A LATE ROMAN SPATHA

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In connection with a double-edged spatha found in a late Roman grave at the archaeological site of Hegyeshalom, Holdas-szántók, we examine the possibility of Celtic or Germanic origin of the Late Imperial Pannonian swords. The different parts of the swords are taken individually as a basis for comparison, given the shape of the hilt, blade shoulder, blade length and tip, scabbard and chape. In addition to the Western and Central European territories, we also cover the Eastern, Parthus influence, and also the long swords of the Sarmatian tribes living in the vicinity of Pannonia provide information on the subject of late Roman spathas. It cannot be ignored that during many occasions the Imperium Romanum faced the different weapons and fighting style of the enemies on the battlefield, to which they were forced to adapt in the hope of victory. In determining the origin of swords, it makes difficult that we can only speak of a ‘pure’ Roman type if the weapon is identical in every detail to either the Celtic or the Germanic swords. Complicating the subject further the fact that the ethnicity of swords cannot be determined in all cases. Even if they were acquired as booty or are subject of trade by Barbarians and vice versa by the Romans, they are placed in the typological system based on the location of the archaeological site.

After the sword discussed, it is also important to address the issue of the archaeological context the spatha was found. The deceased buried with the spatha in the Roman cemetery of Hegyeshalom, Holdas-szántók may have been a military veteran, confirmed by the fact that he was buried with his pilum, spatha and paludamentum. His onion-headed fibula suggests that after his dismissal from the military, he also held some sort of position in the community.

Keywords: Pannonia, Late Roman Imperial Period, spatha, germanic double-edged swords.

In the early decades of the last century, both Celtic and Germanic origins were raised in relation to long, straight double-edged swords of the Romans. It is no coincidence that in several European provinces of the Roman Empire the typical weapon of the fusing autochthonous population of late Iron Age Celtic and Germanic origin was the long double-edged sword. In addition to the financial aspects, their usual fighting style may have contributed to the fact that, when enlisted, they could take their weapons with them into the army, regardless of whether the short sword, the gladius was still in use in the Roman infantry in the Early Imperial era.

Question may arise as to whether written sources can shed light on the origins of weapons. Latin sources use different words for sword, the names ferrum, ensis, gladius, spatha, also sica, and even pars pro toto a macro appears. Of these, sica refers to the shape of the sword, while gladius and spatha most often refer to the size of the weapon. Sometimes, however, there are exceptions. In the description of Germania at the end of the 1st c. AD, Tacitus uses the word gladius for the sword of the Germans, adding even the ‘short’ adjective to the northern Germanic tribes. In this work, the author uses the gladius in a general sense to refer to the sword and not to the Roman weapon form. He writes in the same way when describing the invasion of Moesia, when he uses gladius for the swords of both the Roxolans and the Romans, adding that the sword of the Barbarians is praelongus while that of the Romans is levis. This is evidenced by the fact that the Sarmatian sword differs not only in length from the Roman gladius, but also in its use, i.e. similar to the long swords of the Far East, it is also suitable for two-handed fencing technique. It also means a formal difference; their grip is longer than the grips of one-handed swords.

The Roman military leadership was sooner or later forced to adapt to the fighting style of the

2 The word ‘iron’ is also used for the sword in several languages.
3 The point of the weapon (sword, spear).
4 Tacitus Germania 6, 2; 18, 4; 24, 2.
5 Tacitus Germania 44, 2: ‘breves gladii’.
6 Tacitus Historiae 1, 79, 3–4: ‘sed tunc umido die et soluto gelu neque coni neque gladii, quos praelongos utraque manu regunt, usui... Romanus... tevi gladio inernem Sarmatam... comminus fodiach...’ (highlight from us).
Fig. 1. Hegyeshalom. Grave 42 (75). 1–3, 5, 6 – drawing and photos A. Vaday; 4 – photo A. Figler. Scale: a – 1–3; b – 5, 6.
ENEMIES,7 which also meant taking over similar types of weapons. The recurrent Parthian attacks in the East also contributed to the change, as the Roman infantry armed with a gladius on their balteus faced warriors with long swords. Joachim Werner also pointed out the Eastern influence in the armamen to defend Persian tactics and weapons (Werner 1966, 137, 138). Despite the compulsion, the transition was not rapid either, the short sword, gladius, was only replaced by the long sword, the spatha in the Antonine era, which was accompanied by a change in fighting style and tactics.

Due to character limitations, we could only raise here a few necessary thoughts regarding both the origin and the change that was taking place, which is essential in relation to the late Roman spatha analysed below.

THE SPATHA FROM HEGYESHALOM

In 1996, during the construction works of the M15 motorway, András Figler carried out a rescue excavation in an archaeological site called Hegyeshalom, Holdas-szántók (Hungary). Among the 56 graves belonging to the Late Roman Imperial period cemetery, only grave 42 (75) with SW–NE orientation had two relatively intact weapons: a spatha and a pilum. In addition to the typical items of Late Roman costume and grave furniture, nine, 4th c. worn or already completely illegible coins also came to light. The latest of them was an extremely worn coin of Valentinian I. dated between 350 and 378.8

The double-edged iron spatha lay on the left side of the body, parallel to the upper arm, detached, with its point toward the foot. Remains of a rusted iron scabbard are visible on the blade (Fig. 1: 2). The shoulder curves down to the blade collar. The blade here is 5.5 cm wide. The total length of the sword is 93.5 cm, the width of the blade is 5 cm and the length of the tang is 10.3 cm. The heavily rusty blade is only 4.3 cm wide above the chape. The iron scabbard are visible on the blade (Fig. 1: 2). The blade has a damaged point has the form of a deltoid. L: 27.4 cm wide.

The deceased may have been a military veteran, confirmed by the fact that he was buried with his pilum, spatha and paludamentum. His onion-headed fibulas (Fig. 1: 5, 6) suggest that after his dismissal from the military, he also held some sort of position in the community.14

In recent research, the basis of different classifications of Roman swords (Biborski 1978; Biborski/Ilkjær 2006; Miks 2007) is the length of the weapon,
Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the sword with chape from Hegyeshalom and selected typological analogies. 1 – Hegyeshalom (drawing A. Vaday); 2, 3 – Iža (after Rajtár 1994); 4, 7 – Zalaszentgrót (after Bishop 2020; Müller 1976); 5 – detail of the sword from the Portrait of the Four Tetrarchs (drawing A. Vaday); 6 – Altlußheim (after Garscha 1936). Scale: 1–4.
which is complemented by the design of the hilt, the shoulder, the shape of the blade edge (Miks 2009, 136), the point of the blade, as well as the closure of the hilt and the shape of the cross guard. The scabbard of the sword is also characteristic, and even the way the weapon is worn with the suspension parts. Weapons were also classified based on the proportion of the parts.\footnote{These aspects can only be used with intact pieces, but most of the time, due to fragmentation and rusting, it can only be done with greater safety on some of the weapons. Where the edges of the blade gradually taper to the end of the tip, the blade-to-tip ratio cannot be calculated.}

During the evaluation of the sword from Hegyeshalom there was no financial support to apply material analysis, which is also useful by defining Roman swords (Biborski et al. 1982) and the import of weapons (Biborski/Kaczanowski 1989). Moreover, due to the absence of exact parallels, it cannot be fitted into the typological systematization listed above, therefore in the search for parallels we can only rely on the characteristic features of certain parts of swords. It is no coincidence that most of these parallels come from the finds of the Carpathian Basin, an attempt to explain this will be made below.

Of the typological parallels, tangs can be divided into two types: either narrow towards the end or have parallel edges. It is worth comparing the two Antonine-era swords found in the wood-earth camp of Iža (Slovakia), a spatha and a semispatha. One has a total length of 88 cm, of which the tang is 15 cm long, with a rectangular cross-section and parallel edges (Fig. 2: 2; Rajtár 1994, 83, fig. 3: 1). The other sword is 79 cm long, of which the tang is 18 cm, with a square cross-section, gradually 18 cm towards the end of the hilt, which ends in a rivet head (Fig. 2: 3; Rajtár 1994, 85, fig. 3: 2). The 10.3 cm long tang of the sword from Hegyeshalom has a rectangular shape with rounded corners (Fig. 1: 2A; 2: 1). Its shape and cross-section are similar to the tang of the longer spatha in Iža (Fig. 2: 2; Rajtár 1994, 83, fig. 3: 1). The end of the blade also corresponds to this. The angled point of the shorter Iža semispatha on the other hand, is common among gladii. The sword from Cserszegtomaj, Dobogódomb (Hungary) was lost in World War II, the dimensions are unknown, only its photograph remains (Mráč 2010–2013, 55, 56, fig. 8: 14), its tang is similar to that of the semispatha in Iža, although the point of the blade is not angled, but sharply curves. The sword of the auxiliary cavalry, dated to the last quarter of the 1st c., also indicates that the elements used for typology can often be mixed.

The damaged tang of the Budapest, Bécsi út (Hungary) sword was 14 cm long, but according to the type of sword, this could also be parallel-sided, with silver plates bent on the hilt in eight rows. Based on the publication of Margit Nagy, the wooden cover of the hilt could have been 3 cm in diameter (Nagy 2004, 237). The hilt of the sword from Hegyeshalom may have been made of wood, but no wood remains were preserved in the rust on the tang and it had no metal plates. While the spathae from Hegyeshalom and Budapest, Bécsi út had no crossguard, the sword from the grave of Zalaszentgrót (Hungary) was reconstructed with a crossguard in its first publication (Müller 1976, fig. 12: 3). Later it was published without it (Fig. 2: 4; Bishop 2020, 20, without further number).

The heavily corroded sword from Hegyeshalom is 88.5 cm long, and approximately 5 cm wide. The cross-section of the blade thickened towards the middle, so it had no fuller. Its point is not visible due to the rusted chape, but as the blade gradually tapers at the bottom without breaking, the point may have been sharpened in a curved line (Fig. 1: 3).\footnote{Reconstruction of the blade.}

The double-edged long sword from Budapest, Bécsi út remained in fragments. According to Margit Nagy, the total length of the sword on the grave drawing was 105 cm including the chape, but at the time of restoration it was determined to be 95 cm. It could not be decided due to the rust, but according to the author, it is possible that it had a fuller (Nagy 2004, 235, 237).\footnote{The broken part of the sword from grave 6 of the cemetery from Tiszavalk, Kenderföldék (Hungary), has been restored, so its details are now invaluable, but fortunately part of the hilt and blade has remained, where the fuller of the weapon is clearly visible (Garam/Vaday 1990, 182, fig. 11: 12).}

The sword from Zalaszentgrót is 87.5 cm long, 7 cm wide at the rectangular blade collar, with a straight double-edged blade that gradually narrows.

Christian Miks studied the blade length of pugiones, gladii and spathae from 100 BC to around 500 AD, the longest of which was 85 cm (Miks 2007, fig. 1; 2017, fig. 1). The blade of the sword from Hegyeshalom is longer than this, although the chape covers the point of the blade, but it can still be around 88 cm. The shape (width-length) of the blade is close to the narrow Nydam/Straubing type, which has been replaced by the Illerup/Wyhl type dating from the middle of the 3rd c. (Miks 2007, 99–103). The late form of this type is the Ejsbol variant, however, incorporation of the sword from Hegyeshalom into this system is difficult based on its other parts. In the second half of the 4th c., double-edged swords with 5 cm wide blades, similar to those of Hegyeshalom,
are found in the territory of Upper Elbe, Oder and Vistula, and are found in large numbers in the
territory of the Przeworsk-culture (Kokowski 2003,
170–183, fig. 6). It should be noted that most of them
either have crossguard or their blades gradually
narrow towards the point, which makes them dif-
f erent in shape from the straight blade of the spat ha
from Hegyeshalom.18

Later in the 4th c. the proportions of the swords
change. The shoulders of the sword from Hegyes-
shalom run obliquely down into the blade. This can
also be observed in Bronze Age weapons, but also
occurs in the East at the Scythians and later on is
also characteristic by La Tène swords. For Roman
swords, oblique shoulder can also mean the survival
of archaic features, especially in Hispania and Gaul
(Bishop 2020, 5–7). The shoulders of the Hegyes-
halom sword do not run at the same angle down into
the blade and are not of the same length. (Fig. 1: 2B)

Swords with similar shoulders also occur in inhu-
mation burials dated between the end of the 3rd c.
swords with similar shoulders also occur in inhu-
mation burials dated between the end of the 3rd c.
and the first half of the 4th c., e.g. Monceau-le-Neuf,
grave 2, France, Lampertheim, grave III, Germany
and Stockstadt, grave 1, Germany (Schulze-Dörlamm
1985, 510, 511, 514, 516, 517, fig. 2a: 6; 5: 2; 7: 3). Long,
double-edged swords with asymmetrical shoulders
also occur in the graves of the late Sarmatian period
of the Great Hungarian Plain, e.g. in the cemetery of
the Sarmatian army protecting the Roman ramp-
parts, Mezőszemere, Kismari Fenék, the 95 cm long
sword of the grave 38 (Domboróczki 1997, 138, cat. 1,
fig. 94; 95; Vaday/Domboróczki 2001, 18–20, 86) but the
90 cm long sword of the grave 42 (Vaday/Domboróczki
2001, 86, fig. 36: 2), the broken-ended weapon of the
grave 58 (Vaday/Domboróczki 2001, 24–26, fig. 40;
42: 1) and the 87.6 cm long sword of grave 13 of the
Attal-era cemetery of Alattyán, Tulát can also be
listed here (Kovrig 1963, 10, 11, 193–197, pl. XLV: 15: 3;
To continue the description of parts of the sword
from Hegyeshalom, it is 5.5 cm wide at the top of
the blade, and 2–2.5 cm lower already has a width of
6 cm. Question arises, whether it is a matter of
change or rust, or was the scabbard slightly
shorter than the blade. Like at the tang, there was
no wood residue in the rust. It is impossible to
decide whether the scabbard was made of wood
or a thin iron sheet was bent into the wood. The
scabbard of the sword from Budapest, Bécsi út was
assumed to be made of wood (Nagy 2004, 237, note
44). The 78.5 cm long scabbard of the spat ha from
Zalaszentgrót is also made of wood. Based on the
wood remains, it can be well reconstructed that the
scabbard on both sides was 0.4 cm wider than the
blade. According to Robert Müller, ‘the 4.7 and 4.5 cm
wide strip of leather observed at 12.3 and 39.3 cm from
the blade collar is a remnant of a leather band holding
the two parts of the scabbard together’ (Müller 1976, 60).

The chape of the Hegyeshalom sword is oval-
bottomed, jar-like, 1.3 cm high, made of iron, the
upper part of which is covered with a 3 cm wide
bronze plate. In its unrestored state, the rivets are
not visible at the bottom of either the bronze plate
of the chape or the iron terminal cap. On the upper
side of the chape plate, a fine textile was preserved
in the rust.

The chape of the Budapest, Bécsi út sword was
perished, it was rectangular in shape, 6 to 7 cm long
and 5 cm wide, and presumably a silver plate was
be found among the Germans even
before the Hunnic period (Possenti 2011, 440). These
widespread (Iriarte 2006, 83, note 27), simplified,
tube-shaped, straight-bottomed chapes with three
rivets on the bottom according to Michel Feugère,
were innovations in late Roman fabrics responsible
for supplying Roman armament and armor due to
their easy production (Feugère 2002, 247). Based on
Christian Miks’ typology (Miks 2007, 408–411), Oster-

19 Based on Christian Miks’ typology, they are types A809 and A780 (Miks 2007, 408–411).
burken/Kemathen-type and Asiatic-type *spathae* are common with Gundremmingen-type chapes. Based on its occurrence with Asiatic-type sword forms, it is suggested that it could have been manufactured by a workshop in the East or outside the Empire, and in connection with its occurrence with a crossbar also an eastern workshop related to the Hun rule of the Carpathian Basin emerged (Schmauder 2018, 523, 524). Their shape is similar to the chapes of eagle-headed swords depicted on the porphyry Portrait of the Four Tetrarchs (Fig. 2: 5). The bottom of the scabbard on the long double-edged sword in the grave of the German leader of Lébény Magasmart (Hungary) was made of a thin copper plate, the surface was covered with a silver plate divided by ribs (Pusztai 1966, 103, fig. 4: 1). As an exact parallel, a chape plate of a fragmented sword found in Alltlüsheim (Germany) can be cited, where even an iron disc similar to the find from Hegyeshalom remained at the bottom of the chape (Fig. 2: 6; Pusztai 1966, 109, note 19, with former bibliography). The chape plate of the 5th c. Alltlüsheim grave was considered to be of Eastern origin (Garscha 1936, 193, pl. 40: lb–e). The dating of the chape type is between 300 AD and the first half of the 5th c. based on current finds and depictions (Miks 2015, 20; Schmauder 2018, 524).

The characteristic features of some parts of the swords may also indicate different ethnic contexts. In the case of Pannonia, in addition to the ethnic affiliation of the owner of the weapon, his social status, economic status as well as his occupation was assessed as an influencing factor. Nevertheless, weapons do not often occur in Early and Middle Sarmatian burials, which makes comparisons difficult.

The situation will not change later, weapon is also relatively rare in the Late Roman Imperial graves of Pannonia. This is also understandable, as weapons owned by the treasury had to be handed over to the *curator fisci* by the soldiers when they were disharmed. Nevertheless, albeit infrequently, weapons were placed in the graves. Many Barbarians were enlisted in the Roman army, so the deceased with the sword of Hegyeshalom could also be a settled German warrior, or one from the left bank of the Danube who, according to tradition, was buried with a weapon (Feugère 2002, 34, with previous opinions). This would be supported by the fact that in the Lower Elbe-Loire area, only 25 *spathae* are known from the graves of the 4–5th c. (Böhme 1974, 97, note 33), however, in the Rhine-Main region the graves are characterized by offensive weapons during this period (Schulze-Dörlamm 1985, 552).

In Pannonia, the Roman-Barbarian neighbourhood dates back several centuries to the Late Imperial Era, therefore peaceful and wartime events between the two areas could have had an impact on armaments. Like in the Province, there are only a few sword graves in the early and Middle Sarmatian period of the Sarmatian *Barbaricum*. It can also be explained by the fact that there is no metal deposit in the Great Plain, they were forced to import iron, and the supply of weapons was difficult. In the second half of the 4th c., however, in the Prehunnic, then in the Attila era, and later in the 5th c., the situation changed when the role and importance of the military increased due to the war. Armed graves appear at Sarmatian centers, strategic points, river crossings, in border areas and along routes also used by the military.

The appearance of the Huns in Europe forced many tribes to flee. The Barbarians endangered the provinces partly in *Ister* and partly along the *Danuvius*. Rome intended an important role in the Roman entrenchment defending Pannonia as an ‘advanced limes’. In its construction, the Roman soldiers and the Sarmatians of Eastern origin living in the Carpathian Basin at this period worked in an alliance, the latter also taking part in the defence
of the entrenchment. With this in mind, it is also important to draw attention to the chapes in the Barbaricum of the Carpathian Basin. In the cemeteries of the army protecting the entrenchment, the simpler chape of the sword of grave 38 from Mezőszemere, Kismari-Fenék (Vaday/Domboróczki 2001, fig. 29: 4) and the swords of grave 34 from Tiszadob-Sziget (Istvánovits 1993, fig. 16: 4), also refer to the possible eastern connection system regarding the chape.

Within the middle line of the entrenchment — intersecting the former line of the ditch — a group of graves of barbarian military families protecting the entrenchment was found in Mezőszemere, Kismari-Fenék (Hungary). In grave 38, on the left side of the skeleton, between the body and the arm, a 95 cm long, 5 cm wide-bladed sword was laid with a narrow, straight-bottomed, oval-based chape attached to the wooden scabbard with two nails (Vaday/Domboróczki 2001, 20, fig. 27; 29: 1, 4). In the same site, at grave 42, a detached sword with a 77 cm long blade and a 13 cm long hilt (Vaday/Domboróczki 2001, 24, fig. 36: 2), to which a ‘magical bead also belonged’ (Vaday/Domboróczki 2001, 23, 24, fig. 37) was also placed to the left of the body. In grave 58, the sword was placed on the left of the body, partly on his arm, partly on his thigh, its 8 cm long broken tang remained, and only a 39 cm long piece of the blade was preserved (Vaday/Domboróczki 2001, 14–25, fig. 42: 1). Tiszavalk (Hungary) is also located inside the entrenchment. Here in grave 6 a long sword was laid on the left of the dead. The scabbard and hilt cover were made of wood. The hilt of the ritually bent and broken sword is 6 cm long, the length of the blade is 68.7 cm, the width is 5.2 cm (Garam/Vaday 1990, 182, 188, fig. 10: 1; 11: 12). A so-called ‘magical bead’ hung from both the Mezőszemere and the Tiszavalk swords. Outside the Roman entrenchment, already in the Germanic settlement area at Tiszadob Sziget (Hungary), in the grave 34, on the left side of the body a long sword with a fuller and an iron chape was laid, which is more common among the Germans and less common among the Sarmatians (Istvánovits 1993, 110, fig. 16: 4).31

It is also clear from the listed swords that in the Provinces of the Roman Empire the form of weapons was influenced partly by the weapons of the Celtic and Germanic autochthon population, and partly by the weapons of the Germans, Sarmatians and other settled Barbarians living in the neighbourhood provinces. The fighting and fencing techniques of different ethnic groups could also influence the shape and size of swords. By the Late Imperial era, Celtic elements had already been incorporated and became Roman, but Germanic features were constantly present. In addition to these, the Eastern, Persian influence may also be taken into account regarding Late Roman spatha.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY


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30 Damage to the weapon was not a custom among the Romans, but it was a common phenomenon in both late La Tène and Germanic cremation graves.

31 Fig. 16: 1 depicts a central fuller in a section, but on the other side of the very rusty weapon, it is not visible.


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