

## BOOK REVIEWS / RECENZII

[https://doi.org/10.37710/plural.v13i1\\_8](https://doi.org/10.37710/plural.v13i1_8)



**ZSOLT KÖRÖSFŐI, *Marosszentanna. Sântana de Mureș. Late imperial cemetery at the Mureș*, Publications of the Jósza András Museum 84, Nyíregyháza, 2024, 188 pages, ISSN 0133-8110, ISBN 978-615-5619-30-4**

The monograph signed by Zsolt Körösfői (hereinafter Z.K.) represents a multidisciplinary and quasi-exhaustive revaluation of the famous necropolis at Marosszentanna (Romanian: Sântana de Mureș), as well as of the old documentation made by István Kovács during the excavations carried out at the beginning of the last century. Not all of the information contained in this documentation was included in István Kovács' article (Kovács 1912). Z.K.'s study is all the more important as this necropolis has become eponymous for the "Marosszentanna – Chernyakhov" culture (Romanian: "Sântana de Mureș – Cerneahov") and represents a landmark monument of this culture in Transylvania.

Z.K.'s monograph includes an introduction (p. 7-8), five analytical chapters (p. 9-140) and an appendix with multidisciplinary analyses (p. 141-160), bibliography (p. 162-172) and plates (p. 174-184). It is the result of over 15 years of work in archives and repositories.

In the beginning it was ... luck: the author had the chance to find István Kovács' field diary. This diary contained descriptions and unpublished drawings of the excavated graves. The materials from the necropolis of Marosszentanna, scattered in museums in Cluj, Budapest and Bucharest, have been reillustrated. Investigations in the archives led the author to re-identify several illustrative materials made during the time of István Kovács by Albert Manz and Márton Ferenczi. The author benefited from analyses carried out on 28 samples extracted from the preserved human remains (individuals from 21 graves and 5 stray find skulls), as well as zoological remains (animal offerings from 8 graves). The anthropological material was studied by Szilárd Sándor Gál from the Mureș County Museum (subchap. 7.1, p. 141-151). The radiocarbon analysis and stable isotope analysis were carried out by Mihály Molnár and István Major (subchap.

7.2., p. 152-154), and the diet of the individuals buried at Marosszentanna was debated by István Major and István Futó (subchap. 7.3., p. 155-157). The strontium isotope analysis were carried out by Anna Horváth și László Palcsu from the HUN-REN Institute for Nuclear Research, Debrecen (subchap. 7.4., p. 158-159). The various components of this complex research project were financially supported by the European Union and the State of Hungary, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (project of GINOP-2.3.4-15-2020-00007 “INTERACT”) and the Bolyai Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (BO/00710/23/10). Thus, the research has acquired not only a multidisciplinary character, but also an international one. The author has the merit of having succeeded in harmonizing in a unitary whole the published information (Kovács 1912), numerous descriptions and drawings hitherto unknown, as well as the results of interdisciplinary analyses. The plenary effort towards analytical exhaustiveness must be recognized and appreciated.

In the chapter entitled “*The eponymous site. Archaeological identification of a barbarian kingdom*” (chap. 2), the author has shown a powerful capacity to synthesize the history of research. Béla Pósta’s role<sup>1</sup> in comparing the Marosszentanna and Chernyakhov discoveries was strongly highlighted. The interpretative exaggerations in terms of ethnicity in Russian/Soviet, Romanian and German historiography have been succinctly and critically exposed. The masterful revisions proposed by Richard Wenskus or Herwig Wolfram (Wenskus 1961; Wolfram 1979) and others on the subject of group identities from Late Antiquity (*gens, natio, ethné*) have been omitted.

The author pointed out one of the major dilemmas of current research: are the Marosszentanna and Chernyakhov “type” discoveries the expression of two similar and related but distinct cultures, or together they form one and the same culture?<sup>2</sup> Apparently, this dilemma was not decided by the author (but it should be noted: this was not the purpose of the monograph!). However, in the updated map of the Marosszentanna-Chernyakhov culture (another secondary but important contribution to be welcomed) the findings were not differentiated. Despite some regional aspects, the normative notion of the “Marosszentanna-Chernyakhov culture” retains its validity. The author offers convincing clues for the close and immediate succession between the end of the provincial culture in Roman Dacia and the extension of the Marosszentanna-Chernyakhov culture in Transylvania.

<sup>1</sup> Béla Pósta (1862-1919) was the founder of the school of archaeology at the University of Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) and professor of István Kovács; Gáll 2010, 284-287; Vincze 2014; Petruț 2015 (review); Szabó 2020.

<sup>2</sup> “A systematic comparison of the Marosszentanna and Chernyakhov cultures has not yet been made, and it is unclear to what extent they can be considered identical or similar, a process complicated in many cases by their polyethnic background” (p. 10).



Chapter 3 (“Cemetery under the sand”, p. 11-18) was taught to the history of field research undertaken by István Kovács. Z.K. made use not only of diaries, but also of the correspondence of István Kovács and evoked many picturesque and suggestive details. A particular heuristic value is the reconstruction of the plan of the necropolis, with numerous additional details compared to the plan published by István Kovács (Kovács 1912). The location of the sand quarry that partially disturbed the necropolis in the fourth century has been reidentified with some approximation (p. 17, fig. 13).

The state of preservation of the graves (half of the 80 graves were disturbed; only 21 skeletons and five skulls were collected and preserved) and the ritual elements were studied in chapter 4 (“Graves and funeral customs”, p. 19-60). Before the archaeological debate of the investigations, the author synthesized the radiocarbon and strontium isotope analyses (subchap. 4.1., p. 19-25). Pertinent information about the age and gender of the individuals was presented in a separate paragraph (subchap. 4.2., p. 26-35). Next, the orientation of the graves, the position of the arms, the complexity, the presence or absence of the inventory were debated (subchap. 4.3., p. 36-47). Z.K. considers as valid the six characteristics determined by Kurt Horedt which, when three of them are combined, make for a more than average burial: (1) the presence of silver objects, (2) more than seven vessels, (3) brooches, (4) glass vessels, (5) carnelian and amber beads, and (6) animal bones (Horedt 1982, 113). The few west-east facing graves, all devoid of inventory or animal offerings have been subscribed to early Christians (p. 41-43). Subchapter 4.4. It was dedicated to atypical burials: crouched on the left or right, face down, etc. (about 10% of the documented graves). Deviations from the majority ritual could be the expression of an inferior social status or physical disabilities (p. 51). The “robbery” of graves (the ritual practice of reopening graves) was discussed in subchapter 4.5. (p. 52-60).

Chapter 5 (“Finds”) is dedicated to the different categories of grave goods. Beads, perceived as indicators of female funerals. Based on Kovács’ sketches, it was possible to deduce that, in some cases, the beads were sewn in parallel rows on a clothing support and thus formed real pectorals. The author rightly considers the fixation of beads on garments as a sarmatian influence (p. 65, fig. 55, grave 58). In a few cases (graves 63, 43, probably 26 and 50i), pendants complete the ornamentation of the neck and chest. On the other hand, fibulae are more frequent (31 specimens from 17 graves). Pairs of fibulae are found in 11 tombs and the author tried to distinguish possible rules of wearing (p. 68-70). The morphology of fibulae (p. 71-74) has been debated in close connection with the international literature on this subject. Small buckles are common: 28 specimens in 21 graves (p. 74-79). According to the author, “the buckle was a functional object rather than a decorative element, as opposed to the brooches.” A general characterization of ceramics (pp. 79-83) is followed by a traditional classification into more frequent wheeled shapes (pp. 83-88) and rarer hand-worked shapes (pp. 88-89). Substantial paragraphs were dedicated to glass glasses (p. 89-90),

combs (p. 91-94), knives (p. 94-95), needles and needle kits (p. 95-97), spindles (p. 97-99) and fire tools (p. 99-100). Unusual appearances are represented by a sword (lacking context, perhaps with a different dating from the rest of the necropolis) and the tweezers from grave 43. The deposition of meat offerings (p. 103-106) is attested in 11 graves (mostly female), but the information preserved does not allow the determination of clear rules.

The last analytical chapter is dedicated to the spread of the Marosszentanna-Chernyakhov culture in Transylvania ("6.1. The cemetery in space") and the problems of chronology of the studied necropolis (6.2. The cemetery in time"). A third sub-chapter ("6.3. Summary of the cemetery") contains the conclusions of the monograph. The expressive maps (p. 108-110, 112, 114 and 116, figs. 100-106) should be noted. The biritualism of burial grounds similar to that of Marosszentanna has been interpreted in a balanced way (p. 118), as an expression of the particular relations between the bearers of the Marosszentanna-Chernyakhov culture (dominant group) and the autochthonous bearers of the cremation tradition (dominated group).

Consistent arguments indicate that modern works in the sand quarry led to the destruction of the oldest tombs of the necropolis (p. 119). Under these conditions, the beginning phase of the necropolis (the foundation phase) remains shrouded in uncertainties. The criticism of the dates distorted by ethnic paradigms (p. 120) is welcome. The author has reported the dating of the necropolis both with the chronological systems of Central European research (Bierbrauer 1980; Bona 1986, 115), as well as radiocarbon dating. The investigated graves fall into two distinct phases – an earlier one, called "C3a" (p. 121, note "lvii"; the chronological framework for "C3a" was taken imprecisely from Bierbrauer 1994, 124) and a later one. It should be noted that the earliest dates from Marosszentana (the last third of the third century AD and the beginning of the fourth century) correspond, in fact, to phases C2 and C3a (German: "C3-alt"; Bierbrauer 1994, 123; Tejral 1986, 182-183). It should have been emphasized more firmly that the late phase of the necropolis corresponds to the C3b phase (German: "C3-jung") and the C3/D1 transition (Tejral 1988a, 16; cf. Bierbrauer 1994, 117-118 and 133-134). In any case, the burials at Marosszentana do not contain any dating elements of the post-Chernyakhov phase (cf. Bierbrauer 1980, 134-135; Tejral 1986, 189, 198; Tejral 1988a, 15-16; Tejral 1988b, 241; Bierbrauer 1995, 569, 572). In fact, carbon isotope analysis shows that the latest burials are not much later than the end of the 4th century. In absolute terms, the graves researched at Marosszentana fall between 270/300 and 390/410 AD, but most of them date back to the middle of the fourth century (pp. 122 and 152-154). The most important conclusion is that the necropolis belonged to a single community, united in its burial customs and material culture (p. 137). This funerary tradition has been perpetuated over three or four generations (p. 152).

The monograph is admirably and abundantly illustrated with drawings, photographs, tables and graphs with an attractive and expressive design. Placing



the notes at the end of each chapter (and not infrapaginated) makes it difficult to read and check the bibliographic references. Also, the numbering of the notes with Roman numerals gives originality to the work, but makes it difficult to follow the critical apparatus. Despite shortcomings, the monograph stands out as an elegant attempt at reconstruction and quasi-exhaustive analysis of a necropolis published too succinctly more than a century ago. The monograph is all the more precious and welcome, as it is dedicated to one of the most representative necropoleis subscribed to the Goths in Transylvania. From now on, international archaeological research benefits from a plenary analysis of one of the most important monuments of the Marosszentanna-Chernyakhov culture.

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