

**PROJECT “NECROPOLIS POROLISSENSIS”
METHODS AND PERSPECTIVES¹**

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Abstract. *The Project “Necropolis Porolissensis” is an international collaboration that emphasizes the interdisciplinary character of the research. The project involves scientists from different domains: archaeology, topography, geophysics, anthropology, archaeometry. The proceeding of the data coming from the old excavations side by side with new investigations is going to reveal different aspect of the funerary anthropology and the phenomenology of space at the Roman site of Porolissum. The recent excavations revealed two funerary constructions. Analyzing the grave type (ritually burnt grave pits) associated with rectangular and circular funerary constructions it is presumable an Illyro-Thracian presence in this settlement.*

The present paper does not intend to analyze the results of the research carried out in the Roman graveyard from *Porolissum* (Moigrad and Jac, Sălaj County, Romania), but rather to present alternative research methods in the funerary archaeology and to emphasize the possible applications in the reconstruction of the ethnical and social structures of an ancient town.

The project “Necropolis Porolissensis” is an international collaboration that points out the interdisciplinary character of the research. In order to identify special features of the funerary anthropology in the Roman cemetery of *Porolissum*, this work involves scholars from different fields, different institutes from Romania and abroad. The team consists of archaeologists from different institutes from Transylvania (Institute of Archaeology and Art History from Cluj-Napoca, “Babeş-Bolyai” University from Cluj-Napoca, National History Museum of Transylvania from Cluj-Napoca and History and Art Museum from Zalău), of geophysicists from the “Eötvös Loránt” University from Budapest and specialists of human remains and archaeometry from the University of London. This collaboration between various scholars from different institutes intends to facilitate and to improve the analysis and interpretation of the results by processing recorded data at these specialized institutes. At the same time, this interdisciplinary team wants to underline detailed features of the funerary anthropology and not only the “traditional” archaeological aspects.

The project has three main aims. In the primary stage of research, the most important task is to collect, to correlate the results of the old excavations, and to identify their location on the field. This work involves a broad documentation and presumes at the same time the processing of the artefacts coming from this site. Our next aim is to observe the phenomenology of space with the help of field walking and geophysical survey and by relating the results to a digital terrain model (DTM) of the cemetery’s area. Through the creation of a geographic information system (GIS) our aim is to identify the relation between graves, funerary architecture, the terrain and other constructions of the archaeological complex. The third objective is the analysis of the excavated funerary contexts and the related finds by appealing to the typological, anthropological, zoo-archaeological, archaeometrical and archaeological analyses.

Porolissum is one of the few urban sites in Roman Dacia that has not been disturbed by any modern settlement or constructions. In the Roman time it was an important military centre of the north-western

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defensive system². The civil settlement established around the big auxiliary fort on the Pomet hill received the rank of *municipium* during the reign of Septimius Severus³. As the epigraphically evidence shows, the population of this economically flourishing settlement was ethnically heterogeneous⁴. The cemetery is situated outside the settlement, close to the village of Jac, on the hill called Ursoieș. Graves have been identified on both sides of the imperial road which goes southwards, through Romita, to *Napoca* (today Cluj-Napoca).

The first excavations in the cemetery were undertaken by Marius Moga in 1949. The documentation as well as the artefacts coming from this excavation is lost. Ten years later, another team, led by M. Macrea, continued the research in this area. They identified and documented many graves, marking them on a general sketch plan⁵. Due to the lack of topographical coordinates, the exact location on the terrain of the old trenches is difficult. Fortunately, most of the artefacts collected in the excavations from 1958-1959 were deposited in the collections of the National History Museum of Transylvania, and are under processing.

The geophysical survey undertaken in 2006 by the colleagues from the Faculty of Geophysics from Budapest has prospected an area of approximately 1 ha of the cemetery. Based on the geo-magnetism results several cremation graves, the imperial road going out from the city and two funerary constructions with stone edifice could be mapped⁶. The underground walls show significant positive traces on the magnetic anomalies' maps which is due to the fact that they were constructed of volcanic stones. The volcanic rocks come from the quarry Măgura Hill, in the close vicinity. They bear a very strong magnetization as well as the cremation graves. The geophysical prospection will continue in the following years when it will be applied to the whole area of the cemetery.

Field walking was an alternative method to estimate the area of necropolis. Tacking a walk on hills it was possible to identify further finds related to burial contexts: a funerary lion, a balustrade from a funerary enclosure and a grave with cremation urn. These discoveries emphasized the supposition that the whole area of the Ursoieș hill was covered by the Roman necropolis (see the area marked with **P** on Fig. 1).

The archaeological excavations from 2007 were focusing on the research of the structures identified by the geophysical measurements. They revealed a 9.5m x 3.9m rectangular funerary enclosure (Funerary precinct nr. 1) and as the magnetometric measurements showed, the walls were partially disturbed by modern interventions (Fig. 2-3)⁷. The enclosure was built with volcanic stones and a few sandstone and brick fragments and had three cremation graves heavily destroyed by erosion. Grave 1 and 2 had a burnt edge of rectangular shape. The remaining inventory of the graves was poor and consisted of pottery vessel fragments and grave 2 had a burnt 2nd century AD coin. Further artefacts were found outside of the graves and consisted of: pottery vessel, glass vessel and ceramic lamp fragments. These finds could come from the destroyed parts of the graves. A group of stones displayed near the entrance could indicate a possible foundation of a gravestone.

Through the magnetometric prospection we identified also a circular stone enclosure (Funerary precinct nr. 2)⁸. This one could have been noticed right under the thin topsoil. The circular enclosure (6.9 x 6.6m in diameter) was built of volcanic rocks, a few limestone and sandstone fragments, and occasionally brick, linked without any bonding material (Fig. 4, 6). Because the state of preservation of the enclosure was good the original height of the stone wall could not have been much higher than the preserved remains. In the centre of the circular enclosure appeared the burnt edges of a rectangular grave pit (Fig. 5). The thin layer of ashes, charcoals and the charred bones were spread over the whole pit. The inventory of the grave

² For the military role of *Porolissum* see: Gudea 1989, p. 51 sq.

³ Ardevan 1998, p. 67.

⁴ For this issue see: Paki 1988, p. 215-226; Gudea 1989, p. 182-187.

⁵ The results were summary published by Macrea, Protase, Rusu 1961, p. 361-390; Gudea 1989, p. 148-156.

⁶ The publication of the results from the magneto metrical survey is forthcoming.

⁷ Bajusz *et alii* 2008a

⁸ Bajusz *et alii* 2008b

consisted of pottery vessel and burnt metal fragments⁹. On the south-eastern part of the enclosure a rectangular sandstone construction (1,5m x 1m) was added, and used possibly as a pedestal (Fig. 7)¹⁰.

In conclusion, some preliminary remarks can be made on the social status and ethnic-cultural attribution of the graves.

No doubt, stone funerary constructions suggest a certain financial prosperity which usually goes with a privileged social rank. This stands especially in the case of the circular funerary enclosure, which had probably a low mound, destroyed by erosion. The single grave discovered inside, the dimensions of the ring as well as the well shaped pedestal in the front of them suppose a special treatment of the deceased and the intention to be distinguished from the other graves. At the same time it will also emphasize the higher social status of the deceased¹¹.

In both cases mentioned above (Funerary precinct nr. 1 and 2) the burnt margins of the grave pit and the thin charcoal layer reveal that the grave is not *bustum* type one, they were rather ritually purified¹². This grave type is known in the references as the Mala Kopašnica-Sase type I¹³. It is known from the provinces of the Lower Danube and the Balkan peninsula. In a recent study Alexander Jovanović has shown that 70 % of the graves from *Moesia Superior* belong to this type¹⁴. Furthermore, the Mala Kopašnica-Sase grave type appears in *Pannonia Inferior*, *East-Dalmatia* and *Macedonia*, too. They are all present in necropolises of large urban centres, as well as those of the rural settlements. At the present state of research the scholars consider that these graves indicate a native character and they belong probably to the partially Romanized native Illyrian population¹⁵.

The rail of the sacred space of the burial with stone (rectangular or circular) enclosure is spread throughout the Roman Empire¹⁶, but it could reflect different cultural traditions. Similar funerary constructions came to light from cemeteries in *Moesia Superior* in Sase¹⁷ and Guberevac¹⁸ belonging to the Illyrian culture sphere. In this cases stone rings, probably holding up a small mound¹⁹ are surrounded ritually purified graves.

Many years ago the scholars have observed the connection between the distribution in *Dacia* of the graves of the Mala Kopašnica-Sase type and the presence of Illyrian groups or persons in several settlements

⁹ The finds from the excavations are not discussed here; they are under processing and will be the topic of forthcoming studies.

¹⁰ A funerary inscription fixed mounted in a similar pedestal from *Alburnus Maior* (today Roșia Montană) has been recently published, (Timofan, Barbu 2007, p. 187, fig. 5). Other several more found at the same site will be published soon (information from Sorin Cociș).

¹¹ Wigg 1993, p. 118.

¹² Some scholars consider these graves as belonging to the *bustum* type. Serious arguments (thin charcoal layer, frequently reduced size of the graves, unequally burnt margins) bring serious doubts on this theory (Babeș 1970a, p. 182; Babeș 1970b, p. 728-729). Garašanin tent to see the burn margins a sign for carrying the rests of the pyre when they are still burning (Garašanin 1968, p. 31). More recently, some scholars expressed the hypothesis that a lustration of the grave area and its ritual purification by fire could explain the unequally burnt grave pits (Jovanović 2000, p. 205-206).

¹³ Type I. is characterized by simple rectangular or oval grave pit with burnt edges, type II. has a burnt stepped grave pit, type III. has an oval or round grave pit without signs of ritual purification, see Garašanin 1968, p. 28.

¹⁴ Jovanović 2000, p. 206.

¹⁵ Jovanović 2000, p. 210.

¹⁶ Similar stone enclosures, sometimes catered with a plinth for a funerary monument, are known from: *Aquileia*: Reusser 1987, p. 239-249; *Augusta Treverorum*: Gose 1961, p. 196-199, Tab. 35/1-2; *Wehringen (Raetia)*: Walke 1963, p. 122-123, Annex 6; *Cambodunum*: Krahe 1963, p. 117-119, Annex 5.

¹⁷ Srejić 1965, p. 14, Pl. I/1-3, Map

¹⁸ Here two funerary enclosures were found. One is of rectangular shape and the other one circular. In each of them graves of the Mala Kopašnica-Sase type were placed (Garašanin 1968, p. 8, n.17-21).

¹⁹ Burial mounds delimited with stone walls appear frequently in the western provinces as well as in *Pannonia*. A part of them reflects local (Celtic) customs; others point out an Italian influence (Wigg 1993, p. 122; Palágyi-Nagy 2000, p. 168-169).

of Roman Dacia such as *Apulum*, *Ampelum*, *Porolissum*, Cinciș, Morești, *Romula*²⁰. Recently, a study by S. Nemeti dedicated to the burial customs of Thracians and Illyrians in the province of Dacia has supplemented the list of sites and summarize the topic²¹. He observed the conservative attitude of these populations in the field of funerary customs manifested through the specific form of incineration that may help us to figure out their ethical origin²².

Despite the multitude of the Mala Kopašnica-Sase graves found in Dacia, the type I. of this category associated with circular funerary constructions remains still a particular feature. These graves fenced with stone rings had appeared in the mining centre from *Alburnus Maior*. Here the recent archaeological investigations confirmed the significant presence of Illyrian population. In several funerary districts of this settlement graves surrounded with coarse stone ring of different dimensions were found²³. We shall mention other good analogies in the mining zone *Ampelum*, where the excavations in the 19th century carried out on Boteș and Poduri hills revealed several burial mounds, some of them with a circular or rectangular enclosure²⁴. The graves researched systematically by G. Téglás had a rectangular shape and a consistent ash layer inside²⁵. Going further, another important mining zone is Cinciș (county of Hunedoara), where in the neighbourhood of a *villa rustica* a cemetery with 16 ritually burnt graves was discovered²⁶. Eleven of graves were placed inside 10 stone-rings.

One observation what we can make is that the distribution of these special treated graves in Dacia seems to be connected to the populations specialized in mining. Another question still open to debate, is whether these graves represent real tumuli, and if so, can they be considered a Thracian influence? Simple oval or round grave pits surrounded by stone rings and holding small mounds are known from *Moesia Superior* (e.g. Vișegrad²⁷ and Drasan²⁸). They have been attributed to the Thracian population. It looks like that some Illyrian and Thracian tribes have clearly influenced each other. A relevant example is represented by the case of *Dardaniens* and *Pirustae* documented by the name studies, too²⁹. Based on the analyze of the burial customs practiced by the recently revealed circular funeral monument situated in the “Basil Cosma” site (*Alburnus Maior*) the archaeologists have observed the same characteristics: the interference of the Thracian monumental tumuli and the Thracian *busta* in steps with the graves of Mala Kopašnica-Sase type I³⁰. Such a combination between Thracian burial constructions and Illyrian customs could be presumed in the case of the circular funerary complex from *Porolissum*.

On the basis of the epigraphic evidence the name studies reveals the fact that *Porolissum* was an “international” settlement. Regarding his ethnical structures the East and Celtic elements were primordial. It must be mentioned, that the number of inscriptions, and therefore the number of proper names known from *Porolissum* are limited³¹. Surprisingly none of the names have Illyrian derivation, only one person,

²⁰ Garașanin 1968, 29-30; Babeș 1970a, 197-198.

²¹ He has added to the catalogue the necropolises of *Alburnus Maior*, Ighiu, Sighișoara, Lechința de Mureș, Obreja, Sopor de Câmpie, Bratei, Brad. Nemeti, Nemeti 2003, p. 410-435.

²² Nemeti, Nemeti 2003, p. 437-439.

²³ Funerary district at Hop Găuri: Moga *et alli* 2003, p. 215, grave 6; p. 216 grave 5; p. 220 grave 1; p. 227 grave 9. In one case there were excavated a rectangular funerary construction with rectangular shaped, burnt grave pit; dimensionally reduced stone rings were found also at the funerary district of Tăul Cornei: graves nr.161, 223, 245, 253, 256, 265, 266, 300, see *Alburnus Maior III* (forthcoming).

²⁴ Lukács 1879, p. 14-19; p. 350-355; Téglás 1890, p. 1-44; Téglás 1893, p. 408-412; Protase 1971, p. 104-107.

²⁵ He considered that this graves are *bustum* type ones (Téglás 1890, p. 22; Téglás 1893, p. 409). In 1938 the investigations were continued by O. Floca, who excavated 6 similar mounds. Curiously he has not seen any sign of burn on the grave pits. Automatically he has attributed them to the native population! (Floca 1936-40, p. 170).

²⁶ Floca 1965, p. 189, he consider on the grounds of the burned margins of the grave pits that they are *bustum* type one.

²⁷ Dremisizova-Nelčinova 1980, p. 19, fig. 2; p. 25, fig 8.

²⁸ Mašov 1975, p. 42-44, fig 1-3.

²⁹ Nemeti, Nemeti 2003, p. 435; The Dardanian area in particularly is the contact zone between Illyrians and Thracians (Mócsy 1974, p. 65).

³⁰ Simion, Apostol, Vleja 2004, p. 81-82.

³¹ Approximately 100 inscriptions, including 73 persons, have been analysed by Adela Paki, 1988, p. 215.

Mucianus, could have been of Thracian or Dacian origin³². In reality, the ethnical composition of the city was probably much more diversified as the epigraphy could display. No doubt, the presence of the graves of the Mala Kopašnica-Sase type is a proof of an Illyro-Thracian presence at the military and commercial centre of *Porolissum*, even though, at the moment, no epigraphic evidence supports this theory.

We hope that the processing of the old data and further researches at the necropolis *Porolissum* will contribute to better understanding of the ethnical and social structures of this site.

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³² Paki 1988, p. 219, p. 222; Gudea 1989, p. 183.

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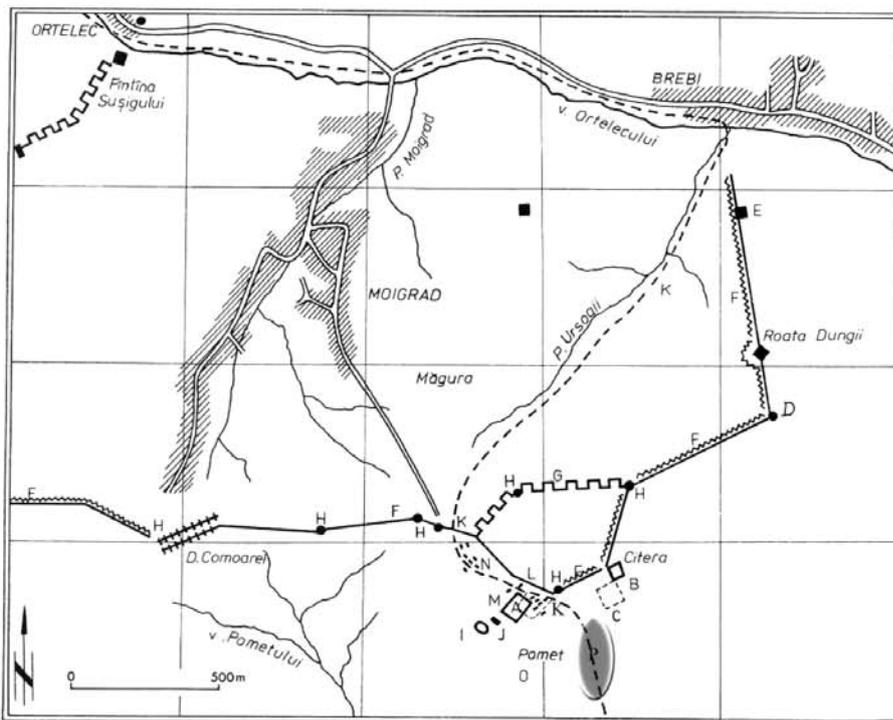


Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

Fig.1. General sketch of the archaeological complex at Porolissum (after N. Gudea).
 Fig.2. Funerary precinct nr. 1.

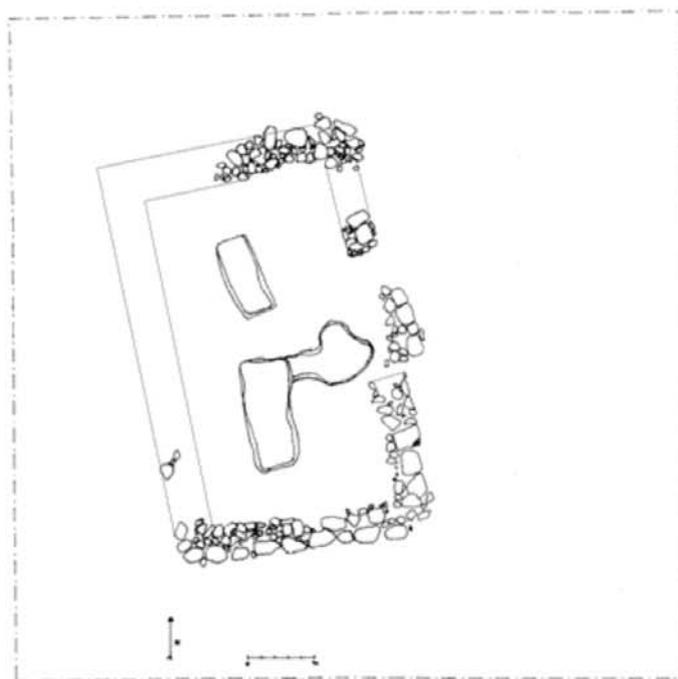


Fig. 3.

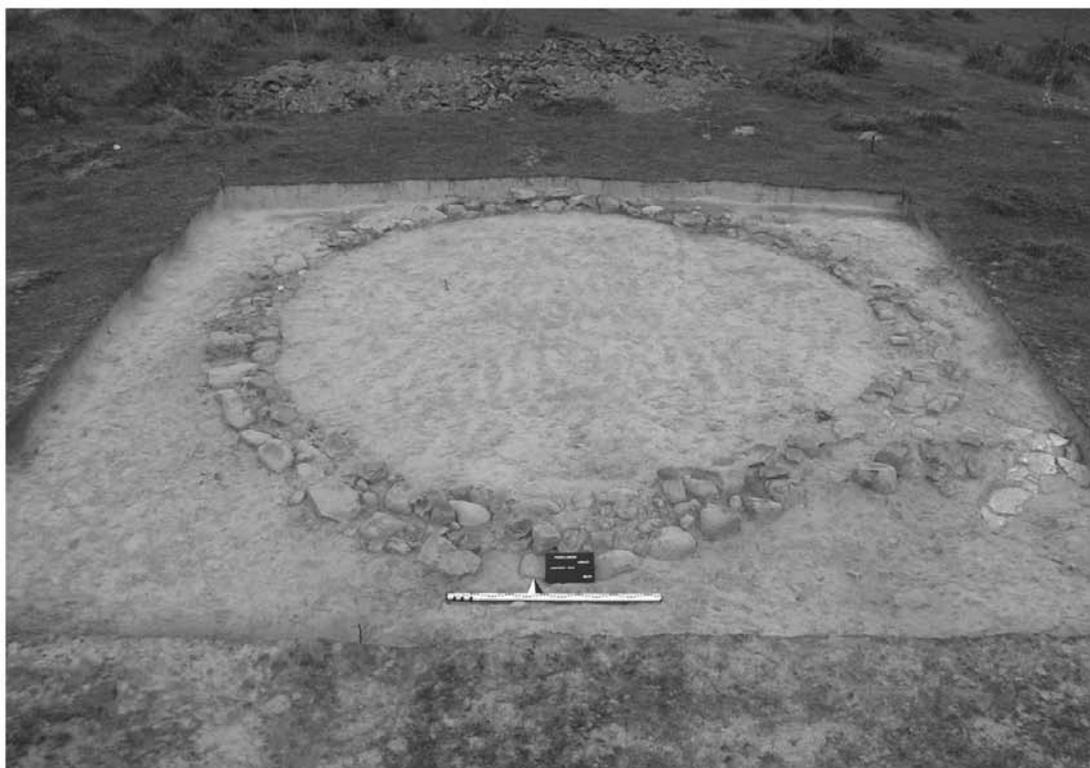


Fig. 4.

Fig.3. Plan of the funerary precinct nr. 1.

Fig. 4. Funerary precinct nr. 2 during excavation.

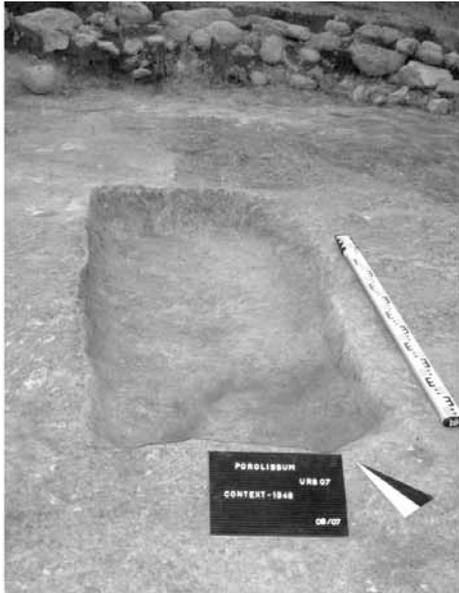


Fig. 5.



Fig. 7.

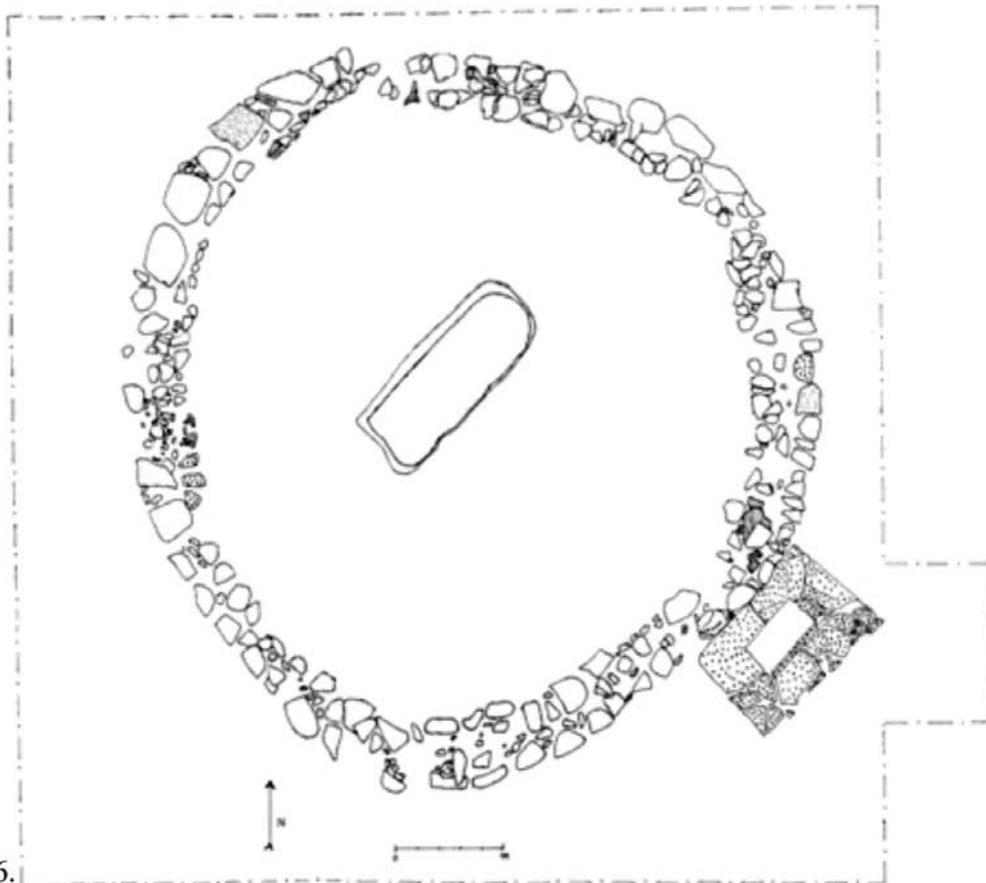


Fig. 6.

Fig. 5. The grave from the funerary precinct nr. 2.

Fig. 6. Plan of the funerary precinct nr. 2.

Fig. 7. The sandstone structure at the funerary precinct nr. 2.