A LATE IRON AGE TIMBER WALLED CONSTRUCTION FROM THE MIDDLE MUREȘ VALLEY

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Abstract. *During the preliminary excavation of the A3 motorway path, an isolated Late Iron Age feature was unearthed, a type of archaeological phenomenon unknown at this time for the given geographical area. Both the features appearance, a sunken rectangle structure with timber walls and its inventory, a vessel assemblage consisting of pottery forms with analogies covering a wide geographical area, with the animal bones, displayed inside and near the vessels, make us think of a funerary construction. However, the deceased is missing, if talking in terms of burial. In the followings, the traits of the feature and its inventory will be presented, with an outlook for the not so frequent combination of vessel shapes, all characteristic for different geographic areas and its inhabitants; analogies and an attempt for functional interpretation of the feature will be discussed, so do the potentials of a missing deceased.*

Keywords: *Late Iron Age; Poienești-Lukaševka pottery style; isolated discovery; ceramic assemblage.*

Introduction

Located on the left upper bank of the Mureș River (Pl. I/1), the site was unearthed in the summer of 2016, during the rescue excavations carried out before the highway construction works. The area's topography is characterized by small alluvial uplands, sand dunes, alongside the meandry path of the Mureș. The multi-period archaeological site was uncovered on one of such plateaus, where mainly household features were unearthed, the exception being four funerary contexts, amongst which the one dated to the Late Iron Age, subject of the present paper, was revealed.

The site

Site III, located in the Mureș County, south-west from the town of Iernut, covering a surface of 0,73 ha, was first time identified during the test excavation held in spring of 2016. Its aim was to delimit those archaeological sites that might be affected by the future A3 motorway path (Brașov – Târgu Mureș – Cluj – Oradea, section 2A Ogra – Câmpia Turzii, lot 2 Iernut – Chețani). Six archaeological sites came to light during this prospection, works that covered a portion of 17, 9 km. The archaeological works have been carried out by a team of the Institute of Archaeology and Art History of the Romanian Academy from Cluj-Napoca[3].

During the trial excavation of the site III from Iernut, two middle bronze age features were unearthed and documented. The proper archaeological excavation took place during the

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[3] COCIȘ ET ALII 2016, 185.

summer of the same year, revealing two middle Neolithic dwellings, 84 middle bronze age (Wietenberg pottery style) household features and three funerary contexts from distinct periods. Later, in the falls of 2018, another small-scale rescue excavation took place, intervention implied by an extension of the motorway path's perimeter, revealing three storage pits and one additional inhumation grave.

The site is located on a plateau of 290 meters asl., a formation of loess and clay deposits, covered with an approximately 40–50 cm thick dark-brown soil, used for agriculture purposes. The extents of the site were completely delimited from three sides, although the southern extent couldn't be established, the boundary of the excavation being limited by the coordinates of the project, thus the likelihood that there might be more features south from the motorway pat should not be ruled out, neither the supposition that the funerary area outspreads towards that direction. The eastern limit is a natural border, represented by the margins of the plateau, the altitude drops with 10 meters from this point onward.

The feature

After the mechanical removal of the topsoil, the feature in question (no. 43 in the inner site codification system) was spotted as a dark, rectangle shape, oriented W-E, dug in the yellow sandy soil (Pl. II/1; III/2). Its dimensions are 2,60 x 2,63 m on the upper outline, 2,10 x 2,17 m at the bottom. Its depth in the central part of the feature, that layer where the pottery assemblage and the animal bones were displayed, measures -0,58 m from the delineation level, while at the margins, surrounding the walls of the pit, where the negative imprint of the timber walls occurred, riches its maximum depth at -0,73 m (Pl. III/2).

The feature was excavated in two halves, aiming to obtain a stratigraphic profile for understanding the backfill of the archaeological structure. The fill consisted of a single layer of dark-brown loose soil, dotted with yellow clayey spot, resulted from rodent activity. The uniform fill suggests a one-moment backfilling activity. The first excavated half has not revealed any archaeological material. In the north-western corner of the second half a vessel assemblage consisting of a large size biconical pot with four knobs, two small sizes, one handled cup and three bowls of a similar type, but different proportions were unearthed (Pl. III/1; 3). In and around the vessel assemblage, animal bones were placed, traces of either cremated or inhumated human remains were completely absent.

The inventory

Placed in the north-western corner of the feature, in a still-standing position, a large size, biconical pot with four knobs (Pl. II/a, III/a) was noticed. The pot is hand-made, with its mouth diameter measuring 21 cm, base diameter of 13,5 cm, and a total height of 43,5 cm. Fine sand with silver mica was used for tempering the clay. The firing was carried out in inoxidizing condition, both the outer and inner surface colour of the vessel being an uneven light brownish-grey with spots. Traces of burnishing and knife trimming marks were visible both on the inner and outer surfaces. The upper part of the rim has a simple decoration, consisting of 24 small incisions. Under the maximum diameter of the pot, four knobs pointing straightforward are placed, with an even horizontal distribution on the sides of the vessel[4].

The shape is a late variant reminiscent of the previous period interpreted and classified as such by I. H. Crișan in the very first reference work dedicated to Iron Age II pottery

[4] The pot was unearthed and brought intact to the Institute of Archaeology and Art History in Cluj where it was emptied and its content carefully sifted but no organic or any other remnants were found.

in Romania[5]. According to his typology, our pot may be representative for substage II1[6], chronologically placed between the beginning of the 3rd and the middle of the 2nd century BC, chiefly represented by finds in the Celtic settlements and burial sites of the Intra-Carpathian area. It is likely that the respective vessel shape was out of usage by the first quarter of the 3rd century[7]. Although this type of vessel is less common, similarly shaped artifacts were found chiefly in Celtic burial sites from the Hungarian[8] and Transylvanian areas[9], and only exceptionally in the area covered by Poienești – Lukaševka culture[10]. A similar vessel associated with Celtic graphite pottery[11] was discovered in the *Bastarnae* settlement context within Glăvănești site, Iași County[12], in the inventory of a domestic assemblage complex, which nevertheless dates back to a different chronological layer. Lately, five, namely almost four decades after the publication of the preceding books[13], Paul Pupeză analyzed again this kind of vessel shape in two general works[14], where he sketched its evolution by identifying similar types in different sites, including the area outside the Carpathian Mountains. He suggested a less complicated typology by reduction and assimilation of various types previously determined by I. H. Crișan and placed the moment when it went out of usage by the mid–1st century BC.[15]

The small one handled mug (Pl. II/b; III/b) placed in the smallest of the bowls, amongst the bird bones, handmade as well, present a mouth diameter of 4,8 cm, the bottom measuring 4,7, its total height is no more than 7,3 cm. As a tempering agent, fine sand with silver mica can be observed. The firing of the mug was carried out in inoxidizing condition, both outer and inner surfaces being of an uneven light blackish-grey colour. The exterior of the mug was burnished. The handle is slightly raised over the body. Its bottom is even, the maximum diameter can be measured around the mid-height of the vessel, the straight rim is lightly everted.

The second little mug (Pl. II/c; III/c) was situated near the biggest bowl, laid on one side. This one is a wheel-thrown mug with the mouth diameter of 4,3 cm, the bottom's diameter measures 2,5 cm, its total height reaches 6,5 cm. The firing took place in inoxidizing condition, giving a uniform ash grey colour to the object. The handle, with an oval cross-section, is easily raised above the body of the mug, its bottom is even, with a maximum diameter under the half-height of the mug. Its straight rim is lightly everted.

Both wheel-thrown and hand-modeled biconical mugs are a frequent occurrence in the inventories of 2nd century BC sites, in settlements and necropolis across the Carpathian Mountains. Exhaustive analyses of the respective shape have enabled us to distinguish several features specific to the artifacts found in the Transylvanian area, where Celtic influences resulted in "preference for curved mugs, in whose case is rather difficult to distinguish between the cone bodies"[16]. The theory is substantiated by similar finds in the Celtic burial sites from Apahida, Derșida, Fântânele, Pișcolt, Orosfaia. Noteworthy as well is the remark that even in certain settlements local biconical mugs have been replaced by Celtic ones[17].

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[5] CRIȘAN 1969.
[6] CRIȘAN 1969, 102.
[7] CRIȘAN 1969, 110.
[8] CRIȘAN 1969, fig.39/2 – vessel from Földlak.
[9] CRIȘAN 1969, Pl. XXX/2 – urn from the burial site in Ciumești; CRIȘAN 1971, Pl. IX/1, X/1.
[10] Henceforth P-L.
[11] BABEȘ 1993, cat.no. 40/II, taf. 28/1–4, the graphite fragments are unfortunately lost.
[12] See BABEȘ 1993, 200, cat.nr. 40/II, tafel 28/8, a similar form, quite rare, "vestigial" in our opinion.
[13] CRIȘAN 1969; MOSCALU 1983.
[14] PUPEZĂ 2010, 140–141; PUPEZĂ 2012 304–306, Pl. 178–179.
[15] PUPEZĂ 2010, 141.
[16] PUPEZĂ 2012, 284.
[17] PUPEZĂ 2012, 284.

Placed left from the biconical pot, the smallest of the three bowls with one symbolical handle/knob (Pl. II/f; III/f) is a hand-made everted bowl with the mouth diameter of 19,2 cm, the bottom measuring 7 cm. Its height measures 6,5 cm. Fine sand and crushed pottery were mixed in the clay's matrix, the firing took place in the inoxidizing condition. Uneven brownish-blackish grey is both the inner and outer colour of the bowl, traces of knife trimming and burnishing are visible. On one side, a small, unperforated, X shaped, unfunctional handle/knob is placed.

Second in size, similar in style with the two other bowls, as well as in the building technique, this one (Pl. II/e; III/e) presents an opening diameter of 23 cm, the bottom measures 7,4 cm. The height of the bowl is 8,4 cm. Fine sand and crushed pottery were added to the clay, undertaking an inoxidizing firing, which has resulted in an uneven brownish-blackish grey colour, both on the inner and outer surfaces. Traces of knife trimming and burnishing are visible, on one side, a small, unperforated, X shaped, unfunctional knob is placed.

The largest of the three bowls (Pl. II/d; III/d), similar in style with the two others, also hand-made, forms a closed group with the afore mentioned bowls, being displayed one closely next to the other. Its mouth diameter is considerably large, measuring 41 cm, the bottom heaving 12 cm. With the height of 13,3 cm, this bowl is almost double in size than the previously described one. Fine sand and crushed pottery were used as clay tempering, the firing took place in inoxidizing condition. Just like in the case of the two smaller items, this one also displays an uneven brownish-blackish grey colour both on the inner and outer surfaces, traces of knife trimming and burnishing and a small, unperforated, X – shaped, unfunctional knob, placed on one side.

The bowls are quite low, flat bottomed, with everted mouth rim, two not very prominent facets in the upper part, and an X-shaped "blind" knob. They are identical copies of the same vessel, but they have different sizes[18]. The shape may be included in the category featuring a slightly marked or even absent shoulder and concave base, defined as the IIA2 variant in the monograph dedicated to P-L culture[19]. Our specimens' shape, paste, and firing most certainly indicate single fire glazing, perhaps executed by the same craftsman, in contrast to the small mugs in the inventory that are completely different from one another in everything, including their manufacturing technique.

The bowls belonging to IIA2 variant peculiar to *Bastarnae* pottery are a constant presence in this chronological layer both among grave goods (especially functioning as lids), such as those from Boroșești[20], Poienești[21], and in the settlements of P-L culture, for instance Lunca Ciurei[22].

The best analogies in the Transylvanian area are to be found in the La Tène layer within Moreşti site, Mureș County, located upstream, about 20 km. eastward, on the opposite bank of Mureș River. The specimens from Moreşti have received considerable attention from specialists, who discussed and illustrated them over and over[23]. In the monograph dedicated to the La Tène site of Moreşti, their number increased from 4 to 27 (among which three bowls initially described and published by K. Horedt have the upper side and knob like the ones in Cx43)[24].

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[18] We wish to express our gratitude to A. Rustoiu who suggested the *Bastarnae* origin of the bowls in inventory cx. 43.

[19] BABEȘ 1993,

[20] BABEȘ 1993, 185, cat. no. 8, with bibliography, see also Taf 3/14; Taf 3/16; Taf 7/51b

[21] BABEȘ 1993, 62–63, Taf. 34/392/b; 34 /394b; 35/434/b; 398/b; 440/b.

[22] BABEȘ 1993, 204, cat.no.59, with bibliography, see also Taf 29/3.

[23] HOREDT 1965, 65, Abb. 10/1–4; HOREDT 1979, 50, fig. 21/1–4; BABEȘ 1993, 207, cat. no. 65, Taf. 46/11–14; BERECKI 2008, 69; 2014, fig.3,3.

[24] P. Pupeză managed to identify the afore mentioned specimens in the meantime and was kind enough to offer them for study so we wish to express once again our gratitude.

The respective number has been reached by mainly reinterpreting the S-shaped bowls found in the layer, now ascribed to the P-L culture[25], redistribution largely due to the prior publication of the flared lip bowls found in the La Tène layer within Șeușa site, Alba County, also deemed to be *Bastarnae*[26].

The bowls from Iernut (Pl. II/d-f; III/d-f), have not only the same profile, with flared lips and X-shaped knobs, but also evince another significant detail highly relevant in our opinion, namely the knobs are not perforated ("blind" or "dummy" knobs), which means that they are of no practical use whatsoever, just decorative elements with particular aspect and aesthetic significance familiar to the craftsman and meaningful for the client who commissioned the bowls.

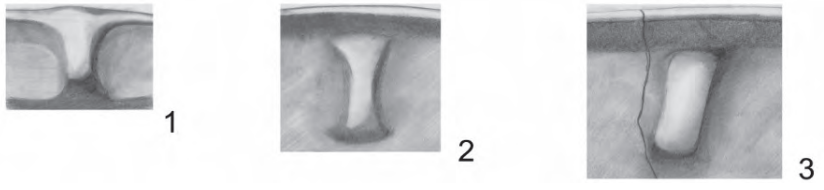

Figure 1. 1–3, detail of the everted bowl knobs

On the other hand, in fig. 1 one may see at a mere glance variations in what concerns the execution of the knobs, ranging from specific, familiar forms such as those of the small and the middle sized bowls (Fig./1, 2), to a coarse, poor imitation in the case of the large bowl (Fig. 1/3).

Near these bowls, as well as inside of the smallest one, bones of animal origin were placed. The fragments placed inside the vessel, altogether with one of the small mugs (Pl. II/1; III/1) were identified[27] as a femural bone, a fibula and ribs of the *Aves species*, while the two larger bones, laid near the vessels, as femur and tibia of *ovicaprines*.

Once the biconical pot was emptied of soil, a clay, yellowish-brick red spinning top (Pl. II/g; III/g) [28], displaying no visible tempering agent and mild oxidation firing was discovered (h=2,8 cm; D max=2,6 cm) in the upper part, actually at the very lip of the pot.

The fact that the specimen was found in the upper part of the pot raised certain questions. As revealed by the soil layer of the feature, we are dealing with a wooden structure with walls made of boards, which logically entails a ceiling or roof, a wooden cist whose function was to protect vessels in the deposit (for the time being we refrain from guessing its purpose). How did the spinning top end up at the rim of the vessel? If it were placed there when the feature was initially arranged, we should have found it closer to the bottom not at the rim of the vessel. Its position can only be explained if the artifact was on the roof of the cist and ended up on the vessel after its collapse. It is hardly plausible that the vessels and animal bones had been just put between mere wooden walls and then covered with earth the moment they were placed there. Analogies for specimens placed on the roof of wooden cists after the closing up of the funeral structure can be found in the Celtic world, in the burial site from Malé Kosihy, in Nitra region, Slovakia, dating back to the end of LT B2 – and the late stage LT C1[29], namely around 280–175

[25] BERECKI 2008, 69, with illustration.

[26] FERENCZ/CIUTĂ, 2005, 239–254, see also pl. III/3, 5; FERENCZ 2011, p.174, fig. 5 where other shards are also included.

[27] We would like to express our gratitude to Xenia Pop, PhD canditate of the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterirnary Medicine from Cluj, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, for her help provided in identifying the taxonomy of the animal bones.

[28] The rather intact artifact is "functional".

[29] BUJNA 1998, 289–308, vezi p.303, M448 dating from a later stage after 200 BC, namely M482, a similar situation.

BC. A more recent discovery with the occasion of rescue excavations near Budapest[30] revealed another similar situation dating back to LT C. In our case, the deliberate or accidental placing of the toy on the roof of the wooden cist, as well as its definite association with complex cx. 43 are unfortunately still open to discussion. Under the circumstances in which the site where the artifact has been found contains features dating back to different epochs, all previous to Iron Age, the spinning top could have simply ended up there from the archeological layer, from the soil deliberately or accidentally amassed on top of the wooden roof.

The feature as such evinces elements characteristic to Celtic burial practices and rites in what concerns its size, wooden cist layout, pottery assemblage, animal offering, but the absence of cremated remains in the contents of the pit or the vessels raises some important questions. In such a situation, one can always resort to the expedient notion of symbolic burial ("cenotaph") or may speculate that the grave was meant for an infant whose cremated remains could not have been retrieved from the *ustrinum,* or identified because they have not been preserved enough due to the chemical composition of the soil. We may also adduce the spinning top here in support of the "cenotaph" theory, but symbolic burial practices are usually associated with important people of high rank or status, which goes contrary to the idea of a child grave in a prehistoric society where child mortality rate was quite significant. Neither the rather modest, even poor inventory suggests the heroic/martial nature of the "celebrated" deceased. Consequently, if we agree that we are dealing with a burial structure, it is more likely to be the grave of an infant whose cremated remains have not been preserved.

We are not going to reopen the argument on the motivation, timeline, presence or absence of the *Bastarnae*, of a group, or an individual, on their invasions, commercial ties or political-military control over the area within the Carpathian arc, topics repeatedly debated upon in the literature in the field[31]. We should also mention here a more recent study elaborated by D. Bereteu on the basis of a comprehensive field research, where he formulates the theory that the local population has built an entire fortification system against the Bastarnae threat along the north-eastern area of Călimani Piedmont [32]. For the time being, the presence of two dozen pottery fragments and three *Bastarnae* bowls in the whole Intra-Carpathian region may rather indicate, in our opinion, weak ties with the Eastern area. Prehistoric cultures from the Neolithic up to the First Iron Age inclusively have manifested a much higher dynamics of exchanges, relations, and mutual influences across the Carpathian Mountains, not to speak of population movement. Were we to be partial to one of the opinions expressed by researchers, with what we know at present, we would support S. Berecki's theory of a *Bastarnae* family enclave in Moreşti area as the most plausible assumption[33]. On the other hand, the structure of Iernut, most likely burial, should be associated with a nearby settlement, not discovered until now.

Considering the Celtic nature of the big biconical vessel and of the smaller mugs, we believe that cx. 43 dates back somewhere between the end of the 3rd and the first half of the 2nd century within the period LT C1b – LT D2 spanning between the end of the 3rd and the end of the 1st century BC where the stages of P-L[34] culture have been lately included, belonging to the same chronological layer as the Celtic stratum of Moreşti, which also contains *Bastarnae* specimens[35].

In our opinion, it is a child grave, whose wooden cist specific structure, arrangement and content of the offering indicate most likely a Celtic tradition, in spite of *Bastarnae* influences.

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[30] HORVÁTH 2012, 90–110, grave no, 122; HORVÁTH 2016, 148, Pl. 10.
[31] FERENCZ 2011, p.175–177, PUPEZĂ 2012, 411–414, MĂNDESCU 2013, BERECKI 2014, 15–16.
[32] BERETEU 2016, 201–229.
[33] BERECKI 2008, 75; BERECKI 2014, 16.
[34] IARMULSCHI 2013, 48, see also fig. 17.
[35] BERECKI 2008, 78.

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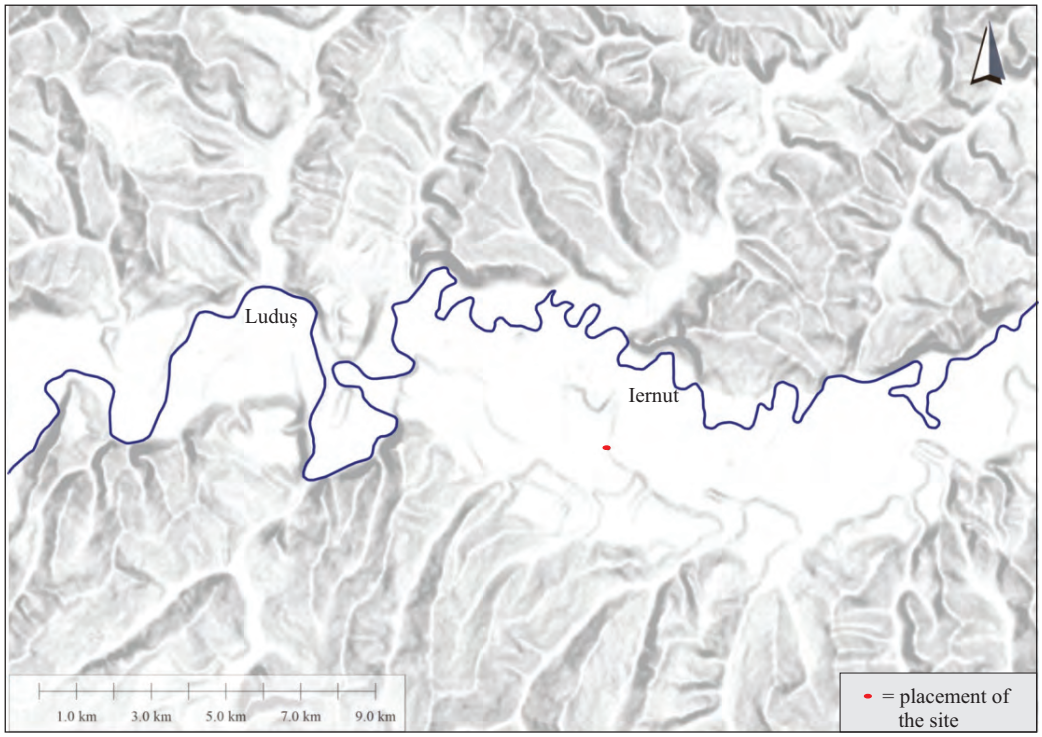

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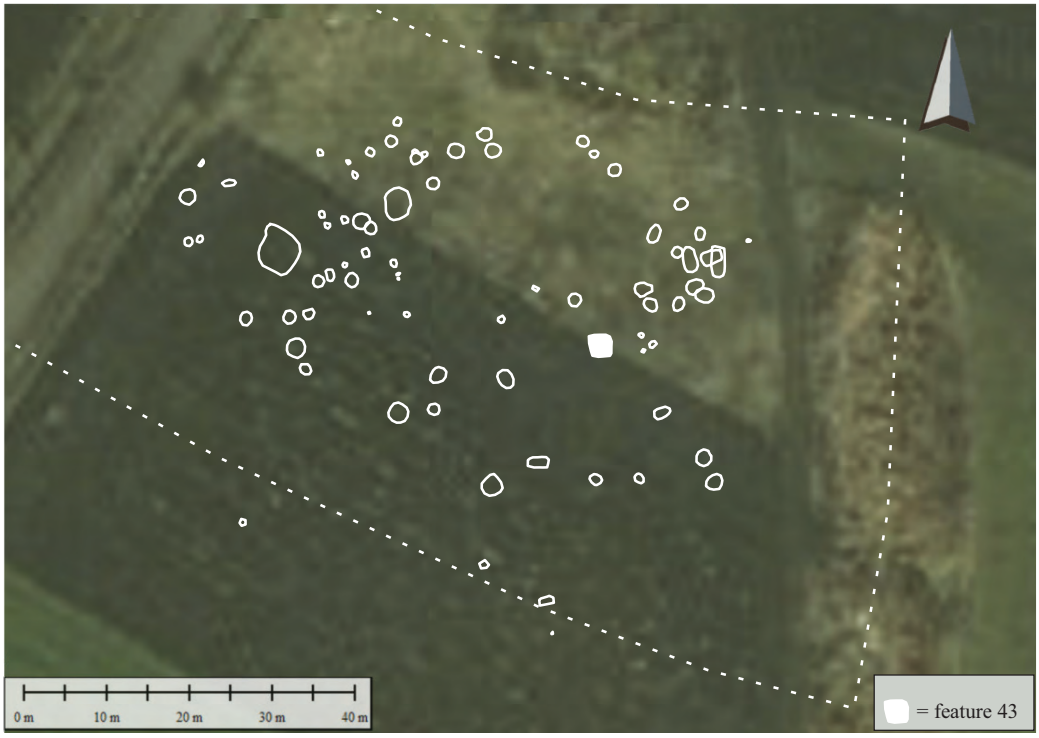

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Plate I. 1. Placement of the site within The Middle Mureș Valley. 2. Placement of feature 43 within the site.

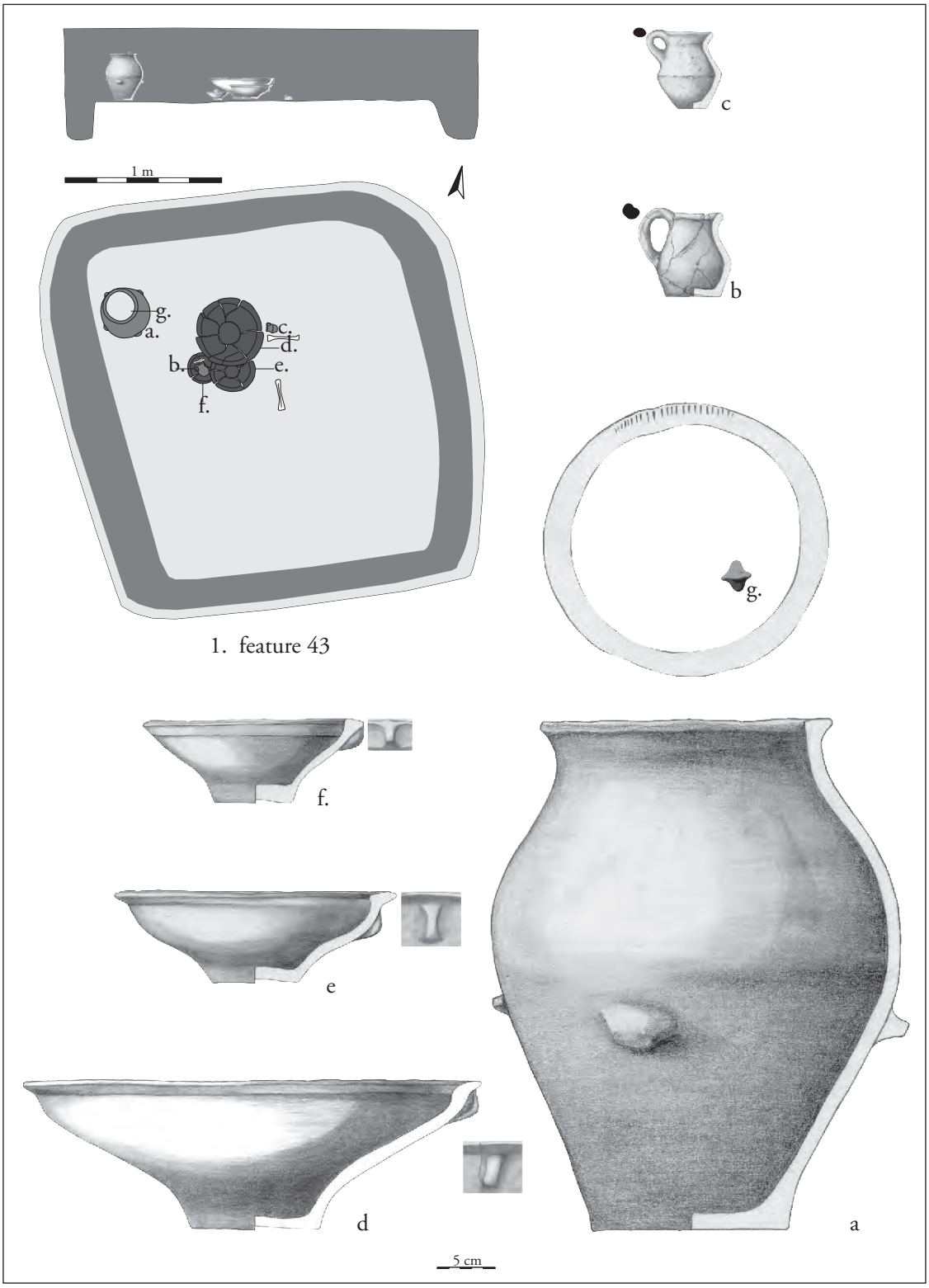

Plate II. 1. Plan and section drawings of the feature. a.–g. Drawings of the ceramic assemblage.

Plate III. 1. *In situ* photograph of the feature's inventory. 2. Photograph illustrating the timber structure's imprint. 3. Detail photograph of the pottery assemblage. 4. a.–g. Photographs of the ceramic vessels.