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**„...ut strenui viri...”
*The history of the Gepids in the Carpathian Basin***

Ph.D Thesis



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Introduction

The present research has tended to focus on the comparative history of the Gepidic Kingdom in the Carpathian Basin from the early period till the disintegration of its political structures. The Gepids, who spoke an Eastern-Germanic language, ruled the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin between the Hunnic and Avaric age. In the zenith of the political power of their realm they were able to control significant cities as the former imperial capital Sirmium. Although considerable researches have been devoted to highlight the relevance of the Gepidic period, though one might agree that, historical investigations paid less attention to this Germanic group. In contrast, other early-medieval German ethnic groups (such as the Goths or the Langobards) became more relevant for the historical and archaeological investigations. This contradiction can be seen through the scientific endeavours, since the latest comprehensive monograph was written more than a half century ago (Sevin, Heinrich: *Die Gebiden*. München 1955; Csallány, Dezső: *Archäologische Denkmäler der Gepiden im Mitteldonaubecken (454–568 u.Z.)*. ArchHung. 38. Budapest 1961.). The research encompasses more than two centuries of the history of the Carpathian Basin. One could agree that with the neglect of the European ambience and parallels together with a great caution of the latest methodological literature the investigation would be preposterous. In the following dissertation one may use the methodological approaches both archaeology and history, with aware of the ambiguous contradictions. The combined examination of written sources and archaeological findings were a focal point in the search of Early-Medieval Germanic ethnics in the Carpathian Basin. This is one of the reason why several theories of connected auxiliary sciences were transferred into other approaches. The contradictions related to this methodological phenomenon were highly debated by significant scholars (Herwig Wolfram, Walter Pohl). Due to this fact, one can find the reception of this controversial theme in the German archaeological studies (German: „*gemischte Argumentation*”, mixed argumentation) with a great response of the international researches. One might admit that the separate examination of the results of the different disciplines is inevitable, in order to avoid the contradictions between the arguments of various fields.

Gepidic groups appear near the Carpathian Basin

With the given aptitude of the written sources one can hardly assign the moment of the Gepidic ethnogenesis. The first certain mentions are from the middle of the 3rd century, and this can be the initial moment, whenceforth one can treat them as an independent ethnicity along with a political organization. The previous scholarly endeavours were dating their appearance in the Carpathian Basin to the second half of the 3rd century. These researches partly took the antique sources as a base and partly the archaeological interpretations of the mentioned writings. Even, with a deficiency in the amount of sources one can clearly record that the main territory of the Gepids was around the river Vistula's northern ending, or a slightly southern. Only one written account (the biographies of the *Historia Augusta*) mentioned the Gepids among those tribes who attacked the Roman Empire's provinces near the river Danube, though the worth of the mentioned source is ambiguous (late editing, interpolations). Still the possibility cannot be excluded that small groups could participate in these raids, which is demonstrated in several inscriptions revealed from Rome and Ostia. One may admit, that the Carpathian Basin not even in the 4th the century were habited by Gepidic communities, since none of the great amount of written accounts noted them, neither at the

attacks against the Roman Empire, nor at the fights inside the Barbaricum. Those approaches, which were attempted to locate the Gepidic core territories based upon the contemporaneous geographical and cartographical fountains may seem inefficient as long as they can provide us with data applicable for limited range. The joint attack with the Vandals against the western Gothic residents doesn't necessarily mean that, one can locate that struggle in Dacia, since it can be assumed that the core of the Gothic residences was also outside of the Carpathian Basin.

Furthermore, those endeavours which tried to find the first traces of the Gepidic presence in the cemeteries of Northeast Hungary, cannot be verified accurately. In the examined region one can suppose that a highly diverse culture flourished. consequently the separation of the certain ethnicities needs to encounter problems. Moreover, the Tiszadob and Ártánd-group's cemeteries (which were opened at the end of the 4th century and were in use during 5th century) involves findings and burial habits which can be considered universal in that time. Regarding these evidences, the interethnic archaeological culture that evolves during and after the Huns, disables the separation of the ethnic groups. Supposedly, in the Hunnic period the Gepids habited the Carpathian Basin. It is underpinned by the fact, that they were continuously took an important role in the great raids, in which mostly the closest tribes to the Hunnic "*ordu*" was participated. This might shed light to the fact that one cannot acutely locate the Gepidic territory before 454.

Gepids during the age of the Huns

During the noted historical period one may find only limited range of sources about the Gepidic groups, who lived in the Carpathian Basin during the age of the Huns. One may not find evidences in the written sources, nor among the archaeological founts. It seems to be convincing that a part of the Gepidic groups were lived near the Huns at the first tierce of the 5th century. The migrations of the early 5th century, which might have involved minor torn elements of the Gepidic groups, could have contributed to their movement into the Carpathian Basin. The 5th century implemented numerous alterations which surely brought considerable changes to the Gepids as well. They took part in successful raids in collaborate with the Huns and therefore a new warrior elite emerged, which was led by Ardaric who became one the most prestigious and prominent leader of them. It seems evidential that based on the indications of the written sources the Gepids took part in raids at 447, 451 and 452, but it cannot be excluded that they could be involved in former military actions with the leading of the nomads. So far, one can consider them as partial winners of the age of the Huns. Moreover, due to the successful armed struggles various new joining and merging groups could have modified the Gepidic tradition. The other major change related to the period is the fact that the Gepids reached the foreground of the Empire's frontier, which proved to be profitable to them. Unfortunately, due to the deficiencies of the sources and the limited range of the archaeological interpretations one cannot locate more precisely the eastern Germanic tribes inside the Carpathian Basin.

The inception of the Gepidic Kingdom and its story until the early 6th century

The Gepids reckoned the strongest group in the Carpathian Basin after dissolution of the Hunnic Empire, thanks to their recruitment. Either the known historical processes or the archaeological finds verify that the power-extension was a part of a long process. We can find the signs of destruction at some settlements and this allude to the former population could have been consolidated by force in some cases. But at the same time the local Huns, and Sarmatians could gave some new elements to the tight Gepidic culture. The warrior aristocracy which rose during the age of the Huns, could warranted its power by integrating the mentioned groups. The Gepidic ethnogenesis could start a new phase after the age of the Huns anyway. But in absence of inside written sources, these events cannot be reconstructed easily. They were out of the gothic wars in the 460-470's, thanks to the time consuming „pacification”, however they exploited the weakening the other groups. Due to this the Gepids became a dominant political force in the mentioned region. Above all these processes they had a good relation with the Byzantine Empire what helped them as well.

After the retire of the Goths the Gepids were able to expand their authority to Sirmium and it's surroundings. So in 473 the Gepids got Sirmium. The Byzantine Empire couldn't expanded its authority to the mentioned city because of the serious fights inside the Empire, none the less Sirmium was their rightful property since the second half of the 5th century. The Gepidic kings regained both Sirmium and the former Pannonia Secunda province until the early 6th century. The year 488 was an exemption according to Ennodius's data because at the mentioned time a smaller group of Goths ran through the territory. They didn't have conflict after the takeover, and this fact verifies the good relations between them.

The early 6th century brought many major changes in Sirmium's and in its surrounding's life. Theodorich learned from the mistakes of his ancestor Odoaker so he decided to win back Sirmium, although the city didn't have it's former influence yet. Sirmium was the gate to Italy at least from the aspect of the Balkan so the question of authority was really important to the Ostrogoths. In the end the Goth forces seized back the mentioned territory without any fighting. But beside the Ostrogoths, the Gepids and the Byzantine Empire another new entrant appeared soon, the Gepid Mundo. This brought an open fight between the Byzantine Empire and the Goths. So the events around Sirmium started as a local conflict, but they led to the inception of a league against the Ostrogoths. The new Trasaric-inscription reveals that the war's goal could be the deflecting of the forming league. So the relation was good between the Gepids and the Byzantine Empire (with an exemption of some raids against the Byzantine Empire) until 536, when the Gepids seized back Sirmium.

The Gepid Kingdom in the 6th century

They led some raids to the Empire's territory during the 6th century, but it didn't changed the relation between them. After Theoderich's death they tried to seize back the city with the help of some Herul team, but the action ended without any success. After this the Gepidic politics had major changes. They took advantage of war and in 536 they seized back

the recapture of Sirmium. The Byzantine Empire tried to seize back the city but without any success (the defeat and death of Calluc *magister militum*). The Gepids led raids against several cities in the northern Illyricum until the middle of the 540's. They could expand their authority temporary to Singidunum and some cities in Dacia and Moesia, thanks to the uprising of the Herul teams. But they never overstepped the borders of the two cities and Illyricum, not even if some archaeologist tried to connect some Bulgarian finds to these processes.

In the next decade Justinian prevented successfully the inception of a new power-concentration. He supported the Longobards against the Gepids, and he gave them some military troops against the eastern Germans as well. Almost 11500 warriors and 3 *magister militum*s from the Byzantine Empire escorted the Langobard army at 549. This number can indicate the power of the Gepid Kingdom as well. Thanks to the possession of Sirmium the Gepid king Turisind let several barbarian groups (Kutrigurs, Slavs) through his territory. These groups led some small raids against the Byzantine Empire, but this was sufficient to prevent Justinian's Italian plans. A collective campaign, led by the Langobards and the Byzantine Empire ended the expansion of the Gepidic Kingdom at 552. The Gepids probably stayed out of the fights in Italy and it's reasonable in the light of the serious damages. We have only barely enough written sources from the next decade, but most of the researchers think this is the time of Alboin's visit in the Gepidic Kingdom. Most of the researchers interpreted this event as Alboin became the „Son in Arms” (German: *Waffensohn*) of Thurisind. We can read the many „saga-like” elements containing story at Paulus. But the mentioned interpretation is most likely false because this habit worked only between the Goth kings and Byzantine emperors, and some other barbarian leaders presumably.

The weapon force of the Gepids in the light of written sources and archaeological finds

Unfortunately no written source exists what can fully represent the structure of the warrior class not either that Procopios citation most researchers mentioned. Using as source of the laws and stories of the Langobard, Frank and some other early Germanic tribes isn't effective as well. In some cases we can find even the signs of „mixed argumentation” (this phenomenon also exists among other themes in the Migration Period). None of the written sources define a true number of the population but we can suspect that the Gepids had a quite serious army at the 6th century. As we alluded in the former chapters 11000 warriors and 3 *magister militum*s from the Byzantine Empire plus the full Langobard army stood against the Gepidic army at 549. This number can allude to the real power of the Gepidic Kingdom. Several written sources mentioned Herul and Slav troops inside the Gepidic army at the same time. We know that only the Heruls had 3000 warriors and they were just temporary allies.

At the Tisza-region almost the half of the men got one or more weapon at the funeral, and this corresponds with the Merovingian grave's finds. Unlike the Langobard men who got a huge amount of weapons usually. But we can't compare a settled and a newcomer population.

Only very few of the skeletons were examined by anthropologist it follows that we have very few age-data. That's a serious problem because it should be the basis of the researches. But considering the data we have: the Gepidic graves corresponds to the other settled tribe's graves in the area.

The weapons itself and their combinations also corresponds to others at the Merovingian Ages. At the early 6th century the ranged weapons are the most common types but to the middle of the century the scale shifts to the heavy weapons. The heavy weapons are always dominant among the weapon-combinations as well. The ranged weapons are focused very clearly near Szentes and these finds in some cases can connect to certain ages presumably. The robbers haven't spared the graves with weapons neither, the sword mounts and the unique weapon-combinations are allude to this.

We can't use the archaeological finds necessarily to reconstruct the structure of the warrior class or to decide the number of the warriors. It's very important to consider the affects of the burial habits – some things get into the graves and some other things stay out of it. As the burial is a ritual activity it's not even sure that any weapon in the grave was used by the dead person in life. The life of these people could be much more complex, than we can see it in their burials. So it's time to say goodbye to try to reflect the cemeteries onto the living world!

The fall of the Gepidic Kingdom and the surviving population in the Avar Ages

The alliance systems at the northern borders were completely ended when Justinian died. His successor (Justin II) stuck up for the Gepids at the Langobard-Gepid fights. Even so Kunimund, the Gepidic king wasn't ready to give Sirmium to the Empire, and his action was pregnant with consequences. The Gepids were unable to defend themselves from the contracted Langobard-Avar attacks in absence of the help of the Empire. Therefore their separate kingdom split up.

Some of them left the Carpathian Basin with Alboin and migrated to Italy but most of the population lived under Avar authority thereafter. Formerly several researchers (after the thesis of Attila Kiss) localized the surviving Gepids to the Southern-Transdanubian. But the written sources and the archaeological finds cannot be mixed without any criticism. Considering everything we can't prove the presence of the Gepidic survivors in Transdanubian. The biggest problems in the researches are the mixed argumentation what we already mentioned. These appear both in historical both in archaeological works and the writers consider them as facts. As a result two separate archaeological horizons have been handled as the same: the first one's archaeological (starts at the end of the 6th century and lasts to the early 7th century) and the other one's written (starts at the end of the 8th century and lasts to the early 9th century) data. Otherwise those written data are even not sure. The particular analysis of the *Conversio* shows us perfectly that the unknown author used former works to locate the eastern Germans to the Transdanubian.

The contemporary written sources from the Byzantine Empire and the archaeological data both shows that these groups and their leaders as well stay at their original villages after the Gepidic Kingdom's fall. We can track the Gepidic survivors for almost 50 more years, thanks to some (mostly Greek) authors: such as Theophylaktos Simokatta, who wrote about Gepids and who lived in their own villages and kept their tradition even at the early 7th century.

So after the examination we got a much more colourful picture than the former researchers had. We cannot make the ethnical interpretations of the finds, from the Transdanubian region but they have rich connections with Italy and Meroving territories. So we should use Tivadar Vida's expression "Avar aged Germans" instead of Gepids. The Kőlked-area's cemeteries neither show connections with the Gepid finds before 567, therefore we can reject the idea of transplantation. Although both in Transylvania and the Tisza-region the great cemeteries proceeded even after „the magic year” 567 to the last tierce of the century. This transitional horizon can be defined by the surviving connections with the Italian and the Merovingian territories. The Mezőbánd-type cemeteries appeared at the end of the 6th century in Transylvania. These had varied connections to the Merovingian, the Mediterranean world and even to the Steppe. The ethnic interpretation is very questionable in these cases, but some surviving Gepidic elements existed in this population presumably. We find a similar phenomenon in the Middle-Tisza area but the population proceeded only the Merovingian traditions here. We also have to take notice of the early excavations what caused loss of a great amount of data mostly in the southern area. The two graves supplemented with weapons from Kishomok and the finds from Magyarcsanak are good examples for this. Although the Gepidic elite class lost its separateness in 567 several minor disorganized local groups could survive under the nomadic leadership.

Conclusion

The historical interpretations were mainly constituted by the theories of István Bóna, whose efforts not only influenced the Hungarian investigations but the international inquiries as well. In most of the cases the Hungarian archaeologist examined the historical role of the Gepids in contrast with the Lombard's history. Principally, he established his theories on the historical interpretations which were derived from the archaeological finds. He implemented a consequent line of conceptions which started with the "half-feudal" status of the Gepidic society which constituted a weak regal power and included a more weakened strata of warriors. But the precise investigation of the historical and archaeological sources can contradict with this. The Gepids could not play a subordinate role in the affairs of the two Germanic ethnicity, as well in the politics of the Danube region. It is reasonable to assume that the relation were exactly the opposite, since the analysis of the various sources till 552 can strengthen an impression of a strong expanding kingdom. Only the excellent diplomacy of Justinian could prevent that the Gepidic Kingdom was not able become a considerable power and could not endanger the Byzantine interests in the Balkan. One may argue that the struggles of the Gepidic state against the Byzantine Empire can be considered as the sign of

the typical barbarian model of development. One of significant elements of this model is the method by which authentic Germanic culture is opposed by the neighbouring high culture (such as the so called “Hunnic alternative” of Herwig Wolfram). The capture of Sirmium altered that status considerably, since then the Gepidic state could follow a different role of development which led to the integration into the tradition of the Roman Empire. The individual church organization (though partly originated from the Ostrogoths) and the establishment of individual coinage could also enlighten the same opportunity. But this development was suddenly interrupted and finally left in torso.

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