

Blazi Cave - an in situ Epigravettian site in Albania



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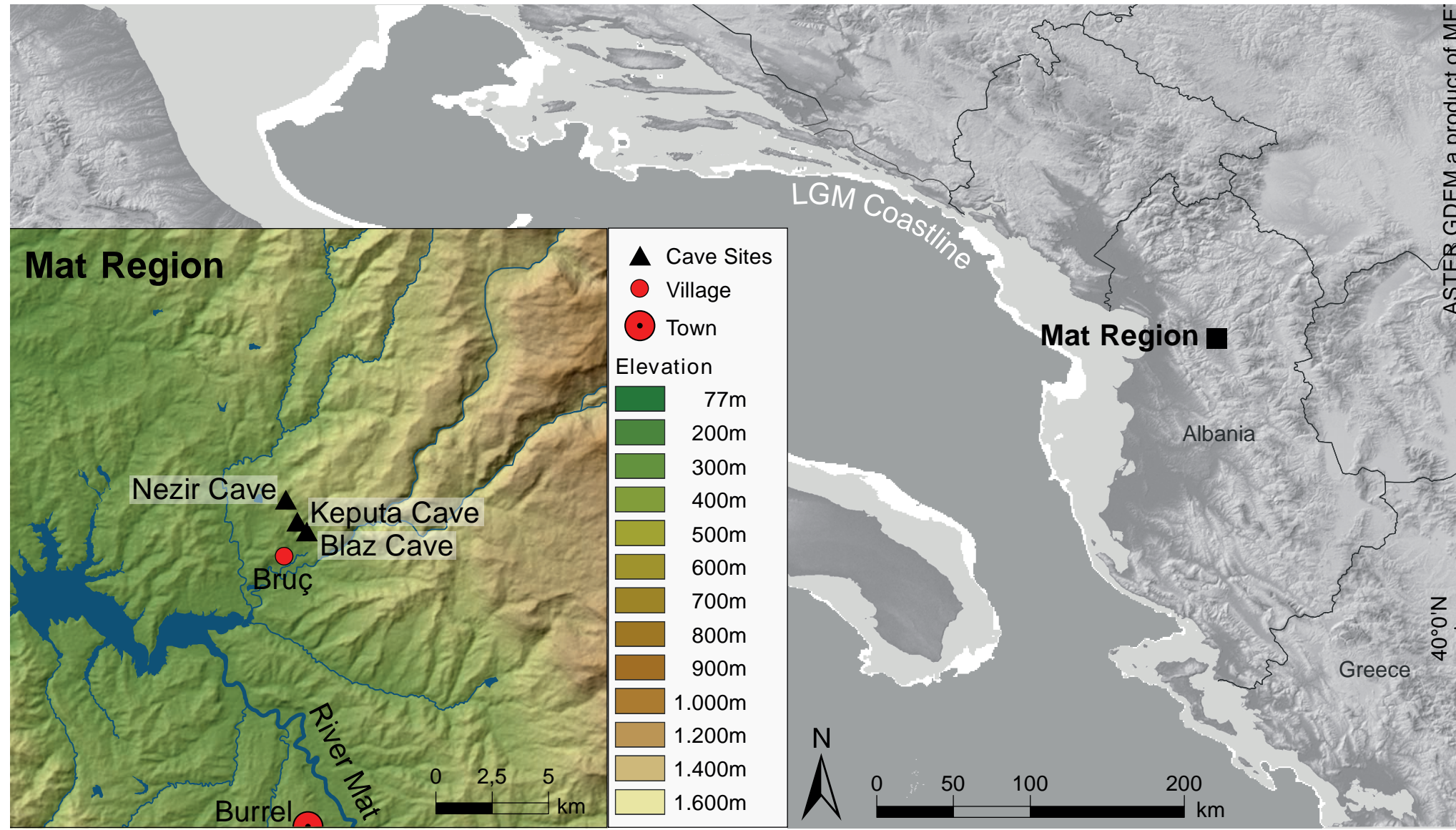


Fig.1 Map of the East Adriatic (LGM coastlines)

Excavation

Blazi cave is situated in the Mat karst region, north-central Albania at 300 m.a.s.l. (41° 42.290' N, 20° 00.469' E). Blazi and two neighbouring caves, Keputa and Nezir, are situated along the small Val river valley. The wide entrance of Blazi cave opens to the south, overlooking the vast Mat river valley (Fig.2&4). Known since the 1980s for its rich archaeological record, bearing Bronze Age and Neolithic sequences, Blazi underwent intensive excavations, leaving only few untouched sediments. Excavated Epigravettian layers were then described as „pre-neolithic“. The excavations of the GAP project started in 2012, the intact Epigravettian layers were recovered in 2015.

Trench 5 was opened in the entrance area, where few sediments remained untouched by earlier excavations (Fig.3). More than 10.000 stone artefacts and about 13.000 faunal remains were excavated. The sequence comprises of five layers, layer 3 bearing the undisturbed Epigravettian deposits (Fig.5).

Introduction

The Epigravettian site of Blazi cave represents so far the only undisturbed and securely dated Epigravettian site in Albania. The new data fill a research gap for the time of the Late Upper Palaeolithic in the Eastern Adriatic (Fig.1).

During the GAP (German-Albanian Palaeolithic research project) campaign in 2015, a large sample of stone artefacts and animal bones was excavated. Their spatial distribution and good preservation indicate an *in situ* position of the archaeological layer. The tool spectrum contains a high ratio of backed bladelets and microgravette points, typical components of an Epigravettian assemblage. The faunal remains, mainly ibex, exhibit numerous cut and percussion marks, characterising Blazi cave as a specialised ibex hunting site. The structure of the faunal sample indicates use of the cave in the summer month. A first AMS 14C-date of 18.820 +/- cal. BP places Blazi cave into the early phase of the Late Adriatic Epigravettian complex and therefore in the final phase of the Last Glacial Maximum.



Fig.2 View from the south to Blazi Cave

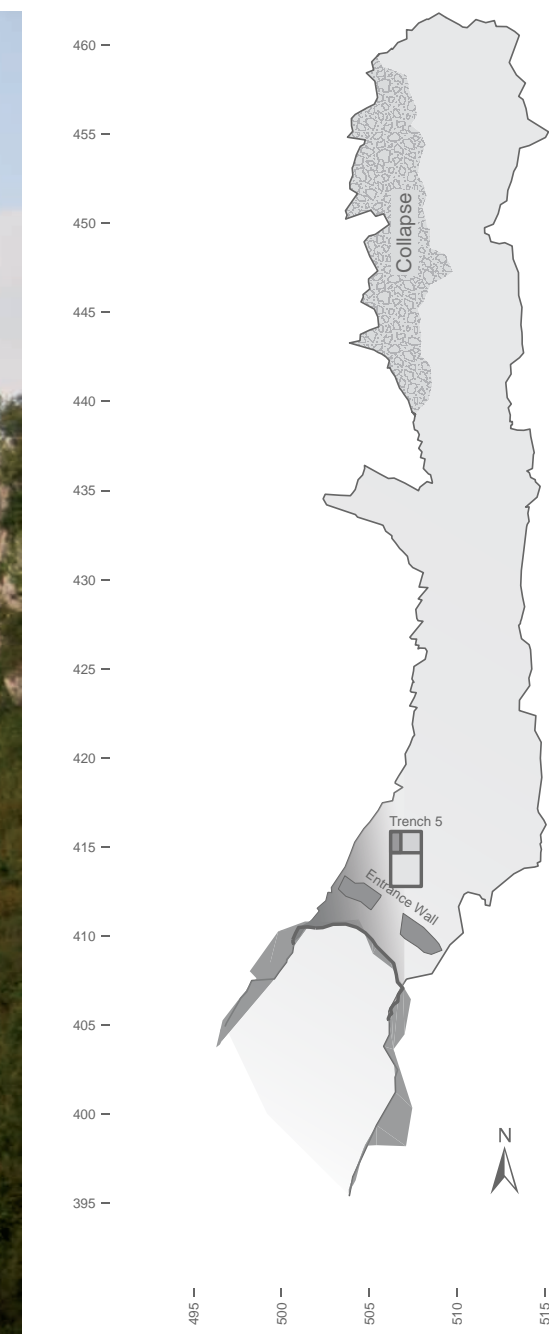


Fig.3 Excavation plan

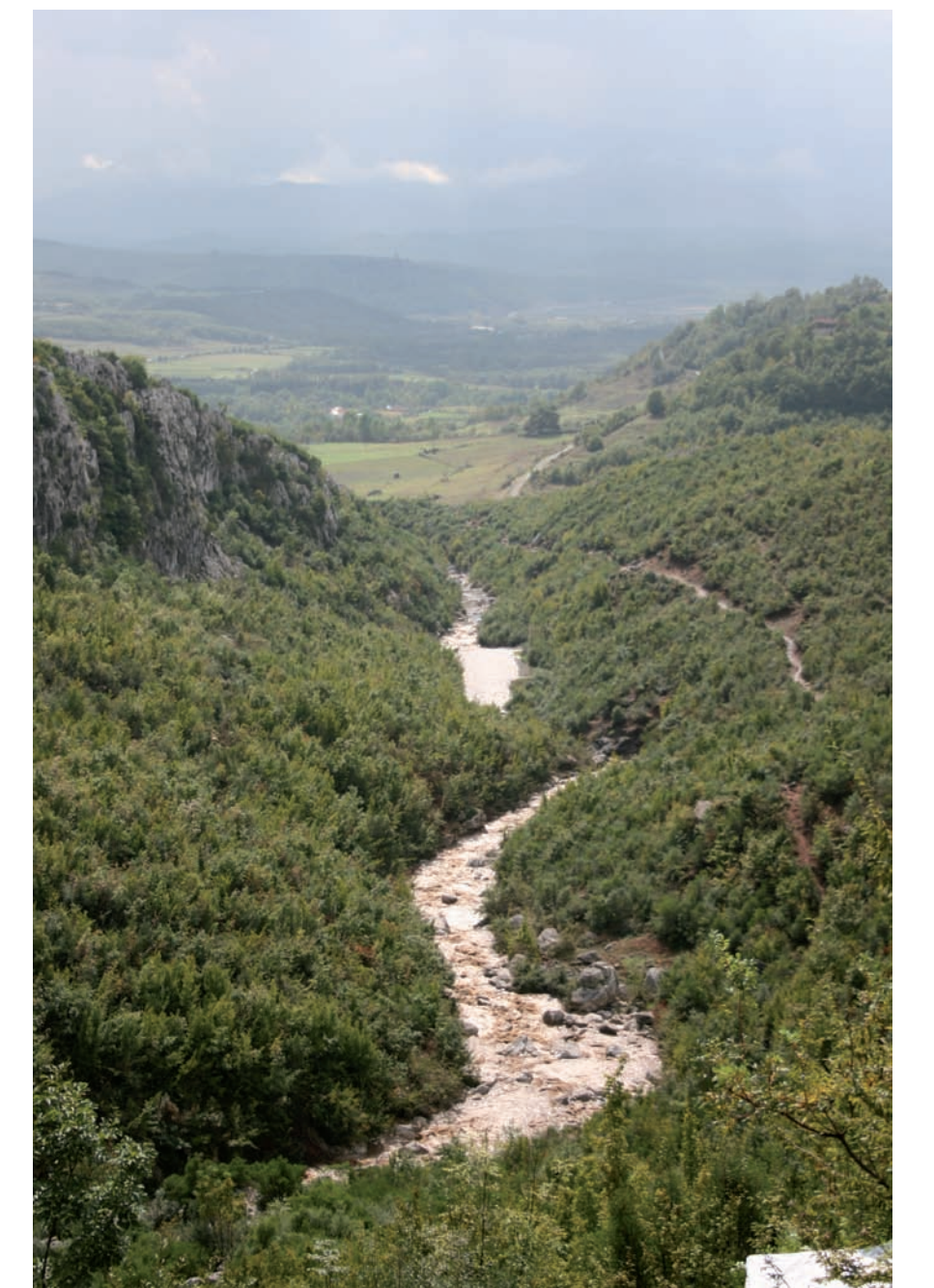


Fig.4 View from Blazi cave to the south

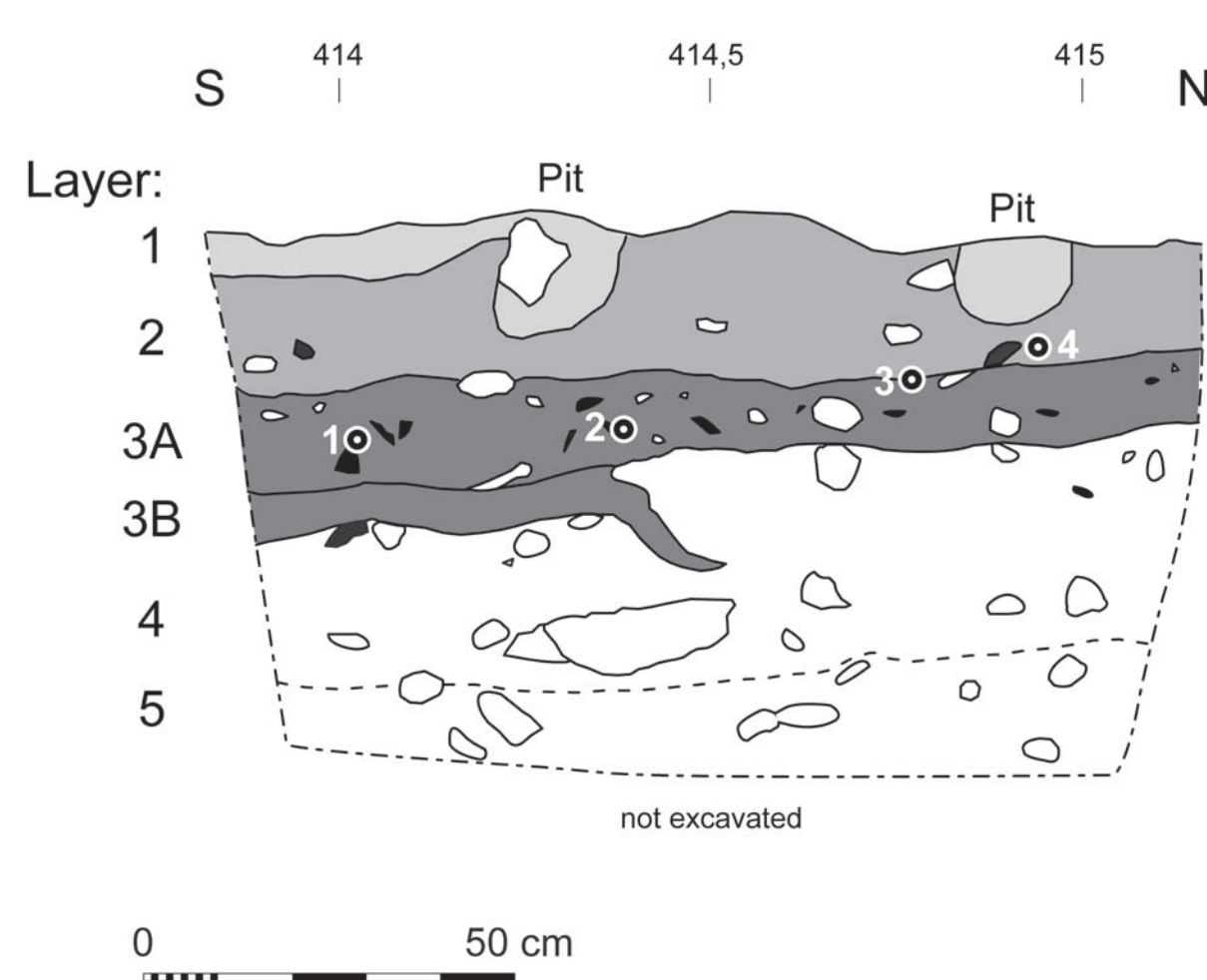


Fig.5 Excavated sequence in trench 5

Fauna

The archaeozoological sample consists of 9808 determinable bones and teeth. Species determination was possible for 263 bones (Fig.6). The most frequent species is ibex (*Capra ibex*), followed by red deer and wild boar. Among the ibex, no neonates could be identified, suggesting an occupation of Blazi cave during summer. A high percentage of bones show spiral breakage patterns indicating the smashing of bone shafts in a fresh state. The high percentage of heavily fragmented bones is most likely linked to the exploitation of bone marrow. Further, two cervical vertebrae of red deer still in anatomical connection point to an *in situ* position of the artefacts. The species represented in the faunal spectrum of Trench 5 are adapted to varying climates and environments. Whereas ibex prefers a cooler and drier mountainous environment like the hinterland of Blazi cave, wild boar occurs only in warmer and densely wooded habitats as the Mat valley.

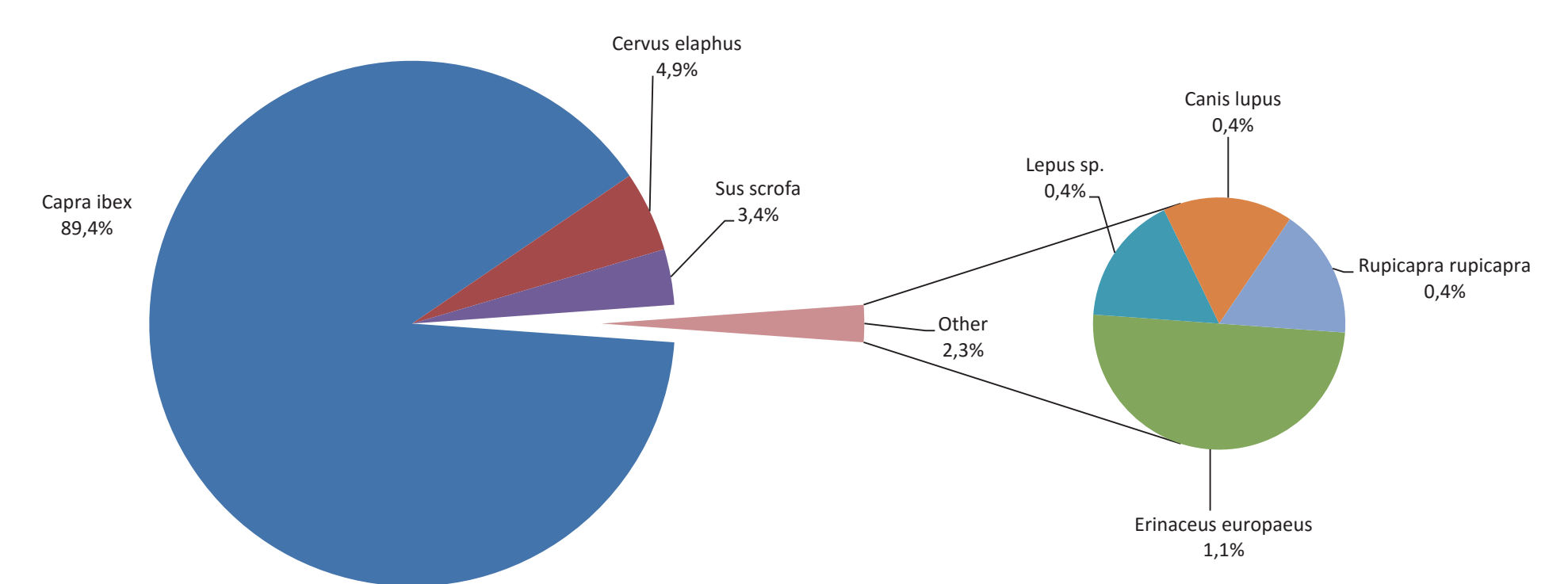


Fig.6 Frequency distribution of animal species in the trench 5 sample

Lithics

A sample of 903 lithic artefacts underwent a more detailed technological and typological analysis. The majority of the artefacts were made on locally occurring radiolarite, only 15 % were produced on flint (Fig.7). Flint was transported to the site in form of small cores of unknown origin, whereas the Radiolarite arrived probably in all kinds of shapes (Fig.8. 1-5). The reduction sequence was mainly focused on blades, bladelets and microblades (Fig.8. 7-17). Three *chaîne opératoires* could be identified (Fig.9): 1) Elongated blank production on semiprismatic cores. 2) Elongated blank production on large flakes or blades. 3) Burins as bladelet/microblade cores. Retouched bladelets and microblades were commonly backed with a continuous abrupt retouch, usually found on the right edge of the blank opposed to a blunt edge. Lower in number are bilaterally backed pieces, pieces with additional retouch or small points with an abruptly retouched back (Microgravettes, Azilian-type points, shouldered pieces) (Fig.10. 5,7-16). The second most frequent group among the tools are endscrapers (Fig.10. 1,2,4,6). Resharpener flakes and the recycling of endscrapers indicate a reuse of worn tools.

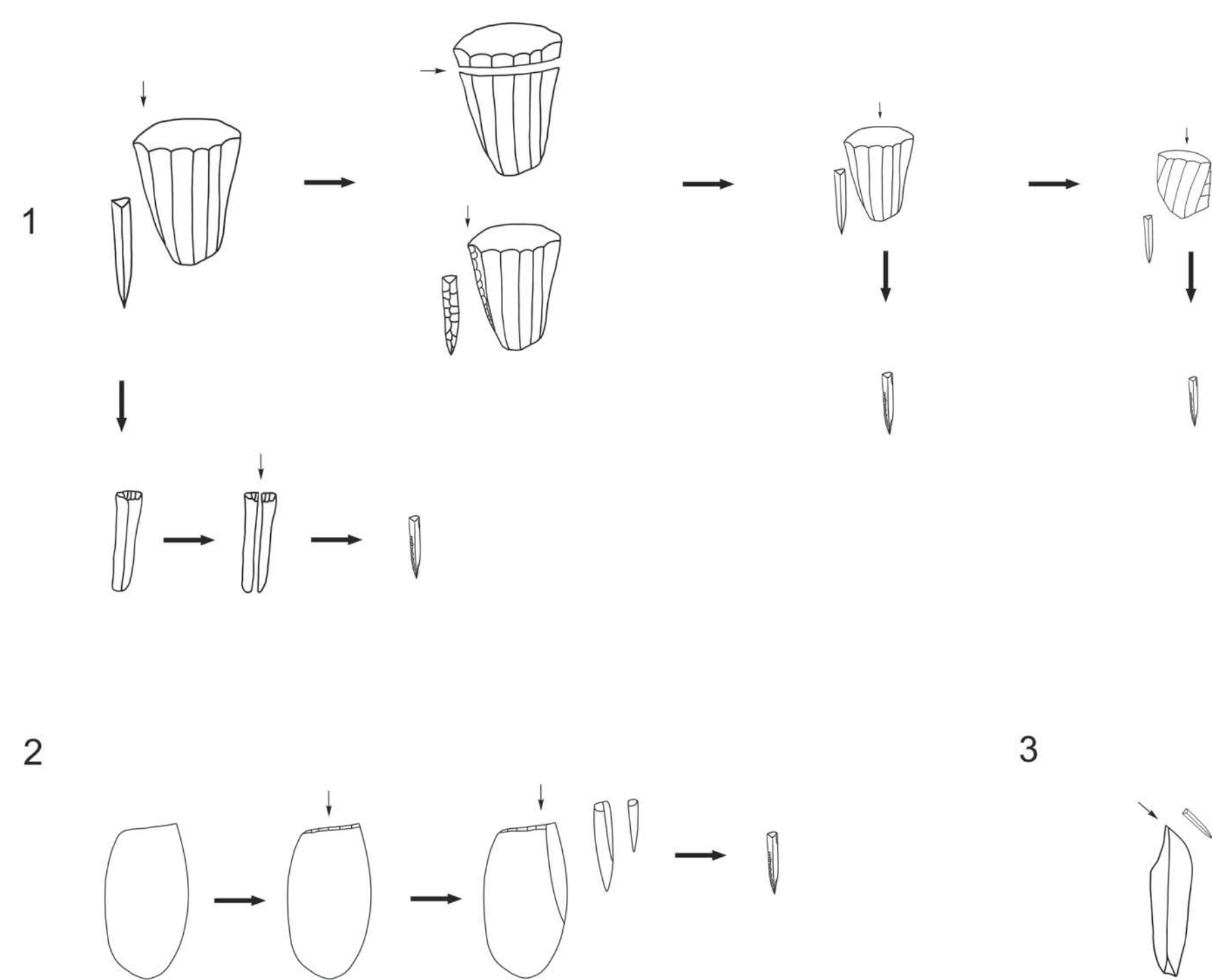


Fig.9 Chaîne opératoires identified in trench 5



Fig.7 1) Tip of an Arenian-type point, radiolarite, 2) Semiprismatic microblade core, flint

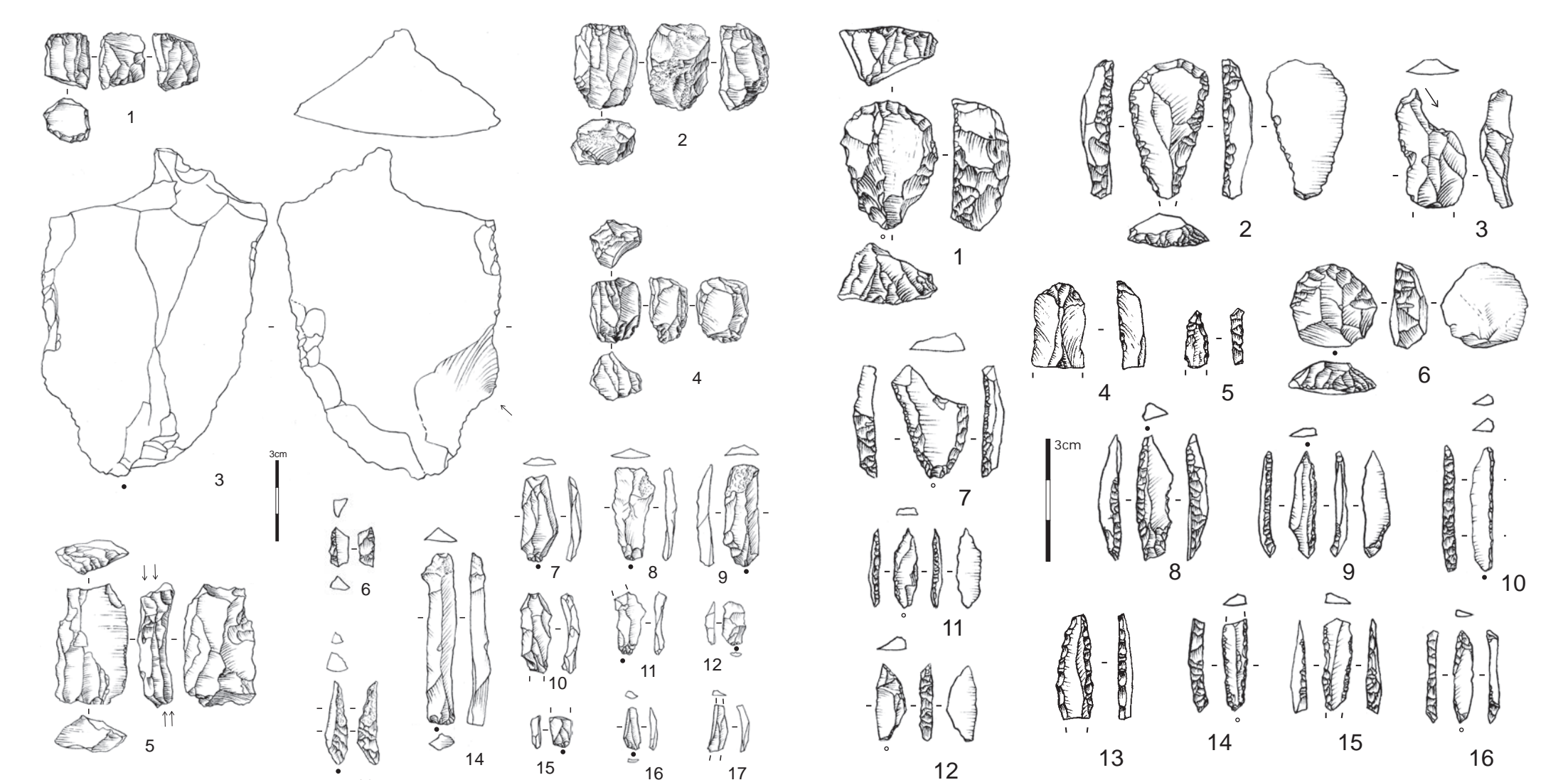


Fig.8 Selected Epigravettian cores and blanks of trench 5

Fig.10 Selected Epigravettian tools of trench 5

Outlook

Future investigations will address the relation of raw material and different *chaîne opératoires*. In addition, the provenience of the used radiolarite and flints will be examined. Breakage patterns on segmented pieces will be studied to identify a possible application of the microburin technique, commonly practiced in the Epigravettian to obtain standardized projectile inserts. Answering these questions will allow a much better comparison with other contemporaneous sites and reveal the foraging radius of the hunter-gatherers of Blazi cave and its role in the network of the Eastern Adriatic Epigravettian.

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