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THE SARMATIANS ON THE WESTERN EDGE OF THE EURASIAN STEPPE.

READING NOTES ON A RECENTLY PUBLISHED MONOGRAPH

VITALIE BÂRCĂ

ABSTRACT:

The publication of the monograph *Sarmatian cemetery-shrine near the village of Petrești in the Middle Prut region*¹ [in Russian] by Serghei Kurceatov and Valeriu Bubulici provides new data and perspectives on the Sarmatian communities inhabiting the western edge of the Eurasian steppe. Owing to the richness of the archaeological documentation and the wide range of issues addressed, the volume serves as the starting point for a series of reading notes examining aspects related to the organisation of funerary space, ritual practices, chronology, and the cultural dynamics of Sarmatian groups in the Middle Prut region and the north-west Pontic area.

Building upon the information and interpretations proposed by the authors, the study discusses the principal results presented in the volume and critically evaluates some of the conclusions concerning the Petrești necropolis and its place within the Sarmatian world between the Dniester and the Danube. Particular attention is paid to ritual structures delimited by circular, square, and rectangular ditches, funerary practices, grave inventories, and the arguments advanced for the chronology of the site. The interpretations put forward by the authors are also examined in the light of comparable discoveries and relevant scholarship concerning the north-Pontic and Carpathian–Danubian Sarmatian environment.

The observations presented here aim both to highlight the contribution of the monograph to our understanding of the Sarmatian communities living on the western frontier of the Eurasian steppe and to discuss a number of issues related to interpretation and historical contextualisation. In this respect, the article seeks to contribute to ongoing debates regarding funerary practices, cultural identities, and the relationships between Sarmatian groups and neighbouring cultural environments during the first centuries A.D.

REZUMAT: SARMAȚII LA MARGINEA VESTICĂ A STEPEI EURASIATICE. NOTE DE LECTURĂ ASUPRA UNUI VOLUM MONOGRAFIC RECENT APĂRUT

Publicarea monografiei *Necropola-sanctuar sarmatică de lângă satul Petrești, pe Prutul Mijlociu*² [în rusă] semnată de Serghei Kurceatov și Valeriu Bubulici oferă noi date și perspective asupra comunităților sarmatice de la extremitatea vestică a stepei eurasiatice. Prin amploarea documentației arheologice valorificate și prin diversitatea problemelor abordate, volumul constituie punctul de plecare al unor note de lectură care examinează o serie de aspecte privind organizarea spațiului funerar, practicile rituale, cronologia și dinamica culturală a grupurilor sarmatice din regiunea Prutului Mijlociu și din spațiul nord-vest pontic.

Pornind de la informațiile și interpretările propuse de autori, studiul discută principalele rezultate prezentate în volum și analizează critic unele dintre concluziile formulate în legătură cu necropola de la Petrești și cu locul acesteia în cadrul lumii sarmatice dintre Nistru și Dunăre. Sunt examinate structurile rituale delimitate prin șanțuri circulare, pătrate și rectangulare, particularitățile ritualului funerar, inventarul descoperit în complexe și argumentele privind cronologia sitului. Totodată, sunt discutate interpretările propuse de autori prin raportare la descoperiri similare și la literatura de specialitate referitoare la mediul sarmatic nord-pontic și carpato-danubian.

Observațiile prezentate urmăresc atât evidențierea contribuțiilor aduse de monografie la cunoașterea comunităților sarmatice de pe frontiera vestică a stepei eurasiatice, cât și discutarea unor probleme de interpretare și contextualizare istorică. În acest sens, articolul își propune să contribuie la aprofundarea dezbaterilor privind

¹ Сергей Курчатov, Валерий Бубулич, *Сарматский некрополь-святилище у села Петреști на Среднем Пруте*, Библиотека „Tyragetia”, XXXIX, Muzeul Național de Istorie a Moldovei, Chișinău: Casa Editorial-Poligrafică Bons Offices SRL, 2023, 174 p. ISBN 978-5-36241-096-4.

Serghei Kurceatov, Valeriu Bubulici, *Sarmatskij nekropol'-svyatilishche u sela Petrești na Srednem Prute*, Библиотека „Tyragetia”, XXXIX, Muzeul Național de Istorie a Moldovei, Chișinău: Casa Editorial-Poligrafică Bons Offices SRL, 2023, 174 p. ISBN 978-5-36241-096-4.

² See the previous footnote.

practicile funerare, identitățile culturale și relațiile dintre grupurile sarmatice și mediile culturale învecinate în primele secole ale erei noastre.

KEYWORDS: Sarmatians; Petrești necropolis; funerary ritual; ritual structures; north-west Pontic region.

CUVINTE-CHEIE: sarmați; Petrești; Prutul Mijlociu; ritual funerar; amenajări funerare; spațiul nord-vest pontic.

The Sarmatian tribes, nomadic populations native to the Eurasian steppes, exerted a profound influence on the history of ancient Europe. In the last centuries B.C. and the first centuries A.D., they controlled the vast territory between the Ural Mountains and the Lower Danube, expanding later also in the space between the Danube and the Tisza, where they became one of the main ethnic-political groups of the time. Their presence in the northern Pontic and Carpathian-Danubian regions has generated complex interactions with the numerous Geto-Dacian, Bastarnae, late Scythians, free Dacians, Carpi, Germanic, and Gothic populations, oscillating between conflict, cohabitation and mutual influences. At the same time, contacts with Greek cities, the Bosporan Kingdom and the Roman Empire shaped both the evolution of local communities and the internal transformations of the Sarmatian world.

The archaeological material, complemented by anthropological, literary and epigraphic data, highlights the dynamics of ethnic and cultural processes in the regions where the Sarmatians have penetrated and settled. In the first – second centuries A.D., the heyday of the Sarmatian culture, there was a significant demographic growth and social development, reflected in the large number of tombs, including aristocratic ones, with rich and varied funerary inventory. At the same time, the distribution and characteristics of these archaeological remains allow the reconstruction of migratory directions and settlement areas, also confirmed by ancient literary and epigraphic sources.

In this context, the analysis of the presence and cultural manifestations of the Sarmatians in the north-west Pontic region and Lower Danube becomes essential for understanding the historical, ethnic and cultural processes that shaped this region in the first centuries of our era.

The Prut-Dniester area, located at the western extremity of the Eurasian steppe, was for several millennia a migration territory for various nomadic populations, including different groups of Sarmatians, archaeologically documented over a vast area. Therefore, the territory between the Prut and the Dniester constitutes a region of major interest for the study of Sarmatian nomadic tribes, which for several centuries were in a continuous movement from East to West.

Perceived as a threat by both the Greco-Roman world and the sedentary populations with which they came into contact, the Sarmatians, like other nomadic communities, are characterised by a pronounced cultural conservatism reflected in the persistence of specific practices, values, and forms of material expression. This conservatism should not, however, be interpreted as evidence of cultural stagnation. Rather, it represents an adaptive strategy through which nomadic communities maintained social cohesion, reinforced collective identities, and responded to an environment characterised by high mobility and continuous intercultural interaction.

In fact, conservatism among nomadic populations is a well-documented phenomenon in anthropology and archaeology, and the central idea is simple: mobility does not exclude traditionalism, it can even strengthen it. This attachment to tradition manifests itself even in contexts of change, when some groups have partially or completely given up mobility and have become sedentary, as is the case with the Sarmatian Iazyges from the Pannonian Plain, without abandoning their fundamental identity landmarks, however.

The monograph elaborated by Serghei Kurceatov and Valeriu Bubulici, dedicated to the Sarmatian necropolis–sanctuary from Petrești, on the Middle Prut, obviously represents one of the most recent contributions to the study of the Sarmatians from the north-west of the Black Sea and, more generally, to the understanding of the cultural dynamics in the Dniester–Prut–Danube area in the first centuries A.D.³ The work is published in the Biblioteca “Tyragetia” series, known for publishing fundamental studies on the archaeology of the Republic of Moldova and its neighbouring regions. The volume has 174 pages, a solid critical apparatus, abstracts in Romanian and English

³ Although the original intention was to write a simple review, the reading of the volume and the numerous problems and scientific aspects addressed in its pages led not only to considerably exceeding the space reserved for a book presentation, but also to further the documentation, to elaborate the critical apparatus and to formulate our own observations, which appeared during the writing, which further extended the framework of the discussion.

and numerous illustrations: 30 figures (plans, drawings of tombs, ritual features and artefacts from tombs, etc.), 7 plates (maps, plans of necropolises and tumuli, etc.), plus 8 other photo plates which illustrate artefacts from the funerary inventory of some of the tombs, in total 45 illustrations, intelligently integrated into the argument.

This monograph is dedicated to the artefacts discovered after field research conducted in 1986 and 1988, near Petrești village. The paper, as structured by the authors, includes all the essential elements of the subject under investigation, and the organisation is clear and coherent. The monograph is structured in four main chapters, followed by conclusions, bibliography (pp. 93-99), abstracts in English (pp. 101-107) and Romanian (pp. 111-117), list of illustrations (pp. 108-110, English; pp. 118-120, Romanian) and the drawings themselves (pp. 121-169).

The last part of the paper is represented by the section *In memoriam* (pp. 171-174), dedicated to Sergei Kurceatov, one of the authors of the monograph, who died before the volume devoted to his archaeological research was under print.

Introduction (pp. 7–11)

The introduction establishes the geographical and historical framework of the research. The authors start from the specifics of the Dniester–Prut–Danube interfluvium as a contact area between the “barbarian world” and the centres of civilisation, highlighting its role as a border between sedentary communities and Iranian nomads in the first centuries of our era. They note that: “The territory of the Dniester–Prut–Danube interfluvium represented for Eastern Europe a traditional zone for the large-scale interpenetration of different ethnic and cultural worlds in Antiquity.”

The authors present the evolution of research on the necropolis with funeral arrangements featuring a moat, from the first discoveries at Cuconești Vechi (1975) to the recent investigations at Medeleni (2015), Chiurt (2021), Cașunca,⁴ and Leova (2022). The authors review the discoveries from Corpaci, Cioropcani, Florițaia Nouă, Cazacalia, Obileni, Tețcani, Palanca or Șalvirii Noi etc. In this context, the authors also mention the discovery of a necropolis with ritual arrangements with a moat on the right bank of the Prut, in Romania, in Ștefănești (Botoșani County), in 1994 (pp. 9, 109, 113), concerning which there are no reports in the literature.⁵ Following a recent discussion with C. Asăvoaie, the existence of such a find has been refuted. However, there is no mention, for example, of the ritual arrangement with circular moat in the Lower Danube Plain, which surrounded the Sarmatian tomb no. 2 of tumulus 2 at Vitănești (Teleorman County).⁶ The authors clarify, however, the transition from the initial interpretations, which attributed Celtic influences to these structures, to the recognition of their Eastern origin, confirmed by analogies from the Middle Don area.

Unfortunately, although the authors present the evolution of interpretations from V. A. Dergachev to A. V. Simonenko up to their own conclusions, they omitted several works and contributions dedicated to ritual ditch arrangements of various forms from the Sarmatian environment.⁷ The introduction ends with the formulation of the central idea of the volume: starting from the mid-second century A.D., there existed a regional power structure, called “Danubian Alania”, which included the group of monuments in the Middle Prut area, including the Petrești necropolis.

Chapter 1. Burials and ritual structures of the Petrești necropolis (pp. 13–50)

This first chapter represents the strictly descriptive and stratigraphic part of the work. It presents the topographic context, the excavation methodology and the detailed description of each structure (tombs, ritual ditches, pits, kilns, etc.).

The authors note that the necropolis is located at the western edge of a promontory that falls steeply towards the Prut floodplain, between Gârla Mare and Șoltoiaia valleys, in a landscape typical for the Middle Prut Plain, part of the Moldavian Plain. This positioning explains the visibility of the site, its easy access to resources and its role in the network of necropolises in the area.

A particularly important element is the partial overlap of the Sarmatian necropolis by a Sântana de Mureș–Chernyakhov one, which provides solid stratigraphic landmarks for dating Sarmatian tombs.

The authors mention that the necropolises investigated in the vicinity of Petrești village mark the southern limit of the Middle Prut Plain from an orographic point of view. The area is characterised by a succession of gently sloping hydrographic basins alternating with the fluvial valleys of rivers and streams oriented along a submeridional axis.

⁴ For the discoveries at Cașunca, where 23 square ritual structures with a moat were identified as a result of magnetometric research carried out in the autumn of 2022, see Sirbu *et alii* 2024. Unfortunately, the analysis of these ritual structures is brief and expedient.

⁵ The research at Ștefănești were conducted by C. Asăvoaie and C. Ionomu.

⁶ See Bârcă 2015, 48-51, Fig. 7; Bârcă 2020, 334, 335, 340.

⁷ For the latest synthesis in which all aspects of these ritual arrangements with a moat are extensively discussed, see Bârcă 2015a; Bârcă 2020, with the entire bibliography.

Regarding the stratigraphic and planimetric analysis of the Petrești necropolis, it is stated that, within the two research campaigns (1986 and 1988), the chernozem layer was mechanically stripped on 3m wide strips, stratigraphic baulks were preserved, and a detailed photographic and graphic documentation was made. The total area investigated amounted to 39,198 m². It is stated that the boundaries of the necropolis could be established with certainty to the west, north and east, while its extension to the south-east remains unknown. Also, no traces or vestiges of burials or ritual structures have been identified at the current soil level.

From the pages of this chapter, we learn that during the two archaeological campaigns, 19 ritual complexes of rectangular/square plan without burials within their interior were identified and investigated, together with 16 ritual complexes with a circular plan containing burials inside them, 37 Sarmatian graves, two ritual graves with horse skulls, eight pits with a possible cultic or economic function (?), a kiln which, according to the stratigraphic evidence, most likely belongs to the Sarmatian period, four Bronze Age graves, two Late Nomadic graves, and 190 graves attributed to the Sântana de Mureș–Chernyakhov culture. For the latter, it is stated that they will be published in a separate paper.

The general plan illustrated in figures 2 and 3 indicates an irregular but coherent distribution of ritual arrangements, characterised by the alternation of rectangular/square structures with circular ones and by the concentration of tombs in the central area, as well as the extension of the necropolis to the south-east, not yet explored completely.

Planimetric analysis shows that square and rectangular structures are arranged in groups, and circular ones are associated with central tombs. It may also be observed that the pits of a cultic character are located in the proximity of the rectangular/square structures, whereas the niche graves occur within the circular features. This organisation of the Petrești necropolis indicates a complex ritual functioning, which goes beyond the strict funerary framework.

Chapter 1 (pp. 13-50) represents, in essence, a commented catalogue of complexes, accompanied by plans and sections (Fig. 2-27), which provides the necessary factual basis for further analysis. Although the descriptive part is dense, the authors already introduce interpretive observations regarding the relationship between the tombs and the constructions with ditches, the chronological sequence of the complexes, as well as the interference with the necropolis belonging to the Sântana de Mureș–Chernyakhov culture.

Chapter 2. General characteristics of the funerary ritual and cultic structures of the necropolis (pp. 51–58)

This chapter represents the interpretive core of the work with regard to the funerary ritual and the function of the structures with ditches. Although relatively short (pp. 51-58), it concentrates a dense analysis that deserves closer examination. The authors address these issues mainly in the context of the Sarmatian vestiges from the Middle Prut basin, discussing the necropolises from Bădragii Noi (military necropolis), Cuconești Vechi I and II, Cioropcani, Florițoaia Nouă, Palanca and Medeleni, as well as a series of singular tumuli from Tețcani, Corpaci and Obileni. The Petrești necropolis is also integrated in this wider comparative framework. The most consistent part of the chapter is devoted to the analysis of ritual arrangements with ditches. The authors consider them a defining element for these necropolises.

The authors point out that these necropolises are located on heights and at watersheds, usually near tumuli belonging to earlier historical eras, and that the ritual structures with a moat, with a square or rectangular shape, provided with access areas in the southern sector and devoid of burials inside, constitute one of their characteristic elements.

They also note that the size of these layouts, oriented after the cardinal points either with the corners or with the sides, does not seem to have had an essential role.

Finally, the authors show that certain organisational elements can be identified in the plan of necropolises and in the arrangement of ritual structures with a moat, which they highlight concretely in the case of some of the sites.

The authors' conclusions show that these ritual structures with a moat represent the defining element of the Petrești necropolis, being more numerous than the tombs themselves, which suggests an autonomous cult function, not one exclusively funerary. At the same time, they are a characteristic element of the entire horizon of necropolises with similar arrangements in the Dniester–Prut–Danube interfluvium, most of which are concentrated in the middle Prut basin and in the Bugeac steppe.

According to the authors, this group of monuments in the Prut basin includes two types of funerary complexes. The first is represented by the main burials of the tribal elite, made in individual tumuli that, in some cases, reached considerable heights and benefited from an elaborate arrangement of the space underneath the mound. The central tombs were delimited by circular ditches, sometimes provided with deliberate interruptions, interpreted as access areas to the inner space. The second type consists of relatively large necropolises, mainly attributed to the common folk, consisting of small tumuli with individual burials, surrounded by circular ditches provided, as a

rule, with access areas arranged in the southern sector – sometimes absent – as well as ritual structures, generally of rectangular or square shape, with access areas and devoid of burial deposits inside. Finally, it is noted that the circular structures with a ditch, provided with access areas in the southern sector, known mainly from burials under the tumuli, were investigated in the Prut region exclusively in the Petrești necropolis.

Ritual structures with a square ditch are among the most enigmatic and also among the most relevant to the religious interpretation of the necropolis. These complexes do not contain tombs, but are distinguished by a varied inventory, consisting of fragments of amphorae and other ceramic fragments, miniature altars made of fragments of Roman tiles or sandy stones, as well as pistils made of amphorae or stone handles (Petrești, ritual structures 6 and 18), probably used for crushing pigments, as suggested by ochre debris documented in tombs 20 and 33. At the same time, these structures provided numerous animal osteological remains, including horse skulls and bones from large cattle, as found in ritual structures 2 and 6 from Petrești. This correlation between the ritual architecture and cultic micro-inventory constitutes one of the strengths of the monograph.

These findings point to funerary banquets, libation rituals, purification ceremonies and animal sacrifices, and support the interpretation that square or rectangular ditched ritual structures constitute autonomous cult spaces, and not mere appendages of tombs.

It is in the same ritual context that other discoveries documented in the necropolises of the Middle Prut basin should be interpreted. Thus, the authors mention the identification of ritual deposits of horse skulls, placed either at the entrances to the ritual structures or in separate pits (at Petrești, tombs 13 and 14). In another case, a ritual deposition consisting of a ceramic vessel was also documented within the same necropolis.

Closely related to these practices are also the offering pits associated with square and rectangular moat funerary structures. The most informative turned out to be those from Petrești, where, in their fill, altar fragments, pieces of burnt clay, ashes, bird bones, and horse skulls were discovered.

The circular ditch ritual structures from Petrești are associated with central tombs. They delimit a sacred space, inside which the deceased is deposited in a simple pit or in a lateral niche, and the funeral inventory is placed in standardised positions. Rites of passage are carried out in the inner space of the ritual structure.

In some cases, circular ditches are interrupted in the southern sector, a fact that may indicate either the existence of a “ritual road” for the soul, or an access area for participants, or a symbolic element related to orientation.

On their surface or in the filling of the ditches of the circular ritual structures from Petrești, ceramic vessels and shards, fragments, handles and parts of amphorae, as well as animal bones and skulls of large cattle were discovered.

When discussing various aspects of the ritual structures, although the authors mention several analogies, they relate to a relatively small extent to the many similar discoveries in the Sarmatian environment of the Eurasian steppes in the first centuries A.D., and do not mention other significant contributions by other researchers. The distribution of such ritual structures with trenches in the Sarmatian environment, in the authors’ opinion, confirms the ritual’s Oriental origin.

The typological duality suggests the existence of complementary functions: a) square and rectangular structures could have served as spaces for conducting ceremonies, banquets or purification practices, b) while circular structures seem to have fulfilled a proper funerary function, also serving to delimit a sacralized space.

The authors insist that these ritual structures, delimited by ditches, must be understood within a religious practice that they define in the chapter of conclusions (p. 91), in a suggestive formulation, as “vulgar Zoroastrianism”.

Regarding the typology of the graves and the position of the deceased, the authors start from the finding that the Petrești necropolis falls in a regional pattern of flat necropolises with small mounds and ritual structures with ditches, or circular, with tombs located in the inner space, or square and rectangular, associated with individual tombs.

They point out that burial pits are mostly simple, rectangular in shape (73.64%), followed by rectangular ones with steps along the long sides (12.13%). Graves with steps on three sides of the burial chamber, graves with steps arranged along the entire perimeter of the chamber, as well as graves with a single step running along one of the longitudinal walls, are attested in much smaller numbers.

A new phenomenon, noted by the authors within the necropolises with ritual structures with ditches, is the appearance of burial pits with niches in the western wall or, less often, in the eastern one. The relatively high number of burials in the niche under the western wall of the burial pit in the Petrești necropolis, compared to previous periods, also stands out. Here, they are represented by nine graves out of a total of 35 identified, which corresponds to a percentage of 25.71%.

In the English and Romanian abstracts, the authors link the appearance of the tombs with lateral niches in the western wall of the burial pit with the eastern Sarmatian traditions, a practice previously documented in the area of the middle course of the Don and in the southern regions of the Aral Sea (pp. 107, 117). This correlation is essential

to the argument concerning the Eastern origin of certain ritual norms and to the integration of necropolises from the Middle Prut area, including the one from Petrești, within the “Danube Alania”.

The authors note that all the tombs within the necropolis with ritual structures with ditches are oriented in a north–south direction, with minor deviations, in most cases to the northeast. The tombs preserved intact, including those in the Petrești necropolis, indicate a unitary funerary pattern: the deceased were deposited lying on their backs, with their heads facing the northern sector, with only small deviations from the main axis observed. Although references are made to graves and the position of the deceased, the paper does not provide an in-depth analysis of skeletons or anthropological data that could support ethnic and social interpretations.

Based on the analysis of the funerary rite and the ritual structures delimited by ditches, the authors argue that the necropolises featuring circular and square/rectangular enclosures in the Middle Prut region reflect a relatively uniform development of the material and spiritual culture of a population that was relatively ethnically homogeneous, identified as the Alans. This interpretation is based on analogies with finds from the middle course of the Don and the Pannonian Plain, where similar structures are documented, as well as on the correlation of these data with the chronological framework discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3. Analysis of the funeral inventory (pp. 59–80)

This chapter is among the densest and most important ones in the volume. It addresses the funerary inventory from the usual Sarmatian necropolises of the Dniester–Prut–Danube interfluvium, and within this wider comparative context, the artefacts from the Sarmatian tombs and ritual structures from the Petrești necropolis are also analysed.

The authors start from a significant methodological finding: the intentional destruction of a large part of the graves makes it impossible to completely reconstruct the set of objects that accompanied the deceased. They point out, however, that “the absence of prestigious precious metal objects in the tombs that escaped destruction excludes the possibility that they were damaged for looting purposes”. However, the statistical and typological analysis of the preserved material is carried out with great rigour.

The authors note that the remains of the funeral inventory are recorded in the overwhelming majority of graves. They note that of the 230 complexes analysed, 51 are completely devoid of inventory; of these, 40 have been destroyed since antiquity, and only 11 intact graves, four of which belong to children, do not contain any objects.

According to the authors, it is not possible to separate the materials based on sex, since anthropological determinations were carried out only at the Bădragii Noi (military necropolis) and Petrești necropolises. The authors also note the extremely low number of children’s graves, with only two such burials identified in the Petrești necropolis.

The predominant quantitative category of funeral inventory in Graves is represented by hand-thrown vessels (pp. 60–66), illustrated by a wide range of pots, cups, lids, etc. These are followed by the vessels thrown at the wheel (pp. 66–72), represented by jugs, mugs, cups, bowls and transport containers (amphorae) (pp. 72–76). According to the authors’ analysis, hand and wheel-thrown vessels are present in different proportions in almost all necropolises with ritual structures with ditches. The only exception is the military necropolis at Bădragii Noi, where only wheel-thrown vessels were discovered.

Complete shapes and fragments of vessels were recorded in 118 funerary complexes (51.3%), and in 88 of them, they were hand-thrown vessels (74.6% of all complexes with ceramic vessels). In the filling of the ditches of the ritual structures, large amounts of amphora fragments were encountered.

According to the authors, in 34 of the 85 graves in which the number of vessels could be established with a sufficient degree of certainty, only one vessel was identified (40%), in 28 — two (32.9%), in 12 — three (14.1%), in five — four (5.9%), in four — five vessels (4.7%), and in one case six and eight vessels, respectively (Diviziya, T 7 M 1 and T 2 M 1).

The placement of the vessels in the graves is also carefully analysed. The authors note that in the 40 complexes untouched, the vessels were most often placed at the feet of the deceased — in 18 cases (45%), and at the head — in ten cases (25%). In five graves (12.5%), vessels were deposited both at the head and at the feet of the deceased. In one tomb, they were recorded at the head, near the hip and at the feet (the military necropolis at Bădragii Noi, grave 7). The placement of the vessels on the left or right side of the body was of no particular importance, in the opinion of the authors.

The subchapters dedicated to ceramics analyse both hand (pp. 60–68) and wheel-thrown vessels (pp. 68–73). The authors examine the composition of the paste, surface treatment, typology of forms and decoration, establishing several types and subtypes of vessels, depending on the proportions, the profile of the neck and shoulders, the shape of the bottom, and decoration. Unfortunately, aside from the vessels from the Petrești necropolis, the authors

do not include in the volume drawings illustrating the types of vessels and do not specify, within these types, which graves and necropolises the artefacts originate from.

Functionally, large pots are interpreted as storage containers, medium ones as cooking vessels, and small ones as drinking vessels, all the while highlighting the continuity of Scythian pottery traditions. The diversity of hand-thrown ceramic vessels analysed by the authors suggests multiple workshops or a decentralised production, in which standardisation was not a priority and the individual expression of the craftsman was accepted.

Wheel-thrown pottery is represented by jugs and mugs of grey fabric with a burnished surface, regarded by the authors as being of Carpic⁸ manufacture (sic!), as well as cups, bowls, vessels made of reddish paste, fine pottery with a red slip, or pottery whose surface is coated with a red gloss, to which may be added the narrow-necked amphorae made of light-coloured paste. In the authors' view, the parallels identified for the bowl fragment from grave 34 at Petrești within the Maeotian milieu, as well as for the burnished grey-ware jugs and mugs in the territory associated with the "Carpi", point to the existence of broad cultural connections.

Ceramic vessels from the Petrești necropolis and the Dniester–Prut–Danube area offer a complex picture of a community between tradition and cultural exchange. Hand-thrown vessels predominate and reflect the local cultural identity, while wheel-thrown pottery indicates openness to external influences. The distribution of the vessels in the graves, the typological diversity and the traces of household usage allow the reconstruction not only of some aspects of the daily economy, but also the funerary practices and the cultural dynamics of the Sarmatian communities in the region.

Although the authors propose a detailed typology, the analysis remains predominantly descriptive. A critical approach would have involved a broader discussion concerning the variances between sites and possible chronological differences between the identified types. It would also have been useful to integrate comparisons with finds from other Sarmatian necropolises or isolated tombs in the north and north-west of the Black Sea, in order to assess the degree of local specificity.

The authors' analysis does not sufficiently address the issue of commercial circuits or possible production centres, limiting itself to mentioning the provincial Roman import character of some artefacts. A more in-depth and critical approach — such as integrating regional comparative analyses, discussing the internal chronology of the types, assessing the social functionality of vessels, or correlations with other inventory categories would have substantially improved this subchapter.

Overall, the ceramic vessels from the Sarmatian necropolises analysed by the authors reflect a community that retains its technological and ritual identity, but one that selectively integrates external influences, in a complex process of cultural adaptation.

The section dedicated to armament and harness parts (pp. 73-75) highlights the central role of weapons in the life of the nomadic warrior. Only offensive weapons are documented in the group of Sarmatian graves under analysis, with a clear predominance for short swords featuring a ring pommel and a straight guard (23 examples), consistently deposited alongside the right thigh. The authors mention that swords are rare, but well represented in the Bădrăgii Noi military necropolis, where they appear in all graves, regardless of the sex of the deceased. The weapon assemblage is further complemented by long swords with plain hilts and by daggers, both categories being represented by finds recovered in both complete and fragmentary condition.

The authors note the frequent association of swords with glass or faience beads, interpreted as decorative and apotropaic elements, a practice well attested in the Sarmatian milieu of the second and third centuries A.D. Isolated artefacts such as an arrowhead or an axe fragment are mentioned as exceptional occurrences.

The military equipment is represented by silver and bronze plates, elements of systems for fastening weapons at the waist, discovered in several necropolises.

Although the horse played a fundamental role in the life of the warrior, elements of horse harness are relatively rare: a few bridle fittings, fragments of bits with large circular cheek-pieces at their ends (Petrești, grave 29), and iron harness beads (Petrești, grave 31). The whips occupy an intermediate position between the armament and the equipment for controlling the horse, being represented by bronze or silver handles, some with a sophisticated decoration. The authors mention that in the tombs of horsemen, the elements of short whips used by horsemen appear as early as the first century A.D., but their widest spread is recorded in the second - third centuries A.D. The authors also note the presence of iron or bronze rings within the group of Sarmatian graves from the Dniester–Prut–

⁸ The usage of the term "Carpi" is, in our opinion, improper; much more appropriate would have been the appeal to the notions of "environment of free Dacians" or "environment of Poieniști-Vârteșcoiu culture". At the same time, we would like to mention that at the current stage of research, there is no convincing scientific evidence that would allow the identification of the Poieniști-Vârteșcoiu culture with the Carpi mentioned in literary sources from the middle and second half of the third century A.D.

Danube region. The harness pieces, although few within the analysed vestiges, paint an image of the importance of the horse in the life of the nomadic warrior and the evolution of military equipment between the first and third centuries A.D.

Overall, the material reflects a coherent military profile, specific to the Sarmatian communities in the region. The necropolis from Petrești, although not a military one in a strict sense, as is the one from Bădragii Noi, indicates by the presence of weapons in some of the graves, the social status of certain individuals and confirms the “Alan-Sarmatian” character of the community that used this cemetery.

The subchapter stands out through a proper documentation of the funerary contexts, but it is largely limited to general descriptions of the artefacts and their position in the graves. The analysis remains predominantly descriptive and technical, and remains, even in this form, surprisingly brief. Critical observations and cultural interpretations are either marginal or completely absent; the authors do not adequately address the social, symbolic or ritual role of armaments and harness parts and largely ignore their chronological and regional variations, including, in the case of essential categories such as swords.⁹ Also, the origin and spread of these artefacts are treated superficially or not addressed at all.

As an example in this regard, we may cite the bit with large circular cheek-pieces from grave 29 at Petrești, whose presence is merely noted¹⁰ by the authors without adequate analysis, despite the fact that the artefact has numerous parallels, including in a Sarmatian grave (M 3) from Ivești (Vaslui County),¹¹ datable, in our opinion, in stage B2 of the Central European chronology of the Roman era in the Barbaricum.

Consequently, the connections between armament, social status, gender and cultural identity remain at the level of suggestions, without being integrated into a coherent interpretative framework based on established typologies and sound regional comparisons.

The subchapter dedicated to adornment objects and clothing accessories (pp. 75-79), entitled *Personal adornment pieces*, presents a rich and diverse inventory, well represented in the tombs of the analysed Sarmatian group, but treated by the authors in a relatively summary manner. Fibulae occur in 16 funerary complexes, with two specimens being found in each case, and encompass several types (strongly profiled fibulae; hinged fibulae; fibulae with a bilateral spring consisting of four coils and an internal chord, provided with a solid catchplate and a terminal loop; fibulae with the foot bent underneath; enamelled horseshoe-shaped fibulae and fibulae of Almgren VII type, series I, the variant without a head knob and with a high catchplate set obliquely in relation to the foot), all manufactured from bronze or iron.

Bronze and iron buckles constitute the most numerous category (52 specimens), they were discovered in 22 graves and illustrate a wide typological variety: with a circular, oval or rectangular link, with or without a movable plate. To these may be added belt fittings and strap-ends, either simple or composite, manufactured from bronze and, more rarely, from silver (as in the case of the fittings from T 9 at Nagornoe¹²). Strap-ends of various types originate from 17 funerary complexes, suggesting a complex costume system incorporating multiple fastening and decorative elements. In two cases, two and, respectively, three such artefacts were discovered in one tomb.

Personal adornments are represented by bronze or silver earrings (13 tombs), bronze bracelets (5 tombs), rings and pendants, sometimes serving an apotropaic function. Also, bronze pieces are present in three cases; their functionality remains uncertain (fans, curling irons, curlers, pendants). Bronze mirrors, discovered in 17 graves,

⁹ For the types of swords from the Sarmatian environment and the discussions regarding their chronological classification, let us be allowed to quote here only Simonenko 2015, 43-71.

¹⁰ It belongs to type XIV, variant A (*glattes Mundstück*) in the classification of W. E. Werner (Werner 1988, 61-65, Pl. 28/208-212, 29/213-220) and to type II 1 in that of M. Babeș (Babeș 1993, 119). Such artefacts have spread widely since the La Tène era, being common in the Celtic environment of the Carpathian Basin and in the Lower and Middle Danube area (Werner 1988, 61-73, type XIV, Pl. 71). Bits with large circular cheek-pieces, belonging to variant A, derive predominantly from finds chronologically attributable to the period between the end of the Early La Tène (B2) and the Middle La Tène (C1-C2) (Werner 1988, 72-73, Fig. 8), but they also occur in contexts and assemblages dating to La Tène D. On the territory of Romania, such pieces are known from contexts and complexes of the Late La Tène (Bărcă *et alii* 2023, 77). Although of Western (Celtic) origin, such bits continue to be used in the early centuries A.D., both in the Roman and the barbarian environment. These are attested in Sarmatian discoveries from the Pannonian Plain (Istvánovits 1999, 181-182, Pl. XLII, 3; XLIII; Kőhegyi and Vörös 2011, 146, Pl. 108/1-3; Khrapunov *et alii* 2019, 19-20, Fig. 6/1-6, 7/1), in the northern Pontic area (Subbotin and Dzigovskij 1990, 24, Fig. 22/9; Medvedev 1990, Fig. 13/13, 31/17, 34/16, 35/11, 42/4, 46/9; Kostenko 1993, 41, Fig. 13/8; Bărcă 2006, 216-217; Bărcă 2006a, 138-139; Marčenko and Limberis 2008, 347, cat. no. 40, Pl. 69/4) and in the late Scythian environment from Crimea (Dashevskaya 1991, 40, Pl. 74/17-18; Trufanov 2009, Fig. 72/6-7, 9-10; Puzdrovskij 2007, 141-142, Fig. 101/VI). For the finds of bits with circular cheek-pieces from the North Pontic area in the first century B.C. - first centuries A.D., see Antipenko 2016, 85-88.

¹¹ Palade 1978-1979, 253, Fig. 7/1-3, 5.

¹² For these artefacts see Gudkova and Fokeev 1984, Fig. 14/4, 9; Bărcă and Simonenko 2009, Fig. 96/10-11.

occur in several variants, ranging from simple discoidal artefacts to discoidal examples with a perforated lateral handle of rectangular shape, decorated in relief on the reverse with representations of various motifs, most commonly solar symbols, geometric designs, or tamga-like signs.¹³

The beads represent the most numerous category of adornment and clothing artefacts, and they are analysed in just half a page (sic!). The authors mention that glass beads, of various shapes, commonly used for decorating clothing and for making necklaces, sometimes also bracelets, were discovered in 53 complexes, and the small glass beads were identified in 46 complexes. Furthermore, the presence of beads made of metal, coral, carnelian, chalcedony, amber, and polychrome glass, as well as mother-of-pearl beads, is noted without further detail in eight funerary complexes in the area of the skull and they are interpreted as decorative elements from diadems. At the same time, the authors note that in four destroyed tumular tombs various gold plates and pendants were discovered, which, in all likelihood, served to adorn clothing and head coverings. The presence of pendants and amulets is also mentioned without many clarifications.

Overall, the material reflects a rather rich and varied repertoire of personal accessories characteristic of Sarmatian communities, suggesting both social status and distinct cultural preferences, as well as special attention to clothing decoration and the symbolic functions of adornments.

The strong point of the subchapter is its well-documented typological diversity, especially in the case of certain categories of artefacts. However, the authors attempt to a limited extent to integrate the material into established typologies, which could provide more solid chronological benchmarks.

The analysis remains essentially descriptive and concise, the emphasis being mainly on the classification of certain categories of artefacts, while cultural or social interpretations are only suggested. For example, the wealth of clothing accessories — beads, mirrors, pendants, earrings, amulets, etc. — would have allowed for a broader discussion on social status, gender identity, possible intercultural influences or even chronological nuances. However, these aspects are treated only marginally or not at all, not even in the case of artefacts from the Petrești necropolis, such as the mirror from tomb 15,¹⁴ earrings from T 3 M 12 and from tomb 15¹⁵ or the beads in tombs 10, 11, 15,¹⁶ 40 and 46.

Another example in this regard is the pendant from T 3, M 12 at Petrești, consisting of a cast profiled bar with a suspension hole at one end, attached to an earring fitted with a fastening system comprising a hook and a loop. This type of pendant is well represented in Geto-Dacian settlements from the east (Brad, Răcățoiu, Poiana, Bâta Doamnei) and south of the Carpathians (Popești, Ocnița). Such pendants were also discovered in the Merești Dacian fortress (intra-Carpathian area), were considered imports from the eastern Carpathian area, and a mould for their production was found at Popești.¹⁷

In the East-Carpathian Sarmatian environment, similar pendants are known in M 71 from Căndești (8 artefacts), T 3 M 3 from Prăjeni–Alimândra (2 artefacts) and T 2 M 9 from Prăjeni–Țarnă,¹⁸ their inventory indicates a dating to the second half of the first century A.D. - the start of the second century A.D. Based on these findings, it is considered that the profiled bar pendants encountered in the Sarmatian world are most likely imports from the Geto-Dacian environment.¹⁹ Such pendants also come from the Sarmatian tomb at Nagykörrű-*Marsó tanya* (Pannonian Plain) dated sometime in the second half/end of the first century A.D. - the start of the second century A.D.²⁰

The authors excel, however, in carefully documenting funerary contexts, which gives the material a definite archaeological value and provides a solid basis for later interpretations.

Working tools and objects with a ritual function, only sparsely represented in the funerary complexes of the analysed group, are discussed in a separate subchapter (pp. 79–80). The most common artefacts are iron knives

¹³ For further discussions concerning the origin, distribution, decoration, and chronological attribution of mirrors of this type within the Sarmatian environment, see Bârcă 2021; Bârcă 2021a; Bârcă 2021b, along with the entire bibliography cited therein.

¹⁴ Discoidal mirrors with a perforated lateral handle of rectangular shape, decorated in relief on the reverse and similar to the artefact from M 15, constitute a frequent find in Sarmatian graves from the east-Carpathian region during the second half of the second century A.D. - first half of the third century A.D. However, the appearance of this type can be dated, on the basis of discoveries, as we have already mentioned, even before the middle of the second century A.D. (Bârcă 2021, 91; Bârcă 2021a, 103).

¹⁵ For this type of earrings from the Sarmatian environment, see Bârcă 2006, 106-107; Bârcă and Symonenko 2009, 142-143; Bârcă 2014, 98-101 with a full bibliography.

¹⁶ Beads from this tomb belong to types characteristic of the first-second centuries A.D. For these see Alekseeva 1975, 29, 32, type 9, Fig. 4/Type 9, Pl. 5/19.

¹⁷ Bârcă 2006, 134-135.

¹⁸ Ursulescu *et alii* 2021, 167, 172, Pl. III/5, IV/4, XVII/6, XVIII/5.

¹⁹ Bârcă 2006, 135.

²⁰ Vaday 1989, Pl. 74/1-2; Bârcă 2022, Fig. 10/1-2.

(20 complexes), and in 19 female tombs, the presence of ceramic spindle whorls of various shapes is reported; in a few cases, two or three artefacts appear. Occasionally, sewing needles are attested (Petrești, grave 33; Kholmokoe, grave 23), drilling tools, a sickle fragment (?), a crease and a pair of scissors (Petrești, grave 33), a rare find in the Sarmatian funerary environment.²¹ Isolated household items, such as a metal hook, are also mentioned in some graves. The presence of these artefacts suggests the existence of well-defined domestic activities, and rarer artefacts, such as the spring scissors or the sickle fragment, also indicate specialised practices.

The subchapter also includes items with a possible ritual-magical function, such as a fragment of opium (Palanca, grave 1) and several sets of astragali, some of them perforated. They originate from seven tombs within the analysed necropolises, the number of artefacts ranging from a single artefact to a batch of 28 astragali. The frequency and variability of these finds suggest the existence of a well-established funerary tradition, with astragali potentially serving both an apotropaic role and a ludic function imbued with symbolic significance. The presence of opium in a tomb may, in turn, indicate magical-ritual practices related to the transition into the underworld.

Overall, the assemblage, although relatively modest in quantity, stands out through the functional and symbolic diversity of its artefacts, providing valuable insights into the household economy, funerary practices, and the belief system of the Sarmatian communities.

It is in this context that Chapter 3 offers a nuanced image of the funerary inventory, in which are intertwined local traditions, Eastern influences, imports from the Roman provincial world and artefacts from the cultural environment east of the Carpathians. Although the authors propose a generally balanced and, in places, well-founded approach, the analysis often remains superficial, and the funerary inventory, although relatively modest in volume, is only partially harnessed to reconstruct aspects of the material and spiritual life of the Sarmatian communities. The absence of a broader interdisciplinary perspective is evident, although data obtained via archaeometry, paleozoology or other related disciplines may have enriched the interpretation. The main contribution of the chapter lies in the rigorous documentation and in the systematisation of the archaeological material, as well as in the attempt to integrate the data into a coherent interpretative perspective. Moreover, the complexity of the presented material forms the basis for the interpretations developed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4. Features of archaeological material and chronology issues (pp. 81–90)

This chapter is, in fact, the typological and chronological synthesis of the entire material and its chronological implications for the Sarmatian necropolises in the Middle Prut region. The authors pay special attention to ceramics (pp. 81-86), which constitutes one of the main categories of materials used to establish chronology and to understand the cultural connections of the analysed communities.

A central place in the analysis is occupied by the study of hand-thrown pottery, especially of vessels that stand out through the continuation and development of traditional Scythian forms, considered a dominant form in the ceramic inventory of the first centuries A.D. in the north-Pontic space. The authors highlight the morphological features of these containers and propose a functional classification between domestic vessels (kitchen pots) and storage containers, differentiated by dimensions, wall thickness and composition of the ceramic paste.

By comparison with finds from late Scythian settlements on the Lower Dnieper and the Lower Dniester, the authors argue that these ceramic forms represent a continuation and adaptation of Scythian ceramic traditions. At the same time, the “supracultural” character of this ceramic type in the first centuries A.D. is emphasised, as it has been adopted by various communities in the north-Pontic steppe.

The analysis is completed by the discussion of the wheel-thrown pottery, including the vessels from the “Carpi” culture and those from the Greek-Roman centres on the north Pontic coast, especially Olbia and Tyras. These include jugs, cups and polished grey bowls, as well as vessels of various shapes made of reddish paste or those made of fine paste with red gloss or red slip. The authors note that these imports are rare and usually appear as isolated pieces, without forming consistent series. Pottery with rare forms is also subjected to analysis.

Unfortunately, for the vast majority of wheel-thrown vessels, the authors offer few analogies, and the chronological attribution is treated cursorily and summarily. There are also cases in which certain artefacts are not subjected to analysis, as occurs with the cup coated with a yellowish-red slip from grave 1 at Petrești, although it constitutes a particularly important chronological indicator, being a Pontic sigillata vessel. The bowls made of fine paste from graves 10 and 25, on whose surface traces of a yellowish-red slip are still preserved, are also not analysed.

²¹ A scissor similar to the one from Petrești, but somewhat larger in size, comes from a rich female Sarmatian tomb, in a pit with niche (T 2 M 1), from Chuguno-Krepinka (for the inventory of this tomb see Simonenko 2008, 65-66, cat. no. 70, Pl. 56-66, 78, cat. no. 114, Pl. 124-125), which dates to the first half of the second century A.D., towards the end of this chronological interval, probably in its second quarter (Bărcă 2021c, 205-209).

The cup in grave 1 has a tronconic body, a vertical rim, with an edge in the passage area between the wall and the rim. The walls are slightly concave, the rim is slightly turned inward, the edge is bevelled on the outside, and the bottom is straight. Such cups belong to Atlante II type, shape V,²² or form 30, variant 2 of D. Zhuravlev's classification.²³ They are frequently found in the north Pontic space, but also outside it, and come mainly from tombs and contexts that indicate a date in the second half or the last quarter of the first century – the beginning of the second century A.D.²⁴ Such cups are also present in the pre-Roman Geto-Dacian environment of the eastern Carpathian area, coming from complexes and contexts dated to the second half of the first century A.D.²⁵ An identical cup was also found in a Sarmatian tomb recently discovered in Mălcăuți (Sorocea district, Republic of Moldova)²⁶, whose inventory indicates a date sometime in the first half of the second century A.D.

As for the bowls from tombs 10 and 25, Roman provincial imports, it should be noted that they are represented by numerous specimens coming from Crimean contexts and complexes²⁷, but also from the eastern Carpathian area, including Sarmatian tombs,²⁸ dated between the end of the first century and the first decades of the third century A.D. Moreover, the bowl from grave 25 is identical to that from grave 7 in the military necropolis at Bădragii Noi,²⁹ which also includes in its inventory a strongly profiled fibula, type Almgren 82, chronologically dated mainly to the second century A.D.³⁰

The transport amphorae also play an important role in establishing the chronology, especially the late Heracleian ones, frequently identified in the fill of the ditches of ritual structures. Based on morphological features, the authors distinguish two main variants, corresponding to the types Vnukov C IVB and C IVC,³¹ accepting the dating proposed by S. Yu. Vnukov (2006) for the type C IVB between the 80s of the first century and the 40s of the second century A.D.,³² as well as for type C IVC in the chronological interval between the second quarter and the end of the second century A.D.³³

Type C IVB amphorae are also dated, in the literature, to the second third of the first century – the middle of the second century A.D.,³⁴ in the last quarter of the first century – the first third of the second century A.D.³⁵ or in the second half/the beginning of the last third of the first century A.D. - the start of the second century A.D.³⁶ More recently, two subvariants (C IVB1 and C IVB2) have been distinguished within this type: specimens belonging to the C IVB1 subvariant are dated to the end of the first century – beginning of the second century A.D., and those in the subvariant C IVB2 are dated between the beginning of the second century A.D. and the 40s of the same century.³⁷

²² Atlante II, 94, form V, Pl. XXIII/5, 6.

²³ Zhuravlev 2010, 60, 145-146, cat. no. 195-204, the artefact from cat. no. 200 is identical to the one from Petrești Pl. 27/195-204.

²⁴ Atlante II, 94, form V; Zhuravlev 2010, 60, 145-146, form 30.2, cat. no. 195-204; Gushchina and Zhuravlev 2016, 39, form 30.2, Pl. 10/16, 13/10, 19/5, 68/1, 89/5, 88/17, 90/2, 128/25, 133/2, 134/3. In the case of the Belbek IV necropolis (Crimea), it was noted that in most complexes these cups appear in association with plates made of fine paste, with the surface covered with scarlet-red slip, on which stamps *planta pedis* are applied (Zhuravlev 2010, 60; Gushchina and Zhuravlev 2016, 39). Only tomb 115, which includes such a cup in its inventory, is dated to the second – third quarter of the second century A.D. (Zhuravlev 2010, 60, 145, cat. no. 196, Pl. 27/196; Gushchina and Zhuravlev 2016, 39). We must note, however, that tomb 115 is closely related to tomb 116, both burials being arranged in a common burial pit, which featured, on the long sides, a side chamber (niche) for each tomb, enclosed with vertically placed stone slabs. Grave 116 included in its inventory two fibulae with the foot turned underneath, belonging to Ambroz type, group 15, series I, variant 3 (Ambroz 1966, 49–50, Pl. 9/8) and to Kropotov type, group 4, series I, variant 3 (Kropotov 2010, 74–77, Fig. 33–35), dated to the second century A.D., particularly in the first half and to the middle. If we also take into account the rest of the funerary inventory of the two tombs, this fact indicates a date rather in the first half of the second century A.D.

²⁵ See Popescu 2013, 71, 135-136, cat. no. 248-253, Pl. 16/248-253, 46/248-253.

²⁶ Vornic and Matveev 2016, 90, Fig. 4/1.

²⁷ Zhuravlev 2010, 142, form 17.1.1, Pl. 24/165-170.

²⁸ Popa 2015, 87, Fig. 53-54; Vornic *et alii* 2007, 79-81, type 1.

²⁹ Kurchatov, Symonenko and Chyrkov 1995, 118, 121, Fig. 11/6.

³⁰ Kropotov 2010, 224, 225, 226-227, 228, cat. no. 4, group 10, series I, variant 2; Hellström 2018, 78-80, type IIa.2a.2, 228, cat. no. 426, Pl. 43B/426.

³¹ Vnukov 2003, 202; Vnukov 2006, 166, 167, Fig. 1/8, 9; 10.

³² See in this regard Vnukov 2006, 166, 167, Fig. 10.

³³ Vnukov 2006, 167, Fig. 10.

³⁴ Shelov 1978, 18; Opaț 1980, 301, type VI A.

³⁵ Vnukov 2003, 202.

³⁶ Naumenko 2012, 64; Naumenko 2017, 25.

³⁷ Vnukov 2016, 44.

C IVC-type amphorae are dated to the second century A.D.³⁸ or in the interval between the second quarter of the second century A.D. and the end of the same century.³⁹ Based on a discovery from Tanais, it is stated that amphorae of this type appeared sometime at the threshold between the first and second centuries A.D., being used until the end of the second century A.D., when they are replaced by those belonging to the type C IVD.⁴⁰ The discovery from a closed complex from the last third of the first century A.D. is invoked in support of the early start date; here, the neck of an amphora belonging to the early variant of type C IVC was found⁴¹ along with type C IVB2 amphorae.

Within IVC C-type amphorae, two subvariants were distinguished: an earlier one (C IVC1) and a later one (C IVC2).⁴² They differ both through a series of morphological peculiarities as well as by dimensions, the specimens of subvariant C IVC1 being larger than those of subvariant C IVC2. The analysis of a very large number of type C IVC amphorae from Tanais showed that those of the subvariant C IVC1 have a volume of 7-7.5 litres, and the latest of these come from complexes destroyed after the fire in the middle of the second century A.D. In contrast, the subvariant C IVC2 amphorae have a volume of about 6 litres and are widespread in the second half of the second century A.D.⁴³

In a recent study, S. Yu. Vnikov reiterates the appearance of these amphorae in the second quarter of the second century A.D., indicating a vague date for C IVC type amphorae (subvariants 1 and 2): up to the year 140 A.D. - after the year 180 A.D. The author notes that amphorae of subvariant C IVC2 were in circulation at least during the Marcomannic Wars, and that the replacement of their late forms by those of type C IVD took place at the end of the second century to the beginning of the third century A.D.⁴⁴ The illustration from the same study suggests a dating of amphorae from the first subvariant up to the middle of the second century A.D., and the appearance of type C IVC2 around 140/150 A.D.⁴⁵ In the east-Carpathian region, finds of Vnikov C IVC type amphorae are concentrated along the middle course of Siret River and derive predominantly from contexts and complexes attributed to the "free Dacians"⁴⁶, which, in our view, indicate a date within phases B2b-C1a of the Roman period in the Barbaricum, no later than the beginning/the first decades of the third century A.D.

In the Petrești necropolis, an amphora belonging to the subvariant C IVC1 was discovered in the trench of the square ritual structure no. 29, and another in the one of the circular ritual structure no. 6, which had inside it tomb 6, which, in the context of the aforementioned, may indicate a dating to the early period of the necropolis. The amphora in the square ritual structure no. 22 is small in size (height – 30 cm) and most likely represents another variant of the C IVC⁴⁷ type, or a subvariant of those belonging to variant C IVC2. A small amphora, fragmentarily preserved, similar to the one from Petrești, but somewhat larger in size (about 38 cm), was discovered in a female Sarmatian tomb in a pit with a niche (T 2 M 2), surrounded by a circular ditch, at Vitănești (Teleorman County).⁴⁸ The tomb, looted in ancient times, indicates, based on the preserved inventory pieces, a date to the first half of the second century A.D.,⁴⁹ possibly starting with its second quarter.

Overall, the analysis of ceramic vessels as carried out by the authors stands out through the richness of typological comparisons, which allow the integration of the archaeological material in a wider regional context. It also highlights a complex combination of local traditions and external influences, reflecting cultural contacts between Sarmatian communities and cultural environments in the north and north-west of the Black Sea.

However, as mentioned in the discussion related to Chapter 3, the analysis remains largely typological and descriptive, the emphasis falling on analogies (usually few) and on identifying formal parallelisms. Interpretations of the cultural or social significance of the material are relatively limited. For example, the role of ceramics in the funeral ritual or the economic implications of ceramic imports are only suggested, without being developed into a systematic analysis.

Also, some hypotheses regarding the origin of certain ceramic forms are presented in a relatively general manner, without a broader critical assessment of the various explanatory models. Similarly, the relationships between local

³⁸ Shelov 1978, 18; Naumenko 2017, 25. Such amphorae represent quite frequent finds in the Roman period sites, in the Carpathian-Dniester region, with a visible concentration in the basin of the middle course of the Siret (Popa 2015, 109; Popa 2016, 209-210, Fig. 6-8).

³⁹ Vnikov 2003, 202; Vnikov 2006, 167, Fig. 10 Vnikov 2016, 41, 43, 44.

⁴⁰ Naumenko 2017, 25.

⁴¹ Naumenko 2008, 271; Naumenko 2017, 25 and Fig. 4/4C1.

⁴² Vnikov 2016, 43, Fig. 4/3-7 (C IVC1) and 4/8-10 (C IVC2); Naumenko 2017, Fig. 4/4 (C IVC1) and 4/4 (C IVC2).

⁴³ Naumenko 2017, 25, Fig. 4/4 (C IVC1) and 4/4 (C IVC2).

⁴⁴ Vnikov 2016, 41, 43, 44.

⁴⁵ Vnikov 2016, Fig. 4/3-10.

⁴⁶ Popa 2015, 108-109; Popa 2016, 209-210, Fig. 8.

⁴⁷ Popa 2015, 108; Popa 2016, 209, footnote 72.

⁴⁸ Bărcă 2015, 48, 49, Fig. 7/1-2, 8/26.

⁴⁹ Bărcă 2015, 48-54, Fig. 8.

ceramic traditions and external influences could have been analysed more deeply by correlating ceramics with other categories of funerary inventory.

Within the analysis of the archaeological material, the authors also pay attention to rarer categories of funerary inventory, such as glass vessels (p. 87), considered fragile objects and therefore not used frequently in everyday life. Their presence in funeral complexes is interpreted as a possible indicator of the high social status of the deceased.

In the analysed necropolises, only four such finds are known, made of transparent, colourless, or slightly greenish glass. Among these are two hemispherical bowls (Khadzhider II, T 7 M 1), a fragmentary unguentarium (Alkaliya, T 6 M 1), and an aryballos made of transparent glass with yellowish hues, lacking its rim, part of the neck, and one of the handles (Petrești, grave 25).

On the basis that the Petrești specimen has a longer neck, similar to the late Mediterranean specimens and therefore is more similar to them, as well as based on artefacts with which such *aryballoi* were discovered in association - without, however, indicating concrete examples and bibliographic references - the authors conclude, referring to the work of N. Kunina,⁵⁰ in which, however, no such long-necked artefacts are found (sic!), that containers of this type can be attributed to the end of the first century – the first half of the second century A.D.

Although they have a relatively unitary shape, these glass vessels are distinguished by the quality and colour of the glass, as well as by the shape of the rim.⁵¹ Based on the classification proposed by N. Sorokina, made according to the shape of the rim and handles, it can be concluded that the Petrești artefact is an *aryballos* which may be classified in the first group, characterised by an A-type flared rim and a C-type handle.⁵² Based on the colour of the glass, the Petrești vessel is rather a product from the second century A.D., most likely its first half. If we take into account that the Petrești container has a long neck, we can indicate as parallels the vessels from the Sovkhoz–10 necropolis, in south-west Crimea, as well as those from Panticapaeum.⁵³

In order to specify the chronology of necropolises with ritual structures delimited by ditches along the middle course of the Prut, the authors also resort to the analysis of adornment and clothing pieces. Unfortunately, only certain fibulae and only a few of the buckles and belt fittings are subjected to analysis, while the other categories of personal ornaments and dress accessories are no longer examined in the manner one might have expected. Even so, their analysis is a cursory one, and the chronological attribution is inaccurate.

The authors analyse the strongly profiled fibula from the military necropolis at Bădragii Noi (tomb 7)⁵⁴ as well as three other fibulae from the Cuconești Vechi II necropolis,⁵⁵ which are considered to have a bilateral spring composed of four coils and an internal chord, a curved bow broadened into a rectangular, lamellar, lanceolate, or rhomboid plate, with a solid catchplate terminating in a loop. Such fibulae are widespread mainly in the second century A.D., but also appear in the first part of the third century A.D.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, only the fibula from T 40 M 2 from Cuconești Vechi II belongs to this type.⁵⁷ The other two (T 22 M 1 and T 34 M 1) belong to the type of two-piece hinged fibulae, with a curved bow broadened into a rectangular plate and a solid catchplate terminating in a loop.⁵⁸ Such fibulae are considered to be characteristic mainly for the first stage of the Late Sarmatian period (the final part of the second century - the first half of the third century A.D.).⁵⁹

⁵⁰ Kunina 1997, 229, cat. no. 228, 323, cat. no. 346-349.

⁵¹ These vessels are among the most widespread cosmetic containers of the Roman era (Isings 1957, 78-81, form 61). They appear in the middle of the first century A.D. and are produced on a large scale, in a wide variety of forms, in various workshop centres, until the third century A.D., and in the western part of the Roman Empire until the fourth century A.D. is supported.

⁵² See Sorokina 1987, 41-43.

⁵³ Sorokina 1987, 41, Fig. 1/1, 4-5.

⁵⁴ The Almgren 82 fibula has a bilateral spring composed of a large number of coils and an external chord supported by a hook. The bow is slightly flattened and decorated with two knobs: one located towards the head, while the other separates the bow from the foot, which terminates in a button. The catchplate is rectangular. It belongs to group 10, series I, variant 2 of strongly profiled fibulae from the typological classification established by V. V. Kropotov (Kropotov 2010, 224, 225, 226-227, 228, cat. no. 4) and to type IIA.2a. 2 in that of K. Hellström (Hellström 2018, 78-80, 228, cat. no. 426, Pl. 43B/426), being chronologically attributed during most of the second century A.D.

⁵⁵ See for these Dergachev 1982, 110-111, Fig. 38/4 (T 22 M 1), 117, Fig. 41/6 (T 34 M 1), 120, Fig. 42/8 (T 40 M 2).

⁵⁶ See for the spread and dating of these fibulae at Kropotov 2010, 201, 204, group 8, series II, form 1; Hellström 2018, 64-65, 66, type IC.2b.1a, Pl. 29.

⁵⁷ Kropotov 2010, 204, group 8, series II, form 1, cat. no. 2; Hellström 2018, 264, cat. no. 873, type Ic.2b.1A, Pl. 29/873.

⁵⁸ The grave contained a mirror with a rectangular perforated lateral handle, decorated in relief on the reverse (Khazanov type IX), a feature that indicates a date for the grave within the first stage of the Late Sarmatian period.

⁵⁹ See Kropotov 2010, 272, 283, cat. no. 4-5, Fig. 82, group 13, form 30; Hellström 2018, 99-100, 264, cat. no. 872, type VA.3, Pl. 56A/872. For similar pieces from the territory of Roman Dacia, see Cociș 2004, 75-77, type 13, Pl. XLIV.

⁵⁹ Kropotov 2010, 275. K. Hellström dates this type of fibulae to the second half of the second century A.D. - the third century A.D. (Hellström 2018, 100).

Tomb 7 from Bădragii Noi is related to the no. 6 ritual structure with a squared ditch, in which two fragmentary amphorae belonging to type Vnukov C IVC were found.⁶⁰

Buckles and belt fittings likewise contribute to defining the chronological framework. According to the authors, buckles from the tombs in the analysed necropolises were used both as belt elements and for fitting shoes. The authors note that the unfaceted artefacts, such as those from grave 7 at Bădragii Noi and grave 25 at Petrești (all provided with a movable plate), belong to group I in V. Yu. Malashev's classification⁶¹ and correctly note that their features indicate their production in the first half of the second century A.D. However, this chronological attribution could have been discussed in more detail, especially in relation to the archaeological context of discoveries and other analogies in the Sarmatian environment.⁶²

Regarding the buckles from the two tombs, it should be mentioned that the artefacts from grave 7 from Bădragii Noi belong to a different variant than the one from grave 25 from Petrești. In the Sarmatian environment of the Pannonian Plain, the discoveries of unaceted buckles, made of two pieces, like the specimens from Bădragii Noi, are very numerous, being dated, *grosso modo*, between the middle of the second century A.D. (with greater frequency in its last quarter) and the first third of the third century A.D.⁶³ In the case of the mobile plate buckle from grave 25 from Petrești, it should be noted that such buckles are common in the Sarmatian environment of the first stage of the Late Sarmatian period⁶⁴ from the north-western Pontic space, as well as in the Crimean necropolises⁶⁵.

With regard to the faceted buckles and belt fittings, represented by four finds from graves within the analysed necropolises, the authors note, in agreement with the opinion of A. Vaday and V. Kulcsár,⁶⁶ that they indicate a later phase, associated with the influences of the Roman provincial workshops active after the Marcomannic Wars, respectively at the end of the second century and the first third of the third century A.D., as well as the fact that they were made specifically for the barbarians.

For example, the two ring buckles in tomb 27 from Petrești have a faceted tang⁶⁷ and they can be classified in group II of the classification made by V. Yu. Malashev, dated, for the Sarmatian environment in the Volga and Don area, within the boundaries of the first half of the third century A.D.⁶⁸

We consider, however, that the spread of faceted buckles, belt fittings, and strap-ends among the steppe populations of the northern and north-eastern Pontic regions was, in all likelihood, a somewhat later phenomenon

⁶⁰ Vnukov 2003, 202; Vnukov 2006, 167, 169, Fig. 10; Vnukov 2016, 41, 43, 44. The Bădragii Noi military necropolis was initially dated in the second half of the second century - the first half of the third century A.D. (Kurchatov, Symonenko and Chyrkov 1995, 122). However, both the amphorae in the square funerary structures and the inventory of the tombs indicate an earlier dating of the necropolis, in the chronological interval between the second quarter/second third and the end of the second century AD. or, as we argued on another occasion, only in the second half of the second century A.D. (Bărcă 2020, 329).

⁶¹ See Malashev 2000, 198-199, 209. V. Yu. Malashev established the dating of the pieces of group I in the chronological interval between the middle and the second half of the second century A.D., with a possible extension in the first half of the third century A.D. To support his argument, the author relies on the presence, within the complexes with buckles belonging to this group, of strongly profiled fibulae provided with a chord hook, from group 11, series I, variants 1 and 2 (Ambroz 1966, 40-41, Pl. 8/1-11), as well as of arched fibulae with the foot bent underneath, manufactured from a single piece, attributed to group 15, series I, variants 4 and 5 in A. K. Ambroz's classification (Ambroz 1966, 50-51, Pl. 9/9-13). However, the strongly profiled fibulae belonging to these variants date, in the case of variant 1, mainly in the second half of the first century - the first half of the second century A.D., and in the second century A.D. (see Kropotov 2010, 225-227, group 10, series I, variants 1 and 2 [for Ambroz, group 11, series I, variant 1]); instead, the specimens belonging to variant 2 fall mainly in the second century A.D. and are also encountered in the first half of the third century A.D. (see Kropotov 2010, 229-231, group 10, series II, forms 1-3 [for Ambroz, group 11, series I, variant 2]). It should also be emphasised that in the period when the Late Sarmatian culture was predominant (the final part of the second century and the first half of the third century A.D.), the strongly profiled fibulae belonging to Ambroz series I, variant 2 are not numerous (Kropotov 2010, 231). As for the fibulae with the foot turned underneath, they date to the second half of the second century and the first half of the third century A.D. (see Kropotov 2010, 77-80, group 4, series I, variant 4).

⁶² Malashev 2000, 209.

⁶³ Vaday and Kul'char 1984, 248-249, 256, 258. type II, group 2.

⁶⁴ Bărcă and Symonenko 2009, 237, Fig. 95/10-13, 19. Recently, the specimen in grave 25 has been erroneously attributed to type 1 in the typological classification made by A. V. Simonenko (Iarmulschi and Batog 2025, 443, note 29).

⁶⁵ Gushchina and Zuravlev 2016, 85-86, Pl. 171/1-2, 4, 180/12, 182/9-10, 17, 187/14, 16, 195/14-15; Trufanov 2009, 218, Fig. 60/18, 21.

⁶⁶ Vaday and Kul'char 1984, 252-258.

⁶⁷ As a parallel for these buckles, a buckle with a rectangular plate from T 5 M1 at Chaush was cited (Iarmulschi and Batog 2025, 443, note 31); however, in that case, both the ring and the tang, as well as the movable plate, are faceted. However, such pieces are dated later, being characteristic for the final stage of the Late Sarmatian period (the second half of the third century and the fourth century A.D.), and the Chaush tomb dates to the late third - early fourth century A.D. (Bărcă and Symonenko 2009, 253-254).

⁶⁸ Malashev 2000, 209.

than among the Sarmatians of the Pannonian Plain or those of the east-Carpathian region, where the Petrești necropolis is also located. As a result, the presence of these artefacts in the latter regions must be dated beginning with the last decades of the second century A.D., as confirmed by the other artefacts with which such buckles were discovered in graves.

Based on the set of discoveries, the authors consider that the analysed necropolises belong to a single Sarmatian cultural group, established in the space between the Dniester and the Prut in the second quarter of the second century A.D. and which would have retained its particularities until the beginning of the third century A.D. After this moment the evolution of this population becomes difficult to trace in the context of the historical transformations of the third century A.D.

Despite these limits, the subchapter constitutes a satisfactory documentary basis for the chronological analysis of the Sarmatian necropolises in the Dniester-Prut-Danube region, providing a useful comparative framework for future research on the cultural dynamics of nomadic communities in the north-Pontic area. Although it is based on typological analogies, the chronology presented in this chapter could have been better supported if it had benefited from a more rigorous and exhaustive analysis, allowing, in certain cases, more precise chronological attributions.

Conclusions (pp. 91–92)

The conclusions of the monograph are relatively concise but dense. The authors summarise the results of the analysis of the funeral ritual and of the inventory discovered in the necropolises with ritual structures with a ditch in the Middle Prut area. Based on these data, the existence of a unitary evolution of the material and spiritual culture of the population of the region in the chronological interval between the second century and the first half of the third century A.D. is supported. A defining element of these necropolises is the presence of ritual structures delimited by ditches, interpreted by the authors as spaces for carrying out cult practices associated with a type of “vulgar Zoroastrianism”.⁶⁹ Based on the funerary rite and the character of the inventory, the necropolises are attributed to a relatively ethnically homogeneous population, identified with the Alans, settled in the area between the Dniester and the Prut during the second century A.D.

In the authors’ view, the chronological analysis indicates the emergence of the earliest necropolises in the second quarter to the middle of the second century A.D. (the Bădragii Noi military necropolis and the earliest burials at Petrești), followed, during the second half of the same century, by other necropolises (Cuconești Vechi and Florițoaia Nouă), while the latest materials are dated to the beginning of the third century A.D. The authors consider that the group of tombs and the square ritual structure with a ditch from Medeleni⁷⁰ are, in general, chronologically neutral, but without a thorough discussion concerning the reasons why they cannot be integrated into a more precise chronological framework. The analysis of the funerary inventory within the tombs located near the square ditch emplacement from Medeleni indicates, in our opinion, that a dating of this group of tombs in the chronological interval between the last quarter/end of the first century A.D. and the beginning / first decades of the second century A.D. is supported.

Regarding the Petrești necropolis, the authors assume that it functioned between the second quarter of the second century and the beginning of the third century A.D., although some artefacts from certain tombs and structures seem to indicate a date for the beginning of the necropolis in the first decades of the second century A.D. Regarding its end date, we consider that, based on the published material, the chronology proposed by the authors is appropriate, despite the recently expressed opinion that it should be placed in the middle of the third century A.D.⁷¹

The authors integrate the analysed finds into a broader context, emphasising the existence of necropolises with ritual structures with ditches in several regions of the northern-Pontic steppe and Eastern Europe. They interpret this geographical distribution as the result of the mobility of Sarmatian populations and of processes of migration and political reorganisation during the first centuries A.D. Historically, the westward movement of the new Sarmatian groups is linked to the conflicts in the northwestern Pontic region and the destabilisation of the Roman frontier following the Tauro-Scythian war under Antoninus Pius. The authors suggest a causal relationship between the destabilisation of the Roman *limes* and the displacement of Sarmatian groups to the west, but the evidence is indirect.

According to the authors, after having reached the space between the Dniester and the Prut, these new groups would have exercised a political influence on the local Sarmatian communities, contributing to the formation of

⁶⁹ Although it represents one of the most questionable hypotheses of the work, and the authors invoke certain parallels, the argumentation remains largely circumstantial.

⁷⁰ Vornic, Bubulici and Popovici 2016, 20–48.

⁷¹ Iarmulschi and Batog 2025, 443.

a new political entity. However, the evidence put forward in support of the hypothesis of the submission of the Sarmatian tribes by the newcomers is, at this stage, insufficient to support a conclusion of such magnitude.

Also, the relations with the neighbouring sedentary populations are analysed, especially with the “Carpi”, from which the Sarmatian communities would have obtained better quality ceramics and other agricultural products necessary for a nomadic economy. Unfortunately, these relations are presented in a one-sided manner, as an economic dependence of the Sarmatians on the Carpi. However, quantitative analyses of ceramics and discussions concerning the distribution in the Sarmatian environment are lacking. Also, aspects related to Sarmatian artefacts and the presence of Sarmatians in the environment of neighbouring sedentary populations are not addressed either.

Finally, the authors consider that the participation of some Sarmatian groups in the Marcomannic Wars would have significantly affected the stability of this political formation, contributing to the gradual decline of the Sarmatian culture in the north-west of the Black Sea. It is also stated that beginning with the end of the second century and the beginning of the third century A.D., the region would have been marked by the emergence of new Sarmatian groups and major cultural and political transformations, determining the displacement of a part of the population towards the Lower Danube area, where its traces are lost in the context of the turmoil specific to the migration era.

The decline of the Sarmatian community after the Marcomannic Wars is presented as a linear process, which oversimplifies the archaeological reality, and the disappearance of the group in the Lower Danube area at the beginning of the third century A.D. is treated as a definite fact, although the data is fragmentary. A more thorough discussion on the internal transformations of the community, as well as its interactions with the new Sarmatian groups coming from the East, would have been necessary.

Beyond the aspects discussed above, the study represents an important step in the research of Sarmatian remains in the eastern Carpathian region, providing a useful monograph synthesis and proposing stimulating interpretations. However, many of the conclusions are debatable and are based on bold assumptions, which require much broader comparative argumentation and more solid substantiation. The study asks valuable questions and opens up interesting research paths, but is vulnerable in terms of ethnic demonstration, religious interpretation and historical reconstruction, issues for which the arguments presented often remain insufficient. Despite these limitations, the work contributes by integrating the archaeological material into a broader historical framework and by trying to provide a coherent interpretation of the evolution of Sarmatian communities in the region. The conclusions, however, should be considered with caution and accompanied by further analysis.

Last but not least, we emphasise that Serghei Kurchatov and Valeriu Bubulici’s monograph is a work of reference for the archaeology of the Sarmatians in the Dniester–Prut–Danube area. It combines exemplary field documentation - with extensively investigated areas, precise plans and detailed descriptions — with a rigorous typological and statistical analysis of some categories of artefacts in the funerary inventory. At the same time, it provides a mature interpretation of the funerary ritual and of the ritual structures with ditches, as well as an integration in the regional and chronological context of the Sarmatian vestiges in the area. With this, the volume opens up both new research directions and interpretive challenges for future studies.

In conclusion, we would like to pay a pious tribute to Serghei Kurchatov, who devoted his entire life to the research of the Sarmatian vestiges, with exemplary devotion and rigour. We are confident that his bright memory will remain alive in the hearts of his friends, colleagues, and all those who worked and collaborated with him over the years.

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