
AN UNKNOWN PART OF PREHISTORIC SPIRITUALITY UNUSUAL MORTUARY PRACTICES IN TRANSYLVANIA

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Abstract

The main focus of this paper is to present current research on unusual mortuary practices in the Transylvanian Neolithic and Eneolithic, with an emphasis on funerary discoveries from the Alba Iulia-Lumea Nouă site (Alba County).

Keywords: neolithic, eneolithic, funerary discoveries, mortuary practices

1. Introduction

It is difficult to attempt the study of prehistoric civilisations without considering aspects related to spiritual life. In this context, there is no doubt at all that funerary rites and rituals represent a significant part of prehistoric spirituality.

An important aspect of mortuary rituals is that they provide social integration by establishing and maintaining links between households; the individuals from a given community participate in collective ritual actions [1]. I. Kuijt believes that mortuary practices are less a mirror of the importance of the deceased, and more a public action that a small group carries out in order to obtain participation from the household society. The specific rituals are based on that society's symbolic themes and world view [1].

Current knowledge and researcher subjectivism constitute important factors to be duly considered in the study, classification and interpretation of burials. For Neolithic agricultural societies, inhumation was the dominant rite, associated with the fertility and fecundity cult specific to the period. Archaeological research views inhumation as a usual funerary practice. Typically, bodies are found lying either supine or in the foetal position, inside the settlement or in necropolises.

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2. Archaeological context and anthropological data

Knowledge of the mortuary practices of Transylvanian Neolithic and Eneolithic communities is sparse at the current stage of research [2-10].

Any understanding of mortuary practices in Transylvanian prehistory must take into account the important site at Alba Iulia-*Lumea Nouă* for the Neolithic and Eneolithic period. In this settlement, the most intensive habitation is that of the Foeni group communities [11]. In excavations from 2003, 2005 and 2011, remarkable discoveries were made of a funerary complex with unique mortuary practices, attributed to the Foeni group.

At the current state of research, the Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI) was calculated from the number of whole and partial skulls discovered. This method was used due to the specific feature of this funerary complex: more skulls than whole skeletons were revealed. Approximately 120 disarticulated individuals were buried in this area.

Osteological analysis has determined the presence of children and adults. Collective death as a result of violence is improbable, as no axes or arrow tips were found alongside the human bones [12]. Abrasion areas and round depression fractures have been identified on some of the skulls [13]. Intentional cut marks were also found on some long bones. The archaeological material found in association with the funerary discovery, once processed, allowed for cultural classification under the Foeni group [11, p. 38, 213].

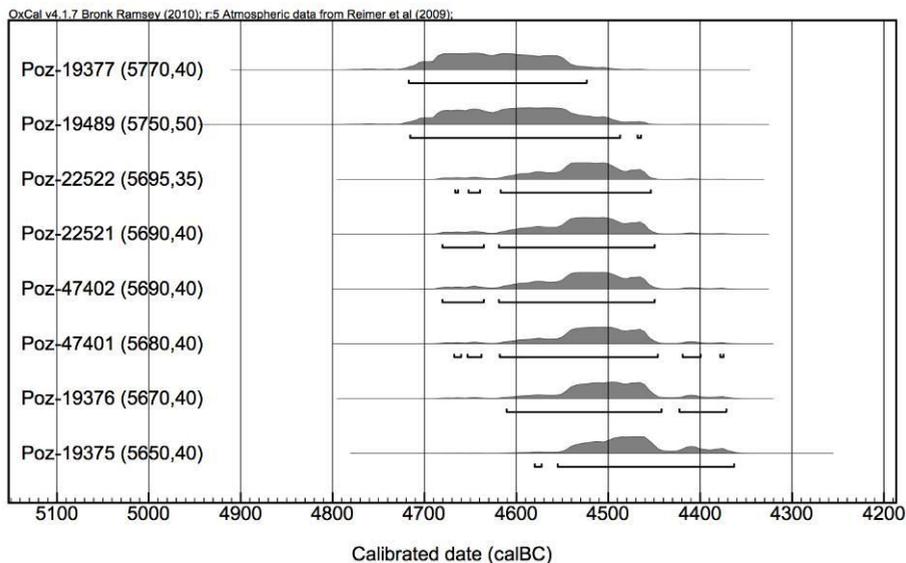


Figure 1. AMS ^{14}C from Alba Iulia-*Lumea Nouă* [15].

AMS ^{14}C dating analyses were performed on skeletal remains [12, 14, 15]. They reveal a timeframe of 4600-4450 calBC (Figure 1), corresponding to the end of the late Neolithic and beginning of the Transylvanian Eneolithic. It is

believed that the human remains from Alba Iulia-*Lumea Nouă* were arranged and deposited in the settlement around this time.



Figure 2. Human remains from Trench II, square C (2003).



Figure 3. Human remains from Trench III, square B (2005).

Excavations in Trench II, square C, pit G1/2003 (▼0.75 m) revealed an MNI of 23 human skulls, and a significant quantity of skeletal remains, distributed randomly in the upper levels. Many of the bones were found in a slanting position (Figure 2). The pit has a diameter of 1.50-1.70m, and is delimited by small stones placed around its exterior [11, p. 32].



Figure 4. Human mandible from Trench III, square B (2005) with intentional cut marks.

During the 2005 excavations, an agglomeration of disarticulated human bones was discovered in trench III, square B, at ▼0.65 m (Figure 3). Most of the skulls were found in pit G2, while the entire perimeter revealed an MNI of 84-85 skulls [11, p. 37-38]. The upper part of the pit and the ground level contained numerous long bones, most in a slanting position. Some of the human bone fragments showed traces of burning. Towards the bottom and on the sides of the pit was a thick layer of ash and traces of intense fire [11].

Some of the mandibles discovered in Alba Iulia-Lumea Nouă site have obvious sectioning traces and regular oblique margins. A significant example can be observed in Figure 4. A left *Juvenis* mandible (15-16 years old), found in Trench III/2005, shows regular, angular cut marks on both the coronoid process and the condylar neck. There is no evidence of bone remodelling [16].

The most prominent discovery from the 2011 excavation is the complex (Figure 5a) from Trench I/2011, square D, at ▼0.15-0.20m [15]. Several human crania, mandibles and maxillae, long bones and vertebrae were found in an area of about 2x2m. The human remains present as disarticulated and the estimated MNI is 19, based on the crania found.

Ceramic fragments from large vessels mark the outer limits of the funerary complex (Figure 6). Disturbance of the general deposition of the remains by later anthropic activity has yet to be identified. Long bones were lying on the ground (not slanted) in rectangular arrangements enclosing skulls (Figure 7), suggesting an intentional disposition. Bones of various fauna were also identified along with the human remains. All remains were found until

▼0.40m (Figure 5d). This funerary complex is part of the Foeni layer, which overlaps the pit of a large Vinča B hut.

Some of the skulls discovered in 2011 present several particular features.

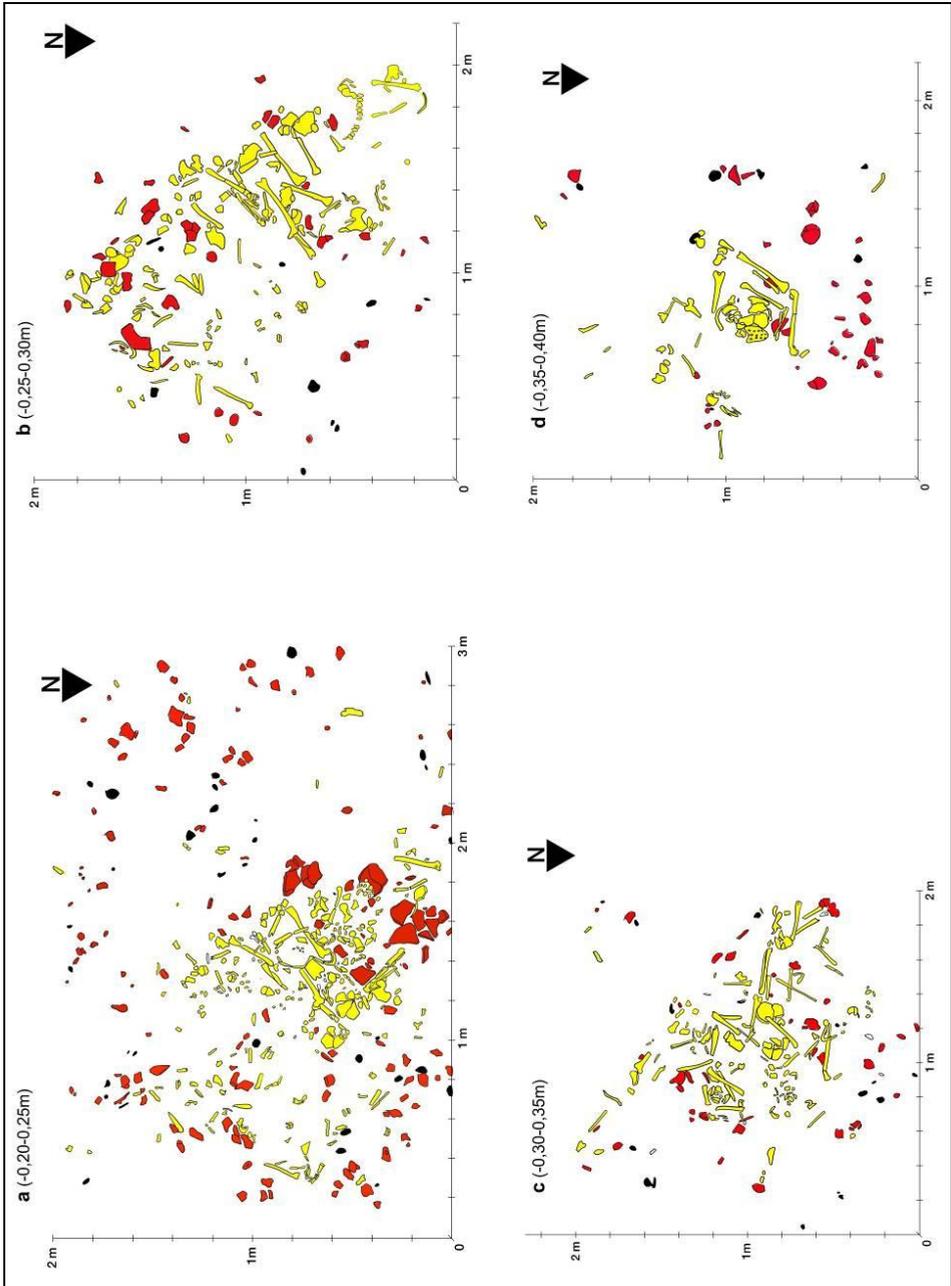


Figure 5. (a-d) Grundriss of successive layers from Trench I, square D (2011).



Figure 6. Human remains from Trench I, square D (2011).



Figure 7. Evidence of defleshed bones from Trench I, square D (2011).

Skull no. 5 is made up of the frontal two thirds of a skull cap, put together from nine separate fragments, most likely belonging to a 20-30 years old female. An oval-shaped (3x1.5 cm) depression fracture was identified on the left frontal eminence. Its edges are regular, cut obliquely towards the interior of the skull (Figure 8). Due to the lack of bone remodelling, this injury probably occurred around the time of death.

Skull no. 6 presents as a 25-30 year old male with an oval-shaped depression fracture on the parietal, approximately 1cm lateral from the sagittal suture. It is 2.5x1.8cm in size and has regular edges obliquely cut towards the interior. In addition, this skull has a clogged fragment and presents as a perimortem injury (Figure 9).



Figure 8. Skull no. 5 from Trench I, square D (2011).

3. Conclusions

Analysis of all skeletal material from Lumea Nouă is presently underway and this research may offer further explanations into the unusual mortuary practices of this community.

Oval-shaped depression fractures have been observed on crania from the 2003, 2005, and 2011 excavations. Analysis of these fractures shows that the edges are regular and discrete, with concentric radiating fractures on the external surface. On the inner layer of the crania, irregular bevelling can be seen [17-20].



Figure 9. Skull no. 6 from Trench I, square D (2011).

These fractures probably occurred close to or at the time of death, and suggest the possibility that they were made by an experienced individual with a dedicated tool, as part of a ritual.

The 2011 funerary discoveries reveal a large quantity of defleshed bones. Ethno-archaeological analogies indicate defleshing and placement of skeletons in mass graves [21-25]. The current state of research suggests that this is the most plausible working hypothesis.

A relevant aspect of the unusual mortuary practices at Alba Iulia-*Lumea Nouă* is the intentional detaching of the mandibles and skull caps. Postmortem manipulation has been noticed not only on the skulls, but also on the postcranial skeleton.

It is possible that the removal of the skull, the cut marks on long bones, and the mandible sectioning are symbolic and form part of a ritual practice. Some of the human remains might even have been brought to Alba Iulia-*Lumea Nouă* for burial from other settlements. A hypothesis worth considering is that the sectioned mandibles were in fact trophies. The new evidence analysed in this present study strengthens the idea from a previous study [16] that *Lumea Nouă* was a ceremonial centre where burial rituals were organized.

Peri- and post-mortem intentional modifications on a skeleton can be interpreted in various ways. One suggestion is that the greater the modification to the bone, the more important an individual was, thereby indicating his status or prestige [26].

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