uplands). The archival research uncovered some information about particularly interesting finds coming from

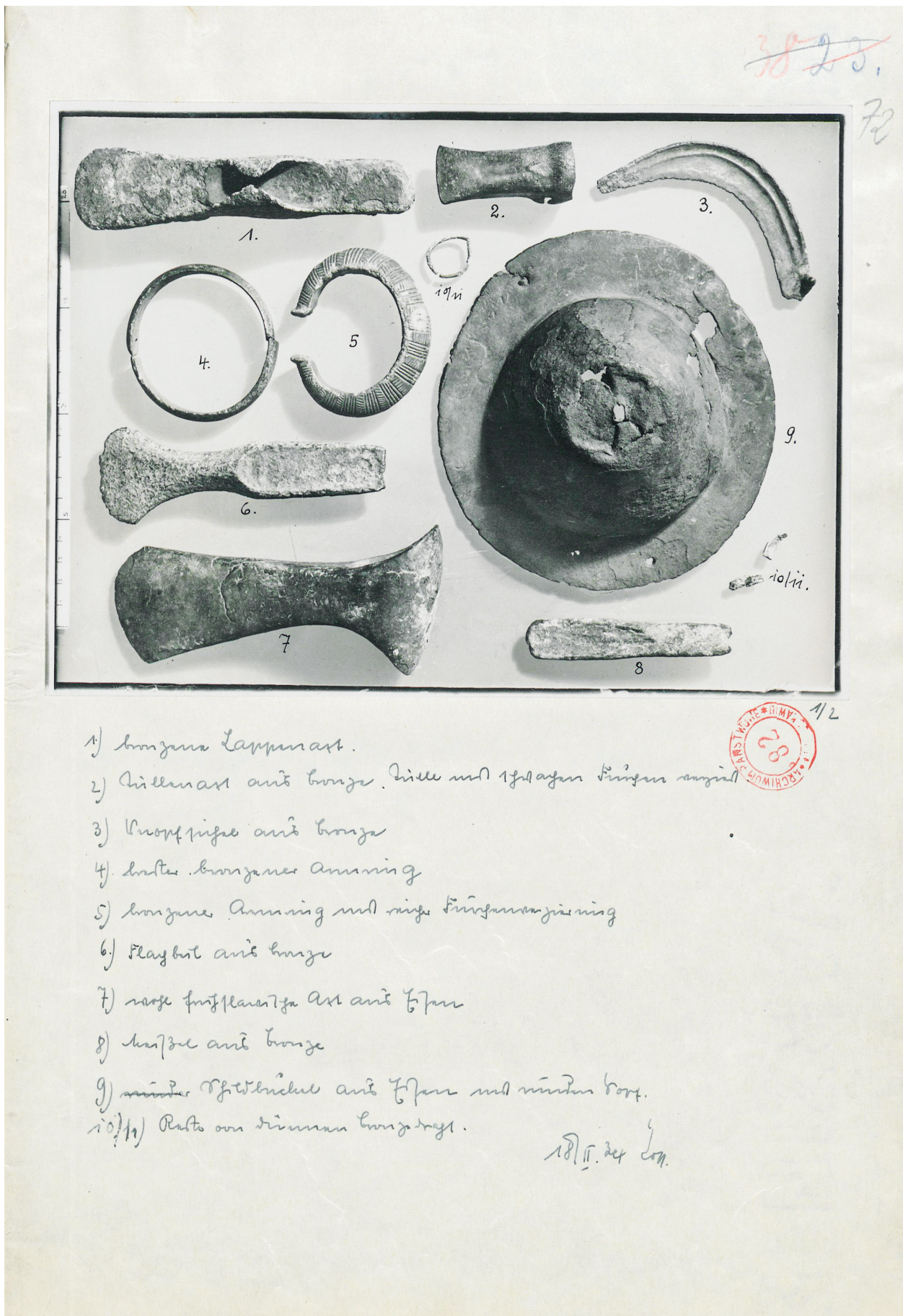


Fig. 1. Collection of finds from Brodno, Lower Silesia, Poland with shield boss (9) and iron axe (7) from Roman Period (photography from National Archive in Wrocław, collection Department of the Province of Silesia, No 739)



Fig. 2. Distribution of shield bosses type 5a after Ilkjær in 'barbarian' Europe: 1 – Brodno, 2 – Snorheim, 3 – Smedby Østre, 4 – Stabu Øvre, 5 – Granby, 6 – Grebo Kyrka, 7 – Chorula, 8 – Opatów, 9 – Tanaïs, 10 – Juzhno-Donuzla (drawn by N. Lenkow)

the area under study, a list of the items and their photographs being kept in folder No. 739. The finds came from the area of Środa Śląska county, and were initially kept in the Regional Museum of Środa Śląska. They were later transferred to the Archaeological Museum in Wrocław during the 1930s, and are currently considered to be war losses, as they were never found after the end of the Second World War. Despite the fact that the artifacts were most probably destroyed due to military action in May 1945, information about them deserves to be more widely known on account of their uniqueness.

It is not certain which of the sites the finds which can be seen in the photograph (Fig. 1) came from. The archive notes that the graveyard in Brodno is the most probable location. The

assemblage of items in the picture suggest that the site contained burials from the Period of Roman Influence period (discussed herein), but also from the Bronze Age Lusatian Culture and the Hallstatt period. There are only two such sites in the vicinity of Środa Śląska: Brodno, which has already been mentioned, and Słup. The archive description clearly states that the site is located on a hill, which matches its location in Brodno far better.

The Shield Boss

The item we are concerned with is a damaged shield boss (Fig. 1:9). The item is made of iron, and the note stating that it was a bronze artefact has been crossed out. Perhaps the item bore traces of a copper

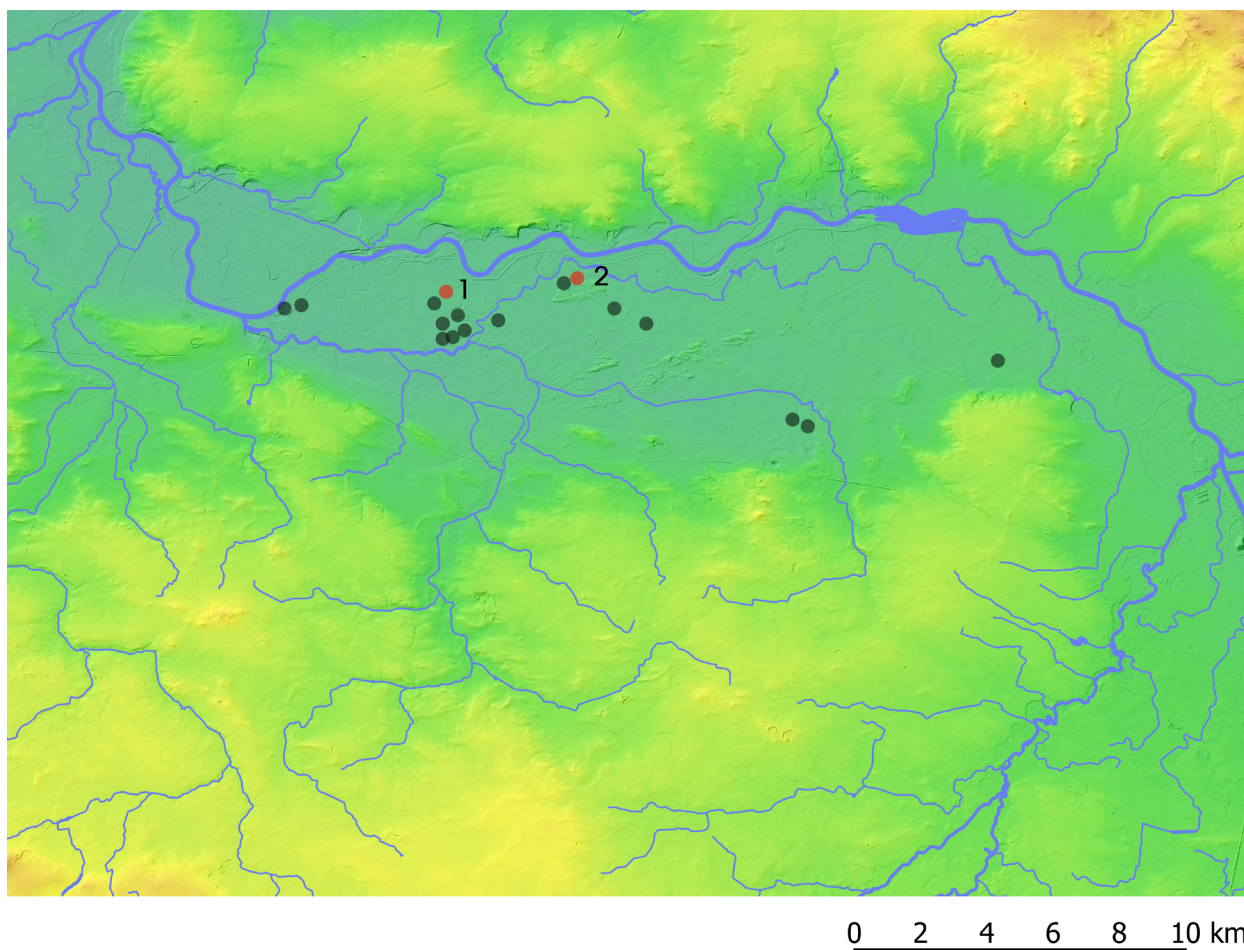


Fig. 3. Big cemeteries from Środa Śląska region (1 – Brodno, 2 – Słup) in the settlement context – sites from late Roman period (drawn by author)

alloy on its surface. If such was the case, then the boss should be considered an import from Rome. However, currently there is no way to verify it.

The photograph shows the find only from a single angle – from above – which limits the possibilities of narrowing down its origin and type. The image is, however, clear and detailed enough for us to make such attempts. A ruler is visible on the left side of the picture, allowing us to establish the diameter of the boss as being ca. 32-33 cm. However, we are unable to determine its height. Four rivet holes are visible. They were placed asymmetrically, or rather in a shape of a trapezoid. The boss was preserved in an incomplete form – the central top piece is missing and we can only guess its form.

It is unknown what other items were deposited in the grave with the shield boss. The only method available of determining its origin and chronology is by finding analogous examples. It should be emphasized that such finds from the Roman period are very rare for the Przeworsk Culture or, more broadly, for the Oder and Vistula river basins. The

nearest analogue coming from the territory of the Przeworsk Culture is the boss from grave 151 in Chorula – a very similarly shaped item, but with three rivet holes.¹ The grave's contents are well recorded, especially the metal items, clearly indicating a burial of a well-equipped warrior. The boss from Chorula is classified as type S, subtype S2 in the classification by N. Zielsing.² Perhaps the find from Brodno should be classified as S3 or S4, mostly corresponding with the bosses from Folkeslund (S3) and Snortheim (S4).

A boss of probably the same form was found at the largest graveyard of the Przeworsk Culture in Opatów, in grave 736, which also was a burial of a wealthy warrior. That find was precisely dated to phase C1b.³

¹ Szydłowski 1964: 116-117, Fig. 124:10.

² Zielsing 1989: 1030.

³ Madyda-Legutko, Rodzińska-Nowak, Zagórska-Telega 2011a: 182-183; Madyda-Legutko, Rodzińska-Nowak, Zagórska-Telega 2011b: 274, tab. CCLXXII:5.

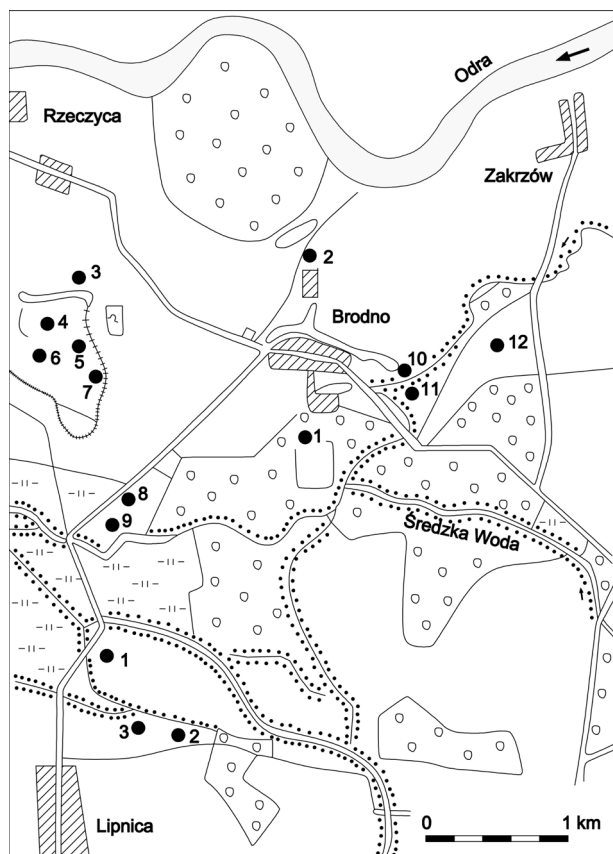


Fig. 4. Micro-region of Brodno with sites of Przeworsk Culture. The cemetery of Brodno marked as No 12 (drawn by author)

Similarities with the boss from Illerup-Ådal should also be mentioned, as a resemblance can be seen in both the shape and the four-rivet attachment method. The boss from that site, marked as UNH, is dated for the younger stages of phase C1, also due to analogies to the boss found in the burial complex N Øvre Stabu and another one from N Østre Smedby (Ilkjaer 2002, 294), although they are classified as examples of type 5ac⁴ (Fig. 2).

Such forms of bosses have been discussed by M. Kazanski, who calls them “type Chorula/Zieling S2-S5”, including all of the finds mentioned above within this grouping.⁵ He also points out that similar bosses were found far away, in the fortified settlements of Juzhno-Donuzlav and Tanais near the Black Sea coast.⁶ Interestingly, the boss from the latter site has rivet holes placed identically as in the case of the boss from Brodno. This proves that we are dealing with a specific way of fixing the boss to the shield.

The term “Chorula type boss” proposed by M. Kazanski is inappropriate, as such bosses are most frequently found at Scandinavian sites.⁷ They also seem to be heavily inspired by Roman craftsmanship, as such bosses are known from iconographic sources to have been used by the Roman legions in the 3rd century AD attached to oval shields,⁸ however the direct import of such shield in Barbaricum is unknown up to now.⁹ Examples of Roman-inspired military equipment becoming adopted into the armament of the local population in the Roman influence period are very numerous, as observed in the finds from Illerup which, although discovered in Jutland, de facto come from Scandinavia. It seems that the boss from Brodno is also an example of such influence.

Chronology

As has been stated at the beginning, the artefact under discussion has been completely detached from its funerary context. It is impossible to determine its chronology by analysing its accompanying finds. The only way to do this is by using the chronology that has been applied to its analogues from other sites. Fortunately, the analogues cited above are pretty well dated. K. Godłowski places grave 151 from Chorula within a group six graves all furnished with weaponry belonging to the Przeworsk culture, typical for the end of phase C1a and the beginning of C1b in the Barbaricum chronology, which roughly covers the period between 200 and 250 A.D.¹⁰ Earlier K. Godłowski opted for placing it specifically in phase C1b, according to the relative chronology for the Barbaricum.¹¹

We should pay particular attention to relatively narrow dating of the bog finds from Illerup-Ådal which have already been mentioned above. They should be placed in the younger stage of phase C1. The grave 151 from Chorula is also well dated – K. Godłowski places it in horizon 2a group 6 of the graves containing weaponry of the Przeworsk culture, therefore in the mid-3rd century A.D. (Godłowski 1994). The shield boss from Opatów is dated precisely to phase C1b.

The boss from Tanais is connected with the Germanic raids onto the Black Sea coast, and

⁴ Ilkjaer 2001b: 294.

⁵ Kazanski 1994: 442.

⁶ Schukin 1994: 493.

⁷ Ilkjaer 2001a: 298.

⁸ Bishop, Coulston 2006.

⁹ Compare: Kaczanowski 1992.

¹⁰ Godłowski 1994: 176.

¹¹ Godłowski 1970.

most probably should belong to the group of finds which directly document the sudden and utter destruction of that Greco-Sarmatian city in the fourth or fifth decade of the 3rd century (Kazanski, 1994, 494). It was also the period during which the so-called Chernyakhov culture, a conglomerate of Germanic, Sarmatian, Dacian and probably also Slavic elements, formed in the areas of modern-day Ukraine.¹²

Chronologically the boss from Brodno should therefore be placed within phase C1b, i.e. roughly in the mid-3rd c. A.D.

Cultural and settlement context

It is unknown from which particular assemblage the artefact under discussion came. We can only be sure that it was found in a male burial, perhaps as well equipped as the graves from Chorula and Opatów. The archive photograph shows another item from the Roman period together with the boss – an iron axe whose form is rather unusual for Central Europe. It can only be matched with the eastern type 5 axes in Kieferling's classification.¹³ Such finds are known only from the area of modern-day Latvia and Lithuania, therefore the Baltic cultural zone. The axe found in cairn 2, grave 3 in the Międzyzany graveyard in Lithuania (Kieferling 1994, fig. 8:1) is relatively close in form. Such axes are unknown in the culture of the western Balts, as described by B. Kontny in his very detailed research into weaponry of this kind.¹⁴

The graveyard in which the boss under discussion was found, was used by individuals belonging to the Przeworsk Culture, from its western territory alongside the Oder river (Fig. 3, 4). As has been already mentioned, it is impossible to analyse the assemblage to which the find originally belonged. The situation is different, however, if the whole site is taken into consideration. The graveyard was located on a sandy hill, which had been occupied earlier on by a graveyard of the Lusatian Culture with an extended chronology, most probably running from period V of the Bronze Age until Hallstatt D. The Lusatian Culture necropolis is better recognised archaeologically, although both of the graveyards are significantly damaged, mainly due to illegal amateur digs.

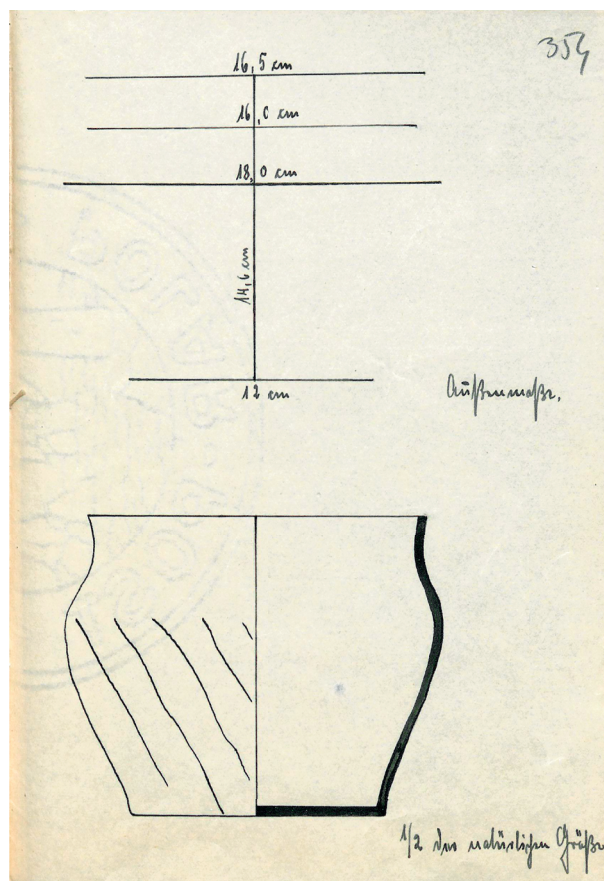


Fig. 5. Vase from Late Roman period found in the cemetery at Brodno, Lower Silesia (archival drawing from National Archive in Wrocław, collection Department of the Province of Silesia, No 739)

In case of the Przeworsk culture graveyard only a few cremation burial complexes have been excavated. One of them, a pit burial, comes from the pre-Roman period. The remaining four (two pit and two urn burials) come from phase C1 of the Roman period. It seems that the graveyard was established in the mid-2nd century B.C. and abandoned at the end of the 3rd century A.D.¹⁵ The chronology of latest stage of this site is also confirmed by the finds of pottery typical for the western part of Barbaricum (Fig. 5). This means that the artefact under discussion belongs to the final phase of the graveyard. It is unclear if there really was any break in the use of the necropolis, as indicated by the lack of burials from the early Roman period. However, only a fragment of the site, of which the total original area was probably ca. 4 hectares, has been excavated so far.

¹² Šarov 2000.

¹³ Kieferling 1994: 345.

¹⁴ Kontny 2018.

¹⁵ Błazejewski 1998: 184.

The cemetery itself should, of course, be perceived within its broader settlement and cultural context. It was certainly a part of a settlement microregion, located somewhere between the hills today known as Średzka Upland and the Oder, the main river in modern-day western Poland. That area contained, apart from the necropolis already discussed, a large number of funerary sites, most of them only partially defined, such as Głoska, Słup and Księginice. The settlements collocated in the same sites should also be mentioned, especially the best explored settlement in Brodno, directly located in the vicinity of the graveyard. Although the central part of the settlement was destroyed during construction works carried out in the 20th century, its size, structure and chronology have been established rather well, although not fully published yet. The settlement was established in phase A2, at which period it was already quite large. It was located by the river, or, as it can be deduced from the initial geomorphological analysis, on a large island between broad streams and pools of the Oder.¹⁶ It also functioned at the turn of the eras, in phases A3 and B1, although as a smaller settlement. There is evidence for people inhabiting the settlement in phase C2 of the Roman period, but the population must have been significantly smaller.

The location of the settlement in Brodno was selected specifically for its economic profile. The key factors here were trade and transport, carried out over large distances, as is proven by the presence of artefacts related to other cultural zones, in particular to the Celtic and Jastorf cultures. Agriculture was of secondary importance, probably not extending beyond cultivation on a small scale for local needs only, using the relatively fertile river soil. There is no evidence for any connections of the settlement with smelting and processing of iron, despite the vicinity of bog ore deposits. The settlement therefore had some importance for communication, perhaps as a port of trade, and as a point of contact alongside the Oder, and perhaps also as a ferrying point between the two banks of that huge trade artery.

It should be mentioned that numerous remains associated with iron production, which has already been mentioned, have been found, especially at the right bank of the Oder, as well as at the left bank some 10 km east of the site at Brodno. They are mostly dated to the Roman period, phases B2, C1 and C2, that is to the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D.¹⁷

All of the archaeological sites dating to the Roman period from the area under discussion typically display numerous elements of foreign cultural origin, and the artifacts described here are also examples of that trend.

We have established that the shield boss discussed in this article most probably comes from Scandinavia, although it belongs to a group of military artifacts based on Roman models. The find should be dated to the mid-3rd century A.D., and placed within phase C1b of the Roman period according to the chronology of the Barbaricum. Analogies from other funerary sites suggest that the boss might have been an element in the inventory of a well-equipped warrior, perhaps a member of a wandering band. The presence of such artifact in a cemetery of the Przeworsk culture in the Oder river basin is a proof for intense contacts between various communities which at that time inhabited vast areas of "barbaric" Europe between the Baltic and the Black Sea. It also confirms the existence of a trade and communication "corridor", whose creation was probably a result of migrations of populations from Jutland and Scandinavia towards the Black Sea. It was a dynamic process, occurring in constant interaction with the political and economic processes which took place during the same period in the Roman Empire.

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¹⁶ Błażejowski 2017.

¹⁷ Pazda 1980: 168-170; Godłowski 1985, map 5, 6.

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