

# SOME CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO THE INTERPRETATION OF SYMBOLS FROM A CULTURAL, HISTORICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE, AS WELL AS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEO-ENEOLITHIC ARTIFACTS FROM OLTENIA

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**Abstract:** The approach of a theme that considers the religious phenomenon in prehistory implies, firstly, the adoption of a specific methodology, which allows a better understanding of it, provided the reconstruction of its structure is hampered by “the opacity of the archaeological document”<sup>1</sup>. Neo-Eneolithic anthropomorphic representations are covered with a multitude of symbols and signs that amaze, impress, intrigue. The study of these artifacts, and their symbolism, are extremely important to understand the reality of antiquity, taking into account their presence in various cultic rituals. Sculptural representations with human images appear under various designations: anthropomorphic figurines, idols, statuettes, three-dimensional miniature anthropomorphic representations<sup>2</sup>. Recent studies also include anthropocentrism, conditioned collateral by human – animal hybridism, new ideas regarding the cult of the Mother Goddess, such as matrifocal, matristic, matricentric<sup>3</sup>, as well as the semiotic matrix unit that has the role of deciphering the signs of anthropomorphic idols<sup>4</sup>. Both the religious ceremonial and the mythical imaginary have complex connotations regarding the spirituality of the Neo-Eneolithic populations.

**Keywords:** representation, culture, practice, proportion, interpretation

Anthropomorphic representations have their own relevance, through the attitudes that the characters render, through their auxiliary elements, clothing, jewellery, accompanying objects (eg, throne, stool). As an example, in this regard, I mention here the figurines that constitute decorations of the altars, in fact representations of the Mother Goddess, possibly also of her male acolyte<sup>5</sup>.

For the significance of the number and location of idols, we can provide the relevant example of the Cucuteni site discovered in Scânteia, Iași County, where over 900 whole or fragmentary anthropomorphic representations, along with a large number of anthropomorphic vessels, allowed the documentation of a „possible cult centre” in that place<sup>6</sup>. It is also important to analyse the numerical variability of the anthropomorphic representations and the anthropomorphic

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<sup>1</sup> Eliade 1981, p. 8–15.

<sup>2</sup> Bailey 2005, p. 26 and the following.

<sup>3</sup> Rountree 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Merlini 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Popovici 2000, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Popovici 2000, p. 142.

vessels, during the evolution of some cultures, which provides significant data on possible transformations taking place in the magical-religious field. Such a clue is given to us, for example, by the numerical increase of male items, which are initially missing altogether and later, towards the end of the Neolithic period and in the Eneolithic period, begin to make their presence felt and increase their appearances, indicating, thus, the modification of the role of men in society<sup>7</sup>.

### **Gender ratio and rendering methods to the analysed representations<sup>8</sup>**

In the group we dealt with, there is a very small number of male representations, this fact being interpreted by specialists as an ascent of the man in the social life, who, until then had been matriarchal. Such representations can be found in pl. 8/7a-c, in which the sex is strongly outlined. Male anthropomorphic idols, represented with diagonals on the chest and girdles, express either a certain social status or may represent a war deity<sup>9</sup>. As an example of this, we can consider the idol in pl. 10/5a-c or that of pl. 8/7a-c (on a naked representation). An interesting, even curious apparition, is represented by the idol from pl. 2/8, which appears to wear the diagonal on the chest, along with possible clothing items specific to anthropomorphic female idols.

An interesting aspect is the ritual nudity that appears in many of the representations, of which we exemplify here only with those in pl. 3/6a-b and pl. 3/7a-c.

According to the position of some of the idols, which have straight legs but slightly forward-tilted body, we can assume that this position was intended to facilitate manual activities, as it is clear that they were performed for the spiritual, magical-religious field. Unfortunately, we cannot establish precisely what activities required such a position. From the point of view of assigning them to one sex or another, we can see that this position is found predominantly in the female sex (pl. 1/3a-c; 1/4a-c; 1/6a-c). A piece interpreted as belonging to the male sex (pl. 1/2a-c), having a series of characters that do not define that sex (protruding breasts and raised buttocks), but also the „marking” of the sex located towards the waist, is more likely to be a woman as well, to whom, for some reason, the navel was marked, a common practice in the Neo-Eneolithic period, if we limit ourselves even to how some of the representations in the catalogue are decorated (e.g. pl. 4/6a-b or pl. 12/4a-c).

The items with legs apart are few, one of them being the one in pl. 2/6a-c, portraying a female character.

Pl. 1/8 presents us with a fragment of a vessel, having as anthropomorphic representation of a woman with the hands down, belonging to the Dudești culture, but such representations also appear in Precucuteni. This type of representation can also be found beyond the borders of Romania, in the sites of linear pottery, or the „ceramic culture with pierced strip decoration” from the former Czechoslovakia<sup>10</sup>.

However, this type of body rendering seems to be taken over rather under the influence of the Hamangia culture, which transmitted some elements to the Precucuteni culture, but also to the Dudești culture. There is no definite interpretation of that type of interpretation.

The female sex is often emphasized by the presence of the sex triangle, which appears on representations rendered as nude, as is the case in pl. 9/3a-c or pl. 9/5a-c. Sometimes it is found that this triangle is strongly marked, by exaggerated dimensions, as it appears in pl. 11/8a-c. Such a feature is not a random deviation, because it appears marked in the same way on some

<sup>7</sup> Nichita 2021.

<sup>8</sup> As it presented from the title, the analysis will count strictly in the interpretation of the symbols, without going into details regarding the archaeological contexts. I would like mention the fact that some pieces from the Olt County Museum collection, which we analyzed, were also published: Popovici 2014, p. 25–54.

<sup>9</sup> Lazarovici 2004, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> Marinescu-Bilcu 1974, p. 92.

representations in the Cucuteni Culture area<sup>11</sup>. The triangle representing the sex, however, appears not only on nude anthropomorphic idols, but also on decorated ones, such as the one in pl. 8/6a-b.

### Manners of rendering

The decoration made by different techniques, such as incision, excision, painting, may in some cases represent elements of clothing (see pl. 2/1a-c; 2/5a-c; 3/1a-c; 5/4a-c), but in other cases it is possible to represent the tattoo (pl. 2/2a-c; 7/6; 12/1a-c).

In some cases, only some of the features appear, considered perhaps defining, such as the moustaches (see pl. 11/6a-b, in which the rest of the details of the face are almost completely missing). In other situations, idols rendered facial features with details, or even with symbolism and some emotional impact, such as in the case of the idol in pl. 11/3a-b, at which the eyes are bulging, the mouth round, wide open, as in a cry of fright, or astonishment. Its mouth, created by a deepened thrust, is very expressive. Other pieces with the face rendered by realistic features can be found, for example, in pl. 7/7, 7/8, 9/7a-c, 12/5, 8/3a-c, 8/1a-c. Often, the figure is highlighted by schematized features, such as those in pl. 7/2, 5/7. In some pieces, the face is made only by pulling clay with the fingers, to highlight the nose, so in a simplistic manner (see, for example, pl. 6/3, 7/1/a-c). The human figure sometimes appears represented in rough form, without well-highlighted features, but also carelessly crafted (e.g. pl. 2/8a-b, 9/2), with somewhat misshapen aspects. We believe that, in such cases, the pieces do not represent divinities, because it is a well-known fact that there is a concern for them to be neatly rendered, beautifully shaped, as a sign of the devotion they enjoyed. Of course, the rendering of the face in the shape of a „bird's beak” is related to the Vinča environment and has a definite symbolic significance.

Instead, other items, crafted with great skill, from „expensive” materials, such as the idol in pl. 2/7a-b, made of marble, is clearly a representation of the divinity.

In general, there is a great variability of rendering methods, there being rough representations (pl. 3/3) simple, but also others, made in a refined manner, with a meticulous and carefully designed décor. Some items, such as the one in pl. 2/3a-c render the female body in a very realistic manner, being a real statuette, depicting the ritual nudity that characterized most of the Neo-Eneolithic communities, possibly being interpreted as a lack of hiding in relation to the divine. Another example of this can be the piece from pl. 2/3a-c or that of pl. 4/3a-c. Others are rendered schematically, for example the idol in pl. 4/2a-b. As a way of rendering the face, the face in the shape of a „bird's beak” appears (for example, the idol in pl. 6/1a-c), the bilobate face (for example, the idol in pl. 1/2a-c), with perforations on the face or on the side of the head (pl. 5/2a-c; 6/2a-c), or even in combinations that bring together the „bird's beak” face and the lateral perforations of the head (pl. 5/5). An example of extreme schematization is the bone pieces, which, for the most part, do not have marked facial features and the demarcation of the main areas of the body is made by deep notches (pl. 6/7; 6/4). We must not forget that the bone pieces were made according to certain precise rules and respected on a large area. However, there are also deviations from such canons, which led to the formation of regional variants<sup>12</sup>.

An interesting case seems to us that of the item from pl. 9/1a-c, which, in our opinion, may have a kind of triangular chastity belt applied and fixed to the lower abdomen could explain the presence of the fold of „skin” above it, which can appear on the body when it is tightly fastened. It remains difficult to argue, however, the obvious absence of a way of fixing it, because no traces of bonds or other supporting elements appear on the idols.

We also find it interesting to point out that many anthropomorphic female representations, presented in the catalogue (pl. 4/5) show more supple silhouettes. They are painted red, but they

<sup>11</sup> Petrescu-Dimbovița 2004, fig. 214/1; 215/10.

<sup>12</sup> Comșa 1995, p. 57.

show no signs of secondary burning. We believe that a possible interpretation of this could be the rendering of young women, to whom vitality is amplified by the presence of ochre.

Another special aspect is the pieces that are made up of two symmetrical halves, joined longitudinally (such as the one in pl. 12/3a-c). This fact is certainly not related to the method of modeling, but it is related to the conception of the duality of the divinity of the Mother Goddess, practically making a symbolic reference to two of its important attributes, very likely those related to life and death. There are also some pieces bearing symbols with ideogram value, of which I mention here only those rendered in pl. 1/1a-c and pl. 10/3a-c.

The lack of head in some of the representations is to be noted, which is broken from ancient times. Eugen Comşa interpreted this aspect as people's dissatisfaction with the divinity that did not fulfil their wishes, so they took revenge on the idol that represented divinity, breaking his head. Of course, it is not excluded that his head would have been broken due to other causes during the stay in the ground. In some cases, (see pl. 2/2a-c), clothing is rendered very simplistically, in others with many details and with a special complexity (see pl. 7/5a-b).

In pl. 2/4a-c is rendered an anthropomorphic vessel which, in our opinion, is similar to those representing characters with a vessel on their heads, as several have been discovered in Muntenia (Vidra, Chirnogi and Gumelnița) and which reflects a custom taken from the Mediterranean area, that of carrying weights on the head, which is maintained in the life of villages and in the present period<sup>13</sup>.

### Zoomorphic representations

In connection with zoomorphic representations, they have received various interpretations over time, being considered toys by some specialists, due to their small size, by others being related to the cult of animal husbandry, to the protection of herds, by others with magical-religious rites for the increase of herds, fruitfulness and abundance<sup>14</sup>. Usually, these pieces, by the shape of their body, by the size of their limbs, but also by the presence of other elements, such as the shape of the muzzle, the horns, the tail, expressed the belonging of that representation to one species or another of animal. I would like to mention that, in the group we dealt with, we have only one bird that appears in the form of a figurine, that of pl. 8/4a-b. We consider it worth noting that, besides the pieces that have clearly highlighted characteristics, there were others, which we can consider „undefined representations” of animals, which can express either the lack of skill of the craftsman, the reduced importance of the rendered animal or, why not, the creation of a mammal „prototype”, with poorly differentiated elements, lacking the defining features of the species, but used as a general „identification” of animals (e.g. representation in pl. 4/4 or pl. 4/8). They usually show signs of secondary firing.

The item from pl. 5/1 is especially interesting, which, in our view, could represent a pregnant animal, which is an additional argument for the use of these idols in cults dedicated to increasing the herds of domestic animals.

It is important to point out that, as already mentioned, for a long time, these representations were considered toys, but some of them, where the raw material from which they were modelled was of good quality, the care with which they were executed, are arguments against that hypothesis, except perhaps for some situations, when they were discovered in burnt houses. Moreover, idols with details rendered as close to reality as possible, made of fine paste, find their equivalent in zoomorphic idols, used in the cult of domestic animal husbandry, or for the worship of wild ones. Such examples might be animals from pl. 6/6 (dog) or pl. 5/6a-b (bull). Other even more enlightening examples in this regard are the decorated pieces, with an elaborate ornamentation,

<sup>13</sup> Comşa 1995, p. 177–120.

<sup>14</sup> Petrescu-Dimbovița 2004, p. 245–266; Marinescu-Bilcu et alii 2000, p. 147.

bearing a symbolism that we can hardly decode nowadays. One such example is the animal in pl. 3/2a-b, or that of pl. 12/8.

Similarly interesting is the existence of a perforation in the neck of some of the small pieces, such as the one in pl. 3/8 or pl. 5/6a-b which indicates that they could be suspended to be worn around the neck. It is quite possible that they served as amulets, or talismans, for hunters or shepherds, because it is obvious that the magical-religious practices included the protection of flocks, implicitly of their breeders, or of those who cared for them. I consider it useful to mention the lack of head in some of the zoomorphic pieces. In such cases, however, we cannot offer an interpretation similar to that given for breaking the head from anthropomorphic idols, because many of these representations are coarse enough and have no fine paste to entitle us to attribute those animals to divinities.

We consider zoomorphic idols to have a diversity of animals, for which we will provide only a few brief explanations below.

### **The bull**

Bull heads, as well as the entire images of the animal, abound in religious practices and appear as early as the Palaeolithic, but, with some variations, remain a constant presence throughout history. Such representations are in direct connection with magical-religious practices specific to hunting communities, and later to those of farmers. We must not forget the Uranian character of the bull, as well as its role in genesis, being chosen as partner and fertilizer of the Great Goddess, as a chthonic and fertilizing deity. Given that, in the relationship between the two, the most important role is played by hierogamy, obviously, the bull as a genesis deity occupies a secondary role<sup>15</sup>.

Vessel protomes, with more realistic or simplistic, symbolic representations of bull's heads, at least in Cucuteni culture, are considered by G. Bodi as a „symbolic figuration of hierogamy, necessary in carrying out certain rituals“. It is very likely that a similar interpretation will be valid for other Neo-Eneolithic cultures in Romania. As examples of zoomorphic representations depicting the bull, I mention here pl. 5/3, pl. 10/7a-b, pl. 11/1a-c, pl. 12/2a-b, F.P. no. 155 – M.O.C.

Without making a statistic collection here, it is possible that the bull appears most frequently as a figurative representation between domestic or wild animals.

### **The horse**

It is an animal with a complex meaning that ranges from the symbol of virility to apotropaic function. In our batch of items, it appears only in one representation, the one from pl. 10/6a-b.

### **The ram**

The ram's representations are believed to come from the Near and Middle East, where it is a representation of the protective divinity of brass metallurgists. In our case, it may have expressed an animal with a remarkable presence in the herds of livestock breeders. As examples of such idols we list here pl. 6/5a-b, pl. 10/2a-c, pl. 11/2a-b, pl. 11/4a-c, pl. 11/7a-b.

### **The dog**

Often, as a representation, this animal is connected with animal sacrifices. One such item depicting a dog appears in pl. 6/6 or pl. 6/8.

### **The snake**

The snake is also an animal of complex significance, and in Neo-Eneolithic cultures it is most commonly associated with the symbolism of life. It sometimes appears as a companion of the

<sup>15</sup> Bodi 2011, p. 155–162.

Great Goddess, also as a symbol of life, but also of cyclical regeneration and the passage of time (this animal being sometimes represented only schematically, in the form of a spiral).

### **The hedgehog**

Although it is an animal specific to the climate in our country, it does not appear frequently in figurative representations. In the batch of pieces we analysed, this is a singular occurrence (pl. 8/5a-b).

### **The vessels**

One could not review anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations without considering a series of other cult accessories, such as vases or items of furniture.

We will not dwell upon vessels, since they are generally well known both in form and representation, especially anthropomorphic, or because of their protomes (see pl. 3/5a-b or pl. 4/7) and the knobs we find affixed to them. I mention here only the vessel from pl. 3/4a-b, which, in our view, a possible lamp. It is well evidenced by archaeological excavations that such vessels were used in the Neo-Eneolithic period, especially in tombs, where they were deposited to light the way of the dead to the underworld. One such example is the necropolis of Grădiştea Ulmilor-Vărăşti.

### **The throne, the chair**

The throne, even when empty, is an attribute of divinity. An almost similar function can be fulfilled by the chairs discovered during archaeological excavations. Such pieces of furniture are rendered in pl. 7/3a-b, pl. 7/4a-c. We consider it necessary to show here, as Eugen Comşa remarked, that the more neatly made chairs, with high backs, sometimes with stylized rendering of the human body, were certainly not used by ordinary members of the community. They fulfilled the role mentioned above. In contrast, the massive, roughly made chairs were not used in magical-religious worship, and were mere pieces of furniture<sup>16</sup>.

Pl. 1/5a-c, with the idol sitting on the throne, discovered in Drăgăneşti-Olt, is a representation of the divinity, having the head in the shape of a „bird's beak” and hands placed on the lap. It is also interesting that, unlike many other pieces, this one does not show traces of secondary firing, probably considering that, just by its simple image, the divinity ensures a sufficient purification of this representation, which, normally, the pieces obtain only after passing through fire a second time, so through the secondary firing which they are subjected to. The lack of the secondary firing in idols on the throne is no accident, because it is also absent in the divinity represented in pl. 1/7a-c, this time portraying a pregnant woman, probably a hypostasis of the Great Goddess, who had the fertility as one of her defining attributes. This fertility manifests itself in its general, comprehensive sense, relating both to humans and to the surrounding nature. The hands deposited protectively on the abdomen show the natural care of the future mother, which the woman accommodates to the unborn child. Furthermore, in some pieces, an additional argument for the hypothesis that the Great Goddess represented life is the ochre decoration, which appears on some of the pieces, being known that this substance is a life bearing symbol.

### **The altar**

This is an essential and defining element of worship. We will not dwell on its meanings, but we will highlight only one element, which we consider more special. Thus, pl. 10/4 depicts an altar leg with eyes. This can only be the expression of a symbolism specific to distant periods in the human history, which was maintained in the Neolithic, when all objects were animated and protected by certain divinities. In fact, the eyes, as it is well known, have always had an apotropaic role, which they retain to this day.

<sup>16</sup> Comşa 1995, p. 104.

The representations belonging to the Vădastra culture are all well interesting, sometimes depicting the face of the Great Mother Goddess alone, in other cases with her male acolyte, or with two acolytes. These flat idols (e.g. pl. 9/4, pl. 11/5) have holes on their back, in which sacred liquid was kept, or it was deposited only at certain ceremonies, when the idol was also used. These plays fulfill a multiple role, both idol and altar, because, very likely, people prayed to the figure.

### **Worship tables**

These, in a general classification, comprise two main types, namely those with flat board, serving for depositing seeds, solid essences or other materials of this type (for example, those in pl. 9/6a-b, 9/8a-b, 10/1a-c, 12/6).

„Cup” or deepened tables with round, triangular or rectangular „boards” were used for burning or storing substances or liquid essences (see pl. 4/1a-b or pl. 1/7a-c).

As it can be easily seen from the above, the spirituality of the Neo-Eneolithic populations was complex, with defining features for each material culture. Within this small chapter, there has been presented only a series of the general characteristics of the period to which we refer, emphasizing, in places, a series of interesting aspects, strictly related to certain anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or furniture representations, without pretending to make these generalized views specific for one culture or another. In this way, we have made only a small contribution to improving knowledge regarding the representations discovered on the territory of Oltenia, as part of the substantial number of such objects found in Romania. Thus, anthropomorphic idols are rendered in a very diverse manner, but this fact is influenced by their belonging to one civilization or another, as well as by the stage which they originate from. The details with which they are rendered have a significant variability, but it is the expression of the imaginative thinking which, however, differs, even from one tribe to another. As far as the zoomorphic representations are concerned, they either depict animals frequently raised by the populations we have analysed, or they are even idols that represent protective deities of these animals. The furniture fits into the characteristics of the one discovered in other areas of the country. As presence, such elements are not too numerous, but in this case too, there is a substantial variability in the way of rendering specific details and décor.

With this brief review of the main issues raised by the origin, significance and functionality of anthropomorphic plastics in the Oltenia area, we tried to highlight the complexity of the religious phenomenon of a very special characteristic, difficult to decipher. The insufficient knowledge of the Neo-Eneolithic civilizations does not allow us, at least at present, to elaborate theories regarding the significance of various plastic representations that show the presence of the external cultural influences, due to the effective penetration into this space of already neolithic populations. Man's space is no longer physical, concrete, he also lives in a symbolic universe, whose defining elements are art, language and religion. Concepts, habits and concerns change over time according to temporal and spatial terms, but some motifs remain permanent landmarks in people's lives.

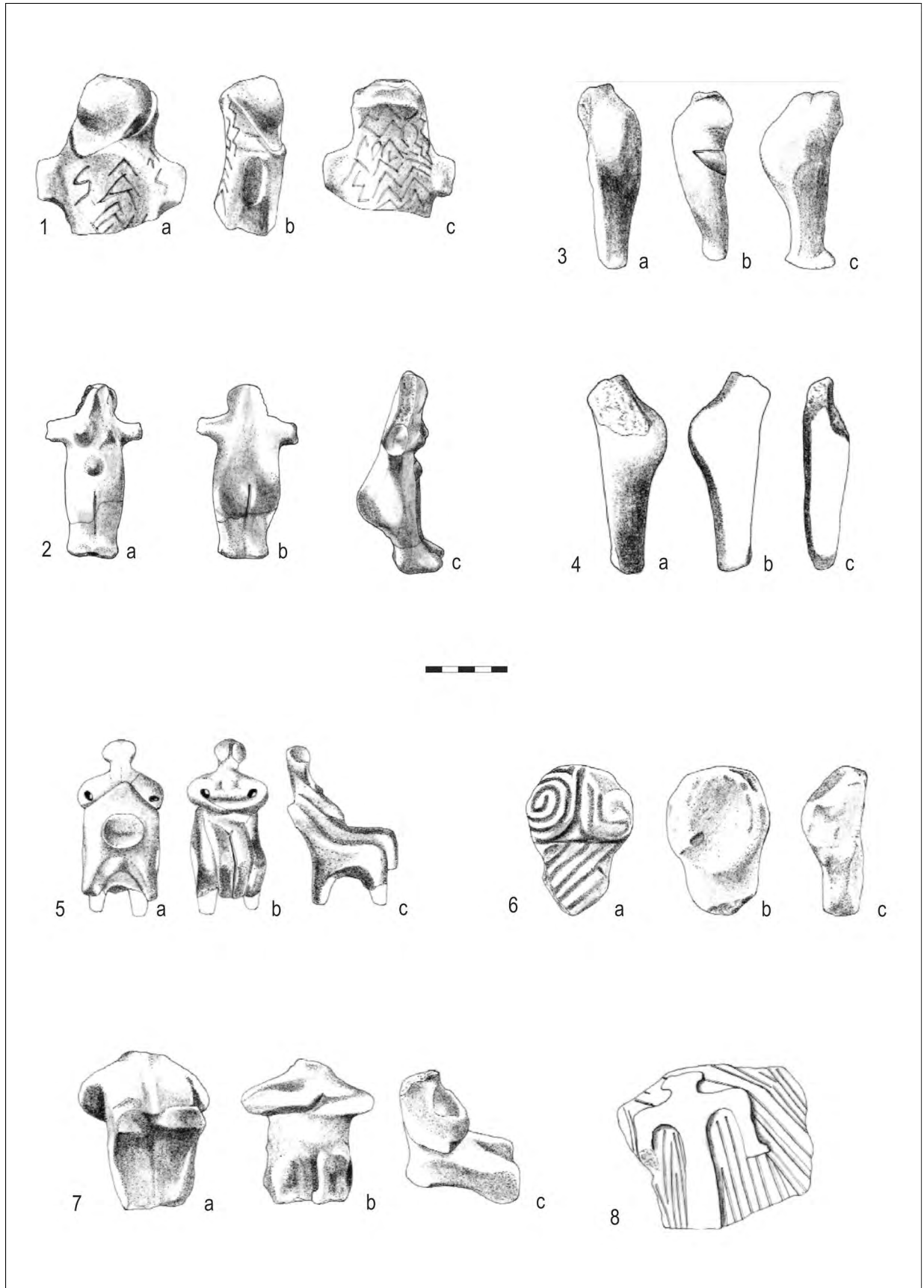
Taking into account the typological and morphological diversity, the expressiveness of the anthropomorphic artifacts, the possibility of a certain plastic category to materialize an aspect of the religious phenomenon through cultic themes, our approach could be a useful working tool that opens the way to new interpretations of the spiritual life. The different aspects of the female character, the variety of her representations, demonstrate, once again, the complexity of the Neolithic spiritual life, but deciphering the meaning remains a problem that still raises questions. Our approach tried to capture the defining elements of the religious phenomenon, the predominant character of female representations in the most varied attitudes, not being a „generally valid explanation for all the cult representations”<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Andreescu 2002, p. 93.

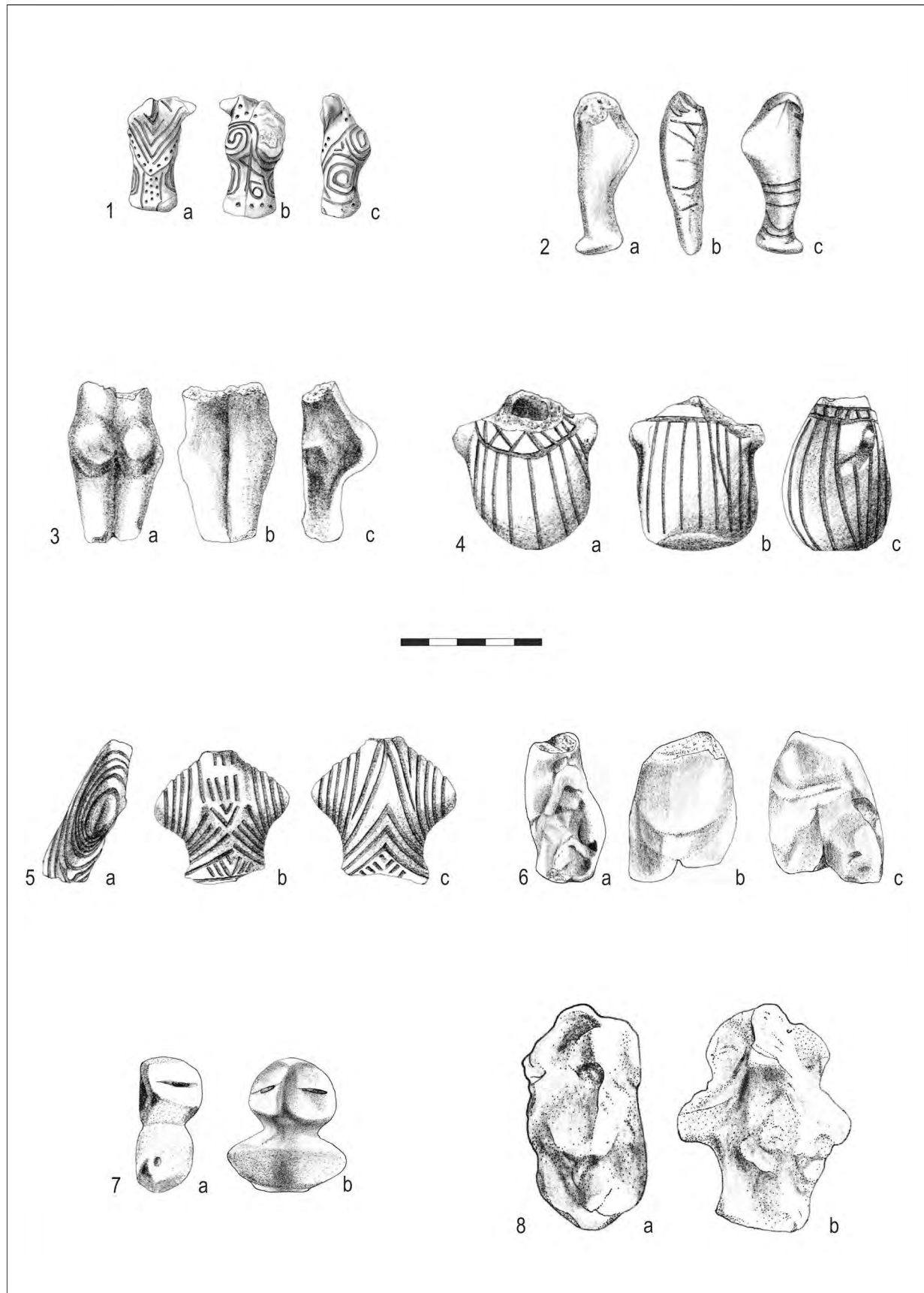
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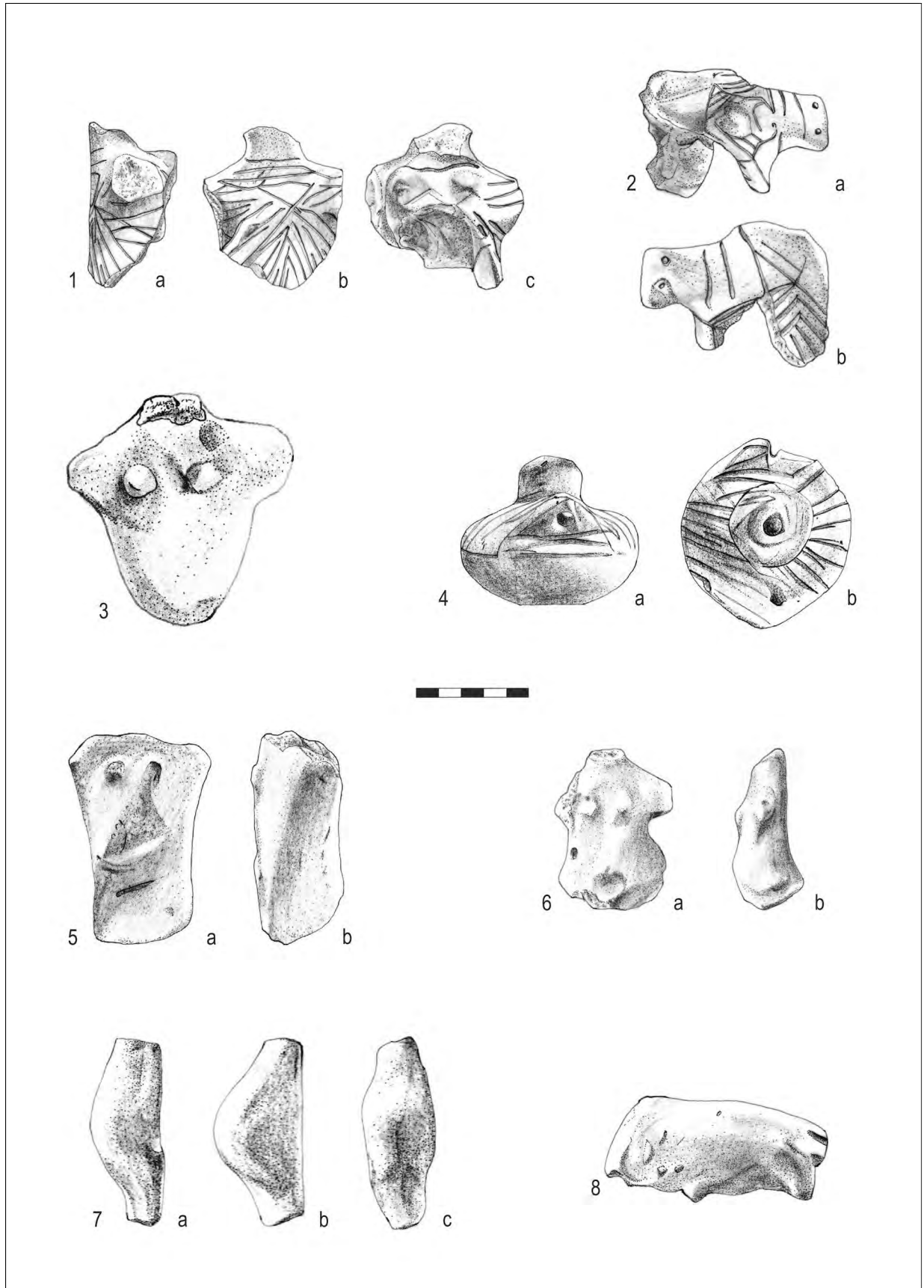




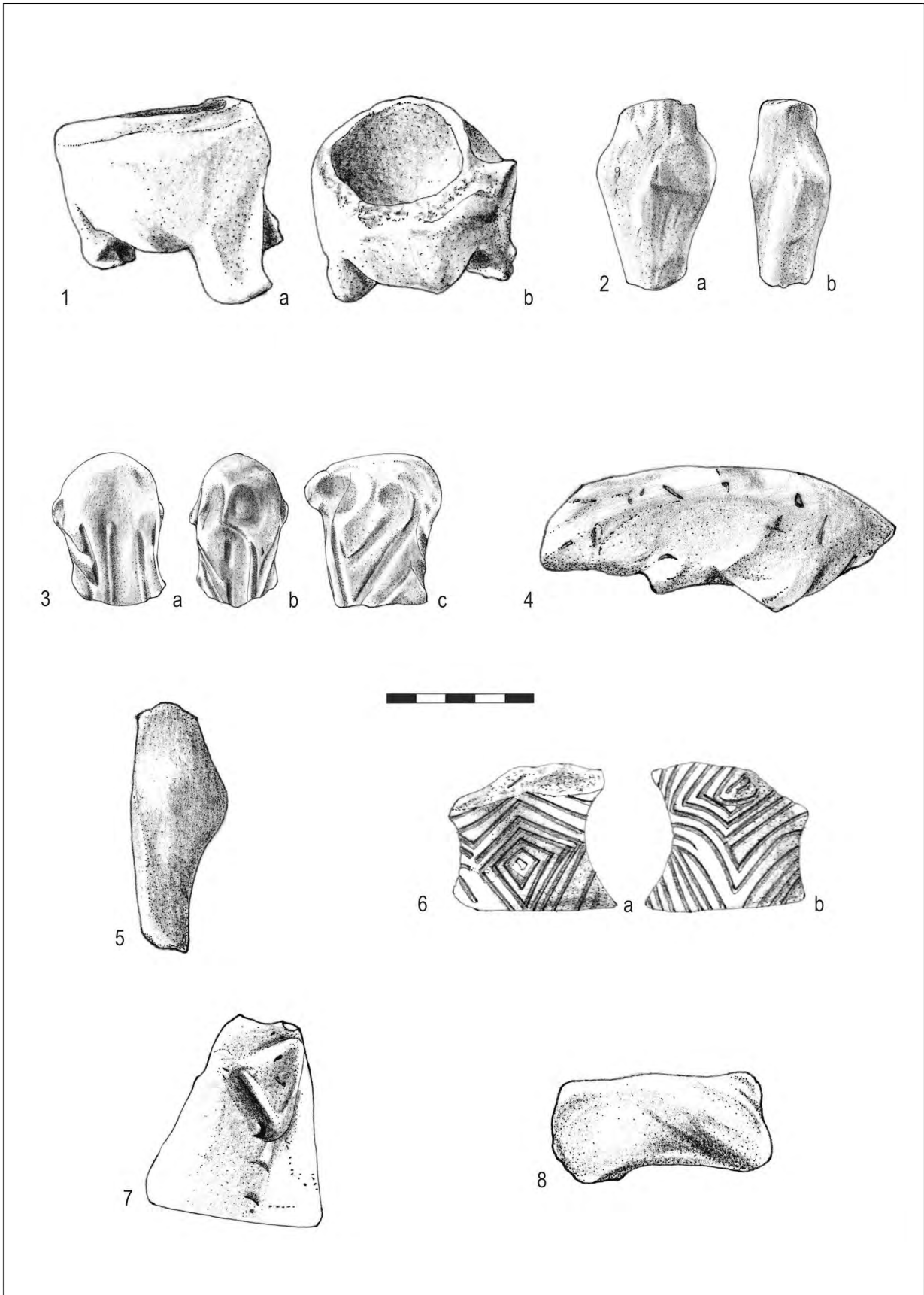
Pl. 1. Objects from the Olt County Museum collection.



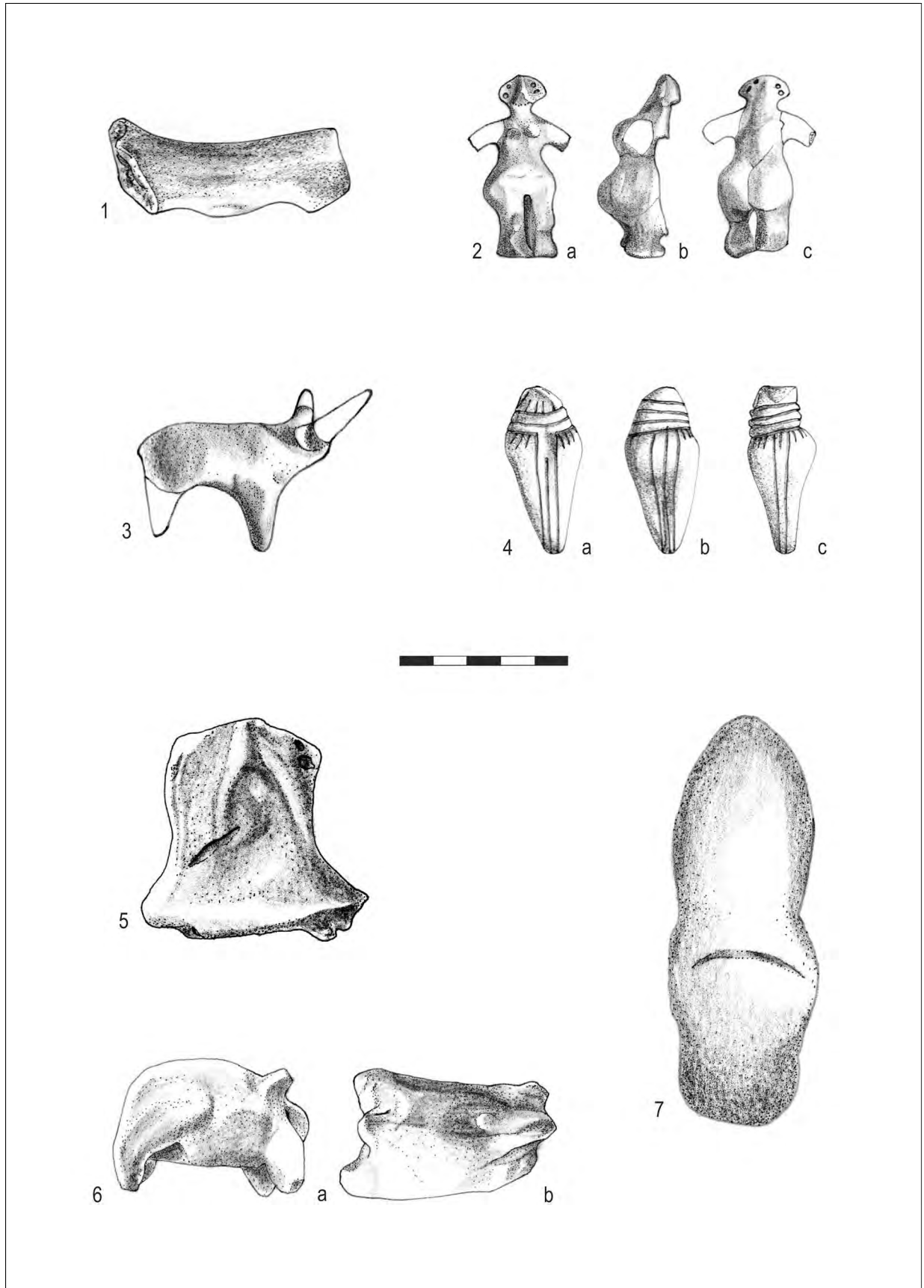
Pl. 2. Objects from the Olt County Museum collection.



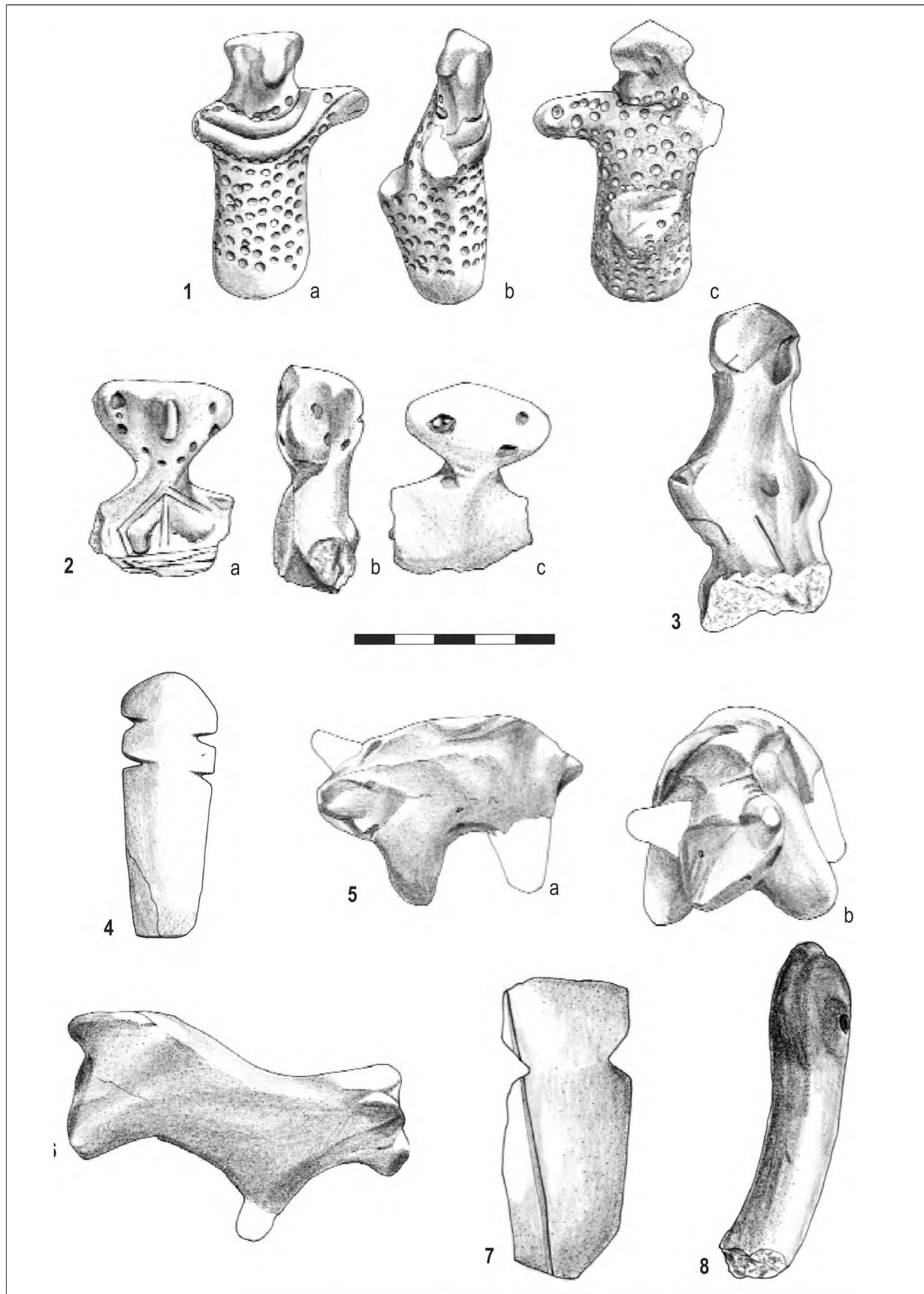
Pl. 3. Objects from the Olt County Museum collection.



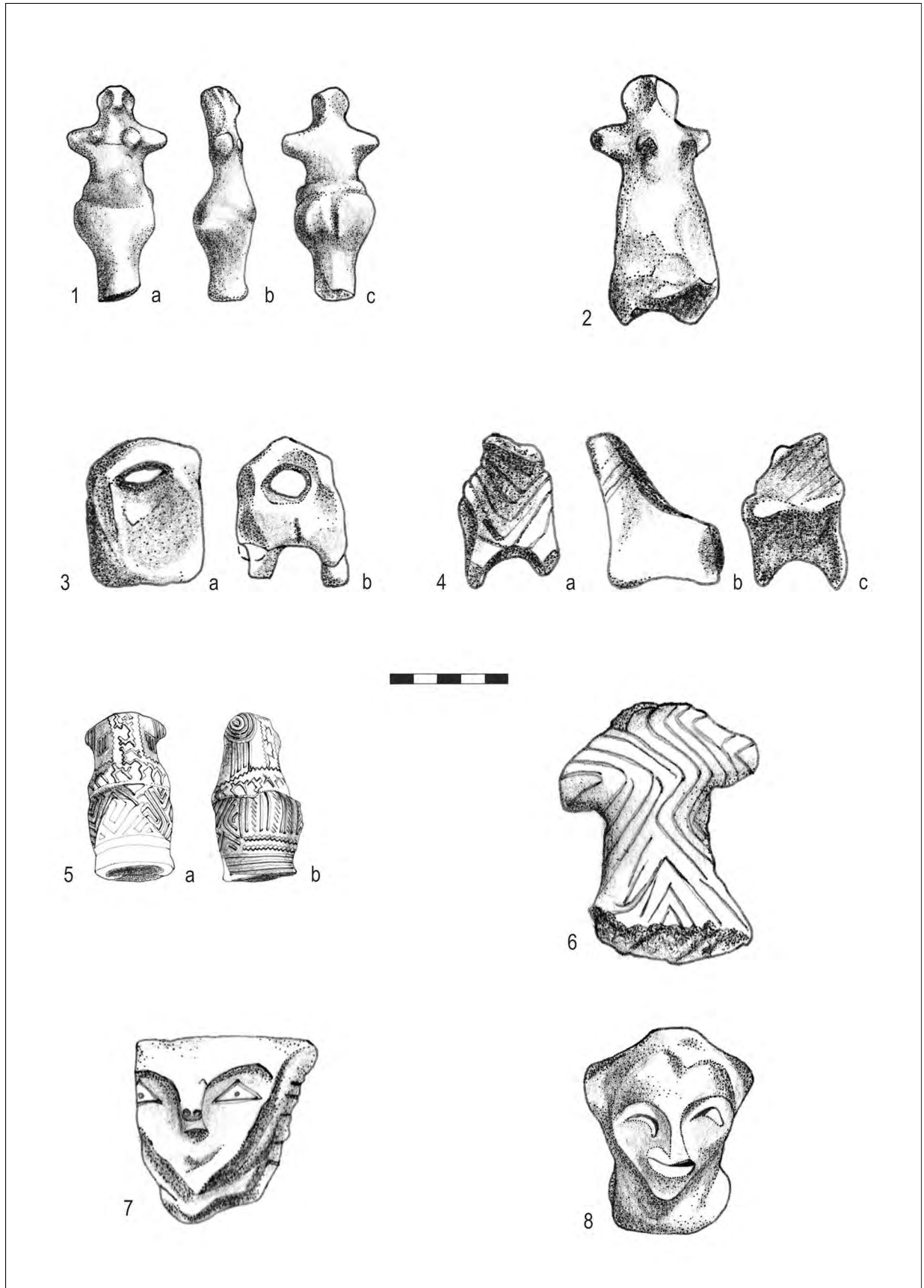
Pl. 4. Objects from the Olt County Museum collection.



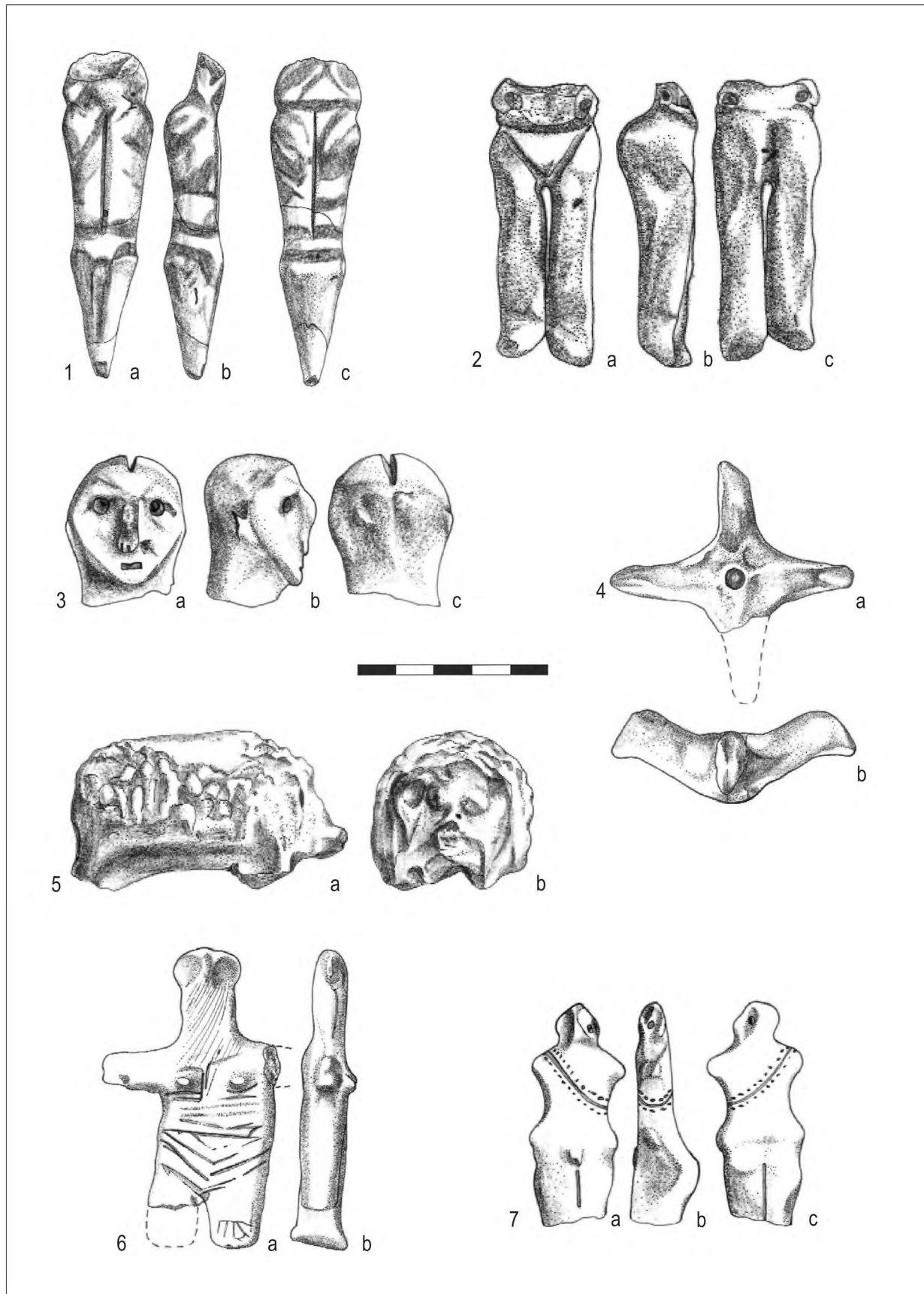
Pl. 5. Objects from the Olt County Museum (1–6) and The Gorj County Museum (7) collections.



Pl. 6. Objects from the Drăgănești-Olt Museum collection.

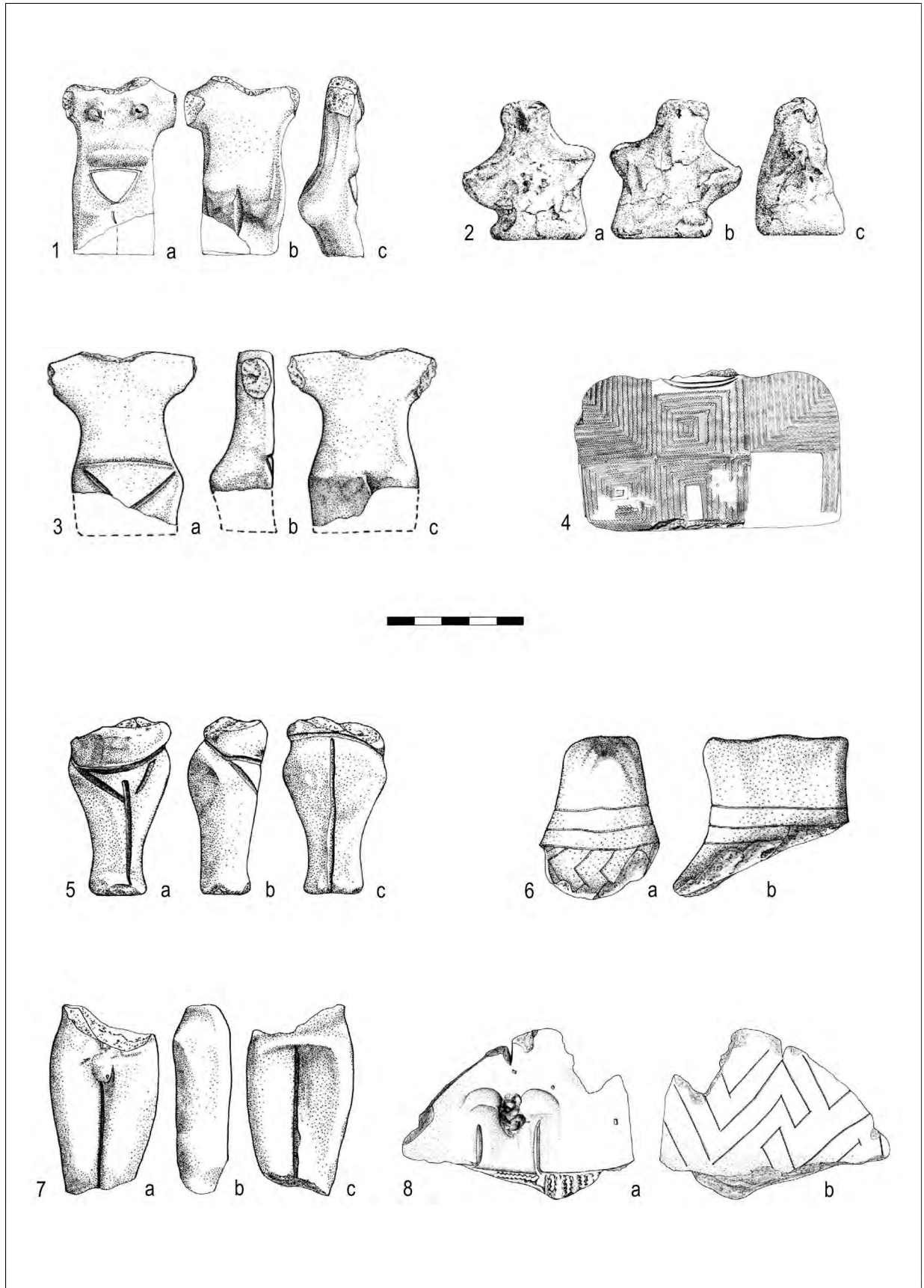


Pl. 7. Objects form The Romanati Museum Caracal collection.

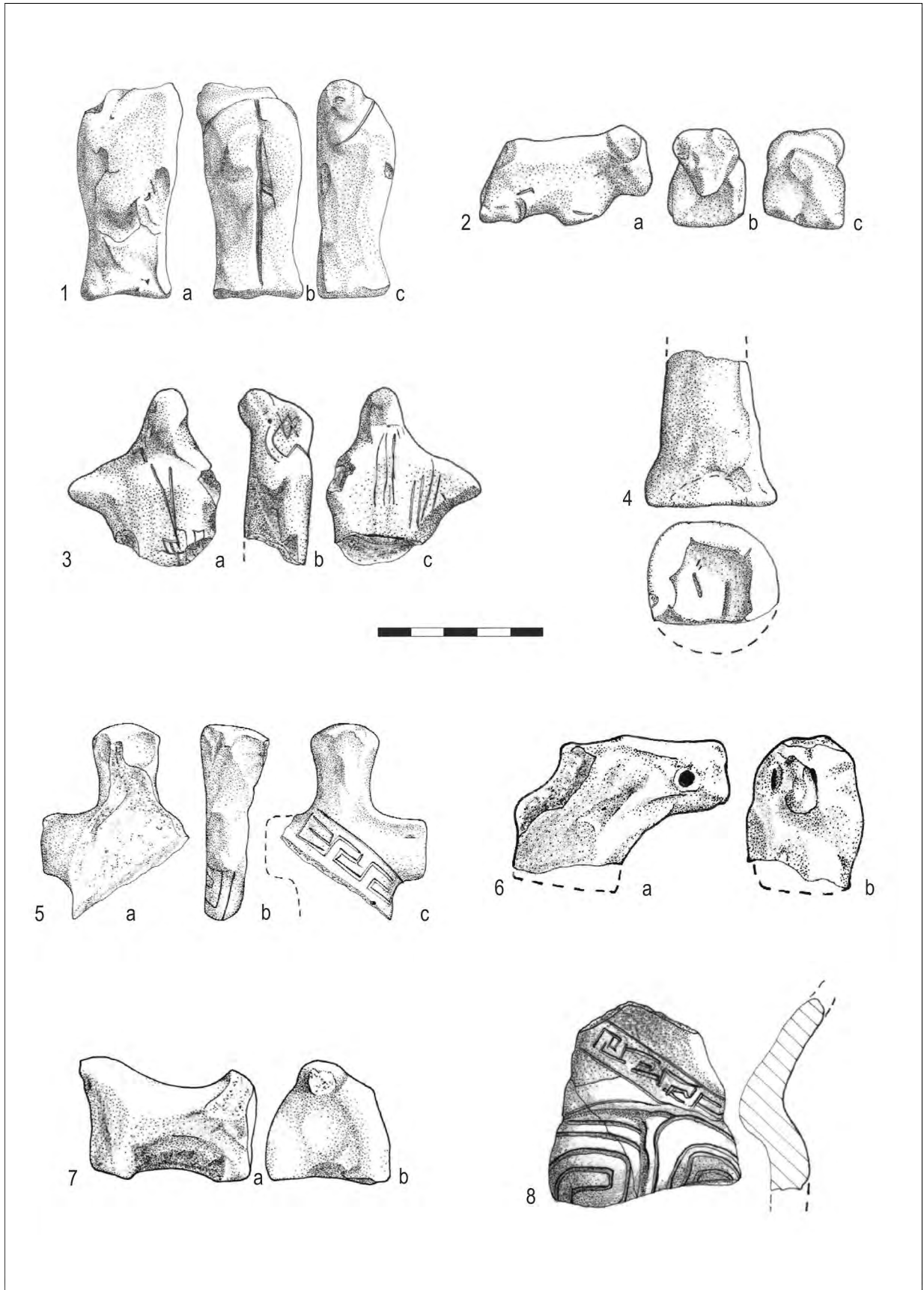


Pl. 8. Objects from The Iron Gates Museum Drobeta-Turnu Severin collection.

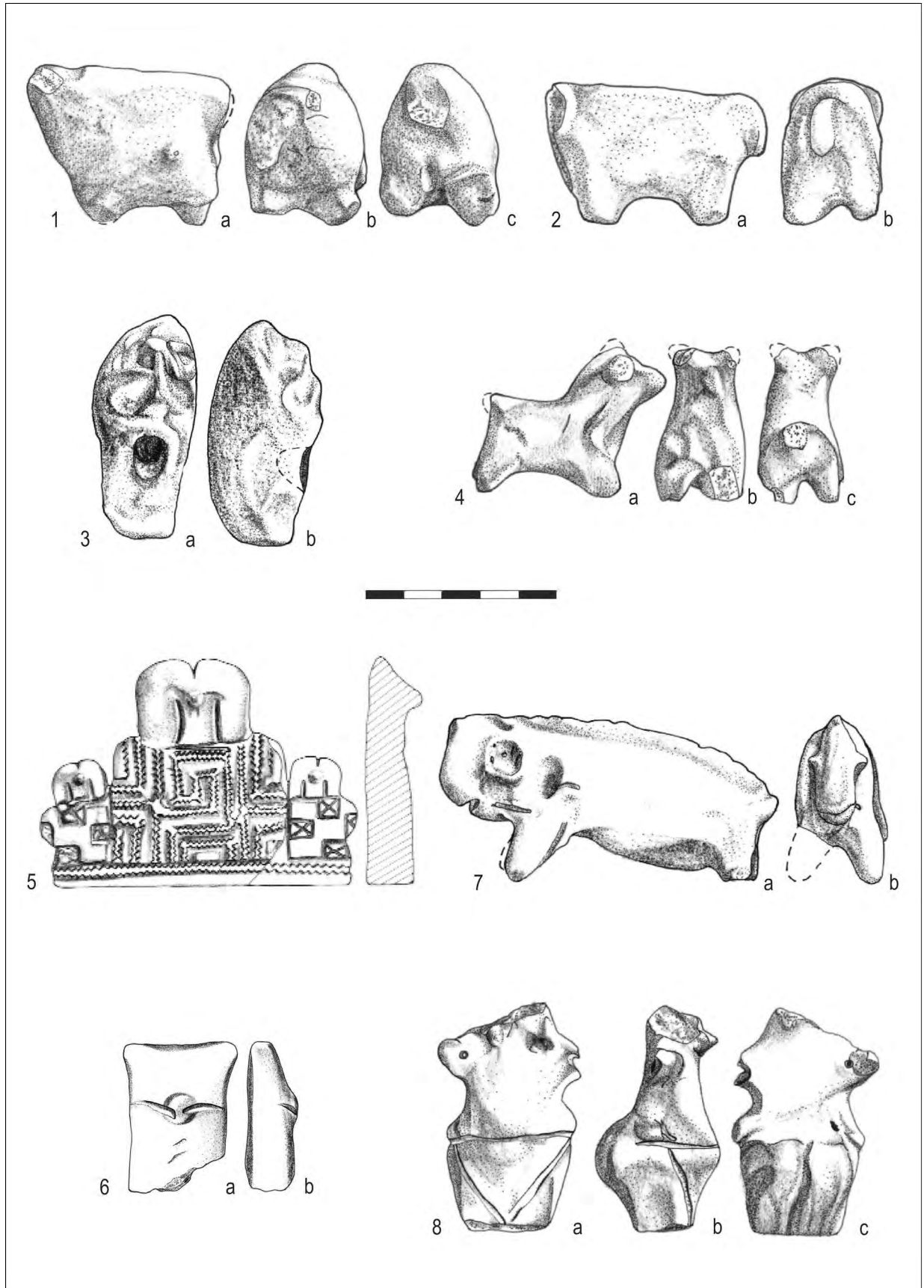




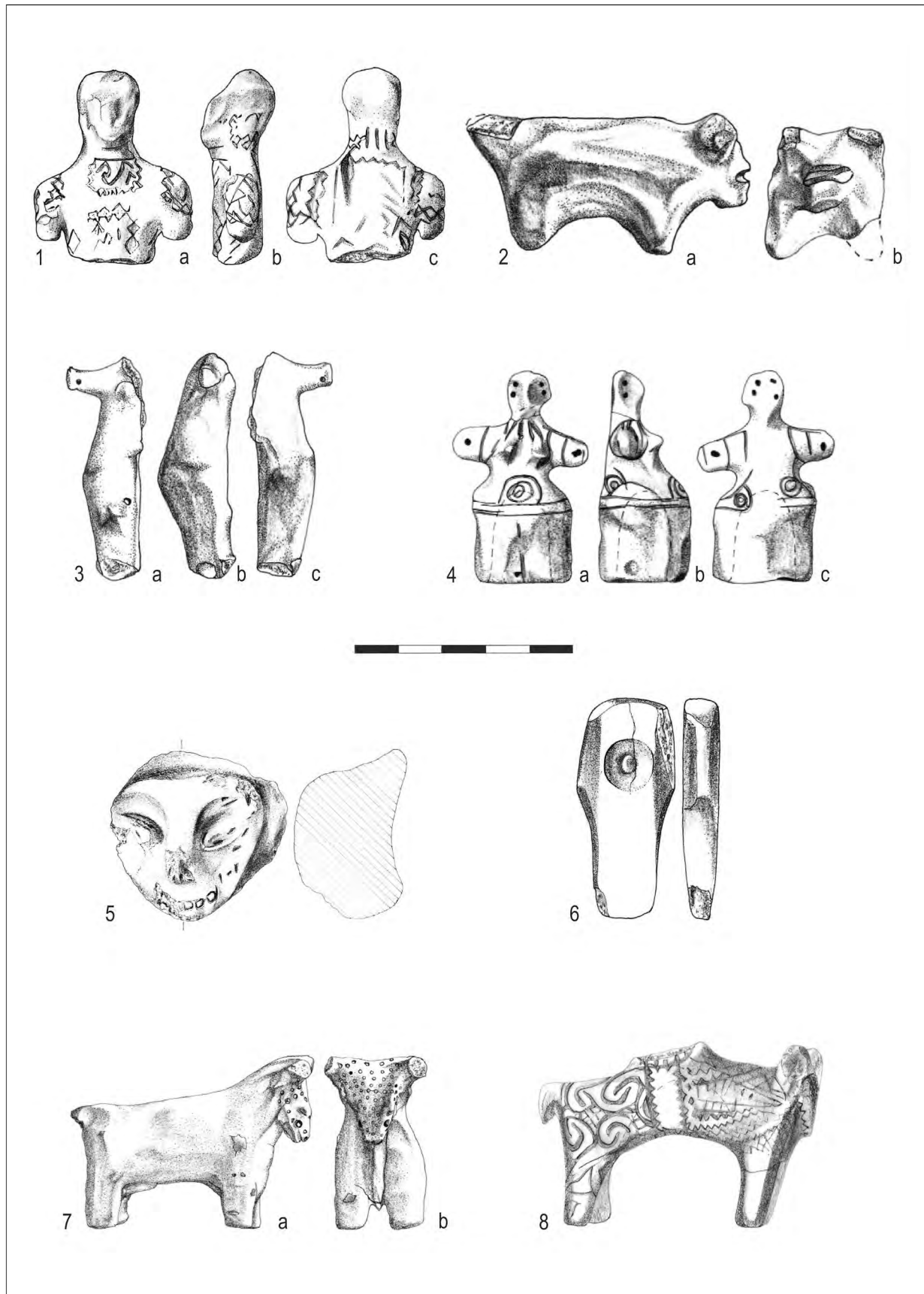
Pl. 9. Objects from The Oltenia Museum Craiova collection.



Pl. 10. Objects from The Oltenia Museum Craiova collection.



Pl. 11. Objects from The Oltenia Museum Craiova collection.



Pl. 12. Objects from The Oltenia Museum Craiova collection.