The *Christianization* of the Funeral Rite in the Early Middle Ages[*]

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Medieval Christianity in Central and Southeastern Europe

THE CHRISTIANIZATION of the Slavs in Central Europe is not sufficiently documented, either from a historical point of view, or from an archeological one, but it is generally accepted that during the 10th–11th centuries the majority of the Slavic communities in the European space were Christianized.[1] Christian symbols start to appear on objects that were discovered in the context of the Avar Khaganate, but this does not necessarily mean that they express the faith of those who wore them. Vladimír Turčan considers that, after the collapse of Moravia, at the beginning of the 10th century, the Christian communities that had appeared in urban centers were bound to move from the fortified precinct to the surrounding regions,[2] thereby facilitating the spreading of Christian funeral practices in the rural areas.

Given the aggressive form in which Christianity asserted itself as the sole religion in Europe, we have to admit that success would only have been guaranteed by the existence of a foundation and an infrastructure that only a state organization can offer. Therefore Christianity was attached to the power structures and was supported by them in its efforts towards administrative organization and then assertion.

What is very important regarding our research is the fact that the oldest church in Mikulčice—at that time the political center of Moravia—was most probably built between 800 and 825 inside the fortified area of the urban agglomeration,[3] which indicates that the mission of Christianization had the support of the political authorities. In the case of Moravia, there was a convergence of interests in this respect between Prince Mojmir and the Archbishopric of Passau. Chronologically speaking, the Christianization of the prince's family has to have happened around the year 820. Prior to this moment and even right after it, burial grounds located in the big fortifications, including Stare Mesto-Veligrad, displayed manifestly pagan features,[4]

which disappear by the middle of the 9th century, a time when the cremation rite was quickly abandoned in favor of inhumation in the central region, between the Morava and the Thaya (Dyje) rivers. An important indicator for considering inhumation an effect of Christianization is the presence in the funeral inventory of metal belt ends, decorated with figures in praying positions, showing an Irish monastic influence and made in local workshops.

The presence of the Byzantine mission in Moravia had, as a direct effect over the funeral practice, the generalization of inhumation and the abandonment of pagan elements (rich funeral inventory, deposition of weapons in graves etc.). The most visible effect, from an archeological point of view, is the construction of stone churches in most urban centers and in their surrounding regions. From an archeological point of view, the consequences of Constantine and Methodius's mission are visible within the precincts of the burial grounds[5] that emerged around the new religious constructions. In what we call today Slovakia—the Nitra region—throughout the 9th–10th centuries there appeared a number of small churches around which graveyards were set up.[6] The funeral practices specific to this period cannot be dissociated from the ones that existed on the entire Moravian territory in the context of the *rebirth of Christianity*, and it is here that we notice the emergence, in military or urban areas, of graveyards, a phenomenon that occurred around the 9th–10th centuries, as well as the preservation of a few non-Christian funeral practices in the row-necropolises of the entirely rural areas. The difference worth mentioning here involves the presence of weaponry in the graves located around the churches, which once again proves that the funeral inventory is important from the vantage point of social rather than ethnic distinctions. The analysis of necropolises / burial grounds and cemeteries / churchyards from the 9th and 10th centuries, on the territory of Moravia, shows that we have three possible connections between necropolises/graveyards and the church[7]: a. row-necropolises / burial grounds situated outside the settlement; b. necropolises / burial grounds on the site of the church which remained in use also after the construction of the place of worship; c. graveyards that appeared right after the church was built.

The Christianization of Bulgaria took place almost at the same time as that of Moravia. In the year 865, Tsar Boris accepted to be christened[8] and applied the same political reasoning as Ratislav, seeking to bring Christianity to the tsardom through missionaries from the Carolingian Empire. As a consequence of the Byzantine attack of 864, he was forced to give up his initial intentions and accepted Byzantine Christianity, taking his Christian name after that of Emperor Michael I. Therefore a series of Bulgarian leaders/ boyars accepted Christianization, accelerating the Christianization of the population and, consequently, radically changing all the funeral practices in the tsardom through the abandonment of pagan burial sites and by relocating burial grounds around the churches.

The *Christianization* of the Funeral Rite: Theoretical Premises

IN OUR opinion the research regarding burial sites offers important benefits, as the understanding of funeral practices makes it easier to obtain information regarding the social and sometimes the ethnic origins of the deceased, as well as the community in general, as it is known that the burial ground represents a permanent link between the community and its predecessors.[9]

The ethnic character of the archaeological objects has always been a topic of debate in the Anglo-Saxon, French or German historiography, and it also timidly emerged in the specialist debate in the Romanian environment, but only after the '90s.[10] Starting from this potential ethnic character of the archaeological object, a theory emerged which later on became an axiom of Romanian history: the Romans, and later on the Daco-Romans, being culturally superior to the foreigners, are easy to identify archeologically because of the perpetuation of a "conservatism" of the funeral rite and, in relation to this, the massive presence of Christianity within the communities. Another axiom is represented by the "belief" in an *early Christianization* and later on in the *persistence of popular Christianity* in all north-Danubian areas and even in the intra-Carpathian Transylvanian region. In spite of these axioms or "beliefs," field archaeology has not managed to provide clear and irrefutable evidence of the existence of a generalized Christianity within certain communities, the majority of them having Daco-Roman origins, from the 9th and 10th centuries.

The link between archaeology and nationalism can be studied, first of all, from the perspective of the role that archaeology has played in the history of the emergence of national identities.[11] The second approach could start from the links between the development of national states and the institutionalization of archaeology.[12] Bruce G. Trigger considers that nationalist archaeology is most strongly developed among the populations that feel threatened, unsafe, or deprived of political rights by stronger nations.[13] Recently, Romanian historiography has tried to eliminate those terms that have to do with the noun *national* when referring to the migrations period and the early Middle Ages and adopted a new term that is closer to the reality of the medieval society: *identity*. This can be understood in different ways: *political*, in the sense of belonging to a privileged category, *religious* and even *social*. In Romanian historiography, Stelian Brezeanu approaches this issue when he, maybe under the influence of this new trend in European historiography, speaks about medieval *identities and solidarities* in the Romanian space.[14] We consider that the idea of "solidarity," regardless of its nature, within the boundaries of any historical-geographic space, especially of the Romanian one, should be looked at with circumspection.

Together with the theory of Romanian medieval solidarity, and even prior to it, historiography embraced the postulate of the spread of Apostolic Christianity among the north-Danubian populations.[15] Archaeology was swiftly called upon to come with relevant arguments supporting the idea of the massive early Christianization of the Daco-Roman populations.[16] In Transylvania, archaeological research turned quite early (right after the First World War) towards two aspects: the Daco-Roman continuity after the so-called Aurelian withdrawal and the search for evidence of generalized Christianity. The discussion around the generalized Christianity of the population from the southern half of Transylvania frequently resorted to the same arguments: the discovery of some Christian elements (crosses, sarcophagi with Christian symbols etc.) from the period prior to the 7th century and the documentary reference to one Hierotheus—Bishop of Tourkia—supposedly tasked by the Byzantine Imperial Court with the administrative-religious organization of the north-Danubian territories. The identification of the region where bishop Hierotheus has been sent as a missionar was based on the archaeological discoveries from Alba Iulia (a round chapel, burial grounds with objects of the Christian type, and a church built in the shape of a Greek cross[17] with parallels in the south-Danubian Byzantine area) and on some references to a visit to Constantinople by a chieftain from Alba Iulia, Gylas/Gyula, sometime around the middle of the 10th century. Alexandru Madgearu, analyzing the possible association with Alba Iulia, came to the conclu-

sion that this hypothesis is not very likely and that the region where Hierothus activated is to be found in the area between the Mureș, Tisza and Danube rivers.[18] Archaeology has not managed to bring other arguments to elucidate the problem and what we have gathered so far leads to the conclusion that between the 7th century and the 10th century, on the Transylvanian territory, Christianity did not represent a generalized religion. The arguments are given by: the almost complete lack of Christian objects between the end of the 7th century and the end of the 9th century; the lack of clues regarding the existence of places of worship—churches—in the time period mentioned above (the first known religious construction in Transylvania is the round chapel at Alba Iulia, whose construction date is still debated by specialists; Radu R. Heitel, the archaeologist who began the archaeological investigation of the site, proposed different dates for the construction, from the end of the 9th century to the middle of the 10th century); the absence of any documentary reference directly or indirectly providing information regarding the existence of an administrative-religious structure north of the Danube, between the 7th century and the 10th century.

Biritualism has been documented through archaeological research in the north-Danubian Romanian space, in Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria. But what do we understand by biritualism? If we were to define it, it would mean the practice of two funeral rites within the same community. Regarding the inventory of these necropolises, the big difference between the biritual necropolises in Transylvania and the ones located in the other regions of the Carpathian basin should not be overlooked. First of all, the major difference is related to the fact that in Transylvania we have few Avar objects—most of them coming from the necropolis at Bratei—while in Slovakia, Hungary or Austria there are many Avar objects.

It could be said that after the decay of the Avar military power at the end of the 8th century, Christian missionaries gained access to the intra-Carpathian territory. Also, following the rise of the new military power in the region—the Bulgarian tsardom, Christianized in the 9th century—all the necessary conditions were arguably met for the *rebirth* of the Christian religion in the territories situated east of the Middle Danube and north of the Lower Danube.

Local, Regional or Ethnic Funeral Inventory

THE CONCEPT of ethnic/ethnicity is an asset acquired in the modern period, generally not very common in historical and archaeological writings dating from before 1970.[19] The term *ethnic group* was used chiefly by anthropologists during the 1960s, at a time when human society was experiencing the "blessings" of the post-colonial period: the massive migration of population groups from the former colonies to metropolises, which led to the emergence of cultural groups that were distinct from the majority population.[20] A brief synthesis regarding this topic was realized by Florin Curta and we reproduce it partially below:

What do we understand by ethnicity? The word ethnicity is a neologism coming from the French language, where, just as in the Romanian language, its word family includes the adjective ethnic but not the noun that expresses the quality this adjective refers to. Studying the origins of modern nations, British sociologist Anthony D. Smith suggested using the French term ethnie (ethnicity) in scholarly works, as an alternative to 'nation' when referring to a historical period when nations had not emerged yet. Smith affirmed that when we speak about ethnicity we are dealing with myths, symbols and values which find their expression in a large category of objects

and activities, whose result is what we know as ethnicity. A. D. Smith considers that any ethnicity has six main components: a collective name; a myth regarding the common origin of its members; a common history; a common distinctive culture; the association with a certain territory; a certain sense of solidarity between the members of the group. [21]

Analyzing A. D. Smith's contention , Florin Curta claims that *ethnic groups are not born out of thin air, but are shaped by the will of their members.*[22] E. Bergman considers that an ethnic group—meaning ethnicity—can be defined as such if we speak of a common biological origin, of physical and cultural characteristics that are distinct from those of others, of the existence of a certain degree of chauvinism, of the existence of communication within a community based on a "mother tongue" and, in certain cases, of a distinct religion or confession.[23] In this respect, we can say that without the opposition between *us* and *the others* there can be no ethnicity.[24]

Within the boundaries of what could be referred to as the ethnic paradigm, archaeological objects—especially those coming from graves—have been interpreted as having a strong ethnic signification, becoming an indicator of the ethnic origin of the owner. In the early 2000s, this type of approach led to the emergence of certain negative comments regarding the increased presence of nationalist approaches in archaeology.[25] However, the Viennese school continued to insist on the ethnic character of the archaeological objects and, in the wake of Walter Pohl's work,[26] suggests a model of archaeological approach to the ethnic problem for the migrations period in the central and west-European space. In a recent work, Susanne Hakenbeck revisits the issue of the ethnic attribution of the archaeological material, starting her analysis from the research of early medieval burial grounds in Bavaria, a region with a particular history generated by the fact that it is the first barbarian dukedom/kingdom mentioned in documents from the middle of the 6th century. The author considers that, given the failure of ascribing ethnicity only based on objects that are considered to be indicators thereof, the analysis of the period of the barbarian kingdoms' emergence cannot overlook the existence of some groups that differ from one another not just in name (as we can infer from the names that the historical sources mention) but also in some particularities reflected in the material culture. These particularities, which can be regional or local, are no more than a form through which we can identify ethnic boundaries in a given territory.[27]

The most important negative comment towards the ethnic paradigm applied to the Early Middle Ages also comes from the German historiography and is represented by the work of the Freiburg Group devoted to the investigation of identity, mainly through the voice of Sebastian Brather. Essentially, he says "that archaeology cannot offer any approach to ethnic indicators because this type of indicators have not been mentioned in written sources—so we have no reference from the inside, no message about the signification of things. Archaeologists only notice the context or the circumstances in which archaeological discoveries occur."[28]

Without necessarily taking Brather's side or fully accepting Pohl's or Bierbrauer's[29] theories, it is difficult to accept such a radical position regarding the impossibility of archaeology to find ethnic indicators on the basis of which the territories of culturally homogenous groups could be identified. An approach within the boundaries of the theory propounded by Bierbrauer and which tries to solve the issue of ethnic attribution through statistical means belongs to Frank Siegmund. His attempts to carry out comprehensive synthetic analyses seek to identify, through archaeological means, the ethnic groups from the north of France

and from Germany based on the differences in the usage of funeral inventory over the entire area.[30] He concentrated on the ratio between weaponry, adornments and belt buckles, thus identifying three areas, described as cultural models: Western (the north of France up to the Rhine), Southern (the south of Germany) and Eastern (from Thuringia to the Elbe). Siegmund does not use the term 'ethnic,' preferring instead to cultural groups, without explaining the mechanism through which these cultural models become relevant for the ethnic identity and without indicating how this context could account for the Romanization of funeral practices, a process extremely visible in the 7th century.[31]

The problem of ethnicity in the migrations period and during the Central and Southeastern European Early Middle Ages is extremely difficult to approach, because the numerous populations (*gens*)—or ethnic groups—for example the Huns, the Gepids, the Avars, the Slavs etc., have become identifiable based on some elements of funeral inventory that are rather an indicator of social status, to the point where groups of different origins that adopted the elements of their material culture went on to become, in their turn, Huns, Gepids, Avars or Slavs through the behavior and the cultural model that they embraced. Walter Pohl[32] reaches some methodology-related conclusions which we shall briefly outline here:

a. *ethnicity is not an objective phenomenon*[33] and therefore archaeological data or objects only allow for hypotheses regarding the *modality of ethnic usage*—in other words, hypotheses regarding the context in which they were used;
b. many of the *objects discovered by archaeologists can be direct or indirect expressions of the ethnic identity*, especially if discovered in ceremonial contexts (for example, in graves), but no group of objects or individual objects unequivocally represent an ethnic indicator;
c. *archaeological cultures and ethnic groups often coincide*, but we do not always have to expect them to be completely identifiable. The political borders, the ethnic territories, the linguistic groups and the territories of some material cultures do not always overlap.[34]

On the other hand, this issue cannot be dissociated from the analysis of the penetration, preservation and assertion of Christianity as a sole religion directly linked to power institutions, during the migrations period and the Early Middle Ages. Ramsay MacMullen analyzed this topic from the perspective of the institutionalized antagonism implied by the destruction of the religious pagan infrastructure[35] and the ascent of the new Christian institutions, considering that the access to information is hampered by the fact that most of the ancient sources still in existence come from the Christian environment.[36] Indeed, documents only present the Christian version of the historical process that occurred between the 3rd and the 6th centuries, and archaeology can fill in the information gap only to a limited extent. Christian items were also traded within the so-called pagan communities and it is enough to cite the situation of the Biertan donarium, a Christian object diverted from its initial purpose and used outside the ritual context for which it had been made, associated mostly with the cult of the "sacred sources," as suggested by Uwe Fiedler.[37] MacMullen affirms that the rise of Christianity to the detriment of the other religions, after the 3rd century, went through multiple stages: *the persecutions* aimed at "pagan" writings[38] (4th–5th centuries), *superstitions* regarding those who were not Christian[39] (5th–6th centuries) and, finally, their *assimilation*[40] (7th–8th centuries).

The persistence of "pagan" influences in the Christian communities is very well illustrated by the preservation of certain pre-Christian feast days in the Christian rituals that mark the beginning of winter and the beginning of spring, holidays that can also be identified in the

6th–13th centuries at the Byzantine Imperial Court, the political-religious center of the Oriental European world.[41]

An important aspect, in our opinion, regarding the ascent of Christianity is the modality in which the funeral rite was "Christianized"[42] starting with the 8th century in Central and Southeastern Europe. We cannot speak of the Christian funeral rite being institutionalized before the "Church" even existed, and this has to do strictly with the political and administrative structures of power. Christianity became (once again) the sole religion in the Central and Southeastern European space after the 8th century, in the context of the eastern expansion of the Carolingian Empire as far as the middle course of the Danube and of the Byzantine revival on the Lower and Middle Danube after the Christianization of the Bulgarians.

In the western Christian world of the 5th–8th centuries, the funeral rite is well illustrated, especially by the political and religious elites that produced funeral monuments or funeral practices of the Christian type, meant to preserve their social status.[43]

Another important aspect for the analysis of funeral practices is given by the understanding of the staging of the rites officiated prior to one's death, during the funeral service, and after the burial. Archaeology only offers indirect and vague information about all of them, and the written sources come mostly from the post–7th century Christian environment. An indirect example of archaeological reference is given by the so-called grave robbery of the Germanic stage, a phenomenon encountered in the whole area occupied by the barbarian post-Roman kingdoms and which, due to this wide distribution, has to be understood rather as an element belonging to a post-burial rite. A series of works that see as plausible the hypothesis of the existence of a post-burial ceremony have appeared in the last 15–20 years in connection to this phenomenon of grave "robbery."[44] Within the boundaries of the Pliening necropolis, the robbed graves are grouped together in a distinct zone and belong to the late burial phase (phase 4: the first half of the 7th century),[45] which is also valid for the Giesing-Munich burial grounds.[46] According to the specialist who investigated the Pliening site, the reason why only the graves belonging to a specific phase of the necropolis were "robbed" had to do with a possible conflict within the community, which generated vindictive actions.[47] We believe that, starting precisely from the analysis made by the specialist in question with regard to this group of graves that seem to have been specifically targeted for robbery, an action that focused only on certain objects (especially weaponry), and considering the fact that the phenomenon is known in the whole Central and Southeastern Europe during the 7th century, we are more likely dealing here with a rite associated with the funeral practices, dedicated to the memory of the ancestors rather than to a kind of *damnatio memoriae*.

Of great importance for the 6th and 7th centuries is the understanding of the significance of burial rites and of their role in creating new social identities.[48] The change regarding the funeral practices was understood most of all as having an ethnic connotation, although it has been noticed that important transformations concerning the funeral rite in the 5th century had to do with highlighting the gender or social position of the deceased by means of the funeral inventory.[49] The question is why was it necessary to differentiate thus between the deceased? During the 7th–9th centuries, the barycenter shifts from the cremation rite to the inhumation rite. What lead to such a transformation? It is hard to believe that it was only the changes related to the ethnic component in a geographic space. More likely, from the vantage point of the funeral practices of that time, the person/body of the deceased was important, and what needed to be emphasized was the social status and not the ethnic affiliation. The shift to incineration starting with the 6th century can be linked to the emergence of some

ethnic groups that were different from the ones which had traditionally lived in the central and southeastern European space, and it is clearly associated with the settling of the Avars in Pannonia.

The conversion to Christianity of a community can indeed be identified using archaeological means, due to the radical shift in funeral practices. In our opinion, however, this does not necessarily represent an ethnic indicator. At European level, the major changes affecting the burial rite starting with the 5th century are visible especially when it comes to the redefinition of the military and social elite in the new polities located on the territory of the former provinces of the Western Roman Empire. In Merovingian France (the former Roman Gaul) the turning point is represented by the rule of Clovis (466–511). His father, Childeric, was buried in keeping with a funeral rite that preserved many "pagan" elements (including the ritual burial of horses), while Clovis and all the Merovingian kings after him were buried in churches.[50] Approximately at the same time, in Transylvania, there are documents concerning the existence of a "barbarian king" when at least the leading elite was possibly Christian, but the funeral practices maintained strong links with the "pagan" ones. Suffice to mention here the so-called princely graves at Apahida (the grave of Omaharus)[51] and the one at Turda (the grave of "Princess Franziska").[52]

After the emergence of the new power centers, churches were built within their boundaries, with "privileged places" [53] reserved for the dead belonging to the ruling families. Examples in this respect can be found at Stare Mesto, Pohansko–Breclav, Mikulčice (Czech Republic), Nitra (Slovakia), Székesfehérvár (?) (Hungary), Preslav and Pliska (Bulgaria), where, in the period between 800 and 910, there existed churches that were used as preferential burying places for the ruling elite.

An example for the emergence a theoretical foundation for the "Christianization" of death and of the rites that go along with it is Eusebius of Caesarea's *Vita Constantini*, in which are presented a series of measures banning the sacrifices, measures adopted after the battle of 324 that saw the final defeat of Licinius.[54]

Substantial research has been carried out concerning the Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, in regard to both written and archaeological sources. Published studies on an impressive number of necropolises / burial grounds and cemeteries / graveyards come to provide a wealth of material connected to the funeral practices (funeral inventory, sarcophagi, stone and brick cists, funeral inscriptions, mosaics, and weaponry), which illustrates a gradual but radical transformation of the European world starting with the 4th century. This process came to an end in Western Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean in the 8th century, when, once again, funeral practices suffer deep transformations: the funeral inventory and the row-type of burial grounds disappear and the graves are grouped around the churches, burial grounds becoming part of the urban landscape.

The same process also occurred in Central and Southeastern Europe—on the territories of the old Roman provinces—but here it was extended by the multiple population movements recorded between the 4th century and the end of the 10th century. The starting point is also in the 4th century, when the changes in the funeral practice involve the abandonment of funeral monuments and the increased importance of funeral offerings/sacrifices (an eloquent example is given by the funeral rite in the communities of the Sântana de Mureş–Cernjachov type). For the eastern half of the Carpathian basin, the end of the process was brought about by the political stabilization of the 10th century, when the Arpadian Kingdom rose and the Christianized Bulgarian tsardom was organized. New edicts imposed the relocation of funer-

al spaces around the churches and we witness the slow disappearance, by the 12th century, of funeral offerings, indicating the adoption of new liturgical rules for funeral ceremonies. The whole process was lengthened by the shock created by the Slavs and by the re-emergence of incineration as a funeral practice, generalized in the north-Danubian region and the eastern Carpathian basin. All these transformations had nothing to do with the ethnicity of those who populated the European lands between the 4th and the 8th–10th centuries, as such distinctions cannot be drawn on the basis of the funeral practices.

The written sources about the non-Christian funeral practices are limited to some short references found in Christian texts.[55] Archaeology alone provided all the materials that might be interpreted and configured into a system that would allow for some kind of reconstruction of a "pagan" funeral rite. Frederick S. Paxton considers, however, that the rich archaeological material is not enough to provide explanations in regard to the relation between the ritual behavior and the elements of funeral inventory, or between the religious changes and the burial ceremony.[56] Therefore, trying to piece together the non-Christian funeral practices of the 5th–8th centuries is a very difficult task and the opinions expressed so far are constantly revised in light of new discoveries or interpretations. Paxton considers that the process that saw the Christianization of death became generalized in almost all of Europe, due to the reforms effected during the period of the Carolingian Empire[57] which, especially after the 9th century, became important in the religious field following a change in the dynamic policy adopted by the monastic clergy in an attempt to bring the monastery into contact with the communities that served it.

The issue avoided by most Central European researchers is related precisely to the identification of the funeral practices of the 9th century starting from the limited written information available and from the numerous funeral archaeological discoveries. No one can say anything about what the funeral rite meant in the context of cremation or biritual necropolises. A whole range of questions require approaches that are different from the historical cultural tradition of the Romanian school of archaeology: does biritualism represent a regional transitional form, from paganism to Christianity? Can the funeral rite which tolerates, within the boundaries of the same community, two burial rites be interpreted as belonging to different ethnic communities? Is there a difference between the religious ceremonies for the two rites: cremation and inhumation? After what point in time can we ascertain the existence of some Christian funeral practices with the communities in the Transylvanian space of the Carpathian basin or in the north-Danubian regions?

According to Arnold van Gennep, the funeral rite has three components identifiable in the majority of human communities, regardless of the period or of their social and economic stage of development: the separation rite, the transition rite and the "resurrection/reincarnation" rite.[58] Paxton thinks that the most important of the three, from the community's point of view, and which we believe difficult to reconstruct through archaeological means, is the third component, the one which refers to the series of practices/ceremonies that take place after the burial. If we analyze matters from this perspective, could we understand the so-called mass "robbery" of graves belonging to the Avaro-Gepid period (6th–7th century) in the context of some funeral practices meant to commemorate the deceased?

Continuing with this idea and considering that we do not precisely know if the population from the Transylvanian space of the 6th–8th century, who practiced the funeral rite, was or was not Christian (at least from what is known today, as there are no relevant written sources and no discoveries proving the existence of religious monuments) we can admit that

the "grave robbery" phenomenon[59] can represent a non-Christian manner of paying tribute to the memory and the body of the deceased.

The clear identification of material traces that could illustrate the three stages of the funeral ceremony is not impossible for the first two of them, because we have numerous examples of funeral objects that can help us understand what preparations were made for the deceased (*separation*) before they were laid in the grave (*transition*), but, as I said before, the third stage (*resurrection/reincarnation*) is quite difficult to illustrate through archaeological means. The oldest Christian text regarding the existence of a ceremony strictly related to this transition from the material world to the spiritual world dates from the middle of the 4th century and belongs to Bishop Serapion of Thmuis,[60] expressing the hope in a life after death and in resurrection. However, we have clear descriptions of Christian burial ceremonies only starting with the 11th century.[61]

The imposition of a relative uniformity of the ceremonial in the entire Christian world eliminated even the last funeral elements with a potential ethnic signification. The irrecoverable loss of the ethnic character of the funeral practices occurred in the western part of Europe, starting with the last phase of Merovingian Kingdom and coming to an end in the 8th–9th century, as a consequence of the double impact of the Carolingian and Papal reforms. The adoption of some Christian elements in the funeral practice of Central and Southeastern Europe in the early Christian period (8th–9th centuries) does not change the social character of the funeral inventory. At the Izvorul Împăratului archaeological site of Alba-Iulia, within the boundaries of the necropolis were discovered a series of crosses (engolpia) specific to the south-Danubian world, alongside funeral inventory specific to the Bijelo Brdo area, just as, within the boundaries of the Ciumbrud necropolis, we can find elements of inventory also found in the burial grounds of Stare Mesto or Pliska, or in Croatian necropolises. As can be observed from this short list, starting with the 9th century we are dealing with a fusion of Christian and non-Christian elements. This *Christianization of death*, a phenomenon that happened in Western Europe between the 6th and the 8th centuries, also manifested itself, after a certain delay, in the Carpathian basin and in the Lower Danube regions.

An interesting aspect is the interest showed by Romanians in commemoration services for their deceased relatives, held after a certain period of time or at certain times of the year (after 9 days, after 40 days, or between the 13th and the 21st of February, every year, during the celebration of the *Parentalia*). The majority of these ceremonies were *Christianized* and are nowadays found in both the Catholic and the Orthodox tradition, which indicates their adoption by the Church before the middle of the 9th century. Initially devised by Irish monks, "intellectualized" in the French and Italian monastic environment and disseminated by the monastic orders over the whole Christian territory after the 10th century, the ceremony dedicated to death became a true Christian world standard, at least until the end of the 16th century, when the Reformation brought about important changes in the funeral practice.

The persistence of one or several funeral practices of pagan origin in the Christian community is an undeniable fact, but the chronology of this phenomenon differs between the western and the eastern parts of Europe. In the Central European space the same *Christianization of death* did occur, best illustrated by the Stare Mesto or Mikulčice discoveries, a phenomenon that ended in the 10th century.

Guy Halsall showed that it is difficult to link the existence or non-existence of the funeral inventory to the absence or presence of Christian funeral practices, saying that the disappearance of burials with a rich funeral inventory—starting with the 7th century—in the western

part of Europe chronologically coincides with the generalization of Christianity, but there is no cause-effect[62] relation between them. The idea of such a causality is strongly rooted in the Anglo-Saxon environment, where the lack of funeral inventory is interpreted as an indicator of belonging to a Christian community.[63]

The Christianization of death was a lengthy process that ended long after Christianity as a religion asserted itself in the empire and in the barbarian kingdoms, death being accompanied by customs and superstitions that needed a longer time to be replaced or *Christianized*. In the non-Christian world, the deposition of funeral inventory was rather an act with social-juridical connotations which marked the status of the deceased, while the Christian world was more focused on the *memory* of the deceased[64], reason for which the deposition of funeral inventory was abandoned. We can say that the pagan outlook on funeral practices triumphed in the Christian world and the entire Christian funeral rite is nothing but a *Christianization*, a Christian explanation of pagan practices.

An archaeological analysis can provide valid information for the second phase of the ceremony—the transition—and to a certain extent also regarding the third—the resurrection—through the identification of some actions that took place after the deposition in the grave. I would say that archaeology can also give us clues in regard to some traditions, practices and elements of material culture that survived from the pre-Christian period in the Christian practices associated with the burial rite. From this point of view it is enough to mention the persistence, in the early Christian period, of two types of orientation for graves, N–S and W–E, the best example being, once again, the Sântana de Mureş type of necropolis.

Apart from all this, quite interesting is the existence of similar developments in the majority of European regions, both before and after Christianization, even if in different chronological intervals. Between the 6th and the 9th centuries, especially in the fringe areas of the continent (Britannia, 5th–6th century[65]; the east of the Carpathian basin and the north of the Bulgarian tsardom, 7th–9th century) the cremation rite is statistically present, while in the territories from the central-western and central areas of the continent inhumation had been generalized since the 6th century (Gaul, Italy, Germany, Raetium, Pannonia). After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the funeral inventory experiences, in all regions, the exact same modifications and returns, indicate a leveling of funeral practices under the impulse given by the emergence of barbarian kingdoms whose Germanic elite became the perpetuators of Roman traditions.

The funeral practices of the early medieval period were complex and with regional particularities, suffering modifications due to the adoption, after the 10th century, of uniform Christian rules for officiating burials. Essentially, the Christianization of the death process developed gradually everywhere and over more than one or even two generations, going through almost the same stages, regardless of the geographic space or the chronological period: the implementation of the Christian funeral practice initially by accepting some elements of the pagan funeral rite; the building of the church and the emergence of the burial ground around it (graveyards); the slow disappearance of funeral inventory.

The Christian funeral rite, albeit rendered uniform by the existence of a unitary set of regulations, maintains regional differences regarding the significance of certain gestures or objects that accompany the deceased. Ellen Jane Pader[66] was among the first to show that graves are no more than "texts" that must be read in a more complex manner than we have been used to. The same objects and the same shape of the grave do not necessarily mean that their symbolism is also the same everywhere. An absolute uniformity of the ceremony does

not exist even in the contemporary Christian church, which is bound by a series of strict rules whose observance can be verified.

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Notes

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Abstract

The *Christianization* of the Funeral Rite in the Early Middle Ages

The Christianization of the Central European Slavs is not sufficiently documented, either from a historical point of view, or from an archaeological one. The way the funeral rite was "Christianized" is, in our opinion, an important aspect regarding the rise of Christianity in Central Europe during the 9th century, when a series of small-sized churches emerged in the Nitra region of present-day Slovakia between the 9th and 10th centuries. It was there that a number of cemeteries also appeared. The process of *christening the dead* took place progressively and developed during one or even two generations. It followed almost the same phases regardless of its geographical area or chronological period: the assertion of Christian funeral practices by initially accepting some pagan funeral practices as well, the construction of churches and the emergence of cemeteries around them, the gradual disappearance of funeral inventory.

Keywords

Early Middle Ages, Christianity, burials, funeral rites