

Hellenistic Age Burials in Pithoi in Thrace

by Rumen Radev

The reason to write the present paper is the burial in pithos discovered in 1994 on the territory of the Getic religious and political center "Sboryanova" nearer Ispirih¹. The burial performed by cremation was of an young individual in adolescent age. The grave represented a pit dug into the ancient terrain, oriented South - North and divided by stone filling into two parts. The cremation was accomplished outside the tumulus and the remains were placed into a pithos laid on its side in the Northern part of the pit, its mouth pointing to the South. The stone filling and a large, roughly tooled slab closed the pithos's mouth in such a way that the construction looked like a sepulchral chamber. Two groups of vessels were discovered. The first one was situated in the southern part of the pit (which was additionally widened in depth) at its west wall, next to the stone filling. The group comprised five wheel-thrown clay vessels: two large and one smaller jugs, a typical Thracian of West Slope made of gray clay and a small black glazed kantharos. The second group, which should also be comprehended as a set of grave offerings, consisted of clay vessels too: a black - grayish bowl with four stamped palmettos, an Attic black kantharos, two askoi, a small unguentarium, a lekythos and a lamp showing traces of black glaze. Fourteen beads of glass paste (one of them cylindrical, representing a stylized human face), four small clay objects of various shapes, one silver and three iron La Tène type fibulae, pieces of iron chain and an wooden object were found amidst the cremated remains dispersed over the pithos's wall. The burial is dated to the middle of

the 3rd century BC². Searching for analogies and similar situations we found out that the data available about this mode of burial in ancient Thrace is rather scanty. The shortage is quantitative as well as regional and chronological.

With respect to their territorial distribution, mode of burial and chronology the pithoi burials in Thrace can be classified in two groups. The first group includes the burials discovered in the Apollonia Pontica necropolises³, Duvanly⁴ and the East Rhodopes⁵. All the burials belonging to the second group have been found on the territory inhabited by the Getic tribal community: Madara, Shoumen region⁶, Praventsi, Novi Pazar region⁷, Dolna Rositsa, Targoviste region⁸ and Sboryanovo, Ispirih region⁹. Some vague data is available about the Rouse region but is not reliable enough to be used here¹⁰. Apart from the burials in the flat Apollonian necropolises, all the remaining graves were hidden under the southern peripheries of tumular embankments. As it is clear pithoi burials are located mainly in the Eastern Thracian land (see the map). The mentioned features are certainly not only classification criteria. The affinities as well as the differences can be perceived also in the separate elements of the burial rite. The pithoi from the first group contained complete or partial inhumations, while those from North-East Bulgaria kept the remains of cremated

¹ Радев 1995.

² Радев 1995, 45 - 46, fig. 1 - 4.

³ Венедиков 1963.

⁴ Филов 1934, 151 - 152.

⁵ Кисътов 1995, 19.

⁶ Попов 1934, 240 - 254.

⁷ Китов, Атанасов, Сътранжев 1989; Китов 1992.

⁸ Овчаров 1961.

⁹ Радев 1995.

¹⁰ Дремизова, Иванов 1983.

individuals. The pithoi used in sepulchral context are of quite the same character. Judging from the data available, their parameters fitted to the physical indices of the buried individuals, whether inhumed or incinerated. Pithoi bodies are spheroidal in shape and the bottoms are usually shaped like amphorae bottoms. The transition from the body to the neck is not underlined. The mouth orifices are wide enough not to impede the penetration. The mouth rims are broad, thickened and projected outwards. The walls are thick up to 4 cm. The short necks and the broad rims are sometimes decorated with winding incised lines or relief human heads or indicated with figures, incised before baking. The pithoi from Apollonia Pontica are typical in the respect¹¹. A children's hand is stamped over the pithos from D. Rositsa¹². The pithos from Sboryanovo bears a negative graphite and a relief rim separating the body from the neck¹³. The latter is the largest one (height 186 cm) and the tenderest spots of its body were additionally strengthened by lead cramps. All the authors are certain for the local production of these pithoi.

Pithoi burials are distinguished for some peculiarities. The receptacles were laid in smaller or larger pits shaped to fit the body. The practice to close the mouth with roughly tooled stone slabs, pithoi fragments, the relevant lids or stone supported and the pithos from D. Rositsa was even covered with a small stone mound¹⁴.

The published data about the situations at the time of the discoveries is neither comprehensive nor precise. Judging by the situations in Madera, D. Rositsa and Sboryanovo, the assumption for sepulchral chamber, probably of cyst type, imitations seems reasonable. The grave in Tumulus 17 in Duvanly is an isolated example. It contains two pithoi with oppositely adjoining mouths lying along the North-South direction¹⁵. The locking of the mouth resembles the numerous cases of clay urns covered with smaller vessels or stone plates which were typical of the

cremations burials from the Hellenistic Age and the preceding period in Thrace.

The grave offerings are similar in their quantity as well as typologically, whether the burial is inhumation or cremation. The differences are in the correlation between the various shapes and types. The affinity is expressed through the presence of gray clay bowls with outwards projected rim and pseudo-glaze coating, jugs made out of the same clay, askoi, kantharoi and sometimes lekythoi and lamps. The most popular shape of earthenware is that of the small unguentaria known from almost all such burials. The group of metal offerings comprises earrings, armrings, medallions, fingerings, coins, stringless, spearheads, knives and mainly fibulae. The offerings produced of precious metals are habitual mostly with the Apollonian burials¹⁶, while the graves in the interior of Thrace contain chiefly articles of bronze and iron. The burials from Madara¹⁷ and Sboryanova¹⁸ were accompanied by the most numerous offerings. The affinity of the pithoi burials is best represented by the five examples in the Getic land. The glass paste beads and the tiny clay objects interpreted as "cult objects"¹⁹ or "Orphic toys"²⁰ persist among the grave finds. The golden lion-head-shaped earrings from Madera are exception. A peculiarity of the pithoi burials is that they were preferred for disposing of individuals in child's or adolescent age, i.e. individuals who had not yet undergone the initiation stage. The lack of a good analysis of the skeletal remains makes the observations on the sex of the deceased impossible. The only certain anthropological data is about the adolescent individual in the pithos from Sboryanovo²¹.

The information about the presence of animal bones is limited. The only records are from D. Rositsa²² and Sboryanovo²³. Sacrifices of two dogs were performed in D. Rositsa. The dogs were

¹¹ Венедиков 1963, 255.

¹² Овчаров 1961, fig. 5.

¹³ Радев 1995, fig. 3.

¹⁴ Овчаров 1961, 62.

¹⁵ Филов 1934, 152.

¹⁶ Филов 1934, 152.

¹⁷ Попов 1934.

¹⁸ Радев 1995.

¹⁹ Тачева 1971, 42.

²⁰ Теодосиев 1990, 64 – 78.

²¹ Радев 1995, 45.

²² Овчаров 1961, 62.

²³ Радев 1995, 46.

partially buried and the comprehensive analysis has shown the presence of not fully burnt canine bone amidst the cremated human remains. Only a sheep's tooth was found into a charcoals accumulation in the central part of the tumular embankment in Sboryanovo.

The dating of pithoi burials in Apollonia, i. e. about the middle of the 4th c. BC, indicates that this type of burials appeared for the first time in this Greek colony along the Thracian coast and it was practiced there for a prolonged period till the middle of the 2nd c. BC. The chronology is relatively precise because of the coins placed in the graves as Charon obolus. A good example is grave No 690 dated by an Ephesus coin minted between 202 and 139 BC²⁴. This mode of burial appeared and was practiced in Apollonia together with the burials in amphorae and the tile graves. The corpse was laid with head pointing to the mouth of the pithos and arms close to the body, so that the orientation of the deceased coincided with that of the pithos. A peculiarity is the placing of the grave offerings in and around the valley²⁵. The burials from the Thracian interior are dated to the end of the 4th, the first half and the middle of the 3rd c. BC. The burials from Duvanlyi (?)²⁶ and the West Rhodopes²⁷ are earlier. They represented partial inhumations and were dated to the end of the 4th c. BC. By their chronology and mode of burial the said graves are related to those from Apollonia and this mode is a Thracian funeral tradition.

The cremation represents a peculiarity of the pithoi burials discovered in North-Eastern Thracian territories. The assumption that the pithoi functioned not only as urns but as sepulchral chambers as well should be reasonable. All the five of them have been dated to the first half and the middle of the 3rd c. BC.²⁸ The burnt remains with three of the burials in question were placed right into the pithoi (Madera, Praventsi 1 and Sboryanovo). The

remains with the other two burials (D. Rositsa and Praventsi 2) were firstly put into bowls and then in the pithos' interior.

It has been ascertained for the burial in Sboryanovo that the bones were carried to the grave after the cremation and "dumped" into the large receptacle through both the large jugs found among the vessels standing at the stone filling. The clay vessels coming from all such graves do not bear traces of secondary firing. In the contrary, the iron and bronze objects, the glass beads and the small clay objects had probably been subjected to the fire in the process of incineration together with the body of the dead. The fragments of hand-made ceramic vessels were discovered into the tumular embankment while the wheel-thrown pottery and the remaining objects accompanied the burial itself.

The results from flat and tumular necropolises excavations in Thrace are indicative of the variety in the Thracian burial rites often showing regional peculiarities. For the time being this entitles us to consider the burials in the pithoi a rare practice. The observations over the Thracian land show these traditions had not been handed down from the Bronze and the Early Iron Ages. The statement is especially valid for North-Eastern Thrace where the number of the burials is the greatest in the interior²⁹. However this mode of burials is typologically similar with the burying in amphoras which was also applied for children at the most tender age interments. With respect to quantity this group is considerably larger.

The late appearance and use of the pithoi burials in Thrace, for the first time evidenced in Apollonia Pontica, raise series of questions related to the origin and distribution of these burials. Pithoi burials were sporadically practiced in West Asia Minor, Crete, Rhodes, insular and continental Greece during the Protogeometric and Geometric Periods³⁰. They were mainly inhumations of young individuals while the widely preferred funeral receptacle, the amphora, was used for burying babies and infants.

Burials of adult individuals in pithoi were not

²⁴ Венедиков 1963, 60.

²⁵ Венедиков 1963, 16.

²⁶ Филов 1934.

²⁷ Кисъов 1995.

²⁸ Домарадски 1984; Божкова 1989, 1 - 10; Димитрова 1989, 5 - 6; Китов 1992, 55; Радев 1995, 46.

²⁹ Стоианов 1992, 82 - 95.

³⁰ Kurtz, Boardman 1971.

common. The pithoi were used sepulchral context mainly during the Archaic period when, together with the amphoras, they became the standard burial vessels³¹. The partiality for this burying mode was however the strongest on the islands of Crete, Rhodes, the Ionian Cyclades and Euboea and its colony Corcyra (Corfu), and in Northern Greece and Macedonia. The inhabitants of Rhodes and Crete preferred the cremation to the inhumation rite. This applies also to the Euboeans. The Cretan practice to put the urns into the pithoi was very popular on the islands. This special feature is registered for a later period in the Getic territories. On the Ionian Cyclades the inhumation prevailed. An example from Naxos represents two pithoi adjoined at the mouths. A similar situation has been documented far to the North, in Vergina where the inhumation burials in pithoi were well arranged. They were surrounded by supporting stones and the deceased was deposited on pebbles mixed up with ceramic fragments³². Such a structure and arrangement of this type of graves has been evidenced for the Classical Period in Epirus when the number of such graves decreased again. The stones were arranged around the pithos in such a way that they looked like a cyst. It should be mentioned that the cremation of babies and infants in insular and continental Greece was during the entire 1st millennium BC only partly accepted and not often practiced. We should probably here address Pliny who noted that the children used not to be cremated if they died before their teeth had been grown up enough³³. The study of Apollonia and its hinterland points at the durable contacts of the city with the Cretan and Mycenaean as well as with the Helladic world during the entire 1st millennium BC and to its conversion into one of the main Thracian gates³⁴. The relations with Ionia were more active at the beginning of the existence of the colony while from the 5th c BC. on, those with mainland Greece and mostly with Attica obviously prevailed. The appearance of pithoi

burials may be associated with the time of active import of Attic pottery and the best evidence is its presence in the Apollonian necropolises. The grave goods are strikingly similar to those in Attic graves that were not rich during the Hellenistic Period³⁵. In the Attic graves stand out the stringless in male, the mirrors in the female and toys in the infant's burials. However their appearance here does not mean Attic origin. This form of burial was not common there. So far as the distribution and practice of the mode of burying in the interior and mainly on Getic territory are concerned, they have their explanation in the situation in the Balkan Peninsula between the middle of the 4th and the middle of the 3rd c. BC. The reason were most probably complex and reflected by the Thracian religious outlook including the faith in immortality and the Orphic immortalisation doctrine³⁶. They should be considered within the general context of the cultural entity, the economic relations and the Macedonian and Celtic Tribal Union is concerned³⁷. The presence of La Tène type fibula in pithoi graves from the first half of the 3rd c. BC³⁸ and Attic shapes among the goods³⁹ illustrate the intricacy and dynamics of this process. It should perhaps be of interest to seek for the relation between the presence of the Ionian (Carian and Lyacian) architectural school⁴⁰ and the pithoi burials distribution over the Getic territories.

Inevitably, we come to the question of this type of burials' interpretations within the Thracian cultural environment. The answer or the possible answer should be looked for within the context of the cultural character of the Balkan and Carpathian region and the Eastern Mediterranean from the Late Bronze Age on. The restricted time here allows me to point out just one aspect but in return an essential one.

A crucial element of the burial rite is the digging into the terrain for placing the pithoi that could have only functional meaning. In such a way the pit should turn into a ritual one and could be

³¹ Kurtz, Boardman 1971, 71 – 74.

³² Kurtz, Boardman 1971, 185 - 190; 307 - 308; Andronikos 1984.

³³ Pliny, VII, 72.

³⁴ Венедиков 1963; Димитров, Порожанов 1977, 28 – 29.

³⁵ Kurtz, Boardman 1971, 163.

³⁶ Фол 1981; Георгиева 1991; Gergova 1992b.

³⁷ Домрадски 1984, 117 – 119.

³⁸ Домрадски 1992, 102.

³⁹ Божкова 1989, 1992; Димитрова 1989.

⁴⁰ Čičikova 1988, Стоианов 1990; Gergova 1992b.

considered as a primitive altar. In Thrace the pit was a manifestation of the cult of the dead but there are some assumptions that the pits were associated with shrines too and were places of communications between the living and the dead⁴¹. The pithoi and amphoras semantics within ritual context might be explained with the following associative chain: Pithos / amphoras = cave = womb as well as with the striking resemblance with the stylized female anthropomorphic idols from earlier times assimilated as fertility symbols. An example from Crete is a good illustration of the above. In seventh century Afrati in Crete, a lid handle is formed by a seated woman with hands to her hair so that the whole vase, like many other Cretan pithoi, may have been intended for the grave. So we come to the Great Goddess Mother and the pithos, assimilated to her, ready to accept back in her womb the children who had not succeeded to pass the initiation. The buried individuals were most probably striplings judging from the ephebi procession in the night cavalcade on the 20th Targellion eve in Athens⁴². This was a trial they were obliged to undergo for the

successful initiation and entering the circle of the having inside knowledge⁴³. In the initiation period the juveniles “turned into” wolves and acquired dual essence⁴⁴ corresponding to the dual essence of the Goddess whether it was called Bendis, Cybele, Kotytho, etc. The wolf was however also a mediator along the way to the immortality⁴⁵ and the latter could not be achieved without the Great Mother Goddess. This might have been the reason for the situations of some of the Getic burials, specifically at the nymphs sanctuary near Madera. The sanctuary was in the shape of a cave on the Copenhagen relief and the three nymphs were hypostases of the Great Mother Goddess personifying her split image⁴⁶. She was the patron of the women in child-birth as well as of the infant girls with a view to their future maternity. Accomplishing the function of a protector of the sexual intercourse she at the same time possessed the power to immortalize⁴⁷. Building on her dual image we would come to the ritual travesty and we could find an explanation of the duality of the grave goods in Sboryanovo: 2 torches - 2 horns - 2 spears = 2 bowls, 3 kantharoi, 2 jugs, 2 askoi, 4 (2 + 2) fibulae, two portioned pit with two colors.

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⁴¹ Гиоргиева 1991, 8.

⁴² Ропов 1984, 69.

⁴³ Ропов 1977, 8.

⁴⁴ Мазаров 1982, 14.

⁴⁵ Gergova 1992b.

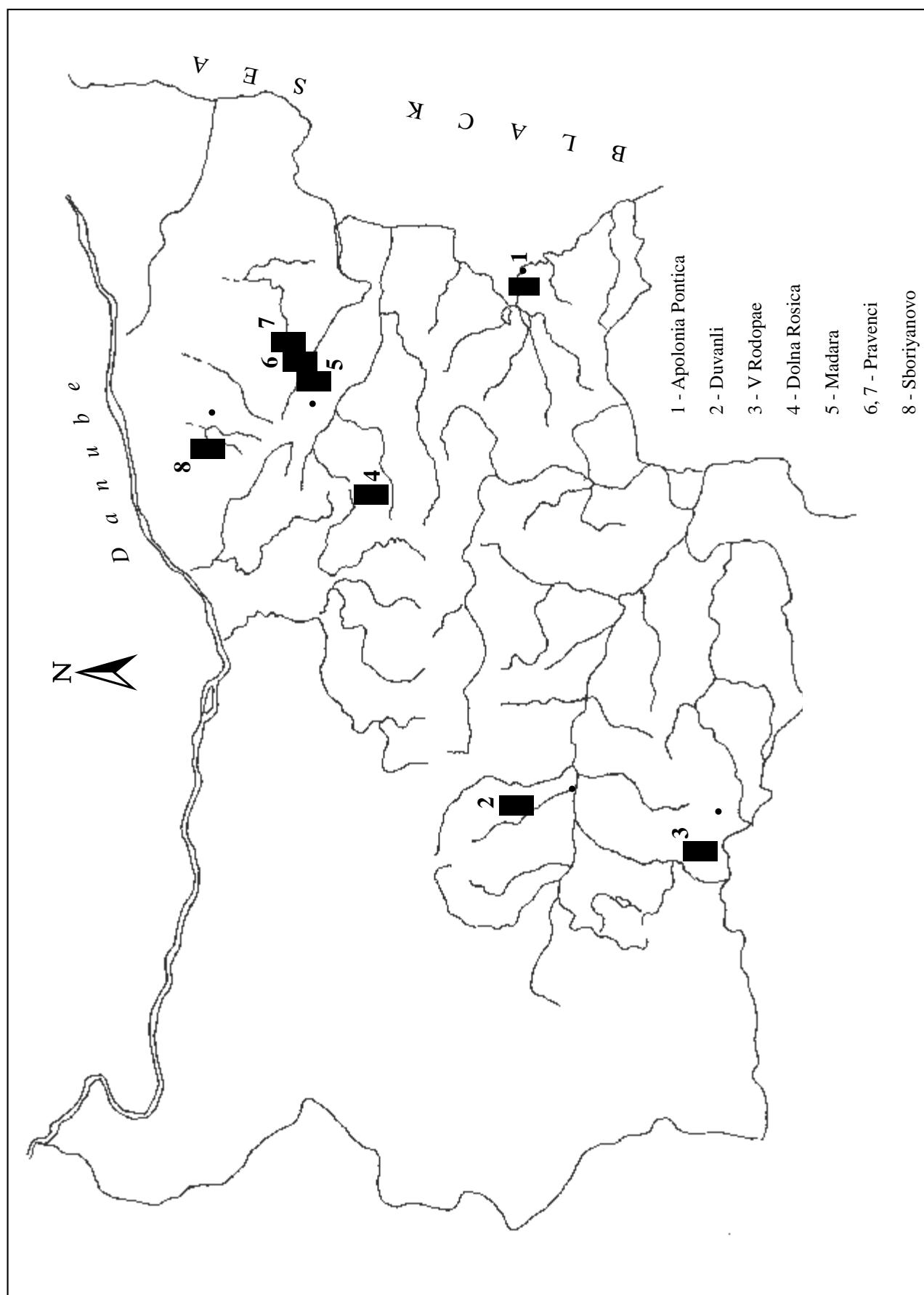
⁴⁶ Ропов 1977; 1984, 65 – 66.

⁴⁷ Ропов 1981, 143.

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A map of burials in pithoi in Thrace during the hellenistic period

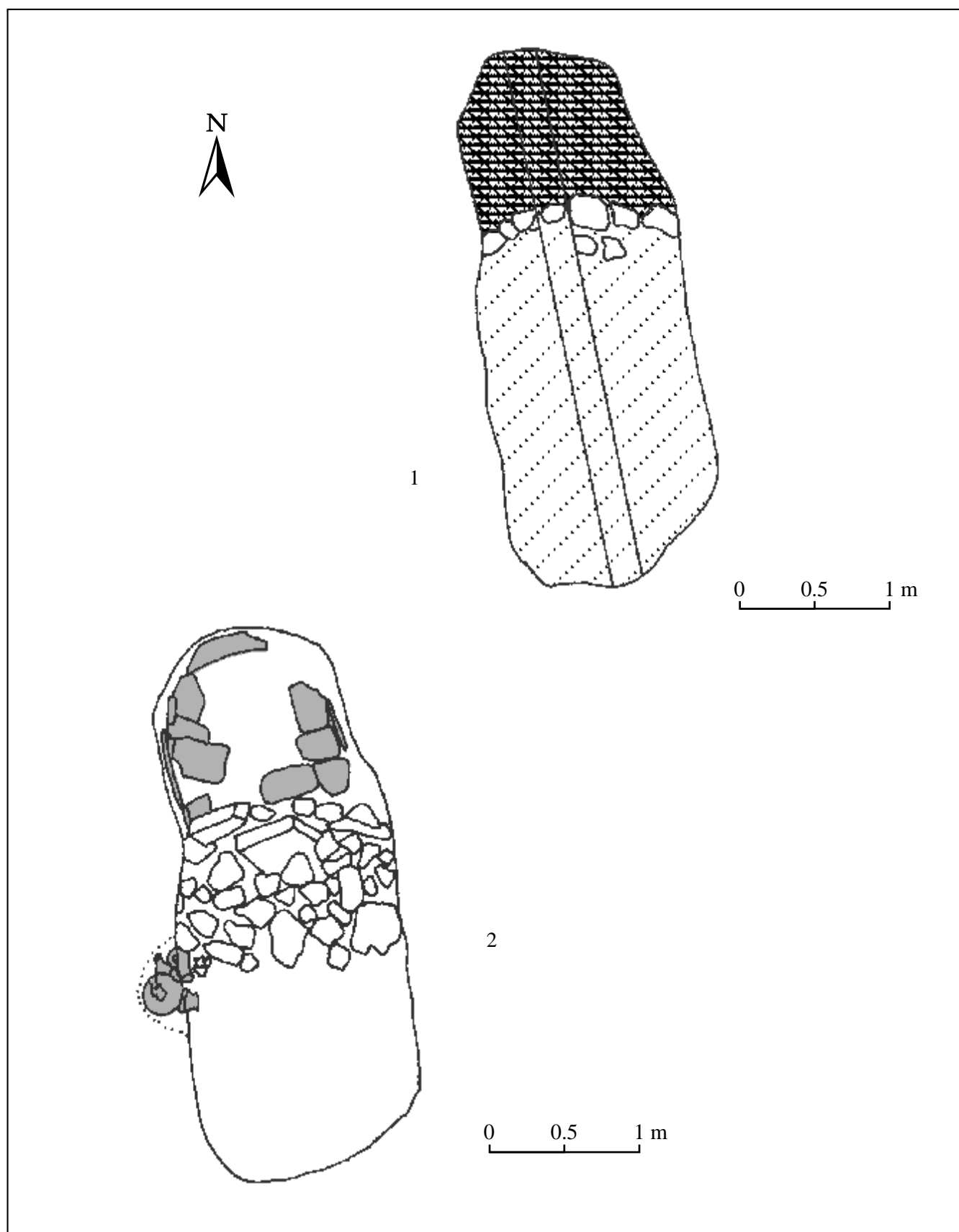


Fig. 1. Tumulus No 23. A pit with burial in pithos from Sboryanovo reservation.

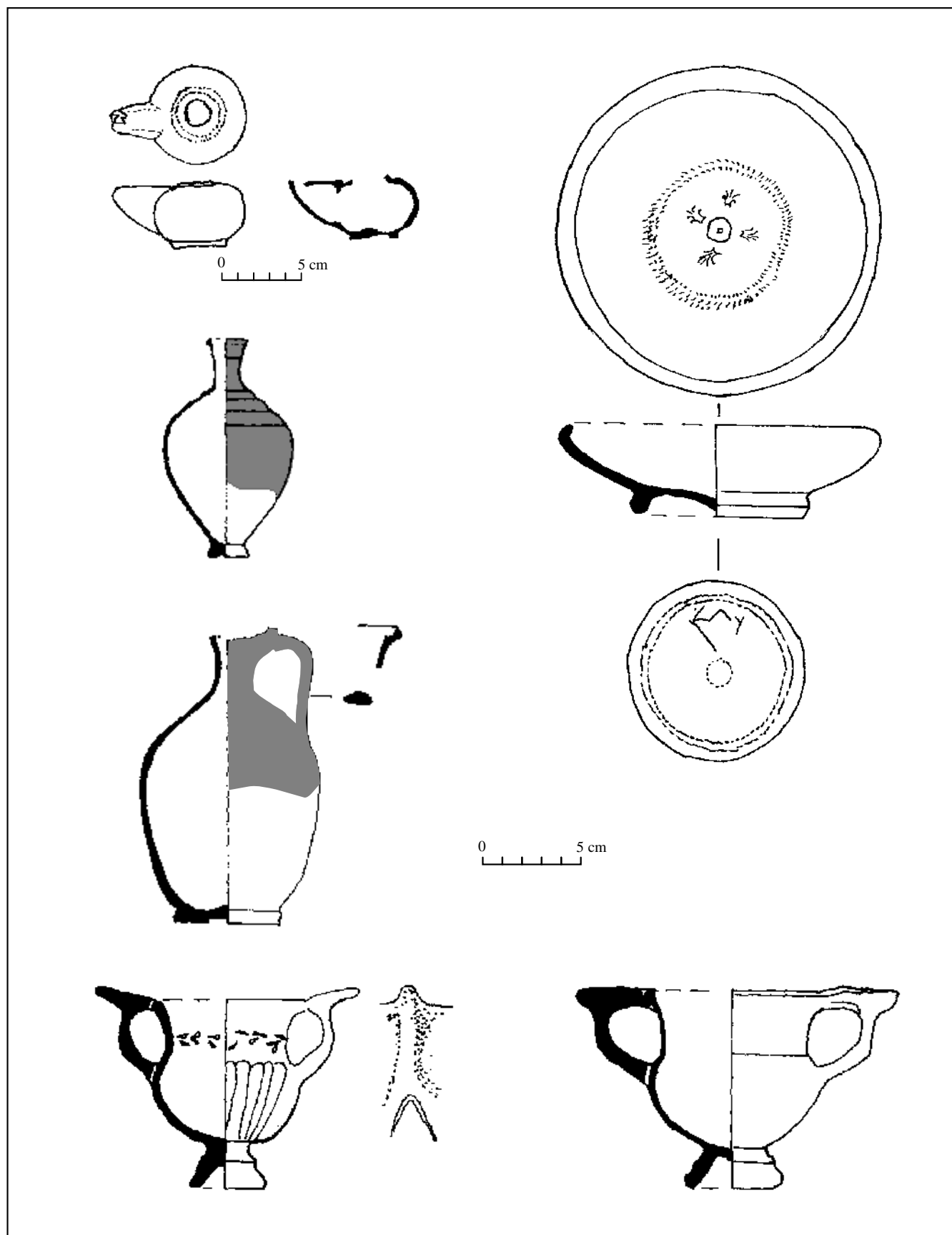


Fig. 2. The vessels of the burial from Sbornyanovo

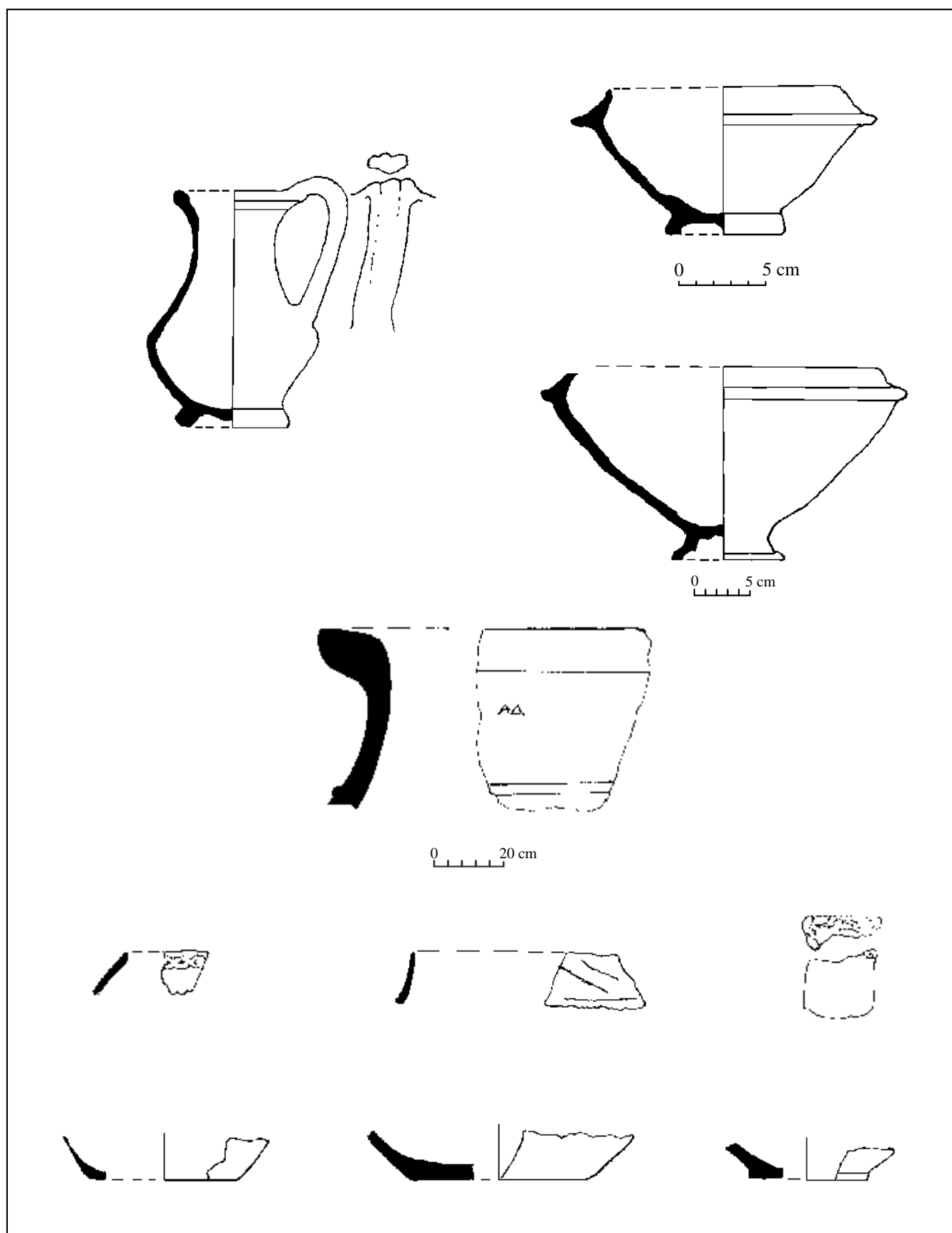


Fig. 3. The vessels of the burial from Sboryanovo

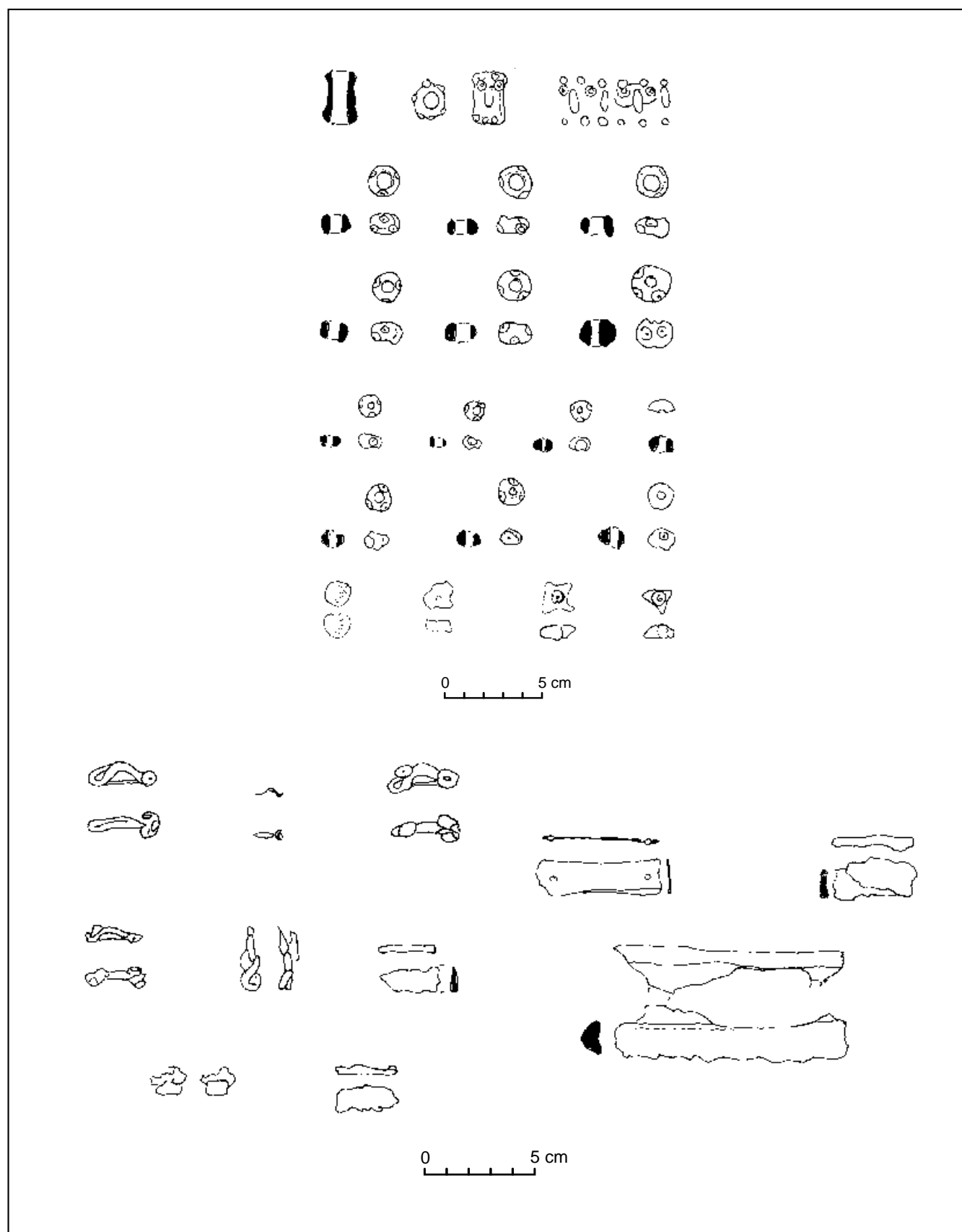


Fig. 4. Grave offerings in the pithos from Sboryanovo.

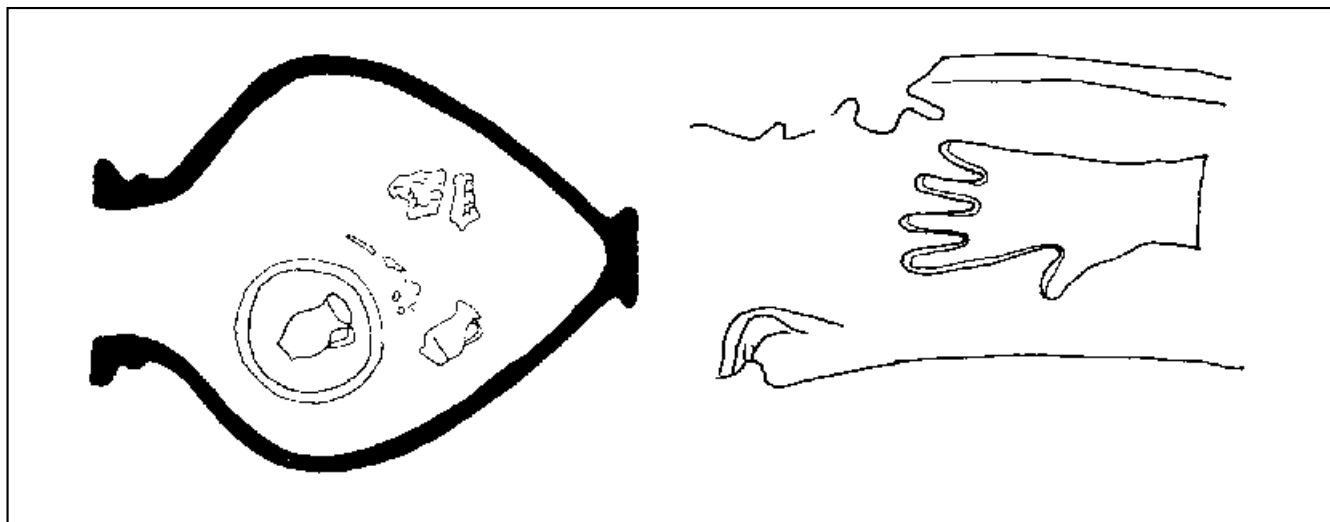


Fig. 5. Burial in pithos from Dolna Rosica, region of Targovishte.

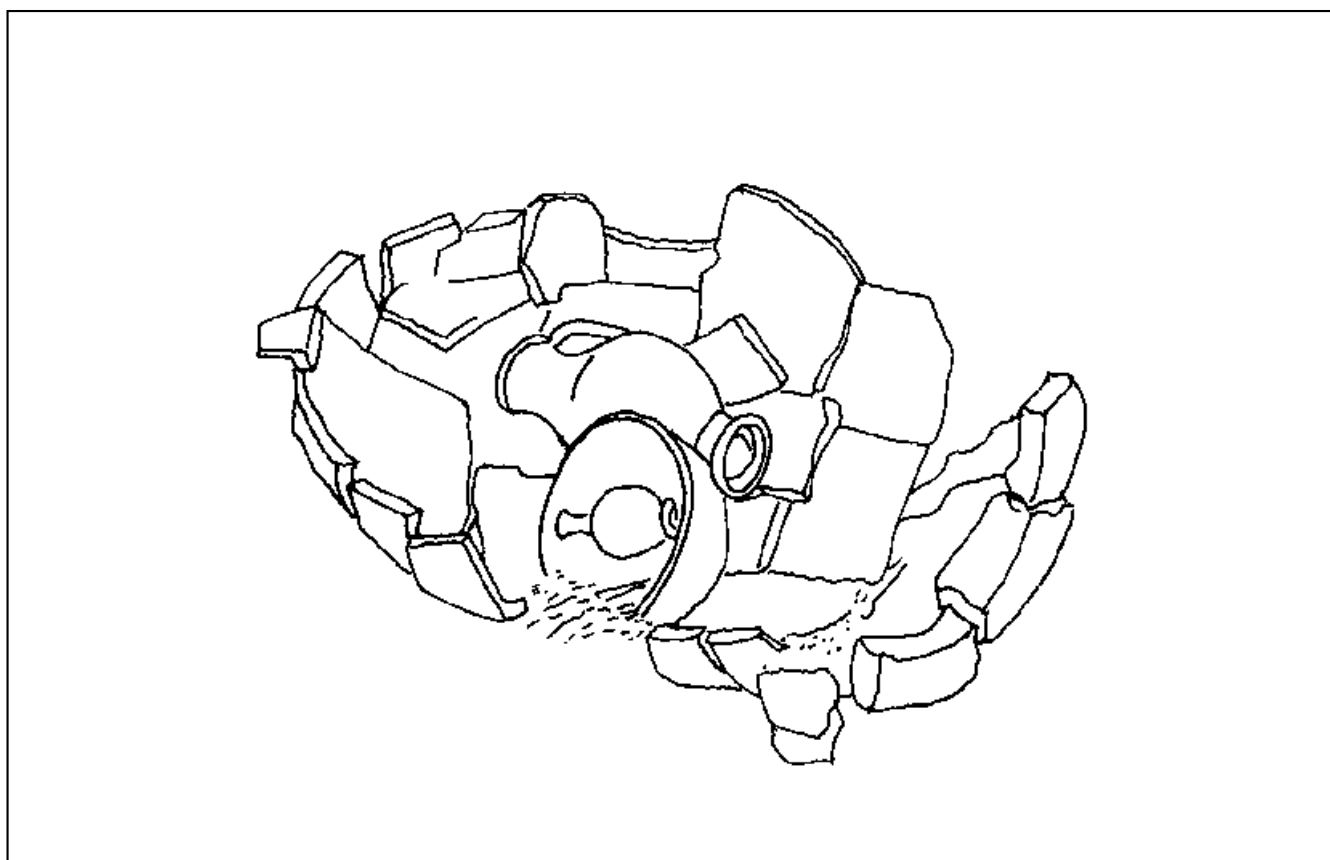


Fig. 6. Burial in pithos-1 from Pravenci, region of Novi Pazar.

