

# Magic and Memory Prehistoric and Roman “Antiquities” in Avar Period Graves from the Carpathian Basin\*

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**T**HE SECOND half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD experienced a relatively widespread phenomenon in temperate Europe—the reuse of antique objects that belonged to earlier periods of time. Archaeologists named these artefacts differently (“antiquities,” “archaika,” “survivals,” “relics” etc.); some of them came from prehistoric or proto-historic sites, but the majority of them were produced during the Roman times. They were mostly found in graves, in Western Europe coming from the Anglo-Saxon (Meaney 1981, 192–238; Eckardt / Williams 2003) or Merovingian environment (Mehling 1998; Pion 2011; Pion 2012), while in Eastern Europe they appeared in the Carpathian Basin mainly in burials of the Avar period (Kraskovská 1971; Garam 2010). In certain European areas such “antiquities” were still present in contexts dated to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium and the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium AD (Gilchrist 2008; Ungerman 2009; Dragotă / Rustoiu 2011).

These artefacts have been studied from different perspectives. Some scholars have focused on the manner in which the objects in question were either transmitted through time from one generation to another, or were discovered and reinterpreted functionally and symbolically. These contributions have been based on a series of anthropological theories stating that the objects (things) have their own social history, similar to the people who use them, and also gain a social biography through human agency. Thus during their lifespan, from manufacturing to a more-or-less lengthy use (sometimes encompassing more than one generation) to abandonment, the objects’ identity and symbolic meanings could have changed according to the specific social contexts in which they were used. At the same time, the social biography of things was influenced by the means and ways of transmission, across territories and through time, between different communities (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Hahn/Weiss 2013).

One specific question concerns the “discovered” objects (“objets trouvés”) whose initial “biography” was forgotten, like in the case of “antiquities” found in Avar graves, which are discussed below. Their archaeological contexts of discovery, as well as the manner in which they were reused, indicate that both the functionality and the significance were reinvented and these objects developed a new “biography”. As it will be shown below, their functional-

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ity frequently moved from the daily practical domain to the magical one, often gaining an apotropaic significance.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned observations, the interpretation of the “antiquities” discovered in early medieval burials has to begin from the cultural and social environment in which they were reused and also from their archaeological contexts of discovery.

As concerning the Avars, they came to the Carpathian Basin in 568 AD during the reign of Khagan Baian, establishing a realm that was organized according to the model of the empires from the Asian steppes. When they arrived, the cultural and ethnic layout of the Carpathian Basin was already diverse. Amongst the communities that came under Avar control are the Romanic population that still lived on the territories of the former Roman Danubian provinces, mainly in Pannonia, the Germanic Gepids from Transylvania and the Great Hungarian Plain, and other groups originating from amongst the populations that lived beyond the Roman provincial frontiers, like the Sarmatians whose traces were still visible in eastern Hungary during the Gepid rule (see more about these aspects in Daim 2003; Pohl 2003; Vida 2008; Vida 2009; Stadler 2008; Vaday 2003 etc.). The persistence of local communities could explain up to a point the preservation and transmission through time of some traditional elements that preceded the Avar arrival in the Carpathian Basin, as well as that of some objects that were meant to express the specific, ancestral identity of some members of these groups.

Archaeologically, the Avar period in the Carpathian Basin is defined by a series of settlements and mostly by hundreds of cemeteries which together consists of over 60,000 graves (Daim 2003, 463; for a short overview of archaeological investigations see Vida 2008, 13–15). Both the settlements and the cemeteries provide important evidence regarding various aspects of the Avar cultural environment in the Carpathian Basin.

The presence of “ancient” objects in graves is uneven. They are more frequently attested in cemeteries from Transdanubia and the Great Hungarian Plain, while in south-western Slovakia are less common and in Transylvania are scarce. Amongst the few Transylvanian discoveries are a fragmentary bronze brooch of the La Tène C type, found in grave no. 3 at Ghirbom (Alba County, Romania)<sup>1</sup> (*Fig. 1*) and a few Roman coins coming from the cemetery at Noșlac (Alba County) (Găzdac / Cosma 2013). At the same time, the frequency of “antiquities” in cemeteries varies from one case to another. There are cemeteries in which the number of finds is reduced, while in others this number is relatively large. For example, the cemeteries from Kékesd, Nagypall, Pécsvárad, Szebény, Pilismarót etc. from Transdanubia (Kiss 1977; Garam 1975; Szabó 1975), Kiskőrös from the Great Hungarian Plain (Török 1975) or Želovce in south-western Slovakia (Čilinská 1973) produced only a few objects of this kind each, whereas 10% of the 2368 graves from Zamárdi contain “antiquities” (Bárdos / Garam 2009; Garam 2010, 148), and at Hird the proportion of graves with this kind of artefacts is over 50% (Sós / Salamon 1995, 63).

The interpretation of the significance of “antiquities” in Avar period burials is directly related to their context of discovery. Thus, on one hand, their shape, chronology and primary functionality has to be taken into consideration. On the other hand, their new functionality and subsequent symbolic meaning are indicated by their state of preservation from the moment of reuse and the eventual modifications or adaptations, the colour, the precise position within the funerary inventory in relation to the corpse, as well as the age and gender of the deceased (Mehling 1998; Pion 2011; Pion 2012). From this point of view, studies regarding the ‘antiquities’ discovered in Merovingian graves from Western Europe have shown that some of these old objects were reused in the same manner as in their original context, while the function of others was modified through a functional and/or symbolic reinterpretation.



Fig. 1. Inventory of grave no. 3 at Ghirbom containing a fragmentary bronze brooch of the middle La Tène type (after Cosma et al. 2013).

tation. The latter group consists of several categories of finds. Some of them were reused as ornaments, for example fragments of glass or metal vessels were transformed into beads or pendants. Other artefacts were invested with a different symbolic meaning, for example the blue glass bracelets of La Tène type were reused as amulets. Lastly, a series of “ancient” objects were only reused as raw materials, being recycled for different practical scopes (Mehling 1998, 86–119; Pion 2012).

The “antiquities” from Avar period graves in the Carpathian Basin illustrate a series of situations which resemble those from the Western European contexts, albeit with some particularities that characterise the geo-cultural area in question.

The first category of finds brought into discussion consists of artefacts that were used continuously during a longer period of time, being transmitted from one generation to another. These are mostly clothing accessories or body ornaments of Roman type, which were discovered intact and were still functional. Their position on the skeleton indicates that they were used in the same manner as in their original context. Such objects come from cemeteries in Transdanubia, on the territory of the former Roman province of Pannonia, and also from nearby areas located beyond the former Roman imperial frontiers. Amongst the relevant examples is one bronze Knee brooch produced in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and found in grave no. 263 at Zamárdi (Fig. 2/1). The grave belongs to a 6–8 years old girl. The brooch was placed on the left side of the chest (Bárdos / Garam 2009, 45, pl. 32). Another example also comes from Transdanubia, from grave no. 188 at Cikó (Fig. 2/2), in which a similar brooch was placed on the left shoulder of a child skeleton (Kiss / Somogyi 1984, 49, pl. 14). Other examples come from adult burials. The female grave no. 56 from Alattyán (Fig. 2/3), in the northern part of the Great Hungarian Plain, contains a bronze hinged brooch which was placed on the left side of the chest (Kovrig 1963, 14, pl. 4). Another slightly later dated hinged brooch, coming from a partially destroyed grave at Vác (Fig. 2/5), probably had the same positioning (Tettamanti 2000, 102, fig. 26, pl. 26, grave no. 464). Lastly, Roman bronze brooches of the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD were found in female graves no. 290 and 510 at Nové Zámky

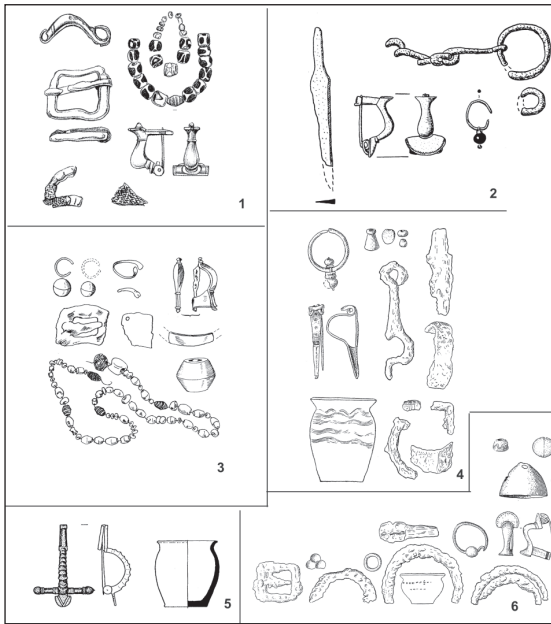


Fig. 2. Inventories of some female and child burials of the Avar period containing functional Roman brooches.

- 1. Zamárdi: grave no. 263 (after Bárdos/Garam 2009);
- 2. Cikó: grave no. 188 (after Kiss / Somogyi 1984);
- 3. Alattyán: grave no. 56 (after Kovrig 1963);
- 4. Nové Zámky: grave no. 290;
- 5. Vác: grave no. 464 (after Tettamanti 2000);
- Nové Zámky: grave no. 510 (after Čilinská 1966).

(Fig. 2/4, 6), in south-western Slovakia, being placed on the chest (on the left and right side respectively) (Čilinská 1966, 59, 99, pl. 50, 75). The positioning of all these brooches on skeletons indicates that they were used to fasten textile clothing. The continuous use of these brooches by several generations is also supported by the fact that they were preserved in a relatively good state. If they would have been first recovered from buried contexts, as in the cases which will be discussed below, they would have been already damaged by soil depositing (for example the pin could have been stuck by oxidization in the case of hinged brooches), so they could not have functioned properly from a practical point of view.

Aside from these brooches, other categories of body ornaments can be taken into consideration, for example some types of beads of the Roman period, albeit some of them could have also been reused upon discovery in the same manner due to their morphology. For example, one scar-

ab glass (“Egyptian faience”) bead was included into a string of beads found in the female grave no. 1234 at Tiszafüred (Fig. 3) (Garam 1995, 148, pl. 164). Similar scarab beads were produced in workshops from the Pontic cities of the 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and were brought in the Tisza region by the Sarmatian populations that arrived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (Bârcă / Symonenko 2009, 167, fig. 61).

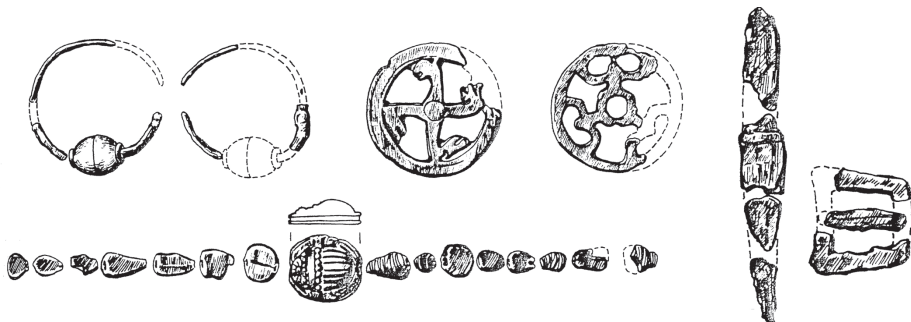


Fig. 3. Scarab bead of the 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century AD in a string found in the female burial no. 1234 at Tiszafüred (after Garam 1995).

The significance of the long-lasting circulation, of the perpetuation through time and of the transmission from one generation to another of antique objects was frequently discussed in anthropological literature (see for example Gilchrist 2012, 216–251; Gilchrist 2013). Similar examples are known from the beginning of the medieval period both in Western and Eastern Europe, although their number is reduced in comparison with other categories of “antiquities”. In the case of Avar period burials from the Carpathian Basin, there are also a few examples. The mentioned Roman brooches may suggest that some social groups preserved a particular traditional identity which preceded the Avars’ arrival by displaying some clothing elements or body ornaments specific to their ancestors from the Roman provincial or nearby indigenous environment. The preservation of some costume elements played an important role in maintaining the concept of an ancestral common origin of some families or larger social groups in relation to the new communities that arrived in the Carpathian Basin after the disintegration of the Roman provincial structures. These old artefacts could have also played the role of family heirlooms which incorporated an emotional meaning and evoked the memory of the ancestors. Along the same lines, it is not a coincidence that in general these old elements were included in female costumes, since the women were those who usually preserved and transmitted a series of traditional practices and customs. Moreover, the Roman origin of some communities can be also noticed in other elements of the funerary rite, ritual and inventory, for example in a series of cemeteries from around the Balaton Lake, indicating the deliberate preservation of some visual elements which defined a particular identity. The transmission of certain objects which materialised the memory of old familial or tribal origins from one generation to another and across wide areas was also noted in other cultural and historical environments (see for example Rustoiu 2013).

Another category of antique objects coming from Avar period burials consists of items “discovered” and reused in the same manner due to their morphological characteristics. Nevertheless, in these cases their transmission through time from one generation to another cannot be excluded, but the large chronological gap between their period of production and the moment of their burial or re-burial in the Avar period is problematic. Amongst the examples can be listed

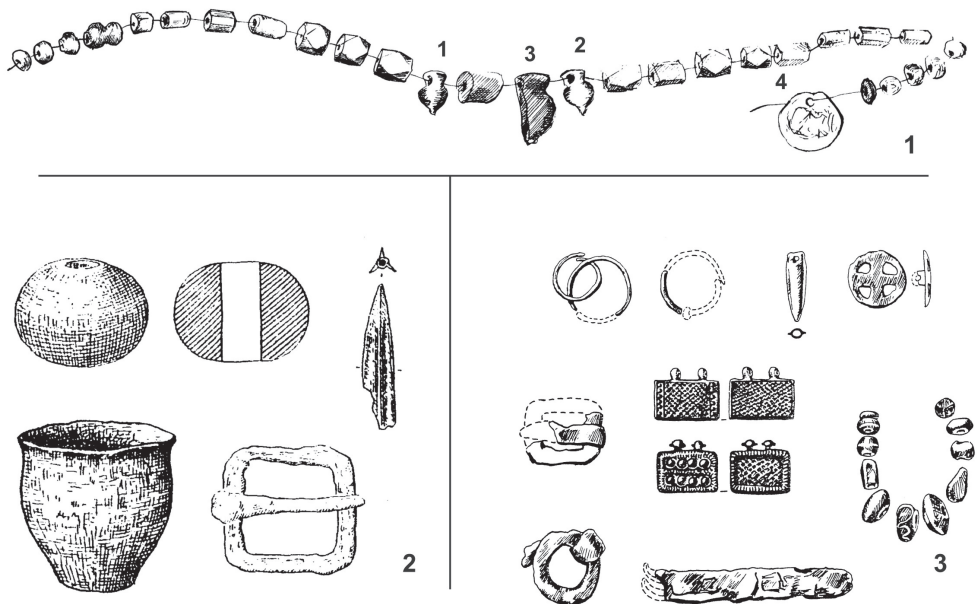
a series of glass beads decorated with “eyes” or protuberances, which were produced during the Early Iron Age (like those from female grave no. 701 and male grave no. 780 at Tiszafüred, or grave no. 1 at Săcueni—*Fig. 4*: Garam 1995, 378; Cosma et al. 2013, 77–78, fig. 54; for the beads of the Early Iron Age see Venclová 1983 and 1990), or the amphora-shaped beads made in Mediterranean or Pontic workshops of the 5<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC and spread in the Celtic environment from the Carpathian Basin during the Late Iron Age (see *Fig. 5/1* and *Fig. 8–9*). These beads will be discussed below. Before that, it has to be noted that all of these objects were reused in strings together with other beads produced during the Avar period, and sometimes these ornaments also included other “discovered” objects (*Fig. 5/1*).



*Fig. 4.* String of beads from grave no. 1 at Săcueni containing two beads of the Early Iron Age (after Cosma et al. 2013).

One question concerns the motivations that led to the reuse of these objects, aside from the aesthetic or morphological ones. The answer might be suggested by the manner in which other antique objects were reused. The latter group includes old artefacts which were already broken when found and were reused as such. The majority of the “antiquities” found in Avar period burials can be ascribed to this group and it is quite clear that their function was modified, being very different from the original one. Moreover, the manner in which such “antiquities” were used was very diverse.

Some of them were reused as beads or pendants in necklaces or strings sewn on clothes, thus being deliberately displayed to be seen by others. Such ornaments were obtained by transforming some old objects. This is the case of some coins of the Late Iron Age or the Roman period which were perforated<sup>2</sup>, of fragments of Roman glass vessels which were transformed into beads<sup>3</sup>, or of some bronze arrow heads of the Early Iron Age, perforated or not, which were used as pendants or, more rarely, were kept in purses<sup>4</sup> (*Fig. 5*) etc.



*Fig. 5.* 1. Kinkier: female grave no. 47. String containing two amphora-shaped glass beads of the La Tène period (1–2), one bead made of a fragment of a Roman glass vessel (3) and one coin of Diocletian (after Garam 1979). 2. Želovce: child grave no. 52 containing a pendant made of a “Scythian” bronze arrow head (Čilinská 1973). 3. Tiszafüred: female grave no. 1049 containing a perforated “Scythian” bronze arrow head included in a string of glass beads (after Garam 1995).

Other “antiquities” were collected and kept in purses or small bags made of perishable materials (leather or textiles) or in small metal caskets attached to the belt (*Fig. 6/2–4*). Sometimes these objects were hung from the belt using rings (*Fig. 6/1*). These small caskets often contained prehistoric flint tools, clothing accessories or fragmentary body ornaments of the Iron Age or Roman period (fragments of blue glass bracelets of La Tène type, or of bronze bracelets and brooches of various types, elements of bronze or iron belts etc.), coins, fragmentary

military equipment, arrow heads, fragments of bronze or glass vessels etc. (Garam 2010). These old objects, which display a wide typological and chronological diversity, were used as complex amulets invested with apotropaic meanings, aiming to protect the owner against all sorts of perils. A collection of amulets could have signalled a more powerful “arsenal” against the evil and malefic spirits<sup>5</sup> (see for example Ungerman 2009, 245–247, fig. 2–3). Thus, it is not a coincidence that many collections of “relics” have been found in female and child burials, as these social categories were considered to be more exposed to various perils. Furthermore, amulets were in general widely used by the communities from the Carpathian Basin during the Avar period (Vida 2002), and a similar pattern has also been noted in other more-or-less contemporaneous European areas (Meaney 1981; Fuglesang 1989).



*Fig. 6.* Complex amulets hung from the belt with rings and chains (1) or kept in small metal caskets, purses or small bags containing “relics” (2–4). 1. Zamárdi: female grave no. 517; 2. Tatabánya: male grave no. 23; 3. Csákerény: grave 284; 4. Várpalota: grave 20 (all after Garam 2010).

Another question concerns the process through which these objects became “magical” or were invested with apotropaic powers. The answer can be provided by an analysis of the manner in which these communities had seen, interpreted or understood antique objects and their means of their acquisition.

At the beginning of the medieval period the ruins of Roman towns or the remains of nearby cemeteries with sarcophagi or funerary monuments made of stone were still visible. As a consequence, these ruins were frequently used as quarries from which stone and bricks were extracted for other buildings. One relevant example, amongst many others, is provided by the settlement of the 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries from Alba Iulia, in Transylvania. The settlement was established amongst the ruins of the former Roman city of Apulum (Municipium Septimium Apulense) which appeared around the fort of the Legion XIII Gemina in the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. Recent investigations in one of the Mithraea from Apulum have revealed that several architectural elements which were once part of various Roman buildings and monuments were reused to build houses in the early medieval period amongst the ruins of the temple<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 7). The transformation of some Roman ruins into sources of building materials could have also happened earlier, in the Avar period. At the same time, the same ruins could have provided many small objects that could have been used subsequently in various ways.



Fig. 7. Alba Iulia (Municipium Septimium Apulense): medieval house dated to the 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries which was built amongst the ruins of the Mithraeum (left: arrow indicating the house) and oven built from Roman architectural elements in the same medieval house (right). Photo by Z. Czajlik and A. Rustoiu.

Recovered metal artefacts were treated in many ways, and recycling and reusing them as raw materials for making other everyday objects were more likely common. The cemetery at Pókaszpetk, in Transdanubia, provides one of the most relevant examples. Grave no. 73 belonged to a goldsmith and its inventory contains a series of Roman metal pieces which were very probably reused as raw materials. They consist of fragmentary bronze sheets which were part of a Roman strainer (Sós / Salamon 1995, 63–64, 143, pl. 8/73). Another grave from the same cemetery (no. 369), belonging to a mature woman, contains two pendants for earrings which were probably made from other sheet fragments cut out from this strainer (Sós / Salamon 1995, 64, 174, pl. 22/369). These two contexts illustrate not only the recy-



cling of some “ancient” objects, but also who were the consumers of the resulting objects. On the other hand, these finds also raise a question regarding the significance of these artefacts made from recycled metal. More precisely, was this metal seen simply as raw material, or these objects also gained certain symbolic meanings? As it will be shown below, a significant percentage of antique objects unearthed during the Avar period were invested with magical or apotropaic meanings or qualities. Therefore, the people of this period might have also considered that body ornaments made of old objects had been imbued with magical qualities. Furthermore, ethnographic literature provides relevant examples regarding the manufacturing of amulets from used or old objects (see note 5).

Antique artefacts did not come only from abandoned settlements but also from cemeteries. The majority of the prehistoric or Roman artefacts discovered in Avar period graves were very probably recovered, either complete or fragmentary, from the funerary inventories of earlier cemeteries<sup>7</sup>. There are numerous examples from the Great Hungarian Plain and Transdanubia in which Avar period cemeteries superposed those belonging to earlier periods, and one consequence was that later burials destroyed the old ones (Kemenczei 2010). However, the frequency of “antiquities” in Avar funerary inventories is not directly proportional to the number of old graves from the same burial grounds. For example, in the cemeteries at Pilismarot, Szob and Vác (Szabó 1975; Kovrig 1975; Tettamanti 2000), which superpose or are closely located to some large Celtic or Roman cemeteries, the number of “antiquities” that could have come from destroyed old graves is reduced. It is difficult to say whether the disinterest of the communities in question has played a role, or some of these artefacts were “exported” in one way or another to other communities. It was already noted that a series of fragments of blue glass bracelets of La Tène type discovered in some Merovingian graves were produced during the Late Iron Age in Central Europe and were absent in that period from the western part of the continent<sup>8</sup>. As a consequence, their presence in the Merovingian environment could be connected with a form of exchange through which such relics could have circulated in the early medieval period (Pion 2012, 51). One relatively similar situation is suggested by the amphora-shaped beads made of translucent or greyish and rarely blue glass, which were discovered in the Carpathian Basin. As mentioned above, they were very popular amongst the communities from the north-western Balkans and Central Europe in the 5<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC, being worn in strings, sometimes together with coral and amber beads (*Fig. 5/1* and *Fig. 8*) (for this type of beads during the Late Iron Age see Popović 1997; Schönfelder 2007, 308–309; Rustoiu 2011a, 95–96; for the correct chronological and cultural identification of the amphora-shaped beads in Avar graves see Kovrig 1963, 113). The number of these beads found in Avar period burials is quite large. They were very probably obtained by “plundering” Celtic graves of the Late Iron Age. In this context, it is significant that the distribution area of the pieces discovered in Avar contexts corresponds to that of the beads from the Late Iron Age (*Fig. 9*). Another argument is provided by the presence of five coral beads in grave no. 72 at Pilismarot (Szabó 1975, 257, *fig. 5/3*). Recent archaeological investigations also unearthed coral and amphora-shaped glass beads in the nearby Celtic settlement and its cemetery, which may suggest that some of the Late Iron Age burials could have been identified and “plundered” during the Avar period (for coral beads in La Tène contexts at Pilismarot see Schmid-Sikimić 2000; for amphora-shaped glass beads in La Tène contexts see Popović 1997, 168; Schönfelder 2007, 319). The large number of amphora-shaped glass beads discovered in Avar contexts also indicates that they might have been exchanged between different communities due to their popularity amongst the early medieval people.



Fig. 8. String containing an amphora-shaped glass bead from the La Tène grave no. 79 at Fântânele–Dâmbu Popii (left) (photo A. Rustoiu) and a similar bead from a string found in grave no. 184 from the Avar period cemetery at Alattyán (right) (after Kovrig 1963).

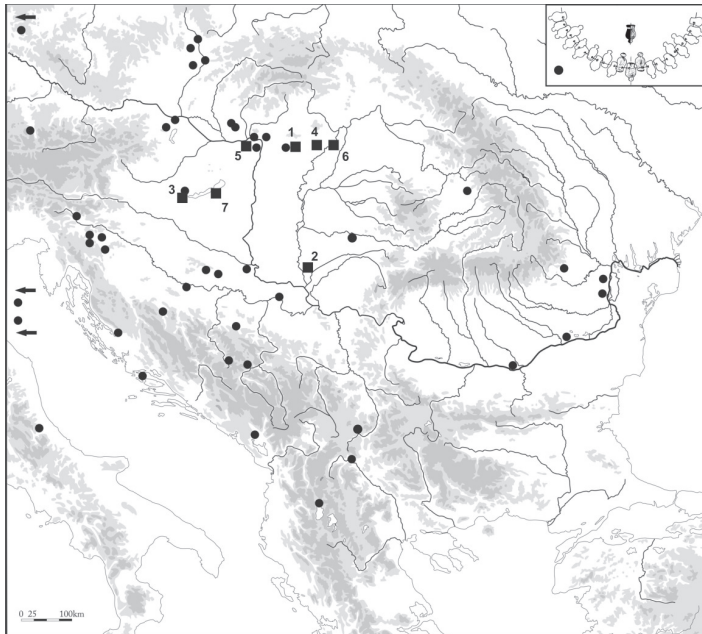


Fig. 9. Distribution map of the amphora-shaped beads of the 5<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC in the Carpathian Basin and the northern Balkans (dots) and of similar beads recovered from Avar period cemeteries (squares). List of discoveries from the Avar period cemeteries: 1. Alattyán (H); 2. Aradac (SRB); 3. Keszthely (H); 4. Kisköre (H); 5. Pilismarot (H); 6. Tiszafüred (H); 7. Zamárdi (H).

The “antiquities” which were discovered more-or-less accidentally by different medieval communities were not perceived as traces of the prehistoric or Roman past, but elements of the natural environment. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century Bishop Marbodius of Rennes (in *Liber lapidum*) and two centuries later Albertus Magnus (in *De mineralibus*) explained that prehistoric stones or those showing different engraved images, including Roman gemstones and cameos, have a natural origin and incorporate supernatural powers. Thus R. Gilchrist has concluded “that

antique items placed in medieval graves were not valued for their temporal or biographical associations, but rather for their connection to the natural world. Roman antiquities came from the earth, just like fossils and prehistoric axes and arrow-heads. Stone, fossils, and “found objects” such as antique intaglios and prehistoric lithics were regarded by medieval people as natural objects that possessed miraculous properties” (Gilchrist 2012, 247). In other cases the place of discovery plays an important role in the interpretation of old objects. Some of these places were associated with a mythical past, when the earth was inhabited by giants or other supernatural beings, so the unearthed objects were ascribed to them (Ungerma 2009, 243–244). To prevent the eventual unwanted effects of such artefacts, at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Gallic priests composed a series of prayers that had to be recited upon unearthing them (Effros 2003, 16–17; see also Krämer 1965, 238).

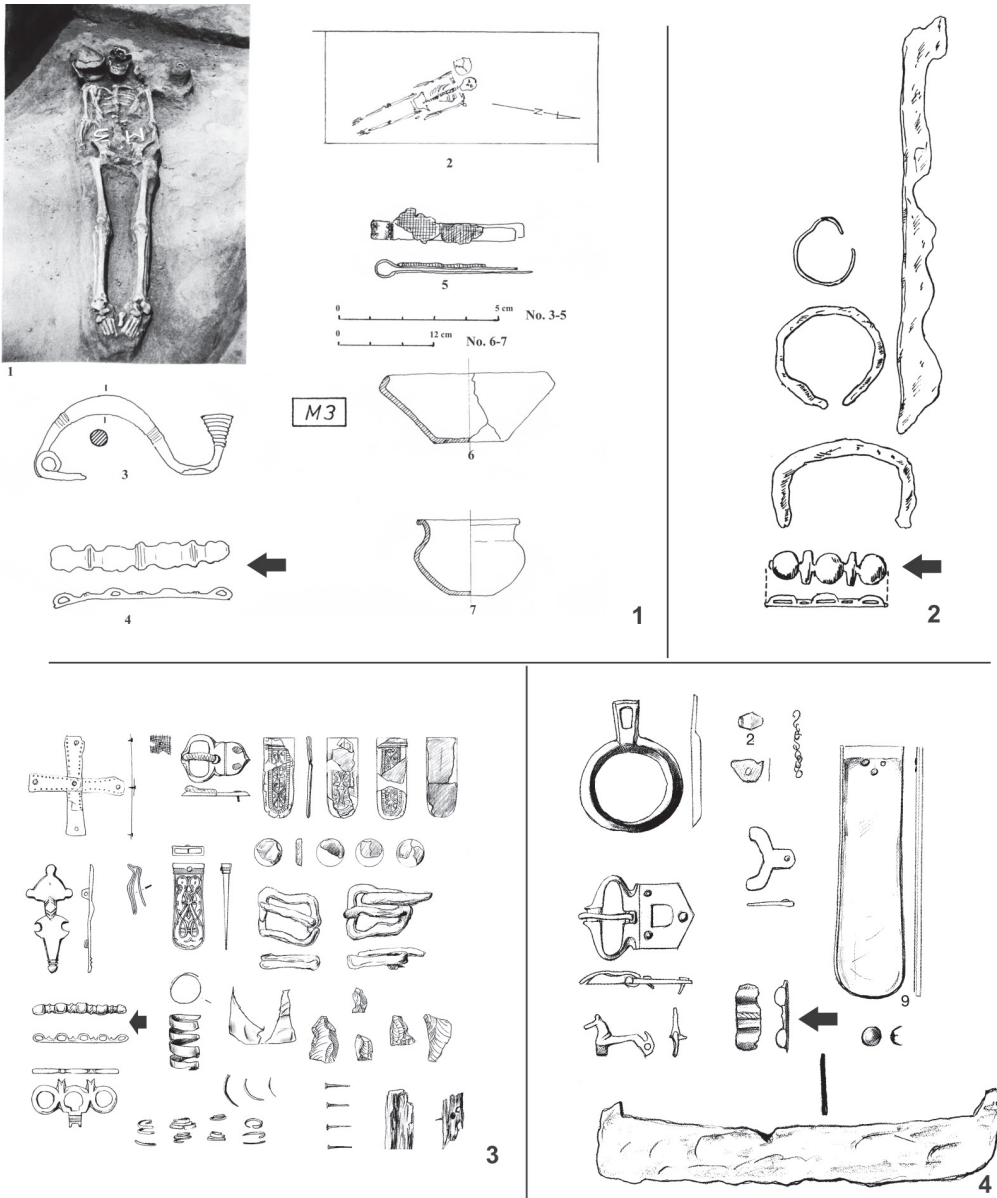
The magical qualities of these objects also came from the popular beliefs about the mythical past or the legendary representations of the surrounding environment. For example, prehistoric flints were perceived as materializations of the thunderbolts or as arrows thrown by supernatural beings, fairies or elves (Meaney 1981, 210–213; Gilchrist 2012, 247). Thus according to the principles of sympathetic magic, such objects were useful as protection against thunderbolts or the attacks of supernatural beings. In Western Europe or Scandinavia prehistoric stones were inserted into the walls or other construction elements of the houses to protect them against thunderbolts (Gilchrist 2012, 247; see also Meaney 1981). Other “antiquities” were appreciated due to their colour, as different hues provided protection against various perils (Meaney 1981, 206–209; Ungerma 2009, 242–243; see also Paine 2004). One example is provided by the glass beads or fragments of glass bracelets of the Late Iron Age.

In other cases the object’s shape hinted to its supposedly magical attributes. One relevant example is provided by the bronze segments of the belts with astragals used in the Carpathian Basin at the end of the Early Iron Age and in the Late Iron Age (for the belts with astragals of the Iron Age see Jovanović 1998). One female inhumation grave from the La Tène cemetery at Remetea Mare, in Banat (Romania), indicates that such bronze elements detached from the belt were reused as pendants already in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC (*Fig. 10/1*) (Rustoiu 2011b, 166–167, fig. 4; Rustoiu 2013, 12, fig. 8/4). Similar artefacts were also reused in the same manner in the Avar period (*Fig. 10/2–4*). Amongst the relevant examples can be listed those from the female grave no. 313 at Szebény (Garam 1975, 89, fig. 21/4.) and the male grave no. 467 and female grave no. 691 at Zamárdi (Bárdos/Garam 2009, 70, 98, pl. 58/18, 87/8, the second piece being wrongly identified by the authors). In all of these situations the contorted form of these belt elements and maybe also the green colour of the bronze patina might have hinted at the supposedly apotropaic properties.

## Conclusions

**P**REHISTORIC, PROTO-HISTORIC and Roman “antiquities” are frequently encountered in the funerary inventories of the Avar period from the Carpathian Basin, similarly to the situation from Western Europe. However, the geographic distribution of these discoveries is uneven. On wide areas, for example in Transylvania, such artefacts seem to have been less popular in comparison with the Great Hungarian Plain or Transdanubia.

The cultural and historical environment from the Carpathian Basin during the period in question, as well as the archaeological contexts of discovery in which these “antiquities” ap-



*Fig. 10.* Bronze elements of the belts with astragals used as pendants.  
 1. La Tène female grave no. 3 at Remetca Mare (after Rustoiu 2011b); 2. Female grave no. 313 at Szébény (after Garam 1975); 3–4. Male grave no. 467 and female grave no. 691 at Zamárdi (after Bárdos / Garam 2009).

pear, indicate that the communities of the Avar period had different practical and symbolic perceptions of the old objects.

Firstly, some of these artefacts were transmitted from one generation to another and continued to be used for their initial purposes. This category of “antiquities” consists mainly of clothing accessories and jewellery. Such objects and their biographies played an important role in the remembrance of familial traditions and ancestral identities that were specific to some groups whose origins were related to the Roman provincial period.

Secondly, the majority of the “antiquities” recovered from Avar period burials were “discovered” and reinterpreted functionally and symbolically, thus being invested with a new social biography. For the people of the period in question the objects unearthed from the ruins of abandoned settlements or “plundered” from accidentally discovered graves belonged to the natural world, as both their previous origin and biography remained unknown to them. Some of these vestiges were reused as building or raw materials to make other objects. However, the concept of a natural origin (even amongst the intellectual elites), the popular beliefs regarding some provenance sites, the morphological characteristics of some objects and their association with myths and legends, led to the interpretation of numerous “antiquities” as magical objects having miraculous or supernatural properties or being able to heal or protect. For these reasons such old objects were mainly placed in female and child burials, as it was considered that they were more likely exposed to dangers of all sorts. The large number of “antiquities” from some cemeteries reflects their popularity at the beginning of the medieval period. In some cases, archaeological evidence suggests that these objects circulated across wider geo-cultural areas. This practice is anticipating the subsequent widespread “trade” with religious relics dating from the first centuries of the Christian period. The latter played, up to a point, the role of “antiquities” from the “pagan” environment of the early medieval age, like the Carpathian Basin during the Avar period. □

## Notes

1. Cosma et al. 2013, 69-70, Fig. 43. In Transylvania such “antiquities” are also scarce in the Gepid graves of the previous period. They include a fragmentary brooch with enamelled plaque of La Tène C type discovered in a grave from Căpușu Mare (Dobos 2009, 219, fig. 2/1) and a fragment of a blue glass bracelet also of La Tène type, which was found in a grave from Band (Haevernick 1968, 131).
2. Roman coins are common in Avar period graves and also later. See for example Dragotă / Rustoiu 2011; Găzdac / Cosma 2013. The images shown on the obverse and reverse were probably considered to have supernatural powers in the same way in which the human images depicted on monuments, gemstones and cameos were seen at the beginning of the medieval period: see Gilchrist 2012, 247.
3. See for example grave no. 47 at Kisköre (Garam 1979, 17, pl. 12/1) or grave no. 301 at Szebény I (Garam 1975, 89, pl. 21/4). Coloured or translucent glass was appreciated by different populations for its apotropaic qualities, especially as powerful protection against evil eye. For the magic of colours see Paine 2004, 98-107.
4. “Scythian” arrow heads are relatively common mostly in Avar period burials from the former area of the Vekerzug culture of the end of the Early Iron Age, but they are also present in Transdanubia. Almost without exception, they were found in female graves and rarely in the male ones. The arrow heads were usually worn as pendants or included in strings of beads and were rarely kept in purses together with other objects. Amongst the numerous examples from the Carpathian Basin are those from the cemeteries at Alattyán (Kovrig 1963, 45, 58-59, pl. 33/15, 23, 44/17), Szob (Kovrig

- 1975, 162, 181, fig. 4/1, 12/5), Tiszafüred (Garam 1995, 83, 94, 123, 137, 140, pl. 109/3, 118/3, 143/3, 145/4, 158/4), Vác (Tettamanti 2000, 65, pl. 15/2), Zamárdi (Bárdos / Garam 2009, 182-184, pl. 160/10), Želovce (Čilinská 1973, 43, pl. 10/2). Due to their contexts of discovery, their presence mainly in female burials and the manner in which they were reused, it is quite clear that the “Scythian” arrow heads played an important symbolic role within the Avar period communities. This role was probably related to the magical or apotropaic qualities with whom they were invested upon “discovery”. Mircea Eliade has pointed to the existence of numerous beliefs related to the symbolism of the arrow amongst various populations. He has defined a few main categories of beliefs: the arrow stroke that cause sickness (from which the magical healing powers of the arrow are deriving); arrow shooting against the thunder gods; arrows as symbols of fertility and good luck; miraculous bows and masters of archery; the oracular function of the arrows; myths of the chain of arrows; role of arrows in mystical techniques and imagination (Eliade 1968).
5. The chain with pendants resembling miniature tools from hoard no. 1 at Șimleu Silvaniei represents a good example of the accumulation of several apotropaic instruments (Vida 2002, pl. 7/2). Such amulets are also known in Scandinavia (Fuglesang 1989, 15-18, fig. 1-2). The custom was preserved by the populations from the northern Balkans and the lower Danube region until the modern times. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in Oltenia and Muntenia (south of the Carpathians in Romania), were used the so-called “ghost strings (or belts)” to protect pregnant women or to bring fecundity to childless women. These were strings of miniature tools that provided protection against malefic spirits. Both the manufacturing and use of these strings were part of some complex magical practices. The woman had to bring nine different iron tools, *worn off* (my emphasis) and randomly found, to the village witch. The witch would give the objects to an old blacksmith, who then took a fragment from each tool and made a miniature version of it; the resulting pendants were assembled together into a string or necklace. The manufacturing process was accompanied by numerous ritual precautions: they were made during the night, the blacksmith worked naked etc. This complex amulet was then returned to the witch who performed another series of rituals in order to activate it. The woman who asked for the amulet had to wear it around the waist until childbirth and upon giving birth she had to ring the amulets to fend off the evil spirits (Vulcănescu 1987, 305-306).
  6. Unpublished archaeological investigations carried out in 2013–2014 within the Apulum–Mithraeum III Project. Co-directors: Matthew M. McCarty (Princeton University), Mariana Egri (“Babeș-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca) and Aurel Rustoiu (Institute of Archaeology and History of Art Cluj-Napoca).
  7. The successive establishing of some cemeteries on the same location at different moments in time raises some interpretative problems. Sometimes local communities were able to preserve the memory of old cemeteries in those places, so the same location was chosen as an already sacred location for the new burials. In other cases the place was chosen perhaps because it corresponded to the same principles of establishing a burial ground which were acceptable for different populations through time. These principles could have been related to the location in relation with the settlement, landscape features (promontories, high terraces, slopes etc.), geological structure (sand dunes, bogs etc.), economic utility of the plot (lower economic value would have deemed a plot more suitable) etc. Prehistoric or Roman graves from which old artefacts were recovered in the Avar period were probably accidentally discovered, since the burial pits cut through the earlier graves.
  8. Prehistoric and proto-historic glass beads and fragments of glass bracelets discovered in the Roman or post-Roman times are numerous in temperate Europe. Numerous examples can be now added to those listed by T. E. Haevernick nearly half of a century ago (Haevernick 1968).

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### Abstract

#### Magic and memory. Prehistoric and Roman “antiquities” in Avar period graves from the Carpathian Basin

Prehistoric, proto-historic and Roman “antiquities” are frequently encountered in the funerary inventories of the Avar period in the Carpathian Basin. The cultural and historical environment from the Carpathian Basin during the period in question, as well as the archaeological contexts of discovery in which these “antiquities” appear, indicate that the communities of the Avar period had different practical and symbolic perceptions of the old objects. Some of these artefacts were transmitted from one generation to another and continued to be used for their initial purposes. This category of “antiquities” consists mainly of clothing accessories and jewellery. Such objects and their biographies played an important role in the remembrance of familial traditions and ancestral identities that were specific to some groups whose origins were related to the Roman provincial period. The majority of the “antiquities” recovered from Avar period burials were “discovered” and reinterpreted functionally and symbolically, thus being invested with a new social biography. For the people of the period in question the objects unearthed from the ruins of abandoned settlements or “plundered” from accidentally discovered graves belonged to the natural world, as both their previous origin and biography remained unknown to them. Some of these vestiges were reused as building or raw materials to make other objects. Others were invested with magical meanings, being used as amulets. For these reasons such old objects are mainly discovered in female and child burials, as they were more likely exposed to dangers of all sorts.

### Keywords

Avar period; “ancient” objects; graves; heirlooms; amulets.