

The earliest burial complexes of the Kubey cemetery*

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Abstract: The article presents materials of the Kubey kurgan cemetery in the North-West Black Sea region which is dated to the late Eneolithic. The most ancient graves of the cemetery stratigraphically and chronologically can be divided in three successive horizons. According to kurgan architecture, burial rite and inventory primary burials can be attributed to the Cernavoda I culture of the late Eneolithic. Secondary graves in the kurgans can be assigned to the Zhivotilovka type and to the group of graves with extended skeletons. The most ancient graves of the Kubey cemetery obviously support an idea that the territory of the North-West Black Sea region can be included in the area of the Cernavoda I culture.

Key words: North-West Black Sea region, Eneolithic, Early Bronze Age, Cernavoda I culture, Usatovo culture, barrows, burial rite, cemetery

Introduction

The cultural identification and chronological position of the earliest kurgan burials remain one of the most controversial problems in the study of the late prehistory of the North-West Black Sea region. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that in the archaeological literature there are a large number of names for different cultural groups, which can be used to designate the same archaeological sites: the Cernavoda I culture, the Usatovo culture, the Nizhnyaya Mikhailovka culture, burial sites of the Hadzhider type, burial sites of the Katarzyno type, burial sites of the Zhivotivka type, etc. At the same time, the criteria by which a particular archaeological site belongs to a certain group are often selected quite arbitrarily. The best illustration of this state of the problem is the three catalogues of burial complexes published in the Republic of Moldova in the last two years.

The first two catalogues were published by V. Dergachev. One of them contains the materials of burials of the late Trypillya culture,¹ the other

considers the burials of the Yamnaya culture in the Carpathian-Dniester region.² In the first catalogue, more than 90 localities were attributed to the Usatovo culture, including cemeteries, individual burial mounds or burials, and isolated finds. At the same time, the principles of selecting materials sometimes seem simply strange. For example, the catalog includes a cemetery near the village of Novoselskoye, which undoubtedly belongs to the Early Eneolithic.³ In addition, several burial sites containing materials from the period of the Cucuteni B culture and/or the Cernavoda I culture were included in the Usatovo culture (e.g. Sărăteni, Gura Galbenei, Cimişlia, Khadzhide, Roşcani, etc.).⁴ All these complexes should be attributed rather to the period before the emergence of the Usatovo culture. Of particular surprise is the fact that the same burials in the first catalogue are attributed to the Usatovo culture, while in the second catalogue they are related to the Yamnaya culture (e.g., Suvorovo I, kurgan 1, grave 1; Roşcani, kurgan 5, grave 7).⁵ It is quite obvious that the

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¹ Дергачев 2022.

² Дергачев 2023.

³ Дергачев 2022, 310-311.

⁴ Ibid. 302, 313-315, 319.

⁵ Ibid. 309, табл. 60, 89, 319-320, табл. 67, 9-14; 2023, 150, табл. 80А, 2-8, 274-275, табл. 157А, 1.2.

issue of cultural identification of archaeological sites in these works is not very easy to solve.

In the catalogue of funerary sites of the Usatovo culture, published by S. Popovici, 45 localities are taken into account, which is half as many as in the work of V. Dergachev.⁶ A significant part of the complexes was attributed to other cultural groups that developed before and after the existence of the Usatovo culture. At the same time, for some reason, this catalogue did not include some materials of the left bank of the lower reaches of the Dniester River, which are undoubtedly associated with the Usatovo culture, for example, the burial mounds near the village of Bychok.⁷ On the other hand, the catalogue contains materials that generally date back to the 3rd or 2nd millennium B.C., for example, vessels from a burial mound near the village of Tochile-Răducani and the destroyed cemetery of the Usatovo culture near the village of Răscăieți.⁸ This once again demonstrates that the problem of cultural affiliation of early kurgan burials requires further thorough study.

To a certain extent, the existing problem can be solved by relying on complex stratified burial sites that contain materials with reliable cultural attribution. Such sites include the cemetery near the village of Kubey, explored by the Danube-Dniester archaeological expedition in the 80s of the last century (Bolgrad district, Odessa region, Ukraine). The burial mounds of the late Eneolithic excavated here are distinguished by a variety of structural elements, multi-layered stratigraphy and well-identified finds. Individual complexes of this cemetery have already been considered in various works,⁹ but the materials of the earliest burials certainly deserve full publication.

Description of burial complexes

The Kubey cemetery, which included 23 burial mounds, was located on the edge of the plateau of the left bank of the Karasulak River, 3 km south of Kubey, near the field camp (45°44'51.15" N, 28°44'10.10" O). It consisted of two groups located at a distance of 1.8 km from each other (Fig.

1). The first group (southern) included kurgans 1 and 19, the rest of the kurgans made up the second (northern) part of the cemetery. The burial site was studied in 1986–1987 by L. V. Subbotin. In burial mounds 1, 21, 22 and 23, burials of the Late Eneolithic and Late Trypillian period were discovered. According to the author of the excavations, burials 4 and 5 of kurgan 5 should also be attributed to the Eneolithic period. Nevertheless, these burials are most likely associated with the Yamnaya culture.

Kurgan 1 was located at a distance of 1.8 km from the northern group of the cemetery, 0.8 km south of the field camp. The height of the kurgan was 1.5 m from the ancient surface, the diameter was 39 m. On the surface of the mound there were some stones that belonged to the cromlech touched by the plough during plowing. 17 burials were found in the kurgan, two of which date back to the Late Eneolithic period. The rest of the burials are associated with various periods of the Bronze Age and medieval nomads (Fig. 2, 1).

Burial 3 was discovered 1.5 m north of the benchmark, at a depth of 1.5 m, at the level of the ancient surface. The pit had a rectangular shape with rounded corners and was oriented along the line east-southeast – west-northwest. Dimensions of the pit: length 1.45 m, width 1.1 m, depth 1 m. The burial was completely destroyed in antiquity. In the filling there were scattered human bones, charcoals, black and brown decay. There was no inventory.

Burial 15 was found 3 m north of the benchmark, at a depth of 1.5 m. The pit had a rectangular shape with strongly rounded corners and was oriented along the east-west line with a slight deviation from this axis (Fig. 2, 2). Dimensions of the pit: length 1.3 m, width 1.15 m, depth 1.04 m. In the center of the pit there was a coating of the bottom with greenish clay. The burial was destroyed in antiquity. The skeletal bones of the adult individual were randomly shifted to the eastern wall of the pit. The ochre painting on the bones has been preserved. There was no inventory.

In addition to the Eneolithic burials, several structures dating back to the same period were discovered under the mound. One of the objects is a wooden structure located 3 m east of the benchmark (Fig. 2, 1.3). The structure consisted of five pillars up to 18 cm thick, vertically dug in

⁶ Popovici 2023.

⁷ Дергачев 1974, 258-260, рис. 3, 2-5.

⁸ Popovici 2023, 127, 136, Figs. 52, 1; 54, 2; 75, 3.

⁹ Субботин 2001; Дергачев 2022, 308; 2023, 316-320.

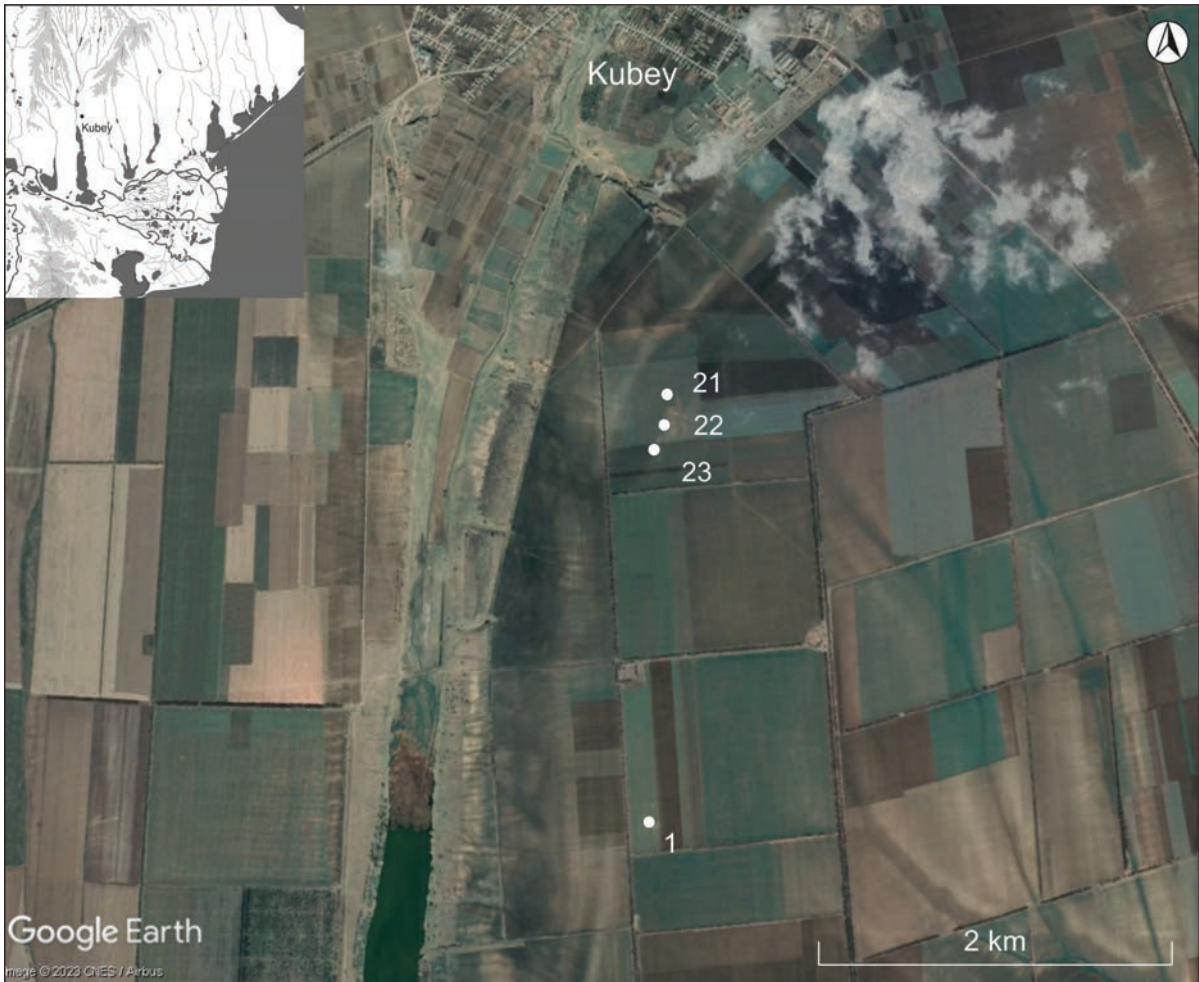


Figure 1. Location of the Kubey cemetery

from the level of the ancient surface. The pits for the pillars had a rounded shape. Their diameter was 40–50 cm, the depth reached 60 cm from the ancient surface. The pillars in the pits were fixed with stones. At first glance, the pillars were arranged without a defined system. Four pillars formed a relatively compact group over an area of 2.5×1.5 m, while the fifth pillar was 2 m away from this group.

The first mound, 1.5 m high and 16 m in diameter, was built over burials 3 and 16. It consisted of several building horizons. At the base of the mound there was dark soil, covered with lighter soil on top. The earth for the mound was taken from the ditch surrounding it, which caused such an alternation of layers.

Around the first embankment, a cromlech was built of sandstone slabs, sometimes reaching a length of 1 m. The diameter of the cromlech was 16.5 m. The slabs were dug vertically close

to each other. On the outside of the vertically mounted slabs there was a belt 1.5 m wide of horizontally laid stones of smaller dimensions, which were apparently intended to strengthen the main structure. Some of the stones slid into the ditch.

A circular ditch was dug around the cromlech. The inner diameter of the ditch was about 21 m, the width was about 3.4 m and the depth was 1–1.5 m in various sectors. In section, the ditch had a horizontal bottom and sloping walls. The ditch was filled with dense dark soil. The ditch remained open for quite a long time, judging by the clay flows at the bottom. The back-filling of the ditch was made in the Bronze Age during the construction of the subsequent layers of the kurgan.

In the center of the first mound, grave 17 of the Yamnaya culture was inserted, over which the second mound was built. Subsequently, the

next burials of the Yamnaya culture and later epochs were allowed into the kurgan.

Kurgan 21 was in the northern group. The height of the mound from the modern surface was 1.1 m, the diameter was 32 m (Fig. 3, 1). 21 burials were found in the mound. Five burials date back to the Late Eneolithic and the beginning of the Bronze Age. The rest of the burials belong to the later periods of the Bronze Age and the Middle Ages.

Burial 4 was discovered 7.5 m north-west of the benchmark. The burial pit with a ledge was oriented along the northeast-southwest line (Fig. 3, 2). The contours of the pit were not clearly traced. The entrance pit was rectangular in shape with strongly rounded corners and probable dimensions of 1.35×1 m. The bottom of the entrance pit was located at a depth of 1.15 m from the benchmark. The rectangular burial chamber was presumably 0.7 m long and 0.5 m wide. At the level of the ledge, the chamber was covered with stone slabs and smaller stones. Three animal teeth were found between the ceiling stones. In the pit there were charcoal and ochre. The skeleton was missing.

Burial 10 was found 1.5 m northwest of the benchmark, at a depth of 0.6 m. The rectangular pit with rounded corners was oriented along the east-west line (Fig. 3, 3). Dimensions of the pit: length 1.4 m, width 1.1 m, depth 0.9 m. The skeleton was completely destroyed. In the filling of the pit there were scattered bones, charcoal, ochre and fragments of a vessel.

Inventory: the vessel is made of clay with an admixture of crushed shells (Figs. 3, 4; 4, 1). The body is squat, spherical in shape with a high cylindrical neck and a very small, poorly defined bottom. Under the rim and on the shoulders, the vessel is decorated with horizontal rows of short oblique cord prints. Vessel dimensions: height 11 cm, rim diameter 10 cm, body diameter 13.5 cm.

Burial 11 was discovered 5.5 m southwest of the benchmark, at a depth of 0.65 m. The burial structure consisted of an entrance pit and a burial chamber separated by a ledge (Fig. 4, 3). The oval-shaped entrance pit was oriented along the southeast-northwest line. Dimensions of the pit: length 1 m, width 0.9 m, bottom was at a depth of 1.8 m from the benchmark. The oval-shaped burial chamber was oriented in the same direction. Dimensions: length 0.8 m, width 0.65 m,

depth 0.45 m. At the level of the ledge, the chamber was covered with an oval stone slab covered with smaller stones. Fragments of the child's skull were located in the southeastern part of the pit. At the bottom of the pit there are remnants of plant litter.

Inventory: a small amphora was located next to the skull, in the southern part of the pit (Fig. 4, 4.5). The vessel is made of clay with a slight admixture of crushed shells. The body is spherical in shape with two handles. The neck is high cylindrical, the bottom is small, weakly prominent. Vessel dimensions: height 10 cm, body diameter 10.5 cm, rim diameter 6 cm.

Burial 19 was found 4.8 m south-east of the benchmark, at a depth of 1.2 m (Fig. 4, 2). The rectangular burial pit was oriented along the southeast-northwest line. Dimensions of the pit: length 1.7 m, width 0.68 m, depth from the detection level 0.53 m. The skeleton of the adult individual was lying in a crouched position on the left side, with the head to the southeast (138°). His left arm was bent and his hand was at his left shoulder. The right arm was bent and the forearm was pointed towards the elbow of the left hand. There was no inventory.

Burial 20 was found 0.6 m northwest of the benchmark, at a depth of 1.4 m. The pit had a rounded shape. Dimensions of the pit: diameter 0.7 m, depth 0.9 m. At the bottom of the pit were found coals and burnt bones of a child, baked with heavily slagged clay. There were no traces of fire on the bottom and walls of the pit, which suggests that the cremation of the corpse took place on the side. There was no inventory.

The first mound was built over Eneolithic burial 20 and consisted of clay with black soil extracted from the ditch. The height of the embankment was 0.5 m, the diameter was 5–7 m. A ditch was dug around the mound in the form of a horseshoe with a passage in the western part. In cross-section, the ditch had an almost rectangular outline. The inner diameter of the ditch was 6–8 m, the width was 1 m, the depth was 0.65 m, the width of the passage was 2 m. The ancient mound and ditch probably remained open for quite a long time, since soil flows from the surface of the mound are noticeable in the ditch. The filling of the ditch consisted of the dark soil of the second mound.

In the center of the first mound, an Eneolithic burial 10 with a vessel was admitted. A thin layer of yellow clay from the pit and ceiling stones from this burial lay on the surface of the first mound. Apparently, simultaneously with burial 10, Eneolithic burial 19 was made on the periphery of the first mound. Over these two burials, the second and third mounds were built, which represented one structural whole. The diameter of the mound increased to 15 m.

During the process of the second and third layers building, a cromlech with a diameter of 13 m was constructed, consisting of vertically installed sandstone slabs up to 1 m long. The height of the cromlech reached 0.7 m. A circular ditch was dug around the cromlech with a diameter of 22 m, a width of 2 m, and a depth of 1 m from the ancient surface. The bottom of the ditch is flat, the walls narrow to the bottom. The ditch was filled with dense dark soil.

On the periphery of the third mound, burials 4 and 11 were made, which can be dated to the beginning of the Bronze Age. Over these burials, a mound 4 with a diameter of 19 m was built. The next two additions of the mound were associated with burials of the Yamnaya culture.

Kurgan 22 was part of the northern group of the cemetery. The height of the kurgan was 1.45 m, the diameter was 36 m. 21 burials were found in the kurgan (Fig. 5, 1). Five burials can be attributed to the late Eneolithic and two to the beginning of the Bronze Age. The rest of the burials belong to the Yamnaya and Sabatinovka cultures of the Bronze Age, as well as to medieval nomads. The cultural and chronological affiliation of two burials has not been determined.

Burial 3 was discovered 4.5 m north-east of the benchmark, at a depth of 0.85 m. In all likelihood, the construction of the burial consisted of an entrance pit and the burial chamber itself. The entrance pit has not been traced. The burial chamber at the level of the ledge was covered with stones. The stones shattered the edges of the chamber, making its shape untraceable. The bottom of the chamber was at a depth of 1.7 m from the benchmark. Charcoals and brown ochre were found in the burial. There were no traces of a skeleton.

Burial 5 was found 5 m north of the benchmark, at a depth of 0.7 m (Fig. 4, 6). The trapezoidal burial pit with rounded corners was

oriented along an east-west line. Dimensions of the pit: length 1.9 m, width 0.7–0.9 m, depth 0.8 m. The pit was covered with flat stones. The infill consisted of clay mixed with dark soil. The deceased (adult) was lying in an extended position on his back, with his head to the east (90°). His arms were stretched out along his body. Around the eye sockets there was an ochre coloration. At the bottom, decay from plant litter was revealed. There was no inventory.

Burial 8 was discovered 1 m northwest of the benchmark, at a depth of 1.45 m (Fig. 4, 7). The rectangular pit was oriented along the southeast-northwest line. Dimensions of the pit: length 1.4 m, width 0.9 m, depth 1.1 m. The cover of the pit consisted of stones occupying an area of 2×1.5 m. The deceased (adult) was lying in a crouched position on his left side, with his head to the southeast (128°). His left arm was stretched out along his body. His right arm was bent at the elbow, pressed against his chest and his forearm pointed towards his face. In the filling of the pit there were small charcoals.

Burial 10 was found 1 m north of the benchmark, at a depth of 1.4 m (Fig. 4, 9). The rectangular burial pit is oriented along the southeast-northwest line. Dimensions of the pit: length 0.65 m, width 0.35 m, depth from the detection level 0.15 m. The grave was covered with a slab with smaller stones laid on top. The filling of the pit consisted of a mixture of clay and black soil. Brown ochre was found at the bottom of the pit. The skeleton was missing.

Burial 17 was found 3 m north of the benchmark (Fig. 4, 11). A rectangular burial pit, oriented along the east-west line, was dug out from the level of the ancient surface. Dimensions of the pit: length 2.27 m, width 1.15 m, depth 1.1 m. The grave was covered with stones. The deceased (adult) was lying in a crouched position on his left side, with his head to the east (100°). His right arm was half-bent and his hand was resting against his pelvis. The left arm was stretched along the body. Sheep teeth and pieces of ochre were found in the filling of the pit. There was no inventory.

Burial 20 was found 5.5 m from the benchmark (Fig. 4, 8). The northwest pit, dug from the level of the ancient surface, was oriented along the southeast-northwest line. Dimensions of the pit: length 0.8 m, width 0.6 m, depth 0.85 m. The

deceased (the child) was lying in a crouched position on his left side, with his head to the southeast (142°). The position of the hands has not been precisely determined. In the filling of the pit there were small pieces of ochre. There was no inventory.

Burial 21 was found 1.5 m north of the benchmark (Fig. 4). The burial was dug out from the level of the ancient surface. The oval-shaped burial pit was oriented along a southeast-northwest line. Dimensions of the pit: length 1.5 m, width 1 m, depth 1.15 m. The deceased (adult) was lying in a crouched position on his left side, with his head to the southeast (142°). The left arm was half-bent at the elbow and the forearm was directed towards the knees. The right arm was bent and the forearm was placed across the elbow of the left hand. In the filling of the pit there were small charcoals. There was no inventory.

As a result of the excavations, it was established that the earliest stratigraphic horizon in the kurgan was represented by burials 10, 17, 20 and 21 (Fig. 5, 1). Originally, Eneolithic burial 17 was performed, which was located in the center of the site delineated by the first ditch. The ditch had a circular shape in plan. The outer diameter of the ditch was 9 m, the width was 1.5 m, and the depth was up to 0.5 m from the ancient surface. The walls of the ditch are vertical, the bottom is flat. The filling consisted of a mixture of clay and black soil.

After the construction of the ditch, Eneolithic burials 10, 20 and 21 were made on the formed site. After that, the second ditch began to be dug and the first mound was built. In the course of this work, an Eneolithic burial 8 was made in the still unfinished mound. In its completed form, the height of the first mound was 1 m, the diameter was 16 m. The second ditch surrounding the mound was also ring-shaped. Its diameter was 22 m, width 1.1 m, depth up to 0.5 m. The second ditch surrounding the mound was also ring-shaped.

In the center of the first mound, burials 3 and 5 from the beginning of the Bronze Age were admitted. A little later, also in the center of the mound, burial 9 of the Yamnaya culture was made. After that, a second mound was built, completely covering the first one. The third mound was erected over the burials 14 and 18 of the Yamnaya culture, which were made on the

periphery of the second mound. Subsequently, the burials of the Yamnaya culture and graves of later periods were allowed into the mound.

Kurgan 23 was part of the northern group and was located 14 m southwest of kurgan 22. The kurgan was 3 m high and about 70 m in diameter (Fig. 6, 1). 19 burials of different epochs have been discovered in the mound. Two of the central burials can be attributed to the late Eneolithic. One burial appears to date back to the beginning of the Bronze Age. Twelve burials belong to the Yamnaya culture and two burials belong to medieval nomads. The cultural affiliation of one burial could not be established.

Burial 13 was found under the benchmark, at a depth of 1.5 m. The contours of the burial pit were not fully traced (Fig. 6, 2). It probably had a rectangular shape and was oriented along the southeast-northwest line. Estimated pit dimensions: length 1.3 m, width 0.7 m, depth 2.2 m from benchmark or 0.7 m from detection level. The burial was covered with large untreated limestone slabs. In the western part of the covering, under the stones, there was a spot of burnt soil. The deceased (adult) was lying in a stretched position on his back, with his head to the southeast (115°). His arms were stretched out along his body. The skull is abundantly covered with crimson ochre. In the filling of the pit there were charcoals and pieces of ochre.

Burial 17 was found under the benchmark, at a depth of 2.6 m (Fig. 6, 3). It is assumed that there is a 3.2×2.6 m entrance pit oriented along the south-north line. The oval-shaped burial pit was oriented along an east-west line. Dimensions of the pit: length 1.2 m, width 0.9 m, depth 0.65 m. The deceased was lying in a crouched position on his left side, with his head to the east (92°). His left arm was bent at the elbow and his hand rested near his face. The right arm was also bent and the forearm was pointed towards the elbow of the left hand. The bottom of the pit and the skeleton are covered with scarlet ochre, especially the skull and leg bones are intensively coloured. At the bottom of the pit, near the western wall, there was a depression measuring 11×9 cm and 8 cm deep.

Inventory: A 1×1 cm bronze clip lay at the elbow of the left arm.

Burial 19 was found 2.5 m north of the benchmark, at a depth of 2.8 m. The contours of the burial pit have not been traced. The child's

skeleton was badly damaged, and its position could not be traced. It is possible that he was oriented with his head to the east.

Inventory: a vessel made of levigated clay was located in the eastern part of the burial, in the heads of the deceased (Fig. 6, 4). The neck with the rim was broken off in antiquity. The body has a biconical shape. The bottom is flat, with imprints of a wicker mat. The vessel is decorated with a painted geometric ornament made in dark brown paint. Dimensions of the vessel: height of the preserved part 19.5 cm, diameter of the body 30 cm, diameter of the bottom 9 cm.

The stratigraphy of the burial mound, described in the report on field research, is distinguished by certain contradictions, which mainly concern the oldest burials of this funerary site. The report indicates that the main one in the mound was burial 19 with a painted vessel, found at a depth of 2.8 m, which approximately corresponds to the level of the ancient day surface. Two mounds were successively built over this burial, which, in fact, are two constructive layers. The first layer consisted of loess, the second of continental clay and chernozem (Fig. 6, 1). The height of the mound was 0.9 m, the diameter was 9.5 m.

A cromlech was built around the ancient mound, which was a masonry of large slabs in the northern part and smaller stones in the southern part. Some of the stones were dug into the ancient surface, the other part was laid flat. The inner diameter of the cromlech was 10.5 m, the width was about 2 m. The mound with the cromlech was surrounded by a horseshoe-shaped ditch, with a passage in the western part 6 m wide. The inner diameter of the ditch was 17.5–19 m, the width in the upper part was 1–1.7 m, the width at the bottom was 0.6–0.9 m, the depth was 0.7–0.9 m from the ancient surface. In a section, the shape of the ditch resembles an inverted trapezoid.

Eneolithic burial 17 was admitted into the second mound, over which the third and fourth layers were successively built. The height of the fourth mound was 1.6 m, and the diameter reached 23–28 m. The structure of this mound was quite complex: there were areas of burnt soil, pieces of burnt wood, and the remains of fires in the form of ash layers. In the fourth mound, burial 13 was allowed with a skeleton in a stretched position, over which a fifth mound was erected

with a height of 2.7 m and a diameter of 25–31 m. In the fifth mound, burials 5, 6, 10 and 14 of the Yamnaya culture were made, over which mound 6 was built. Further additions to the mound were also associated with burials of the Yamnaya culture. One of these additions is associated with a circular stone layout on the floors of the mound.

In this stratigraphic situation, the correlation of burials 17 and 19 remains unclear. They were found at approximately the same depth, corresponding to the level of the ancient surface. However, the pit of burial 19 was not traced, which is often the case if the burial was in the body of the mound. Also, the depth of the grave is not indicated. Taken together, these circumstances suggest that burial 19 was discovered only when a skeleton lying at the level of the ancient horizon came out on the bones. In this case, it can be assumed that the main burial in the mound could be Eneolithic burial 17, while burial 19 was inserted into the first mound.

Also not entirely clear is the stratigraphic position of burial 13, which, according to the text of the report, was inserted into the fourth mound. However, according to the drawing of the western side of the central stratigraphic section, this burial was made from the level of the second mound, which was actually the construction horizon of the original mound and partially floated into the surrounding ditch (Fig. 6, 1). Given that burial 13, according to the report, stratigraphically follows burial 17, the position of the latter remains unclear. A certain contradiction between the textual and graphical information contained in the report makes us cautious about the stratigraphic observations made.

Cultural attribution of burial complexes

All four burial mounds investigated near the village of Kubey can be considered as a chronologically single cemetery. This conclusion may be supported by the peculiarities of the kurgan architecture and the traits of the funeral rite. Among the earliest burials of this cemetery, three independent chronological horizons can be discerned that precede the period of Yamnaya culture burials. Their existence and sequence are

well documented by differences in burial rites and inventory, as well as stratigraphic data.

Burials of the first chronological horizon were found in all burial mounds. As a rule, they were located at the base of the original mound, but occasionally they were secondary in relation to the main burials. They were stratigraphically followed by the burials of the other two chronological horizons. It was the main burials that were associated with various stone and earth structures in ancient burial mounds. Typically, such structures consisted of a cromlech and a ditch surrounding the first mound (mounds 1, 21, 23), although in mound 21 a reverse layout of structures has been traced, with the cromlech located on the outside of the first ditch. In mound 22 the cromlech was missing, but two ditches were found, as in kurgan 21. The first mound in the kurgan was also associated with a structure of five vertically dug pillars, which was located to the east of the central burials.

It is important to note that this combination of structures is found almost throughout the territory of the North-Western Black Sea region, including the left bank of the Dniester River. The most convincing parallels to the burial mounds from the cemetery near the village of Kubey are found in the kurgan cemeteries at Taraclia, Cazaclia,¹⁰ Nicolskoe,¹¹ Sărăteni,¹² etc. Cromlechs and ditches with passages to the west or southwest were also discovered here. In some mounds, pillar structures have also been found, always located to the east of the central burial, as in kurgan 1 in the Kubey cemetery.¹³ At the same time, such a combination of structural elements is not typical for the burial mounds of the Usatovo culture, where cromlechs or ditches are found separately.¹⁴ Especially noteworthy are the ceramics that are found in these burial sites. It is usually found in sacrificial pits, in a ditch, among cromlech stones, or on an ancient surface under a burial mound.

There are two categories of ceramics. The first category includes fragments of painted vessels

made in the ceramic traditions of the Cucuteni B-Trypillia C1 culture. The second category includes fragments of vessels sculpted from clay with an admixture of crushed shells. In terms of its technological and morphological features, the stylistics of the ornament and the character of the surface treatment, this ceramic category fully corresponds to the pottery belonging to the culture of Cernavoda I at the settlement of Kartal near the village of Orlovka on the Lower Danube. Pottery of both categories was found at various kurgan sites of the North-West Black Sea region: near the city of Cimișlia,¹⁵ near the villages of Gura Galbenei,¹⁶ Sărăteni,¹⁷ Congaz,¹⁸ Novokamenca,¹⁹ etc. The presence of such ceramics in combination with the structural features of the burial mounds clearly indicates that these burial sites, including the Kubey cemetery, firstly, chronologically precede the Usatovo culture and, secondly, should be considered in the context of the Cernavoda I culture.

This conclusion is partially confirmed by various traits of the burial rite traced at the Kubey cemetery, although in most cases these attributes do not have a pronounced specificity and are inherent in many cultural groups of the Eneolithic and Bronze Ages. The burial pits were distinguished by rectangular or oval outlines in plan, relatively small size and the absence of any additional structural details. A similar arrangement of pits is characteristic of other early kurgan burials of the North-West Black Sea region²⁰ and is also attested at the cemetery of the Chernavoda I culture in Orlovka.²¹

All burials of the most ancient horizon in the studied burial mounds were performed according to the rite of inhumation. The only exception is burial 20 of kurgan 21, where the remains of

¹⁰ Сава / Агульников / Манзура 2019.

¹¹ Агульников / Сава 2004.

¹² Levițki / Manzura / Demcenco 1996.

¹³ Серова / Яровой 1987, 78, рис. 31; Сава / Агульников / Манзура 2019, 117, рис. 80; Popovici / Ciobanu 2021, 64, figs. 74; 75.

¹⁴ Петренко 2013, 177-179.

¹⁵ Popovici / Ciobanu 2021, 66, figs. 73, 1-5; 76, 1-5.

¹⁶ Dergačev 1991, 48. On the basis of this pottery and the peculiarities of kurgan architecture, V. Dergachev attributed the burial mounds near the village of Gura Galbenei to the Usatovo culture. However, the drawings contained in the field research report unequivocally indicate that the discovered pottery belongs to the cultures of Cucuteni B and Cernavoda I. Unfortunately, this pottery was not found in the funds of the National Museum of History of Moldova.

¹⁷ Levițki / Manzura / Demcenco 1996, 28, 44-45, figs. 11, 3; 32, 5.6; 33, 34.

¹⁸ Popovici et al. 2023, 18.

¹⁹ Руссев / Фокеев / Манзура 2013, 160.

²⁰ Манзура 2013, 130-132.

²¹ Bruyako / Govedarica / Manzura 2022, 15.

cremation performed outside the mound have been discovered. Some burials were destroyed in antiquity, which is a rather characteristic feature of many early burial mounds. The number of disturbed burials here is about 55% of the total number of known complexes. In the rest of the burials, the deceased were laid in a crouched position on their left side. In this case, the right arm was usually bent and the forearm rested across the body, while the left arm was extended to the knees or bent with the hand near the face. In all burials, the deceased were oriented with their heads in the eastern sector. In general, these attributes are encountered in many cultural groups of different epochs from the Neolithic to the Late Bronze Age. They are, for example, characteristic of the funerary rite of both the Cernavoda I²² and Usatovo cultures,²³ but are also quite common in the Yamnaya culture in the Northwestern Black Sea region.²⁴

Inventory in the burials of the first horizon was found in only three cases. A metal clip was found in burial 17 of kurgan 23, and two clay vessels were found in burial 10 of kurgan 21 and burial 19 of kurgan 23 (Figs. 3, 3; 4, 1; 6, 4). If the metal ornament is not particularly original, then the vessel from burial 10 has a pronounced cultural specificity. In terms of manufacturing technology, shape, technique and style of ornament, the vessel finds the most convincing correspondences in the ceramic complex of the Cernavoda I culture.²⁵ Similar vessels were found in other burial mounds near the villages of Kamenka²⁶ and Kholmokoye.²⁷ This clearly indicates that the spread of pottery of the Cernavoda I culture throughout the territory of the North-West Black Sea region was ubiquitous, constantly combined with a certain type of funerary sites. Based on this, it seems that it can be argued that such a stable combination of traits in a wide spatial range testifies to the entry of the region's territory into the area of the Cernavoda I culture.

The second vessel, discovered in burial 19 of kurgan 23, was made according to the

technological tradition of the Cucuteni-Trypillia culture. It has a biconical shape and is decorated with a geometric ornament made in dark brown paint. Somewhat similar vessels in shape or ornament were found in the burials of the Usatovo culture and the Late Trypillian group of Chirileni on the Middle Dniester, which is synchronous with the later sites of the Usatovo culture.²⁸ The presence of such a vessel in the context of the steppe late Eneolithic is, in fact, quite possible, since the latest sites of the Cernavoda I culture as a whole should be synchronous with the Usatovo culture.²⁹

Three burials can be attributed to the second chronological horizon of the most ancient complexes of the Kubey cemetery. The early age of these burials is confirmed by the data of kurgan stratigraphy. They were secondary to the Chalcolithic burial complexes, but all always preceded the burials of the third chronological horizon and the graves of the Yamnaya culture.

The preservation of skeletons in the burials of this group turned out to be very unsatisfactory, due to which it is almost impossible to fully characterize the funeral rite. Judging by the preserved remains and the size of the burial structures, it can be assumed that the burials belonged to children.

One of the burials contained a small amphora (Fig. 4, 4.5). This type of vessel finds the widest parallels in the ceramic collections of various cultural groups. At the same time, taking into account the stratigraphic position of the burial in question, analogies to the vessel should probably be sought among ceramics from sites such as Zhivotylovka, spread throughout the North Black Sea region. In burials of this type, small amphorae are sometimes found, similar to the find from the Kubey cemetery.³⁰

Based on these parallels, the burials of the second chronological horizon can apparently be attributed to the Zhivotilovka type. It is significant that numerous cases have been evidenced when burials of this type were made in the kurgans of the late Eneolithic and stratigraphically

²² Ibid. 15, figs. 15; 16.

²³ Manzura 2020.

²⁴ Иванова 2013, 234-237.

²⁵ Manzura 1999, 120-143, figs. 7.10, 2; 7.11, 6; 7.12, 3; Govedarica / Manzura 2015, 449-452, fig. 15, 4.

²⁶ Алексеева 1976, 183-184, рис. 3, 2.

²⁷ Черняков / Станко / Гудкова 1986, 59, рис. 3, 5.

²⁸ Levițki / Manzura / Demcenco 1996, 50, fig. 40, 2; Яровой / Церна / Попович 2012, 290, рис. 4, 1.

²⁹ Манзура 2013, 138.

³⁰ Дергачев / Сава 2003, 547, рис. 15, 5; Яровой 2019, 60, рис. 4, 1.

preceded the burials of the Yamnaya culture in the absence of reverse stratigraphy.

The third chronological horizon in the Kubey cemetery is represented by two burials in kurgans 22 and 23, in which the deceased were placed in a stretched position on their backs. In both mounds, stretched burials stratigraphically follow the burials of the late Chalcolithic and precede the burials of the Yamnaya culture. Such a stratigraphic situation fully corresponds to the chronological position of burials with stretched skeletons, which are mostly reliably synchronized with the later sites of the Trypillya culture of the C2 period. This age is also confirmed by the discovery of a fragment of a vessel from the late Trypillian Gordinești group in one of these burials.³¹ At the same time, it is possible that some burials may date back to an earlier time.

Conclusion

Excavations of burial mounds in recent years have led to a constant increase in the number of archaeological sites with materials of the Cernavoda I culture. A particularly high concentration of these archaeological sites is observed in the western part of the Budjak steppe. They were found in the basins of the small steppe rivers Yalpug and Kogilnik, as well as on the left bank of the Prut River. In some cases, Eneolithic kurgans form entire burial grounds, which are characterized by a significant similarity of architectural elements, burial rites and inventory. Such burial sites include kurgan cemeteries near such settlements as Cimișlia, Taraclia, Cazaclia, Sărăteni, Crihana Veche etc.

The kurgan cemetery in the vicinity of the village of Kubey fits well into the general series of steppe burial sites of the late Eneolithic, which are directly related to the culture of Cernavoda I. The spread of this Balkan culture in the steppe zone led to significant changes in the life of the cultural groups living here and, possibly, somehow stimulated the beginning of intensive kurgan construction. Obvious transformations in ritual practice were apparently associated with a noticeable change in the economic structure, expressed in the development of mobile forms

of stock breeding. That is probably why the deep steppe territories are beginning to be actively developed. The construction of clearly visible mounds on high watersheds was supposed to reflect a changed attitude towards the once desert territories, which turned into valuable pastures for livestock. This event can be figuratively designated as a “jump for the hills” which brought ancient herders to steppe elevated pastures.

Most likely, representatives of various cultural associations were involved in the development of the steppe. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the buried population of the cemetery of the Cernavoda I culture at Orlovka, individuals genetically related to both Balkan populations and natives of the steppe cultural environment coexist. This process reached its culmination with the emergence of the Usatovo culture and during the transition to the later period of the development of the Cernavoda I culture, when complex hierarchical societies emerged.

Rezime

Najranije sahrane u nekropoli Kubej

Novija iskopavanja tumula (kurgana) u zaleđu sjeverozapadne obale Crnog mora rezultirala su konstantnim povećavanjem broja arheoloških lokaliteta sa materijalom kulture Cernavoda I koja, prema lokalnoj hronologiji, pripada kasnom eneolitu. Posebno visoka koncentracija arheoloških nalazišta ovog tipa konstatovana je u zapadnom delu Budžak stepe na jugu Moldavije, naročito u basenima malih stepskih rijeka Jalpug i Kogilnik, kao i na lijevoj obali rijeke Prut. U nekim slučajevima kurgani kulture Cernavoda I predstavljaju primarne grobne spomenike čitave nekropole, o čemu svjedoči značajna sličnost u načinu gradnje kurgana, u obredu sahranjivanja i u grobnom inventaru. Takve nekropole su postojale u blizini današnjih naselja Cimișlia, Taraclia, Cazaclia, Sărăteni, Crihana Veche i dr.

Pojava grobova tipa Cernavoda I je posljedica širenje ove balkanske kulture na stepsku zonu istočno od Dunava i Pruta. To je dovelo do značajnih promena u životu zajednica koje su ovde živjele i stimulisalo početak intenzivne gradnje kurgana. Transformacije ritualne prakse su bile povezane sa promjenom ekonomske strukture, izražene u razvoju mobilnih oblika

³¹ Ciobanu / Vornic / Agulnicov / Noroc 2016, 33, fig. 8.

stočarstva. To je takođe uslovalo intenzivnije naseljavanje stepske teritorije. Izgradnja grobnih humki na visokim bregovima na razvodju spomenutih rijeka odražava promjenjeni odnos prema do tada pustim teritorijama koji se sada koriste kao pašnjaci za stoku. Ovo širenje drevnih stočara na uzdignute stepske pašnjake može se figurativno označiti kao “jump for the hills”.

Kurganska nekropola koja je istražena u blizini sela Kubej dobro se uklapa u opštu seriju stepskih grobova kasnog eneolita, koja su direktno vezana za pojavu kulture Cernavoda I na prostoru Budžak-stepe i za njen dalji razvoj u širem regionu sjeverozapadnog Crnog mora. Pri tom se najstariji grobovi ove nekropole stratigrafski i hronološki mogu podijeliti na tri sukcesivna horizonta. Primarni grobovi pripadaju kulturi Cernavodi I, odnosno kasnom eneolitu. Grobovi koji su sekundarno ukopani u ove kurgane odgovaraju tzv. tipu Životilovka koji označava prelaz u bronzanodobsku Usatovo-kulturu. Treći horizont ranog sahranjivanja u kubejskim kurganima predstavljaju pojedinačni grobovi sa ispruženim skeletima. Ovi grobovi po položaju skeleta u potpunosti odskaču od svih poznatih eneolitskih i bronzanodobskih sahrana, a uz to su uvijek bez priloga, pa ih je teško kulturno bliže determinisati. Prema 14C datumima ovi grobovi pripadaju kraju 4. milenija BC. Vjerovatno je ovdje u pitanju kulturni arhaizam Postmariupolj-tipa koji se kao prateća pojava manifestuje i u ranim tumulima ovog područja.

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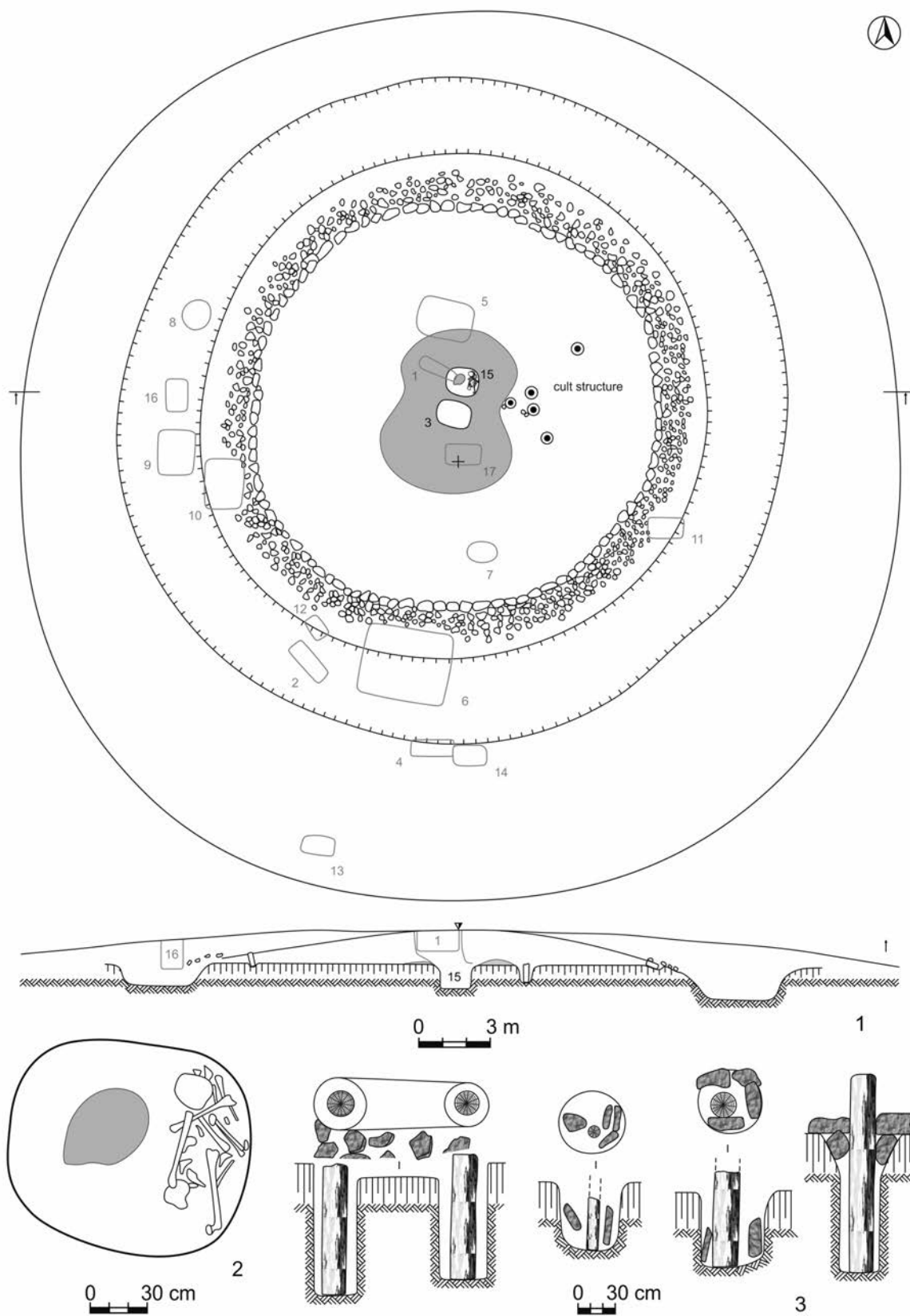


Figure 2. Kurgan 1: 1 – plan and stratigraphic section of the kurgan, 2 – grave 15, 3 – cult structure

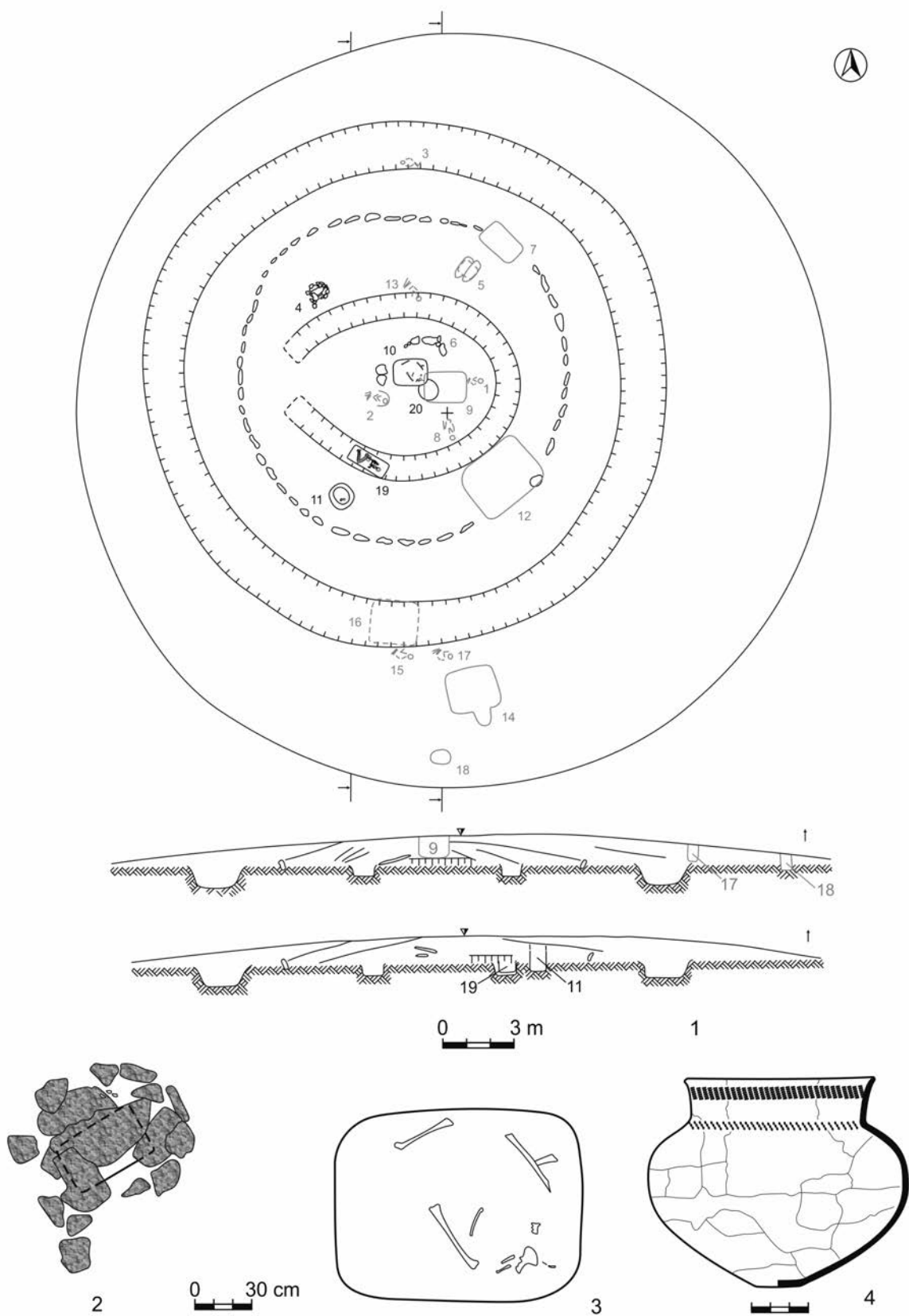


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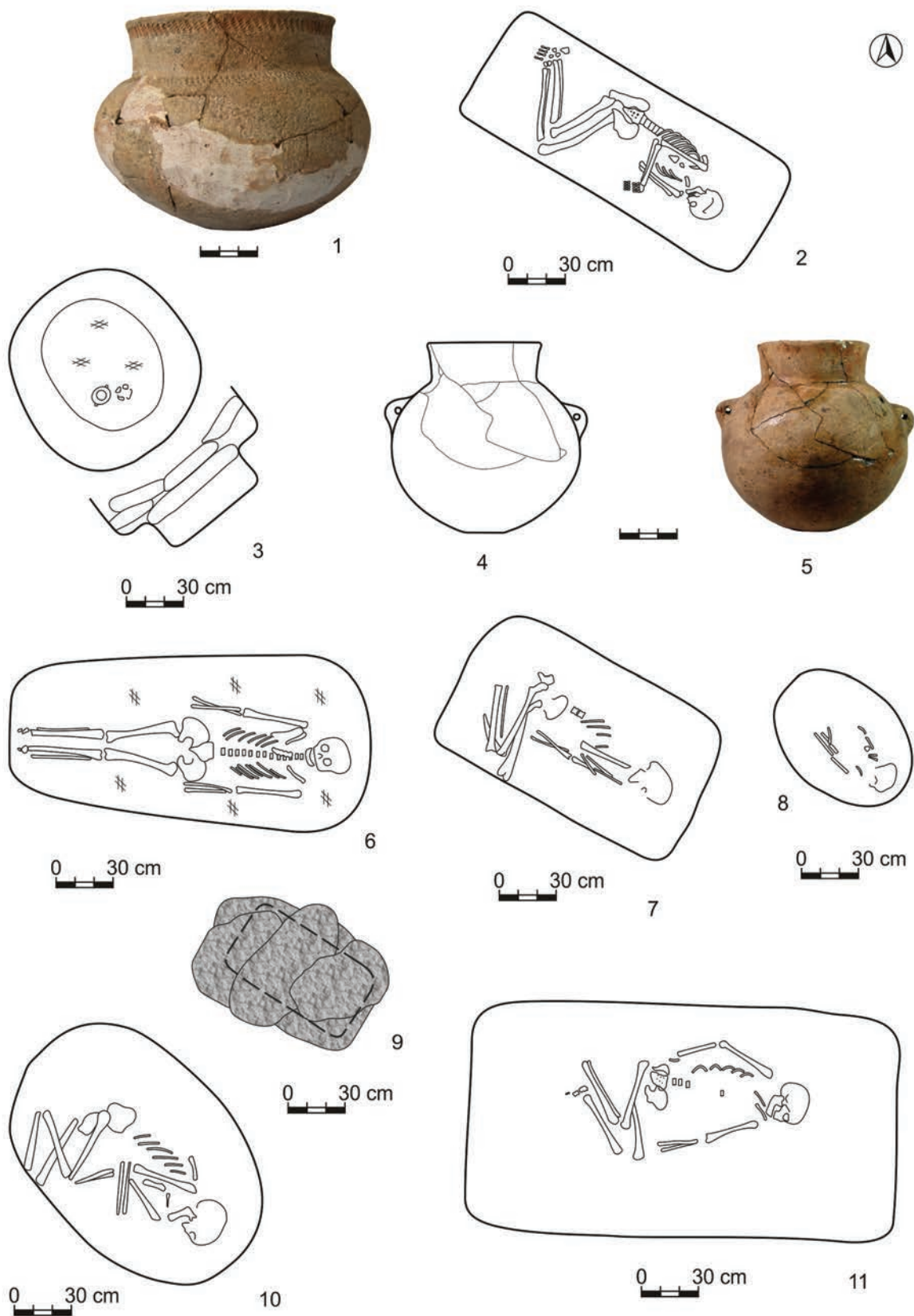


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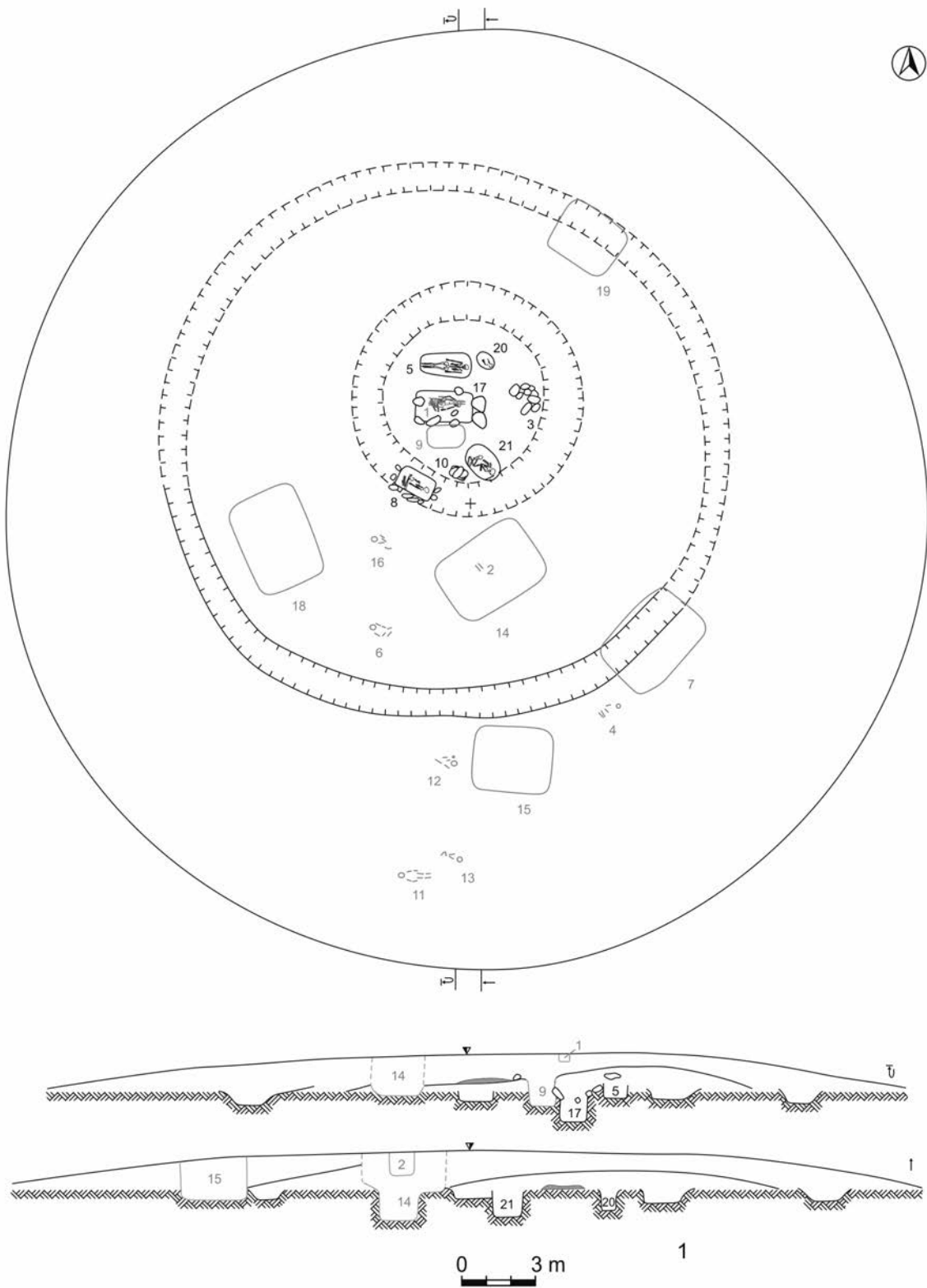


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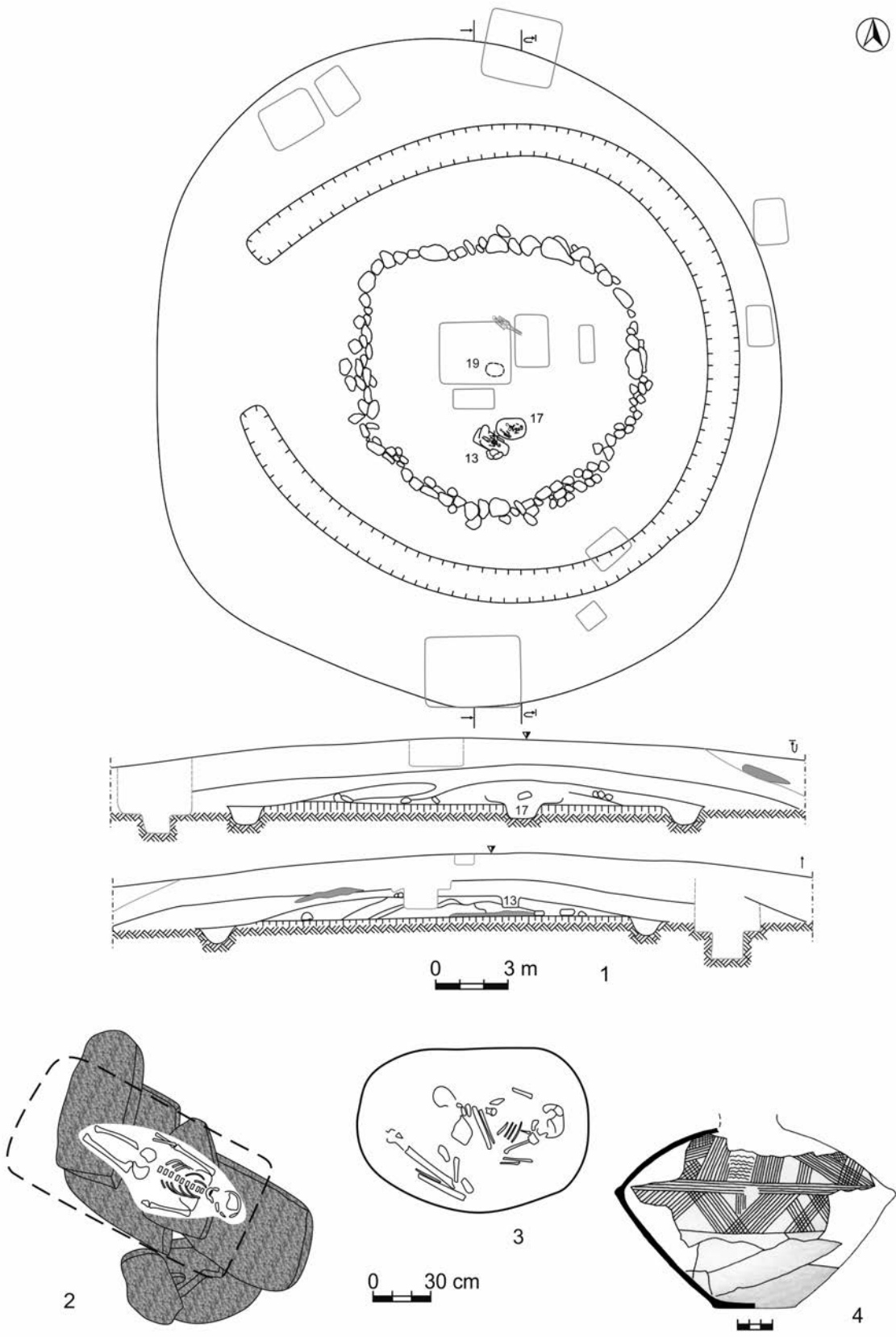


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