

Research stage of the La Tène and Thracian scheme fibulae in Romania - Dynamics and exclusion. Critical general approach

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Abstract: In this presentation, the author brings some general comments concerning the archaeological finds containing La Tène and Thracian scheme fibulae from Romania. The critical approach refers to the research stage, discovery circumstances, state and interpretation of the items and to the publication conditions. Globally, the author considers that these artifacts, present over the nowadays Romanian territory between the 4th century BC to first century AD, through their important number (still growing each year) represent a good beginning for considerations of chronological, typological, social status, trade and cultural relations point of view.

Key-Words: La Tène scheme fibulae, Thracian scheme fibulae, statistics, material conditions, research stage, geographical distribution, typology, chronology.

1 Importance of the problem

In the archaeological past and present research the fibulae have been used and remain an attraction. They were followed in chronological and functional terms, manufacturing techniques or ornamentation. Attention was also given to the social status value of certain categories of these pieces and their role in costume and clothing. In this regard distinctions were made between their functional role and the possibility to be valued as ornaments or symbols of prestige by their users.

Generally speaking, even since archaeology was developing as an autonomous science, the fibulae were used primarily and largely for the chronological division of various findings, and as an evidence (amongst other metal objects and pottery), sometimes decisive, for ethnic attribution. This special status acquired by the fibulae, even from the beginning of scientific archaeology, was due to their relatively high frequency in various findings, ranging from settlements, cemeteries, thesauri to hoards of various types, sometimes with a special character. Along with other categories of archaeological items, made primarily of metal, through comparison and association evidence, the fibulae, in general, have become “guiding fossils” of some epochs, and their stages and sub stages.

Moreover, on several occasions, these artifacts were used as a chronological definition criterion. For example LT C₂ and D₁ phases were largely shaped by the types commonly known as Mötschwil or Nauheim. Therefore, sometimes a “tyranny” of fibulae is mentioned in the definition of some phases in the relative archaeological chronology. Referring to this subject, the fibulae have gained their “merit” through their general remarkable diversity. In certain epochs their variety can be really surprising, in others, even if many items are found, a relative “standardization” of their morphology is observed, thus making their classification difficult [1].

Generally speaking, because the fibulae undergo such dynamic morphological changes they offer the premises of being “invested” with a high chronological value. Many Romanian and foreign authors devoted their efforts towards the classification of fibulae in time and space. I will limit myself to a very selective enumeration, because the number of authors involved in this type of classification, even in a superficial way, reaches hundreds: R. Beltz, D. Viollier, J. Kostrzewski, O. Almgren, Ilona Kovrig, Erzsébet Patek, A. K. Ambroz, K. Horedt, Elisabeth Ettlinger, Emilie Riha, V. Căpitanu, M. Feugère, R. Gebhard,

Distribution of the La Tène scheme fibulae in Romania

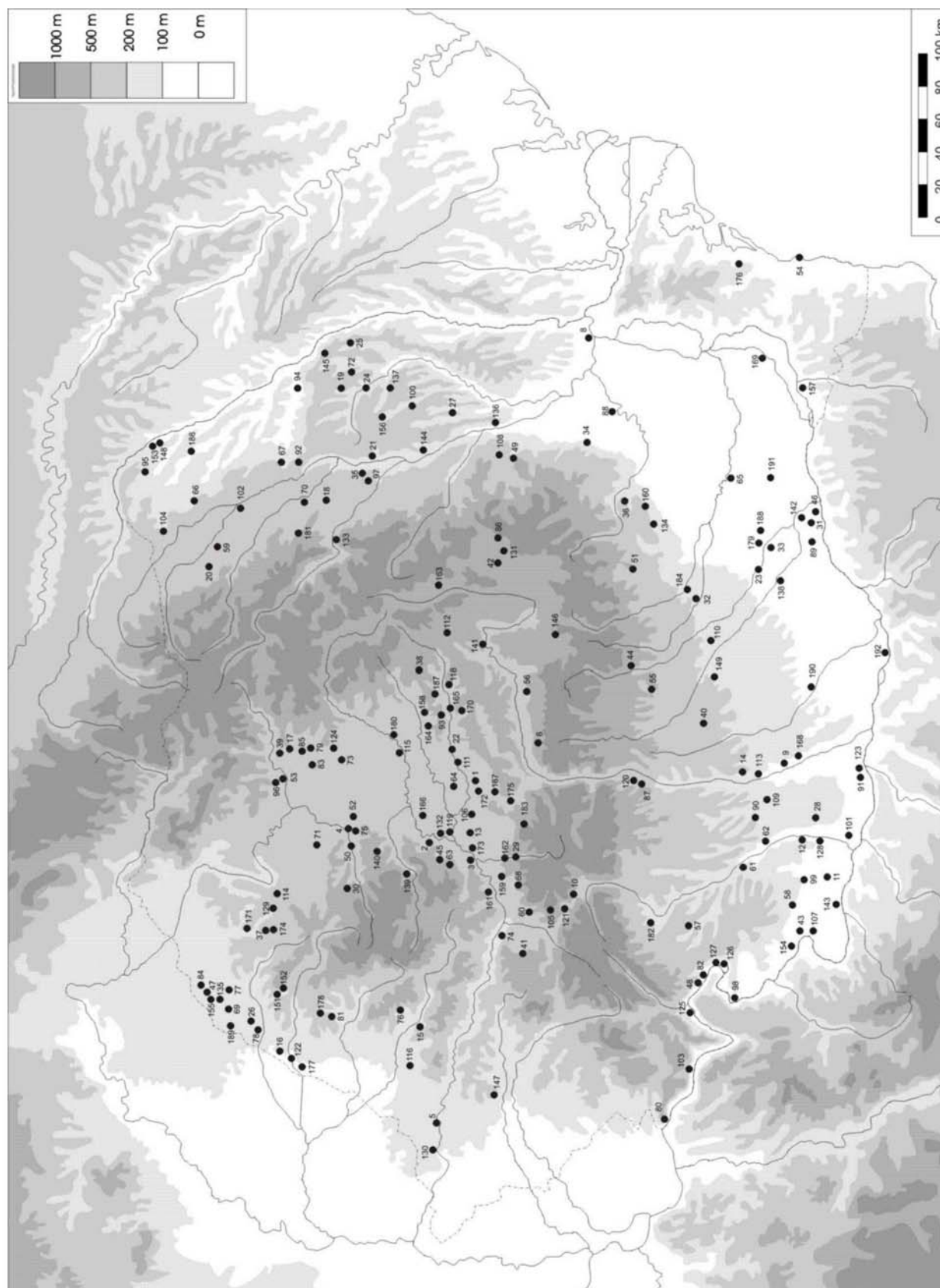


Figure 1

M. Babeş, V. Ursachi, Silvia Teodor, A. Rustoiu.

Traditionally, for Central Europe the material classification of various findings in early, middle and late La Tène phases was done according to the constructive scheme of the fibulae – free bow, attached foot or closed foot - together with other decoration criteria, and different metal [2] items style. It was noted, however, fast enough, that fibulae could not be assigned a decisive chronological value, so the more vague notion of early, middle and late La Tène scheme was introduced. It is obvious that a fibula found in clear stratification conditions represents an important chronological clue, but yet insufficient if it is not sustained by other “parallel series” of objects, as it has been established since the beginning of the last century [3].

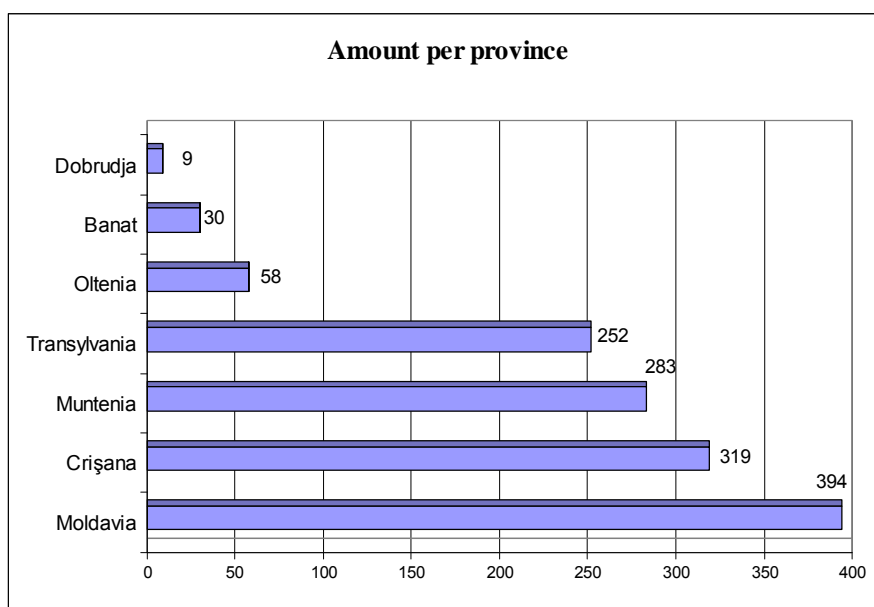


Figure 2

2 La Tène scheme fibulae in Romanian area

In the Romanian research of the finds, included chronologically in the La Tène period, the interest for fibulae was from the very beginning manifested, they being given the value of „powerful force”, first of all in the chronological classification of the finds. These specific items usually enjoyed distinctive chapters or paragraphs in the excavation reports, studies or summaries related to the before mentioned epoch (figure 1). In the overwhelming majority of cases they have been invoked as chronological markers of first-hand, even if sometimes only in an implicit form. Some authors have followed them strictly and closely not only in their own discoveries, but also in the ones

used as relevant analogies over the territory of Romania and over other closer or further geographical areas. However, on many occasions, one can only find simple references, sometimes approximate, related to pieces more or less similar to ones known from anterior findings in the scientific circuit. In itself this is not at all surprising if we take into account the considerable diversity of types and the high number of fibulae found on the Romanian territory and dated centuries back, before or at the beginning of the Christian era. We must emphasize that the total of approximately 1345 fibulae of La Tène scheme that are considered in this presentation has to be looked upon as significant. However, if we were to compare this number recorded for the whole country (gathered from at least 192 finding places)

with the number of fibulae brought to light by some important excavations abroad, there is a discrepancy. In Manchong, for example, by 1993 almost 1400 [4] were published and in the late '70s from Augst and Kaiseraugst over 1800 fibulae [5] were put into scientific circulation (true, many of them not being of La Tène scheme).

3 Geographical distribution and quantitative marks

The La Tène scheme fibulae found on the nowadays Romanian territory vary in quantity

according to different provinces (figure 2). In terms of numbers Moldavia is on the first place, with 394 registered pieces, plus approximately 70 – 80 items discovered in Brad, but remained only mentioned by the author [6]. Thus the total could be of approximately 475 fibulae. Most of them are from the “dava/oppidum type” settlements, which are intensely researched, and from the important Poienişti and Boroseşti cemeteries, from the Poienişti-Lukaševka culture. The fibulae from Crişana (319 pieces), a region smaller than Moldavia, Muntenia and Transylvania, are important especially because of the funerary discoveries belonging to the Celtic type civilization. An impressive number of pieces recovered from Crişana originates from the Dacian treasures belonging to the late La Tène period. The number of brooches found in Transylvania, known in the specific

literature, is of 252, and their majority was found in fortified settlements of the late La Tène period, Celtic-type graves, and also treasures. We must also mention the numerous items found after the exhaustive research from the rich Fântânele necropolis – “Dâmbul Popii”, an approximate of 250 (?) objects, which would put Transylvania on the first place in terms of recovered fibulae (approximately 500). In Muntenia (previously also known as Wallachia), the number of published items together with the unpublished ones from Popești – “Nucet” is of 283, adding to it another approximate 10, mentioned recently in the findings from Pietroasele – “Gruia Dării” [7]. The objects come mostly from settlements, few from the hoards (treasures) and an insignificant number from funerary background. A few pieces are known in Oltenia (previously also known as Little Wallachia) and Banat, while almost absent in Dobruja. If we take into account the items, unknown to me, from the partially destroyed La Tène necropolis from Remetea Mare, the number of pieces is approximately the same. In relation to the situation presented we could conclude that the unequal presence of the La Tène scheme fibulae, in various regions of Romania, depends more on the intensity of terrain research conducted on sites of La Tène period, the state of

zones, with a reduced number of findings. This is noticeable in the Someș basin, in Banat, northern Oltenia, south-western and eastern Muntenia and in Dobruja [8].

Beside the fact that the La Tène scheme fibulae were largely used for the chronology of different findings, they have also been considered a kind of ethnic indicator. In this regard, however, considered as a criterion in isolation, they cannot provide the necessary discrimination. It is true that the La Tène scheme fibulae are generally attributed to the Celtic activity in Median Europe, which also moved towards East.

To believe, however, that the occurrence of some isolated La Tène scheme fibulae, even if numerous, in other archeological environments than those clearly included in the so called La Tène civilization, implies the physical presence of a Celtic origin population which is an unsupported methodological concept.

4 Publication and fibulae condition

This brief overview involves a number of 1345 fibulae, whole, fragmented or highly fragmented, out of which less than 90% is already present in the specialized publications. The rest, approximately 10% are still unknown pieces. Out of this 10% I only had the possibility to access directly the items from Popești. Naturally, therefore, the information gathered over the La Tène scheme fibulae on the Romanian territory is mostly dependent on the results published by other authors. Undoubtedly, given the time difference between research in progress or completed and the moment of results publishing, remains impossible to estimate the number of fibulae that I have not learned about, but, as we all know, the number of findings rises yearly in a consequent and sensible way.

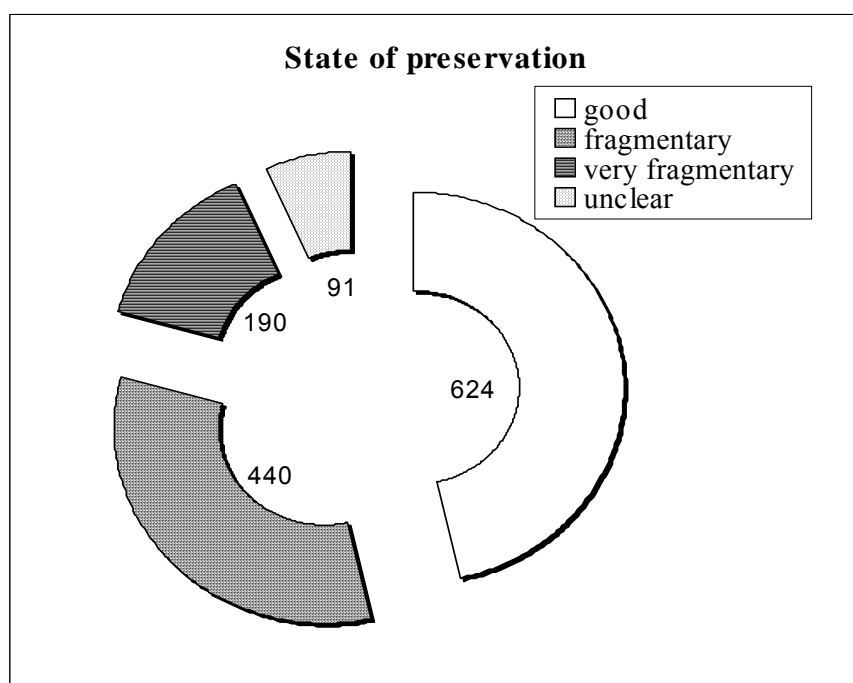


Figure 3

findings publication, and less on the popularity of using fibulae in the referred period. At a closer look over how the La Tène scheme fibulae are spread in our country, we may conclude that there are some so called “white”

The conservation state of the pieces is the one that gives the possibility of cataloguing the La Tène scheme fibulae in Romania (figure 3). Because there is no precise, exact evaluation standard of the conservation state, we considered that those brooches with a perfectly

clear morphology and the majority of their components present can be included in the “good” category. The “fragmented” items miss some of their constructive parts, thus, more often than not, they are difficult to be attributed to a certain type, as for the “highly fragmented” pieces they are almost impossible to include in any object class based on reasonable arguments. Based on the mentioned criteria, we can observe that the number of the “good” pieces is approximately equal to that of the “fragmented” and “highly fragmented” ones (figure 3). As we can observe the material state of the pieces influences directly the identification possibility of the catalogued pieces. In some of the cases it is the description quality, and especially the fibulae illustrations by some authors that help the cataloguing process (figure 4). Sometimes the items presented in the source illustration as being whole cannot be classified, and on the other hand the fragmented fibulae, or to a limit the highly fragmented ones can be classified with certainty. As a conclusion, from the total number (1345 pieces) 72,93% can be considered as certainly classifiable, 17,76% brooches can be considered as probable classifiable, and 9,29% are the unidentifiable ones (probably of La Tène scheme) that cannot be classified or attributed to a specific type (figure 4). In principle, this statistic is largely

words, disregarding the unpublished pieces, the typological statistics should not be affected in a significant way.

Regarding the publications related to fibulae there are more comments and specifications to be made. Often, although it is clear that the authors have thoroughly tried to order and interpret the materials, the way the research results were presented was clearly a disservice for the outcome. The publishing format, to a lesser extent, space saving in printing, especially, sometimes required amputations of both explanatory text and illustration. For this reason, in too many cases, the illustration is practically unusable, so the identification of parts, even whole and well preserved, becomes impossible or remains questionable, this being the source of many of my indecisions or uncertainties.

In other situations, the actual condition of manuscript illustration, submitted by the authors, was of inferior quality or defective. I refer to the submission of incorrect drawings and particularly to the publication of photographs of poor quality or more than poor which became gray spots following printing processes below any minimum requirements. Thus, even a specialist in this category of items is forced to give an approximation of some important elements or details regarding the scheme, form or art of decoration. On the other hand the size of the fibulae is not explicitly presented [9], either in illustrations with a graphic scale, or with a numerical scale. It happens that such information cannot be found in the main text. Therefore only after gathering a large number of pieces of a certain category we can talk about an approximate idea over the dimensions that were not mentioned.

In numerous situations the published material does not make a clear mention of the discovery circumstances, thus another difficulty is encountered in establishing an accurate catalogue of

the La Tène scheme fibulae. There are also situations in which the author's explanations are unintelligible for the reader because although circumstance references are made the situation is not known in its whole, there is no general

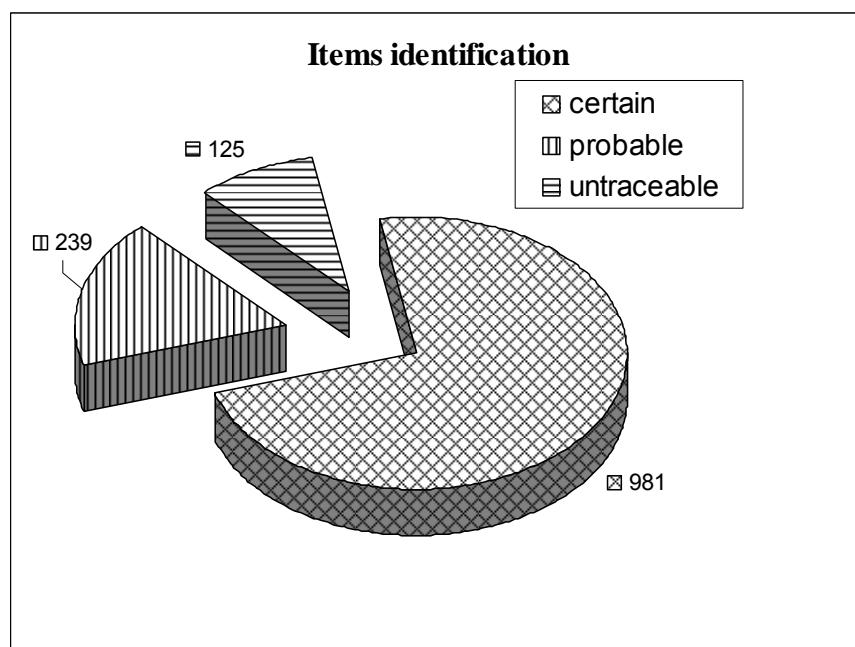


Figure 4

positive in nature and can sufficiently support the number and frequency relationship between different types of fibulae, even if some typological classifications could be debatable or even inappropriate. In other

reference system. It is useless to know that an item was found in a grave, house, pit, level, strata etc. as

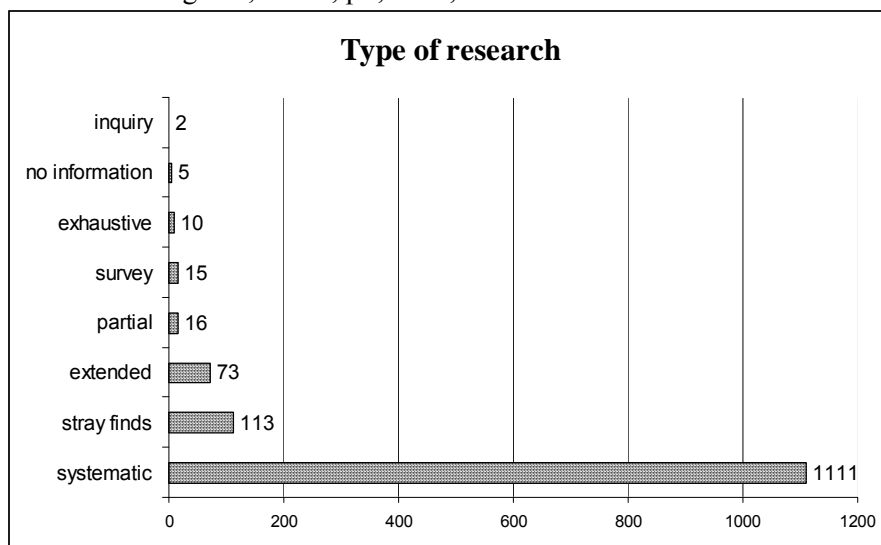


Figure 5

long as nothing important is mentioned about the materials to be associated with it [10]. In such situations, if there are no obvious contradictions, the only way is to take the author's opinion for granted. Unfortunately though, these kind of instances should not be legitimate as an argument of chronological classification of a specific object category.

The way the La Tène scheme fibulae were found in Romania is various (figure 5). Unfortunately many of the findings containing such pieces were made by chance or in vague contexts, sometimes linked with the renewal of certain sites or to significant later urban genesis [11]. If for the old finds, some of them back to the 19th century, there is an explanation through the lack of further terrain research, it is difficult to accept the absence of research when we are talking about findings dated after the Second World War. In fact, in almost all cases when an occasional appearance of a treasure was reported, even if the news spread quickly, there has been no further research done, and more than that not even the exact finding spot is registered. Most of the La Tène scheme fibulae come following extensive research in, especially, settlements and cemeteries. Partial investigations, surveys and field researches contributed only with a small number of specimens (figure 5).

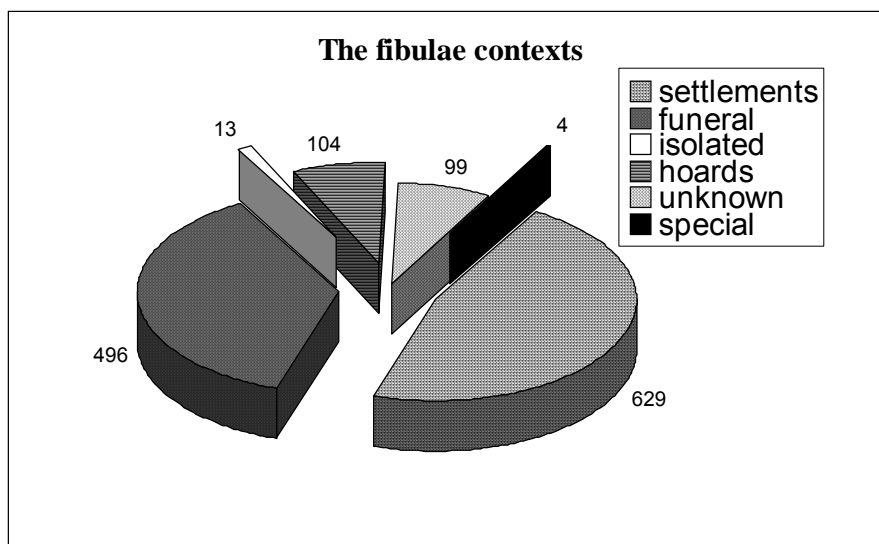


Figure 6

Also, not always, based on published information can be determined with precision what material the fibulae were made of or their conservation state. There are some confusions or doubts about the instances when some pieces are associated with others, especially when it comes to treasures discovered long before.

It is sad to mention that a large number of discoveries known to include important quantities of fibulae have never been published and probably will not see the printed format in the foreseeable future. Some of these findings contain important fibulae sequences in closed contexts (figure 6). They would be a great help in verifying and detailing the typology, chronology, clothing tradition, social status and so on. We have in mind especially the early and middle La Tène fibulae from Romania. At the same time, we know far too little about the results of excavations of “dava/ oppidum type” settlements investigated in Muntenia, Oltenia, Moldavia. In the case of the Ocnița settlement, although many materials were published, the value of the presented conclusions is questionable [12] because the data was inefficiently organized and the stratigraphic situations are also a “novelty”.

Consequently the La Tène scheme fibulae collected here should be regarded as mere museum property, collection objects.

However in the recent years an important number of fibulae from excavations, undertaken in both cemeteries and settlements, has been published. Their number amounts to several hundred, which greatly enriched and completed the information about these artifacts. Even a simple listing could be explicit: Borosești, Brad, Grădiștea, Pietroasele, Pișcolt, Poiana, Poienești and Răcățău. Thus, the typology and chronology of fibulae present in the Poienești-Lukaševka culture, for instance, can currently be considered a problem well explained. At the same time we must acknowledge the importance of articles or synthesis studies which brought a valuable contribution in defining the types, variants and varieties of La Tène scheme fibulae discovered in Romania.

5 Thracian (scheme) fibulae

5.1 Distribution and importance

This category of items (so designated by R. Popov on a geographical [13] criterion, without an ethnic or linguistic [14] connotation) is widely spread in the Central Balkan area, with a major expansion in the Romanian Extra-Carpathian area. A peripheral distribution between the Prut and Dniester, and rarely even east of the latter, towards the steppe area north of the Black Sea is also registered. The North of the Carpathian Mountains [15] also knows a limited number of such items, that penetrated occasionally (figure 7). Similar to the La Tène scheme fibulae, the Thracian scheme fibulae (also known as Thracian-Getian fibulae) have attracted a constant and tireless interest, thus being considered typical guiding fossils of their typical distribution area.

However, the archeological literature specific to this subject is extremely rich and it has reflected, since the inter war period, the permanent effort to accumulate and interpret information that finds itself in a constant growth. Among the many authors who dedicated their work to this subject, in this summary I will limit myself to only a few, the ones who brought the most significant contributions to this issue (considering chronological order of their publications): R. Popov, V. Mikov, R. Vulpe, D. M. Robinson, D. Berciu, A. D. Alexandrescu, V. V. Bazarciuc, M. Domaradzki, V. V. Zirra, D. Măndescu, etc. I do apologies to those not mentioned here because of editorial space reasons.

The research history and analysis of Thracian fibulae, beside often different opinions related to their origin and evolution (initially considered as being a late development of Certosa type fibulae, despite their distribution areas are not secant [16], and consequently possible avatars of the so called *Bügelfibeln mit Nadelhalter und rechteckiger Platte*) [17], distinguishes two contradictory positions in terms of their filiation and chronological evolution.

Thus, usually, the Bulgarian featured literature emphasizes the Thracian fibulae classification particularly in the 5th and 4th century BC [18], as opposed to the Romanian archeological literature that considers a later presence of the fibulae until the 2nd and the 1st century BC [19]. Therefore, at some point, because of the major chronological development, the respective fibulae category, regardless of the typological classification or variants, largely lost its value as a reference point or a chronological indicator.

This situation was largely due to the fact that each analysis of the Thracian fibulae made reference only to a reduced number of items, or to certain distribution areas, or to the sites they originated from. For these reasons, both the context of the finds, together with their chronological relevance, and the typological complexity remained, to a certain extent, unexploited.

5.2 Typological Classifications

There are currently six typological classifications (for which relatively convenient correspondences and equivalents can be established), and at least two of them are of recent date [20]. We can add numerous other typological proposals, rather less operational, either because they are too brief, or, conversely, too detailed, so that these types, or, where appropriate, their variants, cover a too small number of occurrences in relation to the context, which, more often than not, is relatively vague. Most of the morphological observations that led to the typological classifications, were based on the shape and position of the foot of the items taken into consideration, which, generally speaking, proved to be a “comfortable” criterion, with a formal relevance, since the Thracian fibulae with a vertical foot (with or without a terminal button), those with an “S” shaped foot and the ones with a conical foot coexist for quite a long period of time (at least one hundred years). Despite the fact that the bow shape was relatively early taken into consideration [21], it is only recently [22] that it

has been granted a constant and distinctive regard, when it was found that this feature (simple and thin

5.3 Chronological evolution

The same as with the La Tène scheme fibulae, the

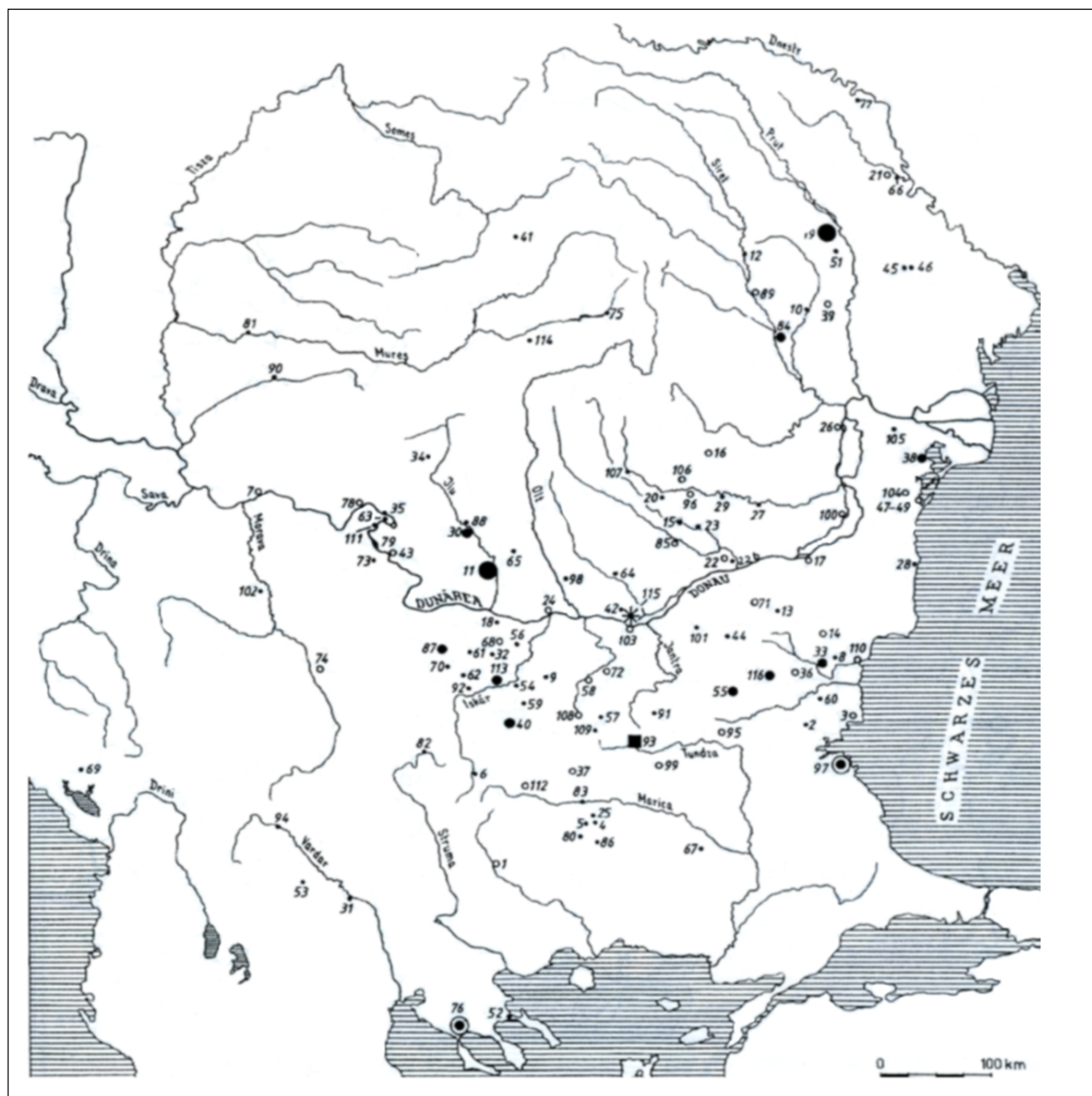


Figure 7: Distribution map of the Thracian fibulae

bow, thickened bow, sometimes decorated, hex or octagonal shaped bow) has an excellent first hand typological relevance, when it is associated with other valuable dating materials, or with the regional chorological distribution. Ultimately, the analytical monitoring of such variables brings the best results for a balanced relationship between the typological classification and the chronological evolution of such items.

Thracian scheme items increase in number each year, through various sites research, especially in their primary area of diffusion, or through trade, or antiquities smuggling. Therefore, a complete catalogue of sites and items cannot claim to be final or complete. From this perspective the problem of studying and interpreting the Thracian fibulae, from different points of view, remains open. On the other hand, taking into account the high number of sites of origin (at least 130) and a substantial quantity of items known following publication (over 600 in any case), we may acknow-

ledge, with no doubt, the existence of a solid information base that allows, at least broadly, appreciations and interpretations with good chances of confirmation in the future.

It may be noted that in today's Bulgaria, generally speaking, the Thracian brooches have an earlier occurrence and evolution (middle or the second half of the 5th - 3rd century BC) as compared to today's Romanian territory. In other words, the Thracian fibulae range from the south of Danube is more complete and balanced in terms of types and variants, as opposed to the ones between the northern part of the Danube and the Carpathian Mountains. In this latter area the Thracian fibulae become current commencing with the mid of the 4th century and remain popular till the middle of the 3rd century BC, when they are not produced or used anymore. Thus, it can be rightly considered that these objects had spread from south to north, having a production and circulation period of approximately 100 years, if we take into account all the types and variants of this category of items. If we look at the precious metal items (because of their, possible, prestige function and their intrinsic value), for example the silver items from the Epureni hoard [23], we may eventually allow a certain time difference between the production moment and the deposit moment. Although the Thracian fibulae have a fairly long time extension, the specific types of this category of items respond to a deeper dynamic, with "life" periods obviously more limited, as the contexts and items' associations indicate in different situations. As a matter of fact, the theory is based on the assumption that a certain type of item was produced each and every year according to the need or taste for that specific artifact. The annual quantities might have varied, but normally when we speak about common objects, the quantity produced would have achieved rapidly and suddenly the maximum "quota". On the other hand, with the change in demand or taste, a production diminution leading to a final production end would have happened in a slower manner, but anyways in a fairly short period of time. This curve is known as type production function [24].

The issue of Thracian brooches final production and circulation horizon has often been a debate reason. The fact that sometimes a "longer" timeline has been proposed (until the 2nd and 1st century BC) it is rather explained through the research history, stratigraphic ambiguous observations or the contextual [25] associations. To my know-

ledge, until now, there is no clear context to indicate, without a doubt, the persistence of the Thracian fibulae in the 2nd century BC, as, rather cautiously, their circulation could be admitted in the second half of the 3rd [26] century BC.

5.4 La Tène scheme fibulae and Thracian scheme fibulae. Dynamics and exclusion

The analysis of how these object categories were distributed leads to the following conclusions (fig. 1, 7): 1. The La Tène scheme fibulae cover, starting with mid and second half of the 4th century BC, the whole Romanian territory and in the first half of the 3rd century they can be found south of the Danube too; 2. The Thracian fibulae, even in the peak time period of their distribution (end of the 4th century and the first half of the 3rd century BC), do not penetrate to the western or the northern side of the Carpathian Mountains, except under some special circumstances (we are referring to approximately 5 isolated items only); 3. Between the two types of fibulae there are no direct associations in closed complexes, with only one hypothetical exception, in T.(=tomb) C₂16 from Zimnicea [27]. 4. Between the two item categories one can notice constituent elements "hybridization" having as a result the so called "hybrid" fibulae [28] (figure 8), which are reduced in number, despite their distribution over a large area to the north and south of the Danube, and have different shapes. Referring to those, there is only one known case of association with two Thracian fibulae, belonging to the late series, in the necropolis of Zimnicea (T. 97) [29]. The mentioned situations could be interpreted as a consequence of two reasons: 1. A reduced appearance at the same time to the south of the Carpathians and the Danube, although these categories of items coexisted for approximately a hundred years in their main distribution areas; 2. A certain "intolerance" between the two cultural areas (Central European and Southeastern European), defined through apprehension and carelessness regarding trade and exchange of fashion items.

Towards the middle of the 3rd century BC the Thracian fibulae seem to fall into "disgrace" for reasons difficult to determine. Anyway is difficult to prove (but tempting to imagine) that this phenomenon was due to an increase of the La Tène [30] type civilization influence, in a time frame when the ample movements towards south-east of the

Celtic population represent a major event starting with the end of the 80's of the same century.

period La Tène II, because "The fibulae are all the same type, and so simple that one cannot differen-

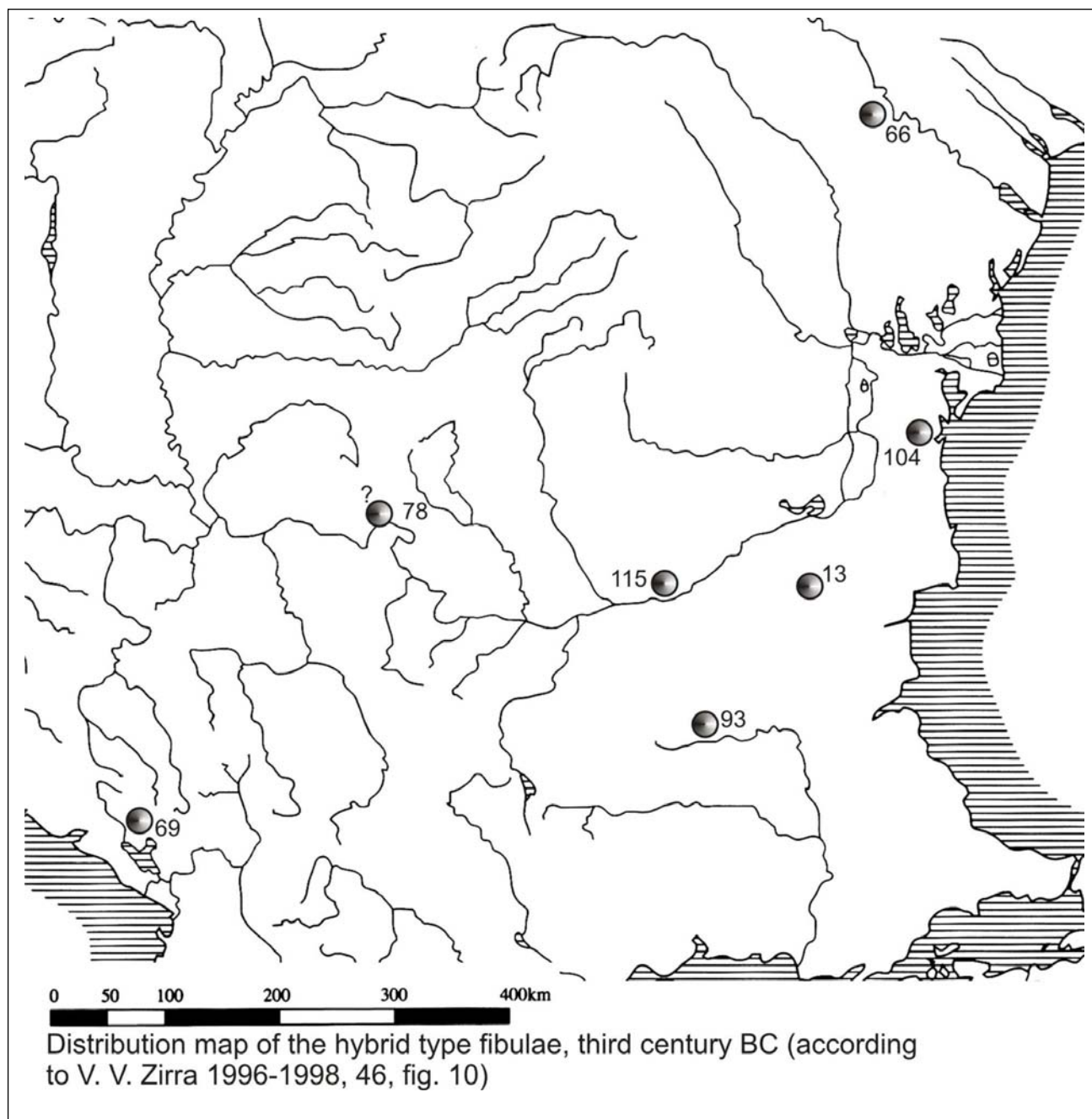


Figure 8

Acknowledgement: This work was supported by CNCISIS –UEFISCSU, project ID_664 PNII – IDEI, code 137/1. 10. 2007.

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- [21] D. Berciu, *op. cit.*, 283-296, and fig. 6.
- [22] V. V. Zirra, *op. cit.*, 29-53; D. Măndescu, *op. cit.*, 71-92.
- [23] G. Severeanu, *Trésor de Huşi (Huşi hoard)*, Bucureştii. Revista Muzeului Municipal, 1936, 17-36.
- [24] The theory chapter of the *BASP for Windows Version 5.4* (I. Scollar and contributors), together with the related bibliography.
- [25] D. Berciu, *op. cit.*, 283-296; D. V. Rosetti, *Săpăturile arheologice de la Snagov (Snagov archaeological excavations)*, Publicaţiile Muzeului Municipiului Bucureşti 2, 1935, 5-52.
- [26] A. D. Alexandrescu, *op. cit.*, Thraco-Dacica N.S. 1, 1976, 131-142; D. Măndescu, *op. cit.*, SCIVA 51, 1-2, 2000, 71-92; both quoted authors consider, without presenting solid arguments, that the specific items were able to „survive” in the 2nd century BC too.
- [27] A. D. Alexandrescu, *La nécropole gète de Zimnicea*, Dacia N.S. 24, 1980, 21, 99 (fig. 48/15). According to the published drawing, the end towards the spring, because of an exterior slight curving (if we are not talking about a secondary deformation) could be a mark for a bilateral type spring specific to the La Tène scheme fibulae (perhaps B₂), V. V. Zirra, *op. cit.*, 47. Even if it was so, the respective item cannot be categorized in more detail from a typological point of view; D. Măndescu, *op. cit.*, 77 has a contradictory opinion, and considers that the detail I make reference to is caused by a deformation, although even the author

of the original publication considers the fibulae as “possible Thracian”.

[28] D. Măndescu, *A Witness of the Fashion's Change in the 3rd C BC at the Lower Danube: The Fibula of Hybrid Type*, in *The Lower Danube in Antiquity, International Archaeological Conference Bulgaria-Tutrakan, 6.-7. 10. 2005* (Sofia 2007), 59-63; V. V. Zirra, *Two Thracian Fibulae*, in *Treasure lost, Treasure regained, part I*, The Heritage Series no. I, „Teohari Antonescu” County Museum of Giurgiu 2009, 82-84.

[29] A. D. Alexandrescu, *op. cit.*, 30.

[30] V. V. Zirra, *Entre l'utile et l'art. Les fibules laténiennes en Roumanie*, *Études Celtiques*, XXVIII, 1991, 451-464.