

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN CUCA, GALAȚI COUNTY.  
TUMULUS no. 8**

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**Abstract:** The article presents the results of excavations conducted in 2022-2023 at Tumulus no. 8. It was located on the *Piscul Fântânilor* Hill, approximately 2.5 km south of the village of Cuca, Galați County. It had been heavily affected by agricultural work and, at the time of excavation, preserved a height of 0.40 m above the current ground level. It had an oval shape, measuring 18 × 15 m.

The archaeological excavations led to the discovery of three inhumation burials, all located in the southwestern quarter of the tumulus. These had been arranged in successive stages. The novelty of this monument lies in the questions raised by the chronology of the primary burial (2562-2142 calBC). Taking into account contemporary discoveries as well as the limited funerary ritual elements, it could be attributed to at least a very late Yamna horizon or to the early KMK period. Grave no. 2 can be easily attributed to KMK, as the vessel deposited as grave goods and the identified ritual elements have numerous analogies in the North Pontic area. The existing radiocarbon dating indicates a chronological interval (1876-1537 calBC) that confirms the partial overlap of KMK with the Monteoru culture and probably with the beginning of the Noua culture. The most recent grave (no. 3) can be chronologically related to the interval 710-994 calAD. It has numerous analogies in the steppe area of the northwestern Black Sea and may be attributed to the Turanian migratory populations, most likely the Pechenegs attested in this area in the 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.

**Rezumat:** Articolul prezintă rezultatele cercetărilor efectuate în anii 2022-2023 la Tumulul nr. 8, aflat la aproximativ 2,5 km sud de localitatea Cuca, jud. Galați, pe Dealul *Piscul Fântânilor*. Acesta era puternic afectat de lucrările agricole păstrând în momentul săpării o înălțime de 0,40 m față de nivelul actual al solului. În plan avea o formă ovală, cu dimensiunile de 18 × 15 m.

Cercetările au condus la descoperirea a trei morminte de inhumație, toate poziționate în sfertul de sud-vest al tumulului. Acestea au fost amenajate în momente succesive. Aspectul de noutate al acestui monument este adus datarea mormântului principal (2562-2142 calBC). Luând în considerație descoperirile contemporane, cât și puținele elemente de ritual funerar, acesta ar putea fi atribuit cel puțin unui orizont foarte târziu de tip Yamna, ori perioadei timpurii KMK. Mormântul 2 poate fi atribuit cu ușurință KMK, căci vasul depus ca inventar, precum și elementele de ritual identificate au numeroase analogii în spațiul nord-pontic. Datarea existentă indică un interval cronologic (1876-1537 calBC) care confirmă paralelismul parțial al KMK cu cultura Monteoru și probabil începutul culturii Noua. Cel mai recent mormânt (nr. 3) poate fi încadrat cronologic în intervalul 710-994 calAD. Acesta are numeroase analogii în zona de stepă din nord-vestul Mării Negre și poate fi atribuit populațiilor migratoare turanice, cel mai probabil pecenegilor atestați în această zonă în sec. IX-XI p.Chr.

**Keywords:** Lower Danube, Cuca, Bronze Age, Yamna culture, KMK, Turanians, Early Middle Ages, Tumuli, Burials

**Cuvinte cheie:** Dunărea de Jos, Cuca, epoca bronzului, cultura Iamna, KMK, turanici, ev mediu timpuriu, tumuli, înmormântări

## INTRODUCTION

In 2022-2023, large-scale archaeological surveys were carried out in the territory of Smârdan, Frumușița, and Cuca localities (Galați County). This fieldwork was caused by the development of a wind farm and led to the identification of several tumuli. Of these, those numbered 1 and 8, located around Cuca and impacted by the investment plan, were excavated between 2022 and 2023. This article presents and analyses the burials discovered in Tumulus 8, located on *Piscul Fântânilor* Hill (Fig. 1).

### The landscape

From a physical-geographical perspective, the area of Cuca village is situated at the juncture between the Covurlui Plain and the southern boundary of the Moldavian Plateau. This area embodies a combination of geographical features characteristic of both the Romanian Plain and the Moldavian Plateau. The southern part of the Plateau is identified as the Covurlui Platform or Covurlui Plateau<sup>1</sup>, a subunit of the Moldavian Plateau, characterised by relief forms similar to plateaus with altitudes marginally exceeding those of the hills.<sup>2</sup> The area under investigation is located in the northern half of the Covurlui Plain, featuring a somewhat monotonous relief consisting of valleys and plateaus, which are frequently mistaken for hills but are, in fact, vast areas resembling high plains.<sup>3</sup> This plain-like appearance is due to the wide and gently sloping valleys associated with the Siret and Prut river basins. The predominant soil type is cambic chernozem alongside loess<sup>4</sup>, marl, and clay deposits, with grassy vegetation specific to the forest-steppe zone.<sup>5</sup>

### Tumuli in the surveyed area

As early as the 1970s and 1980s, Mihalache Brudiu mentioned the existence of burial mounds in the Cuca area<sup>6</sup>, and several mounds have been identified between Rediu and Stoicani. The burial structures reach heights of up to two meters and are frequently severely damaged by agricultural or infrastructure works. When viewed in a broader geographical context, the mounds in the Cuca area are part of a series of alignments oriented in a NW-SE direction, starting from the Prut River and extending north of Rediu. The burial structures appear to be more numerous north and south of Cuca (Fig. 1).

In the vicinity of the village of Cuca, tumuli have been identified mainly to the northeast and southeast, on the Băleanu and Caligar hills, as well as on the Arcanu, Poloboc, and Piscul Fântânilor plateaus. If we refer to Tumulus no. 8, several mounds are situated around it. This tumulus may be part of a line of mounds extending from north of Rediu towards the southeast, or it may belong to a cluster located on the *Piscul Fântânilor* Hill (Fig. 1-2).

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<sup>1</sup> Stănescu et al. 1980, 223.

<sup>2</sup> Stănescu et al. 1980, 223.

<sup>3</sup> Stănescu et al. 1980, 239.

<sup>4</sup> Stănescu et al. 1980, 274-275.

<sup>5</sup> Geacu 2007, 79.

<sup>6</sup> Brudiu 1979, 151-164; Brudiu 1991, 41-55; Brudiu 2003.

## TUMULUS NO. 8

Tumulus no. 8 was severely affected by agricultural work. It was crossed in the middle by a north-south agricultural road. At the time of the excavation in the fall of 2022, the tumulus had a height of 0.40 m above the current ground level and exhibited an oval shape with dimensions of  $18 \times 15$  m. The profiles preserved traces of a ditch from which the earth used to build the mound was probably extracted. The mound was investigated using perpendicular stratigraphic profiles, each 1.00 m thick, oriented in the N-S and E-W directions (Fig. 3-4), and the excavation was carried out mechanically.

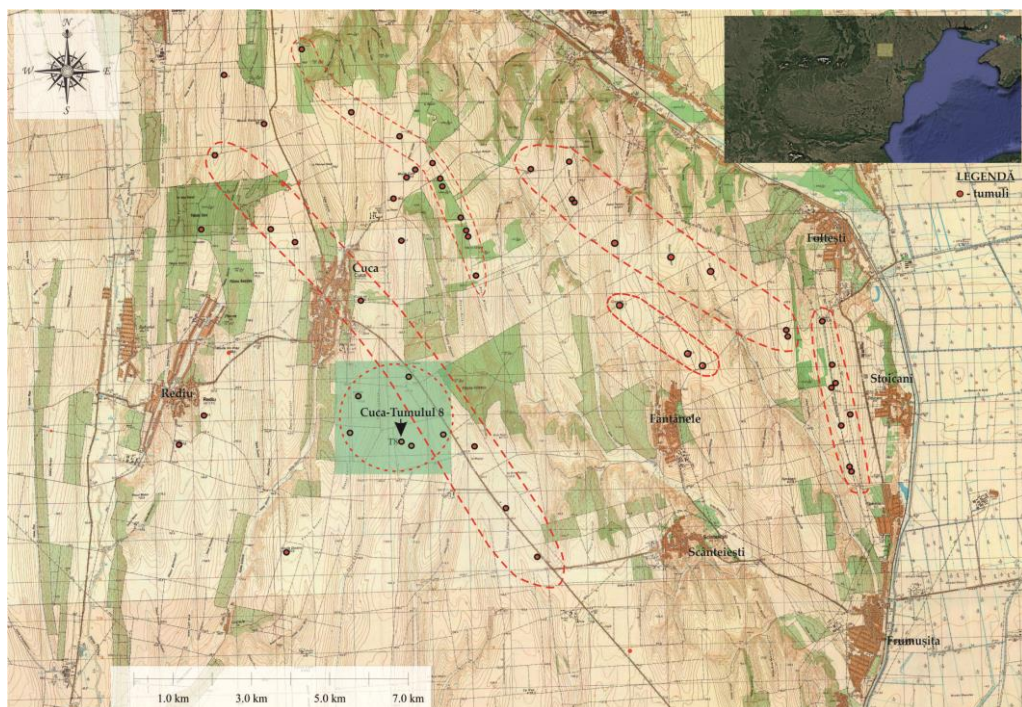


Fig. 1. Tumuli identified in the Cuca area

### Stratigraphic observations

The stratigraphy of the tumulus was relatively straightforward. Above the yellow loess layer with calcareous concretions (layer 4), a gray layer mixed with yellow soil (mantle) was identified, with a maximum thickness of 0.60 m (layer 3). Above this, a black-brown layer was observable, with a thickness of 0.50-0.60 m in the central area and exceeding 1.50 m towards the periphery, in the ditch area (layer 2). The upper part of this layer had a different consistency due to agricultural work (layer 1) (see Fig. 3).

### Description of the graves

The excavations revealed three burial graves, all located in the southwestern quarter of the tumulus (Fig. 3).

**Grave no. 1** was identified in squares XVI-XVIII/9-12. The burial pit was oval, measuring  $1.35 \times 1.00$  m, and was dug into the ancient surface to a depth of approximately 0.60 m. The yellow soil displaced during the pit's construction was visible surrounding the area (Fig. 3).

The body was laid on the bottom of the pit in a lateral decubitus position, on the left side, oriented in a NE-SW direction, with the lower limbs strongly flexed at the knees. The upper limbs were partially preserved in situ, but they also appeared to have been flexed at the elbow in a manner that is difficult to reconstruct (Fig. 4). Stratigraphically, grave no. 1 can be considered the primary grave, as it was covered by the mound mantle.

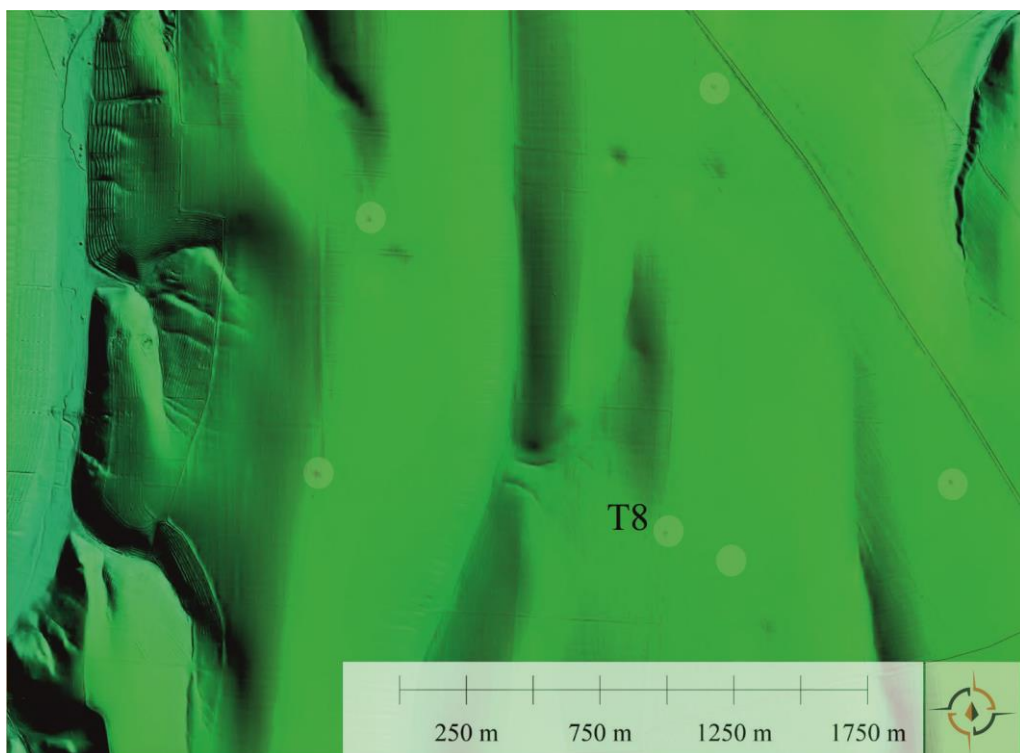


Fig. 2. LiDAR image in the area of Tumulus no. 8

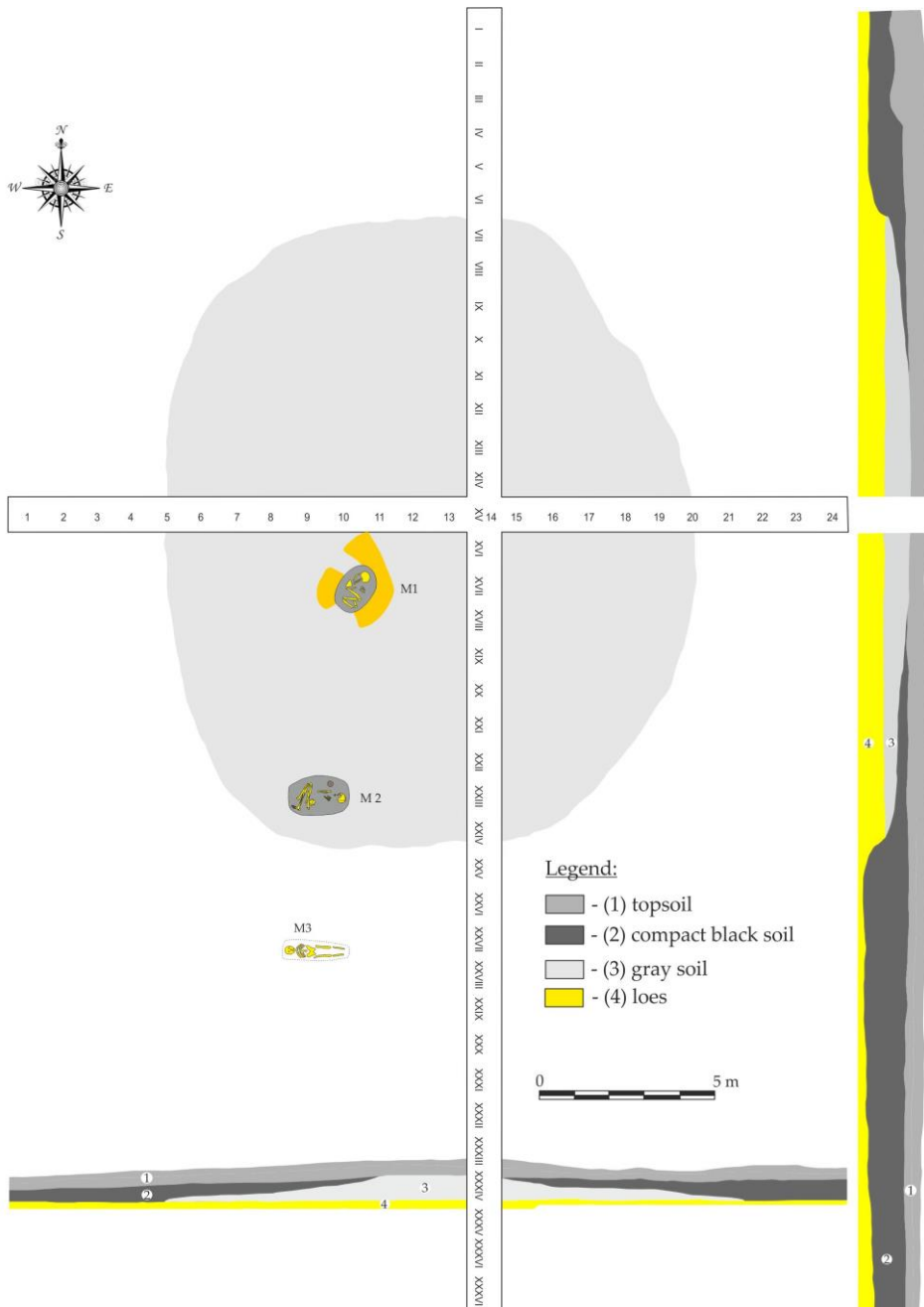


Fig. 3. Tumulus no. 8. The plan of the excavations (drawing by Adrian Adamescu)

The skull and femurs are better preserved<sup>7</sup>, while the rest of the skeleton is in a poor state of preservation. Much of the cortical part of the bones has been destroyed by natural agents in the soil. The skeleton is also poorly represented, with most of the bones being completely destroyed by natural agents or fragmented during recovery (Fig. 4). The skeleton belonged to an individual, probably female (?), as inferred from the preserved cranial features, with an estimated age between 35 and 45 years, based on the evolution of the dentition and the degenerative changes observed in the preserved skeletal segments. The dentition shows marked alveolar resorption, moderate tartar deposits, and very pronounced wear of the molars, while the preserved incisors exhibit completely worn crowns. All preserved joints display signs of osteoarthritis.

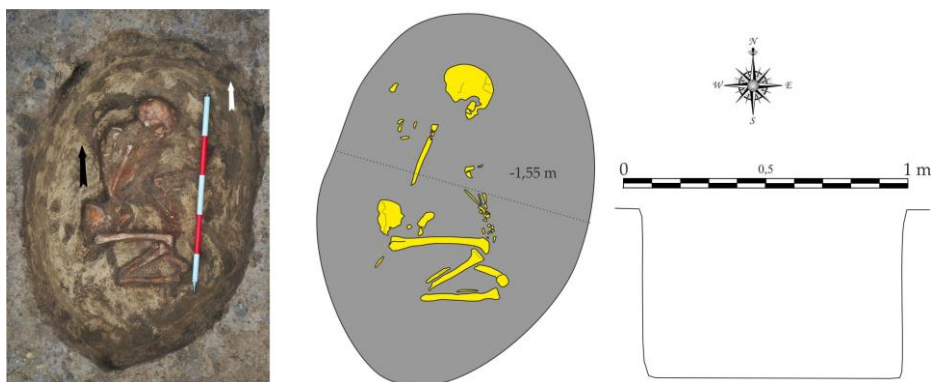


Fig. 4. Cuca, Tumulus no. 8, Grave no. 1 (photo and drawing by Adrian Adamescu)

**Grave no. 2** was discovered in squares XXII-XXIII/8-10. The grave pit was dug into the mound, it was oval in shape, with diameters of 1.70 × 1.10 m. The body was laid on the

<sup>7</sup> For each individual's bones, the state of preservation and representation was analysed according to McKinley (2004) and Mays et al. (2002), as well as the taphonomic transformations of the bone surface (Stodder 2008; Byers 2005). Sex was determined based on cranial (Soficaru et al. 2014) and postcranial features (Buikstra, Ubelaker 1994; Bruzek 2002), and for age estimation we used the degree of obliteration of the cranial sutures (Meindl, Lovejoy 1985), the evolution of the sternal ends of the ribs (Loth, İscan 1989), and the evolution of the auricular surfaces (Buikstra, Ubelaker 1994). Palaeopathological observations were made based on the volumes by Brothwell (1981), Ortner (2003), and Waldron (2009), and to determine stature, we used Breitingner's method (1937), while metric data were collected according to methods known in the literature (Bräuer 1988; Buikstra, Ubelaker 1994). Asymmetry was calculated according to Auerbach, Ruff (2006), and weight according to Ruff et al. (1991).

bottom of the pit in a lateral decubitus position, on the right side, oriented in an E-W direction. The lower limbs were bent at the knees, forming a sharp angle, while the upper limbs were flexed at the elbows, with the hands brought towards the chin (Fig. 5).

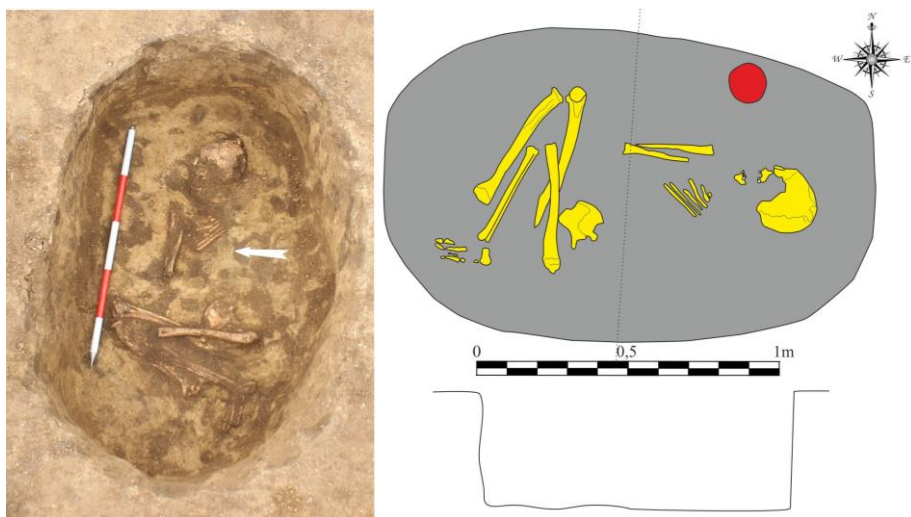


Fig. 5. Cuca, Tumulus no. 8, Grave no. 2 (photo and drawing by Adrian Adamescu)

On the north side of the pit, near the skull, there was a restricted, simple-contour vessel. The rim was decorated with alveoli (translational movement), under which a decoration band can be seen, composed of motifs following a bilateral motion along a vertical axis (Fig. 6-8).

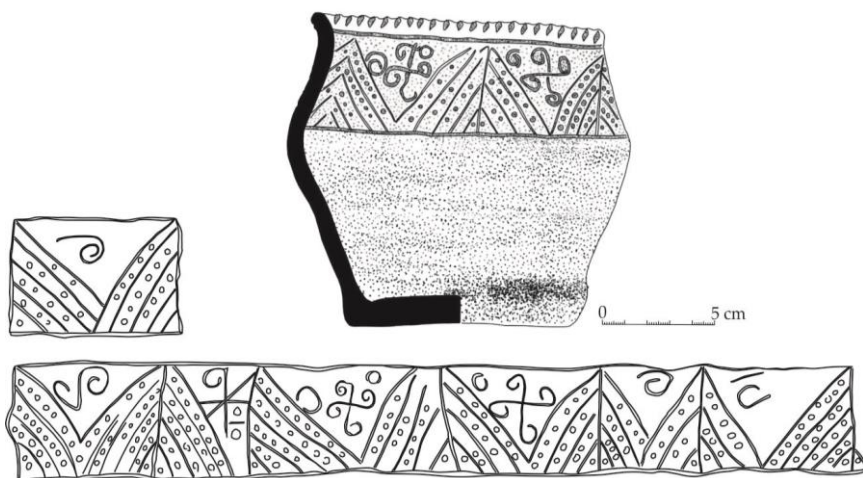


Fig. 6. The vessel from Grave no. 2 (drawing by Sorin Ailincăi and Adrian Adamescu)

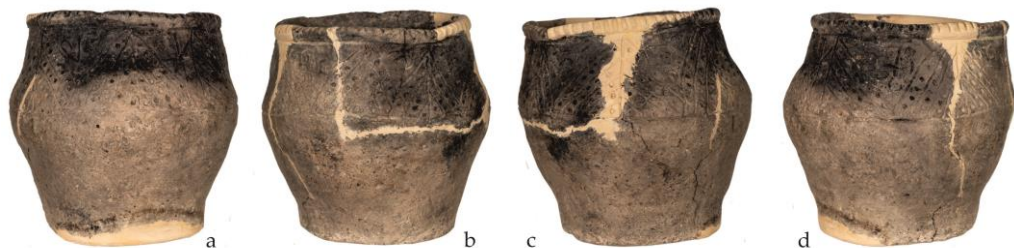


Fig. 7. The vessel from Grave no. 2 (photo Adrian Adamescu)



Fig. 8. The vessel from Grave no. 2. a-d. details of the decoration (photo Adrian Adamescu)

The osteological remains are relatively well preserved but poorly represented, all the bones being heavily fragmented post-excavation and unrestorable (Fig. 5). The skeleton belongs to an individual, probably female (?), as inferred from the preserved cranial features, with an estimated age between 43 and 58 years, based on the evolution of the sternal ends of the ribs.

There is evidence of marked dental wear of the molars, large alveolar resorption and heavy calculus deposition, two teeth having been lost antemortem. The right mandibular first molar and the left maxillary first molar have fragmentation of the crown on the occlusal surface, produced antemortem, probably due to ingestion of hard food. The preserved joints show traces of osteoarthritis, more accentuated at the knee joints and on a fragment of thoracic vertebra. Well-defined enthesophytes are visible on the muscular insertions of the right ulna, on the ulnar tuberosity and

interosseous crest, on the iliac crest and on the linea aspera of the left femur, due to intense physical activity in the last years of life and old age.

**Grave no. 3** was discovered outside the mound. It was partially damaged by the digger during excavation. The deceased was probably deposited in a supine position, oriented in a W-E direction (Fig. 3).

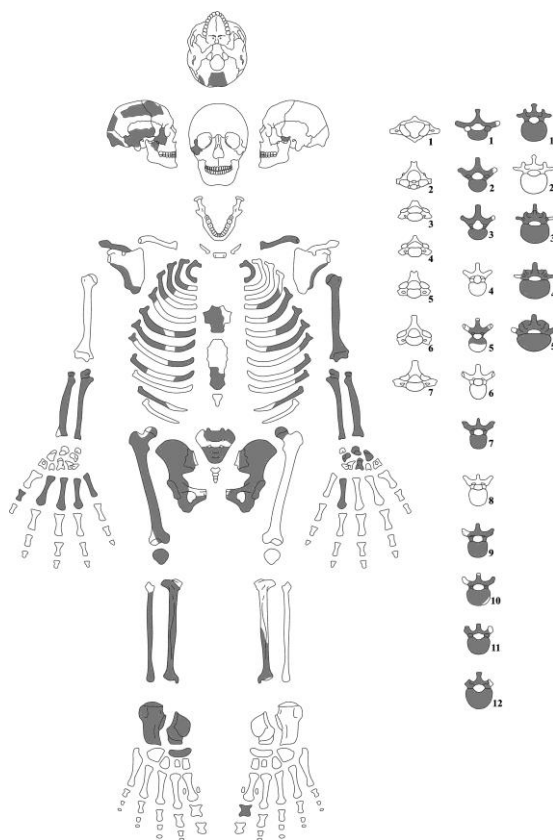


Fig. 9. The preserved skeletal elements of the individual interred in Grave no. 3  
(drawing by Mihai Constantinescu)

It is the best preserved of the skeletons found in Tumulus 8, with modern losses and damage (Fig. 9). The deceased was male, with an estimated age at death in the range 43-55 years, based on the evolution of the auricular surfaces and the sternal ends of the rib ends. All preserved joints show marked signs of osteoarthritis, most pronounced in the thoracic and lumbar spine where osteophytes up to 9 mm in size appear. Also, the muscle insertions of the upper limbs show raised enthesophytes, traces of aging and intense physical activity. The asymmetry of the ulna, the only one

that can be calculated, indicates an individual who predominantly used the left upper limb. The height was calculated by the length of the left humerus is 161.67±4.9 cm and the weight by the diameter of the left femoral head is 79.76 kg.

## DISCUSSIONS

### Elements of relative and absolute chronology

Analysis of the data reveals that the tumulus encompassed three successive burials. Grave 1 was primary, while grave 2 was secondary. The third burial was discovered near the tumulus, as preserved in 2022, and can also be linked to a later intervention.

This sequence, observed during the research, was also confirmed by the three <sup>14</sup>C dates obtained at the RoAMS Laboratory of the Horia Hulubei National Institute of Physics and Nuclear Engineering (Table 1; Fig. 10).

Table 1. Radiocarbon data obtained for the burials in Tumulus no. 8

RoAMS ID	Context	Material	δ13C (‰)	Radiocarbon Age	2σ calibration results (95.4% probability) OxCal v4.4.4
2991.153	Grave no. 1	Human bone	-50.2	3871±66 BP	2562 (1.8%) 2537 cal BC 2492 (89.6%) 2191 cal BC 2181 (4.0%) 2142 cal BC
2992.153	Grave no. 2	Human bone	-20.6	3397±51 BP	1876 (6.3%) 1843 cal BC 1822 (3.2%) 1796 cal BC 1779 (86.0%) 1537 cal BC
2993.153	Grave no. 3	Human bone	-15.6	1158±49 BP	710 (1.0%) 720 cal AD 772 (94.4%) 994 cal AD

Thus, as previously noted, the tumulus was built for Grave no. 1. The dating obtained has a rather high degree of uncertainty, indicating a wide range covering almost the entire second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC when calibrated at 95.4% probability (Table 1). Grave no. 2 was secondary and dated to the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, while grave no. 3 was introduced into the tumulus at a much later period, specifically at the beginning of the Middle Ages (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD).

### Interpreting funeral ritual aspects

The three burial graves belong to successive and distinct periods of burials in tumuli. The identified funerary ritual elements, alongside the radiocarbon data, provide new insights or corroborate existing knowledge.

Thus, in the case of grave no. 1, an oval pit was dug to a depth of 0.60 m. The earth removed from the pit was deposited around it and was most likely not used for refilling. A small mound was built over the grave, raised with the soil extracted from the surrounding area.

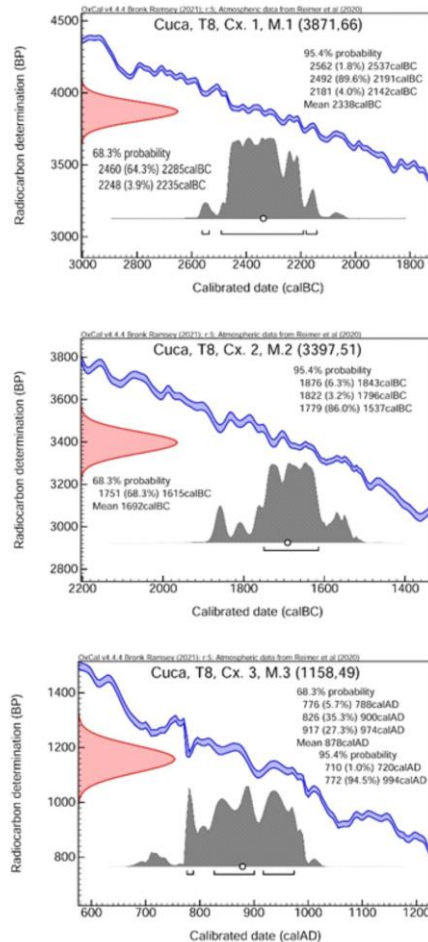


Fig. 10. Calibration of the  $^{14}\text{C}$  data obtained for the graves in Tumulus no. 8

The elements of the funerary ritual, although lacking clear chronological and cultural indicators, are present in numerous prehistoric burial mounds from the Lower Danube region. In many cases, these have been attributed to the Yamna burial standard, and even earlier, despite the absence of traces of frequently encountered ritual activities, such as covering the bottom of the pit with a mat, the inclusion of ochre and grave goods, or the covering of the grave with wooden beams<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> See for example: Motzoi-Chicideanu 2011, 225 sqq.; Frînculeasa et al. 2013; Frînculeasa et al. 2015; Kaiser, Winger 2015; Frînculeasa et al. 2017; Diaconescu 2020; Frînculeasa 2021; Dergačev 2023; Ivanova 2023; Preda-Bălănică 2024 ș.a.

Such graves with oval pits and individuals laid in a crouched position appear in tumuli, most often as secondary graves and, to a very small extent, as primary burials<sup>9</sup>.

The radiocarbon date obtained for Grave no. 1 (RoAMS 2991.153: 3871±66 BP) is very late for the Yamna burial standard, indicating the interval 2562-2142 cal BC (95% probability). In most of the cases documented thus far in the Lower Danube region, the latest Yamna burials are dated to the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC<sup>10</sup>. For Muntenia, at the current stage of research, the radiocarbon data analysis carried out by Bianca Preda-Bălănică is eloquent. Figure 11 shows that around 2500 BC, at least in Muntenia, Yamna burials disappear, the next horizon being represented by catacomb burials<sup>11</sup>.

However, there is evidence suggesting that the Yamna burial standard persisted in certain communities even after 2500 BC. Notably, late dates of Yamna contexts from the Lower Danube, such as those at Rahman 2<sup>12</sup>, Ariceștii-Rahtivani I, grave 1<sup>13</sup>, and Mireasa<sup>14</sup>, date to the middle of the third millennium BC, although none are as late as the one from Cuca. However, the literature mentions a series of contexts from the north and north-west of the Black Sea, dated to the second half of the third millennium BC<sup>15</sup>. Based on these findings, some researchers propose that the Yamna burial standard extended until approximately 2200 BC<sup>16</sup>, in many areas coexisting with catacomb graves<sup>17</sup> or even KMK (*Kul'tura mnogovalikovoj keramiki*) graves<sup>18</sup>.

In fact, the absence of inventory or more specific ritual elements complicates the attribution of grave 1 at Cuca to a particular funerary standard. The shape of the pit, along with the position and orientation of the deceased, are elements also found in graves attributed to KMK, although primary burials associated with this group are rare.

<sup>9</sup> Яровой 1985; Motzoi-Chicideanu 2011, 266-267, Fig. 2; Preda-Bălănică 2024, 53 sqq.

<sup>10</sup> Frînculeasa et al. 2015; Preda-Bălănică 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Preda-Bălănică 2024, 101 sqq; Heyd 2013; Kaiser, Winger 2015; Frînculeasa et al. 2015; Alexandrov 2020 ș.a.

<sup>12</sup> Ailincăi et al. 2016 (Poz-65968: 3950±35 BP).

<sup>13</sup> Frînculeasa et al. 2013 (DeA 8816: 4018±32 BP).

<sup>14</sup> Frînculeasa et al. 2017, 149 (4030±30 BP).

<sup>15</sup> See for example: Mironivka, Tumulus no. 2, grave no. 4 – Ki-5825: 3810±55 BP (Klochko, Koško, Szmyt 1999); Zatoka – Ki-3840±65 BP, Ki-6822: 3810±55 BP, Ki-6821: 3775±69 BP, Ki-6820: 3760±45 BP (Szmyt, Chernjakov 1999; Nikolova 1999); Višnevoe, Tumulus no. 17, grave no. 36 – Ki-1424: 3750±60 BP (Rassamakin 2002; Kaiser 2003; Rassamakin, Nikolova 2008, 65-66). However, all of these have fairly high error margins and should be treated with caution.

<sup>16</sup> See for example: Rassamakin, Nikolova 2008, 65-66 and Motzoi-Chicideanu 2011, 226-227.

<sup>17</sup> See: Kaiser 2003; Кайзер 2009; Frînculeasa et al. 2017 sqq.

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion on the KMK chronology at Motzoi-Chicideanu 2011, 547-548.

Until further similar discoveries are made, Tumulus 8 at Cuca remains an isolated case in the Lower Danube region, one that is still difficult to explain satisfactorily.

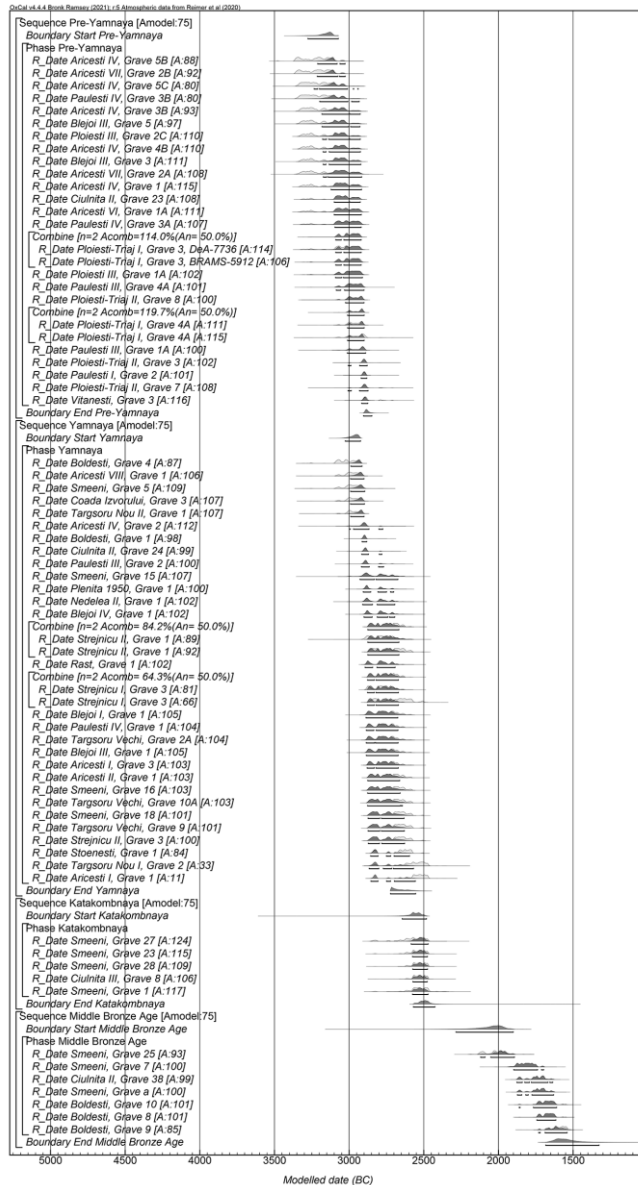


Fig. 11. Modeling of radiocarbon data obtained from tumular burials in Muntenia (after Preda-Bălănică 2024)

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Grave no. 2 is a secondary burial. The details of the funeral ritual, including the shape of the pit and the position and orientation of the deceased, are very common in Bronze Age burials in the steppe area.

Of particular importance for the dating and cultural attribution of the burial is a small, restricted vessel deposited as an offering. This vessel was handmade, slightly asymmetrical, with a simple contour. It is light brown in colour and exhibits traces of secondary burning. The rim of the vessel was decorated with oblique incised lines arranged around its entire circumference. The upper part retains an ornamentation composed of several motifs following a vertical reflection symmetry. The register comprises a composition of upward-pointing triangles filled with dots. In the space between the triangles, decorative elements in the form of crosses with twisted ends and a spiral were made. This entire composition is delimited by two horizontal lines, one immediately below the rim and the other above the maximum diameter. The vessel has the following dimensions: height = 13.8 cm; opening diameter = 12.5 cm; base diameter = 10.5 cm. It was registered in the archaeological collection of the "Paul Păltănea" History Museum in Galați, under inventory number 44138 (Fig. 6-8).

The vessel has numerous analogies in burials attributed to the KMK (Kul'tura mnogovalikovoj keramiki) or Babino group, documented over a broad area covering the steppe and forest-steppe zones from the Middle Volga to the Prut River and extending even further west. This horizon is known mainly through inhumation burials, with very limited information available regarding the associated habitation sites.<sup>19</sup>

Such small containers, characterised by a contour defined by two endpoints and a corner point in the upper half, frequently display decoration similar to that found in Cuca. Particularly noteworthy in this context are the vessels classified by Eugen Sava as Type I, and especially those attributed to Type IV<sup>20</sup> (Fig. 12).

Besides the vessel, grave no. 2 also exhibits other ritual elements specific to KMK, such as the oval shape of the pit, the lateral decubitus position, crouched on the right side, and the orientation of the body towards the eastern sector.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See for example: Березанская et al. 1986; Савва 1992; Березанская 1998; Pâslaru 2006; Motzoi-Chicideanu 2011; Brujako et al. 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Савва 1992, 33-34.

<sup>21</sup> Савва 1992; Pâslaru 2006; Motzoi-Chicideanu 2011, 556-557, Pl. 349.



Fig. 12. Ceramic vessels exhibiting characteristic KMK decoration - Types I and IV  
(after CABBA 1992)

The  $^{14}\text{C}$  dating of grave no. 2 (RoAMS 2992.153: 3397 $\pm$ 51 BP) suggests a range between 1876-1537 calBC (with 95.4% probability). The chronology of KMK discoveries in the Prut-Dniester region has been established predominantly through synchronisation with phases Ic3-Ia and partly phase II of the Monteoru culture<sup>22</sup>, although the KMK burial standard may be earlier.<sup>23</sup> Recently obtained data suggest that the beginning of phase Ic3 can most likely be considered around 2200 BC, while the Monteoru Ia-IIb type discoveries are situated in the range of 1700-1500 BC<sup>24</sup>, being partially contemporary with the beginning of the Noua culture. Consequently, the chronological data obtained for this grave supports the existence of KMK burials at Lower Danube until approximately the 16<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The Lower Danube delineates the western boundary of KMK or Babino burials. These are very common north of the Danube, between the Dniester and the Prut, where they exhibit a high degree of standardisation in terms of both grave

<sup>22</sup> CABBA 1992; Sava 1994.

<sup>23</sup> See Motzoi-Chicideanu 2011, 547-548.

<sup>24</sup> Motzoi-Chicideanu, Şandor-Chicideanu 2015; Constantinescu 2020, 149-157.

arrangement and the way the corpse is buried. Since the 1990s, Eugen Sava has noticed many such discoveries west of the Prut<sup>25</sup>. Although his work has been severely criticized, discoveries such as the one at Cuca seem to substantiate the use of KMK funerary standards westwards, to the hilly area of Central Moldavia.<sup>26</sup>

This area of interference between the communities of the North Pontic steppe and local communities, especially Monteru and Tei, is also indicated by the presence of Tei or Monteoru-style ceramic vessels in certain Middle Bronze Age graves discovered in tumuli investigated in Northern Muntenia<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, based on stratigraphic information, radiocarbon data, grave inventories, the arrangement of the graves and the manner in which the deceased were buried, Bianca Preda-Bălănică attributes no less than 43 burials discovered in tumuli in southern Romania to the KMK horizon.<sup>28</sup> However, similar secondary burials from the post-Yamna period are also frequently documented south of the Danube, in Dobruja<sup>29</sup>, as well as across the eastern half of Bulgaria<sup>30</sup>, indicating a continuity of the steppe tradition until the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.

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Grave no. 3 was, regrettably, mostly destroyed by the digger. Based on field observations, it appears that the deceased was likely interred in a supine position, oriented in a W-E direction. The date obtained for this grave (ROAMS 2993.153: 1158±49) most likely indicates a period between the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD (Table 1; Fig. 10).

In the Lower Danube region, and beyond, the period between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD was marked by increased mobility of populations that moved mainly from Asia to the Balkans and Central Europe. Written sources, often confirmed by archaeological discoveries, mention numerous populations that occupied the Lower Danube area, such as the Huns, Kutrigurs, Utigurs, Avars, Bulgarians, Pechenegs, Uzes, Cumans, etc. These movements also involved communities from the Ural, Caucasus, and northern Black Sea regions, such as the Slavs, Antes, and Hungarians. This period of migration ended with the Great Mongol Invasion of 1241 and the establishment of the Golden Horde's rule in the northern Black Sea region.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Савва 1992.

<sup>26</sup> Brudiu 2003; Pîslaru 2006; Motzoi-Chicideanu 2011, 547 sqq.

<sup>27</sup> Frînculeasa 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Preda-Bălănică 2024, 91 sqq.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example: Vasiliu 1995a; Vasiliu 1995b; Vasiliu 1995c; Vasiliu 1995d; Vasiliu 2008; Schuster et al. 2011; Ștefan et al. 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Alexandrov, Włodarczak 2024.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example: Sâmpetru 1973; Spinei 1985; Musteață 2005; Postică 2007; Curta 2019 and others.

The characteristics of the funerary ritual observed in grave no. 3, along with its chronological range, strongly indicate its association with the Turanian populations. Burial in a supine position, west-east orientation, utilisation of the southern sector of older burial mounds, are considered specific to these communities<sup>32</sup>. The discovery at Cuca is not isolated, as numerous similar graves have been documented in Moldova and Muntenia.<sup>33</sup> For instance, several similar burials dating from approximately the same period have been found in the tumuli investigated at Cimişlia.<sup>34</sup>

The Turanian burials in the Eastern Carpathian region were recently studied by Ion Ursu.<sup>35</sup> His work analyses more than 560 burial discoveries dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. These are located near the most important water sources, with a high density observed in the southern part of the studied area, the western plain of the Black Sea serving as the main passageway for migratory populations to the Romanian Plain, the Balkans, and Pannonia.<sup>36</sup> According to Ursu, graves similar to the one discovered in Cuca are classified as group I graves, dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD. These graves are characterised by "simple, quadrangular pits, oriented W-E, with the skeleton lying on its back. From an anthropological point of view, most of the skeletons studied are male, which is characteristic of the period in question".<sup>37</sup> In most cases, these graves have been attributed to the Pechenegs, who are mentioned in historical sources between the Dnieper and Siret rivers from the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD onwards.<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Tumulus no. 8, identified and investigated in the village of Cuca, Galaţi County, completes the data on burial sites in southern Moldavia, which we owe mainly to the fieldwork and cataloguing efforts conducted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Mihalache Brudiu.<sup>39</sup> By 2003, he had identified over 430 tumuli in the studied area, with their number increasing significantly as a result of field surveys in recent years.

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<sup>32</sup> Spinei 1985, 107-125; Spinei 1999; Postică 2007, 204-205; Spinei 2010; Ursu 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Sâmpetru 1973; Harţuche 1980; Spinei 1985; Postică 2007; Brudiu 2003; Popovici, Ciobanu 2021; Ursu 2022; Popovici et al. 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Popovici et al. 2023, 11-12, 62-63.

<sup>35</sup> Ursu 2022, with literature.

<sup>36</sup> Ursu 2022, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Ursu 2022, 94-95.

<sup>38</sup> Diaconu 1970; Diaconu 1975; Spinei 1999; Ursu 2022, with literature.

<sup>39</sup> Brudiu 2003.

From existing maps, we can observe a high density of these funerary structures, the situation being broadly similar to that east of the Prut River. In most cases, the tumuli are arranged in alignments, as identified in the Cuca area (Fig. 1).

According to the published data, most of the tumuli in southern Moldova seem to have been built at the end of the Eneolithic period and during the Early Bronze Age. However, some were raised by communities during the second Iron Age or in Antiquity. These structures have been perceived as burial sites over time, continuing to serve this purpose until the Middle Ages.

From this point of view, Tumulus 8 at Cuca does not distinguish itself in any way, partially confirming the burial horizons already known in the area. The novelty of this monument lies in the questions raised by the dating of the primary grave (2562-2142 BC). Taking into account contemporary discoveries and the limited elements of funeral rituals, it may be attributed to at least a very late Yamna horizon or the early KMK period.

Grave no. 2 can be easily attributed to KMK, as the vessel deposited as inventory, along with the identified ritual elements, have numerous analogies in the North Pontic area. The existing dating indicates a chronological interval (1876-1537 calBC) that confirms the partial overlap of KMK with the Monteoru culture and probably the beginning of the Noua culture.

The most recent grave (no. 3) can be chronologically placed between 710 and 994 calAD. It has numerous analogies in the steppe area northwest of the Black Sea and can be attributed to the Turanian migratory populations, most likely the Pechenegs, attested in this area in the 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.

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