

SOME NOUA SETTLEMENTS WITHOUT ASH-MOUNDS FROM THE
EASTERN PART OF ROMANIA (WITH EMPHASIS ON THE REGION OF THE
BÂRLAD BASIN)

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Keywords: Noua culture, the Bârlad Basin, the Eastern part of Romania, settlements without ash-mounds, change in cultural aspects.

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to draw the attention to some Noua settlements for which no ash-mounds were revealed during the excavations. Though, I focus in the first place on the Basin of the Bârlad River, I will also look for parallels in the Eastern part of Romania. A small number of excavations were performed in Late Bronze Age settlements from the Bârlad Basin; in three cases, the small scale soundings revealed levels without ash-mounds. The comparison between layers with and without ash-mounds allowed some preliminary observations to be made, though further reinforcement is needed. I intend to present those particular cases and to bring into discussion some of the remarks the researchers made. Also, an objective of this approach is to establish a starting point of a discussion about Noua settlements without ash-mounds.*

Rezumat: *Articolul de față prezintă câteva așezări Noua unde nu au fost descoperite cenușare în timpul săpăturilor. Astfel, autoarea își concentrează analiza asupra așezărilor din bazinul Bârladului, căutând analogii cu așezări din estul României. Unul din obiectivele acestui demers este și de a stabili un început al unei discuții privind așezările fără cenușare aparținând culturii Noua.*

I. Introduction

The Noua culture is a Late Bronze Age group which is characteristic for a large area, delimited eastward by Dniestr river, westward by the Apuseni Mt., to the North by Northern Carpathians and the southern limit is given by the Siret-Prut confluence point². Ash-mounds are among the defining elements of the cultural complex

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² VULPE 2001, 281.

Sabatinovka-Noua-Coslogeni (S-N-C). Their definition and function has been a subject of different theories and polemics³.

However, the aim of this paper is not to discuss the ash-mounds but to draw the attention to the sites that didn't reveal any traces of "ashy" soil during the diggings. Up to now, only disparate mentions about these particular cases have been made. In this situation, an approach bringing together the data and outlining some remarks made by the researchers has the potential of creating a starting point for a more detailed study of Noua settlements without ash-mounds.

This article is divided into several sections. First, some information will be provided on the territorial and chronological framework of the Noua culture as a whole. Furthermore, I present the sites from the Bârlad Basin which revealed no ash-mounds during the excavation. In the end, I will summarise the observations made by the researchers and I will look for parallels that can fill in the database. The study ends with the suggestion of models that can explain the lack of ash-mounds from some Noua settlements.

II. Geographical framework

At the end of the Middle Bronze Age, significant changes took place, which characterize the beginning of the Noua culture in the east- and intra-Carpathian regions, on the left side of Prut River and also in Carpathian Ukraine. Out of this vast territory, the study focuses in the first place on the Basin of Bârlad River, which lies within the core of Noua culture. This small area is part of a larger plateau region, extending on both sides of Prut River. The left side is bordered by the Codru Bâcului hills and on the right side by the Moldavian Plateau.

Within the Basin of Bârlad River, there is hilly terrain with altitudes decreasing from north (around 400 m) to south (ca 250 m). The major axis of the region is the Bârlad valley, that connects the surrounding regions through its tributaries⁴. This hydrographical unit is not rich either in water

³ SAVA 2005, 78-83; DIETRICH 2011, 131-142; SAVA, KAISER 2011, 421-434.

⁴ POGHIRC 1983, 45.

supplies or natural resources⁵. Communities living in Bârlad valley were also not favoured by fertile soils⁶.

III. Chronological framework

Traditionally, it is assumed that the chronological framework of the Noua culture coincides with the end of the Bronze Age. This division corresponds, *grosso modo*, to LH (Late Helladic) III from the Aegean tripartite system⁷. Since its first mentions until two decades ago, the chronological limits for the Noua culture were established between XIV-XIII/XII centuries B.C.⁸. Lately, radiocarbon dating and new archaeological investigations extended its limits between XVI-XIII/XII centuries B.C.⁹.

IV. Methodology and sources

This paper is the result of a study I was carrying out as a doctoral Student at the University of Iași¹⁰. Firstly I created a database that recorded all known sites from the Bârlad basin assigned to Late Bronze Age. This framework was supplemented through the study of archaeological collections owned by the museums from Iași, Vaslui, Bârlad, Bacău and Tecuci, and through field research. Afterwards, the information from this database was analyzed also according to the presence or absence of ash-mounds.

I identified around 180 certain or probable Noua settlements in the Basin of the Bârlad River. In half of the cases ash-mounds were mentioned in the documentation. For the other half, there was no specific information about the settlement type (pl. 1). Beyond this, I have been able to identify

⁵ MUTIHAC, STRATULAT, FECHET 2007, 29.

⁶ BARBU 1987, 158-160.

⁷ MOUNTJOY 1993, 4, table I; VULPE 2001, 15.

⁸ NESTOR 1934, 116-117, and also the bibliographical marks 480-481; NESTOR 1934, 183, and also the bibliographical mark 47; NESTOR, PETRESCU-DÎMBOVIȚA 1960, 113-114, where the authors assign Noua culture to the third and the last part of the Bronze Age; PETRESCU-DÎMBOVIȚA 1953, 443-486; FLORESCU 1964, 143-216.

⁹ KAISER, SAVA 2009, 147-159.

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three sites that were excavated and which revealed no ash-mounds. These are Dealu Morii-*Gura Ghionoaiei* (the last level of the Late Bronze Age settlement), *Dădești-Pe Tablă*, as well as *Negrilești-Zaharia*. Recently, the fourth Noua settlement from the southern part of the Bârlad Basin, discovered by chance while digging a different chronological context, does not contain traces of “ashy” soil. These last discoveries will be further discussed when the stratigraphy and the archaeological material will be published.

I have had to rely on the published archaeological plans/outlines of the investigations of these sites since detailed drawings were and are not available¹¹.

1. Dealu Morii (pl. 1/1)

The Late Bronze Age settlement from Dealu Morii is located in the western part of the Bârlad Basin, in the region of the Tutova hills. In 1963 a small excavation was performed here and Monteoru and Noua settlement layers were found¹². The authors (M. Florescu and V. Căpitanu) mention that the trenches they made, T and L, revealed a settlement with two Late Bronze Age levels, the one below with remains of ash-mounds and the last one without (pl. 2)¹³. The authors assert that the second level, documenting a later phase of Noua culture, overlaps and extends beyond the former one, although the general excavation plan suggests that the archaeological structures from this subsequent layer were spread between and around the ash-mounds, not above them¹⁴. However, there are some limitations in

¹¹ The plans included in the plate section have been modified (in most of the cases, I removed other archaeological structures but those ones assigned to Noua culture) in order to reflect the plan of Late Bronze Age inhabitation and to transmit the informations in a simpler, easier way.

¹² FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1969, 50.

¹³ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1969, 71, fig. 1/1-11. The authors say that this last layer contains five houses, two pits and some other living structures that were not so well preserved. In the plan of the Noua layer without ash-mounds they illustrated 11 living structures.

¹⁴ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1969, 71; FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1968, 35-48. A brief remark: in the article published in 1968, M. Florescu and V. Căpitanu shortly describe the Noua settlement from Banca. In their second article, from 1969, in the first bibliographical mark they indicate that due to administrative changes, the settlement from Banca is now called Dealu Morii.

fully relying on the published data: the sounding was small scale and the stratigraphy is ambiguous, insufficiently explained.

Another site considered by the authors of the excavation (M. Florescu and V. Căpitanu) without ash-mounds is the one from Dădești (pl. 1/2). The site is located a few km north of Dealu Morii village. In 1963 a small trench (83 x 1 m) was dug here (pl. 3). Among other discoveries (assigned to the Neolithic and late Hallstatt periods) archaeological material from the Monteoru and Noua cultures was found¹⁵. There were not any structures assigned to the Late Bronze Age (like houses, pits or hearths), only some scarce archaeological material: pottery, bone artefacts. The authors concluded that this site does not contain ash-mounds, because no clustering of archaeological material was noticed and there are no signs of “ashy” soil¹⁶.

Though this case is not relevant for a comprehensive study of the subject, I consider that it must be mentioned when talking about Noua sites without ash-mounds identified in the Bârlad Basin. It is noteworthy also because the authors, M. Florescu and V. Căpitanu, assume that this Late Bronze Age “layer” from Dădești is contemporary with the last level from Dealu Morii, though they do not offer a strong argument for this assumption, like artefacts’ parallels; instead, they suggest that in both cases the archaeological remains are no longer clustered, but spread¹⁷. Another interesting point is that M. Florescu and V. Căpitanu talk again¹⁸ about the possibility of a final (third) phase of Noua culture, represented in the western part of the Bârlad Plateau by settlements with and without ash-mounds¹⁹.

2. Negrilești (pl. 1/3)

The settlement is located on the left bank of the Bârlad River at the interface of two different geographical regions, i.e. the Tutova hills in the

¹⁵ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1971, 123.

¹⁶ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1971, 123.

¹⁷ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1971, 123.

¹⁸ They also mentioned this hypothesis in their articles from 1968 and 1969.

¹⁹ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1971, 127-128.

north and the Tecuci plain in the south. The small scale excavation performed here in 1981 revealed, among others, a double Noua burial, but it was only 2008 when another campaign found additional Late Bronze Age material²⁰. Systematic research that began in 2009 is still ongoing and that makes of Negrileşti the only settlement of Noua culture that is currently investigated in the Bârlad basin²¹. Nine pits, one deposition and one house assigned to Late Bronze Age have been discovered up to now²² (pl. 4).

In order to find out if the absence of ash-mounds is also associated with differences in the inner structure of the settlements or in material culture, it is necessary a detailed study, regarding aspects like: the type and the size of the houses, the distance between them and their arrangement within the settlement, the building techniques, other structures (hearths, pits) and the frequency of different types of artefacts. Unfortunately, the published data is not satisfactory to allow such an approach: the number of the sites without ash-mounds is too small and they have been investigated through small scale soundings, so we don't have a proper view of the main characteristics of these settlements. Looking for a change in the frequency and structure of artefact types is not sustained and also risky, since only a percentage of the material culture was discovered and published. There are, though, some mentions made by the authors of the diggings, more or less argumented, that can be mentioned here and that if, they are even partly correct, indicate that the absence of the ash-mounds is accompanied by changes in material culture's aspects:

- The final level from Dealu Morii consists of ground level houses²³ and the excavations from Negrileşti revealed one pit dwelling²⁴. Both types

²⁰ ADAMESCU, ILIE 2011, 21.

²¹ Also, small digging performed in 2010 in the neolithic site *Tăcuta-Dealul Miclea* revealed a Middle Bronze Age à Late Bronze Age necropolis, which is, at the moment, the only (proto?) Noua burial context investigated nowadays in the studied region (<http://cimec.ro/arheologie/cronicaca2012/cd/index.htm>).

²² ADAMESCU, ILIE 2011, 23-25.

²³ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1969, 71.

²⁴ ADAMESCU, ILIE 2011, 24-25.

are peculiar to the entire S-N-C cultural complex²⁵, so that no particular trait of these settlements can be seen on the basis of this architecture.

- The regular size of the clay platforms found within the ash-mounds²⁶ is around 3,5 x 4m (14 m²), with quasi-rectangular contours²⁷. A similar situation was recorded in the layers without ash-mounds (Dealul Morii, the last level, and Negrileşti), where the houses are around 14 m²²⁸.

- A detailed comparison between the structure of the settlements with and without ash-mounds is hampered by the small scale excavations performed in the sites presented here, so we do not have the overall picture. There are noteworthy, though, some observations that the authors of the diggings, comparing levels with and without ash-mounds, made:

- The ash-mound contains one or more levels, and usually each level consists of a cluster of two or three platforms distributed randomly in each level of the mound. This is the situation revealed by large scale excavations performed at some sites such as Gârbovăţ²⁹, Lichitişeni³⁰, Cavadineşti – the layer with ash-mounds³¹ (these three sites are located in the Bârlad Plateau, which partially corresponds to the Bârlad Basin). One exception is from Cândeşti (lies southwards of the region discussed here,

²⁵ MANZURA, SAVA 1994, 186.

²⁶ The purpose of this paper is not to debate the character of the “ash-mounds”. According to the some known contexts from the Eastern part of Romania, ash-mounds consist from one or more levels of platforms that were seen as house floors. The subject is still a matter of discussion. DIETRICH 2011, 132, where the author claims that only the “ash-mounds” have been studied, and the space between or near them not.

²⁷ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1968, 37. Bigger sized platforms are an exception, like the one of 7x2,3 m from Tăvădăreşti-Banca, with three hearths, dated to the second phase of Noua culture (FLORESCU 1991, 128).

²⁸ ADAMESCU, ILIE 2011, 24. In one case, the authors of the excavation from Dealul Morii mention a house of 7 x 2,3 m, with three hearths (FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1969, 72, fig. 5). Both the description and the drawing looks alike the house from Tăvădăreşti-Banca as it was published by A. C. Florescu (FLORESCU 1991, fig. 6), and it might be a confusion. There are known houses with impressive surfaces found in Noua sites, like the one from Andrieşeni, of 35-40 m² (FLORESCU 1959, 120).

²⁹ FLORESCU, RUGINĂ, VICOVEANU 1967, 76.

³⁰ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1968, 37; FLORESCU 1991, 87.

³¹ DRAGOMIR 1959, 455.

outside the Carpathian curve), where the houses were arranged radially around a “cult place”³². Usually, the distance between the platforms inside the ash-mounds is around 3-4 m³³.

- In contrast to this, in the level without ash-mounds from Dealu Morii, the distance between the five houses is much larger and they are not clustered, but spread over a large area (pl. 2). Because this one example cannot sustain our argument that the structure of the level without ash-mounds, shown only partially by the investigation, differs, I looked for similar situations in other areas of Noua culture. The excavation performed at the Cavadinești site, near the Bârlad Basin, revealed two Late Bronze Age levels: the first one, older, with ash-mounds, and the second one, later, without³⁴. The author assumes that during this second phase the community living in Cavadinești had to abandon the ash-mounds and build houses around and between them, because the area for inhabitancy became more and more restricted³⁵. The material discovered in this second phase from Cavadinești shows a simplification in pottery style compared to the previous level, and the prevalence of Noua elements³⁶, and this suggests that the second level could be assigned to the final phase of the culture, *grosso modo* contemporary with the second layer from Dealu Morii and with the one from Negrileşti.

- In order to build domestic structures, the Late Bronze Age communities used wattle and daub technology, in other words the available raw materials. Occasionally (for instance in the first level from Dealu Morii, unlike the ones from Bârboasa and Lichitişeni³⁷), the clay platforms found within the ash-mounds overlay a pebble or stone layer and the remains of the wooden sill beam is shallow³⁸. In the second level

³² FLORESCU, FLORESCU 1990, 58.

³³ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1968, 37.

³⁴ DRAGOMIR 1960, 157.

³⁵ DRAGOMIR 1960, 157.

³⁶ DRAGOMIR 1960, 156-157.

³⁷ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1968, 37; FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1969, 58-60.

³⁸ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1968, 37.

from Dealu Morii the houses lack an actual platform³⁹. Nevertheless, no firm comparison can be made until new research is performed.

- Comparing the artefact frequency between layers with and without ash-mounds is untenable at the moment. Yet, the authors of the investigations from Dealu Morii mention the decrease in bone material in the second level (they do not specify if is household waste, tools or both) and the increase of grinding stones⁴⁰. This fact is considered as evidence that Noua communities who until recently were seen as leading a nomadic way of live, may have led a more sedentary lifestyle⁴¹.

The number of examples discussed here and the small scale investigations do not allow assumptions to be made. Therefore, I looked for sites without ash-mounds in the Eastern part of Romania and I identified some specific situations:

A: Sites where the level with ash-mounds is followed by one without “ashy” soil, where the living structures are no longer clustered, but spread all over the surface of the layer. These situation is specific to the second layers from Dealu Morii and Cavadinești, located in the southern part of the region. In both cases, the second layers are more recent and have been assigned to a late phase of Noua culture.

B: Sites that do not show evidence of ash-mounds: Negrilești, Dădești, Ripiceni-Izvor. I also mentioned another case of Noua settlement without ash-mounds, but published data is needed.

- The authors of the digging from Negrilești date the findings, based on a horse bit, somewhere in the XIIth century B.C⁴².

- The situation from Dădești is not clear, also because the sounding was irrelevant due to its scale: the authors did not find any ash-mound while digging and they did not see any traces of “ashy” soil around. Due to this and also to the fact that the sporadic material is spread all over the

³⁹ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1969, 71-72.

⁴⁰ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1969, 73.

⁴¹ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1968, 46.

⁴² ADAMESCU, ILIE 2011, 34.

Dădești Hill and is not clustered, the authors of the diggings indicate the possibility that this site is contemporary with the second level from Dealu Morii⁴³.

- The situation from Ripiceni-Izvor is not clear; in this case, it is mentioned only that the Noua material does not come from ash-mounds⁴⁴.

C: Other questions are posed by Noua settlements, where the archaeological material is found in clusters, without forming a proper ash-mound. This is the situation of many Late Bronze Age sites from the Sub-Carpathian region, where only few settlements with typical ash-mounds have been identified⁴⁵.

D: In only one case, that of Epureni, the ash-mound superposes a mound with “ashy” soil, with a maximum width in the middle of 0,7 m that thins towards the edges⁴⁶. In the report published in 2001, E. Safta mentions two layers, the one from the top with ash-mounds and the one below without, but no remarks to the assignment of the material to any of Noua phases were made⁴⁷. The next year’s report does not solve the problematic details; on the contrary, the author talks about a Bronze Age level, ante-Noua, two Late Bronze Age layers and one settlement assigned to early Hallstatt⁴⁸.

V. Results and Discussions

The possibility to find a well-argued hypothesis about the causes of the appearance of the Noua settlements without ash-mounds is out of question at this stage of research. There are noteworthy, though, some remarks that can replace, for the moment, the lack of firm theories:

⁴³ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1971, 123.

⁴⁴ PĂUNESCU, ȘANDURSCHI, CHIRICA 1976, 31.

⁴⁵ DIACONU 2008-2010, 53; DIACONU 2012, 101.

⁴⁶ SAFTA 2001, <http://cronica.cimec.ro/detaliu.asp?k=1174>; The author doesn’t say anything else about the settlement without „ash-mounds”.

⁴⁷ SAFTA 2001, <http://cronica.cimec.ro/detaliu.asp?k=1174>.

⁴⁸ SAFTA 2002, <http://cronica.cimec.ro/detaliu.asp?k=1362>.

a. the ash-mounds were not discovered, but they might exist. In the situation where only small areas were investigated, they might be somewhere around. It is possible that the digging from Dădești did not reach the proper settlement. An example in this respect is the settlement from Mihălășeni, where the ash-mounds could not be seen at the surface, but they were found while digging⁴⁹. A plausible explanation, suggested by Lidia Dascălu is that it is possible, during all these millennia, that the ash-mounds were flattened (because of the short inhabitancy, agriculture, geomorphologic factors) or they can be visible today only in case of thick cultural layers⁵⁰.

b. there are no ash-mounds.

b.1. This was considered to be a clue for the short inhabitancy period of the site, which could be the case for Dădești. In my opinion, this hypothesis is noteworthy, also because the ash-mounds often have more than one cultural phases and they indicate a longer and more intense inhabitancy of the settlement.

b.2. If we exclude the cause of short inhabitancy and if changes (like the appearance/disappearance of ash-mounds) can be noticed from one Noua layer to the next one, then it would be appropriate to talk about a process of change in cultural aspects⁵¹. In this case, the problem of the lack of ash-mounds is more complex and each variation should be dealt with separately. Unfortunately, there are not known so many cases of such settlements, that have been also dug, so, at the moment, we can talk of exceptions, but not of a pattern.

The problem of Epureni settlement is interesting, because the ash-mound layer overlaps the one without. If the level below belongs to the first phase of Noua culture, then this settlement could offer a glance into a

⁴⁹ DASCĂLU 2007, 80, 240.

⁵⁰ DASCĂLU 2007, 80, 240.

⁵¹ To use in this context the formula “cultural change” is risky, since even the term “culture” is so complex and there isn’t an agreement between different schools of archaeology, anthropology, ethnology, etc. (HOLE 1973, 28).

gradual process of appearance of the ash-mounds⁵². The observation is supported also by the structure of the Pufești settlement, where a trench performed in a Monteoru IIa and IIb site revealed a type of settlement with houses clustered in groups of 35-45 m diameter⁵³. These clusters were located at a distance of 25-30 m from each other⁵⁴. But since we do not know yet the nature of the material from Epureni, first level, and we don't have more examples from Monteoru IIa and IIb and Noua I, this is only an idea that needs further consideration.

The last levels from Dealu Morii and Cavadinești also pose problems of interpretation. This problematic situation is reinforced by the discoveries from Negrilești. Coincidence or not, these three particular sites, located in the southern part of Siret-Prut interfluve, are assigned to a developed phase of Noua culture. There have been discussions about a final phase (III?) of this culture⁵⁵, in which some of the defining elements, like ash-mounds, disappear. This alleged third phase would be characterized by the increase of the agricultural activities and by a more sedentary lifestyle of the Late Bronze Age communities⁵⁶. In the same time, a possible cause of these changes might be the contact with the Early Iron Age elements⁵⁷. It was also mentioned that these changes in material culture, reflected also by the lack of ash-mounds from levels assigned to the end Noua culture, are announcing the changes that were about to happen⁵⁸.

VI. Conclusions

Due to the current state of research, outlining a firm argued hypothesis is a difficult approach. Therefore, I rather wanted to draw the attention to the lack of the ash-mounds from particular sites of Noua

⁵² FLORESCU 1964, 164-165, talks about the phase before Noua culture, with sites that contain smaller, more clear bordered ash-mounds.

⁵³ FLORESCU, NICU, RĂDULESCU 1971, 159.

⁵⁴ FLORESCU, NICU, RĂDULESCU 1971, 159.

⁵⁵ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1968, 46; FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1969, 77.

⁵⁶ FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1969, 77.

⁵⁷ LÁSZLÓ 1976, 64 and the bibliographical mark 44.

⁵⁸ LÁSZLÓ 1972, 220 and the bibliographical mark 24.

culture, first and foremost from the Bârlad Basin. Later on, several parallels were identified in the Eastern part of Romania. The brief description and discussion of these particular cases show rather the difficulty of approaching the subject. It is upon further investigations to fill in this framework and to expand the discussions on the theme.

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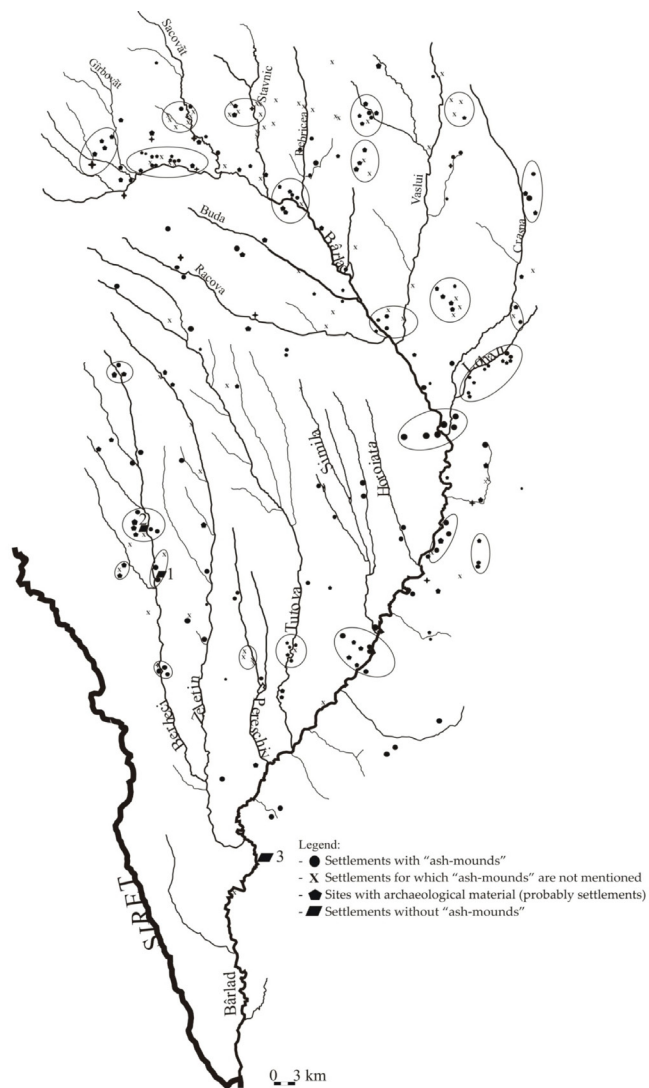


Plate 1. Distribution map of Late Bronze Age (Noua culture) sites from the Bârlad Basin

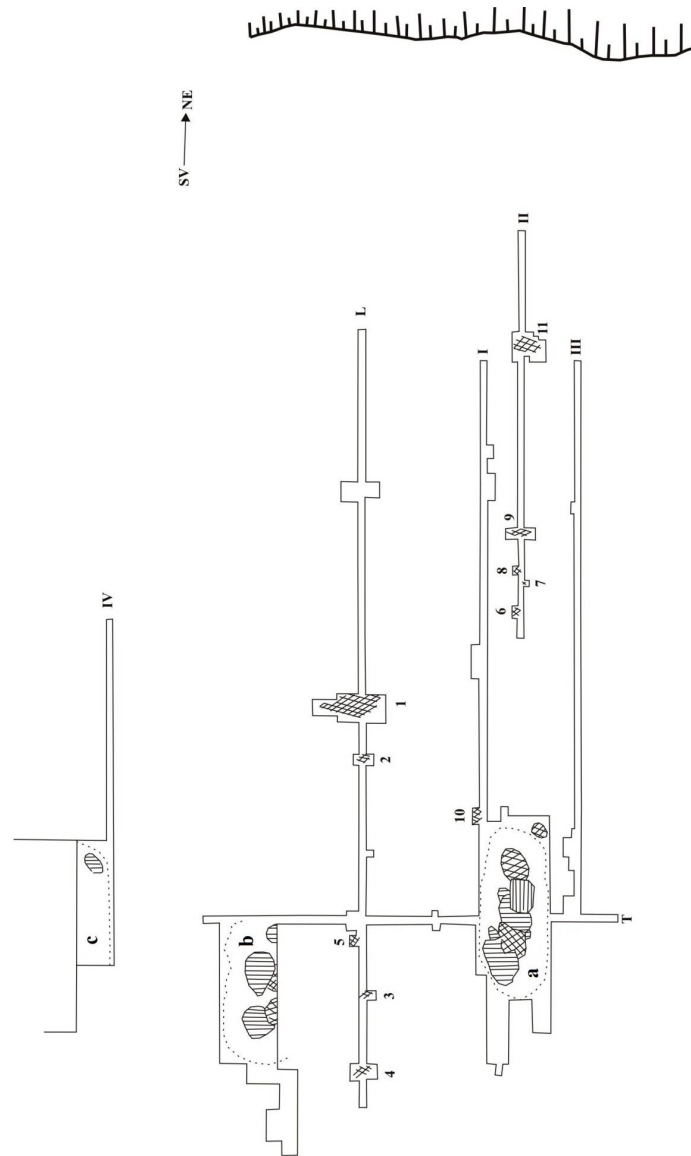
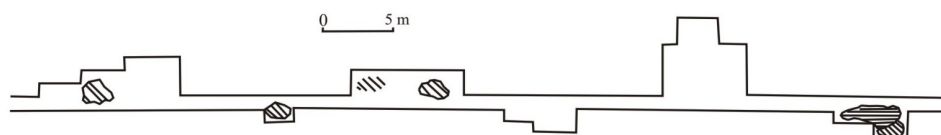


Plate 2. Dealu Morii-Gura Ghionoaiei: the excavation plan. a-c: „ash-mounds”; 1-11: inhabitory structures from the last level (adapted after FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1969, fig. 1)



Legend:

 Noua archaeological material

 Monteoru artefacts

 Undetermined artefacts

Plate 3. Dădești-*Pe Tablă*: the outline of the small scale sounding (after FLORESCU, CĂPITANU 1971, fig. 1)

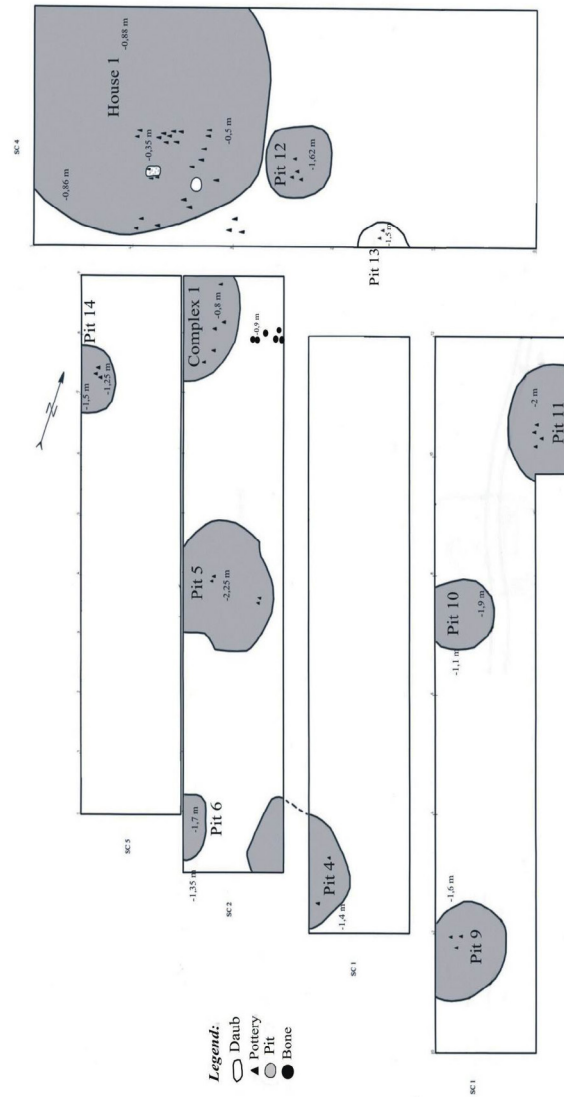


Plate 4. Negrilești-Zaharia: the excavation plan with Noua structures and material (after ADAMESCU, ILIE 2011, fig. 1/3)