

REPRESENTATIONS, SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

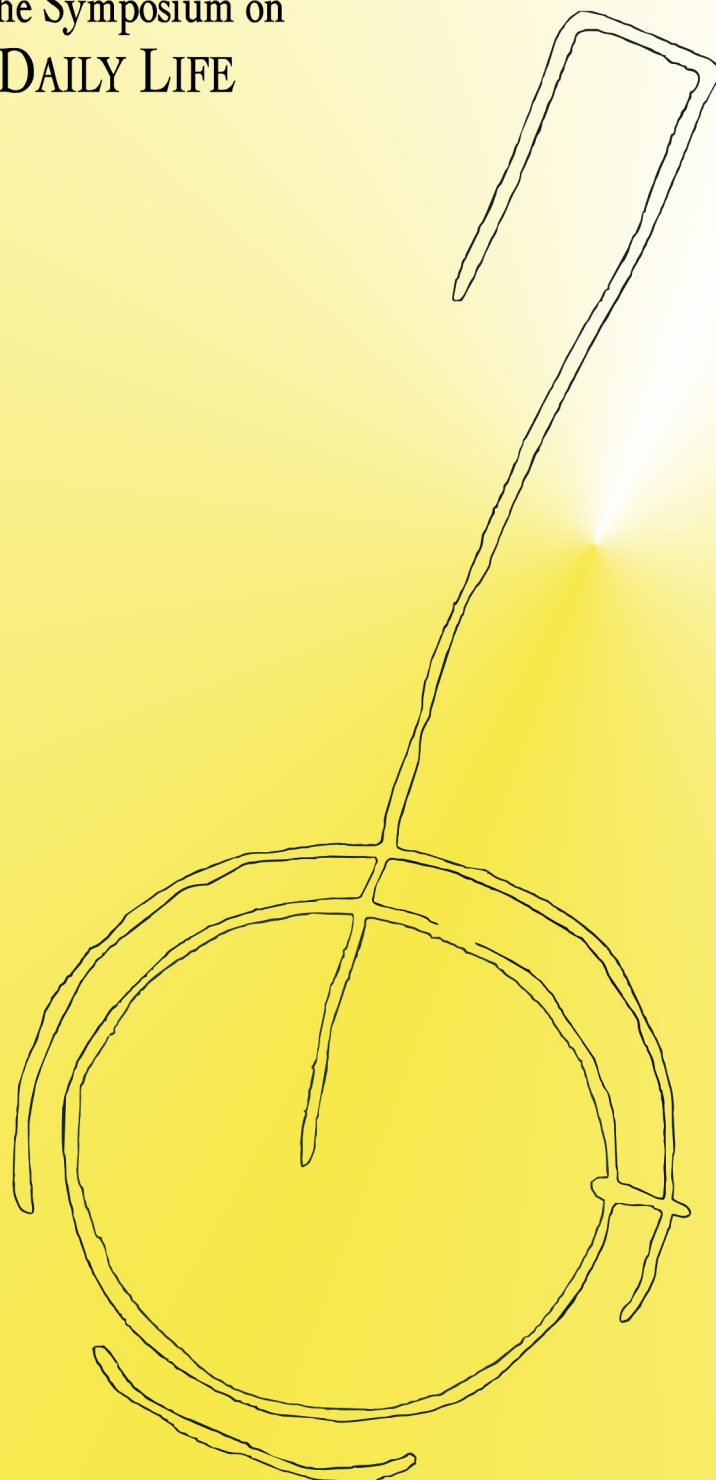
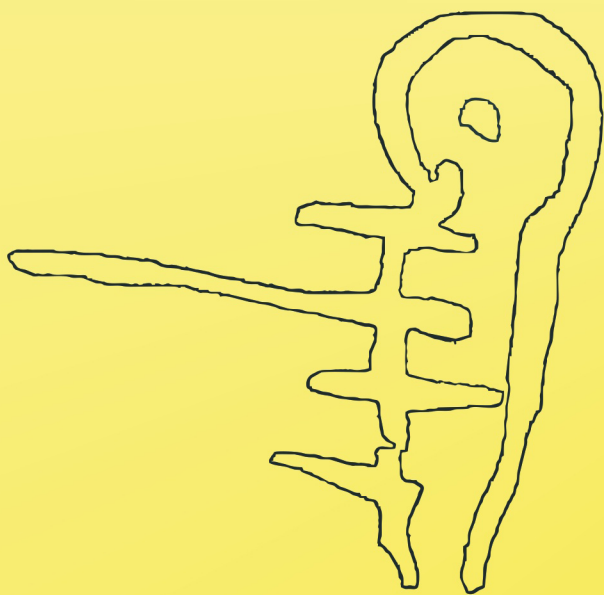
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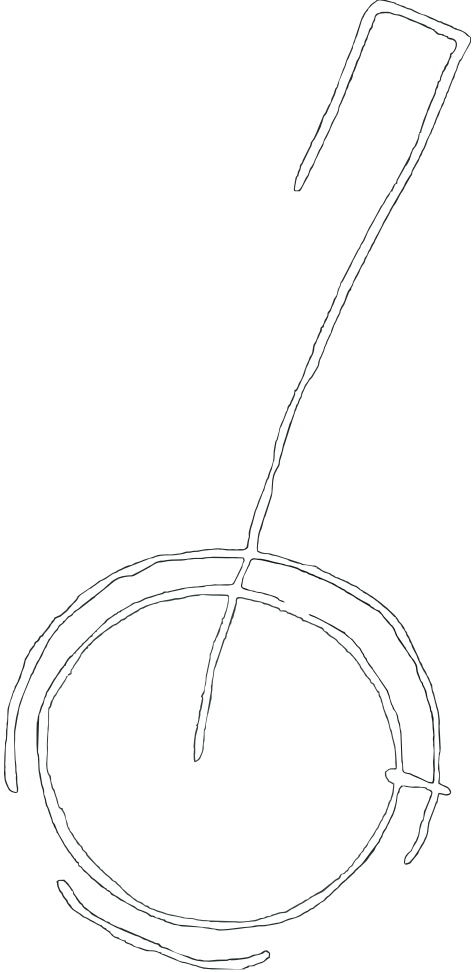
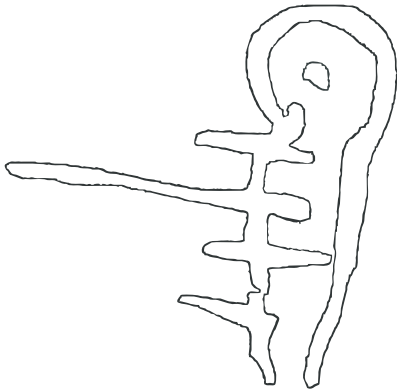
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NICOLAE CĂTĂLIN RIȘCUȚA



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SYMBOLS OF STATUS AND POWER IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF LATE IRON AGE TRANSYLVANIA. SHAPING THE LANDSCAPE*

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Keywords: *Late Iron Age, Transylvania, Celts, Dacians, landscape archaeology.*

Abstract: *In everyday life, the surrounding space is defined by signs and symbols having various functions. They organize the space into a structure that is expressing certain economic, social or ideological concepts, as well as particular relations of power and subordination or social and cultural identities. Some anthropological studies as well as others that are dealing with the cultural geography point to the close functional*

and symbolic connections between the social structures, the systems of authority and the landscape shaping. One of the relevant indicators that define the symbolic relation between landscape and social status or power is the manner of organizing the space both horizontally and vertically. The aim of this article is to discuss the manner in which the Late Iron Age communities from Transylvania organized the space and manipulated the landscape, on one hand, and to identify the symbolic relation between these practices and the dynamics of status and power, on the other hand.

INTRODUCTION

Right from their beginnings, human beings perceived the surrounding space in a way which differed significantly from that of all other terrestrial beings. Writing about this difference, Mircea Eliade noted long time ago that “the upright position [of the human beings] already signals the overcoming of the primates’ condition. We can only stand up when we are awake. Due to the upright position, the space is organized in a structure that is not accessible to the pre-hominids: in four horizontal directions starting from a central *up – down* axis. In other words, the space is organized around the human body, extending ahead, behind, to the right and the left, up and down. Beginning from this original experience – of being thrown into an environment whose expansion was apparently unlimited, unknown and threatening – various manners of *orientatio* emerged; we cannot live too long with the confusion generated by disorientation (Fig. 1). *This experience of the space oriented around a centre is explaining the importance of divisions and the exemplary separation of the territories, settlements and households, and their cosmological symbolism*”¹ (emphasis added). Accordingly, the organization of space is an inherent characteristic of the human (daily) life, and the spatial orientation is facilitated by natural or man-made signs and symbols which are read and understood according to the norms governing the visual language of each community.

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¹ ELIADE 1991, p. 13.

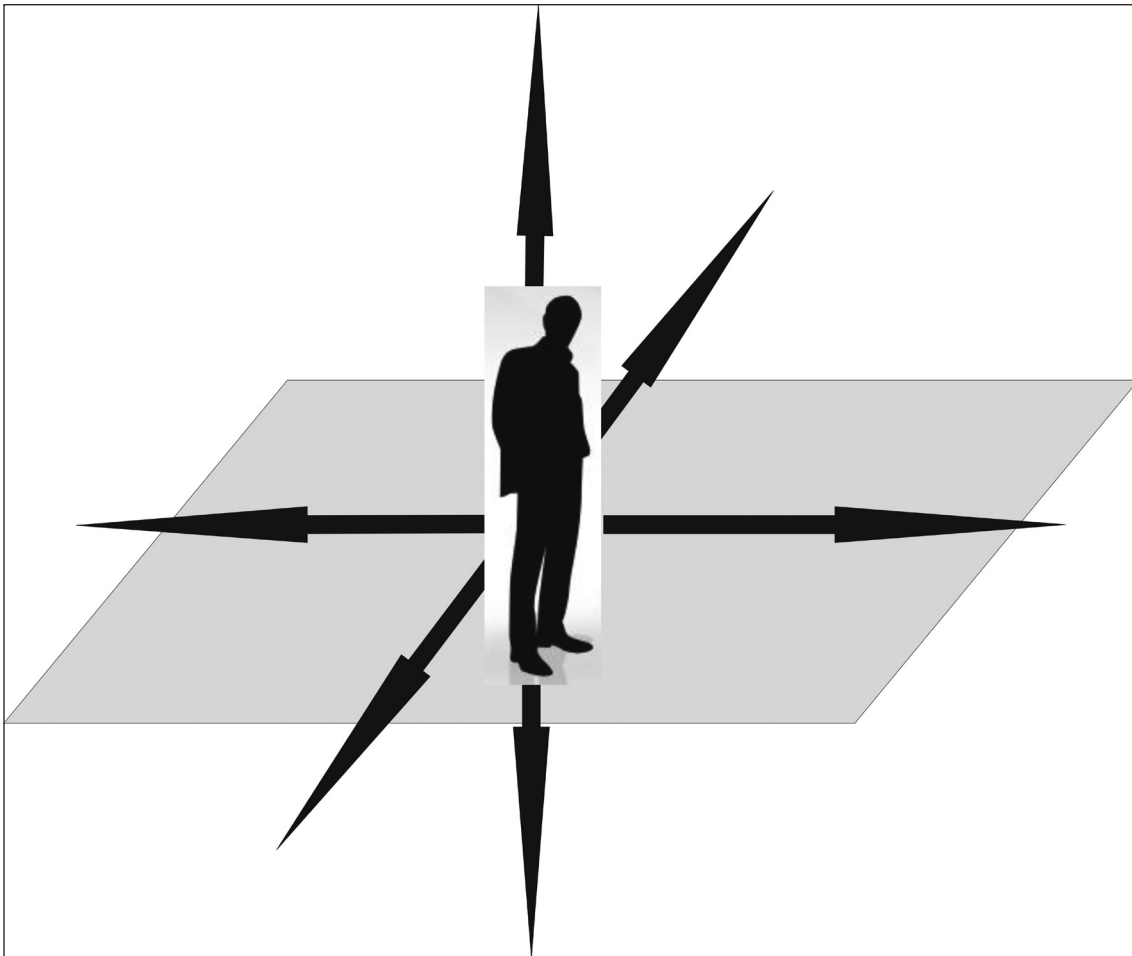


Fig. 1. M. Eliade: "...the space is organized around the human body, extending ahead, behind, to the right and the left, up and down. Beginning from this original experience... various manners of *orientatio* emerged" (drawing A. Rustoiu).

In everyday life, the surrounding space is defined by signs and symbols having various functions: indicators of location or direction, commercial billboards, public and private constructions, religious signs etc. (Fig. 2). Together they organize the space into a structure that is expressing certain economic, social or ideological concepts, as well as particular relations of power and subordination or social and cultural identities. For this reason, some anthropological studies as well as others that are dealing with the cultural geography point to the close functional and symbolic connections between the social structures, the systems of authority and the landscape shaping². One of the relevant indicators that define the symbolic relation between landscape and social status or power is the manner of organizing the space both horizontally and vertically³.

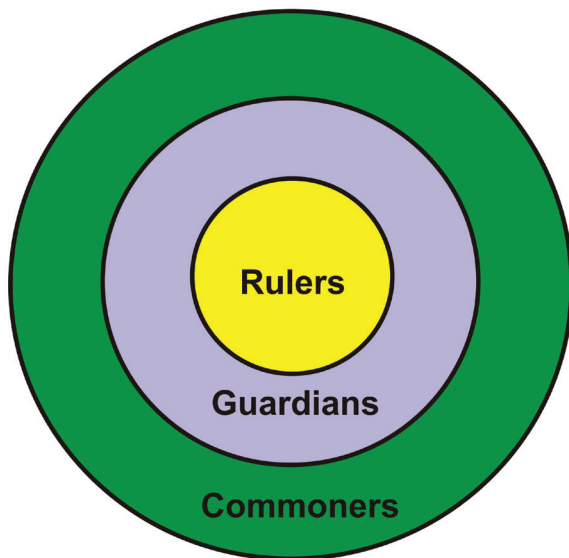
Horizontally, many communities organize their space according to the location of the centre of power. The activity of the entire society gravitates around this centre. However, its location is seldom corresponding to the topographic or geographic centre of the territory occupied by the community. In Plato's "ideal city-state" the authority represents the focal point of the community, which is surrounded by the remaining social layers of the respective society; its ideal "central" location signals the determinant role played by the "philosopher-ruler" in the life of the entire society and not necessarily the topographic organization of the community (Fig. 3/1).

² A synthesis of the theoretical and methodological approaches regarding landscape analysis in archaeology in SEIBERT 2006; see also ROWNTREE, CONKEY 1980; GREIDER, GARKOVICH 1994; FORSYTH, DRISCOLL 2009.

³ GALVANI, PIRAZZOLI 2013.



Fig. 2. “In everyday life, the surrounding space is defined by signs and symbols having various functions...”. Signs, billboards and public initiatives in the daily urban landscape – Cluj-Mănăştur, Romania (photo A. Rustoiu).



1



2

Fig. 3. 1. Organization of the “ideal city-state” according to Plato (drawing A. Rustoiu); **2.** The White House and the Kremlin: symbolic centres of power (after Google Images).

At the same time, the centre of power and its visual representation also play an important symbolic role in the construction and reiteration of collective identity. For example, exceptional architectural embodiments of power, like the White House in the US or the Kremlin in Russia, are often perceived as shorthand for powerful political entities (Fig. 3/2). Their role as symbols of the centres of power is also expressed in official discourse or public sphere, i.e. “the White House has declared...” or “the Kremlin has decided...”.

The vertical organization of the space also offers relevant information regarding the nature of power structures in a given society. In highly hierarchic societies there is a tendency to express social inequality and subordination through the vertical manipulation of the landscape. This is the case, for example, of the fortresses made of earth and timber, and then of stone in the medieval times⁴

⁴ FORSYTH, DRISCOLL 2009, p. 49 note that in Britain during the second half of the 1st millennium AD “the hillforts

(Fig. 4/1) or of the sky-scrappers from the financial capitals of the modern world⁵ (Fig. 4/2). These constructions stand out in the surrounding landscape and are meant to express visually and symbolically the economic and social power of a restricted group. In “pseudo-egalitarian” societies, like those of the rural communities from Iron Age Europe, or in modern democratic societies, social competition is more often expressed in the public sphere and less likely by manipulating the landscape.

Taking into consideration these general observations, the aim of this article is to discuss the manner in which the Late Iron Age communities from Transylvania organized the space and manipulated the landscape, on one hand, and to identify the symbolic relation between these practices and the dynamics of status and power, on the other hand.

CELTIC VS. DACIAN HORIZON

In this context, it has to be noted that both culturally and historically the Transylvanian Late Iron Age consists of two distinct horizons. The first is the so-called Celtic horizon, between ca. 350 and 175 BC, whereas the second is the so-called Dacian horizon, between ca. 175 BC and AD 106⁶.

The Celtic horizon was characterized by an exclusively rural way of life. The local communities, each consisting of a reduced number of individuals (ca. 15–25), were divided in family groups or clans⁷. This pattern can be best observed in the internal organization of the settlements and also in that of some cemeteries⁸.

In spite of the “pseudo-egalitarian” nature of the respective societies, these clans were apparently engaged into a permanent social and economic competition. Sometimes the effects of this competition left behind some archaeological traces; for example it can be observed in the layout of the cemetery at Fântânele – *Dâmbu Popii* (Fig. 5). This cemetery was established by three different families who divided the funerary ground among themselves. Over time, one of these families expanded its funerary area to the detriment of the other two families. This territorial expansion was more likely the result of a “demographic” increasing within the respective group, leading to a strengthening of its social authority within the entire community. One other argument for this hypothesis is the concentration of the graves containing weaponry mostly in the area occupied by this dominant group⁹.

The internal organization of the settlements reflects a similar social structure of the communities. The dwellings are grouped, with each group located at a certain distance from the others, for example at Ciumești or Cicir, or in some settlements from the western Carpathian Basin¹⁰ (Fig. 6). Nevertheless, there are some situations, for example at Morești, where this kind of internal organization is less visible on the plan of the settlement¹¹.

Regarding the geographic position, the rural settlements are surrounded by their agricultural hinterland, being located either on river terraces or in fertile meadows¹². Unlike the settlements, the cemeteries usually occupy higher locations in the settlements’ surroundings: hilltops or slopes, higher terraces or ridges etc.¹³. Among the relevant examples can be mentioned the cemeteries at Aiud, Blandiana or Ciumești (Fig. 7). Accordingly, the cemetery of a community is always visible from the settlement and also from the nearby routes of communication and the neighbouring settlements.

can be thought of as ‘proto-castles’, as these fortified elite residences frequently occupied prominent positions of natural strength and visually dominated their hinterland. The use of hilltop fortifications declines during the 9th century, when paradoxically, warfare was at its most intense during the wars of the Viking Age”.

⁵ See further in GALVANI, PIRAZZOLI 2013.

⁶ RUSTOIU 2008; RUSTOIU 2015a.

⁷ KARL 2015, p. 90; RUSTOIU 2016, p. 240–244.

⁸ RUSTOIU 2016.

⁹ RUSTOIU 2015a, p. 22–23; RUSTOIU 2016, p. 240.

¹⁰ ZIRRA 1980; RUSTOIU 2013; KARL 2015; TREBSCHKE 2014 etc.

¹¹ BERECKI 2008.

¹² See further in BERECKI 2015.

¹³ BERECKI 2015.



1



2

Fig. 4. In highly hierarchic societies social subordination is also expressed through the vertical organization of the landscape: **1.** Medieval fortress at Deva (Romania); **2.** Financial power of the banks illustrated by the sky-scrapers from Frankfurt (Germany) (photo A. Rustoiu).

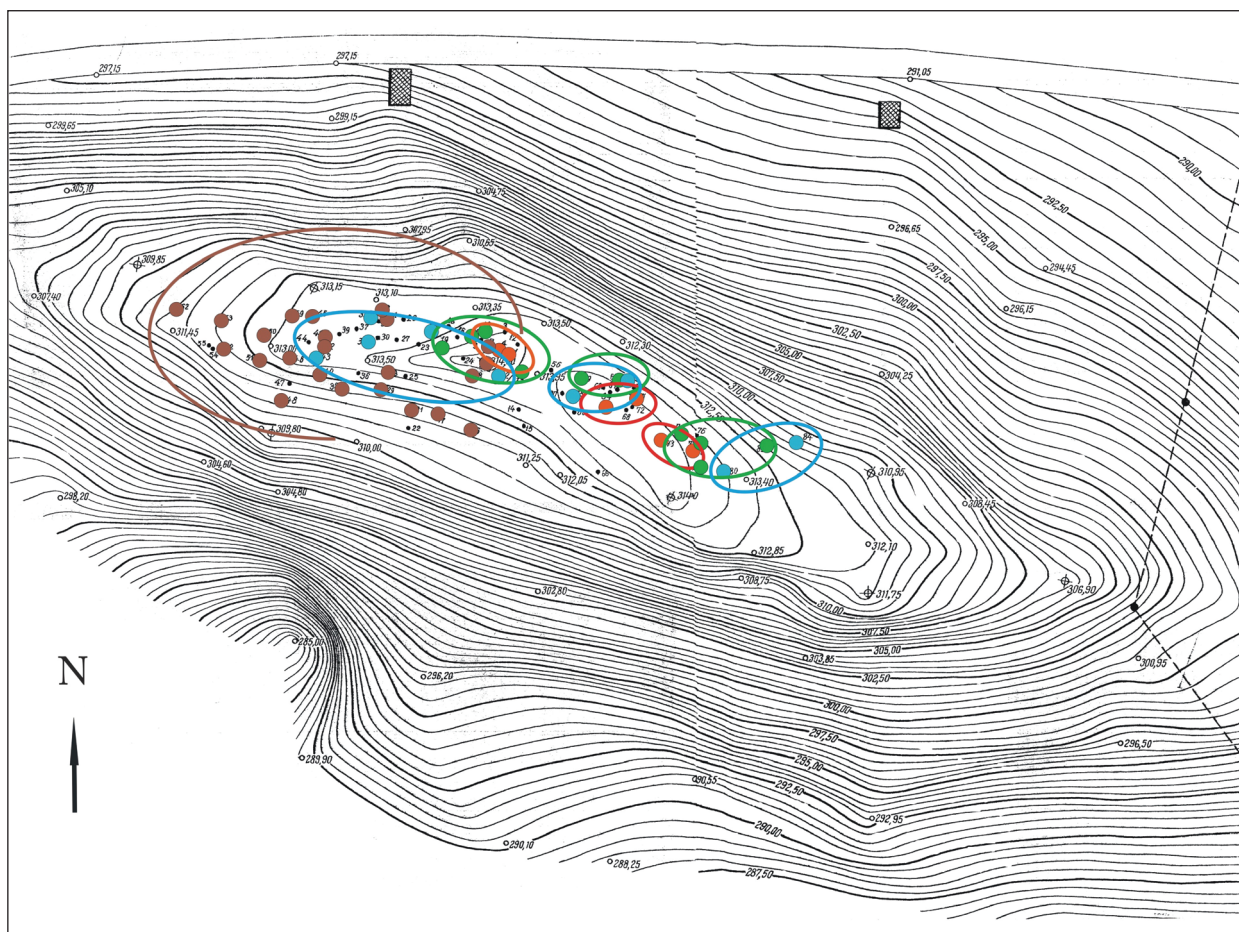


Fig. 5. Chronological evolution of the cemetery at Fântânele – Dâmbu Popii. Red: horizon 1 (LT B1/B2). Green: horizon 2 (LT B2a). Blue: horizon 3 (LT B2b). Brown: horizon 4 (LT C1). The cemetery was established by three different families or clans. During the last horizon, the western group had expanded to the detriment of the two other groups (after RUSTOIU 2015a).

The case of the Celtic cemeteries from the Aiud area, where each funerary ground was visible from the others, is relevant (Fig. 8). Taking into consideration these principles governing the organization of the habitat and the funerary space, one cannot exclude that the respective cemeteries visually signalled the ownership rights of each community over a certain area on the basis of ancestral ties or traditions. Along the same lines, it is probably not a coincidence that many Celtic cemeteries from Transylvania are located in the same areas in which earlier cemeteries were established at the end of the Early Iron Age¹⁴. The latter more likely contributed to the construction of new collective identities on the basis of certain myths of origin in the context of Celtic colonization in Transylvania.

Summarising these observations, it is quite clear that the manner in which the surrounding space was organized played an important role in the symbolic reiteration of a rural collective identity of “pseudo-egalitarian” type. Social competition between various clans took place mostly within the public sphere, during communal gatherings or funerals etc and not on the basis of an “ostentatious” manipulation of the landscape.

This situation had changed significantly during the following period corresponding to the Dacian horizon. In this context, the fortified settlement at Cugir provides a relevant example regarding the manner of organizing the surrounding space¹⁵ (Fig. 9/1). The defensive elements consisting of earth ramparts and palisades were erected around a man-made plateau on top of the *Cetate* hill, having an

¹⁴ BERECKI 2014.

¹⁵ See further in RUSTOIU 2015b.

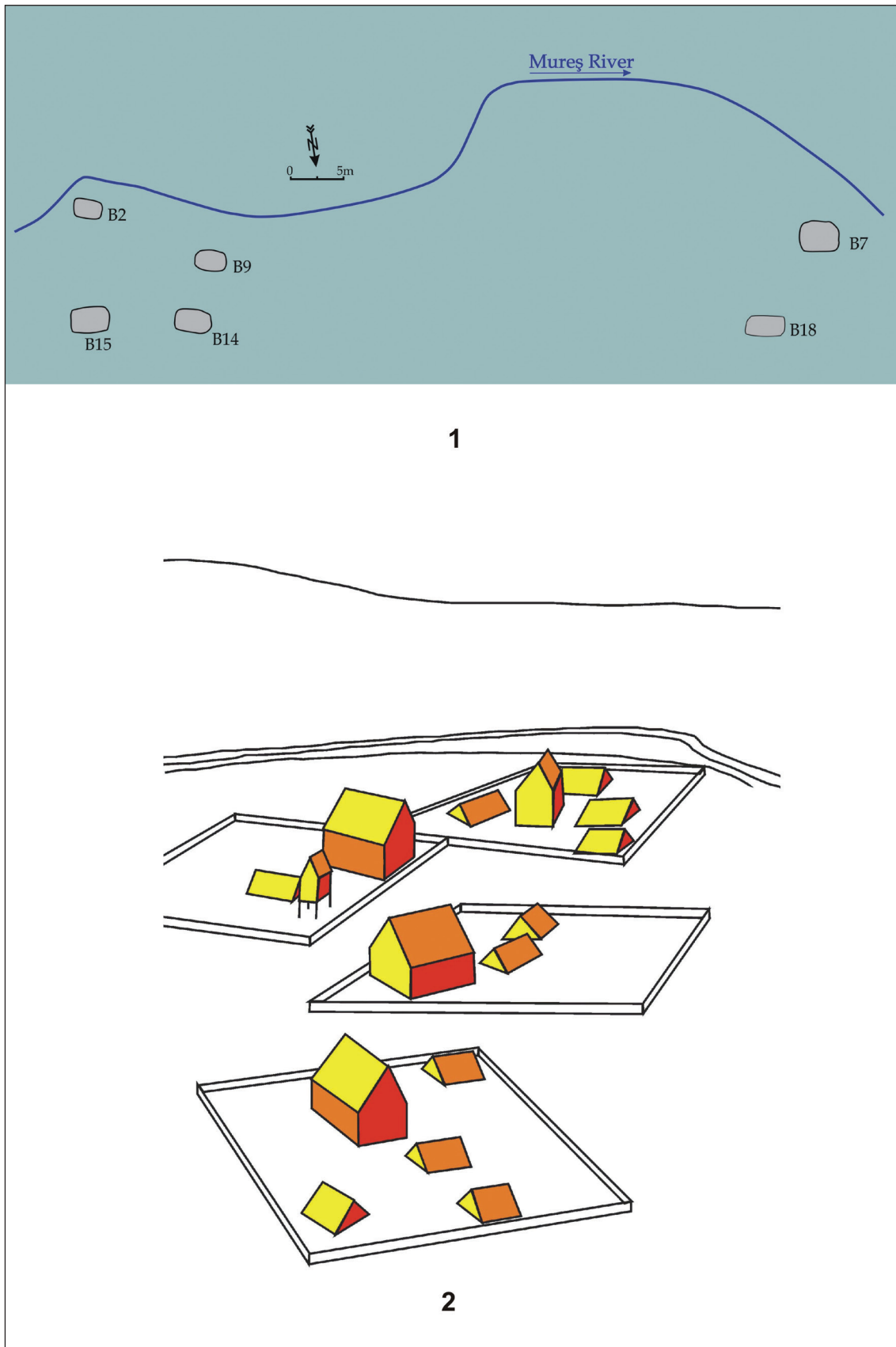


Fig. 6. Internal organization of some settlements in group of houses: **1.** Cicir, Romania (after RUSTOIU 2013); **2.** Göttlesbrunn, Austria (after KARL, PROCHASKA 2005).

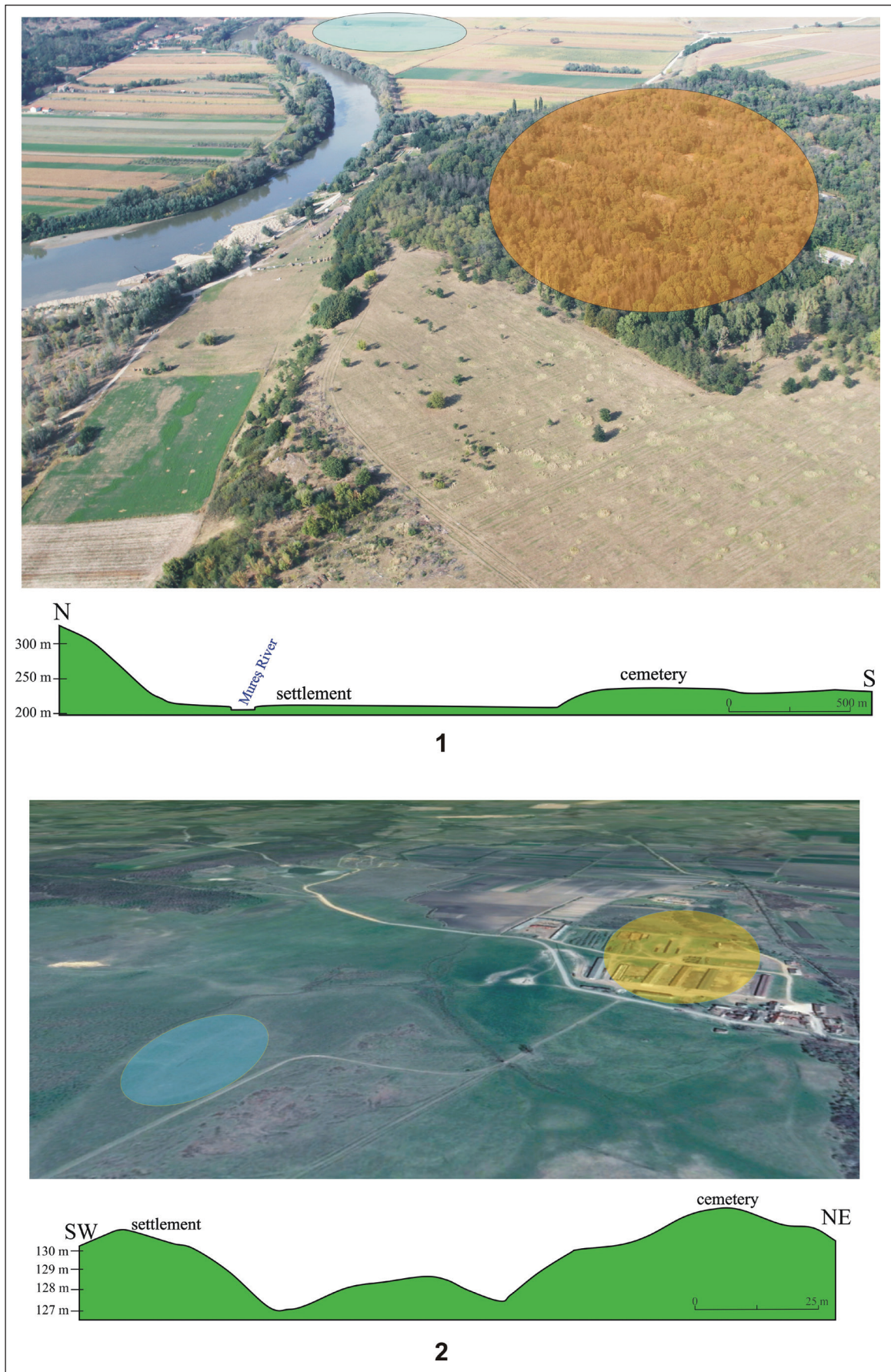


Fig. 7. Topographic distribution of the cemeteries and settlements at Blandiana (1) and Ciumești (2), in Romania (photo and drawings S. Berecki).

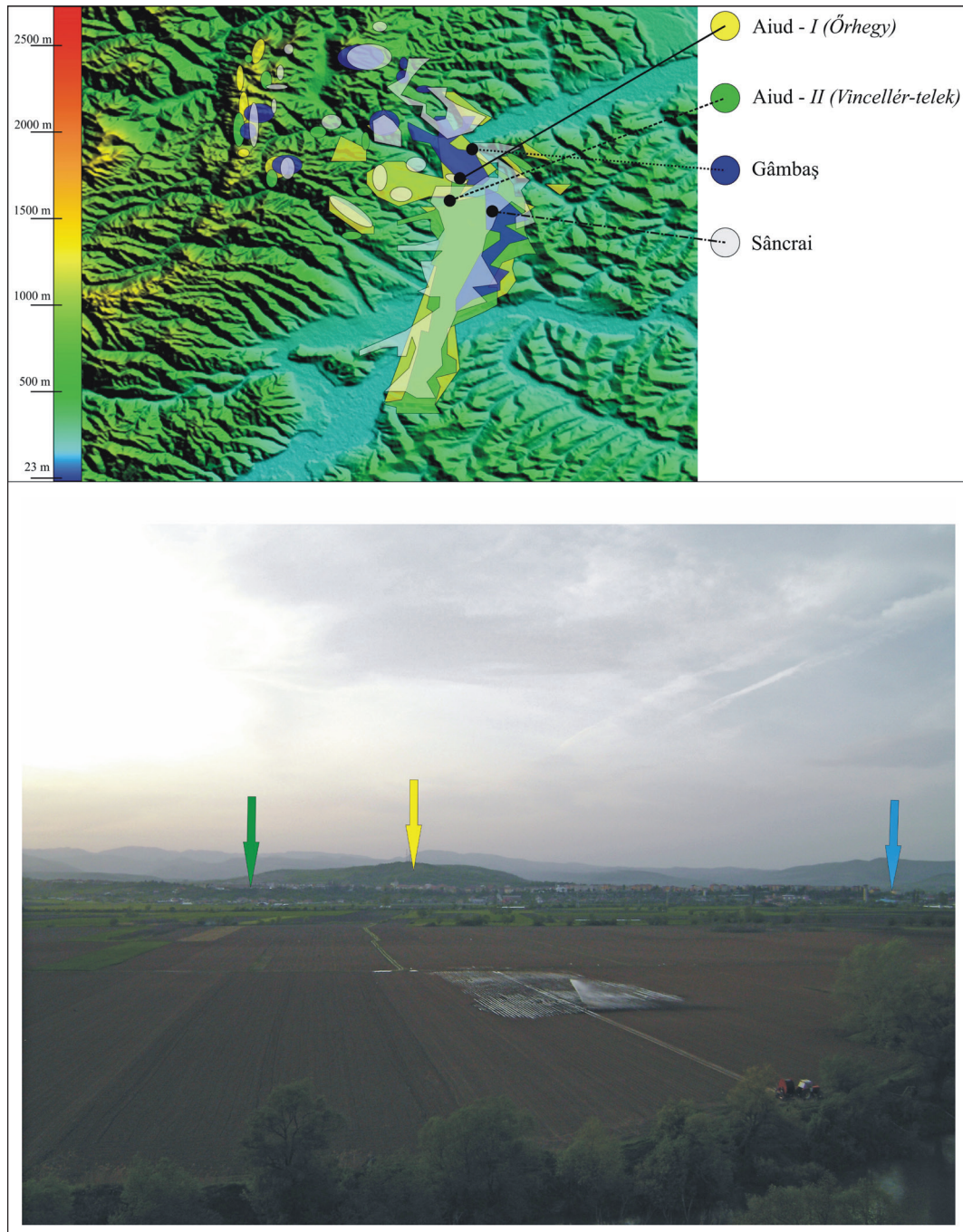


Fig. 8. 1. The cemeteries from Aiud region and their visibility areas (image generated using Global Mapper by S. Berecki); **2.** The cemeteries at Aiud and Gâmbaş as seen from Sâncrai (photo A. Rustoiu).

altitude of 495 m. Due to its position, the *Cetate* hill dominates the surrounding regions along the valley of Cugir River, having a good visibility to the north over the fertile plain extending towards the meadows of the Mureş River (Fig. 9/2). To the south, the landscape is dominated by the heights of the Şureanu Mountains. Numerous dwellings and storage pits have been found inside the fortified enclosure. The habitat areas expanded on the lower terraces of the hill, outside the fortified enclosure.

Aside from the fortified settlement on the *Cetate* hill, other traces of habitat have been identified during archaeological surveys or as accidental discoveries on the foothills as well as on the terraces of the Cugir River and down to the Mureş valley¹⁶. Lastly, traces of habitat dated to the

¹⁶ POPA 2004, p. 91–97; POPA 2011, p. 283–298.

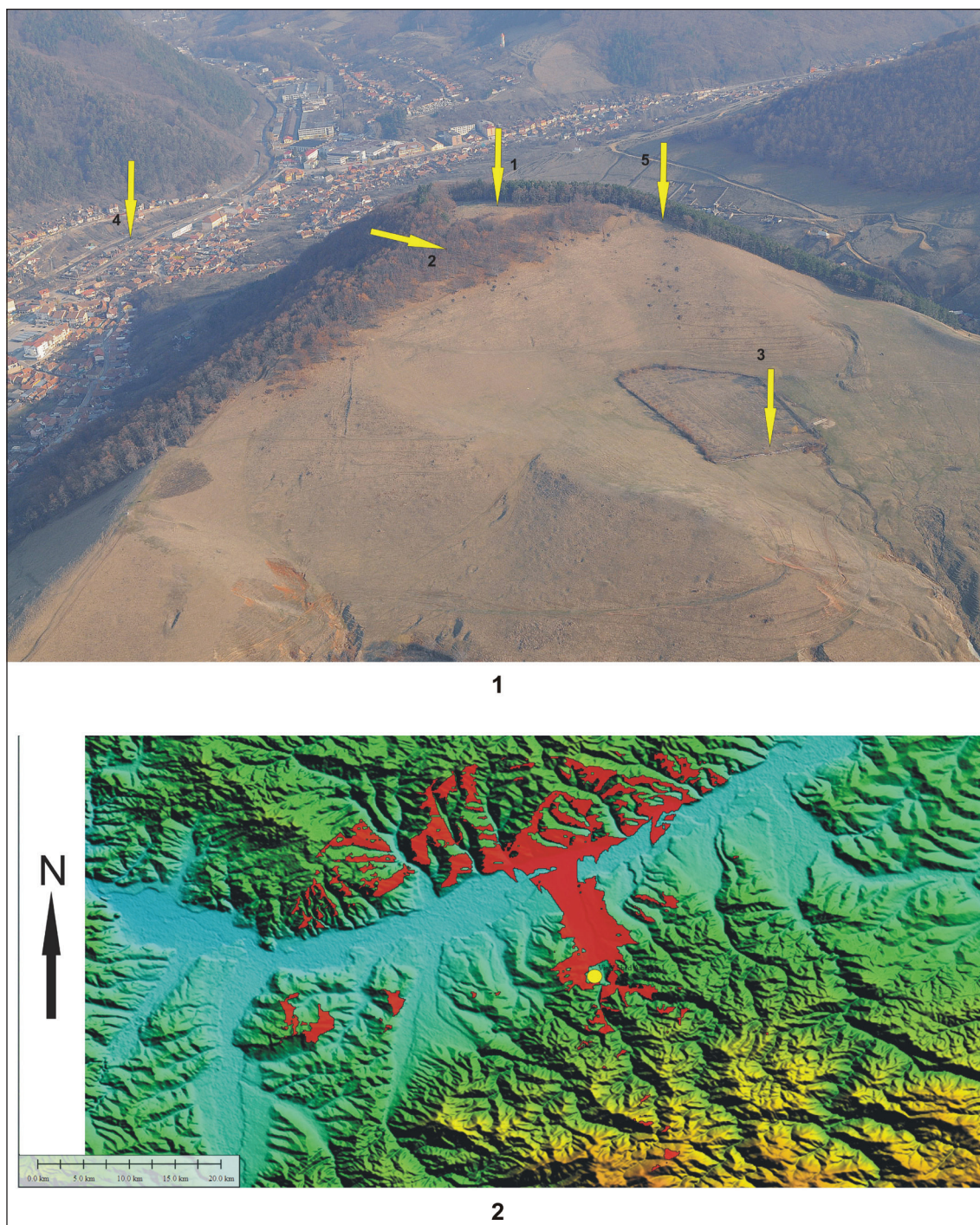


Fig. 9. 1. Organization of the habitat and funerary space in the settlement at Cugir (1. fortified enclosure; 2. inhabited terraces outside the fortified enclosure; 3. lower plateau with traces of habitation; 4. Cugir River; 5. tumulus cemetery seen from the north–south direction; Șureanu Mountains in the background) (after RUSTOIU 2015b; aerial photo Z. Czajlik); **2.** Visibility range (red) of the fortified settlement at Cugir (yellow dot), extending northward mainly along the Cugir valley and down to the Mureș valley. The area probably corresponds to the agricultural territory of the community from Cugir (image generated using Global Mapper by S. Berecki).

same period have been identified on *Chiciura* peak (730 m altitude), southward from the *Cetate* hill¹⁷ (Fig. 10).

Regarding the funerary space, this consists of a small cremation cemetery including four tumuli, which is located on the relatively steep western slope, in the immediate vicinity of the fortified

¹⁷ RUSTOIU 2015b.

enclosure and the road leading to the fortress. Three of these burials contained weapons or other elements of military equipment. Tumulus no. 2 contained the richest inventory, pointing to the social importance of the deceased. The inventory, including one panoply of weapons, one chariot, harness fittings, one situla of the Eggers 20 type and other grave-goods, can be dated to the La Tène D1, being contemporaneous with the beginnings of the fortified settlement¹⁸.

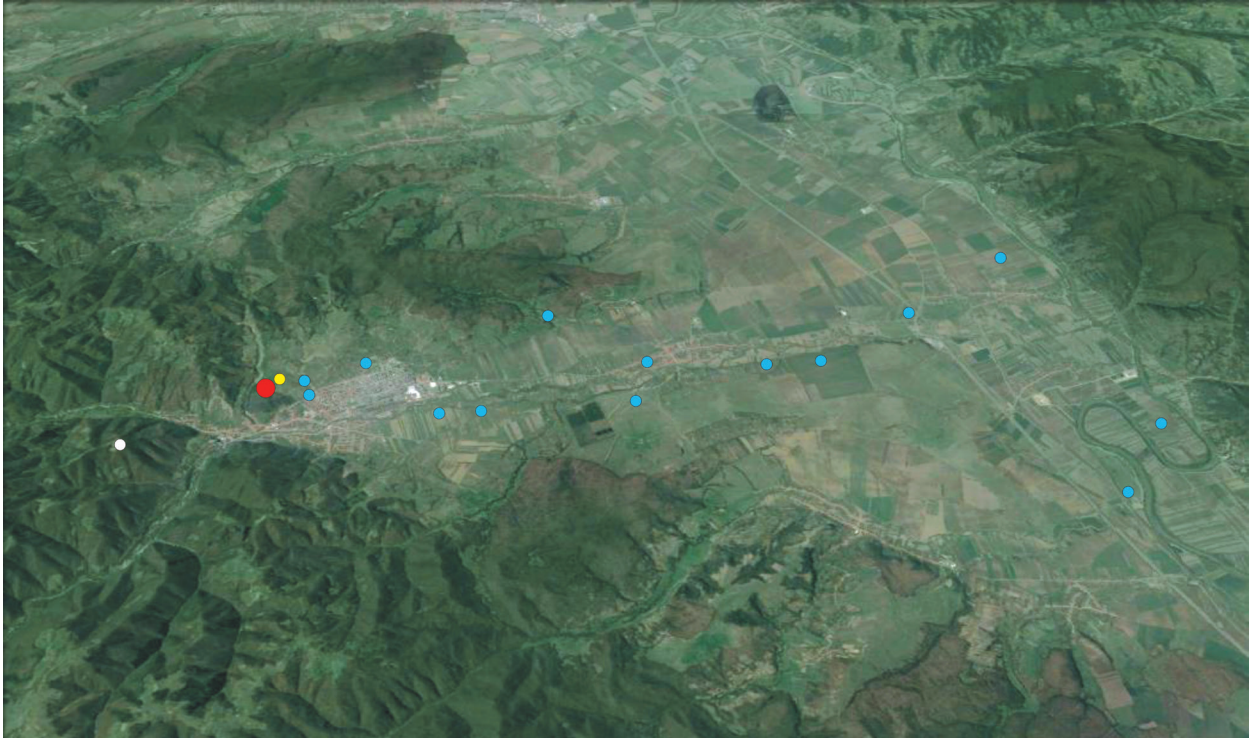


Fig. 10. Horizontal organization, from the south to the north, of the social and economic space of the Dacian community from Cugir. The distribution of rural settlements corresponds to the visibility area from the fortress (see fig. 9/2). Red – fortress; yellow – ancillary settlement; white – observation point or shepherd shelter; blue – rural settlements (drawing A. Rustoiu after POPA 2011).

This cemetery, containing a small number of graves which share the same funerary rite, rituals and inventories, seems to have belonged to a small group of warriors whose identity was primarily expressed by the panoply of weapons (or elements of it) laid into the grave. This manner of expressing individual identity is specific to the ruling elites of the northern Balkans, the lower Danube area and the Dacian territories inside the Carpathians range (Fig. 11). Due to the chronology of the cemetery and the fortified settlement, it can be presumed that members of this group were the “founders” and “rulers” of the fortified settlement and the Dacian community from Cugir.

Accordingly, the organization of the habitat and the funerary space in the fortified settlement at Cugir and in its hinterland differs significantly from the rural model specific to the previous Celtic horizon.

The horizontal organization of the habitat indicates that the fortified settlement was a ‘central place’ around which gravitated the ancillary settlement from the vicinity¹⁹, as well as those from the agricultural hinterland. The entire economic activity was destined to serve the interests of the fortress and its owners (Fig. 10).

The vertical organization also had significant symbolic implications (Fig. 12). The fortified settlement served as residence of the elites ruling over the community from Cugir. Its location on the dominant height, having a wide visibility towards the neighbouring settlements and those from the

¹⁸ CRIȘAN 1980; RUSTOIU 2008, p. 161–162; RUSTOIU 2009.

¹⁹ For the meaning of “ancillary settlement” in the context of spatial organization of the fortresses from the period of the Dacian Kingdom see EGRI 2014, p. 177.

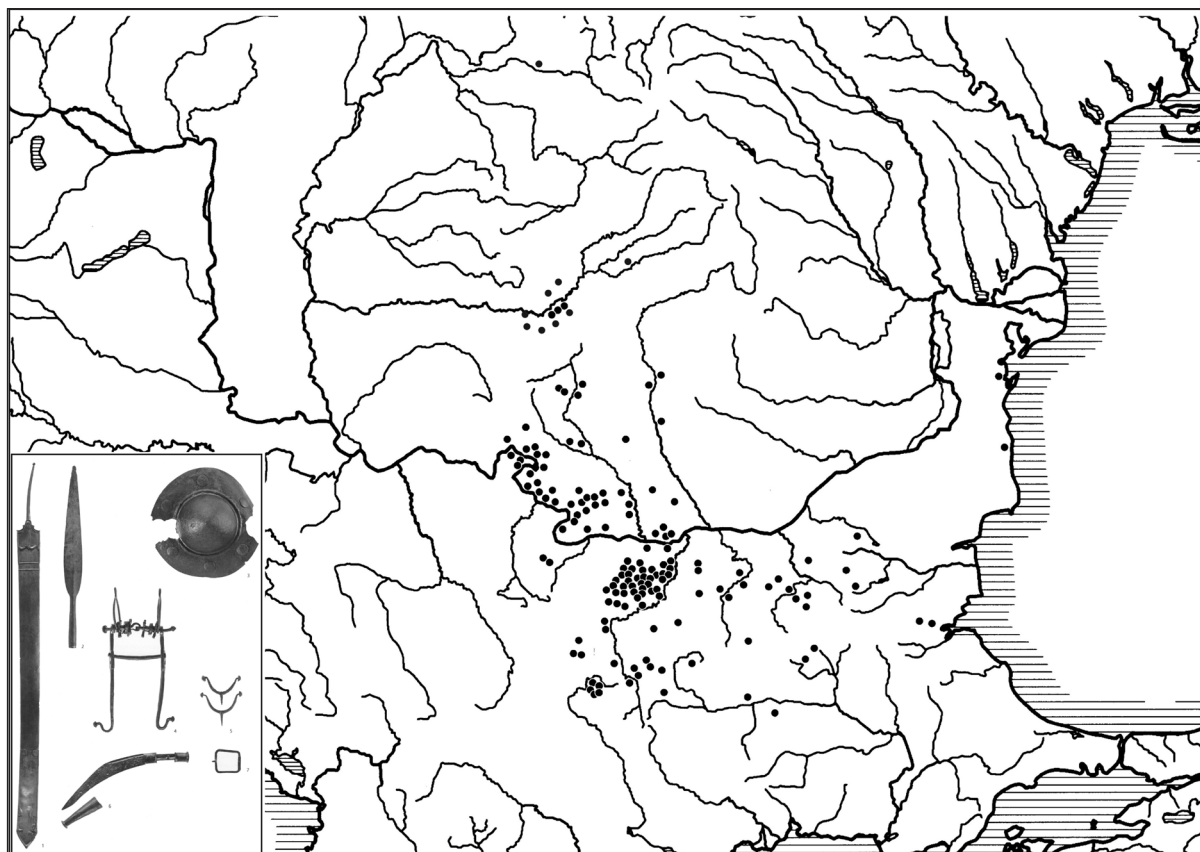


Fig. 11. Distribution map of the graves with weapons specific to the Padea-Panagjurski kolonii group – black dots (after ŁUCZKIEWICZ-SCHÖNFELDER 2008 and RUSTOIU 2015a).

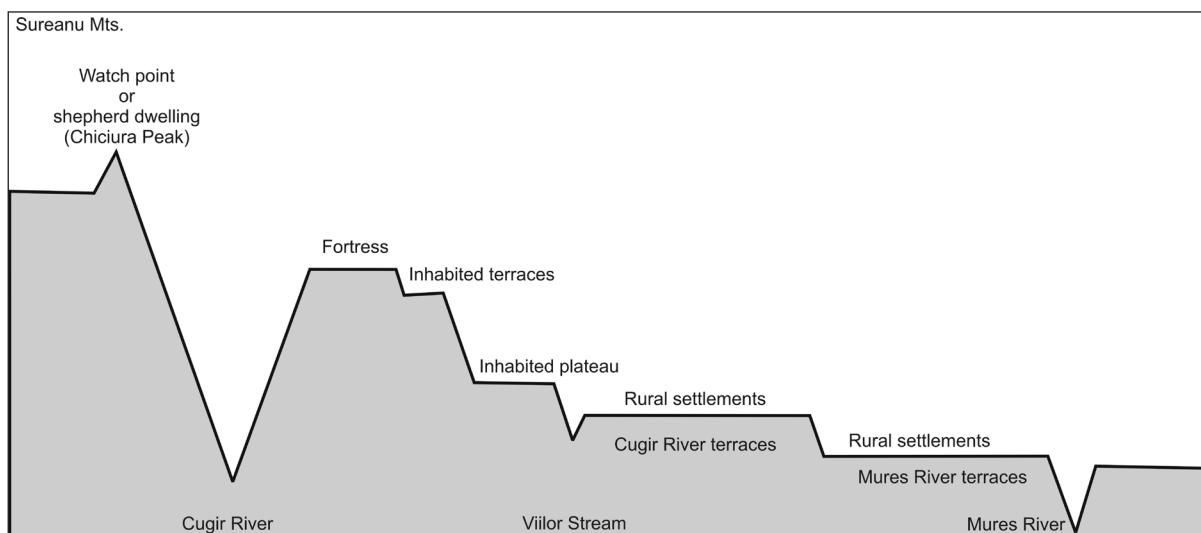


Fig. 12. Vertical organization, from the South to the North, of the social and economic space of the Dacian community from Cugir (after RUSTOIU 2015b).

agricultural hinterland reaching the Cugir valley down to the Mureş River, reflects the intention of these elites to indicate their dominating position within the local society. Along the same lines, the fortress served as the visual expression, visible from the distance, of the social status of its owners in relation with the ordinary members of the community and also with the elites of other communities. A similar example is provided by the medieval fortresses having imposing walls and towers set on top of dominant heights, whose primary scope was to indicate the status of their owners as members of knighthood elites who ruled the European aristocratic realms of the period.

Regarding the funerary space, the cemetery which more likely belonged to the founding family who ruled over the fortress was established in a highly visible location, close to the fortress and the road leading to its enclosure. At the same time, the tumuli erected over the graves were also visible from the surrounding valleys or the plain. Their presence also indicates the intention to visually signal the social importance of the deceased and their families in relation with all other members of the community. The important social role played by the families of these deceased is also underlined by the funerary rituals performed during the funerals in which more likely most of the community participated.

Accordingly, the organization of the habitat and the funerary spaces in the settlement at Cugir had both a practical, economic scope and also a symbolic one, aiming to serve as a visual expression of the local social hierarchy. The pattern identified at Cugir suggests an interpretative model regarding the organization of space and the manipulation of landscape specific to the Dacian chronological and cultural horizon preceding the Roman conquest.

CONCLUSIONS

This comparative analysis, which has taken into consideration the manner of organizing the habitat and funerary space and the manipulation of landscape, points to important variations from the Celtic to the Dacian horizon in Transylvania. Among some other things, these elements also served as markers of the manner in which these communities and various groups within them had built and expressed their identity. Accordingly, these variations are the result of significant differences in the social structure and dynamics of the respective societies. These incorporated different social-political, economic and cultural concepts and practices, thus leading to the successive evolution of distinct communal identity constructs inside the Carpathians range during the Late Iron Age.

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