Eötvös Loránd University
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE HUMAN COMMUNITIES IN THE EASTERN PART OF THE CARPATHIAN BASIN BETWEEN THE MIDDLE OF THE 5TH AND 7TH CENTURY ROW-GRAVE CEMETERIES IN TRANSYLVANIA, PARTIUM AND BANAT Theses

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I. Introduction

After several decades of scientific research, the Migration period and the Early Middle Ages can be considered one of the less researched fields of the Romanian archaeology. Except the scientific activity of Kurt Horedt, more important studies started to be published more regularly only in the last two decades. Of course, the so-called row-grave cemeteries dated roughly between the second half/end of the 5th century and the middle of the 7th century represent no exception. The main goal of the PhD-thesis is the systematization and reinterpretation of the archaeological material accumulated until the present date, coming from the mentioned cemeteries.

The geographical frame is offered by three main regions: the Transylvanian Basin, the Partium region and the Banat/Bánság region. Within this territory, the Transylvanian Basin constitutes a separate region both from a geographical and a historical point of view. In the contemporary historiography one can frequently encounter the approach according to which the term Transylvania means the totality of the territories annexed to Romania after the World War I, including Maramureș/Máramaros, the Partium region and the eastern part of Banat/Bánság. Taking into account the geographical separation of the Transylvanian Basin as well as the fact that, from geographical viewpoint, the Partium region and the Banat/Bánság are organic part of the Great Hungarian Plain, the term Transylvania denotes in the dissertation only the basin surrounded by the Carpathians and delimited in the west by the Apuseni Mountains (Nyugati-Szigetegység). This demarcation is also supported by the geographical distribution of the analyzed cemeteries.

From a chronological point of view the limits are determined by the period of use of the row-grave cemeteries. Taking into consideration that the moment of their emergence is still quite unclear, the dissertation discusses also the previous period. The discoveries belonging to the Apahida–Someșeni/Apahida–Szamosfalva group are only tangentially considered, taking into account that these have already been analyzed in detail several times. On the other hand, those graves dated in the second half of the 5th century which might be parts of larger cemeteries were included in the analysis. The upper chronological limit was established based on the latest burials belonging to the late group of the row-grave cemeteries. The dating of these varies from site to site; roughly the middle/second half of the 7th century can be proposed. The only exception is represented by the cemetery at Noșlac/Marosnagylak, where the latest burials belong to the Late Avar Period.

II. Methods

The PhD-thesis analyzes the Gepidic and Early Avar Age cemeteries from an archaeological viewpoint and for this reason less emphasis is put on the historical issues of the period. Therefore, the historical context is not sketched either, instead a more detailed overview is offered for those historical problems which strongly influenced the
interpretation of the archaeological material. Among these, the most significant are the process of the settlement of the Gepdis in the different regions of the Carpathian Basin as well as the identification of the Gepids in the Avar Age. The former played an important role in the interpretation of the early row-grave cemeteries, while the latter in the interpretation of the late ones.

The thesis is mainly based on published material. The only exception is represented by the cemetery at Noșlac/Marosnagylak which is known in the literature only from archaeological reports. The presentation of the site is based on the original documentation left by Mircea Rusu which includes grave plans, grave descriptions, partially the drawings of the grave-goods, and an incomplete plan of the necropolis. Unfortunately, the objects discovered in the cemetery could only be partially identified in the collection of different museums from Romania.

The most important working instrument of the research is represented by the catalogue compiled on the basis of the published material. The cemeteries included in the catalogue are analyzed both from the perspective of the burial customs and the grave-goods. The analysis of the latter is completed by the stray-finds. This detailed analysis offers the base for the conclusions referring to the chronological and social issues and the settlement pattern.

It is noticeable in the archaeological literature that the row-grave cemeteries, especially the late group, are treated as a whole. Beside the common traits, in the dissertation I tried to focus also on the individual cemeteries in order to detect the existing regional differences.

After a short review of the theoretical literature one can observe that there is no consensus in the research regarding neither the social nor the ethnical interpretation. From the point of view of the social aspects, in the last few decades the research pointed out that the burials cannot be considered at all the direct and passive reflections of the living society. However, several patterns can be detected, among which the most significant seems to be the deposition of the grave goods depending on gender and age. This observation underlines once again the crucial importance of the anthropological analysis which, unfortunately, is lacking in the majority of the cemeteries discussed in the dissertation. Therefore the available data is not sufficient in order to draw further conclusions regarding this matter.

In my opinion a direct connection between the material culture and the ethnicity of the deceased persons cannot be established either, taking into account the situational aspect of the ethnic identity. Furthermore, it is questionable in what extent the ethnic identity was expressed through the burials. Of course, this does not mean that in certain cases the ethnic identity could not have been expressed during the funeral, but these situations are difficult to identify archaeologically. For this reason the ethnic markers (e.g. Gepidic, Avar etc.) are used in the PhD-thesis as terminus technicus, being associated with
the representative material culture of a certain period and region and not with the ethnic identity of the buried individuals. On the other hand it has to be emphasized that if one does not examine the objects separately, but their combination inside the individual graves, certain assemblages can be identified which reflect different traditions and, therefore are relevant from the viewpoint of the cultural relations of the given communities. In order to simplify the terminology in the dissertation, these were named ‘Merovingian’ and ‘Avar’ traditions, however, without assigning an ethnical meaning to them. The former model is strongly connected to the Merovingian Age cemeteries from Western- and Central-Europe, while the latter appeared in the Early Avar Age in the Carpathian Basin.

III. Results
On the grounds of the typological analysis of the individual artefact types and the position of the objects inside the graves it became possible to draw conclusions regarding the female and male dress as well as the weapon combinations. It seems that in the case of the female graves, similar to the Tisza-region, the peplos-type garment with two brooches on the shoulders remained in use for a longer time than on the territories situated west from the Danube. A change similar to the one observed in Western- and Central-Europe took place only later and in a different manner: the brooches were placed in pair or single in the area of the chest or single on the pelvis. Due to the lack of an exact chronology referring to the brooches it is difficult to establish when exactly this change occurred, it seems likely that it can be placed roughly in the period when the small bow-brooches were in use, i.e. the last third of the 5th – beginning of the 6th century. It seems that simultaneously the girdle hangers decorated with hinged pates appeared, which are attested only two times in Transylvania.

In the late group of the row-grave cemeteries the number of the brooches decreased significantly. Among these a disc-brooch discovered in grave 114 at Nošlac/Marosnagylak can be mentioned which was situated under the chin, on the left side. This situation, like the type of the brooch itself, is a typical characteristic of the late Merovingian Age. Most of the brooches which can be dated in this period were discovered in cemetery 3 at Bratei. All of them belong to the group of the so-called ‘Slavic’ bow-brooches. Beside the decrease of the importance of the brooches another significant change in this period is the growing popularity of the girdle-hangers, the typical variant being represented by the one decorated with metal sheet mounts and strap-end. Similarly the sets belonging to the footwear equipped with buckle and strap-end became popular in this period.

In the case of the male graves the components of the belt can be mentioned in the first place. While in the Gepidic period the simple oval copper alloy or iron buckles were characteristic, in the early Avar period the composite belt-sets also occurred. The components of the belts discovered in the Transylvanian cemeteries belong to the so-called
three-part variant of the Merovingian type belt sets, the only significant difference being that the ‘classical’ combination (buckle–counterplate–rectangular mount) is sometimes completed with a strap-end. Regarding the geographical distribution of the three-part belt sets important regional differences can be observed. These are the most frequent in the cemeteries situated in the Mureș/Maros Valley (especially at Noșlac/Marosnagylak), but are completely missing in the cemetery 3 at Bratei.

Concerning the weapon combinations, again the cemeteries belonging to the late group are more suitable for revealing some general tendencies. Similar to the belt sets, regional differences can be detected. The ratio of the weapon assemblages characteristic for the ‘Merovingian’ tradition is higher in the cemeteries situated in the Mureș/Maros Valley, while the ones connected to the ‘Avar’ tradition occur more frequently in the cemetery 3 at Bratei. In the same time the latter is completely missing in the cemeteries from the north-eastern part of the Transylvanian Basin (Bistrița/Beszterce, Galații Bistriței/Galac, Fântânele/Szászújós).

Unfortunately, due to the high degree of the secondary grave reopening and the small number of the well datable grave-goods, the archaeological material coming from the analyzed cemeteries is not suitable for elaborating a precise chronological system.

Regarding the inner chronology of the individual cemeteries it can be observed that only the situation documented at Noșlac/Marosnagylak allows more exact conclusions. Within this necropolis several chronological groups can be isolated; however, without tracing sharp chronological borders between them. In the earliest group the graves containing buckles with shield-shaped tongue can be included. Another artefact which can probably be connected to the earliest horizon is represented by the wheel-thrown pottery with burnished decoration. The 1st chronological phase can roughly be dated in the second third – second half of the 6th century. The 2nd group is defined mainly by the three-part belt sets and related variants discovered in the male graves. Concerning the weapons the double-edged swords (two of them with pyramidal strap-retainer), the short seaxes and the spears with leaf-shaped blade are characteristic, which were already present in the 1st group. The representative grave-goods of the female graves belonging to the 2nd group are the girdle hangers decorated with rectangular mounts and a strap-end, the footwear equipped with buckles and strap-ends as well as the disc-brooch discovered in grave 114. Based on the mentioned grave-goods the 2nd group can be dated mainly in the period between the last third of the 6th century and the first third of the 7th century. Within this group a few burials can be isolated which probably belong to the late part of the mentioned period, but tracing a sharp borderline between the two phases is not possible. Only two graves can be included in the 3rd chronological group: grave 102 belonging to a boy with a composite belt set and grave 27 belonging to a woman buried, among others, with a girdle hanger and a bracelet with widened ends. These can be dated to the beginning – first half of the 7th century. The
grave-goods of the burials included in the next group consist of objects which cannot be 
dated to a shorter period, but they certainly cannot be placed before the Middle Avar Age. 
Thus, the 4th group can be dated in a longer chronological interval, roughly between the last 
third of the 7th century and the middle of the 8th century. The 5th phase is represented by 
female graves containing late type of jewellery, first of all earrings and beads, which can be 
dated to the end of the 8th century, perhaps to the beginning of the 9th century.

Taking a look at the general plan of the cemetery from Nošlac/Marosnagylak it is 
obvious that two areas can be separated. The graves situated in the south-eastern part are 
the earlier ones (1st–3rd chronological groups). It seems that among these groups the earliest 
one are situated mainly in the eastern part. In this area the edge of the cemetery was not 
identified during the archaeological excavations; therefore, it can be presumed that the 
necropolis continues in all directions. Except one grave, the late burials (4th–5th chronological 
phases) are placed in the north-eastern edge of the cemetery. It is worth mentioning that 
horse burials were discovered only in this area of the cemetery. Just a few graves were 
earthered in this part of the necropolis; thus, it can be presumed that more burials can be 
found in the south-western direction.

Based on the above-mentioned, the question can be raised: there was only one 
necropolis at Nošlac/Marosnagylak which was continuously in use beginning with the 
middle/second half of the 6th century until the end of the 8th (beginning of the 9th?) century 
or two different cemeteries can be presumed which were opened in two different moments 
close one to another. Unfortunately, without new archaeological excavations it is not 
possible to give a certain answer to this question.

Regarding the other cemeteries one can draw much less conclusions. It is 
conspicuous that at Band/Mezőbáňd the chronological interval corresponding to the 2nd 
phase of the chronology established for Nošlac/Marosnagylak is the most detectable. 
However, this phase can be defined here mainly based on the female burials (girdle hangers 
decorated with rectangular mounts and a strap-end, footwear sets composed of buckles and 
strap-ends, amulet boxes etc.). In the same time, at Band/Mezőbáňd none of the graves can 
be dated with certainty after the first third/half of the 7th century. The horse burials situated 
on the edges of the cemetery, considered in the archaeological literature to represent the 
latest phase of the cemetery, cannot be dated more precisely; therefore, the topographical 
argument remains the only one which might indicate that they belong to the end phase of 
the necropolis. The only exception is represented by grave 44 containing a whip-handle and 
rosette-shaped mounts belonging to the harness, which roughly indicate a dating in the 7th 
century.

It is difficult to establish an inner chronology for the cemetery 3 at Bratei/Baráthely, 
taking into consideration that the grave-goods discovered here are less suitable for a precise 
dating than the ones coming from the abovementioned graveyards. The Byzantine buckles,
the so-called ‘Slavic’ bow-brooches, the beads belonging to the category of the so-called ‘Augenperlen’, the different types of spearheads etc. can only be date to a longer period of time, broadly between the last third of the 6th century and the middle of the 7th century. For the moment it seems that none of the graves can be dated with certainty before the middle/second third of the 6th century. The latest graves belong to the middle of the 7th century or slightly later.

The emergence of the row-grave cemeteries in the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin is generally placed in the archaeological literature in the second half of the 5th century; however, for Transylvania rather the end of the 5th century – beginning of the 6th century was proposed. Unfortunately, for the time being, the available data do not allow the establishment of the precise moment when this process took place. However, in my opinion, a stronger relation can be observed between the ‘small grave groups’ containing small bow-brooches from the second half of the 5th century and the row-grave cemeteries than it is generally supposed. Moreover, it cannot be totally excluded that some of these graves might have represented parts of larger cemeteries which were not totally excavated. On these grounds, it can be presumed that the emergence of the row-grave cemeteries in Transylvania could have happened somewhat earlier (perhaps in the last third of the 5th century?) than it was formerly proposed; however, the confirmation of disproof of this presumption is one of the tasks of the future research.

Until now, the only chronological system of the Transylvanian row-grave cemeteries was elaborated by Kurt Horedt in 1977. Three of the four chronological groups established by Horedt are representative for the analyzed period, which were named after the representative archaeological sites: group II = group Aplahida, group III = group Morești, group IV = group Band–Vereșmort. Regarding the relative chronology it can be stated that the groups defined by Horedt are still valid and, therefore, his system can be used further with some adjustments. Accordingly, I tried to integrate my chronological observations into Horedt’s system.

The most representative finds of the cemeteries belonging to Horedt’s group II are the small bow-brooches decorated with chip-carving frequently combined with earrings with polyedric button. Due to the reduced number of the discoveries the dating of the group is quite difficult, roughly the second half/last third of the 5th century can be proposed.

Among the main characteristics of group III, the larger dimensions of the cemeteries as well as the occurrence of new artefact types can be mentioned. Unfortunately, the cemetery from Morești/Malomfalva is the only larger cemetery from this chronological phase which is published. It can be dated mainly in the first and second third of the 6th century, but it cannot be excluded that the earliest phase already began at the end of the 5th century. Due to the present state of the research no further inner phases can be isolated within this chronological group.
Due to the high number of unearthed graves, most of the conclusions can be drawn regarding group IV. Its earliest phase can be dated roughly in the second third of the 6th century. Within the group an inner chronological division can be established which can be identified in different degree at Noşlac/Marosnagylak, Band/Mezőbánd and Unirea–Vereşmort/Marosveresmart. The upper chronological border of the group differs from cemetery to cemetery; generally speaking, it can be placed around the middle of the 7th century. At Noşlac/Marosnagylak the use of the cemetery continued in the Late Avar Age as well.

Examining the distribution pattern of the row-grave cemeteries in Transylvania, dated to the Gepidic period, one can observe that these are situated mainly in the valleys of the important rivers and their tributaries. One of the future tasks of the research should be the investigation of the settlement area not only as a whole, but also on a micro-regional level. A higher concentration can be observed in the valley of the Someşul Mic/Kis-Szamos in the area of the middle course of the Mureş/Maros, as well as in the valley of the Târnava Mare/Nagy-Küküllő River. At the same time, finds are also known to a lesser extent from the north-eastern part of Transylvania, from the area of the Someşul Mare/Nagy-Szamos River. On the other hand, the south-western and south-eastern regions are blank, a situation which can scarcely be explained with the lack of research. It has not yet been fully explained why the horizon of row-grave cemeteries did not extend to these areas.

Comparing the distribution pattern of the late group of the row-grave cemeteries with the previous period, one can observe that on the one hand the distribution area becomes smaller in the Early Avar Period, and on the other hand the main concentration of the cemeteries is situated in the valley of the Mureş/Maros River. Only one necropolis is known in the Târnava Mare valley at the moment (Bratei 3); instead, it seems that the north-eastern area of the Transylvanian Basin played a more important role now than in the Gepidic Period. On the other hand, it is conspicuous that no cemetery has been identified until this moment in the valley of the Someşul Mic/Kis-Szamos. At the present the causes of this sharp cultural change in this region are still unclear, as well as to what extent this may be explained by the earlier communities possibly moving away.

Several differences can be detected in this period between the different micro-regions. The two different traditions (the ‘Merovingian’ and ‘Avar’ models) as well as the intensity of the Byzantine-Balkan objects show significant differences. Based on the actual state of research, it can be presumed, on a hypothetical level, that the geographical location of the individual cemeteries had a crucial importance. On these grounds three main groups can be defined. In the central area of the Transylvanian Basin, in the valley of the Mureş/Maros River and the southern part of the Câmpia Transilvania/Mezőség region (Noşlac/Marosnagylak, Unirea–Vereşmort/Marosveresmart, Band/Mezőbánd and perhaps Târgu Mureş/Marosvásárhely) both the ‘Merovingian’ and the ‘Avar’ traditions can be
detected, but without any doubt the former is the dominant. In the same time, Byzantine elements appear only sporadic. In the north-eastern part, in the valley of the Someșul Mare/Nagy-Szamos River and its tributaries, as well as in the northern part of the Câmpia Transilvaniei/Mezőség region (Bistrița/Beszterce, Galații Bistriței/Galac, Fântânele/Szászújös, Archiud/Mezőkered) the ‘Merovingian’ tradition can be observed in less degree, while the ‘Avar’ tradition and the Byzantine objects are completely missing. Perhaps, this phenomenon might be explained by the relative geographical isolation of this region which could have induced the participation to a less extent of the north-eastern communities in the communication networks of the period. In the third group only cemetery 3 at Bratei/Baráthely lying in the valley of the Târnava Mare/Nagy-Küküllő River can be included, where the elements connected to the ‘Merovingian’ model can be detected only in a reduced number. Instead, the ‘Avar’ tradition can be observed in a higher degree. The most conspicuous, however, is the massive presence of the Byzantine objects which undoubtedly points towards the existence of strong relations towards south. In the current state of research it is difficult to determine the character of these relations (trade, migration of small groups from the Lower-Danube area? etc.).

It can be presumed that the communication networks of the Transylvanian communities were functioning based on the traditional trade routes used throughout history. Thus, for the communities living in the Mureș/Maros Valley and in the southern part of the Câmpia Transilvaniei/Mezőség region, the Mureș/Maros Valley probably represented the main communication route towards west, while the one living at Bratei might have used mainly the Olt/Olt Valley for communication towards south. It seems very likely that the economical base of the external relations was the salt, mainly if one takes into consideration that some of the cemeteries are situated in the vicinity of salt resources.

Publications of the author related to the subject of the dissertation:

*Gepidic finds from Câpușu Mare (Cluj County)*, Ephemeris Napocensis 19, 2009, 219–242.

*An unpublished fibula found in the area of Sic, County Cluj*, Marmatia 9/1, 2009, 171–182 (co-author: Vlad-Andrei Lăzărescu).

*Lead pendants from the Avar Period cemetery at Noșlac (Alba County), Romania*, Instrumentum 32, déc. 2010, 15–16.

Migration Period and Early Medieval Cemeteries at Fântânele, Patrimonium Archaeologicum Transylvanicum 5, Cluj-Napoca, 2012 (co-author: Coriolan Horaşiu Opreanu).


