

## Notes and Field Reports

### The Eneolithic necropolis at Urziceni-Vamă, Romania: excavations in 2023

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# The Eneolithic necropolis at Urziceni-Vamă, Romania: excavations in 2023

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## Abstract

This article comprises a brief report on the 2023 excavations of an extensive Eneolithic cemetery undertaken as a UCL collaboration with colleagues from the Muzeul Județean Satu Mare. The site represents the largest cemetery of the Middle Eneolithic Bodrogkeresztúr culture in Romania and has yielded extensive grave finds, including items of gold and copper.

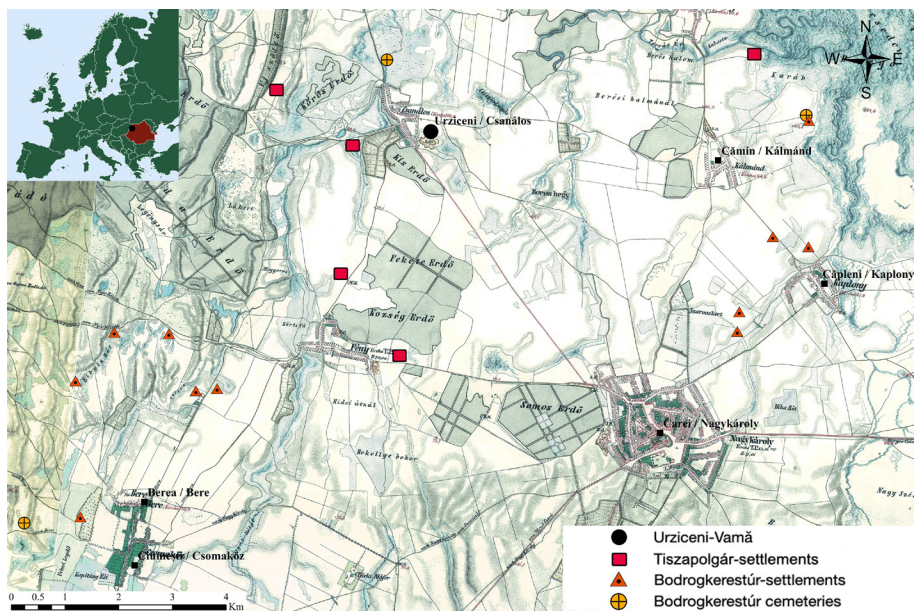
**Keywords:** Bodrogkeresztúr culture, Eneolithic, burial, material culture

## Introduction

The Eneolithic necropolis of Urziceni is situated in the zone between the Romanian and Hungarian border posts at Urziceni-Vamă, on a small terrace in the marshy valley of the Negru Brook in the Satu Mare district of north-west Romania (see Figure 1).

The site is located in the flat landscape of the Upper Tisa valley, at the border of extensive marshes that were only drained between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. The prehistoric communities of the Upper Tisa Basin evidently preferred to place their settlements on the levees of rivers, on higher land like the small hills dominating the surrounding flat landscape, or in marshy areas on slightly elevated land not liable to flooding or only temporarily threatened by floods.

The necropolis was discovered in 2003 during the construction of a duty-free shop. Seventeen undisturbed graves were excavated, as well as three graves that had been disturbed or destroyed by later prehistoric activity. The initial excavation trench was expanded in 2005, and the spectacular nature of the discoveries led to the resumption of excavations from 2014 onwards. At present, Urziceni is the largest Bodrogkeresztúr cemetery in Romania with 132 graves and numerous grave goods excavated to date, including several gold objects and other artefacts of special value made of copper, shell, horn and stone.



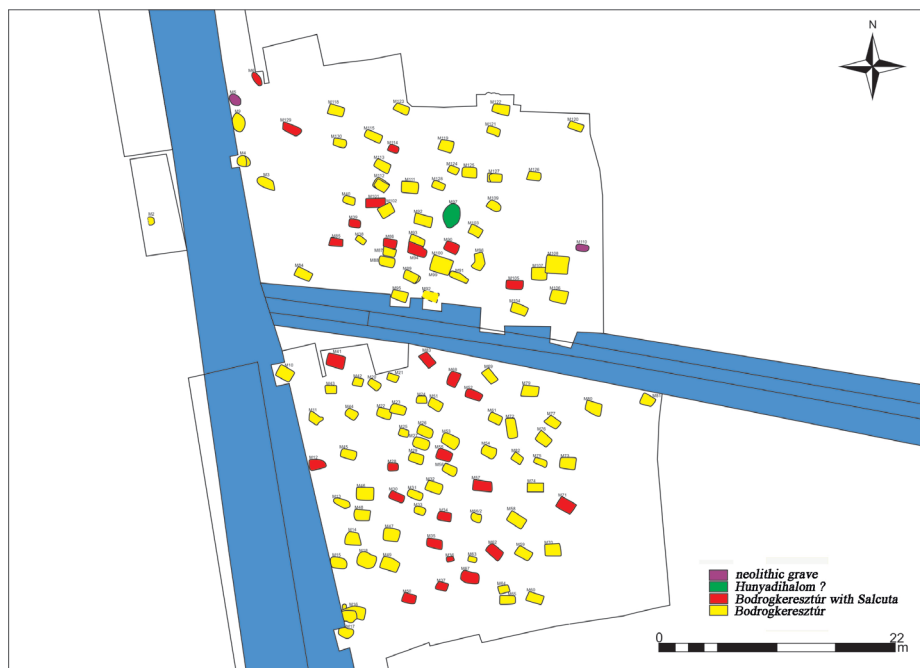
**Figure 1** Location of Urziceni-Vamă and adjacent Eneolithic sites; basemap from the Josephinian Land Survey, Transylvania (1769–73) (Source: Cristian Virag)

During the archaeological excavations of 2003, 2005, 2014 and 2016–18, field research concentrated on the southern side of the necropolis, an area crosscut by a modern drainage ditch. In the north-western area of the cemetery, investigations were carried out in 2005 (Virag 2004), 2016, 2019 and 2020. In the western area, the necropolis was disturbed by a roadside dyke and the current road between Carei and Mátészalka in Hungary (DN 1F). The eastern area and the marginal areas, which contain both isolated graves and groups of graves, remain to be explored (see Figure 2).

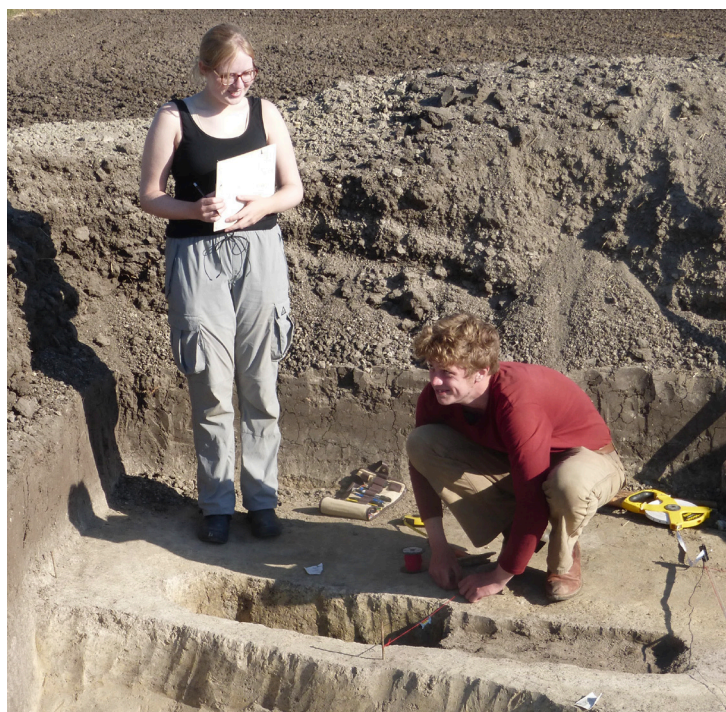
Features from several archaeological phases have been uncovered at Urziceni-Vamă. The first cultural horizon at Urziceni belongs to the Middle Neolithic and the Pişcolt cultural group (5300–5000 BC). This culture is derived from the preceding early Neolithic Starčevo-Criş culture, representing the first agriculturalists in the Carpathian Basin. It developed in north-western Romania and is part of a larger horizon of cultures with painted pottery. This horizon is present in Transylvania, Slovakia, Transcarpathian Ukraine and eastern Hungary. In Hungary it is known as the Szatmár group according to Kalicz and Makkay (1977) or AVK (Alföld linear pottery culture) according to Kalicz. In Slovakia it is known as the East-Slovak linear pottery culture according to Hájek (1957), Vel'ké Raškovec or the Vizdal, Kopčany and Kopusany groups (after Šiška) and as the Diakovo culture in Ukraine (Potushniak 1999). Previously, it was also known as the Painted Bükk or Esztár group.

The settlement at Urziceni-Vamă consists of pits and postholes as well as Schlitzgruben, a type of V-shaped linear pit entirely devoid of finds, which are also known from the Western Linearbandkeramik (see Achard-Corompt and Riquier 2013; Figure 3).

The finds from Urziceni belong to the middle phase of the Pişcolt cultural group, dated between 5300 and 5200 BC. The pottery is of a good quality, with a very fine clay



**Figure 2** Plan of the Urziceni cemetery (Source: Cristian Virag)

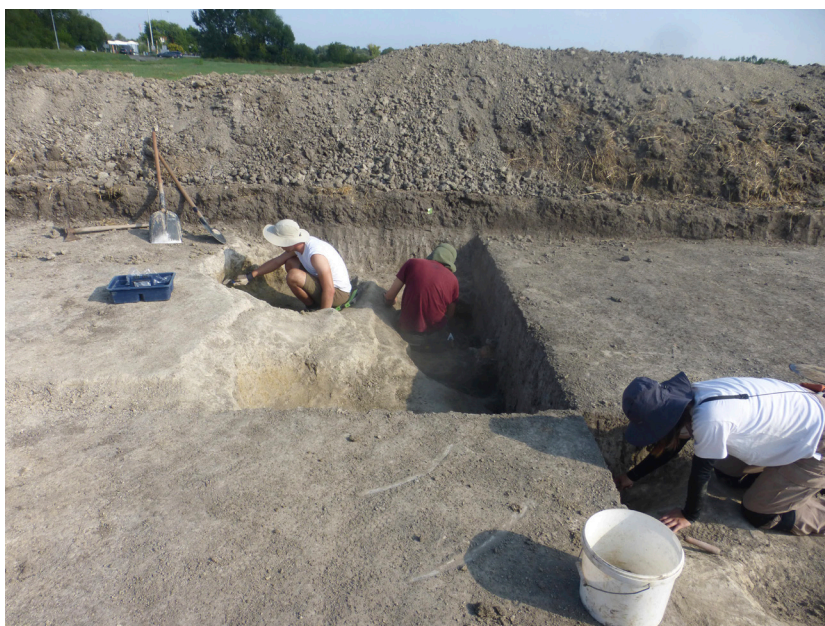


**Figure 3** Excavation of the Pişcolt Schlitzgrube in Urziceni with UCL students in 2023 (Source: Ulrike Sommer)



used, tempered with organic materials and fired at a relatively high temperature in an oxidising atmosphere. Towards the end of this phase and in some secondary settlements, a slight reduction in quality can be observed, where the pottery is tempered with silt, which can lead to the exfoliation of slip coating and decoration. Decoration by finger-pinches is replaced by small round impressions and incised ornamental designs, which, although common during the entire period, decrease in quantity over time. The designs and motifs were painted with birchbark tar and show a great stylistic variety, although the principal motifs are wavy lines, thin parallel lines and thick bands arranged in crosses, meanders and cross-hatching.

The Eneolithic necropolis described here partly overlies a Middle Neolithic settlement, in some instances disturbing earlier features. The necropolis is in turn overlain by the remains of a Late Bronze Age settlement belonging to the Hajdúbagos/Cehăluț group of the late Otomani/Füzesabony culture (see Figure 4), which has disturbed a number of graves.



**Figure 4** Excavation of an Otomani pit complex in Urziceni by UCL students in 2023 (Source: Ulrike Sommer)

## The first cemeteries

During the early Neolithic of south-east Europe, formal extramural cemeteries were unknown, or at least not visible archaeologically. Burials inside the houses, common in eastern and central Anatolia, are also almost unknown in Romania in this period. In a few cases, scattered burials are known from pits at settlement sites and, occasionally, burials are found adjacent to dwellings, either individually or, more rarely, in small groups (Lazăr 2012). The placement of bodies in otherwise domestic pits does not follow

a clear pattern and gives the impression of the casual deposition of bodies rather than careful, respectful burial.

Formal cemeteries first appear in the Hamangia culture (c. 5250–4950 BC) in the Northern Dobruja of Bulgaria and Romania (Lichter 2001, 60–70) and are best known from the massive multi-period cemetery of Durankulak. The first Hamangia graves contain predominantly extended supine burials, especially for males. Graves rarely contain pottery, but rather shells, especially *Spondylus* (a genus of bivalve molluscs), beads fabricated from the canine teeth of deer, chipped stone blades and stone axes (Todorova 2002). Only in the later phases of this cultural period does the number of crouched inhumations increase.

This burial tradition continues into the Bulgarian late Eneolithic in the context of the KGKIV (Varna) tradition, especially prominent in the famous Varna cemetery. While the later graves contain substantial quantities of pottery, evidently produced especially for the burials, as evidenced by low firing temperatures and elaborate decoration, the tradition of incorporating shell ornaments, bone figurines and deer canines continues. Burial is mainly crouched, but the extended position remains common (Biegel 1986, 143). Krauß et al. (2014) have emphasised that the composition of grave goods is highly individualistic, with the selection of grave finds possibly indicating individual skills and choices rather than social hierarchies.

As Reingruber (2017) has pointed out, the Danube delta was an area of intense north–south contacts, both in the Neolithic and Eneolithic periods. There is a long tradition of extended supine burial in the preceding Mesolithic and subsequent ‘Subneolithic’ fisher-hunter-gatherer groups of central, northern and eastern Europe (Häusler 2001). This raises the possibility that the tradition of large extramural cemeteries was actually adopted from or influenced by the Dniepr-Donets culture of southern Ukraine (5750–4050 BC) (Kotova et al. 2024, 770), where large cemeteries are found with north–south-oriented extended burials. Cultural contacts with farmers to the south are indicated by ceramic forms and decorative schema, as well as imports of seashells, copper beads and sheet copper items (Kotova 2016). Family connections seem not to have been established with the north (Mattila et al. 2023), while skeletons examined so far from the agricultural communities south of the Danube show genetic continuity from the preceding Neolithic period (Penske et al. 2023), although Hamangia burials still await scientific analysis. Chapman (2012) suggests the possibility that formal cemeteries created new ‘arenas’ of interaction, where social relations could be negotiated away from the constraints of tightly built up tell-like settlements.

This new custom of formal cemeteries spreads west from the western Pontic coast, and is found slightly later in Salcuța, Tiszapolgár and Bodrogkereztúr-contexts, where large cemeteries can contain more than 100 graves with rich assemblages of pottery, shell ornaments, metal tools and weapons as well as long flint blades in male graves (see Bognár-Kutzian 1963; Patay 2008).

## The Urziceni cemetery

The Bodrogkereztúr culture is found in western Romania and eastern Hungary and dates to between 4400/4300 and 4000 BC (Brummack and Diaconescu 2014; Raczky and Siklósi

2013; Siklósi and Szilágyi 2021). There is a partial overlap with the preceding Tiszapolgár culture, which is characterised by a different type of pottery ornaments and a lack of heavy copper tools.

The Urziceni cemetery belongs to this tradition and can be broadly dated to between 4250 and 4000 BC, based on Bayesian modelling of radiocarbon determinations. Its period of use is estimated between 25–165 years (Chmielewski et al. 2021). It also contains pottery of the Salcuța style, common in south-west Romania, Serbia and north-west Bulgaria, ornamented with grooves.

Until now, no Bodrogkeresztúr settlement has been discovered in the vicinity of the cemetery, although two Tiszapolgár sites are known from field surveys. The area was relatively intensively inhabited during the Early Copper Age, within a radius of 5 km, 10 Tiszapolgár/Bodrogkeresztúr sites and two Bodrogkeresztúr cemeteries (Urziceni and Cămin) are known.

The necropolis itself is remarkable due to its spectacular inventory of grave finds (Oanță-Marghitu 2014), including – as indicated above – ceramic pots, bone tools and ornaments, copper ornaments and weapons, *Spondylus* beads, marble adornments, chipped stone arrowheads and blades, groundstone axes and, remarkably, eight items of gold.

The graves are arranged in rows, without intercutting grave pits, indicating that burials were most likely made over a relatively short period and that graves were marked above ground. Based on DNA analysis at the Pinhasi Lab, Vienna, it was possible to identify members of the same families, establishing degrees of kinship between mother and children, siblings and third-degree relatives. The graves of relatives are not grouped together, and the arrangement of graves is organised according to chronological, not social relations.

Within this cultural horizon, inhumation was the dominant rite. The deceased were placed in a crouched position in shallow sub-rectangular pits, lying on the left or the right side, with the head facing west or east (Szücs-Csillik and Virag 2016). Generally, the position of the deceased was determined by sex; women were placed on their left side and men on their right sides, although there are exceptions. The funeral inventory also shows clear differences between the sexes. In the graves of women, the number of pottery vessels is higher, with five to seven vessels normally placed around the body. In many cases, strings of shell beads are found in the pelvic area, probably indicating the decoration of dresses. For men, the number of vessels is significantly smaller, with one or two vessels usually located near the legs. The men are typically buried with stone or copper tools; namely, arrowheads, knives, scrapers and borers. In most cases, pottery vessels were made especially for burial in specific shapes not found in Bodrogkeresztúr settlements. Double burials have also been discovered, with one grave containing mother and child; the mother with her hands under the child's head, suggesting a protective attitude.

The economic power and the importance of the community whose members are buried at Urziceni is also demonstrated by the provenance of the raw materials used. Certain materials were procured over long distances: obsidian from eastern Slovakia (Cejkov-Vinický source), flint from the Prut/Dniestr area, *Spondylus* shells from the Aegean or the Black Sea and imports of ceramic materials, including a large number of vessels with Sălcuța stylistic elements, placed in graves together with the local Bodrogkeresztúr pottery, indicating connections with communities to the south.

## Excavations in 2023

The excavations in 2023 were conducted by means of a collaboration between the UCL Institute of Archaeology and the Muzeul Județean Satu Mare. An area of 275 m<sup>2</sup> was excavated, continuing the excavations of 2020–2. Three Neolithic features, two exceptional Eneolithic burials – detailed below – and 14 features belonging to the Bronze Age were explored (see Figure 4).

### M131

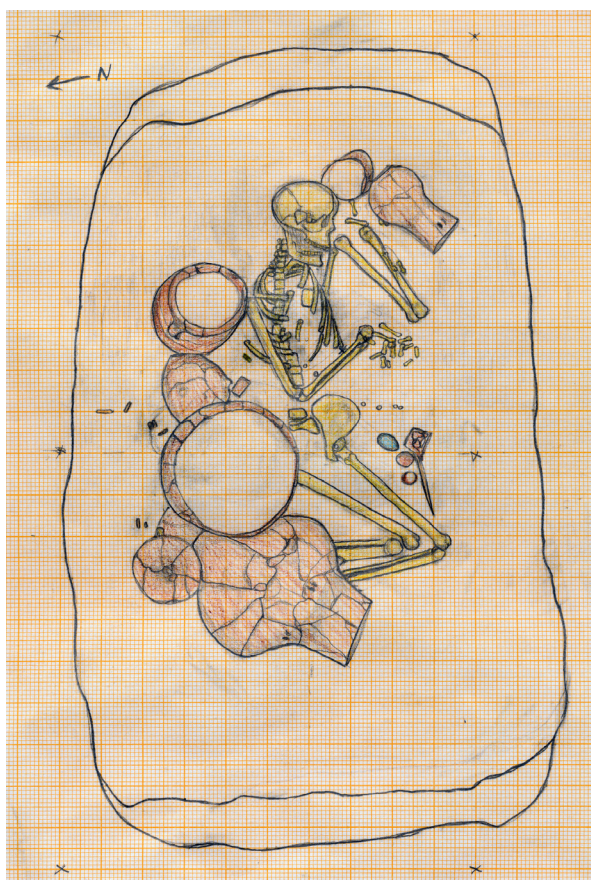
M131 is an inhumation grave of a young female with the body placed in a crouched position, lying on the left side, oriented east–west (97°), and the head towards the east, while the grave pit was oriented east–west (106°) (see Figure 5). The right hand was bent over the abdomen (83°) and at the elbow; the left hand is sharply bent towards the face (18° bend at the elbow). The legs were also bent sharply back with the heels oriented towards the pelvic area (see Figure 6). The grave contained the following items:

1. Pot of a milk-jug type, semi-fine brown paste with patches, high conical neck, rim slightly everted, bulging body, straight base, with two perforated handles. Placed near the left hand.
2. Dipper with two perforated handles on the rim, rounded base, placed between the jug (1 above) and the cranium.
3. Conical storage jar with a carinated shoulder, rim missing, placed near the right shoulder of the body.
4. Biconical storage jar with four unperforated lugs in the middle of the pot, rim slightly everted, placed behind the back, between pots 3 and 5.
5. Large, deep biconical bowl with lugs below a shoulder, partially placed over the pelvis.
6. Biconical amphora-type pot with four small handles on the shoulder, horizontally perforated. Four circular perforations at the foot. Placed over the feet.
7. Small conical bowl, short conical foot with four circular perforations. Four symmetrical lugs. Placed close to the heels of the body, near pot 6.
8. Miniature conical dipper with a small protuberance on the rim. Iron oxide inside the vessel, probably a pigment for pottery decoration. Placed near the left femur.
9. Miniature conical dipper with a slightly rounded base and a small protuberance on the rim. Placed near the left femur.
10. Small conical dipper with a small protuberance on the rim. Placed near the left femur.
11. Bone awl placed near the left femur, between pots 8 to 10.
12. Flat river pebble, probably used for smoothing or polishing pottery.
13. Disk-shaped beads of *Spondylus* shell, found around the pelvis. Microscopic analysis of beads previously found at Urziceni reveals degrees of use-wear, pointing to the gradual accumulation of the beads by women of the Bodrogkeresztúr community (Märgärit et al. 2020).
14. Spiral copper beads alternated with shell ones on the necklace attached to the clothes of the body.
15. Animal offering, placed in the individual's back area, underneath pots 4–5.





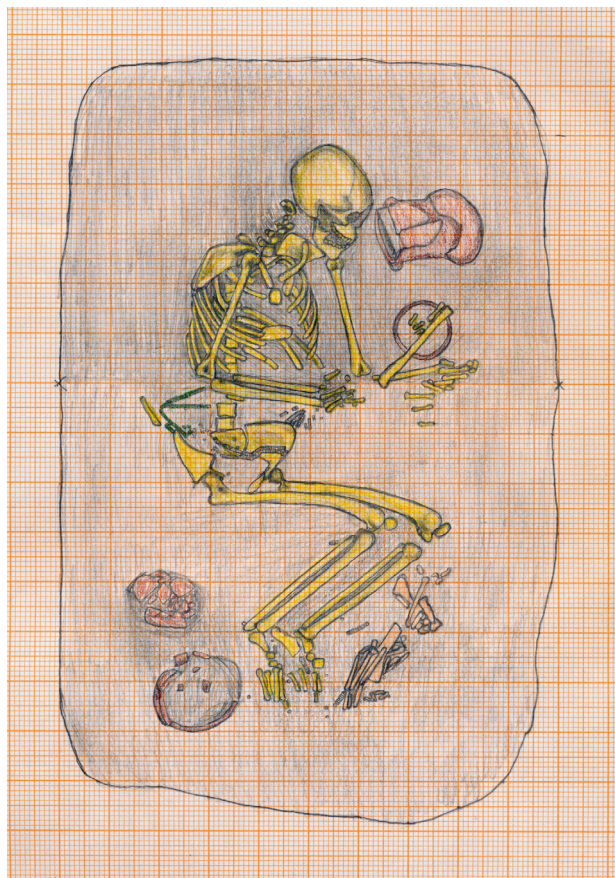
**Figure 5** Excavation of Bodrogkeresztúr grave M131 in Urziceni in 2023 (Source: Ulrike Sommer)



**Figure 6** Feature M131, female grave of the Bodrogkeresztúr culture (Source: Julia Ogden)

M132 (Figure 7) is an inhumation grave of a young female, lying on the left side, oriented east–west ( $116^\circ$ ), with the head towards the east. The grave pit is rectangular, oriented east–west ( $90^\circ$ ). The body lay in a crouched position, the right hand bent over the abdomen ( $77^\circ$  at the elbow), the left hand bent towards the face, slightly disturbed (ulna is at  $51^\circ$  towards face and the radius at  $99^\circ$  towards the abdomen). The legs are contracted with the heels pointing towards the pelvis. The grave contained the following items:

1. Pot of a milk-jug type, semi-fine paste, brown with patches, high conical neck, globular body, straight base, with two perforated handles on the rim. Positioned near the head.
2. Bowl with slightly everted rim, rounded base, carinated shoulder, fired in a reducing atmosphere. Placed by the left hand, with the ulna of the left hand located on top of the vessel.
3. Vessel with two handles, friable, ornamented with spiral incisions, placed between the heels and the pelvis.



**Figure 7** Feature M132, female grave of the Bodrogkeresztúr culture (Source: Julia Ogden)

4. Bowl with carinated shoulder, everted rim and globular body, placed over the heel of the right foot.
5. String of *Spondylus* beads, shell and copper wire, with spiral beads arranged in two rows around the pelvis.
6. Disk shaped *Spondylus* shell beads placed at the ankles.
7. Conical gold foil ornament, bent in a straight angle at the base, decorated with four grooves flanked by rows of dots, created by punching from the outside. Found on the head, above the ear; a hair ornament, probably a wooden hair pin with the head covered in gold foil.
8. Animal offering placed near the left leg bone and foot.

## Bronze Age

The Bronze Age features from the 2023 field season consisted mainly of pits, one small and shallow and one large and deep feature. Feature Cx 96/92 is an interesting discovery, however, as it appears to have been an oval post hole, within which a ceramic cup was deposited. This complete vessel, with a bulging body, carinated shoulder, everted rim and an elevated handle was fired in a reducing atmosphere. It is suggestive of intentional deposition. Votive deposition of vessels or, in this case a single pot, are frequently found in this chronological phase more widely. The deposition is perhaps foundational.

## Conclusion

The 2023 excavations have probably reached the limit of the cemetery, but the trench must be extended in future years to confirm this view. The fieldwork has confirmed the exceptional character of the site and its importance in the archaeology of the region.

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