

Natural environment of cultic activities in Late Iron Age Transylvania

Sándor Berecki¹

Abstract. Among the finds from the Late Iron Age in Transylvania, there are some objects that, on the one hand, due to their location, and on the other hand, due to their characteristics, can be linked to cultic activities. Such finds are the stone sculpture from Prundu Bârgăului or the linchpin from Gălăoia in north-eastern Transylvania, or the brooch from Ohaba Ponor and the bracelet from Bănița, in south-western Transylvania; both are mountainous regions that are covered with forests. The study examines the natural environment of these objects, outlining the characteristics of the landscape use of Late Iron Age communities and the role of nature in various ceremonies.

Keywords: Late Iron Age Transylvania; landscape; ceremonies; cultic activities; stray finds

Introduction

Collective practices, such as feasting, religious, and burial rites strengthen collective identity. The ceremonies, these events out of the ordinary with a defined sequence of moments and stages mark transition from one state to another. The archaeological data deals only with the end product of the ritual, therefore the actions themselves can be reconstructed only partially. Yet, depending on their place of occurrence it can be presumed that some of them would have involved gatherings of people at special locations and certain periods or days of the year, while other times the connection between human and supernatural was intermediated by initiated persons. The study takes into account the natural environment of those Late Iron Age finds in the Carpathian Basin which by their nature or place of discovery could point to a ritual ceremony.

Looking at the distribution map of the LT B and LT C finds in Transylvania,² it can be noted that excepting the settlements from the large river valleys and their immediate side valleys, most stray finds are known from the periphery. The character of some of these objects is outstanding, and also from a land-use point of view, some of these finds were identified in exceptional places. There can be many reasons for how these objects ended up on the periphery of the core region (travel, trade, exchange, gifts etc), but in the case of some finds, it is highly probable that they played a role in ceremonies related to the marking of boundaries of the inhabited territory.

Cultic activities and their environment in the Late Iron Age Transylvania

At Prundu Bârgăului in north-eastern Transylvania, on the Bârgău valley, the head of a man carved out from volcanic tuff was discovered (Fig. 1/1). Even though the circumstances of discovery do not provide data for a more exact dating, the find was dated by V. Vasiliev based on stylistic

¹ <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7752-5126>

² See Berecki 2015, 39.

analysis and analogies to the middle of the Late Iron Age.³ On the distribution map of Celtic finds in the Carpathian Basin the stone head from Prundu Bârgăului is the north-easternmost point, and the closest known site, the cemetery at Cepar, lies at a distance of 26 km. The landscape is completely different than the characteristic Late Iron Age settlement pattern in Transylvania and the Carpathian Basin, and this also indicates the particularity of the site. On the upper part of the stone head is a carved out a cavity, and on its lower part, under the left ear, a small-size spout hole is visible. Therefore, one can infer that the object most likely played a central role in libation rituals.

The large sculptures of the Carpathian Basin traditionally were connected to the late La Tène oppida period and the sanctuaries that functioned inside or close to these central settlements.⁴ Stone heads were found so far in the region of the middle Danube and in Transdanubia, for example the janiform double head from Badacsony or the triangular-shaped sandstone head from Százhalombatta. Even though technically it is much different than the head from Prundu Bârgăului, the design and sculptural techniques such as the lentoid eyes and the deeply carved out part of the face around the triangular nose makes the find from Százhalombatta quite similar to the head from Transylvania.

From the functional point of view and taking into consideration certain stylistic elements (eyes, moustache and mouth), the closest parallel to the stone head from Prundu Bârgăului can be found in Sutherlandshire, in Scotland (Fig. 1/2), this piece also having a cavity on top, indicating its more likely use in libation rituals.⁵ The dating of the sculpture from Scotland, also based on stylistic elements, was set to the 1st century BC. However, stone sculptures did not appear in the late La Tène period, a high number of central and western European stone sculptures from Glauberg, Heidelberg, Pfalzfeld etc coming from early and middle La Tène contexts.⁶



Figure 1. Stone statue from Prundu Bârgăului, Romania (1) and Sutherlandshire, Scotland (2)

Based on the stylistic elements, the Celtic head from Prundu Bârgăului can be considered a product of the La Tène culture just as the stone head from Százhalombatta or the one from Sutherlandshire, which in its functionality provides a parallel, as well. Additionally, all stone heads cannot be regarded a Celtic product of the late La Tène period, since after the first third of the 2nd century BC the Celtic culture ceased to exist across Transylvania. Thus, the stone head from Prundu Bârgăului could have been produced sometime between the end of the 4th century and the beginning of the 2nd century BC. On the other hand, this statue is not the only Transylvanian Celtic stone art product. An unpublished stele fragment was discovered in the cemetery at Viștea in 2015, proving that during the 3rd century BC stone carving was practiced by the Celts in Transylvania. Taking into account the similarity of carving techniques, it can be argued that even though the statues from Százhalombatta, Prundu Bârgăului and Sutherlandshire come from significantly distant places, they were close in time.

³ Vasiliev 1969.

⁴ Szabó 2005, 168; Szabó 2015, 66–67.

⁵ Megaw, Megaw 2001, 227–228, fig. 382.

⁶ Megaw, Megaw 2001, 74.

The environment of the finds from Gălăoaia, in north-eastern Transylvania, located on a high terrace in the uplands of the Mureş valley, in the mountain – plain transition zone, is also outstanding. An iron linchpin was buried as a single object on this location, which indicates a conscious and at the same time isolated burial of the find (Fig. 2). Close to this linchpin, three iron spear heads were found, one of them bent and broken.⁷ The character of the site at Gălăoaia can be vaguely defined at this state of the research; most probably it was a hoarding place, but the object might also indicate the presence of a warrior who took part in a war or a hunting expedition.

The symbolic placement of linchpins in graves is a common phenomenon in the Late Iron Age cemeteries from the Carpathian Basin. Actually, no complete chariot was documented to the east of the Danube for this period, and only a few usually small metal pieces stood for the entire vehicle as *pars pro toto*. This is the case of the systematically excavated grave 49 at Fântânele-Dâmbu Popii, where only the linchpin ended up in the burial from the whole chariot.⁸ The inventory of the middle La Tène grave was carefully arranged in the pit: the human bones, clothing accessories, and animal offerings were placed on one side of the grave, while the weapons and the linchpin were placed on the opposite side, pointing to the special importance of this type of object.

The iron linchpins from Mukachevo–Galliš-Lovačka are the only ones found to the east of the Danube that come from a settlement feature.⁹ From a land-use point of view, Mukachevo and Gălăoaia are quite similar: both are situated at the entrance of mountain passes, in a very different environment than the traditional La Tène B and C settlements. These circumstances are further evidence that the Mukachevo site could have been more than an atypical mountainous Iron Age settlement.

The particularity of the linchpin from Gălăoaia is provided not only by the fact that it was discovered in an atypical landscape from the point of view of the Late Iron Age settlement pattern of the Carpathian Basin, but also by the character of the find. The Plastic style decoration on the knob of the linchpin from Gălăoaia is unique for the middle La Tène period in the Carpathian Basin. Somewhat similar Plastic style spirals on terminal knobs are known from Trier in Germany.¹⁰ The bent spear head indicates a deliberate damage, which means the conscious termination of the functionality of the object, while its interment alludes to the separation of the owner and the object. This symbolic activity practiced since prehistory had the character of a pledge and carried the value of a message towards the community. In the Celtic cemeteries excavated in the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin, the bending of the swords was much more popular than the bending of the spear heads.¹¹ However, not only the weapons ended up in graves in a damaged state, but also other objects such as shears or knives.



Figure 2. Linchpin and bent spear head from Gălăoaia

⁷ Berecki 2018, 146, pl. VI/4–5.

⁸ Rustoiu 2015, 75–76; 2019, 188–204.

⁹ Mihalik 1901, 208–210, V. ábra/2–4; Lehoczky 1912, 57–58, XIX. ábra; Kobal 1996, 155–156, Abb. 4C, 6B, 10B; Miroššayová 2012; Kazakevich 2015, 25, fig. 2/3.

¹⁰ Jacobsthal 1944, pl. 102/161.

¹¹ Măndescu 2012.

The identification of ritual actions based on archaeological features is an endeavour that brings only approximate results. Still, in the case of the finds from Gălăoia which were buried in a landscape that was unusual for the Celts, the symbolic importance and meaning of the linchpin, as well as the presence in the nearby area of the three spear heads, lets one conclude that these finds were deposited during some kind of special events.

Another object indicating ritual actions in a natural environment was found in south-western Transylvania, at 40 km south of the valley of the Mureş, an area intensely inhabited by the Celts. Here, in the Bordu Mare cave from Ohaba Ponor (Fig. 3), a LT C1 silver brooch was found during archaeological excavations in 1955.¹² The object was discovered above the Palaeolithic stratum, in an 80–100 mm thick layer, in which also prehistoric and Late Iron Age finds were identified. Other finds contemporaneous with the brooch were not discovered. Although the brooches were frequently used objects, they were also found across Europe in a number of contexts connected to ritual and witchcraft.¹³



Figure 3. Natural environment of the Ohaba Ponor–Bordu Mare cave (aerial photo S. Berecki, March 2018)

The importance of caves as social landscapes is well-known throughout history. In the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin the finds from caves are more frequent at the end of the Late Iron Age, in the LT D period.¹⁴ Regardless of the historical period or region, the caves were permanent, seasonal, periodic or strategic settlements, workshops, cultic or hoarding places or funerary sites. There are examples throughout Europe of sheltering in caves of the individuals displaced or discriminated by the society, while in other cases they were used as permanent dwellings by persons or families of low social status. Usually, caves used as shelters or settlement are easily accessible, while those used as funerary or fortified sites are harder to reach. The ritual use of these caves can also be presumed, since the few existing written sources that refer to the Late Iron Age religion of the region report about that.

¹² Nicolăescu-Plopşor et al. 1957, 46–47, fig. 5/6.

¹³ Rustoiu, Ferencz 2017, 352, fig. 10; Rustoiu, Ferencz 2018, 40–42.

¹⁴ Berecki 2014–15.

On the territory of Transylvania, for the Late Iron Age, most caves yielded only pottery fragments and other traces of short-term settling, serving as temporary shelters for small communities. In some cases, the possibility of their use as observation posts during the Dacian wars against the Romans was also presumed. There are also caves with thermal and medicinal waters, while cultic features or blacksmiths' workshops were also documented. Therefore, the isolated presence of a silver brooch in the Bordu Mare cave from Ohaba Ponor might be interpreted as a ritual deposition of the artefact.¹⁵

Also in south-western Transylvania, another unique isolated object, a bracelet made of silver sheet was found on the Peștera Bolii Hill at Bănița (Fig. 4), in an old limestone quarry on the left bank of the Bănița River, where no traces of habitation or funerary context are known. Previously it was considered that the artefact came from the Dacian fortress at Bănița, but based on the close analogy from a cremation grave unearthed at Vrșac-At in Serbia, the bracelet was re-dated to the LT C1.¹⁶ The object with a decorative pattern made of small lines, zigzags, semi-circles and dots which suggest stylized zoomorphic heads, was found in an exceptional natural environment, far from any contemporaneous settlement that also indicates that the artefact was invested with a ritual meaning and was deliberately deposited in this place.

Starting from the fact that in the above discussed cases the intensive settlement traces or burials are located at a distance of more than 20 km, it is probable that these objects were not discarded or lost, rather representing the result of intentional human actions, being most probably votive offerings for supernatural beings.¹⁷ In each case, the positioning of the object in the landscape goes through a transformation in which its earlier profane function is lost and a new symbolic character is acquired. This is indicated by their burial, concealment, their placement in locations hard to reach, which is also a kind of destruction (Fig. 5).



Figure 4. The silver bracelet from Bănița (after Rustoiu, Ferencz 2018)

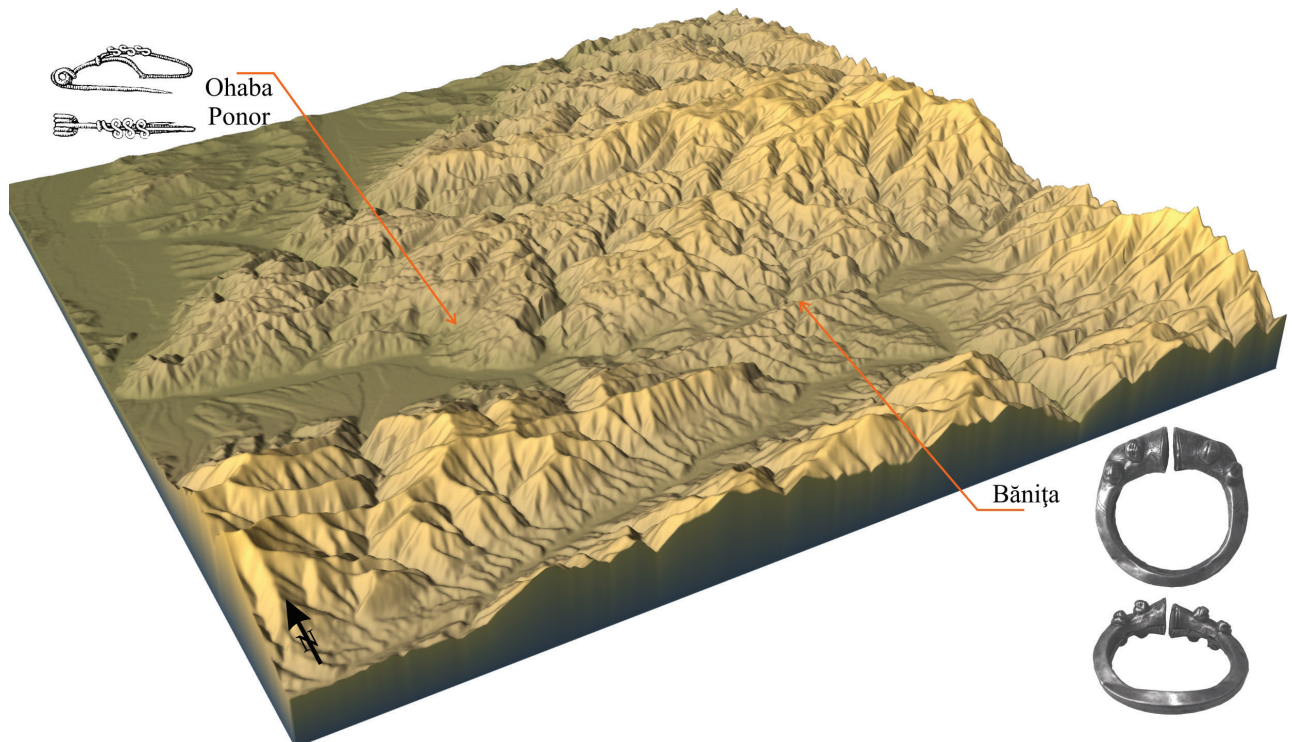


Figure 5. The location of the finds from Ohaba Ponor and Bănița in south-western Transylvania (after Berecki 2021)

¹⁵ Rustoiu, Ferencz 2017; 2018.

¹⁶ Rustoiu, Ferencz 2018, 35–36.

¹⁷ For a theoretical approach, see Rustoiu, Ferencz 2018.

But not all isolated finds should be seen as part of ritual actions. In eastern Transylvania, the La Tène brooch from Augustin / Racoş, the Steckverschluss type bracelets from Vurpăr and Braşov, the Münsingen type bronze brooch from Râşnov and probably also the Hiebmesser from Rupea, finds mostly dated to the early phase of the Transylvanian Celtic settlement, more likely attest scouting expeditions, territorial or other types of negotiations through gift exchanges of the newcomers with the communities from the eastern Carpathian piedmont regions. The latter already reached during this early period to the east of the Carpathians, as the finds from Moldavia are showing.¹⁸

Sometimes the ritualization of domestic life could also be noted in the Late Iron Age settlements. In such cases, the transformation of everyday life and everyday objects was observed. In a still unpublished Late Iron Age settlement from Cluj-Napoca–Strada Câmpului, next to a dwelling house, a Hiebmesser was unearthed next to animal bones.¹⁹ This type of assemblage can frequently be seen in the funerary inventories, but its appearance in a settlement is outstanding and alludes to the fact that certain rituals were performed both in a domestic and in a consecrated landscape.

Similarly, the feature no. 10 from Teiuş, a sunken dwelling dated to the LT B1–B2 belongs to the group of domestic rituals.²⁰ In this case, ceramic fragments, daub, animal bones, river stones, a grinding stone, a spindle, and a wheel-made ceramic vessel with four bunches of dwarf elder berries were found. This species of wild fruit, due to the chemical composition of the berry, could be used both for medicinal purposes and for hallucinogenic effects, which were well known in ancient times, as mentioned also by Pliny the Elder.



Figure 6. Aerial view of the ditched area without funerary complexes in the cemetery at Viştea (aerial photo S. Berecki, September 2014)

In the case of settlements, it can be observed that some structural elements divide the space. Ditches located inside the settlements or on their borders could have delimited numerous landscape elements or various living spaces. They could separate the open fields from the arable lands, the

¹⁸ Honcu, Munteanu 2018.

¹⁹ Dima 2008.

²⁰ Ciută 2019, 649, 651.

limits of properties, agricultural units or pens; others could serve as boundary signs between the sacral and the profane space, or represent a symbolic landscape element between the world of the dead and the living or an element signalling the place of collective feasts etc. On the area of the cemeteries at Viştea (Fig. 6), Gâmbaş and Szeged-Kiskundorozsma the closed or partially opened ditch systems without burials lets one to note that certain communities considered important to define a sacred space, which even though it was connected to the world of the dead, it was still needed to be separated, assigned and delimited.²¹

Conclusions

According to the examples presented here, the Late Iron Age sacred landscape in the Carpathian Basin had two characteristics. One was connected to hiding, concealment, explicit isolation from the everyday routine, being characterized by otherness. These places were situated far away from the settlements, in forests, on heights or in caves. The other was the sacred space combined in harmony with the everyday space structures which were located inside the settlements. Its sacred character is highlighted by the actions or the objects connected to its function.

In conclusion, it can be summed up that the reading of the archaeological data reveals in a number of instances some details connected to the Late Iron Age rituals or ceremonies, as well as the location of these events in the landscape. Based on these observations, it can be concluded that in the belief system of the Celts, in addition to the subjects of the rituals, such as food, drink, weapons, jewellery and other material offerings, the landscape played an essential, sometimes mediating, role in these practices.

Acknowledgements: This study was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and by a grant of the Ministry of Research and Innovation, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PNIII-P4-ID-PCE-2020-0566, within PNCDI III.

Bibliography

Berecki 2014–15

S. Berecki, Late Iron Age Finds from the Collection of István Dénes. *Marisia* 34–35, 17–30.

Berecki 2015

S. Berecki, *Iron Age Settlement Patterns and Funerary Landscapes in Transylvania (4th–2nd Centuries BC)*. Catalogi Mvsei Marisiensis, seria archaeologica II. Târgu Mureş 2015.

Berecki 2018

S. Berecki, Connected Elites. Middle La Tène Chariots in the Carpathian Basin. In: S. Berecki, A. Rustoiu, M. Egri (eds.), *Iron Age Connectivity in the Carpathian Basin. Proceedings of the International Colloquium from Târgu Mureş, 13–15 October 2017*. Bibliotheca Mvsei Marisiensis, series archaeologica XVI. Cluj-Napoca 2018, 143–164.

Berecki 2021

S. Berecki, *Identity in Landscape, Connectivity and Diversity in Iron Age Transylvania*. Bibliotheca Mvsei Marisiensis, series archaeologica, XVIII / Ethnic and cultural interferences in the 1st millennium BC to the 1st millennium AD XXVII. Cluj-Napoca 2021.

Ciută 2019

B. Ciută, Archaeobotanical analysis on samples recovered from archaeological contexts from Banat and Transylvania belonging to La Tène Age. In: S. Forţiu (ed.), *ArheoVest VII: In Honorem Sabin Adrian Luca, Interdisciplinaritate în Arheologie, Timișoara, 23 noiembrie 2019*. Szeged 2019, 643–654.

Dima 2008

C. Dima, Despre un cuțit celtic descoperit recent la Cluj. *Acta Musei Brukenthal* 3, 1, 81–88.

²¹ Berecki 2021, 77.

Honcu, Munteanu 2018

Șt. Honcu, L. Munteanu, A fibula of Celtic origin in the collection of Archaeology Institute in Iași. In: S. Țurcanu, C. E. Ursu, (eds.), *Materiality and identity in pre- and protohistoric Europe. Homage to Cornelia Magda Lazarovici*. Suceava 2018, 453–462.

Jacobsthal 1944

P. Jacobsthal, *Early Celtic Art*. Oxford 1944.

Kazakevich 2015

G. Kazakevich, The La Tène culture of the Trans-Carpathian area: is the migration model still relevant? *Bulletin of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. History* 3, 126, 24–30.

Kobal 1996

J. V. Kobal, Manche Probleme der La Tène-Kultur des Oberen Theißgebietes (Karpatoukraine). *Acta Archaeologica Carpathica* 33, 1996, 139–184.

Lehoczky 1912

T. Lehoczky, *Adatok hazánk archaeológiájához, különös tekintettel Beregmegyére és környékére II*. Munkács 1912.

Măndescu 2012

D. Măndescu, Killing the Weapons. An Insight on Graves with Destroyed Weapons in Late Iron Age Transylvania. In: S. Berecki (ed.), *Iron Age Rites and Rituals in the Carpathian Basin. Proceedings of the International Colloquium from Târgu Mureș, 7–9 October 2011*, Bibliotheca Mvsei Marisiensis, series archaeologica XVI. Târgu Mureș 2012, 343–356.

Megaw, Megaw 2001

J. V. S. Megaw, R. M. Megaw, *Celtic Art. From its Beginnings to the Book of Kells*. London 2001.

Mihalik 1901

J. Mihalik, Emlékek a régebbi vaskorból Munkács környékén. *Archaeológiai Értesítő* 28, 1901, 198–239.

Miroššayová 2012

E. Miroššayová, Mukačevo, Ukraine. In: S. Sievers, O. H. Urban, P. C. Ramsel (eds.), *Lexikon zur keltischen Archäologie*. Wien 2012, 1331–1333.

Nicolăescu-Plopșor et al. 1957

C. S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor, N. Haas, Al. Păunescu, Al. Bolomey, Șantierul arheologic Ohaba-Ponor (reg. Hunedoara, r. Hațeg). *Materiale și Cercetări Arheologice* 3, 41–49.

Rustoiu 2015

A. Rustoiu, Arme, care de luptă și elite războinice în Transilvania epocii fierului. Un mormânt cu arme și un cui de ax din fier din necropola La Tène de la Fântânele-Dâmbu Popii. In: A. Gavrițaș, D. L. Vaida, A. Onofreiu, G. G. Marinescu (eds.), *Trecutul mai aproape de noi. Omagiu Profesorului George Marinescu la 70 ani*. Cluj-Napoca 2015, 71–87.

Rustoiu 2019

A. Rustoiu, *Archaeological explorations of magic and witchcraft in Iron Age Transylvania*. Cluj-Napoca 2019.

Rustoiu, Ferencz 2017

A. Rustoiu, I. V. Ferencz, Cross-cultural connections between the middle and lower Danube regions during the Late Iron Age. The silver bracelet from Bănița (jud. Hunedoara/RO) revisited. *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 47, 3, 341–357.

Rustoiu, Ferencz 2018

A. Rustoiu, I. V. Ferencz, Gates to the otherworld. Jewellery and garment accessories of the Celtic horizon from isolated places in Transylvania. *Archaeologia Bulgarica* 22, 2, 33–46.

Szabó 2005

M. Szabó, *A keleti kelták. A késő vaskor a Kárpát-medencében*. Budapest 2005.

Szabó 2015

M. Szabó, A kelták Magyarországon. In: M. Szabó, L. Borhy, *Magyarország története az ókorban: kelták és rómaiak*. Budapest 2015.

Vasiliev 1969

V. Vasiliev, O piesă sculpturală de factură celtică, *Acta Musei Napocensis* 6, 451–457.