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**THE BRONZE-AGE AXE-SHAPED SCEPTRE FROM PĂLATCA  
(TRANSYLVANIA) AND ITS EASTERN CONNECTIONS**

**Abstract.** *In the Pălatca Commune (Cluj County) in Transylvania, a prehistoric (probably elk) antler axe was discovered accidentally and it later came into the possession of a collector. The item is extremely rare, which is why we subjected it to analysis in the present paper.*

*The axe has an arched, but very blunt, blade and a round edge. The shaft was made through an oval perforation, inside which there are numerous traces of a tool. The outer surface of the axe is polished, particularly the circular edge, with edges in the form of a border which was decorated with short, regular indentations. It can be seen that the item was used intensely, in a phase in which its function was probably that of a tool. Upon a closer look, two groups of markings were also identified: one above the blade, made of two "stirrups", and another between the hole and the edge, consisting of oblique stirrups, a cross and several punctures.*

*The shape presents several antecedents until the Neolithic and the Eneolithic in the eastern part of Europe, both in items made of antler and those made of metal or stone. However, the best analogies found among the Bronze Age items from the current space of Ukraine and Russia. In the Ingul-catacomb culture, there were stone items that have similar edges, including some with notched decorations. However, we believe that the closest analogy is the famous sceptre-axe discovered in Dudarkov, which is particularly remarkable due to then numerous zoomorphic, phytoform and geometric motifs incised on its surface, attributed to the Mnogovalikovaja culture. In the same eastern area of Europe, the best analogies are given by stone axes from the Borodino hoard, or Suvorovskaja-type ones, dating from the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. Based on these correspondences, our assessment is that the axe from Pălatca can be interpreted as a sceptre, similar to other antler items already discovered in the Mid- and Late Bronze Age in Transylvania or neighbouring regions.*

*Regarding the item's dating and context, it is highly likely that it came from the site surveyed in Pălatca – "TogulluiMândrușcă", where a settlement dated to the beginning of the Late Bronze Age was discovered and from which other eastern type items originated, such as a bronze needle with four protuberances and Noua culture ceramics.*

**Key words:** antler axe, sceptre, Bronze Age, Symbolism, Transylvania.

## СОКИРОПОДІБНИЙ СКІПЕТР БРОНЗОВОГО ВІКУ З ПАЛАТКИ (ТРАНСИЛЬВАНІЯ) ТА ЙОГО СХІДНІ ЗВ'ЯЗКИ

**Анотація.** У громаді Палатка (округ Клуж) у Трансильванії випадково виявили доісторичну (ймовірно, лосину) рогову сокиру, яка пізніше потрапила у володіння колекціонера. Цей предмет є надзвичайно рідкісним, тому ми піддали його аналізу в цій статті. Сокира має дугоподібне, але дуже тупе лезо і кругле лезо. Стовбур виконано через овальну перфорацію, всередині якої є численні сліди знаряддя. Зовнішня поверхня сокири відшліфована, зокрема кругла кромка, з краями у вигляді бордюра, прикрашеного короткими правильними поглибленнями. Видно, що предмет використовувався інтенсивно, на етапі, коли використовувався як інструмент. При детальнішому розгляді також було виявлено дві групи розміток: одна над лезом, виконана з двох “стремен”, а інша – між отвором і кромкою, що складається з косих стремен, хреста та кількох проколів.

Форма нагадує декілька відомих попередників доби неоліту та енеоліту в східній частині Європи у виробках як з пантів, так і з металу чи каменю. Проте найкращі аналоги знайдено серед предметів доби бронзи з сучасного простору України та Росії. В Інгульсько-катакомбній культурі зустрічалися кам'яні вироби з подібними краями, в тому числі з виїмчастим оздобленням. Однак, на нашу думку, найбільшю аналогією є відомий скіпетр-сокира, знайдений у Дударкові, який особливо примітний завдяки численным врізаням на його поверхню зооморфним, фітоформним і геометричним мотивам, віднесеним до Многояликової культури. У цьому ж східному ареалі Європи найкращі аналоги дають кам'яні сокири з Бородинського скарбу, або суворовського типу, що датуються першою половиною I тис. до н.е. З огляду на ці відповідники наша оцінка полягає у тому, що сокиру з Палатки можна інтерпретувати як скіпетр, подібний до інших предметів з пантів, які вже були виявлені в епоху середньої та пізньої бронзи у Трансильванії або сусідніх регіонах.

З приводу датування та контексту предмета зазначимо: цілком імовірно, що він походить із обстеженого в Палатці місця – “Тогуллуй-Мандрушка”, де було виявлено поселення, що датується початком епохи пізньої бронзи, і з якого походять інші предмети східного типу, зокрема бронзова голка з чотирма виступами та кераміка культури Ноуа.

**Ключові слова:** пантова (рогова) сокира, скіпетр, бронзовий вік, символізм, Трансильванія.

**The Problem Statement.** In 2012, we were given a prehistoric antler axe for research purposes<sup>1</sup>. The item was photo documented and drawn, but we have no information regarding its subsequent fate. However, given its importance in the wider knowledge about a certain type of antler artefact characteristic of the Transylvanian Bronze Age, we considered its publication to be quite useful, all the more so as it represents an item that is unique in the aforementioned geographical space and even beyond.

**The Description.** The artefact was made from an antler, and the wide blade suggests that the raw material used was an elk antler, and not that of a stag (fig. 2). The axe has a wide and arched blade, and the opposite side (the edge) is circular, slightly bulged, with an emphasised border, larger in diameter than the body (fig. 2/b, d-e). On the edge of this border, there are short, radial notches, displayed regularly. The edge is not sharp, but actually very blunt (fig. 2/g), which suggests that it was used for cutting. In the central part of the axe, the shaft-hole was made vertically, in an oval shape (fig. 2/a). A very interesting aspect is the execution of the perforation, for which the maker used a tool with an approx. 0.2 cm tip, with which the texture of the antler was carved. On the entire surface, many small, vertical or oblique grooves are visible, which were finished subsequently (fig. 2/j). This final clue offers up details not only regarding the manufacturing technology used for the perforation, but also the duration of its use through shafting. However, the exterior parts, particularly the blade and the edge, bear strong traces of polishing. The circular edge has a dark colour

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<sup>1</sup> The item belonged to Radu Duma from Cluj-Napoca who, at that time, was a Master's student at the “1 December 1918” University of Alba Iulia.

(fig. 2.d), which suggests that it was hardened through heat treatment (length = 18 cm; blade width = 8.6 cm; poll diameter = 5.5 cm).

**The Analysis of Sources and Recent Researches.** Based on all its details, the item from Pălatca resembles a series of stone axes, most of which originated from the eastern part of Europe. In order not to overburden the text with too many analogies, we shall focus on the most illustrative examples, beginning with the axes from the Borodino hoard (Kaiser, 1997, pl. 2/1–4), or the Suvorovskaja-type axes from the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, from Nal'čik, Šalušinskoe (fig. 3/7) and Stavropol (Kaiser, 1997, pl. 24/2–4), with correspondences with metal axes, as per the ones from Kišpek (Russia) (Kaiser, 1997, 104, Abb. 55). Particularly from the perspective given by the edge, a good analogy is provided by a stone axe discovered in the Mikolaiiv region (Ukraine) ([http://neolitica.ru/lot.php?lot\\_id=2241](http://neolitica.ru/lot.php?lot_id=2241)). This item has a circular edge, marked by a border with short, regular incisions (fig. 3/8), very similar to the ones on the axe from Pălatca. Although the axe from Ukraine was found by accident, its attribution to the Ingul catacomb culture (approx. 3200–1750 BC) is highly likely.

Naturally, we must turn our attention to antler and bone artefacts. From a typological viewpoint, this type of axe appeared as early as the Eneolithic, in the Prut-Dniester space. A large collection of round-edged axes, some similar to the item from Pălatca, is known in the area of the Tripolie culture (Markevich, 1981, fig. 52). In the area of the Bessarabian variant of the Cernavodă I culture from Moldavia, we know of a ceremonial axe, found in a tumular grave in Krasnoe, bearing a similar edge with a border to the axe from Pălatca (Manzura, Sava, 1994, fig. 4/7; Govedarica, Manzura, 2011, fig. 8). The dorsal part of the axe, with a discoidal edge, is also similar to the shape of the sceptre found in grave 2 in Mound 1 from Luhansk (formerly Vorošilovgrad), in south-eastern Ukraine (fig. 3/2). The sceptre had been placed on the right shoulder of the deceased, a man buried together with 11 large silex blades, belonging to the Novodanilovka group of Eneolithic graves containing ochre from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium and the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Govedarica 2004, pp. 181, 194–195, Abb. 36; 66/4). However, the form points to much older origins, which we can identify in the Neolithic period of the Caucasus (fig. 3/1) (Hansen et al. 2006, 22, Abb. 50), with certain similarities to the circular and bulged poll found in the phallus-shaped axes from Aruchlo (Georgia), in the area associated with the Shulaveri-Shomutepe culture (Hansen, 2017, pp. 269–271, fig. 1-3). Transposed into metal, morphologically similar axes appeared as early as the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, in the northern Pontic space, as in Cuconeștii Vechi (Republic of Moldova) (Dergačev, 2002, pl. 18/R), or in the deposit from Klady (fig. 3/3) (Epoha bronzы, 1994, pl. 47/8; Rezepkin, 2000, p. 64, Taf. 54/13, 15; Hansen, 2009, pp. 149–150, fig. 12/5, 8; Hansen, 2011, p. 161, fig. 9/5, 8).

Analogies for the item from Pălatca are practically absent in the Romanian space, with the exception of one (rather relative) discovery made in Transylvania, in Teleac, belonging to the Late Bronze Age (the Gáva culture). The item is lacking a blade and both of its ends are circular, but the common elements include the arched shape and, especially, a well-outlined groove all around one of the ends (fig. 3/6) (Vasiliev et al. 1991, pp. 73–74, fig. 22/14), which has a similar appearance to the border of the edge of the item from Pălatca. The correspondences from the Central European area are not very close either. One antler item from Piliny (Hungary) (Báró, 1909, p. 427, fig. 22), decorated with incisions that imitate the straps with which it was fixed to the handle (fig. 3/5), seems to have had an active part that is similar in use to the blade of the axe from Pălatca. The way in which the poll of the item from Pălatca was carved from an antler was known in the Hungarian Late Bronze Age, having

been used, for instance, in the case of the cheek pieces from G6r (Ilon, 2001, p. 248, pl. III/1). Other items could also represent possible analogies, but they are fragmentary, as is the case of the item dating from the Koszider period (1450–1350 BC) found in Jász6d6zsa (Choyke, 2005, p. 147, pl. I/7). In the absence of analogies, we were compelled to seek correspondences in the Bronze Age of western Europe as well, where, in the Seine-Oise-Marne culture, there are horn axes with similar blades and edges (Otte, 2001, p. 132, fig. 115/7–8).

Similarities are easier to find in the eastern part of Europe. In terms of its shape, the axe from Pălatca is not far from an exceptional Late Bronze Age discovery from the upper course of the Dnieper River, in Dudarkov, Ukraine. This horn axe (fig. 3/4a-b), richly ornamented with arboreal, zoomorphic and geometric motifs, was found in the area associated with the Mnogovalikovaja culture and has been connected to Mycenaean influences from the Aegean area (Lichardus, 2001, pp. 77–80, Abb. 1; Lichardus, Vlad6r, 1996, pp. 43–44, pl. 25/10; Irimia, 2007, 16–17, fig. 6A). Maja Kašuba and Elke Kaiser consider that, in this case, the axe's initial use was simply as a hammer, but, due to the symbolic value it gained after its ornamentation (similarly, for instance, to a mining hammer from Őold6neŐti), it was later included in the category of prestige goods (Kašuba & Kaiser, 178, Taf. 11/1).

Regarding the shape of the blade, the axe from Pălatca presents similarities with the blade of the equally famous axe-shaped sceptre ending in a leopard, discovered in the palace in Malia and dated to the Paleopalatian Period (1800 – 1700 BC) (fig. 3/9) (see <https://heraklionmuseum.gr/>).

**The Main Material Statement.** The Pălatca village is known in the scholarly literature due to the Bronze Age discoveries made there. In 1972, Tudor Soroceanu published a study on a Bronze Age settlement in Pălatca–*Sub Pădure*, which he attributed to the Wietenberg culture (the Middle Bronze Age); he also identified similar materials at a distance of approx. 200 m, in the area of a cemetery from the migration period (Soroceanu, 1972, pp. 165–170 and note 4, pl. I–III). Systematic excavations were resumed in 1991 in the settlement at *Togullui MândruŐc6*, which also uncovered (besides ceramics characteristic of the Late Wietenberg phase, with Noua culture influences) bone, horn and metal items. Among the latter, we must mention a bronze needle with four protuberances (attributed to the Noua culture), a bronze anvil and a copper ingot. A metallurgic workshop and a place of worship belonging to the cultural horizon of the Late Bronze Age was also discovered, and this also contained metal items (an arrowhead, a needle with a spherical head) (Rotea, 2009, pp. 7–8, fig. 4; Wittenberger, Rotea, 2011, pp. 261–263, fig. 1, 4; Rotea, Wittenberger, Tecar, & Tecar, 2011a, pp. 13–17, pl. II; III/2; IV–XIII; Rotea, Wittenberger, Tecar, & Tecar, 2011b, pp. 13–16, pl. 2, 4–11; Benea, S6s6ran, & Rotea, 2011). From this complex, a fragment of a Keftiu-type ingot is particularly meaningful, since it is the only such item found in the current Romanian space (Rotea, 2001, p. 26, Abb. 15; Rotea, 2004, p. 8, fig. 4a; Rotea et al, 2011a, p. 13, pl. VI.7/1; Rotea et al, 2011b, p. 13; Popa, 2015, pp. 190–191, 200, 205–207, 209, fig. 4).

A cremation cemetery, also dating from the Late Bronze Age and containing urns, was discovered in Pălatca, in the *Poderei* point (Rotea & FeneŐan, 1994, pp. 351–353, pl. I–II).

The context of the axe's origins is unknown. The only information offered by the owner refers to the village from which it came: Pălatca (Cluj County). However, based on the data presented above, we believe that there are sufficient arguments that support the dating of the axe–sceptre from Pălatca to the Bronze Age. Moreover, given certain chronological benchmarks in the evolution of axes and sceptres, the dating can be refined to the Middle Bronze Age. The axe is probably connected to the site from *Togullui MândruŐc6*, where contemporaneous items

were discovered, including those of eastern type or influence, such as the bronze needle with protuberances (fig. 1/1), kantharos-type vessels (fig. 1/2) and common use vessels (fig. 1/3–4) specific to the Noua-Sabatinovka culture (Rotea, 1997, p. 14, fig. III/3; V/3).

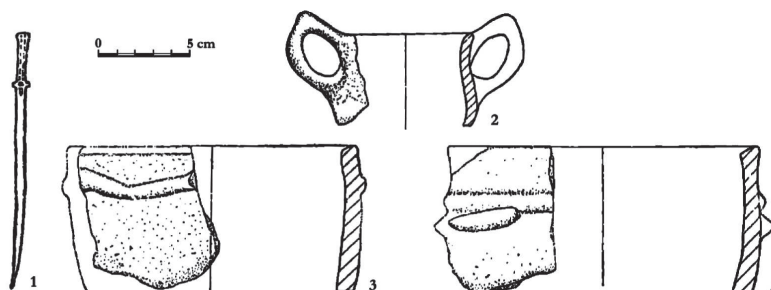


Fig. 1. Pălatca–Togullui Mândrușcă (after Rotea, 1997)

### Symbolism and significance

What distinguishes the item from Pălatca from other horn artefacts from the Bronze Age is, first and foremost, its axe shape. Leaving aside one of its utilities that arises from its very shape, however, its morphological features, associated with symbolic incisions present on its surface, offer the axe the significance of a sceptre. The known horn sceptres from the Bronze Age, in the Carpathian–Danube area, differ in shape (Diaconu, 2014), the most evolved and well-known of which are the items with two circular ends, vertical perforations and surfaces decorated with geometric motifs. These evolved items originated primarily from the area of the Wietenberg culture (Popa & Simina, 2004, pp. 19, 26–29, pl. 8, photo 1), but they have also been encountered in areas associated with the Otomani culture (Fazecaș, 2005) and the Gáva-Holigrady culture (Vasiliev et al. 1991, pp. 73–74, fig. 22/14).

Together with the stone sceptres, these horn items represent the power insignia held during the Bronze Age by the small peaks of a local aristocracy. Happily, the archaeological information we have is complemented by ancient written sources. The most important information that can be considered in this endeavour is provided by the two major works attributed to Homer: *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. These works contain numerous references to the utility of sceptres. Such symbols of power were held by two important characters in the *Iliad*, namely Achilles and Agamemnon (Popa & Simina, 2004, pp. 28–29). Regarding the former, Homer stated that:

*“Those were his words, and he slammed the scepter,  
Studded with gold, to the ground and sat down”* (Homer, *Iliad*, 8)

The macroscopically visible incisions on the surface of the item are equally important. Some that are present in particular abundance on the active areas could have occurred due to the practical use of the item and are incidental. Other incisions were made intentionally. They are grouped in two areas, both located on the upper part of the item. The first group is located under the tip of the blade of the upper part, at the base of the arched area. They consist of two “stirrup” shaped markings made of deep incisions (fig. 2/h; 4/1b). Another group is located on the edge between the shaft-hole and the blade, consisting of several fine oblique incisions. Two of these incisions were made close together (1mm between them), forming another “stirrup”, and we believe that they did not occur due to the item’s use, but were rather made intentionally. Moreover, a cross with equal 2 mm long arms was incised deeper, next to them. Towards the blade, there are other oblique lines, remnants from two other “stirrups”, and a

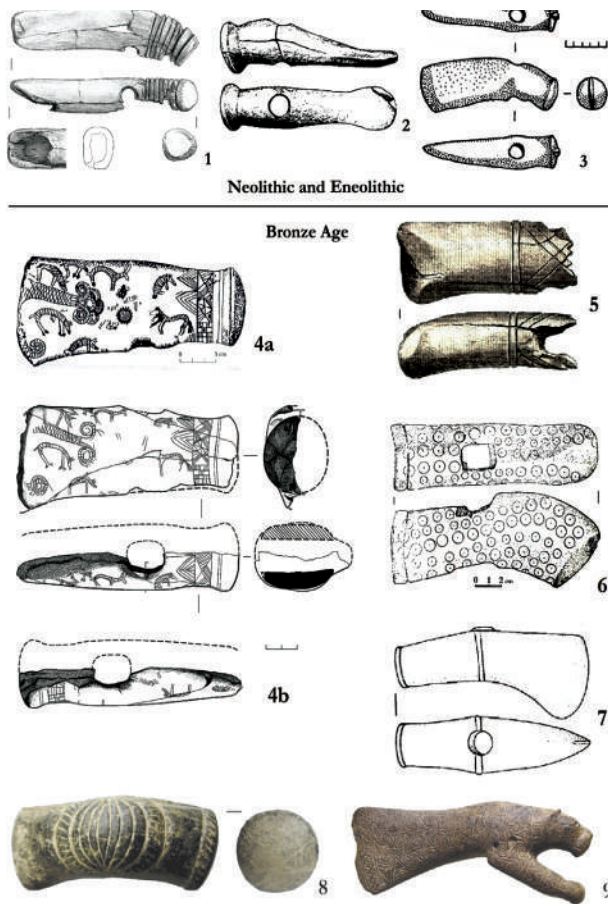
small group compiled of fine points (fig. 2/i; fig. 4/1a). The remainder of the incisions/cuts are either due to the final stages of manufacturing the antler, or to random blows.

Naturally, the presence of these incisions on the surface of the axe must be understood in the wider context of artefacts made of bone and horn in the Bronze Age, in order to identify the possible symbolic and even cultural benchmarks. The best analogies for incised markings such as these are on items associated with the Noua culture in Moldova. A bone chisel from Giurcani bears on its body several transversal incisions (fig. 4/6), interpreted as playing a practical role, to facilitate better grip (Rotaru & Gheorghe, 2006, p. 130, fig. 2/7). Another bone item with similar incisions originated from the settlement in Poșta Elan (fig. 4/5) (Rotaru & Gheorghe, 2006, p. 130, fig. 9/7), and it also has good analogies in the Noua settlement in Cavadinești (fig. 4/3) (Florescu, 1991, fig. 155/9). A combination of transversal and oblique incisions (fig. 4/4) is visible on a bone tip from Șuletea-Șipote (Rotaru & Gheorghe, 2006, p. 130, fig. 9/4) and on a unique bone artifact from the late Bronze Age settlement of Giarmata Vii-Ghiroda 4 Site (jud. Timiș) (fig. 4/7). Another bone tip that probably also functioned as a comb, found in the Noua settlement at Horga Pod bears a series of incised marks (fig. 4/2) in a row: a star made of three lines, five vertical lines and four horizontal lines (Rotaru & Gheorghe, 2006, p. 130, fig. 12/1). Naturally, the small star makes us think of the small cruciform motif identified on the axe from Pălatca. Surely, the association of markings on the item from Horga Pod must have had a certain meaning, as is our suspicion in the case of the markings that, despite being more disparate and less visible today, are preserved on the horn item from Pălatca.

However, the situation is quite different in the case of the axe-shaped sceptre from Dudarkov. The preserved portion bears a rich symbolic ornamentation, which contains different representations of animals, a tree (palm) and



**Fig. 2. The horn axe-sceptre from Pălatca (Transylvania)  
photo Ștefan Lipot**



**Fig. 3.** Axes (1, 3) and sceptre-axes (2, 6–9) made of horn (1–2, 4–6), bronze (3) and stone (7–9) Aruchlo (1), Luhansk (2), Klady (3), Dudarkov (4); Piliny (5); Teleac (6); Salušinskoe (7); “The Mikolaiiv Malia region” (8); Malia (9) (after Hansen, Mirtshulava, 2013 – 1; Govedarica, 2004 – 2; Rezapkin, 2000 – 3; Lichardus, 2001 – 4; Báró, 1909 – 5; Vasiliev et al. 1991 – 6; Kaiser 1997 – 7; [http://neolitica.ru/lot.php?lot\\_id=2241](http://neolitica.ru/lot.php?lot_id=2241) – 8; <https://heraklionmuseum.gr/> – 9)

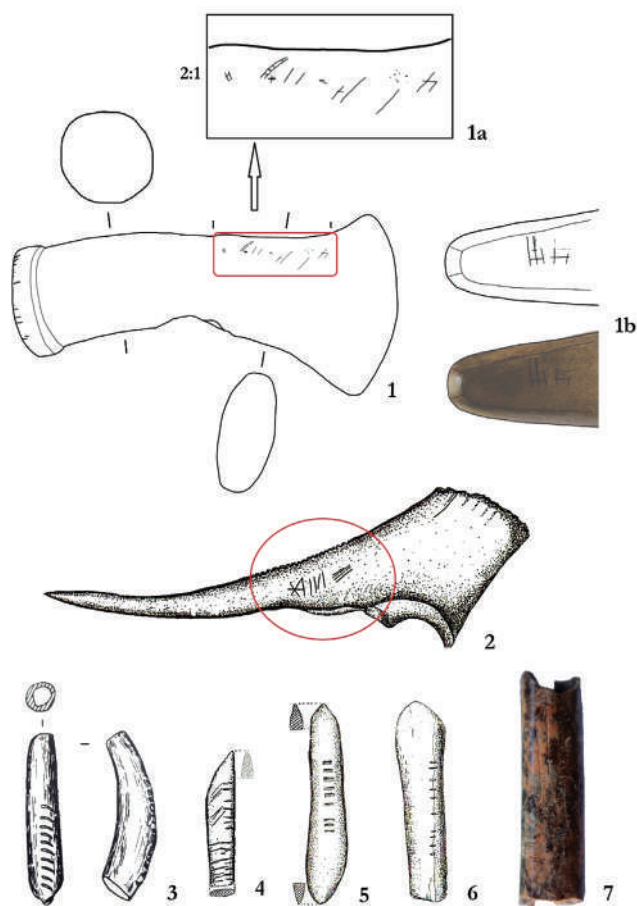
sceptre-axe. It is probable that during the first phase it was used intensely, and this was then the strong polishing of the outer parts occurred. In the final phase, the perforation for the shaft hole obtained its current appearance, that is, its oval shape, achieved using a tool that removed the old perforation, which would normally have been intensively polished.

**The Conclusions.** We can easily assert that the shape of the sceptre-axe discovered in Pălatca is quite unique and makes it stand out among the Bronze Age horn artefacts. The closest known analogies are axes from the eastern part of Europe (Ukraine, Russia),

geometric shapes. The markings, which must have covered the entire surface of the item, were executed through fine incisions (Lichardus, 2001, pp. 77–80, Abb. 1; Lichardus & Vladár, 1996, pp. 43–44, pl. 25/10; Irimia, 2007, pp. 16–17, fig. 6A). The particular symbolic charge of the axe from Dudarkov supports its function as a sceptre. A good contemporary correspondence for this type of iconography on bone can be found in Ukraine, on an animal mandible from Putivl (Lichardus, 2001, p. 82, Abb. 3). So far, in the absence of other obvious analogies, we believe that the item from Dudarkov, as well as the one from Pălatca, are part of the same category of axe-shaped sceptres, their shapes, iconography and uses given by the cultural contexts from which they originated, characteristic of Bronze Age society in the eastern part of Central Europe.

As emphasised above, it is highly likely that the antler axe from Pălatca underwent two phases of use, initially as an axe used in household or handcraft activities, and later as a

regardless of whether they are made of horn, stone or metal. The morphological similarities between the axe from Pălatca and the famous axe from Dudarkov that have been repeatedly emphasised must, of course, be seen within the limits imposed by the austerity of the decorations on the Transylvanian item, which cannot be compared with the complex symbolic decorations on the analogy from Ukraine. However, they offer a chronological benchmark that aids in the time framing of our item. Based on the data analysed above, we believe that the axe-shaped sceptre from Pălatca can be considered to be contemporaneous with the Mnogovalikovaja culture or the Noua culture. Given the realities from the known sites in Pălatca, it is possible that the sceptre originated from the settlement with many metallurgical valences in “Togullui Mândrușcă”, from which other metal and ceramic items that can be associated with the Noua culture originated. We believe that the local environment in which we can identify these manifestations is the Gligorești group, characteristic of the Wietenberg and Noua synthesis.



**Fig. 4. The horn sceptre–axe discovered in Pălatca (Transylvania): drawing, with the groups of markings present on its surface (1–1a–1b) and analogies of markings on bone and horn items from the area of the Noua culture in Moldova: Horga Pod (2), Cavadinești (3), Șuletea-Șipote (4), Poșta Elan (5), Giurcani (6) and Giarmata-Vii-Ghiroda (unique – 1, 7; after Rotaru, Gheorghe, 2006 – 2, 4-6; Florescu 1991 – 3)**

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