

LIVING DOWNTOWN. AN EARLY IRON AGE SETTLEMENT DISCOVERED IN THE CENTER OF TIMIȘOARA.

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(Abstract)

The rescue excavations that were coordinated by Alexandru Szentmiklosi in the Piața Unirii (The Union Square) from Timișoara revealed important aspects from the history of medieval and modern city of Timișoara. Unexpected was the discovery of three Early Iron Age features. One of the features was a sunken dwelling, while the others were two shafts. While the dwelling was seriously damaged by later constructions, the shafts provided relevant information regarding water management strategies but also concerning spiritual aspects of this community. The settlement can be dated to the Late Hallstatt period, a chronological horizon which has been only scantily investigated so far in the Banat region.

The Rescue Excavations from Timișoara- Piața Unirii

During the year 2014, large scale rescue excavations were undertaken in the historical center of Timișoara (Timiș County/RO). They were caused by major infrastructure implements and consolidations. One of these rescue excavations focused on the *Piața Unirii* (The Union Square), one of the major squares of the city. The project was coordinated by Alexandru Szentmiklosi¹, who managed to organize every aspect of the investigation from fieldwork to restoration and illustration of the archaeological material. The effort was immense considering the numerous archaeological features (over 2000) and the large quantities of archaeological material yielded.

The main expectations of these archaeological works were connected to the fortification system dating from the Ottoman period and the subsequent transformations of the area, following the Habsburg conquest from 1716². However, besides features belonging to the medieval and modern history of Timișoara, older archaeological structures as well as information regarding the ancient

topography of the area were also uncovered³. Amongst these, several features belonging to the Early Iron Age will be discussed in the present paper.

The square covers an area of 150 m × 110 m, being the largest in the city. The excavation trenches were placed on all four sides of the square and had a width of 2 m. In several places, where cable and pipe hubs were installed, extensions were made. In total, three Early Iron Age features were unearthed: one sunken-dwelling, in the southeastern corner of the square and two shafts, in the south and south-western part (Pl. 1).

Description of the Early Iron Age features.

The removal of the thick layer of debris that was used to level the surface of the square in the modern period, allowed us to gain some valuable information about the ancient landscape of the area. A dried stream crossed the entire square, diagonally, from southeast to northwest, and was used as defensive ditch during the Ottoman period. The river was dried out after the Habsburg conquest. On the north and southern banks of the former river, several terraces suitable for habitation were identified. In the southeastern corner of the square, on one of the terraces mentioned above, **feature V.147 (Fig. 1)** was discovered. It was a rectangular shaped pit, with rounded corners. It had a length

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¹ Among others, the research team also included: Dragoș Diaconescu, Sorin Tincu, Andrei Bălărie and the author of this paper.

² Szentmiklosi *et alii* 2015.

³ Szentmiklosi *et alii* 2015.

of 4 m and it was only excavated on a 1,8 m width due to the fact that the rest of the feature continued outside the area affected by the project. The maximum depth of the feature was 0,90 m from the layer where it was first visible (0,80 m from the current walking surface). The filling of the feature was composed from several layers of soil. The first layer had a dark colour and a clayish texture. The second layer had a dark-greyish colour, while the third one, had a brownish colour. The feature was badly disturbed during the construction of the Ottoman fortification. On the eastern side of the dwelling, a possible storage-pit was found which had a similar filling, meaning that both features were abandoned and filled simultaneously. The archaeological material found in feature V.147 consisted of fragmentary pottery, pebbles and micashist fragments.

Approximately 40 m west from V.147, **feature C. 389** was found (**Fig. 2**). It had a circular ground shape, with a diameter of 0,95 m. The pit was noticed at a depth of 2,40 m from the current walking surface, after removing the filling of feature C.359, which was a wide ditch (probably a dried river stream) filled during the Ottoman period. The maximum depth of the pit was that of 1,90 m from the layer where it was noticed (total depth of 4.30 m from the current walking surface). The shaft's filling was homogenous and was made up from a greyish clay-like soil. Such a filling suggests that the shaft was not used as a waste pit after its initial function was abandoned. Judging by the characteristics of the soil that was thrown back, one could assume that the filling of the pit took place very soon after it was initially dug. Near the bottom of the pit four hand-made vessels were discovered. They were found separately one from another and were probably thrown while the shaft was being filled.

Feature 467 was discovered on the southwestern side of the square (**Fig. 3**). Just like feature 389, it was a shaft which came to light after removing the modern and medieval layers, at a depth of around 2,90 m from the current walking surface. The maximum depth of the pit was 2,10 m from the level it was noticed (5 m from the current walking surface). The filling of the feature was similar to the one found in C.389, and just like in the latter, four hand-made vessels were found near the bottom of the pit. Besides these, another hand-made miniature vessel was also found. Three of the pots found were complete, while another had the rim missing.

Interpreting the features

Not many elements from the rural habitat of the Early Iron Age are known in the Banat region. Another open settlement was discovered at Remetea Mare-Gomila lui Gabor (Timiș County/RO), almost 13 km east from the centre of Timișoara. The settlement was positioned on a hillock, near the current stream of the River Bega. Although a large portion of this settlement was excavated during the 1980's by Fl. Medeleț, only a limited amount of information has been published so far. Nonetheless, a detailed description of a sunken dwelling was provided in a study from 1991⁴. The structure had a similar shape and size to V.147 described above. However, the filling of the feature demonstrated numerous phases of re-using of the house. Several sunken-dwellings have also been discovered at the site from Unip-Dealul Cetățuica (Timiș County/RO), which lies around 12 km south-east from the center of Timișoara, on a hillock near the current stream of the River Timiș⁵. The features had different shapes which might indicate various functionalities. Some of the structures show traces of multiple phases of utilization while others were used only for a certain period of time⁶.

Similar building types are preserved in this region in the subsequent period of time⁷, suggesting that it was determined by environmental factors rather than cultural one.

Wells are an important feature in the life of any community. Due to this aspect, their mundane role is often intertwined with spiritual functions. Judging from the information acquired during the excavation, several hypotheses can be drawn regarding the use of the shafts from *Piața Unirii*. The position of the two wells seems to have been on lower ground, in areas that were probably, at some point in time, on the bottom of creek streams. This is not unusual for prehistoric wells from the Carpathian Basin, the reason behind this being easier access to the water supply in terms of time and energy invested⁸. The filling of both shafts seemed similar and showed little traces of human waste. It is therefore likely that the shafts were not used as waste pits after their primary function expired. No traces of wooden structure were noticed, even if the environment was suitable for the preservation of organic material⁹. The lack of reinforcements for

⁴ Medeleț 1991

⁵ Măruia *et alii* 2019

⁶ Măruia *et alii* 2019, 74–78

⁷ Georgescu 2019

⁸ Fülöp 2017, 316

⁹ A large quantity of wood of different sizes (planks,

the walls of the shaft is typical for short-term constructions¹⁰. Another interesting aspect is the similarity of the two sets of vessels found in the shafts. This could point to a deliberate act of positioning carefully selected types of objects on the bottom of the pits. It could be very likely that the pots were placed shortly before the shafts were filled, in what could be interpreted as a ritual event¹¹.

Analysis of the pottery finds

The finds from dwelling V.147 were all fragmentary. They comprised mostly of pottery sherds, pebbles and a few chunks of micashist. Not a single vessel was possible to reconstruct after restoration.

The ceramic inventory included fragments from bowls, storage pots, cups and miniature vessels (Pl.2–7).

Some of the most numerous bowl fragments belonged to the type with inverted rim and grooves decoration (Pl.2). Such pots are common throughout the entire Iron Age¹². The earliest finds in the area come from Felnac-Complexul zootehnic (Arad County/RO)¹³, Giroc-Mescal¹⁴, Satchinez or Dejani (Timiș County/RO)¹⁵. They are more frequently found in settlements dated to the middle and late Hallstatt period like the ones from Valea Timișului-Rovină (Caraș-Severin County/RO)¹⁶, Unip-Dealul Cetățuica¹⁷ or Remetea Mare-Gomila lui Gabor¹⁸. This type of bowls continues to be produced and used in the Late Iron Age as the finds from Remetea Mare-Gomila lui Pituș¹⁹ (Timiș County/RO) or Iaz-Sat Bătrân Mare (Caraș-Severin County/RO)²⁰ demonstrate.

Another type of bowls that were found in feature V.147, were the ones with outwards oriented rim and grooves decoration on the inside of the vessel's mouth (Pl.4). This kind of ceramic is typical for the latter phases of the Early Iron Age. Similar pots were found at Remetea

Pogănici-Dealul Pășcoanii (Caraș-Severin County/RO)²¹, Unip-Dealul Cetățuica²², Bernadea (Mureș County/RO)²³, Ferigile (Vâlcea County/RO)²⁴, Oreșac-Židovar (Southern Banat District/SRB)²⁵ or Feudvar (Mošorin village/SRB)²⁶.

Several handle fragments are also relevant for dating the feature (Pl.3). Their shapes and protuberances are typical for the late Hallstatt settlements from the region. Examples include finds from Remetea Mare-Gomila lui Gabor²⁷, Remetea Pogănici-Dealul Pășcoanii²⁸ or Unip-Dealul Cetățuica²⁹.

Besides bowls, fragments of storage pots have also been found in this feature. The most common are the ones with straight walls and thickened rim (Pl.5; Pl.6/1–2;4). These are typical for the Early Iron age and their usage covers a larger time span. Most often they are decorated with embossed ribs and oblique incision series.

Judging from the ceramic material found in the filling of the dwelling V.147 we can roughly date it to a late Basarabi or post-Basarabi horizon.

In feature C.389 four nearly complete vessels were found. Three of them were small storage vessels, while one was probably used for storing liquids. They were all found near the bottom of the shaft. One pot had a slightly "S"-shaped profile with two small handles attached to the rim (Pl.8/1). It had a rim diameter of 16 cm, a base diameter of 10 cm and height of 18 cm. The rim and the base of the neck were decorated with embossed ribs and oblique incisions. Similar pots were found in a later Basarabi phase layer from Gradina na Bosutu (Vașica Village/SRB)³⁰. Another storage pot had straight walls with slightly outwards modelled rim (Pl.8/2). It had a rim diameter of 17 cm, a base diameter of 11 cm and was 17 cm tall. Just like the previous described pot, it had two rows of decorations, one on the rim and the other at the base of the neck. The third storage pot was slightly taller than the others (Pl.9/1). Its rim had a diameter of 18 cm, the base had a diameter of 10 cm while the height was 24 cm. The last two vessels are common throughout Early Iron Age with numerous parallels in the southeastern Carpathian Basin. The nearest

tree-trunks and even twigs) as well as leather objects were recovered from the Ottoman layers. They were preserved due to the humid environment and sealing properties of the dense clay from this area. For this reason we can assume that if any wooden structures were present in the wells, it would have been preserved.

¹⁰ Fülöp 2017, 310

¹¹ Fülöp 2020, 186

¹² Popa – Plantos 2001

¹³ Sava 2011, Pl. 4

¹⁴ Gogăltan 1996, Abb.8/3–4

¹⁵ Gumă 1993, Pl. XI/2–5

¹⁶ Gumă 1993, Pl. XCI/4–6

¹⁷ Măruia et alii 2019, Pl.65/5–7

¹⁸ Medeleț 1991, Fig.5/1;3

¹⁹ Rustoiu – Berecki 2016, Fig.7/3

²⁰ Bona – Rogozia 1985–1986, Pl. VI/2

²¹ Stratan 1960, Fig. 5/1;3

²² Măruia et alii 2019, Pl. 78/8

²³ Ursușiu 2002, Pl. LXXVI/LXVII

²⁴ Vulpe 1967, Pl. II/ 20(65)

²⁵ Jevtić 1996, Pl. VIII/2–4

²⁶ Borić 1998, Taf.3/1;6

²⁷ Medeleț 1991, Fig.6

²⁸ Stratan 1960, Fig.5/6

²⁹ Măruia et alii 2019, Pl.78/4–5;7

³⁰ Medović – Medović 2011, Sl. 151/8;14

analogies for these pots would be from Remetea Mare-*Gomila lui Gabor* (although three times larger)³¹ or from burial mound VI at Moldova Nouă (Caraș-Severin County/RO)³². The fourth vessel from this feature was probably used for storing or serving liquids (Pl.9/2). It had a narrow mouth and a wider lower-body. The rim diameter was 12 cm, the base diameter was 9 cm, while the maximum diameter, which was in the lower part of the pot was 20 cm. The vessel was 19 cm tall. It had two opposing handles placed on the median lane of body. The lower part of the vessel was delineated through an embossed line upon which two protuberances were placed in opposite position. A similar, albeit not identical vessel comes from the Basarabi settlement from Sebeș-*Podul Pripocului*³³.

Finally, the second shaft, feature C.467, contained a similar pottery assemblage as C.389 with an addition of a miniature vessel. The shape of the pots was slightly different, but the functionality of them seems to be corresponding. The three storage vessels had similar shapes with slightly different sizes. The first one (Pl.10/1) had a rim diameter of 19 cm, a base diameter of 13 cm and a maximum diameter of 21 cm. Its height was 24 cm. The second (Pl.10/2) had a rim diameter of 15 cm, a base diameter of 12 cm and a maximum diameter of 21 cm. The vessel was 25 cm tall. The third vessel was incomplete, having the upper part of the neck missing (Pl.11/2). It had a maximum diameter of 14 cm and a base diameter of 12 cm. The fourth vessel was probably used for serving food (Pl.11/1). It had a "S"-shaped profile with a rim diameter of 19,5 cm and a base diameter of 9,5 cm. Its maximum circumference was 20 cm, while its height was 13 cm. Below the neck of the pot four knobs were placed, each facing another one. Lastly, the miniature vessel (Pl.11/3) had arched walls and two ring-like handles (one of which was broken). Its rim diameter of 3 cm and a base circumference of 2,5 cm. The small vessel was only 3,5 cm tall.

The three storage pots from this feature have a similar morphology. A miniature variant of these vessels was found in a house from Remetea Mare-*Gomila lui Gabor*³⁴. Others are known from the Scythian environment like for example in the graves from Teiuș or Blaj (Alba County/RO)³⁵. For the deep bowl I wasn't able to find any relevant parallels, although one might find a resemblance

with a vessel from a late Hallstatt grave in Maňa (Nové Zámky District/SVK)³⁶

The cultural context

Not much is known about the period from the middle of the 1st millennium BC in south-western Romania (**Fig. 4**). In M. Gumă's major work dedicated to the Early Iron Age of the region, written almost three decades ago, the late Hallstatt period has the least number of archaeological contexts and sites investigated. Since then, several discoveries have been made that help us create a sketch about the social and cultural environment of the time.

So far three hill forts have been investigated in this region, but unfortunately very little information is known about them. The excavations from the fortified settlement at Remetea Pogănici-*Dealul Pășcoanii* revealed two layers of habitation³⁷, which M. Gumă assumes are dated starting with the 6th century BC³⁸.

The hillfort from Herneacova-*Cetate* (Timiș County/RO) has been investigated in the '70s and early 2000's. Little is known about these excavations, but the authors of the investigations date the fortified settlement at the end of the Early Iron Age³⁹.

In the southern Banat, investigations at the multi-layered settlement from Oreșac-*Židovar*, revealed, among others, several layers of habitation dated to the late and post-Basarabi chronological horizon⁴⁰.

Two Illyrian-type helmets, discovered by chance, complete the data we have about the elites from the late Hallstatt period in the Banat region. The first one is known since the 19th century and was found at Berzovia (then Jidovin, today in Caraș-Severin County/RO)⁴¹. The second one is a chance find coming from the Timiș River, near the village of Găvojdia (Timiș County/RO)⁴². This type of helmets was a mean of expressing identity used by the north-western Balkan aristocracy during the 6th and the 5th century BC. Judging by the distribution map of these finds, we notice that the Banat region is at the periphery of this cultural phenomenon⁴³.

Other traces of habitat from this period have been found at Remetea Mare-*Gomila lui Gabor*⁴⁴

³¹ Medeleț 1991, Fig.11/1

³² Gumă 1993, Pl.CII/20–21

³³ Ursuțiu 2002, Pl.CLXXV/3

³⁴ Medeleț 1991, Fig.5/1

³⁵ Vasiliev 1980, Pl.5/1–2

³⁶ Benadik 1983, Taf.I/14

³⁷ Stratan 1960, 165

³⁸ Gumă 1993, 236

³⁹ Cedică – Medeleț 2002–2003; Medeleț *et alii* 2002–2003; Mare – Cedică 2004–2005

⁴⁰ Jevtić 1997; Jevtić – Sladić 1999; Ljuština 2009

⁴¹ Milleker 1899, 91–92; Gumă 1993, 239–240

⁴² Medeleț – Cedică 2002–2003; Sirbu 2012

⁴³ Blečić Kavur – Pravidur 2012, Fig. 6–7.

⁴⁴ A sunken dwelling and several pits were considered by F.

and Unip-Dealul Cetățuică⁴⁵. These settlements seem to have a rural character, being positioned on small hillocks nearby water streams.

Using this information we draw some preliminary conclusions concerning the social organization of the 6th–5th century BC communities from the Banat region. Firstly, we can observe the existence of regional centres of power, concentrated in fortified settlements. These settlements show continuity from the late Basarabi horizon and were ruled by a military elite who chose to express their identity using the north Balkan and southern Pannonian models. Besides these, several rural settlements have also been found being located on small hillocks in the proximity of river streams.

Final remarks

The traces of habitat found in the centre of Timișoara provide new information concerning the spiritual and every-day life of the communities from Early Iron Age in the plains of the Banat region. The sunken-dwelling is a typical construction for the Iron Age in the Banat region. Such buildings are found in rural settlements that were usually founded on small hillocks near major or minor water streams. They are present throughout the entire Iron Age in this region, regardless of the cultural changes that took place.

The shafts that were found during these excavations give valuable information not just concerning the water management strategies, but also regarding the spiritual aspects of the community.

From a chronological and cultural perspective, the settlement from Piața Unirii can be ascribed to the Late Hallstatt or post-Basarabi horizon. During this time, communities were dominated by elites that chose to express their identity through models specific to the northwestern Balkan region. The social organization of the communities was also similar, with the existence of hill forts dominating over several other rural settlements.

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⁴⁵ Măruia et alii 2019

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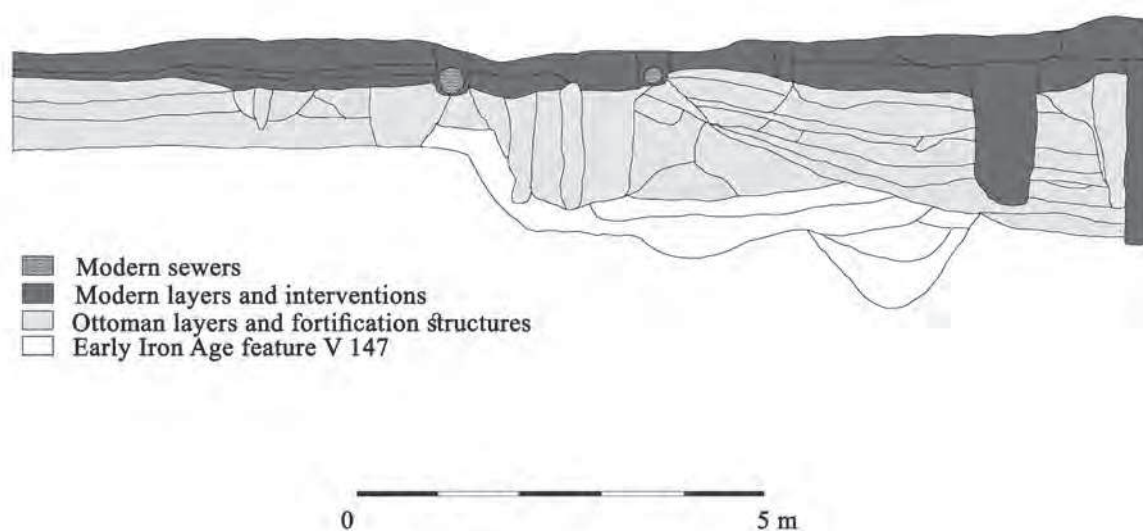


Figure 1. *The profile of feature V.147 (view from the south)*

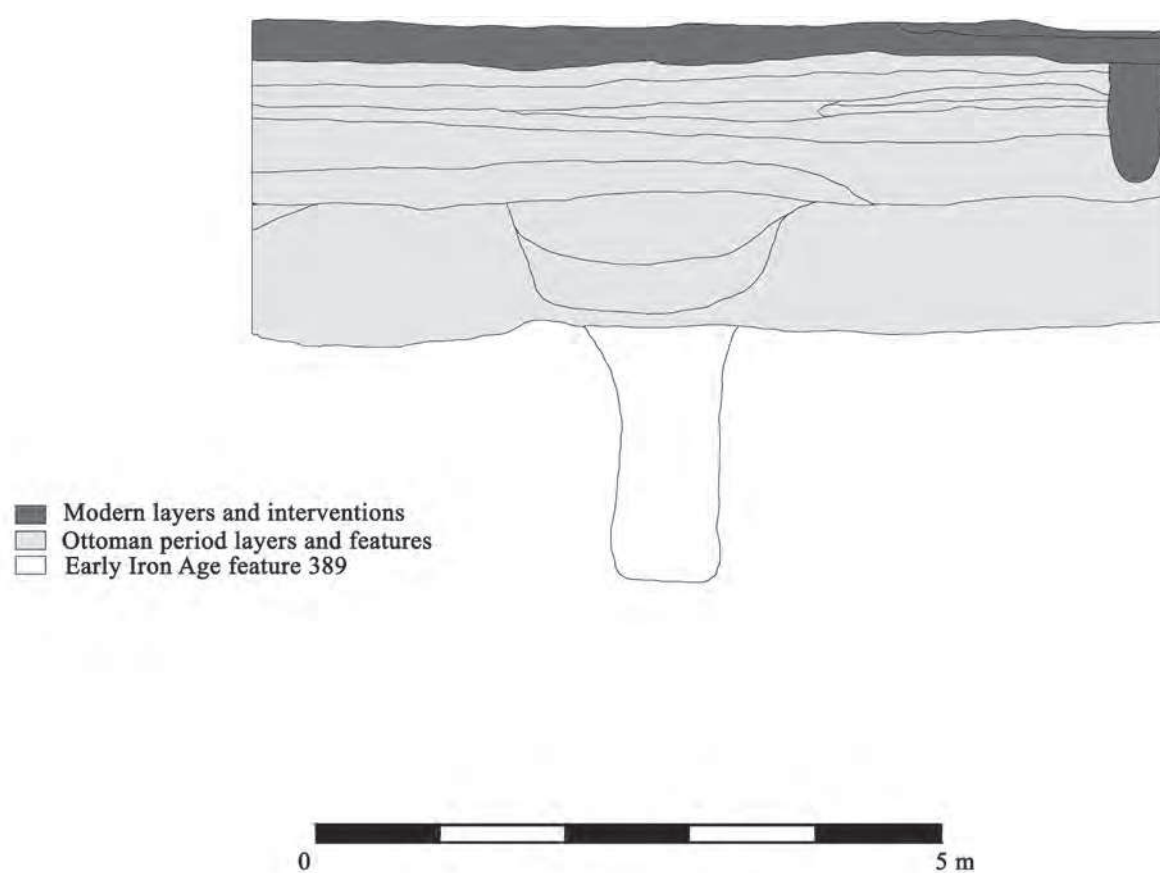


Figure 2. *The profile of feature C. 389 (view from the south)*

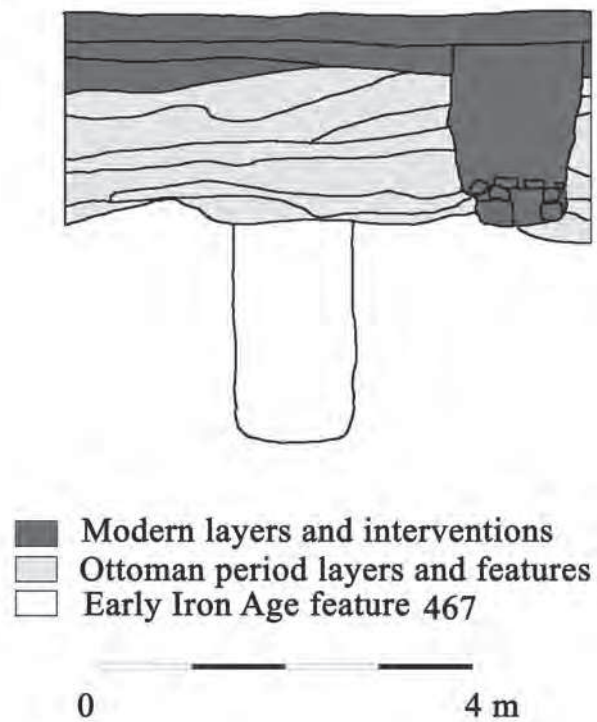


Figure 3. The profile of feature C.467 (view from the east)

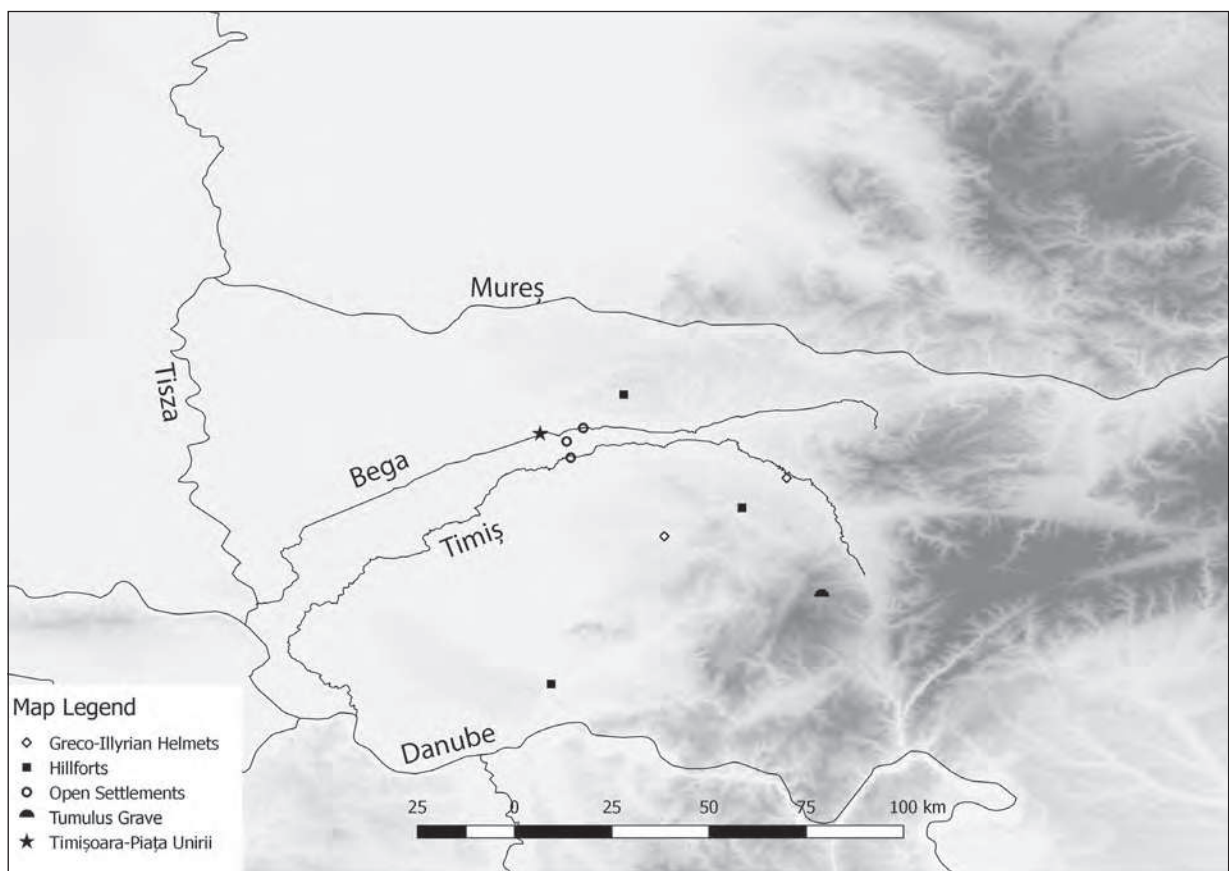


Figure 4. Map of finds dating from the final period of the Early Iron Age in the Banat Region.

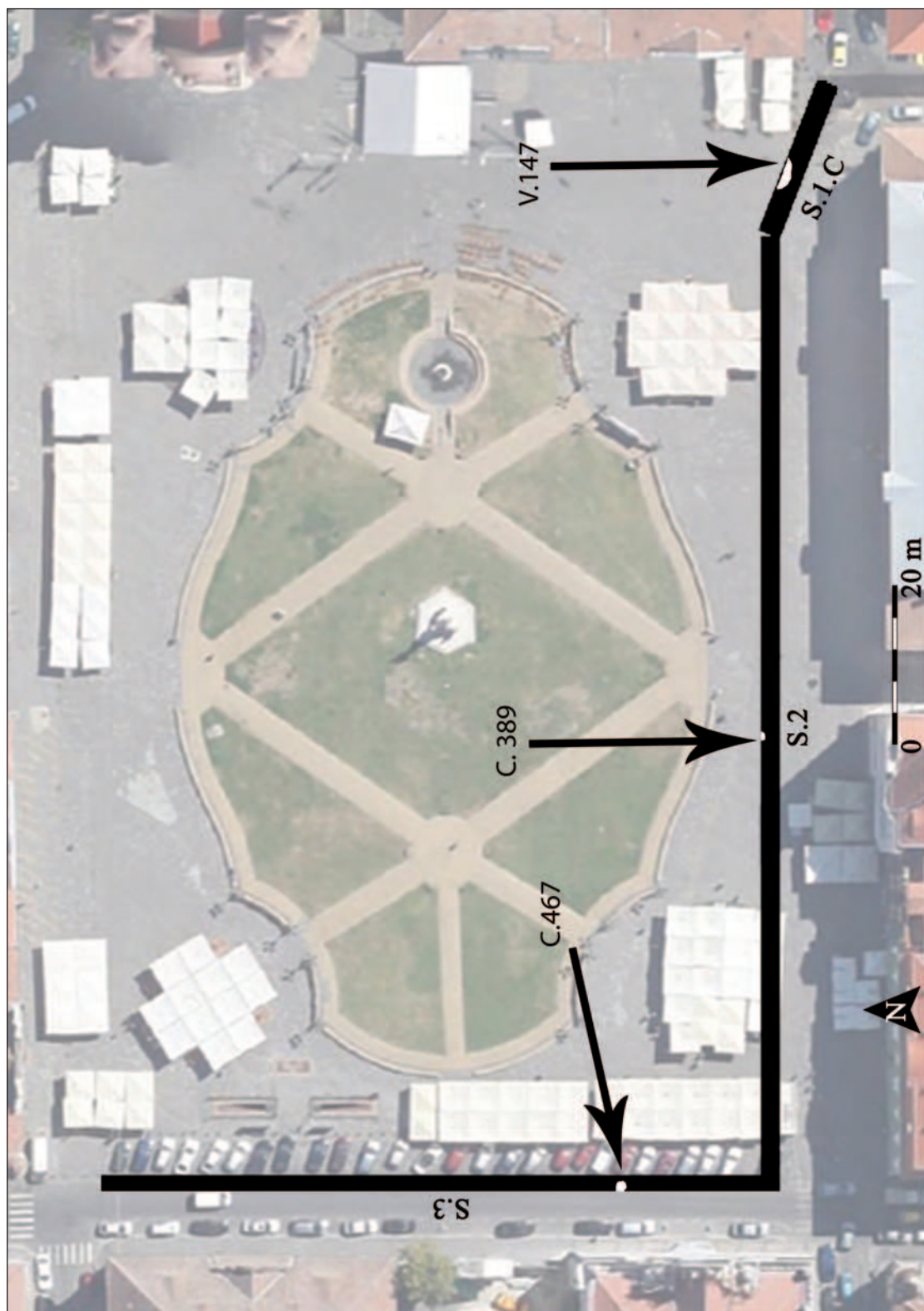


Plate 1. The location of the Early Iron Age features within the researched area from *Piața Unirii*

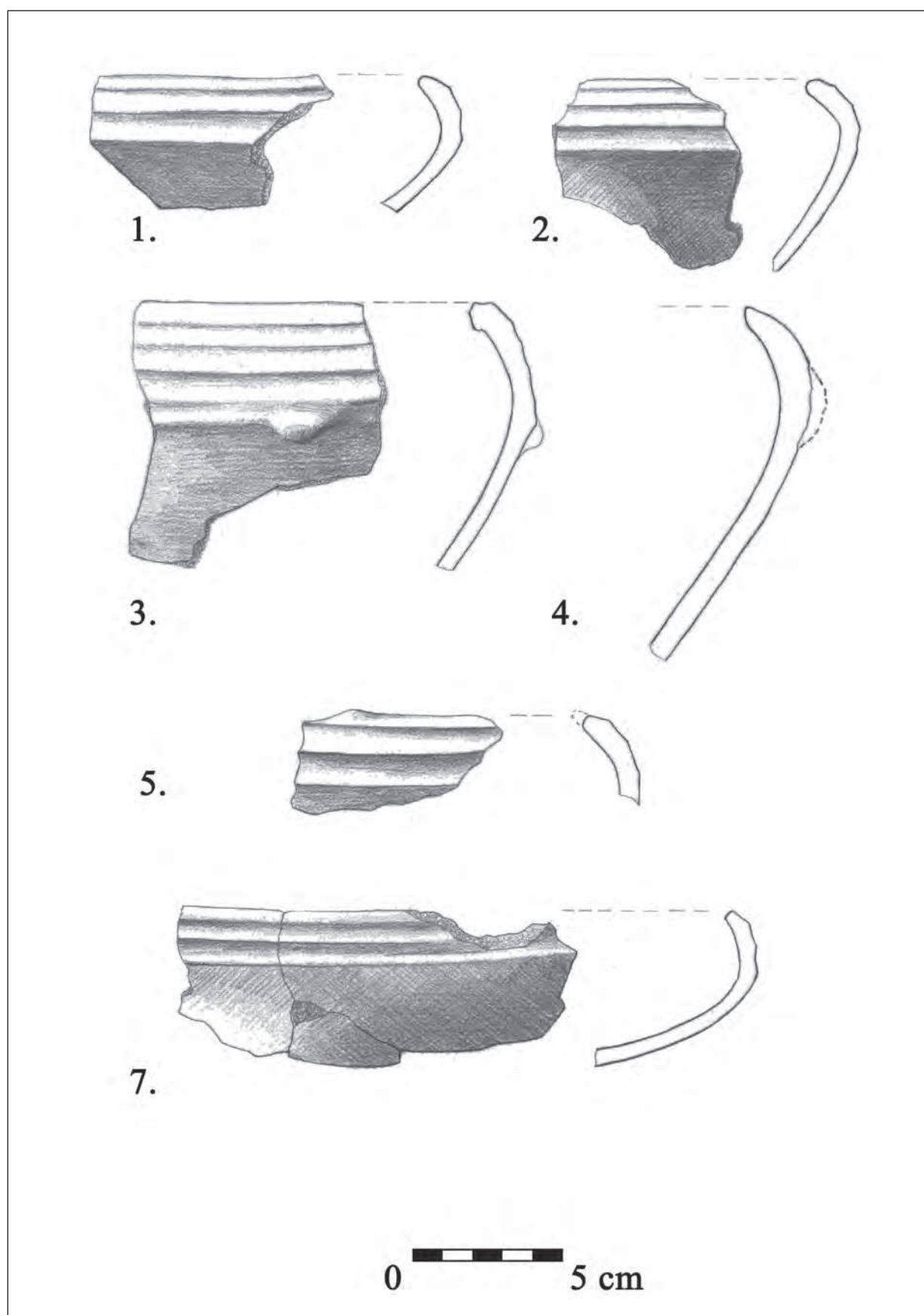


Plate 2. Pottery fragments found in feature V.147

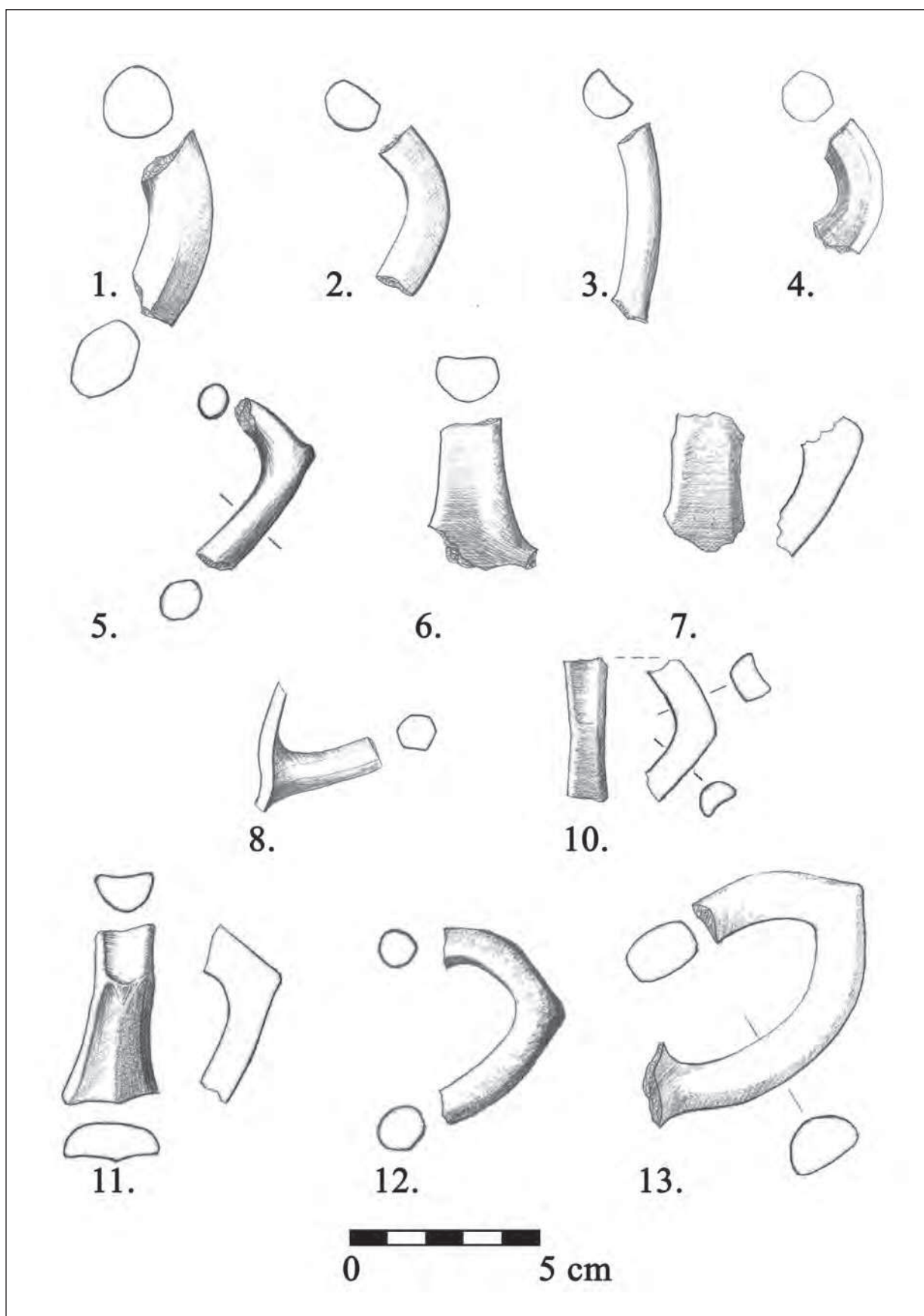


Plate 3. Pottery fragments found in feature V.147

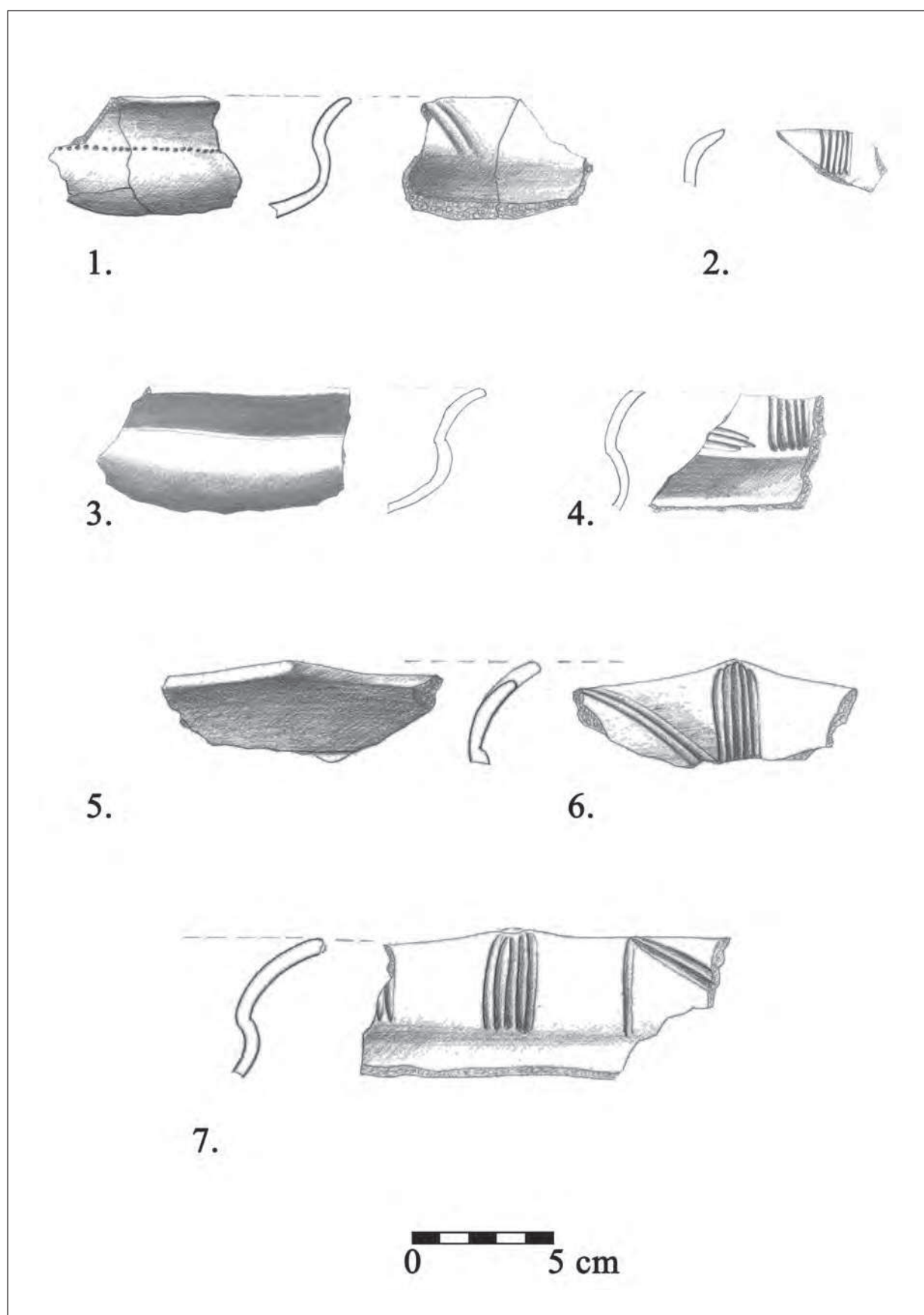


Plate 4. Pottery fragments found in feature V.147

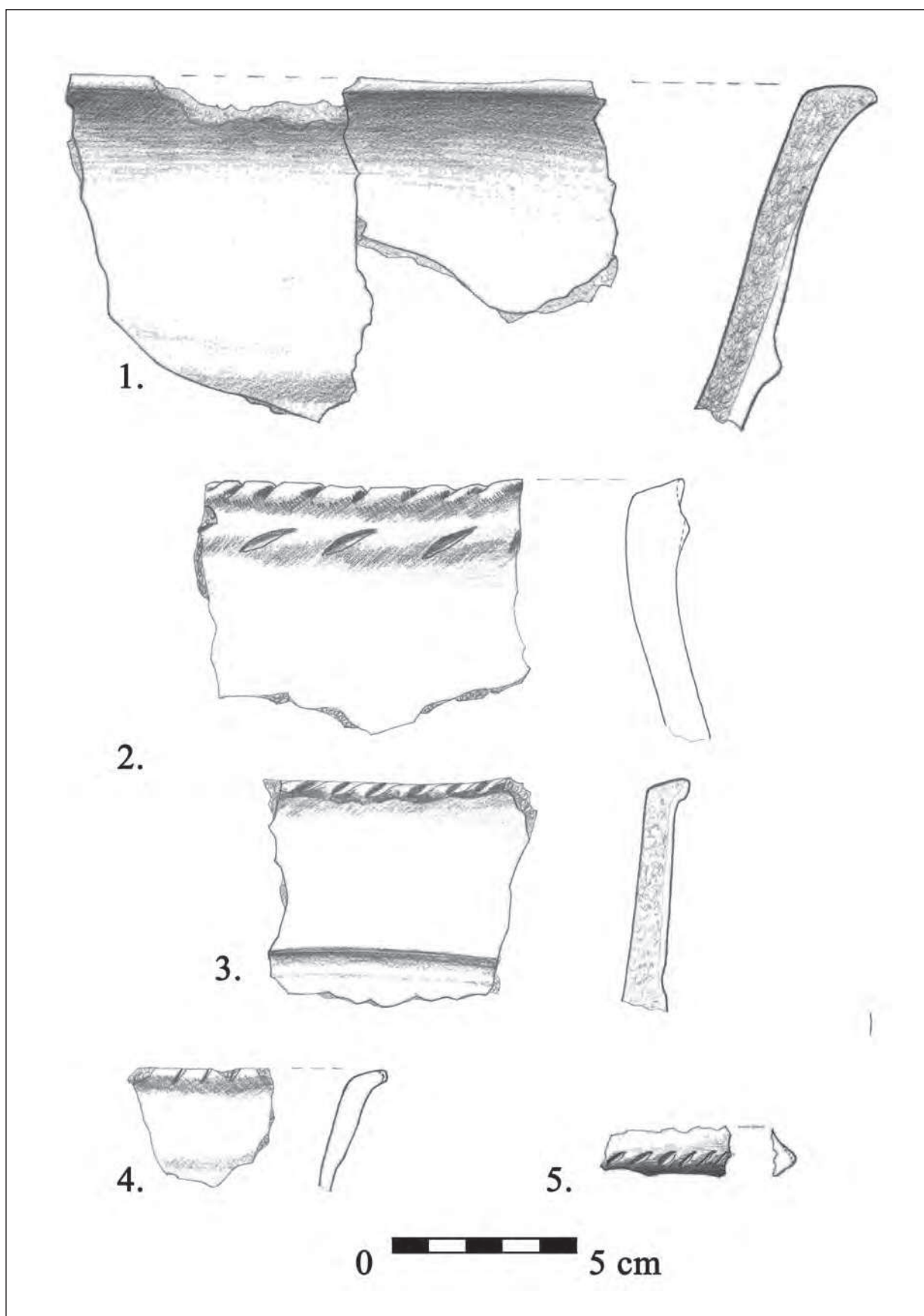


Plate 5. Pottery fragments found in feature V.147

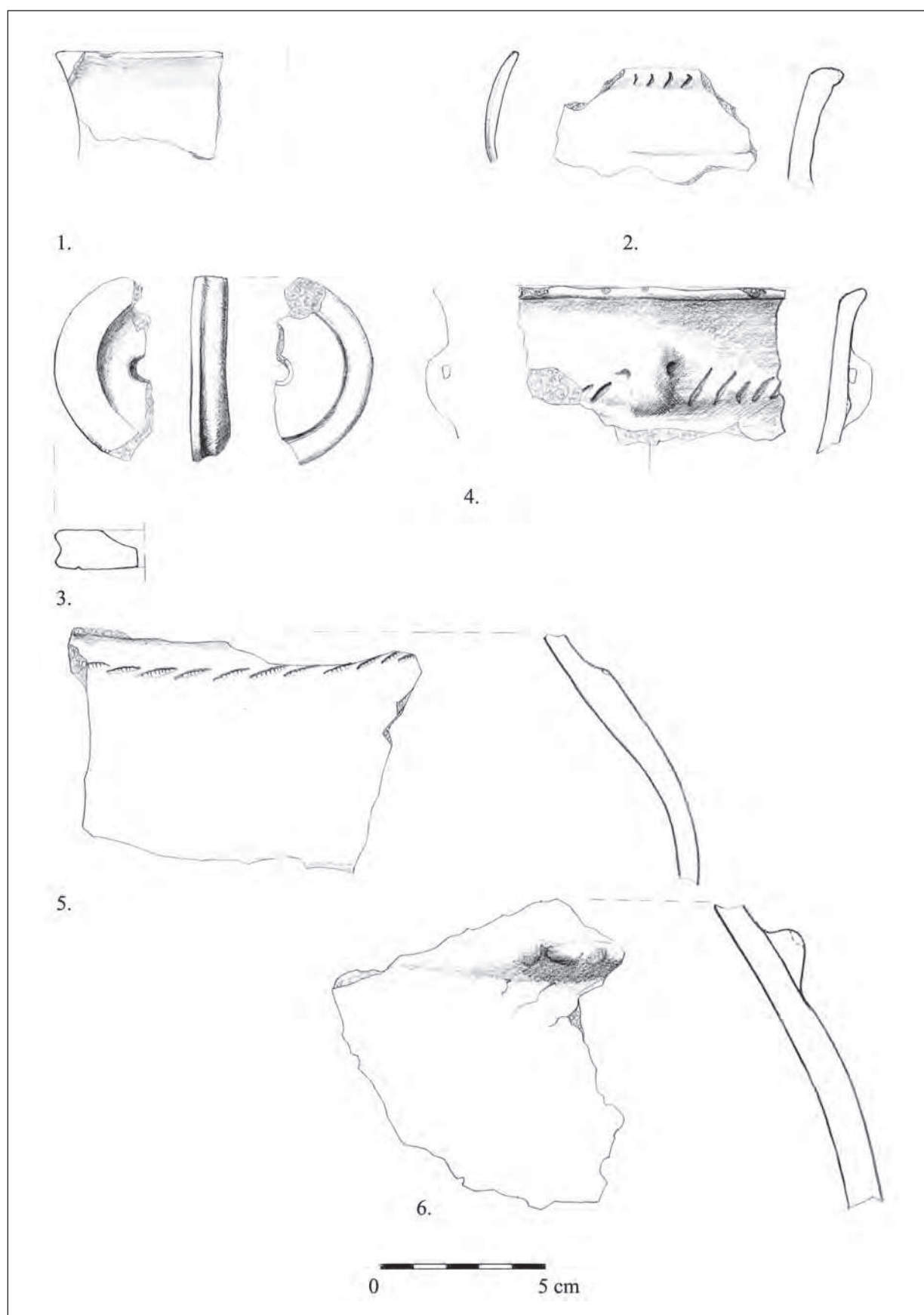


Plate 6. Pottery fragments found in feature V.147

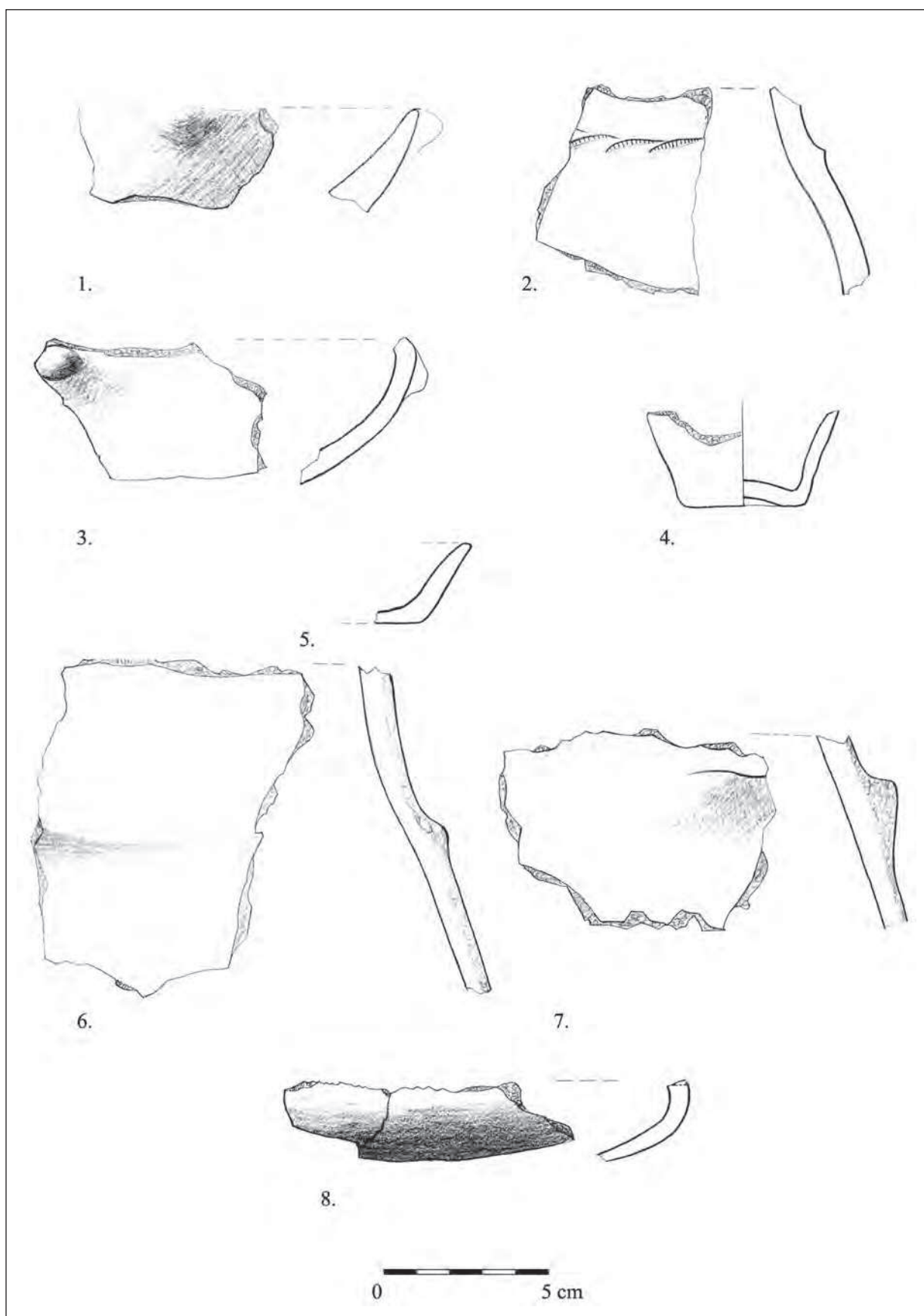
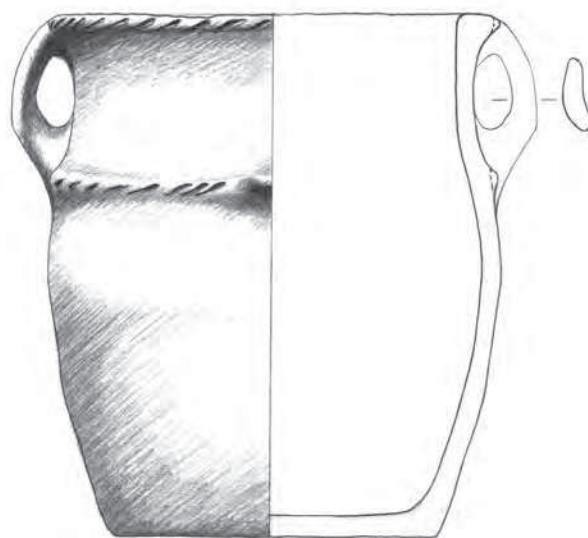
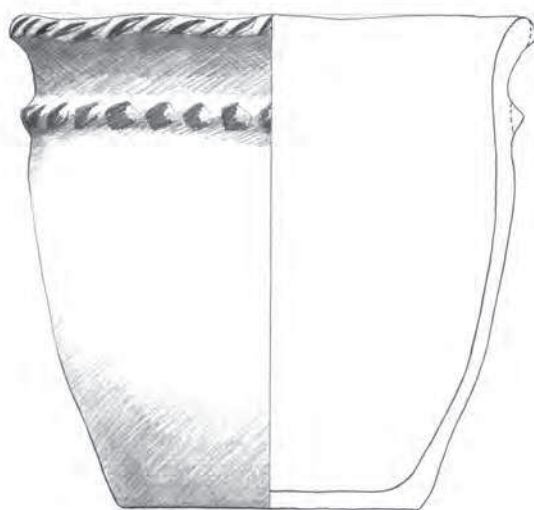


Plate 7. Pottery fragments found in feature V.147



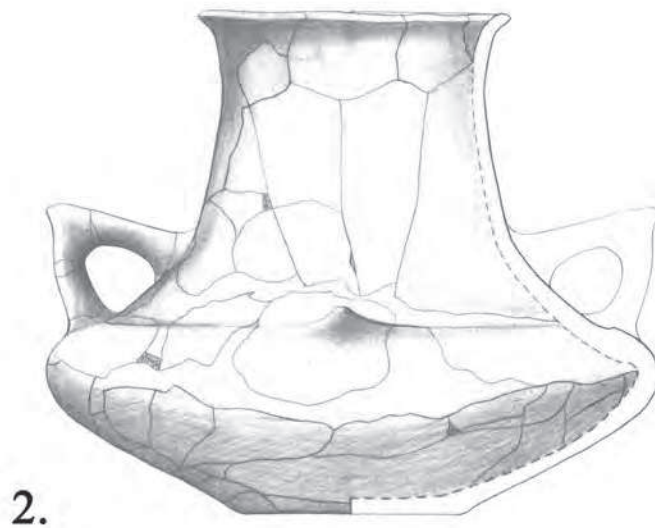
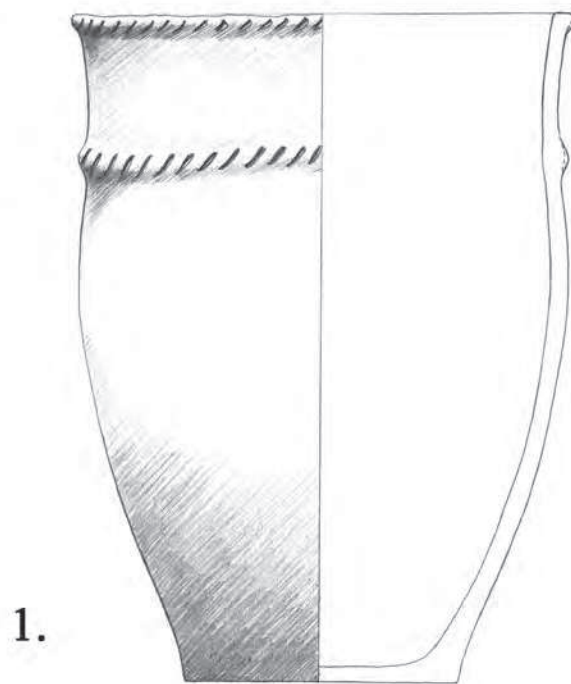
1.



2.

0 5 cm

Plate 8. Pots from feature C.389



0 5 cm

Plate 9. Pots from feature C.389

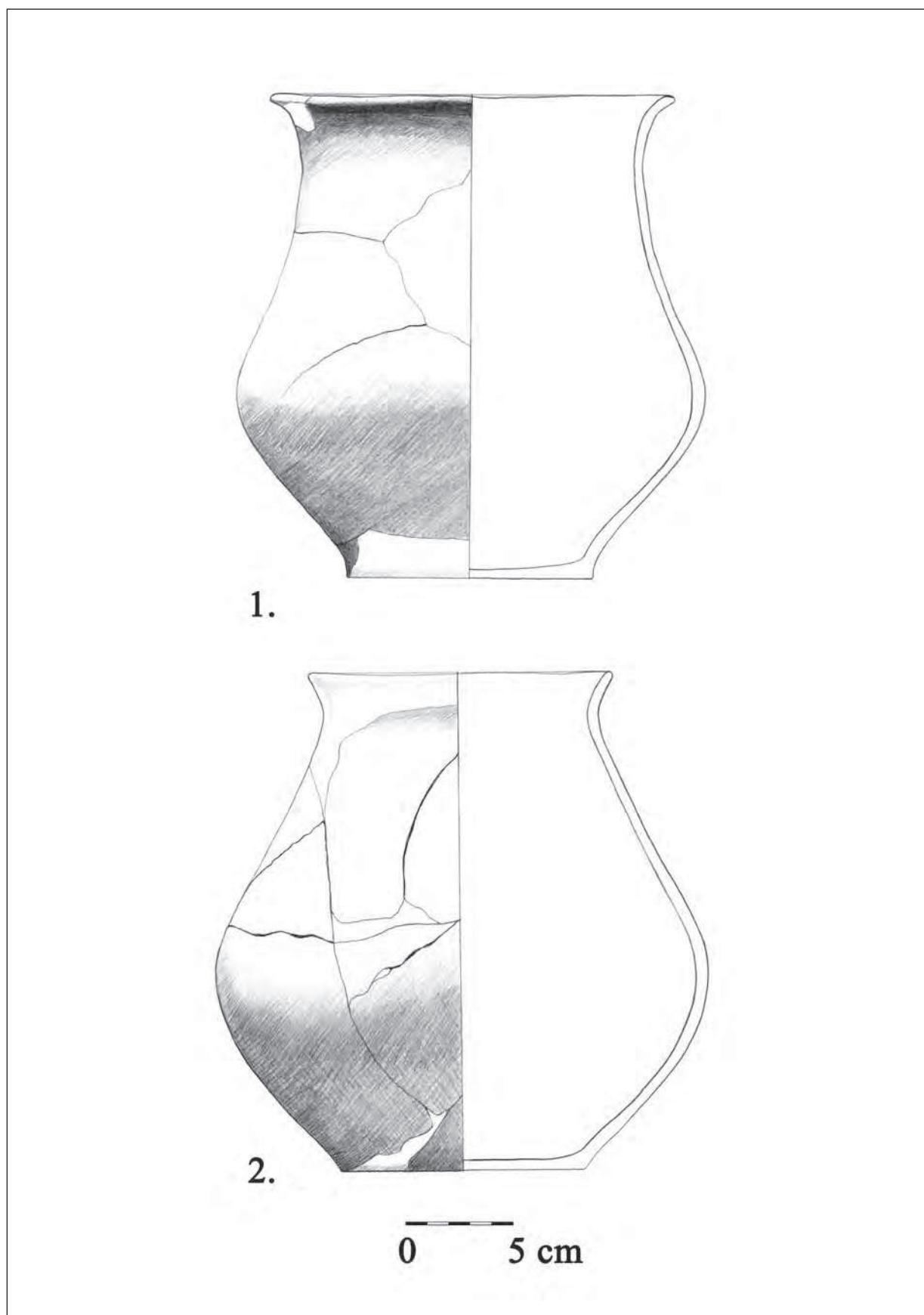
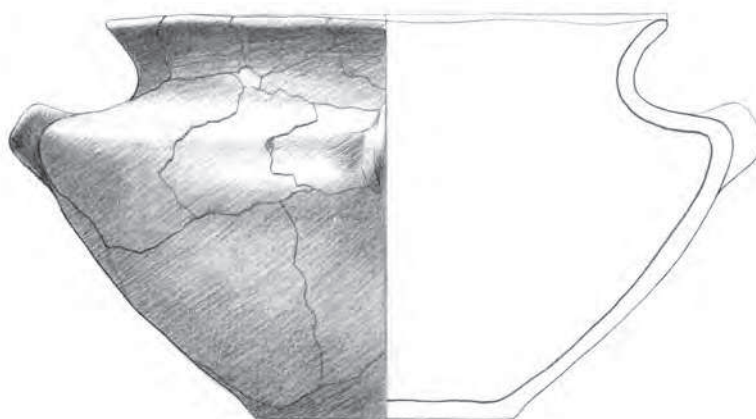
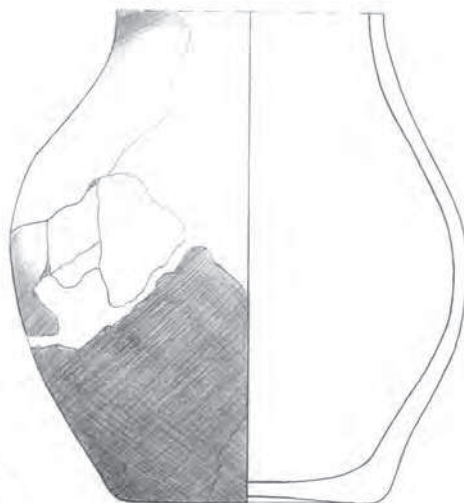


Plate 10. Pots from feature C.467



1.



2.



3.

0 5 cm

Plate 11. Pots from feature C.467