

## LATE NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT NEAR THE VILLAGE OF APRILTSI, PAZARDZIK DISTRICT

---

**Abstract:** Așezarea cercetată se află în partea de vest a Depresiunii Tracice, lângă satul Aprilți, regiunea Pazargic. Săpăturile au fost efectuate cu prilejul trasării conductei de gaze, care trebuiau să traverseze periferia sudică a așezării de-a lungul a 80 de m. S-au făcut trei sondaje, fiecare cu lungime de 10 m și lățime de 2,50 m. La capătul de est și la cel de vest al sectorului cercetat s-au descoperit părțile nordice a două locuințe pe jumătate săpate în pământ. Suprafața lor era de peste 100 m<sup>2</sup>. Locuința 1 este săpată în terenul de odinioară la adâncime de peste 1,40 m și prezintă trei niveluri de dezvoltare. Locuința 2 are 0,90 m în pământ și arată cinci etape de restructurare. În ultimele etape (III pentru locuința 1 și IV – V pentru locuința 2) podelele locuințelor ajung la nivelul suprafeței. Între cele două locuințe rămâne o porțiune cu lungime de circa 55 m, în care stratul cultural este analogic cu cel al locuințelor din ultimele etape menționate. Materialele arheologice din partea cercetată a așezării arată unele trăsături specifice: foarte puține oase de animale – mai ales la adâncime până la 1 m; cantitate mare de unelte de piatră; puține la număr obiecte de silex. Complexul ceramic din etapele timpurii ale edificiilor este tipic pentru cultura Karanovo III. În etapele târzii, apar și forme caracteristice pentru Karanovo III-IV. Rezultatele obținute de cercetarea așezării lângă satul Aprilți dau posibilitatea să fie clarificate unele momente importante ale dezvoltării neoliticului târziu în Tracia de Vest. Aceasta este cea mai timpurie așezare din neoliticul târziu în Tracia cu locuințe semiîngropate având dimensiuni impresionante. Particularitățile materialului ceramic, grosimea stratului cultural și multiplele niveluri de podine și refaceri, permit să se admită că așezarea de lângă satul Aprilți există de la începutul culturii Karanovo III până la trecerea ei treptată la Karanovo IV. Așezarea aparține unui grup etnocultural aparte care se stabilește în această regiune în perioada de tranziție de la neoliticul timpuriu spre neoliticul târziu. Acest grup etnocultural își continuă existența și după încetarea locuirii așezării cercetate, probabil în așezarea apropiată de lângă satul Kalugerovo.

**Keywords:** neolithic, settlements, dwellings.

The settlement is situated in the western part of the Thracian Plain, near the village of Apriltsi, Pazardzhik district (fig. 1a). It is located on a southwest facing slope that descends to the adjacent gully (fig. 1b). The site covers an area of cca. 25 daa (Цончев 1963, 10). The excavations were conducted in relation with the construction of a gas pipeline. The pipeline crosses the settlement in east/ west

---

\* National Institute of Archaeology with Museum, 2 Saborna Str., 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria, yavordb@abv.bg.

\*\* Regional Museum of History - Varna, 41 Maria Luiza Blvd., 9000 Varna, Bulgaria, vladosl@yahoo.com .

direction over an area of around 85-90 m (fig.1b). It was dug out before the archaeological excavations and the cultural layer was destroyed. That is why the possibilities for sensible archaeological work were severely limited – only the area between the already excavated outline and the dirt road constructed to serve the future pipeline.

The investigation was conducted in three sondages, each 10m in length and 2.50m in width. Sondage 2 was in the centre of the excavated strip where the dark-brown to brown soil contained destroyed fired clay features. Sondage 1 was to the east part of the site, while sondage 4 was to the west. Both sondages covered the north part of two large patches of grey soil that were formed during the digging of the pipeline and were visible in the channel dug into the sterile brown clay for a control cable to the south of the outline. It was established that there were two semi-sunken dwellings in the east and the west end of the settlement periphery.

**Dwelling 1** (fig. 2). It is located in the southeast periphery of the settlement (Sondage 1). Only its northernmost part was investigated. Its northern 'wall' was registered for 7.20 m in north/northeast -south/southwest direction but its east and west boundaries were not found. To the west, there is a beginning of a curve to the south in the southwest corner of Sondage 1B (fig.2e), but it is not clear how the building continues to the south and whether it widens again, since this area is destroyed by the pipeline. To the east, the wall reaches the north cross-section and the building occupies the entire east part of Sondage 1A and continues to the east and north (northeast) (fig. 2 b, e). The southern limits of both dwellings were not established but according to the size of the grey soil-mark, that is obviously corresponding to the buildings, they covered an area of at least 10 m to the south.

The total thickness of the investigated cultural layer is up to 2.10 m. It is clear, however, that it was even thicker since the above figure does not include the heavily destroyed surface layer of 0.20 m. In addition, there is a series of indicators suggesting that the sunken structure was more substantial in the uninvestigated area. The lowermost floor has a clear slope (at an angle of 30<sup>0</sup>) to the south (fig. 2a, g).

Three major occupational stages were registered in the investigated northern part:

**I.** *From the bottom to a strip of whitish clay with limestone concretions.* The finds are very few from this stage. There are limited strata and lenses. They are most pronounced in the southeast part, where four floor levels were registered above the initial floor, all of which are descending at an angle (fig. 2g). Obviously, in this phase the main part of the dwelling was in the southern uninvestigated area. The thickness of the layer from stage I is around 0.80 m but it increases to the south where the sunken structure deepens. It is not impossible that an even earlier stage of occupation has taken place in the central and the deepest part of the building. The finds (including sherds) are very few from stage I. This is probably due to the fact that in this period the investigated area was at the very northern part of the building and constituted part of a wall rather than a living space.

**II.** *Marked by a layer of whitish clay with limestone concretions that indicates the beginning of a floor level* (fig. 2b, f, h). Over the layer is a hearth, which has been renewed four times and, in three of the four cases, there are traces of partial reconstruction, too (fig. 2d, g). Although the clay coating was also multiply renewed, it does not form separate clearly defined floors but it is rather mixed with the grey-greenish fill. The total thickness of the layer that contains the whitish clay is up to 0.30-0.35 m. The spots of whitish clay usually contain a concentration of fragmented vessels which means that this combination marks different sub-stages of the floor utilization. The finds from this stage are most numerous – fragmented vessels, clay weights, stone tools, a figurine and animal bones. Its end coincides with the leveling of the sunken part with the surface part and the establishment of an above-ground dwelling. The thickness of the stage II layer is around 0.60 m.

**III.** *During this stage the dwelling is above-ground* (fig. 2c, e, f, h). Perhaps the floor level was extended to the north in this stage since no traces of a northern wall were found. The thickness of the stage II layer is around 65 cm with three distinguishable sub-stages.

**Dwelling 2** (fig. 3). It is located in the southwest periphery of the settlement (Sondage 4). Similarly to dwelling 1, only its northernmost part was investigated. The northern wall was registered for 6.40 m in east-west direction but there are at least five more meters to the west. The northeast corner of the dwelling and the beginning of the eastern wall up to 60 cm in length were excavated. The southern boundaries of the building were not found but the grey fill, dug into the bedrock and clearly related to the dwelling, was visible in the channel for a control cable that is at 9.50 m to the south of the sondages. The digging into the bed-rock is almost vertical. It is not impossible that there was a deeper part located to the south – an indication for that is the depth of the dug-into structure with grey fill that is traceable in the cross-section of the control-cable channel. There are five stages of the sunken structure:

**I.** *From the initial floor to the first coating of the fill with yellow clay* (fig. 3e). The bottom is at 0.85-0.90 m under the ancient surface. It is covered with yellow-reddish sandy clay. Traces of two slightly sunken round burnt features are visible, perhaps serving as places for shallow clay hot-plates.

**II.** *From the first to the second coating with yellow clay* (fig. 3f). A new floor level was made 20-25 cm above the initial floor and on top of the grey-greenish fill. It is a 3 cm thick layer of sterile yellow clay that is more clearly marked in the eastern part of the building. In the western area it is thinner and missing at places. In that part of the building, under this layer there is another layer of 15 cm thick grey-brown clay that is very strongly rammed. The second stage was relatively short and has produced only 8-10 cm of fill.

**III.** *Between the second yellow clay floor and the level of the oven, when the sunken part is leveled with the above-ground part* (fig. 3a-d). It starts with a new floor level of yellow clay that is at 40 cm under the ancient surface. It is thicker than the first floor level (6 - 7 cm) and it is clearly traceable over the entire investigated area. The floor, however, does not reach the wall of clay bedrock but

stops 25-35 cm from it. The situation is the same with the previous floor. The distance corresponds to the diameter of the two post-holes found there, which suggests that there was a wall along the northern part of the sunken structure that was separating the building from the bedrock. The cut is much more vertical here than in dwelling 1. The third stage finishes with the infill of the sunken part and its leveling with the ancient surface when the dwelling becomes above-ground.

**IV. *The period of the use of the oven*** (fig. 3a-f). The building was extended to the north, since now there was a new surface area available. An oven was built next to the northern wall and its northern part is over the bedrock, while its south part is above the fill of the sunken structure. The soil in the northern end of sondage 4B is close to the bedrock clay in terms of structure and colour and perhaps belongs to a washed-away wall of the building that was made of the clay extracted from the dwelling pit.

**V. *Period after the destruction of the oven*** (fig. 3a-d). Very weak traces of human activities – several large pottery fragments and a flint blade. It is possible that this area was used for different purposes rather than dwelling.

An oven with a preserved dome was found at 2 m to the east of the northeast corner of the dwelling 2 (fig. 3g). Its south half remains in the cross-section. The oven is directly over the bedrock and perhaps was serving dwelling 2 during the first two stages, while it was still outside it.

Between dwellings 1 and 2 there is an area of 55 m in length. The nature of the cultural strata there (sondages 2, 1B, 4A) is the same as that in the dwellings after they occupy an above-ground position. It seems that the area between the dwellings was more intensively occupied during the later stages of habitation when the sunken structures were filled and the dwellings were above-ground. The daub and the concentration of archaeological material at a depth of 0.30-0.40 m in sondage 2 and the fired clay remains scattered by the building machines suggest that there were some architectural feature in this area during its last occupational stage. It is possible that some new dwellings have appeared or that the old ones have changed their size and location.

The archaeological material from the investigated part of the settlement has shown some particularities:

- very few animal bones – especially up to 1 m in depth;
- large number of stone tools (fig. 4: 11-17) – especially pestles, pestles-smoothers (with different shapes and sizes) and grinding stones - relatively few flint artefacts – only 7;
- great amount of clay weights (36) (fig. 4: 1-10) – different in shape but with approximately the same size and weight (i.e. most probably with similar function). The greatest concentration is along the line of the sunken structure in sondage 1.

Numerous fragments of vessels were collected during the investigations. Unfortunately, the high acidity of the soil has had an adverse effect on this material.

Two technological groups of fine Late Neolithic pottery are usually found in the Upper Thracian Plain – those with a grey-black to black surface and those with a light-brown to grey-brown surface. However, this is not the case for the settlement near Apriltsi. A steady graduation from grey-black to grey-brown (sometimes even to light-brown) is clearly visible on part of the sherds. There is a substantial difference neither in the cross-section of the sherds nor in the consistency of the surface layer of the fragments. A specific feature of the assemblage is its slip – although the majority of the sherds are eroded or even their surface layer is removed as a result of the acidity effect, there are many fragments with a clear slip whose compact burnished surface is in sharp contrast with other sherds. We can securely infer that there was a local pottery tradition in Apriltsi. The following types of vessels are found:

*Conical dishes* (fig. 7: 1). The rim is straight, the body undecorated.

*Shallow conical dishes* (fig.8: 1). Examples with thickened rim predominate (fig. 5: 9), usually with incised decoration (fig.5: 1, 14, 15).

*Shallow hemispherical dishes*. There are undecorated examples (fig. 8: 2, 4, 5), examples with applied plastic knob (fig. 5: 10)<sup>1</sup>, with oblique incised lines over the rim (fig. 5: 12), that in some cases is thickened (fig. 8: 3), and finally, examples with relief band with small holes that is attached to the interior middle part of the vessel (fig.6: 8).

*Necked carinated dishes* (fig.8: 6, 7). The carination between the upper and the lower part is very clear and almost sharp. The rim is slightly everted.

*Dishes with inverted rim* (fig. 8: 8). They are rare.

*Globular dishes/bowls*. This type includes vessels whose shape and size put them between deep dishes and bowls. The rim could be straight (fig. 5: 13, 16; 8: 12, 14) or slightly everted (fig. 7: 11; 8: 10; 9: 1). Some of the vessels have an incised oval over the upper parts of the body (fig. 5: 17; 7: 3). Decoration consisting of a group of shallow impressions over the body is also registered (fig. 8: 9) and a relief band with small holes that is attached to the interior middle part of the vessel (fig. 7: 10).

*Globular bowls*. In most cases, they are decorated with a relief band (usually with small holes) or knobs over the widest part of the vessel (fig. 6: 10, 11, 12; 7: 9, 13; 9: 17); incisions (fig. 6: 5-7); all-over finger-nail impressions (fig. 6: 12; 7: 13); finger-impressions on the rim (fig. 6: 9).

*Biconical bowls* (fig. 5: 3). They have straight rims and are usually undecorated.

*Bowls with S-profile* (fig. 5: 18). They are rare, found mainly in the upper layers.

Many sherds of undecorated necks were found. Due to their fragmentary nature, the type and shape of the vessels is very difficult to establish. According to

---

<sup>1</sup> The fragment discussed here is missing the knob but the place of its attachment to the vessel is very clear.

their diameter, height, rim curvature and the transition to the lower part of the vessel, they can be generally divided into two groups – pots with a neck and jugs.

*Pots with a neck* (fig. 9: 5, 6, 13). These are closed vessels, most probably with spherical, spherical-conical or biconical body and short cylindrical or slightly conical neck.

*Jugs* (fig. 5: 4, 20; 9: 7). The high necks with small diameter (up to 10 cm) probably belong to these vessels. Some middle vessel parts may also come from this type (fig. 7: 14, 15). The necks are undecorated. The body may have been decorated with relief bands with incisions (fig. 7: 14), or very shallow wide channels sometime accompanied by a knob (fig. 7: 15). The place of detachment of the handle is visible on some examples.

*High cylindrical cups* (fig. 6: 1, 2; 9: 15). Most of them gradually widen toward the rim (fig. 9: 8-10). One fragment is decorated with oblique shallow channels. On the same fragment there is also a vertical line perhaps made of bitumen (fig. 9: 10).

There are multiple handles with round cross-section whose fragmentary nature makes it very difficult to determine whether they belong to cups or jugs (fig. 5: 5-8; 7: 6-8; 9: 16).

There are also feet with round cross-sections (fig. 7: 5).

A single fragment of a neck from an *askos-like vessel* is found (fig. 9: 12).

Rarely, *vertically-profiled lids and a low dome* are also found (fig. 6: 3).

The pottery assemblage from the lower layers is characteristic for the classical Karanovo III culture as defined by G. Georgiev (Georgiev 1961, 69; 1967, 97; Георгиев 1974, 15). This is confirmed by the numerous parallels with the assemblage from Karanovo itself (Николов 1998, т.8.1-6, т.9.5,6, т.10.1-3,10, т.12.9-13, т.13.1-7). The total lack of the characteristic straight-sided bowls is noteworthy. The upper layers are characterized by shapes that are more common for the Karanovo III-IV phase (defined by V. Nikolov (Николов 1998, 105-163; Nikolov 2000, 12-13). There is also a tendency to smoother lines of vessel profiles and to a more diverse ceramic repertoire. The comparison with the pottery assemblages from Karanovo tell (Николов 1998, т.14-19) and the closer Kapitan Dimitriev tell (Николов 1999, т.1-3), however, shows a lack of the characteristic Karanovo III-IV dishes with inverted rim in Apriltsi and only single cases of another characteristic feature – decoration with shallow channels. At the same time, it is noteworthy that vessels with incised decoration typical for Karanovo IV appear during stage IIIc if as single examples. The settlement near the village of Kalugerovo corresponds to the Karanovo IV culture and it is at 15 km to the west of Apriltsi (Гиздова, Кънчев 2000, 14-131). The pottery from the settlement has numerous exact parallels in the Karanovo IV assemblage.

The results from the investigations of the settlement near Apriltsi provide an opportunity to clarify some peculiarities in the development of the Late Neolithic in Western Thrace. So far, it is the earliest settlement in Thrace with semi-sunken dwellings from the Late Neolithic that have an impressive size – an area above 100 m<sup>2</sup> (Boyadzhiev 2004). The characteristics of the pottery assemblage, the thickness

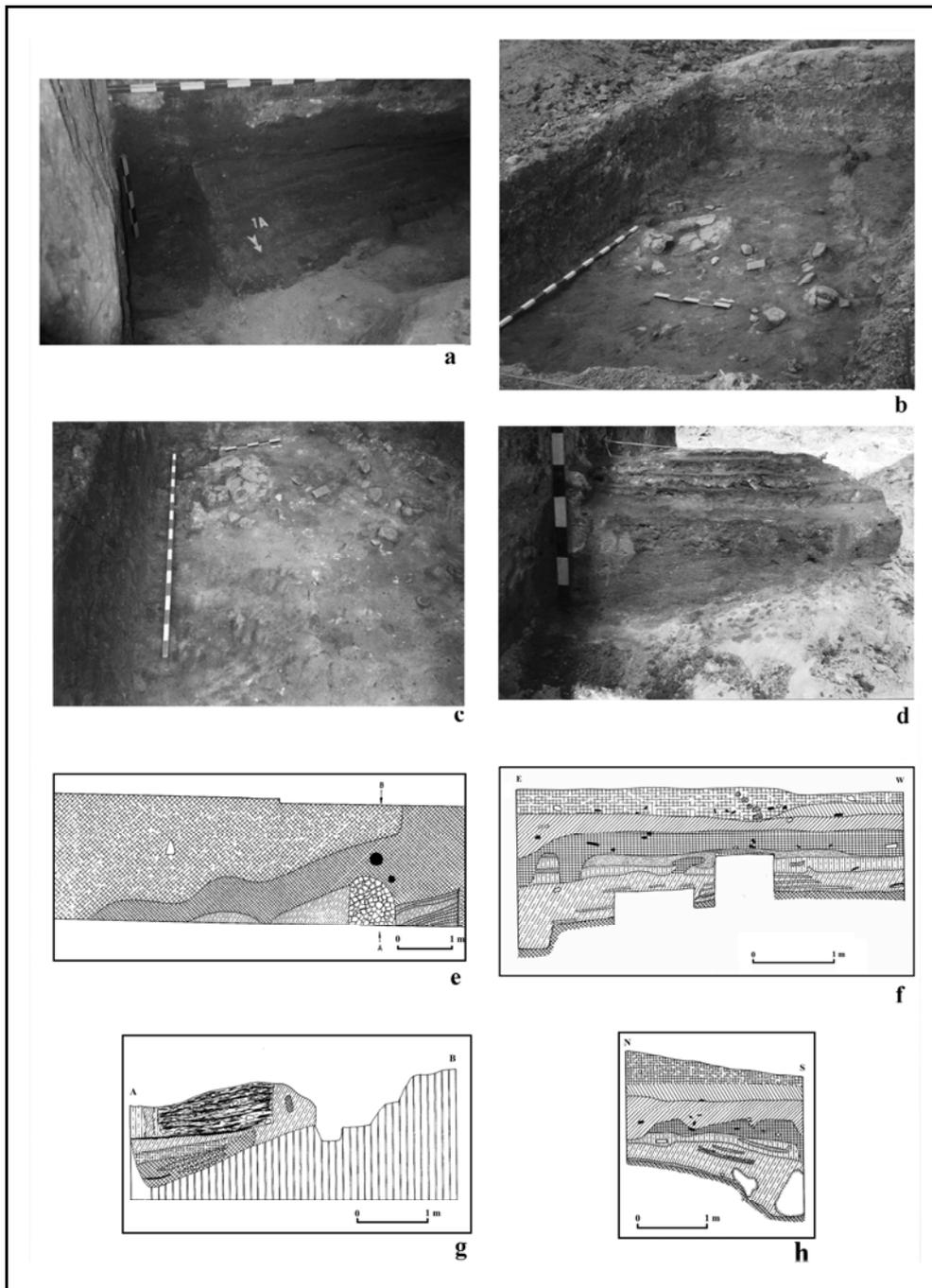
of the cultural layer and the multiple floor levels and reconstructions give grounds to suggest that the Apriltsi settlement lasts from the very beginning of the Karanovo III phase to its gradual transformation into Karanovo IV. It belongs to a separate ethno-cultural group that has settled in the area at the time of the transition between the early/late Neolithic and which continued to stay in the region after the demise of Apriltsi by, most probably, occupying the adjacent settlement of Kalugerovo.

## REFERENCES

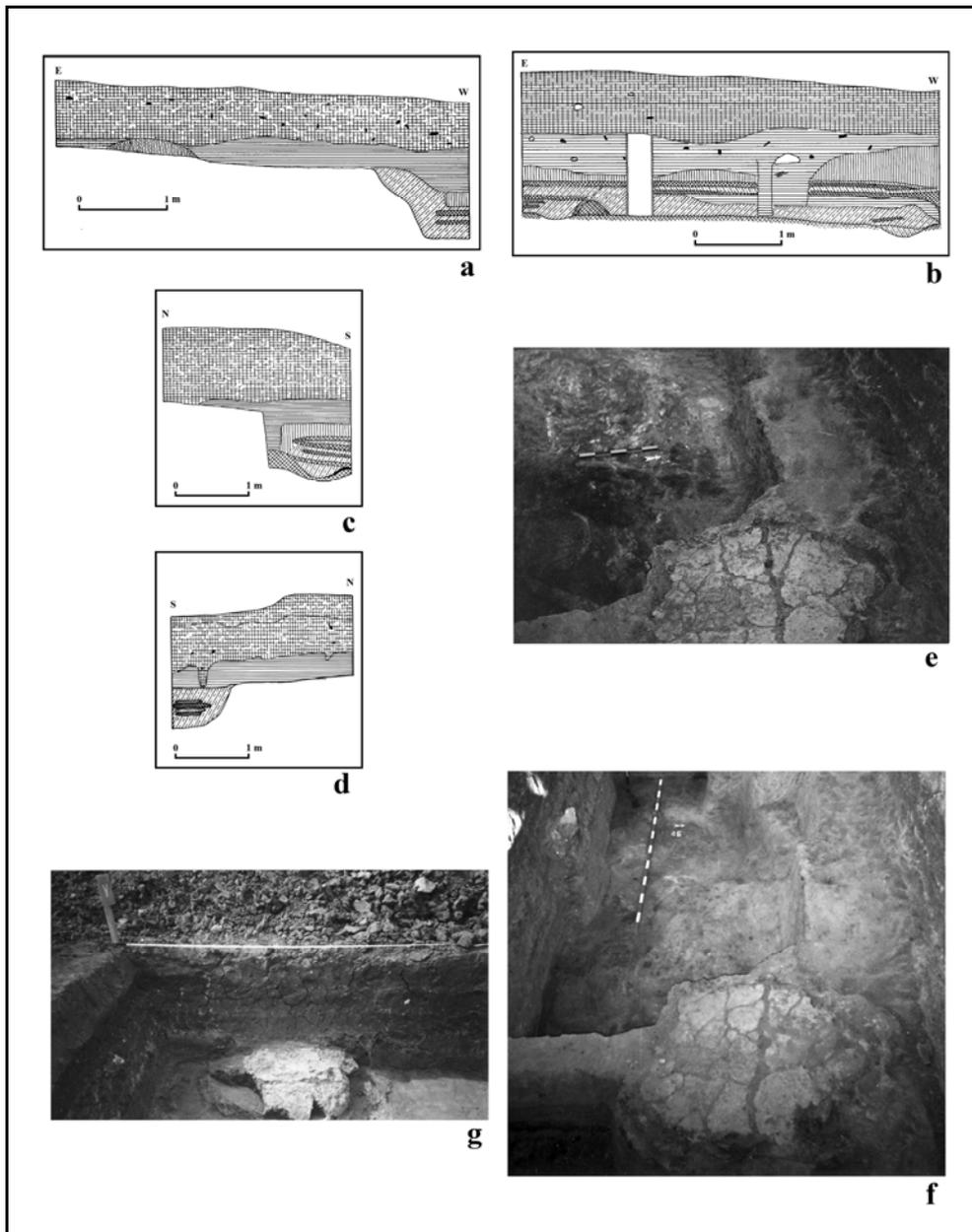
- Георгиев 1974: Г. Георгиев. Стратиграфия и периодизация на неолита и халколита в днешните български земи. – Археология, 1974, 4, 1-18.
- Гиздова, Кънчев 2000: Н. Гиздова, К. Кънчев. Калугерово - къснонеолитното селище и тракийският могилен некропол. Пазарджик, 2000
- Николов 1998: В. Николов: Проучвания върху неолитната керамика в Тракия. София, 1998.
- Николов 1999: В. Николов. Къснонеолитна керамика. – В: В. Николов (ред.). Селищна могила Капитан Димитриево. Разкопки 1998-1999. София-Пещера, 1999, 39-53.
- Цончев 1963: Д. Цончев. Археологически паметници по южните склонове на Панагюрска Средна гора. София, 1963 (Материали за археологическа карта на България, кн. IX).
- Boyadzhiev 2004: Boyadzhiev Y. Late Neolithic Sunken Houses in Thrace. – In: Prehistoric Thrace (V. Nikolov, K. Băčvarov, P. Kalchev eds.), Sofia, 2004, 203-214.
- Georgiev 1961: G. Georgiev. Kulturgruppen der Jungstein- und der Kupferzeit in der Ebene von Thrazien (Südbulgarien). – In: L'Europe a la fin de l'âge de la pierre. Praha, 1961, 45-100.
- Georgiev 1967: G. Georgiev. Beiträge zur Erforschung des Neolithikums und der Bronzezeit in Südbulgarien. - Archaeologia Austriaca, 42, 1967, 90-144.
- Nikolov 2000: V. Nikolov. Neolitische Keramikkomplexe in Thrakien. – In: Karanovo, Bd. III. Beiträge zum Neolithikum in Südosteuropa (S. Hiller, V. Nikolov eds.), Wien 2000, 11-19.



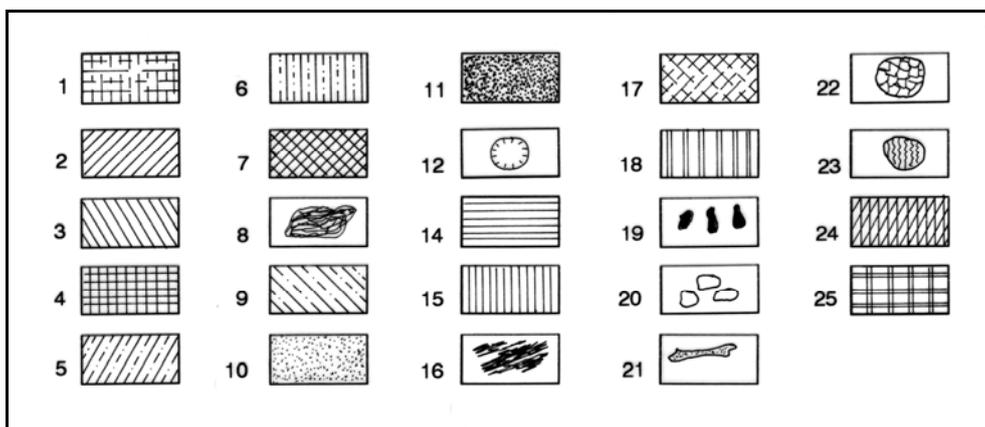
**Fig. 1.** a – Apriltsi: location of the site; b – the route of the pipeline that crosses the settlement.



**Fig. 2.** Dwelling 1: a – stage I; b – stage II; c – fireplace from stage II; d – cross-section of the fireplace from stage II; e – horizontal plan; f – southern profile of Sondage 1A; g – section along the A-B line in Sondage 1A; h – eastern profile of Sondage 1A.

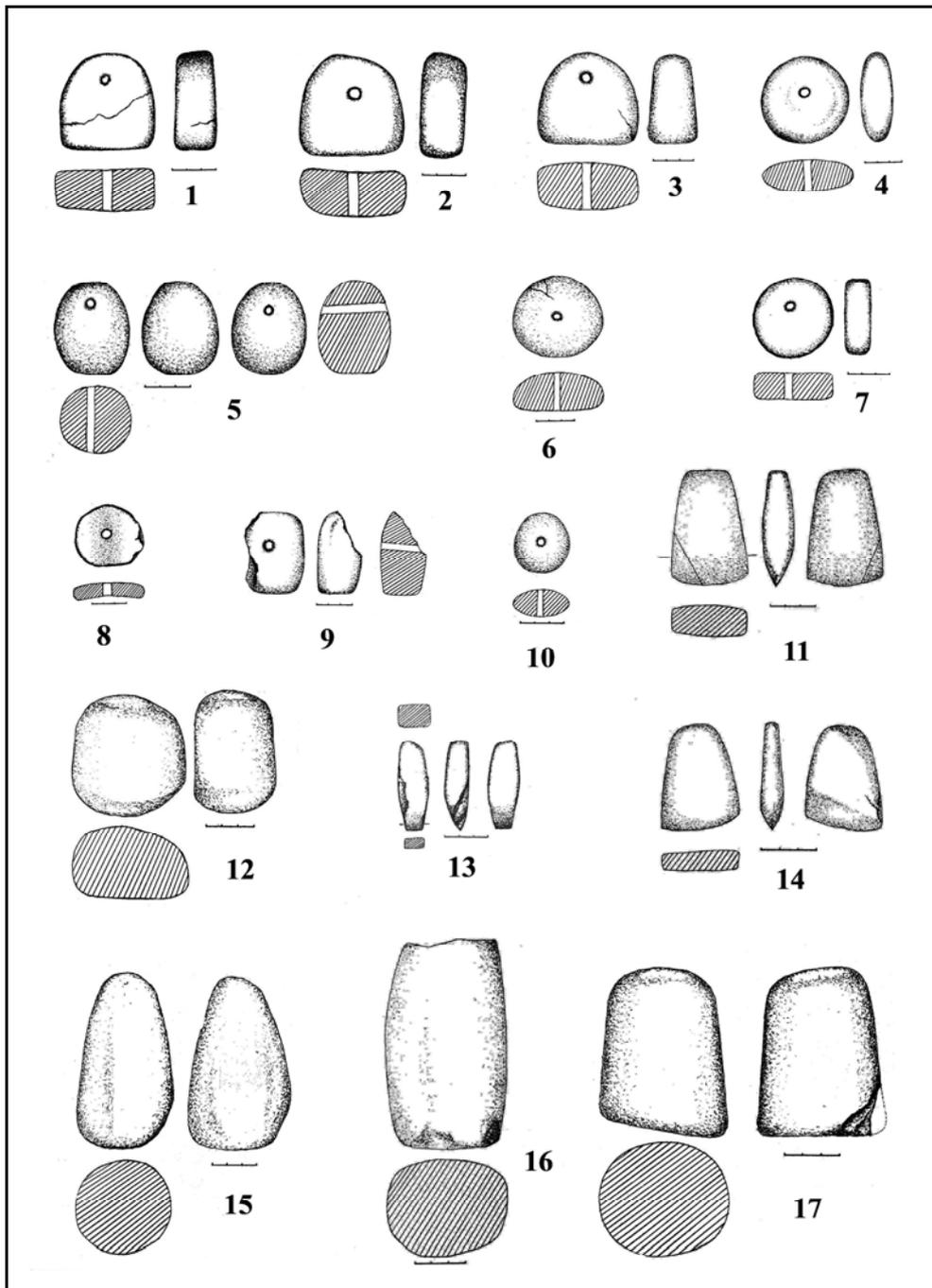


**Fig. 3.** Dwelling 2: a – Sondage 4A, southern profile; b – Sondage 4B, southern profile; c – Sondage 4B, eastern profile; d – Sondage 4B, western profile; e – stage I and an oven from stage IV; f – floor level from stage II and an oven from stage IV; g – an oven to the east of dwelling 2.

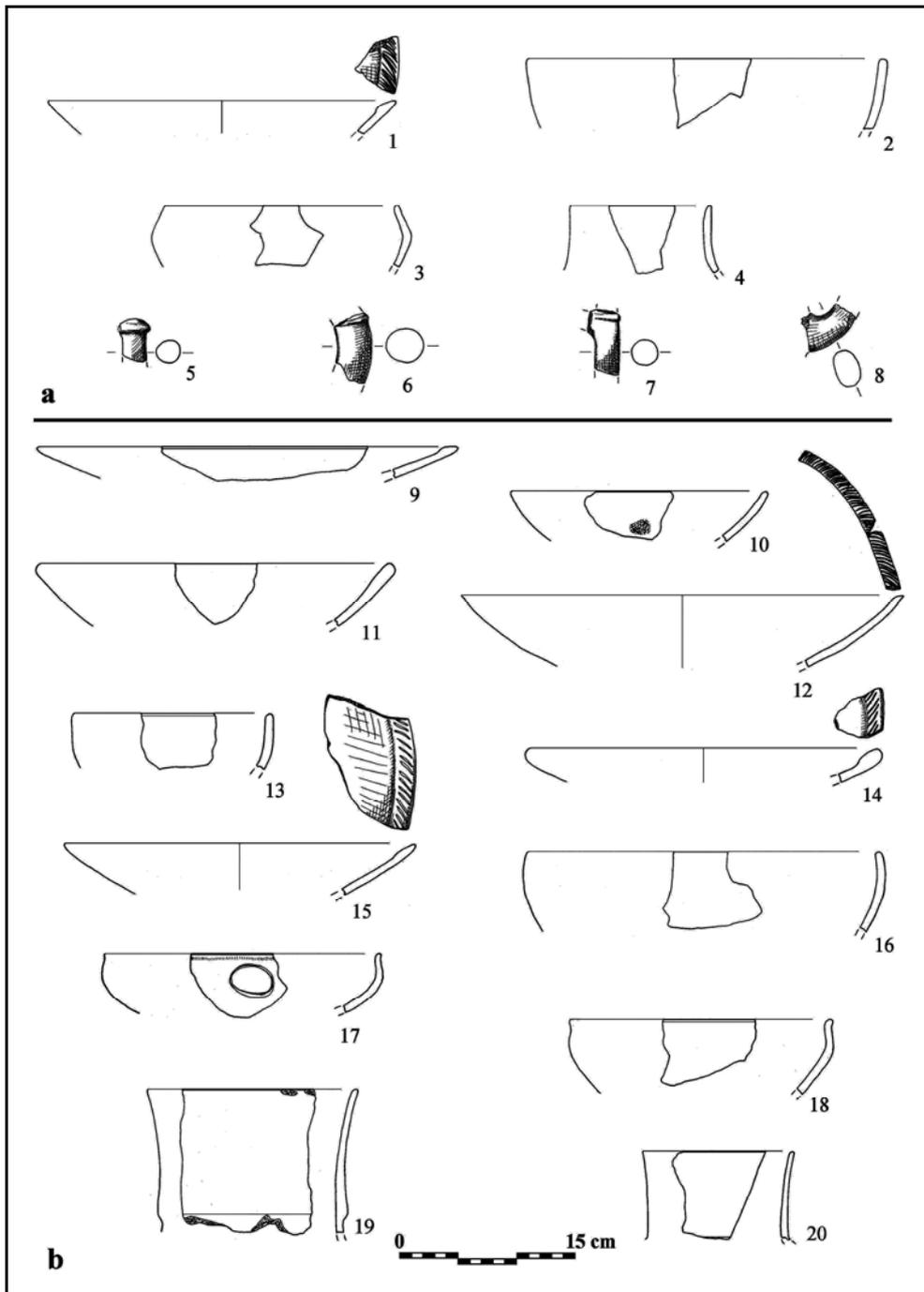


Legend of figures 2 and 3

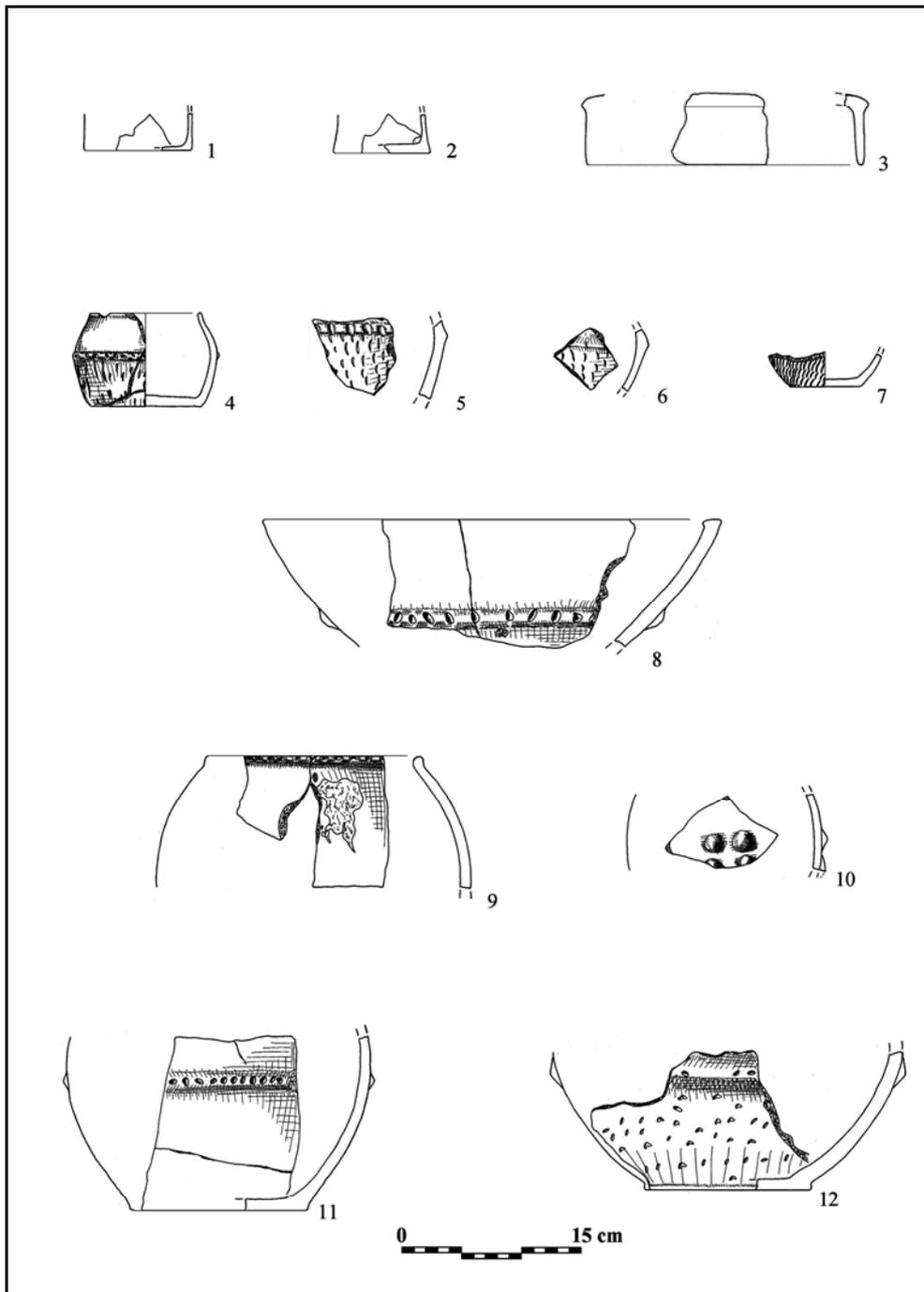
1. Grey-black soil; 2. Black-brown soil; 3. Grey-black sandy soil; 4. Dark grey-brown soil; 5. Greenish grey-brown backfill; 6. Whitish clay; 7. Yellow clay; 8. Burnt plaster; Dark grey clay; 10. Light grey ashes; 11. Black ashes; 12. Animal hole; 14. Dark grey-green soil with brown layers; 15. Yellow-brown soil; 16. Black burnt layer; 17. Red-brown soil; 18. Bedrock; 19. Pottery, clay weight; 20. Stones; 21. Bone; 22. Hearth; 23. Oven; 24. Brown soil; 25. Grey-brown soil with various inclusions.



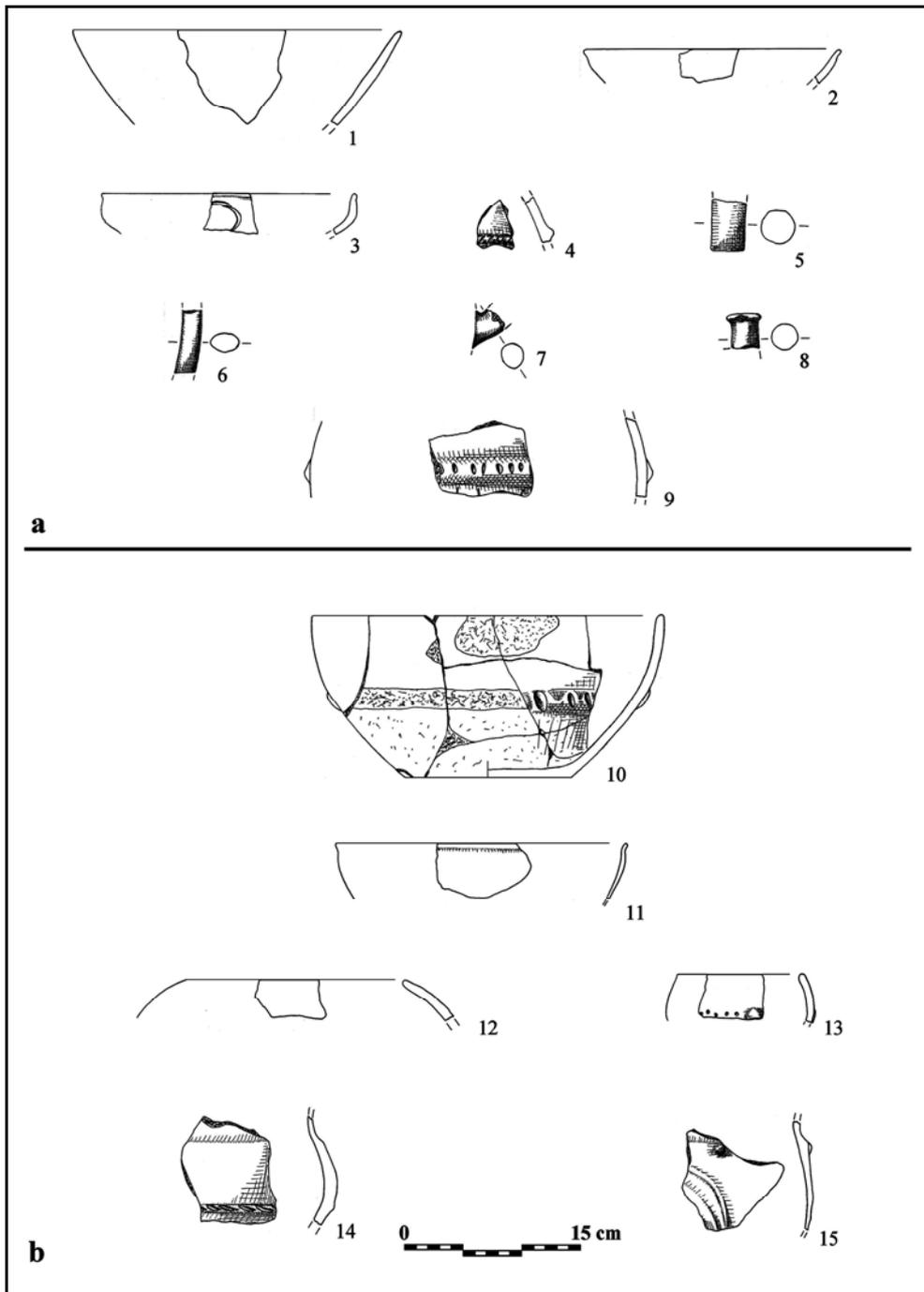
**Fig. 4.** Finds: 1-10 – clay weights; 11-17 – stone tools.



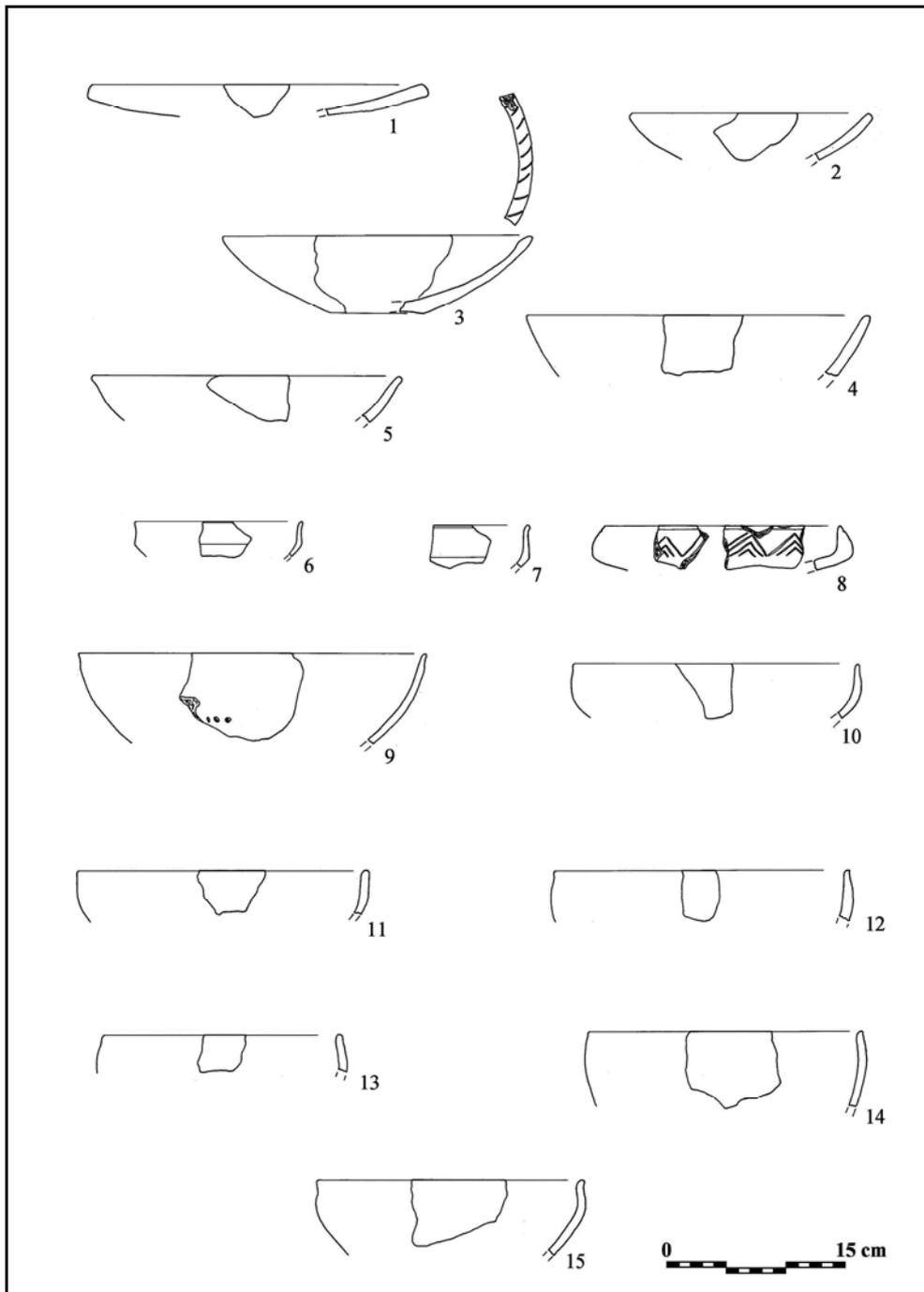
**Fig. 5.** Pottery from stage I (a) and stage II (b) of dwelling 1.



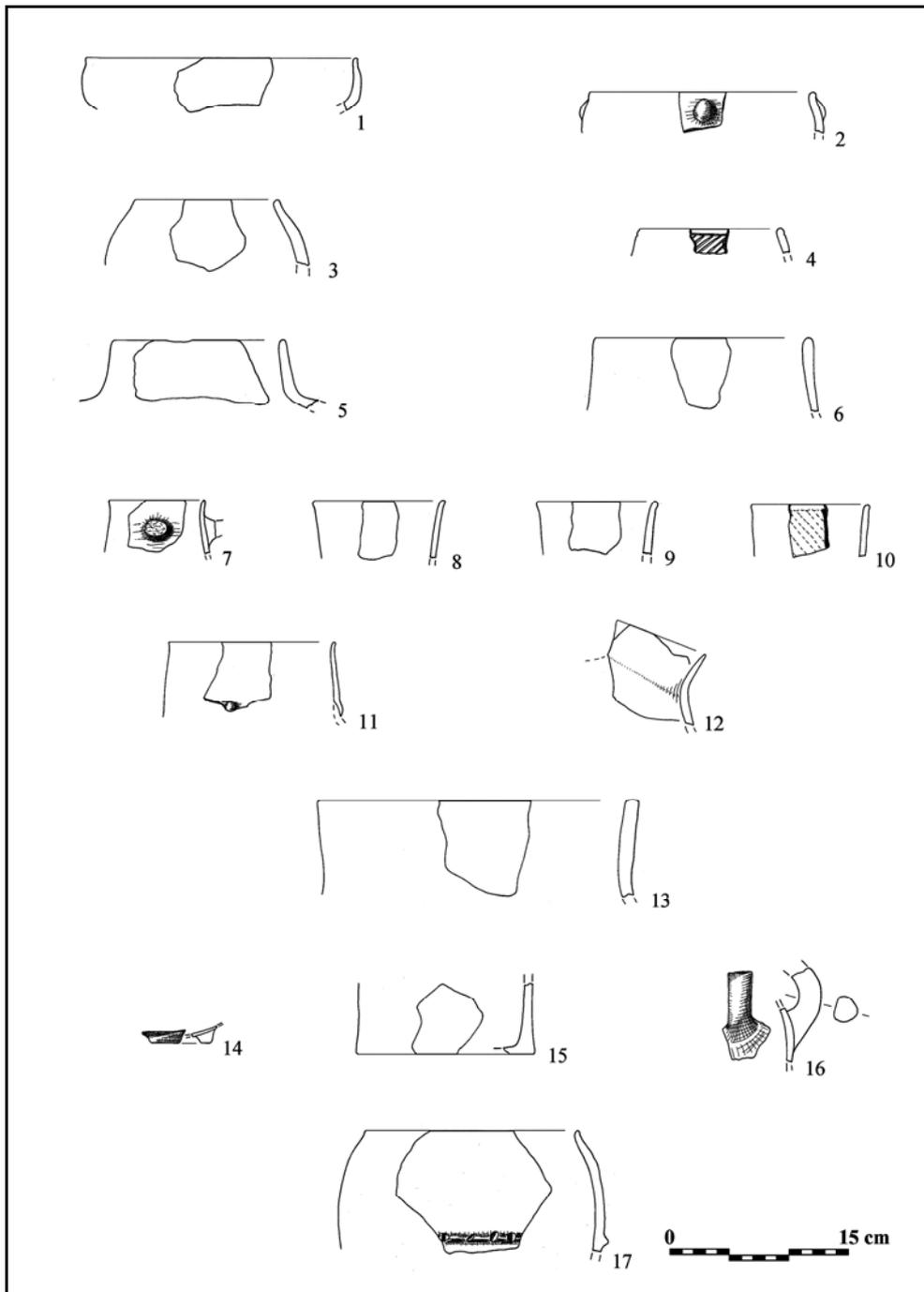
**Fig. 6.** Pottery from stage II of dwelling 1.



**Fig. 7.** Pottery from stage IIIa (a) and stage IIIb (b) of dwelling 1.



**Fig. 8.** Pottery from stage IIIc and of dwelling 1.



**Fig. 9.** Pottery from stage IIIc of dwelling 1.