

IN THE VICINITY OF THE AVAR KHAGANATE.  
TOPOGRAPHY, STRUCTURE AND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVENTORY IN THE  
EARLY MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENTS (7<sup>TH</sup>-9<sup>TH</sup>  
CENTURIES) FROM THE SYLVANIAN BASIN.  
THREE EXAMPLES: MARCA – SFĂRĂUAȘ I, PORȚ  
– LA BARAJ AND AGHIREȘ – SUB PĂȘUNE

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**Cuvinte-cheie:** *Kaganatul avar, Depresiunea Silvaniei, topografie, structură, inventar arheologic, așezări.*

**Abstract:** *As is known, archaeological research has shown the fact that, during the Avar Period, the northwestern area of Romania (implicitly the Sylvania Basin) was outside the borders of the Avar Khaganate, representing a neighboring area to it. Although, the Sylvania Basin has a significant number of early medieval sites (7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries) identified following several surface research campaigns, few of them have been archaeologically surveyed, and of these, only three settlements have benefited from extensive archaeological excavations (preventive archaeological research determined by investment works): Porț – La baraj, in 2007, Aghireș – Sub pășune, in 2008–2009, and Marca – Sfărăuaș I, in 2012. For the Sylvania Basin, from the data we currently have, the spatial arrangement of the archaeological structures (those insulae) in a circular arc around a “square” seems to be a common element of the settlements from Porț – La baraj and Marca – Sfărăuaș I. This internal structure/topography has also been reported in other early medieval Transylvanian settlements, such as those at Jucu de Sus – Tetarom III/Râtul boiler and Comana de Jos. In his analysis of the early medieval villages in the Carpathian Basin, P. Šalkovský emphasizes the existence of settlements with archaeological structures arranged in a circle (with examples of sites from the 7<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries), but also those that are composed of groups (those insulae), of archaeological structures with varied functionality (understood as independent farms/households). Regarding the chronology of the settlements now compared, based on the formal characteristics of the discovered artefacts (especially the ceramics) we can assume a possible contemporaneity (8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries) of the settlements at Porț – La baraj and Aghireș*

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– Sub pășune, *the one from Marca – Sfârâuaș I being earlier (7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries) than the other two settlements.*

**Rezumat:** *După cum se cunoaște, cercetările arheologice au arătat faptul că, pe durata epocii avar, teritoriul nord-vestic al României (implicit Depresiunea Silvaniei) se afla în afara granițelor Kağanatului avar, dar în vecinătatea acestuia. Cu toate că Depresiunea Silvaniei are un număr însemnat de situri medievale-timpurii (secolele VII–IX), identificate în urma mai multor campanii de cercetări de suprafață, puține dintre ele au fost investigate arheologic, iar dintre acestea doar trei au beneficiat de săpături arheologice extinse (cercetări cu caracter preventiv determinate de lucrări investiționale): Porț – La baraj, în 2007, Aghireș – Sub pășune, în 2008–2009, și Marca – Sfârâuaș I, în 2012. Pentru Depresiunea Silvaniei, din datele pe care le avem în prezent, dispunerea spațială a structurilor arheologice (acele insulae) în arc de cerc în jurul unei „piațete” pare să fie un element comun al așezărilor de la Porț – La baraj și Marca – Sfârâuaș I. Această topografie internă a mai fost semnalată și în alte așezări medievale timpurii transilvănene, cum este cazul celor de la Jucu de Sus – Tetarom III/Râtul boilor și Comana de Jos. În analiza sa privind satele medievale timpurii din Bazinul Carpatic, P. Šalkovský subliniază existența așezărilor cu structuri arheologice dispuse circular (cu exemplificări de situri din secolele VII–X), dar și a celor care sunt compuse din grupări (acele insulae), de structuri arheologice cu funcționalitate variată (înțelese ca și ferme/gospodării independente). În ceea ce privește cronologia așezărilor comparate acum, pe baza caracteristicilor formale ale artefactelor descoperite (în special a ceramicii), putem presupune o posibilă contemporaneitate (secolele VIII–IX) a așezărilor de la Porț – La baraj și Aghireș – Sub pășune, cea de la Marca – Sfârâuaș I fiind mai timpurie (secolele VII–VIII) decât celelalte două.*

## General data about the sites

As is known, archaeological research has shown the fact that, during the Avar Period, the northwestern area of Romania (implicitly the Sylvania Basin) was outside the borders of the Avar Khaganate, representing a neighboring/adjacent area to it. Although, the Sylvania Basin has a significant number of early medieval sites (7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries) identified following several surface research campaigns, few of them have been archaeologically surveyed, and of these, only three settlements (**Fig. 1**) have benefited from extensive archaeological excavations (preventive archaeological research determined by investment works): Porț – *La baraj* in 2007, Aghireș – *Sub pășune* in 2008–2009 and Marca – *Sfârâuaș I* in 2012.

Despite the fact that the three settlements (mentioned earlier) did not have the entire surface archaeologically researched (thus, we currently do not have a complete picture of such a settlement), the studied segments nevertheless provided a series of concrete elements regarding their structure/topography, which makes possible a comparative analysis of the archaeological realities captured in the three objectives.

Undoubtedly, when the three settlements were founded, the proximity to a constant source of water was taken into account, with slightly inclined terraces located at the edge of the flood zones, two of the settlements being located on the middle course of the Barcău River (Porț – *La baraj* and Marca – *Sfârâuaș I*), and the third (Aghireș – *Sub pășune*), on the course of the Miței valley (a tributary of the Zalău valley).

In the three settlements, archaeological complexes with varied planimetry and functionality were identified and researched: dwellings, household annexes, open hearts installations, pits and postholes.

The number of archaeological complexes registered in these settlements is also different (**Table 1**): 33 at Porț – *La baraj*, 61 at Aghireș – *Sub pășune* (the habitation phase of the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries), and 54 at Marca – *Sfârâuaș I*.

**Table 1.** The situation of the archaeological structures/complexes.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL STRUCTURES/COMPLEXES		
PORTȚ – <i>La baraj</i>	AGHIREȘ – <i>Sub pășune</i>	MARCA – <i>Sfârâuaș I</i>
7 dwelling	23 dwellings	4 dwellings
10 household annexes	16 household annexes	15 household annexes
1 open-air fire installation	11 open-air fire installations	8 open-air fire installations
6 pits	8 pits	7 pits
5 postholes	3 postholes	17 postholes

### Elements of topography and internal structure

As we have already stated, regarding the actual areas and limits of the respective settlements, they remained unknown because none of the three sites were fully excavated due to the characteristics of the investment works. Of course, this fact prevents the formation of a correct image regarding the topography and internal structure of the respective settlements. However, the horizontal distribution of the archaeological complexes captured in the researched segments (the way they are grouped) suggests the existence of certain “urban planning” rules/customs.

**a.** The settlement from the Porț – *La baraj* (**Fig. 2**):

- as we stated in 2011 (in the monograph of the site), the settlement at Porț – *La baraj* was not fully researched. Only 75% of the site was researched, the remaining 25% remained unresearched because it was outside the area where the respective investment was to take place;

- most of the archaeological structures/complexes are grouped in the form of *insulae*;

- the layout suggests that almost every dwelling had its own household annexes;

- inside the settlement, the composition of a certain grouping of archaeological complexes with varied functionality (dwelling + household annex + pit + postholes) creates the image of a real *farm/household* whose boundaries were marked by the existence of a fence;

- with regard to the general topography of the settlement, the data provided so far by the preventive excavation present the image of a settlement in which the archaeological complexes (grouped) are placed almost circularly around a central space (a situation almost similar to that of Marca – *Sfârâuaș I*);

- most of the archaeological complexes are placed in the northern part of the settlement, where overlaps of complexes are also observed, which could suggest the direction of expansion in time of the inhabited space.

**b.** The settlement from Aghireș – *Sub pășune* (**Fig. 3**):

- the Aghireș – *Sub pășune* settlement has not been fully researched. Only one segment of the site was investigated (the one that was affected by the bypass belt of Zalău municipality), the early medieval settlement developing on both sides of the investment area;

- and in this site, there are archaeological structures/complexes arranged grouped in the form of *insulae*, however, the horizontal distribution of the researched archaeological complexes suggests that the settlement developed (on the respective terrace) along a N-SE longitudinal axis, in parallel with the water supply pipe.

c. The settlement from Marca – *Sfârăuș I* (Fig. 4):

- the archaeological complexes with varied functionality are arranged in groups (*insulae*)<sup>1</sup>;

- the *insulae* are arranged (somewhat) in a semicircle, giving the impression of the existence of a central "square".

Considering the above, from the point of view of internal structure/topography, similarities and differences can be identified between the three settlements:

- in all three settlements there are groups of archaeological complexes with varied functionality (*insulae*);

- in the case of the settlements at Poț – *La baraj* and Marca – *Sfârăuș I*, the *insulae* are arranged around a central space;

- the isolated *insulae* and complexes in the settlement of Aghireș – *Sub pășune* are distributed along a longitudinal duct, along and parallel to the course of the water source;

- in all three archaeologically researched settlements, the existence of some *insulae* was found, which, through their structure (the varied functionality of the component archaeological complexes), suggest the existence of real *households*.

### Characteristics of the archaeological inventory. Chronology elements

From a quantitative point of view, the most representative archaeological inventory is ceramics, a situation valid for all three analyzed early medieval settlements. As can be seen from the tables below, there are common (but also distinctive) elements in terms of the repertoire of ceramic forms and other objects produced from clay (Table 3). Within the ceramic repertoire we meet both common shapes (cooking pot, tray, baking bell) and rarer shapes (amphora type vessel, bowl, miniature vessel, cup/beaker).

**Table 2.** The situation of the ceramic vessels (forms).

CERAMIC VESSELS (FORMS)		
POȚ – <i>La baraj</i>	AGHIREȘ – <i>Sub pășune</i>	MARCA – <i>Sfârăuș I</i>
Cooking pot (handmade, slow wheel made, fast wheel made)	Cooking pot (handmade, slow wheel made, fast wheel made)	Cooking pot (handmade, slow wheel made, fast wheel made)
Tray (handmade)	Tray (handmade)	Tray (handmade)
Bowl (handmade, slow wheel made)	Bowl (fast wheel made)	Bowl (handmade, slow wheel made)

<sup>1</sup> BĂCUEȚ-CRIȘAN 2021, p. 59–73.

Amphora type vessel (fast wheel made)	Amphora type vessel (fast wheel made)	Amphora type vessel (fast wheel made)
Miniature vessel (handmade)	Miniature vessel (handmade)	
Big tray (handmade)	Big tray (handmade)	Cup/Beaker (slow wheel made, fast wheel made)
	Baking bell (handmade)	Baking bell (handmade)
		Small tray/Lid (?) (handmade)
		Large pot/Provision pot (handmade, slow wheel made)

The ceramic fragments discovered come from vessels that were handmade, on the slow wheel or on the fast wheel. The statistical analyzes performed on the ceramic lots (taking into account the vessel modelling technique) reveal certain quantitative values (**Table 2**):

- it can be observed that, in the case of the settlements at Poṛṭ – *La baraj* and Aghireş – *Sub păşune*, the slow wheel made pottery is the majority;
- in the settlements of Poṛṭ – *La baraj* and Aghireş – *Sub păşune*, the slow wheel made pottery is present in nearly identical amounts (68.50%, and 70%, respectively);
- the largest amount of handmade pottery was found in the Marca – *Sfârăuaş I* settlement (47%);
- the largest amount of fast wheel made pottery is in the settlement from Marca – *Sfârăuaş I* (31%).

**Table 3.** The situation of the ceramic categories (proportions).

CERAMIC CATEGORIES (PROPORTIONS)		
POṚṬ – <i>La baraj</i>	AGHIREŞ – <i>Sub păşune</i>	MARCA – <i>Sfârăuaş I</i>
Handmade pottery 10.99%	Handmade pottery 20%	Handmade pottery 47%
Slow wheel made pottery 68.50%	Slow wheel made pottery 70%	Slow wheel made pottery 22%
Fast wheel made pottery 20.51%	Fast wheel made pottery 10%	Fast wheel made pottery 31%

Of all the archaeological structures researched at Poṛṭ – *La baraj*, the circular complex C. 5/2007 (the only discovery of this kind on the territory of Romania) has the most interesting planimetry, such constructions being noticed in Hungary at Esztergom – *Zsidód*<sup>2</sup>, but especially in the space Eastern European<sup>3</sup>. To these analogies we could add examples from England where in sites datable between 700–1000 the traces of some structures/buildings with a circular planimetry (trenches or pillar pits) with the role of farm annexes for the preservation of grain harvests were identified<sup>4</sup>.

It is known that, during the Avar Period, wheel made pottery experienced

<sup>2</sup> MOLNÁR 2011, p. 663, kép 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> MOLNÁR 2011, p. 684–685, kép 6–8.

<sup>4</sup> GARDINER 2013, p. 25 and so on., fig. 2/2.

a standardization process. However, in the case of the sites at Porț – *La baraj* and Aghireș – *Sub pășune*, some fragments of vessels with ornamentation and formal characteristics less common attract attention:

- from the complex C. 20/2007 from Porț – *La baraj* comes a fragment from the mouth of a pot (fast wheel made) which, on the inner surface (in the area of the neck which is thicker) has a pronounced shoulder in the form of a groove with the edge sharp<sup>5</sup>. Such modeling of the inner surface of the upper part of the pots is very rare, they were discovered in contexts datable to the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries (as well as the specimen from Porț – *La baraj*), as is the case with the pot from Stránska (Slovakia)<sup>6</sup> or those from the necropolises of the Lower Danube (Istria – *Capu Viilor* and Izvoru)<sup>7</sup>;
- another batch of ceramic fragments (the upper part of some pots shaped on the slow wheel) from Porț – *La baraj* have a strongly arched neck and a sharply drawn down rim<sup>8</sup>. Batches of pots with such mouth characteristics are present in finds from the late Avar Period, such as those from Nagykanizsa<sup>9</sup> or Rákoczfalva<sup>10</sup>;
- in the complex C. 17/2007 from Porț – *La baraj*, a fragment of the mouth of a pot (modeled with a slow wheel) was discovered which, on the inner surface, shows some horizontal, straight and parallel striations, drawn very often. This is not a „decoration” but rather the result of techniques for treating and finishing the inner surface of the vessel. For now, in Transylvania, such discoveries have only been reported in the settlement of Jucu de Sus – *Tetarom III/Râtul boilor*<sup>11</sup>. Discoveries of ceramics with such characteristics have also been reported in foreign literature (for example discoveries from the south-east Alpine area<sup>12</sup>, Slovenia<sup>13</sup>, Germany and Austria<sup>14</sup>), this technique of treating and finishing the inner surface of vessels being considered a legacy from late antiquity<sup>15</sup>. Also, discoveries made in much later archaeological contexts are known, such as those in Poland from Wrocław, datable to the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> – first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>16</sup>;
- at Aghireș – *Sub pășune*, a batch of ceramic fragments<sup>17</sup> that come from the upper part of some pots (mostly shaped with a slow wheel, a single example of an handmade pot that imitate those shaped on a wheel) is characterized by a broken neck (practically non-existent), rim wide/elongated and sloping outwards. Examples of pots with very wide mouths are known from Slavic-Avar burial contexts (second

<sup>5</sup> MATEI, BĂCUEȚ-CRIȘAN 2011, pl. 63/4.

<sup>6</sup> RUSNÁČ 2011, p. 160, fig. 8.

<sup>7</sup> FIEDLER 1992, Taf 31/2 and 36/11.

<sup>8</sup> MATEI, BĂCUEȚ-CRIȘAN 2011, pl. 97/1, pl. 12/1.

<sup>9</sup> SZÖKE 1992, fig. 11/2.

<sup>10</sup> KONDE 2017, p. 340, pl. 1/1C.

<sup>11</sup> STANCIU 2016, fig. 123.

<sup>12</sup> On the pottery (of ancient tradition, attributed to the Romance population of the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries) from the sites of Taurnia, Ulrichsberg and Hemmaberg (RODRIGUEZ 1997, Taf. 1/3, Taf. 2/11, Taf. 3/25, Taf. 4/32, Taf. 7/64, Taf. 8/74, Taf. 9/83–84).

<sup>13</sup> On pottery of ancient tradition (5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries) (PERKO 1995, p. 248, Abb. 5/2, 4).

<sup>14</sup> On the ceramics of the ancient tradition (5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries) attributed to the Romance population (ceramics conventionally called *horreumkeramik*), see GATTRINGER, GRÜNEWALD 1981, p. 199, Abb. 1–6.

<sup>15</sup> An extensive analysis of these findings in STANCIU 2016, p. 164 and so on.

<sup>16</sup> RZEŹNIK 1995, p. 71, Abb. 9/1, 3.

<sup>17</sup> BĂCUEȚ-CRIȘAN *et alii* 2009, pl. 194/1, 197/1 and 259/2.

half of the 7<sup>th</sup> – first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries) such as those from Záhorská Bystrica<sup>18</sup> and Nové Zámky<sup>19</sup>;

- the upper part of a pot (slow wheel made) discovered at Aghireş – *Sub păşune* in the complex C. 97/2008<sup>20</sup> is decorated with two parallel rows of short incisions drawn obliquely. It is known that such ornaments are found mainly on ceramics dated *after* the year 1000<sup>21</sup>, however, they have also been reported (of course, less often) in archaeological contexts datable to the Avar Period, as is the case with some specimens discovered in the Nové necropolis Zámky<sup>22</sup> and Velký Grob<sup>23</sup>;

- also, from Aghireş – *Sub păşune* (from the complex C. 111/2009) come several ceramic fragments from a pot (slow wheel made) decorated with parallel rows of small impressions made with a sharp tool<sup>24</sup>. Again, we are in front of a decoration that is similar to that made with a cogwheel (characteristic of ceramic vessels dating from the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>25</sup>). And in this case, the use of such a decoration in the Avar Period (of course less often) is supported (for example) by the discoveries from the Slavic-Avar necropolis at Záhorská Bystrica<sup>26</sup>, or from the settlement at Kántorjánosi<sup>27</sup>.

## Final considerations

For the Silvanian Basin, from the data we currently have, the spatial arrangement of the archaeological structures (those *insulae*) in a circular arc around a "square" seems to be a common element of the settlements from Poř – *La baraj* and Marca – *Sfârăuaş I*. This internal structure and topography has also been reported in other early medieval Transylvanian settlements, such as those at Jucu de Sus – *Tetarom III/Râtul boilor*<sup>28</sup> and Comana de Jos<sup>29</sup>.

In his analysis of the early medieval villages in the Carpathian Basin, P. Šalkovský emphasizes the existence of settlements with archaeological structures arranged in a circle (with examples of sites from the 7<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries), but also those that are composed of groups (those *insulae*), of archaeological structures with varied functionality (understood as independent farms/households)<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> KRASKOVSKÁ 1972, p. 126, fig. 23/1.

<sup>19</sup> ČILINSKÁ 1966, p. 311, fig. 465/4.

<sup>20</sup> BĂCUEȚ-CRIȘAN *et alii* 2009, pl. 223/2.

<sup>21</sup> BĂCUEȚ-CRIȘAN 2014, p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> ČILINSKÁ 1966, p. 294, fig. 310/1, p. 304, fig. 422/2 and 423/4.

<sup>23</sup> ŠTEFANOVIČOVÁ 1996, p. 264, Abb. 3.

<sup>24</sup> BĂCUEȚ-CRIȘAN *et alii* 2009, pl. 243.

<sup>25</sup> BĂCUEȚ-CRIȘAN 2014, p. 115.

<sup>26</sup> KRASKOVSKÁ 1972, p. 141, obr. 38/10, p. 142, obr. 39/1.

<sup>27</sup> BAJKAI 2012, p. 464, Tábla 5/5.

<sup>28</sup> In the case of the settlement at Jucu de Sus – *Tetarom III/Râtul boilor* it can be observed (in the central segment Ia of the settlement) that most of the researched dwellings investigated were arranged in a circular arc (STANCIU 2016, fig. 36).

<sup>29</sup> In the case of the settlement at Comana de Jos, the arrangement of most of the archaeological structures can be observed in a circular arc around a free central space. Another (smaller) group of archaeological structures was attached to this group, probably later (a fact probably determined by the growth and expansion of the community), also arranged in a circular arc (STANCIU 2016, fig. 43).

<sup>30</sup> VIZAUER 2008, p. 145; ŠALKOVSKÝ 2011, Abb. 2/3.

Regarding the chronology of the settlements now compared, based on the formal characteristics of the discovered artefacts (especially ceramics, some of the artefacts being mentioned above) we can assume a possible contemporaneity (8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries) of the settlements at Porț – *La baraj* and Aghireș – *Sub pășune*, the one from Marca – *Sfărăuș I* being earlier (7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries) than the other two settlements.

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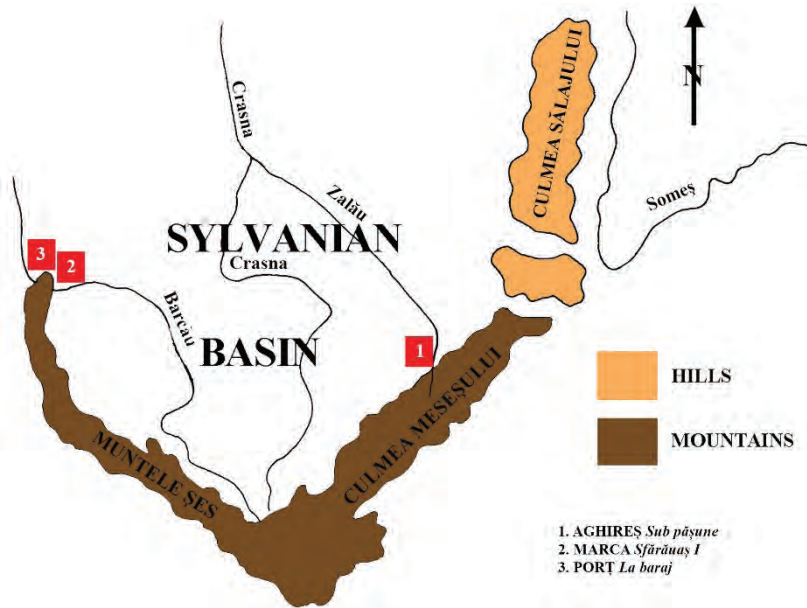


Fig. 1. The location of the three sites analyzed in the text in the Sylvanian Basin.

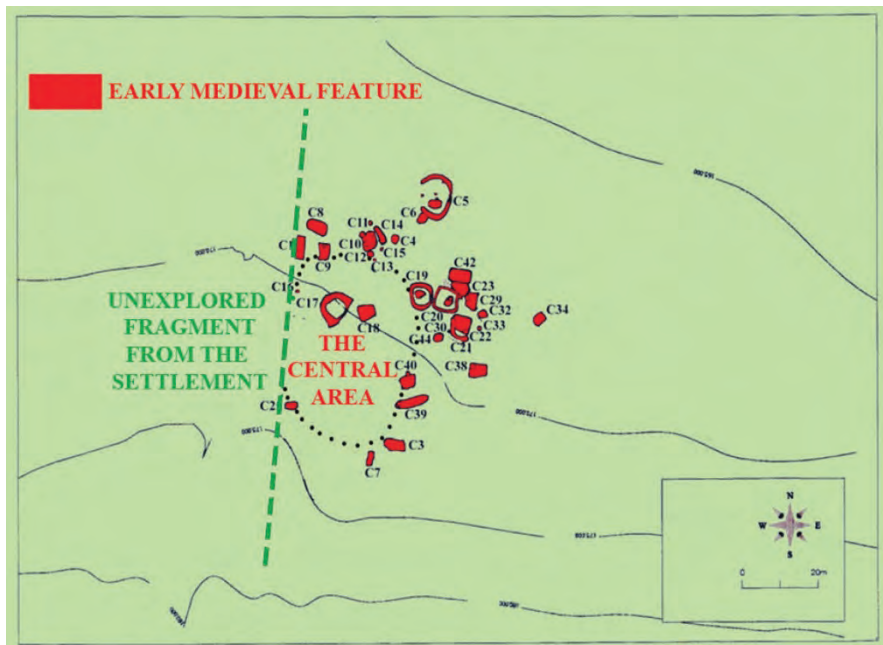
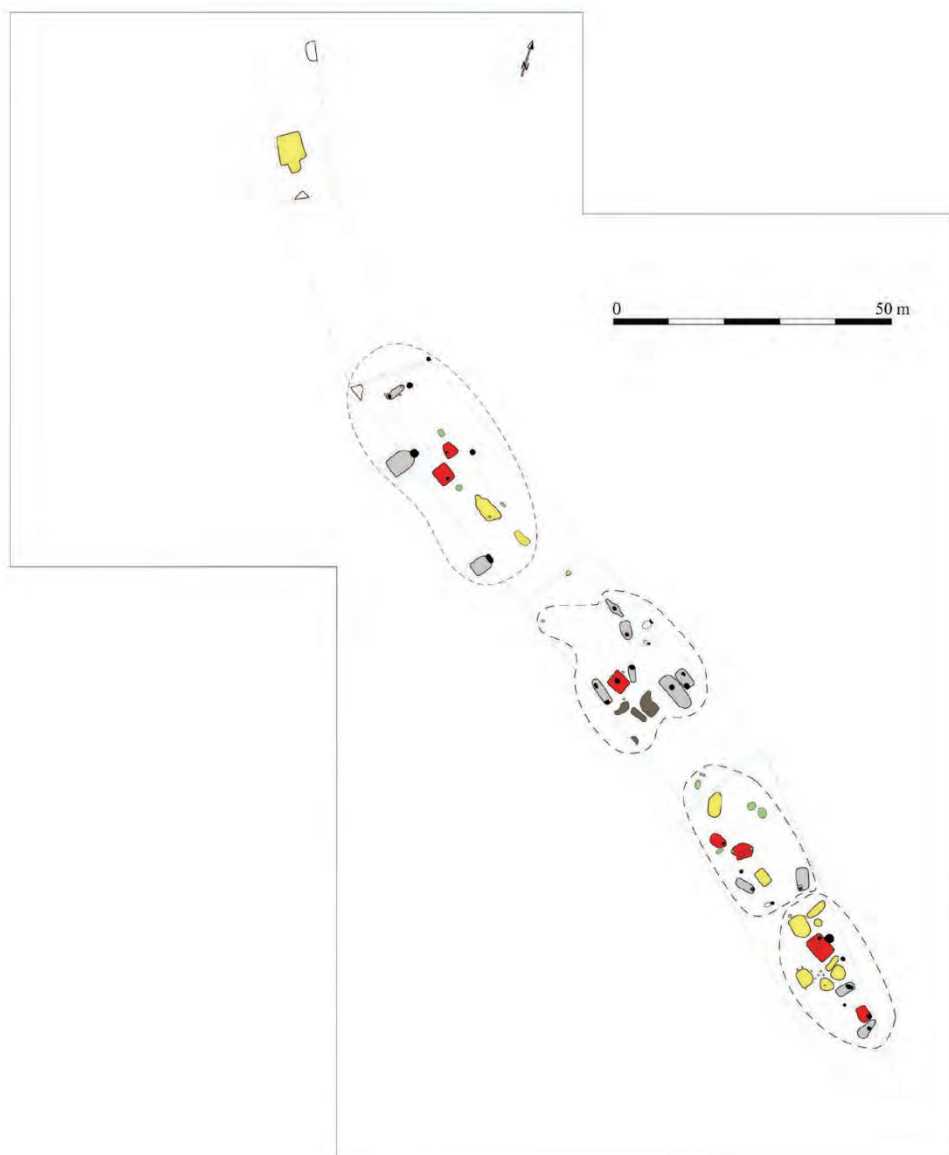


Fig. 2. Early medieval settlement from Port – La baraj. Internal organization (according to BĂCUEȚ-CRIȘAN 2021, fig. 4).



**Fig. 3.** Early medieval settlement from Aghireș – *Sub pășune*. Internal organization (according to STANCIU 2023, fig. 5).

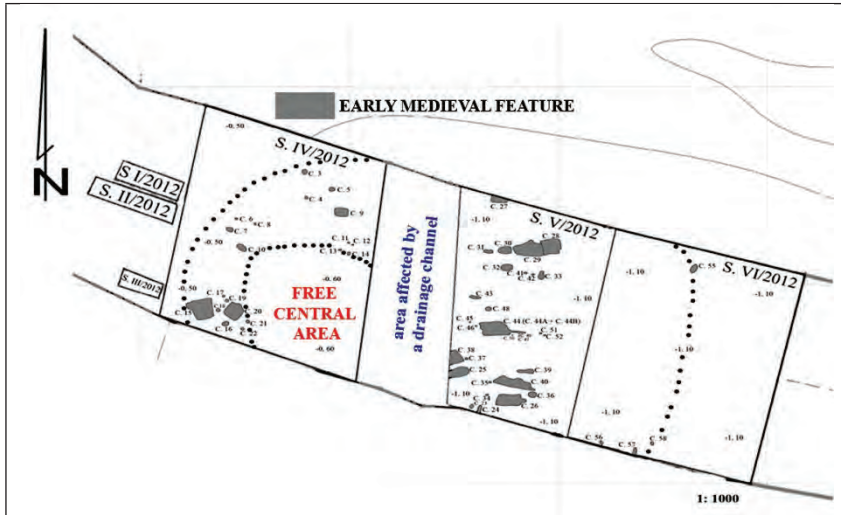


Fig. 4. Early medieval settlement from Marca – Sfârșauș I. Internal organization (according to BĂCUEȚ-CRIȘAN 2021, fig. 4).