

# NEW DATA ON THE LATE ROMAN CEMETERY (4<sup>TH</sup>–5<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES AD) FROM THE *EXTRA MUROS* BASILICA AT HISTRIA: BURIAL AND REBURIAL OF TWO YOUNG PEOPLE

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**Abstract:** This study presents an atypical burial from the Late Roman cemetery at Histria. During previous archaeological excavations at the same site and the Scythia Province, no such discoveries were identified. This case consists of a burial in a simple pit with coffin and ordinary inventory, and an atypical re-inhumation which disturbed the first skeleton. The anthropological analysis identified two individuals under 20 years old, who displayed musculo-skeletal markers of physical activity. This feature is less common for this age category.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Histria, arheologie funerară, înmormântare atipică, analiză antropologică

**Rezumat:** Studiul de față prezintă o înmormântare atipică din necropola romană târzie de la Histria. Atât în descoperirile arheologice precedente din acest sit, cât și din provincia Scythia, nu au fost documentate astfel de complexe funerare. În cazul de față s-a identificat o înmormântare în groapă simplă cu sicriu și inventar funerar modest și o reînhumare atipică care a deranjat scheletul precedent. Analiza antropologică a identificat doi indivizi sub 20 de ani, care au efectuat activități fizice intense în timpul vieții, aspect mai puțin normal pentru asemenea categorie de vârstă.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past 15 years, archaeological excavations at Histria shed light on a variety of ancient funerary practices. Among these, an inhumation grave identified in 2012 and excavated in 2018 appears to occupy a special place. During ordinary re-inhumations, the disturbed skeleton is usually placed commingled in a corner of the pit. In the case discussed below, unparalleled so far in Late Roman Dobrudja, the skeleton of a young male was reburied, mimicking an articulated skeleton, alongside that of an adolescent girl (the primary burial). The anthropological analysis identified bones from four individuals: skeleton 2 was buried first, later to be disturbed by skeleton 1, alongside bones from skeletons 3 and 4. Our aim is to explain the succession of the skeletons in the same pit and to correlate and interpret the archaeological and anthropological data.

## THE CEMETERIES OF THE *EXTRA MUROS* BASILICA. THE HISTORY OF THE EXCAVATIONS

First archaeological excavations in the *Basilica extra muros*<sup>1</sup> area started in 1914, under the supervision of Vasile Pârvan and some graves were found<sup>2</sup>. More excavations around this spot took place between 1950 and 1953<sup>3</sup> and 30 skeletons from disturbed graves were uncovered<sup>4</sup>; based on their inventories they were assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>5</sup>. In 1955–1956<sup>6</sup>, those excavations were extended by Emilian Popescu to the west of the area between the Hellenistic wall and the *Basilica extra muros*. Then the Early Christian basilica was unearthed along with three inhumation graves found to the east, in the cemetery yard<sup>7</sup>. In 1956, the same archaeologist supervised a north-south trench across the church: 13 graves were found, but only eight were excavated<sup>8</sup>. According to the excavator, some of them were dated to the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD and some to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Pârvan 1914, p. 118–119; Pârvan 1915a.

<sup>2</sup> Nubar 1971a, p. 203.

<sup>3</sup> Nubar 1970, p. 193; Nubar 1971a, p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> Nubar 1971a, p. 199

<sup>5</sup> Preda, Doicescu 1966, p. 331–332.

<sup>6</sup> Popescu 1957; 1959.

<sup>7</sup> Popescu 1959, p. 295.

<sup>8</sup> Popescu 1959, p. 293–294.

<sup>9</sup> Popescu 1959, p. 295.

During the excavations between 1961 and 1964 conducted by Nubar Hamparțumian<sup>10</sup>, some Early Roman (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD) monumental buildings were identified but also other 74 graves, 71 of which were excavated<sup>11</sup>. As a result, the archaeologist established the chronology of the findings in the *Basilica extra muros* area: a cemetery dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD and another one (contemporary with the basilica) from the end of 5<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>12</sup>.

The cemetery extended also to the south-west in the area of the former Early Roman baths (*Thermae II*) where 18 graves were discovered by Alexandru Suceveanu. From those, only ten were excavated and seven of them were dated to the 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>13</sup>.

New archaeological excavations at the *Basilica extra muros* started in 2001 boosted by Alexandru Suceveanu, the head of the Histria archaeological site at the time, and led by Viorica Rusu-Bolindeț<sup>14</sup>. Between 2008 and 2010, based on the collaboration with the South Sector team of archaeologists, the excavations focused on the southern side of the *Basilica extra muros*; 23 graves were found and only nine were excavated in that area. Based on this new research, Viorica Rusu-Bolindeț and her team proposed a new chronology of the funerary discoveries of the necropolises located in the area of the Early Christian basilica<sup>15</sup>, the first cemetery was dated between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, and the second one from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>16</sup>.

With 2011, in the area south and west of the *Basilica extra muros* (Pl. I/a), 32 graves were discovered and 13 were published<sup>17</sup>, most of them from the first cemetery.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

**Location.** The inhumation grave 29 (Pl. I/b) was found in the South Sector area in 2012 (Pl. II/c) (square C2, trench S3b) at 1.05 m depth. At that moment, only its eastern end was uncovered and a coin (Pl. II/d) from Emperor Gordian III was found, a possible grave good, very probable in a secondary position. The grave was excavated in 2018 at the same time as trench S16.

**Orientation of the burial.** The inhumation grave 29 has the cardinal position of WSW–ENE (Pl. II/e–f).

**The pit** (without any stone or tile construction) has a rectangular shape with the dimensions of 1.65 × 0.55 m (Pl. II/a–b). The soil matrix consisted of yellow silty clay with tile fragments, mortar, and limestone rubble<sup>18</sup>. The

bottom of the burial pit (Pl. IV/b) overlapped the southern wall of the Early Roman building (dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), which is indicative together with the funerary inventory, of the 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. In the pit filling, along with the above-mentioned coin, five iron nails were found on the sides of skeleton 2 (Pl. IV/a, e), which indicate the presence of a coffin. Also, some animal bones (cattle, birds, fish and shells) and atypical ceramics, both from the Early and Late Roman periods, were found (not illustrated).

**The skeletons.** Skeleton 1 (Pl. III) was not articulated, but skeleton 2 was in dorsal decubitus position with the lower limbs stretched and parallel. The skull of skeleton 1 (with SW-NE orientation) was deposited over that of skeleton 2. Skeleton 1 was found at 0.90 m depth, the pelvic bones at 1.00 and the lower limbs at 1.05 m; the skull of skeleton 2 was observed at 0.93 m. During the archaeological excavation, no second pit of intervention and no animal disturbance were observed (Pl. IV/a).

**The grave goods** (Pl. IV/a, c–d) consist of one bronze ring and four glass beads. The ring (Pl. V/a–b) has a maximum diameter of 1.7 cm, a width of 0.2 cm but at the superior part the width is 1.1 cm and the thickness is 0.1 cm; the object was made from a flat bronze strip and joined by hammering at the superior side. The third left hand phalanx of skeleton 2 presents bronze colouration and was found in the lower area of the pit.

Bead 1 (Pl. V/c–d) has a diameter of 2.1 cm, a wall thickness of 0.7 cm, a height of 1.9 cm and the perforation hole of 0.7 cm; it is dark blue in colour and geometric patterns decorate its surface.

Bead 2 (Pl. V/e–f) has a diameter of 1.3 cm, a height of 1.2 cm with a perforation hole of 0.2 cm.

Bead 3 (Pl. V/g–h) has a diameter of 1.2 cm, a height of 0.9 cm with a perforation hole of 0.2 cm; both beads are dark blue.

Bead 4 (Pl. V/i–j) is tubular with a diameter of 0.9 cm, a height of 2.6 cm, a wall thickness of 0.2 cm with a perforation hole of 0.5 cm and is dark blue and decorated with a glass thread.

All four beads were found in secondary position in the lower area of the pit. These kinds of objects are dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. By comparison, the same kind of rings was found at the Late Roman necropolis from *Callatis* and they are included in the category of simple bronze rings, without *chaton*, the type with overlapped ends<sup>19</sup>. The beads also have analogues at the same site, the first being included in the category of beads with

<sup>10</sup> Nubar 1970; 1971a; 1971b.

<sup>11</sup> See the last paper of Crețu *et alii* 2020, *passim* (based on the archive of excavations).

<sup>12</sup> Nubar 1971b *apud* Rusu-Bolindeț *et alii* 2014b, p. 258; Rusu-Bolindeț *et alii* 2014a, p. 203.

<sup>13</sup> Suceveanu 1982, p. 36–37, fig. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Rusu-Bolindeț, Bădescu 2003–2005; Rusu-Bolindeț *et alii* 2014a; 2014b.

<sup>15</sup> Rusu-Bolindeț, Bădescu 2003–2005, p. 104–112.

<sup>16</sup> Rusu-Bolindeț, Bădescu 2003–2005, p. 118–119.

<sup>17</sup> Dabîca 2014, p. 136–137, pl. 4–7.

<sup>18</sup> For the recording system of burials at Histria and elsewhere, see Pavel 2010, p. 133–134.

<sup>19</sup> Preda 1980, M 101, p. 93, 193, pl. LXIII/101/1.

painted decoration<sup>20</sup>; the second and the third being spheroidal beads<sup>21</sup>, and the fourth falls into the category of tubular glass beads<sup>22</sup>. More analogies can be found at the necropolis in Beroe<sup>23</sup>, with bead 1 belonging to the type I5 B&C, beads 2 and 3 to the type I1 D, while bead 4 is included in the type II3 A.

### ANTHROPOLOGICAL DATA

A human osteological handbook was used for identification and description of the bones and their sides<sup>24</sup>. Age at death was estimated based on the age of fusion of long bones, the ossification of the sphenoccipital synchondrosis<sup>25</sup>, and maximum length of the long bone's diaphysis<sup>26</sup>. Sex determination was assigned by pelvic bones features<sup>27</sup>.

**Skeleton 1** (Pl. VII) is well preserved with an intact surface. The skull is complete, but the mandible is broken at the level of the right first premolar. The left maxillary canine and first left mandibular incisor are missing; third molars started to erupt. Both scapulae are complete with low erosion on the edges. Humeri are complete but the left one has broken parts in the proximal area, and both proximal unfused epiphyses were found. The radii and ulnae are also complete with the left distal unfused epiphysis of left radius present. The phalanges from hands were identified. All the vertebrae are present and only two thoracic ones display cracks. The majority of the ribs are mostly fragmentary, but five of them from the right side were complete. The sacrum is broken in two, both *os coxae* are present but the left one is broken in three fragments. From femurs, the left one has the distal end broken and both trochanters and distal epiphyses are not fused. Both patellae are present. The right tibia presents a broken area on the tuberosity and the left one has missing parts in the proximal area; the unfused proximal and distal epiphyses are present. The fibulae show missing parts at the distal ends. From feet bones, both talus bones are complete, where as some phalanges and calcanei are fragmentary.

Age-at-death for this skeleton is 20 years based on the following observations: third molars are close to erupting; a sphenoccipital synchondrosis is not closed, the medial epicondyle of humeri, proximal epiphyses of radius and ulna or femoral head are not fused.

The skull and pelvic bones features indicate a male.

The identified palaeopathological change is enamel hypoplasia on the maxillary incisors and canines but also on the mandibular canines (Pl. VI/a). On the superior margin of the fifth lumbar vertebra an osteophyte was

identified (Pl. VI/b). Pronounced muscular insertions were observed on both clavicles (*Pectoralis Major*) (Pl. VI/c–d), on humeri (*Latissimus Dorsi* and *Pectoralis Major*) (Pl. VI/e), and on radii (*Pronator Teres*) and ulnae (*Membrana Interossea*).

**Skeleton 2** (Pl. VII) is also in a good condition. The skull was partially reconstructed (only for the frontal, parietal bones, and occipital); the basilar side is the most affected by decrepitude. The mandible was broken under the right canine. The scapulae are complete but with some erosion. The left clavicle is complete, but the right one has the sternal end broken. From the sternum just one fragment of the manubrium is present. The vertebral column preserved five cervical, eight thoracic and five lumbar vertebrae. Five complete ribs from the right side and seven from the left were identified. The humeri are complete with the proximal epiphyses present, but the distal ones are missing. The left and right radius do not have epiphyses present. The sacrum and coccyx are complete. The femurs show some damage at the distal areas, but for both were recovered the femoral heads, left trochanter, and distal epiphyses. The ilium, ischium, and pubis from both sides are present. Only the right patella was found. From the tibiae, the right one is broken at the proximal end. The left fibula is complete and the right one has the proximal end missing. Bones from hands and feet are also present, including the calcanei and tali.

The great sciatic notch is open and the cranial features indicate a female. The epiphyses are not fused, and the diaphysis lengths indicate the age-at-death is between 14 to 16 years old.

As for the paleopathology indicators, enamel hypoplasia on the maxillary incisors and the left canine was identified. On the humeri, significant muscular insertions of the *Pectoralis Major* and *Latissimus Dorsi* muscles were identified (Pl. VI/f).

**Skeleton 3** is represented by the right femur from an indeterminate adult (Pl. VI/g) with the great trochanter area missing, displaying bite marks from canids on the diaphysis and the femoral head (Pl. VI/h); it is broken in the distal metaphysis area.

**Skeleton 4** is a non-adult of 10 years of age identified by the left femur, a distal epiphysis, left and right ilium, both pubis, right ischium, three fragments of sacrum, and three epiphyses (Pl. VI/i).

### RESULTS OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The anthropological analysis of skeleton 1 indicates intense physical activity during life, perhaps lifting heavy

<sup>20</sup> Preda 1980, M352, M209, M262, M329, pl. XXVI.

<sup>21</sup> Preda 1980, M319, M356, M358, pl. XXVII.

<sup>22</sup> Preda 1980, M331, p. 177, pl. XXVII, p. 177, pl. XLVII/1; M250, pl. XXVIII.

<sup>23</sup> Petre 1987, pl. 149.

<sup>24</sup> White *et alii* 2012, p. 43–294.

<sup>25</sup> White *et alii* 2012, p. 395; Mirițoiu, Soficar 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Bernert *et alii* 2007, *passim*.

<sup>27</sup> White *et alii* 2012, p. 408–418.

weights and mostly from the upper limbs. All these are corroborated by the muscular insertions of these bones but also by the osteophyte from the fifth lumbar vertebra. The same kind of insertions can be identified also on the skeleton 2 humeri but less marked. Both skeletons display the same type of upper limbs musculoskeletal stress markers for young age, which is unusual. In various societies in the world, such markers indicate the participation of adolescents in activities related to agriculture<sup>28</sup>.

From the view of the archaeoanatomical interpretation of the skeletons<sup>29</sup>, the aim was to establish the chronological sequence of the burials and bone manipulation (Pl. VII–IX). Skeleton 2 was buried first (in dorsal decubitus) and most of the bones were articulated: the mandible, vertebral column, bones of the upper and lower right limb were in place. Skeleton 1 was buried subsequently disturbing some of the bones of skeleton 2: the ribs, the left humerus and the scapulae. At an ulterior moment, the left side of the skull fractured. When skeleton 1 was placed in the grave mostly in the area of the lower limbs of skeleton 2, various bones from skeletons 3 and 4 were also added. None of the bones exhibit any *antemortem* cutmarks or fractures. The adult femur of skeleton 3 displays a very distinct taphonomy which indicates that prior to its deposition in this grave, it originated in a different environmental *milieu*, including perhaps a period spent exposed at the surface. This bone, alongside the non-adult bones of skeleton 4, was buried when the pit was refilled.

This type of re-inhumation, with one skeleton buried first and the second one commingled on top of it, had not been identified yet at other sites from *Scythia Minor*. The type of grave, including the presence of the coffin, and the orientation and skeletons position of the skeleton 2 are common elements to the funerary behaviour during the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>30</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

At first glance, a re-inhumation is easily documented and explained: a pack of bones in one of the corners of a pit together with a complete skeleton. In fact, of the numerous discoveries of graves from the *Scythia Province*<sup>31</sup>, not all provided good archaeological contexts, photos from the period of excavation and anthropological studies. The case presented above meets all of these.

At Histria, at the moment of discovery<sup>32</sup> grave 18 was described as a re-inhumation. Another site with securely contextualized re-inhumations is Slava Rusă, where two

graves with comingled bones were identified in 2010. They have similar dimensions and in each of them were found bones from four different individuals. It is very possible that human bones were removed from disused graves when the 4<sup>th</sup> century wall was built<sup>33</sup>. At Callatis, grave 323 contains one articulated adult skeleton and other two were packed in the north-west corner<sup>34</sup>.

At Histria, in the case of grave 29, in order to offer a valid explanation for the second burial and the bone manipulation, an extensive analysis of all options has to be undertaken. If the two individuals died together, they would have been buried in the same pit, one on top of the other or one next to the other; this would have been a double inhumation. If individual 1 was interred as a body (not like a skeleton), the bones of skeleton 2 would have been re-located to one of the pit corners; this would have represented a typical re-inhumation. To the contrary, skeleton 2 was left in the same place and sometime later, when the body skeletonised, the bones of skeleton 1 were buried, with the long bones placed over the lower limbs of skeleton 2, and the skull over the skull of skeleton 2. At that moment, the grave goods and some of the bones of skeleton 2 were disturbed, but the skull, vertebral column, and bones from the lower limbs remained undisturbed. Length-wise, the pit matches the height of individual 2, who was buried in a coffin.

Their lower social/economic status is indicated by the ordinary burial in a simple pit and without any other constructions, the common inventory, the young age at death, the muscular insertions (atypical for people under 20 years) and the enamel hypoplasia, a sign of deprivation<sup>35</sup>. Using the same pit for the second burial indicates perhaps kinship among the individuals buried, because the people who buried them may have remembered the place.

The tomb M29/2018 within the *Basilica extra muros* cemetery and its atypical reburial show that between two individuals of low social status, a bond of such strength can exist (whether rooted in familial or perhaps religious ties) as to warrant unusual mortuary practices.

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<sup>28</sup> Guzik 2016, p. 69–71.

<sup>29</sup> Duday 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Soficaru, Sofaer 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Soficaru 2011, p. 133.

<sup>32</sup> Crețu *et alii* 2020, p. 152, pl. 11/b–c, p. 171.

<sup>33</sup> Iacob *et alii* 2011, p. 130.

<sup>34</sup> Preda 1980, p. 111, pl. VIII, p. 142.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis 2018, p. 84–85.

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a



b

**Plate I.** a. General plan of Histria. Location of the South Sector (after Suceveanu 2007); b. South Sector general plan with the position of M29/2018.



a



b



c



d



e



f

**Plate II.** a–b. Grave-pit of M29/2018; c–d. Grave of M29/2018 in 2012 when first observed; e. Grave M29/2018 – general view from the west; f. Grave M29/2018 – detail from the north.



a



b



c



d



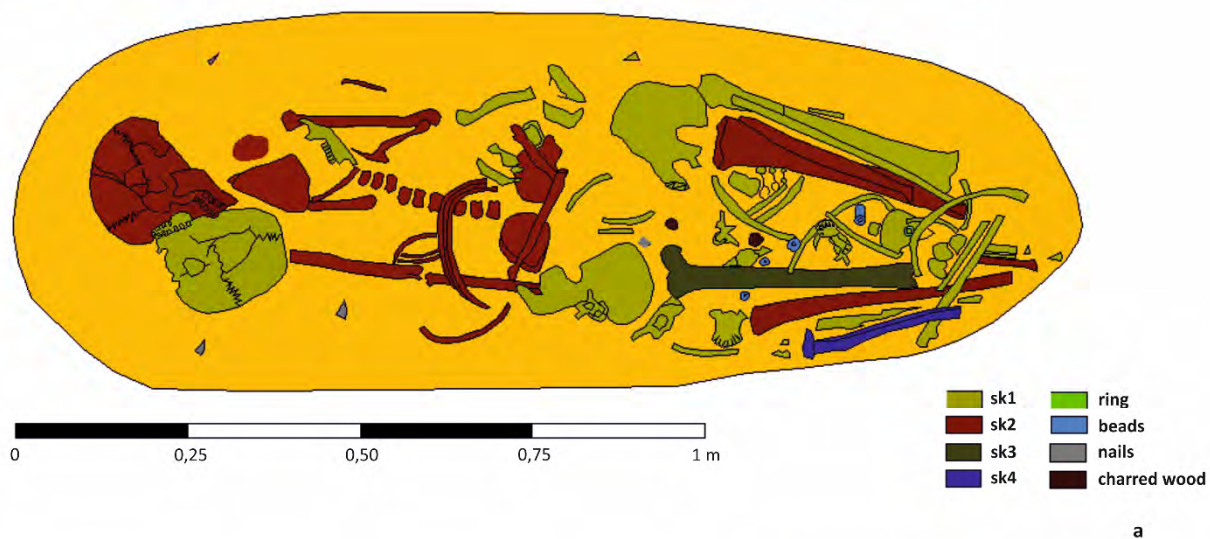
e



f

**Plate III.** Grave M29/2018. a. General view from the east; b. General view from the west; c. Detail of the upper parts of the skeletons (view from east); d. Detail of the lower parts of the skeletons (view from east); e. Detail from the north; f. Detail from the north.





**Plate IV.** a. Grave M29/2018 – ground plan; b. The M29/2018 grave-pit overlapping the wall of an Early Roman building; c. Bronze ring discovered in situ; d. Glass beads discovered in situ; e. Iron nail discovered in situ.



a



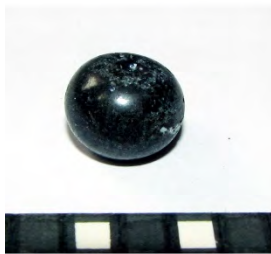
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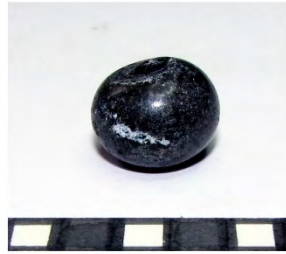
c



d



e



f



g



h

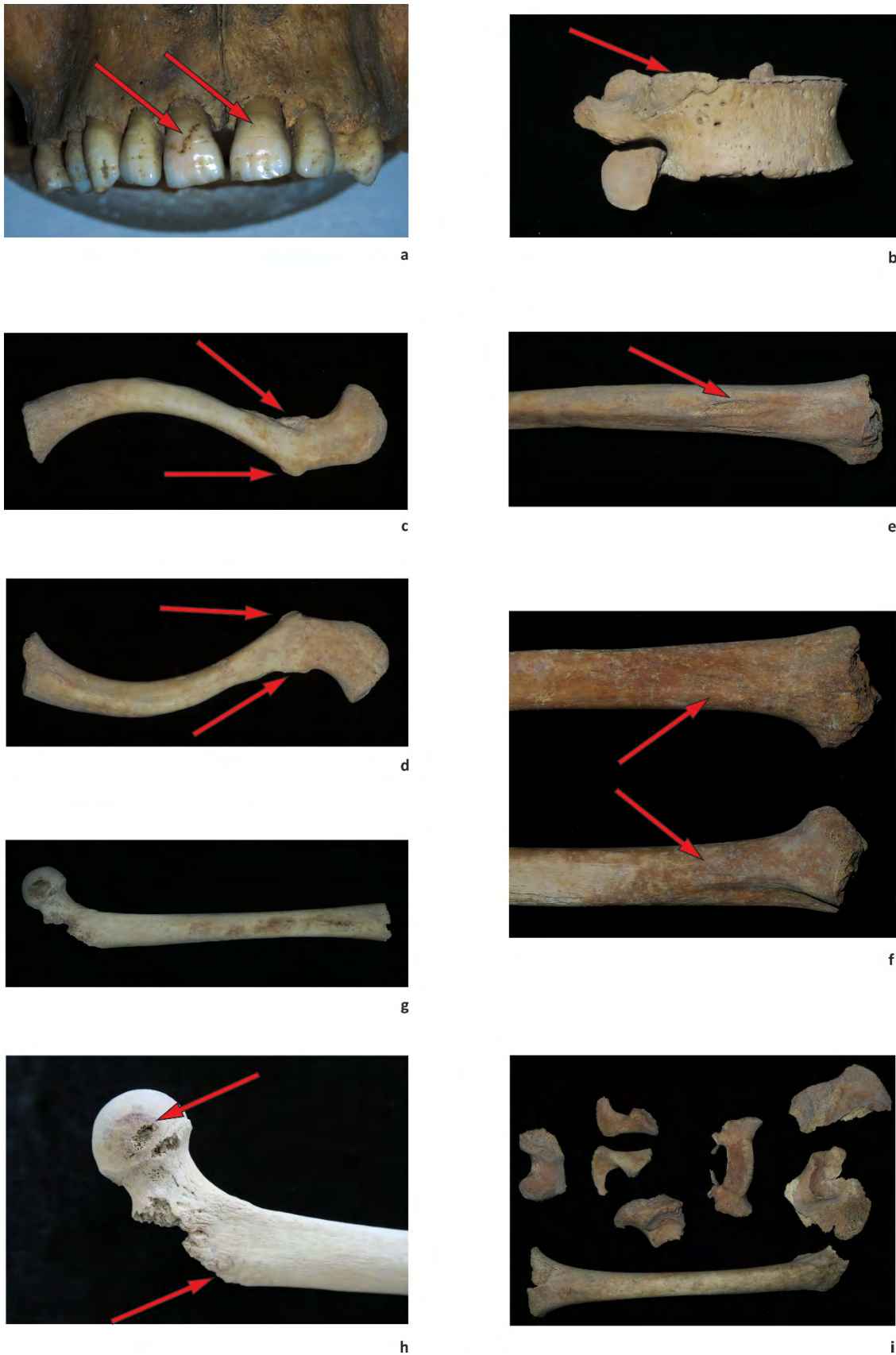


i



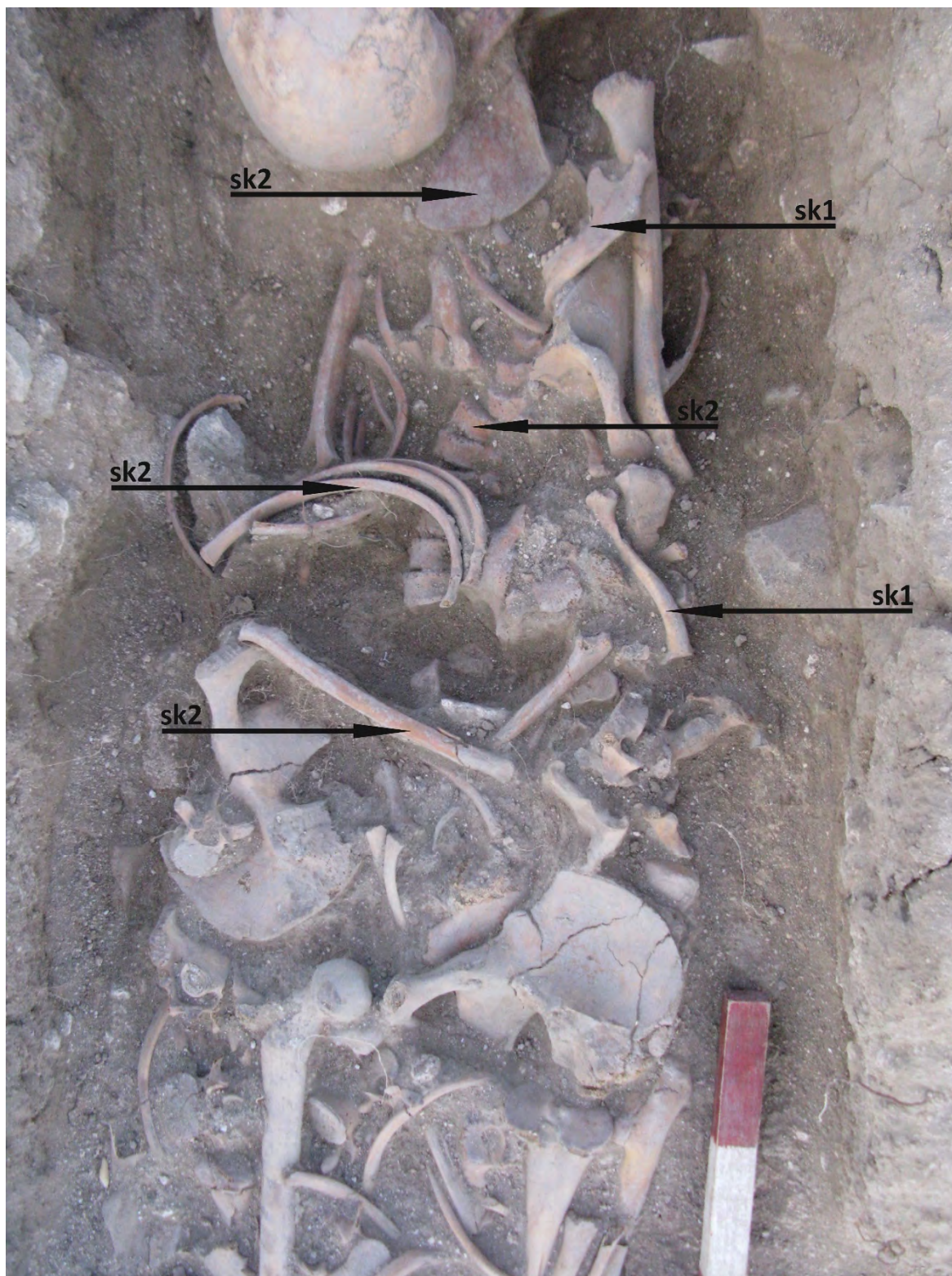
j

Plate V. Grave goods. a–b. Bronze ring; c–d. Glass bead 1; e–f. Glass bead 2; g–h. Glass bead 3; i–j. Glass bead 4.



**Plate VI.** Anthropological analyses. A. M29/1 skeleton: a. Enamel hypoplasia on the maxillary incisors; b. Osteophyte on the upper edge of the fifth lumbar vertebra; c–d. Muscular insertions on the right clavicle, superior and inferior view; e. Muscular insertions on the right humerus; B. M29/2 skeleton: f. Muscular insertions on humeri; C. M29/3 skeleton: g. Adult right femur; h. Detail of the adult right femur with bite marks from canids on the diaphysis and the femoral head; D. M29/4 skeleton: i. Non-adult bones.





**Plate VIII.** Distribution of the bones of the identified skeletons, superior half.



**Plate IX.** Distribution of the bones of the identified skeletons, inferior half.