Insights Regarding an Early Medieval Grave Discovered at Dudeștii Vechi, Timiș County, Romania

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Abstract: The present paper aims to bring forward new insights regarding the early medieval age in the Banat region of Romania. The main subject of our paper revolves around a grave discovered during the 2016 archaeological research of the "Cociohatu Mic" site located near the village of Dudeștii Vechi, Timiș County, Romania. The grave, as well as the grave goods were poorly preserved, still a few competent conclusions could still be drawn after analyzing the funerary inventory.
Keywords: Banat, early middle ages, avar age, funerary context, XRF analysis

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Introduction

The early middle age period in Banat still presents a multitude of unknown variables, and many questions have yet to be answered. This situation is generated by the rather reduced number of archaeological invasive researches, compared to the size of the Banat region, that have been conducted in the last 100 years. Considering all this, in the past 20 years, the research of the early middle ages period has seen its fair share of progress, mainly due to the influx of preventive archaeological excavations, these being the result of infrastructure and real estate development projects. The funerary context disused in the present paper, was unearthed during the summer of 2016, when an archaeological preventive excavation was conducted by the National Museum of Banat[1], within the site known as "Cociohatul Mic", located within the administrative boundaries of Dudeștii Vechi, Timiș County. The site itself was first discovered 1996, by Constantin Kalcsov and Mircov Francisc[2], and later it was published in the monography of Dudeștii Vechi[3]. Another paper that referenced the site of "Cociohatu Mic" was published in 2015, this time the authors offered more information in regard to the exact location of the site (by means of GPS coordinates) and its state of preservation[4]. Starting with 2016, different archaeological contexts and artifacts, all of them discovered during the 2016 preventive excavation, have been published in various papers. The subject of these papers covers an extensive chronological period, from the bronze age[5] to the high middle ages[6].

Grave and grave goods description

The grave pit was discovered at a depth of 0,20 m, measured from the present-day ground level. The pit itself had a rectangular shape, with rounded corners,

and measured 2 m in length and 0,60 m in width. The filling consisted of a dark brown soil, with a rather loose consistency, and it was filled with bronze age pottery fragments and human bones. The skeleton was discovered in a very poor state of conservation, as many parts of the body were missing or heavily degraded, while other parts were disturbed by external factors, such as animal activity or possibly anthropic activity. The deceased was placed in a supine position, with his arms positioned along the length of his body, while the overall orientation of the grave was on a WNW-ESE axis, with his head placed to the west-north-west and his legs towards the east-south-east. The skull was tilted to the left of the body, with his gaze facing north (Pl. 1).

Almost the entirety of the upper body was missing or was heavily degraded, with only a few vertebrae and one rib fragment being discovered in anatomical position. The upper limbs were also either missing or poorly preserved, only the right radius bone, as well as the right and left humerus were discovered during the excavation. In regard to the lower part of the body, it was poorly conserved, too. The bones of the pelvic area were disturbed and some of them were entirely missing. The lower limbs were probably the best-preserved area of the skeleton, with both legs found in anatomical position and in a decent state of preservation. Still, all the toes and both calcanea were found scattered around the lower limbs area, as they were discovered alongside fragments of vertebrae and ribs. The skull itself was in no better shape than the rest of the upper section of the body, as it was clearly disturbed by external factors, a few of the skull fragment were found scattered within the grave. The estimated length of the skeleton is 1,70 m. During the excavation of the grave, we could not identify any traces of a robbing pit, thus we cannot confirm the hypothesis that the skeleton was disturbed and ravaged by grave looters, though it remains a possibility. Another possible explanation for the missing and scattered bones, is that the grave was somehow affected by animal activity (possible dwelling rodents). Because of the poor state of conservation, we cannot exactly determine if the deceased was a male or a female.

The funerary inventory was composed of 7 distinct artifacts, most of them being poorly preserved, and a few small metal fragments, which were highly corroded, thus their functionality could not be properly established. Inside the skull cap, near the cervical area, two earrings were found. Both are quite simple in design, the link is round, and it's made out of a single piece of copper wire, while the lower part is undecorated as well and made out of single straight copper wire (Pl. 2/1,2). To further determine the exact metal composition of the earrings, as well as for the other artifacts presented in this paper, we conducted a series of XRF analysis, using a handheld ElvaX ProSpector spectrometer. The first earring (Pl.2/1) has a high concentration of copper in its composition, 90.34% to be exact, while silver and gold only make up around 8%, the other 2% are represented by other materials (Fig.1/A).

The second earring (Pl.2/2) has a slightly higher cooper composition, 93.2%, a 4.47 lead composition, while silver measures only 1.10% and gold is completely absent (Fig.1/B). Two more copper artifacts were found around the pelvic area, both are made from a thin sheet of copper and have a rectangular shape with one of the endings rounded. The first one (Pl. 2/6) has a length of 3 cm, a width of 1,2 cm, is undecorated and the XRF analysis showed us that it has mainly made out of copper, although traces of silver and lead were also found (Fig. 2/A). The second one is slightly larger and thicker than the other one, measuring 5 cm in length, 1,5 cm in width, while also being undecorated (Pl. 2/7). Judging by the shape and size of these two artifacts, as well as the material used in manufacturing them, we assume that both were decorative elements for a belt or a piece of clothing.

Cu:	90.34±0,05%
Ag:	7.09±0,3%
Au:	1.02±0.04%
W:	0.71±0,5%
Zn:	0.69±0,04%
Ni:	0.07±0,02%
In:	0.03±0,02%
Co:	0.02±0,02 %

A (Pl. 2/1)

Cu:	93.32±0.04%
Pb:	4.47±0.05%
Ag:	1.10±0.01%
Sn:	0.53±0.02%
Fe:	0.25±0.03%
Ti:	0.14±0.08%
Sb:	0.11±0.03%
Ni:	0.05±0.01%

B (Pl. 2/2)

Fig. 1

Another grave good was found near the last three vertebrae of the spine. It has a length of 10 cm, an average width of 1,1 cm, it is wider at the base and slightly narrower towards the tip. The overall shape of the object is rectangular and flat, with a rounded tip (Pl. 2/5). After conducting an XRF analysis on this particular artifact, we can firmly state that it was manufactured entirely out of iron (Fig. 2/B). At the moment of its discovery, the object was heavily oxidized and corroded, which made it very challenging for us to determine its functionality. Considering all the latter mentioned characteristics, we assume that this object is most likely part of a knife blade.

Cu:	97.22±0.03%
Ag:	1.16±0.01%
Pb:	0.84±0.03%
Sn:	0.44±0.02%
Ni:	0.10±0.01%
Sb:	0.09±0.03%
Ti:	0.08±0.08%
Fe:	0.06±0.03%

A (Pl. 2/6)

Fe:	99.68±0.01%
Ni:	0.07±0.02%
Co:	0.05±0.05%
As:	0.05±0.00%
Cu:	0.05±0.01%
Ti:	0.04±0.07%
Cr:	0.03±0.02%
Mn:	0.03±0.01%

B (Pl. 2/5)

Fig. 2

The last two pieces of inventory were found scattered around the pelvic area. Both of them are parts of a belt buckle and were discovered in a very poor state of conservation, highly oxidized and corroded. The first belt buckle is rectangular shaped, with the corners rounded and it measures 4 cm in length and 3 cm in width (Pl. 2/3). The other one has a more rounded and smooth shape, resembling the letter "D", it has a preserved length of 3 cm and a preserved width of approximately 2,2 cm (Pl. 2/4). Both belt buckles are undecorated, and the poor state of conservation deters us from making any other assumptions.

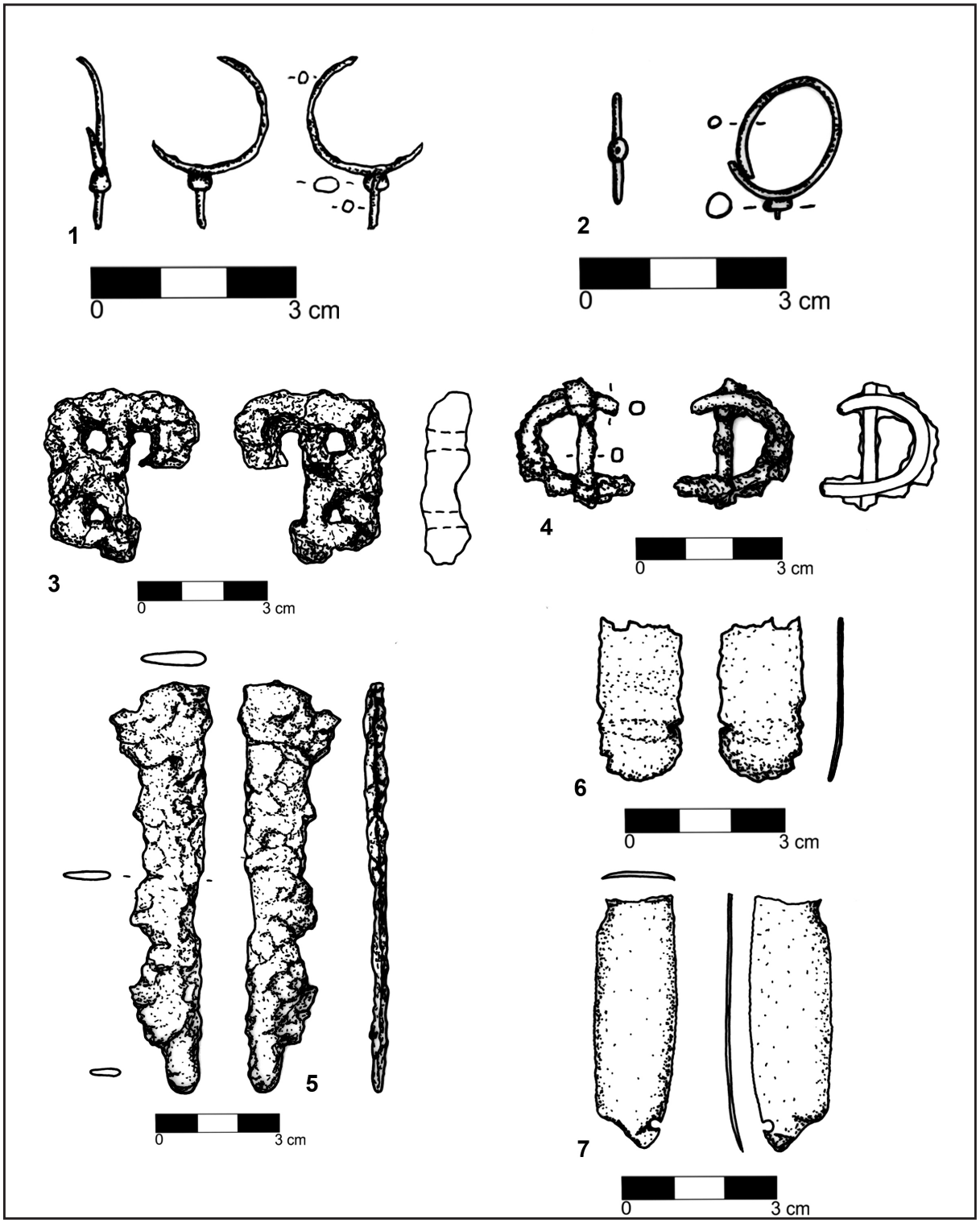
Conclusions

The small number of grave goods discovered, as well as their poor state of conservation, made the process of dating this grave a challenging one. Taking this into consideration, based upon the characteristics of the funerary inventory, especially the two belt buckles, we can assume that this grave dates to the first half of the VIIth century A.D, during a time when the Banat region was under the dominion of the Avar Khaganate. Similar artifacts were discovered in Banat, most notably at Dudeștii Vechi – Mount V[7], and in Transylvania at Bratei – Cemetery 3[8], Fântânele[9] and at Unirea II/Vereșmort[10]. The XRF analysis provides us a different dimension in the overall research process. The results shown for the belt buckles, knife fragment and the two cooper decorative elements, were straightforward and confirmed our suspicions in regard to the materials used to manufacture these artifacts. In the case of the first earring (Pl. 2/1), the results showed that besides cooper, silver and gold were also present in the metal composition. Most likely this is because the raw materials used in the manufacturing process contained small amounts of these precious metals. At the same time, we cannot leave out the possibility that this earring may have been covered in a very thin layer of silver.

The grave discovered at Dudeștii Vechi – Cociohatu Mic represents another pin on the ever-evolving map of VIIth century findings in Banat, and although it is a single funerary context, we believe that it still represents a step forward in the research of the early avar period in Banat and its surroundings.



Planșa 1



Planșa 2

Note:

1. We wish to thank dr. Călin Timoc for his kindness in offering us the material for publication, as well as dr. Daniela Tănase for her guidance. Nonetheless, we also wish to thank Alina Gheorghe for her help in illustrating the artifacts.
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