

An Interesting Discovery at Alba Iulia

Could It Be an Inscription with the Name of Saint Methodius?

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TECHNICAL ABBREVIATIONS

G.	grave	D _b	bottom diameter
H	height	D _m	maximal diameter
l	width	D _r	rim diameter
L	length	MNUAI	Muzeul Național al Unirii Alba Iulia (National Museum of the Union)
T.	thickness		

LOCATED NEAR the gold deposits and the salt road of Transylvania, ancient Apulum is characterized by several funerary spaces and sporadic funerary discoveries made both inside and outside the city. Thus, during the 9th–12th centuries in Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár, Weißenburg), three distinct funerary areas were functional: 1) the northern area with the two cemeteries: “Stația de Salvare” and Vânătorilor St.; 2) the western area represented by the necropolises at Izvorul Împăratului and Brândușei St. and 3) the area of the Roman Catholic Cathedral.¹ During the archeological research from 1980–1981 carried out at Alba Iulia–“Stația de Salvare” by the team composed of M. Blăjan, I. Șerban, and Ștefan Pascu, a number of 18 burial graves were revealed, all of which belonged to the 1st horizon (group Blandiana A) from the 9th–10th centuries. Of these, some were oriented w-e (7) and others nw (skull)-se (5), wnw (skull)-ese (4) and wsw (skull)-ene (2). The seven w-e oriented tombs, which could suggest a possible Christian influence, present remains of animal offerings, with only one exception (G. 667). The animal offering from these graves (the graves belonging to men, women and children) is represented by a skull and the remains of an ovi-caprine (G. 497, G. 551, G. 608, G. 624, G. 685), two skulls and ovi-caprine remains (G. 74), and eggshells (G. 624).²

Among these funerary complexes, G. 624 (male child?, age 6–7 years) stands out through the elements of funeral rite and ritual. The skeleton, oriented on the w (skull)-e axis, was placed in dorsal decubitus, with his left hand next to his body and his right with the palm brought to the chest. The skeleton had a length of 82 cm, having a crushed skull lying to the left side. The state of preservation of the bones was quite precarious. The pit of the grave, deepened up to 115 cm, was trapezoidal in shape, with rounded corners (135 × 40/50 cm). The western end of G. 624 sectioned part of the sepulchral

pit of G. 623 (Roman cremation). The animal offering (the limb bones and the skull of a lamb, deposited with the cap up and the mandible facing south) was deposited at the child's feet. Two ceramic vessels (a fragmentary pot and an amphora) were placed next to the deceased's skull, with the remains of a bird's egg between them. The remains of one or two bird eggs were placed in the WNW corner of the pit, under the amphora.³ The funerary inventory is completed by a pear-shaped bronze bell identified near the right coxal and by a knife blade located between the ceramic vessels. Coal remains were observed in the filling soil of the pit and were noted in larger pieces near the left knee and between the femurs.

The graves belonging to the 1st horizon in which egg remains appear are quite few and we chronologically place them in the interval between the two phases (1st and 2nd horizons) at "Stația de Salvare," respectively in the first half of the 10th century.

The fully restored amphora (photos 1a, 1b) was worked on a fast potter's wheel from a fine, yellow-red paste. The vessel has a tall and ovoid body. The truncated cone-shaped neck has a straight rim and a concave base. Two symmetrical handles, quadrilateral in cross section, with rounded edges, are attached to the top of the vessel. One of the ends was pinned under the rim and the opposite one was glued to the shoulder and provided at the base with a conical protrusion.

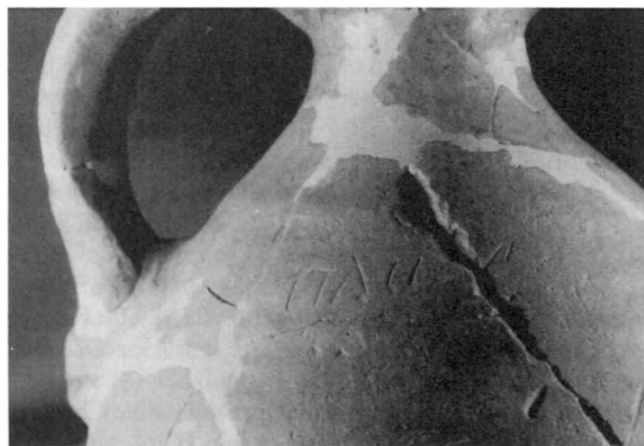


PHOTO 1A

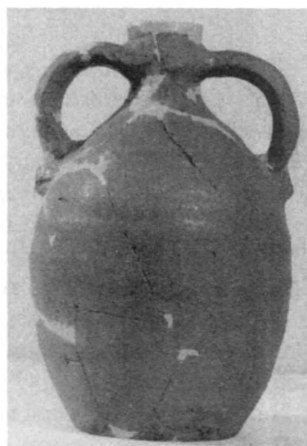


PHOTO 1B

Wide grooves and some short oblique incisions imprinted in clay can be observed on the body of the vessel. An inscription on the amphora's shoulder, engraved in Greek letters, stands out on one of the faces of the amphora. This inscription, which is written slightly obliquely to the left, consists of five letters of different heights.

Π: the first letter of the inscription has the bars of the legs placed in an oblique manner and inclined to the right. It has a height of 6.5 mm. The bar above the letter is slightly oblique and has a length of 5.5 mm. Its left corner touches another oblique incised bar that is about 12 mm long.

A is the second letter and consists of three oblique bars. The bar on the right tilts to the left and has a height of 7.3 mm, the one at the base measures 5.6 mm and the third one, the one that closes the triangle, measures 6.9 mm.

Π : the third letter has the bars of the legs parallel and inclined to the right and an oblique upper connecting bar ($H = 4.7$ mm, $l_{\text{connecting bar}} = 4.4$ mm).

A is the fourth letter. It is placed near the fissure of the vessel and maintains the angle on the left side.

Γ or C (?): the last letter, partially preserved due to a fractured area of the vessel, consists of a bar of 5.2 mm in length which is obliquely incised to the right, having the lower extremity exactly on the *fissure line*. The upper extremity intersects at an obtuse angle with another short 2.5 mm bar. A bar shorter than 3 mm that is not parallel starts down from the other end of the letter bar.

The inscription ΠΑΠΑΓ or ΠΑΠΑC was incised from left to right on the shoulder of the amphora and the letters were rendered in italics in soft clay before burning, most likely being incised with a needle or knife ($H = 23.5$ cm, $D_b = 8.6$ cm, $D_m = 13.8$ cm, $D_g = 4$ cm). The inscription has a width of 3.3 cm, and its first two letters (ΠΑ) are taller than the last three, which are smaller and slightly elevated upwards, in an oblique manner.

The presence of a possibly Cyrillic (?) inscription on one of the vessels from Alba Iulia—"Stația de Salvare" was initially mentioned by R. R. Heitel.⁴ The mass at the base of the handles (conical protrusions) that appears on some amphorae from "Stația de Salvare" can be observed on other specimens of the same period at Pliska,⁵ Sultana⁶ and Blandiana A.⁷

The second ceramic vessel (in a fragmentary state) was identified to the left of the skull and was wheel-thrown from a sandy paste. Its small body is ovoid-shaped, has a bulgy middle area and a short neck. Brown or blackish traces are still preserved in the middle area of the vessel's reddish body, whose color is a result of an incomplete oxidizing burn. The marks at the base of a handle seem to have been kept on the area of maximum diameter. The decoration consists of rows of oblique incisions made with a cogwheel and are alternately drawn to the right or to the left. The decorative element covers the surface between the base and the neck of the vessel (MNUAI E 6575; $H = 12.7$ cm, $D_b = 7.5$ cm, $D_m = 12.1$ cm, $D_g = 9.5$ cm; photo 2).

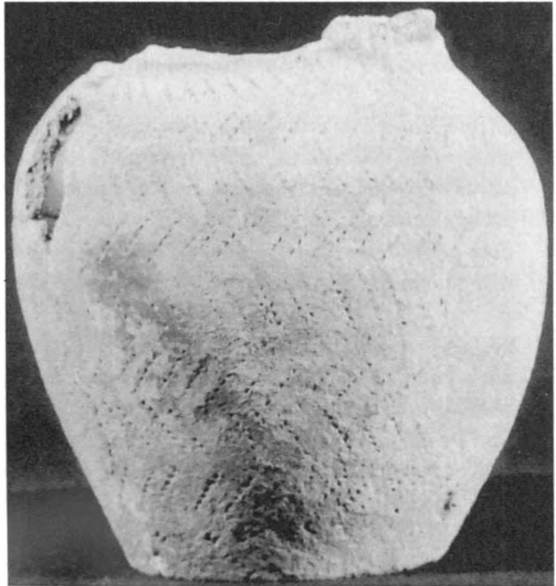


PHOTO 2

The pear-shaped bell was cast in bronze and had the lower half split into a cross in the shape of four lobes. The specimen was laterally flattened and had a little ball on the inside. The clamping handle, laterally flattened, has an overhung ring at the base and is transversely perforated. Identified in the area of the right coxal, the bell has a height of 13.7 mm (MNUAI E. 7770).⁸ This form, which is typical for the 10th–11th centuries, is also found in other funerary discoveries such as those from Alba Iulia–Brândușei St.,⁹ Bijelo Brdo,¹⁰ Mahovljani¹¹ and Voiteg.¹²

The iron knife discovered near the skull is in a fragmentary state. Its blade is curved in a convex manner and the edge is concave (L=67 mm, l=12 mm, T_{edge}=3.5 mm, MNUAI E. 7500).

The W-E orientation of some graves belonging to the first horizon of “Stația de Salvare” can be explained by the fact that the Bulgarian enclave that reached the area had already come into contact with Christianity, enforced upon the Bulgarians by Boris since 864. After the enforcement of Christianity upon the great mass of the population (864–865), Boris Mikhail I (852–889), the son of Presian I, was forced to suppress the revolt of conservative elements among the aristocracy (865). On that occasion, a number of 52 boyar families were destroyed to the last generation.¹³ However, Christianity was not yet fully implemented at community level in the First Bulgarian Empire due to the internal political situation. On the other hand, the time elapsed since the adoption of Christianity was not enough to remove the pagan traces. We know that, after a rather long reign of 37 years, Boris most likely retired to the monastery of St. Panteleimon in Preslav (889). Vladimir-Rasate (889–893), the eldest son of Boris, was considered a “Bulgarian equivalent of Julian the Apostate.”¹⁴ This Bulgarian presence in Transylvania can be correlated with the event of 892, mentioned in the *Annals of Fulda*, when Arnulf of Carinthia (887–899), king of the eastern part of the Frankish state, while being in conflict with the Moravian Prince Svatopluk, sent an embassy to Vladimir-Rasate, asking him to renew the peace of 862 and stop the sale of salt to the Moravians.

*Missos etiam suos inde ad Bulgaros et regem eorum Laodomir ad renovandam pristinam pacem cum muneribus mense Septembrio transmisit et, ne coemptio salis inde Maravansis daretur exposcit. Missi autem propter insidias Zwentibaldi ducis terrestre iter non valentes habere de regno Brazlavonis per fluvium Odagra (=Odra) usque ad Gulpam (=Kulpa) dein per fluenta Savi (=saue) fluminis navigio in Bulgaria perducti. Ibi a rege honorifice suscepti eadem via, qua venerant cum muneribus mense Maio reversi sunt.*¹⁵

*He also sent his men with gifts from there in the month of September to the Bulgarians and their king, Lodomir, to renew the former peace and to ask that they should not sell salt to the Moravians. The ambassadors, not being able to travel by land because of the ambushes laid by the dux Zwentibald, went from the kingdom of Brazlavo by the River Odra as far as Kulpa, and then by ship along the River Sava into Bulgaria. There they were received with honour by the king, and returned with gifts by the same route by which they had come arriving back in the month of May.*¹⁶

Through his behavior he undermined the new faith and position of the Church, pursuing a policy of persecution of the clergy. His attitude in favor of paganism attracted

the support of the elite of Bulgarian society, whose revolt had initially been silenced by Boris. The pact with Arnulf, the rebirth of paganism but also the anti-Byzantine attitude determined the return of Boris-Mikhail from the monastery. With the help of faithful people, Vladimir was imprisoned and blinded as punishment. A “national assembly” (893) decided a complete rupture from paganism. It was also decided to move the capital from Pliska (where paganism was still strong) to Veliki Preslav, and enthrone Simeon, Boris’s third and youngest son, whose monastic oaths were annulled. Once the political and religious situation was restored, Boris-Mikhail returned to the monastery, where he remained until the end of his life (2 May 907).¹⁷

We interpret the graves belonging to the first horizon of Alba Iulia in this same context, in the sense that the rather short time since the official adoption of Christianity by the Bulgarians was not enough to remove all pagan elements. On the other hand, the existing political problems and also the resistance put up by the elements from the upper layer denote the fact that this enclave in Transylvania still practiced the old traditions, or maybe had not even abandoned them in the first place. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Bulgarian enclave that reached Transylvania in the second half of the 9th century was culturally and religiously heterogeneous. The political and religious situation in the First Bulgarian Empire that generated dissensions between Boris and Vladimir is very clearly reflected in the case of this community that reached the north of the Danube.

Some elements or customs (the inscription Π Α Π Α Γ or most likely Π Α Π Α C, the W-E orientation of some graves, the egg offering from G. 624 and Section XIII/G. 10) indicate an indisputable contact with Christianity, but others (pottery offering, coal, animal remains offering: bovine and ovi-caprine) reflect pagan customs. In this context, we must also consider the shaman’s grave (G. 2) from the necropolis of Blandiana A.¹⁸ From the perspective of the ceramic offering and some funerary arrangements, a symbiosis between the Romanesque elements, the southern ones, and those received from the Saltovo cultural environment can be inferred.

Probably, in the case of some individuals, Christianity was received and preserved ad litteram after its adoption by Boris, and in others, the return to paganism in Vladimir’s time was an opportunity to return to the old beliefs. This “trial” period not only particularizes the history of the Bulgarians but is also found in the case of the Hungarians, where we have a tendency to return to paganism after the death of Stephen I. This is normal, if we consider that the Christian religion could not be implemented overnight in the case of these populations with complex pagan traditions.

The signature of St. Methodius, quite close to the inscription on our vessel, appears along with other names on the pages of a book that includes the benefactors of the Benedictine monastery of Reichenau, to whom services and prayers were dedicated by monks.¹⁹

Between 870 and 873 Methodius was imprisoned for two and a half years in Swabia. Sent to take jurisdiction over Pannonia, Moravia, Slovakia and part of Croatia, Methodius was arrested by the Frankish and Bavarian clergy and was convicted by a synod in Regensburg for usurping episcopal rights. His prerogatives in Pannonia and Moravia clashed with the interests of the Frankish and Bavarian clergy, at a time when the political situation in Central Europe had become critical, with the imprisonment of Rastislav

by his nephew Svatopluk and the recognition of the supremacy of Louis the Pious. At the express request of Pope John VIII, the Bavarian bishops and Louis the Pious were forced to release him in 873.²⁰ The Magyar invasion and the end of the Moravian Empire marked the moment when the Slavic priests that had a refugee status focused their work upon Bulgaria, trying to keep it within the Greek religious sphere of influence.²¹

We know that in 893 the Bulgarians officially adopted the new “Cyrillic” writing, more similar to the Greek alphabet, apparently invented in Bulgaria by one or more disciples of Methodius.²² The disciples of the holy brothers (Kliment, Naum, Angelarij) arrived in Bulgaria, where the foundations of the great centers of Slavonic culture and literature at Pliska (later Veliki Preslav) and Ohrid²³ were laid with the support of Boris-Mikhail. The use of this writing in the first decades of the 10th century would explain the style of our inscription and the similarities with the letters of the Greek and Cyrillic alphabets.²⁴ Some funeral aspects such as the egg offering, the decoration using the cogwheel on the second vessel, and the shape of the bell plead for the dating of G. 624 in the 10th century.

Within this enclave (the cultural group Blandiana A), Christianity had a major impact rather on an individual level, precisely because of the political and religious situation in the First Bulgarian Empire. At the community level, until the “Hierotheus moment” both manifestations coexisted (paganism and Christianity), a fact supported by the archaeological discoveries from Alba Iulia.

The inscription Π Α Π Α Γ, or most likely Π Α Π Α C, on the body of the amphora represents in this context a reminiscence of the name of Saint Methodius, archbishop of Sirmium and Moravia. Undoubtedly, the presence of the name of Methodius on a ceramic vessel from Alba Iulia has a special symbolism for Christianity in Transylvania in particular and for the European space in general.



Notes

1. Horia Ciugudean, “Pottery Offerings in the Early Middle Age Cemetery of Alba Iulia–Stația de Salvare,” in *Funerary Offerings and Votive Depositions in Europe’s 1st Millennium AD: Cultural Artifacts and Local Identities*, edited by Călin Cosma (Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2007), 243–262.
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8. Mihai Blăjan, "Alba Iulia (sec. VIII–XI)," in *Arta bronzului din preistorie până în zorii Evului Mediu* (Alba Iulia: n.p., 2004), 56, fig. 160; Aurel Dragotă, *Podoabe și accesorii vestimentare din Banat, Crișana și Transilvania (secolele X–XI)* (Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2014), 86.
9. Dragotă, *Podoabe și accesorii vestimentare*, 86, fig. 46/1.
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11. *Ibid.*, 91, 105, pl. IV/4.
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16. *The Annals of Fulda: Ninth-Century Histories, Volume II*, translated and annotated by Timothy Reuter (Manchester–New York: Manchester University Press, 1992), 124.
17. Pavlov, Ianev, and Cain, 30; Dimitry Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe 500–1453* (New York–Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 97.
18. Anghel and Ciugudean, 179–196.
19. Petr Charvát, *The Emergence of the Bohemian State* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2010), 97. The possible similarity with the inscription from Alba Iulia was pointed out to us by Mr. Dan Ioan Mureșan (Rouen University), to whom we express our gratitude.

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21. Dvornik, 8.
22. Obolensky, 148–149.
23. Pavlov, Ianev, and Cain, 34.
24. Steven Runciman, *A History of the First Bulgarian Empire* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1930), 298–299.

Abstract

An Interesting Discovery at Alba Iulia: Could It Be an Inscription with the Name of Saint Methodius?

The present article focuses upon an interesting discovery made during the archaeological research carried out at Alba Iulia—"Stația de Salvare," concerning the elements of rite and funeral ritual of grave 624, which most likely belongs to a male child. In the sepulchral pit of the abovementioned grave one can observe animal remains, egg-shells, coal, a pear-shaped bell, an iron blade and the deposition of two ceramic vessels. Of these two, the amphora features on its shoulder an inscription engraved in Greek letters. This inscription consists of five letters of different heights and it is widely discussed in the present article.

Keywords

Alba Iulia, Transylvania, necropolis, inscription, Saint Methodius