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IN HONOREM

VASILE BORONEANŢ - 80 ANI

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BETWEEN EVERYDAY AND RITUAL USE - 'SMALL ALTARS' OR 'CULT TABLES' FROM MĂGURA 'BUDUIASCA', TELEORMAN COUNTY (I): THE EARLY NEOLITHIC FINDS [1]

Pavel MIREA

Rezumat: *Acest studiu îşi propune să prezinte un prim lot, mai precis acela ce aparţine neoliticului timpuriu, dintr-o categorie de descoperiri cunoscute sub denumirea de 'altare', 'altăraşe' sau 'măsuţe de cult'. Piesele provin din situl de la Măgura, judeţul Teleorman şi constituie unul dintre cele mai numeroase loturi de asemnenea obiecte descoperite în sudul României. Sunt analizate tipurile ce aparţin celor două secvenţe cronologice: Starčevo-Criş I şi Starčevo-Criş III. Sunt avute în vedere terminologia, funcţionalitatea, morfologia şi contextul descoperirilor acestui tip de obiecte, precum şi racordarea lor cu descoperirile similare din sud-estul Europei.*

Abstract: *This study aims to present a group of objects belonging to the early Neolithic, category of finds known as 'altars', 'small altars' or 'cult tables'. The items were discovered on sites in Măgura, Teleorman County and are one of the largest groups of such objects found in southern Romania. The artefact types belonging to two chronological sequences: Starčevo-Criş I and Starčevo-Criş III are examined. The discussion takes into account the terminology, functionality, morphology and context of the finds, as well as their connection to similar discoveries in south-eastern Europe.*

Cuvinte cheie: *Măgura; sudul României; neolitic timpuriu; 'altare'; 'altăraşe'; 'măsuţe de cult'.*

Keywords: *Măgura village; southern Romania; early Neolithic; 'altars'; 'small altars'; 'cult tables'.*

Introduction

Ceramic 'altars' are quasi-present in the South-Eastern European Neolithic. Several scholars have focused on this type of artefact and usually different sections are reserved for discussion of these objects in early Neolithic monographs, including recently published ones (Ciută 2005: 110-11; Popuşoi 2005: 90-91; Schwarzberg 2005a; Chohadzhiev 2007: 114-19; Băcueţ-Crişan 2008: 60-2; Bogdanović 2008: 122-5, 128-133; Ganetsovski 2009: 131-2).

Some studies have addressed these items in terms of attempting to identify their functionality, putting forward arguments for and against the possibility of a ritually role (Schwarzberg 2003). The origins of these artefacts have been considered, and they are seen as a new type of object forming part of the 'Neolithic Package' (Schwarzberg 2005, 2006).

A recent article approaches the topic of the 'altars' in a different way, moving beyond terminology and functionality, looking instead to establish patterns relating to the archaeological context in which they were discovered (Jacobsson and Boroneanţ 2010).

Reports relating to finds of 'altars' in the southern part of Romania are limited and are generally only included in overviews about excavated early Neolithic settlements. Objects that are discussed come only from the western part of Wallachia, and the dates discussed rely purely on morphology and decoration, with few discussions regarding functionality (Nica 1971, 1976, 1999).

* * *

The key-site of Magura, discovered in 2001, is located on the lower eastern terrace of Teleorman River, 8km from the town of Alexandria, and 45 km north of the Danube River. Excavations focused around Măgura village within the Teleorman River Valley were carried as part of the 'Southern Romania Archaeological Project' (SRAP)[2] between 2001-2004 and 'The Neolithic in the Lower Danube Project' (ICE)[3] between 2005-2008 (Figure 1).

Archaeological research led to the discovery of both pits and surface structures, ranging in date, according to the ^{14}C data, from the earliest Neolithic (Starčevo-Criş - c. 6100-6000 BC) to the developed Neolithic (Dudeşti and Vădastra - c. 5500-5200 BC). Excavations carried out on sites around Magura in the past decade have recovered 214 'altar' fragments, bone of the largest such assemblages in southern Romania.

The following discussion will focus on the discoveries belonging to the early Neolithic, specifically to the earliest phase, Starčevo-Criş I (also know as Gura Baciului-Cârcea, Cârcea-Grădinile or Precriş) from the site of 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş' (Andreescu and Mirea 2008) and to a later phase, Starčevo-Criş III, from excavations on the site of 'Buduiasca' (Andreescu *et al.* 2002).

Several ^{14}C dates indicate dates for the earliest phase of 7107±29 BP (UBA-9630) and 7031±31 BP (UBA-9629)[4], while the later phase is dated to 6896±61 BP, 6833±53 BP, 6784±56 BP (Mirea 2000), 6868±38 BP, 6831±37 BP, 6767±36 BP, and 6761±36 BP (Walker and Bogaard 2011).

Terminology and functionality

In the literature a wide range of terms has been used to describe these objects, from 'altars', 'miniature altars' and 'cult tables' to 'offering platforms' and 'model thrones' (Schwarzberg 2003: 79). Certain scholars have preferred to use a summarising term, for instance, 'altar-tables' (Chapman 2000: 82). These widely used terms automatically suggest function: 'cult tables', 'small altars', 'cult altars' or just 'altars'. The inclusion of terms such as 'cult' and 'spiritual' in discussions suggests a religious function, however their presence in normal dwelling houses and the absence of excavated 'cult' complexes, rather suggests a domestic use (Schwarzberg 2006: 128). On the other hand they are seen as miniaturised replicas of real religious structures, used to create a cult space within the domestic sphere. In one Neolithic settlement at Samovodene, in the south Danube, a large structure considered to be a cult altar was identified (Chohadzhiev 2007: 132, note 15). The act of passing these 'altars' from generation to generation might be central to their importance as objects, which, unfortunately, makes it difficult to establish an accurate chronology (Chohadzhiev 2007: 114-15). Perhaps the most appropriate and neutral designation should be the 'prismatic polypod vessels' proposed by Heiner Schwarzberg (2006: 127). The name of tripod has a limitation, denoting only the three legged items.

In southern Romania the terminology is not uniformly used. Usually, they are called 'small altars' (Nica 1976: 452-3), 'cult tables' (Nica 1999: 14), 'support tables' (Nica 1971: 553) or 'cult altars' classified with 'cult objects', 'plastic art objects' or simple 'other objects' (Iosifaru and Fântâneanu 2003: 7).

No matter what they are called, the items in question have several features that make them easily recognisable: they have a prismatic shape with three or four legs (sometimes the legs are replaced by a rectangular base) and a shallow platform or container on top. This discussion will use the label of 'altars', with the intention of employing a brief neutral-value term without any religious meaning.

Several assumptions have been expressed in attempts to establish the functionality of these objects, most often without strong supporting arguments. Thus, it was considered that they have been used for illumination (Nandris 1973), for ritual lighting, to burn fat or offerings, or for storing fire (Lazarovici and Maxim 1995). Sometimes a multiple function is assigned to an object, from a magical role to a functional one, used for example during the rituals for burning offerings, for burning spices at different events or celebrations, during ceremonies to guard against storm or disease, for storing fire, for illuminating a space, similar to a night-light in houses with children or sick people, or to light an idol (Maxim 1999: 61; 2000: 121-2). Less realistic seems to be the interpretation of these objects as furniture components: miniature tables or beds (Comşa 1995: 97; 216, fig. 108).

From the ethnoarcheological perspective they are linked to fire and light, important components in the daily life of the Neolithic communities (Băcueţ-Crişan 2008).

'Altars' is the traditional label assigned to this special form of vessel, and the traces of charring within the receptacle on the top could suggest their use as lamps (against their rarity), or as devices to heat and liquefy some substance (Thissen 2009: 50). If these containers were used to burn something, they would retain the traces of such use. Some observations seem to support this hypothesis (Karmanski 2005: 44-6), whilst in other examples the recorded data seems to prove the opposite. Chemical analysis carried out on the objects belonging to the Lengyel culture, for example, did not provide a positive outcome (Bánffy 1997: 54). The study of the objects from Magura has revealed at least 8 instance of soot and burning traces within the receptacle, evidence of the combustion of various substances and the exposure of the vessel to heat. The possibility of secondary firing is excluded in these cases, although this has been identified in 17 altar fragments. Perhaps an analysis of residues within the receptacles might provide information about the substances that were burnt.

Context of finds

The original context of deposition and any post-depositional disturbances affecting the 'altars' from Măgura were established through the analysis of the archaeological context and the stratigraphic data. It should be noted that 64 'altar' fragments were discovered in the earliest Neolithic level at Măgura, 18 of which (28%) could be conjoined with two or three other fragments. No objects

were able to be completely reconstructed, but it was possible to establish that the fragments originated from 51 individual objects. Obviously, most of them (44 fragments) come from the excavated area measuring 10m by 8m, resulting from the joining together of sondages 46-48 and 50-52 (2007-2008). The fragments are dispersed throughout the area, both in pits and the surrounding layers. Some fragments belonging to the same object and which may be re-assembled, were found up to 4.50m apart within different archaeological contexts, and separated by up to 0.40m in depth. This seems to be a general pattern in the spread of archaeological materials in the investigated area, with several potsherds that formed part of two painted vessels, also found some distance apart, as revealed by the depositional analysis (Figure 2).

The range of materials found both in pits and more general archaeological layers comprise: ceramic fragments, including some complete vessels; stone and bone tools; anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurine fragments; and other artefacts; building materials and hearth fragments; animal bones; shells and even human bones. Overall, the 'altar' fragments were found in those contexts which seem to be a result of multiple deposition events. Certain fragments were found in a surface dwelling area, along with other archaeological materials massed not directly on the floor, but about 0.20-0.30 m above it. The deposition patterns suggest that the site functioned as a refuse area after the dwelling was abandoned. The high degree of potsherd fragmentation together with the eroded surfaces showed that the materials had been exposed for a long time. The presence of animal bones and shell debris also implies that this was an area used for rubbish disposal.

In the Starčevo-Criş III level 16 fragments were found, consisting of 15 individual 'altars'. One example retained a small part of the container, while the others survived as just legs in various stages of fragmentation. The fragments are also located both in pits and spread in layers, although there was evidence of disturbance of the deposits in the later (developed) Neolithic and in the post-Neolithic periods.

A high degree of fragmentation is a common feature of the items discovered at Măgura. Related to the general archaeological context in which these pieces were found, John Chapman believes that they had a 'frequent and lengthy use, often accompanied by multiple episode of fragmentation' (2000: 85), perhaps the result of a deliberate practice by Neolithic people. Obviously, accidental breakage cannot be excluded, but this seems more unlikely and difficult for the massive body sherds. However the most common type of fragments are those which have been broken 'in quarter'. This remark is valid for earliest phase of the Neolithic, while in the later phase (Starčevo-Criş III) the most commonly fragmented parts are the feet. This last aspect can be identified as a consequence of the way in which the 'altars' have been initially modelled.

Morphology

Most of the authors have approached the 'altars' from the perspective of the decoration, and typological classifications. In attempting to observe patterns in relation to their manufacture, particularly when trying to establish whether there was a degree of standardisation in their design, a complex system of measurement by sizes and typological groups has been proposed. Typologically the altars were divided into three main groups: with three legs; with four legs; and without legs (Maxim 1999, 2000). The early Neolithic levels at Măgura have so far only produced items belong with the second category, with four legs. The third category - without legs - also includes those examples with a rectangular base and a receptacle above. The object type with a base perforated by fenestrated, or round, holes comprising a medium to large rectangular shaped vessel with elongated or lobed corners is not considered to be an 'altar' and can be regarded instead as a special open shape vessel type. These vessels have red slip inside the receptacle and a carelessly treated outside, and were probably used for display in feasts and rituals. Four fragments of such vessels (a base and three rim fragments) were excluded from the 'altars' category quantification (Figure 5).

Several types of 'altar' have been identified at Măgura, classified by their receptacle:

- with more or less deepened receptacle;
- with differentiated cup-shaped receptacle;
- with rectangular box-type receptacle;
- special shape.

The first type has been found only in Starčevo-Criş I contexts (Figs. 3; 4.1-4; 8.1-4 and 9.1, 3). The second type seems to occur in both stages (Figs. 4.4; 8.6 and 9.2, 5), with a variant in Starčevo-Criş III (Figs. 6.11 and 9.6). The third type is known only in the Starčevo-Criş I stage (Figs.

5.1; 8.9 and 9.4). A special type of a flat fenestrated platform also derives from the Starčevo-Criş I stage (Figure 4.8).

No zoomorphic 'altars' have been found at Magura, in fact they are rare in the early Neolithic of southern Romania[5].

The fragment analysis was carried out using an adapted version of the code sheet for SRAP pottery analysis (Thissen 2008: 11-12, 157), pursuing the correlation with the pottery. Relevant statistical data are summarized in Table 1. The fragments were counted, identified as components, measured, drawn and photographed. Establishing the degree of fragmentation and the degree of surface abrasion was fundamental to the analysis, as was analysis of the decoration. Any traces of soot and charred material within the receptacles were also noted.

The 'altars' are made up of two components: the base (usually 4 feet) and the body (receptacle and rim) suitable to hold fluids. All the items were hand made, probably using local alluvial clay, tempered with chaff and quartz sand. In some of the objects it was possible to observe the black colour centre that indicates a firing in reducing conditions. An experiment to recreate the same type of firing using pottery has estimated a firing temperature about 800^{o}C (van As *et al.* 2004).

It is possible to establish that the fabric and the surface treatment of both the pots and 'altars' found in contemporary contexts is identical, while the decoration is different.

The analysis of the way in which the 'altars' have been shaped revealed few steps:

- the separate shaping of receptacle and legs;
- the joining of the legs to the receptacle;
- the rim shaping, using a thin clay coil;
- the application of a thin layer of clay on the entire surface and the decoration;
- the surface finishing (smoothing, burnishing and eventually red slip application) (Figure 7).

The most common form of fragmentation identified revealed that most had broken into quarters, and the breakage structure suggests that the body was formed using the 'plaques technique'. This does not exclude the possibility that the initial modeling of some large pieces could have been made using a kind of mould. Fine parallel striations observed within some receptacles may be a consequence of this modelling type, together with some examples where the wall is extremely thin, no more than 1.5 mm.

Observations about the size of 'altars' have been made only for the Starčevo-Criş I items. Usually the receptacle has a round shape, however sometimes it is slightly oval. The diameter ranges between 4.5cm and 13 cm, most are between 8cm and 9cm. The legs are rectangular or triangular, less often circular or oval. The height ranges between 4.5cm and 9cm, most of the pieces being between 8cm and 9cm. It was not possible to determine a constant ratio between the height and the diameter.

Statistically, the Starčevo-Criş I sequence comprises 51% decorated fragments. The decoration is predominantly excised (82.8%), followed by incised (11.4%) and finally the application of plastics (5.8%). There are excised triangles positioned in rows on either side of the legs and/ or body of the 'altars', sometimes preserving traces of white filling (Figs. 3; 4.1, 3, 8 and 8.1-6). Very rarely, the triangles are imprinted with a bone or wooden tool. Sometimes the triangles are carelessly made, comprising only lines of cut notches. The incised decoration consists of lines and points while the plastic applications are small hemispherical protuberances (Figs.4.5, 6 and 8. 8).

The few fragments of Starčevo-Criş III revealed that excision is still prevalent in the decoration (61.5%) (Figs. 6.1, 2, 4 and 8.10-12), followed by incision (Figs. 6.3, 5 and 8.13) and plastic applications. A preliminary 'sketching' of the decoration using finely incised lines is sometimes noticed on items with excised decoration. On one leg a prominent plastic application looks like an elongated protrusion, broken off in antiquity (Figure 6.10). One of the legs has two cross perforations above the plastic application (Figure 6.10). The combination of excision and plastic applications is a frequently identified aspect of the decoration, however there is a notable lack of painted decoration. The excised or imprinted rows of triangles can be seen as perpetuating from the early to the late phase of the Early Neolithic, suggesting its conservatism. It is important to note that this decoration type is not found on other contemporary ceramic vessels.

Măgura finds in the Lower Danube catchment context

The Magura 'altars' can be connected, through analogy, to finds from a larger area of south-eastern Europe belonging to a chronological period roughly comprising the first four centuries of the sixth millennium BC. Strong parallels are present with similar objects found at contemporary sites located close to Magura in south-western Romania and the northern central part of Bulgaria.

Relevant analogies for the Starčevo-Criş I material are the artefacts from Koprivets (Chrnakov 2006) and Dzhuljunitsa[6], and for Starčevo-Criş III those from Malyk Preslavts[7] (Panayotov, Gatsov and Popova 1992).

Conclusions

Morphological and stylistic differences are perceptible in the finds of 'altars' from various sites, which are thought to be an expression of the creativity and adaptability of their creators; however, fundamentally, these objects are the same. It is probable that the mode or modes in which they were used will never be fully understood, their original significance masked by the 'prehistoric documents opacity' (Eliade 1991:15).

Could parallels with ethnoarcheology explain the significance of these early Neolithic items? A relevant object of comparison may be found in the Inuit world: the 'kudlik' (or 'qulliq') is a type of oil lamp used for illuminating and heating the tents and igloos, for melting the snow, for cooking, and drying the clothes, and also for ceremonial purposes (Wikipedia 2011). The lamp consists of a crescent-shaped cup of carved soapstone, sometimes with four wooden sticks used as a stand, filled with oil from the blubber of a seal and a wick made from moss, arctic or common cotton grass. It is an item in which the daily use combines with the ritual use. Could the 'altars' be a kind of 'Neolithic kudlik', a model of a multi-purpose object? Maybe through larger scale research and the identification of such objects in secure archaeological contexts, the careful publication and reconsideration of the previous discovered lots, the support of potential residue analysis, and the experimental archaeology we will be able to find some answers in this matter.

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Notes

[1.] First part of this study focuses on artefacts belonging to the early Neolithic (Sterčevo-Criş). A second part will address those attributed to the developed Neolithic (Dudeşti and Vădastra).

[2.] SRAP was an agreement between the National History Museum, the Teleorman County Museum and Cardiff University. The project has been founded by the British Academy, the Society of Antiquaries of London, Cardiff University, the Romanian Ministry of Culture and the Teleorman County Council and has been directed by Dr. Douglass W. Bailey, former Head of Archaeology and Conservation at Cardiff University, UK and currently Chair of Anthropology, San Francisco State University, CA, USA, and Dr. Radian R. Andreescu, researcher with the Romanian National History Museum, Bucharest.

[3.] ICE was an agreement between the National History Museum, the Teleorman County Museum, the Lower Danube Museum of Călăraşi, the Prahova County Museum of History and Archaeology, the Buzău County Museum, and the Caracal Museum. The project has been founded by the Romanian Ministry of Culture and the County Councils of Teleorman, Călăraşi, Prahova, and Buzău and has been directed by Dr. Radian R. Andreescu, researcher with the Romanian National History Museum, Bucharest.

[4.] The ^{14}C dates were obtained in ECONET project - 'Des bœufs, des souris et des hommes: premiers animaux domestiques et premiers commensaux en Europe continentale tempérée (fin du 7e mill. - 3e mill. a. J.-C.). Eclairages centre-européens (Moldavie, Muntenie, Doubroudja, Moravie, Bohème) et ouest-européens (Bassin Parisien, Ouest de la France)', coordinated by Dr. Anne Tresset (CNRS Paris), and Dr. Adrian Bălăşescu (MNIR Bucharest).

[5.] Recently a fragmentary item belonging to a late Starčevo-Criş phase was discovered at Seciu (Prahova County), northern Wallachia (Frînculeasa and Negrea 2010).

[6.] The materials are stored in Veliko Turnovo Museum. Many thanks are due to Nedko Elenski and Alexander Chohadzhiev for showing us the material and sharing the information.

[7.] Similar materials could be seen in the Silistra History Museum archaeological exhibition.

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Starčevo - Criş I

number of fragments	elements		joints	estimated number of 'altars'	context of finds			traces of burning	
	legs	body			feature	layer	*passim*	use	secondary
64	39	25	18	51	33	31	-	7	16

	surface treatment*			decor				
	PBW	SFRW	RSW	incision	excision	plastic application	combine	none
	40	13	4	4	29	2	1	30

number of items (whose sizes have been able be measured)										
	1	1	5	4	7	1	-	1	1	
diameter (cm)	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
	3	2	5	1	9					
height (cm)	4	5	6	7	8	9				

Starčevo - Criş III

number of fragments	elements		joints	estimated number of 'altars'	context of finds			traces of burning	
	legs	body			feature	layer	*passim*	use	secondary
16	15	1	-	15	6	8	2	1	1

	surface treatment*			decor				
	PBW	SFRW	RSW	incision	excision	plastic application	combine	none
	11	2	3	3	8	8	6	2

* **PBW** - Plain Burnished ware; **SFRW** - Surface Roughened Ware; **RSW** - Red Slipped Ware

Table 1 The main statistical data concerning the 'altars' discovered at Măgura.
Principalele date statistice privitoare la 'altarele' descoperite la Măgura.

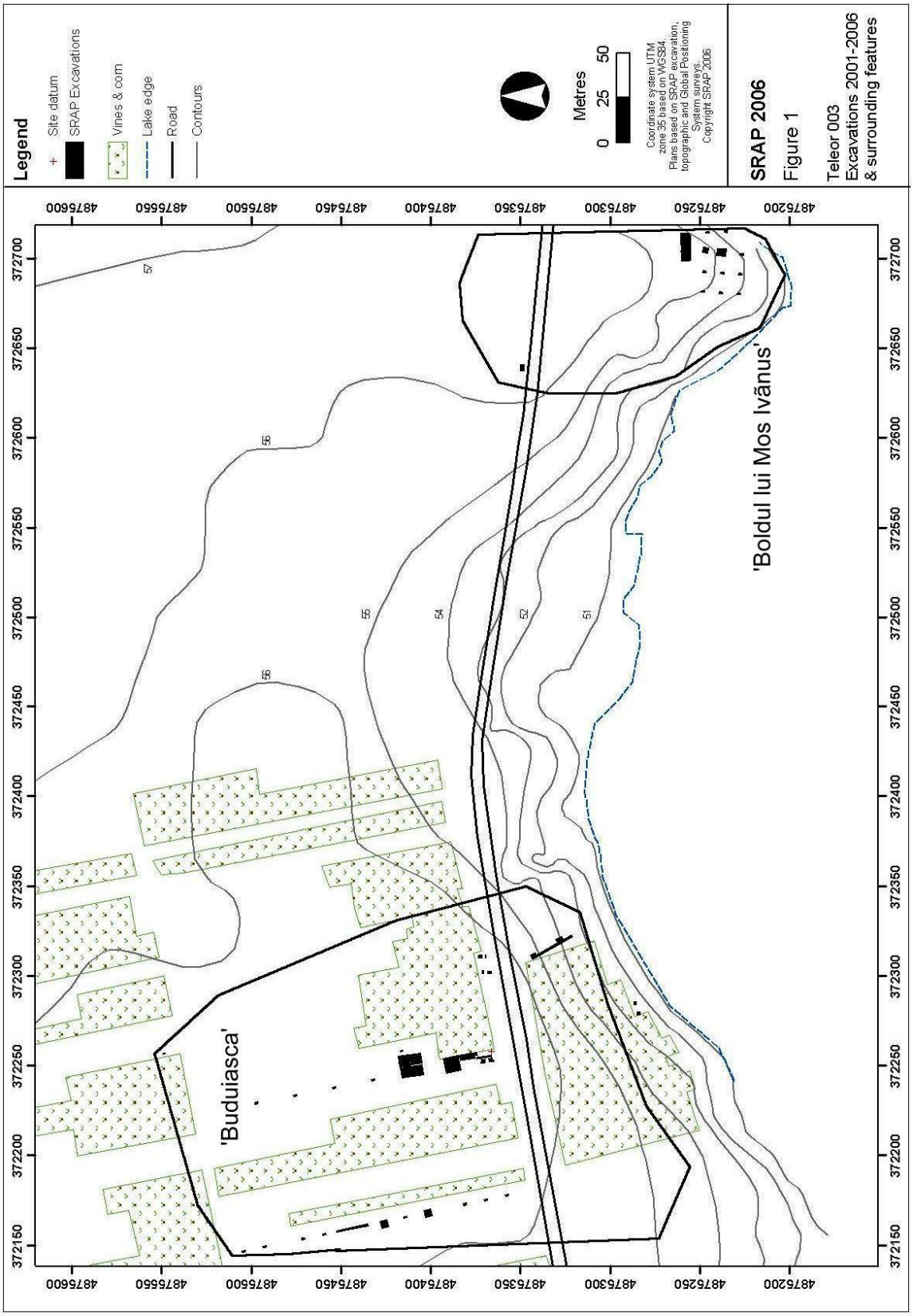

Figure 1 General plan of excavations at Măgura, with the location of 'Buduiasca' and 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş' areas (SRAP archive).

Planul general al săpăturilor de la Măgura cu zonele 'Buduiasca' şi 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş' (arhiva SRAP).

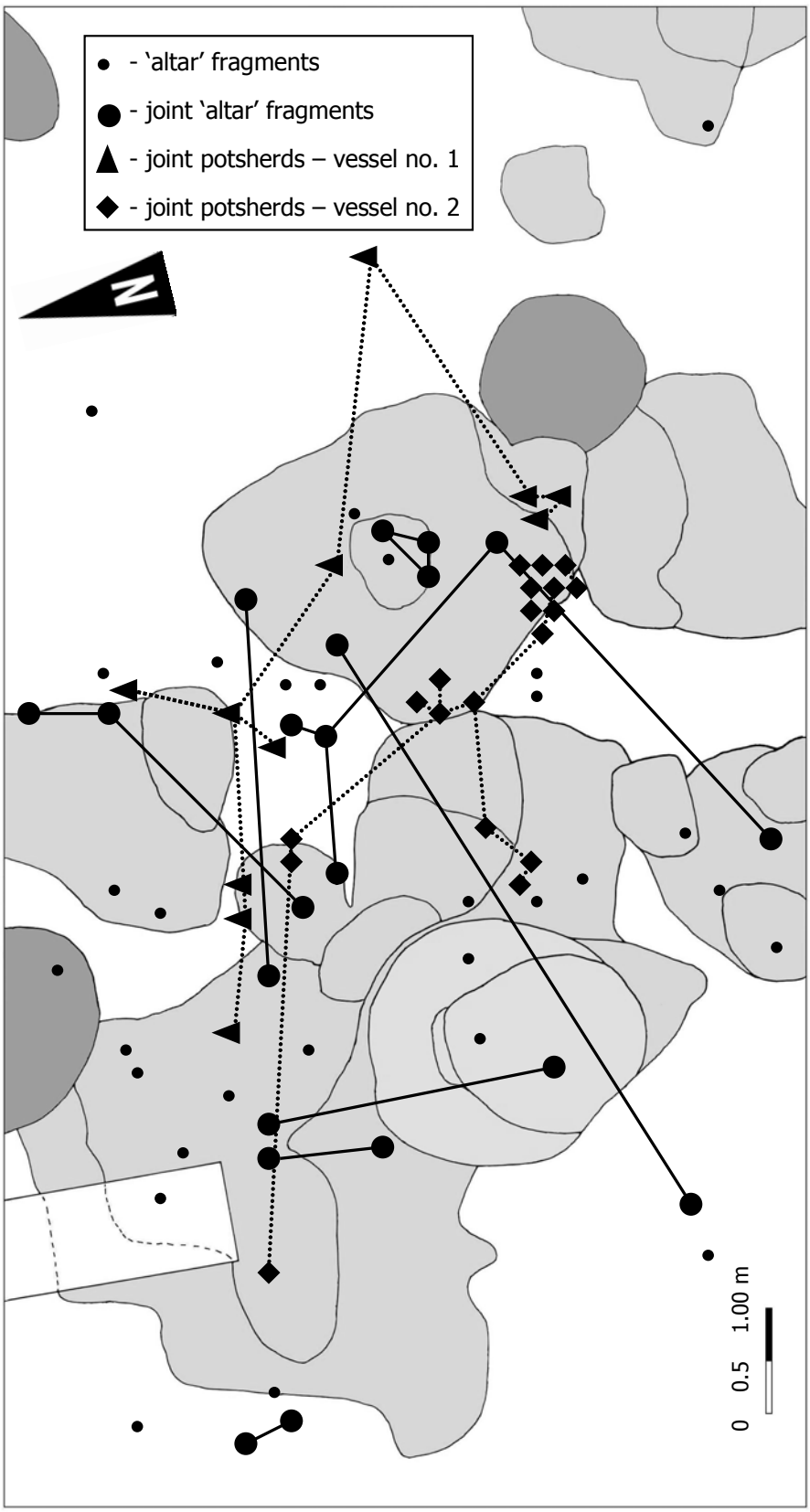

Figure 2 Măgura 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş'. General plan of the excavated area indicated the deposition of the 'altar' fragments and two painted vessels fragments.

Măgura 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş'. Planul general al suprafeţei excavate cu indicarea provenienţei fragmentelor de 'altare' şi a fragmentelor din două vase pictate.

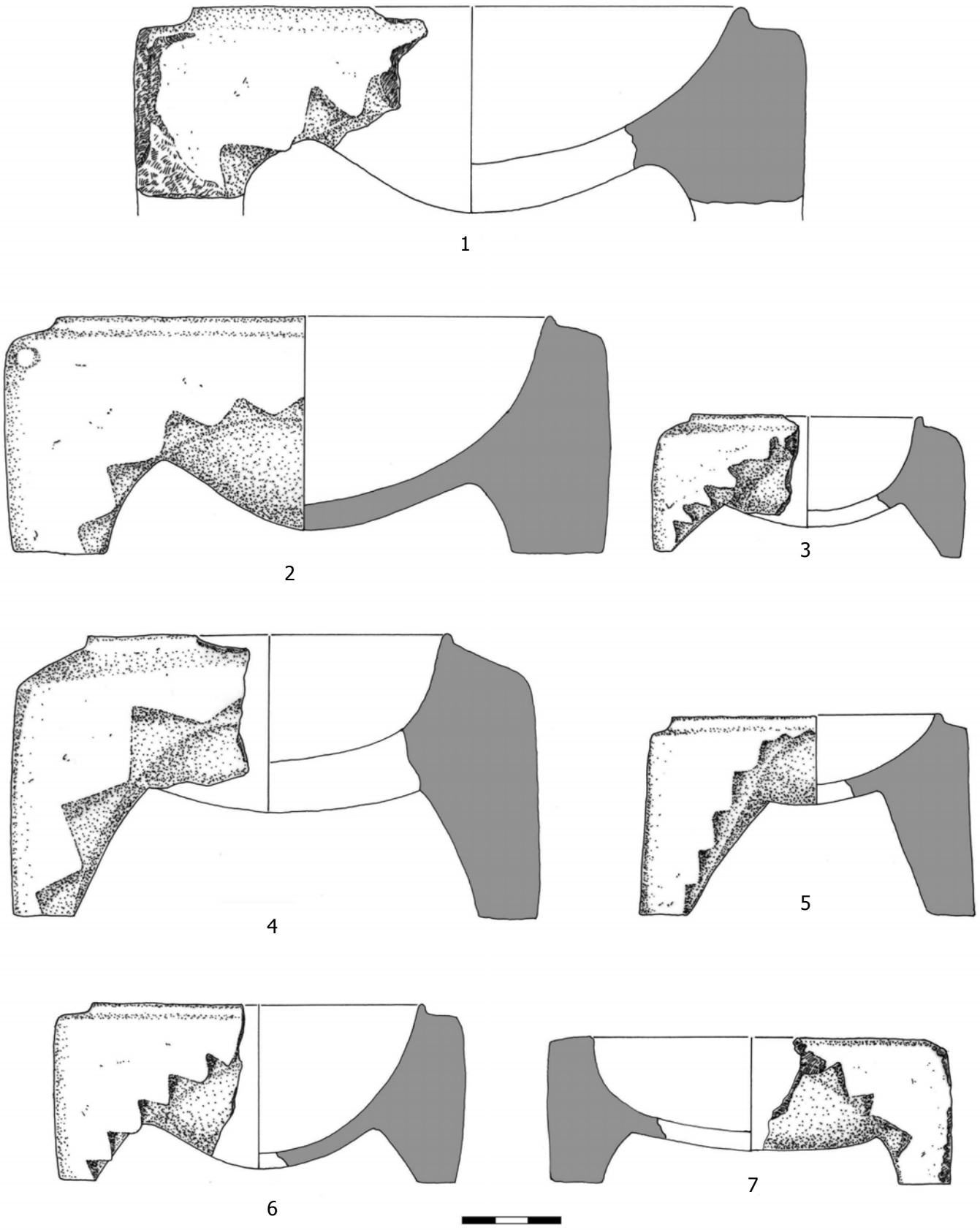

Figure 3 Măgura 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş' - 'altar' fragments discovered in Starčevo-Criş I level.

Măgura 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş' - fragmente de 'altare' descoperite în nivelul Starčevo-Criş I.

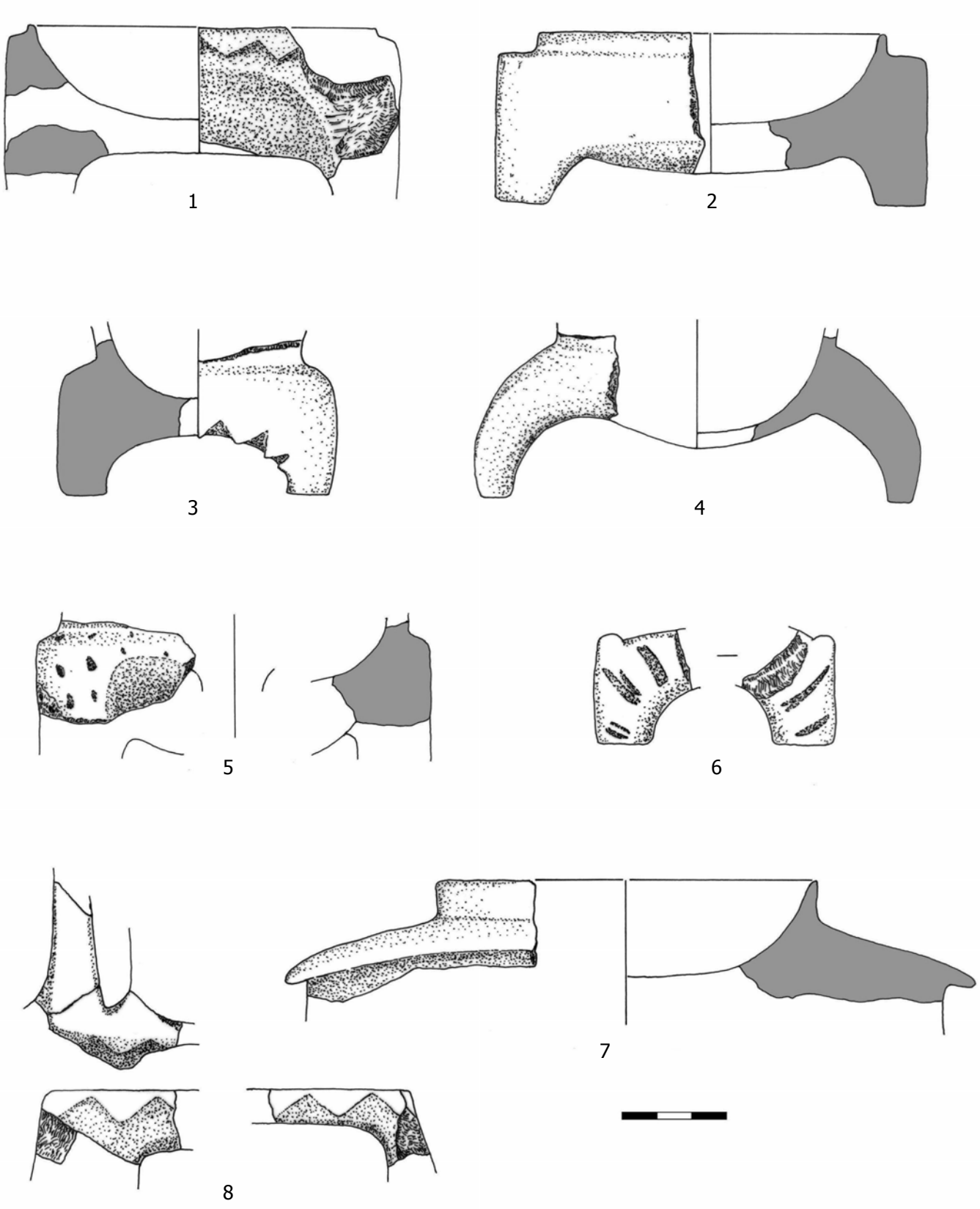

Figure 4 Măgura 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş' - 'altar' fragments discovered in Starčevo-Criş I level.
Măgura 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş' - fragmente de 'altare' descoperite în nivelul Starčevo-Criş I.

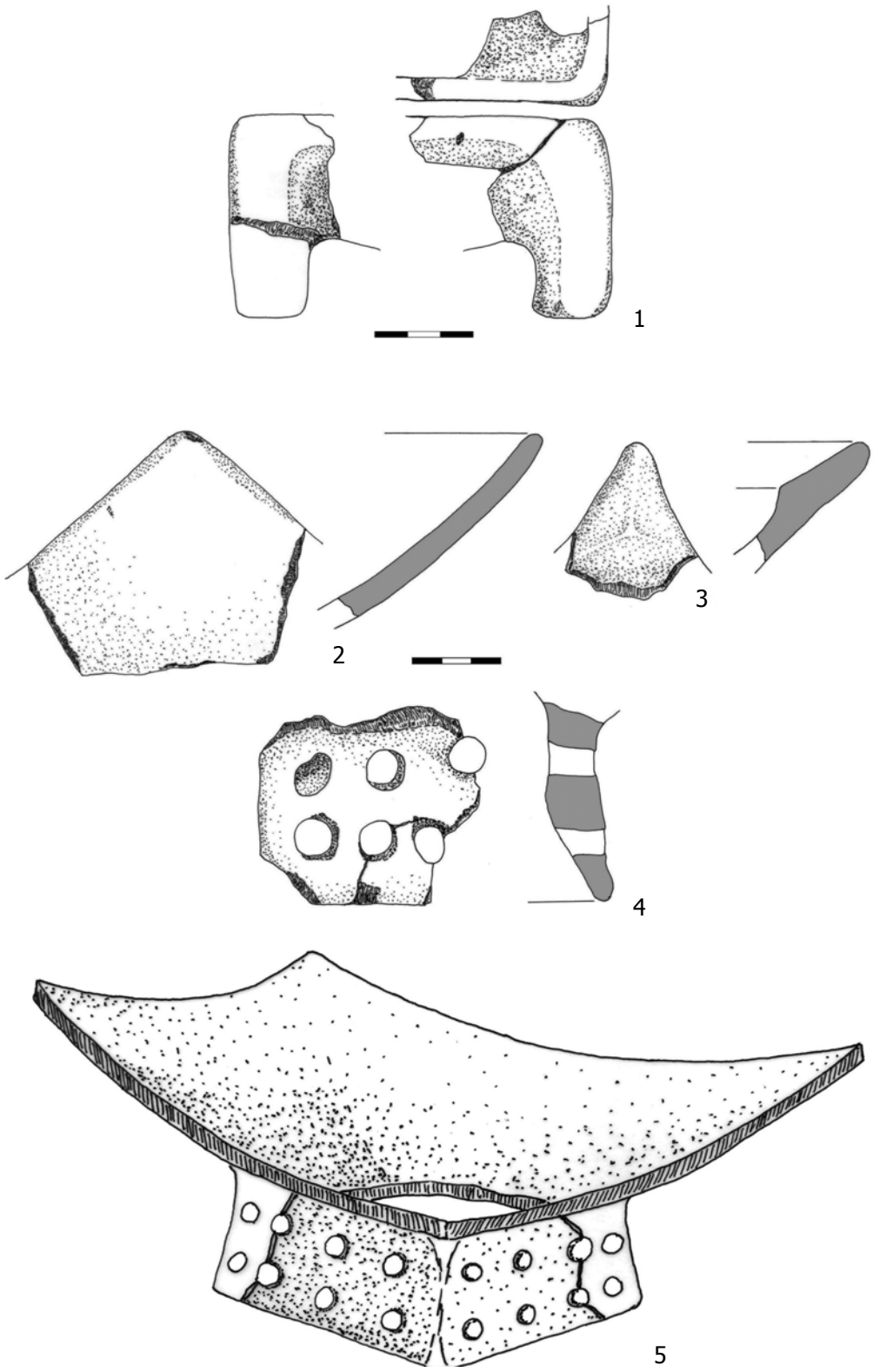

Figure 5 Măgura 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş' - 'altar' fragments (1), red slipped ware rims and base fragments (2-4) and graphic reconstruction of the display vessel type (5) discovered in Starčevo-Criş I level.

Măgura 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş' - fragmente de 'altare' (1), fragmente de buză şi bază acoperite cu slip roşu (2-4) şi reconstrucţia grafică a unui tip de vas pentru etalare (5) descoperite în nivelul Starčevo-Criş I.

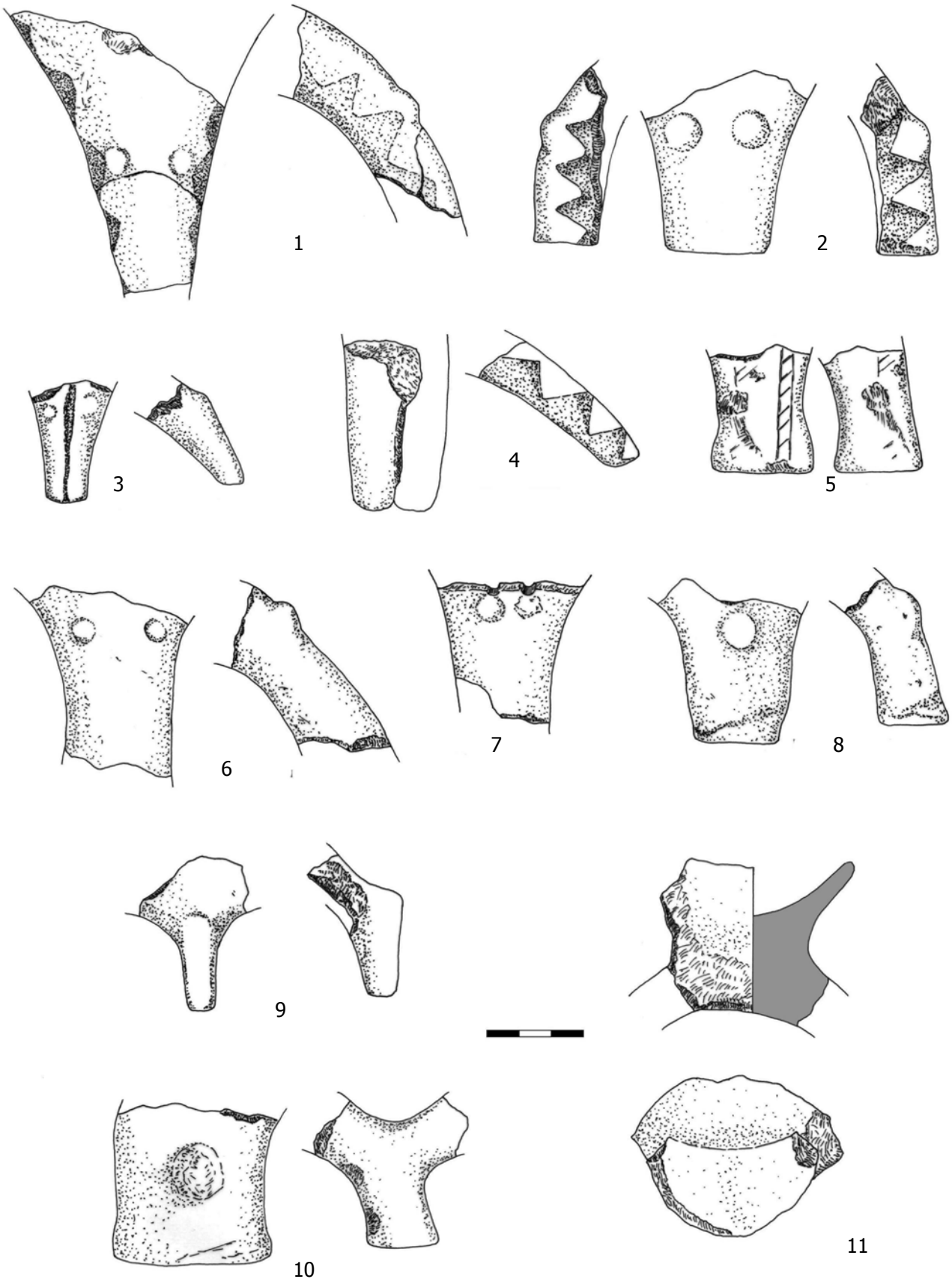

Figure 6 Măgura 'Buduiasca' - 'altar' fragments discovered in Starčevo-Criş III level.
Măgura 'Buduiasca' - fragmente de 'altare' descoperite în nivelul Starčevo-Criş III.

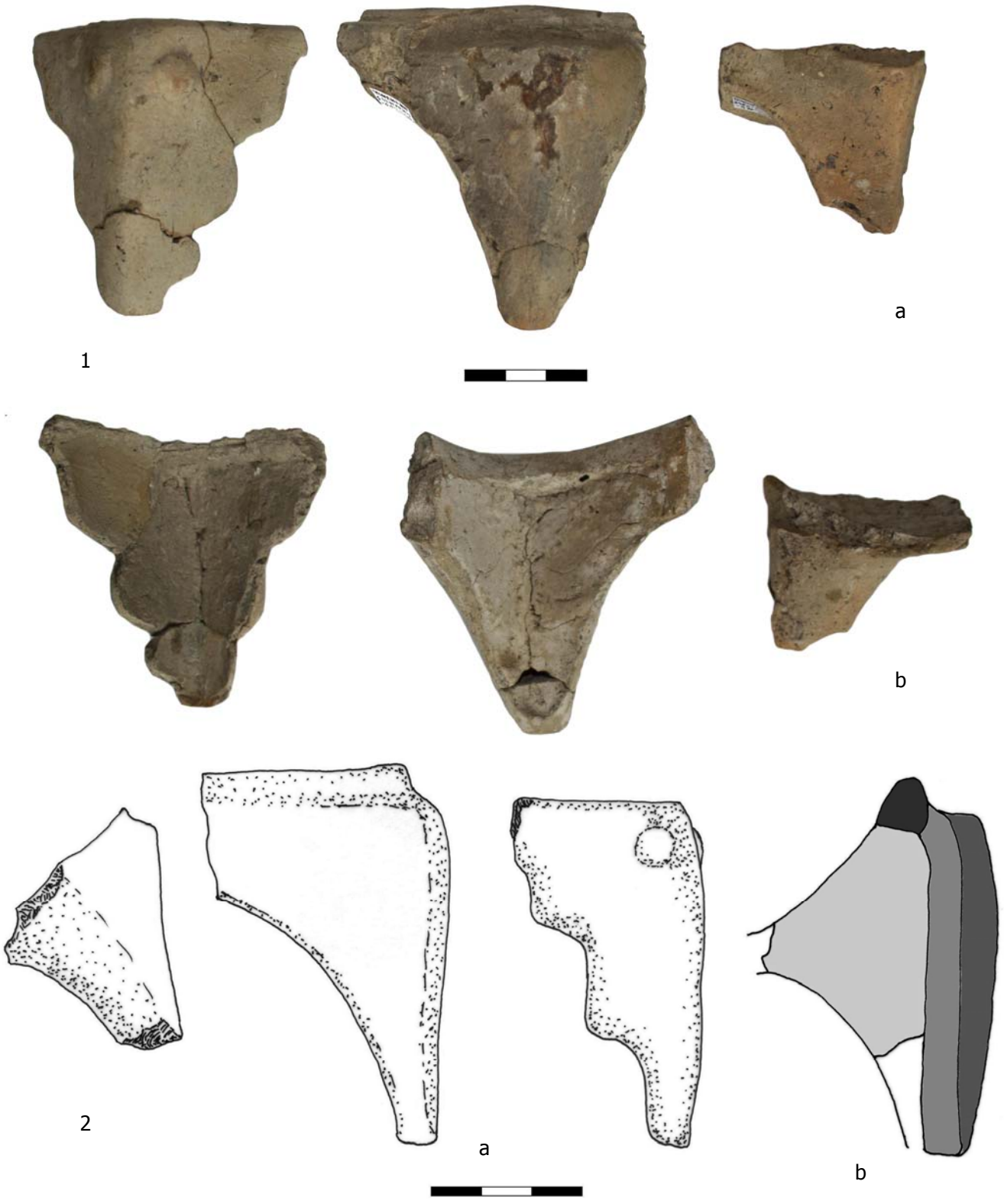

Figure 7 Măgura 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş'. Fragments showing the way which 'altars' have been shaped (1a-external view, 1b - inside view, 2a - drawing of component elements, 2b - assemblage section).

Măgura 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş'. Fragmente ce ilustrează modul în care 'altarele' au fost modelate (1a-vedere exterioară, 1b - vedre interioară, 2a - desen al elementelor componente, 2b - secţiune a ansamblului).

Figure 8 Măgura - 'altar' fragments discovered in the Starčevo-Criş I (1-9) and Starčevo-Criş III (10-13) levels.

Măgura - fragmente de 'altare' descoperite în nivelurile Starčevo-Criş I (1-9) şi Starčevo-Criş III (10-13).

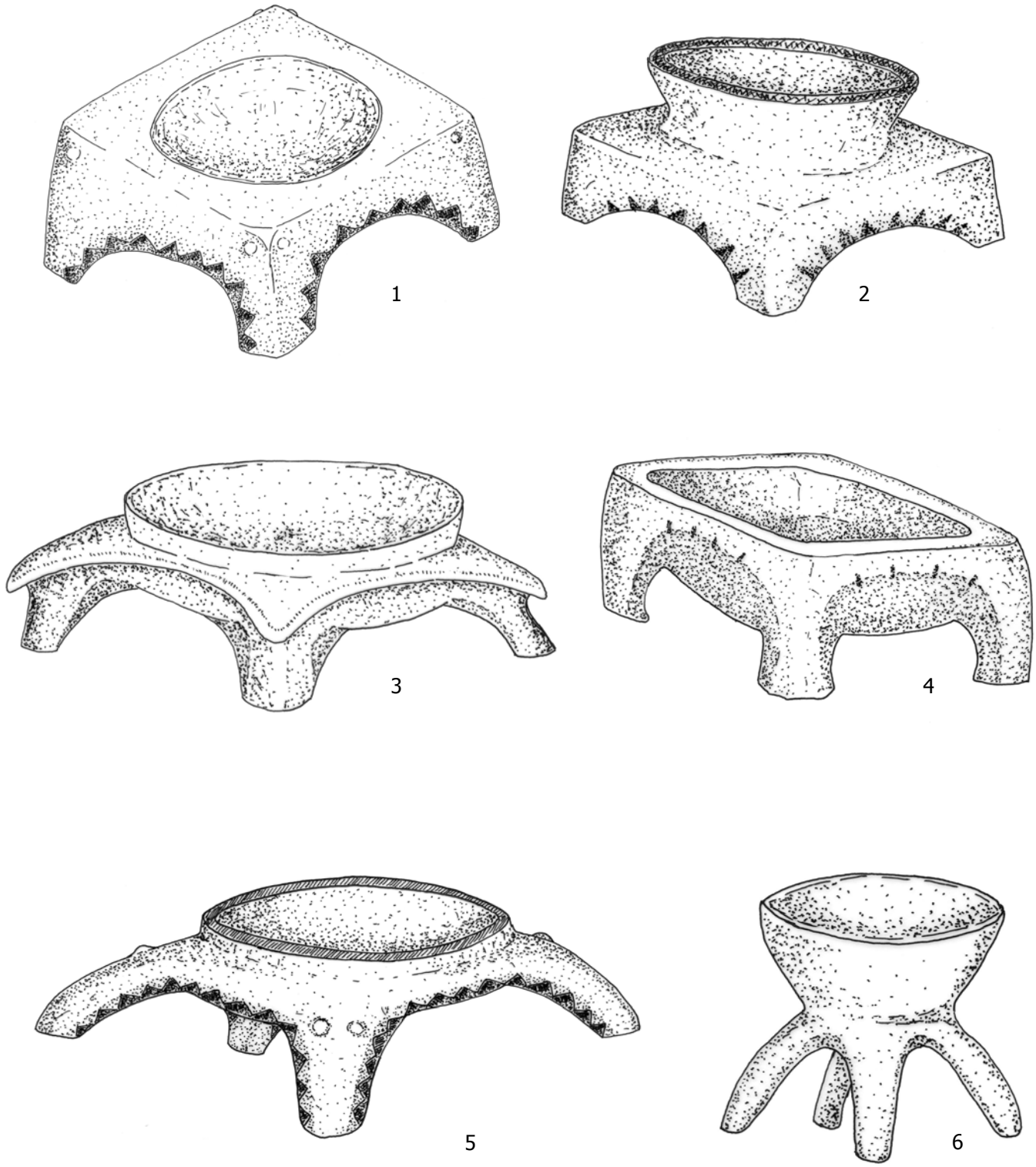

Figure 9 Graphic reconstruction of the main 'altar' types discovered at Măgura: Starčevo-Criş I (1-4); Starčevo-Criş III (5, 6).

Reconstituirea grafică a principalelor tipuri de 'altare' descoperite la Măgura: Starčevo-Criş I (1-4); Starčevo-Criş III (5, 6).