

HEALTH AND TRAUMA OF IRON AGE GETIC BURIALS AT CELIC-DERE, ROMANIA

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The Iron Age cemetery at Celic-Dere, a mound cemetery of over 50 tumuli, sits on a low mountain south of the flood plain of the Danube and the apex of its delta. Slightly downslope to the southeast is a co-existent village, with remains of houses, metal objects and many pottery shreds. The burials exhibit three basic kinds of grave rites, with all three involving pottery.

1) One form is the cremation, the ashes of which are usually put into a ceramic vase. The cremations appear to be younger than the two forms of inhumations often occurring high in the tumulus.

2) One form of inhumation consists of a crouched skeleton lying on its side. The side of repose and the orientation of the head seems to depend on a complex system of status and role. This form of interment represents a traditional burial style of dating back beyond the Bronze Age. Pottery is the most common grave good with the flexed burials. Tumuli with this kind of burial usually hold multiple burials. The relatively disturbed skeletons and such phenomena as ground surface snails under the bodies suggest that the hocker graves were kept open for some time.

Contemporary with these, occasionally even in the same tumulus, are 3) a series of burials where the deceased lies supine on the back with the arms stretched along the sides of the body. This kind of burial is known for both men and women, but more common for men. Grave goods are relatively plentiful. Besides the frequent pots are often food bones, weapons, implements, jewelry and other grave goods. These burials retain anatomical articulation and show little evidence of disturbance, as if they were covered over quickly or extremely well-guarded. Dr. Simion points out that the supine inhumations recall the burials of Scythic horse pastoralists to the northeast of Dobrudja. 3 bis) A subset of the extended burials, usually equipped with grave goods, tend to have their bodies laid out in a less formal position with their arms and legs splayed.

Our study concentrates on the skeletons recovered from the inhumations excavated in 1996-1998, although ultimately a great deal of useful information can be obtained from the cremations also and we hope that these cremains will be available for deriving an understanding of the Iron Age population that occupied Celic-Dere. With such clearly culturally defined 3 to 4 sets of burials, it can be very informative to compare these cultural identity sets with exhibited biological variations.

Characteristic of these burials is the vastly different state of preservation of skeleton from tumulus to tumulus, among burials in the same tumulus, and even of parts of the same skeleton. This contrasts markedly with the uniformly better preservation of skeletons dating from ca. 2000 years ago excavated by Dr. Rodica Ursu on a nearby mountain. Measurements of present-day surviving bone density provide an objective measure of this differential preservation, in general, the flexed or crouched skeletons show more variability in preservation than do the supine ones. This differential preservation must be in somewhat with the funeral rites and any shrouds or clothing worn by the deceased, as the soil characteristics are essentially the same in all these tumuli.

The sixty-year old Hero of Movila 42 is particularly noteworthy in that his foot bones were well-articulated and perfectly in place, as if he were wearing some kind of undyed leather boot that decayed relatively slowly and held his bones in place. With the foot bones in perfectly preserved anatomical position, it could be clearly noted that his third toe, the middle one, was the longest. Having the second toe the longest is less rare, and historically has been associated with the Balkan Peninsula. The ancient Greeks preferred to carve sculptures with the second toe longer than the first. Several of the local workers at the Celic-Dere cemetery had longer second toes.

So far the most intensely studied skeleton is the moderately well-preserved hocker female from Movila 14. It would be desirable to make a detailed comparison of her with the well-preserved female warrior skeleton that wore a tinker-bell on her sacrum.

For these skeletons the crania are not particularly well-preserved, so we have had to do much work reconstructing skulls. We aspire to be able to do this with the Old Hero of Movila 42. Cranial appearance should be matched with DNA results. With the present small sample, and smaller number of analyzable, crania, it is premature to state definitively how the faces of the people look and to compare the appearance of the two sets of inhumations, the hocker and the extended. It can be seen even now that the population does not look particularly Mediterranean. The "Scythic" graves have stronger builds and are taller than the folk buried flexed.

Remarkably for a series of dead people, these skeletons seem to be an especially healthy lot. The Old Warrior of Movila 42 had to be brought down by three arrows. Signs of osteal pathology are extremely rare. Normal cranial bone thickness implies an absence of malaria. Dental caries are almost non-existent, noteworthy for an Iron Age people that must have included some wheat and other cereal grains in their diet. Modern day Romanians would greatly reduce their dental expenses if they could revert back to the diet of these Iron Age Getae.