

DELIBERATELY DEFORMED SHEARS FROM EARLY AND MIDDLE LA TÈNE GRAVES IN THE CARPATHIAN BASIN

Andrei Georgescu*

*Keywords: Late Iron Age, shears, tools, ritual destruction, Carpathian Basin
Cuvinte cheie: a doua epocă a fierului, foarfece, unelte, distrugerii rituale, Bazinul Carpatic*

Abstract

Shears are commonly found in La Tène burials from the Carpathian Basin. The earliest such finds known in Europe date from the early 4th century BC Mediterranean cultural milieu. Towards the end of the same century they are adopted by the La Tène communities, where their morphology and meaning in the funerary process is changing. The purpose of these tools during the burial ritual seems to be similar to the one played by the swords. This fact can be deduced from several treatments that were applied to them like: position in the grave, similar decoration as some of the weapons or deliberately mutilation of the objects.

The earliest shears in Europe

During the early and middle La Tène period, certain burial rites rituals were common throughout the entire Carpathian Basin while others show regional or even intracommunal variations¹. These custom variations reflect different means of expressing various layers of identity. They also reflect different traditions and cultural interactions that are characteristic of each area. One of these customs, which is found throughout the entire Carpathian Basin, is the placing of shears as grave offering. In Europe, these items appear in the early 4th century BC in Greek or Punic contexts from the Peloponnese², Magna Graecia³, Sicily⁴, Sardinia⁵ or Ibiza⁶, where they are found in female burials as part of toiletry sets. The custom is also known in the Black Sea area, in the Greek colony from Apollonia Pontica (Sozopol, Bulgaria), where, starting from the second quarter of the 4th century BC, shears are found in toiletry sets from female burials⁷. Most of these tools have a similar morphology. Their length is rather small, ranging

between 11–13 cm and their handle is often longer than the blade.

Around the same period shears appear in the La Tène milieu. Among the earliest finds are the ones found in grave 141 from Dürrenberg (Salzburg, Austria)⁸ or in grave 180 from Pişcolt (jud. Satu Mare, Romania)⁹, both dated to the La Tène B1 period. The custom becomes more frequent in the subsequent periods.

The morphology of the La Tène shears is somewhat different than the ones from the Mediterranean world (Pl.I.1). Their average length is between 18 and 23 cm, while the handle and the blades are roughly equal in size. Their shape remains unchanged until the end of the first millennium BC when various types of handles and blades appear¹⁰.

Unlike the ones from southern Europe, shears from the Celtic environment are more frequently found in male graves, placed alongside a razor or a whetstone¹¹. Their functionality has often been debated being thought to have been used for body hygiene¹² or textile production¹³. A different approach has been proposed by Jenny Kaurin in her study about shears found in the cemeteries of

* Muzeul Național al Banatului-Timișoara, Bastionul Maria Theresia, Strada Martin Luther 4, Timișoara 305500, e-mail: andreigva@yahoo.com.

¹ Berecki 2006; Némethi 2012; Ramsel 2012.

² Kovacovics 1990, T. 30/4.

³ Prohászka 1995, 142–143.

⁴ Bechtold 1999, 172.

⁵ Levi 1950, Tav. XI.

⁶ Gómez Bellard 1984, 46; Fig. 13/15.

⁷ Bogdanova 2016, 72–73.

⁸ Tiefengraber – Wiltshcke-Schrotta 2012, 134–140.

⁹ Némethi 1988, 62, Fig. 9.

¹⁰ Jacobi 1974, Abb.24; Kaurin 2011, Fig. 2.

¹¹ Georgescu 2018.

¹² Jacobi 1974, 87.

¹³ Grömer 2012, 55.

the Treveri¹⁴. Her research method combines the morphological variations of the tools with their grave position in relation to the human remains. The study is relevant for attempting to identify the functionality of these tools in everyday life. However, this method would not be so relevant for the shears dated to the early and middle La Tène period due to their lack of morphological variations. It also doesn't provide an answer for the role of shears in the funerary context.

Concerning their position in graves several rules have been noticed. In inhumation burials, shears have been placed either in connection with some of the vessels or in the proximity of the body. In the latter case, they are more frequently found on the right side of the body; near the head, the arm or the hand of the deceased. In some cases, like graves 520¹⁵ and 562¹⁶ from Pottenbrunn (Niederösterreich, Austria), or the grave 181¹⁷ from Mannersdorf (Burgenland, Austria), shears have been placed alongside swords, near the right hand of the deceased. The close association between swords and shears is also visible in some cremation burials. In grave 12 from Zvonimirovo (Virovitičko-podravaska županija, Croatia) a triple cremation burial was found¹⁸. The remains belonged to an adult male, an adult female and an infant. Among the grave goods, a complete panoply of weapons (sword, spearhead and shield-boss) and a toolset comprising of two razors, a pair of shears and a whetstone were found. Unlike in most of the cases when such toolsets are found, the shears were not placed together with the razor and whetstone, but on top of the weapons heap¹⁹. A similar situation was encountered in grave 10 from Dobova (Občina Brežice, Slovenia)²⁰. In this case, the weapons were grouped in two heaps. The shears were placed along with one of the swords, a slashing knife and a spearhead, while another sword and a shield-boss were placed on the opposite side of the grave. The razor was placed in the middle of the grave among the cremated bones²¹. Another example where shears show a strong connection with the weapons is grave 30 from Dubník (Nitriansky kraj, Slovakia). The cremation burial contained a sword with a scabbard decorated with

a pair of dragons, a sword-chain with a decorated loop-end, a spearhead with decorated shaft, a razor and a pair of shears which were decorated in a similar manner to the spearhead. The decorated shears are unique in the entire Carpathian Basin and are rarely known in the entire Late Iron Age²².

All these examples seem to indicate that shears had a similar role in expressing the deceased's identity as the weapons did. Another treatment that can be observed on both weapons and shears is the ritual 'killing' of the object.

Ritually destroyed shears in graves from the Carpathian Basin

Out of the 93 shears discovered in early and middle La Tène graves in the Carpathian Basin, only six of them were intentionally destroyed before being placed in the grave. The roughly 5% prevalence show that this custom was not common for everybody in that period. Although it is found in the entire Carpathian Basin, most of the cases (5) were encountered in the western part of the area (Pl. I.2).

Two of the finds come from the cemetery at Pottenbrunn. Grave 854 (Pl. II/a) was a cremation burial dating from the end of the LTB1 period, which also contained a bent sword, a fragment from a razor and two brooches²³. The shears were deformed by pulling the blades outwards. The second grave from Pottenbrunn containing deformed shears was grave 975 (Pl. II/b). It was also a cremation burial which contained a folded sword, a spear-head, a fragmentary razor, two brooches and a bracelet²⁴. The shears were deformed by twisting the blades outwards. The burial is also dated roughly at the end of the LTB1 phase.

Two more finds come from south-western Slovakia. The first one comes from the cremation grave 274 found in the cemetery from Malé Kosihy (Nitriansky kraj, Slovakia) (Pl. II/d). The burial inventory was composed of seven brooches, fragments from a bronze anklet, a fragment of tweezers, an armlet and several fragments from a belt chain²⁵. The shears and most of the metal inventory were placed in the south-western corner of the

¹⁴ Kaurin 2011.

¹⁵ Ramsl 2002, Taf. 58.

¹⁶ Ramsl 2002, Taf. 64.

¹⁷ Ramsl 2011, Taf. 188.

¹⁸ Dizdar 2013.

¹⁹ Dizdar 2013, Fig. 157.

²⁰ Guštin 1981.

²¹ Guštin 1981, Abb. 1–2.

²² Another decorated pair of shears was found in Hertfordshire, UK. (Hill – Crummy 2005) They were made from copper alloy which, together with the decoration raises questions about their use in ceremonial practices, for which some metals might have been considered impure (Aldhouse-Green 2010, 1–3; 167).

²³ Ramsl 2002, Taf. 71/5–9; Taf. 72.

²⁴ Ramsl 2002, Taf. 76–77.

²⁵ Bujna 1995, 63–65.

pit, on top of some of the cremated remains²⁶. Anthropological analysis was not able to establish the gender of the deceased but determined that they belonged to a mature person. However, judging from the grave inventory we can assume that the buried person was a female. The grave can be dated to the middle La Tène period. The shears were deformed through a slight bending of the blades. In the same region, another cremation burial containing deformed shears was unearthed at Sv. Michal (Pl. II/c). Grave 17 contained two brooches, a razor, a whetstone and a shield-boss, the entire inventory being placed in one heap²⁷. Based on the inventory, the burial can be dated to the LTC1 period. The shears were deformed by folding the blades towards the handle.

In south-western Hungary, a deformed pair of shears was found in the disturbed grave 10 from Szabadi (Somogy megye, Hungary) (Pl. II/e)²⁸. Other grave goods recovered were a chain-belt and an armler²⁹. Unfortunately the burial rite could not be determined, although it was presumed to be cremation. The shears were deformed by bending the blades to a nearly 90 degrees angle.

Finally, in the eastern Carpathian Basin, in the cemetery from Pişcolt, a pair of intentionally deformed shears was found in the cremation grave 158 (Pl. II/f)³⁰. The burial also contained three brooches, three small knives of different shapes, a spear-head and a sword scabbard belt-hanger. The grave can be dated to the early middle La Tène period. The shears were placed underneath the spear-head, with the rest of the metal inventory positioned nearby. They were deformed by folding the blades towards the handle in the same manner as the ones from Sv. Michal.

In the end of this survey we can conclude that all of the ritually deformed shears from the Carpathian Basin were found in cremation burials (if we include here the disturbed grave from Szabadi). Most of the burials belonged to males and also contained military equipment. Only one grave could have belonged to a woman. The earliest manifestation of this custom comes from the cemetery from Pottenbrunn, in eastern Austria. Here, both the shears and the swords that were placed in the grave have been ritually 'killed'. The destruction of the shears was done in most cases

by bending or folding. Only at Pottenbrunn, the shears were twisted or pulled apart.

The ritual destruction of grave goods in the La Tène period

The custom of destroying grave goods is known throughout different periods of time and in numerous cultures. The reasons behind these acts are various ranging from repulsion caused by the use of the objects in preparing the body for funeral or fear of contamination in the case of persons dying of diseases³¹. In the case of objects thought to indicate the status of the individual, they have often been connected with the life of the deceased, sharing the same faith as their owners³².

In the Late Iron Age the most frequent destroyed objects found in graves are weapons³³ or pots³⁴. In the Carpathian Basin they are mainly associated with cremation burials. This custom is missing in cemeteries like Mannersdorf³⁵ or Chotín³⁶, where inhumation was the dominant burial rite. In biritual cemeteries, like Dubník³⁷, Pottenbrunn³⁸, Sajópetri³⁹ or Pişcolt⁴⁰, ritually killed weapons are found only the cremation burials. In this context, it seems highly likely that the custom of ritual destruction of iron tools or weapons was linked to the act of cremation. The preference of burial rite was often linked with ethnic identity. However, the preference for cremation or inhumation was more likely determined by other factors like the status of the deceased, certain events that occurred in life or even the season in which the burial took place⁴¹. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that within the same community we may encounter both cremation burials with weapons that have or have not been ritually 'killed'. This situation is noticed in the cemeteries both in the western (e.g. Dubník) or eastern Carpathian Basin (e.g. Pişcolt). This aspect suggests that some burial rituals were perhaps determined by deeds or events from one's life⁴². It could also infer a hierarchical stratification of the elite, where some burial rituals were only reserved for a certain class.

²⁶ Bujna 1995, Abb. 55.

²⁷ Benadik 1958, Obr. 199/4–7.

²⁸ Horváth – Németh 2009, 9. kép/6.

²⁹ Horváth – Németh 2009, 140.

³⁰ Némethi 1992, 97; Fig 28/M158.

³¹ Grinsell 1961, 476–479.

³² Åström 1987, 216; Lloyd 2015, 22.

³³ Măndescu 2012.

³⁴ Repka 2018.

³⁵ Ramsl 2011.

³⁶ Ratimorská 1981.

³⁷ Bujna 1989.

³⁸ Ramsl 2002.

³⁹ Szabó *et alii* 2018.

⁴⁰ Némethi 1988; Némethi 1989; Némethi 1992.

⁴¹ Rebay-Salisbury 2017, 56–57.

⁴² Lloyd 2015, 22.

A similar explanation can be used for the deformation of shears. Their connection to cremation graves seems to be prevalent, while the rare occurrence of the custom could suggest a use reserved for people of special deeds or special class.

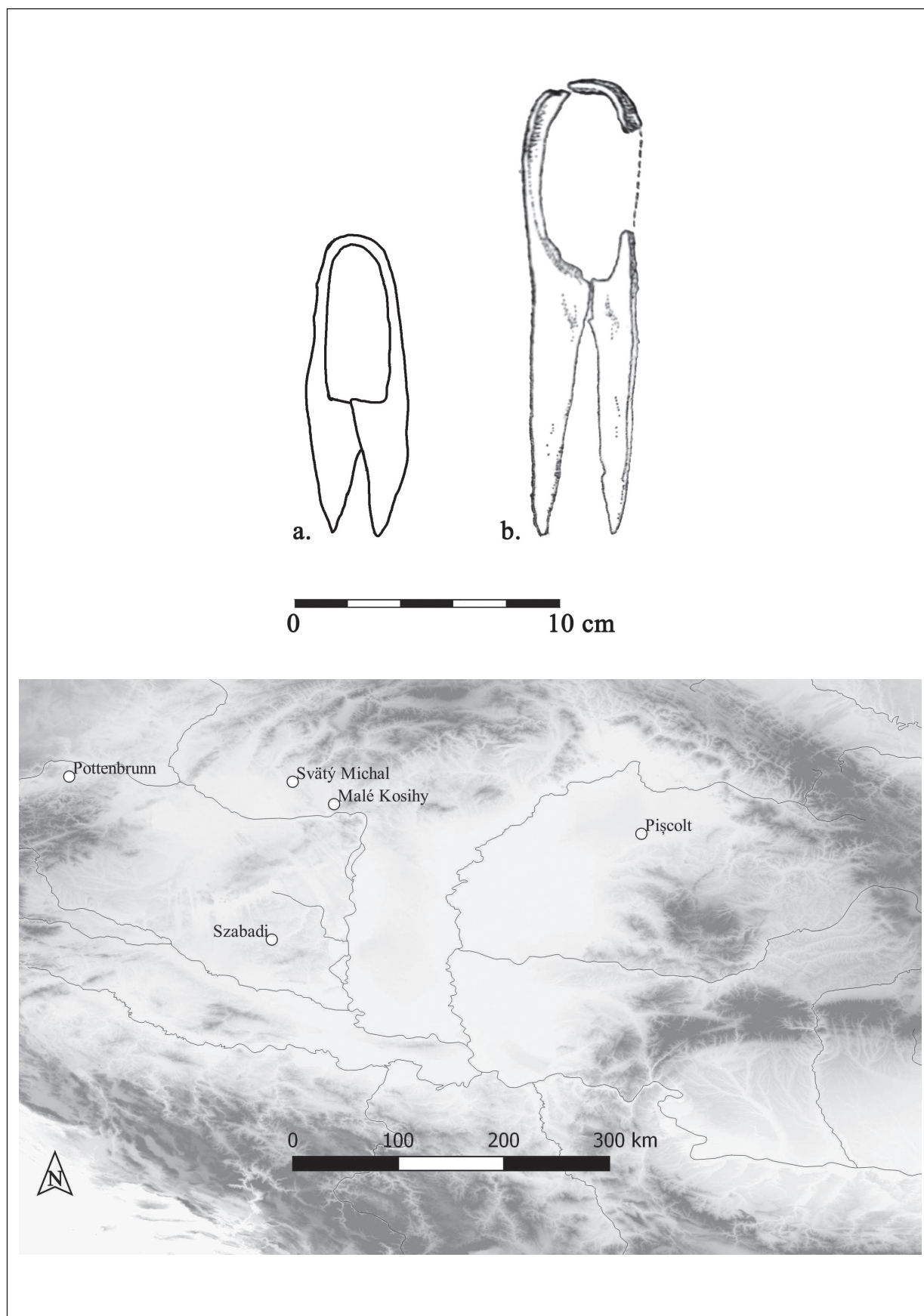
Conclusions

Shears appear in European funerary contexts around the early 4th century BC in the Mediterranean world. Here, they are part of toiletry sets and seem to express women identity. Around the end of the same century they are adopted by the La Tène communities, who adapt the morphology of these tools to better suit their needs. The symbolic meaning of these objects is also different, being mostly associated with male burials which often contained weapons. These tools are found throughout the entire Carpathian Basin in the early and middle La Tène period burials. Their role during the funeral procession was probably to signal the membership of the deceased to a certain social class. This could be argued by the small proportion of graves that contained these objects, their position in relation with the human remains and also by the special treatment that sometimes was applied to them. One such treatment is the deliberate destruction before the burial. There have been numerous attempts at identifying the reason for killing the grave goods but, as P. Åström already expressed over three decades, an explanation might never be found. This could be owed to the fact that there isn't just one explanation valid for every community that practiced this custom throughout time. As the research conducted by L.V. Grinsell showed, different communities could have their own motivation for destroying the goods that accompanied the deceased in the afterlife.

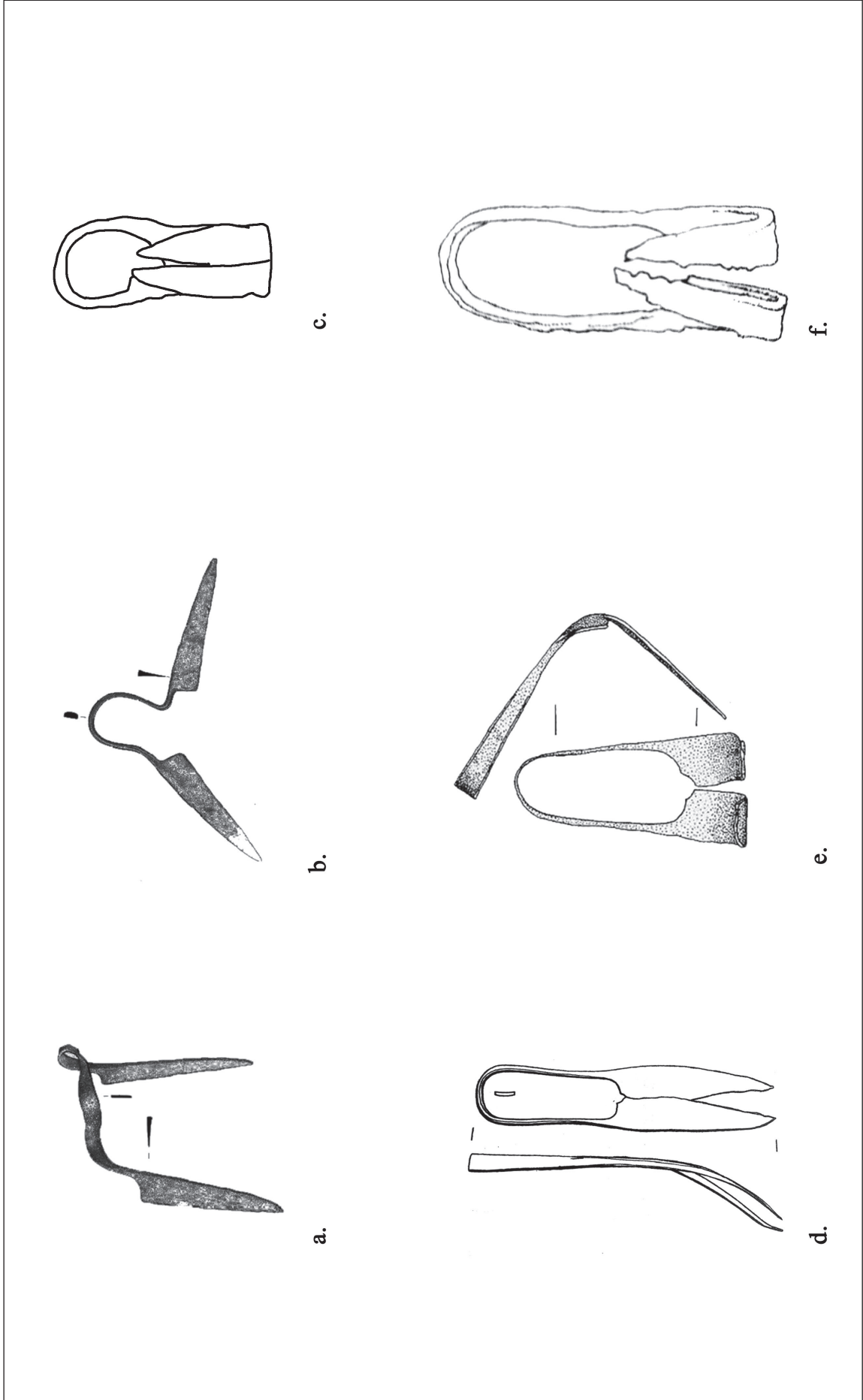
REFERENCE LIST

- Aldhouse-Green 2010
M. Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids: Story of an ancient priesthood*. New Haven & London (2010)
- Åström 1987
P. Åström, *Intentional Destruction of Grave Goods*. (R. Laffineur), *Thanatos: Les coutumes funéraires en Égée à l'âge du Bronze. Actes du Colloque de Liège*, Liège (1987), 213–217.
- Bechtold 1999
B. Bechtold, *La necropoli di Lilybaeum*. Palermo (1999)
- Benadik 1958
B. Benadik, Dve nové keltské pohrebiská na juhozápadnom Slovensku, *Archeologické rozhledy* 10, 1958, 508; 520–525; 533; 534.
- Berecki 2006
S. Berecki, *Rite and ritual of the Celts from Transylvania*, (V. Sirbu, D.L. Vaida), *Thracians and Celts. Proceedings of the International Colloquium from Bistrița 18–20 May 2006*. Cluj-Napoca (2006), 51–76
- Bogdanova 2016
T. Bogdanova, Metal instruments associated with woman's beauty care (based on data from the necropolis of Apollonia Pontica). *Proceedings of the National Museum of History XXVIII* (2016), 59–80
- Bujna 1989
J. Bujna, Das latènezeitlichen Gräberfeld von Dubník I. *Slovenská Archeológia XXXVII –2* (1989), 245–354
- Bujna 1995
J. Bujna, *Malé Kosihy: latènezeitliches Gräberfeld: Katalog*. Nitra (1995)
- Dizdar 2013
M. Dizdar, *Zvonimirovo-Veljiko Polje. A cemetery of the La Tène period*. Zagreb (2013)
- Georgescu 2018
A. Georgescu, A Warrior's Beauty? Variations of a Burial Custom in the Carpathian Basin. S. Berecki, A. Rustoiu, M. Egri) *Iron Age Connectivity in the Carpathian Basin*, Cluj-Napoca (2018), 165–174
- Gómez Bellard 1984
C. Gómez Bellard, *La necrópolis del Puig des Molins (Ibiza). Campaña de 1946*. Madrid (1984).
- Grinsell 1961
L. V. Grinsell, The Breaking of Objects as a Funerary Rite. *Folklore* 72–3 (1961), 475–491.
- Grömer 2012
K. Grömer, Austria: Bronze and Iron Ages. (M. Gleba, U. Mannering), *Textiles and Textile Production in Europe: From Prehistory to AD 400*. Oxford (2012), 27–64.
- Guštin 1981
M. Guštin, Keltische Gräber aus Dobova, Slowenien. *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 11 (1981), 223–229.
- Hill – Crummy 2005
J. D. Hill, N. Crummy, Late Iron Age shears from Hertfordshire. *Lucerna* 30 (2005), 2–4,
- Horváth – Németh 2009
L. Horváth, P. G. Németh, Kelta temető leletei Szabadiból (Somogy megye), *Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae* (2009), 133–178.

- Jacobi 1974
G. Jacobi, *Werkzeug und Gerät aus dem Oppidum von Manching*. Wiesbaden (1974).
- Kaurin 2011
J. Kaurin, Approche fonctionnelle des forces de la fin de l'âge du fer et du début de l'époque romaine. L'exemple des forces dans les nécropoles trévires. *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 41/2 (2011), 231–247.
- Kovacsovics 1990
W. K. Kovacsovics, *Die Eckterrasse an der Gräberstrasse des Kerameikos*. Berlin-New York (1990).
- Levi 1950
D. Levi, Le necropole puniche di Olbia. *Studi Sardi* IX/ I–III (1950), 5–120.
- Lloyd 2015
M. Lloyd, Death of a Swordsman, Death of a Sword: the Killing of Swords in the Early Iron Age Aegean (Ca. 1050 To Ca. 690 B.C.E). (G. Lee – H. Whittaker – G. Wrightson), *Ancient Warfare: Introducing Current Research*. Cambridge (2015), 14–31.
- Măndescu 2012
D. Măndescu, Killing the Weapons. An Insight on Graves with Destroyed Weapons in Late Iron Age Transylvania. (S. Berecki), *Iron Age Rites and Rituals in the Carpathian Basin: Proceedings of the International Colloquium from Târgu Mureş, 7–9 October 2011*. Târgu Mureş (2012), 343–356
- Németi 1988
I. Németi, Necropola Latene de la Pişcolt, jud. Satu Mare. I. *Thraco-Dacica* IX, 1–2 (1988), 49–74.
- Németi 1989
I. Németi, Necropola Latene de la Pişcolt, jud. Satu Mare. II. *Thraco-Dacica* X, 1–2 (1989), 75–114.
- Németi 1992
I. Németi, Necropola Latene de la Pişcolt, jud. Satu Mare. III. *Thraco-Dacica* XIII, 1–2 (1992), 59–112.
- Németi 2012
I. Németi, Funerary Rites and Rituals of the Celtic Cemeteries in North-Western Romania and a Comparison with the Funerary Discoveries in the Tisza Plain and Transylvania. (S. Berecki) *Iron Age Rites and Rituals. Proceedings of the international colloquium from Târgu Mureş (7–9 October 2011)*. Târgu Mureş (2012), 295–302.
- Prohászka 1995
M. Prohászka, *Reflections from the dead: the metal finds from the Pantanello Necropolis at Metaponto : a comprehensive study of grave goods from the 5th to the 3rd centuries B.C.* Jonsered (1995).
- Ramsl 2002
P. C. Ramsl, *Das eisenzeitliche Gräberfeld von Pottenbrunn. Forschungsansätze zu wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen und sozialen Strukturen der latenezeitlichen Bevölkerung des Treisental, Niederösterreich*. Wien (2002).
- Ramsl 2011
P. C. Ramsl, *Das latenezeitlichen Gräberfeld von Mannersdorf am Leithagebirge, Flur Reinthal Süd, Niederösterreich*. Wien (2011).
- Ramsl 2012
P. C. Ramsl, Late Iron Age Burial Rites in Eastern Austria. (S. Berecki) *Iron Age Rites and Rituals. Proceedings of the international colloquium from Târgu Mureş (7–9 October 2011)*. Târgu Mureş (2012), 183–188.
- Ratimorská 1981
P. Ratimorská, Keltské Pohrebisko v Chotíe I. *Západné Slovensko* 8 (1981), 15–88.
- Rebay-Salisbury 2017
K. Rebay-Salisbury, Rediscovering the Body Cremation and Inhumation in Early Iron Age Central Europe. (J. Cerezo-Román – A. Wessman – H. Williams) *Cremation and the Archaeology of Death*. Oxford (2017), 52–71.
- Repka 2018
D. Repka, Intentionally broken vessels in Celtic graves Evidence of funerary rites in the la Tène period. *Archeologické Rozhledy* 70, 2 (2018), 239–259.
- Szabó et alii 2018
M. Szabó – Z. Czajlik – K. Tankó, *La nécropole celtique à Sajópetri – Homoki-szölöskert*. Paris (2018).
- Tiefengraber – Wiltshcke-Schrotta 2012
G. Tiefengraber, K. Wiltshcke-Schrotta, *Der Dürrenberg bei Hallein. Die Gräbergruppe Moserfeld-Osthang*. Rahden (2012).



Pl. I.1. Morphological differences between shears from the Mediterranean environment and the La Tène milieu: a. Shears from Kerameikos cemetery (after Kovacovics 1990); b. Shears from Pişcolt (after Némethi 1988); 2. Map of deliberately deformed shears in early and middle La Tène burials from the Carpathian Basin.



Pl. II. Deformed shears from early and middle La Tène burials from the Carpathian Basin (not at scale): a. Pottenbrunn grave 854 (after Ramsl 2002); b. Pottenbrunn grave 975 (after Ramsl 2002); c. Sv. Michal grave 17 (after Benadik 1958); d. Malé Kosihy grave 274 (after Bujna 1995); e. Szabadi grave 10 (after Horváth, Németh 2009); f. Pišcolt grave 158 (after Németh 1992).