The Late Iron Age Grave from Tirimioara, Mureş County, Romania

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Abstract: The study presents a Late Iron Age burial found with a metal detector in Tirimioara, Transylvania, which was afterwards excavated archaeologically. The grave inventory consisted of a belt plate, an arrowhead and a crown-shaped neck ring. The crown-shaped neck ring is the southernmost example of its type, previously unknown in this region, whose closest parallels occur east of the Carpathians, in the area of the Poienești-Lukaševka communities associated with the Bastarnae, while its core region is situated in the north-eastern part of central Europe. Together with a few previously discovered contemporary finds, the complex sheds light on the social and political transformations of the eastern periphery of the Carpathian Basin in the 2nd century BC.

Key words: Late Iron Age, grave, crown-shaped neck ring, Poienești-Lukaševka communities, Bastarnae.

I. Circumstances of discovery

In July 2024, Á. Cs. Balázs reported to the Mureș County Museum the identification of a Late Iron Age grave using metal detectors on the outskirts of the village of Tirimioara. The metal detectorists provided the museum with fragments of a bronze and an iron object, human bones, and several fragments of a black pot. As a result, the archaeological feature was unearthed in August 2024.

Tirimioara (Hungarian Kisteremi, commune Crăciunești/Karácsonyfalva, Mureș County) is located 10 km south of the municipality of Târgu Mureș, in the hilly area on the eastern edge of the Niraj Valley, a tributary of the Mureș River, south of county road 151D (Acăţari – Ungheni). The area where the cremation grave was discovered is located south of the village of Tirimioara, in the Nagyerdő forest, north of Benehegy hill, east of the Bene stream (**fig. 1**).

According to the metal detectorists, they carried out a surface metal search over a large area around the finds, but did not detect any further signals. This effectively rules out the presence of surface metal fragments, but does not exclude the possibility of further finds without metallic evidence. The finds were discovered at a depth of approximately 0.20 m in an area of about 2-3 m^2 on a forest road that is no longer in use. Among the objects, metal detectors recovered an iron belt plate and four pieces of a crown-shaped neck ring, along with a few pottery fragments and human bones, while the arrowhead and other pieces of the vessel were left at the site. The spatial location of the finds can be reconstructed based on the report and drawing of the finders (**fig. 2**).

The grave was probably disturbed during the use of the forest road, which may have scattered the grave goods and human bones and destroyed the upper half of the vessel and perhaps the lid, whose pieces could not be identified afterwards. However, the fragmentation of the necklace cannot be attributed to modern disturbance, as the different preservation, oxidation, and patina of the pieces suggest that the crown-shaped neck ring was placed in the grave in a fragmentary state.

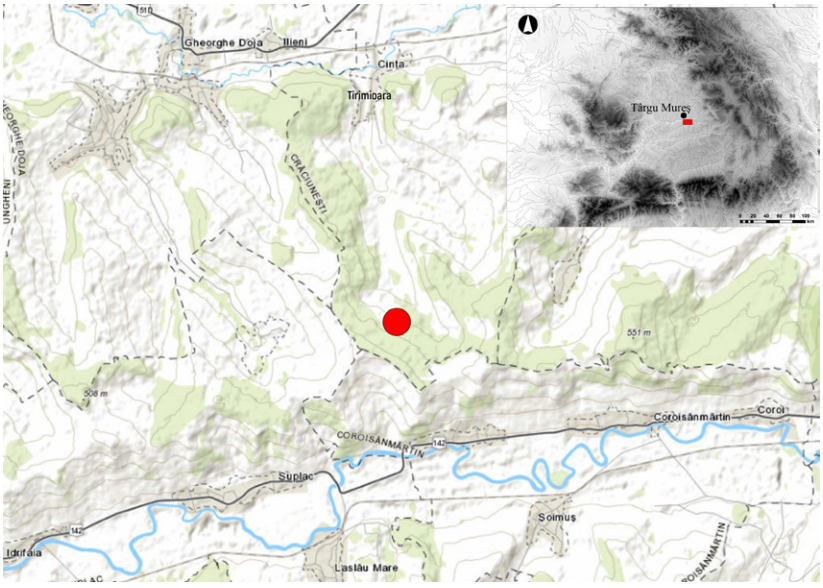


Fig. 1. The location of the discovery near Tirimioara, Mureş County, Romania (S. Berecki)

Upon arrival at the site, it was possible to re-identify and document the arrowhead left in situ by the metal detectorists, as well as to excavate the bottom of the vessel, inside which another piece of the neck ring was found (**figs. 3-4**). A 2 × 2 m section was opened around the central part of the grave. As the brown, porous soil around the objects was uniform and homogeneous due to the tree roots, it was not possible to identify the grave pit, which could not have been large and deep. In many cemeteries of this period, the observation of grave pits was problematic; when they were identified, their diameter was usually no greater than 1 meter (Babeş 1993, 36).

A few small, heavily fragmented cremated human bone fragments were also collected by the metal detectorists, and during the excavations further fragments were found in and around the vessel. Bones were found at all depths from 0.20 m, where the finds were discovered, to the bottom of the grave at 0.27 m (**fig. 5**). In some places, charcoal spots were also visible, coming probably from the funerary pyre. Due to the nature of the soil, the human bones at the bottom of the pit were only visible as impressions and could not be collected because of their fragile condition.

Based on anthropological analysis (for which thanks are due to Szilárd-Sándor Gál), the urn contained the cremated remains of an adult who died in his early twenties. Among the skull bones, a fragment of the zygomatic bone and a few pieces of cheekbone were found. The rest of the human remains were mainly splintered fragments of long bones. 90% of the skeleton is missing. Traces of bronze and iron oxide were observed on some bone fragments, suggesting that the inventory was burned alongside the deceased. Due to the small quantity and fragmentation of the remains, it was not possible to determine the sex of the deceased.

II. The grave inventory (figs. 6-7)

The grave goods were probably placed in the urn, as it was observed in the case of the Poieneşti-Lukaševka burials east of the Carpathians (Babeş 1985, 187-188; Babeş 1993, 34-35, 38), and some of the objects may have been scattered as a result of modern disturbance. Secondary

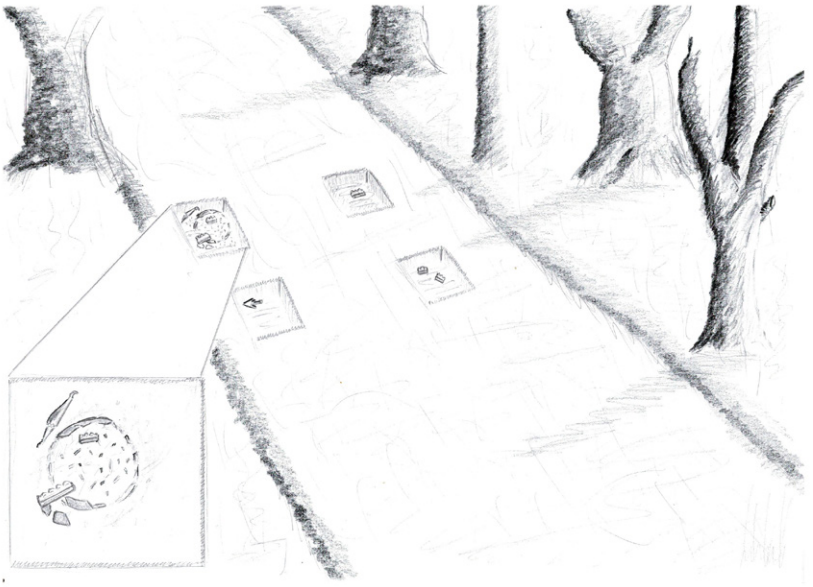


Fig. 2. Drawing by Á. Cs. Balázs, the discoverer of the grave, showing the position of the objects found with the metal detector

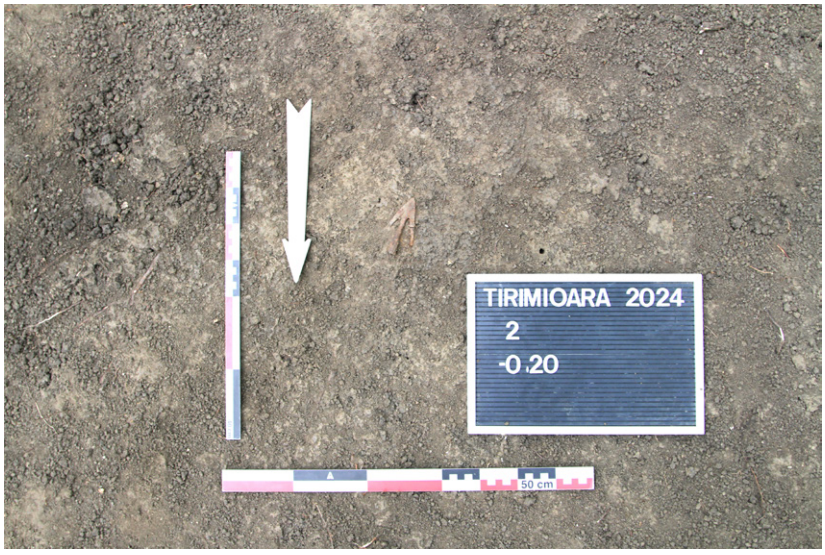


Fig. 3. The re-excavated arrowhead (S. Berecki)



Fig. 4. Pottery and a crown-shaped neck ring fragment from the grave (S. Berecki)

burn marks were observed on each object. In agreement with the anthropological observations, this fact suggests that, according to the common practice (Babeş 1993, 39), the grave goods were placed on the pyre together with the deceased. The cremated bones were usually placed in the grave separated from the remains of the pyre (Babeş 1993, 36-37).

The iron winged arrowhead (**fig. 6/1**) was found approximately 1 metre from the urn and measured 82 mm in length. Its wings were fragmented, likely due to secondary combustion. Very few weapons have been found in the Poienești-Lukaševka graves so far; arrowheads are only known from settlements (Babeş 1985, 200; Babeş 1993, 116).

The iron belt plate (**fig. 6/2**) was found near the urn. Due to secondary burning and the characteristics of the soil, its fragments were poorly preserved, and the object was held together almost exclusively by rust, making conservation impossible. The slightly curved plate had hooks at both ends. Its length was approximately 115 mm. Typologically, it can be classified as belonging to M. Babeş's Group III of narrow-band belt plates (Babeş 1985, 195, fig. 9/III; Babeş 1993, 103-104, Abb. 26).

The crown-shaped neck ring (*Kronenhalsring*) (**fig. 6/3**) was mould-cast from bronze. The thickness of the bronze plates varies due to preservation, averaging around 5 mm. The five pieces vary in size and together make up barely a quarter of the jewellery. The fragmen-

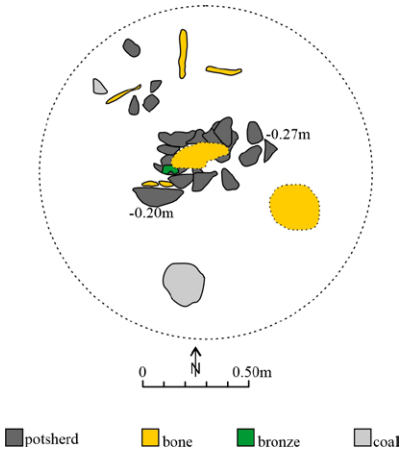


Fig. 5. Plan of the grave at depths of 0.20 and 0.27 m (S. Berecki)

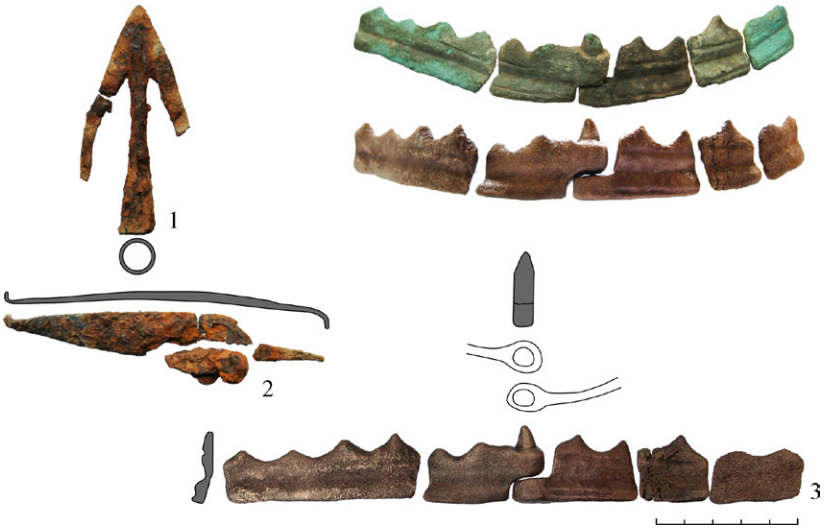


Fig. 6. The metallic inventory of the grave: **1** iron arrowhead; **2** iron belt plate; **3** fragments from a crown-shaped bronze neck ring (before and after restoration, conservator: T. András, Mureş County Museum) (S. Berecki)



Fig. 7. Ceramic inventory of the grave (S. Berecki)

tation, characteristic of the period and associated with the burial ceremony (Babeş 1985, 188), also determined the subsequent fate and condition of the object: the surface and patina of the pieces are not uniform, one piece is heavily cracked, all surfaces are very rough, and many areas are distorted as a result of secondary burning. The corrosive patina of the pieces, which led to pitting and degradation of the object, varied in colour on different pieces, and sometimes even on the same piece, ranging from yellow-green to bright green to brownish green.

The massive bronze collar was ornamented on its upper part with triangular spikes. The outer side has two parallel ribs, decorated on top and at the bottom with incised decoration. The inside is flat. The cylindrical hinge pin with a conical upper end was fastened at the bottom with hammering, and the body broke at the joint between the two moving parts. The part with the plug fastener locking system is missing. At the joint of the pin, the diameter of the hole is 11.62 mm. The weight of the remaining pieces after restoration is 117 g.

The crown-shaped neck ring with band-shaped ring body and horizontal groove from Tirimioara can be included into the types Kostrzewski III, Babeş E, and *Rauchfuß* 5 (Babeş 1993, 108; Rustoiu et al. 2026 forthcoming), dated to LT D1, i.e. between the second half of the 2nd century and the beginning of the 1st century BC. In the region, similar jewellery has only been found east of the Carpathians, with examples of the same type found in Romania at Miroslava, Ţibucani (Coman 1968), Vârfu Câmpului (unpublished, artefact found by metal detectorists), in Ukraine at Stanivtsi (Ільків / Боднарюк 2020) and Zalishchyky (Zales'e) (Babeş 1993, 107, 207, Abb. 28), while a Kostrzewski II, Babeş B, and *Rauchfuß* 2 type was found in Davideni (Babeş / Untaru 1969).

The vessel used as an urn is heavily fragmented, with only a few pieces remaining from its bottom (80 mm in diameter) and lower part (**fig. 7**). Its outer surface is dark grey-black, its inner wall is mostly light brown and brownish-grey; its firing is mixed, reductive, with traces of secondary burning on many sherds. Based on the fragments, the vessel may have been a pot or a jug. A few reddish pottery fragments with a rough surface and oxidised firing suggest that there was a second vessel in the grave, which may have been the lid of the urn.

III. Poieneşti-Lukaševka finds in Transylvania

The number of Transylvanian finds associated with the Poieneşti-Lukaševka communities characteristic of the area east of the Carpathians is very small. The bowls with faceted rims and the pottery with X-shaped handles in Moreşti belong to this group. The finds are concentrated around two structures interpreted as houses, from which, apart from the characteristic Poieneşti-Lukaševka pottery, only hand-formed pottery was found (Berecki 2008, 68-70, e.g. 5). No similar Poieneşti-Lukaševka fragments were found in the other features and the layer. In the case of contemporary settlements east of the Carpathians, the finds of the newly arrived communities were found mixed with those of the "autochthonous" population (Hânceanu 2021, 70), which is natural in the case of goods that entered through trade relations or some form of coexistence between the two communities. Co-habitation cannot be confirmed in the case of the settlement of

Moreşti, as the presence of pottery is not due to import or cultural influence (Horedt 1979, 52), despite the fact that during the Middle La Tène period, there were connections and flows of goods between the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin and the eastern regions outside the Carpathians (Berecki 2014, 16).

Therefore, we must consider two habitats in Moreşti (Berecki 2008, 75; Berecki 2014, 16; Ursuţiu / Urák 2019, 170, *contra* Rustoiu 2023, fn. 54), the first related to the "Celtic horizon" dating to LT C1 with metal and glass objects, while the second – "Bastarn episode" (Horedt 1979, 52) – is somewhat later and can be dated to the "Dacian horizon" (for the Transylvanian Late Iron Age "horizons", see Rustoiu 2015). The absence of a layer associated with the later habitat can be explained by the nature of the settlements in the core region east of the Carpathians, where the cultural layers connected to the few dispersed dwellings are either thin or absent.

At Şeuşa-La Cărarea Morii, a Late Iron Age settlement with two distinct chronological horizons (Ferencz / Ciută 2005, 239), a fragment of a shallow bowl from the trench SIII/1998 and another of a deep bowl are specific to the Poieneşti-Lukaševka area. Their association with the "Celtic" level is not sustained by their stratigraphic position, since the fragments were recovered from the archaeological layer, without a well-defined context (Berecki 2008, 69).

A funerary or ritual complex was discovered recently at Iernut (Ursuţiu / Urák 2019). Due to its shape and the internal timber structure, the whole complex resembles a La Tène cremation grave, but the inventory reflects specific Poieneşti-Lukaševka elements. The absence of cremated human remains has led to its classification as a cenotaph. This isolated symbolic burial can also be dated after the "Celtic horizon", sometime between the LT C1b and LT D2 periods (Ursuţiu / Urák 2019, 170, *contra* Rustoiu 2023, 152). Like the Tirimioara burial, dated to the LT D1 period, the Iernut grave was not found in the cemetery of a smaller or larger "Celtic" community, but as an isolated, solitary burial, which perhaps supports the idea that, from a chronological point of view, it belongs to the era following the Transylvanian "Celtic horizon", to the new period following the transformation of otherworldly beliefs and funeral rites.

IV. The significance of the Tirimioara find

The crown-shaped neck ring is a particularly significant piece from the Tirimioara grave goods. Due to their unique shape, they were not everyday jewellery, but rather ritual objects (Maciałowicz 2016, 78). This is also indicated by the place where they were found, as they were most often deposited as votive offerings mostly in a wet environment, less frequently as grave goods, mainly for women, and only in exceptional cases in dry deposits or in settlement features (Maciałowicz 2016, 77-78; Rustoiu et al. 2026 forthcoming). Crown-shaped neck rings similar to the Tirimioara specimen, placed as grave goods, are known from the Dwikozy and Błonie graves in Poland; in the latter case the necklace was also placed in pieces in the grave. The Stanivtsi scattered find also yielded five fragments, showing signs of ancient fracturing (Ільків / Боднарюк 2020, 74).

The anthropological analyses were unable to determine the sex of the young deceased, and neither the characteristics of the grave

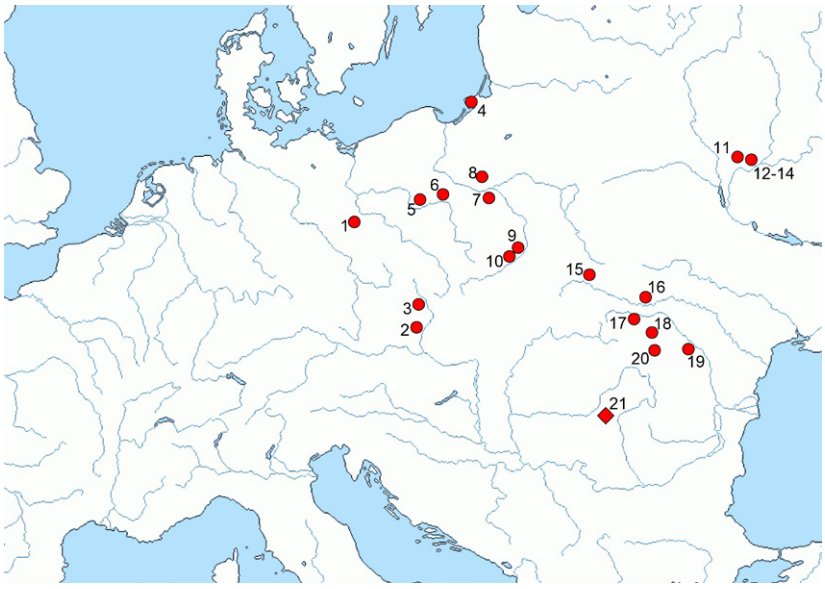


Fig. 8. Crown-shaped neck rings of Kostrzewski III, Babeş E and *Rauchfuß* 5 (Dwikozy and Błonie) type (after Rustoiu et al. 2026, fig. 8, list 1): **1** Klinge, DE; **2** Bobravská vrchovina, CZ; **3** Křenov, CZ; **4** Lochstädt, RU; **5** Staw, PL; **6** Synogaç, PL; **7** Izdebno Kościelne, PL; **8** Kluczewo, PL; **9** Dwikozy, PL; **10** Błonie, PL; **11** Hreblya, UA (2 pcs); **12** Lisky-Makhon'kovo, UA (2 pcs); **13** Lisky-Kazjonnoe, UA; **14** Lisky-Valok, UA; **15** Vil'khovets', UA; **16** Zalishchyky (Zales'e), UA; **17** Stanivtsi, UA; **18** Vârful Câmpului, RO; **19** Miroslava, RO; **20** Ţibucani, RO; **21** Tirimioara, RO (S. Berecki)

goods nor analogies with contemporary cemeteries excavated east of the Carpathians and their burial customs provide any help. The use of pots and jars as urns has been observed mainly in women's graves, and belt plates also occur more frequently as grave goods in women's burials, while weapons are characteristic of men, although no arrowheads have been found in graves so far (Babeş 1985, 188; Babeş 1993, 39, 42).

Based on the crown-shaped neck ring, the grave can be dated to the LT D1 period. The nature of the burial indicates that the object did not arrive in the intra-Carpathian region through intermediaries (trade, looting, etc.), but was buried in the grave together with its owner, in accordance with the rite characteristic of the Poienești-Lukaševka community.

V. Discussion and conclusions

European mobility in the 3rd-2nd centuries BC had a significant impact on the Carpathian Basin region. At the end of the LT C1 period, the Transylvanian "Celtic horizon" came to an end, and the use of earlier settlements and cemeteries was discontinued. A new type of culture, the "Padea-Panaghiurski Kolonii group", appeared in the region (Rustoiu 2015, 27-28), which advanced from the lower Danube area to Transylvania, led by an equestrian warrior aristocracy, whose panoply consisted of sword, spear, shield and curved dagger (Berecki 2021, 82), with a heterogeneous culture which combined mainly Thracian and Celtic cultural elements (Szabó 2005, 51).

Almost simultaneously, from the end of the 3rd century BC (Iarmulschi 2016), communities from Central-North Europe, from the territory of the Jastorf culture area between the Elbe and Oder, together with others from the Danish islands, arrived in several waves and, enriched with elements from the territories they passed through, settled east of the Carpathians, creating the "Poienești-Lukaševka culture", which, based on ancient sources, is associated with the Bastarnae. The route of this early Germanic migration towards southeast is also reflected in the distribution map of crown-shaped neck rings (**fig. 8**) (Babeş / Untaru 1969, 290; Babeş 1993, 108; Munteanu / Iarmulschi 2018, 230, *contra* Maciałowicz 2016, 87). Approximately 205 settle-

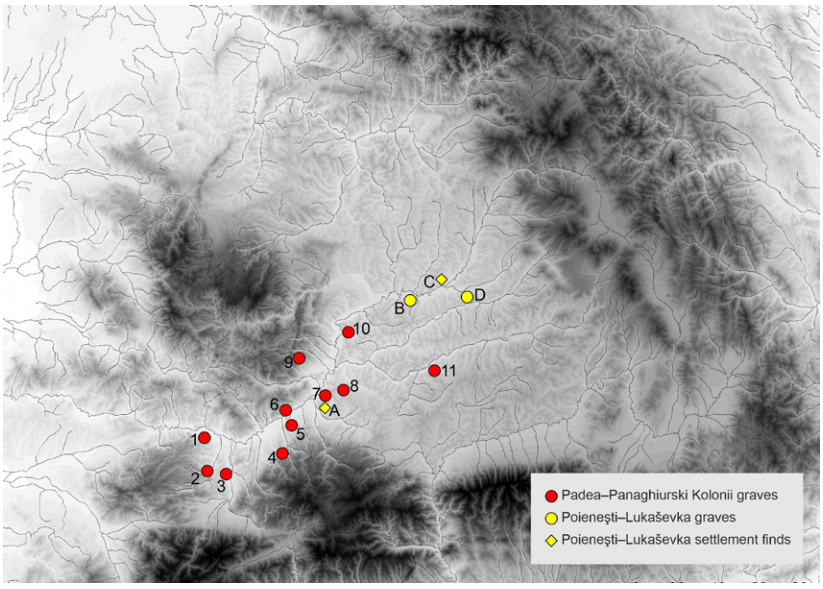


Fig. 9. Transylvania during the LT C2-D1: Padea–Panaghiurski Kolonii graves (after Rustoiu 2012) and Poienești-Lukaševka finds: **1** Deva; **2** Hunedoara; **3** Călan; **4** Cugir; **5** Tărtăria; **6** Blandiana; **7** Teleac; **8** Berghin; **9** Craiva; **10** Sâncrai; **11** Mediaș; **A** Șeușa; **B** Iernut; **C** Moreşti; **D** Tirimioara (S. Berecki)

ments, six cemeteries, and 11 isolated graves with a total of 520 burials are attributed to this cultural circle in the forest-steppe east of the Carpathians (Munteanu / Iarmulschi 2018, 217-219, fig. 1-2).

According to A. Rustoiu, already towards the end of the LT C1a period (Rustoiu 2023; Rustoiu et al. 2026 forthcoming), but more likely after the "Celtic horizon", during the "Dacian horizon", when the Bastarnae established consolidated centres in the areas east of the Carpathians, in the new regional geopolitical context and during a period of radical ideological and religious transformations spreading across Europe, a certain competition began for the resources and the communication and trading route along the Mureş River valley, which soon became a buffer zone (**fig. 9**). In the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin, after the LT C1 period and the "Celtic" domination, beside the Padea-Panaghiurski Kolonii groups advancing from the lower Danube region, the Poienești-Lukaševka communities living east of the Carpathians also became interested in the area, presumably seeking trade relations and stability for their core settlement area in the new geopolitical context.

According to the archaeological findings, the mobility of the different groups involved interactions with the neighbouring communities, sometimes also in course of expansion, contacts established through social and commercial networks, as shown by the settlements of Moreşti and Şeușa, or the isolated burials of Iernut and Tirimioara. The two Poienești-Lukaševka-type burials in Transylvania were found not in cemeteries but as isolated graves. In their case, therefore, the mobility of small groups rather than large ones must be taken into account, of families preserving the traditions and burial customs of their core settlement areas. This is also suggested by the small habitation at Moreşti, while in the case of the two Poienești-Lukaševka-type pottery fragments at Şeușa, probably there was no effective presence, but they represent trade in goods. At the same time, the crown-shaped neck ring from Tirimioara indicates that members of the elite were also engaged in this mobility in some cases. Based on the finds from Moreşti, Şeușa, and Iernut, it can be assumed that the formation of the buffer zone and the networking between communities took place after the

LT C1 and the period of changes following the Transylvanian "Celtic horizon", while the grave in Tirimioara shows that during the LT D1 period, the Poienești-Lukaševka communities continued to maintain relations with the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin and showed interest in this region.

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Гроб от късножелезния период от Тиримиоара, окръг Муреш, Румъния

Шандор БЕРЕЦКИ

(резюме)

Погребението е открито с металотърсач, а впоследствие е проучено от археолози. Гробният инвентар включва плочка от колан, връх на стрела и обръч за шия, оформен като корона. Торквата е най-южната находка от този тип, чиито най-близки паралели са източно от Карпатите на територията на археологическата култура Поянещи-Лукашевка. За носители на последната се смятат бастарните. Ядрото на тази култура лежи в североизточната част на централна Европа. Заедно с няколко предходни находки, погребението илюстрира социални и политически промени в източния край на Карпатския басейн през II в. пр. Хр.

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