

## THE DACIAN FORTRESS AND GRAVES FROM MESEȘENII DE SUS

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**Keywords:** Meseșenii de Sus, Sălaj County, The Depression of Șimleu, Dacian fortress, Dacian graves,

**Abstract.** The pass through the Meseș Mountains, at Meseșenii de Sus, in the south-eastern sector of the Șimleului Depression, was blocked and surveyed in the Dacian period by a fortress built in the location Osoiul Măcăului (RAN Code 142113.01; LMI Code SJ-I-s-B-04918). In 1957 a team coordinated by V. Lucăcel, the first director of the Museum of Zalău made a trench in the Prehistoric settlement just identified in Meseșenii de Sus-Osoiu Măcăului, discovering pottery dated in the Wietenberg culture, but no feature. From the above-mentioned trench some other artifacts, yet unpublished, were discovered dated into the Dacian period: hand-made and potter's wheel made pottery dated in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> c. BC and a tip of a Celtic iron sword. The acropolis, the highest part of the fortress, is in fact a Dacian feature, with a double enclosure. The highest plateau has the diameters of 40 x 20 m. Measured from the exterior of the enclosure it has the diameters of 80 x 40 m. Only the interior vallum is better preserved, as is the ditch which is still visible. The ditch is 5 m wide, 0.5 m deep. Behind the ditch, a vallum 1.5-2 m high was built with the earth extracted from the ditch and with stones. The width is ca. 7 m, while on the access way on the Meseș Mountains side, around 3-4 m. Behind this fortress was a protected plateau, oriented south-north, lower on the northern side. Further in the northern end one can observe a semilunar terrace, with a length of 95 m and a width (on the direction of the axe of the fortress) of ca. 35 m, disposed at an inferior altitude as the superior plateau (30m difference measured from the sea level). On the field one can observe the traces of previous excavations, yet unpublished. The archaeological material existing in the collections of the Museum of Zalău are few and irrelevant. During the archaeological diagnosis performed with volunteers in the year 2016, two Dacian burials were researched, ravaged from Antiquity. These burials were disposed on the extra vallum terrace. The trench was positioned where clues existed on the existence of discoveries dated in the Dacian period having a funerary character. The archaeological strata are less than 0.4 m deep. Artifacts dated in the Dacian period include pieces of iron, bronze, silver, glass (burnt), without the possibility of contextualizing them properly, being scattered on the entire surface of the trench. The presence of incinerated bones (in low quantities however), and the secondary burning of the artifacts may constitute the argument of the funerary character of the discovery, bearing in mind the fact that they may have been destructed from the Antiquity. The discovery of two large buckles makes us believe that these were two funerary depositions dated in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> c. BC.

The passage through *Munții Meseș*, at Meseșenii de Sus, in the south-eastern sector of *Depresiunea Șimleului* (Sălaj County, Fig. 1/1), was blocked and surveyed, in the Dacian period, by the fortress built in the location *Osoiul Măcăului* (Fig.1/2-4) (Pop 2009, Repertoriu n<sup>o</sup> 32).

In 1957, a team coordinated by V. Lucăcel, the first director of the Museum of Zalău, made three tests in the prehistorical research station just identified in Meseșenii de Sus-*Osoiu Măcăului*, where there was found pottery dated in the Wietenberg culture, but any archaeological complex. Out of this test there are coming some Dacian pottery fragments, hand-made and made on the potter's wheel which can be dated in the period between the end of 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> c. BC and a tip of a Celtic iron sword. The materials of this campaign are still unknown. The research occurred after a donation of pottery to the Museum of Zalău, discovered in 1954 (Matei 1979, p. 13, n<sup>o</sup> 6).

The acropolis, the highest part of the fortress, is in fact a Dacian feature, with a double enclosure, from the South, Meseş Mountains, and from the village, in the North. . The highest plateau has the diameters of 40 x 20 m. Measured from the exterior of the enclosure it has the diameters of 80 x 40 m. Only the interior *vallum* is better preserved, as is the ditch which is still visible. The ditch is 5 m wide, 0.5 m deep. Behind the ditch, a *vallum* 1.5-2 m high was built with the earth extracted from the ditch and with stones. The width is cca. 7m, while on the access way on the Meseş Mountains side, around 3-4 m. Behind this fortress was a protected plateau, oriented south-north, lower on the northern side (Fig. 1/4)<sup>1</sup>.

Further in the northern end one can observe a semilunar terrace, with a length of 95 m and a width (on the direction of the axe of the fortress) of ca. 35 m, disposed at an inferior altitude as the superior plateau (Pop 2006, p. 23-24).

In the site there can be observed some traces of older tests, unused scientifically. The archaeological materials which exist in the collections of the Museum of Zalău are just a few and irrelevant. Following the archaeological diagnosis in 2016, on the above-mentioned terrace, two Dacian burials were researched, ravaged from Antiquity (Fig. 2) (Pop, Borangic 2017).

The archaeological diagnosis in 2016 was accomplished with volunteers (Pop 2018). They made a trench of 4 x 4 m where there were clues on the existence of discoveries dated in the Dacian period having a funerary character. The archaeological strata are between 0.2-0.4 m deep (Fig. 2). Artefacts dated in the Dacian period, including pieces of iron, bronze, silver, glass (burnt), were discovered, and there is a certain grouping of them in two laying places (Fig. 3). The pieces were then spread on almost all the surface of the trench. The presence of incinerated bones (in low quantities however)<sup>2</sup>, and the secondary burning of the artefacts may constitute the argument of the funerary character of the discovery, which can be dated in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> c. BC.

The research in 2018 tried to establish the chronological report between the fortress and the funerary deposition, but first of all to clarify the construction type of the defensive elements and their chronological evolution (Fig. 4).

In this regard, there was established a section of 26 m long and 1.5 m wide, oriented about N-S, partly above the elements of fortress and inside the space defended by this one.

There was noticed a succession of arrangements of the plateau. The first arrangement was accomplished in the Bronze Age (Wietenberg culture) and the second in the Dacian period.

In the Bronze Age the ground was levelled without modifying radically its configuration. On this levelling of 0.10-0.20 m deep there was ascertained a level of habitation from the Bronze Age, 0.2 m deep, containing fragments of pottery. This yellowish layer is juxtaposed to a burnt *vallum* of 3 m breadth (between m 13.7-16.5) in which there are previous pottery fragments belonging to the culture Coțofeni. The burnt thin ground doesn't contain any trace of wood or adobe and it is max. 0.35 m to the North. There is no trace of any palisade. Between 9.6-10.4 m there was dugged a groove in the local stone, 0.2 m deep, filled like the *vallum*, but much more settled. This seems rather the prehistoric matrix which was widened in the Dacian period. Anyway, over this came the eroded deposit of the later *vallum*, Dacian, 0.4 m thick, composed of thin ground and broken stone (Fig. 4).

<sup>1</sup> Field walks by H. Pop, I. Bejinariu, S. and D. Băcuciu-Crișan on 26.11.1997. On this occasion were also made the presented measurements. Additional data, more precise, were obtained during a subsequent field walk (H. Pop, April 2007) and settling in topographic coordinates on a more recent date (16.06.2009, H. Pop, S. Băcuciu-Crișan, D. Sana).

<sup>2</sup> Determination realised in 2018 at Institutul de Antropologie Fr. I. Rainer by a team coordinated by dr. A. Soficaru, according to which the three cremated fragments of bones, weighing 0,6 g, one might be from a skull and two from diaphysis, but it is impossible to say if they are human or not.

In the Dacian period, over the prehistoric level of occupation, the broken stone probably in provenance from the straightening of the plateau aimed to the fortress was levelled. The layer is 0.2 m thick and it contains a few prehistoric and Dacian archaeological materials, such as pottery and metal (iron knife). Therefore, the Dacian groove which resulted is 6m wide and 0,6m deep, and the level difference between this one and the coping of the prehistoric *vallum*, raised by the Dacians, measures now 2 m. Probably in the Dacian period it wasn't higher than 3-3.5 m. For increasing the depth of the groove, in the Dacian period there was also built an artificial shoulder between m 6-9.6 m, which is now 0.2 m thick (Fig. 4).

The section drawn this year contained also 6 m exteriors to the precincts, visible in the site, in the aim of the archaeological checking of the status. There were found elevation elements which can be connected to the Dacian period, as there were found both fragments of pottery from the Bronze Age and pottery and even Dacian metal objects (iron fibula, iron shield frame?). The Dacian objects discovered in 2018 confirm the dating of the feeble Dacian habitation in the end of 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> c. BC.

The research in 2018 invalidated the existence of Dacian circular *valla*, but it identified the presence of some obstructions of the access ways with grooves and *valla*, and the absence of a permanent habitation in the fortified space. There are precisely the workings less important in scope for the arrangement of the land, achieved in the Dacian period, which protected, at least in the northern sector, the previous elements of habitation and fortress in the Middle Bronze Age.

For limiting the discussion to the two areas rich in artefacts, we can affirm that the discoveries converge to the hypothesis that two graves are the main subject. The inventories were altered even from the Antiquity, but it was still possible to notice a separation of the artefacts in two categories (Fig. 3). The presence of bone fragments and the secondary burning of most of the artefacts represent complementary arguments for establishing a funerary character to this discovery.

The Grave no. 1 contains: an iron link, part of a bit, an arrowhead made of iron sheet, the blade of a small knife, four bronze links, two small and shapeless pieces of melted silver, two iron fibulas (Fig. 5/3) and three fragments of the pins of other three ones, all of them made of iron, and an iron buckle, with link and attachable to the belt (Fig. 5/2). There was also discovered in this perimeter a fragment from an iron artefact with a functionality impossible to determine and a piece of melted bronze (Annex I; Fig. 7).

The Grave no. 2 contains: the blade of a small iron knife with blood-drain (*Blutrinne*) (Fig. 5/1), the blade of another small knife (blade of a penknife) not burnt, a link from an iron bit, a pin from an iron fibula, three bronze links, two small pieces made of melted silver, a broken spring of a silver fibula, a fragment of a necklace made of plaited elements of silver wires (Fig. 5/5), a small bead made of blue glass with a white stripe and a small bead made of blue glass with eight "peacock eyes" (Fig. 5/4), a fragment of iron which is not conclusive and an iron buckle with traces of bronze collaring and attachable to the belt, maybe with link (Fig. 6/1). There were also discovered in this deposition three fragments of burnt bones (Annex I; Fig. 8).

The interesting fact is that there are completely missing the fragments of pottery, both in these two depositions and in the rest of the studied area. This aspect leads to the hypothesis that the area was not inhabited permanently.

We could affirm that the most interesting artefacts seem to be the iron buckles. Apparently, the contexts from which proceeded the buckles were not placing beyond doubt the deceased person in the group of the warriors, all the more that for the Illyrian-Scordisc group it appeared the hypothesis that such artefacts were part of the feminine costume (Guštin 2011, p. 250, footnote 34), but more recent researches identified this kind of artefacts in the graves of some warriors (Borangic 2017, p. 203). The presence of fragments of silver jewels (and of melted silver) could bring again

into discussion the sex of the defunct, because the graves of the warriors known for that time didn't contain such jewels.

Even if in the habitation areas the blades of simple small knives are very numerous, in the graves they appear more rarely. The fact that the one found here has the blood-drain (*Blutrinne*) rather leads to the idea of a substitute, because the small dimension of the artefacts does not qualify them as weapons, and the drain doesn't have any way any technical practical value, as it would have for a sword or a dagger. Most probably such artefacts are some miniatures sacrificed symbolically instead of real weapons. We have to mention that the blade of a penknife does not present traces of burning, which means that it was layed down after the funerary ritual.

The small beads made of glass, one of them decorated with “peacock eyes” and the other one, identified in the Grave no. 2 are in the same situation, they don't present any trace of burning. Generally, such jewels, relatively frequent in the centuries II-I BC, are discovered in the graves of warriors. Their laying down on the cremation residues brings one more spiritual dimension to the funerary ritual, because the presence of the “eyes” figured on the beads refers to the wish that the deceased person could see through them in the other world or that these magic eyes watch him.

The iron fibulas offer a serious analogy with the recent discoveries from Rotbav (Sîrbu, Savu 2015, p. 97-123; Sîrbu, Savu 2017, p. 83-93), and so do also the buckles, especially regarding the chronological framing.

The parallel with the graves from Rotbav is even more interesting if we have a look to the funeral ensemble and its relationship with the environment. First, we have to notice the fact that the two discoveries benefited by a professional archaeological research<sup>3</sup>, which led to the recording of all the structural elements (context, stratigraphy, artefacts), a situation unfortunately quite rare for this kind of discoveries, but which permitted a more correct positioning in the historical reality of the inventories. The absence of pottery is also interesting both at Rotbav, and at Meseşenii de Jos. Then, the two discoveries are located near fortresses, aspect which connects naturally the function of the deceased persons with the role of the fortresses. They were residents, even temporarily, of these power centres.

Mentioning the power centres, we prolong the analogy, because the two situations contain a necessary recuperation and rounding of the historical information concerning the peripheral areas of the Dacian Kingdom – considering Sarmizegetusa Regia as the main reference point. Both the Carpathians' Curvature and the territory of Sălaj county became richer in the last decade in discoveries specific to the Dacian military elites, filling in the image of the social and military dynamic of these provincial aristocrats. We could even affirm that these areas become more known from this point of view than the area itself of the big fortresses in the centre of the kingdom<sup>4</sup>.

Last but not least, the analogy offers good chronological reference points, the discoveries in Meseşenii de Sus being also datable in the period between the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, an effervescent period from all points of view, to which lined up also the masters of this fortress. According to their possibilities, of course.

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<sup>3</sup> Even if in the case of Rotbav the initial discovery belongs to some fans of metal detection, the discoverers announced the authorities and the archaeologists came on the spot; they studied and drew the artefacts. The first signalation of the discoveries in this area appeared online: [http://www.enciclopedia-dacica.ro/operatie=subiect&locatie=blog&fisier=20161124\\_mormantul\\_unui\\_razboinic](http://www.enciclopedia-dacica.ro/operatie=subiect&locatie=blog&fisier=20161124_mormantul_unui_razboinic) (10.02.2019).

<sup>4</sup> Even if the situation itself can be produced by a phase of the research or to a cruel poaching of the perimeter of Sarmizegetusa Regia (Borangic 2018, p. 379-380).

About the possibilities and the life of these provincial aristocrats we will write in a more detailed way in the short monography of the Dacian fortress of Meseșenii de Sus, project in which the authors are already involved.

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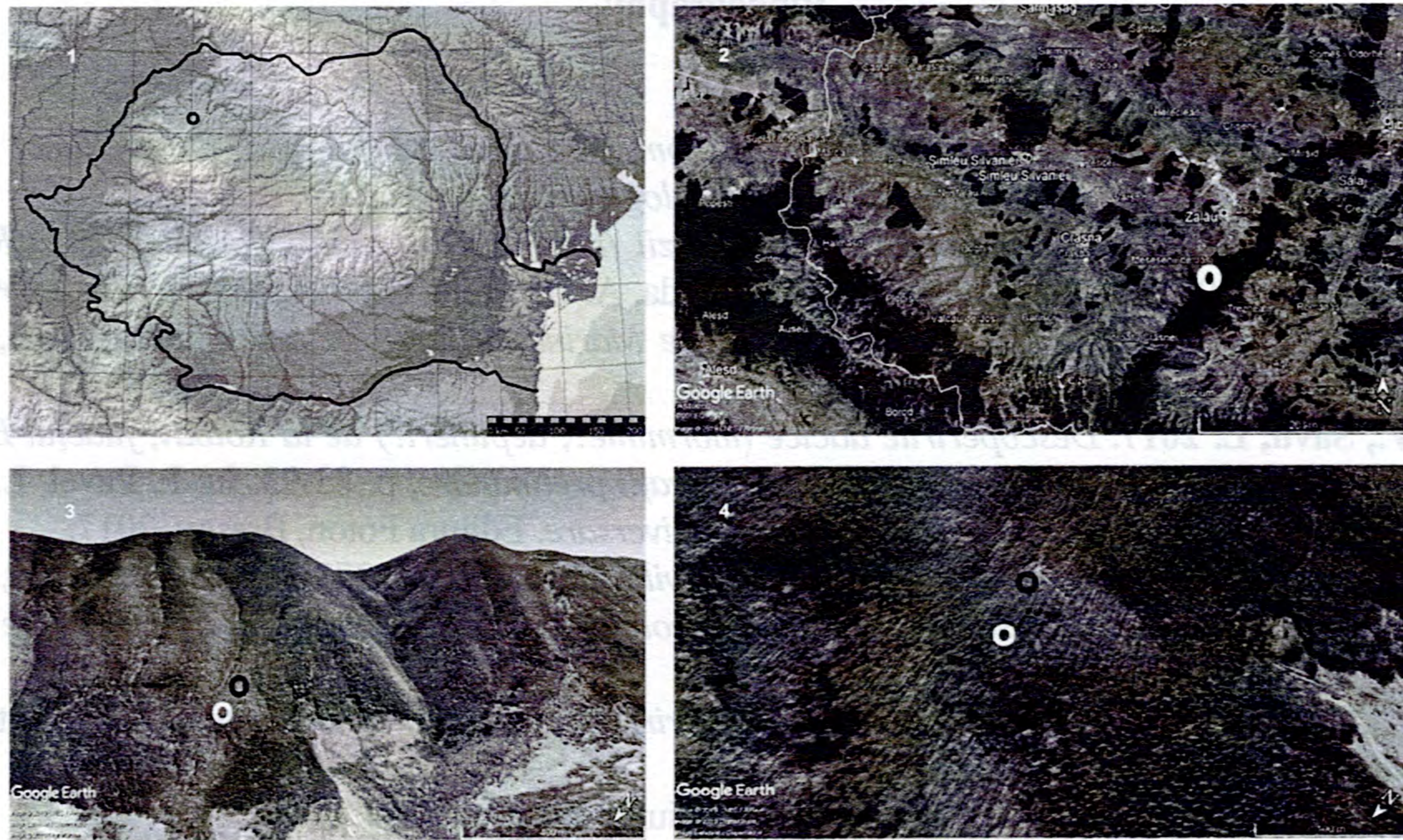
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**ANNEX I.**  
**THE ARTIFACTS DISCOVERED IN THE DACIAN GRAVES**  
**FROM MESEȘENII DE SUS**

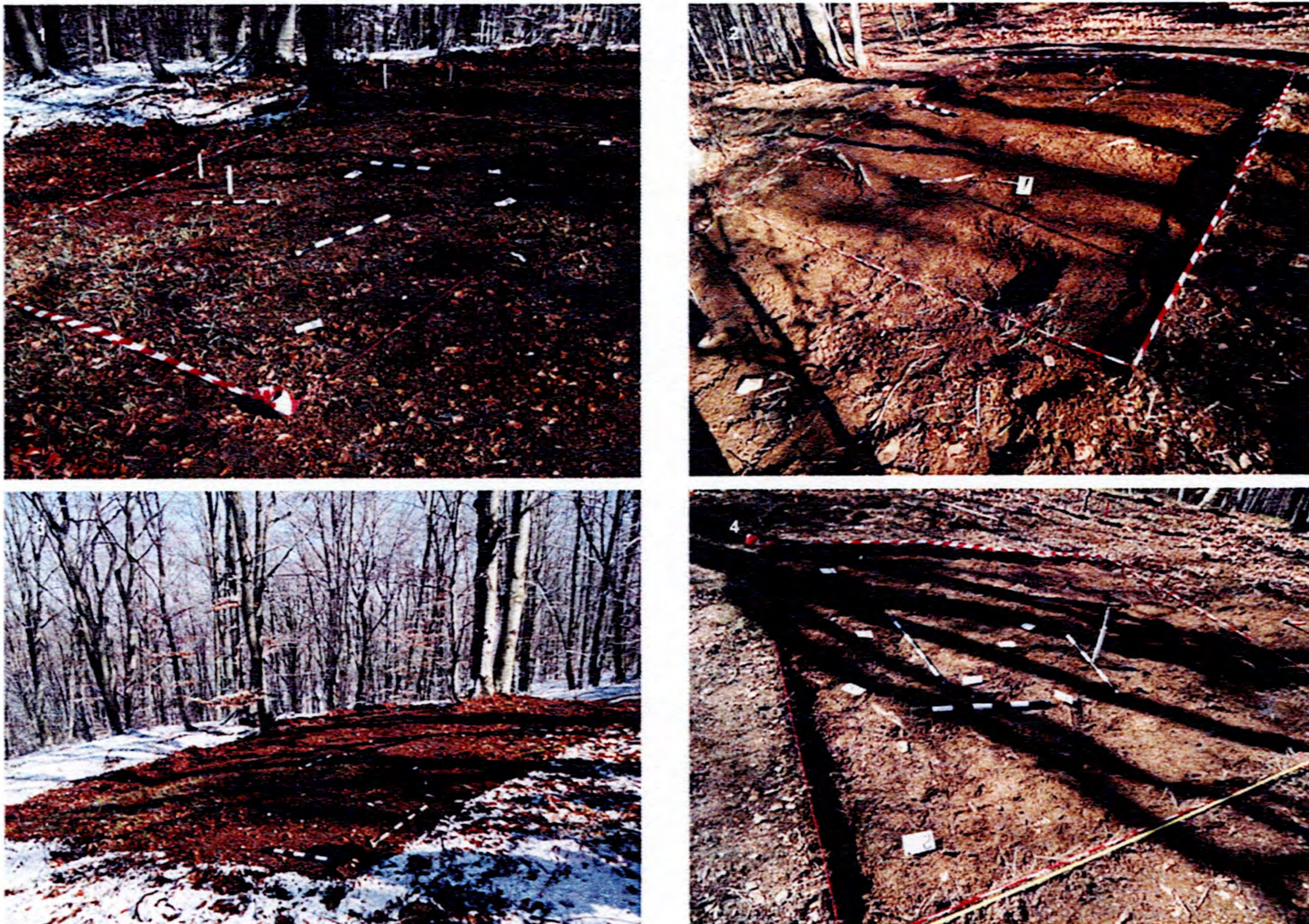
No.	ARTIFACT	Grave	DESCRIPTION	FIGURES
1	Circular fragment made of iron, part of a bridle.	G1	Diameter 29 mm (inv. CC 890/2017)	7
2	Two fragments of iron fibula needles.	G1	Length 22 mm and 25 mm (inv. CC 889/2017)	7
3	Melted silver.	G2	2 pieces	
4	Iron fibula needle.		Length 37 mm (inv. CC 882/2017)	
5	Iron arrow head.	G1	Length 38 mm (883/2017)	7
6	Iron blade of a small knife.	G2	Length 73 mm (inv. CC 885/2017). No traces of secondary burning.	8
7	Bronze link.	G2	Diameter 16 mm	
8	Bronze link.	G1	Diameter 18 mm	7
9	Bronze link.	G1	Diameter 17 mm, with one side missing.	7
10	Fragment of an iron piece.	G1	Length 12 mm (inv. CC 887/2017)	7
11	Melted bronze.	G1	One piece	
12	Bronze link.	G1	Diameter 22 mm	7
13	Circular fragment made of iron, part of a bridle.	G2	Diameter 31 mm (inv. CC 884/2017)	8
14	Iron blade with a small ditch for liquid drainage.	G2	Length 79 mm (inv. CC 886/2017)	5/1; 8
15	Blue glass bead with a white strap.	G2	Diameter 11mm. No traces of secondary burning.	5/4; 8
16	Fragment of an iron piece.	G2	Length 30 mm (inv. CC 888/2017)	8
17	Melted silver.	G2	One piece	
18	Bronze link.	G2	Diameter 28 mm	8
19	Bronze link.	G1	Diameter 19 mm	7
20	Bronze link.	G2	Diameter 17 mm	8
21	Fragment of a iron fibula needle.	G1	Length 18 mm (inv. CC 891/2017)	7
22	Melted silver.	G1	One piece	
23	Melted silver.	G1	One piece	
24	Fragment of the resort of a silver brooch.	G2	Length 22 mm	8
25	Blue glass bead with 8 decorations in the shape of a "peacock's eye".	G2	Diameter 22 mm. No traces of secondary burning.	5/4
26	Incinerated bones.	G2	Three fragments	
27	Fragment of a silver necklace made by joining two links.	G2	Length 20 mm	5/5; 8
28	Iron buckle with links and strap fastener.	G1	Length 177 mm, with one hobnail for fixing it into the leather still preserved (inv. CC 870/2017)	5/2; 7
29	Iron buckle with traces of bronze appliance and strap fastener with a link.	G2	Length 167 mm, (inv. CC 881/2017)	6/1; 8
30	Iron brooch with broken needle.	G1	Length 87 mm (inv. CC 862/2017)	5/3; 7
31	Iron brooch	G1	Length 88 mm (inv. CC 862/2017)	5/3, 7

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**Fig. 1.** Location of the discovery on the map of Romania (1), Șimleu Depression, (2) at the base of the Meseș Mountains, (3, white circle-funeral deposits, black circle-Dacian fortress), of the locality Meseșeni de Sus on the hill Osoiu Măcăului (4, white circle-funeral deposits, black circle-Dacian fortress).



**Fig. 2.** Meseșeni de Sus, Osoiu Măcăului hill 2016. Images during the researches.



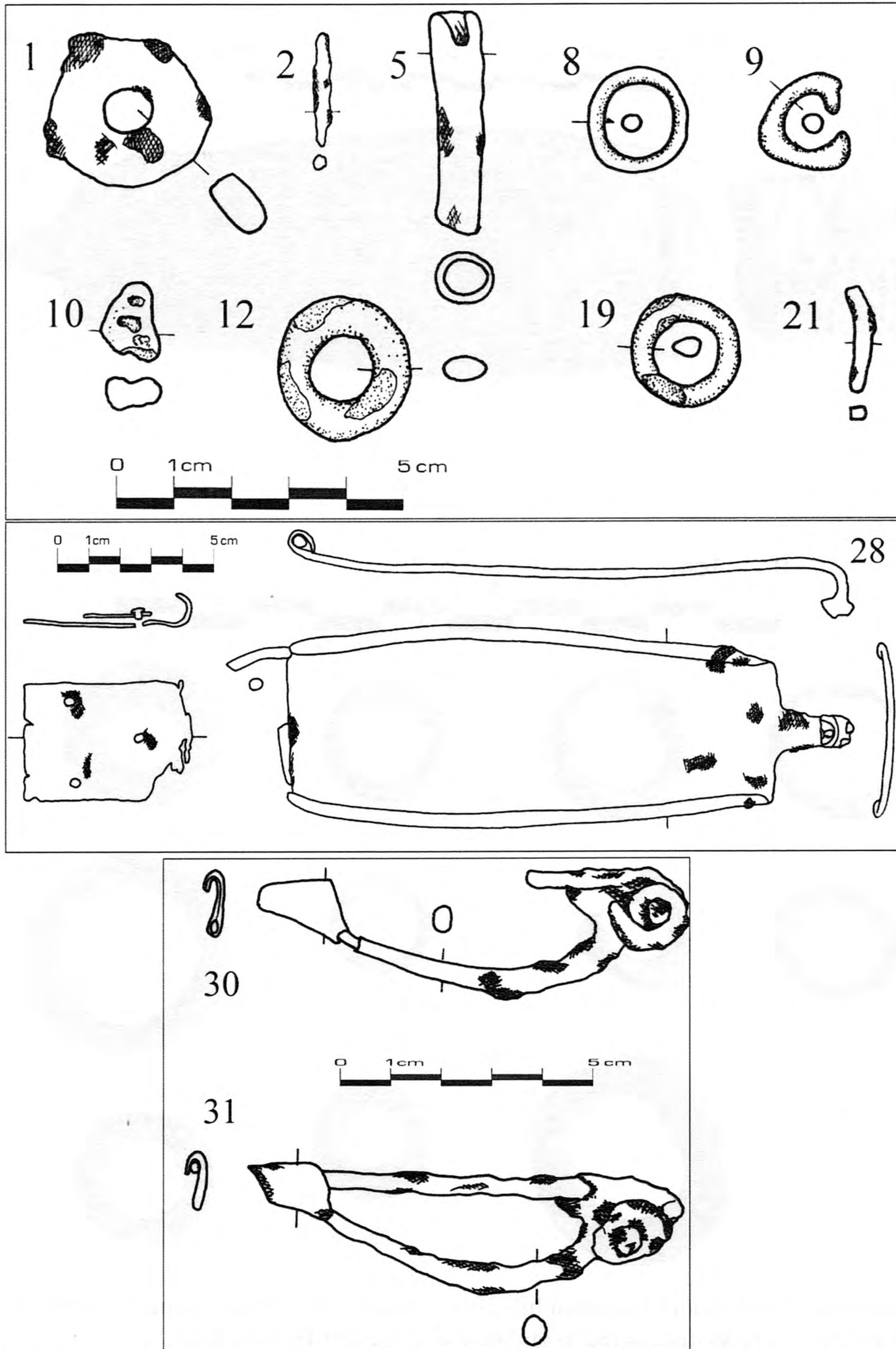




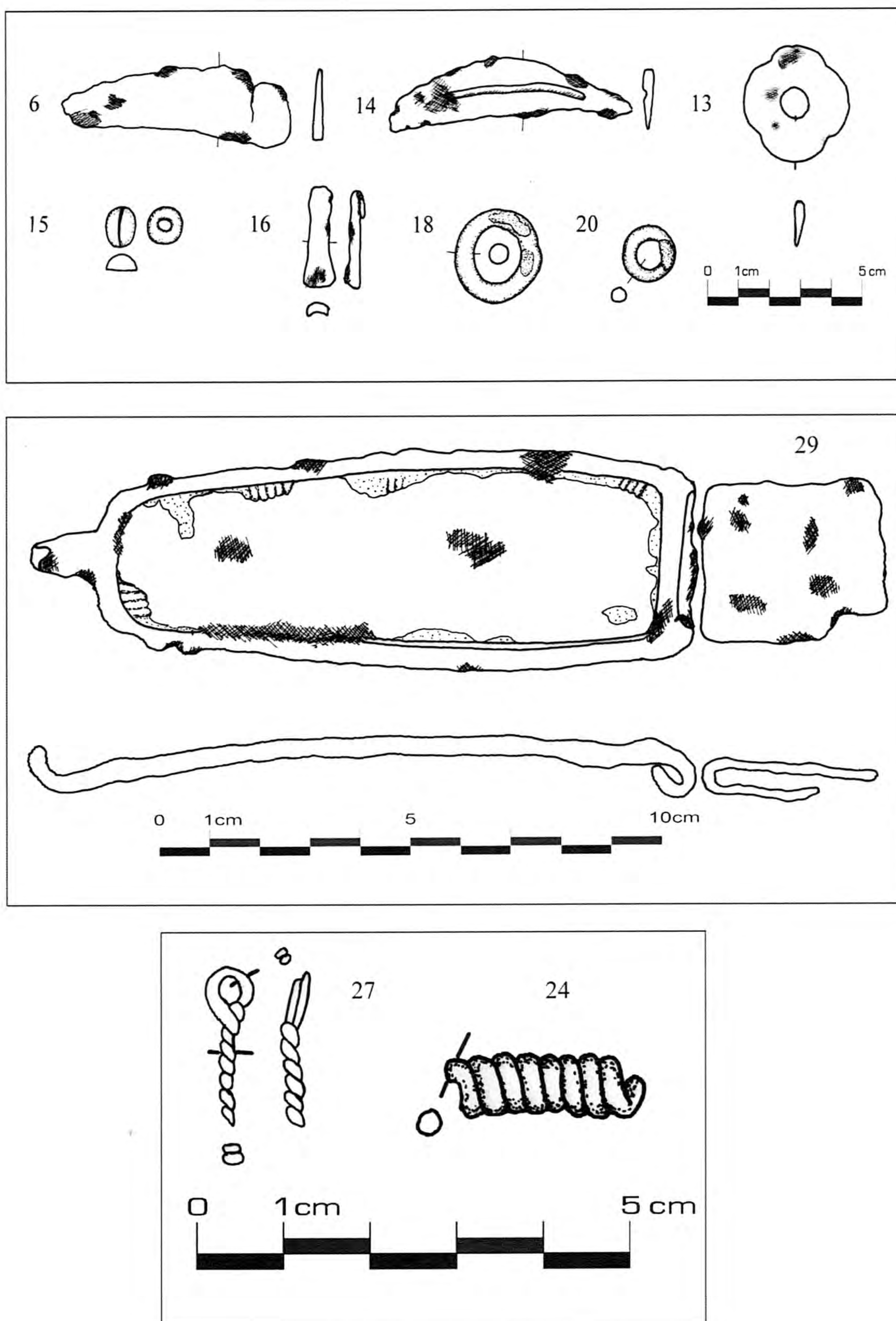
**Fig. 5.** Meseșeni de Sus, Osoiu Măcăului hill 2016. Images with objects discovered in the funeral *Deposit 1* (2 buckle, 3 fibulae) and 2 (1 knife, 4 beads, 5 fragment of necklace element).



**Fig. 6.** Meseșenii de Sus, Osoiu Măcăului hill 2016. Images with objects found in funeral *Deposit 2* (1 buckle) and bronze links discovered in graves and in the fortification area.



**Fig. 7.** Meseșeni de Sus, Osoiu Măcăului hill 2016. The drawings of the objects from funeral *Deposit 1* (the numbers correspond to those in *Annex I*).



**Fig. 8.** Meseșenii de Sus, Osoiu Măcăului hill 2016. The drawings of the objects from funeral *Deposit 2* (the numbers correspond to those in *Annex I*).