

BARBARICUM BEYOND TROESMIS IN ROMAN IMPERIAL PERIOD: A CHANGING CULTURAL MOSAIC

Daniel Spânu

Abstract: Situated in the extreme north of *Moesia* (precisely *Moesia inferior*), the military Roman centre in *Troesmis* was meant from its beginnings to supervise the barbaric world beyond the limes. From a strictly archaeological perspective, the transformations of the cultural mosaic beyond *Troesmis* can be captured by observing the different means of manifestations of three vectors: funerary and depositional practices, and forms of habitat.

Keywords: Late La Tène; Roman period; Poienestî-Lukaševka Culture; Sarmatians; Černjachov Culture; funerary practices; votive depositions; hoards; *oppida*; Romania; *Dacia*.

1. Barbaricum before Troesmis

The period before the beginning of the Roman *Troesmis* finds its correspondent beyond the Danube in a late La Tène culture that the Romanian literature also names “the classic Geto-Dacian culture”¹. In the regions neighbouring the area of this culture (Transylvania and Muntenia), researchers have identified several other distinct cultural groups, such as the group of Padea–Panagjurski Kolonii burials in Oltenia and Northwest Bulgaria, the Poienestî-Lucașevka culture in the centre and north of Moldavia, as well as the group of “Sarmatian” findings along the Lower Danube, in Budjak and Bărăgan (fig. 1).

1.1. The Dacian Late La Tène

The monuments typical for the Dacian late La Tène are small *oppida* settlements², hill-forts³ and jewellery hoards structured as garments⁴. The most representative pieces of precious metal work are the spiral bracelets with terminal plates⁵, fibulae with knobs (germ. 'Knotenfibeln') and spoon-bow fibulae (germ. 'Löffelfibeln')⁶. Just like in some regions of the late La Tène Central Europe, necropoleis are missing and tombs are relatively rare⁷. However, there are a couple of tumulus burials in the

¹ On the notion “classic Geto-Dacian culture” see: Daicoviciu 1972, 340-341; Babeș 1974, 241; Babeș 1979, 18, Babeș 2001f, 760; Babeș 2003, 474 a.o.

² Babeș 1979, 6; Babeș 1982a, a.o.

³ Ștefan 2005, 113-262; cf. Costea *et alii* 2006.

⁴ Horedt 1973; Spânu 2012a.

⁵ Spânu 2010; Spânu 2011.

⁶ Horedt 1973, 131-133 (types A1 and A4); Rustoiu 1997, 31-33 (type 1) and 48-50 (type 16); Spânu 2012a, 42-45 (type 1.4.) and 47-49 (type 2.2.).

⁷ Babeș 1988, 6-7; Sirbu 1993, 21, 71.

* Institute of Archaeology “Vasile Pârvan”, Bucharest, hazdrik@yahoo.com.

vicinity of some *oppida* in South-Eastern *Dacia*, for example in Cugir or Poiana⁸. In some cases, entire or partial human skeletons have been found abandoned in waste pits inside or close to the settlements⁹.

The most original element of the Dacian late La Tène is the monumental facilities in Orăștiei Mountains, especially those on Grădiștii Hill. The sanctuaries, fortifications and mountain terraces in this area are the first attempts to build monumental edifices north of the Lower Danube. The character of these buildings should be understood in relation to coin minting and metallurgy workshops, tool deposits, the outstanding goldsmithery tools and products discovered in the close vicinity of sanctuaries on Grădiștii Hill. The special monuments and inventories discovered on Grădiștii Hill reveal the action of a multi-skilled leading group, as well as the spontaneous access to a technology of Greek-Roman origin. This group was able to propose a repertoire of common signs and symbols to the remaining Dacian communities, thus ensuring a possible religious supremacy. The silver reproductions in different pre-Roman *Dacia* areas of the patterns recognizable in the gold bracelets found at Grădiștea de Munte reflect the primary influence of this centre on the regional symbolical expression.

The inventory of the *oppida*-settlements reflects the development of ceramic and metal production. Handmade pottery is still widespread, but the wheel-made pottery became increasingly popular. This technique, bearing influences of both southern (Hellenistic) and western (Celtic) origin, gained popularity across the region. The most specific wares of the late La Tène period in *Dacia* are the handmade slender pots with waist and handles and the bowls on tall foot (fruit bowls) made of grey clay on the pottery wheel. A particular interest in cups with embossed decoration casted in moulds was manifest in Southern *Dacia*.

Strangely, except for some findings in Poiana or Ocnița, most monuments representative for this cultural environment (*oppida*, hoards, tumuli) date back to the middle of the 1st century AD. In other words, the “Dacian” cultural mark drastically fades away in the decades before (!) Trajan’s conquest of *Dacia*¹⁰, respectively when the Roman military begins to be present in *Troesmis*.

1.2. The Padea - Panagjurski Kolonii Group

Located in Oltenia and in Northwest Bulgaria (Fig. 1), the Padea - Panagjurski Kolonii cultural group is characterised by small groups of incineration tombs or isolated incineration tombs, the inventories of which consist of weaponry and harness items¹¹. The funerary rituals of this group show the concern for making heroes of the deceased by depicting them as warriors on horseback. The representative artefacts include long curved daggers, spearheads, sometimes swords and bits. All these illustrate a particular development of bronze and iron working, as well as the adoption of a funerary and symbolic language similar to that in the *Scordisci* necropoleis (Serbia). The *Scordisci* influences were however manifest on an older symbolic background of Thracian origin. Nevertheless, some funerary inventories of this group (e.g. Dubova) also reveal close connections with the cultural environment in Transylvania. In the current research stage, the settlements in the Padea - Panagjurski Kolonii area are less known, and the depositional practices were less developed than those in the late La Tène in Transylvania. Whereas the end of the Padea - Panagjurski Kolonii group in the regions south to the Danube may be correlated with the establishment of Roman garrisons in *Moesia*, the concurrent termination of burials north of the Danube was probably due to internal causes. Anyway, the Padea -

⁸ Crișan 1993, 245-246 - cf. Spănu 2001-2001 (2004), 123, note 160. - Spănu 2012b, 166-174.

⁹ Babeș 1988; Sîrbu 1993; Babeș 2001.

¹⁰ Horedt 1973 ș.a.

¹¹ Zirra 1976; Spănu 2001-2002 (2004).

Panagjurski Kolonii funerary rituals did not survive past the 1st century AD. The inclusion of *Moesia Superior* in the Roman Empire marked the latest date of this cultural group's dissolution.

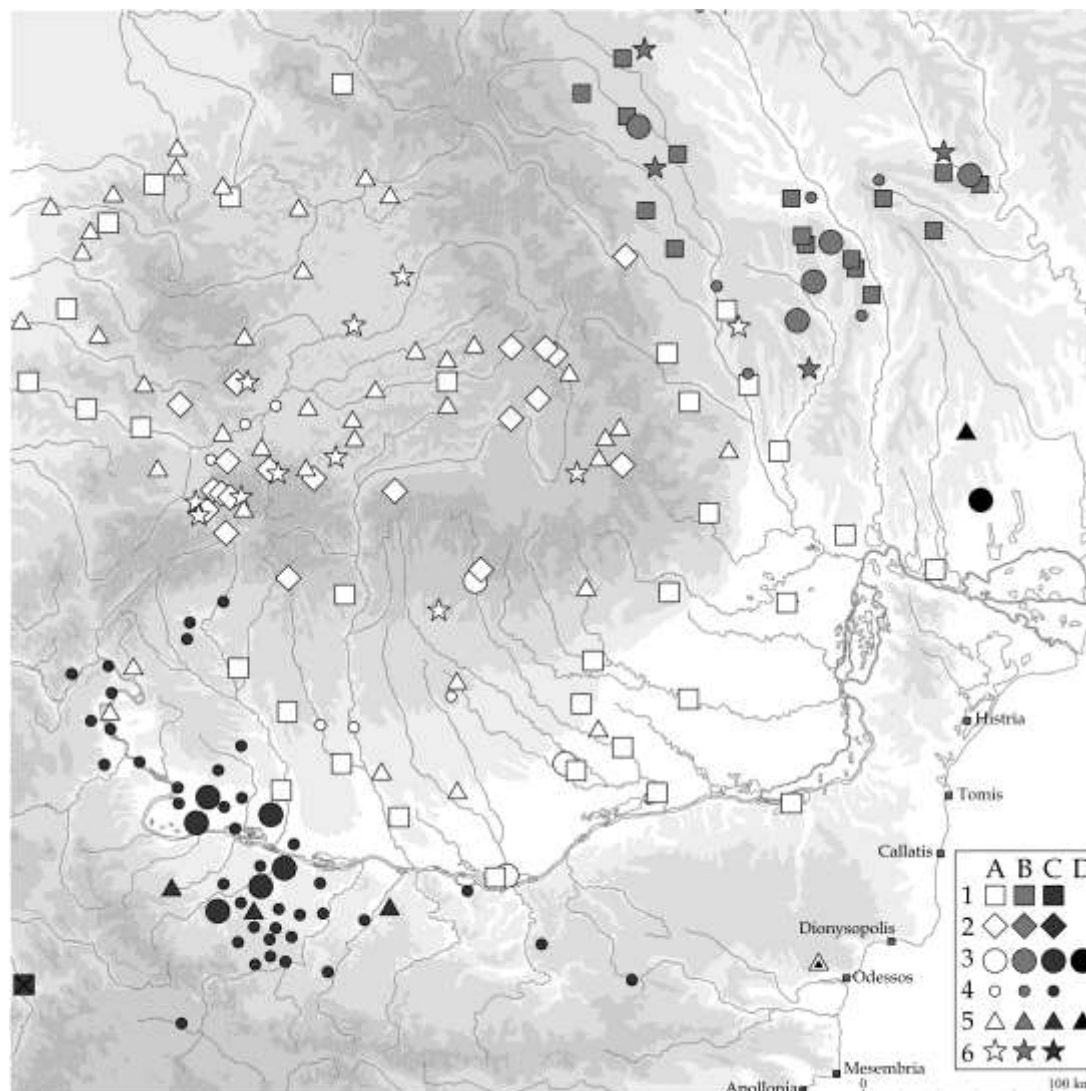


Fig. 1: Barbaricum before *Troesmis*; Late La Tène cultural groups in pre-Roman *Dacia* and surrounding areas. Legend capital letters: A late La Tène culture in pre-Roman *Dacia*; B Poieniști-Lukaševka culture; C Padea - Panagjurski Kolonii group; D Sarmatian finds. Legend numbers: 1 settlements; 2 hill-forts; 3 necropolis; 4 isolated graves/small groups of graves; 5 jewelry hoards; 6 deposits (by D. Spănu).

1.3. The Poieniști-Lucașeuca Culture

The Poieniști-Lucașeuca (also spelled Poieniști-Lukaševka)¹² culture, created after the beginning of the 2nd century B.C., reveals the settlement of some early Germanic populations (*Bastarnae*) from the Lower Vistula area in the hilly regions of Eastern Carpathians. The most representative monuments of this culture are the plane incineration necropoleis (Borosești, Poieniști, Dolineani, Lucașeuca, **fig. 1**), where human remains were deposited in urns made by hand out of a carefully smoothed black paste. The wheel-making technique of vessels is attested by the settlement inventory, but the exclusive handmade funerary ceramic reflects the ritual conditioning of a conservative technology. The funerary

¹² Babeș 1993.

inventories comprise middle and late La Tène fibulae, iron and bronze buckles, sometimes small knives (toilet-knives probably) and tweezers. Weapons are totally lacking from funerary inventories. The settlements are not as large and complex as the *oppida*, and Greek and Roman imports are rare. Furthermore, in the Poieniști-Lucașeuca area, the depositional practices are scarcely used. The reasons for the abandonment of the Poieniști-Lucașeuca necropoleis are still uncertain in the current stage of research. The main elements for dating these necropoleis indicate the latter ceased to be used at the turn of the century.

1.4. The beginnings of the Sarmatian group on the Lower Danube

It is in this controversial time that the bearers of different burial rituals of Sarmatian type arrive in the plains north of the Lower Danube. Literary sources mention the *Roxolani* in the proximity of the river since the beginning of 1st century AD (e.g. Ovidius, *Tristia* III. 3. 5-6, III. 10. 5, IV. 1. 94, V. 7. 60; Strabo VII. 3. 13, 17). However, some researchers (like Gheorghe Bichir) place the penetration of the Sauromatians in Southern Moldavia and Eastern Muntenia only after the fall of the Dacian kingdom (106 AD)¹³. Nevertheless, other authors, like Radu Harhoiu and Mircea Babeș emphasized a series of elements that lead to accepting an earliest presence of the “Sarmatian” burials, dating back to the middle of the 1st century AD (e.g. Căndești - grave 71 or Tutova)¹⁴. The typical “Sarmatian” monuments consist of small groups of inhumation tombs oriented north-south, spread almost exclusively on plains¹⁵. Some inventories of these graves are particularly spectacular (e.g. Porogi, “Buzău-1941”, Medeleni – grave 1)¹⁶. In these tombs dating from the late 1st century AD, we find golden filigree jewellery, mirrors with tamgha, beads, sometimes weapons etc.

2. Cultural reconfigurations after the Roman conquest of *Dacia*

The Roman conquest of *Dacia* (107 AD) triggered a reconfiguration of the regional cultural mosaic even beyond the *limes* (fig. 2). The local cultural expressions faded away, and the Dacian regions turned into peripheral areas of some distinct cultural blocs, such as the Roman Empire and the Eurasian Steppe. In the shadow of the new province founded by the Emperor Trajan there were two distinct groups, reflecting different degrees of the acculturation process of the communities from Eastern-Carpathian Barbaricum to the Roman provincial cultural models: the “Chilia-Militari” group in Central-West Muntenia¹⁷ and “Poieniști-Vârțișcoiu” group in Central and South-West Moldavia¹⁸ (fig. 2). Both of them date back to the 2nd century and the first half of the 3rd century AD. In this new cultural context, the *oppida* settlements beyond the *limes* are abandoned and the depositional ritual of burying garment-hoards disappears. The Sarmatian funerary expression continues to dominate the plains close to the Lower Danube, being particularly present in this period¹⁹.

2.1. The Poieniști-Vârțișcoiu Group

The “Poieniști-Vârțișcoiu” group is special thanks to its plane necropoleis (e.g. Poieniști, Văleni)²⁰ in which the adults deceased were incinerated, while the young deceased were inhumed. The funerary inventories contain good quality grey wheel-made pottery, silver filigree pendants, strongly profiled fibulae (germ. 'kräftig profilierte Fibeln'), fibulae with high catch-plate (germ. 'Fibeln mit hohem

¹³ Bichir 1977; Bichir 1993; Bichir 1996; Oța, Sîrbu 2009, 178-182; Oța, Sîrbu 2010; Oța, Sîrbu 2014b, 131.

¹⁴ Harhoiu 1993; Babeș 1999; Bobi 1987.

¹⁵ Grosu 1995; Oța, Sîrbu 2009; Oța, Sîrbu 2014a; Oța, Sîrbu 2014b.

¹⁶ Simonenko 2008, 14-15, 31-32; Harhoiu 1993; Vornic, Buculici, Popovici 2015, 59-61.

¹⁷ Bichir 1984; Niculescu 2003, 180.

¹⁸ Bichir 1973; Bichir 1976.

¹⁹ Bichir 1993; Bichir 1996; Niculescu 2003, 182-188; Oța, Sîrbu 2009; Oța *et alii* 2014.

²⁰ Poieniști: Vulpe 1953; Spânu 2012b, 174-185; Văleni: Ioniță, Ursachi 1988. Cf. Spânu 2012c.

Nadelhalter'), tendril fibulae (known also as 'brooches whit returned foot'/ germ. 'Fibeln mit umgeschlagenem Fuss'), different polychrome beads and some Roman imports. Judging by the fibulae, the necropoleis east of the Carpathians may be enclosed in phases B2 and C1 (most probably only C1a) of the Central-European chronology of the imperial period. The funerary rituals in the necropoleis east of the Carpathians (Poienеști, Văleni etc.) are similar to the rituals in the rural provincial necropoleis such as Locusteni, Daneți in Oltenia, or Obreja, Sopor de Câmpie, Șopteriu and Sighișoara in Transylvania²¹. These analogies may be interpreted as expressions of a profound acculturation of Eastern Carpathian communities in relation to the funerary models in the rural provincial world. The acculturation was conditional upon the existence of the *Dacia* province. The dissolution of the Poienеști-Vârțișcoiu group may be explained in the context of the Roman authority in *Dacia* coming to an end and the Romans' decision to leave the province.

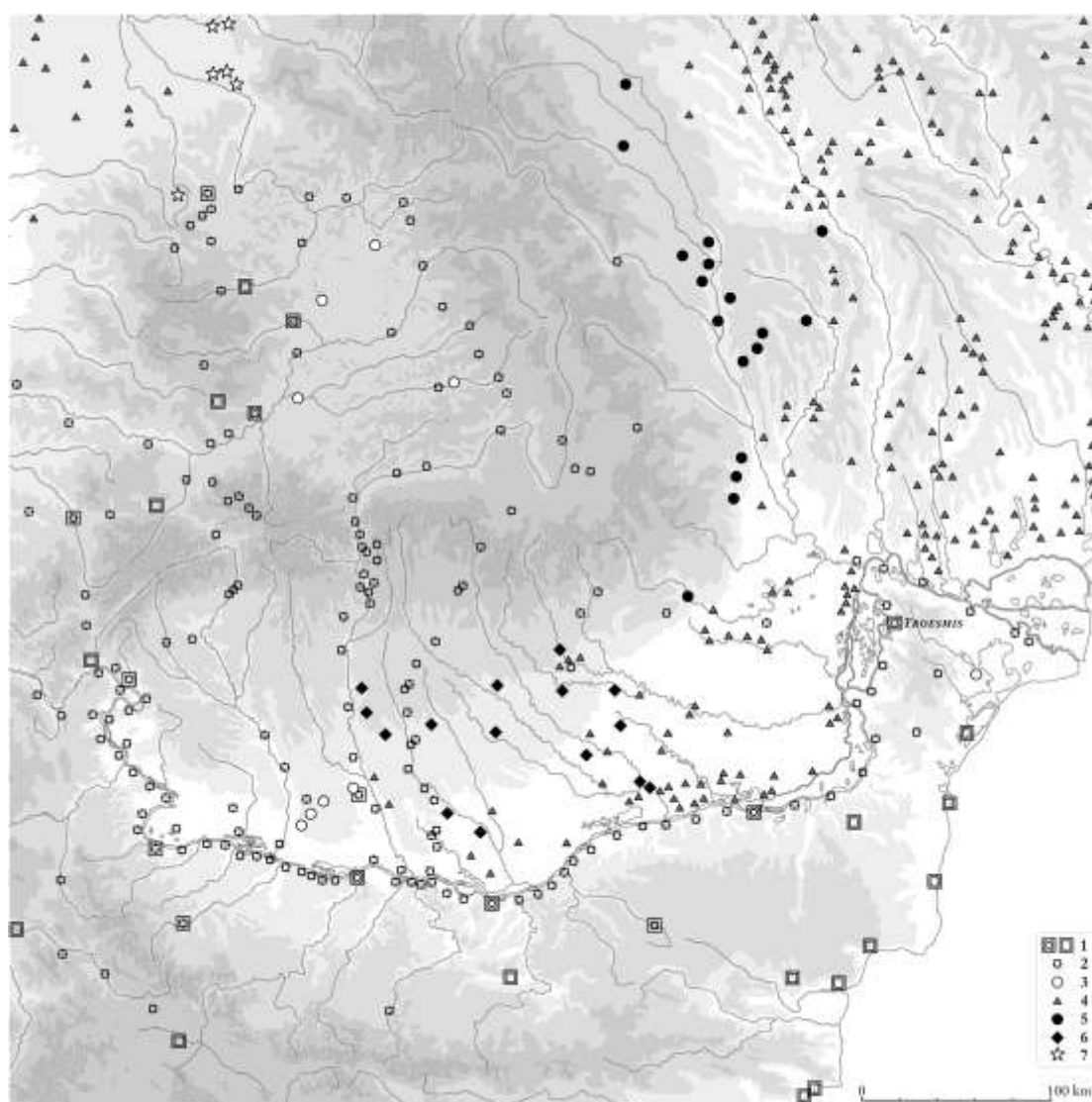


Fig. 2: Barbaricum beyond *Troesmis* in 2nd century and first half of the 3rd century A.D. (Roman Imperial Period B2 and C1). Legend numbers: 1 Roman towns; 2 *castra/castella*; 3 provincial rural necropolis; 4 Sarmatian graves/necropolis; 5 Poienеști-Vârțișcoiu necropolis; 6 Chilia-Militari finds; 7 Przeworsk finds (by D. Spănu).

²¹ Popilian 1980; Popilian 2012; Protase 1976; Protase 2002; Marinescu, Mirițoiu 1987; Spănu 2012b, 185; Spănu 2014-2015 (2016).

2.2. The Chilia-Militari Culture

From a cultural perspective, three distinct cultural areas can be distinguished in the principality of Wallachia: the strip between the Olt River and Limes Transalutanus was under the direct military control of the Romans, the plain and steppe areas in the south and east were dominated by the “Sarmatian” findings and the hilly, Subcarpathian regions in the centre, north and north-west, where researchers identified a group of “non-Sarmatian” discoveries, called Chilia-Militari.

Unlike the Sarmatian funerary discoveries – small groups of inhumation tombs, the specifics of the Chilia-Militari funerary rituals are the urn incineration and the plane necropoleis organisation. These ritual specifics are common to the rural funerary vestiges in *Dacia* and the Poienеști-Vârțișcoiu area. Unlike those in the latter group, the Chilia-Militari funerary inventories are, nevertheless, extremely sober. Only two out of the 82 tombs in the Chilia²² necropolis have inventories (containing one fibula each). The only silver filigree ornament attested in the Chilia-Militari²³ area was found at Mătăсарu (grave 15). The dwellings of the Chilia-Militari group are small and single-layered – simple groups of above ground or semi-underground houses. The inventories of the Chilia-Militari settlements consist in local ceramic, clothing accessories, tools, to which add certain Roman inputs, such as oil lamps and amphorae. The beginnings of the Chilia-Militari group should be placed in the context of the Roman conquest of *Dacia* (B2b). The Roman imports and the organisation of plane incineration necropoleis are indicators of a certain degree of acculturation of communities settled on the hills of Muntenia to the models of the Roman rural provincial culture. The Chilia-Militari group, emerged under the impact of the Roman conquest, was not meant to survive the provincial *Dacia*. The latest elements for dating this group did not go past the C2 phase of the imperial period²⁴.

2.3. The Sarmatian Culture on the Lower Danube

The Roman conquest of *Dacia* did not endanger the “Sarmatian” cultural manifestations around the Lower Danube. The Sarmatian vestiges found here represent one of the peripheral areas of the Sarmatian culture in the Eurasian Steppe. The princely graves in Muntenia and Moldavia are by far more modest when compared to the funeral pomp of some princely tombs in the North Pontic region²⁵. However, the Sarmatian culture in Eastern Romania has grown more strongly in the 2nd and the 3rd centuries, due probably to the contribution of some successive “waves” of eastern populations²⁶. In the current research stage, the distinct stages of the Sarmatian inflow, which were manifest east of the Prut²⁷ River, have not yet been identified and acknowledged for the discoveries made in Romania.

The tombs are either isolated or grouped in small necropoleis. Sometimes, the burials took the form of tumuli or tells specific to the previous ages. In other cases, Sarmatian tumuli were built, but plane tombs and necropoleis were also known²⁸. Most Sarmatian funerary monuments were concentrated on the fields close to the Lower Danube²⁹.

²² Morintz 1961, 406, fig. 7/2.

²³ Bichir 1984, 167, pl. 50/13.

²⁴ Niculescu 2003, 186, note 36.

²⁵ e.g. Kovpanenko 1991; Vollkommer 1993; Šarov 2003; Mordvintseva, Zaitsev 2003; Mordvinceva, Treister 2005; Simonenko 2008; Vornic, Buculici, Popovici 2015.

²⁶ Grosu 1995, 163 (with literature), 181-184.

²⁷ Grosu 1990.

²⁸ Harțuche 1980; Oța, Sirbu 2009, 138; Grosu 1995, 134-146.

²⁹ Grosu 1995, 135, fig. 1; Niculescu 2003, 181, fig. 2, 183, fig. 3; Oța *et alii* 2014.

The Sarmatian tombs around the Lower Danube contain individuals buried dorsally, with their heads being preferentially oriented towards the north³⁰. The grave holes are rectangular, while the demarcation of lateral edges was rarely attested. The anthropological research has seldom highlighted the artificial skull deformation³¹.

The Sarmatian funerary inventories include handmade or wheel-made local ceramic recipients and sometimes imported Roman amphorae. The strings of beads that were probably attached to the funerary clothing in the chest, waist or foot areas³² were a frequent find. More rarely, imperial fibulae, spindle whorls or mirrors with tamgha made of bronze have been found in the tombs. A representative weapon is the sword with ring pommel. In addition, daggers, arrowheads or spearheads have sometimes been discovered.

The “Sarmatian” funerary rituals along the Lower Danube (**fig. 2**) are well shaped and essentially different from those of the neighbouring cultural groups (Poienеști-Vârțișcoiu, Chilia-Militari). The non-highlighting of settlements³³ is one of the lacks of the research on the Sarmatian culture in Romania. Additionally, the practice of burying Roman coin hoards in the regions comprising Sarmatians tombs has not yet been appropriately interpreted from the perspective of cultural classification³⁴.

The Sarmatian funerary rituals around the Lower Danube, which were attested even before Trajan’s conquest of *Dacia*, can be traced until the end of the 3rd century and the beginning of the 4th century³⁵. It is very likely that the “Sarmatian” funerary identity in Muntenia and Moldavia has gradually dissipated in the context of the emergence of the Sântana de Mureș – Černjachov culture³⁶.

3. Cultural reconfigurations after the abandonment of *Dacia* (the 3rd and 4th centuries): the Sântana de Mureș-Černjachov synthesis

By the mid third century, the crisis and yielding of *Dacia* occasioned another cultural turning point in north of the Lower Danube. The groups reflecting to a certain degree the process of acculturation to the Roman values in Barbaricum, in particular the necropoleis of the Poienеști-Vârțișcoiu group, ceases to exist. The funerary “Sarmatian” rituals fade away and the regions east of the Carpathians are included in the area of Sântana de Mureș-Černjachov culture (**fig. 3**)³⁷.

The starting moment of the Sântana de Mureș-Černjachov culture on the Romanian territory was controversial. Some authors postulate an intermediate “carpianic” phase (the end of the 3rd century – the beginning of the 4th century) between the Roman evacuation of *Dacia* and the cultural expansion to Sântana de Mureș-Černjachov inside the Carpathian Basin³⁸. However, Alexandru Niculescu’s research brought to attention that the beginnings of the Černjachov type burials from Târgșor, date back to the beginning of phase C2 of the imperial period (around 260-275 AD)³⁹. Therefore, postulating an intermediate “Carpianic” phase is obviously inconsistent from an archaeological point of view.

³⁰ Niculescu 2003, 185, fig. 4/1.

³¹ Necrasov, Antoniu 1962; Niculescu 2003, 204-205; cf. Grosu 1995, 150.

³² Cf. Tejral 2003, 242 (with literature).

³³ Niculescu 2003, 182 and 188.

³⁴ e.g. Vilcu 2014, 135-160.

³⁵ Niculescu 2003, 185-188.

³⁶ Niculescu 2003, 196-198.

³⁷ Bierbrauer 1999; Petrescu 2002.

³⁸ Ioniță 1982. Cf. Bóna 1990, 65, 71; Mitrea, Preda, 148; Schmauder 2002, 228-229.

³⁹ Niculescu 1993, 204, note 20; Niculescu 2003, 196, note 87; cf. Bierbrauer 1994, 123.

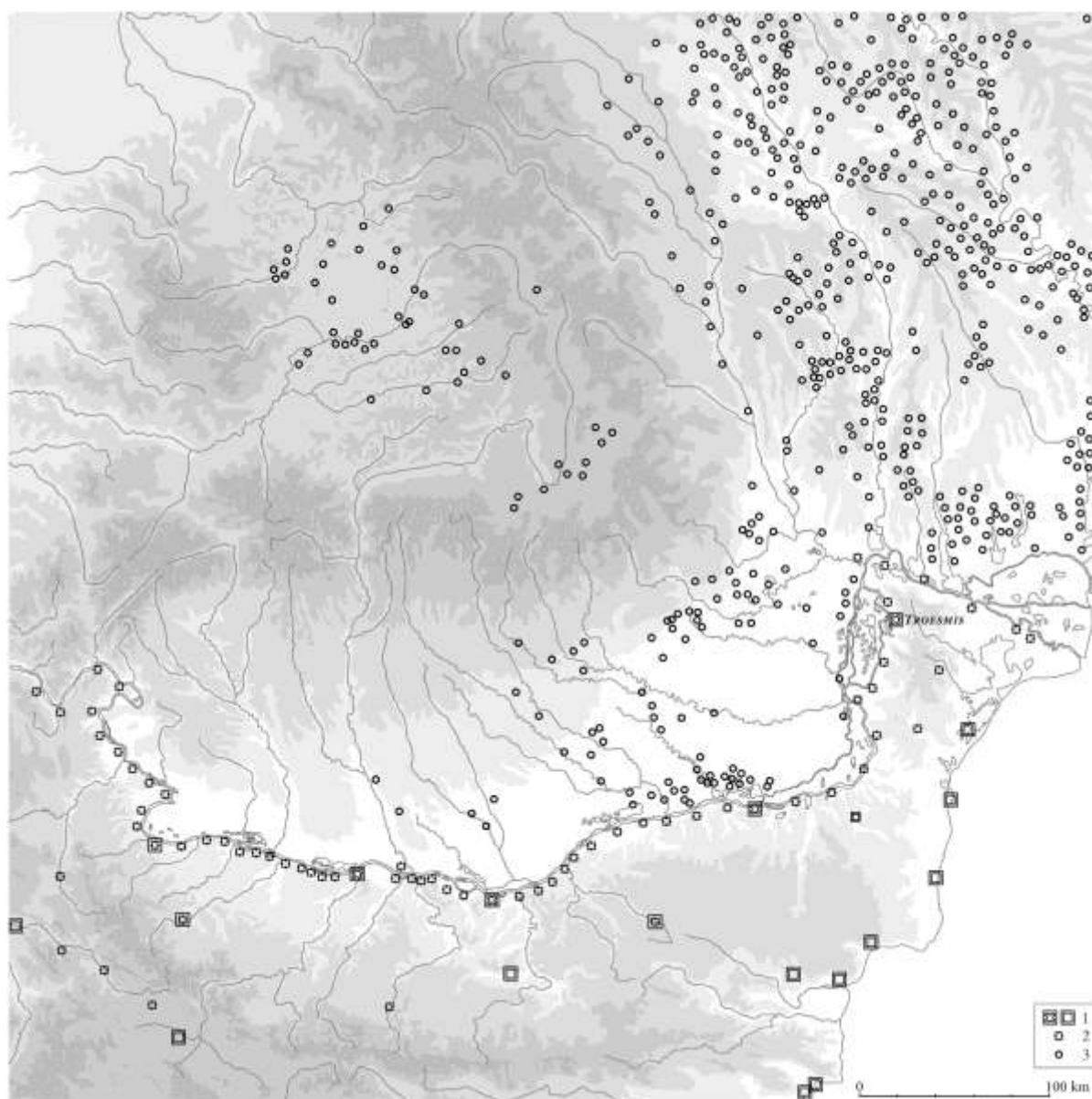


Fig. 3: Barbaricum beyond *Troesmis*, end of 3rd century and 4th century A.D. (Roman Imperial Period C2-C3).

Legend numbers: 1 Roman towns; 2 *castra/castella*; 3 Sântana-Černjachov finds (by D. Spânu).

The appearance of plain necropoleis with two burial rituals like the ones in Târgșor, Sântana de Mureș, Mihălășeni or Bârlad 'Valea Seacă'⁴⁰ prove the strong expansion of the Sântana de Mureș-Černjachov culture on the current Romanian territory. The new types of funerary rituals contrast the previous period. The choice between inhumation and incineration is no longer age determined: inhumation still prevails and applies to the adult deceased too. The funerary inventories gather a wide variety of ceramic types. The morphological repertoire of the metal pieces consists in forms that are specific to the C2 and C3 phases from the Central European chronology: 'tendrill fibulae' (germ. 'Fibeln mit umgeschlagenem Fuss'), fibulae with semicircular plate, combs with three plaques etc.

⁴⁰ Kovács 1912; Diaconu 1965; Mitrea, Preda 1966; Palade 2004; Șovan 2005.

Except for the monetary hoards⁴¹, depositional practices are only rarely found. Nevertheless, the hoards in Valea Strâmbă and Chernowitz (middle/end of the 4th century) and the hoard recently discovered (2015) in Mălăiești de Jos (end of the 3rd century)⁴² attest a lower degree of depositional practices also in the Sântana de Mureș-Černjachov area.

The migration of the Huns (376 AD) would shatter the equilibrium that had been so hard to establish in the Lower Danube after the evacuation of *Dacia* and the reorganisation of the Empire as a Dominate a century before. The Visigoths, the main bearers of the Sântana de Mureș-Černjachov culture on the current Romanian territory abandoned their dwellings and crossed the Danube not far from *Troesmis*, thus marking the beginning of the Migration Period⁴³.

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⁴¹ Mihăilescu-Bîrliba 1980, 207.

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