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**Sarmatian necropolises and graves from the territory of
Banat (1st – 4th century AD)**

- Abstract -

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I. INTRODUCTION

For nine centuries the Sarmatians were mentioned in ancient sources, inhabiting a large territory. The Sarmatians were nomadic tribes who, according to Tacitus, are “*living on horseback and in wagons*”¹, extremely conservatives regarding their funerary rituals, but very interested in the Roman and Greek products. The Sarmatians rose up east of Volga River. From here the tribes of *Iazyges*, *Roxolani*, *Aorsi*, *Siraces* and *Alans* started to search new territories in west, achieving an important place in the history of Asia and Europe.

On the road to west some groups settled down in the Great Hungarian Plain starting with the second half of the 1st century AD. From there they descended towards the center and the south of the plain. We don't know for certain the reason for this migration. Some historians believe that the Sarmatians were brought hereby the Romans for strategic reasons: to make a buffer zone between the old province of Pannonia and the Dacia². In any case, their settling down in this area, between three provinces was not possible without a Roman agreement.

Starting with the second half of the 1st century AD till the 4th century AD, the Sarmatians kept coming in several and distinct waves, towards the Great Hungarian Plain. They left the north pontic region and entered in the Carpathian Basin coming from north of Romania. They settled down in Banat during the Dacian wars and establishment the Roman province of Dacia.

II. STATE OF RESEARCH

In Romania, Serbia and Hungary there are different states of research concerning the Sarmatian history and archaeology. First archaeological investigations and publications of the funerary archaeological material were performed at the end of 19th – beginning of the 20th century. The three repertoires of M. Milleker³ and the archeological excavations undertaken by Gy. Kislégghi Nagy at Dudeștii Vechi – *Mogila* and Vizejdia (Timiș County)⁴ are relevant in this regard.

Between 1931 and 1951, M. Párducz had published many necropolises from the Hungarian and Serbian Banat⁵. His work was continued by A. H. Vaday and V. Kulcsár. A. H. Vaday revised the material discovered at Vizejdia, and proposed a chronology and an

¹ Tacitus, *Germ.*, 46, 1, 2.

² Harmatta 1970, 100; Mócsy 1977, 446; Opreanu 1994, 194; Opreanu 1998, 31.

³ Milleker 1897 – 1899 – 1906.

⁴ Vaday 1986; Gáll, Tănase, Ciobotaru 2010.

⁵ Párducz 1931, Párducz 1940, Párducz 1942 a, Párducz 1945, Párducz 1950 a, Párducz 1951.

ethnicity more similar to the eastern Sarmatian discoveries⁶. In addition, she analyzed in some articles certain types of materials characteristic to the southern area of Sarmatian *Barbaricum* (rectangular vessels, *Cypraea* shells or enameled brooches)⁷. V. Kulcsár discussed in a synthesis paper also about the Sarmatian rites and rituals from the territory of Banat (V. Kulcsár, *A kárpát-medencei szarmaták temetkezési szokásai*, Aszód, 1998), and she noticed in these area unique ritual patterns in Carpathian Basin⁸.

The Sarmatian discoveries from Romania were explained, started with the communist period, through a nationalist approach, the Sarmatians often being identified with a "Romano-Dacian" group⁹. While Romanian historiography looked everywhere for the Romano-Dacians, Hungarian archaeologists made major excavations and published many works concerning the Sarmatian settlements and necropolises. The Hungarian archaeologists have even drawn attention to the Romanian nationalist interpretations, which are affecting the study of Sarmatian archeology. An overview of the Sarmatian culture in the Carpathian Basin is also impossible to have¹⁰.

III. THE PERIODS OF THE SARATIAN CULTURE AND THE FUNERARY PATTERNS BY PERIOD

From the beginning of the 20nd century till now, M. L. Rostovtzeff, P. S. Rykov, P. Rau, B. N. Grakov, M. G. Moškova, K. F. Smirnov, M. I. Vjaz'mitina, V. I. Kostenko have proposed various chronologies for the eastern Sarmatian culture¹¹.

Recently A. V. Simonenko, based on the analysis of the Sarmatian antiquities from the north pontic area, offers a new period division of the Sarmatian culture from the area¹². The archaeologist considers that from the 2nd century BC till the middle of 2nd century AD we have a unique Sarmatian culture. Therefore, the Sarmatian culture from north pontic area, which comprised the Sarmatian early and middle period from the previous period division became *Period I* (the 2nd century BC till the middle of 2nd century AD) and the late Sarmatian period became *Period II* (second half of the 2nd century – 4th century)¹³.

⁶ Vaday 1986.

⁷ Vaday, Medgyesi 1993; Kovács, Vaday 1999; Vaday 2003.

⁸ Kulcsár 1998.

⁹ "A combination of Roman material culture with elements from the Dacian one", Benea 1996, 114.

¹⁰ Barosiewicz *et alii* 2003, 267.

¹¹ Bărcă 2006 a, 31.

¹² Simonenko 2004, 156-159.

¹³ Simonenko 2004, 156-159.

Between 1931 and 1951 M. Párducz proposed the first chronologies for the Sarmatian history in the Great Hungarian Plain. The orientation of the graves, the type of the necropolises (flat or tumuli), the remarks concerning the rites and rituals and the archaeological material were the basis of his chronologies¹⁴.

A. H. Vaday extends M. Párducz chronology, uniting the archaeological data with the historical events which are associating with the Roman Empire policy. Therefore, we have four distinct segments:

Early Sarmatian period

Phase I (from the arrival of the Sarmatians in the Great Hungarian Plain – till the end of the 1st/beginning of the 2nd century AD)

Phase II (end of the 1st/beginning of the 2nd century AD – till the Marcomanic Wars)

Middle Sarmatian period (the period of the Marcomanic Wars – middle of the 3rd century AD)

Late Sarmatian period

Phase I (middle of the 3rd century AD – the Roman withdrawal from the province of Dacia)

Phase II (the instauration of the tetrarchy and the creation of the *limes Sarmatiae*)

The Hun period (last third of the 4th century – middle of the 5th century AD)¹⁵

IV. THE SARMATIAN FUNERARY RITES AND RITUALS FROM THE TERRITORY OF BANAT

The study presented in the present dissertation is based on the funerary discoveries from the territory of Banat. At the moment 52 flat necropolises (or isolated discoveries of one – two graves) have been identified by us, consisting of 321 graves, one barrow – cemetery (with 5 tumuli excavated), one barrow – grave (at Dudeștii Vechi – *Moghila*) and 49 stray discoveries (especially from old excavations). Some data has been already published and the rest of material is still unpublished, provided by the Museum of Banat, Timișoara and the Institute of Archaeology and Art History of the Romanian Academy, Cluj-Napoca.

The funerary discoveries are mainly spread within the northern and southern part of Banat. In these areas we have found cemeteries with the most numerous graves: Deszk – *Újmajor* (18 graves), Kiszombor – *Cimitirul B* (29 graves), Klárafalva – *Cimitirul*

¹⁴ Párducz 1931; Párducz 1941; Párducz 1944; Párducz 1950 a.

¹⁵ Vaday 1989 a, 205 – 210; Vaday 1994, 105.

B (19 graves), Pančevo – *Vojlovica* (54 graves), Vršac – *Crvenka* (18 graves) and Vršac – *Dvorište Eparhie Banata* (16 graves). In the central part of Banat we know only two cemeteries: Foeni – *Cimitirul Ortodox* (18 graves) and Giarmata – *Sit 10* (32 graves). We cannot say that this area is poor in archaeological findings. Recent rescue excavations (from 2010 to 2012) have revealed, in the central part of Banat, Sarmatian settlements and cemeteries, but the material is still unpublished.

During hundreds of years, all the Sarmatian tribes used the inhumation funerary traditions. The construction of tumuli graves was another frequent tradition, in the East. In the Carpathian Basin the so-called “unmarked” graves are more frequent. Only six barrow graves were dug out, till now, five from the cemeteries of Vizejdia and one at Dudeștii Vechi. Unfortunately the excavations were made at the end of 19th century – beginning of the 20th century and provided only incomplete information and mixed archaeological material.

These graves are part of some small cemeteries with few tumuli, probably the burial place of Sarmatian nobility¹⁶. Except for one barrow grave (Dudeștii Vechi) are exclusively male graves, belonging to a warrior aristocracy, buried by eastern rituals: north – south orientation, offensive and defensive weapons, horses and large coffins. Even the female buried under the barrow from Dudeștii Vechi had a shield. This Sarmatian aristocracy arrives in the Banat Plain during the Marcomanic Wars (at the end of the 2nd – beginning of the 3rd century AD). They can be found in other barrow cemeteries from Tisza Plain (Tiszalök – *Rázompusztá*, Herpály and Hortobágy) but also in the area of Volga – Ural – west of Kazakstan and Azov Sea¹⁷.

In the analyzed material, the inhumation in plane graves is widespread. We have 321 such graves, with rectangular or oval pits. Although no catacombs or niche graves were discovered, different methods of arranging the grave pits, extremely popular in East, were documented: cremation or purification of the pits with white material or spreading signs of fire inside the pits (ashes, charcoal). This “cult of fire” appears only in rich graves, facing south from west of Banat – south of Tisza River. These rituals are extremely rare on the territory of Hungary¹⁸.

Inside the unmarked graves, wooden or other vegetal structures were discovered in eight necropolises (16 graves). The coffins were made of wooden planks or hollow trunks (*Eimbaumsarg*), often joint with iron nails and clams. The iron clamps appear only in the Carpathian Basin and they are a local pattern. At Deszk – *Újmajor*, M 6 an iron band, 173 meters long covered the skeleton. Probably it fixed a coffin lid; wooden traces were

¹⁶ Kulcsár 1991, 28; Kulcsár 1998, 111.

¹⁷ Istvánovits, Kulcsár, Carnap 2006.

¹⁸ Kulcsár 1998, 110.

found near the clamps. We don't have analogies for such type of construction. Perhaps we are dealing with a plank reused as cover, imitating a sarcophagus.

Other funerary structure was documented in the Giarmata – *Sit 10* necropolis: a funerary stretcher, on which the deceased was placed for transportation and, ultimately, buried with it. Such funerary structures are mentioned by the Latin writers, for the Roman and barbarian areas.

V. THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE SARMATIANS FROM THE TERRITORY OF BANAT

The grave goods can be classified into several categories: jewelers and dress items, toiletries, coins, weapons, harness objects, household objects, pottery.

All these items are Roman imported products (brooches, belts parts, beads, etc.) or eastern products (mirrors, pendants, weapons, harness objects). A funerary male and female costume can be described. In male graves we can find brooches, collars, weapons, different buckles and bags with tools necessary for the nomadic life. The buckles are used for closing the belt, for the shoes or they are part of complicated arrangements for hanging the weapons, the tools or the bags.

The female costume was richer, in terms of types. Necklaces, brooches, different pendants, rings, bracelets, loom –weights and many beads were documented. The beads appear in large number (even two or three thousand pieces in some graves). So far we have managed to find 8 types of monochrome glass beads (with different subtypes) and 10 types of polychrome glass beads. Other beads from distinct raw materials were documented: calcium, carnelian, amber or coral. This large number of beads can be explained by the multiple functions of these artifacts: they were worn as ornaments for the neck; as part of bracelets, earrings; the beads were buttons, amulets, sword pendants (in male graves) and often they were sewn on women clothes.

Many of these artifacts are more than parts of a costume or offerings. Certain funerary beliefs can be predicted by the presence of some objects or according to the way they were positioned. The coins from the graves served, most likely as money for the afterlife; the ceramic vessels probably contained food and drink for the deceased; the mirrors, often fragmentary, were ritually broken – not to provide “a space for the soul”¹⁹; the smoking vessels and the bells from children graves were probably against the “evil spirits”.

¹⁹ Kulcsár 1998, 63.

However, a part of these statements are often impossible to prove. The ethnographic sources and the analogies with the Roman beliefs can be helpful. The Roman sources should be carefully applied in the study of Sarmatian beliefs. Although some rituals were taken from the Romans they were filtered through their own thinking. The Sarmatians had their own beliefs, rituals and rules, characteristic to a nomadic society.

For example, in the Roman necropolis only small coins made of bronze were put inside the grave. According to mythological tradition, the boatman is demanding only a symbolic fee (an *obolus*). "This tax" is documented especially in female and children graves, most vulnerable and conservatory. In the graves from Banat region we have a different situation: the coins appear especially in rich male grave, they are made mostly of silver, they were probably also important for the Sarmatians spirituality (the depiction of gods on coin revers).

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

These aspects of rites and rituals, together with the grave goods of each grave were put into the CAPCA program – a software application which is using the correspondence analyses for the data²⁰. Therefore, we were able to identify the existence of several Sarmatian groups, and distinct time periods, using a mathematic basis. The results show several waves of migration of distinct Sarmatian populations, starting with the end of the 1st century to the 4th century AD.

For the first phase (the end of the 1st century – beginning of the 2nd century AD) we have for Banat just one grave, at Sănnicolau Mare – *Seliște*. This grave can be included in the so called „*Golden horizon*” – the first horizon of Sarmatian graves from the Hungarian Plain, characterized by rich female burials, containing the remains of golden artifacts from the Pontic area²¹. This particular grave had a necklace made of tubular beads, tear-shaped pendants and central *lunula*-shaped pendant, all made of gold and glass²².

The number of Sarmatians in the Banat area increased with the Marcomanic Wars. Then, at the end of the 2nd century, other Sarmatian groups also appeared within the Banat area. A first group is the one of eastern Sarmatians (possibly from the Azov Sea area), represented by a warrior aristocracy, buried in tumuli, in coffins, in funerary chambers – together with their weapons and horse. They were oriented north-south, inside the coffins probably funerary chambers.

²⁰ Download from <http://www.archaeoinfo.dk/> (20 December 2012).

²¹ Istvánovits, Kulcsár 2006; Vaday, Istvánovits, Kulcsár 1989, 110-111.

²² Bejan, Măruia, Tănase 2011.

The second group was also of warriors – their remains were found in three flat-area cemeteries (Ujszentiván – *Cărămidărie*, Szöreg and Uljma – *Cărămidărie*). As particular features, we found, the west – east orientation, the vessels in the head area and the presence of weapons, features rarely present in the Sarmatian graves from Banat. The west – east orientation occurs only in 8% of the analyzed cases and it is not frequent even east of the Carpathians.

Most of the graves from this period are flat graves, oriented south – north, with many grave-goods of Roman tradition and more rarely of an eastern one. Perhaps after the Marcomanic Wars other Sarmatian communities migrated in the Banat, maybe from Black Sea area or they descended towards Banat from the north and center part of the Great Hungarian Plain. Representative for this period are the necropolises from Banatski Despotovac - *Pape föld*, Giarmata – *Sit 10* (groups I – III), Foeni – *Cimitirul Ortodox*, Klárafalva – *Cimitirul B*, the graves from Lovrin, Padej, Szöreg – *Cărămidăria Ivan*.

Inside this south – north orientated graves seldom were documented rituals from the eastern Sarmatian area: different arrangements of the grave pits, “purifications” of the pits with white material or with ashes and charcoal, the positioning of the deceased inside the coffins, on vegetal carpet or on stone boards.

The last period of the Sarmatian culture in Banat takes place in third part of the 3rd century to the 4th century AD, a period when the province of Dacia was abandoned by the Roman Empire, the borders were free, and barbarians from various corners of Europe appeared in the Tisa Basin. Culturally, we can identify two different Sarmatian groups. The first preserved the same funerary traditions as during the previous period: flat graves, oriented south – north. The grave goods are mostly of Roman tradition (beads, coins, earrings, brooches with returned foot, “Crossbow” brooches or brooches with buttons on the head - „Bügelknopffibeln”), but eastern traditional items also appear (*Cypraea* pendants, ritual vessels, weapons). The necropolis from Pančevo – *Vojlovica*, Giarmata – *Sit 10* (group IV) and Crvena Crkva – *Cărămidăria Zoltán* are representatives for this period.

During this late period of the Sarmatian history other cemeteries, with distinct funerary rituals, were also identified. They probably belonged to the last wave of Sarmatians that is archeologically visible. They came mostly from the north-pontic area and they settled in the southern part of Banat. Their funerary characteristics comprised the north – south orientation, flat graves, the presence among the grave goods of weapons, ritual vessels, and rich funerary clothing garments in the case of women (numerous beads, pendants, *Cypraea* shells, bells, „Dosenförmigefibel”, box – shaped brooches, circular brooches with anthropomorphic representation – human faces) of eastern, Roman and Germanic influence equally. In case of these graves, the ceramic vessels were put at the

feet, but especially at the head-area. The necropolises from Vatina – *Bele Vode*, Vršac – *Crvenka*, Vršac – *Dvorište Eparhie Banata* are representatives for this group.

With the 4th century AD, especially towards its end, the Roman interest and influence for the Carpathian Basin had gradually decreased and different populations, Iranians and Germanics appeared. The archaeological findings have more and more a „Barbarian” and “Eastern” nature²³, but this represents another historical stage in the history of Banat.

At the present moment, based on the funerary archaeological findings we can propose a chronology of the Sarmatian culture in the Banat, and indicate the funerary characteristics of each group. Our attempt is based mostly on the archaeological discoveries and the correspondence analyses. Hopefully, in the future stable isotope analyses and soil analyses will also be possible, very necessary to the funerary archaeology. In addition, a study of the Sarmatian settlements should double the present study on the cemeteries.

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²³ Vaday 1994, 105.

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