

SETTLEMENTS OF LIFE AND DEATH: HUMAN INTERMENTS IN LATE IRON AGE SITES FROM THE SIGHIȘOARA REGION (MUREȘ COUNTY, ROMANIA) *

Aurel RUSTOIU

Institute of Archaeology and History of Art, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
e-mail: aurelrustoiu@yahoo.com

Abstract: Human interments in settlements are a quite regular feature in pre-Roman Dacia. These are frequently encountered in the Sighișoara region in the 1st century BC–1st century AD. Pits containing human skeletons have been identified in rural settlements on the valleys of the Târnava Mare River's tributaries, for example at Sighișoara–Valea Dracului and Albești–Valea Șapartocului, and also in the fortified settlement at Sighișoara–Wietenberg. The latter ones are representative for the entire region due to the large number of discoveries and the diversity of contexts containing human remains. Archaeological excavations have been carried out at Sighișoara–Wietenberg in several stages covering nearly a century: in 1902–1904 and 1938 (by C. Seraphin and K. Horedt) and in 1991–1995 (by I. Andrițoiu and A. Rustoiu). Pits containing human skeletons have been found both inside the settlement and in its immediate vicinity, where the presence of a ritual or sacred area has been presumed. The features from Sighișoara–Wietenberg belong to several categories of archaeological contexts. Regarding the skeleton's position and treatment of the body, the following contexts have been encountered: complete skeletons in supine position (mostly children); complete skeletons in contorted positions; damaged or dismembered skeletons; isolated human bone fragments (maxillas or ribs). Regarding the number of individuals, the pits contain: one complete individual; one complete albeit dismembered individual; fragments of one individual; several complete individuals (matures and children); several dismembered individuals (mostly matures); one complete together with one fragmentary individual. In general, children (infans 1) were more carefully treated, according to some ritual norms that have also been identified in other settlements. The presence of several children in a single pit could indicate a concomitant death caused by illness. Isolated skeleton parts or dismembered skeletons could indicate practices of exposure – decomposing of the corpses or grave opening, followed by bone selection and re-inhumation. Mature skeletons bearing traces of violence could indicate the practice of human sacrifices. One of the features from the settlement could indicate a founding ritual (of the entire community or of a group from within). From the funerary perspective, the body of most members of the community was treated in an archaeologically “invisible” manner. Some members of the military elite were cremated and then laid together with their panoplies of weapons in flat or tumulus graves, close to the settlement over which they ruled. The body of some women, probably priestesses, who worn rich sets of silver ornaments was also treated in an archaeologically “invisible” manner upon death, but their costume and other objects (ceramic and metal vessels) related to their function were also removed from the world of the living and buried in pits which were probably located in sacred areas from the settlements' vicinity. Therefore, the presence of human skeletons in settlements indicates the existence of different manners of treating the deceased, directly related to the social or symbolic categories to which they belonged: very young children, ancestors, local and alien individuals who were sacrificed, individuals suffering an unusual death etc.

* This work was supported by a grant of the Ministry of Research and Innovation, CNCS - UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2016-0353, within PNCDI III.

Rezumat: Înhumările umane în așezări constituie un fenomen obișnuit în aria Daciei preromane. Ele sunt frecvente și în zona Sighișoara în sec. I a.Chr.–I p.Chr. Gropi cu schelete umane au fost identificate în așezări rurale situate pe văile laterale ale râului Târnava Mare, cum sunt cele de la Sighișoara–Valea Dracului și Albești–Valea Șapartocului, dar și în așezarea fortificată de la Sighișoara–Wietenberg. Acestea din urmă sunt reprezentative pentru întreaga zonă, atât din punct de vedere al numărului mare de descoperiri, cât și al diversității tipurilor de complexe cu înhumări umane. Cercetările de la Sighișoara–Wietenberg s-au desfășurat în mai multe etape care se întind pe o perioadă de aproape un secol: între 1902 și 1904 și în 1938 (săpături C. Seraphin și K. Horedt); între 1991 și 1995 (săpături I. Andrițoiu și A. Rustoiu). Gropi cu schelete umane au fost descoperite atât în interiorul așezării, cât și în imediata ei apropiere, unde s-a presupus existența unei arii rituale sau sacre. Aceste contexte de la Sighișoara–Wietenberg acoperă un spectru larg de situații arheologice. Din punct de vedere al poziției și tratării corpurilor defuncților au fost identificate următoarele situații: schelete depuse în poziție anatomică (mai ales copii); schelete întregi în diferite poziții; schelete răvășite sau dezmembrate; părți de schelete (maxilare sau coaste). Din punct de vedere al numărului de indivizi gropile conțin: un defunct întreg; un defunct întreg dar cu oasele răvășite; părți de la un singur individ; mai mulți indivizi întregi (maturi și copii); mai mulți indivizi dezmembrați (mai ales maturi); doi indivizi din care unul parțial și altul întreg. Se observă în general o tratare mai atentă a copiilor (infans 1), conform unor norme rituale care se repetă și în alte așezări. Prezența mai multor copii într-o singură groapă ar putea indica decesul lor concomitent datorită unor boli. Părțile de schelete descoperite izolat sau scheletele cu oase răvășite ar putea indica practici de expunere-descompunere a cadavrelor sau deshumarea și reînhumarea unor părți de schelete. Scheletele de maturi cu urme de violență pot să indice practicarea unor sacrificii umane. Complexul nr. 8 din săpăturile lui C. Seraphin ar putea reflecta un ritual de fondare comunitar (al întregii comunități sau al unui grup al ei). Din punct de vedere funerar, marea majoritate a membrilor comunităților erau tratați într-un mod „invizibil” din punct de vedere arheologic (poate incinerati, resturile arse fiind împrăștiate în ape, în locuri din afara așezărilor etc.). Unii membri ai elitei militare erau incinerati și depuși împreună cu panopliile lor de arme în morminte plane sau tumulare în apropierea așezărilor pe care le stăpâneau. Femeile posesoare ale unor bogate garnituri de podoabe din argint, probabil preotese, erau tratate funerar într-un mod „invizibil” arheologic, dar ornamentele și vasele ceramice de metal erau „ucise” și „înmormântate” în gropi practicate probabil în locuri sacre din apropierea așezărilor. În acest context, depunerile de schelete umane din așezări reflectă o tratare diferită a unor indivizi care constituiau din punct de vedere ritual categorii aparte ale societății: copii înainte de vârsta inițierii, strămoși, subiecți (intra- și/sau extra-comunitari) supuși unor sacrificii, subiecți care au suferit decese ieșite din comun etc.

Keywords: Late Iron Age, Lower Danube, unusual burial, personhood, fire installations.

Cuvinte cheie: a doua epocă a fierului, Dunărea de Jos, înmormântări neobișnuite, amenajări pentru foc.

INTRODUCTION

Two decades and a half have passed since Ulrich Veit, among others, argued in favour of “archaeology of death” beyond the limits of the cemetery¹. In the intervening period the number of funerary discoveries from settlements belonging to different historical periods has increased significantly across Europe. However, the questions regarding their interpretation are similar to those posed two or three decades ago, in spite of the progress in analysing archaeological evidence both at theoretical and interdisciplinary levels. Can settlement burials be considered “graves” or they belong to another ritual or spiritual domain? Who are those interred in settlements and those found in cemeteries? Why individuals were treated differently and which are the ritual differences between these two types of interments? To what degree the difference in the funerary rite and ritual expresses differences in the social structure of the communities? And lastly, how the frontiers between the living and the dead were defined and maintained within settlements and communities?² These are some of the questions posed by the human

¹ Veit 1992.

² Veit 1992, 107-108.

interments encountered in some settlements. The answers can be offered, up to a certain degree, by the analysis of the contexts of discovery and by their comparison, on one hand, with the entire range of funerary practices of a community, and on the other hand, with the social structures of the community. From this perspective, the present article, which is the expanded version of a poster presented to the symposium from Tulcea dedicated to the aforementioned topic, brings into discussion the human interments discovered in settlements belonging to the period of the Dacian Kingdom from a micro-region in central Transylvania which is well-defined geographically and culturally.

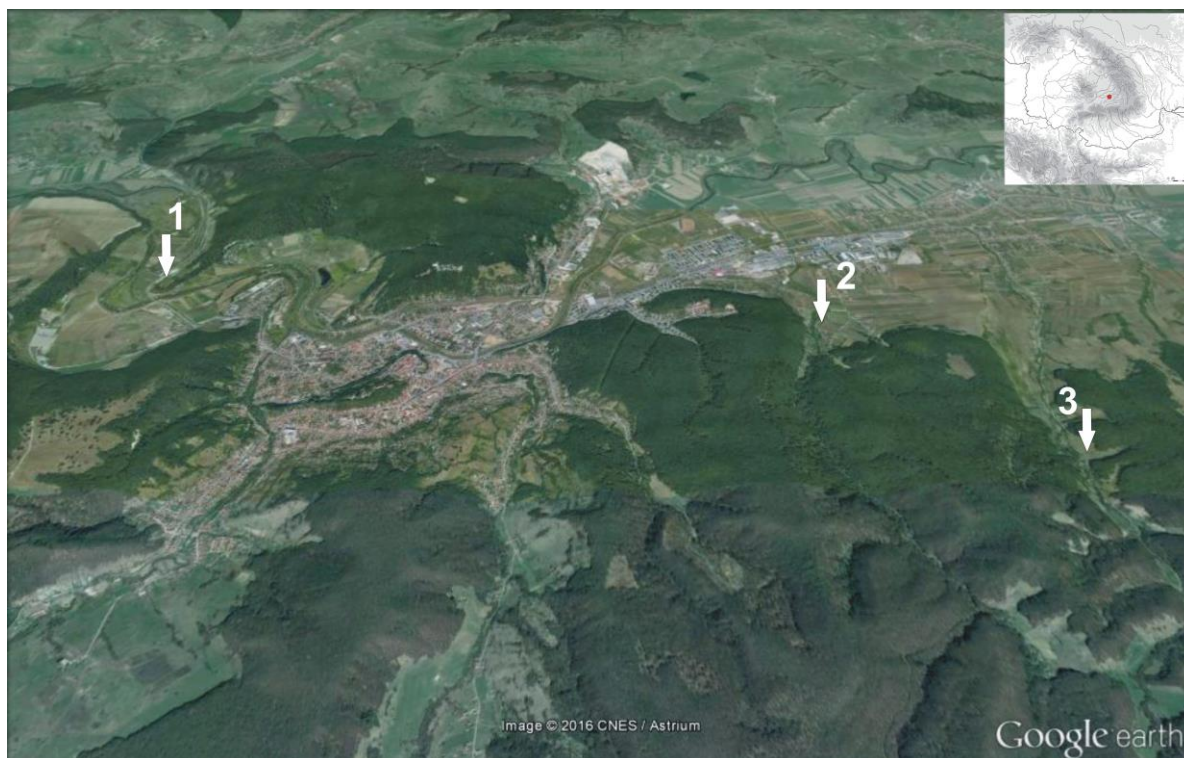


Fig. 1. Settlements from the Sighișoara region in which pits containing human remains have been found: 1 Sighișoara–Wietenberg; 2 Sighișoara–Valea Dracului; 3 Albești.

In this context, it has to be noted that human interments in settlements are a quite regular feature in pre-Roman Dacia³. These are also frequently encountered in the Sighișoara region in the 1st century BC–1st century AD. Pits containing human skeletons have been identified in rural settlements on the valleys of the Târnava Mare River's tributaries, for example at Sighișoara–Valea Dracului⁴ and Albești–Valea Șapartocului⁵, and also in the fortified settlement at Sighișoara–Wietenberg (Fig. 1). The latter ones are representative for the entire region in question due to the large number of discoveries and the diversity of contexts containing human remains.

³ Babeș 1988; Sîrbu 1993. The practice of interring complete corpses or parts of them in settlements is also encountered on many other areas across Iron Age Europe, but also in other historical periods, so the respective bibliography is vast. See, for example, Delattre et al. 2000; Landolt et al. 2010, 220–223; Ailincăi 2015; Trebsche 2016 etc.

⁴ Unpublished, excavated by I. Pascu in 1996; see also Andrișoiu, Rustoiu 1997, 75.

⁵ Sîrbu 1993, 95, no. 5; Baltag 1994, 76.

Archaeological excavations have been carried out at Sighișoara–Wietenberg in several stages covering nearly a century:

First stage: 1902-1904 and 1938 – excavations by C. Seraphin and K. Horedt⁶.

Second stage: 1967-1970 – excavations by G. Moldovan (unpublished)⁷.

Third stage: 1991-1995 – excavations by I. Andrițoiu and A. Rustoiu⁸.

Pits containing human skeletons have been found both inside the settlement and in its immediate vicinity, on a height located to the north-east, where the presence of a ritual or sacred area has been presumed (Fig. 2).

PITS WITH HUMAN SKELETONS LOCATED OUTSIDE THE SETTLEMENT FROM SIGHIȘOARA–WIETENBERG

The pits from the settlement's vicinity have been investigated by G. Moldovan, though his results are still unpublished. The Museum of Sighișoara holds photos of the contexts containing human skeletons⁹, though other documentation is missing (Fig. 3-6). Consequently, the information concerning the number of pits and their contents is contradictory: seven pits containing 17 skeletons; 18 "inhumation graves"; 19 skeletons; 28 "graves" etc¹⁰. However, it is quite clear that there are two types of round pits. The first type includes pits containing ash, charcoal and ceramic fragments (probably remains of collective feasts¹¹). The second includes pits containing human remains. Most of these pits contain children skeletons (one or several: Fig. 3), one pit contains a mature man, a young woman and a baby (the three could have been a family: husband, wife and child)¹² (Fig. 4), while another pit contains seven mature individuals (Fig. 5) etc. In the case of pits containing mature individuals, photographic documentation sometimes shows traces of violent blows on bones, which may suggest the cause of death (Fig. 6). At the same time, the contorted position of these skeletons indicates that they were put in pits shortly after death, before *rigor mortis* set in. The pits' inventories are unknown. Some of the deceased were surely dressed, hence the discovery of garment accessories, like the leather belt with bronze fittings and a bronze buckle of the late La Tène type which were found in one of the pits containing mature individuals¹³ (Fig. 5).

⁶ Horedt, Seraphin 1971.

⁷ See some information in Rustoiu, Comșa, Lisovschi-Cheleşanu 1993, 81-83, with previous bibliography.

⁸ Rustoiu, Comșa, Lisovschi-Cheleşanu 1993; Andrițoiu, Rustoiu 1997.

⁹ Handed over to Aurel Rustoiu by G. Baltag in 1991; some of these photos were also published in Sîrbu 1993, Fig. 58/1-2, 59/1; Sîrbu 1997, Fig. 12/2, 13/2 etc.

¹⁰ Horedt, Seraphin 1971, 18; Sîrbu 1993, 98; Babeș 1971a, 387.

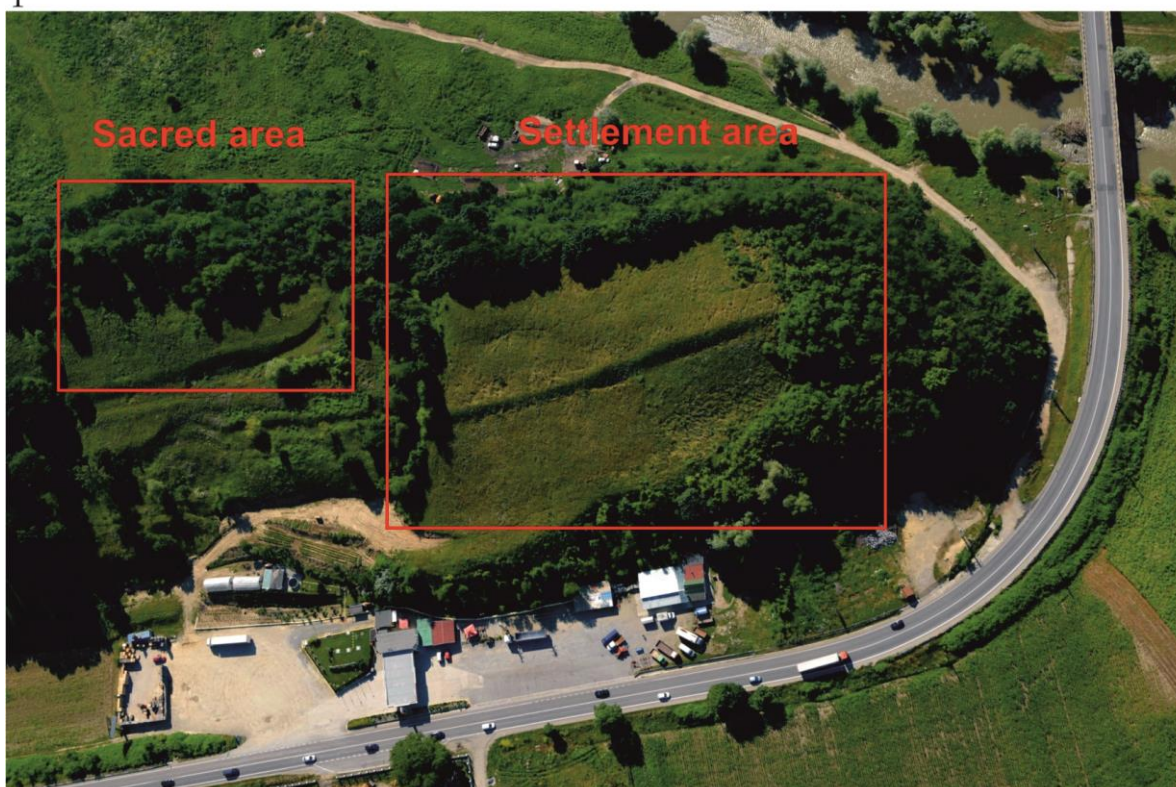
¹¹ See Andrițoiu, Rustoiu 1997, 76-77.

¹² Nicolăescu-Plopșor, Wolski 1975, 143-151.

¹³ Babeș 1983. For this type of belts, see recently Guștin 2011.



1



2

Fig. 2. The settlement at Sighișoara-Wietenberg and the inside and outside areas in which pits containing human remains have been found (photo Z. Czajlik).

Table 1. Features containing human remains found by C. Seraphin.

No. Context	No. individuals	Skeleton preservation	Skeleton position	Age	Gender	Type of pit	Ritual evidence	Inventory
1	1	Maxilla	?	Mature	F?	?	Found at 1.4 m deep; traces of ash above it	?
2	1	Left half of maxilla	?	Mature	F?	?	Found in a jar decorated with four knobs	?
3	1	Ribs	?	Mature	?	?	Found in a fragmentary vessel	?
5	1	Complete	Supine	Infans 1	C	Refuse pit	Found in a vessel laying on its side, at 1 m deep	Fragments of several ceramic vessels
6-7	2	Complete	One on top of other	Infans 1	C	Purposefully made?	?	No inventory
8	1	Damaged	Supine	Mature	M	Purposefully made?	Skeleton found at 1.40-1.50 m deep; a layer of ash above it. Re-inhumed?	Half of a spindle whorl and 2 fragmentary iron sickles near skeleton; 1 spindle whorl and 1 miniature cup under skull
9	2	1 fragmentary bone and 1 complete skeleton	1 rib (lower pit); 1 laid on right side (upper pit)	Mature	?	Purposefully made	Rectangular pit (at -1.86 m) containing 1 human rib, ash, charcoal, 37 iron nails. Above it, at -0.80 m was 1 complete skeleton	1 small iron knife together with the human rib; 1 silver button near skull of complete skeleton
10	1	Complete	Supine, right hand on pelvis	?	?	Purposefully made at 0.30 m deep (!)	?	No inventory

PITS WITH HUMAN SKELETONS LOCATED INSIDE THE SETTLEMENT FROM SIGHIȘOARA-WIETENBERG

In the settlement, the investigations of C. Seraphin uncovered eight features containing human bones (Table 1). Another one was found in 1992 (Fig. 7–8). In three cases fragments of human skeletons (maxillas or ribs) have been found, three (or perhaps four – no. 7) pits (including the one from 1992) contained children, and one pit contained the damaged skeleton of a mature individual. One particular case is feature no. 8. Although in general it is considered that the deceased were put in refuse pits from the settlement area, at Sighișoara-Wietenberg the pits were purposefully dug out for human interment. Furthermore, they preserve traces of the rituals performed during interment. This is the case of the pit containing the skeleton of a child (*infans I*) discovered in 1992 (Fig. 7). The deceased was laid in supine position in a purposefully dug pit, on top of a layer of ash covering the pit's bottom. The pit was then filled with a layer of soil which was covered with a layer of clay.

On top of the latter was found another layer of ash probably resulting from the rituals associated with the sealing of the pit. Inside the pit were found fragments of ceramic vessels and one complete miniature vessel (Fig. 8). They were accompanied by animal bones probably coming from the meat offering¹⁴.



Fig. 3. Human interments outside the settlement. Left: pit containing partial skeletons. Right: pit containing the skeleton of a child – infans 1 (photo G. Moldovan).

¹⁴ See a wider discussion in Rustoiu, Comşa, Lisovschi-Cheleşanu 1993.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The pits containing human skeletons identified at Sighișoara–Wietenberg, both inside the settlement and outside of it, belong to several categories of archaeological contexts.

1. Regarding the skeleton's position and treatment of the body, the pits contain: complete skeletons in supine position (mostly children); complete skeletons in contorted positions; damaged or dismembered skeletons; human bone fragments (maxillas or ribs).
2. Regarding the number of individuals, the pits contain: one complete individual; one complete albeit dismembered individual; fragments of one individual; several complete individuals (matures and children); several dismembered individuals (mostly matures); one complete together with one fragmentary individual.



Fig. 4. Human interments outside the settlement. Pit containing the skeleton of a mature man, 40-45 years old (left), and of a woman, 15-17 years old (right); one baby was laid between the man's right arm and body. (photo G. Moldovan).

3. In general, children (*infans* 1) were more carefully treated, according to some ritual norms that have also been repeatedly encountered on wider areas in Dacia, both inside and outside the settlements. The presence of several children in a single pit could indicate a concomitant death caused by illness. Usually children were interred without being hacked off or dismembered, unlike the adults found in some pits. At the same time, in numerous situations the pits in which they were laid were purposefully dug out for inhumation. For example, in the settlement from Brad the deceased were laid on the bottom of the pit or on "beds" carved out of the lower side of the pit. Regarding the children burials outside the settlements, the recent discoveries from Hunedoara-Grădina Castelului are relevant for the manner in which they were treated upon death in a community from the inside of the Carpathians during the last decades of the Dacian Kingdom¹⁵. They are frequently accompanied by garment accessories and other artefacts, much like in the case of normal burials. Moreover, the presence of garment accessories and ceramic or other offerings was also noted in the case of some children burials from settlements¹⁶, this being for example the case of the miniature vessel found in the pit excavated in 1992 at Sighișoara-Wietenberg.

Among the ritual elements that can be recognized on wider areas are also those identified in feature no. 6 (see Table 1) discovered by C. Seraphin in the settlement at Sighișoara-Wietenberg. This is a pit containing the skeleton of a child who was put in a vessel laid on its side. Some children burials with similar characteristics were also found in the Roman provincial cemetery at Enisala, in Dobrogea¹⁷. Here burials begin in the last decades of the 1st century AD, M. Babeș considering that the first are contemporaneous with the last

¹⁵ Unfortunately, the authors of archaeological excavations at Hunedoara-Grădina Castelului published some contradictory information, so the studies regarding this important cemetery have to be critically read. For example, the first archaeological report in which grave no. 7 is mentioned states that it belonged to an **inhumed** child (probably an infant) and contained a spearhead, a curved dagger of the *sica* type and an arrowhead, among other things. The inventory also probably contained "one Roman denarius made of bronze (*sic!*), which was issued by Trajan in AD 98-99", so the mentioned funerary context was dated to the period of the Dacian – Roman wars at the beginning of the 2nd century AD (Luca et al. 2003). In subsequent publications, grave no. 7, later designated as deceased no. 7 from feature no. 12, became a **cremation** burial belonging to a male deceased who was 21-22 old, according to the anthropological analysis. The "denarius" of Trajan (later dated to AD 100), which was initially associated with this grave, was this time listed as found nearby; the burial itself was dated to the beginning of the 2nd century AD and the children burials in general were interpreted in connection with the Dacian – Roman wars: "it is possible that many of the children deposits took place in a very short period of time, and the cause could be an exceptional event (the wars between the Dacians and the Romans, the young warrior's death of the Grave 7?)" (Sîrbu et al. 2006, 189-190, Fig. 7). Later, the cremation burial containing the panoply of weapons that is more likely specific to the Padea-Panagjurski kolonii group was dated to the 125–50/25 BC or 125–51 BC. In this study, the finally correctly identified bronze aes of Trajan, which previously caused dating problems, became an "isolated discovery" and was not associated with the grave (Sîrbu et al. 2007a, 156-157; Sîrbu et al. 2007b, 24-25, 51). Aside from these embarrassing contradictions, it has to be noted that the cemetery from Hunedoara-Grădina castelului illustrate a series of funerary practices specific to different social and age categories.

¹⁶ See, for example, the children burials from Brad: Ursachi 1995, 259-262.

¹⁷ Babeș 1971b, 26-27.

archaeological layers of the Dacian settlements at Răcățău, Brad or Ocnița, all from the north of the Danube¹⁸.

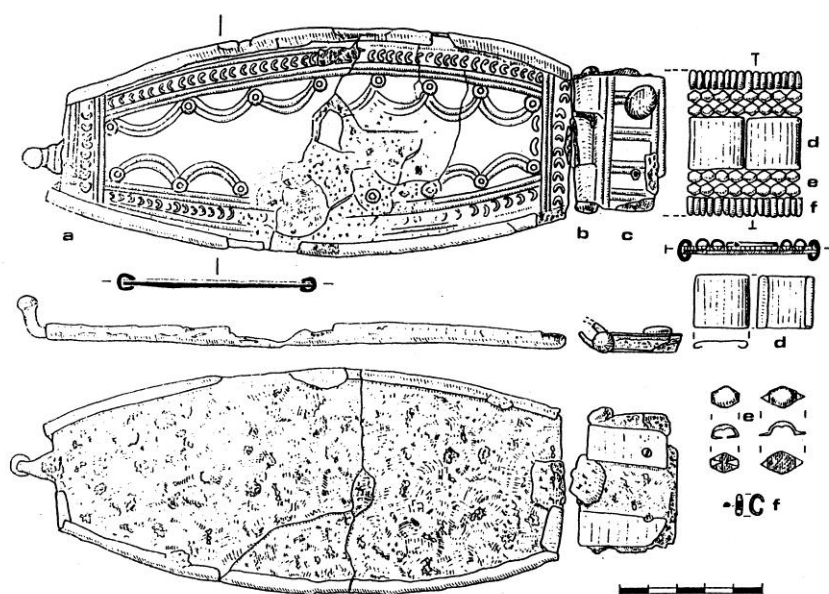


Fig. 5. Human interments outside the settlement. Pit in which seven individuals were carelessly thrown (photo G. Moldovan) and buckle and belt with bronze fittings found in the pit (Babeș 1983).

¹⁸ Babeș 1971b, 28-31; Babeș 1988, 8, n. 18.

The presence of similar children burials in a cemetery probably belonging to an indigenous community from the province of Moesia indicates, on one hand, that these features belong to the funerary domain, and on the other hand, that such funerary practices are encountered on wider areas in Dacia. This hypothesis is also supported by other discoveries. A grave containing the skeleton of a child (*infans* 1) placed in a ceramic vessel was recently unearthed at Luduş, Mureş County, in Transylvania. Calibrated ^{14}C dating of the skeleton indicates that the feature belongs to the 1st–2nd centuries AD¹⁹. This dating also corresponds to the chronology of the aforementioned graves from Enisala and probably of the one from Sighişoara–Wietenberg.

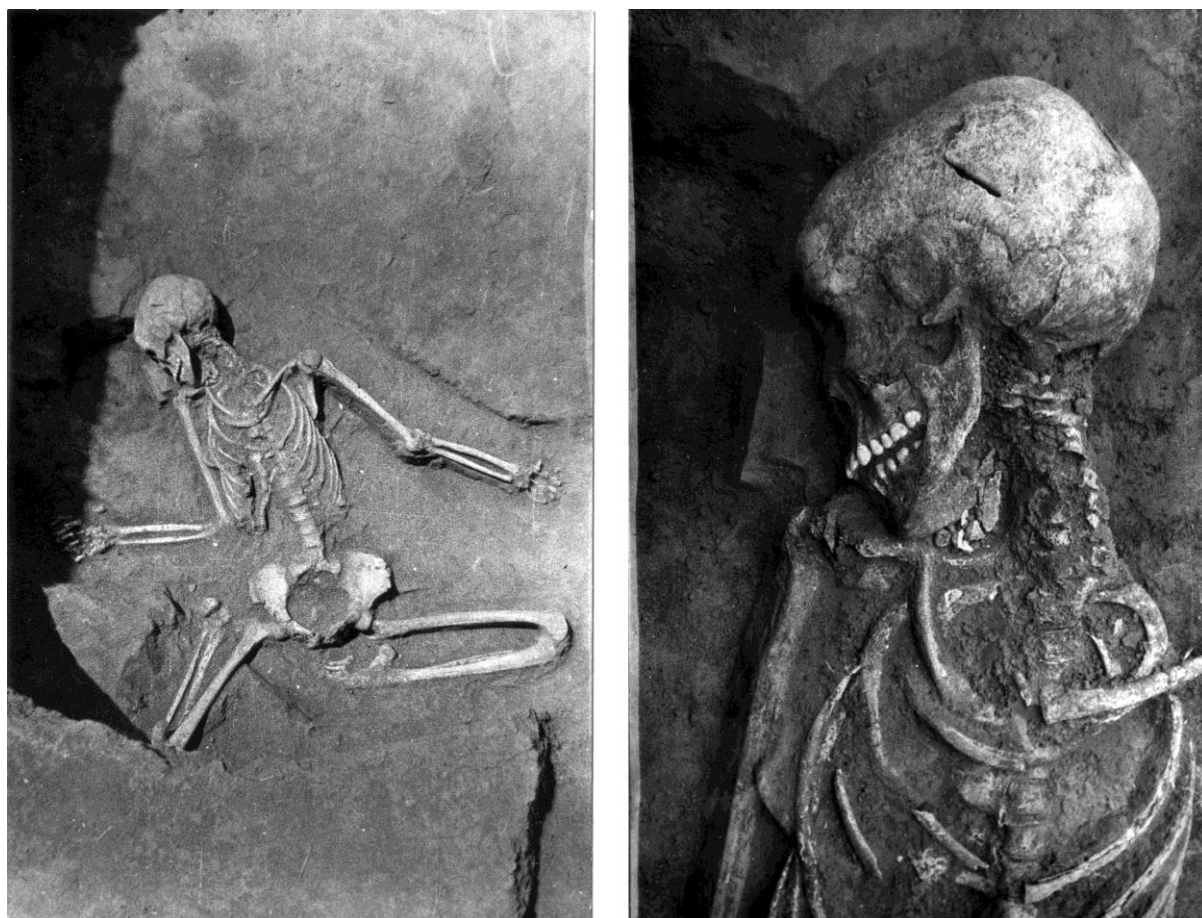


Fig. 6. Human interments outside the settlement. Pit containing one skeleton whose skull displays a blow trace resulting from a sharp instrument (axe or sword): general view and detail (photo G. Moldovan).

In conclusion, there are sufficient arguments to consider that the children (*infans* 1) burials are common funerary manifestations. In spite of some differences in ritual and in the manner and place of interring the corpse (sometimes in pits inside settlements, other times in consecrated areas outside settlements etc.), there are some rituals which are repeatedly encountered in different communities on a wider area: the corpses are never dismembered, the deceased are often accompanied by personal objects or offerings, the

¹⁹ Berecki, Cioată 2015, 90-91.

interment is associated with a series of rituals, some being archaeologically visible (placing of complete or broken vessels, meat offerings, burnt traces or ash layers resulting from different practices etc.). All of them indicate that children were treated differently upon death among the communities from the Dacian Kingdom and also in the case of some provincial indigenous population, and this difference is also visible archaeologically²⁰.

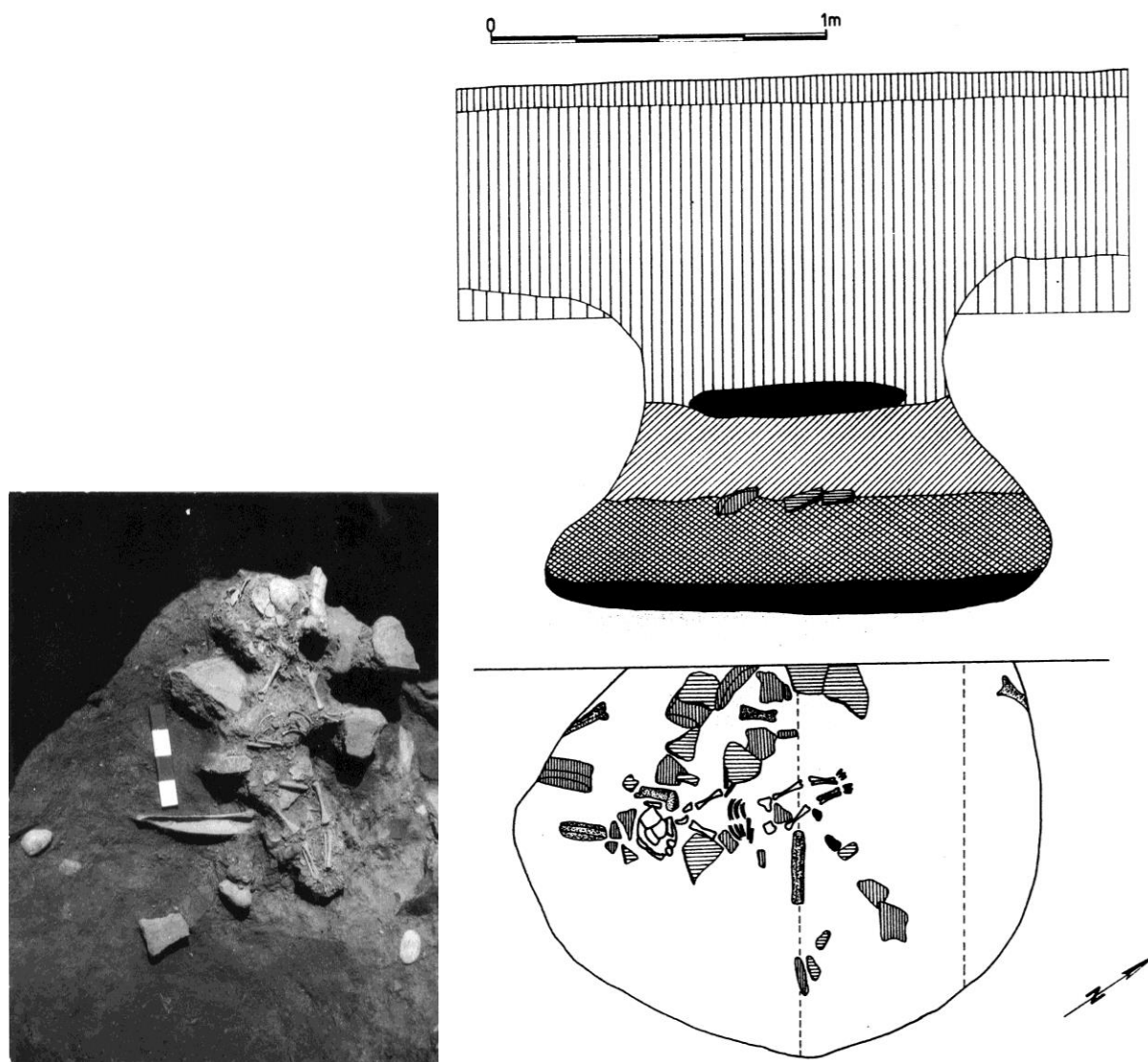


Fig. 7. Pit containing the skeleton of a child (*infans 1*) discovered in 1992 inside the settlement (photo and drawing A. Rustoiu).

²⁰ The distinct funerary treatment of the deceased according to their age is also documented among other populations, see Weiss-Krejci 2013, 285, with further bibliography. For similar variations related to age or social group in pre-Roman Dacia, see Popa 2014.

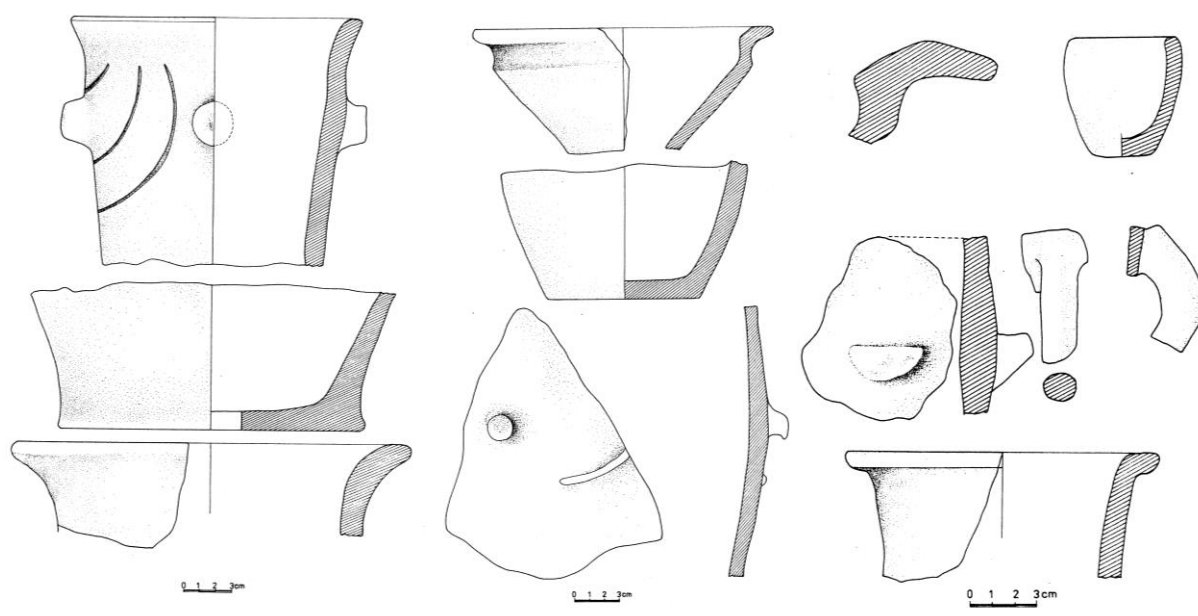


Fig. 8. Ceramic inventory from the pit containing the skeleton of a child discovered in 1992 (Rustoiu et al. 1993).

4. Isolated skeleton parts or dismembered skeletons could indicate, as already presumed²¹, practices of exposure – decomposing of the corpses or grave opening, followed by bone selection and re-inhumation²².
5. Mature skeletons bearing traces of violence could indicate the practice of human sacrifices.
6. Feature no. 9 from the excavations of C. Seraphin could indicate a founding ritual (of the entire community or of a group from within) where the human rib found in the rectangular pit could have belonged to a “founding ancestor” who was buried elsewhere and whose remains were unearthed and brought over to contribute to the establishing of a new settlement. When this relic was reburied, it was accompanied by a human sacrifice (the complete skeleton being laid above the founder’s pit). A similar situation seems to occur in another fortified Dacian settlement at Sprâncenata, Olt County, south of the Carpathians. In the centre of this settlement, located on a height on the left bank of the Olt River, was found a rectangular pit which was dug below the habitation layers of the site. The pit was lined with timber to form a funerary chamber. A coffin carved into a split tree trunk was placed on the pit’s bottom. The coffin was empty but “one radius and a few phalanges belonging to the skeleton of a teenager” and a few ceramic fragments were recovered from the pit’s filling on the bottom²³. According to the published archaeological documentation²⁴, this funerary feature more likely belongs to the second layer of

²¹ Sîrbu 1993.

²² Babeş, Mirițoiu 2011.

²³ Preda 1986, 50-51.

²⁴ Preda 1986, 16-19, Fig. 4 and Fig. 6: plan and profile of trench V in which the grave was found.

habitation, which can be dated to the end of the 2nd century and the first half of the 1st century BC. Its characteristics suggest a “founding” ritual in which an important individual was interred in a way which differed significantly from the funerary practices of the rest of the community. From this point of view, it is relevant that the grave is located in the centre of the settlement and belongs to the habitation layer corresponding to the fortification phase. The absence of the skeleton and funerary inventory from the coffin may suggest that the deceased was later exhumed and re-inhumed in another place.

7. Unlike the period of the 5th–3rd centuries BC, when dozens of cemeteries consisting of hundreds or even thousands of cremations (and also inhumation) graves are known from the Lower Danube region and Transylvania²⁵, during the Dacian Kingdom of the 1st century BC–1st century AD the cemeteries are almost non-existent, and when some do appear, they seem to belong exclusively to certain social groups. From the funerary perspective, the corpses of most members of the community were treated in an archaeologically “invisible” manner. Perhaps they were cremated and remains were scattered in water bodies or other places outside the settlement²⁶. One discovery made several decades ago offers an image of one such sacred place located outside the settlements. Its location and characteristics may explain, up to a point, the difficulty in identifying these ritual spaces archaeologically. A “platform” of ash having an oval shape and the dimensions of 13.5 × 8.5 m and a thickness of 0.25–0.30 m was accidentally found (while digging a drainage trench) at Conțești, Argeș County, south of the Carpathians, in an isolated area on the bank of a lake located between two hilly ridges. Burnt ceramic fragments (some belonging to cooking vessels, others to tableware and some to storage vessels including Greek amphorae), 45 iron arrowheads, 12 kitchen knives, iron nails, a few garment accessories (brooches of the middle La Tène type), one Dyrrachium silver drachma and some small bronze and glass bits were recovered from its surface. The garment accessories and the Greek coin date this feature to the end of the 2nd century and the first half of the 1st century BC. On the ash “platform” were also found more than 3400 fragments of cremated bones²⁷. Their analysis has shown that the majority of the burnt remains belong to domestic animals from which mostly the limbs were selected for sacrifice²⁸. Its topographic and structural characteristics and the inventory suggest that the feature from Conțești belongs to the ritual domain, probably illustrating a collective sacrifice. This kind of isolated sacred places, located far away from settlements, could have also been used for funerary purposes, so the cremated remains of the deceased, subsequently scattered around, are difficult to identify archaeologically.

²⁵ For the Lower Danube region see Măndescu 2010, with further bibliography; for Transylvania see Rustoiu 2015a, with further bibliography.

²⁶ Regarding the scattering of cremated human remains in landscape features or rivers during the European Bronze Age and Iron Age, and for ethnographic analogies from Nepal, see Kaliff, Oestigaard 2004; Rebay-Salisbury 2010, 65–66.

²⁷ Vulpe, Popescu 1976

²⁸ Nicolăescu-Plopșor 1976.

However, certain social categories belonging to these communities were treated differently upon death. For example, some members of the military elite were cremated and then laid together with their panoplies of arms in flat or tumulus graves, close to the settlement over which they ruled²⁹. The body of some women, probably priestesses, who wore rich sets of silver ornaments was also treated in an archaeologically “invisible” manner upon death. Their costume and other objects (ceramic and metal vessels) related to their function were also removed from the world of the living by “killing” and then burying them in pits which were probably located in sacred areas from the settlements’ vicinity³⁰. Therefore, the presence of human skeletons or part of them in settlements indicates the existence of various manners of treating the deceased, according to the social and symbolic categories to which they belonged: very young children, ancestors, local and foreign individuals who were sacrificed for various purposes, individuals suffering an unusual death etc.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Sándor Berecki (Târgu Mureş) for kindly helping with the illustrations.

²⁹ Rustoiu 2008, 135-163; Rustoiu 2015b.

³⁰ Egri, Rustoiu 2014.

REFERENCES

- Ailincăi 2015 S.-C. Ailincăi, *Trăind cu morții. Înmormântări în așezări de la începutul epocii fierului între Balcani, Tisa și Nistru*. Cluj-Napoca, 2015.
- Andrițoiu, Rustoiu 1997 I. Andrițoiu, A. Rustoiu, *Sighișoara-Wietenberg. Descoperirile preistorice și așezarea dacică*. BThr 23, București, 1997.
- Babeș 1971a M. Babeș, *Les fouilles archéologiques en Roumanie*. Dacia 15, 1971, 359-393.
- Babeș 1971b M. Babeș, *Necropola daco-romană de la Enisala*. StCercIstorV 22, 1, 1971, 19-45.
- Babeș 1983 M. Babeș, *Paftalele Latène târzii din sud-estul Europei*. StCercIstorV 34, 3, 1983, 196-221.
- Babeș, Mirițoiu 2011 M. Babeș, N. Mirițoiu, *Practici funerare birituale prelungite în spațiul carpato-dunărean în secolele V-III a. Chr.* AMold 34, 2011, 103-149.
- Baltag 1994 G. Baltag, *Așezarea de la Albești-Sighișoara. Elemente inedite în cultura materială din sec. 9-10*. RevBis 8, 1994, 75-81.
- Berecki, Cioată 2015 S. Berecki, D. M. Cioată, *Late Iron Age zoomorphic clay representations from Luduș, Mureș county*. In: A. Gavrilăș et al. (eds.), *Trecutul mai aproape de noi. Omagiu profesorului Gheorghe Marinescu la 70 de ani*. Cluj-Napoca 2015, 89-96.
- Delattre et al. 2000 V. Delattre, A. Bulard, P. Gouge, P. Pihuit, *De la relégation sociale à l'hypothèse des offrandes : l'exemple des dépôts en silos protohistoriques au confluent Seine-Yonne (Seine-et-Marne)*. RACFr 39, 2000, 5-30.
- Egri, Rustoiu 2014 M. Egri, A. Rustoiu, *Sacred conviviality in the Lower Danube region. The case of the Sâncrăieni hoard*. StUnivBB-H 59, 1, 2014, 153-188.
- Guštin 2011 M. Guštin, *Eastern imports from the end of the Late Iron Age at Novo mesto/Slovenia*. In: D. Măgureanu, D. Măndescu, S. Matei, (eds.), *Archaeology: Making of and Practice. Studies in Honour of Mircea Babeș at his 70th Anniversary*. Pitești, 2011, 239-254.
- Horedt, Seraphin 1971 K. Horedt, C. Seraphin, *Die prähistorische Ansiedlung auf dem Wietenberg bei Sighișoara-Schässburg*. Bonn, 1971.
- Kaliff, Oestigaard 2004 A. Kaliff, T. Oestigaard, *Cultivating corpses. A comparative approach to disembodied mortuary remains*. CurrSwedArch 12, 2004, 83-104.
- Landolt et al. 2010 M. Landolt, E. Millet, M. Roth-Zehner, H. Barrand, E. Cartier, A. Mauduit, O. Putelat, *Pratiques funéraires en Alsace du V au I^{er} siècle avant J.-C.* In: P. Barral et al. (eds.), *Gestes funéraires en Gaule au Second Âge du fer. Actes du XXXIII^e colloque international de l'AFEAF; Caen, 20-24 mai 2009*. Besançon, 2010, 207-230.

- Luca et al. 2003 S. A. Luca, V. Sîrbu, C. Roman, D. Diaconescu, N. Cerișer, S. Purece, *Hunedoara-Grădina Castelului*. CCAR. Campania 2002. București, 2003, 143-144.
- Măndescu 2010 D. Măndescu, *Cronologia perioadei timpurii a celei de a doua epoci a fierului (sec. V-III a. Chr.) între Carpați, Nistru și Balcani*. Brăila, 2010.
- Nicolăescu-Plopșor 1976 D. Nicolăescu-Plopșor, *Considération anthropologiques sur l'ensemble rituel géto-dace de Conțești-Argeș*. Thraco-Dacica 1, 1976, 227-230.
- Nicolăescu-Plopșor, Wolski 1975 D. Nicolăescu-Plopșor, W. Wolski, *Elemente de demografie și ritual funerar la populațiile vechi din România*. București, 1975.
- Popa 2014 C. N. Popa, *Uncovering group identity in the Late Iron Age of south-east Europe*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2014.
- Preda 1986 C. Preda, *Geto-dacii din bazinul Oltului inferior. Dava de la Sprîncenata*. București, 1986.
- Rebay-Salisbury 2010 K. Rebay-Salisbury, *Cremations: fragmented bodies in the Bronze and Iron Ages*. In: K. Rebay-Salisbury, M. L. S. Sørensen, J. Hughes (eds.), *Body parts and bodies whole. Changing relations and meanings*, Oxford, 2010, 64-71.
- Rustoiu 2008 Rustoiu, A. *Războinici și societate în aria celtică transilvăneană. Studii pe marginea mormântului cu coif de la Ciumești*. Cluj-Napoca, 2008.
- Rustoiu 2015a A. Rustoiu, *The Celtic horizon in Transylvania. Archaeological and historical evidence*. In: S. Berecki, *Iron Age Settlement Patterns and Funerary Landscapes in Transylvania (4th-2nd Centuries BC)*, Târgu Mureș, 9-29.
- Rustoiu 2015b A. Rustoiu, *Civilian and funerary space in the Dacian fortified settlement at Cugir*. In: D. Micle et al. (eds.), *Interdisciplinarity in Archaeology and History. In Memoriam Florin Medeleț (1943-2005)*. Arheovest III. Szeged, 2015, 349-367.
- Rustoiu, Comșa, Lisovschi-Cheleşanu 1993 A. Rustoiu, A. Comșa, C. Lisovschi-Cheleşanu, *Practici funerare în așezarea dacică de la Sighișoara-Wietenberg (Observații preliminare)*. EphemNap 3, 1993, 81-94.
- Sîrbu 1993 Sîrbu, V., *Credințe și practici funerare, religioase și magice în lumea geto-dacilor*. Galați, 1993.
- Sîrbu 1997 V. Sîrbu, *Sacrifices humains et pratiques funéraires insolites dans l'areal thrace du Hallstatt et du La Tène*. In: G. Simion (ed.), *Premier Age du Fer aux bouches du Danube et dans les régions autour de la Mer Noire. Actes du colloque international, Septembre 1993 Tulcea*. Tulcea, 1997, 193-221.
- Sîrbu et al. 2006 V. Sîrbu, A. S. Luca, C. Roman, S. Purece, D. Diaconescu, *Dacian settlement and children necropolis of Hunedoara. An unique discovery in the Dacian world. Archaeological approach*. ActaTerSept 5, 1, 2006, 188-208.

- Sîrbu et al. 2007a V. Sîrbu, A. S. Luca, C. Roman, *Tombs of Dacian warriors (2nd - 1st c. BC) found in Hunedoara-Grădina castelului (Hunedoara county)*. ActaTerSept 5, 1, 2007, 155-177.
- Sîrbu et al 2007b Sîrbu, V., Luca, A. S., Roman, C., Purece, S., Diaconescu, D., Cerișer, N., *The Dacian vestiges in Hunedoara*. Sibiu, 2007.
- Trebsche 2016 P. Trebsche, *Latènezeitliche Leichen im Keller? Überlegungen zur Deutung von Siedlungsbestattungen im österreichischen Donaauraum*. In: L. Husty, K. Schmotz (eds.), *Vorträge des 34. Niederbayerischen Archäologentages*. Rahden/Westf., 2016, 79-117.
- Ursachi 1995 Ursachi, V. *Zargidava. Cetatea dacică de la Brad*. București, 1995.
- Veit 1992 U. Veit, *Burials within settlements of the Linienbandkeramik and Stichbandkeramik Cultures of Central Europe. On the social construction of death in Early-Neolithic society*. JEurArch 1, 1992, 107-140.
- Vulpe, Popescu 1976 A. Vulpe, E. Popescu, *Une contribution archéologique à l'étude de la religion des Géo-Daces*. Thraco-Dacica 1, 1976, 217-226.
- Weiss-Krejci 2013 E. Weiss-Krejci, *The unburied dead*. In: S. Tarlow, L. Nilsson Stutz (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of the archaeology of death and burial*. Oxford, 2013, 281-301.