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MARIA BITIRI

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HUMAN BONES FROM ȘOIMUȘ-LA AVICOLA (FERMA 2), ROMANIA, IN CONTEXT

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Keywords: human bones, Neolithic, Vinča, interpersonal violence, context

Abstract: In this contribution the author presents several discarded human bones found in various Neolithic contexts from the Vinča settlement at Șoimuș-La Avicola (Ferma 2), Hunedoara County, Romania. Some of them show signs of interpersonal violence, which makes the interpretation more difficult when compared with the usual funerary contexts of the Southeast European Neolithic. On the other hand, this type of finds are not uncommon in the Neolithic Europe of the second half of the 6th and the first half of the 5th millennia BC.

Cuvinte-cheie: oase umane, neolitic, Vinča, violență interpersonală, context

Rezumat: În această contribuție autorul prezintă un lot de oase umane descoperite în diferite contexte din așezarea vinčiană de la Șoimuș-La Avicola (Ferma 2), județul Hunedoara, România. Unele dintre acestea arată semne de violență, lucru ce face interpretarea mai dificilă comparativ cu contextele funerare obișnuite din neoliticul sud-est european. Pe de altă parte, acest tip de descoperiri nu este cu totul neobișnuit în neoliticul Europei în a doua jumătate a mileniului VI î.Chr. și prima jumătate a mileniului V î.Chr..

INTRODUCTION

During the construction of the A1 Motorway route, the segment located between Deva and Orăștie, a joint team of archaeologists from the “Vasile Pârvan” Institute of Archaeology (Bucharest), the Dacian and Roman Civilization Museum (Deva) and the National History Museum of Romania (Bucharest) conducted rescue archaeological research in the settlement of Șoimuș, from the 16th of August until the 16th of November 2011. The settlement is positioned nearby the Șoimuș commune, between this locality and the Bălata Village, Hunedoara County, at a place known as *La Avicola (Ferma 2)*, on the middle sector of the first terrace of the Mureș River (Pl. I/1, 2). Based on the preliminary field reports and surveys carried out in the area, the existence of a Neolithic settlement with two main habitation levels attributed to the Vinča tradition was confirmed. In terms of stratigraphy, the first occupation stage corresponded to a settlement with pit-houses, followed by a levelling of the site with a brown-ash sediment observed in the upper part of the infill of many features. The second stage of occupation corresponded to a settlement with surface dwellings and appeared at a depth of 0.40 m. At that depth, a substantial destruction level was observed, consisting of burnt debris scattered all over the surface (some of the daub fragments still bearing wattle imprints), hearths and clay floors; below those was a thin layer of gravel, some negative impressions of poles and a large quantity of archaeological material (pottery, bones and lithic items). Besides the Neolithic habitation, some traces of Early Bronze Age, Late Iron Age, Roman and Early Medieval structures were also documented¹. In this study we analyse the human bones found in various features from this settlement belonging to the Vinča tradition, which at Șoimuș is dated to the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 5th millennia BC². We also explore other settlements north of the (Lower) Danube, either belonging to the Vinča tradition or with roughly contemporaneous traditions, in order to understand whether this behaviour was common in the region during the Late Neolithic.

¹ Ștefan 2017, with previous bibliography.

² Ștefan 2017, p. 7–8, fig. 1.

FEATURES AND HUMAN BONES

Eight structures from Șoimuș contained discarded/deposited human bones, i.e. four pits/group of pits, three enclosure ditches and a pit-house. We will describe briefly these features and the human bones found in them as follows.

Feature 62 was a pit of an irregular shape, with the dimensions of 3.1 x 3.64 m and a maximum depth of 1.58 m. It contained pottery, a clay weight, flint and obsidian artefacts, fragments of daub with and without wattle inprints, animal bones, and bone implements. The feature walls had shallow cavities on the northeast and western parts and a step on the northern side. In the upper part of the infill a layer of grey soil with daub coloured pigments was documented, followed by a compact layer of brown soil mixed with yellow clay, daub and archaeological material. These two layers were separated by a black soil lens consisting of charcoal, burnt daub and ash. The lower part of the feature contained brown soil with less archaeological material and some daub pigment. Below this layer another one consisting of charcoal was observed and to the southern part a dirty-yellow clay lens (Pl. II/1–3). As for the skeletal remains, some elements of one cranium were found, i.e. most of the frontal, occipital and the two parietals (Pl. II/4). Most of the diagnostic nuchal and orbital regions are missing. Based on the suture fusion the individual was a middle adult and considering the overall robusticity and the partial nuchal segment with moderate development of muscle attachments was probable male. We also observed some peri-mortem modification of the frontal (Pl. II/5) and a possible healed trauma on the parietal bone³ (Pl. II/6).

Feature 182 was a pit with the dimensions of 2 x 3.1 m and a maximum depth of 0.6 m. It contained pottery, flint and obsidian implements, animal bones, bone and antler artefacts. The feature had an oval shape with slightly oblique walls and was filled with burnt soil, charcoal and ash, separated into two layers: one of a dark grey colour at the upper part containing also daub fragments, and another at the lower part, filled with dirty-yellow clay (Pl. III/1–3). A fragmentary mandible was recovered. Based on the M1 development and the heavy tooth wear it belongs to a middle/old adult (probably over 40–50 years of age); sex was undetermined (Pl. III/4, 5).

Feature 202 had an irregular shape, the dimensions of 3.34 x 6.08 m and a maximum depth of 0.80 m. It contained pottery and daub fragments, a clay weight, hearth fragments, flint and obsidian implements, animal bones, bone and antler tools, and shells. These may indicate the presence of a pit-house, an argument enforced by the three post holes documented around the feature, namely Features 201 and 202 and another small post hole situated on the northern part of the pit; other arguments would be the presence of the hearth fragments recovered from the feature and also the shape of the feature itself, which appears to have consisted of three „components”. The south-western „component” had a greyish infill with a few pigments. Between this one and the other two „components” was documented a step. It is a strong possibility that the hearth was positioned there because we observed a deposition of solid ash at the base of the brown-greyish infill (Pl. IV/1–3). In this area were discovered some shell beads from a necklace, associated with human remains (Pl. IV/7): a near complete cranium but highly fragmented (22 pieces) except for the primary vault bones, an almost intact mandible, the vertical rami (fragmented) and the proximal half shaft of a femur with no epiphyses. Based on the suture and the epiphyseal fusion status, the metrics, and the dental development, the individual was an infant (c. 4–5 years old), of undetermined sex. As a pathological condition *cribra orbitalia* was documented (Pl. IV/4-6)⁴.

Feature 237A was a ditch with the dimensions of 0.75 x 19 m and a maximum depth of 0.75 m. It contained pottery, anthropomorphic figurines, a clay weight, flint and obsidian artefacts, a polished stone axe, a quern, animal bones, human bones, bone and antler tools, and antler. The feature is a clogged-up ditch with a compact infill consisting of brown soil mixed with daub-coloured pigments (Pl. V/1–4). From this feature a mandible was recovered, with the left part nearly complete and the right part missing the ascending ramus. Based on the full dental development and the moderate tooth wear it can be ascribed to a middle adult (35–50 years old). The sex was difficult to assert, however based on the gonial angle (120°) and the moderate eminence development it appears to be more likely male than female. Another argument for this is the overall robusticity of the bone (Pl. V/5, 6).

³ Many thanks are due to Amy Nicodemus (Wisconsin University, La Crosse Department for Archaeology and Anthropology, U.S.A.) for the anthropological data.

⁴ See also Ștefan, Petcu 2018, p 17–24.

Feature 239 was a ditch with the dimensions of 4.1 x 54 m and a maximum depth of 2.2 m. It contained pottery, anthropomorphic figurines, daub, a stone disk, a clay weight, flint and obsidian implements, a quern, human bones, animal bones, bone and antler tools, antler, and shells. The ditch was oriented NE–SW, and it functioned during three phases, initially probably for water drainage and subsequently for enclosing an area or a household (Pl. VI/1-3). From this ditch the occipital and parietal elements of a skull fragment were recovered. Based on the near adult cranial size and the completely open sutures, including the endocranial, the individual was an adolescent or a young adult (15–30 years old), possibly female, considering the gracility of the partially preserved nuchal region (Pl. VI/4). Also, a blunt force trauma wound was observed (Pl. VI/5).

Feature 270 is a pit with the dimensions of 4.4 x 6.9 m and a maximum depth of 1.3 m. It contained pottery, daub with and without wattle imprints, flint implements, human bones, bone and antler tools, animal bones, shells, polished stone tools, a (clay) strainer and a stone disk. This feature was systematically filled in, there were no natural depositions. From the infill were recovered a fragment of a skull and a broken mandible, both human. On the eastern side, the feature presented many shallow cavities, while steps were noted on the northern and southern parts (Pl. VII/Fig. 1–3). A near complete mandible was discovered with only the ascending ramus on the right side missing. Based on the dental wear, we can ascribe it to an adolescent (12–20 years old), most likely around 15–16 years old. Considering the large gonial angle (125°), the minimal mental eminence and also the overall gracility it was possibly a female (Pl. VII/6). The fragment of occipital from the lambdoid part, belongs to a mid to late adolescent or young adult, based on the open lambdoid suture, probably to a female, based on the partial nuchal segment with minimal development of muscle attachments (Pl. VII/4, 5). There is a strong possibility that both skeletal fragments belong to the same individual.

Feature 271 represents a group of pits with the dimensions of 7.9 x 23.2 m and a maximum depth of 2.4 m. It contained pottery, zoomorphic figurines, daub, a clay weight, flint and obsidian implements, a polished stone axe, human bones, animal bones, bone tools, and antler. The infill was relatively compact consisting of black-greyish soil with daub pigments. To the north-eastern area of the feature was found part of an articulated animal skeleton. It seems that this place was used continuously for a long time (Pl. VIII/1–3). Several human bones were recovered from this feature. There was a femur from an adult individual (based on its size), most likely male, taking into consideration the robust muscle attachments (Pl. VIII/7). We also uncovered a few skull fragments from a young to middle adult, based on the mostly open sutures, sex being impossible to determine (Pl. VIII/5); another set of bones consisting of skull elements and a rib were also found, belonging to an infant, based on the size and the degree of the suture fusion, of undetermined sex (Pl. VIII/6). A fragmentary skull belonging to a child around seven years old (based on dental development), of undetermined sex, was discovered in the sixth baulk of Feature 271 (Pl. VIII/4).

Feature 365 was a ditch with a maximum length of 41.5 m, a maximum width of 0.60 m and a maximum depth of 0.95 m. It contained pottery, daub fragments with and without wattle imprints, a clay weight, flint implements, a stone axe, human bones, bone tools, and animal bones. The ditch overlapped several features and between the baulks 3 and 4 a few post holes were documented indicating the existence of a palisade (Pl. IX/1-3). From this feature a fragmentary mandible was recovered, with the left part complete. Based on the M3 eruption we can ascribe it to a late adolescent (15–20 years old) and considering the large gonial angle (135°) and the minimal mental eminence it was possibly female (Pl. IX/4).

A fragmentary mandible was also recovered from the occupation layer. Based on the very heavy dental wear it was an old adult (40–50 years old) and considering the large gonial angle (130°) possibly female (Pl. IX/5).

DISCUSSION

In the following sequence we will analyse a few examples more or less similar to our finds from Şoimuş, namely bodies or body parts discarded/deposited in domestic or ritual contexts in Romania and abroad. A first case comes from the famous so-called ritual pit from Tărtăria, Alba County. Here, amongst other finds such the three well-known incised tablets, idols, animal bones, etc.⁵ parts of a female skeleton were deposited/discarded (the head and

⁵ Lazarovici *et alii* 2011, p. 125–208.

the lower parts of the hands and feet were missing). The woman was 50–55 years old, a cca. 147 cm⁶ in height and a radiocarbon age of 6310 ± 65 BP (5470–5200 calBC, 2 sigma). Other similar finds of discarded/deposited human bones are mentioned at Parța, Gornea and Vinča⁷. Only two cemeteries were documented until now in the Vinča area, at Botoș and Gomolava⁸.

We also mention the discovery of a human body (female) in a pit from the settlement of Turdaș. The find is described as an inhumation grave, but the illustration (drawing) of the pit shows us some disarticulated human bones⁹. Two fragmentary human skulls were discovered in a pit-house from Orăștie-Dealul Pemilor/X₂¹⁰. Although there is no detailed analysis of the bones, the calottes were radiocarbon dated (skull 1: 4780–4517 calBC, skull 2: 5211–4803 calBC)¹¹, the difference between the two dates being explained by the post-mortem manipulation of the skulls over a long time, having been used as drinking cups in certain ceremonies¹². For the Dudești culture some human bones were found in domestic contexts at Cârcea-Viaduct¹³, Măgura-Buduiasca¹⁴ or Milcovu din Deal¹⁵. For the Hamangia culture there are the interesting finds from Hamangia, *Columbia C* and *Columbia D* findspots. At *Columbia C* human remains were found scattered in the occupational level¹⁶, while at *Columbia D* post-mortem manipulation of the human bones was documented in the so-called *Skull Complex*. This latter discovery was dated broadly between 5300–5000 cal BC¹⁷. For the Boian culture (cca. 5200–4550 BC) “normal” graves and cemeteries are known at Cernica, Glina, Andolina, Boian, Izvoarele and Radovanu¹⁸, while bone fragments/skeletal parts were documented at Glina and Căscioarele¹⁹.

Very significant are also the discoveries from Alba Iulia-*Lumea Nouă* belonging to the final part of the first half of the 5th millennium BC. This site yielded evidence of post-mortem manipulation of the human bones, some of them showing clear signs of interpersonal violence²⁰.

Rescue excavations carried out in 2012 at Pianu de Jos-*Podei* led to the exploration of a spectacular enclosure system with ditches, palisades and pits, radiocarbon dated broadly in the second quarter of the 5th millennium BC²¹. At this site three graves (Cx. 227/M1, Cx. 228/M2, Cx. 229/M3) were documented, but also human bones deposited at the lower part of the ditches²². Human parts were also discovered in the Vădastra culture area, dated at the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 5th millennia BC. They were interpreted as metaphorical links between the pots and the human body²³.

A relatively recent overview of this practice of human bones disposal covers the Balkans and Greece from the Mesolithic until the dawn of the Bronze Age. Following M. Strathern²⁴ and E. LiPiuma²⁵, the authors consider that *[...disarticulated bones constituted strong indicators of ‘dividual’ personhood, in which the dispersion of the body can be perceived as an analogy for dispersed social relationships. The materiality of disarticulated human bones would have created an enduring visual and tactile proof of the links to the deceased. The ancestral bones could have been used to presence the deceased in ceremonies, at locations in the landscape, and during inter-group exchanges through the principle of pars pro toto; the part standing for the whole...]*²⁶.

⁶ Lazarovici, Lazarovici 2006, p. 198–205.

⁷ Lazarovici, Lazarovici 2006, p. 200.

⁸ Chapman 1981, p. 54–60; Boric 1996, p. 67–83.

⁹ von Roska 1941, p. 8–9, fig. 3.

¹⁰ Luca 2001, p. 49.

¹¹ Kogălniceanu, Simalcsik 2018, p. 52 and note 34.

¹² For a skeptical view of such interpretation see Bem 2015, p. 40, note 9.

¹³ Nica 1997, p. 23–25; Lazăr, Voicu 2012, p. 55.

¹⁴ Andreescu *et alii* 2005; Lazăr, Voicu 2012, p. 58, Fig. 6.

¹⁵ Unpublished material, rescue excavations conducted by author in 2020.

¹⁶ Kogălniceanu *et alii* 2016, p. 27–50.

¹⁷ Kogălniceanu, Simalcsik 2018, p. 33–75.

¹⁸ Comșa 1974, p. 199–221.

¹⁹ Lazăr *et alii* 2013, p. 67–88.

²⁰ Gligor 2009, p. 117–132; Panaitescu *et alii* 2008, p. 261–168; Gligor, McLeod 2015, p. 25–41; Gligor *et alii* 2018, p. 27–96; Fetcu *et alii* 2020, p. 500–517.

²¹ Bem 2015, p. 107–121.

²² Bem 2015, p. 35–41; Vasile 2015, p. 99–106.

²³ Dragoman 2009, p. 101.

²⁴ Strathern 1988.

²⁵ LiPiuma 1998, p. 53–79.

²⁶ Chapman *et alii* 2014, p. 41.

Evidence for mass graves with injuries and trauma were found all over Europe in the 6th and 5th millennia BC. Well documented cases are published from Els Trocs (Spain)²⁷, Talheim²⁸ and Herxheim²⁹ (Germany), Asparn/Schletz³⁰ (Austria) and Kuyavia region³¹ (northern Poland). At Talheim 34 individuals (men, women and children) were killed and buried at the same time; the alleged motives for the attack were blood feuds, abduction of women and children, scarcity of resources due to famine or climate changes, and neighbourhood disagreements³². Strontium isotope data suggested that at least three individuals spent their childhood in another location or gathered their food from another region³³. At Herxheim, 60.000 human bones were discovered representing at least 325 individuals³⁴. The authors assumed the post-mortem manipulation of the individuals as part of a complex multiphase mortuary rite rather than the expression of violence between individuals or evidence of cannibalism, as presumed earlier³⁵.

When reviewing the human bones from Şoimuş one observes that almost all age categories (infant, young and middle adult, old adult) and both sexes are represented (two males, five females and five indeterminate, with the minimum number of individuals of 15). In two cases evidence of injuries was remarked (Pl. II/5,6; VI/5), and as pathological conditions *cribra orbitalia* (Pl. IV/4) and the possible sign of a tumour were documented (Pl. VII/5). In the case of the infant from **Feature 202**, the human remains were associated with a shell bead necklace made of *Spondylus gaederopus* (Pl. IV/7). The fact that in several cases only a single or just a few bones from a person were found seems to fit the *pars pro toto principle*, as the part stands for the whole used in various ceremonies involving ancestors, or during inter-group exchanges³⁶.

CONCLUSIONS

One overall statement that could be made after reviewing the cases above is that all the cultures/traditions analysed (Vinča, Dudeşti, Foeni, Turdaş, Hamangia, Boian, Vădastra, etc.) yielded “normal” graves with or without grave goods, but also the category of human scattered/deposited bones inside settlements³⁷. The question to be answered is who were those people? Were they strangers/outcasts which did not deserve to be buried within the community? Were they merely ancestors whose bones were manipulated in some ceremonies?

For getting such answers we need to take our analysis at a higher level, e.g. to obtain strontium isotopes to see if they came from elsewhere. A recent study suggests that we should pass beyond the dichotomy of the “normal” graves – discarded/deposited bones, the latter being proof of the post-mortem manipulation of individuals “in the context of wider social practices which contributed to the creation and maintenance of identities”³⁸.

If we take a look at the general plan of the Şoimuş settlement we can see its evolution goes from an initial enclosed nucleus in the eastern part to the later stages of enclosure and dispersal of the community towards the west. We can observe that all the features that contained human remains (marked with blue colour) are positioned at the periphery of the settlement at a particular evolution stage (Pl. X). Maybe this could be an indicator that the individuals were outsiders, taking into consideration also the fact that some of the human bones present marks of interpersonal violence.

As we have seen above, a multitude of explanations were advanced for the post-mortem manipulation of the human remains in the Neolithic Europe, such as the metaphorical link between bodies and pottery as containers of life, conflicts over scarce resources, the skull cult, cannibalism, neighbourhood feuds, etc. Some of the authors try to change the stereotype of the peaceful Neolithic communities and to emphasise the possible conflicts, while others reject these scenarios and underline the ritual post-mortem manipulation of the human bones. In our opinion the key is to analyse every case study by itself and not try to obtain a general explanation for this phenomenon, which seems to be quite widely spread in Europe between 6th and 3rd millennia BC³⁹.

²⁷ Alt *et alii* 2020.

²⁸ Wahl, Trautmann 2012, p. 77–100.

²⁹ Orschiedt, Noël Heidle 2012, p. 121–137.

³⁰ Teschler-Nicola 2012, p. 101–119.

³¹ Lorkiewicz 2012, p. 51–75.

³² Wahl, Trautmann 2012, p. 99.

³³ Wahl, Trautmann 2012, p. 98.

³⁴ Orschiedt, Noël Heidle 2012, p. 124.

³⁵ Orschiedt, Noël Heidle 2012, p. 133–137.

³⁶ Chapman *et alii* 2014, p. 41.

³⁷ Schuster *et alii* 2008, p. 21–45.

³⁸ Ion 2020, p. 366.

³⁹ Schulting, Fibiger 2012, p. 1–15, Tab. 1.1.

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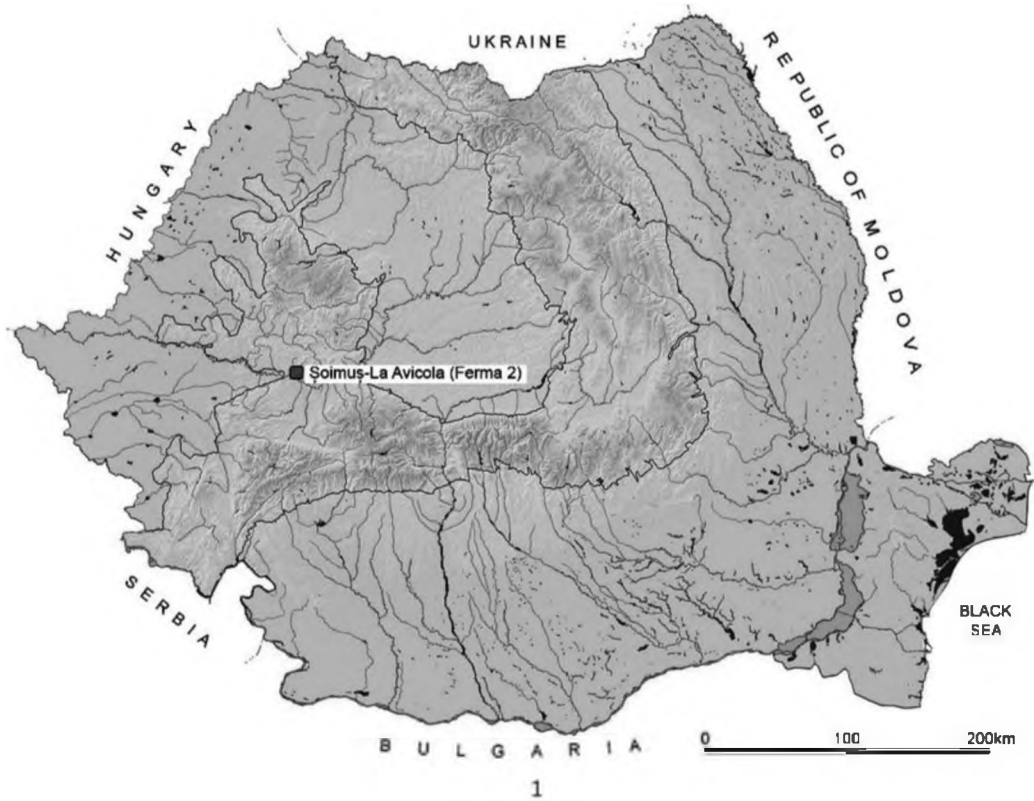


Plate I. 1. Topographic position of the settlement from *Șoimus-La Avicola (Ferma 2)*, Hunedoara County; 2. Aspects during the rescue archaeological research from *Șoimus-La Avicola (Ferma 2)*, Hunedoara County.

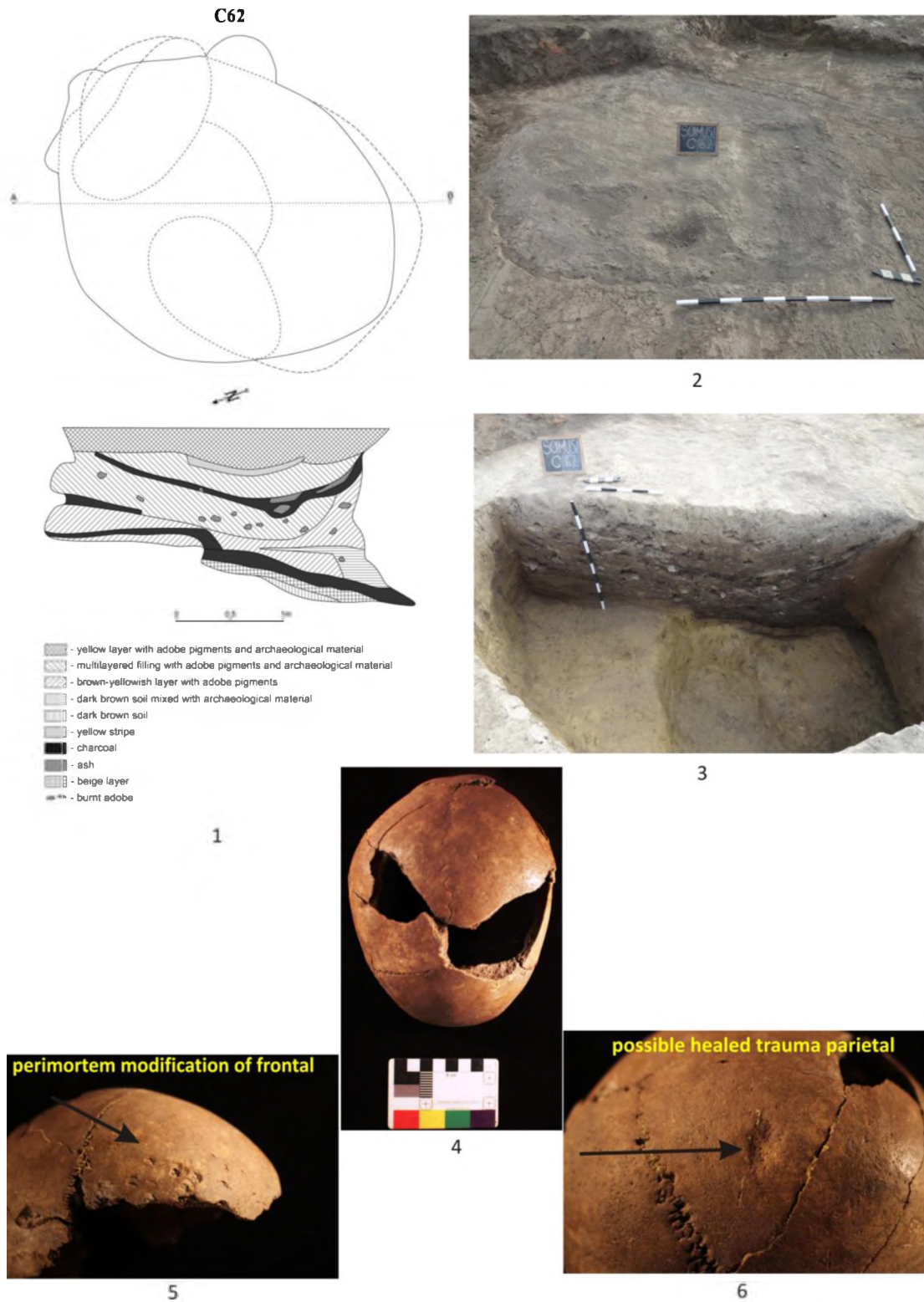
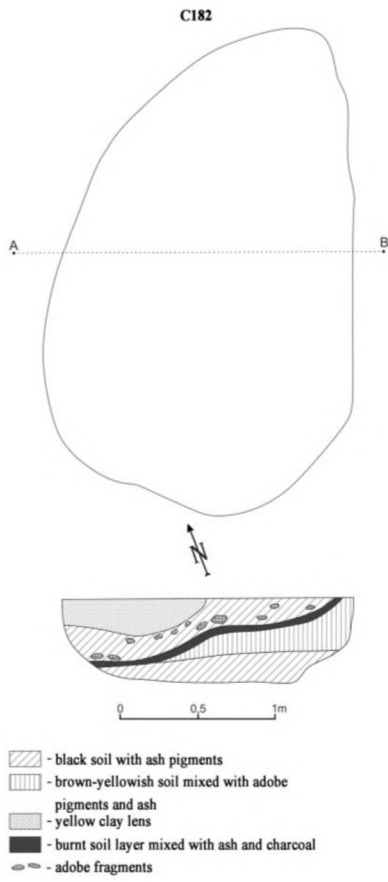
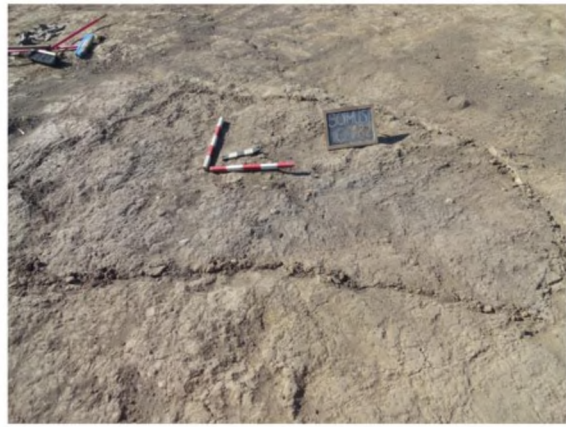


Plate II. 1–3. Feature 62 (drawing and photo); 4–6. Human skull with traces of interpersonal violence from Feature 62.



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Plate III. 1–3. Feature 182 (drawing and photo); 4–6. Fragmentary mandible from Feature 182.

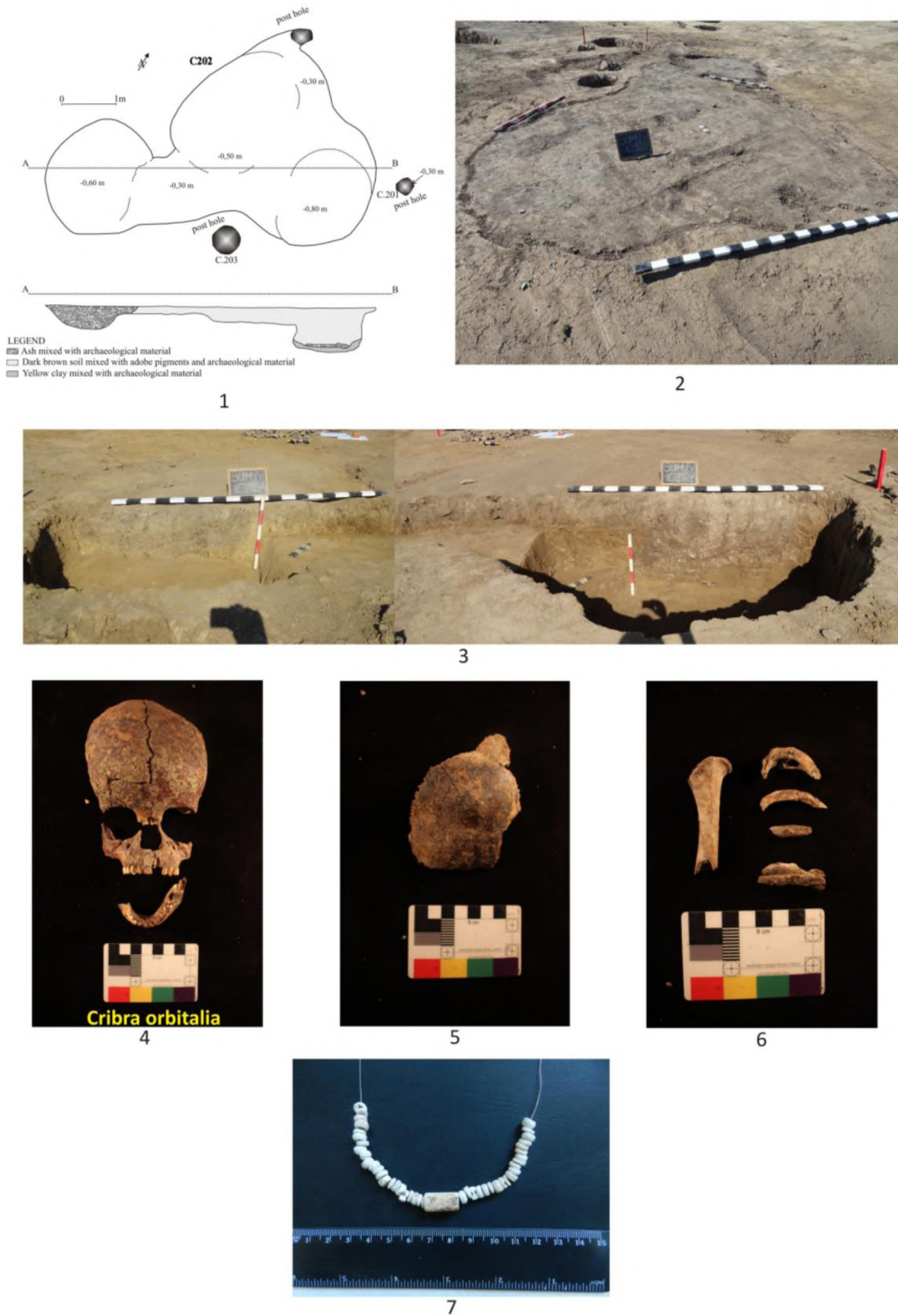
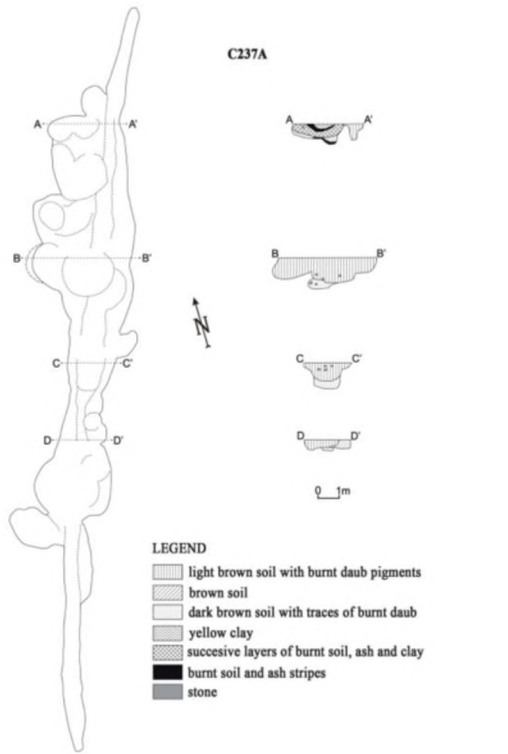


Plate IV. 1–3. Feature 202 (drawing and photo); 4–6. Human bones from Feature 202; 7. *Spondylus* beads necklace.



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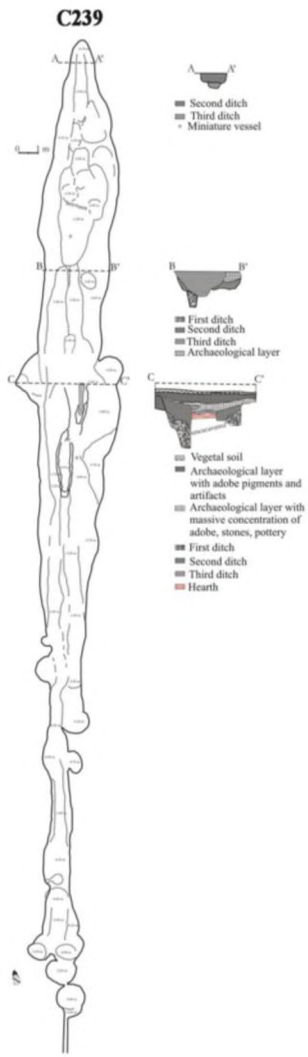


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Plate V. 1–4. Feature 237A (drawing and photo); 5, 6. Fragmentary mandible from Feature 237A.



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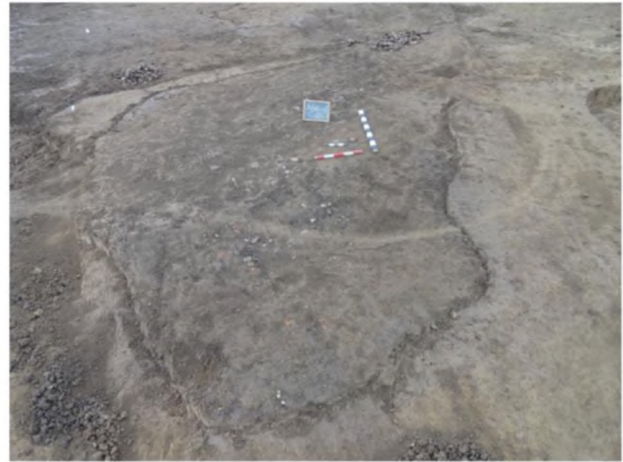
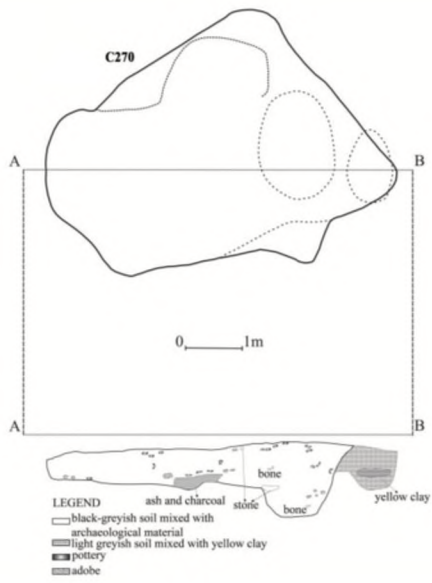


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Plate VI. 1–3. Feature 239 (drawing and photo); 4, 5. Human skull fragment with traces of interpersonal violence from Feature 239.



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Plate VII. 1-3. Feature 270 (drawing and photo); 4-6. Human bones from Feature 270.

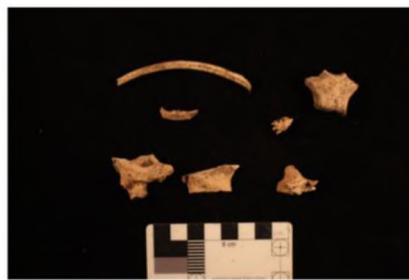
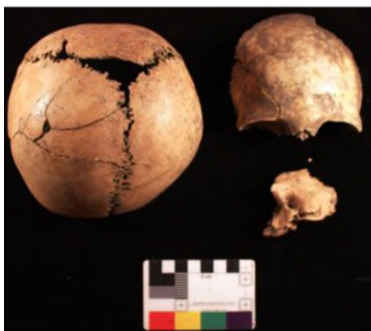
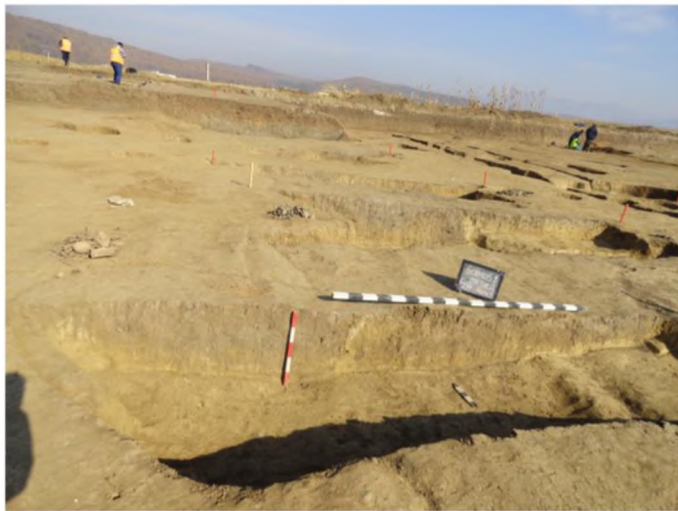
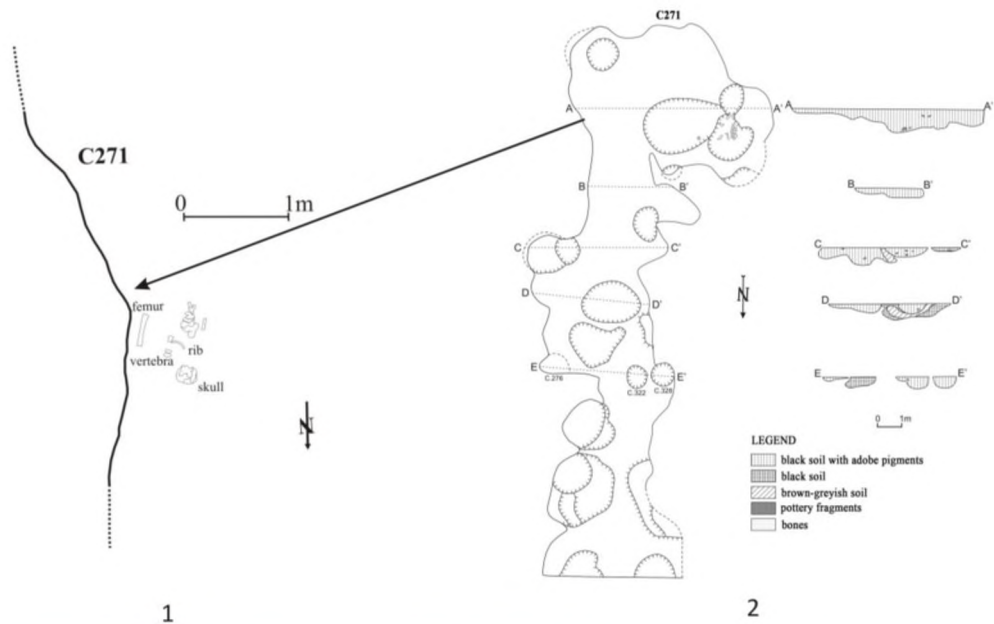


Plate VIII. 1–3. Feature 271 (drawing and photo); 4–7. Human bones from Feature 271.

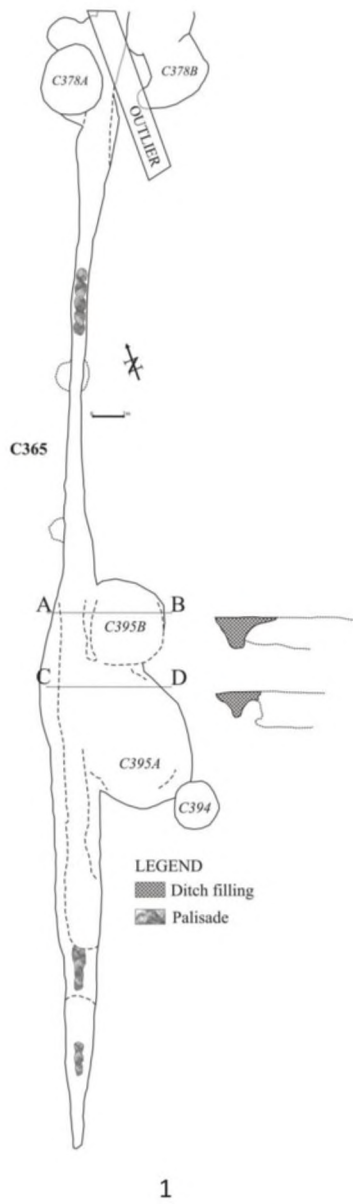


Plate IX. 1–3. Feature 365 (drawing and photo); 4. Fragmentary mandible from Feature 365; 5. Fragmentary mandible from the habitation layer.



Human bones from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2), Romania, in context

Plate X. General plan of excavations from Şoimuş-La Avicola (Ferma 2) with the features containing human bones (marked with blue colour)