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# THE CULT OF THE THRACIAN RIDER IN CAPIDAVA: NEW EVIDENCE AND ICONOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses a marble fragment from a votive plaque discovered during the 2015 archaeological campaign at Capidava. The bas-relief preserves the lower back part of a horse, the rider's legs, and a fully rendered dog. These surviving elements unmistakably indicate the representation of the **Thracian Rider**, a widespread deity venerated in the Lower Danube region during the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. The fragment was unearthed in a corridor situated between the walls of two buildings along curtain B, in the north-western sector of the fortification. Although the archaeological context had been disturbed since antiquity, the typological and stylistic characteristics of the relief securely date it to the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD.

## REZUMAT: CULTUL CĂLĂREȚULUI TRACIC DIN CAPIDAVA: NOI DOVEZI ȘI OBSERVAȚII ICONOGRAFICE

Articolul de față prezintă un fragment de placă votivă din marmură descoperit în timpul campaniei arheologice din anul 2015 la Capidava. Basorelieful păstrează partea posterioară a unui cal, picioarele călărețului și un câine redat integral. Elementele iconografice conservate indică fără echivoc reprezentarea **Cavalerului Trac**, o divinitate populară în zona Dunării de Jos în secolele II–III p. Chr. Fragmentul a fost descoperit într-un culoar format între zidurile a două clădiri, în dreptul cortinei B, în sectorul de nord-vest al fortificației. Deși contextul arheologic este deranjat încă din Antichitate, particularitățile tipologice și stilistice ale piesei permit datarea sigură în intervalul secolelor II–III p. Chr.

**KEYWORDS:** Capidava; Thracian Rider; bas-relief; votive plaque; Roman provincial art; Moesia Inferior; religious syncretism; hero cult.

**CUVINTE CHEIE:** Capidava; Cavaler Trac; basorelief; placă votivă; artă provincială romană; Moesia Inferior; sincretism religios; Cultul Eroului-Cavaler.

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## Introduction

Capidava, situated between ancient Axiopolis and Carsium (modern Cernavodă and Hârșova), occupied a strategic position at a navigable crossing of the Danube.<sup>1</sup> Although modest in size, the fortification has yielded abundant material remains of exceptional quality, reflecting its long occupation from the Early Roman through the Byzantine and even Ottoman periods.

The archaeological investigations undertaken at Capidava in 2015 formed part of the large-scale restoration project *Restaurarea, consolidarea, protecția, conservarea și punerea în valoare a sitului arheologic Cetatea Capidava (SMIS code 31212)*, financed under contract no. 3784/2013. This project provided researchers with a rare opportunity to excavate a far larger area than in ordinary campaigns, yielding substantial advances in the documentation, stratigraphic understanding, and general interpretation of the site.<sup>2</sup>

During the 2015 excavations, while cleaning the area adjacent to curtain B, in square R-51<sup>3</sup>, between the walls of two adjoining chambers forming a corridor, several architectural fragments and artefacts from different periods were uncovered. Among fragments of amphorae, fine wares, bricks and metal objects, a marble piece was found — part of a votive plaque representing the Thracian Rider. Although only the lower left quarter of the plaque was preserved, the surviving iconographic elements were sufficient to identify it as a depiction of this widely venerated deity.

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<sup>1</sup> Opreș 2003, 18; Opreș and Rațiu 2017, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Opreș, Duca and Petcu 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Opreș, Duca and Petcu 2016, 138.

## State of Research

The cult of the Thracian Rider has been extensively studied, and its iconography is well documented. The abundance of finds<sup>4</sup> across the Balkans and Lower Danube has generated a rich and consistent body of academic literature. The ever-increasing number of such representations attests to the deity's enduring popularity and has prompted multiple attempts at classification, both typological and functional.

A series of fundamental monographs – notably those of Gočeva and Oppermann within the *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii* (CCET)<sup>5</sup> – provide a comprehensive synthesis of the material. Among the most significant works addressing iconographic aspects and providing a typological classification of the representations of the 'Heros Equitans' is Volume VI of the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (LIMC),<sup>6</sup> an indispensable and authoritative source for research and iconographic interpretation in this field. Subsequent contributions by Boteva,<sup>7</sup> Baumann,<sup>8</sup> Scorpan,<sup>9</sup> Covacef,<sup>10</sup> Opaït,<sup>11</sup> Tudor,<sup>12</sup> Nemeti and Nemeti,<sup>13</sup> and Szabó<sup>14</sup> have refined our understanding of the Rider's local manifestations in the provinces of Moesia Inferior, Thracia and Dacia. While differing in interpretation, these authors converge on several key themes: the Greek funerary origins of the motif, its transformation through religious syncretism, and its particular resonance among the provincial populations of the Lower Danube during the Principate.

As Boteva observes, the iconographic scheme frequently belongs to the category "*Héros en train d'agir*"— the hero in action — most commonly represented in the act of hunting.<sup>15</sup> This motif symbolically mediates between the human and the divine spheres, a theme referred to in the literature as "*Héros dans le monde des dieux*", in which the mortal hero assimilates certain attributes of the classical gods. Such imagery reflects a long-standing oral tradition traceable as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, the composition derives from Greek funerary art of the 6<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC,<sup>17</sup> where the mounted hero personified a deceased nobleman elevated to heroic status.

During the Roman period — particularly between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD — this iconography reached the zenith of its popularity within rural contexts,<sup>18</sup> functioning both as a vehicle of personal devotion and as an emblem of local cultural identity. The majority of extant examples date to this chronological horizon and are predominantly attested in the provinces of Moesia Inferior (later Scythia Minor, Moesia Secunda, Thracia, and Haemimontus within the *Dioecesis Thraciae*) and Dacia.

The Thracian Rider's association with chthonic symbolism and deities<sup>19</sup> —manifested through graves, caves, serpents, and trees—reveals a complex synthesis of death and regeneration, simultaneously evoking the realms of nature, life, and the hunt.<sup>20</sup> The scenes are generally interpreted as visual representations of the *heroization* of the deceased,<sup>21</sup> a treatment characteristic of Thracian religious and cultural traditions.<sup>22</sup>

This iconographic language expresses the rite of passage through death toward deification, materially and visually articulated through the mounted figure,<sup>23</sup> accompanied by chthonic symbols such as the serpent and regenerative motifs like the tree. The variety of depictions—each differing in composition, actors, and gestures—suggests a personalized narrative for every commissioner,<sup>24</sup> endowing the Thracian Rider with diverse epithets<sup>25</sup> that often derive from toponyms, tribal names, or functional attributes.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Boteva 2006, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Gočeva and Opperman 1979; Gočeva and Opperman 1981; Gočeva and Opperman 1984.

<sup>6</sup> LIMC VI/1 1992; LIMC VI/2 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Boteva 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Baumann 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Scorpan 1967.

<sup>10</sup> Covacef 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Opaït 1973–1975.

<sup>12</sup> Tudor 1969; Tudor 1976.

<sup>13</sup> Nemeti and Nemeti 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Szabo 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Boteva 2000, 118.

<sup>16</sup> Boteva 2000, 118.

<sup>17</sup> Dimitrova 2002, 220-221.

<sup>18</sup> Baumann 2013, 94.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandrescu-Vianu 1980, 101; Scorpan 1967, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Covacef 2002, 169; Baumann 2013, 80.

<sup>21</sup> Scorpan 1967, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Liapis 2011, 96-100.

<sup>23</sup> Alexandrescu-Vianu 1980, 102.

<sup>24</sup> Szabo 2016, 64.

<sup>25</sup> Dontcheva 2002, 324. Most of them are either Greek or Latin.

<sup>26</sup> Hamparțumian 1979, 16.

Among the cults that display the closest affinities, the Mithraic<sup>27</sup> cult stands out, sharing several iconographic and conceptual parallels and possibly serving as a model for the evolution and reinterpretation of the Rider's imagery. Under Roman influence, the Rider assimilated attributes from deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon—Apollo, Silvanus, Asclepius, and Cybele<sup>28</sup> among them—resulting in a rich religious syncretism.<sup>29</sup>

This synthesis is particularly evident in the provinces of Moesia and Dacia, where the cult of the Thracian Rider enjoyed remarkable popularity, especially among military personnel.<sup>30</sup> By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, more than two thousand<sup>31</sup> monuments associated with the Rider had been documented across the region, many discovered in the vicinity of fortresses or military settlements—clear evidence of the cult's strong appeal to soldiers and veterans alike. Throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the Thracian Rider remained one of the most venerated divine figures in Moesia, a fact further corroborated by the numerous sanctuaries dedicated to him that have been identified in the area.<sup>32</sup>

### Context of Discovery and Stratigraphic Observations in Sector I, Capidava

The excavation plan for Sector I of the Capidava archaeological site focused on clearing the inner side of the fortification wall, specifically along Curtains A and B (Pl. I), in order to provide the restoration team with an unobstructed view of the interior parament of the fortification. The purpose was to assess its construction technique and to understand the relationship between the fortification wall and adjacent internal structures.

For the excavation grid, we maintained the alphanumeric system established by Grigore Florescu in the 1950s for the entire fortress, ensuring stratigraphic consistency and facilitating the systematic recording of finds. The grid consisted of 5 × 5 m square units excavated in a chessboard pattern.

Square R-51 (Pl. I, 2–3) was largely occupied by two perpendicular walls, each belonging to different chambers. Their orientation suggests that the wall extending into the adjacent square Q-51 is part of a distinct chamber or building, while the other wall continues toward squares S-51 and Ș-51, forming part of another structure. The space between these two walls likely served as an alley or a narrow storage area between two adjacent buildings or between two rooms belonging to a larger construction (Pl. I, 3; Pl. II, 1a–1b).<sup>33</sup>

We began by cleaning the area, which had been excavated on two previous occasions: first, during the investigation and documentation of Hovel no. 6, dated to the Middle Byzantine period, and later, in the 2010's.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, our campaign represented the third archaeological intervention in this sector. We proceeded to remove the rubble to a depth of approximately one metre, until we reached what appeared to be a floor level composed of compact, yellowish soil (Pl. II, 3a–3b). On this level, we identified several short wall segments running parallel to the curtain. These low stone-and-earth constructions — only one or two courses high — were clearly partition walls, most probably destroyed and collapsed during the construction of the Middle Byzantine structures. As we cleared and cleaned this corridor, we recovered a significant quantity of artefacts; however, the material was stratigraphically mixed and not found in situ (Pl. II, 3a–3b).<sup>35</sup>

Along the length of R-51, the finds comprised materials from various chronological horizons, including a well-dated fragment of a rectangular plate of Hayes Form 56,<sup>36</sup> assignable to the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> to the first quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, as well as earlier artefacts. The high degree of fragmentation and stratigraphic disturbance indicates that the construction of the Middle Byzantine hovel disrupted all pre-existing layers, thoroughly mixing the material originally deposited in chronological succession.

It should be emphasised that Hovel no. 6 directly overlaps this corridor, and its foundation activity evidently disturbed the underlying strata (Pl. I–II). Consequently, no secure stratigraphic or chronological connection can be established between the artefacts discovered here. Although some contextual information was irretrievably

<sup>27</sup> Boteva 2006, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Dimitrova 2002, 210.

<sup>29</sup> Baumann 2013, 93.

<sup>30</sup> Boteva 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Boteva 2005, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Dontcheva 2002, 317.

<sup>33</sup> We say this because there was a case in the south-western part of the fortification where a colleague of ours excavated some chambers and believed to be different houses and a street between but when the excavation extended was very clear that is was actually a corridor inside of the same building.

<sup>34</sup> Florescu and Covacef 1988-1989.

<sup>35</sup> The level that we started was at the same level of wall of the fortification – preserved for curtain B.

<sup>36</sup> Hayes 1972, 83-91. Few other fragments were discovered also at Capidava being the only place where this type of pottery was discovered, see also Opris 2003, 145, Pl. L, 337-338;

lost, the evidence recovered—when correlated with data from adjacent, better-preserved contexts—nonetheless contributes valuable elements to the broader reconstruction of the site’s occupational sequence.

### Description of the Plaque

Only the lower left quarter of the marble plaque survives, 10,7 cm long by 11 cm wide and a thickness of 3cm, the whole item was probably rectangular, approximately 30 cm wide.<sup>37</sup> The lower border of the frame is slightly wider (c. 2 cm) than the one on the left of the scene (c. 0.5cm). The marble, of yellowish hue, is roughly faceted on the reverse, without any secondary working (Pl. III).

Although fragmentary, the preserved elements clearly convey the iconography of the Thracian Rider. The relief includes the hindquarters, tail, belly, and legs of the horse, part of the rider’s right leg, and a fully preserved dog beneath the horse. In front of the dog’s head, the faint outline of another animal — likely a boar — can be discerned.

The scene depicts a horse galloping rightwards. The modelling of the animal is rendered with remarkable precision: the musculature, hock, and hoof are carefully detailed, conveying a sense of dynamic movement. The rider’s leg, bent at the knee and clad in a high boot reaching mid-calf, is visible, while the folds of a short *chiton* fall over the upper thigh, enhancing the impression of motion. Beneath the horse, between its legs, appears a dog also facing right. Its arched hind legs suggest the moment of attack, while the forelegs are extended along the ground and the head raised alertly. Distinct details—the muzzle, ears, eyes, and tail—lend expressiveness and vitality to the animal. In front of the dog’s head, the fragment preserves the front part of another animal’s head, most plausibly a boar, judging by the iconographic parallels of similar compositions.

Such analogies allow for a credible reconstruction of the scene: the mounted hero galloping rightwards, spear in hand, accompanied by his hunting dog and charging towards his prey. Although only a small fragment of the relief survives, its numerous iconographic parallels support the interpretation of a complex composition—possibly including, beyond the immediate hunting group, a sacred tree, altar, or additional human figures.

Ultimately, this representation of the Thracian Rider encapsulates courage, vitality, and the eternal heroic struggle against death, reaffirming his dual role as both protector and psychopomp within the Thracian religious imagery.

Following Kazarow classification that later was adopted by scholars like Hamparțumian<sup>38</sup> or Opperman,<sup>39</sup> this fragment belongs to the hunting type (Type B)<sup>40</sup> of the Thracian Rider, one of several established iconographic sub-groups. Scholars generally interpret such scenes as individualized narratives<sup>41</sup> of protection or salvation, suggesting that even in mass-produced plaque,<sup>42</sup> craftsmen could adapt details to the commissioner’s personal devotion.

### The Broader Picture

The first two representations of the Thracian Rider from Capidava fit seamlessly within the broader cultural and religious landscape of the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, a period during which numerous such monuments were erected across what is today Dobruja.<sup>43</sup> Given the history of Capidava and the presence of two known auxiliary units — *Cohors I Germanorum c.r.*<sup>44</sup> and *Cohors I Ubiorum*<sup>45</sup> — as well as the local elite family of the *Cocceii*, it is not surprising that one of their members commissioned a funerary stele featuring the Thracian Rider motif.<sup>46</sup>

The finds from Capidava uniformly depict the horseman in his peaceful aspect, dedicated to the chthonic deities of death. In these representations, the Rider is shown facing right, before him an altar and a tree — and in one instance, a serpent coiled around the trunk. The serpent motif also appears on the altar of another horseman relief discovered in the same year as the piece discussed in this article.

A further representation of the Rider from Capidava was found on a clay plaque, now lost, known only through a photograph published by Scorpan in 1967.<sup>47</sup> In a previous study, a bas-relief depicting the Thracian Horseman

<sup>37</sup> The preserved fragment can be found at the Constanța National Museum of History and Archaeology (MINAC) inventory number 50617.

<sup>38</sup> Hamparțumian 1979, 12-14.

<sup>39</sup> Opperman 2006, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Kazarow 1936, 5-6.

<sup>41</sup> Szabo 2016, 64.

<sup>42</sup> Boteva 2016, 309-310.

<sup>43</sup> Florescu, Florescu and Diaconu 1956, 83-38, no. 6, 103-104, no. 25; ISM V, 26 and 30.

<sup>44</sup> Covacef 2000; Matei-Popescu 2010, 213-215.

<sup>45</sup> Matei-Popescu 2010, 235-236; Rațiu and Opreș 2021, 182-184.

<sup>46</sup> ISM V, 30.

<sup>47</sup> Scorpan 1967, 50-51.

discovered during the 2015 campaign was published in this journal.<sup>48</sup> That relief, carved in yellowish limestone and broken into two pieces, was found reused as *spolia* in the outer corner of a building near Tower No.1, blocked by a fragment from a column placed before a doorway (Pl. IV). Once the column was removed, part of the relief became visible beneath the mortar (Pl V). The restored piece is now kept at the Constanța National Museum of History and Archaeology (MINAC).

The four previously published pieces, together with the present one, suggest that even within a relatively small settlement, the cult of the Thracian Rider was widely practiced during the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, embraced both by members of the higher social strata and by the common population alike.

The item under discussion, however, differs slightly from the other representations from Capidava by depicting the horseman in an explicitly martial/hunting posture.<sup>49</sup> This interpretation is supported by the presence of the dog in a charging position — indicating, by analogy, the presence of a hunted animal, likely a boar or hare — and by the depiction of the rider with one arm raised, weapon in hand, poised to strike. Thus, this is currently the only known representation of the Thracian Rider from Capidava shown in a martial/hunting stance.

As with the other examples from the site, the stylistic and iconographic features place this relief within the chronological horizon of the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, more precisely at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, based on close parallels and formal analogies (Pl. VII).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Duca 2015.

<sup>49</sup> LIMC VI. 1. 1991, 1019-1021; 1052-1053; LIMC VI. 2. 1991, 705-706, 465, 466, 471, 472, 475, 477

<sup>50</sup> Hamparțumian 1979, 16, 21, 35, 46, 75, 80 for Dobrodja and Manumenta Danubium I and II: 175, 246, 281, 343, 347, 355, 361, 480, 531, 532, 574, 576, 607, 614, Opperman 2006, 495, 514, 51, 605, 773, 775, 929.

## Abbreviations

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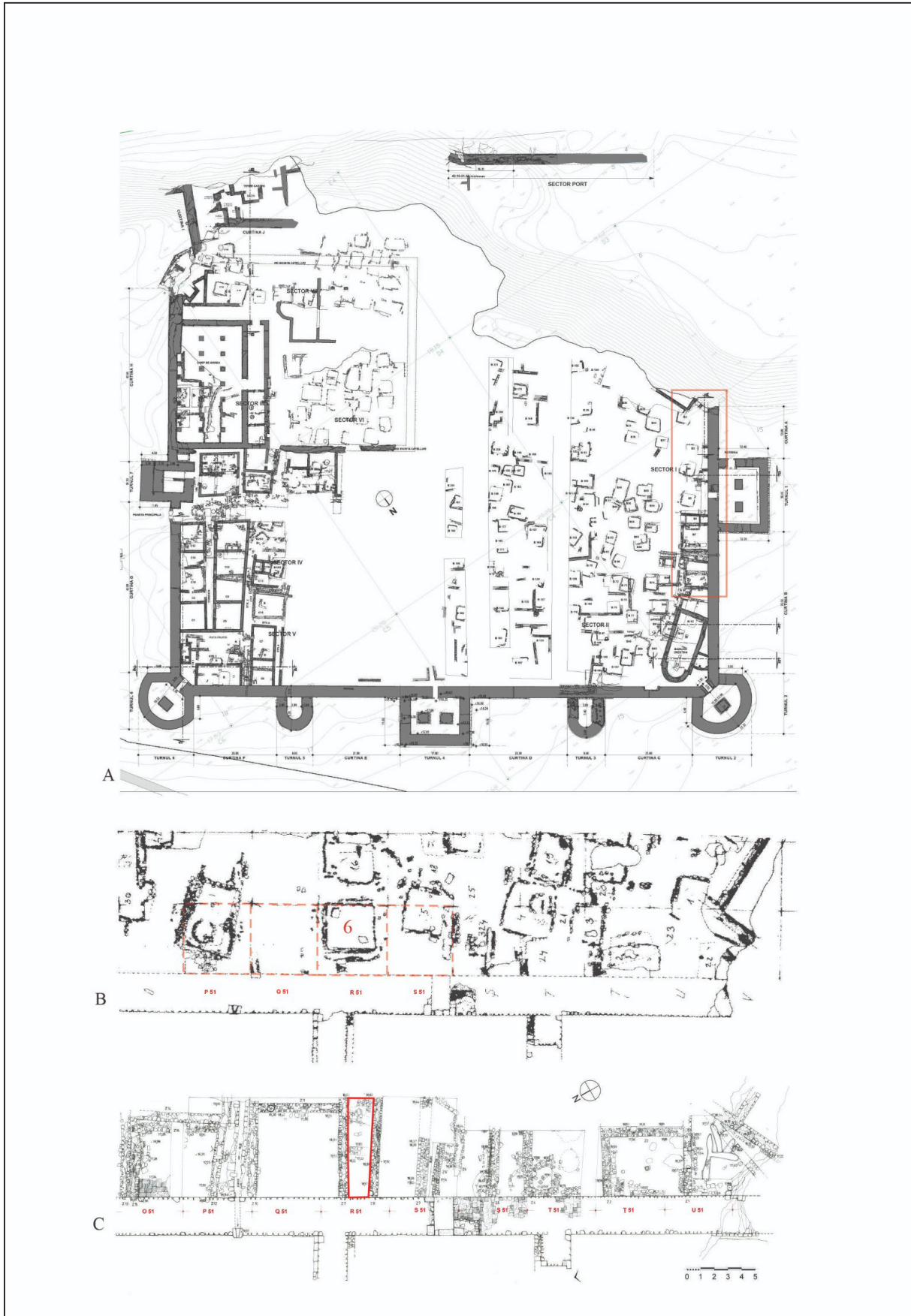
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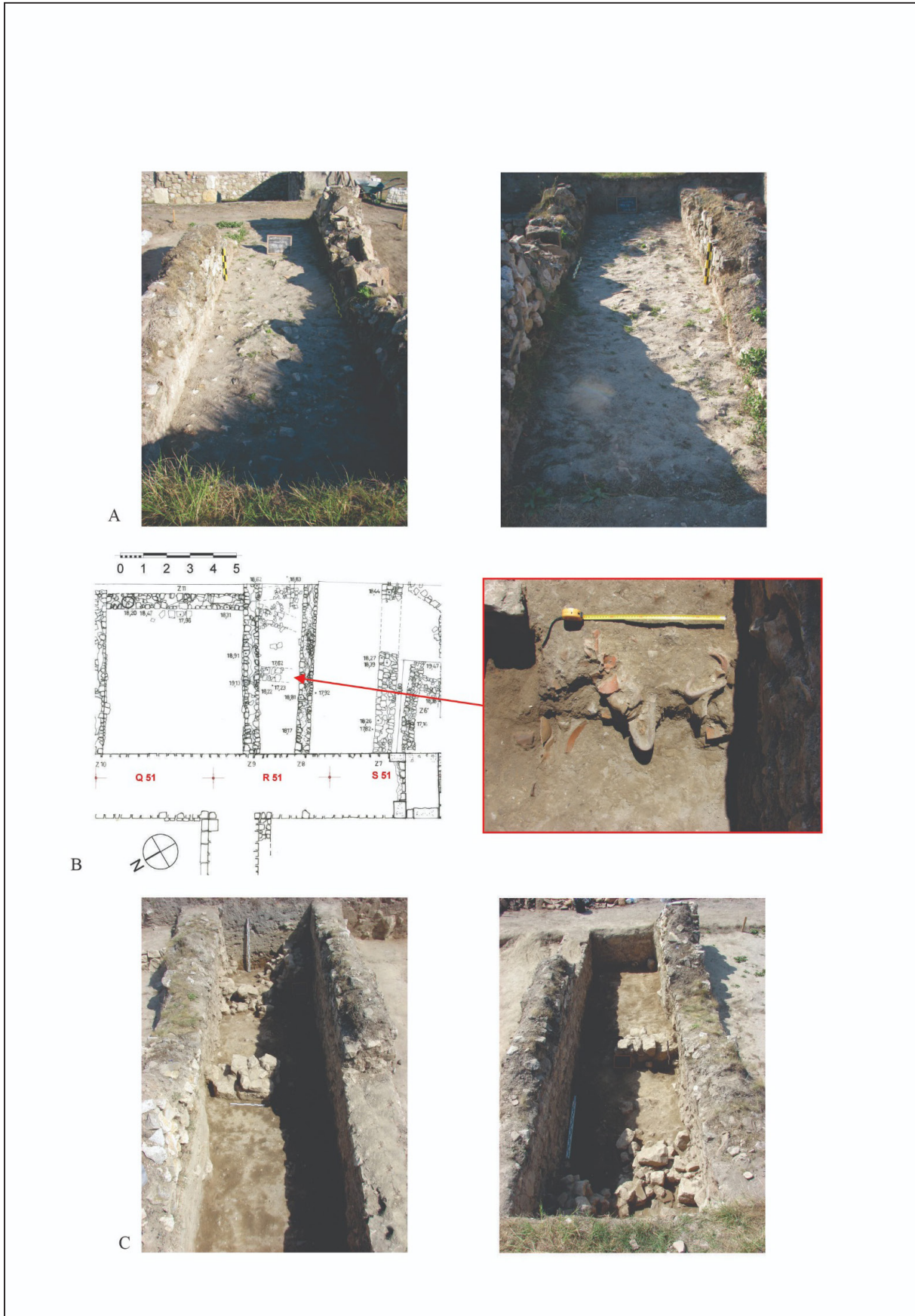
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- Pl. VI. Hartă cu descoperiri similare în provinciile de la Dunărea de Jos.
- Pl. VII. Analogiile compoziției (scenă de vânatoare): 1. Dragnaici; 2. Dražankovec; 3. Lipnik; 4. Tomis (Constanța); 5. Stisko; 6. Augusta Traiana (Stara Zagora).

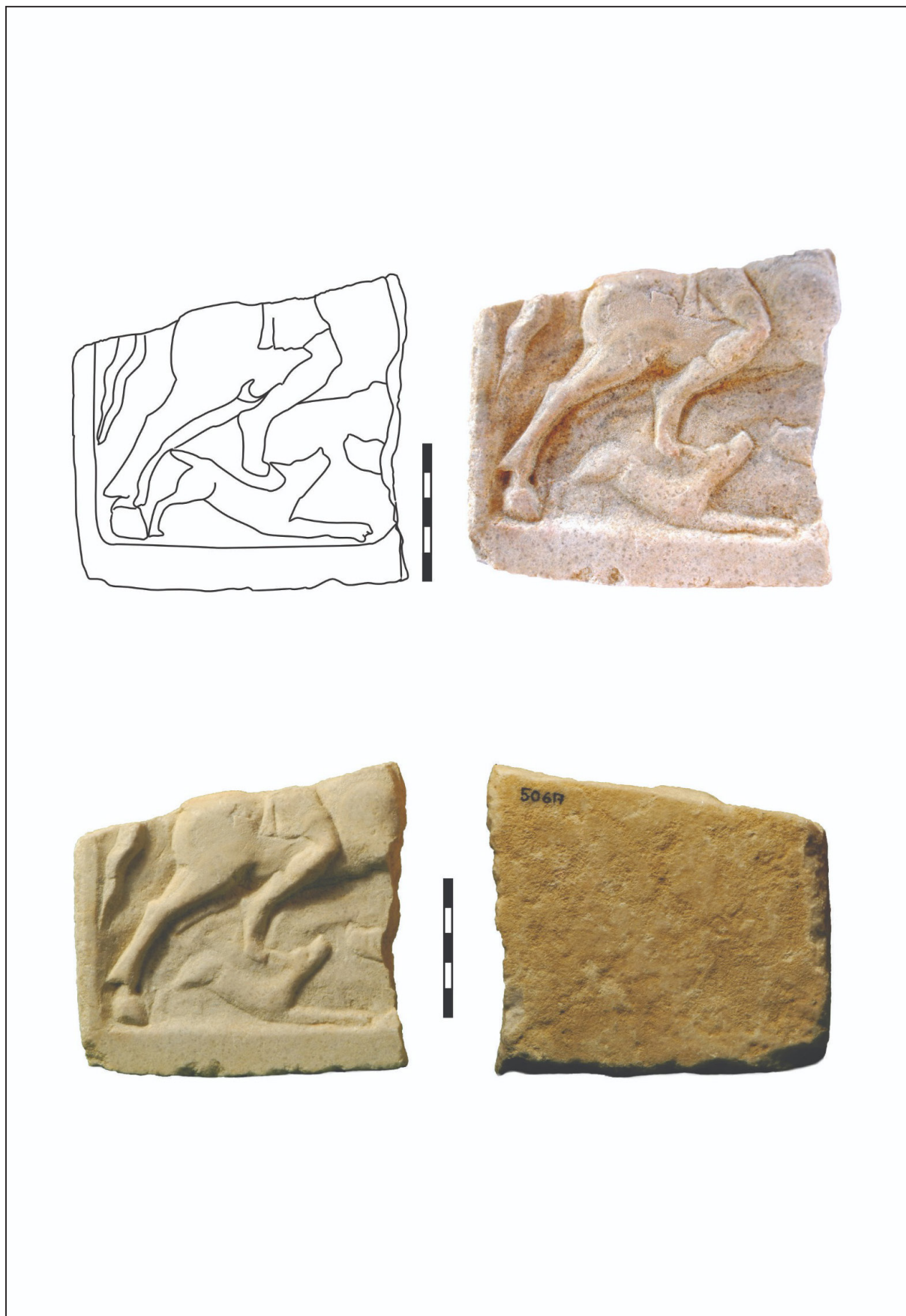
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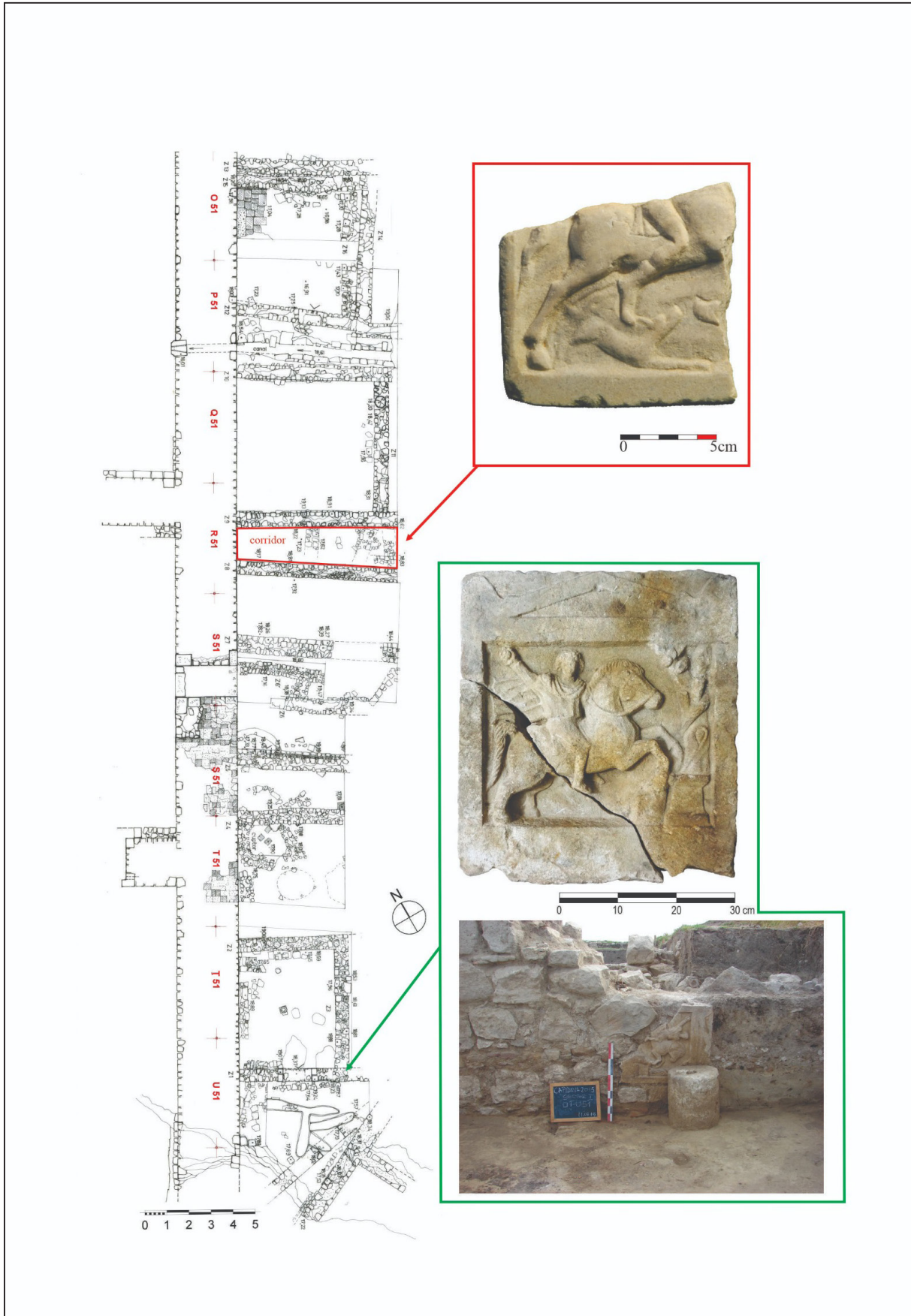
Pl. I. 1. Plan of the Capidava fort (plan by Anișoara Sion); 2. Location of the medieval dwelling prior to excavation (plan by Anișoara Sion); 3. Plan of the 2015 excavation (plan by Anișoara Sion & Mihai Duca).



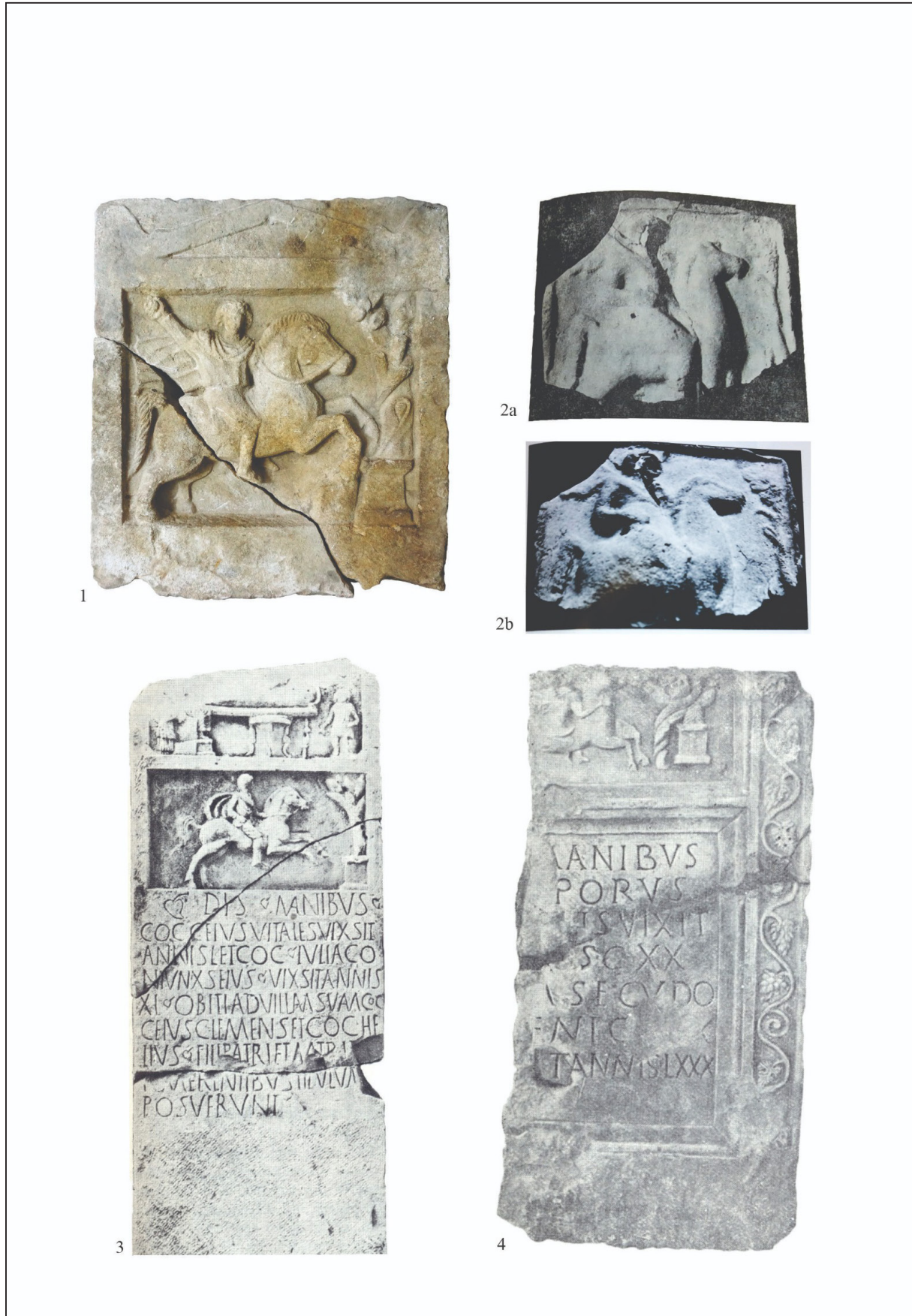
Pl. II. 1. Views of the corridor from the east and west; 2. Plan of the corridor showing the concentration of finds (plan by Anișoara Sion & Mihai Duca); 3. Excavation level where the votive plaque was discovered (photos by Mihai Duca).



Pl. III. Drawing of the votive plaque (by Mihai Duca) and photographs (by Radu Petcu & Mihai Duca).



Pl. IV. Curtain A and Tower 1, indicating the 2015 finds related to the Thracian Rider (drawing by Anișoara Sion & Mihai Duca; photos by Mihai Duca).



Pl. V. 1. The Thracian bas-relief found in 2015; 2. The clay plaque depicting the Thracian Rider; 3. Funerary stela of Cocceius Vitulus; 4. Funerary stela inscribed with the name (?Aul)uporus.



*Pl. VI. Map showing similar finds in the Lower Danube provinces.*



Pl. VII. Analogies regarding the composition (hunting scene): 1. Dragnaici; 2. Drajanovec; 3. Lipnik; 4. Tomis (Constanța); 5. Stisko; 6. Augusta Traiana (Stara Zagora).