

BEYOND CULTURAL GROUPS RETHINKING HORED'T'S CULTURAL GROUPING SYSTEM IN EARLY MEDIEVAL TRANSYLVANIA

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Abstract: The Transylvanian region between the 7th and 11th centuries was marked by the presence of multiple ethnically and culturally diverse communities living side by side. Although these populations shared certain archaeological characteristics and funerary practices, notable distinctions led researchers to establish a classification framework for differentiating cemetery groups. Developed primarily by Kurt Horedt, this framework organised the region into several groups – Mediaș, Gâmbaș, Blandiana, Ciombrud and Cluj – according to key burial sites, as well as their presumed ethnic and chronological attributes. In this study, we reexamine these groups by focusing on the circumstances and motivations behind their formation, while also assessing the broader impact of this methodological approach on the study of the period and the region. Furthermore, the paper addresses continuing debates surrounding previously discovered cemeteries and their classification within this system and considers possible avenues for methodological refinement and the reassessment of earlier interpretations.

Cuvinte-cheie: Transilvania, Kurt Horedt, grupuri culturale, etnie, Evul Mediu timpuriu, clasificarea cimitirelor

Rezumat: Regiunea Transilvaniei din secolele VII–XI s-a caracterizat prin coexistența mai multor comunități distincte din punct de vedere etnic și cultural. Deși aceste populații prezentau anumite asemănări în ce privește patrimoniul arheologic și practicile funerare, diferențele semnificative au determinat cercetătorii să elaboreze un cadru de clasificare pentru diferențierea grupurilor de cimitire. Dezvoltat în principal de Kurt Horedt, acest sistem a organizat regiunea în mai multe grupuri – Mediaș, Gâmbaș, Blandiana, Ciombrud și Cluj – pe baza principalelor situri funerare, precum și a caracteristicilor etnice și cronologice presupuse. În acest studiu, reexaminăm aceste grupuri concentrându-ne asupra circumstanțelor și motivelor care au stat la baza formării lor, evaluând totodată impactul mai larg al acestei abordări metodologice asupra cercetării perioadei și regiunii. De asemenea, lucrarea abordează dezbaterile încă existente privind cimitirele descoperite anterior și încadrarea lor în acest sistem, analizând posibile direcții pentru rafinarea metodologiei și reevaluarea interpretărilor anterioare.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the undeniable characteristics of the Transylvanian territories is that several populations with different cultural backgrounds lived side by side during the same period. Although numerous similarities can be observed in the archaeological heritage and burial customs of these groups, significant differences are also evident; therefore, from an archaeological perspective, it became necessary to establish a system that would allow these cemeteries to be distinguished from one another. As a result, a classification framework emerged which, in certain respects, resembles the differentiation of prehistoric archaeological cultures. Within the region, the following units were identified: the Mediaș, Gâmbaș, Blandiana, Ciombrud, Nușfalău and Cluj groups. This classification system was developed by Kurt Horedt, whose work continues to play a decisive role in current research¹.

Contemporary scholarly debates primarily focus on determining to which group certain cemeteries – especially newly discovered ones – should be assigned. According to the methodological principles underlying this classification,

the names of the groups refer to the most significant archaeological sites associated with a given population and were attributed the following ethnic and chronological meanings: the Mediaș group includes the 6th–8th century biritual and cremation Slavic cemeteries; the Nușfalău group comprises the 8th century Slavic tumulus cemeteries²; the Gâmbaș group represents the 7th–8th century Avar heritage of Transylvania; the Blandiana group is associated with the 9th century Bulgarian finds; the Ciombrud group includes 9th–10th century Moravian or Bulgarian burials; while the Cluj group encompasses the 10th–11th century burials of the conquering Hungarians. In addition, to provide a more nuanced picture, researchers often discuss the Blandiana group in parallel with the Dridu or Danubian-Balkan culture, while the Cluj group is frequently connected to the Bijelo Brdo culture. In our analysis, we examine these groups, focusing on the circumstances and motivations behind

¹ Horedt 1986, p. 59–87.

² Although the Nușfalău group constitutes one of the Horedt's classification system, it is not discussed in detail in the present study. The research focuses primarily on Central and Southern Transylvania, whereas the Nușfalău cemeteries are concentrated in the northwestern part of the region. Their inclusion would have substantially broadened the geographical scope of the analysis and diverted attention from the microregional framework adopted here.