

THE PURIFYING FIRE IN THE ROMANIAN PREHISTORIC BURIALS

BY

ALEXANDRA COMȘA

Keywords: *ritual use of fire, pyres tipology, cremation rites tipology, Romanian prehistory.*

The Romanian prehistory is rich in various spiritual aspects, some of them being known for a longer time, some other being slightly outlined and following further investigations.

The purifying fire is relatively well known in the settlements, where it has different functions and most of the time, it facilitates the contact with the divinity, for solving some specific problems of the community, or expelling the evil spirits in certain places.

Of course, the purifying fire is, in fact, a complex element of the spiritual life, which was both connected with the living and with those in the after world.

Once an individual departed from this life, the entire community took care that the complete funerary ritual should have been fully accomplished, otherwise believing that the dead could return for revenge against the community.

HOUSE OF THE DEAD

At Năeni-Zănoaga, on the bottom of a pit three skeletons were placed, surrounded by complete and fragmentary vessels, massif pieces of adobe with traces of pillars, coming from a burnt construction, stones with traces of burning, as well as an axe¹. The presence of the burnt construction can lead us to the thought concerning the practice of raising a house of the dead that was destroyed by fire, at the moment when corpses had to be cremated (fig. 1 a, b).

PYRES

The pyres were used just for burning the corpse of the human or animal individuals. They were placed close to the pit, in the necropolis, or somewhere in its proximity. Most often, a single individual used to be burnt on a pyre at the same time.

Depending upon the number of individuals which could be burnt upon those pyres, we could find individual, family or community pyres².

¹ I. Motzoi-Chicideanu and Monica Sandor-Chicideanu, *Ein bronzzeitliches Grab aus Năeni –Zănoaga*, in *Dacia*, N.S., XXXVIII–XXXIX, 1994–1995, p. 32–33.

² C. Schuster, Alexandra Comșa, Tr. Popa, *The Archaeology of Fire in the Bronze Age of Romania*, Bibliotheca Musei Giurgiuvensis, I, Giurgiu, 2001, p. 79–81.

INDIVIDUAL PYRES

As a relevant example of such a kind of pyre we could mention a round hearth with a diameter of 1.50 m, uncovered in the western part of the settlement from Sibîșeni. Iuliu Paul, the archaeologist who discovered it had mentioned that, as no other place bore clear traces of burning the dead, he could consider this hearth to be the pyre, bringing as arguments concerning the shape and dimensions of the hearth, its good preservation, its location outside the habitation site, at the margin of the settlement, its construction system (being made of gravel and ceramic fragments), as well as the absence of domestic remains around it. Besides, in the southern part of the hearth there was a cylindrical pit, inside which were probably gathered the remnants of cremation. He had also shown that upon that hearth a crouched dead could be placed and burnt (fig. 1).

At Milostea (Argeș County), in tumulus no. 2, a special mode of using the fire was found. The excavators presumed that the burial contained an inhumed skeleton, with its bones completely destroyed at the moment of its discovery. The individual was covered by river stones that created an oval mantle of the tumulus. Beneath the stone there were massif charcoals, resulted from the slow combustion of a wooden cover, placed between the cadaver and the layer of stones. The burial was plundered at a later moment. Just a vase could be recovered from the burial inventory. As we could see, the Milostea Group had a special kind of funerary customs, in which fire had played an important role³ (fig. 4).

Later on, in the Telești-Drăgoiești Group of the Hallstatt period, the mortuary pyre was not discovered. Yet, in one of the tumuli at Drăgoiești, a large quantity of ash and charcoals was found together with the inventory, placed upon a bed of stone that usually served for keeping the funerary urns. This is why, the find was considered to point to the cremation of the dead on site, at the burial place⁴.

2. Family pyres

The family pyres were well represented in the Monteoru Culture. In the site of Căndești, for instance, burial no. 7 had obviously served both as a pyre and as burial place. The cremation and burial space was surrounded by a stone ring. Half of it, namely a surface of about 23 sqm was used as a pyre, where the four members of the family were burnt, before being interred in four small pits located in the other half of the ring⁵ (fig. 2).

3. Community pyres

For the community pyres, the most representative find is the one at the spot Poiana Scorșului, discovered at Sărata Monteoru and belonging to the Monteoru Culture. This consisted of a platform made of gravel, upon which bones, parts of skeletons in anatomic connection, inventory remains, ash and charcoals were uncovered. The intensive burn of the bones and the thick layer of ash and charcoals had proved that in this site cremation of the corpses was practiced for a long time and besides, it was not partial and followed by the inhumation of the dead as it happened in some cases at Căndești, a necropolis belonging to the same Monteoru Culture⁶. In the mentioned cemetery, there were burials whose pits had the walls burnt until they got red. They contained skeletons with traces of fire, which showed that the corpses were placed upon the

³ Eugenia Popescu, Al. Vulpe, *Necropola tumulară de la Milostea*, in *Revista Muzeelor*, 2, anul III, 1966, p. 148–155 and figs. 2–5.

⁴ D. Berciu, *Arheologia preistorică a Olteniei*, in *Arheologia Olteniei*, 1939, nr. 101–103, p. 305; Gh. Calotoiu, I. Mocioi, V. Marinoiu, *Mărturii arheologice în Gorj*, Târgu Jiu, 1987, p. 87–98; Gh. Calotoiu, *Prima epocă a fierului în nordul Olteniei*, Târgu Jiu, 2002; Gh. Calotoiu, *Necropole tumulare din Gorj*, Craiova, 2007.

⁵ Marilena Florescu, *Cîteva observații referitoare la ritul și ritualurile practicate de purtătorii culturii Monteoru în lumina săpăturilor de la Căndești (jud. Vrancea)*, in *Carpica*, X, Bacău, 1978, p. 97–136.

⁶ Eugenia Zaharia, *Stațiunea arheologică de la Sărata Monteoru*, in *Studii și cercetări de istorie buzăiană*, Buzău, 1973, p. 24.

purifying fire set into the pit and were just partly damaged by it. Anyway, it seems that, even such a short contact with the sacred flames was enough for a secured travel to the after world⁷.

And, because we have discussed about cremation, we should mention here that, according to the material culture or with the dating of the cemeteries in the Bronze or Iron Ages, the deceased people were placed with their body either stretched or flexed upon the pyre. Usually, after cremation, the community had shown a great care to the remains of the dead, gathering them from the pyre and burying them with a certain ritual.

An interesting case was found in the Lăpuș Group (Late Bronze Age). In the tumuli necropolis of the eponymous site, it could be noticed that in the first phase the pyre was situated at the place where the tumulus would be raised. After cremation of the individual, the pyre was cleaned of ash and charcoals, which were gathered on its edge, or beside it. The cremated bones were placed on its middle, surrounded by the inventory, which was spread randomly around. Sometimes, above the pyre was created a compact layer of river stones that, in other tumuli, were arranged in groups. In the following phase, the remains of the dead were not abandoned upon the pyre, but placed into an urn. In some tumuli, like no. 4 or 21, two pyres were found⁸.

At Milostea (Argeș County), in tumulus no. 2, a special mode of using the fire was found. The excavators presumed that the burial contained an inhumed skeleton, with its bones completely destroyed at the moment of its discovery. The individual was covered by river stones that created an oval mantle of the tumulus. Beneath the stone there were massif charcoals, resulted from the slow combustion of a wooden cover, placed between the cadaver and the layer of stones. The burial was plundered at a later moment. Just a vase could be recovered from the burial inventory. As we could see, the Milostea Group had a special kind of funerary customs, in which fire had played an important role⁹ (fig. 3).

HEARTHS

Out of the late Yamnaia Culture (the classical phase), at Chersăcosu (Vaslui County), in a tumulus containing the burial of a child placed in a central position, there were also the remains of a possible pyre (hearth) situated close to the burial, about 0,50 m above it¹⁰.

At Grivița (Galați County), in two burials belonging to the classical phase of the Yamnaia Culture, where were two hearths. The one in burial no. 2 was a big sized one. In the same interment it was also found a cup with evident traces of smoke. In burial no. 3 there was another hearth, „charred to red”¹¹.

A similar case we find at Cheile Aiudului (Alba County), where tumulus no. 9, with six burials, contained in the one no. 4 a skeleton flexed on its left side, with a rich inventory and close to the pit had a hearth with traces of burning, charcoals, bovid bones and ceramic fragments¹².

The cult of the fire and hearth were of great importance for the contact between the divinity and community. This is why, on some special occasions, some human sacrifices were offered to the fire, to the hearth, or to the divinity.

In tumulus no. 2 uncovered at Meri (Teleorman County) (Hallstatt), almost on its center, there were found four pots, placed at the level of the ancient soil. At various depths there were found human dismembered bones, arranged in groups, spread on a range of about 3 m. Among and in the proximity of the vases there were three hearths of small dimensions. Two of them were at the level of construction, while the third one was a little bit higher, fact which pointed to its raise and utilisation in a moment subsequent to the beginning of the mound building. Besides the human bones, there were found some animal ones (reindeer, ovicaprinaes, cattle

⁷ Marilena Florescu, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁸ C. Kacsó, *Zur Chronologischen und Kulturellen Stellung des Hügelgräberfeldes von Lăpuș*, in C. Kacsó, (ed.), *Der nordkarpathische Raum in der Bronzezeit, Symposium Baia Mare, 7.–10. Oktober 1998, Bibliotheca Marmatia*, 1, 2001, S. 231–278.

⁹ Eugenia Popescu, Al. Vulpe, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Fl. Burtănescu, *Epoca timpurie a bronzului între Carpați și Prut cu unele contribuții la problemele perioadei premergătoare epocii bronzului în Moldova*, București, 2002, p. 109.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

¹² H. Ciugudean, *Epoca timpurie a bronzului în centrul și sud-vestul Transilvaniei*, București, 1996, p. 61–62.

and horse). At the base of the tumulus there were two metal pieces, a bronze object plated with gold foil and a fragmentary iron knife. In the mantle of the tumulus was found another cremation burial, also dated in the Hallstatt time, but later than the one in the mound¹³ (fig. 5).

The rite of cremation is put into connection with the change of the religious beliefs of the communities that, mostly during the Bronze Age and increasingly in the Iron Ages, had considered the human being as having a dual structure, composed of the body and soul. Therefore, at the death of the individual, the soul had to detach itself from the body and this is why, the corpse had been put to fire, in order to release it. This practice had been adapted to various beliefs and customs of the different communities, thus resulting in a diversity of funerary rituals, involving also distinct modes of cremation. T. Muscă, in a paper referring to the funerary rituals of the Prehistory and Protohistory¹⁴, had emphasized the difficulty of grouping such types of cremations, which finally offer a rather large number of variants and subvariants. Here, we will consider just the place where cremation took place, as we found an easier way to identify it:

1. Cremation on the pyre

At Glăvăneștii Vechi (Iași County) – Yamnaia Culture, mound II, B. 8, with a skeleton of a child aged at about 2 years, in the proximity of the funerary pit had a pyre, out of which charcoals and ash had been preserved, but also heaps of charred bones of birds or small animals, with burnt sand above and beneath¹⁵.

2. Cremation on site

A somehow similar situation we found at Susani, in a tumulus dated back in the Early Hallstatt time, where the authors of the find had considered that an inhumation burial existed, in connection with a purifying fire, but the skeleton was missing, possibly due to the many disturbances that affected the ground. The burial contained a large number of vessels, but also charred grains, offered to the dead¹⁶.

Regarding the number of individuals that could be found in a pit, we could mention:

1. Cremation in individual burials

We will not insist about the ritual involved by the cremation rite in individual burials. What is worth to be mentioned here is the large diversity they have, according to the material culture they had belonged to.

A very interesting example of evident social differentiation we find in the necropolis of Cârna, belonging to the Gârla Mare Culture. This distinction is given by the number of vessels placed in each burial. As we consider relevant the statistics made for this purpose, we render here the data resulted from it:

- 42 poor burials, with one or two vessels (about 36,2%);
- 54 burials of medium condition – between three and five vessels (or least 2 pots and one statuette) (about 46,6%);
- 15 rich burials – between six and eight vessels (or at least 5 pots and one statuette) (about 13%);
- 5 very rich burials – at least nine vessels (or eight pots and one statuette) (about 4%)¹⁷.

2. Cremation in double or multiple burials

In our opinion, the rite of cremation, when used together with the inhumation one, in some of the double or multiple burials, was surely used also as a distinguishing element, which, in some certain situations, could have provided hints regarding the social status of the deceased.

¹³ E. Moscalu, *Die frühhallstattzeitlichen Gräber von Meri (Gem. Vedeia, Kr. Teleorman)*, in C. Preda, Al. Vulpe, C. Poghiric (ed.), *Thraco-Dacica, Recueil d'études à l'occasion du IIe Congrès International de Thracologie (Bucarest, 4–10 septembre 1976)*, București, 1976, S. 77–86 and Abb. 1; *Idem*, *Mormintele tumulare hallstattiene timpurii de la Meri (com. Vedeia, jud. Teleorman)*, in *Memoria Antiquitatis*, IX–XI, 1985, p. 163–169;

¹⁴ T. I. Muscă, *Contribuții la studiul ritualurilor funerare pre- și protoistorice*, in *Acta Moldaviae Meridionalis*, II, 1980, p. 45–50.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

¹⁶ I. Stratan, Al. Vulpe, *Der Hügel von Susani*, in *Prähistorische Zeitschrift*, Band 52, 1977, Heft 1, S. 42–46 and Abb. 2.

¹⁷ Vl. Dumitrescu, *Necropola de incinerare din epoca bronzului de la Cârna*, București, 1961, p. 310.

BURNING OF THE PIT

In some certain cases, even if the deceased are not being burnt, the purifying, sacred fire plays an important role in the funerary ritual. There are finds that show that, either the entire pit had been burnt to red, or a fire was set on its bottom, so that the ground preserved traces of burning. Such examples we have at Căndești (Vrancea County) (Monteoru Culture – Bronze Age)¹⁸. We should not forget here to mention that, in some cases, the individuals were not burnt completely. On the contrary, they were placed in the pit after the sacred fire was set in there so that, the corpse was affected just in part, otherwise, the bones preserving their anatomical structure. Thus, an incomplete cremation occurred, as found in some cases in the necropolis from Căndești (Monteoru Culture – Bronze Age)¹⁹.

CHARCOALS

In our opinion, the charcoals must have been very important for the funerary rituals. They were usually taken from the pyre upon which the dead had been burnt. They were part of the purifying fire that released the soul of the individual but, they might have had also a psychopomp function for the soul of the dead, in the same manner like some material cultures have used the lamps.

At Holboca (Yamnaia Culture) in burial no. 11, belonging to an adult male, traces of charcoal had been found on the bottom of the pit²⁰.

At Brăești (Noua Culture), at the level of the skeleton, on the bottom of some funerary pits (B.3 and B.10) pieces of charcoals had been found. This is the only case of the mentioned culture where such a situation could be identified²¹.

At Galați – „Dunărea” quarter, in burial no. 8, some charcoals had been found. The burial was dated possibly in the Middle, or Late Bronze Age²².

The presence of the charcoals in the burials seems to have been a usual procedure in the tumuli necropolis from Vârtopu-Ciuperceni, belonging to the final part of the Early Bronze Age. In this cemetery, that comprised 14 tumuli, the existence of charcoals in the burials seems to have been part of the customary ritual for the dead. It is interesting to note here that, in most of the funerary finds of this necropolis, the charcoals have been placed in the proximity of the cremated human bones²³. But, what could be their significance? They could either have been taken accidentally from the pyre, fact which is denied by their frequency or, they were put there in order to bring an extra-purifying fire to the corpse, or provide it with a sacred fire for the travel towards the after world. Another argument that could support this presumption is the find in tumulus no. 9, where, inside a big vessel, the cremated bones were placed together with charcoals²⁴.

OTHER CHARRED DEPOSITIONS IN BURIALS

In the layer Cucuteni A₂ from Poduri, there were some human disparate bones, among which, in 1990 was found the skull of a child of about three years, that was placed upon a layer of charred layer of cereals, with a diameter of approximately 1 m.

¹⁸ Marilena Florescu, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 115; Marilena Florescu, *Quelques observations concernant le rite et les rituels des communautés Monteoru à la lumière des fouilles de Căndești (dép. de Vrancea)*, in R. Vulpe (ed.), *Actes du IIe Congrès International de Thracologie, I, Histoire et archéologie*, București, 1980, p. 85.

²⁰ Fl. Burtănescu, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

²¹ Lidia Dascălu, *Probleme ale bronzului târziu din nord-estul României, Rit și ritual funerar în cultura Noua*, in *Hierarus*, IX, 1994, p. 146.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 115.

²³ Gh. Calotoiu, *Necropole tumulare din Gorj. Vârtopu-Ciuperceni, Telești-Drăgoiești*, Craiova, 2007, p. 9–41.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 16 and plate no. 9.

A somewhat similar find was done at Doboșeni, where a double burial was found, containing two flexed skeletons accompanied by inventory and buried on a layer of ash²⁵.

We consider interesting to note here also the deposition in burial no. 33 from Holboca (Fig. 4), belonging to male of 30–40 years, with a very robust body and a height of 180,5 cm. Between the scapula and hummers on the left side, there were found green charred bones, one such bone being also found between the fingers of the left and near the right scapula. It is not known if those bones were animal or human ones²⁶. Considering their position, in front of the mouth, we find it appropriate to consider that they were animal bones.

CONCLUSIONS

Even if the use of the purifying fire seems apparently less used in the cemeteries, if we take into consideration the large number of elements provided by the funerary ritual, we can observe its constant presence, even if not intensely manifested in all material cultures. On the other hand, the use of fire had served both a utilitarian and a symbolic role and its existence in burials shows the diversity of beliefs and customs specific to the communities of the prehistoric times.

FOCUL PURIFICATOR ÎN MORMINTELE PREISTORICE DIN ROMÂNIA

REZUMAT

Lucrarea se referă la folosirea focului purificator în necropole, acesta având un rol important în cadrul ritualului funerar din diferite culturi materiale.

Desigur, focul purificator este, de fapt, un element complex al vieții spirituale, care s-a aflat în conexiune atât cu lumea celor vii, cât și cu cei de dincolo.

De îndată ce un individ a părăsit această viață, întreaga comunitate avea grijă să îndeplinească ritualul funerar până la cel mai mic detaliu, altfel existând credința că morții ar putea să se întoarcă și să se răzbune împotriva întregii comunități.

Se fac referiri la situații care evidențiază folosirea „casei morților”, unde cei morți au fost depuși și apoi construcția a fost incendiată.

Rugurile folosite pentru incinerarea celor morți erau de diferite tipuri și anume: individuale, familiale sau ale comunității.

Este menționat și cultul vetrei, care asigura legătura dintre divinitate și comunitate.

Referitor la locul unde se desfășura ritualul de incinerare se pot găsi morminte cu incinerare pe rug sau pe loc, apoi având în vedere numărul de indivizi depuși într-o groapă erau morminte cu un singur individ, doi sau mai mulți. Se au în vedere și alte aspecte ale ritualului funerar legat de focul purificator, cum ar fi arderea gropii, depunerea de cărbuni alături de cel decedat sau în groapă, alte depuneri incinerate.

Concluzia care a putut fi desprinsă din analiza acestor date evidențiază faptul că focul purificator a fost folosit în mod constant, chiar dacă nu la fel de intens, în culturile preistorice de pe teritoriul României. El a servit atât unui rol utilitar, dar și unui ritual, exprimând diversitatea concepțiilor religioase și a obiceiurilor din perioada la care ne referim.

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1. Drawing of the burial from Năeni-Zănoaga, apud I. Motzoi-Chicideanu, M. Șandor-Chicideanu, 1994–1996, 26, Abb. 6.

Fig. 2. Family burial from Căndești, apud M. Florescu 1978, fig. 6.

Fig. 3. The tumulus from Milostea, apud E. Popescu, Al. Vulpe 1966.

Fig. 4. Burial no. 33 from Holboca, apud E. Comșa, 1985, p. 153, fig. 7.1.

Fig. 5. The tumulus from Meri, apud E. Moscalu 1976.

²⁵ Cornelia-Magda Mantu, D. Botezatu, B. Kromer, *Une tombe double à inhumation de l'établissement de type Cucuteni de Scânteia, département de Iași, Roumanie*, in *Préhistoire Européenne*, vol. 6, 1994, p. 226.

²⁶ E. Comșa, *Mormintele cu ocru de la Holboca*, in *Thraco-Dacica*, VI, 1–2, 1985, p. 152–153 and fig. 7.



Fig. 1. Drawing of the burial from Năeni-Zănoaga, apud I. Motzoi-Chicideanu, M. Șandor-Chicideanu, 1994–1996, 26, Abb. 6.

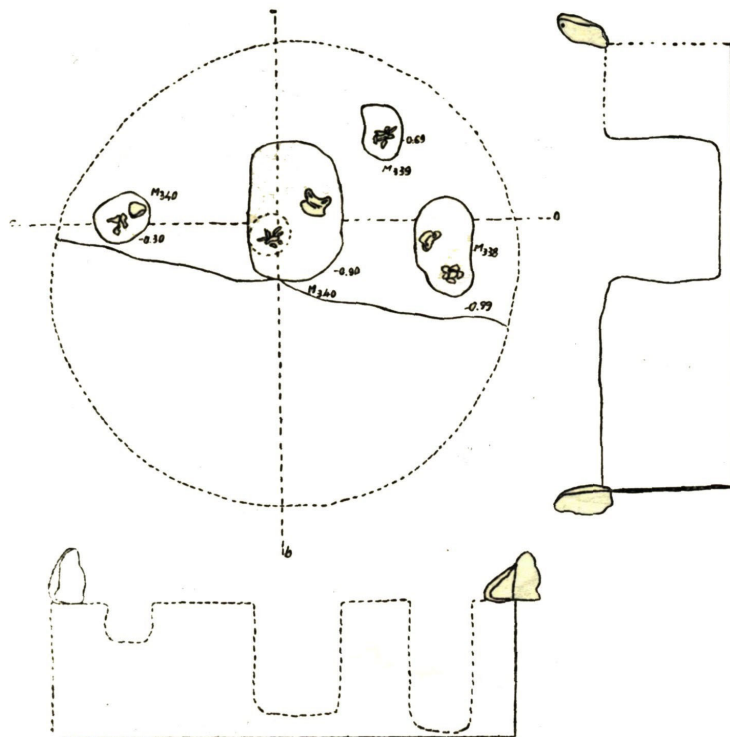


Fig. 2. Family burial from Căndești, apud M. Florescu 1978, fig. 6.

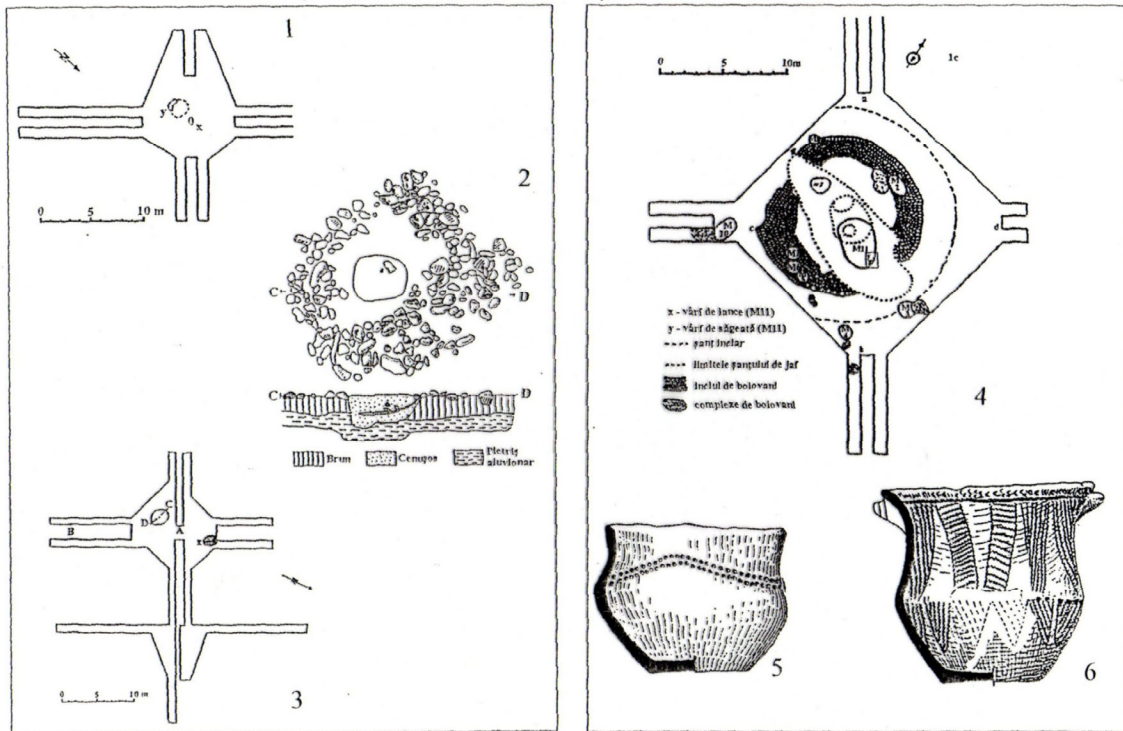


Fig. 3. The tumulus from Milostea, apud E. Popescu, Al. Vulpe 1966.

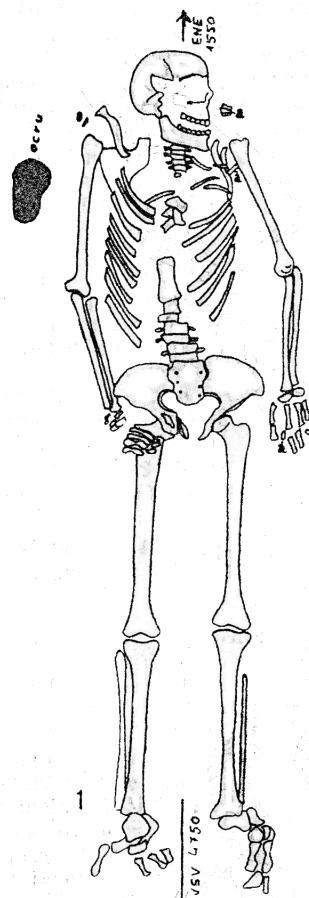


Fig. 4. Burial no. 33 from Holboca, apud E. Comșa, 1985, p. 153, fig. 7.1.

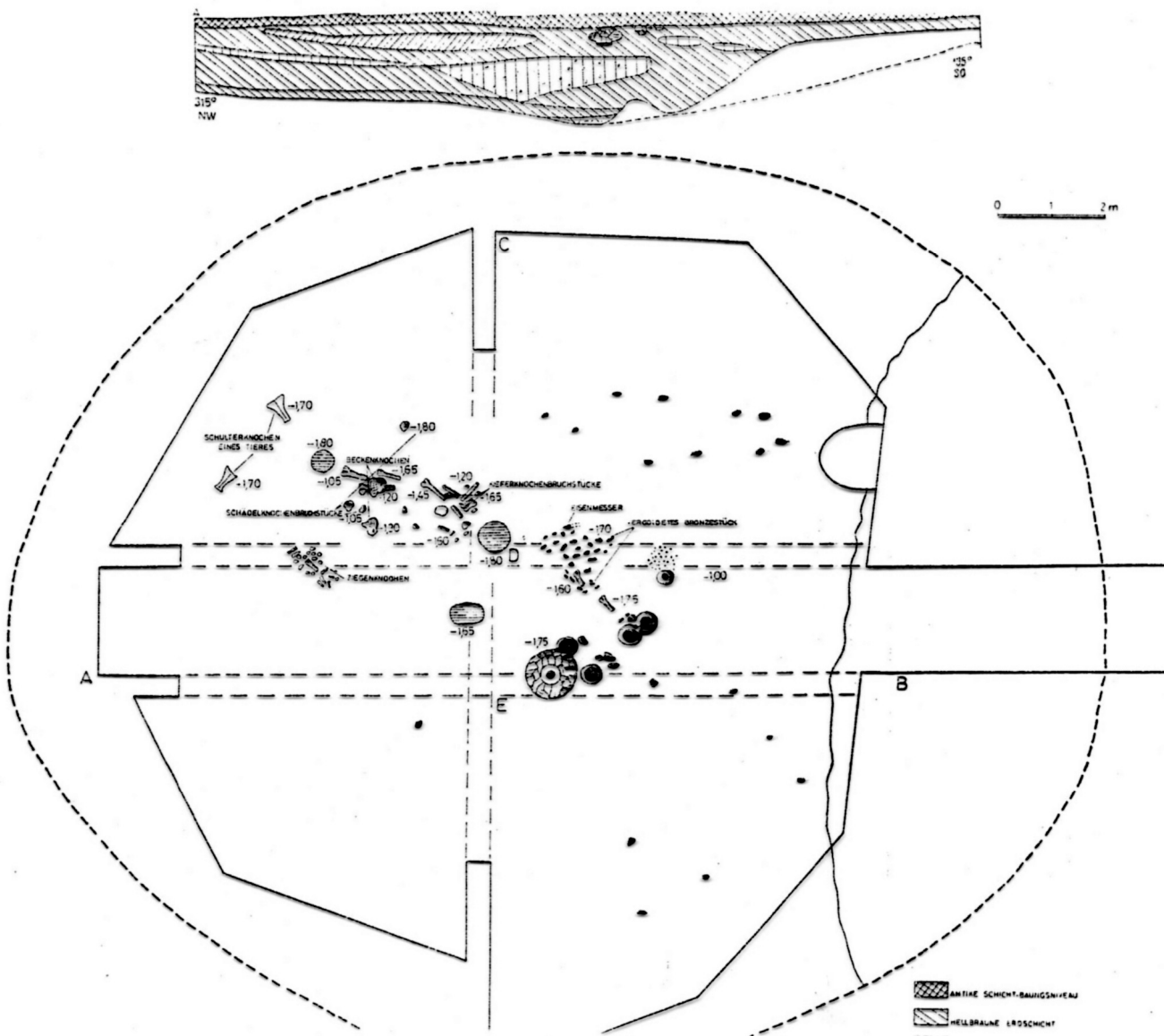


Fig. 5. The tumulus from Meri, apud E. Moscalu 1976.