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Studies

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

A GREEK CORINTHIAN HELMET ACCIDENTALLY DISCOVERED IN IAȘI COUNTY, ROMANIA¹

Abstract: In 2014, a citizen from the Alexandru Ioan Cuza village, discovered in the waters of the Siret River a Corinthian type Greek helmet. Without realising the importance of the discovery, he took the helmet home. Although he did not appear to have any knowledge of the value of the object, the discoverer allowed an acquaintance to photograph and post the images on a social network. These photos started a judicial investigation that led to the identification of the author of the discovery and the recovery of the helmet, six years later. The artifact was recovered and included in the national cultural heritage, by submitting it in the custody of the National Museum Complex "Moldova", Iași. The helmet is made of bronze, in the composition of which traces of lead (Pb) and iron (Fe) have been identified. It also displays traces of gilding. It is whole, but it has many marks and bends, some due to its engagement by the waters of the river, others as a result of blows with a hard body. The general condition is good.

Keywords: *Corinthian type, helmet, Getae, military elite, warriors.*

The helmet is made of bronze, in the composition of which traces of lead (Pb). The appearance of a Corinthian type helmet in the lands north of the Danube was one of those events that encompassed both the joy of adding an exceptional artifact to the national heritage and a certain measure of frustration, due to the ambiguity of the circumstances of the discovery. This special piece is only the latest addition to a very long list of artifacts stemming from accidental discoveries with disturbed context.

The helmet we are assessing was accidentally discovered in 2014, in the waters of the Siret River (**Fig. 1**) by a local residing in Alexandru Ioan Cuza village. That particular segment of the river presents with frequent and substantial changes in natural flow, due to heavy rains, which result in drastically changing of the regular course, with the water stream breaking through its banks. These phenomena can be related with a high probability to the detachment and rolling of the artifact downstream. The rapid waters of the Siret also bring up other materials from upstream, notably tree trunks, which the villagers of Alexandru Ioan Cuza usually collect for use as firewood. The local who discovered the helmet was in the middle of such activity when the incident occurred. These particular details make it necessary for us to seriously consider that the artifact may have been caught between the roots of a log or tree trunk and subsequently carried over some distance until it was observed by the discoverer while gathering wood brought by the river

¹ This article is a summary of the material published in Romanian in *Cercetări Istorice*, S.N, XL, Iași, 2021, p. 85-110

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| R (Analysis point) Element | R 73 (1) % | R 74 (2) % | R 75 (3) % | R 77 (5) % | R 78 (6) % | R 81 (9) % | Average % |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| Cu | 91.57 | 91.46 | 91.69 | 91.31 | 91.66 | 91.97 | 91.61 |
| Sn | 8.21 | 8.29 | 8.08 | 8.48 | 8.09 | 7.85 | 8.16 |
| Fe | 0.17 | 0.21 | 0.19 | 0.17 | 0.20 | 0.13 | 0.18 |
| Pb | 0.05 | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.04 |

Table 1
XRF Analysis



Table 2
XRF Analysis – deposit/corrosion area

| R (Analysis point) Element | R 76 (4) Deposits % | R 79 (7) Corrosion % | R 90 (8) Patina % |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Cu | 86.45 | 90.62 | 91.43 |
| Sn | 7.53 | 7.92 | 8.34 |
| Fe | 5.97 | 1.42 | 0.18 |
| Pb | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.06 |



| R (Analysis point) Element | R 13 (A) % | R 27 (G) % |
|----------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Cu | 85.19 | 85.94 |
| Sn | 6.33 | 7.08 |
| Au | 7.24 | 6.24 |
| Ag | 0.55 | 0.53 |
| Fe | 0.15 | 0.21 |

Table 3
XRF Analysis – metal covering area

waters. This scenario could satisfactorily provide the causes for the obvious “wrinkling” of the helmet, otherwise difficult to explain just by the mechanical process of rolling on the bottom of the channel, which must have been of a relatively short duration, due to the most likely rapid sinking of the piece because of its weight.

The very good preservation status is most likely related to the absence of oxygen, indicating that the piece was buried in the alluvial layer for a prolonged period. Probably, in a recent stage, closer to the moment of discovery, the

initial preservation site was washed away by the stream of the river, so that the helmet was positioned half in the mud and half in the water. This is the most likely explanation for the incomplete degradation of the patina, presenting with noticeable oxidation of the helmet only on the left half. The deformations on the surface of the piece most likely indicate the result of the constant pressure, in an alluvial deposit, and exclude the hypothesis of a long run downstream, in which case the degree of conservation and the stage of deformations would have been much more pronounced.

The formal recovery procedure² of the piece was initiated by the appearance of some photos of the helmet published in social media. This led to the identification of the discoverer and the recovery of the piece from his residence. The helmet was abandoned in an outbuilding, with no obvious traces of contemporary intervention, with the sole exception at the far extremity the right cheekbone side, indicating a tentative straightening of the metal plate.

The artifact was recovered and included in the national patrimony, by depositing it in the custody of the "Moldova" National Museum Complex, Iasi.

The artefact is made out of bronze (**Fig. 2-4; 10**). Traces of lead (Pb) and iron (Fe)³ were also identified in the composition.

The helmet was analysed by X-ray fluorescence spectrometry (XRF). According to the analysis (Table 1), the copper concentration varies between 91.31 - 91.97%, with an average of 91.61%; the tin concentration varies between 7.85 - 8.48%, with an average of 8.16%; the iron concentration varies between 0.13 - 0.21%, with an average of 0.18%. The lead concentration varies between 0.03 - 0.05%, with an average of 0.04% (Table 2).

Deposits on the surface of the helmet (point 4) are hydrated iron oxides ($\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3 \cdot n\text{H}_2\text{O}$). Corrosion on the surface of the helmet (point 7) consists of corrosion products of copper. On the surface of the helmet there are areas covered with corrosion products (identified by light microscopy, micro chemical tests): copper chlorides (atacamite, paratacamite), cuprite, and tenorite. The patina (point 8) is specific to copper. Deposits inside the helmet: calcium and potassium salts (carbonates and sulphates) – most likely soil residues.

According to XRF analyses, in points A and G on the surface of the helmet was identified a concentration of gold ranging between 6.24 - 7.24%, with silver in gold in concentrations of 0.53 - 0.55%.

Given these findings, we can affirm that the piece shows traces of gilding (points A and G - Table 3). It is very possible that the gilding covered larger parts of the helmet, potentially the entire surface of the artifact. (**Fig. 10**).

DATA SHEET

Artifact type: Corinthian Greek helmet.

Place of discovery, toponymal: Village, Alexandru Ioan Cuza, Iași County, Romania.

Type of research: accidental discovery.

Archaeological context: unknown.

Place of storage: National Museum Complex „Moldova”, Iași.

² Based on art. 112 lit. e, f NCP orders the taking of the security measure of special confiscation of a Hellenistic (Corinthian) bronze helmet taken from the named Zaina Constantin Radu and left in the custody of the National Museum Complex "Moldova" Iași according to the minutes of 15.01.2021.

³ The information regarding the metallographic composition was provided to by Dr. Eng. Maria Geba, senior researcher and leader of the Center for Restoration and Conservation of Cultural Heritage with the National Museum Complex „Moldova” in Iași, whom we thank for the kindness and promptness with which he offered us the results of the metallographic analyses he performed.

Warehouse, inventory identification: unregistered.

Material: bronze.

Dimensions: h = 25 cm; base circumference = 60 cm; circumference median area = 66.5 cm; h nasal protection = 7 cm; maximum nasal protection = 1.1 cm; nasal protection thickness = 1 cm; metal sheet thickness = 0.1 cm; inner diagonal = 20.5 cm x 23 cm; face protection width = 10 cm; face protection length = 17 cm; visor length = 6 cm; visor height = 2.7 cm.

Remarks: Occipital left, imprint approximately rectangular 9x9 cm; right parietal, trace of mechanical deformation; frontal area = longitudinal deformations, most likely caused by a blade weapon; in the back area two cut/hit marks. In general, the artifact presents with numerous mechanical deformations, bending and crushing of the cap, most of which are apparently due to the rolling and pressure of the environment in which it was preserved. There are no ear cutouts present. The helmet was gilded, partially or most likely completely.

Dating: Manufactured in the 5th century BC.

Corinthian type helmets were initially identified in the Peloponnese during the 7th century BC and were an evolution of the helmets previously used by the Greeks. The phrase "Corinthian helmet" used by historians today seems to have been in circulation since antiquity⁴. The designation is linked to the geographical location of a well-established production center, reputed for the manufacture of this type of helmet. Most interpreters agree that there were probably only a few major workshops, Corinth being one of them, perhaps even the first, and several peripherals, and the manufacture happened for a long period of time. The multitude of different technological details, the existing groups, and subtypes, support this hypothesis. It should also be noted that, while being careful about the correctness of the information, these types of helmets were associated with strong cultic significance for „barbarians” – aka, non-Greeks, wherever they were from.

This helmet type was superbly adapted for the compact combat mode, namely the phalanx, an infantry unit that dominated the battlefields of the Greeks for almost half a millennium. Most Corinthian-style headpieces were hammered from a single sheet of bronze - eliminating some of the shortcomings of the pieces assembled from riveted components. The most obvious feature of the Corinthian helmets was the frontally positioned, significantly downward elongated cheek pieces, as well as the strong nose guard. Basically, only the eyes remained unprotected, the rest of the head being completely covered by the metal cap.

While excellently suited for the phalanx battle style, the helmet presented some disadvantages for other battle units, the most serious being the „isolation” of the fighter, who could not hear or see the battlefield very well. Another problem was their weight, which made the soldier quite uncomfortable. The Greek workshops, while trying to keep the typological line, tried to solve this inconvenience

⁴ HERODOT, IV, 184.

by elimination of any unnecessary attached ornaments, by reducing the protection of the nape and by reducing the thickness of the metal sheet, which in the late specimens reaching but a fraction of that of older pieces. With the new modifications, the helmet could also employ a resting position, worn on the back of the head, as it often appears in art. Iconography is important because it places this final form between the last quarter of the sixth century and the end of the Greco-Persian wars. It should be noted that, carried in this position, the artists could also portray the faces of the illustrated characters, which further emphasized their function as a symbol of the hoplite military prowess⁵.

These manufacturing adaptations present some issues whether the helmets retained their usefulness as an effective protection weapon, as it seems that these changes may have turned them into panoply prestige pieces, rather than tools of battle. In the real field of battle, not only the specific characteristics had diminished its utility, but also the newer war tactics and formations that were deployed were rendering the prestigious Corinthian helmet obsolete.

All these attempts at adaptation eventually led to the emergence of other types of combat helmets. The helmets that succeeded them, especially the Chalcidice ones, solved most of the troubling issues, being much better suited to the increasingly fluid realities of the battlefields. Corinthian helmets gradually became obsolete by the end of the 5th century BC, along with the Greek hoplites, after some centuries of being a central feature of all battlefields. In general, the decommissioning of Corinthian helmets can be reasonably timed in between the reforms of Iphikrates and the decline of Greek mercenaries in the Mediterranean basin. It must be said, however, that the hoplites continued to be equipped with heavy weaponry until later, when the Greek city-states lost their independence⁶, but their numbers and importance declined steadily, in direct relation to the prosperity of the social class they represented and belonged to.

The headpieces of this type have been meticulously designed and manufactured with a great deal of attention, each specimen being made to order and customised to the anatomical characteristics of the individual who ordered it⁷.

A rather less discussed aspect in the historical literature is the apparently phallic morphology of the cap. We do not know of any ancient sources addressing the phallic shape of these helmets, so it is unclear whether the shape of the Corinthian-type helmets, later inherited by the Chalcidic type, is a direct result of cap-making techniques - the egg-like shape being aptly suited to deflecting weapon strikes - or is an explicit and intentional design of an erect penis. One must keep in mind that the Greek mentality and iconography constantly render small, flabby penises, considering that enlarged penises signaled low self-control and that they were the attributes of insignificant men, satyrs, and barbarians. We can safely assume as likely the hypothesis in which the Greeks sought and obtained an effective type of headpiece, without aiming to be associated with phallic morphologies. We also do not know to what extent the apparent phallic

⁵ PFLUG 1988, 87.

⁶ UEDA-SARSON 2002, 30.

⁷ SNODGRASS 1967, 59.

shape was masked by the various decorative elements, which were rather commonly used on the helmets⁸.

Heavily associated with the hoplite battle formation, the Corinthian-type helmet was relatively widespread in the Mediterranean basin, wherever the Greeks made an appearance - from Spain to Cyprus (**Fig. 6**). When detached from the type of heavy infantry for which it was created and the workshops that manufactured it, the Corinthian helmet experienced a much-reduced geographical spread, with sporadic sightings in the "barbarian" environment. An exception to this register can be considered the Apulia region of Italy, where, due to the local high demand for such equipment, it was possible to open local workshops and, eventually, to develop a specific localised type of helmet.

As for the remainder of the barbarian world (**Fig. 7**), especially the Northern area, where heavily armed infantry and armor manufacturing infrastructure were basically non-existent, the Corinthian helmet is exceedingly rare.

The discoveries of Corinthian helmets beyond the borders of the Mediterranean world are quite exceptional, very few being identified, although they were undoubtedly familiar for the local elites of these regions.

Such a helmet (**Fig. 7/1**) was discovered in insufficiently documented circumstances and context near the village of Čelopeč (Челопеч), Sofia region, Bulgaria (**Fig. 6**). According to the researchers who have documented the finding, the helmet was retrieved from the gravel extracted from a riverbed⁹.

Another Corinthian helmet of the same type (**Fig. 7/2**) was also discovered in Bulgaria, near the village of Čelopečene (Челопечене), Sofia region (**Fig. 6**). Although the location of the discovery does not appear to be known precisely, this helmet also appears to have been recovered from gravel extracted from a gravel pit on the Lesnovska River. Both helmets have been dated sometime between the end of the 6th century BC and the first decades of the next century¹⁰.

Advancing further north, the helmet discovered at Alexandru Ioan Cuza connects the Thracian areas with the steppe regions, where some interesting pieces were discovered.

First on the list is an artifact recovered in southwestern Ukraine, near the town of Pesčannaja (Песчаная), Odessa region (**Fig. 6**), by an amateur browsing with a metal detector, in 2016. The helmet (**Fig. 8**) was discovered in a forested area, at a depth of approx. 50 cm and was extremely fragmented. From the analysis of the images it seems that the destruction of the helmet took place in Antiquity, at the time of the deposition. Carefully observation of the few photographs leaked in the public space, one can note the unnatural elongation and undulating appearance of some of the remains of this helmet, so one may assume that there is a possibility that the piece, as a whole or fragmented, may have been subjected to high temperatures. But for now, that's just a guess.

⁸ BORANGIC/GUŢICĂ-FLORESCU 2020, 261.

⁹ LAZOV 2006, 9.

¹⁰ LAZOV 2006, 10-13.

A little further on, about 125 km northeast of Pesčannaja, near the village of Romejkovo (Ромейково), Cherkasy region, Ukraine (**Fig. 6**), sometime before 1849, a tomb was discovered and researched. It undoubtedly belonged to a Scythian chieftain. In the funerary inventory there were, among other things, two bronze greaves (*cnemis*), several arrowheads, the remains of a sword and a Corinthian helmet (**Fig. 9**)¹¹.

At Romejkovo, about 295 km southeast, there is another point of interest regarding the Corinthian helmets in this region. This is the mound/kurgan in the archeological site of Solokha (Солоха), Zaporozhye region, Ukraine (**Fig. 6**). The mound, discovered at the beginning of the 20th century, is one of the most impressive of such funerary arrangements in the region. It houses, among others, the tomb of a high-ranking individual, perhaps even a royal one, from the Scythian world¹². It was quite precisely dated between the last decades of the 5th century BC and the first decades of the next century. The inventory list is rather spectacular. One of the items, a gold comb is lavishly decorated with dynamically rendered human and animal figures¹³. One of the characters, an extremely realistic rider, wears a Corinthian helmet on his head (**Fig. 7/3a-3b**).

In the same funerary ensemble, but in a different tomb, among the numerous weapons that belonged to the inhumed a bronze helmet was identified, most likely also of Corinthian type, but which underwent serious modifications, applied with the intention to adapt it to other tactical needs (**Fig. 7/4**). These corrections must be understood not only as physical adaptations for the cranial conformation of the new owners of the helmets, but also as imperative changes determined by the different fighting style practiced by the Scythian cavalry archers, who needed improved sensory acuity and greater general mobility, almost completely unnecessary for the rank and file of a heavy infantry unit. The modifications kept only some part of the protection, which resonated with the tactical needs of a mounted soldier, but retained the prestige given by an emblematic luxury product.

Although the piece cannot be undoubtedly identified as a Corinthian helmet, even if the alterations and the shape of the preserved cap strongly support this hypothesis, we can affirm with some degree of certainty that both the helmet and the gold comb are representative's items signaling the connections of the Scythian elites with the products and the ideologies of the Greek colonies of Pontus. The cultural landscape of the North Pontic Scythians reveals that such helmets were a valuable commodity of obvious ideological importance.

In addition, the modern methods of dating the tomb used in this case, which, even if they restrict the temporal area, support the previous archaeological assessments¹⁴. At the same time, accurate and precise dating shows that Corinthian helmets that have reached the periphery, at great distances from the original manufacturing sites and their original bearers, remained in the use of barbarian elites for

some time, even after their tactical importance had visibly diminished.

The last such a discovery is a Corinthian helmet from a tomb in the Taman Peninsula, near the village of Volna (Volna), Krasnodar region, Russia (**Fig. 6**). The helmet deposited in the funerary inventory of the individual buried here was preliminarily dated in the interval 450-425 BC. The helmet is strongly fragmented, apparently due to the positioning circumstances, it has been only partially reconstituted at this time (**Fig. 9/5-7**) and it is in the process of being published. The discovery is the final piece of an arc relatively parallel to the Black Sea coast, theoretically delimiting the peripheral space of the influence of the Greek *polis*. With no complete data on this yet unpublished discovery, from the few publicly available presentations we can infer that it is the tomb of a Greek horseman, which indicates, if confirmed, an adaptation of the North Pontic Greek world to the tactical realities of the steppe region.

The way in which such helmets arrived in the barbarian world is prone to numerous working hypotheses and reasonable assumptions. Either they were spoils of war, or political gifts, or they could even reach the target area by way of trade. Regardless of any of these vectors, the presence of Corinthian helmets in the barbarian environment denotes the connection of local elites to the products of Greek workshops and the ideology emanating from the prosperous and influential Pontic *polis*.

In the same register, the artifact is added to the valuables held by leading members of local communities, emphasising their economic power and military strength.

CONCLUSIONS

During the period between the 5th and 3rd centuries BC, the territory between the Eastern slopes of the Eastern Carpathians and the Dniester River experienced tremendous human activity which is quite difficult to explain by historians. First, the number of built fortresses increases remarkably, some of them impressive in size, revealing serious collective efforts. The number of settlements is also significant, as are the buried treasures and the discovered necropolises, and the numerous imported products complete the image of a powerful urban and economic demography.

However, the prosperity and dynamics of these indicators raise some interesting issues, the first being the contrast between the relatively limited local resources and the economic elements listed. This discrepancy reveals the existence of a local elite not only strong and rich, but also aware of its own identity.

In fact, all this social, economic, military and probably even political dynamics in some places, is the result of the strategic position of the territory between the steppe populations and the lush south. At the time, the Siret meadow had the function of a communication artery between the steppe and the Pontic coast and even further, to the rich territories of the southern Danube. It seems obvious that this advantage has contributed and allowed the accumulation of material and cultural values and the emancipation of local leaders and chieftains. The control

¹¹ FUNDUKLEJ 1848, 72-73, Fig. 16.

¹² MANTSEVICH 1987, 60-61.

¹³ MANTSEVICH 1987, 57-60; PIOTROVSKY 1986, 128-129.

¹⁴ ALEKSEEV *et alii* 2002, 145.

of this corridor and its adjacent routes, favored the trade exchanges, allowed the enrichment and mobility of the elites and, implicitly, the exchanges of goods, people, and ideas in both directions.

Pressed by the increasingly frequent nomadic raids on one side, engulfed in endemic intertribal conflicts - events that may explain the rise of countless fortresses - and on the other side, inexorably attracted by the sophistication of the Hellenistic south, the historical Getae elites, dominant in the territory in question at that time, developed a culture, an identity and an obvious ideology of their own.

In this hastily sketched landscape, the Corinthian helmet discovered at Alexandru Ioan Cuza, although it makes an apparently discordant note, is in fact a natural part of the general context. The presence of such a special product in the areas controlled by the Getae can have multiple explanations. It could have been procured by robbery, it could have been a political gift, it could have been a capture of war, or it could have been merely a traded object.

The blows identified on the hood, however, suggest the existence of a more abrupt route. The helmet appear to have suffered a rather sudden change in ownership. The visible traces of aggression on the artifact outline the hypothesis that it was part of the spoils of war, a conflict that we can safely assume took place elsewhere. Considering, with all due caution, the fact that it was found in an riverbed, a potential moment with a cult significance, such as a sacrifice or on offering to the gods, it is possible to be added to this scenario. The destruction of the helmet discovered at Peșcănaja, the probability that those discovered in Bulgaria were also removed from the bottom of the rivers, the identical situation in the case of the Chalcidic helmet from Budești, suggests a form of ritual - destruction and/or sacrifice by disposing in running streams. The helmet, combining the attributes of a substitute for the actual physical head and as a symbol of the the virtues of the warrior, acquires strong spiritual valences.

The presence in this area of the helmet from Alexandru Ioan Cuza shouldn't be extremely surprising. The Corinthian type was undoubtedly well known in the time and region. The Greek *polis* represented a tangible archetype and a clear cultural pattern for the barbarian world. The Corinthian helmets were only one of the symbols of the Greek culture, not only more refined, but also stronger from a military point of view and, consequently, particularly influential.

Possession of a Greek gilded bronze helmet, probably captured in battle fundamentally changed the status and position of the one who acquired it. It is very possible that this extremely precious items may not have been used as an actual implement of warfare, but rather used as a spiritual item, to be worshipped and sacrificed to who knows what deities, in order to secure the victory in coming battles.

Beyond every possible assumption, the presence of this artifact in Getae lands, during the glory age of the *golden princes*, is the clear and undisputed confirmation of the connection of the local elites to the Hellenistic models and culture.

translated by F. D. Pălimaru

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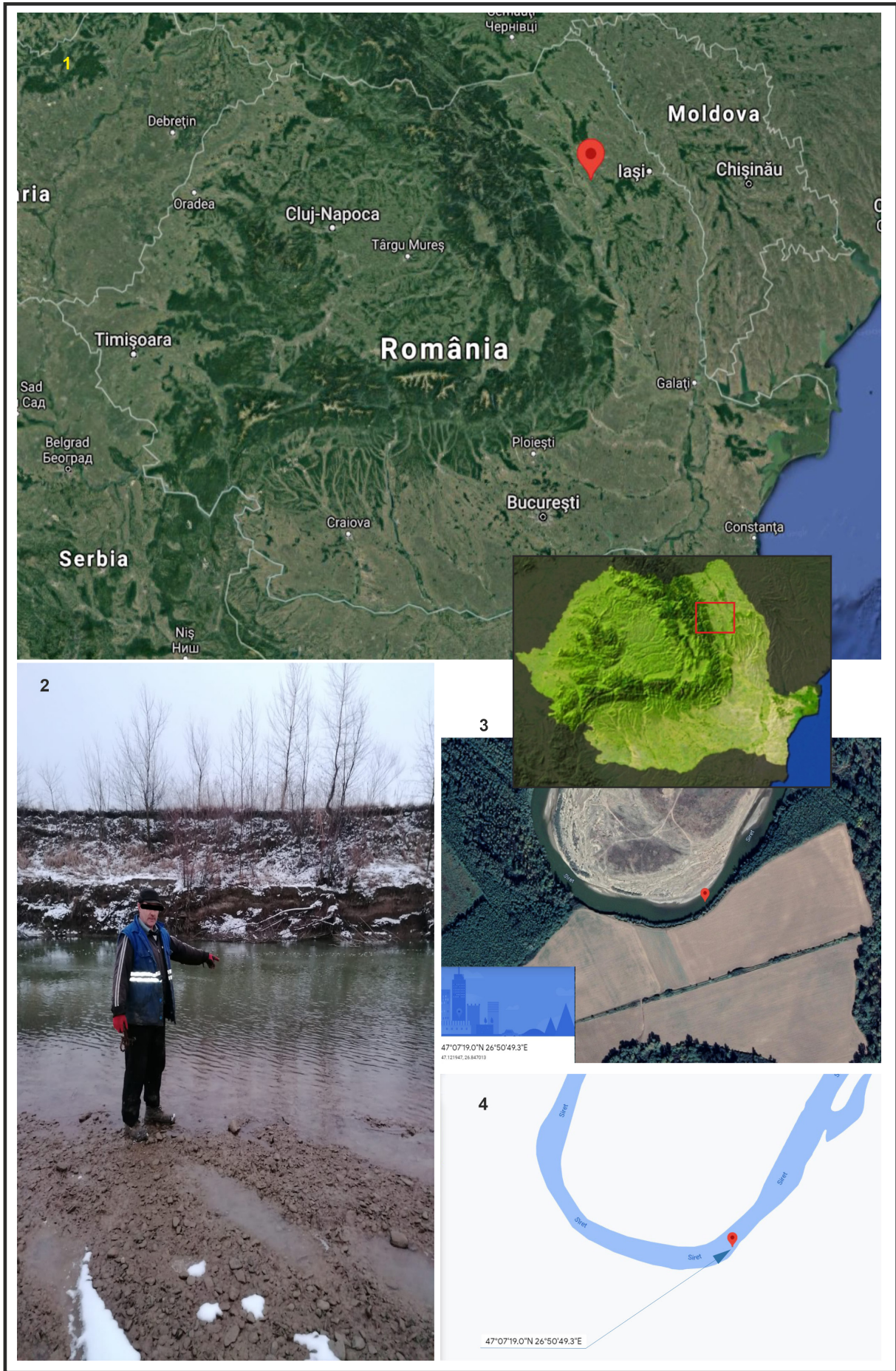


Fig. 1. The area and place of the discovery of the helmet from Alexandru Ioan Cuza.



Fig. 2. Corinthian helmet discovered at Alexandru Ioan Cuza.



Fig. 3. Corinthian helmet discovered at Alexandru Ioan Cuza (photo by M. Neagu, „Moldova” National Museum Complex, Iași, Romania).

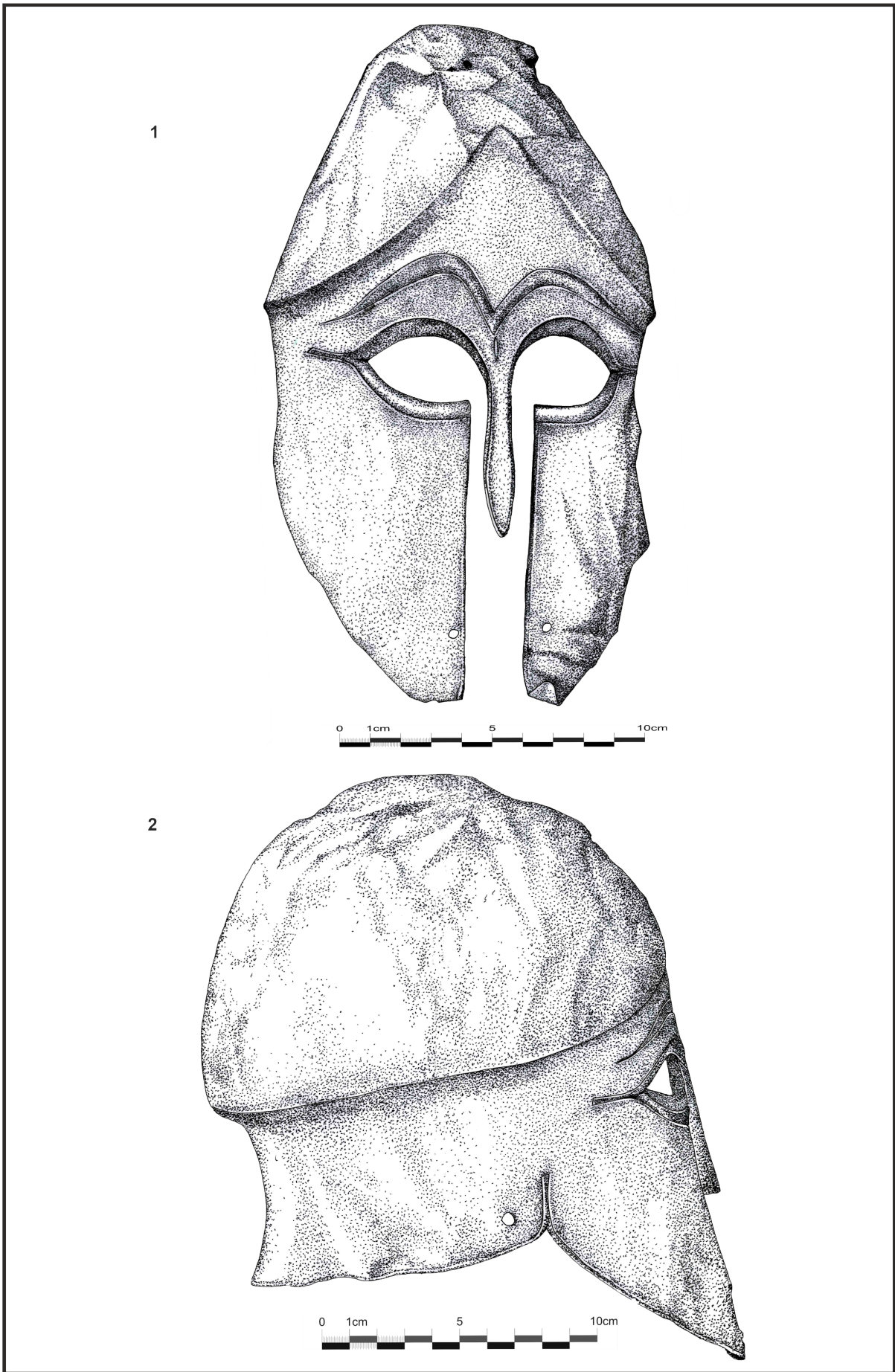


Fig. 4. Drawing F. Martis.

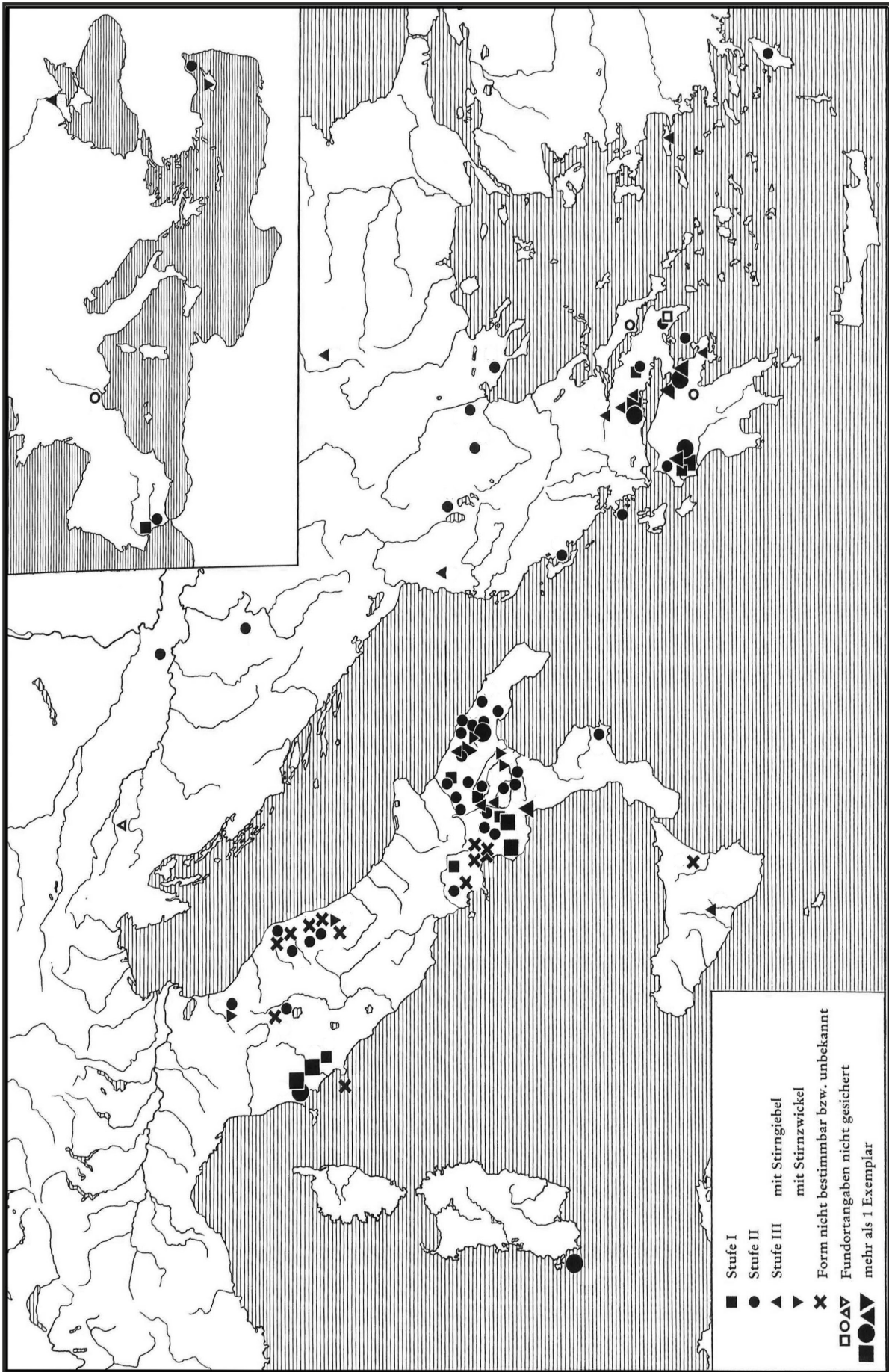


Fig. 5. Distribution of Corinthian helmets discovered in Europe (according to PFLUG 1988).

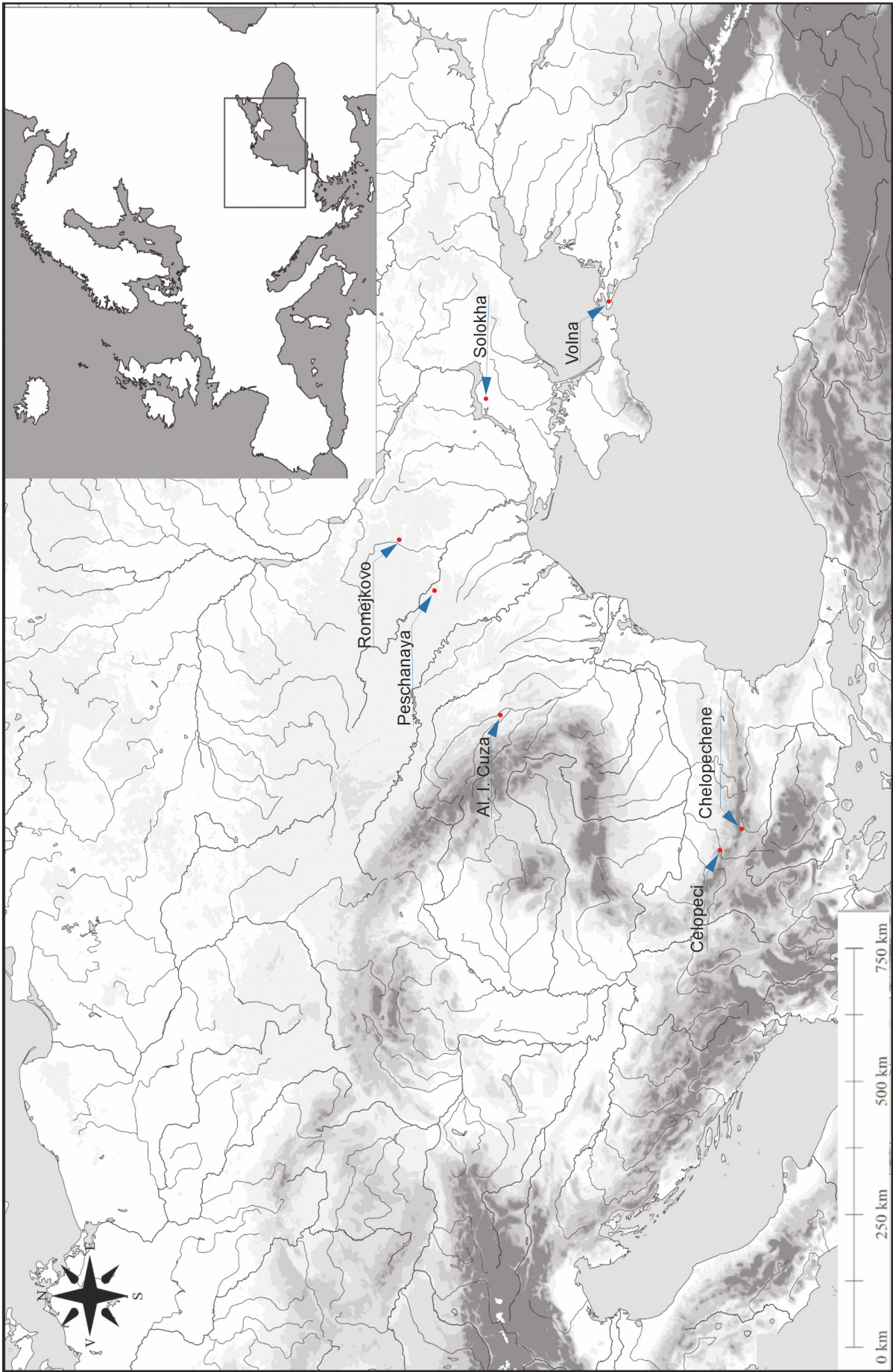


Fig. 6. Distribution of Corinthian helmets discovered in barbarian environments in the western and northern Black Sea.

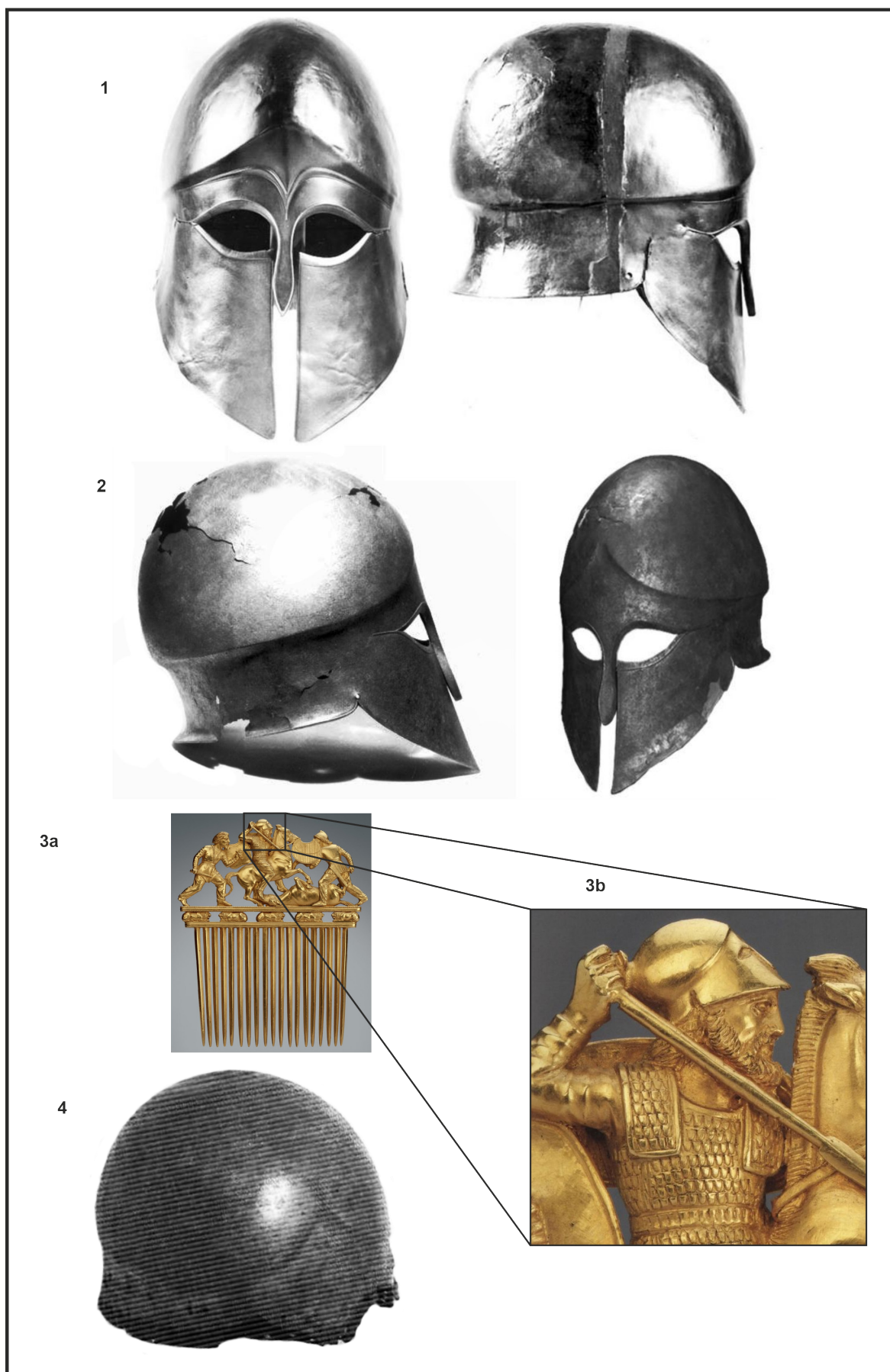


Fig. 7. **1** - Corinthian helmet discovered in Čeloreč (Челопеч) Bulgaria (after LAZOV 2006); **2** - Corinthian helmet discovered at Čelorečene (Челопечене), Bulgaria (near LAZOV 2006); **3** - Golden comb discovered in the mound of Solokha (Солоха) Ukraine (after PIOTROVSKY 1986); **4** - Bronze helmet discovered in the mound of Solokha, Ukraine (after MANTSEVICH 1987).



Fig. 8. Bronze helmet discovered near Pesčannaĵa (Песчаная), Ukraine (Facebook photo).

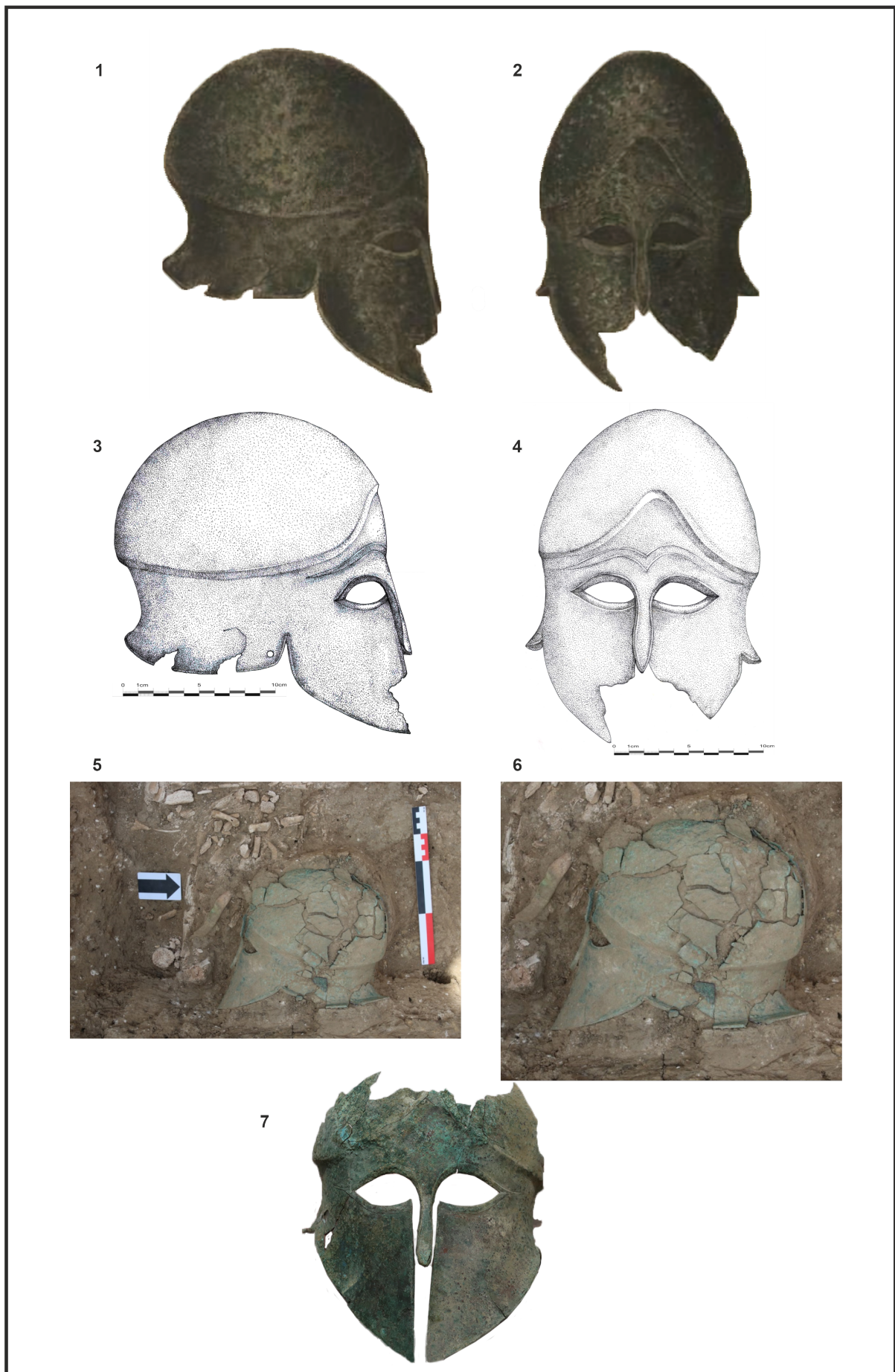


Fig. 9. 1-4. Bronze helmet discovered Romejkovo (Ромейково) Ukraine (1-2. near FUNDUKLEJ 1848; 3-4. drawing F. Martis); 5-7. Bronze helmet discovered at Volna (Volna), Russia (photo <http://mospravda.ru>).



Fig. 10. The helmet from Alexandru Ioan Cuza - restored (restoration and photo by V. Grecu, „Moldova” National Museum Complex, Iași).