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ARCHAEOLOGY

TEST EXCAVATIONS AT THE ROMAN-AGE NECROPOLIS OF CAȘUNCA (FLOREȘTI DISTRICT, REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA)

Abstract: The diagnostic archaeological research conducted in 2025 at the Roman-era necropolis at Cașunca-la Movile (Florești District, Republic of Moldova) was intended to evaluate the results of geophysical surveys that revealed the existence of an characterized by 63 grave pits and multiple quadrilateral ditch-type structures, specific to the Sarmatian environment of the Prut–Nistru region. The invasive research confirmed the existence of the necropolis and allowed for the investigation of two inhumation graves, attributed to an adult male and a juvenile female. The archaeological inventory, relatively poor and disturbed as a result of post-funeral interventions, includes fragments of Roman amphorae, an imported vessel, glass paste and amber beads, gold pieces (pendants, tubes, beads, and wires), as well as a bell-shaped pendant. These finds reflect the local community's integration into the trade networks of the Barbaricum and its contacts with the Roman world, allowing the complex to be dated to phases B2a–C1 (late 1st century – first half of the 3rd century AD). Of particular relevance are the enclosure-and-ditch structures, interpreted as ritual spaces associated with funerary practices, likely used for conducting rituals and funeral feasts. The typological and comparative analysis reveals parallels both in the Eastern Carpathian region and in the Pontic and Carpathian Basin regions. The study highlights the importance of correlating archaeological data with interdisciplinary research to reconstruct the funerary practices, chronology, and population dynamics of the Sarmatian peoples in the Roman-Barbarian contact zone.

Keywords: *Cașunca, Necropolis, Roman-Age, Graves, Sarmatian Culture, Roman "Imports".*

Vasile IARMULSCHI

Moldova State University/Free University Berlin, Germany
vasile.iarmulschi@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9013-1973>

Sergiu MATVEEV

Moldova State University, Republic of Moldova
sssmatveev@yahoo.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8515-2852>

Dieter QUAST

Leibniz Zentrum für Archäologie Mainz, Germany
dieter.quast@leiza.de
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7181-9158>

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

The rapid development of scientific methods in recent decades has opened up entirely new perspectives for archaeological research. Paleogenetics and isotopy, in particular, can provide information on the origins of individuals and raw materials, which, when combined with archaeological findings, allow for detailed insights into networks and population dynamics. With the excavations at the Cașunca burial ground (Florești district, Republic of Moldova), we aim to explore precisely these questions. The location at the western end of the Eurasian steppe belt and just a few hundred kilometers north of the Roman Danube frontier makes this area particularly interesting. Beyond the historically documented “great migrations,” we are interested here in the “everyday” dynamics that are not reflected in written sources.

The Cașunca necropolis is located in the Răut River basin, approximately 15 km southeast of Florești and about 100 km north of Chișinău (Fig. 1/1). It was discovered rather by chance during geomagnetic surveys in the vicinity of burial mounds that are still clearly visible today (presumably dating from Early Bronze Age)¹. The site is located approximately 300 m north of the village, at a location known to locals as La Movile (on the hills), on a terrace of the Răut River (Fig. 1/2). Twenty-three square trenches as well as 63 round and oval graves pits are discernible in the visualization of the measurements (Fig. 2). It is unclear whether the entire necropolis within the surveyed area has actually been recorded. The square ditches allowed for an initial chronological classification of the burial ground, as comparable structures exist particularly in the Prut-Dniester interfluve. There, they mostly date to in the 2nd Century AD².

TEST EXCAVATION

The primary purpose of the 2025 test excavation was to assess the state of preservation of the skeletons and artifacts in order to determine whether they were suitable for paleogenetic and isotopic analyses.

In June 2025, a three-week excavation campaign was conducted at the site³, confirming the existence of the burial ground and ditch as well as the excellent state of preservation of the finds (Fig. 3-4; 7). Anomalies in the geomagnetic mapping, which we interpreted as burials, were verified during the test excavation⁴.

¹ SÎRBU *et alii* 2024.

² See BÂRCĂ 2020.

³ The excavation was funded by LEIZA-Mainz. We would like to thank Prof. Dr. Al. Busch for his support. We would like to thank Mayor R. Bilenco and the owner for his assistance on site—including providing accommodations, etc.

⁴ Colleagues from the “Ion Niculita” Archaeological Center participated in

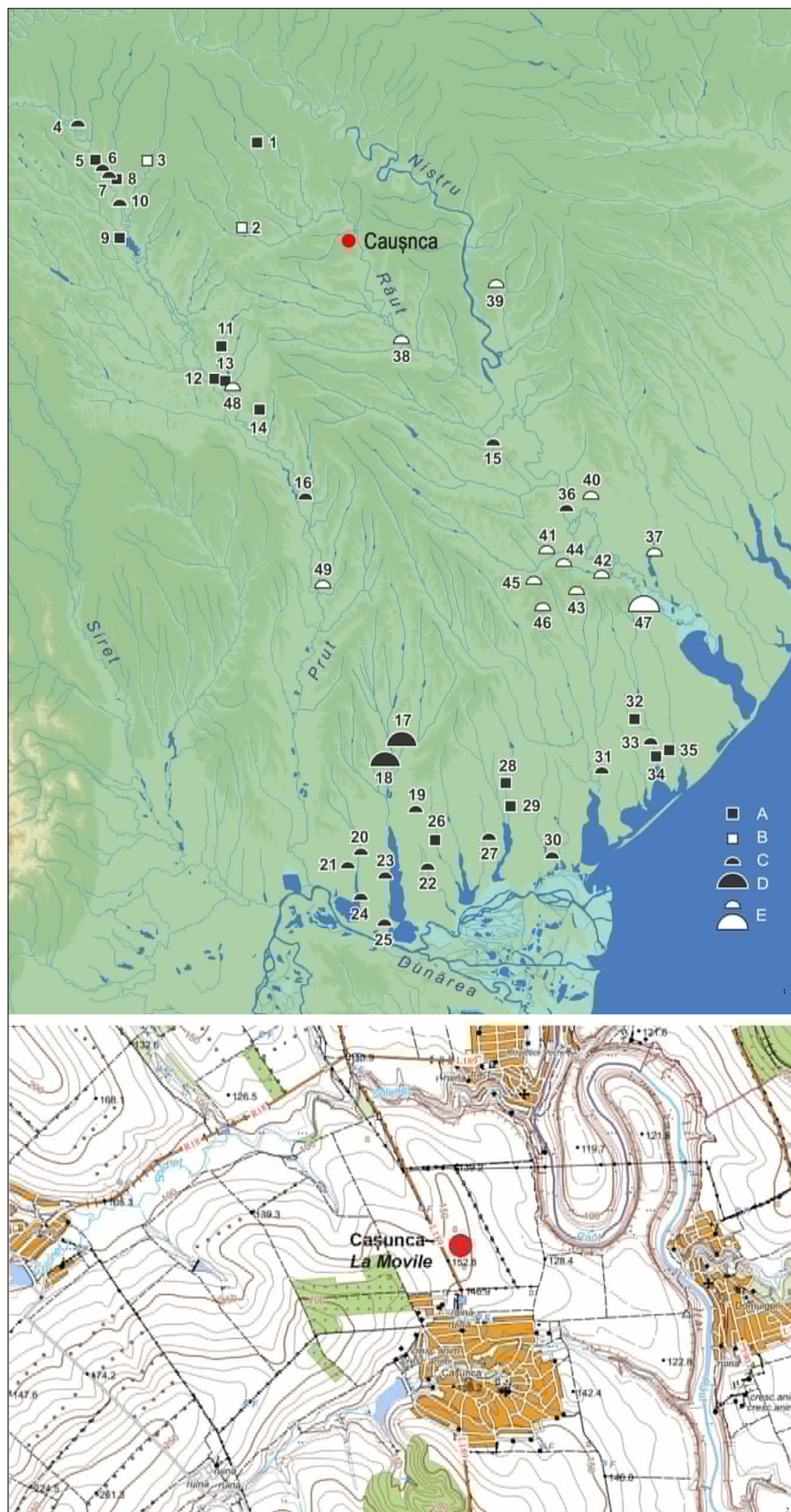


Fig. 1. The distribution of funerary finds attributed to the Sarmatian Culture in the Prut-Dniester area (1) and the localisation of the Cașunca necropolis (2). 1 – after KURCEATOV/BUBULICI 2023 with additions).

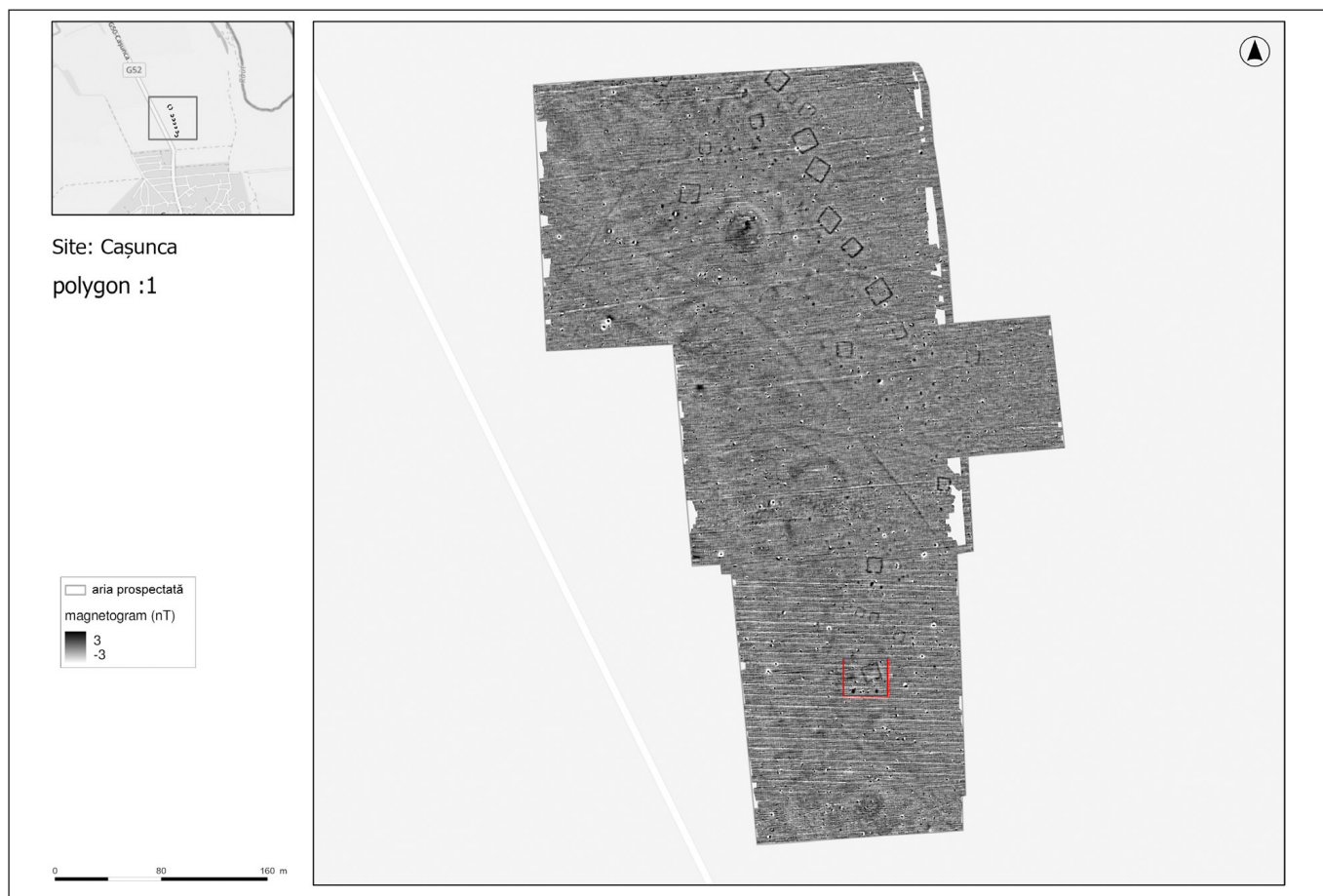


Fig. 2. Magnetogram on map of the Cașunca necropolis (after SÎRBU *et alii* 2024).

GRAVE TYPES AND DITCH STRUCTURES

Geomagnetic surveys in Cașunca revealed 63 rounds to oblong graves pits. Two of these were examined in 2025 (Fig. 3-4). The pits were oriented northward and, as is typical of the so-called Sarmatian culture⁵, the graves had been disturbed or, to put it more neutrally, altered⁶, although it is not currently possible to provide more precise information regarding the timing of these disturbances. The skeletons were no longer intact, and the few remaining grave goods were found in the backfill.

The rectangular graves pits were found at a depth of about 0.5 m below the current ground surface, so they had not been destroyed by plowing. The graves were 2.3 to 2.5 m long and 1 to 1.2 m wide, with depths ranging from 0.8 m (Grave 1) to 1.6 m (Grave 2). As the results of the anthropological analysis have shown, Gr. 1 is a male grave (approx. 35–50 years old) and Gr. 2 is, most likely, a female grave (approx. 15–18 years old)⁷.

the test excavation—V. Șerban, D. Condrea, S. Serbinov, V. Dulgher, A. Spănu, M. Moga, and V. Potlog—as well as colleagues from Ion Creangă University—PD. Dr. O. Munteanu, C. Corolenco, N. Batog, and I. Dimov.

⁵ According to the latest research, more than 80% of the so-called Sarmatian graves in the middle and lower Danube region were opened or looted after death—see KÖHEGYI 1994, 280; GRUMEZA/URSUȚIU 2016, 285; BÂRCĂ *et alii* 2024, 176; BATOG 2025, 49.

⁶ For more on the issue of grave robbery in prehistory and early history, see – KÜMMEL 2009; ZINTL 2019.

⁷ These analyses were conducted by Dr. A. Simalcik (Olga Necrasov Center for Anthropological and Biomedical Research, Iasi). We would like to take

In Gr. 1, only a fragment of a Roman amphora was discovered. The preserved part of the vessel's neck does not allow for certain identification. At a depth of 0.7 m below the current ground level, in the northern part of the burial pit, two fragments of an amphora were discovered; the amphora was made of clay mixed with fine chamotte impurities, was fully and uniformly fired, had a reddish-brick color, and was 9.35 mm thick (Fig. 3/2), identical to those recovered from the trench fill. At a depth of 1.8 m, on the northern side of the burial pit, several pieces of wood in an advanced state of decay were recovered. We also note traces of a bronze artifact identified on the bones of the hind limbs.

In Gr. 2, several glass and amber beads, gold sheets, a cauldron pendant, a piece of flint, and a fragment of Roman amphorae were found (Fig. 5-6). Such finds are characteristic of the graves of the so-called Sarmatian culture in the region east of the Carpathians, dating from the End of the 1st to the first half of the 3rd century AD⁸.

At the top of the burial pit, in square 1, at a depth of 0.65 m below the current ground level, a fragmentary bucket-shaped pendant was discovered. The iron artifact is cylindrical in shape, with a diameter of 10.8 mm, a height of 7.3 mm, and a wall thickness of 1.3 mm; the handle is missing (Fig. 5/5). At a depth of approximately 1 m in the central

this opportunity to thank her for her work.

⁸ GROSU 1990; BÂRCĂ 2006; BÂRCĂ/SYMONENKO 2009; POPA 2015; BATOG 2025.

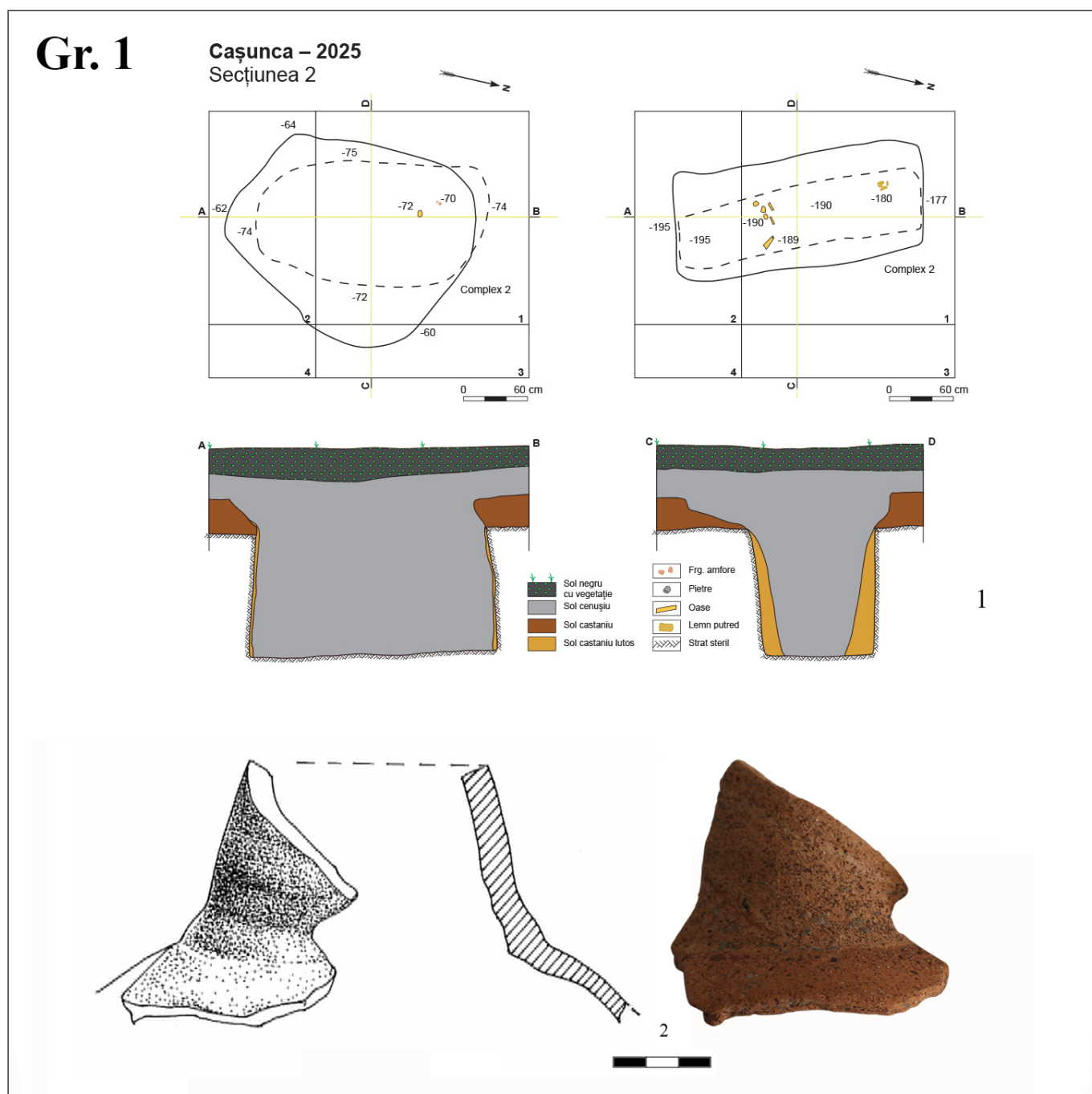


Fig. 3. Cașunca. Plan, Profile and archaeological material from Gr. 1 (Drawing a Plan and Profile by S. Matveev; Archaeological material by S. Burciu).

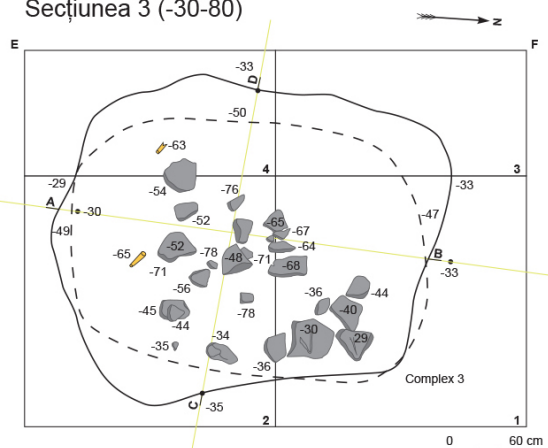
part of the burial pit, a white-gray flint flake was discovered, measuring 22 mm in length, 15.5 mm wide, and 9.2 mm thick, which we classify as having been accidentally found in the complex; a larger number of similar pieces have been identified in the microzone of the village of Cașunca, near which several sites with Late Stone Age habitation levels are known (Fig. 5/9). A fragment of an amphora similar to those discovered in the complexes described above was recovered at a depth of 1.6 m in the southern part of the burial pit. In the sterile layer beneath the burial bed, within the fill soil of some pits, at depths ranging from approximately 1.95 to 2 m in the southwestern sector of the burial pit, several pieces of jewelry were recovered, namely: four amber beads, two glass paste beads, one coral bead, one piece (bead?) of

undetermined material, along with several gold artifacts: four pendants, 27 small beads, two tube-shaped pieces, one of which has a small bead identical to the 27 embedded inside, and two gold wires.

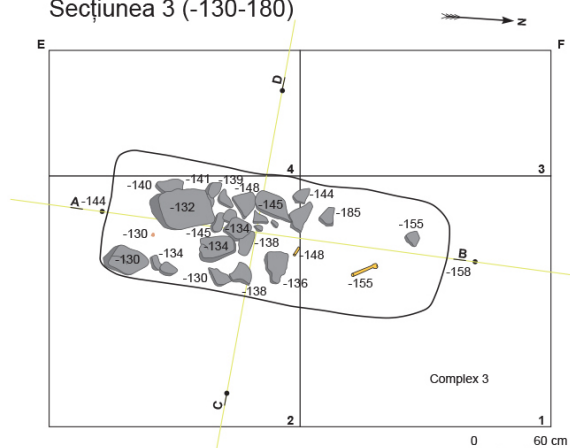
The dark brown amber beads come in two varieties: oval-shaped, large in size (one fragment measuring 11×19.2 mm, with the length not preserved and a hole diameter of 3 mm, and another measuring 8.2×11.2×12.9 mm, with a hole diameter of 3 mm) (Fig. 5/1, 6); two other beads are slightly flattened spheroidal in shape, with a diameter of 7.1×9.4 mm and a hole diameter of 2.5 mm (Fig. 5/7), and a second one with a diameter of 5.2×6.7 mm and a hole diameter of 1 mm (Fig. 5/2).

Gr. 2

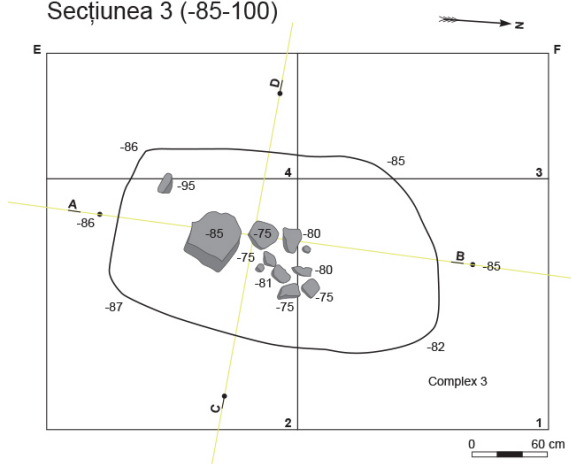
Cașunca – 2025
Secțiunea 3 (-30-80)



Cașunca – 2025
Secțiunea 3 (-130-180)



Cașunca – 2025
Secțiunea 3 (-85-100)



Cașunca – 2025
Secțiunea 3 (-190-195)

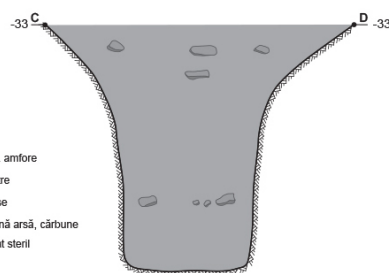
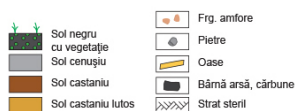
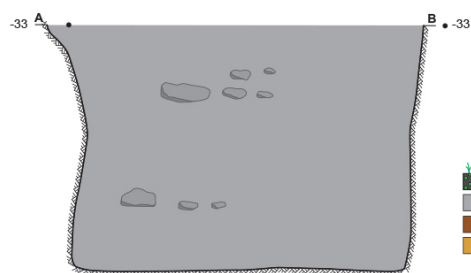
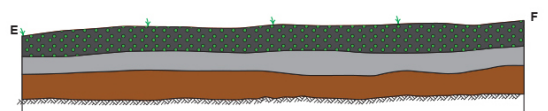
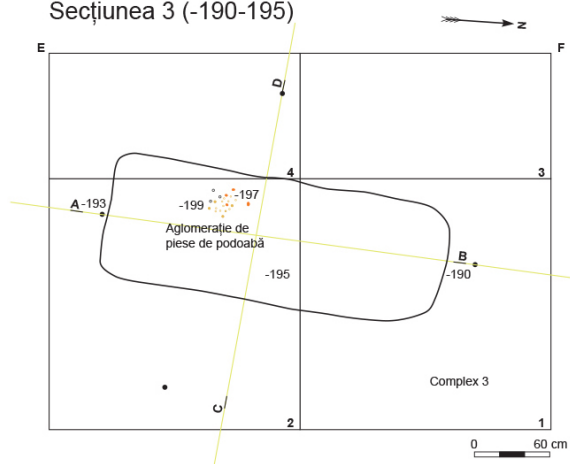
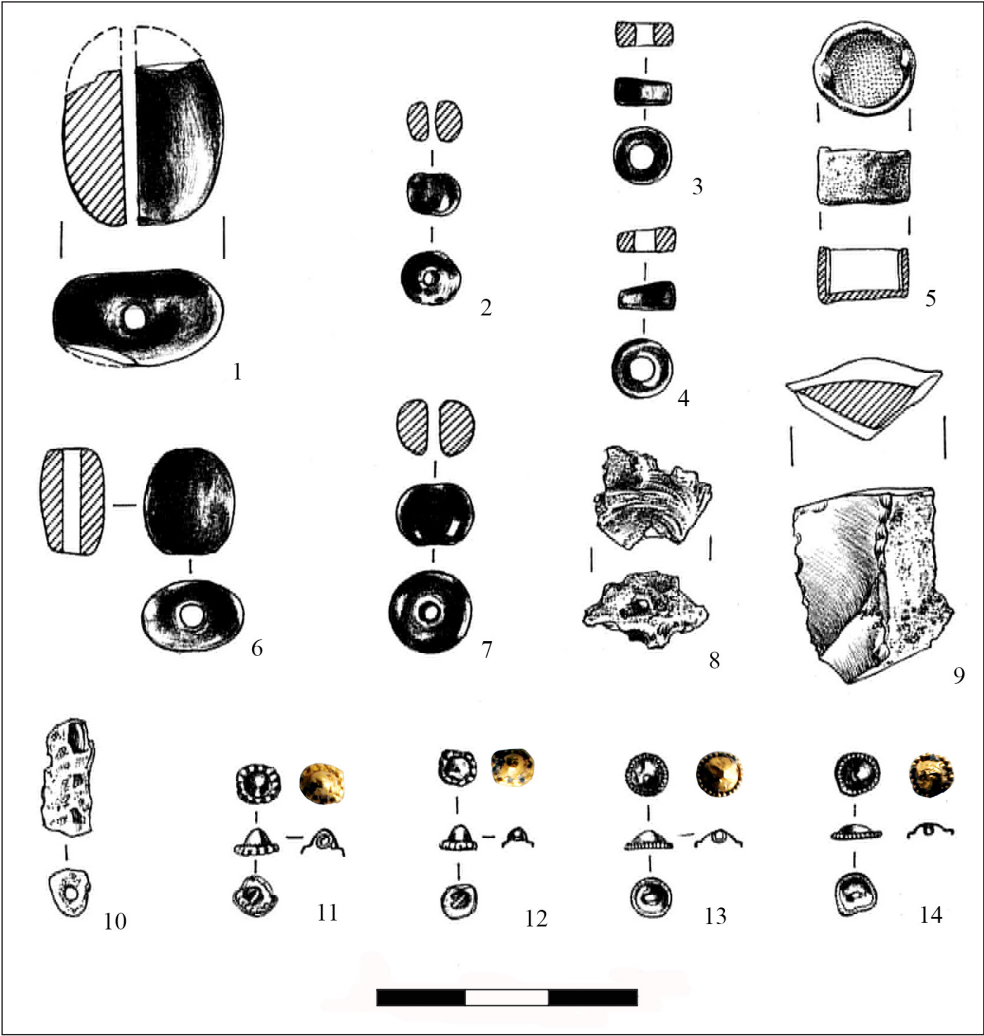


Fig. 4. Cașunca. Plan and Profile of the Gr. 2 (Drawing by S. Matveev).

The two black shell paste beads, one of which survives in two fragments, were cylindrical in shape, with diameters of 6.73 and 6.85 mm and heights of 3.26 and 3.27 mm, and the diameters of the holes were 2.5 and 2.9 mm (Fig. 5/3-4). The coral bead was elongated tubular in shape, with a length of 12.1 mm and a diameter of 4.51×5.26 mm, and the diameter of the hole was 1 mm (Fig. 5/10). Also included in the category of beads is a piece of uncertain function, consisting

of a shapeless piece of pitch (?) measuring 8.5×9.3×12.4 mm with a hole diameter of 1 mm (Fig. 5/8).

The gold pieces were divided into four groups: pendants, beads, tubes, and wires. The pendants, created by embossing a round gold plate, are circular in shape with several hemispherical protrusions along the outer edge and a larger conical protrusion in the center. For fastening, a small ring made of the same metal was attached to the inner side of the



from 1.26–1.69 mm and a thickness of 0.95–0.97 mm (Fig. 8/1-27). The total weight of the bead set is 0.42 g (approx. 0.015 g per bead).

Along with the beads, two gold wires with a thickness of 0.15 mm and lengths of 2.5 and 4 mm were also recovered (Fig. 8/28-29). One wire was found inside a bead at the time of discovery.

Of particular interest are the 23 nearly square ditches visible on the plan (Fig. 3). Their dimensions range from 7×7 to 17×17 m⁹. The southernmost of these was investigated in 2025. The ditch measures approximately 12×12 m and has a triangular profile (Fig. 7).

At the western end of the trench, at depths ranging from 1.1 to 1.25 m, alongside a stone and several pieces of charcoal, fragments of a complete truncated-cone-shaped bowl were recovered; the bowl has slightly arched walls, a shoulder marked by a ridge, and a rim that is thickened on the outside and straight

Fig. 5. Cașunca. Archaeological material from Gr. 2 (Drawing by S. Burciu).

disc. Although very similar in shape, two distinct variants can be clearly distinguished among the four appliques based on the fineness of their workmanship: coarser ones with slightly deformed edges (Cas-01a and Cas-03a) (Fig. 5/11-12; 8/32-33) and finer ones (Cas-02a and Cas-04a) (Fig. 5/13-14; 8/34-35).

Two tubular pieces were made from the same metal, one of which was deformed, with lengths of 4.72 and 4.66 mm, cross-sectional diameters of 1.68×2.18 and 1.43–2.45 mm, and weights of 0.06 and 0.03 g. The difference in weight is explained by the different dimensions and the presence of a small gold bead inside one of the tubes (a bead would weigh approximately 0.015 g) (Fig. 8/30–31).

A total of 27 ring-shaped beads were discovered, in addition to the one inside a tubular piece; they were made from a gold bar with joined ends, with diameters ranging

	Base diameter	High	Thickness of the clamping bar	Weight
Cas-01a	4,18x4,8	3,05	0,55	0,1
Cas-02a	4,79	1,85	0,73	0,07
Cas-03a	4,06x4,47	2,87	0,55	0,09
Cas-04a	4,51x4,88	1,85	0,69	0,09

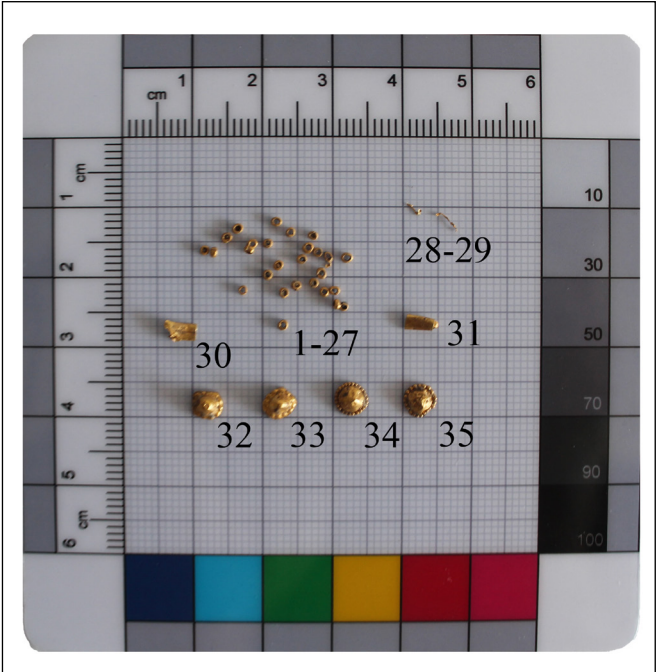


Fig. 6. Cașunca. Gold pieces from Gr. 2 (Foto by S. Matveev).

⁹ SÎRBU et alii 2024.



Fig. 8. Cașunca. A bowl from ditch 1 (Drawing by S. Burciu).

on the inside, made on the potter's wheel from clay well mixed with finely ground chamotte impurities, uniformly but incompletely fired, the color ranging from gray to brown, with a rim diameter of approx. 25 cm and a height of 10.6 cm (Fig. 8/1). Similar examples are found at sites of the Poienеști-Varsteșcoiu Culture, such as Poienеști¹⁰, Pruteni¹¹, and Văleni¹², where they are dated to the B2b–C1a phases of the Roman Age in the Barbaricum¹³. Four animal bones were also recovered from the trench fill.

Such ditches are typical of the Prut-Dniester interfluve¹⁴. Most recently, Vitalie Bărcă has conducted a detailed study of these “funerary ditch enclosures”¹⁵. He was able to identify the oldest rectangular enclosures without burials along the Middle Don (Chertovitski II and Pisarevka) and in Moldova (Medeleni, Palanca)¹⁶. They date from the 1st to the mid-2nd century. There are not only square or rectangular ditches—round ones are also known. What they have in common is that they have an opening, allowing access to the interior. It is also typical that no burials are found inside.

Very few artifacts have been recovered from the ditches. These are often fragments of ceramic vessels and amphorae. These are remains of the funeral feast that were deposited there and, to date, provide the only clues for dating the respective structures. In the ditch from Cașunca investigated in 2025, a Roman bowl was also found (Fig. 6/2), allowing for a chronological classification in the phases B2b–C1.

Similar enclosures are found not only in the Prut-Dniester interfluve, but also east of the Dniester, in southwestern Ukraine, as well as a group along the lower Don¹⁷. They are also found almost regularly in Sarmatian cemeteries in present-day Hungary—though somewhat later, namely from the second half of the 2nd century onward. There, however, they are mostly round, and the interior typically contained inhumation graves¹⁸. Graves were also found in rectangular enclosures in the Carpathian Basin¹⁹.

There are similar rectangular enclosures, but also north of the Carpathian Basin in the area of the Przeworsk culture. Marek Gedl first compiled a comprehensive study of them in 1985 and designated them as the Kryspin type. They are known from 17 burial grounds, located primarily along the upper Vistula²⁰. They all have a rectangular shape with a side length of 5 to 12 meters, though mostly 6 to 8 meters, and date to the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age and the Early Roman Imperial period²¹. In contrast to the ditches from the Prut-Dniester interfluve, however, those of the Przeworsk culture

are enclosed. Gedl has pointed out their similarity to the Celtic burial gardens of the Late La Tène period²². They are likely unrelated to the enclosures of the Sarmatian burial grounds.

Little is known about the exact function of the enclosures. It is clear, however, that they are connected to burial rituals. Structures such as those found in the Przeworsk culture have not yet been observed²³. It is conceivable that funeral rites took place within the ditches and that the deceased was laid out there. The large number of such ditches at the respective necropolises indicates that these were not central sites, but rather those of individual clans. The burials themselves took place outside the enclosures. Microstratigraphic or micromorphological analyses of the interior of the structures may provide further information.

In addition to the actual archaeological test excavations, soil samples were collected for pedological analysis; an anthropological examination was conducted, and human bones were selected for DNA and 14C analyses, while animal bones were chosen for radiocarbon dating; furthermore, XRF analysis was performed on several metal objects. The integration of these interdisciplinary analyses will enable a deeper understanding of the burial practices, chronology, and cultural context of the cemetery, while also providing important insights into the study of the so-called Sarmatian culture, as well as population dynamics and networks. Undoubtedly, continued archaeological fieldwork is necessary to comprehensively investigate the identified complexes and clarify the spatial and functional organization of the necropolis.

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- ²² GEDL 1985b, 165-180. For the ditches in the Late Iron Age - CORDIE 2006.
- ²³ ZAGÓRSKA-TELEGA 2024, 197.

¹⁰ SPĂNU 2019, 43-44.

¹¹ VORNIC *et alii* 2007, 81-83.

¹² IONIȚĂ/URSACHI 1988, 75-76.

¹³ VORNIC *et alii* 2007, 83.

¹⁴ KURCEATOV/BUBULICI 2023, 8-10.

¹⁵ BĂRCĂ 2015; BĂRCĂ 2020, 326-332, 340-341.

¹⁶ BĂRCĂ/SYMONENKO 2009, 218; BĂRCĂ 2020, 326-332, 340-341.

¹⁷ KURCHATOV/SYMONENKO/CHIRKOV 1999; SYMONENKO 2003; BĂRCĂ 2015; BĂRCĂ 2020; ISTVÁNOVITS/KULCSÁR 2017, 159-160

¹⁸ KULCSÁR 1998.

¹⁹ ISTVÁNOVITS/KULCSÁR 2017, 237, Fig. 184; BĂRCĂ/COCIȘ 2013; BĂRCĂ 2020, 342-346; For recent discoveries see BĂRCĂ *et alii* 2024, 169-170, 179-196, Fig. 2/2; 3; 9-12.

²⁰ GEDL 1985a; GEDL 1985b; Zulezt ZAGÓRSKA-TELEGA/PIKULSKI 2014; ZAGÓRSKA-TELEGA 2024, 197 with the List at the Note 54.

²¹ There are other types of ditches that are not discussed here.

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