

MEDIEVAL CEMETERY FUNERARY EXCAVATION DYING ON THE EUROPEAN FRONTIER: LOST CHURCHES PROJECT



TRANSYLVANIA, ROMANIA
JUNE 7 - JULY 4 / JULY 5 - AUGUST 1, 2020



As the 15th century ends, the battle for Europe begins! The southeastern European frontier collapses in front of the Ottoman Turks. The heroes (and their legend) that held back the East have died: Vlad Dracula the Impaler, prince of Wallachia in 1476; Holy Stephan the Great, prince of Moldavia in 1504; Skanderberg (Iskender Bey), lord of Albania in 1468. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the united European defeat at the great Battle of Mohacs in 1526 opened the way for the Ottoman expansion into Europe.

DURATION: 4 week sessions

Field Program Fee (non-credit): US\$2495 per session

IT INCLUDES: field program participation fee, most gear, museum clearance; housing in double/triple occupancy rooms in a newly renovated hotel; breakfast and dinner, Monday-Friday

ACADEMIC CREDITS (6 cr.) available through WCU (session 1) and USF (session 2)

As Europe redefines itself in the wake of the Ottoman invasion, the Transylvania frontier still holds fast against the Eastern invaders. However, during the 17th century, a series of churches in the region around Odorheiu Secuiesc cease to be used. In the aftermath of the crisis that shook the foundation of European identity, these churches disappear from collective memory.

The aim of this project is to explore how major political events physically impacted local populations. We are interested in the evolution of the population throughout the Middle Ages in the region, the changes in church architecture and burial patterns, and the variations of burial ritual during social, political and economic stress. The further study of the human remains in our osteology laboratory will provide a more detailed view of the human aspects of these transitions.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: www.archaeotek-archaeology.org
CONTACT US: archaeology@archaeotek.org



MEDIEVAL CEMETERY FUNERARY EXCAVATION

Lost Churches Project

June 7 – August 1, 2020

Session 1: June 7 – July 4, 2020 / Session 2: July 5 – August 1, 2020

Valeni (Odorheiu Secuiesc), Transylvania, Romania

PROJECT DIRECTOR (INSTRUCTOR):
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Dr. Zsolt Nyaradi, PhD
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Project Web Site:

<https://www.archaeotek-archaeology.org/medieval-cemetery-funerary-excavation>

Project Application Form:

<https://www.archaeotek-archaeology.org/application-bioarchaeology>

Academic Credits: 3-6 graduate/undergraduate credits available through University of South Florida - Not Mandatory (additional USF credit tuition applies)

USF Program Brochure – Credit Application Page:

<https://educationabroad.global.usf.edu/index.cfm?FuseAction=Programs.ViewProgramAngular&id=23628>



I. Project Introduction:

As the 15th century ends, the battle for Europe begins! The southeastern European frontier collapses in front of the Ottoman Turks. The heroes (and their legend) that held back the East have died: Vlad Dracula the Impaler, prince of Wallachia in 1476; Holy Stephan the Great, prince of Moldavia in 1504; Skanderberg (Iskender Bey), lord of Albania in 1468. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the united European defeat at the great Battle of Mohacs in 1526 opened the way for the Ottoman expansion into Europe. By 1529, Suleiman the Magnificent has conquered southeastern Europe, the Kingdom of Hungary collapsed and the Ottoman troops were battering the walls of Vienna. The Ottoman expansions was finally checked in 1683, when the arrival of King Jan III Sobieski of Poland's heavy cavalry charge under the walls of besieged Vienna broke the Ottoman army and won a crucial victory.

However, Transylvania was never successfully invaded by the Turkish armies. The Saxon fortresses and the Szekely armies held the Ottomans at bay. With the collapse of the Kingdom of Hungary in 1526, its Transylvanian territories became a political battlefield between European, Russian, and the Ottoman backed princes until the Principality of Transylvania was born as an autonomous political entity in 1570. In 1600, Michael the Brave, with the support of the Transylvanian Szekely armies, beat the Ottoman and their supporters and realized the first union of the three Romania principalities into one kingdom.

As Europe redefines itself in the wake of the Ottoman invasion, the Carpathian frontier still holds fast against the Southern invaders. As Transylvanian suzerainty has passed from the Hungarian Kingdom, to the Ottomans, to the Habsburgs from the 15-17th century, the local populations lived under constant social, political, economic and religious stress. Since the Neolithic, Transylvania has been at the crossroads of European identity. During the late Middle Ages, this region goes not only through major political changes, but also through a spirituality crisis, under the pressure of Islam from the East and Protestantism from the West.

The Carpathians frontier held, but at what price?

II. Historical and Archaeological Background:

During the 17th century, a series of stone, fortified churches in the region around Odorheiu Secuiesc cease to be used. According to our archeological evidence, most of these churches existed as far back as the 12th century. In the aftermath of the crisis that shook the foundation of European identity, these churches disappear from collective memory. At the same time, the use of these temples changes in a fundamental way during the last decades of their use. The church at Teleac/Telekfalva revealed that it



was almost exclusively used to inter children, mostly preterm: the funerary ensemble showed one adult, 69 juveniles out of which 48 were of preterm or fetal age. Our 2013 excavation at the lost churches of Bradesti/Fenyed and Lueta has yielded a series of surprises, ranging from a highly complex ossuary, to a “Romeo and Juliette” grave, to a series of twins. The material culture associated with the various graves was exceptionally well preserved, allowing a very interesting glimpse into 15-17th century rural life and mortuary aesthetics. Our on-going excavation and current project of the lost church of Valeni/Patakfalva has shown that it was built on top of a pre-Christian tumulus that contained at least 3 individuals and a horse!!!

III. Project Goals:

The aim of this project is to continue to explore how major political events physically impacted local populations. We are interested in the evolution of the population throughout the Middle Ages in the region, the changes in the very local type of church architecture and burial patterns through time, and the variations on the Christian burial ritual during social, political and economic stress. At the same time, we will explore the way local communities "lived" the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism.

The results of our 2013-2019 laboratory analysis of the human remains from the “lost churches” we excavated have shown a very interesting demographic profile and pathologies. During our 2020 field season, we will continue excavating the extraordinarily well preserved “lost church” of Valeni, sister church of Teleac. We will focus on the immediate exterior of our „lost church”. One important question to address is how and why the burrial of deceased children varied so much in the region, in the hopes that we can elucidate the extraordinary high concentrations – both in space and time – of preterm and/or fetal remains.

At the same time we will investigate the building phases of this ecclesiastic building and its relationship to the deceased. The unexpected discovery, during our 2014 season of a pre-Christian / migration period burial complex, comprising several individuals and a horse, adds another level of perception to the evolution of the landscape. Another suprise was the discovery in 2017, of a stone build, very well preserved ossuary, for which more than the third of the sacristy was sacrificed. Its detailed excavation of analysis forms the basis of our Osteology Excavation and Commingled Remains Osteology Laboratory Research Workshop (<https://www.archaeotek-archaeology.org/commingled-remains>).

These results could also shed light on the relation between this church and its community, from the first moments of its existence. Through a more thorough study of the cemetery and its occupants, we will also explore the different processes that led to the penetration of Protestantism in the village and then its subsequent return to Catholicism and/or its final disappearance. The further study of the human



remains in our Adult Osteology Laboratory Research Workshop (<https://www.archaeotek-archaeology.org/adult-osteology-laboratory>) as well as our Juvenile Osteology Laboratory Research Workshop (<https://www.archaeotek-archaeology.org/juvenile-osteology-laboratory>) will provide a more detailed view of the human aspects of these transitions.

IV. Objectives:

- Determining the architectural building phases of the central cemetery church and their chronology
- Mapping the different phases of the cemetery inhumations and their relationship to broader social, political, religious, military and economic events
- Proper retrieval of the human remains for further anthropological analysis
- Establishment of late medieval funerary behavior and its evolution
- Identification of idiosyncratic ritual changes and their relationship to historical stresses
- Local and regional patterns of interaction, mobility and association among various groups of individual
- Ethnic historical evolution of the local and regional landscape

V. Specialized Skills Taught:

Lectures will be offered to our volunteers, ranging from local history and archaeology to material culture typologies and architecture, to various subjects related to mortuary archaeology. Students will be taught the proper use of various field tools. Explanations will be provided for every step of the excavation, on stratigraphy, field finds and archaeological complexes. We expect our participants to be intellectually involved in the archaeological process and thus interacting with the research staff.

Skill sets taught during the project:

- **Excavation:** proper use of excavation tools, strategic excavation of human bone material and associated grave goods, mapping, drawing, soil description, feature and site notation, interpretation, and removal of skeletal remains
- **Laboratory:** osteological processing and basic analysis



VI. Research Team:

1. Scientific Director (Instructor): Dr. Katie Zejdlik (Western Carolina University)
2. Field Director: Dr. Zsolt Nyaradi (Expert Archaeologist – Haaz Rezso Museum of History and Ethnography, Odorheiu Secuiesc, Harghita County, Central Transylvania, Romania)
3. Program Director: Dr. Andre Gonciar (Director, ArchaeoTek / BioArch Canada)

For more information on the staff, please visit: <http://www.archaeotek-archaeology.org/staff>

VII. Additional Weekend Field Trips:

Public transportation within Eastern Europe does not allow usually to optimize travel and sightseeing for visitors with limited time available. Furthermore, except for the main tourist attractions, getting to various sites can be very challenging due to the complete lack of public transportation to and from those sites. As a result, we are organizing transportation for several day/weekend trips to allow our participants to contextualize their work within the historical and cultural framework of Transylvania:

- Szekely Land Day Trip (mandatory - free): visit of the Lost Churches sites, including our active site of Patakfalva (Valeni), the Jesus Chapel (the oldest medieval monument around Odorheiu Secuiesc), and the ethnographic museum in Cristuru Secuiesc.
- Medieval Saxon Heritage Day Trip (optional – additional \$100): visit of some beautiful Saxon fortified churches (Cata, Homorod, Viscri) and the Rupea Fortress
- Brasov Weekend Trip (optional – additional \$60): visit of Brasov. From there, students can, if interested, arrange to explore Bram Stoker's Bran Castle, Rasnov Fortress, and the amazing Peles Castle, the summer residence of the Romanian kings