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Nemanja Mrđić - Angelina Raičković

## SOLDIER BURIALS WITH WEAPONS AT VIMINACIUM CEMETERY

Nemanja Mrđić  
Archaeological Institute Belgrade  
Knez Mihailova 35/IV  
11000 Belgrade  
SERBIA  
nemanjamrdjic@gmail.com

Angelina Raičković  
Archaeological Institute Belgrade  
Knez Mihailova 35/IV  
11000 Belgrade  
SERBIA  
angelinaraickovic@gmail.com

### INTRODUCTION

Viminacium, a city which later became the capital of Moesia Superior, and the legionary camp of *legio* VII *Claudia* near the city existed for over 400 years in continuity. Systematic research into Viminacium's cemeteries has revealed more than 14,000 graves and facilitated comprehensive analysis of burial customs during Roman period (Fig. 1). Until now not a single part of the entire cemetery could be identified and interpreted as legionary in character, although large areas around the urban zone have been excavated. There was a long-standing burial tradition which included weapons as grave goods. The pre-Roman population consisted of the Celtic Scordisci tribe, whose weapons-related customs were confirmed in a number of graves discovered at the Pećine site. During the Migration Period, Germanic tribes brought rites which included placing weapons in graves.

Archaeologists generally agree that placing weapons in graves was not a common practice although some exceptions exist throughout the imperial period (Bishop-Coulston 2006, 33-34). These examples are found both in Roman and Romanized contexts, and can also be found in regions under Roman influence.

Legionary soldiers (predominantly members of *legio* VII *Claudia* and *legio* IV *Flavia*) left numerous traces in all segments of life as a part of the active population. The practice of burials without weapons was generally respected, except in several cases which could be interpreted as soldiers' graves with weapons as burial inventory. Among the thousands of excavated graves this small number is almost insignificant.

Generally, most of the graves interpreted as being those of soldiers have belts as their inventory.<sup>1</sup> Some are interpreted as soldiers based on fibulae or certain other finds. Therefore, we can accept that weapons were not placed in graves as a common burial custom.

### WEAPONS INVENTORY IN GRAVES

Daggers, spears and arrowheads account for the highest number of weapon finds. Knife and dagger finds are discussed in the paper by M. Korać and S. Golubović (in this same volume). Overall, arrowheads are the most common weapon finds in graves at Viminacium. Some graves with arrowheads, when observed in their full context with other finds, were excluded, especially if they were women's graves. The reason for this

was that arrowheads could be interpreted not as burial inventory, but the cause of death. When a person was cremated, these arrowheads could be mistakenly interpreted as a component of the grave inventory together with the bodily remains and other regular and burnt grave goods from an *ustrinum*. To some extent, this could be also the case with men's graves.

In skeletal burials arrowheads would be normally treated as grave inventory unless found within the human bodily remains. Grave G-152 from the Pirivoj site is one of the examples in which two wounds inflicted by arrows and one by a sword were recognized on the bones. An arrowhead was still plunged into the femur when the skeleton was uncovered.<sup>2</sup> Although this grave had no other finds except the arrow in the femur, the deceased was designated a soldier based on stress markers on the bones typical for prolonged wearing of armor. Unfortunately this was the only arrowhead found in a Roman skeletal grave.

Spears are the next highest in the number of weapons in the inventory. Finally, only one sword and shield complete the list of weapon finds.

#### GRAVE TYPES WITH WEAPONS INVENTORY

There are few grave types with weapons as burial inventory.

The first grave type is Mala Kopašnica-Sase (Fig. 2). These graves are a typical form of cremation graves from the first to third centuries, and they have their origins in the burials of local indigenous populations in the eastern Balkans.

Weapons were found in two well graves. In spite of endless discussions as to whether these are graves, sacrificial pits or something else, we decided to mention some of them in this paper. G<sub>1</sub>-263 has two arrowheads in its inventory and possibly a spearhead in a pile of heavily corroded objects. This well is treated as a grave since cremated human bones were discovered mainly at a depth of 1.65 m but also at lower depths.

<sup>1</sup> Belts and burials with belts at Viminacium will be analyzed in separate studies. Some of these from the eastern cemetery in Viminacium were already published in a text by S. Redžić (REDŽIĆ 2010). All belts from the Viminacium cemeteries are included in Saša Redžić's Ph.D. dissertation and therefore not mentioned in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> GOLUBOVIĆ-MRDIĆ 2010.

The well designated as G<sub>1</sub>-70 contained a fragmented, heavily corroded spearhead, but no human bones were found in this well.<sup>3</sup>

#### INHUMATION BURIALS

*Pećine G-2427 – Burial beneath a shield* (Fig. 3)<sup>4</sup>

Probably the most interesting grave among the soldiers at Viminacium is G-2427<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 3). This inhumation burial is the only example of body lying beneath a shield. The deceased was placed on his back, with hands laid alongside the body. The legs were bent at the knees. The length of the entire grave was 1.3 m. The body's orientation was SW-NE. The grave was damaged by G-2426 in the north-west section. The shield covered the head, torso and legs to the knees.

The shield was the only item in the grave. Only the iron shield binding was preserved. It is notable that there was no umbo (boss) on the shield. The height of the shield was 101 cm, the width in the middle was 55 cm, the width in the upper part 49 cm and in the lower part 42 cm. Also, the curved shape of the shield was not the same in upper and lower sections. The height of the curve was 19 cm in the upper and 10 cm in the lower section. The shield binding consists of straps that are 1.8 cm wide and 2-3 mm thick. Very small wooden fragments were still preserved between the straps and nails. The nails were positioned every 10-15 cm around the shield binding.

There are no elements to date this burial.

*Više grobalja G-443*<sup>6</sup>

The body of the deceased was laid in a simple pit. The grave was badly damaged by earthworks at the time of discovery. The skeleton was scattered, so there is no precise information on the position of the finds. A spearhead and bronze grommet were attributed to this grave as they were found among the bones (Fig. 4). There were no elements for dating.

<sup>3</sup> GOLUBOVIĆ 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Unpublished, Viminacium Project, field documentation.

<sup>5</sup> We are grateful to Snežana Golubović, Ph.D., who managed to find virtually lost photographs from this campaign, including those published in this text.

#### CREMATION BURIALS

*Kod Bresta G<sub>1</sub>-20* (Fig. 5)<sup>7</sup>

Rectangular grave pit with charred sides (148 x 75 cm) and numerous lumps of burnt soil, ash and charcoal. The grave pit was damaged by earthworks.

Grave inventory: spearhead (1); bone pendant (2); iron and bronze items (3); heart-shaped pendant, probably part of a riding harness (4) – several analogies can be found at other sites in Serbia;<sup>8</sup> the bronze pendant was probably a component of riding gear (5) – a similar find can be seen in the Belgrade City Museum, 3281/III<sup>9</sup>; iron key (6); iron tools (7); fragments of 3 glass balsamaria (8).

*Pećine G<sub>1</sub>-91* (Fig. 6)<sup>10</sup>

Leveled grave pit, partially damaged by a later skeletal grave. Remains of the deceased were severely cremated.

Grave inventory: socketed arrowhead (1); clay oil lamp – Firmalampen type (sketch not found in the documentation);<sup>11</sup> coin of Antoninus Pius (2); 4 bone chips (3); bronze pendant with enamel and button (4); iron decorative button (5).

*Pećine G<sub>1</sub>-329* (Fig. 7)<sup>12</sup>

Leveled grave pit with charred sides.

Grave inventory: socketed arrowhead (1); jug (2); jug (3).

*Pećine G<sub>1</sub>-579* (Fig. 8)<sup>13</sup>

Rectangular grave pit with charred sides.

Grave inventory: socketed arrowhead (1); amulet box (2), large pot (3); fragmented knife blade (4).

<sup>6</sup> KORAC - GOLUBOVIĆ 2009, 365.

<sup>7</sup> Unpublished, Viminacium Project, field documentation.

<sup>8</sup> VUJOVIĆ 1998, 152

<sup>9</sup> VUJOVIĆ 1998, 152

<sup>10</sup> Unpublished, Viminacium Project, field documentation.

<sup>11</sup> Item is probably in the Požarevac Museum, but it is inaccessible to us.

<sup>12</sup> Unpublished, Viminacium Project, field documentation.

<sup>13</sup> Unpublished, Viminacium Project, field documentation.

*Više grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-58* (Fig. 9)<sup>14</sup>

The grave was discovered in October 1978 at a depth of 1.7 m. This is a leveled grave with charred sides with maximum dimensions of 2.30 x 1.20 m (first level). The grave pit was covered with wooden planks, of which scarce remains were found along the northern and southern edge. Severely cremated human remains were found at a lower level. The preliminary anthropological report at the time of excavation designate these remains as that of an approximately 40 year-old man. The grave is generally dated into the second century.

Grave inventory: iron sword (1); iron dagger (2); bronze belt fittings (3); bronze grommet (4); decorative bronze application (5); red fired bowl (6); bronze coin generally dated into the second century (7); fragmented clay lamp (with stamp reading FORTIS – Firma-lampen) (8).

A fragmented hard-fired red ware bowl was found by the northern side of the first level. By the bowl a bronze coin, the remains of a belt and bronze ring were found. The corroded remains of a sword were discovered on the inner edge of the northern upper level.<sup>15</sup> Part of the sword fell down to the lower level where it was found. A sword pommel is shaped like the grommet. The lower part of the scabbard was also found. Next to the sword a bronze application, possibly part of the scabbard, was laid. Right below it a dagger was found. Small pieces of bronze sheets were discovered by the sword and dagger, possibly belonging to the scabbard of either.

*Više grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-161* (Fig. 10)<sup>16</sup>

A leveled grave with charred sides partially damaged by later graves. At the lower level, the bones of almost the entire skeleton were found, poorly cremated. Anthropological analysis conducted at the time of discovery

<sup>14</sup> ZOTOVIĆ-JORDOVIĆ 1990, 84.

<sup>15</sup> This sword is known only by the poor description in the field documentation. When the authors published this grave in Viminacium - Više grobalja I, the sword was completely omitted. The reason remains unknown to these authors. It can be only assumed that its poor state and rapid deterioration, and the fact that it was burned at the *ustrinum* with the deceased left almost nothing to conserve and present. It is mentioned in all three parts of the field documentation: small finds inventory (C-cards), grave files (G-cards) and field journal. No photograph nor sketch are available, and probably do not exist.

<sup>16</sup> ZOTOVIĆ-JORDOVIĆ 1990, 95.



designated these remains as a man up to 40 years of age. The entire inventory from the grave was heavily damaged by fire at the *ustrinum*. The *terminus ante quem* is marked by a later grave from the Hadrianic period, which damaged this grave.

Grave inventory: spearhead, badly damaged and deformed, only part of the socket remains (1); large pot (2); small pot (3); glass balsamarium (4); bronze coin, illegible and severely damaged by fire (5).

#### Više grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-222 (Fig. 11)<sup>17</sup>

Leveled grave with charred sides. Large animal (bovine) bones were found at the first level. Human bones were laid at the lower level, severely cremated. It was an adult, possibly male (?). The grave was dated into late second or first half of the third century.

Grave inventory: large socketed arrowhead, damaged by fire. Probably rhomboid shape (1); bronze coin (Augustus) (2), in this context in secondary use. The grave was dated using another that this grave damaged. The damaged grave was dated from the reign of Antoninus Pius to the mid-third century; cylindrical lead weight (3).

#### Više grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-461 (Fig. 12)<sup>18</sup>

Damaged leveled grave with charred sides. Cremated bones were discovered at the bottom of the lower level. The grave was dated to the time of Antoninus Pius. All finds were located at the lower level.

Grave inventory: small foliate spearhead, length 12.5 cm (1); bronze knee fibula (2); bronze coin (Antoninus Pius) (3); two bronze grommets (4); two bone chips (5); 9 glass beads (6) bronze heart-shaped pendant (7).

#### Više grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-531 (Fig. 13)<sup>19</sup>

Leveled grave with charred sides. Completely cremated bones scattered on the second level. Jug, spike (?), arrowhead and wild boar tooth were found together in

the southern part of the grave. A lamp was found in the middle and the rest of the items were in the northern section.

Grave inventory: socketed arrowhead (1) large 32 cm long iron spike (2); red fired jug (3) wild boar tooth (4); clay oil lamp bearing the stamp FORTIS (Firmalampen) (5); bronze coin (6); fragmented bowl – imitation terra sigilata (7); red fired bowl (8).

#### Više grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-1697 (Fig. 14)<sup>20</sup>

Leveled grave with charred sides. There were no human remains in the grave. Two jugs and an oil lamp were found in the eastern part of the grave. A third jug was found in the western part. A spearhead was discovered in a bowl on the bottom in the south-western corner. In the center silver pyxis was laid with razor blade below it.

Grave inventory: socketed spearhead, preserved length 13.6 cm (1); 3 jugs (2); clay oil lamp (3); red fired bowl (4); pyxis made from a thin silver sheet (5); razor blade with bone handle (6).

#### INSCRIPTIONS RELATED TO SOLDIER BURIALS

There are many inscriptions of the names and ranks of soldiers in Viminacium.<sup>21</sup> But unfortunately very few provide data related to their rank and vital statistics. All of them were dislocated, damaged or found in secondary contexts. None of these can be related to an exact grave. In this paper we present only tombstones that provide some information on the duration of service and age at death.

The data found on tombstones correspond to the Roman standard recruitment from the ages of 18 to 25. It is notable that almost half of the tombstones were for soldiers killed in action (at least 8 of 19).

<sup>20</sup> Unpublished, Project Viminacium, field documentation

<sup>21</sup> MIRKOVIĆ 1986

NAME AND RANK	AGE AT DEATH	DURATION OF SERVICE	AGE RECRUITED
? centurio	65	35	
?	48	23	25
?	45	22	23
?	37		
?	34	15	19
?	40	23	17
P. Aelius Priscus, miles	50	25	25
L. Cassianus Potens, miles	28	11	17
P. Aelius Priscus, miles		25	
L. Aemilius eques legionis	32	14	18
L. Aurelius Marcianus, miles	30	5	25
L. Valerius Celsus, miles	20	2	18
M. Aurelius Dizzonus, aquilifer	46		
M. Aurelius Rufus, tesserarius	40	20	20
C. Domitius, custos armorum	42		
L. Blacssius Nigellio, speculator	35		
C. Pomponius Valerianus, miles	28		
Aurelius Marcianus, stator legati legionis		26	
C. Iulius Valentius, miles		25	

Table 1. Overview of soldier and officer tombstones with inscribed age at death and duration of service

#### CONCLUSION

Most of the burials with weapon finds belong to cremations of indigenous type. Since this type of burial originated among the pre-Roman indigenous population, the solution should be sought in that direction. Romanized soldiers were obviously influenced by their pre-Roman origins when laying weapons in their graves.

Among the cremation graves of Mala Kopašnica-Sase type there are cases of burials with no human remains deposited in the grave. Among these is Više grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-1697, which contained a spearhead and standard burial inventory but no human remains. Therefore, the custom of making cenotaphs was applied even among Romanized populations.

A unique burial is G-2427, containing a shield. We have thus far found no analogies in the Roman world. The fact that this burial appears in a regular cemetery is

even more intriguing, since we would expect this type of burial in some distant land during a war or military campaigns. This would be a rushed yet honorable burial. We prefer to avoid speculating about it, since this is the only burial that has no other parallels, especially at Viminacium, and it is completely different from anything we have encountered among almost 14,000 burials.

Cremation graves with weapon finds do not differ in any way from other graves of the same type. The burial rite is the same as well. Therefore, we may conclude that all these men were part of the local community, and the placement of weapons in their graves was more a private and individual act which did not influence or change the normal custom of Roman burials with no weapons.

<sup>17</sup> ZOTOVIĆ-JORDOVIĆ 1990, 102

<sup>18</sup> KORAČ-GOLUBOVIĆ 2009, 200.

<sup>19</sup> Unpublished, Viminacium Project, field documentation

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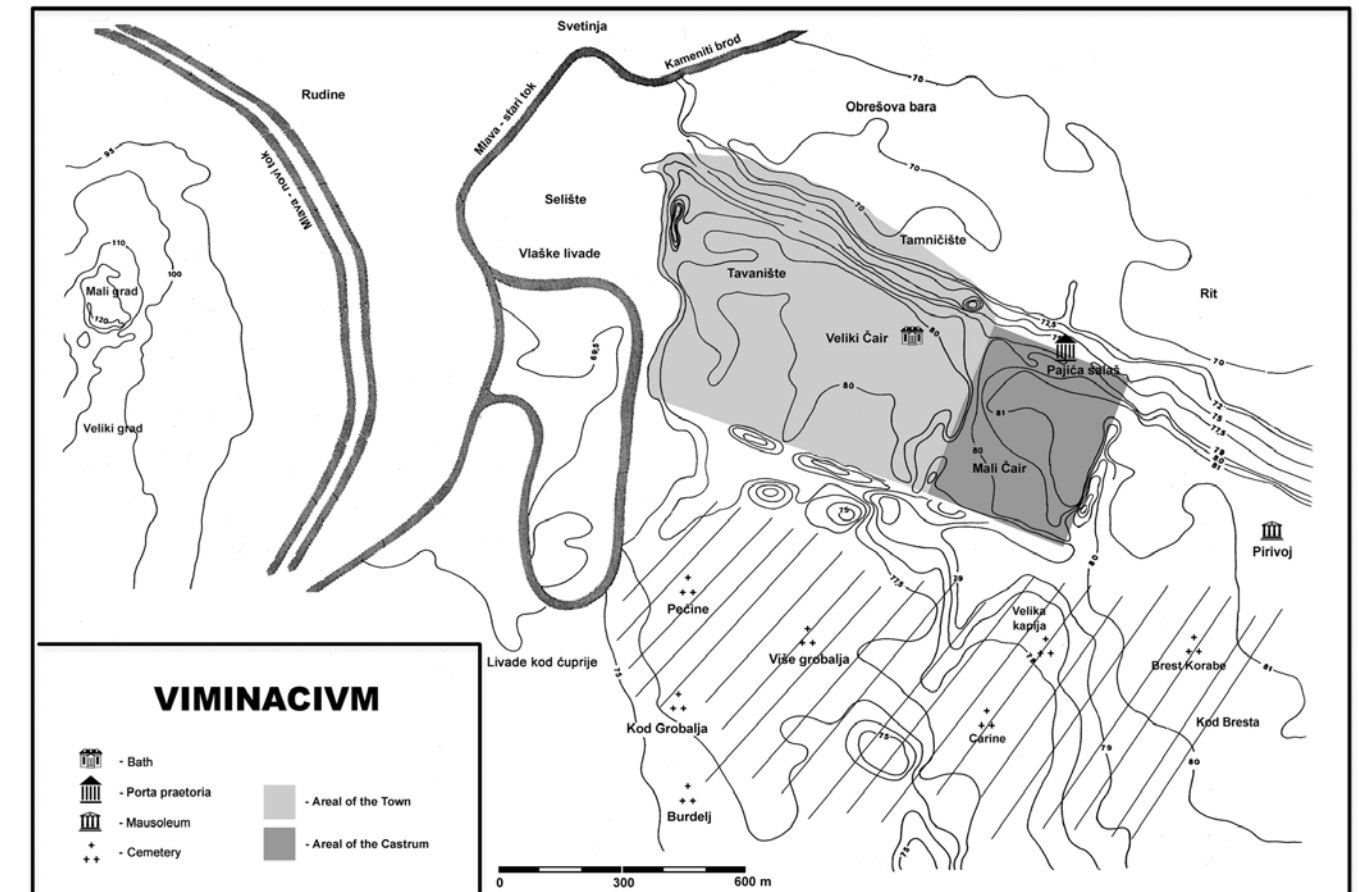


Fig. 1. Viminacium – general layout

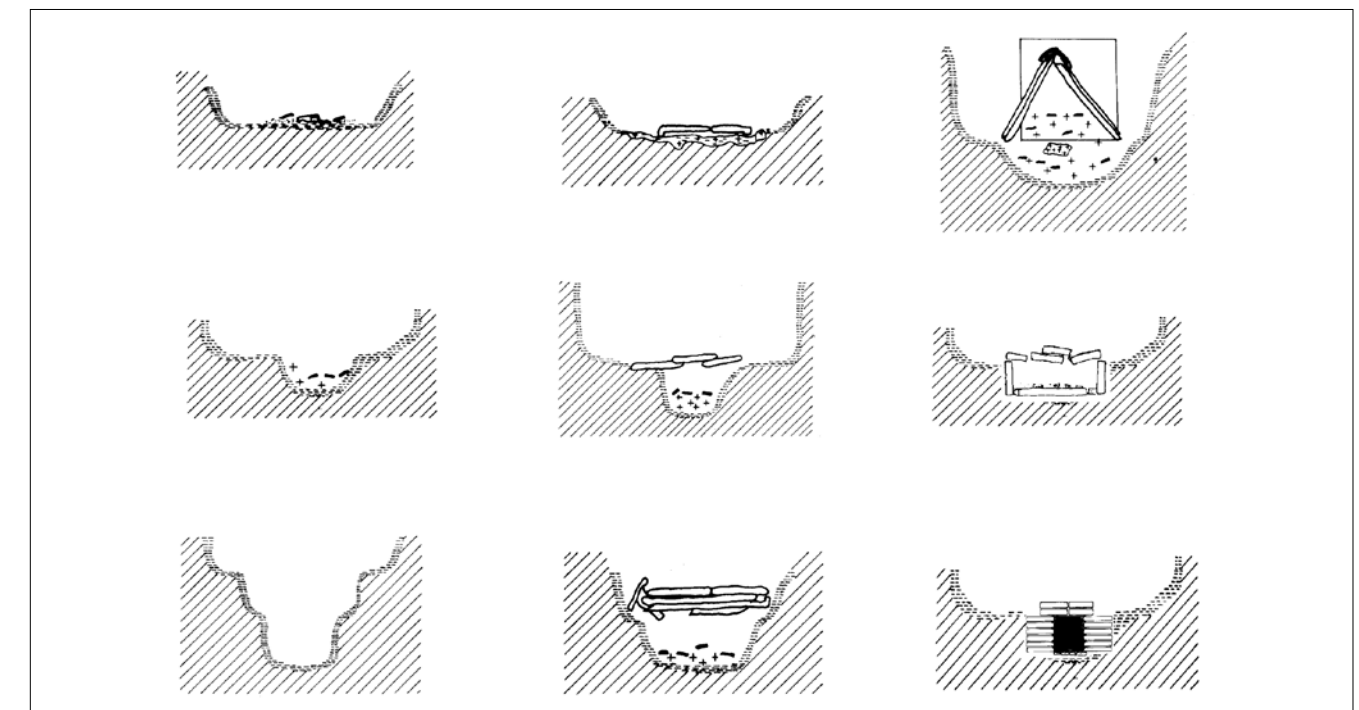


Fig. 2. Mala Kopašnica-Sase, burial types (Golubović 1998)



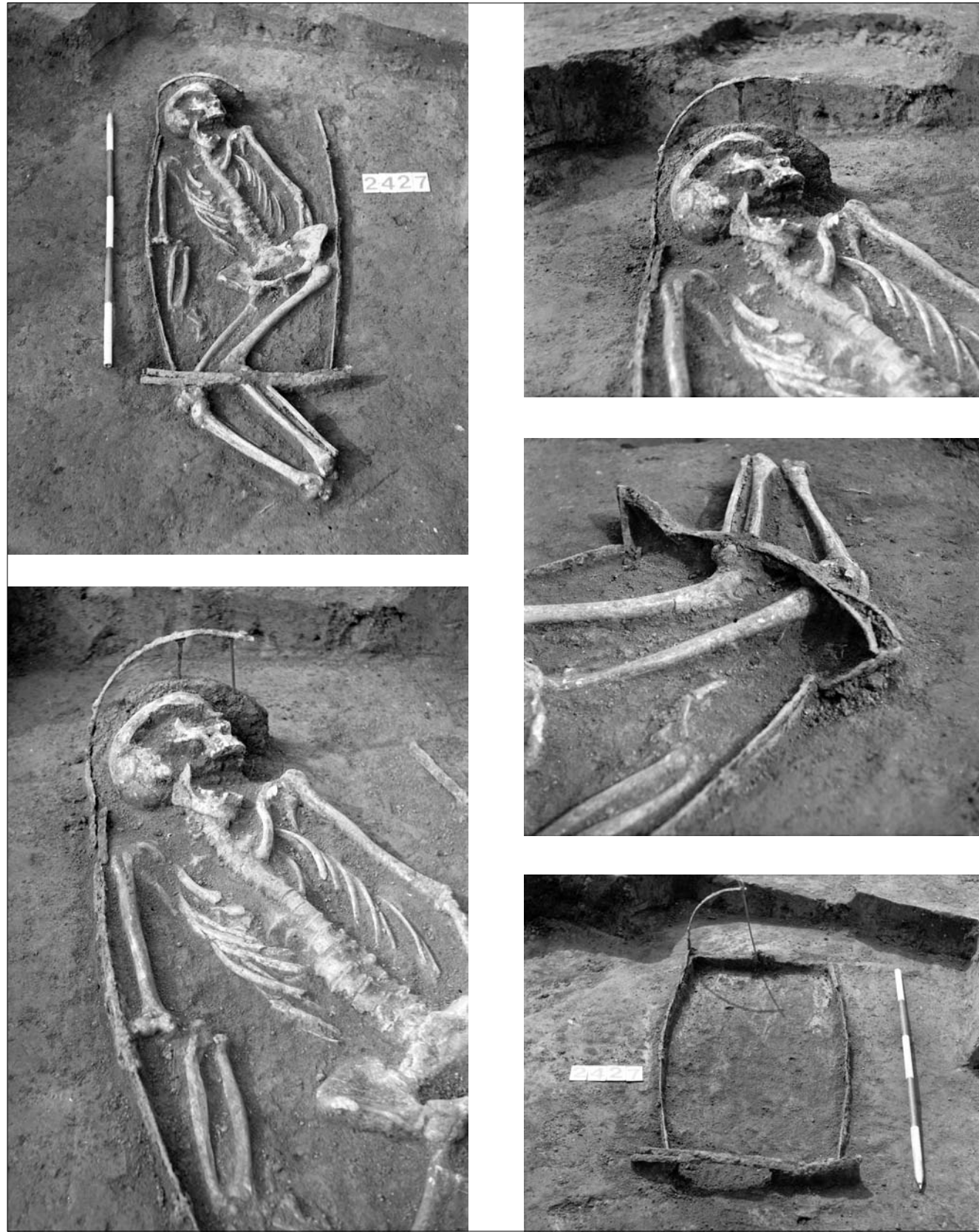


Fig. 3. Pećine G-2427

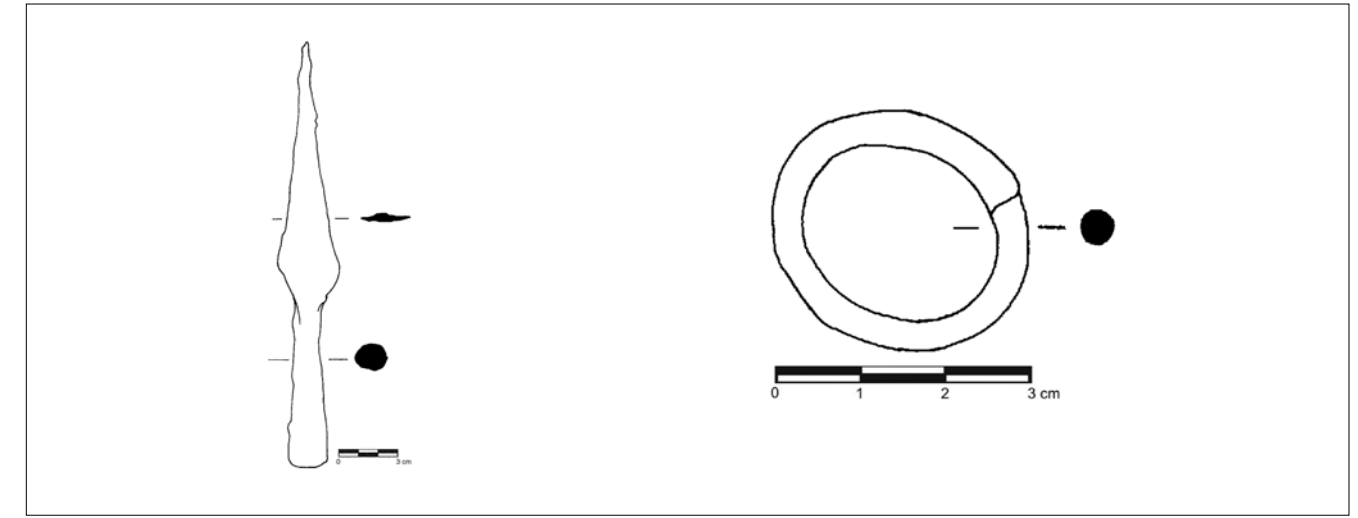


Fig. 4. Više grobalja G-443, grave inventory

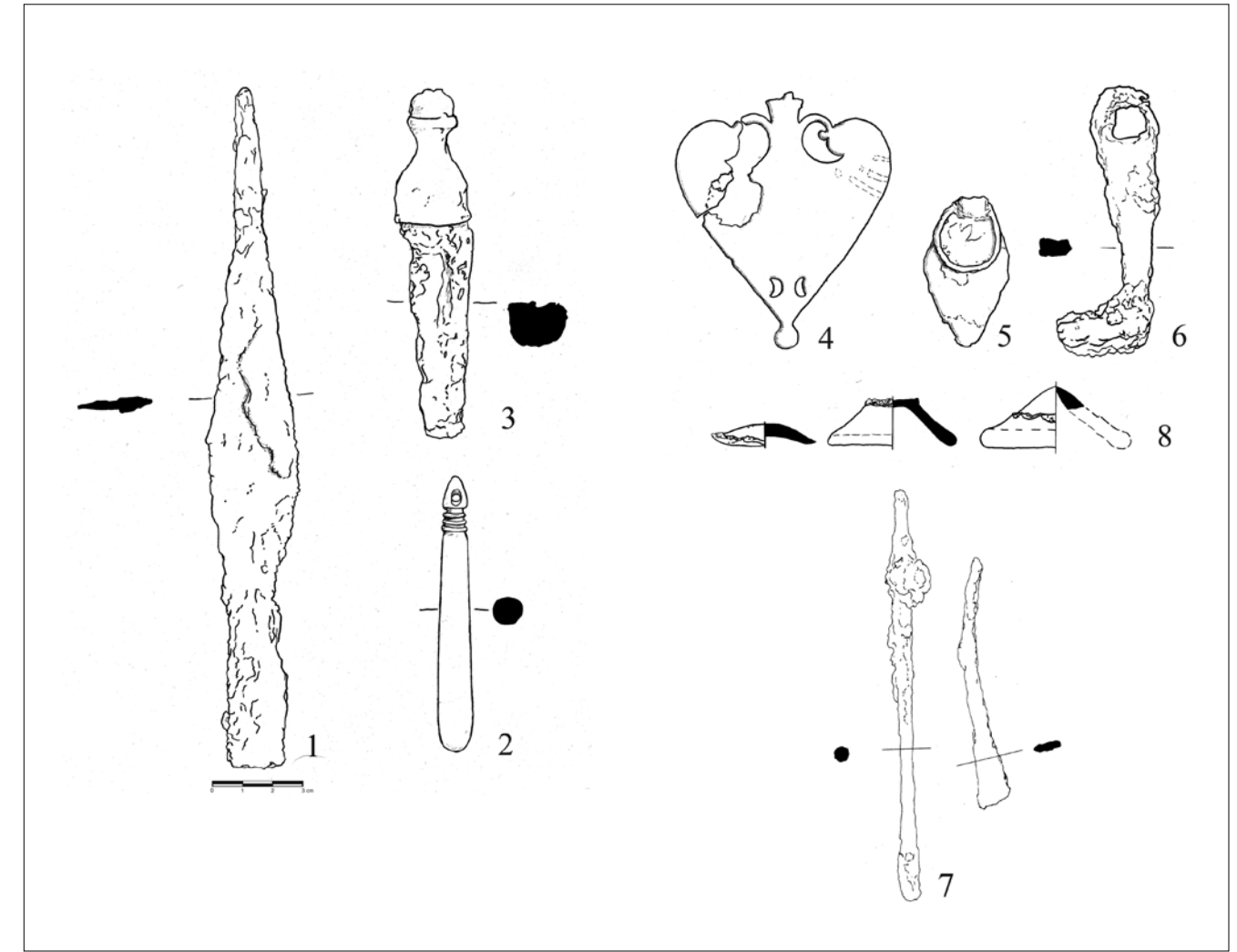


Fig. 5. Kod Bresta G<sub>1</sub>-20, grave inventory

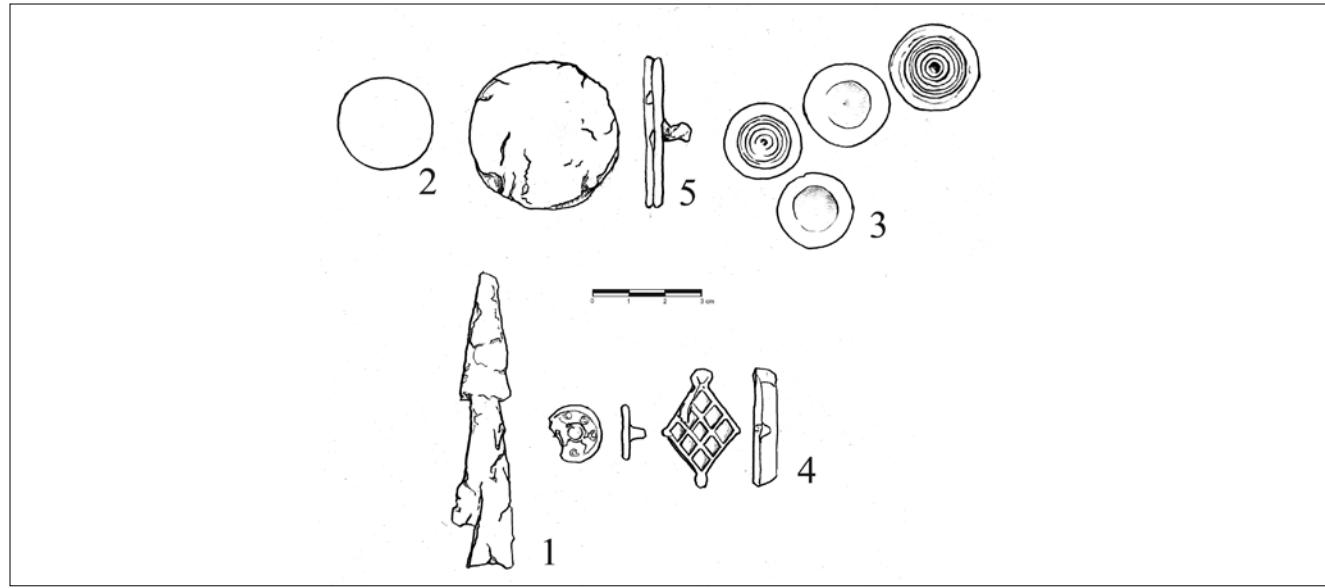


Fig. 6. Pećine G<sub>1</sub>-91, grave inventory

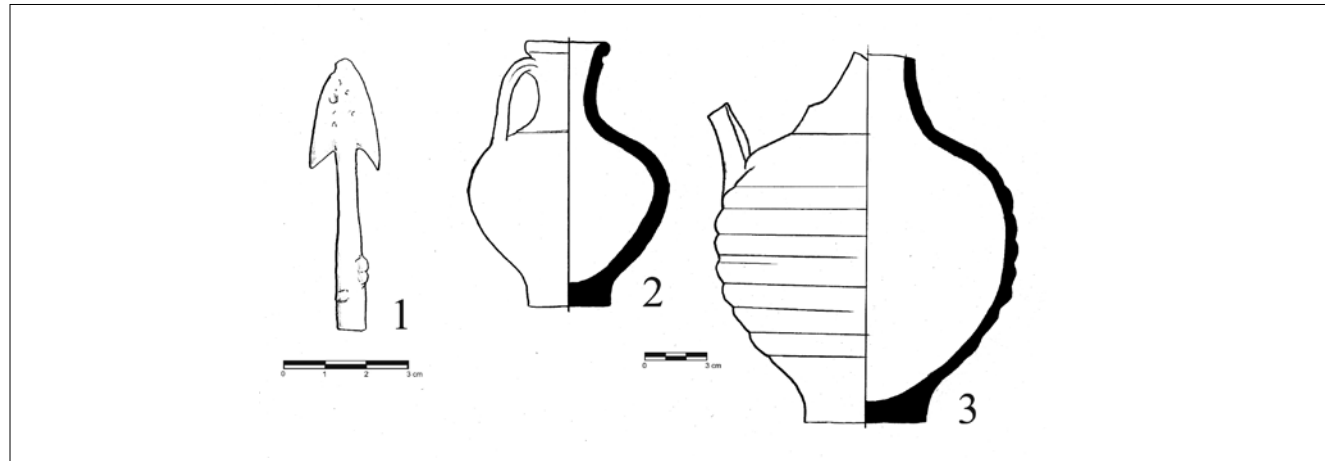


Fig. 7. Pećine G<sub>1</sub>-329, grave inventory

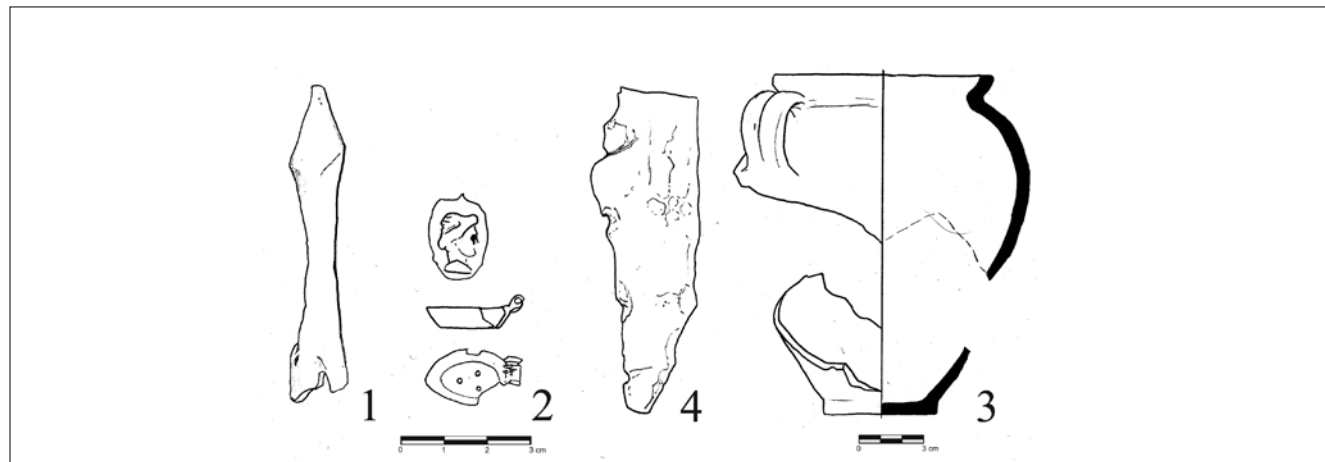


Fig. 8. Pećine G<sub>1</sub>-579, grave inventory

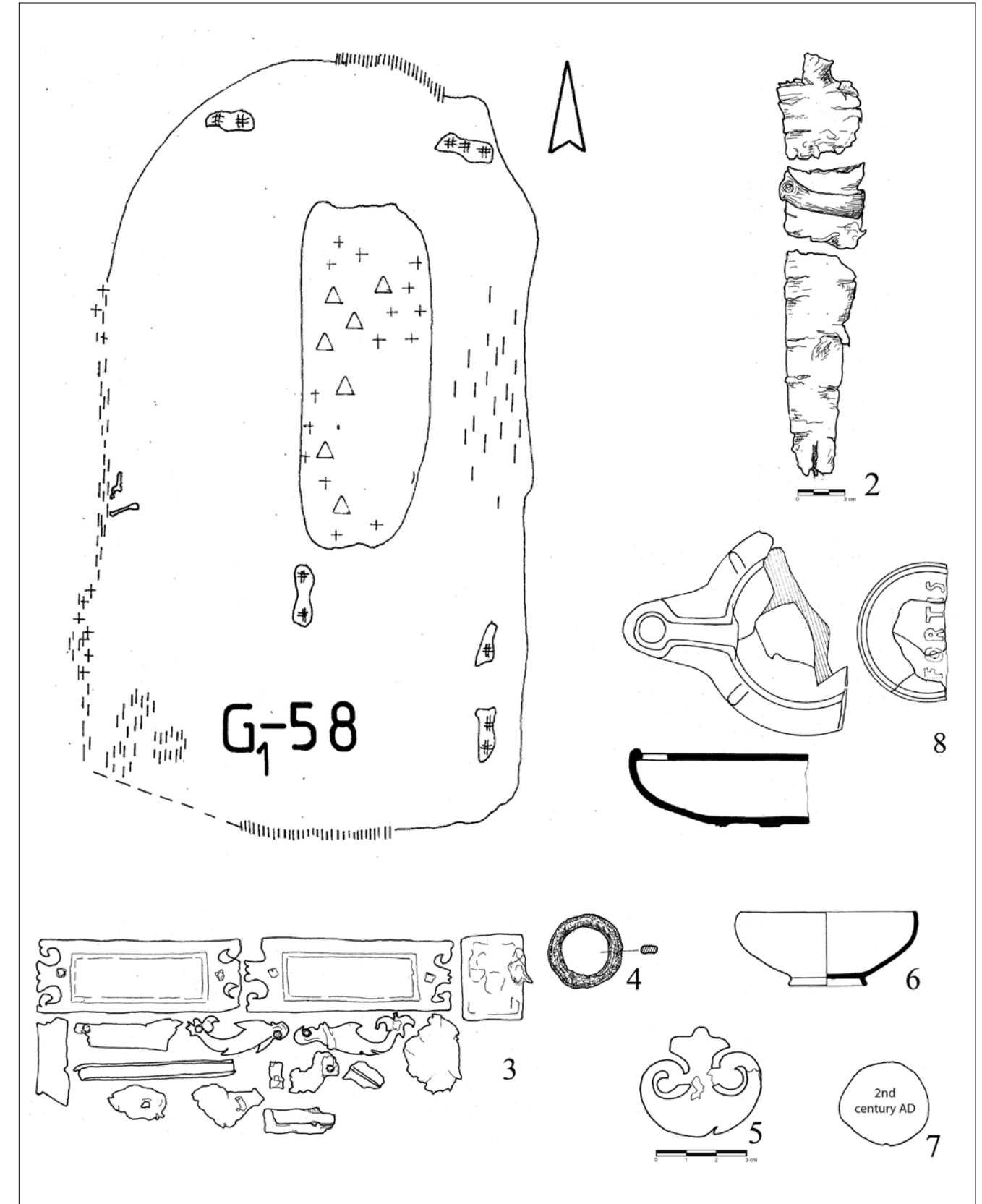


Fig. 9. Više Grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-58, grave inventory



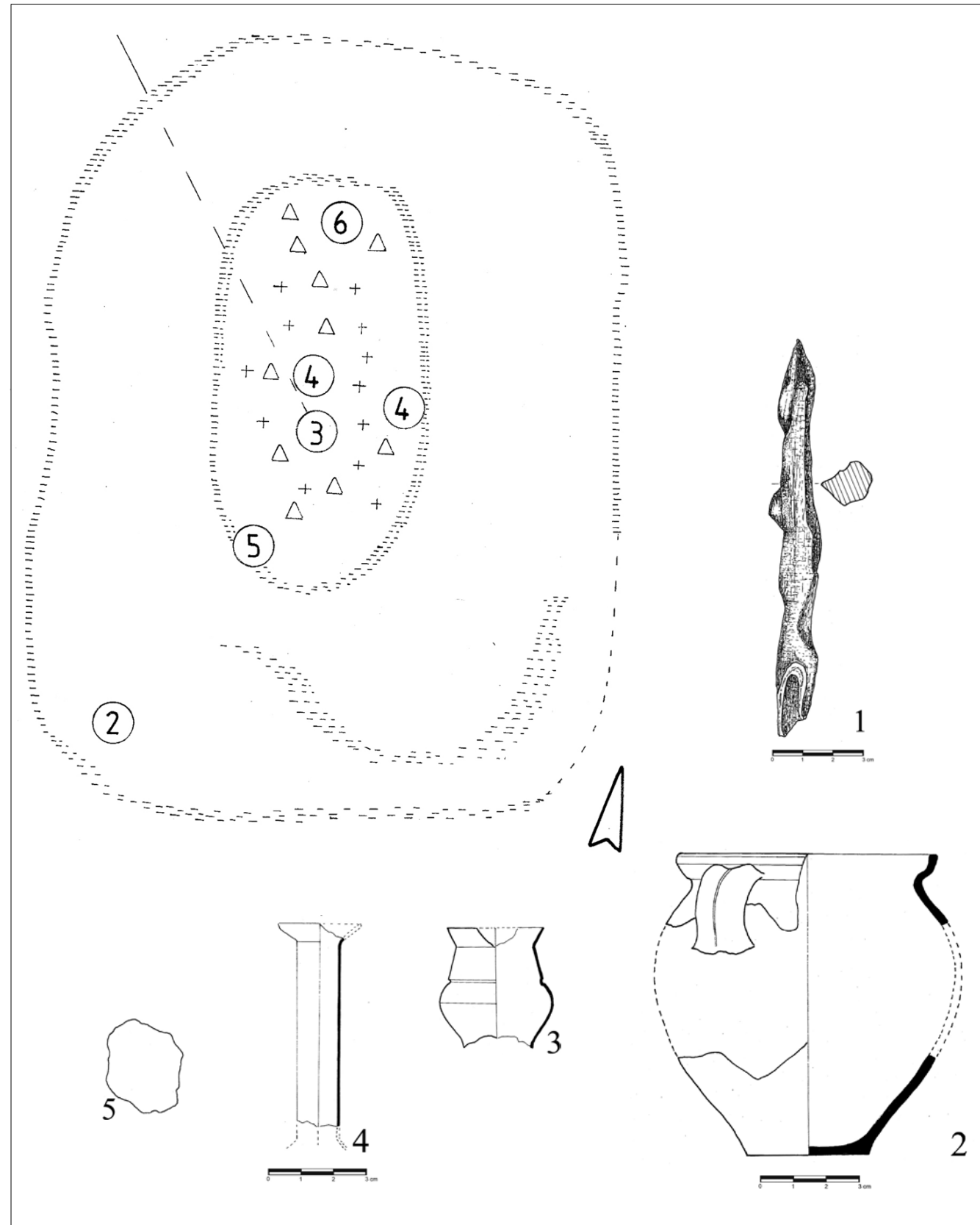


Fig. 10. Više Grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-161, grave inventory

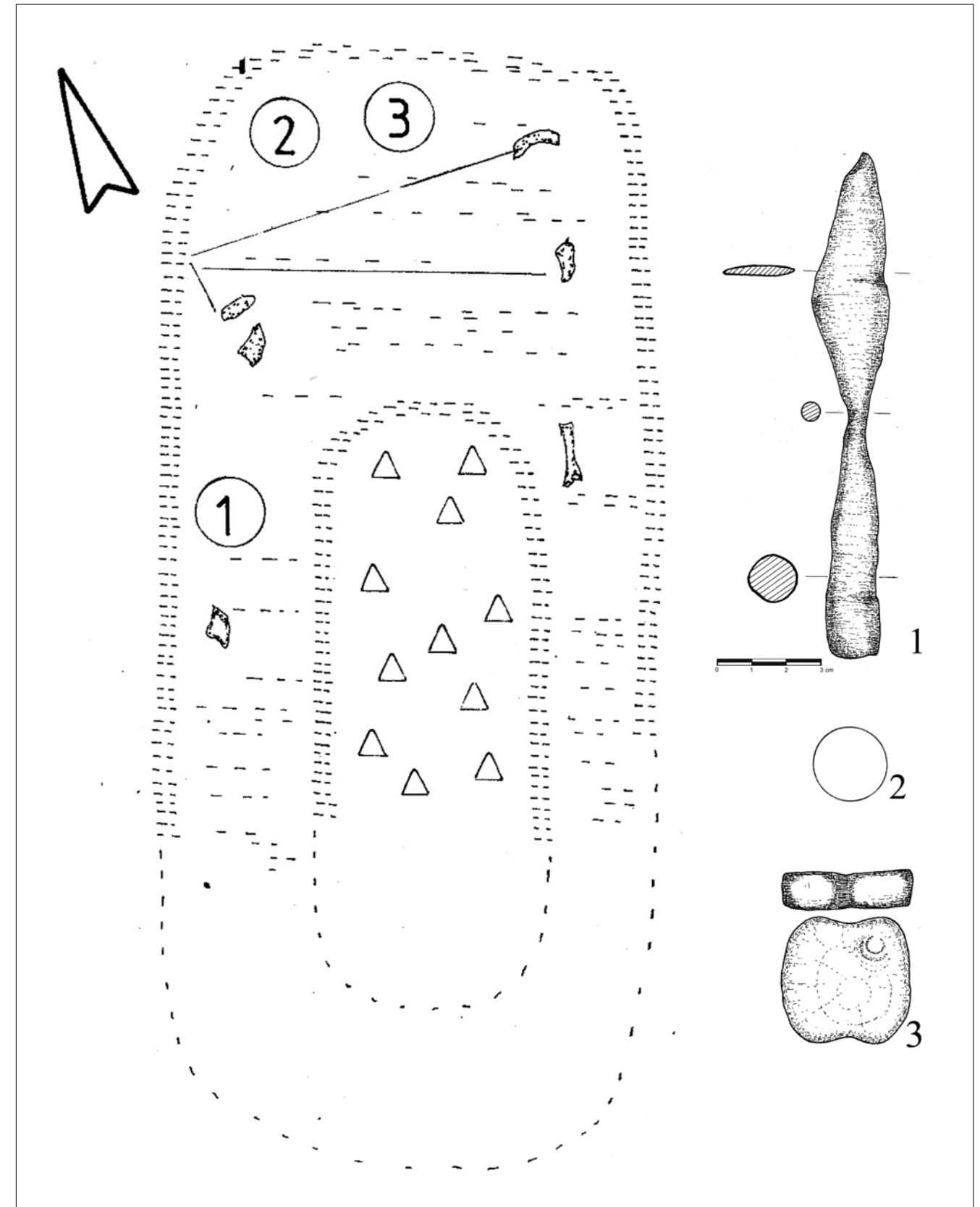


Fig. 11. Više Grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-222, grave inventory

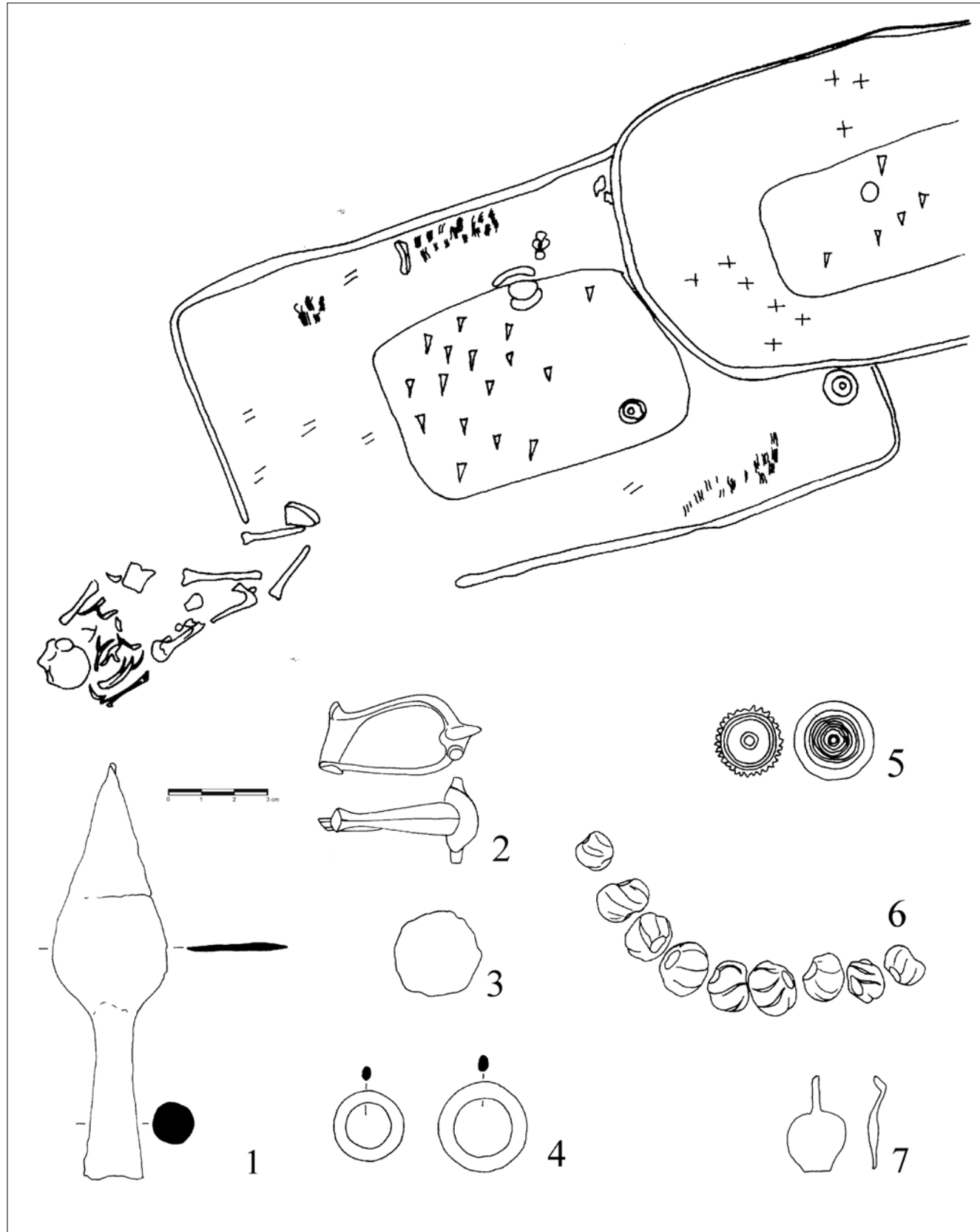


Fig. 12. Više Grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-461, grave inventory

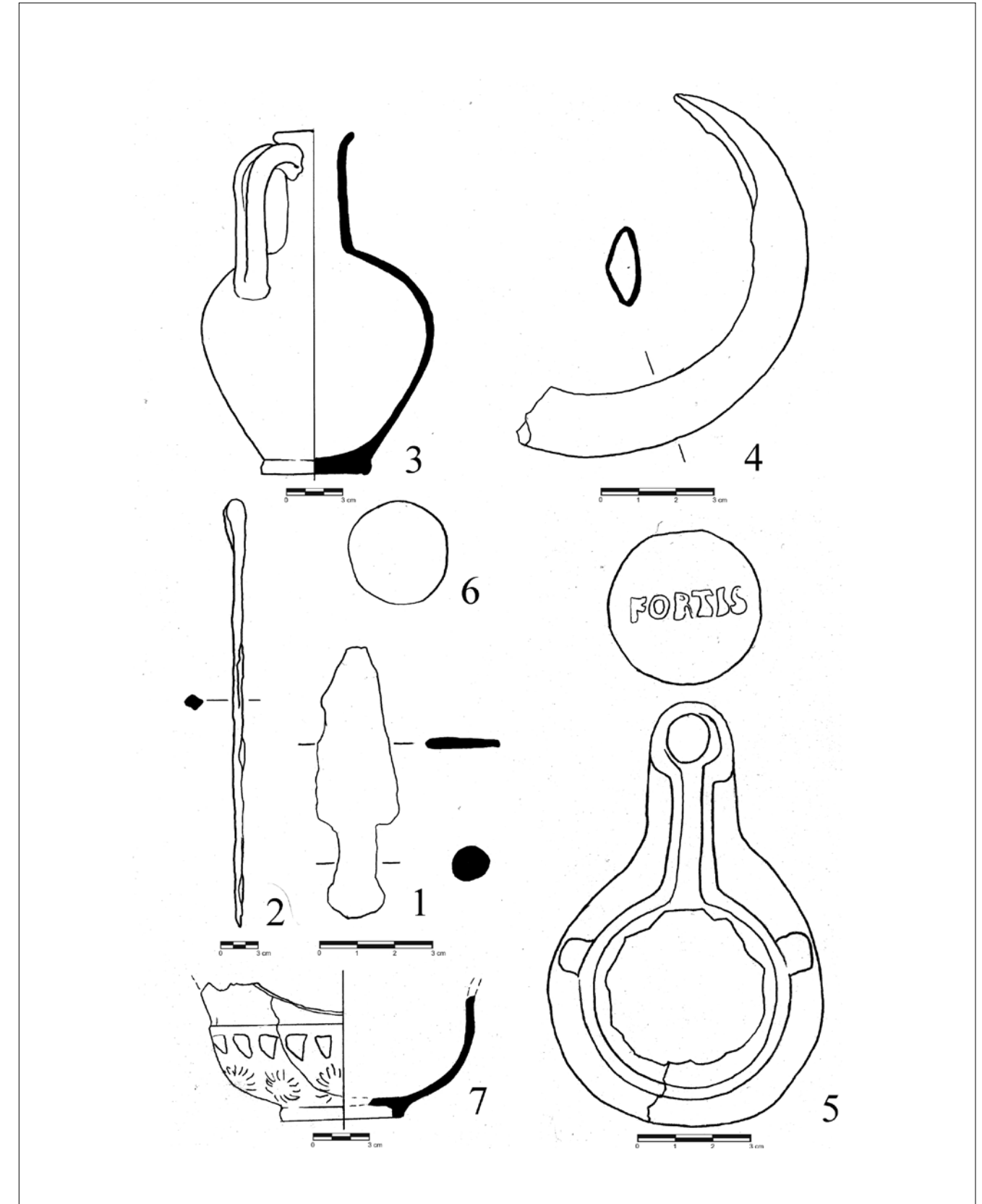
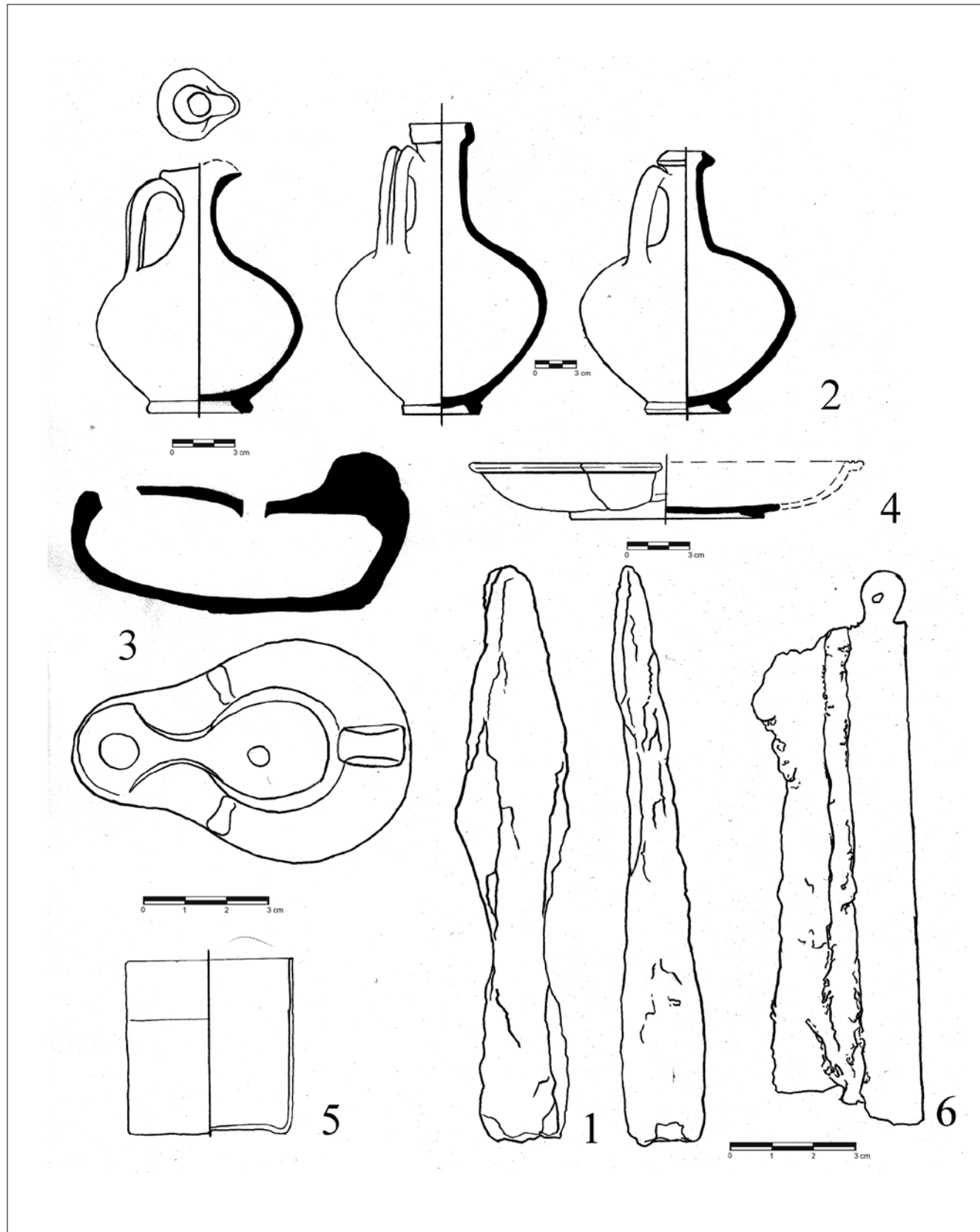


Fig. 13. Više Grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-531, grave inventory



Fig. 14. Više Grobalja G<sub>1</sub>-1697, grave inventory

Miomir Korać - Snežana Golubović

## KNIVES AND DAGGERS IN GRAVES FROM VIMINACIUM

Miomir Korać  
Archaeological Institute Belgrade  
Knez Mihailova 35/IV  
11000 Belgrade  
SERBIA  
misko@turing.mi.sanu.ac.rs

Snežana Golubović  
Archaeological Institute Belgrade  
Knez Mihailova 35/IV  
11000 Belgrade  
SERBIA  
arheosneska@gmail.com

The rescue excavation of *Viminacium* cemeteries was conducted at the site of the present-day thermoelectric power plant and coal strip mine. From 1977 to 1997, cemeteries that extended south and east from the city of *Viminacium* were explored, and as of 2000 the section extending east from the military camp was also examined.<sup>1</sup> More than 14,000 inhumation and cremation graves with various grave goods were excavated. The oldest graves belong to the Celtic necropolis, testifying that the *Scordisci* inhabited this region prior to the arrival of the Romans. However, the highest number of burials dates to the period from the end of the first to the fourth centuries, during Roman domination.

<sup>1</sup> ZOTOVIĆ-JORDOVIĆ 1990; KORAĆ-GOLUBOVIĆ 2009.

During all long-term rescue work, as in more recent excavations, a certain number of daggers and knives were found in the graves. In this paper, only those found in graves from the Roman era will be encompassed herein.

The *Viminacium* cemeteries were biritual: both cremation and inhumation burials were registered. Given the immense number of all explored graves, the total of 89 knives and 5 daggers seems rather meagre. Also, even when considering the total number of knives found in the entire cemetery (345), the number of those found in graves is quite small. The remaining knives were found in different layers, pits or in sacrificial ditches.