

AN IRON MASK FROM ALBENI, GORJ COUNTY, ROMANIA. PRELIMINARY NOTE

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REZUMAT: În vara anului 2022, pe raza localității Albeni, județul Gorj, în urma unei investigații făcută cu detectorul de metale, a fost descoperită o mască de fier pentru coif (**fig. 1-4**), cu reprezentare umană. Locul descoperirii se numește "*În coastă*" și este situat în vecinătatea de sud-est a localității, pe versantul unui deal acoperit de pădure. La baza dealului, spre nord, curge un pârâu ce se cheamă, Colnic. Între locul descoperirii și albia pârâului Colnic este o distanță de cca. 150 m (**fig. A**). Cu ocazia verificării locației descoperirii, nu au fost aflate alte artefacte, de unde concluzia că avem de-a face cu o descoperire izolată.

Personajul redat are fața alungită (**fig. 2**), ochii întredeschiși, pomeți proeminenți, gura mică și la fel întredeschisă, nasul drept și puternic, sprâncene conturate și bărbia reliefată. În prezent, se găsește la Muzeul Județean Gorj, inv. 33186 și este deteriorată din cauza procesului de coroziune (**fig. 3**).

Este evidentă apartenența măștii la tipul Kalkriese, denumire consacrată ca urmare a unei descoperiri similare în localitatea cu acest nume. Aceasta și alte descoperiri analoge permit o datare timpurie, poate cândva la începutul secolului al II-lea d.Chr.

CUVINTE-CHEIE: mască de coif, fier, Dacia romană, tipul Kalkriese, secolul al II-lea.

Summary: In the summer of 2022, in the vicinity of the town of Albeni, Gorj county, following an investigation with a metal detector, an iron helmet mask (fig. 1-4) with a human representation was discovered. The place of discovery is called "In coast" and is located in the south-eastern vicinity of the town, on the slope of a hill covered with forest. At the base of the hill, towards the north, flows a stream called Colnic. Between the discovery site and the bed of the Colnic stream is a distance of approx. 150 m (fig. A). Upon checking the location of the discovery, no other artifacts were found, hence the conclusion that we are dealing with an isolated discovery.

The depicted character has an elongated face (fig. 2), half-open eyes, prominent cheekbones, a small and equally half-open mouth, a straight and strong nose, contoured eyebrows and a raised chin. Currently, it is found at the Gorj County Museum, inv. 33186 and is damaged due to the corrosion process (fig. 3).

It is obvious that the mask belongs to the Kalkriese type, a name established as a result of a similar discovery in the locality of that name. This and other similar finds allow an early dating, perhaps sometime at the beginning of the 2nd century AD.

Keywords: helmet mask, iron, Roman Dacia, Kalkriese type, 2nd century.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2022, in the area of Albeni locality, Gorj County, following an investigation with a metal detector, an iron helmet mask (**fig. 1-4**) with a human representation was discovered¹. Prior to the publication of this study, the mask was reported on several social media channels².

The discovery conditions specified by the detector owner are quite brief; thus, the piece would have been found at the *entrance to the village of Albeni, on the left, across the "Colnic" water, approximately 200 m from it, on a wooded slope, at a depth of approximately 25-30 cm*.

We proceeded to verify the location of the discovery, to the directions and together with the one who found the piece³. It is about the point called by the locals "*În coastă*" (= steep slope), located in the south-eastern vicinity of the village, on the slope of a hill covered with forest. At the base of the hill, towards the north, flows a stream called Colnic. Between the discovery site and the bed of the Colnic stream is a distance of approx. 150 m (**fig. A**).

We found no Roman or other archaeological artefacts at the site. The conclusion that we are dealing with an isolated discovery is the only one at this point.



Fig. A. Google-earth capture, with the discovery site of the mask and the course of the Colnic stream.

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¹ The piece was available to us, by courtesy of Mr. Dumitru Hortopan, manager of the County Museum Gorj from Târgu-Jiu, many thanks.

² www.radioinfinit.ro/1030-masca-romana-descoperita-la-albeni; www.gorjexpress.ro/masca-de-parada-din-epoca-romana-descoperita-la-albeni; www.heritagedaily.com/2023/02/roman-parade-mask-discovered-in-romania.

³ Thanks to Mr. Gabriel Betej, which kindly showed us the discovery place.

DESCRIPTION

Iron mask made by casting; anatomical features: elongated face (**fig. 2**), half-open eyes, prominent cheekbones, small and equally half-open mouth, straight and strong nose, contoured eyebrows, raised chin, currently damaged due to the corrosion process (**fig. 3**).

The eyebrows are suggested by prominent, arched and continuous lines, parallel to the lines by which the upper eyelids were also suggested, and the latter also being rendered in relief. The straight and strong nose (**fig. 1**) is provided at the bottom with two nostrils, the diameter of which is approx. 1 cm. An anatomical cavity is found between the lower lip and the chin.



Fig. 1. Lateral view.



Fig. 2. Front view.

All these, along with the sensual lips, betray a young character. It is also worth mentioning that he does not wear a beard. The mask has the normal dimensions of a human face.

The nasal bone has been rendered rather thick in relation to the lower part of the nose, which may seem unusual; initially, I thought that this aspect somehow particularizes the representation; after reviewing other helmet masks from the Roman Empire, I found that most of them have a thick and prominent nasal bone; therefore, it can be appreciated that this aspect was imposed by the need for the stability of the piece, in the sense that the master metallurgist wanted to give more resistance and solidity to the piece.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4. Rear view.

In the middle of the forehead, above the arches of the eyebrows, there is a cavity used to arrange a hinged place, through which the mask was attached to the helmet sliding up and down, becoming in this way, foldable.

The back of the piece is deepened (**fig. 4**), according to the protrusions of the human face (nose, cheekbones and others). Undoubtedly, the piece replicates a human face, after which a mould (probably plaster) was made.

On either side of the closure system, the piece is "cut" horizontally and has several round protrusions (buttons) at the top. These protrusions probably had a certain role in fixing and, respectively, folding the helmet mask or represented simple decorative elements.

We do not in any way exclude the possibility that in antiquity, the mask was plated with a sheet of bronze or silver, which, however, has not been preserved. It may also have been decorated with other motifs or representations.

At the time of studying the piece, its surface was covered with corrosion products, so other finer details could not be observed. It is possible that with the process restorations, other aspects will become visible.

Dimensions: height- 17.5 cm; length- 15.3 cm; width- 9 cm; plate thickness- 2 mm; weight- 486,17 g.

Other dimensions: nose height- 6 cm; the length of the slits that suggest the eyes- 3.5 cm; the length of the slit suggesting the mouth- 3.5 cm; chin length- 3 cm.

Currently, the piece is in the County Museum Gorj, "Alexandru Ștefulescu", with the inventory number- 33186.

COMMENTS

Without a doubt, the mask from Albeni is part of a helmet, as can be deduced from the existence of the fastening system, in the middle of the forehead. From the typological point of view, it belongs to the Kalkriese type⁴.

⁴ Schamper 2015, p. 33.

As it has already been pointed out⁵, such discoveries usually come from the vicinity of forts or from the locations where cavalry units of the Roman army were stationed. The point is that in the area of Albeni locality there are no Roman cavalry units attested. Also, in the Roman auxiliary forts from Bumbesti-Jiu (Bumbesti-Gara, Bumbesti-Vartop and Bumbesti-Plesa) there are no documented horseman troops⁶.

Several archaeological sites, some prehistoric, some Geto-Dacian or Roman, have been identified on the territory of Albeni commune⁷. However, we are not dealing with a Roman fort. Since the possibility that the mask came from a tomb is excluded, then it must have arrived at the place where it was found, under who knows what circumstances. However, we could also take into account the possibility of a ritual deposition⁸, especially since a stream flows nearby. Moreover, the discoverer told us that the mask would have been found face up, its gaze directed towards the direction of the water course.

Due to its elongated shape, our mask from Albeni resembles the one from Vechten⁹ (fig. 5/2), dated to the second half of the 1st century AD.¹⁰ Judging by the shape of the narrow slits that suggest the eyes, they are similar to those on a mask from Nijmegen¹¹, datable to the 2nd century AD.¹²; this observation is not very important, since the shape of the eyes could not be obtained by making a mold, but represents the creation of the master metallurgist.

In most of the cases, the possibility of using such helmets with a mask as part of the equipment used by the Romans on the battlefield was excluded, suggesting their use rather in competitions and sports games¹³, or in events of the type of military parades or ceremonies of various kinds. In order to exclude the use of helmets with a mask during the fight, they would also argue that the slits practiced near the eyes could restrict the fighter's field of vision¹⁴.

And yet, we are today in a position to state without problems that we are dealing with objects used during military confrontations¹⁵. The discovery of such a helmet mask at Kalkriese¹⁶ (**fig. 5/3**), in the area of the Teotoburg Forest, where the disaster of Varus occurred in AD 9, therefore, on a battlefield, proves beyond doubt, the use of masked helmets during combat. We could imagine that if it had been a

⁵ Vlădescu 1981, p. 196; Narloch 2012, p. 377.

⁶ IDR, II, p. 94-98; Marinoiu 2004, p. 89-92.

⁷ Rădoescu, Hortopan 2021, p. 25-26.

⁸ Dziurdzik 2015, p. 966-967.

⁹ Garbsch 1978, Tafel 18/2.

¹⁰ Willems 1992, p. 60.

¹¹ Robinson 1975, p. 116, no. 330.

¹² Willems 1992, p. 60.

¹³ Robinson 1975, p. 107: *cavalry sport helmets*; Bishop, Coulston 2006, p. 103: *'sports' cavalry helmets*.

¹⁴ Benndorf 1878, p. 362.

¹⁵ D'Amato, Sumner 2009, p. 187.

¹⁶ Rost, Wilber-Rost 2010, p. 130 and 132.

parade weapon, the unfortunate possessor of the mask would not have taken it with him in his luggage, which was already quite loaded and bulky.

This assertion is even more valid in the case of the Albeni iron mask, which was cast as a thick plate, which could protect the head against blows inflicted during battles. Even if masked helmets were also used in parades or ceremonies or sports games of the *hippika gymnasia* type (ἵππικὰ γυμνάσια) this fact does not exclude their wearing or use during battles¹⁷.

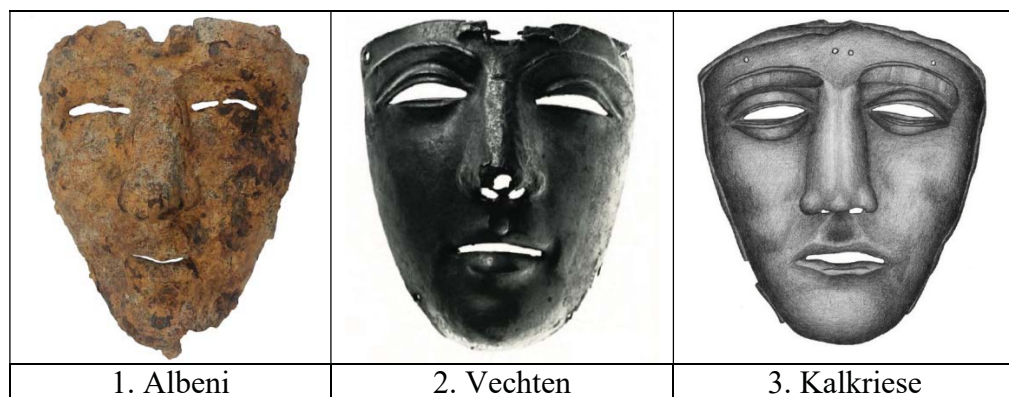


Fig. 5. Helmet masks from Albeni (photo taken by the authors), Vechten (photo after J. Garbsch) and Kalkriese (drawing E. Szewczyk, acc. to K. Narloch, 2012).

Taking into account the fact that the similar pieces from Vechten and Kalkriese (**fig. 5/2-3**), cited above, date from the 1st century AD, then the mask from Albeni cannot be too far from this chronology either. Considering the time of the establishment of the Romans in Dacia, it could be about the beginning of the 2nd century AD, without completely excluding any later date, especially if, for example, the piece will have remained for a longer time in use.

Otherwise, in the area near the locality of Albeni, archaeological discoveries from the Roman period have also been reported. At approx. 6.5 km to the west, in the territory of Bobu village in Scoarța commune, a Roman funerary stela was discovered, with a medallion-shaped representation¹⁸. At approx. 5 km north, within the area of the locality of Ciocadia, a Roman necropolis and a villa rustica were investigated¹⁹. However, the Roman spa resort of Săcelu is much better known²⁰, located approx. 7 km northwest of Albeni. As for the town of Bumbăști-Jiu, which hosts in its perimeter no less than three Roman forts, already mentioned above, it is located approx. 25 km northwest (straight-line measurement, made on a Google-Earth type application).

¹⁷ Vlădescu 1981, p. 195-196.

¹⁸ Toropu 1975, p. 121; Bondoc 2004, p. 7, no. 2.

¹⁹ Marinoiu 2010, p. 5-16.

²⁰ Tudor 1978, p. 227; Petolescu, Gherghe, Calotoiu 1978, p. 33-35.

We stop for the moment with these considerations, to resume the discussion on another occasion.

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