Decorative art in the middle Neolithic. The ceramics of the Piskolt Group[1]

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Based upon the finds found in the 16 archaeological objects (14 rubbish pits and two graves withouth skeletons), from Pişcolt-Lutărie settlemet, which were excavated between 1970-95, the present paper gives an insight into the decorative art of the Pişcolt Group, whose variety and colourfulness gives testimony to the superior workmanship that in some cases even bore with artistic value.

Keywords: Middle Neolithic, Painted Pottery Culture, Piscolt Group, Alföld Linear Pottery, neolithic decorative art.

Geographic location

Pişcolt is a village in the western part of County Satu Mare, approximately 20 km southwest of Carei, along Motorway DN19 between Satu Mare-Oradea, on the border of Nyírség and the Carei plains (Table I/1,2 ,4). There are several small streams flowing near the town (Zimolyás, Nóborda, Ógát, Ierul Rece (Plate II/1), which collect water from the direction of Nyírség and empty into the Ier. The surrounding area of the village is exceptionally rich in archaeological finds. In the past forty years a great number of archaeological finds have been excavated ranging from the Neolithic to the late Middle Ages (Németi 1999, 43-46.).

The site called *Lutărie* (Kincsverem in Hungarian or Treasure Pit in English) can be found approximately 200 metres west of the town limit, the so called Gipsy Row (Cartierul Ţiganilor), by the road leading to Oradea, on a somewhat high elevation, which was densely inhabited in the prehistoric times. The higher terraces of the smaller streams were inhabited from the Neolithic times to the IInd-Vth centuries AD.

Introduction

In the Upper-Tisza Region, the complex problems of several archaeological cultures arise. The various cultures that can be related to one another have been given different names and they have been defined differently by the experts in different countries (Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine). The experts of this period still disagree about the use of terminology[2]. The finds left behind by the culture researched by us also fall in this category. The Pişcolt Group is the same as the Ciumeşti culture, which was described by Eugen Comşa[3] and Alexandru Păunescu[4] upon the basis of the Kovács Collection[5] and the excavations carried out near the settlements of Ciumeşti and Berea. This has been reassessed based upon the finds excavated during the rescue excavations started in the first half of the 1960s in the sites of Pişcolt-Lutărie, Tiream-Drumul Tireamului, Moftinu Mic-Pescărie A, B, Urziceni-Păşune, Căpleni, Andrid[6]. This group was part of the Painted Pottery Culture, which used to exist in the north-eastern part of present day Romania, forming a compact cluster together with the finds excavated in the neighbouring regions indicated by different names[7]. The territory of Romania has been integrated into the CCTLNIZ complex, which is defined as a developed middle Neolithic culture, in which the Pişcolt Group is at Level Vinča A2/C2[8]. In the past few decades, due to the great amount of finds excavated, three development phases have been

separated, mainly based upon the techniques of surface treatments, the cremation, the thinning material and the ornaments[9]. In the region of north-eastern Romania, this archaeological culture covered the area between the basin of the River Tur and the River Crişul Repede[10]. Most sites are situated in the Carei plains, the Nyírség Region and in the valley of the Ier[11], its northernmost site can be found in Halmeu-Vamă (Border Post)[12] but some finds were found in the Counties of Sălaj[13] Maramureş[14] and Bihor[15]and some more recent information seems to prove that some imported products reached lands far to the south of the territory of this culture[16].

A brief history of the research of the site

The archaeological excavations in the settlement were started in the first half of the 1970s, when the local people disturbed several archaeological objects while they were working in the clay quarry near the town. The archaeological excavations, mainly rescue excavations, were led by the Director of the Carei Town Museum, János Németi (1970-77, 86-89, 1995-2002.). While the clay was quarried in the mine and the wells were dug to gain water for making adobes, several archaeological finds (pits, dwellings, wells and graves) were excavated and rescued dating from the middle Neolithic[17]the Copper Age[18] the La Tène/Celtic time[19] and the imperial times[20]. Systematic excavations started in the 1990s and they were continued with some breaks until 2007 (Table II/2). In those years, several finds dating from the Neolithic and imperial periods were excavated. Liviu Marta and Róbert Gindele, the archaeologists of the Museum of County Satu Mare also participated in the researches. Owing to the support provided by the Cultural Ministry of Romania, we managed to visit again the archaeological sites situated in the county in 2010-2011, locating them by GPS[21] and carrying out topographic and magnetometer measurements in the most important sites, e. g. Pişcolt- Lutărie (Kincsverem – Treasure Pit) in cooperation with other institutes and research teams. (Plate I/3)[22].

Based upon the finds found in the 16 archaeological objects (14 rubbish pits and two graves withouth skeletons), which were excavated in the above mentioned excavations, the present paper gives an insight into the decorative art of the Pişcolt Group, whose variety and colourfulness gives testimony to the superior workmanship that in some cases even bore with artistic value.

Research method

The ceramic material of the Pişcolt Group will be processed[23] by the PhD School of the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu. The statistical analysis of the considerable amount of archaeological finds excavated in the site of Piskolt-Kincsverem (ceramic categories, cremation technologies, thinning material, surface treatment technique) will be done with the help of a software called ZEUS[24] and the catalogue[25] drawn up for the specific characteristics of the group (fiering, tempring material, pottery shapes, motifs, etc). After the restoration, the ceramic shreds with the information on the circumstances of the excavation (site, year of the excavation, object number, etc) are to be entered into the database, to which queries can be sent according to given requirements. The queries may give us a comprehensive picture of the ceramics found in closed objects and the frequency of certain ornamentations in particular objects and their frequency in certain development phases in the same site or in other sites. Approximately 2000 ceramic shreds, found in 16 archaeological objects, have been analysed by us statistically. Besides these finds, a lot of animal bones, obsidian and silex blades and stone-axes were found.

At the same time, the research of the finds involves modern analysis methods too. 3D graphics have been drawn of the restored pottery profiles, which helped to reconstruct both the whole pots and the painted, scratched, pinched or incised ornaments on them (Plate VI/2-3.). By using this method, a more comprehensive picture of the decorative ornaments of the analysed pot can be drawn[26].

The decorative art of the Piskolt Group

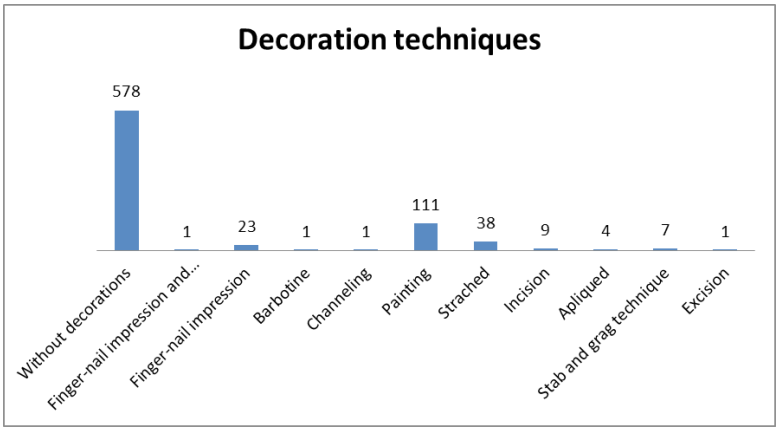
The decorations on the ceramic finds analysed by us can be divided into two big categories according to the technique of decoration. Therefore on the finds excavated in Pişcolt-Lutărie there are not painted (scratched, cut, pinched, poked, pressed, pushed, etc) and painted decorations (red, coffee brown, black). Their frequency and variety change in accordance with the three development phases.

In the first development phase the elements from the end of the Körös/Criş phase (IIIB-IVA according to Lazarovici's chronology) are quite common, appearing as decorative motifs: pinches and incisions[27]. On the other hand, on some of the finds found in the objects, decorations reminding of the ALP appear such as pointed and scratched lines. Such analogies are known from the settlements of Füzesabony-Gubakút, Mezőkövesd-Mocsolyás, Tiszaszőlős-Domaháza [28] and other Szatmár settlements[29].

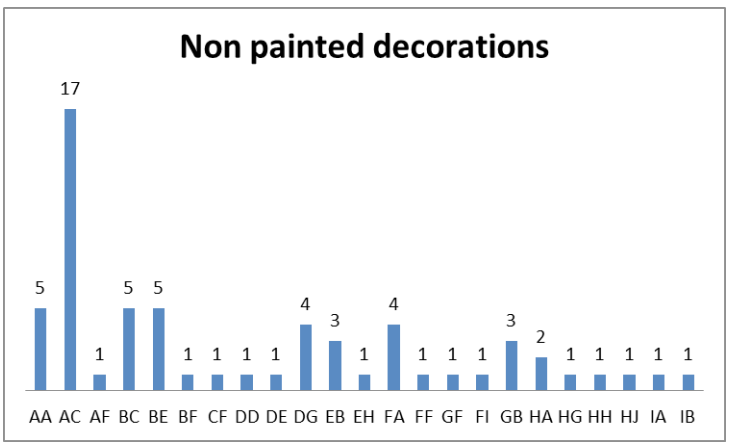
In this period the painting is pearly black, which is applied directly on the surface of the pot. In this period, in some cases the scratched lines appear together with painting. Pişcolt-Lutărie Berea-Stavila Mică/ Kisrengátja, Berea-Stavila Mare/Nagyrengátja[30], Berea-Miriştea lui Csányi/Csányi sűrűje[31], Ciumeşti-Fântâna păşunii, La Silozuri/Legelő kút, Silógödrök[32],Sântandrei-Malul Crişului Repede[33] and Tiszacsege-Homokbánya, Rétközberencs-Paradomb[34] can be categorised into this development period. The scratched, pinched and painted decorations show a wide variety (Plate III. 1-2.).

The transition into the middle phase is shown by the disappearance of the Lippenrand shape and the pinches. Apart from the ceramic shreds, the anthropomorphic idols are also worth noting, although in the area of the Pişcolt Group in north-western Romania quite few of them have been found so far[35] these have all been found in the settlement which gave its name to the group[36] and only one item is decorated.

The unique idol fragment, on which the face is painted and there are scratched decorations on it too can be categorised into the first phase[37].The best analogies of the idol fragment with a triangle-shaped face can be found in the AVK in Tiszavalk-Négyes[38] Ebes-Agyagbánya[39] Füzesabony-Gúbakút[40] and other Szatmár settlemets. In the four closed objects researched by us, we have analysed 774 pieces of ceramic. Based upon the query from the database, the following diagram has been drawn up showing the categories of decorating techniques.

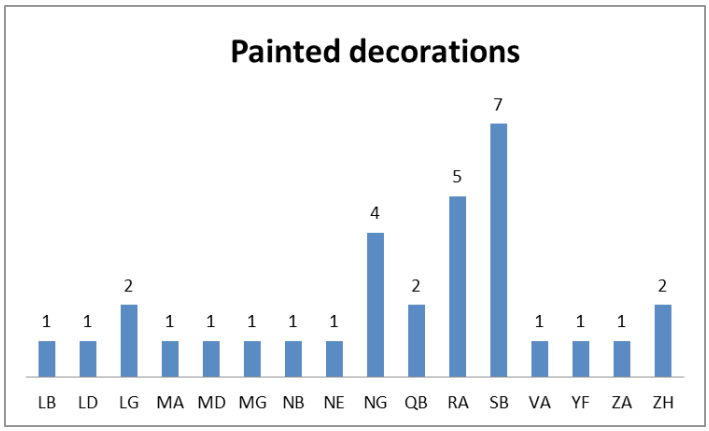


As is shown by the above chart, most fragments are undecorated (75 %), which is followed by the number of painted fragments (14 %), and then the different not painted patterns follow (11 %). The not painted decorations on the fragments from the early period are supposed to have been applied on to the surface of the earthenware by using a method similar to that of the decorative art of the Criş and Körös Culture. The simplest ones such as the pushed and pinched motifs must have been made by the fingertips and fingernails (Makkay, Starnini, 2008, Fig. 30/1-2.), whereas in the other cases such as pointing, incision, hewing, graving etc, tools made of animal bones or wood must have been used[42]. Archaeological experiments have proved that the linear decoration might as well have been applied to the surface of the pottery with the stem of the narrow leaf plantain (Plantago lanceolata)[43], and the barbotin was splattered or daubed on the pottery[44]. The decorations could have been in one or in several lines, in the shape of an ear of wheat, in sheaves and in disorder, the motifs used show a great variety and can be found on almost every type of pottery (Plate VII-VIII). On the other hand, placed-on ornaments, which were decorated by pinching or pushing, were present in all the three development phases (Table IX), through-holes and pushes of the brim can also be observed. The placed–on ornaments are usually wrapped around the pottery like ribbons, so far only one plastic human representation has been found on a pot, (Căpleni-Drumul Căminului), which can be categorised into the Pişcolt Group[45]. The chart below shows the categories of the decorative art of the first development phase.



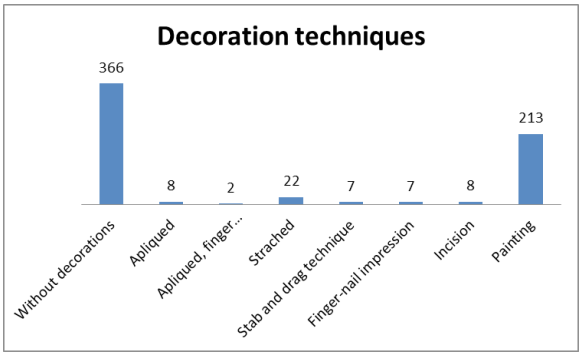
The most characteristic way of decoration present in all the three development phases of the Pişcolt Group is the painted decoration. In the early researches several archaeologists considered bitumen, this naturally occurring mixture of hydrocarbons, the raw material of the black paint in the literature on Neolithic both in north-western Romania[46] and in Hungary[47] This raw material could easily have been carried from the Barcău Valley through the Valea Ierului to the region of Nyírség and from there further to the Upper-Tisza region and the south-eastern regions of Slovakia[48]. The decrease in its use was explained by the longer and longer distance from the source of the raw material[49]. Near the upper reaches of the River Barcău this bitumen containing material can be found on the surface or close to it: near Suplacul de Barcău - Derna – Brusturi[50] . Due to the modern interdisciplinary researches both on the late Neolithic decorated ceramics found in the Hungarian Great Plains[51] and on the middle Neolithic finds from Hungary and Romania, by a spectroscopic method (FTIR: Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy) the use of birch resin was detected[52]. This painting material was applied to the already cremated pottery, probably with hands or brushes made of animal hair. Archaeological experiments have proved that a big quantity of it can be made in a short time at relatively low temperatures, without using special tools, even in pits by dry cremation[53].

The decorations on the fragments and on the complete earthenware are quite varied similarly to the other not painted motifs (Plate IV-V., VI/1). In most cases, thin and thick lines made up of painted dots, zig-zag lines and geometric forms are the most common. In this phase, there is another type of painted decoration, where the whole surface of the pottery is painted and the motif is 'drawn' on the painting material, bearing the colour that the pottery gained after cremation (yellowish-brown, brown, reddish). On most potteries the original colour of the paint (black) has not remained but peeled off the surface of the ceramics and only its imprint has been retained in the coffee brown, yellowish brown or reddish colour (Plate X/4). However, painted decorations were still in use together with scratched motifs (Plate X/1). Painted patterns can be seen on almost all types of potteries, even on the fine and half fine ceramics (Plate X). The following chart goes to show the proportion of the various types of painted motifs on the ceramic fragments from the first development phase researched by us.

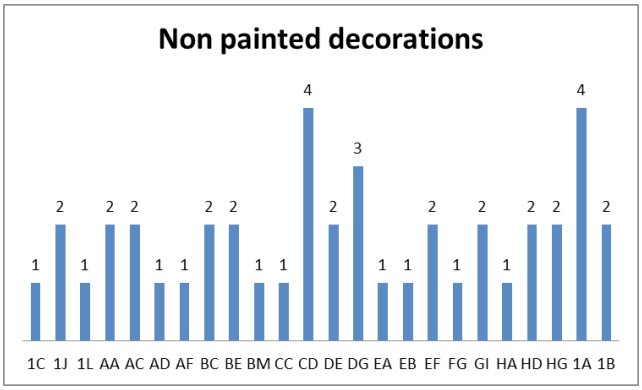


In the second phase, the communities of the Pişcolt Goup reach the peak of their development, which is indicated by the much bigger variety of pottery shapes and the development of decorative motifs. Most known finds excavated mainly near Carei can be dated to this period like: Andrid-Păşune, Berea-Colina cu Măcriş/ Sóskás, Berea-Togul Dolarului/Dolláros, Ciumeşti, Dindeşti, Moftinu Mic-Pescărie A, B, Pişcolt-Lutărie, Tiream-Drumul Tireamului, Uriceni-Păşune, Urziceni-Vamă (Border Post)[54], Căpleni-Reök tag[55]. Pottery had a better quality, a fine clay mixture is used, which is thinned mainly by organic materials (chaff and other plant fibres) and fine sand and after that it is cremated thoroughly. In this period the so called Lippenrand shape disappeared and the number of not painted decorations, which can be seen on the big size container potteries and the kitchen potteries (probably used for making food), is decreasing.

633 ceramic fragments found in the nine archaeological objects (8 clay mining pits and a grave) have been analysed by us, and the proportion of the decorative techniques on them is illustrated by the following chart.

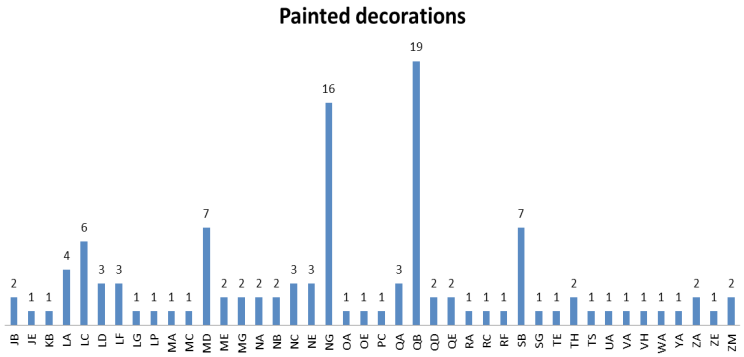


As could be seen in the first development phase, it is the undecorated ceramic fragments that can be found in the greatest number (58%), which is followed by the painted pottery, whose number is on the rise (34%), and the Criş/Körös or linear technique (8 %) strongly decreased. Although there were much fewer pinched, incised or engraved decorations, several motifs can be distinguished in this case too, which are almost identical to the decorations of the first phase.



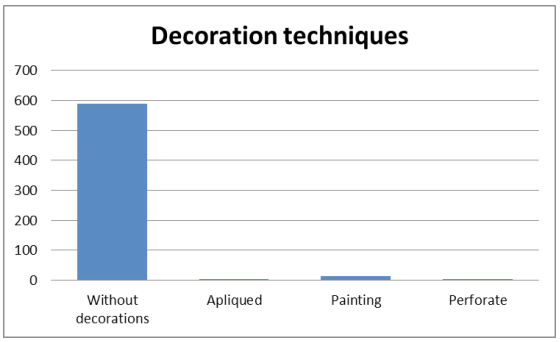
Concerning the application of the paint to the pottery, the technique underwent some changes in the more developed phase of the Pişcolt Group. In this period the surface of the pottery was coated with a thin layer of 'slip' or engobe of different colours (brown, yellowish, reddish) and it was glazed and the black painting material was applied to this surface. These paint supports peel off the pottery together with the applied paint. These motifs are of the same quality as those of the first development phase, but they are much more varied, developed and new, more complicated geometric meander motifs also appear and the glazing of the pottery surface is becoming more and more common (Tables XI-XII). In some cases the different motifs are combined.

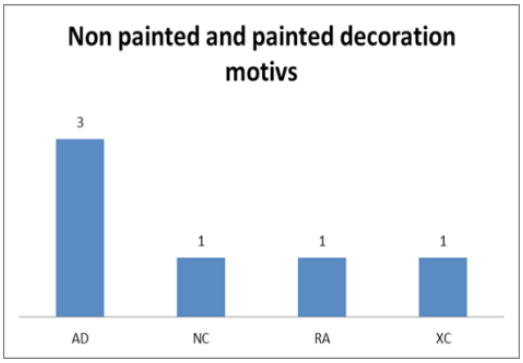
Most of these motifs can be found in almost all the Pişcolt settlements in northwestern Romania in the second phase[56] and at the same time, they were present in the settlements in Hungary too: Nyíregyháza-Oros[57], Nyíregyháza – Nagyszállás[58] , Vállaj – Határátkelő (Border Post)[59] and Laskod – Akasztóhegyen[60], but such decorations have also been found in Slovakia, in Velke Raskovce[61] and in the Transcarpathian region in the Ukraine, in the site of Munkachevo-Mala Hora[62]. Towards the end of this phase, the quality of the ceramics became poorer and paintings or other decorative motifs became rare. It is worth noting that among the fragments collected by the adobe making workers there was one, on which a painted stylized human figure can be seen[63]. After a statistical analysis of the painted fragments, the following chart was drawn up:



In the third or late phase of this archaeological culture there was a big decline in the ceramic techniques (Plate XIII). It can mainly be seen on the poorer quality of the thinning material and the raw material the potteries were made of. The surface of the pottery loses its *"metal like"* glaze observed in the developed phase, the white slip is used more and more often. Moreover, the cremation of the pottery also became poorer, they became much more porous. Fine sand and chaff were replaced with sand and silt as thinning materials.

In the case of Pişcolt-Lutărie (Treasure Pit), an archaeological object was excavated which can be categorised into the last development phase. In the huge clay pit excavated in the summer of 1986, a huge quantity of ceramic fragments, animal bones and obsidian fragments were found[64]. From this archaeological object, 605 ceramic fragments have been entered into the database by us. As can be seen in the chart below, 97% of the analysed ceramic fragments were undecorated, the rest 3% is divided between painted and other decorations.





Incisions, cuts became rare in this phase, and pinched or pushed decorations almost disappeared. In this phase the projecting big bumps and placed-on ornaments became more common, especially on the big sized, crude ceramics. A considerable part of the painted fragments is coated with white, 'dirty white', brownish-yellow or yellowish-brown slip or engobe, which has only been partly preserved in most cases. Black painting, as could be observed in the earlier phases, leaves only a yellowish or reddish imprint. The decorative motifs are much less varied, compared to the developed or even the first phase. The most common decorations are the wavy, pointed, parallel, slanting or horizontal lines.

Concerning the burials, in the whole area of the Pişcolt Group, we only have a few finds, at the territory of Romania, which can firmly be identified as graves[65], but we have more than fifty graves from Hungray[66]. The interpretation of the archaeological object found in Pişcolt-Lutărie (Treasure Pit)[67] and Nisipărie (Sand Dune)[68] as graves is uncertain as the iron oxide in the sand destroyed the skeletons, only tiny fragments and their imprints have been preserved. Two small concave bowls[69] and a few fragments could be collected in the disturbed objects[70]. On the basis of the cremation of the ceramics and the thinning material, they can be dated to the end of the developed period of the Pişcolt Group or to the last phase, each piece is undecorated (Plate XIV).

The following sites can be classified into this

late period: Pişcolt-Lutărie (Treasure Pit)[71] (Pişcolt-Cărămidărie (SMA)[72] (Baba-Novac-Drum Gelu[73], Blaja-Zsölce[74], Blaja-Grind Cehal[75] ,Berea-Colina cocosată/Puposhegy[76], Bicaz-Ighoaie[77], Căpleni-Reöktag[78] , Halmeu-Vamă (Border Post)[79], Oarța de Sus-Oul Făgetului[80], Sanislău-Curtea grajdurilor[81] , Zilah-Valea Mâții[82].

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Note:

1. This paper is intended to present the decorative ornamentation of the ceramics of the Piskolt Group, based upon the archaeological excavations in the site of Piskolt-Kincsverem (Lutărie-Treasure Pit) carried out in 1970-77, 1986-89 and in 1995. Hereby, I acknowledge the invaluable help of János Németi, who made the archaeological material accessible to me.
2. Németi 1999, 43-46.
3. Virag 2005, 13 – 25; Virag 2008, 112
4. Comşa, 1963, 477-484, Comşa 1973, 39-49
5. Păunescu 1963, 467-475.
6. Németi 1997, 63-68
7. Lazarovici, Németi 1983, 17-61; Németi 1999, 166-167.
8. Pothusniak 1997, 37-29, Jakucs 2010, Map 1; Kolzłowski, Nowak 2010, Fig. 18.
9. Maxim 1999, 69; Luca et ali. 2011, 23-24; Lazarovici
10. Maxim 1999, 76; Virag 2004, 13-27.).
11. Maxim 1999, 76
12. Németi 1999, 95
13. Virag 2004a, 25-44.),
14. Băcueț-Crișan 2008, 11-52.)
15. Kalmar 1979-1981, 107-114; Idem 2003, 7-17.)
16. Comşa, Nánási 1972, 3-18; Ignat 1973, 7-35; Idem 1974, 121-134, Idem 1987, 43-52.)
17. Luca et ali. 2011, 23-34
18. Lazarovici, Németi 1983, 17-60, Németi 1986-87, 15-16, Hágó 2013, 411-416, Hágó, Németi 2013, 21-36
19. Németi 1999, 44
20. Németi 1999, 44-45
21. Németi, Gindele 1997, 656-657
22. In this work take part the archaeologists from Satu-Mare County Mueum.
23. Hereby, I acknowledge the invaluable help of Róbert Gindele, who made the topographic measurments accessible to me.
24. Hereby, I acknowledge the invaluable help of János Németi, who made the analysis of the finds accessible to me.
25. Lazarovici, Micle 2001.)
26. Maxim 1999, 76, fig. 88-91; Virag 2011, Pl. I-V.
27. The 3D ceramic model was made by Nándor Laczkó.
28. Lazarovici 1980, 23-29.
29. Domboróczki 2012, 62.
30. Hágó 2014b (in press)
31. Virag 2004, 17.
32. Virag 2008, 117.
33. Virag 2004, 21.
34. Ignat 1973, 15.
35. Kalicz, Makkay 1977.
36. Lazarovici, Németi 1983, 22, fig. 15/6; Luca, Iercoşan 1998, 15.
37. Băcueț-Crișan, Virag, 47.
38. Németi 1986-87, 31, Fig. 1/4.
39. Nagy 1998, 85, 25. tábla 6a-b.
40. Nagy 1999, 34-36, 3. tábla 3a-c.
41. Domboróczki 1997, 164, Figs 57–59, Idem 2013, 494, Fig. 5/7-8.
42. Makkay, Starnini 2008, Fig. 27/1-5; 28/1,3-6,9; 28/1-2.
43. Előry 2006-2007, 62-67.
44. Makkay, Starnini, 2008, Fig. 30/4.
45. Németi 2014, in press.
46. Vlassa 1971, 30; Németi 1999, 166; Luca 2001, 135, 153; Sanda Bacueț– Crișan 2007, 72-73.
47. Raczky 1987, 68; Korek 1987, 54 - 57; Goldman és Szénászky 1994, 228; Kalicz 2006, 144 – 146.
48. Nagy 1998, 85-86; Pothusniak 1997, 40-45, Šiska 1989 41/1-17, 43/1-18, 44/1-15, 45/1-17.
49. Lazarovici, Lazarovici 2006, 441.
50. Nagy 1886, 79-80.
51. Raczky, S. Kovács 2008, 135-144.
52. Jakucs, S. Kovács 2012, 307-316.
53. Jakucs, S. Kovács 2012, 307
54. Virag 2004b, 27-42; Hágó 2011, 19.
55. Virag 2008, 114.
56. Virag 2011, 33.
57. Virag 2011,23-60.
58. Almássy 2004, 25.
59. Makkay 2003.
60. Jakab 2008, 243.
61. Vizdal 1973.

62. Pothusniak 1999, 9-37.
63. Lazarovici, Németi 1983 Pl. XXI/3.
64. Hágó, Németi 2013, 21-36.
65. Comşa, Nánási 1965, 363-636; Iercoşan 1992-1993, 7-22; Németi 1999, p. 21; Băcueț-Crişan 2004, 73; Virag 2004b, 2-43.
66. Hágó 2014a in press.
67. Németi 1999, 45; Astaloş, Virag 2006-2007, 75
68. Lazarovici, Németi 1983, p. 23.
69. Astaloş, Virag 2006-2007, 88, Pl. I. 2/1, 2/2.
70. Németi 1999, 45.
71. Hágó, Németi 2013, 21-36.
72. Lazarovici, Németi 1983, 30.
73. Astaloş, Gindele 2004.
74. Németi 1986-87, 27-28.
75. Virag 2007, 27-42.
76. Németi 1999, 54.
77. Maxim 2003, 7-17
78. Iercoşan 1992-1993, 9.
79. Virag 2004a, 25-44.
80. Kalmar 1979-1981, 107-114.
81. Németi 1986-87, 19.
82. Băcueț-Crişan 2008, 11-52.

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