

ZIRIDAVA
STUDIA ARCHAEOLOGICA

34

2020

MUSEUM ARAD



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34
2020

Editura MEGA
Cluj-Napoca
2020

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In Romania, the periodical can be obtained through subscription or exchange, sent as post shipment, from Museum Arad, Arad, Piata G. Enescu 1, 310131, Romania.

Tel. 0040-257-281847.

ZIRIDAVA STUDIA ARCHAEOLOGICA

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Layout: Francisc Baja, Florin Mărginean, Victor Sava

ISSN 2392-8786



EDITURA MEGA | www.edituramega.ro
e-mail: mega@edituramega.ro

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New Reliefs Plaques from Pojejena (Caraş-Severin county) depicting the Danubian Riders*

Sorin Nemeti, Ştefana Cristea

Abstract: In the summer of 2019 the archeological excavation of the auxiliary fort from Pojejena was resumed by a team of archaeologists from the National Museum of Banat (Timișoara), from the University of Warsaw and from the Museum of the Highland Banat (Reșița). In this campaign, in the area near a *horreum*, the fragments of two marble reliefs plaques with the representation of the Danubian Riders were discovered. These reliefs illustrate a locally distributed religious iconography that artistically translates indigenous myths and religious beliefs from the area bordering the Danube. The rectangular relief plaques can be included in the type of simple rectangular *stelae* with a single row, with two Riders flanking the goddess and there is no exact known parallel for this relief in the repertoire of monuments depicting the Danubian Riders. The fragmentary marble rondel belongs to type Nemeti B1b, two-row medallions. Their main field always depicts two Riders and a goddess, and the lower row various symbols and cult scenes.

Keywords: Pojejena; Danubian Riders; votive relief; auxiliary fort; Danube.

The auxiliary fort from Pojejena was part of Dacia Superior and it is considered to have been a harbor and a supply base¹. In support of this statement comes the discovery, near *porta praetoria*, of some lead seals with the inscription AVG N, and the discovery of one of the *horrea*, whose existence is suspected inside this camp². The construction of the fort was comprised of two phases: an earth-wood phase, in which the surface of the camp is considerably smaller and is surrounded by a single moat, and an extended stone phase, in which the camp is surrounded by two defensive ditches³. The military camp and *vicus* from Pojejena is located on the north bank of the Danube, thus in the border area that separates Upper Moesia and Dacia⁴, an area where navigation was more difficult due to the fact that the Danube crosses a mountainous area, which made it narrower and dotted with rocks. This area, called the Iron Gates, was located between Drobeta (East) and Pojejena (West), and the strong currents that were felt here determined the Romans to initiate a series of measures to facilitate the communication route: carving a road in the rock of the mountain and the construction, in the Sip area, of a navigable canal finished in 101 AD⁵.

The garrison of the fort was *cohors V Gallorum*⁶, and recent research has shown that there were actually two military units with that name⁷, one being the garrison of the South Shields fort, located near Hadrian's wall, in the second half of the 2nd century AD⁸. As in the case of the auxiliary troops stationed at Pojejena, the role of the one from Britannia was to secure the harbour and the provision of supplies to the province. *Cohors V Gallorum (Dacica)* from Pojejena it probably continue to be stationed here until the end of the 2nd century AD⁹ without knowing, at this stage of the research, where

* English translation: Ştefana Cristea, Sorin Nemeti, Mihnea Cristea.

¹ Marcu 2009, 150.

² During the 2019 and 2020 excavation campaigns, undertaken by the National Museum of Banat Timișoara together with the museum from Reșița, and led by Dr. Călin Timoc.

³ Gudea 2001, 59.

⁴ Benea 2016, 12–13.

⁵ AE 1973, 475: “..... *ob periculum Cataractarum derivato flumine tutam Danuvii navigationem fecit*”.

⁶ Marcu 2009, 150–151; Benea 2016, 83; Matei-Popescu, Țentea 2018, 56–58; Piso *et al.* 2019, 95–100.

⁷ Florian Matei-Popescu and Ovidiu Țentea considers that there were three such auxiliary troops: *cohors V Gallorum Pannonica*, *cohors V Gallorum Dacica* and *cohors V Gallorum* from Britannia (Matei-Popescu, Țentea 2018, 56–58), while Felix Marcu considers the possibility that the one in Pannonia and the one in Britannia are in fact the same one (Marcu 2009, 151).

⁸ Marcu 2009, 151.

⁹ Matei-Popescu, Țentea 2018, 57.

it was transferred from here. In addition to this cohort, the vexillations of the legions *VII Claudia* and *III Flavia felix* were also stationed at Pojejena¹⁰, probably during the 3rd century AD, as the stamped bricks and tiles discovered here prove. Pojejena was also an important strategic and economic place.

Identified on the field in 1930 in the place named “Sitarnița”, after being noted in 1699 by L. F. Marsigli¹¹, the Roman military fort from Pojejena (Caraș-Severin county) has been excavated since 1970 by the archaeologists from Reșița and Cluj-Napoca¹². N. Gudea stresses the fact that the Roman camp here was probably built at the end of the 1st century AD¹³, information accepted also by other researchers¹⁴. The stone phase of the fort is dated by D. Benea, who takes the information from N. Gudea, during the reign of the emperors Trajan or Hadrian¹⁵. Most of the coins discovered in the 2019 excavation campaign date back to the period of military anarchy (after Severus Alexander, including his time), but a coin from the time of the Emperor Constantius II was also discovered in the mortar of the *horreum* (the SE corner of the building) previously mentioned, which proves a much longer existence of this fort, until middle of the 4th century AD. There was certainly a port at Pojejena, but due to the fact that it is currently under the waters of the Danube, along with a considerably part of the *vicus*, we had no information about the involvement of the military naval units circulating on the river in the life of the fort and the settlement that developed nearby.



Fig. 1. Coin from the time of Constantius II discovered in the mortar of the wall of the *horreum* (photo Ștefana Cristea).

Except for the Roman fort and the *vicus*, within Pojejena there were also attested a medieval fortification¹⁶ with a defense moat and a rural community, initially recorded between 1458–1490 (in 1569 had 25 houses)¹⁷.

N. Gudea and O. Bozu assembled in an article¹⁸ from 1977 the Mithraic discoveries up to that time, some of them from the NE tower of the fort, although for the majority of the items the exact place where they were found it was not indicated¹⁹. The same archaeologists expose the excavations carried out in the Pojejena military camp in 1977 and 1978²⁰, which consisted of sections meant to establish the plan of the fort, including the location of *principia*, objectives accomplished only partially.

The resumption of the research of the military camp and the *vicus* from Pojejena occurred in 2014²¹ and continue until today. The investigations undertaken until 2018 were carried out at surface level or in areas where the soil had collapsed and left exposed traces of Roman habitation, as well

¹⁰ Gudea 2001; Benea 2016, 91, 92, 105, 154, 171, 173, 177, 178, 179, 180–182; Piso *et al.* 2019, 14, 15, 16, 21, 34, 46, 47, 49, 50, 53, 55, 56–60, 62.

¹¹ Timoc 2018b, 25.

¹² Gudea, Uzum 1973, 85; Nemeti 2005, 42; Benea 2016, 20.

¹³ Gudea 1976, 849–886.

¹⁴ Benea 2016, 153.

¹⁵ Benea 2016, 153.

¹⁶ Timoc 2019, 35–38.

¹⁷ Pesty 1884, 128–129.

¹⁸ Gudea, Bozu 1977.

¹⁹ The statement that a *mithraeum* functioned inside the fort is considered unfounded by Felix Marcu (Marcu 2009, 150).

²⁰ Gudea, Bozu 1979.

²¹ Timoc 2018b, 26.

as non-invasive investigations in collaboration with a Polish team. Only starting with the year 2019 and continuing in 2020, the archeological excavations were resumed. The non-invasive investigations proved to be particularly important, being identified the most important elements of the fort's planimetry, the two phases of construction, as well as part of the *vicus*²². It should be noted that the *vicus* settlement that developed near the fort was never the subject of archaeological research in Pojejena which makes the image of religious life from here, and not only, a truncated one.

Even for the soldiers who were stationed inside the camp, the religious life is not easy to follow, given the stage of its research, but we can mention the votive inscriptions of Q. Vibius Donatus, *praefectus* of *cohors V Gallorum*, for *Diana Augusta*²³ and Q. Petronius Novatus, *praefectus* of the same auxiliary troop, for *IOM Dolichenus*²⁴. In connection with the latter god, we must also mention the discovery in 2019 of a bronze statuette with the representation of the winged goddess Victoria standing on the globe, probably the upper part of a Dolichenian standard. We have already mentioned the discoveries related to the cult of the god Mithras undertaken in this fort, the discussion about the presence of a *mithraeum* inside the fort, being still unresolved. In the 2020 excavation campaign, a fragmentary terracotta was discovered, probably with the representation of the goddess Venus, goddess often present in the Roman military environment. To the image of the religious life from Pojejena is added the discovery of the head of a marble statuette depicting the god Hercules²⁵. At the beginning of the 20th century, a resident of Pojejena discovered, due to his agricultural activities, in the Roman fort area, a votive relief with the representation of the Danubian Riders, which will become part of the collection of the museum in Timisoara. We can notice, even in this incipient stage of the research of the Roman fort from Pojejena, the predilection towards deities related to the military environment or representing imperial power.



Fig. 2. Votive relief with the representation of the Danubian Riders discovered in 1908 at Pojejena (drawing Veronica Rogoveanu).

²² For the full discussion of non-invasive research at Pojejena see: Jęczmienowski 2019.

²³ IDR III/1, 10.

²⁴ IDR III/1, 11.

²⁵ Timoc 2018a.

In the 2019 excavation campaign, in the western part of the section, the SE corner of a building was unveiled, probably a *horreum*. Near the wall of this building there has been found an important amount of rubble consisting of fragments of tiles, bricks (three of them with the stamps of the IIII Flavia felix legion, probably reused²⁶) and stones. Here were discovered the fragments of the two marble items that are the subject of this article, next to a *fibula*, a bronze statuette with the representation of the winged goddess Victoria, coins and ceramic fragments.



Fig. 3. The position of the area where the reliefs fragments with the representation of the Danubian Riders were discovered within the section made in 2019 (photogrammetry E. Jęczmienowski).

A series of small reliefs plaques dedicated to the gods conventionally called the Danubian Riders can be found in the Danubian provinces of the Roman Empire. Easily identified through their specific iconography (mounted male gods trampling fallen enemies, associated with a goddess, surrounded by various symbols and cult scenes), these artifacts are to be found mainly in the provinces around the Middle and Lower Danube, in the Moesias, Dacia, the Pannonias, with fewer examples in Thracia, Noricum, and Dalmatia. These reliefs illustrate a locally distributed religious iconography that artistically translates indigenous myths and religious beliefs from the area bordering the Danube²⁷.

1. Rectangular marble relief plaque with the depiction of the Danubian Rider gods; dimensions: 13 × 11 × 1,6 cm. The relief is fragmentarily preserved, broken into three pieces, with a part from the upper left side missing.

The typical image of the cult, the standing goddess between the Rider Gods, is depicted in a single register. Only the outer frame has been preserved, wider in the lower part of the relief, but the composition is divided into two rows: the upper part with the busts of the astral deities and the Danubian anthropomorphic triad and the main row with the common cult scene, the goddess flanked by the Riders.

In the preserved part of the upper row one can see, from left to right, the lower part of a bust in the center of the relief plaque (that must belong to the goddess, depicted in the center of anthropomorphic triad), another bust on the right (usually depicting a male character, therefore the Rider from the right in the anthropomorphic triad), and a third, smaller bust in the right corner of the plaque. This third bust, smaller than the previous two, belongs to one of the members of the pair of the astral

²⁶ Timoc, Jęczmienowski 2019.

²⁷ The essential bibliography of these monuments: Antonescu 1889; Rostovtseff 1923, 385–415; Tudor 1937, 189–356; Will 1955, 30–32, 312–355; Tudor 1969; Tudor 1976; Popović 1992, 1078–1081; Ertl 1996; Tatcheva 2000, 231–245; Nemeti 2005, 200–216 = Nemeti 2019, 213–228; Nemeti 2012, 167–191; Nemeti 2015, 129–138.

deities, the luminaries of ancient sky, Sol and Luna. On the stone reliefs depicting the Danubian Riders in the north-Danubian area, Luna is usually depicted in the upper right corner²⁸. The bust of Sol with his radiate crown must have been depicted in the missing, opposite corner. All three preserved busts are sculpted in a simplified manner, therefore one cannot determine if they depict male or female characters, Danubian Gods or the astral gods. Their identity could only be established if they featured in the same positions in the iconographic compositions of the Danubian reliefs plaques. Despite the fact that there are no frames between rows, this relief copies the iconography of the three-row stone reliefs well known from the province of Dacia. The upper



Fig. 4. Rectangular votive relief with a register representing the Danubian Riders discovered in 2019 at Pojejena (photo Milan Şepeţean).

row of these reliefs plaques (type Nemeti B2a) commonly shows the Danubian triad in two different hypostases: the anthropomorphic one (like the type Tudor C of the Danubian reliefs: the bust of the goddess in the center, flanked by two busts of bearded men wearing Phrygian caps) or the symbolic one (an egg or a vessel flanked by two rearing snakes, a motif shared with Bacchic iconography).

Below the triad and the astral gods the artisan has sculpted the essential scene of the cult, namely the goddess standing in front of a tripod with a fish upon it, flanked by two Riders with Phrygian caps. Due to the rude craftsmanship, the details of costume are barely sketched. The goddess probably wears a *tunica* and a *stola* (marked by a V-shaped cleavage). In front of the goddess one notes a tripod, with three barely sketched legs, and a big fish on the top. The upper part of the Rider from the left falls in the missing section of the relief plaque. Only the body and the legs of the horse and the Rider's right leg have been preserved. Under the horse's hooves there is a barely distinguishable fallen character. The Rider from the right side is entirely preserved. One can see a rather small horse, with long ears. The Rider's costume is not distinguishable, except for his Phrygian cap. His right hand is raised, in a gesture of spear throwing (the weapon is not depicted) or holding a double axe (like on a relief from Tibiscum)²⁹. Due to the rudimentary sculpture it is difficult to see what is depicted under the horse's hooves: there seems to be the body of the fallen character, but in the front of the horse's legs the artisan has carved something similar to a lion's head. The lion, as an animal acolyte of the Thracian Rider, is present sometimes on the reliefs as companion at arms (instead of the more common hunting partner of the Rider, the dog)³⁰. On the analogues reliefs, like the one from Apulum (Alba Iulia), two fallen characters figure under the horses' hooves, but it is possible that here the artisan has also tried to depict a lion, following a model close to the Thracian Rider reliefs.

2. Two fragments from a marble rondel. Dimensions: 5 × 3 × 0,7 cm; 4,2 × 2,7 × 0,7 cm. Fig. 5 The preserved part probably belongs to a two-row marble rondel. The upper section might depict the legs of the characters that populate the main row (the goddess and the Riders' horses), while in the lower row one can hazard to identify a sort of clumsily sketched quadrupedal animal and a column-like element on the right. Both of these symbols are usually encountered on the lower registers of marble medallions depicting the Danubian Riders. Still, due to the fragmentary state of this marble rondel, this identification is not the only possible one. In theory, the fragments could belong to any type of top-rounded relief or medallions, known also from Mithraic repertory.

²⁸ Tudor 1976, 181–189 (there are a few exceptions with Luna on the left – Tudor 1969, nos. 15, 42, 71, 81, 120, 137, 191).

²⁹ Tudor 1976, no. 204.

³⁰ Tudor 1976, 224–225; the lion as companion at arms – Tudor 1969, nos. 18, 27, 49, 59, 64, 77, 79, 80, 85, 87, 97, 104, 118, 122, 153, 154, 181, 164; Tudor 1976, no. 208.



Fig. 5. Circular relief probably with the representation of the Danubian Riders discovered in 2019 at Pojejena (photo Milan Șepețean).

The rectangular relief plaque can be included in the type of simple rectangular *stelae* with a single row, with two Riders flanking the goddess (class B for D. Tudor; Nemeti A1). It is a category of simple reliefs, with the iconography restricted to the essential elements of the cult icon (the goddess with the three-legged table and the fish, the Riders, the fallen enemies, and possibly the lion). Many symbols generally associated with the cult of the Danubian Riders are missing (the tripod and the ram's head, *lucernae*, stars, secondary divinities, human and animal companions, ritual and initiation scenes). There is no exact known parallel for this relief in the repertoire of monuments depicting the Danubian Riders. The closest analogies are from Dacia, Moesia Inferior, and Pannonia Superior, namely the reliefs from Apulum, Porolissum, Tibiscum, Tomis, Castelu, and Carnuntum³¹.

The relief differs from the common single-row reliefs because the craftsman has rendered in the upper part the five busts of the Danubian triad flanked by astral deities, *Sol* and *Luna*. This is, in fact, the upper register of variant III of the three-row reliefs (Nemeti B2a), well known from the province of Dacia³². This pattern, with the five busts on the upper row, is known from the reliefs plaques from Tibiscum, Studenčani (Moesia Superior), and Carnuntum (Pannonia Superior)³³. Then, the rectangular relief from Pojejena is a hybrid one, like the three-row relief from Tibiscum with a single Rider in the main field and the anthropomorphic triad and the astral gods in the upper row³⁴. We have generally asserted that the single-row reliefs with their basic iconography and the absence of the multiple scenes and complex symbolism could indicate an earlier dating for this type³⁵. Still, the presence of the five busts in the upper part of the single-row relief from Pojejena shows that the production of this particular relief is at least contemporary with that of the three-row reliefs. The closest stylistic and iconographic analogies are the three-row reliefs from Tibiscum, especially the relief with two Riders and five busts, type B2a, variant III³⁶. That indicates how the models circulated regionally and how the main workshops from South-West Dacia³⁷ influenced the Pojejena local stone-cutters.

The fragmentary marble rondel belongs to type Nemeti B1b, two-row medallions. Their main field always depicts two Riders and a goddess and the lower row various symbols and cult scenes (like *occultatio-ostentatio* scene). Many of these symbols are hard to identify, due to the rudimentary sculpture and the small size of the reliefs. Something resembling a quadrupedal animal and a column are to be seen on five medallions from Moesia Inferior (Suhindol – Ezerče), Pannonia Inferior (Kapolna, *Siscia*) and Italy (*Aquileia*)³⁸.

³¹ Tudor 1969, nos. 6 (Apulum), 8 (Porolissum), 94 (Tomis), 97 (Castelu), 149 (Carnuntum); Nemeti, Ardeț 2013, 213–221 (Tibiscum).

³² Will, Nemeti 2010, 183–196; Nemeti 2012, 172–180.

³³ Tudor 1976, nos. 200, 204 (Tibiscum); Tudor 1969, nos. 66 (Studenčani) and 149 (Carnuntum).

³⁴ Tudor, 1976, no. 200.

³⁵ Nemeti 2019, 223, 227; Nemeti 2013, 215–216; Nemeti 2015

³⁶ Tudor 1976, no. 204 (see also no.200, for the upper row).

³⁷ Balaci-Crînguș, Balaci 2016, 130.

³⁸ Tudor 1969, nos. 78 (Suhindol), 86 (Ezerče), 119 (Kapolna), 160 (*Siscia*), 178 (*Aquileia*).



Fig. 6. Votive relief with the representation of the Danubian Riders with three registers from Tibiscum (photo Milan Şepeţean).



Fig. 7. Hybrid votive relief with the representation of the Danubian Riders from Tibiscum (photo Milan Şepeţean).



Fig. 8. Votive relief with the representation of the Danubian Riders from Studenčani (after D. Tudor 1969).

The two reliefs plaques with the representation of the Danubian Riders illustrate the result of the new archeological excavations undertaken starting with 2019 in Pojejena, excavations that are based on the non-invasive investigations carried out between 2016–2018. Over time, archaeological excavations have focused only on the military camp area, without involving the *vicus* area, therefore it is not surprising that the objects that mirror the religious beliefs discovered in Pojejena reflect only the military or official aspect of the settlement. The new discoveries, namely these votive reliefs depicting Danubian Riders, bring new data about the religious options of the soldiers



Fig. 9. Circular relief with the representation of the Danubian Riders from Suhindol (after D. Tudor 1969).



Fig. 10. Circular relief with the representation of the Danubian Riders from Kapolna (after D. Tudor 1969).

garrisoned in Pojejena auxiliary camp, and how the patterns underlying these objects move inside a certain area and a certain time.

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Abbreviations

ActaArchHung	Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae.
AAC	Acta Archaeologica Carpathica, Cracow.
ActaMN	Acta Musei Napocensis, Cluj-Napoca.
ActaMP	Acta Musei Porolissensis, Zalău
AnArchRessoviensia	Analecta Archaeologica Ressoviensia, Rzeszów.
AAS at CEU	Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU, Budapest.
Apulum	Acta Musei Apulensis – Apulum, Alba-Iulia.
Alba Regia	Alba Regia, Székesfehérvár.
Antaeus	Antaeus, Budapest.
Arrabona	Arrabona, Győr.
ArhMed	Arheologia Medievală, Cluj-Napoca, Brăila, Reșița.
ArchBaltica	Archaeologia Baltica, Vilnius.
Arch.Inf	Archäologische Informationen.
ATS	Acta Terrae Septemcastrensis, Sibiu.
ArchÉrt	Archaeologiai Értesítő, Budapest.
Banatica	Banatica, Reșița.
BBMÉ	A Béni Balogh Ádám Múzeum Évkönyve, Szekszárd.
BUFM	Beiträge zur Ur- und Frühgeschichte Mitteleuropas.
BCMI	Buletinul Comisiei Naționale a Monumentelor, ansambluri situri istorice. București.
CommArchHung	Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungaricae, Budapest.
CCA	Cronica Cercetărilor Arheologice, Comisia Națională de Arheologie, București.
CIL	Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, Berlin.
CMA	Complexul Muzeal Arad.
Dolgozatok	Dolgozatok az Erdélyi Múzeum érem- és régiségtárából, Cluj.
Dolg.	Dolgozatok a Magyar Királyi Ferencz József Tudományegyetem Archaeologiai Intézetéből, Szeged.
Dolg. ÚS	Dolgozatok az Erdélyi Múzeum Érem- és Régiségtárából, Új Sorozat. Cluj-Napoca / Kolozsvár.
EphNap	Ephemeris Napocensis, Cluj-Napoca.
HOMÉ	A Hermann Ottó Múzeum Évkönyve. Miskolc.
JAHA	Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology, Cluj-Napoca.
JAM	Jósa András Museum, Nyíregyháza.
JPMÉ	Janus Pannonius Múzeum Évkönyve.
JRGZM	Jahrbuch des Romisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, Mainz.
KRRMK	Kaposvári Rippl Rónai Múzeum Közleményei, Kaposvár.
LMI	Lista monumentelor istorice, updated in 2015.
MittArchInst	Mitteilungen des Archäologischen Instituts der Ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
MOL	Magyar Olaj- és Gázipari Részvénytársaság / Hungarian Oil and Gas Public Limited Company
Marisia	Marisia, Târgu Mureș.
NyJAMÉ	A nyíregyházi Jósa András Múzeum Évkönyve, Nyíregyháza.
PBF	Praehistorische Bronzefunde. Berlin.
Przegląd Archeologiczny	Przegląd Archeologiczny, Wrocław.
Rad	Jósa András Museum, Archaeological Archive
RégFüz	Régészeti Füzetek, Budapest.

RKM	Régészeti Kutatások Magyarországon/Archaeological Investigations in Hungary, Budapest.
RAJ Arad	Repertoriul Arheologic al Mureşului Inferior. Judeţul Arad. Timişoara 1999.
RAN	Repertoriul Arheologic Naţional.
Sargetia	Sargetia. Acta Musei Devensis, Deva.
SCIV(A)	Studii şi Cercetări de Istorie Veche şi Arheologie, Bucureşti.
SGB	Studii de Geografie a Banatului, Timişoara.
SIB	Studii de Istorie a Banatului, Timişoara.
Slavia Antiqua	Slavia Antiqua, Poznań.
SlovArch	Slovenská Archeológia, Nitra.
SMK	Somogyi Múzeumok Közleményei, Kaposvár.
SovArh	Sovetskaja Arheologija, Moskva.
SRTM	Shuttle Radar Topography Mission.
StudiaUBB Historia	Studia UBB Historia, Cluj-Napoca.
SzKMÉ	A Szántó Kovács Múzeum Évkönyve, Pécs.
Századok	Századok, Budapest.
Terra Sebus	Terra Sebus. Acta Musei Sabesiensis, Sebeş.
Tibiscum S. N.	Tibiscum S. N., Caransebeş.
TransRev	Transylvanian Review, Cluj-Napoca.
ZalaiMúz	Zalai Múzeum, Zalaegerszeg.
ZSA	Ziridava. Studia Archaeologica. Arad.
Živa Antika	Živa Antika, Skopje.