

Lost Churches Project Medieval Funerary Excavation



View from the modern cemetery located next to the excavation

When thinking about Transylvania, the first thought that comes to many minds is that of ‘vampires’, due in large part to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. In this infamous book, *Dracula* claims to be of the Székely people, a Hungarian sub-group living in the Transylvanian region of Romania nestled within the Carpathian Mountains. This summer I was fortunate enough to live amongst the Székely people in Harghita County, Székelyföld, Transylvania. Contrary to the mysterious, vampiric stigma that the Székely people have been linked to for decades, they were instead vibrant and tremendously welcoming. The landscape of Transylvania was also awe-inspiring, with jaw dropping sunsets and picturesque thunderstorms that only worked to highlight the artistic nature of the Carpathian countryside.

In June of 2023 I joined ArchaeoTek’s Lost Churches Project, which included a medieval funerary excavation, uncovering human remains from middle ages Transylvania. This project was of interest to me because of its work in helping reclaim the Székely narrative. Having uncovered various churches in Odorheiu Secuiesc, in ArchaeoTek’s words, the “excavation aims at retrieving the memory of these churches and to try to elucidate the social, political and religious context that created such an environment that would extract a church from local collective memory”¹. The modern Székely people are currently seeking autonomy from the Romanian government as they face stigmatization and discrimination from their neighboring communities². ArchaeoTek’s work, in conjunction with the local Haáz Rezső Museum, helps solidify Székler claims to land and other cultural resources.



View from the modern cemetery located next to the excavation

The area where we worked was located in Văleni, or Patakfalva in Hungarian, a settlement located a short bus ride south of Odorheiu Secuiesc, or Székelyudvarhely in Hungarian, the major city where our accommodations were located. The village of Văleni dates back to around 1300, with remains from this cemetery ranging from that time into the 1800s³.

¹ Archaeotek, “Lost Churches Project - Medieval Funerary Excavation,” Archaeotek, accessed November 26, 2023, <https://www.archaeotek-archaeology.org/medieval-funerary-excavation>.

² RMDSZ, “Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania,” <http://dahr.ro/>, accessed November 26, 2023, <http://dahr.ro/>.

³ Katie Zeidlik et al., “Investigating a Medieval Church and Cemetery (Văleni-Popdomb, Harghita County),” *Acta Musei Napocensis*, 11, no. 57 (2020): 143–73, <https://doi.org/10.54145/actamn.57.08>.

ArchaeoTek began their in 2013 and, by the time my group arrived on location, the Văleni cemetery had revealed nearly 800 graves and counting.

Our work days started with a loud neighborhood bell that not only marked the beginning of the day but also signaled to us that the neighborhood cows would soon be walking by. That was then followed by a lovely breakfast cooked by our accommodation's hosts, and then a 20-30



View of 1 of 2 major locations of the excavation, this area was mostly clay, our first two graves are in the bottom right

minute bus ride to the location. Every day was either very hot or very rainy but as long as the weather wasn't too extreme the work carried on! On very hot days, we worked against the clock to safely uncover bone without the sun drying out them out before we could safely remove them from the ground. On very rainy days we worked against the clock to ensure our trenches didn't flood and that our bones were kept safe from movement or damage from falling rocks or mud. The ground we maneuvered through ranged from loamy clay to dry dirt and our assigned trenches varied from 1 ft deep to over 6 ft deep. My partner and I were first assigned to separate graves that were so confined we each had to lay on our stomachs and dive down to see if anything was retrievable. After a day or so, neither of us uncovered anything so we moved into larger, shared spaces where we first uncovered remains that seemed to be of a child's age and then remains that seemed to be of an elderly woman.

During this process I learned how to find and recognize bone, how to document the remains and map them out, and how to utilize the different tools involved, like tooth picks, brushes, brooms, buckets, dusters, and of course, my trowel! I also learned how to get close and personal with bugs, from ants and crickets, to bees, yellow jackets, stinging gnats, and spiders, all of which seemed to have a deep interest in our work. Regardless, the work was immensely rewarding, with that sentiment being reinforced each time a group of locals came to visit to see our work or to chat with us.

When not in the field, either due to heavy rain or it being a day off, we all kept busy. To keep busy during extreme weather we could participate in lectures



Rainy day in the trenches

or bone washing. Lecture time was spent covering topics like Székely history, bioarchaeology, osteology, and Székely folklore, as well as watching powerful documentaries. Other working



Lecture time!

time was used to sharpen or organize our tools and to work on our respective end-of-the-month projects that ended with a colloquium. Bone washing refers to the cleaning of bones that were excavated from the ossuary located within the excavation site. This was a great opportunity to get up close and with various bones, to compare things like size, sex estimation, and taphonomy. Days off included field trips to local Székely and Saxon churches, some featured on UNESCO's World Heritage List⁴, as well as other culturally significant destinations like castles, small villages, a salt mine, swimming, and more. I also got very acquainted with the train system and thankfully I learned enough Romanian and Hungarian to navigate getting lost!

All of this adventure and education was made possible with the help I received from the Jane C. Waldbaum scholarship. Expenses ranged from food and daily incidentals to tuition and travel. I was

able to not only travel to and then participate in the activities included in my tuition, but I was able to join in on the educational, optional field trips on the weekends. This gave me further context into the history of Transylvania and extra time interacting with the people in the region. I've now started my graduate program at Cal State Northridge for Archaeology and I'm so happy I'm coming into it with real world, bioarchaeological and ethnographic experience.

⁴ UNESCO, "World Heritage List," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed November 26, 2023, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>.



Work continues...



References

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- Zeidlik, Katie, Andre Gonciar, Jonathan Bethard, and Zsolt Nyárádi. "Investigating a Medieval Church and Cemetery (Văleni-Popdomb, Harghita County)." *Acta Musei Napocensis*, 11, no. 57 (2020): 143–73. <https://doi.org/10.54145/actamn.57.08>.



Excavation crew 2023!

**Images below reflect more of the excavation and contain human remains, with permission to share from the descendent community*



*My partner, Isaac, and
I uncovering a small
skeleton*



*A view of the different
levels being worked on*



A well preserved C2, my favorite bone!



A neighboring trench was given permission to dig into the wall in order to retrieve the skull of a fully excavated skeleton



*Bone washing
times*

