



Orbis Mediaevalis  
II

*Inter tempora.*

The Chronology of the  
Early Medieval Period

Issues, Approaches, Results

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Cronologia perioadei  
medievale timpurii

Probleme, abordări, rezultate





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## Can One Use the Results of <sup>14</sup>C Analyses to Perform Historical Interpretations? The Case of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Funerary Site in Cluj-Napoca-Zápolya Street\*

Erwin Gáll, Attila Türk, Szabolcs Nagy, Sarah Peter, Ferenc Wanek\*\*

*Abstract: the archaeological site known in specialized literature as Zápolya Street (sometimes Dostoievski Street, the present-day General Traian Moşoiu Street) is located ca. 1430 m SE of the present-day city center, on the northern edge of the third terrace of River Someş, also known as Pietroasa inferioară. As this is one of the most researched funerary sites of the era in the Transylvanian Basin, it benefits from numerous more or less detailed analyses. The combined analyses point to the wide variability of the dating of each grave and the danger of drawing pertinent and clear conclusions regarding the period when this/these micro-communities settled in the area. The combined data of the burials have revealed no dating earlier than 925/930 and no dating later than 970/980. As no data are available on whether the individuals in question had been born there or elsewhere, when they arrived in the area of Cluj-Napoca, or how much time they spent there, the issue must remain open until new research on the matter.*

*The funerary spot in Cluj-Napoca-Zápolya Street was most likely already in use (see the dating of Grave 6) during the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This also means that the process of conquest and immigration of the newcomers reached the basin of Someşul Mic rather early. Nevertheless, the nature of the conquest, as in the case of all nomad groups, must not be viewed from a territorialist perspective; the main goal of either nomad power structure was to control the natural resources (especially the salt-rich areas in the case of the Transylvanian Basin), the population, and the pastures, facilitated by the infrastructure of roads built during the past Roman Era.*

*Keywords: 10<sup>th</sup> century, Cluj-Napoca-Zápolya Street, <sup>14</sup>C analysis, Hungarian conquerors*

**I**ntroduction and research topic. Cluj-Napoca, the center of the hydrographic basin of Someşul Mic (fig. 1), is located, from a geological perspective, on the Tisa unit which is a continental fragment caught in the Alpine folding system. The morphology of the present surface around the area discussed in this study has been completed during the Quaternary (the last 2.5 million years in the geological history of the Earth), modeled through fluvial erosion; still, slope processes have also been substantial, more intense during the glacial periods both in the areas of the Transylvanian Basin with hard rocks and in those consisting mainly of poorly consolidated deposits.

Through the changes triggered by the succession of glacial and inter-glacial periods, fluvial erosion went through more intense and slower phases, leading, eventually, to the formation of wide alluvial fields. During the intense phases the river bed of Someşului Mic deepened and left the old alluvial field, transforming into a suspended fluvial terrace. Thus, seven multi-tiered terraces, in places just caused by erosion, in places with preserved fluvial deposits, were formed in the area of Cluj, just like in the entire Transylvanian Basin<sup>1</sup>. These terraces, both in the area of Cluj

\* This paper was supported by the Thematic Excellence Programme – NKFIH-832-15/2019 – ‘Late Avar Reform and consequences’.

\*\* English translation: Ana Maria Gruia. Drawings: Edit Ambrus.

<sup>1</sup> Savu *et al.* 1973.



and in the Transylvanian Basin, display a very strong N–S asymmetry, caused by the pressure exerted on the E–W oriented courses of gelisolifluxion that was stronger on the slopes with northern exposure<sup>2</sup>. This triggered a more extensive development of the terraces on the right bank of Someșul Mic, but also caused the loss of integrity of the upper terraces through slope movements<sup>3</sup>.

The extended terrace II or the city terrace (10–16 m) is the most favorable to human settlement. On the one hand it provides protection against the strongest floods and optimal stability for buildings, on the other hand, through the proximity of phreatic water and the presence of springs that usually feature in the front of the low terraces, it ensures a permanent supply of vital drinking water.

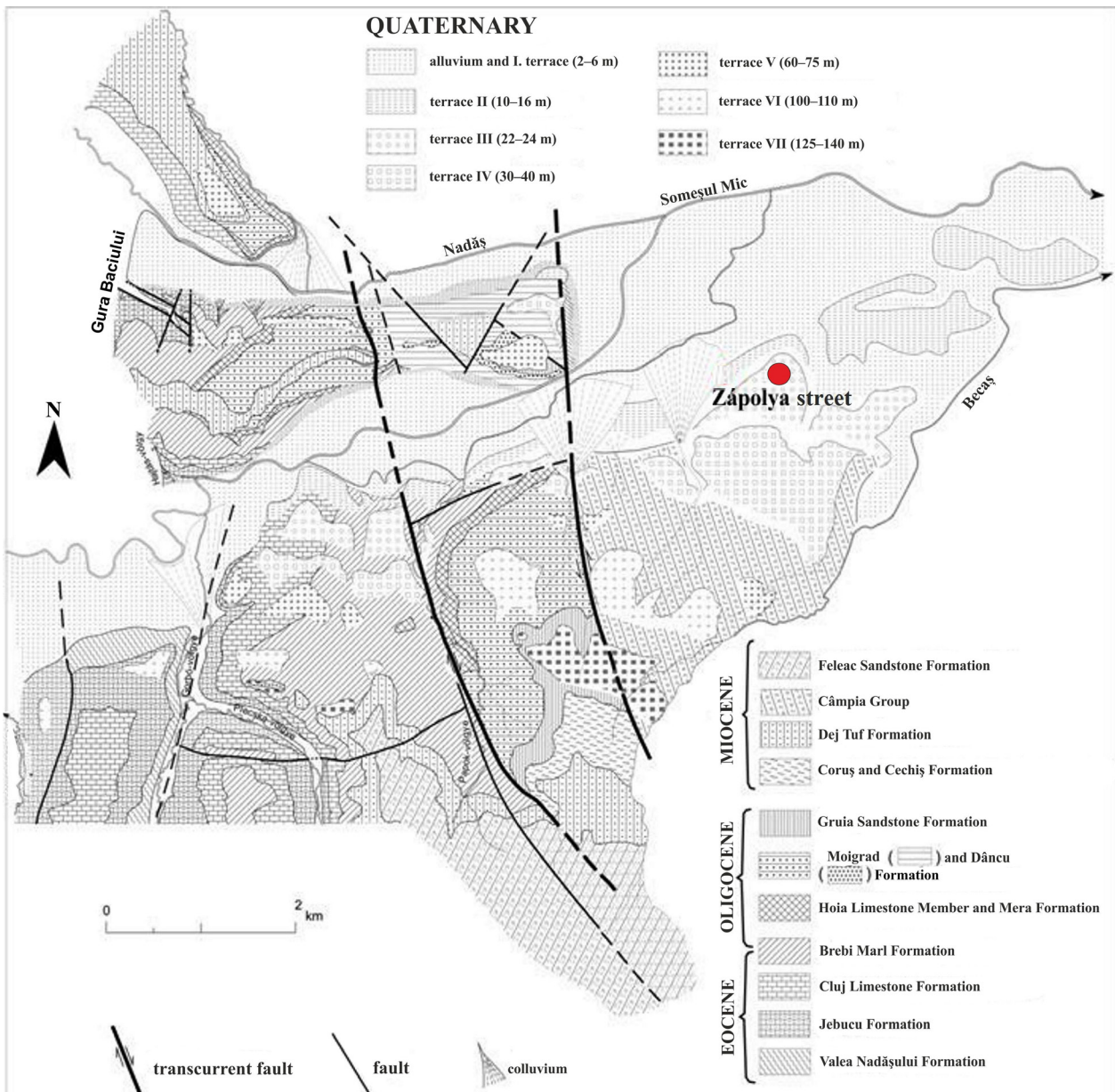


Fig. 1. Geological map of part of the city of Cluj-Napoca, with the location of the archaeological site (marked through a red circle)

The archaeological site known in specialized literature as Zăpolya Street (sometimes Dostoi-evski Street) is located ca 1430 m SE the present-day town center, on the northern edge of the third terrace of River Someș, also called Pietroasa inferioară. This is the exact location of the

<sup>2</sup> Wanek, Poszet 2010, 80–81.

<sup>3</sup> Wanek, Poszet2011, 88–89.

researched archaeological site, on the very edge of the city terrace, in a spot where the valley of Someşul Mic has exited the area covered with harder Eocene–Oligocene rocks (between Cetățuia Hill and Hajongard Hillside), into the area of Miocene-era poorly consolidated deposits; in time, the river levelled wide alluvial fields and left behind extended fluvial terraces. The surrounded vast plain surfaces have provided an excellent terrain for agricultural cultures and pastures.

One can easily observe on the first military Josephine Map the small valley that divides the terrace in two (Pl. 1/1). The former street Pietroasa (today Aurel Suci Street) runs up this valley and then splits on the edge of the upper part. The former Zápolya Street (also called Dostoievski for a while), the present-day General Traian Moşoiu Street, runs westwards, while the former Kalevala Street (today Semenicultui Street) runs eastwards. Thus, the graves on Zápolya Street were in fact found starting with the end of the terrace, followed by the small valley (Pietroasa Street). However, three other graves also dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, were discovered (in 1944) after the little valley (Pietroasa Street), but also on the terrace III, in front of the building at no. 4 on Kalevala Street, under the road (Pl. 1/2)<sup>4</sup>.

The burial ground in Zápolya Street has been located on a plateau ending in a very steep slope, measuring 45–60° degrees, generating a difference of ca. 5 m. The remains of the Roman road running northwards, most certainly visible during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, were probably found not far from the base of the slope (Pl. 7). The burial ground was partially researched in the southern areas of the plots at nos. 78 and 76, over a length of 42–43 m along the E–W direction. The 1911 and 1942 excavations extended over 18–19 m in width (see also Pl. 1/2, Pl. 2).



Fig. 2. The extent of the areas researched in 1911 and 1942.

Based on Kovács's 1911 documentation one can state that the graves were located on the margin of the burial ground and that the latter extended southwards towards the present-day Albini Street. On the other hand, the northern side can be considered to have been fully researched.

Based on the ground plan of the excavation performed by István Kovács grave no. 2, located east of the group of graves nos. 3–5 that form a distinct group, probably belongs to another group. In our opinion, graves 2, 6 and 7 also belong to separate groups of graves (Pl. 2).

In the summer of 1942 the excavations continued on the plot at no. 76, but no planimetry of these excavations has been performed. Gyula László researched three other graves west of graves 2, 6 and 7, situated “in a row” (according to him)<sup>5</sup> (Pl. 2).

<sup>4</sup> Considering the fact that the term was adopted as such in the specialized literature, we chose to continue using it. Gáll 2013a, Vol. I: 257–258, vol. II: Pl. 115–116.

<sup>5</sup> László 1942, 578.

The excavations did not / could not be unfortunately continued southwards, towards the street called *Méhes* at the time (today Septimiu Albini) and the area is currently occupied by buildings. The researches could continue in the end of plots nos. 76–62, located in the edge of the plateau. Unfortunately, there is almost no possibility to continue the research to the south-east due to ongoing constructions.

The analysis of the recovered anthropological material can be presented in an abstracted form in the following table, as, like we will see in the end, it is important to certain conclusions<sup>6</sup>:

No. of the graves	Gender	Age	
Grave 1	Male	35–55	<i>Adultus/Maturus</i>
Grave 2	?	?	
Grave 2	?	6 years 3–7 months	<i>Infans I</i>
Grave 4	Male	23–60	<i>Adultus/Maturus/Senilis</i>
Grave 5	?	23–32 years	<i>Adultus</i>
Grave 6	Male	54–71	<i>Maturus</i>
Grave 7	Female	54–68	<i>Maturus</i>
Grave 10	Male	35–40	<i>Maturus</i>

Fig. 3. Results of the anthropological analysis

We have published the entire archaeological material – mostly as technical drawings – in 2013, together with its detailed analysis<sup>7</sup>. In the specialized literature the funerary spot has been generally connected to the “conquering Magyars”<sup>8</sup> and only in our 2013 analyses we have put forward a more nuanced approach to these interpretations (a heterogeneous group created in the course of the 10<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>9</sup> that are strongly marked by the nationalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, namely the modern *nation-building*. It is, at the same time, very clear that the burials on this funerary site belong to the funerary horizon of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and one must exclude both earlier and later datings.

We have been compelled to continue the analysis because some of the anthropological material has been determined in the meanwhile and was unknown prior to 2013; it was analyzed through the *NKFIH* project<sup>10</sup>. The project has also included the first radiocarbon analyses that support a better dating of the funerary site, but also raise a series of questions that we shall discuss below.

Thus, overall, a new debate on the chronology of the graves part of this funerary area, especially those that produced the <sup>14</sup>C samples, has become topical again. Based on these facts, the comparative analysis of the archaeological material with new <sup>14</sup>C dates – even partial ones – can not only refine the period during which the burial ground has been in use, but also supports certain methodological approaches that are also suggested in the article’s title.

<sup>6</sup> Their entire anthropological material will be published: Gáll et al. 2019, u.pr.

<sup>7</sup> Gáll 2013a, Vol. I: 268–292, Vol. II: Pl. 117–137; Gáll 2015, 350–404.

<sup>8</sup> We only use this term from a structuralist perspective, not from an ethnical / ethnicist point of view. Thus, it can be applied to the graves that display several very specific characteristics: the ritual of depositing horse remains, the specific set of weapons (sabre, quiver, arrowheads), harness elements with specific types of stirrups and bids. One can only (possibly) differentiate between conquering Magyars and the structural integration of other groups of populations that imitated the funerary habits of the newly arrived clans, and can only decide according to context.

<sup>9</sup> “These two observations concerning the Cluj communities might lead to the supposition that, firstly, the area of the Little Someş might have been occupied by a population with various burial traditions, which might indicate the varied origin of this population. This is quite firmly supported not only by archaeological but also anthropological research<sup>69</sup>. Secondly, the sabre is the primary status symbol in the graves of mature males and can be identified as a symbol creating group identity. From these observations concerning the professional warrior class of the 10th century power centre, one can see a greatly varied population with individuals of different origins. These communities are organised here, in the Cluj region, and their statuses are indicated by the weapons placed in their graves” Gáll 2013b, 479–480.

<sup>10</sup> NKFIH: Nemzeti Kutatási, Fejlesztési és Innovációs Hivatal, Magyarország (The National Office for Research, Development and Innovation, Hungary) (OTKA/NKFIH no. 106369).



**A few methodological observations regarding the connection between the archaeological material, the “population pyramid” and the employed term of “first generation”.** The term “first generation” understood as the sociological group of those individuals of the communities from the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century who were born in the so-called *Atelkuz* area<sup>11</sup> but were buried in the Carpathian Basin spread without any deep theoretical backing in the archaeology of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, especially after K. Mesterházy’s 1990 article<sup>12</sup>. Specialists have almost entirely ignored the socio-demographical problem that arises, namely the fact that each population consists of individuals of various ages, thus one can speak of age groups. The new conquerors, like any other human society, represented a biologically varied community, with individuals ranging from infantile to senile – and the chronological analyses have rather ignored them. As an example, an individual born in the *Atelkuz* could have died around the year 900 or might have lived until the 930s–940s or even the 950s (reaching an old age). A hypothetical comparison of the archaeological “luggage” of an individual who died around the year 900 as *juvenile*, with that of a senile individual from the 1930s – 1950s or even the 1950s would reveal striking differences, despite the fact that both individuals played an active role in the migration from the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century!

The term “first generation” should thus be nuanced, from at least two perspectives:

1. From the biological perspective of the individuals who took part in the migration, one should also take into consideration the term “age group”;

2. The contextual analysis of the dynamic nature of material culture, in the case of which one can ask various questions. There are more numerous difficult methodological problems, namely: which of the artifacts can be determined as produced in the Orient and brought to the Carpathian Basin through migration in the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and can one identify mixed elements in the graves: on the one hand artifacts brought from the Orient and on the other hand objects produced and acquired here?

As a methodological conclusion, the analyses must be restricted to combining the data regarding the biological age of the individual, the characteristics of the dynamism of material culture, to which one should mandatorily add – as much as possible –  $^{14}\text{C}$  analyses. We have attempted to illustrate the issue through the following diagram:

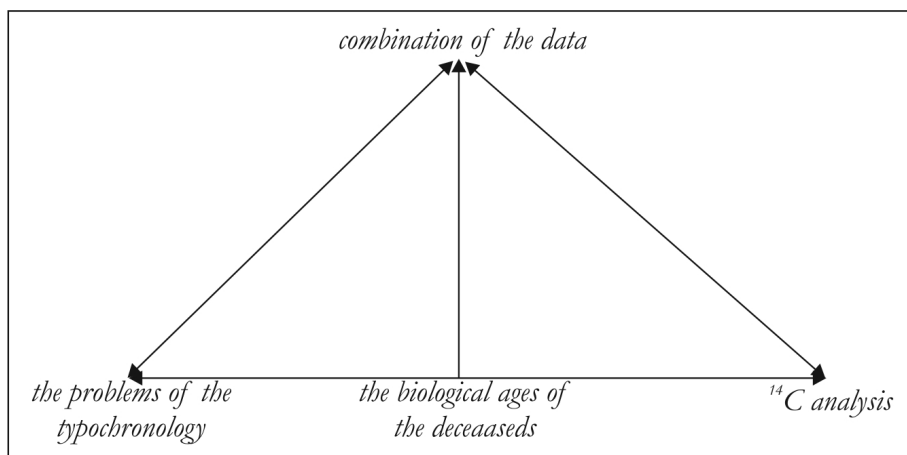


Fig. 4. The methodology of combining different data

**The issue of dating the graves through classical archaeological methods.** As this is one of the most researched funerary sites of the era in the Transylvanian Basin, it has benefited from

<sup>11</sup> The micro-region was mentioned by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. In this sense, see: Harmatta 1984, 419–431.

<sup>12</sup> Mesterházy 1989–1990, 235–250, 15. kép.

numerous chronological analyses, more or less detailed. Shall henceforth present a synthesis of the dating of the graves through classical typo-chronology.

From a chronological perspective, among the materials found in the graves one notes, foremost, those in graves nos. 10 and 11. As for the richest grave, no. 11, we were able to observe the intense wear and tear of the rectangular applique, indicating without doubt the fact that the item that lacks exact analogies in the Carpathian Basin has been worn for a long time. Other items, mainly the stirrup from grave 11, pear-shaped, type IA1<sup>13</sup>, with analogies only inside the Carpathian Basin, have been in use for much shorter periods. We believe one cannot much thinking that these items might have been deposited in the grave during the second third of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. If the first item can be connected from a cultural perspective to the “first generation”, the stirrup only points to analogies in the area of the Upper Tisa<sup>14</sup>, lacking analogies east of the Carpathian Basin. This case shows that from a biological perspective, the individual in grave no. 11 could have belonged to the “first generation” (how could he have been born already in the Carpathian Basin), but from a chronological perspective he displays mixed elements; thus, one can see in this looted grave the archaeological combination of the different chronological elements.



Fig. 5. The artefacts from the grave 11

The case of grave 10 is even more interesting. The grave, researched by Gyula László, has revealed a quiver or bag hanger, analogies for which have been identified in the area of Kiev. Based on these analogies the individual has been interpreted as belonging to the “first generation”. The anthropological analysis performed by Szilárd Gál indicates the fact that the deceased was an individual aged 35–40 years. If the male died during the first third of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, he had reached a mature age when he arrived in the Carpathian Basin. On the other hand, if he died during the 930s, he could have taken part in the sociological and military phenomenon of homeland

<sup>13</sup> Gáll 2015, Table 1, Fig. 8–9, fig. 15–16, Plate 1.

<sup>14</sup> See the debate, with analogies Gáll 2015, 380–384.

changing only during childhood. As he shall subsequently show, this observation is not fully supported by the  $^{14}\text{C}$  analyses (Pl. 5–6).

Graves nos. 6 and 7 can be dated to the first two thirds of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, grave no. 1 and the group of graves 2–5 can be dated to the middle of the century based on the grape-bunch-shaped earrings analyzed before. At the same time, the group of graves 2–5 is located on the margin of the terrace and thus these were probably the last ones excavated (Pl. 3–4).

Thus, longer or shorter chronological hiatuses certainly existed between the burials. One must mention the fact that burial grounds of the same type as the one in Zápolya Street could contain up to 80–100 graves. As previously mentioned, according to Gyula László, graves 1–2, 6–7 belong to a single group, but in our opinion each grave is part of a different group. Based on these observations and the typo-chronological analysis of the inventory we date the burial ground fragment to the 925–970/980 period.

**The issue of dating graves 6 and 10 through  $^{14}\text{C}$  analyses.** We were able to collect samples from graves 6 and 10. Based on the analyses and the calibrations, as one can see in fig. 6–7, grave 6 can most probably be dated, among the multitude of possible datings, to 930–940, and grave 10 to 955–965.

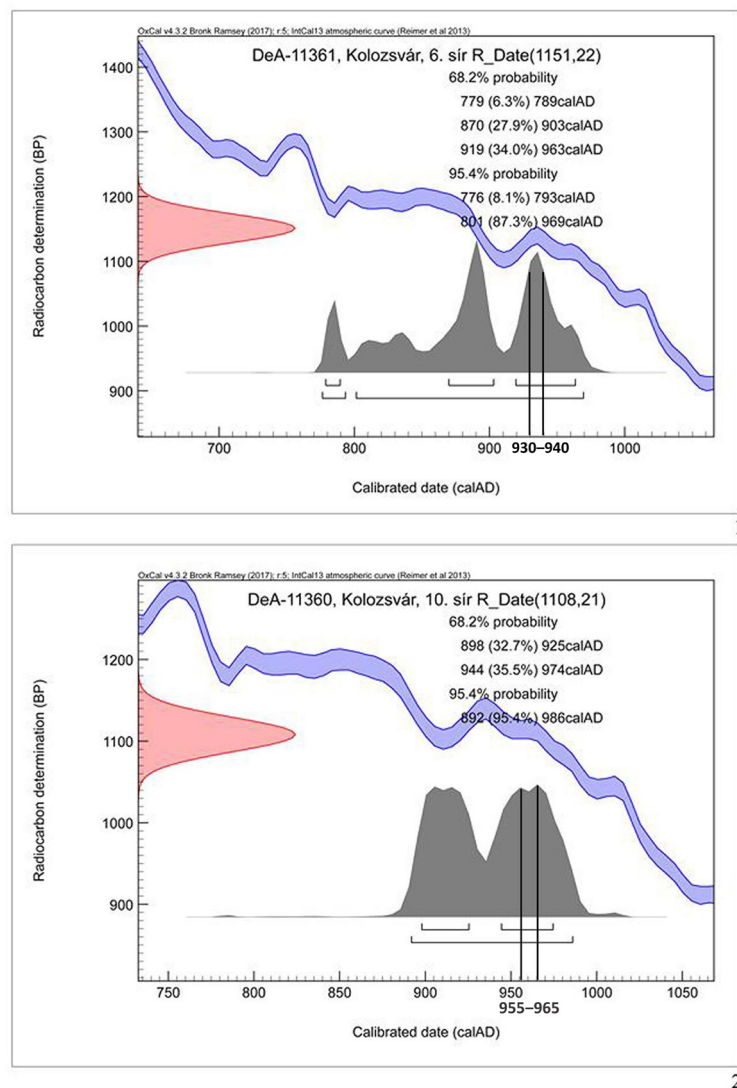


Fig. 6.  $^{14}\text{C}$  analyses of samples from grave 6 and grave 10



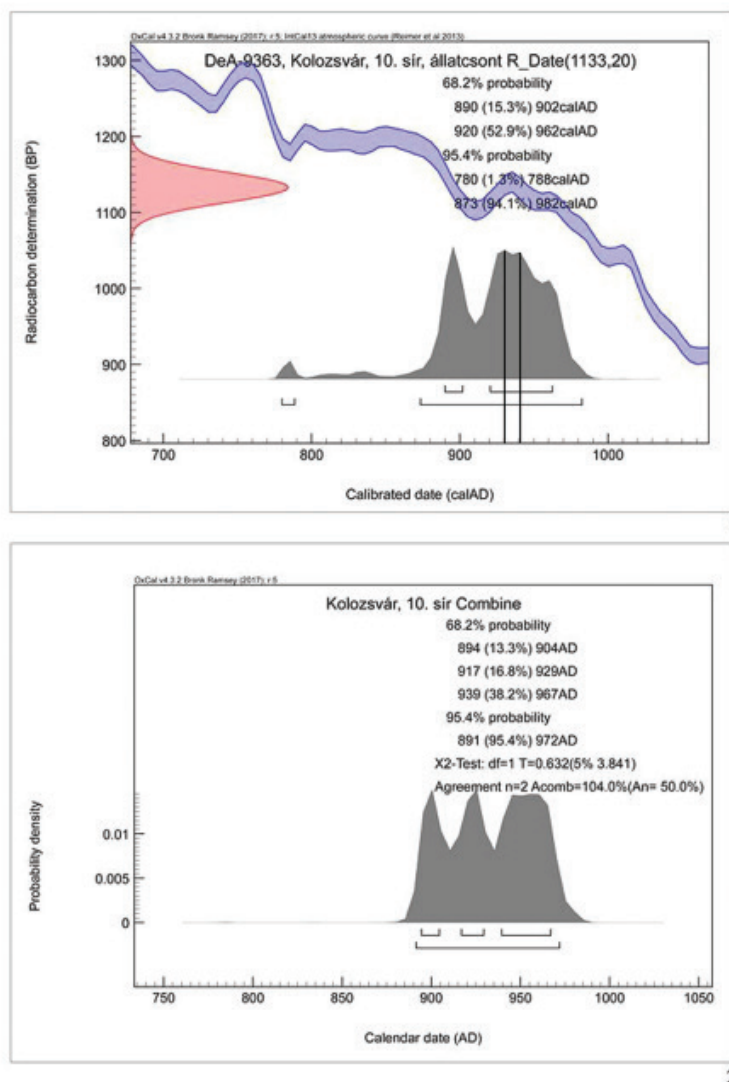


Fig. 7.  $^{14}\text{C}$  analysis of the sample from grave 10

These datings support the archaeological observations performed on the basis of the archaeological material.

**Conclusions: the combination of archaeological dating and  $^{14}\text{C}$  dating with the data regarding the biological age of the skeletons.** As one can see the archaeological and the  $^{14}\text{C}$  datings generally indicate the possible dating especially to the second third of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Based on the biological age indicated by the analysis of the skeletons one can reach a large variation of socio-historical interpretations, thus showing how relative historical interpretations based on the archaeological material are. At the same time we must mention the fact that the graves do not form a unitary group, so that significant chronological differences in their dating might have existed. At the same time, without being able to perform *strontium stable isotope* analyses, we cannot answer the following basic question: were the individuals buried in Cluj-Napoca-Zápolya Street born already in these areas or did they arrive from elsewhere? Still, several observations – raising numerous questions – can be formulated based on this set of data. These are only the observations with the highest probability.

1. The male skeleton in grave 6 indicates that the individual died at an age between 54 and 71 years. He could have taken part in the socio-historical process of migration from the Orient to the Carpathian Basin if he was buried in 930–940 (which was very likely the case).

2. On the other hand, the individual buried in grave 10 most probably died in 955–965, at the age of 35–40 years, and was thus probably born in 915/20–925/930. Biologically, he was in fact part of the second or third generation after the migration from the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

3. Such observations can also be made in the case of graves nos. 1, 4, 5, and 7 that unfortunately did not benefit from <sup>14</sup>C analyses. Thus, the female in grave no. 7 was most certainly born either before the 10<sup>th</sup> century or during the first two decades of the century – considering the fact that the anthropological analyses performed on the skeleton have indicated that the age of the individual was between 54 and 68 years at the time of death. Still, based on a less than uncertain dating, the grave cannot be dated more narrowly than 900–970. Thus, considering the fact that the female died at the age of 54–68 years, she could have been born both during the ninth and in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The man in grave no. 1, aged 35–55 years at the time of his death, could have been born sometime during the first two decades of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. With this great variability in age, on the basis of the archaeological inventory that can be dated around the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, one can presume he born either in 900 (if he died at 55) or in 920 (if he died at 35).

The woman (?) in grave 5 could have been born during the first third of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but one cannot exclude the period towards the middle of the century, as she died at an age between 23 and 32. In the case of grave 4 on the other hand one could formulate numerous combinations as the bones have been very poorly preserved (23–60 years).

The subsequent figure shows the diagram in which we have attempted to combine all the data:

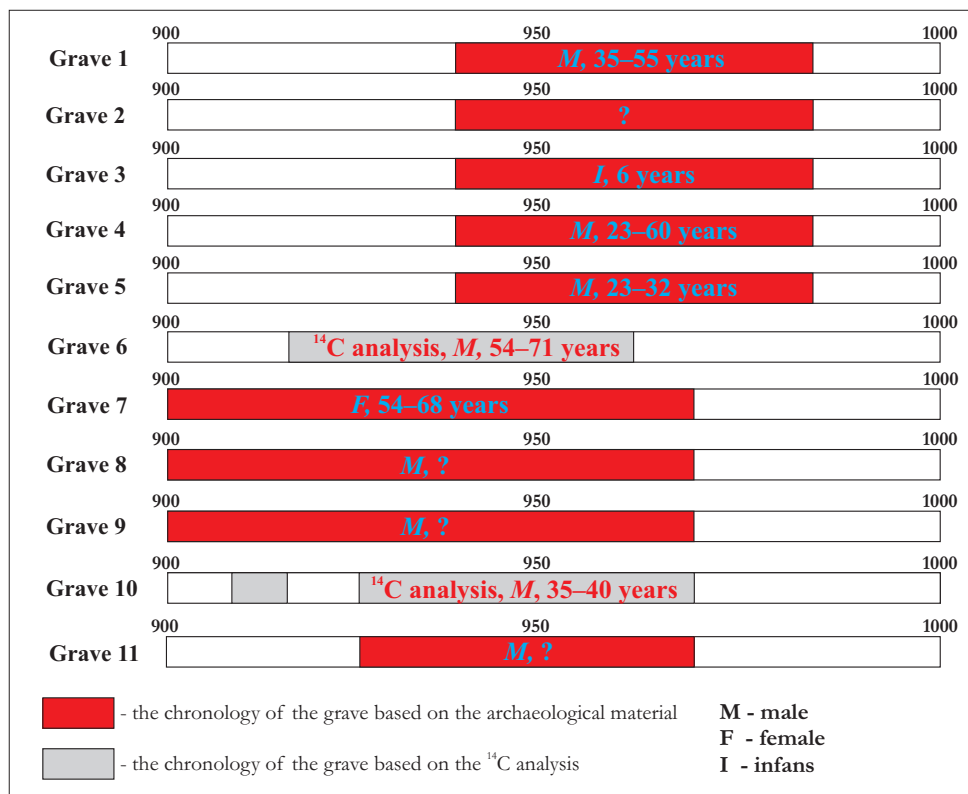


Fig. 8. The combination of archaeological and <sup>14</sup>C datings and the data regarding the biological age of the skeletons

**Without “historical” conclusions?** In the end of this brief analysis one must ask the following question: can the results of <sup>14</sup>C analyses be used in combination with other types of sources in historical interpretations? As in our 2013 analyses we have nuanced the rather simplistic interpretations existing so far<sup>15</sup>, in the present paper we wish to bring a further nuance to the issue. Thus,

<sup>15</sup> Thus, we did not interpret the micro-communities from Cluj-Napoca as consisting of *conquering Magyars*, but as military communities organized in the area during the tenth century. Gáll 2013b, 479–480.

on the basis of the great variability of dating that we have previously presented, one can make two observations:

1. Previous analyses have demonstrated the fact that the micro-community from Cluj-Napoca-Zápolya Street had certainly settled in that micro-region during the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, the great variability in dating in the case of each grave draws attention to the danger of drawing clear and pertinent conclusions regarding the period when this/these micro-community/communities settled in the area. The combined data regarding the burials show no earlier dating than 925/930 and no later dating than 970/980. Since no data are available regarding the place of birth of these individuals (here or elsewhere), when they arrived in the area of Cluj-Napoca, how long they spent there, the issue must remain open until new researches.

2. Another simplistic and superficial question that representatives of East-Central European archaeology still could not get rid of after 150 years, cannot and probably will never find an answer based on available archaeological data: “when did the conquering Magyars occupy Transylvania (?)”<sup>16</sup>, i.e. the exact year (even if some have suggested the year 896, others 950 or even after the year 1000).

Nevertheless, the funerary spot in Cluj-Napoca-Zápolya Street was most probably in use (see the dating of grave 6) already in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and this means that the process of migration and conquest reached these parts rather early. Still, like in the case of any nomadic group, the character of the conquest must not be regarded from a *territorialist* perspective,<sup>17</sup> as the main goal was to control the resources of the areas (especially the salt areas) and to gain access to pastures. This was facilitated by the infrastructure of the roads created during the former Roman Period (for this, see Pl. 7–8)<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Questions of this kind are pointless for two reasons: 1. In the conquering philosophy of the leaders of the nomad structures the following elements played a crucial role: the population, the quantity of cattle owned, and the resources (the salt in the case of Transylvanian Basin). At the same time the *territoriality*, as conceptualization of the “people” is a Western European feudal political conception (Szűcs 1997, 91–97); 2. The term Transylvania is a geopolitical concept unknown in the ninth century, so this approach is ahistorical.

<sup>17</sup> To this end see: Szűcs 1997, 91–97.

<sup>18</sup> “The topographical position of the cemeteries makes this situation even more unequivocal: these sites are situated on the higher terraces of the Someş River along the Roman roads, which indicates the continuity of infrastructure. From there, they could control the whole Someş valley”. Gáll 2013b, 480.

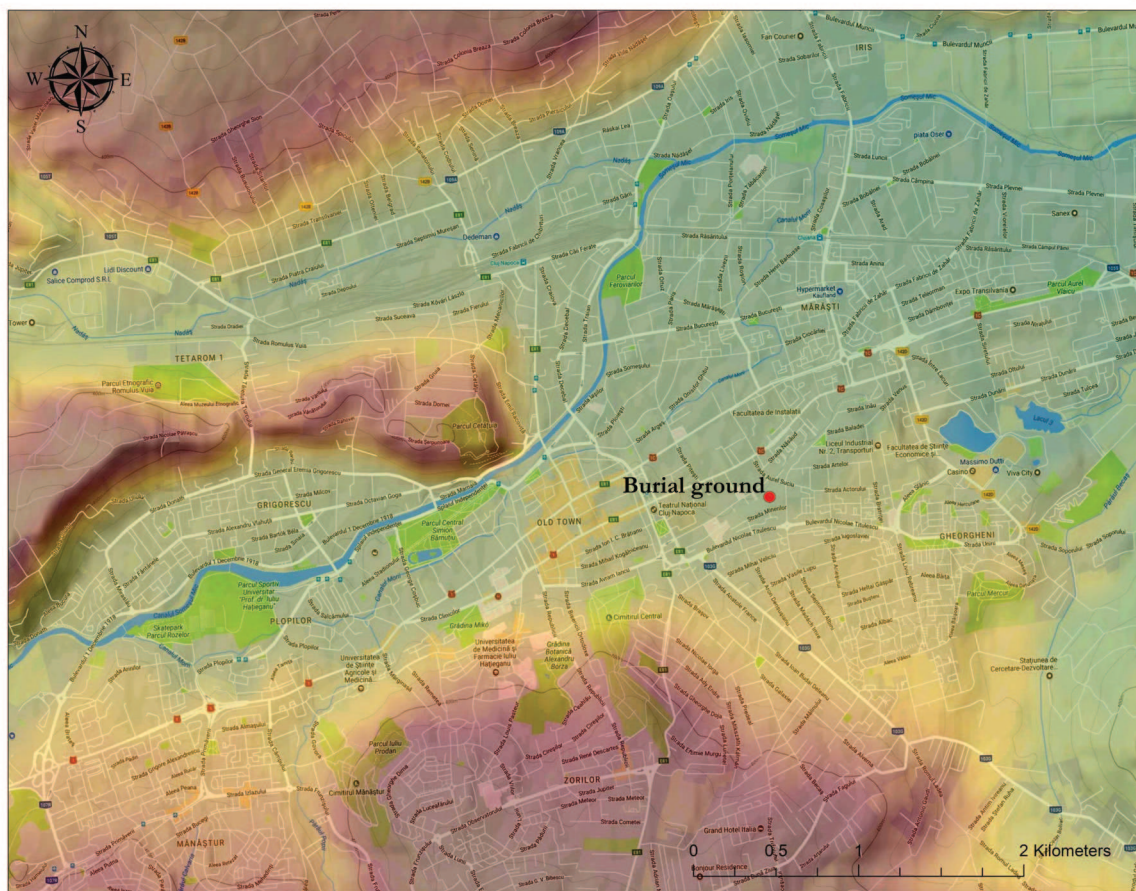
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2

Plate 1. Cluj-Napoca on the first military map; 2. Map of the present-day city of Cluj-Napoca.

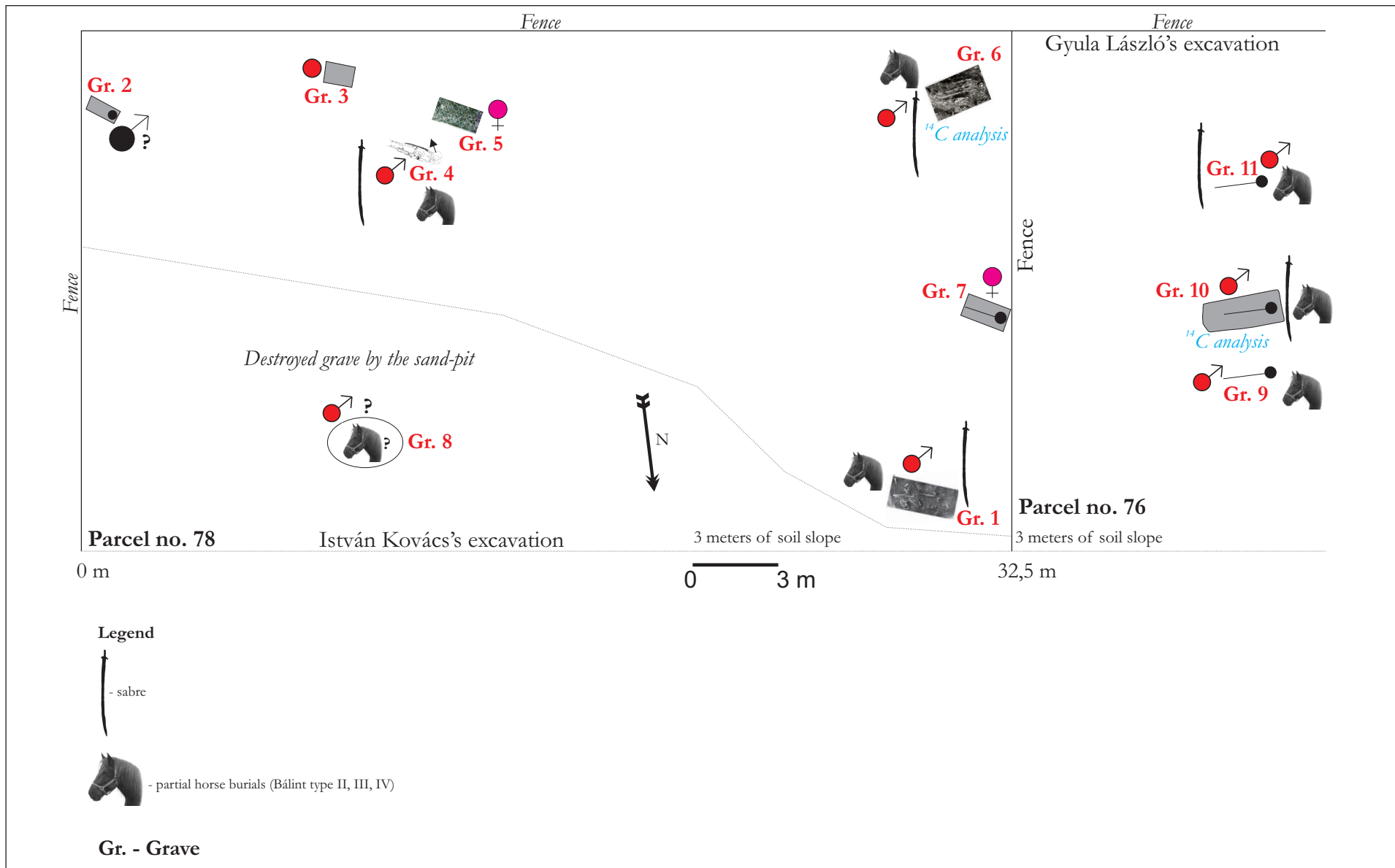


Plate 2. The funerary spot in Zápolya Street, Cluj-Napoca.



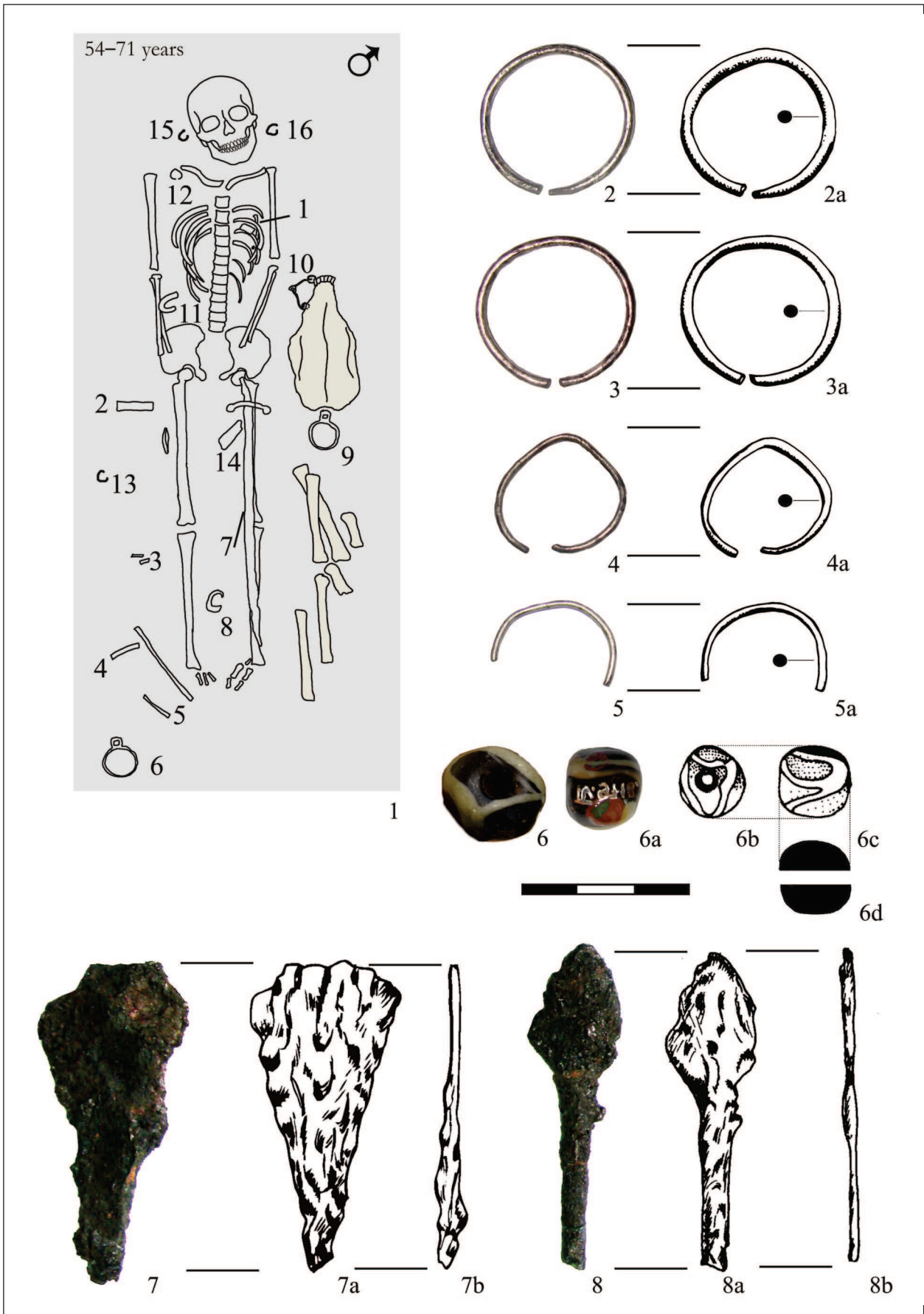


Plate 3. Grave 6.

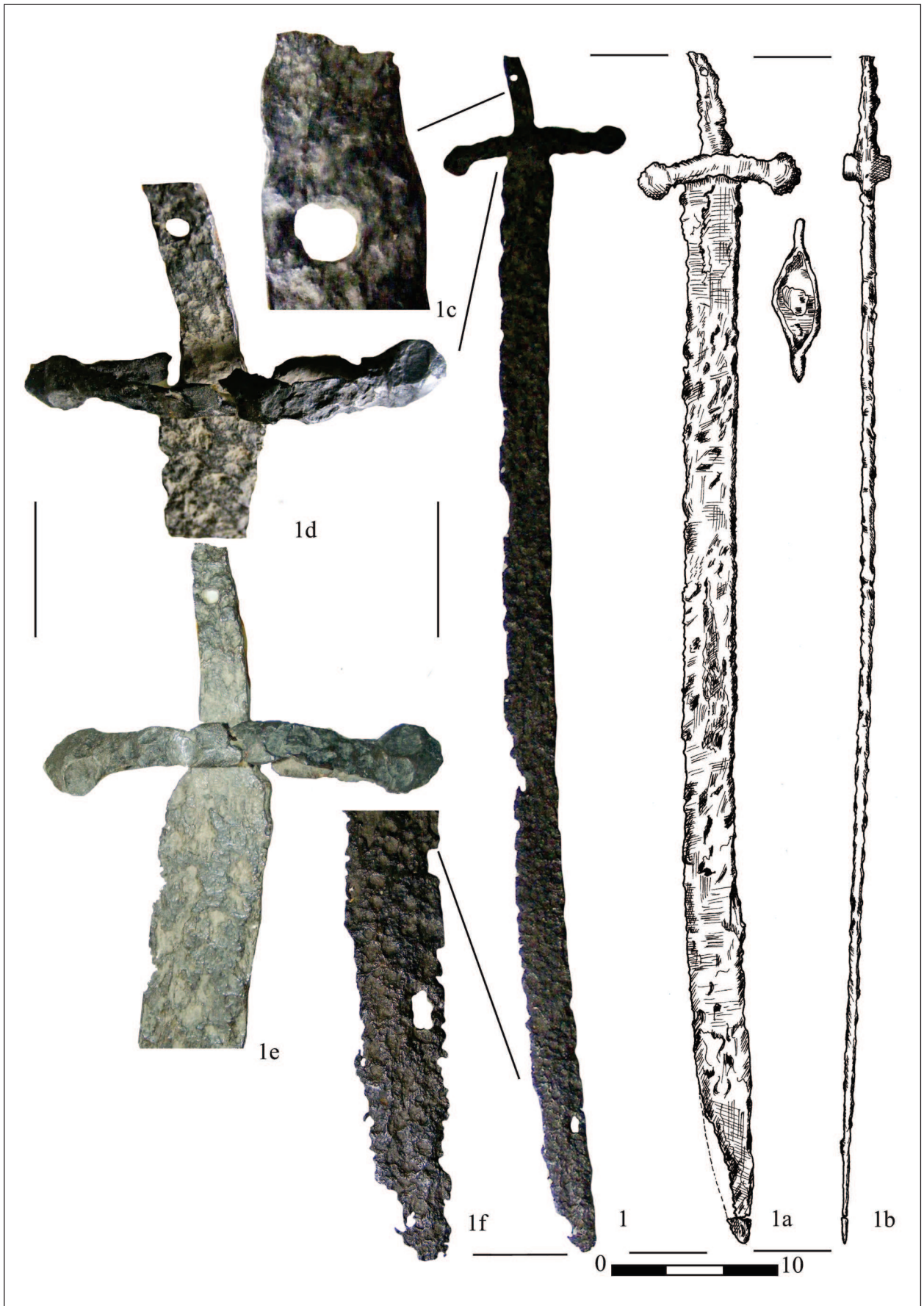


Plate 4. Grave 6.



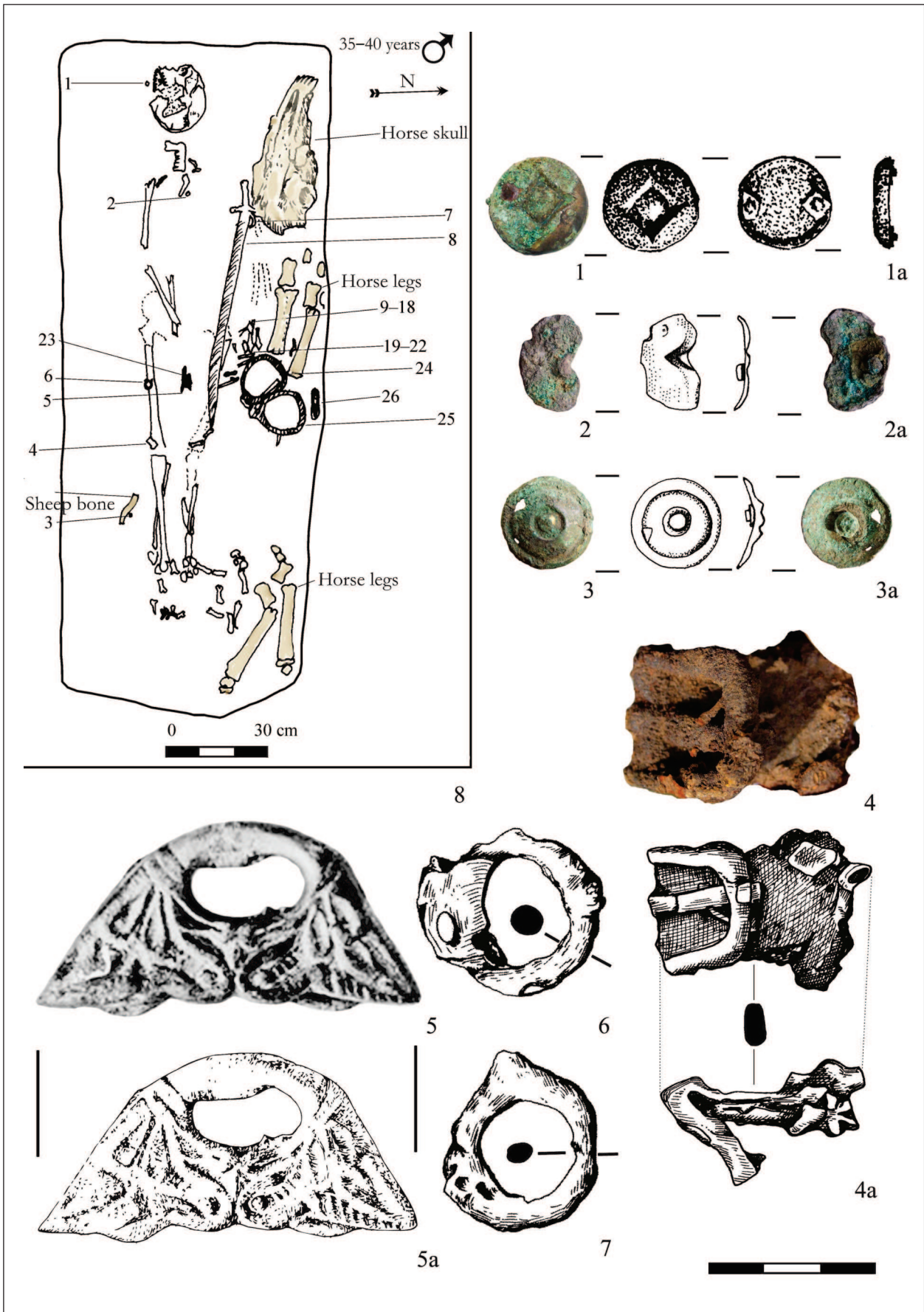


Plate 5. Grave 10.



Plate 6. Grave 10.



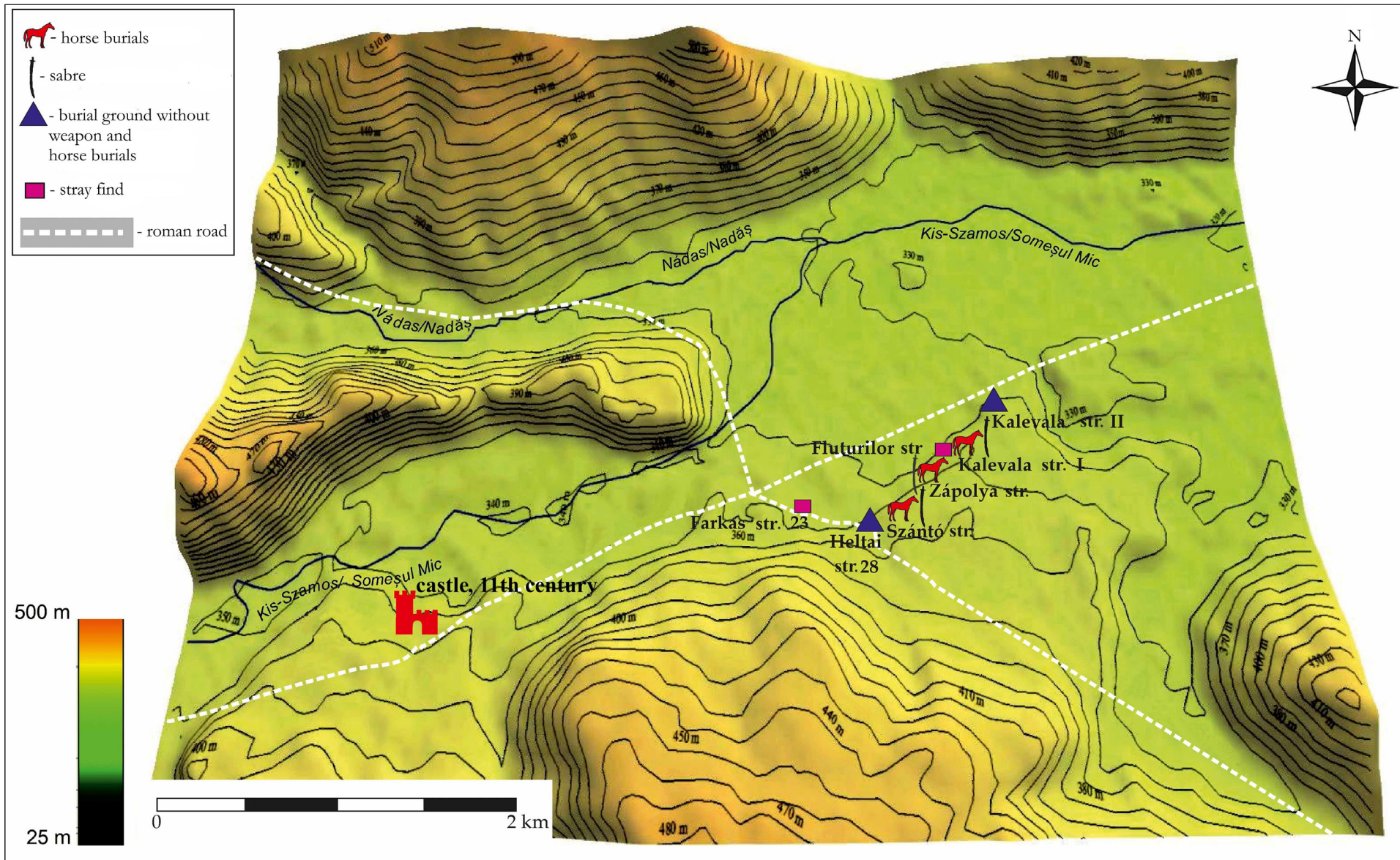


Plate 7. The archaeological discoveries dated to the tenth-eleventh centuries from the territory of the city of Cluj-Napoca and the Roman Road, illustrated in 3D.

Plate 8. The Transylvanian Basin and the possible route of the Magyar conquest.

