BETWEEN CREMATION AND INHUMATION THE RE-BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY IN TRANSYLVANIA (7th-10th CENTURY A.D.)

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Abstract

The defined chronological limits (7th–10th centuries) cover the entire 'Slavization' and its subsequent Christianization process within the Transylvanian space. Both phases have influenced the shaping of a cultural Transylvanian distinctiveness. Cultural and religious features belonging to the autochthonous population were caught up by those belonging to local ethnic groups.

The archaeological research between the 1960's and 1980's was interested in finding the necessary tools that were able to force the archaeological object to reveal information about the ethnicity of its 'maker' or 'master'. This assumed archaeological objects' ethnic load theory became a postulate of the Romanian history. Therefore, the Romans and later on the Daco-Romans are archaeological traceable by means of their holding onto a certain funerary rite 'conservatism'.

The ancient society was characterized by its bi-ritualism. The latter was documented within the empire's Danube provinces starting with the I[st] century B.C. The bi-ritualism was given up starting with the IIIrd century A.D. during the rise of barbarian kingdoms within the former Roman provinces: Moesia Inferior, Dacia and Pannonia. The re-birth of this funerary rite was acknowledged during the rise of the Avars' authority within the Pannonia plain and the emergence of Slavic populations within central and south-eastern Europe.

The proportion of inhumation and cremation burial grounds in Transylvania favours the first ones (the cremation burial grounds). The proportion expresses a different point of view in Moldavia or Wallachia where the number of inhumation burial grounds is higher than the number of cremation ones. Therefore, one can conclude that the political influence of the Byzantine Empire was always of high importance in the Lower Danube region and was emphasized by the religious influence after the 8th century. This century marks the rise of the eastern Christian communities.

Keywords: Transylvania, early Middle Ages, Christianity, cremation burial grounds

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1. Introduction

The chronological limits are covering the entire 'Slavization' process, as well as the subsequent Christianization of the Transylvanian space. This process rounded up the shaping of the Transylvanian cultural distinctiveness. Cultural, as well as religious autochthonous features merged with those belonging to local communities that are known as follows: *Mediaş group*(7th-9/10th) [1-3], *Blandiana A and B group* (sec. 9th-11th) [4], *Ciumbrud group* (sec. 9th/10th) [5], *Cluj group* (late 9th century-early Xth century), *Dridu-Alba Iulia Staţia de Salvare II culture* (9th–10th centuries) [6].

The European archaeological research during the 1960's – 1980's tried to reveal instruments by means of which the archaeological objects could reveal its ethnic origins. The archaeological objects' ethnic character represented a debating theme within the Anglo-Saxon, German and French historiography and has entered the Romanian one during the 1990's [7, 8].

This ethnic load attributed to the archaeological object has become the postulate of the Romanian history: the Romans and later on the Daco-Romans disposed of a higher cultural level than that of the local groups. They are therefore easier to be traced from an archaeological point of view due to their funerary rite's 'conservatorism'. This feature is strongly linked to their communities' massive Christian feature.

Another postulate is given by the 'belief' in early Christening and the *continuity of folk Christianity* within all spaces north from the Danube and within the inner Carpathian region. This postulate was the basis for all Transylvanian archaeological research regarding the early Middle Ages. These efforts were trying to prove the existence of an autochthonous Christian population and its superiority towards the local populations. This is why the archaeological research oriented towards burial grounds didn't develop on a constant basis that would have allowed a clarification on the topic of the ethnic situation during the above mentioned historical period. We do not know all the reasons that led to an insufficient interdisciplinary research regarding the burial grounds dated between the 7th and 10th centuries. We aren't therefore able to refer to any interdisciplinary researched burial ground or at least one that was published as such.

Despite all these 'beliefs', the field archaeology wasn't able to provide clear and undeniable arguments regarding the overall existence of Christianity within the Daco-Roman communities between the 7th–9th centuries. Our analysis will emphasize particularly on this discrepancy between the nationalism based 'subjectivity' and the results given by the period's archaeological results.

2. Discussion

The link between Archaeology and nationalism can be studied first of all from the point of view regarding the role attributed to Archaeology within the structure of national identity's history [9]. The second approach could be traced

within the links between the establishment of national states and institutionalizing the field of Archaeology [10]. Bruce G. Trigger considers the nationalist archaeology to develop at its strongest within nations that are feeling the most threatened, that are feeling unsafe or without of their public rights. Their privation is always caused by stronger nations [11].

While Marie Louise Stig Sørensen was studying the way Archaeology developed into a means of nationalist discourse in Denmark, she concluded that Archaeology was institutionalized then when *it became politically useful and it was only than that it was brought to the public's attention* as well [12].

Most recently, the Romanian historical discourse is trying to renounce the term *nationalism* when referring to the migration period and the early Middle Ages. It therefore started to coin a new term that is more appropriate to the medieval society's reality: *identity*. The term can make itself understood on more than one level: in politics, in terms of belonging to a privileged category; in religion or in a social manner as well. Researching the *identity* was also the object of the debates that took part during the 3rd International Conference of Medieval and Later Archaeology 'Medieval Europe', called Identity and Demarcation [13]. Regarding the Romanian historiography, Stelian Brezeanu is the one to take a stand from this point of view – new to the European historiography as well – and to talk about medieval *solidarities* within the Romanian space [14]. We consider the idea of 'solidarity' to be taken as circumspect, regardless of its nature, within any kind of geographical and historical space, all the more so within the Romanian space. We should keep in mind that the voivodeships – present until the late 18th century – were mostly based upon armed and diplomatic conflicts and the *solidarity* seems more likely to be applied in order to revive a concept known to the Marxist-Leninist discourse, namely the 20th century *communist society's internationalizing* and to direct it towards the medieval period.

The postulate of Romanian medieval solidarity was preceded and accompanied by the one regarding the Christianity's breach within the populations located north from the Danube [15, 16]. Archaeology was quickly put to a good use and was to provide with the arguments needed to sustain the massive early Christening of the Daco-Roman populations. We shall not emphasize upon this aspect, since it was already debated within so many studies [17, 18]. Our intention is to present what had Archaeology managed to provide as a useful result in respect to this theme.

The Transylvanian archaeological researches were early on (right after the I^{st} World War) oriented towards two main directions: the Daco-Roman continuity after the so called *Aurelian retreat* and the search for proofs in terms of an overall massive Christianity. The University in Cluj took over the research regarding these two directions through the studies of Constantin Daicoviciu and the ones belonging to his successors, Dumitru Protase and Nicolae Gudea. The works of the latter two researchers regarding the above mentioned directions [18, 19] have quickly managed to emphasize an approach way embraced especially by the theological historiography. Both renowned researchers have

carried out a number of archaeological researches within important archaeological sites regarding the history of the 1st–9th centuries A.D. They have therefore enforced an approach model in respect to the continuity and Christianity themes. From their point of view, the two concepts were linked and reshaped into an argumentative model: the continuity proofs the existence of Christianity and the Christianity proofs the existence of an autochthonous population. This population was a Daco-Roman one in its majority.
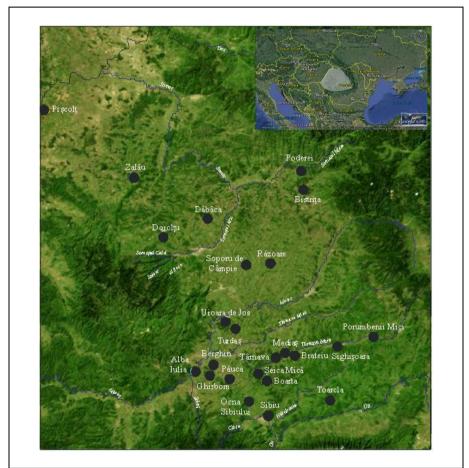

Figure 1. The spread of the cremations and bi-ritual necropoles in Transylvania.

The chronological period after the 3rd century can be once again divided from the point of view regarding the ruling political authority. This division results in three categories: the German period, the Slavic period and the Hungarian one. We shall take a look at the Slavic one between the 6th and 10th centuries. This period is emphasized mostly by means of cremation burial grounds. Kurt Horedt has named this archaeological horizon the *Medias* group, represented by what he had named a bi-ritual burial ground (Figure 1).

The bi-ritualism was a characteristic of the ancient world and was documented within the empire's Danubian provinces since the I[st] century B.C. However, it was abandoned during the rise of the barbarian kingdoms in the region of the former provinces Moesia Inferior, Dacia and Pannonia, during the 3rd century A.D.

This funerary rite was recommenced once the Avar authority enforced itself within the Pannonia plain and the same time the Slavic communities had arrived in central and south-eastern Europe. The bi-ritualism is documented by means of archaeological researches within the Romanian north Danubian region, within the boundaries of nowadays Hungary, Slovakia and Austria. The Medias group is the expression of bi-ritualism in Transylvania and the outer Carpathian Romanian regions have expressed their bi-ritualism feature within the Danubian-Balkan culture, also known as the Dridu culture. Both cultures have experienced their evolution during the late Avar domination period (the first half of the 8th century) and after the khaganate's decay as a result of the convergent Franks' and Bulgarians' attacks.

But what has to be understood with bi-ritualism? If we were to apply a definition, it would mean practicing both funerary rites within the same community. Therefore, both rites would be traceable within the same burial ground, during the same time. Kurt Horedt and everyone following in his footsteps have considered the presence of one or more than one inhumation graves within a cremation burial ground to be a proof of bi-ritualism. None the less, there isn't an agreement in respect to the researchers' opinions, but there is one regarding the approach of the cremation or bi-ritual burial grounds as a counter argument directed towards the existence of an overall Christianity during the 8th–10th centuries A.D.

The discourse in respect to an overall Christianity within the population in the southern part of Transylvania has frequently used the same arguments - the Christian findings (crosses, Christian tombs and others more). These findings are dated back to the 7th century and are documented in the time of the bishop Hierotheus, Tourkia's bishop. He has received, on the behalf of Byzantine imperial court, the mission to fulfil the administrative-religious organization at the north of Danube. The archaeological findings in Alba Iulia (the rotunda chapel, burial grounds with Christian findings) helped locate Hierotheus' mission. The archaeological findings suggested that the ruler in Alba Iulia – Gylas/Gyula – made a visit to Constantinople sometime around the 10th century. Alexandru Madgearu has analyzed the possibility of locating him in Alba Iulia, but his conclusions state a rather opposed hypothesis. He concludes that Hierotheus' mission was more probable to take place somewhere between the rivers Mures – Tisa – Danube [20, 21].

Archaeology did not manage to discover other arguments in favour of an overall Christian presence in Transylvania between the 7th and 10th centuries. This thesis is given by:

- the almost complete lack of any Christian object between the late 7th century and the late 9th one;

- the lack of any churches during the above mentioned period. The first known religious structure in Transylvania is the rotunda chapel in Alba Iulia. Dating this chapel was always a cause for conflict. Radu R. Heitel, the archaeologist that undertook the structure's archaeological research, has provided different data regarding the structure's construction phases. He concluded that the structure was erected somewhere between the late 9th century and the early 10th one.
- the lack of any documented reference that would lead more or less to information regarding the existence of an administrative-religious structure located north from the Danube sometime between the 7th century and the 10th one.

3. Conclusions

The above mentioned period overlaps the Avar Khaganate (567-797) and the period of settlement for some of the Slavic populations in central and south-eastern Europe as well. The steppe populations have therefore asserted their funerary rites (the inhumation rite along with a ritual that cannot be attributed to the Christian environment) or that of the Slavic populations (the cremation that was quickly spread during the 8th century becoming the main funerary rite in the north-western and eastern Pannonia space, as well as within the boundaries of central southern Transylvania).

In respect to the inventory discovered within these burial grounds, one should notice the difference between the Transylvanian bi-ritual burial grounds and the ones outside the Carpathian basin. The difference consists in the low number of Avar objects uncovered in Transylvania. Furthermore, those found here, came mostly from the burial ground in Bratei. The number of Avar objects in Slovakia, Hungary or Austria is considerably higher than that.

One can affirm that the military decay of the Avar Khaganate by the end of the 18th century has opened the path for the Christian missions within the inner Carpathians' region and has led to the emergence of a new power, namely that of the First Bulgarian Empire. The latter had adopted Christianity during the 9th century.

All conditions for a re-birth of Christianity east from the Middle Danube and north from the Lower Danube were therefore fulfilled. The main factor for this re-birth was as stated: the First Bulgarian Empire. It was also the main representative of Byzantine culture within the northern Balkans' region, as well as within the inner Carpathian one.

Acknowledgement

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