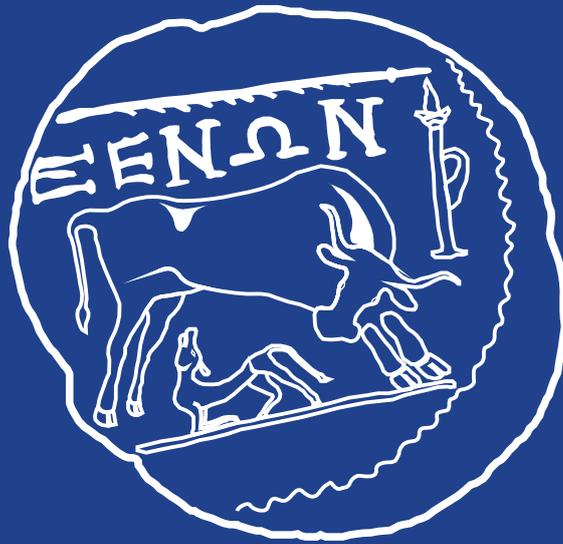


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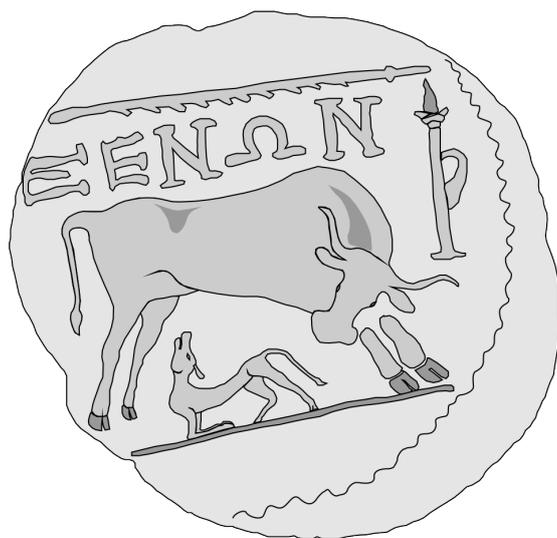
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*This volume is dedicated to Florin Draşovean at 70 years*

*Acest volum este dedicat lui Florin Draşovean cu ocazia împlinirii a 70 de ani*





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# Revised Information on the Early Avar Period Grave from Sânpetru German-Magazin

**Florin Mărginean, Erwin Gáll**

**Abstract:** The article aims to resume and revise from a different, novel perspective the burial finds made during the 1960s in the vicinity of Sânpetru German commune, dated to the Avar period. Just nearby Sânpetru German commune, there are two archaeological sites where yielded finds, dating to the period of the Avar Khaganate, have been already known in the academic literature. In the local toponymy, one was located at Magazin, while the other at Goliath. The grave discovered at Magazin, which we shall discuss here, is one of the important burial finds of the time and also one of the most quoted in the academic literature of the Transtisza regions.

**Key words:** Sânpetru German; Early Avar Period; grave; burial customs; grave goods.

Two archaeological sites located in the vicinity of the Sânpetru German commune yielded finds dated to the period of the Avar Khaganate, already known in the academic literature. In the local toponymy, one was located at *Magazin* and the other at *Goliath*. In both cases, these were former clay quarries, where clay used to build houses or household annexes had been mined. The Magazin site lies to the left by the entry to Sânpetru German from Pecica, where the pits of the former clay exploitation are still visible today. The Goliath site is located 1.6 km east of the village limit.

The grave discovered at Magazin, which we shall discuss below, is one of the important burial finds of the time and one of the most quoted in the academic literature of the Transtisza regions<sup>1</sup>.

The grave was discovered north of the commune, nearby a pond formed subsequent to the cease of the ancient clay mining operation. The alluvial ridge chosen for inhumation is a loop created by the Aranca canal, a small tributary of the Tisza. According to the description and sketch made by Egon Dörner<sup>2</sup>, the accidentally discovered grave had been unfortunately destroyed by workers. The find lies in a slightly higher area and based on to the Austrian survey maps of the 18th – 19th century, it stood on a small alluvial ridge, so specific of those areas, at approximately 100 m from the Aranca canal. On the first, second and third Austrian military surveys, the area seems to be a flatland, not far from this canal. Only the second survey maps southwards the higher terrace of the current Vinga piedmont plain. The proximity to this canal is not at all surprising, since many burial finds of the period (and others) may be documented nearby water sources.

Similarly to other burial finds, it may be noted that the burial location had been chosen carefully, in a protected area, in this case especially from the yearly floods of the Mureş, likely also involving the Aranca canal. The average elevation of the Vinga piedmont plain is between 130 and 140 m, gently descending to 100 m towards Secusigiu. The relief is characterised by a meadow appearance given by the Mureş valley. Unfortunately, there are no available analyses that would allow the reconstruction of the landscape at the time when the burials occurred. It is though certain that the landscape looked different from today, even if we were to consider only that the Mureş riverbed was not yet developed, while the many overflows caused landscape shifts. It may be assumed that most parts of the land were covered by forests, brushwood and reed beds. The non-floodable areas represented by high terraces, secondary valleys, and hills constituted safe refuge areas, compared to lower regions where marshes usually formed. Nevertheless, the marshlands included numerous alluvial ridges that were carefully chosen as either habitation or burial areas, like for the instance the case here.

<sup>1</sup> Dörner 1960, 423–433.

<sup>2</sup> Dörner 1960, Fig. 1.

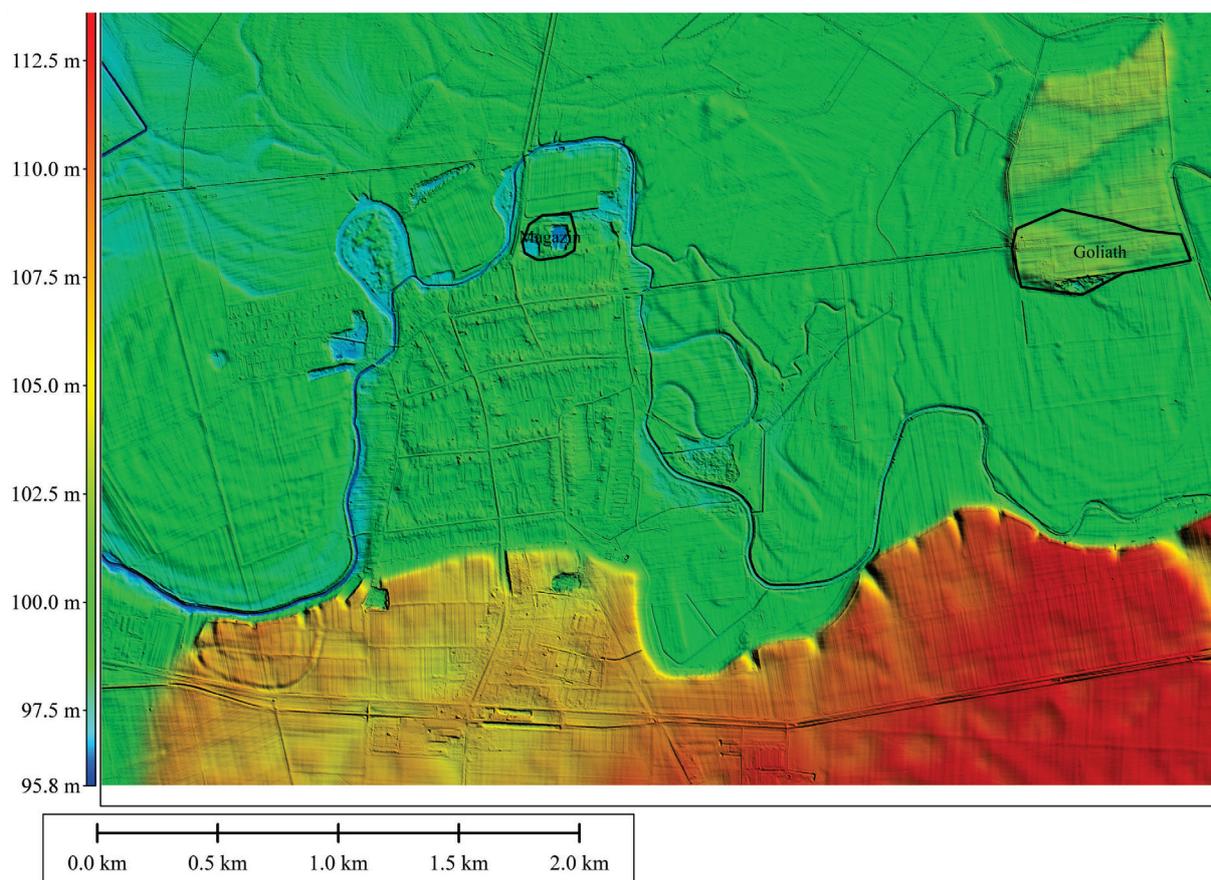


Fig. 1. The relative location of the Sântpetru German-Magazin grave, and the location of the Goliath pyre-find on the digital elevation model (LiDar).

The grave had already been destroyed when Egon Dörner arrived on site, so the sketch he was able to make was not-at-scale. Therefore, the sketch termed “Figure 2” in the article published by the Arad-based archaeologist contains inaccuracies, which we believe should be clarified.

In what the grave orientation is concerned, one may agree with Dörner’s field observations, namely N–S, a well-known orientation at the time<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the hypothetical location of the illustration is emphasized by the author himself.

In terms of the grave sketch, we must firstly address the length issue of the illustrated skeletal remains. Since the 90 cm sword length is well known from the work as well<sup>4</sup>, the length of the skeletal remains is rendered inaccurately, as this would have reached **2 m 89 cm**, should one make computations based on the rendered sword length! Thus, it may be argued that Dörner’s sketch does not realistically reproduce the length of the skeletal remains and even less so, the gravepit length (see Pl. 1/sketch of the grave).

Far more issues result from the rendered location of the horse skeletal remains. Dörner depicts these at 12 cm from the human skeleton’s feet, mentioning however that “..pare corectă informația că la circa 1,30 m SSE de picioarele scheletului, s-au descoperit părți dintr-un craniu și câteva oase ale unui cal, din care s-au putut salva pentru muzeu un fragment de craniu și un molar din maxilarul inferior”(“...the information that parts of a skull and a few bones of a horse were discovered approximately at 1.30 m SSE from the skeleton’s legs seems accurate, of which a skull fragment and a lower jaw molar could be retrieved for the museum”)<sup>5</sup>. This, however, means that the human and horse skeletal remains lay at a great distance in-between, which we personally could not parallel elsewhere, either in the case of niche-catacomb type burials or of other large-sized graves. We believe one should agree that this was effectively an error in acquiring information for which there is absolutely no evidence, yet for which Dörner is likely not to

<sup>3</sup> Lőrinczy 1987–1989, 164.

<sup>4</sup> Dörner 1960, 424.

<sup>5</sup> Dörner 1960, 424.

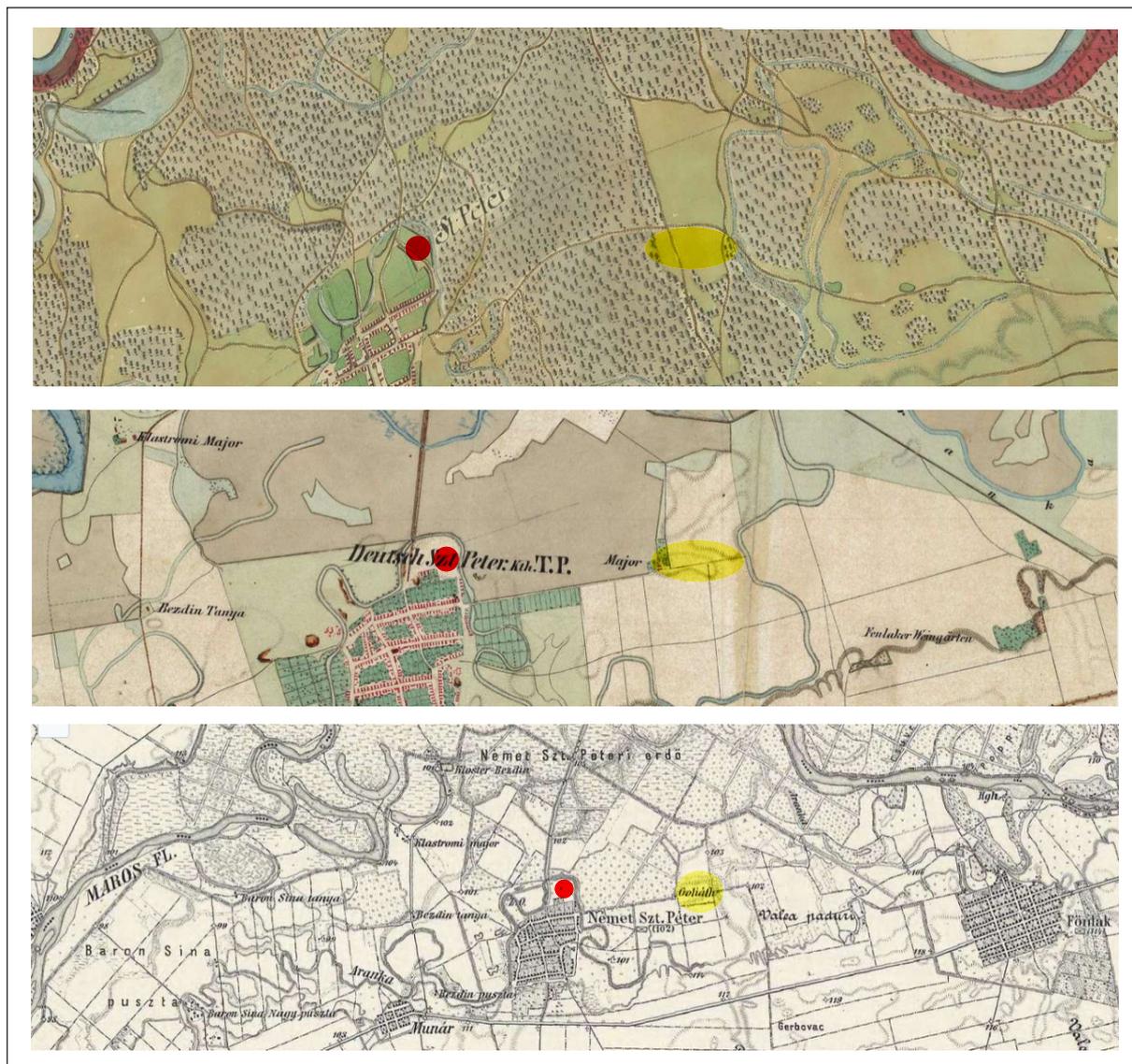


Fig. 2. The relative location of the Sânpetru German-Magazin grave, and the location of the Goliath pyre-find on the I–III Austrian military surveys.

blame. His notes were not written with information accuracy, hence his use of the optative<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, it must be agreed there is no secure information in this case, hence one should use both the sketch and written documentation cautiously, as it differs from the illustration.

Much more accurate data, without yet specifying their source (!?), were provided by Gábor Lőrinczy in 1994. The Szeged archaeologist interpreted Dörner's notes in his own manner, mentioning that the grave pit was 330–370 cm long, being of *horizontal niche-catacomb type* and that the deceased was placed in a coffin<sup>7</sup>, although such data is mentioned nowhere in Dörner's text. The grave was classified as a niche-catacomb type by Béla Kürti<sup>8</sup> as well, being later interpreted as such by Lőrinczy<sup>9</sup> and Péter Somogyi<sup>10</sup>.

We believe that data is not sufficient at all in order to reconstruct a horizontal niche-catacomb type burial, while via the insertion in the academic literature of archaeological (ir)realities, for which

<sup>6</sup> The Arad-based archaeologist also mentions: “..informațiile primite fiind deseori contradictorii” (“..received information being often contradictory” / translated by the authors). Dörner 1960, 424.

<sup>7</sup> Lőrinczy 1994, 325: note 32.

<sup>8</sup> Kürti 1996, 2. kép.

<sup>9</sup> For instance: Lőrinczy 2016, 160.

<sup>10</sup> Somogyi 1995, 460.



Fig. 3. Photo on the relative location of the Sânpetru German-Magazin grave (made by Erwin Gáll).

practically there is no conclusive information, as ground zero necessity of 21st – century archaeology, we do nothing but further fiction so specific to 19th – century archaeology in particular.

As previously mentioned, the Sânpetru German grave is one of the burial sites dated to the 7th century in the regions that belong to Romania, most often used in the academic literature. In 1962,

it was included by Attila Kiss among burials with *partial horse deposition by the feet*<sup>11</sup>, while in 1979, István Bóna classified it among *burials with horse parts in subtype 3*<sup>12</sup>, the basic information in both cases being represented by the sketch at Fig. 2.

The burial, probably of a male, had very likely benefited from the partial deposition of the horse<sup>13</sup>, together with the human corpse (the head and the 4 tibiae of the horse in its hide)<sup>14</sup>.

Evidently, the quantity of materials recovered from the workers does not amount to all discovered grave goods, as Dörner also mentions<sup>15</sup>. Thus: the earring with a granulated globular pendant with three small spheres and one large (*Ohrgehängeform mit Großkugelhänger*) (Fig. 4), the golden coin of solidus type (Figs. 5–6), fragments of an iron helmet<sup>16</sup> (Pl. 1/1), Felnac type belt appliques<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 7/1–4), a single-edged sword<sup>18</sup> (Pl. 1/2), a *pika*-type spearhead<sup>19</sup> (Pl. 1/3), a simple bit and two stirrups with strap loops and rounded body<sup>20</sup> (Pl. 1/4–5), an iron arrowhead<sup>21</sup>. The item termed as a *clasp* by Dörner also belongs to the belt, in fact is a belt-hole guard<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 8).

Earring with a granulated globular pendant with three small spheres and one large, the so-called Páhipuszta subtype of the Szentes type<sup>23</sup>, has analogies in the regions to the east of Tisza in Deszk-G-Gr. 37, Szegvár-Oromdűlő Gr. 33, 554, 692, 730, Szentes-Belsőecser, Szentes-Kurcapart, Tiszavasvári-Kashalmi dűlő Gr. 33, -Koldusdomb Gr. 18, and Tótkomlós-Békéssámsóni u. 48<sup>24</sup>. In general, their fashion was dated to the second third of the 7th century.



Fig. 4. The fragmented gold earring from Sănpetru German-Magazin (photos: Vlăduț Murgu and Roberto Tănăsache).

<sup>11</sup> Kiss 1962, 158.

<sup>12</sup> Bóna 1979, 21.

<sup>13</sup> As Egon Dörner had been accepted this type of horse deposition in the academic literature. Dörner 1960, 424: “..părți dintr-un craniu și câteva oase ale unui cal” (“...skull fragments and several horse bones..”) (translated by the authors).

<sup>14</sup> Kiss 1962, 158; Bóna 1979, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Dörner 1960, 424.

<sup>16</sup> Balogh 2016, 316. Monographic analysis of helmet depositions has not been accomplished so far.

<sup>17</sup> Garam 2001, Taf. 82/4.

<sup>18</sup> *Type I*: Simon 1991, 269, 271, 304; *type E.II.A/1*: Csiky 2015, 174, Map 24.

<sup>19</sup> Csiky 2015, 29, 395.

<sup>20</sup> Stirrups are typical to the early Avar period. Kovrig 1955a, 30–44; Kovrig 1955b, 163–192.

<sup>21</sup> Dörner 1960, 427, Fig. 3/2.

<sup>22</sup> Dörner 1960, 425, Fig. 4/3.

<sup>23</sup> Ormándy 1995, 157–158.

<sup>24</sup> Ormándy 1995, 157.



Fig. 5. The obverse of the “light” solidus.



Fig. 6. The reverse of the “light” solidus.

The coin is a “light” solidus (the equivalent of 20 siliquae) measuring 2.0 × 1.98 cm and weighing 3.76 grams. It was issued by Heraclius jointly with his son Heraclius Constantine, minted at Constantinople between 616–625<sup>25</sup>. The piece was perforated and was most likely worn as a pendant (on the neck).

The five surviving appliques are of Felnac type<sup>26</sup>, decorated with three concentric circles in the shape of a triangle and the semicolon motif, have parallels in many burial contexts (seventeen graves) from the Middle Danube Basin, without being though entirely identical<sup>27</sup>, not even among the Felnac patterns. According to Éva Garam’s view, these most accurately copy one of the Felnac type patterns, thus the belt ends discovered at Sânpetru German could offer indications on the activity area of the Felnac goldsmith, considering that the dating of the Felnac grave is similar<sup>28</sup>.

The belt-hole guard<sup>29</sup> (length: 2.85 cm; width: 0.69 cm; weight: 2.70 grams) was cut out of a bronze plate, folded in half, rounded at both ends. Half of the folded plate was bent at 90°. The surface of the plate was decorated with incised, probably fish motifs, in three lines. The incised ornamentations are very rudimentary and difficult to distinguish on the surface of the object.



Fig. 7. Belt mounts of Felnac-type of the grave from Sânpetru German-Magazin (photos: Vlăduț Murgu and Roberto Tănăsache).

<sup>25</sup> DOW, II.1, 252, no. 19, Constantinople, 616–625; MIB III, 217 and pl. I, no. 65, Constantinople, c. 616–625. We thank our colleague and friend Theodor Isvoranu (“Vasile Pârvan” Institute of Archaeology, Bucharest) for having determined the coin. See also: Somogyi 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Garam 2001, 115–119; Tănase 2010, 163–164; Rác 2014, 40, Karte 4.

<sup>27</sup> Garam 2001, 115–116, Taf. 81–84.

<sup>28</sup> Garam 2001, 116.

<sup>29</sup> Dörner 1960, 425, Fig. 4/3.

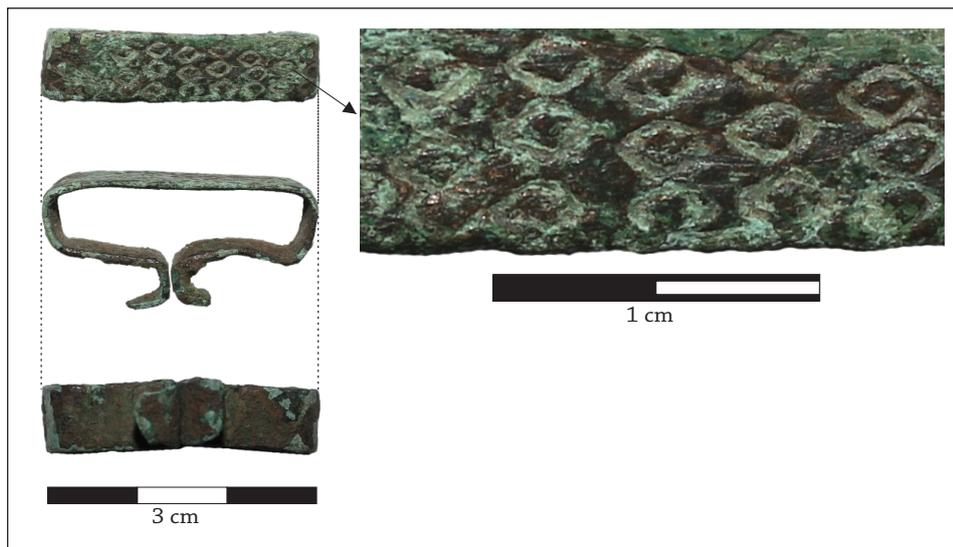


Fig. 8. The belt-hole guard (Sânpetru German-Magazin).

The fish motif is very rare among the known ornaments from the Avar period<sup>30</sup>. In general, it has been accepted as a Christian symbol<sup>31</sup>. At the same time, it is important to note that transplanting a symbol from one socio-cultural context to another transforms the symbol itself<sup>32</sup>.

A single-edged sword, probably to the left of the skeleton was registered by Egon Dörner. The weapon has been preserved in relatively good condition. By now the superior part and its handle has not been preserved (current length: 70.5 cm; width of the blade: 2.8 cm. Weight: 295.0 grams) (Fig. 8).

This weapon can also be categorized into Group E.II/A1 to Csiky's typology.<sup>33</sup>

Undoubtedly, the *post quem* dating of the grave is ensured by the coin minted by the Eastern Roman emperors during the first part of the 7th century, which also dates the remaining grave goods to the second third of the 7th century, convincingly integrating in the II-III chronological horizon of the early Avar period from the Lower Mureş region. Concurrently, as it lacks wear marks, one may consider that the burial might have occurred in the 20s–30s of the 7th century<sup>34</sup>, so the man could have belonged to the second (if over 50) or third (if his death occurred under 30 years of age) generation of the population that had arrived in these regions during the second part of the 6th century or later.

In the attempt to reconstruct the so-called regional political *hubs*, Béla Kürti believed that the richly furnished grave of Novi Kneževac could be linked to a *tarhan*<sup>35</sup>, buried by late 6th century, whose regional power might have extended towards Felnac and Sânpetru German<sup>36</sup>, according to the graves identified nearby these two locations. Given that the two graves clearly date – as previously mentioned – after 620, this theory, which aimed to establish a social-military pyramid model, cannot be supported, perhaps in only those cases where individuals buried in different graves are proven to be contemporaries.

<sup>30</sup> An example in the Late Avar Age: Székkutas-Kápolnadűlő Grave 382. B. Nagy 2003, 134. kép 49.

<sup>31</sup> Szenthe 2022, 10.

<sup>32</sup> A large discussion on these problems: Gáll *et al.* 2019, 28–35.

<sup>33</sup> Csiky 2015, 174, Fig. 65–68, Map 30.

<sup>34</sup> Such dating was also suggested by János Ormándy, in connection with the earring discovered in the grave. Ormándy 1995, 158.

<sup>35</sup> On the political function of *tarhan*, see: Pohl 2018, 363–364.

<sup>36</sup> "...*ugy véljük, hogy a fent ismertetett törökkanizsai sírban a tárgyalt terület életét közvetlenül irányító tarkánt kell gyanítanunk. A leletek alapján eltemetésére valószínűleg még a VI. század végén kerülhetett sor. Uralmát a három folyó által határolt területen gyakorolhatta, keleten szállásterülete szélét a németszentpéteri lovassír, valamint a főnlaki ötvössír jelenthette.*" Kürti 1983, 51.

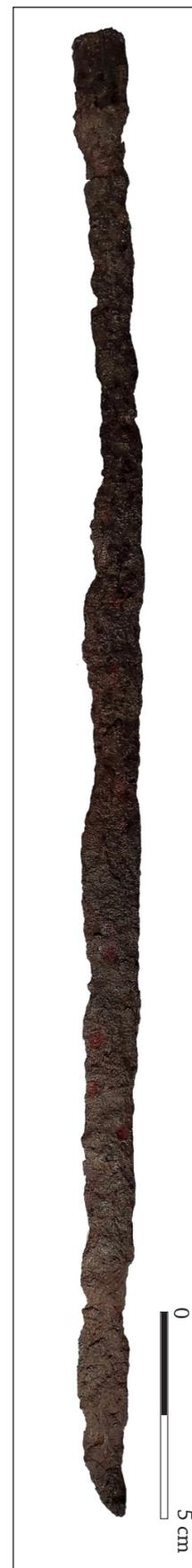


Fig. 9. The single-edged sword (Sânpetru German-Magazin).

## Conclusions and questions

1. Is it possible to answer the obvious question whether this is a singular or even an isolate grave, respectively a grave of a burial site? Given recent conclusions of large-area field surveys, it has become quite clear that this question remains unanswered for now<sup>37</sup>.

2. As discussed, there are insufficient data to catalogue this grave as a *niche-catacomb type grave*.

3. As a burial with weaponry among the grave goods (single-edged sword, spearhead), one may term the grave a *warlike type representation*. Since the skeletal remains could not be identified, it is impossible to answer the question of whether the deceased was indeed a *warrior* or if we are only *dealing with the social depiction* of the individual?

4. The individual very likely died in the first part of the 7th century, after the moment of 626, i.e., the assault of Constantinople by the Avar Khaganate, followed by its internal crisis<sup>38</sup>, precisely the period when the most spectacular burials (*Prunkgräberhorizonte*<sup>39</sup>) emerge in the Middle Danube Basin, interpreted as archaeological evidence of the prestige and political crisis of the “Avar” elites.

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<sup>37</sup> See on the approach of this issue Gáll, Mărginean 2025, 47–49, 169–171.

<sup>38</sup> The 626 siege was ultimately a catastrophic defeat, with fundamental consequences on the development of the Avar Khaganate in the subsequent period. The crisis, followed by the collapse of the functioning mechanism network, resulted immediately in the set off of internal wars: in a first phase, the eastern Khaganate peripheral territories revolted (*Kuvrat*), the Lower Danube, followed by the internal war at the heart of the Khaganate (the military conflict of the different origins clans). Thus, the situation resulted in the aftermath of 626 clearly shows why nomad states were unstable and ephemeral, why the war-based *mono-economy* directly led, in case of defeat, to the prestige turmoil of the elite group, in general, and its leader. In this respect, a good analysis: Bollók 2021, 63–73.

<sup>39</sup> Vida 2016, 251–270.

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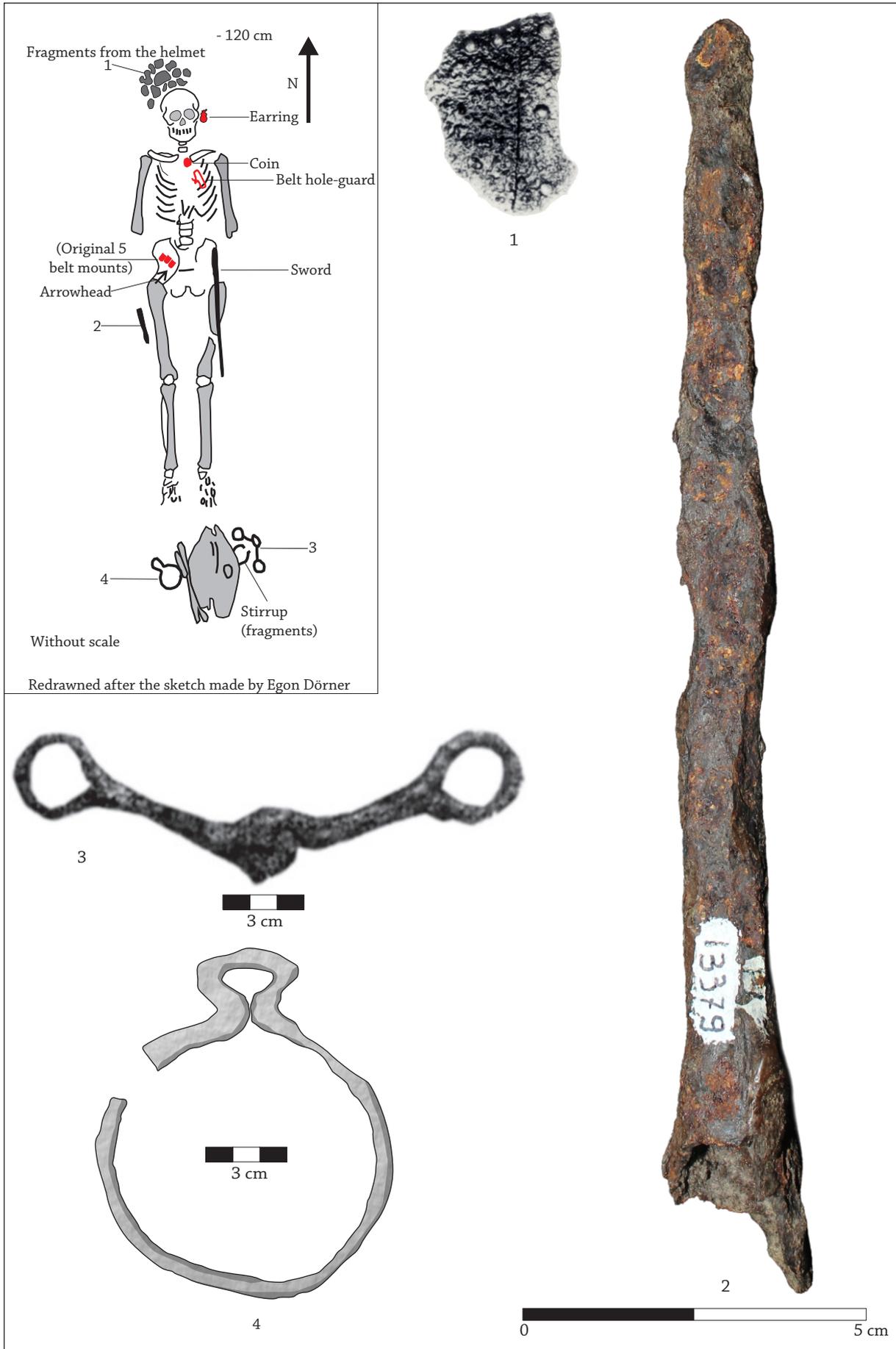


Plate 1. Sânpetru German-Magazin (redrawn after Dörner 1960, Fig. 2–4).