Acculturation East of the Carpathians: the second and third centuries Necropolis of Poieneşti. Summary

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The research conducted in 1949 by Radu Vulpe, and between 1979 and 1996, by Mircea Babeş, both of whom excavated the "Măgura" hill at Poieneşti (Co. Vaslui), led to the discovery of 224 burials from the 2nd and 3rd centuries[1]. One third of these finds were exemplarily published by Radu Vulpe, the remaining two thirds having been left mainly undocumented. Expert anthropological reports of the human remains found on this site were completed by Nicolae Miriţoiu and Mihaela M. Culea in 2010.

I undertook documenting and analysing the Poieneşti necropolis materials as my foremost personal research theme, which was firstly conducted as part of the 2006-2008 research plan of the Bucharest Institute of Archaeology, and subsequently, between 2009 and 2010, owing to the scholarship I was offered by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, at the German Archaeological Institute and the Free University Berlin. Further revisions and improvements contributed to my drawing up a monographical study of the Poieneşti necropolis between 2011 and 2017. Together, the systematic presentation and evaluation of the full set of (previously published and unpublished) archaeological documentation) in conjunction with the anthropological determination allowed assessing in-depth the cultural, ritual and social expressiveness of the community buried at Poieneşti in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

HISTORY OF THE RESEARCH

Radu Vulpe's 1953 report acted as the path-breaker in studying east-Carpathian necropoleis of the "Poieneşti-Vârteşcoiu" type. There were not a few polemics sparked by the partial investigation of the necropolis. Historiographic debate revolved around three issues: the dating of the necropolis, its cultural ascription, and establishing what ethnic profile it belonged to. Romanian historiography unfortunately treated indistinctly the cultural and ethnic profile ascriptions of the Poieneşti necropolis. Whereas Radu Vulpe dated the necropolis to the end of the 3rd c. and to the 4th c., Gheorghe Bichir traced it further back, to the second half of the third century, and Mircea Ignat dated it even earlier, to 150 -

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[1] Vulpe 1953; Babeş *et al.* 1980; Babeş 2001.

230/240 AD[2] Mention should be made of the fact that the methodology employed for drawing up these chronological schemata was precarious[3], which is why the documentation needed to be revised completely.

In the Romanian line of research, the autochtonous ("Carpic" or "Dacian") character of the Poieneşti-Vârteşcoiu ethnicity bearers and, implicitly, of the eponymous necropolis was constantly rehearsed. The only noteworthy exception was the Sarmatic ethnic profile acknowledged on the basis of the artificially induced deformities of the skulls for the deceased buried at Poieneşti[4]. Further to numerous criticisms[5], however, the prestige of the "Sarmatic theory" was diminshed to a ridiculous extent, being eventually and unilaterally rejected[6]. After the unearthing of the entire funerary unit at Poieneşti completed during the 1979-1996 research, it became possible to verify the old theories and interpretations.

FUNERARY RITE AND RITUAL

The Poieneşti necropolis is characterized by biritualism in dependence on the age of the dead : burial was reserved for *infans* and *juvens* ages (82 graves), and cremation was practised in the majority of adult cases (142 graves). Cremation remains were deposited in urns frequently covered with lids, and were only rarely put straight into the tombs. In some cases, there were traces of some textile material wrapped around the cremation remains. Yet another special arrangement was observed in some burial tombs, where the deceased were either contained in amphorae (*enchytrismos*), or in wooden coffins; or they were laid on a bier (*lectus funebris*), which was also made of wood. The immature deceased were usually oriented most frequently west-north-west and north-west. . Pottery is extremely diverse in the Poieneşti necropolis. There was a preference for grey (sometimes redish) vessels turned on the potter's wheel; they usually served as urns (amphorae, slender or thick-neck pots, kraters). Hand-turned pottery was scarce (being present in 13,15% cases) and consisted of a few pots and incense burners. No other recipients in addition to the lidded urns were deposited in the graves. Beside pottery, inventories also contain fibulae, silver filigree jewels (pendants, ear rings), beads made of glassy paste and coral, and various tools (knives,

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[2]   Vulpe 1953, 498; Bichir 1973, 148; Ignat 1999, 128-137.

[3]   Sonoc 2007, 99; Spânu 2012b, 176-178 and Spânu 2012c, 124-132.

[4]   Morintz 1959, 465 and 468; Nestor 1960, 678-679; Morintz 1961, 411.

[5]   Ioniţă, Ursache 1968, 224; Ioniţă, Ursache 1988, 95-98; Ioniţă 1982, 64-70; Palade 1971b, 273-274, Babeş 2000b, 340.

[6]   Bichir 1967, 215; Bichir 1969, 228, Bichir 1984b, 198; Ignat 1999, 20.

needles). Other categories of objects (for example a drinking glass vessel or the ornamental bronze plates of a little Roman wooden box) are random imports.

A characteristic trait of the Poieneşti necropolis is its highly standardized organization of inventories. The presence or absence of ornamental funerary elements deposited (clothes accessories and/or jewels) was not casual, but prompted, rather, by the gender of the deceased. As shown by the anthropological determinations at Poieneşti, and also Dămieneşti[7], the filigree jewels are indicative of feminine tombs. Jewels are usually missing from masculine tombs, and there are only rare finds of fibulae or tools.

THE PLANIMETRIC LAYOUT OF THE NECROPOLIS

Masculine and feminine cremation tombs together with infant inhumation burials are grouped into family lots. The tombs' layout, relatively perpendicular to the main axes in the orientation of the inhumation burials, suggests the existence of a rectangular pattern for the ordering of the funerary space. In the absence of any local pre-Roman antecedents, this configuration for the spatial layout of the necropolis was observed over several generations, and it could well be the mark of some initial founding authority.

CHRONOLOGY

The fibulae are the main chronological indicators of the Poieneşti necropolis. Their spectrum permits dating the necropolis to the second century and the first third of the third century. The beginnings of the necropolis are relatively obscure, but it appears that the first "Măgura" tombs were laid out after the beginning of the 2nd century AD. The strong profiled fibulae (Almgren group IV or germ.: *kräfrig profilierte Fibeln*) which remained in use until the age of the Marcomanic Wars[8] indicate a first, early necropolis phase. A second, late phase of the necropolis is illustrated by three graves which contained tendrill fibulae (Almgren group VI, Germ.: *Fibeln mit umgeschlagenem Fuss*) and high catch plate fibulae (Almgren group VII, Germ: *Fibeln mit hohem Nadelhalter*); the latter were widespread in East and Central Europe after the Marcomanic Wars[9]. The small number of late tombs/graves makes implausible the continuation of burials on the "Măgura" hill until the middle of the third century. The necropolis was most likely abandoned at the middle of the third century

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7   Mitrea 1988; Miriţoiu 1988.
8   Jobst 1975, 40-41; Dąbrowska 1994, 29; Bichir 1973, 100.
9   Eggers 1955, 201-202; Koch 1985, 466-469; Godłowski 1992, 80 ff.; Teegen 1999, 139; Beck, Müller 2000, 90.

or soon afterwards. From the cultural-historical perspective, the Poieneşti necropolis can be coeval with the Roman rule in Dacia.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL MEANINGS

The Poieneşti necropolis illustrates the funerary representation of all age and gender categories characteristic of a rural community. Its rural character may be easily supported by considering its geographical location, outside the Imperium, far from the provincial urban territories. In effect, the borrowing of Roman rural culture forms outside the limes was consistently attested both by literary and by archeological sources[10]. The varying complexity of the inventories does not reflect social or political divisions (into "rich" versus "poor", or "leaders" as opposed to "subjects", respectively) but the translation into funerary terms of family relationships: woman as opposed to man (who differed in point of ritual) and adult as opposed to child (distinguised by the rite).

Investigating the 2nd and 3rd centuries tombs at Poieneşti permits identifying certain ceremonial stages closely akin to the funerary customs of the Roman world. It is most likely that the cremations were conducted in a specially designed common area (*ustrinum*), which was not identified during the excavations. It is surmisable that the body of the deceased was brought to the *ustrinum* in a *pompa funebris* procession. As it took place outdoors, cremation may have acquired the dimensions of a regular collective ceremony. The fauna remains which were found in some urns could be explained as proffered food or as indications of collective funerary banquets. The urn content indicates that the human remains on the funerary pyre were carefully selected. This practice might be assimilated to the ὀστολογειν / *ossilegium* phase of the Greek and Roman ceremonial[11]. The absence of ashes and other charred material from the urns may be interpreted as the outcome of washing the cremated bones, which also represented another ritual attested in the Roman world[12]. The organization of the necropolis into family groups involves the recourse to an institutionalized and ritualized post-funerary collective memory. The fact that there are no overlay of graves allows us to conjecture that tombs had landmarks of sorts, indicative of post-funerary ceremonies.

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[10] Ammianus Marcelinus XVII. 1. 7; Kolník 1998, 155-158.

[11] Strumpf 2006, 86-87; Favez 1928, 84; Burkert 1983, 52; Burkert 1997, 64.

[12] Vergilius, *Aen.* 6, 227-228; *cf.* Strumpf 2006, 86-87, n. 238; Walker 1985, 57.

The Roman parallels of the Poieneşti funerary ceremonial are all the more significant as the necropolis was dated to an age immediately following the conquest of Dacia by Trajan. The organization of the "Măgura" necropolis happened after more than a century of discrete funerary practices, or archaeologically undeterminable practices not only at Poieneşti, but also in the whole area of pre-Roman Dacia[13] and in the neighbouring regions. The preference for cremation may also be interpreted as the expression of Roman influence exerted east of the Carpathians by the organization of the Dacian province[14]. Actually it appears that the Roman conquest determined a series of major transformations of funerary customs – everywhere in barbarian Europe[15].

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Rite differentiation (namely, burial of immature deceased and cremation of adults) was probably correlated with particular coming of age rituals. The burial of immature deceased was a widespread practice in the Roman world[16] and has no local pre-Roman analogies. The fact that adults and children (including *neonati*) were buried close together reflects the integration of the latter in the funerary-symbolic projection of the local community mentality. This ritual option has a considerable number of parallels in the Roman world, since here, in the imperial age, deceased children funerals were assimilated to the public sphere (the *funus acerbum*), at the expense of the private one[17]. The long lasted Greek and Roman republican tradition of burying deceased children in the vicinity of private dwellings (*suggrundaria* type burials[18]) was discouraged and was gradually abandoned in the imperial age. In the continental regions integrated to the Roman Empire the burial of deceased with lesser ages in necropoleis side by side with cremated adults was frequently attested[19] and considered the expression of the provincial Romanization[20].

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[13] Babeş 1988, 8-9; Babeş 2001, 745-748.

[14] Babeş 1988, 8-9.

[15] Kaiser 2001, 286-*sqq*; Strobel 2010, 293.

[16] Plinius, *Nat. hist.* VII, 16, 72; Juvenal, *Satire* XV, 138/140; *cf.* Beilke-Voigt 2004.

[17] Rawson 2003, 362-363; Schorn 2009, 341-343; *cf.* Boyancé 1952; Néraudau 1987.

[18] Gaio 2005, 65-*sqq*; *cf.* Beilke-Voigt 2008.

[19] E.g.: Bratislava-Rusovce, necropolis II (Pichlerová 1981, 219-*sqq*), Šempeter (Mackensen 1978b), Kempten (Mackensen 1978a, 144-150; Fasold 1993, 392), Halbturn (Doneus 2014, 198-202), Gross-Geraus (Schleifring 1986), Stettfeld, necropolis I (Wahl, Kokabi 1988), Fréjus (Gébara, Béraud 1993), Tarent (Hempel 2001, 79); for Britania see: Scott 1999, 114.

[20] Fasold 1993, 392; Mackensen 1978b, 179.

The Roman civilization special ritual importance to the funerary representation of the family[21], acknowledging complementary brands of symbolism to masculine, feminine and *infans* identities[22]. The organiztion of the Poieneşti necropolis into possibly familial groups and the distinctions made via main funerary rite and ritual elements of feminine and children burials may be interpreted as expressions of the Roman funerary concedptions materialized to the east of the Carpathians. In other words, the Poieneşti necropolis of the 2nd and 3rd centuries illustrates a funerary ideology whose landmarks are Roman in origin. The fact that this ideology was adopted represents a particular case of acculturation in a community located outside the Empire which adopted provinvial cultural models.

The necropolis at Poieneşti resembles, through its ritual characteristics (biritualism; the adoption of a particular imperial age spectrum of fibulae and of filigree jewels; pottery inventory, etc.), several other necropoleis in the Central Moldavian Tableland (Văleni, Săbăoani, Sohodor, Dămieneşti) and in the Carpathian Arc (Vârteşcoiu, Gura Nişcovului, Pădureni) – but it also resembles certain rural necropoleis in the Dacian province, especially the one at Locusteni. Consequently, the "Poieneşti" acculturation model attests the identification of "provincial" and "barbarian", which was specific of the Roman political mentality before the 3rd century crisis, and it reflected the cultural fluidity of the limes. The steady adherence, during several generations, of a rural community in the *Barbaricum* to funerary customs originating in the Roman provinces reflects the acquiescence to the symbolic sedentarism brought about by the Roman conception of "civilization"[23]. It is highly likely that, in the particular historical context of the 2nd century AD, the adoption of an acculturation process prevailed over the aspiration to self-determination and identitary differentiation. The integrating and captivating force exerted by the Roman culture was manifest even beyond the limes.

The revision of the relative and absolute chronology of the Poieneşti necropolis has a direct bearing upon the identitary determination. The Poieneşti necropolis can be attributed to one of the communities in the ethnic mosaic evoked by Ptolemy III. 5. 10, III. 8. 3, and III. 10. 7 which was spread on the banks of the Siret River[24]. These groups were to be most likely integrated, in the middle third of the 3rd century, to the Carpian power zone.

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[21]   Walker 1985, 11: „perhaps the most striking aspect of Roman rituals at death is the emphasis placed upon the long-term continuity of the family".

[22]   Foster 1993, 212; Boyancé 1952, 275-289, Engels 1998, 44, Rawson 2003, 343.

[23]   Georges, Amiel 2008, 194-195.

[24]   Bichir 1973, 157; *cf.* Vulpe 1960b; Bogdan Cătăniciu 1990, 223-225.

Paradoxically enough, the moment when the latter ethnic group asserted itself, in the year 238 AD[25], coincides precisely with the time when the "Măgura" necropolis was abandoned. The acculturation model illustrated by the community buried at Poieneşti is in stark contrast with the historical profile of the Carpi, who were presented by literary sources as a mobile group hostile to the Empire. The two models belong to distinct historical and cultural contexts, and their amalgamation would diminish the archaeological expressiveness for the sake of ethnic determination desiderata.

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[25] *Historia Augusta* XXI. 16. 3; *cf.* Bichir 1973, 179-181; Wolfram 1979, 42-43; Petolescu 2010, 301.

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