

EXPEDITIONS

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH1941137-1160>

Scientific Report

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INVESTIGATIONS AT THE DARGAVS BURIAL GROUND IN PRIGORODNYI DISTRICT OF NORTH OSSETIA-ALANIA IN 2019

Abstract. The paper discusses the findings from the 2019 excavation conducted by the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences at the Dargavs catacomb burial ground, a reference site associated with the medieval Alan culture. The research unveiled a two-level, three-chamber catacomb designated as No. 97 and 98, initially misinterpreted as two individual catacombs. The catacomb was situated in the central part of the burial ground. The catacomb's inventory dates back to the second half of the 8th – mid-9th century. Interestingly, the multi-level catacombs, such as the one discovered, have not been documented in the archaeological records of this burial ground or in synchronous sites within the mountainous regions, including Chmi, Dagom, and others. The primary objective of this study is to introduce the collected materials and findings concerning the analysis of funerary practices and associated artifacts into the scholarly discourse. Standard archaeological research methods were employed in the execution of this work. The analysis of the burial complexes relied on the comparative typological method, along with a detailed examination of the stratigraphy and planigraphy of the excavated section. The proposed dating is confirmed by the results of radiocarbon dating, specifically from a sample collected from chamber No. 97. Within the burial complex's chambers, both individual (specifically in catacomb No. 97) and collective burials (chambers 1 and 2 of catacomb No. 98) were revealed. The buried were accompanied by a diverse set of grave goods, including jewelry, amulets, mirrors, fibulae, an axe, a glass cup, and more. These artifact categories exhibit significant parallels with findings from sites associated with the Alan and nearest cultures of the Central Caucasus and the Middle Don. Through a comprehensive analysis, it was determined that chamber 1 of catacomb No. 98 was constructed first, followed by chamber 2 and catacomb No. 98. This study serves as a vital supplement to previously released publications on the results of natural science research, encompassing anthropological, paleozoological, palynological, and radiocarbon dating studies of catacomb materials.

Keywords: Central Caucasus; Dargavs burial ground; Alan culture; catacomb; 8-9th century.

For citation: Uspensky P.S., Albegova (Tsarikaeva) Z.H.-M. Investigations at the Dargavs Burial Ground in Prigorodnyi District of North Ossetia-Alania in 2019. *History, Archeology and Ethnography of the Caucasus*. 2023. Vol. 19. N.4. P. 1137-1160. doi.org/10.32653/CH1941137-1160

ЭКСПЕДИЦИИ

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH1941137-1160>



Научный отчет

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ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ ДАРГАВСКОГО МОГИЛЬНИКА В ПРИГОРОДНОМ РАЙОНЕ РЕСПУБЛИКИ СЕВЕРНАЯ ОСЕТИЯ-АЛАНИЯ В 2019 Г.

Аннотация. Статья посвящена результатам раскопок экспедиции Института археологии РАН на территории одного из опорных памятников средневековой аланской культуры – Даргавского катакомбного могильника в 2019 г. В ходе исследований была выявлена двухуровневая, трехкамерная катакомба №№ 97, 98, первоначально принятая за две катакомбы. Катакомба находилась в центральной части могильника. Ее инвентарь является показательным для второй половины VIII – середины IX в. Многоуровневые катакомбы ранее не встречались в материалах могильника, а также синхронных памятниках горной зоны, таких как Чми, Дагом и других. Цель работы – введение в научный оборот полученных материалов, результатов анализа погребального обряда и инвентаря. В работе использовались стандартные методы археологического исследования. Анализ комплексов основывался на сравнительно-типологическом методе, изучении стратиграфии и планиграфии раскопа. Предлагаемая датировка подтверждается результатами радиоуглеродного датирования одного из образцов из камеры № 97. В камерах погребального комплекса были выявлены индивидуальное («катакомба» № 97) и коллективные захоронения (камеры 1 и 2 «катакомбы» № 98). Погребенные сопровождалась разнообразным инвентарем: украшения, амулеты, зеркала, фибулы, топор, стеклянный стакан и др. Эти категории вещей находят широкие аналогии в памятниках аланской и смежных культур Центрального Кавказа и Среднего Дона. В результате комплексного анализа установлено, что, первой была сооружена камера 1 «катакомбы» № 98, а затем камера 2 и «катакомба» № 98. Публикуемая работа является необходимым дополнением для ранее вышедших публикаций результатов естественнонаучных исследований (антропологического, палеозоологического, палинологического, радиоуглеродного) материалов катакомбы и, в свою очередь, учитывает эти результаты.

Ключевые слова: Центральный Кавказ; Даргавский могильник; аланская культура; катакомба; VIII–IX вв.

Для цитирования: Успенский П.С., Албегова (Царикаева) З.Х.-М. Исследования Даргавского могильника в Пригородном районе Республики Северная Осетия-Алания // История, археология и этнография Кавказа. 2023. Т. 19. № 4. С. 1137-1160. doi.org/10.32653/CH1941137-1160

The Dargavs catacomb burial ground rightfully holds significance as a reference necropolis associated with the Alan culture of the 7th to 13th centuries. Situated in the mountainous zone of the Central Caucasus within the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, it lies to the north of the village of Dargavs, on the left bank of the river Midagrabindon (a tributary of the Gizeldon river), positioned at the base of Mount Tbaukhoh and approximately 1470 meters above sea level. The necropolis extends along a gentle slope, tapering eastward at the tip of one of its spurs (Fig. 1, 1, 2). It is plausible that the necropolis originated as early as the second half of the 6th century. During the 6th – 7th centuries, the Alans, carriers of the Alan culture in Central Ciscaucasia, gradually moved from the lowland to the adjacent mountains. Experts attribute this migration to several factors, such as climate change towards warming and aridity, which led to the optimization of the climate in the mountains, and epidemics [1; 5; 6, p. 54–61; 7; 9, p. 123], development of new metal deposits for developing crafts [12, p. 234].

The Dargavs burial ground persisted for approximately 600 years, gradually expanding over time to encompass an area of around 40 hectares.

Since 1993, the expedition led by R.G. Dzattiaty was conducting comprehensive exploration of the site. By 2019, the expedition had successfully excavated numerous single-chamber and multi-chamber catacombs, totaling 96 chambers, along with individual horse burials, cists, and tombs. A substantial portion of the findings has been documented and published [2]. An analysis of the chronology of the published complexes indicates that 42% of them are dated to the second half of the 8th–9th centuries. This timeframe is suggested as a period corresponding to a demographic surge in the Dargavs Basin [2; 9, p. 124].

In 2019, the expedition of the Institute of Archaeology of RAS, led by the authors of this article, conducted excavations that included the study of a three-chamber, two-level catacomb, with samples collected for natural science analyses. While exploring the burial ground, a discovery was made – a heraldic buckle (Fig. 1, 3). Although the detailed publication of the studied complexes is pending, they have already been partially covered in scientific literature, incorporating results from various natural science studies [4; 8; 9, p. 117, 139; 10; 11].

The 2019 trench was excavated in the central section of the burial ground, measuring 4×6 m with a depth of approximately 0.8 m. The stratigraphy on the walls revealed several layers: a turf layer with a thickness of 2–8 cm, succeeded by humified loam incorporating crushed stone and gravel, with a thickness of around 38–40 cm. Beneath this layer, in certain areas, a stratum of sandy loam with crushed marlstone, up to 10 cm thick, was identified. The origin of the sandy loam layer is linked either to ejected debris during the construction of the catacombs, situated on the paleosurface, or to slope processes (Fig. 2). Drawing conclusions about the paleosurface in a complex stratigraphic setting, particularly when studying only a limited area, poses challenges. The manifestation of the layer representing soil ejection during catacomb construction or marl slides is weakly expressed and not consistent on all walls.

At a depth of 40 cm from the daylight surface (-40 cm from R0 in section A-A1 in Fig. 2, 2), natural soil in the area was identified as dense brown loam incorporating marl deposits. From this level, an amorphous light spot of the filling in the entrance pit, was recorded. The section revealed that the amorphous nature of the spot was linked to the removal of soil (possibly ancient turf) across a broader area than the entrance pit, reaching a depth of 17

cm. Only through excavation of the natural soil up to a depth of 40 cm and extending the excavation by 2 m to the west, was it possible to fully expose a distinct light spot filling the entrance pit (Fig. 2, 1). Further up the slope, on the western side of the excavated section, the light spot was recorded from a level of -58 cm, and lower along the slope, specifically in its central part, from a level of -100 cm (Fig. 2, 1; 3). The filling of the pit comprised a mixture of loams with marl debris.

The entrance pit in the upper part of the slope was marked by a grave structure, once composed of several boulders. However, only the lower stone remained *in situ* (Fig. 2, 1; 3, 2). Positioned atop this stone and in its vicinity were two additional smaller stones, arranged without a discernible pattern. Notably, these stones were situated above the entrance hole of chamber No. 1 of catacomb No. 98.

The numbering of the identified burial structures adhered to the system introduced by R.G. Dzattiaty. Initially, during the start of fieldwork, it appeared that the examined catacombs constituted distinct burial structures – specifically, that the two-chamber catacomb No. 98 was situated above the single-chamber catacomb No. 97. However, a remarkably precise alignment of their entrance pits was noted. During the construction of a deeper chamber, the prior entrance pit was fully exposed and subsequently covered to facilitate the creation of a new chamber. The axis of the later recessed part of the entrance pit deviated slightly northward from the axis of the original pit. Notably, the later chamber of catacomb No. 97 was positioned beneath the entrance to chamber No. 1 of catacomb No. 98, displaced to the east to avoid disruption to the latter (Fig. 3).

These observations have led to the conclusion that the excavated structure is a single multi-chamber and multi-level catacomb, constructed by a relative group of people, likely an extended family, in at least three distinct stages. Since these stages are structurally distinguished, we will characterize the catacomb as two separate structures – a one-chamber and a two-chamber catacomb – aligning with the field numbering system.

Catacomb No. 97 (Fig. 3–6)

The shared entrance pit for catacombs No. 97 and 98 exhibits a subtrapezoidal shape. The total length of the exposed entrance pit along the upper level measures 274 cm.

The reconstructed length of the pit section pertaining to catacomb No. 97 is 162 cm at the top and 148 cm at the bottom. The depth from the paleosurface to the bottom of the entrance pit at the entrance hole of chamber No. 97 is -271 cm. Notably, the axis of the pit in the lower part shifts northward relative to the original bottom of the pit and its upper contour. The width of the pit at the rear wall is 45 cm. In the rear wall of the entrance pit, two recesses were identified, presumably steps. The bottom of the pit inclines toward burial chamber No. 97, with a difference of 25 cm. The depth of the pit in the eastern part is -286 cm from RO, and at the entrance hole, it is -311 cm from RO (Fig. 3).

The entrance hole leading into the burial chamber is arch-shaped and sealed with a subtrapezoidal slate slab measuring 72×62 cm. The dimensions of the entrance hole are as follows: height – 50 cm, maximum width – 50 cm, bottom width – 38 cm. The threshold of the entrance hole is positioned at a level of -299 cm from RO, situated 12 cm above the bottom of the entrance pit and 71 cm above the floor of the chamber. The chamber itself is located 59 cm below the level of the entrance pit.

The chamber is oval in shape, with its long axis oriented along the north-south line. Its measures 196×140 cm. The ceiling has partially collapsed, and the walls are nearly vertical, with a preserved height of 93 cm. The chamber floor is horizontal, situated at a level of -370/-371 cm from RO. Marks of the tools used in the chamber's construction are evident on the walls, characterized by rough, incised vertical grooves (Fig. 3, 3).

At the floor of the burial chamber, a solitary interment was uncovered, attributed to a woman below the age of 35 [8, p. 126] (Fig. 4, 1). The skeleton was positioned at the far (western) wall of the chamber extended on its back, with the skull oriented towards the south. The skeletal remains were poorly preserved, with the bones of the upper part of the body exhibiting considerable decay, while those of the lower part were in relatively better condition. The right arm was slightly bent at the elbow, with the hand resting on the right ilium and the upper part of the femur. The left arm also showed a similar bent position at the elbow, and fragments of finger bones, along with the distal end of the radius bones, were found in the lumbar area.

Adjacent to the southern wall of the chamber, to the right of the skull, lay a small wooden box No. 1 (Fig. 4, 1, 2). Inside the box were a walnut shell No. 18 (Fig. 5, 12) and a bronze mirror encased in leather No. 23 (Fig. 5, 10, 11).

On either side of the skull, two earrings with pendants were discovered, labeled as Nos. 13 and 22 (Fig. 5, 1, 2). A spot of leather decay was identified in the neck area, possibly remnants of a collar. Dark organic decay was also found atop the skull, likely remnants of a leather headdress (Fig. 4, 1).

On the left side of the chest lay sleigh bell No. 3 (Fig. 4, 6), while another bronze sleigh bell No. 2 (Fig. 4, 3) was found on the right side.

On the fingers of the left hand, three signet rings Nos. 15–17 were discovered, with two presumably on the middle finger and one on the ring finger (Fig. 5, 6–8).

At the wrist of the right hand, a cluster of beads No. 6 was uncovered, likely used as a bracelet (Fig. 4, 7–11). To the right of the wrist, a bronze wheel-shaped amulet No. 7 was discovered within the remains of a leather case (Fig. 5, 9). On the phalanx of one of the fingers of the right hand, potentially the middle or ring finger, three bronze signet rings Nos. 8, 9, 12 were identified (Fig. 5, 3–5). In the area of the articulation of the left femur with the pelvis, a bead No. 21 was found (Fig. 5, 13).

On the lumbar area along the right arm, with a slight extension under the radius bone, fragments and decay of a leather product, possibly a bag or a section of outwear, were found. The spot left by the item was oblong, measuring 27×17 cm. Beneath the decay (within a presumed bag or secured on a belt beneath outwear), several items were discovered: a knife in a wooden sheath with a bronze plaque No. 4, (Fig. 4, 4), a cluster of beads and seed beads No. 19, (Fig. 6). Associated with the leather decay spot were fragments of a miniature leather pouch (tobacco-pouch) No. 11, containing plant remnants (Fig. 5, 15) [4, p. 93]; fragments of two chamois horns¹ secured with bronze mount No. 10 (Fig. 5, 14), two bronze sleigh bells Nos. 5 and 20 (Fig. 4, 5; 5, 6), as well as two beads No. 14, made from small cattle excrement (Fig. 5, 17) [4, p. 93].

1. Here and further, paleozoological determinations of chamois horns were made by E.E. Antipina (Laboratory of Natural Science Methods in Archeology, Institute of Archaeology, RAS) [11].

Organic decay, possibly leather or fabric, covered the torso area, including the arms and hands, with all fragments of decay linked to the clothing of the deceased individual. Sheep wool² preserved on the decayed leather product and on the organic bead, suggesting its origin from outerwear.

The bones of the feet were arranged in a compact manner, and a fragment of leather was preserved on top of the heel bone of the left foot. Fragments of leather decay were also identified on the shins, likely remnants of footwear (Fig. 4, 1).

Grave goods description³

1. A fragment of a small rectangular linden⁴ box, composed of 8 parallel planks. One edge is relatively well-preserved; on the inside along this edge, there is a rabbet measuring 0.9 cm wide. The dimensions of the detail are 9.5×8.3 cm, and the thickness of the edge with the rabbet is 0.6 cm. The base thickness is 0.8–0.9 cm.

2. A sleigh bell, stamped and round, crafted from low-grade silver with a transverse diameter of 23 mm. The lower half is fragmented. Inside the bell, there were 2 irregularly shaped fragments of iron (?) slag serving as rattle elements. In the upper part of the bell, there is a hole through which a hanging loop made of oval wire is attached, with a maximum diameter of 4 mm.

3. A bronze sleigh bell made from low-grade silver, composed of two halves with a single lower slit and a loop for hanging. The transverse diameter is 20 mm.

4. An iron knife in a wooden sheath, featuring a bronze plaque covering one side. The bronze plaque is affixed to the top of the sheath with a bronze mount, and the sheath is equipped with a bronze tip having a flat bottom. The cross-section and shape of the blade are unclear. The tang is rectangular in shape with a corresponding rectangular cross-section. At the upper part of the tang, a bronze mount was originally positioned.

5. A sleigh bell made of bronze or low-grade silver, round in shape, featuring a loop for hanging and composed of two halves. The transverse diameter is 20 mm. Inside the bell, there was a rattle element – an irregularly shaped piece of slag. A detail, likely for attaching the bell to clothing, consisting of two circles crimped together and fastened with a jumper forming a loop, was affixed to the body. The bell loop and parts are intertwined with thread or braid.

6. A bead bracelet (5 pcs.) with glass beads of various shapes.

7. A wheel-shaped amulet with four rims and a square eye. Diameter is 5.5 cm.

8. A bronze signet ring with a rectangular face and a glass insert. The shank is false-twisted, 1.7 cm in diameter.

9. A cast bronze signet ring with a rectangular face. The diameter of the shank is 2.0 cm.

10. Two fragments of a chamois horn with a bronze mount made of a flat plate.

11. A fragment of a leather bag (tobacco pouch) with fabric tape edging the seams. It contained plant remains, including herbs, leaves, thin branches, or roots in pieces, as well as flour or some sort of grain.

2. Determined by Dr. of Biological Science O. F. Chernova (Severtsov Institute of Problems of Ecology and Evolution, RAS) [4, p. 99].

3. Numeration here and further corresponds to the numeration given in the description of the chamber and burial ground plan.

4. Wood species is determined by L.N. Solovyova (Laboratory of Natural Science Methods in Archeology, Institute of Archaeology, RAS)

12. A cast bronze signet ring with a rectangular face. The diameter of the shank is 1.9 cm.
13. A composite earring with an oval hoop and a pendant in the form of a column composed of 4 balls made of low-grade silver and cylindrical metal beads threaded on a rod. The rod is secured between two disks threaded on the earring hoop. The hoop's height is 1.69 cm, ball diameter is 0.7 cm, the earring height is approx. 5.3 cm.
14. Beads made from small cattle excrement, round in shape with a hole. Found in cluster No. 19.
15. A cast solid bronze signet ring. The shank is flattened, 2.2 mm wide. The face is oblong. The shank is approximately 1.6 cm in diameter.
16. A cast solid bronze signet ring with a round, convex smooth face. The shank is flat in cross-section, and the diameter of the shank is 2.3 cm.
17. A cast solid signet ring with a square convex face. An oblique cross is pressed onto the face. The shank is flat in cross-section, and the diameter of the shank is 2.0 cm.
18. Walnut shell.
19. A cluster of beads and seed beads (likely originally threaded together in a bag), totaling 168 pieces. They come in various shapes and colors, made from glass (Fig. 6, 2–15, 16–27), carnelian (Fig. 6, 16), with an inclusion of a cowrie shell (Fig. 6, 1).
20. A sleigh bell, stamped from low-grade silver, round, featuring a loop for hanging, with a transverse diameter of 20 mm. In the lower half, there is a cross-shaped slit (2 specimens) (Fig. 5, 6).
21. A blue eye bead made from translucent glass. The eyes are made from blue translucent glass with white contours.
22. An earring similar to earring No. 13.
23. A bronze mirror with a central loop and fragments of a leather case. It is adorned with a concentric circle dividing the mirror backside into two zones. The outer zone contains radial lines, while the inner zone features relief dots. Diameter is 53 mm. The mirror case is crafted from leather with a cut-out design.

Catacomb No. 98 (Fig. 3, 7–10)

The catacomb was initially classified as a two-chamber catacomb. Chamber No. 1 was situated at the western end of the entrance pit, perpendicular to it, while chamber No. 2 was positioned at the southern wall of the entrance pit, parallel to the latter.

The reconstructed length of the entrance pit is approximately 225 cm. The width of the entrance pit at the rear wall cannot be determined but is estimated to be no less than 35 cm. The width of the entrance hole in chamber No. 1 from the floor is 57 cm, and the width of the entrance hole in chamber No. 2 is around 65 cm. The depth at the rear wall cannot be determined since it intersected with the entrance pit of catacomb No. 97 in this spot. The depth at the entrance hole of chamber No. 1 is -255 cm from RO, and the depth at the entrance hole in chamber No. 2 cannot be determined.

In the western part of the entrance pit, a shale slab of chamber No. 1 was identified, while in the central part of the southern wall, there was a slab covering the entrance hole to chamber No. 2.

Chamber No. 1 (Fig. 7, 1). The entrance hole is arched and is covered with a slate slab measuring 65×63 cm. The dimensions of the entrance hole are as follows: height – 88 cm,

width – 58 cm. Positioned 11 cm above the floor of the entrance pit, the entrance hole is situated 22 cm above the floor of the chamber. The chamber is located 13 cm below the level of the entrance pit near the entrance hole.

The chamber exhibits an irregular shape in plan, close to round, with its length axis oriented along the EW line. The chamber measures 133×122 cm. The ceiling is partially collapsed, and its shape cannot be determined. The preserved walls of the ceiling smoothly curve upward. The preserved height is approximately 72 cm. The floor of the chamber is horizontal, with a slight decrease from SW to NE (Fig. 3, 2).

Charcoal was observed in the filling of the chamber, with a notable accumulation of oak coals found in the southern part of the chamber.

The burial in this chamber included four adults and one child, approximately 7 years old [8, p. 126–128]. The bones belonging to the earliest buried individuals were displaced to the western wall of the chamber during the second burial of individual No. 1. Small bone fragments, remnants of two craniums, a crushed jaw (possibly male, aged 25–35 years), and scattered teeth (from individuals under 30 years old and 20–35 years old) were preserved. The anatomical order of the bones of individual No. 1 (a woman aged 40–49 years) was also partially disturbed, likely due to natural processes.

The relatively well-preserved skull of individual No. 1, maintaining articulation with the upper cervical vertebrae, and several bones of the foot (possibly the calcaneus, metatarsal bones, and toes) were positioned closer to the exit. With the tip facing the entrance hole lay iron knife No. 7 (Fig. 8, 1), and bead No. 35 was uncovered in the front part of the skull (Fig. 9, 62).

Individual No. 1, identified as a woman, was the last to be interred in the chamber, evident by her placement atop the partially displaced remains of the two previous skeletons. The skull is shifted towards the entrance hole, possibly due to the decomposition of soft tissues. Despite this, the skull was well-preserved. Some cervical vertebrae remained *in situ* near the southern wall. Based on the preserved parts of the skeleton, the woman was laid in a flexed position on her left side, with her head to the left of the entrance hole. The left hand lay in front of the torso, and the right hand, indicated by the discovery of ring No. 13 (Fig. 7, 8), was positioned on the right ilium.

Most of the artifacts found near individual No. 1 were discovered amid bone decay, making it challenging to definitively associate them with a specific buried person. Cluster No. 1 (comprising beads, seed beads, and a bronze button) was situated among poorly preserved bones of the woman's chest (Fig. 9, 1–28), and fragments of bronze rings No. 32 were also uncovered in this area (Fig. 7, 10–13). To the right of the cervical vertebrae, fragments of earring No. 2 (Fig. 7, 2) were found, while the second earring (No. 3) lay to the WNW, to the left of the cervical vertebrae (Fig. 7, 3). In the NE part of bead cluster No. 1, fragments of bronze items No. 32 were discovered (Fig. 7, 10–13). A bronze bracelet, No. 11, was found near the southern wall (Fig. 8, 10).

At the proximal end of the right femur, the following artifacts were discovered: a fragment of a chain-mail item No. 8 (Fig. 8, 12), cluster of beads No. 9 (Fig. 9, 29–37), bronze sleigh bell No. 10 with a fragment of fabric inside (Fig. 7, 18, 19), and bronze plate or clasp No. 14 (Fig. 7, 4). Between the right femur and tibia, two iron knives, Nos. 17 (Fig. 8, 3) and 18 (Fig. 8, 2), were found. At the elbow of the left hand lay fibula No. 12 (Fig. 7, 17). Iron staple with

a chamois horn No. 27 (Fig. 7, 16), strung on it, cluster of beads No. 28 (Fig. 9, 48, 49), and iron knife No. 29 (Fig. 8, 4) were all discovered at the wrist of the left hand.

In the central part of the chamber, within the accumulation of bone decay, the following items were discovered: bronze pincers No. 26 (Fig. 7, 9), an item made of chamois horn No. 30 (Fig. 8, 9), and beads No. 34 (Fig. 9, 56–61).

In the northern part of the chamber, near the tibia of one of the buried individuals, there was iron knife No. 38 (Fig. 8, 6).

As the skeletons of earlier burials were partially covered and displaced during the secondary burial, it was not possible to separate them and determine the position of each. The decay of two skulls and the lower jaw was recorded at the western wall of the chamber. The long leg bones were concentrated in the northern part of the chamber. Presumably, all the buried individuals were laid to the left, with their heads opposite the entrance hole and their skulls oriented towards the southern sector.

At the western wall of the chamber, near the remains of the cranium and jaw, the following items were uncovered: glass cup No. 5 (Fig. 8, 7), iron axe No. 6 (Fig. 8, 8), beads (No. 4, 21, 22) (Fig. 9, 47, 40, 41) and their clusters (Nos. 19, 24) (Fig. 9, 38–39, 42–46), and bronze object No. 23 (Fig. 7, 6). In the central and southwestern sectors of the chamber, fragments of a spiral torque (Nos. 20, 25) (Fig. 8, 11) and earrings, No. 15 (Fig. 7, 3a), were found.

The remaining artifacts were discovered during the soil clearing in the southern part (fragments of signet ring No. 36) (Fig. 7, 7), in the central part of the chamber (cluster of beads No. 33) (Fig. 9, 50–55), and in the western part of the chamber (fragment of bronze item No. 31, buckle No. 37) (Fig. 7, 7, 15).

Grave goods description

1. A cluster of beads and seed beads, totaling 71 pieces, of various shapes and colors, including amber (Fig. 9, 1, 2), carnelian (Fig. 9, 13, 21), and glass (Fig. 9, 3–12, 14–20, 22–26, 28). Additionally, a round cast bronze button with an elongated teardrop-shaped shank was found in the cluster. The height with the shank is 16.7 mm, and the button height is 8 mm, with a diameter of 10.3 mm.

2. A composite bronze earring, featuring an oval hoop with an oblong metal bead soldered on top. The pendant is composed of hollow balls threaded on wire, attached to the hoop between two disks. The hoop's height is 19.5 mm, and the preserved ball's diameter is 9 mm. The height of the three-ball pendant is 26 mm.

3. An earring pendant made of hollow balls, consisting of no fewer than 5 balls. The diameter of the balls is 0.6 cm, and the diameter of the beads is 0.35 cm.

4. A disc-shaped eye bead made of dark translucent glass with red eyes and white contours of translucent glass. External wide contours of yellow transparent glass surround them.

5. A tulip-shaped cup made from light green transparent glass. At the bottom of the cup, there are regular row rhombic impressions, forming a relief oblique grid. The bottom has embossed "rays" extending from the center to the edges. The central part of the bottom is concave into the vessel. Height – 7.5 cm, rim diameter – 8.2 cm.

6. An iron axe, double-bladed. The blades are trapezoidal, with one slightly shorter than the other. The cross-section of the blades is rectangular.

7. An iron tanged knife, with the back of the blade almost straight. The tang is wedge-shaped. A small ledge is present on the side of the blade at the transition to the tang. The cross-section of the blade is wedge-shaped, and the tang is oval.

8. An iron object (a fragment of a chain-mail item). The rings have a diameter of 11.5, and the cross-section of each ring is approximately 2 mm.

9. A cluster of beads, 23 pieces in total, of different shapes and colors, made of amber (Fig. 9, 29) and glass (Fig. 9, 30–37).

10. A bronze sleigh bell, spherical, with a loop for hanging and a rattle element inside. Diameter of the bell – 2.2 cm.

11. A bronze bracelet made of wire, with overlapping terminals. The terminals have holes and are decorated with oblique notches that intersect and form rhombs. The cross-section is round. Bracelet diameter – 5.2 cm. Wire diameter – 0.3 cm.

12. T-shaped bronze hinged fibula with three buttons on the head and a scroll on the stem. The maximum backrest deflection is shifted towards the leg. Iron needle. The back is ornamented. The total length of the fibula is 7.2 cm.

13. A bronze oval ring. The shank is flat.

14. A bronze belt plaque. The base of the plaque is eight-shaped with a protruding prong in the central, narrow part. Length – 21 mm, width – 12 mm.

15. A fragment of an earring hoop with two disks strung on it, between which a pendant is usually attached.

16. A rectangular-frame plateless bimetallic buckle. Two protrusions on the frame, extending the long sides of the frame and serving to secure the belt. The prong is iron and does not protrude beyond the frame. Dimensions: 2.9x1.9 cm.

17. An iron knife, with fragments of a wooden sheath made of linden. The exact shape of the knife cannot be restored. The length of the fragments is 9.5 cm (blade with tang) and 5.3 cm (knife tip). The width of the blade at the break point is 1.2 cm.

18. An iron knife, tanged, the back of the blade is straight, the cross-section of the blade is wedge-shaped. The tang is almost completely lost; the transition to the tang is marked by a small ledge on the dorsal side.

19. A cluster of beads: irregularly shaped amber beads and a round bead made of colorless transparent glass.

20, 25. False-twisted bronze torque, with loose terminals. The terminals feature holes. Diameter of the torque – approx. 10 cm, diameter of section – 1.9 mm.

21, 22. Blue faience beads, ribbed.

23. An object resembling a deformed frame of a triangular-frame plateless buckle (?).

24. A cluster of beads (5 pcs.): disc-shaped and teardrop-shaped beads made of glass.

26. A clamp made of a flat bimetallic strip, flared towards the ends and bent in half. An oval arch is formed from the central part when bent. Length – 3.7 cm, width at the ends – 0.6 cm.

27. U-shaped iron frame with a fragment of chamois horn strung on one end. The length of the object is 2.5 cm. The cross-section in the least corroded part is 0.6 cm.

28. A cluster of beads (3 pcs.), irregularly shaped amber beads (Fig. 9, 48), and a cylindrical eye bead made of blue translucent glass (Fig. 9, 49).

29. An iron knife, tanged. The back of the blade is slightly curved outward, the blade is concave. The blade has a triangular section. The transition to the tang is smooth, the tang is flattened and has a rectangular cross-section. Total length – 8.4 cm. Thickness at the tang – 1.7 cm.

30. Chamois horn.
31. A fragment of a bronze oval cross-section of the frame (?) of an object.
32. Metal objects: 1 earring hoop (?); 3 ring shanks (rings, earrings?).
33. A cluster of beads, 16 pieces in total, of different shapes and colors, made from amber (Fig. 9, 51–54), carnelian (Fig. 9, 50), glass (Fig. 9, 55).
34. A cluster of beads, seed beads, and threads, 28 pieces in total, of different colors and shapes, made of glass.
35. A bead made of white mineral coated with a thin layer of glass.
36. Oval convex face of a solid cast bronze signet ring. Fragment of a metal plate.
37. Rectangular-frame plateless bimetallic buckle with an iron prong, bent in the center and encircling the front bar of the frame. The sides of the frame are triangular in cross-section and protrude beyond the back plate on which the prong is attached. Dimensions 2.5x2 cm.
38. An iron knife with fragments of a wooden sheath. The tang is broken. The total length is 9.8 cm, the width at the tang is 1.7 cm.
39. An iron knife, with fragments of a wooden sheath. The knife is tanged, the back of the blade is straight, the cross-section is triangular. The total length is 8.9 cm, the width at the tang is 1.6 cm.

Chamber No. 2 (Fig. 3, 10). The suboval-shaped entrance hole in the chamber was covered with a slate slab, measuring 44×85 cm. The dimensions of the entrance hole are as follows: height – 48 cm, width – 72 cm. It is positioned 33 cm above the bottom of the chamber and has an additional step towards the chamber. The chamber itself is situated 45 cm below the bottom of the entrance pit.

The chamber exhibits an oval shape, with its length axis oriented along the west-east line. It measures 150×83 cm in dimensions. The ceiling is partially collapsed, the walls smoothly curve upward. The preserved height of the ceiling is 80 cm. The floor of the chamber is flat, gradually rising slightly to the west from -304 to -297 cm from R0. Notably, the southern wall of the chamber encroached upon the neighboring catacomb's chamber, which was not explored.

In the chamber, there were four burials, each corresponding to different individuals: a man aged 20-29 (individual No. 1), a woman aged 20-25 (individual No. 2), a child aged 3-5 (individual No. 3), and an infant under one year old (individual No. 4) [8, p. 128, 129].

Individual No. 1 was positioned atop the skeletons of individuals No. 2-4. This burial was arranged with the individual lying to the right, and the head facing away from the entrance hole (head up the slope). The skeleton is poorly preserved, with only ashes and a fragment of the lower jaw with teeth remaining. The right arm extended along the body, and the epiphyses of the forearm rested near the right femur. The legs were oriented towards the entrance hole, with the left leg bent at the knee and the distal end of the fibula brought towards the entrance hole. The right leg was nearly straight, and the bones of the feet were positioned at the northeast corner of the chamber.

In the neck area of the buried individual, there was a cluster of beads and sleigh bells No. 2 (Fig. 10, 3–19). At the elbow of the right hand, clusters of beads No. 4 and 5, were discovered (Fig. 10, 20–29, 31–40), along with a bronze sleigh bell No. 6 (Fig. 10, 41). Near

and under the arm, the skeleton of child No. 4 was identified. It is plausible that the beads and sleigh bell belonged to either child No. 4 or to skeleton No. 2.

Individual No. 2 was positioned flexed on their right side, with the head to the right of the entrance hole. The skull has decayed, leaving only a fragment of the lower jaw with teeth. The right hand, located under the skeleton of individual No. 1, did not survive. The left arm was bent at the elbow, and the distal end of the ulna was found in the sacrum.

In the region of the right ilium, an iron buckle No. 1 (Fig. 10, 2), and a knife in a wooden sheath No. 3 (Fig. 10, 30), were discovered.

From the skeleton of individual No. 3 (child), femurs and several ribs have been preserved. All the surviving bones were relocated to the legs of the buried individuals Nos. 1 and 2.

Individual No. 4 (infant) was positioned extended on their back. The skull and left side of the skeleton did not survive, except for the ilium and the displaced humerus. The distal end of the right ulna was found on the right ilium.

Chamber No. 2 was utilized for a brief period, and its assemblage can be considered nearly closed. The bones of the child skeleton No. 3 were shifted entirely to the eastern wall, at the feet of the adult burials. This suggests that the child was the first to be interred in the chamber. When individual No. 1 was buried, the skeleton of individual No. 2 remained undisturbed, indicating a short time gap between the burials. Judging by the bone arrangement, the baby (No. 4) was likely interred at the same time as the mother (No. 2). The left part of the child's skeleton No. 4 was damaged and ended up beneath the skeleton No. 1.

Grave goods description

1. A heavily corroded, plateless, triangular frame iron buckle.
2. A cluster of beads, seed beads, and sleigh bells, totaling 47 pieces. The beads (44 specimens) vary in shapes and colors, made from glass (Fig. 10, 6–9, 13–19) and carnelian (Fig. 10, 10–12). The cluster also includes solid cast bronze sleigh bells (2 specimens) flattened on the sides, featuring a horizontal belt with a groove and a rounded loop with a slit at the bottom. Additionally, a solid cast diamond-shaped pendant with an eye and two prongs on the reverse side was found in the cluster. The pendant displays an image of a trefoil (lotus) in the center. The total height is 20.2 mm, the length of the loop is 7 mm, and the length of the diamond side is 11.5 mm.
3. An iron knife in a wooden sheath.
4. A cluster of beads, totaling 10 pieces, made of glass (Fig. 10, 20–25, 28), bone (Fig. 10, 26), clay (Fig. 10, 27), and low-grade silver (Fig. 10, 29).
5. A cluster of beads totaling 11 pieces, made of glass (Fig. 10, 31–38, 40) and carnelian (Fig. 10, 39).
6. A solid cast bronze sleigh bell with a horizontal belt in the form of a groove, featuring a rounded loop and a slit at the bottom.

The relative chronology of the examined burial complex is as follows: chamber No. 1 of catacomb No. 98 was constructed first, followed by the construction of chamber No. 2 from the entrance pit. However, it cannot be ruled out that chamber No. 2 was built either synchronously or in close proximity in time to chamber No. 1. In the final stage, the entrance pit in the eastern part was deepened, and catacomb chamber No. 97 was built.

Collective burials occurred in the chambers of catacomb No. 98, making it challenging to distinguish individual assemblages within them. In the case of chamber No. 1, a pair of earrings that lay on either side of the original skull location, along with cluster of beads No. 1, can be reasonably associated with the later burial (individual No. 1). Objects from an earlier period were relocated to the western wall, such as the iron axe and disc-shaped eye beads. Individual beads from individual No. 1 might have ended up near the western wall during the displacement of the skull of the latter. However, the absence of disc-shaped beads in cluster of beads No. 1 suggests that they belong to the grave goods of previous burials.

Interestingly, the axe and cup, similar to the discoveries from catacomb No. 98 of chamber No. 1, were also found in catacomb No. 36, identified as a closed complex dating to the late 8th to the first half of the 9th century [3, p. 165, 166], which corresponds to period IV, chronological groups 2 and 3 of the Dargavs burial ground [9, p. 116, 117]. During the interment of the last individual No. 1, in chamber No. 1 of catacomb No. 98, the individuals within the chamber were already fully or predominantly skeletonized, indicating a potential gap between the last and preceding burials. Chamber No. 1, presumed to be the primary chamber, was likely constructed first. The burials that were displaced to the western wall of chamber No. 1 are theoretically the earliest. Consequently, the construction time of chamber No. 1 can be inferred from artifacts such as a T-shaped fibula with a curl, earrings with a pendant of hollow balls, plateless trapezoidal-frame buckles, and a glass cup from the late 8th to the first half of the 9th century.

Chamber No. 2 had a brief period of functioning. The initial burial of a child in this chamber lacked grave goods. Subsequently, a woman and an infant were interred, followed closely in time by the burial of another adult, presumably a man, placed atop the previous burials before the soft tissues decomposed. These last three burials occurred nearly simultaneously. The chamber did not contain objects serving as reliable chrono-indicators, and dating relies on the general stratigraphy of the studied complexes. It appears that chamber No. 2 was utilized in the first half of the 9th century, either after the cessation of secondary burials in chamber No. 1 or contemporaneously with the last burial in chamber No. 1.

Catacomb No. 97 was constructed later than all others, as it became impractical to continue burials in the chambers of catacomb No. 98. The dating of the burial in catacomb No. 97 is supported by the discovery of the earrings with a pendant of hollow balls, three signet rings, and radiocarbon analysis of nut shells from the chamber. This analysis confirms the dating of the complex to the second quarter – mid-9th century [9, p. 139].

The chronology and typology of various artifact categories from the Dargavs catacombs, with analogies in published material and other sites of the Alan culture in the Central Caucasus and Middle Don, were extensively addressed in the monograph [9], therefore, we will not delve into a detailed analysis of the artifact assemblage here. Based on the catacombs' planigraphy and the accompanying grave goods, the examined burial structure can be dated to the second half – the end of the 8th century to the mid-9th century.

Multi-chamber catacombs are known in other contemporaneous sites in the mountain and foothill zone of the Central Caucasus, such as in Chmi, Dagom, Arkhon, Balta, and several others. However, there are no direct analogues to the multi-chamber and multi-level burial structure.

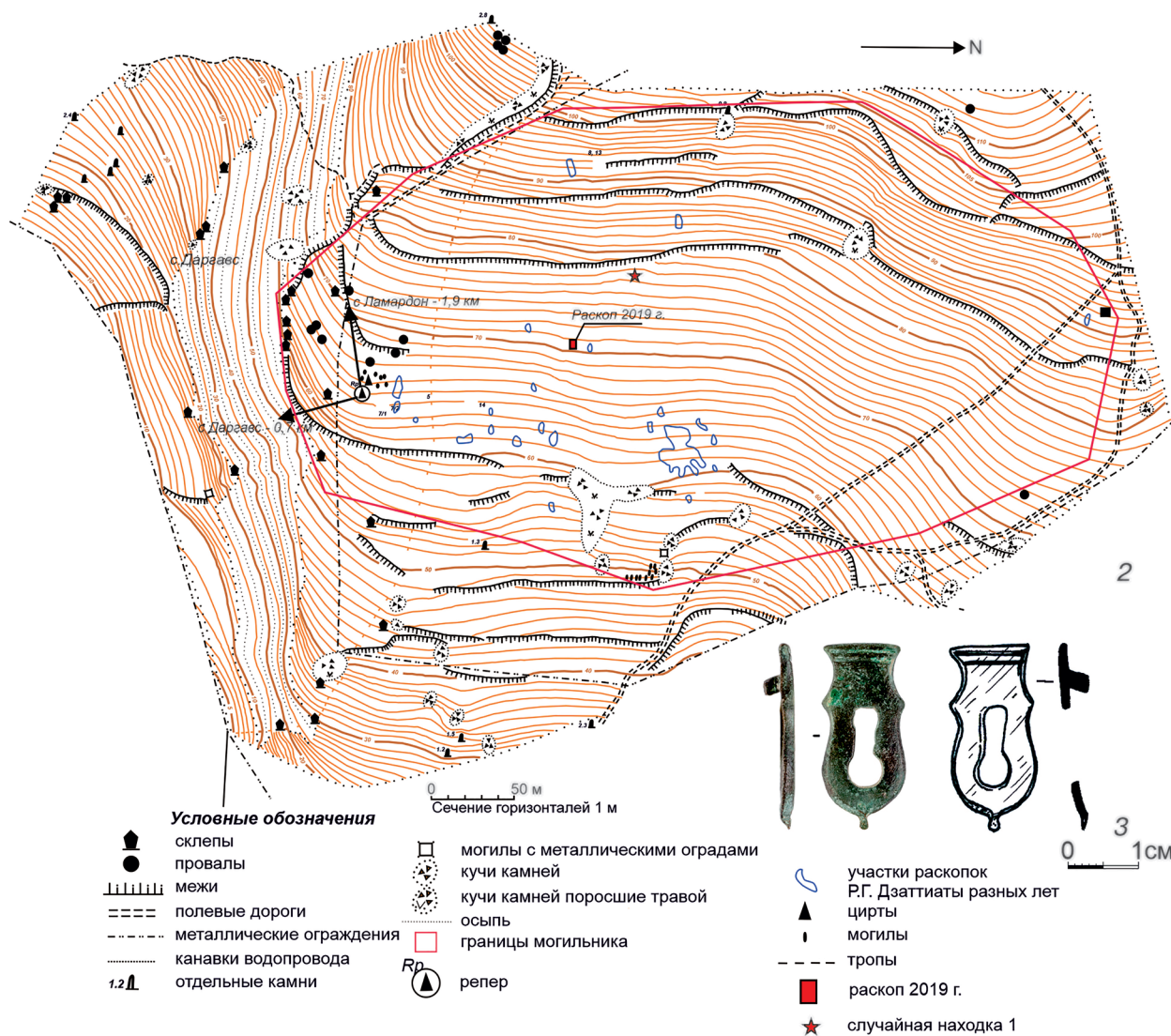


Fig. 1. Dargavs burial ground. 1 – location of the Dargavs burial ground on the map, 2 – topographical plan of the burial ground, 3 – accidental find (bronze belt plaque).

Рис. 1. Даргавский могильник. 1 – карта расположения даргавского могильника, 2 – топографический план могильника, 3 – случайная находка (бронзовая поясная накладка)

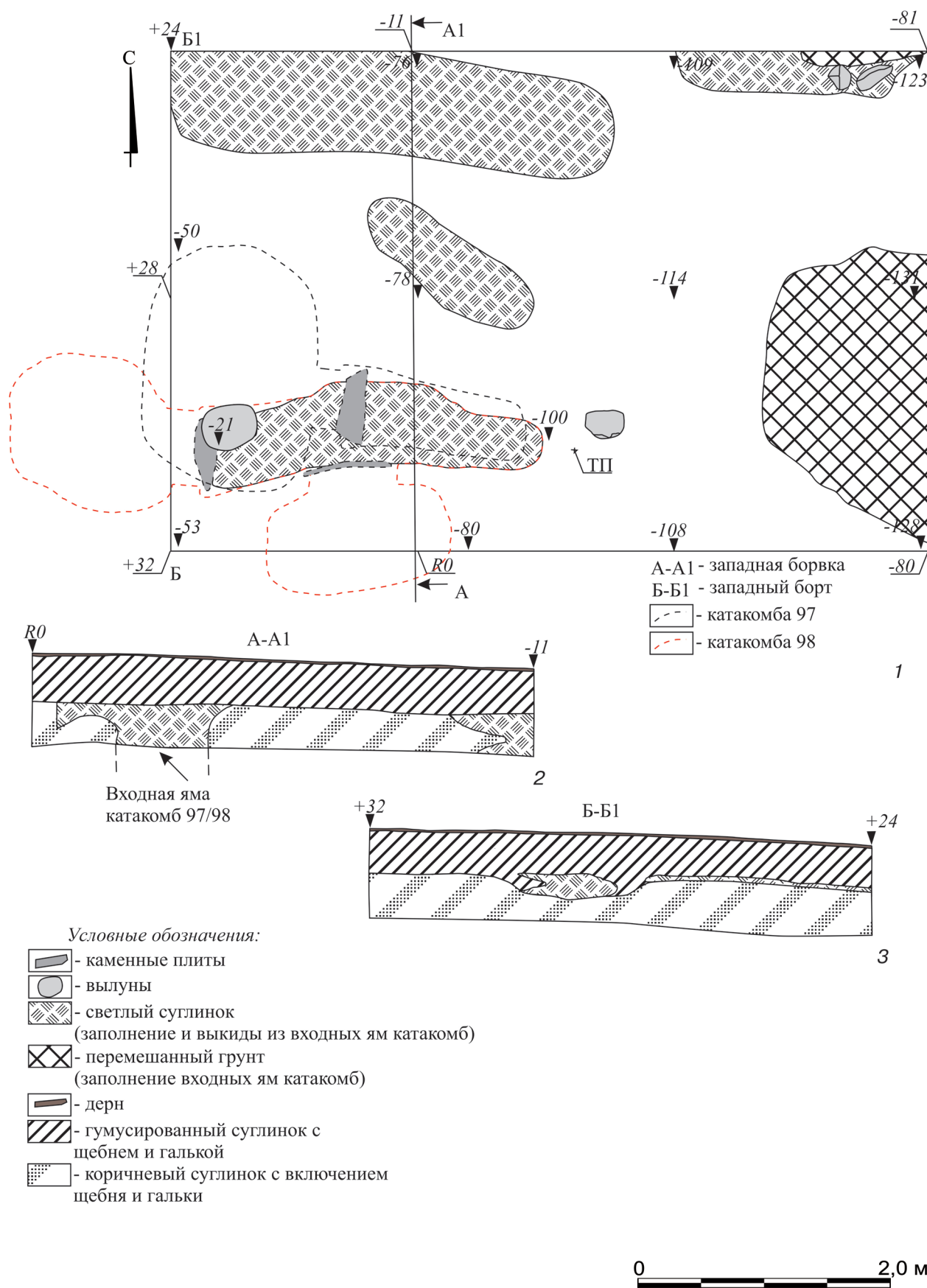


Fig. 2. Dargavs burial ground. 1 – plan of the excavation in 2019 at the level of recorded entrance pits of the catacombs. 2, 3 – stratigraphy of the excavation in the ridge A-A1 and the western side of B-B1.

Рис. 2. Даргавский могильник. 1 – план раскопа 2019 г. на уровне фиксации заполнения входных ям катакомб. 2, 3 – стратиграфия раскопа в борке А-А1 и западном борту В-В1

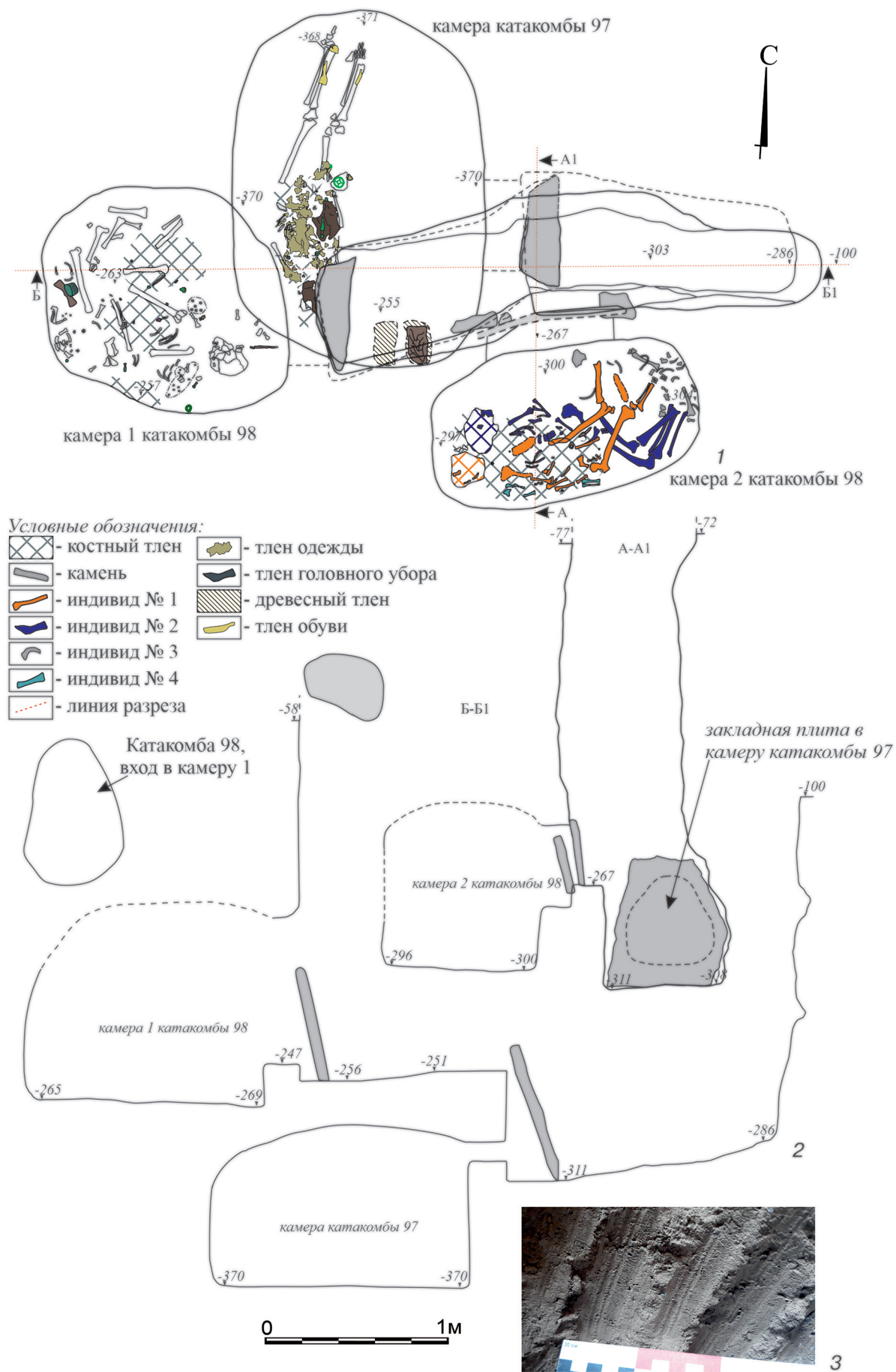


Fig. 3. Dargavs burial ground. Plan (1) and sections (2) of the multi-chamber catacomb Nos. 97, 98. 3 – tool marks on the walls of chamber No. 97.

Рис. 3. Даргавский могильник. План (1) и разрезы (2) многокамерной катакомбы №№97, 98. 3 – следы инструмента на стенках камеры №97

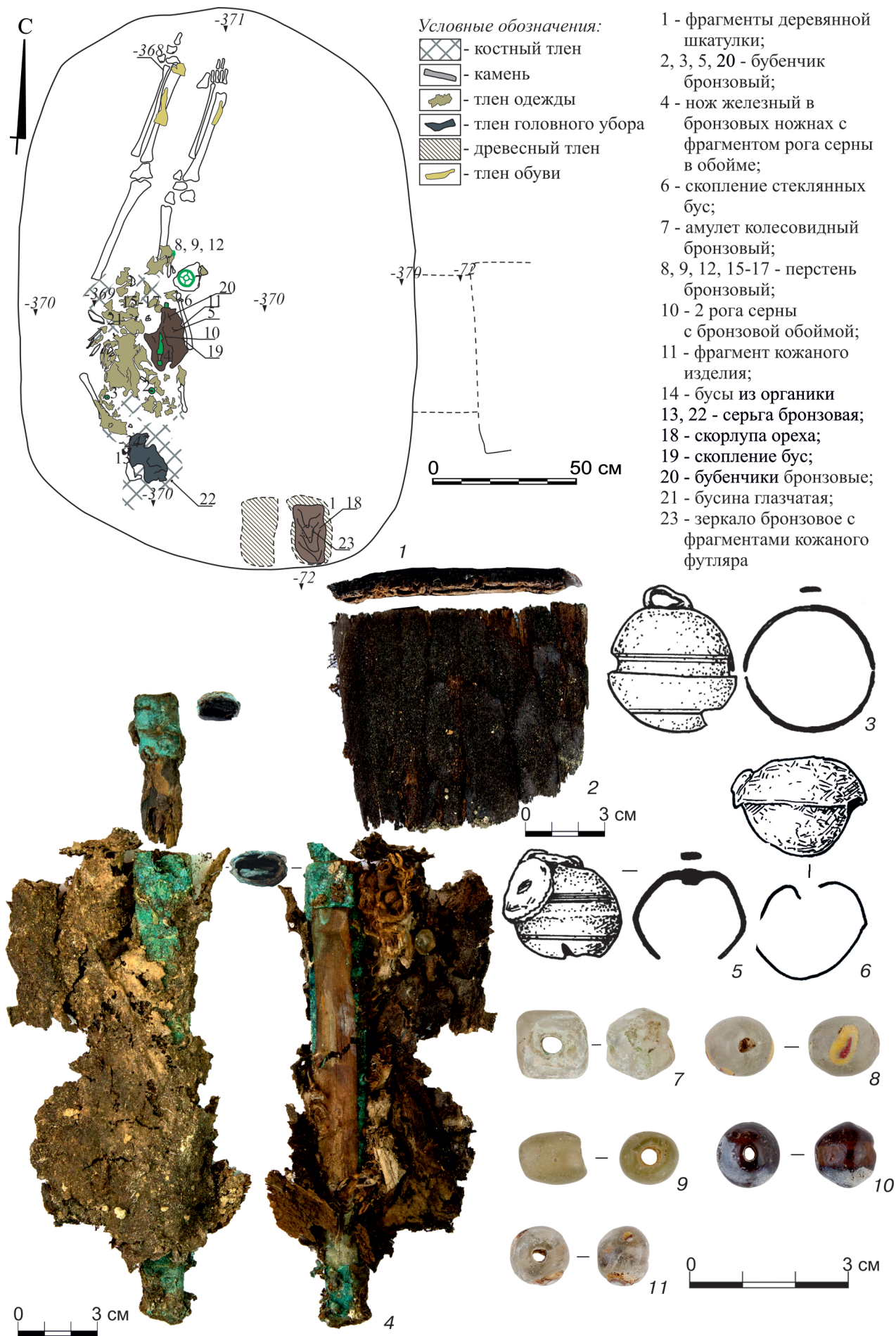


Fig. 4. Dargavs burial ground. Catacomb No. 97. 1 – plan of the catacomb, 2–11 – inventory. 2 – wooden box No. 1; 3, 5, 6 – sleigh bells No. 2, 5, 3; 4 – knife No. 4; 7–11 – cluster of beads No. 6.

Рис. 4. Даргавский могильник. Катакомба №97. 1 – план катакомбы, 2–11 – инвентарь. 2 – шкатулка №1; 3, 5, 6 – бубенчики №№2, 5, 3; 4 – нож № 4; 7–11 – скопление бус № 6



Fig. 5. Dargavs burial ground, catacomb No.97, grave goods: 1, 2 – metal earrings Nos. 13, 22; 3–5 – rings No. 8, 9, 12; 6–8 – rings Nos. 15–17; 9 – amulet No. 7; 10, 11 – mirror with leather case No. 23; 12 – nut shell No. 18; 13 – glass eye bead No. 21; 14 – remains of two chamois horns No. 10; 15 – leather pouch No. 15; 16 – sleigh bell No. 20; 17 – organic bead No. 14.

Рис. 5. Даргавский могильник, катакомба №97, погребальный инвентарь: 1, 2 – серьги металлические №№13, 22; 3–5 – перстни №№8, 9, 12; 6–8 – перстни №№15–17; 9 – амулет № 7; 10, 11 – зеркало с кожаным чехлом №23; 12 – скорлупа ореха №18 ; 13 – бусина стеклянная глазчатая №21; 14 – остатки двух рогов серн №10; 15 – кожаный мешочек №15; 16 – бубенчик №20; 17 – бусина из органики №14



Fig. 6. Dargavs burial ground, catacomb No. 97, grave goods. Cluster of beads and seed beads No. 19, materials: 1 – cowrie shell, 16 – carnelian, 25, 17–27 – glass.

Рис. 6. Даргавский могильник, катакомба № 97, погребальный инвентарь. Бусы и бисер скопление № 19, материал: 1 – раковина каури, 16 – сердолик, 25, 17–27 – стекло



Fig. 7. Dargavs burial ground, catacomb No. 98, chamber No. 1. 1 – plan of the chamber; 2–21 – grave goods. 2 – earring No. 2; 3 – fragments of earring No. 3, 3a – fragment of the earring hoop No. 15; 4 – belt plate No. 14; 5 – item No. 31; 6 – item No. 23; 7 – signet ring No. 36; 8 – ring No. 13; 9 – forceps No. 26; 10–13 – fragments of items No. 32; 14 – buckle No. 16; 15 – buckle No. 37; 16 – staple No. 27; 17 – fibula No. 12; 18, 19 – sleigh bell No. 10.

Рис. 7. Даргавский могильник, катакомба №98, камера №1. 1 – план камеры; 2-21 – погребальный инвентарь. 2 – серьга №2; 3 – фрагменты серьги №3, 3а – фрагмент дужки серьги №15; 4 – накладка №14; 5 – предмет №31; 6 – предмет №23; 7 – перстень №36; 8 – кольцо №13; 9 – пинцет №26; 10-13 – фрагменты изделий №32; 14 – пряжка №16, 15 – пряжка №37; 16 – скоба №27; 17 – фибула №12; 18, 19 – бубенчик №10

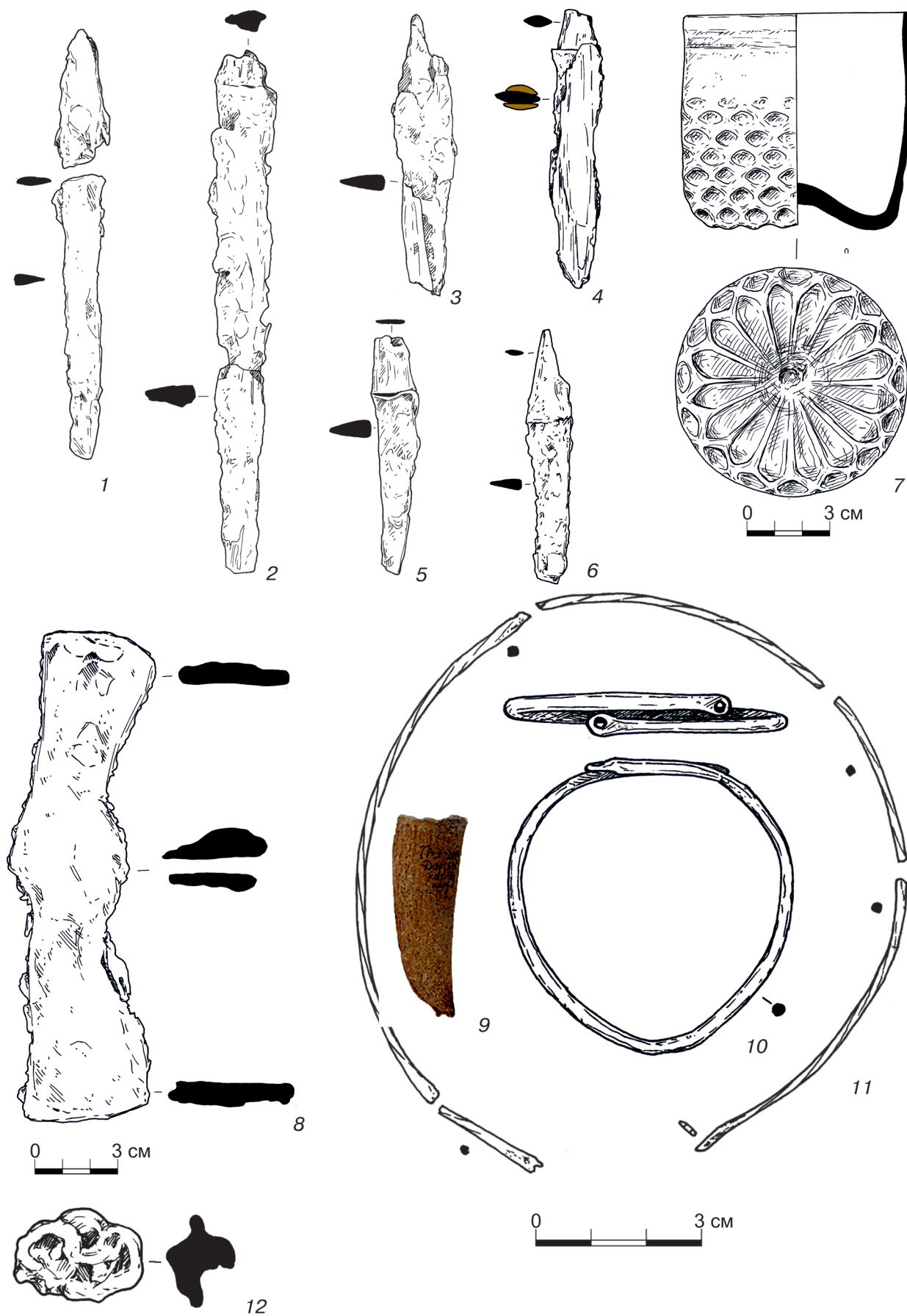


Fig. 8. Dargavs burial ground, catacomb No. 98, chamber No. 1, grave goods. 1 – knife No. 7; 2 – knife No. 18; 3 – knife No. 17; 4 – knife No. 38; 5 – knife No. 29; 6 – knife No. 39; 7 – glass cup No. 5; 8 – axe No. 6; 9 – chamois horn No. 30; 10 – bracelet No. 11; 11 – torque No. 20, 25; 12 – fragment of chain mail No. 8.

Рис. 8. Даргавский могильник, катакомба №98, камера №1, погребальный инвентарь. 1 – нож №7; 2 – нож №18; 3 – нож №17; 4 – нож №38; 5 – нож №29; 6 – нож №39; 7 – кубок №5; 8 – топор №6; 9 – рог серны №30; 10 – браслет №11; 11 – гривна №№20,25; 12 – фрагмент кольчужной ткани №8



Fig. 9. Dargavs burial ground, catacomb No. 98, chamber No. 1, grave goods. Clusters of beads, seed beads, button (No. 27). 1-28 – cluster No. 1; 29-37 – No. 9; 38, 39 – No. 19; 40, 41 – No. 21; 42-46 – No. 24; 47 – bead No. 4; 48, 49 – No. 28; 50-55 – No. 33; 56-61 – No. 34; 62 – bead No. 35. Beads material: 1, 2, 29, 39, 48, 51-54 – amber, 3-12, 14-20, 22-26, 28, 30-38, 42-47, 49, 56-61 – glass; 13, 21, 50 – carnelian; 40, 41 – faience; 62 – white mineral with a glass layer.

Рис. 9. Даргавский могильник, катакомба №98, камера №1, погребальный инвентарь. Скопления бус, бисера, пуговица (№27). 1-28 – скопление №1; 29-37 – №9; 38, 39 – №19; 40, 41 – №21; 42-46 – №24; 47 – бусина №4; 48, 49 – №28; 50-55 – №33; 56-61 – №34; 62 – бусина №35. Материал бус: 1, 2, 29, 39, 48, 51-54 – янтарь, 3-12, 14-20, 22-26, 28, 30-38, 42-47, 49, 56-61 – стекло; 13, 21, 50 – сердолик; 40, 41 – фаянс; 62 – белый минерал со стеклянной коркой

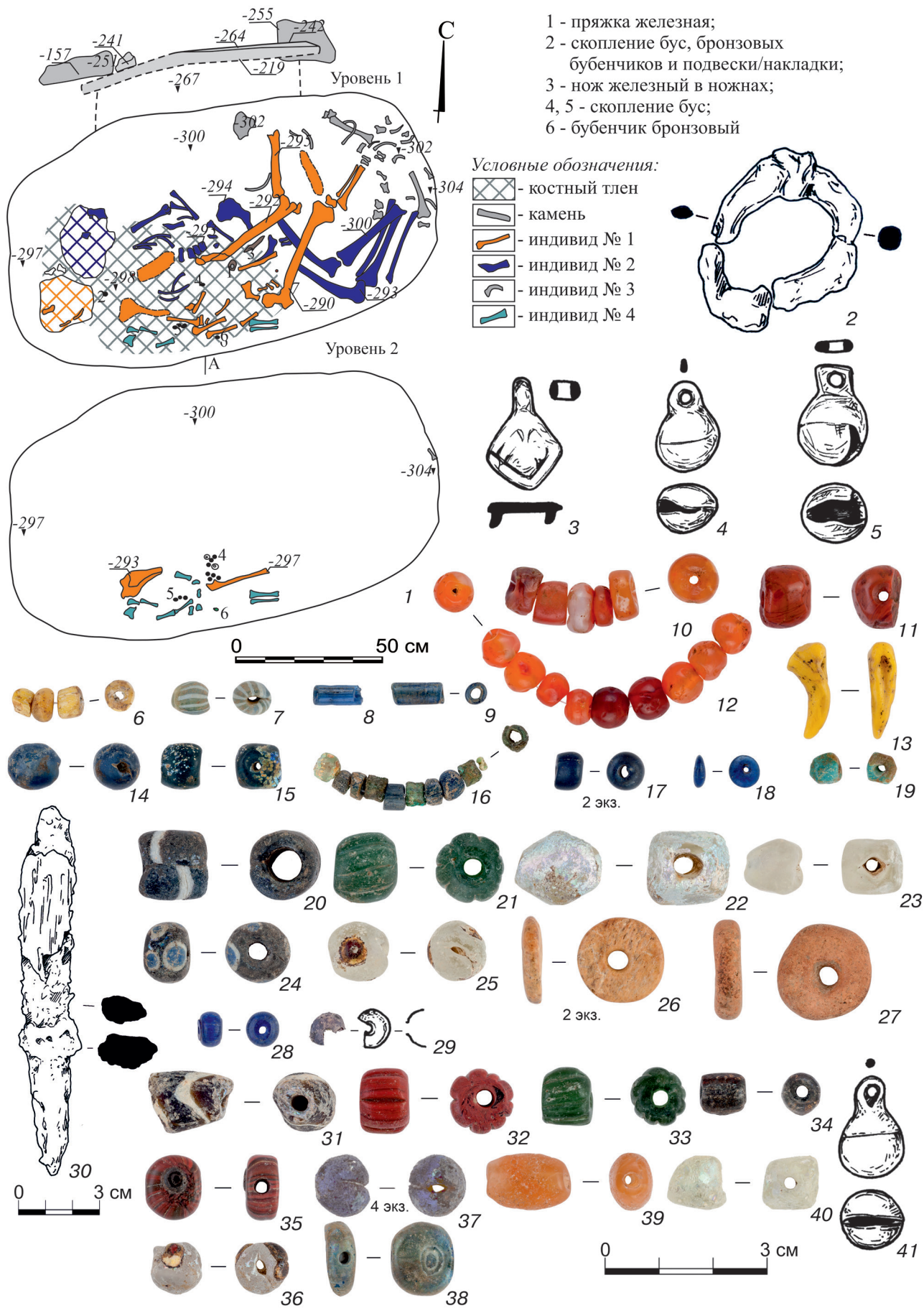


Fig. 10. Dargavs burial ground, catacomb No. 98, chamber No. 2. 1 – plan of the chamber. 2–41 – grave goods. 2 – buckle No. 1; 3–19 – cluster No. 2; 20–29 – cluster of beads No. 4; 30 – knife No. 3; 31–41 – cluster of beads No. 5; 41 – sleigh bell No. 6. Beads material: 6–9, 13–25, 28, 31–38, 40 – glass; 10–12, 39 – carnelian, 26 – bone; 27 – clay; 29 – bronze.

Рис. 10. Даргавский могильник, катакомба №98, камера №2. 1 – план камеры. 2–41 – инвентарь. 2 – пряжка №1; 3–19 – скопление №2; 20–29 – скопление бус №4; 30 – нож № 3; 31–41 – скопление бус № 5; 41 – бубенчик №6. Материал бус: 6–9, 13–25, 28, 31–38, 40 – стекло; 10–12, 39 – сердолик, 26 – кость; 27 – глина; 29 – бронза

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Received 27.04.2023
Accepted 02.08.2023
Published 15.12.2023

Поступила в редакцию 27.04.2023 г.
Принята в печать 02.08.2023 г.
Опубликована 15.12.2023 г.