

**POSSIBILITIES FOR ESTABLISHING LOCAL GROUPS BASED ON  
GRAPHITE DECORATION ON CERAMICS WITHIN THE  
GUMELNITSA – KARANOVO VI CULTURE  
(RESULTS FROM A STUDY ON THE CERAMICS FROM  
TELL VINITSA, SHUMEN DISTRICT)**

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**Cuvinte-cheie:** *epoca bronzului, ceramică, analiză, diferențe/similitudini culturale.*

**Abstract:** *This article presents a study of the graphite decorated pottery from the Vinitsa settlement tell. The analysis aims to establish the separate components of the decoration and to track their arrangement and distribution. It is possible that their spatial location can be identified with a local cultural circle. Based on this, assumptions about local cultural differences and similarities can be made.*

**Rezumat:** *Acest articol prezintă un studiu al ceramicii cu decor grafitat din tell-ul aşezării Vinitsa. Analiza îşi propune să identifice diferitele componente ale decorului şi să urmărească dispunerea şi distribuţia lor. Este posibil ca aria geografică a descoperirilor să poată fi identificată cu un cerc cultural local. Ținând cont de aceasta, pot fi enunţate presupuneri în privinţa diferenţelor şi similitudinilor culturale locale.*

The Aeneolithic graphite-painted decoration impresses the researchers and attracts their attention because of its high aesthetic qualities. It is a specific phenomenon which defines the specific character of the pottery assemblages of the Aeneolithic cultures on the territory of Southeastern Europe. The graphite-painted pottery belongs to the group of fine or table ware – the most luxurious pottery of the fifth millennium – its ornamentation reflects the aesthetic norms and the ideology of the Aeneolithic people. Apart from being an art tool, the graphite-painted decoration was an element of the material culture which changed comparatively fast, and it is for that reason that the periodization and the relative chronology of the Copper Age it often based on it.

During thousands of years people were mainly concerned with providing

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means for their existence, as well as with exchanging information with other people in order to get to know the world which surrounded them – both external and internal. It is a matter of further discussion to what extent the ornamentation can be considered a specific element defining ethnicity and the way a group of people can express its self-consciousness and world perception.

There is a great regional variety of graphite-painted elements and motives used for the patterns within the Gumelnitsa-Kodzhadernmen cultures. Is it possible to search for the explanation of this variety in the geographical conditions which led to different ways of life and world perception, thus assuming that the difference in the patterns reflected this? It is difficult to give a simple answer to such a question. If we accept that the motifs and patterns are material expression of man's self-consciousness, the investigation on their variety can provide an opportunity to identify separate groups within the frames of a community.

This article is an attempt to provide an answer to the question to what extent the graphite-painted decoration on the pottery can be used as a marker of separate ethnic groups within a larger cultural community.

The analysis of the decoration includes examination of the organization and the location of its components. It aims at examining the possibilities to use the extent of the similarity of the decoration components to define the cultural interactions between the various groups. It has been accepted that the decoration components are not reliable indicators for intensive interactions among communities because they were easily copied and exchanged even if there was a minimal contact between the artists. In the research their location is considered an indicator of local or cultural differences<sup>1</sup>.

The current analysis is based on a study of graphite-painted ware from the archaeological excavations at Tell Vinita and its cemetery near the town of Shumen, Northeastern Bulgaria (Pl. 1/1-2). The excavation of the site was completed in the period 1965-69 by Ana Raduncheva, and the results were published shortly after the end of the excavations<sup>2</sup>. Today the spot is situated under the water of the Vinita dam lake. The secondary study on the pottery collection from Tell Vinita provides the opportunity to examine the rules governing the development of the graphite-painted decoration concerning its structure and the organization of its components.

The study is based on all clay vessels with visible graphite-painted decoration. It is possible that there was a higher number of graphite-painted vessels, but since this type of decoration can be difficult to identify, the study has used only pieces that definitely have graphite-painted decoration.

The analysis of the Tell Vinita pottery focuses on separating and defining the basic components of the decoration – elements and motifs. In the current study, the smallest component of the decoration is the *element*, which is an independent and complete form, and it can be used for a composition alone or together with other motifs. The *motif* is a form consisting of a combination of elements. The variety of the graphite-painted elements and motifs on the clay

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<sup>1</sup> RICE 1987, p. 266.

<sup>2</sup> RADUNČEVA 1976.

vessels from Tell Vinita is not very big. They are divided into nine main groups designated with Latin letters (Pl. 1/3), and it is possible for each group to have several sub-groups depending on the different variation of the image presentation.

The next step is separating the compositions constituting the decoration of the vessel and studying their position on the vessel shapes. The structure of the composition is related to the spatial location of the motifs forming it and/or the elements and their motion along a straight line and around an axis. I have defined eight groups of arrangement of the composition parts related to each other in a horizontal band (Pl. 1/5). The decoration structure is related to the number of the compositions and their spatial location on the clay vessels. The decoration of a vessel covering its exterior or interior can consist of one or more than one composition.

The clay graphite-painted vessels from Tell Vinita are plates and bowls consisting of two parts, as well as storage vessel and bowls consisting of three parts. The colour is beige to beige-brown or gray/red-brown and the surface is very well smoothed or polished. The graphite-painted decoration consists completely of geometric designs.

The compositions consist mainly of negative elements and motifs. The highest number of vessels is decorated with elements from group C. – single or in combination with other elements (Pl. 2; 4/5-7; 5/1, 5). They are followed by elements from sub-group B.II. and III. (Pl. 2/8-12; 5/1-2) forming compositions together with other elements or motifs. Decoration consisting of single elements from sub-groups A.I. and II. (Pl. 3) and a combination of the latter and elements from sub-group B.I. (Pl. 4/1-4) are documented on almost the same number of vessels. It is worth noting that the compositions consisting of repeated motifs are few. The prevailing number is that of compositions consisting of elements only or elements and motifs.

The decoration on a great deal of the vessels consists of one composition organized in a horizontal band, the exception being the decoration on the interior of the shallow plates and the exterior of the three-partial vessels, consisting of two or three compositions (Pl. 3/12-14; 5/1-2, 4). Practically the main part of the graphite-painted vessels present one and the same scheme including several main elements (sub-groups A.I and II, group B and sub-group C.I.), organized in one and the same way - motion 1(Pl. 1/5). The same regularity is documented on the graphite-painted lids as well (Pl. 6). Most of them are decorated with elements from group A and motif H.II., arranged in a swastika-shaped pattern.

The analysis reveals that the distribution of the graphite-painted vessels in the various chronological periods of the settlement existence is definitely irregular. Only four graphite-painted vessels came from building level I (Middle Aeneolithic – Polyanitsa IV culture) while the Late Aeneolithic building levels II-V (Kodzhadermen-Gumelnitsa-Karanovo VI cultures) yielded 50 vessels and 5 lids. There are four Late Aeneolithic building levels, but most of the graphite-painted vessels came from building level II which is the most well preserved one. This fact has been documented at other sites as

well. Some of the Early and Middle Aeneolithic sites in present-day Northeast Bulgaria yielded a large number of graphite-painted vessels<sup>3</sup> while at others the number of such ware was very low in the Early Aeneolithic and increased in the Middle Aeneolithic<sup>4</sup>. Having in mind that the graphite was an imported raw material for Northeast Bulgaria, it can be suggested that the vessel form building level I from Tell Vinisa, and especially the ones presented on Pl. 3/12-13, which are covered with complicated and lavish graphite-painted decoration, were also imported, as it has been assumed for some vessels from Tell Golyamo Delchevo<sup>5</sup>. It does not seem very likely that they were locally made and decorated with imported graphite. If we assume that the graphite was imported as a raw material in the site, then the number of graphite-painted ware should be higher. The results from the comparative analysis of the composition and the spatial analysis of the organization of their components is in favour of the assumption that graphite-painted clay vessel had been imported there. Practically, the compositions on the vessel from building level I do not show similarity with the ones on the Late Aeneolithic building levels despite the fact that the chronological difference between the two is not very big. This lack of similarity can be due to other reasons, such as the arrival of new occupants who were not direct descendants of the previous occupants of the settlement (coming from a different place and bearing different cultural traditions). If we accept that the two abovementioned vessels from building level I were imported, we have to stress the fact that they had not been brought from Thrace but probably from a site whose ceramic traditions and pottery assemblage were similar to those from Tell Ovcharovo, where a higher number of graphite-painted vessels with similar shapes were found and where the ornamentation patterns have parallels with the ones from Tell Vinitza.

The markedly higher number of Late Aeneolithic graphite-painted vessels (ca. 15% of the total number of vessels) suggests that they were made locally. Such assumption is supported by the fact that finds of graphite as raw material have been located at sites from the same region<sup>6</sup>, as well as by the few analyses of similar finds from North Bulgaria which prove that the raw material was imported from Thrace<sup>7</sup>. The organization of the decoration – the repetition of the patterns in the Late Aeneolithic building levels – can also be considered a proof of the existence of a local production.

The available data on the distribution of the artifacts within the houses of the building level II, which provided the largest amount of information, reveals that the number of the clay vessels and especially that of the graphite-painted ones is not uniform. House 16 yielded the highest number of graphite-painted vessels – 8 out of a total number of 32 found in the building level. It is possible that this house was the residence of the workman who painted the vessel or the wealthiest family in the village; it also seems probable that it was a storage place for clay

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<sup>3</sup> TODOROVA 1983, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> TODOROVA 1975 p. 89-92.

<sup>5</sup> TODOROVA 1975.

<sup>6</sup> POPOV 1919, p. 71-155.

<sup>7</sup> LEŠČAKOV 2004, p. 483-496.

vessels prepared for exchange. Considering the fact that the Late Aeneolithic is the period during which the first evidence for production specialization were recorded - initially in the field of the metalwork followed by other fields<sup>8</sup> - as well as for property division<sup>9</sup>, it can be assumed that the uneven distribution of the vessels within the houses in the village was related to the general changes taking place within the structure of the Aeneolithic communities rather than to any other reason.

The comparison between the Late Aeneolithic compositions and the motifs and the elements constituting them reveals repetition within the four excavated building levels – part of the vessels belong to the second building level according to the available stratigraphic information. The rest of the vessels are dated back to the Late Aeneolithic and should be related to the upper three building levels. The repetition of the patterns suggests continuity of the traditions within the settlement.

A small part of the compositions documented in Tell Vinita find exact parallels or similarity in the decoration on similarly shaped clay vessels from other sites. The compositions consisting only of the element A.I. repetitions (several straight horizontal lines) documented on the Late Aeneolithic pottery from Tell Vinita have the highest number of close parallels in a large number of sites. Parallels are practically found on the entire area of the Kodzhadermen-Gumelnitsa-Karanovo VI cultures. The graphite-painted decoration from Tell Vinita finds the closest similarities only in the pottery from Tell Kodzhadermen<sup>10</sup>, Tell Deneva<sup>11</sup>, Tell Sultan<sup>12</sup>, Tell Radingrad<sup>13</sup> and Tell Ovcharovo<sup>14</sup> situated in the same region and relatively close to each other (Pl. 1/4). In few cases parallels are found in Thracian sites as well. The examination of the published pottery from sites within the Gumelnitsa culture area (Romania) revealed that in general it provides no parallels with the graphite-painted patterns on the pottery from Tell Vinita.

At this stage of the research, the analysis of the graphite-painted decoration on the vessels confirms the suggestion that the population living in the sites mentioned above belongs to one group within the community of the Kodzhadermen-Gumelnitsa-Karanovo VI cultures.

Also, at this stage of the research it is not possible to state with certainty that the documented regularities of the territorial distribution of the graphite-painted compositions are regional and not a chronological phenomenon since our knowledge on the relative chronology of the sites related to the Kodzhadermen-Gumelnitsa-Karanovo VI cultures is not very detailed, and it is based mainly on unpublished materials from the excavated sites. In this sense the analysis in this article and the related conclusions have to be considered an experiment and a

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<sup>8</sup> GEORGIEVA 2010, p. 23-41.

<sup>9</sup> IVANOV, AVRAMOVA 1997.

<sup>10</sup> POPOV 1909, p. 503-562; 1919, p. 71-155.

<sup>11</sup> POPOV 1914, p. 148-225.

<sup>12</sup> MICOV 1922-1925, p. 23-48.

<sup>13</sup> IVANOV 1982, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> TODOROVA 1975, 1983.

starting point for further and more detailed studies rather than a study providing final results on the relative chronology and additional information for defining microregions within the frames of a culture.

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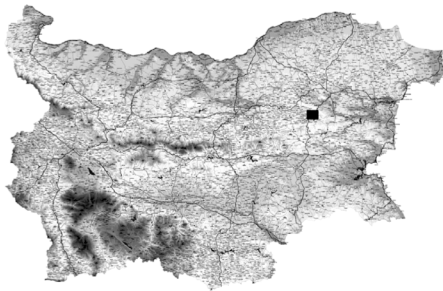
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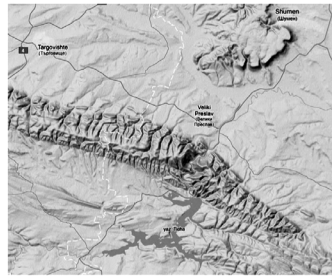
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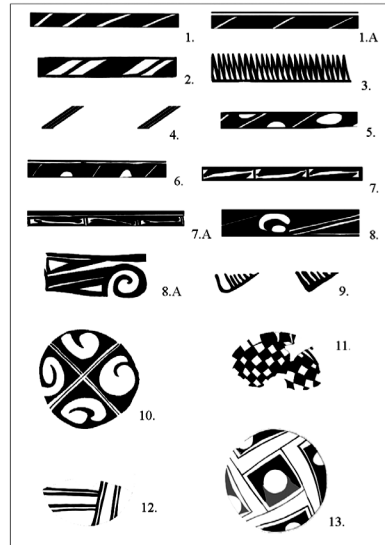
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	III	—	—					■	■
B	I	—	—	—	—			—	—
	II	—	—	—	—			—	—
	III	—	—	—	—			—	—
C	I	—	—	—	—			—	—
	II	—	—	—	—			—	—
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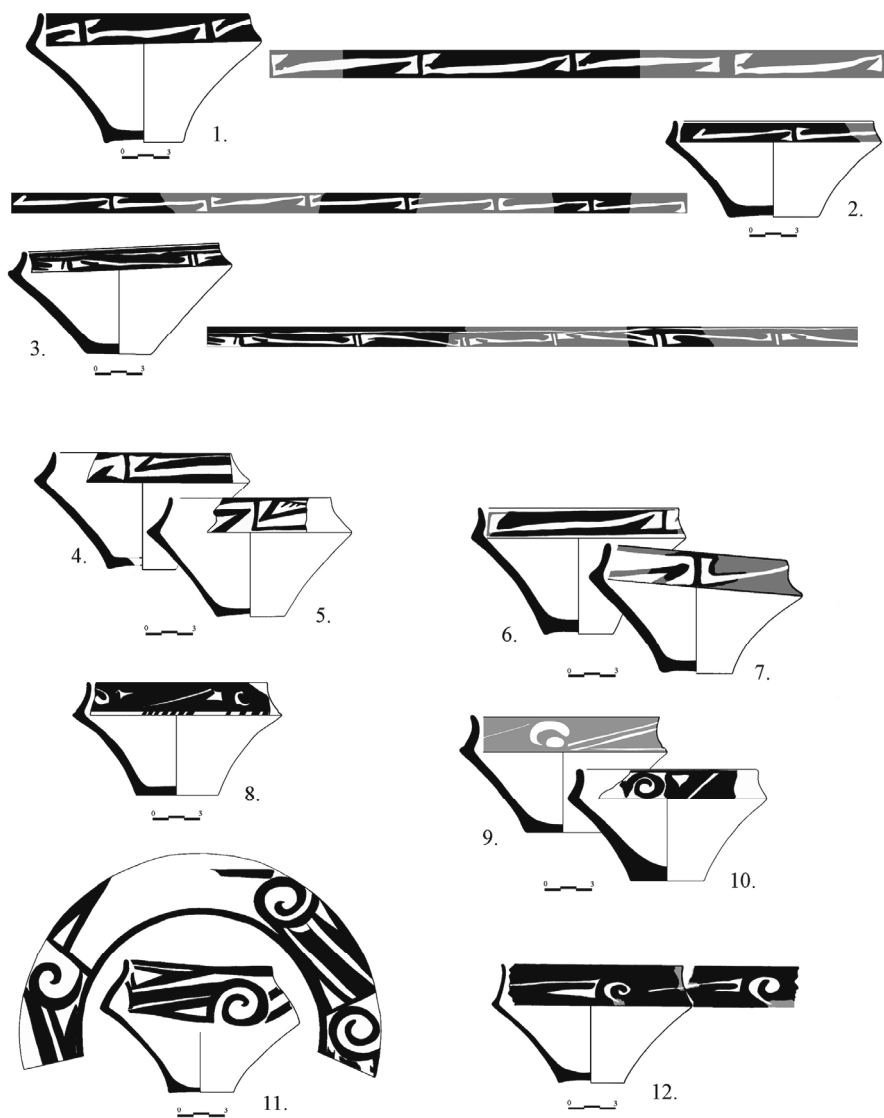
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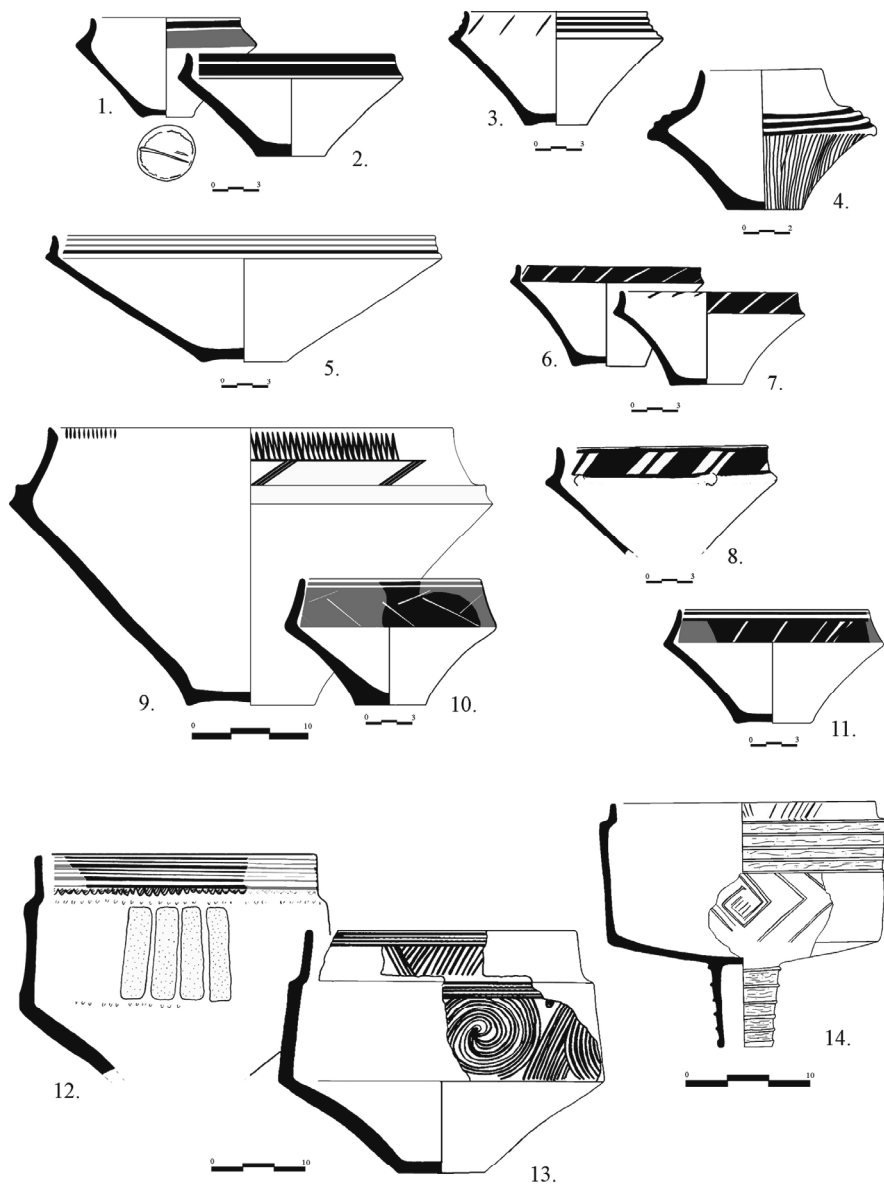
4

1		<i>Translation.</i> The fundamental part is moved without change in orientation.
2		<i>Horizontal reflection.</i> This class involves translation as well as reflection.
3		<i>Vertical reflection.</i> Repeated reflection alone produces the band.
4		<i>Bifold rotation.</i> The fundamental part is swung around the axis through an angle of 180 degrees.
5		<i>Horizontal and vertical reflection combined.</i>
6		<i>Slide reflection.</i>
7		<i>Alternate rotation and vertical reflection.</i>
8		<i>Translation and vertical reflection combined.</i>

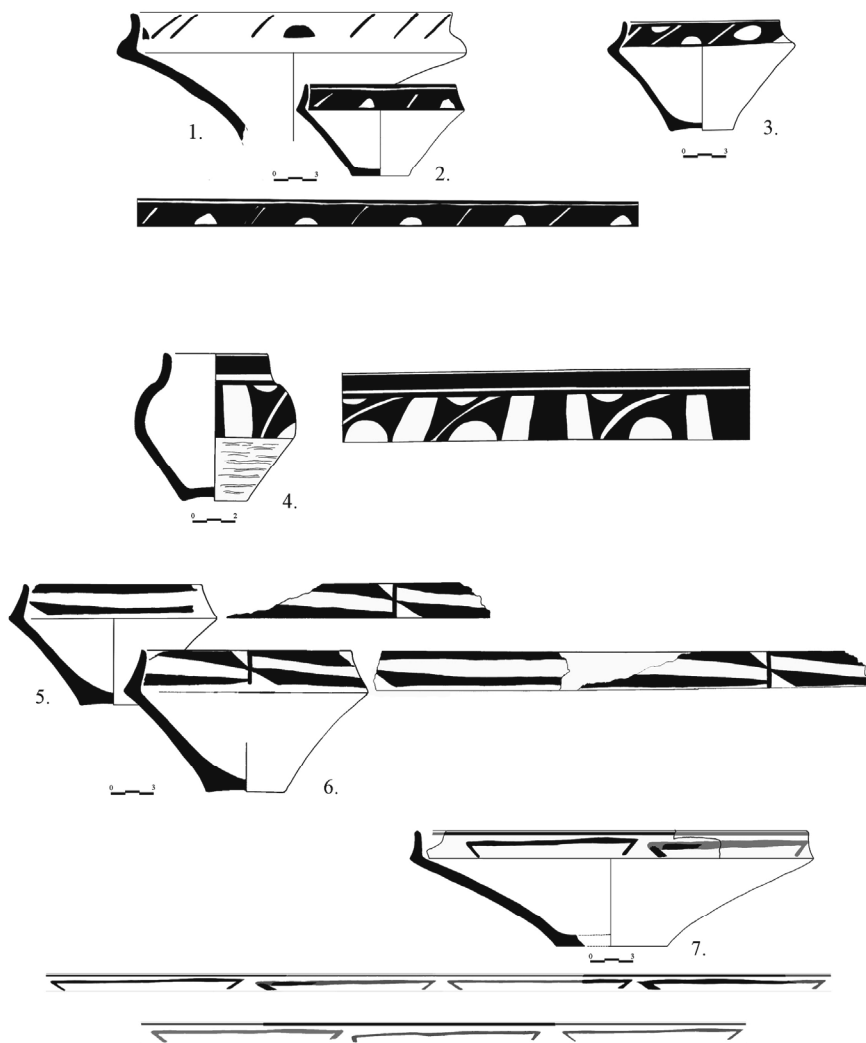
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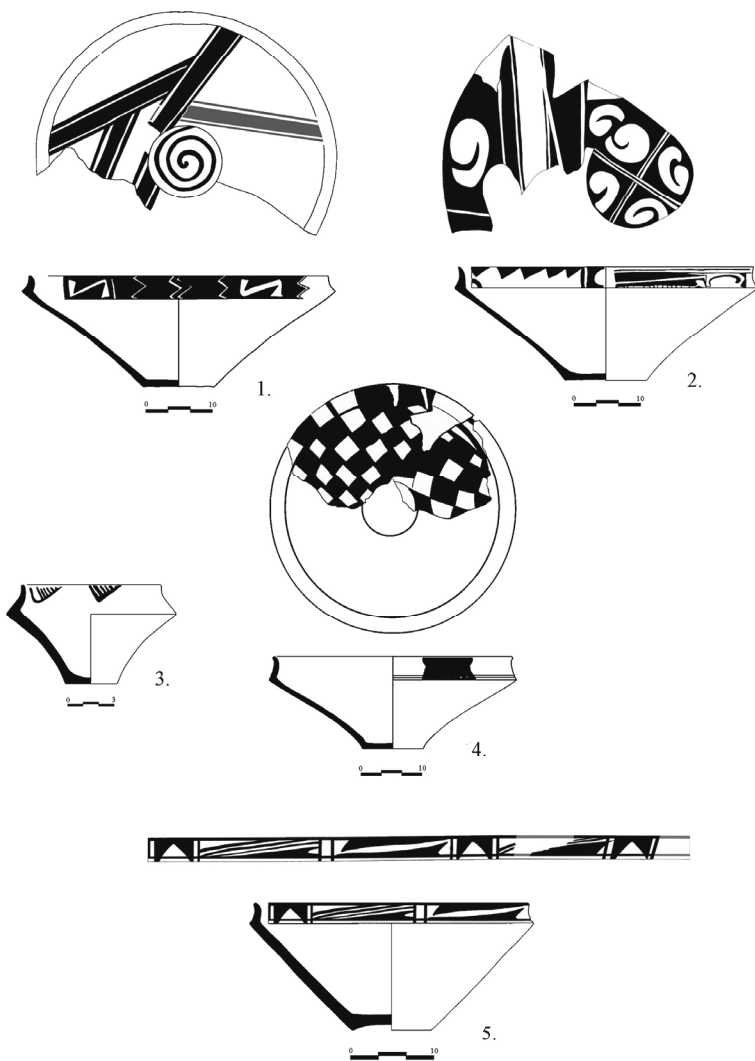


Pl. 2

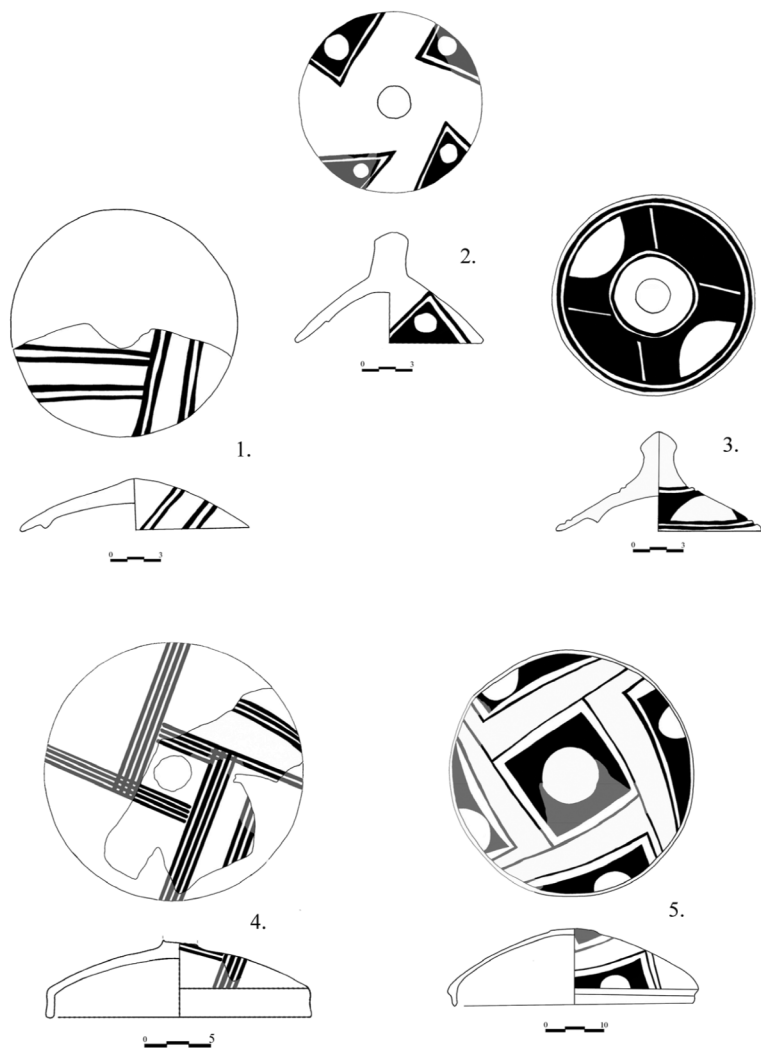


Pl. 3





Pl. 5



Pl. 6