The Icoana burials revisited

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Abstract: *The paper summarizes the formal burials and isolated human remains from the Mesolithic/Early Neolithic site of Icoana in the Iron Gates of the Danube. All the available information on the burials, as taken from the field notes and site plans is being presented for the first time after 40 years. A list of all the (remaining) isolate human remains found on the site, part of the collection of the Center for Anthropological Research "Francisc Rainer", is also given. The paper aims to be a first step in the attempt of the full publication of the archaeological records on the Mesolithic and Early Neolithic sites in the Iron Gates, hopefully leading to a better understanding of the Mesolithic-Early Neolithic transition in the area.*

Rezumat: *Articolul trece în revistă mormintele și resturile osteologice umane izolate descoperite în situl mezolitic/neolitic timpuriu de la Icoana din zona Porților de Fier ale Dunării. După 40 de ani de la cercetări este prezentată informația integrală conținută în carnetele de șantier și planurile întocmite în anii '60 ai secolului trecut. O listă a resturilor osteologice umane izolate, aflate în colecțiile Centrului de Cercetări Antropologice "Francisc Rainer" din București este de asemenea prezentată, împreună cu informația antropologică aferentă. Articolul se dorește să fie un prim pas spre publicarea completă a materialului și documentației arheologice a siturilor mezolitice și neolitice timpurii din zona Porțile de Fier, în speranța unei mai bune înțelegeri a perioadei de tranziție între cele două epoci.*

Keywords: *Iron Gates, Icoana, Mesolithic, Neolithic, burials.*
Cuvinte cheie: *Porțile de Fier, Icoana, mezolitic, neolitic, morminte.*

One of the most important features of the Iron Gates Mesolithic is the relatively large number of human burials uncovered on sites such as Lepenski Vir, Vlasac, Padina on the right bank of the Danube and, so far, only Schela Cladovei on the left bank. Among the sites excavated on the Romanian side, only Icoana provided other human interments: two relatively complete skeletons and an isolated skull (V. Boroneanț 2000, p. 112, 351, pl. 99, 1-2; 1970, p.18). Recently, another fragmented skull (not mentioned in the field notes), found in the collections of the Center for Anthropological Research „Francisc Rainer" in Bucharest, was published and dated (A. Dinu *et alii* 2007, p. 38-39).

The archaeological site of Icoana (former village of Ogradena, Mehedinți county), nowadays covered by the Danube waters, was located at the foothills of the Ciucaru Mic mountain, in the area of the Little Cauldrons of the Iron Gates (at approx. 100 downstream km 966 – fig. 1).

The excavations were conducted by Vasile Boroneanț in three consecutive campaigns from 1967 to 1969. This relatively long time interval is deceiving as the excavations actually lasted for only 31 days as a whole[1]. 8 trenches were opened, known as SI to SVIII, with a total surface of approx. 90 sqm. SI-SVI, SVIII were dug on the narrow land strip running along the base of the old road but some 6 m lower, in a floodable area in the very proximity of the Danube, while SVII was located on the mountain slope, above the old Austrian road. Prior to the excavations, in order to clear the area of the large boulders and the debris, fallen from up the slope, dynamite was used[2].

SI was excavated in 1967. Two trenches were opened in 1968, both running along the river bank: SII (9.25 x 2 m) and SIII (6 x 2.30 m), with approx. 6 m left between them (also excavated the next year and marked as SIV). At the time the river level was already very high due to the increase in the water of the artificially created lake for Iron Gates I power-plant, with the Danube level fluctuating very often, at times covering the site completely (fig. 2). SIV-SVII were excavated in 1969 while the water level was increasing constantly and SVII was opened higher up, on the mountain slope above the road and excavated when the river bank was inaccessible.

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[1] November 1-5, 1967; September 23-27, 1968 and October 23-November 2, 1968; July 28-August 7, 1969, V. Boroneanț, Icoana. Field notes 1967-1969.
[2] The controlled explosions were planned and carried out with the full support of the border troops. They took place on September 25, at 9 and 9.30 am, respectively 3.30 and 4 pm (V. Boroneanț, Icoana field notes 1968).

We offer below a summary of the field notes for trench SII, vital for the discussion of the human burials, previously only extremely briefly mentioned in publications (V. Boroneanț 2000, p. 112). A complete discussion on the Icoana site and its issues is under preparation (A. Boroneanț, forthcoming).

The SII trench was excavated in 4 squares: sq. 1, 2 and 3 measured 2 x 2 m each, while sq. 4 covered the remaining 3.25 x 2 m. Apart from the area where burials or features were observed, the surface was excavated in 10 cm spits and the resulted soil was dry-sieved (fig. 3). The depth was measured from the foundation of the protection wall of the old Austrian road, built in 1780.

The archaeological finds uncovered down to -0.30 m of depth were mixed: small fragments of Starčevo-Criș pottery and some "atypical" ones, abundant lithic material (quartzite and flint), faunal remains. No pottery was recorded lower than 0.40-0.50 m, only bone tools (the notes mention a spatula, a bone point, burn bone fragments), flint (a backed blade) and quartzite flakes. The excavator noticed a trapeze shaped platform, of hardened soil with lots of ashes and traces of burning, cut to the west by the wall foundation of the road. Based on the photographs, it seems to have occurred at a depth of approx. 0.30-0.40 m. Several slabstones of large size, more or less rectangular in shape and fired on one or several sides, were seen as fragments of a possible hearth. The finds from the platform consisted of many quartzite flakes, bones - many of them burnt, flint tools, fragments of bone tools. It seemed the platform covered almost the entire surface of sq. 2-4, with finds concentrating in square 2 and very few on sq. 4.

According to the field notes, a human skull (marked M1) and a relatively complete skeleton (M2) were uncovered in sq. 3-4 at a depth of 0.45-0.50 m. A second relatively complete skeleton (M3) was soon identified in sq. 2, and by analyzing the photos, it was probably found slightly lower down in the trench. The foundation of the wall protecting the old Austrian road had "cut" the graves, going through them (fig. 4). It is therefore safe to presume that the upper part of original Mesolithic level could have been higher than the one recorded, and the constant flooding of the bank and the falling of rocks from up the slope could account for erosion/depositional processes and the mixing of the materials in the upper 30 cm.

The human remains recorded on the field notes were described as follows:

M1 (SII, sq. 3-4, -0.45-0.50 m): isolated skull, no grave goods (fig. 5, 8)

M2 (SII, sq. 3-4, -0.45-0.50 m): human skeleton in extended supine position, head towards north, lying parallel to the Danube, hands on the pelvis. The lower part of the legs was destroyed by the foundation of the wall protecting the road. Bones were in very poor state of preservation, turning to dust when touched/removed. Under the right temporal bone a small red ochre boulder was found and several very small ones were also noticed (unfortunately no other details were given). In the close proximity of the skeleton several large boulders with a flattened side were uncovered (fig. 4, 8), although, by studying the photographs, they seem to be at a higher level.

M3 (SII, sq. 2, -0.50-0.60 m): skeleton in extended supine position, head pointing WNW, lying perpendicular to the Danube. Left arm on the pelvis, right arm along the body. The skull was destroyed by the same wall foundation. The feet were also disturbed by a pit feature. The skeleton was sprinkled with red ochre. The grave was rather narrow, fit to the size of the individual and dug through the above mentioned platform. From the head area a tusk tool was recovered (described as a *perćoir-racloir*). It was noticed (as shown in fig. 7) that the right ulna was detached from the lower leg and placed as a continuation of the right radius. On the „house platform", around the skeleton, approx. 0.45 m away, several Mesolithic tools were noticed: two scrapers (one flint, one calcareous rock), one bone and one tusk tool (marked as special 14).

One of the features of the Iron Gates Mesolithic was recognized in the intentional location of the burials around the "houses" or hearths (V. Boroneanț 2000, D. Srejovic, Z. Letica 1978). Still, it has been suggested that the same areas were not used simultaneously for burial and occupation and rather the houses were used for burial after they had been used for occupation or viceversa (C. Bonsall 2008, p. 259). As the graves were cut into the trapeze platform, it is conceivable that individuals were buried when the "house" stopped to be occupied (fig. 8).

* * *

Apart from the burials described above, isolated human remains were found in SIV - depth 1.70 m: "*fragments of a human jaw*", collected separately and labelled *special 25* in the field notes, in the context of antler tool fragments, bone points, in a black-grayish soil (V. Boroneanț, Icoana. Field notes 1969) - and SVII - depth 0.30 m - again fragments of a human jaw, in a very disturbed context: a mixture of sherds from the Iron Age (Hallstatt) and Starčevo-Criș Early Neolithic (ornamented fragments), a spear-point of Schela Cladovei type (labelled *special 58*). In the case of SVII, pottery occured down to 0.60 m of depth. In SIV, the Early Neolithic layer was reported to start at the depth of 0.30 m, with a compact Mesolithic layer occuring at 1.40 m. In both cases, no other details were given concerning the location of the human bones within the squares.

At the end of the excavation, the bones susceptible of being human were handed by Vasile Boroneanț to the anthropologist Dardu Nicolăescu-Plopșor from the Center of Anthropological Research "Francisc Rainer" in Bucharest.

We present below the collection comprising the Icoana human remains from the Center for Anthropological Research of the Romanian Academy. The measurements and determinations were made in accordance with the methodologies in T.D. White and P.A. Folkens (2005).

Year of excavation: 1968

1. M 1, S II, sq. 3 – 4
Description: cranial vault with some missing parts in the inferior area; thickness of the frontal: approx. 9 – 10.3 mm and 10.1 – 10.6 mm for the parietal;
Age estimation: Mature (based on the cranial suture);
Sex determination: Female.

2. M 3, S II, sq. 2
Description: fragments of skull, mandible, cervical vertebras, humeral head, ribs, and distal epiphysis of femur. The skull was restored; thickness of frontal approx. 6.5 – 10.6 mm and 7 – 10.8 mm for parietal;
Age estimation: 40 years old (based on the cranial suture and dental wear);
Sex determination: Male.

3. S II, 0.35 m
Description: right second proximal phalanx and the third right metacarpal;
Age estimation: Adult;
Sex determination: Unknown.

4. S II, sq. 1 – 2, - 1.15 m
Description: 7th cervical vertebra;
Age estimation: Mature;
Sex determination: Male.

5. S II, sq. 3, - 1.40 m
Description: one fragment of occipital and a fragment of left parietal;
Age estimation: Adult;
Sex determination: Female.

6. S II, sq. 3 – 4, - 1.55 m
Description: left metatarsal;
Age estimation: Mature;
Sex determination: probably female.

Year of excavation 1969

7. S IV, - 1.50 m
Description: right talus;
Age estimation: Adult;
Sex determination: probably female.

8. S IV, -1.90 m
Description: left fifth metatarsal and right first metacarpal;
Age estimation: Mature;
Sex determination: probably female.

9. S VI, 0.90 m
Description: left third metatarsal and left foot navicular;
Age estimation: Mature;
Sex determination: probably male.

10. S VII, - 0.30 m (see also A. Dinu *et alii* 2007, p. 39)
Description: 10 fragments of frontal, parietal, and occipital; the frontal has a thickness of 8.7 – 13.3 mm and the parietal of 9.0 – 13.0 mm;
Age estimation: Mature;
Sex determination: Male.

11. S VII, - 0.30 m
Description: fragment from the right scapula;
Age estimation: Adult;
Sex: Unknown.

Comparing the field notes with the description of the listed osteological material, it is easy to notice large discrepancies: first, there are human bones in the field notes that do not appear on the list but equally, there are human remains in the collection that were not listed on the field notes. Moreover, the available descriptions of the finds even when the location details coincide are not identical.

Summarizing:

M1 could surely be identified as no.1 in the list presented above.

M2 is not represented in the collection, probably due to its already very poor state of preservation when uncovered (see the description of M2 above) and while trying to remove it the bones could have been destroyed.

M3, identified as no. 2 on the list above, if compared to the plan (fig. 7), seems to be missing some of the vertebras, the arms and most of the leg bones. Unfortunately this makes impossible to check whether the human ulnae found near the right radius belonged to the same individual.

In SIV there is no human bone listed at 1.70 m of depth (as in the field notes) but in SVII, the "*jaw fragment"* mentioned turned to be an almost complete (reconstructed) cranial vault (no. 10). It is unclear (the marking on all the bone fragments only read *Icoana 1969, SVII, 0,30 m*) whether the fragments were found together or whether they were scattered over a larger area. This makes any speculation difficult on whether or not it was a burial (skull burials were documented in the Iron Gates Mesolithic - C. Bonsall 2008, p. 257, V. Boroneanț *et alii* 1999, p. 389).

Still, it has been suggested to be Mesolithic (A. Dinu *et alii* 2007, p. 32, 39), based on the ^{14}C dating of the resulted cranial vault giving the date of 6530-6390 cal. B.C. (AA 66368). The date has not been corrected for the freshwater reservoir effect (G.T. Cook *et alii*, 2002). So, it could finally prove to be as much as approx. 450 years younger than suggested and thus becoming problematic. A provisional chronology of the Iron Gates Mesolithic situates the Late Mesolithic around 7200-6300 cal BC (Hajducka Vodenica, Icoana, Ostrovul Banului, Ostrovul Corbului, Schela Cladovei, Vlasac), the Final Mesolithic (so far, based on the ^{14}C dates present only at Lepenski Vir, so far) between 6300 and 6000 cal. B.C. and the Early Neolithic (Cuina Turcului, Lepenski Vir, Padina, Schela Cladovei, Vlasac) between 6000-5500 cal. B.C. (C. Bonsall 2008, p. 252). Until corrected for the reservoir effect the date presented above it is a date of no use. And given the unsecure context of the bones, it was not the best candidate for a ^{14}C dating[3].

Seven items from the collection list were not mentioned in the field notes. Putting them in a precise archaeological context is difficult, as shown below:

[3] A more detailed discussion on Iron Gates stratigraphies will be given elsewhere (A. Boroneanț, The excavations from Icoana, forthcoming).

No. 3 came originally from a very unclear "layer", containing mixed Early Neolithic and undiagnosed pottery sherds, and no square indication.

No. 4 came probably from the pit of a "habitation"/pit feature (labeled L3), and shown in the published western profile of SII (V. Boroneanț 2000, p. 275, pl. 14), with a description in the field notes (A. Boroneanț, forthcoming). The habitation was dug in the Ib Mesolithic horizon.

The context of **No. 5** is horizon Ia, and of **No. 6** horizon Ia or the pit feature L3, thus horizon Ib.

No. 7 and **No. 8** are difficult to assign based only on the field notes and the existing plans – they could have come from a Neolithic pit feature (labeled habitation L4/1969) or a compact Mesolithic layer.

SVI did not seem to yield any other finds but the Mesolithic one – and this is unfortunately the most precise attribution to **No.9**, without further details regarding a specific horizon.

No. 11, the same as **No. 10** discussed above, comes from a disturbed context, and it not is unconceivable to be the result of alluvial processes.

Given the very poor state of the representation of the skeletons (apart from M2 and M3), the anthropological data resulted from the analysis is difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, the number of human bones scattered in various trenches at various depths and from what it seems to be different individuals speak of intense human activity in the area. Dating the two secure burials left (M1, M3) would provide important information on the chronology of Icoana and so would the full publication of the archaeological documentation and finds.

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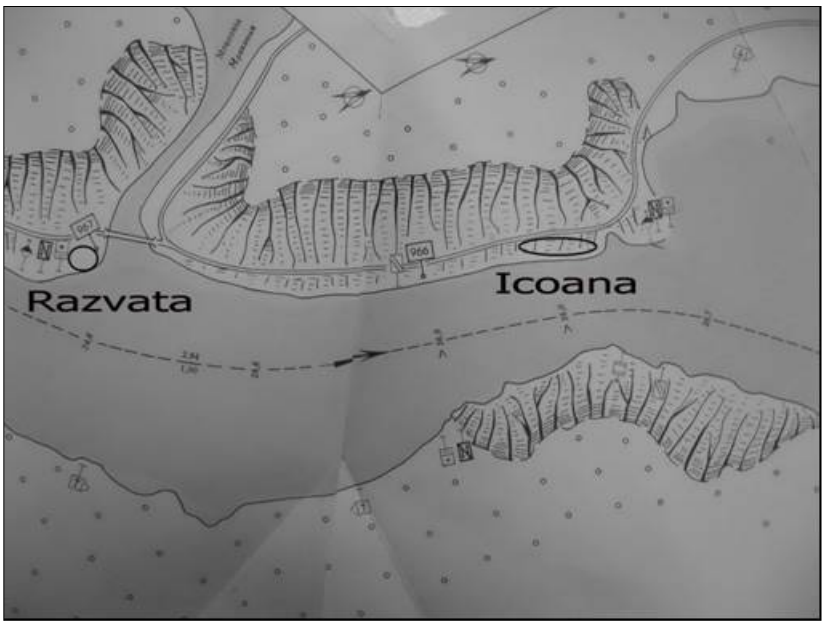
* * * — *Carte du pilotage du Danube du km 1075 (confluent de Nera) au km 981 (Drobeta-Turnu Severin)*, Commission du Danube, Budapest, 1976.

a) 

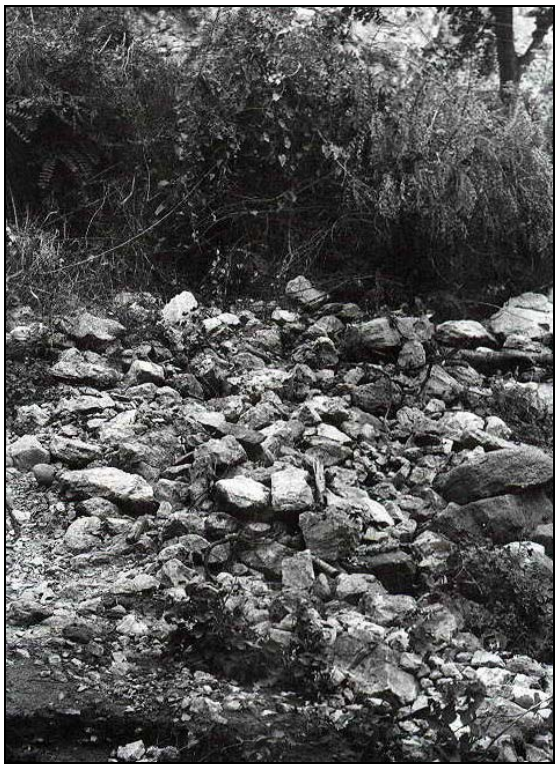
b) 

Fig. 1. a) - Map of the Iron Gates Gorge in the Little Cauldrons area showing the site Icoana and Răzvrata, after *Carte du pilotage du Danube du km 1075 (confluent de Nera) au km 981 (Drobeta-Turnu Severin)*, Commission du Danube, Budapest, 1976, b) – view of the river bank prior to the excavation.
a) Harta Porţilor de Fier la Cazanele Mici cu poziţia siturilor Icoana şi Răzvrata, după *Carte du pilotage du Danube du km 1075 (confluent de Nera) au km 981 (Drobeta-Turnu Severin)*, Commission du Danube, Budapest, 1976, b) vedere a malului fluviului inainte de săpăturile arheologice.

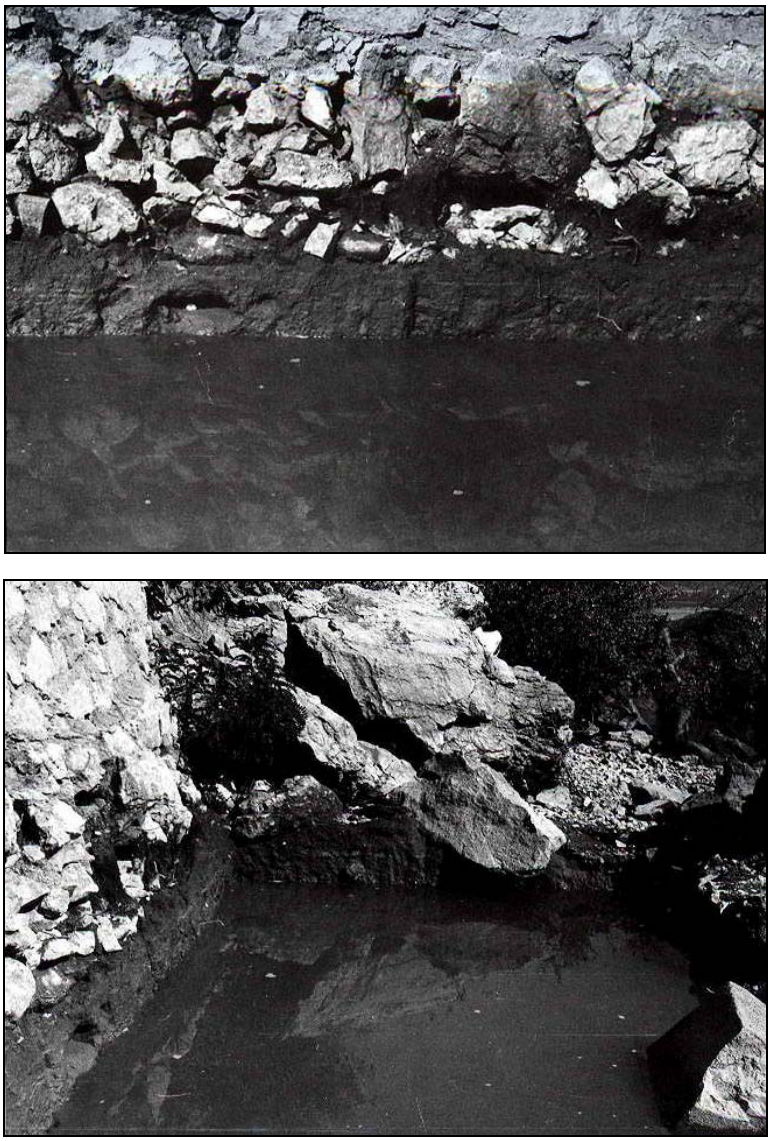


Fig. 2. Images during the excavations in 1968, showing the flooding of the site.
Imagini cu inundarea sitului în timpul săpăturilor din 1968.

Fig. 3. Dry-sieving of the resulted soil.
Cernerea la sec a sedimentului arheologic.

a)

b)

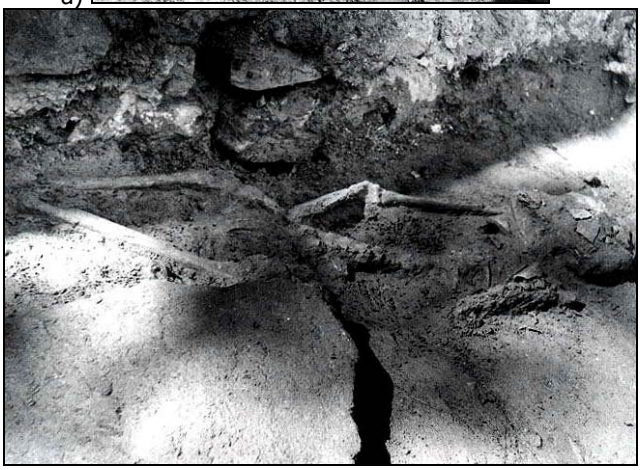


Fig. 4. Images of M2 (a) and M3 (b).
Mormintele M2 (a) şi M3 (b).

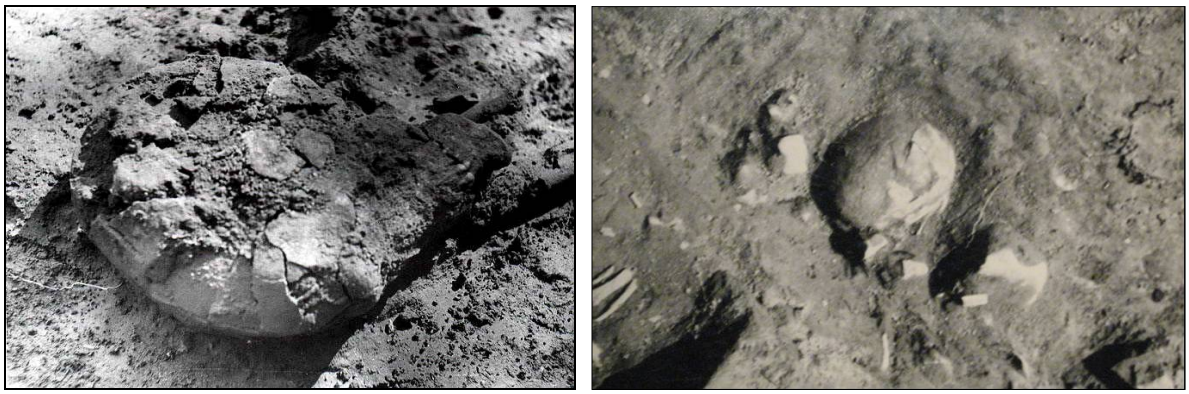


Fig. 5. Detail of the skull of M2 (left) and the isolated skull M1 (right).
Vederi de detaliu ale craniului aparţinând lui M2 (stânga) şi ale craniului izolat al lui M1 (dreapta).

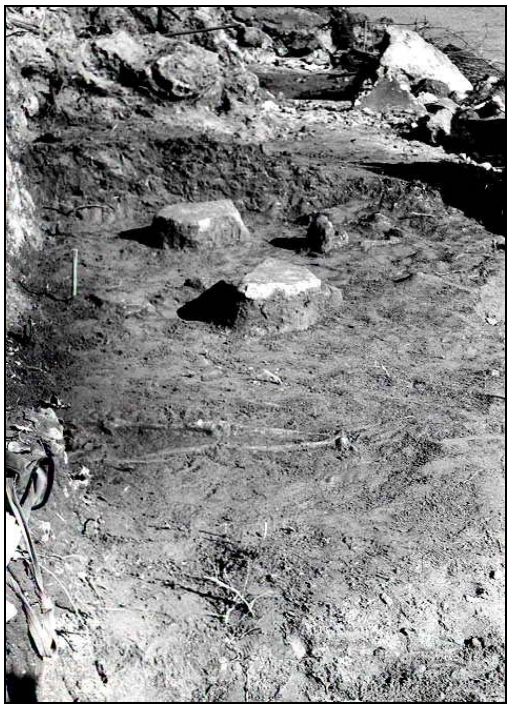


Fig. 6. Image of the trapeze shaped platform and two of the flat slabstones.
Imagine a platformei trapezoidale şi ale celor două lespezi din piatră.

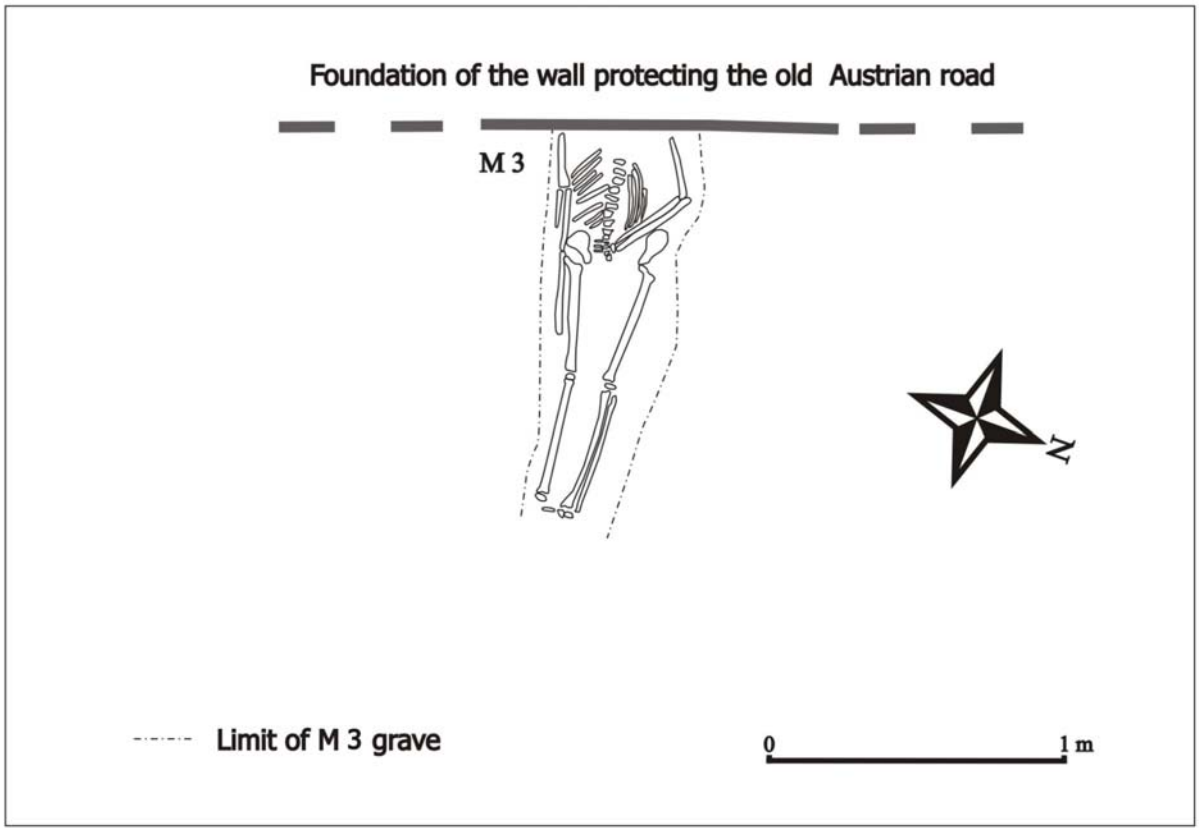


Fig. 7. Plan of M3 in SII.
Planul mormântului M3 din SII.

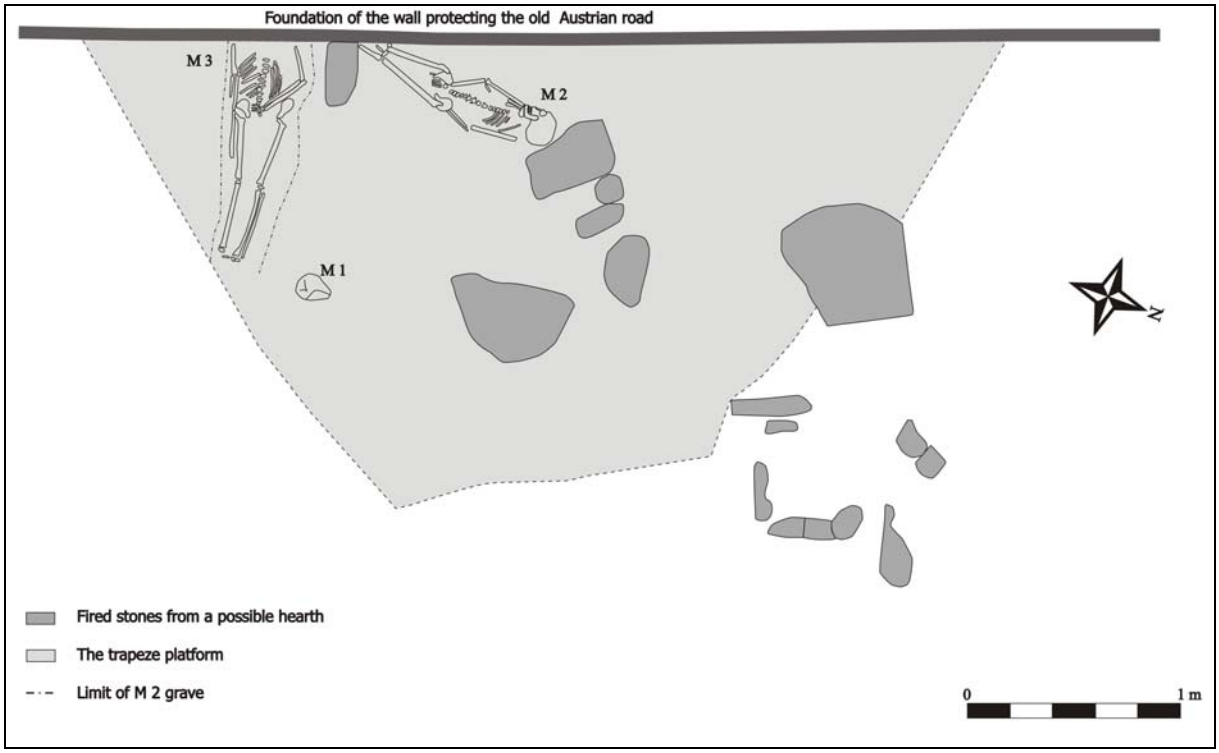


Fig. 8. Trench II: reconstruction of plan with the trapeze platform and the location of the skeletons.
Sectiunea II: planul platformei trapezoidale şi poziţia scheletelor.