

ZIRIDAVA  
STUDIA ARCHAEOLOGICA

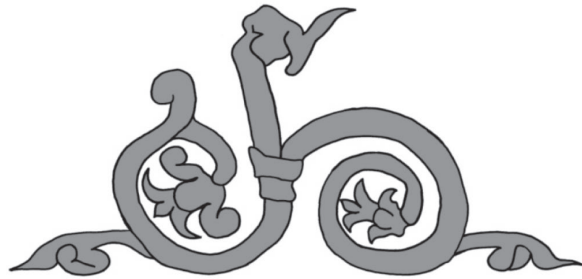
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# The Medieval Church in the Village of Secaş (Arad County) and its Vestiges\*

Florin Mărginean, George P. Hurezan, Augustin Mureşan

**Abstract:** The present paper aims to bring a contribution to the repertoire of ecclesiastic monuments in the mountainous region of Zărand. This would not have been possible if a decorated stone block hadn't been discovered in the summer of 2008, etched with a Christian inscription and Christian symbols. The stone block allowed us to identify the exact location of the medieval church in the village of Secaş. This paper also aims to analyze a stone block and to decipher its message and decoration.

**Keywords:** medieval church, funerary stone, roadside crucifix, Zărand.

The village of Secaş (in the municipality of Brazi, Arad County) is located in the southern part of Gurahonţ Depression, at the feet of Zărand Mountains. Nowadays, the village may be accessed by following a road that branches off from Road DJ 708, the one that connects the Crişul Alb and Mureş Valleys (Fig. 1).

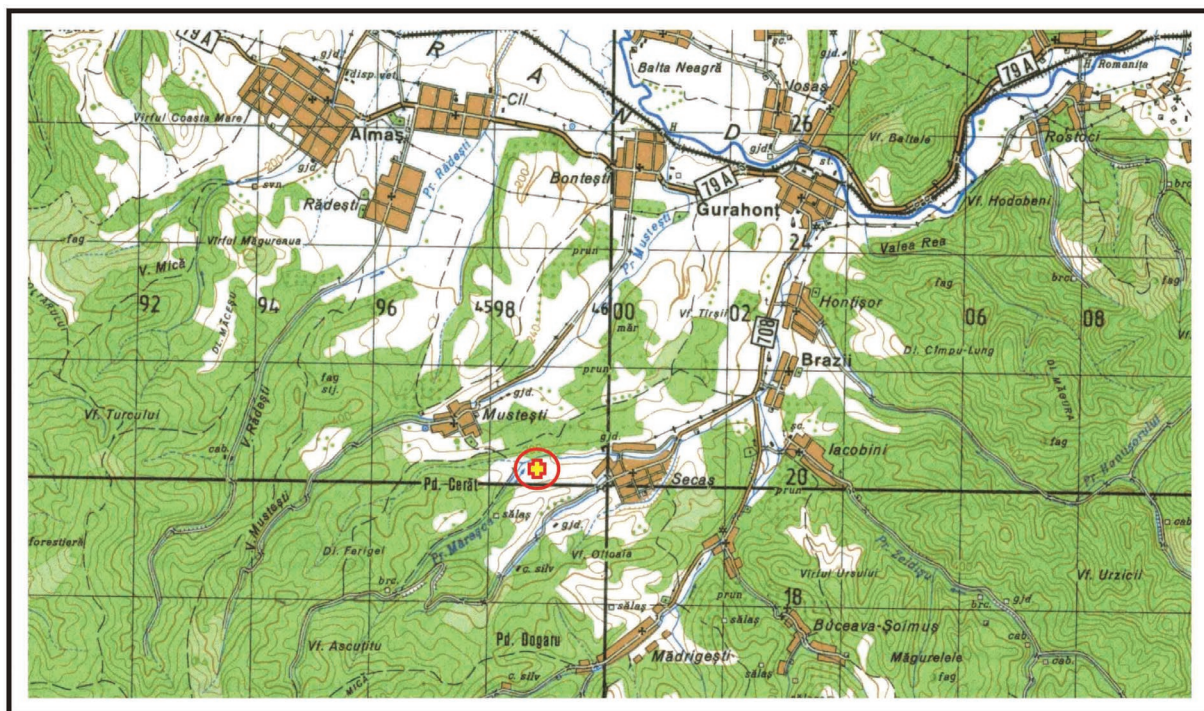


Fig. 1. The location of the village of Secaş

Written sources do not provide much data on the past of this settlement and on the people who inhabited it during the Middle Ages. The few mentions spread over several centuries are insufficient for any reconstruction of the medieval period realities<sup>1</sup>.

It is known that in the end of the fourteenth century the domain of Şiria included six Romanian districts<sup>2</sup>, while in 1439, when the domain was transferred to Gheorghe Brancovici, seven such districts

\* English translation: Ana M. Gruia.

<sup>1</sup> Roz, Kovách 1997, 218–219.

<sup>2</sup> Caciara, Glück 1980, 160; Borcea 1989, 186.

were mentioned<sup>3</sup>. At least for the period of the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, it is known that Upper Secaş and Lower Secaş<sup>4</sup> are mentioned among the 45 villages and 5 deserted settlements in the district of Căpâlna (*Kapolna*). The settlement was not deemed notable by the era's written sources, except for data extracted from the *urbarium* of the fortification in Șiria that mentions the fact that a certain voivode, Petru More, resided there<sup>5</sup>.

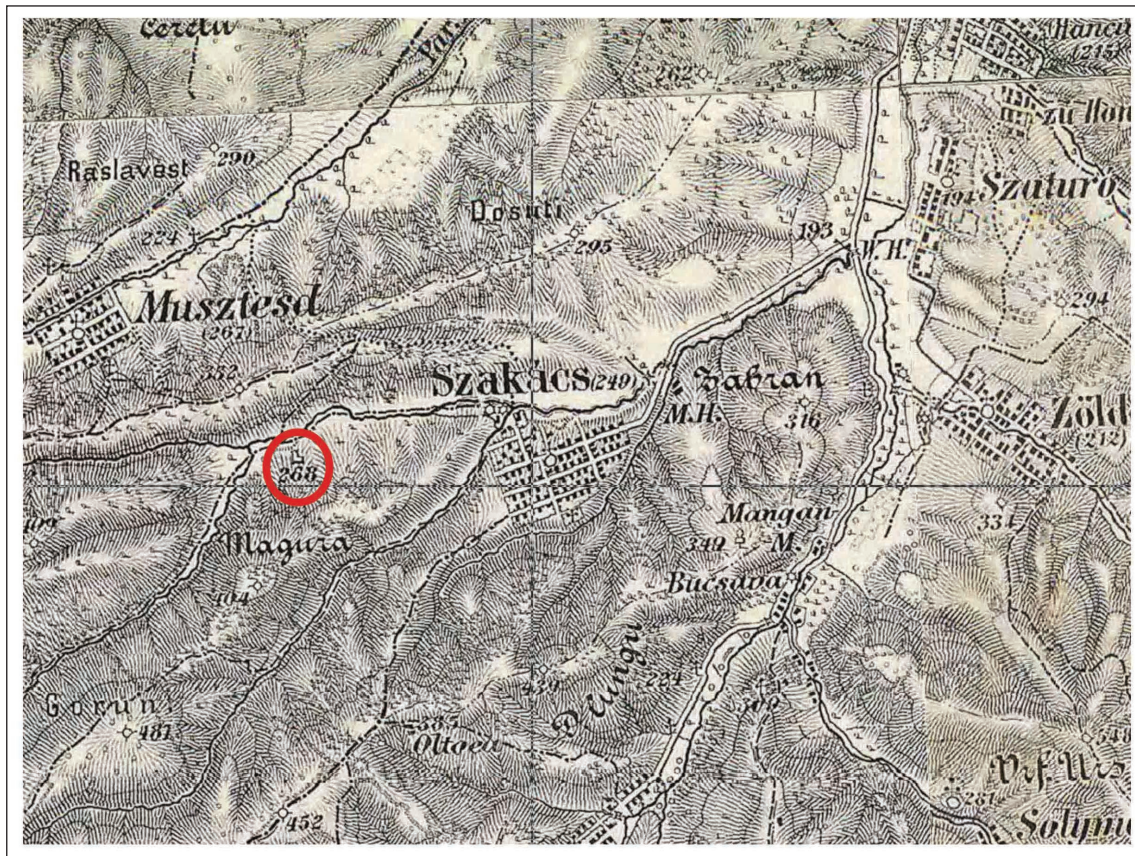


Fig. 2. The location of the ruin after the third Austrian military topographical survey

The present study attempts to show how a stray discovery allowed us to locate the medieval church of the village of Secaş. Today, the site does not preserve ruins that might indicate the existence of a church from the medieval period. The only indications for it are stone fragments with traces of mortar on the spot where the old village church once stood. The place is marked on the third Austrian military topographical survey (Fig. 2).

Mentioned by nineteenth-century historians<sup>6</sup>, the medieval church was forgotten once the village center moved and the ruins, visible until the middle of the twentieth century, were spoiled<sup>7</sup>. Most of the structures that were still visible in 1942, when one photograph of the area was taken (see Pl. 1/2), were reused in the construction of the C.A.P.<sup>8</sup> in the settlement<sup>9</sup>.

Despite the fact that certain authors were interested in the ecclesiastical edifices in the area of Arad, the scarcity of written sources and the limited number of medieval monuments in the mountainous area of Zărand were not attractive enough to trigger more detailed researches. According to data available so far on the medieval churches in this area, one can estimate that the number of stone-built ecclesiastical monuments was relatively small in comparison to those in the surrounding

<sup>3</sup> Borcea 1989, 188.

<sup>4</sup> Eskenasy 1975, 81; Borcea 1989, 195.

<sup>5</sup> Prodan 1960, 83.

<sup>6</sup> Fábíán 1834; Marki II, 753.

<sup>7</sup> Popa 1942, 50–51.

<sup>8</sup> Cooperativă Agricolă de Producție (Agricultural Production Cooperative).

<sup>9</sup> Information kindly provided by priest Petcuț Tuțu, whom we hereby thank.

areas. There are various causes for this, thus we shall not dwell on them here. They were mentioned in a relatively recent analysis of a medieval religious buildings inventory from this area<sup>10</sup>. The present approach aims to contribute to the repertoire of stone-built ecclesiastical edifices, besides the already well researched churches in Hălmaşiu, Ribiţa, and Criscior.

In 2008, after we were contacted by the Town Hall of Brazi on the discovery of a stone block with “Christian marks” on the spot of *Biserica turcească*<sup>11</sup> or *Satu Bătrân*, we went on site to verify the information<sup>12</sup>.

The place where the stone was discovered led us to the ancient location of the medieval church in Secaş, upstream the confluence of the valleys of *Măraşca* (*Maraska*) and *Ferice* (Pl. 1/1). It seems that the church served the faithful from the Cârjeşti, Secaşul de Jos, Secaul de Sus, Mărişesti and Ferice villages<sup>13</sup>. On site we could notice, on one end of a hilltop shaped like a mamelon, located on the right side of the confluence of the two valleys, that several traces could still be seen on the surface (“forest stones” as the local language refers to extremely friable sandstone blocks, showing traces of mortar) that indicated the obvious existence of a stone building. The western end of the earth mound still preserves traces of stone blocks connected with mortar that might have been part of the foundations of the western tower, photographed in 1942 (Pl. 1/2). Unfortunately, some of the landscape has been modified, especially the part towards the valley where the foundations of the parish house were indicated. Interventions were stopped in time, so that the possible negative impact on the integrity of the monument and on local stratigraphy has been kept to a minimum.

Written sources are not very generous on the medieval church in the village of Secaş, just as in the case of other ecclesiastical edifices in the area under discussion. Thus, the *urbarium* of the fortification in Şiria only mentions the village priests<sup>14</sup>. No other written source contains subsequent mentions of this church. Its ruin is mentioned by historian Márki S., who calls it *Biserica turcească* (The Turkish Church), with three-four-meter-tall walls. He also notes that the church once had a porch and a semi-circular apse<sup>15</sup>. One knows that in 1786 the old church was still used occasionally, since it was probably in disrepair<sup>16</sup>.

Even today, the spot is known in local folklore under the toponym of *Biserica turcească* (The Turkish Church)<sup>17</sup> or *Biserica Bătrână* (The Ancient Church)<sup>18</sup>. Human bone remains have been recovered periodically, very probably from the cemetery around the church. Another toponym, *Dealul Crucii* (Cross’ Hill)<sup>19</sup> (located on a hill south of the spot of *Biserica turcească*), might indicate another religious building or a cemetery.

Unfortunately, nothing has been preserved from what priest Dr. Roman Popa saw and presented in a short article in 1942<sup>20</sup>. The image published by the aforementioned author reveals a bell tower (P+2) in an advanced state of degradation (Pl. 1/2). The same author mentions that the church was used by the faithful from seven villages<sup>21</sup> spread along the surrounding valleys. He also mentions, and the fact is partially confirmed by what has been preserved on the surface, that the church was built from “stones broken off the rock and built with hydraulic lime”, but does not indicate the existence of any architectural components. The author dates the church to the same period as the churches in Ribiţa, Criscior, Hălmaşiu, and Căpâlna (unidentified exact site). The same author claims that the church was used until 1837 when the present-day church in Secaş was built. Notably he also mentions the traces of a building’s foundation that can no longer be seen on site, which, he reports, was part of a parish house built of large blocks of cut stone.

<sup>10</sup> Rusu, Hurezan 2000, 20–23.

<sup>11</sup> See Marki II, 753.

<sup>12</sup> The team included Peter Hügel, Florin Mărginean (Museum Complex in Arad), Adrian A. Rusu (Archaeology and Art History Institute Cluj-Napoca) and Ileana Burnichioiu (“1 Decembrie” Univ. Alba Iulia).

<sup>13</sup> Vesa 2006, 438.

<sup>14</sup> Prodan 1960, 81.

<sup>15</sup> Marki I, 443; See Rusu, Hurezan 2000, 130–131, erroneously localized in the village of Secaci (municipality of Beliu).

<sup>16</sup> Marki II, 751.

<sup>17</sup> See Marki II, 751.

<sup>18</sup> Vesa 2006, 438.

<sup>19</sup> Vesa 2000, 68; Vesa 2006, 444.

<sup>20</sup> Popa 1942, 50–51.

<sup>21</sup> Data taken from G. Fabian, 221.

The absence of written sources might be, in this case, supplemented by archaeological excavations. Otherwise, one can only mention and place this church in a rather poor and insufficiently researched context of ecclesiastical medieval buildings. The archaeological research of the site would certainly enrich available knowledge on medieval churches built and used by Romanians in this area.

In connection to the discovery that indicated the location of the medieval church of the village of Secaș, we will subsequently attempt to determine the function of this stone block with Christian decorations, marks, and messages in the structure of the ecclesiastical building. The stone block, irregular in shape, measures 95 cm in length, an average of 26 cm in width, and 18 cm in thickness. It is currently preserved inside the Orthodox church dedicated to the “Descent of the Holy Ghost”<sup>22</sup> in the village of Secaș.

Several depictions have been preserved on the surface of the stone (a more resistant sandstone): one cross, solar decorative (geometrical) motifs, and an inscription<sup>23</sup>. It is very likely that the hardness of the sandstone did not allow the stonemason to carve these elements very precisely.

One cross (of the roadside crucifix type) is placed in the center of the upper part; under the horizontal arm one can see the short variant of the name Jesus Christ, to the right side of the arm initials **ΙΣ** (Jesus) and to the left **ΧC** (Christ); lower, the vertical arm of the cross is flanked by two solar motifs. Under the cross and under the two symbols one can read the following inscription: **НИ-ХА** (probably NIKHA). A disk is placed above the cross and another solar motif can be seen under the cross and under the word **НИ-ХА**. In fact the letters are not Cyrillic (excepting the C in XC where C maybe very well be Sigma) but Greek<sup>24</sup>. Such solar motifs are a recurrent feature in Romanian folk art, from embroidery to sculptures in wood and stone<sup>25</sup>. A similar decoration, with a rosette, can also be traced in Hungary (Veszprem county, on the north shore of Balaton Lake) where, in a Calvin cemetery one could see hundreds of tomb stones with this motif, though different in drawing and muster<sup>26</sup>. Considering the fact that the stone’s discovery context remains unknown, as it was found in a secondary position, its probable role and meaning could be of that marking a tomb or, probably, a crossroad crucifix.

The discovery is not unique in the area under discussion, though it is known that such finds are rather rare. In one of his recent articles, Pál Lóvei analyzes the issues connected to the introduction and use of funerary markings in cemeteries during the medieval period in the Hungarian Kingdom<sup>27</sup>.

Funerary *stelae* or tomb stones are mentioned in Țebea, Baia de Criș, Conop, and Zăbrani<sup>28</sup>, and one such item seems to have been built in the wall of the church in Dezna<sup>29</sup>. One only knows that the item in Conop was discovered in an archaeological context, placed on top of tomb no. 14. The authors of the discovery have provided two possible datings of the stone under discussion: one to the Neolithic and one to the twelfth-fourteenth century, using as argument the context in which the other discoveries in the cemetery researched on the spot of “Cotărci” were made<sup>30</sup>. A stone with a similar inscription to the one on the item from Secaș is preserved in the storage rooms of the museum in Arad. Its place of origin remains, unfortunately, unknown. It seems to include, besides Jesus Christ’s initials, the year 1748.

Very little is known on the funerary practices during the period when the village and implicitly the church in Secaș are mentioned, and even less on markings employed as tomb signs or indicators of prayer places. This is partly due to the scarcity of written mentions, but there are also too few

<sup>22</sup> The noble coat of arms of Cyro Nicolici is depicted on the western wall in the Orthodox church in Secaș, built in 1837. Cyro (Cyrill) Nicolici was a Romanian of South-Danubian origin, land owner with properties in the settlements of Secaș and Mădrigești, in the *comitatus* of Arad. Cyro Nicolici, an important merchant from Vienna, received as donation the settlements of Secaș and Mădrigești on December 30<sup>th</sup> 1819, while on May 30<sup>th</sup> 1821 he also obtained Slatina (present-day Slatina de Mureș); soon afterwards he made his noble title public (see Mureșan 2012, pp.215–219).

<sup>23</sup> The stone block was recovered from the site of the old medieval church in the village of Secaș and was transported in 2008 to the new village church by priest Petcuț Tuțu.

<sup>24</sup> We would like to give special thanks to Dr Ioan Albu, who gave us pertinent suggestions regarding our researches.

<sup>25</sup> Opreșan 2003, XLIII.

<sup>26</sup> We would also like to give special thanks to Dr Pál Lóvei for his remarks and suggestions.

<sup>27</sup> Lóvei 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Boroneanț, Demșea 2005, 46–47.

<sup>29</sup> Greceanu, Munteanu-Trucă 1980, 184.

<sup>30</sup> Boroneanț, Demșea 2005, 44.

discoveries of the sort. In their case, it is very possible that the markings were made of wood and thus decayed in time, and only the rich could afford such stones inscribed with Christian signs and posthumous messages made from durable materials.

It is very likely that the discovery under discussion was part of a roadside crucifix aimed at marking the ancient spot of the village church in Secaş. Besides, one knows that towards the end of the eighteenth century and in the beginning of the nineteenth century the old church was gradually abandoned, and this is the probable chronological interval when the stone was carved.

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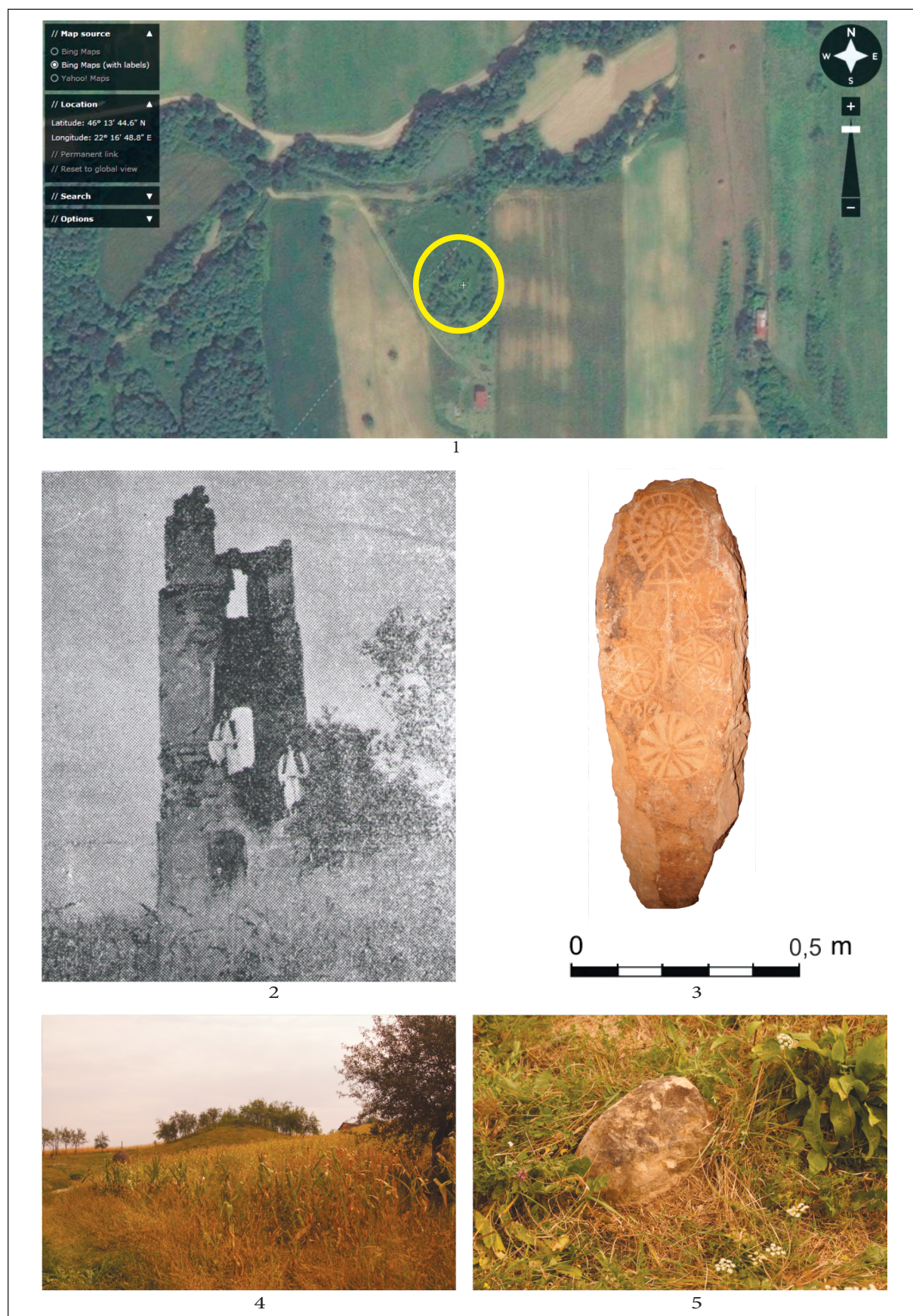
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Planșa 1. Secaș: 1. Localizarea amplasamentului bisericii medievale; 2. Imagine cu ruinele turnului de vest al bisericii (1942); 3. Piatră cu decor, inscripție și însemne creștine descoperită pe vechiul amplasament al bisericii; 4. Imagine dinspre SV cu amplasamentul fostei biserici; 5. Detaliu cu o piatră de la baza promontoriului, posibil marcaj de mormânt sau rămasă în urma spolierii monumentului.

# Abbreviations

AAC	Acta Archaeologica Carpathica. Cracovia.
AARMSI	Analele Academiei Române. Memoriile Secțiunii Istorice. București.
ACSSTU	Annals. Computer Science Series Tibiscus University. Timișoara.
ActaArchHung	Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae. Budapest.
AÉ	Archaeologiai Értesítő. Budapest.
AGGH	Acta Geodaetica et Geophysica Hungarica. Budapest.
AIINC	Anuarul Institutului de Istorie Națională Cluj. Cluj-Napoca.
AISC	Anuarul Institutului de Studii Clasice. Sibiu.
AJPA	American Journal of Physical Anthropology. New York.
Alba Regia	Alba Regia. Annales Musei Stephani Regis. Az István Király Múzeum Közleményei. Székesfehérvár.
AMN	Acta Musei Napocensis. Cluj-Napoca.
AMP	Acta Musei Porolissensis. Muzeul Județean de Istorie și Artă Zalău. Zalău.
AnB S.N.	Analele Banatului, Serie nouă. Timișoara.
Analele ANTIM	Analele Asociației Naționale ale Tinerilor Istorici din Moldova. Chișinău.
Apulum	Apulum. Alba-Iulia.
ArchKorrbl	Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt. Urgeschichte, Römerzeit, Frühmittelalter. Mainz.
ArhMed	Arheologia Medievală. Brăila, Reșița, Cluj-Napoca.
AS	Acta Siculica. Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu Gheorghe.
ATS	Acta Terrae Septencastrensis. Sibiu.
AUVT	Annales d'Université Valahia Targoviste, Section d'Archéologie et d'Histoire. Târgoviște.
BAM	Brvkenthal Acta Mvsei. Sibiu.
BAR International Series	British Archaeological Reports, International Series. Oxford.
Banatica	Banatica. Muzeul Banatului Montan. Reșița.
BĂMÉ	A Béri Balogh Ádám Múzeum Évkönyve. Szekszárd.
BCȘS	Buletinul Cercurilor Științifice Studentești. Istorie-Arheologie-Muzeologie. Alba Iulia.
BerRGK	Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Frankfurt a. M. - Berlin.
BHAB	Bibliotheca Historica et Archaeologica Banatica. Timișoara.
BSNR	Buletinul Societății Numismatice Române. Societatea Numismatică Română. București.
Caietele CIVA	Caietele CIVA. Cercul de Istorie Veche și Arheologie. Alba Iulia.
CCA	Cronica cercetărilor arheologice. București.
CCDJ	Cultură și civilizație la Dunărea de Jos. Muzeul Dunării de Jos. Călărași.
CN	Cercetări Numismatice. Muzeul Național de Istorie a României. București.
CNA	Cronica Numismatică și Arheologică, Societatea Numismatică Română. București.
Corviniana	Corviniana. Acta Musei Corvinensis. Hunedoara.
Crisia	Crisia, Muzeul Țării Crișurilor, Oradea.
Cumania	Cumania. A Bács-Kiskun Megyei Önkormányzat Múzeumi Szervezetének Évkönyve. Kecskemét.
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DolgSzeged	Dolgozatok a Szegedi Tudományegyetem Régiségtudományi Intézetéből. Szeged.
Drobeta	Drobeta. Muzeul Regiunii Porților de Fier. Drobeta Turnu-Severin.
EME	Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület. Cluj-Napoca.
EphNap	Ephemeris Napocensis. Cluj-Napoca.
ETF	Erdélyi Tudományos Füzetek – Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület. Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca.
Fdi	File de istorie, Muzeul de Istorie. Bistrița.
FolArch	Folia Archaeologica. A Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Évkönyve. Annales Musei Nationalis Hungarici. Budapest.
Germania	Germania. Anzeiger der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Berlin.
História	História – történelmi folyóirat. Budapest.
HK	Hadtörténelmi Közlemények. Budapest.
HOMÉ	A Herman Ottó Múzeum Évkönyve. Miskolc.
Istros	Istros. Muzeul Brăilei. Brăila.
JAHC	Journal for the Association of History and Computing. Michigan University.
JahrbRGZM	Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums zu Mainz, Mainz.
JAMÉ	Janus Pannonius Múzeum Évkönyve. Pécs.
KL	Kartografické listy. Bratislava.
Korall	<i>Korall Társadalomtörténeti Folyóirat</i> . Budapest.
Közl	Közlemények az Erdélyi Nemzeti Múzeum Érem- és Régiségtárából. Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca.
Lucrări	Lucrări Științifice. Istorie-Științe-Pedagogie, Institutul Pedagogic. Oradea.
GT	Geographia Technica. International Journal of Technical Geography. Cluj-Napoca.
Marisia	Marisia. Marisia. Studii și materiale. Arheologie – Istorie – Etnografie. Târgu-Mureș.
MCA	Materiale și Cercetări Arheologice. București.
MEKSB	A Miskolci Egyetem Közleménye. A sorozat, Bányászat. Miskolc.
MFMÉ StudArch	A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve. Studia Archaeologica. Szeged.
MFMÉ MonArch	A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve. Monumenta Archaeologica. Szeged.
MHB	Monumenta Historica Budapestinensia. Budapest.
MIM	Materiale de Istorie și Muzeografie, Muzeul de Istorie a Municipiului București. București.
MSW	Materialy Starozytne Wczesnosredniowieczne. Kraków.
MW	Materialy Wczesnośredniowieczne. Kraków-Wrocław-Warsawa.
NK	Numizmatikai Közlöny, Magyar Numizmatikai Társulat. Budapest.
NNT	Norsk Numismatisk Tidsskrift.
NZ	Numismatische Zeitschrift, herausgegeben von der numismatischen Gesellschaft in Wien. Wien.
OJA	Oxford Journal of Archaeology, Oxford.
OpHung	Opuscula Hungarica. Budapest.
PBF	Praehistorische Bronzefunde.
Potaissa	Potaissa. Studii și comunicări. Turda.
PZ	Prähistorische Zeitschrift. Berlin.
Régészeti Füzetek	Régészeti Füzetek. Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum. Budapest.
RÉSÉE	Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes. l'Institut d'Études Sud-Est Européennes de l'Académie Roumaine. București.
RI	Revista de Istorie, Institutul de Istorie „Nicolae Iorga”. București.
RM	Revista Muzeelor. Centrul pentru Formare, Educație Permanentă și Management în Domeniul Culturii. București.
RRH	Revue Roumaine d'Histoire, Academia Română. București.
Sargetia	Sargetia, Muzeul Civilizației Dacice și Romane Deva.

Savaria	Savaria – a Vas megyei múzeumok értesítője. Pars historico-naturalis. Szombathely.
SCIIVA	Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche (și Arheologie). București.
SCN	Studii și Cercetări Numismatice. Institutul de Arheologie „Vasile Pârvan”. București.
SCȘI	Studii și Cercetări Științifice. Istorie.
SIB	Studii de Istorie a Banatului. Universitatea de Vest Timișoara.
SlovArch	Slovenská Archeológia. Bratislava.
SMIM	Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie. Institutul de Istorie „Nicolae Iorga”. București.
SMK	Somogyi Múzeumok Közleményei. Kaposvár.
SSCR	<i>Social Science Computer Review. North Carolina State University.</i>
Speculum	Speculum. Cambridge Journals Online. Cambridge.
StComCaransebeș	Studii și Comunicări. Etnografie. Istorie. Caransebeș.
StComSatuMare	Studii și Comunicări. Satu Mare.
Stratum plus	Stratum plus Journal. High Anthropological School University. Cultural Anthropology & Archaeology.
Studia Caroliensia	Studia Caroliensia. A Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem szakfolyóirata. Budapest.
Studia Comitatus	Studia Comitatus. Tanulmányok Pest Megye Múzeumaiból. Szentendre.
Századok	Századok. A Magyar Történelmi Társulat Folyóirata. Budapest.
Terra Sebus	Terra Sebus. Acta Musei Sabasiensis. Sebeș.
Thraco-Dacia	Thraco-Dacia. București.
Transilvanian Review	Transilvanian Review/Revue de Transylvanie. Cluj-Napoca.
TS	Történelmi Szemle. A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Történettudományi Intézetének Értesítője. Budapest.
UPA	Universitätsforschungen zur Prähistorische Archäologie. Bonn.
VAH	Varia Archaeologica Hungarica. Budapest.
VMMK	Veszprémi Megyei Múzeumok Közleményei. Veszprém.
World Archaeology	World Archaeology. London.
ZfA	Zeitschrift für Archäologie. Berlin.
Ziridava	Ziridava, Complexul Muzeal Arad. Arad.
ZMSW	Zeitschrift für Münz-, Siegel- und Wappenkunde. Berlin.

