

## SPECIAL FEATURES FROM CSEPEL ISLAND

### Reliquiae of the Celtic Red Deer Cult at the Vicinity of Budapest

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During the excavations prior to the building of the M0 motorway in Hungary between 1988 and 1989 remains of various cultures were unearthed on the almost 2,500 m<sup>2</sup> site of Szigetszentmiklós-Üdülősor, among others a late Celtic rural settlement. Further excavations in 2008 and 2010 revealed additional parts of the settlement. From one of the features came an enormous deer antler with some ceramic fragments. This feature was largely similar to the one excavated in 1989, also containing an antler. Both were found on the area of the waterside settlement. For sure these findings can be connected to the Celtic cultural cycle, in which the red deer and the roe were regarded as sacred. Although the original Celtic names are unknown and they are not recorded until the late Celtic era, based on the Graeco-Roman inscriptions one can safely assume these findings were offerings to the Celtic deer god.

Keywords: Hungary, Late La Tène Period, settlement, red-deer antlers, ceremonies, *Cernunnos*.

During the excavations prior to the building of the M0 motorway around Budapest, some 250 features of various ages were unearthed in Szigetszentmiklós-Üdülősor between 1988 and 1989 by archaeologists of the Budapest History Museum led by Anna Endrődi. On the almost 2,500 m<sup>2</sup> site remains of various cultures living

here from the middle Copper Age to the Árpád age were found.

The archaeological site lies some 100 m from the Soroksár Danube branch on a onetime island that emerged from the floodplain, 3 km outside the administrative border of Budapest (Fig. 1: 1). The surface of Csepel Island was formed by the erosion and accumulation of the Danube, and also deflation by wind, although on a smaller scale. During the Holocene the Danube flown in several branches which developed the low and high floodplain levels. Most archaeological sites here lie some 96–103 m a.s.l. Their surface is covered with calcareous mud, while meanders are filled with denser sediments (mud, clay). Both surfaces can be covered, due to more arid periods, by sand or even small mounds (Schweitzer 1992, 9–13).

The excavation of the late Celtic partial settlement, found in Szigetszentmiklós-Üdülősor was published by Erzsébet Hanny (1992).

Exactly twenty years later during the expansion of the M0 motorway in 2008, new excavations began on the site conducted by Attila Horváth M. and Anna Endrődi, with the contribution of Eszter Kovács. Three phases of excavations were conducted south to the already existing motorway and the bridge arching over the Danube branch, on some 17,000 m<sup>2</sup> area between 2008 and 2010. A total of 1,458 units were unearthed with findings largely similar to the previously found ones (Endrődi/Horváth 2009, 150–166; Endrődi/Horváth/Kovács 2011, 139–150).

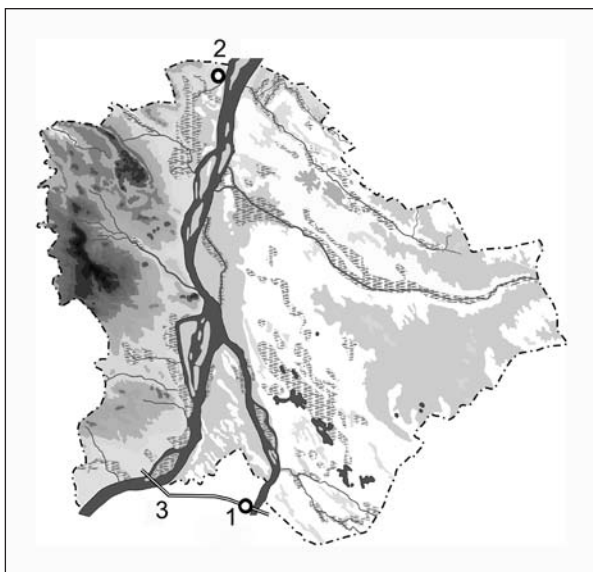


Fig. 1. Palaeohydrography of the Danube in the area of Budapest and the location of Celtic sites with antlers. 1 – Szigetszentmiklós-Üdülősor; 2 – Budapest III, Királyok útja 291–293; 3 – section of the M0 Motorway on Csepel Island (computer graphics by A. Horváth M.).

<sup>1</sup> Results of the excavations were published by Havassy/Selmeczi 1992.

A new section of the previously excavated late Celtic waterfront settlement also came to light. A total of 155 units belonging to the settlement can be dated to the La Tène D2 period (late 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE; *Hanny 1992*, 254) excavated in 1988–1989, 2008 and 2010.

Celtic findings mostly came to light on areas near the Danube or the present Űdülősor road, both in 2008 and 2010. Units found in the thick flood layer were mostly storage or garbage pits, from which findings similar to the previous excavations were unearthed. Fragments of fine textured, well-levigated wheel thrown vessels, tempered with fine-grained sand, in gray, beige and orange colours (the latter, the so-called *oppidum* pottery, was coated with a red or red-and-white painted decoration), situlae with combed decoration usually tempered with gritty sand or gritted mica and occasionally with graphite and fragments of great storage vessels were also found in the features. According to this findings both of the pits can be clearly dated to the La Tène D2 period.

Beside the pits unearthed on the site, traditional semi subterranean houses, one edifice identified as roofed storage pit (*Hanny 1992*, 248–250, 254), remains of a house with cellar (SE 403/2008), a house filled with iron slag indicating metalworking (SE 1–3; 10/2008) and a workshop with external furnaces were also found (*Endrődi/Horváth 2009*, 160, fig. 6). As significant as they are, however, the most important right now are two pits uncovered in 1989 and 2008 respectively.

#### The 202–201/1989 pit structure (Pl. I: 1).

Together they are 160 cm long, 110–60–95 cm wide, 40–50 cm deep, oriented in an E–W direction. The filling from the upper 15 cm was yellow with wattle and daub with black humus below that. The straight bottom was covered with clay mixed with ash. From the layer above that came fragments of grey and dark grey wheel thrown bowls, a spindle weight made from the bottom of a similar vessel, pieces of liquefied slag, a small lump of graphite and a red deer antler (Pl. II: 1; *Hanny 1992*, 247, pl. 4; 10; 16).

#### Pit 1090/2010 (Pl. I: 2; II: 2, 3).

Diam. 100 cm; depth 57 cm; 99,6 m a.s.l., 25 cm below today's surface. During the demolition there were fragments of fine textured, well-levigated wheel thrown vessels, tempered with fine-grained sand, in gray, beige (Pl. III: 1–5; IV: 3), and orange colours in the pit. The latter, the so-called *oppidum* pottery, was coated with red or red and white painted decoration. (Pl. IV: 1) There were rough pottery in the pit as well. These situlae with combed decoration were formed of roughly kneaded clay, usually tempered with gritty sand or gritted mica

and occasionally with graphite (Pl. III: 6–11). Besides, a stone, a loom weight and many wattle and daub fragments were excavated. The red deer antler was laid on the side fragment of a large storage vessel (Pl. II: 2, 3; III: 12)<sup>2</sup> on the thick bottom layer of the pit, mixed with charcoal, ash and daub (*Endrődi/Horváth 2011*, 145–147, fig. 9). The findings from both of the pits can be dated to the La Tène D2 period.

As of now we have limited knowledge regarding Celtic rituals, however based on the excavated units we believe the antlers' presence and placement are somehow connected to some ceremony. In both cases there were charcoal and ash mixed in the bottom layers of the pits although no signs of fire were found. The antlers laid on this layer were not naturally shed, but taken from a sacrificed animal with a piece of the skull with almost all certainty. A similar phenomenon can be observed on Szigetszentmiklós-Űdülősor in the case of unit 1076/2010, which also had a carcass of a swine without skull and limbs laid on a thick bottom layer mixed with charcoal and daub, together with various ceramic fragments dating to the La Tène D2 period (*Endrődi/Horváth 2009*, 146, 147, fig. 10).

These ritually buried antlers are by no means unique, however, in the Celtic cultural cycle. Remains of the red deer cult with western origin can be found in many places of the country, mainly at burial sites but also in settlements. Whole animal burials are more common in Western Hungary sites, such as Keszthely-Fenekpuszta (*Müller/Sugár 2001*, 43–45), Balatonőszöd-Temetői dűlő (*Horváth 2019*, 121–125) and Tihany-Óvár (*Regenye 2004*, 189, 190). However, different rites can also be found on the sites mentioned above. For example, Judit Regenye found a whole, although shed antler similar to Szigetszentmiklós (Pl. V: 4), next to a pit containing a dismembered carcass of a red deer (*Regenye 2004*, 189, 190, fig. 7; 8).

A really close parallel to Szigetszentmiklós, however, can be found in the vicinity of Budapest. Ildikó Poroszlai unearthed a similar shed antler during the excavations of Százhalombatta-Földvár (Pl. V: 1). The pit bottom was plastered with yellow clay and the antler was laid on the top if it. There are no information regarding the filling or signs of fire. During the excavation only two La Tène D fragment was found (*Poroszlai 2003*, 207).<sup>3</sup>

Partial antler burials are also not uncommon, however. This phenomenon can also be found on the previously mentioned Sopron-Krautacker (*Jerem 2003*, 545–549), Balatonőszöd-Temetői dűlő (*Horváth*

<sup>2</sup> The storage vessel fragment is 65 cm long, 23–27 cm wide and 1.6 cm thick. The antler is 83 cm long.

<sup>3</sup> Information and photography courtesy of Magdolna Vincze and Gabriella Németh, Matrica Museum, Százhalombatta. Findings will be published by Gabriella Németh in place of the late Ildikó Poroszlai.

2019, 119, 121) and Tihany-Óvár sites (Regenye 2004, 189, 190, fig. 7: 7). Several animal skulls found in Sopron-Krautacker was published by Erzsébet Jerem and points out a particular red deer frontal bone found in unit 228 (Jerem 2003, 549, footnote 13). László Bartosiewicz also points out similar findings from Sajópetri-Hosszú dűlő, which as of now the easternmost occurrence of the LaTène red deer findings (Bartosiewicz 2007, 292, 295).

Partial red deer antler findings were also recovered from Budapest III, Királyok útja (Fig. 1: 2), Békásmegyér, at the Danube riverbank (Pl. V: 2, 3).<sup>4</sup> They were found on two adjacent lots and in both cases the antlers were laid on the pit bottom plastered with clay. No signs of fire were found although in the case of unit 293/45 next to the orderly arranged antlers of a gigantic stag, the metacarpus of a cattle was laid in the pit, which indicates ritualistic nature and it cannot be associated with craft activities (Pl. V: 3).

Animals sacrificed during the funerals or animal bones found in sacrificial pits in the settlement (swine, dogs, horses, cattle, poultry, rarely red deer), occasional ritualistic burials of humans or human body parts is a known phenomenon in the Celtic cultural cycle.

A standalone find from Sopron-Krautacker is a partial red deer antler from a human burial (Jerem 2003, 545) However, during the excavation of Celtic sanctuaries in Pákozd-Keltaforrás (Petres 1972) and Roseldorf (Holzer 2008, 128, 131; 2015, 141, fig. 4) sites, among others, archaeologists registered signs of human sacrifices beside animal offerings.

Beside dwellings and farm buildings on the large settlement, archaeologists managed to isolate three simultaneously used cultic areas in Roseldorf-Sandberg site, Upper Austria. They found two larger and five smaller square shaped sanctuaries surrounded by sacrificial trenches, and a large sacrificial pit was also excavated.

These sanctuaries can be dated mostly to the early and middle La Tène period, and as it seems they were used in cults of gods connected to various jewellery, tools or weapons, or various species of animals. Based on the numerous horse bones and tacks excavated around the second large sanctuary (feature 30) the unit can be connected to the cult of the goddess Epona (Holzer 2014, 126–129).

Beside the human remains and large amount of animal bones excavated from the sacrificial trench of the first large sanctuary (feature 1), two really significant findings need to be mentioned. One is the druid crown made of iron straps and the second is

a red deer antler modified for ceremonial purposes by removing the skull, formed into a prism and drilled through in order to fasten it to the statue of the deer god (Pl. V: 8; Holzer 2009a, 175–178, fig. 4–11).

The first large sanctuary is reconstructed in the museum of Asparn an der Zaya in Lower Austria (Lauermann 2009), where the sanctuary statue that later became known as *Cernunnos* (Pl. VI: 3) was created based on the deer god depiction on the Gundestrup cauldron (Pl. VI: 2) and the wooden statues (Pl. VI: 4) found in a well excavated in Fellbach-Schmieden, Baden-Württemberg (Martin-Kilchner 2007, 36, 37, fig. 3).

Considering the pits with red deer antlers found in Szigetszentmiklós, as mentioned above, they are not rare in the Carpathian Basin. According to our current knowledge their easternmost occurrence can be found in Sajóperi (Szabó 2007) and in Čurug, Vojvodina (Trifunović 2014). It seems they cannot be found on the Great Hungarian Plains or Transylvania. László Bartosiewicz interprets the antler remains as bone processing and possible dietary supplements, namely the consumption of hunted animals, based on the bone findings from Sajópetri. The only exception is the skull fragment which he connects, although reluctantly, to the Celtic red deer cult, also present in Transdanubia (Bartosiewicz 2007, 295, 296, fig. 85).

The La Tène D ceramic assembly from the pits found in Szigetszentmiklós clearly dates the units and the settlement, and puts them in the corresponding cultural cycle, even so if the investigation of the surrounding area is ignored, although painted ceramic fragments sometimes marked with gemma-shaped seal, typical in oppidiums are present as stray finds. Description of the findings and position of the antlers have already been mentioned above. It's worth mentioning that on other, also unfortified settlements, fragments of late black painted and red-white striped ceramics are present likewise (Trifunović 2014, fig. 12).

The settlement in Szigetszentmiklós is open, rural and close to water (Hanny 2017; Maráz 2011), with an animal offering that is typical to the Celtic faith. Many parallels can be found in Hungary and also abroad (Horváth 2019, 125, 126). The most conspicuous in this assembly are the pits themselves. Their bottom is plastered with burnt pieces of daub, mixed with ash and charcoal remains, although none of the bottoms are burnt through and atypical to the ordinary garbage pits. The antlers are whole, although not in pairs. It's almost certain they were not put to

<sup>4</sup> Information and photography courtesy of Gábor Szilas, Budapest History Museum, Department of Prehistory and Migration Period.

the pits as waste from a workshop. Based on their sheer sizes they could very well be hunting trophies.

That's not the case now, however. The findings are so called sacrificial pits, the antlers are not trophies but votive gifts, together with the vessel fragments, to a celestial being known mostly from the western Celtic culture. The Hercuniates tribe, the Taurisci and the Boii are both mentioned in this regard (Szabó/Borhy 2015, 57, 58). Mostly they are believed to have Gaulic origin and connected to a certain god. It's original Celtic name is unknown, but based on Titus Livius, Tacitus and others, also on Latin inscriptions, such as the Nautae Parisiaci relief it's regarded as *Cernunnos* (Pl. VI: 7; Hatt 1980, 69, fig. 9).

It can be found on cauldrons, stelae and stone monuments, always the same but always a bit different. A typical attribute of its depictions is the posture, which usually is regarded as the 'Buddha sitting', but can be described as a figure sitting with crossed legs, raised hands and elbows. Jan Filip noticed this unusual sitting position in the 60s and connected the hoofed figure wearing a torques from Bouray with the 'deer god' (Pl. VI: 5; 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE; Baigl/Vernou 2001–2002, fig. 10; Filip 1963, 200).<sup>5</sup>

The figure either holds something in their hand or not, has beard or not, but always has headdress resembling antlers, sometimes combined with a helmet and always wears a torques which is the attribute of its godhood or lordship. This is sometimes in its right hand, sometimes on the antlers, sometimes around the neck.

Comparing the depictions this torques is twisted with a globular end, a massive metal object presumably made of gold. On the depictions it can appear with a boar, bull, dog, snake and red deer (Pl. VI: 2, 9; Gundestrup cauldron, Reims relief), as the 'lord of the beasts', the giver of fertility and wealth, a vegetation god with a natural connection to solstice, life and death (Hainzmann 2012; Pointreud 2014, 1–6). Fertility, good harvest, the death and revival and nature, however, often connected to the same god in other European cultures.

*Cernunnos* is already identified as Jupiter, Apollon or even Diana in the 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE. In the Hellenic world it is known as *Karnonos* or *Kernunnus*, the Dacians call it *Juppiter Cernenus*; these are showing the syncretism of the Graeco-Roman world (Guštin 2006, 125–127).

According to Miklós Szabó, the underworld can also be connected to it, based on the ram headed snakes in its left hand on the depictions (Gundestrup). These two-faced attributes should

be examined as whether the findings came from a settlement or a cemetery (Szabó 2005, 98).

Erzsébet Jerem connects these pits found in open settlements along rivers to fertility rites, be it in South England, France or Hungary. Although the systematic publication of Celtic religious beliefs in Hungary leaves much to be desired, some attempts were made to interpret the findings (e.g. Horváth 2019, 126, 127; Jerem 2003, 556). Foreign research tried the same as well (e.g. Holzer 2014, 129, fig. 11: 8; Martin-Kilcher 2007).

One would presume that rites and beliefs connected to *Cernunnos* were brought by romanized Gaul soldiers serving in Roman legions, originally coming from Gallia province, however, signs of the red deer cult already appearing in the La Tène C period. Moreover, it seems based on the findings from Western Hungary (Sopron-Krautacker) that a certain form of the cult is already present in the La Tène B2 period, and became demonstrably more popular in the La Tène D period (Jerem 2003, 545–548; Regénye 2004, 189; 190).

Beside the partial sacrificial pits only containing antlers, the tradition of burying the whole animal is also present (Horváth 2019). However, this tradition cannot be traced back to previous times and undoubtedly can be dated to the La Tène D period.

Taking these facts into account we can presume that the cult of *Cernunnos* that originates from Gallia merged with an already existing and similar system of beliefs here in the Carpathian Basin, which also regarded red deer and roe deer as symbols of fertility and rebirth.

There are no soldiers buried in Szigetszentmiklós, not even a cemetery. The settlement came into being roughly around the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE and exists even in the 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE. They practiced some kind of a fertility cult connected to their old beliefs and only the newcomers, the Romanized or Roman historiographers, travellers who has some knowledge of the Celtic peoples connects these rites with the multifunctional Gaul *Cernunnos*, sometimes during the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE. Most of the written sources and depictions can be dated to the Romanized period, mostly to the time of Traianus.

There is no zoological classification in place for the antlers found in Szigetszentmiklós, however, based on other excavations we know that specimens, mostly young stags were hunted down during fall (Bartosiewicz 2004, 203).

In agreement with Peter-Röcher we can safely state that there were no *Cernunnos* depictions on the sites cited above. Anthropomorphic depictions of

<sup>5</sup> A hoofed god wearing a torques can also be seen on a Gallo-Roman statue in Angoulême with a small deer resting on its lap (Musée des Beux-Arts, Verteuil-sur-Charente; see Baigl/Vernou 2001–2002).

the 'Lord of the beasts', the 'Deer god', the cycle of nature and seasons only appeared after the Roman conquest. Every depiction is from after the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE. The name itself is only known from Latin sources, from after the conquest (*Peter-Röcher 2012–2013, 195, 196*).

We have made the mistake trying to reconstruct beliefs of older times from newer depictions and sources. These have its own downsides but at the moment we have no better option.

We can also determine that the Celts, if we accept this name as an overall denomination, had no pantheon or even standard gods with strictly assigned roles. They believed in tribal gods (*Szabó 1971, 60*) which strongly connected families and clans. The deer or the ritualistic burial of antlers, the worship of a fertility and underworld god named after the Roman conquest is mainly present in the Gaul/Celtic area and we can safely say it spreads eastward from there.

However, we can also state if we take a look at the map that sacrificial deer findings are not always dependent on the presence of Western Celtic people.

They occur earlier in the Carpathian Basin and can be found from the La Tène B2 period. This suggests that red deer and antler burials are evidences of religious beliefs brought here by a certain group of people, but also results of old traditions relying on local principles.<sup>6</sup>

The already present populace of Celtic origin, which also connected the red deer or roe deer to fertility and cyclic renewal easily adopted and accepted the named god of Graeco-Roman practice.

The cult of the red deer, and the depiction of the entity with horns and hooves or sometimes with snakes can be traced from the early Bronze Age all through the Middle Ages to early modern history in various religious beliefs. This entity, which symbolises fertility and also the cycle of life and death through the seasonal rebirth of nature, went through a change of function by Romanisation and the spread of Christianity. It's possible that the traditional depiction of Evil in the European cultural cycle was heavily influenced by the depictions of the west Celtic *Cernunnos*, which seeped into the Christian iconography by Roman globalisation.

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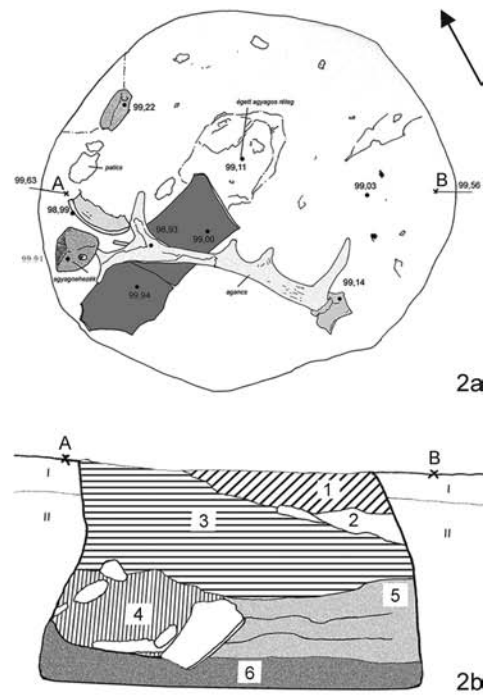
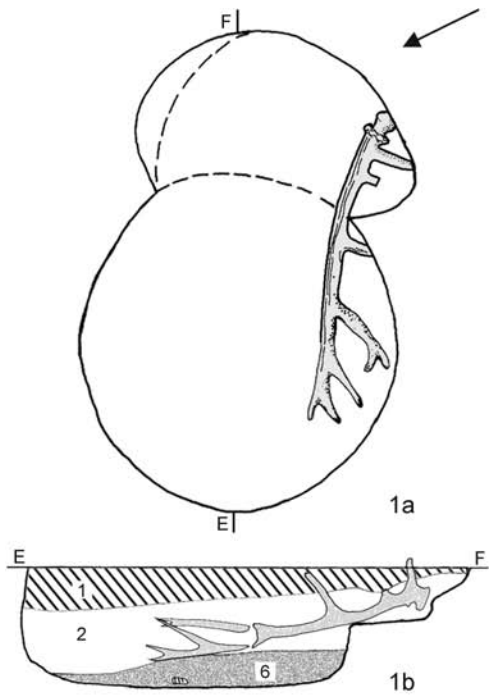
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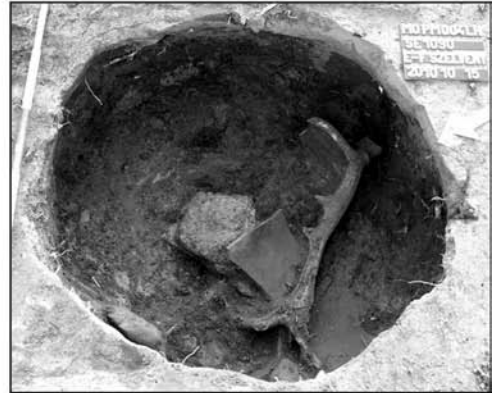
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1c



2c

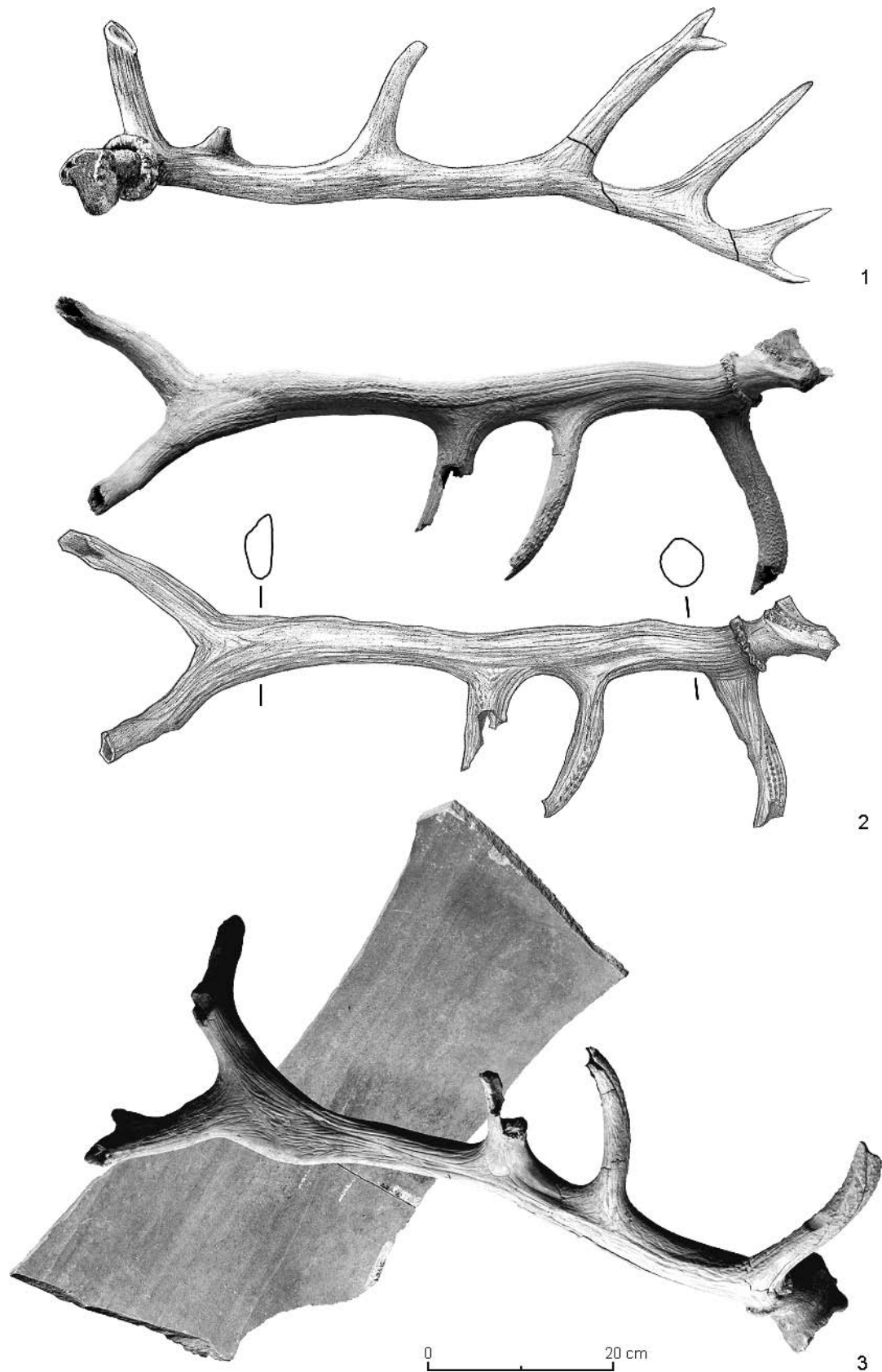


1d



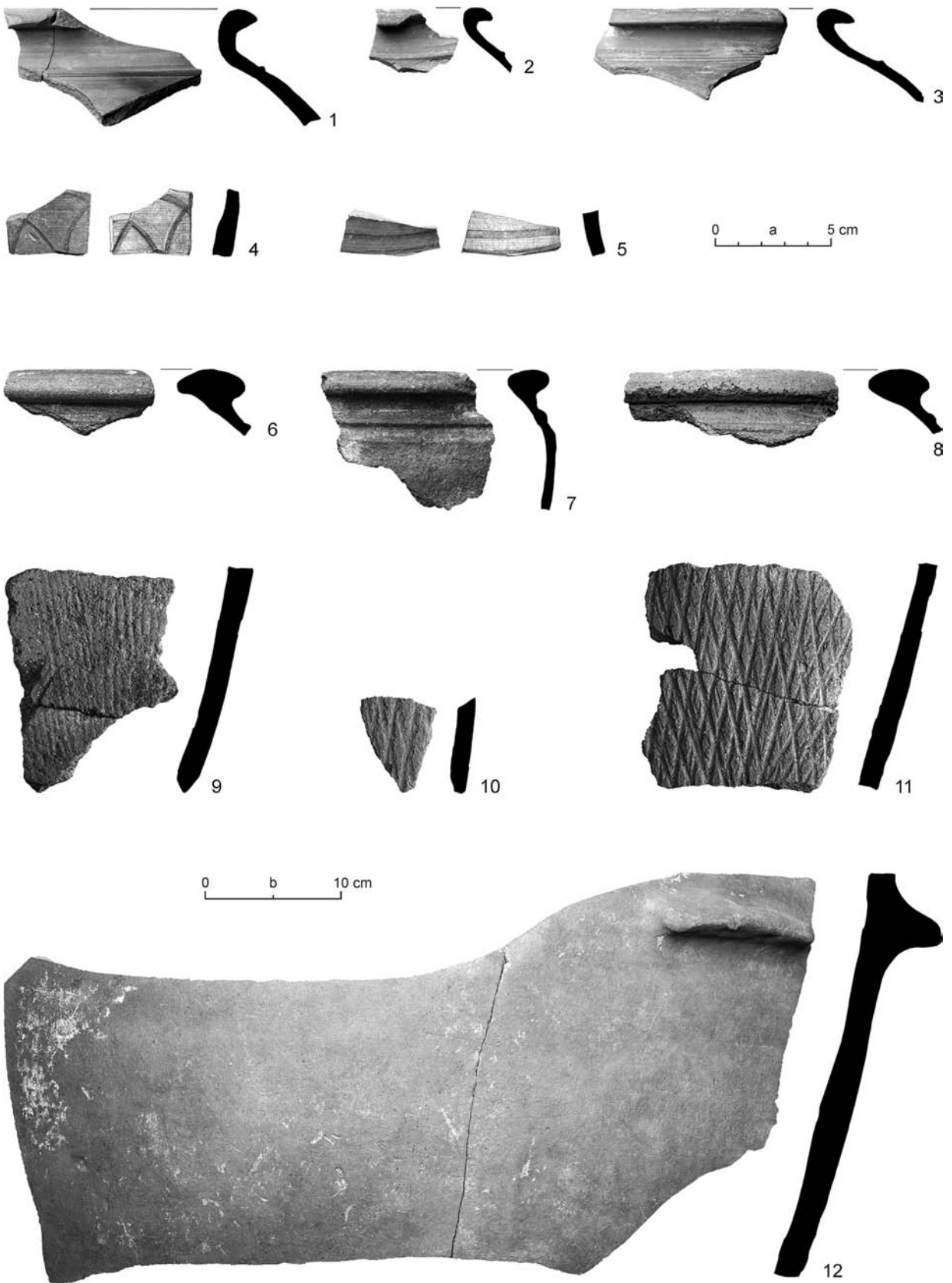
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Pl. I. Sacrificial pits with red deer antlers from Szigetszentmiklós-Üdülősor. 1 – structure 202–201/1989; 2 – structure 1090/2008 (drawings E. Hanny and G. Gyenes, photos A. Horváth M.).

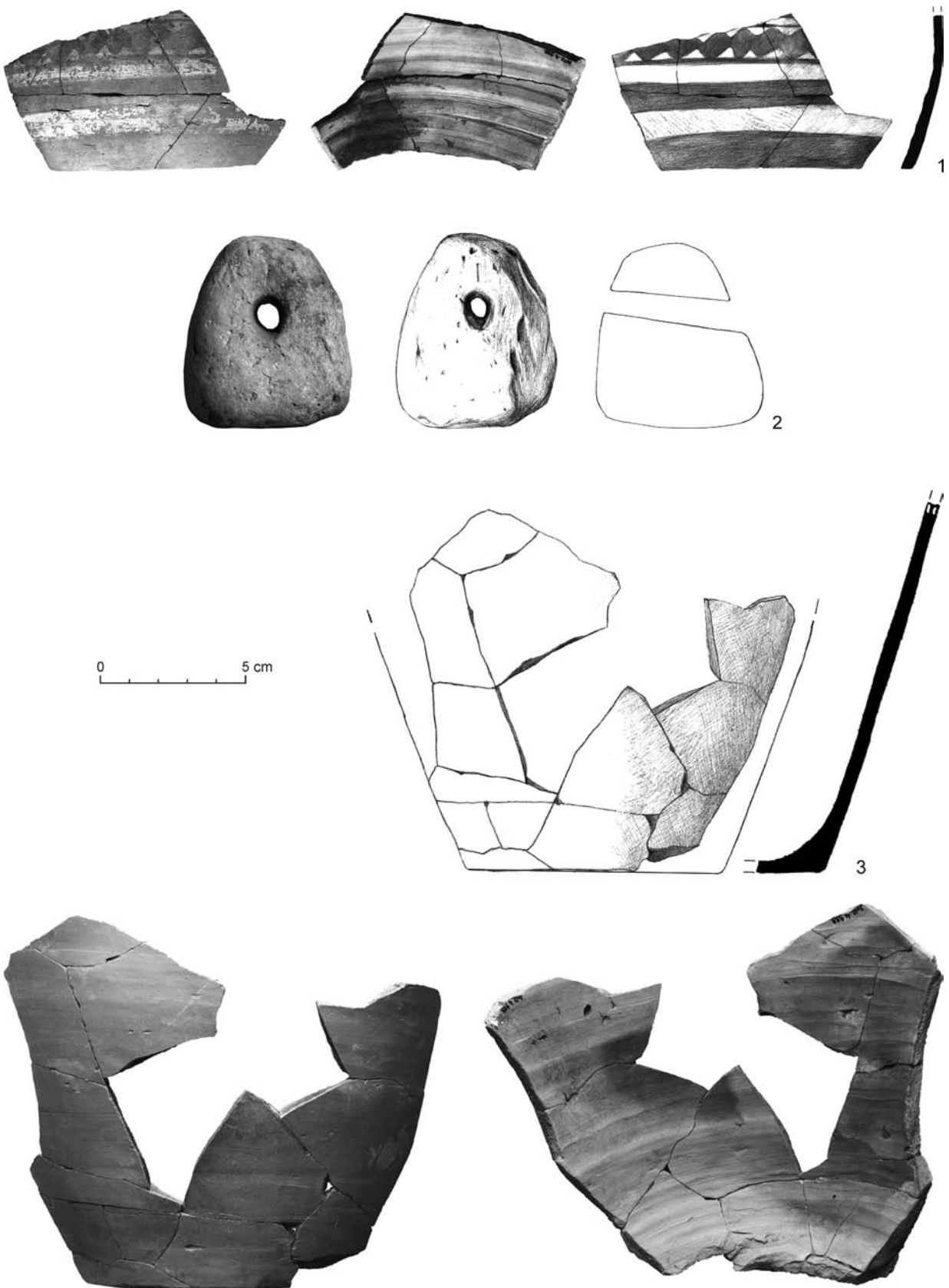


Pl. II. Red deer antlers from Szigetszentmiklós-Üdülősor. 1 – reconstruction of the red deer antler from the structure 202–201/1989; 2 – red deer antler from the structure 1090/2008; 3 – position of the antler and great storage vessel fragment in sacrificial pit 1090/2008 (drawings O. Kangyal, photos N. Szilágyi).

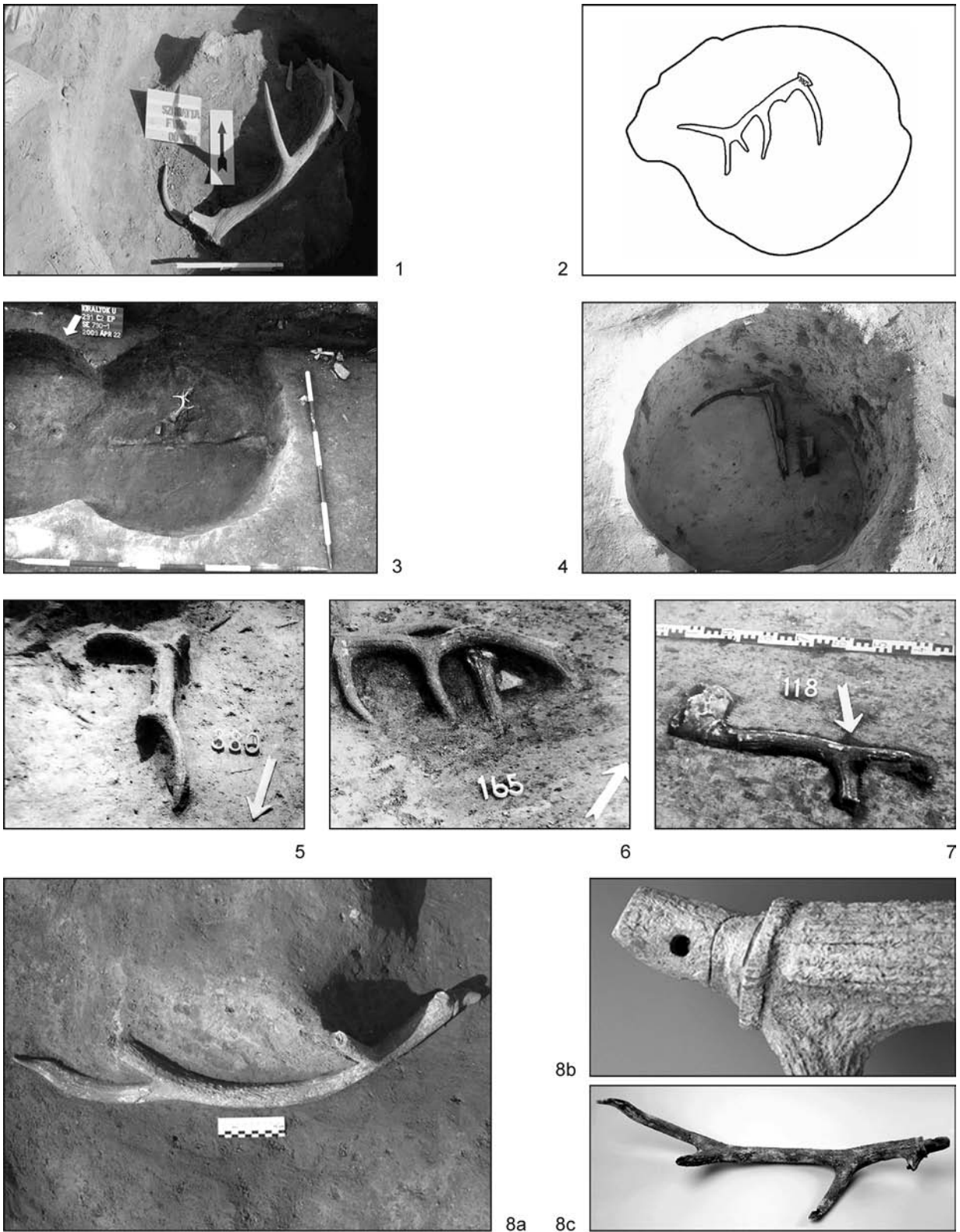




Pl. III. Finds from the structure 1090/2008 at Szigetszentmiklós-Üdülősor. 1-3 – rim fragments of wheel thrown vessels; 4, 5 – fragments of wheel thrown vessels with smoothed decoration; 6-11 – rim and side fragments of situlae with combed decoration; 12 – fragment of a great storage vessel (drawings O. Kangyal, photos N. Szilágyi). Scale: a – 1-11; b – 12.



Pl. IV. Finds from the structure 1090/2008 at Szigetszentmiklós-Üdülősor. 1 – fragments of red and red-white painted vessel; 2 – loom weight; 3 – remnant of a wheel thrown storage vessel (drawings O. Kangyal, photos N. Szilágyi).



Pl. V. Analogies to the Celtic red deer cult. 1 – Százhalombatta-Földvár (photo I. Poroszlai); 2 – Tihany-Óvár (after *Regenye 2004*); 3 – Budapest III, Királyok útja 291 (photo G. Szilas); 4 – Budapest III, Királyok útja 293 (photo G. Szilas); 5–7 – Sopron-Krautacker (after *Jerem 2003*); artificially processed, skull-proof stag red deer antler rod as part of a *Cernunnos* statue from the large sanctuary at Roseldorf, feature 1, cult district 1: a – appearance of the red deer antler (*Holzer 2009a*, 117. fig. 8.), b – carved rosette and end pin with drilled hole (*Holzer 2009b*, 66, fig. A: 127, 128.), c – carved and drilled red deer antler (*Holzer 2014*, 130, fig. 11: 8).



1



2



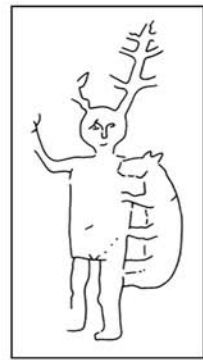
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Pl. VI. Depictions of *Cernunnos*. 1 – Valcamonica, rock carving (after *Hatt 1980*); 2 – the deer god on the Gundestrup cauldron (after *Peter-Röcher 2013*); 3 – Roseldorf, reconstruction of the shrine statue (after *Lauermann 2009*); 4 – Fellbach-Schmiden, carved wood red deer statues (after *Martin-Kilchner 2007*); 5 – Bouray, statue in ‘Buddha sitting’ (after *Filip 1966*); 6 – Bela Krajina, Gallo-Roman gravestone (after *Guštin 2006*); 7 – Paris, the ‘Nautae Parisiaci’ relief (after *Hatt 1980*); 8 – Verteuil-sur-Charente, headless statue of *Cernunnos* with a red deer on his lap (after *Baigl-Vernou 2002*); 9 – Reims, *Cernunnos* Celtic horned god Gallo-Roman relief (after *Bober 1951*).