

ENEOLITHIC CERAMIC TABLETS (ALTARS) FROM BULGARIA

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Whenever a research on various prehistoric sites has been carried – findings of non-utility comprise a considerably large share of the overall objects discovered. Such objects are mostly made of ceramics and represent cult tables, chairs, stamps, etc. Among the findings generally different in terms of form and purpose one small group of objects does attract attention and is comparatively unexplored. The group of objects mentioned comprises ceramic tablets of polygonal or oval shape, with extended bottom part, interpreted by some explorers as „altars“, due to their resemblance of the pediment building facade (TODOROVA 1983, 91). Up to now there is no typology published regarding such objects except for several preliminary studies (TAKOROVA 2006). Separate publications have been developed concerning the ornamentation and purpose of such objects. The present study aims at developing certain taxonomy of the publications regarding the eneolithic ceramic tablets from Bulgaria.

The different types have been defined based on their general form whereas for the sub-types the definition is made based on the presence or absence of additional components. The typology suggested is based on the principles of the abovementioned typology pattern (TAKOROVA 2006, 28 - 30).

The tablets have been crafted from a piece of clay shaped to the desired form whereas ornamentation has been added via different ornamentation techniques. The tentacle-type details at the upper part of the tablets have been formed and shaped through pinching. The basis of the tablets is slightly broadened which is achieved by taking away clay from the middle part of the tile and adding it to the bottom part of the tile. This leads to tablets being less thick at their upper end. The tablets have been baked under different conditions, most commonly – in a non homogenous environment.

The ceramic tablets included feature objects from the eneolithic layers of archeological sites in Bulgaria – 30 objects in total. Most of them explored (12 objects), they were discovered during the excavations of Ruse tell (40% of all objects).

Formal typology

Type 1. Includes tablets of pentagonal form

- 1.1. These are tablets of pentagonal forms with no additional components. (Fig. 1).

The pentagonal tablets comprise 6 objects (20% from all) discovered at Deneva tell, Salmanovo village¹ (Fig. 1/6) (POPOV 1908, 667), Kodjadermen tell - 2 objects (Fig. 1/2,3), (POPOV 1909, 561, Pl. XXII - Fig. 10; Pl. XV, Fig. 9) and Sultan tell (Fig. 1/4), (MIKOV 1922-1925, 46, Pl. 83). The height/length proportions of the well-preserved or restorable objects is 1:1,2 and 1:1,3. Most of the objects are richly ornamented with paint, carved and inlaid ornamentation except for the tablets from Kodjadermen tell. The tablets from Kodjadermen feature a rough surface, barely definable inlaid ornamentation on one of them and admixtures in the clay dough. The object from Deneva tell features miniature size of 4 cm in length and 3,1 cm and differs from the other objects in the sub-type and is unique for the whole group. The piece is decorated with red and black paints organized in parallel vertical bands. The other two objects are discovered in Ovcharovo tell, 5th level (Fig. 1/1), (TODOROVA 1983, Pl. 90, 13) whereas there is an object discovered at the Gudjova Tell, Madrets village, dated in Late Eneolithic (Fig. 1/5), (Leshtakov *et alii* 2001, fig. 23 e). The object discovered at Gudjova tell features inlaid ornament as a means to add anthropomorphous features to the object.

- 1.2. Tablets of pentagonal shape with additional components (Fig. 2; Fig. 3).

1.2.1 These are the objects featuring bud-like growths in their upper end edges (Fig. 2/1-4). There are 4 objects of this kind (13,3%) whereas two of them are discovered at Ruse tell, late eneolithic horizons (GEORGIEV, ANGELOV 1952, 161, Pl. 146; Popov 2002, 553 Pl. 13:3) (Fig. 2/1,2). The height/length proportion is 1:1,15-1,2. The ornamentation features inlaid white and red ochre. An object that can be classified to this type of altars has been discovered at Drama - Merdjumekia tell (Fig. 2/3) and in particular in the Karanovo V level (LICHARDUS *et alii* 2001, Pl. 22, 1), another object that belongs to the sub-type is a tablet discovered at Okol-Glava tell, Gniljane village, Sofia district (PETROV 1933, 136-137; PETROV 1950, 161, Pl. 95; Fig. 23, 2), (Fig. 2/4).

1.2.2 These are tablets of prolonged and evenly cut central upper edge. Only one object under this pattern is present and is discovered at Ruse tell (POPOV 2002, Pl. 13:1), (Fig. 2 5) featuring height equal to the length and is richly decorated with inlaid ornamentation. This variant is 3 % of all objects.

1.2.3 Tablets featuring bud-like growths at their upper edges – represented by objects discovered at Ruse tell, late eneolithic horizons (Fig. 3/1), (GEORGIEV, ANGELOV 1952, 162, Pl. 147), Sultan tell (Fig. 3/2), (MIKOV 1922-1925, 46, Pl. 83) and Kurttepe tell, (DETEV 1965, 71, Pl. 12, 2), (Fig. 3/3). The tablets are decorated with inlaid ornamentation. This variant is 10% of all objects.

The two fragments featuring (6,6%) central upper edges are discovered at Ruse tell (POPOV 2002, 553, Pl. 13 : 2; 554, Pl. 14 : 1), (Fig. 3/4,5) and can not be assigned to any of the two subtypes due to their preservation condition.

¹ Thanks to my colleague Svetlana Venelinova for the assistance for the publication of the find.

Type 2. Ceramic tablets of quadrangular form

- 2.1 These objects have no additional components. The category is represented by 3 objects (10%): from Ovcharovo tell – a part from a „Cult scene” (TODOROVA *et alii* 1983, Pl. 89: 3), (Fig. 4/2), from the prehistoric settlement at Telish village, Redutite area (GERGOV 1992, 29, Pl. 3), (Fig. 6/2), as well as an object similar in its features to the abovementioned, discovered at Ruse tell, XIII horizon, Late Eneolithic (CHERNAKOV 2006, 22), (Fig. 4/1). The height/maximum length is 1:1,5. The object from Telish is the largest from all the rest discovered. Its dimensions are 1,28 m width, 0,60 m height and 0,12 m thickness. The decoration features red ochre ornaments. The object was discovered in a house, II horizon, dated in Late Eneolithic.

2.1.1 The subclass includes an object from Ovcharovo tell (Fig. 4/3) and is also a part from the „Cult scene” (TODOROVA *et alii* 1983, Pl. 89:1). The upper end is round whereas a decoration of red paint is laid on the front and back side of the tile. This variant is 3% of all objects.

2.1.2 The subclass includes an object from Vaksevo (Fig. 6/1). The upper end is round, the two upper edges on each other sides are parallel of the base. The tablet is fragmented and decorated with a couple of arc fluting filled with white paint (ČEOHADJIEV 2001, 168, 177, Fig. 95). This variant is 3% of all objects.

- 2.2. Objects featuring additional components.

2.2.1 This particular subclass relates to objects with two growths pinched in their upper end and a third one pinched from the center of the upper edge. The three objects discovered are from Kodjadermen tell (POPOV 1916-1918, 148, Pl. 159) (Fig. 4/5), Ovcharovo tell (Fig. 4/4), (TODOROVA *et alii* 1983, Pl. 89:2) – part of the „cult scene”, and a fragment of a similar object found in Kurttepe tell at Ruen village (DETEV 1965, 71, Pl. 12:1), (Fig. 4/6). The height/length proportions are respectively 1:1,1 and 1:1,5. The tablet from Kodjadermen has no decoration; the one from Ovcharovo is ornamented with red ochre and the last one features inlaid decoration. This variant is 10% of all objects.

2.2.2 The subclass features one object discovered at Ruse tell (GEORGIEV, ANGELOV 1952, 163, Pl. 148:3), (Fig. 4/7) with two growths pinched from the upper edges. The height/length proportion is 1:0,9 – it is the only object with length smaller than its height. This variant is 3% of all objects.

Type 3. These are tablets of round, semicircular shape and even base end.

- 3.1 Objects featuring no additional components.

There are two objects from Ruse tell, late eneolithic horizons (GEORGIEV, ANGELOV 1952, 163, Pl. 148: 1, 4), (Fig. 5/1, 2). Their height/maximum length proportion is 1:1,3. The objects are ornamented with inlaid decoration. The common feature is a spiral element on the one side and a combination of vertical lines on the other. This variant is 6,6% of all objects.

- 3.2 Objects with additional components.

This group includes one tablet from Ruse, 15th construction level. There are growths pinched in the upper ends. There are four small legs pinched from the bottom, whereas the bottom itself is even and slightly thickened. The object is ornamented on both sides by inlaid spiral motives. (POPOV 2002, 533. Taf. 13 : 4), (Fig. 5/3). This variant is 3% of all objects.

Type 4. Unclassified. The subclass includes fragmented ceramic tablets which based on their preserved parts cannot be related to any of the three classes mentioned above. This is the reason why these objects are classified under a different object type. This variant is 6,6% of all objects.

The category includes two fragments of ceramic tablets with lower end parts. The objects are discovered at Podgoritza tell (TAKOROVA 2006, cat. № 105, Fig. 20, 5) and Ruse tell (GEORGIEV, ANGELOV 1952, 163, Pl. 148:2), (Fig. 5/4). The objects feature inlaid decoration.

Ornamental motives on the eneolithic ceramic tablets.

1. Vertical fields – these are filled with sidelong, horizontal or crossed cuts and lines. In one case the lines form V shaped motives. The technique features carving and in other case painting. This particular model is typical for tablets type 1.

2. Spiral – This ornamentation pattern is related to tablets type 1 and 3. The pattern is usually the only decoration for the tile and in only one case it is combined with other ornamentation motives. The ornamentation is made through carving and with one of the tablets the model is placed on both sides of the tile.

3. Spiral - meander – this is the model related to objects type 2. The pattern is placed on the tablets in combination with other motives through carving.

4. Concentric circles – four cases as a central motive. It is always placed in combination with other motives. The technique features painting with red paint. The model features only on the tablets from the so called „Ovcharovo” cult scene.

5. Circles – the model is present solely on one tile (type 1) and features on other tablets in complex combination of multiple motifs.

6. Semicircles – this pattern features only on the tile from Gudjova Mogila, type 1, whereas the pattern is used to add anthropomorphic features (eyes) to the object. The pattern is laid through carving.

7. Concentric bows– it is a single case related to the tile discovered at Sultan settlement tell. The tile is type 1 and the model is laid through carving. Due to the fragmented matter of the finding it can not be ultimately defined whether the model is used solely or in combination with other motives.

8. Angular model – the motif features in 7 cases. The pattern is always laid in combination with other motifs. The motif is typical for all tablets from the Ovcharovo cult scene. The technique of ornamenting includes painting with red painting or carving.

9. Complex patterns – 7 cases featuring inlaid and painted motifs. It is the typical pattern for objects classified type 1 and 2.

10. Vertical lines, crossed with sidelong diaper-pattern lines found in 4 cases whereas the lines are carved. In one case - a tile type 2 from Ruse the motif is present on both sides of the tile. The pattern does not feature in combination with other motifs.

11. A dot in the centre of the ornamental composition is a motif featuring in 3 cases of the tablets from the Ovcharovo cult scene. The pattern is laid via painting with red paint.

12. Vertical and sidelong lines are a motif featuring in two cases type 1 and 2 respectively. It is a stand alone motif placed via carving.

13. Vertical and horizontal lines forming a net of small quadrants is a motif featuring in one case (type 1 object from Ruse tell) placed via carving.

There are repetitive combinations on both sides of the ceramic tablets: two type 3 objects from Ruse settlement tell featuring spiral on one side and fields of vertical cuts on the other. Two type 4 objects from Podgoritza and type 2 from Ruse feature spiral and vertical lines crossed by sidelong lines on the other.

Based on the objects explored in this particular study there is no dependency between the form and the ornamentation motifs.

Quite often the motifs on the objects are interpreted as sign compositions (NIKOLOV 1991, 97 – 102; RADUNCEVA 2003, 284; CHERNAKOV 2003, 217 – 219). Other scientists define the findings as decoration (DETEV 1965, 65) or classify them as objects of unidentified purpose (GEORGIEV, ANGELOV 1952, 59). Such objects are typical for the last levels of the so far explored eneolithic settlements. Similar objects have been discovered in much earlier neolithic exploration sites (KÎNCEVA – RUSEVA 2000, 61; ILCEVA 2002, 68).

Various research and classification systems have been developed in regard to the semantics and meaning of certain purposely repeated ornaments on prehistoric findings. S. Winn collected samples mostly from the area of Vinča whereas his exploration and conclusions have been documented and published. (WINN 1973; WINN 1981). M. Gimbutas who prepared one of the first catalogues of „sacred symbols“ of various prehistoric ages and regions, formulates her own concept regarding symbolic readings (GIMBUTAS 1991). Similar issues have been also explored by I. Paul (PAUL 1990), G. Lazarovici (LAZAROVICI 2000), N. Vlassa (VLASSA 1976), J. Makkay (MAKKAY 1969, MAKKAY 1984).

H. Todorova supports the thesis that the concentric circles, the spiral and the spiral - meander reflect general concepts related to the cosmogony of the prehistoric people. The continuity of the spiral - meander maybe linked to the perceptions of cyclic recurrence of the main events in agriculture and nature in general (TODOROVA 1986, 210).

In one of his studies V. Nikolov interprets the spiral - meander ornament on pottery discovered in the early neolithic settlement near the town of Rakitovo as „The garland of fertility“, closely related to the movement of the sun. The author presents the hypothesis that the ornament is actually a graphical interpretation of the annual path of the sun (NIKOLOV 1987, 19-20). It should be accentuated on the fact that the spiral - meander is widely used as an ornamental motif during the neolithic and especially during the eneolithic.

Russian explorer B. Rybakov states his own interpretation of some ornamental motifs typical for the findings of various prehistoric ages. In his view the vertical and sidelong lines symbolize the rain. Such motifs are found on the side of the ceramic tablets object of the present study (Fig. 4/1). Rybakov interprets the spiral as a symbol of the time flow (RÎBAKOV 1965, 38 – 44).

V. Gergov explains the geometrical pattern of ornamenting as an evidence of a definite rule present in prehistoric art and life. The magical force encoded in the painting could have been defined by certain priests leading and practicing a religious cult. (GERGOV 1992, 30).

The ornamentation on the tablets that is similar to the one from the group of the so called cult objects and the fact that objects have been discovered in the

same area and context (Ovcharovo cult scene) are evidence that these objects were somehow connected to the ancient cults. In case we support these hypotheses we should point out that the ornamental compositions on the ceramic tablets are in fact symbols related to the concept of fertility. The objects were most probably used in ancient cult rituals dedicated to Mother - Goddess (CHERNAKOV 2006, 22).

Based on the archeological data available such findings can be related to the Early Eneolithic. In the end of the said age their diffusion has undergone popularization. The largest number of such objects is concentrated on the territory of North Bulgaria (83,4%). Only 5 object are discovered in South Bulgaria (16,6%), (Fig. 7).

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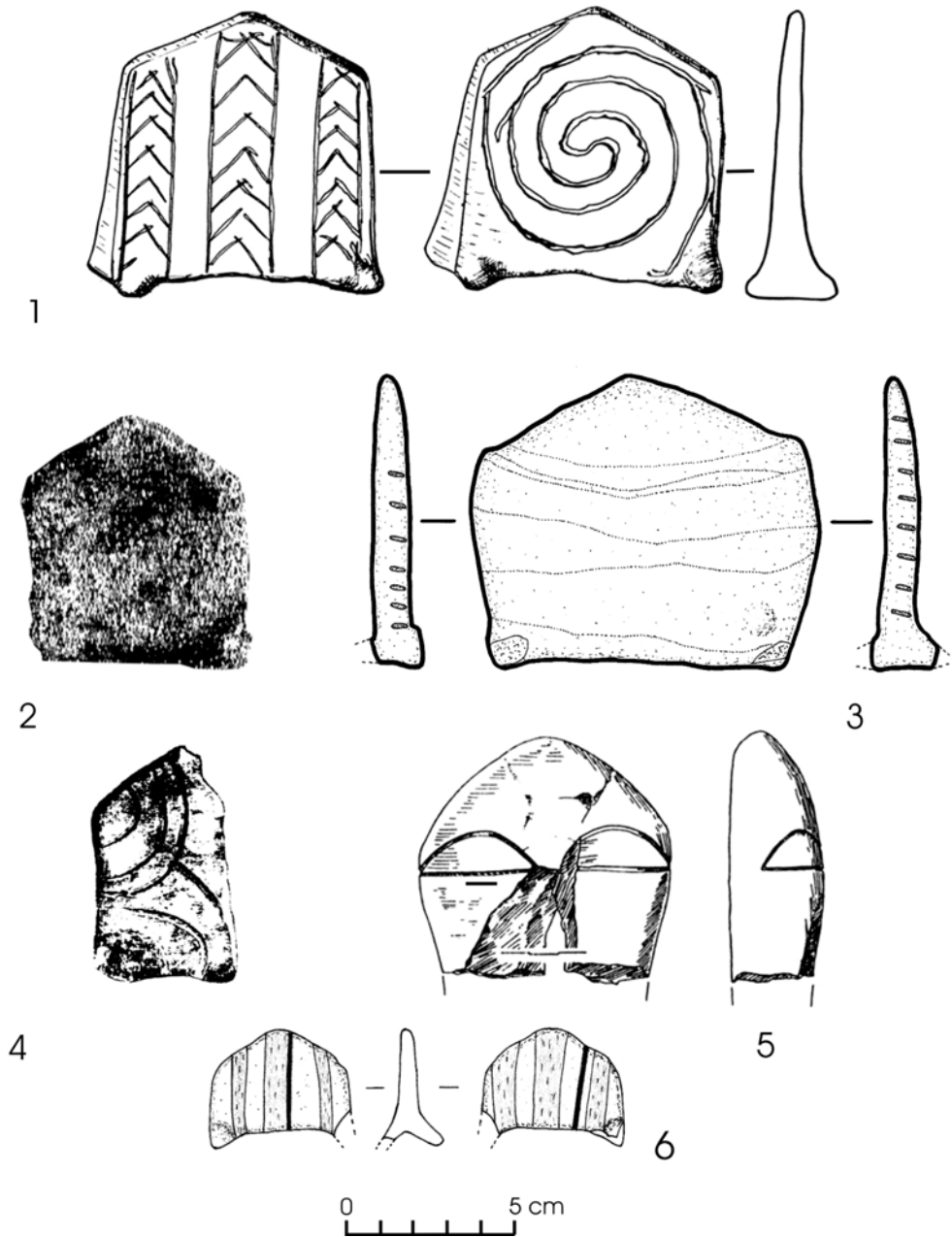


Fig. 1 - Eneolithic ceramic tablets from Bulgaria. Type 1.1.
 1 - Ovcharovo tell; 2, 3 - Kodjadermen tell; 4 - Sultan tell;
 5 - Madrets village, Gudjova tell; 6 - Deneva tell, Salmanovo village.

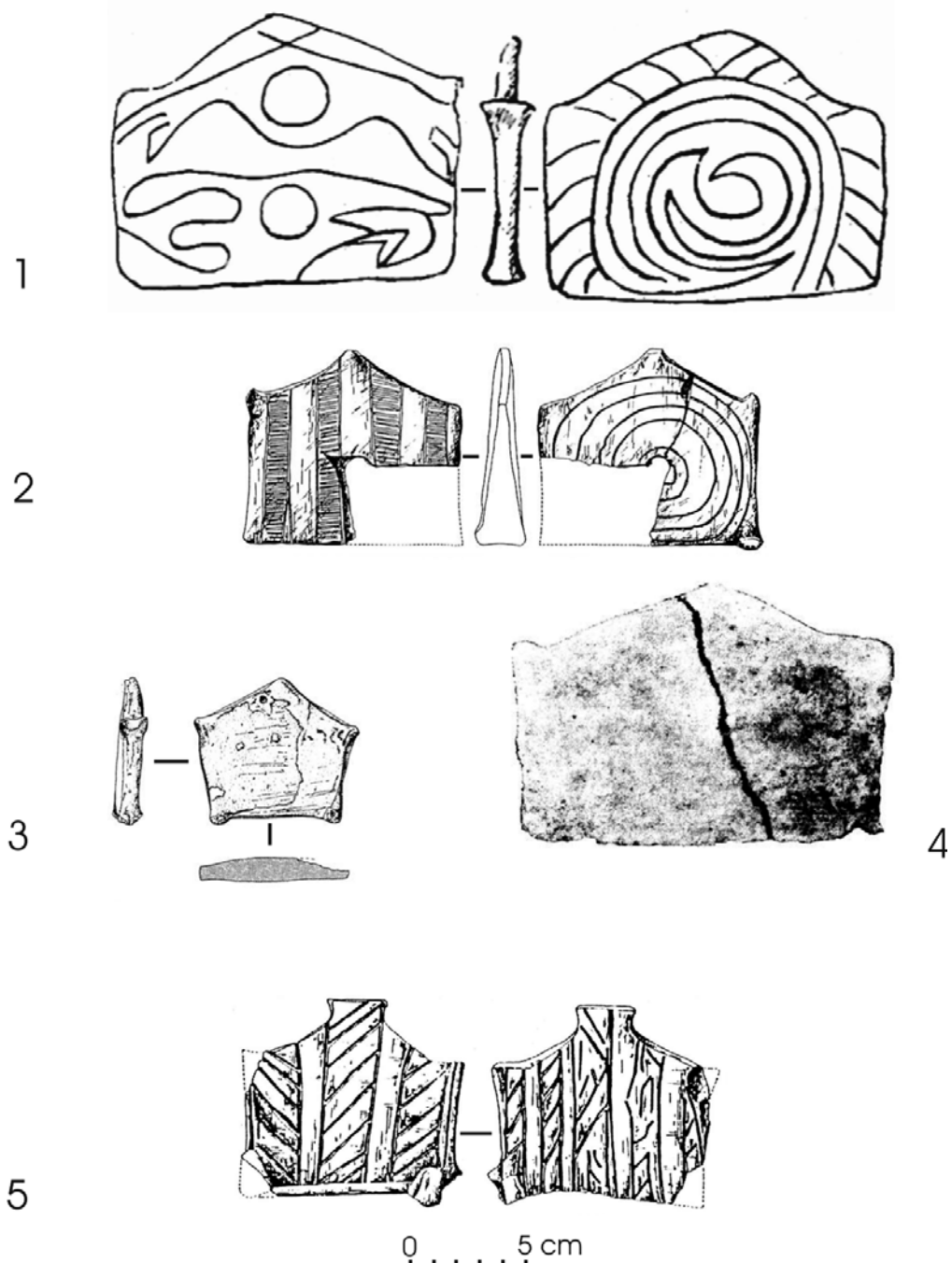


Fig. 2- Eneolithic ceramic tablets from Bulgaria.

Type 1.2.1 - (1-4); Type 1.2.2 - (5); 1,2,5 - Ruse tell; 3 - Drama - Merdjumekia tell;
4 - Okol glava tell, Gnijane village.

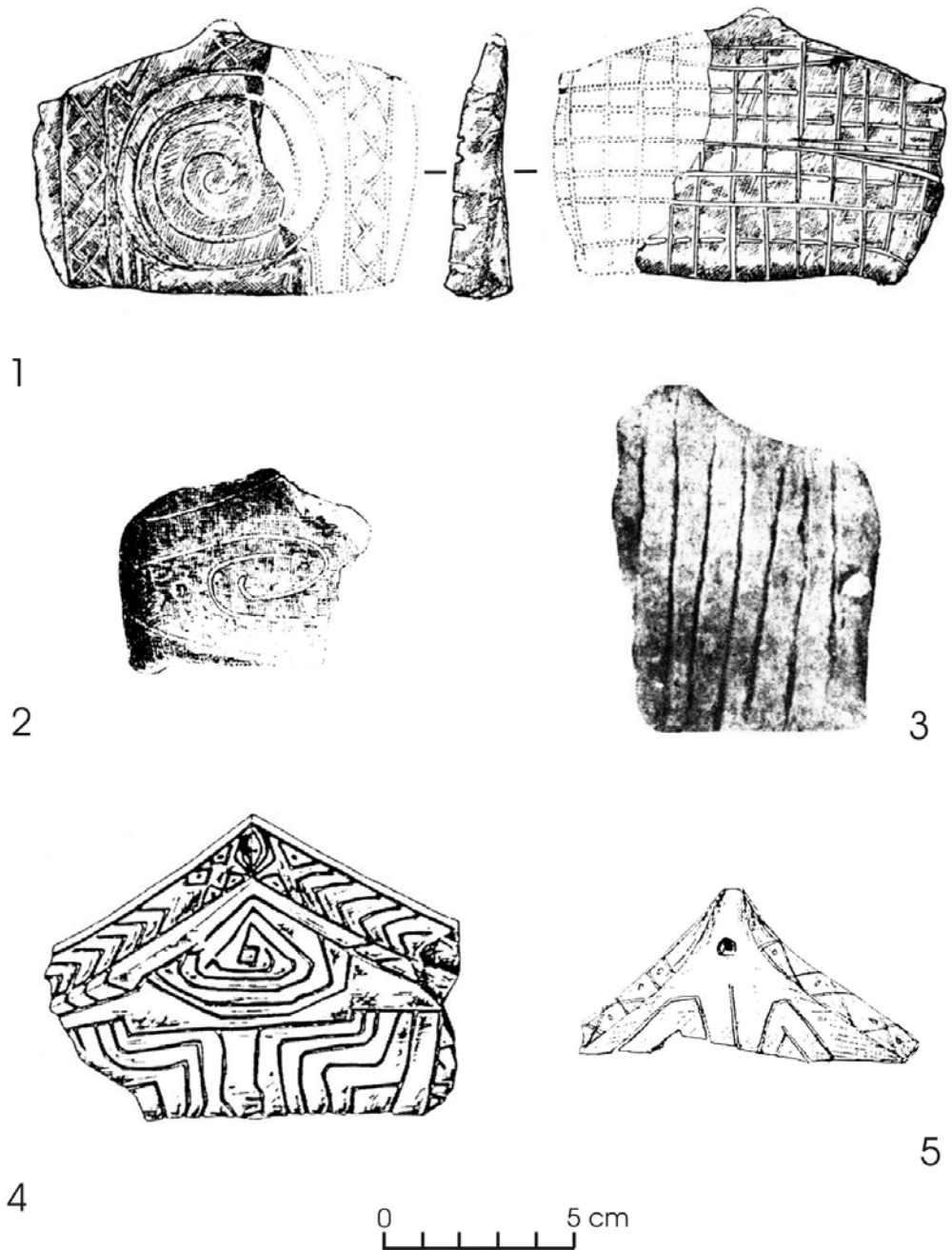


Fig. 3 - Eneolithic ceramic tablets from Bulgaria.
Type 1.2.3 - (1-3); Type 1.2 - (4-5); 1, 4, 5 - Ruse tell; 2 - Sultan tell; 3 - Ruen, Kurttepe tell.



Fig. 4 - Eneolithic ceramic tablets from Bulgaria.
 Type 2.1 - (1 - 2); Type 2.1.1 - (3); Type 2.2.1 - (4-6); Type 2.2.2 - (7);
 1, 7 - Ruse tell; 2, 3, 4 - Ovcharovo tell, a part of „Cult scene“; 5 - Kodjadermen;
 6 - Ruen village, Kurttepe tell.

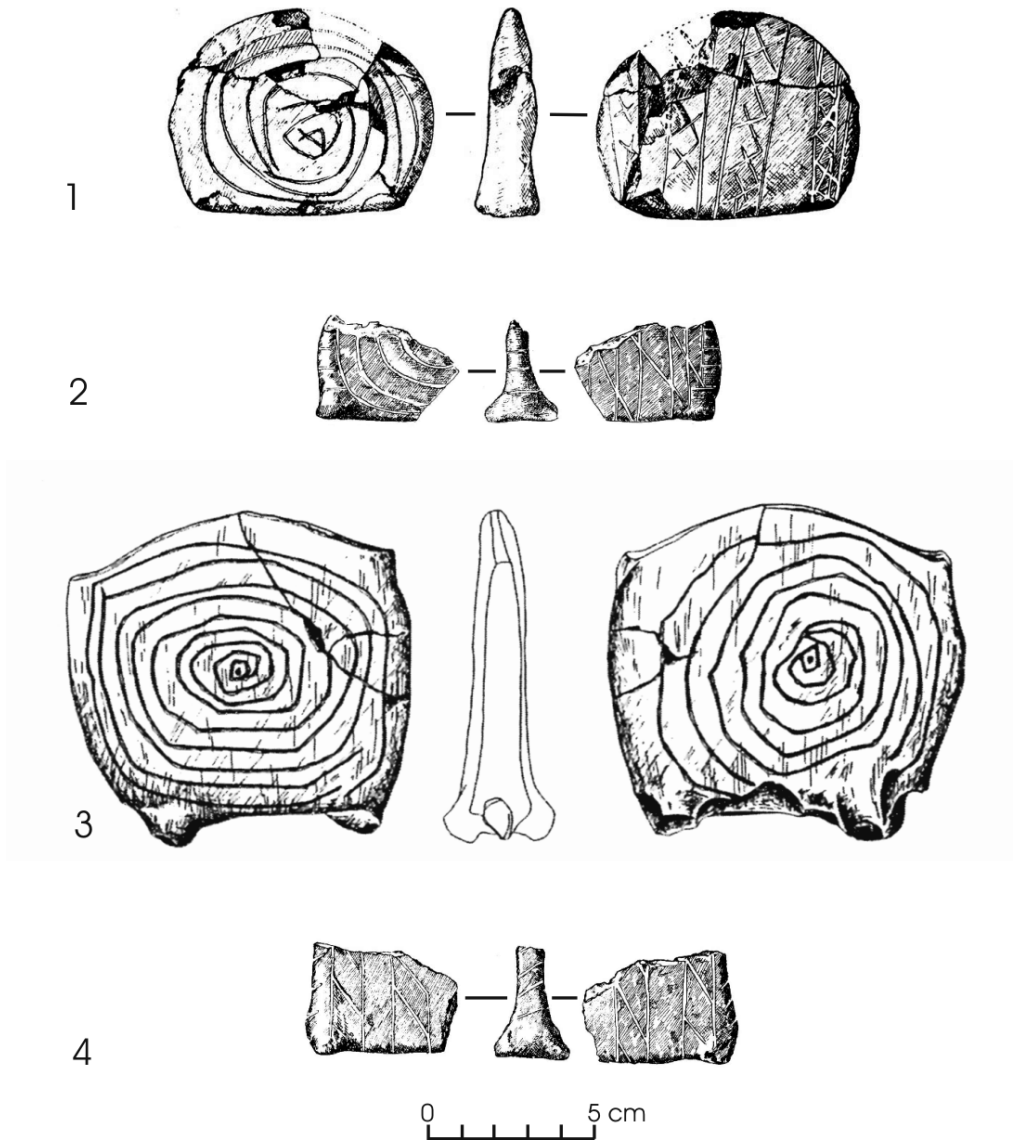


Fig. 5 - Eneolithic ceramic tablets from Bulgaria. Type 3.1 - (1,2); Type 3.2 - (3);
Type 4- (4); 1-4 Ruse tell.

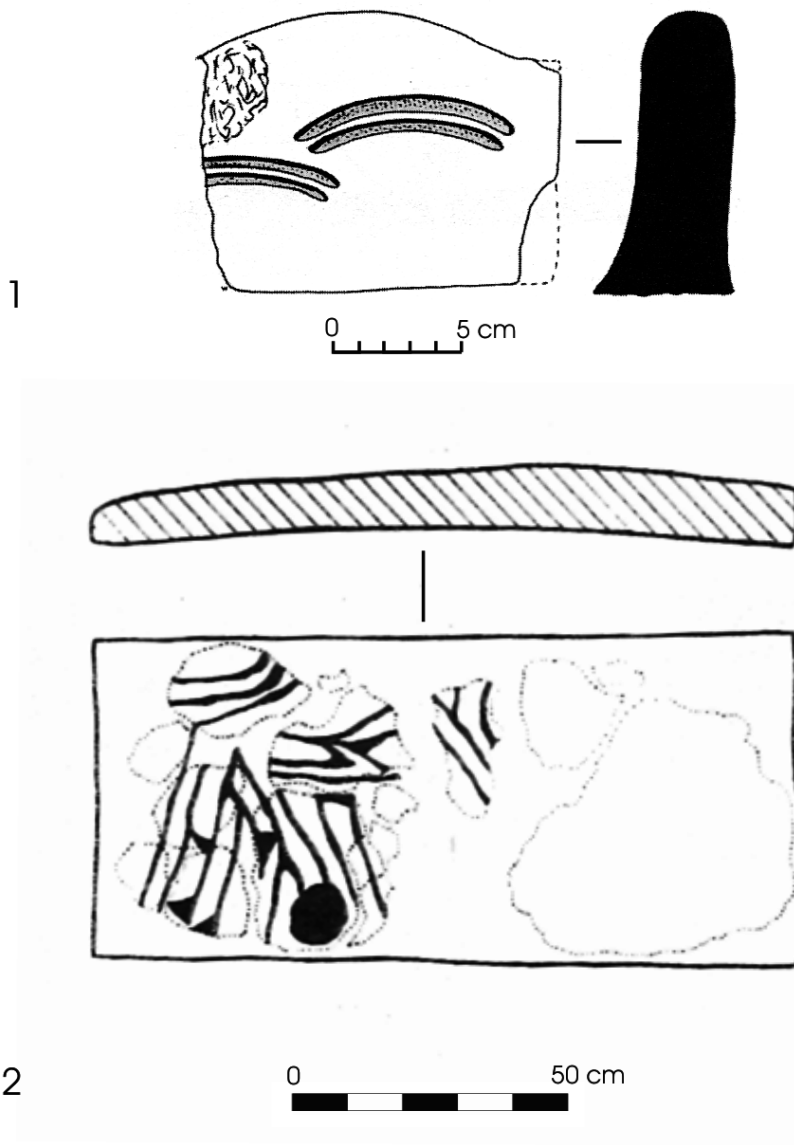


Fig. 6 - Eneolithic ceramic tablets from Bulgaria. Type 2.1.2 - (1); Type 2.1 - (2);
1- Vaksevo; 2 - Telish.

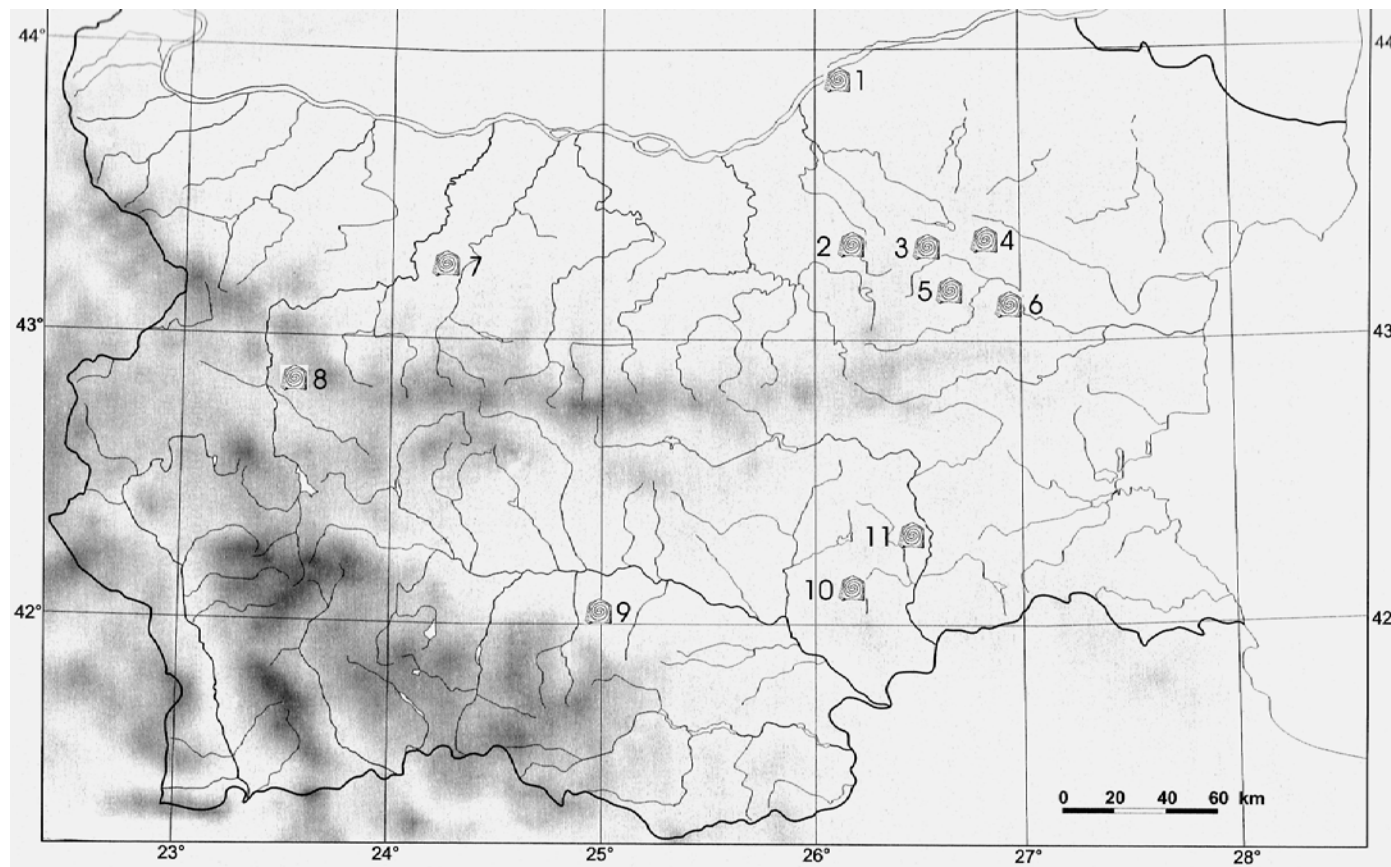


Fig. 7 - The currency of eneolithic ceramic tablets from Bulgaria. 1 - Ruse tell; 2 - Sultan tell; 3 - Podgoritza tell; 4 - Shumen, Kodjadermen tell; 5 - Ovcharovo tell; 6 - Salmanovo, Deneva tell; 7 - Prehistoric settlement at Telish - Redutite; 8 - Gniljane, Okol glava tell; 9 - Ruen, Kurttepe tell; 10 - Madrets, Gudjova tell; 11 - Tell Drama-Merdjumeckja.