

# WHEN DID THE FIRST MAGYAR WARRIORS AT THE PORTA MESESINA/MESEȘ GATE ARRIVE? FROM HYPOTHESES TO ARCHAEOLOGICAL REALITIES

DAN BĂCUEȚ-CRIȘAN\*

CÂND AU AJUNS PRIMII RĂZBOINICI MAGHIARI LA PORTA MESESINA/  
POARTA MESEȘEANĂ? DE LA IPOTEZE LA REALITĂȚI ARHEOLOGICE\*\*

**ABSTRACT:** Among the historical sources that refer to the first incursions of the Hungarians in Transylvania during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the *Gesta Hungarorum* or *Chronicle of Anonymus* is an important document, despite the criticism/appeals it has received in the specialist literature. In chapters XXI and XII of the *Gesta Hungarorum*, Anonymus describes the moment when the two groups of Magyar warriors, the first group led by Zobolsu and Thosu, the second one by Tuhutum and his son, Horca, reach the area of Meseș Gate.

Even though numerous hypotheses have been considered, the dating of the moment of arrival of the Magyar warriors to the Porta Mesesina/Meseș Gate remains an open issue. This may be due to the state of the research conducted here, but might have other causes as well, which, at the moment, we can not identify with certainty.

**KEYWORDS:** Porta Mesesina/Meseș Gate, Magyars warriors, hypotheses, archaeological realities, artifacts.

**REZUMAT:** Dintre sursele istorice care fac referiri la primele

incursiuni ale maghiarilor în Transilvania pe parcursul sec. X., *Gesta Hungarorum* sau *Cronica lui Anonymus* reprezintă un important document, în ciuda criticilor/contestărilor formulate în literatura de specialitate. În Capitolele XXI și XXII din *Gesta Hungarorum*, Anonymus descrie momentul în care cele două grupuri de războinici maghiari, primul condus de Zobolsu și Thosu iar al doilea de către Tuhutum împreună cu fiul său Horca, ajung în zona Porții Meseșene.

Deși s-au avansat mai multe ipoteze, datarea momentului în care războinicii maghiari au ajuns la Porta Mesesina/Poarta Meseșeană rămâne încă un subiect deschis. De remarcat faptul că, până acum, în spațiul nord-vestic al României din care face parte Depresiunea Silvaniei împreună cu Poarta Meseșeană nu au fost descoperite morminte ale războinicilor maghiari timpurii. Acest fapt se poate datora stadiului cercetărilor dar poate avea și alte cauze pe care în acest moment nu le putem identifica cu certitudine.

**CUVINTE-CHEIE:** Porta Mesesina/Poarta Meseșeană, războinicii maghiari, ipoteze, realități arheologice, artefacte.

## A. INTRODUCTION

Among the historical sources that refer to the first incursions of the Magyars in Transylvania during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the *Gesta Hungarorum* or *Chronicle of Anonymus* is an important document<sup>1</sup>, despite the criticism/appeals it has received in the specialist literature<sup>2</sup>.

\* County Museum of History and Art-Zalău, bacuetz@yahoo.com

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<sup>1</sup> Alimov 2012, p. 91, 96.

<sup>2</sup> See Kristó 1983, p. 132 and next; Engel 2006, p. 39; etc.

In chapters XXI and XII of the *Gesta Hungarorum*, *Anonymus* describes the moment when the two groups of Magyar warriors, the first group led by *Zobolsu* and *Thosu*, the second one by *Tuhutum* and his son, *Horca*, reach the area of Meseș Gate<sup>3</sup>.

Even though numerous hypotheses have been considered, the dating of the moment of arrival of the Magyar warriors to the *Porta Mesesina*/Meseș Gate remains an open issue. This may be due to the state of the research conducted here, but might have other causes as well, which, at the moment, we can not identify with certainty.

## B. HYPOTHESES

Based on traces of burning identified in some early medieval fortifications, I. A. Pop argues that the events discussed occurred sometime in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>. Al. Madgearu considers that the attacks of the Magyars took place after the year 927, more specifically in the third decade of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, starting with the year 934<sup>5</sup>. In contrast, T. Sălăgean believes that the attacks in north-western Transylvania happened at least a generation earlier than the conquest of central Transylvania, the Alba Iulia area<sup>6</sup>. M. Țiplic claims that in 934, the north-western areas were already under the control of the Magyar warriors<sup>7</sup>.

Evidently, those who have addressed this issue have made various proposals concerning the chronology of the events described by *Anonymus*. Even though the authors of these hypotheses utilized data from the research conducted in the area, they have not considered a rigorous revaluation/reinterpretation of the archaeological sites identified in the area of Meseș Gate.

## C. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL REALITIES OF THE MESEȘ GATE ZONE

The only elements that can be credited to early Magyars in the western part of Meseș Gate are the three iron arrowheads discovered in a settlement (2 pieces) and in a fortification (1 piece). We are talking about the two triangular arrowheads discovered in the 10–11<sup>th</sup> century settlement layer at Aghireș “*Sub pășune*”<sup>8</sup> and the diamond shaped arrowhead found at the fortification from Giurtelecu Șimleului “*Coasta lui Damian*”<sup>9</sup>.

These artifacts are joined by the silver sight/applied part from a quiver of arrows, a piece also discovered in the 10–11<sup>th</sup> century settlement layer at Aghireș “*Sub pășune*”<sup>10</sup>. The archaeological sites from which the mentioned artefacts come from are dated to the second part of the 10<sup>th</sup> century- the start of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Aghireș “*Sub pășune*”)<sup>11</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century (Giurtelecu Șimleului “*Coasta lui Damian*”)<sup>12</sup>.

Other items that can be correlated with the presence of early Magyars in the area are the grooved neck vessels identified in 10–11<sup>th</sup> century settlements from Zalău “*Valea Mății*”<sup>13</sup> (TCI base), Aghireș “*Sub pășune*”<sup>14</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> century fortification from Șimleu Silvaniei “*Cetate/Várhegy*”<sup>15</sup>.

As I stated earlier, so far, in north-western Romania (including the Sylvanian Basin), no discoveries

<sup>3</sup> *Anonymus Notarius*, Chapter XXI and XXII, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> Pop 1996, p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> Madgearu 2001, p. 143–144.

<sup>6</sup> Sălăgean 2006, p. 73.

<sup>7</sup> Țiplic 2007, p. 67–68.

<sup>8</sup> Băcuet-Crișan *et al.* 2009, Pl. 191/7, Pl. 266/10.

<sup>9</sup> Băcuet-Crișan 2000, p. 579–580, Fig. III.

<sup>10</sup> Băcuet-Crișan *et al.* 2009, 57, Pl. 191/5.

<sup>11</sup> Băcuet-Crișan *et al.* 2009, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> Băcuet-Crișan 2014, p. 126.

<sup>13</sup> Băcuet-Crișan 2013, p. 282, pl. III/1.

<sup>14</sup> Băcuet-Crișan 2013, p. 282, pl. III/3, Pl. IV.

<sup>15</sup> Pop *et al.* 2006, p. 125; Băcuet-Crișan 2013, p. 282, pl. III/2.

of the presence of early Magyars in a context dated to the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century exist. Given this reality, it can be assumed that the incursion of Magyars in the Meseş Gate took place after the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, sometime in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, a hypothesis which contradicts the chronology advanced, so far, in the specialist literature.

#### **D. A POSSIBLE ROUTE OF THE MAGYAR WARRIORS TO PORTA MESESINA/MESEŞ GATE, IMPLIED BY THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS AND FINDS IN THE AREA**

In chapters XXI and XXII of his chronicle, *Anonymus* describes the route followed by the two groups of warriors to the Meseş Gate<sup>16</sup>:

- after conquering the fortification from *Zotmar*, the group of warriors led by *Zobolsu* and *Thosu* begin their journey to *portas Mezezinas*
- the group of warriors led by *Tuhutum*, with his son *Horca*, start off from parts of the Nyr towards *Zyloc*, and from *Zyloc* they move to *partes Mezezinas*, where they join with the group of warriors led by *Zobolsu* and *Thosu*, who were already there

If the accounts related by *Anonymus* are real, and the first incursions of the Magyars followed the routes described in *Gesta Hungarorum*, we must try to identify these routes with the help of archaeological data.

The movement of the two groups of warriors in a virtually unknown territory probably happened with the help of local guides who knew the configuration of the terrain and easy access paths, especially the passes over hostile territory, controlled by *dux Menumorout*. They were forced to choose paths suited for a group that travels on horseback, with low and large areas, which benefit cavalry, making their maneuvering possible.

Given the places described in *Anonymus's* chronicle and the geography of the area, in order to reach *Porta Mesesina*, the two groups of warriors should have followed the valleys:

- *Zobolsu* and *Thosu's* group started from *castrum Zotmar* on the wide Someş valley, then the course of the Sălaj valley, to *Porta Mesesina*.
- *Tuhutum* and *Horca's* group started from *partes Nyr* (Carei), following the Crasna valley, then the Zalău valley, to *Zyloc* and then to *Porta Mesesina*.

The second route appears to be supported by archaeological traces of the Magyars warriors that we mentioned earlier. In the Crasna valley, the Magyars warriors could have destroyed the fortification from Şimleu Silvaniei "*Observator*", strategically located on the Măgura Hill, a fort which according to existing data, was out of use in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>17</sup>.

Close to this fort, at the end of a branch of Măgura Hill, at Giurtelecu Şimleului "*Coasta lui Damian*", archeological surveying was conducted on the top of the hill, which was fortified in the Dacian period with a palisade and two ditches<sup>18</sup>. The discovery in one of the two ditches of a big thorned romboid iron arrow<sup>19</sup> suggests that the site has been fortified in the early medieval period. The presence of the romboid arrowhead at Giurtelecu Şimleului "*Coasta lui Damian*" can be placed in connection with the moment of the attack on the fortification from Şimleu Silvaniei "*Observator*".

Leaving the Crasna valley, the Magyars warriors should have followed the Zalău valley to the foothills of the Meseş Mountains. Their presence in the Meseş Mountains could be supported by the discovery of triangular iron arrowheads, of the sight/applied part of a quiver and of grooved neck pottery<sup>20</sup> in the

<sup>16</sup> *Anonymus Notarius*, Chapter XXI and XXII, p. 101.

<sup>17</sup> Băcuet-Crişan, Pop 2011, p. 312.

<sup>18</sup> Băcuet-Crişan 2014, p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> Băcuet-Crişan 2014, p. 126.

<sup>20</sup> We have to acknowledge the fact that there is another discovery of this sort in the settlement of Zalău „Valea Măţii” (Baza TCI)

settlement layer, datable to the second part of the 10<sup>th</sup> century in the settlement of Aghireș “*Sub pășune*”<sup>21</sup>, which is at 3,5 km away (in a north-west direction) from the archaeological site of Zalău “*Valea răchișorii/Pâlvâr*”.

### E. ANONYMU’S ZYLOC. AN ATTEMPT AT LOCATING THE SITE

The two groups of warriors reunited at the Meseș Gate, *Anonymus* specifying that the group led by *Tuhutum* and his son *Horca* stopped first at *Zyloc*<sup>22</sup>. The mentioning of this *Zyloc* raises the question of why did the warriors decide to stop here, before reaching the Meseș Gate?

*Anonymus* doesn’t provide any data about *Zyloc* so we are forced to put forward several hypotheses:

- a toponym.
- a settlement which lies on the route taken by group of warriors.
- in the *Chronicle* fortifications, or centres of power are mentioned. If *Zyloc* would have been a fortification, *Anonymus* should have described its conquest by the warriors.
- at *Zyloc* there was a fortification, unmentioned by *Anonymus*.

Taking into consideration the points mentioned above, we believe that the stopping of the group of warriors was due to the importance/role/status of *Zyloc* at the time.

In the Romanian specialist literature there have been attempts at locating this *Zyloc* on the field, the sites considered being the fortification from Ortelec “*Cetate*”<sup>23</sup> and the settlement from Zalău “*Valea răchișorii/Pâlvâr*”<sup>24</sup>. The chronology of the fortification from Ortelec “*Cetate*” takes this site out of the equation<sup>25</sup>. If we analyse all the archaeological sites identified so far in the area of/in close proximity to the Meseș Gate we will find that there are 5 sites which could be datable (partially/totally) to the period in which the events described by *Anonymus* took place in:

- the settlement from Zalău “*B-dul M. Viteazul, nr. 104–106*” (settled from the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century – start of the 11<sup>th</sup> century).
- the settlement and the cemetery from Zalău “*Valea răchișorii/Pâlvâr*” (10<sup>th</sup> century).
- the settlement from Zalău “*Valea Mâții*” (TCI Base) (10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century).
- the settlement from Zalău “*Valea Mâții-Școala veche*” (the second half/end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century- first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century/ 11<sup>th</sup> century).
- the settlement from Aghireș “*Sub pășune*” (settled from the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century- start of 11<sup>th</sup> century).

Of all of the sites mentioned above, the only one covering the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century chronologically (possibly the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century in case of settlement) is the one from Zalău “*Valea răchișorii/Pâlvâr*” (the settlement and the cemetery). The final traces of habitation and use for burial of this site (the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century) are on the same chronological level as the arrowheads, typical for steppe warriors, appear at Aghireș “*Sub pășune*”. In addition, the complexity of this site, the characteristics of the artefacts and the geographical position are factors that contribute to the sustainability of our hypothesis<sup>26</sup>.

Assuming that the fortification from Zalău “*Valea răchișorii/Pâlvâr*” was contemporary with other archaeological features identified in the area, and that in the cemetery burial of the local elite took place,

(see Băcuet-Crișan 2013, p. 282, Pl. III/1).

<sup>21</sup> Băcuet-Crișan *et al.* 2009, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> *Anonymus Notarius*, Chapter XXII, p. 101.

<sup>23</sup> Madgearu 2001, p. 175; Iambor 2005, p. 95–96.

<sup>24</sup> Sanda Băcuet-Crișan, Băcuet-Crișan 2003, p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> First phase of fortification can be dated in the early XI-th century (Băcuet-Crișan 2014, p. 48).

<sup>26</sup> This opinion is however supported by us, too, from the moment when we have published a detailed report regarding the archaeological excavations from this site (Sanda Băcuet-Crișan, Băcuet-Crișan 2003, p. 66).

its presence is justified by the fact that such constructions were clearly the product of social stratification, a privilege of the ruling elites, a “command centre” of the local leaders/elites<sup>27</sup>. If the fortification was not contemporary with other features found here, we can assume that it was built by the Magyars immediately after the destruction/burning of the settlement sometime in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, or that it was built by the Magyar royalty in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, as a part of the system of border fortifications (*indagines*) on the line of the Meseş Mountains.

## F. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS: HYPOTHESES AGAIN

If the early Magyar warriors arrived in the area of Cluj in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>28</sup>, we are faced with the problem of their way of penetration in Transylvania, because, at least until now, the earliest discovered artifacts belonging to the Magyars to the west of Meseş Gate, are not dated to the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century!

In the study of artefacts belonging to the Magyar warriors in the Romanian literature (not exclusively) the problem of the moment/moments and the direction/directions of the incursions of these warriors has been addressed many times, several hypotheses being presented: through Meseş Gate, through the Crişul Repede valley, Căpuş valley, Mureş valley<sup>29</sup>.

Even though the area of study sufficient for identifying these moment/moments and direction/directions of incursion of early Magyars exceeds the current studied area, we are inclined to formulate a few hypotheses:

- the possibility that the Magyars warriors buried in the Cluj area have arrived via the Meseş Gate, which would require the revision of the chronologies of the discoveries in the area of Cluj and their dating to after mid-10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>30</sup>.

- the possibility that the Magyars warriors buried in the Cluj area arrived there earlier than the discoveries from the zone of the Meseş Gate suggest, the warriors not leaving any archaeological traces on their route.

- that they entered *Terra Ultrasilvana* from the north-west, but not through Meseş Gate.

- they entered through the course of the valley of Mureş river.

Corroborating all data to which I referred above, we have an more complex image:

- a first incursion could have happened using the Mureş valley, if we consider the opinion expressed by A. Madgearu, which places the attack against the Bulgarians near the third decade of the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>31</sup>. At the basis of this choice of path could have been the intention of attacking the area around the ancient *Apulum* (Alba Iulia)<sup>32</sup>, controlled by the Bulgarians. During this attack the area around ancient *Napoca* (Cluj) could have been occupied as well, for the control of sources of salt.

- on the other hand, if we take into consideration the recently formed opinion of A. Dragotă (in a study referring the battle axes found in the 10<sup>th</sup> century warrior graves), the Mureş valley was used by the Magyar warriors as approach path into Transylvania only after the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>33</sup>.

- E. Gáll published recently the C<sub>14</sub> analysis results made on horse bones found in grave no. 10, of the Cluj- Zápolya street burial, results that have identified the chronology set between 873–981. From this wide chronology, the author of the study chosed that period/sequence (meaning 900–963)<sup>34</sup> correspond-

<sup>27</sup> Băcuet-Crişan 2012, p. 287.

<sup>28</sup> Gáll *et al.* 2010, p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> Ţiplic 2007, p. 55–56.

<sup>30</sup> Moreover it was mentioned that there are artifacts dating in the interval of 940/950–980 AD (Gáll *et al.* 2010, p. 112).

<sup>31</sup> Madgearu 2001, p. 195.

<sup>32</sup> Incursion lead by *Gylas*?

<sup>33</sup> Dragotă 2015, p. 334.

<sup>34</sup> Gáll 2015, p. 391.



ing to its own chronology, or, this wide chronology does not exclude an interval set after the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, more exactly 950–963/981!

– the second incursion, a later one, came from a north-west direction, through the Meseș Gate/*Porta Mesesina*, after the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (probably at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>35</sup>.

The characteristics of the artifacts (discovered until now) susceptible to be attributed to early Magyar warriors (including those in the *Porta Mesesina*/Meseș Gate area), artifacts analysed on categories and types through several occasions in the archaeological literature, indicates that the path of these early warriors into Transylvania on any of the two main ways (1. Meseș-gate; 2. Mureș valley) happened sometime during the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but not earlier than the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Regarding the conquest of the territory down to the Meseș Gate, essentially the territory controlled by *dux Menumorout*, this could have happened with the combined attack of the two groups of warriors, the first one led by *Zobolsu* and *Thosu*, and the second by *Tuhutum* and his son *Horca*.

Our views expressed on this occasion are based strictly on the results of archaeological excavations carried out so far in the studied area. The data future research will provide could confirm or refute our position on the subject, provided that the research is continued and deepened.

(translated by Zsolt CSÓK)

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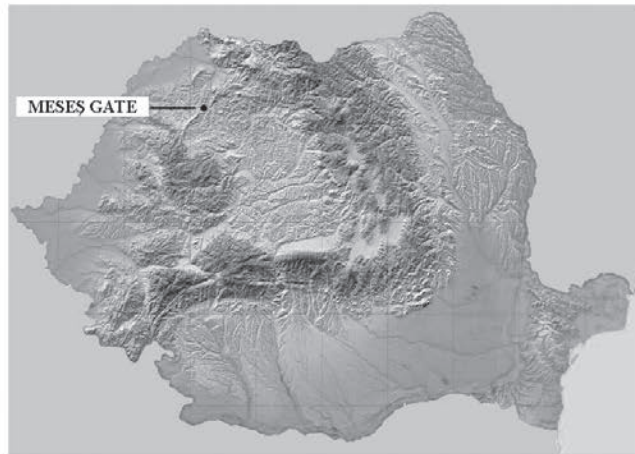
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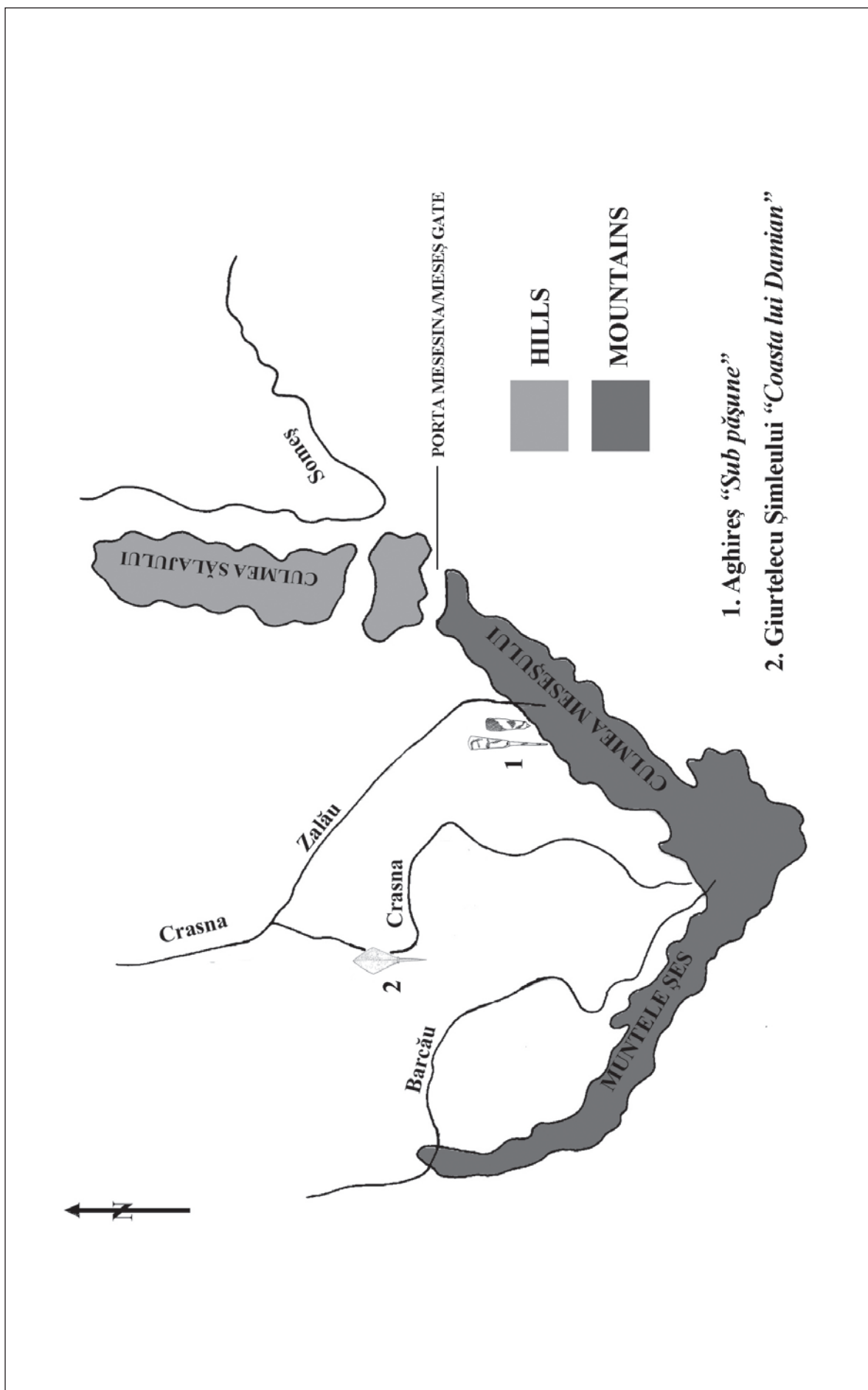
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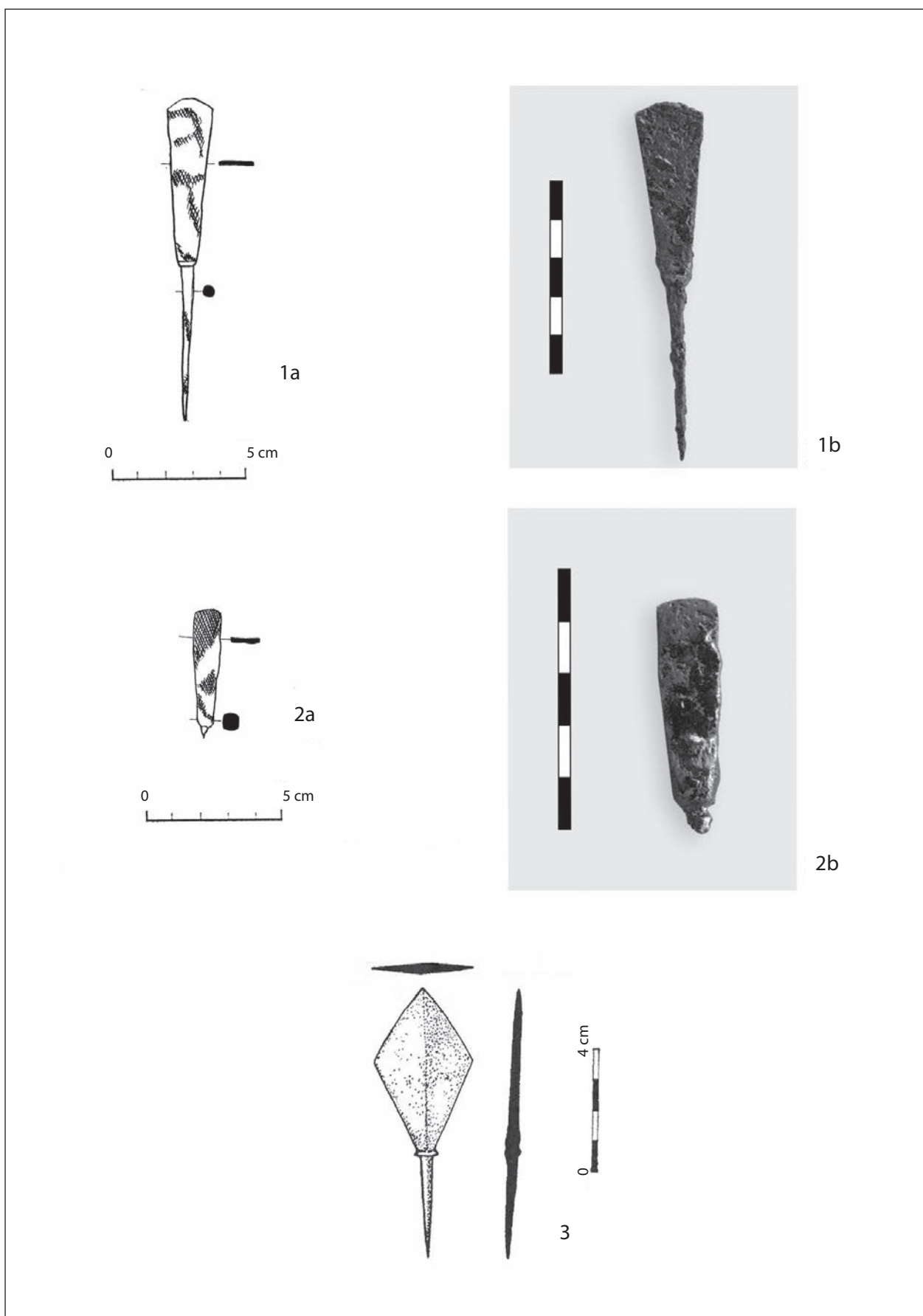
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Pl. I. The location of the Porta Mesesina/Meseș Gate.

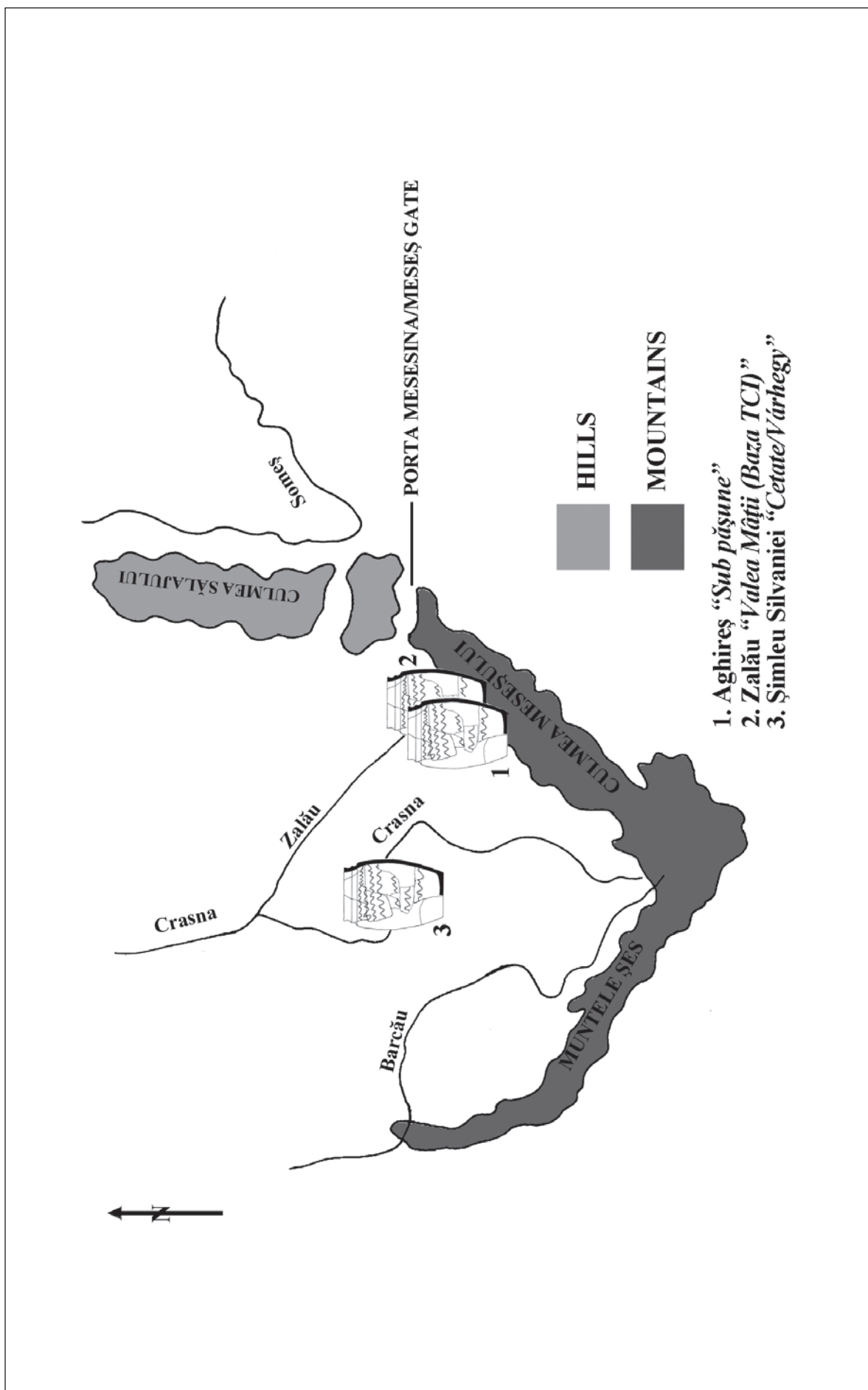




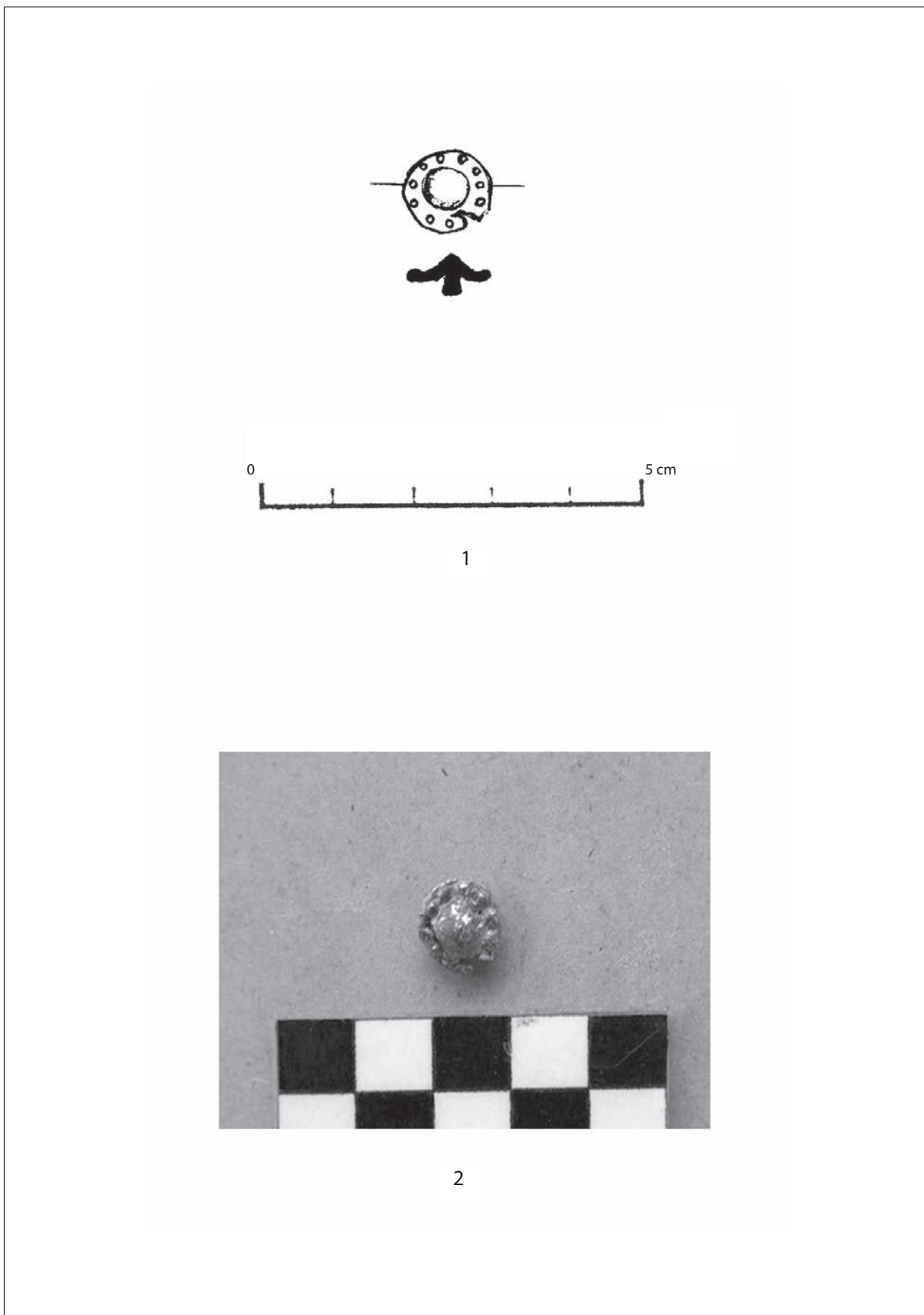
Pl. II. Arrows. The distribution of the finds in the Sylvania Basin and the location of the Porta Mesesina /Meseş Gate.



Pl. III. Arrows discovered in the Sylvania Basin: Aghireș „Sub pășune” (1a–1b, 2a–2b), Giurtelecu Șimleului „Coasta lui Damian” (1a–1b, 2a–2b after Băcueț-Crișan et al. 2009; 3 after Băcueț-Crișan 2000).



Pl. IV. Grooved neck pots. The distribution of the finds in the Sylvania Basin and the location of the Porta Mesesina/Meseş Gate.



Pl. V. Aghireș „Sub pășune”. (1–2) Silver ornament for quiver.