

E. Istvánovits, V. Kulcsár, *Sarmatians: History and Archaeology of a Forgotten People* (Monographien des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums. Band 123), Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, Mainz 2017 (ISBN 978-3-88467-237-2), 501 pages, 329 figures*

The monograph's aim is to make a comprehensive history – for a large audience – of the Sarmatian tribes in antiquity and their further influence in the history of medieval and modern Europe. The vast geographical region discussed by the authors is stretching from the Eurasian steppes to the Great Hungarian Plain, with ramification in Central Europe, Western Europe, and Eastern Asia. The book is divided in three main parts: *Sarmatians of the Steppe*, *Sarmatians in the Carpathian Basin* and *Sarmatians after the Sarmatian Period*, some introductory chapters (*Preface*, *Introduction*, *The Geography of the Region*), and final remarks or annexes (*Afterword*, *Bibliography*, *Abbreviations*, *Indexes*).

In the short *Preface* of the book, Falko Daim summarized the most important Sarmatian discoveries from Russia and Ukraine and concluded that “For the first time since 1970, the fascinating and rich legacy of the Sarmatians from the second half of the 1st millennium BC to the first half of the 1st millennium AD is made accessible in a western language”.¹ Practically in this new monograph E. Istvánovits and V. Kulcsár – prestigious specialists in the archaeology and history of the Sarmatians – provide an important gateway in the current state of research, dominated in the last decades by the Russians and Ukrainians historians. This aspect is underlined in a brief *Introduction*, where the two

authors explain why the Sarmatians are a “*forgotten people*” in Europe: “*European archaeological and historical studies, by and large, tend to ignore the Sarmatians, the only exceptions being Russian and Ukrainian scholars*” (p. 2).

The chapter dedicated to *The Geography of the Region* is very important for an apprentice and even for a less familiar scholar in the geography of Inner Asia, Central Asia, the temperate steppe zone, the Caucasus, the Crimean Peninsula, and the Carpathian Basin. All the geographical and historical data are accompanied by suggestive and very helpful maps (Fig. 2–10). Furthermore, the illustrations – essential in an archaeological study – are impeccable and very attractive throughout the entire volume.

The main parts of the monograph are dealing with the Iranian-speaking people of the Steppe (p. 15–181: *Sarmatians on the Steppe*) and of the Carpathian Basin (p. 183–397: *Sarmatians in the Carpathian Basin*). The chapter dedicated to East Sarmatia deals with important topics of the Cimmerians, Scythians, Maeotians, Sarmatians ethnogenesis and history. Although these issues were highly debated in literature, there are still many unanswered question (especially for the chronology of the Sarmatian culture – see Tab. 1, p. 32). Based on literary sources², archaeological finds, physical anthropology and contemporary historical theories, E. Istvánovits and V. Kulcsár emphasized that:

– The Sauromatae/Sarmatians were the

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¹ In 1970 Tadeuzs Sulimirski published the monograph: T. Sulimirski, *The Sarmatians. Ancient Peoples and Places*, Southampton 1970. Since then, few monographs have been written in western languages, and usually related with the Roman imports found in the Sarmatians environment north of the Black Sea, for example: B. A. Raev, *Roman Imports in the Lower Don Basin*, Oxford 1986 or Al. Simonenko, I. I., Marčenko, N. Ju. Limberis, *Römische Importe in sarmatischen und maiotischen Gräbern zwischen Unterer Donau und Kuban* (Archäologie in Eurasien 25), Verlag Philipp von Zabern Mainz 2008.

² Even though the authors analyse in detail a large part of the early sources, we must emphasize that the first references of the Sarmatian people are fragmentary and give little specific information. Only the later texts contain more detailed facts, after the region became the scene of political activity involving Rome and its important enemy: Mithridates VI Eupator, see V. Mordvinceva, *The Sarmatians: The Creation of Archaeological Evidence*, in Oxford Journal of Archaeology 32(2), 2013, 203–219 and V. Stolba, *Demograficheskaya situatsiya v Krymu v V–II vv. do n.e. (po dannym pismennykh istochnikov)*, in Peterburgskiy arheologicheskii vestnik 6, 1993, 56–61.

descendants of the Scythians and their ethnogenesis took place on the steppe extending between the Don, the Volga and the Ural Rivers (p. 30) and both groups (Scythian/Sauromatians) are direct descendants of the Kurgan cultures (p. 43);

- The name *Sauromatae* and *Sarmatians* denotes variants of one and the same people (p. 53)³;

- The Sarmatian assemblage firstly appeared in the Caucasian foreland (Kuban region) in the second half of the 4th c. BC (p. 66);

- The Sarmatians advance westward (in the 3rd c. BC) and the fact that the Scythians were engaged in a war on two fronts (against the Sarmatians and the Celts) led to the fall of the Scythian empire (p. 78);

- The Sarmatian populations (the Urgi, the Iazyges and the Royal Sarmatians) had settled west of the Dnieper at least by the early 1st c. BC at the least (p. 88);

- The Sarmatian influence can be seen in the Crimean finds from the 2nd c. BC to the mid-3rd c. AD, and they reach these area from the Don-Dnieper interfluvium (p. 97);

- The Sarmatian movements of the 1st c. BC–1st c. AD were influenced by the pressure of the Alans from the east and the weakening of the Getan-Dacian-Bastarnian control west of the Dnieper (p. 114).

The elite burials of the 1st c.-mid 2nd c. AD were also analysed in this main chapter. The outstanding burials from Porogi (Moldavia), Sokolova Mogila (Ukraine), Nogajčik (the single representative of this burial type in the Crimea), Hohlač, Sadovyj, Kobjakovo, Dači, Vysočino, Zubovskij-Vozdviženskaja and Zolotoe Kladbišče (Russia) are associated especially with the Aorsi tribes (p. 131).

In the 1st c. AD the Alans also appeared in the northern Pontic region. In analysing the origin and evolution of these complex tribes, E. Istvánovits and V. Kulcsár presents the existing theories, but as usual they are cautious in interpretations: “*we must be aware that we can never be quite certain whether the term Alan is an umbrella term for the peoples in the Alan tribal alliance or whether it denotes the genuine Alans after whom the coalition was named. (The*

same holds true for every nomadic people, such as the Scythians, the Saka, the Massagetae, the Sarmatians, the Huns, the Turks, etc.”, p. 145–146).

This important part of the book (*Sarmatians on the Steppe*) ends with the Late Sarmatian period, with discussions on population movement in the 3rd–4th c. AD, the global crises of the 3rd c. AD (which coincided with the Hunnic, Gothic and Sassanian expansions), the arrival of Alans and Germanic groups in the Crimean Peninsula, and the spread of the so-called Sântana de Mureș-Černeahov Culture. From my point of view and my research interest, one of the most important conclusions of this chapter is that there was a direct correlation between the depopulation of the Dnieper-Dniester interfluvium (after the Marcomannic-Sarmatian Wars) and the Sarmatian population expansion in the Carpathian Basin in the late 2nd–3rd c. AD (p. 170).

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The second main part of the monograph, the chapter *Sarmatians in the Carpathian Basin*, starts with a significant remark: “*Although countless studies have been devoted to these problems [the Sarmatians arrival in the Carpathian Basin] a convincing answer is still lacking, even for the most important questions*” (p. 183). Thus the author re-examined the information provided by the ancient authors, the disputes in the literature about the moment when the Sarmatians arrived, the route they followed and the causes of the migrations. The jewellery belonging to the so-called “golden horizon” – earrings, lunulas, dress ornaments (flitters), torcs, beads, etc. – are also discussed. The authors’ conclusion is that the Sarmatians came around 20 AD, following a route through southern present day Romania⁴, and we cannot exclude the possibility that the Romans had organized the migration of Iazygian *metanastae* (transplanted) in order to establish a buffer state in the Carpathian Basin. Very important are the observations regarding the first Sarmatians artifacts recorded: “*Surprisingly, the highest number of finds analogous to the Hungarian gold horizon are found*

³ We would like to add the impressive work (both in linguistics and classical archaeology) of S. R. Tokhtašev, omitted in the bibliography section (for example S. R. Tokhtašev, *Problema skijskogo jazyka v sovremennoj nauke*, in V. Cojocaru (ed.), *Ethnic Contacts and Cultural Exchanges North and West of the Black Sea from the Greek Colonization to the Ottoman Conquest*, Iași 2005, 59–108 or S. R. Tokhtašev, *Sauromatae–Sarmatae–Syrmatiae*, *Khersonesskij sbornik* 14, 2005, 291–306).

⁴ In fact, the route followed by the Sarmatian is still problematic, and at p. 191, E. Istvánovits and V. Kulcsár mention that: “*the migration could have taken both a northern and a southern route*”. See a recent discussion also in V. Bărcă, *The Dating of the Sarmatian Grave at Sânnicolau Mare – Seliște (Timiș County, Romania) and the Problem of the Early Sarmatian Entry and Settlement of the Pannonian Plain*, *Ephemeris Napocensis* XXVI 2016, 7–66.

in the Late Scythian burial grounds of the Crimea (...) At the same time, jewellery of this type is conspicuously rare in the Lower Danube (in the Republic of Moldova and the Odessa region, i. e. the Budžac steppe). This is all the more surprising because the first lazygian groups are assumed to have migrated to the Carpathian Basin from this region” (p. 206).

The relations of the Sarmatians with their neighbours (the Dacians, the Celts and especially the Romans) are also analysed in this chapter. Already in 73 AD, a cavalry unit (*ala I Tungrorum Frontaniana*) was stationed at *Aquincum*, a troop very capable in fighting with a mobile population like the Sarmatians. The Roman military strategy will be definitely established on the Dacian-Pannonia limes during the 2nd c. AD. The organization of the east-Pannonian and west-Dacian borders indicates that the Romans were prepared to face highly mobile populations, with some nomadic features, groups which were a threat to the Danubian provinces. Thus, in camps from western Dacia Superior and east Pannonia Inferior were stationed cavalry troops of Syrian and African archers, such as *cohors I miliaria Hemesenorum Aurelia Antoniniana sagittaria equitata civium Romanorum* (at Intercisa), *cohors I Sagittariorum, numerus palmyrenorum Tibiscensium* (at Tibiscum), *cohors II Flavia Comagenorum sagittariorum, numerus maurorum Miciensium* (at Micia), etc. – an army highly specialised in fighting the steppe people.⁵

In addition, the authors discuss the “Dacian problem”, the Dacian-Roman wars, the positioning of the Sarmatians in these conflicts and the outcomes: the establishment of the Dacia province (106 AD), “a hydracephalous extension of the Empire” (p. 232) and the creation of a new powerful enemy: the Sarmatians. Thus, after the provincialization of Dacia the number of Sarmatians increased in the Hungarian Plain, suggesting the arrival of new population groups from the steppe, perhaps the Roxolani (p. 254).

The authors have made an exhaustive analysis of the archaeological material from the first decades of the 2nd c. AD until the Marcomanic Wars, a material characterized by the North-Pontic, Roman and Dacian (the latter to a smaller extent) influences: the strongly profiled brooches (especially the anchor and fantail varieties), mirrors, torqs,

pendants (especially the knobbed rings and the so-called pocket-microcosm pendants), and ceramics. Until now, it was considered that the Sarmatians ceramic that originated in the Carpathian Basin was a combination and a product derived from technical and stylistic elements of Dacian, Celtic and especially Roman traditions⁶. E. Istvánovits and V. Kulcsár propose another intriguing hypothesis: “At the same time, the best analogies to the ceramics of the Sarmatians of the Hungarian Plain, regarding both vessel forms and their manufacturing technique, can be found in the Maeotian territory. It is possible that the pottery wheel reached the barbarians of the Danube region from the Greek towns on the Pontic, as it did in the case of the Scythians a few hundred years earlier” (p. 247).

The Great Marcommanic-Sarmatian Wars brought a new stage in the history of the Hungarian Plain and the Lower Danube. E. Istvánovits and V. Kulcsár have drawn the attention to the fact that although there is an abundant literature on the causes, course and consequences of the war, far less is known about this period that one would expect in views of its importance. Also, the authors analysed the important role that the Sarmatians had occupied during the conflicts, the peace treaties and the military fronts. The state of instability caused by the Marcomannic Wars would have led Marcus Aurelius to take into account (in the year 177 AD) the possibility of creating two new provinces: *Sarmatia* and *Marcomannia*⁷. In reality, these provinces were never created and the lazyges were about to receive more and more privileges from the emperor, including the right to restore trade links with the Roxolans and the North-Pontic region, through Dacia. So “The entire territory of the Carpathian Basin never came under Roman rule which in our opinion, determined its history to this very day as a region poised on the boundary between east and west” (p. 273). With the period of

⁵ M. B. Shchukin was among the first to notice that “the Danubian frontier was defended from the mid-1st century onwards by cavalry forces, which were capable of dealing with lazigian horsemen” (M. B. Shchukin, *Rome and the Barbarians in Central and Eastern Europe. 1st Century B.C. – 1st Century A.D.* Oxford 1989, 225).

⁶ See for example the theory of A. Vaday, D. B. Jankovich, L. Kovács, in *Archaeological investigations in County Békés 1986–1992*, Budapest, 2011, 232: “Sarmatian pottery in the form found in the Carpathian Basin emerged as a combination of Dacian, Celtic and Roman stylistic elements. In this sense, Sarmatian ceramics from Barbaricum can be regarded as derivative. On the other hand, distinctions must be made between pieces of pottery where the origins of their shapes can be recognized in the form of stylistic influence, and ceramics that were consciously made copies of other vessels. Through time, imitations often deviate from the original type that inspired their manufacture in the first place”.

⁷ SHA, Marc. 24. 5–6: He [Marcus Aurelius] wished to make a province of Marcomannia and likewise of Sarmatia, and he would have done so had not Avidius Cassius just then raised a rebellion in the East.

the Marcomannic Wars, new types of rituals (the custom of enclosing graves with a ditch), objects (buckles, strap ends, weapons, countless beads, Germanic articles, etc.) and *gentes*⁸ appeared in the Great Hungarian Plain. Also Roman products appear *en masse* from the late 2nd c. onward, as well as an immense quantity of *denarii*. E. Istvánovits and V. Kulcsár noticed that most hoards were not hidden during the Marcomannic Wars, but much later, in the early 190s, fact which is not explained (p. 281), but they draw attention to the fact that the economic and commercial role of Dacia is often underestimated in literature: “*One contentious point in research on the Roman-Sarmatian trade is the role of Dacia. Most scholars focus on contacts with Pannonia, even though the mass import of Dacian beads and the possible shipments of iron from that region indicate an important but hitherto neglected field of research*” (p. 283). This overlooking is due to the fact that Roman-provincial archaeology had a slow development in Romania. In the last years except some sites (for example *Apulum* or *Porolissum*)⁹, the majority of Roman urban-settlements were not excavated or they had short scale excavations. Therefore, we have limited information about the economic life in Roman Dacia or the products originating in local workshops.

Also, in the years of Dacia's evacuation little is known from the written sources about the history of the neighbouring barbarian *gentes*. Not only Dacia was lost, but Pannonia was devastated far more devastating than during the Marcomannic-Sarmatian Wars. Also, the Sarmatians had become extremely dangerous neighbours after the evacuation of Dacia (p. 297). The Sarmatian power-centre shifted to the east-north-east of the Hungarian Plain (attested by the warrior graves from Geszteréd, Tiszalök or Herpály).

After this “transition period” the political

landscape of the Carpathian Basin changed and the Sarmatians had new neighbours: different Gothic tribes. The 4th century AD was full of internal and external conflicts in the Sarmatian society. Based on the archaeological data, the two authors reject a Vandal or Gepidic permanent presence in the Hungarian Plain but are aware of the fundamental transformation in the Roman-Sarmatians relations in the late antiquity. Unfortunately in contrast to the richness of the documentary evidence (especially Ammianus Marcellinus), the dating of the late artefacts is still problematic, with the exception of the coins and the onion headed brooches.

An important chapter of the monograph is dedicated to the Late Antiquity and to the rule of the Huns on the Hungarian Plain, when “*the roughly one-and-a-half-thousand kilometres long frontier extending from the Danube Bend to the Pontic suddenly became a single continuous military frontline*” (p. 367). The Sarmatian population was rapidly integrated in the Hunnic conglomerate, probably facilitated by the linguistic kinship. Thus, the Sarmatians did not disappear and their presence could be proved even in the 5th c. AD by a rich and colourful material (glass vessels, jewellery, beads or pottery)¹⁰. In north of the Hungarian Plain some Germanic groups also arrived at the turn of the 4th and 5th c. AD. Therefore, A. Vaday believes contrary, that the attribution of artefacts to well-defined ethnic groups is problematic, because of the „Barbarization” and „Orientalization” of the Great Hungarian Plain material¹¹.

The last main chapter of the monograph is dedicated to the topic *Sarmatians After the Sarmatian Period*. Here it is discussed the survival of the Sarmatian legacy from the Hun period to the present, both in Eurasian Steppe (Crimea, Caucasus) and in Western Europe (Britain). The “relics” of Alans are searched and found in the archaeological material (Maeotian swords, mirrors, etc.), in byzantine literary sources, medieval epic traditions, Hungarian chronicles or Arthurian legends. The fascination for these nomadic tribes in the late medieval/early modern period is best illustrated by the “*Polish Sarmatism*”, a belief shared by Polish aristocracy in the 16th – 18th centuries that they were descendants of the Sarmatian tribes.

⁸ Smaller groups, such as: Alans, the so-called Azov-Hévízgyörk-Vizesdpusztá group, elites from the Don Delta, inhabitants of the Crimea and the north-western Pontic region/Budžak Steppe, and the Vandal groups of the Przeworsk culture.

⁹ See for example the recent publications of C.H. Opreanu/V.A. Lăzărescu, *A Roman Frontier Marketplace at Porolissum in the Light of Numismatic Evidence*, Cluj-Napoca – Zalău, 2015; S. Cociș, *Fibelwerkstätten im römischen Dakien* in H. U. Voss, N. Müller-Scheeßel, *Archäologie zwischen Römern und Barbaren. Zur Datierung und Verbreitung römischer Metallarbeiten des 2. und 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. im Reich und im Barbaricum – ausgewählte Beispiele* (Gefäße, Fibeln, Bestandteile militärischer Ausrüstung, Kleingerät, Münzen). Beiträge des Internationalen Kolloquiums in Frankfurt am Main, vom 19. bis 22. März 2009, 2017, 511–520 (with further bibliography).

¹⁰ Furthermore, E. Istvánovits, V. Kulcsár believe that “*a huge mass of this population [Sarmatic/Alanic] lived on the Hungarian Plain during the 5th century and there can be no doubt that they lived to see Gepidic rule*” (419).

¹¹ A. Vaday, *Late Sarmatian graves and their connections within The Great Hungarian Plain*, Slovenská Archeológia, XLII/1, 1994, 105–124.

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This monograph offers a good access in the fascinating history of the Sarmatians tribes and an excellent overview of the current state of research concerning the antiquities of the entire Eurasian area. Besides, a good part of the book is based on unpublished extensive excavations made by E. Istvánovits and V. Kulcsár in Hungary.

The questions that should be asked now are: what to do next in the Sarmatian research? How to make a step forward, beyond the descriptive methods and the writing of monographs? One answer came from the same authors, and now E. Istvánovits and V. Kulcsár are coordinating an NKFI grant (2017–2021) entitled *Online publication of Roman and Hun Period burials from the Barbaricum of the Carpathian Basin/ A Kárpát-medencei Barbaricum császárkori és kora népvándorláskori temetkezéseinek online publikációja*. The main objective of this team-project¹² is to have a data base with all the Sarmatian and Hunnic graves from the Carpathian Basin in order to finally obtain a clear chronology in this part of *Barbaricum* based on all the funerary discoveries. In the absence of such serialisations, various types of artifacts are dated subjectively.

Another path – a more critical one – was chosen by the Russian scholars. A. Ivantchik disapproved with the matriarchal/gynaecocratic interpretations of the Sarmatian society and the Amazon ideology in the modern literature, art and history¹³. V. Mordvinceva questions the literary sources, because they are an „outside view”, thus limited to the interests of ancient authors and

their audience. Furthermore, she considers that the Sarmatian history and archaeology was often vulnerable to the subjective explanatory models or backgrounds and the contemporary scholars often used the Rostovtzeff model: “the idea of long-distance migration from the East”¹⁴. In consequence if something new appeared in ancient Eastern Europe cultures they are explained as being related to new Sarmatian waves coming from the Eurasian Steppes or even further¹⁵.

In conclusion, the present volume will be an indispensable tool for anyone working on the Sarmatian peoples and adjacent neighbours from the entire Eurasian continent. The new database initiated by E. Istvánovits and V. Kulcsár (*Online publication of Roman and Hun Period burials from the Barbaricum of the Carpathian Basin*) shows the way forward.

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¹² See more on <http://nyilvanos.otka-palyazat.hu/index.php?menuid=930&lang=HU&num=124944>; the author of this review is also a team member.

¹³ See A. Ivantchik, *Amazonen, Skythen und Sauromaten: Alte und moderne Mythen*, in: *Amazonen zwischen Griechen und Skythen. Gegenbilder in Mythos und Geschichte*, in Ch. Schubert, A. Weiß (ed.), *Beiträge zur Altertumskunde*, 310, Berlin-New York, 2013, 73–87, especially p. 73: “Die am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts sehr populäre Vorstellung vom Matriarchat wurde auch in die marxistische Ideologie integriert, woraus sich ihre große Rolle in der sowjetischen Forschung erklärt (...) Die Identifizierung der Sauromaten und Sarmaten mit den Amazonen scheint so unbezweifelbar, dass einige in den letzten Jahren organisierte Ausstellungen der sarmatischen Kunst sogar Namen wie L’or des Amazones (Paris, 2001) trugen“, and p. 74: „Heute allerdings wird dieser Mythos von einem anderen modernen Mythos verdrängt. Mit dem Wachsen des politischen Einflusses des Feminismus und der Ideen der Gleichberechtigung der Geschlechter finden sich immer öfter in der Literatur Betrachtungen über die Gesellschaft der eurasiatischen Nomaden, in der angeblich eine solche Gleichberechtigung existiert und eine Arbeitsteilung zwischen den Geschlechtern gefehlt habe“.

¹⁴ Mordvinceva, *op. cit.*, 205–207.

¹⁵ V. Mordvintseva, *Die Sarmaten und Phaleren des graphischen Stils im nördlichen Schwarzmeergebiet* (3.–1. Jh. v. Chr.). *Fragen zur kulturellen Zugehörigkeit*, in J. Apakidze [et al], *Der Schwarzmeerraum vom Äneolithikum (1) bis in die Früheisenzeit (5000–500 v. Chr.)*. Kommunikationsebenen zwischen Kaukasus und Karpaten. Internationale Fachtagung von Humboldtianern für Humboldtianer im Humboldt-Kolleg in Tiflis/Georgien (17.–20. Mai 2007). *Prähistorische Archäologie in Südosteuropa*. Leidorf, 2009, 228–238, especially p. 237: “Wenn es einige neue Züge in irgendeiner osteuropäischen archäologischen Kultur gibt, werden sie damit erklärt, dass sie mit der neuen, von Osten kommenden sarmatischen Welten zusammenhängen”.