

## PLAYING GAMES IN EARLY MEDIEVAL TIMES

### Possible Archaeological Examples from the Sylvania Basin (Sălaj County, Romania)

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In the Romanian archaeological literature, games and toys from the medieval period have hardly been subjects of study and analysis, perhaps due to the rarity of such artefacts that can be connected to leisure time. The artefacts analysed on this occasion come from archaeological excavations carried out on sites from the north-western part of Romania, more precisely from the Sylvania Basin, a geographical area that lies within the administrative territory of the county of Sălaj. Artefacts that may have multiple functionalities often appear within archaeological inventories discovered in settlements. The limitations of the research mean that in many cases it is impossible to establish the functionality of some objects with certainty, cases in which we can only make assumptions/proposals. In the case of the geographical area under analysis (the Sylvania Basin) we also note the existence of early medieval artefacts whose possible function as toys or as components of games can only be hypothesized.

Keywords: Sylvania Basin, Early Medieval times, games, archaeological examples.

#### INTRODUCTION

In the Romanian archaeological literature, games and toys from the medieval period have hardly been subjects of study and analysis,<sup>1</sup> perhaps due to the rarity of such artefacts that can be connected to leisure time. In the current study we intend to present some artefacts that could be linked (directly or indirectly) to the way of spending leisure time, to the practice of games by both children and adults. The artefacts analysed on this occasion come from archaeological excavations carried out on sites from the north-western part of Romania, more precisely from the Sylvania Basin, a geographical area that lies within the administrative territory of the county of Sălaj (Fig. 1).

The Sylvania Basin<sup>2</sup> is a tectonic depression with a hilly type of relief formed by hilly ridges distributed along the Barcău, Crasna and Zalău valleys (Fig. 1: C). Geographical limits: Sălajului Hills (north-west; *Mac/Idu* 1992, 39–42; *Morariu/Sorocovschi* 1972, 27), the Meseș Mountains with *Porta Mesesina* (the Meseș Gate; east), the Plopiș Mountains and the Sylvania Hills (south-west). Due to the existence of clays, marls and sands that are easily shaped by the flowing waters, several depres-

sionary units were formed/individualized within this geographical unit.<sup>3</sup> On the eastern part of the Sylvania Basin (on the Meseș Mountains line) lies the most important pass of the north-western part of Romania, *Porta Mesesina* (the Meseș Gate). This is a short and wide pass formed by the Ortelec Valley (*Mac/Idu* 1992, 45; *Matei* 2012, 2, 3).

#### ARTEFACT PROVENANCE AND CHARACTERISTICS

The artefacts come from preventive excavations carried out at four settlements (with different chronologies) located in the Sylvania Basin, all places of discovery being on the territory of Sălaj County: Aghireș-Sub pășune, Zalău-Valea Mâții (Livada veche), Porț-La baraj, Marca-Sfărăuș I (Fig. 1: C).

#### Zoomorphic figurine

The first artefact comes from the settlement at Marca-Sfărăuș I, partially excavated in 2012 and dated in the period between AD 662–776, based on <sup>14</sup>C analyses (Fig. 2: 1; *Băcueț-Crișan/Bejinariu*

<sup>1</sup> Approaches of this theme only in *Rusu* 2016, 352–357; 2019, 769–775.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as Central Sylvania Basin (*Mac/Idu* 1992, 39; *Morariu/Sorocovschi* 1972, 27).

<sup>3</sup> The Șimleu Basin, the Zalău Basin, and the Sălaj Basin (see *Mac/Idu* 1992, 41; *Morariu/Sorocovschi* 1972, 27).

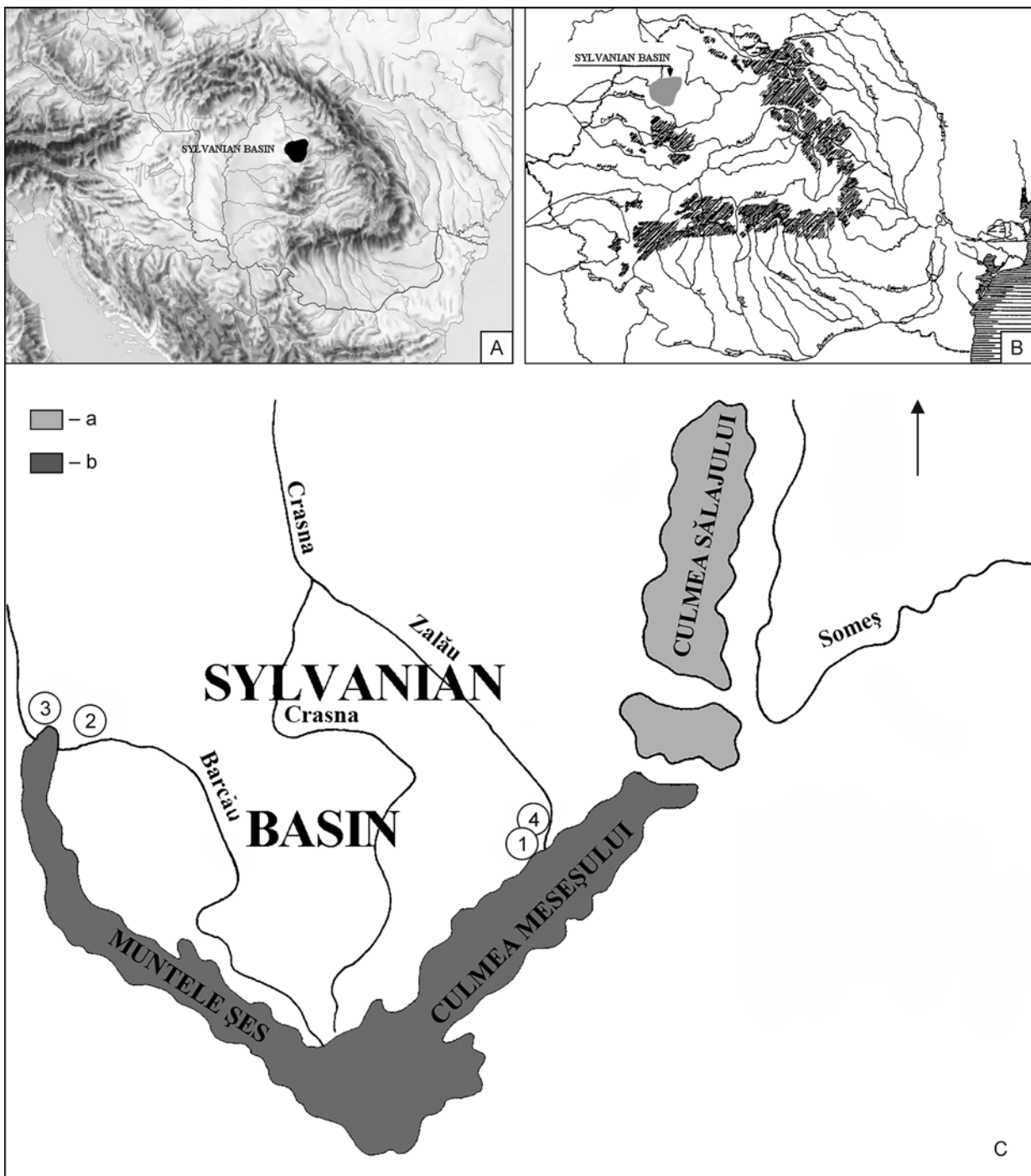


Fig. 1. The Silvanian Basin. A – the location in the Carpathian Basin; B – the location on the territory of Romania; C – map of the Silvanian Basin with the location of the sites where the analyzed artefacts were discovered. 1 – Aghireș-Sub pășune; 2 – Zalău-Valea Mății (Livada veche); 3 – Porț-La baraj; 4 – Marca-Sfărăuș I (maps elaborated by D. Băcuet-Crișan). Legend: a – hills; b – mountains.

2020, 71). A zoomorphic figurine, of which only the head was preserved, comes from the deepened dwelling C. 15/2012 (Fig. 2: 2; Băcuet-Crișan/Bejinariu 2020, 23, pl. 24: 4). The formal characteristics of the head suggest a horse with well-rendered ears. The (scarlet-coloured) figurine was modelled from a

fine fabric tempered with sand and mica flakes. The preserved dimensions of the figurine fragment are 27 mm long and 17 mm thick.

For the Silvanian Basin, this artefact represents a singular discovery (for the moment!), but, on the Romanian territory, such zoomorphic figurines are

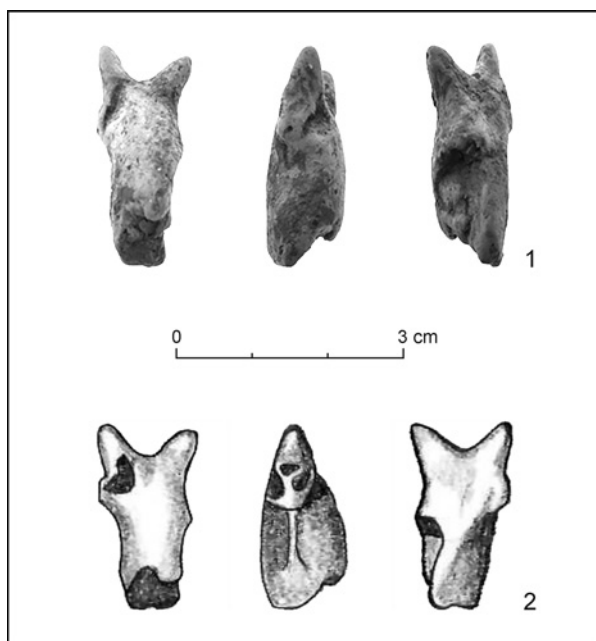


Fig. 2. Marca-Sfârâuaş I. Zoomorphic figurine (1 – after *Băcucet-Crişan 2022b*; 2 – after *Băcucet-Crişan/Bejinariu 2020*).

present in large numbers, especially in early medieval sites in the Moldavian area.<sup>4</sup> As far as their functionality is concerned, without exception, they have been linked to certain pagan magical practices (*Musteaţă 2005, 102; Teodor 2011, 68*), without any of them being accepted as a possible toy. In the Slavic cultural environment, miniature horses made of wood and even bronze are known, such as the examples discovered in Poland (*Gardela 2011–2012, pl. 1*), artefacts interpreted as toys but also as objects used in certain pre-Christian pagan magical practices (*Gardela 2011–2012, 16–18*). Additionally, in the Classical and Late Medieval period, fired clay toys (sometimes glazed) in the shape of a horse (sometimes even with a rider) were produced, such as the examples found in Hungary, artefacts datable to the 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> c. (*Petényi 1994, 94–99, pl. XX–XXIII*).

### Miniature vessels

Often in early medieval settlements, among the normal-sized pottery shapes, extremely small vessels (miniature vessels) were also found. On various occasions we have reported the presence of such small-sized vessels in the Sylvania Basin in specialised literature (*Băcucet-Crişan 2010, pl. III:*

2–4; IV: 1–3; 2014, fig. 25; 52), but at the time we had not formulated any hypothesis about their possible use as toys.

The miniature vessels we refer to (all modelled by hand) come from two settlements, the one at Porţ-La baraj, dated in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. (*Matei/Băcucet-Crişan 2011, 62, 63*) and the one at Aghireş-Sub păşune (in occupation levels from the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> c.; *Băcucet-Crişan et al. 2009, 25, 55–57*). The artefacts discovered in the settlement of Porţ-La baraj (two handmade examples; *Matei/Băcucet-Crişan 2011, pl. 17: 3, 48: 3*) imitate bowls (Fig. 3: 2, 3) and were discovered in a dwelling and in a household. There are four miniature vessels from the settlement of Aghireş-Sub păşune, all handmade – one imitates a bowl (Fig. 3: 1) and comes from an 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> c. household (*Băcucet-Crişan et al. 2009, pl. 255: 5*), while the other three imitate cups (Fig. 3: 4–6) and come from a dwelling from the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> c. (*Băcucet-Crişan et al. 2009, pl. 191: 1–3*).

In the north-western part of Romania, such small vessels have also been found in the early slavic horizon (*Stanciu 2011, pl. 30: 6*). All these examples were entirely hand-made, as confirmed by the examples found at other sites in present-day Romania, which, due to their small size, were sometimes included in the category of crucibles used in metallurgical activities (*Teodor 2011, fig. 41*).

### Sandstone slab with several perforations

The early medieval settlement of Zalău-Valea Mâţii (Livada veche; dated in the 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> c.) was investigated in 2008–2009 by means of a preventive archaeological excavation (*Băcucet-Crişan et al. 2009, 14–24*). In an early medieval dwelling (*Băcucet-Crişan et al. 2009, 25*), a fragment of sandstone slab with several perforations/carving was discovered, the preserved dimensions of the piece being: sides 40 × 60 mm, thickness of the slab 17 mm, diameter of the cut tokens 30–35 mm. The formal characteristics show that this (greyish-coloured) sandstone slab was cut (starting from both sides) to produce several discs/tokens, at least three are visible on the remaining piece (Fig. 4). Unfortunately, as the sandstone is fragmentary, we do not know what size such a slab would have been and how many tokens would have resulted from it.

As is known, concerning games, in the early medieval sites from Romania, have been found several tokens made of ceramic fragments (*Rusu 2016, fig. 5*) or bone/horn, some of them being nice decorated

<sup>4</sup> For example, the finds from Lozna-Botoşani (see *Teodor 2011, fig. 51; 52*). From a formal point of view, these examples are joined by those from the Pruto-Nistrean area (see *Musteaţă 2005, fig. 51*).

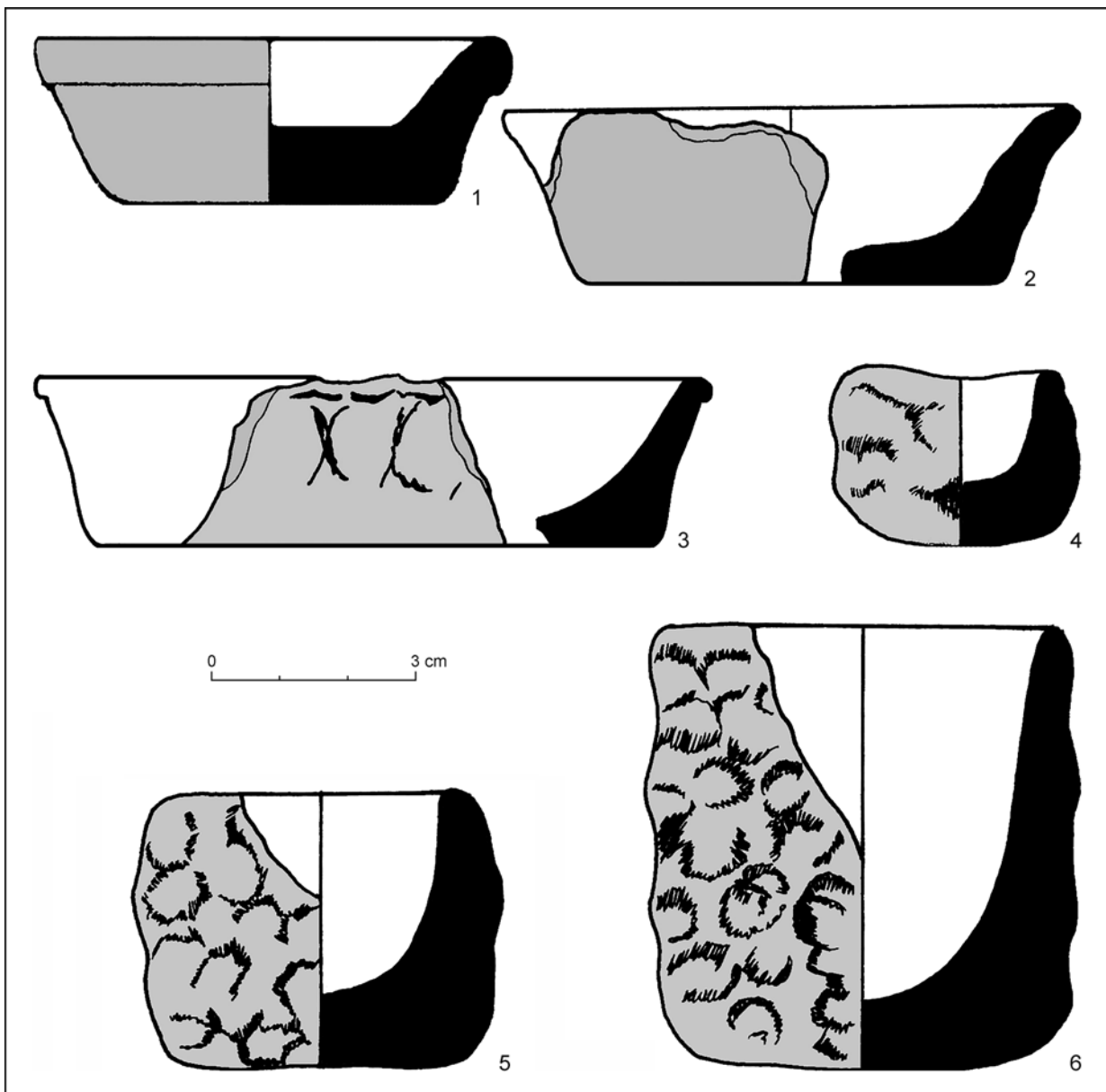


Fig. 3. Miniature vessels. 1 – Aghireș-Sub pășune; 2, 3 – Porț-La baraj; 4–6 – Aghireș-Sub pășune (after Băcueț-Crișan 2010).

(Gáll 2013, pl. 5: 9; Rusu 2016, fig. 20). There is also archaeological evidence of game boards, such as the 'mill'-type ones found in the fortresses of Dăbâca (Gáll 2011, pl. 66; Rusu 1997, pl. XLIX: 14–16) and Oradea (Rusu 2016, 354), where the lines of the game are incised upon stone blocks.

#### Decorated spur with 'dice'

In the settlement of Aghireș-Sub pășune (occupation level datable in the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> c.) were found five medieval spurs, all made of iron, one of which stands out due to its formal characteristics and

ornamentation: on one of the arms of the decorated spur there are three small squares that are integral to the arm (Fig. 5). The three decorative squares (each square has sides measuring 7 × 7 mm) are in their turn ornamented with small dots executed deep into the soft metal. Each square on the arm of the spur has a different number of dots – four, five, six (Fig. 5: 2). If in the case of the squares with four and five dots these are very visible, being well preserved, in the case of the square with six dots, five of them are very visible, while the sixth is more difficult to distinguish due to the corrosion of the piece. The three squares (with a different number of dots on each) mimic the sides of a die.



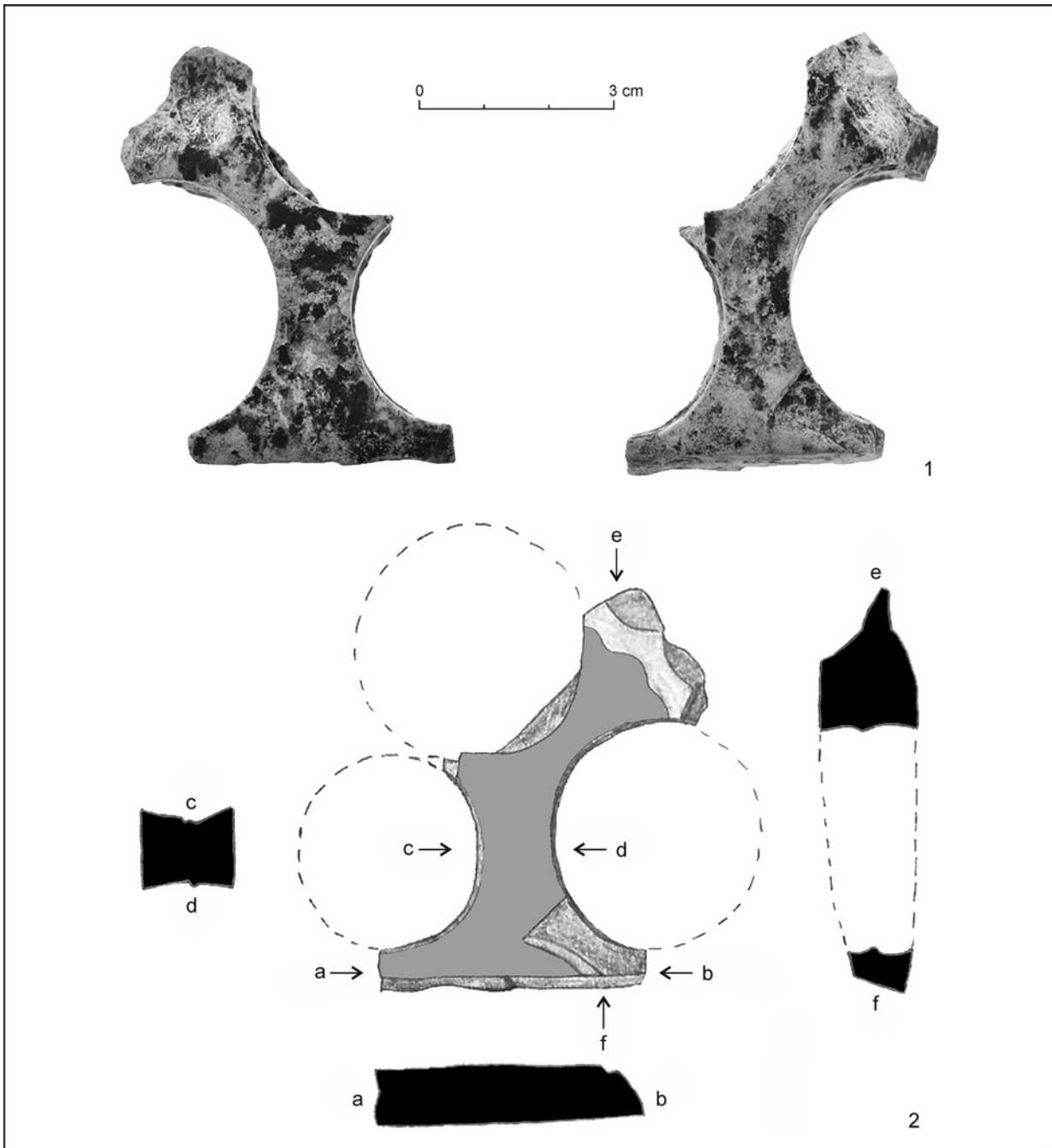


Fig. 4. Zalău-Valea Mâții (Livada veche). Sandstone slab with several perforations/carving (after Băcucet-Crișan 2022a).

In those dots there are still very faint traces of green colour from the bronze with which they were filled (metal inlays) so that, when the piece was used, the dots indicating the numbers on the sides of the dice, were very visible. The formal characteristics of the spurs place these examples among the finds that are specific to the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> c. (Băcucet-Crișan 2020a, 96; 2020b, 481; Băcucet-Crișan et al. 2009, 59; Györfi 2006, 111). If the three squares represent the sides of the die, it is likely that this

spur's pair would have also had its arm decorated with three squares but with a different number of dots (one dot, two dots, three dots), so that the two spurs would have had a rendering of all six sides of the die.

Such ornamented spurs (rare examples denoting the rank/social status of the bearer) could not belong to commoners, but rather to the elite(s), the owner of the example discovered at Aghireș-Sub pășune probably being one of the (local) potentates, an

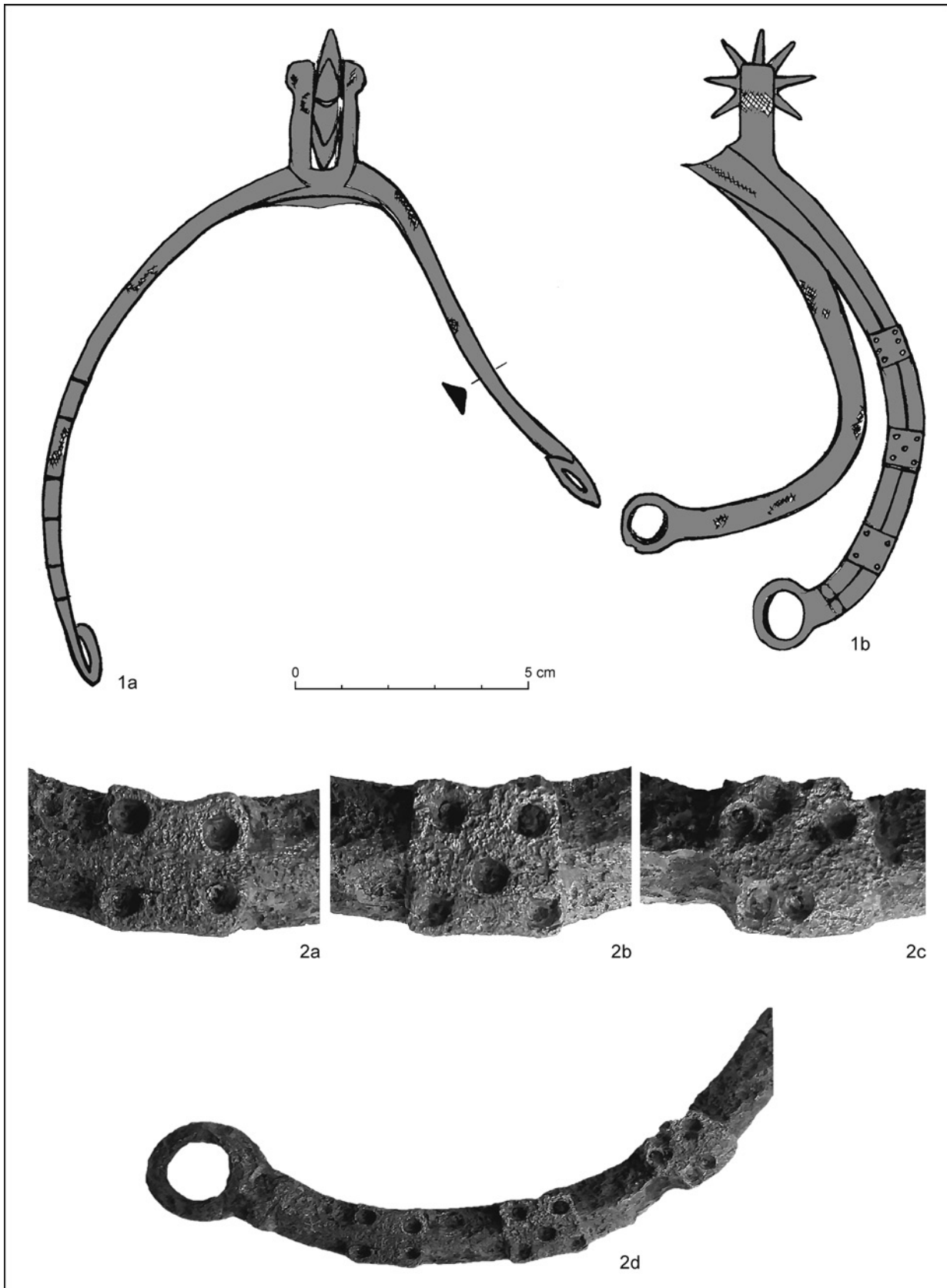


Fig. 5. Aghireș-Sub pășune. Decorated spur with 'dices' (after Băcuet-Crișan 2020a).

important figure of that community, fond of playing dice games (*Băcuet-Crișan 2020a*, 93–102; *2020b*).

#### TO PLAY OR NOT TO PLAY? SOME (CAUTIOUS) CONSIDERATIONS

As already stated, the games and toys of the Early Middle Ages have not been a frequent theme in Romanian specialised literature. Artefacts that may have multiple functionalities often appear within archaeological inventories discovered in settlements. The limitations of the research mean that in many cases it is impossible to establish the functionality of some objects with certainty, cases in which we can only make assumptions/proposals. In the case of the geographical area under analysis (the Sylvania Basin) we also note the existence of early medieval artefacts whose possible function as toys or as components of games can only be hypothesized.

In the Romanian archaeological literature, multiple functionalities have been proposed for miniature vessels belonging to other eras. The miniature vessels are seen as ‘replicas’ (of the ‘real’ large ones) created for ‘didactic’ purposes (repetition and practice), having at the same time the role of a toy. However, magical functionalities have also been assumed (*Rustoiu 2016*, 49–56). For example, in the case of Neolithic miniature pots, a multiple role is also accepted, in addition to that of a toy (*Băcuet-Crișan 2011*, 22–25). This pottery category present in early medieval occupation levels would deserve a special approach in Romanian literature, an approach that would address not only formal and structural characteristics but also issues linked to possible multiple functionalities.

Of the artefacts presented above, only the iron spur discovered in the settlement of Aghireș-Sub pășune can be considered an (indirect) argument in favor of the practice of games (in this case, a game of dice) in the early medieval period, in the Sylvania Basin. Archaeological finds attest to the presence of the die since ancient times, the game of dice (made of clay, bone, stone, metal, glass) being inseparable from the evolution of human society. In its turn, the medieval world<sup>5</sup> had practitioners/enthusiasts of (gambling) games, including dice, with prominent members of the elite among them (about playing dice in the Middle Ages see *Rusu 2019*, 769 ff.).

European archaeological literature has often addressed issues related to the presence of toys or the practice of various games (e.g. *Gardela 2011–2012*; *Grandet/Goret 2012*; *Khamaiko 2018*, 149, 150; *Petényi 1994*; *Rundkvist/Williams 2008*; *Spjuth 2012*), approaches facilitated by the multitude and diversity of artefacts found on archaeological sites in various geographical locations and different cultural environments. Considerations on some archaeological finds of this kind in Romania (in the context of the evolution of games in the medieval period) have been formulated by *A. A. Rusu (2016, 352–357)*, noting that, in 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> c. Europe, tokens made of metal, bone, wood and stone were already widely used (*Rusu 2016, 355*).

The present approach aimed to make known some early medieval artefacts with (possible) play-related functionalities discovered in the Sylvania Basin, artefacts that provide additional information about the toys and games of this period, aspects that have been very timidly addressed so far in Romanian archaeological literature.

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<sup>5</sup> In Transylvania, such a medieval dice (dated in the 16<sup>th</sup> c.) comes from the castle of Vințu de Jos (see *Rusu 1998, 106, fig. 74*).

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Manuscript accepted 28. 11. 2022

Translated by Alina Ioana Piticaru  
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## Hranie hier vo včasnom stredoveku

### Možné archeologické príklady zo Sylvánskej kotliny (župa Sălaj, Rumunsko)

Dan Băcuet-Crișan

#### SÚHRN

Hry a hračky raného stredoveku neboli v rumunskej odbornej literatúre častou témou. Možno kvôli vzácnosti artefaktov, ktoré možno spájať s voľným časom, sa takmer neskúmali. Predmety, ktoré sú analyzované v tejto štúdiu, pochádzajú z predstihových archeologických výskumov na štyroch lokalitách (s rôznou chronológiou). Nachádzajú sa v severozápadnej časti Rumunsku, presnejšie v Sylvánskej kotline, geografickej oblasti, ktorá leží v administratívnom území župy Sălaj (obr. 1). Ide o lokality Aghireș-Sub pašune, Zalău-Valea Mății (Livada veche), Porț-La baraj, Marca-Sfârșauș I (obr. 1: C).

Prvý artefakt pochádza zo sídliska v Marca-Sfârșauș I a pripomína hlavu koňa (obr. 2). Pre Sylvánsku kotlinu predstavuje tento artefakt zatiaľ ojedinelý nález, no na území Rumunsku sa zoomorfné figúrky vyskytujú vo veľkom počte. Sú spájané s pohanskými magickými praktikami bez toho, aby niektorá z nich bola doteraz akceptovaná ako možná hračka.

Na včasnostredovekých sídliskách sa medzi bežnými tvarmi keramiky našli aj drobné, v ruke robené miniatúrne nádoby. Z osady Porț-La baraj z 8. stor. pochádzajú dve misky (obr. 3: 2, 3) a z osady v Aghireș-Sub pašune štyri miniatúrne nádoby, z ktorých jedna, z objektu z 8.–9. stor., predstavuje misku (obr. 3: 1), kým ďalšie tri, pochádzajúce z obydľia z 10.–11. stor., imitujú poháre (obr. 3: 4–6). Miniatúrne nádoby sú vnímané ako repliky tých

skutočných, veľkých. Mohli byť vytvorené na „didaktické“ účely a zároveň mať úlohu hračky. Predpokladajú sa však aj magické funkcie.

Na sídlisku v Zalău-Valea Mății (Livada veche), datovanom do 11.–13. stor., bol objavený fragment pieskovcovej dosky s viacerými perforáciami, ktorá bola určená na výrobu niekoľkých kotúčov/žetonov. Na zachovanom fragmente sú viditeľné aspoň tri (obr. 4). Na ranostredovekých lokalitách v Rumunsku sa našlo niekoľko žetonov vyrobených z keramických úlomkov alebo kosti/parohu/rohoviny. Existujú tiež archeologické dôkazy o hracích doskách.

Z hodnotených artefaktov možno za (nepriamy) argument v prospech praktizovania hier (v tomto prípade hry v kocky) v ranom stredoveku považovať len železnú ostrohu, objavenú v osade Aghireș-Sub pašune. Ostroha z 13.–14. stor. je ozdobená „kockami“ (obr. 5). Takéto predmety nemohli patriť obyčajným obyvateľom, ale skôr elite. Majiteľ nálezu objaveného v Aghireș-Sub pašune mohol byť jedným z významných postáv miestnej komunity, ktorý holdoval hraniu kockových hier.

Cieľom príspevku bolo sprístupniť niektoré ranostredoveké artefakty s (možnými) funkciami súvisiacimi s hrou, objavené v Sylvánskej kotline. Poskytujú dodatočné informácie o hračkách a hrách tohto obdobia, čo sú aspekty, ktoré sa v rumunskej archeologickej literatúre doteraz riešili veľmi nespelo.

Obr. 1. Sylvánska kotlina. A – lokalizácia v Karpatskej kotline; B – poloha v rámci územia dnešného Rumunsku; C – mapa Sylvánskej kotliny s polohou lokalít, na ktorých sa našli analyzované predmety. 1 – Aghireș-Sub pašune; 2 – Zalău-Valea Mății (Livada veche); 3 – Porț-La baraj; 4 – Marca-Sfârșauș I (autor D. Băcuet-Crișan). Legenda: a – pahorkatina; b – vrchovina.

Obr. 2. Marca-Sfârșauș I. Zoomorfná plastika (1 – podľa Băcuet-Crișan 2022b; 2 – podľa Băcuet-Crișan/Bejinariu 2020).

Obr. 3. Miniatúrne nádoby. 1 – Aghireș-Sub pašune; 2, 3 – Porț-La baraj; 4–6 – Aghireș-Sub pašune (podľa Băcuet-Crișan 2010).

Obr. 4. Zalău-Valea Mății (Livada veche). Pieskovcová platňa s viacerými perforáciami (podľa Băcuet-Crișan 2022a).

Obr. 5. Aghireș-Sub pašune. Ostroha ozdobená hracími kockami (podľa Băcuet-Crișan 2020a).

