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CHAMBER-LIKE GRAVES IN THE WEST OF THE POLATSK PRINCIPALITY. POSSIBILITIES OF INTERPRETATION IN THE CONTEXT OF EASTERN EUROPEAN ANTIQUITIES

ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the study of the elite funeral rite of the western regions of the Polatsk Principality at the turn of the 2nd millennium AD. The main attention is paid to the identification of this category of burials with chamber-like graves. The issues of the emergence of

a chamber-like funeral ritual in the west of the Polatsk land, the topography and chronology of chamber-like burials, and the origin and social status of the carriers of this tradition are considered.

Keywords: funeral rite, chamber-like graves, Polatsk Principality

The issue of identifying criteria for the elitism of burials on the basis of the nature of inventory and the characteristics of ritual actions performed in the inhumation process is among the traditional ones for archaeology. At the same time, the traditional character of this issue has by no means led to the development of some universal solution. Each past community could have its own ideas, different from those of its neighbours, about the prestige and status of a person in society and the means of its embodiment in the funeral rite.

This article is devoted to the characteristics of one of the types of high status funeral rite performed by the population of the western regions of the Polatsk Principality from the very end of the 10th to the 12th century. The question posed seems to be relevant for two reasons. First, the funeral rite of the population of the Polatsk Principality of the Old Rusian period is relatively poorly studied in comparison with other regions of Rus'. Secondly, recently a number of new elite burial monuments from the era of the formation of the Old Rusian state have been investigated on the territory of Eastern Europe. The materials of these excavations allow us to take a fresh look at the development of the funeral rite among residents of early urban centres and other groups

of the population who were involved in the processes of creating early state associations and transcontinental trade. The identification of new archaeological sources has led to an intensification of the discussion about the evolution of the prestigious funeral rite in Rus' and the criteria for identifying such burials.

One of the most striking types of elite burials of the era of formation and early stages of existence of the Old Rusian state is the so-called chamber grave funeral rite. At the same time, despite the fact that the elite nature of Old Rusian chamber graves does not raise doubts among researchers, the criteria for identifying such burials and the degree of distribution of this rite in Rus' remain controversial. For this reason, it seems necessary to turn to a brief review of the approaches to the definition of chamber graves formed in Old Rusian archaeology. It should be noted that this article does not aim at an analysis of the entire existing historiography of the study of Eastern European chamber graves. Firstly, such work has already been carried out several times over the last decade.¹ Secondly, in this article we will be primarily interested in the topical issues of studying chamber graves and the current state of the discussion about the place of this type of funeral ritual in the context of Eastern

¹ Janowski 2015, 17–28; Mikhaylov 2016, 15–40; Bibikov 2020, 212–213.

European antiquities from the era of the formation of the Old Russian state and its territory.²

Criteria for Old Russian chamber graves identification

The leading specialist in the study of Old Russian chamber graves is K.A. Mikhaylov, who outlined the main results of his research in the fundamental monograph *The Elite Funeral Rite of Old Rus*.³ As a result of painstaking source study carried out over more than two decades, Mikhaylov created the most complete and detailed catalogue of Old Russian chamber graves, and determined the main characteristic features of a chamber funeral rite in Rus', its origins and chronology.

The close attention to details and strict methodology in the process of developing criteria for identifying specific types and forms of funeral rituals, characteristic of Mikhaylov, save us from the need to go into details of the features of Old Russian burials in chambers. This allows us to restrict ourselves to a brief overview of the main features of chamber graves as identified by Mikhaylov, necessary for the further presentation of the material. According to the researcher,

behind the term 'chamber graves' is a special, different than in other types of burials, funeral rite with a repeated set of ritual actions. In this rite, the main idea was embodied by the builders in the construction of a rather vast underground space, empty and closed on all sides, where the body of the deceased was placed, accompanied by a stable set of equipment.

The space was designed by the builders in the form of a wooden crypt with a roof/ceiling, walls and a floor, using the technologies of North or East European housing construction (frame, pillar structure, etc.). The grave pit where the crypt was located was quite extensive; the length-to-width ratio often ranges from 0.6 to 1.

The characteristic features of the ritual were the placement of the dead in a cell in a sitting position, as well as the paired burials of a man and a woman, the burial of a horse. ... Equally characteristic of the chamber graves was a stable set of equipment, which included frequently repeated combinations of components – a set of ornaments, weapons, horse harnesses.

After the erection of the upper ceiling, on the roof of the chamber a fire was lit for some time. ... After the completion of the ritual activities, a barrow was erected

over the crypt. Thus, the rite of burial in a chamber grave is the inhumation in a vast burial pit with a wooden crypt inside, built like an underground house.⁴

Chamber-like graves – the essence of the phenomenon and approaches to its interpretation

Such an extensive quote from the work of K.A. Mikhaylov is cited because it is impossible to talk about the phenomenon of Old Russian chamber-like graves without a clear understanding of the exact characteristics of the chamber ritual. Actually, the most important result of Mikhaylov's research is the identification of 'pure' chambers which have all the features typical of this type of burials and the determination of the period in which the ritual existed and its socio-cultural characteristics in the context of the formation of the Old Russian state. Today we can confidently say that chamber graves are associated with the necropolises of the first Old Russian towns and large trade and craft centres. The group of population that practised this ritual was closely associated with urban communities and consisted of multi-ethnic representatives of the elite of Old Russian society.⁵

At the same time, researchers of the Old Russian funeral rite have repeatedly noted that in Eastern Europe, in addition to the elite burials proper, which meet all the criteria of classic chamber graves, there is also a category of burials in the ritual of which there may be individual, often irregular, 'chamber' features. Such burials are united under the general name 'chamber-like graves' (*kvazikamera*). No clear criteria for chamber-like graves have yet been identified; however, it is widely believed that the origin of such funeral rituals is directly related to the classic chamber graves. Actually, given the secondary nature of the chamber-like ritual in relation to the chamber graves, the selection of its criteria is an extremely difficult task.

The conceptual definition of a chamber-like funeral rite was formulated by Y.M. Lesman in a work dedicated to the identification of the Scandinavian component of Old Russian material culture published after his death.⁶

According to the researcher, such burials

were performed in and without coffins, could be placed in specially built (of wood, earth, turf, stone) relatively

² This article considers only the problems of Old Russian chamber and chamber-like graves. It should be noted that over the past decade, Polish archaeologists have been enviably active in the study of the chamber funeral rite. Unfortunately, the limited size of the publication does not allow even a brief overview of the existing Polish historiography of the question. For this reason, I will only refer to the key Polish studies of chamber funeral

ritual of recent years: Buko 2016; Gardela 2013; Janowski 2015; Wadył 2019, etc.

³ Mikhaylov 2016.

⁴ Mikhaylov 2016, 40.

⁵ Mikhaylov 2016, 180–181.

⁶ Lesman 2014.

spacious rooms – chambers (the latter were most often located under the mounds of barrows, but could also be in the body of the mound, or not be associated with a barrow at all), but sometimes in small pits (corresponding to the size of the coffin or body), which were dug both in the ground before the construction of the barrow and in the already finished (sometimes earlier) mound, they could be located under the mound of the barrow, on the surface of the ground or on a bedding, etc. The corpse could be placed lying down or, less often, sitting down.⁷

Lesman believed that such burials, although not very numerous,

became widespread almost throughout the entire Old Russian territory only from the end of the 10th to first half of the 12th centuries. They are usually found in large cemeteries or large accumulations of smaller graveyards. Such burials are sometimes distinguished by the richness of inventory, occasionally including Scandinavian finds (or ones derived from Scandinavian prototypes), but this is far from the rule. Chamber graves dating from the end of the 11th and the 12th centuries are not distinguished by a particular richness of inventory.⁸

V.Y. Sobolev repeatedly turned to the study of chamber-like graves in the northwest of Russia. Based on the analysis of materials from the Novgorod land, he came to the conclusion that

the 11th century Russian society preserved the idea of chambers as a prestigious type of burials ... 11th century chamber graves are already part of a purely local Christian funeral ritual. They were built by a population hardly familiar with the details of the 'original' tradition, hence the differences in the technique and methods of their construction. ... Regarding the social status of the people buried in the chambers, it can be assumed that they were representatives of the central administration sent to key points of the Novgorod land, apparently not of local origin, and their closest relatives.⁹

According to Sobolev, chamber-like graves included both those made in large graves, where traces of wooden ceilings and/or intra-grave structures were discovered, and in-ground wooden and turf structures, the size of which exceeded the size of ordinary coffins. In the Novgorod land in the middle of the 11th and first half of the 12th centuries

society retains only a general idea of chambers, specific methods and techniques of construction are individual

and vary from one community to another, from cemetery to cemetery.¹⁰

The above definitions of chamber-like graves clearly show how difficult it is to develop the criteria for this funeral rite. These difficulties notwithstanding, in 2020 D.V. Bibikov made an attempt to classify chamber-like graves on the Dnieper Right Bank, which seems extremely interesting and promising for further development of the systematization of Old Russian chamber-like graves. The researcher identified four main types of such graves:

1) chambers with coffins. The main aspect of such burials differentiating them from classic chambers is precisely the presence of coffins;

2) overground chambers. A constructive feature of this type of chamber-like graves is the placement of the burial structure at the level of the horizon or on a bedding. Most of the burials in such overground chamber-like graves were also performed in coffins;

3) 'earthen' chambers, which are large grave pits that did not have wooden walls and floors, but had wooden ceilings, thanks to which the inner space of the grave remained uncovered with earth. In the Middle Dnieper Region and Volhynia, in all chamber-like graves of this type, the bodies of the deceased were in coffins;

4) 'large burial pits' without wooden structures. The width of such pits had to reach at least 1.4–1.5 m, and the ratio of width to length was from 0.6 to 1. Bibikov believes that the identification of chamber-like graves of this type is the most arbitrary in comparison with the first three.¹¹

As a result of the analysis of the chamber-like graves of the Dnieper Right Bank, Bibikov came to the conclusion that in the last quarter of the 10th century a number of morphologically similar structures appeared in this Old Russian region, inheriting from the classic chamber grave ritual. The beginning of the mass distribution of chamber-like graves on the territory of Volhynia is connected by Bibikov with the activities undertaken by the Kiev Prince Vladimir Syatoslavich to spread his power in the East Slavic region.¹²

In the Belarusian archaeological literature, the question of the presence of chamber-like graves in the west of the Polatsk Principality (Fig. 1: 1) was first raised by the author of the present article in the process of analyzing the results of the study of the Pahoshcha (Pahošča) barrow cemetery.¹³ Later, A.V. Voytekovich in his summary monograph dedicated to the funeral rite of the

⁷ Lesman 2014, 79.

⁸ Lesman 2014, 79.

⁹ Sobolev 1997, 276–277.

¹⁰ Sobolev 2018, 66.

¹¹ Bibikov 2020, 214–218.

¹² Bibikov 2020, 238–239.

¹³ Plavinski 2017, 156–158.



Fig. 1. 1 – Polatsk Principality on the map of Eastern Europe; 2 – cemeteries with the chamber-like graves of Belarus: 1 – Pahoshcha; 2 – Izbishcha; 3 – Charnevichy; 4 – Zabor’ye; 5 – Vitunichy; 6 – Nyabyshyna II; 7 – Byahoml’ (Marhavitsa); 8 – Slabada; 9 – Zaslauye; 10 – Zvyazda (Auhustava); 11 – Barysau (drawing by M. Plavinski).

population of the Polatsk land in the 10th–12th centuries supported the author’s conclusions.¹⁴ In addition, a common conference paper by the author and V.M. Vasiliev was devoted to substantiating the idea of the existence of a number of chamber-like graves in the western regions of the Polatsk Principality.¹⁵

Chamber-like graves in the west of the Polatsk Principality

No classic chamber graves are currently known from the territory of the Polatsk land. Actually, their presence can only be assumed in the necropolises of early main

¹⁴ Voytekhovich 2019, 33, 42.

¹⁵ Plavinskiy, Vasil’ev 2018.

town centres.¹⁶ On the territory of the Polatsk land, these necropolises include, first of all, the barrow cemeteries of Polatsk and Viciebsk. However, the mounds of these barrows have not survived to our day. Their traces, visually perceptible on the surface, were destroyed during the expansion of the urban territory from the Middle Ages on. At the same time, an analysis of iconographic and written sources as well as some archaeological data provides grounds for reconstructing the location of these necropolises in the topographic structure of these early urban centres.¹⁷ This, in turn, allows one to hope for a future identification and study of burials that have survived below the levelled barrows.

As already noted, raising the question of identifying chamber-like graves in the western regions of the Polatsk land was prompted by the materials of the excavations of the barrow cemetery in **Pahoshcha (Pahošča)**, Braslau District, Viciebsk Region (Fig. 1: 2: 1), carried out by the author in 2005–2009.

The cemetery consisted of 15 barrows, with 11 of them containing burials which can be divided into two cultural and chronological horizons. The first of the horizons includes barrow 9, belonging to the Pskov Long Barrow Culture and dating back to the 6th–7th or 7th centuries. The second cultural and chronological horizon of the necropolis includes ten barrows containing 15 burials. The dating of this horizon fits into the timeframe of the second half of the 10th to first half of the 11th century, while its functioning seems to be most probable from the very end of the 10th to the first decades of the 11th century.¹⁸

An analysis of the funeral rite and grave goods of the second cultural and chronological horizon suggests that it was left by a community in which representatives of the princely administration occupied a dominant position, who had a certain corporate idea of the funeral ritual corresponding to their group and social status. The main features of the funeral rite of the barrow cemetery in Pahoshcha are as follows:

- in the planigraphic structure of the necropolis, the dominant position is occupied by mounds containing male inhumations with weapons – barrows 1, 5, 6, 10, 12 and 14;
- burials of adult men have similar features in terms of ritual and grave goods. All of them are oriented with their heads to the east (with slight deviations). Those buried in barrows 1, 10, 12 and 14 were placed in birch-bark coffin-like structures, which were located in large pits under the mounds and covered with

wooden ceilings. In barrows 5 and 6, birch-bark coffins with the bodies of the dead were placed in large wooden structures erected in the bases of the barrows;

- in turn, the lack of a certain standard is noticeable in the female funeral rite. Clearly, female burials have a subordinate and secondary character in comparison with male inhumations with weapons.¹⁹

The presence in Pahoshcha of burial pits covered with wooden ceiling under the mounds and wooden structures in the bases of barrows is of greatest interest in the context of pondering the existence of chamber-like graves in the Polatsk land.

The ritual of burial in a pit under a barrow can be most fully reconstructed in mound 12 (Fig. 3: 2). Initially, a round-shaped fire pit was made in the base of the mound. A burial pit measuring 3.7 × 2.8 m and 1.05 m deep was dug in it, oriented along the northwest–southeast axis (Fig. 2). The grave contained burial 2 as the main one, accompanied by burial 3 (Fig. 3: 1). The main burial – of a man of 20–25 years with a rich inventory that included two items of weaponry – was made in a coffin-like structure, consisting of a lower board or boards on which the body was laid, and, possibly, low vertical boards on the sides. This structure, with the body of the deceased placed in it, was wrapped in birch bark. To the right of the main burial (burial 2), there was burial 3 without grave goods, which belonged to an adult woman. Both skeletons are oriented with their heads to the southeast. The grave pit was covered with a ceiling of logs (Figs 2: 2; 3: 2). On this ceiling were scattered the bones and inventory of cremation burial 1, belonging to a 25–30-year-old woman. Then the mound was erected.

Similar features of the funeral rite can be traced in barrows 1, 10 and 14. In barrow 1, the burial of a man of about 30 years with a spear was placed in a pit 2.2 × 1.4 m in size and 0.6 m deep. It was located in a structure made of birch bark. The grave pit was covered with a wooden ceiling (Fig. 4).

In barrow 10, the inhumation of a man aged 49–51 was in a pit 3.5 × 1.9 m in size and 1.2 m deep. The burial, accompanied by an axe, was in a birch-bark structure similar to a coffin. The pit was also covered with a wooden ceiling (Figs 5–6).

In barrow 14, a male inhumation was placed in a pit 3 × 2 m in size and 0.8 m deep. The body of a 20–30-year-old man was in a birch bark ‘coffin’. The grave goods included an axe. As in previous cases, the pit was covered with a wooden ceiling (Fig. 7).²⁰

¹⁶ Mikhaylov 2016, 180.

¹⁷ Alekseyev 1966, 167–169; Duk, Plavinski 2006, 173–180; Duk 2010, 106–109; Plavinski, Babenka 2006, 59–60.

¹⁸ Plavinski 2017, 199–200.

¹⁹ Plavinski 2017, 7–201.

²⁰ Plavinski 2017, 13–21, 49–56, 125–131.

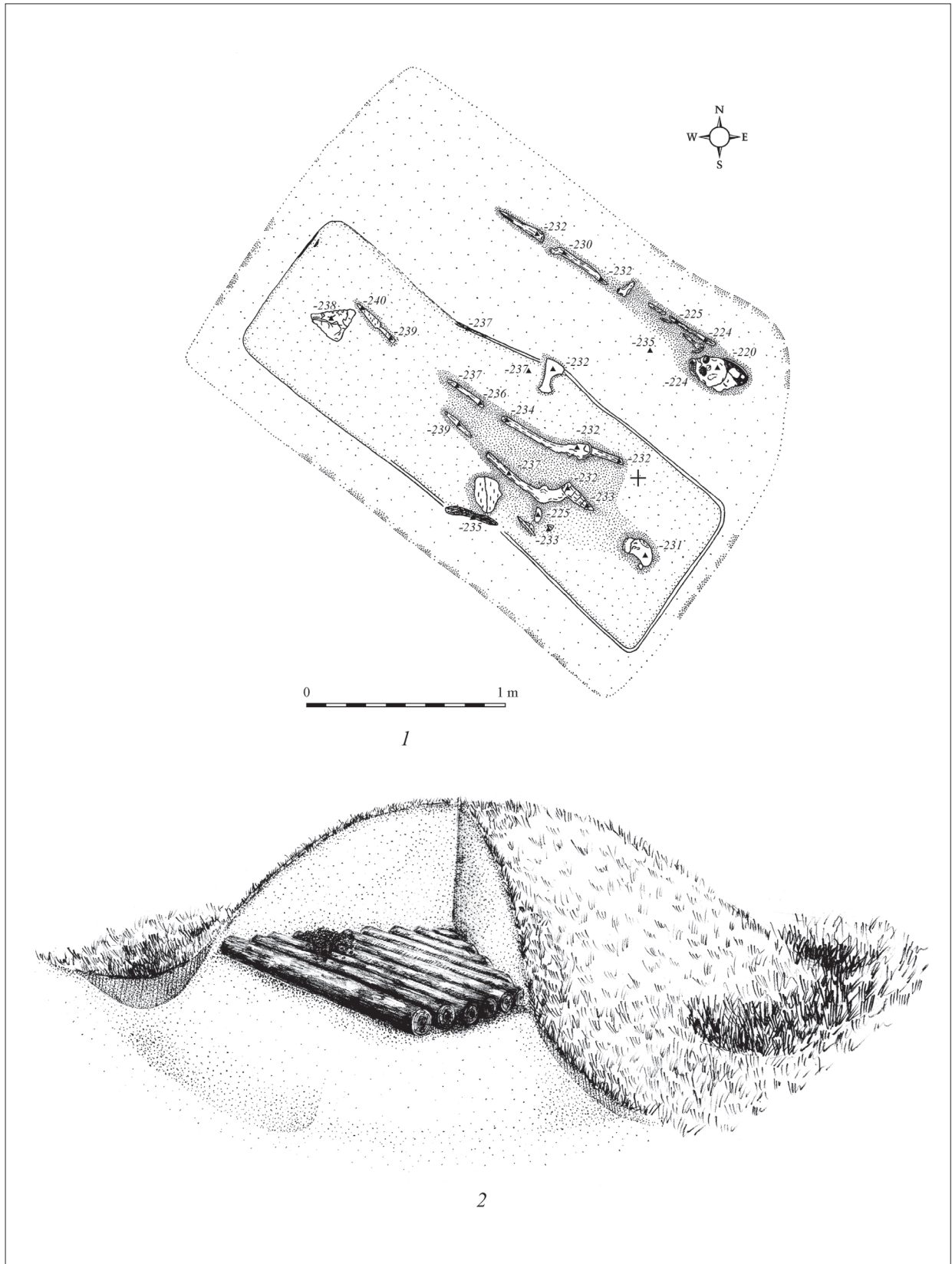


Fig. 3. Pahoshcha barrow cemetery, barrow 12: 1 – plan of burials 2 and 3 (drawing by M. Plavinski); 2 – reconstruction of the mound structure (reconstruction by M. Plavinski, drawing by M. Latyshava (Stsiapanava)).

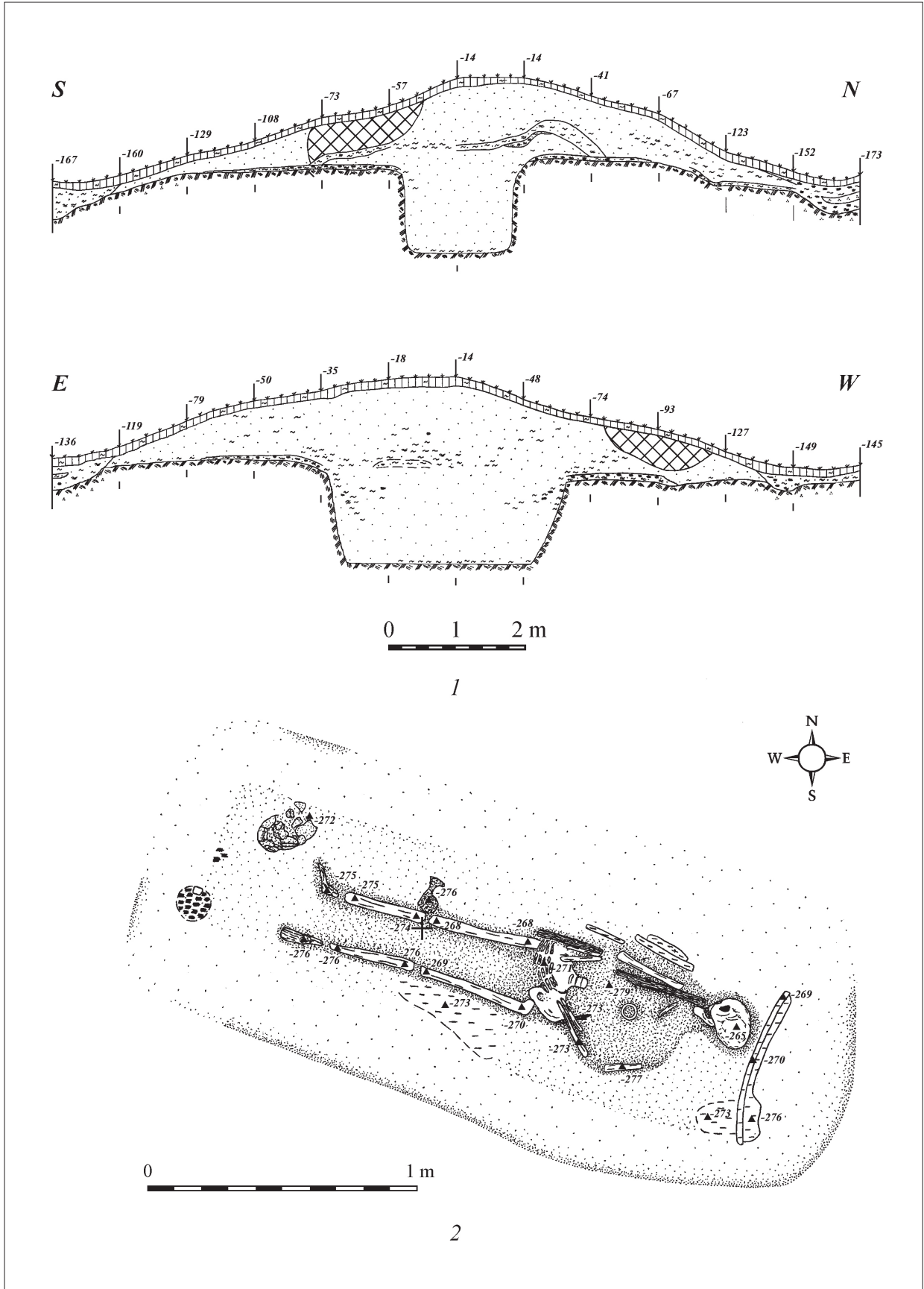


Fig. 5. Pahoshcha barrow cemetery, barrow 10: 1 – barrow sections; 2 – plan of burial (drawing by M. Plavinski).

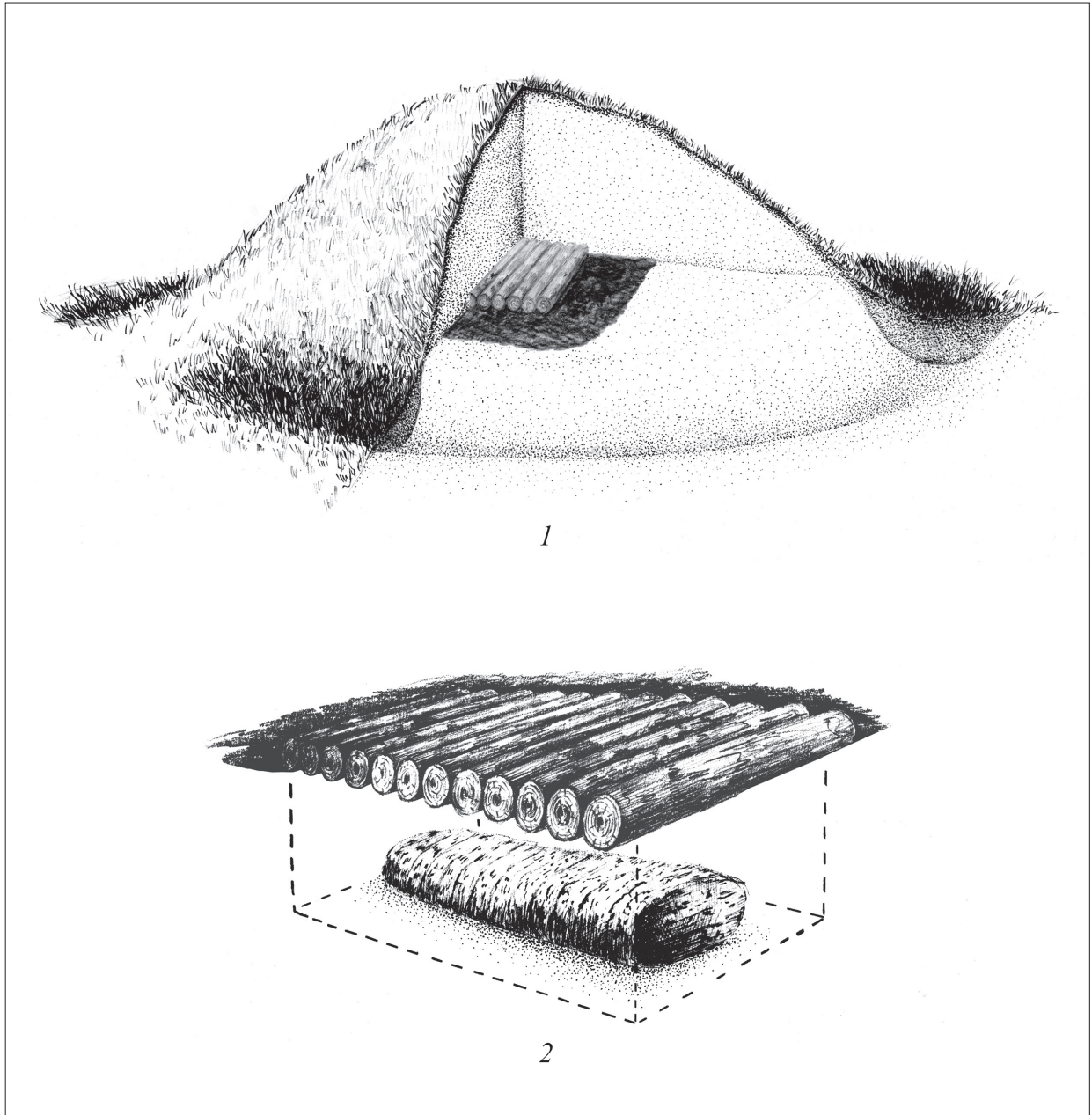


Fig. 6. Pahoshcha barrow cemetery, barrow 10: 1 – reconstruction of mound structure; 2 – reconstruction of grave pit (reconstruction by M. Plavinski, drawing by M. Latyshava (Stsiapanava)).

In all of the above barrows, inhumations were placed in burial pits, much larger in size than required by sanitary considerations. All the pits were covered with wooden ceilings in such a way that their interior space was not filled. These characteristics are fully consistent with the main idea of chamber burials – the creation of a vast empty underground space. Conversely, the absence of wooden crypts with a floor and walls inside this space does not allow a grave to be classified as a classic chamber. Accordingly, such graves can be confidently classified as chamber-like graves.

The burials in barrows 5 and 6 also represent the manifestation of the idea of creating a vast empty space in which to place the bodies of the buried; however, this space was not under but above ground, which, in turn, also allows us to consider them chamber-like graves.

In barrow 5, two inhumation burials were placed in birch bark coffins in the base of the mound (Fig. 8: 2). The bodies of the deceased were in the centre of a rectangular wooden structure, probably made of planks and oriented parallel to the burials. The width of the structure was 2.85 m, its length was more than 3 m, and the height

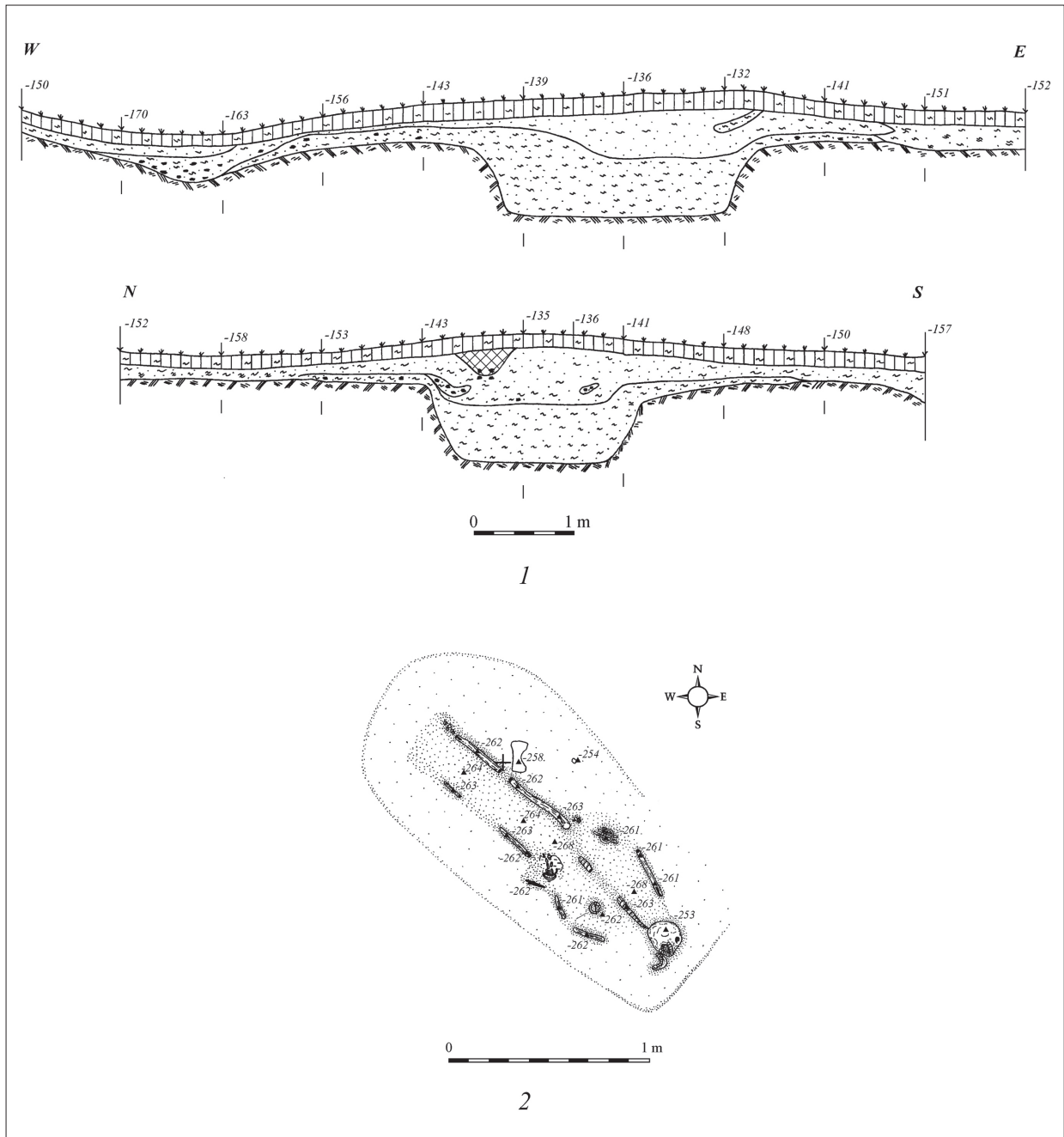


Fig. 7. Pahoshcha barrow cemetery, barrow 14: 1 – barrow sections; 2 – plan of burial (drawing by M. Plavinski).

could reach approximately 0.4–0.5 m (Fig. 9: 1). On the edge of the base of the future burial mound, an annular lining was made of pieces of turf, which was supposed to strengthen the slopes of the embankment (Fig. 9: 2).

The (main) burial 1 belonged to a man and was accompanied by rich grave goods including, among other items, balances and a set of weights, Arab dirhams and

Western European denarii, a lock, two keys, a spear and an axe. Burial 2, of a female, despite the presence of a fairly representative set of grave goods, can be counted among accompanying ones. Probably, in a certain sense, the buried woman can be considered as part of the inventory of the main male burial.²¹

²¹ Plavinski 2017, 97–123; Plavinskiy 2018.

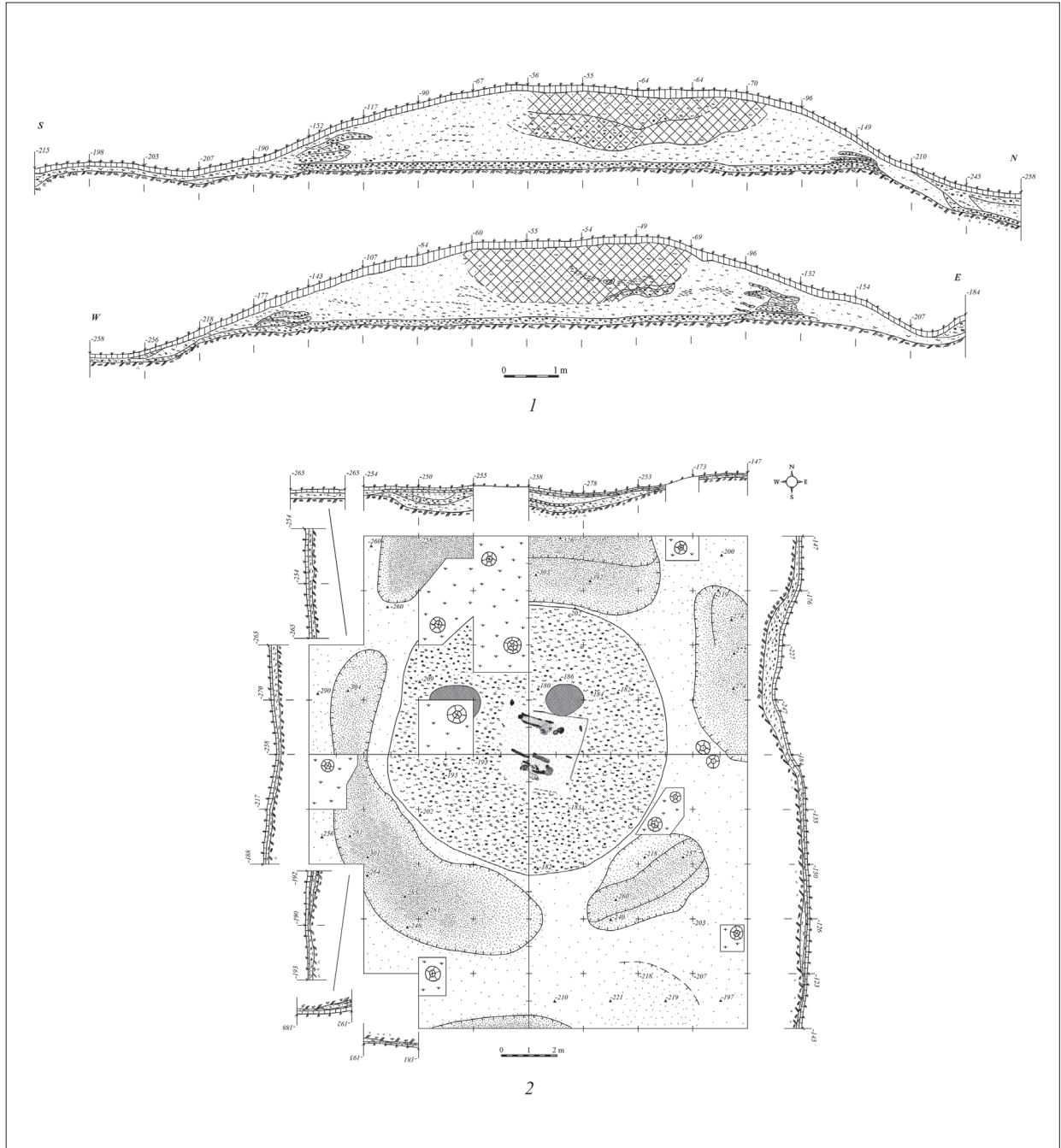


Fig. 8. Pahoshcha barrow cemetery, barrow 5: 1 – barrow sections; 2 – plan of the basic ground level (drawing by M. Plavinski).

In barrow 6, the burial of a man aged 20–30 years was found in the base. The body was in a birch bark coffin and was accompanied by a set of grave goods that included a javelin. The coffin was placed inside a wooden structure 5.5 m long, 5 m wide and up to 0.45 m high (Fig. 10).²²

The data presented allow us to believe that the members of the community who erected barrows with high status male burials in Pahoshcha had a certain idea of the chamber grave funeral rite, clearly understood its prestige and tried to reproduce it to the best of their ideas and capabilities in the form of chamber-like graves.

²² Plavinski 2017, 77–84.

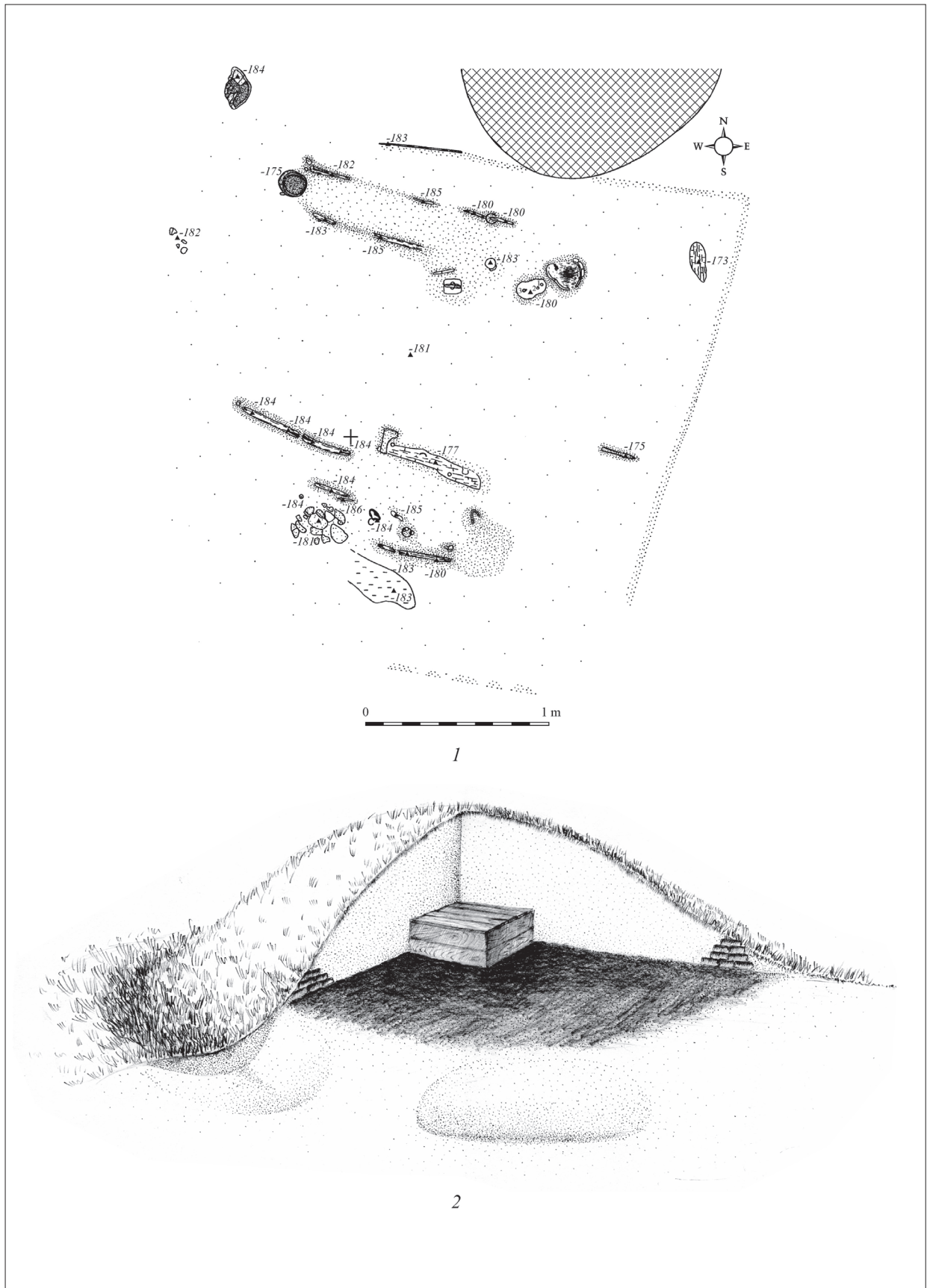


Fig. 9. Pahoshcha barrow cemetery, barrow 5: 1 – plan of burials 1 and 2 (drawing by M. Plavinski); 2 – reconstruction of mound structure (reconstruction by M. Plavinski, drawing by M. Latyshava (Stsiapanava)).

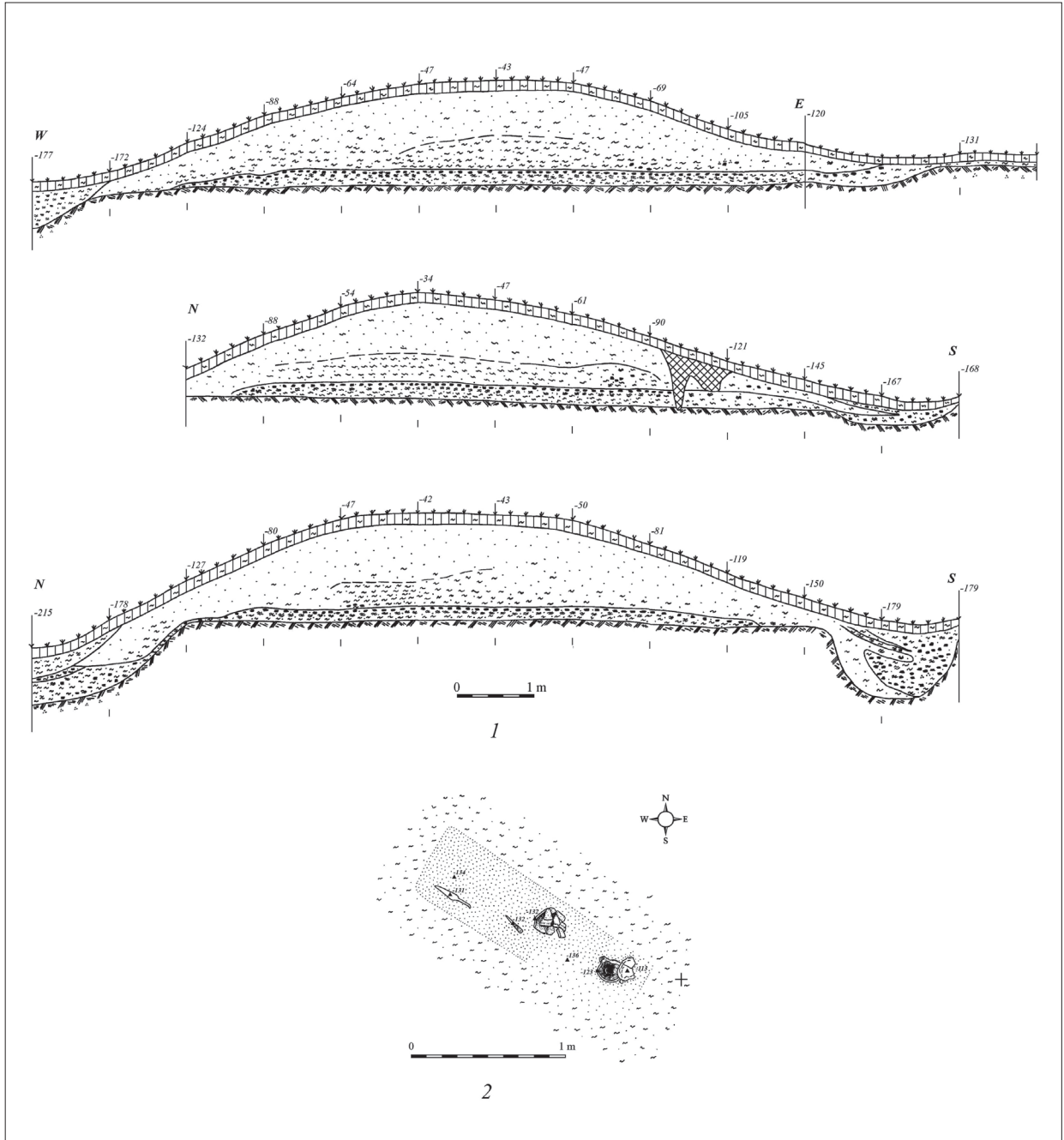


Fig. 10. Pahoshcha barrow cemetery, barrow 6: 1 – barrow sections; 2 – plan of burial (drawing by M. Plavinski).

Another necropolis in which a number of burials have been identified that meet the characteristics of chamber-like graves is the barrow cemetery in **Izbishcha (Izbišča)**, Lahoysk District, Minsk Region (Fig. 1: 2: 2). The Izbishcha necropolis is located on the right bank of River Dzvinas (left tributary of the Vilija in its

upper reaches). This cemetery was completely explored in 1987–1990. 114 barrows were excavated in the necropolis by V.V. Kazey, V.Y. Sobal' and H.V. Shtykhau.²³ At first glance, the rare case of a complete study of a barrow cemetery could allow for the use of the obtained data as a basis for reliable chronological assessments and

²³ Shtykhau 2008, 5–6.

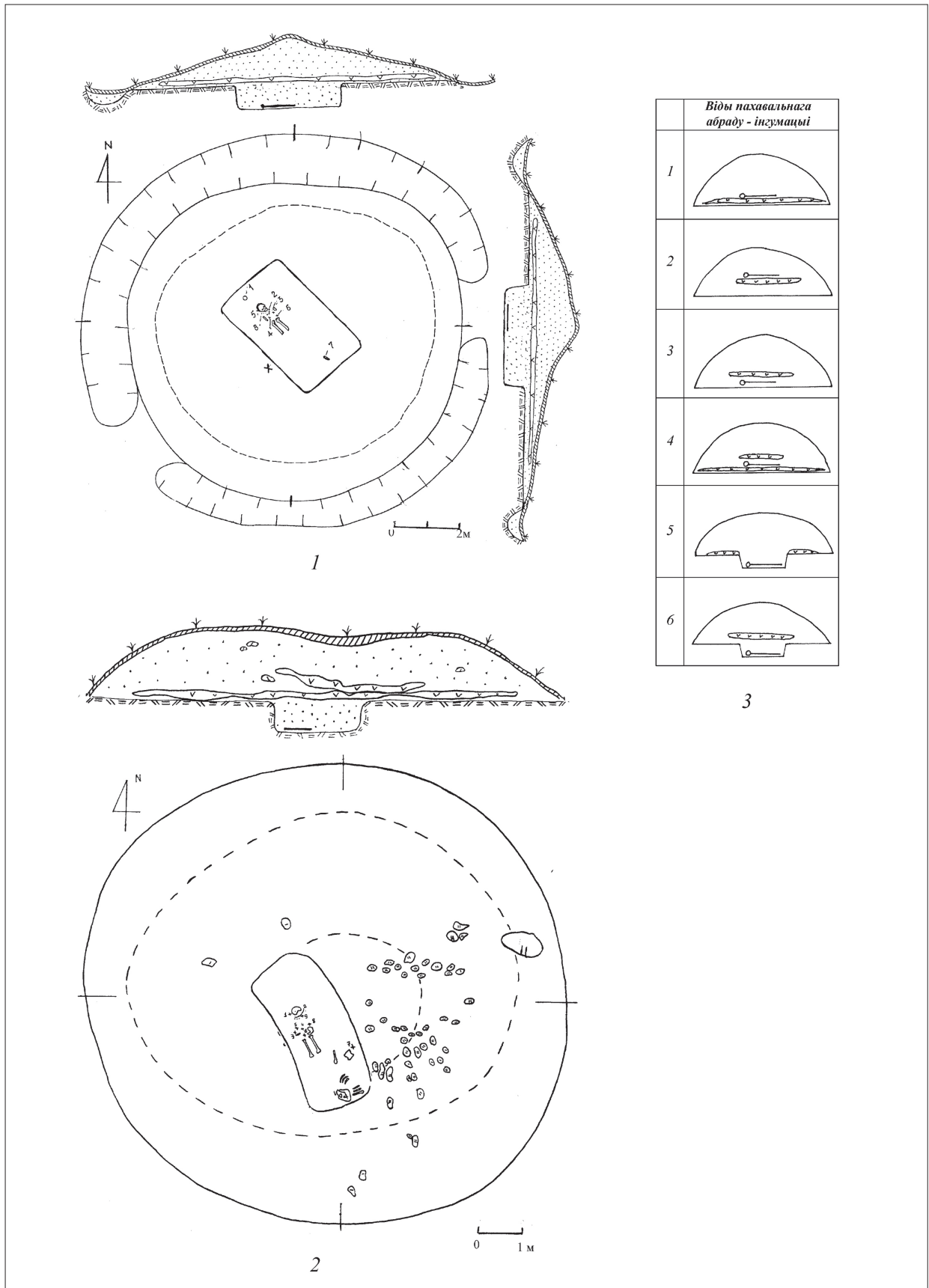


Fig. 11. Izbishcha barrow cemetery: 1 – sections and plan of the basic earth level of barrow 26; 2 – sections and plan of the basic earth level of barrow 99; 3 – typology of inhumation burials (after H. Shtykhau).

sociological observations. However, the state of the excavation reporting documentation used by H.V. Shtykhau in preparing a summary monograph about the Izbishcha cemetery,²⁴ as well as the state of preservation of collections of finds stored at the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, do not always allow for the published data to be treated with complete confidence. Therefore, in this paper I will allow myself to give only a brief summary of the most general considerations about the existence of chamber-like burials in the Izbishcha necropolis, leaving the detailed elaboration of this issue for the future.

In considering the question of the presence of chamber-like graves in the western regions of the Polatsk land, barrows 26 and 99 are of greatest interest in the Izbishcha cemetery.

Barrow 26 contained an inhumation of a 25–30-year-old woman with her head oriented to the northwest. The woman was placed in a burial pit measuring 3.8 × 2.4 m with a depth of 0.7 m, covered with a wooden ceiling (Fig. 11: 1). The body was accompanied by rich grave goods, including a set of Arab dirhams, Western European denarii and Byzantine miliarensia, converted into pendants as well as other ornaments, and a metal comb.²⁵ The dating of the burial can be determined on the basis of the numismatic material within the timeframe of the beginning or the first half of the 11th century.²⁶

In barrow 99 the burial of a woman 35–40 years old, with her head oriented to the north, was located in a covered pit 3.8 × 1.6 m in size and 0.7 m deep (Fig. 11: 2). The burial goods featured a rich set of ornaments, including a dirham converted into pendant. It should be noted that during the excavations remains of boards were traced under the skeleton, and goat bones were found in the southeast corner of the burial pit.²⁷ The dating of the burial can be preliminarily determined within the timeframe of the late 10th to the early 11th century.²⁸

The above characteristics of barrows 26 and 99 make it possible to reliably classify them as chamber-like graves. It should be noted that in the publication of materials from the excavations in Izbishcha, H.V. Shtykhau attributed both these mounds to inhumations of type 6. The author describes this type of funeral rite as follows: 'A pit was dug into the surface of the ground, the buried person was placed in it, covered with sand (earth), then a fire was burned and a mound was erected'.²⁹ However, a careful

examination of the sections of the barrows suggests that in this case the researcher was unable to correctly interpret the stratigraphy (Fig. 11: 3). The interpretation of the ash-coal interlayers over the burial pits as the remains of their carbonized wooden ceilings seems to be more probable, especially since in the case of barrows 26 and 99 this explanation does not raise objections.

According to H.V. Shtykhau, type 6 inhumations were identified in 19 cases in Izbishcha.³⁰ Without dwelling on the description of each of these complexes, we present here only the metric characteristics of the burial pits under the barrows (Tab. 1).

It is clearly seen from the table that most of the pits under the barrows in Izbishcha are much larger than the sanitary norms for burying the bodies of the deceased require. Accordingly, the vast dimensions of the grave pits in the Izbishcha cemetery and the presence of wooden ceilings above them make it possible to raise the question of their attribution to chamber-like graves.

At the moment, the barrows explored in Pahoshcha and Izbishcha are the most striking examples of chamber-like graves in the western regions of the Polatsk land. Yet in the necropolises of the region under consideration a number of barrows can be distinguished which can also be correlated with this funeral tradition.

These monuments include, first of all, the barrow cemetery in **Charnevichy (Čarnievičy)**, Hlybokaye District, Viciebsk Region (Fig. 1: 2: 3), the research of which was carried out in 1935 and 1937–1938 by H. Cehak-Hoľubowiczowa. A total of 79 barrows were excavated.³¹ A number of barrows excavated in the vicinity of Charnevichy contained burials according to the rite of inhumation in large pits. Unfortunately, in the article published by H. Cehak-Hoľubowicz devoted to a preliminary analysis of the results of excavations of barrow groups V and I only some sections of mounds are given and their plans are absent. The article does, however, contain data on the size of burial pits (Tab. 2).

In 1938, in group V nine burial mounds were excavated, among which barrow 6 deserves special attention, under whose mound a pit 0.8 m deep and 2.5 × 1.5 m in size was found, containing a male inhumation with the head oriented to the southwest. Irregular dark spots with inclusions of coal were found in the sand mound, which, judging by the published profile (Fig. 12: 1), are the remains of a grave pit ceiling.³²

²⁴ Shtykhau 2008, 5–248.

²⁵ Shtykhau 2008, 23.

²⁶ Plavinskiy 2016, 4; Sinchuk 2015, 193–194.

²⁷ Shtykhau 2008, 29.

²⁸ Plavinskiy 2016, 4.

²⁹ Shtykhau 2008, 34.

³⁰ Shtykhau 2007, 60, fig. 8; 2008, 22–29, 34.

³¹ Golubovich, Golubovich 1945, 128.

³² Cehak-Hoľubowiczowa 1939, 423, 427–428, Fig. 1.

Tab. 1. Izbishcha barrow cemetery. The size of burial pits under the barrows.

Barrow no.	The size of the burial pits under the barrows (in metres)		
	Length	Width	Depth
25	2.5	1.3	0.5
26	3.8	2.4	0.7
29	2.6	1.2	0.5
35	3.0	2.0	0.4
36	3.0	1.2	0.4
43	2.8	1.5	0.9
49	2.0	1.0	0.4
51	2.8	1.2	0.5
54	1.8	1.0	0.6
63	2.8	1.6	0.6
69	–	–	–
73	2.1	1.6	0.65
74	1.9	1.1	1.0
76	2.3	1.1	0.6
87	2.3	1.2	0.6
89	2.2	0.7	0.5
97	2.5	1.5	0.5
99	3.8	1.6	0.7
107	2.6	1.4	0.6

In the mounds of the rest of excavated group V barrows, H. Cehak-Hołubowiczowa did not record any traces that could be interpreted as the remains of burial pit ceilings. At the same time, it is obvious that some of these pits are much larger than the bodies of the dead.³³

In group I, also excavated in 1938, layers of dark sand with coal were found in the mounds of five of the seven investigated barrows (Fig. 12: 2). The presence of interlayers with coal was also noted in the filling of grave pits under these barrows.³⁴ The interlayers could also be interpreted as traces of wooden ceilings of the grave pits. However, the extremely scarce descriptions of stratigraphy available in the publication do not allow for such an assumption to be made with complete certainty.

³³ Cehak-Hołubowiczowa 1939, 422–429.

Tab. 2. Charnevichy barrow cemetery. The size of the burial pits under the barrows.

Group no.	Barrow no.	The size of the burial pits under the barrows (in metres)		
		Length	Width	Depth
V	1	1.5	1.0	0.5
V	2	2.3	1.2	0.9
V	3	2.4	1.3	0.7
V	4	2.2	1.0	0.7
V	5	3.0	1.4	0.8
V	6	2.5	1.5	0.8
V	7	2.3	1.5	1.0
V	8	2.5	1.2	0.9
V	13	1.8	1.0	1.1
I	1	2.5	1.4	0.7
I	2	3.3	1.4	0.7
I	3	2.3	1.0	0.6
I	4	2.3	1.1	1.0
I	5	2.6	1.1	1.1
I	6	2.7	1.1	0.9
I	7	2.5	1.1	1.0

Barrow groups I and V of the Charnevichy cemetery can be preliminarily dated to the 11th century, or, in a somewhat wider timeframe, from the very end of the 10th to the 12th century. Despite the limited information at our disposal about the structural features of the mounds of the necropolis, at least one of them, barrow 6 of group V, can be quite confidently classified as a chamber-like grave. In the case of the rest of the barrows, in some mounds traces of wooden structures have been found, yet there is no certainty that they can be interpreted as the remains of burial pit ceilings. At the same time, the discovery in Charnevichy of inhumations in large burial pits that did not have ceilings above them allows us to assume with all possible caution that this necropolis is a rare example of an adoption, rethinking and local transformation of a chamber-like grave funeral rite.

The 11th–12th century barrow cemetery of **Zabor'ye (Zabor'e)** is also located in Hlybokaye District, Viciebsk

³⁴ Cehak-Hołubowiczowa 1939, 430–439.

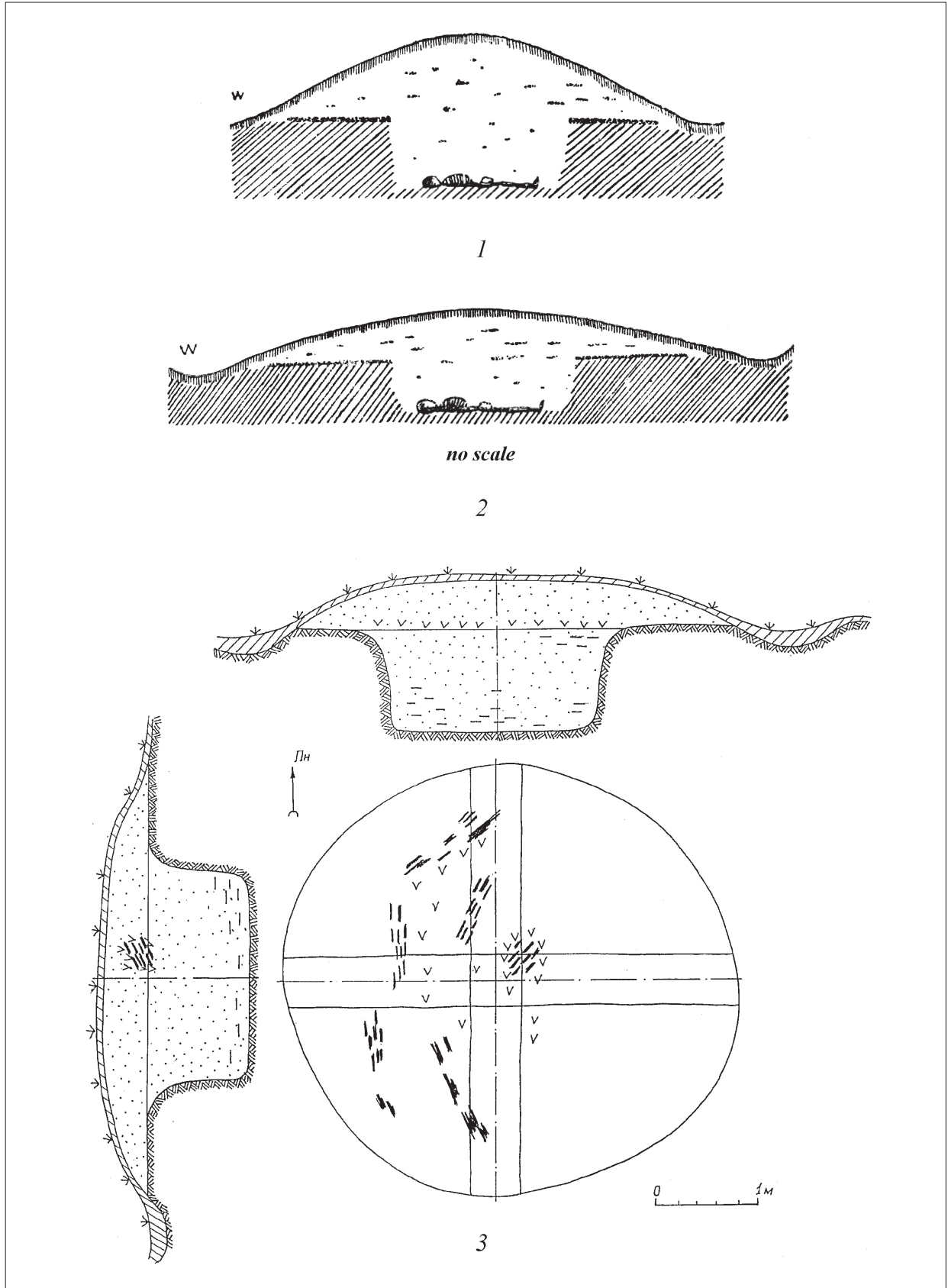


Fig. 12. Charnevichy and Zabor'ye barrow cemeteries: 1 – section of barrow 6 of group V, Charnevichy cemetery; 2 – section of barrow 5 of group I, Charnevichy cemetery; 3 – sections and plan of the basic earth level of barrow Zabor'ye cemetery (1–2 – after H. Čehak-Hoľubowiczowa, 3 – after L.U. Duchyts and A.V. Voytekhovich).

Region (Fig. 1: 2: 4). It was investigated in 2000–2001 by L.U. Duchyts and A.V. Voytekhovich. Of particular interest is barrow 7, which had relatively small dimensions: 4.4 × 4.2 m and a height of 0.5 m. During the excavations, it was revealed that:

Coal was found in the sandy mound. When excavating the northwest and southwest sectors, parallel remains of a wooden structure were revealed in the base. Near the centre, a coal spot with a diameter of 0.2 m was recorded. During further excavations, it turned out that this was part of a significant accumulation of coal. Most likely, there was a pillar that supported a wooden structure, which was burned before the mound was erected. There was a dark ash-coal layer all over the base of the barrow. Under the mound there was a 2 × 2 m pit, 1 m deep. No traces of the burial were found.³⁵

The above description of the stratigraphy, together with the sections and plan of the base of the barrow (Fig. 12: 3), makes it possible to form a certain idea of its structure. Apparently, over a fairly large and deep pit, which did not contain a burial or its remains were not revealed during the excavations, a wooden ceiling was made, supported by a vertical pillar (this structural element was not recorded on the plan and sections of the mound). However, the initial incorrect assumption that the pit was filled in and the ceiling was burned, and not carbonized in a natural way, did not allow the authors to adequately envision the structure, although its archaeological traces were recorded in sufficient detail in the course of research. The dating of barrow 7 can only be determined within the timeframe of the functioning of the Zabor'ye necropolis – the 11th–12th centuries. Despite the fact that no burial was identified under the mound, its classification as a chamber-like grave seems to be quite justified due to the presence of a vast empty space under the mound, covered with a wooden ceiling.

Several burials close in their characteristics to chamber-like graves were unearthed during excavations conducted by A.V. Voytekhovich in the very upper reaches of the Byarezina, in fact, on the watershed of the Byarezina and Vilija, in the barrow cemeteries Vitunichy, Nyabyshyna II and Byahoml' (Marhavitsa). Given that the materials of these excavations were recently published by their author,³⁶ I will not consider in detail these burial complexes, but only briefly describe them and state the

reasons for considering them in the context of studying the chamber-like grave funeral rite.³⁷

The end of 10th to 12th centuries barrow cemetery in **Vitunichy (Vituničy)**, Dokshytsy District Viciebsk Region is located on the right bank of River Ponya, which is a right tributary of the Byarezina (Fig. 1: 2: 5). In 2002–2006 A.V. Voytekhovich excavated 19 of the 42 barrows preserved in this cemetery.³⁸

In the mound of barrow 34 traces of a wooden ceiling were found in the form of a saturated ash-coal layer. A pit 2.4 × 1.4 m in size and 0.35 m deep was found under the barrow, oriented from the west to the east. Along the walls of the pit layers of ash and coal were also traced, reaching the very bottom (Fig. 13: 1), which suggests the presence of wooden walls.³⁹

In the mound of barrow 37 traces of a wooden ceiling in the form of an ash-coal layer were likewise found. Under the mound there was a burial pit 2.6 × 1.4 m in size and 0.3 m deep, oriented along the southwest–northeast axis. Ashes and coal were also found in the upper part of the filling of the pit, which can be interpreted as traces of subsidence of the wooden ceiling. At the bottom of the pit a female burial was found, oriented with the head to the southwest, dated by the author of the excavations to the 12th century (Fig. 13: 2).⁴⁰

It should be noted that several more barrows were explored in Vitunichy the inhumations in which were placed in pits covered with wooden ceilings (barrows 18, 22),⁴¹ but their relatively small size does not allow to confidently classify them as chamber-like graves.

The **Nyabyshyna II (Niabyšyna II)** barrow cemetery, in Dokshytsy District, Viciebsk Region, is located on the left bank of the Ponya (Fig. 1: 2: 6). The necropolis consists of 50 barrows. In 2006–2009 A.V. Voitekhovich excavated here four barrows ranging from the 10th to the first half of the 12th century.⁴² Under the mound of barrow 48 a grave pit 2.5 × 1.2 m in size and 0.6 m deep was found, oriented along the west–east axis. In the filling of the pit a layer of wood decay was revealed, probably being traces of a wooden ceiling. In the northwest corner of the pit and in the middle of its south edge traces of pillars were recorded on which a wooden ceiling was probably laid (Fig. 14: 1).⁴³

The barrow cemetery in **Byahoml' / Marhavitsa (Biahoml' / Marhavica)**, Dokshytsy District, Viciebsk Region, is located on the right bank of the Byarezina

³⁵ Duchyts, Vaytsyakhovich 2002, 169, fig. 8.

³⁶ Voytekhovich 2019, 152–267.

³⁷ I express my sincere gratitude to A.V. Voytekhovich for valuable advice and comprehensive assistance in using the materials from his excavations.

³⁸ Voytekhovich 2019, 164–174.

³⁹ Voytekhovich 2019, 172, fig. 98.

⁴⁰ Voytekhovich 2019, 173, fig. 101.

⁴¹ Voytekhovich 2019, 170–171.

⁴² Voytekhovich 2019, 179.

⁴³ Voytekhovich 2019, 180–181, fig. 124.

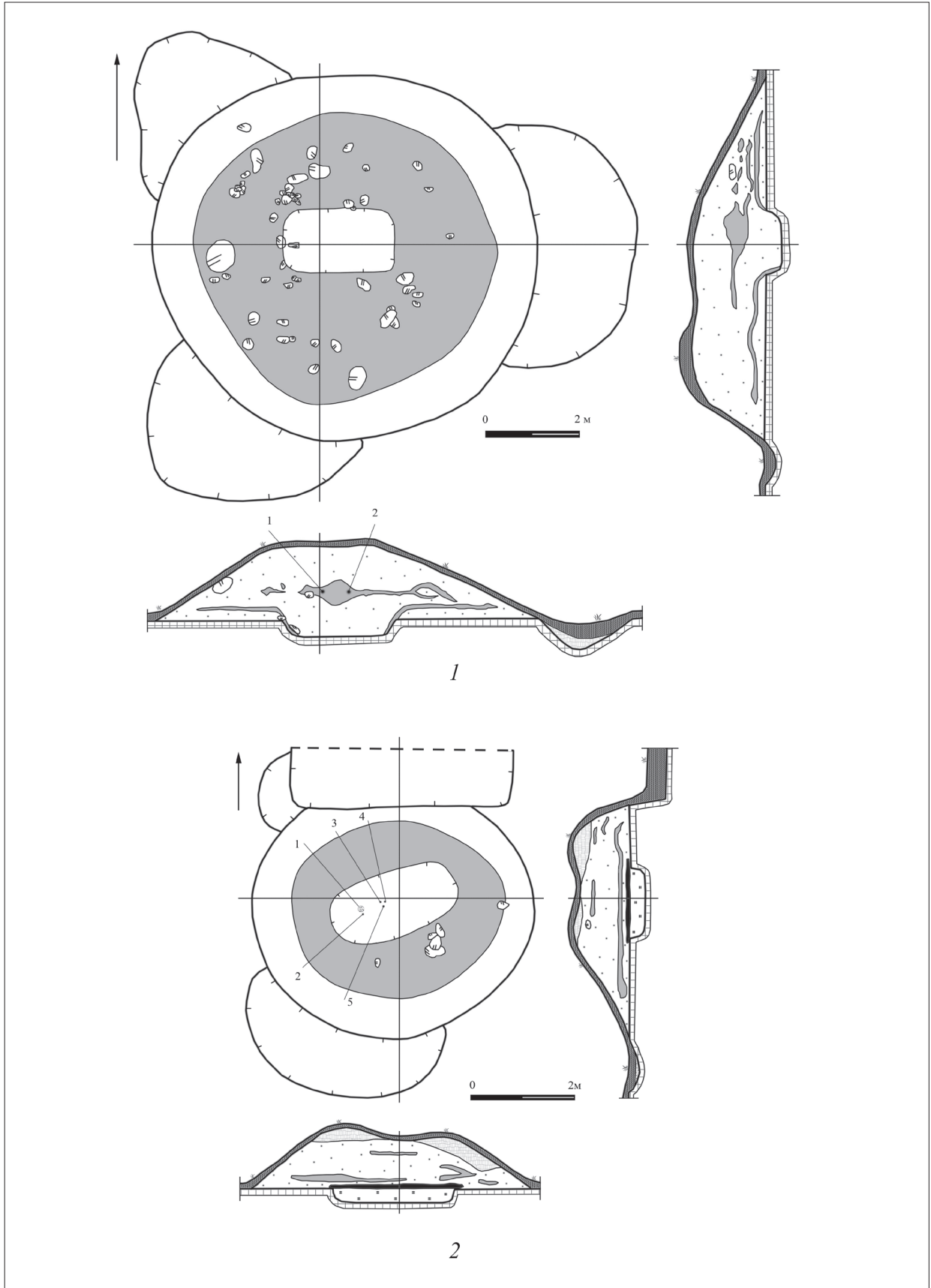


Fig. 13. Vitunichy barrow cemetery: 1 – sections and plan of the basic earth level of barrow 34; 2 – sections and plan of the basic earth level of barrow 37 (after A.V. Voytekhovich).

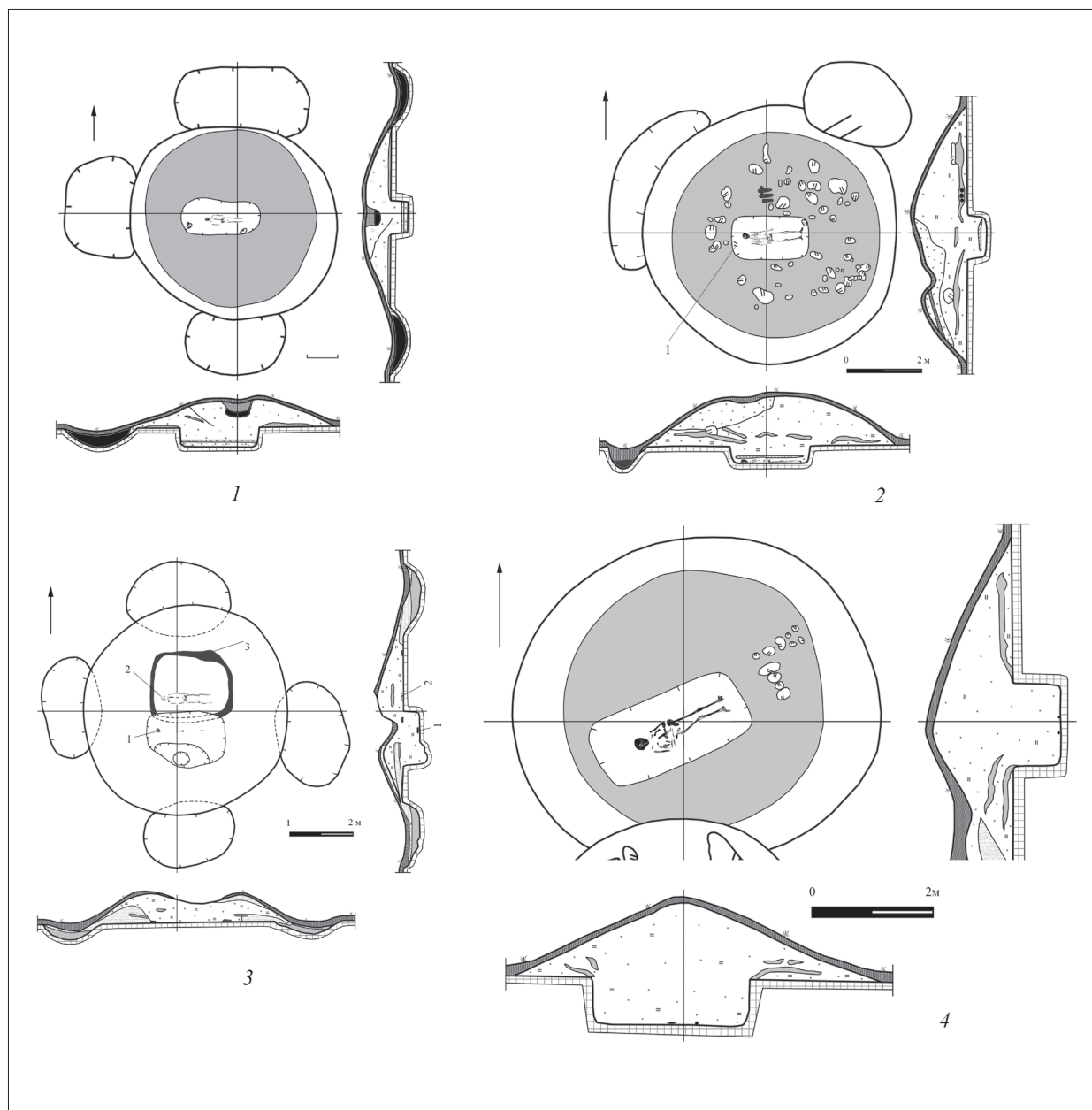


Fig. 14. 1 – Nyabyshyna II barrow cemetery, sections and plan of the basic earth level of barrow 48; 2 – Byahoml' (Marhavica) barrow cemetery, sections and plan of the basic earth level of barrow 5; 3 – Slabada barrow cemetery, sections and plan of the basic earth level of barrow 56; 4 – Zvyazda (Auhustava) barrow cemetery, sections and plan of the basic earth level of barrow 53 (after A.V. Voytekovich).

in its very upper reaches (Fig. 1: 2: 7). In 2003 A.V. Voytekovich excavated here one barrow out of the five preserved. A grave pit measuring 2.35×1.3 m and 0.5 m deep was discovered under the mound, oriented along the west–east axis. It contained a male inhumation, oriented with the head to the west, which was dated by the author of the excavations to the 12th century.

The grave pit was covered with a ceiling of wooden slabs, laid in at least two layers (Fig. 14: 2).⁴⁴

One more barrow with burials that have signs of chamber-like graves was investigated in the very upper reaches of River Dzvinasa on the outskirts of Pleshchanitsy, in the barrow cemetery in **Slabada**, Lahoyisk District, Minsk Region (Fig. 1: 2: 8). There are

⁴⁴ Voytekovich 2019, 184, Fig. 127.

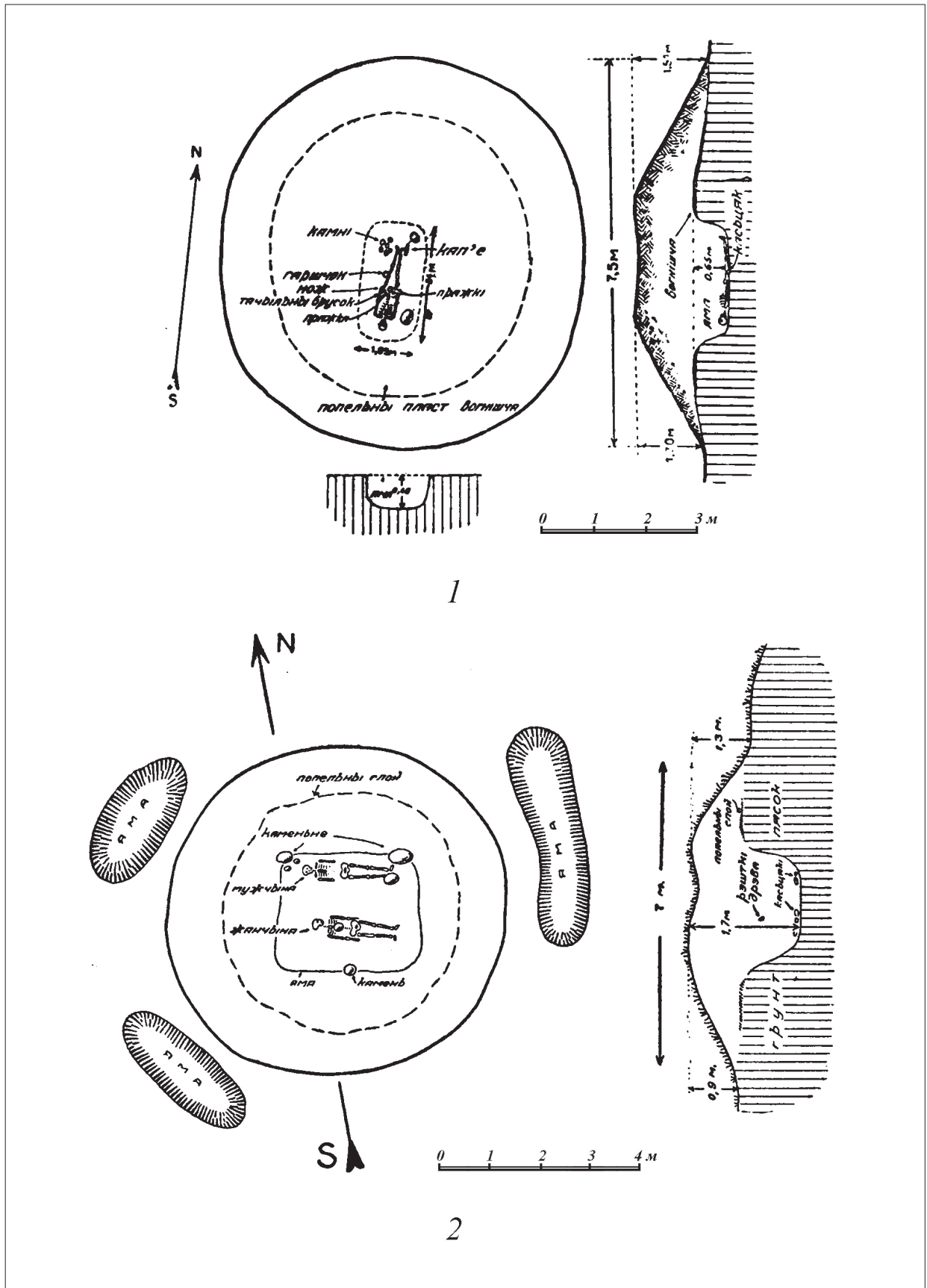


Fig. 15. Zaslauye and Barysau barrow cemeteries: 1 – sections and plan of the basic earth level of barrow 23 of group II, Zaslauye cemetery (after S.A. Dubinski); 2 – sections and plan of the basic earth level of barrow 4, Barysau cemetery (after A.M. Lyaudanski).

102 barrows in the necropolis, four of which were excavated in 2009–2010 by A.V. Voytekhovich. Two burials were found in barrow 56. Burial 1 was located in a pit 2.5 × 1.8 m in size and 0.5 to 0.77 m deep, oriented along the west–east axis. The body of the deceased was oriented with her head to the west. At the south wall of the grave pit traces of wood decay were revealed, and above it, in the sections, remains of ceiling were traced. Burial 2 was found in the base of the barrow. The inhumation, oriented with the head to the west, was inside a rectangular wooden structure measuring 2.6 m (along the north–south axis) by 2.34 m (along the west–east axis), 0.28 m high. It should be noted that the south edge of the wooden structure covered the pit. Both burials are dated by A.V. Voytekhovich to the 12th century (Fig. 14: 3).⁴⁵

In barrow 23 of group II of the cemetery in **Zaslauije** (**Zaslaŭje**), Minsk District and Region (Fig. 1: 2: 9), A.M. Lyaudanski excavated in 1928 a male inhumation burial with the head oriented to the south. The body was placed in a pit under the mound measuring 2.4 × 1.25 m with a depth of 0.65 m. The fact that at the time of the erecting of the mound the pit under it was not filled with sand is evidenced by the presence of a distinct depression at the top of the barrow. At the same time, no traces of a robber pit were recorded in the section (Fig. 15: 1). A set of grave goods was found with the deceased, including a javelin. Judging by the description by S.A. Dubinski, the body of the buried was in a wooden coffin.⁴⁶ The dating of the barrow can be preliminarily determined within the timeframe of the 11th century.

At the end of the review of the Polatsk land burials which can be considered in the context of chamber-like graves traditions, two more monuments located in the central regions of the principality should be mentioned. The first of them is the barrow cemetery in **Zvyazda / Auhustava** (**Zviyazda / Aŭhustava**), Lepel' District, Viciebsk region (Fig. 1: 2: 10), located on the shore of Lake Teklits. In total, there are 95 barrows in the necropolis, of which 13 were excavated in 2001–2003 by A.V. Voytekhovich.⁴⁷ In barrow 53 an inhumation burial was located in a pit oriented along the southwest–northeast axis, which had a size of 2.6 × 1.2 m and was 0.8 m deep (Fig. 14: 4). Traces of sagging ceiling are clearly seen in the sections of the mound. In addition, a thin layer of decayed organic matter was found under the body, laid with his head to the southwest. The barrow is dated to the 12th century.⁴⁸

Finally, mention should be made of barrow 4 of the **Barysau** (**Barysau**) cemetery, Minsk Region (Fig. 1: 2: 11), investigated by A.M. Lyaudanski in 1928.⁴⁹ The barrow contained a paired inhumation burial without grave goods in a pit. The skeletons of a man and a woman were oriented with their heads to the west (Fig. 15: 2). The dimensions of the burial pit are not given in the publication; however, judging by the provided scale, its length reached approximately 3 m, the width was about 2.3 m, and the depth reached up to 1.1 m. The researcher noted that: 'Traces of coniferous tree wood up to 5 cm thick were preserved on top of the bones and on the sides, along the pit. It is possible that the pit with the corpses was lined with wooden planks, or that a log structure was built in the pit for the buried'.⁵⁰ A.M. Lyaudanski also writes that: 'At the top, along the edges of the pit, there were stones. Several stones were found in the pit, in the mound and above the bones. One stone lay on the bones of the man's legs'.⁵¹ Judging by the above description, the double burial was located in an empty pit covered with wood. This is supported not only by the identification of a layer of wood decay above the bones, but also by the presence of wood residues in the upper part of the filling of the pit, visible in the section, and the revealing of a stone on the leg bones of the man, which, most likely, could have got there as a result of subsidence of the sand from the mound into the hollow grave pit after the rotting of the wooden ceiling. The lack of inventory does not allow us to narrowly date this barrow. Its dating can be determined only within the chronological limits of the functioning of the entire necropolis in the late 11th to 12th centuries.⁵²

Conclusions

The reviewed material shows that individual groups living in the western regions of the Polatsk land practised burials according to the rite of inhumation in chamber-like graves starting from the very end of the 10th or the beginning of the 11th century. The practice is recorded throughout the 11th century and may have continued into the 12th century. The first barrows with chamber-like graves were erected in the cemeteries in Pahoshcha (the very end of the 10th to the first decades of the 11th century) and Izbishcha (the first half of the 11th century). The set of grave goods in these early chamber-like graves makes

⁴⁵ Voytekhovich 2019, 181–182.

⁴⁶ Dubinski 1928, 254–255.

⁴⁷ Voytekhovich 2019, 152.

⁴⁸ Voytekhovich 2019, 154, 156.

⁴⁹ I express my sincere gratitude to M.V. Vasileu, research fellow of the Department of Archeology, Numismatics and Weapons

of the National Historical Museum of the Republic of Belarus, who kindly drew my attention to this burial complex.

⁵⁰ Lyaudanski 1930, 258.

⁵¹ Lyaudanski 1930, 258.

⁵² Lyaudanski 1930, 257–258, 261.

it possible to identify them as rich burials. This suggests that members of the communities who buried their dead in such a way apparently perceived the construction of chamber-like graves as a reflection of their high status.

Isolated chamber-like graves have been found almost along the entire western border of the Polatsk Principality (Fig. 1: 2). At the same time, their highest concentration is observed in the upper reaches of the Vilija and Byarezina. The vast majority of chamber-like graves belong to the type of earthen chambers. The second known type is ground chambers, although those are very few and found only in Pahoshcha and Slaboda.

The first chamber-like graves appeared in necropolises which belonged to the population of local administrative centres that arose on the western borders of the Polatsk Principality in the late 10th to early 11th centuries, when the Polatsk land became part of the Rurik dynasty's realm during the reign of Vladimir Svyatoslavich. It can be rather cautiously assumed that the spread of ideas about the burial of the dead in chamber-like graves and the prestige of this funeral rite in the west of the Polatsk land could be linked with the movement of certain groups of the population to this region, associated with the performance of certain administrative functions. It is currently not possible to establish the source region

these people could hail from. In all probability, however, this region could be some Old Rusian territory where a chamber-like grave funeral rite was known at the end of the 10th century.

Barrows with chamber-like graves in the west of the Polatsk land can be considered as a peculiar and rather rare type of funeral rite of the local borderland elites, who could strive to emphasize their special status, different from that of the surrounding rural population, by building mounds under which the bodies of the dead were placed in large pits or ground structures with wooden ceilings.

Later, during the 11th century, the chamber-like funeral rite in the western regions of the Polatsk Principality probably did not develop independently. Separate known chamber-like graves of the 11th and 12th centuries are not particularly large in size, and the burials made in them are not accompanied by rich grave goods or there may be no grave goods at all. Probably, the idea of the prestigious nature of the chamber-like funeral rite was slowly lost, and its criteria became blurred. This, in turn, led either to the disappearance of chamber-like rituals, or to their transformation and merger with the Christian rite of burial of the dead in ordinary grave pits, which gradually spread throughout the territory of Old Rus'.

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