
A Feature (Cx 96) of the Gáva Culture from Sânpaul–Usturiș (Cluj County): A First Assessment of Its Absolute Chronology

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Introduction

The construction of the Nădășelu–Topa Mică sector of the A3 motorway (Brașov–Cluj-Napoca–Oradea), which crosses the territory of the Gârbău and Sânpaul communes (Plate I/1–2), was preceded by the archaeological diagnosis carried out, in 2016, by the Institute of Archaeology and Art History in Cluj-Napoca. On that occasion, mechanically excavated sections of variable lengths (7–10 m) were performed, leading to the identification of numerous archaeological sites (Cociș *et al.* 2016). The following year, the preventive excavations were carried out by the National History Museum of Transylvania in Cluj-Napoca. The works took place between May and July and were ceased before the investigations were fully completed.

One of the most important sites researched on that occasion was found on the territory of the Sânpaul commune (in Hungarian, Magyarszentpál, about 25 km northwest of the city of Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County: Plate I/ 1), on the hill called by the locals *Usturiș*. This is situated north of the village, on the left side of the Sânpaul–Mihăiești highway (E 81), between the *Cozopăii Valley* to the north and the *Usturiș Valley* to the south (Plate I/ 2; II/ 1–2). The southeastern hillside, which descends from the altitude of 477 m to 405 m, has a narrow terrace between the altitudes of 410 and 405 m. On this terrace there is a ploughed piece of land from which, during an earlier field survey, numerous prehistoric ceramic fragments of the Coțofeni, Wietenberg and Gáva cultures were recovered (Bereteu 2014, 94, no. 13; Bereteu 2020, 34–35, no. 27). During our excavations, this spot was labelled as Site no. 9. Here we were able to identify and research over 358 archaeological features (abbreviated as Cx) belonging to different periods (Plate III). 309 of them belong to the Bronze Age (the Coțofeni, Wietenberg and Deva-Bădeni cultures: Plates XI–XIII) and the Early Iron Age (Gáva culture). Further 46 features belong to the Roman period, while three features are Early Migration Age burials (Cupcea *et al.* 2019, 147–194).

The prehistoric artefacts discovered in this site are currently in different stages of processing. The processing of three features assigned to the third phase of the Wietenberg culture (Cx 171, 183 and 261) has been completed and will be published in a separate volume (Rotea *et al.* 2021). Two artifacts from these features were displayed in the exhibition *At the beginnings of history. Prehistoric civilizations between the Carpathians and the Lower Danube* (2019–2020, Liège), coordinated by C. Borș from the National History Museum of Romania. Among the features that are only partly analysed so far is Cx 96, which will be presented briefly in this article (Plates IV–X). As the restoration-conservation process of its ceramic inventory is completed (due to the care of C. Rotariu from the National History Museum of Transylvania) and the two samples taken for radiocarbon dating have been analysed (at the “Horia Hulubei” National Institute for Physics and Nuclear Engineering; for analysis method

see: Sava *et al.* 2019, 649–658), we are in the position of presenting here a preliminary cultural and chronological evaluation of Cx 96.

The data

Feature Cx 96 is a pit, approximately cylindrical in shape, with flat bottom and straight walls, with a diameter of ca. 1.70 m and maximum depth of ca. 0.55 m (Plate VI/ 1). Inside it, at different depths, were found: a partial human skeleton, one unattached long bone, a large vessel fragment, other small fragments from various vessels, one sandstone fragment and a hare skeleton (Plates IV–IX).

The human bone remains, most likely belonging to one and the same individual, were found at the top of the pit, in its central part (Plate IX). The upper part of the body was partially in supine position and partially lying on its right side, with the face oriented towards southwest. The arms, of which only fragments of the two humeri have been preserved, were in front of the chest. While the axis of the spine was orientated approx. east-west, the axis of the pelvis was orientated north-south. From the legs, only the femurs were preserved. The left one seemed in anatomical connection, but the right one was clearly dislocated and placed parallel to the first at a distance of approx. 0.55 m (Plate IV/ 2; V/ 1–2; IX). The remains were not yet analyzed by an osteologist, but according to our preliminary evaluation they probably belonged to a teenager.

Next to the human skeleton, at its backside, there was a fragment of a large amphora (Plate VII and IX, see below) and near it, a pyramidal piece of sandstone object with traces of burning (Plate IX).

Beneath the human bones there was a layer of earth, containing a long bone, close to the bottom of the pit, in its northern area, and approximately below the right human femur. As it was not analysed so far, it is not clear whether it belongs to the human skeleton. The earth layer containing this long bone covered the complete skeleton of a *Lepus europaeus*, European hare (Plates VIII–IX). The latter was laid on the bottom of the pit, in its southern part, with an amphora sherd beneath. The hare skeleton was in poor state of preservation in that the bones were strongly fragmented. A whole femur, with a maximum length of 143.5 cm, was recovered. On a fragment of the right upper jaw, the dentition was preserved *in situ* (P2–P4 premolars and M1–M2 molars). The length of the premolar string is 8 cm. As dentition, owing to its continuous growth, cannot be an age estimation criterion, the age of death cannot be determined exactly. However, since all the epiphyses of the recovered long bones are fused to the diaphyses and the vertebral bodies are ossified, the animal must have reached adulthood at the time of death. Domestic rabbits live between 8–12 years, but wild hares live much less because of harsh conditions and predators. Therefore, we estimate that the hare was between 1 and 5–6 years old at the time of death. Metric data — i.e., the distal femoral