

A Fourteenth Century Sword from Moldovenești (Hung.: Várfalva)¹

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Keywords: *Transylvania, Moldovenești, Middle Ages, sword, cross-guard, pommel, graves*

Abstract

The two-edged swords are a small but significant group of the medieval material culture of Transylvania.² For various subjective and objective reasons the scholarly world, which dealt with swords of the migration and the early medieval period of Europe, neglected the research of this group of swords. Although the European sword was classified in numerous types and sub-types precise definitions of date and place cannot be done. Therefore in some cases it seems more practical to look for a period during which it might have been in use than to try to date the sword or its types, even if this does not supply a certain date.³ Swords were widespread and very distributable objects throughout Europe and it is impossible to assign certain specific regions of origins. Since, out-of-context finds get published rarely it is our aim to publish this single find in order to make its type and details available for the researchers dealing with medieval weapons.

1. About the context of the find

According to the historian Tudor Sălăgean, three years ago Adrian Cohorzan gave the sword to the National Museum of Transylvanian History. The architect related that he had found the sword not far from Moldovenești on the territory of a sand extraction site. Based on a hand-drawn sketch preserved in the museum, the sword was found during extraction with the excavator on a 1,50 m terrace right next to the River Arieș (germ.: Ariesch, hung.: Aranyos). (*Pl. 1*)

2. The description of the sword

The corroded sword was preserved only in a fragmented state; in our opinion its real length was around 1, 15 – 1, 20 m. In the middle of the polygonal pommel, which is attached at the end of the hilt, a disc shaped projection can be observed. During the weighing of the sword we realized that the pommel had significant weight but we couldn't measure it separately. The hilt on the side of the pommel suddenly narrows down while on its other end, before the cross-guard, imprints of wood could be clearly recognized. Looking at it from profile its boat-shaped cross-guard is preserved

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¹ The drawing was made by Emese Apai.

² For a typology based on pommel and cross-guard styles of the medieval two-edged sword see: Hoffmeyer 1954.

³ Oakeshott 1997, 16.

only fragmentary. Because of its corroded state the fuller of the blade can hardly be recognized but it is still visible and goes in the middle towards the tip of the blade on all its preserved length.

3. *Proportions of the sword*: 1. Full length: 67,5 cm; 2. Width of the pommel: 5,6 cm; 3. Height of the pommel: 5,6 cm; 4. Thickness of the pommel: 2,6 cm; 5. Length of the hilt: 16,5 cm; 6. Width of the hilt: 2 – 2,6 cm; 7. Length of the fragmentary cross-guard: 12 cm; 8. Width of the cross-guard: 1,6 cm; 9. Width of the blade: 4 – 4,4 cm; 10. Width of the fuller: 0,9 – 1 cm. Weight: 642 gr. (*Pl. 2 – 3*)

4. *Discussions on the occurrence of the weapons in early medieval graves*

In the system of death- and life-symbols of the early middle Ages, jewellery played an important role for *women*; in the case of free *men weapons* fulfilled this symbolic role. At a closer look the problem seems to be more complicated. The occurrence of weapons in cemeteries of the early middle Ages is not surprising, since prestige, status and rank was expressed in burying the dead in the same way as he or she lived in the everyday life. The question of *jewellery* is more complex. Although jewellery are known mainly from women's graves, the male or female character should be considered rather as a cultural construction. This explains the fact that they can also be found in men's graves.⁴

In connection with jewellery another problem arises. The exact chronological limitation of the usage of an object is almost impossible. This definitely holds true for fashion-items, while in the case of weapons their spread or disappearance can be caused by more practical reasons, whereas the spread of fashion-items is rather a social-psychological phenomenon. Therefore, the chronological curve of jewellery usage can be built only with difficulties. The usage of *weapons*, in contradiction with jewellery, was connected to practical-strategic problems.

Although in pagan cemeteries (of the tenth century and the first quarter of the eleventh century) the rank of a deceased person or the prestige of the family (through the deceased person) was symbolized by different types of weapons, horse burials and funeral garments adorned with jewellery; inside the churchyard prestige was symbolized by the *placement of the graves*. The main features of the “*churchyard cemeteries*” are the presence of the church or its remains and the density of the graves, usually with poor furnishings and grave goods. In many cases one can find multiple or super-positioned graves, which make the process of interpretation more difficult.

Christianity, which taught spiritual and, from the point of view of the economic-political hierarchy, an egalitarian picture of the other world superseded the symbols that represented the status of the individual or the family in the burials,⁵ but it allowed

⁴ Examples for this see: Gáll 2007, 397.

⁵ It is very interesting that *sword* or *saber* burials became fashionable again from the sixteenth century on, especially inside church. Do we face a more complex manifestation of self-representation or self-fashioning? On this issue see the excavation of Pósta Béla, Roska Márton and Kovács István in Alba Iulia (Pósta 1917, 1–155). Such a phenomenon is known from Scandinavia (Kiefer-Ollsen 1997, 188, note 17).

another representation. This is very well indicated by Theodulf's decree, which, at the end of the ninth century, emphasized that *bishops, monks and priests* could be buried in the church and, what is most interesting to us, *laymen* who are worthy of it could also be interred there. In the case of medieval laymen this symbolic "*competition*" of power and wealth meant the same as the jewellery, weapons or parts of horses did in the burials of the bygone pagan times. In contrast with older days, the poverty of furnishings does not mean the poverty of the society, but the *Puritanism* of medieval way of thinking, which was often dissonant. *Simplicity* and *Puritanism* are the solution to this problem, but the aim to represent power and prestige remained the same and *the burials in the church or as close to the church as it was possible were its manifestations*. That is the reason why overlapping burials and superposition can be found around the churches, which are the characteristic features of churchyard cemeteries as opposed to the cemeteries with rows of graves.⁶

In this *mental context* we have to understand the missing of the weaponry from the graves. However, we can understand why the majority swords from Transylvania Basin from the twelfth until the fifteenth centuries were discovered without context namely these were stray finds.

5. *Discussions on the sword from Moldovenești*

A number of factors should be taken into consideration when one tries to date a sword but not all of them can offer a precise dating. Towards the end of the middle ages fashion shown through varying styles of hilt becomes a useful tool for dating. Blade inscriptions and heraldic bearings can give a more precise dating although these indicate only the date when they were applied to the weapon and not the production date of the sword. As can be seen in the literature the mounts of scabbards can give a reliable dating not for the sword itself but for the scabbard. These, as well as the grips, must have been changed quite often due to everyday usage and were greatly influenced by the change of fashion. The sword forms can be also classified but only vaguely dated. In the light of the above mentioned we tried to give a more or less precise dating of this sword mainly based on analogies coming from the neighboring regions and using the well-known typologies available for our research. According to the typology compiled by Oakeshott this sword can be assigned to the XIII A or even the XVIA type, which seems to be a development of the former, both dated largely to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁷ The pommel form is closest to the II of Oakeshott's typology, this being the most popular in the fourteenth century and onwards.⁸ Following Pinter's typology, the sword can be dated to the second half of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century, and belongs to the XI type. The closest analogy for the pommel and maybe even for the sword, can be

⁶ On the evolution of the „pagan” and „intermediate” burial customs in the Transylvanian Basin, Partium and Banat from the tenth to the eleventh centuries, see: GÁLL 2004–2005, 334–454.

⁷ Oakeshott 1997, 42–46, 63–64; Oakeshott 1998, 10, 95, 98–106, especially the one on page 104.

⁸ Oakeshott 1997, 95–96.

found at Oradea (without context).⁹ In Aleksić's typology of swords from southeastern Europe, the pommel of the sword from Moldovenești can be asserted to the II type of polygonal pommels having analogies in Finland, Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, Serbia and Croatia.¹⁰ Since the point of the sword was not preserved it is hard to decide whether the blade would fit into the XIIIa or the XVIa type of blades described by Aleksić but the dating corresponds with the previous ones, the second half of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century.¹¹

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⁹ PINTER 1998, 148–150, pl. 46/b.

¹⁰ ALEKSIĆ 2007, 51–53.

¹¹ ALEKSIĆ 2007, 84, 89.

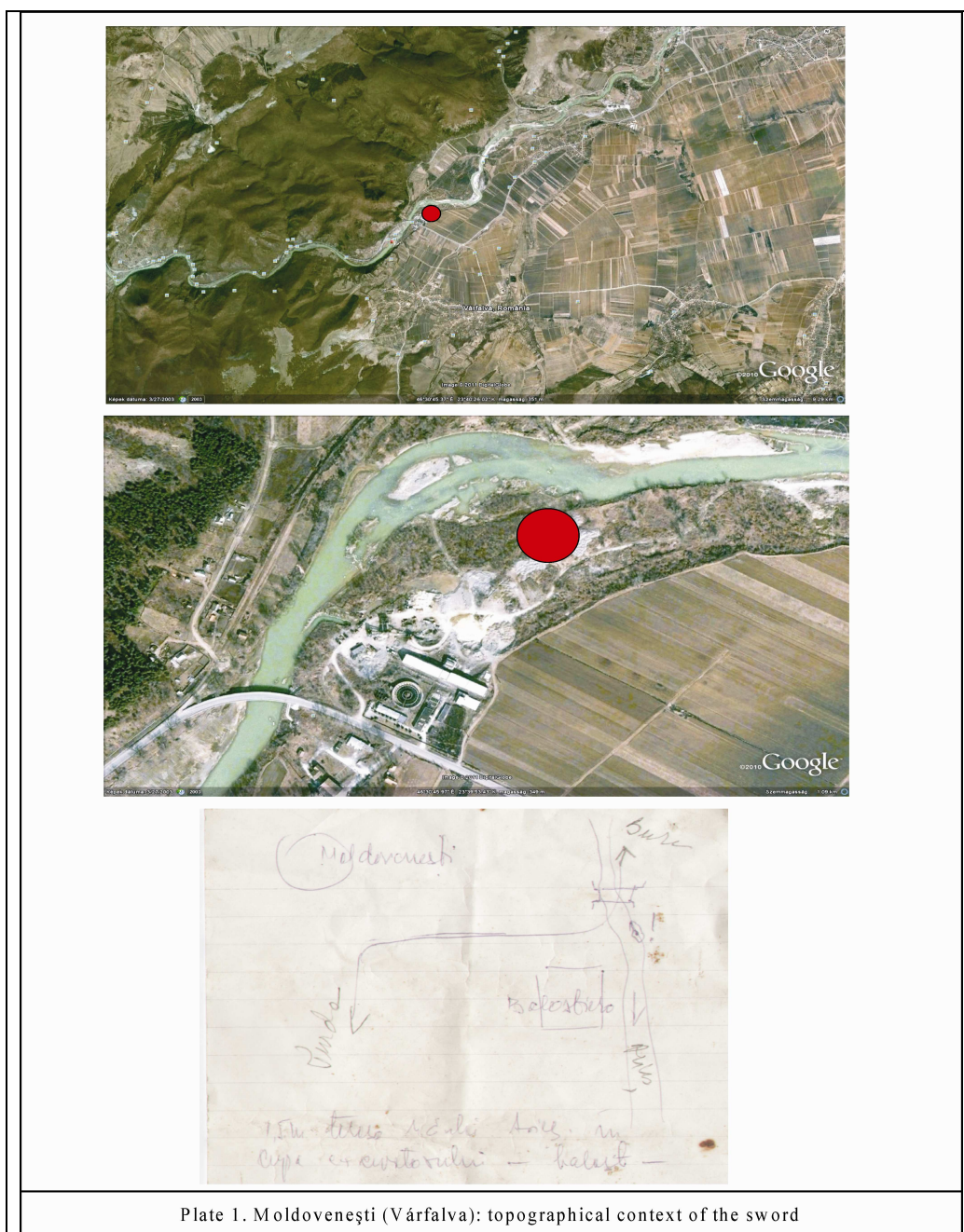


Plate 1. Moldovenești (Várfalva): topographical context of the sword

