



**BRAȘOV COUNTY HISTORY MUSEUM  
MUSEUM OF BRĂILA**



***The Thracians and their Neighbors in  
the Bronze and Iron Ages***

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE 12<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL  
CONGRESS OF THRACOLOGY**

**TÂRGOVIȘTE  
10<sup>TH</sup> -14<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2013**

***“Necropolises, Cult places, Religion, Mythology”***  
**- Volume II -**

**Editorial Board  
Valeriu Sîrbu and Radu Ștefănescu**

**MUZEUL BRĂILEI**



**EDITURA ISTROS**

**BRAȘOV  
2013**

## THE LATE FIRST IRON AGE FERIGILE CULTURAL GROUP – AN ORIGINAL NORTH-THRACIAN SYNTHESIS AT THE INTERFERENCE OF THE SURROUNDING CULTURAL SPACES

Dragoş Măndescu (Piteşti – Romania)

**Keywords:** Ferigile group, late horizon of the First Iron Age, North-Balkans, weaponry, adornments, ceramic, cultural interferences.

**Abstract.** The paper aims to highlight the peculiarities of the Ferigile group seen as a mixture and as an original synthesis of multiple cultural influences that interfered in the North-Balkan area at the end of the Early Iron Age. It will be pursued what is original in Ferigile group was taken over the Basarabi cultural background, as well as what might be the result of cultural influences acquisition of other spaces and cultures. Based on the direct study of the finds in eponymous cemetery and in others representative cemeteries such as the ones situated on the valley of Topolog River (Cepari, Tigveni, Rudeni), discovered several decades ago by Alexandru Vulpe and Eugenia Popescu, the elements of the funeral rite and ritual, but especially the mobile inventory's features will be discussed. Regarding the grave goods must be said that an amalgam of influences from the Scythian space (arms and harness), the Illyrian space (adornments, and also weapons) or the South-Thracian (pottery and some types of weapons) was noticed. All these heterogeneous components, whose origin and function are synthesized in an original manner in the Carpathian foothills of Wallachia and Oltenia, represent defining features of the Ferigile group.

Any kind of attempt on a topic regarding the crossroads of Iron Age civilizations in the north-Balkans Thracian territory should not avoid bringing into discussion the realities yielded by the Sub-Carpathian area. Ferigile archaeological group, representative for the end of the First Iron Age in the southern part of nowadays Romania, in the area situated in the southern part of the Carpathians, between the mountains and the Danube plain have an uninterrupted evolution during almost two hundred years, from the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century BC until the dawn of the Second Iron Age, around the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Looking at the distribution map of the finds belonging to the middle period of the First Iron Age north of the Lower Danube, a stage that corresponds to the Basarabi culture evolution, can be clearly seen that the Sub-Carpathian area is a large blank spot (fig. 1a). The high-density of discoveries marked by the Basarabi specific pottery focuses on the Danube valley and also on the lower courses of its main tributaries.

Then, during the late stage of the first Iron Age, starting from the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century major changes occur in the indwelling in this area. It seems that the Danube Plain suddenly depopulates, while the discoveries concentrate on the high hills area at the foot of the Carpathians, within the former blank spot (fig. 1b).

Some scholars have explained this shift of the habitation's poles during the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC through the withdrawal of the lowland population exposed to more and more frequent raids of Eastern horsemen (namely Scythians) in sheltered territory from the north, in a higher and hard to reach area. A safe living in the Danube Plain has become increasingly difficult as the Scythians riders were more & more present in the area (Vulpe 1970, 176-178; Sîrbu 1987, 427-428). Some opinions expressed in recent times urge us not to see this alleged invasions the one and only reason for which the Danube Plain became uninhabited, but other factors such as the modification of the climate that led to the environment's changes and the search for other new areas rich in food resources (Vulpe 2003, 124-126; Vulpe 2012, 46-54).

Taking into account this archaeological vacuum in the Romanian Plain (the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries), we consider that what Herodotus claimed (V, 9-10) about complete dominion of bees in the northern bank of the Danube is not an exaggeration.

Until the beginning of the second half of the past century, the concept of a late stage of the first Iron Age in the north of the Danube and in the south of the Carpathians was very difficult if not impossible to define, and could not rely on a coherent set of archaeological data. When Alexandru Vulpe accidentally discovered the necropolis of Ferigile after which systematic archaeological excavations of the 150 barrows containing about 200 incineration graves were performed between 1956 & 1962 a drastic turn occurred. The swift release of the cemetery's monograph in 1967 (Vulpe 1967), consecrated the takeover the name of locality where the cemetery was found for the late period of the first Iron Age in the south of Carpathians.

As a result of the increasing of the archaeological discoveries and chance finds, today we are able to draw the map showing the spread of Ferigile group: about 40 cemeteries or small groups of graves, all of cremation, which does not deviate significantly from the pattern of small barrows with mantle in boulders.

The group's evolving structure is based on the chronological outline highlighted following the research of the eponymous cemetery: three chronological stages (Ferigile South, Ferigile North and Ferigile III) approximately two hundred years, between mid-7<sup>th</sup> century and mid 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (Vulpe 1977).

Almost all of the information we have about Ferigile group comes from funerary feature discoveries - cemeteries and groups of graves archaeologically excavated and chance finds (here we include the isolated single pieces). The absence of the settlements of this group's monuments ensemble could be solely the result of the research stage. The Settlements of this group, hard to be spotted in the ground, have not caught the attention of archaeologists yet. Although rare, some evidence slightly began to appear (Palincaş 2003-2005, 291-301). A settlement area spotted only by field walking at Tigveni-"Momaia", located one kilometer and a half away from the group of Ferigile barrows at Tigveni-"Babe", shows us the basic features of such kind of habitat<sup>1</sup>: a not very large area, apparently without a fortification system, located on a small promontory bordered by two natural ravines in a former wooded area, near a stream abundantly fed by torrents flowing down on the slopes (fig. 2)

Going back now to the phenomenon of sudden occurrence of this cultural group in the areas of high hills from the southern side of the Carpathians due to the advancement of the population from the Danube Plain to the north in search for safe shelters, it would seem that we are dealing with an isolated group that was looking for survival hiding away from a real danger which threatened their old dwellings. For them, the Danube Valley then was no longer the path of communication and intercultural contact, but the corridor that brought great dangers and threats.

With all these assumptions, justified however only in theory, a number of features of Ferigile group demonstrated the opposite, namely sensitivity, receptivity and openness of these people to the stream of all cultural trends of the time, fashionable in a certain period. Some peculiarities of weaponry, adornments and even pottery of Ferigile group bear hints of that great openness and availability to dialogue and a quick receiving of the new.

About a quarter of investigated graves in Ferigile cemetery contains weapons as grave goods, and, based on bridle bits and harness parts deposited also as grave goods, one third of them belonged to riders (Vulpe 2013, 14). So, the weaponry component in overall funerary grave goods of the tombs belonging to Ferigile group is not at all insignificant.

The panoply of the Ferigile warriors comprised a well established and defined range of quality weapons. Although never all kind of these components have been found together in the same grave, warriors used spears, swords type akinakes, fighting knives, battle axes and fewer bows with arrows. Funeral grave goods do not provide any indication about the shields.

---

<sup>1</sup> Discovered by the author in 2006, July, after the promptly reporting made by the mayor of Tigveni commune.

Without any doubt, the akinakai type swords found in many Ferigile group's necropolises (Ferigile, Cepari, Tigveni) are taken over from an oriental pattern through the Scythian's intermediation. It is well known that this type of weapon has its origins in the Persian Iranian area. Bringing and spreading it in Europe was mainly due to Scythians. Other weapons of the Ferigile group have western origins, Illyrian ones – this is the case of iron large long spearheads like the two found by chance at Tigveni-"Babe" (Popescu and Vulpe 1982, 91, fig. 15/D).

But not all the weapons were of foreign origin or influence. Local Thracian milieu was present through specific weapons. Long and curved fighting swords and knives with cutting edge on the concave line of the blade are of course a local product. The most relevant of this kind of swords belong to Ferigile (Vulpe 1967, 61, pl. 17/13) and Tigveni (Popescu and Vulpe 1982, 109, fig. 17/a) necropolises and recall of the *machaira* Macedonian and Thracian type of weapon (Boranic 2009, 7, pl. 7/1-2; 9/3).

In addition, another original component of the weaponry used by Ferigile warriors is the iron arrowhead, flat and displaying mounting holes. Archers from Ferigile group are totally reticent to any other type of arrows that could penetrate from the outside<sup>2</sup>.

It is to be mentioned the funeral ritual element of bending iron arms before putting them inside the tomb as grave good. The few examples found in the necropolis from Ferigile but also in the necropolis at Eşalnița-Mala precede by more than two centuries the emergence of this phenomenon in Central European Celtic world (Măndescu 2012, 347-348, fig. 3/1-4, 6).

One of the most spectacular graves with weapons in the area of the Ferigile group was discovered in the tumulus no. 5 of the necropolis at Cepari (Popescu and Vulpe 1982, 88-89, fig. 11). The panoply of the warrior buried here is virtually complete: sword-akinakes, combat knife, spear, battle ax, including a peculiar iron arrowhead, while the presence of a bridle bit and several other bronze harness fittings are strong indications that we are dealing with a rider (fig. 3).

The dating as absolute chronology of the rider's grave in the tumulus 5 from Cepari to the year 500 BC relies mainly on the akinakes' analogy with that found nearly 900 km to the east, at Žurofka in a Scythian tomb, a sealed complex in which the sword was in assemblage with Greek ceramics (Popescu and Vulpe 1982, 89; Vulpe 1983, 128).

The similarity of the akinakes from Cepari and those of the Scythian and even of the Achaemenid milieu is also reflected by the presumable ornamentation of the handle with gold leaf, as suggested by the highlighted striations displayed on the handle's surface, melted in the flames on the funerary pyre. The same situation was also suggested for some weapons from the necropolis from Ferigile (Vulpe 1967, 58).

The harness fittings, the iron bridle bits Vekerzug type, very common among the finds from Tisza Plain, are frequent occurrences in tombs belonging to Ferigile warriors. There is Also a bronze front trapping piece and a bronze and iron bridle bit with zoomorphic decoration discovered in a warrior's grave in the barrow 15 at Tigveni-"Babe" (Popescu and Vulpe 1982, 92, fig. 18/f, h) which has clear affinities with similar harness parts used in the middle Dnieper area and it is not impossible to be an importation from Scythian world and not just a locally produced imitation under the influence of superregional fashion. In the same time, the bronze phalera found in barrow 2 at Rudeni (Popescu and Vulpe 1992, 109, fig. 3/11), an unicum among the Ferigile harness finds, recalls of an older pre-Scythian tradition having its roots deeply steeped in the so called "cimmerian" era (Chochorowski 1993, 103-109, pl. 9)

---

<sup>2</sup> The only different type iron arrowhead sample, having long barbes, found at Tigveni-"Babe" in the area of tumulus no. 13 does not necessarily belongs to a Ferigile sealed complex, but seems to be from a more recent era (Popescu and Vulpe 1982, 91, fig. 15 A/a).

The adornments set specific for the Ferigile group is formed by bronze spiral chains of Saltaleoni type, open worked belt plates, fibulae, pendants and pins with rich decorated bronze heads and so on. Various adornments such as the Saltaleoni spiral chains, belt bronze plates and fibulae belonging to the types known as Donja-Dolina or Glasinac have the best analogies in Western Balkan Illyrian space or even in the Eastern Alpine area. Others, such pendants, or circular appliqués seem to indicate a different origin, namely the Ciunbrud group from Transylvania. The inhumation grave no. 3 from Budești-Fânațe cemetery in Ciunbrud area is illustrative for the way these little bronze rings were worn: probably hung on the belt (Marinescu 1984, 48, fig. 3/3a-c).

Contacts with other more remote areas, such as the Southern Balkan Peninsula are certified by a pin bronze head found in the necropolis of Ferigile (Vulpe 1967, 74, Pl. 33/3). It is a very finely crafted artifact in a high quality bronze<sup>3</sup> - certainly an importation from the South, maybe even from the Peloponnesus considering the analogies (Kilian-Dirlmeier 1984, 200-203, pl. 65-83). The pin proper working of iron was broken and it was not preserved. The differences between it and a poorer quality local product found in Curtea de Argeș cemetery (Măndescu 2004, 151, fig. 6/3; 11/2), more roughly worked are obvious.

Regarding Ferigile group's specific pottery, its reference to the Basarabi cultural background is certain. From the Basarabi ceramic are taken not only some basic forms and manners of treatment of the vessel's surface with a quality dark-gray slip (in the case of fine ceramics) but also some decorative motifs like the grooves (fig. 4).

In the graves belonging to the final evolutionary phase of the Ferigile group is pointed out a kind of ceramic taken after the pattern yielded in the Thracian Balkans area south of the Danube: over-raised handle cups or drinking vessels with two handles, wide open bowls with knob-grips etc., for instance, in the Getian necropolises from the right bank of the Danube as it was noticed by Profesor Ișirkovo (Georgieva and Bačvarov 1994, 13-18) or Canlia (Boroffka and Trohani 2003, 139-198). With very few exceptions (Măndescu 2004, 148-149)<sup>4</sup>, all the pottery found in the graves of Ferigile group is handmade, without using the potter's-wheel, but the graves of the same final horizon contain many hand-made vessels clearly imitating wheel-made prototypes produced in the Greek area, as oenochoe or lékané (fig. 5), the latter ones commonly used in Ferigile group's graves as funerary urns. The handmade imitation of oenochoe from Țițești (Popescu and Vulpe 1982, 102, fig. 24/5) testifies that there was a potter who saw directly the original wheel-made vessel, but had no technical means to use an identical manner of working. The spreading of these ceramic patterns to the north was received by the Ferigile group's communities and adapted to funeral use; it was most likely produced through the intermediation of south-Balkan Thracians, who were more familiar with Greek wheel-made pottery.

Apparently an isolated archaeological group and secluded into a well-delimited territory, Ferigile cultural milieu actually represents a melting pot in which the people took over and processed and adapted to their own tastes and needs many influences from various areas, sometimes from considerable distances away.

Some types of weapons were taken from the east, as a result of the Scythian world's influences, the other ones from the Western Balkan Illyrian territory. Some harness fittings

---

<sup>3</sup> Recently, the internal structure and composition of this artifact were investigated through neutron tomography process at the Institute for Nuclear Research, Pitești. The results were presented by the project coordinator (dr. Marin Dincă) in collaboration with the author in NINMACH 2013 conference held at Garching, Germany and will be published in the proceedings of this scientific meeting.

<sup>4</sup> Four finds belong to Ferigile North horizon (Tigveni-"Babe", Tigveni-"Pietroasa", Cepari, Curtea de Argeș) and five others to Ferigile III horizon (Tigveni, Rudeni, Năeni, Gătejești) and immediately after it (Telești-Drăgoești), but not all of them found in a sure context (Petre-Govora 1971, 559, 563-564, fig. 1/1).

are taken over from the northwest Vekerzug cultural milieu, while others are inspired by Scythian fashionable prototypes.

Various adornments have the best analogies in the Western Balkan Illyrian territory or even in the Eastern Alpine area. Some adornments are imported from great distances as well as southern the Balkan Peninsula, but there are some others from nearest areas, like Ciunbrud cultural milieu, from beyond the Carpathians. Ceramic has affinities with Thracian southern Danube pottery. Some vessels, though handmade, imitated Greek wheel-made forms.

Therefore far from being a closed entity and reluctant to communication, actually Ferigile group provides a good example of society at the end of the early Iron Age stage, successfully open to a wide range of cultural contacts and influences exerted from various corners of Eastern Europe in the second quarter of the first millennium BC.

**Acknowledgement:** This work was funded by CNCS-UEFISCDI, as a part of the project PN-II-RU-TE-2011-3-0078 (*The archaeological relevance of periphery*).

### Bibliography

**Borangic, C. 2009.** *Incursiune în arsenalul armelor curbe tracice. Mahaira*, Buletinul Cercurilor Științifice Studențești, 15, p. 47-67.

**Boroffka, R., Trohani, G. 2003.** *Necropola getică de la Canlia, com. Lipnița, jud. Constanța*,

Cercetări Arheologice – Muzeul Național de Istorie XII, p. 139-198.

**Chochorowski, J. 1993.** *Ekspansja kimmeryjska na tereny Europy Środkowej*, Kraków, 1983.

**Georgieva, R., Bačvarov, I. 1994.** *Trakijski nekropol pri selo Profesor Iširkovo, Silistrensko*. Silistra.

**Kilian-Dirlmeier, I. 1984.** *Nadeln der frühhelladischen bis archaischen zeit von der Peloponnes*. Prähistorische Bronzefunde XIII/8. München.

**Marinescu, G. 1984.** *Die jüngere Hallstattzeit in Nordostsiebenbürgen*, Dacia, N. S. XXVIII, p. 47-84.

**Măndescu, D. 2004.** *Necropola de la Curtea de Argeș-„Rodovanu”*. Noi precizări privind inventarul funerar, p. 139-174. In: *Prinos lui Petre Diaconu la 80 de ani* (Eds. I. Căndea, V. Sîrbu, M. Neagu). Editura Istros, Brăila.

**Măndescu, D. 2012.** *Killing the weapons. An insight on graves with destroyed weapons in Late Iron Age Transylvania*, p. 343-356. In: *Iron Age Rites and Rituals in the Carpathian Basin* (Ed. S. Berecki). Proceedings of the International Colloquium from Târgu Mureș (7-9 October 2011). Editura Mega, Târgu Mureș

**Palincaș, N. 2003-2005.** *Câteva fragmente ceramice hallstattiene de tip Ferigile descoperite la Câmpulung (jud. Argeș)*, Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche și Arheologie 54-56, p. 291-302.

**Petre-Govora, Gh. 1970.** *Necropola și așezarea din epoca fierului de la Gătejești*, Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche și Arheologie 22, 4, p. 557-565.

**Popescu, E., Vulpe, A. 1982.** *Nouvelles découvertes du type Ferigile*, Dacia N. S. XXVI, p. 77-114.

**Popescu, E., Vulpe, A. 1992.** *Necropola de tip Ferigile de la Rudeni, jud. Argeș*, Materiale și Cercetări Arheologice XVII/I, p. 109-113.

**Sîrbu, V. 1987.** *Câmpia Română în prima jumătate a sec. V î.e.n. – note la o problemă de geografie istorică*, Istros V, p. 425-429.

**Vulpe, A. 1967.** *Necropola hallstattiană de la Ferigile. Monografie arheologică*. Editura Academiei, București.

**Vulpe, A. 1970.** *Archäologische Forschungen und historische Betrachtungen über das 7. bis 5. Jh. im Donau-Karpatenraum*, Memoria Antiquitatis II, p. 115-182.

**Vulpe, A. 1977.** *Zur Chronologie der Ferigile-Gruppe*, Dacia, N. S. XXI, p. 81-111.

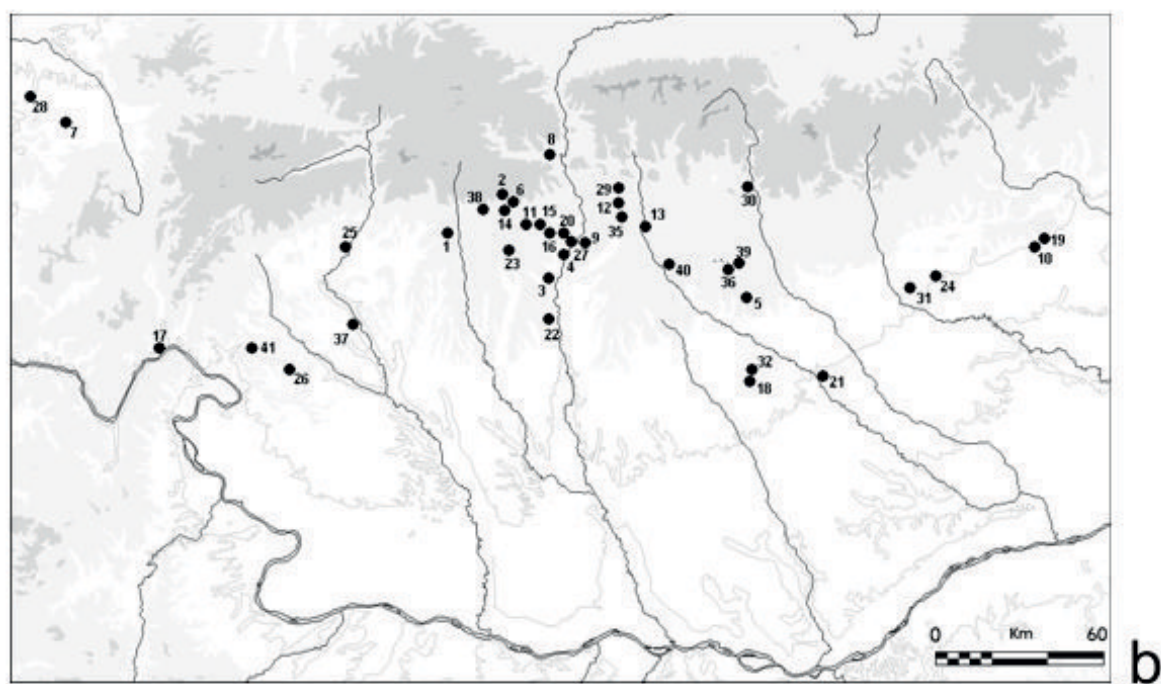
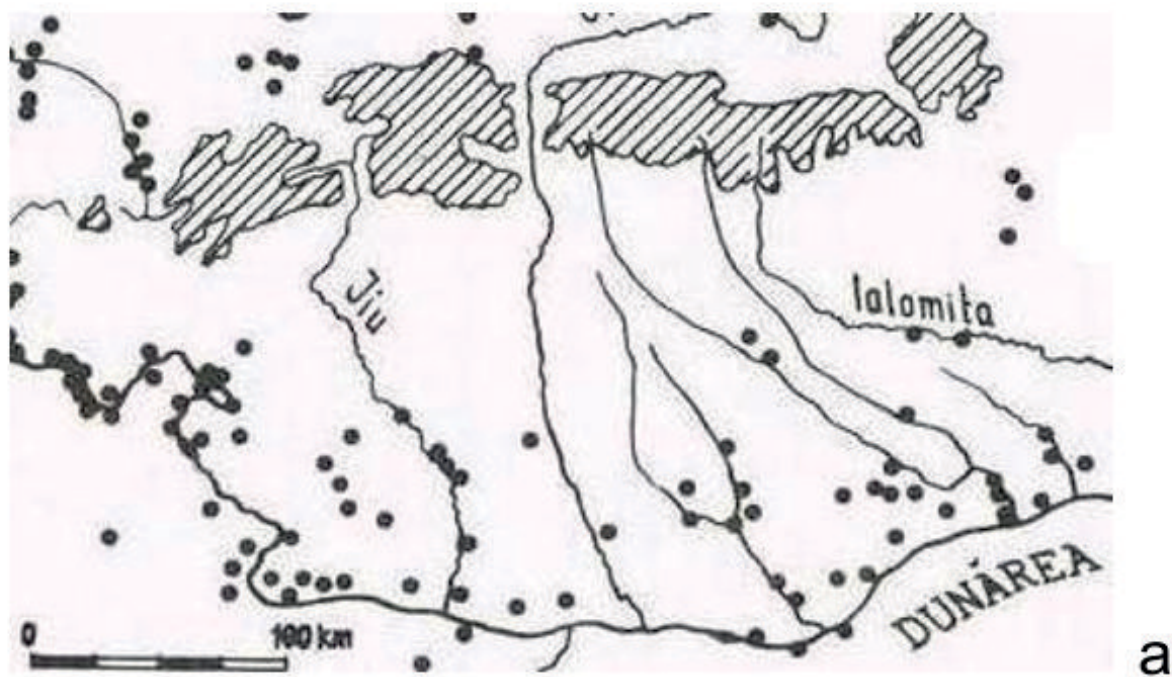
**Vulpe, A. 1983.** *Pe marginea a trei cărți noi despre traci și sciți*, Istros II-III, p. 151-144.

**Vulpe, A. 2003.** *Problema scitică în România*, p. 113-134. In: *Identitate națională și spirit european. Academicianul Dan Berindei la 80 de ani* (Ed. Ș. Ștefănescu, F. Constantiniu, D. Rusu). Editura Enciclopedică, București.

**Vulpe, A. 2012.** *Sciți și agathyrsi în spațiul Carpato-Dunărean*, Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche și Arheologie 67, 1-2, p. 27-66.

**Vulpe, A. 2013.** *Istorie și arheologie sau arheologie și istorie: Prima epocă a fierului în România* – Romanian Academy Reception Speech (on [www.acad.ro](http://www.acad.ro)), p. 1-30.

Dragoș Măndescu  
Muzeul Județean Argeș  
E-mail : [dragos\\_mandescu@yahoo.com](mailto:dragos_mandescu@yahoo.com)



**Fig. 1.** Comparative maps showing the Sub-Carpathian area during middle stage of the First Iron Age corresponding to the Basarabi "culture" (a) and during late stage of the First Iron Age – Ferigile archaeological group (b). a – after A. Vulpe; b – after D. Măndescu.



**Fig. 2.** Settlement from Tigveni (view from the West). Photo by R. Cârstea.



**Fig. 3.** Graphic reconstruction of the Ferigile warrior buried in the tumulus no. 5 from Cepari. Drawing by R. Oltean.



**Fig. 4.** From Basarabi pottery to Ferigile pottery - a good proof of lineage. Not to scale.



**Fig. 5.** Ferigile III hand-made pottery imitating the Greek wheel-made pottery shapes of *oenochoe*, respectively *lékané*. 1 Țițești; 2 Cepari-Pământeni. Not to scale. Photo by D. Măndescu.