

## **The Eastern Celts and their Invasions of Hellenistic Greece and Asia Minor**

**Abstract:** During the fourth century BC the Celts expanded into the Balkan Peninsula and the Carpathian Basin. After the major defeat at Delphi, in Greece, the surviving Celtic tribes formed an alliance under the name Scordisci. They settled in the wider territory around the confluence of the Sava and the Danube, which became a base for their subsequent invasions into Thrace and beyond. The Celtic presence in the region has been best documented by the necropolises in Karaburma (Singidunum) and Pećine (Viminacium). These graveyards had a complex arrangement of burials into groups and sections. The warrior graves contained pieces of weaponry showing decorative elements of both Western and Eastern Celtic art tradition. Some of the female graves contained rich personal adornment such as the coral bracelet and the *Münsingen-type* fibula in a grave in Pećine. Until the Roman conquest, the Scordisci remained the most powerful military force in the region.

**Keywords:** Celts, central Balkans, Scordisci, necropolises, warrior graves

The presence of the Celts in western and central Europe came into the focus of Roman and Greek authors only after the Celts had started expanding their territory in the fifth and fourth century BC. The Celtic homeland between the Rhône, Rhine and Danube stretched over an arch-shaped area that included the Alpine foreland in northern Italy and western Austria, and the Danube basin in Moravia. As the nearest northern neighbours, they soon got acquainted with, and started importing various luxury goods from, Rome, Etruria and the Greek colonies. As early as the fifth century BC, the wealth of the southern neighbours and their own enhanced military power inspired the Celts to make risky attempts at conquering the bordering areas of northern Italy.

The surprisingly powerful strike of Celtic armies resulted in first military successes, such as taking control over a large part of the region, making assaults upon Rome, collecting substantial taxes from the local communities, and permanent settling in the newly-conquered territories. There followed, however, a series of wars with the powerful Roman Republic up until the latter half of the second century BC when the alliance of the Celtic tribes of Taurini, Senones and Boii was completely subdued and driven out of its territories.

A century after the incursions of the Western Celts into northern and central Italy, the Eastern Celts consolidated their forces and started

pushing their way into the areas of the modern-day Czech Republic, Moravia and western Slovakia. In the course of the fourth century, they moved southwards into the Balkan Peninsula and occupied the Carpathian Basin and eastern Transylvania, including the areas along the Danube. Towards the end of the fourth century, the Eastern Celts started preparations for invading the eastern and southern Balkans, but this time without any clear strategy for migrations and settling in the potentially occupied territories. The first military campaigns in Thrace and the Aegean coast were unsuccessful and they slowed down the initial wave of expansion. The Celts used this delay in their movement across the peninsula, in the late fourth and early third century BC, to muster a powerful army and concentrate along the Danube in the northern Balkans. This particular period in the history of Celtic settlement in the Balkans is archaeologically documented by the excavation of two large necropolises of the Eastern Celts: Karaburma, in Belgrade, and Pećine, on the very site of the future urban centre of the Roman province of Upper Moesia, Viminacium.

Soon afterwards, the Celts started invading Thrace and conducted several small operations, some of which ended in defeat. Sources state that, in the battle at Lysimachea on the Aegean coast, diadoch Seleucos won a victory over Celtic army by deceiving them. If this was about assessing enemy's military forces, then the attack on the great oracle of Delphi in central Greece, and the cross-over to Asia Minor, were all about showing off Celtic self-confidence, rather than elements of a well-designed war strategy. Written sources report in detail on these invasions and their outcomes, and describe the complete debacle of the Celts. In 279 BC near Delphi, the Celts were beaten and driven off; the invasion on Asia Minor also ended in defeat and, subsequently, the Celts became mercenaries of the Hellenistic rulers.

Gloating over the failure of the Celtic attack on Delphi, which forced the defeated Celts to retreat northwards, the antique sources provide a good deal of information on the invasion itself and the subsequent developments. The surviving Celtic troops established a new alliance of tribes under a previously unknown name of Scordisci; they settled in the occupied territory at the confluence of the Sava into the Danube. The written sources also provide the name of the seat of the alliance — Singidunum — and this is the earliest identification of the precise geographic position of Belgrade. Leaving aside the historical consequences of the foundation of a Celtic centre in this region, the importance of its location is manifold. The fact that Celtic military campaigns were launched from the Danube region in modern-day Serbia has direct implications for detecting the material evidence of their military presence in the area, and this is a crucial aspect of the research focused on this particular period in prehistory.

Given the continuous efforts of the Celts to conquer new territories through invasions and attacks, it is not surprising that there are no traces of their permanent settlements from this early phase. Celtic cemeteries, on the other hand, constitute definite evidence of their uninterrupted presence in the region. The recent investigations of Celtic sacral structures reveal that differences between the graves of warriors and the female graves rich in grave goods directly reflect the organisation and spatial distribution of burials in the cemeteries from the period of military expeditions. The excavated warrior graves contained major types of weapons of the Eastern Celts from the time of the great invasions. The female graves as a rule contained an assortment of jewellery accessories that can be precisely chronologically determined and that often belonged to two or more generations.

The excavations of the Karaburma necropolis in Singidunum, which partially overlapped with the excavations in Pećine, were conducted during the intensive modern-day building activity in the homonymous part of Belgrade. As a result, the ninety-five Celtic graves discovered in Karaburma, of which some were inhumations, were largely destroyed or damaged by the construction works.

The excavated area of the Early La Tène burial site in Pećine near Kostolac encompassed forty-three graves: seventeen inhumations, seventeen cremations and nine burials of individuals from the local, indigenous populations of the Central Balkan's Iron Age. Within the excavated zone of the necropolis, three different groups or micro-zones of graves were identified. In addition, within each of the groups, several smaller subgroups of burials (e.g. Ia – If) were recognised, probably incorporating members of the same family or inhabitants of the same settlement.

Based on the distribution of individual graves and the type of burial, both Pećine and Karaburma belong to the same class of cemeteries where graves were located on separate ground plots and organised within small or large sub-groups. They, therefore, represent agglomerations of independent micro-zones composed of groups of burials that were in some way connected. The necropolis in Karaburma extends over a much larger area than the one in Pećine. Although it was not completely excavated, the reconstruction of the distribution of burial micro-zones was possible. The necropolis in Pećine was only partially investigated. There the burial plots were located at some distance from one another, a pattern that suggests that the designated cemetery area was not limited. The investigated section of the Pećine necropolis seems to have been in use over a relatively short period. The grave offerings show similarities, but their origin, typology and style appear very diverse, perhaps reflecting individuality of the communities to which the burials belong (Fig. 1).

Apart from the regular offerings of food and drink, warriors were also buried with pieces of personal weaponry which bear stylistic characteristics of both Western and Eastern Celtic populations. The typical, double-edged swords were protected by light scabbards made of iron and worn suspended from a waist-belt ending in iron chains or spindle-shaped links that formed the two sides of a clasp. The scabbard from grave No. 1791 in Pećine still displays its ornamentation — the incised dragon-pair motif in the form of opposed S-shapes with heads facing inwards, resembling a lyre (Fig. 2).

In the history of Celtic art, the dragon-pair motif like this one has been interpreted as symbolising Celtic universal well-being. In art it takes on two patterns: one called “cheerful obstacle racers”, the other labelled “a pair of opposed hippocampi”. Both patterns are associated with the swords from the period of Celtic invasive migrations. As much as they appear restrained in form, they vary in the decoration. The scabbard referred to here is an exceptional example of the latter and later pattern, recognisable by the vegetal or elongated floral ornament, and bearing elements attributed to the early phases of its development. Grave No. 29 of a warrior buried in the cemetery in Karaburma yielded a similar scabbard, though in this case featuring a decoration conforming to the former of the two ornamental patterns.

An important component of the Celtic women’s jewellery sets were fibulae (brooches for fastening clothing) which were highly valued decorative applications. Their form and style varied greatly. In the fourth and third century BC, two types of fibulae seem to have been very popular among Celtic women: the type made in *Münsingen* (south-west Switzerland) with the characteristic ornament in the form of a rosette inlaid with coral, and the fibulae from the western Czech Republic (the Duchcov type — after the site of Duchcov) recognisable by their knob-decorated back-bent foot that touched the corrugated bow or was wrapped around it. These two types of fibulae are indisputable diagnostic elements crucial for determining the relative and absolute chronology of La Tène artefacts and structures.

The most valuable item in the rich personal adornment from female cremation grave No. 378 in Pećine (Fig. 3) is a bracelet decorated with coral bead embroidery, interred after the funeral. The bracelet is embellished with delicately shaped coral beads incised with symbols and ornaments and symmetrically arranged around the central rosette. The most curious aspect of this unique composition is the cuff that served as a foundation on which the beads were fitted. Contrary to the usual practice of creating the cuff out of a piece of bronze sheet, this one is made of iron. As a result, the cuff is fairly heavy and not quite suited for fixing the beads into a solid arrangement; also, through time, beads got covered in a thick layer of rust (Fig. 4a-b). The conservation treatment of the bracelet has improved the visibility of the

ornamental composition depicting stylised skulls surrounded by multiple rows of beads engraved with triskelion motifs. The skull cult and the marked use of the skull motif in the decoration of a single piece of jewellery, along with the high quality of craftsmanship and the ritual message conveyed by the composition, are so far unique in the art of the Eastern Celts. The way in which coral and bronze parts were modelled in the *Münsingen-type* fibula found among the offerings in female grave No. 982 in Pećine presents an entirely different picture (Fig. 5).

After over a century of rule in Thrace, the sudden split of the Eastern Celts into two factions decided the future of Celtic presence in the Balkans. Until the arrival of the Romans in the early first century BC, the Scordisci remained highly influential and maintained their status as the most powerful military force in the region. At the same time, the Celts in Galatia struggled to maintain their territory established after the migration into Asia Minor in the third century BC. The historic significance and identity of the Galatians would have been lost in conflicts and dynastic wars between the diadochs, in which the Celts took part as hired soldiers, had they not been a well-organised, independent group that stood out from the rest of the Celtic groups mercenaries.

Encouraged by the initial success in the battles they fought as allies of the Hellenistic rulers and interfering in local conflicts, the Galatians went so far as to decide on the amount that the Greek cities in Asia Minor were paying in return for hiring Galatian soldiers. This move led to a revolt of the Hellenistic rulers which, now united under the leadership of the kings of Pergamon, turned against the Galatians and inflicted several severe defeats on them. Eventually, the Galatians ended up confined to the infertile areas of central Anatolia where they settled permanently in the territory of Galatia. However, their adversaries — the Pergamon kings Attalus I and Eumenes II — treated the defeated enemy in an unusual way: they erected a number of triumphal monuments to celebrate their victory, but accorded the central place in the artistic depictions to the Galatians. They are shown as fierce soldiers, and at the same time as accepting the final and inevitable defeat with dignity. This respect for the tradition of the Galatians and their willingness to sacrifice themselves are portrayed in sculptures of the monumental Pergamon Altar, in the monuments of the Acropolis of Athens, and in the frieze in Ephesus, all created in the mid-second century BC. These representations also show typical weapons of the Galatians, that is, of the Eastern Celts and thus serve as a key piece of authentic archaeological evidence.

Ultimately, the territory of Galatia marked the southern border of the expansion of the Eastern Celts. In the central Balkans, they occupied an area from which they prepared their invasions of Greece and Asia Minor

— the area along the Danube. This historical delineation remained more or less unchanged over the period of three centuries, up to the Roman conquest of the Balkans. Along with the growing domination over the Balkans, the Roman Empire rapidly expanded across Asia Minor, gaining control of the Hellenistic states. Galatia lost its independence and its status as an autochthonous La Tène cultural phenomenon, and was gradually absorbed by Roman provincial culture.

There are now even more arguments to support the claim that the burials of the Galatians' ancestors in the necropolises of Singidunum, Karaburma and Pećine serve as distinctive documents of the beginning of a short co-existence of three leading cultures in the Balkans of the time: Hellenistic Greece, the militant Romans and the invasive, protohistoric Celts of central and south-east Europe. To the impressive longevity and monumentality of Viminacium has now been added a new aspect through the archaeological reconstruction of its origin, firmly embedded in protohistory.

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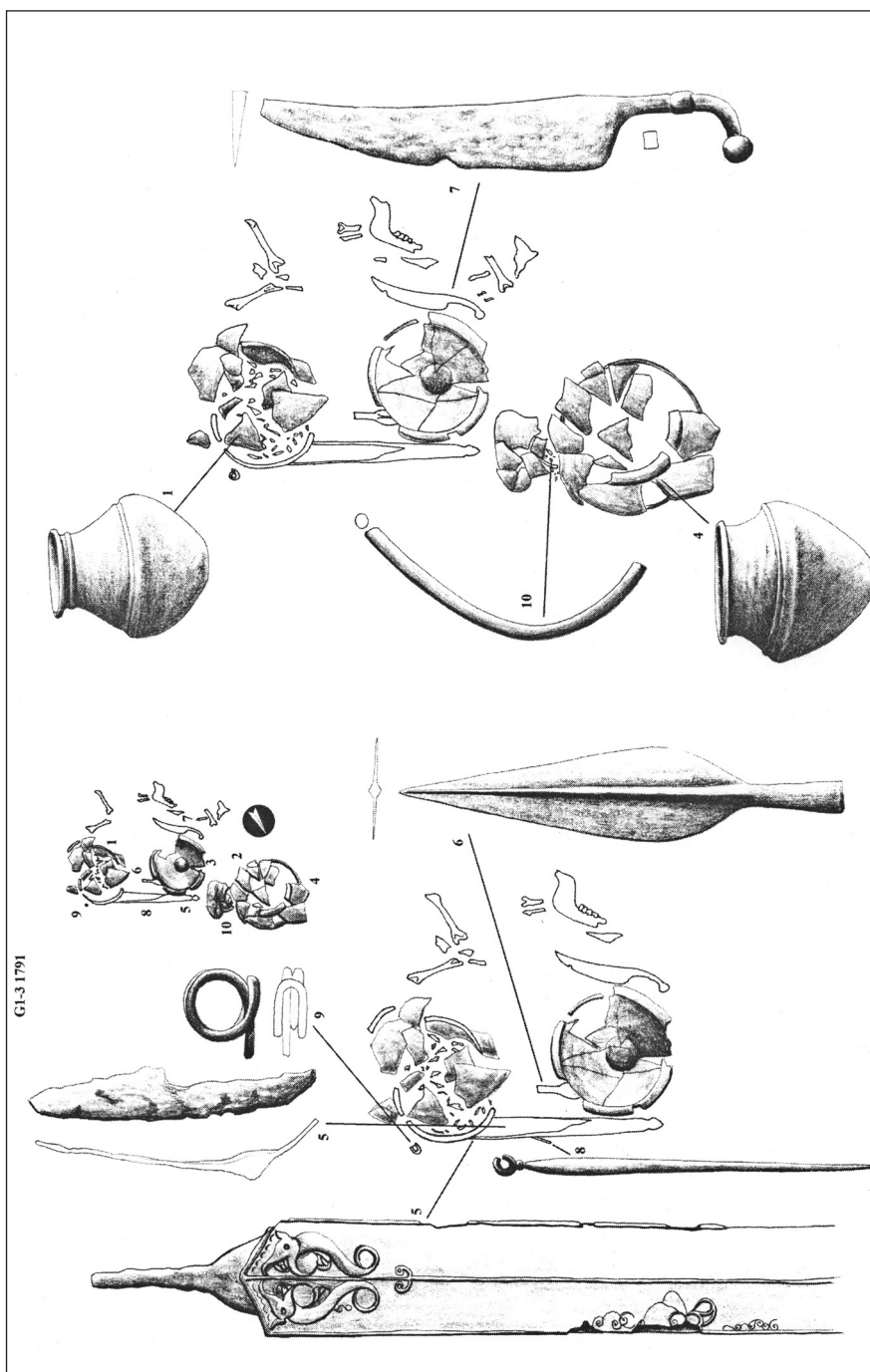


Fig. 2 Pećine: Offerings from warrior grave G 1-3 1791

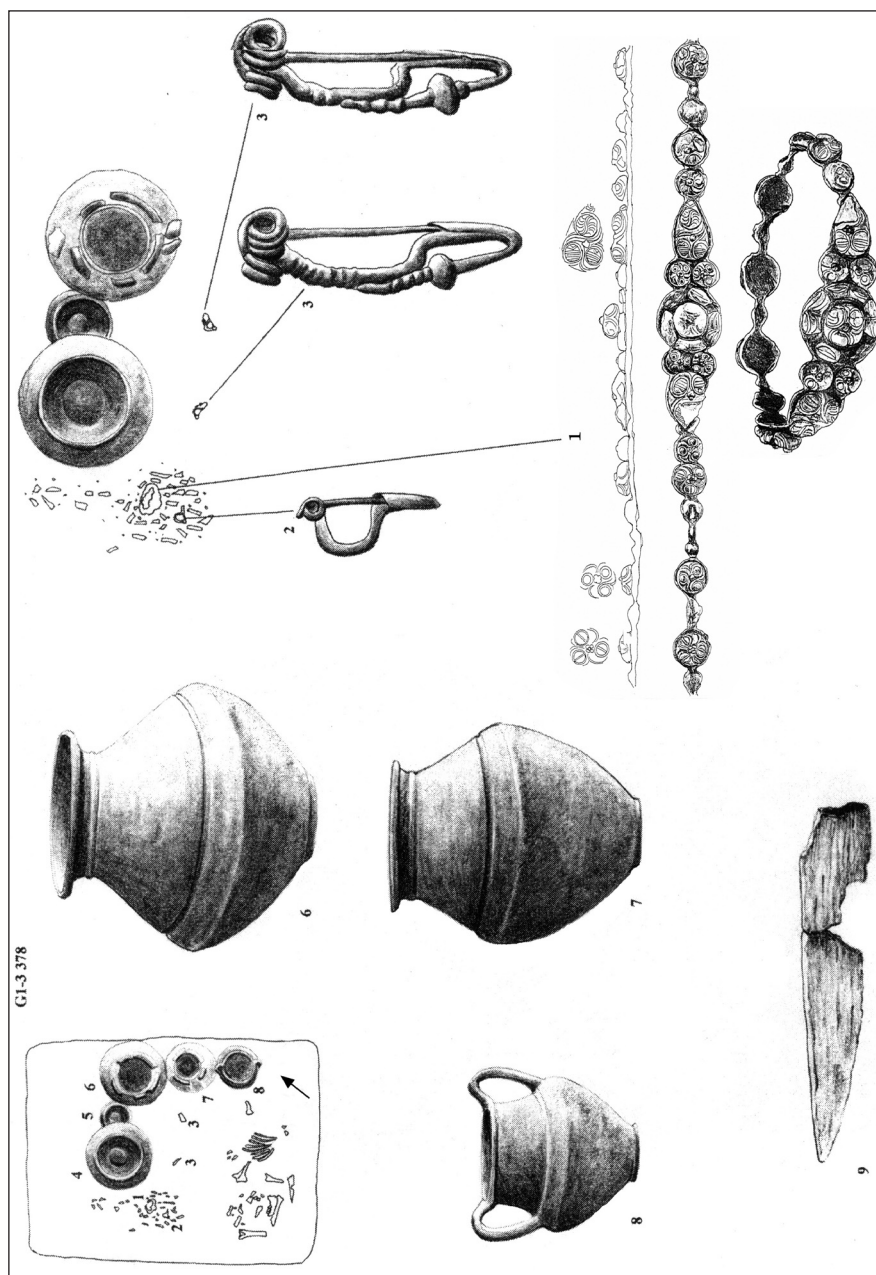


Fig. 3 Pećine: Offerings from female grave G 1-3 378



Fig. 4a-b Pećine: Coral bracelet with an iron cuff from female grave G 1-3 378

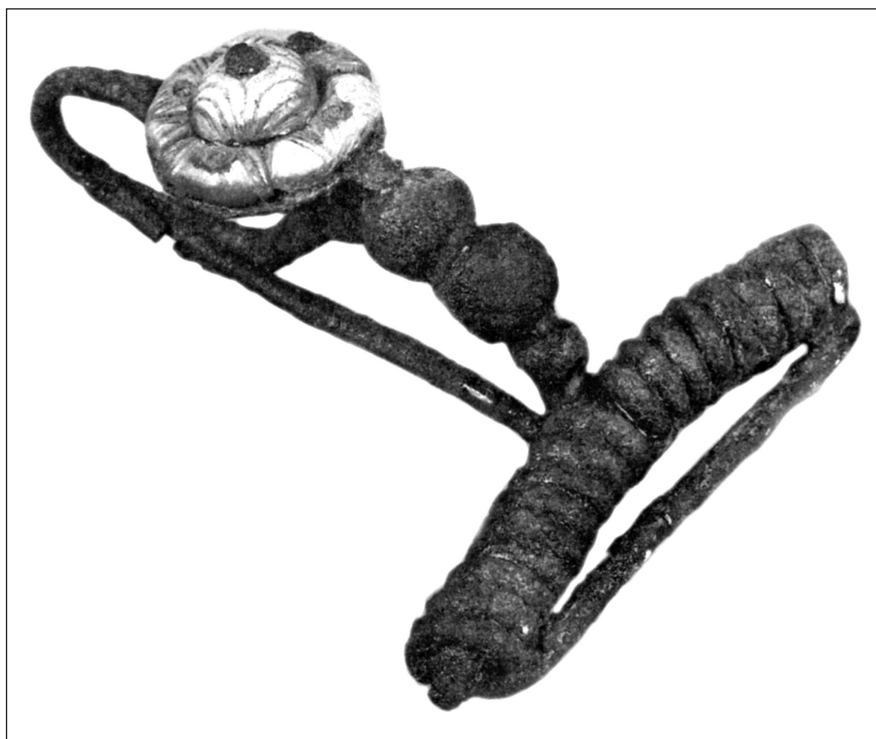


Fig. 5 Pećine: Fibula decorated with a coral rosette from female grave G-3 982