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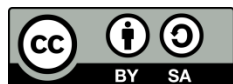
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Guarding what? A Middle Bronze Age fortification near Moldova River Valley

Alexandru GAFINCU¹, Vasile DIACONU²

Abstract. *This study aims to present a fortified settlement located near Subcarpathian area, at a small distance from Moldova River Valley (Eastern Romania). The site was known in the archaeological literature but because of the inconclusive artifacts the cultural and chronological association was mistaken. Placed in a dominant position and protected by two defensive ditches, the archaeological site belongs to the Middle Bronze Age period, Costișa culture. In the close proximity, was discovered an unfortified settlement, with contemporaneous artifacts, and the relation between these two sites it is indisputable.*

Rezumat. *Acest studiu are ca scop prezentarea unei așezări fortificate aflată la contactul cu zona subcarpatică, la mică distanță de culoarul râului Moldova (estul României). Situl era cunoscut în literatura arheologică, însă din cauza materialelor neconcludente atribuirea cultural-cronologică a fost una eronată. Aflat într-o poziție dominantă și protejat de două șanțuri de apărare, situl aparține perioadei mijlocii a epocii bronzului, cultura Costișa. În apropiere, o așezare deschisă, cu materiale din aceeași perioadă, a fost descoperită, relația dintre cele două fiind de necontestat.*

Keywords: Subcarpathian, Middle Bronze Age, fortification, surveillance.

The occurrence and the dynamics related to Bronze Age fortified settlements still represents a relevant study subject, especially that, in the East-Carpathian area, were not conducted a lot of researches on this topic. Even if some fortified archaeological sites were systematically investigated, many more are further unknown or little studied, and a genuinely image about their significance and, above all, importance in the Prehistoric landscape/world is far for being outlined.

In a broader approach for the registration of fortifications in the Neamț County, were verified several reports from the archaeological literature and the obtained data represents

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important landmarks for the reconstruction of the defensive strategies of the prehistoric communities.

Because we mainly followed the dynamics of the Bronze Age fortifications, further on we will present such a site, located on the territory of Văleni administrative unit (Neamț county). This settlement has not been investigated in detail, but through its location and defensive system can reveal important information necessary to understand the social efforts involved in community defense actions.

Although preliminary, the field observations are intended to highlight specific details of the site, which represent the base for further research.

Geographical landscape of the site

Geographically, the Văleni village is located in the Subcarpathian area, not too far from Moldova River Valley, near the Șarpelui stream. This area has typical features for the plateau area from the East of the Carpathian Mountains, with wide plateaus on the left side and steep slopes on the right side of the main watercourses. Thereby, the gentle hills and the medium height terraces, shaped by secondary watercourses, provided habitable places to the prehistoric people. Some parts of the high terraces were used for the defensive advantages being added various improvements by these communities.

The Șarpelui stream, tributary to the Moldova River, is the main hydrographical watercourse of the area, with a length of 15 kilometers, and from its upper course, it could be made the connection with the Cracău-Bistrița Depression.

Methodology

In order to obtain some new data about this site, we started with an evaluation of the bibliographic and cartographic sources. To check the local topography and to identify some of the recent landscape changes we used the existing maps³, which were correlated with satellite imagery, allowing to understand of some of the reasons that could determine a prehistoric community to settle in a certain place and, moreover, to fortify it.

Field observation provided new information and allowed us to gain important data, despite the fact that more than a half of the fortification boundaries is covered with dense vegetation and the rest is forested. In these conditions, in order to establish the dimensions of the ditches, enclosure and the unfortified settlement, the topographical measurements and the field investigations were conducted in different seasons in order to identify the inhabited perimeter and the recovered archaeological material provided an accurate cultural and chronological assessment.

³Moldawischen Districten (1788–1790) - First Military Survey (<https://maps.arcanum.com/en/map/firstsurvey-moldva>, accessed on 15.09.2021); Military map from 1916–1956 (<http://geo-spatial.org/vechi/download/planurile-directoare-de-tragere>, accessed on 07.09.2021).

Văleni-Dealul Cetății

The fortified settlement we discuss in this paper is located south of the Văleni village, on the watershed between Șarpelui and Valea Neagră streams. On behalf of uncertain archaeological findings this site was incorrectly chronologically framed. Thereby, in some local and regional repertories, the site from Văleni-Dealul Cetății was assigned to Late Bronze Age, Noua culture⁴.

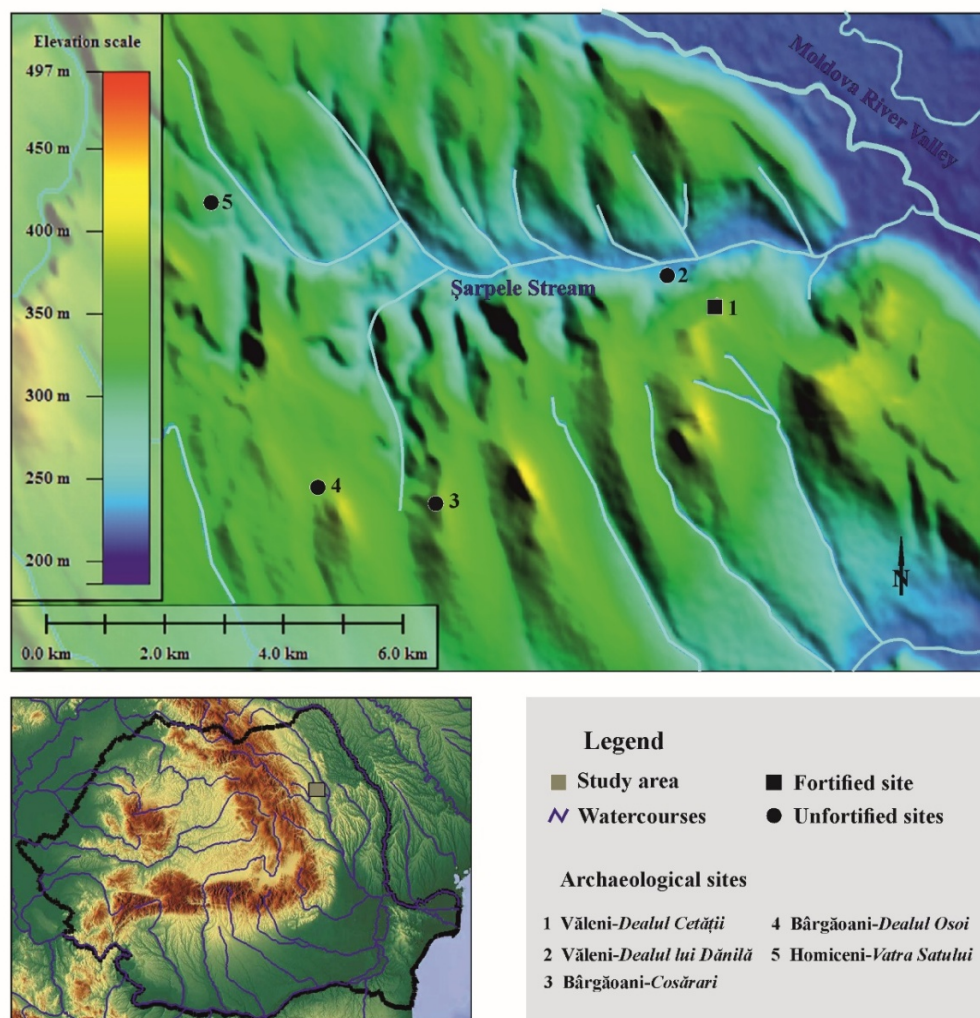


Fig. 1. The location of the Middle Bronze Age archaeological sites from the hydrographic basin of the Șarpelui stream

Just after the recent field investigations, conducted in 2017 by the authors, were discovered Middle Bronze Age ceramic fragments belonging to the Costișa culture, and in this

⁴ZAHARIA *et alii* 1970, 296; CUCOȘ 1977, 39; CUCOȘ 1992, 16; FLORESCU 1991, 141; DUMITROAIA 1992, 139; CIUBOTARU 2007, 84; DIACONU 2016, 76.

respect, it argues that the fortification must be from the same chronological span. In this context we must mention that near the Văleni village, on the place called *Dealul lui Dănilă*, at a few kilometers from the fortification, in the 1960, was conducted an archaeological excavation which led to the discovery of a Middle Bronze Age habitation^s (Figure 1).

The Văleni settlement (Figure 2) is located at the edge of a high plateau, south of Șarpelui stream, with a South-West to North-East orientation.

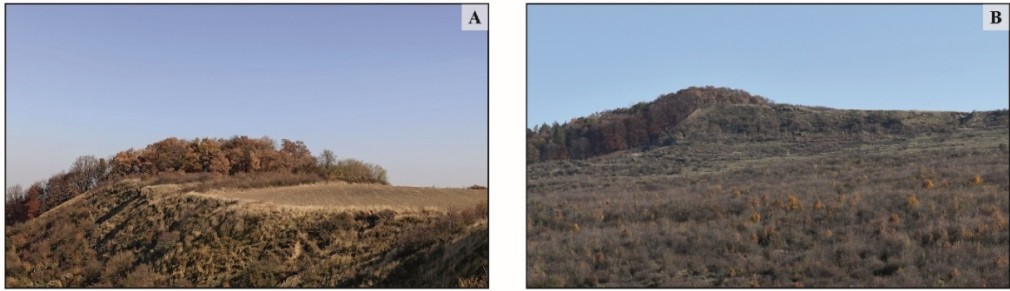


Fig. 2. The site from Văleni – *Dealul Cetății*. View from the West (A) and the North (B).

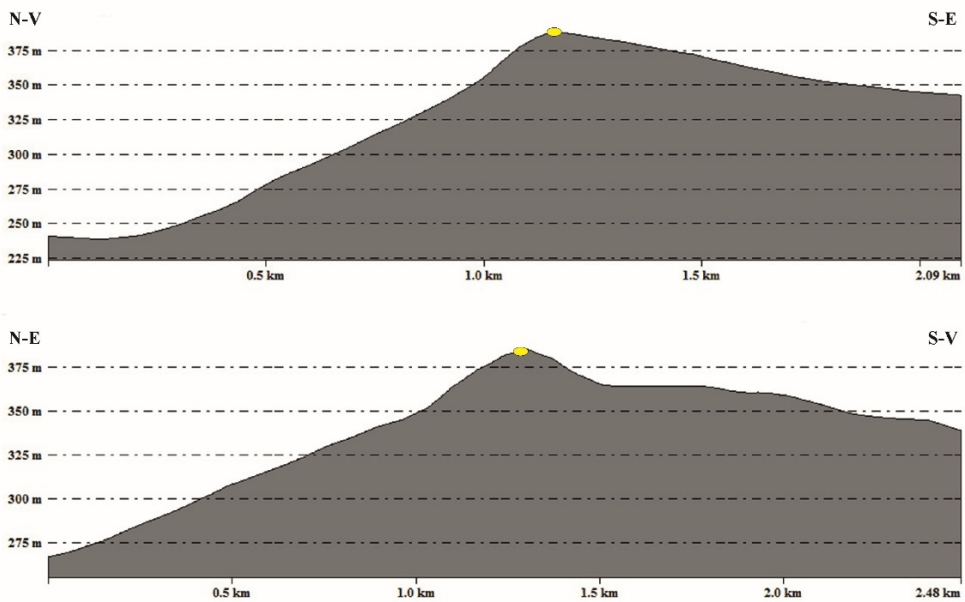


Fig. 3. The topographic location of the site.

^sURSACHI 1968, 125; ZAHARIA *et alii* 1970, 297; CUCOȘ 1992, 16; DUMITROAIA 1992, 139; MUNTEANU 2001, 49, Pl. 59-61; CIUBOTARU 2007, 84; DIACONU 2016, 76, Fig. 81.

The area is heavily affected by landslide from the North and West, the slope being extremely abrupt, while on the Eastern side the inclination is also quite high. The easier access on the site's plateau is made from the South, on a gentle slope, and from the South-West, on the watershed of above-mentioned water basins (Figure 3; Figure 4).

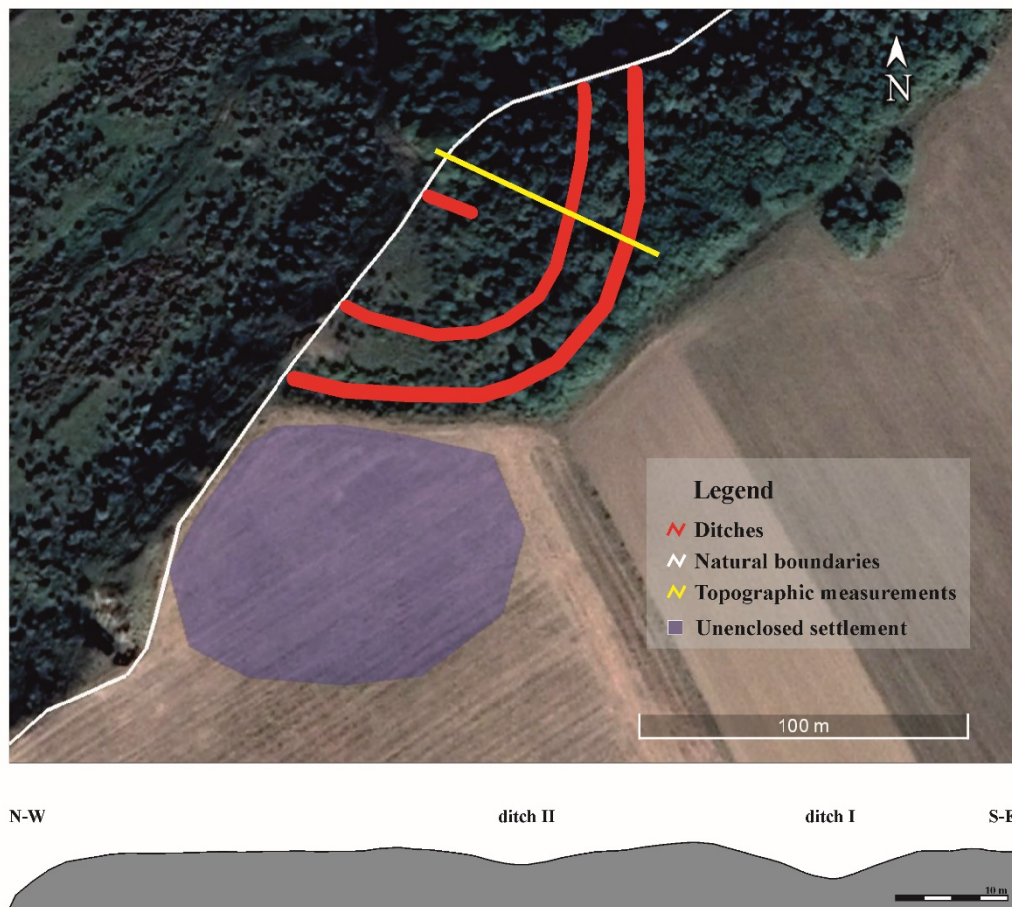


Fig. 4. The Site from Văleni – Dealul Cetății.

In these topographic conditions the water supply could be easily done from the South, where is located the spring of the Brițcani stream, tributary to the Valea Neagră stream.

Located at an absolute altitude of 390 m, the fortification is guarding the Șarpelui stream valley from a relative altitude of 150 m, prevailing in the landscape. From this point to the North is visible a large area of the Șarpelui stream, while to the South, is in the visual range just a smaller portion of the Valea Neagră hydrographic basin. The viewshed towards the East is partially limited by the high terraces of the Moldova River (Figure 5; Figure 6).

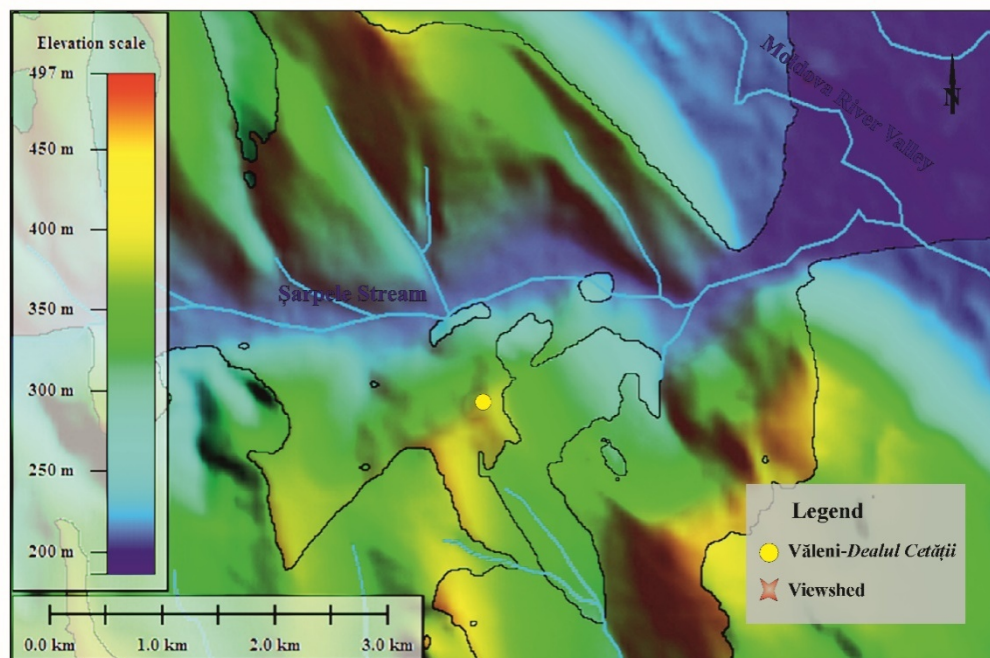


Fig. 5. Viewshed from the site

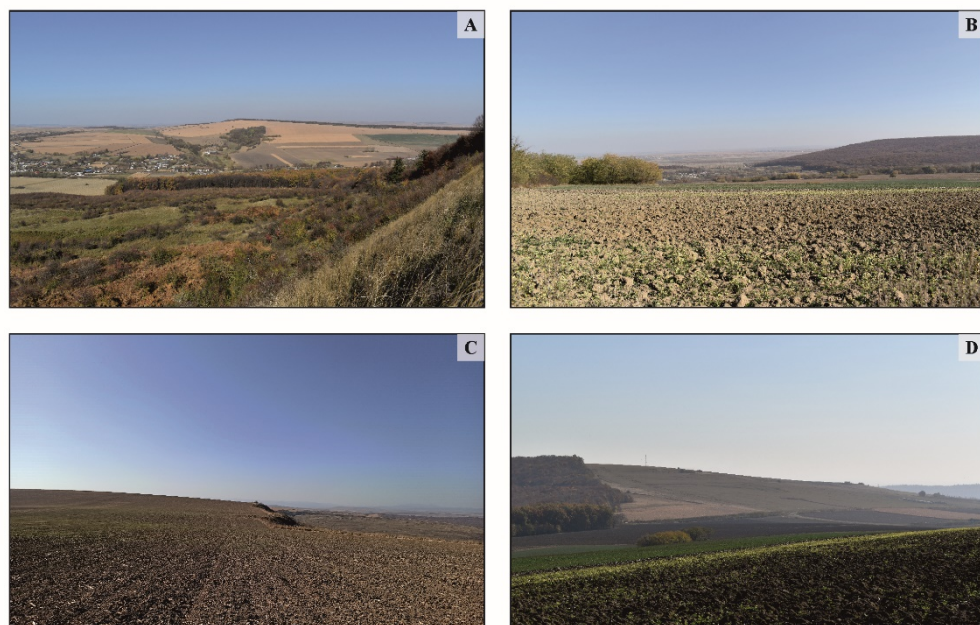


Fig. 6. View from the site towards North (A), East (B), South (C) and West (D)

The defensive system. Social energies

The investigated archaeological site is divided into two distinct parts: a fortified perimeter and an unenclosed settlement.

The defensive system of the fortified area is made up of two half-round large ditches, which encircle an area of approximatively 1 ha and restricts the access from the East, South and West (Figure 4). According to the field observations, the northern slope of the terrace where the site is located shows multiple signs of erosion, but there seems to be no substantial changes in the settlement dimensions.

The two ditches are parallel and the distance between them is 10 to 12 m, the western limits, near the terrace, are deeper and better shaped (Figure 7).



Fig. 7. Photographs from inside the site with the northern slope (A) and the ditches (B-D).

Nowadays, the outer first ditch is the biggest, with a length of approximatively 200 m, a maximum span of 15 m and a current depth of 3 m. On both sides of this structure are visible small land bumps caused by the excavated soil during ditch digging, representing a small bank that would have increased the efficiency of the defense system.

The second ditch has a length of 150 m, a maximum span of 12 m, and the current depth is between 1.5 to 2 m. As in the previous case, some of the excavated soil was placed on the inner part of the ditch, but, for now, we cannot assume the existence of a real intended bank.

In the Western side of the enclosure, starting from the edge of the terrace and at 35 m inwards from the second ditch, is visible another unfinished defense system. Therefore, we

can assume that the community started to dig a ditch as a first defensive structure, which was abandoned because the resulted enclosure would have been too small for the space requirement.

In order to understand the humongous effort which led to the construction of this defensive system it is necessary to present some observations about the unenclosed settlement located in the proximity of the fortification. This site is located in the South-South-Western part of the enclosure, on a 1.5-2 ha area. In this regard, we can assume that the community living in this space was not so numerous, aspect that leads us to consider that the building effort of the enclosure was even greater. Thus, only a few thousand cubic meters that have been excavated from the ditches, would involve many members of several nearby contemporary communities or even more people from the same community working for a longer period of time. These presumptions can only find an answer after a systematical archaeological research and solid information regarding stratigraphy and absolute chronology.

Regardless of the number of those who dug the ditches or the time span required for this operation, it is clear that consistent social energies were involved here, for reasons we can only guess. Were there any imminent attacks? Or, in this case, we can think that a superficial defense system has been created, which would provide temporary security. Or the fortification was made for preventive purposes? And then arises the question what was the danger that could have threatened this community? What if the fortification was a center of power? The answers to some of these questions can be stated only after intrusive research that would highlight the presence of some housing structures and the degree of frequentation. Also, we can find possible explanations using a regional level approach, in the sense, the eastern and southeastern area of the Moldavian Subcarpathians, where most settlements of the Costișa culture are clustered, seems to be marked by several fortified sites. These promontory forts could represent surveillance/defensive points of an occupied territory by the same cultural entity.

The unenclosed settlement

As mentioned before, near the fortified area were identified traces that are associated with an unenclosed settlement, having an extensive hinterland, naturally delimited to the north by the steep slopes of the terrace. The archaeological material recovered from a surface of approximately 2 ha is represented by quantitatively reduced ceramic fragments without any typological features. Many of the ceramic fragments are small, or are deteriorated due to the intensive agriculture of the last half century. However, the paste characteristics, the firing type and the surface treatments confirm a classification of the pottery in the Middle Bronze Age repertoire. Also, it can be added the fact that some pottery fragments have

decorative elements (hatched triangles, rows of incised points) that are typical to the Costișa culture (Figure 8).

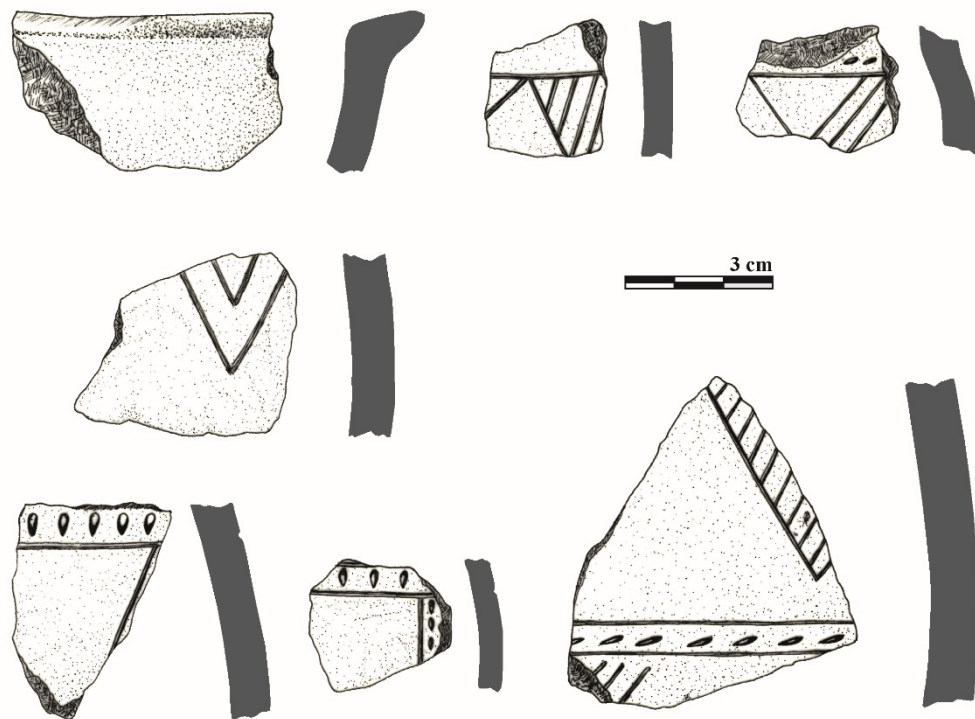


Fig. 8. Costișa ceramic fragments discovered in the unenclosed settlement

From the settlement's surface was also recovered a varied lithic material, consisting largely of processing debris of the local rocks (sandstones, shales), to which are added several hammerstones and grinding stones made from the same raw materials.

Final remarks

On a micro-regional scale, the Văleni fortification is not an isolated settlement by means of the territorial dynamics of the Costișa communities. Thus, beside the discoveries from Văleni-Dealul lui Dănilă, we can also mention those further west, in the upper basin of the Șarpelui stream, from Bârgăoani-Căsărari⁶, Bârgăoani-Dealul Osoi⁷ and Hlăpești⁸, but where traces of habitation are less well represented.

⁶CUCOȘ 1969, 416-417; CUCOȘ 1992, 10; DUMITROAIA 2000, 130.

⁷CUCOȘ 1992, 10; DUMITROAIA 2000, 130.

⁸DUMITROAIA 2000, 134.

It is known that the construction of fortifications in various stages of prehistory was based on military, social or even religious reasons, and the strengthening of a settlement with defensive elements was a community effort that used many humans, economic and logistical resources. From this perspective, it is clearly that the site from Văleni is distinguished between other similar Middle Bronze Age sites from East of the Carpathians especially due to the complexity and size of the defense system, the unusual type of landscape chosen (a watershed with only one side defended by natural slopes) in contrast with others fortifications placed on promontories with at least two sides naturally protected. Moreover, we do not believe that this settlement was a control point of an area with important natural resources which could have been an attractive factor for allogeneic human groups.

In this case we are still in doubt: what was the purpose of this fortification?

Until now, this fortified settlement is the easternmost in the whole spreading area of Costișa culture, being also the closest to one of the major prehistoric traffic routes - Moldova River Valley. The small density of unfortified settlements recorded in the Șarpelui hydrographical basin does not argue for a refuge function of the Văleni settlement. In this case, relating the habitual dynamics from the Subcarpathians, which are concentrated in the depression areas⁹, the Văleni fortification can be rather considered an outpost with surveillance purpose of an area or an access road towards the territory inhabited by Costișa communities.

⁹MUNTEANU 2010, fig. 2.

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