

**Border Guards of the Passes,
from the Fortresses and the Graves.
The Bronze and Iron Ages**

**Proceedings of The 17th International Colloquium
of Funerary Archaeology**

**Târgu Jiu, Gorj County (Romania)
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EXOTIC GOODS FROM THE EARLY IRON AGE NECROPOLIS STUBARLIJA, SERBIA, AS INDICATORS OF CULTURAL CONTACTS

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Key words: Early Iron Age, Sarmia group, Stubalija necropolis, cowry shells, Scythian Alföld group

Abstract. The Early Iron Age necropolis Stubarlija is situated near the village of Mošorin in south Bačka. It contained five skeletal graves attributed to the Srem/Sarmia group. The grave inventory included pottery finds, Certosa fibulae, glass beads and cowry shells. Apart from the pottery finds with traditions of the local Bosut group, other finds are considered to be imported goods. In this paper we will focus on the cowry shells - the unique finds which have not been recorded on other sites in the territory of the Sarmia group. Cowry shells were found only in one grave of this necropolis. According to P. Medović, the cowry shells were imported to the territory of present day Slovenia via the northern Adriatic, and as re-imported goods they could have been brought from Slovenia, along with the Certosa fibulae and the multi-coloured glass beads to the territory of the Sarmia group. The aim of this paper is to examine whether the practice of placing cowry shells in graves suggests cultural contacts other than proposed.

1. Introduction

Discovering objects, recognised as exotic goods, in ancient funerary contexts is a glimpse into the concept of afterworld as well as into the world living, full of contacts and interaction not too easy to decipher. These objects, the origins of which are always expected to be far away from the place of their finding, can be used as indicators of trade and exchange and complexity of the cultural environment. In the case of the Late Hallstatt world of the south-eastern part of the Carpathian Basin, namely the Sarmia group, exotica in the grave inventory indicates that these special objects had specific meaning for the Iron Age people. They must have engaged additional efforts to get them. A nice example can be seen in the case of the Stubarlija necropolis, where cowry accessories or adornment was obviously an important companion in the afterlife.

The Stubarlija necropolis is situated near the village Mošorin in Bačka district, Serbia, on the north-eastern edge of the Titel Plateau, about 800m eastwards from the Feudvar settlement (Medović 2007, p. 5). Five graves from the Early Iron Age were found and attributed to the Sarmia group. Medović (2007, p. 72) proposed dating of the necropolis in the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd century BC, but earlier date should be taken into consideration (Ljuština *et alii* in this volume). The graves inventory included pottery finds with traditions of the Bosut group, and imported goods: Certosa fibulae, glass beads and shells of cowries (Medović 2007, p. 10-18).

According to P. Medović, the cowry shells were imported to the territory of present day Slovenia via the northern Adriatic. As re-imported goods they could have been brought from Slovenia, along with the Certosa fibulae and the multi-coloured glass beads to the territory of the Sarmia group (Medović 2007, p. 71). Though it can be accepted that some of the Certosa fibulae from the Stubarlija necropolis originated from the Late Hallstatt groups of present day Slovenia, the glass beads were widely distributed and used in this period, so their place of origin is not easy to

recognize (Ljuština *et alii* in this volume). Based on presence of the ring eye glass beads in the Stubarlija necropolis, contacts with other regions, such as Alföld in Hungary can be proposed (Ljuština *et alii* in this volume). In the light of the new results, we decided to reassess the opinion that cowry shells, Certosa fibulae and glass beads came as a package in the territory of Sarmia group from Slovenia. In this paper our focus is on the cowry shells – the goods which do not appear anywhere else in the territory of the Sarmia group, and the presence of which opens up new questions about contact routes which existed in the Early Iron Age in the area of the Middle Danube and Tisa rivers.

2. Cowry shells in the Stubarlija necropolis

Cowry shells appeared in only one grave (Grave 1) in the necropolis. Orientation of the grave is East-West. It is a female skeletal grave with the head resting in the east. The deceased was placed on the back with hands on the stomach (Fig. 1). The estimated age of this woman is between 35 and 50 years, and estimated height is about 160cm. The north wall of the grave pit was slightly disturbed in the area around the hip of the individual. In this part a fragment of a Sarmatian vessel was found. The deceased had three strings of glass ring-eye beads, one spindle whorl, three fibulae and fourteen shells of cowries. Thirteen of them were found around the right hip, and one next to the left upper arm (Medović 2007, p. 10).

The cowry shells from the necropolis Stubarlija are not well preserved. Naturally the shell surface is smooth and highly polished, but these cowries have rough and misted surface, probably due to taphonomic agents. They are quite small. Length is between 1,5 cm and 2,3 cm. They also have large holes on the dorsal side (Fig. 2). Because of these taphonomic changes and modifications, it is hard to determine species, but it can be said that they belong the genus *Cypraea*. Based on morphology, they are the most similar to species *Cypraea annulus*. Shells of this species are oval with humped dorsal side and smoothly rounded margins, white in colour. Dorsum is separated from callous sides by narrow yellow ring (Oliver 2012, p. 320). Two other similar species, *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea obvelata*, unlike *Cypraea annulus* have strong callous sides (Oliver 2012, p. 320).

As already stated, the Stubarlija shells have large holes on the dorsal side. This kind of modification is usually interpreted as artificial, but we think it might also be the result of some processes that occurred between the death of snails and collecting by humans. We inspected the shells under microscope in order to trace the fine marks. Some marks could be seen, but they are too precisely shaped to be the result of artificial work. Still, it is necessary to conduct further investigation, on larger sample, and with larger magnification. Also, we want to point out that mentioned species have humped and rounded dorsal side which is exposed and easy to break, so it should not rule out the possibility that these holes were created during some natural processes, maybe when cowry shells were thrown by waves on beaches.

In search of the answers to the question of the origin and technical performances of the holes, we came to the idea that the perforations were the results of predatory attacks. Traces of such attacks can be found in the hard parts of shell-bearing organisms, and even repaired shell injuries (Lindström 2005). Having compared our samples with the published ones, we came to the conclusion that such an explanation could not be excluded for the original, presumably smaller perforations, but could not be accepted for the final shape of the hole.

3. Biological distribution of the cowry shells

The name “cowrie” is of Indian origin, and today the term is used in reference to shells of the Cypraeidae family. Their polished and often colourful shells have attracted humans for thousands of years, and have been used for decoration, as currency and in religious rituals (Moretzsohn 2014, p. 278).

Cowry shells inhabit shallow tropical or subtropical waters. There are six major biogeographical regions where cowries are found: Indo-Pacific, southern Australian, South African, Mediterranean and West African, Caribbean and West American. Among them the Indo-Pacific is the largest and richest province (Moretzsohn 2014, p. 279). The closest water to the southern part of Eastern Europe where they appear is the Arabian and Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Some species of the Cypraeidae family, are also widespread in the waters of the Mediterranean (Puppe and Goto 1991, p. 123-126). Mentioned species like Gold Ring Cowry (*Cypraea annulus*) or Money Cowry (*Cypraea moneta*) live in warm sea waters and shallow lagoons in the basins of the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Oliver 2012, p. 320).

4. Cowry shells in the ancient cultures

The extensive distribution of cowries attests to their popularity among many ancient and unrelated cultures, in the past as well as the present. Ethnographers, cultural historians and archaeologists alike are in general agreement that the symbolism of the cowry shell is linked with the appearance of its underside: the lengthwise, serrated opening resembling a female vulva or a squinting eye. So, cowries have been commonly interpreted as amulets intended to protect against sterility, to increase fertility and to ward off the evil eye and bring good luck (Golani 2014, p. 75; Hildburgh 1942, p. 178). Also, cowries have physical attributes that make them an appealing form of currency. They are durable, long-lasting, easy to handle, portable, have an alluring gloss, are uniform in shape and size and are impossible to counterfeit - all of which make them suitable for trade by weight, volume or number (Li 2006). They are common at the Iron Age sites in Israel (Ktalav and Borowski 2010, p. 131). Based on the shell finds of Gold Ring Cowry (*Cypraea annulus*) from Kadesh Barnea site Bar-Yosef Mayer (2007) suggested that they were used as currency during the Iron Age in the southern Levant. Historical records refer to both Gold Ring Cowry (*Cypraea annulus*) and Money Cowry (*Cypraea moneta*) as “shell money”. Cowries in China were not used as currency until the Middle Western Zhou period, in India their usage was confirmed around 400 AD, and in Cairo in the Middle Ages (Li 2006).

In the Near East, humans have been using the shells for ornamentation since the Epipaleolithic period. Among these shells, cowries from the Red Sea and the Mediterranean have been found. They are usually intact or were perforated at their narrow end (Golani 2014, p. 72). From the Neolithic period onwards, cowries with hole on dorsal side appeared in Egypt and the Near East. During the Bronze Age, cowries became more common as grave goods, usually associated with burials of women and children. They were also popular in pre-dynastic Egypt and also in the southern Levant of the Bronze and Iron Ages. In the southern Levant modified cowry shells were worn as headbands, and in Egypt of the Middle Kingdom representation of cowries appeared on female figurines as beads on a girdle around the hips. Cowries in the pelvic area suggest that the shells were not just ordinary decorative beads, but were probably imbued with a function beyond ornamentation. Their association with males seems to be sporadic (Golani 2014, p. 74). The importance of cowries extends throughout the Fertile Crescent as noted in Neo-Assyrian

records. They are mentioned as precious items, alongside silver and gold. These texts highlight the cultic and religious importance of cowries, as well as their economic value (Golani 2014, p. 75). Their immense distribution, often far removed from their origin, indicates that they were widely traded and very popular among many cultures.

4.1. Cowry shells in the Early Iron Age of Eastern Europe

During the 9th and 8th centuries cowries were found in Iranian Azerbaijan and Central Iran. In Transcaucasia cowries appeared slightly later, but no later than the 9th century BC, and in the Central Caucasus in the 8th and 7th century BC (Bruyako 2007, p. 228). In the second half of the 8th century BC and especially in the 7th century BC cowry shells spread north of the Great Caucasus into the zone of the Koban Culture, and at the same time they can be found in the Northern Caucasus in the Proto-Meotina Culture - Yassenovaya Polyana and in the Early Scythian burials (Bruyako 2007, p. 228-229). Bruyako (2007, p. 229) thinks that spreading of the cowry shells was gradual from the parts of the Near East northward across the mountains Caucasus in the steppes of Southern Russia. It is also Bruyako's (2007, p. 230) opinion that the spread of cowry shells northwards and sudden appearance of the fashion among the ancient inhabitants of the southern part of Eastern Europe in the 7th and 6th centuries BC is linked with the appearance of nomadic populations in this region, which have traditionally been equated with the Early Scythians. The cowries were recorded in the Early Scythian period in the Northern Caucasus not earlier than the 8th century BC, and in the Crimea Mountains and the forest steppes bordering the Dnieper River not earlier than the 7th century BC (Bruyako 2007, p. 225). The area from where this spread of cowry shells originated should be recognised as the Middle East. From that region there was an access to the shores of the Indian Ocean and parts of the Far East, including the coasts washed by the seas of the Pacific basin (Bruyako 2007, p. 235). As Kemenczei (2009, p. 91) stated, the cowry shells were one of the most typical objects in the Scythian material culture.

Considering shells from the Scythian territory, they mainly belong to Gold Ring Cowry (*Cypraea annulus*), with few belonging to some other species. What is also very important is that most of them have a hole. In the Pre-Scythian and Scythian period the cowry shells were used as jewellery and amulets. Keeping in mind that they could only be acquired through the intermediary of long-distance trade, they cannot be considered ordinary commodities. They were rather desirable and valuable objects (Kemenczei, 2009, p. 92).

4.2. Cowry shells in the Alföld and Ciumbrud groups in the Carpathian Basin

During the 7th and 6th centuries BC the cowry shells spread from Eastern Europe further to the west. Their appearance in Transylvania in the mid- 7th century BC is quite curious (Bruyako 2007, p. 232). The oldest cowry shells in the Carpathian basin came from the burials in Blaj, Budesti-Finate, Măriselu, Ozd, Simeris (Vasiliev 1980). In that period an unusual enclave of the Early Scythian culture known as the Ciumbrud group emerged with burials in which quite large quantities of cowry shells have been found. Vasiliev suggested that the pendants made of the cowry shells appeared in Transylvania with the populations who buried their dead in the burial grounds of the Ciumbrud type, but only in the early assemblages (Vasiliev 1980, p. 101, 132). The cultural isolation led to absorbing of the population, which was once core, into the local population in the 6th century BC. It is also important to say that the cowries have not been found at sites of the same date in adjacent regions. Bruyako associated the isolated finds of cowry shells scattered through the Carpathian-Danubian region with movement of the Scythian nomads (Bruyako 2007, p. 232). These

sites are Cimbala, Giurgiulești, Babadag, Dobrina, and they are dated to the time no later than the first half of the 6th century BC (Bruyako 2007, p. 233).

The second isolated region where cowries were found is in Alföld in the 6th and 5th century BC in the Scythian Alföld group, another cultural phenomenon associated with the penetration of the Early Scythian population (Bruyako 2007, p. 232; Kozubova 2013, p. 50). In the flat cemeteries of the Alföld group cowry shells occur in very different quantities. Most of the specimens were found in the tomb of Szentes Vekerzug (40 specimens), in a grave of Mezótúr (50 specimens) and in a grave of Medgyesháza (14 specimens). But in general one to seven cowry shells are to be found in one grave. It is interesting to note that this type of body decoration is not documented at all the burial sites of Alföld group - they are relatively rare in the western region (Kozubova 2013, p. 48).

As is the case of Transylvania, cowry shells in the Alföld group appeared in the first half of the Scythian period in the lowlands, and in the second half of the period, the pieces which could have been used as funerary objects were already missing in some regions, in certain communities (Kemenczei 2009, p. 92). Chochorowski points out that cowry shells were found neither at sites in the neighbouring regions, nor in the regions settled by the Illyrian tribes south of the Hungarian Plain, nor within the zone of the “classical” Hallstatt culture further west (Chochorowski 1985, p. 56). In contrast, Kemenczei argues that cowry shells were found in Transdanubia in burials of the Hallstatt culture (Kemenczei 2009, p. 92). Kozubova also points out their occurrence in the Hallstatt and Early La Tène settlements in south-western Germany and western Austria (Kozubova 2013, p. 50). In the following period of the Iron Age, at the time of La Tène, cowry shells were also found in the Carpathian Basin.

It is important to emphasize that most cowry shells from the Scythian funerals in the Carpathian Basin came from the burials where skeletons were in an extended supine position. Most of them came from female or children’s graves, and rarely from men’s graves and graves with horse (Kemenczei 2009, p. 92). They have artificially formed hatch on dorsal side, and could be used as separate pendants as well as necklace components. Their number in graves varies. Usually, there is no more than three pieces, but there are graves with large number of shells which is particularly typical for the Szentes-Vekerzug necropolis (Kozubova 2013, p. 48). In Transylvania cowries were found around head and shoulders, which suggested that they had been worn as diadems or necklaces (Vasiliev and Zrinyi 1974, p. 109).

Based on the chronological classification of cowries in the North Pontic-Caucasian region, there is no doubt that their occurrence in the eastern regions of the Carpathian Basin, both in the Alföld group and the Ciombrud group, is mainly related to the forest steppe area of southern Eastern Europe (Kozubova 2013, p. 50). According to Bruyako (2007, p. 232) appearance of the cowry shells in Transylvania and Alföld is the result of penetration of two different groups of the Early Scythian population. Based on the chronology, at least half a century separates the appearance of these two groups. The same author also points out that distribution of the cowry shells should be seen as secondary to those of the forest steppes bordering the Dnieper (Bruyako 2007, p. 233). From there they spread to the West and South-West together with the groups of the Early Scythian nomadic populations. In the 5th century BC they also spread to the North, in particular to the lands where the Lusatian and Pomeranian cultures were to be found within the territory of modern Poland. It is possible that from the Tisa region of the Alföld the nomadic enclave extended distribution of the cowries further to the North in the 5th century BC (Bruyako 2007, p. 235).

4.3. Cowry shells in the East Alpine region during the Early Iron Age

According to Teleaga and Zirra, cowry shells appeared in the zone of the Western Balkans and Alpine regions, but no earlier than the Ha D period, while in Southern Italy they were recorded slightly earlier in the Ha C period (7th century BC) (Teleaga, Zirra 2003, p. 84-85). Interestingly, they are almost completely absent in the Hallstatt groups of Slovenia. Few finds are recorded and they are connected with the Scythian influence (Grahek 2004, p. 153). Likewise, real cowry shells are not frequent in the neighbouring regions (Kukoč 2010, p. 210).

There they are documented in particular by their bronze imitations, used either as separate pendants or necklace components, or as parts of various composite pendants. These are not limited to Slovenia and neighbouring regions but are also known from the Golasecca culture sites in north-western Italy and on the Adriatic coast of Central Italy (Picena region), where they are characteristic mainly for Ha D1 (Grahek 2004, p. 153-154; Kukoč 2010, p. 209). There are also sporadic amber imitations in the Japod group (Grahek 2004, p. 154; Kukoč 2010, p. 211). Returning to the Apennine Peninsula between the end of the 8th and the 6th century BC, where in the vast territory from Etruria to Basilicata, numerous princely tombs have been found, one can also recognize graves of distinguished members of the society which comprised bronze jewellery in the form of cowries (e. g. “Queen of Cupra”, who was buried with a large *Cyprea* fibula, accompanied by a remarkable series of bronze cowry-shaped pendants) (Negroni Catacchio 2007, p. 533, 545).

5. Interpretation of cowry shells in the Stubarlija necropolis

It is important to emphasize that cowry shells appeared only in one grave (Grave 1) in the Stubarlija necropolis. In this grave an adult woman was resting on her back with her hands on the stomach. The lady had three necklaces of glass beads, one spindle whorl, three Certosa fibulae and fourteen shells of cowries. Thirteen of them were found around the right hip, and one next to the left upper arm. They are even more puzzling because they do not appear either in the graves in the Syrmia group or in the neighbouring areas. Only one cowry shell was found in the vicinity, at the site Pećine near Kostolac, along with the material reflecting influence of the Rača-Ljuljaci group from central Serbia (Jovanović 2018, p. 142). As we can see, placing the cowry shells in the graves is neither the common practice in the Syrmia group, nor in the groups it was surrounded with. Consequently, their presence in one grave in the Stubarlija necropolis opens up new questions about the origin of this practice and also contacts routes which existed in the Early Iron Age in the area of the Middle Danube and Tisa rivers.

According to P. Medović, who conducted the excavations, the shells of cowries could have been brought from Slovenia as re-imported goods, along with the Certosa fibulae and multi-coloured glass beads (Medović 2007, p. 71). Having analysed available data about the cowry shells from the Stubarlija necropolis and taking into account new literature, it is our intention to propose other possibilities.

In the Hallstatt groups of Slovenia and in the neighbouring regions, there are few finds of cowry shells, but there and generally in the Adriatic area they are documented by their bronze imitations, used either as separate pendants or necklace components. So, in the area placing real cowry shells in graves is not a common practice. Consequently, the region can be ruled out from the group of potential places from where this practice came. Furthermore, we can exclude the Mediterranean as place they originated, because cowry shells from the Stubarlija necropolis do not belong to any species from *Cypreaeidae* family living in the Mediterranean.

The place where we found analogies for this practice is the area of the Great Hungarian Plain and Transylvania, as well as regions further to the east. Finds of cowry shells in the burials in the Alföld or Transylvania, mostly belong to species *Cypraea annulus* and have large holes on dorsal side, like the cowry shells in the Stubarlija necropolis. The difference between our finds and the finds in the mentioned regions is the position inside the grave. The pieces in the Stubarlija necropolis were not found around the head or on the chest of the deceased like in Ciumbrud and Alföld group, but grouped by the right hip. We did not find analogies for such a position of the cowries in the graves, so the interpretation of their functions is not certain. They might have been kept inside some kind of bag as separate pendants which had not been previously used or as parts of some composite jewellery. Only further analysis of marks can provide additional information to reach the final answer to the question.

Despite the fact that their position in the Grave 1 from Stubarlija differs from the positions in other analysed graves, other similarities point out that the Ciumbrud or the Alföld groups should be looked at in search of the answers, since the practice of using cowry shells as jewellery is concentrated there. However, chronological attribution of the grave is also under a question mark. The rest of the grave inventory puts the unit in the 5th century BC. As already noted, cowries appeared only in early graves of the Ciumbrud group, but not later than the 6th century BC, while in Alföld in the 5th century BC nomadic enclave from the Tisa region extended distribution of cowries further to the North. Accordingly, it is logical to presume that it was actually the Tisa to have acted as the route via which cowries reached the south.

6. Conclusion

The ancient people who created and used special implements of all sorts must have had a clear concept of the social meanings the chosen raw materials had. The case of cowry shells provides much inspiration to dig through the layers of the past in search of the answer what gave them the power to stay attractive for millennia. This shell can be seen used as exotica on ladies' outfit even today, in 21st century Europe. For some ladies from the Syrmia group it was obviously of great importance to be accompanied with their cowry accessories or adornment on their journey to the afterlife.

Since cowry shells are not in standard grave repertoire of either the graves of the Syrmia group or in the neighbouring areas, this desire and/or need was obviously not an ordinary one. Consequently, the way of supplying with the desired goods should not be expected to have been in the set of daily routines. In the light of the results of our recent analysis, the opinion that the cowries came as re-imported goods from Slovenia, along with other finds such as the Certosa fibulae and multi-coloured glass beads, whose origin is also questionable, is brought into question. In addition, the Mediterranean Sea can be excluded from the group of places cowry snails could have originated, because the shells from the Stubarlija necropolis do not belong to any species from Cypraeidae family living in the Mediterranean.

Based on what we get as the result of this research, we want to conclude that the communities in the region between the Sava, Danube and Tisa rivers in the Late Hallstatt period had multi-dimensional contacts, hard to recognise and reconstruct in archaeological sense, not only with the cultural groups to the west, but also to the north. The communities from Alföld and Transylvania, with whom the communication along the Tisa routed was active, must have played important roles in the network of trade and exchange, not only of goods but of ideas. In some of the

cases, as in the case of the lady whose place of eternal rest was in the grave 1 from Stubarlija, one must take into consideration personal preferences and individual human mobility as well.

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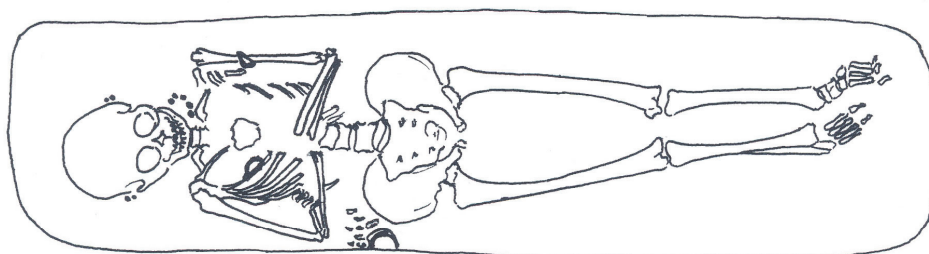


Fig. 1. Grave 1 from Stubarlija (modified after Medović 2007).



Fig. 2. Cowry shells from Stubarlija, Grave 1 (photo by Teodora Radišić).