

TWO NEW FINDS OF CLAY ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINES IN LATE IRON AGE CONTEXTS FROM SOUTHWESTERN ROMANIA*

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Cuvinte cheie: a doua epocă a fierului, figurine antropomorfe din lut, mobilitate în epoca fierului

(Abstract)

The presence of anthropomorphic figurines made of clay is well documented in the “Getae” environment north of the Danube. Judging from their discovery context, the “special” treatment visible on some of the pieces, as well as comparing these finds with the ones from Graeco-Roman, specialists have come to the conclusion that such objects were used for magical purposes. While common in the area east of the Carpathians, such objects have rarely been found in contexts attributed to the so-called “Celtic horizon” from the Carpathian Basin. The two finds presented in this paper

Anthropomorphic clay figurines are not uncommon discoveries in the “Getae” environment north of the Danube. They are mostly found in the outer Carpathian area and the contexts in which they were found cover a time span that starts from the 5th c. BC and ends into

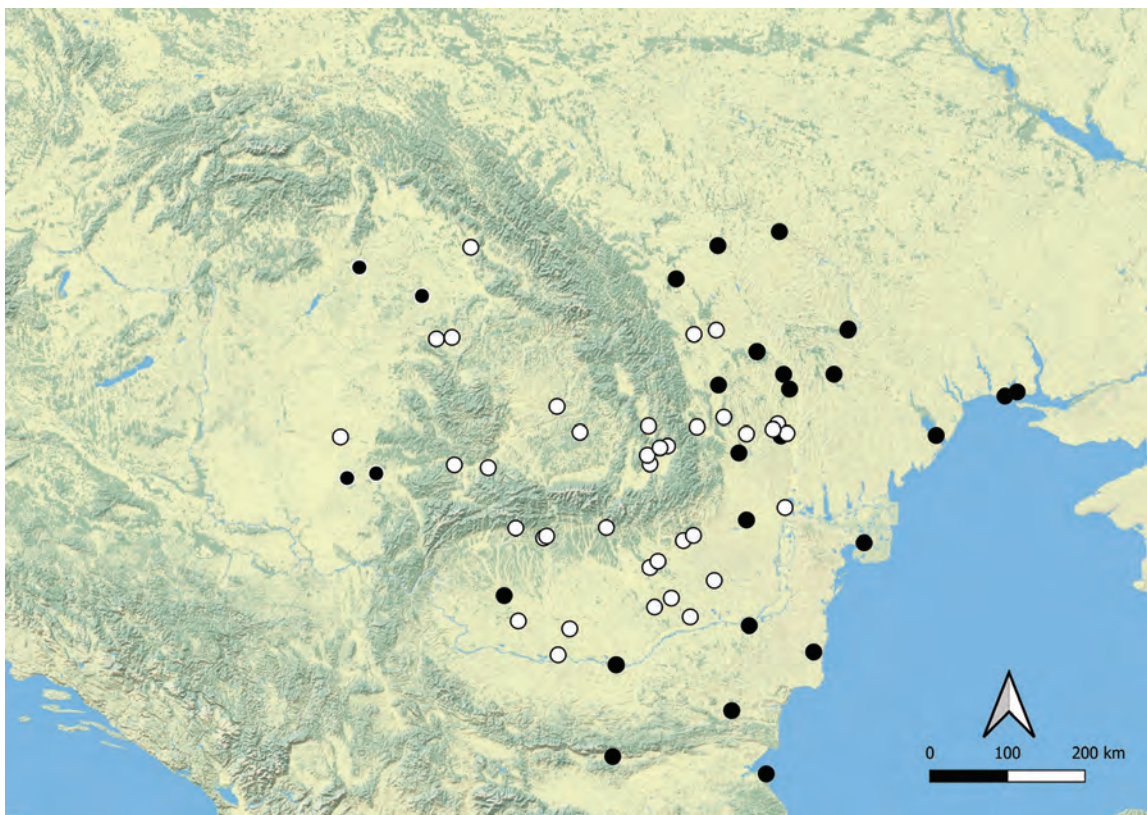


Fig. 1. Distribution map of clay anthropomorphic figurines. Dark circles: 4th – 3rd centuries BC; white circles 2nd century BC–1st century AD. (After Sirbu 1993, Rustoiu 2019 with additions)

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the 2nd c. AD (Fig. 1). Throughout the years, several hypotheses regarding their role and function have been put forward, with most researchers identifying them as objects used in magical practices¹. Similarities have been noticed with objects from the Greek and later, Roman world, where literary and epigraphic sources are more abundant in describing how such objects were used in magical rituals². In the La Tène rural environment from the 4th–3rd c. BC such objects are extremely scarce. In fact, they are found only in the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin in small numbers.

The purpose of this paper is to bring forward two new discoveries, consisting of three anthropomorphic figurines, unearthed in present-day southwestern Romania. The study will also attempt to interpret the meaning of such objects in a cultural environment where they are not commonly found.

The find from Topolovățu Mare

During rescue excavation conducted prior to the introduction of a gas pipe, a half-sunken dwelling belonging to the La Tène period was unearthed in the plains north of the Topolovățu Mare village (Timiș county)³. The structure was discovered on the slope edge of a small hillock, surrounded by what seems to be a fossil stream. It had a rectangular shape with rounded corners, spread over

a surface of around 17 sq. m (Pl. I/1). On the southern side of the building, a step entrance was discovered, which was around 1m long. The roof of the dwelling was supported by two main posts positioned on the eastern and western sides of the pit. After the collapse of the structure, the pit was deliberately filled using debris from household activities. The backfill was probably a one-time event judging from the shards belonging to a bowl which were found scattered across the entire feature at different depths. Inventory recovered from the archaeological feature consists mainly of pottery fragments, both hand-made (Pl. II) and wheel thrown (Pl. III) and it is typical of the “Celtic” horizon in the eastern Carpathian Basin. The hand-made pottery from this feature is relevant to understand how older traditions and crafting techniques were preserved in the La Tène communities from the 4th–2nd centuries BC. Particular attention should be paid to the pottery with channeled decoration which consists of several types of bowls and jugs. These types of pots have their origins in the Early Iron Age milieu of the eastern Carpathian and their presence in La Tène contexts has been seen as a preservation of older traditions by the indigenous element of the newly founded communities of the Late Iron Age⁴.

The clay anthropomorphic figurine (Fig. 2)

was found in the center of the dwelling, very close to the bottom of the feature. It is 3.5 cm high and 2.1 cm wide, with a thickness of 1.1 cm. The facial features are crossed out by three incisions resembling the shape of the letter “H”. The limbs are barely distinguishable from the body, all of them ending with notches symbolizing fingers and toes. Two protuberances in the chest area suggests that the figurine was intended to represent a female character. In the abdominal area two vertical lumps might also suggest the female genitalia, but it could also be a

reference to the womb. Judging from the size of the figurine and the style in which the limbs were modeled, the piece from Topolovățu Mare strongly resembles a find from Polovragi (Gorj County),



Fig. 2. The anthropomorphic figurine from Topolovățu Mare (drawing by S.Saftu)

¹ Tătulea -Vicoveanu 1973, 149–150; Sîrbu 1993, 68–69; Palincaș 1995, 96–103; Rustoiu 2019, 239–257.

² For a recent summary concerning the epigraphic and literary sources concerning this matter see Németh 2018.

³ For some preliminary data concerning archaeobotanic and archaeozoological remains from the dwelling see Ciută 2019, 644–647; El Susi 2021, 171–172.

⁴ Maráz 1981, 111–112; Popa – Plantos 2001, 115; Medeleț 2022, 76–78.

which was also found in a dwelling alongside two other figurines and a miniature vessel⁵.

The finds from Timișoara-Freidorf

Located at the outskirts of Timișoara, the site from Freidorf was generally known in literature due to its finds belonging to the first half of the 1st millennium AD⁶. Rescue excavation undertaken in 2017 and 2020 also unearthed remnants of La Tène rural settlement, roughly dated to the late 4th – early 2nd c. BC⁷. Among the archaeological features excavated in 2020, one half-sunken dwelling is of interest for this study. Feature U.A. 11 was a rectangular dwelling which was 6.5 m long and 4.5 m wide and was 0.7 m deep (Pl. I/2). It had a roughly east-west orientation two posts on the shorter sides. The backfill of the pit consisted of three layers of soil containing household waste. Judging from the pottery inventory which consists of both hand-made (Pl. IV) and wheel-thrown pottery (Pl. V), the building can be dated to the “Celtic horizon”. The two figurines (Fig. 3) were discovered in the southwestern corner of the dwelling, very close to each other. Both of the figurines

preservation (Fig3/2). It was 11 cm tall, 5.5 cm wide and 2.7 cm thick. The right arm of the figurine was missing. While the facial features (eyes and nose) were sketched by pulling the soft clay with the fingers, gender traits were not marked by the craftsman. Both of the figurines were made from a similar clay paste, which contained a high degree of sand used as temper and both of them seemed to have been fired at similar temperatures.

The significance of the clay anthropomorphic figurines.

Due to the lack of written sources preserved from the Iron Age communities inhabiting the eastern Carpathian Basin and the lower Danube area, the purpose of these figurines has been deduced by analyzing the contexts in which the items were found and the treatments they have been subjected to. Some were found as part of “special kits” buried in consecrated spaces like graveyards, as it is the case with the find from Zimnicea (Teleorman County), where such an assemblage was buried in a textile or leather wrapping⁸. At Poiana (Galați County) 28 figurines were discovered in two

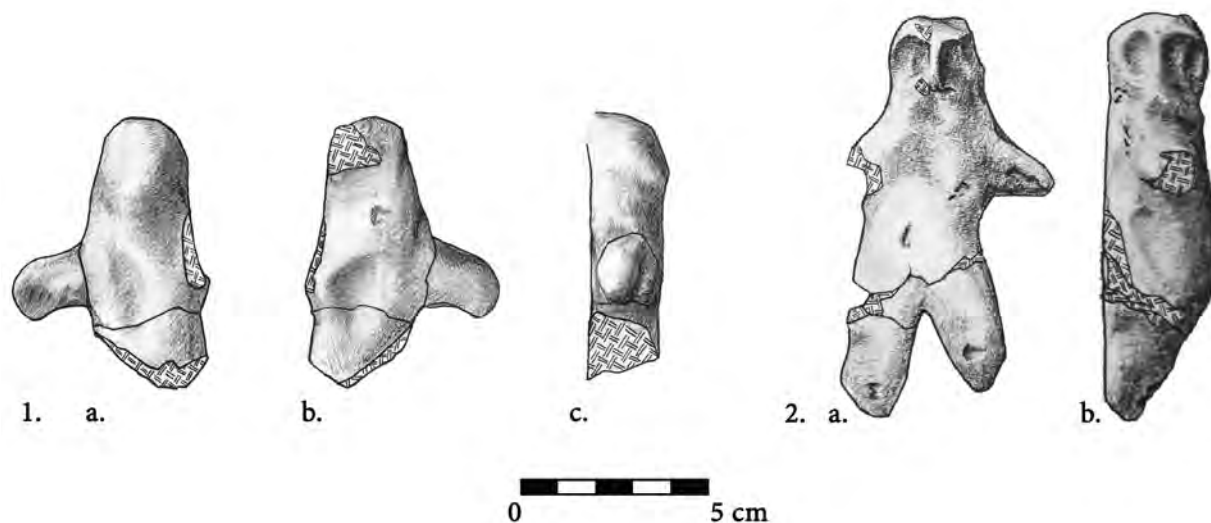


Fig. 3. The anthropomorphic figurines from Timișoara-Freidorf (drawing by B. Calotă)

were fragmented before their discovery. The first one was the most damaged with its inferior limbs completely missing and only one arm still preserved (Fig. 3/1). At the moment of its discovery the figurine was 6.5 cm tall, 5 cm wide and 2 cm thick. It lacked any facial or gender features. The second figurine was in a more complete state of

amphorae. Half of the figurines, all having female traits and modeled with their hands tied behind their backs were placed in one vessel, while the other half (11 having female traits and three having male features) were placed in the other⁹. Another interesting example comes from the fortified settlement at Răcătău (Bacău County), where in a refuse pit six figurines were placed in a circle, face

⁵ Sîrbu 1993, 119–120; Fig. 39/4.

⁶ Mare *et alii* 2006, 9–10.

⁷ For some preliminary data concerning this settlement see Georgescu 2019; Georgescu 2020.

⁸ Ganciu – Măndescu 2014, 94–95.

⁹ Sîrbu 1993, 119.

down, with river pebbles¹⁰. In another case, a similar anthropomorphic statuette has been associated with metallurgical craftsmanship, being found in a house belonging to a travelling goldsmith. It has been interpreted as a proof of the magical powers ascribed to certain craftsmen due to their ability to transform matter into finite objects¹¹.

In the case of the two finds presented in this paper, the information which can be drawn from the discovery context is rather superficial. The piece from Topolovăţu Mare was found very close to the walking surface of the dwelling so it can be assumed that it was part of the inventory of the building during the period it was functional. It must also be pointed out that the building was found at the edge of the hillock, near the dried-out stream, which could indicate that this construction was somewhat remote from the core of the settlement¹². Due to this aspect, we can assume that the building was used for a special purpose which required it to be placed outside of the main core of the settlement in a somewhat liminal position. Such behaviors are sometimes associated with specialized individuals such as craftsmen or healers¹³. The incisions on the face and around the genitalia might represent traces of mutilation which took place prior to the firing of the clay. It can also be presumed that the overemphasis of the female reproductive organs, as well as their placement in the abdominal area might be linked with erotic or fertility rituals.

The two figurines from *Timișoara-Freidorf* come from a building that was part of a cluster of constructions with a similar shape and dimensions. Their functionality is hard to ascribe since the backfill of the features is composed of random debris. However, based on the proximity of the two figurines to each other, as well as the similarities in clay paste, shape and firing techniques, it can be assumed that they were used simultaneously during the same procession.

The presence of the clay anthropomorphic figurines in a “Celtic” environment.

Starting with the later part of the 4th century BC the La Tène culture is spreading eastwards into

the Carpathian Basin¹⁴. This event has been correlated with the movement of the Celtic populations which culminated with the Balkan invasion from the 3rd century BC. The process, often called the Celtic colonization of the Carpathian Basin, has led to the creation of a hybrid material culture, which comprises elements of both the indigenous population and the newcomers.

The anthropomorphic clay figurines are a trait specific to the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin. Other than the finds presented in this paper, another similar figurine was unearthed in the settlement from Ciumești (Satu Mare county), which is adjacent to the cemetery¹⁵ in which the famous iron helmet decorated with a bronze bird of prey was found¹⁶. The anthropomorphic figurine was found in a sunken dwelling with a rather poor inventory according to the author¹⁷. Based on a bronze brooch, the abandonment of the dwelling can be dated to the middle La Tène period.

Another clay figurine comes from a funerary context in eastern Hungary. Grave 10 from Tiszavasvári, a cemetery dated to the LTB2-C period, belonged to an infant and contained a small wheel-thrown vessel, a stone fragment, a bronze bracelet and a clay figurine which was placed near the head of the deceased¹⁸.

The absence of these type of artifacts in the central European La Tène environment suggests that rituals involving such items were not common for these communities. Their presence in the eastern Carpathian Basin during the time of the so-called “Celtic” horizon could be owed to different factors. It can be affirmed that due to the fact that clay as a raw material is very easily accessible and the creation of such figurines doesn't require a special set of craft skills, it is unlikely that these items were seen as desirable goods which could have been brought into the La Tène environment via trade¹⁹. It is also reasonable to consider that practicing rituals that involved the use of clay figurines required the presence of specialists that were familiar with the custom, but also an audience that believed that such practices worked. Therefore, the presence of these objects might indicate the mobility of a small group of people that were familiar with these practices and believe in the effects of rituals involving the clay figurines. A. Rustoiu has already postulated

¹⁰ Sirbu 1993, 120.

¹¹ Rustoiu – Berecki 2015, 128.

¹² The settlement was only excavated through a narrow trench which crossed the outskirts of the hillock. The main core of the settlement is thought to be present on the top of the hillock. Future non-invasive measurements are planned in order to determine the full stretch of this settlement.

¹³ Gartski 2016, 105.

¹⁴ Rustoiu 2012, 316.

¹⁵ Zirra 1967.

¹⁶ Rustoiu 2008.

¹⁷ Zirra 1980, 47; Pl. XII/3.

¹⁸ Almásy 1998, 59–60; Pl. IX.

¹⁹ Egri 2014, 233.

the hypothesis stating that travelling sorcerers or magicians might be responsible for spreading this custom in the eastern Carpathian Basin²⁰.

In recent years, the number figurines discovered has increased due to large scale rescue excavations which significantly improved our knowledge about the La Tène period as a whole and particularly its habitat in. It would also be fair to assume that, as these investments will reveal more and more sites, the probability of unearthing similar figurines will increase, which in turn will re-shape the distribution map. In this scenario we could assume that these magical rituals were a trait belonging to the indigenous population from the eastern Carpathian. Just like certain burial rites and rituals, as well as some pottery traditions, this practice has been perpetuated in the new environment following the “Celtic” colonization.

Conclusion

The new discoveries presented in this paper are relevant for understanding aspects of the spiritual life the cultural dynamics of communities from the 4th- 3rd c. BC. While the context or treatment of the figurines presented doesn't clearly indicate their use in magical practices like in other cases, some clues might hint to this idea. In the case of the small statuette form Topolovăţu Mare, the scratches on the head and womb, made before the firing of the clay, might be linked to a deliberate mutilation of the object. Also, its discovery in a dwelling situated at the outskirts of the hillock might indicate that the construction could have been inhabited by a liminal character.

In the case of the finds from Freidorf, one can assume that originally the pieces were part of a kit, similar to many others found east of the Carpathians. Their presence in the half-sunken dwelling can be seen as accidental, thrown together with other household debris in order to refill the pit.

Objects of this type are rare in the rural La Tène environment from the Carpathian Basin, being found exclusively in the eastern part of the area. Their presence here might indicate the mobility of certain specialists that are familiar with these practices, or could be seen as a custom specific for the indigenous populations that has been perpetuated in the newly formed mixed communities of the 4th–3rd centuries BC.

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²⁰ Rustoiu 2019, 256.

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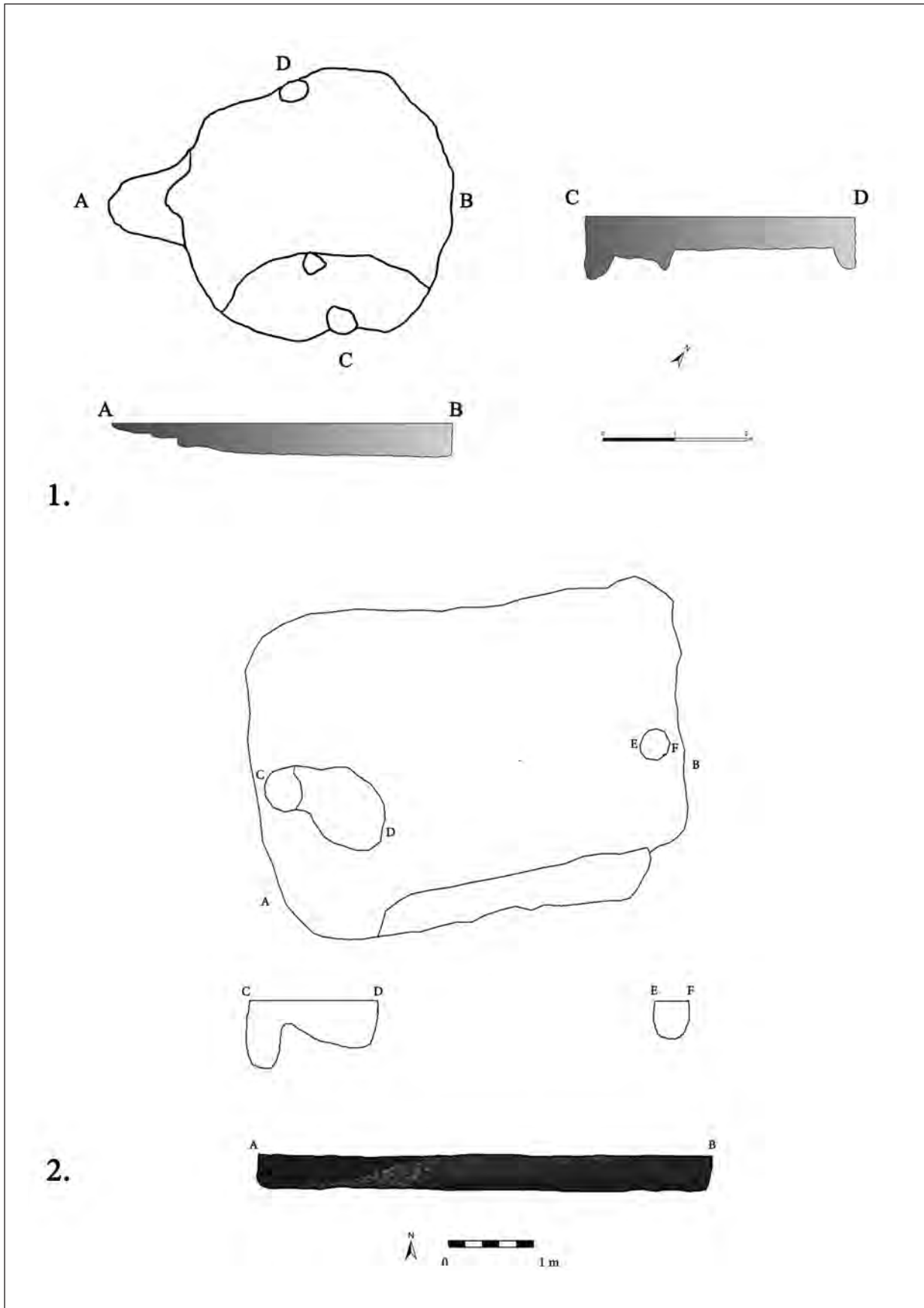
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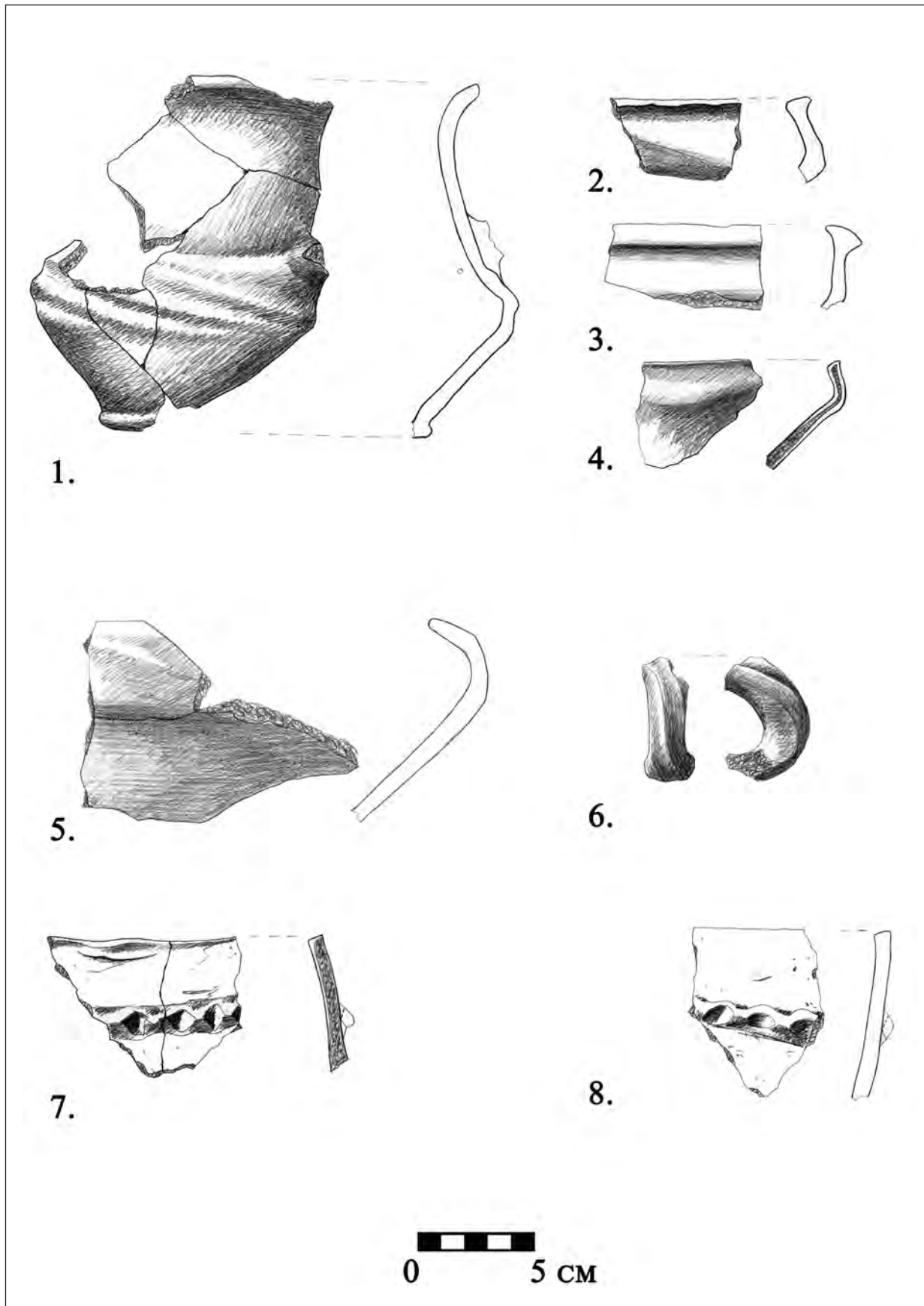
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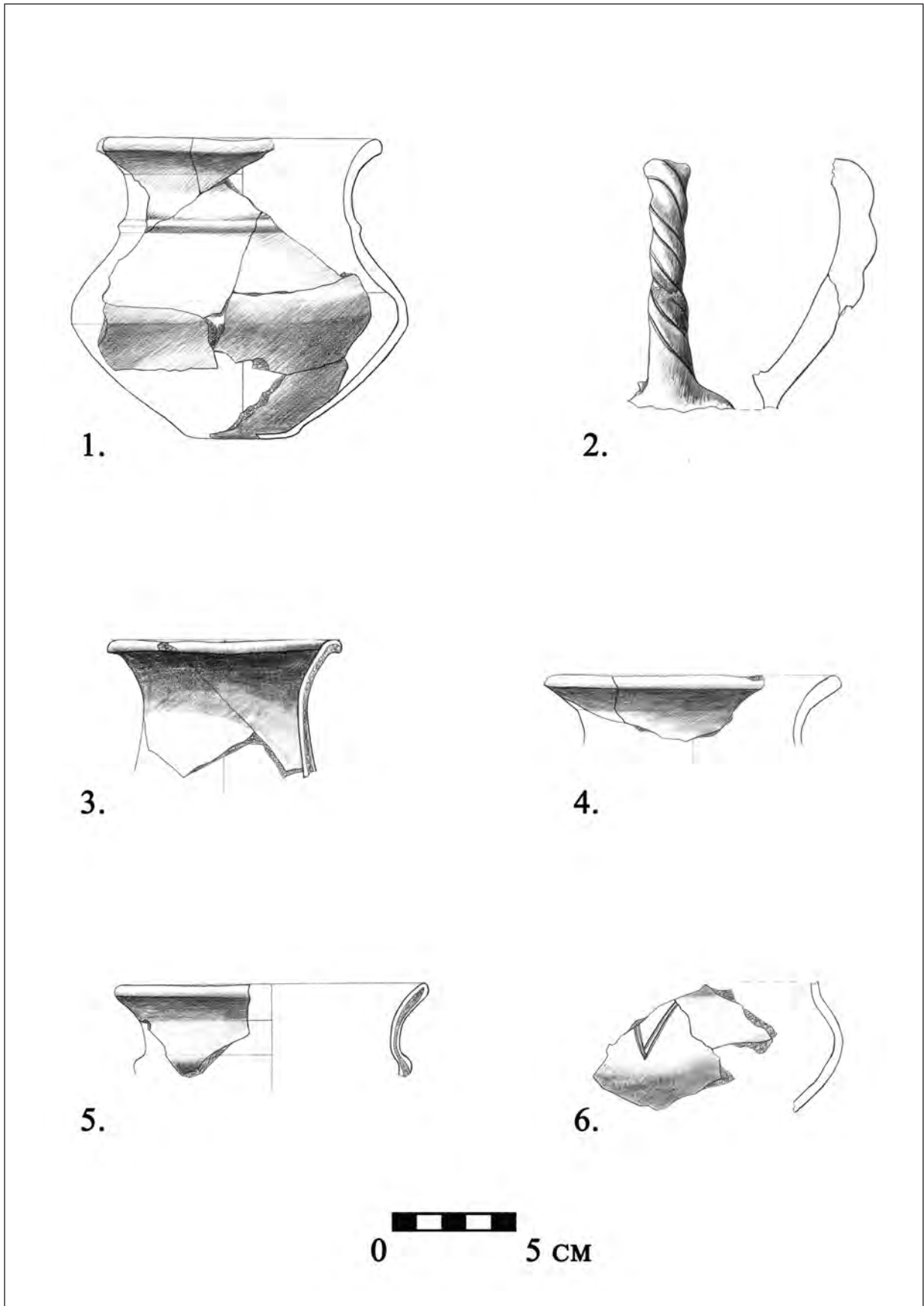
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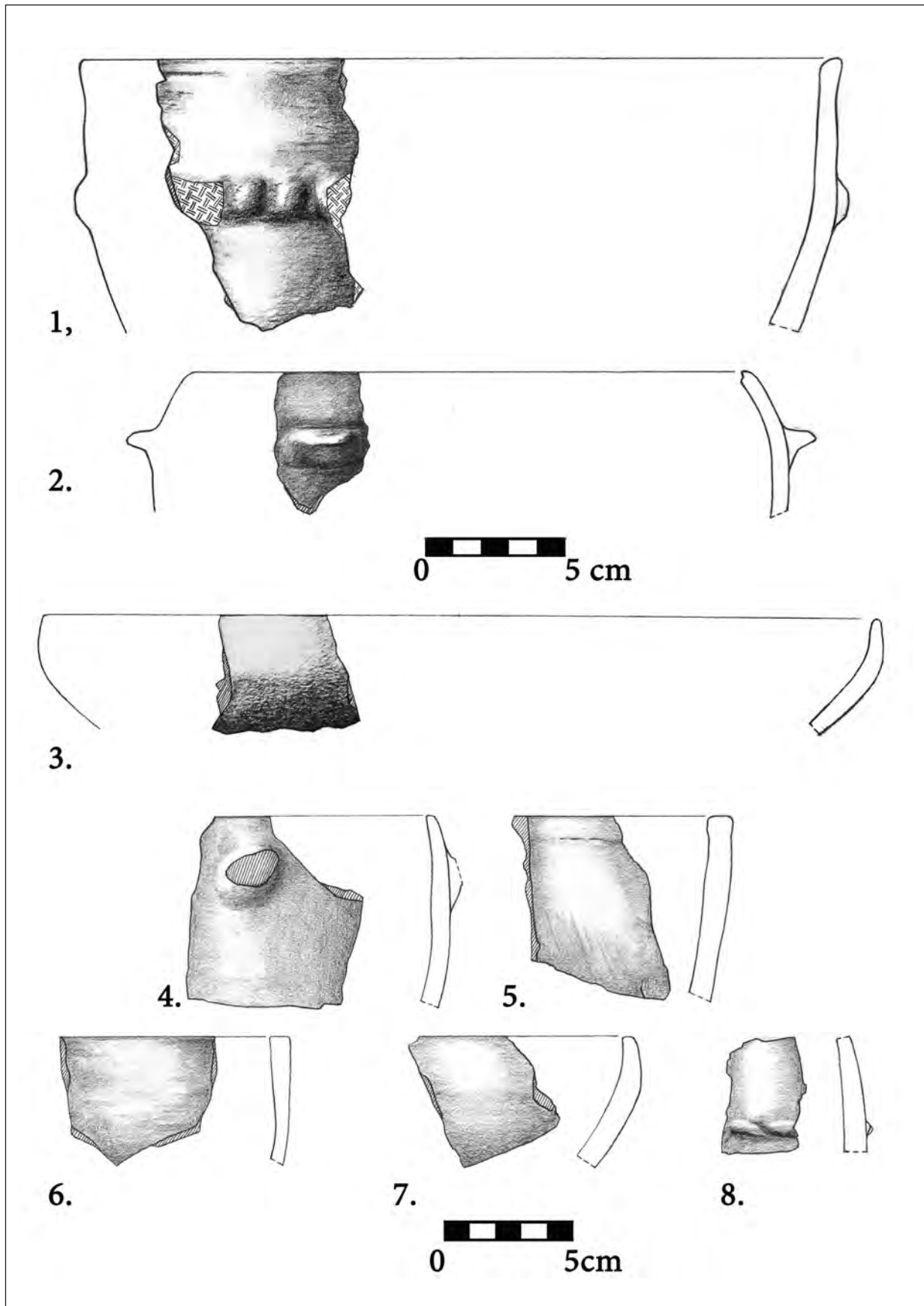
Pl. I. 1. Plan and profiles of the dwelling unearthed at Topolovătu Mare. 2. Plan and profile of feature U.A.11 from Timișoara-Freidorf (by the author)



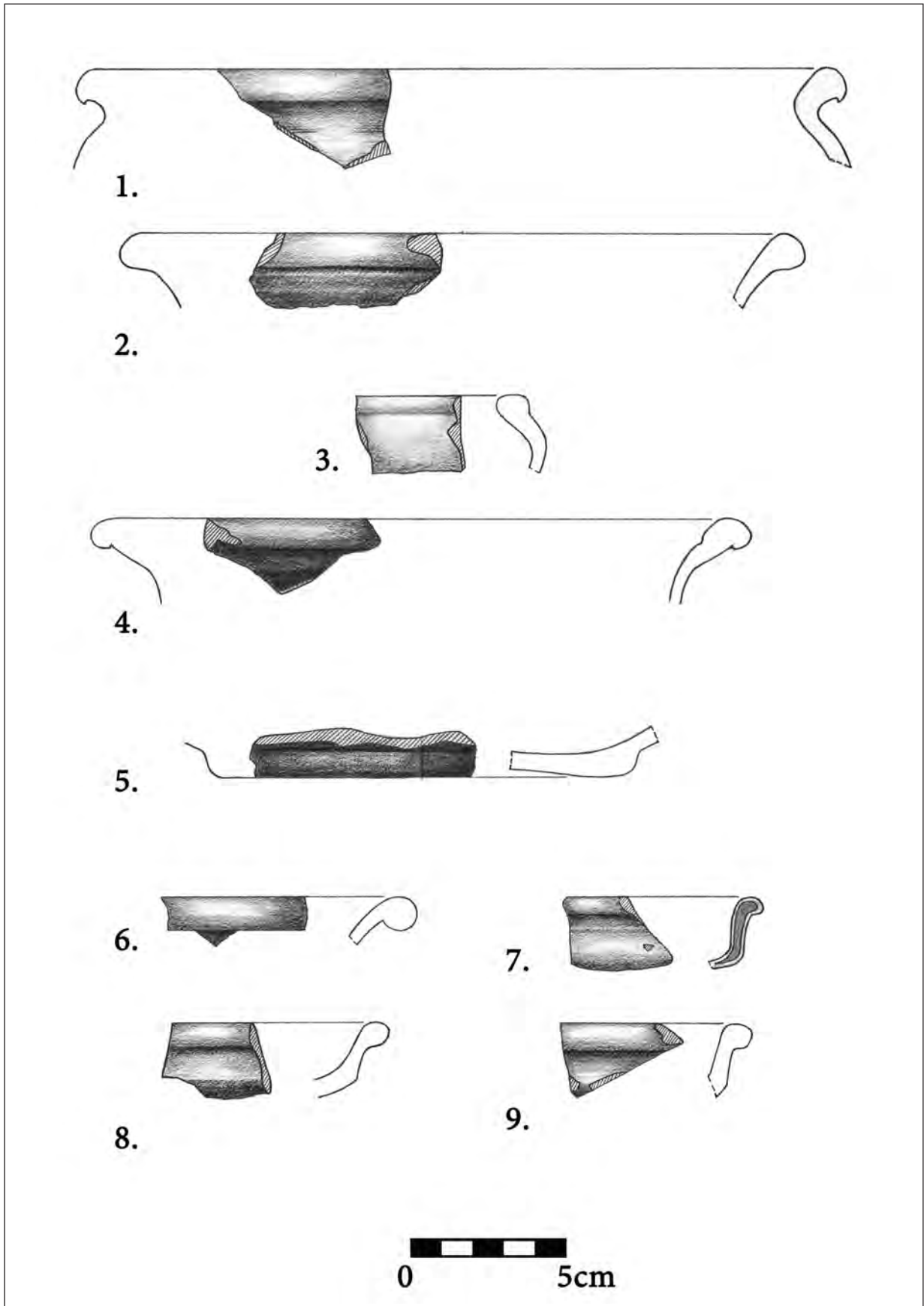
Pl. II. Hand-made pottery discovered in the dwelling from Topolovăţu Mare (drawing by S. Saftu)



Pl. III. Wheel-thrown pottery discovered in the dwelling from Topolovățu Mare (drawing by S. Saftu)



Pl. IV. Hand-made pottery discovered in feature U.A. 11 from Timișoara-Freidorf (drawing by B. Calotă)



Pl. V. Wheel-thrown pottery discovered in feature U.A. 11 from Timișoara-Freidorf (drawing by B. Calotă)

