

Burial Mounds of the Scythians - Nomads near Village Steblev

by Sergei Skoryj

The most important problem in the study of the ethnocultural history of the Right-Bank Ukrainian Forest-Steppe is to identify in the range of the preserved antiquities two main groups of relics: those left by autochthonous population and relics left by alien nomadic tribes¹. Being particularly specific, burial relics are of primary significance. It is very important for reconstruction of historical and ethnic processes not to use single burials, however striking they were, but entirely studied sepulchers.

Among those sepulchers there is a barrow necropolis near village Steblev (Korsun-Shevchenkivsky district, Cherkassy region) excavated by the expedition of the Archaeological Institute of the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences led by Victor Kločko in 1983². It is located on a comparatively high plateau of the right bank of the Ros river and consists of 15 graves, 11 of which belong to the 1st half of the 5th c. BC and 1st half of the 4th c. BC (the rest belong to the Bronze Age, late Chernolesian period, ancient Scythian archaic). Burial mounds of the Scythian period were arranged in two compact groups. The first of them was a chain stretched in the SW - NE direction, the second group consisted of graves concentrated in a circle near barrow No 3, the earliest one in the sepulcher (the 1st half of the 5th c. BC). That group included mound No 5 which contained no interments and was a sanctuary of the burial cult. All burial mounds

were ploughed up, so the height preserved is 0.3 - 2.5 m, diameter 12 - 35 m (fig. 1/1).

Each mound consisted of one grave as a rule, except for mounds No 1 and 7, which contained two graves each. Altogether 12 graves were excavated; one grave contained a paired horse interment (fig. 1/2). Burial constructions were simple soil pits (9) or vaults (3) either of a rectangular or of a square shape, 6 - 26 m² in size (depth of 1.7 - 2.3 m), ceiled by wooden blocks sometimes combined with complex overgrave constructions made of soil and wood, the tent-like shape included (fig. 1/1; 2/1). The graves were oriented on the east-west line. Remains of 14 people (according to anthropological data they were: 8 men, 4 women, 1 teenager, 1 skeleton is not identified) were found in partially destroyed and robbed graves. Single burials dominated, except for the grave of mound No 12 (two buried persons) and the grave of mound No 14 (four buried persons). Position and pose of the deceased were fixed in four cases: stretched on the back; orientation was fixed in five cases: head west - in three cases, head north and head south - one case each. The deceased lay on wooden floorings, beddings made of cane or grass.

Despite robbery, representative items excavated in the graves embraced various categories of findings, but mainly arms, which were present in all graves, women's included (fig. 3/2; 4; 5). Most often they were arrowheads (382 arrowheads were found in the grave of mound No12), remains of 19 spears and darts, of 4

¹ Skoryj 1993, 56 - 57.

² Kločko 1985, 284 - 285.

swords and daggers, of 4 laminar armors. Of particular interest are: a grave in mound No3 which contained remains of a man-warrior accompanied by a practically complete set of offensive (arrows, a spear, a sword) and defensive (metal-made armor, Greek knives) arms and a grave of a woman in mound No 13 which contained 2 spears, 3 darts and horse's bridle (fig. 3/1).

The small number of burial mounds with large graves and complicity of certain burial structures, horse interments or harness accompanying people graves, striking and expressive items including diverse weapons, prove that the Steblev necropolis is the burial place of chiefs of a tribe which inhabited the river Ros basin or, in other words, the tribal aristocracy.

An analysis of burial rites in the Steblev sepulcher against the background of forest-steppe and steppe graves of the Scythian epoch demonstrates some properties intrinsic to nomadic Iranian ceremony. They have appropriate analogies in the Scythian graves in steppe of the Northern Black Sea areas and are not bound up with the forest-steppe burial ceremony (*extramuros* constructions looking like circular ditches, overgrave constructions of the "tent" type, accompanying horse interments, separate graves included, details of harness, farewell meat food, sometimes in a metal pot, setting on fire to wooden overgrave constructions, covering the grave dump with a layer of grass, wood and so on)³. The presence of a primitive stone anthropomorphic, an ethnographic detail peculiar exclusively to the steppe Scythians, is to be particularly noted.

The Steblev findings confirm that certain nomadic Scythians penetrated to the southern territories of the Right-Bank Forest-Steppe from the steppes of the Northern Black Sea in the 1st half of the 5th c. BC and, probably, instituted their control over certain forest-steppe territories.

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³ Skoryj 1990, 80 - 87.

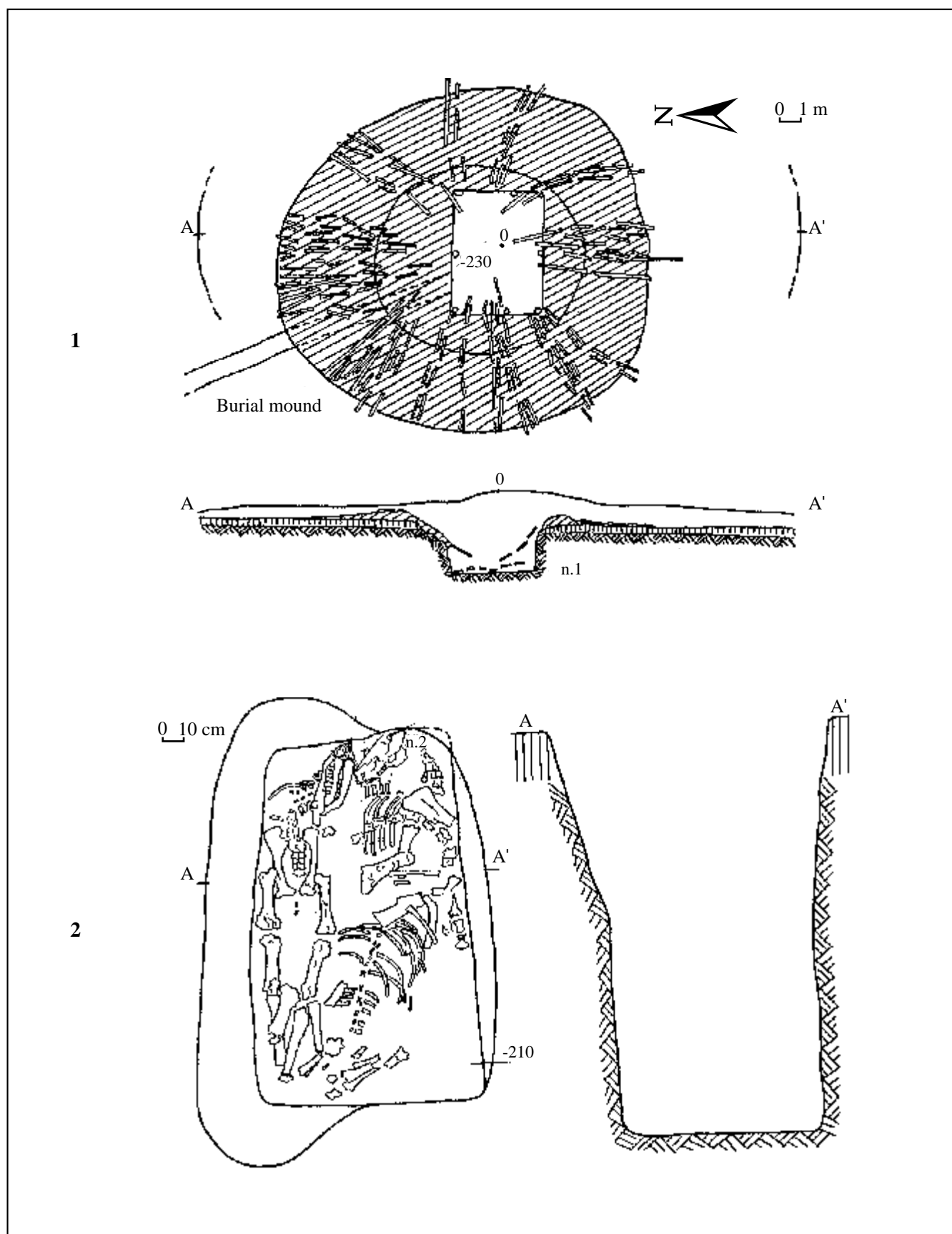


Fig. 1. The plans and stocks of the Barrow No 12 (1) and the horses grave No 2 of the Barrow No 1 (2)

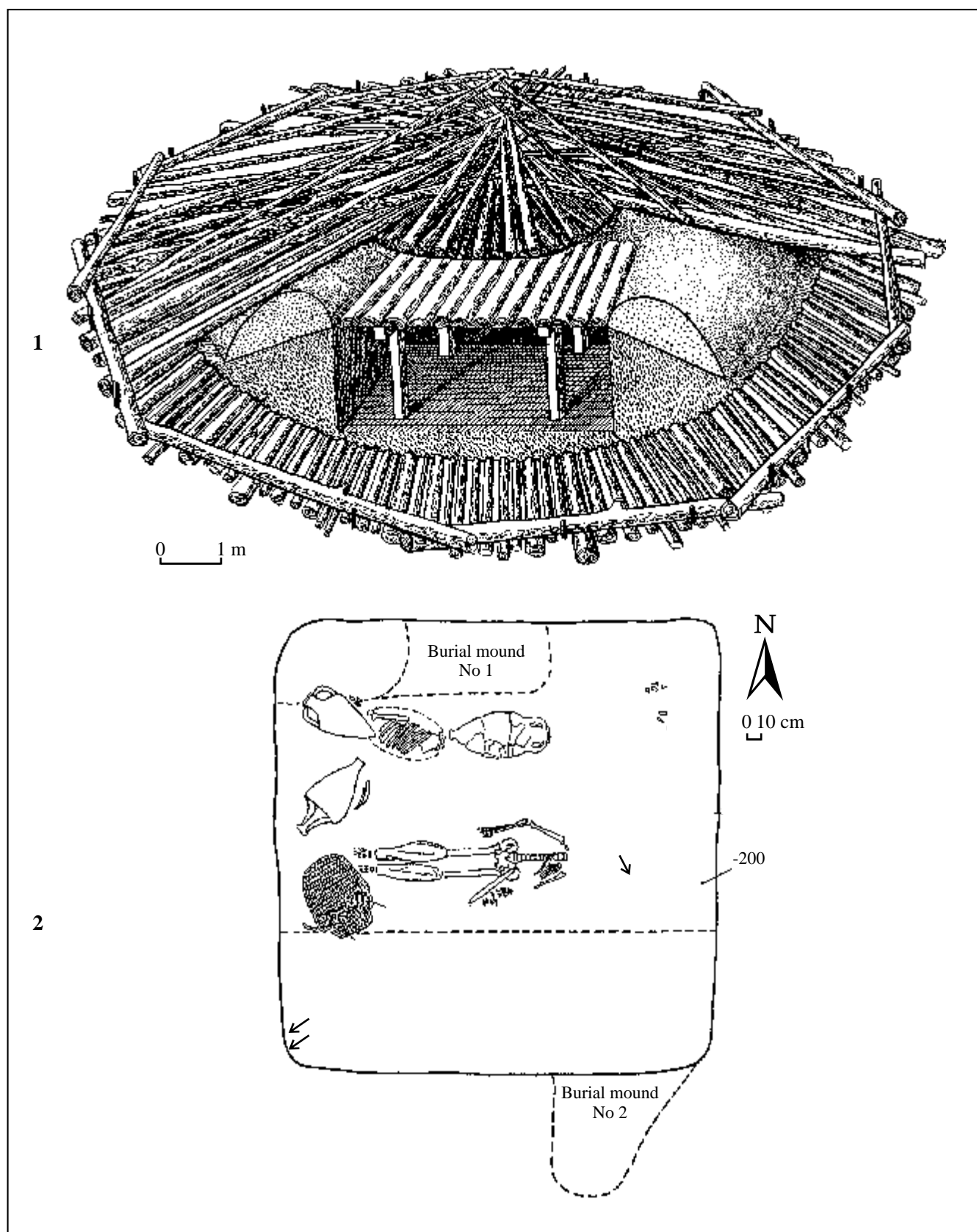


Fig. 2. The reconstruction of a grave with wooden construction of "tent" type (1), and the plan of the man-warrior's grave in the burial mound No 3 (2)

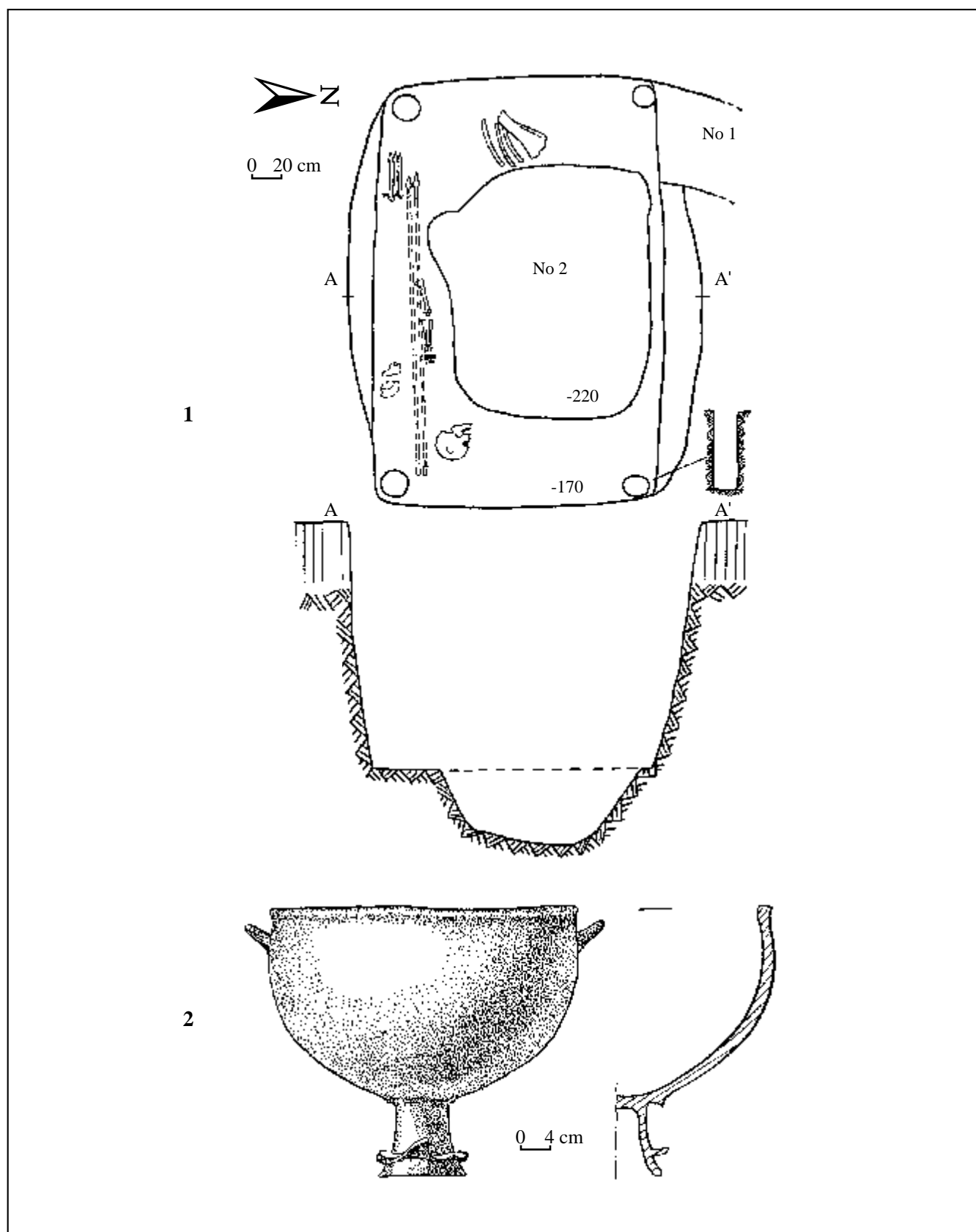


Fig. 3. The plan and stock of the woman-warriors grave of the burial mound No 13 (1) and the bronze vessel from the burial mound No 12 (2)

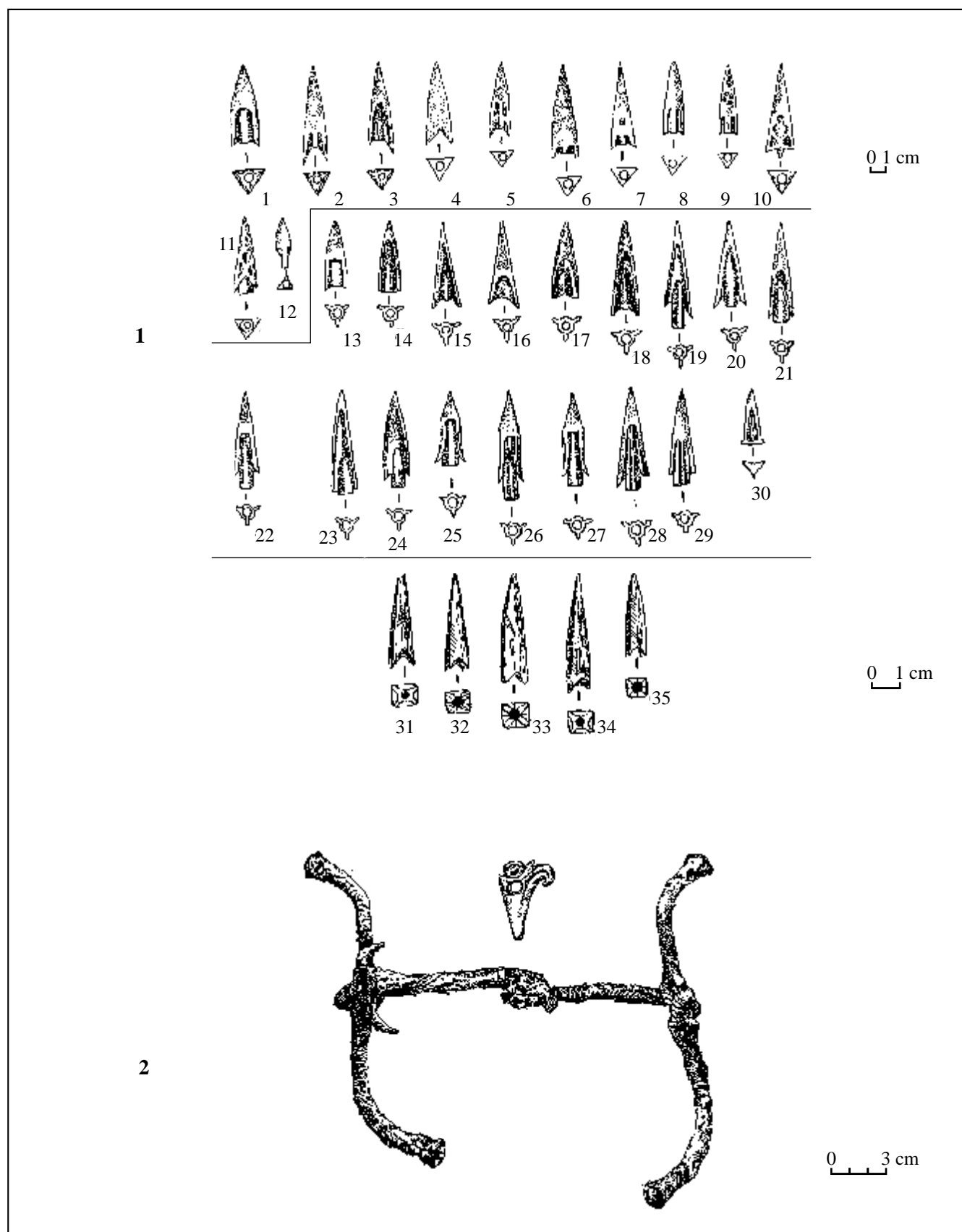


Fig. 4. The bronze (1 - 30) and bone (31 - 35) arrow-heads of the Steblev sepulcher (1) and the horses bridles from the burial mound No 1 (2)

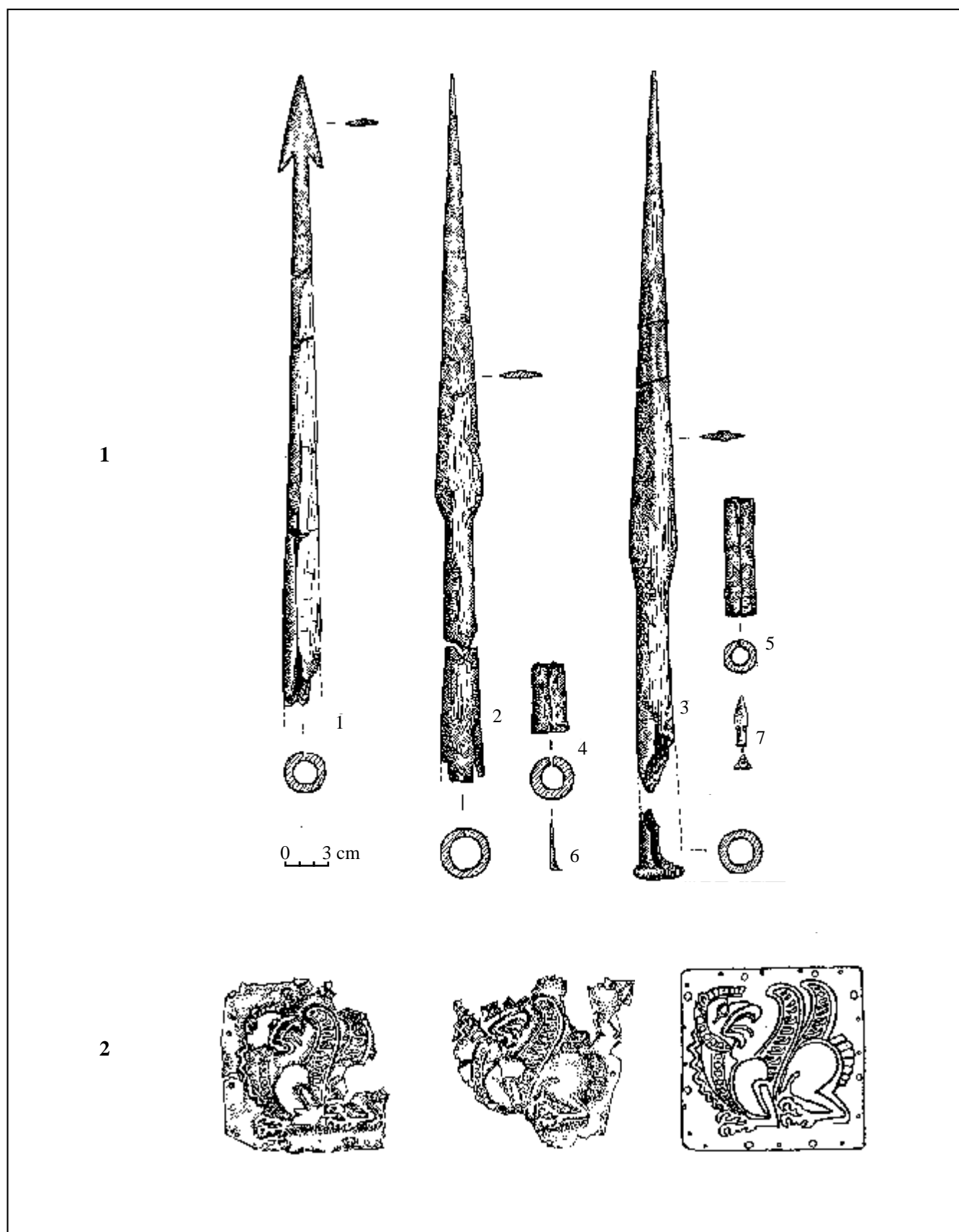


Fig. 5. Iron dart, spears (1) and the gold plates of the wooden cups (2) from the burial mound No 12