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<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3627-046X>*NOVAESIUM* TYPE CHAPE FROM THE AREA OF MIĘDZYRZECZ<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

A copper alloy chape was found by chance by a detectorist, Ernest Buczkowski, at Silna – several kilometers to the east of Międzyrzecz. It is a unipartite form with an openwork crescent decoration on the front side fastened to the scabbard with the use of a nail. One should attribute the item to the Roman type *Novaesium*, dated to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century and the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Outside the Roman limes, it was popular in the Elbe Circle as well as the Isle of Funen and the Jutland Peninsula during Subphases CIa and CIb. Some of the chapes of the said type (specifically the multipartite

specimens) may be treated as barbarian replicas of Roman originals. However, it is not the case for the finding from Międzyrzecz. It is the second find of this type from the territory of Poland. It should be associated with the Wielbark Culture, which was situated in the Międzyrzecz region in the beginning of the Early Roman Period. It makes the finding very intriguing, as this cultural unit is characterised by the lack of weapons among the grave goods; therefore, the one in question sheds some light on the problem of armament in the Wielbark Culture.

**Keywords:** Wielbark Culture, Roman Empire, weapons, *Novaesium* type chape, *Barbaricum*, Crisis of the Third Century

The artefact presented here was discovered in the village of Silna, Międzyrzecz district, in the Lubusz Lakeland, in the topsoil layer of a field intersected by a ditch, at the depth of c. 20 cm (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> It is a one-piece cast copper alloy chape of a double-edged sword (Figs 2–3). Its lower part is rounded, and the upper part has two s-shaped ornaments separated by a centrally located pineal projection with a triangular top; no rounded extensions are visible on the edges above the openwork ornament. Below the s-shaped ornaments, there are symmetrical crescent-shaped holes, and slightly below them, there is a small hole made only in the front part, at the vertical axis of the chape, which was used to fasten it to wooden laths. The back part is lower, and its upper edge is parallel to the lower edges of the crescent-shaped

openwork ornaments. Along the vertical axis there is a lath; in this place, the artefact is slightly concave so that the chape could have been tightly fitted to a wooden scabbard. The arms are bent and u-shaped in profile. The chape is 5 cm high, 4.1 cm wide, and 0.8 cm thick in its thickest point. It weighs 0.017 kg.

The find should be classified as the *Novaesium* type, which is indicated by the characteristic crescent-shaped (it could be also pelta-shaped) openwork decoration (cone-shaped central projections are also known from these forms<sup>3</sup>). It can be ranked as medium-sized among all the chapes,<sup>4</sup> just as the larger ones among the chapes without extensions over openwork crescents.<sup>5</sup> Chapes of the *Novaesium* type (Fig. 4) are considered to be of Roman origin<sup>6</sup> and to have evolved from the

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a part of a research project led by Prof. Adam Ziółkowski from the Institute of History, University of Warsaw, financed by the Polish National Science Centre, 2017/25/B/HS3/01299 ('Crisis of the Roman Empire in the 3rd c.: causes and reflection in ancient sources').

<sup>2</sup> In 2017, the finder, Mr Ernest Buczkowski, handed the artefact to the Institute of Archaeology at the University of Warsaw.

The artefact is now in the process of being transferred to the Jan Dekert Museum of the Lubusz Land in Gorzów Wielkopolski.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, cf. Thorsberg – Matešić 2015, pls 26: M 193, 29: M 213, 215, 216; see also Fig. 4.B285.72–73 here.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Miks 2007, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Matešić 2015, 73–74.

<sup>6</sup> Kaczanowski 1992, 43.

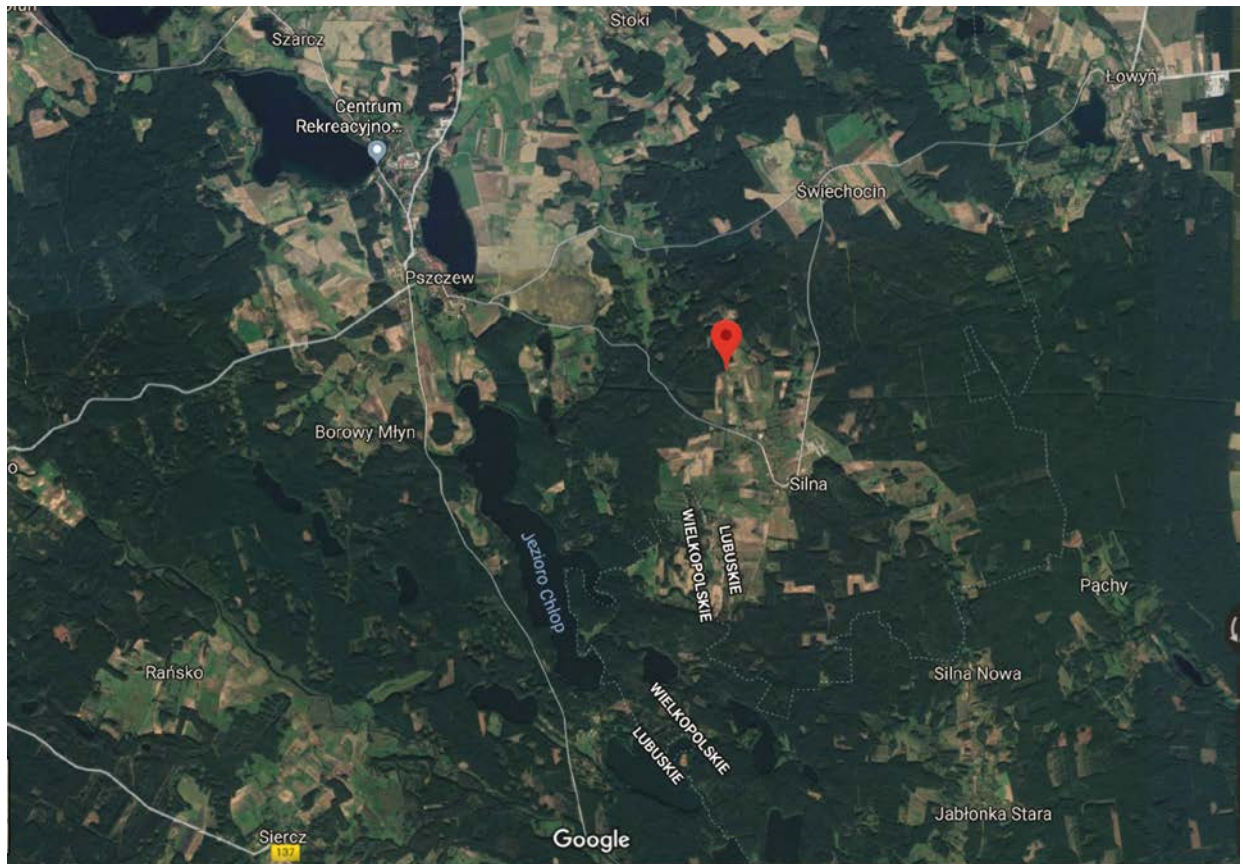


Fig. 1. Silna, Międzyrzecz district. Location of the site.



Fig. 2. Chape from Silna (photo by M. Bogacki).

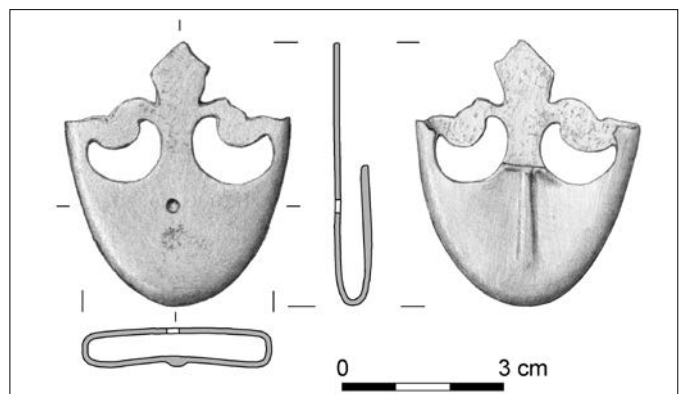


Fig. 3. Chape from Silna (drawing by P. Szymański).

pelta-shaped forms of the *Hamfelde-Vimose* type.<sup>7</sup> The discussed artefacts were made almost exclusively from copper alloys.<sup>8</sup> However, there are some differences between the finds from the lands of the Empire and those from the *Barbaricum*: the former were usually made from one piece of cast metal and fixed with rivets for

which special holes were left, whereas the latter were in some instances made of several elements, and rivets were put through the openwork ornaments in the chapes.<sup>9</sup> The artefact from Silna was made from a single piece and has a hole for a rivet in its front part. At the areas of the Roman Empire such forms are quite frequent:

<sup>7</sup> Miks 2007, 338.

<sup>8</sup> Miks 2007, 225–336.

<sup>9</sup> Miks 2007, 336.

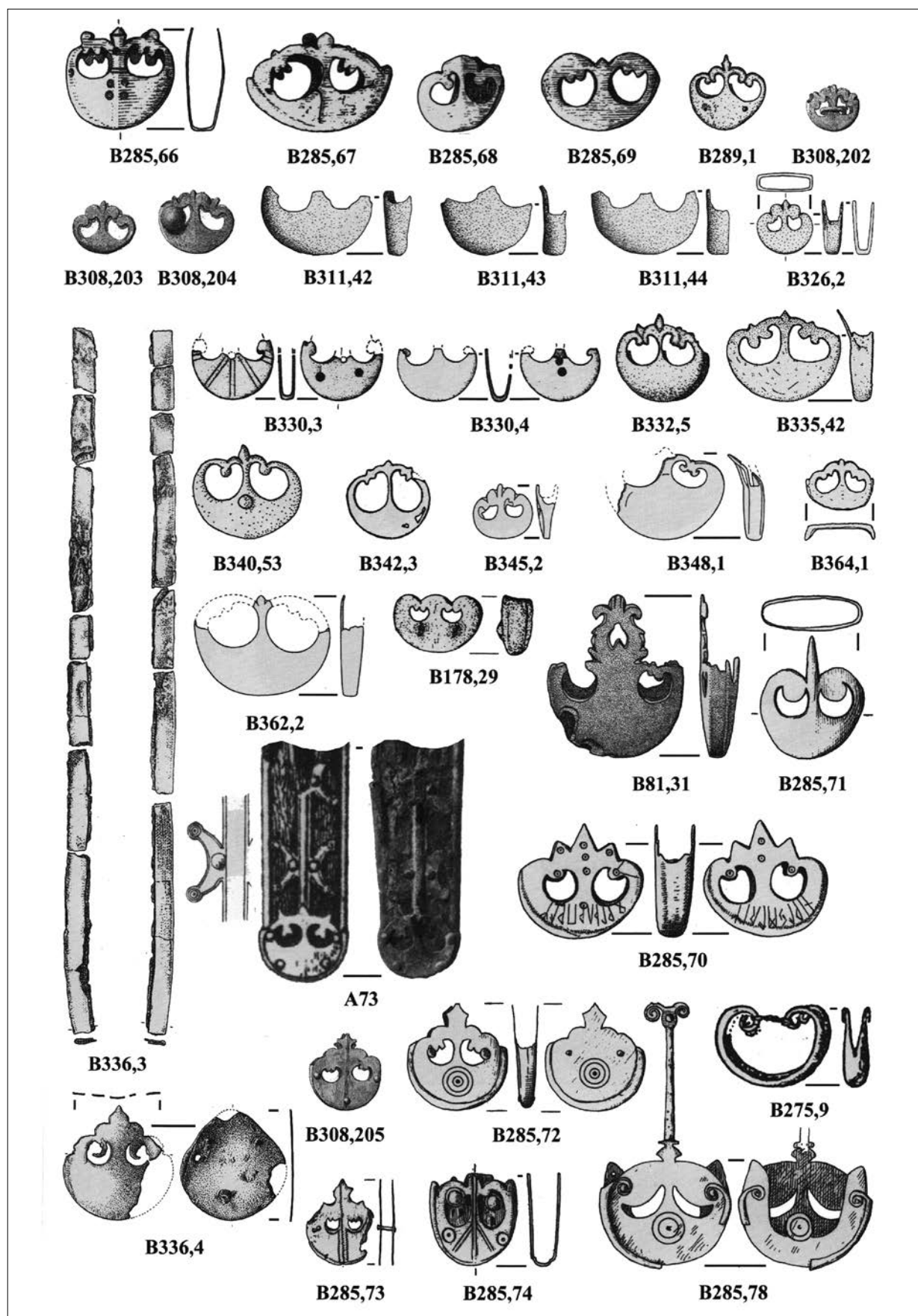


Fig. 4. Examples of the *Novaesium* type chapes (after Miks 2007).

from Britain and Gaul through Raetia, Pannonia, and Dacia to Syria.<sup>10</sup> In the lands of the *Barbaricum*, the majority of the *Novaesium* type chapes were found in the Elbe Circle, on Funen, and in Jutland. Besides them, only a number of single items were found in the Rhine and the Weser lands, which may be a matter of burial rite rather than the actual circulation. Until recently, no specimens were discovered in the lands to the east of the Elbe.<sup>11</sup> The situation has been changed by the recent discoveries from Bąbolin, Inowrocław district in Kujawy,<sup>12</sup> and from Silna.

The origin of the item from Bąbolin is not certain. There are some Germanic imitations of the *Novaesium* type,<sup>13</sup> especially small specimens without rivets (*i.e.* features exhibited by the artefact from Kujawy), discovered almost exclusively across Germanic lands.<sup>14</sup> However, as it was made from a single piece of metal, has quite a complex openwork decoration, and is of relatively high quality, it seems more probable that the chape was made somewhere in the Empire.<sup>15</sup>

These doubts do not pertain to the find from Silna. The specimens with rounded projections over openwork crescents/peltae (*cf.* Fig. 4.B285.66–67, B308.204, B332.5, and B335.42) have been recorded at the north European bog sites of Thorsberg, Illerup Ådal, and Vimose, as well as at two sites in the *Barbaricum*, including Mušov in Moravia. The last of the mentioned finds may be related to the Roman presence in the Barbarian lands during the Marcomannic Wars. Similar chapes are also known from the provinces of *Germania Inferior* and *Britannia*, as well as the north-Germanic-Rhaetic *limes*. When it comes to the ones without side extensions (like the case from Silna and the others shown on Fig. 4), they appeared sparsely throughout the whole Roman Empire, whereas their smaller variants show concentrations in the province of *Germania Inferior* and in the *Barbaricum* (Fig. 5).<sup>16</sup>

The context of the finds of the *Novaesium* type chapes enabled dating them to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century (recently these specimens have been included in the chrono-

logical group IIa, which is equivalent to the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century<sup>17</sup>) as well as to the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The precise chronological determination was possible owing to the discoveries made outside the *limes*<sup>18</sup> which should be associated with Phases Cl a and Cl b.<sup>19</sup>

The find from Silna bears no traces of melting, which means that it either came from a disturbed inhumation burial or does not have a sepulchral character. The latter possibility is supported by the cultural analysis. The chape should be linked to the Wielbark Culture because the area of modern Międzyrzecz was under the influence of that culture during the Early Roman Period. In the vicinity of its findspot, there are no known sites from similar times except one – Silna, site 8 – where a single potsherd identified as dating to the Roman Period was found.<sup>20</sup> Wielbark Culture burial grounds are known from Brójce, Trzciel district, and Jordanów, Świebodzin district, located more than a dozen kilometres to the south-east and south from Międzyrzecz respectively. Hence, the chape from Silna, discovered to the east of Międzyrzecz, should be linked to this cultural unit. The above-mentioned burial grounds functioned in Phase B2 but also at the beginning of the Early Roman Period and in Jordanów – even in Phase Cl b.<sup>21</sup> This area is considered the starting point for the westward migration of the Wielbark Culture population.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the chape should be dated to the time when members of the Wielbark Culture were settling within the micro-region. The almost complete lack of weapons in the Wielbark Culture burial grounds<sup>23</sup> undermines the hypothesis that the find could have come from a sepulchral context. Possibly, the discussed artefact comes from a yet undiscovered settlement. The popularity of similar forms in particular parts of Scandinavia (Denmark and its sacrificial bog sites) suggests that this is where the chape originated from.<sup>24</sup> This remains in agreement with the increasingly well-documented claim that at the beginning of the Early Roman Period the Przeworsk Culture was replaced by Scandinavian influences as an inspiration for Wielbark

<sup>10</sup> Oldenstein 1976, 112–113, pl. 19:112–116; Miks 2007, 337; Matešić 2015, figs 43–44.

<sup>11</sup> Kaczanowski 1992, 44; Pauli Jensen 2016, fig. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Kontny, Rudnicki forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> Matešić 2015, 87–88, fig. 53.

<sup>14</sup> Matešić 2015, 73–75, fig. 44.

<sup>15</sup> Naturally, quality should not always be paralleled with provenance. One may encounter also truly perfectly-manufactured items produced in the *Barbaricum* as well as mediocre (cheapish?) specimens coming from the Empire. The distinction between the Roman and the Barbarian pieces may be blurred further by the possibility that Roman artisans (captives or hired) did their work in the Barbarian territories – see *e.g.* Schnurbein 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Matešić 2015, 73–74.

<sup>17</sup> *Cf.* Biborski, Ilkjær 2006, fig. 116.

<sup>18</sup> Miks 2007, 336–338.

<sup>19</sup> Pauli Jensen 2016, 654.

<sup>20</sup> Archive of the National Heritage Board of Poland, Polish Archaeological Record, area no. 51–17.

<sup>21</sup> Gałęzowska 2007, 188, 192, tab. 1, with further literature.

<sup>22</sup> *Cf.* Schuster 2007, 438, fig. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Kaczanowski, Zaborowski 1988; Kontny 2006; 2019a, 69–113.

<sup>24</sup> It seems possible that such borrowings were possible via participation in joint military actions or raids organised by north European military leaders, see *e.g.* Kontny 2019a, 90.



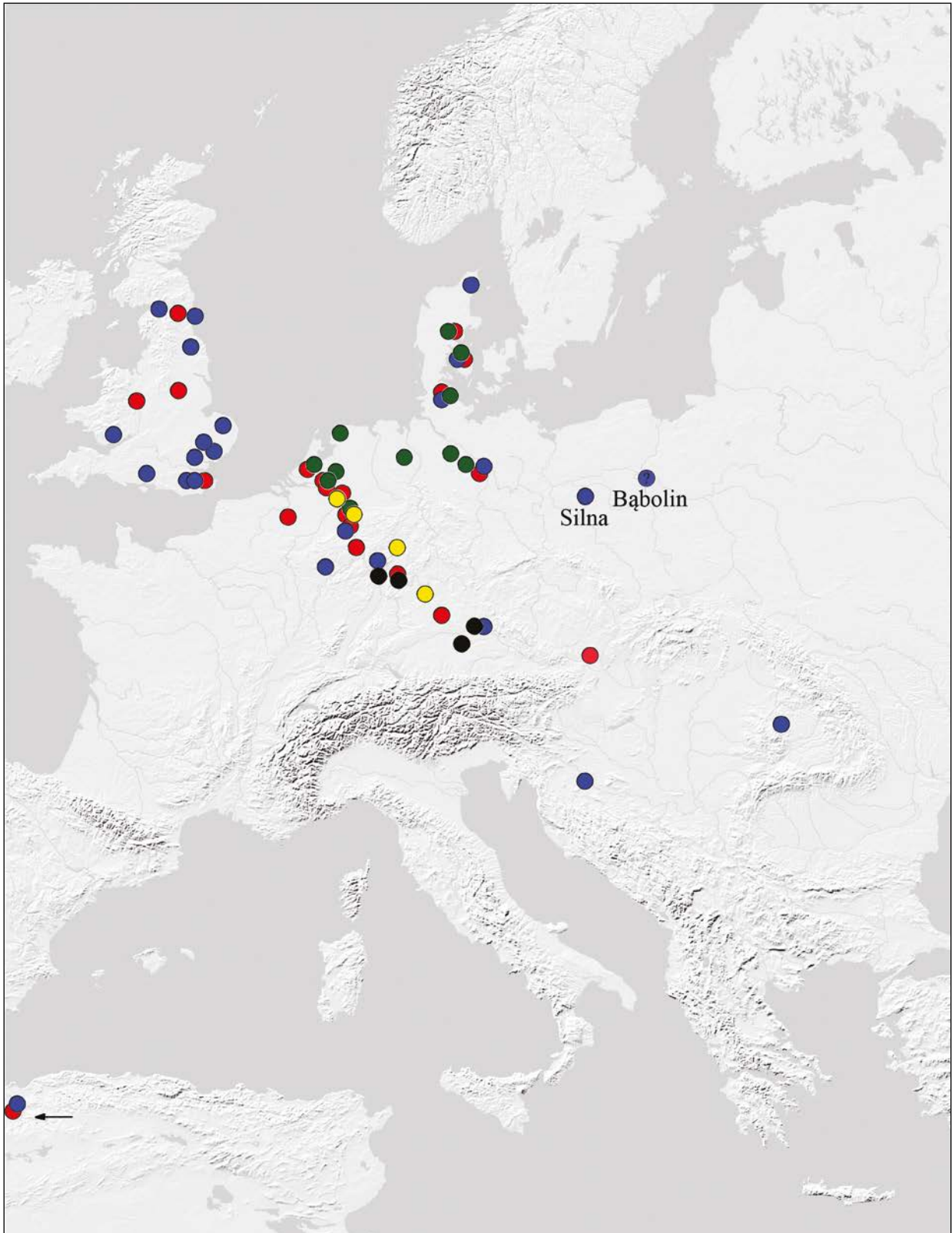


Fig. 5. Distribution of the *Novaesium* type chapes (after Matešić 2015, supplemented by the author): ● – Large *Novaesium* type chapes without extensions over openwork decorations on the sides; ● – Small chapes of the *Novaesium* type without extensions over openwork decorations on the sides; ● – Large *Novaesium* type chapes with extensions over openwork decorations on the sides; ● – Small *Novaesium* type chapes with extensions over openwork decorations on the sides; ● – Variants with buckles on the front side.

weapons.<sup>25</sup> This trend can also be noticed in male belt fittings.<sup>26</sup> This points to the possibility that the Roman chape came to Silna from Scandinavia, but this hypothesis should be verified by excavations in the area. Such possi-

bility, however, sheds new light on the problem of military contacts and movement in Barbarian Europe. It may be specifically linked to the crisis of the Roman Empire in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and in times directly preceding it.

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<sup>25</sup> Kontny 2006, 152; 2019a, 89–90; 2019b.

<sup>26</sup> Madyda-Legutko 2015.