

NEW DATA ABOUT THE THRACIAN CULT PRACTICES AT THE WEST TO RHODOPA MOUNTAIN IN THE I MILLENNIUM B.C.

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The problems of the thracian cult practices, and mostly those connected with sanctuary activity, have been subject of special interest for the Bulgarian archaeologists since the beginning of the 70s. There are some general trends in the investigations of the cult places dated in the 1st millennium B.C. from the whole territory of the Ancient Thrace. The most important in this stage of research are the questions about localization of the sanctuaries and about the criteria for definition and distinguishing them from other archaeological sites¹⁾. The next tendency of the scientific investigations is connected with the efforts to make up a typological scheme of the different sacred places and to trace out their evolution²⁾. In some cases the attention of the authors is focused on the characteristic features of the cult practices at a certain sanctuary, its similarity with and difference from other cult places and attempts to explain more precisely the religious beliefs of the thracian tribes for every single site³⁾.

One of the profoundly explored territories, as far as the thracian cult practices are concerned, is the Rhodopa mountain and especially its western part. Surface surveys and archaeological excavations at thracian sacred sites have been carried out in this region for more than 20 years. There is good basis for more general conclusions⁴⁾.

The purpose of this paper is to present some of the results from the investigations of the thracian sanctuary near the village of Babyak /Nord-West Rhodopa mountain/ (Map 1). For 6 years, regular archaeological digging here gave answers to a lot of questions connected with the problems of the thracian cult practices. The aim of the author is to consider some of the characteristic constructions found at the site as a reflection of the human religious activity during the 1st millennium B.C. They are important for specifying the chronology of the same type of constructions found at other thracian cult and burial sites⁵⁾.

The cult place itself is located on a high mountain top, with steep slopes and three rock culminations, connected by saddles (Fig. 1)⁶⁾. It dominates over the landscape in the neighboring area. The central culmination is the highest one. Archaeological artefacts have been found all over the peak. The most characteristic features show that the cult place is from the so called mountain rock sanctuaries type⁷⁾. Different sectors of the site have been explored up to now, so the hypothesis about the configuration of the elements of the sanctuary during the period of its using can be formulated.

The most interesting results have been achieved in the archaeological research at the flat ground, between the highest and northern culminations, just to the edge of

the slope. The digging area of about one hundred square meters demonstrated that there is a thick cultural layer /2.50–3.00 m/ (Fig. 2). Well traced out vertical stratigraphy here allows us to make more precise the chronology of the comparable constructions found at the separate parts of the sanctuary or on some other sites.

The earliest remains from human activity at this place are from the Early Iron Age /about ninth century B.C./. Firstly, this is a line of big stones arranged parallelly to the edge of the slope. This construction is well dated by many pottery fragments found here. The aim of the stones is to stop the sliding down of the ground. It is interesting that one cannot trace out this stone construction in all the investigated area.

The ground inside the area lined by the stones toward the highest culmination of the peak has been leveled several times with light brown clay-like soil. The main colour of the soil at the investigated part of the sanctuary is dark grey, with greasy consistence. The results of the analysis have not been ready yet, but the preliminary observations proved that this earth is quite different from the soils characteristics for highlands⁸⁾. This kind of earth is result of the rotting or/and burning of organic materials here⁹⁾.

Some different types of clay constructions provisionally named "putty" were discovered at the same part of the sanctuary. They are located in the space between the rocks to the East and the steep slope to the West. Some of them are partly destroyed by the modern building works and it is impossible to define the exact forms and connections among them. It is difficult to trace out their stratigraphic position in comparison with stone construction mentioned above. Generally, speaking the putties laid in the upper layer, eastwards to the stone line. There are several kinds of clay constructions. A common feature of all clay putties is the existence of a layer with coal-pieces and ceramics shreds, very occasionally bones, just over their upper surfaces. Undoubtedly, the constructions were connected with the thracian cult practices. Some of them were made *in situ* and others were brought here after use from the different points of the sanctuary. There is a sequence of the cult practices at some of these constructions. The state of the clay and the remains above or around them allow us to connect the putties with rites of sacrifice. There are clear traces of fire in several vases /burnt upper surface like brick/, but there are examples of a different type of ritual. Probably these constructions were primitive clay altars associated with rites of sacrifice.

The assumption that all the place, between the line of crude stones to the West and rock slope to the East, had been used like one large altar seems quite possible, too. The fact that the clay and stone constructions have not been discovered northwards to this area confirms this hypothesis. Similar primitive altars that can be chronologically connected with the sanctuary of Babyak have been known from neighboring territories¹⁰⁾.

A part of the wall orientated from North to South has been discovered in the most southern quarter of the excavated area (Fig. 3). It is built of big stones and rock pieces, with well formed banquette. Just one face /to the West/ has been evidenced. The aim of this wall is probably to stop the soil sliding down, but it is more carefully made in comparison with stone lines found deeper to the North from it. Just to the east of the wall one of the biggest putty /about two square meters/ is located. The same kind of

putty, but with smaller dimensions and yet deeper to the west of the wall is discovered, too (Fig. 4). The connections between them /or a putty destroyed by the wall/ is not completely traced out, but it is easy to see that the wall was erected after the putty has been laid in this part of the sanctuary. It is quite probable that this wall is a part of building /?/. The spot of hard light grey dry earth inside it with unknown purpose /debris from rituals, maybe/ has been discovered (Fig. 4).

Changes of the cult practices at the sanctuary after the end of the Early Iron Age /about 6th c. B.C./ took place. The habit to carry out sacrifice here seems to be interrupted. At the beginning of the Late Iron Age a stone wall around the highest part of the peak and the North culmination was erected. There is no constructive connection between the wall mentioned above and the new one. These walls are different in their functions and time of erection. This problem will be solved more decisively when all the results from the excavations of the parts of the sanctuary between the walls are published¹¹⁾.

At the investigated zone above the putties a strip of different by their dimensions stones put in 3–5 levels without any order, parallelly to the edge of the slope has been located. The stones are crude, non manufactured, the pile width is about 6–8 meters and it has been found at different sectors near the West end of the site. It is partly destroyed by the modern building works but one can draw out some conclusions about its main characteristic features¹²⁾. Many artefacts, ceramics shreds and vessels, bones, charcoals had been discovered among the stones. The soil here is mostly dark grey with greasy consistence, but there are spots with dry, light brown and grey earth in the stone heap. It is interesting to point out that there are not imported materials or coins here. This fact and results from analysis of the types of gifts confirm the hypothesis that the people who visited the sanctuary had followed old traditions¹³⁾. All data shows that this is the place where the gifts and the debris from sacrifice were kept. The materials which can be dated later than the 1st c. B.C. have not been discovered here¹⁴⁾.

The brief look at the results from the excavations at a part of the sanctuary near Babyak allows us to draw out some conclusions. The beginning of the human activity here is dated in the first phase of the Early Iron Age. A clear tendency to change the sanctuary constructions depending on their functions during different periods of use is evident. For instance, the walls at the site are used to stop the earth sliding, to mark sacred area /temenos/ and to be part of a building, probably. There are many common features between cult practices of the Babyak sanctuary and other cult places like walls, stone piles, dispersed ceramics shreds etc¹⁵⁾. But there are a lot of basic differences. For example, the cult pits considered by the scholars as a very significant feature of the sacred activity of the thracian tribes were absent here¹⁶⁾. We can explain this fact with chronological distinction but it isn't understandable why the imported vessels and coins – artefacts so typical for cult sites after the 6th c. B.C. in Thrace, are missing in our case¹⁷⁾. All the data known up to now show that the sanctuary near Babyak has played an important role among other cult places in the Rhodopa region. The real position of the sanctuary in the system of the thracian religious practices will be defined after the complete publication of the results from all the up to now investigated cult places in Ancient Thrace.

NOTES

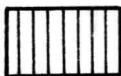
1. Domaradski M., *Sanctuaires thraces du Ile - Ier millénaire av.n.è.*, Acta Archaeologica Carpathica, t. XXV 1986, p. 100-103; idem, *Trakijskata Kultura prez kasnoželjzaznata epocha v Rodopite i gornite porečija na Marica, Mesta i Struma*, Trakijskata Kultura v Rodopite i gornite porečija na Marica, Mesta i Struma, Smoljan 1990, 34-36; Delev P., *Problemi na trakijskite megalitni pametnici, Megaliti v Trakija*, čast 2, Trakija Pontica/Trakiiski pametnici, T. 3, Sofija, 1982, 416-417; Najdenova V., *Skalnite svetilišta v Drevna Trakija*, Poseliščen život v Trakija. Vtori nacionalen simpozium, Jambol, 1986, 16 sqq.
2. Domaradski M., *Trakijskata kultura v dolinite na r. Marica i r. Tundža/IV v. pr.n.e. - I v. ot n.e.*, in print.
3. Domaradski M., *Sanctuaries thraces...*, p. 92-100; idem, *Ravnoatrakijska keramika ot kultov obeki v m. Skaleto pri s. Cranča, Blagoevgradski okrag*, Archeologija, XXVIII, 1986, 2, 10-24; idem *Pametnici na trakijskata kultura po gornogo tečenje na reka Mesta*, pod pečat; Gergova D., *Deset godini proučuvanija v Sborjanovo*, Chelis I, Sofija, 1992, 12-14 and lit.
4. Domaradski M., *Trakijskata kultura prez kasnoželjzaznata epocha v Rodopite...*, 34-40; Kis'ov K., *Skalni svetilišta v Rodopite i Gornotrakijskata nizina, predstaveni s archeologičeski materiali i obeke ot Smoljansko i Plovdivsko*, Trakijskata kultura v Rodopite i gornite porečija na Marica, Mesta i Struma, Smoljan, 1990, 64-70, obr. 5.
5. The trial excavation at this site is started in 1983 by M. Domaradski. Since 1985 a new team under his leadership has been organized. Since 1988 archaeological research at the sanctuary has been led by M. Tonkova and A. Gotzev. The results of investigation up to now are published in: Domaradski M., *Trakijskata kultura prez kasnoželjzaznata epocha v Rodopite...*, 34-40 and lit.; idem, *Pametnici na trakijskata kultura po gornoto tečenje na reka Mesta*, in print.
6. The plate is prepared by engineer N. Tonkov from the Bulgarian Academy of Science – Sofia.
7. Domaradski M., *Trakijskata kultura prez kasnoželjzaznata epocha v Rodopite...*, 34.
8. *Geografija na Balgarija. Fizičeska geografija. Prirodni uslovia i resursi*, Izdatelstvo na BAN, Sofija, 1982, pp. 403-405.
9. Information from assistant lecturer from Biological Department at the University of Sofia, S. Chakarov.
10. Rupp D.W., *Reflections on the Development of Altars in the Eight Century B.C.*, The Greek Renaissance of the Eight century B.C., ed. by Robin Hagg, Stockholm 1983, pp. 101-104, fig. 1, 2 and lit.
11. Results of the investigations of M. Tonkova and M. Domaradski not published yet.
12. The most full reconstruction and interesting issues about way of erection of this stone construction in: Domaradski M., *Pametnici na trakijskata kultura po gornovo tečenje na reka Mesta*, in print.
13. Domaradski M. et al, *Razkopki na trakijskoto svetilište v m. "Babjaška mogila"*, s. Babjak, Blagoevgradski okrag, Archeologiceski otkritija i razkopki prez 1985., Veliko Tyrново, 1986, 52.
14. Look footnote No. 11.
15. Kis'ov K., *Skalni svetilišta v Rodopite...*, 65.
16. Domaradski M., *Ravnoatrakijska keramika ot kultov obeke...*, pp. 10; idem, *Sanctuaires thraces...*, pp. 92-95.
17. Kis'ov K., *Skalni svetilišta v Rodopite...*, 66-67.



– dark grey soil, with greasy consistence



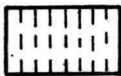
– spot of hard, light grey dry earth



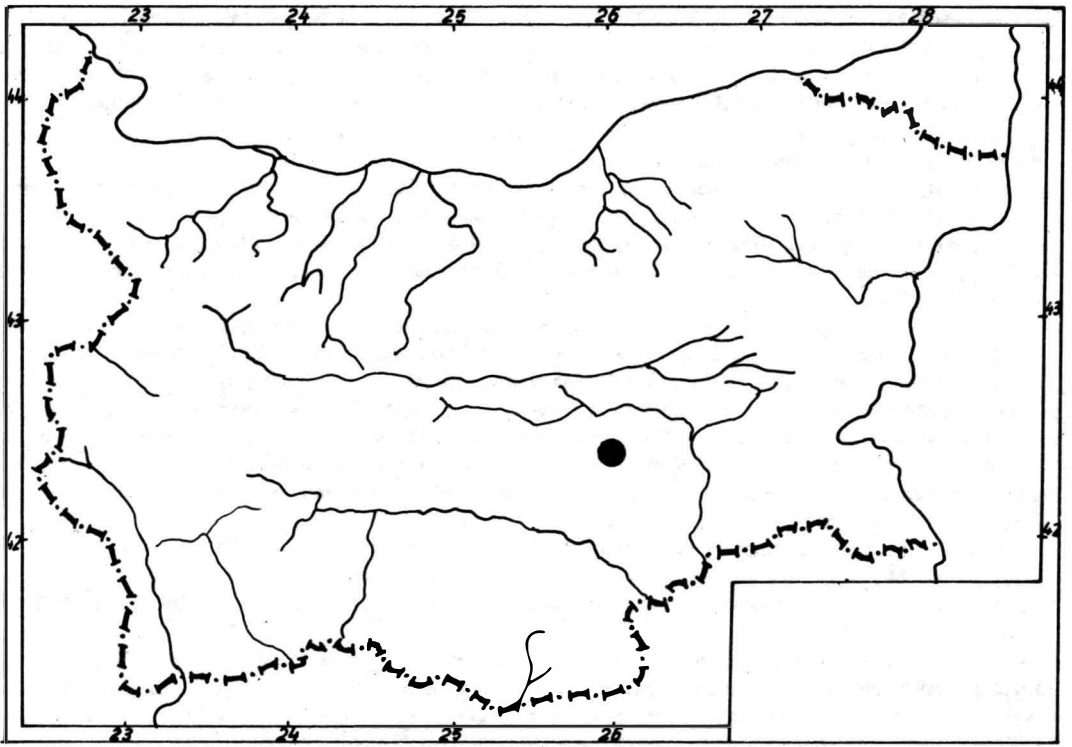
– light brown earth, putty



– spot with coal and ash



– grey soil in the stone heap or in the wall



Map 1. The sanctuary near village of Babyak (Nord-West to Rhodopa mountain).

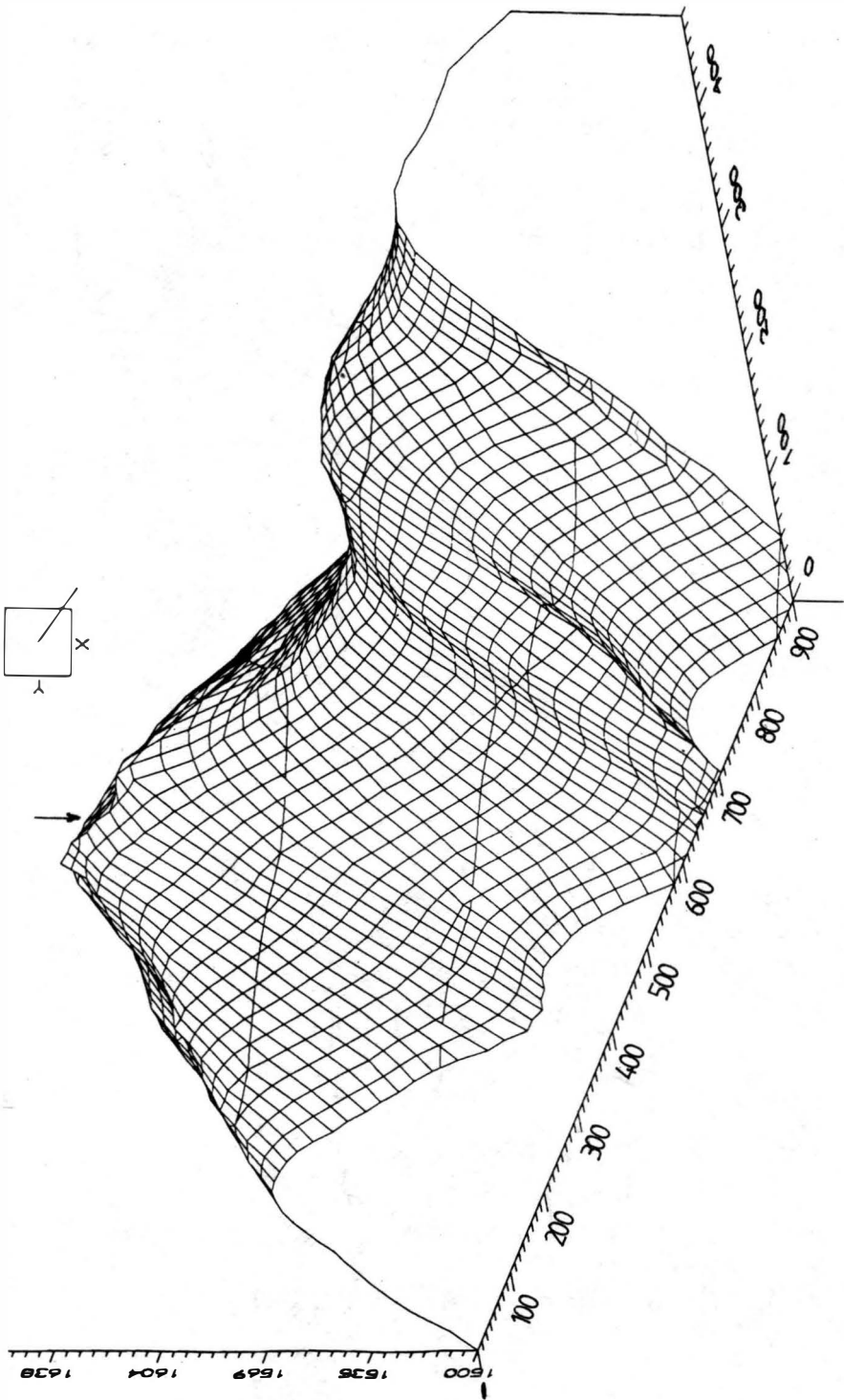


Figure 1. View to the top with the place of investigations.

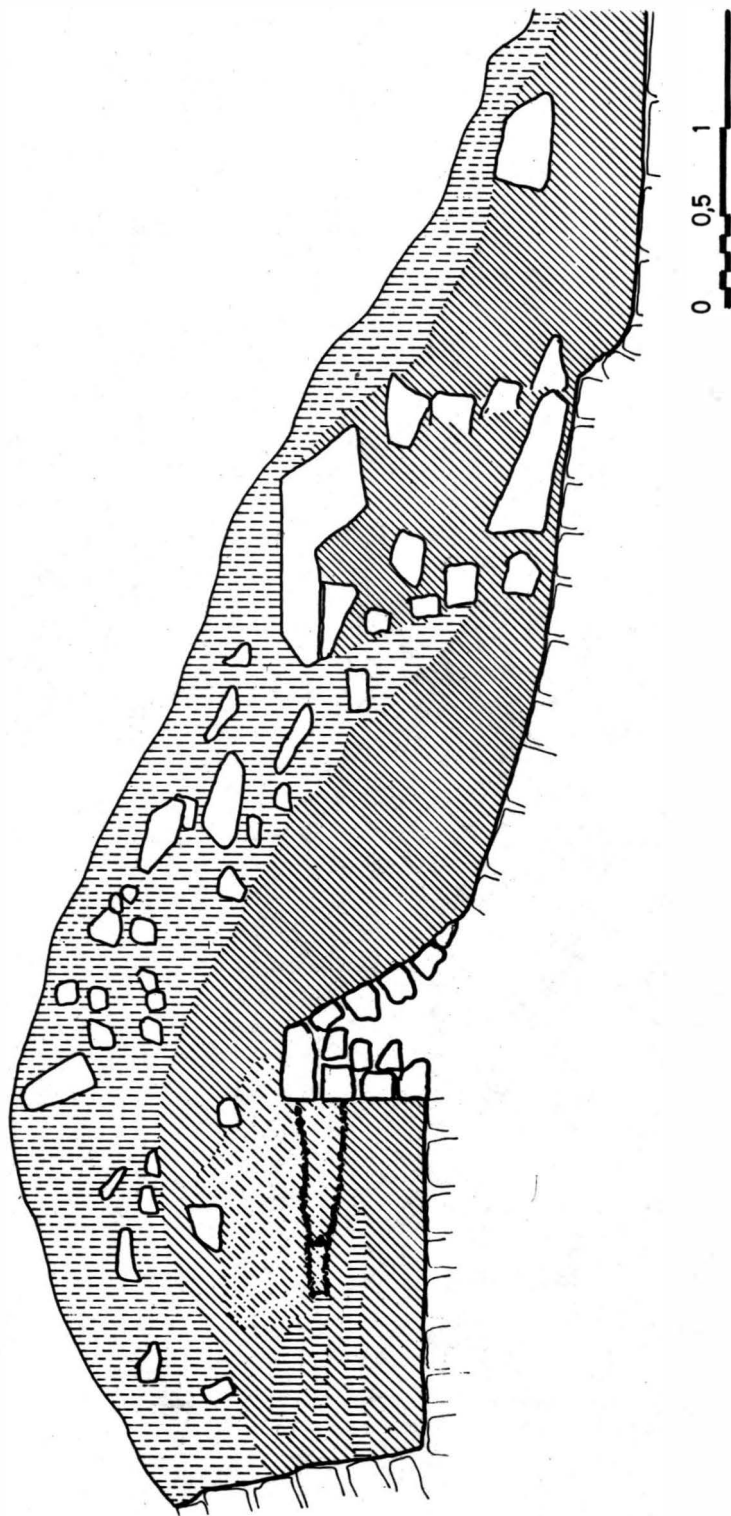
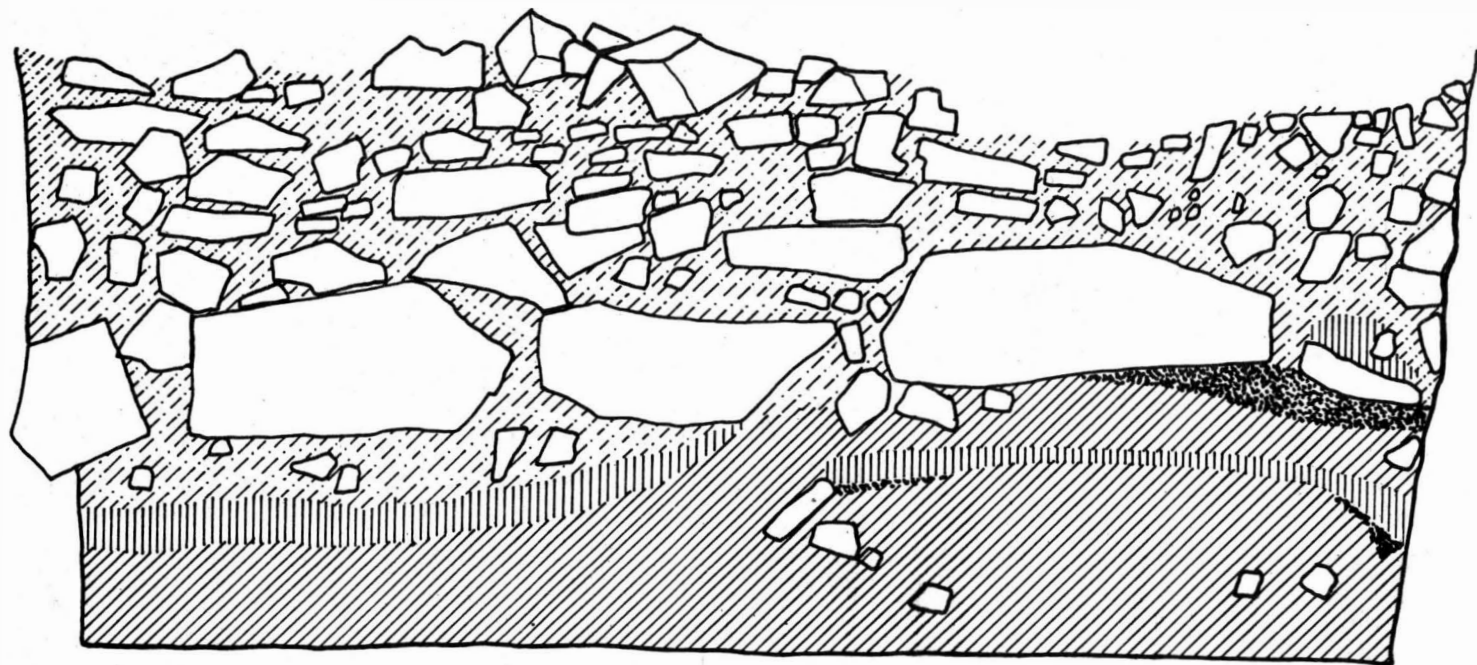


Figure 2. Profile of the investigated area, view from the North.



0 0,1 0,5 1 m

Figure 3. Profile of the wall, view from the West.

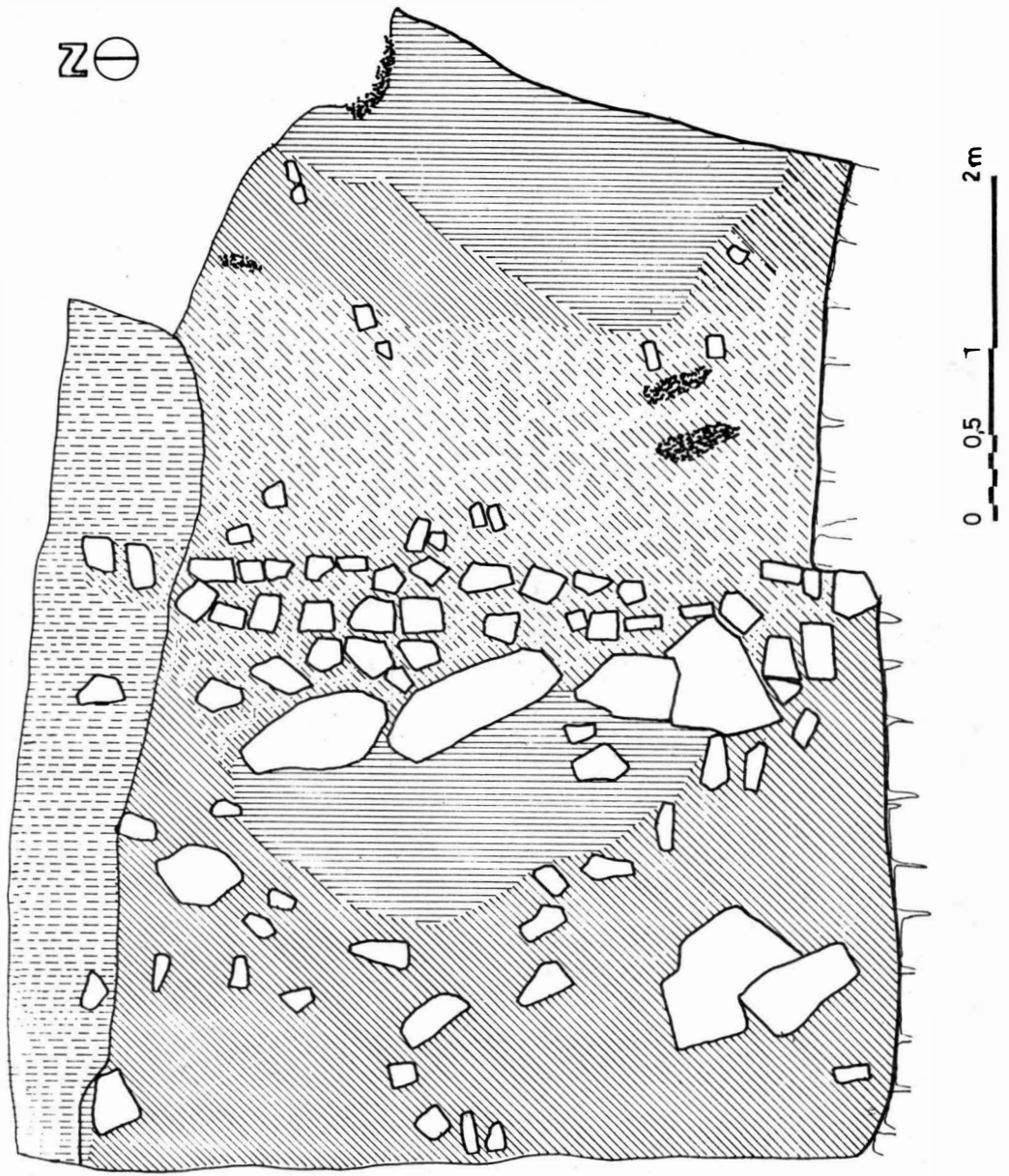


Figure 4. Situation at the south square with the wall, putties and spot of hard light grey soil.