

Some considerations regarding the copper axe from Cosmești (Galați County, Romania)

Vasile Diaconu*
Paul Ciobotaru**

Cuvinte-cheie: *topor din cupru, eneolitic, epoca bronzului, Cosmești, România.*

Rezumat: *În cadrul acestui articol este prezentat un topor de cupru descoperit pe teritoriul localității Cosmești (jud. Galați). Pentru că nu se cunoaște contextul din care provine acest artefact, el va fi analizat în raport cu alte piese similare, confecționate din metal sau piatră. Toporul a fost menționat în literatura arheologică, dar nu a beneficiat de o discuție amplă, motiv pentru care intenționăm să introducem în circuitul științific o serie de informații legate de acest artefact.*

Cele mai apropiate analogii pentru toporul de la Cosmești le găsim în unele descoperiri din spațiul carpatic, dar și în zona nord-pontică și caucaziană, iar din punct de vedere cronologic pot fi atribuite unui interval cuprins între eneoliticul final și bronzul mijlociu. Având în vedere trăsăturile morfologice ale obiectului, suntem de părere că aparține epocii bronzului.

Dacă luăm în considerare aspectul deosebit de îngrijit al acestui topor, dar și faptul că nu prezintă urme de uzură, putem presupune că acest artefact este mai curând un obiect-simbol decât o unealtă propriu-zisă.

Keywords: *cooper axe, Eneolithic, Bronze Age, Cosmești, Romania.*

Abstract: *In this article is presented a copper axe discovered on the territory of Cosmești (Galați County). As the context of this artifact is not known, it will be analyzed in comparison with other similar items, made of metal, or stone. The axe had been mentioned in the archaeological literature, but it was not extensively discussed. This is the reason why, we intend to introduce a series of information about this artifact, into the scientific circuit.*

The closest analogies for the axe from Cosmești could be found in the Carpathian space, but also in the North-Pontic and Caucasian regions, while chronologically it could be assigned to a time span comprised between the final Eneolithic and the Middle Bronze Age. Considering the morphological features of the object, we consider that it belongs to the Bronze Age.

If we look at the extremely neat aspect of this axe, but also taking into account the fact that it has no traces of use, we can assume that this artifact is rather a symbol-object than an implement proper.

It is well-known that prehistoric metal items are considered important chronological and cultural landmarks. Even in the case of isolated discoveries, apart from their statistical importance, a careful evaluation of the meanings that

such items could bear is required; this evaluation is to be done by comparing them to similar items, discovered in properly known archaeological contexts.

This article deals with a metal item discovered several decades ago, within the area of Galați County (Cosmești village) (fig. 1/1), which, at present, is preserved in the collections of the „Teodor Cincu” History Museum of Tecuci. Unfortunately, in the case of the item under discussion, the place of discovery and, consequently, its archaeological context, are not precisely known. As yet, there is no evidence regarding the existence, in the Cosmești village, of any prehistoric sites which could be connected with the axe¹. Nevertheless, it is possible that the axe might have been part of a funerary complex or might have represented a solitary find.

This item is known from the archaeological literature, but there has been no discussion at large about it therefore we intend to present some supplementary information about it to the scientific world.

Description of the item

This is a metal axe, with a slightly curved profile and a thickened body in the area of the hole where a handle was fixed. The edge is cylindrical and ends with a fake button. The lower half of the item is flattened and the blade is curved and bent back towards the blunt side. Most likely, the piece was casted in a bivalve mould but the surface was thoroughly polished and, consequently, traces of the junction of the mould can no longer be seen. The hole for fixing a handle is cylindrical, carefully polished inside and placed approximately in the middle of the item (fig. 1/2).

The metallographic analysis, carried out at the *National History Museum of Romania*, revealed the following composition: Cu - 99 %, Zn - 0,005-0,010 %, Sn - 0,5-1 %².

Dimensions: height - 10,7 cm; maximum width of the blade - 3,30 cm; diameter of the hole - 2 cm; weight - 231,48 g.

Discussions

The Cosmești axe was firstly mentioned in the archaeological literature, in a study authored by Alexandru Vulpe, which dealt with the hoard from Perșinari³. It was mentioned again, by the same author⁴, but a detailed study of

* Dr. **Vasile Diaconu**, Muzeul de Istorie și Etnografie Târgu Neamț, Complexul Muzeal Județean Neamț, ștr. Ștefan cel Mare, 37, diavas_n82@yahoo.com.

** Dr. **Paul Ciobotaru**, Muzeul de Istorie „Teodor Cincu” Tecuci, str. 1 Decembrie, 36, paulciobotaru2008@yahoo.com.

¹ Croitoru 2014, p. 69.

² The information was taken from the archives of the „Teodor Cincu” History Museum of Tecuci. Alexandru Vulpe stated only that the percentage of Stanium was of 0,5 % (Vulpe 1995, p. 57).

³ Vulpe 1995, p. 57, fig. 4/B3.

the item was not presented in either case. Later on, the Cosmești axe was included in a monograph dealing with Romanian Neo-Eneolithic metallurgy⁵. The item was labeled as an axe-hammer, being included in the group of the items with a cylindrical arm-hammer, ascribed to Cornești typology⁶.

The absence of any knowledge regarding the archaeological context of its discovery prevents a proper dating of the item; Alexandru Vulpe argued that it was dated in the early phase of the Bronze Age⁷, while Ion Mareș dated the axe in the Eneolithic, most probably considering the raw material it was made of. Neither of the authors succeeded in finding proper analogies for the item and this increased the uncertainties regarding its chronological position.

Considering its typology, this item belongs to the class of axes with a cylindrical edge, as this class was defined by Alexandru Vulpe. Considering its morphology, it belongs to group B, characterized by a curved longitudinal profile⁸. As the above mentioned author showed, this class of axes, made either of stone, or of metal, can be dated only in the Bronze Age⁹. Nevertheless, we consider it necessary to provide a brief presentation of the items which exhibit similarities with this axe, with the aim of delineating a chronological frame wherein the axe may be placed.

In the Eastern area of Romania, a metal item similar to the copper axe from Cosmești was discovered in a funerary complex at Fălcu (Vaslui county) (fig. 2/1), along with several carved stone and flint weapons¹⁰. The burial was dated in the so-called „*transitional period*”¹¹, and Alexandru Vulpe¹² placed it towards the end of the 4th millennium and the first half of the 3rd.

Another metal item, similar to the one from Cosmești, was found in the Argeș county¹³, but, unfortunately, in its case, the information needed for the localization of the discovery, is missing. As in the previous case, the morphological similarities are quite strong, the only obvious difference being the fact that the axe discovered in Argeș has the handle hole in its upper part (fig. 2/3).

For the Eneolithic, axes with a cylindrical edge, similar to the one discussed here, are known from Șiria¹⁴ and Cornești¹⁵, in Transylvania.

⁴ Vulpe 1997, p. 273, fig. 12 and note 46.

⁵ Mareș 2002, p. 213, fig. 24/1.

⁶ Mareș 2002, p. 213.

⁷ Vulpe 1995, p. 57.

⁸ Vulpe 1959, p. 271.

⁹ Vulpe 1959, p. 272-273.

¹⁰ Popușoi 1987-1989, p. 15, fig. 2, 4; Govedarica 2004, fig. 65.

¹¹ Popușoi 1987-1989, p. 19.

¹² Vulpe 1997, p. 273.

¹³ Vulpe 1975, fig. 11/79; Mareș 2002, fig. 24/3.

¹⁴ Vulpe 1975, fig. 10/76.

¹⁵ Vulpe 1975, fig. 10/78.

Nevertheless, these items have slightly different morphological parameters; these two axes having elongated bodies and their edges end with a flat surface.

Morphological similarities had been noticed between the item in question and the axe discovered at the excavation of *T9/M.15* at Cuconești Vechi, belonging to the Early Bronze Age (fig. 2/2), though this item has several elements that distinguish it from the one found at Cosmești. The axe from Cuconești Vechi has a shorter and splay edge, the handle hole is situated in the upper half, and the lower part is much broader¹⁶.

Some typological similarities can be also noticed between our item and the silver axe from the Perșinari hoard (fig. 2/4). Nevertheless, that axe was not entirely preserved, therefore we only know about its extremities¹⁷. It is noteworthy that the Perșinari hoard was ascribed to the Tei culture, and hence it would have belonged to the Middle Bronze Age¹⁸.

If we cannot find many similar metal items, the situation is different in case of the stone items. Similar stone axes are frequently encountered within the eastern cultures, especially during the Early Bronze Age. We can mention here several items discovered in the area of Donețk, in Eastern Ukraine, notable for their careful execution¹⁹.

In a study dedicated to the Borodino hoard, Elke Kaiser presented with a large number of examples, several types of stone axes specific to the Northern Pontic area; the study also classifies these items according to their morphology. According to that classification, the most accurate similarities for the Cosmești axe can be found among the stone axes from the Northern Caucasian area, especially in the case of *variety 2* of the Suvorovskaja type axes²⁰, but also in the case of some items of the Mihailovka type²¹, which have been for the most part discovered within several funerary complexes (fig. 2/5-8). Also in the North-Western Caucasian area, we find some stone axes, mainly discovered in the layers of the Novotitorovskaja culture²², which display obvious similarities with the item from Cosmești.

Also regarding the Borodino hoard, it must be mentioned that it includes three axes made of semi-precious stone, very similar to the metal axe from Cosmești, their major difference being that, in the case of the stone items from Borodino, the edge is more splayed and the area surrounding the hole is much more clearly highlighted (fig. 2/9-10)²³. The stone axe from Vorosilovgrad is dated to the same chronological period and has similar morphological features²⁴.

¹⁶ Dergačev 1985, fig. 13/23; 2002, fig. 18/R.

¹⁷ Vulpe 1997, fig. 9/1.

¹⁸ Leahu 2003, p. 92-93.

¹⁹ Klochko 2006, fig. 33/1-4.

²⁰ Kaiser 1997, fig. 25/7-10.

²¹ Kaiser 1997, fig. 26/3, 5.

²² Kohl 2007, fig. 3.30/5-6, 8.

²³ Krivkova-Grakova 1949, figs. 3/1-2; 4; 8/2; 14-15; Šišlina 2013, fig. 1, 5.

²⁴ Berezanskaja *et alii*. 1986, fig. 9/9.

Considering the above mentioned things, it can be stated that the Cosmești axe, though it is made of copper, cannot be certainly dated in the Eneolithic. At present, no item with similar features originating from an Eneolithic archaeological complex is known, the most accurate similarities being with the axe from Fălciu, dated to a period prior to the Bronze Age. Very accurate analogies could be identified among several types of stone axes, spread over a vast area, from the northern part of the Black Sea. Chronologically, many of these items belong to cultures of the Early, or Middle Bronze Age.

If we consider the extremely careful execution of the item and the fact that it doesn't show any traces of usage, we can presume that this copper axe is rather a symbolic object, than a tool. This hypothesis could be proven by the similar stone items which most likely represented imitations of metal prototypes. Moreover, considering that most analogies are to be found in the Northern Pontic area, we can consider that this item originated in that area and its presence in the eastern part of Romania is probably due to the long-distance social connections in the Early Bronze Age. Moreover, during the 4th millennium BCE, similar metal items, produced in the Northern Caucasian area, reached Central Europe as a result of contacts and exchanges between these areas²⁵.

Even if the archaeological context of its discovery is unknown and, therefore, can't certainly be ascribed to any particular culture, we consider that this item is important, due to the fact that it allows the completion of several typological schemes, starting with the beginning of the Bronze Age. The item can also be considered as a *marker* of long-distance contacts.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Sven Hansen, Dr. Sorin-Cristian Ailincăi and Mariana Sîrbu for the useful suggestions for editing this paper and for the indications regarding the literature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

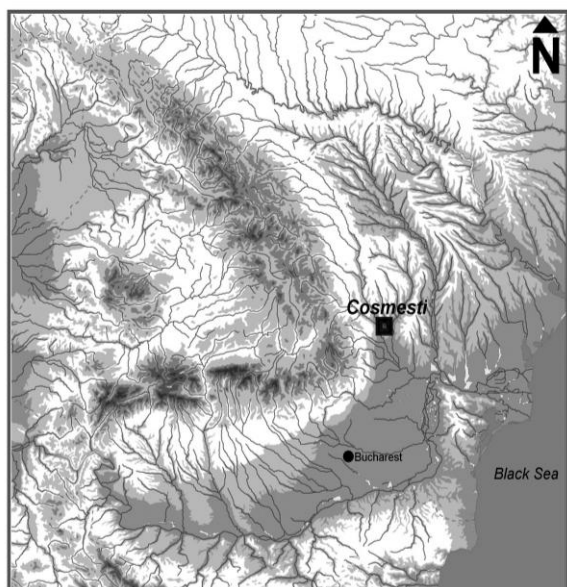
Berezanskaja et alii. 1986 – S.S. Berezanskaja, V.V. Otrošenko, N.N. Ceredničenko, I.N. Šarafutdinova, *Kul'tury epochi bronzы na territorii Ukrainy*, Kiev, 1986.

Croitoru 2014 – C. Croitoru, *Galați. Repertoriul descoperirilor arheologice și numismatice*, Galați, 2013.

Dergačev 1986 – V.A. Dergačev, *Moldavja i sosednie territorii v epochu bronzы*, Chișinău, 1986.

²⁵ Hansen 2010.

- Dergačev 2002** – V.A. Dergačev, *Die äneolithischen und bronzezeitlichen Metallfunde aus Moldavien*, Prähistorische Bronzefunde, XX, 9, Stuttgart, 2002.
- Govedarica 2004** – B. Govedarica, *Zepterträger - Herrscher der Steppen. Die frühen Ockergräber des älteren Neolithikums im Karpaten-Balkanischen Gebiet und im Steppenraum Südost und Osteuropas*, Mainz, 2004.
- Hansen 2010** – S. Hansen, *Communication and exchange between the Northern Caucasus and Central Europe in the fourth millennium BC*, in S. Hansen, A. Hauptmann, I. Motzenbäcker, E. Pernicka (eds.), *Von Majkop bis Trialeti. Gewinnung und Verbreitung von Metallen und Obsidian in Kaukasien im 4.-2. Jt. v. Chr. Kolloquien zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte 13*, Bonn, 2010, p. 297-316.
- Kaiser 1997** – E. Kaiser, *Der Hort von Borodino. Kritische Anmerkungen zu einem berühmten bronzezeitlichen Schatzfund aus dem nordwestlichen Schwarzmeergebiet*, UPA, 44, 1997.
- Klochko 2006** – V.I. Klochko, *Ozbroennja ta vije'kova sprava Davn'ogo nacelennja Ukraini (5000–900 pp. do P. X.)*, Kiev, 2006.
- Kohl 2007** – Ph.L. Kohl, *The Making of Bronze Age Eurasia*, Cambridge, 2007.
- Krivcova-Grakova 1949** – O.A. Krivcova-Grakova, *Bessarabskij klad*, Moscova, 1949.
- Leahu 2003** – V. Leahu, *Cultura Tei. Grupul cultural Fundenii Doamnei. Probleme ale epocii bronzului în Muntenia*, Bibliotheca Thracologica, XXXVIII, București, 2003.
- Mareș 2002** – I. Mareș, *Metalurgia aramei în neo-eneoliticul României*, Suceava, 2002.
- Popușoi 1987-1989** – E. Popușoi, *Mormintele cu ocră de la Fălciu, jud. Vaslui*, Acta Moldaviae Meridionalis, IX-XI, 1987-1989, p. 15-26.
- Šišlina 2013** – N. Šišlina, *Borodinskij klad: prodoljenje pouska*, in *Bronzovij vek. Evrope bez granič. Četvertoe – pervoe tysjačeleťja do n.e.*, Sankt Petersburg, 2013.
- Vulpe 1959** – Al. Vulpe, *Depozitul de la Tufa și problema topoarelor cu ceafa cilindrică*, SCIV, X, 2, 1959, p. 265-276.
- Vulpe 1975** – Al. Vulpe, *Die Äxte und Beile in Rumänien*, II, Prähistorische Bronzefunde, IX/5, München, 1975.
- Vulpe 1995** – Al. Vulpe, *Der Schatz von Perșinari in Südromänien*, in A. Jokenhövel (ed.), *Festschrift für Hermann Müller-Karpe zum 70. Geburtstag*, Bonn, 1995, p. 43-62.
- Vulpe 1997** – Al. Vulpe, *Tezaurul de la Perșinari. O nouă prezentare*, Cultură și Civilizație la Dunărea de Jos, XV, 1997, p. 265-301.



1

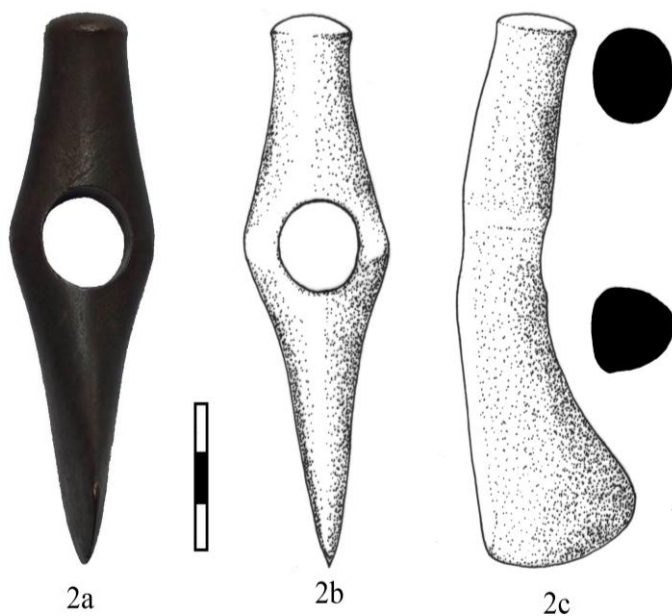


Fig. 1 - Cosmești: **1** = location of the site, **2** = the cooper axe.

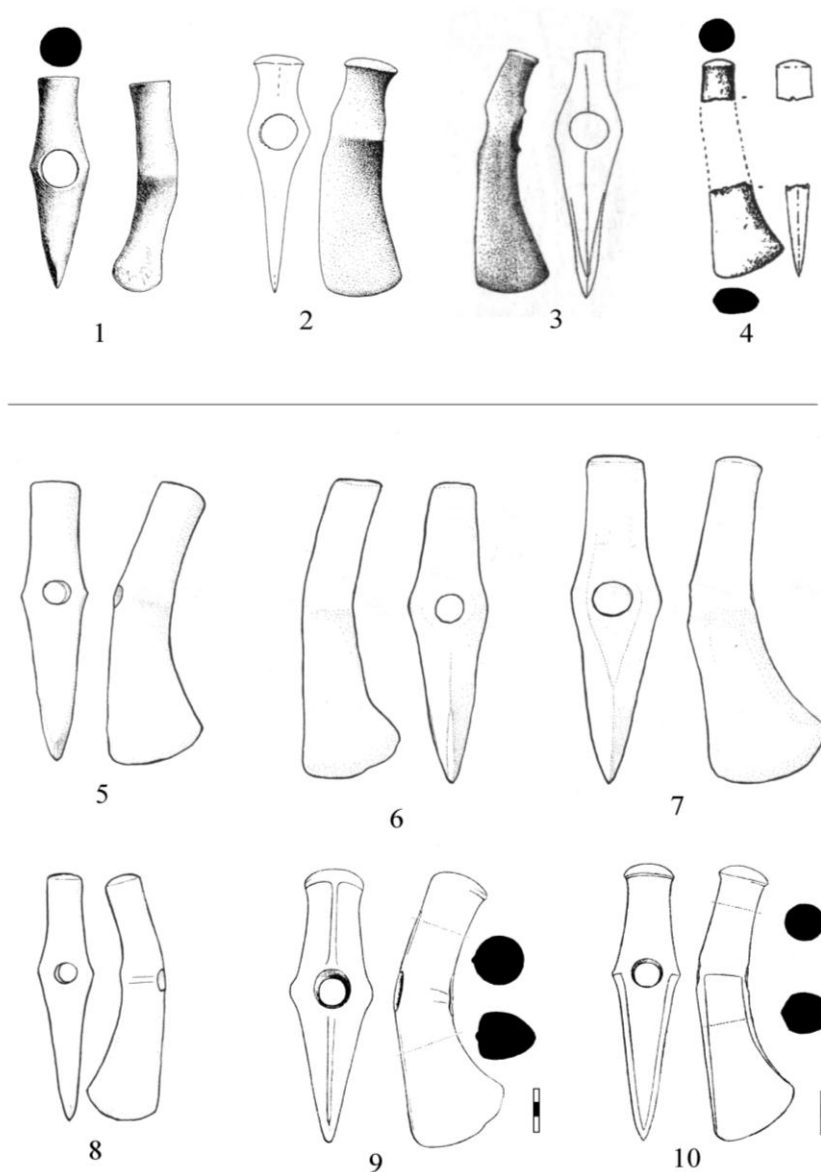


Fig. 2 - Metal and stone axes: **1** = Fălciu; **2** = Cuconeștii Vechi; **3** = Argeș County; **4** = Perșinari; **5** = Michailovka; **6** = Kučugury; **7** = Akkermen; **8** = Northern Caucasus; **9-10** = Borodino (**1** after Govedarica 2004; **2** after Dergačev 2002; **3** after Vulpe 1975; **4** after Vulpe 1995; **5-8** after Kaiser 1997; **9-10** after Krivcova-Grakova 1949). Different scales.