

## Refining the Past Understanding with the Help of Technology.

### The case of the Iron Age archaeological complex from Telita-Celic Dere

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**Abstract:** In this paper, the authors sustain the practice of a qualitative archaeology, carried on after coherent strategies. Using the case of a famous Romanian Iron Age site from the Lower Danube, they exemplify how noninvasive methods and complex landscape studies, combining large amounts of archaeological and historical information, led to a reassessment of the entire understanding of this site, in contrast with its research results obtained in 20 years of extensive excavation campaigns.

**Keywords:** non-invasive, landscape archaeology, research strategy

#### Preliminaries

Modern archaeologists have different priorities than 30 years ago. Extensive digging is not their objective anymore, but the aspiration to obtain information from alternative sources, using the excavations only in limited circumstances as the most harmful research method. Funding bodies and national legislations encourage nowadays a more qualitative based archaeology, concentrated in key sites, involving large and interdisciplinary research teams. In this context we notice a growing need for the reevaluation of older excavations as alternative sources of gaining new information.

Our concern in this paper is to exemplify how this different approach of the research strategy may change significantly the quality of archaeological and historical knowledge and we will use as example the case of a famous Romanian archaeological excavation from the lower Danube, Telita - Celic Dere.

#### Archaeological and historical problematic

The archaeological assemblage from Telita - Celic Dere may be categorically regarded as an exceptional site. It represents one of those rare occasions an archaeologist has to investigate both the settlement and necropolis of a human community. Moreover, the localization of this site in the nearby of the Danube and Black Sea situates it in a space of cultural and ethnic transition, therefore an excellent context in which one may analyze and understand important cultural and ethnic changes of the Iron Age communities from the Lower Danube (6<sup>th</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC). In addition, the coexistence in the necropolis of tumuli graves along flat graves, and of incineration graves along inhumation graves, put forward the possibility to comprehend complex social structure and ritual behaviors.

The site was identified and excavated (1985-2001) by Dr. G. Simion. His excavations conducted to the discovery and research of an unfortified settlement, a necropolis of small tumuli and a flat grave necropolis. Due to the complexity of the archaeological in situ structures and also to their inventory, found both in the necropolis and settlement, only little information was published (SIMION 1995, 1996, 2000, 2003).

### Interdisciplinary strategy. Methods

Beginning with 2005, the archaeological complexity and historical problematic raised by the TeliŃ - Celic Dere site led to a reassessment of the research strategy by a new team conducted by Dr. Valeriu Ńirbu (ŃIRBU et al. 2007, 2008). The emphasis was taken towards the integration of the excavations' results with information obtained from alternative noninvasive investigations. In order to understand the composite relations developed between the human communities from Celic Dere and their natural environment, there were used specific concepts and methods in the field of Landscape Archaeology (LOCK 2003; PETERSON 1998). In order to develop such complex investigations, large amount of geographic and geological data was processed. In addition, for these analyses, the archaeological map of the region had to be assembled through the integration of published documentation and personal recent field survey works (Fig. 1, 2). Large scale geophysical surveys were used to delimitate the structural assemblages of this site and for the identification of unexcavated features (for example flattened tumuli) (Fig. 5). The spatial management of the entire research was ensured through accurate topographic activities, both in the case of general terrain analyses and also for archaeological documentation (Fig. 4). Innovative databases were developed to include information from older and newer excavations, and everything was integrated in a GIS system. New excavations were made to verify and refine the results of the analyses made with non-invasive technologies (Fig. 5c)

Further in this study, the authors will resume the preliminary results of an interdisciplinary analysis. In the beginning, however, few considerations regarding the site's archaeological and cultural problematic will be stated. We will use in the discussion, published results of the archaeological discoveries from TeliŃ – Celic Dere from older excavation of G. Simion and also new results from the 2005-2008 research campaigns.

### The site

The settlement is located on top of a plateau with three steep slopes, elevated with 30-35 m above the Valley of the Celic River, water which borders the site in its southern side. The plateau has a surface of approximately 4.2 ha. A small part was excavated by G. Simion (under 5%). No traces of fortification were discovered. The preliminary published results suggest a chronological framework between 6<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC, period which corresponds to two different stages in the site existence. The first phase (6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC) ended probably during a violent fire, as the discovered large quantities of burnt clay walls and ash attest. Furthermore, inside the hut-dwellings, a large quantity of in situ inventory was found, suggesting, as well, a violent and rapid end of this habitation level (SIMION 1997: 238-9, 246-7, fig. 5-6) among which Greek ceramic was discovered, mostly amphorae, like the Chios type, dated at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (SIMION 1997: 239, 250, fig. 10). Some ceramic fragments were interpreted as having connections in the eastern space, in the area of late Cernoles culture, the Jabotinsc phase (SIMION 1997: 241 with bibliography) which in connection with the dwellings' type and some discoveries in the necropolis, pointed to an ethnic presence in this area of a Pre-Scythian community (SIMION 1997: 241). The

second and most recent habitation level consisted of rectangular surface dwellings with clay walls. Household pits, fireplaces and cooking kilns were also found. For the second period, in the ceramic inventory together with local vessels (SIMION 1997: 240, 248, fig.7-8) there were found, many Greek vessels, noticeably, amphorae from Thasos.

The necropolis is located at 300 m north from the settlement plateau. No precise limit between the two different areas has been yet identified. Inside the necropolis G. Simion excavated all the visible mounds and many flat graves. Published information proposes for the necropolis, a general chronology between 6<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. The diameters of the mounds varied from 3 to 15 m and the height from 50 cm to 2 m. The main architectural elements of the mounds are the broken stone embankment and the large stone outer ring. The tumuli were built above large rectangular or oval pits. In Celic Dere there were found under the same architectural constructions, both inhumation graves (the majority) (SIMION 2000: 70) and graves with the cremated bones deposited in urns covered with leads or with the burnt bones deposited directly in pits covered with stones (SIMION 2003: 70, fig.7-6). The graves inventory contained weapons, harness items, adornments, dress accessories and ceramic. We emphasize the presence of Greek imported wares and also of the gray clay vessels imitated after Greek shapes (SÎRBU et al. 2007: 480, pl. 76). Among the discovered items, of great interest are considered to be the eastern type artifacts belonging to Pre-Scythian and Scythian cultures (SIMION 2003: 250, 255-7, fig. 4-6)

The cultural mixture of inventory and rituals in TeliŃa - Celic Dere needed an extensive analytical exercise and also a reevaluation of the old results with newly available technologies and theoretical approaches.

### **Geological and Geographical Assessments**

The site is located 20 km South-West from the modern city of Tulcea, 14 km south of the Danube, in a hilly relief, in what can be named the central part of Northern Dobrogea. Northern Dobrogea has five main relief unities: Măcin Mountains, The NiculiŃel Plateau (or the NiculiŃel Hills), the Nalbant Hollow, the Tulcea Hills and the Babadag Plateau (Fig. 1). The archaeological complex from TeliŃa - Celic Dere is localized in the eastern part of the NiculiŃel Hills, on the Valley of Celic River. NiculiŃel Hills are characterized by ridges orientated from north to south which are crossed over by many small rivers. This area has, in fact, in the context of the entire central Dobrogea region, a quite abundant rainfall average. The geographical unit of NiculiŃel Hills is delimited in the eastern side by the river TeliŃa and in the west by the river TaiŃa. In modern times, the circulation in the NiculiŃel Hills is made exactly along these valleys. For example the county roadways 229A Cataloi-TeliŃa and 22 between Cataloi and Mihail Kogălniceanu municipalities use the valley of the river TeliŃa. Other river valleys used for modern access in the region are TaiŃa and Alba (Fig. 2).

In the past, however, there were also other options to cross over the landscape (TILLEY 1994). Some roads could had followed the hills' ridges, especially those which are long and flat and offered in this way the possibility to minimize circulation effort and also to allow the traveler to find his direction in the

forests. There were more secure against flooding or than the routes trough the marshes of river valleys.

### Landscape Analysis

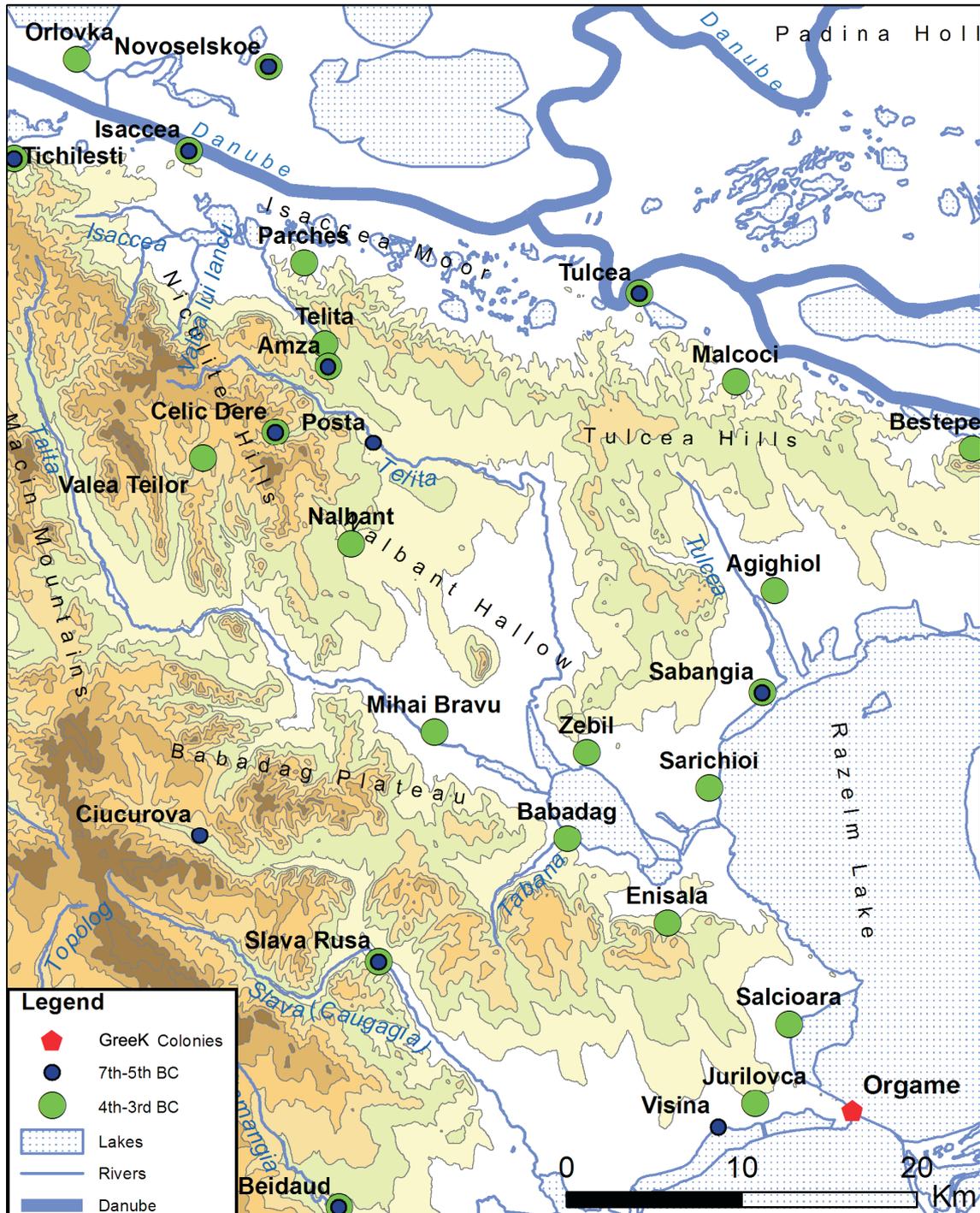


Fig. 1 – Northern-Dobrogea. Relief and 7<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> BC centuries archaeological discoveries map.

Today, the site from Telimă - Celic Dere seems isolated, in a remote and wild region, not immediately connected with the major roads of the area. How did, however, the site contain the remains of eastern

ethnic groups, and how did arrive here so numerous Greek imports from the Black Sea and Mediterranean area? What were the resources that allowed these communities to prosper along centuries? The most obvious interpretation is that of a major circulation road which must have existed in the vicinity of the site. We mention that the crucial pass over the Danube from Isaccea is only at 17 km NW (in bird's flight) from Telița - Celic Dere. This place was used along ages, as a passing point across the Danube.

Analyzing the relief in the micro region of Telița - Celic Dere with the help of slope calculations (Fig. 2, 3) we noticed that the easiest way to cross the Niculițel Hills from north to south, so from across the Danube, towards southern Dobrogea, is to follow a ridge route which passed exactly in the nearby of Celic Dere settlement. In fact, the settlement is localized exactly in the single point where this ridge-route crosses over the Valley of Celic River.

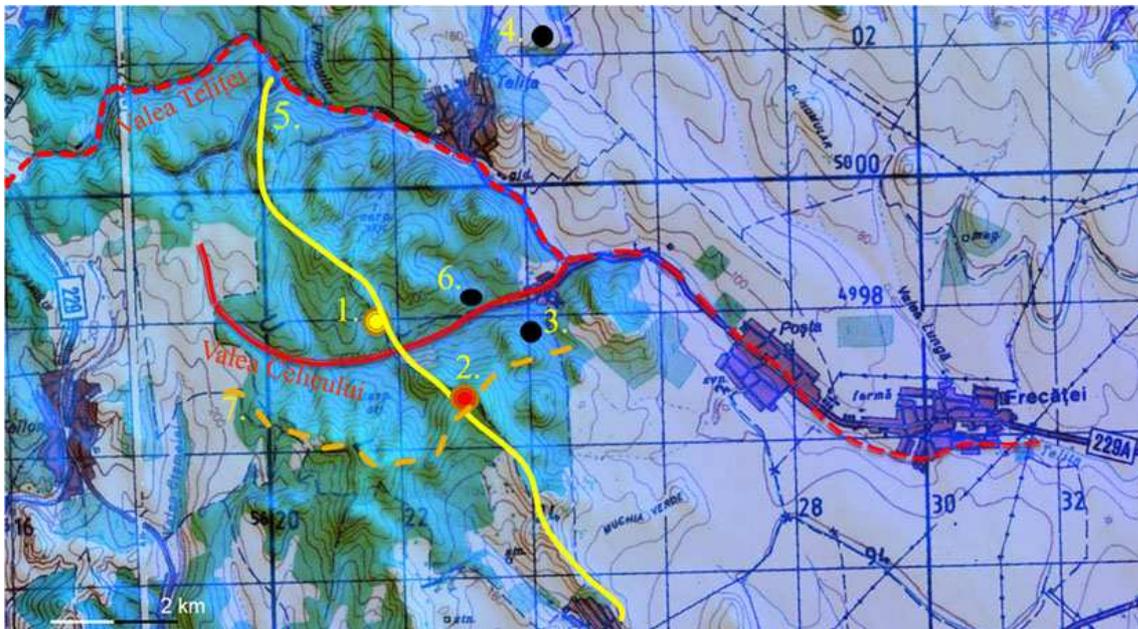


Fig. 2 – The Map of the region around Celic Valley. 1 – The site Telița - Celic Dere, 2 – Edirlen Fortress, 3 and 6 – 4<sup>th</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC settlements, 4 – Mound grave from Telița, 5 – The possible route of the south-north road passing in the nearby of Telița - Celic Dere site, 7 – The possible route of the road east-west passing in the nearby of Edirlen Fortress.

The settlement may be associated in this way with the existence of a road pass. The point where the settlement was identified, a plateau elevated more than 30 m above the Valley of Celic River, is located in the western vicinity of the only place where, from a topographical point of view, two long ridges crossing the entire Niculițel Hills meet. Today, this route is used only as a forest road by the local communities living now in the area to circulate across the hills. It is however, one of the main forest roads which has a mark and is signalized in the terrain. The significance of this road north-south may be proven by the existence on its route of an impressive fortress with stone walls (no 2 in Fig. 2), dated in the second Iron Age, on the peak of Edirlen. The site's fortification was excavated by G. Simion, but only briefly mentioned, not completely published (SIMION 1993: 134 fig. 10). The localization of this fortress along the discussed route has for sure great importance in sustaining the

significance of this road. In fact, in this point, at Edirlen, the north-south road meets an east-west road, which uses also the hills ridges. The reason for the localization of the fortress from Edirlen can be connected with this important crossroad and also with the topographical advantages of the hill, which offers visibility in the entire area of the Niculițel Hills, from the Danube till the Nalbant Hallow. The analysis of the microregion around the Celic River Valley and, in a larger context, of the Niculițel Hills, allowed the underling of complex conditions which concluded with the appearance in a particular place of the settlement and necropolises from Telița - Celic Dere. In this area we have already noticed a higher average rainfall than in other parts of Central Dobrogea, condition for the existence of many rivers with small, but stable flow, which cross over, especially the southern part of the Niculițel Hills. Sedimentary rocks from Triassic, generally sandstones, but also limestone, and volcanic rocks (basalt, porphyries, granites) are to be found in the nearby or in underground as sources for the building material used in the tumuli funerary architecture (stone embankment and outer ring).

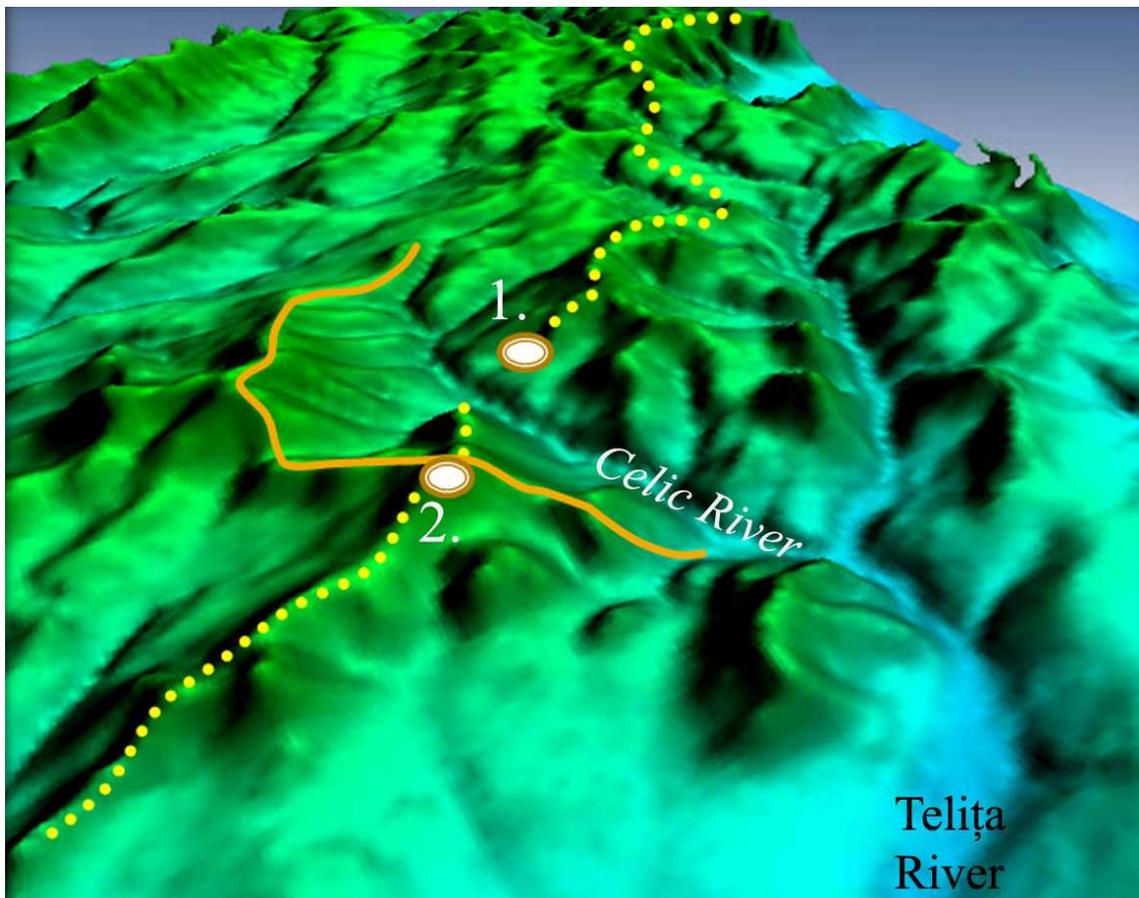


Fig. 3 – 3D Model of the relief around Celic Dere Valley. View from south-east. 1 - The site Telița - Celic Dere, 2 – Edirlen Fortress

Finally, the location of the Telița - Celic Dere site, may be connected with the geomorphologic structure of the terrain which allows a good circulation across a ridge route, an almost continuous saddle developed on a northwest-southeast direction. This road must be seen as linked with two other transversal pathways, one passing along the Celic River Valley and another, located more to the

south, connecting the sites from Edirlen, in the nearby of Trestinic peak, towards Valea Teilor. Further in our analysis, we have to investigate if this network of pathways represented more than the result of a local context. The discoveries from Teliňá - Celic Dere designated a place where northern and southern influences interlaced in more than a regional cultural mixture. It was therefore naturally to follow the role of this community in an extended geographic and historic context. Since the beginning of their foundation, the Greek colonies from the Black Sea attracted the barbarian communities in a complex system of relations, with commercial and cultural-social implications. For Northern Dobrogea, Histria and Orgame were the reference points. Commercial exchanges between colonies and the barbarian environment of Northern Dobrogea and Southern Basarabia implied the existence of a secure road along which, people and merchandise may travel all year long. The analysis of the discoveries from the 7<sup>th</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC (Fig. 1) suggest from the beginning, the existence of a generic road from southeast towards northwest, from Orgame towards Southern Basarabia, crossing over Danube at Isaccea. On both sides of Danube, in the nearby of Isaccea, we know the archaeological sites dated in the 6<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC from Novoselskoe (BRUJAKO, NOVITKI 1997), Giurgiulești (LEVIŃKI, HAHEU 1999), Tichilești (BAUMAN 1995: 227-232; SIMION 2003: 79-80) and Isaccea (SIMION 2003b).

For the 7<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC this pathway could have used the ridges which originate in the Nalbant Hallow and continue on a long saddle towards northwest. This ridge route was controlled by the community located in the settlement of Teliňá – Celic Dere in the cross-point with the Valley of Celic River. The northern end of this road could be located in the place where the Măcin Hills descend in the Danube Meadow, in front of the small valley called Tichilești, not far from the modern municipality of Revărsarea. This is the location of another important archaeological assemblage. On a plateau shaped by the Tichilești Valley there was identified a fortified settlement from the First Iron Age (SIMION 2003: 79-98; Juğănaru 1996). One may recognize in the Revărsarea – Tichilești site many of the archaeological features encountered in the Teliňá – Celic Dere site: ceramic vessels post Babadag III, ceramic fragments with influences from the sub Carpathian area (Bârsești and Ferigile), Greek ceramic, Greek archaic amphorae, ceramic decorated in a typical North-Pontus style, Glasinac fibulae. In the necropolis from Revărsarea – Tichilești there were excavated graves similar as structure, rite and inventory with some graves from Teliňá - Celic Dere. We regard as interesting the fact that the single Corinthian ceramic fragments known in Northern Dobrogea were discovered at Orgame, Celic Dere and Tichilești (MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 1996) staking out the route of the previously discussed road.

For the subsequently chronological period (the 4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC) a considerable growth in the number of archaeological discoveries is noticeable in all the North and Northeastern Dobrogea. The western and northern shores of the Razelm Lake became in this period crowded with settlements and funerary contexts in an almost continuous chain (Fig.1). Discoveries from this period are known on the left bank of the Danube, too (VANCUGOV et al 1999a, 199b; ARNĂUT 1999). Two large settlements were identified in field surveys in the nearby of the Teliňá – Celic Dere site (no. 3, 6 in Fig. 2). They contained local ceramic fragments mixed with Greek Hellenistic ceramic, among which amphorae

fragments (SIMION 1995a: 250). In this period the possible routes to travel from north towards the Black sea shores multiply. Along to the previously described pathway (Tichile ști, Celic Dere, Nălbant) other routes were active too, most probably, on the direction Parcheș – Teliuța – Nălbant -Slava Rusă (OPAIȚ 1991: 21; LUNGU 1994: 139, no. 16). The connection between these two major routes was accomplished on the Valley of Celic River as the presence of the two previously described settlements from Hellenistic times suggest and on the ridge pathway, previously discussed, located 1,5 km to the south than the valley of Celic which connected the Alba Valley (Valea Teilor) with Teliuța Valley. The cross-point between this east-west route and the north-south one was located in the nearby of Edirlen fortress (SIMION 1993: 134, fig. 10). At least a variant of the Central - Northern Dobrogea road was used in the Roman Times. Its' most possible route could be Parcheș – Teliuța – Nălbant - Ibida, suggested by the discovery of miliari stones from Maximinus at Parcheș – Saon Monastery (ISM V, 250bis) and Ibida (Slava Rusă) (ISM V, 223). In fact, this road was only the northern segment of the major inner province road which linked Noviodunum, Ibida, Ulmetum and further south, Tropaeum Traiani (BARBULESCU 1998). An important objective of our research was to assimilate the site from Teliuța – Celic Dere in a complex environment, both natural and human made. The integration of all the archaeological information about this region makes this site, a component of a system, not an isolated item (ȘTEFAN, DUȚ ESCU 2008). In this way the result of its excavation may be better interpreted and the characteristics of the material culture, better explained.

### Topographical Analysis

Since 2005, the most important part of the documenting process of the Teliuța – Celic Dere site has been the detailed and accurate topographical recording of the relief, archaeological structures and trenches. Different strategies and instruments were used accordingly to particular situations (ȘTEFAN, DUȚ ESCU 2005). The idea was to integrate the site in a larger geographical area and to develop GIS analyses in a single system. Therefore we mixed in a homogeneous system of coordinates, cartographic information from various sources: paper maps, GPS recordings, SRTM digital elevation models, aerial photographs, total station measurements, site drawings. Great attention was given to the exact recording of the position, shape and structure of all the tumuli excavated by G. Simion. On the plan we measured, until now, 60 excavated funerary structures with stone ring (the ring was preserved during archaeological excavations 1985-2001). Analyzing the site plan (Fig. 4) one may notice that the necropolis is localized at 300 m north from the settlement, on the same hill massif. The tumuli are mainly organized along the central ridge of the hill slope, and towards its eastern side on a 300 m length east-west. The necropolis covers a 3,4 ha surface, its northern limit being in the point where the slope becomes steeper and the ridge narrower. As the slope analysis pointed out, the access road to which the settlement was connected should have passed exactly on this ridge, so we may consider a spatial relation between the ancient road and the mounds. Even if this phenomenon was attested for Greek and Roman necropolises, there is little information about its appearance in other cultures. The tumuli appear to be structured in two main groups. The northern group is localized in the pick of the slope and the second, at the bottom of the eastern slope, in a flatter area. Inside

these groups, the mounds are grouped in alignments or in satellite configurations (smaller mounds gathered around a larger one). The apparent division of the necropolis in two different groups could be as well, the result of the more advanced erosion affected the mounds localized on the slope. In order to validate this, geophysical prospecting were undertaken beginning with 2008 in this area.

### **Geophysical Analyses**

Among the non-invasive methods used for analyzing the site of Celic Dere interesting results were obtained using geophysical equipments, in our case a Bartington gradiometer, sensitive to magnetic anomalies (SCOLLAR et al. 1990; SMEKALOVA et al. 2005). With its help we were able, first of all, to identify unexcavated mounds and also to understand the characteristics of the terrain, either in terms of natural features or modern interventions. In Fig. 5, one can see a plot of the magnetic survey realized for a 40 x 40 m surface. One may notice in the northwestern margin of the plot, the traces of an excavated tumulus - T38 (no. 1 in Fig. 5b.), researched in 1997 by G. Simion. The 1997 excavated soil from T38, deposited around it, appeared also in the plot as a highly magnetic area of 3 m around the tumulus. Nine meters south of T38 the survey identified an anomaly which proved to be an unexcavated tumulus, T 44. It appeared as an oval shaped nonmagnetic area of 5 m diameter, surrounded by magnetic soil.

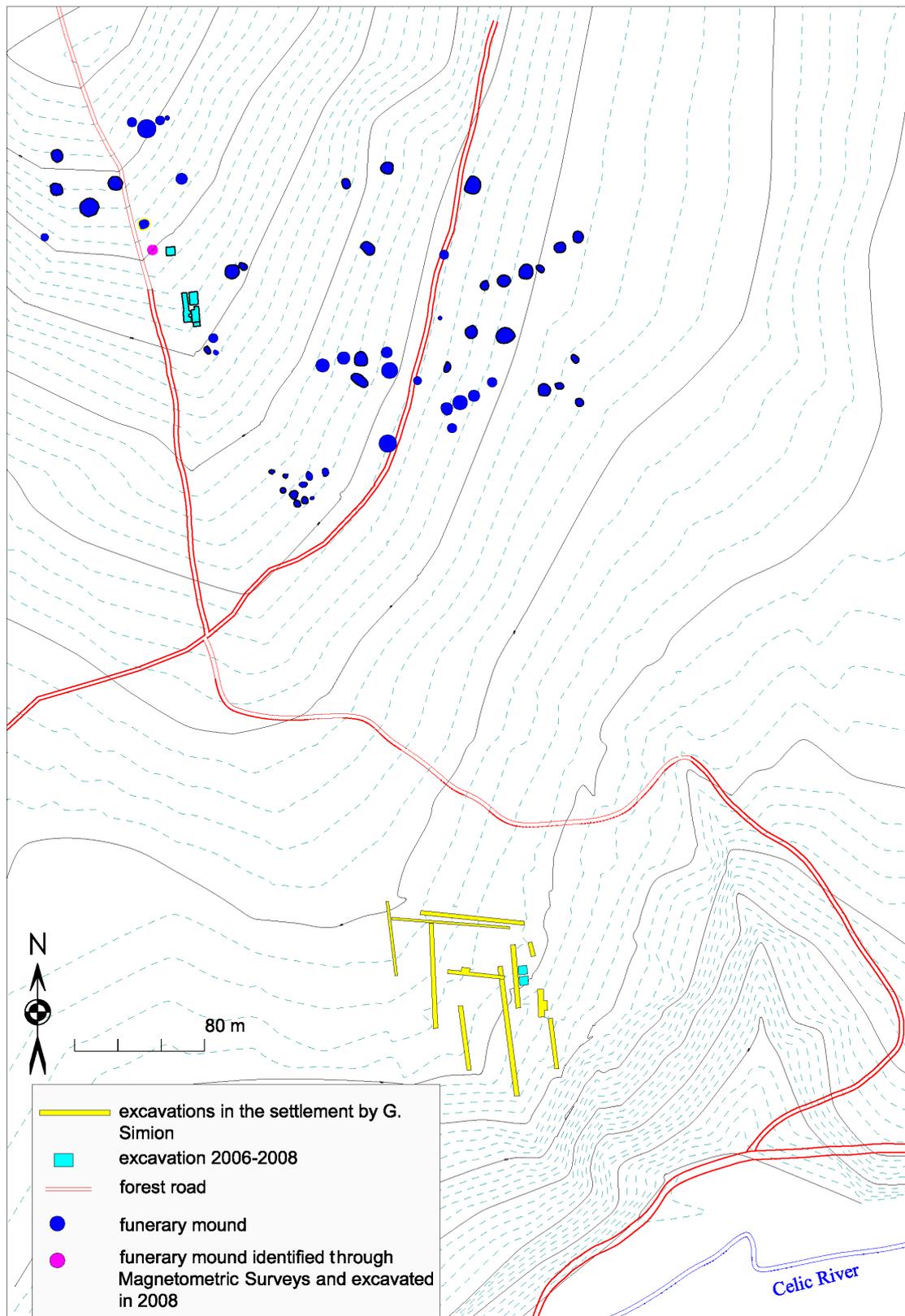


Fig. 4 - Telin-Celic Dere. The plan of the site

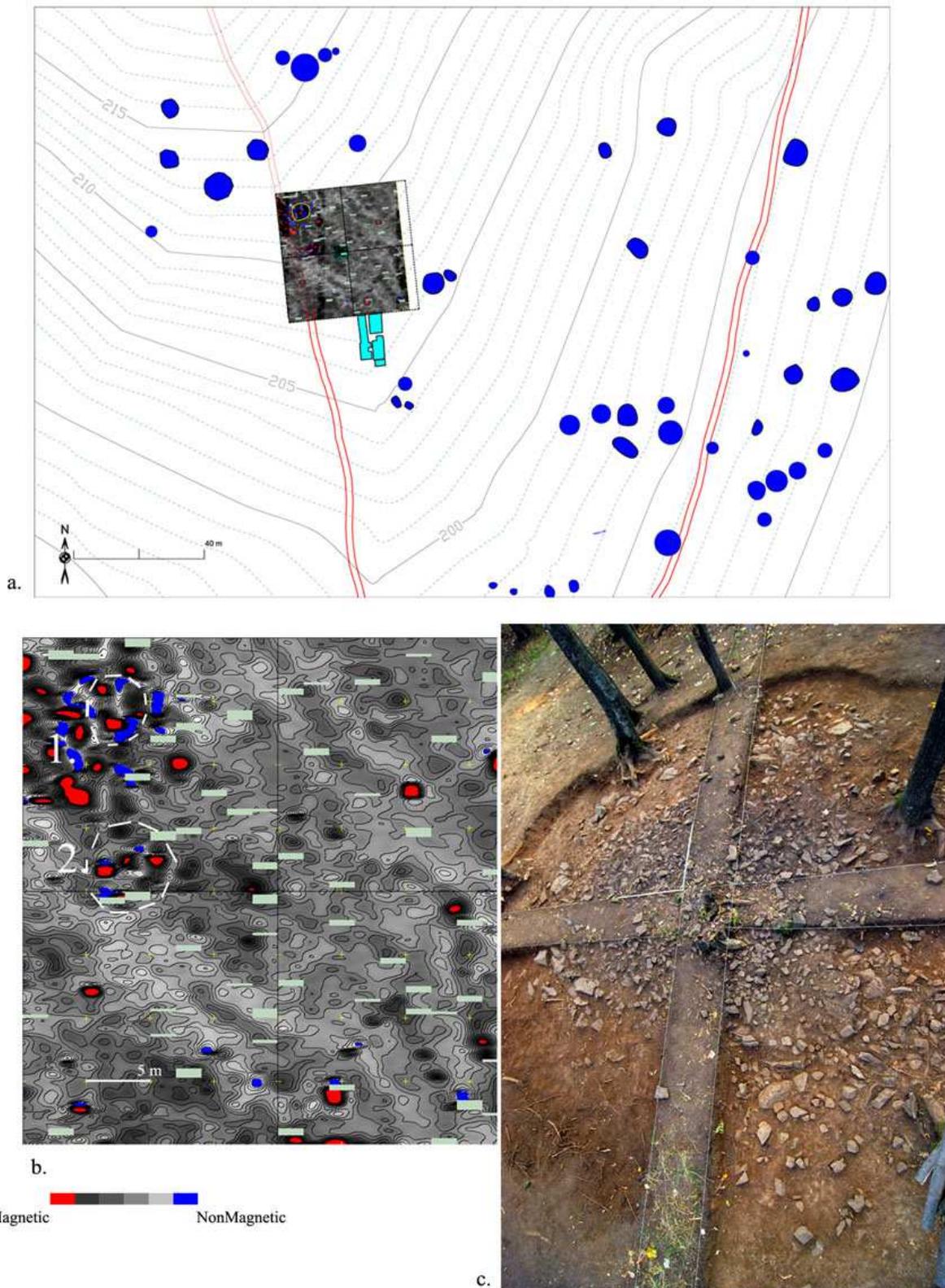


Fig. 5 - Teliká - Celic Dere. a - The Necropolis map. Detail with the position of the magnetic survey plot presented in fig 5.b., b - Magnetic Survey plot. 1. Tumulus 38 excavated by G. Simion in 1997; 2. Tumulus 44, identified with the help of magnetic analyses, c - Photo of the Tumulus 44 after excavating the first layer of soil, view from south-west.

Considering these elements, we were able to mark the excavation surfaces in such a way that the profiles did not cover entirely the centre of the mound, and thus, the possible dead would be only touched by the profile, but not completely hidden inside it. In the image there is also visible a natural relief element, a valley, passing south to tumulus T 44. Its color is very light, therefore nonmagnetic, meaning that the water swept in time the vegetal soil, bringing the native rock which is nonmagnetic, closer to the surface. In this way it became clear, that the mound, even if very flat, was built in a slightly elevated point in the terrain, above a small valley. In September 2008, after analyzing the magnetic survey results, excavations were made in the area of the anomaly indicating a flat tumulus. Tumulus 44 was unearthed, but the excavations were not completed. The tumulus had a 5 m broken stone embankment, an outer ring built from large block of limestone. It was built above a large pit. In its upper part, fragments from wheel and hand- made vessels were discovered Figure 5c.

## Conclusions

This study exemplifies how the use of alternative methods of investigation may enhance the quality of the archaeological data interpretation. The excavation is no longer the unique way to uncover the past realities. The localization of the site of Teliu – Celic Dere along one of the most important route which connected the Northern Dobrogea with the area around Babadag - Razelm - Sinoe lakes, where the Greek colonies stood, brings the site into a new light.

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