

HISTORIC GEOGRAPHY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL TOPOGRAPHY AT BULCI AND CĂPÂLNAȘ

Dumitru Țeicu*

Keywords: *Bulci abbey, Zadia fortress a ground fortification.*
Cuvinte cheie: *abația Bulci, fortificația de pământ Zadia.*

(Abstract)

The Mureș Valley was alike a geographic and a cultural corridor lengthways of which people, ideas and goods have run since the prehistoric age till the dawn of the modern one. Obvious vestiges of ground and wall defensive structures that kept a check on that geographic corridor can be found throughout the river middle and lower stream.

Our approach concerning an archaeological research of that area which formally limits the Banat province to the northward started in 2004, at Chelmac with the avowed intention to identify laid waste medieval churches and monasteries. That approach was an integrant part of a larger front at the entire Banat level in order to reconstitute a historic ecclesiastic geography of the medieval Banat¹. Under such circumstances we organized archaeological diggings at Chelmac and Bulci to identify and research the Catholic abbeys built on the Mureș corridor in the 12th–13th centuries. Initially the archaeological investigation developed at Chelmac where ruins of massive walls within the Mureș River meadow had been assigned to *Eperjes* abbey. The archaeological research proved that the ruins from Chelmac-*Cetate* with preserved walls till 3.70 m in heights and 3.20 m in breadth belonged to a late medieval fortification, and the abbey had to be placed within Chelmac built-up area².

The archaeological research at Bulci began in October 2005 aiming to further uncover the ruins of the Benedictine abbey on the one hand, and to answer to former questions on the other hand, concerning the presence there of a Roman fortification discovered as result of some researches from

the middle of the 19th century at Bulci-*Cetate*. The project of the archaeological research from Bulci belonged to the researching program of medieval ecclesiastic architecture in the Banat and also of medieval ecclesiastic geography of the province. Such a large program at the province level took in account from the very beginning the museums from the area join efforts and the ecclesiastic units involving as we thought that times that they were interested in a project of medieval ecclesiastic history asserting. The punctual archaeological research from Bulci, which had prepared the site with monuments already invaded with abundant vegetation up to the archaeological open remained diggings from 1977–1978 and up the uncovered foundations stopped from its first moment. Re-shaped according to our own efforts, the program of researching the ecclesiastic medieval architecture and ecclesiastic geography of the Banat went on and we are still working within it stage by stage. The archaeological research from Bulci offered us the possibility to find out an archaeological diagnosis of the corridor of the Mureș, from which we present now some questions. The 1976–1978 and 1981 researches the results of which are included in two digging report, gave no answer to the questions concerning the church and the abbey planimetry and also those regarding the archaeology of the fortifications existing there, as we have shown above³.

* Muzeul Banatului Montan Reșița, Bd. Republicii, nr. 10; e-mail: office@muzeulbanatuluiimontan.ro.

¹ D. Țeicu, *Geografia ecleziastică a Banatului medieval*, Cluj-Napoca, (2007).

² D. Țeicu, Fl. Mărginean, Despre localizarea abației Eperjes la Chelmac. In: *România în Europa medievală (între Orientul bizantin și Occidentul latin). Studii în onoarea profesorului Victor Spinei*, Brăila (2008), p. 243–271.

³ The ruins from Bulci had been investigated in 1869 by Fl. Römer, and the hypothesis of a Roman fortification on that part of the Mureș was circulated after. In 1976–1977 and 1981 they were resumed under St. Ferenczi direction. Two

The ruins of Bulci abbey that was registered in 1225, are placed on a slowly raised sand bank in the Mureş meadow, now at almost 100m far from the river bed⁴. They were entirely covered with brush and oak grove through which two or three traces of the remained uncovered archaeological sections could be discerned, having wall foundations in certain places within two sections. In the proper way the site was cleared up of vegetation, the topographic plan was drawn up so that the site was prepared for systematic researches planned for the next years, but unfortunately they wouldn't be held.

We deem that it would be useful that the topographic plans for Bulci and Căpâlnaş fortifications be published together with our observations from the site. Those plans are the unique map-drawing reference materials for those ground fortifications within that area of the Mureş lower stream. The inferior Mureş Valley archaeological repertoire or other writings referring to that area fortifications and churches become conspicuous just for plans on Bulci absence⁵.

The ground fortification from Bulci had a defensive ditch and a ground wall outside of it. The fortification has a prolonged oval shape more prominent to the westward and south-westward sides. Its eastern extremity is placed now near the Mureş bed (Fig. 1). The densely grown up grove there covers thoroughly the fortification, what rendered somehow more difficult the measurements. The inner sizes are of 85/48 m; in outwardly they are of 112.5/75 including the defensive ditch and the wall (Fig. 1). Those defensive elements were archaeologically sectioned in 1977–1978 by Şt. Ferenczi and M. Barbu, with summary references to the wall structure and the ditch shape in the

published digging reports⁶. The graphic reference material which accompanies the written reports on Bulci does not back by plans and profiles what they assert on the fortification structure. The wall was sectioned down to 4 m, burnt beams being found at its basis, quite probably having proceeded from a stockade structure. A sterile layer and a level of late graves without an inventory overlapped that wood structure; the graves were set down to the Ottoman attacks from the middle of the 16th century⁷. The defensive ditch was also sectioned so that a ditch profile and archaeological material were offered and a chronologic estimation may be done there. The profile is in a shape of the letter U, much rounded therefore on its depth. Early ceramics was found on the ditch depth which could be assigned to the 10th–11th centuries and to 11th–12th⁸ ones, on the analogy of this type. The same sort of ceramics appeared also on the level where the stockade was surprised and it was assigned to the same early age. The stockade and the defensive ditch were contemporary in the opinion of St. Ferenczi and M. Barbu, being chronologically assigned to that lapse of time of the 10th–12th⁹ centuries. In my opinion they remain some puzzles concerning the wall assigned to a very late age of the 16th century, without archaeological arguments. The invoked one is a circumstantial and for form's sake argument which refers to the Mureş general historical reality, but with no archaeological sustenance.

Many controversies within the historic writing were generated by the absence of systematic archaeological research, the only one which could have offered conclusive information on the church of Bulci abbey and the ground fortification there¹⁰.

The archaeological work organization at Bulci offered us the possibility of making some site researches within the neighbour areas on the Mureş valley, as that one of Căpâlnaş for instance, were we made three ground fortifications map-drawing¹¹. Bulci village is placed at the villages of Birchiş, Valea Mare, Căprioara and Groşi limits, on the Mureş corridor. The Mureş meadow enters on a long distance this zone between the low summits of Lipova Hills to southward. The Groşi stream a southern tributary of the Mureş delimits on the villages of Valea Mare and Căpâlnaş

digging reports were published but they did not include the area general plan and the archaeological researches situational plan. St. Ferenczi, M. Barbu, *Cercetările arheologice de la Bulci și împrejurimi*, *Ziridava*, X, (1978), p. 67–80; Idem, *Săpăturile arheologice de la Bulci (județul Arad) în anul 1978. Raport preliminar*, *MCA*, 13, (1979), p. 289–290. The Benedictine abbey from Bulci was presented on the basis of historical sources within zonal ecclesiastic history geography and archaeological repertoires: B. Romhányi, *Kolostorok és társoskaptalanok a középkori Magyarországon*, Budapest, (2000), p. 16; A. A. Rusu, G. P. Hurezan, *Biserici medievale din județul Arad*, Arad, (2000), p. 85; D. Țeicu, *op. cit.*, p. 72–73.

⁴ S. Marki, *Aradvármegye és Arad szabad Királyi város története*, I, (1892), p. 451–452.

⁵ M. Barbu, P. Hügel, G. P. Hurezan, E. D. Pădurean, *Repertoriul arheologic al Mureşului inferior. Județul Arad*, Timișoara, (1999), p. 47; A. A. Rusu, G. P. Hurezan, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁶ Ferenczi, Barbu, *op. cit.*, p. 68–69.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 71 și ceramica de la p. 72–73.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 71

¹⁰ P. Iambor, *Așezări fortificate din Transilvania (sec. IX.XIII)*, Cluj-Napoca (2005), p. 87–88.

¹¹ Site researches at Căpâlnaş, October 2005.

line the eastern Lipova Hills endings from those of Bulza Hills (Fig. 1). The research concerning Căpâlnași archaeological topography developed on the southern frame of the boundary and the Groși valley. The archaeological diagnosis kept the zone of Ciuernic Hill and Birtala Hill in mind (Fig. 3). We kept track of the matter of a former discovery, namely the ground fortification on Ciuernic Hill verifying and mapping, and equally Birtalan Hill investigating as there a monument ruin used to be set by the local tradition. The ground fortification on Ciuernic Hill is placed on a hill prominence a promontory like, with an extremely marked slope to northward and eastward. The ground fortification Căpâlnaș-Ciuernic is in a shape of a rectangle of 60/ 70 m, with rounded corners. It was pointed out in 1965 by I. H. Crișan who assigned the ground fortification to the feudal age, on the basis of some ceramics remains¹². The oval broadened precinct is surrounded by a defensive ditch and a wall. Nowadays the wall is preserved on the northern and eastern sides and only in a small proportion on the western one. Its breadth varies from 5 to 6.5 m and the preserved height is of 1.5 m about. The ditch kept its untouched profile on three of the four sides. It was a sharpen angle profile as the drawing of I. H. Crișan former digging shows, with 6m in breadth at mouth¹³.

The field research identified the presence of two ground fortifications at Căpâlnaș, on Birtalan Hill. They are closely near on the same hill summit which guards the way to Groși village. Conventionally we named them fortification I and fortification II.

Căpâlnaș-Birtalan. Fortification I was arranged on the hill prominence where from the defensive ditch and an exterior wall are visible. It has an oval plan of 65/70 m on axes. The defensive ditch aperture is of 10 m about, its outline being very well delimited on the northern, eastern and western frame of the fortification. The ground wall is well preserved on the eastern frame. It was about 2.90 in breadth. The precinct defended by the ditch and the wall has the same irregular outline, inner of which the plan of a right-angled building is visible, of 12.50/6.50 in survey sizes on the sole surface. The mortar, stone and brick remains suggest that we are in the presence of a tower-dwell which was defended by a ditch and a ground wall. The absence of some archaeological materials does not allow us to speculate upon the fortification chronology. Căpâlnaș-Birtalan,

fortification II is placed west from the fortification I, on a hill prominence, delimited by a deep valley to westward, by the road to Groși and another valley to eastward. That promontory was fortified with a defensive ditch and an exterior wall. As nowadays that zone is intensely afforested it was extremely hard to map it. The fortification diameter is about 60 m. the ground wall is very well visible on the northern and eastern fortification outline. Its breadth varies from 5.50 to 6.50 m. the defensive ditch to delimit the fortification has an aperture of 12 m, and 1.6 m in depth on the eastern fortification frame. The survey research of such a covered with vegetation and great trees zone did not provide archaeological material. The site research from Bulci and Căpâlnași, not very large, raises for discussion some punctual items regarding the ground fortifications on the Mureș corridor on the one hand, but also the historic geography on the other hand. The topography of Birtalan Hill from Căpâlnaș with a mortar wall building, having the ditch and the ground wall for external defensive elements proves that we are in a medieval fortification environment. The tower-dwell from Căpâlnaș has similitude with the topographic structure of some monuments from the 14th-15th centuries. We may invoke formal similitude with Mehadia and Turnu-Ruieni donjons topography, for instance¹⁴. The vestiges of Căpâlnaș-Birtalan Hill medieval fortification might be identified with the medieval fortress Zaad that was recorded in the 15th century. Pál Engel proposed Zaadya fortress location within Căpâlnaș village boulder¹⁵. As a material reference *possessio Zaad* appears in 1427 in an office document, and *oppidum Zadya* in a document from 1479¹⁶. Căpâlnaș boulder preserved the toponyms Sădișor and Livada which could be invoked for Zadya fortress identifying at Căpâlnaș¹⁷. The medieval fortification was placed in a zone that kept a check on the Mureș corridor on the one hand, and the road that bound the Mureș Valley to the Bega Valley.

The other question concerning the archaeological topography on the Mureș, at Bulci and

¹⁴ D. Țeicu, *Cetăți medievale din Banat/Medieval fortifications in Banat*, Timișoara (2009), p. 28–32.

¹⁵ Pál Engel, *Magyarország világi archontológiája 1301–1457*, Budapest (1996), p. 419. He invokes the ground fortification from Ciurec Hill for location, but it has no connection with the medieval fortress.

¹⁶ Dezső Csánki, *Magyarország történelmi földrajza a Huniadiak Korában*, I, Budapest (1890), p. 762.

¹⁷ Petre Ursulescu, *Banatul de nord-est în secolele X–XVI*, Timișoara (2005), p. 116; he placed Zaadya fortress at Căpâlnaș on Birtalan Hill.

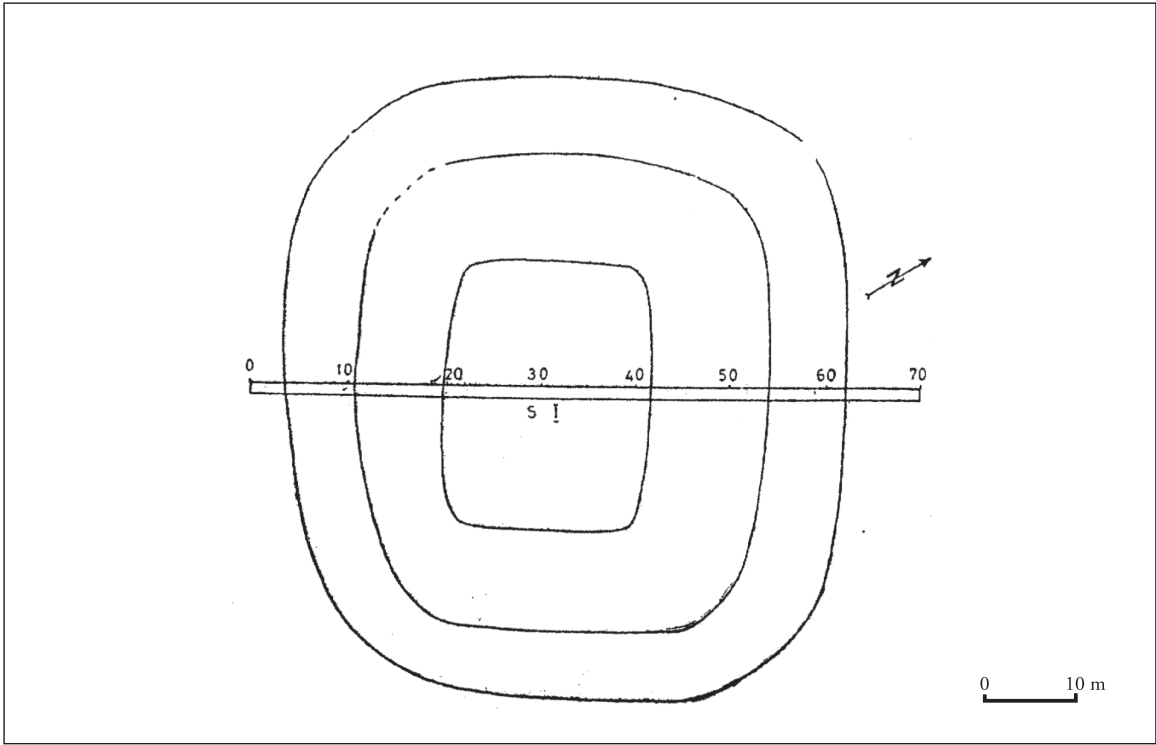
¹² I. H. Crișan, Fortificația feudală de la Căpâlnaș, *Tibiscus*, 5, (1979), p. 197–198.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 198 and fig. 1.

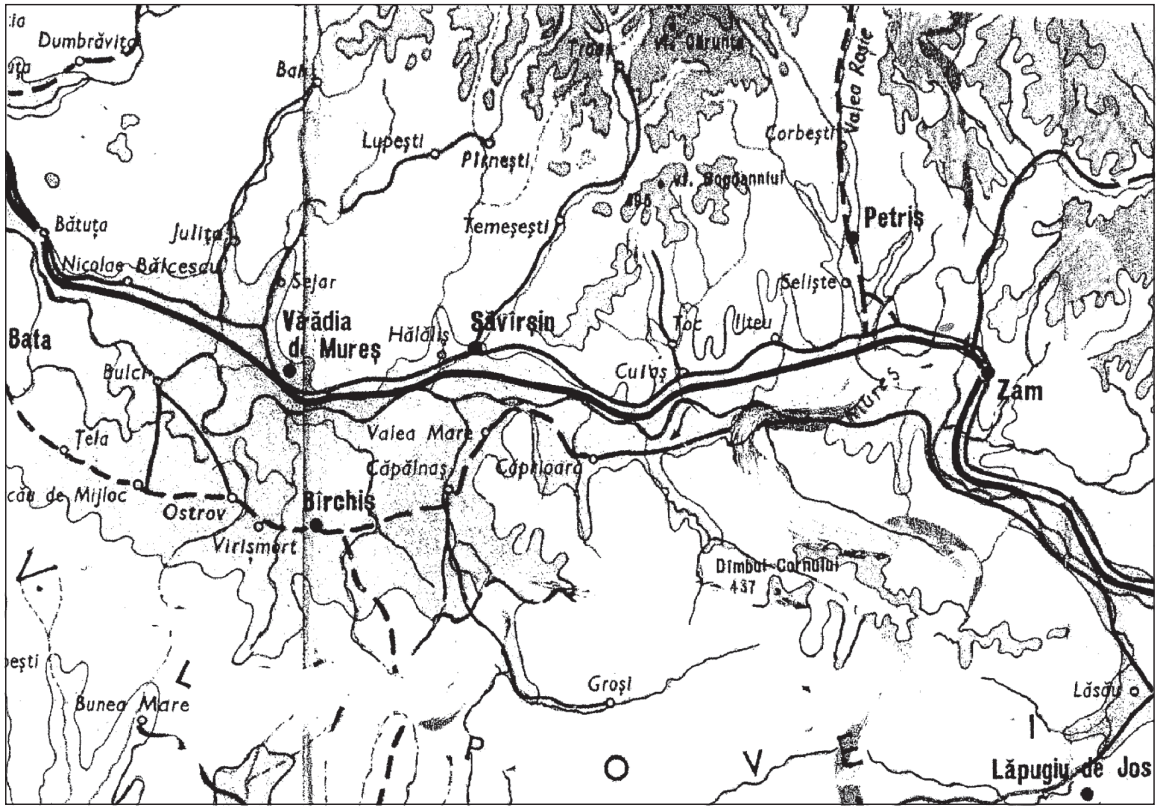
Căpâlnaș raised for discussion the ground fortifications item. Mapping and effecting surveys of any monument is the first priority in my opinion of the field archaeology, on the Banat province entire level. The problem of ground fortifications, especially of those belonging to the Early Middle Age concerned the Romanian archaeology but only from time to time critical estimates appeared on this matter. We may remember in this respect of the historic writing Radu Popa's more recent opinions¹⁸. The discussion prop is offered by a modest

archaeological reference material of the last four or five decades, often incompletely published. There is not a repertoire or an accurate map-drawing of ground fortifications from Transylvania and the Banat, at this moment, so much the less of those ones from the intra-Carpathians areas, a reference material which in my opinion might be the starting point of any historiographic approach. The diggings files from Bulci, Dăbâca and Biharea fortifications publishing would offer chronological reference point for much discussed matters.

¹⁸ R. Popa, Observații și îndreptări la istoria României în preajma Anului O Mie, *SCIVA*, 42, 3–4, (1991), p. 167–171; Curta, *op. cit.*, p. 277.



A



B

Fig. 1. A. Căpălnaș-Ciumernic ground fortification plan; B. The Mureș Valley at Bulci-Căpălnaș.

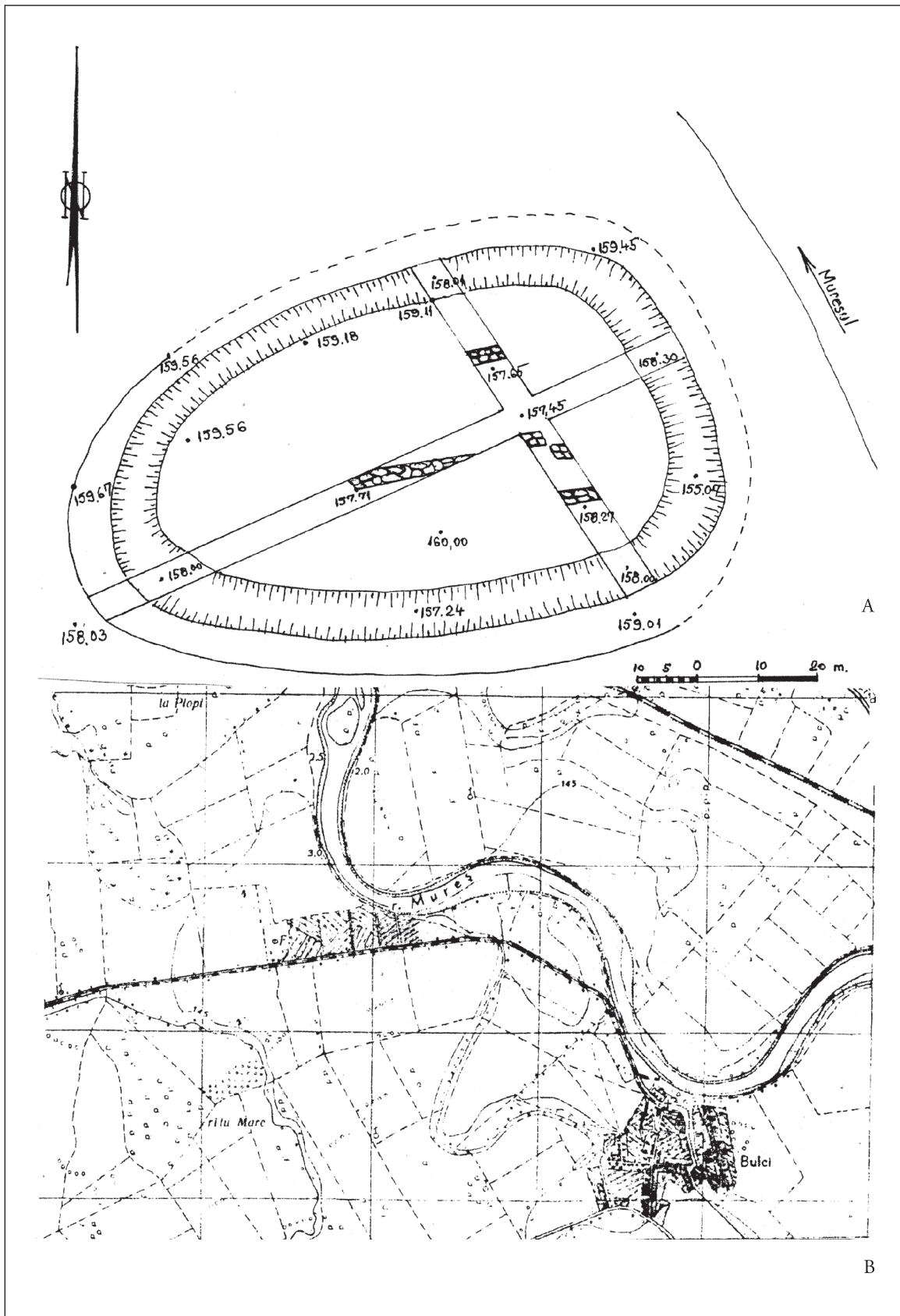


Fig. 2. Bulci. A. The ground fortification plan, with the Benedictine abbey ruins (the 13th century); B. The Mureș Valley map at Bulci.

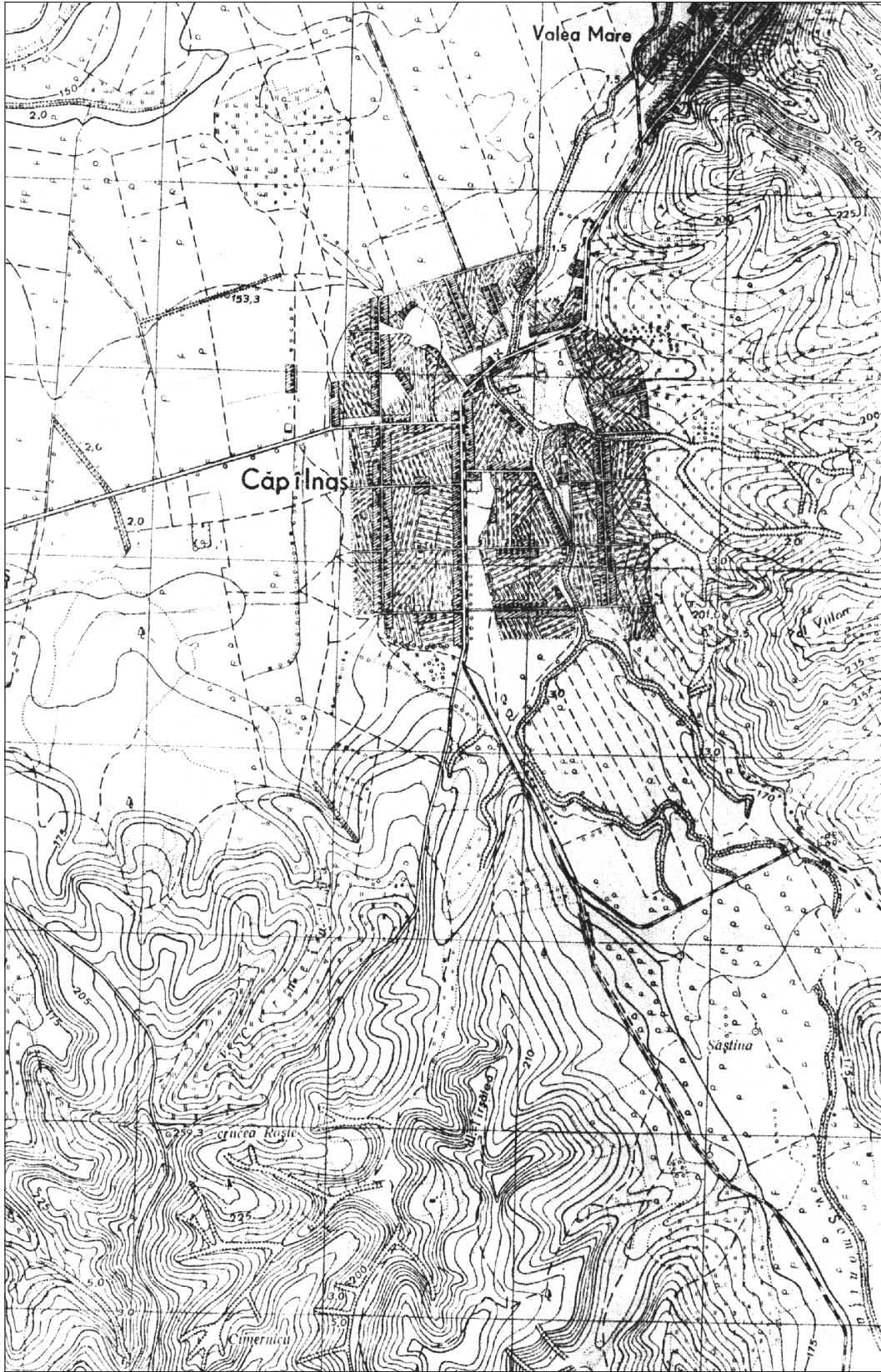


Fig. 3. Căpâlnaș area map.

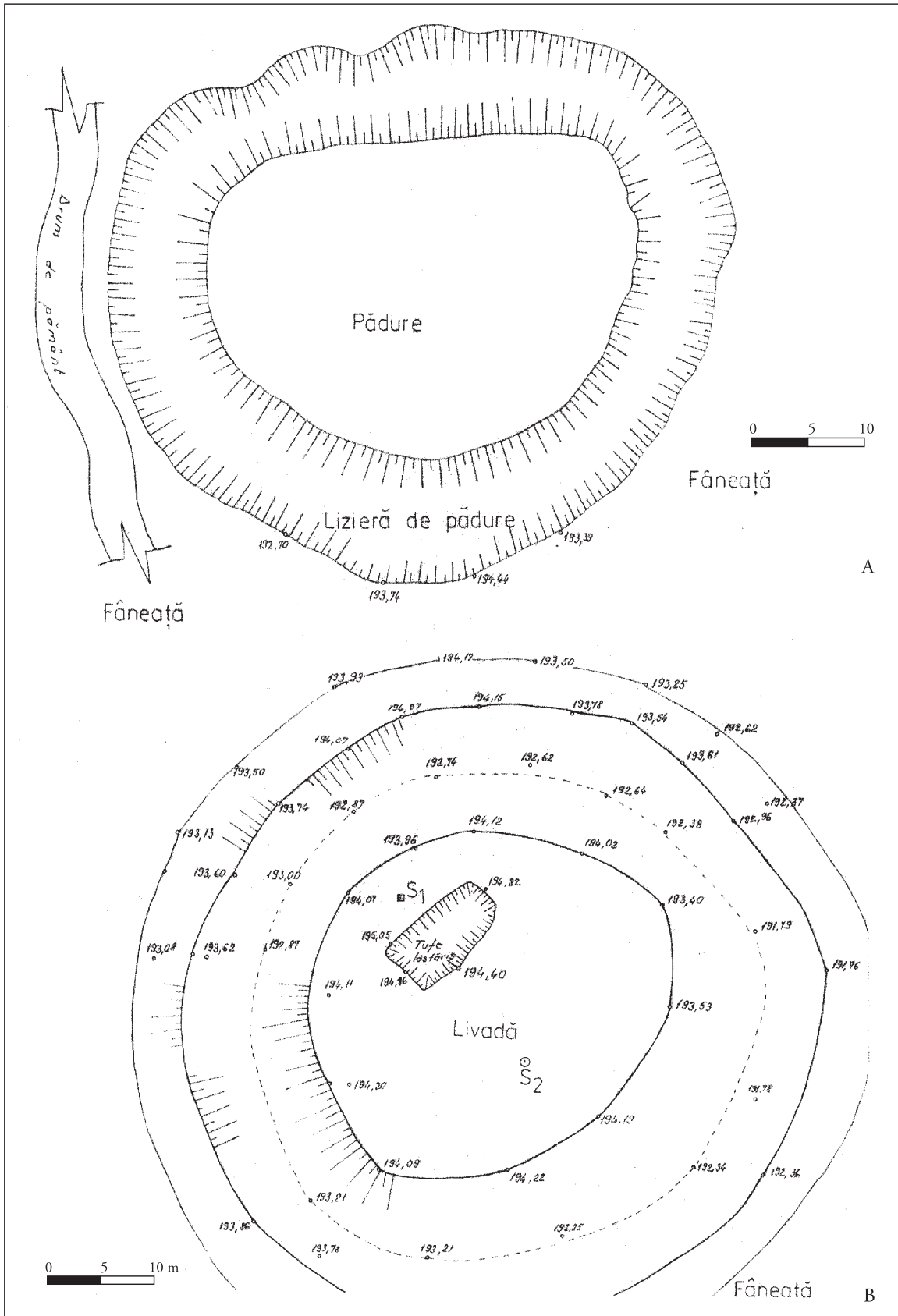


Fig. 4. Căpălnaș-Birtalan fortifications plan. A. The brickwork fortification with the defensive ditch; B. The ground fortification.



Fig. 5. Căpălnaș – Birtalan Hill. The defensive ditch and wall of the brickwork fortification.



Fig. 6. Birtalan Hill. The fortified precinct.