



REFLECTIONS OF THE IRON AGE

Studies dedicated
to Natalie Venclová

EDITED BY

Jan Kysela

Petra Goláňová

Tomáš Mangel

Jan Mařík

PRAHA – BRNO – HRADEC KRÁLOVÉ 2026

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IRON AGE TEENAGERS IN THE EASTERN CARPATHIAN BASIN. REVISITING THE GRAVE FROM FÂNTÂNELE-LIVADĂ, TRANSYLVANIA

Sándor Berecki

A Late Iron Age cremation grave with rich grave goods was discovered in 1970 during agricultural works on the periphery of Fântânele village. As shown by geomagnetic survey, other graves are suspected at the site. Recent analysis of the human bones suggests that a juvenile was buried in the grave. In conjunction with other anthropological analyses from Transylvania and other parts of the Carpathian Basin, the new results offer additional data that help build a more nuanced picture of the palaeodemographic patterns and burial practices of the region.

Transylvania, Late Iron Age, human bones, cremation, juvenile burial.

INTRODUCTION

From the middle of the 4th century BC, the first characteristic settlements and cemeteries of the La Tène period appeared in the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin. One of the most intensely inhabited areas is the northeastern part of Transylvania, on the eastern periphery of the Transylvanian Plateau bordered by the Someş and Mureş rivers, on the rolling Lechinţa Hills, which are crossed by numerous small streams, and where several cemeteries and isolated graves dating from the period have been found. In the valley of the Meleş stream, on the outskirts of the village of Fântânele, Bistriţa-Năsăud County, two cemeteries and an isolated burial have been excavated (BERECKI 2021a, 41, fig. 14) (**Fig. 1**).

THE FÂNTÂNELE CEMETERIES

In the Fântânele-Dâmbul Popii cemetery, located on a low hilltop within the village, 84 Late Iron Age graves were unearthed between 1969 and 1974; the site also contained Early Iron Age and Migration Period burials (BERECKI 2015, 118–121,

with further bibliography). To the east of the village, on the upper slopes of the high hill forming the watershed, another cemetery was discovered in 1999, although research has not yet been completed. The site of Dealul Iuşului / La Gâţa, which was also used as a cemetery during the Early Iron Age and probably as a place of sacrifice during the Late Iron Age Dacian period, has so far yielded 43 Late Iron Age graves (see BERECKI – GÁL – VAIDA 2022, with further bibliography).

The Livadă burial

To the south of the village, west of the spring of the Meleş creek, which crosses the village, on a terrace on the side of a gently sloping hill, in a place called Livadă (orchard), a cremation grave was accidentally discovered in 1970 during ploughing, at a shallow depth. From a landscape perspective, the topographical location of the grave is atypical in micro-regional terms: while the nearby cemeteries lie on narrow spurs of high ground, the Livadă site is situated between high, steeply sloping hills on a basin-like gentle slope ca 250m long and 50m wide (**Fig. 2**). The grave inventory dated to LT C1 and consisted of three bronze and two iron fibulae, two anklets with

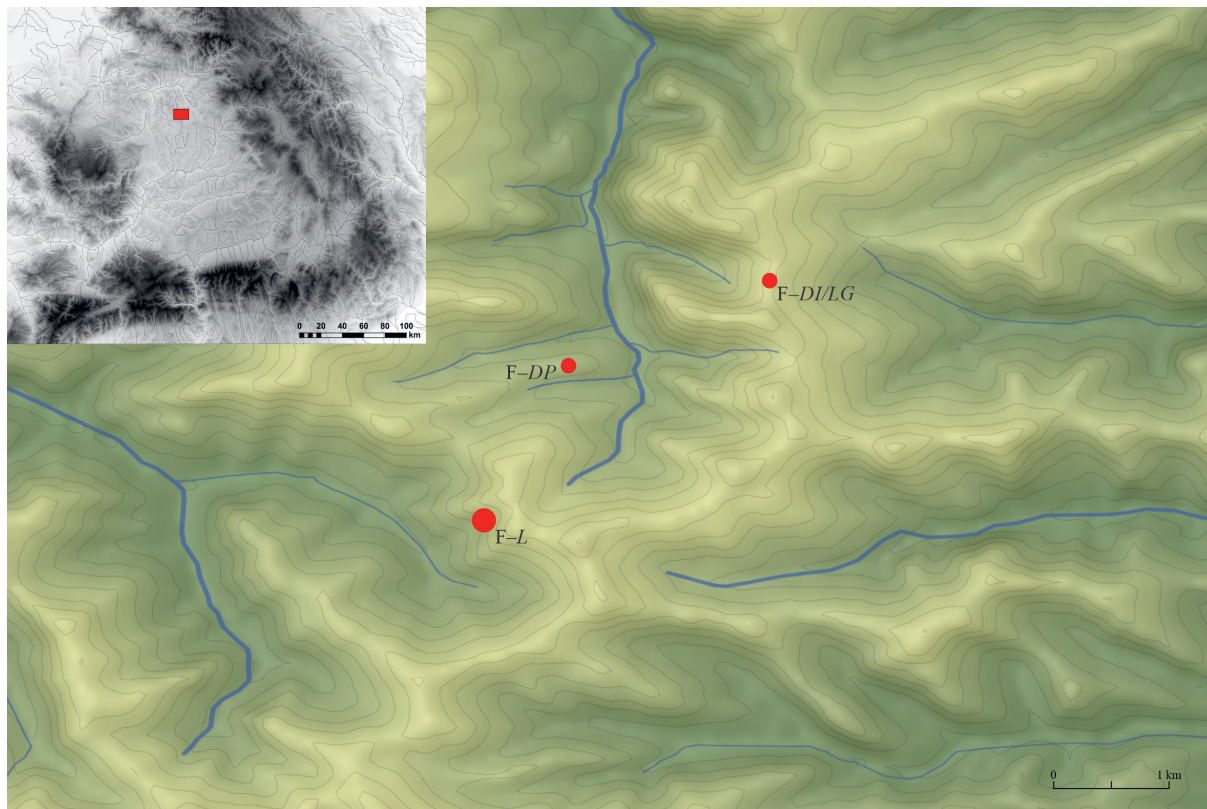


Fig. 1 The micro region of the Fântânele cemeteries. F-DI/LG: Fântânele-Dealul Iușului, F-DP: Fântânele-Dâmbu Popii, F-L: Fântânele-Livadă.



Fig. 2 Fântânele-Livadă. The location of the site. Photo by S. Berecki, September 2014.



Fig. 3 Fântânele-Livadă. The jewellery assemblage from the grave. Photo by D. Rotari, Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex.

four large hollow knobs, a bronze bracelet with ornament in relief, a black sapropelite and a dark blue glass bracelet, six glass beads with eyes, two tubular beads with eyes, a tubular face-bead, a Transylvanian type bronze belt, and a fragment from a thin iron chain, as well as a deep pottery bowl, a shallow bowl, and a large vessel, all of them wheel-thrown (CRIȘAN 1975) (**Fig. 3**).

Despite the fact that the archaeologists, who had been informed by the local finders (CRIȘAN 1975, fn. 1), continued to excavate the Dâmbul Popii site for several years, no further archaeological research was carried out around the Livadă grave site. In Transylvania, the number of isolated burials is very significant, but this is mainly due to the generally accidental circumstances of their discovery, rarely followed up by archaeological observation or excavation, therefore in many cases it is no longer possible to identify the exact findspot (BERECKI 2015, 74). An exception is the grave unearthed in Band, Mureș County, whose entire vicinity has been excavated, but no other Iron Age burial has been found (KOVÁCS 1913).

Geophysical survey at Livadă

In 2014, geophysical survey was carried out at the Livadă site on behalf of Mureș County Museum by the team from the Eötvös Lóránd University in Budapest, under the supervision of Zoltán Czajlik. The magnetic anomaly maps were compiled by András Bődöcs, Gábor Márkus, and Sándor Pusztai, data processing was carried out by Sándor Pusztai, and the archaeological interpretation of the results was provided by Zoltán Czajlik (**Fig. 4**). The linear anomalies on the map indicate the inclination of the slope and the direction of ploughing. A difficulty in interpreting geomagnetic results for Late Iron Age burials is that iron objects in the graves may appear as a dipole, which can be barely separated from surface iron contamination, and iron objects in the grave pit may obscure any other differences. Geomagnetic survey at the nearby site of Fântânele-Dealul Iușului / La Gâța, undertaken in 2013 and 2014 and control excavations in 2014 and 2015 also provided evidence that surface contaminants and some types of archaeological objects produce similar anomalies.

Anthropological research

Although the grave was discovered during agricultural works, the archaeologists recovered not only the grave goods at the site, but also managed to collect the human remains. The analyses were carried out by Sándor Szilárd Gál, archaeologist-anthropologist at Mureş County Museum.

A total of 174 pieces of bone were identified (not counting fragments smaller than 1mm), with a total weight of 108g. The colour of the bones ranges from greyish-white to brownish-white, but most of the bones are blue-white and greyish-white in colour, with cracks on the surface indicating a relatively high burning temperature of approximately 525–645°C (SHIPMAN – FOSTER – SHOENINGER 1984; MAYS 1998). The bones are micro- and meso-fragmented, ranging in size from 2–35mm. Some fragments of the skull were identified (frontal bone and parietal bone, the cortical layer is 2–3mm thick). No teeth were found. From the postcranial skeleton, small fragments of the rib diaphyses (rib II, IV), fragments of the diaphyses of the upper (humerus) and lower limbs (femur, tibia, the upper part of a calcaneus) were identified. There are insufficient data for a precise sex determination. In terms of age, the dimensions of the long bones indicate an *Infans* II or *Juvenis* aged 12–14 years. Iron and bronze traces on the ribs show that the deceased was cremated together with part of the funerary inventory.

DISCUSSION

For an adolescent, the 108g of incinerated bones represent about 16% of the total bone mass remaining after burning on the pyre (TROTTER – HIXON 1974). It should be taken into consideration that the finds were discovered as a result of agricultural work, so it is possible that some of the cremated bones were lost. However, it can still be assumed that this grave was a partial burial of the cremated human remains, a typical funerary custom during the Late Iron Age. In the case of the cemeteries of Fântânele-Dealul Iușului / La Gâța (BERECKI – GÁL – VAIDA 2022, 58), Bucsu (TÓTH 2010, 133–134), Vác (KÖHLER 2023, 10),

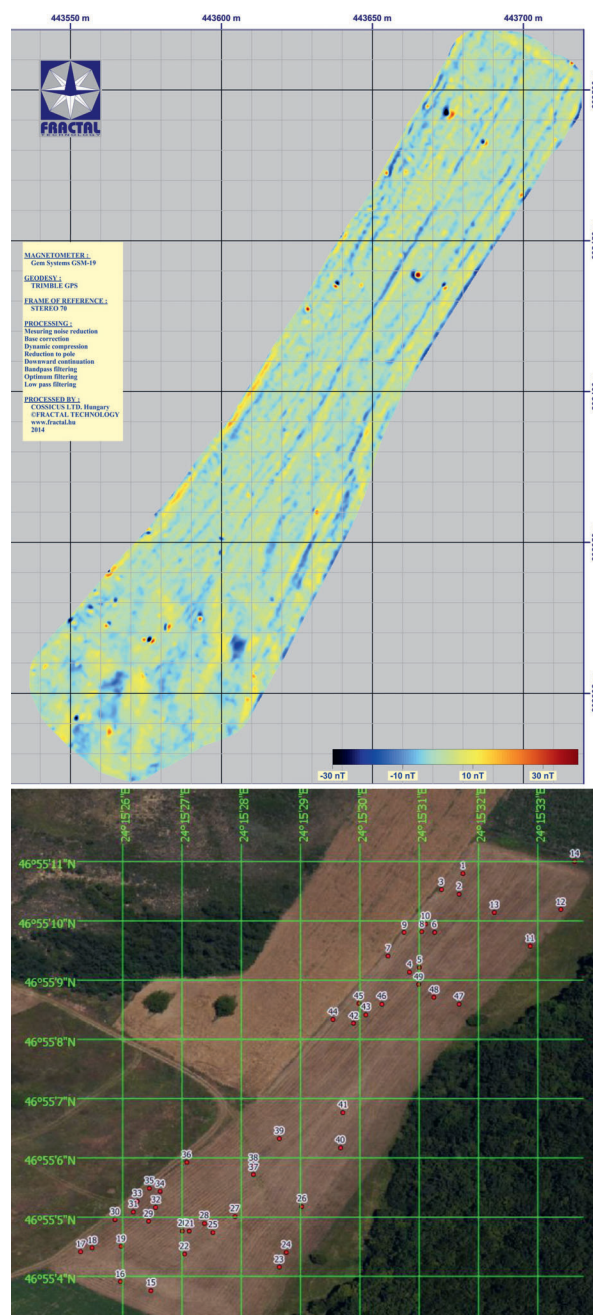


Fig.4 Fântânele-Livadă. Magnetic map and interpretation of anomalies.

Győr-Kálvária (GYENESEI *et al.* 2023), and in the only analysed grave at Apahida (BERECKI 2021b), the cremated human bones placed in most graves did not exceed 100g, at Ludas the average was between 100 and 200g (TANKÓ 2012, 215, fig. 213), at Mátraszőlös and Hegyfalu around 300g (ALMÁSSY 2012; BALÁZS – HORNOK – TÓTH 2015).

The temperature attained in cremations in Late Iron Age cemeteries in Transylvania is usually around 525–645 °C. The same temperature was observed for the cremation graves of the Fântânele-Dealul Iușului / La Gâța cemetery (BERECKI – GÁL – VAIDA 2022, 57), and for most of the unpublished graves of the Fântânele-Dâmbul Popii, while the burning temperature was slightly lower for the Apahida grave (BERECKI 2021a, 118) and for the Vác-Kavicsbánya (gravel pit) burials (KÖHLER 2023, 14). Cremations at Zvonimirovo (ŠLAUS – NOVAK 2013) and Sajópetri (BÓZSING 2018, 268) were carried out at temperatures similar to those in the Fântânele cemeteries, and, at a wider range, between 200 and 800 °C, at Ludas (TANKÓ 2012, 212), Hegyfalú (BALÁZS – HORNOK – TÓTH 2015), and Dobova (HINČAK – GUŠTIN 2011).

Among the identified bones are fragments from the skull, the upper body and the limbs. While bones of the skull are also found in the Apahida grave (BERECKI 2021a, 118), they are missing, presumably intentionally, from some graves in the Fântânele-Dealul Iușului / La Gâța cemetery (BERECKI – GÁL – VAIDA 2022, 54). A similar lack of cranial bones was observed in some children's graves at Ludas (TANKÓ 2012, 213), while in contrast, fragments belonging to the skull and limb bones were most frequent at Gencsapáti (ILON – NAGY 2010), Bucsú (TÓTH 2010), and Vác (KÖHLER 2023, 15). At Hegyfalú, the absence of vertebral and pelvic bones suggested that the waist area was exposed to higher temperatures, resulting in these bones being burnt to ashes and thus not buried (BALÁZS – HORNOK – TÓTH 2015, 7).

From a regional palaeodemographic point of view, it can be observed that, like the Fântânele-Livadă grave, the number of young deceased is relatively high at nearby Fântânele-Dealul Iușului / La Gâța (BERECKI – GÁL – VAIDA 2022, 54¹), while in Northern Hungary, at Ludas the incidence of children burials is only 19% (TANKÓ 2012, 212–213, fig. 219, 221), slightly lower in the Chotín and Dubník cemeteries in southwestern Slovakia (TÓTH 2015, 19), and insignificant at the Vác-Kavicsbánya site (KÖHLER 2023, 11).

At the nearby site of Fântânele-Dealul Iușului / La Gâța, the character of the grave inventories

and the presence or absence of certain grave goods point to changes in the social role of children and young people or young adults at the microsocial level. Four *Infans* I, one *Infans* II and four *Juvenes* graves were identified by the anthropological study (BERECKI – GÁL – VAIDA 2022, chart 2). Most of the *Infans* I graves lacked vessels or only fragments of a vessel were found, and these graves do not contain any animal bones that would indicate food remains. Grave 24 had no grave goods at all (BERECKI – GÁL – VAIDA 2022, 41²), while the other graves contained one or two fibulae or bracelets. In contrast, all the *Juvenes* graves contained animal offerings, and all three cremations contained vessels, although pottery was absent from inhumation grave 18.

In the case of the other nearby cemetery, at Fântânele-Dâmbul Popii, two *Infans* I graves had no grave goods, while the other graves of children and juveniles contained pottery and in most cases animal offerings too. It is therefore observed that, in this micro-region, in only some of the *Infans* I burials lack grave goods, while the *Infans* II and *Juvenes* graves already had inventories typical of adults.

In the cemetery at Fântânele-Dâmbul Popii grave 65 belonged to a 15–17-year-old juvenile and grave 72 to an *Infans* I child less than 7 years old. Both LT B2 graves contained, in addition to pottery, an iron knife and a spearhead, and in grave 65 there was also a spear butt. Burials of children or teenagers containing only a spear as a sign of their virtual belonging to the warrior class are also mentioned from Monte Bibele (LEJARS 2008, 158; VITALI 2008, 30, 32, fig. 22–23, 26), but no other cases are known from the Carpathian Basin (RUSTOIU – BERECI 2015, 132). The presence of weapons in child burials suggests that belonging to the warrior aristocracy was hereditary.

Although anthropological investigations have not yielded conclusive data for the gender of the Fântânele-Livadă individual, the archaeological evidence suggests that a female was interred. A female, aged 15–17, with a similarly rich grave inventory was buried in grave 18 at Fântânele-Dealul Iușului / La Gâța.

1 *Erratum*: in the description of grave 24 on page 41 the second and third sentences should be omitted.

2 See previous footnote.

	rite	face-bead	beads	sapropelite / glass bracelet	bronze / iron fibulae	anklets	bronze / iron bracelets	chain belt	small chain	pendants / buttons / rings	knife	pottery
Fântânele-Livadă CRIȘAN 1975	C	1	8	2	3+2	2	1+0	1	1			3
Fântânele-Dealul Iușului / La Gâța, grave 18, unpublished	I	1	1		2+1		3+0		1	3p		
Bratei-Ațel CRIȘAN 1973	?	1		1	3+0	2					1	3
Pișcolt, gr. 191 NEMETI 1988	I	1	1		1+1		1+1					4
Tiszaölök ALMASSY 1993	C	1	4	1	1+	1	+2	1	1	2b/r	1	4
Nyírbátor HELLEBRANDT 1994	?	1	1	1		3						1
Vác, grave 29 HELLEBRANDT 1994	I	3	15					1				

Tab. 1 The inventories of graves with face-beads from the Carpathian Basin. Rite: C - cremation, I - inhumation, ? - unknown rite.

One of the most outstanding objects among the grave goods is the face-bead, which is also found in the surrounding areas, mainly as an accessory to women's graves (MĂNDESCU 2010, 373). Based on the distribution of these beads (KARWOWSKI 2005, list 4, fig. 8) a core production region was proposed in the north Pontic area, but presumably there were also bead manufacturing workshops in the central Danube region supplying the Carpathian Basin and its surroundings (RUSTOIU 2011, 97). Late Iron Age face-beads from the Carpathian Basin have been found as stray finds in the fills of settlement features – Mukachevo / Munkács (LEHOCZKY 1906), Sajópetri (SZABÓ ed. 2007, 271), Polgár (SZABÓ *et al.* 2008), Mezőnyárad (HELLEBRANDT 1994, 24), and Szajol-Széle II (KOVÁCS F. 2022), as well as from inhumation and cremation graves (Tab. 1).

The homogeneity of the combination of grave goods is surprising in the case of burials with face-beads. As mentioned above, the grave goods from the Fântânele-Livadă site consisted, beside

the face-bead, of five fibulae, two anklets with large hollow knobs, a bronze bracelet, a sapropelite and a glass bracelet, glass beads, a bronze chain belt, and three wheel-made pottery vessels. The inventory of the Tiszaölök grave is almost identical, and the grave goods of the other face-bead graves show very similar combinations (Tab. 1). In grave 18 at nearby Fântânele-Dealul Iușului / La Gâța, the young woman aged 15–17 was buried with grave goods comprising, in addition to a glass tubular face-bead, three bronze bracelets, two bronze fibulae, an iron fibula, three iron pendants, an iron ring, a clay bead, small fragments of an iron chain and food offerings. The objects recovered from Ațel-Bratei were probably not part of a grave, which explains the presence of the horse bit.

In the Late Iron Age cemeteries of Transylvania analysed in recent years, the number of young people aged 10–15 is not high. At Fântânele-Dealul Iușului / La Gâța, it was not possible to determine the age of some *Juvenis* graves, although there were sufficient data to

determine an age of 12–15 for the juvenile buried in grave 16 (BERECKI – GÁL – VAIDA 2022). At Fântânele-Dâmbul Popii, graves 11 and 71 contained young persons aged 7–14, each with an assemblage of jewellery, vessels, and animal offerings. In warrior grave 65 there was a person aged between 14 and 17; in double burial 69B, the separate deposit contained the bones of a *Juvenis* aged between 14 and 19. Three of the 16 graves in the unpublished cemetery of Sălcuța-Coasta Oilor (graves 8, 9, and 10) belonged to children, but none of their ages could be determined.

In a broader Carpathian Basin perspective, the graves of young teenagers are not common. At Sajópetri, out of 85 graves, only one cremation burial contained a young person aged 10–15 years (BÓZSING 2018, 263). The person buried in tomb 19 at Mátraszőlös was of late *Infans* II or early *Juvenis* age. The grave inventory consisted of pottery vessels, several bronze and iron fibulae, and a belt chain (ALMÁSSY 2012, 89). In the Danube region, of the six analysed graves at Gencsapáti, feature no. 837 contained a juvenile aged 12–16 years whose grave inventory consisted of ceramic vessels and fibulae, while the younger person in a double burial from feature no. 912 was a female aged 10–14 years (ILON – NAGY 2010, 88–89). Cremation burials KE8 and KE119 in Hegyfalú could also belong to this age group, which can be attributed to the transition between the infant and juvenile ages (BALÁZS – HORNOK – TÓTH 2015, 5), as well as cremation grave 184 from the cemetery with 41 burials in Ordacseh (ZOFFMANN K. 2012, 3. táblázat). Double burial grave 2 in Dubník contained a 40–50-year-old male buried next to a 12–13-year-old *Infans* III (JAKAB – VONDRÁKOVÁ 1989). In Zvonimirovo the younger male in grave LT12 was about 10–14 years old (ŠLAUS – NOVAK 2013, 517).

It can be observed that in the double burials (Fântânele-Dâmbul Popii, Gencsapáti, Dubník, Zvonimirovo) individuals of this age group were usually placed next to older people.

Among the 22 graves in the Győr-Kálvária cemetery, no *Infans* II or *Juvenis* graves were found (GYENESEI *et al.* 2023). Likewise, no young teenagers were found among the 18 graves analysed from the Vác-Kavicsbánya cemetery (KÖHLER 2023), nor were there any 12–14-year-olds among the 24 graves analysed from Ménfőcsanak

(KÖHLER 2020), or in the Ludas-Varjú-dűlő cemetery (TANKÓ 2012, fig. 219). People under the age of 15 are also absent from the cemeteries of Brežice-Sejmišče and Dobova-Kosovka (HINČAK – GUŠTIN 2011).

Although some cemeteries have high infant mortality rates, in several communities, cemeteries show that the majority of the population reached adulthood. It is also apparent that mortality of young teenagers is rare, so it can be assumed that deaths in this age group had a significant traumatic effect not only on the family but on the community as a whole. Perhaps this also contributes to the richness of their grave goods.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the young deceased of the Fântânele-Livadă grave was buried according to the cremation rite typical of the wider area. Only a part of the cremated bones with fragments from the skull and the postcranial skeleton were interred. There are no sufficient data for the sex determination of the 12–14 years old *Infans* II or *Juvenis* person. The small quantity of human bones placed in the grave is characteristic for the rituals of the early and middle La Tène communities in the Carpathian Basin, as well as the 525–645 °C temperature attained in cremation. The richness of the grave goods and the analogies from the Carpathian Basin suggest that the social status of young juveniles was defined at an early age, presumably inherited and largely accepted at the community level, and that in the case of early death it was reflected in the burial rite and ritual.

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