

BETWEEN EVERYDAY AND RITUAL USE - 'SMALL ALTARS' OR 'CULT TABLES' FROM MĂGURA 'BUDUIASCA', TELEORMAN COUNTY (II): THE DEVELOPED NEOLITHIC FINDS

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Rezumat: Acest studiu își propune să prezinte un al doilea lot de obiecte cunoscute sub denumirea de 'altare', 'altărașe' sau 'mese de cult', ce aparține neoliticului dezvoltat (cca. 5500-5000 î.Hr.). Obiectele au fost descoperite la Măgura, jud. Teleorman. Sunt analizate tipurile ce aparțin celor trei secvențe cronologice, definite tradițional ca secvențe culturale: Dudești timpuriu, Dudești târziu și Vădastra. Sunt avute în vedere mai multe aspecte precum: contextul descoperirilor, morfologia, posibilă funcționalitate și analogiile cu alte zone aflate în vecinătate, atât de la nord, cât și de la sud de Dunăre.

Abstract: This study aims to present a second group of objects, known as 'altars', 'small altars' or 'cult tables', items belonging to the developed Neolithic (c. 5500-5000 BC) and discovered at Măgura, Teleorman County. They are analysed as object types belonging to the three chronological sequences of Developed Neolithic, traditionally defined as cultural sequences: Early Dudești, Late Dudești and Vădastra. The discussion takes into account the context of the finds, the morphology, the possible function and analogies with similar discoveries in the neighboring area, both north and south of the Danube.

Cuvinte cheie: Măgura; sudul României; 'altare'; neolitic dezvoltat; Dudești; Vădastra.

Keywords: Măgura village; southern Romania; 'altars'; developed Neolithic; Dudești; Vădastra.

Introduction

The first part of this article has approached a series of issues related to terminology and functionality of the so-called 'altars', 'small altars' or 'cult tables'; clay objects widespread throughout Southeast European Neolithic (Mirea 2011a). In the following I address the Developed Neolithic (c. 5500-5000 BC) items discovered at the same site near Măgura ('Buduiasca – Boldul lui Moș Ivănuș'), Teleorman County, southern Romania.

The initial sequence belongs to a chronological horizon called 'Early Dudești' (Mirea *in press*) attested in South Walachia at Dudești, the lowest layer – 'Malul Roșu' phase (Comșa 1971: 202), Drăghiceanu – 'Drăghiceanu I' phase (Păunescu 1964: 298), as well in Oltenia region, at Cârcea 'Viaduct' – 'Cârcea IV' phase (Nica 1977). 'Early Dudești' is synchronous with 'Samovodene culture', 'Samovodene phase of Ovčarovo culture' or 'Ovčarovo-Samovodene culture' which occurred south of the Danube, in the north-central area of modern Bulgaria (Stanev 2002: 206; Todorova and Vasjov 1993: 132; Popov 1996: 94).

Several ¹⁴C dates support the 'Early Dudești phase' at Măgura (6543±37 BP (OxA 16636), 6497±35 BP (OxA 16633), 6484±37 BP (OxA 16637), 6463±40 BP (OxA 16630), 6454±39 BP (OxA 16634), 6415±45 BP (OxA 16641), 6371±37 BP (OxA 16669), 6354±37 BP (OxA 16635); Thissen 2013: 25 tab.1), and identified the beginning of the Developed Neolithic, at approximately 5500-5300 cal.BC.

The subsequent sequence, 'Late Dudești' (Mirea *in press*), corresponds to 'Cernica phases' in Central Walachia (Comșa 1971) and 'Dudești III-IV phase' in Eastern and Central Oltenia (Nica 1977). There still no ¹⁴C data for Late Dudești contexts, but it is considered that this phase lasts approx. 100 years, respectively 5300-5200 cal.BC. (Thissen 2013: 26, tab.2).

Vădastra discoveries are assigned to the last Developed Neolithic sequence, whose absolute chronology is suggested by five ¹⁴C dates: 6260±35 BP (OxA 16632), 6278±37 BP (OxA 21404), 6130±40 BP (OxA 16631) (Thissen 2013: 25 tab.1), 6260±32 (OxA 24693) and 6238±34 (OxA 28791) (Evin *et al.* 2015: tab.3), related to approximately 5200-5000 cal. BC.

Context of finds

The 'altars' are present at Măgura, in both Early and Late Dudești (90 pieces), Vădastra (24 pieces) and mixed Dudești – Vădastra contexts (30 pieces). They were discovered with different archaeological features, most of them discard pits and occasionally surface dwellings, and have been

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found in association with other archaeological artefacts. It must be noted that there is a high degree of fragmentation in the 'altar' assemblages: a total number of 144 fragments from 111 objects. Other common features include surface degradation on the 'altars', which are sometimes very eroded, suggesting a lengthy period of exposure following discard. Only two objects survive in pieces larger than 80% of the original¹. They belong to the same Early Dudeşti pit-feature (Cpl.55) investigated at Măgura 'Boldul lui Moş Ivănuş' (Plates II and III). Another object (approx. 40% surviving) which could be reconstructed comes from the remains of a poorly preserved Vădastra surface dwelling (Plate VI.1). All the known types identified have been reconstructed in relation to graphic reconstructions and analogies.

Some remarks have been made on the inventory of two of the most interesting Early Dudeşti undisturbed pit-features (Cpl.40 and Cpl.55). In the first one, which contained no less than 106 complete and restorable ceramic vessels, produced only fragments of 'altars' – 7 fragments, originating from the same number of objects (Mirea 2011b). The other one (Cpl.55), contained 20 restorable ceramic vessels, contained fragments of two restorable 'altars', together with 5 other fragments belonging to two similar objects (Plate I.1). There no observable patterns relating to the depositional choices and post-depositional processes associated with these objects.

Morphology

The Developed Neolithic 'altars' should be classified into three main groups: three-legged, four-legged and legless. The receptacle is generally supported by feet, but examples are known where the base is flat. Molded clay was sometimes applied to the receptacles, on the corners above the legs.

The fragment analysis was carried out using an adapted version of the code sheet for SRAP pottery analysis (Thissen 2008, 11-12, 157), pursuing the correlation with the pottery. Relevant statistics data are summarized in Table 1. The fragments were counted, sized, identified as fabric type and component elements, drawn and photographed. The archaeological context from which each fragment was recovered was also recorded. Fragmentation and the degree of surface abrasion were noted during the recording, as were surface treatment and decoration. The fragments were carefully checked for any traces of soot and charred material on the receptacles fragments.

The analysis of the way in which the 'altars' were created indicated the following steps:

- the separate shaping of receptacles and legs;
- the joining of the legs and receptacles;
- the addition of clay applications (if present);
- preparing for eventual decoration by application of a thin layer of clay over the entire surface, followed by smoothing and polishing;
- the exterior surface decoration.

Fragmentation patterns are suggested by the first three steps of the shaping.

The legs have been modeled in two ways: from two clay plates of different widths that have been joined together at 60° to 90° angles, or from a triangular shaped clay bar.

The receptacle consists of triangular or rectangular base onto which the walls, formed of clay slabs, were attached. A single instance where the receptacle had a closed shape, like a small bowl, modeled by thin clay coils (Plate IV.1) was noted. The legs were generally attached directly to the body of the receptacle. Some of the short triangular legs were attached to the base plate by using a small wooden stick or a piece of reed to mold the clay together, as the visible impressions suggests.

The main features of Dudeşti and Vădastra items will be presented below.

Dudeşti 'altars'

It is difficult to identify any differences in shape and style of 'altars' between the two phases of the Dudeşti sequence (Early – Plates I-III, and Late Dudeşti – Plates IV, VII.3-8). An assessment of chronology could, therefore, only be made in relation to the archaeological context from which the fragments were recovered.

The analysis of the pottery fabric reveals that the same clay used to make other forms of ceramic container was also preferred for the manufacture of 'altars'. This is defined as the fine category of clay, consisting of local alluvial clay tempered with quartz sand and sometime chaff. Several fragments belonging to the 'fine soapy fell' category (Thissen 2008: 78, 79) – clay tempered with fine sand and chaff, sometimes with limestone inclusions and, most likely accidentally, with small shell fragments – were identified. The most common clay type used was the local micaceous clay (van As, Jacobs and Thissen 2004: 125). The 'fine soapy fell' category is thought to be a non-local clay, as identified from ceramic vessels manufactured from this material (Thissen 2008: 90).

The 'altars' are triangular or rectangular in shape, with different sizes and proportions within the component elements. The triangular shape is created by an exterior angle of approx. 60⁰, while the rectangular objects have an exterior angle around 90⁰ (Schwarzberg 2005). It was noted that Early Dudești objects are all triangular, with a shift to a rectangular shape only identifiable in the Late Dudești contexts. At that stage the legs are sometimes widened, giving the appearance of a massive base with rectangular or trapezoidal fenestrations. Unlike Early Dudești where 'altar' corners are generally plain, the Late Dudești 'altars' usually have clay attachments of various shapes and sizes (Plates IV.1, 4, 5, 8, 9 and VII.5, 7, 8). Occasionally the clay attachments take a zoomorphic (Plate VII.1) or bird-like (Plate VII.2) shape, but this is unusual in the study area. Unfortunately, the context of these unusual discoveries is a mixed Dudești/ Vădastra level.

Usually the entire surface is decorated in a rich range of motifs, created by incision or excision combined with incision and grooving, that are generally filled by a white and occasionally, red, paste. Before decoration, the external surfaces of the 'altar' were carefully smoothed and then polished. This treatment is not often applied to the inside the containers. The bottom of the receptacle and the inside part of the legs are not polished. Both, the bottom and the inside part of the receptacle, sometimes show traces of red or yellow paint. This provides some evidence relating to their use, or not, with fire. Traces of fire within the receptacles are rare (only 6%): only 2 Early Dudești and only 3 Late Dudești fragments preserve traces of burning and soot deposits. It should be noted that another 2 fragments from an unsecured Developed Dudești context also showed traces of soot. In contrast, several fragments (12) retain traces of red or yellow paint, both outside and inside the receptacle, which would exclude their use as receptacles for containing fire.

Vădastra 'altars' (Plates V, VI)

In Vădastra contexts a new types of 'altar' is found, alongside the three or four legged types – legless 'altars' (Plate VI.1, 5). On examples which do display legs, these are usually massive.

The ceramic fabric used in the manufacture of most of the objects of this date belongs to the fine category, consisting of local alluvial clay tempered with quartz sand and occasionally chaff. The 'fine soapy fell' fabric seen in the Dudești contexts disappears.

In addition to the triangular shape the rectangular or square shaped 'altars' are also common. These often have applied clay decoration on the corners, with a disc-shape the most frequently identified.

The surface preparation for decoration is similar to that seen in the Dudești examples, with decorative techniques including incision, excision and grooves. White paste filling the decoration is also identified. There were no traces of painting and no traces of burning or soot deposits on the 24 Vădastra 'altar' fragments analysed.

Măgura finds in the regional context (Figure 1)

In the last decade research has revealed a new image of the distribution of Developed Neolithic settlements in south-west Walachia, with several new Dudești and Vădastra settlements identified (Mirea 2005; 2009). Assemblages of surface finds of Dudești materials have produced very few 'altar' fragments. Three such fragments were found in Vedeia River basin area, one at Beiu, close to the confluence of the Teleorman River (Plate VII.7), and another two found further to the north at Nenciulești (Plate VII.7, 8). Another 4 fragments were discovered at Beciu in 2000, during a trial excavation on a settlement located on the high eastern Olt River terrace (Mirea 2005) (Plate VII.3-5). The 'altars' are also found in several Dudești, Dudești-Vinča and Vădastra settlements, on the west side of the Olt, in Oltenia region (Nica 1970; 1976; Nica and Niță 1979).

'Altars' are ubiquitous throughout the Neolithic Balkans (Nikolov 2007; Pavúk and Bakamska 2014). To the south of the Danube, in the neighboring area – north-central Bulgaria, within the Iantra River Basin – the Neolithic settlement of Samovodene produced hundreds of 'altar' fragment during the excavations², but few were ever published (Stanev 2002: 367-9). Similar objects, comparable in morphology and decoration with Dudești ones, have been identified at Koprivets (the Late Neolithic level), as well at Hotnitsa ('Kuslata', 'Orlovka' and 'Kaya Bunar'), and Kachitsa settlements (Chernakov 2006: 19, 20, 23-6, fig.2-4).

Concluding remarks

Among the Early and Developed Neolithic 'altar' assemblages some differences are observable in terms of morphology, clay preparation and decoration type. Unlike the Early Neolithic, many Developed Neolithic items display similar decoration to the pottery. As with the ceramic vessels,

the use of white paste filling emphasizes the incised, excised or grooved decoration and creates a striking visual effect. Achieving such high quality decoration involved skill, with the incision/excision/grooving made during the first stage of drying the pieces, before firing.

A particularly interesting piece, an Early Dudești 'altar' wall fragment, was decorated by incised lines which were originally filled with red paste, but were later filled with white paste (Plate I.11). The combination of the red and white colours, the replacing of the first type of paste with the second, suggest some rituals linked to the cycle of life and death.

Grooved decoration can be considered as technologically between incision and excision techniques, and occurs mainly in the Early Dudești phase, often associated with excision and/or incision. The decoration obtained by combining these techniques appears on medium-sized, small-mouthed pots associated with high cylindrical lids manufactured from the non-local 'fine soapy feel' fabric. Decorative motifs are intricate and varied: combined fine incised bands, parallel or angled hatched or filled with stitches or triangular point network associated with parallel or angled lines, meanders, 'wave' and 'checkerboard' motifs, all incrustated with a white paste.

The applied clay decoration and receptacle edges are sometimes well-burnished and plissé (fluting) decorated (Plate I.3). This decoration type requires skill to execute, and fluted decoration is created rather to be felt than seen, and it is primarily a tactile one.

Indications for the reuse of broken 'altars', are similar to those identified for the Karanovo III type pots with four or five legs, discovered in Early Dudești contexts. Noticeable is the polishing of legs that were broken, as a way to create a stable base that allowed the continuing use of the object. This reuse suggests that these were valued object, prized either as ritual items or simply as individual items, with the skilled workmanship involved in their manufacture recognised by the owner of the 'altar'.

In relation to the use of these objects, the most common theories are similar to those for the Early Neolithic 'altars', discussed in the first part of this study, but it is far from being clarified (Mirea 2011a). Evidence for their use as fire receptacles is scarce and potentially excluded with the Early Dudești painted items. The decorative nature of the 'altars' suggests that such objects were, perhaps, displayed in different ceremonies. The applied animal decoration may represent a symbolic transposing, which possible cult activities related to domestic animals.

Analysis of the decoration of the two restored Early Dudești 'altars' (Plates II and III), revealed an apparently deliberate feature: asymmetry. Each side has different decorative motifs. The decoration comprises finely incised lines, filled with white paste. One of the items (Plate II) has abstractly-geometrical decoration: lines arranged in registers or as distinctive elements, zigzag lines, hatched bands, rhombs, triangles etc., sometimes appearing as distinctive signs. These signs have been associated, by some scholars, with an early communication system: the so-called 'Danube Script' (Haarmann 2008; Merlini 2009).

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Finally, I consider that the publication of the second part of the study focused on 'altars' discovered in the south-central area of Walachia, specifically at key sites from Măgura, fills a gap in our understanding of the spread of these Neolithic clay objects, a gap that has unfortunately persisted in recent studies concerning the whole Balkans area (Pavúk and Bakamska 2014).

Acknowledgements

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Notes

¹. The 'altars' have been restored by Mădălina Dumitru (Teleorman County Museum).

². The objects are part of Veliko Turnovo Regional Museum collection. Many thank to the colleague Nedko Elenski, who facilitated the access to Samovodene collection.

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number of fragments (NF)	elements						joins	Complete/ restorable objects	estimated number of 'altars' (ENA)	context of finds (of ENA)		
	legs (I)	body (II)	protomas (III)	I+II	II+III	I+II+III				feature	layer	passim
01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13
Early Dudești												
74	25	32	1	9	1	-	28	2	52	39	13	-
Late Dudești												
16	6	4	2	-	3	1	-	-	16	5	11	-
Dudești (unspecified phase)												
22	10	9	1	1	1	-	-	-	22	-	20	2
Dudești/ Vădastra (mixed context)												
8	1	-	3	-	2	-	2	-	7	-	8	-
Vădastra												
24	7	6	3	3	3	-	7	-	14	6	7	1
traces of burning		surface treatment*			paint		decor			encrusting		
use	secondary	PBW	SFRW	DW	red ochre	yellow ochre	incision	excision	grooves	white	red	
14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	
Early Dudești												
2	2	3	-	49	9	2	42	10	14	35	2	
Late Dudești												
3	-	1	-	15	1	-	14	-	1	9	-	
Dudești (unspecified phase)												
1	3	1	-	21	-	-	18	-	3	9	1	
Dudești/ Vădastra (mixed context)												
1	-	1	1	5	-	-	5	1	-	2	-	
Vădastra												
-	-	-	-	15	-	-	7	6	9	3	-	

* **PBW** - Plain Burnished Ware; **SFRW** - Surface Roughened Ware; **DW** - Decorated Ware

Table 1. The main statistical data concerning the developed Neolithic 'altars' discovered at Măgura. Principalele date statistice privitoare la 'altarele' din neoliticul dezvoltat descoperite la Măgura.

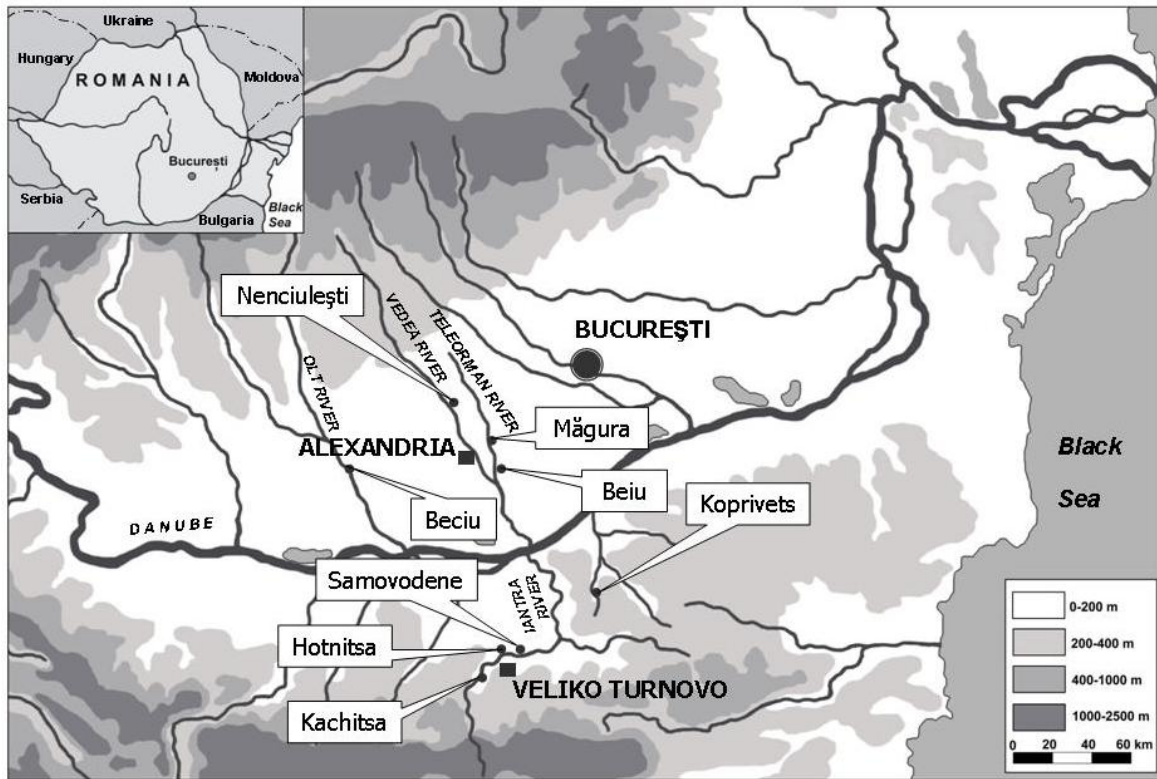


Figure 1 Map of Developed Neolithic sites in south-central Romania and Late Neolithic sites in north-central Bulgaria with 'altars' fragments finds.

Harta cu siturile din neoliticul dezvoltat din zona central-sudică a României și din neoliticul târziu din zona central-nordică a Bulgariei unde au fost descoperite fragmente de 'altare'.

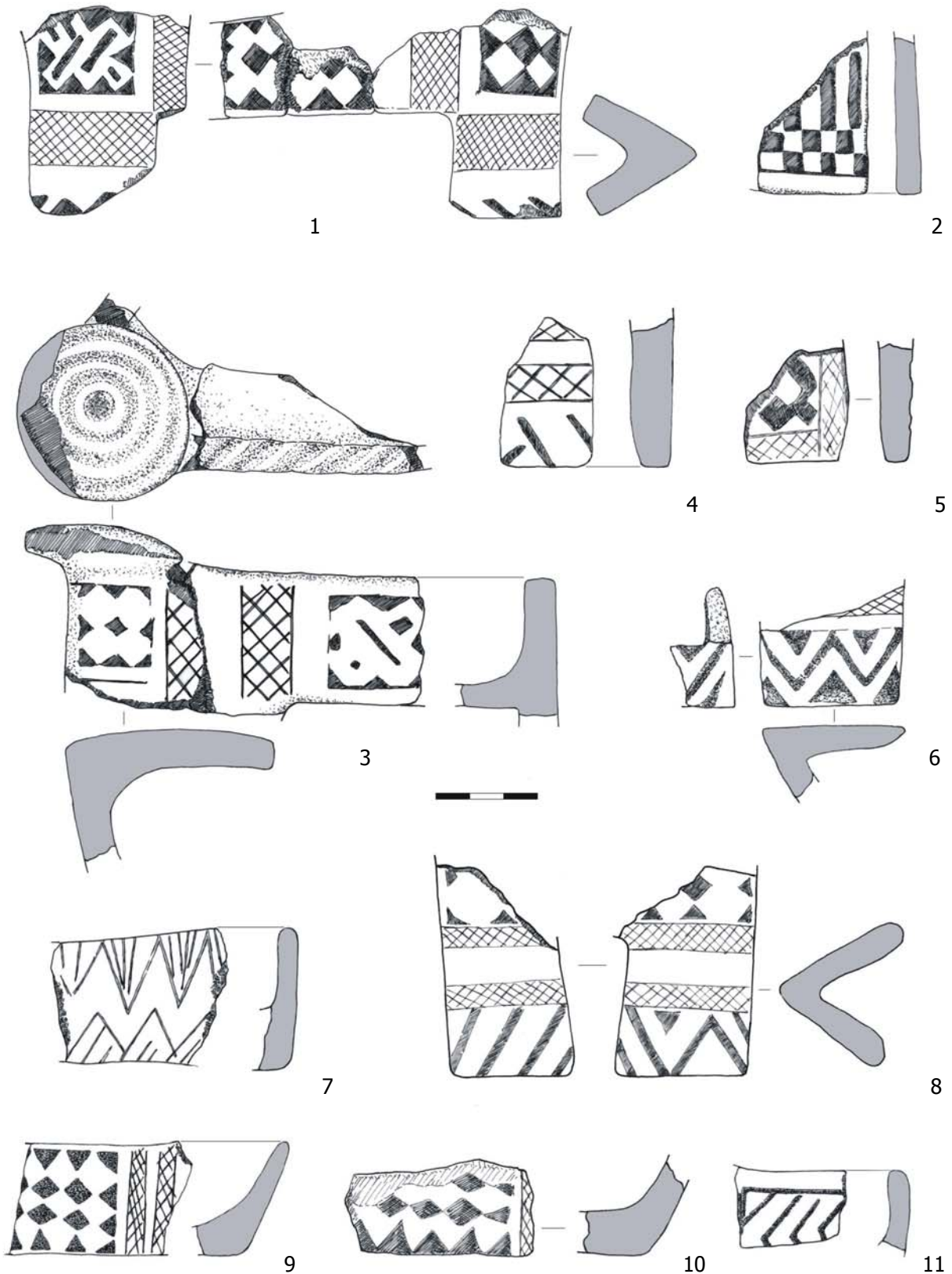


Plate I. Măgura 'Boldul lui Moș Ivănuș' (1) and 'Buduiasca' (2-11). Early Dudești 'altars' fragments.
 Măgura 'Boldul lui Moș Ivănuș' (1) și 'Buduiasca' (2-11). Fragmente de 'altare' Dudești timpuriu.

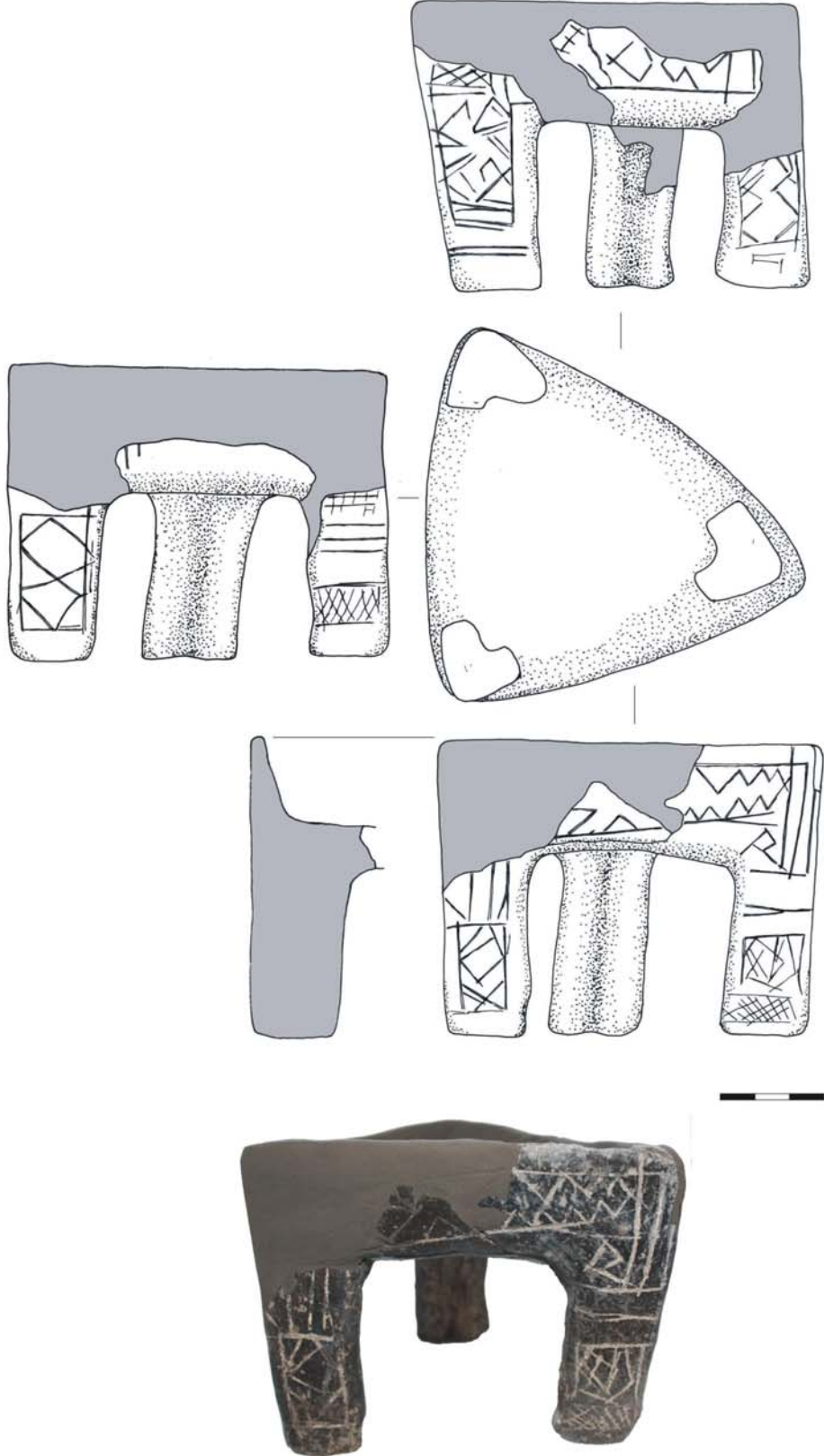


Plate II. Măgura 'Boldul lui Moș Ivănuș'. Early Dudești restored 'altar'.
Măgura 'Boldul lui Moș Ivănuș'. 'Altar' Dudești timpuriu, restaurat.

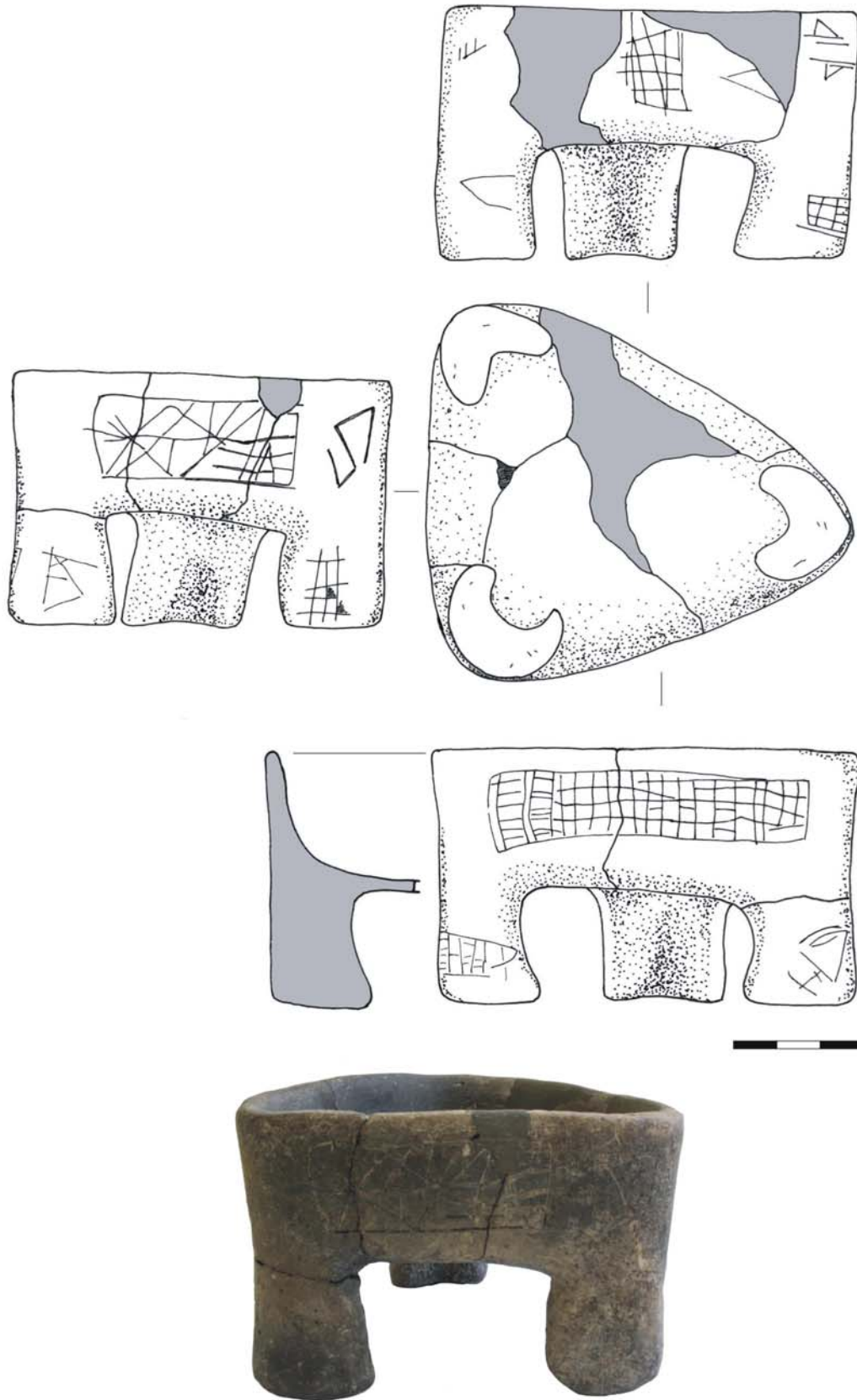


Plate III. Măgura 'Boldul lui Moș Ivănuș'. Early Dudești restored 'altar'.
Măgura 'Boldul lui Moș Ivănuș'. 'Altar' Dudești timpuriu, restaurat.



Plate IV. Măgura 'Buduiasca'. Late Dudești 'altars' fragments.
Măgura 'Buduiasca'. Fragmente de 'altare' Dudești târziu.

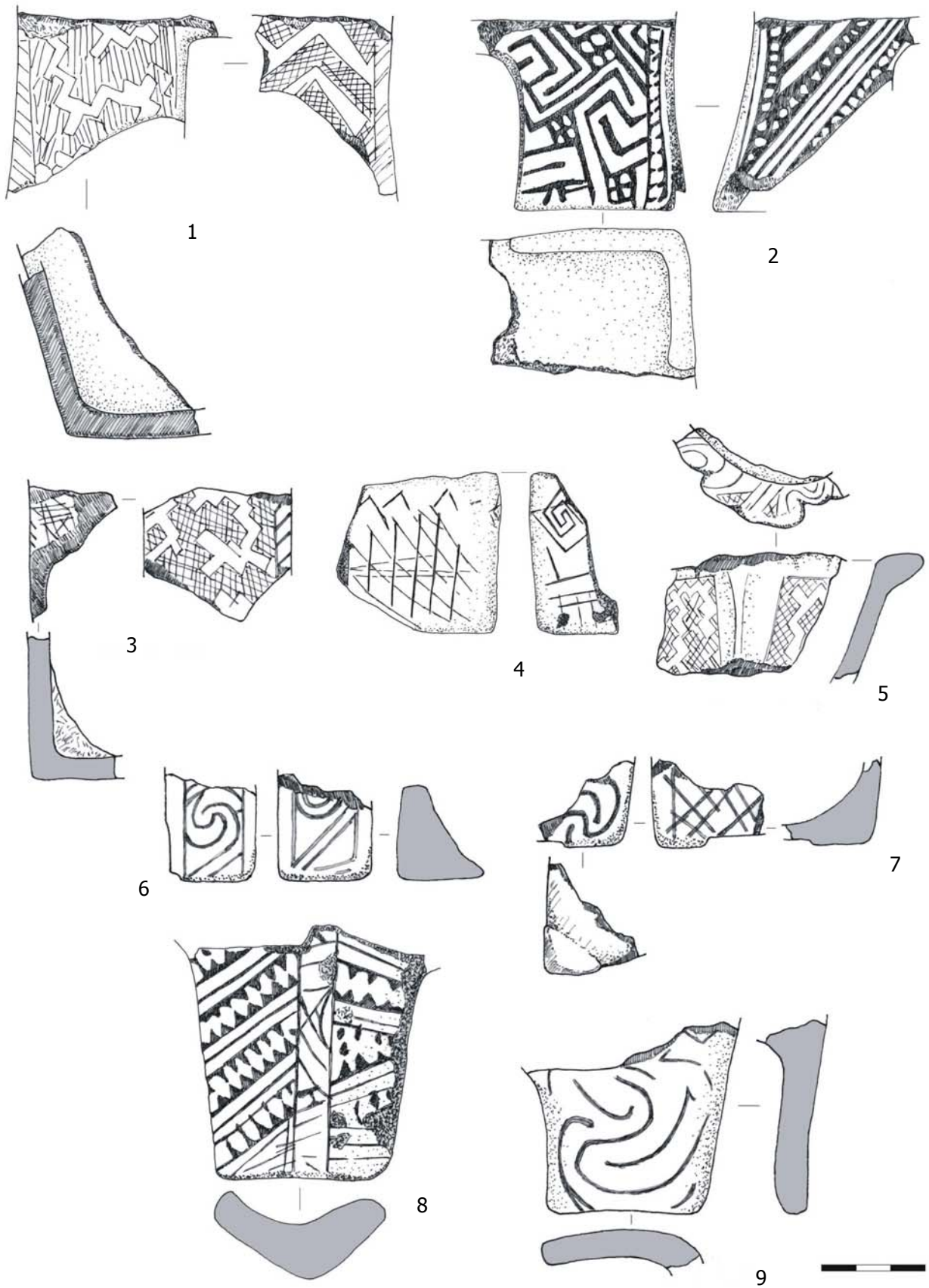


Plate V. Măgura 'Buduiasca'. Vădastra 'altars' fragments.
Măgura 'Buduiasca'. Fragmente de 'altare' Vădastra.

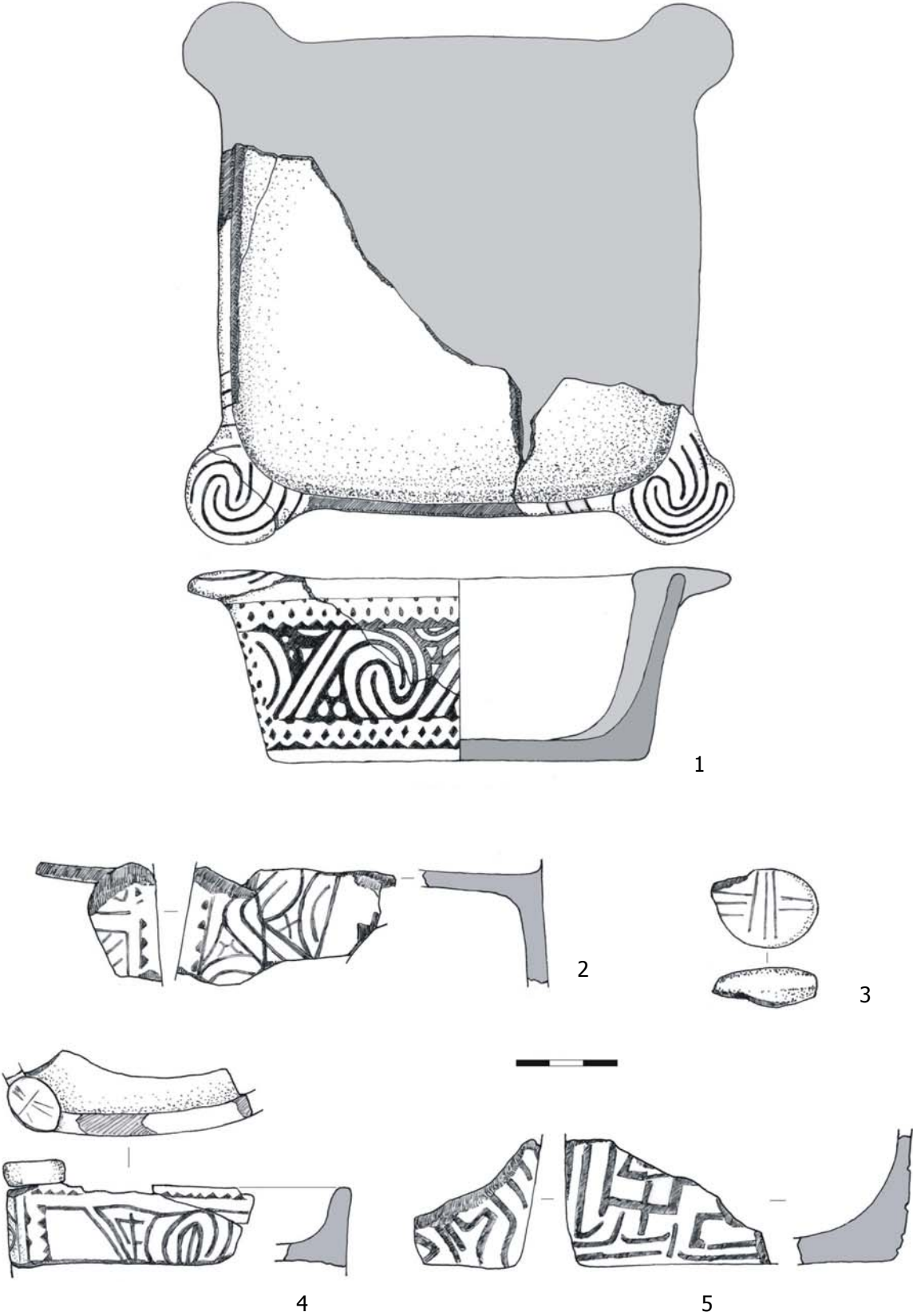


Plate VI. Măgura 'Buduiasca'. Vădastra 'altars' fragments.
Măgura 'Buduiasca'. Fragmente de 'altare' Vădastra.

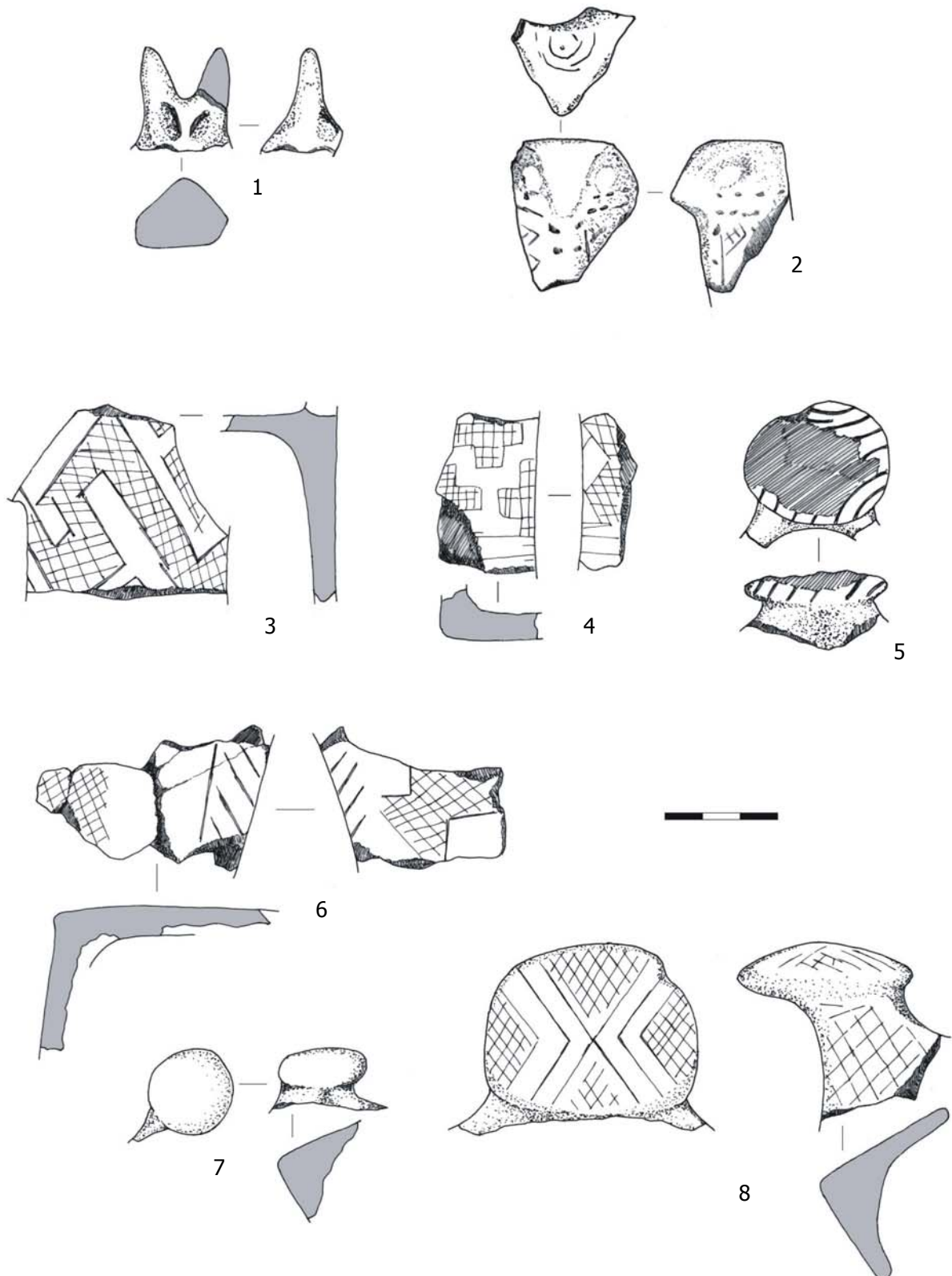


Plate VII. Măgura 'Buduiasca', 'altars' fragments discovered in mixed Dudești/ Vădastra levels (1, 2). Late Dudești 'altars' fragments discovered at Beciu 'Rusca Scărișoreanu' (3-5), Beiu (6) and Nenciulești (7, 8).

Măgura 'Buduiasca', Fragmente de 'altare' descoperite în nivelurile amestecate Dudești/ Vădastra (1, 2). Fragmente de 'altare' Dudești târziu, descoperite la Beciu 'Rusca Scărișoreanu' (3-5), Beiu (6) și Nenciulești (7, 8).