# Burial customs of the Lower Danube and Eastern Balkans in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic

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The discovery of the rich copper age cemetery at Varna on the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast in the early seventies captured the attention of scholars throughout the world, most particularly because of the copious inventories of gold and copper implements in certain burials. The finds from the cemetery were introduced to archaeological scholars through several conferences (e.g. Ivanov 1978; Fol, Lichardus 1988; Lichardus 1991a) and to a wider public though the exhibition "The Oldest Gold of the World," which traveled around the globe (Biegel 1986; Eluère 1989; Tokio 1982).

Various hypotheses were proposed to explain the distinct character of the Varna necropolis, distinguished from inland cemeteries not only by the richness of the burial gifts found here (Chapman 1990; Renfrew 1986), but also by the cultural features reflected in the burial customs. Lichardus (Lichardus 1988; 1991b)—to some extent echoing the ideas of M. Gimbutas—referred to a strong influence from the North Pontic steppes on the West Pontic region, suggesting that this lay behind a shift in social structure from an egalitarian society (with status based on sex and age as well as personal attainment) to a ranked society (with hereditary social status based on family descent), accompanied by a corresponding change in burial customs. Lichardus argued that the differences between the burial customs at the coastal site of Varna and those of cemeteries further inland distinctly mirrored an intensifying influence from the North Pontic steppes, an influence felt much more weakly in the inland regions of what is now northeastern Bulgaria. Häusler (Häusler 1995) argued, that the dissimilarity of burial customs was caused by the geographical position of Varna at a border zone of the two big european burial custom areas.

Bailey, on the other hand (Bailey 2000) presumed recently that the difference in the layout of the bodies in the burials near the Black Sea coast and those in inland cemeteries reflected nothing more than the absence of permanent settlements associated with the latter.

In the developped phase of the copper age—roughly the second half of the fifth millennium—we are dealing with a very broad geographical area represented by the Kod·adermen-Gumelniţa-Karanovo VI cultural complex (KGK VI) that covered the whole of the eastern Balkans, reaching from the eastern lower Danube (Muntenia), Dobrudja and the Black Sea coast over northeastern Bulgaria and Thrace as far as the Rhodope mountains. It is obvious that over such a huge area (from the Danube delta to Thrace), the variety of landscapes, relief, and climatic zones—not to mention the variety of earlier cultures

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established here—would encourage the formation of different cultural facies. Along with the so-called Kodjadermen facies in northeastern Bulgaria, the Gumelniţa group in Muntenia and the Karanovo VI culture in Thrace, the term "Varna culture" has been suggested for the cultural variant in the Dobrudja and along the Black Sea coast (Todorova-Tonceva 1975; Todorova 1978a; 1978b; Todorova, Vajsov 2001; for critical comments, cf. Lichardus 1988; Simon 1983). The term "Varna culture" is used in this paper.

Characterizing burial customs within the KGK VI cultural complex (details and discussion in Lichter 2001, 75-132), we have some 250 burials from the lower Danubian cemeteries of Căscioarele D'aia Parte, Chirnogi I and II, Radovanu (Comşa 1995b), Ulmeni, and Vărăşti B (Comşa 1995a),[1] as well as some 100 interments from the northeastern Bulgarian cemeteries of Goljamo Delcevo (Todorova et al. 1975), Omurtag, Radingrad, and Târgovişte (Angelova 1986).[2] Whereas not a single cemetery in Thrace[3] has yet been uncovered, we have evidence from some 650 inhumations of the Varna culture excavated in the cemeteries of Devnja (Todorova-Simeonova 1971), Durankulak (Todorova, Dimov 1989) and Varna (Ivanov 1991).

Because none of these cemeteries have been completely exposed, totals represent only minimum values. As it would now appear, extramural cemeteries were generally established within a range of 500 m west of the settlement (Lichter 2001, 80). Considerable regional variation is apparent in nearly all aspects of burial customs. Whereas the dead in Muntenia and northeastern Bulgaria were interred in simple pits, the inhumations near the Black Sea coast display greater effort, with burials in deeper and more expansive pits (Varna, Durankulak), some with wooden pot construction (Devnja; see Fig. 2A), and some covered with stone slabs (Durankulak; see Fig.3).

Along the lower Danube and in northeastern Bulgaria the dead were laid to rest without any sex-differentiation, generally in a fetal position facing left (Figs. 4 and 5). The legs were moderately or strongly flexed, and the arms bent the elbows so that the hands generally lay before the face. Orientation was E-W or SE-NW.

Interment of the deceased within the Varna culture, in contrast, was differentiated according to sex: men were interred stretched out on their backs (Fig. 2A; Fig.3) whereas women where buried in a fetal position, facing right (Fig. 2B). The orientation of both men and women was N-S or NE-SW.

Differences between the coastal and inland graves extend to burial gifts as well. In both Muntenia and northeastern Bulgaria bowls and open vessels dominate the inventory (Fig. 4B, 2-6; 5C, 3-4). Whereas in Muntenia only a few graves included pots—with three quarters of the deceased in the cemetery of Vărăşti B buried without *any* tomb gifts, the graves in northeastern Bulgaria contained an average of two vessels per burial, in most cases found near the pelvis or in the vicinity of the legs (Fig. 5A, 1; C, 1).

Funerary gifts in the graves of the Varna culture, in contrast, display both a greater number of vessels (an average of three per burial) and a greater variety in vessel form (Fig. 2A, 2-4; Fig. 3, 5-10). Male burials usually contain a potstand as well (Fig. 3, 10).

Some 90 % of all vessels found in burials of the Varna culture had been placed near the head of the deceased, irrespective of body position.

In both areas heavy tools of copper, antler or stone are restricted to male burials (Fig. 2A, 5). Most especially the sites of Varna and Devnja near Lake Varna are conspicuous for the great number of heavy tools found in the graves (Todorova 1981). Such a wealth of tools was not recorded in the cemetery of Durankulak, little more than 100 km north of Varna. The difference is apparent in the ratios. Whereas at Varna every fifth burial contained a heavy copper tool, in Durankulak it was only every fiftieth! Golden jewelry and implements were—with a few exceptions—restricted to Varna and Devnja sites (Todorova, Vajsov 2001). The great wealth typifying certain burials at Varna is thus by no means reflected in every burial of the Varna culture. The propitious strategic location of Varna near the lake and the Black Sea—with rivers providing natural access to the inland—must have made Varna a much-frequented point of transfer (Frey 1991; Todorova 1995) along the trade routes for copper,[4] spondylus (Todorova 1995; 1997) and gold[5] during the second half of the fifth millennium. The wealth found in the graves might well be the result of this flourishing trade.

The relative location of the burials within the cemeteries provides yet another criterion distinguishing the cemeteries near the Black Sea from those in northeastern Bulgaria. In the Varna culture, the dead were interred over the whole of the cemetery irrespective of sex and age, while in the cemeteries known from northeastern Bulgaria (Vinica, Goljamo Delcevo, and Târgovişte) there is a clear distinction: men were found interred in the northeastern reaches of the necropolis, with the remains of women and children distributed throughout the west of the cemetery. Here, however, we might add that this latter phenomenon was not apparent in Muntenia (Lichter 2001, 125-129).

A certain degree of cultural interchange is evident, however. In the necropolis of Goljamo Delcevo in northeastern Bulgaria, we witness one interment (Grave 10; see Fig. 5B) in hocker position, a female with her remains oriented N-S and facing right, with fragments of a vessel near her head, i.e. buried according to the "Varna tradition" (Todorova et al. 1975) and we encounter as well a handful of other skeletons—from sites such as Vără ti B—that were interred in a crouched position facing right. On the other hand, from three cemeteries within the Varna region, we can site some 25 skeletons (from Varna itself as well as Devnja and Durankulak) buried in the fetal position (men, women and children) with "inland" attributes; that is, they faced left and were accompanied by vessels situated near the legs. There is every reason to believe that an exchange of individuals (exogamy) or families took place. This retention of native burial customs by emigrants might emphasize how important burial customs were to cultural identity.

What the above tells us is that burial customs within the KGK VI cultural complex are by no means homogeneous; clear distinctions are obvious, differentiating the burials of the "Varna culture" near the Black Sea and the Dobrudja on the one hand from the cultures of northeastern Bulgaria (including Muntenia) on the other. These distinctions are basic, related to all elements of burial customs, encompassing not only the position of the

skeleton, but the orientation of the burial as well as the inventory and location of the funerary gifts, not to mention discrimination by sex and age. These are all very fundamental tenets hardly likely to be explained by deviation or by elements newly introduced to the culture.

As G. Kossack points out (Kossack 1974), one motive underlying a splendid burial is the effect it has upon the other members of the community; the interred is obviously one of the elite. Kossack maintains that one factor significant here is the emulation of practices associated with "higher civilizations." Contacts with any community exalted in the eyes of the populace will dictate new standards (in both goods and concepts) to their leaders, who henceforth employ these to demonstrate their personal importance and status within their own community.

On the other hand, internal developments, such as change and/or specialization in production, might also have initiated new social ranking and differentiation in status.

Referring to Kossack, Lichardus (1988, 100; 1991b, 189) has suggested that the rich burials of Varna were a result of contact between the local elite of Varna and the societies of the North Pontic steppe during the second half of the fifth millennium. This influence, he claims, would explain why a new society based on heredity might have replaced one more egalitarian. Certain children buried with rich gifts reflecting status symbols may be taken as a sign of this change in the social system. One such burial is Grave 4 at Devnja (Todorova-Simeonova 1971), in which a child's skeleton is accompanied by a copper axe and spondylus. This axe, of the Coka-Varna type (Todorova 1981), is moreover a miniature replica, measuring only half the length of other recorded specimens of the type.

Häusler (1966; 1995) points out, on the other hand, that similar phenomena—extraordinary gifts accompanying the burial of specific children—are known throughout prehistory, at least from late Palaeolithic times onward. It would therefore not be logical to interpret such gifts as an irrefutable sign of inherited status. Considering this, an alteration in the social system of the KGK VI cultures seems less likely. Parzinger (1998, 124) has also questioned Lichardus' assumption of the respect presumably felt for the foreign societies in the steppe; why should the people of the KGK VI culture in the eastern Balkans—already in possession of the most important copper mines of the period—look up to the peoples of the steppe?

Thus, Kossacks' second suggestion would appear more probable. As demonstrated above, the rich graves were restricted to the cemeteries of Varna and Devnja (also within the Varna region). The wealth evidenced by certain of these burials may reflect nothing more than the important role the Varna region played in trade during the fifth millennium.

It now seems clear that the changes in burial custom were the result of neither an invasion nor influence from the steppe region. To explain the obvious disparity between practices in the coastal area and those in the inland, let us look more closely at the burial customs of the cultures formerly occupying the area.

The archaeological sources for the burial customs of the Neolithic and early Copper Age cultures of the eastern Balkans are not as comprehensive as those revealing the

customs of the late Copper Age. From the early Neolithic period, we have as yet discovered no cemeteries; the few burials known are intramural graves found within settlements (see Lichter 2001, 37-43).

In the Dodrudja, the time span from middle Neolithic to the early Copper Age is represented by the Hamangia culture. The cemetery of Durankulak, comprised of more than 500 interments, and the necropolis of Cernavodă with some 400 individuals both belong to this culture. The graves at Muntenia often contain no funerary gifts at all; without pottery, chronological correlation becomes difficult. The cemetery of Cernica (Comşa 2001), then, can be correlated to a span between the middle Neolithic and the early Copper Age. From the Boian-culture of the late Neolithic and early Copper Age, we may refer to burial sites such as Andolina (Comşa 1961) and Valea Orbului (Şerbănescu 1997). Some settlements include intramural inhumation as well (e.g. Vărăşti A). While in northeastern Bulgaria, early Copper Age burials of the Poljanica Culture are represented in the cemeteries of Poljanica (Todorova 1982, 163-165) and Ovcarovo (Todorova et al. 1983, 8-9), no cemeteries of the middle and late Neolithic have yet been discovered.

Among the inhumations of the Hamangia culture at Durankulak, the extended supine position dominates; only one third of the burials here contained individuals in hocker position, some facing left, some right. Significant here is the obvious differentiation in the positioning of the deceased that took place during the development of Hamangia culture. Some three quarters of the individuals buried during the early phases were found in an extended position; and among the remainder in crouched position, twice as many faced left (16%) as right (8%). By the late Hamangia phases the pattern has changed. While skeletons stretched out on their backs still dominate (60%), those in hocker position demonstrate a reversal in position. Those facing right (25%) are now predominant—more than double those facing left (10%). Overall, this shows a decrease in number of individuals buried on their backs in an extended position, and an increase of individuals interred on their right in a fetal position. It is the anthropological data that clarifies the picture. The proportion of male skeletons found lying extended on their backs remains constant (ca. 90 %) within the whole of the Hamangia culture; the change in position within the development of the culture seems to have affected only females. The proportion of individuals interred in the extended supine position decreases from 57 % to 48 %; those buried on their left in hocker position decreases from 31 % to 21%. Thus it is only the skeletons interred in a right fetal position that are seen to have increased (from 12 % to 31%). These individuals, furthermore, were women. This change in burial practice is reflected only in the interment of women. These observations demonstrate a development in burial practice from the Hamangia culture suggesting a continuity into that of the Varna culture (with its clear-cut differentiation between the sexes: males buried extended on their backs, and women in a fetal position facing right). Various other aspects of funerary ritual underline this continuous development; among these we may cite the preferred N-S orientation registered among the Hamangia burials and the vessels characteristically situated near the head of the deceased.

Among burials of the northeastern Bulgarian Poljanica culture, only skeletons laid out E-W in hocker position are known (Poljanica, Ovcarovo); the same would appear to be true of the graves at Andolina (Fig. 6A) and Valea Orbului (Fig. 7A) in Muntenia.

It is evident that such distinctions differentiating the burial customs of the local populaces inhabiting the Black Sea coastal region from those of the inland residents (from those of northeastern Bulgaria and from those of Muntenia) existed at least from the late Neolithic period onward, i.e. from the end of the sixth millennium. Moreover, within each of these three regions it is possible to trace a continuous development in burial customs.

At first glance, evidence from the cemetery of Cernica in Muntenia would seem to disturb the pattern. This site, excavated between 1960 and 1970, yielded more than 300 burials (Comşa 2001). Most all skeletons were found laid out extended on their backs (Fig. 6B); only some 10 % were discovered in a fetal position (facing either left or right). Due to the sparse inventory of burial gifts, the chronology of the graves in this cemetery is still far from clear. In contrast to the chronological interpretation suggested to explain one hocker burial found above an inhumation with the skeleton in an extended supine position[6], there are two further observations we should keep in mind. The first is that at Cernica hocker burials were scattered throughout the necropolis. The second is that certain artifacts such as the spondylus spacer-beads (Fig. 6B, 10-14) and the bone pendants[7] belonging to three individuals (nos. 37, 82 and 88; cf. Fig. 7B) found extended on their backs, have also been observed in the graves of individuals laid out in a crouched position facing left at Andolina (Fig. 6A) and Valea Orbului (Fig. 7A). These observations suggest that both positions—the extended supine and the contracted hocker position—existed side by side and contemporaneously in Muntenia.

The combination and the numerical proportion of the two positions at Cernica, best parallel those we have observed above in the cemeteries of the early Hamangia culture in the Dobrudja. Burials within the southeastern reaches of Muntenia and the Dobrudja, regions characterized by not only the existence, but also the domination of interment with individuals laid out in the extended supine position, demonstrate further elements in common. Considering the natural environment (Bolomey 1978) of these areas—as well as the fact that they lie outside the distribution area of the early Neolithic Criş culture (Comşa 1987), we may deduce that these two regions were neolithicized during a more developed phase of the Neolithic (middle Neolithic), that means parts of Muntenia at the beginning of Dudeşti culture, and the Dobrudja at the beginning of the Hamangia culture. Although concrete evidence is still missing, certain considerations suggest that during the Criş culture, Mesolithic groups were still inhabiting parts of Muntenia and the Dobrudja. These considerations are based on a study of the lithic industries within the Dudeşti and Hamangia cultures. In contrast to the lithic inventories of the areas already occupied by the early Neolithic Criş culture, the lithic industry here exhibits Mesolithic tardenoisien traditions (Comşa 1991, 231; 1993, 152 u. 157; Gatsov 1985; Păunescu 1979; 1988; 1990). These observations suggest that the neolithization of Dobrudja and Muntenia occurred not through an

influx of newcomers, but through a gradual change in the habits of the local population who came into contact with the Neolithic farmers of the neighboring regions and slowly adapted themselves to the new life style. From this point of view, the existence of still further Mesolithic elements in these regions would hardly be astonishing. The pre-Neolithic inhumations thus far discovered at the Iron Gates (comprehensively treated in Radovanovic 1996a and b; cf. also Letica 1974), as well as the dominance of individuals buried in an extended supine position throughout areas first neolithicized only in the middle Neolithic period, increase the likelihood that extended interment represents a Mesolithic tradition. Subsequently, this older tradition was either gradually replaced (as in Muntenia), or further developed (as in the Dobrudja and toward the Black Sea coast), taking on new implications such as differentiation between the sexes.

To summarize, the interpretation that the burial customs seen in the Varna cemetery are the result of strong influence from the steppe region during the second half of the fifth millennium BC can be refuted. The obvious differences between the burial customs practiced at this time by the inhabitants of the Black Sea coastal region and those practiced by the inland populaces are a result of long lasting autochthonous traditions, which may prove traceable back into the early Neolithic and even Mesolithic periods. At present we might conjecture that this differentiation in custom is due to the different junctures at which neolithization reached the various geographical areas.

## Note

[1] The nine burials from Dridu (Comşa 1980)—without burial gifts—cannot be included in a characterization of the burial customs of the Gumelnita culture as their chronology remains insecure.

[2] Inhumations at Kubrat (Mikov 1927) and Ruse (Georgiev, Angelov 1952; 1957) were intramural burials; found within the settlements, they have not been included within this survey of burial customs. As for the cemeteries mentioned at Kamenovo and Sava (Todorova 1981b, 17; 19) we await further information.

[3] The dead from Junacite (Merpert 1995), again buried within the settlement, probably do not reflect "typical" burial customs.

[4] Several studies (Cernych 1991; Pernicka et al. 1997) show that Balkanic copper (Ai Bunar) was exported to the North Pontic region. Copper from a source near Medni Rid (Burgas) can only be traced in artifacts near the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, but not in the inland. The people of Varna seem to have had access to both sources.

[5] Hartmann (1978; 1982) has shown that those in the Varna area had access to two sources of gold (B and BP) whereas those in the inland used only one source (B).

[6] According to Comşa (1974), burials in the stretched out position belong to the Bolintineanu phase whereas those in a crouched position belong to the Giuleşti phase of Boian culture. Another possibility (Comşa 1995b) would be that the former belonged to the Dudeşti culture, the latter to the Boian Bolintineanu.

[7] Identical beads (Fig. 7 C) have come at Aşagi Pinar in Turkish Thrace (Özdogan-Parzinger 2000). These were reported from layer 3 (C 14 dates 5080-4900 BC cal.).

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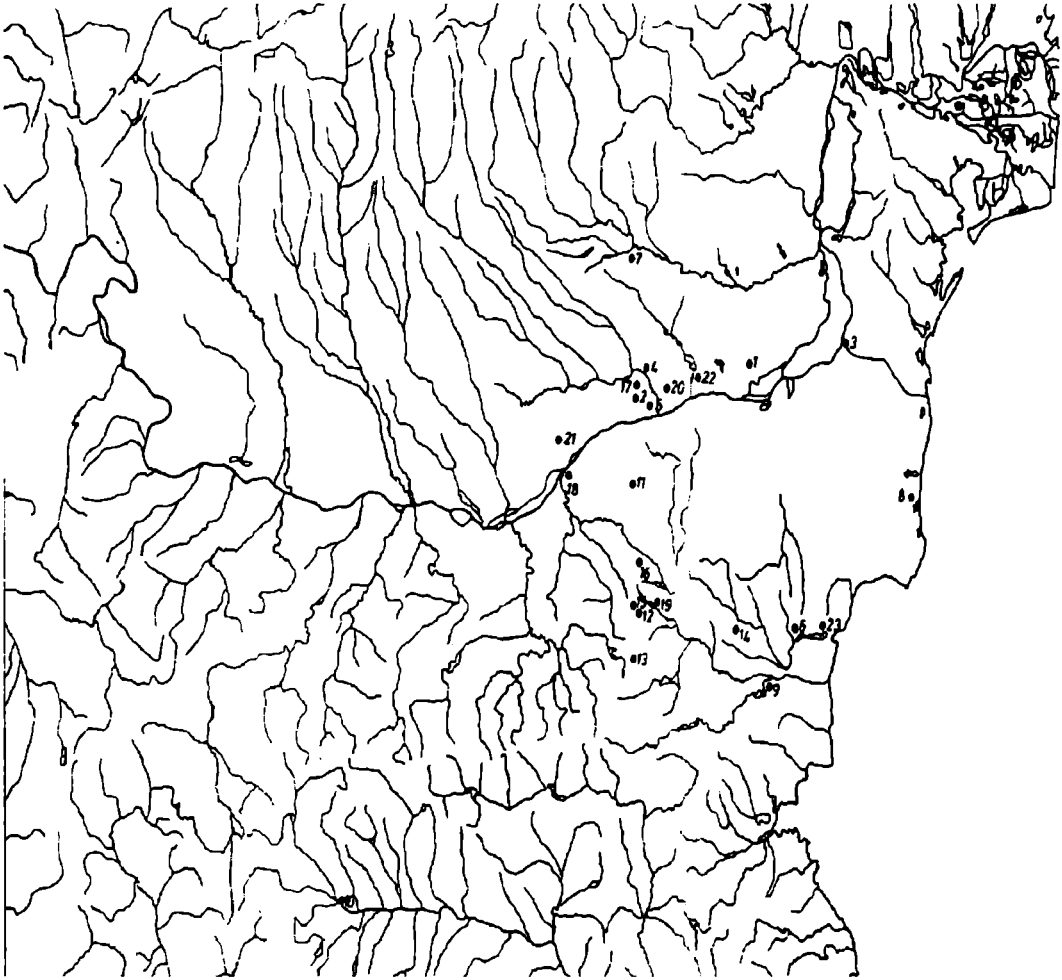

Fig. 1: Important sites with burials mentioned in the text; 1 Andolina; Jud. Călăraşi, Rumania; 2 Căscioarele D'aia Parte, Jud. CălăraŢi, Rumania; 3 Cernavodă, Jud. Constanţa, Rumania; 4 Cernica, Jud. Călăraşi, Rumania; 5 Chirnogi, Jud. Călăraşi, Rumania; 6 Devnja, Okr. Varna, Bulgaria; 7 Dridu, Jud. Ialomiţa, Rumania; 8 Durankulak, Okr. Dobrič, Bulgaria;9 Goljamo Delčevo, Okr. Varna, Bulgaria; 10 Junacite, Okr. Plovdiv, Bulgaria; 11 Kubrat, Okr. Razgrad, Bulgaria; 12 Liljak, Okr. Tărgovişte, Bulgaria; 13 Omurtag, Okr. Tărgovişte, Bulgaria; 14 Ovčarovo, Okr. Tărgovişte, Bulgaria; 15 Poljanica, Okr. Tărgovişte, Bulgaria; 16 Radingrad, Okr. Razgrad, Bulgaria; 17 Radovanu, Jud. Călăraşi, Rumania; 18 Ruse, Okr. Ruse, Bulgaria; 19 Tărgovi te, Okr. Tărgovişte, Bulgaria; 20 Ulmeni, Jud. Călăraşi, Rumania; 21 Valea Orbului, Jud. Giurgiu, Rumania; 22 Vărăşti B, Jud. Călăraşi, Rumania; 23 Varna, Okr. Varna, Bulgaria

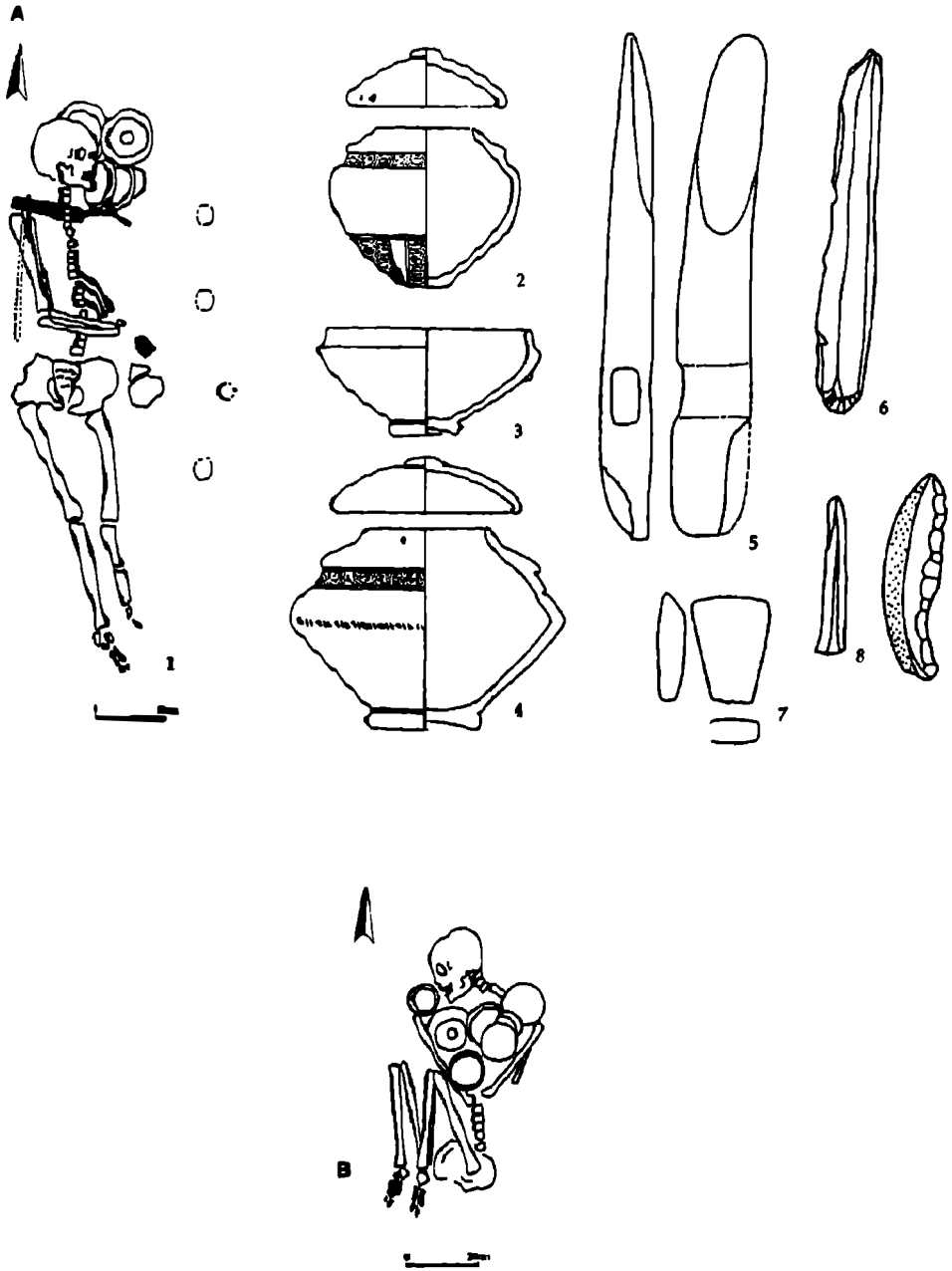


Fig. 2 Burials from Devnja (Varna culture) (after Todorova-Simeonova 1971, Taf. XI-XIII)

A: Devnja burial 6 2B: Devnja burial 21

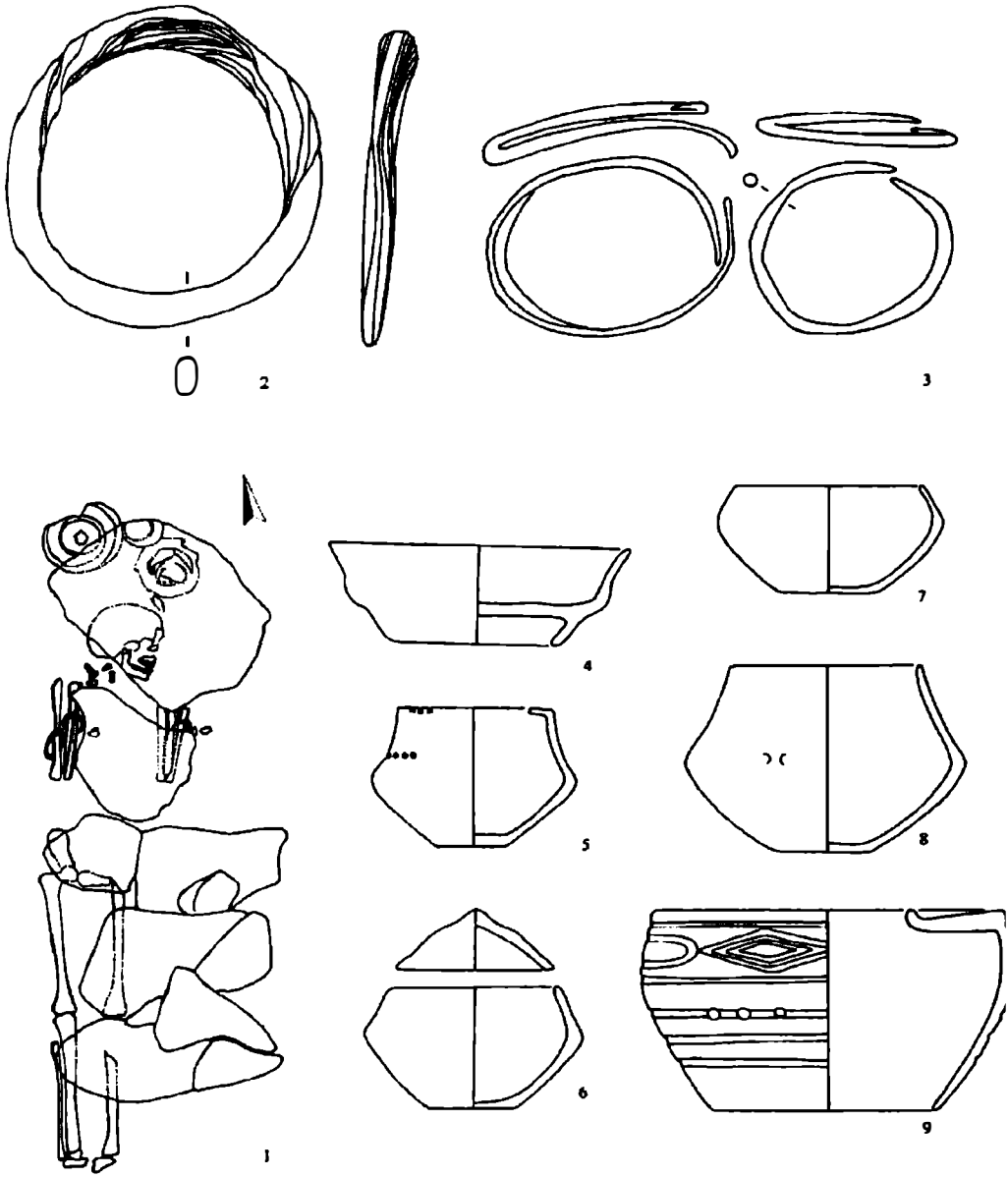

Fig. 3 Burial 672 from Durankulak (Varna culture) (after Todorova, Dimov 198 Abb.12)

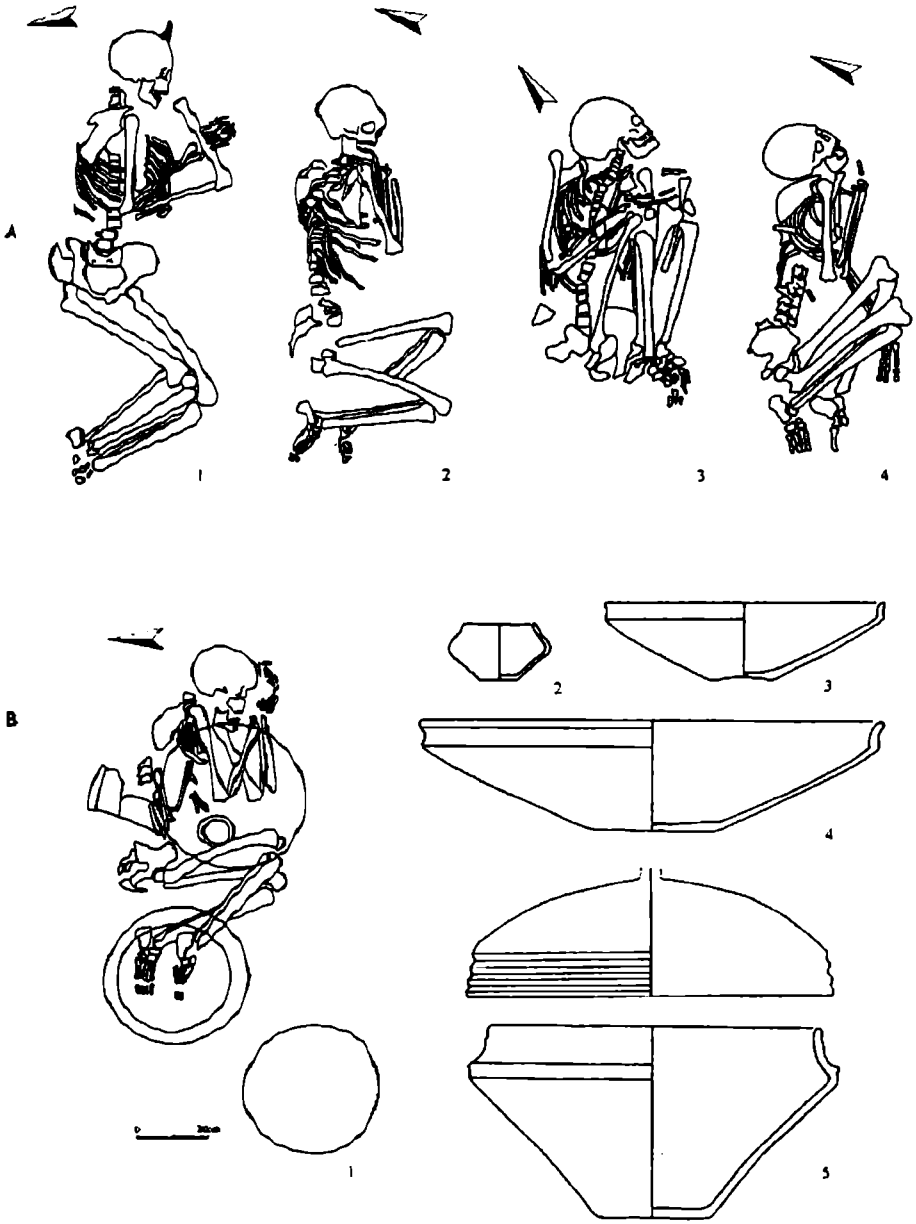


**Fig. 4 Burials from Vărăşti B (Gumelniţa culture) (after Comşa 1995)**
**A: 1 burial 51; 2: burial 20; 3: burial 46; 4: burial 17**
**B: burial 61**

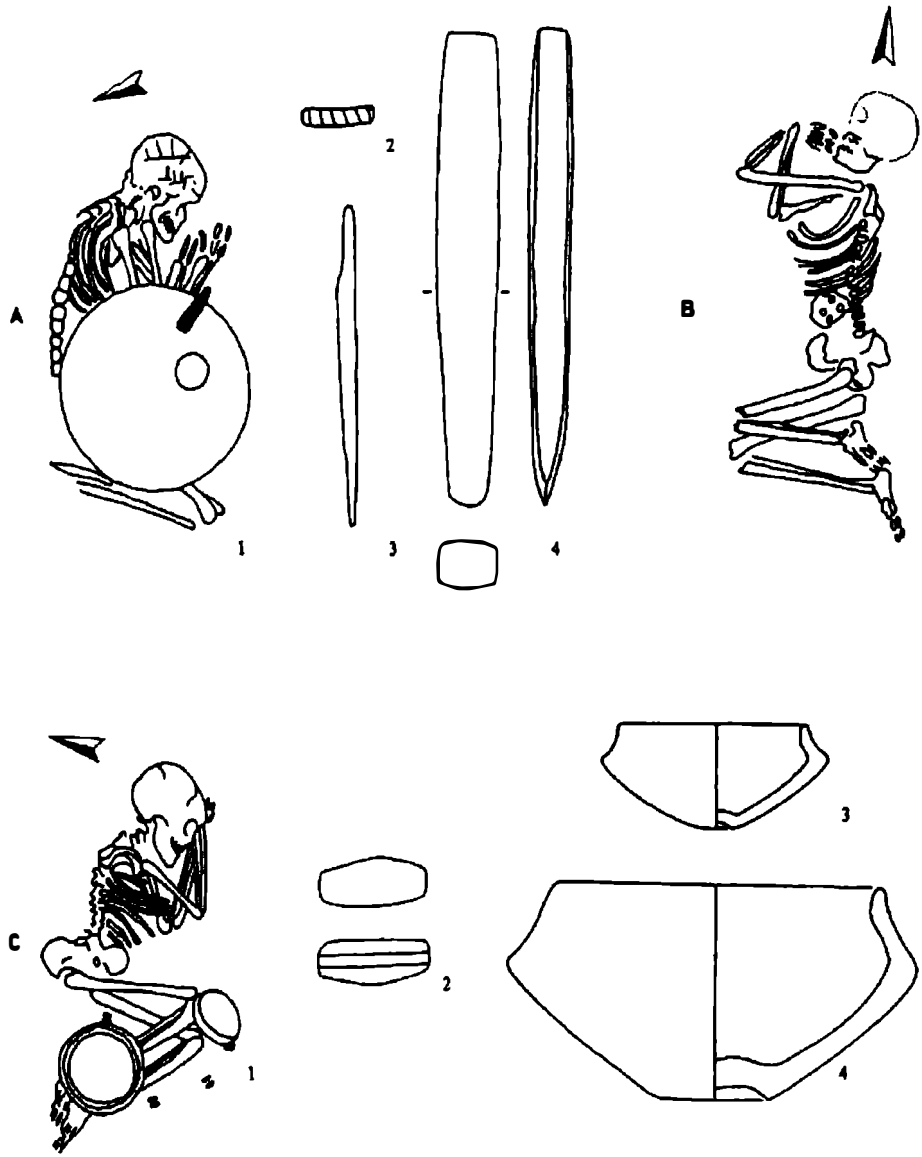


Fig. 5 Burials from Goljamo Delèevo (Gumelniţa culture) (after Todorova et al. 1975)

A: burial 25; B: burial 10; C: burial 8

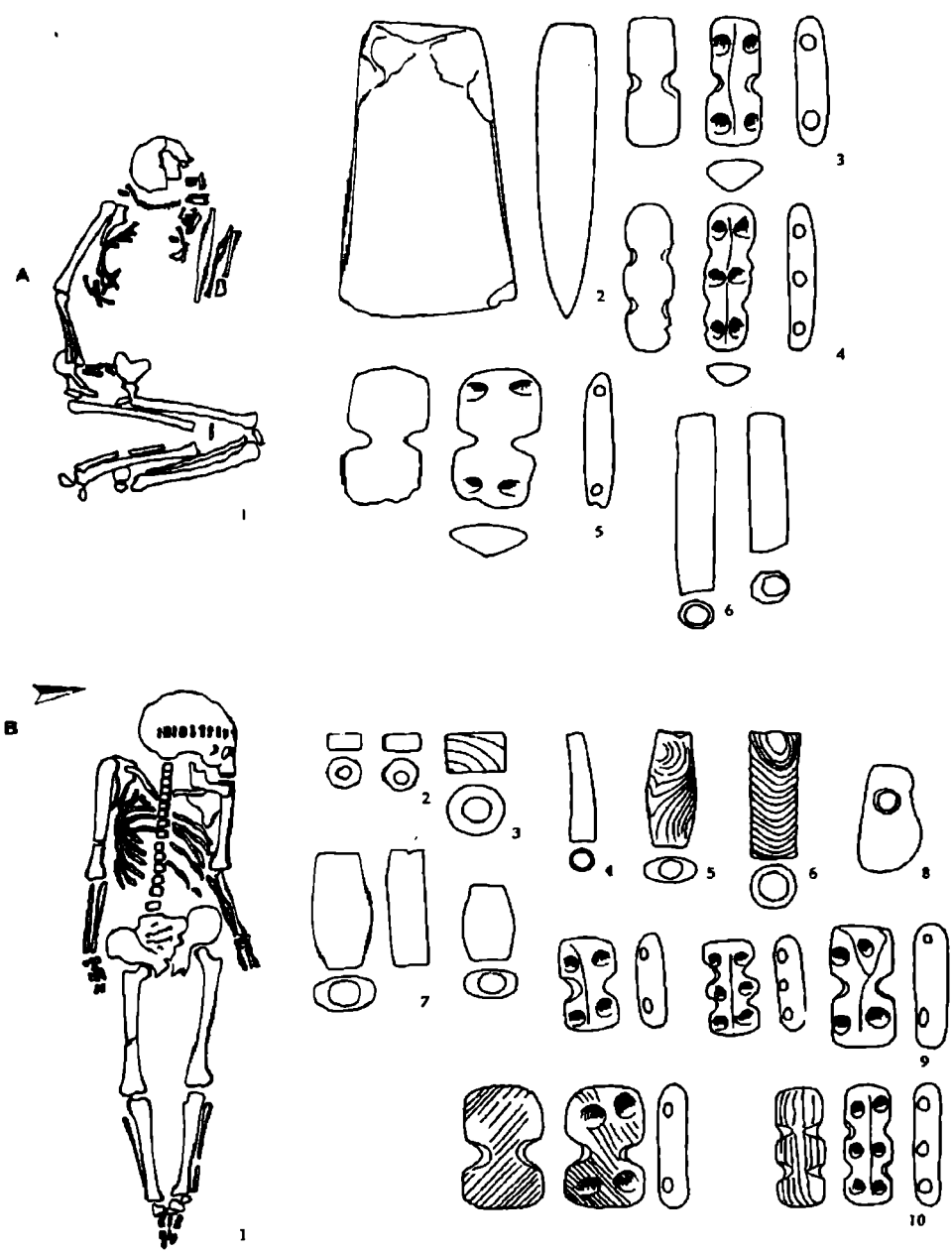


Fig. 6A: Burial 1 from Andolina (after Cornşa 1961) with adze and spondylus spacer beads

6B: Burial 292 from Cernica (after Cantacuzino 1969) and beads from burials in Cernica

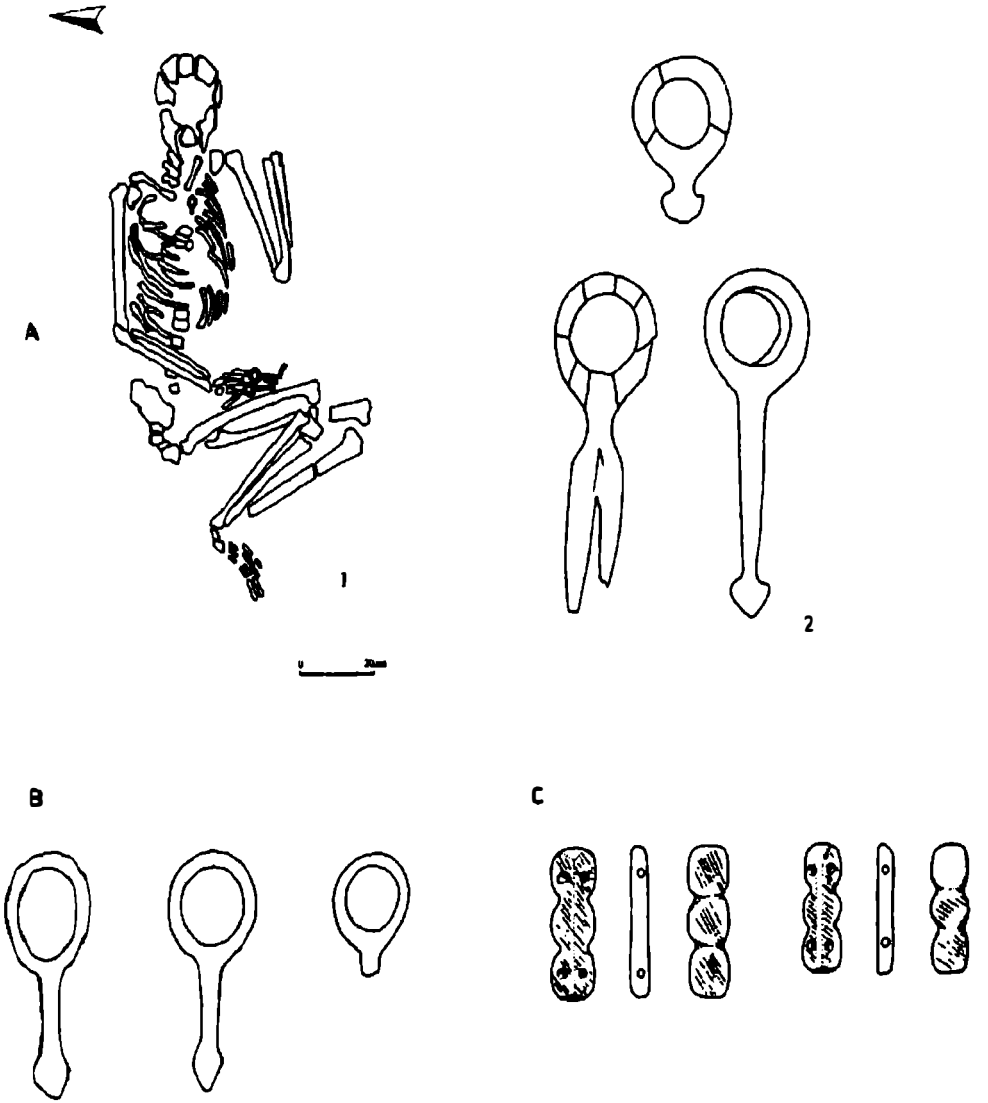


Fig. 7A: Burial 21 from Valea Orbului with bone pendants (after Şerbănescu 1997)
7B: Bone pendants fron Cernica burial 37; 88; 82
7C: Spondylus spacer beads from Aşagâ Pânar (after Özdogan, Parzinger 2000)