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Celtic Settlement in North-Western Thrace during the Late Fourth and Third Centuries BC: Some Historical and Archaeological Notes*

North-western Thrace is a specific region of the northern Balkans that was inhabited by various tribal communities of Thracians, Illyrians and Celts who played important roles in the history and culture of south-eastern Europe during the first millennium BC. Geographically, the ancient region of Thrace covers modern north-western Bulgaria and eastern Serbia, while the most powerful tribal community that emerged in the fifth century BC was known as the Triballi who were Thracian people well described in various Greek and Roman historical sources (for a detailed study on the whole region see: Theodossiev 2000). The early Celtic settlement in this part of ancient Thrace has been always a controversial question examined by different scholars since the first decades of the twentieth century. Some recent detailed studies have thrown additional light on the whole problem (Megaw *et al.* 2000; Megaw 2004; Theodossiev 2000: 82-100) and the following paper is offered in honour of Zenon Woźniak, an international scholar of the highest reputation who has been for many years deeply involved in European Iron Age studies and who is the author of a number of seminal studies of the eastern zone of La Tène culture (Woźniak 1974; 1976).

Various historical records and archaeological finds of the early Hellenistic Age provide us with options for considering the presence of Celts in north-western Thrace and their interaction with local tribal communities. The earliest contacts are

evidenced in Arrianus (*Anab.* I 4, 6-8) and Strabo (VII 3, 8) who testify that Celts from the Adriatic coast attended the armistice and alliance agreements concluded between the Triballian king Syrmos and Alexander the Great in 335 BC (see also Bouzek and Guštin in this volume). During the negotiations, which took place in the territory of the Triballi, the Celts affirmed their vows of friendship and hospitality before the Macedonian king and presumably at precisely that time they established first diplomatic contacts with Triballi (for a compilation of the ancient records see: Katsarov 1919; Cunliffe 1997: 79-80; Megaw 2004; Theodossiev 2000: 81-82; see also discussion of the nature of ancient literary sources concerning Celts in: Dobesch 1991; Rankin 1995).

Any reconstruction of contacts and relations, including gifts exchange, between Celts and Triballi during the last decades of the fourth and the very beginning of the third century BC, or, in contrast, supposed military conflicts and invasion, does find some support in the scanty archaeological finds available. Such is the golden Celtic neckring or torc (Fig. 1), unearthed by chance near Gorni Tsibar, a village situated close to the southern bank of the Danube in north-western Bulgaria (Theodossiev 2000: 116, cat. no. 84 with *op. cit.*, fig. 90; cf Wells 1995 for the possible range of methods of distribution of valuable objects). The torc dates to the end of the fourth or beginning of the third century BC and finds good parallels among a number of La Tène B1/B2 neckrings discovered in other parts of Iron Age Europe (Jacobsthal 1969: 170, no. 46; Megaw and Megaw 2001: 119 ill.168; Moscati *et al.* 1991: 712: no. 129; more recently see also: Megaw 2004). It is known that the torc was considered as a sacred object and symbol of high social status among the Celts (Green 1992: 211-212). Unfortunately, as far as the Gorni Tsibar neckring is concerned, there is no reliable information on the find circumstances or its archaeological context. Therefore, it is only speculation to consider that the torc originally formed part of a Celtic burial or ritual deposit and

thus could be related to a presumed ethnic presence of Celts in that region of Thrace. However, such a presence during the late fourth and early third century BC is not supported by any surviving historical record. Since the torc may alternatively come from a Thracian funeral or other ritual context, it is possible to assume that the precious object was a political gift, offered by some Gaulish chieftain to an unknown Triballian aristocrat during the course of negotiations. One may go further and hypothesise that similar contacts accompanied the first expansion of Celtic tribal groups towards the central Balkans during the last decades of the fourth century BC, as well as during their settlement on the western fringes of north-western Thrace, in the Morava river valley, previously controlled by the Illyrian tribe of the Autariatai. Of course, the Gorni Tsibar torc might be also interpreted as booty, related to the victory of Cassander over the Galatae, which took place in the area of the west Balkan range c. 310 or c. 298 BC (Frey, Szabó 1991: 481 who suggest a relationship between the torc and this historical event).

From the first decades of the third century BC the territory of the Triballi became a marginal zone of the Hellenistic world and during the late 280s and 270s BC indigenous tribal communities faced a well-organized Celtic military invasion (on this incursion and the political history of the region see: Katsarov 1919; Polaschek 1937; Mócsy 1966; Gerov 1967; 1969 with historical sources; Danov 1975-1976; Papazoglu 1978: 52-57, 272-278; 1988; Domaradski 1984; Tacheva 1987: 27-48; Hammond 1989: 298-301; Frey, Szabó 1991; Garašanin 1996; Lazarov 1996; Theodossiev 2000: 82-92; Megaw 2004). However, the great Celtic inrush into north-western Thrace was preceded by military pressure on its western periphery and incursions leading towards the central Balkans, incursions that had already begun in the last decades of the fourth century BC, when, c. 313 BC, the Gauls conquered the Illyrian Autariatae and banished part of them. Soon after that conquest, in 310 BC — or possibly 298 BC — the Macedonian general Cassander

defeated the Celts somewhere in the west Balkan range, presumably in the territory of the Triballi as mentioned above. Supposedly at the same time, military detachments of Gauls, led by Cambaules, reached the borders of Thrace but did not have the courage to invade it.

While the gold torc from Gorni Tsibar may not testify with complete certainty to military conflicts or to a Celtic enclave in north-western Thrace during the late fourth or beginning of the third century BC, the conquest of the Autariatae c. 313 BC and Celtic settlement in the Morava river valley are well evidenced with archaeological material. Thus, the investigation of the flat cemetery in the region of Pecine near Kostolac, a town situated in the lower Morava valley and close to the Danube, in north-eastern Serbia, provides a good illustration of the ethnic changes that occurred in the region (Jovanović 1984, 1985, 1991; Theodossiev 2000: 120-121, cat. no. 113 with full bibliography). A number of Celtic cremation and inhumation graves, the earliest dating to the end of the fourth or beginning of the third centuries BC, are situated around the nine earliest graves, presumably belonging to the Autariatae and dated to the second half of the fourth century BC. These are located in the centre of the cemetery (on possible ethnic identification of the earliest burials see: Theodossiev 2000: 40-41). The continuity observable on this burial site clearly indicates that the new Celtic settlers did not annihilate the Autariataec community but that they assimilated with the indigenous population and presumably mixed ethnically with it (Jovanović 1985, 1992). Therefore, it is possible to assume that from the end of the fourth century BC onwards, the Morava River valley and the regions located to the east turned into a Celto-Illyro-Thracian interaction zone (Theodossiev 2000: 98-100).

The major and well-organized Celtic military invasion into Thrace, Macedonia and Greece occurred at the very end of the 280s BC. Using as a base the already conquered territories of the Autariatae in the central Balkans, in 280 BC the

Gauls led by Cerethrius prepared themselves to fight against the Triballi and the remaining Thracians, Brennus and Acichorius against Paeonia, and Bolgios/Bulgius against Macedonia and Illyria (Pausanias X 19, 7). At the end of the same year or in the next one, Bolgius defeated the Macedonian army and killed Ptolemy Ceraunos. In 279 BC, Brennus— possibly not a historical character — began a campaign against Delphi; the Celtic detachments on their way south devastated the Dardani, neighbours to the south-west of the Triballi. At the same time, those Gauls who were left by Brennus to guard their tribal borders, enlisted 3000 horsemen and 15 000 foot-soldiers to form an army which defeated the Triballi and the Getae, who seem unsuccessfully to have tried to push out the invaders (Iustinus XXV 1, 2-3). In the same year, 279 BC, after the complete defeat of the Celts during the campaign against Delphi and Brennus's suicide, some of the surviving Gauls took the way back led by Bathanattus (later the route was named the 'Way of Bathanattus') and in 278 BC part of them, the so-called Scordisci, settled the lands between Sava, Danube and Morava rivers (Polybius I 6, 4; Iustinus XXIV 4, 8, XXXII 3, 6-8; Posidonius frg. 48J; Athenaeus VI 25, p. 234 a-b). The new Scordiscan settlers completely overran the local Autariatae and formed a powerful tribal alliance that played an important rôle, both politically and military, in the north Balkans until the end of the first century BC (Garašanin 1966, 1996; Todorović 1974; Papazoglu 1978; Jovanović, Popović 1991). Also in 279 BC, another part of the Celtic forces, who survived the defeat at Delphi, led by Comontorios established a tribal state in Thrace with its capital called Tylis, presumably located in the region of Byzantium, where another group of Gauls under the leadership of Leonorius and Loutorius had already settled after they had separated from Brennus during the march through Dardania. The Gaulish tribal state established in this way expanded gradually and reached the Balkan range to the north but was destroyed by the Thracians in 213 BC (recent study in: Lazarov

1996). In 277 BC, Antigonus Gonatas defeated the Gaulish army in a great battle near Lysimacheia, close to the Thracian Chersonese. Thus, he ended the period of Celtic invasion and plundering.

The early settlement of the Scordisci on the western periphery of north-western Thrace, that is, in the lands to the east of the Morava, is not well documented in the ancient sources. Strabo (VII 5, 11) provides vague information on the Triballi being conquered by the Autariatae, and one possible interpretation of this text is that both tribal groups were defeated by the newly settled Scordisci in 278 BC (Papazoglu 1978: 53). This interpretation finds some support in Appianus (*Illyr.* 3) who notes that after the Scordisci defeated the Triballi, the latter withdrew beyond the Danube towards the territory of the Getae. Strabo (VII 3, 13) also describes similar movements of the Getae to the south of the Danube, due to the military pressure from the Scythians, Bastarnae and Sauromatae, while on the other hand, the Triballi, threatened by Illyrians (most likely the Scordisci: Papazoglu 1978: 54-55), escaped to the north of Danube. Unfortunately, the ancient records cannot be placed in a reliable chronological framework (Papazoglu 1978: 54). Most likely, these military confrontations occurred in the 270s and 260s BC, not long after the Triballi had been defeated for the first time by the Brennus's Celts in 279 BC, and when the Scordisci led by Bathanattus had already settled between the Morava and Sava rivers (Garašanin 1996). The Triballian tribes, who had escaped across the Danube, presumably inhabited the region immediately to the east of the Morava, where the Little Scordisci were certainly located during the second and first centuries BC. During the second quarter of the third century BC the Triballian tribal community, after it had experienced the effects of the devastating Celtic invasion, certainly lost forever political control of the peripheral western area.

A number of archaeological finds may be interpreted as a proof of the fluid political situation within north-western Thrace due to the Gaulish invasion and the

following conflicts with the newly settled Scordisci. In primary position is the remarkable silver treasure from Rogozen, which most likely was hidden as a result of military threat. If so, the latest vessels, dated to the end of the fourth century and first decades of the third century BC, testify that the hoard was buried in the period of the great Celtic invasion of 280 BC (Theodossiev 2000: 135, cat. no. 196). About eleven separate hoards, consisting of early Hellenistic gold and silver coins, are known from north-western Thrace and presumably most of these were also hidden during the turbulent events of 270s and 260s BC when the Triballian tribes had been defeated by the Gauls and the Scordisci (Theodossiev 2000: 84, 101 and List).

The ancient sources describing Celtic incursions are well supported by other archaeological finds. In 1959, an iron La Tène C1 sword with fragmentary decorated scabbard (Fig. 2a, b) was found in a funerary pyre, during excavation of the Kopanata Mogila tumulus at c. 2 km to the north of Pavolche, a village situated near the town of Vratsa in north-western Bulgaria (Nikolov 1965: 179-181; Theodossiev 2000: 143, cat. no. 248; Megaw *et al.* 2000). The tumulus belongs to a barrow cemetery consisting of six small mounds located close to the South of the Vrats-Mezdra road. Although the decorated sword scabbard has been previously considered in a number of prior publications (Woźniak 1974: 46-95, fig. 9: 6, 190, list II, no. 109), only recently has a detailed study provided a complete analysis of the find and in particular the decorated scabbard. The scabbard design, which most probably is derived from the dragon- or bird-pair motifs, may be compared with a number of decorated scabbards and swords known in Slovenia, Croatia and Transdanubia, a style which spread throughout Iron Age Europe in La Tène B and C; undoubtedly, the Pavolche sword is a Celtic product (Megaw *et al.* 2000; Megaw 2004). Rather than an occasional import or status-enhancing gift or booty belonging to a deceased Triballian warrior, it might be suggested that the Pavolche

sword might be evidence of a Scordiscan intruder buried in the mound some time around 270-200 BC. However, the funerary rite and grave construction — a pyre within a tumulus — evidenced by the Pavolche barrows is entirely typical of the Triballi during the Hellenistic period and is not known among the Scordisci (Theodossiev 2000: 29-31, 44-45); moreover, almost all grave goods found at Pavolche are of Thracian origin. Therefore, having in mind that there is not a single historical record testifying to Celtic settlement in the eastern part of north-western Thrace during the third century BC, and given that all sources describe a period of invasion and conflict, and moreover, that at present there are no excavated graves in the region that can be regarded as typically Celtic (*cf* Theodossiev 2000: 25-48), one may conclude that the Pavolche sword was most likely booty or a gift buried within a Triballian funerary context. Of course, one may not exclude the probability that some Gaulish (that is, Scordiscan) ethnic enclaves existed in the region during the third century BC (*cf* Zirra 1976; Tacheva-Hitova 1978; for Celtic enclaves in north-eastern Thrace: Lazarov 1996). Following from this, any Celts who may have settled among the indigenous Triballi would have been assimilated and adopted Thracian funerary customs. In any case, the Pavolche sword scabbard reflects the complex and often violent interactions and the dynamic relationship between Celts and Thracians in a period of war, invasion and ethnic changes.

Another curious object, which may suggest contacts and interaction between the Scordisci and Triballi, is a small inscribed cult relief (Fig. 3a-c), a chance find most likely from western Bulgaria and currently located in the National Museum of Archaeology, Sofia (Manov 1993; Theodossiev 2000: 58, fig. 155). The carved stone illustrates well the religious beliefs of the Scordisci who obviously worshiped Epona, the tribal ancestor-god and the warrior hero. Since the object comes from no clear archaeological context and lacks exact parallels among Celtic cult reliefs, it is not easy to provide a precise dating for the piece; only the inscription gives some

support for a third century BC date (Manov 1993). The ritual function of the object is also unknown but carved stones displaying various imagery were widely used in Celtic cult practices (Cunliffe 1992; 1997; Green 1986; 1992; 1995: 466-468; Megaw and Megaw 2001; Moscati *et al.* 1991). While the ritual purpose is obscure, the understanding of the figures carved on the Sofia object seems to be relatively clear. On the one side of the relief, there is a mare, which in this particular case might be interpreted as a hippomorphic personification of Epona, the Celtic horse-goddess (Green 1986: 91-94, 173-174; 1992: 90-92; 1995: 479). Epona was known as a deity of fertility and prosperity but she was also associated with beliefs relevant to death and the underworld. The other side of the carved stone shows a man in a fight to the death with an enormous snake. Most probably, this is a representation of the tribal warrior-chieftain and hero, presumably regarded as a mythical ancestor and represented in a moment of heroic confrontation, fighting a chthonic reptile (*cf.* Green 1986: 185-186; 1992: 194-195 on the healing, chthonic, fertility, protection and evil associations of the snake in the Celtic cults). In Irish mythology, the warrior chief Finn mac Cumhaill kills great water snakes, while the Ulster hero Conall Cernach is recorded as overcoming an enormous snake which guards a treasure (Green 1992: 64-65, 98-99, 194-195). On the edge of the Sofia relief, a second snake is depicted together with a male facing to the front contiguous to a short incised inscription – ΣΚΟΡΔΟ (= genitive: ‘belonging to Scordus’). It is beyond any doubt that this is the image of the tribal eponym and ancestor-god Scordus, attested as Scordiscus in the sources (Appianus, *Illyr.* 2). Although the fighting scene between the Scordiscan warrior hero and the snake finds good parallels in later Insular Celtic myths, an alternative reading would be that the imagery was influenced by the Delphic dragon-slaying myth concerning the fight between Apollo and Python. In such a case, it is possible even to assume a Graeco-Celtic religious syncretism and to suggest that the carved cult stone was

produced after the failed Gaulish campaign against Delphi in 279 BC. As discussed above, this event was of crucial importance for the establishment of the Scordiscan tribal community and its later political development. It is interesting that the cult relief is the first monument, which displays the use of Greek script by Scordisci in the Hellenistic period.

A number of historical records of the late second and first centuries BC reinforce the earlier evidence on multilateral interaction and relationship, clearly testifying that the Scordisci inhabited the western regions of north-western Thrace and were there intermingled with Thracians and Illyrians. Ammianus Marcellinus (XXVII 4, 4) mentions that the Scordisci occupied part of Thrace while Strabo (VII 5, 12) specifies that the Great Scordisci lived between the Noaros (present-day Sava or Drava) and the Morava rivers, while the Little Scordisci inhabited lands to the east of the Morava in the neighborhood of the Triballi and Moesi (for the distribution of the Scordisci in the Hellenistic age see: Papazoglu 1978: 354-389). Moreover, both archaeological finds and historical sources testify that during the late Hellenistic period the Little Scordisci became ethnically intermingled with the indigenous Autariatae and Triballian tribes in the Morava valley and further to the east; this led to syncretic ethnic and cultural processes and turned the region into a Celto-Illyro-Thracian interaction zone (Garašanin 1957, 1966; Todorović 1966; Zirra 1976; Jovanović 1992; Theodossiev 2000: 85-92, 98-100; Gerov 1967). The co-existence of different tribes and their ethnic mixing are clearly evidenced by Strabo (VII 3, 2 et 11; VII 5, 1-2), who describes Scordisci crossed with Thracians and Illyrians and writes of Thracians mixed with Celts and Scythians, obviously having in mind north-eastern Thrace and the regions to the north of the Danube. Presumably, it is due to these reasons that other ancient authors, when they describe Celtic ferocity, also identify the Scordisci with the Thracians, (Iulius Florus, *Epitom. de T. Liv.* I 39 et III 4; Rufius Festus IX; Orosius, *Hist. adv. pag.* V 23, 17-19; Iordanes, *Rom.*

219). As discussed above, the Celtic flat cemetery at Kostolac clearly indicates ethnic change and assimilation, which occurred at the end of the fourth century and into the first decades of the third centuries BC, before the region fell under the political control of the Scordisci during the 270s BC. Therefore, it is possible to suppose that the historical sources, describing the localization of the Little Scordisci and the ethnic mixing between Celts, Thracians and Illyrians during the late second and first centuries BC, may reflect earlier events at the time of the great Gaulish invasion, which was to have so strong an impact and to change for ever certain parts of the early Hellenistic world.

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CAPTIONS

Fig. 1 – Golden torc from Gorni Tsibar (after Theodossiev 2000)

Fig. 2 a – Iron scabbard and sword from Pavolche (after Megaw R. et al. 2000)

Fig. 2 b – Decorated front plaque of Pavolche scabbard (after Megaw R. et al. 2000)

Fig. 3 a, b, c – Inscribed cult relief from Western Bulgaria (after Theodossiev 2000)