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CONTENTS

STUDIES

ANCIENT HISTORY

Sofia ANDREEVA

ON THE DATE OF THE OLBIAN CALENDAR GRAFFITO
SEG 30: 977 5

Cristina-Georgeta ALEXANDRESCU

„I HAD A DREAM...” - THE DEDICATION OF AN *EQUES*
OF THE *ALA I DARDANORUM* IN THE SURROUNDINGS
OF *TROESMIS* AND THE PROBLEM OF RURAL SETTLEMENTS
IN NORTHERN MOESIA INFERIOR 10

Lucrețiu MIHAILESCU-BÎRLIBA

EPIGRAPHIC AND PROSOPOGRAPHICAL NOTES
ON Q. MARCIUS QUADRATUS FROM IBIDA 19

Annamária – Izabella PÁZSINT

ROMANS 1 BY 1. AUGUSTA TRAIANA ET TERRITORIUM 25

Ioan Carol OPRÎȘ

MILESTONES FROM *CAPIDAVA* AND THE
TERRITORIUM CAPIDAVENSE. AURELIAN'S WAR
AGAINST THE CARPI *INTER CARSIUM ET SUCIDAVAM*,
IN A NEW LIGHT 62

Rada VARGA

THE NATURE OF ROMAN DOMINION
OVER THE PROVINCE OF DACIA.
NOTES ON THE ROMANIZATION PHENOMENON
AND ITS LIMITS 89

NUMISMATICS

Silviu I. PURECE

DIVVS AVGVSTVS AND THE ARRIVAL
OF THE NORICO-PANNONIANS IN DACIA.
COINS FROM OCNA SIBIULUI
– *FAȚA VACILOR* / *LA FĂGĂDĂU* SITE 98

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

Marius-Mihai CIUȚĂ, Anamaria TUDORIE

NEW TECHNOLOGICAL AND STATISTICAL DATA
ON THE PROCESS OF TRANSITION
FROM THE EARLY TO THE MIDDLE NEOLITHIC
IN THE MUREȘ VALLEY, ROMANIA 108

Sabina VESELI

AN AUCISSA DERIVATIVE FIBULA IN THE
MIDDLE ROMAN PERIOD CEMETERIES IN ALBANIA:
MILITARIA OR CIVIL TRENDS? 121

Alina STREINU, Irina ACHIM

A STREET WITH A VIEW OVER THE CENTURIES.
THE CERAMIC MATERIAL FROM THE STREET A
IN FRONT OF THE CRYPT BASILICA AT HISTRIA (I) 127

Evgenij V. SUKHANOV

KITCHEN POTS OF THE 8TH-9TH CENTURIES
IN THE PONTIC REGION AS AN ETHNIC MARKER
(continuation of the discussion) 156

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Arina BRAGOVA

RUSSIAN AND SOVIET RECEPTION OF CICERO'S VIEWS
ON THE IDEAL CITIZEN, RULER, AND STATE
IN THE 19-21st CENTURIES 169

Florin-Gheorghe FODOREAN

MAPS OF ROMAN DACIA. II. VICTORIA VASCHIDE
AND THE CARTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION
OF DACIA IN 1903 176

REVIEWS

Csaba SZABÓ

MARLIS ARNHOLD, *TRANSFORMATIONEN
STADTRÖMISCHER HEILIGTÜMER WÄHREND
DER SPÄTEN REPUBLIK UND KAISERZEIT*,
CONTEXTUALIZING THE SACRED SERIES 10,
BREPOLS, TURNHOUT, BELGIUM, 2020 181

Pim MÖHRING

GROOT, T. DE & J.W. DE KORT, *VEILIG NAAR
DE OVERKANT. ONDERZOEK NAAR EEN MUNTUVONDST
UIT DE ROMEINSE TIJD IN HET DAL VAN DE AA
BIJ BERLICUM (GEMEENTE SINT-MICHELSGESTEL)*,
RAPPORTAGE ARCHEOLOGISCHE MONUMENTENZORG
NO. 267, CULTURAL HERITAGE AGENCY,
AMERSFOORT, 2021 184

Studies

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

NEW TECHNOLOGICAL AND STATISTICAL DATA ON THE PROCESS OF TRANSITION FROM THE EARLY TO THE MIDDLE NEOLITHIC IN THE MUREŞ VALLEY, ROMANIA

Abstract: The archaeological rescue excavations occasioned by the construction of the *Lot no. 1* of the *Highway no. 10*, Sebeş-Turda, highlighted new data about the spatial distribution of the Neolithic settlements from Limba-Oarda de Jos (Alba county), which evolved on the high terrace of the Mureş River, as well as housing structures, containing ceramic materials whose technological and statistical analysis provided new information on the complex processes specific to the final phases of the Early Neolithic and the transition to the Middle Neolithic. The study below is also in this direction which addresses the analysis of the ceramic material offered by feature **Cpx. 584** (most probably a pit-house), investigated in March 2017, in **Zone 3 sector B3**.

Keywords: *Early Neolithic, Limba-Oarda de Jos site, pottery analysis, typology, technology, statistics.*

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The archaeological site from Limba-Oarda de Jos¹, together with the one from Tărtăria-Gura Luncii² (Alba county), represents, over the cultural-chronological sequences of the specific habitation deposits - which covers, practically, the entire evolution of the Neolithic - as well as by the material content of the researched contexts, what we define by the term "key site", representative and essential for understanding the complex processes of the Neolithic communities that inhabited the south-western area of Transylvania.

The site from Limba-Oarda de Jos is a large Neolithic settlement in South-Western corner of Transylvanian Plateau (Secaşelor Plateau). The site is located on the Mureş Valley, a major communication route in the prehistory of the Carpathian Basin that linked Transylvania to the Pannonian Plain. The site was occupied during the Early and Middle Neolithic (7-5 mil B.C.) and had a long series of successive habitations beginning in the early phases

¹ CIUTĂ 2009; CIUTĂ 2015; CIUTĂ/CIUTĂ 2017; CIUTĂ/CIUTĂ 2018; CIUTĂ *et alii* 2016; CIUTĂ *et alii* 2017.

² LUCA 2016.

of Starčevo-Criș Cultural complex (IB-IIA, Precriș culture) and ending with the complex phenomenon of the Vinča Cultural complex (A2 – B1 phases). The high unflooded terrace (approx. 10-15 m.), spread over approx. 1.5 km on the left bank of the river (over 70-80 ha), on which the Neolithic settlements are located, is characterized by a particularly favourable ecosystem for human habitat, providing essential resources needed by communities based on animal-farmer subsistence strategies, specific to the Neolithic age. The fertile soil, the presence of numerous drinking water springs, the vicinity of the Mureș River and its tributaries: Sebeș and Ampoi - with all the resources they offer -, the advantageous position within the area (which practically makes the connection between the two major units: Transylvania and Banat), the presence of deposits of useful minerals (salt, flint, sandstone, rocks of different natures etc.), the presence of forests in the immediate vicinity, are solid arguments that justify the special intensity (over 2.5 meters thickness of the archaeological layer) and the considerable expansion of dwellings human resources in this sector of Mureș river³.

If the systematic research has succeeded in distinguishing the main cultural components of the archaeological deposits, through the control and stratigraphic information surveys carried out in several sectors of the site⁴, (*Bordane, Vărâria, Vărar, Șesul Orzii*), the preventive researches occasioned by the construction of the Sebeș-Turda A10 highway (2016-2017), managed, besides confirming the previous stratigraphic data, to capture the architectural and spatial planimetry elements of the successive Neolithic settlements, being revealed their limits, the characteristics of the spaces intended for living but also for those intended for public use or intended for certain occupations (Fig. 1-2). During more than 10 months,



Fig. 1. Aerial view of the site during the rescue excavations (July 2016). The red spot indicates the position of the feature **Cpx. 584** (photo by C. Șuteu).

³ PAUL *et alii* 1999.

⁴ 1995-2001 excavation campaigns carried out by the Centre for Pre- and Protohistoric Research of the University "1-st December 1918" Alba Iulia (PAUL/CIUTĂ 2001; CIUTĂ 2002; CIUTĂ 2009; CIUTĂ 2009a, CIUTĂ 2015).

between 2016 and 2017⁵, the rescue research confirmed many cultural and chronological items later revealed by systematic excavations⁶, but also highlighted unexpected

⁵ **The Site no. 6** of the **Lot no. 1** of the Sebeș-Turda Highway, was excavated as part of mitigation ahead of the construction of the infrastructure project and was delimited by the way in which practically the footprint of the motorway crossed, from south to north, the archaeological site, previously known and researched under the name: *The Assembly of archaeological sites from Oarda de Jos-Limba* (CIUTĂ 2009, CIUTĂ 2009a, CIUTĂ *et alii* 2017). More than 70% of the archaeological site is located in the administrative territory of Oarda de Jos (now a district of Alba Iulia), but because in the literature the site became known as Limba (Ciugud commune), where they were made the first excavations in the middle of XX century, the responsible decided to keep its title sending first to this locality (Limba-Oarda de Jos). The archaeological complex which does the subject of the present paper, belong to Oarda de Jos, more precisely to Șesul Orzii sector (1106.2 - National Archaeological Register code - RAN).

⁶ CIUTĂ 2009, CIUTĂ 2009a, CIUTĂ *et alii* 2017; CIUTĂ *et alii* 2018.



Fig. 2. Hypothetical spatial delimitation of Neolithic habitations, related to the presence of researched complexes: green – Preciș (Starčevo-Criș IB-IC), yellow – Starčevo-Criș IIIB; blue - Vinča A2; purple - Vinča A3 -B1.

new results. Moreover, the exhaustive research of the entire perimeter for the infrastructure project resulted in the comprehensive research of over 900 Neolithic features, belonging to all stages of occupation of the large terrace located between Limba (com. Ciugud), at East and Oarda de Jos, at West (Fig. 2).

In the 1998 campaign in the central area of the *Bordane* sector - characterized by the highest stratigraphic complexity, the succession of housing deposits here descending to a depth of 3 meters - in a section of control and stratigraphic information (SX/1998)⁷, an Early Neolithic surface dwelling was captured (L3/1998), which, following

⁷ PAUL *et alii* 1999.

the processing and analysis of the materials contained, was interpreted as belonging to phase IIIB of the Starčevo-Criș Cultural Complex, as it was defined at that time⁸. At the end of the study dedicated to this house, based on the technology and typology of pottery, as well as the specific motifs and decorative register, we specify that the cultural-chronological level was that of the first “Vinča type impulse” in the North Danube large areas. At this time, there was also seen the Neolithization of south-eastern Transylvania and Moldova⁹. Based on the study of polychrome pottery, analogies were made with the southern Balkan, Greek and even the Orient¹⁰. The Vinča elements influence being strong, obvious (especially in the case of fine ceramics), proving strong connections with the first stages Vinča (A1, A2), which evolves, in the same period, in the Banat area¹¹.

The rescue research of the imprint of the A10 infrastructure project (Sebeș-Turda Highway) led to the discovery of other housing complexes contemporary to the surface house L3/1998, so it was possible to delimit, in space, the terrace area used by Starčevo-Criș IIIB communities, simultaneously with the delimitation of the areas used by the communities that inhabited the terrace before (Preciș a.k.a. Starčevo-Criș I), but also after (Vinča A1 (?) - A2, respectively Vinča A3-B1 (Fig. 2)¹².

The feature that is the subject of this study: **Cpx. 584**¹³, which supplied the ceramic material under analysis, is a “pit type” one and was seized in *Zone C, sector B3* (Fig. 3), this sectorization of the researched footprint being imposed by the geo-morphological characteristics and by the way in which the preventive archaeological excavation evolved,

⁸ CIUTĂ 2002, p. 24-28.

⁹ LAZAROVICI 1984, 66-70; URSULESCU *et alii* 2001.

¹⁰ LAZAROVICI 1977, 37-40; LAZAROVICI 1984, 68.

¹¹ LAZAROVICI 1984, 65-73; LAZAROVICI 1988, 17-28; DRAȘOVEAN 1989, 9-47; LUCA 1991, 1-14; CIUTĂ 2002.

¹² CIUTĂ/CIUTĂ 2018.

¹³ Discovered and researched in March 2017.

influenced by the presence of anthropogenic structures (communication routes, medium voltage electricity transmission routes etc.).

The **B Sector** is represented by the perimeter of the county road DJ 107C, to which are added the protection

zones, with a width between 8-10 m, located north (B2) and south (B1) (Fig. 3). Sector B3, is represented exclusively by the footprint of the county road DJ 107C, which crosses the footprint of the infrastructure project (and the archaeological site) on the east-west direction, parallel to

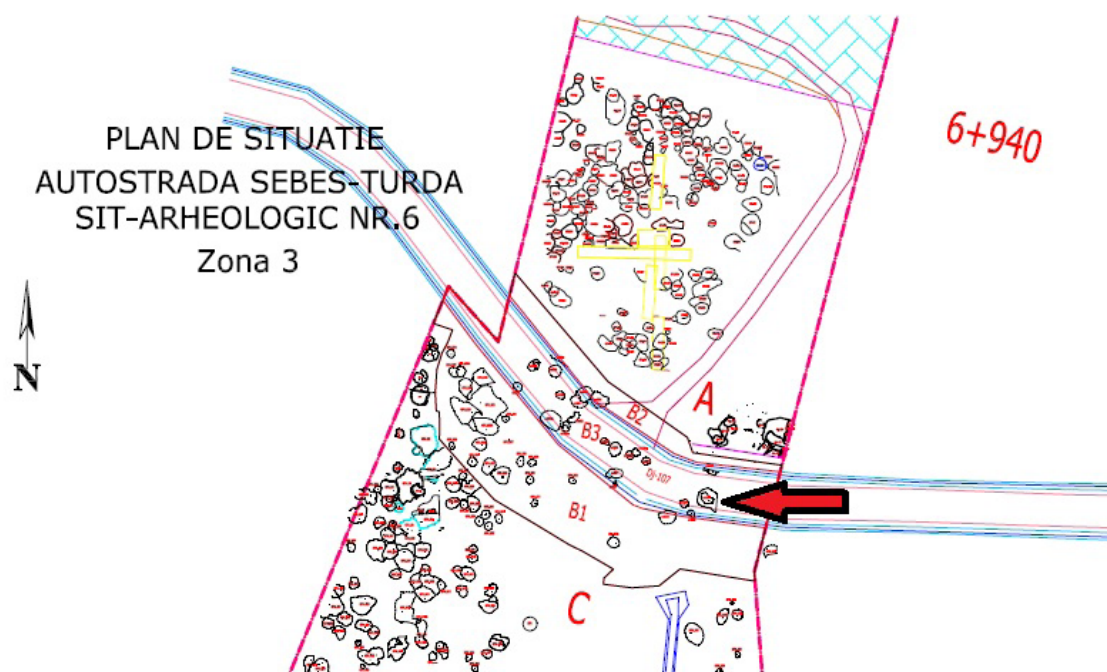


Fig. 3. Topographic plan of the main archaeological features discovered in **Zone C, Sector B3**. Feature **Cpx. 584** is indicated by the red arrow.



Fig. 4. Aerial photography at the end of the works in **Zone 3, sector B3**. At the eastern end, feature **Cpx. 584** is indicated by the red arrow (photo by C. Șuteu).

the Mureș River (Fig. 4). This section was among the last researched, being possible only when the original route of DJ 107C was diverted, to the south, being necessary the construction of the footbridge on which the highway passes over the county road.

The feature **Cpx. 584** was discovered exactly on the eastern boundary of sector B3 (Fig. 3-4), being located at a depth of 2.20 m from the level of tread of DJ 107C, just below its axis. Basically, the feature belongs to the Șesu-Orzii sector, being on the right side (to the east) of

the ancient torrent - active in prehistory, clogged in the modern era - which descended from south to north, towards Mureș. At the initial contouring (on ground), it presented an irregular shape, betraying several compartments of the complex (Fig. 5). The maximum depth reached the elevation of 1.40 m (Fig. 7-8), in its central area, deepening in the yellow sandy loess soil, specific to the entire terrace of Mureș. The emptying of the complex showed a distinct central, irregular deepening, lower than the marginal areas, outlined in the form of an intermediate step on the entire



Fig. 5. The feature **Cpx. 584**. Ground view from East.



Fig. 6. The feature **Cpx. 584**. East-West cross-section. View from South.

irregular circumference (Fig. 7-8). The profile resulting from the cross-sectioning of the complex (Fig. 6) revealed a slow filling of the complex, with successive lenses of soil mixed with ash and coal, ceramics and faunal remains, specific to all those researched, as a result of both housing processes, as well as post-housing. The highest percentage

of ceramic fragments was discovered in the deepest levels of the complex, in its central area. The few Vinča ceramic fragments, with specific decoration (dotted incised strip), revealed at the first levels of emptying of the feature, we interpret as ordinary leakage from the Early Neolithic post-habitation period, due to the processes of slope erosion.



Fig. 7. The feature **Cpx. 584**. View from West.



Fig. 8. The feature **Cpx. 584**. Aerial view from East.



Fig. 9. Pottery from feature **Cpx. 584.**

1. Rim, category: rough, exterior colour: light brown, interior colour: whitish coffee-like, temper: chaff, large-grained sand, gravel and shards, rough surface (exfoliated inside), light oxidating firing, pseudo barbotine. 2. Entire pot shape, category: category, exterior colour: greyish with firing spots, interior colour: coffee-like with greyish firing spots, temper: chaff and sand, polished, good firing. 3. Entire pot shape, category: fine, exterior colour: greyish, interior colour: coffee-like, temper: chaff and sand, good oxidating firing. 4. Bottom, category: fine, exterior colour: coffee-like, interior colour: whitish-grey, temper: sand and chaff, polished, good oxidating firing. 5. Bottom of miniature pot, category: fine, exterior colour: greyish, interior colour: light brown, temper: fine sand, chaff and ochre, polished, good firing. 6. Bottom, category: rough, exterior colour: whitish coffee-like, interior colour: greyish-black, temper: chaff and sand, smoothed surface, light oxidating firing, decorated with barbotine. 7. Bottom, category: semi fine, exterior colour: brown, interior colour: light brown, temper: chaff and silt, floury aspect, peeled off slip, good oxidating firing.

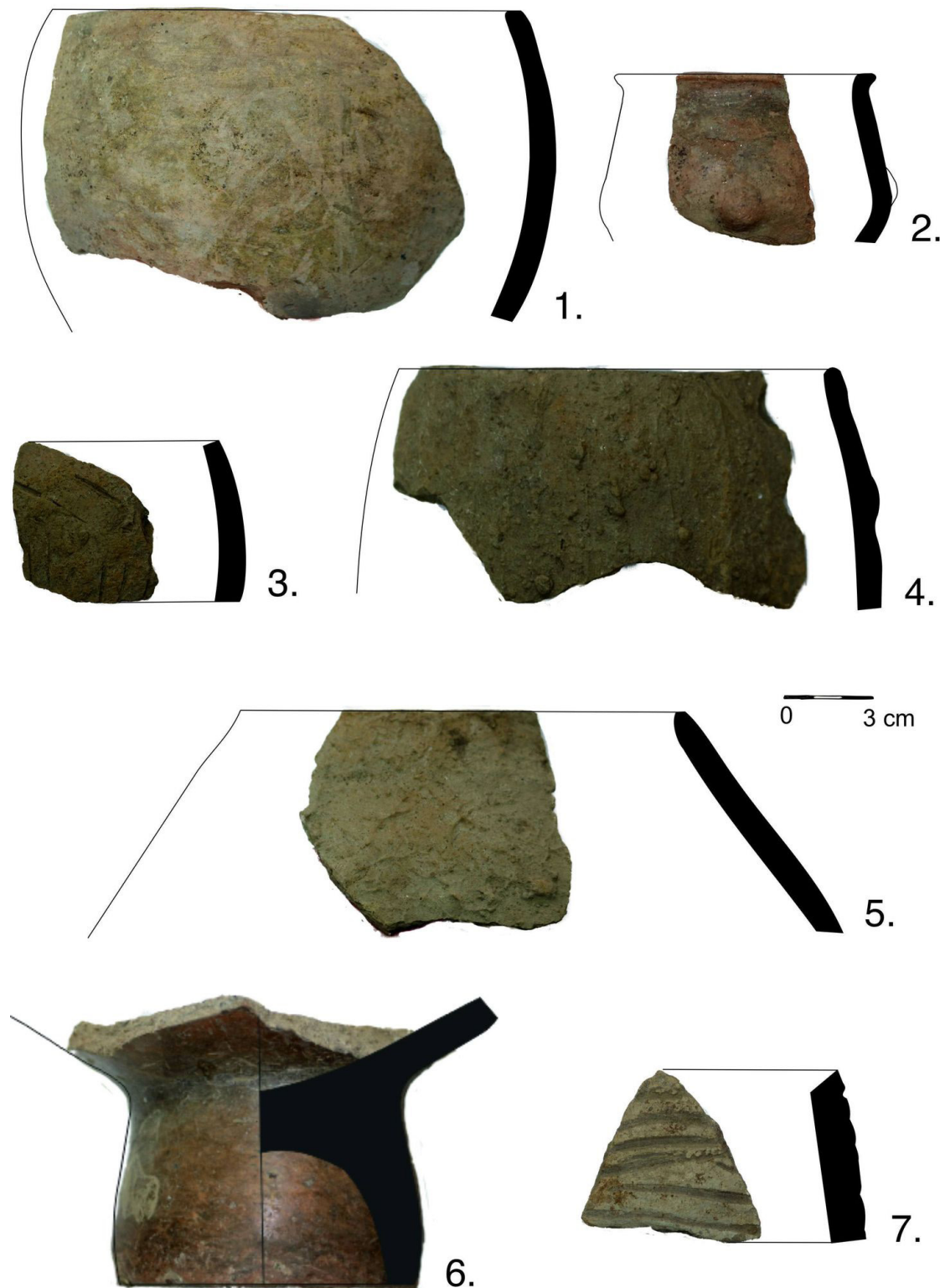


Fig. 10. Pottery from feature **Cpx. 584.**

1. Rim, category: fine, exterior colour: whitish coffee-like, interior colour: whitish coffee-like, temper: silt and chaff, polished, good oxidating colour. 2. Rim, category: fine, exterior colour: light brown, interior colour: light brown, temper: fine sand and chaff, peeled off slip, oxidating firing, with button. 3. Belly, category: rough, exterior colour: whitish coffee-like, interior colour: light brown, temper: chaff, sand and silt, floury aspect, good oxidating firing, decorated with incisions. 4. Rim, category: rough, exterior colour: light brown, interior colour: brown, temper: chaff and large grained sand, poor oxidating firing, decorated with barbotine organized in vertical rows. 5. Rim, category: semifine, exterior colour whitish coffee-like, interior colour brown with firing spots, temper: chaff and sand, smoothed, slight oxidant firing, ornamented with barborine; 6. Pot stand, category: fine, exterior colour: brown, interior colour: reddish-brown, temper: chaff and sand, polished slip, good oxidating firing. 7. Belly, semifine category, exterior colour: whitish coffee-like, interior colour: brown with firing spots, temper: chaff, sand and silt, good oxidating firing, decorated with deep incisions.

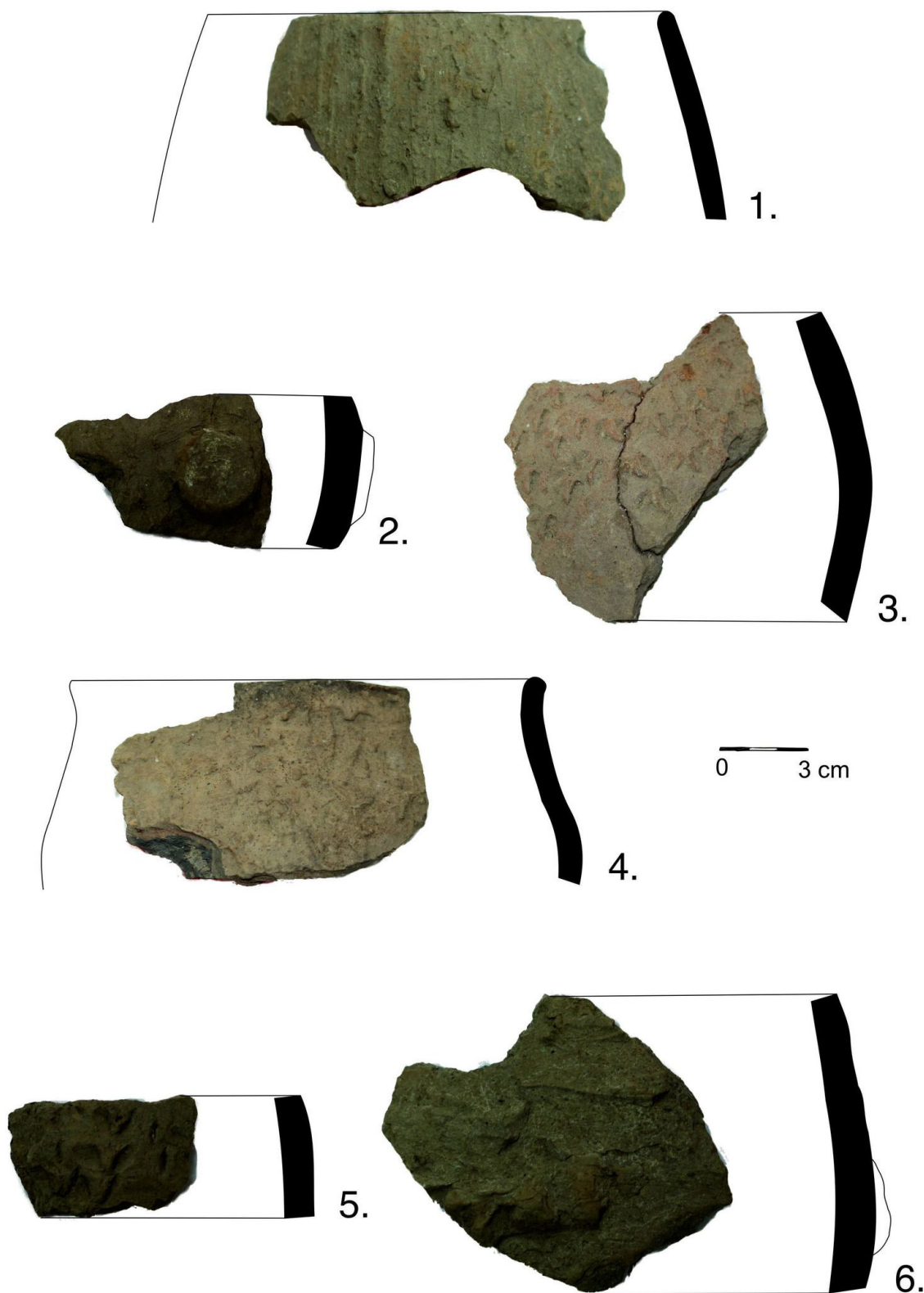


Fig. 11. Pottery from feature **Cpx. 584.**

1. Rim, category: rough, exterior colour: light brown, interior colour: coffee-like with black firing spots, temper: chaff and large grain sand, smoothed surface, light oxidating firing, decorated with barbotine organized in vertical rows. 2. Button, category: rough, exterior colour: light brown, interior colour: dark brown, temper: chaff and sand, peeled off slip on the interior, good oxidating colour, decorated with barbotine organized in vertical rows. 3. Two belly fragments, exterior colour: light brown, interior colour: greyish-black, temper: chaff and sand, smoothed surface, light oxidating firing. 4. Rim, category: rough, exterior colour: light brown, interior colour: brown with burning spots, temper: chaff and sand, smoothed surface, light oxidating firing, decorated with barbotine. 5. Belly, category: semifine, exterior colour: light brown, interior colour: greyish, temper: chaff and sand, smooth surface, good oxidating firing, decorated with pinches. 6. Belly, category: rough, exterior colour: light brown, interior colour: greysih with black burning spots, temper: chaff and sand, smoothed surface, light oxidating firing, decorated with plastic application, possibly alveolate belt and barbotine.

FEATURE CPX. 584, POTTERY ANALYSIS

Methodology

The analysis of the pottery resulted after the preventive excavations from Limba-Oarda de Jos (Alba County), was made by considering three aspects: the fabrication methods analysis, the typological analysis, and ornamentation.

In what concerns the analysis of the fabrication methods this included the framing of category, naming the exterior and interior colour, identifying the temper used for producing the pottery, the analysis of surface treatment and firing. For all three types of analysis, we have used the initial codes presented in the catalogues published by Zoia Maxim for Starčevo-Criş pottery¹⁴, with the following additions¹⁵. In the case of the archaeological site under discussion here no other new situations needed to be added to the catalogues in what concerns the morphology of rims, bottoms/stands, handles or types of ornamentation, but for the shapes we had to add to new codes, as it will be presented below.

1. Analysis of the technologies

1.1 Category of the pottery

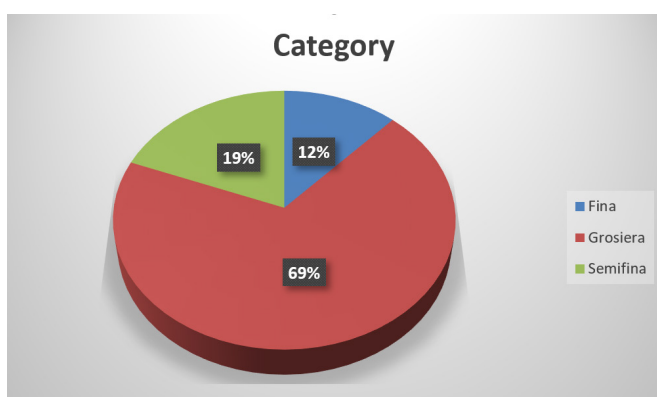


Fig. 12. Category distribution of the pottery from feature Cpx. 584.

From a total amount of 168 ceramic fragments from feature Cpx. 584 that were examined, most of them were framed to rough category, with 69%, followed by semi-fine, with 19% and fine with 12%.

1.2. Colour

In what concerns the exterior colour of the pottery from feature Cpx. 584, as it can be also noticed on Fig. 13, most of the examined shards had a light brown colour (code H), with 45%, followed by whitish-coffee-like (code O1) with 20%, orange (code D) with 10%, brown (code U) with 8%, brown with firing spots (code Q) with 6%, reddish (code I) with 4%, dark brown (code E) with 3%, greyish (code F) with 2%, coffee-like (code O) with 1% and grayish-black (code G) with 1%.

¹⁴ KALMAR MAXIM 1999.

¹⁵ TUDORIE 2011, 7-16; TUDORIE 2013, 73-75, 77, 82-88; TUDORIE 2014, 8-14, TUDORIE 2017, 11-17.

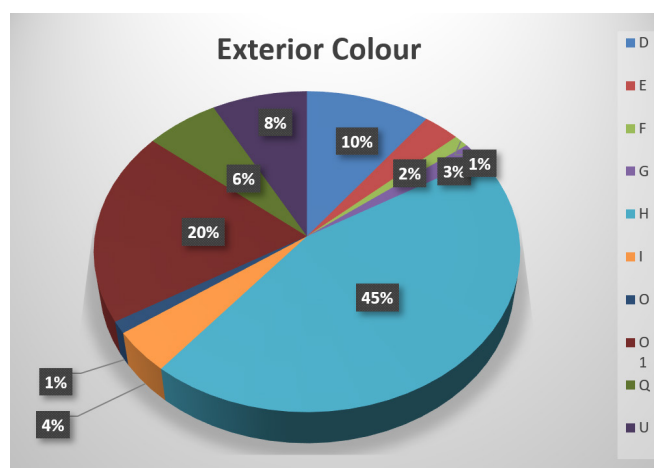


Fig. 13. Exterior colour of the pottery from feature Cpx. 584.

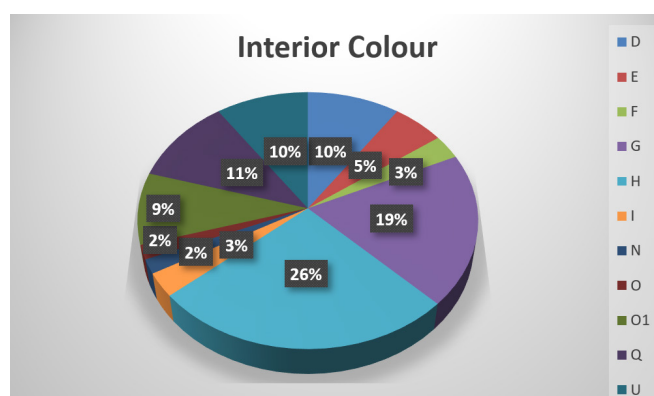


Fig. 14. Interior colour of the pottery from feature Cpx. 584

In what concerns the interior colour of the pottery, 26% was light brown (code H), 19% dark-grey (code G), 11% brown with firing spots (code Q), 10% brown (code U), 10% orange (code D), 9% grey (code F), 5% dark brown (code E), 3% reddish (code I), 3% whitish-coffee-like (code O1), 2% whitish-grey (code N), 2% coffee-like (code O).

1.3 Temper

More than half of the temper used for producing the pottery identified in feature Cpx. 584 represented chaff and sand (code D), with 55%. The rest, is being represented by: sand and chaff (code E) with 10%, chaff and large-grained

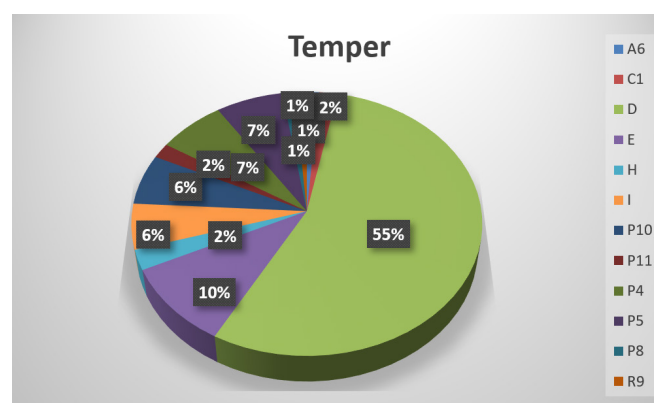


Fig. 15. Temper used for the pottery from feature Cpx. 584.

sand (code P4) with 7%, large-grained sand and chaff (code P5) with 7%, silt and chaff (code I) with 6%, large-grained sand, chaff and gravel (code P10) with 6%, chaff and silt (code H) with 2%, chaff, silt and ochre (code P11) with 2%, fine sand and chaff (code C1) with 2%, silt, large-grained sand and chaff (code R9) with 1%, large-grained sand, chaff and mice (code P8) with 1% and chaff, sand and ochre (code A6) with 1%.

1.4. Surface treatment

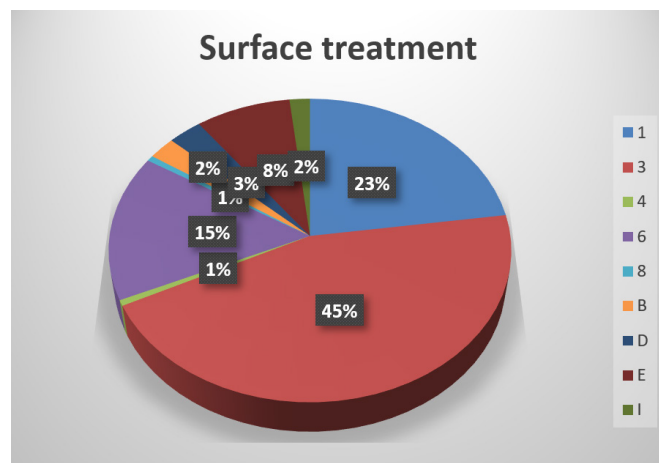


Fig. 16. Surface treatment for the pottery from feature Cpx. 584.

The analysis of the surface treatment for the pottery discussed here indicated that 45% of the pottery has a smoothed surface, 23% was polished, 15% has a rough surface, 8% has a floury-like aspect, 3% has a peeled-off slip, 2% has a polished slip, 2% is well-smoothed and 1% is unsmoothed.

1.5. Firing

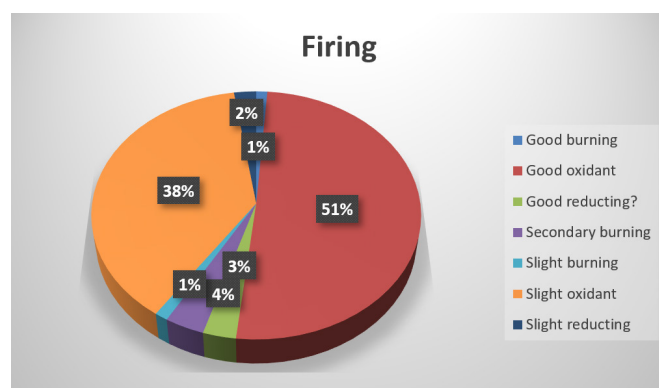


Fig. 17. Firing of the pottery from feature Cpx. 584.

The firing analysis for the pottery identified in feature Cpx. 584 revealed that 51% was fired good oxidant, 38% slight oxidant, 4% was good reducing fired, 3% presented secondary firing, 2% slight reducing firing 1% was slightly fired and other 1% good fired.

2. Morphology

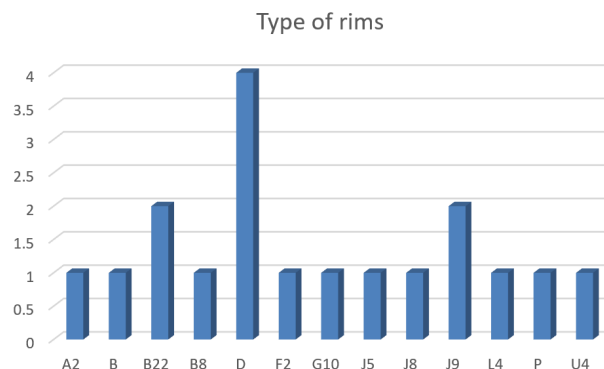


Fig. 18. Type of rims identified on the pottery from feature Cpx. 584.

From the total amount of the pottery from feature Cpx. 584, 33 represented rims, and for 18 it was possible to establish the type (Fig. 18).

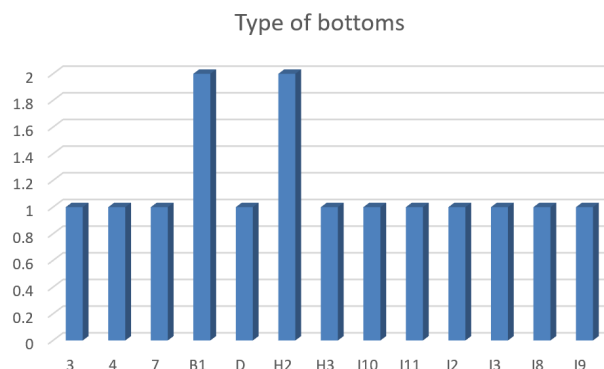


Fig. 19. Types of bottoms identified on the pottery from feature Cpx. 584.

In what concerns the bottoms/stand, there were 23 fragments identified as such, from 15 of them it was possible to establish the type (Fig. 19).

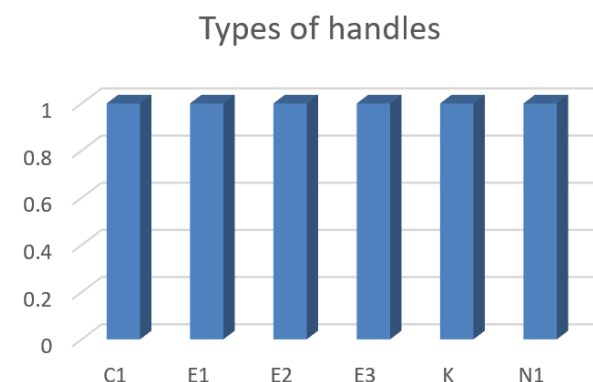


Fig. 20. Type of handles identified on the pottery from feature Cpx. 584.

7 fragments of handles were identified in the lot of pottery from feature Cpx. 584 and for 6 of them it was also possible to establish the type (Fig. 20).

From the total amount of pottery shards from feature Cpx. 584 two of them presented the entire shape (see Fig. 9/2, 9/3). Both have biconical shapes and one of them (Fig. 9/3) had also two small handles and a *lippenrad* type of rim. Because the two pots represented new situations for our catalogues, two new codes were added: HK (Plate 9/2) and HL (Plate 9/3).

3. Ornamentation

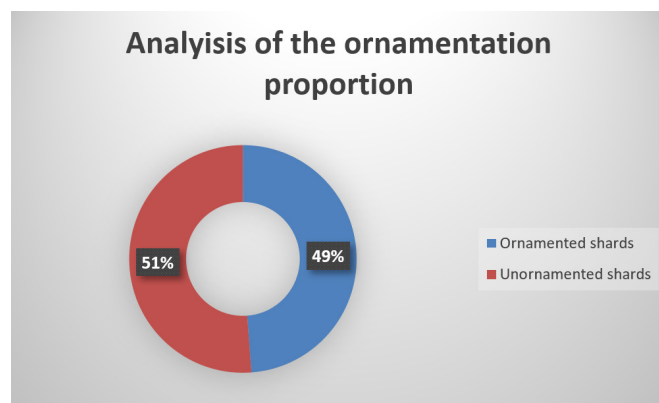


Fig. 21. General analysis of the ornamented pottery from feature Cpx. 584.

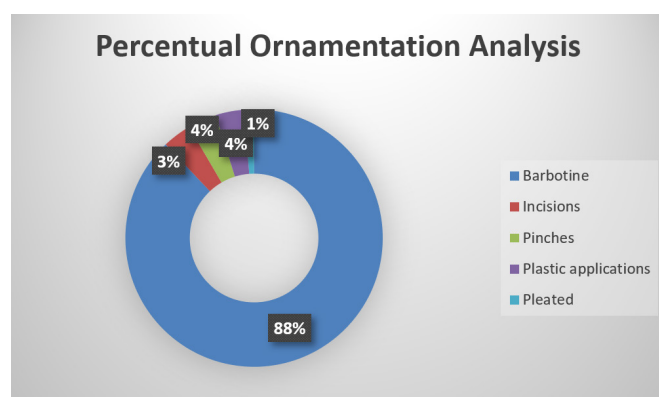


Fig. 22. Analysis of the types of ornaments identified on the pottery from feature Cpx. 584.

As suggested in Fig. 21 one can notice the fact that almost half of the pottery from Feature Cpx. 584 was ornamented (49%).

From this amount, 88% is represented by barbotine, or pseudo-barbotine. Pseudo-barbotine, a slight buffering of the pot's surface was present in two cases, (code IA), splashed barbotine (12 cases): IB 3 shards, IC 8 shards, IG 1 shard, barbotine organized in oblique rows: JK 1 shard, and the most frequent, barbotine organized in vertical rows (22 cases), JM 2 shards and JN with 20 shards.

4% of the ornamented pottery presented plastic applications (for examples see Fig. 10/6) some of them with small alveolations made with the fingertip on them, other 4% pinches (for examples see Fig. 10/3; 10/5), 3% incisions

(for examples see Fig. 10/3, 10/7) and 1% presented a pleated surface.

CONCLUSIONS

The reexamination of the pottery from the surface dwelling L3/1998, corroborated with the results offered by the ceramic inventory of feature Cpx. 584 confirms the fact that the technology of fabrication developed by the Starčevo-Criș IIIB community from Limba-Oarda de Jos indicated noticeable changes, comparative with what it is known as being specific for this moment of evolution in the Early Neolithic period. The biconical shapes, the extremely carefully made surface treatment (in the case of fine pottery), the frequent appearance of *lippenrand*, the firing with reductant predominates, shows that the Starčevo potters from Limba gained some advanced knowledge in producing the ceramics.

Considering the exterior colour of the pottery from feature C584 one can notice that the light colours (as light brown or coffee-like) are predominant, but there is still a 14% of dark colours being represented on the pottery here. In what concerns the temper used, the chaff, in different combinations and proportions (!), was identified in 99% of the shards we have analysed, the presence of this organic material being definitory for Starčevo-Criș pottery. Besides chaff, this pottery was usually tempered also with sand, silt, large-grained sand and sometimes ochre. Another interesting aspect for this pottery is represented by the quite high number of shards with polished surface (23%), in some of the situations, as is the case one entire pot identified here (Fig. 9/3) the polished surface related to dark colours and a good reducing firing.

The rims, bottoms and handles from this feature were easily identified in the older typological catalogues for Starčevo-Criș pottery, but there was a different situation in what concerns the two entire shapes (Fig 9/2, 9/3). For them new codes needed to be added. Both shapes have a biconical aspect, a fact that clearly indicates a transformation in the way the pots were modelled, but still following some of the same steps in *chaîne opératoire* as before (see, for instance the continuous use of chaff as temper) and with new additions (good polishing or reducing firing), being clear the fact that they start to present elements of direct influence from the first Vinča communities.

The stratigraphic data, although quite eloquent, doesn't offer any clearer information regarding the way Starčevo potters gained the advanced knowledge in producing the ceramics. In the case of surface dwelling L3/1998, above it, at approximately 10-15 cm, there is a Vinča surface dwelling (Vinča A2) but, according to the last data, it didn't belong to the oldest Vinča habitation from Limba-Oarda de Jos. In the proximity of dwelling L3/1998, but also of feature Cpx. 584, around *Vărăria* sector, on the eastern side of the old torrent, the preventive research from 2016 conducted to the discovery of a Vinča A feature which, according to all its specific elements, it seems to belong to the oldest Vinča horizon from Transylvania, with strong Vinča A1 elements¹⁶.

¹⁶ LUCA 1999; LUCA *et alii* 2000. The materials belonging to this complex are being processed and prepared for scientifically valorisation.

In these circumstances, the question addressed by the authors of this study aims to the possibility that the transfer of technologies between the two communities should have taken place in the most natural conditions, through their cohabitation inside the settlement of Limba-Oarda de Jos. We are positive that the processing of the relative chronology data and the ones of absolute chronology, for the materials from the above-mentioned feature, will clarify the working hypothesis that we are launching here.

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