

AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MARGINAL: THE CEMETERY FOR POLITICAL PRISONERS ON DEALUL CĂRĂMIDĂRIEI, GHERLA, ROMANIA*

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Abstract: According to oral and written testimonies, a large proportion of the prisoners who died in Gherla Prison during the period of communist repression of Romania of 1948-1964 were buried on the hill known as Dealul Căramidăriei. At the initiative of Holy Forty Martyrs Monastery, founded in memory of those who died in political detention in Gherla, in the autumn of 2018 we carried out archaeological research on Dealul Căramidăriei with the aim of identifying the graves of any former political prisoners. Based on the results of the archaeological surveys, placed within the context of the contemporary built space, this article presents an archaeology of the marginal that transcends the dominant dichotomy between the communist and post-communist periods, while also shedding a critical light on the post-communist politics of memory and commemorative practices that focus exclusively on the fate of political prisoners, while ignoring or remaining silent about that of other “marginal” categories.

Rezumat: Dealul Căramidăriei este locul în care, conform mărturiilor orale și scrise, au fost îngropați anonim o bună parte a deținuților politic decedați în închisoarea Gherla în timpul represiunii comuniste dintre anii 1948 și 1964. La inițiativa Mănăstirii Sfinții 40 de Mucenici, ctitorită în memoria celor care au murit în închisoarea politică de la Gherla, în toamna anului 2018 am efectuat cercetări arheologice pe Dealul Căramidăriei, cu scopul de a identifica prezența eventualelor morminte ale deținuților politici. Pornind de la rezultatele sondajelor arheologice, puse în relație cu întregul spațiu construit contemporan, textul de față prezintă o arheologie a marginalilor ce transgresează dihotomia dominantă dintre perioada comunistă și cea postcomunistă și, totodată, pune într-o lumină critică politicile memoriei și practicile comemorative postcomuniste ce privilegiază exclusiv soarta deținuților politic, ignorând sau trecând sub tăcere soarta altor categorii de „marginali”.

During the period of communist repression in Romania under the regime of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, who came to power after the Second World War, Gherla Prison (Cluj County; Figs. 1 and 2) served as one of the country's largest, most important and most sinister political prisons, its dark reputation also extending to “re-education through torture”, a practice exported to Gherla from Pitești Prison in the summer of 1950.¹ The number of prisoners incarcerated there varied over time: 703 prisoners in 1948 (of which over 600 were political prisoners), 1,600 in 1950 (of which 1,200 were political prisoners), with the highest population occurring in 1959, when there were around 4,500 prisoners; while at the end of 1964, when all political prisoners were released, there were only 600 people in the prison.² Many political prisoners died as a result of the extremely harsh prison regime: for example, 200 deaths were recorded between 1958 and 1960; during the same period, 28 prisoners were executed by firing squad.³ From 1964 to the fall of the communist regime in 1989, Gherla functioned as a common law prison. Today it is once again a maximum-security facility.

Many memoirs and testimonies of survivors of the period of communist repression refer to Dealul Căramidăriei in Gherla as a burial ground for political prisoners that was opened and used intensively after the prison cemetery became full. In 1996, the Association of Former Political Prisoners in Romania created a symbolic cemetery on this site to honour the names of those who died while in Gherla Prison – 150 crosses arranged in six rows.⁴ In 2017, Holy Forty Martyrs Monastery, dedicated to those who died in the political prison in Gherla, was established alongside this symbolic cemetery (Fig. 3).

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¹ See, for example, Mureșan 2010; Stănescu 2010.

² Muraru 2008, p. 323.

³ Muraru 2008, p. 330.

⁴ Dumitrescu 2004, pp. 70, 75, 76.