

## A BRONZE HANDLE FROM THE PONGRÁCZ COLLECTION

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*Cuvinte cheie: Dierna, vas de bronz, antichitate, Muzeul Național al Banatului, colecția Pongrácz.*

*Keywords: Dierna, bronze vessel, antiquity, National Museum of Banat, Pongrácz collection.*

### Abstract

This paper brings to the attention of researchers a bronze handle, most likely from a larger vessel, a piece that was part of the famous Pongrácz collection, housed by the National Museum of Banat in Timișoara, now unfortunately lost, kept only in the form of a drawing. We cannot say with certainty the piece comes from the ancient *Dierna*, but we cannot exclude this possibility either. We will try in our approach to establish the functionality of the piece and, through analogies, to try a typological and chronological classification of it. Due to the quality of the execution, the attention to detail and the mastery of the decor, we do not exclude the hypothesis that we are in front of an imported piece, both a testimony of trade relations and the level of civilization reached in antiquity by the settlements in the Danube area.

The National Museum of Banat has hosted, as it has been known for more than a century, the collection of the famous military commander of the port of Orșova and a passionate collector, Pongrácz Imre. Along with the numerous pieces (objects, coins) from different locations in the Danube area, on both banks alike, in the Pongrácz collection there are artifacts recovered from the area of the ancient settlement *Dierna*.

Recently, by the kindness of Dr. Călin Timoc, researcher at the National Museum of Banat, we were brought to our attention a drawing made by Pongrácz Imre himself (as it appears from the text written below the drawing and the author's signature), which showed certainly a piece from his vast collection, unfortunately lost today (Pl. I).

It is a drawing made at a scale of 1: 1 on a sheet of A4 size, which shows a bronze handle (the author calls it a "bronze object", the drawing bearing the number 39, inscribed by the collector). The text written by Pongrácz at the bottom of the sheet, below the drawing, contains extremely valuable explanations regarding the origin and description of the piece (we thank our colleague, Assoc Prof. Sorin Pribac, for the help offered by translating the text). Thus, Pongrácz allegedly purchased the piece from the jeweler Kugler Felix from Orșova. He describes it as a piece with a green patina, possibly

the handle of a vessel or a metal object used to knock on the door, and he thinks it comes from Serbia. In the description of the object, he noticed the shape of a frog in the center of the side.

Dr. Călin Timoc, whom we thank both for the drawing and for the suggestions, was of the opinion that we are in front of a solid bronze handle, from a large vessel ("basin"), possibly a luxury object, coming from the Orșova area, in connection with the intense, commercial activity of the ancient port, therefore it could be a Roman piece.

An argument in favour of this hypothesis is the information published in the catalogue of the exhibition organized in 1978 by the Romanian Academy, "Archaeological treasures in the Iron Gates region", where the piece (then available to researchers, the place of storage being the Museum of Banat, with the number of inventory 2631) appears with the number 349, being described as a "vessel handle" made of cast bronze, coming from the civil settlement of *Dierna*. The handle has a length of 25 cm and a height of 3.5 cm. The description of the piece mentions "the heads decorated with volutes on the rod, two spirals arranged face to face, with a frog in the middle." The handle was dated by the authors in the 1st century AD.

The drawing therefore presents a large piece, with a decoration and an execution technique that suggest its belonging to a luxury vessel. The handle has an arched shape, being decorated in the upper part (according to the drawing, noted by the author

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with 1a, with an approximate size of 10–11 cm) with lizards, the two of the sides captured in length, and for the middle one being visible only the head and front paws (this if only Pongrácz accurately captured the decor, and it's not, in fact, a rosette). The decoration does not continue on the back of the handle, which seems to be smooth (according to the drawing, front 1b). The ends of the handle are decorated with volutes, which frame the tail of the two lizards, then extending in the form of four arched leaves, united, with a size of approximately 4 cm.

The collector's hypothesis that this bronze object could be a door hammer does not seem to be confirmed by the two fragments that are preserved from the attachment of the handle and that suggest that we are dealing with a fixed handle.

In these conditions, we aimed to verify the second hypothesis, belonging to our colleague Călin Timoc, according to which it would be a handle from a large bronze vessel from the Roman era (basin).

Without claiming to be exhaustive, nor to make a synthesis of the bronze handles, we will try in the following to see how the situation is presented in the literature and if we identify any analogy for the piece in question.

In our study published in 2008 we mentioned as certain in the province of Dacia a single basin, discovered in the vicinity of the *Apulum* thermal baths<sup>1</sup>. Along with this we mention the existence of a considerable number of fragments, handles, torches, belonging to different categories of vessels, but which we did not consider typological, not being the object of the study carried out then<sup>2</sup>.

Following the archaeological rescue research carried out in 2012 in the military vicus of *Micia*, nine bronze fragments were discovered, including a handle, from a basin dating from the second half of the second century – third century. The handle, almost complete, considered by the authors a unique in Dacia, belongs to the type with a horizontal part and two vertical S-shaped, finished with leaf-shaped sconces, and at the end of the horizontal part decoration in the form of stylized rosettes / stars. The handle has a length of 7.5 cm and a height of 7 cm<sup>3</sup> (Pl. II.1).

In 2017, an extensive monographic study appeared on the bronze vessels from *Dacia Porolissensis*, in which this category of vessels was also analysed, mainly represented by handles. The

author, Silvia Mustață, describes the basin as a vessel with a diameter greater than its height, usually provided with two or more small handles, placed diametrically opposite, under the rim of the vessel, fixed directly or with the help of an attachment<sup>4</sup>. The discoveries from *Dacia Porolissensis* are catalogued, the author accurately describing and typologically classifying them. From the settlements of *Dacia Porolissensis* come 10 discoveries, from Gherla (4 pieces), Ilișua (3 pieces), Orheiul Bistriței, Buciumi and *Porolissum* (one discovery each). Of these, a number of 7 are attachments of vessels in the shape of an elongated leaf (3 at Gherla, 2 at Ilișua<sup>5</sup> with analogies at *Tibiscum* and Pianu de Câmpie<sup>6</sup> and 1 from *Porolissum*<sup>7</sup>) or the shape of a vine leaf (Buciumi<sup>8</sup>), 2 fragmentary handles (Gherla, Ilișua<sup>9</sup>) and 1 fragmentary vessel (Orheiul Bistriței<sup>10</sup>).

Of these, we will focus only on one of the handles discovered at Gherla<sup>11</sup>, having the dimensions of 9.12 / 8 cm, in the shape of the letter omega, having the attachment in the shape of a swan placed on a fruit basket (Pl. II.2). From a typological point of view, the author classifies it as Eggers 103. The same category includes a basin handle presented in the work of K. Elschek regarding the discoveries from Zohor (western Slovakia). Thus, from the settlement from Zohor comes a basin handle framed by the author in type E 99–106, having the shape of the letter omega, with a length of 10.4 cm and a height of 7.4 cm, undecorated (Pl. II.3). The play dates from the 1st–2nd centuries (the reign of Trajan – Antoninus Pius<sup>12</sup>).

Bronze vessels of this kind (Eggers type 99–106) discovered in Eastern Europe were included in 2020 in a synthesis analysis belonging to M. Treister<sup>13</sup>, which notes their presence mainly in funerary contexts in the Sarmatian environment, over an extended area and over a chronological period from the middle of the first century – the middle of the third century AD.

As can be easily seen, neither in size, nor in

<sup>4</sup> Mustață 2017, 130.

<sup>5</sup> Mustață 2017, 132, nr. 60–63, 66, Pl. XXXIV/60–63, LXXXII/60–63, XXXVII/66.

<sup>6</sup> Mustață 2017, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Mustață 2017, 136, nr. 68, Pl. XXXVII/68, LXXXIV/68a-b.

<sup>8</sup> Mustață 2017, 136, nr. 65, Pl. XXXV/65, LXXXII/65a-b.

<sup>9</sup> Mustață 2017, 136, nr. 67, Pl. XXXVII/67, LXXXIV/67.

<sup>10</sup> Mustață 2017, 135, nr. 64, Pl. XXXVI/64, LXXXIII/64a-b.

<sup>11</sup> Mustață 2017, 130, nr. 59, Pl. XXXIV/59, LXXXII/59.

<sup>12</sup> Elschek 2002, 248, Abb 4:5, Ob. 27/95.

<sup>13</sup> Treister 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Ștefănescu-Onițiu 2008, 218; Moga 1985, 71, nr. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ștefănescu-Onițiu 2008, 219.

<sup>3</sup> Mustață-Cociș 2015, 301–302, Cat. Nr. 3, Pl. II/3, V/3

decoration or typology, there are no similarities between the pieces described above and the handle from the Pongrácz collection.

In these conditions, being of the opinion that the hypothesis from which we started (that it is a Roman basin handle / basin) is not validated, we tried to look for another possible interpretation of the piece. Thus, we advanced the hypothesis that this is not a Roman piece, but a piece of Greek origin, more precisely coming from a *podanipter* type basin.

Our hypothesis was kindly confirmed by the researchers Marina Castoldi and Chiara Tarditi. The arched handle has analogies regarding the lizards decoration with two Athenian pieces discovered on the Acropolis<sup>14</sup> and two other unique pieces from Dodona. According to the information provided by Chiara Tarditi, both the volutes and the leaves on the sides are unusual, but they have some similarities with palmettes also present on Athenian vessels. The dating in the case of the piece from the Pongrácz collection, proposed by the two authors, would be from the middle of the 5th century BC<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, the piece from the Pongrácz collection, a unique piece we could say at this time, does not seem to come from the ancient *Dierna*, has nothing to do with the commercial activity of the Roman settlements in the Danube area, but it is rather a collector's item whose place of discovery we do not know and which, in fact, hides many other unknowns.

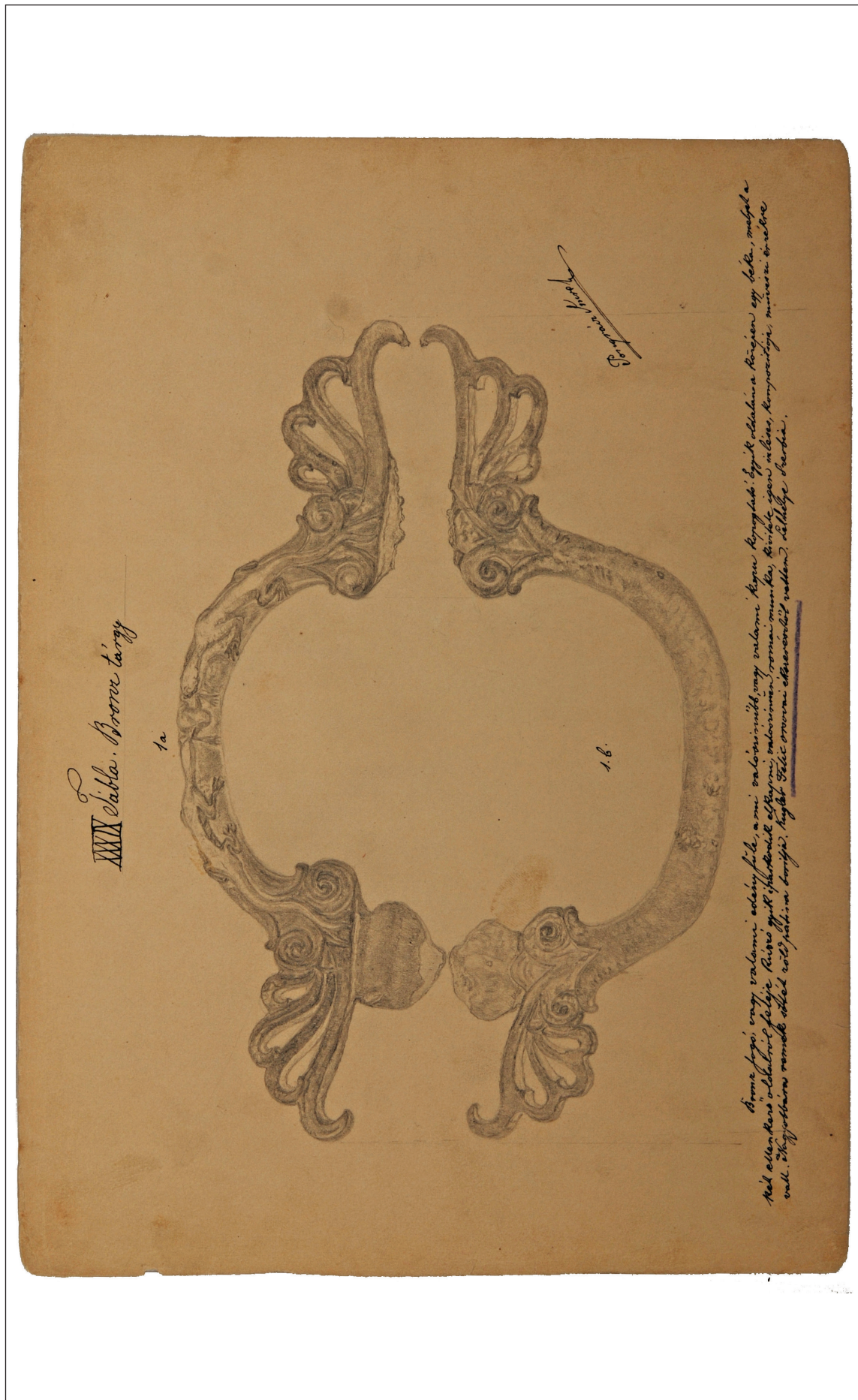
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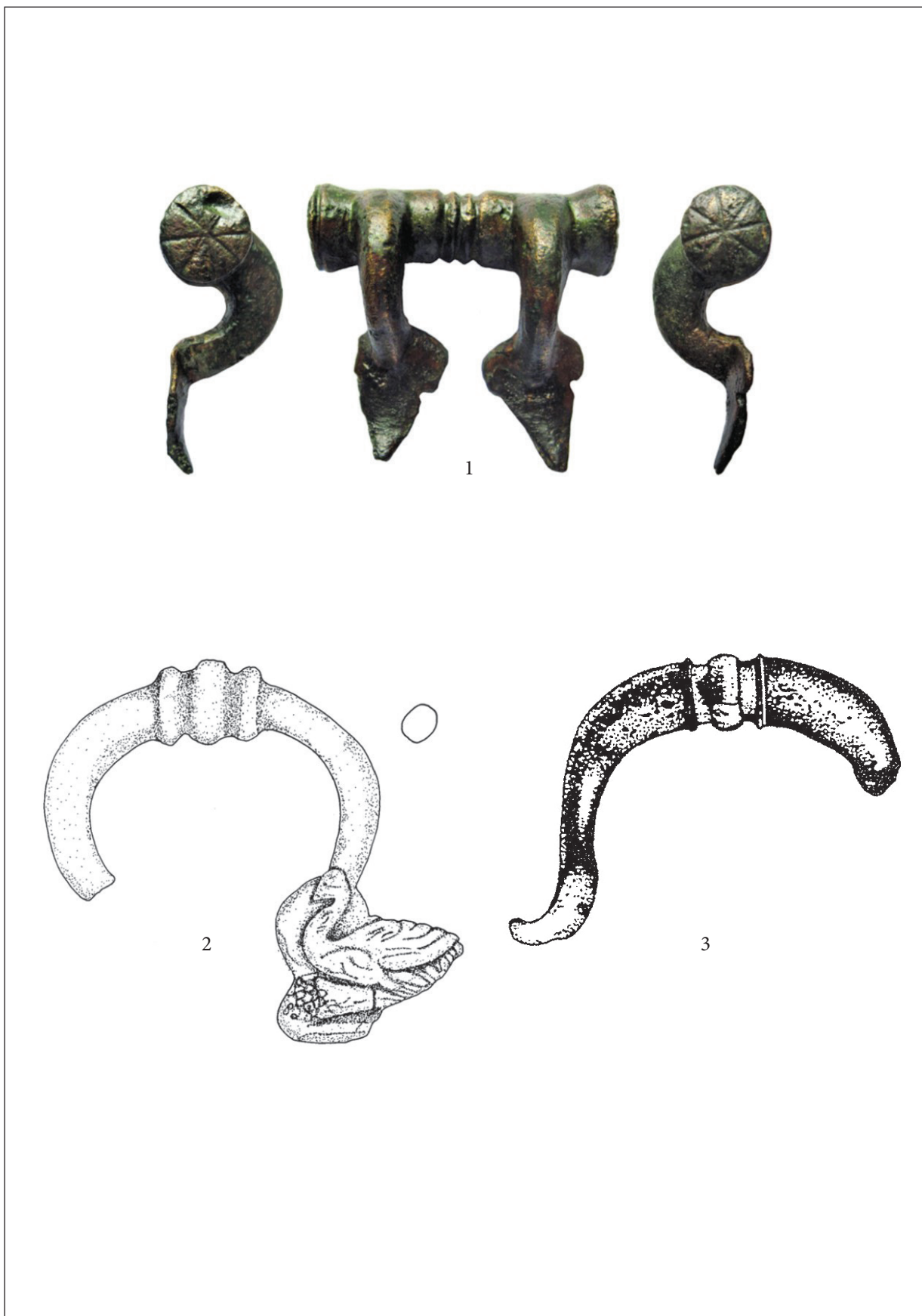
<sup>14</sup> Tarditi 2016, 172, 261.

<sup>15</sup> We are very grateful to Mrs. Marina Castoldi and Chiara Tarditi for their valuable help regarding the piece from the Pongrácz collection.





Pl. I. Drawing of a bronze handle from the Pongrácz collection, the National Museum of Banat, Timişoara



Pl. II.1. Basin handle from Micia (after Mustață, Cociș 2015, Pl. V); 2. Basin handle from Gherla (after Mustață 2017, Pl. XXXXIV/59); 3. Basin handle from the settlement of Zohor (after Elschek 2002, Abb 4:5)



1



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Pl. III.1–2. Podanipter handles from the Athenian Acropolis (Chiara Tarditi's photographs)