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## A sign of identity, power, and protection. Some remarks on the non-military role of shields in the Przeworsk culture in the Early and Middle Roman Periods

**Abstract:** Our knowledge of shields in Celto-Germanic societies north of the Danube River – especially among people of the Przeworsk culture, the most ‘militarized’ archaeological culture in this part of *Barbaricum* – comes mainly from archaeological sources dated to the beginning of the Roman Period (mainly the first three centuries AD), as well as ancient texts (especially Tacitus’ works). However, due to the incompleteness of material relics (lack of wooden elements, etc.) and difficulties in interpretation of Roman references (as a result of their propaganda character, literary qualities), the sources are highly fragmented. It is therefore crucial to find archaeological analogies from different regions, and other kinds of sources, in order to come to know not only the appearance of barbarians’ shields, but primarily their sociocultural importance. As well, some ethnographic and historical analogies (relating to the Celtic, Anglo-Saxon or Norse cultures of the early medieval period) can be also taken as an explanation of ritual and symbolic functions of shields, and ways in which inhabitants of Central Europe could have used them in their ritualized forms of behaviour during the Roman period. Shields, as it turns out, were intended to signal identity of members of a retinue, family, or clan, to protect a warrior in combat, and to ward off evil (for example, by using them as apotropaic objects in funerary rituals), as well as to emphasize high social position, power and prestige of individuals. Finally, richly decorated shields could have served as valuable goods in ritual gift-exchange.

**Keywords:** shield, weaponry, *Barbaricum*, Przeworsk culture, Roman period, Tacitus, rituals

*To abandon your shield is the basest of crimes;  
nor may a man thus disgraced be present at the sacred rites,  
or enter their council (...)*

Tacitus, *Germania* 6.6

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

There are abundant evidences from the history of barbaric Europe suggesting that shields (Lat. *scuta*; singular: *scutum*) were used not only in combat (Dickinson, Härke 1992, 61–62). In the case of the Przeworsk culture, which is recognized as one of the most ‘militarized’ archaeological

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cultures in the Central European *Barbaricum*, information about various non-military functions of such weapon comes from archaeological records<sup>2</sup>. The acquired knowledge is usually supplemented by ancient references to the weaponry and its usage in ancient Germania. However, both types of sources provide a very incomplete view of culture<sup>3</sup>. Therefore is why it seems necessary to draw ethno-historical analogies (or archaeological finds from different regions, where shields were preserved in better condition), and create theoretical foundations for discussing ritual meanings of shields in Celto-Germanic societies. Issues of power, prestige, and spiritual protection expressed through shields as material objects are indicated occasionally by scholars studying the Przeworsk culture (Andrzejowski 2000, 23–42; Czarnecka 2012, 97–98, 104–105; 2014, 41–43; Czarnecka, Kontny 2009, 29–35; Kontny 2001; 2003a; 2008). All of them suggest that besides strictly chronological and practical-functional analysis<sup>4</sup> of metal artefacts (shield bosses, grips and fittings), the emphasis should be placed on the context of broader interpretation, including the cultural, social and religious backgrounds of using such weapons<sup>5</sup>. This approach is especially important because the societies whose material heritage is manifested as the Przeworsk culture, were characterized of multi-ethnic character and their culture was influenced by many different factors. Theoretically, a distinction between military and non-military functions of weaponry is very difficult to draw in tribal-chieftdom societies including weapon-bearing male members taking an important role (Bazelmans 1999, 4; Wenskus 1992, 311). It should be noted that war and warfare, as expressions of power and superiority, were highly ritualized forms of human activity<sup>6</sup> (Malinowski 1941, 521–524; Bazelmans 1999, 3–5; Burmeister 2009, 46–48, 60–63). Therefore, the ritual significance of the shield as the warrior's primary attribute could be reflected in various habits, customs, and traditions of Germanic peoples, as well as the Celts and tribes of mixed Celto-Germanic ethnicity who occupied barbaric Europe in antiquity and the Migration period (Dickinson, Härke 1992, 61, 72). We can expect that it was manifested in (1) visual forms of identity expression by members of a retinue (Lat. *commitatus*, in German, *Gefolgschaft*), clan or tribe, (2) particular ways of emphasizing the prestige and importance of individuals equipped with arms in funeral contexts, (3) belief in the protective power of defensive arms in some mortuary customs, and (4) ritual gift-giving. Of course, some assumptions will be purely hypothetical, but – on the other hand – very helpful in the process of constructing the entire socio-cultural phenomenon. In this paper we would like to focus on the Przeworsk culture's materials dating back to the first three centuries AD, a period in which the largest amount of arms was deposited in burials north of the Danube River (Godłowski 1992; Kontny 2003a, 118, 133–143)<sup>7</sup>. Some knowledge about non-funeral customs or social habits will be provided mainly by Publius Cornelius Tacitus' works relating to the beginning of the Roman

<sup>2</sup> From the strictly archaeological perspective considering chronological values and military functions of shields in the Przeworsk culture during the pre-Roman and Roman Periods, the most important works include: Jahn 1916; Bohnsack 1938; Zielsing 1989; Godłowski 1992; Bochnak 2005; and Łuczkiwicz 2006 (see also: Kontny 2001, 2003a, 2008; Czarnecka, Kontny 2009).

<sup>3</sup> It is caused by funeral context only, the lack of wooden parts, etc., and finally difficulties in interpreting classical texts (resulting from a matter of propaganda, literary qualities, etc.).

<sup>4</sup> Including interpretation of fighting techniques in particular (Kontny 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Or its equivalents: ceremonial shields or miniatures.

<sup>6</sup> In some sense, it was and still is one of the most ritualized aspects of human experience.

<sup>7</sup> Archaeological evidence from phases B1–B2/C1 (the Early and beginning of the Middle Roman Period) is connected with various phenomena: from the horizon of princely graves in the north and central part of Barbaricum, to the Marcomannic Wars in 167–180 AD and its cultural implications.

era in barbaric Europe. Other important points of reference will be texts composed within the early-medieval Germanic literary tradition<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Distinctive emblem and sign of collective identity

In the study of both practical and symbolic functions of the shield among the Przeworsk culture societies, the basic problem is the incompleteness of data. Generally, the only source of knowledge about weapons possibly owned and used by these peoples is provided by grave goods. Meanwhile, with a few exceptions<sup>9</sup>, the prevalence of cremation rituals was a specific feature of that culture, whereby warrior accessories were ritually destroyed by bending, breaking, or crushing, and then usually burned with the body (Czarnecka, Kontny 2009, 29–30; Kontny 2001, 91)<sup>10</sup>. As a result of reaction to fire and the adverse soil conditions in the Polish Lowlands, wooden parts of shields have not survived. Therefore, information on the ways of painting or decorating the boards are inaccessible for scholars (Kontny 2006, 60–61; 2008, 108, 122). Discovered metal pieces, i.e. shield bosses<sup>11</sup>, grips, rivets, and U-shaped fittings of edges made of precious metals and sometimes richly decorated, only provide knowledge about the parade function of such weaponry and its prestigious significance (Andrzejowski 2000, 32–33). But if we are really intrigued by the role of shields in the system of identification or marking within the retinue, we can look for some information in classical and medieval written sources. What is more, it is possible to find comparative archaeological evidences referring to that period and discovered in other parts of barbaric Europe, in regions where the deceased and their armour were buried unburned and where soil conditions allowed for the preservation of organic materials (Kontny 2008, 122).

The Przeworsk culture, which developed and flourished during the Pre-Roman and Roman times, is generally defined as one of the entities in the central-European *Barbaricum* which were influenced the most by the La Tène culture. It emerged as a result of cultural-settlement changes which took place in the last phases of the La Tène period (i.e. since 200 BC) in territories presently belonging to central and western Poland (Dąbrowska 1988). Then, with the Pomeranian culture societies as the local ethnic background, some influences coming from the Celtic world were adopted (Godłowski 1977, 161–183; 1981, 57–59; 1985, 13–14, 112–157;

<sup>8</sup> Although literary sources taken into consideration are separated in time, the social structure of Germanic societies from ancient to medieval times is quite comparable, and all the texts could be helpful in explaining some archaeological phenomena of the Roman Period. Moreover, the old-Germanic literature gives us an insight into the inner world of these societies, determined by the continuity of centuries-old traditions, whereas classical authors described 'barbaric' tribal habits and customs from their own perspective (Bazelmans 1999, 3, 7).

<sup>9</sup> See: Zagórska-Telega *et al.* 2014, 495.

<sup>10</sup> However, inhumation graves equipped with shields from Szczepkowo-Zalesie (Nidzica District) and Nowa Wieś (Germ. Neudorf, Wrocław District) seems to be particularly problematic. In the case of grave II in Szczepkowo-Zalesie, we have no information of research on organic materials (Odoj 1962, 826), while in the case of grave 158 in Nowa Wieś some wooden elements have probably been incorrectly interpreted as parts of a shield board (Andrzejowski 2000, 31; Pescheck 1939, 349).

<sup>11</sup> Among people of the Przeworsk culture, and other societies inhabiting Central and Northern Europe in antiquity, the common type of shield bosses were circular (round). This category of artefacts was defined as one of the main indicators of archaeological cultures in the mid-European *Barbaricum* (Bochnak 2015; Jahn 1916; Kostrzewski 1919). Some scholars claim that round bosses came from Celtic strip bosses, while others submit that it was a local Germanic invention (Bochnak 2005, 104–105), and still others consider them as the result of influences from the Greek civilisation and the Northern Balkans (Łuczkiwicz 2006, 92–94).

Kaczanowski, Madyda-Legutko 2005, 125–127). In the beginning of the Roman Period people linked with this culture occupied a vast territory between the Oder and the Bug river basins, which stretched from the lowland basin of the Noteć River and Masovia in the north to the Carpathian Foothills in the south (Godłowski 1985, 42–51). It was a time of forming cultural connections with Marcomannic Bohemia, as well as Noricum and Panonia. These links led to the inflow of Roman goods, and the spread of the so-called ‘strong profiling’ style (which developed in the territory of the Roman Empire) which had a major impact on the local manufacture of metal dress accessories, such as brooches and belt fittings (Salač 2016). To some extent, this style influenced the ways of profiling metal shield elements in phase B1 as well, especially ‘baroque-shaped’ grips with decorated double rivet plates<sup>12</sup> in the Przeworsk culture (Godłowski 1985, 41). All these changes in the material culture could have been accompanied by some transformation of Germanic ideology and imagery. We may suppose that non-military roles of barbaric shields reflect some symbolic meanings of this kind of weapon in the Roman world and generally in the classical culture (Kontny 2008, 107). The idea of scutum, as a common metaphor of protection and security, served as an inspiration to create Roman shields/works of art (shields with painted narrative decorations excavated in Dura-Europos, Syria – Fig. 1; e.g. James 2004, 182–183, Figs 106, 107), and was a frequent motif in ancient literature (e.g. the well-known description of the shield of Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad*) and historiography (according to Lactantius, Emperor Constantine was commanded in his vision to “delineate the heavenly sign on the shields of his soldiers” before the battle of Milvian Bridge in October 312; *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 44.5).

Bearing in mind the impact of the Celts on some habits or cultural activities exploiting weapons in societies lived in the Central European Barbaricum, we should quote Diodorus of Sicily’s words recorded in book 5 of his *The Historical Library* (1<sup>st</sup> century BC):

*For armour [Celts] use long shields, as high as a man, which are wrought in a manner peculiar to them, some of them even having the figures of animals embossed on them in bronze, and these are skilfully worked with an eye not only to beauty but also to protection (Bibl. Hist. V.30.2).*

This remark concerns shields used in combat but fitted with particular bronze elements. Practices such as marking shield boards with signs, namely metal appliqué, are also confirmed by artefacts coming from Celtic settlements, dated mainly to the period from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC (Ritchie, Ritchie 1996, 48–49). We cannot exclude different ways of marking shield boards (for example wooden sculptures and leathers) by the Celts and other societies inhabiting barbaric Europe in classical and early-medieval times (Fig. 2). Identity and affiliation could be expressed both through figures or emblems, and appropriately selected colours. Particular references to the role of a shield in the system of collective identification among Germans, including tribes who occupied the central-eastern part of Europe in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, come from the works of the Roman historian Tacitus: *The Germania, Annals and Histories*<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> For example: grips from graves 66 and 79 in Domaradzice, Rawicz District (Kostrzewski 1954, 194, fig. 73.11), grave 47 in Kamięńczyk, site 1, Wyszaków District (Dąbrowska 1997, 12–13, pl. 5.2), grave 8 in Wesółki, site 5, Kalisz District (Kozłowska 1972, 356, fig. 8c).

<sup>13</sup> *The Germania*, written around 98 AD, presents the Romans’ knowledge of tribes settled in the north-central Europe in the middle of the 1st century AD. It is divided into two parts: the first, ethnographic part, illustrates the life and overall habits of ancient Germans, and the second one, choreographic, may be considered as a detailed description of Germanic tribes for their ethnic diversity – from the Rhineland to the eastern borderland of the Suebia. The work was created on the basis of numerous sources, not only details provided by scouts and merchants, but also earlier literature including the *Bellorum Germaniae libri viginti* by Pliny the Elder (who did military service on the Rhine during 46–58 AD), and an anonymous



**Fig. 1.** An example of painted decoration on a shield from the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Reconstructed Roman legionaries' scutum discovered in Dura Europos (Syria) in the 1930s. Photo credit: © Yale University Art Gallery (source: [www.art-gallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/5959](http://www.art-gallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/5959))

neither cuirass<sup>14</sup> nor helmet; even his shield is not strengthened with leather or steel, but is of osiers woven together or of thin and painted board (Ann. II.14). Despite the propagandist dimension of this text where the phrases 'osiers woven' and 'painted boards' contrast with the sophisticated Roman weapons, it is suggested again that a shield, as a kind of 'visual message', could have served to manifest identity, or to signal hostile intentions (Dickinson, Härke 1992, 54; Kontny 2008, 122).

In the context of using identification marks (*signa*) by Germanic warriors, other statements by Tacitus seem to be very meaningful and impressive. With regard to his remarks about preparations for battle during the war between Maroboduus and Arminius (17 AD), scholars conclude that intensive contacts with Romans resulted in some changes within barbarian warfare and war habits (Ziółkowski 1975, 21–31)<sup>15</sup>. The second especially important reference comes from

*The Germania (On the Origin and Situation of the Germanic Peoples)*, despite its literary qualities and propagandistic overtones, provides useful information about peoples who settled the area between the Oder and Vistula Rivers in antiquity (Kolendo 2015, 19–24; Kolendo, Płóciennik 2015, 209–217). Of course, some of Tacitus' comments in the first (ethnographic and general) part of the work concerned tribes located close to the Rhine frontier, while others described the inhabitants of Suebia. However, as we can suppose, some features of the Germanic culture in Europe at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD were common to various communities (Kolendo 2015, 19).

*There is no display about their equipment: their shields alone are marked with very choice colours (Germ. 6.6)*, writes Tacitus in the first chapters of *The Germania*. This quote evokes the earlier reference to Celtic shields, which were decorated – as the Greek historian Diodorus wrote – in a peculiar, if we may say so, 'barbaric' way. In *The Annals*, describing the history of the Empire between 14 and 68 AD, Tacitus conveys the following speech by Germanicus to his soldiers: *The German has*

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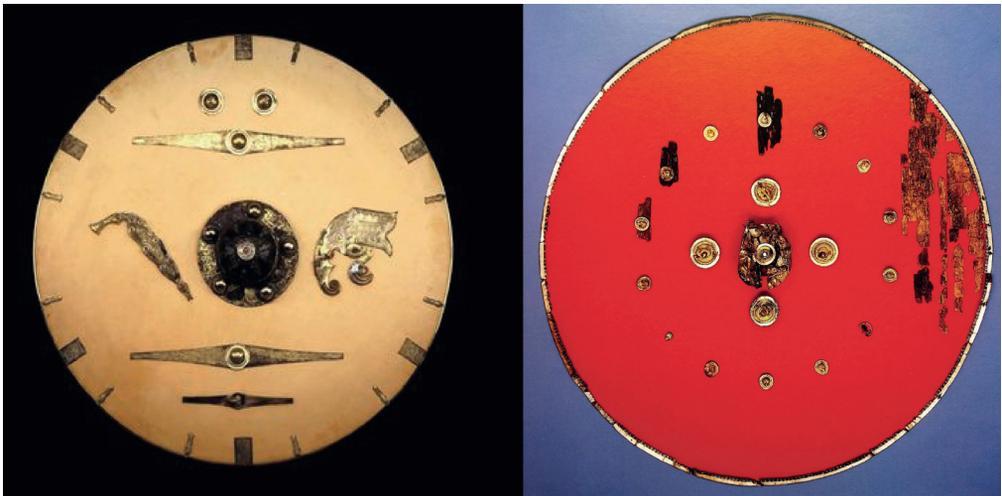
text of the *Descriptio Suebiae*, written under the reign of Domitian at the end of the 1st century. The second source was a description of the Suebia based on the message given by Masynos the King of Semnons and Ganna the Prophet, who arrived in 91 or 92 AD (Kolendo 2015, 24–44).

<sup>14</sup> This means 'armour'.

<sup>15</sup> (...) *The armies were drawn up, with equal confidence on both sides, and there were not those desultory attacks or irregular bands, formerly so common with the Germans. Prolonged warfare against us had accustomed them to keep close to their standards, to have the support of reserves, and to take the word of command from their generals (Ann. II.45.2).*



**Fig. 2.** Pictures of Early Roman Period barbarian shields. 2a. Dacian warriors with decorated shields. The Column of Trajan, Rome – The First Dacian War, scene XXIV. Photo by R. B. Urlich; 2b. Representation of a Germanic shield. The Column of Marcus Aurelius, Rome – scene LXXVII; 2c. Germanic warriors with shields. The Column of Marcus Aurelius, Rome – scene LX (sources: 2a. [www.trajans-column.org/?page\\_id=107](http://www.trajans-column.org/?page_id=107); 2b. Kontny 2008, Fig. 12; 2c. Kontny 2008, Fig. 6)



**Fig. 3.** 3a. Reconstruction of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Saxon circular shield from Sutton Hoo. Photo credit: © The Sutton Hoo Society. All rights reserved; 3b. Reconstruction of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Scandinavian shield from Illerup. Photo by P. Dehlhom (sources: 3a. [www.suttonhoo.org](http://www.suttonhoo.org); 3b. Ilkjær 2007, p. 103)

*The Histories* and relates the Batavian rebellion against the Romans in 69–70 AD. Although it concerns tribes which occupied *Germania Inferior*, we can treat this observation as essential:

(...) *Here were the standards of the veteran cohorts; there the images of wild beasts, brought out of the woods and sacred groves, under the various forms which each tribe is used to follow*

into battle, and these mingled emblems of civil and of foreign warfare utterly confounded the besieged (Hist. IV.22).

Considering the role of a shield (beside a spear) as the primary equipment of Germanic warriors, it is possible that some marks or signs were exposed on shield boards in order to identify with other members of a retinue, or maybe also with the ancestors of a family/clan – somewhat similarly to the coat-of-arms shields of medieval chivalry (Pastoreau 1993). Regarding barbaric Europe, once more, a very good example is the shield discovered in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century royal burial at Sutton Hoo (Britain). Although there were no traces of dyes on the planks, the board was covered by e.g. an iron ‘east-Scandinavian’ boss and gold and bronze plaques as animal-shaped emblems: the bird and the flying dragon (Fig. 3a; Bruce-Mitford 1978, 55–65; Dickinson, Härke 1994, 54).

Referring to painted shields, another remark by Tacitus should be recalled here. In his description of the Suebian realm, the Roman historian mentions the Lugii, a large tribal union of the five most important civitates: the Harii, Helveconae, Manimi, Helisii, and Nahanarvali. According to Tacitus, people of the Harii would paint their bodies and shields in black:

*The Harii, besides being superior in strength to the tribes just enumerated, savage as they are, make the most of their natural ferocity by the help of art and opportunity. Their shields are black, their bodies dyed. They choose dark nights for battle, and, by the dread and gloomy aspect of their death-like host, strike terror into the foe, who can never confront their strange and almost infernal appearance. For in all battles it is the eye which is first vanquished (Germ. 43.12–14).*

This remark leads us back to the quoted remarks from the *Annals* and *Histories*, because all of them suggest that painting shields could have a certain, unfortunately unknown, symbolic dimension. There are different interpretations of the text about the Harii, as stressed by Jerzy Kolendo. One of these indicates the purpose of Tacitus’ remark was to highlight the infernal character of the Harii; surprisingly, it makes them comparable to the mythical Wild Hunt, an army of Odin’s warriors (*berserks*) (Kolendo, *Plóciennik* 2015, 215; Wade 2016, 24–28). Another way is to connect the Harii’s description with some kind of collective organisation, including the retinue institution – typical for Germans and well-confirmed by classical and medieval sources (Kolendo, *Plóciennik* 2015, 167; Kontny 2008, 119). However, it could also relate to a secret society created at the margin of tribal organization, in which young men were probably invoking the war magic for achieving invulnerability (Wade 2016, 29)<sup>16</sup>.

In the Przeworsk culture, as mentioned above, wooden elements of shields (or perhaps whole items if they were manufactured from organic materials only; Kontny 2008, 122) have not survived. Even if a shield was not burnt with the body for unknown reasons (instead having been manually destroyed and torn to pieces, like the parade shield from grave 93 in Czerny, Piaseczno District; Czarnecka 2014, 42), none wooden parts have been preserved due to adverse soil conditions. The situation is different in Danish waterlogged sites where weapons were deposited in moors as votive offerings during the Roman Period (e.g. Illerup Ådal, Thorsbjerg<sup>17</sup>). These artefacts also suggest how parade shields could have looked at that time in these regions. Thanks to the presence of traces of crimson dyes and numerous metal fittings on preserved wooden planks, the circular shield of Illerup Ådal, dated back to the turn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, was reconstructed with details (Carnap-Bornheim, Ilkjær 1996, 284; Ilkjær 2006;

<sup>16</sup> More about the retinue (*comitatus*) and secret societies in the following paragraphs (rituals of wartime).

<sup>17</sup> The shield from the Thorsberg bog is completely preserved (Fig. 4), but it does not provide any evidence of paintings (Raddatz 1987, Abb. 21–2, Taf. 84–5).

Kontny 2008, 126). Decorative bosses on the board represented the highest (one of three) level of hierarchy in the army; this means that every shield from Illerup served as a visual manifestation of the position of chief (Fig. 3b). The shield from the ‘princely’ inhumation grave discovered in Mušov, in the south Moravian wetlands (dated to the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, after the Marcomannic Wars), was quite similar. Its surface and edges were originally ornamented by silver- and gold-plated fittings, while the boss was silver plated (Peška, Tejral 2002, 97–126). Thanks to the well-preserved burial equipment, including planks and traces of paint on the wood, it was also possible to determine the colour of the board.

Interestingly, both finds from Illerup and Mušov indicate the usage of different shades of red dyes. The red colour may have indicated the rank of warriors; indeed, spectacularly decorated specimens painted in clear and powerful colours probably had a parade function. For example, the board of the shield found in a ‘princely’ grave at Gommern (Saxony Anhalt in Germany, 3<sup>rd</sup> century) was painted with two valuable dyes: Egyptian-blue and vermilion (Becker 2010). Apart from the problem of power and rank, a red-painted shield also signalled hostile intentions (*Eiríks saga rauða*, Chapter 11; *Egil’s saga*, Chapter 48), perhaps somewhat like the red hair of Civilis, the leader of the Batavians, in Tacitus’ reference (*Hist.* IV.61). A red shield is also mentioned in the *Waltharius* poem in the 10<sup>th</sup> century (*Walth.* 781–804; Dickinson, Härke 1992, 54). According to the Norwegian laws (*Gulaping* and *Frostapin*), the front of a board was to be painted red and white, which is confirmed by archaeological finds from Trelleborg in Sweden (10<sup>th</sup> century). On the other hand, black and yellow shields were found on the Vikingsè Gokstad ship in Norway (Nicolaysen 1882, 33–34, 63). *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon epic poem composed in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and written down about 1000 AD, describes the colours of Anglo-Saxon shields as being ‘polished’ and ‘yellow’ (*Beow.* 232, 437–438, 1243–1244, 2620; Underwood 1999, 79). Similarly, classical sources declare British shields as ‘lime-white’ boards (Dickinson, Härke 1992, 54). Some remarks about painting shields in *Barbaricum* are known also from older texts. The Greek biographer Plutarch, for instance, in the *Life of Caius Marius* described the shields of the Cimbri tribes in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century as ‘white’ (*Mar.* 25).

In general, there is a lack of archaeological evidence for painted shields belonging to warriors of a lower social status during the Roman Period in continental Europe. We know nothing about colours used by shield-bearers in the Przeworsk culture society, except the enigmatic remark concerning the Harii. Generally, it is quite improper to take the quoted Tacitus reference to their black shields literally, although surely it cannot be excluded. After all, we know very little about the meanings ascribed to colours among barbaric societies; in various cultures red or black can have very numerous and sometimes conflicting connotations. Nevertheless, in the view of all the examples mentioned above, it is possible that warriors (or manufacturers) from the Przeworsk culture would also have painted shield boards with natural dyes such as haemate or charcoal (Orzechowski 2013, 62–63, 65).

### 3. Rituals of wartime: shields as marks of power, prestige, and glory

The problem of ritual usage of shields is strictly connected with some traditional social norms which determined models of behaviours and habits within Germanic societies. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Roman sources described a shield as a mark of prestige, glory, and specific social empowerment, which were so important in the development of warrior identity (Kontny 2003a, 121). Following Tacitus, there was a strong correlation between being a good warrior and having full political rights. Roman writer also emphasises how the act of abandoning a shield meant a warrior’s utmost disgrace and social exclusion (Kolendo 2015, 118):

[t]o abandon your shield is the basest of crimes; nor may a man thus disgraced be present at the sacred rites, or enter their council; many, indeed, after escaping from battle, have ended their infamy with the halter (*Germ.* 6.6).

In comparison, Frankish laws specified some penalties for losing shields in battle (Pfannkuche 1908, 22; Dickinson, Härke 1992, 61–62). A warrior without a shield was supposed to be a reckless madman, so one was not expected to attack him (Speidel 2002, 278). The role of the shield in a fair fight is mentioned, for example, in the Icelanders' *Kormáks saga*; in Chapter 10 we can read a description of *Holmgang* – a ritual combat 'for three shields' which ended after losing the last shield.

In early Germanic societies, the shield was treated as a symbol of adulthood or social maturity. As historian Jerzy Kolendo claims, the public act of bestowing a shield and spear (*framea*) was a key stage of initiation ritual for young men (Kolendo 2015, 124; Dickinson, Härke 1992, 69). Equipped with some arms, they acquired rights or privileges, and became not only weapon-bearing members of the retinue, but also full citizens (Much 1967, 221–224):

*They transact no public or private business without being armed. It is not, however, usual for anyone to wear arms till the state has recognized his power to use them. Then in the presence of the council one of the chiefs, or the young man's father, or some kinsman, equips him with a shield and a spear. These arms are what the 'toga' is with us, the first honour with which youth is invested. Up to this time he is regarded as a member of a household, afterwards as a member of the commonwealth* (*Germ.* 13.1–3).

The Danish archaeologist Anne Kristensen, regarding this reference, highlights the problem of hierarchy inside a retinue in which the youngest members (with little experience) possessed only a shield and a spear as the basic set of weapons (Kristensen 1983, 44, 50). This explains to some extent the mechanism of social advancement and stratification within the *commitatus*. As Tacitus often stressed (*Germ.* 6; 11; 13; 22), a weapon-bearing warrior had an essential dignity, while an unarmed warrior lost his social rank, importance, honour and prestige. The institution of retinue in the Germanic world was probably one of the primary social units and it played several functions: basic/military, organizational, economic, and ideological (Kontny 2003b, 253; Łowmiański 1970, 166; Wenskus 1961, 347).

Moreover, Tacitus' remark about the 'official' ceremony of initiation (*Germ.* 13) can be linked with the so-called secret initiation of Germanic youths. As stated in the previous part of this paper, the phenomenon of secret societies is one of many possible models of interpretation of the 'black' Harii tribe (*Germ.* 43.12–14). As some scholars suggest, Tacitus described groups of young men (*Germ. Männerbünde*; Weiser 1927) who under the aegis of the elders painted their bodies and shields to participate in night training, which prepared them for the 'official' ritual of passage (Kolendo 2015, 167; Szejter 2015, 218–219; Turner 1969, 163). Black shields and painted bodies could have served as symbolic attributes of adepts, who were separated from the community for that time (see: the *pre-liminal* or *separation* phase in the theory of *rite de passage*; van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969). Within many war-oriented societies, sets of beliefs and behaviours relating to warfare would imply different ritual actions, carried out especially during adolescence and connected with ancient ecstatic warrior traditions (Eliade 1954, 66–72; Wade 2016, 21–38). This included inhuman appearance (*cynocephalic* features like a dog's or wolf's head), activities such as wild gestures or following animals (chewing shields, roaring, biting one's shield – e.g. *Egil's saga*, Chapter 64; Fig. 5) which could have evolved into war cries or battle songs (Klausner 1993, 255–256; Kolendo, Płociennik 2015, 215; Speidel 2002, 278). Both classical sources and early-medieval sagas collecting the Old Norse anonymous epic poems, mention the custom of singing to one's shield before a fight. As stressed by Livy in

the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, Celtic warriors would sing, dance, and *shake their shields in the way their fathers did before them*, to provoke their opponents (*Hist. Rom.* 38.17). Relating to Germans, however, Tacitus wrote: *They aim chiefly at a harsh note and a confused roar, putting their shields to their mouth, so that, by reverberation, it may swell into a fuller and deeper sound* (*Germ.* 3.5). In the 9<sup>th</sup>-century poem *Hávamál* from *The Poetic Edda* there is a reference to a quite similar practice of singing a spell-song to one's shield in order to ensure self-protection and prevent wounds<sup>18</sup>. Overall, the meaning of the shield as a powerful or prestigious item in Germanic rituals of wartime was particular, and it is well-confirmed by some archaeological finds from barbaric Europe as well (e.g. Speidel 2002, 265, 275), including the territory of the Przeworsk culture.

The Roman Iron Age in the central European *Barbaricum* is marked by several horizons of richly furnished burials. Let us concentrate on the horizon of early Roman 'princely' graves with-in phases B1–B2/C1. Despite Rolf Hachmann's definition assuming the absence of weaponry as their distinctive feature (Hachmann 1956, 17), it is possible to classify two different types of elite burials: inhumation and weapon-less (*Lübsow* type), as well as cremation burials with some 'parade' arms (*Hagenow* type) (Schuster 2010; 2014, 30; von Voß 2005, 2014, 19–59). In certain regions, particularly in southern Scandinavia and the Elbe basin, graves of the military elite were well-furnished with numerous Roman imports and prestigious outfits (i.e. shields, spurs, brooches) indicating the rank of the deceased (Weski 1989, 198–199). For example, elements of parade shields are known from the eastern part of Bohemia, among other artefacts linked to the Przeworsk culture (Jílek, 2016, 181; Jílek, Horník 2017, 77–78). However, in the Oder and Vistula basins princely graves full of luxurious items accompanied by weapons are quite rare for this period, and they should be treated rather as evidence of interregional connections among Germanic elites. It is therefore appropriate to consider the social significance of shields in the Przeworsk culture differently than in the western and northern regions of *Barbaricum* (Kontny 2003a, 123). This remark concerns, among others, graves excavated in Sandomierz-Krakówka (Wilkoński 1938; Kokowski, Ścibior 1990), Witaszewice, Łęczycza District (Kaszewska 1971) and Strobin, Wieluń District (Abramek 1984)<sup>19</sup>. Apart from these, there are some exceptional burials in which weapons are almost the only 'elite' accessories. Among them are parade shields, which can be interpreted as signs of power, wealth, and higher social status (Czarnecka 2012, 2014; Skowron 2007).

It can be presumed that the shield could have played a crucial role in many ritual activities including funeral customs, by fixing and preserving the social order and interrelations, such as those between a leader and followers (Kietlińska 1963, 30–31). An example can be the parade shield from cremation grave 93 discovered in the Czersk cemetery in Piaseczno District, dated to phase B2. As Katarzyna Czarnecka states, the boss, the grip and pieces of shield fittings were made from three different metals: silver, bronze, and iron. It is highly intriguing that the shield was

<sup>18</sup> *An eleventh [song] I know, if needs I must lead  
To the fight my long-loved friends;  
I sing in the shields, and in strength they go  
Whole to the field of fight,  
Whole from the field of fight  
And whole they come thence home.  
(Háv. 157; Bellows 1936).*

<sup>19</sup> Another local example of an early-Roman cremation burial with imported vessels and weapons is grave 1 in Domaradzice dated to phase B1 (Kostrzewski 1954, 155–159, Figs 3–4).

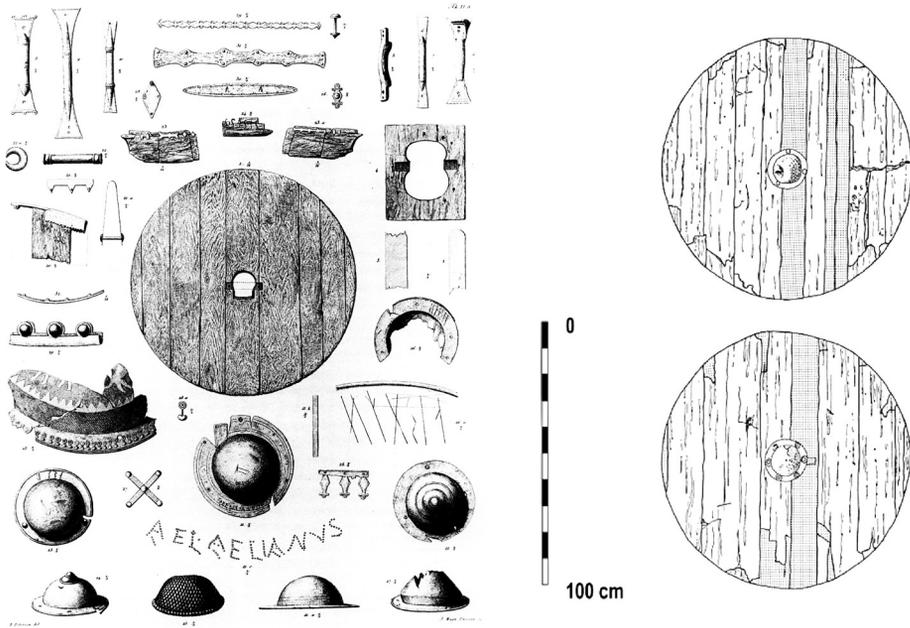
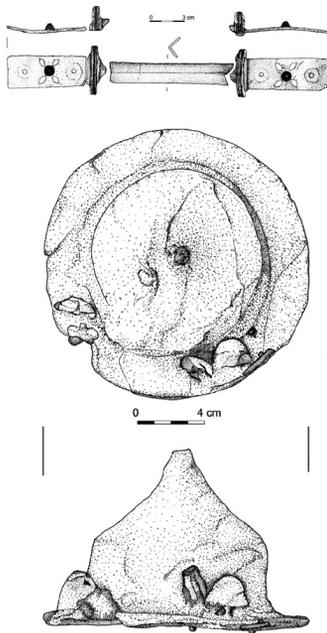


Fig. 4. Late Roman Period circular Scandinavian shield components and fittings from Thorsberg bog deposit (source: 4a. Dickinson, Härke 1992, Fig. 27; 4b. Kontny 2008, Fig. 14)



Fig. 5. Berserkers, ca. 1150–1200. Scandinavian chess pieces made from ivory. Found on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, 1831. Photo credit: © The British Museum. All rights reserved (source: <http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2011/the-game-of-kings-medieval-ivory-chessmen-from-the-isle-of-lewis/exhibition-blog/game-of-kings/blog/maddens-moves>)



**Fig. 6.** Shield components (grip and boss) from Czersk, Piaseczno District, gr. 93 (source: Czarnecka 2014, Figs 5, 9)

probably not burnt in the fire, but destroyed (broken apart?) manually and deposited in the grave in this form (Czarnecka 2012, 99). It follows from the description that the boss served as a container for fragments of U-shaped edge fittings, rivets, and burnt bones. The iron boss, moreover, was located within a distance about 40 centimetres from the bronze grip (with two silver plated crests), originally attached to the shield by silver rivets made by the filigree technique (Fig. 6; Czarnecka 2012, 99, 104–105, Figs 6–8). The reasons of such exceptional treatment of the shield are unclear, but they could have been linked to the elite character of that weapon, somewhat distinctive and foreign in the local cultural context<sup>20</sup>. Also the sequence of ritual activities between death and burial remains is unknown, with the exception of the final act of depositing the remains in the grave and furnishing them (Steuer 1992, 203–257; 2006, 13–14; 2009, 309–419). However, all of these activities could have influenced the general view that emerges from the analysis of archaeological data. The ritual destruction of parade shield as a sign of prestige and wealth can be interpreted as the ‘mortuary potlatch’ practice, which played an important social role (Palgi, Abramovitch 1987, 395; Boas 1916, 368; Mauss 2002, 38). Traces left by a chisel (?) and razor on the edge fittings suggest that the weapon perhaps was destroyed

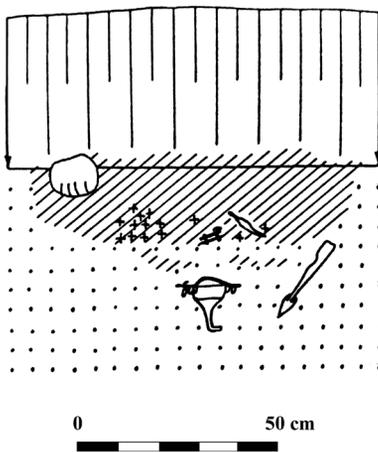
for a demonstration. Czarnecka sees an analogy between the shield from Czersk and some parade arms from an inhumation grave discovered in Brostrop, *Öland* (Sweden); in both cases the shields were destroyed with great precision, so it can be supposed these parts of funeral ceremony run in similar ways (Czarnecka 2014, 43).

Presumably, one of the most impressive examples of using a shield in a funeral context is grave 74 from Kuny (Turek District) located in the east of Greater Poland. The burial inventory, dated to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (phase B2), contains an iron boss (Fig. 7b) with bronze plated edges and bronze rivets with traces of silver on their heads (Skowron 2007, fig. 2). The shield boss, with the spike pointing downwards, was placed under the burnt human remains (Fig. 8; Skowron 2007, Pl. I). In addition, the iron spearhead was stuck in the ground beside the pit grave. In terms of the arrangement of the burial place, this feature is very similar to grave 216 in the Hamburg Marmstorf cemetery (Lower Saxony), in the territory of the Elbe cultural circle (Menghin 1985, fig. 120). Wilfried Menghin interpreted this grave as an illustration of symbolic placing the warrior on his shield (Menghin 1985, 147–148); was it also done this way during the funeral ceremony which took place about two thousand years ago in Kuny? Such a practice, relating to the well-known ancient Greek phrase: [*Come back*] either with this or upon this [*shield*] (Plutarch, *Moralia* 235), could be a direct result of a death in combat (Fig. 9). Perhaps inhumation grave II discovered in Szczepkowo-Zalesie (Nidzica District) in the Przeworsk culture territory is an analogy. According to Romuald Odoj, the warrior was probably buried on the

<sup>20</sup> See the paragraph: *Shield as a dowry and ritual gift-giving*.



**Fig. 7.** 7a. 3<sup>rd</sup>-century silver shield boss from Gommern, Saxony-Anhalt; 7b. 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Germanic iron bronze-plated boss (with bronze rivets with traces of silver on the heads) from Kuny, Turek District (sources: 7a. Menghin 2002, Fig. 3; 7b. Skowron 2007, Fig. 2)



**Fig. 8.** The grave of a warrior discovered in Kuny, Turek District (source: Skowron 2007, Pl. I)

126, 135, 153). Tacitus, highlighting the symbolic meaning of shields in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, describes how the Canninefates honoured their new king:

*There was among the Canninefates a man of brute courage named Brinno, who was of illustrious descent; (...) and in accordance with their tribal custom the Batavians set him on a shield and, lifting him on their shoulders, chose him as their leader (Hist. IV.15; Kontny 2003a, 121)<sup>21</sup>.*

<sup>21</sup>The scene of *Brinio Raised on the Shield* has become a popular motif in European fine art (see: paintings by Otto van Veen (1613; Fig. 10a) and Jan Lievens (1661)).

shield with the boss downwards, with his face to the ground and hands close to the head; the burial was covered by a stone pavement (Odoj 1962, 826). Unfortunately, the find is not fully reliable (a lack of documentation in the paper), and we have too little information about this. According to the early-medieval *Ljósvetninga saga*, meanwhile, shields could also be used as stretchers to carry warriors wounded in combat (Chapter 24). On the other hand, however, the act of burying the body on a shield may also be interpreted as a special post-mortem treatment and reminiscent of some crucial events from the warrior's lifetime, e.g. becoming a chief (Tokarska *et al.* 1982, 79–114; Chrościcki 1974). Generally, the link between shield and royal power is indicated by many sources in Germanic history, in different times (Dickinson, Härke 1992, 61–62, 72). In the poem *Beowulf* kings are described as 'the shields' for their followers: subjects and warriors (Bazelmans 1999,



**Fig. 9.** The dying Gaul, 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> Roman sculpture. The Capitoline Museum, Rome (source: <https://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/press/exh/3655.html>)

Raising the leader up on a shield, an old Germanic ritual which was last mentioned in the 5<sup>th</sup> century by the Franconian chronicler Gregory of Tours (*Hist. Franc.* II.40), meant upgrading him to superior dignity with a great honour (Fig. 10b). Structural anthropologists indicate that a ritual (like a ceremonial drama) is built on the need for symbolic repetition of the creation, beginning, or other important sacred events (Turner 1974, 24). In the case of the burial rite presented by the rich warrior grave in Kuny, for example, there might be ritual repetition of that day when he became tribal chief, in order to – as we may assume – legitimate the social and political order.

The situation is quite different for grave 10 in Strobin on the Warta river (Wieluń District), dated to phase B1b. It is mentioned in the literature as the burial of a warrior-bronze worker or goldsmith (Abramek 1984, 64; Orzechowski 2010, 217). Interestingly, no human remains were found, so calling it a ‘burial’ is purely hypothetical; both weapons and tools were deposited in a damaged pit, originally dug into an older grave of the Pomeranian culture (Abramek 1984, 56). The set of weapons and other accessories were burnt. Most importantly, the shield found in Strobin was without a doubt a ‘parade’ specimen, which is well-reflected in the melted silver particles on the rivets, as well as traces of silver plating on the iron grip (Fig. 11; Abramek 1984, 64). Burning the richly decorated shield together with goldsmith’s tools and other objects (i.e. a silver plated scabbard, bronze vessels, two belts and a brooch) may have been connected with the role and rank of some affluent artisan to whom these items probably belonged. As in the case of blacksmiths in Przeworsk culture societies, his craft placed him in a special sphere of people imagery, myths, and beliefs (Orzechowski 2010, 231–233). It also gave him a particularly high social rank, as emphasised by the shield and other valuables.

#### 4. Protective magic in mortuary practices

We have to bear in mind that a shield, which served in practice as a tool to protect a warrior and his brothers in arms during combat, could be also an object providing symbolic security. This duality of meanings also applies to other kinds of defensive weaponry: chain-mails and helmets (e.g. Czarnecka 1994, 245–253; Jażdżewska 1985, 112, Figs 3–4).



**Fig. 10.** Representations of the old Germanic ritual of raising the leader up on a shield. 10a. Brinno Raised upon the Shield (Otto van Veen, 1613); 10b. Phramond is lifted on the shield by the Franks (begun by Revoil in 1841, finished by Genod in 1845)

The most obvious evidence of protective-ritual use of shields among societies of the Przeworsk culture is the common custom of furnishing warriors with weapons for the afterlife. This entailed numerous examples of outstanding treatment of metal shield fittings, especially bosses (Liana 1968, 381–382; Czarnecka, Kontny 2009, 30–35). Karol Hadaczek described the shield boss in grave 5 in Gać, Przeworsk District, as a container for human remains<sup>22</sup> (Hadaczek 1909, 4; similarly to grave 93 in Czersk – Czarnecka 2012, 99), and the second one, in grave 135, as a cover of the urn (Hadaczek 1909, 7). In the Przeworsk culture cemetery at Kopki (Nisko District, grave 9), the urn was mounted in the shield boss, which served as some kind of a stand

<sup>22</sup> The most spectacular manifestation of using a defensive weapon as a container for remains is the eastern-Celtic helmet excavated in grave 25 at Siemichów, Łask District (Jażdżewska 1985, fig. 3).



**Fig. 11.** Weapons (including shield) from the grave of a rich warrior-silversmith, discovered in Strobin, Wieluń District. Photo M. Grabczak (source: <http://www.turystyka.wielun.pl/pl/poi/3273244>)

(Jamka 1936, fig. 4.2)<sup>23</sup>. In Wólka Domaniovska (Radom District, grave 66) small objects were found inside the crushed boss, which probably served as a substitute for the whole shield after its burning in pyre<sup>24</sup> (Czarnecka 2005, 68–69, fig. 1d–2).

However, every deposited shield (not only richly decorated or treated in an unusual way) was supposed to have some ritual significance. Of course, it was closely related to a sphere of religious beliefs and images which is unknown for us today. Intentional destroying or burning, linked with Celtic traditions, and ceremonial burial of weapons with dead bodies by peoples living in central *Barbaricum* was typical in itself. Therefore, it may be considered as a general confirmation of ritual meaning of shields among peoples of the Przeworsk culture (Czarnecka, Kontny 2009, 29–30; Czarnecka 2005, 69). Since shields were common and frequent elements of burial inventories, especially in the Early and beginning of the Middle Roman Periods (Kontny 2008, 107), we can suppose that they played a very important role in both spheres:

<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in few pit-graves inside the burial mound discovered at Łęgonice in 1871, urns were placed on the sets of weaponry, including elements of shields (Jagmin 1873, 143–145, 149, 153; Hadaczek 1909, 5–6).

<sup>24</sup> In the Przeworsk culture, as Czarnecka notes, small artefacts were found in shield bosses also in Oblin, Garwolin District (graves 30, 45b), Nadkole, Węgrów District (site 2, grave 13), Łęgonice Małe, Przysucha District (grave 41) and Ciecierzyn, Kluczbork District (grave 141, 197).

*profanum* and *sacrum*, and that their magical power was as crucial as practical protection in combat (Kontny, Rudnicki 2009, 38).

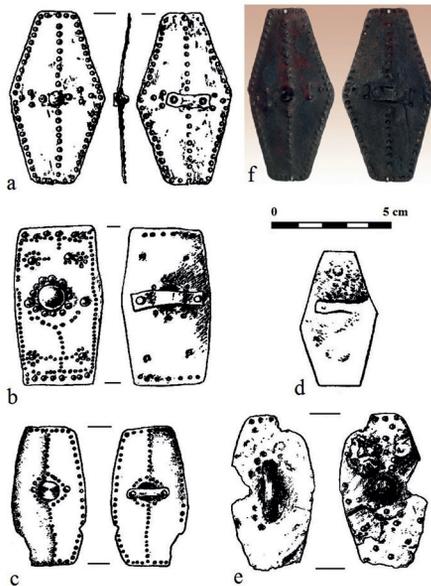
Among customs connected with the belief in symbolic functions of shields, there were exceptional funeral practices well-documented in the territory of the Przeworsk culture. This comment applies particularly to ritual furnishing of burials with shield miniatures meticulously crafted from iron<sup>25</sup> (Andrzejowski 2000, 23–28, Figs 2–3). Miniatures (or parts) of weapons, tools, and objects of everyday use known from the territory of barbaric Europe are interpreted, in general, as amulets to which *apotropaic* properties were attributed (Czarnecka 1994, 245–253; Beilke-Voigt 1998). In the Early Roman period, artefacts of this type appear in the Przeworsk culture (Godłowski 1980, 85–100; Andrzejowski 2000, 23, footnote 2), in the Wielbark culture (Kaczanowski, Zaborowski 1988, 225–226, fig. 4; Kucharenko 1980, 17, XVII.49) and, most frequently, in the Elbe basin (Beilke-Voigt 1994, 102–124) and in eastern Bohemia (e.g. Nové Bydžovo, Moucha 1974, 455–452; Pierrevelcin 2012, 155). Against this background, however, shield miniatures discovered in Poland are unique because of their close links with the Celtic culture (Andrzejowski 2000, 37). This issue was discussed in detail by Jacek Andrzejowski (for a general overview – Andrzejowski 2000).

Hexagonal, oval or rectangular shield models have been excavated in Nadkole (Węgrów District, site 2, grave 141B; Andrzejowski 2000, 23–25, fig. 2.1), Siemianice (Kępno District, grave 24; Szembekówna 1905, 6, fig. 19)<sup>26</sup>, and Siemiechów (Łask District, site 2, graves 39 and 46; Jażdżewska 1985, 119, pl. VIII, 2–3). All of them (Fig. 12), dated to the phase B2, presumably were representations of battle shields of the Przeworsk culture warriors at that time (Andrzejowski 2000, 31)<sup>27</sup>. A reduction in size, however, did not at all mean a reduction in significance; therefore it is the symbolical function that seems to be the most intriguing and thought-provoking. Generally most of the miniatures, as Andrzejowski claims, can be interpreted as evidence or relics of some widespread beliefs and practices typical for societies influenced by the La Tène culture (Andrzejowski 2000, 37). The symbolic function of the artefacts mentioned was rather different than in the case of Celtic and Gallo-Roman miniatures regarded as votive offerings deposited in special places (Salisbury in south Britain, the Tiber River) or sacrificed in a sanctuary or in a religious object context (e.g. Flavier and *Baâlons Bouvellemont* near Mouzon – *Mosogamus* oppidum; Saint Marcel – *Argentomagus*; Mont Auxois, Alise-Ste-Reine – *Alesia* in France; or Baratela near Este and Norcia – *Nursia* oppidum in Italy; see Andrzejowski 2000, 33–38 for more examples). To the contrary, in the central-eastern *Barbaricum* these items most likely served as magical amulets, and were placed into graves in order to protect the deceased (Andrzejowski 2000, 39). A similar specimen is a shield excavated in the settlement at Pełczyska (Pińczów District, site 1, grave 9; Kontny, Rudnicki 2009, 32, Figs 3–4). This context suggests that shield miniatures could have been used not only for funeral purposes, but also in everyday life, with their ornamental and protective aspects, e.g. as parts of costume (Kontny, Rudnicki 2009, 38; Andrzejowski 2000, 37–38).

<sup>25</sup> A bronze shield miniature comes from the Wielbark culture cemetery in Nowy Targ, grave 69, Sztum District (Fudzińska, Fudziński 2013, pl. VIII.69:1).

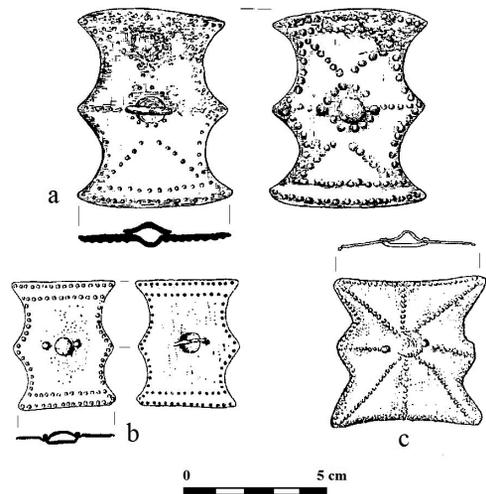
<sup>26</sup> There was probably a second miniature shield in Siemianice (Andrzejowski 2000, 25–26, footnotes 14–17).

<sup>27</sup> For comparison – we may suppose that miniature circular and richly ornamented shields, discovered in Scandinavia and dated to the Migration period, reflect local parade shields (Andrzejowski 2000, 28, 30).



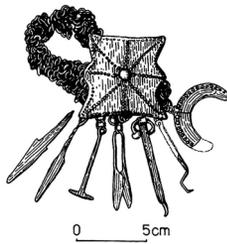
**Fig. 12.** Miniature iron shields from the Przeworsk culture. 12a-b. Nadkole, gr. 141B; 12c. Simiechów, gr. 46; 12d. Siemiechów, gr. 39; 12e. Siemianice, gr. 24; 12f. Siemianice, ? (sources: 12a, c-f. Andrzejowski 2000, Fig. 2.1-4, 6; 12b. Kontny 2006, Fig. 10)

Opatów (Kłobuck District, site 1, grave 49; Godłowski 1959, 203–204, fig. 33.3; Madyda-Legutko *et al.*, 2004, 205), Piaski (Łowicz District, site 1, grave 95; Horbach, Ołędzki 1983, Table 307.3), and Mierzyn-Grobla (Piotrków District, site 2, grave 2; Ziętek 2004, 25–85). They were discovered either as a single miniature in a grave inventory, or along with other amulets, especially blacksmith's tools (Fig. 14): scissors, hammers, or knives, sometimes linking together with a piece of chain mail, which is typical for female and children burials (Madyda-Legutko *et al.*, 2010, 457–478; Florkiewicz 2011, 331). Due to similarity of forms, it can be supposed that these miniatures were manufactured in the same workshop or even by the same blacksmith (Andrzejowski 2000, 28). Their shape relates to *hide-shaped* Celtic shields from the south of Britain, as well as images of shields imitating animal furs which were depicted on Celtic and Roman reliefs (Andrzejowski 2000, 32, 37; Farley 2011, 97). The protective role of animals in Celtic beliefs and customs could have influenced the forms of ritual shields (Wade 2016, 26). According to Gaius Julius Solinus, for example, Briton warriors would wear skins of totem animals before combat (MacCulloch 1911, 217). Moreover, warrior-shamanism and rituals of *becoming-animal* in the battle-trance were peculiar to Germans and their war magic (Wade 2016, 29). Perhaps the Przeworsk culture's miniature shields were also some kind of representation of full-size ritual shields being used in this part of Europe. In funeral contexts, however – particularly in female and children burials – their significance and properties became reinforced.



**Fig. 13.** Miniature iron shields with C-shaped cuts from the Przeworsk culture. 13a. Mierzyn-Grobla, gr. 24; 13b. Piaski, gr. 95; 13c. Opatów, gr. 49 (source: Andrzejowski 2000, Fig. 3.1–3)

Of particular interest are rectangular-shaped specimens with C-shaped cuts resembling animal hides, which come from the later horizon (B2/C1). All of them (Fig. 13) were excavated in three cemeteries located not far from each other:



**Fig. 14.** Miniature items from Opatów, Kłobuck District, gr. 49 (sources: Godłowski 1980, Fig. 5; Czarnecka 2010, Fig. 8)

During the discussion on shield miniatures as funeral gifts, ritual treatment of shield bosses with human remains, etc., a reference point might be provided by anthropological theory of defensive magic. The universal structure of ritual processes, as well as the idea of *liminality* was conceptualized by the British anthropologist Victor W. Turner on the basis of Arnold van Gennep's classification of rites of passages (Turner 1967, 123–130; van Gennep 1960, 65–165). According to Turner, the structure of *rites de passage* (i.e. each ritual of transgression: birth, wedding ceremony, youth initiation or funeral indeed) incorporates three phases: pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal (Turner 1969, 155). In the case of death rituals, the middle stage is the period between death and burial, when the deceased is in an unusual state defined as 'in-between time' or 'anti-structure' (Turner 1969, 359–360). By reason of exclusion from a *communitas*, loss of identity, status, property, rank or role, and not possessing a new one, he or she is exposed to the influence of the power of evil spirits, or is at risk of failure during the ritual act of transgression (Turner 1967, 46–47). For explaining this mechanism, ethnographers provided several examples in case studies from all over the world, concerning different cultures and times (van Gennep 1960, 1–7). So belief in the need to provide him or her with magical protection, for example with amulets, should therefore be regarded as a world-wide conviction, common also for ancient cultures (Palgi, Abramovitch 1987, 390–393; Shorter 1935, 171–176; Wawrzyniuk 2016, Chapter 5). Typically there is no information about all the sequences of death rituals, and we must consider the role of apotropaic objects and particular treatments of the body soon after death and before ceremony (e.g. Charon's obol used as mouth or eye covering; Stevens 1991, 225). Also the final moment of ceremony is clearly stressed by gifting the deceased with grave goods in order to protect him or her in afterlife.

Although we do not know the real active role of these items in funeral procedures, it seems that a *rite de passages* concept can be treated as an adequate category to interpret some ritual behaviours of people who lived in the Oder and Vistula basins two thousand years ago, including furnishing graves with miniature shields.

## 5. Shield as a dowry and ritual gift-giving

*The wife does not bring a dowry to the husband but the husband to the wife* – the Roman historian writes in *The Germania* (Germ. 18.3). Although the whole description of family life and marriage is interpreted in some relation to the moralizing dimension of Tacitus' work (Kolendo, Plóciennik 2015, 209–217), his remark about the set of weapons as some kind of ritual gift is well worth considering:

*The parents and relatives are present, and pass judgment on the marriage-gifts, gifts not meant to suit a woman's taste, nor such as a bride would deck herself with, but oxen, a caparisoned steed, a shield, a lance, and a sword* (Germ. 18.4–5).

We do not have any knowledge of the symbolic meaning of such gifts, and why there was a shield among them. It can be noted that in the folklore, a wedding ceremony means transition to a new state (as it is in birth, initiation, becoming a chief, and burial of the dead), and a change

in status of two individuals who create a reproductive social unit (Turner 1974, 57). In connection with this, it is preferable to protect the wedding couple by special treatments and ritual gift-giving aimed at providing fertility, welfare and care or safety (e.g. Maj 1986). However, relating to barbaric Europe, more can be said about the social, practical dimension of marriage transaction as an element of mutual social-economic relationships between families. In this context, the issue of ritual gift-giving was raised by Eduard Krekovič and Jan Jílek (Krekovič 2006, 130–134; 2007, 91–97; 2008, 113–116; Jílek 2016, 169–188).

The ritual act of bestowing a shield, a spear, and a sword to the bride could be interpreted as a dowry – an arrangement leading to a marriage, and pre-mortem inheritance which was “set up to protect property given to women” (Anderson 2007, 170). A dowry system was typical for Celts, as Julius Caesar wrote in *De Bello Gallico* (*B. Gall.* I.3; Markale 1986, 33). So on the one hand, it cannot be ruled out that some Celtic customary practices survived in the Roman Period among peoples of the Przeworsk culture; but on the other, as the reciprocal exchange of valuables: the bride as ‘a container of life’ and some gifts as some replacement for her, was also an old Germanic ritual surrounding marriage (Bazelmans 1999, 167). As is apparent from the *Beowulf* story, the set of weapons was given by the bride-taker to the bride-givers during the process of marriage negotiations between royal families in the Anglo-Saxon society (Bazelmans 1999, 169, fig. 6.1).

The weapon as a dowry could be passed down from one generation to next, as Tacitus wrote: *She must live and die with the feeling that she is receiving what she must hand down to her children neither tarnished nor depreciated, what future daughters-in-law may receive, and may be so passed on to her grand-children* (*Germ.* 18.7). His remark is recalled by Katarzyna Czarnecka, in the consideration of the parade shield excavated in the Przeworsk culture cemetery in Czersk (Czarnecka 2012, 105). In this case, the shield was the only outstanding item in grave 93, which held the remains of a man 40–50 years old; neither the rest of the inventory nor the form of burial was unique (Czarnecka 2014, 35). But the way of decorating details of the shield indicates some connections with the northern part of *Barbaricum*, probably a mutual relation between the local and external centres of power (Czarnecka 2012, 106). Was it due to political alliances and taking a ‘foreign’ woman as a wife, who left behind a dowry for her son? Or was it a burial of a husband who received a shield from his wife, as a Roman historian notes: (...) *she herself in her turn brings her husband a gift of arms* (*Germ.* 18.5)? It is still a great secret.

As anthropologists emphasise, the funeral ceremony and customary gifting also played an important role in the system of traditional social relationships (Mauss 2002, 38). While for the deceased the funeral was intended to be a passage into the afterlife, for participants it was an occasion for congregation and ritual feast. Because the parade shield found in Czersk was probably damaged for a demonstration (see Chapter 2), we can look at it as evidence of a ‘mortuary potlatch’ (Boas 1916, 368). During such a performance, similarly to every potlatch manifestation, the social order and political relations were renewed or confirmed. Also the wealth of certain social unities (family or clan) could be emphasised by ostentatious destruction of prestigious items (Bloch, Parry 1982, 7).

There are other ways of interpretation. On that point we have to refer to the Germanic custom of bestowing young warriors with parade weaponry by their superiors, namely earls, lords, or kings (*Germ.* 13; *Beow.* 2494–2498; Bazelmans 1999, 150). As we can read in *Egil’s saga* (12<sup>th</sup> century):

*The earl [...] gave Einar a shield, which was a most costly work. It was inscribed with old tales; and between the writing were overlaid spangles of gold with precious stones set therein* (chapter 83).

After the bestowal of arms, a newly elected warrior had to prove that he deserved it (Bazelmans 1999, 174–175). It could happen that one of them died away from home.

The parade shield in the mentioned grave could be interpreted as evidence of ordinary gift-giving (for example, in exchange for some courtesy, or as family heirlooms). The same elaborately decorated shield which the skald and warrior Einar received from the earl was gifted to his friend Egil Skallagrímsson and hung on the wall in the long house (*Egil's saga*, Chapter 83). Besides, in the text we quoted, there is a second mention of furnishing the interior with shields: (...) *and all around the building shields were hung* (Chapter 11).

Theoretically, the role of the gift-in-exchange in protecting the local economic system was highly important, as Marcel Mauss noted in his famous work *The Gift* (Mauss 2002, 6–9). In traditional cultures the ritual circulation of things and objects had a clearly protective function; according to the rule of reciprocity, a model of exchange of goods, services or liabilities provided economic balance by securing resources inside the society. It also determined some traditional behaviours, like marriage transactions, exchange of diplomatic gifts, lords bestowing items upon warriors, etc. In Germanic society, as mentioned above, the most important element within the system of 'total services' was probably the retinue; the authority of chiefs was still determined by their successes in combat and the distribution of valuable spoils (Wenskus 1961, 355). Another functional component of this system of relationships was, indeed, a dowry and other customs surrounding marriage, by making it possible to control not only local ways of redistribution of wealth, but also fertility, power and knowledge. In other words, economic issues were linked strictly with the traditional model of habits, customs and beliefs (Harris 1974, 111–130). As Jos Bazelmans writes, *Among objects of exchange, roughly five categories may be distinguished: 1. armour, standards and horses, 2. gold, rings, jewels and gems, 3. silverware, 4. land, and 5. women* (Bazelmans 1999, 150). In light of the presented model of exchange, the parade shield was a measure of other material and non-material valuables. This is one possible interpretation of the rich set of inventory, including a parade shield and Roman vessels, excavated in Strobin, which could be equivalents of a goldsmith's crafts distributed to multiple receivers. Even though we consider this parade shield as his own product, it does not exclude the role of silver, which served as material for preparing decorations, as payment (Abramek 1984, 64). Remarks of ritual gift-exchange relate also to other richly furnished graves with weapons, which were excavated in the area of the Przeworsk culture and originate from the beginning of the Roman times.

## 6. Conclusion

*The larger essential meaning of a given thing in a cultural system, the greater its metaphorical sense and emblematic importance* (Łotman 1978, 46–47). This statement, relating to the main principle of semiotic theory, explains why the shield as primary defensive weapon existed in barbaric culture with a great symbolic burden. In order to demonstrate this phenomenon, we decided to interpret selected finds linked with the Przeworsk culture and dated to the Early and beginning of the Middle Roman Periods. However, being limited by incompleteness of data and the exclusively sepulchral character of materials, our consideration needed supplementation by classical and early-medieval texts, as well as analogies from different regions of north-central *Barbaricum* with the support of an anthropological approach.

First, in the culture we discussed, there are no preserved shield boards which would be painted or marked in any special way. However, it should be stressed that one of the most

important non-military functions of shields was to manifest affiliation and the collective or personal identity of the warrior. These remarks concern possible ways of marking weapons of shield-bearers who belonged to a particular retinue, family, clan, tribal union or even secret society. Specially selected colours and decorations, as we can expect, were treated as signs of rank and position within the retinue, or as expressions of the warrior's intentions. Moreover, a shield had also great significance in rituals of wartime. Both archaeological records and classical and early-medieval written sources indicate that such a weapon was often treated in special ways (which are exemplified by the customs of raising a new leader up, putting a dead body on the shield, the bestowal of shields on young warriors, the act of breaking shields before the burial, etc.). In the case of early-Roman richly furnished graves, however, valuable and decorated shields as marks of prestige and rank of warrior were crucial elements of funerary equipment. The next essential non-military function of the shield within societies of the Przeworsk culture resulted, as scholars suppose, from the belief in its strong protective role. This influenced numerous funerary customs, mostly linked with the existence of Celtic traditions, in which real shields and their fragments (e.g. bosses as containers for human remains or urn covers) or especially miniatures of shields were placed in graves as kinds of amulets. Finally, the shield – similarly to the spear or sword – could have been an equivalent of different goods, persons or services in the provision of ritual gift-giving. This system of exchange was connected with an interregional network of ties among local elite families in the north-central part of *Barbaricum*. According to classical and early-medieval sources, as well as works of literature which evolved on the basis of Germanic culture, shields were particularly important as customary gifts (e.g. in the dowry system common for various barbaric societies). In the light of archaeological records as well, richly decorated specimens excavated in local contexts of the Przeworsk culture could be treated as evidence of circulation of goods and services within a wider region.

#### **Atrybut tożsamości, władzy i magicznej ochrony. Uwagi na temat pozamilitarnej roli tarcz w kulturze przeworskiej we wczesnym i środkowym okresie rzymskim**

Wiedza o pozamilitarnej roli tarcz używanych przez społeczeństwa celto-germańskie zamieszkujące w I–III wieku n.e. obszary leżące na północ od Dunaju – zwłaszcza ludność związaną z tzw. kulturą przeworską, określaną jako jedna z najbardziej „zmilitaryzowanych” kultur archeologicznych w tej części europejskiego *Barbaricum* – pochodzi częściowo ze źródeł archeologicznych datowanych na okres rzymski, jak również z przekazów autorów starożytnych, głównie Publiusza Korneliusza Tacyta (*Tac. Germ.* 3, 13, 18, 43). Jednakże, z uwagi na niekompletność relikwów kultury materialnej (destrukcyjna rola obrządku pogrzebowego wpływającego na zachowanie wyłącznie metalowych elementów: umb, imaczy i innych okuć), ale i trudności z interpretacją wzmianek zawartych w tekstach antycznych (propagandowy charakter dzieł, liczne zabiegi literackie itd. – patrz: Kolendo 2015, 19–24), posiadane przez nas dane są relatywnie skąpe. W pewnych sytuacjach pozostaje zatem posłużyć się analogiami archeologicznymi z innych regionów, a także źródłami historycznymi datowanymi już na wieki średnie. Przekazy te, dotyczące kultur wikińskiej bądź anglosaskiej, ale i celtyckiej, w połączeniu z teorią antropologiczną rzucają bowiem pewne światło na społeczno-kulturowe znaczenie tego typu broni ma terenie barbarzyńskiej Europy (Andrzejowski 2000; Dickinson, Härke 1992, 61–62). Tarczy, będącej w świecie barbarzyńskim podstawową bronią o charakterze defensywnym i jednym z ważniejszych elementów ekwipunku wojownika, przypisać można niewątpliwie szereg rozmaitych znaczeń. Obok funkcji podstawowej – związanej

z obroną podczas walki, wyróżnić możemy funkcje o charakterze rytualnym i symbolicznym: identyfikacyjną, prestiżową (określającą status i przywileje jednostki), magiczno-ochronną bądź też społeczno-ekonomiczną. (1) Malowanie tarcz oraz zdobienie ich przy pomocy określonych aplikacji, potwierdzone przez wiele analogii archeologicznych i historycznych, służyć mogło manifestowaniu określonych treści oraz informacji. (2) Wyróżniająca się bogactwem zdobień i wykonana z cennych materiałów (np. metali kolorowych) tarcza służyła zaś najprawdopodobniej jako wyznacznik wysokiej pozycji społecznej oraz określała miejsce w hierarchii wojskowej. (3) Podejrzewać należy również, że tarczom oraz substytutom tarcz (np. miniaturom – Andrzejowski 2000) bądź poszczególnym ich elementom (najczęściej umbom) przypisywano nierzadko moc apotropaiczną, tak w kontekście funeralnym (Liana 1968, 381–382), jak również podczas walki, o czym wspominają źródła pisane (dotyczące magii wojennej Celtów czy Germanów). (4) Tarcza jako ekwiwalent wymiany mogła również funkcjonować jako dar w złożonym systemie stosunków społeczno-ekonomicznych, choćby jako element wiana w umowie małżeńskiej, bądź też jako dar dyplomatyczny.

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