

BURIALS WITH THRESHING-BOARDS FROM ELI-BABA CEMETERY

The Eli-Baba cemetery is situated in south Georgia, on the Trialeti Plateau, between the villages of Besh-tasheni (Beshkenasheni) and Bashkoi (Bareti), on the north-east slope of Mount Eli-Baba, on the left bank of the Bashkov-Su river (pl. I, 2). It is arranged on a flat area of about 200 sq. m and is situated between two large basalt massifs. The Tsalka-Trialeti Archaeological Expedition (director G. Narimanishvili) conducted excavations here in 2003-2005, in the construction zone of the BTC pipeline (pl. I, 2).

Forty-four pit-graves and eighty-three cists were found at the cemetery. Nine of them (six cists, Nos 10, 13, 26, 67, 92, 110 and three pit-graves, Nos 17, 60, 113) produced threshing stones. Both types of burials have chambers and are covered with stone slabs.

Burial No. 10 (pl. V, 4) is situated in Grids 5-8, Plot XVII. The cist with a circular stone mound was oriented NW-SE. Two large basalt slabs were used for the longitudinal walls, and there were earthen walls at each end. The ceiling of the chamber was damaged and no bones of the deceased were found in the burial. The earth filling of the burial pit and the floor produced unattractive fragments of pottery. There were several courses of threshing stones on the floor. The burial had been robbed.

Burial No. 13 (pl. V, 6) was a cist with a circular stone mound. It was excavated in Grid 5, Plot XVII. The roof slab was oriented N-S. The cist beneath it, however, was oriented NW-SE. The burial had been damaged and robbed. No bones of the deceased were found. Fragments of ceramic vessels, beads and 20 threshing stones were recovered at floor level.

Burial No. 17 (pl. II, 3-4; IV, 2-4) was a pit-grave with a chamber. It was located in Grids 1, 2, 4, 5, Plot XVII. The roof the burial was damaged. The roof slab measured: 2.20 x 1.30 x 0.40 m, and the burial is oriented E-W. To the north-west an independent Burial No. 124 was recovered. The principal burial contained stones thrown into it irregularly. Some of these seemed to have been packed along the wall, while some lay on the floor. Fragments of pottery and other objects were recorded in different parts of the burial and at different levels. Some of the objects and 29 threshing stones (29 pieces) were found in the centre, inside a large pot fitted into the floor, which was cut or broken at floor level, while its fragments lay to the south (pl. II, 4). The burial had been damaged and robbed. The following artefacts were discovered in the burial: a smaller (pl. VI, 7; VII, 1) and a larger (pl. VI, 11; VII, 9) pot, and five fragments of various ceramic vessels, bronze rings (pl. VI, 5; VII, 6-7), a bronze arrowhead (pl. VII, 8), fragments of an iron object (pl. VII, 3-4), and vitreous paste beads (pl. VI, 1-4; VII, 2, 10). The burial did not contain any bones of the deceased.

Burial No. 26 is situated on Grid 4, Plot XVII. The cist (1.90 x 1.30 x 0.90 m) was covered with large stone slabs. The chamber was oriented NE-SW. The burial yielded four fragments of pottery, an iron spearhead, domino-like paste beads and three threshing stones. The burial had been damaged and seems to have been robbed.

Burial No. 60 with a stone circle (pl. II, 1; III, 4; IV, 1) was excavated in Grid 7, Plot XI. The north and south parts of the stone circle were disturbed by Burial No. 59. The ceiling stone had dropped into the chamber. The burial was oriented east to west. On the floor there were a larger (pl. VII, 19) and a smaller pot (pl. VII, 17),

the stones of a stones of a threshing board arranged in several courses and one bone fragment from the deceased.

Burial No. 67 was a cist with a stone circle (pl. II, 2; V, 1) situated in Grid 12, Plot X. The stone circle was disturbed by Burials Nos 58 and 64, while the burial itself disturbed the stone circle of Burial No. 73. The burial consisting of stone slabs was oriented E-W. The chamber had been covered with slabs. The longitudinal walls were made up of two slabs each. The cist (1.7 x 0.8 x 0.8m) was walled only at one (eastern) end and was open at the other. Fragments of ceramic vessels, cornelian and paste beads (pl. VII, 11) and seven pieces of threshing stone were recovered on the floor.

Burial No. 92 was a pit-grave with a stone circle (pl. III, 2; V, 2) situated in Grid 6, Plot XVII. The burial had been damaged, and only the eastern part of the stone circle survived. The roofing stone had fallen into the chamber. Within the burial (1.5 x 0.8 x 0.45 m) were two pots (pl. VI, 10; VII, 15), a bowl (pl. VI, 8; VII, 16), a fragment of an iron weapon (a knife?), cornelian and paste beads (pl. VII, 12), and 25 threshing stones found at different levels of the chamber.

Burial No. 110 was a cist with a stone circle (pl. III, 1; V, 5) situated in Grid 11, Plot X and oriented SW-NE. The north-east wall had been damaged by the chamber of Burial No. 72. In the central part of the burial chamber were found bones of the lower extremities of the deceased who seems to have been buried with the head to the SE. A large two-handled pot containing paste beads (pl. VII, 13) was placed against the NE wall (pl. VI, 12; VII, 14), beneath which lay the shoulder blade of a bovine. There were 35 pieces of threshing stone recorded on the floor (pl. V, 5).

Burial No. 113 was a pit-grave with a stone circle (pl. III, 3; V, 3) situated in Grid 10, Plot X. It was covered with two large basalt slabs; judging by the remains, the deceased must have lain on the left side with the head to the south-west. Two large ceramic vessels were recovered near the west wall of the burial (pl. VI, 9) and a bronze pin in the chest area of the deceased (pl. VI, 6). Threshing stones arranged in several courses were recorded upon the skeleton of the deceased (pl. III, 3).

Only three of the listed burials (Nos 60, 110, 113) yielded any remains of the deceased. The other burials did not have any bones. The remains of threshing boards were not recovered either, due either to the high acidity of the soil or as the result of robbery.

Of the three pit-graves containing threshing stones the most interesting was Pit-grave No. 17. This burial differed from the others in the large size of the ceiling stone of the chamber (2.2 m long and 1.30 m wide) and by the artefacts recovered in it. It belongs to an earlier group of burials (Nos 49, 42, 51, 52) and must be dated to the turn of the 8th-7th centuries BC. One view is that the grave was used for cremation (Murvanidze 2005, 147-163). Archaeological material recovered in burials with threshing stones does not differ from that of other burials, indicating their equal status. Analysis of the finds leads to the conclusion that the cemetery belongs to the 8th-6th centuries BC (Murvanidze 2005, 147-163; Narimanishvili 2004, 3-20).

The number of burials with threshing boards excavated in South Caucasus is very small. This is why every new discovery of threshing boards remains arouses special interest, and in particular when several cases are recorded in the same cemetery. It is also interesting that threshing boards—household implements—are found in burials at all. A threshing board is a sort of an implement known throughout the world which operates only by using traction and is used for threshing out wheat. The oldest threshing boards have been excavated in Mesopotamia (Gasitashvili 1980, 83), Italy (Sergeenko 1958, 60), the Mediterranean countries, Asia Minor (Vavilov 1932, 9), and North Caucasus (Peoples of the Caucasus 1960, 348). In Transcaucasia, apart from Georgia, burials with threshing boards have been found in Azerbaijan (Gumel 1949, 36) and Armenia (Piotrovskii 1939, 49-50; Khachatryan 1979, 15).

Remains of threshing boards in Georgia have been mainly found in the cemeteries and settlements

of Shida and Kvemo Kartli. According to the latest data, most remains (11 burials) have occurred in Trialeti. In Georgia, burials with remains of threshing boards have been excavated in the following cemeteries (arranged in chronological order): Tsaghvli, Burial No. 94 (15th century BC; Ramishvili 1987, 31-35); Bornighele, Burial No. 52 (14th century BC; Ghambashidze 1987, 36-43); Dzveli Kanda, Burial No. 16 (14th-13th centuries BC; Bokhochadze et al. 1986, 42-48); Digasheni, kurgan No. 1 (14th-13th centuries BC; Ordjonikidze 1995, 80-82); Avranlo, Burial No. 2 (13th 12th centuries BC; Narimanishvili 2006); Gantiadi, Burials No. 120, No. 140 (13th-8th centuries BC; Kakhiani et al. 1985, 29-31); Samtavro, Burial No. 320 (8th-7th centuries BC; Chubinishvili 1951, 61-67); Kazreti, Burial Nos 1, 4 (7th-6th centuries BC; Sinauridze et al. 1976, 96-105); Kulbakevi, Burial No. 1 (7th-6th centuries BC; Chubinishvili 1957, 106); Eli-Baba, Burial No. 17 (8th-7th centuries BC; Narimanishvili 2004, 34-56); Eli Baba, Burial Nos 10, 13 (7th-6th centuries BC; Narimanishvili 2003, 19-22); Eli-Baba, Burials Nos 26, 60, 67, 92, 110, 113 (7th-6th centuries BC; Narimanishvili 2004, 86-448); Natsargora, Burial No. 447 (5th-3rd centuries BC; Ramishvili 1999, 33); Abulmugi, Burial No. 22 (4th-3rd centuries BC; Dzeladze 2001, 140-235; Dzeladze 1998, 18-26); bottom of the Tsalka reservoir (4th century BC; Narimanishvili 2000); Nastakisi, Burial Nos 44, 124, 140 (1st c; Narimanishvili 1990, 85-110); Klde, Burial Nos 70, 76 (Early Medieval; Ghambashidze 2006, 56).

Threshing stones have been recognized at quite a few settlements: 1. Digasheni I (14th-13th centuries BC; Ordjonikidze 1995, 81); 2. Qatnalikhevi, at an altar (12th-8th centuries BC; Khakhutaishvili 1964, 32); 3. Khovle (9th-7th centuries BC; Muskhelishvili 1978, 40-81); 4-5. Plavismani and Qornisi (Muskhelishvili, Tskitishvili 1960, 125-196); 6. Satsikhurisgora (Tsaghvli) (Late Bronze-Early Iron Age; Ramishvili 2000, 29-35); 7. Natsargora (Late Bronze-Early Iron Age; Ramishvili 2000, 29-35); 8. Khizanaant Gora (Kikvidze 1975, 80); 9. Nastakisi settlement (6th-8th centuries AD; Narimanishvili 1990, 91). The discovery of threshing stones near an altar at Qatlaniskhevi strongly suggests ritual sacrifice.

Among all household implements the threshing board is the most related to agriculture from practical, as well as cultural and historical, points of view. The discovery of evidence for threshing boards in nine burials in the Eli-Baba cemetery indicates that the region was advanced agriculturally and that the community utilized this implement very intensively. This discovery gives us an insight into the everyday life of the community in antiquity. It would appear that in the first half of the 1st millennium BC the population of Eli-Baba was involved in intensive agricultural work. The discovery of a number of threshing boards points to the fact that one group of people was occupied in a specific (professional) activity. The wide utilization of threshing boards meant that large numbers had to be produced, and consequently part of the community will have been involved in this activity. The whole community of Eli-Baba was presumably completely occupied in this business. The existence of a few centres of manufacturing threshing boards has been attested ethnographically; Trialeti has always been one of the most well-known centres (Jalabadze 1960, 130-135).

While defining sizes of threshing boards from Eli-Baba we should consider the sizes of the burials where they were recovered: 1.9 x 1.3m; 1.5 x 0.7m; 1.5 x 0.8m; 1.52 x 0.93 m; 1.3 x 0.5 m. Accordingly, the threshing board discovered at Eli-Baba cemetery must measure 1.5 x 0.8 m. S. Menteshashvili gives a maximum size of 3.00 x 1.00 m and a minimum of 1.45 x 0.54 m for threshing boards. He had measured one threshing board himself at 2.09 x 0.38 m. He also interviewed a maker of threshing boards, Mchedlishvili by name, who informed him that the maximum size of modern ones is 1.7 x 0.6 m and the minimum 1.5 x 0.5 m (Menteshashvili 1936, 57-77).

The sizes of some archaeologically recorded threshing boards are known: at Abulmugi, 1.9 x 0.8 m; in Klde, 1.3 x 0.6 m; at Khalnar (Azerbaijan), 1.25 x 0.46 m; at Tsaghvli, 1.25 x 0.75 m; and at Akhtala (Armenia), 0.92 x 0.7 m. The size of the threshing boards excavated in the Eli-Baba cemetery—1.5x0.8m—matches the sizes listed here.

It was interesting to define the nature of the stones that were mounted on the threshing boards of the

Eli-Baba cemetery. These included: fine-grained, quartzite- and calcium-rich, tufogenic sandstones, stones in the medium hardness category. (Thanks are due to the geologist D. Ghambashidze for identifying the stones in question).

Agricultural peoples had customs associated with religious cults. One was a ritual for the reception of the harvest, that is also recorded in the ethnographic record: when a threshing board was placed on a sheaf, it had first to be carried over a loaf of stale bread. This was believed to bring abundance and prosperity. They would also drop an axe or a hatchet in the middle of the threshing floor in order to protect it from the evil eye (Jalabadze 1960, 131).

The discovery of threshing boards in burials is interesting. After utilizing them in regular household activities, the community used them in funerary rituals, as is indicated by the presence of threshing stones in burials. Depositing implements in burials or representing them symbolically as an indication of the occupation of a deceased was a widespread practice on Roman, Greek and Assyrian sites (Uvarov 1903, 97).

By re-using threshing boards, very sophisticated and efficient implements, in burials the community of Eli-Baba emphasized the profession of the dead and their honourable position in the society.

Threshing stones placed in a vessel in Burial No. 17 must also be symbolic of the activities of the deceased in life. Threshing stones were found behind the backs of the deceased in pit-graves excavated at the Kazreti cemetery (Sinauridze 1985, 17), which again suggests a ritual associated with threshing boards.

Threshing stones appeared in few of the burials in the Eli-Baba cemetery. More than 80% of them were badly worn, which pointed to a prolonged use of the threshing board. For example, 14 of the 29 threshing stones packed in the vessel in Burial No. 17 were new. It is likely that the threshing board placed in the burial was still in working order. As a rule, the threshing stones need to be changed when a threshing board is refurbished. But the ratio of old to new, worn out to usable threshing stones showed that mostly old, disused or (rarely) refurbished threshing boards were used in funerary rituals.

The practice of erecting a stone resembling a threshing board over the burial (Bokhochadze 1956), as seems to have happened at a grave excavated at the Nachivchavebi settlement, must be a belated echo of the ancient tradition of using threshing boards in a burial rituals.

The use of threshing boards in burial rites, as indicated in the archaeological record, was also widespread in the cultural world of Transcaucasia. Links between threshing boards and the cult of the dead is well known in the ethnographic record of the ancient Near East, especially among Syrians. According to the ethnographer Johann Gottfried Wetzstein, who lived in Syria between 1848 and 1862, a threshing board was a "sacred" implement for Syrians living near Baghdad and they had preserved the rite of resting the dead on a threshing board. The Syrians placed the dead laid out on a threshing board within a tent erected over a threshing floor (Wetzstein 1873, 295). This is remarkable in the context of threshing boards excavated in Georgia, as it clearly shows ancient ties between the Caucasian and Near Eastern peoples, as is shown by the use of a highly developed implement and the common agricultural culture of these peoples (Jalabadze 1960, 130-135). Every object in a burial is a symbolic ritual element that justifies speculation about this complicated rite. The discovery of threshing board stones in the Eli-Baba cemetery must be considered part of the funerary ritual.

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Illustrations:

Pl. I – 1. Topographic plan of Eli-Baba cemetery; 2. General plan of Eli-Baba cemetery.

Pl. II – 1. Burial No. 60 before opening; Burial No. 67 before opening; 3. Burial No. 17 before opening; 4. Burial No. 17 after opening.

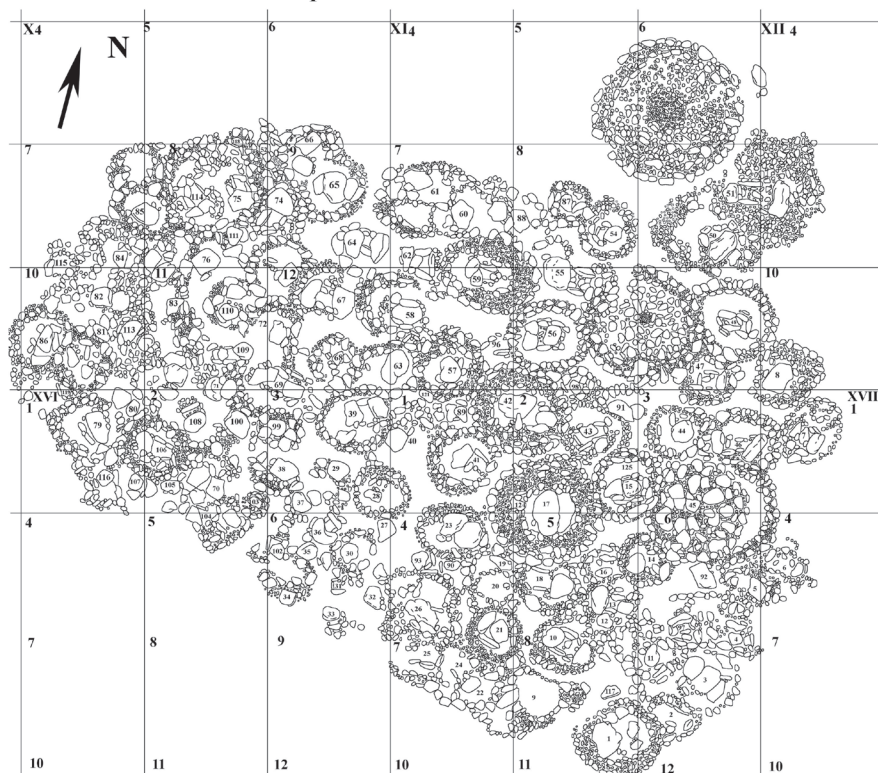
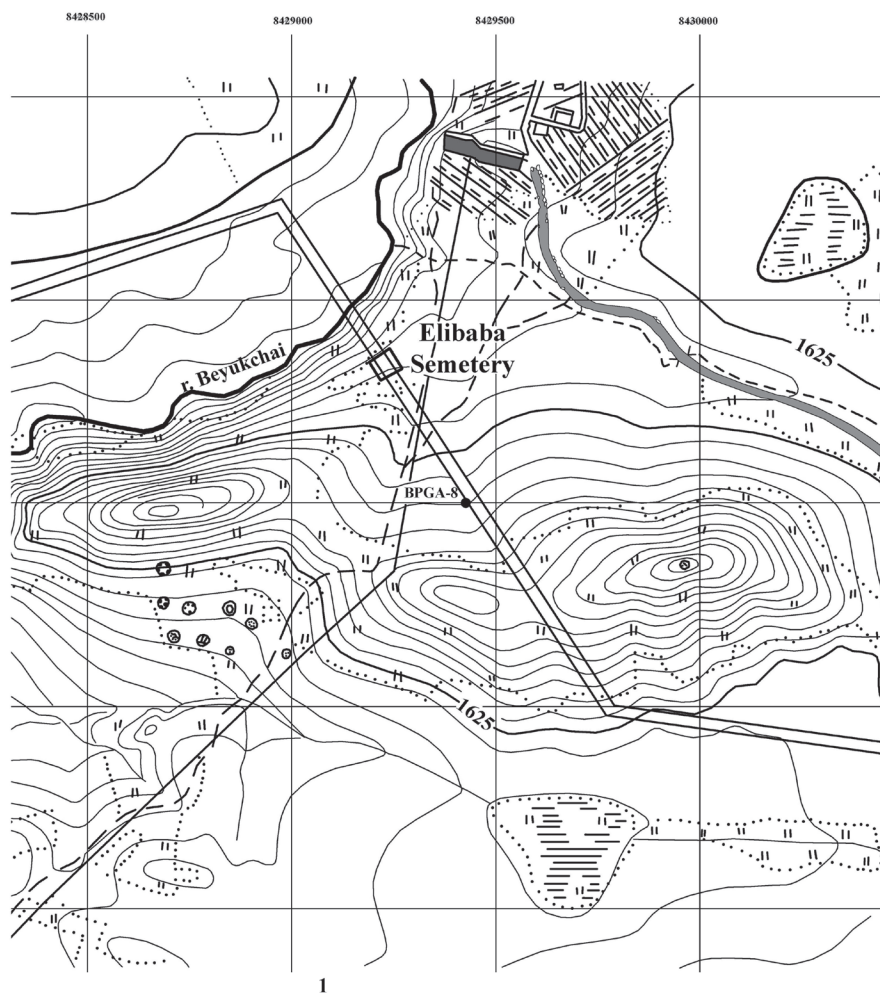
Pl. III – 1. Burial No. 110 after opening; 2. Burial No. 92 after opening; 3. Burial No. 113 after opening; 4. Burial No. 60 after opening.

Pl. IV – 1. Burial No. 60. Plan; 2-4. Burial No. 17. Plans and sections.

Pl. V – 1. Burial No. 67. Plan and sections; 2. Burial No. 92. Plan and sections; 3. Burial No. 113. Plan and sections; 4. Burial No. 10. Plan and sections; 5. Burial No. 110. Plan and sections; 6. Burial No. 13. Plan and sections.

Pl. VI – 1-5, 7, 11. Burial No. 17, inventory; 6,9. Burial No. 113. Inventory; 8,10. Burial No. 92. Inventory; 12. Burial No. 110. Inventory.

Pl. VII – 1-10. Burial No. 17. Inventory; 11. Burial No. 67, inventory; 12, 15, 16, 18. Burial No. 92. Inventory; 13. Burial No. 110. Inventory; 17, 19. Burial No. 60. Inventory.



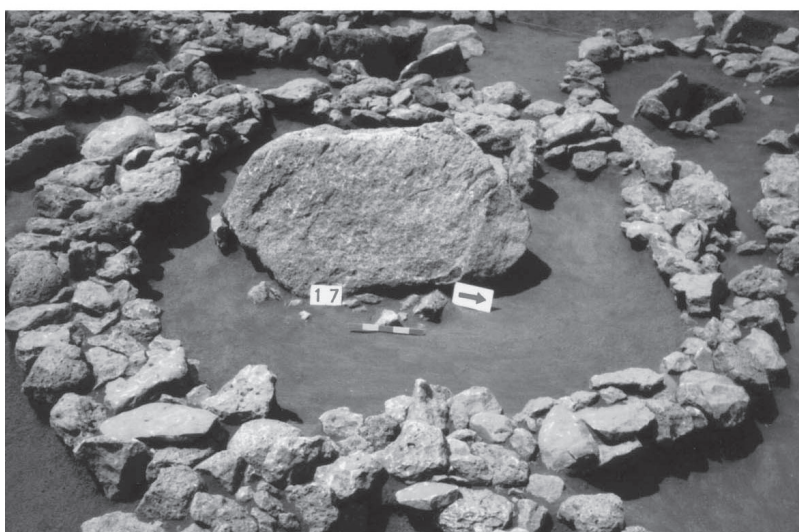
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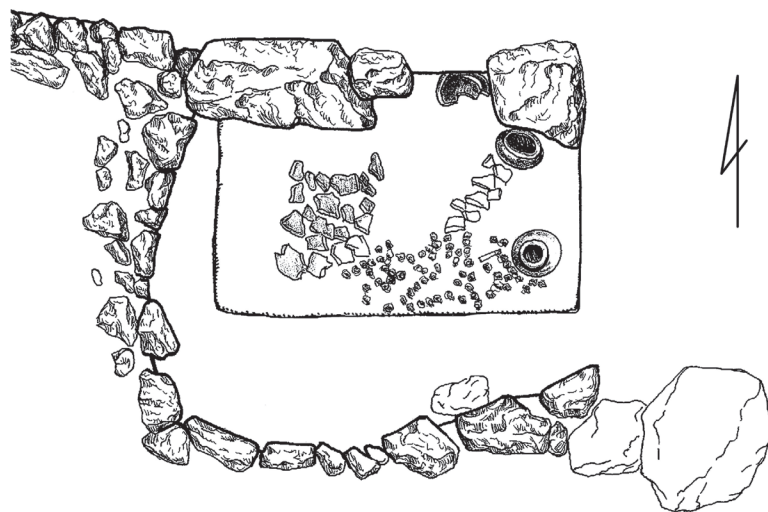
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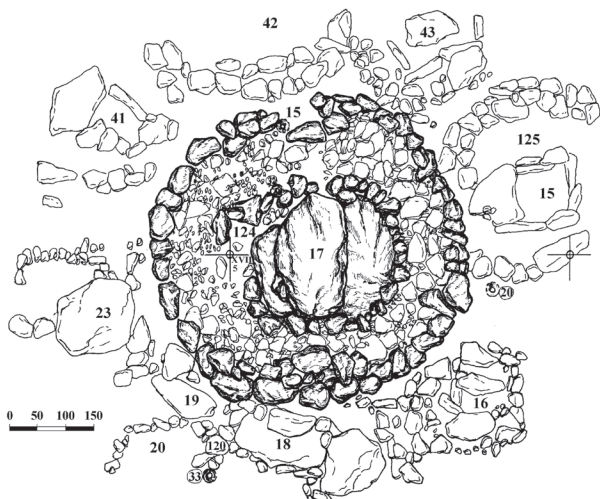


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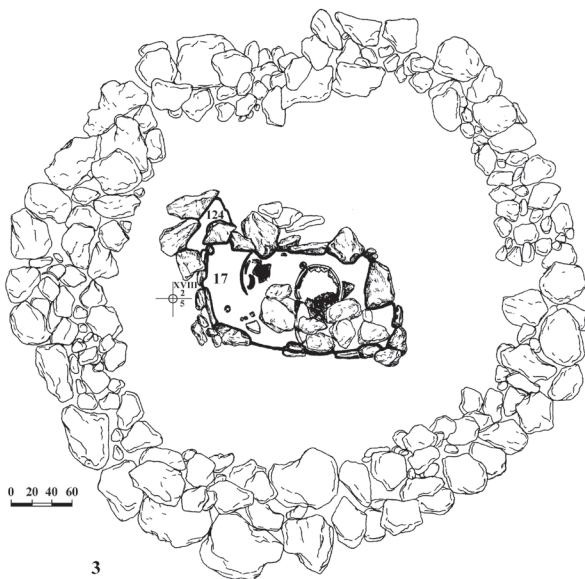


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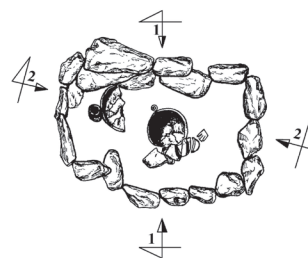
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