

„BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA
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**The habitation in the Upper Someș Basin between
the last decades of the Roman province of Dacia and
the fall of the ”Hunnic Empire” (250-450).
-Case Study: The settlement at Suceagu, Cluj
County-**

- PhD Thesis Abstract -

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Although the studies dedicated to the Late Roman and Early Migration Period are not entirely missing, they are oriented towards the elaboration of typological systems and/or chronologies, problems that are not changing in any way the traditional manner of addressing the main problems that we face while dealing with these historical periods. Another way generally used when addressing this period refers to the publication of stray finds or singular archaeological features that are presented regardless of the general context that they are part of. We can easily see the lack of any regional studies destined to highlight specific patterns of evolution or regional tendencies.

The discussions regarding problems such as the ethnic interpretation of different artefacts and/or archaeological features are scarce and in many cases quite ignored by the vast majority of the Romanian scholars who are mainly focusing their attention on cataloguing and analysing the sites and artefacts without aiming at creating a general theoretical framework in which they can integrate their research. All these realities are doubled by the lack of any reasonable research plan regarding the national strategy of archaeological research. Because of the many problems raised by the research of the Early Migration period, many of them being of paramount importance for the understanding and contextualising the phenomenon that contributed to the appearance of our civilization as we know it, it is quite clear to us that the re-assessment of the main theories dealing with this historical period, based on the numerous new discoveries, is needed.

It is our main goal to focus our research upon the problems mentioned before and attempting to put things in context starting with the case study for the site at Suceagu, Cluj County. We are trying to find the right place for one site in the general framework of the entire historical period that it is part of; hoping that some specific patterns observed for one individual can make the entire picture much closer to the reality of those long forgotten times. In achieving such results we strongly believe that our research should be conducted at two

different levels, on a general one trying to establish the main chronological and spatial characteristics of the epoch we are dealing (in other words to contextualize our research) and on the other hand at an interpretative level, according to the current theories that are common to the scientific milieu.

After several decades of scientific research, the Early Migration Period continues to be one of the little known archaeological domains in Romania. Although during the last 20 years a series of monographic publications touching also this period were published. It is quite clear that such a reality should also be pursued for the other big sites belonging to this chronological span that are still unpublished. We must be aware of the fact that without the publication of such site monographs we cannot go on further with the elaboration of a general history regarding the many problems of this epoch such as the ethnic, cultural and social phenomena that took place in Transylvania for example. Because of the lack of strategy in the research activity of this period, the vast majority of archaeological material comes from rescue excavations or stray finds, the systematic archaeological excavations being documented for only a few cases. Thus, the processing of these discoveries is very difficult, being doubled also by the lack of literary sources.

Although apparently the subject has been approached in many occasions, there are only two works worth mentioning, respectively those published by Kurt Horedt¹ and Radu Harhoiu², a complex and unitary work based on the study of geographical micro-areas being still wished for. If regarding the first mentioned work we can invoke the need for an update of the information presented, the second book discusses mainly the spectacular finds belonging to the Early Migration period neglecting the other finds categories and especially the settlements. Having in mind the above mentioned situation, we will try to follow not only the conclusions of the authors that dealt before with this epoch but also the correlation of the now known information for the area of the Someș basin while trying to analyse them on a micro-regional context, based on up to date methods of interpretation.

The territory that is being analysed represents both from the geographical and historical point of view a unitary and homogenous area. The geographical argument relies in the fact that the chosen territory is part of a larger geographical unit composed by the Someș Hills and the Someș Field up to the confluence of the Someșul Mic and Someșul Mare rivers. Apart from the geographical point of view, based on historical facts (archaeological discoveries), we consider that the area defined using the term “Upper Someș basin” can be

¹ K. Horedt, *Siebenbürgen in spätrömische zeit*, Bukarest, 1982.

² R. Harhoiu, *Die frühevolkerwanderungszeit in Rumänien*, Bukarest, 1998.

extended for the whole area encompassing also the Meseş Gate. Another element that determined us to operate this extensive analysis refers to the importance of judging things in a much larger context both geographically and chronologically. While attempting such an approach we are aware of the fact that in order for us to understand the cultural changes that took place during the Early Migration period, a comparative analysis with the previous chronological stages is obvious.

We focused our attention on analysing the sites that are both contemporaneous and part of the same geographical region hoping that the comparison between them will yield similar situations with those documented for sites considered to be reference points for this chronological span. Throughout the analysis of these mentioned sites (being either discovered by accident or systematically researched) and having as reference the settlement at Suceagu we consider that we can establish a general typology of the pottery that is typical for the researched region. We will later try to establish the chronology of this above mentioned typology studying the way in which these ceramic artefacts are being combined with other well dated finds inside closed contexts. We also believe that analysing the pottery produced by this site we can determine the existence of different relationships between several populations that lived together in this area. The analysis of the literary sources will serve as background check for the realities proven by our research. We are basically trying to establish a general typology working our way up from a particular situation (the settlement at Suceagu) to a regional scheme suitable for this chronological period, such an attempt being absent until now.

For the area of the Upper Someş basin the importance of such a study is highlighted by the potential of the conclusions that we might reach, having impact upon the possibility of differentiating cultural influences coming from several geographical regions. The aim of our study would be to identify and highlight relations and interactions between different cultural milieus especially since the entire area is situated in a geographical key point, the Meseş Gate acting as the main access point into the heart of Transylvania throughout antiquity. Having in mind the local characteristics of the studied area we will attempt at establishing the existence of the continuity process, such concept being understood either as a cultural and ethnic continuity throughout time (based on technological traditions in pottery production) or simply as a habitation continuity. The studied area is very well suited for such an analysis since it was formerly part of the Roman province of Dacia, the comparison with the realities of the Early Migration's period *Barbaricum* being revealed after close analysis of the settlements situated in north-west Romania.

Another topic that we will try to follow and approach from a critical point of view would be the problem of ethnical interpretations according to the new theories which presume certain reassessments regarding theoretical constructs or concepts such as “ethnic identity” or “social mobility”. In order for us to understand such notions it is quite clear that apart from the archaeological perspective we need to address things also from the point of view of the social sciences, disciplines that establish a better theoretical framework for these questions. The question of “ethnic identity” as an essential characteristic of the identity of a certain population expressed in order for them to be differentiated from others as well as a manner in which they represent themselves, determined the archaeologists and historians in general to operate with terms such as “cultural continuity” or “cultural discontinuity”. The new theoretical framework generally created and adopted by the scholars studying the Early Migration period tends to limit the significance of such concepts as the ones mentioned before that establishes a direct limit between certain archaeological culture and an ethnical group or population known from the ancient literary sources.

The studied area although having geographical limitations has great archaeological potential. At a first glance, focusing upon the distribution of the archaeological sites regardless of their nature, we can easily observe certain clusters situated mainly along the Someş valley. Even so, the situation of the area as it can be interpreted based on a fast study of the existing archaeological literature can be quite deceiving: out of a total of 119 sites (mentioned in different published studies) after a close analysis of all the information regarding each of them, we managed to discard the ones that offered insufficient or misleading data. This filtering process showed that we can only rely for our analysis on 37 sites (see Annexe 1).

The chronological frame that we are dealing with overlaps stages C2-D2 or C2-D2/3 according to the different chronological systems elaborated for the European *Barbaricum*. The chronological stages correspond to certain historical realities regarding the studied area having as limits the withdrawal of the Roman administration from Dacia (270 AD) and the appearance of the “Gepidic Kingdom” (454 AD). One of the first objectives of this work, having impact upon the understanding of the historical background of the region, is the establishing of a relative chronological system as well as the evolution of the entire area throughout the given time span, such an attempt only being possible by approaching the general evolution of Transylvania. The distribution and character of the habitation represents another point of interest of our study. Finally, all the gathered information, interpreted together with the situation documented for the site at Suceagu will help establish an accurate

picture regarding the micro-regional evolution of the studied area during the Early Migration Period. The research methodology constitutes the “backbone” of our approach, a reason for which it was totally adapted to the interpretative needs that such a micro-regional and afterwards a regional study implies. The modern technologies, such as statistical data acquisition, storage and processing as well as GIS based applications proved to be of great help. The database specially designed for our needs covering a wide range of information such as the type of habitation and its nature as well as the archaeological contexts and artefacts represents the starting point for our analysis.

The problem of creating a chronological system for the Migration Period in general and for the Early Migration Period in particular was and still is one of the most important factors for understanding the ancient realities. Throughout the time, several attempts were made trying to create some regional chronological frameworks which corresponded more or less to the main historical events of that era. The importance of correlating the chronologies elaborated for the Romanian territory with those generally accepted all across Europe puts us in the situation of creating a common ground for the better understanding of our regional patterns as part of the main features observed at the European level. The main difficulty that we face while trying to correlate the above mentioned chronological systems resides first of all in the fundamental differences regarding the way in which they were elaborated. If for the whole Europe the scholars started by analysing the way in which different sets of artefacts were combined inside closed contexts (based on the theoretical principle of cross-chronology), the Romanian archaeological milieu usually created chronological systems based on historical events described by the ancient literary sources.

Once established, the chronological framework offers the element that will assure the context of the future problems that we might face while dealing with typical archaeological questions. It is worth mentioning that in order for us to achieve such a goal we focused our attention on the study of the archaeological finds themselves and interpreted them according to the present archaeological theories that are generally accepted across the world, thus being able to free ourselves from the mental blockage that is represented by “the continuity theory”. Approaching the main theories proposed by the Romanian historiography using such an interpretative key might lead to new questions and answers regarding the general picture of the studied area after the Roman withdrawal. The problems raised by the Late Roman archaeological find discovered in this area, coming from well documented contexts, point to the fact that the mechanism behind their penetration north of the Danube must be reassessed. The ancient literary sources together with the archaeological data are pointing towards a very

complex cultural situation in which the tribal social structures typical to the *Barbaricum* can be seen all across the studied area. The connections with the Late Roman Empire are drastically reduced starting with the late 3rd century AD being limited only to individual contacts and not to a programmed plan as presumed by the existence of strong local communities organised after the old social model implied by the Roman civilisation. A series of nuances are necessary while analysing the Late Roman artefacts with military character such as the crossbow brooches (*Zwiebelknopffibel*) or the belt sets found in barbarian contexts. Although the interpretation of *insignia* for such artefacts (of objects with a well-established military significance inaccessible to everybody) cannot be denied in this case, a certain caution must be taken into consideration while attempting to answer questions regarding the persons that used such high ranking adornments. It seems unlikely that such objects, having important military nature and being officially distributed along with the related outfit (military uniform) by the Roman Empire to reach these distant lands and have the same meaning in an area in which the Romans had lost their authority for almost five decades. It is most probable that we are dealing with *foederati* that after serving for a certain period of time in the Roman army are returning to their own communities.

A similar situation can be also documented after performing a comparative study between the Late Roman coins discovered in Transylvania with the ones coming from the Sântana de Mureş – Černajchov milieu. We consider that such a parallel provided enough arguments that enable us to determine the existence of the same phenomenon that characterises these two cultural areas, respectively the lack of a monetary economy. The paradox of such a comparison applicable also to the obtained results refers to the following two scenarios that exclude one another: we can either speak of the existence of a “romanic” population in the černjachovian milieu or, more probably, about the presence of the barbarians in Transylvania. Having all these in mind, much more interesting seems to be the nature of the mechanisms that allowed for these coins to penetrate such a remote area. It is plausible to believe that such realities were the results of the salaries paid by the Roman Empire to some *foederati* groups, either on small scale commercial connections between these two lands. As for such commercial connections, although the barbarian societies did not have a monetary based type of economy, we can easily presume that they knew the actual function of the coins and that they used them in their commercial relationships with the Romans. Therefore, we can presume that such mechanisms allowing for the accumulation of monetary finds in barbarian societies can only be explained throughout the existence of a mixed economic system involving both the existence of barter used mainly inside their own communities along with

a real trading system using money as a way of exchange while dealing with the Late Roman Empire. Such a reality has obvious implications regarding the differences observed in the monetisation of various regions (the percentage of coin finds being higher close to the *limes* and decreasing proportionally with the distance) situated outside the economic buffer zone that was the Roman *limes*. The prosperity of these commercial relationships between the barbarians and the Romans is revealed both by the study of the Roman imports as well as by the ancient literary sources that speak about the large scale of such actions that sometimes could have taken the form of smuggling.

The extremely complicated cultural mosaic of the entire Transylvania becomes clear after a sustained study of different barbarian populations that start to invade this region starting with the *Carpi* and ending along with the “empire of the steppes” being ruled by the mighty Huns. Some nuances regarding the inner chronology of these different archaeological cultures destined to change the common perception about the evolution of these archaeological cultures are necessary. For instance, it is now clear that the Sântana de Mureş – Černajchov culture continues to exist even after the arrival of the Huns as shown by the study of the brooches with semi-circular head plate, but also by a series of closed archaeological contexts datable throughout the chronological stage D1. On one hand, we clearly observe the exaggeration of the impact that the Huns had upon this region (seen especially in the Romanian archaeological literature) and on the other hand the inexistence of a good reason for us to believe that the end of a certain archaeological culture must be related to an exact date given by some military conflict recorded by the ancient writers. In fact, we are dealing with a control over the local elites of the Hunnic rulers as well as with a synchronism of the entire Gothic world regardless of its geographical position. In other words, we cannot speak about major chronological differences between Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania that could be related with the massive migration of the Goths, pressed by the new coming force represented by the Huns as presumed by some Romanian archaeologists. Starting with the end of the 4th century AD, the cultural mosaic that we mentioned before starts to be even more complex. We now face the presence of new cultural influences coming from the Germanic barbarian world from Central Europe (the so called Dobrodzien-Guttentager horizon) that are entering the Transylvanian basin on a north-west – south-east direction. We can easily see that we are dealing with a period extremely sensitive, a time of great changes at the whole European level that allows us to feel the turbulent atmosphere that was marking that era.

The situations already described should be able to establish quite well the historical context in which the settlement of Suceagu appeared and developed. The site is composed of three different overlapping settlements, each having its own chronology as follows: the first one is dated during the time of the Roman province of Dacia, the second one dated between the second half of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century AD and the last one broadly dated during the 7th-8th century AD. Because of this particular situation, our first attempt was to determine whether some direct connections between them truly existed. If right from the beginning it seemed that we cannot find such links between the Early Medieval and the Early Migration period settlements, regarding the Roman and the Early Migration period settlement we considered that only a thorough analysis would determine such assumptions. Our analysis needed to focus upon certain aspects of the pottery production such as technological tradition and regional patterns of distribution as well as the habitation of the entire studied area in order to identify possible similar or different models that will clarify the problem of ethnical continuity versus habitation continuity.

The correct chronology of each settlement along with the study of all the archaeological documentation provided us with the first information regarding the structure of these two settlements. Consequently, in order for us to handle such a wide area that composed the entire site, a series of non-invasive geophysical surveys were performed having as main objective the identification and dispersion of each site as well as that of some relevant features such as different structures and pottery kilns. One of the first assessments that we were able to figure out was that the area of the site is much bigger (cca. 3 hectares) than the one presumed before based on archaeological excavations. In the same time we were able to identify three more geophysical anomalies that we might interpret as pottery kilns together with two rectangular structures probably made of stone. We must stress the fact that without any archaeological excavation we are unable to establish the chronology of the structures mentioned before. As a hypothesis, we can presume, based on the data gathered from the excavations in 2012 that the rectangular structures identified on the magnetic map belong to Roman time while the pottery kilns should be linked to the Early Migration Period settlement.

Some fundamental differences observed for the inner structure of the two settlements were documented. The Roman settlement resembles what we all know to be a rural settlement in which at least two large stone structures were determined occupying a very large area inside the site itself while the barbarian settlement is characterized by the agglomeration of archaeological features such as sunken dwellings, pits and pottery kilns clustered in a limited area of the site illustrating the tribal manner of organizing the landscape

(such inner structure being typical for the barbarian settlements known from all over Northern Europe). Moreover, these two settlements do not share the same spatial distribution and landscape arrangement, the Roman site occupying a larger territory. Maybe the best argument in resolving the so called “continuity question” refers to the stratigraphic data that clearly indicates that the two settlements are overlapping one another and thus having no direct chronological or ethnical link. We refer here to a situation observed in 2012 when we managed to identify and date a late 4th century feature overlapping the collapsing layer of one of the Roman stone structures dated with a coin from the 3rd century AD, a fact which implies that the stone structure was already collapsed and therefore not functioning in the 4th century AD.

The analysis of the pottery recovered from the site at Suceagu pointed to the same conclusions based on the fact that we were unable to determine any pottery technological traditions transmitted from the Roman time latter on as well as on the fact that the general tendencies highlighted for each period appear to be quite different. Some aspects are destined to draw our attention at a general lever such as the high quantity of course pottery and together with lots of fine pottery bowls identified for the Early Migration period. The same situation is also documented in north-west Romania as well as in sites such as the one identified at Archiud for example, a fact that implies a close link with the central and northern European *Barbaricum*. From this point of view, we can easily link the settlement at Suceagu to the group of Transylvanian archaeological sites having northern Germanic elements and are dated during the chronological stages D1-D2.

Another problem that we addressed was that of the pottery production and the possibility to identify certain ceramic imports that might allow us to establish some inter-regional connection patterns. The petrographic analysis performed on a series of 60 samples coming from different types of pottery established after analysing all the ceramic material coming from the settlement at Suceagu (cca. 4500 pottery fragments) and ranging from the Roman time until the Early Medieval period showed that in this case we are only dealing with local products. This situation, together with the relatively limited number of pottery kilns (3 previously identified during archaeological investigations and other 3 based on the geophysical surveys) suggests that we are facing an autarchic pottery production model which was active only when a certain market demand existed. We are basically talking about closed communities capable of auto-subsistence, as opposed to the big pottery production centres oriented towards the surplus needed in order for the export to different market places that they supply to have place, as for example is the case of the pottery production centre at

Medieșul Aurit. As for the history of the economical pottery production we are unable to determine such well established distribution networks which can be only supported by some thorough mineralogical and petrographic analysis of the pottery collected from different contemporaneous settlements situated very close to one another.

The study of some typological and decorated pottery categories offered additional chronological information. We refer here to the burnished pottery of Murga type or to the faceted pottery both of these being dated towards the end of the 4th century and the first half of the 5th century AD. Some decorative burnished patterns can be also found in the Gepidic milieu, a fact that seems to be the proof for a late dating of the site until the middle of the 5th century AD, a case in which we might face an almost singular situation of a settlement dated right before the dissolution of the “Hunic Empire” and the appearance of the “Gepidic Kingdom”. If such a hypothesis is not unexpected we might correlate the late phase of the Early Migration period settlement at Suceagu with some of the Gepidic graves and dwellings found at Florești – “Polus Center”.

The general typology established after studying all the pottery shards from the settlements at Suceagu stands as a reference point for what the pottery production meant for central-north-western Transylvania during the D1-D2 chronological horizons. The comparison of the situation identified here with other contemporaneous settlements will help to better understand the habitation and pottery production dynamics and distribution patterns as well as for the mixed cultural milieu documented during this interval.