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**THE DACIAN FORTRESS BEFORE THE ROMAN CONQUEST.
CASE STUDY — THE FORTRESS AT ARDEU**

ABSTRACT

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In the final decades of the Late Iron Age some changes are recorded within the European civilizations. In Central and Western Europe the oppidum civilization is developing, characterized by sites with Celtic materials. In Transylvania small rural communities continue to exist similarly as during previous centuries. Alongside them fortified settlements and fortresses also begin to appear. Celtic artifacts are missing nearly completely from these sites.

The “Cetățuia” (Citadel) at Ardeu is one of the lesser known monuments in the Hunedoara County. Just a brief glimpse at any map shows that the positioning of the fortress allows it to control the local valley and also to defend the shortest road connecting the capital of the Dacian Kingdom with precious metals deposits in the Apuseni Mountains. In our opinion this is the reason why the settlement and fortress developed and thrived for almost two centuries, before Roman legionaries put an end to its existence. The walls were built of local stone, clay and wood and enclosed an area of about 1/2 ha. Inside the stronghold we identified structures such as: houses, a workshop as well as a tower-dwelling, interpreted as a personal residence of a Dacian nobleman. So far the location of the gate has not been identified but access from the foot of the hill to its summit was by a path, suitable for traveling by foot, horse or mule.

In the lower lying area on southern slopes of Ardeu Valley, at Gura Cheilor, we identified a settlement dating from the same period as the fortress.

Dacian fortresses appeared in late second and early first century B.C., in Transylvania, in some places outside the arc of the Carpathians, in the Romanian southern Banat, right on the Danube bank. Some of them, probably the richest, were built using blocks of dressed limestone, in a Hellenistic technique, but in most of them local stone was used. Inside some structures were identified, most of them interpreted as noble residences.

The Dacian fortress at Ardeu is similar to most other strongholds from that period. It had the same plan and the walls were built from the same type of raw material as most Dacian fortresses of this type. The archaeological material is also similar to that recorded at other sites dated to this period. The positioning of the Cetățuia stronghold at Ardeu, not very far from Sarmizegetusa Regia, as well as its special features recommend it as an interesting site for further research.

Key words: Late Iron Age; La Tène Period; Transylvania; Dacians; Fortified settlements

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INTRODUCTION

The final stages of the Late Iron Age may be viewed as a time of a major transition which swept over much of Europe. In Transylvania, the second century

B.C. may be interpreted as a period of wide-scale social transformation. The La Tène type culture, sharing many similarities with Central European culture, is present in the region until the first decades of the second century B.C. (Ferencz 2011, 173–175). During the final decades of that century a new type of material culture is attested in the settlements (Rustoiu 2008, 149). More than one hypothesis has been formulated to explain the cause of this change, including assimilation (Crişan 1966, 44–45; 1977, 31) and retreat under Roman pressure (Zirra 1980, 71–72). In my opinion, the interpretations proposed by Aurel Rustoiu seem to be the most clear (Rustoiu 2002, 33–36; 2008, 142–163) but we have to be honest and admit that none of them have been sufficiently validated (Ferencz 2007, 160).

Fortified settlements, and subsequently, hillforts, would become a usual presence in the Dacian landscape amidst the Carpathian mountain ranges during the last century B.C. and in the one that followed (Glodariu 1983, 49–130). The presence of hillforts with stone walls set up in mountain areas, on higher lying ground, is noted by classical authors starting from the first century A.D., when contacts between the Romans and Dacians became more intense (Medeleţ 1971). Their existence ends in early second century when two campaigns led by Trajan (101–102; 105–106) ultimately led to the defeat of the Dacians.

Discovered in early nineteenth century the stone ramparts of Dacian fortresses, especially in the Orăştie Mountains, have attracted interest of many scholars (Jakó 1966; 1968; 1971; 1972; 1973; Daicoviciu *et al.* 1989, 185–187; Mateescu 2012, 21–32). During the nineteenth and early into the twentieth century they were investigated less intensely but interest increased in the period between the two world wars and even much more in the second half of that century. In this context many Dacian sites have been investigated to a varying extent and, in the process, some fortifications with stone walls were recorded (Glodariu 1983; Rustoiu 1993; Crişan 2000; Gheorghiu 2005; Nemeth *et al.* 2005; Pop 2006).

There is no doubt that south-western Transylvania, with its Dacian hillforts protected by ramparts of limestone blocks, built in a Hellenistic manner, is the best known area. These structures draw attention of specialists and of the wider public alike. It is obvious that the entire complex discovered in the Orăştie Mountains is extraordinary (Lockyear 2004, 69). At the same time, the largest number of hillforts with stone ramparts were built using local raw material, with little or no processing at all (Glodariu 1983, 123; Rustoiu 1993). The construction techniques for the fortifications are not uniform everywhere in Dacia. Some of them are considered to have “traditional” roots (Rustoiu 1993, 183–184), while others are inspired from the “Celtic” world (Moga 1981), or even from African masonry — *opus Africanum* (Bodó 2001, 321). And naturally, we need to draw attention to techniques inspired by Hellenistic masonry, as when we speak of walls built of large limestone blocks (Florea 2011, 153), and some raised of rough local stone (Rustoiu 1993, 183).

Dacian architecture in general and fortifications in particular have been the subject of many studies in Romania (Glodariu 1983, 49–120; Conovici, Mărgineanu-Cărstoiu 1985; Antonescu 1984; Rustoiu 1993; Crișan 2000, 97–114; Nemeth *et al.* 2005, 9-77; Pop 2006; Florea 2011). All of them are regarded as elements of a great system created to defend the capital of the Dacian Kingdom and all of Dacia (Glodariu 2003, 109–110). It is believed that the fortifications placed in the mountain area were garrisoned (Glodariu 2003, 108). This would be the reason for the presence in them of buildings interpreted tentatively as “barracks” or “simple wooden houses” for the warriors (Glodariu 2003, 108).

Actually, when the lay-out of these fortifications was understood better some details became obvious. Most of these structures had two or more enclosures, in a concentric design or in a suite. In all cases the enclosures with the most ostentations building occupied a dominant position. The presence of buildings placed on the terraces suggests the existence of hierarchy (Florea 2011, 94). Dacian fortresses have been defined as establishments defended by a garrison and their political and military leader. They were placed in the vicinity of one or more settlements (Glodariu 1983, 50). Inside the fortified encampments, buildings were frequently discovered. Some of them were large, sometimes with more than one level. Their shape was rectangular, the base was of great blocks of stone, either local in origin or brought over large distances. Their construction material was clay brick or timber. These buildings have been interpreted by archaeologists as tower-dwellings because of their similarity to the medieval tower houses (Glodariu 1983, 26-29). They may be regarded as palaces of that age, as compared to the rest of the more modest dwellings (Glodariu 1983, 26). The same interpretation may be used for another type of building, like the one identified at Piatra Roșie (Daicoviciu 1954, 50–55). Almost invariably buildings of this type occupy a dominant position as compared to other structures — the latter mostly dwellings interpreted by their inventories as domestic, but some workshops also.

Viewed from this perspective the hilltop or hill slope “fortresses” with mighty stone walls are likely to be aristocratic residences of noblemen, their family and retinue (Florea 2011, 93-94).

Romanian researchers have developed standardized terminology for the Late Iron Age (*Dicționar...* 1976; *Propuneri...* 1997–1998). The word used most frequently to describe some of the fortifications placed on higher lying ground (hilltops and hill slopes), enclosed by stone ramparts, are defined by them as “cetate”, meaning “fortress”, “citadel”. Another frequently used term is “dava” (Florea 2011, 16–18). More recently, this type of archaeological site has been defined as *château fort* (Florea 2011, 89-92) which in our opinion defines better this kind of structure.

THE DACIAN HILLFORT AT ARDEU

A less known “fortified castle” is found in Ardeu, a small mountain village in south-western Transylvania (Fig. 1). *Cetățuia* (“little fortress”) was discovered here in late nineteenth century by G. Tég l á s (1885, 299–307; 1888, 134–138). The same scholar began exploring the site, organizing two campaigns (F e r e n c z 2012a). Some decades later L. Nemoianu from the National Museum of History in Bucharest made a small archaeological survey (Nemoianu, Andrițoiu 1975), with inconclusive results.

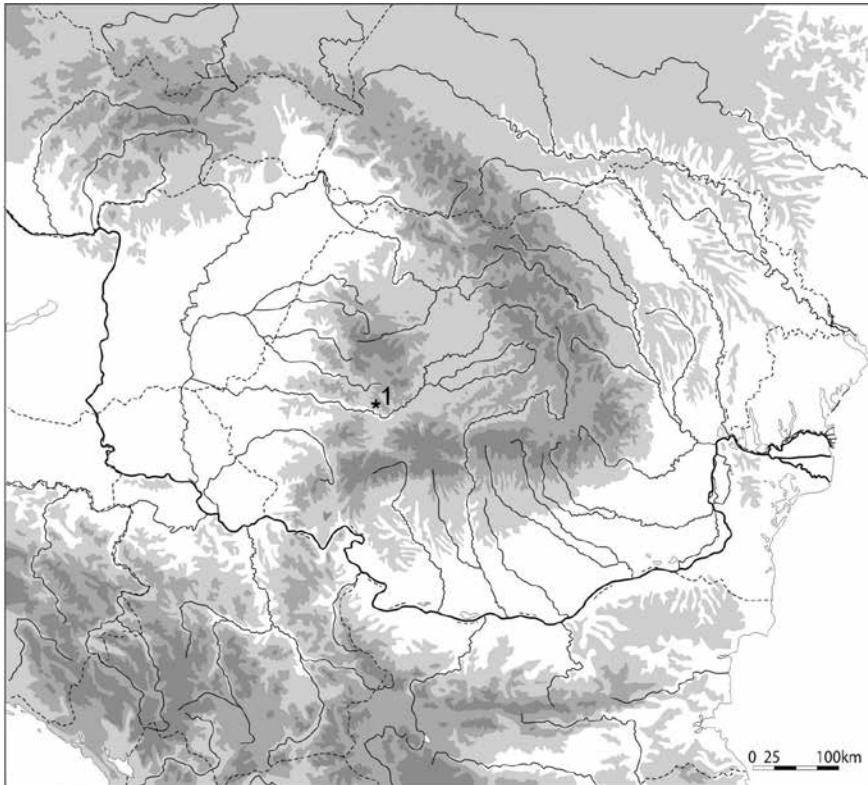


Fig. 1. Ardeu, județul Hunedoara, Romania. The location of the site; after I. V. Ferencz (2010).

Interest in investigating the site at Ardeu revived during the final years of the twentieth century but new excavations were undertaken only at the start of the new millennium (Pescaru *et al.* 2002; Ferencz *et al.* 2003; 2004; 2005; 2010; 2011). The results of this research have been presented at several conferences (see Ferencz 2012a, 70–71, Footnote No. 3) with some of the artifacts published in books and journals (Bodó, Ferencz 2003; Ferencz, Bodó 2003; Ferencz 2003; 2005; 2006; 1010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2012a; 2012b Ferencz, Roman 2010).

DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

The site at Ardeu takes in a limestone hill — “Cetățuie” — which rises on the southern margin of the village and a plateau — “Judele” — at the base of its eastern slope. Moreover, at tract of land bordering on the stream Valea Ardeului, at the southern foot of the hill, are also parts of the site (Fig 2). The “Cetățuie” lies in an area surrounded by dominant landforms (Fig. 3).

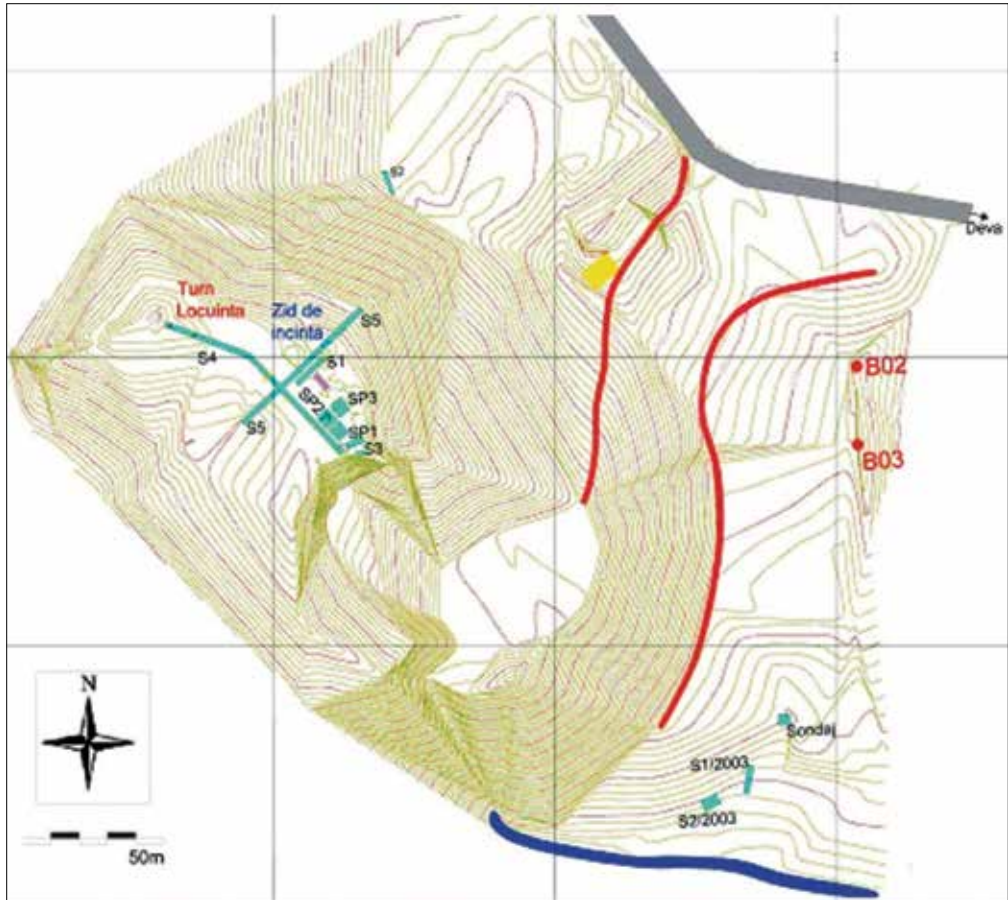


Fig. 2. Ardeu, județul Hunedoara, Romania. Plan of the excavations of “Cetățuie” hill up to 2004; drawn by M. M. Ștefan.

Valea Ardeului flows through the village, separates the “Cetățuie” hill from another, much higher, known as “Cornet”, and with other streams it joins the Mureș River, the main river of south-western Transylvania. Its importance during Antiquity as a communication route from and to the centre of the Carpathian Basin has been noted by modern scholars (Glodariu 1974, 117–118; Mărghităn 1977, 203–207; Rustoiu 2002, 36). The importance of the Mureș

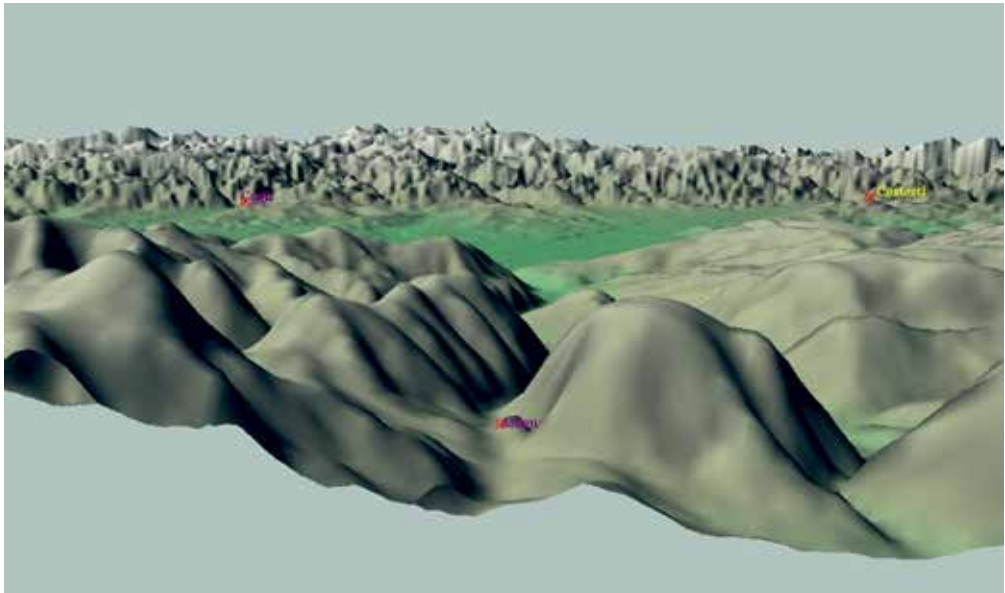


Fig. 3. Ardeu, județul Hunedoara, Romania. Digital reconstruction of topography; computer design by M. M. Ștefan.

River as a communication route is confirmed by references found in some of the classical writers, as Herodotus and Strabo, who believed that the Tisa River was a tributary of the Mureș and not the other way around as we know today (Mărghitan 1977, 203).

The fortress at Ardeu lies at a small distance from the Mureș (about 17 km), on the shortest route connecting the Dacian system of fortifications in the Orăștie Mountains to the precious metals deposits in the Apuseni Mountains. We believe that the fortress was placed here to gain proper control of this route (Bodó, Ferencz 2003, 153–154).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION AT ARDEU 2001–2013

The purpose of the fieldwork undertaken in the summer of 2001 was to evaluate the potential of the site (Pescaru *et al.* 2002). Its results exceeded our expectations and starting from 2002 gave a number clear objectives to the investigation. That season two main trenches (Fig. 4), laid out at right angles, and two square surfaces were excavated (Ferencz *et al.* 2003). At the same time we started to clear the hilltop of vegetation to better understand its natural topography and identify man-made changes. More features were documented (dwellings, pits etc.), and a rich archaeological material was collected. More than that, the stone wall of the fortification was unearthed and, on the eastern edge (Fig. 5), relics of the palace walls (Fig. 6). Also recorded were three dwellings of smaller dimensions,



Fig. 4. Ardeu, județul Hunedoara, Romania. Plan of the excavations of the summit of “Cetățuie” hill; drawn by M. M. Ștefan.

probably belonging to members of the nobleman’s retinue. The aim of the 2003 season was to cut a section of the stone wall (Fig. 7) and also to verify the location in the meadow of the Valea Ardeului stream (Ferencz *et al.* 2004).

In 2004 the aim of the fieldwork was identifying the fortification wall on the western slope. One of the main trenches was extended 10 m westwards. The wall was not found, possibly because its traces lie more to the west, but the remains of another important Dacian building were discovered instead (Fig. 8) — relics of a workshop, site of manufacture of iron, bronze and bone objects (Ferencz *et al.* 2005; Ferencz 2010b, 82, Footnote No. 30; Ferencz *et al.* 2010; 2011; Ferencz, Beldiman 2012, 48, 201). Between 2009 and 2013, fieldwork focused on the workshop, its construction and outfits inside it. During the excavations numerous artifacts were unearthed.

The area investigated so far is not too extensive (Fig. 2, 4) but to judge from discoveries made so far we can define some of the main coordinates of the site.

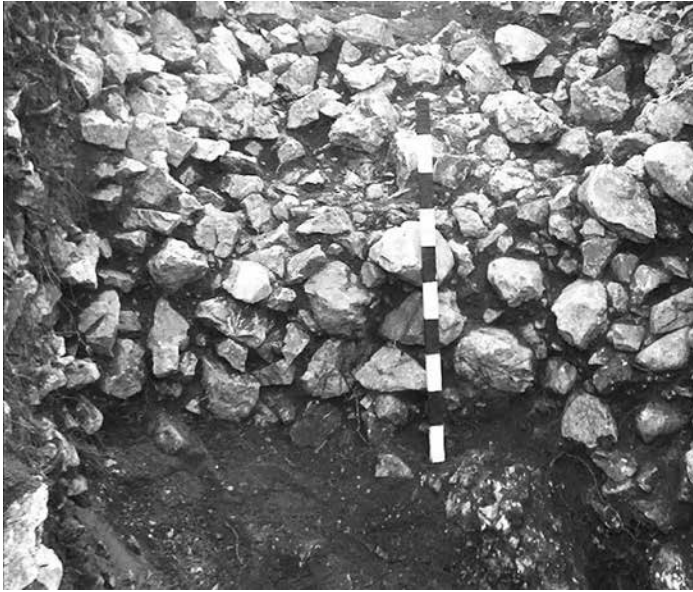


Fig. 5. Ardeu, județul Hunedoara, Romania. The wall of the Dacian hillfort on the eastern edge; Photo by I. V. Ferencz.



Fig. 6. Ardeu, județul Hunedoara, Romania. The wall of the tower-dwelling; Photo by I. V. Ferencz.



Fig. 7. Ardeu, județul Hunedoara, Romania. Section through the wall of the Dacian hillfort on the eastern edge; Photo by I. V. Ferencz.

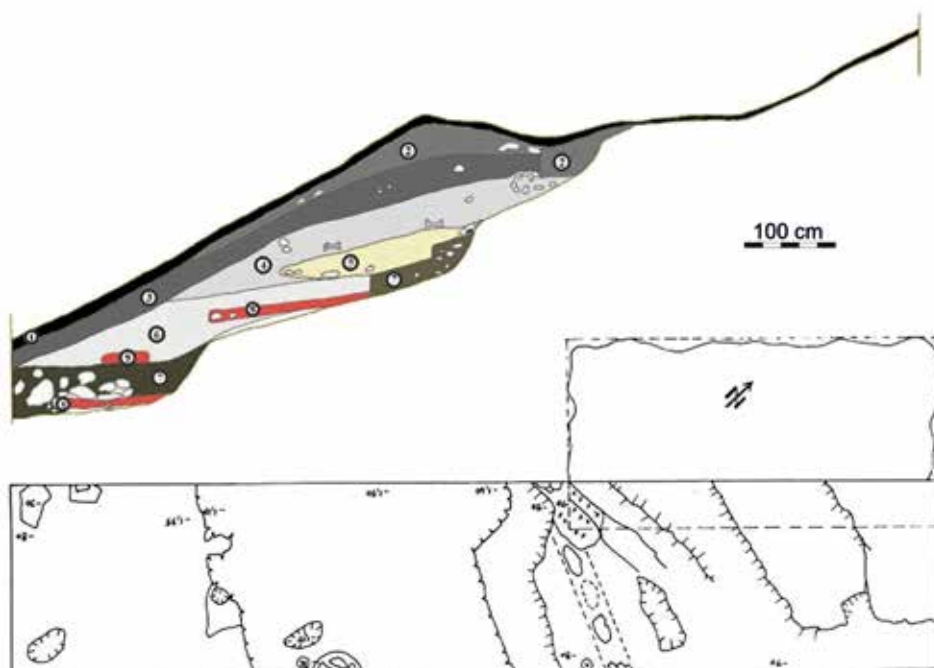


Fig. 8. Ardeu, județul Hunedoara, Romania. Profile of section S5B/2004; drawn by I. V. Ferencz.

1 — Vegetal layer— black earth; 2 — Layer of dark-grey earth from a trench probably excavated by L. Nemoianu and earth from this trench; 3 — Layer of dark earth with artifacts (Bronze Age, Dacian, Roman, Migration Period and medieval); 4 — Layer of grey earth with Dacian artifacts from the first century A.D.; 5 — Layer of reddish clay; 6 — Layer of light-grey earth with Dacian artifacts; 7 — Layer of dark-brown earth mixed with limestone, Dacian and prehistoric artifacts; 8 — Layer containing traces of a wall made of clay; 9 — Hearth.

INTERNAL STRUCTURE

The most elevated part of the “Cetățuie” hill has one ridge oriented SW-NE, its summit a limestone peak situated on the northern edge (at 450 m; *cf.* Fig. 9). On the east, north and south side the slopes are steep. In the west the incline is more gradual and descends to the upper part of short gullies eroded by the stream. The stone rampart of the fortification was discovered, as mentioned earlier, on its eastern side, exactly where the slope becomes steeper. It encloses the entire plateau with an area of about 1 ha. Its construction material is local limestone bonded with clay. The rampart survived to the height of 1 m as was 2 m wide (Fig. 5, 7). On outer and inner face there was evidence of attention of the masons to arrange the stones to obtain a façade as even as possible. This is not uncommon in walls constructed of rough blocks of local limestone (Glodariu 1983, 123; Rustoiu 1993, 182). We think that it is quite possible that the entire stone wall was reinforced by a timber structure, but so far we have found no traces of beams or postholes. We did, however, identify traces of a great fire which altered the physical-chemical structure on the surface of the stone wall.



Fig. 9. Ardeu, județul Hunedoara, Romania. Aerial view of the “Cetățuie” hill with the main components of the site; Photo by Z. Czajlik.

- 1 — judele; 2 — the settlement; 3 — possible grave; 4 — the wall of the hillfort; 5 — workshop;
6 — tower dwelling.

We believe that the stone rampart originally had a height of two meters, possibly even more. Its wooden structures, including perhaps a platform and a parapet, were probably much higher. We propose this image of the wall because we think that it had to ensure the defence of the people inside the fortification and the base of the wall is placed four meters lower than the main ridge.

Access into the hillfort was probably by a path, which presumably led from the north, around the hill on its west side until it reached the south-western part of the upper plateau. So far we have no sound evidence to confirm this hypothesis. According to the local inhabitants, who used to drive their sheep to graze in the plateau, the easiest access route is the one mentioned above. In addition, some traces of the path can still be seen clearly today (F e r e n c z, B e l d i m a n 2012, 202).

The settlement, the remains of which were discovered on the southern slope and at the foot of the hill, had a few dwellings. A survey made in 2003 led to the identification of two structures, each having two phases (F e r e n c z *et al.* 2004). During the 2001 season, when the margins of an intervention was made to organize a limestone quarry on the southern slope we identified a large terrace with traces of habitation (F e r e n c z, B o d ó 2003).

That same year when investigating the base of the “Judele” plateau (also known as “Dealul Judelui”) we discovered a funerary, possibly, a ritual feature (P e s c a r u *et al.* 2012; F e r e n c z, D i m a 2009, 20, Footnote No. 9). A few years later, a magnetometer survey revealed the presence of some circular structures (F e r e n c z *et al.* 2011) which are to be investigated in future.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES

In the northern part of the plateau is a small prominence, the site selected for the most important building inside the fortified enclosure — the nobleman’s palace. This structure was built on a platform made of limestone installed to make the ground more level. After levelling, the tower-dwelling was built of timber, its walls plastered with clay. The remains of this building and its inventory were found also to the south of the prominence, on a plateau where the surface of the rock had been prepared with equal care. Here, above the surface of the rock, we discovered a 2-cm thick layer of slaked lime. Its presence has been interpreted as proof of a great fire which burned for a long time, developing high temperatures. Over the slaked lime layer we found another layer, of reddish soil, mixed with a great quantity of archaeological material such as limestone fragments and pieces of clay with marks of wooden constructions. Among the artifacts discovered in this layer was a Roman lamp (Fig. 10) and a fragment of a Roman *pilum* (Fig. 11). These finds prompted us to date the destruction of the feature and of the entire hillfort to early second century A. D. (F e r e n c z 2005, 374). The presence of the *pilum* fragment suggest a violent end of the palace and of the entire hillfort. The destruction of the fortification can be linked to the Roman campaigns in Dacia of early second century A.D.

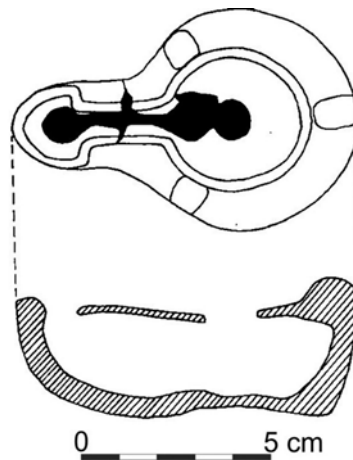


Fig. 10. Ardeu, județul Hunedoara, Romania. Roman lamp made of clay; drawn by M. Egri.



Fig. 11. Ardeu, județul Hunedoara, Romania. Roman pilum fragment; Photo by I. V. Ferencz.

On the surface of the rock we observed traces of human activity datable to different ages and with different purposes. Some appear to be cavities, some regular, others irregular of shape. There was also a small ditch, about 20 cm wide, 8–10 cm deep, orientated E-W, discovered in the area investigated near to the main ridge of the plateau. It is important to note that from the north of this ditch as far as the base of the prominence with the nobleman's residence the surface of the rock had been levelled with care. By analogy to other hillforts which have more than a single enclosure we believe that the small ditch may have separated two distinct areas, the northern area with the nobleman's residence and court from the southern area inhabited by his retinue formed by persons of inferior rank. In this area a number of dwelling structures were found, variously disturbed during the medieval period (F e r e n c z *et al.* 2003).

Another building identified by us is the workshop. It was built on an artificial terrace created on the western slope, less steep. Workshops have been identified inside some hillforts or near to them (R u s t o i u 1996, 53–61), but the one discovered at Ardeu holds special place because of the complexity of activities that were carried out in it.

CHRONOLOGY

So far we have little evidence to date the origins of the hillfort at Ardeu more closely. Nevertheless, the oldest artifacts suggest that the hillfort goes back to the second half of the first century B.C. These include an imported Roman bronze vessel — a pan (“*kasserolen*”) (Gheorghiu 2005, 168). For the settlement at the foot of the hill we have a coin, discovered inside a fire hearth in a dwelling dated to the first phase of habitation. This coin (Fig. 12) is a local type distinctive for south-western Transylvania of late second and early first centuries B.C. (Floca 1945–1947; Preda 1973, 300–307).



Fig. 12. Ardeu, county județul Hunedoara, Romania. Dacian coin, type Rădulești-Hunedoara; Photo by I. V. Ferencz.

As to the end of occupation of the Dacian hillfort, as noted earlier, we have evidence that it was marked by violence. The traces of a great fire which took place at the end of the first century, possibly in early second century A.D., links this disaster tentatively to the Romans and the military campaigns of Trajan.

THE PLACE OF THE HILLFORT AT ARDEU IN THE DACIAN WORLD

Situated in south-western Transylvania the hillfort at Ardeu lies close to Grădiștea Muncelului and to other hillforts with stone walls. Moreover, it lies in the southern area of the Apuseni Mountains, not far from the Piatra Craivii hillfort (Berciu *et al.* 1965), which has yielded numerous analogies for the artifacts recovered at Ardeu.

The hillfort at Ardeu has many similarities to other sites and is well integrated into the phenomenon specific for Transylvania of the last two centuries before the Roman conquest. The internal organization of the site is typical for the Dacian period. The hillfort would have been the residence of a nobleman set up in a prominent site meant to stand out and be seen by local villagers and

also by foreigners traveling nearby. The symbolic messages transmitted by the hillfort seem to be: power, security and wealth (P u p e z ă 2012, 83). We have to agree with the conclusion formulated recently by Paul Pupeză that the purpose of this kind of placement was, probably, not to see the landscape nearby, but to be seen from the landscape nearby. The function of the hillfort was not only to control and protect its territory, but also to be seen from the territory nearby, as a symbol of power and a material manifestation of the nobleman (P u p e z ă 2012, 84). More than that, we believe it is likely that the hillfort Costești–Cetățuie, with its huge tower-dwellings, the largest in all of Dacian territory, was a model followed variously by other hillforts of south-western Transylvania.

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Abbreviations

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CCaR Cronica Cercetărilor arheologice din România.

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