



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation of

**Petar Parvanov**

on

*Deviant Burial Practices in Medieval Southeastern Europe (7<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century)*

will be held on

Monday, 5 September 2022, at 11:00 am

Hybrid: Budapest, Nádor utca 9, Hanák Room (201) and

Zoom (for link contact [dobos@ceu.edu](mailto:dobos@ceu.edu))

### **Examination Committee**

**Chair:** Miklós Takács, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest

**Supervisors:** József Laszlovszky, CEU, Department of Medieval Studies

Alice Choyke, CEU, Department of Medieval Studies

**Member:** Daniel Ziemann, CEU, Department of Medieval Studies

**External Readers:** Edeltraud Aspöck, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna,

(present)

Andrew Reynolds, University College London (not present)

The doctoral dissertation is available for inspection on the CEU e-learning site. Should you wish to access it and/or join the defense online, contact Csilla Dobos ([dobos@ceu.edu](mailto:dobos@ceu.edu))

## Dissertation Abstract

Archaeologists are sometimes compared to detectives solving the mysteries of history. Rarely such analogy is more appropriate than in the study of deviant burials. The nearly forensic strive to collect the most detailed observations possible and to restore the stories embodied in the human remains motivates the investigation of these unusual and marginalized discoveries. The growing awareness that those special cases where the deceased received noticeable differential treatment deserve dedicated and systematic approach turned a tide in funerary archaeology. Furthermore, we must admit deviant burials attracted significant interest from the wider public and, like it or not, are now part of the pop-culture perception of the discipline.

Redefining the phenomenon through an archaeothanatological approach emphasizes the treatment of archaeologically recovered human remains and the symbolic interactions embodied in them. The major themes that emerge are the variability in mortuary behaviour and the relationship between regular and extra-normative funerary rites, the impact of spiritual and secular factors on past populations and their burial customs, and the development of power structures and their strategies for extending social control over the dead. These themes demonstrate that medieval people resorted to deviant burials when facing a wide range of individual and communal challenges. Thus, they can reveal the more clandestine aspects of otherwise well-documented cultural trends and provide an original historical template for comparison with similar material record in different geographical or temporal settings.

The diachronic regional perspective in the heart of this project aims to demonstrate the significant potential of collaborative and comparative cross-cultural survey based on expandable datasets with burial evidence from around Europe and beyond. Nevertheless, the scope of the dissertation is limited to medieval South-eastern Europe, interchangeably referred to as the Balkans. The core of the database consisting of 250 individual cases and mass graves is derived from the archaeological record in four contemporary states (Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Serbia) up to 2019. Notably, this is the first systematic analysis of deviant burials from the region on this scale.

The introductory section examines in detail the foundations for this study by critically reviewing previous research and the methodological considerations devised to overcome some of its recurrent issues. For instance, the terminological anxiety dominating the discussion is a typical example. The approach taken here tries to turn the short-comings of the term into an advantage by attaching its descriptive and interpretative value to a narrower definition. According to it, deviant burials are a distinct, extra-normative variation in the continuum of mortuary practices. They are characterized by the specific body treatment signalling devaluation of the individual and thus, the negative connotations attached to it in the past or the present.

The thesis is divided into three principal chapters, which discuss at length the big picture acquired from the combination of quantitative analysis, chronological sequencing, and distribution patterning before offering further examples from selected case studies.

The first chapter, “Chronology, distribution, and quantification of individual deviant burials,” establishes the four major deviant burial practices, namely prone, decapitation, fixation, and mutilation burials. Moreover, the general patterns for all four groups are outlined. The emerging three major periods are rather traditionally classified as early medieval (seventh-tenth century), middle or transformative period occurring in a long eleventh century, and late medieval period starting usually in the twelfth century. The main differentiation between them is in the distribution patterns and less often in the outlook of the preferred deviant rite. Examples for the latter include the changing dominant form in prone burials, various targeting of body parts or the diversification in fixation modes in the late period.

In the early medieval period, there are three major clusters in the Lower Danube area, in Vojvodina, and in the Adriatic littoral zone. Over time the significant concentration of deviant burial practices in the western Balkans disappear. In the late period when dispersed local clusters set the trends, the Podunavlje-Iron Gates area stands out in the overall picture.

The demographic profile is incomplete due to the unsatisfactory integration of osteological data in the archaeological analysis. However, the overall picture suggests that adults and juvenile individuals are the two age groups most often represented in the sample. Furthermore, males are more than females, although the gap in beheadings is not so drastic as one might expect.

The following chapter, “Outsiders in death: Contextual site surveys,” builds on the identification of clusters with deviant burial practices can be commented in depth against the immediate context on a single site or in landscape-based case study. Digging into specific sites of interest is also somewhat representative for each group in the categorization. For instance, Avar-age Bečej exemplify the meticulous study of alternative modes of beheading in pre-Christian milieu as much as Ždrijac-Nin and Maklinovo Brdo do for fixations prior and around the mass conversion to Christianity. The immense variety within the mortuary landscapes of Devnya and Pliska illustrate evolving patterns in co-existing burial grounds, whereas Trnjane gives a glimpse into the role of mutilations and decapitations for the supposedly rural communities sharing the extensive open field cemetery.

Interesting observations on the integration of deviant burials can be made by examining their peripheral positioning on early medieval sites from the Lower Danube or the internments with unclear status inside settlements. The latter group also provides quite significant evidence for mass atrocities due to conflict or disasters, a matter relevant to the discoveries of mass graves around the eastern part of the Balkan peninsula. No less informative is the archaeological record for interpersonal violence. Here this is elaborated in the depiction of the cluster Podunavlje-Iron Gates where all sorts of maltreatment and violence intensify after the eleventh century. The accumulation of thick descriptions narrowed down to a single site or area enriches the summarized large-scale patterns and opens the road to properly contextualizing the deviant burial practices.

The third chapter, “Mortuary proxies: Deviant burial practices in context,” elaborates on the interpretation from multiple perspectives reflecting the major themes outlined above. The balance

between regularity and exceptionalism in the mortuary variability is addressed by looking at the existing overlaps between deviant burials and other forms of bodily disposal. Deviant burials were never meant to be simply the exception of the rule as much as a recognizable extension of the customs sustaining the funerary behaviour. For instance, the unburnt skull deposits from early medieval cremation cemeteries like Constanta-Castelu resembling the severed heads found in contemporary biritual or later inhumation burial grounds are indicative for the situational negotiation of extra-normativity and the ingrained potential for the standardization of deviancy.

The main strategy for the creation of meaning in this context is juxtaposition. Its remarkable efficiency in deviant burials relies on the sheer physicality of these practices. The shared corporeal experiences and body-centred semantics are applied in referential symbolism reinstating social relations and networks. Deliberate manipulations of the body often resolve to disarticulation of the natural anatomical order of the cadaver or target particular body parts. The head has formidable biocultural significance and is very often displaced to unnatural position, turned facedown, covered by stones or even nailed down like in Vojka and Vajuga-Pesak.

The key concept in the interpretation of the deviant practices is ritual. However, ritual is not merely a simplistic label synonymous with religion rather than a multifaceted experience executed through combined physical and mental activity. All rituals are contextually constructed, and these contexts can be both secular and spiritual or even a hybrid between the two as medieval deviant burials illustrate quite vividly.

Traditionally, deviant burial practices were included in the domain of popular beliefs. Actually, within this cultural milieu any alleged pre-Christian rudiments are thought to survive most successfully. In other words, analysis of popular beliefs could not be completely separated from the pagan heritage. Especially recurring motif is the belief in revenants and the development of preventive measures. As the detailed examination of the deviant practices like in the decapitation burials from Bečej, the appropriate treatment for spiritual transgressors would resemble the punishments reserved for the criminals and sinners under the temporal law. This attitude is preserved even in Christian context centuries later as testified by the ritual mutilations in Trnjane, Hodoni or Dervent. The destruction of the physical integrity of the corpse also played to popular Christian beliefs in literal bodily resurrection.

The prone burials exemplify the duality and flexibility of religious interpretations. Christian humility expressed through facedown placement may have been a customary funerary gesture ensuring long-term inclusions for the social outcasts. At the same time, extreme demonstrations of religious reverence are not necessarily socially accepted.

Another principal concern is the insight into early judicial cultures. Religion and law coalescent in the medieval mind, and the detailed study of legal practices implemented on the criminal body reflect the mechanisms of social control. The interpretation of deviant burial practices in judicial terms as the funerary treatment for criminals or extra-legal individuals is based on two lines of argumentation. The first are the archaeological analogies found in an increasingly diverse corpus of

thorough research on medieval funerary contexts and contents of the burials. The second element is based on documentary evidence.

The comparison with mortuary data from England and Central Europe, as well with the textual information on corporate punishment and the description of public executions demonstrates the plausibility of the legal interpretation. In fact, most beheaded individuals or mutilation burials as those in Ždrijac or Nikolovo are best explained as the remains of lawbreakers. The customary nature and plurality of normative systems in the medieval Balkans is also manifested in the posthumous punishments. The desecration of the corpse emphasized the abuse and disregard for those deemed outside of the law and its protection.

The variation in punitive display opens up the question for the emergence of designated execution cemeteries in the region. Their existence in Constantinople is recorded in written accounts. Further, the formation of distinctive clusters for deviant graves on sites like Kyulevcha or Devnya indicated that execution cemeteries may indeed be identified in the future under redefined research strategies focusing on the comprehensive investigation of past landscapes.

Finally, the dissertation discusses the development of social complexity as seen in the intrinsic connection of deviant burials to power structures and the judicial activities of local and long-distance authorities. The transition from kin-based societies to supra-local chiefdoms coincides with the changing geography of mortuary deviance. The deviant burial practices concentrate in the core territories of the early states for instance on the Lower Danube for the Bulgar Khanate and the Dalmatian region around Nin for the Croatian polity.

The maintenance of habitual forms of maltreatment for felons and social outsiders remains distinctive trait of local elites. Thus, the deviant burial practices also reflect social stress in separatist or contested regions where distant hegemony struggles. The dissolution of large-scale power in the region and the formation of shadow states, especially after the eleventh century when deviant burials conspicuously appear in areas where appanages and independent polities controlled by prominent local autocrats emerge.

The former Bulgar core territory on the Lower Danube serves as a very indicative example. The eleventh century Pliska-Odartsy cluster with deviant burials concur with its transformation into a Byzantine province, the so-called thema Paristrion, later Paradounavion. Another example for the correlation with regional identities and instability of political systems is the major late medieval cluster in the Podunavlje-Iron Gates region. This is a period when the area is controlled by semi-independent local formations or is the arena of a military contest between Hungary and Byzantium, Bulgaria, and finally Serbia.

In conclusion, it must be noted that deviant burial practices might appear marginal but were never excluded from the overall social processes and transformations. They provide quite distinctive and provocative point of view on human behaviour across time and space on different levels from invisible long-term processes to individual agency and experience.

# Curriculum Vitae

## EDUCATION

---

- 2016–2022      **PhD in Medieval Studies, Central European University**  
Department of Medieval Studies, Vienna, Austria
- 2014–2016      **MA in Interdisciplinary Medieval Studies, Central European University**  
Department of Medieval Studies, Budapest, Hungary
- 2015            **Certificate for Advanced Study in Paleoanthropology, Federal University of Kazan**  
International Archaeological School, Kazan, Russian Federation
- 2010–2013      **BA in Archaeology, University of Sheffield**  
Department of Archaeology, Sheffield, United Kingdom

## SELECTED TEACHING AND WORKING EXPERIENCE

---

- 2014–2021      **Field Archaeologist, National Archaeological Institute with Museum**  
Fixed term positions on rescue and research excavations with the National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia, Bulgaria.
- 2017-2018      **Teaching Assistant for graduate courses, CEU**  
Courses: Memory and Oblivion; Cultural Heritage Project Management; MA Thesis Writing Seminar.
- 2013            **Shore Excursions Officer, Voyages to Antiquity**  
On board of the M/V Aegean Odyssey, Voyages to Antiquity, Oxford, United Kingdom

## SELECTED GRANTS AND AWARDS

---

### **CEU Global Teaching Fellowship**

2022, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

### **DAAD Project-related Exchange Program**

2020, University of Heidelberg, Germany

### **Henrik Birnbaum Memorial Grant**

2018, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

### **Full CEU Doctoral Fellowship**

2020, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

*Yearly, 4 years*

2016–

### **CEU MA Fellowship**

2013–2014, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

*Yearly, 2 years*

### **Fieldwork Grant**

2012, British Institute in Ankara, Turkey/United Kingdom

### Sheffield Undergraduate Research Experience Award

2012, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

### Tessa and Mortimer Wheeler Memorial Travel Grant

2011, Society of Antiquaries of London, United Kingdom

### Petrie Watson Exhibition

2011, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

### SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

---

- 12/05/2022 Whispers from the Grave: Early Medieval Prone Burials in the Necropolitics on the Middle and Lower Danube  
*Power in Numbers. The Role of the Rural Population in Christianization and State Formation II. (Charles University, Prague, Czechia).* Invited participant.
- 09/09/2021 Playing with Fire: Partial Cremations and Mortuary Variability in the Early Medieval Balkans  
Life and Death on the Riverbanks: ‘Deviant’ Burial Practices from Medieval Rural Cemeteries in the Iron Gates Region  
*European Association of Archaeologists. 27<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting. (Kiel, Germany)*
- 29/04/2021 All Death is Certain: Representations of Mortuary Behaviour in “Kingdom of Heaven”  
*Medievalisms on the Screen: Representations of the Middle Ages in 21st Century Audiovisual Media (CEU, online).*
- 09/09/2020 Ain’t No Rest for The Wicked: Current State and Prospects in The Study Of ‘Deviant’ Burial Practices (roundtable, main organizer)  
*European Association of Archaeologists. 26<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting. (online)*
- 04/07/2018 Disturbed Graves and Bad Memories: Deviant Burials in the Northern Balkan Region and Their Archaeological, Religious, and Legal Context  
*Leeds International Medieval Congress (University of Leeds, England)*

### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

---

Parvanov, Petar. Forthcoming. “Making a Deviant: Intentional Skeletal Dislocations in Reopened Graves from the Medieval Balkans.” In *Sit tibi terra gravis. Sepoltura anomale tra età medievale e moderna*. Edited by Philippe Pergola, Stefano Roascio, Elena Dellù. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Parvanov, Petar. Forthcoming. “Medieval Deviant Burials from Pliska.” *Плиска-Преслав* vol. 14.

Parvanov, Petar. “Mortuary Proxies: Archaeological Contextualization of Medieval Legal Practices.” In *Law, Book, and Culture in the Middle Ages*. Edited by Thom Gobbit. Leiden: BRILL (2021), 275-295.

Parvanov, Petar. "Lost in Time? Revisiting the Szentes pendant from the British Museum." *Hungarian Archaeology* 9 Issue 3 (2020), 27–32. =Parvanov, Petar.

"Elveszve az időben? A British Museumban őrzött szentesi medál újraértelmezése." *Magyar Régészet* 9:3 (2020), 26–31.

Parvanov, Petar. "The mass grave from Devnya and judicial culture in medieval Bulgaria." in *(Re)lecture archéologique de la justice en Europe médiévale et modern*. Edited by Matthieu Vivas. Bordeaux: Ausonius (2019), 279-294.

Parvanov, Petar (with E. Vassileva and V. Russeva). "An Ottoman-age femme fatale: archaeothanatological context for the deviant burial of a woman from site No.6 on the Haemus Highway in Bulgaria." In *Archaeology of Women. Mortuary practices and bioarchaeological reconstruction*. Edited by Mihai Gligor and Andrei Soficaru. Alba Iulia: Editura Mega (2018), 265-278.

Parvanov, Petar. "Fire and Stone: Placing Flints in Graves in Late Medieval Kaliakra." In *Genius Loci Laszlovszky 60*. Edited by Dóra Mérai et al. Budapest: Archaeolingua (2018), 197-200.

Parvanov, Petar. "Book review: Leszek Gardeła. Bad Death in the Early Middle Ages. Atypical Burials from Poland in a Comparative Perspective. Rzeszów: Instytut Archeologii UR, 2017." *Bulgarian e-Journal of Archaeology* vol. 8 (2018), 115-118.

Parvanov, Petar. "A Tale of Two Graves: Rethinking the Medieval Re-use of Prehistoric Burial Mounds in Madara." *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* vol. 23 (2017), 11-19.