

**THE AREA OF VENAFRO IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ARCAIC  
AGE OF HIGH VOLTURNO VALLEY (ISERNIA- ITALY).  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA AND THEIR DISSEMINATION IN THE  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF VENAFRO.**

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**Key-words:** Arcaic era, high Volturno Valley, Venafro, necropolis, socialization of knowledge.

**Abstract:** from the beginning of 2018, at Venafro archaeological Museum (Isernia), the Istituto Centrale per l'archeologia and the Polo Museale del Molise (both for the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage) are carrying out a joined project aimed to realize a new permanent exhibition of the pre-roman section, according to the latest ministerial and ICOM standards. This work gave the opportunity to review the context of the Pozzilli-Camerelle necropolis, located in the nearby territory and investigated at the end of 1970s and the beginning of 1990s. The grave goods reveal the social organization and the territorial impact of local communities during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, and late 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, along the Volturno river, which connected Campania, Latium and the internal Samnium. The population framework of the archaic period is integrated by other similar sites located along the ancient routes connecting the internal Apennine region: it is precisely across this mountainous region that, at the end of the fifth century B.C., oscan populations descended through the upper valley of the Volturno until the Etruscan Capua occupying it.

### **Introduction**

Venafro is a small town that gives access both to the upper Volturno valley both to the Molise region coming from Rome and Naples. The territory of Venafro is rich in evidences of the late Iron Age, like walled enclosures and necropolis, as is the whole of the upper valley of the Volturno; according to Calastri (2002, p. 202) it is from the mountain massifs of the upper Volturno valley that a Oscan group have come down the upper Campania up to occupy Capua in the 425 BC: Venafro represents the end of the “pass corridor” along the mountains, before the entrance in the plain of the middle and low Volturno valley, known in Antiquity as the “Campania felix” (Franciosi 2002).

The territory of the high Volturno represent an important archive of information related to the previous substratum and immediately situation following this event, where populations from the inner Apennines cross the mountain pass boarding to head in the territory of the Etruscans of Campania. Venafro today host an State Archaeological Museum in which are preserved the materials of the largest necropolis of the archaic age of the high Volturno, discovered in 1978 in the nearby Municipality of Pozzilli. The project of musealization of these materials it is an opportunity to rethink a new form of presentation to the public the role of the high valley of the Volturno between VI and IV centuries BC, through this important necropolis that chronologically interests the “shortly before”, the “during” and “shortly after” the descent of the Osci towards Capua from the mountain pass.



### Settlement pattern in the inner and mountainous areas of the Middle-Adriatic / Central Italy during the pre-roman period

The Venafrò's territory, in the high Volturno valley, during the pre-roman period is part of a wide cultural region extended from the Middle Adriatic coasts (Marche and Abruzzo) to the inner Campania, Molise and Basilicata. This area was settled by peoples of Italic origin, variously identified by the historical sources, depicting an extremely articulated (and problematic) framework, with a various degree of reliability. The traditional ethnic names (as, for the Campanian hinterland, Osci, Opici, Ausoni, Aurunci ecc.), their origin, diffusion and chronology can be hardly pointed out or even ascribed to neatly individuated archaeological evidence (see Cerchiai 1995, p. 21-25). The nature of the historical documentation neatly changed in relation to the events of the 5th century BC when, with the conquest of Capua (423 BC; Livy IV, 37, 1-2) and Cuma (421 BC; Diod. XII, 76, 4; Strabo V, 4, 4), the Campani/Samnites were firstly recorded by ancient authors as an Italic population coming from the inner mountainous area, intended to conquest the fertile lands of the coastal Campania (Tagliamonte 2005; Scopacasa 2015). The Campani/Samnites are described as an ethnic entity group newly "founded" (Diod. XII, 31, 1; Livy X, 38, 5-12) and, since the beginning of the 4th century BC, all the indigenous communities settled in the inner Campania, the southern Abruzzo and Molise were collected under this name and involved in a long series of wars against Rome (343-290 BC).

Contrary to the Middle-Tyrrhenian side of the Italian peninsula, during the first half of the first millennium BC, ancient Samnium is perceived as a "non-urban" territory. Properly urban centres can be recognized only since the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, with the administrative reorganization imposed by Rome, that founded colonies and praefecturae in the newly conquered territories (as Venafrum in 268 BC). The come into contact with Rome probably induced and accelerated the development of the *urbes foederatae* (later, *municipia*, formally independent until 90 BC) of the Samnite territory, that arose from pre-existing indigenous centres, originally located on high and well defended positions, close to the main pathways, and progressively expanded towards the valley plans, as Saepinum and Bovianum and, probably, Venafrum (La Regina 1970, p. 192-194; Tagliamonte 2005, p. 160; Rainini 2000, p. 238).

The pre-roman settlement trend, instead, is marked by the sparse and nucleated diffusion of medium-small inhabited sites, interpreted by modern scholars (in the light of some passages in the historical sources) as the "vicatim / *kata komas*" model ("through villages"; Livy X, 17; Tuc. I, 8), and well adapted to the irregular and mountainous landscape (see, in general, Capini 2000). For the Samnite territory, E.T. Salmon suggested that this settlement system corresponded to a "tribal states" population pattern. Every tribe (the Caudini, Pentri, Frentani, Marrucini and Carricini) coincided to the *touto* ("community"/*res publica*) recorded by the Italic inscriptions since the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards, joined by a wider political entity (a league; Salmon 1967, p. 78-81; Tagliamonte 2005, p. 257-259; for a different point of view, Bourdin 2012, p. 256-263). Recently, many scholars have reinterpreted this model, and especially the traditional definition of the "*kata komas/vicatim*" political and territorial system. L. Capogrossi Colognesi, M. Tarpin and S. Bourdin have evidenced the influence of the Roman historians' interpretation, suggesting that the archaeological record for pre-roman times should be analyzed separately.

The best-known inhabited sites since the Iron age to the Samnite wars' period in the area under exam are the so-called "hillforts" (*oppida*): small or at least middle-sized, they were positioned on the mountaintops, controlling the valley paths, and were usually defended by dry stone walls (La Regina 1970, p. 194; Oakley 1995; Rainini 2000, p. 240-241; Bourdin 2012, p. 413; Bourdin 2014, p. 162). Unfortunately, a very few of them have been excavated, so that we have



only generic data about their chronology, their real extension, the use of the inhabited area inside and outside the walls. These sites have been often mapped in wide survey projects, which evidenced their scattered distribution as a marking element of the pre-roman landscape. The Sangro Valley project and the Biferno Valley project (Barker 1995, p. 158-176) revealed also a narrow framework of rural sites, probably connected to the land exploitation.

Since the Iron Age, the local communities founded their funerary areas in the valley bottoms. The necropolises were characterized by the diffusion of the inhumation burial rite in single fossa graves, every individual being characterized by the occurrence of gender, age and role markers (especially, weapons for males and personal ornaments for females) and by a standardized code of self-representation of a strictly peer social structure. Since the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the diffusion of specific elements in the personal burial furniture (as the bronze belts with clasps or, more rarely, the trefoil cuirasses) has been problematically connected with the emerging of the Samnite ethnos.

The Venafro's area connects the inner territories of Molise to the Campania and the southern Latium, through the Volturno valley. While the Roman town of Venafrum is well known from the late republican period, its Italic origin still remains uncertain and only supported by some portions of polygonal walls in the defensive structure of the Medieval castle (Oakley 1995, p. 29-30).

The surrounding territory is marked by hillforts, which can be attributed to the Samnite wars' period, if not to earlier periods. This is the case of the Monte Santa Croce oppidum, the Castello Pentime and Presenzano (maybe the ancient Rufrae recorded by Cato, Agr. 135, 2 and Livy, VIII, 25, 4), Colle Castello, Colle Percorino, Monte Cesima, Sant'Eustachio, Colle Matrena/Colle Falascosa, Mandra Castellone, Monte Castellone, Roccavecchia di Pratella, La Croce (Oakley 1995, p. 30-41)

#### **The plaine of Venafro between VI<sup>th</sup> and IV<sup>th</sup> century BC: new data from recent works**

Survey campaigns in the territory of Venafro, published in the archaeological map (Cera 2011) and a series of preventive surveys related to public works, retained in the archive of the Superintendence of Molise, confirm the economic and cultural vivacity of the area since the most ancient times. Moreover, the excavation campaigns carried out in recent years in the context of public works and the tireless protection activity, made possible through private clients collaboration, allowed the implementation of the archaeological data framework and, consequently, the diachronic knowledge of the settlement models. The passage of the Paliano-Busso pipeline in the plain of Venafro, despite the small extent of the area investigated during the laying of the pipes, about 10 m in width, has nevertheless allowed the discovery of very interesting archaeological sites: it is right to recall quickly the two important Neolithic settlements, currently under study, founds in the locality of Tenuta Nola and in the locality of Ficora di Morra, where there is also a phase attributable to the Bronze Age. Regarding the attendance between the VI<sup>th</sup> and the IV<sup>th</sup> century BC the necropolis returns the more information.

In the westernmost part of the plain, in Ponte Schito, it was only possible to record the presence of an area of necropolis due to the constant ascent of water that prevented the safe recovery of the burials (Fig. 1/1). Among the material recovered there are fragments of a bronze basin with a beaded edge certainly made in Capua, which further confirm the close relationship between the plain of Venafro and the campanian metropolis of Capua. Immediately to the west of the modern road that comes from Naples, in Masseria Indeglia locality (Fig. 1/2), a portion of necropolis has been identified and excavated: also in this case the archaeological works were rather complexes due to the constant presence of ground water and consortium channels that, not suitably



conveyed in the preventive phases to the implementation of the pipeline under construction, have made the area of survey rather marshy. However, 11 graves relevant to a very large burial ground have been recovered. The intervention probably involved the marginal portion of a necropolis developed in the N-NW direction, probably extended also under the neighboring area, crossed by the Vairano-Caianello-Isernia railway line. The state of conservation of the materials before restoration does not allow to specify in detail the chronology of the individual burials, but only to date the burial complex in a rather broad chronological step, which goes from the middle of the V<sup>th</sup> century BC up to the II<sup>nd</sup>-III<sup>rd</sup> century DC. The graves of the "archaic" phase (1 and 2) are in an earthly grave; the Grave 1 with a simple pit, has a rich set consisting of both ceramic material, whose very fragmented state of preservation does not allow a punctual classification, or of metallic material, among which an iron ax is distinguished (Fig. 2), two skewers in iron, a fibula always in iron and a thin band in bronze immediately above the head; the Grave 2, a earthly pit with pebbled roof, returns a *skyphos* of dough placed at the knees of the skeleton and two fibulae in iron, one a simple arched and other a drafts that finds comparisons with some fibulae found in Alfedena (Abruzzo) and allows to date the burial around the middle of the V<sup>th</sup> century BC. (Parise Badoni, Ruggeri Giove 1980, p. 9-10). The remaining 9 graves take place chronologically between late republican age (direct or indirect cremation burials with *cappuccina* cover) up to the full imperial age (burial in burial in a simple pit)

On the border between the modern towns of Venafro and Sesto Campano (Fig. 1/3), in Carrera del Conte locality, also in this case along the road that comes from Naples and that probably constituted an important road axis already in the Archaic period, during works for the construction of rainwater collecting tanks by the Colacem company, four inhumation graves in single pit, three of adults and one of infants were brought back to light. It was possible to chronologically frame the graves at the end of the V<sup>th</sup>-IV<sup>th</sup> century BC through a preliminary analysis of the material of the grave goods, consisting of 5/6 pots in raw dough or black paint and personal ornaments. The ceramic grave good of Graves 1 and 2 find precise analogies with the Graves 51 and 67 of the nearby necropolis of Pozzilli, in the locality of Camerelle, as the ceramic bowl in black paint with the classic owl-billed rim attested from the VI<sup>th</sup> century BC until the end of V<sup>th</sup> BC (Capini 1981, p. 456; Capini 1991, p. 78). In the graves there are specimens similar to those of the necropolis of Alfedena in locality Campo Consolino, dated from the second half of the V<sup>th</sup> century BC, while the raw dough with curbs and beaded sockets datable to the V<sup>th</sup> cent. BC they also find comparisons in the neighboring Lazio context, in San Vittore del Lazio (FR) Nicosia E., Tondo E., D. Sacco, p. 629). It is noted in the Grave 1 a specimen with dough in *bucchero rosso* (Fig. 3), typologically referable to the Campania context with a chronological extension that extends widely from the second quarter of the VI<sup>th</sup> century BC until the second half of the V<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The fibulae find punctual comparisons in the IV<sup>th</sup> century BC in central Italy (Dioniso 2010, p. 164-165). Interesting is the fact that traces of organic material are preserved, probably referable to the wooden till preserved inside the pit of the Graves 4 and 5 and the imprint on the sternum of the deceased of Grave 4, of a veil or a shroud that was stopped by four simple-arched bronze fibulas.

Also in the eastern area of the plain of Venafro, corresponding to the current territory of the municipalities of Pozzilli and Montaquila (Fig. 1, N° 4), the rescue excavations carried out for the pipeline have allowed to found a substantial area of necropolis, not very far from the necropolis in Camerelle, which will be discussed later (see Davide Delfino's contribution for the description and reference bibliography). From what has been possible to understand the necropolis system, unfortunately only partially revealed, it extends to the east in an undiscovered area, in the direction



of the Volturno River. 23 pit graves have been found which, although with considerable problems in the recognition of the badly preserved and not yet restored ceramic material, have returned objects in bronze and iron that frame the context between the last half of the VII<sup>th</sup> century BC and the V<sup>th</sup> century B.C. As for the topographical aspects inside the necropolis, also due to the narrowness of the area investigated, there was not a single or group arrangement, but rather an attempt to optimize the spaces. During the investigation phases, however, it was possible to notice that some of the graves were reported on the surface by ceramic / raw dough / *bucchero* elements with the function of "sign", but also in fragmentary condition. In almost all cases the kit, ceramic and metallic, is placed at the feet, rare cases of trousseau on the basin. The oldest piece of equipment is the acorn fibulae of Grave 6, a rich female tomb that also returns a bronze basin and necklace elements that allow us to date the grave at the end of the VII<sup>th</sup> century BC (Fig. 4); bronze basins are also found in the Graves 4 and 8.

The *bucchero* pottery, which is almost dissolved due to the acidity of the ground, is present in almost all the graves and can be classified in the production of heavy *bucchero* belonging to the phase V of Capua (570 / 60-520 BC., Johannowsky 1983), while little attested (Graves 16 and 22), but still present is the *bucchero rosso*; therefore the cultural and commercial relationships of the plain of Venafro with the area of northern Campania are reconfirmed.

A kind of monumentalization is present only for the Grave 16, which suggests the prominent position of the deceased within the community. The burial has a pit lined by a double row of bricks on which probably stood a wooden table that divided the deceased, deposited with the objects of personal ornament consisting of a spiral iron bracelet, three iron fibulae enriched with a vague amber and a digital silver ring, from the vascular set, that had to be placed on the plank and made up of pottery in black *bucchero* and red *bucchero* stacked in correspondence with the left arm and the feet of the deceased. The presence of a series of knives and skewers in iron that can be found in the vertical is singular, probably laid straight between the plank and the edge of the pit (Fig. 5).

A special feature is the preservation in Grave 9 of the traces of a uniform black layer associated with an organic degradation of a shroud or a garment / coat stopped on the right clavicle by two leech fibulae and which had to completely cover the deceased with the exception of the head (Fig. 6).

#### ***The archaic phase of the necropolis of Pozzilli-Camerelle***

During the works for the construction of structures in the industrial area of Pozzilli-Camerelle, near Venafro, a large necropolis was been found in two steps (1978-79 and 1994). Each phase of the discovery has brought to light only a distinct area of an archaic necropolis (first half of VI<sup>th</sup> century BC- full IV<sup>th</sup> century BC), separated by a not studied area where no construction work was done and, consequently, it was not possible to excavate it (Fig. 7).

Of all the 111 graves recognized in the end of the two campaigns, only the 70 found in 1978-79 have been partially published (Capini 1980; Capini 1981; Capini 1991). According to the studies by Stefania Capini, it is possible to recognize two chrono-cultural phases. The first, corresponding to the phase V of Capua (570/60-520 BC), is characterized by heavy *bucchero* shapes (oinochoai, kantharoi, stamnoi, crenated cups, little kotylai, little amphorae), red *bucchero* shapes (oinochoai and jars) (Capini 1991, p. 57); metal grave goods are represented by iron and bronze fibulae, bronze rings, bronze pendants, one bronze basin and one iron dagger with its iron lining; some graves stand out for greater wealth of their ceramic grave goods, while generally though not rare, metal objects are clearly less represented than ceramic shapes.



The second phase is characterized by the presence of symposium services in black slip ceramic and his the presence in all the graves and the greater uniformity of the number of ceramic shapes in all the graves, makes it a more homogeneous phase. Black slip pottery services are formed by kylyx and cup and/or little cup (Capini 1991, p. 57); metal grave good are represented by iron and bronze fibulae, bronze rings, iron rings and pendant, iron spear heads and one bronze italic warrior belt. Some big iron nails in few graves, indicate that perhaps it was used to be buried in wooden crates.

All are pit graves covered by a stone cover: the pits are dug in the travertine bench, covered with stone slabs and accompanied by an offset.

The funerary ritual is more or less uniform in both the phases; the body is deposited in supine position, with the ceramic grave good deposited prevalently on the feet of the death, while metal kits differentiate the sexes: to the males iron rectangular fibulae are on the chest, and to the female arched iron fibulae are on the shoulders and, sometimes, also on the flanks (Capini 1991, p. 57). Some little differences between the two phases are in the presence of the most widespread warrior status to the males of the second phase (while in the first phase it is witnessed only by one iron dagger), and in the different use of the big bowl in each grave: while in the first phase, in almost all the graves, a large olla with two bucchero shapes inside is placed so that its mouth emerges in the surface outside the pit, in the second phase the big olla with two black slip pottery shape inside is placed entirely within the grave; perhaps the big olla in the first phase it was functional to some funeral rite, while in the second phase it was perhaps only a cultural heritage that remained only in meaning and not in the use (Capini 1991, p. 57).

No specific horizontal chronologies were identified for areas, one can think of the existence of groups of tombs that are autonomously increased from one another: only with a complete excavation of the entire area formerly occupied by the necropolis will it be possible to have a clearer vision in this sense (Capini 1991, p. 57).

***Socialization of knowledge in the Archaeological Museum of Venafro. The joined work of Istituto Centrale per l'Archeologia and Polo Museale del Molise.***

The Istituto Centrale per l'Archeologia, recently established as part of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities (MiBAC) has the aim of coordinating archeology in its broadest definition, providing standards, guidelines, publishing opportunities and geographical digital platforms to encourage the open archeological data sharing and dissemination. One of the targets of its mission is to promote the development of study and research in archaeology, even supporting the activities of the peripheral MiBAC offices spread across the Italian territory.

From this point of view, the Archaeological Museum of Venafro offered, with the large amount of materials preserved in its deposits, a precious opportunity to reanalyze different interesting archaeological contexts dealing with the Volturno valley and Venafro's territory. This peculiar situation gave a hint to activate a joined project between ICA and Polo Museale del Molise, aimed to present the Museum as a research pole and to improve its offer to the public.

The project framework, fits well in the mainstream of studies recently named as "alibi archaeology" (Coralini 2017) i.e. the set of practices "others" from the field activities carried out, following the methods of a stratigraphic enquire, not *in situ* but "digging" into archives, deposits and libraries, with the aim of publishing and / or reinterpreting the results of the too many unedited excavations, facing the risk of the permanent loss of information; after all, the only legitimate end of an archaeological investigation should be the reorganization of silent datasets into a story to be narrated to the public. Following this theoretical background, the context of the archaic necropolis



of Pozzilli-Camerelle, was chosen, among the others, as a pilot-project, for the richness of its materials, only partially exposed in a previous museum exhibition and still waiting for a comprehensive publication.

After a meticulous work of bibliographic and inventory check, all the materials stored in the deposit were taken into account; the funerary outfits of each burial, frequently confused due to the disassembly of an earlier exhibition, were reordered, recorded and photographed (Fig. 1/AF).

At the same time, two museum rooms, gradually occupied in the last decades by waste materials and closed to the public, were emptied, cleaned and functionalized as exhibition rooms (Fig. 2/AF).

All the operations took into account the instructions given by the recent decree issued by “Direzione Generale Musei” – MiBAC (DM 21.02.2018, n. 113) stating uniform quality levels for Museums aimed to create a National Museum System in Italy, inspired by international best practices stated by ICOM (Code of Ethics for Museums) and UNESCO (Recommendation on the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections). The decree, providing minimal standards and improvement targets, focuses on three strategic areas of intervention: 1. Organization, 2. Collections, 3. Communication and relation with the territory. A great effort, during all the set out of the project, was made to emphasize point n. 3, implementing strategies to inform the local community on the activities going on in the Museum: guided tours, periodic public meetings, free openings and, for the first time, the signing of an agreement with local cultural associations for the free use of some museum rooms for didactic activities, meetings etc. (fig. 3 AF)

By this point of view, the project, still in progress at the current date, can be described as a multi-functional action. First of all, it presents the archaeological museum of Venafro as a research museum: its activities are focused on the study of the collections carried out both by the Museum staff (archaeologists of the Polo Museale del Molise) and external researchers (ICA’s archaeologists) whose support was asked to reach a better knowledge and comprehension of the collection themselves. On the other hand, as mention above, a critic part of the project has been focused on the research communication, implementing using available tools and means, with the purpose to share the results within the largest number of interested people.

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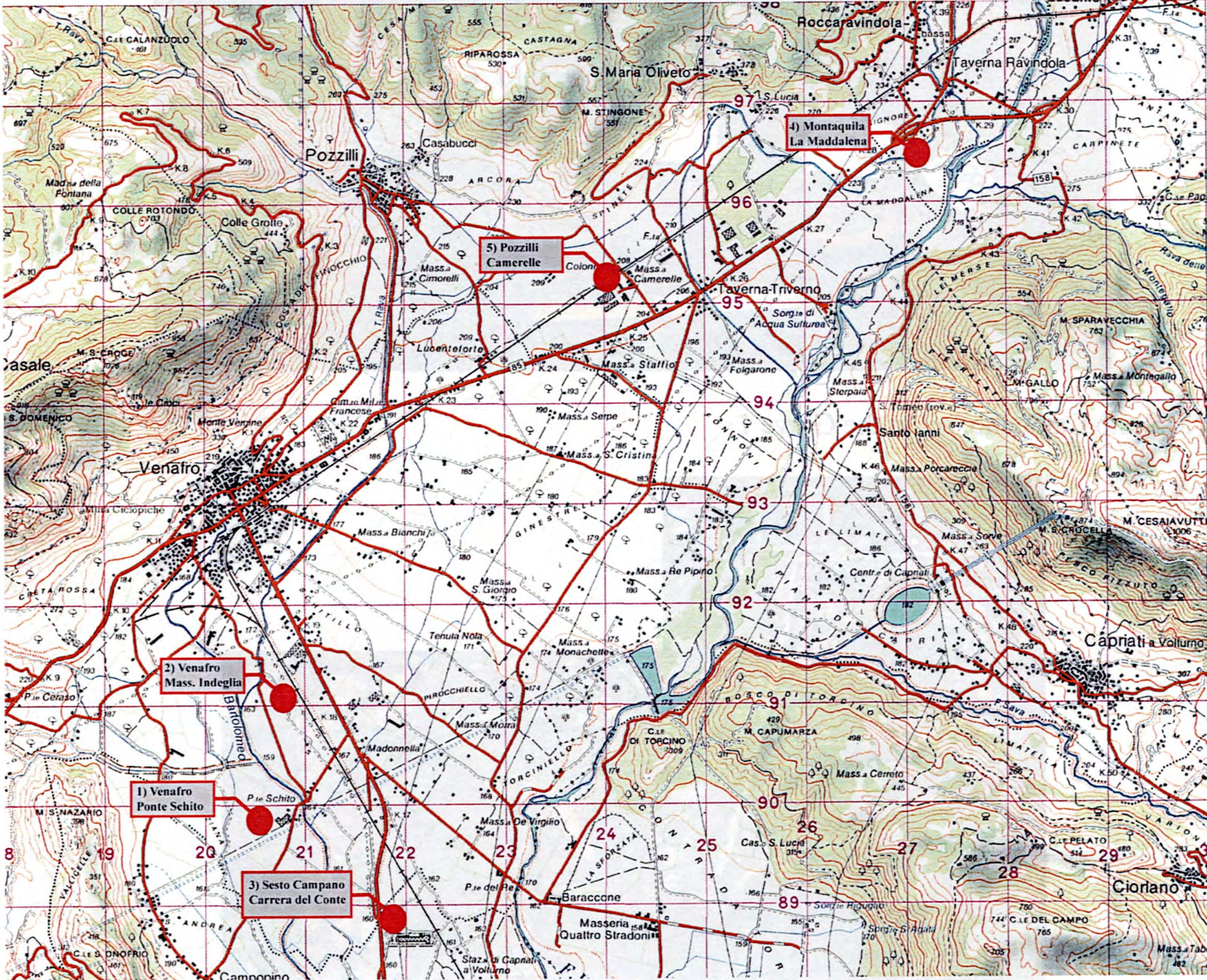


Fig. 1. The territory of Venafro.





Fig. 2. Venafro locality Indeglia, axe from Grave 1.



Fig. 3. Sesto Campano, set in the Grave 1.

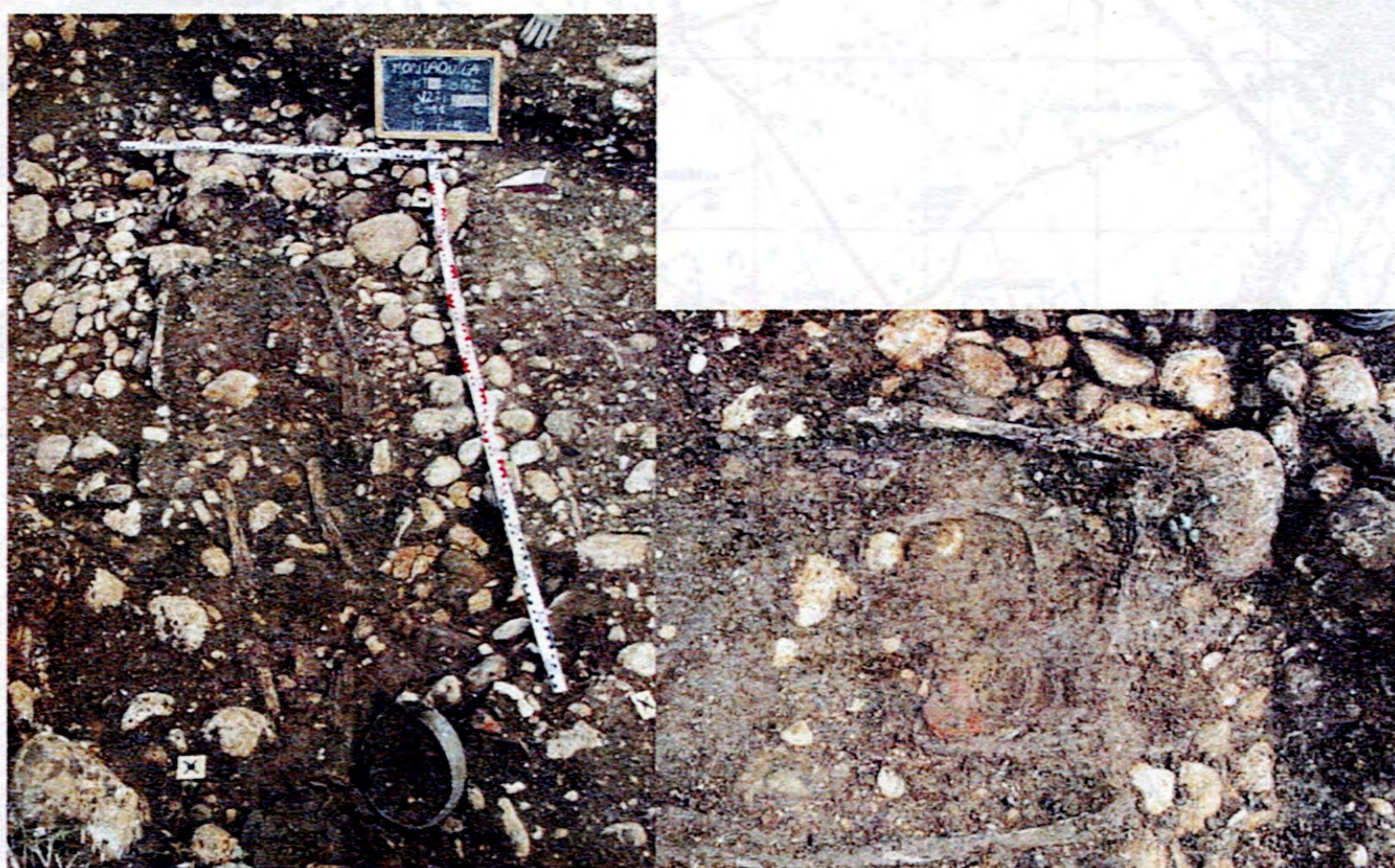


Fig 4. Montaquila, Grave 6.

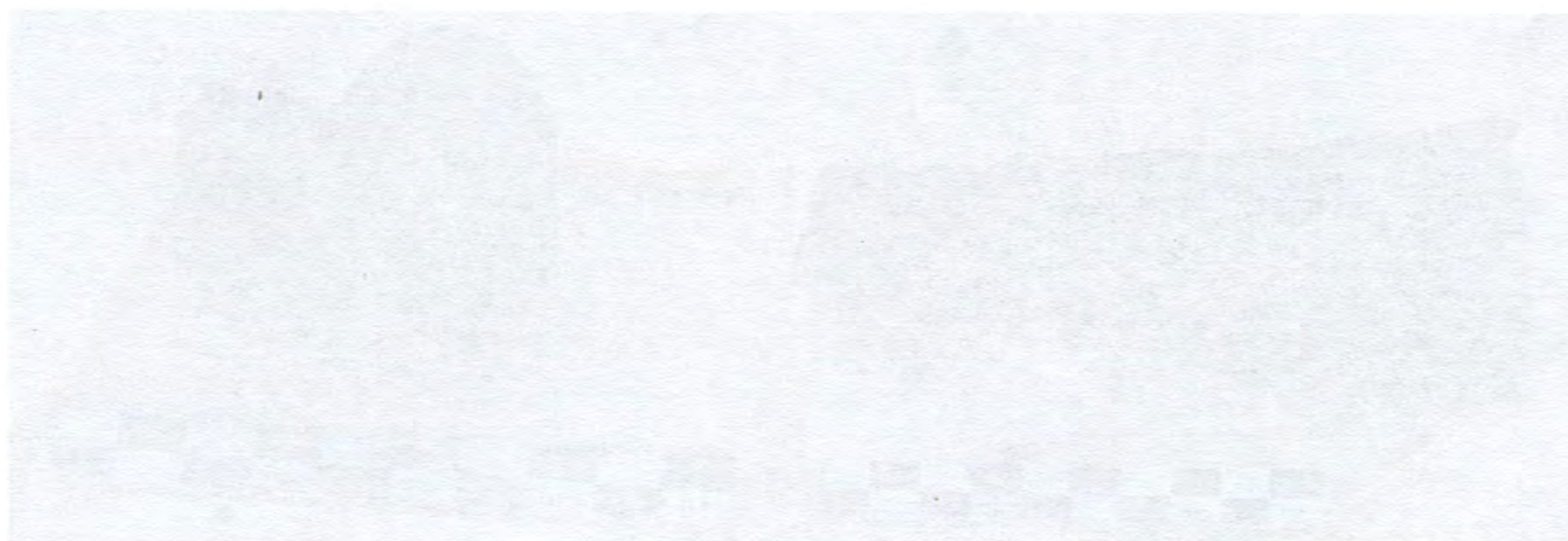


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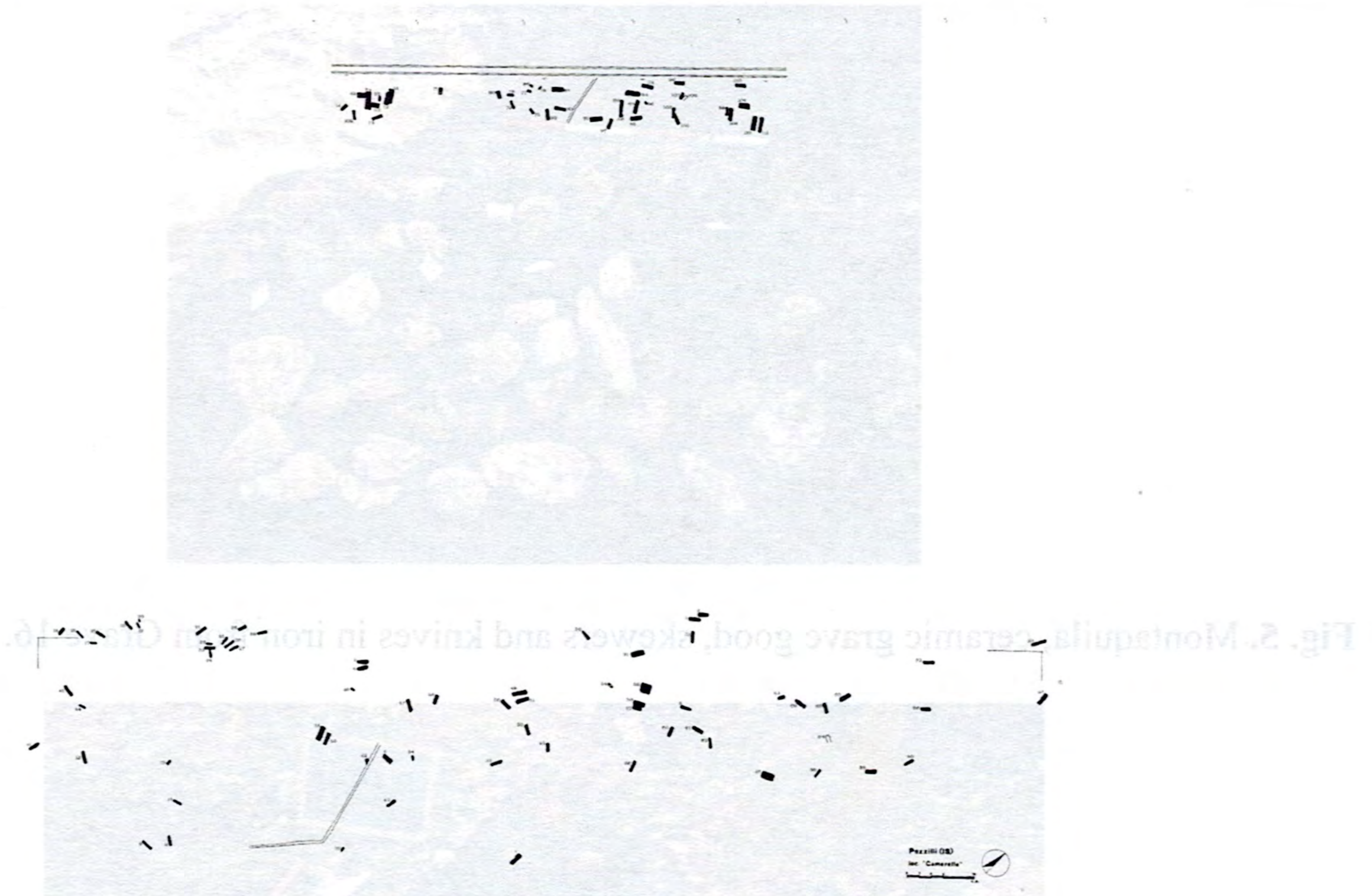


**Fig. 5.** Montaquila, ceramic grave good, skewers and knives in iron from Grave 16.

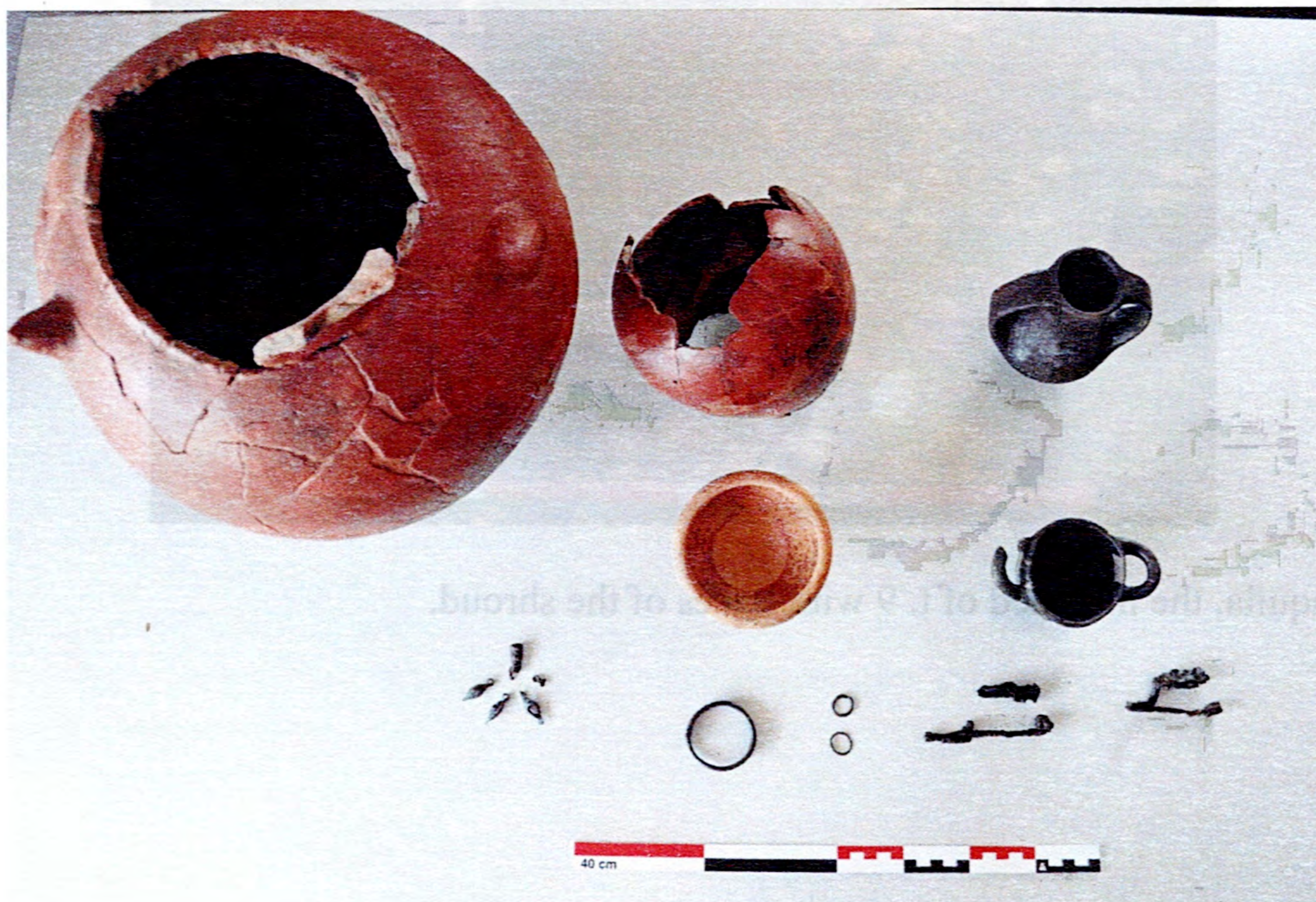


**Fig. 6.** Montaquila, the inhumed of t. 9 with traces of the shroud.





**Fig. 7.** A general plan to the necropolis of Pozzilli-Camerelle. Down the area excavate in 1978-79, below the area excavate in 1994 (source Superintendence Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape of Molise- draw Luigi Silvestri and Elisabetta Valletta).

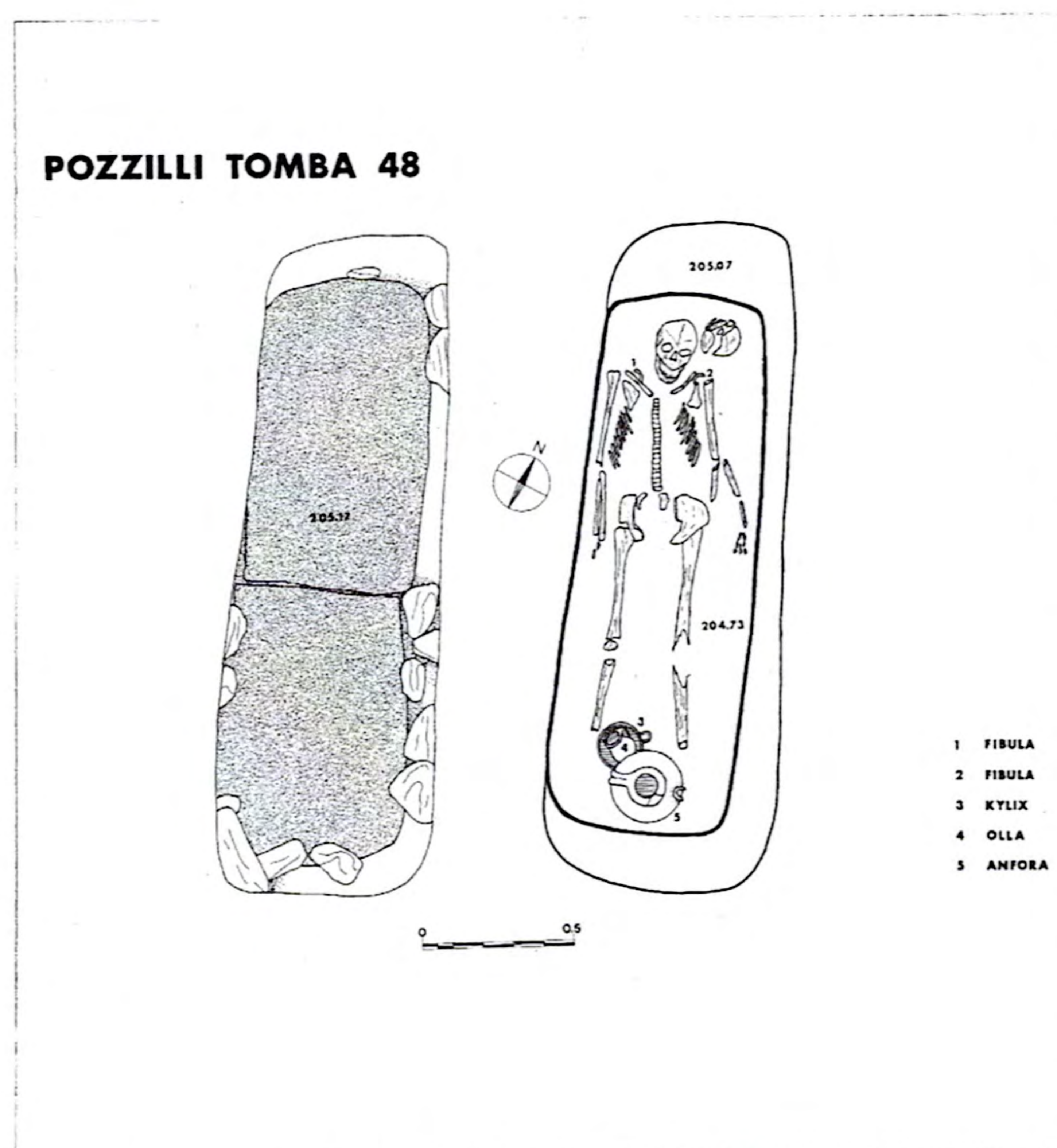


**Fig. 8.** An example of grave good of the first phase grave of Pozzilli-Camerelle (VI<sup>th</sup>-V<sup>th</sup> century BC). Grave 34 (photo by Davide Delfino).





Fig. 9. Example of a grave good of the second phase of Pozzilli-Camerelle (V<sup>th</sup>-IV<sup>th</sup> century BC). Grave 67 (photo by Davide Delfino).

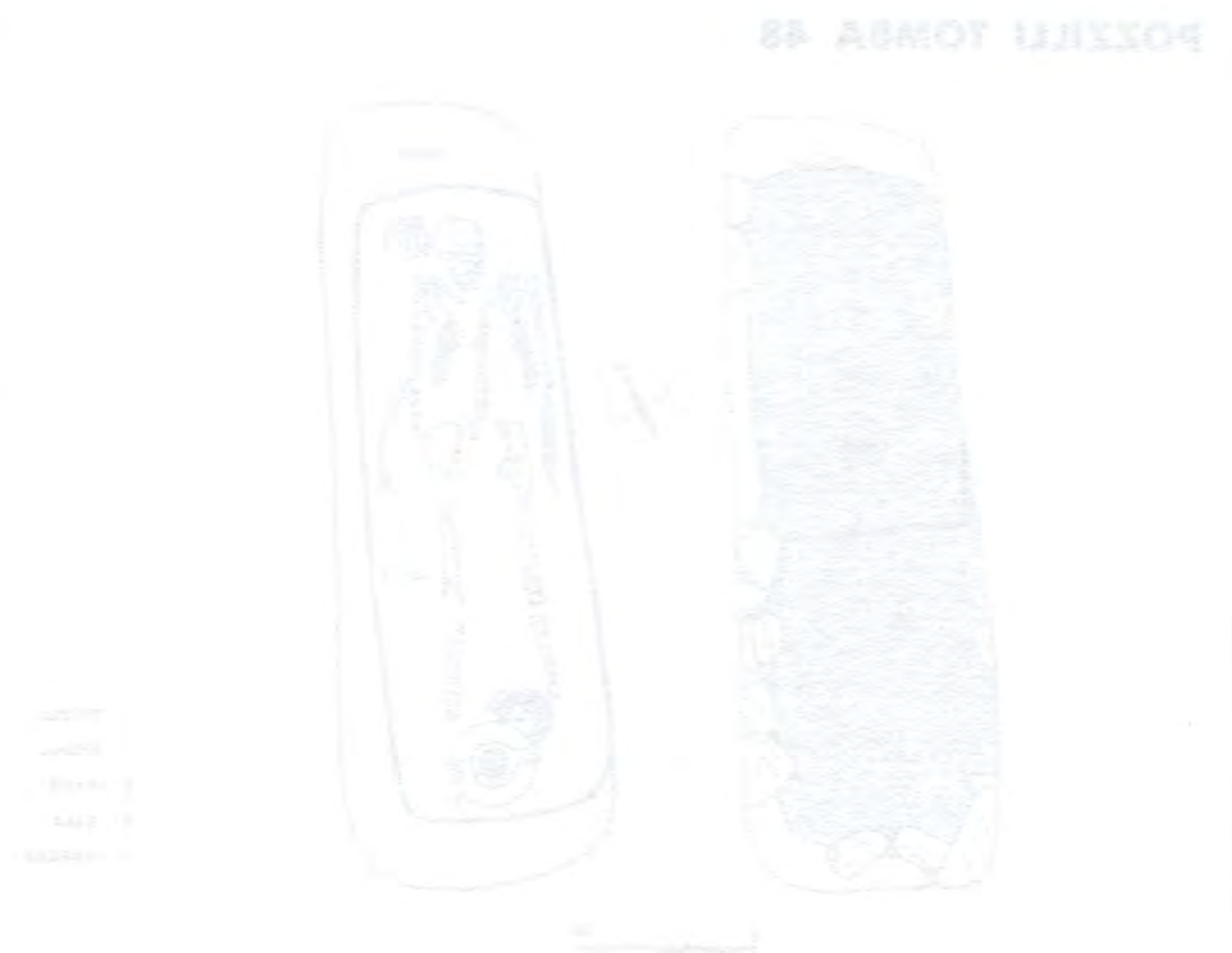




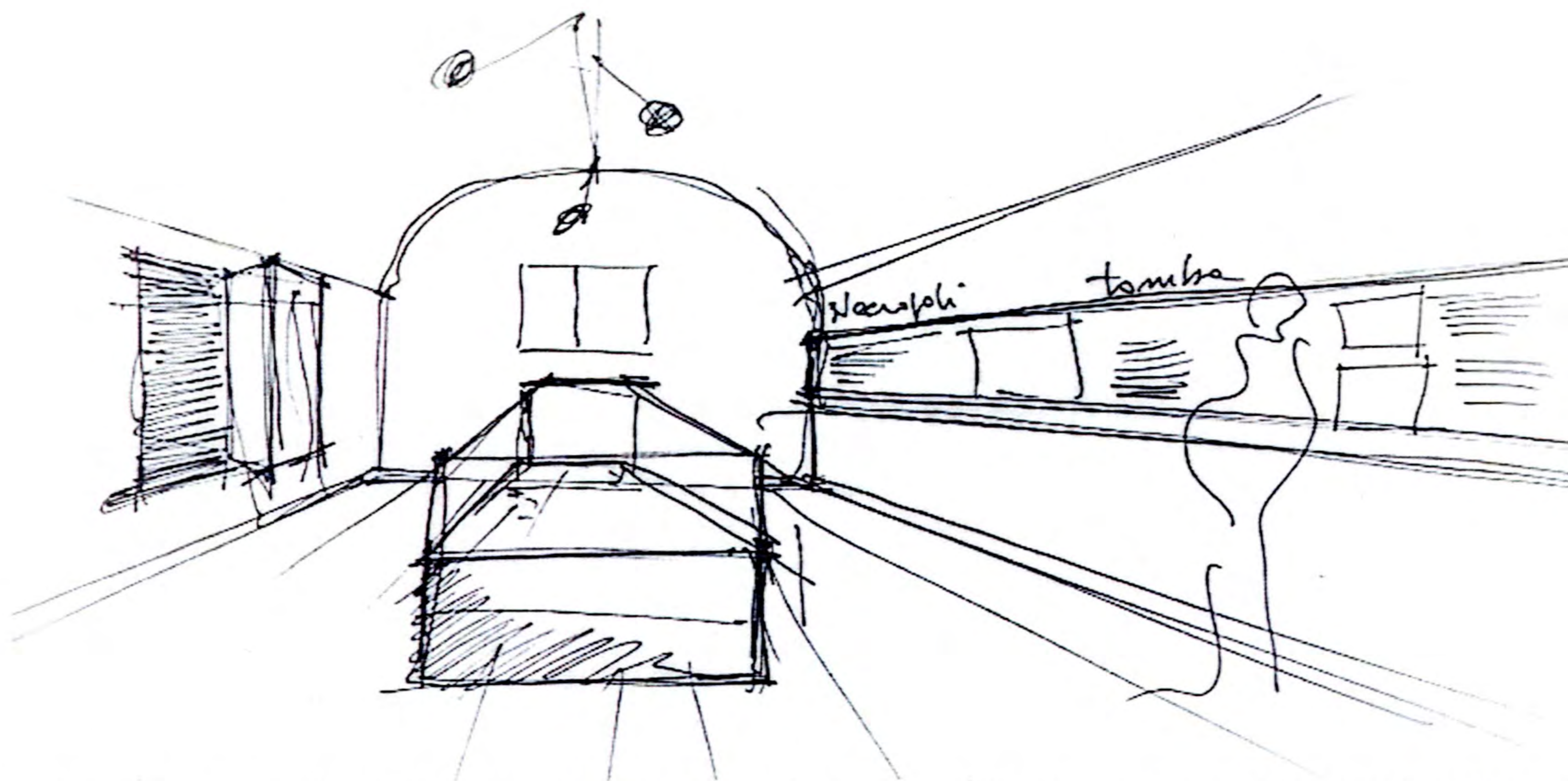
**Fig. 10.** Example of the cover in stone slab of the pit grave. Grave 48 (source Superintendence Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape of Molise- draw Luigi Silvestri and Elisabetta Valletta).



**Fig. 11.** Inventory check and recording of Pozzilli artifacts stored into Museum deposits.







**Fig. 12.** clearance operations and sketch for one of the new exhibition rooms (draw of the future room by arch. Pierangelo Izzo).



**Fig. 13.** Museum activities to involve the local community.