
THE *BENEFICIARIUS* SPEARHEAD FROM ARCOBADARA

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Abstract: The paper is analyzing an artefact discovered in the Roman auxiliary of *Arcobadara* (today's Ilișua, Romania) on the northern frontier of the province of Dacia. This artefact represents a symbolic spearhead discovered on in an archaeological context belonging to the first phase of the earthen fort. The blade is strengthened on the edge with a bronze band that is ending on the lower part with two rings that symbolize the 'eyes' of a *beneficiaries* spear. The analogies that are almost identical to the piece under study come from *Albertfalva* and *Gerulata* in *Pannonia* and from *Regensburg* in *Rhaetia*.

Keywords: *Dacia Porolissensis*, *Arcobadara*, *beneficiarius* spearhead, *hasta pura*

The Roman auxiliary fort from Ilișua (Romania) was located on the northern frontier of the province *Dacia Porolissensis* (fig. 1). The civilian settlement developed around the fort has been identified as the ancient *Arcobadara* or *Arcobara*.¹ The systematic archaeological investigations provided a large variety of artefacts that point out the importance of this site within the daily life of the province.

Among these artefacts connected to the cavalry unit that was garrisoned here most of the time of the Roman administration in Dacia, *ala I Tungrorum Frontoniana*, the weaponry have a distinctive place.

This study focuses on a spearhead that can be catalogued within the category of *beneficiarii's* spearheads. This piece was discovered in the *praetentura sinistra*, in a layer belonging to the first phase of the earthen fort.² The layer proved to be one of a heavy fire which made the artefact – made of iron and bronze – to go through a difficult process of restoration.

Artefact description: The spearhead is made of iron. The joint tube is short and of conic shape; the blade is in the shape of a willow leaf and lenticular. The blade is strengthened with a bronze frame that ends on the upper side into a link, which is also strengthened by a tubular muff, 0.8 cm wide. Before restoration, this muff presented a link made of bronze wire. On the lower part of blade, the bronze frame is closed by two rings of 0.5 cm in diameter that came out by twisting the bronze band. Another muff seems to have delimited the blade from the tube but the heavy oxidation of the artefact only suggest this possibility. Sizes: L=13.5 cm, W=2.3 cm, L_{muff}=4.8 cm, Ø_{muff}=2.2 cm. Ilișua, Roman auxiliary fort, *praetentura sinistra*, barrack V, phase: small earthen fort. Bistrița, Museum: inv. no. 21896; Pl. I.

The fact that the blade is plated with a bronze band that ends with

¹ NEMETI/BĂRBULESCU 2006–2007; NEMETI/BĂRBULESCU 2010; DANA/NEMETI 2012.

² PROTASE/GAIU/MARINESCU 1997; GAIU 2006.



Fig. 1. Places of discovery for hasta: 1. Arcobadara, 2. Giläu, 3. Albertfalva, 4. Gerulata, 5. Regensburg, 6. Günzburg

links made this artefact to be considered a symbolic weapon instead of one that actually was used in combat. This type of spearheads were used as military awards *donna*, *vexillum*, or *hasta pura*³ all part of the Roman military award scheme (e.g. *corona civica*, *corona muralis*, *corona vallaris*, *phalerae*, *armillae*).⁴

A similar artefact was discovered in former territory of Pannonia at Albertfalva (fig. 1), in the *vicus militaris*. A spearhead that has a short muff and two side rings; the blade shows a central nervure, strengthened on the edge with a bronze band that ends with a link with a ring. L = 19 cm, W = 4.3 cm.⁵ (Pl. II/1).

An identical piece was found in the auxiliary fort from la Regensburg – Kumpfmühl.⁶ The muff is only partially preserved. The blade is also strengthened with a bronze band while a lid of acorn shape protects the tip. Sizes: L = 13.5 cm, W = 4.2 cm. (Pl. II/2).

While some scholars have considered the three fragments found in the Roman auxiliary fort from Gerulata (Rusovce, Slovakia) (fig. 1) as tips from either *gladii* or *pugiones*⁷, P. Kovács believes that they actually belong to this type of *hasta*.⁸ These iron artefacts have the edge

strengthened with bronze band (pl. II/5–7). The sizes and the manufacture technique frame these pieces the *hasta* type Albertfalva.

The same criteria, the sizes and the manufacture, can be applied to the *pugio* sheath discovered in the auxiliary fort from Giläu⁹ (Pl. II/3) which is similar to the spearhead from Arcobadara.¹⁰ The preserved length is circa 12 cm and the width 3.7 cm. Like in the case of the artefact from Arcobadara the edge is protected by a bronze band that ends into a link delimited by a circular muff crossed by a ring made of bronze wire. Therefore, the piece from Giläu (fig. 1) also belongs to the category of *hasta pura* or the *beneficiaries* spearhead.

An illustration in stone of this type of *hasta* is documented on a tombstone from the Roman cemetery of Günzburg (fig. 1) (Pl. II/4) – beginning of the 2nd century AD.¹¹ The shape of a spearhead with the blade's edge strengthened by a nervure is depicted on a series of coins and altars from the period of Roman Republic and Empire.¹²

Coming back to the artefact from Arcobadara the archaeological context – the phase of the first earthen fort – is in concordance with the dating suggested for the spears from Albertfalva¹³ and Regensburg¹⁴: the first decades of the 2nd century AD.

Apart from its use as an offensive weapon the *hasta* is also an ancestral symbol,¹⁵ an attribute of god Mars; a

³ KOVÁCS 2004, 91.

⁴ MAXFIELD 1981, 61. According to Flavius Josephus, during the Jerusalem siege Emperor Titus distributed rewards to brave soldiers. Among these the gold spears are mentioned: „[...] he called to him by their names, and [...] put on their heads crowns of gold, and golden ornaments about their necks, and gave them long spears of gold, and ensigns that were made of silver, and removed every one of them to a higher rank [...]” (Flavius Josephus De bello Judaico, VII,1,3).

⁵ SZIRMAI 1999; SZIRMAI 2000; KOVÁCS 2004, 91, fig. 3; TÖPFER 2011, 425, pl. 144 Zw 2.

⁶ FABER 1993, 145, 309, no. 4, fig. 29/4; KOVÁCS 2004, 91; TÖPFER 2011, 426, Pl. 144 Zw 4.

⁷ VARSÍK/KUZMOVÁ/SCHMIDTOVA 1996, 219, nos. 41–43, 230, pl. 4/41–43.

⁸ KOVÁCS 2004, 91.

⁹ ISAC 1997, pl. XXVI/11

¹⁰ P. Kovács (KOVÁCS 2004, 91) have made this observation.

¹¹ CZYSZ 1988, 113–116, apud KOVÁCS 2004, 91, 90, fig. 4.

¹² ALFÖLDI 1959a, 25–26, pl. 10/1–2, 21, 26; RITTERLING 1919, 13, fig. 4; SZIRMAI 1999.

¹³ SZIRMAI 1999 dates the artefact in the second half of the 1st century AD. P. Kovács agrees with dating, KOVÁCS 2004, 92.

¹⁴ TÖPFER 2011, 425–426, Zw 2 and Zw 4 dates both pieces in the 2nd century AD.

¹⁵ PANELLA 2011.

symbol of commander and authority; the icon of courage and a central element of imperial ideology.¹⁶ The worship of *signa* was „*religio Romanorum toto castrensis signa veneratur, signa iurat, signa omnibus deis praeponit*” (Tertulian, Aplogeticus, 16, 7). A large number of *signa* had the tip in the shape of a spearhead as one can notice on the monuments and coin series going back to republican period and throughout the imperial time.¹⁷ The *vexillum* as a military decoration is identic to that used as a standard for military units. The last one has a horizontal bar to hang the banner with the unit’s name.¹⁸ In ancient times, various armies and cultures used these artefacts. In the Roman world, the *vexillum* had a wide scale of functions: the identification of military units on the battlefield; the standard of a detachment (*vexillatio*), unit or veterans’ association; an attribute to a divinity.¹⁹ Altogether, it stood beside the other symbols of Rome’s honor.

Based on coin evidence the *hasta pura* was initially considered as a spear for ceremonies²⁰ or a military decoration for the officers of the equestrian order²¹ with a distinctive place within the scheme of Roman symbols „*hasta summa armorum et imperii est*”.²² Varro stated that the *hasta pura* contained no iron – „*pura iuvenis qui ninitur hasta id est sine ferro*”. The adjective *purus* was interpreted as a proof that originally the spearhead had no iron and only later this metal was added.²³ The ancient literary sources mention *hasta pura argentea* and *hasta aurea* as decorations awarded according to the military ranks.²⁴ According to other scholars, that statement referred, in fact, to the quality of those decorations. A. Alföldi and V. Maxfield suggest that the phrase is regarding the ritual aspect of the spear as a symbolic weapon and not a combat tool.²⁵ The impure feature of iron, originated in the Bronze Age superstitions, led to the addition of bronze in the manufacture of these weapons with ritual and symbolic purposes.²⁶

The *beneficarii* spearheads are known in small number throughout the territory of the Roman Empire. Most of them have been discovered at the sites on the frontiers. Such a small number is explainable due to the importance of this artefact as a symbol in the Roman army and society.²⁷ The loss of such an object meant a high dishonor.

The illustration of these artefacts on stone monuments erected for various officials (*beneficarii*, *frumentarii* and *speculatores*)²⁸ is the most reliable criterion for a typology of such objects. Apart from the stone monuments, the small

replicas such as ensigns, belt plaques, strap-ends, rings and brooches may also help on this line.²⁹

From typological point of view, four types have been established: a) those similar to the combat spearheads; b) the blade with eyes-shape holes; c) the willow-leaf shaped blade or triangular blade – some of them with bronze and silver insertions and asymmetric oblique cuts; d) with a more elaborate shape, rich decoration and blade with large holes of eye-shape (fig. 2).³⁰ This typology was established based on the depictions on the altars dedicated to or erected by *beneficarii*.³¹ These representations illustrate spearheads with serrated blade,³² a shape that is also noticed for the spearheads entirely preserved – iron or bronze³³ –, as well as for the spearheads with “eyes”,³⁴ and on numerous small replicas.³⁵ According to A. Alföldi the type of spearhead with cordiforme smooth blade is dated in the republican period, samples with cuts on the edge cuts in the 1st century AD. The type with “eyes” replaced the last ones in the 2nd–3rd centuries AD.³⁶ The variant with double blade is specific to trajanic period.³⁷

The ensigns of the Flobecq type are described as having a blade of cordiforme shape with two circular perforations; the tip has the shape of a chapter with zoomorphic or religious ornaments.³⁸ This type is documented by entirely preserved samples as well as on cameos, rings or mosaics.³⁹ Most of the scholars regard this type as an effigy to prove the membership to a *collegium*.⁴⁰ For instance, they were used during religious ceremonies dedicated to the imperial cult care by the members of the *Collegium Iuvenum* who had no direct connection to the military environment.⁴¹ The discovery of such artefacts within religious room or as votive deposits⁴² emphasizes their sacred side unlike the spearheads with “eyes” of the *beneficarii*.⁴³

BISHOP/COULSTON 2006; NELIS-CLEMENT 2000; CUPCEA 2008, 278; ALEXANDRESCU 2010; TÖPFER 2011.

²⁹ OLDENSTEIN 1976, 152–157, pl. 39–40; PETCULESCU 1993; SPINDLER 1992; EIBL 1994. KOVÁCS 2005, 955, records over 100 small replicas in bronze and silver.

³⁰ EIBL 1994, 286, 292–293, pl. Ia–Ib; WAURIK 1971, pl. 25/2–5.

³¹ RITTERLING 1919; BEHRENS 1941; MAXFIELD 1981, 50; SPINDLER 1992, 190, A; KOVÁCS 2005, 960 records seven monuments from Pannonia which depict *beneficarii* spear. From 1,160 inscriptions throughout the Empire that mention *beneficarii* (NELIS-CLEMENT 2000, 22), 21 depict spears (EIBL 1994, 294–295).

³² ALFÖLDI 1959a, pl. 7/1, 10/18

³³ BEHRENS 1941, 18, fig. 18; Spindler 1991, 191, lista D

³⁴ NELIS-CLEMENT 2000, 285–286; BEHRENS 1941, 18, fig. 19; EIBL 1994, 293, pl. 1a/13–18.

³⁵ BEHRENS 1941, 20, fig. 22; ALFÖLDI 1959a, 25–27, pl. 10/19–45.

³⁶ ALFÖLDI 1959b, 12.

³⁷ ALFÖLDI 1959b, 12.

³⁸ RITTERLING 1919, 31–32; VETTERS 1975, 397; DEGAN 1981, 254–256; KÜNZL 1993, 89–92; UBL 1993, 13–16; EGGER 1999; UBL 2001; VEGA-ALVEIRA 2007, 478–479. SPINDLER 1992, 191, the list C records 18 pieces of this seriesto which other fragments host by various museums may be added (TÖPFER 2011, 177).

³⁹ UBL 2001, 382–385, figs. 4–10.

⁴⁰ NELIS-CLEMENT 2000, 286.

⁴¹ PICCOTTINI 1979, 168; ARCE 1984, 38–39; UBL 1993, 13–16; KOVÁCS 2005, 958–959; TÖPFER 2011, 176.

⁴² A standard of the type Flobecq was found in the sanctuary from Grand Saint-Bernard, while the piece from Flobecq was deposited in a well, DEGAN 1981, 244–259; RANKOV 1986, 102.

⁴³ KÜNZL 1993, 89–93; EIBL 1994, 280

¹⁶ ALFÖLDI 1959a; KOVÁCS 2005, 955; TÖPFER 2011, 169–173.

¹⁷ ALFÖLDI 1959b, 5–6; ZEHETNER 2009, 157.

¹⁸ MAXFIELD 1981, 82; ALEXANDRESCU 2010, 232–233, pl. 100/11–12, 101/15, 102; TÖPFER 2011, 29–31, pl. 141–142/ AR 3–11.

¹⁹ TÖPFER 2011, 31; ALFÖLDI 1959a, 13.

²⁰ MAXFIELD 1981, 86.

²¹ According to MAXFIELD 1981, 245; Coatu 2012, 67, A. von Domaszewski assumed that the *hasta pura* was dedicated to the equestrian order based on the fact that Tilius Rufus awarded the decorations of consisted of *corona aurea* and *hasta pura* only to *toequites*.

²² Apud ALFÖLDI 1959a, 1.

²³ KOVÁCS 2004, 81–82.

²⁴ ALFÖLDI 1959b, 12.

²⁵ ALFÖLDI 1959a, 2; MAXFIELD 1981, 86.

²⁶ KOVÁCS 2004, 82.

²⁷ BISHOP/COULSTON 2006, 189

²⁸ DOMASZEWSKI 1885; RITTERLING 1919; BEHRENS 1941; ALFÖLDI 1959a; MAXFIELD 1981; RANKOV 1986, 100–115; FEUGERE 1993;

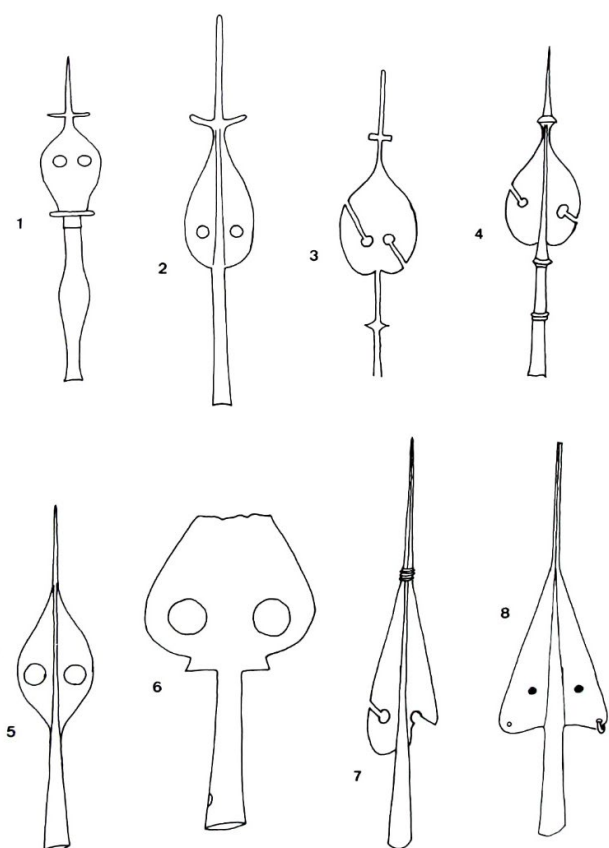


Fig. 2. Types of beneficiarii spearheads (after ALFÖLDI 1959).

The *beneficiarii* spearheads found in Dacia at Copăceni⁴⁴ and Slăveni⁴⁵ do not present enough arguments to be considered as such artefacts. On the other hand, ensigns of *beneficiarii* – appliques from the *balteus* and pendants – were discovered throughout the province of Dacia and beyond its frontiers in the barbarian territories: *Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa*, *Micia*, *Porolissum*, Slăveni, *Drobeta*, Răcari,⁴⁶ Mătășaru⁴⁷ și *Medieșul Aurit*.⁴⁸ The officials wore them during their mission in the province as symbols of their authority. Their presence in the barbarian territory may not be explained as a proof that the *beneficiarii consulares* actually control the area but more as a fashion of *imitation imperii* or as spoils of war. Such artefacts were found up to Denmark.⁴⁹

The sizes of the *beneficiarii* spearheads – some of them with bronze parts added⁵⁰ – can run from a length of 93 cm (the piece from Ehl⁵¹) to 40–50 cm as the majority of samples have (the samples from Weissenburg, Mariasaal, St. Peter im Holz) and the smaller samples of 20–25 cm (Niederbiber, Pfünz, Bad Deutsch-Altenburg).⁵²

⁴⁴ AMON 2004, 166, 227, no. 21, pl.XLIII/5; TUDOR1982, 67, no.1, figs. 6/b, 7/h.

⁴⁵ AMON 2004, 166, 258, no. 10, pl.XLIII/4.

⁴⁶ PETCULESCU 1993, 195, fig. 1; AMON 2004, 149–150, pl. XXXIX/1–3.

⁴⁷ BICHER 1984, 58, pl. 52/8; PETCULESCU 1993, 196, fig. 2/7.

⁴⁸ DUMITRAȘCU/BADER 1967, 40, pl. 16/8; PETCULESCU 1993, 196, fig. 2/6.

⁴⁹ SPINDLER 1992, 186, E7, fig. 4/7.

⁵⁰ NELIS-CLEMENT 2000, 285; SCHALLMAYER 2003, 266.

⁵¹ RANKOV 1986, 101; BEHRENS 1941, fig. 19/1.

⁵² SPINDLER 1992, 190–191.

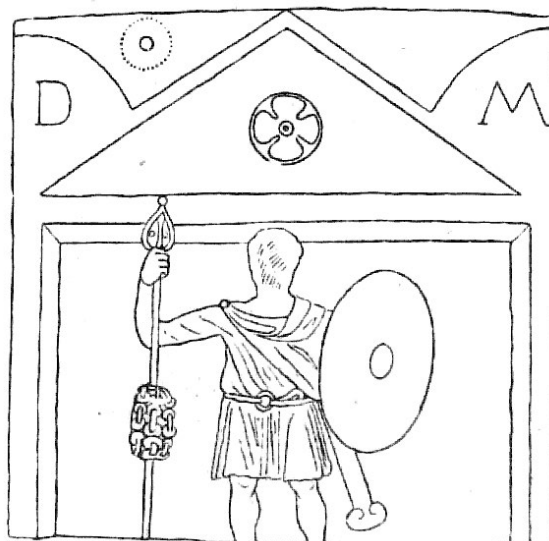


Fig. 3. a. A tombstone from Perinth depicting a beneficiarius (after Ritterling 1919); b. A tombstone from Salona depicting a beneficiarius spear (after Behrens 1941).

Although this artefact is known in modern bibliography as the *beneficiarius* spear, this weapon shape is not something that belong exclusively to this category of military (fig. 3). Other government officials wore it, as well, and this aspect explains why parade and miniature spears turned up on monuments of various magistrates.⁵³ If on a funerary monument from *Lugdunum* the letters B and F – abbreviation for

⁵³ NELIS-CLEMENT 2000, 121, 288; RANKOV 1990, 181–182.

beneficiarius consularis – appear in the side ‘eyes’ of the *hasta*⁵⁴ other similar images are documented on altars dedicated by *byfrumentarii*⁵⁵, *speculators*,⁵⁶ and *principales*. Owing to their religious and powerful value these spears and ensigns gave the bearers a certain authority, carried on in the name of the emperor or the provincial governor. These objects were worn by *beneficarii* and other *officiales* as *ornamenta dignitatis*, a symbol of social rank and of a certain authority, as well as a sign of a sacred value.⁵⁷

The *beneficarii* were officers free of extra-military activities. They were recruited from legionnaires and acted beside other officials in the provincial administration. They had an *officium* in the provincial capital. Frequently, they were sent on duty to various parts of the province and garrisoned in the *beneficarii*'s stations in the proximity of forts.⁵⁸ These stations were situated either on the main roads, near settlements of certain strategic, political or economic importance or within the mining areas. The corpus of inscriptions mentioning *beneficarii*⁵⁹ points out the fact that the majority of these inscriptions is concentrated within the administrative and military centers, important trade places and the *beneficarii*'s stations.

These stations appeared at the beginning of the 2nd century AD, during the reign of Emperor Trajan, and their number increased under the Antonine dynasty.⁶⁰ These edifices have been considered as police stations for road protection⁶¹, to control the financial and economic activities⁶² and to ensure an efficient communication between various parts of the province.⁶³ Such *beneficarii*'s stations are documented in Dacia at *Porolissum*, *Buciumi* and *Cășeu*.⁶⁴ The largest number of monuments mentioning *beneficarii* comes from the fort of *Samum* (today's *Cășeu*): 14 inscriptions. Four of them state the presence of a *statio*.⁶⁵ The *beneficarii* garrisoned here were in charge with the administration of a *regio Ans (amensium)*. This administrative unit is mentioned on the

⁵⁴ RITTERLING 1919, 18–19; ALFÖLDI 1959a, 26, fig. 12. The pieces from Salona (RITTERLING 1919, 15, fig. 8; ALFÖLDI 1959a, 27, fig. 45), Friedberg, Stockstadt, Obernburg, Jagsthausen (RANKOV 1986, 105, n. 3) also belong to some *beneficarii*.

⁵⁵ Kornberg (*Noricum*), *Sirmium (Pannonia Inferior)*, Pfaffenhofen (RITTERLING 1919, 13, fig. 5; ABRAMIC 1922, 57–64; EIBEL 1994, 277–278; RANKOV 1986, 105; UBL 2001, 381; KOVÁCS 2005, 960; CUPCEA 2009, 306).

⁵⁶ Salona (CIL III 9401), *Viminacium* (CIL III 1650), BEHRENS 1941, 19–20; ALFÖLDI 1959a, fig. 21; RANKOV 1986, 105; EIBEL 1994, 286–287, pl. 1/18–19; NELIS-CLEMENT 2000, 285.

⁵⁷ NELIS-CLEMENT 2000, 29 states that the illustration of this *hasta* on the funerary monuments is a consequence of their cultic statute as *signa*, worshiped by the Roman soldiers, an explanation for the phrase, *agens sub signo* “from the votive altar of the *beneficarii* M. Valerius Valentinus and P. Aelius Marcellinus at *Cășeu*. The magic-religious feature of the *beneficarii* ensigns from Dacia is also pointed out at PETCULESCU 1993, 192.

⁵⁸ NELIS-CLEMENT 2000, 41, 134, 178.

⁵⁹ CBI 1990.

⁶⁰ DISE 1997, 275

⁶¹ RANKOV 1986, 11; Ott 1995, 103–111.

⁶² SCHALLMAYER 1994, 161, 191.

⁶³ ŠAŠEL-KOS 1995, 162.

⁶⁴ NELIS-CLEMENT 2000, 164; ARDEVAN 1994, 199–204.

⁶⁵ The highest number of inscriptions mentioning *beneficarii* is provided by *Sirmium* – 80 (Boura 1994, 66; Mirkovic 1994) – and *Osterburken* – 40 (SCHALLMAYER 1994; NELIS-CLEMENT 2000, 134–140). Seventy inscriptions are known for Dacia (DAICOVICIU 1970, 386–402; CBI 1990, 392–434; ARDEVAN 1991; ARDEVAN 1994, 199; ISAC 1994; ISAC 2003, 48–58).

altars dedicated to three of the *beneficarii* that were on duty in the *statio* from *Samum*.⁶⁶ There is a long and large debate regarding the area and the role played by this *regio Ansamensium*.⁶⁷ The opinions were divided between the existence of a territory in *Barbaricum* under Roman authority named after the population that lived on,⁶⁸ and *aregio ansa* serving as a custom station and controlling the border zone.⁶⁹ More recently, another hypothesis was pushed forward. Based on analogies provided by other provinces in different periods „the *regio Ans (amensium)* must be regarded not as a rural territory belonging to a *civitas* or civilian agglomeration around the local fort, but as a circumscription of the judicial police”.⁷⁰ The term *regio* is accepted as a synonym to *territorium*, meaning the areas developed around an urban center or military *vicus* as one could notice for the settlement in the proximity of the fort from *Arcobadara* (Ilișua).⁷¹ D. Dana and S. Nemeti reached the conclusion that the terms *territoria* and *regiones* are administrative units developed around a military *vicus*.⁷² Although no inscription mentioning a *statio* of *beneficarii* at *Arcobadara* was discovered, so far, the presence of the spearhead discussed in this study may suggest such a presence, which is demanded by the developing of this *territorium Arcobadarense*. This administrative unit requests and administrative staff that must survey and control the activity, as it has been demonstrated for other *territoria* and *regiones*.⁷³

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⁶⁶ RUSSU 1956, nos. 1–3, 9, p. 120–131.

⁶⁷ OPREANU 1994; VĂTAVU 2011.

⁶⁸ DAICOVICIU 1970.

⁶⁹ OPREANU 1994, 72–75.

⁷⁰ VĂTAVU 2011, 226; DISE 1997, 294, points out how different the tasks the *beneficarii* may had to fulfil according to each province, from one period to another.

⁷¹ NEMETI/BĂRBULESCU 2007, 112–113; DANA/NEMETI 2012, 111; MATEI-POPESCU 2011, 359, assumes that the *territorium Arcobadarense* is rather referring to the civilian settlement in the close vicinity and not necessary to the military *vicus*. At the same time, the scholar expresses his doubts regarding the synonymy between the terms *regio* and *territorium*, but no arguments are offered on this line.

⁷² DANA/NEMETI 2012, 113.

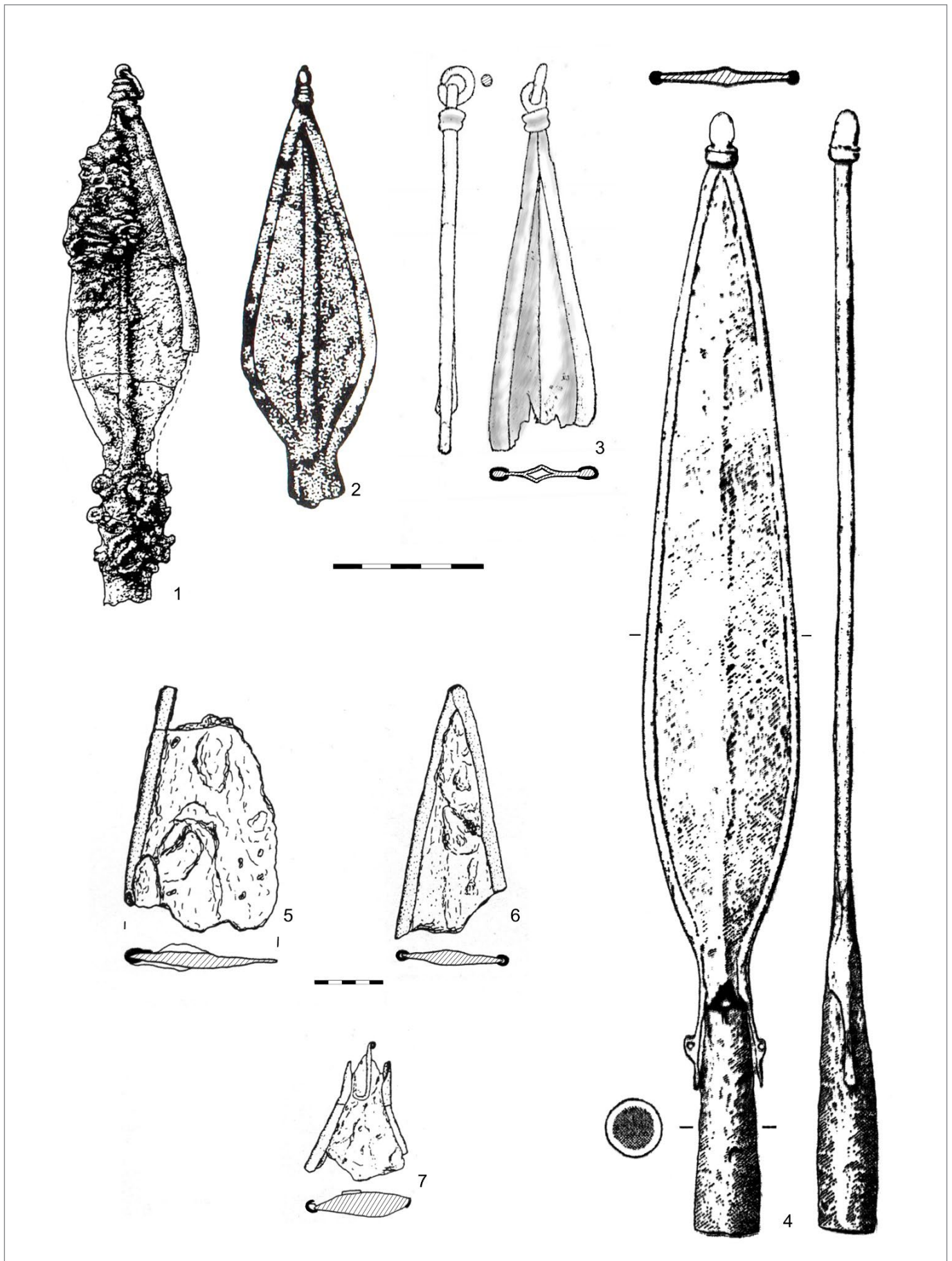
⁷³ MATEI-POPESCU 2011, 354–355.

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Pl. I. The beneficiarius spearhead from Arcobadara (Ilişua)



Pl. II. Beneficiarii spearheads: 1. Albertfalva, 2. Regensburg-Kumpfmühl, 3. Giläu, 4. Günzburg, 5-7 Gerulata (Rusovce).