

# THE DEAD AMONG THE LIVING IN THE BABADAG SETTLEMENT FROM NICULIȚEL–CORNET (TULCEA COUNTY, ROMANIA)\*

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**Keywords:** Early Iron Age, Babadag culture, complexes with human bones.

**Abstract.** The two preventive archaeological campaigns carried out in 1988 and 2000 the Babadag culture settlement at Niculițel–Cornet revealed numerous complexes containing human bones. The purpose of this article is to present an objective and detailed analysis of these discoveries, based on the drawings of the complexes, the complete archaeological inventory and the anthropological study of the human bones.

The situations encountered in this site contribute to adding new and important information regarding the practices of deposition of the dead in the Babadag culture settlements (11<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.).

**Introduction.** The site from Niculițel–Cornet (Tulcea County) is situated in northern Dobruja, in the vicinity of the Danube River, approx. 5 km west of Niculițel settlement, on a terrace bordering Gorgonel Lake in the north (Fig. 1/1-2).

The archaeological remains were endangered by the installation of methane gas pipes, thus two preventive archaeological campaigns were carried out in 1988 (Topoleanu, Jugănaru 1995) and 2000 (Simion 2001)<sup>1</sup>.

**Archaeological vestiges.** The stratigraphical analysis reveals that beneath the 0.25 m thick arable soil there was the layer formed during the Roman era, under which lied the layer dated to the first Iron Age, 0.50 m thick. During the 2000 campaign, separately, without stratigraphic differentiation, towards the eastern extremity of the site (S XIII), a big size pit containing Neolithic pottery material that can be attributed to phase A<sub>1</sub> of the Gumelnița culture was investigated; near this pit, in S XI, another pit containing Hellenistic pottery was identified. If we also took in consideration the Pătulele type copper axe discovered in the same area (Ailincăi 2003-2005), we could also add the Middle Bronze Age to the above mentioned periods.

Overall, however, the most consistent inhabitation belongs to the Early Iron Age. Approx. 200 pits that were completely or partially investigated during the two campaigns and several complexes that could be considered surface dwellings or huts can be attributed to this period. The archaeological inventory consists mainly of pottery, but we need to mention several other objects like: an instrument used for pottery stamp decoration (pintadera), a pair of bone cheek-piece, and a bronze bracelet.

The found material was not entirely published or studied according to each complex, but the authors of the investigation support the existence, in this settlement, of all three phases of the Babadag culture, even though most clues point exclusively to the dating to the 2nd phase (10<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.)

**Pits containing human bones.** There are eight pits containing human bones and they have been dedicated special studies (Jugănaru, Topoleanu 1994; Ailincăi, Topoleanu 2003).

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\* I dedicate this article to Professor Gavrilă Simion, an enthusiast researcher of funerary archaeology and of the Iron Age at Lower Danube.

<sup>1</sup> The archaeological investigations from 1988 were lead exclusively by Dr. F. Topoleanu, who also coordinated the first part of the 2000 campaign, then the excavations were continued and concluded by dr. G. Simion.

However, due to inaccuracies in the initial publishing, some of new data and part of the analyses on some of the bones, we consider it necessary to reanalyze these data in the present study.

*The catalogue of the finds:*

1. *Pit no. 3, square 46, S I/1988* (Fig. 2/1) – The diameter of the upper part of the pit was 1.20 m and the diameter of the lower part was 1.70 m. The filling of the pit consisted of clean black earth and, on the bottom of the pit, on an agglomeration of pottery fragments there was a human skeleton on extended burial on the back, aligned NE-SW, its right hand on the thorax and the left on the abdomen. There is no anthropological data regarding this individual.

The pottery fragments discovered in the pit belonged to amphorae (Fig. 3/1-4; 4/1, 4-6), a bowl (Fig. 4/3), and a cup (Fig. 4/2). The stamped decoration represents a clue to dating the complex to phase II of the Babadag culture.

2. *Pit no. 4, square 52, S I/1988* (Fig. 2/2) – was partially identified in S I. In order to complete its investigation, the excavations were extended with an adjacent surface. The diameter of pit no. 4 was approx. 2 m. On the bottom of the pit, on an agglomeration of pottery fragments there was a skeleton on extended burial on the back, hands on the abdomen, aligned N-S, around which there were four skulls, bones of the upper and lower limbs and pieces of the thorax. There is no anthropological data regarding the individuals in this complex.

The pottery fragments discovered in the complex belong to cups (Fig. 5/1-6), bowls (Fig. 5/9-10; 6/1), amphorae (Fig. 5/7-8) and kitchenware (Fig. 6/2-4) that can be attributed to phase II of Babadag culture.

3. *Pit no. 12, square 76, S I/1988* (Fig. 7/1) – was partially investigated and was probably circular at the surface, with the maximum diameter of approx. 2 m. In section, the pit looked like an alveolus dug in the sterile soil, with sloping walls, and 0.30 m of depth. On the bottom of the pit the upper and lower limbs of a mature individual were found. The position of the bones suggests that the body was flexed. Among the bones, some atypical pottery fragments were also found. There is no anthropological data regarding this individual.

4. *Pit no. 45, squares 8-11, S IV/1988* (Fig. 7/2) – was partially investigated during the 1988 campaign and is relatively large, as on the western profile its width is 4.20 m. It was dug directly into the sterile soil up to a depth of 0.75m. In the SW, close to the bottom of the pit, several human bones without anatomical or with partial connection were identified. Initially, two skulls and bones from the upper and lower limbs were noticed. Near to these bones, to the north, there was an agglomeration of bones which seemed to have belonged to an individual in flexed position, aligned NE-SW. There is no anthropological data regarding these individuals.

The pottery fragments discovered at this site belong to cups (Fig. 8/3-4, 8), amphorae (Fig. 8/7), bowls (Fig. 8/1-2) and kitchenware (Fig. 8/5-6).

5. *Pit no. 1, C 4/C/2000* (Fig. 9/1) – was dug in the sterile soil; on the surface had an irregular in shape, but the stratigraphical profile showed it was shaped like a truncated cone. The depth of the ancient stepping level was 0.70m; E-W diameter was 1.80 m, and N-S diameter was 1.60 m. On the bottom of the pit several human remains from three individuals in partial anatomical connection were discovered. In the northern extremity of the complex the bones were covered with a layer of ashes and pottery fragments.

The anthropological analysis<sup>2</sup> identified remains from three individuals: *Skeleton #1* - female, 25-30 years old, showing signs of secondary kyphosis and scoliosis of the thoracic and lumbar spine; *Skeleton #2* - female, 14 years old, exhibiting signs of *hiperostoa porotica*, and *cribra orbitalia*; *Skeleton 3*: represented by the remains of the zygomatic process of the maxilla,

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<sup>2</sup> The anthropological analysis of the preserved human bones from Niculițel–Cornet was carried out by M. Constantinescu and N. Mirițoiu (F. I. Rainer Institute of Anthropology, Bucharest). In this article we have used only concise data, as the full details of the analysis are presented in a separate article published in this volume.

the diaphysis of a femur with shattered metaphyses, the distal third of the right tibia diaphysis and a fragment from the left ischion. All these belong to an *infans I* individual.

The pottery discovered in this area belongs to amphorae (Fig. 10/3-5), cups (Fig. 10/1-2), bowls (Fig. 10/6) and coarse vessels (Fig. 10/7). On the bottom of the pit, on the same level with the bones, there were also several pieces of burnt clay preserving marks from twigs, a shoulder blade from an animal, probably a bovid, a fragment from a horn and other fragments from a two ear cup (Fig. 10/1). \* \*

The sections investigated during the two campaigns (1988 and 2000) were not measured topographically, therefore the layout of the excavations was reconstructed according to certain guide marks and notes made at the site. If our reconstruction is valid, then it is possible that the human bones found in *S IV/1988* and *C4/C/2000* is part of the same complex (Fig. 9/3).

6. *Pit no. 1, S VI/2000* (Fig. 9/2) – was almost circular in shape, with the N-S diameter of 1.55m; the earth in the filling was dark brown. In section, the walls were almost straight and the depth of the pit from the digging level was 0.75m.

On the bottom of the complex the investigators found the incomplete skeletons of two individuals flexed on the right side, hands to the chin. The skeleton from the south of the pit is missing the skull and is aligned ESE–WNW; its feet are under the skull of the second individual. It was probably a male, approx. 13-14 years old.

The second skeleton belonged to a female of approx. 14 years of age, and it was aligned SSW–NNW. Cause of death seems to have been at least two blows with a blunt object to the lateral side of the right parietal, which dislocated a fragment of the cranial vault and another blow in the back lateral side of the left frontal eminence and two other possible blows to the lateral side of the left parietal and glabella area.

Inside the pit there were also found a few atypical pottery fragments.

7. *Pit no. 7, SVII/2000* (Fig. 11/1) – at the surface was circular, but in section it was shaped like a truncated cone; it was 1.20m deep. The diameter of the upper part was 0.80m, and the one of the lower diameter was 1.10m. On the bottom of the pit there was a human arm in anatomical connection, together with a big rock. There were only a few atypical pottery remains. There are no anthropological data available.

8. *Dwelling no. 1, S K/2000* (Fig. 11/2) – was investigated in squares 4 and 5 of S K (4 × 12 m). It was almost circular in shape, with the diameter of 3.4m. Due to the large size and the numerous superstructure remains that showed traces of burning, the authors of the investigation considered that it was a hut-like dwelling. It was dug in the sterile soil up to a depth of 0.70m, with relatively straight walls. On the bottom of the dwelling, to its centre, there was a human skull surrounded by several bones belonging to four individuals:

*Skeleton #1* – represented through parts of the scapula, clavicle, left ulna and right femur. The bones belong to an *infans II* individual, its age most likely to belong to the first part of the interval; its sex is undeterminable; *Skeleton #2* – of which only part of the left clavicle, left radius and right coxa were preserved, probably belonging to a female of 25-30 years of age; *Skeleton #3* – represented by a skull with old fragmentation. Its sex is difficult to determine, but some traits of the skull indicate a female individual; *Skeleton #4* – represented by a fragment of the frontal and the maxillae with old cracks. The exfoliation of the surface of the skull indicates exposure to high temperatures, but only ectocranially. It could be a young adult, or even an adolescent, of undeterminable sex.

In this complex, there were also found numerous fragments of pottery belonging to large amphorae (Fig. 12/1-2, 4-6), bowls (Fig. 12/7-9) and cups (Fig. 12/3) that can be dated to phase II of Babadag culture.

## **Analysis of the finds.**

### *a. Surface layout (Fig. 13)*

Even though the settlement was only partially investigated, we can assume, due to the low density of the complexes, that we have partially identified the S, SE and NW margins of the site. Thus we can observe that complexes containing human bones are more concentrated towards SE, where *pits nos. 3, 4 and 12* from *SI/1988*, and also the complex formed by *pit 45/SIV/1988* and *pit 1* from *C4/C/2000* were investigated. To the NW margin, the dwelling investigated in *SK/2000* was also identified. Close to each other are the two pits investigated during the 2000 campaign: *pit. 1/SVI* and *pit 7/SVII*, situated in a highly concentrated area of archaeological complexes.

However, on the whole, we cannot distinguish a certain area used for such depositions. This is also applicable for the Babadag settlement (Ailincăi *et alii* 2005-2006), where such complexes are scattered all over the investigated area of the site.

### *b. The layout of the complexes*

No similarities were found regarding the layout of the pits – shape, depth or dimensions. Overall, *pits nos. 3 and 12* from *S I/1988*, *pit no. 1/S VI/2000* and *pit no. 7/SVII/2000* are of relatively small dimensions and the walls are almost vertical or inclined. Practically, these complexes are not different from the pits considered to have been used as domestic waste pits or storing space.

The diameter of *pit no. 4/SI/1988* is approx. 2 m, but, comparatively, the complexes from *S K/2000* and *S IV/1988 – C4/C/2000* are much bigger and approx. 0.50m deep, revealing similarities with the complex containing human bones recently investigated in the pre-colonial level at *Orgame/Argamum*. Numerous adobe pieces with traces of twigs or reed (remains of a superstructure – walls, roof) were found in these complexes at Niculițel, which represents an argument for considering them structures similar to dwellings.

In one of our previous studies dedicated to this topic we pointed out that, in the case of some complexes containing human bones with partial or without anatomical connection, there were no marks of cuts or animal bites, therefore we assumed the existence of special closed spaces where the bodies were left to decompose before manipulation and deposition in another place. Continuing this idea, we can assume, with certain reservations, the big complexes at Niculițel–*Cornet* could have been used in this purpose.

### *c. The archaeological material discovered in the complexes*

The archaeological material found in the complexes containing human bones consists of pottery (fragmentary in most cases) and animal bones. The pottery fragments come from different types of vessels, no particular category being predominant. The only vessel that was almost complete was the two ear cup discovered in *C4/C/2000*.

In *pit no. 12/SI/1988*, *pit no. 1/S VI/2000* and *pit no. 7/ S VII/2000* there were discovered only a few atypical pottery fragments, if compared with *pit 4/SI/1988* where a large amount of pottery was found. The lack of domestic origin content in these pits may suggest that they were deliberately dug for the deposition of human bones.

The individuals in extended burial found in *pit no. 3/S I/1988* and *pit no. 4/S I/1988* make a special case: they were each deposited, probably deliberately, on an agglomeration of pottery fragments; while the bones in *C4/C/2000* were covered with a layer of ashes mixed with pottery and animal bones, which is similar to other cases encountered at Babadag (Jugănaru 2005, 33), *Orgame/Argamum* (Ailincăi, Mirițoiu, Soficaru 2003) or Satu Nou (Irimia, Conovici 1991, 53, 89, 91, 94).

### *d. The state of presentation and representation of the dead*

From the overall discoveries in the site at Niculițel – *Cornet* we can notice that in the same or in a separate complex there are: complete or almost complete skeletons in anatomical connection; parts of a skeleton in anatomical connection; bones without anatomical connection.

Taking into consideration that at least the bones submitted to the anthropological analysis did not exhibit marks of dismembering with blunt objects, we could explain the state of partial anatomical connection of the bones through repeated interventions on the bodies at different stages of decay. It is possible that parts of the bodies deposited in these areas had been removed at different intervals and deposited separately. Thus, we can explain the isolated arm found in *pit no. 7/S VI*, and other similar situations encountered in the settlements from Early Iron Age at Tămăoani (Petrescu-Dîmbovița 1953, László 1986, 68) and Satu Nou (Irimia, Conovici 1993, 53, 93). It is also possible that the skulls deposited separately in different contexts at Babadag (Jugănaru, Ailincăi 2003, 49), Jijila (Sîrbu, Ailincăi, Simion 2008, 51-52), Satu Nou (Irimia, Conovici 1993, 52-65, 89-97) or Garvăn (Jugănaru 2005, 34) had been subjected to a special treatment.

The upper maxilla and frontal bone fragments belonging to skeleton #4 from *SK/2000* constitute a special case. These fragments exhibit signs of exposure to high temperatures, which resulted in ectocranial exfoliation of the cranial vault and degradation of the maxilla. Endocranially there are no traces of fire, a proof that the skull was complete during the exposure to heat. We need to specify that no burning marks could be identified on the other bones discovered here, which indicates a different treatment of the skull of this individual. The lack of burn marks on the archaeological material found in the same complex excludes the possibility that the dwelling had been set on fire, and the layout of the bones indicates a deliberate deposition of the remains of the four individuals.

The complete human humerus (right upper limb) found in the filling of the pit investigated at *Orgame/Argamum* also exhibited burn marks. It was passed through fire, as the anterior side is black and posterior side is only brown, indicating that it did not undergo a complete calcination process (300-400° C) (Ailincăi, Mirițoiu, Soficaru 2003). These two situations known so far make more difficult the reconstruction of the treatment of the dead and suggest the complexity of the ritual.

#### *e. Cause of death*

Even though only a part of the bones were submitted to an anthropological analysis, the data available to us being limited to a few individuals, we must observe the perimortem violence marks visible on the skull of skeleton #2 from *pit no. 1/S VI/2000*. This is not a singular situation among the discoveries within the Babadag culture area, as the anthropologists have also reported cases of violent death for skeletons 5 and 6 from (Ailincăi, Mirițoiu, Soficaru 2003, 314-315) and for skull no.1 from the complex investigated within the entrenchments of the Babadag settlement (Jugănaru, Ailincăi 2003; Ailincăi *et alii* 2005-2006).

#### *f. Age and sex data*

From the analyzed bones we found out that they belonged to two children (*infans I* and respectively *infans II*), five females (two of approx. 14-15 years old, two other around 25-30 years of age and one of undeterminable age) and one male (13-14 years old), while the skull fragment with marks of burning from *SK/2000* belonged to an adolescent individual of undetermined sex.

#### *g. Pathology*

The anthropological analysis of some of the bones discovered at this site pointed out the existence of certain illnesses or accidents occurred to the individuals deposited here. We mention here: deformations of the left humerus of skeleton #2 from *pit no. 1/ SVI/ 2000* due to congenital or traumatic causes occurred in the early years of life affecting the normal development of the bone; signs of secondary kyphosis and scoliosis at the level of the thoracic and lumbar spine of skeleton #1 from *C 4/C/ 2000*, whose diaphyses of the tibiae and fibulae also show signs of inchoative periostitis; signs of *hyperostosa porotica* and *cribra orbitalia* in the case of skeleton #2 from *C 4/C/ 2000*.

**Conclusion.** The new data resulted from the cumulated study of the two archaeological campaigns; together with the anthropological data for a part of the human bones represent the motivation for undergoing this new analysis aiming to complete our knowledge of the behaviour of the Babadag communities towards the dead.

This study does not insist on the other macabre finds from the Babadag culture settlements, as they have been widely discussed in other articles (Sîrbu 1994; Sîrbu 1997; Irimia 2003; Ailincăi, Mirițoiu, Soficaru 2003; Ailincăi *et alii* 2005-2006). However, we need to point out that Niculițel–*Cornet* is the settlement with the most finds of this kind, after the site at Babadag. Even though contemporaneous and produced by the same human community, the complexes found here are varied and, as in other cases, the depositions are not standardized.

*Translated by Cristina Ailincăi*

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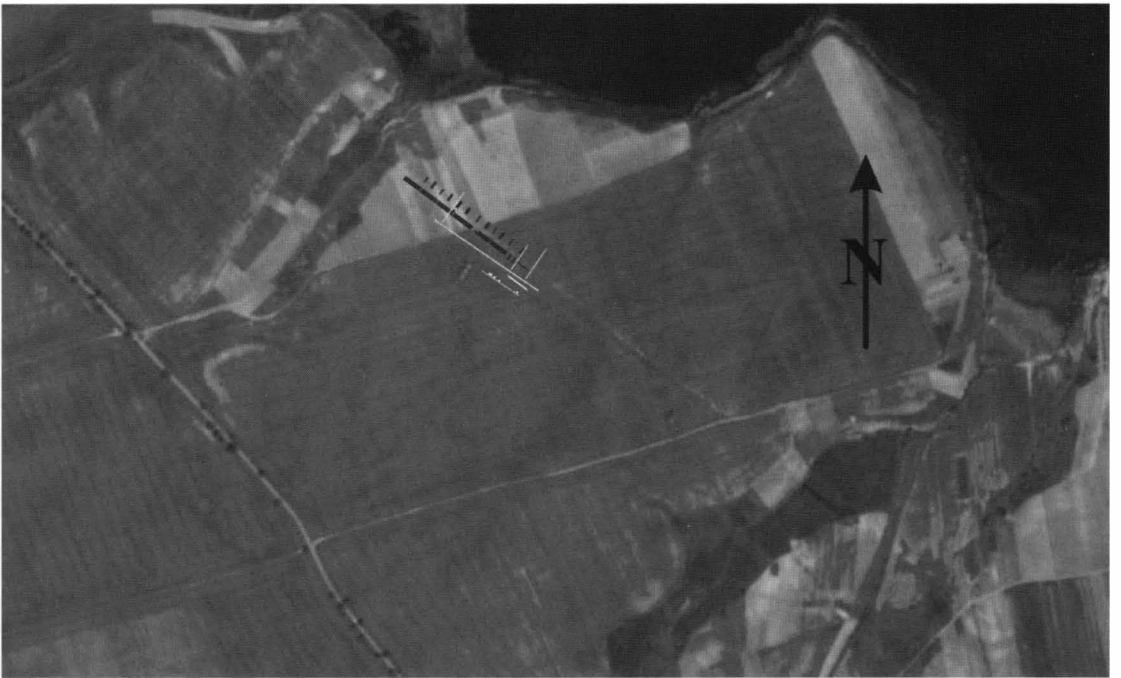
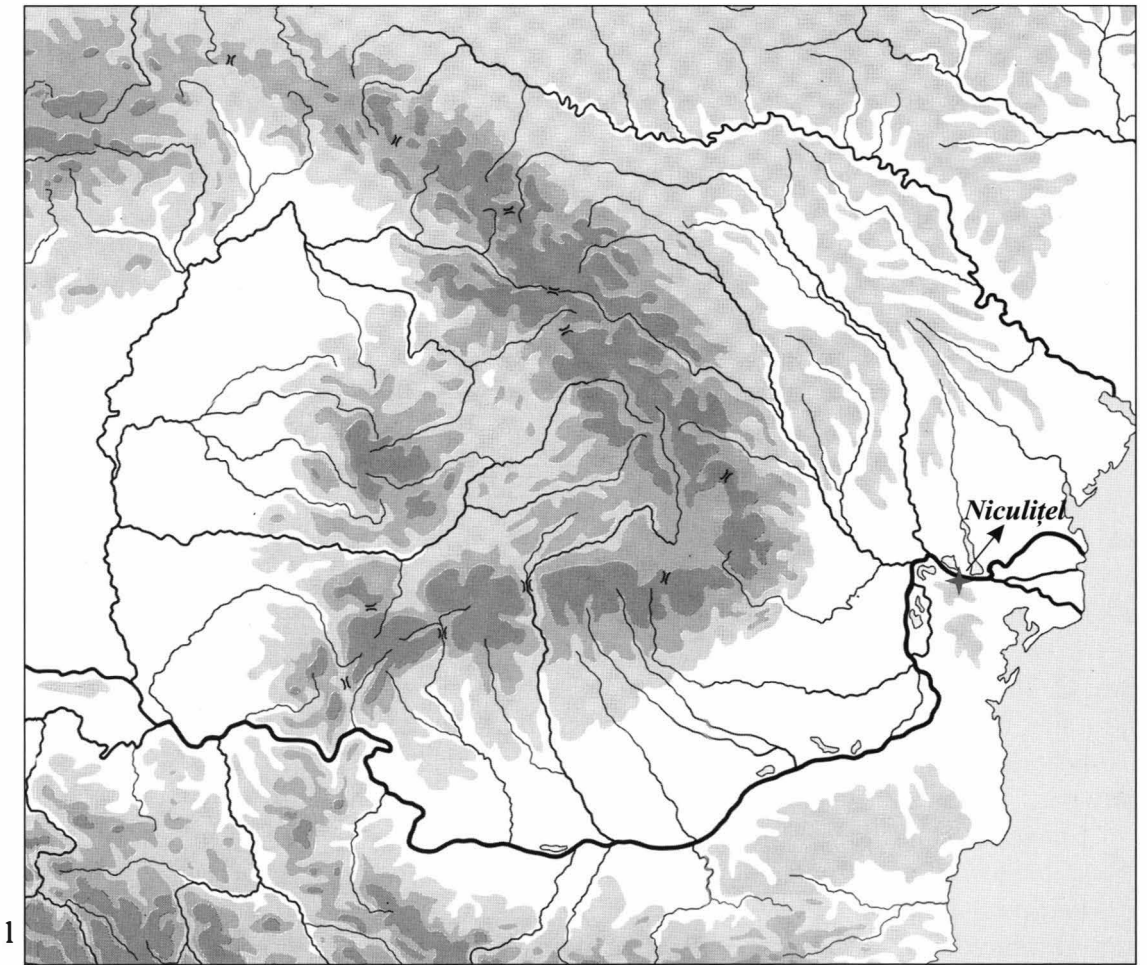


Fig. 1. Niculițel-Cornet

1. The geographic location of the site; 2. View from above.



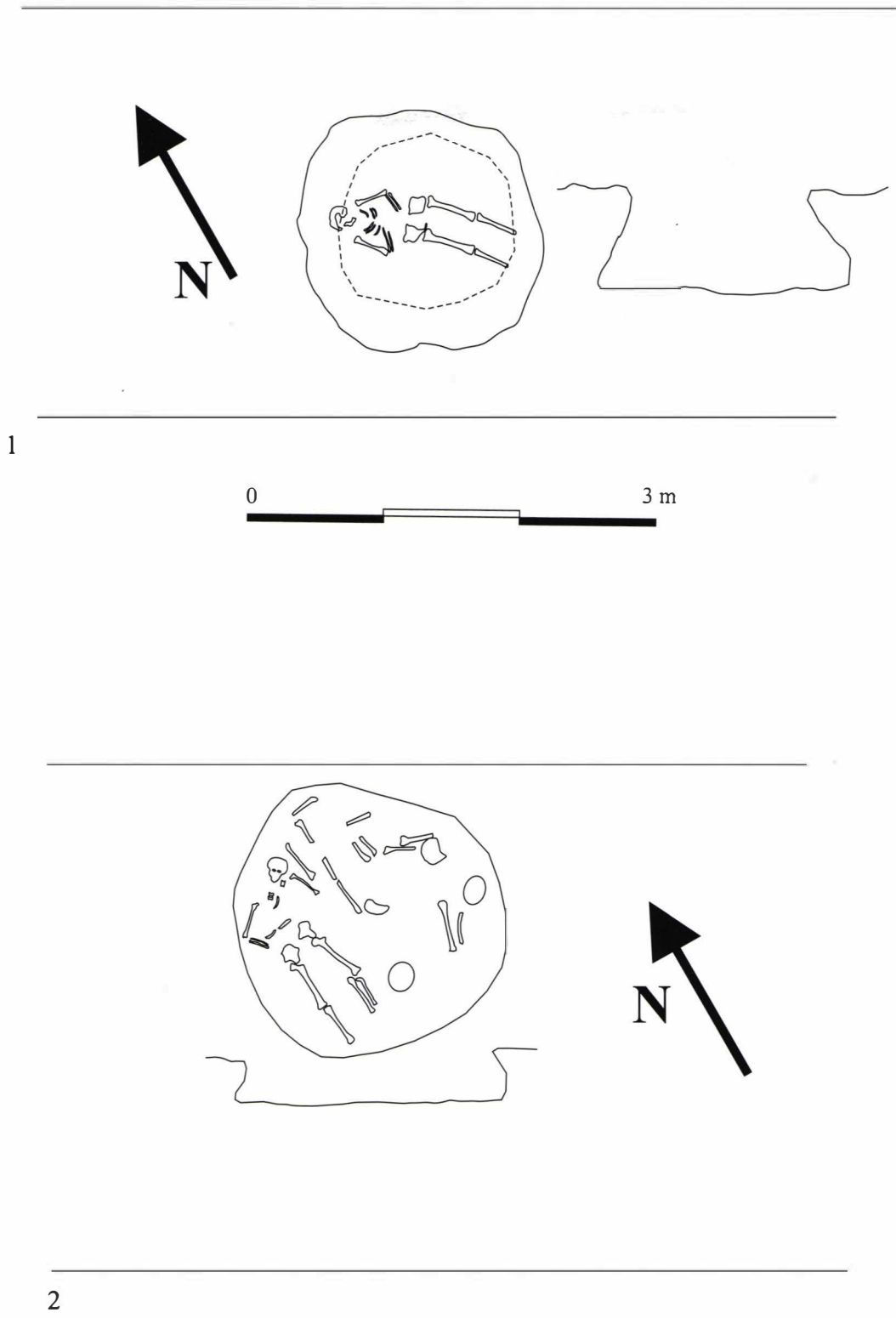


Fig. 2. Niculișel-Cornet 1988.

1. Pit no. 3, square 46, SI; 2. Pit no. 4, square 52, SI.

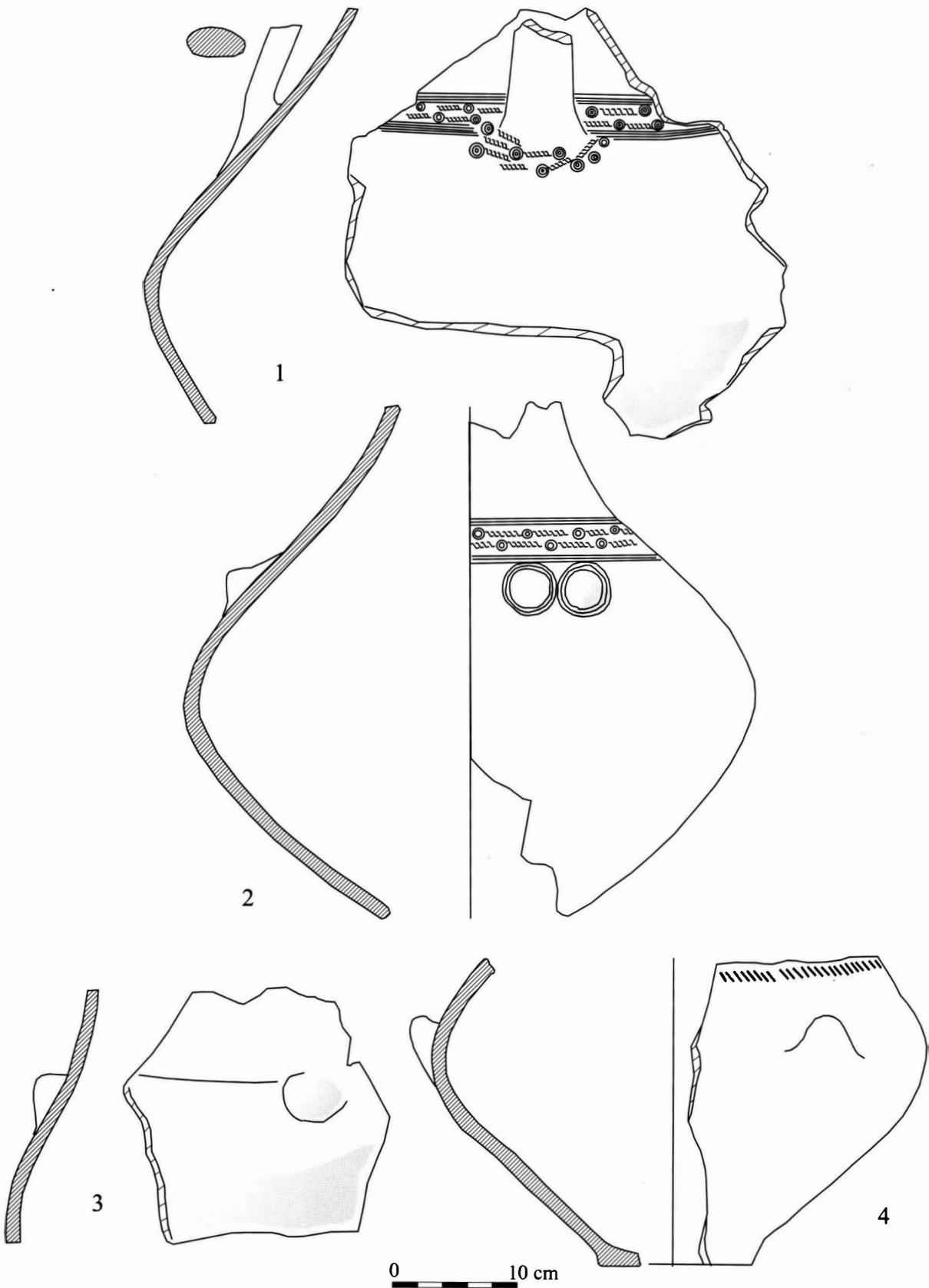


Fig. 3. Niculitel-Cornet 1988.

1-4. Pottery discovered in *Pit no. 3, square 46, S I.*

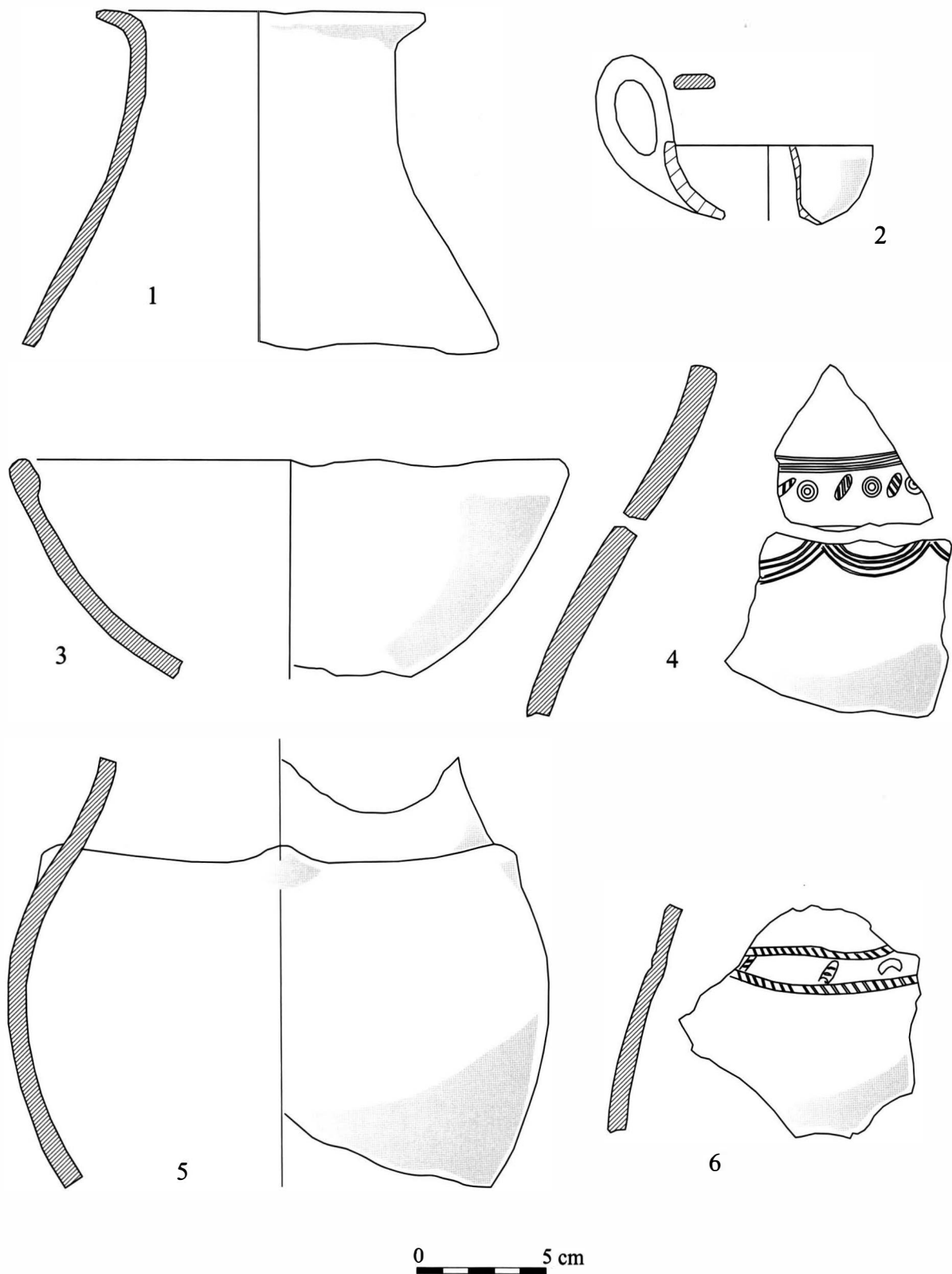


Fig. 4. Niculițel-Cornet 1988.

1-6. Pottery discovered in Pit no. 3, square 46, S I.

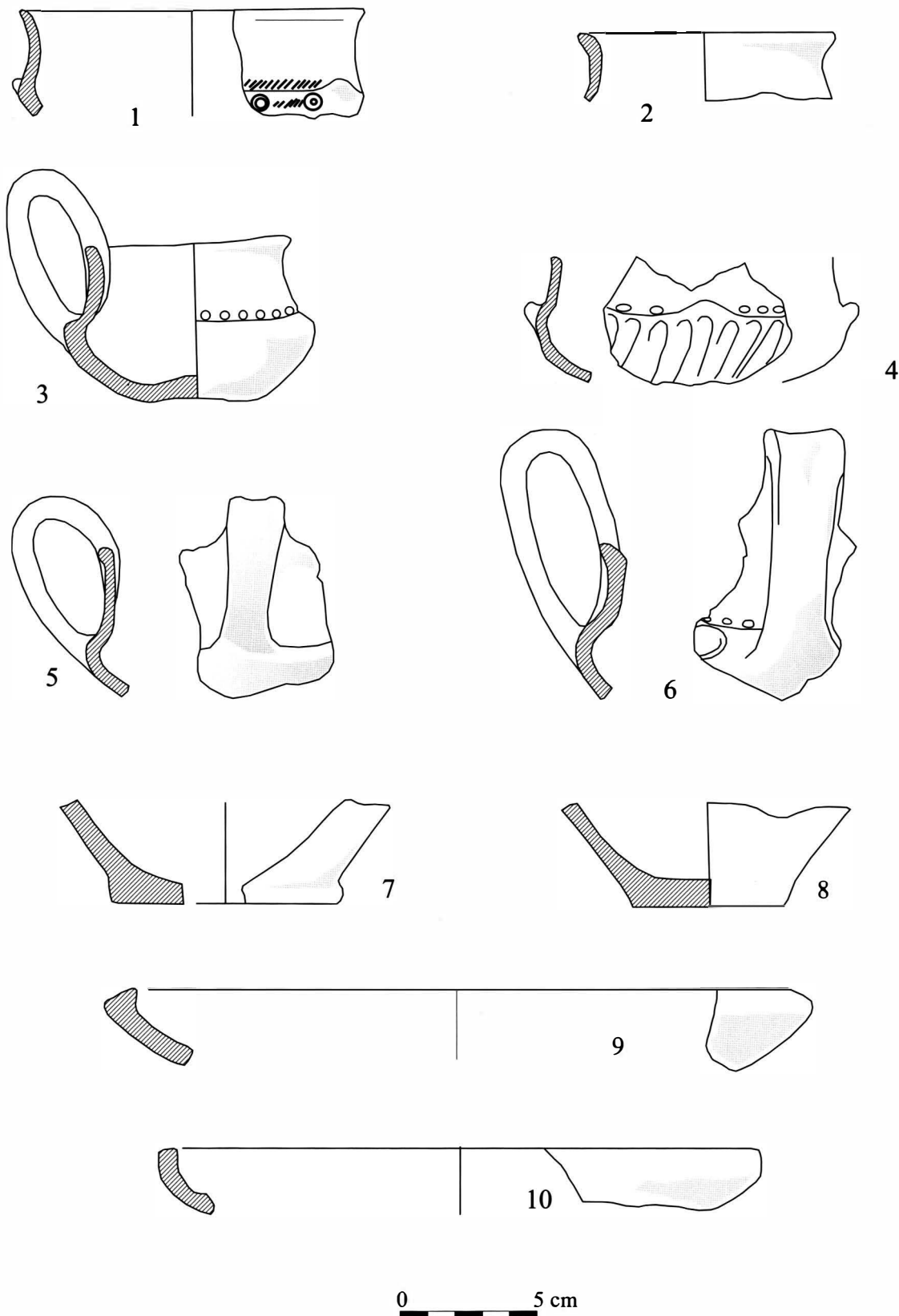


Fig. 5. Niculițel-Cornet 1988.

1-10. Pottery discovered in *Pit no. 5, square 52, S I.*

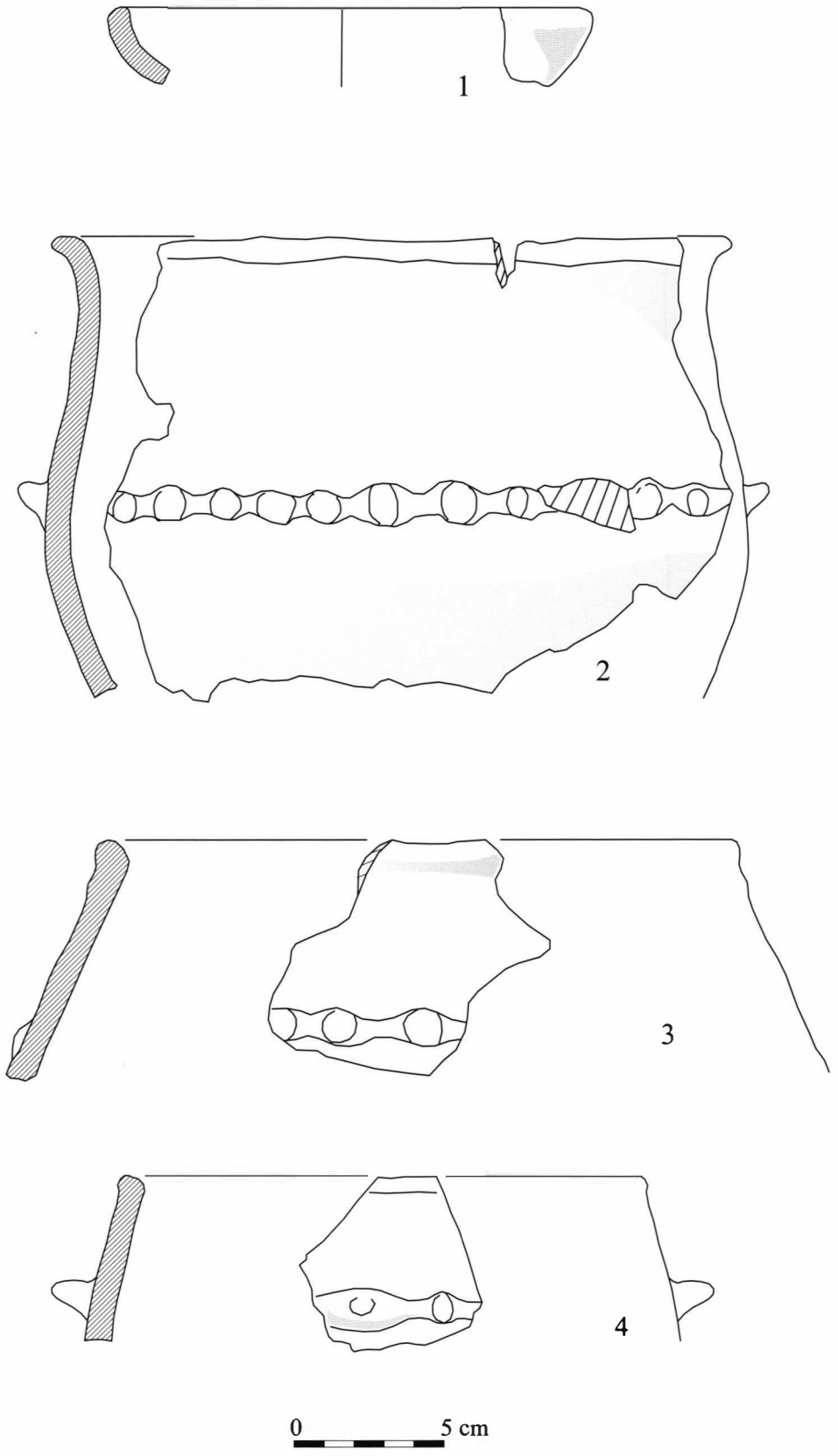


Fig. 6. Niculișel-Cornet 1988.  
 1-4. Pottery discovered in *Pit no. 5, square 52, SI.*

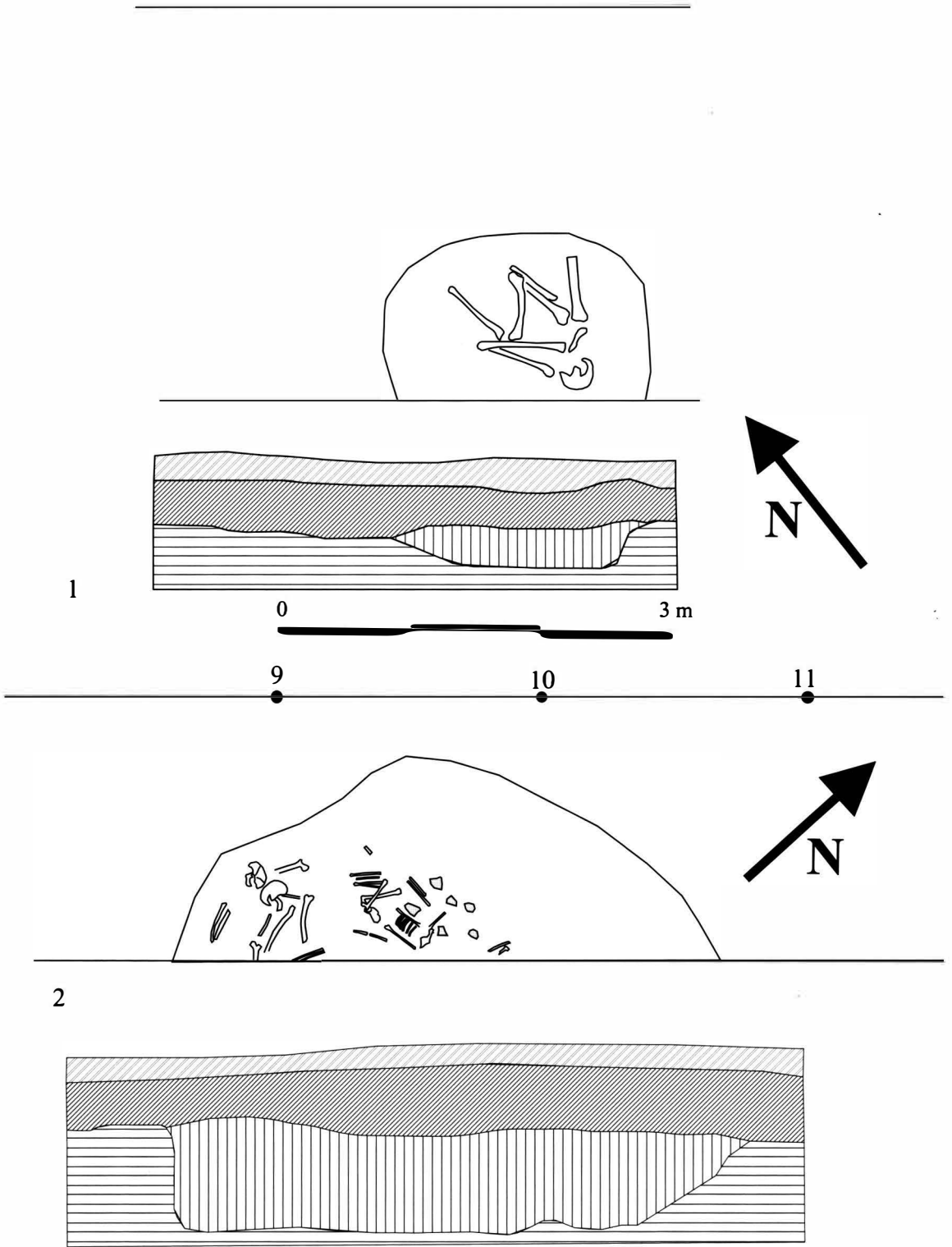


Fig. 7. Niculițel-Cornet 1988.

1. Pit no. 12, square 76, S I; 2. Pit no. 45, squares 9-11, S IV.

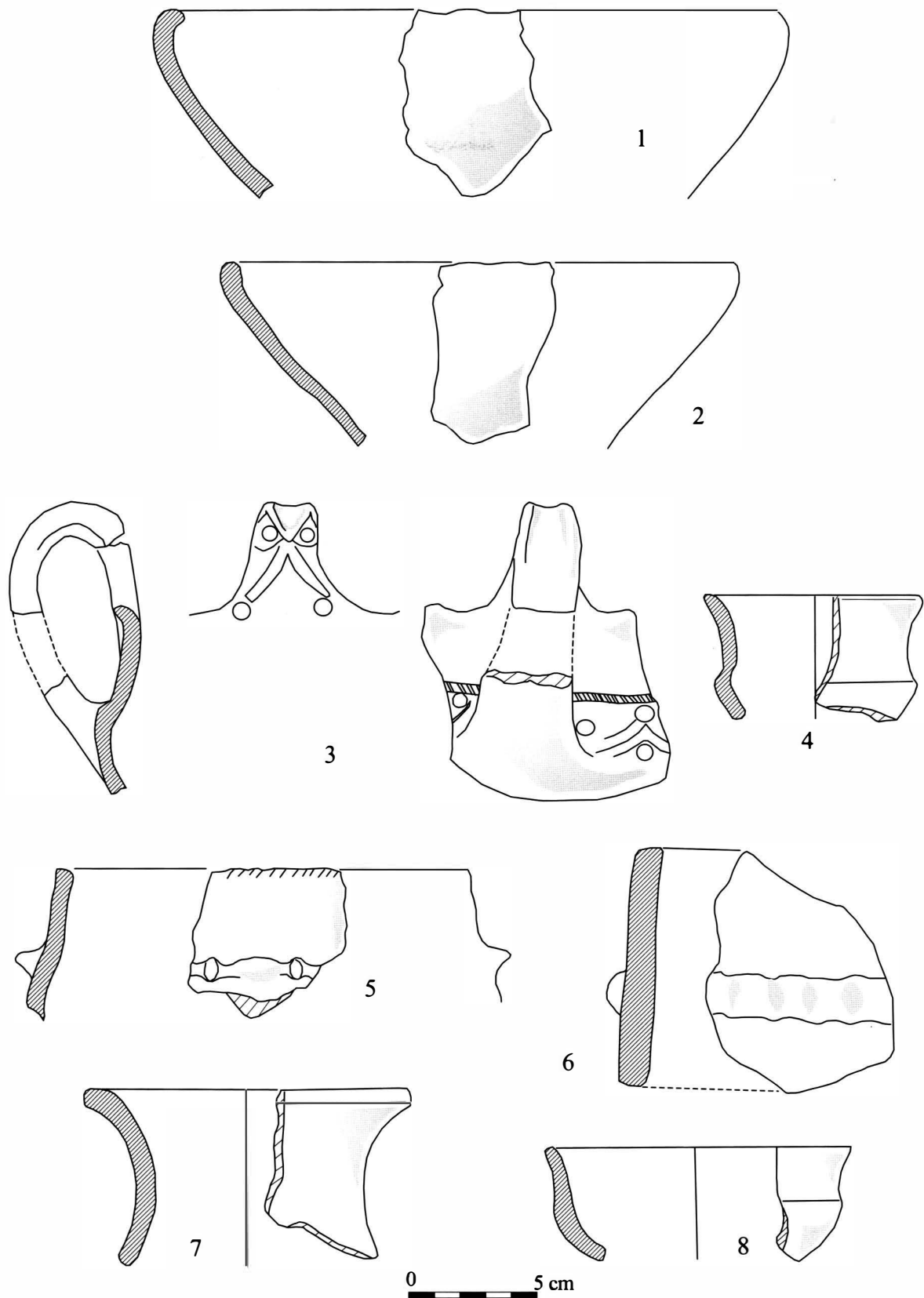


Fig. 8. Niculitel-Cornet 1988.

1-8. Pottery discovered in *Pit no. 43, squares 9-11, S IV.*

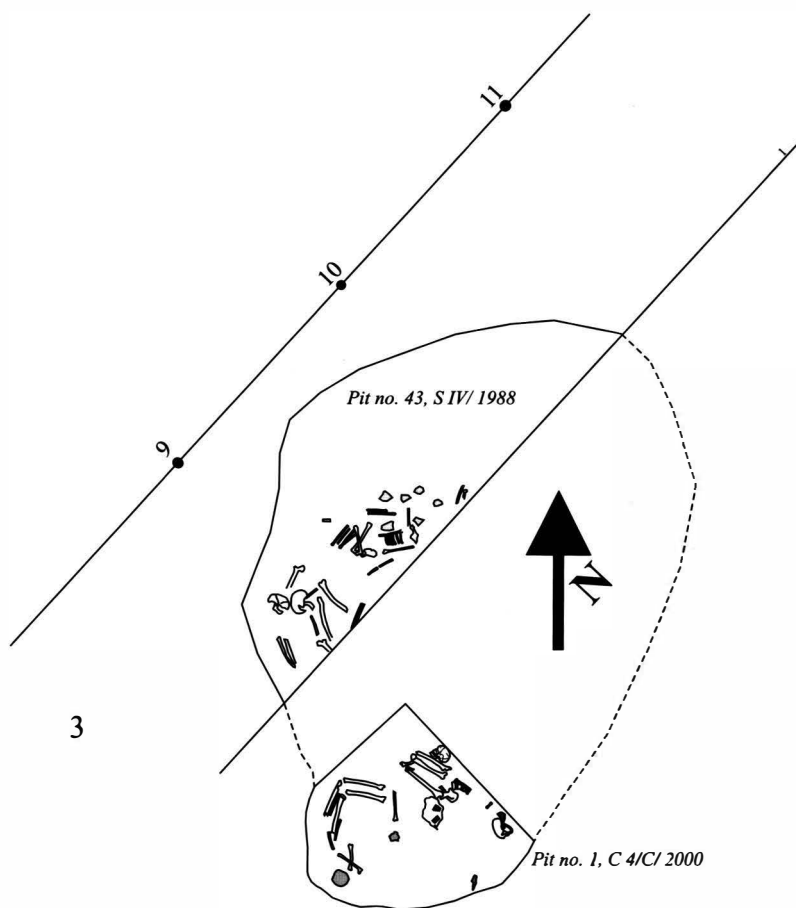
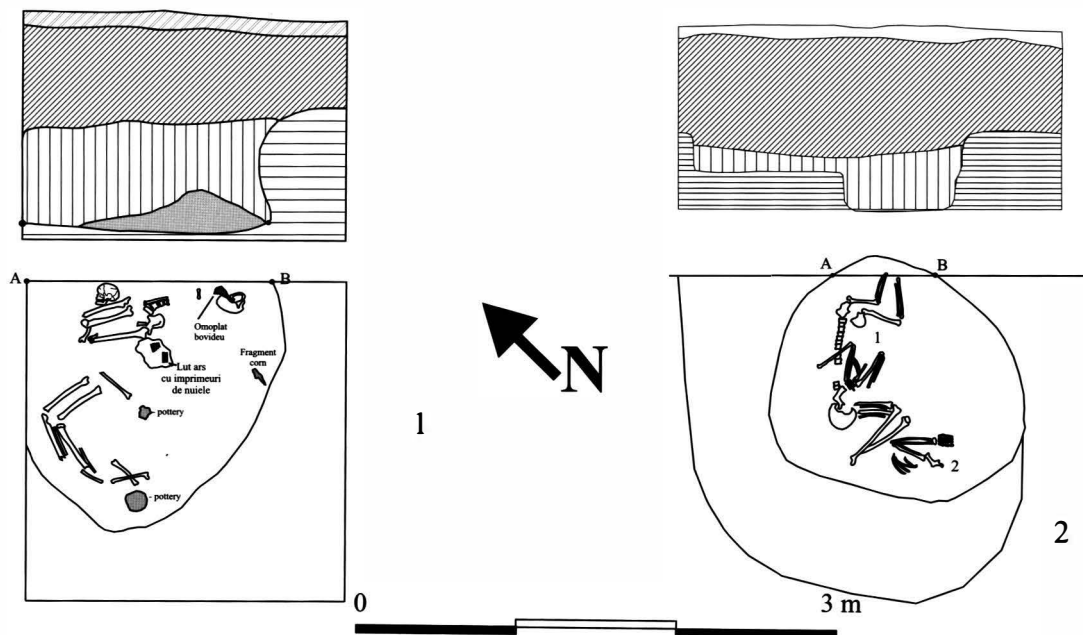


Fig. 9. Niculișel-Cornet 1988, 2000.

1. Pit no. 1, C 4/C; 2. Pit no. 1, S VI; 3. Possible graphical reconstruction of the discoveries from S IV/1988 and C 4/C/2000.



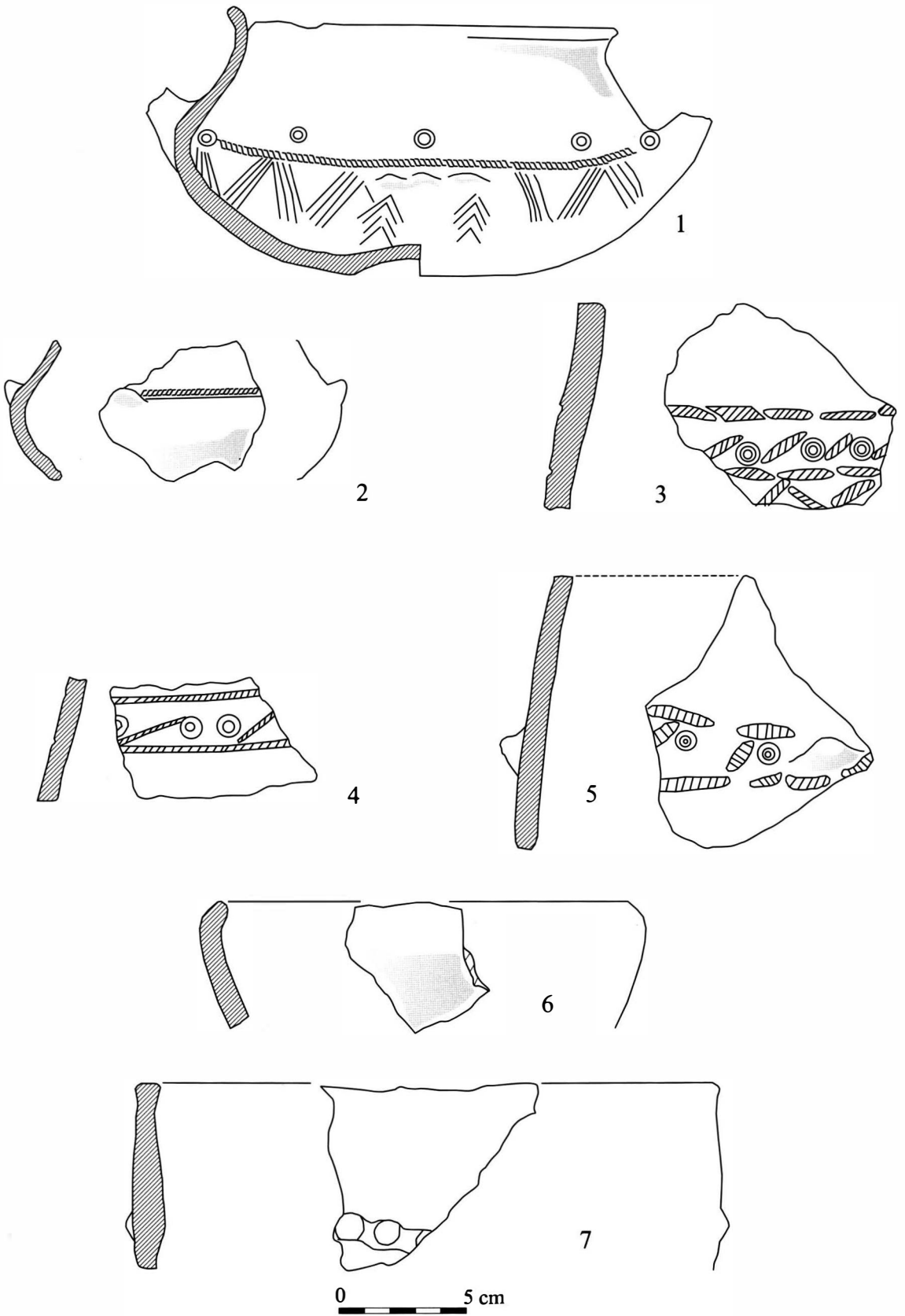


Fig. 10. Niculițel-Cornet 2000.  
1-7. Pottery discovered in Pit no. 1, C 4/C.

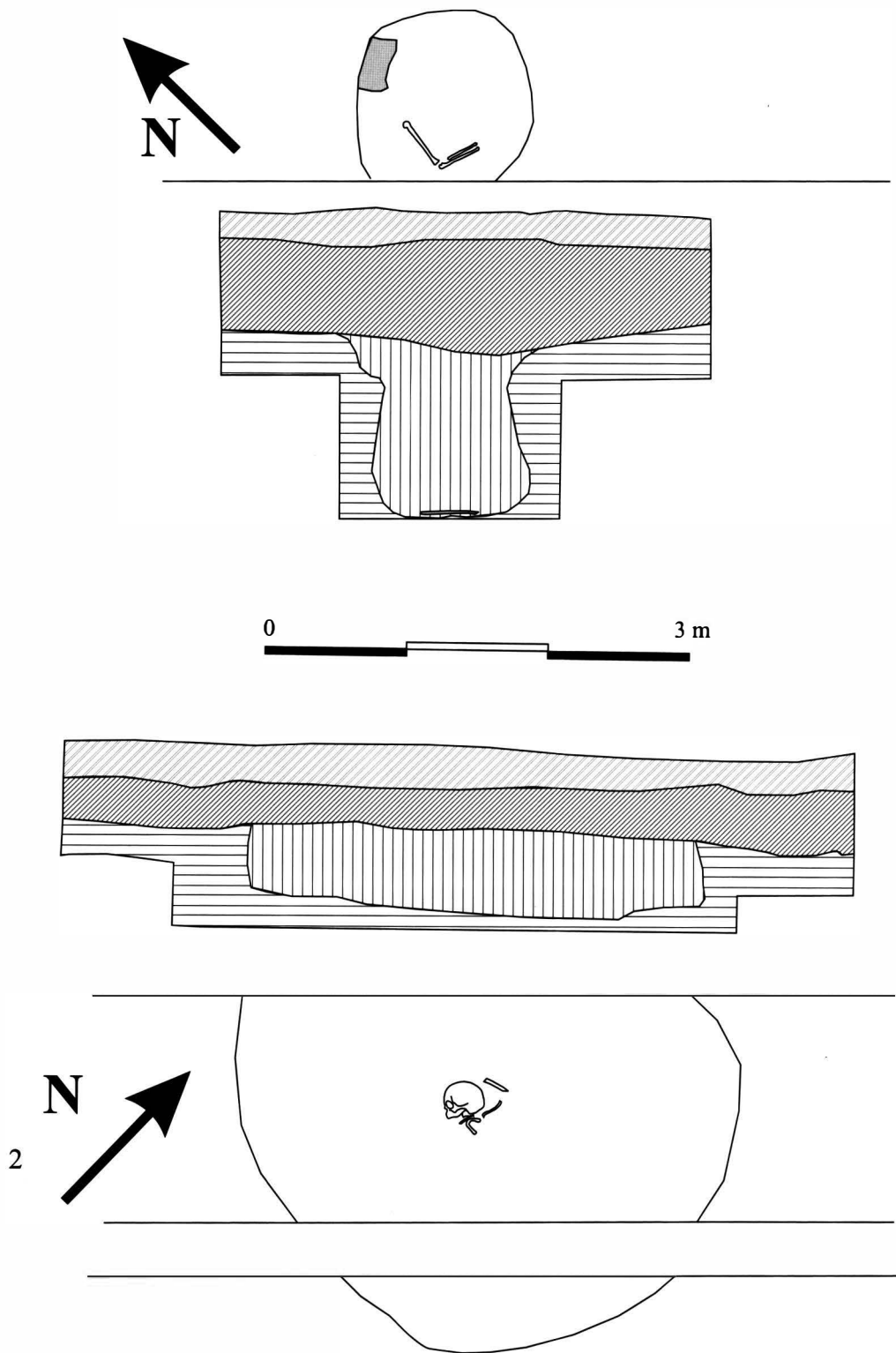


Fig. 11. Niculițel-Cornet 2000.

1. Pit no. 7, S VI; 2. Dwelling no. 1, S K.

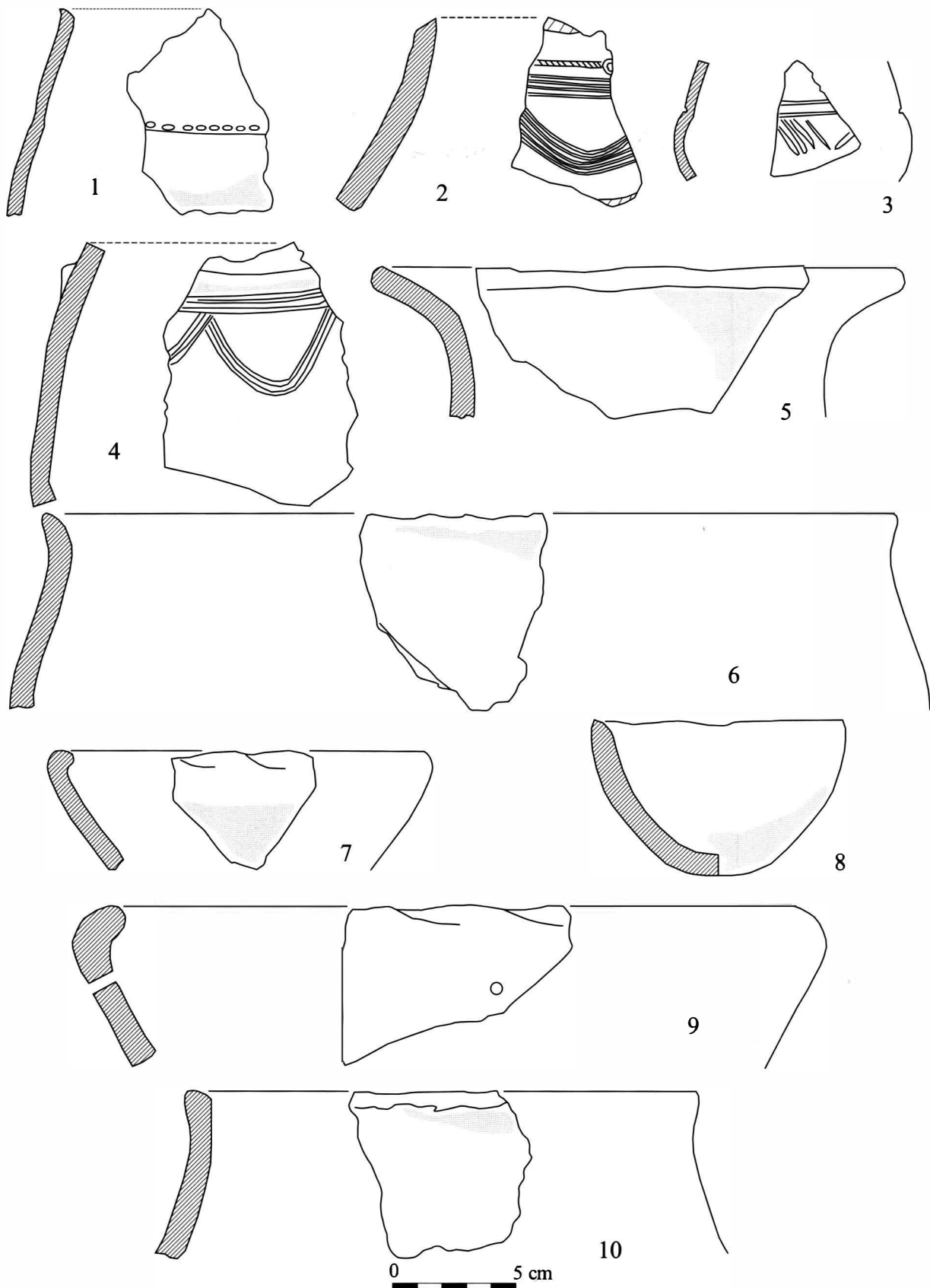


Fig. 12. Niculițel-Cornet 2000.  
1- 10. Pottery from the *dwelling no. 1*, S K.

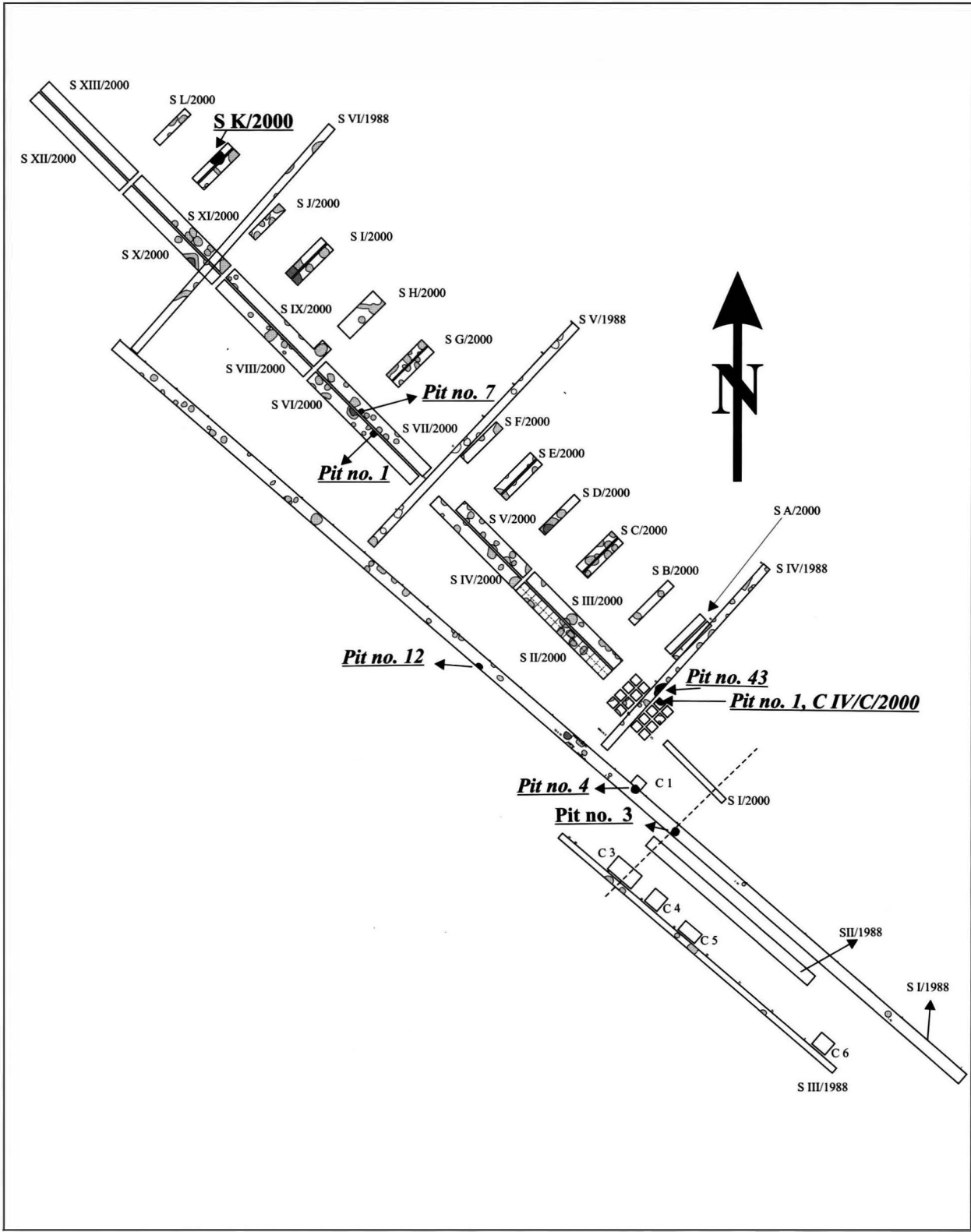


Fig. 13. Niculițel-Cornet 1988, 2000. Graphic reconstruction of the investigation plan (with only the Early Iron Age discoveries).