

50 YEARS OF SYSTEMATIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AT THE PRE- AND PROTOHISTORIC SITE AT POPEȘTI

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The site at Popești (Mihăilești, Giurgiu county) occupies a prominent place in the Romanian archaeology due to its important remains from the Bronze and the early Iron Ages as well as from the epoch generally termed as “of utmost development of the Geto-Dacian civilization”. As far as we know now here must have been the main Getic center of power in the Argeș Basin. We considered appropriate to commemorate a half a century from the beginning of systematic excavations at this important site as part of the celebration of 170 years of archaeology in Romania.

The site is situated at ca 25 km southwest of Bucharest, on a promontory almost 1 km long, detached from the terrace of the right bank of the river Argeș (fig. 1). According to the geographers who studied the Romanian Plain, this is the longest promontory of all fluvial terraces of this region. It rises by approx. 20 m above the Argeș flood plain, and was sectionalized in Antiquity by three ditches dividing the site into a corresponding number of sectors: A-C (fig. 2). The northern one (A), named “Nucet” by the natives, yielded the most massive anthropic deposit (ca 2.5 m), spanning from the early Bronze Age to the classical Latène inclusively; it is in some sense an acropolis of the entire settlement. Sector B, separated from the former by a ditch, deepened up to the level of the river, is also covered by an archaeological deposit, but this time a more modest one (ca 1.2-1.5 m). Finally, sector C was also inhabited during Antiquity, but here features are scattered all over the vast space of the area. It must have been a place of some importance since a ditch – easier to notice nowadays on aerial photo (fig. 2) – was made to cut it off not only from sector B but also from the terrace itself.

The existence of an archaeological site at Popești was first recorded at the end of 19th century, as a hoard of Thasos tetradrachms was found here. Subsequently, between 1901 and 1905, small trial excavations were done at “Nucet” by Dimitrie Butculescu and Grigore Tocilescu (together with engineer Pamfil Polonic). Later, during 1932-1947, ample excavations were intermittently performed by the amateur archaeologist Dinu V. Rosetti. The traces of these sections, scattered all along and across sector A, were visible until recently. Their results have never been recorded; the whole documentation – had it really existed – is lost forever; this is the reason why we do not include these earlier diggings in the category of systematic excavations.

In 1954, the Romanian Academy entrusted Radu Vulpe and an archaeological team to explore the site. They were meant to focus on the Getic period. The works lasted till 1963. From 1976 until 1995 excavations continued intermittently under the direction of the author of these lines; beginning with 2000, the research has been coordinated by Nona Palincăș.

Initially, the work focused on the exploration of the trenches dug by Rosetti, but soon, as important habitation remains from the Getic period were uncovered, large areas in the form of parallel sections were opened up (fig. 2A). The preliminary results of these researches were regularly published as reports in

specialized journals.¹ Various causes, financial first of all, prevented the finalization of our research, so that the task of reaching the bedrock at least in those surfaces where only the Getic deposit was excavated had to be left for the future.

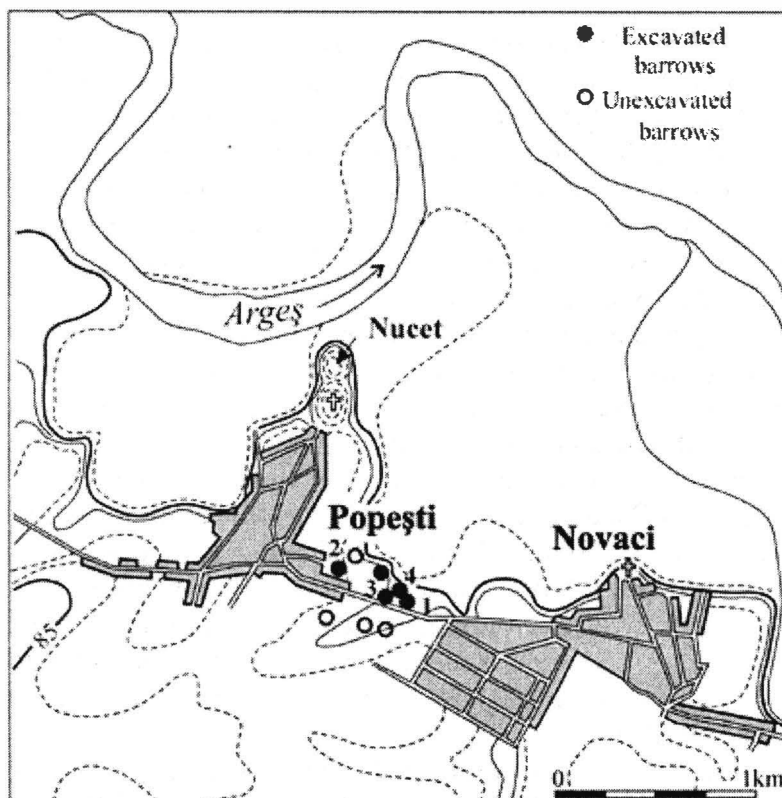
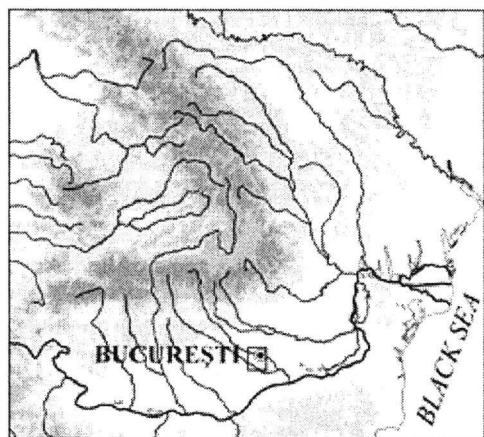


Fig. 1. Popești, Giurgiu county. Location of the site and the tumular necropolis.

¹ The results of the systematic excavations were published only as preliminary reports: R.Vulpe and collab., SCIV 6, 1955, 1–2, p. 240; idem, Materiale 3, 1957, p. 227; 5, 1959, p. 342; 6, 1959, p. 307; 7, 1961, p. 321; 8, 1962, p. 457; A. Vulpe, M. Gheorghiiță, Cerc. Arh. MNIR 3, 1979, p. 95; 4, 1981, p. 58; 8, 1986, p. 43; A. Vulpe, *ibidem*, 10, 1997, p. 163; N. Palincaș, *ibidem*, p. 173; G. Trohani, *ibidem*, p. 193; N. Palincaș, in *Cronica*, 2000, p. 198; *ibidem*, 2001, p. 248. A brief presentation of site at Popești in: R. Vulpe, *Așezări getice din Muntenia*, București 1966, p. 27–42.

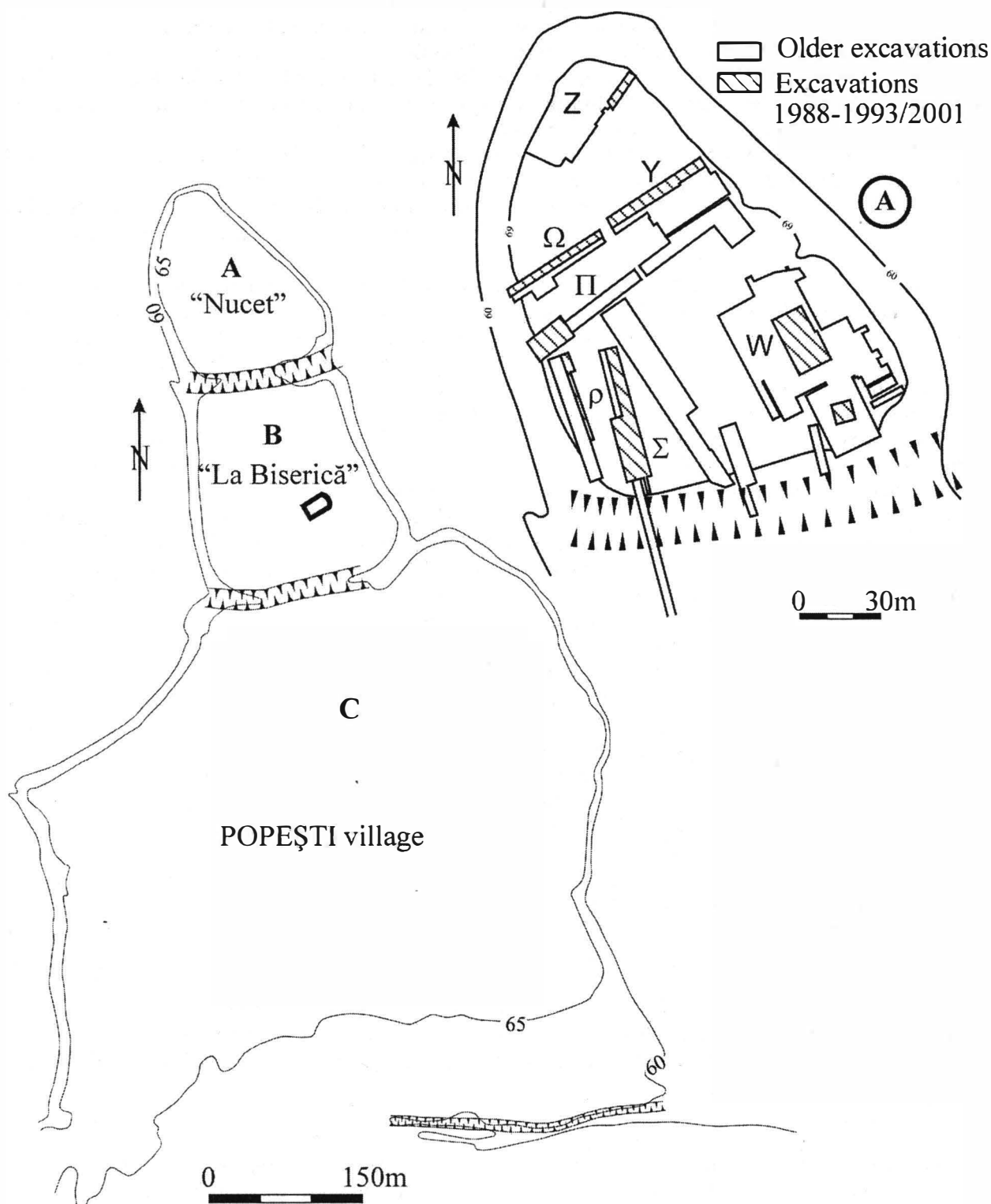


Fig. 2. Popești, Giurgiu county. Location of section A ("Nucet"), B and C. General plan of excavations in sector A.

Stage of the researches (brief description)

The fact that, despite intermittent habitation, deposits from all periods attested at Popești were identified in all three sectors (A – C), indicates that they should be considered as a whole.

The oldest deposit dates from the early period of the Bronze Age (Glina culture). It is represented mainly by - mostly corroded - pottery sherds with specific decoration, and by a few hearths. Speculations have been made about the existence of a fortification system with ditch and wall in this period, especially in sector A, but this could not be proved undisputedly.

The following late Bronze Age habitation is characterized, among others, by Fundeni-Govora- and Zimnicea-Plovdiv pottery. Each of them was found in various parts of the settlements in either one or in two layers. While there are hardly any architectural remains from the Fundeni-Govora period, the traces of the following Zimnicea-Plovdiv habitation are better preserved – among others there are two houses that also yielded a large number of kantharos pots.

The first fortification of the site – a wood and brick wall – was raised during the Fundeni-Govora dwelling, and strengthened in the following period, so as to enclose the whole settlement. Radiocarbon samples of charcoal stemming from the earliest wall delivered a date between approx. 1500 and 1400 B.C.; this should also be a date when the Fundeni-Govora pottery was in use. The fixing in time of the earthen wall and ditch as well as of the Zimnicea-Plovdiv pottery associated with it is possible only by cross-dating; there is good reason to think that it should not be placed much later than 1400 B.C.²

After a period of interruption, the site was inhabited again during the early Iron Age or “Hallstatt period; according to the use of the term in Romanian archaeology Reinecke’s Hallstatt A and B are also included here. The habitation remains consists of three layers: two with grooved pottery, followed by one with a richly decorated ceramics – incised, excised, and filled with white substance. The later is known under the name of Basarabi and dates as a whole between approx. 800 and 650 B.C.³ Though hearths and pits with typical inventory were identified in all three Hallstatt layers, remains of buildings – most probable dwelling houses – were found only in the Basarabi layer. To this latter layer also belongs what I consider to be a cult place – an altar hearth (i.e. a sizeable decorated hearth), close to which abundant and richly decorated ceramics was found.

We ignore the fate of the settlement during the interval between the middle of the 7th and the 6th century B.C. Our site comes thus to be part of the general phenomenon observed in the Romanian Plain, that of its “emptying” through apparent “retreat” of the population towards the Sub Carpathian regions (followed by the appearance there of what is known under the name of Ferigile- and Bârsești groups). In exchange, we know that the promontory at Popești was inhabited again beginning with the 4th century B.C. (if not already one century earlier). This was stratigraphically certified in sector B, and, through pits and isolated finds (for ex. fibulae of Thracian type), also in sector A. We ignore the intensity, the structure as well as the duration of this habitation.

On the acropolis, the level belonging to the afore-mentioned period was strongly leveled with the founding of the Getic settlement towards the middle of the 2nd century B.C. Excavations in sector B were able to show that the ditch separating sectors A and B was cleared, since we found the excavated earth lying over large areas of the deposit belonging to the 4th – 3rd centuries B.C. This fact, together with the leveling of the ground, shows that around 150 B.C. a real “setting up” of an oppidan type settlement took place.

A relevant date for the founding of the Getic site at Popești was inferred from a fragment of a stamped handle of a Rhodian amphora found on the ground level of a building belonging to the first Latène layer - the stamp is attributed to group IV (roughly dated approx. 165 – 145 B.C.).⁴ On the other

² N. Palincaș, *Valorificarea arheologică a probelor ¹⁴C din fortificația aparținând Bronzului târziu de la Popești (jud. Giurgiu)*, SCIVA 47, 1996, 3, p. 239; C. Fischer, *Problele ¹⁴C din valul de epoca bronzului de la Popești*, ibidem, p. 289. Idem, Arch. Korrespondenzblatt, 30, 2000, 2, p. 209–229 (N. Palincaș), 227–230 (C. Fischer).

³ A. Vulpe, *Zur mittleren Hallstattzeit in Rumänien (die Basarabikultur)*, Dacia 9, 1965, p. 105 sqq; idem, Dacia 30, 1986, p. 62.

⁴ The stamp bears the eponym *Pythodoros*, dated towards the end of groupe IV according to V. Grace (N. Palincaș, Cerc. arh. MNIR 10, p. 184 sqq); see more recently some corrections of the chronology of Rhodian amphora stamps in: Chr. Habicht, *Rhodian amphora stamps and rhodian eponyms*, REA, 105, 2003, 2, p. 541–578, especially p. 549 sqq, placing the activity of this eponym between 152–150 B.C., dating which does not change essentially the data of the issue in the case of the piece from Popești.

hand, the discovery *in situ* on the stone pavement of the last but one level, of a denarius from AVGVS TVS, issued at the earliest in 27 B.C., as well as the absence of any elements datable into the 1st century A.D. show that the settlement ceased to exist not later than the first years of our era.⁵

The Getic settlement from Popești is of particular interest first of all due to its complexity, but also to the relatively short interval - of circa 150 years -, illustrating a well delimited chronological sequence in the life of the Geto-Dacians from Southern Romania, that also comprises Burebista's reign (82 or ca 60 - 44 B.C.).

The following general stratigraphy is relevant for Settlement "A". For its rendering, I will use - as I already deed⁶ - a set of acronyms designating the main epochs known from the site: *Br* for Bronze Age; *Ha* for the Hallstatt period/early Iron Age; *Lt* for the La Tène culture/Getic period):

	5	} Getic <i>dava</i> , period ca 150 B.C. - Augustan epoch
	4	
	3	
	2	
Lt II	- 1	
Lt I	-	Getic settlement of the 4 th -3 rd c. B.C.
II	-	Basarabi period
I 2	-	"Pre-Basarabi" habitation
Ha I 1	-	"Pre-Basarabi" habitation
III 2	-	Zimnicea-Plovdiv habitation
III 1	-	Zimnicea-Plovdiv habitation
II 2	-	Fundeni-Govora habitation
II 1	-	Fundeni-Govora habitation
Br I	-	Glina habitation

As said above, this scheme does not imply uninterrupted habitation of the site, except for the levels Lt II 1-5. I am in no position to deliver an explanation for these discontinuities, which are rather amazing in a site situated on a dominant place, defended both naturally (by the swampy flood plain of the Argeș) and anthropically (ditches with adjacent wall blocking the access from the river terrac); possible reason could be the evolution of environment, developments in local economy of population dynamic, power relations, social and ideological structure of the communities etc.

The Getic settlement (Lt II 1-5)

The favorable work conditions in the field, especially in Settlement "A", allowed our team to prepare excavations in detail. Not only stratigraphy but also the structure of the settlement could be sketched. As illustrated here on fig. 3 the existence of an elite residential complex could be deduced - including a sanctuary, and several workshops - in the southeastern part of the acropolis (section W). Identified in 1957/1958, this complex was partially completed by the excavations in 1989 and 1991. In other parts of Sector A ("Nucet") a large number of rectangular buildings were identified, with inner hearths, and, in several cases, adjacent cellars (on one of the profiles the steps descending into the dugout were easily visible⁷). Up to this moment we are unable to specify whether a certain order existed in the location of these houses - which have most probably served as ordinary dwelling houses -; it is though certain that they were prevailingly orientated towards either N-S or E-W. Several altar hearths with decorated surface uncovered in different parts of the acropolis suggest that ritual activities were not restricted to the perimeter of the sanctuary.

⁵ Another denarius, bearing the same legend, had been discovered during Rosetti's diggings, with no further details.

⁶ A. Vulpe, Cerc. arh. MNIR 10, 1997, p. 165. The slight changes that occurred here are due to N. Palincaș's recent reevaluation of the stratigraphy of the prehistoric site.

⁷ N. Palincaș, Cerc. arh. MNIR 10, 1997, pl. 2.

As we repeatedly noticed, houses destroyed for whatever causes – but prevailingly through fire – were then rebuild on the same spot, from the first till the last of the Latène levels. I consider this to indicate the existence of a parcellation of the settlement surface.

Besides the five levels identified throughout the settlement, some small variations were noticed from section to section, due mainly to local rebuildings. The first three levels (Lt II 1-3) disappeared through fire; level Lt II 2 was destroyed by a particularly powerful one. After the habitation belonging to the level Lt II 3 came to an end, the whole Settlement “A” was leveled with a layer of sterile earth overlaid by a thin layer of pebbles; even now the new houses were placed on approximately the same locations. The levels further up – Lt II 4 and Lt II 5 – look much similar, and are sometimes difficult to distinguish; they create rather the impression of local rebuildings. The fact that the last level (Lt II 5) only sporadically presents fire traces, and that its inventory is richer both in quantity and variety, and that most artifacts are only partially damaged, gives the impression of a “voluntary” abandoned settlement. (See below the discussion the hypotheses concerning the history of the Getae from the Romanian Plain).

The “elite residential” complex in section W (fig. 3–6)

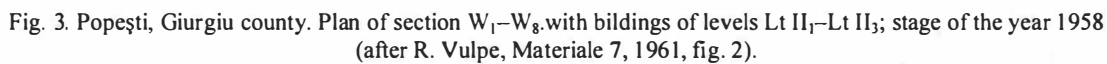
On an area of ca 1,200 m² the burnt rests of a complex of buildings were discovered. Given its particular architectural characteristics and inventory, we called it the “elite residential quarter”. Though identified since 1957, the uncovering of the whole area down to the first level, Lt II 1, could not be achieved up to this date.

The plans of the buildings could be identified with certainty for those belonging to the first two levels - Lt II 1 and Lt II 2 (fig. 3) -, and only partially for of the following levels.

The architecture of the area revolves around a building with three rooms that communicate with each other through a door. The most northwestern of them is an apse room. As the shape of the building resembles a basilica, I shall refer to it further on using this name. Its plan is approximately the same, both for the first level (Lt II 1) and for the following one. This latter “basilica” was remarkably well preserved due to a powerful fire that affected the whole settlement (as mentioned above) - a thick layer of burnt debris covered its remains; large portions of burnt floor and walls of wattle and daub reaching up to 20 cm were preserved; nevertheless, the southern part was partially destroyed by the diggings before 1947.

The plan of the “basilica” of the first level (20 x 12 m), though less well preserved, could be reconstructed more precisely due to the clearly visible traces of its walls (fig. 4 gives a sketch of its plan). In the center of the apse room there was an undecorated altar hearth – four circular hollows, one at each corner suggests that a four-legged object (mobile table? cauldron?) was placed over it. During a partial rebuilding a second altar hearth, slightly differently oriented was placed on the east side of the apse room. The middle room of the “basilica”, square in shape (12 x 12 m) had a large altar hearth (2 x 2 m) in its center. Around but asymmetrically arranged in relation to the central hearth, the traces of 34 poles were discovered – they formed a approx. semicircle very similar in shape to the apse of the “basilica”, and of slightly different orientation; traces of other four poles seemed to outline another semicircle, situated a little more eastwards. Finally, the southeastern room of the “basilica”, a kind of “narthex”, ca 4 m wide, was the entrance room of the building; the outside wall was made of wood or had at least a wooden threshold. Along the western walls of the “basilica”, there were three small altar hearths, two of which were decorated. Other two altar hearths were discovered along the northern wall of the apse room. It is probable that there were hearths along the eastern walls too, but since this part of the building was largely damaged by older excavations there is no way of making sure of this.

The “basilica” of the level Lt II 2 was also oriented towards NW, but slightly differently from the one of the preceding level (fig. 3). Like its predecessor, its apse room also had two altar hearths. The one to the left was richly decorated (fig. 5 represents the part uncovered in 1958; as in 1989 the rest of it was found, fallen into a pit, it turned out that the decoration was asymmetrical). The other one, found in the eastern corner, was large (2 x 2 m) and undecorated. The central room that seems to have been longer than that of the preceding “basilica” also had a large central altar with a slightly different orientation than that of the “basilica” as a whole. Since the southern part of the building was destroyed by older excavations, one can only guess that this “basilica” too must have had a southern wall as well as a “narthex”.



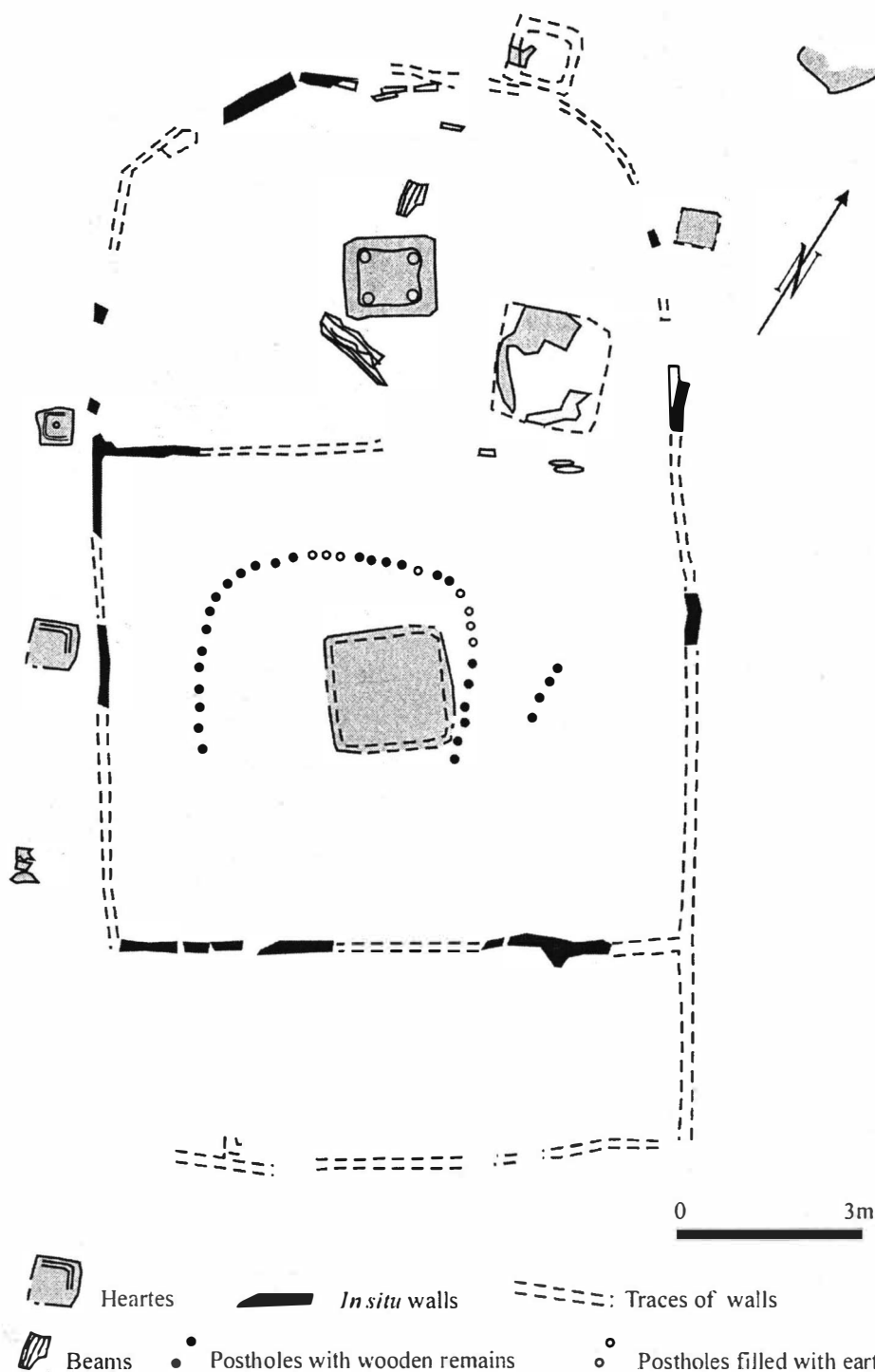


Fig. 4. Popești, Giurgiu county. Sanctuary of level Lt II₁ – simplified plan of the 1989 excavations.

The scraping in 1991 of the subsoil of the level Lt II 1 yielded several postholes, oval in shape, and of equal sizes (ca 60 cm), eight of which were aligned on a direction parallel to the western wall of the Lt II 2 “basilica”. The location of other two postholes corresponded to that of the central room of the same building. It is most probable that the role of these massive poles was to support the roof of the Lt II 2 “basilica”, which must have been made of flat and curved clay tiles (a couple of such tiles were restored starting from the fragments found among the burnt debris that formed the massive deposit covering the remaining of the “basilica” - fig. 6).

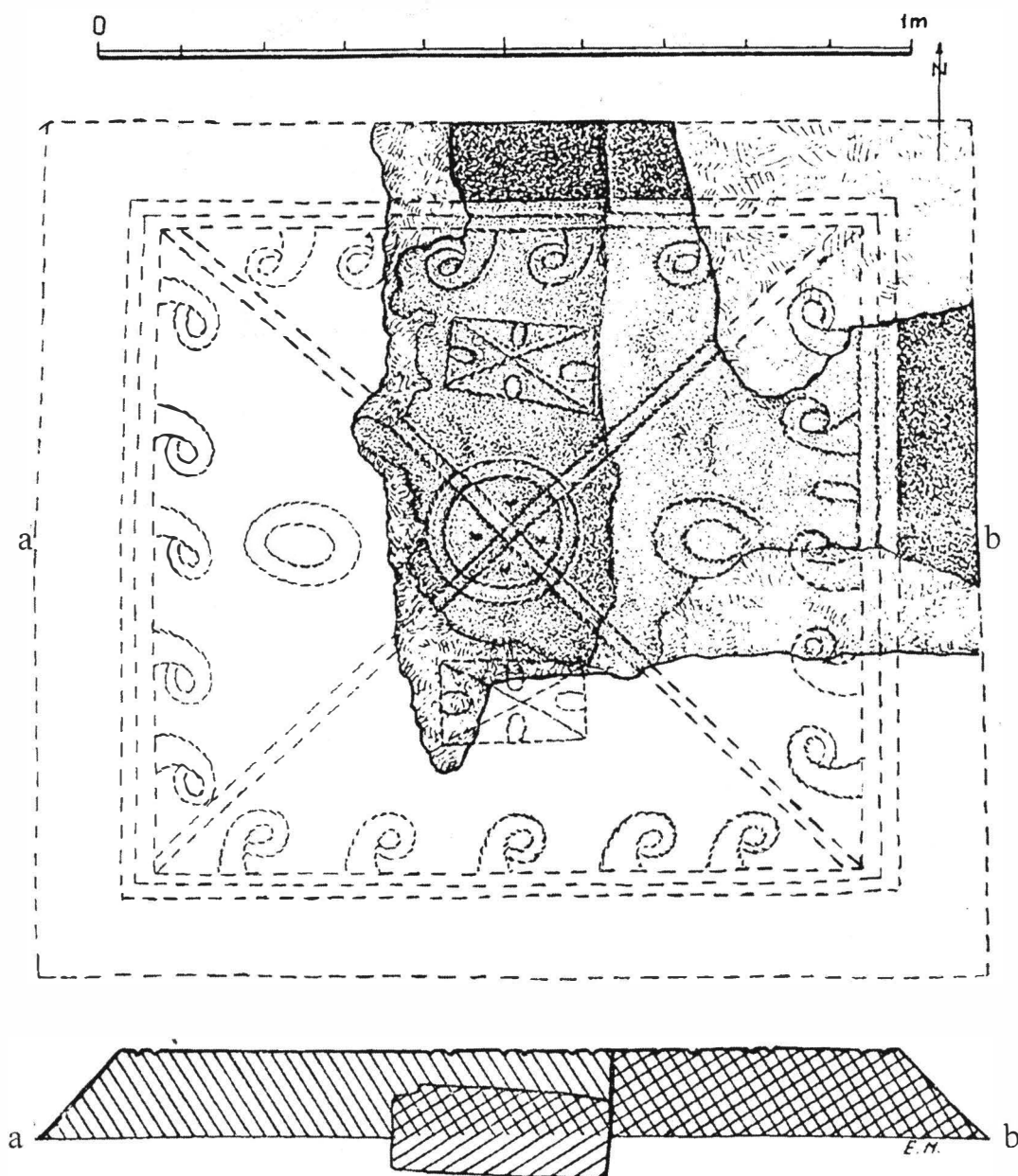


Fig. 5. Popești, Giurgiu county. Decorated hearth of the sactuary of the Lt II₂ (after R. Vulpe, Materiale 6, 1961, fig. 7).

Let us attempt an imaginary reconstruction of this “basilica”. We know, on the one hand, that the “basilica” of the second level was surrounded by a line of thick poles forming a porch, and that altar hearths were missing; on the other hand, such small altar hearths lined the sides of the first “basilica”, which instead has no signs of a porch. We ignore how the “basilica” of the lowest level might have been covered.

It is thinkable that there must have been strict rules defining access into different parts of the sanctuaries. Even if one can’t make direct comparisons with what we know from votive places and sanctuaries in the open in the Greek antiquity, it is thinkable that some restrictions according at least to sex and age categories might have been specified for our sanctuaries too.

As to what was built in this area during the next periods of habitation (Lt II 3-5) we only have scarce information. All we know is that there were some altar hearths found approximately on the same spots as those of the earlier phases, so it is probable that the area continued to serve as a cult place till the settlement was abandoned.

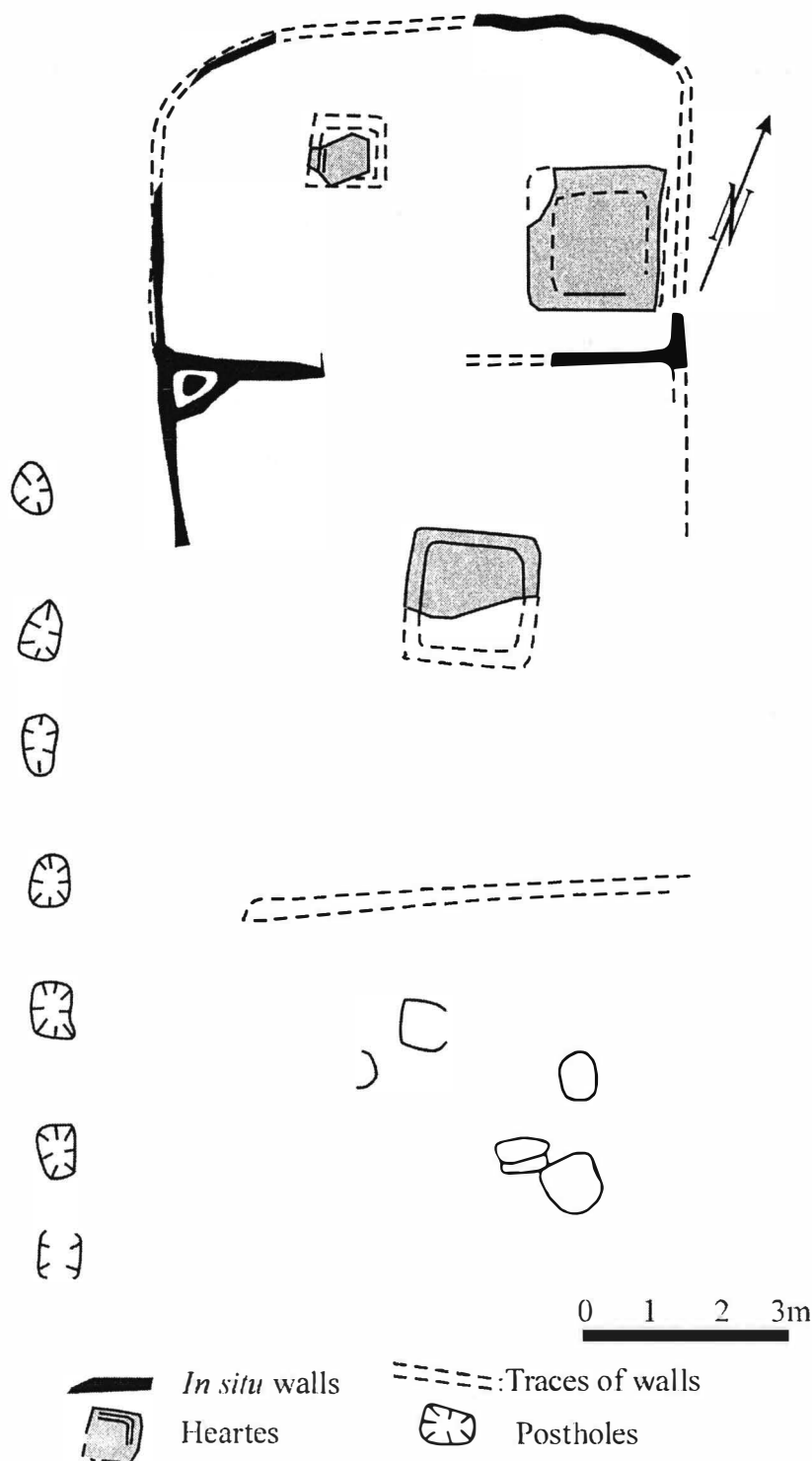


Fig. 6. Popești, Giurgiu county. Sactuary of the level Lt II₂ (hypothetical reconstruction by N. Palincas, 1991).

While there is little reason to doubt the sacred character of these buildings – buildings of similar plan and orientation (\pm NW, varying probably according to the moment in time they were built) are known from many places in pre-Roman Dacia –, their origin is still open to debate. R. Vulpe found analogies in Samothrace, in the Dioscuri cult.⁸ Even if it is not my intention to widen here the discussion,

⁸ R. Vulpe, *L'origine delle costruzioni daciche ad abside nell'età preromana*, in Atti del settimo congresso internazionale di Archeologia Classica, vol. III, Roma 1961, p. 87–104.

I would like to draw attention on the tomb at Levkandi, dated to the 10th century B.C., which subsequently became a sanctuary (heroon): it also has the shape of a “basilica” and \pm NW orientation.⁹

As far as the buildings surrounding the “basilica”-sanctuary are concerned even if situated only approx. 7 meters to the west they seem to have been destined to household activities.

A construction of ca 6 x 7 consisted of a large oven, provided with a hearth of ca 1.90 m in diameter, in front of which there was a slightly deepened room, full of the fragments of more than 20 pots, all handmade, and of various sizes. Nearby there was a long, rectangular room (ca 7 x 2.5 m), separated from that with the oven by a clay wall, which was preserved up to a height of 52 cm; only a few ceramic sherds were found here. Behind the oven there was a room of smaller sizes (it couldn't be delimited exactly) with lots of pyramid trunk shaped clay pieces, specific to loom weights. Southwards of it, a larger room had five *in situ* pithoi. To the north of this compound, only one meter away from the oven, a rather large house (ca 12.5 x 5 m) with two rooms separated by a corridor - very similar to the plan of a modern peasant house - was uncovered. It had a decorated altar hearth in its northern room (fig. 3 and 7). All these buildings belong to the Lt II 2 level and we preserved in view of further research, which hitherto did not take place.

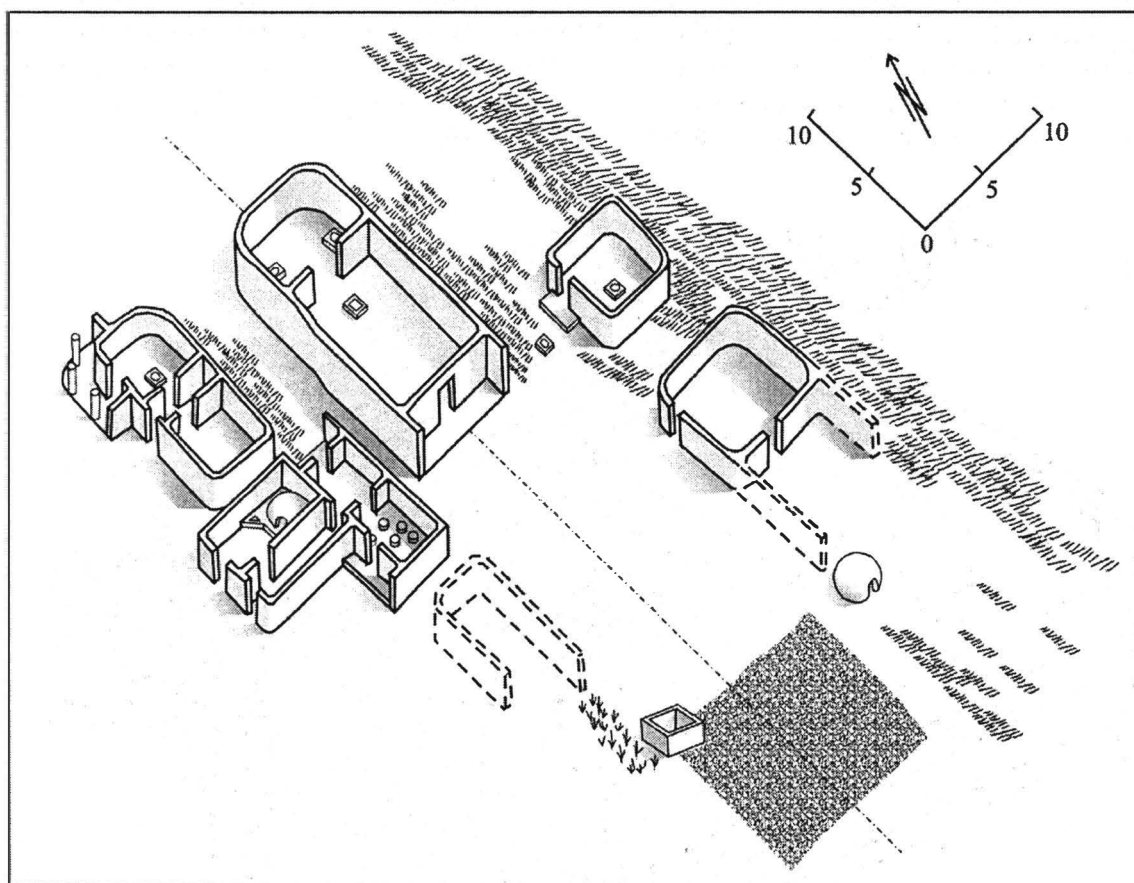


Fig. 7. Popești, Giurgiu county. Section W – Residential quarter (Axonometry by Dinu Antonescu 1978).

In the whole area westwards of the “basilica”, numerous traces were found of buildings whose plan could not be specified in detail, as well as several hearths at different depths; all these, coming from the Lt II 1-3 levels, testify for an intense building activity in the area.

⁹ G. Kossack, *Religiöses Denken in Alteuropa vom 8. bis 6. Jahrhundert v. Chr. Geb.*, in P. Schauer, (ed.) *Archäologische Forschungen zum Kultgeschehen in der jüngeren Bronzezeit und frühen Eisenzeit Alteuropas* (Koll. 1993), *Regensburger Beiträge zur prähistorischen Archäologie*, Bd. 2, Regensburg, 1995, p. 18, fig. 2, 1 (according M. R. Popham *et al.*, *Lefkandi II*, 1993, pl. 38). Cf. also M. R. Popham, E. Touloupa, L. H. Sakett, *The Hero of Lefkandi*, *Antiquity* 56, 1982, p. 169 sqq.

The parts eastwards of the “basilica” were seriously affected by the unprofessional excavations from the '30s and '40s. Nevertheless, it was possible to identify an approximately quadrilateral construction that belongs to the Lt II 2 level, and had an altar hearth in the middle.

Further to the south and southeast, there was another room, of ca 8 x 7 m, with a burnt wooden beam collapsed over a *pithos* full of grains (probably millet). Even further to the south there was another oven with a hearth of ca 1.95 m in diameter, walls preserved up to 80 cm height, and a doorway with a clay ogival frame. Here too remains were found of a partially preserved room (ca 5 x 6 m), full of sherds and grains (millet). Unfortunately, the stratigraphic relation of this latter building to the “basilicas” of the Lt II 1 and 2 levels could not be specified with certainty.

About 20 m southwards from the “basilicas”, a large pit approx. 4.80 x 4 m wide was discovered. First noticed in 1957, its excavation was resumed in 2000 – 2001 in the frame of a joint project with the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Vienna. Since the geological drilling carried out at the beginning of the excavation showed that the pit reached the groundwater, we consider it to be a well. Characteristics of its filling as well as charcoal fragments found *in situ* during excavation allowed a partial reconstruction of its upper part (fig. 8).¹⁰ In that same area, earlier diggings had revealed six pithoi, also *in situ*. Both these features – the well and the group of pithoi – were located at a small distance from the earthen wall. By this time – the beginning of the Lt II habitation – the wall was partially rebuilt (it might have also been provided with a wooden palisade) and probably used as an enclosure the function of which must have been related to prestige at least as much as to some other practical reasons (see above the observation of a clearing out of the ditch in Sector B, nearby).

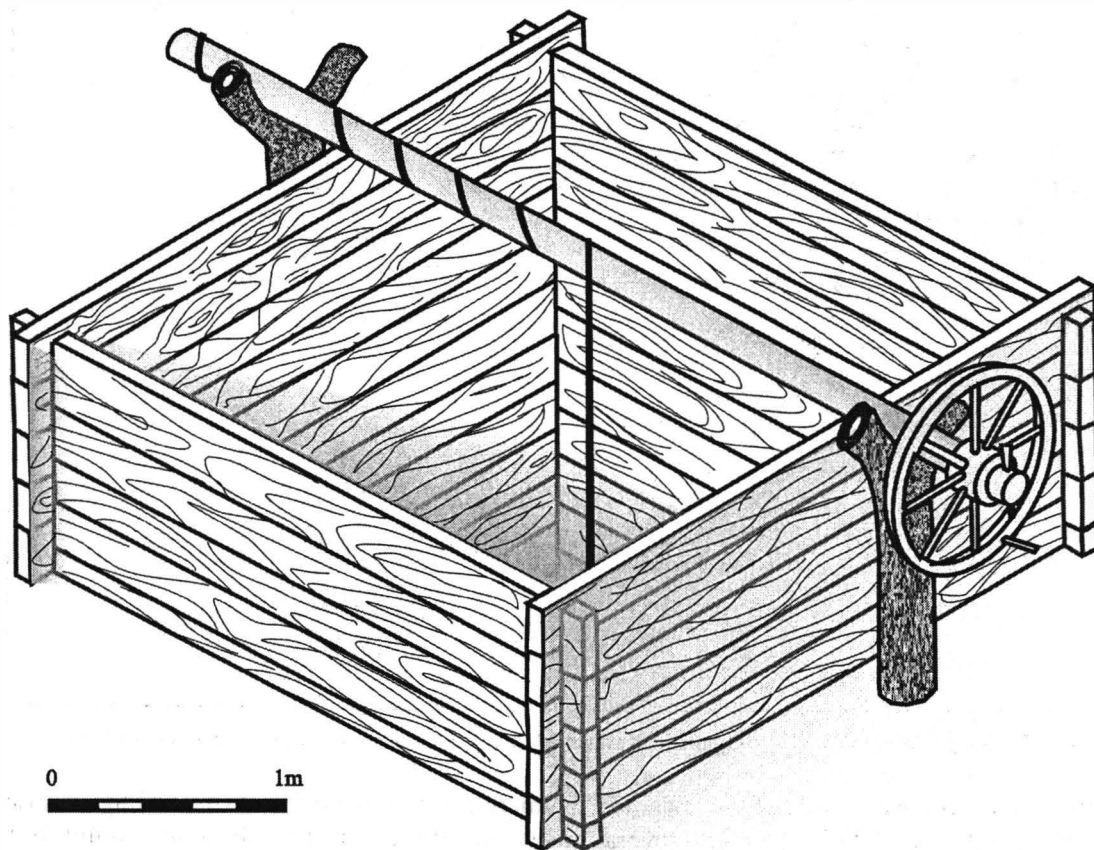


Fig. 8. Popești, Giurgiu county. Reconstruction of the level Lt II well (reconstruction by N. Palincaș, drawing I. Barnea; after N. Palincaș, A. Lippert).

¹⁰ N. Palincaș, A. Lippert, *Ein latènezeitlicher Brunnen von Popești (bei Bukarest, Rumänien)*, Archäologie Österreichs 14/2, 2003, p. 59–63.

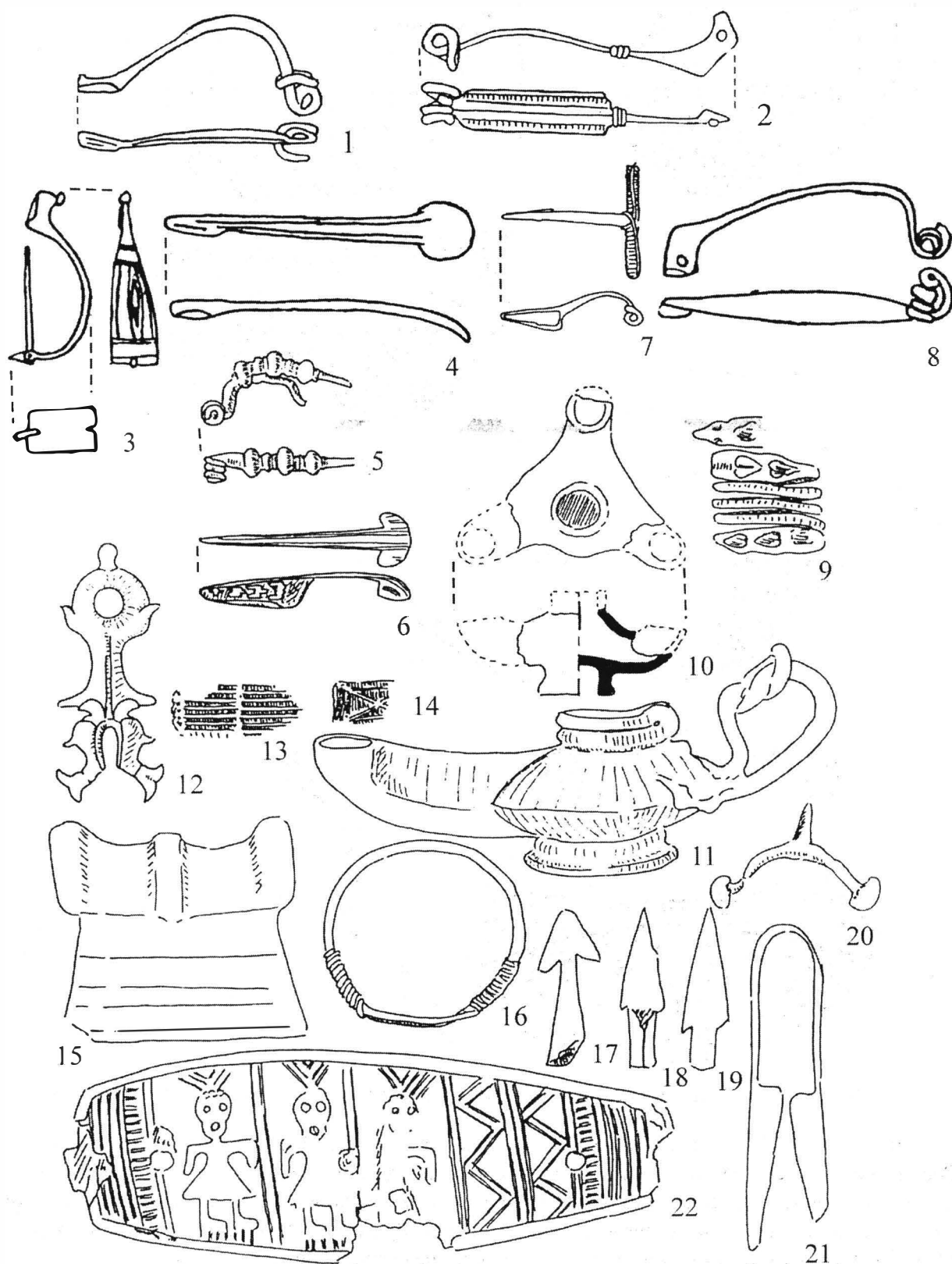


Fig. 9. Popești, Giurgiu county. Objects found in level Lt II₂; selection of types (after different authors; various scales).

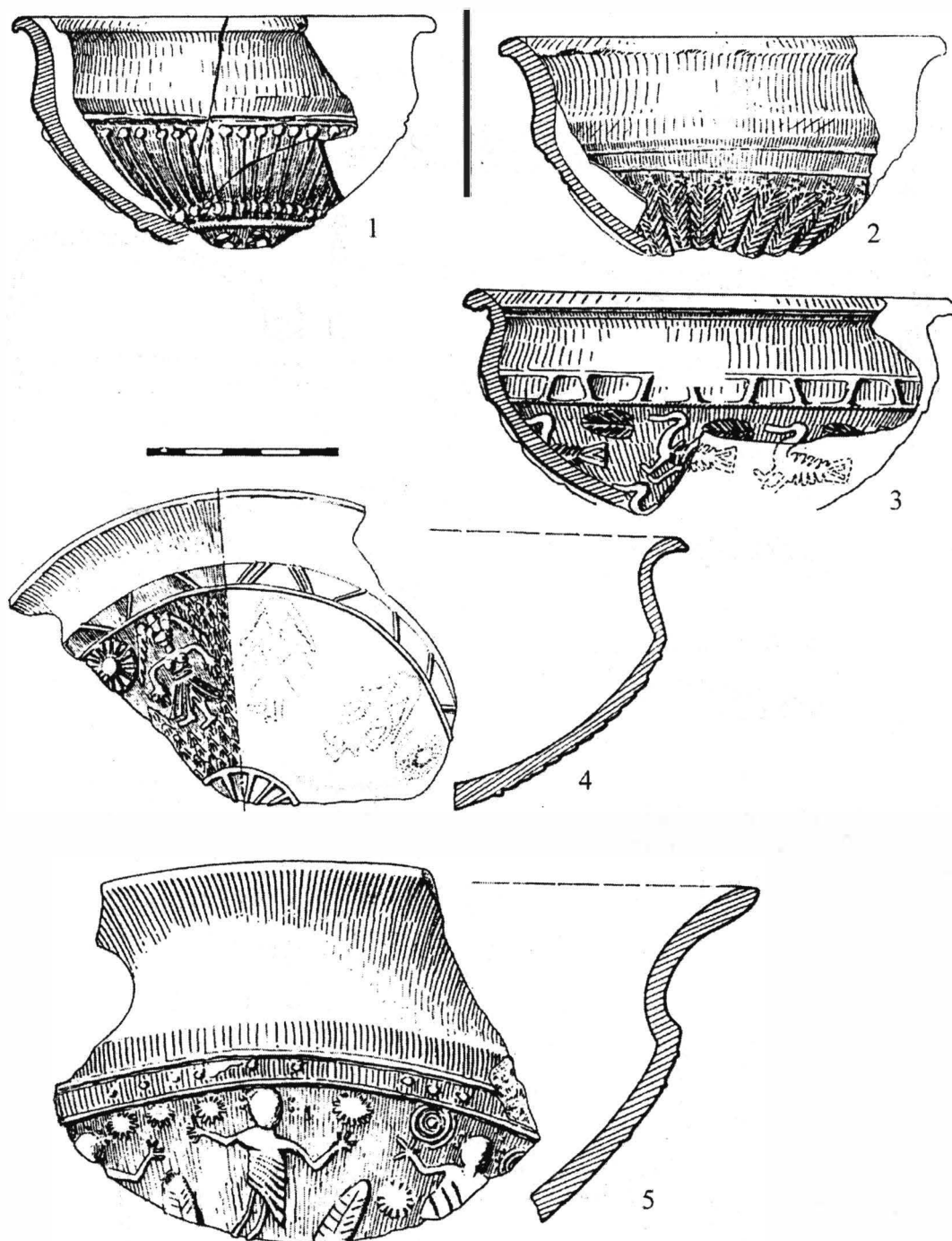


Fig. 10. Popești, Giurgiu county. Bowls with relief ornament (after A. Vulpe, M. Gheorghică, *Dacia* N.S. 20, 1976).

If above description justifies the idea of some sort of elite residential “quarter” on the citadel at Popești (fig. 7 presents an axonometric reconstruction of this “quarter”, made by architect Dinu Antonescu), all sections practiced in other zones of this settlement evidenced an intense habitation throughout it (e.g. rooms with several pithoi in various areas, traces of a partially excavated construction with several rooms, identified further to the west from the so-called “elite residential” area). It is to be expected that other “quarters” may be also identified, yielding other complex constructions. Generally, in the present stage of research, we can state that the multitude of types of artifacts in clay (ceramic, etc.), metal (especially jewels/fibulae, iron utensils, nails, etc.) is attested almost equally in the whole sector A (fig. 9).

Besides, the whole inventory discovered through systematic excavations is quantitatively considerable. Apart from large quantities of pottery shapes typical of the Geto-Dacian civilization, numerous amphorae were found, some imported from Greek centers, some locally imitated; even stamps on the amphora handles were forged in a gorsier manner (the so-called anepigraphic stamps – fig. 9, 13–14). Worth mentioning is a category of ceramics – cups with relief decoration –, imitation of a type of Hellenistic luxury cups (fig. 10). The decoration motifs are indigenous though; on some fragments are printed coins issued by local centers and even human faces (fig. 10/4 – 5 represents a group of dancers). It is most probable that the main center of production of this type of cups was at Popești¹¹ (up to now, fragments from almost 1,000 items and moulds have been found). Other items also occur in large numbers: over 100 fibulae in bronze, iron or silver, bracelets, bone combs, various tools and instruments in iron, and over 200 coins (local and Greek issues or Roman republican denarii).

It is clear to us that further excavations in Popești need to rely on a different strategy. The sections dug hitherto undoubtedly contributed to our knowledge of the Getic period (Lt II), and gave us an image of what is to be expected from now on; the richness of information recovered in section *W* proved the advantages of opening large areas which must be researched annually, based on projects well prepared scientifically as well as financially. We hope that such projects will be achievable within a future not too far away. The particularly favorable conditions in the case of the site at Popești should stimulate this kind of complex and interdisciplinary archaeological researches.

The burial mounds of the Getic epoch

Near the site at Popești, ca 1.5 km southeastwards, on the right terrace of the Argeș, a series of tumuli were identified (fig. 1). Their initial number could not be determined, but it seems to have been small; in 1954 some 12 mounds could still be mapped, and during the following years (1958–1961), four were systematically explored (at the present, only two tumuli, still uninvestigated, are visible at the surface).¹²

The four systematically excavated barrows contained each one cremation tomb; they correspond to the Lt II period of the settlement. The archaeological remains of the funerary ritual consisted in a large burnt area at the ground level of the mound; in the case of Barrow 2, better preserved, and consequently researched in more detail, it was clearly seen that the cremation of the body had taken place nearby, on a small pyre (ca 2 m in diameter), where calcinated bones were amassed and mixed with fragments of jewels (among which the iron fibula) - strongly distorted by fire. In the vicinity, from a wide area of burnt soil (ca 5 x 9 m), numerous pottery sherds were collected (some from cups with relief decoration), as well as fragmented pieces of bronze and iron, stemming from weapons (sword, spear, shield, armor jacket); some of them could have been part of a wagon, used probably in burial ritual (a bier?). From the earthen cover of the barrow, amongst traces of ashes and charcoal, there were fragments stemming from the objects found on the above mentioned burnt surface at the ground level of the mound (fig. 11). Even if by far and away less well preserved, the other barrows could be, to a certain extent, reconstructed starting from the situation in Barrow 2. A special case is that of Barrow 4, almost entirely leveled through ploughing; several fragments of jewelry and weapons that must have stemmed from its pyre and its ground level could be picked up from the field. The ground level itself could not be identified with certainty but we were able to observe an undisturbed pit in which the following items were lying: a folded armor jacket (so strongly damaged by fire that it could not be unfolded by means available in the country), a sword with its sheath, a fighting knife with its sheath, a spearhead, pieces from a shield (including the *umbo*), a cheek piece, and a sickle, all of iron, as well as a bronze helmet (fig. 12) with a pile of calcinated bones inside.

¹¹ Cf. A. Vulpe, M. Gheorghiiță, *Bols à reliefs de Popești*, Dacia N.S. 20, 1976, p. 167–198; M. Turcu, *Les bols à reliefs des collections du Musée d'histoire du municipe de Bucarest*, ibidem, p. 199–204.

¹² The complete results of the diggings here were published by A. Vulpe, *La nécropole tumulaire gète de Popești*, Thraco-Dacica 1, 1976, p. 193–215.

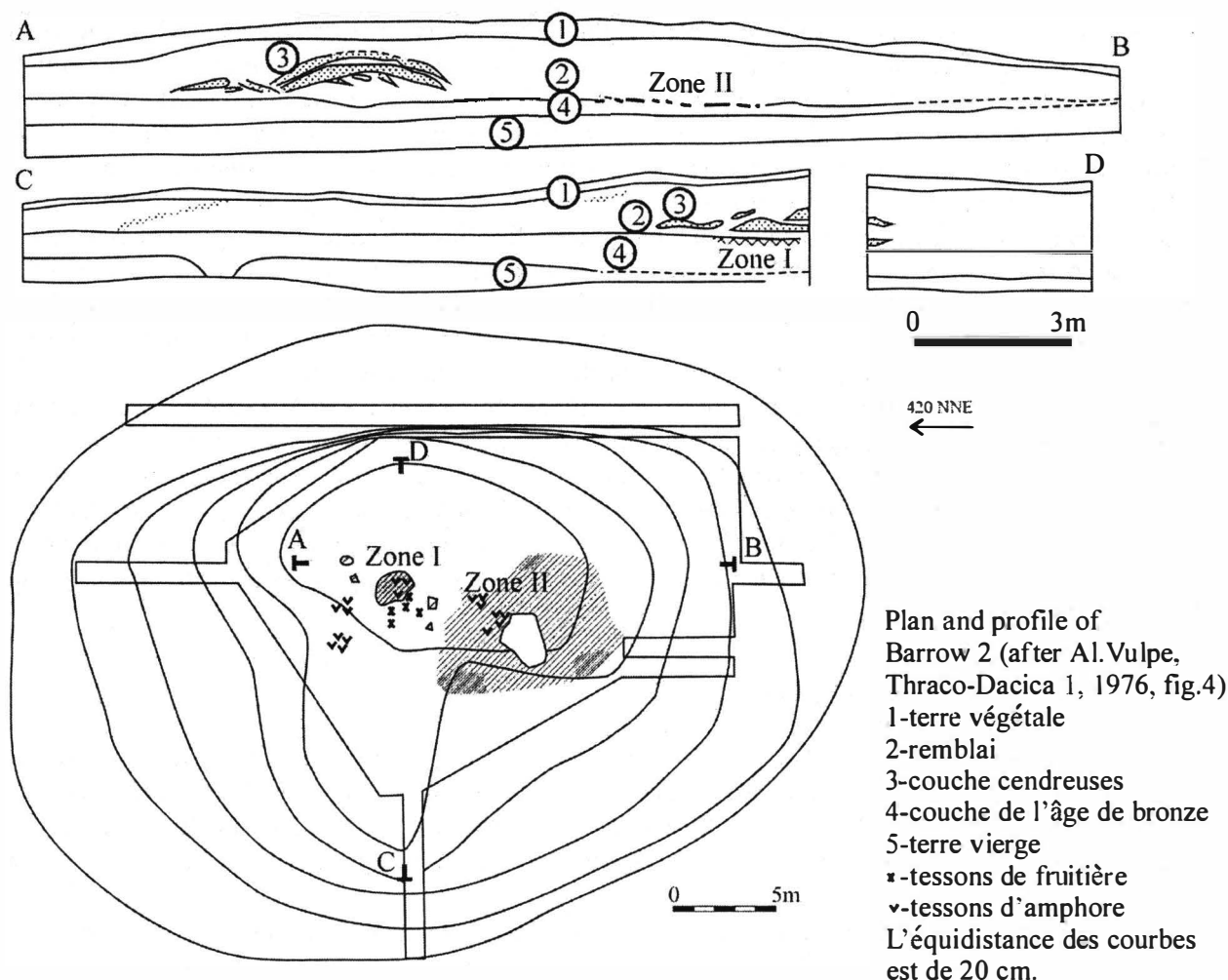


Fig. 11. Popești, Giurgiu county. Plan and profile of Barrow 2 (after A. Vulpe, Thraco-Dacia, 1 1976, fig. 4).

All four excavated barrows were raised over earlier mounds that were leveled by their builders. These low mounds represent remains of prehistoric sites: Barrows 2 and 3 were lying over a small Tei settlement,¹³ Barrows 1 and 4 over an early Iron Age site (of the Basarabi culture).¹⁴ It is obvious here that in positioning of the funerary mounds their builders deliberately searched for prominent places in the landscape.

These burial mounds are in no way the cemetery of such a prominent and densely populated site as the settlement at Popești must have been at that time. As in the case of the other *dava*-type settlements of 2nd c. B.C. – 1st c. A.D. Dacia, the funerary practices of the majority of the population are not known; they must have implied a ritual that leaves no archaeologically detectable traces - at least not by the presently available means.¹⁵ The type of funerary monument (tumulus), as well as the sumptuous inventory suggest the particular social importance of the people buried here. It is thinkable that they were the leaders of the community whose center was the *dava* at Popești. Similar situations are known from other sites in Dacia, such as the three *dava* on the Siret (Poiana, Răcătau and Brad), Cugir in Transylvania and, most probably,

¹³ Cf. A. Vulpe, V. Veselovschi-Bușilă. *Date noi privind periodizarea culturii Tei și cunoașterea culturii Basarabi* (Săpăturile de la Novaci, 1961), SCIV 18, 1967, 1 p. 83–112.

¹⁴ Cf. A. Vulpe, *Sălașul hallstättian de la Novaci*, Materiale 8, 1962, p. 359.

¹⁵ Cf. M. Babeș, *Descoperirile funerare și semnificația lor în contextul culturii geto-dace clasice*, SCIVA 39, 1988, 1, p. 3–32; see also V. Sîrbu, *Credințe și practici funerare, religioase și magice în lumea geto-dacilor*, Brăila-Galați, 1993.

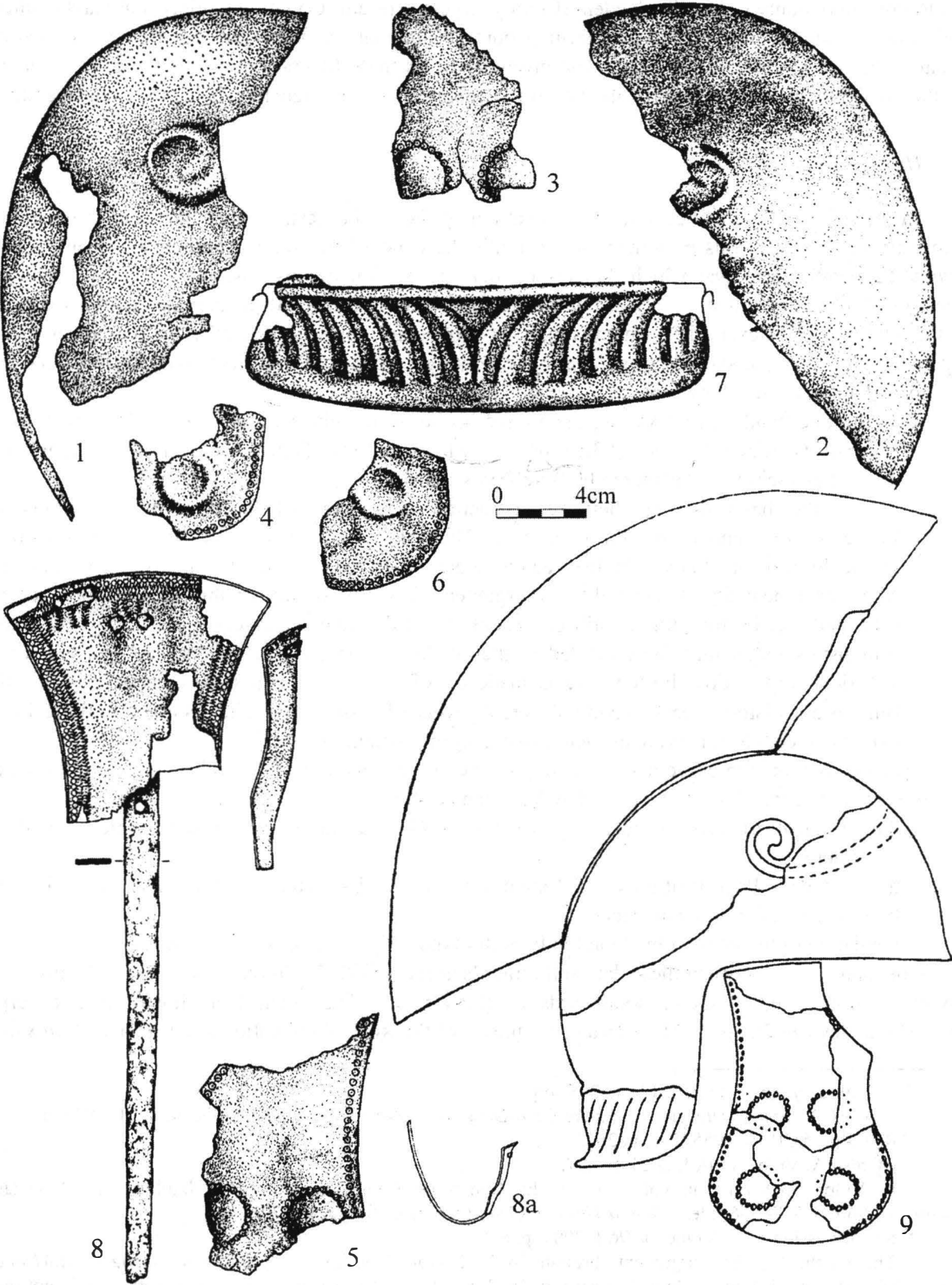


Fig. 12. Popești, Giurgiu county. Bronze helmet from Barrow 4; fragments and reconstruction (after A. Vulpe, *Thraco-Dacica*, 1 1976).

also Radovanu (County Călărași), Cetățeni (County Argeș), Crăsani (County Ialomița), and maybe others too;¹⁶ the two tumuli investigated at Lăceni (County Teleorman) certainly belonged to a site nearby, probably the one at Orbeasca de Sus.¹⁷ The inventory of all these funerary monuments was sumptuous, and the ritual, though with local particularities, was, generally, similar - cremation being the exclusive rite.

Historical considerations

Ever since Radu Vulpe began to excavate at Popești he tried to reconstitute the name and to specify the historical importance of this prominent site. Initially, he believed he could hypothetically identify it in *Sornum* (Σόρνυον), place near which Ptolemy (*Geogr.* III, 8, 4) mentions a population called *Piephigoi* (Πιέφιγοι).¹⁸ It is known that, in the case of the names of places in Dacia, the geographic coordinates given by the author from Alexandria in many situations correspond, roughly, to reality.¹⁹ Consequently, this hypothetical identification should not be overlooked. Subsequently, R. Vulpe came back to this issue. He tried to find an agreement between two hypothetical names:

- on the one hand ΑΡΓΕΔΑΥΟΝ, mentioned in the decree given by the city of Dionysopolis in honor of its citizen *Akornion* (IGB I, no. 13), who went to the father of a local ruler, whom many (but not all) scholars consider to be Burebista's father;
- on the other hand, the hypothetical reconstruction of the name of the river Argeș, reconstituted by Vasile Pârvan under the form *Argesis*. Thus the *dava* at Popești, the most important archaeological site known in the region might have been the *dava* on Argeș (Argedava).²⁰ Although repeatedly challenged,²¹ the arguments brought to support this identification remain valid and are, in my opinion, still consistent, if not decisive.²² Consequently, it is possible that Burebista's father may have resided in the citadel at Popești. But, as one can see, the whole historic interpretation drafted here is made up of a series of hypotheses (as also is, mostly, Burebista's history), each having different levels of probability. Their sum is nothing but a hypothetical conclusion, with an even lesser level of probability.

Another issue is the cause and the dating of the end of this *dava*. The archaeological information converges to a date which cannot exceed the Augustan epoch:

- the dating of artifacts considered typical for the Geto-Dacian culture, and on which I shall not insist here;
- the absence at Popești of traces of Roman influence datable to the 1st century A.D. and otherwise known from other *dava* in Dacia;
- the dating of the latest coins found in Popești to the early years of Augustus' reign.

R. Vulpe made a link between these data and Strabo's account (VII, 3, 10) on consul Sextus Aelius Catus having relocated 50,000 Getae southwards of the Danube. The event that should have occurred somewhere between 2 and 12 AD, was a consequence of the Roman's intention to create a *no man's land*

¹⁶ A. Vulpe, *op. cit.* (supra, n. 12), p. 207 sqq.

¹⁷ E. Moscalu, *Sur les rites funéraires des Géo-Daces de la plaine du Danube*, Dacia N.S., 21, 1977, p. 329.

¹⁸ R. Vulpe, SCIV 6, 1955, 1-2, p. 264.

¹⁹ Cf. also A. Vulpe, in *IR* I, 2001, p. 427.

²⁰ R. Vulpe, *Argedava*, in vol. "Omăgiu lui Constantin Daicoviciu cu prilejul împlinirii a 60 de ani", București, 1960, p. 557-566 (idem, *Studia Thracologica*, București, 1976, p. 69-79).

²¹ See discussion of A. Vulpe, in *IR*, I, 2001, p. 638.

²² Though the linguistic arguments brought by V. Pârvan (*Considerații asupra unor nume de riuri dacoscitice*, ARMSI, ser. III, tom. I, Mem. I, București, 1923, p. 12 sqq) in reconstructing the name *Argesis* do not seem convincing at all to me, a fragment from Charon from Lampsakos (FgrH, 262, F 6), which escaped the attention of my great predecessor, and from which it results that the city of *Astakos* was called in Ionic dialect *Ostakos* (and on which my attention was drawn by A. Robu, in *Erasmus* 12, 2001, p. 90-99, where he quotes an opinion of A. Avram), makes it plausible that the name *Ordessos*, in Herodot, IV, 48, was nothing more than the Ionic pronunciation of an *Ardessos*. This would give consistency to the old proposition by Pârvan for the form *Argesis*.

at the Danubian frontier. R. Vulpe also thought that the Romans' action affected a large area of the Romanian Plain - including the *dava* at Zimnicea and Piscu Crăsani - and that it was achieved by force.²³

Archaeological data suggest that the lower Argeș Basin, i.e. the region where our *dava* is situated, was "emptied" of people. The dating possibilities available at this time do not allow us to settle a precise date for the end of the other settlements in the area R. Vulpe referred to. The archaeological picture of the last habitation layer at Popești (Lt II 5), give rather the impression of an abandoned site. But since this is nothing more than a personal judgment, it is difficult to defend. One should also take into account the advantages that a more quiet life under Roman armed protection offered those who more or less willingly accepted to be transferred to Moesia.

*

To conclude, it is clear that whatever image would suggest the interpretation of written sources for the *dava* at Popești this was an important elite residential center – the most important elite residential center presently known in the Romanian Plain.

I would like, though, to conclude by quoting a great Romanian geographer – Simion Mehedinți (1868-1962) – on what he understood by *Drumul Codrului* (The Way of the Woods): "Whoever was coming down from the Southern Carpathians could, until recently, reach the gulf of Balcic, without noticing having entered a land different from those connected to the mountains. Indeed, following the bunch of rivers from the Argeș Basin, immense woods (Vlășia) were lying, continuing over the Danube with other big woods (Deliorman), and the traveler, walking in the shade of the trees, arrived from the peaks of the Carpathians at the border of the Sea."²⁴ But, must I add, on the Way of the Woods was also the *dava* at Popești. And the *Way* led to the gulf of Balcic where, in Burebista's time, was the city of Dionysopolis, the same city that in its decree in honor of Akornion called Burebista "the first and the greatest among the kings of Thracia and lord of the whole country on both sides of the river", and at the same time the only city that was spared by Burebista as he, about 50 B.C., devastated all Greek cities of the Left Pontus, from Olbia to Apollonia. May all these have any relation with the above notes on the historic importance of the *dava* at Popești? Who knows?!

²³ R. Vulpe, *Les Gètes de la rive gauche du Bas-Danube et les Romains*, Dacia N.S. 4, 1960, p. 309–332, especially p. 317 (idem, *Studia Thracologica*, București, 1976, p. 131 sqq) with older literature.

²⁴ S. Mehedinți, *Dacia pontică și Dacia carpatică. Observații antropogeografice*, in vol. (ed. V. Mihailescu) *S. Mehedinți Opere alese*, București, 1967, p. 256 sqq.