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Cuprins

STUDII // MATERIALE // NOTE

Marian Cosac

Istvan Dènes and the archaeological research of the Vârghiș Gorges karst (Harghita County, Romania)

Dénes István és a Vargyas-karszt régészeti kutatása (Hargita megye, Románia)

Istvan Dènes și cercetarea arheologică a carstului din Cheile Vârghișului (județul Harghita, România) 7

Ihor Pistruil

Note about angle transverse burins in collection of the Upper Palaeolithic settlement Anetivka II (Mykolaiv Oblast, Ukraine)

Notă despre burinele transversale de unghi din colecția de piese descoperite în așezarea din paleoliticul superior Anetivka II (Regiunea Mykolaiv, Ucraina) 21

Alla Hlavenchuk, Oksana Hrytsiuta

An original technological approach for the figuration of zoomorphic figurines at the Late Palaeolithic settlement of Anetivka 2 (Ukraine)

O abordare tehnologică originală pentru realizarea statuetelor zoomorfe în situl Paleolitic final de la Anetivka 2 (Ucraina) 29

Mădălina Stănescu

Materialul litic cioplit descoperit în așezarea neolitică de la Coroteni – punct „Cetățuia" (comuna Slobozia Bradului, județul Vrancea)

The knapped lithic material discovered in the Neolithic settlement at Coroteni, „Cetățuia" Point (Slobozia Bradului commune, Vrancea County) 45

Andreea Bîrzu, Cristian Eduard Ștefan

Notă privind două vase de lut descoperite în așezarea gumelnițeană de la Glina-*La Nuci*

Note concerning two clay vessels discovered in the Gumelnița settlement from Glina-La Nuci 55

Svitlana V. Ivanova

Yamna/Budzhak Culture of North-West Pontic region: classification and typology of pottery

Cultura Iamnaia/Bugeac din regiunea nord-vest pontică: clasificarea și tipologia vaselor ceramice 67

Bianca Preda-Bălănică, Angela Simalcsik, Elena Rența
O reevaluare a descoperirilor arheologice din tumulii II și III de la Ciulnița (județul Ialomița, România)
A re-evaluation of the archaeological discoveries of mounds II and III from Ciulnița (Ialomița County, Romania) 91

Dmitriy A. Kirichenko
Palaeoanthropological note about Buzeyir necropolis (Southeastern Azerbaijan)
Notă paleoantropologică despre necropola Buzeyir (sud-estul Azerbaidjanului) 159

Alexandru Berzovan, Angela Simalcsik, Constantin Aparaschivei
Trei morminte inedite aparținând culturii Poienești-Lucașeuca descoperite la Mihoveni-*Cahla Morii* (com. Șcheia, jud. Suceava, România)
Three new graves belonging to the Poienești-Lucașeuca Culture discovered at Mihoveni-Cahla Morii (Șcheia commune, Suceava County, Romania) 167

Adrian Adamescu, Gabriel Jugănaru, Tudor Mandache, George Nuțu
Consolation in death. Three cameos from the Roman necropolis of Barboși
Consolare în moarte. Trei camee din necropola romană de la Barboși 197

Ana Honcu
Epigraphy and the use of ArcGIS to analyse inscriptions. A case study
Epigrafia și utilizarea ArcGIS pentru analiza inscripțiilor. Studiu de caz 215

Lucian Munteanu, George-Dan Hânceanu, Nicoleta Vornicu
Notă asupra compoziției unor monede romane din colecția Muzeului de Istorie Roman
Note on the composition of several Roman coins from the collection of the Roman History Museum 229

George-Dan Hânceanu
Morminte de incinerație din secolele II-III d. Hr. descoperite la David (jud. Neamț, România)
Cremation graves from the 2nd-3rd centuries AD discovered at David (Neamț County, Romania) 237

Dmitriy A. Kirichenko
Note about one case of cranial trepanation from catacomb burial of Mingachevir (Azerbaijan Republic)
Notă despre un caz de trepanație craniană dintr-un mormânt în catacombă de la Minghachevir (Republica Azerbaidjan) 259

Robert Daniel Simalcsik

Indicatori demografici și ocupaționali la două populații ce aparțin culturii Sântana de Mureș - Cerneahov (Mihălășeni, jud. Botoșani și Valea Seacă, jud. Vaslui)

Demographical and occupational markers of two populations belonging to Sântana de Mureș - Chernyakhov Culture (Mihălășeni, Botoșani County and Valea Seacă, Vaslui County) 267

Geanina A. Butiseacă, Vasile Diaconu, Maria Ilie, Iuliana Vasiliev

The transition from the Mediaeval Warming Period to the Little Ice Age in northeastern Romania (Târgu Neamț, *La Damian* site)

Tranziția de la perioada medievală de încălzire la Mica Eră Glaciară în nord-estul României (Târgu Neamț, situl La Damian) 279

Angela Simalcsik, Robert Daniel Simalcsik

Primul caz de amputare din România medievală

The first case of amputation in Mediaeval Romania 295

Franceska Știrbu, Gabriel Vasile

Beneath the surface: Uncovering the social and biological significance of contemporary multiple burials in a Mediaeval sample from Wallachia

Dincolo de suprafață: descifrarea semnificațiilor sociale și biologice ale înhumărilor contemporane multiple dintr-un eșantion din perioada medievală din Țara Românească 327

Andreea Toma, Gabriel Vasile

Abnormalities of the first cervical vertebra in a Muslim community from Dobruja (Southeastern Romania): a case study

Anomalii ale primei vertebre cervicale la o comunitate musulmană din Dobrogea (sud-estul României): un studiu de caz 363

Cătălin-George Fedor

Raporturi interconfesionale într-o comunitate rurală moldovenească

Interconfessional relations in a rural Moldavian community 377

RECENZII // PREZENTĂRI DE CARTE

Done Șerbănescu

Necropole eneolitice din Câmpia Dunării

Cristian Eduard Ștefan 385

Norme de redactare / Publishing Rules 388

Istvan Dènes and the archaeological research of the Vârghiș Gorges karst (Harghita County, Romania)

Marian Cosac[1]

Abstract. Istvan Dènes (1954-2005) is "an outsider" in Palaeolithic archaeology, but an undisputed figure in research on the karst region in southeastern Transylvania. His speleological activity is primarily linked to the karst area of the Vârghiș Gorges. I. Dènes paid special attention to recording archaeological material and identifying the sources of raw materials used by Palaeolithic hunters. Thus, we can say that we are facing a rare situation in archaeological endeavours: the results of investigations conducted by a researcher with foreign training in the field of archaeology illustrate, in many aspects, an approach of remarkable professionalism.
Keywords*:* Istvan Dènes, Vârghiș, Palaeolithic, karst.

Dénes István és a Vargyas-karszt régészeti kutatása (Hargita megye, Románia). Dénes István (1954-2005) ismeretlen a paleolitikus régészetben, de a délkelet-tranzszilvániai karsztvidék kutatásának vitathatatlan alakja. Szpeológiai tevékenysége elsősorban a Vargyas-szoros karsztvidékéhez kapcsolódik. Dénes különös figyelmet fordított az archeológiai anyagok rögzítésére és apaleolitikus vadászok által használt alapanyagforrások azonosítására. Elmondhatjuk tehát, hogy a régészeti törekvésekben ritka helyzettel állunk szemben: egy külföldi képzéssel rendelkező kutató által végzett vizsgálatok eredményei számos szempontból rendkívüli szakmai felkészültséget tükröznek.
Kulcsszavak: Dénes István, Vargyas, paleolitikum, karszt.

Istvan Dènes și cercetarea arheologică a carstului din Cheile Vârghișului (județul Harghita, România). Istvan Dènes (1954-2005) este un necunoscut în arheologia paleolitică, dar o figură incontestabilă în cercetarea regiunii carstice din sud-estul Transilvaniei. Activitatea sa speologică este legată în primul rând de zona carstică a Cheilor Vârghișului. Istvan Dènes a acordat o atenție deosebită înregistrării materialului arheologic și identificării surselor de materii prime folosite de vânătorii din paleolitic. Astfel, putem spune că ne confruntăm cu o situație rară în demersurile arheologice: rezultatele investigațiilor efectuate de un cercetător cu pregătire străină în domeniul arheologiei ilustrează, în multe aspecte, un demers de un remarcabil profesionalism.
Cuvinte cheie: Istvan Dènes, Vârghiș, Paleolitic, carst.

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The evaluation of archaeological materials resulting from older excavations is unquestionably conditioned by the standard at which the initial information was archived and the methodology applied to their collection. The absence of rigorous documentation irreversibly biases the interpretation of data. Consequently, decontextualised archaeological materials become mere trophies in the absence of rigorous methodology, which is dependent on the training and experience of the archaeologist conducting the excavation. However, there are fortunate situations in which the individual conducting archaeological research, even without specialised training, carries out excavation and data recording at a high level of quality. One such example is Istvan Dènes (1954-2005), a foreigner in Palaeolithic archaeology but an undisputed figure in the research of the karst region in southeastern Transylvania, particularly the karst area of the Vârghiș Gorges in Harghita County. As stated by the renowned speleologist Cristian Goran: "His natural inclination towards speleology and nature, fuelled by passion and strong will, was supported by serious knowledge in various domains" (Goran 2006, p. 42). His involvement in speleology went beyond the level of an amateur, as highlighted by his published scientific studies (Dènes 1995; 2003; 2005). Undoubtedly, his education at the "Post-High School of Mining Geology" within the Mining School Group in Baia Mare decisively contributed to the professionalisation of his speleological endeavours. In fact, as early as 1978, the documentation prepared by I. Dènes for the inclusion of the Vârghiș Gorges caves in the "Catalogue of Caves" was, for a long time, the only one correctly compiled, featuring detailed maps, descriptions, and clear locations that could be immediately recorded (Goran 2006, p. 42).

Istvan Dènes focused primarily on speleological activities in the karst area of the Vârghiș Gorges. Beginning in 1971, and with the support of the members of the "*Ursus spelaeus* Speleology Circle", he dedicated himself to identifying and mapping new caves. Thanks to his efforts, the number of known caves increased from 67, which had been identified by Traian Orghidan and Margareta Dumitrescu between 1952 and 1955 (Orghidan, Dumitrescu 1963), to 122. This area developed along the Vârghiș Valley, a right tributary of the Cormoș River (which flows into the Olt Valley on the right side), in its lower section (**Fig. 1**), as it passes through limestone formations accumulated in the second half of the Upper Jurassic period. The karstification process began in the early Quaternary and evolved through several stages, leading to the formation of four distinct karst levels. As previously mentioned, over 122 caves have been identified within these levels.

We do not know exactly when speleologist Istvan Dènes began to show interest in archaeology. According to Dr. Viorica Crișan (personal communication), we know that he participated as a volunteer in archaeological excavations at the prehistoric

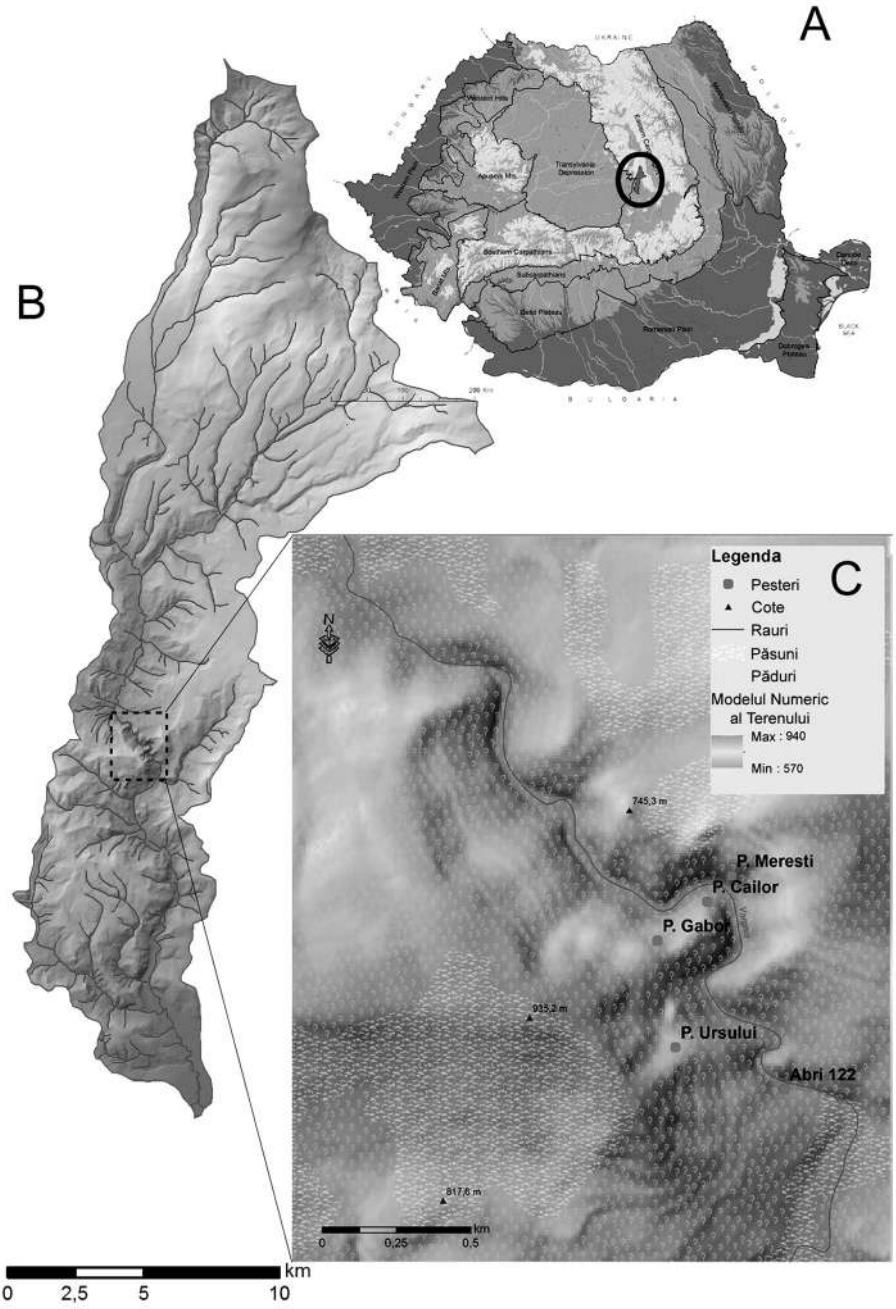


Fig. 1. The location of the Vârghișului Gorges.
Fig. 1. Amplasarea Cheilor Vârghișului.

settlement of Mereşti - Dâmbul Pripaşilor, located on the left slope of the Vârghiş Gorges. Additionally, his wife, Ildiko Dènes, has informed us that "all his knowledge of archaeology and archaeological excavations was self-taught, and he participated several times in archaeological excavations carried out by the archaeologist brothers Ferenczi Istvan (1921-2000) and Ferenczi Geza (1924-2007)[2]".

In 2014, we decided to initiate an archaeological assessment of the caves in the Vârghiş Gorges, starting with an exploration of the Calului Cave (Cosac *et alii* 2015). At that time, legislation in Romania allowed nongovernmental associations to act as custodians in protected natural areas. Mrs. Ildiko Dènes, as the president of the "Lumea pierdută" association, continued the conservation efforts of the karst area in the gorges, following in the footsteps of her husband, Istvan Dènes. She informed us of the extensive archaeological excavations conducted by her husband in the caves, the results obtained, and the existence of an excavation journal. Subsequently, his meticulous archaeological journal and the archaeological materials resulting from the excavations were handed over by Mrs. Ildiko Dènes to the National Szekler Museum in Sfântu Gheorghe. Archaeologist Dr. Sándor József Sztáncsuj facilitated our access to Palaeolithic materials and the excavation journal[3]. This is a detailed record of the archaeological research conducted between 1989 and 2003, and the motto of his excavation journal is taken from Vera Gáboriné Csánk (1926-1996): *"Every excavation means destruction! What is taken out, what we have observed, what we have destroyed, cannot be put back and repeated..."*

Results:

1. Rock shelter Abri 122, catalogue number 122/1200, is located on the right slope of the Vârghiş Gorges, in their terminal section, with access from the village of Vârghiş, approximately 30 meters above the streambed. In 1989, Istvan Dènes conducted the first excavation: "*After mapping the roof, we decided to carry out a verification excavation, as the location could have been inhabited in ancient times, as it is used today by speleologists and climbers. The discovered ceramic fragments encouraged us to undertake such work.*" We know that Abri 122 was used for a long period of time by amateur speleology teams as a resting place because, through Cave 33, located just above Abri 122, caves on the right slope of the Vârghiş karst could be visited. Istvan Dènes, together with his team of young speleologists, spent many nights in the shelter area under the Abri 122 rock. In 1989, excavation areas A, B, C, and E were excavated, with the latter continuing into 1990. When the excavation resumed in 1995, the surface designations were modified as follows: I, II, V – 1995, III, IV, VI, VII – 1996, VIII – 2003, IX – 2001, X – 2002, and XI – 2003. The excavated area

[2] After 1989, Ferenczi Istvan taught at the branch in Sf. Gheorghe of Hyperion University.

[3] We thank Mr. Sándor József Sztáncsuj and Ms. Ildiko Dènes.

covers approximately 16 square meters, and the sediment package had a thickness of approximately 1.30 meters. Istvan Dènes did not remove the sediment resulting from archaeological excavations. From the excavation plan prepared by Istvan Dènes, it is evident that other individuals participated in the excavation: L. Iliës – 1989, M. Giurgiu, I. Tóth – 1990, L. Iliës, K. Iliës, M. Giurgiu – 1995, L. Iliës, K. Iliës – 1996 (**Fig. 2**). At the end of the 1989 archaeological research campaign conducted in Abri 122, I. Dènes prepared an excavation report, informing about the scientific importance of the findings, but it is unclear whether it was submitted to a museum or archaeological institution. Istvan Dènes mentioned that the trampling level is horizontal at the beginning of the research, and he does not have any information about previous research. The cultural and stratigraphic sequence established in this campaign remained unchanged until the completion of his research in the area of Abri 122. In the 1989 excavation section, the excavation reached 0.70 meters in depth, and has the following stratigraphic succession (**Fig. 3**):

- A black layer with organic material and modern materials – 5 cm.
- A gray, crumbly layer with small limestone fragments and ceramic materials from the Iron Age and Bronze Age – 25 cm.
- A yellow layer with many limestone fragments and lithic and faunal materials attributed to the Middle Palaeolithic – 35 cm.
- A limestone-clay layer with many stones and no archaeological material.

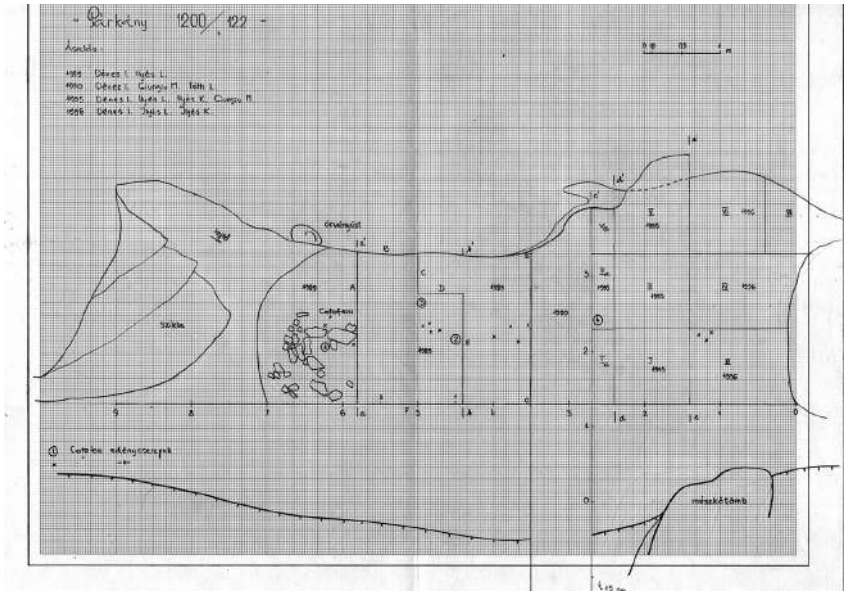


Fig. 2. The excavation plan drawn up by I. Dénes.
Fig. 2. Planul de săpătură realizat de I. Dénes.

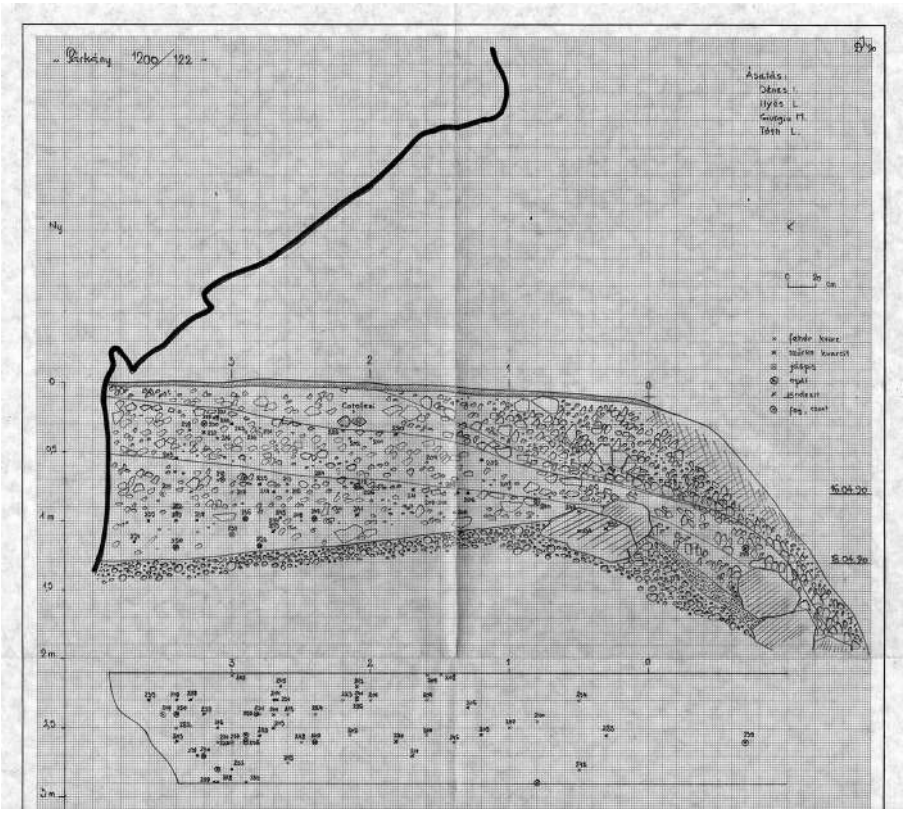


Fig. 3. Stratigraphy of the Abri 122 site drawn up by I. Dénes.
Fig. 3. Stratigrafia sitului Abri 122 realizată de I. Dénes.

Istvan Dènes paid special attention to recording archaeological material and identifying the sources of raw materials used by Palaeolithic hunters. According to the available records from the excavation journal, archaeological research in Abri 112 appears to have been the first systematic Palaeolithic excavation in the Carpathian region of Romania, where lithic artefacts were individually recorded in three coordinates. Although he did not use a single point to reference the depth of the artefacts, the initial relatively horizontal trampling level facilitated the easy integration of archaeological data (Cosac *et alii* 2019a). Based on the information provided in the excavation journal, it appears that his research was largely driven by the conviction that the discoveries made should be fully recovered and meticulously documented. Consequently, the recovered lithic assemblage includes not only cores, raw supports, and complete retouched pieces, which are visually striking because of their size or unique appearance, but also fractured pieces,

debitage remnants, indeterminate fragments, and broken flakes. Additionally, most lithic artefacts were accompanied by three-dimensional recordings of their positions in the excavation sections, identification of the raw materials used, and preliminary categorisation of artefact types. This approach facilitated the study of the collection by defining the spatial distribution of the lithic artefacts and making observations on the stratigraphic integrity of the deposits.

The Middle Palaeolithic lithic material discovered in Istvan Dènes' campaigns in Abri 122 constitutes a numerous and diverse sample in terms of technological aspects, typology, and categories of raw materials used. The studied collection consists of 1,938 lithic artefacts, of which 121 (6.24%) are retouched pieces (Cosac *et alii* 2017; 2019a). However, the study of the collection would not have been possible without complete data on the artefacts' provenance. Thus, we can say that we are facing a rare situation in archaeological endeavours: the results of investigations conducted by a researcher with foreign training in archaeology illustrate, in many respects, an approach of remarkable professionalism. It is believed that this is the reason why the decision was made not to fully excavate the sediment package in the Abri 122 area. Therefore, I. Dénes did not explore the cave area that delimits the rock shelter, allowing for the integration of archaeological, stratigraphic, palaeoclimatic, and chronological data resulting from the new research initiated in 2014 (Cosac *et alii* 2017).

2. Cave 33, catalogue number 33/1200, is located on the right slope of the Vârghiș Gorges, approximately 30 meters above the streambed, in close proximity to Abri 122. They are part of the same karst system. Cave 33 appears in the form of an angled tunnel with two openings. The secondary opening near the Abri 122 site (**Fig. 4, B**) is difficult to access and is suspended at approximately 30 meters above the streambed. The main opening, oriented N-NW, has a width of six meters, maximum height of three meters, and features a small terrace (**Fig. 4, A**). The two cave openings facilitate the development of strong air currents. The cave's location, at the entrance of the Vârghiș Gorges, from the village of Vârghiș, along with its high visibility and easy access, attracted numerous archaeologists, speleologists, and self-taught enthusiasts in the 19th and 20th centuries. Franz Podec (1914) and Maria Mott (1950) conducted archaeological excavations in this cave; unfortunately, the caves addressed in their studies cannot be identified in the field due to the absence of plans and descriptions of the archaeological excavations. I. Dènes claims that the cave was explored by Julius Teutsch and Janos Glaf in the early 20th century. In fact, a series of sections can be observed at the main entrance of the cave. Extensive excavation work was carried out at the secondary entrance by speleologist I. Dénes in the years 1989, 1990, 1994, and 1996, as noted in his excavation journal. His excavation reached a depth

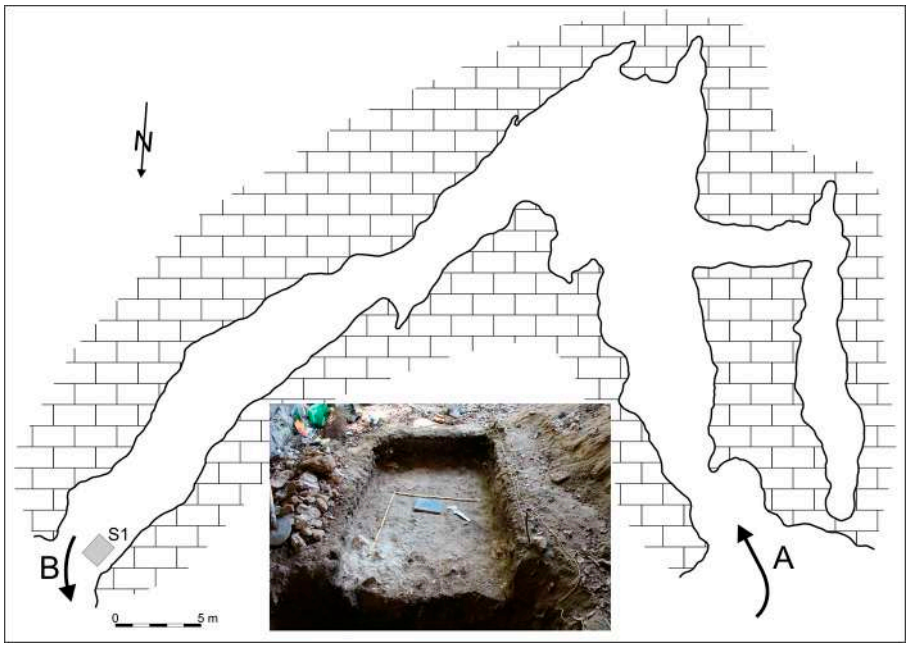


Fig. 4. Plan of Cave 33 and the location of the Cosac section.
Fig. 4. Planul Peșterii 33 și localizarea secțiunii Cosac.

of three meters, but the exact area covered is not specified. From his notes, it is evident that approximately 100 Middle Palaeolithic lithic artefacts were discovered *in situ*, associated with macrofauna, and were more abundant from 60 cm to -200 cm below the current trampling level of the cave. The resulting materials were not accessible for study and were not handed over to the National Szekler Museum in Sfântu Gheorghe, as was the case for the excavation in Abri 122. Given the available data from previous research, in 2017, we decided to resume archaeological investigations in this cave by establishing a section in the area of the secondary entrance, attempting to partially capture Istvan Dènes' excavation and an undisturbed area (**Fig. 4**).

The excavation reached a depth of 150 cm, and we found that the sediment deposits had been entirely disturbed by a previous excavation (**Fig. 5-6**), but we passively recovered a series of lithic materials assignable to the Middle Palaeolithic period. The small lithic assemblage (42) consists mostly of unretouched flakes made of quartzite and basalt. Complete artefacts range from 35 to 54 mm in length, 25 to 49 mm in width (occasionally up to 83 mm), and 9 to 17 mm in thickness. Fragmented proximal and distal artefacts occasionally show similar length and

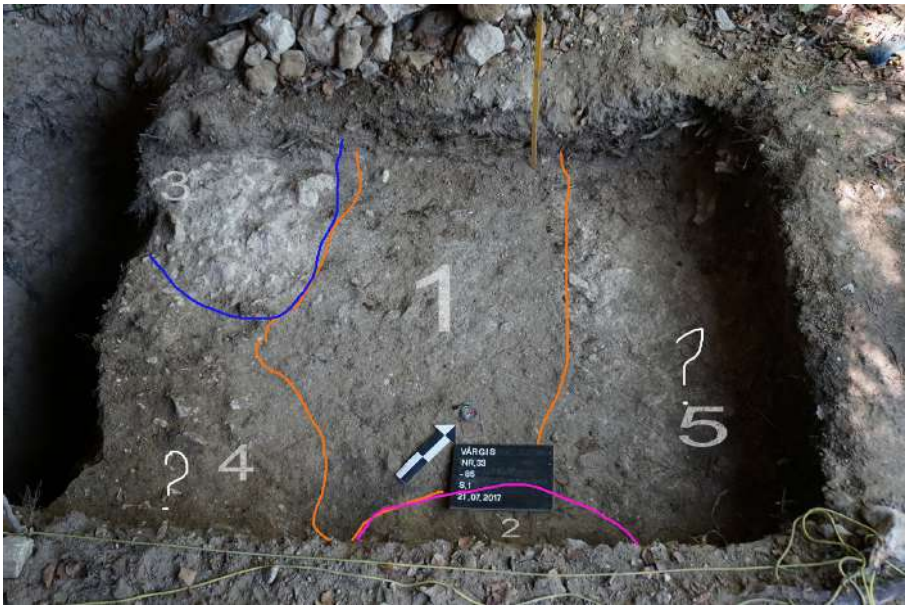


Fig. 5. Excavation details from Cave 33.
Fig. 5. Detalii de săpătură din Peștera 33.



Fig. 6. Excavation details from Cave 33.
Fig. 6. Detalii de săpătură din Peștera 33.

width values or slightly higher, indicating the exploitation of several larger cores. The width of flat platforms on complete and proximal artefacts varies between 3 and 10 mm, with isolated occurrences of thicker platforms, one dihedral, and one faceted (13 mm and 20 mm, respectively). Hard-hammer percussion scars were observed. Unidirectional dorsal negatives and perpendicular or oblique fractures are common. The collection includes only two cores, one heavily fragmented (quartzite) and the other with large weathered cortical surfaces, one striking platform, and only a few observable flake-like detachments.

There are only three distal retouched flakes made of quartzite, likely former transverse and lateral scrapers, with partially or discontinuously applied direct retouch. Several lydite, argillite, and radiolarite artefacts, mostly flakes, and one exceptionally large cortical secondary blade are also present (Cosac *et alii* 2021). Although small and decontextualised, this lithic assemblage highlights the irreversible scientific loss of material resulting from Dènes' excavation.

3. Lublinit Cave, catalogue number 9/1200, is located on the right slope of the Vârghiș Gorges, approximately 72 meters above the streambed. The entrance to the cave is 1.3 meters high and 3 meters wide. In the portal area, the sedimentary deposit descends, but leads to a wide chamber that gradually narrows. The first research was conducted by Maria Mottl (1950), but her objectives were palaeontological, and she does not mention the recovery of archaeological materials. On July 21, 1985, István Dénes mapped the cave and mentioned the existence of an extensive section conducted by Maria Mottl (Dènes, Szabó 1998, p. 90). Hoping to identify archaeological materials along the walls, in an area unaffected by previous research, approximately 12 meters from the entrance, he noticed the presence of limestone blocks placed in a niche on the southern wall of the cave (**Fig. 7**).

While removing the limestone blocks, he discovered two axes with transverse handle perforations, one with a calcite crust on its surface, and two multi-spiral bracelets. The axes were placed horizontally and parallel to each other, and it is possible that they were initially deposited one over the other or partially covering each other; one of the multi-spiral bracelets was in a vertical position behind the middle segment of the axes, and the other was in a horizontal position, perpendicular to the long axis of the axes, in the area of the cutting edges (Soroceanu 2012, p. 115-116). István Dénes documented the objects in their initial position using colour and black-and-white photographs before touching them (**Fig. 8**). Only after that, he collected the objects and examined the area by establishing a 3 × 3 meter section. I. Dénes mentions the presence of coarse ceramic fragments attributed to the Early Neolithic, but we have reservations about accepting this classification, as well as fragments of pottery that belonged to the Wietenberg culture (Dènes, Szabó 1998, p. 90-91).

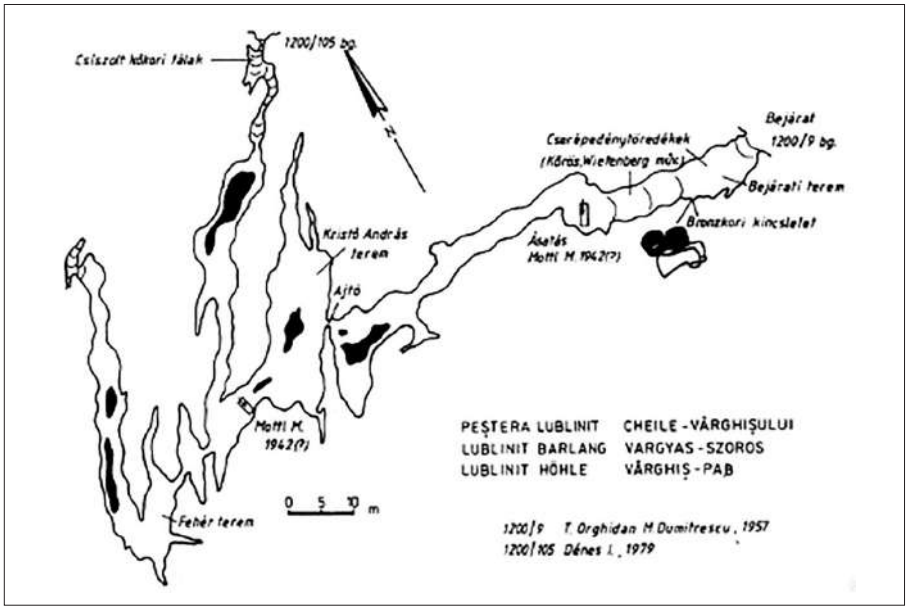


Fig. 7. Plan of the Lublinit Cave and the location of the deposits discovered by I. Dénes (after Dènes, Szabó 1998).
Fig. 7. Planul Peșterii Lublinit și amplasarea depozitelor descoperite de I. Dénes (după Dènes, Szabó 1998).



Fig. 8. The pieces at the time of discovery (after Dènes, Szabó 1998).
Fig. 8. Piesele în momentul descoperirii (după Dènes, Szabó 1998).

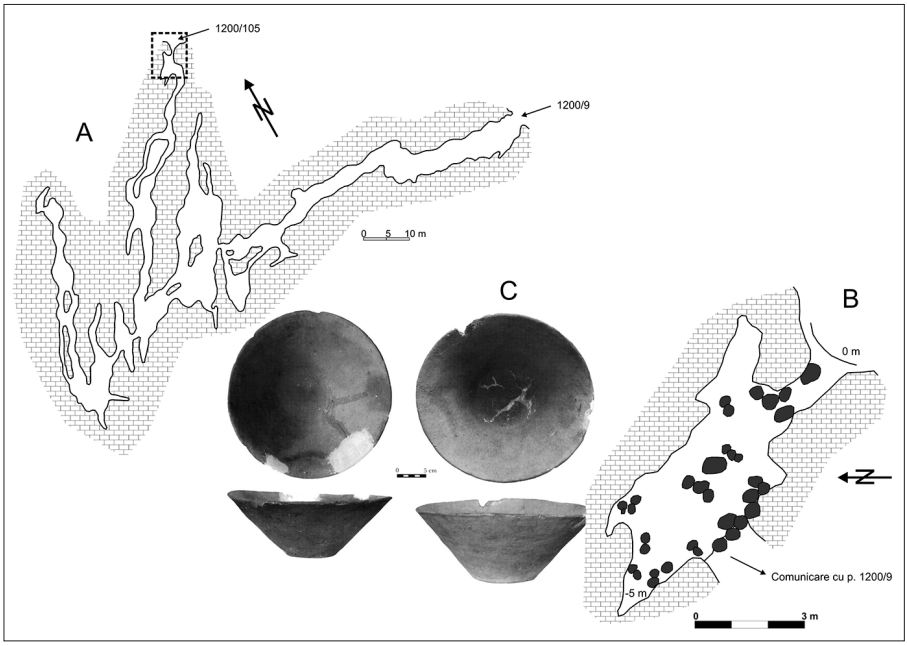


Fig. 9. Plans of the Lublinit caves and no. 105; vessels attributed to Ariușd Culture (after Stáncsuj 2015).
Fig. 9. Planurile peșterilor Lublinit și nr. 105; vase atribuite grupului cultural Ariușd (după Stáncsuj 2015).

4. Vessels' Cave, catalogue number 105/1200, is located on the right slope of the Vârghiș Gorges, approximately 72 meters above the streambed. It is situated in the vicinity of Lublinit Cave - no. 9 and belongs to the same karst system (**Fig. 9**). These two caves used to communicate through a corridor, which is now inaccessible because of the collapsing limestone wall. In fact, Cave 105 was one of the entrances to Lublinit Cave - no. 9 (Dénes, Szabó 2000, p. 14). Cave 105 has modest dimensions, with an entrance height of 3 meters and an entrance width of 1.5 meters, while the gallery has a length of 5.5 meters and a width of 2 meters. It exhibits a strongly descending floor profile. In 1979, the year of its discovery, the entrance was blocked by a pile of stones. The discoverer, speleologist I. Dénes, cleared the access and noticed the presence of two conical bowls deposited in the northwestern part of the cave space. The bowls contained material composed of earth and bones. In the central part of the cave, fragments of a vessel and a bone tool were also identified (Dénes, Szabó 2000, p.14). According to Sándor József Sztáncsuj (Sztáncsuj 2015, p. 81), the vessels belong typologically to the Ariușd group. No other archaeological materials are present in the cave space,

suggesting that it was blocked after the deposition of the vessels (Dénes, Szabó 2000, p.15). In July 2018, we reidentified Cave 105; its entrance is only visible from close proximity, it is difficult to access from the Vârghiș riverbed, and it is located at the base of an almost vertical wall. Numerous limestone blocks of varying sizes are observed at the entrance, which are also present inside the cave. At the base of the strongly descending floor, a bear jawbone and a rib were discovered. It is unknown whether these can be associated with the initial discovery (Cosac *et alii* 2019b).

With the experience gained from the excavations initiated in the presented caves, but certainly aware of the archaeological potential of the caves in the Vârghișului Gorges area, I. Dènes began conducting sondages (small-scale excavations) in caves with substantial sedimentary deposits starting from 1990. These caves include numbers 1, 3, 5, 8 – Cailor, 10, 11, 12, 13 – Tătarului, 14 – Cave Marte/Orbán Bálasz, 18 – Ursului, 20, 23, 24, 27, 34, 36 – Urșilor, 40, 57, 58, 74, 87 – Șura de piatră, 92, 97, and 106. The archaeological materials obtained were handed over to the National Szekler Museum in Sfântu Gheorghe, as mentioned previously. The vast majority of these materials are post-Palaeolithic and will be valorised in a commemorative volume. I. Dènes did not publish the results of archaeological research in these caves, and his research was conducted without compliance with Romania's legislation for the protection of archaeological heritage. However, his professionalism in the conducted research is indisputable.

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