

The Dacian and Prehistoric Fortresses and Dwellings at Măgura Șimleului (Șimleu Silvaniei, Sălaj District)

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Lying on the western half of Sălaj district, on the north of the Depression of Șimleu, Măgura Șimleului can be observed like a little mountain with steep and hard to climb slopes at south and west, while both the northern and eastern slopes have leisurely inclines. Dominating the surrounding region with its height (its maximal altitude being of 597 m) and area (about 100 km²) Măgura Șimleului was not only a major strategic position in time but also a micro-zone extremely favourable to human life¹. Nowadays being surrounded today by five localities, Măgura Șimleului became a well-known site in the historic literature because of some accidental discoveries made at the end of the 18th century and during the following ones.

The archaeological diggings made in several places of the Măgura (Șimleu Silvaniei - "Centrul orașului", "Cetate", "Observator", "Uliul cel Mic"; Cehei - "Mesig"; Giurtelecu Șimleului - "Coasta lui Damian")² during the last half of our century, although superficially taken into account, led by the beginning in 1992 to a wide project of investigation over the entire ensemble of discoveries either by surface reconnaissances of the region or by systematically diggings at "Cetate" and "Observator".

The prehistoric archaeological materials from Măgura Șimleului discovered incidentally or with the occasion of archaeological diggings begin to be published as early as the end of the last century³. During the 50's of our century, scarce tests on different spots throughout the whole Măgura Șimleului were performed⁴. The results of the tests remained however unpublished. In order to obtain a general image on the evolution of the human prehistoric communities within this area it was necessary to begin performing systematic diggings in a few places ("Cetate", "Observator"). Concomitantly, surface tests were made in order to spot new sites.

So far, the only discoveries made on Măgura Șimleului to be dated around Early Bronze Age are those of the Coțofeni culture. There have been discovered artefacts characteristic to the 2nd and 3rd Coțofeni in three spots of the area of Măgura Șimleului (Șimleu Silvaniei - "Ferma pomicolă nr. 9"⁵, Giurtelecu Șimleului - "Coasta lui Damian"⁶ and Bădăcin - "Dealul Cornet"⁷). The settlements of Giurtelec and Bădăcin are both set on promontories, while the one of Șimleu is set on a valley terrace. There has only been sounded the settlement of Giurtelec, without the publishing of the results.

However, the discoveries dated Middle Bronze Age consist on a far greater number. During this period the Wietenberg culture evolved. So far we have dis-

covered at least ten Wietenberg sites throughout Măgura Șimleului. In the '50 the Wietenberg settlement of Giurtelec was sounded. The settlement was also set on a long, smooth promontory ("Coasta lui Damian"). The actual dimensions of this settlement are around 60x25m. At the foot of the promontory on a plane named "Tărbăcii" an cremation burial of the same culture has been found⁸. In the literature, the settlement of Giurtelec is dated in Wietenberg 3rd phase. However, by studying artefacts taken from this place, we were not able to trace any features to describe Wietenberg 3rd phase (the winding decoration lack in each case) as one of the head features of the Wietenberg 2nd phase are decorations.

In 1992 systematic diggings begun on the "Cetate" place where Wietenberg materials had been found since as early as last century. The "Cetate" hill is a knoll-shaped, steep hill with a max. height of 370 m. In the north, it is linked to the massif of the Măgura Șimleului by a saddle, about 100 m long and 30 m wide. After the five diggings campaigns a small amount of Wietenberg materials resulted⁹. We have not discovered any complex to belong to this culture, and if there is any, it must have been destroyed during the Latène Age in some further attempts to fit out the hill. Otherwise, the place is relatively unsuitable for habitation (waterless, exposed to winds), but an easily place to defend. That is why we tend to explain the presence of Wietenberg materials by the existence of a refuge fortress. While digging on the linking saddle, there have been detected the traces of a few defence works. One of them seems to belong to the Bronze Age, as further investigations are required in order to obtain hard evidence on this matter. It is possible for the knoll to have been surrounded by a simple stockade during that period. The settlement to which this fortress belonged was set along the two valleys which run to the east and to the west side of the "Cetate" hill and also on the present central area of the town Șimleu Silvaniei, throughout the bank of the river Crasna. In order to build the fortress, terraces were fitted out along the two valleys, as their banks were very steep. On these terraces, there have often been found Wietenberg and Dacian artefacts during town works. The urn incineration necropolis uncovered in 1898 near by, on the "Várkert" place, must have belonged to this settlement¹⁰.

The Wietenberg culture stops to evolve on the area of Măgura Șimleului in its 3rd phase, because of the western penetration of the Cehăluț group¹¹. This happened actually to the whole Wietenberg sites in the Depression of Șimleu. So, on this area there are no Wietenberg 4th phase settlements. During a recent digging in the centre of Șimleu this succession has been stratigraphically revealed. The level of Wietenberg 3rd phase is directly overlapped by the one of the Cehăluț group. Materials belonging to the Cehăluț group have been found in five spots of the Măgura Șimleului. They were all either close to Crasna (Cehei - "Mesig"¹², Șimleu Silvaniei - "Str. Dunării"¹³) or to some valleys at the foot of Măgura (Șimleu Silvaniei - "Nagy Pista"¹⁴) or they were on the superior plateau of the

Măgura Şimleului (“Observer”¹⁵). As to the funeral discoveries made since Late Bronze Age we can consider a tumulus dug at the end of the last century near Măgura¹⁶. According to the description, the pottery inside the tumulus seems to belong to this period.

From the Hallstatt Age there have been made discoveries in seven places around Măgura Şimleului. All these are disposed around the great hallstattian fortified settlement of “Observer”. The settlement is situated on the high plateau of the Măgura Şimleului and it stretches over about 20-25 ha. Its research debuted in 1994. As a result to the tests performed on the soil surface (as only two digging campaigns have been made) we believe that the fortifying works were erected in several phases. It looks like initially the highest plateaus were fortified and then the fortified area was extended by including in it other areas which were flatter and by blocking the main access paths to the higher part of the knoll. In some places, by extending the defence works a better protection of the water sources was intended (we have discovered at least five springs). So far the Hallstattian defence works has only been sectioned in its western area, where there is an extension blocking the way to an easier acces to reach the zone and also protects the main water sources. The traces of a complex- stockade (about 2,5 m wide) in front of which lied a 2 m wide and 1,3 m deep ditch, have also been found. During the two digging campaigns three dwellings have been found: two hovels and a surface dwelling. The two hovels are circular and have a diameter of about 3 m. The surface dwelling is of a polygonal shape and it has only been partially examined. It was built over wooden supports and its floor was made of trodden clay. All the dwellings within the examined area seemed to lack a fire place. In the south-eastern part of the fortified settlement on one of the edges of a bulldozer made road, we identified the traces of two more hallstattian dwellings. While digging we uncovered 17 more Hallstattian complexes (supply pits, domestic pits, ritual pits). All these elements allow us to presume that on the “Observer” spot lays a fortified Hallstattian settlement and not a refuge fortress. On the examined area the Hallstattian settlement seems consistent so far, displaying at least two Hallstattian levels¹⁷. The proportions of the defence works the surface of the fortifying elements (ditches, walls and stockades), the difficulties implied by the achievement of such great work required a steady activity to a number of rather large communities. We think that the fortified settlement of “Observer” in Şimleu Silvaniei might be linked to the existence of a Thracian tribal union in the north-western part of the Şimleu Depression, as the settlement is surrounded by a few smaller settlements. However more archaeological tests are required in order to verify the chronological relation between these settlements and the great fortified settlement of Măgura Şimleului.

The Dacian Era (the End of the 2-nd century B.C. - the Beginning of the 2-nd century A.D.)

The Dacian complex of settlements and fortresses from the top as well as from the foot of the Măgura Şimleului hill proves to be the most abundant zone in silver treasures on the whole area inhabited by Dacians¹⁸.

This conclusion, based on data gathered only during this century, characterises the Dacian kernel from Şimleu as one of the most important concentrations of Dacian power in the whole Dacian Kingdom.

At least six such treasures consisting of coins, jewels or both are known to belong to the lapse of time between the end of the 2-nd century B.C. and the beginning of the 2-nd century A.D.¹⁹

By its massive shape, made up of central plateaus on the top which were very suitable to be inhabited (springs, grasslands and even lands for tillage), defended by its steep slopes and by fortified places located on smaller periphery hills linked to the central massif by narrow saddles, Măgura Şimleului forms a whole, well put together by Dacian settlements and fortresses.

All of the important discoveries made in the Şimleu depression dated Dacian era are related to this complex.

The most important place of Dacian discoveries is also accessible because of its positioning on the highest plateaus of Măgura Şimleului: the Observer spot, where in spring 1964 a treasure which contained about 100 Dyrhachium - Apollonia type drachmas - was accidentally found²⁰.

After recent archaeological investigations (1994-1995)²¹ resulted that during the classical Dacian era, the highest side of the older Hallstadian settlement was re-used by the Dacians by digging three ditches with rear palisades. The ditches are disposed at variable distances between them, a fact that probably resulted from the gradual enlargement of the fortified area. The exterior defence work stretches on a surface of about 3-4 ha. In this research study, is hard to state what exactly those walls defended. There have been uncovered supply domestic and ritual pits, a surface compartment dwelling with fire place and oven as well as some traces of metallurgic activity (silver, bronze and iron processing). This large, fortified area is visibly secured in its western, southern and eastern side, where surface tests have been performed even more often.

This area is easily to be identified as a refuge defence work or as the kernel of the laic or ecclesiastic aristocracy. Therefore, on the Uliul cel Mic place, there have been uncovered a number of 5-7 ritual pits containing about 50 republican dinars, Dacian silver and bronze jewelry, weapons, tools, pottery and incinerated bones²².

This spot is situated at about 500 metres from Observer (597 metres) and there have been performed archaeological investigations (1978)²³. The spot might also be taken as a modest defence work because of its very steep inclines.

The treasure uncovered in 1986 at Cehei²⁴, containing coins and silver jewelry, is certainly connected to the highest point as an access path. The existence of another treasure has been mentioned by the inhabitants of the hamlet Tău, situated at the northern extreme limit of Măgura Șimleului. In the east, on the Cornet spot, situated over the village Bădăcin, and at the eastern extreme limit of Măgura Șimleului, there has been identified a Dacian settlement laid on terraces. A small fortress on the hill Hempu watches from the western side to this settlement and closes the access to the highest point through many paths from the north and the east.

The southern area of Măgura Șimleului, although harsher, but exposed to sunlight²⁵ is more known due to its location within Șimleu. A large Dacian settlement set on terraces has been discovered at the foot of the Cetate hill, from Măgura Șimleului. It borders the valleys which cross the streets Argeș and Andrei Mureșan.

At the river mouth of the Ciorgău valley (which crosses street Argeș) where it flows into the Crasna river, it has been identified an area of Dacian deposition in ritual pits²⁷.

The acropolis of the mentioned settlement has been identified and systematically recorded on the Cetate hill since 1992. The fortifying of this hill (height-372 metres) was only made during the second half the first century A.D. because unknown reasons (Sarmatian Yazig threat). Two concentric palisades were erected on the superior plateau and beneath it. The external palisade forms a 80 by 60 m diameter oval. In time, this defence work was given up and the saddle which linked the hill to the rest of the knoll was blocked, extending in this way the fortified area²⁸.

On this area, 30 domestic and ritual pits and dwellings disposed on terraces have been uncovered. There have also been found sheds and a workshop to serve to counterfeiting republican Roman dinars of non-precious metals (copper and zinc) by moulding²⁹.

The density of settlements and fortresses on the Măgura Șimleului as well as at its foot should not be considered from a geographical point of view (auspicious climate, southern exposure)³⁰ or a military and strategical one only (as the area overlooks the entire Șimleu depression through its imposing landscape). First of all, its position towards the commercial routes should be noticed. The density of coins and jewelry treasures is not at random. It is very likely for an alternative path of the ancient Salt Route leading from Transilvania towards west to have crossed the Crasna river. On its way, it must have touched the Dacian kernel from Șimleu, which can be identified as the ancient Dacidava mentioned by Ptolemeus³¹, as the placement of the discoveries has not yet been sufficiently valued.

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NOTES

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