

Notes on the presence of Avar warriors in the Transylvanian Plateau during the 7th–8th centuries*

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PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL evidence on the Avar presence in the Transylvanian Plateau (Horedt 1956, 393–406; Horedt 1958, 61–108; Horedt 1968, 103–120; Rusu 1977, 169–213; Rusu 1997, 223–271), to which also adds a series of recent information in the field, altogether considered from a novel point of view provide opportunities for the re-assessment of the “Avar moment” in the history of intra-Carpathian Transylvania during the 7th–8th centuries. We examine herein only the funerary finds from the Transylvanian area (cemeteries and graves), which can be assigned without any doubt to the Avar warriors. We added to the above only those artifacts, which though discovered by chance, are still items that are certainly originating in Avar graves. They include weapons, harness items, but also objects decorating the apparel of the Avar warriors of various ranks as well as of the military retinues or the highly ranking individuals in the Avar society hierarchy (see list A-B and tables A-B). We purposefully excluded from the list of finds all those artifacts bearing no chronological and ethnical significance, discovered by chance in various places from Transylvania. They are items of which there is no topographical information and furthermore, no archaeological context.

The reason for which we chose to refer only to evidence assignable, beyond any doubt, to the Avars is simple: the Avar fighters, of various ranks and their military retinue are noticeable in the Carpathian Basin by unique dress, lifestyle, fight style and especially burials, specific to their ethnicity (for instance: Mauricius, XI, 2; Agathias I, 3.30; Horedt 1958, 62–69; Bóna 1980, 31–95; Erdély Története 1986, 164–166; Garam 1987, 191–202; Pohl 1988; Pohl 2003, 574–578). Thus, the presence of the Avars in Transylvania, detectable at cemetery or isolated graves level, can be disputed not in the least. These specific archaeological realities are the most important evidence for defining the relation between the Avar Khaganate and intra-Carpathian Transylvania during the 7th–8th centuries. The use of information regarding only the Avar warriors enables a pertinent analysis that may provide plausible answers to a series of questions which synthesised, refer to the political, military and economic status of the Transylvanian Plateau during the 7th–8th centuries.

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Presentation of the data

UNTOFAR, IN the Transylvanian Plateau, there is no cemetery dated between 567 and 650 (in absolute chronology), assignable exclusively to the Avar warriors. However, it has been argued for a long time that the Avar warriors were buried in Band-Noşlac type Gepid cemeteries from the Transylvanian Plateau, dated to the last decades of the 6th century until around 650 (Horedt 1956, 402–403; Horedt 1958, 87–88). The graves in those cemeteries that contained horses as well, phenomenon correlated with a series of artifacts discovered within the sepulchres, but also with the peripheral position of these sepulchres within the cemeteries, were the main arguments underlying their assignment to the Avar warriors (Kovács 1913, 389; Dobos 2010/2011, 377–403).

The list of Gepid cemeteries with horse graves datable to the first half of the 7th century is not sizeable (List A; Table A; *Fig. 1*). Moreover, there is no clear and unequivocal evidence to claim that Avar warriors had also been buried in all respective cemeteries. Horse burials in the Carpathian Basin are presented as a specificity of the Avar ethnicity (Horedt 1958, 65–66; Kiss 1962, 153–162; Bóna 1980, 31–95; Daim 2003, 486–487, 492; Dobos 2010/2011, 377–403), yet the phenomenon is found in the German environment (Rusu 1977, 185–186; Dobos 2010/2011, 377–403; Gáll 2014, 295–323) too. Obviously, the archaeological items are much supportive for confirming the Avar presence in the Gepid cemeteries of the intra-Carpathian Transylvania. However, unfortunately, on one hand, most of the graves containing horses were looted (Kovács 1913, 305–389; Dobos 2010/2011, 377–403), and, on the other hand, there are cemeteries where graves that contained horses had no funerary inventory. Thus, in both cases, it is very difficult to make value judgements on the ethnicity of those buried in respective graves.

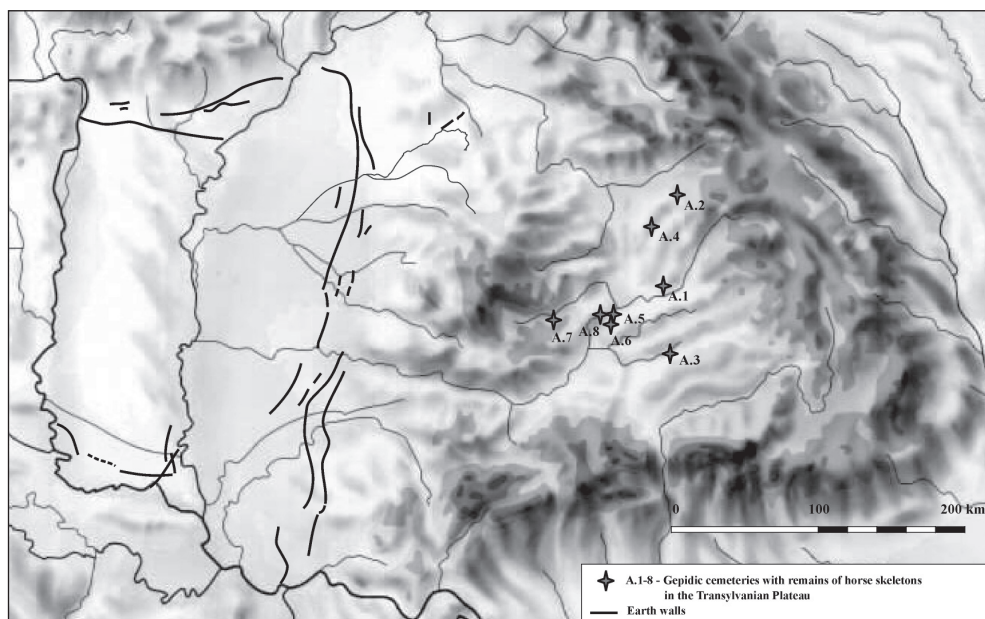


Fig. 1. Gepidic cemeteries in the Transylvanian Plateau with graves containing horse skeletons or horse skeleton remains. Numbers on the map correspond to Table A.

TABLE A. GRAVES WITH HORSE SKELETONS OR HORSE SKELETON
REMAINS DISCOVERED IN GEPID CEMETERIES FROM THE TRANSYLVANIAN PLATEAU

Archaeological sites	C	M	A	PH	ÎC	LC	Ac	Ca	P	Ah	Ce	OCG	Mo	Fi	D
A. 1. Bandu de Câmpie	X				X		X	X			X	X		X	630–650
A. 2. Bistrița	X				X			X						X	630–650
A. 3. Bratei	X		X	X	X		X	X			X	X		X	630–650
A. 4. Fântânele	X				X ?										630–650
A. 5. Noșlac	X		X	X	X	?	?	X		?			X		630–650
A. 6. Șpălnaca	X		X	X	X			X	X	X		X	X		630–650
A. 7. Valea Largă	X				X									X	630–650
A. 8. Unirea II/ Vereșmort		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X			630–650/ (670)

LEGEND: C – Cemeteries; M – Graves; A – weaponry; PH – harness items; ÎC – Burial with horse; LC – Belt tongue; Ac – Belt appliques; Ca – Buckles; P – Jewellery; Ah – harness appliques; Ce – Pottery; OCG – Household and domestic objects; Mo – Coins; Fi – W/A inventory; D – Dating of the Avar graves.

Still, one cannot deny the phenomenon of the burials of Avar warriors within some of the Gepid cemeteries in the Transylvanian Plateau. Thus, for instance, in the cemetery of over 80 graves at Noșlac, there are 5 graves containing horses. They are inserted among the graves with human bones and had no archaeological inventory. Definitely though, an Avar warrior was also buried at Noșlac, proven by the funerary inventory composed of harness items specific to the Avar ethnicity (Rusu 1962, 274, *fig. 4*, G. 11: 9–10; Rusu 1964, 37, M. 11, 39, *fig. 3*, M. 11: 8–10) as well. The pressed appliques in Grave 44 in the Band cemetery also evidence the Avar presence in the respective cemetery (Kovács 1913, 321; Dobos 2010/2011, 391).

Several records verifying the phenomenon of Avar warriors' burial within the Gepid cemeteries in Transylvania come from Bratei/Cemetery 3, Șpălnaca and Unirea II/Vereșmort. At Bratei, in cemetery 3, beside the Gepid sepulchres, there are many graves with funerary inventory specific to common Avar warriors (Bârză 2010, 171–271; Dobos 2010/2011, 378). In the cemetery at Șpălnaca, among the 39 researched sepulchres, three (3) graves (Graves 10, 19, 37), had belonged, according to the anthropological analyses, to Avar origin individuals. The three graves contained weapons, harness items, dress accessories, adornments, and one even a golden Byzantine coin. Two graves (Graves 19, 37) also contained horse skeletons (Botezatu/ Blăjan 1989, 351; Grosu et alii 1995, 276 and note 6; Protase et alii 2000, 104, no. 143).

The Avar warriors arrived in the Transylvanian Plateau during the first decades of the 7th century under the command of some military chieftains loyal to the Avar Khaganate of Pannonia. The purpose was to conquer and control the Gepid communities in the Transylvanian area. It is very likely though, that during a first stage, dating until mid 7th century, the Avar khagans had controlled the Transylvanian Plateau also via the Gepid elites, offering them

a series of rewards (Rusu 1977, 185–186). An example to this effect is the warrior grave discovered at Unirea II-Vereşmort. According to the inventory, the dead may be considered a member of the military elite of Avar origin. The anthropological analyses of the skeleton has shown we are dealing with an adult individual (27–28 years of age), however, of North-Alpinoid features and with few Mongoloid specificities (Rustoiu/ Ciută 2008, 93–94). The analysis of the horse skeleton, buried beside the warrior at Unirea II/Vereşmort, presents the morphological elements existent in the Avar environment of the Pannonian Plain (Rustoiu/ Ciută 2008, 94–96). The said warrior was a Gepid-Avar mestizo and the funerary inventory suggests he adopted a lifestyle specific to the Avar military chieftains. His horse was of the breed used by the Avars in Pannonia. He owned artifacts, weapons and harness pieces specific to the Avars, in whose name he was involved in the management of the salt area at Ocna Mureş.

Once with mid 7th century, but most likely starting with the last three decades of the respective time period, the first cemeteries containing graves assignable to only the Avar ethnicity appear in the Transylvanian Plateau. This is in direct relation with the increased number of archaeological sites where Avar remains were discovered, compared to the period until mid 7th century. Additionally, noticeably, the Avar warriors camped only in a few geographical areas in the Transylvanian Plateau: along the Mureş valley river; approximately in the centre of the Carpathian Arc, in the area by the Mureş river elbow; in the Târnave rivers basin (List B; Table B; *Fig. 2*).

On one hand, there are Avar cemeteries which contain graves rich in dress accessories, jewellery, pottery and harness items, which may be related to the elites. Within the same cemetery, beside graves rich in funerary inventory, there are also graves with only weapons or graves with no inventory. On the other hand, in the Transylvanian Plateau there are cemeteries with graves that contained only weapons and harness items or graves lacking any archaeological inventory.

TABLE B. CEMETERIES, GRAVES AND FUNERARY NATURE
FINDS IN THE TRANSYLVANIAN PLATEAU WITH INVENTORY SPECIFIC TO AVAR WARRIORS

Archaeological sites	C	M	CF	A	PH	ÎC	LC	Ac	Ca	P	Ah	Ce	OCG	FI	D
B. 1. Aiud	X			X	X	X			X			X			650/670–710/720
B. 2. Aiudul de Sus	X			X	X	X									650/670–10/720
B. 3. Cicău	X			X	X	X			X	X	X		X		650/670–710/720
B. 4. Gâmbaş	X			X	X	X			X	X		X	X	X	650/670–710/720
B. 5. Geoagiu de Sus			X	X											650/670–710/720
B. 6. Lopadea Nouă	X			X	X				X	X					650/670–710/720
B.7. Stemţ		X		X	X										650/670–710/720
B. 8. Târnava			X	X							X				650/670–710/720
B. 9. Târnăveni			X	X											650/670–710/720

B. 10. Teiuș	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	650/670–760
B. 11. Bratei		X		X	X	X	X						710/720–800/830
B. 12. Câmpia Turzii	X		X	X	X	X	X	X			X		710/720–800/830
B. 13. Măgina		X	X	X	X				X				710/720–800/830
B. 14. Heria		X	X										8 th century
B. 15. Leșnic		X			X	X							8 th century
B. 16. Râmeț		X	X										8 th century
B. 17. Sebeș		X	X										8 th century

LEGEND: C – Cemeteries; M – Graves; CF – Funerary nature; A – weaponry, PH - Harness pieces; ÎC – Burial with horse; LC – Belt tongue; Ca – Buckles; P – Jewellery; Ah – Harness appliques; Ce – Pottery; OUC – Household and domestic objects; FI – W/A inventory; D – Dating

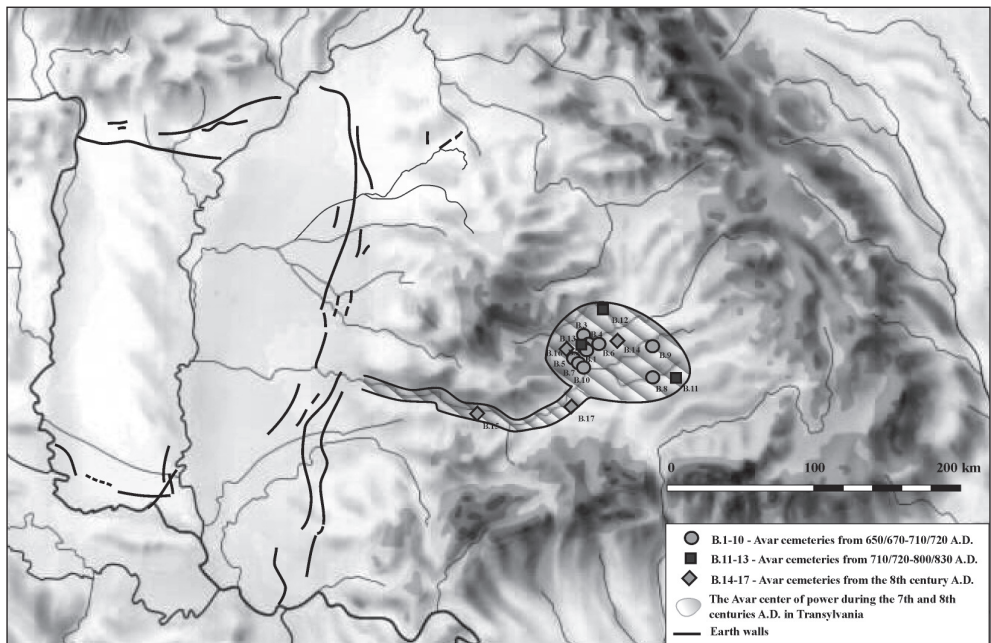


Fig. 2. Avar cemeteries in the Transylvanian Plateau dating to the 7th–8th centuries. Numbers on the map correspond to Table B.

The difference between the military chieftain, retinue, common warriors or slaves is extremely visible within the cemetery at Teiuș. In the respective cemetery, with over 60 graves, datable to the last decades of the 7th century until mid 8th century, there is a single male grave very rich in archaeological material. The grave belonged to the military chieftain of the community in the respective area. The warrior was buried in a timber coffin, with many dress accessories,

including for belt, pottery, weapons and harness appliques. In the same cemetery there are also warrior graves comprising only weapons, which places the respective dead in the military retinue or common warriors in the Avar army. In addition, at Teiuș there are many female graves with a rich funerary inventory, consisting of jewellery, dress accessories or pottery, framing the respective persons among the elite. They were likely the wives and concubines of the military chieftain or his akin. Slaves and servants were buried without artifacts.

The cemetery at Gâmbaș, dated to the Mid Avar period (ca. 650/670–720), is a cemetery of common Avar warriors. There are many male graves, all assignable to mounted warriors. All males were buried with the same weaponry type (lances, swords), and/or harness items. There are though a few differences at the level of graves inventories. In some of the warrior sepulchres, two or even three lance tips were placed compared to others where only a single lance tip was placed. Only some of the warrior graves contained clay pottery and finger rings. On one hand, the number of weapons differing from one grave to the other, and on the other hand, the presence of certain artifacts like pots or finger rings in some of the warrior graves only, are aspects that may be interpreted as a social differentiating message between the community fighters at Gâmbaș. However, noticeably, certain dress accessories, like for instance, artifacts decorating the belt or the harness lack from the funerary inventories, which suggests the lower rank of the warriors at Gâmbaș in the Avar warriors' hierarchy. They were common fighters forming the Avar troops camped in Transylvania after mid 7th century. The social differentiation at the Avar community level which buried its dead in the cemetery at Gâmbaș, is visible among the women as well. In the cemetery, there is a woman's grave with a rich archaeological inventory specific to women dress, like earrings, brooches, beads, wooden pots etc., compared to other women graves in the same cemetery, poor in adornments, yet with pottery or others, lacking pottery. The grave with rich inventory may be related to a woman within the military elite, likely, the spouse of the chieftain of the warriors at Gâmbaș, which remained though undiscovered. We do not exclude the possibility that the dead woman was herself the leader of the detachment of Avar warriors in the Gâmbaș area. We mention that at Gâmbaș we are dealing with common warriors, none of them displaying among the funerary inventory, a high social standing in the hierarchy of the Avar warriors.

The cemetery at Cicău, datable to the Mid Avar period, may represent an example for how a high ranking Avar family from Transylvania looked like. According to the excavations carried out insofar, the site at Cicău prefigures a small size cemetery. It contains a single grave of a military Avar chieftain buried with horse. The grave is noticeable by the rich funerary inventory composed of several weapon types, harness items, dress accessories and harness belts. Beside the warrior, in the cemetery was also buried the spouse and/or his concubines, accompanied by jewellery. In addition, in the cemetery was also discovered a common warrior grave, possible the second in the community hierarchy, but also graves that may be related to the servants or slaves of the leading family. The military chieftain at Cicău had a Tarpan horse (Georoceanu et alii 1977, 285–294), a horse breed used by the Avars (Rustoiu/ Ciută 2008, 96).

During the 8th century, an Avar power centre was located in the area of the current city of Câmpia Turzii. The weapons, harness items, but especially the belt tongues coming from the destroyed cemetery by the western border of the city at Câmpia Turzii, artifacts all dating to the 8th century, support the fact that in the cemetery were buried including high ranking warriors in the Avar Khaganate.

The cemeteries and isolated graves, like those at Aiud, Aiudul de Sus, Heria, Lopadea Nouă, Măgina or Stremț, but also others, belonged, according to current data, to common

warriors in the Avar army. The Avar graves in respective places are rather more difficult to accurately frame in one of the chronological segments of the Avar Khaganate period. Nevertheless, the archaeological material coming from the specified graves framed some in the Mid Avar period and other to only the 8th century. The fact that at Măgina we are certainly dealing with an Avar fighter is confirmed by the anthropological analysis, which shows that the preserved bones belonged to an adult male, aged between 28–30, with a mesocran skull of Mongoloid features (Gál 2013, 255–259).

Obviously, most of the isolated graves discovered in the placed specified above, were part of large cemeteries. All graves belonged to mounted warriors. Their social differentiation is not provided, like in other cases, by the richly decorated belts. It may be though inferred from the number of weapons placed within the graves. In the cemeteries, there are sepulchres with one, two or even three lance tips, which may be deemed a differentiation sign on the social ladder of the Avar warriors (for this issue see for instance: László 1955; Cilinská 1991, 187–212; Zábajník 1995, 205–336; Csiky 2009, 56–60; Csiky 2011, 9–34). A possible analogy for all these graves, which may be considered as parts of larger cemeteries, is provided by the common warrior cemetery at Gâmbaş. The warriors in the graves and cemeteries at Gâmbaş, Aiud, Aiudul de Sus, Heria, Lopadea Nouă, Măgina or Stremț, were “the units/band” of warriors, reporting to the local Avar military chieftains from the centres located in the Teiuș, Cicău, Câmpia Turzii area where, as already mentioned, were discovered graves of Avar chieftains.

Regarding the weapons in the inventory of the graves one should notice the almost entire lack of bow remains and arrowheads (Hoređt 1956, 398). It is a curious phenomenon should we consider that the presence of arrowheads in the Avar graves, correlated to their high numbers within the sepulchres, was believed to designate the social standing, either lower or higher, of the dead within the Avar society (Poohl 1988, 26). Were the warriors in the Transylvanian Plateau of a lower social status within the Avar army or simply, the Avar khagans had sent to intra-Carpathian Transylvania cavalry troops only fighting with only the sword, axe and especially the lance? Likely, troops formed of the fierce Avar archers were not needed for the conquest of Transylvania.

In what the multitude of Avar power centres is concerned (the Avar “aul”/s and “ordu”/s, geographical and political-administrative units into which the territory of the Avar Khaganate was organized: Rusu 1977, 194–195; Erdély Története 1986, 166–167; Pohl 1988, 293–308; Garam 1994, 171–181; Rusu 1997, 232–233), supposed to have existed in various areas of the Transylvanian Plateau, datable over the 7th–8th centuries (Erdély Története 1986, 167–168, 171–177; Bóna 1990, 90–97), a series of notes may be made. The hypothesis maintaining that the Avars conquered the entire territory of the Transylvanian Plateau, supported by a series of historians, takes into consideration beside the certain Avar archaeological sites also a series of artifacts discovered by chance and having no archaeological context, “spread” all over the territory of intra-Carpathian Transylvania (Erdély Története 1986, 164–177; Bóna 1990, 90–101; Garam 1994, 171–181; Szentpéteri 2002). It must be specified though that many of these artifacts are items without ethnical origin, so they might have been worn and/or used by any of the ethnicities present in Transylvania during the last centuries of the first Christian millennium. Obviously, they also comprise objects brought by the Avars to the Carpathian Basin. Later, such items were passed over and used also by the populations with which the Avars entered in contact in the centre and south-east of Europe. Evidently, the artifacts date to the 7th–8th centuries, however they do not evidence the fact that respective geographical areas where they were discovered were by all means part of the Avar Khaganate borders, as presumed (Erdély Története 1986, 176–177). The Avar

“aul”/s and “ordu”/s are located up to the Carpathian Curvature, or in the geographical areas of the cities of Alba Iulia, Cluj-Napoca or Târgu Mureş (Erdély Története 1986, 167–168, 171–177; Bóna 1990, 90–97). We believe that in most cases, things are slightly far-fetched. For instance, it is a long way from an applique and a golden ring with only a “likely origin at Alba Iulia” to defining an Avar political-military centre on the territory of this city. No Avar warrior grave was discovered on the territory of the city at Alba Iulia or by its peripheries, although many archaeological excavations were carried out on the city territory. We add that the bi-ritual cemeteries, dating to the 7th–8th centuries, discovered in a larger geographical area around the city of Alba Iulia (Aldea/ Stoicovici/ Blăjan 1980, 151–177; Stoicovici/ Blăjan 1982, 139–154; Blăjan/ Botezatu 2000, 453–470), are closer to the Avar power centre between Teiuş and Câmpia Turzii. We believe it is more opportune to consider that those human communities which buried their dead in the bi-ritual cemeteries in the Alba Iulia city area were controlled much easier and sooner, as intervention time, and, by the Avar warriors camped near the Mureş river elbow. At Târgu Mureş, except for a single Byzantine coin, from the Early Avar period, no Avar grave or cemetery were discovered (for confirmation see: Zríny 1976, 148; Lazăr 1995, 255–261). Not even at Cluj-Napoca were discovered Avar cemeteries or graves (for confirmation see: Repertoriu Cluj 1992, 118–154). The find at Târgu Secuiesc, is no grave, thus it is impossible to assign to an Avar warrior (Comşa 1987, 228). The sword and horse bit at Târgu Secuiesc, donated to the Museum of Sfântu Gheorghe, were discovered by chance. There is no evidence they had been discovered together and especially within a grave (Horedt 1951, 204–205; Székely 1969, 13–14). The sword was lost, thus no chronological and ethnical analogies may be provided. In what the four pots at Târgu Secuiesc are concerned, it is possible that they were part of a grave, yet rather of Slav (Cosma 2011, 146), than Avar origin. It is also mentioned a sword with curved tip discovered somewhere at Cristuru Secuiesc, also used as evidence of the Avar presence in the Carpathian Curvature (Erdély Története 1986, 174). Certainly though, it remains only a heritage item. We should also mention that during the 7th–8th centuries the area of the Carpathian Curvature was invaded by the Slav tribes, and studies regarding archaeological realities of the south-east of Transylvania do not specify the presence of Avar grave cemeteries in the respective geographical area (Székely 1962, 46–58; Székely 1969, 7–22; Székely 1974, 55–57; Székely 1974–1975a, 35–55; Székely 1974–1975b, 57–61; Székely 1975, 71–79; Székely 1976, 117–123; Székely 1988, 169–198; Székely 1992, 245–306).

Within the same framework of the scientific approach, it must be specified that there are no clear-cut arguments supporting an effective political domination of the Avars over the Făgăraş and Braşov areas. Until new information becomes available, it is even difficult to specify whether the Avar khagans were interested in exercising a “remote control” over the two geographical areas, territories populated by Slav communities (Comşa 1987, 221, 224, 227–228). In the same train of thought, changing only the geographical area, we must record that all these cast items of Avar origin presented as discovered for instance at Dăbâca and Someşeni, come from a Slav and by no means Avar environment. At Someşeni, locality on the Someş river valley (the segment in the Transylvanian Plateau), we are dealing with a barrow cremation Slav cemetery, where in one of the barrows were discovered bronze items used by the Avar elite (Macrea 1959 a, 519–527; Macrea 1959 b, 515–522). At Dăbâca as well, village also located in the hydrographical basin of Someş river, we are still dealing with a flat cremation Slav cemetery (Gáll/ Laczkó 2013, 53–74). Both sites, but also other information supports the fact that the Someş river valley up to the exit from the Transylvanian Plateau was controlled by the Slavs during the 8th century (Comşa 1987, 224–225, 229).

This invalidates assumptions according to which Someş river valley (on the intra-Carpathian segment), was a region used by the Avars for animal herding (Erdély Története 1986, 177).

With certainty though, the Avars were interested to maintain good neighbouring relations with the Slav communities recorded in the mentioned areas. This occurred by offering gifts to the Slav chieftains, which consisted in metal items worn by the Avar elite. The items record the acknowledgment by the Avars of the Slav chieftains, with whom they maintained relations on various levels. The presence of the Avar items in the Slav cemeteries, artifacts which conferred the bearer a significant social standing within the Slav communities from the north-west of the Transylvanian Plateau, is thus explained. The relations between the Avars and the Slavs in Transylvania are yet a much broader subject, which requires a separate study.

Some researchers believe that the Târnave Depression was a very important geographical area for the leaders of the Avar Khaganate (Erdély Története 1986, 164, 168, 169, 176–177; Bóna 1990, 90–97; Garam 1994, 179). For the first half of the 7th century, representative for the Târnava Mare valley is the Gepid cemetery at Bratei/Cemetery 3 (already discussed), which contained Avar graves as well. The presence of Avar warriors there proves the wish of the khagans in Pannonia to conquer and destroy the power of the Gepid community or communities located somewhere around Bratei. The use of the cemetery 3 at Bratei extends into the second half of the 7th century as well, which supposes that the Avars buried there continued to survey the Târnava area also well into the second half of the 7th century.

From the Târnave region come a series of metal artifacts dated to the second half of the 7th century. The artifacts are few, were discovered by chance and have no archaeological context (Horedt 1956, 386–398; Horedt 1958, 91–108; Horedt 1968, 116–118; Erdély Története 1986, 164, 168, 169, 176–177). Moreover, most of the items display no ethnical specificities. They are thus objects that do not provide any date enabling certain scientific interpretation, except for the finds at Târnăveni and Târnava, confined to weapons specific to the Avars, definitely coming from graves. They most likely date to the Mid Avar period.

Still at Bratei was discovered also a bi-ritual cemetery dating to the 7th–8th century, known in the specialty literature as “the cemetery at Brateiu/La Zăvoi/Cemetery 2”. Most cremation graves in Cemetery 2 at Bratei lack artifacts (like for instance weapons, jewellery or dress accessories). Within the inhumation graves there are a few graves with typically female jewellery, which suggest a higher standing of respective dead women in the community hierarchy. Some of children, dying prematurely, were buried with jewellery and pottery, compared to others, whose graves had no funerary furniture. The male graves do not contain weapons. Instead, some of them comprised a few dress accessories, domestic items (knives) and pottery. It is possible that these men had a rather special position within the community, compared to other males whose graves have no funerary inventory. The differentiation resulted from the presence or absence of the funerary inventory within the graves, like for instance pots, may though have religious significance (Cosma 2011, 121–133). It is important though that in Cemetery 2 at Bratei was discovered an inhumation grave with artifacts specific to the elite Avar warriors. The warrior was buried with horse and the inventory comprised appliques, pendants and attached cast bronze belt ends, as well as stirrups and a horse bit. The grave dates to the Late Avar period. Although in the cemetery there are several inhumation graves, the one presented above is the only warrior in the cemetery. That individual was a warrior in the Avar elite who had the role to control or lead the Slav-Avar community or communities of the 8th century, who buried their dead at Bratei/Cemetery 2. Respective warrior was accompanied at Bratei by his entourage. For instance, some of the dead women buried with jewellery, individuals who may be deemed the spouses or concubines of the military chief-

tains were part of the cemetery as well. We also mention that still in Cemetery 2 at Bratei, was found a grave with horse which had deposited near the skeleton a pot. The horse skeleton may be deemed the funerary inventory of an Avar warrior, whose grave was damaged over time, or the horse might have possibly been special for the community, having magical powers, thus benefiting of a special burial ritual, fact also found in other Avar cemeteries in Pannonia (Sós/ Salamon 1995, 102–111).

The scarce Avar cemeteries and graves in the Târnave rivers basin dating to both the 7th and 8th centuries makes impossible to support the existence of an “aul” composed of only the territory of the Târnave Plateau. If for the 7th century one may accept there existed a direct control over the Târnava Mare valley, carried out by the warrior buried in Cemetery 3 at Bratei, Târnăveni and Târnava, for the 8th century it is hard to agree with the same circumstances. It is difficult to believe that during the 8th century, the single military Avar chieftain recorded in Cemetery 2 at Bratei, succeeded to impose himself, with no support, as sole leader of the human Slav origin communities in the Târnave rivers basin, communities recorded by the presence of the Mediaş type cemeteries, but also a series of settlements discovered in a rather large number in the Târnave Plateau (Horedt 1976, 35–57; Horedt 1979, 385–394; Székely 1988, 169–198). One may presume that maintaining under control all those communities required much more “military force”. The Avar warriors who comprised that “military force” were headquartered between Câmpia Turzii and Teiuş. They also controlled the Târnave rivers basin, one of their representatives being the elite warrior at Bratei/Cemetery 2.

Final specifications

THE AVAR cemeteries present in certain areas closer or farther to the Avar power centre in Pannonia are the best evidence of the fact that respective territories were effectively controlled by the Avar Khagans. Furthermore, this time with strict reference to intra-Carpathian Transylvania, it may be noted that not any archaeological item “with ethnical attribute” discovered by chance, most of them unique in various areas of the Transylvanian Basin, may be deemed as undisputable evidence of an effective Avar control over the territories of origin. It is very likely that the item had been lost by an “Avar,” possibly even an Avar warrior only transiting the area. The presence of the Avar origin objects, singular and with no archaeological context may be also the result of the trade relations between the communities of the time, those selling the item or even the one purchasing it (and then either lost or buried it), had no connection to the Avar ethnicity. The record of Avar origin items in territories far from the Avar centre in Transylvania, located by the Mureş river elbow, may be also due to travelling artisans who worked various items upon order, for various individuals, not necessarily of Avar origin. Additionally, a series of metal items of Avar origin may be interpreted as gifts that the Avar chieftains made to local leaders of an origin other than that Avar. In Transylvania’s case, they were the chieftains of the Slav tribes, as evidenced by the metal Avar items discovered in the barrow Slav cemeteries at Someşeni and Nuşfalău. We believe that a pot, a buckle, a belt tongue, a coin etc., discovered by chance and with no archaeological context, in a certain geographical area far from the Avar power centre in Transylvania located between Teiuş and Câmpia Turzii, cannot be used as viable markers for delimiting the political border of the Avar Khaganate in the Transylvanian Plateau up to the Carpathian Curvature.

The presence of the Avar warriors in Transylvania during the 7th–8th centuries is a reality which cannot be disputed, proven by the cemeteries and graves that belong without a shadow of a doubt to warriors of Avar origin. According to the archaeological data that may be assigned with certainty to the Avar warriors (cemeteries and graves), it may be noted that the discussed phenomenon was not on large scale, while the conquered territory effectively controlled by the Avars is restricted to a much smaller geographical area compared to that presented in a series of speciality studies (for instance: Erdély Története 1986, 167-168, 171-177; Bóna 1990, 90-97).

As early as the fifties of the 20th century, the specialists wondered if there was any continuity between the two supposed advance stages of the Avars in the Transylvanian Plateau (Horedt 1956, 403; Horedt 1958, 87-89). I believe that one may also take into consideration the possibility there was a single advance stage of the Avars into Transylvania, phenomenon which occurred after 630. Such supposition may be tied to the political events living their sings on the Avar Khaganate after the defeat under the walls of Constantinople in 626 (Erdély Története 1986, 169; Daim 2003, 481, 483–484). On one hand, after this date, decentralising movements occurred on the entire territory of the Avar empire, which eventually, the Khagans succeed to put an end to, settling circumstances to their favour (Erdély Története 1986, 169; Daim 2003, 481–482). One may not exclude the possibility either that the leader communities in the Transylvanian Plateau had been involved in the uprisings against the political structure of the Avar Khaganate. On the other hand, still after the defeat in 626, the Avar communities grow increasingly sedentary, even though cattle herding would still be their main trade (Erdély Története 1986, 169, 171; Daim 2003, 481, 483–486). The Avar Khagans efforts for the political and economic recovery of the empire during the second half of the 7th century and pursued still into the 8th century definitely required measures that targeted inclusively the support of salt mining in Transylvania and its trade to western Europe. In this case, it is acceptable that the leaders of the Avar empire in Pannonia wished to establish direct control of the salt reserves in the Transylvanian Plateau.

Thus, one may infer that the Avars initiated during the 4th–5th decades of the 7th century large scale military actions with the aim of conquering Transylvania. The military campaigns were designed to address several issues: 1. The conquest, abolishment or only the control of the Gepid power centres in Transylvania, still active in the first half of the 7th century; 2. The repression of the supposed Slav uprisings in Transylvania; 3. The establishment of an Avar power centre in the middle of the Transylvanian Depression with the distinct aim of effectively controlling the salt reserves in the centre of the Transylvanian Plateau.

The political and economic reasons presented in the support of a “single stage” of the Avars advance into Transylvania, are complemented to a certain extent by a series of arguments provided by the archaeological evidence. Noticeably, from Transylvania are missing a archaeological evidence attributable to the first generation of Avars settled in Pannonia. Furthermore, the Avar archaeological remains from within Band-Noşlac-Bratei type cemeteries date rather to the 4th–5th decades of the 7th century. In fact, the same Avar warriors, yet of different generations, carried with them in the Transylvanian depression the changes occurring in weaponry, harness and dress accessories. I believe it is in fact entirely illogical to assume that the first Avar invasion of Transylvania occurred in the 2nd–3rd decades of the 7th century with the aim of destroying Gepid centres, being followed by their retreat in Pannonia, so that only later, after a period of at most 10 years, other conquest campaigns of Transylvania would be initiated.

In conclusion, without excluding a priori a “novel” advance of the Avars into Transylvania sometime around 650 or just after, one may still take into account the hypothesis of

a single advance stage of the Avars in intra-Carpathian Transylvania just after 630, even though the current archaeological evidence is still insufficiently reliable.

The causes which made the Avars enter intra-Carpathian Transylvania are both of political and economical nature. Without diminishing the significance of the political factor, we believe that the most important reasons which made the Avar khagans to establish an effective control over the Transylvanian territory in the Mureş river elbow area starting with the second half of the 7th century, is economical in nature. The leaders of the Avar empire from Pannonia wished to set up a direct control over the salt reserves from the Transylvanian Plateau. It is easily noticeable on the map of finds that in the Mureş river elbow area (approximately in the centre of the Transylvanian Plateau), where most part of the Avar cemeteries clusters, is precisely the territory where good part of the salt resources of Transylvania were located. The Avar power centre set up during the second half of the 7th century in the centre of the Transylvanian Plateau continued to exist on the same spot also during the 8th century (*fig. 2*). The efforts of Avar khagans' efforts during the second half of the 7th century for a political and economic recovery of the empire, also extending into the 8th century, definitely required the initiation of certain measures that targeted including reviving the salt mining in Transylvania and its trade in Western Europe.

The archaeological investigations at the level of the Transylvanian settlements datable to the 7th–8th centuries are extremely few, reason for which one cannot issue theses referring to the number of the Avar communities in Transylvania or their layout within the territory. The situation concerning the occupations and lifestyle of the human communities, possibly also of Avar origin, from the second half of the 7th century and the 8th century, cannot be but supposed. From the scarce information available, according to the bone material found in settlements or houses, it results that the main occupation remains animal breeding, which confirms that Transylvania makes no exception from this point of view from other areas of the Avar empire (Erdély Története 1986, 169,171; Daim 2003,481, 483-486).

Those arguing the existence of a mining activity on Arieş river valley also during the Avar period, specify that the archaeological evidence proving respective trade was destroyed by the continued gold extraction during the Middle Ages and then in the Modern period (for these issues see: Bărcăcilă 1939–1942, 203–227; Rusu 1977, 192; Rusu 1997, 247). On the other hand, on the same Arieş valley, it was supposed that gold panning was also carried out, which at its turn leaves no traces either (for these issues see: Bărcăcilă 1939-1942, 203–227; Rusu 1977, 192; Rusu 1997, 247). Until new data, it is difficult to reject or confirm gold mining on Arieş river valley during the 7th–8th centuries.

Geographically, the Avar cemeteries in the Transylvanian Plateau point to a single power centre. Differences of social status between those buried within the cemeteries, but also those noticeable from one cemetery to another, outline an Avar power centre in Transylvania coordinated by several Avar chieftains, who established the “command headquarters” in various geographical points between Teiuş and Câmpia Turzii (Teiuş, Cicău or Câmpia Turzii). These chieftains had under their command those common warriors buried in the Avar cemeteries discovered at Gâmbaş, Aiud, Aiudul de Sus, Heria, Lopadea Nouă, Măgina or Stremţ (*fig. 2*).

Graves of Avar princes with rich inventory (golden pieces), like those found in Pannonia (Lázló 1955; Garam 1993; Kováci/ Garam 2002, 81–112) are missing from Transylvania at least until now. From this standpoint, circumstances in Transylvania may be deemed different than those in other provinces within the Avar empire, political-administrative entities led, in the name of the khagan, by one high ranking person in the Avar Khaganate hierarchy,

like the dignitary at Kunágota (Hungary), who commanded the area of Lower Tisza river (Erdély Története 1986, 166) or the one who coordinated the Avar centre located in the Upper Tisza area (Garam 1994, 175–179).

The economic importance of the Transylvanian Plateau during the 7th–8th centuries, based especially on the salt reserves supports the hypothesis of an Avar centre in the Mureş river elbow of “Aul” province status, subordinated directly to the Avar khagans in Pannonia. They exercised a direct control over the centre of Transylvania via personal representatives. They were prestige warriors, accompanied in Transylvania by their military retinues as well as the bands/units of common fighters from the Avar army. The simple fact that they personally represented the khagan supposes that respective warriors were highly trusted individuals, thus with a higher position among the military chieftains of the Avar army. Through these loyal persons, the Avar khagans ensured an efficient control of the area and concurrently could more efficiently stop autonomous tendencies or the centrifugal movements extremely frequent in the warlike societies of the time. All the above were absolutely necessary in order to create optimal conditions for exercising the salt mining activity as well as to ensure this product transport safety on Mureş river to the Pannonian Plain, but also of the trade in general, which unfolded on the same route. The latter was likely one of the main duties of the Avar warriors camped in a series of “garrisons” located on the Mureş river valley, downstream, towards Pannonia. Such a centre existed at Leşnic (Veşel, Hunedoara county). From there come metal artifacts datable to the 8th century, which had belonged to an Avar military chieftain, who likely led the garrison surveilling trade on Mureş river. The military chieftains of the 8th century, recorded by graves in the centre of Transylvania, remained loyal to the khagan in Pannonia.

Even though few, the cemeteries in the Târnave rivers basin, datable to the 7th–8th centuries, prove the interest of the Avars for the respective area. The scale of the constant Avar presence in respective area is still a research theme. Possibly the Avar khagans, via the chieftains sent from the power centre by Mureş river elbow, contended themselves to levy a tax from the Slav communities in the Târnave Depression.

Archaeological data confirm that the Avars entered in intra-Carpathian Transylvania on Mureş river valley and under no circumstances via the Someş valley or Meseş Gates, geographical areas controlled by the Slavs. Within this context it must be specified that the suggestion according to which the Transylvanian “aul” had been under the authority of the secondary Avar power centre in the Upper Tisza river area, political unit led by the “Iugur” himself (Garam 1994, 179), (position deemed second in the hierarchy of the Avar empire, after the khagan: Rusu 1977, 194–195; Pohl 1988, 293–300; Garam 1994, 171–181; Rusu 1997, 232–233), is unacceptable. There is no archaeological evidence supporting a direct relation between the Avar power centre in Transylvania, from the Mureş elbow area and the great Avar centre with the headquarters located on the territory of the current city at Nyíregyháza, in north-east Hungary (Bóna 1993, 116–118). Under the control of this centre were though areas from north-west Romania (Bóna 1993, 116–118; Stanciu 2000, 422–424; Cosma 2002, 57–63, 71–76, 160–161; Cosma 2012, 138–144).

Given the current state of research, we believe that the political control of the Avars in Transylvania is restricted to the Mureş river valley, the area by the Mureş river elbow, also extending to the Târnave rivers basin, territories where the Avar cemeteries cluster (*fig. 2*). Outside the “borders” of the Avar empire remain spread territories from Transylvania like those in the north of the Transylvanian Plateau, but also the piedmont areas of the Carpathian Arch.

Even if we agree to the “remote control” to which it seems that the Avar khagans had appealed in the case of certain geographical areas (Comşa 1987, 229; Fiedler 1996, 197,

210-211), we believe that in the Transylvanian Plateau, they were not very spread. The Avar control reached in no circumstances the hilly and mountain areas in the area of the Carpathian Mountains Curvature. In addition, no archaeological find proves that the Avar khagans were interested during the last quarter of the 7th century and the 8th century in the north-east of the Transylvanian Plateau. Very likely, in that geographical area the Avars limited themselves to only dissolve the Gepid power centres, after which they withdrew from the area and settled the Mureş river valley (*fig. 3*).

It is though certain that the Avar warriors were very careful about what was happening in the area adjacent to their power centre located in the middle of the Transylvanian Plateau. From there, they intervened to maintain peace or counteract the centrifugal tendencies of the Slav communities in the neighbouring territories. That area may be extended to a 50, maximum 100 km radius from the Avar power centre by the Mureş river elbow. The Avars preferred to maintain those Slav communities under observation (thus involving in this process the Slav chieftains as well), control which in certain cases occurred by tax levy (Rusu 1977, 174, 195–196).

The issue remains on open question. We believe though, that future archaeological excavations, extremely necessary for Transylvania of the Middle Ages, are the only to provide essential data for furthering and developing the subject regarding the presence of the Avar warriors in the Transylvania Plateau. It is also necessary to publish the novel Avar material and afferent documentation identified in Transylvanian museum deposits.

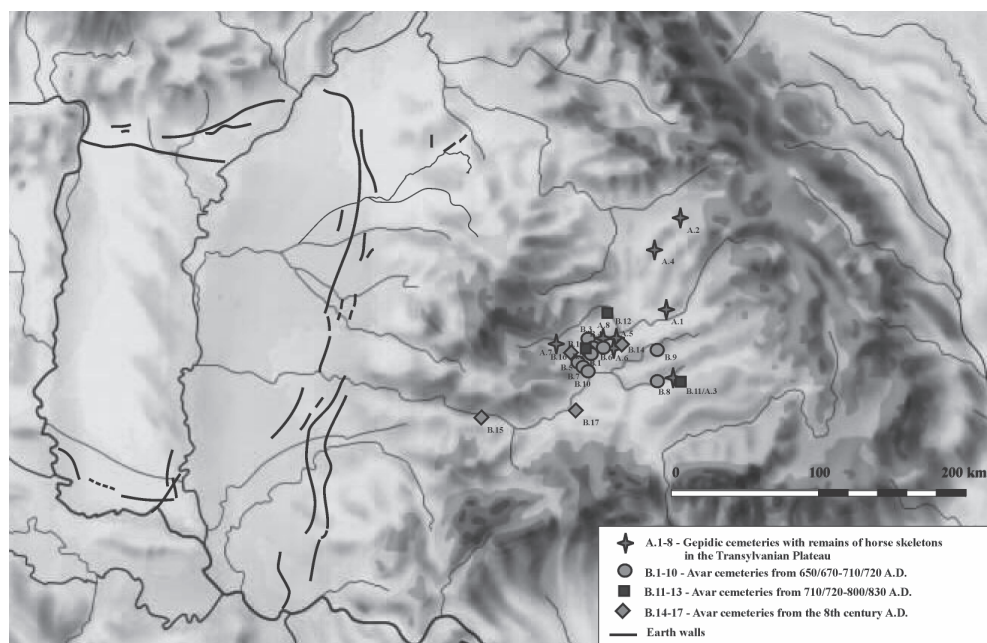


Fig. 3. Gepidic cemeteries containing graves with horse skeletons or horse skeleton remains and Avar cemeteries and graves in the Transylvanian Plateau dating to the 7th – 8th centuries. Numbers on the map correspond to TABLES A-B.

List of sites from the Transylvanian Plateau where Avar cemeteries and graves dating to the 7th–8th centuries were discovered

List A. Sites where Gepid cemeteries containing graves with horse skeletons or horse skeleton remains were identified

- A. 1. Bandu de Câmpie (jud. Mureș): Kovács 1913, 265–429; Dobos 2010/2011, 379–380.
- A. 2. Bistrița (jud. Bistrița Năsăud): Gaiu 1992, 118, fig. 3/1; Dobos 2010/2011, 380.
- A. 3. Bratei (jud. Sibiu): Bâzru 2010, 171–271; Dobos 2010/2011, 378.
- A. 4. Fântânele (jud. Bistrița Năsăud): Dobos 2010/2011, 380; Dobos/ Opreanu 2012.
- A. 5. Noșlac (jud. Alba): Rusu 1962, 270; Rusu 1964, 36; Dobos 2010/2011, 380.
- A. 6. Șpălnaca (jud. Alba): Botezatu/ Blăjan 1989, 351; Grosu et alii 1995, 276 și nota 6; Protase et alii 2000, 104, nr. 143.
- A. 7. Valea Largă (jud. Alba): Hica 1974, 519; Dobos 2010–2011, 380.
- A. 8. Unirea II/Vereșmort (jud. Alba): Rustoiu/ Ciută 2008, 71–98; Dobos 2010/2011, 381; Cosma et alii 2013, 89–96, fig. 65.1–4.

List B. The Transylvanian Plateau: Sites where Avar cemeteries and graves were discovered

- B. 1. Aiud (jud. Alba): Horedt 1958, 91–92; Cosma et alii 2013, 56–59, fig. 27–30.
- B. 2. Aiudul de Sus (jud. Alba): Horedt 1958, 93; Cosma et alii 2013, 60, fig. 31.
- B. 3. Bratei (jud. Sibiu): Zaharia 1977, 45–62; Cosma et alii 2013, 35, 61–62, fig. 20, 33.
- B. 4. Câmpia Turzii (jud. Cluj): Bajús 2005, 31–40, Cosma et alii 2013, 34, fig. 19.
- B. 5. Cicău (jud. Alba): Winkler et alii. 1977, 269–283; Georoceanu et alii. 1977, 285–294; Cosma et alii 2013, 33, fig. 18. 1–3.
- B. 6. Gâmbaș (jud. Alba): Bodrogi 1913, 22–24; Horedt 1951, 198, Nr. 21; Horedt 1958, 95–100; Cosma et alii 2013, 30–31, 64–65, fig. 16–17, 38.
- B. 7. Geoagiu de Sus (jud. Alba): Rustoiu, Dărămuș 2005, 483–490, fig. 1/4; Cosma et alii 2013, 65–67, fig. 30–40.
- B. 8. Heria (jud. Alba): Horedt 1958, 100–101; Cosma et alii 2013, 71–72, fig. 48.
- B. 9. Leșnic/Vețel (jud. Hunedoara): Szénpeteri 2002, 226.
- B. 10. Lopadea Nouă (jud. Alba): Bodrogi 1913, 25–27; Horedt 1958, 101, nr. 9, 75, 84, fig. 13/11–12, fig. 18/1–5; Cosma et alii 2013, 72–74; fig. 49.
- B. 11. Măgina (jud. Alba): Ciugudeanu 1974, 457–459, fig. 1; Cosma et alii 2013, 74, fig. 50.
- B. 12. Râmeț (jud. Alba): Horedt 1958, 102; Cosma et alii 2013, 77, fig. 53.
- B. 13. Sebeș (jud. Alba): Horedt 1958, 103; Cosma et alii 2013, 84, fig. 59.
- B. 14. Stemț (jud. Alba): Bodrogi 1913, 25; Horedt 1958, 103, nr. 17, fig. 19/1–3; Popa 1961, 225–226, nr. 6, fig. 3/a–c; Cosma et alii 2013, 85, fig. 60.
- B. 15. Târnava/fostă Proștea Mare (jud. Sibiu): Horedt 1958, 101–102, nr. 10; Cosma et alii 2013, 86–87, fig. 62.
- B. 16. Târnăveni (jud. Mureș): ArchÉrt, XXXIV, 1914, 153–154; Horedt 1968, 117, nr. 1. 24. fig. 2.1.2.
- B. 17. Teiuș (jud. Alba): Daicovicu 1945, 210; Horedt 1951, 205; Horedt 1953, 798–814; Párducz 1954, 59–60; Horedt 1958, 104–105; Cosma et alii 2013, 23–29, fig. 12–15.

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Abstract

Notes on the presence of Avar warriors in the Transylvanian Plateau during the 7th–8th centuries

The political domination of the Avars in Transylvania was confined to the center of the Transylvanian Plateau (bend of the River Mureș, between Câmpia Turzii and Teiuș), extending also to the Târnavă Basin, territories where the Avar cemeteries cluster. Mureș Valley connected this centre of power with Pannonia (*fig. 2*). Large territories from Transylvania, like the northern part of the Transylvanian Plateau as well as the piedmont areas of the Carpathian Arch remained outside the “borders” of the Empire. In this context, a series of extensive Avar military expeditions can be supposed during the fourth and fifth decades of the 7th century in order to conquer Transylvania. The military campaigns were aimed at solving several issues: 1. The conquest, abolishment or only the control of the Gepidic centers of power from Transylvania, still active in the first half of the 7th century; 2. The repression of the supposed Slavic uprisings from Transylvania; 3. The establishment of an Avar centre of power in the middle of the Transylvanian Depression with a distinct aim of effectively controlling the salt reserves in the centre of the Transylvanian Plateau. A single Avar military centre existed in the Transylvania, positioned in the area of the River Mureș bend. It had the status of a province “Aul” and it was subordinated to the Avar khagans from Pannonia (*fig. 2*). They exercised a direct control over the centre of Transylvania via personal representatives. They were elite warriors, accompanied in Transylvania by their military retainers, as well as by bands/units of common fighters from the Avar army.

Keywords

Early Middle Ages, Transylvania, Avars, warriors, political status