

THE SETTLEMENT AT CHORATI

The Chorati settlement is situated in Akhaltsikhe district, north-west of the town centre of Vale, and extends over 1.5 km of an agricultural terrace.

The Chorati settlement extends over a high terrace (70-100 m above sea level) situated on the right bank of the river Potskhovi. The terrace is level, slopes gently (10-12°) from south to north, and occupies an area of about 10 ha. The terrace is sharply delineated from the surrounding area at the north and east. It extends 3 km towards the west. It is worth mentioning that a small tributary of the Potskhovi used formerly to irrigate the settlement flows 100-150m to the west.

Today locals call the area of the settlement "Saurme Seri", "Slope for a Cart", which implies the existence at one time of a road linking the settlement with other places. The highway from the Potskhovi valley to Adjara and the Black Sea coast runs through Vale-Chorati and via the Kvabliani valley (Ude-Arali) and the Zekari Pass. It is also a route to North Caucasia via the Khanistsqali Valley and the Rioni Valley beyond, and must be the part of a historical north-south transit road. The shortest way to the east to the Mtkvari-Rioni main road also runs here. There is thus a basis in historical reality in the toponym "Saurme Seri".

It is noteworthy that the toponym Chorati was probably a later development. It is not mentioned in *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (*Life of Kartli*) nor in the *Great Register of Guurjistan Vilayet*, which gives detailed information about the place-names of Samtskhe and the size of its population.

The Chorati terrace is mainly brownish loam. Underneath is a light yellow, hard-packed dirt layer containing sand and lithic cores, and cut through by household pits and burials. The upper horizon of the layer also contains remains of the Stone Age. The Chorati settlement fell within the area of the construction works of the BTC pipeline. Cultural remains emerged during the cutting of the route and levelling the surface. Research works were carried out in 2004 and 2005. The pipeline route and the pipeline section were investigated. Archaeological sites in the environs of Vale were actually unknown before the expedition started. Several sites of different period have been excavated by now:

Agricultural areas immediately adjacent to north and south of the settlement revealed andesite-basalt and obsidian hand-axes, scrapers, side scrapers, perforators, which indicate the presence of strong open Acheulian-Moustierian dwellings of the Lower Paleolithic over an area of about 700x200m. The upper horizon of the dwelling is damaged. Analogous sites are known at Javakheti Plateau (Akhalkalaki), the Enguri and the Rioni Valleys, in Abkhazia and Kvemo Kartli.

In the extreme north part of the Chorati terrace, in the section a blackish-grey 1-1.2m layer can be observed, which revealed fragments of unattractive pottery made from grained clay with gravel admixture. The assemblage is diagnostic of the so called Early Farming Culture (Eneolithic), widespread in eastern Transcaucasia and the north-east regions of Anatolia. It is likely that a large vessel decorated with vertical oval projections excavated in the thick occupation stratum of this period was connected with those regions.

North of the Chorati settlement, in a section 250 m long on the road, there is a trace of a Late Bronze Age cemetery. The sparse pottery collected here is typical of Samtskhe cemeteries (Bornighele, Zveli). Remains of Early Medieval buildings and pottery can be seen for 200-500m beyond the settlement. Together with the excavated part, it suggests that there once existed here quite a large, united, settlement. The influence of the

settlement is suggested by the existence of the basilica of St. Nicholas in Vale, built in the 11th century and which functioned until the 17th century. It was reconstructed several times (Bochoridze 1991, 58) and has recently been reopened.

The Chorati settlement was excavated over an area of 220 x 8 m. A concentration of archaeological features was observed in the central part of the trench, which was relatively better preserved (fig. 1).

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Room No. 1 is situated in grids A, 22-23 and B, 22-23. It is oriented north to south (pl. I). The room has two parts. The living room was approached by a rectangular corridor. The surviving length of the wall is 6 m and its width 1 m. Part of the building extends into an unexcavated area. Stone cushions are arranged along the wall and were used to support columns holding up the ceiling. The walls are built of pebbles in a fishbone pattern. The floor was recorded at a depth of 0.8 m from the ground level. The room was full of ashes and charcoal, remains of timber, animal bones and some artefacts: three iron objects, fragments of pottery and obsidian flakes.

Room No. 2 is situated in grids A, 19-20 and B, 19-20. The surviving part of the building is trapezoidal. The south wall is 4.6 m and the east wall 3.2 m long. It is oriented east to west. A circular stone mound is attached to the construction, which contained the bones of cattle. Two building strata were recorded in Room No. 2. The lower structure is rectangular and measures 5.3 x 3.4 m.

Room No. 3 is situated in grids 17 and 18 at 0.4 m below ground level. The remains of the room consist of a wall oriented east to west, 3.6 m long, and built of double masonry using a clay bonding solution. The floor of the room is plastered with clay.

This room must also have had two parts.

All three rooms produced interesting finds: fragments of various kinds of household pottery, fragments of 7 knife blades, a silver cross-like object, two bronze toilet items, stone, flint and basalt flakes, base of an antler, wild boar tusks, etc.

There were a total of 21 pits situated over the whole area of the ROW. They are cut through a conglomerate consisting of pebbles, and yellow loam containing gypsum. They begin at a depth of 0.4-0.5 m below the modern ground level.

Pit No. 1 is situated in grid 24. It is almost circular, large (2 x 1.8m), oriented south to west, and 1.2 m deep. At the bottom of the pit a suspended burial was found, and the fill contained cattle bones, fragments of household pottery and stones.

Pit No. 2 is situated in grid 26, is circular with a diameter of 0.9 m, and a depth of 1.2 m. It is cylindrical with straight walls and sparse archaeological material.

Pit No. 3 is situated in the north corner of grid 26, is circular with a diameter of 0.68 m, and a depth of 1.75m. It is cylindrical with straight walls and contained pottery fragments, animal bones, basalt flakes.

Pit No. 4 is situated in the south corner of grid 27, and is circular at the top where its diameter is 1.4 m. It broadens towards the bottom, at a depth of 1.4 m. There was a soil layer with ash and charcoal, fragments of

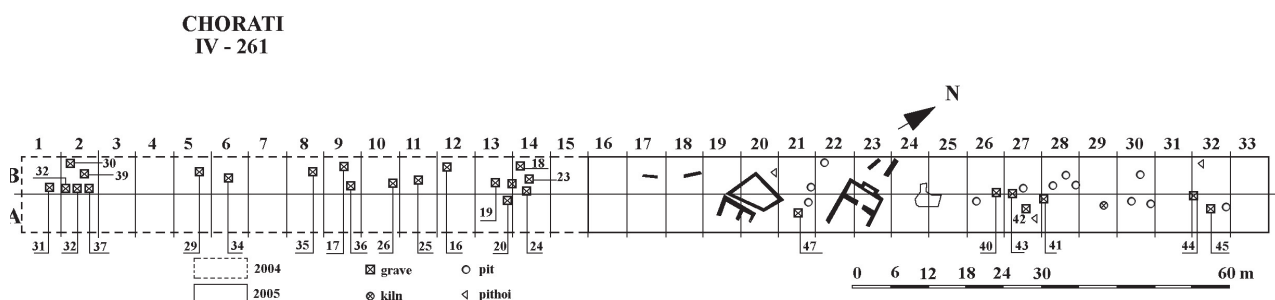


Fig. 1. Plan of showing the distribution of rooms and pits

ceramic kitchenware and animal bones.

Pit No. 5 is situated on the border of grids A, 27-28. It is circular with a diameter of 1.4 m, and a depth of 0.9 m. Its cylindrical sides were plastered, and a flat hewn stone lay on the bottom of the pit. Judging by fragments of large kitchen vessels, it may have had a household function.

Pit No. 6 is situated on the border of grids 28-29. It is oval at the top, measuring approximately 1.5 x 1.2 m, and is oriented east to west. It is conical, narrowing towards the bottom, at a depth of 1.6 m. The fill of ash and coal included fragments of ceramic kitchenware, broken animal bones and stones. At a depth of 1.5 m, Acheulian basalt and obsidian tools were recovered. It would appear that they appeared in the pit when the dirt conglomerate was cut into.

Pit No. 7 is situated in grid No. 28. It is pear-shaped with a circular mouth, diameter 0.8 m. At it widest, the diameter is 1.1 m, and the depth is 1 m. A flat hewn slab 0.5 x 0.5 m lies on the bottom. Fragments of kitchenware and tableware suggest that the pit had a household function.

Pit No. 8 is situated in grid A₃₀. It has a circular mouth, diameter 1.3 m. There were animal bones and various fragments of pottery, including a red painted one with flutes.

Pit No. 9 is situated in the middle part of grid 30. It is elongated, measuring 1.6 m x 1.3 m, and 0.5 m in depth. It contained numerous fragments of various kinds of pottery, including a sieve, and the base of an antler.

Pit No. 10 is situated at the border of grids A, 30-B, 30. The mouth is circular, 0.8 m in diameter. There were no finds.

Pit No. 11 is situated in the corner of grid A₃₁. The mouth is circular, 0.9 m in diameter. The pit is cylindrical with straight walls. It contained basalt flakes, cattle bones and unattractive fragments of vessels.

Pit No. 12 is situated in grid No. 12 and was damaged. The mouth is circular, 0.35 m in diameter, and 1 m deep.

Pit No. 13 is situated in grid 19. The mouth is circular, 0.8 m in diameter, and the pit is cylindrical. It contained fragments of ceramic kitchenware, three iron knife blades and irregular pieces of stone.

Pit No. 14 is situated at the border of grids 28 and 29. The mouth is circular, 0.8 m in diameter, and the pit is cylindrical. The floor was rolled smooth. The pit contained fragments of household vessels and cattle bones.

Pit No. 15 is situated in grid A, 22. The diameter of the mouth is 1.7 m, and the depth 1.2 m. The pit gets broader towards the bottom. The diameter of the base is 2.10 m. Rectangular, flat, hewn tufa slabs were found on the floor, apparently used for lining the walls.

Pit No. 16 is situated in grid 24, but was badly damaged. It has a round shape, being 1.1 m in diameter and 1.3 m deep.

Pit No. 17 is situated in grid A, 26. Lined with a badly damaged *pithos*.

Pit No. 18 is situated in grid A, 20. Pear-shaped, the diameter of the mouth is 0.6 m, and at the broadest part 1 m. It is 1.4 m deep. Ashes, charcoal, fragments of bone and stone had been thrown into it. It is located near Building No. 2, with which it appears to have been associated.

Pit No. 19 is situated in grid 20. It showed up on the ground as a red spot, implying traces of an intense fire. It turned out to be a rectangular bakery (1.5 x 1.4 m). The walls were constructed of smooth stone slabs.

Pit No. 20 is situated at the border of grids 20 and 21. It round but irregularly so, and 1 m deep. It was filled with burnt red soil, sooty pebbles cracked from fire and huge pieces of burnt adobe blocks. It may have been a kiln for firing ceramics since fragments of clay blowpipes were recovered nearby.

Pit No. 21 is situated at the border of grids 33-34. It is slightly elongated, with a mouth 0.9 m across, and 1 m deep. The walls were plastered with a coat of clay. It was empty, but positioned at the south corner of Room No. 1, it may have been used for food storage.

The occupation layer was 0.3-0.5 m thick and stretched over the whole of the excavated area; it contained fragments of pottery, animal bones, stone flakes and chips; the cultural stratum.

Artefacts assembled at the Chorati settlement (21 pits, 3 rooms and a cultural stratum) are highly in-

formative and enable us to look for parallels and draw conclusions.

A typological analysis of the finds showed that the material recovered from the rooms, pits and cultural stratum are completely uniform in terms of technique as well as shape, ornament and household function. They are therefore, discussed together (pl. II-IV).

The pots (57 fragments were found) were all manufactured on a potter's wheel and often display traces both on the interior and the exterior. Most of them were smoothed with a piece of wood which left thin parallel lines creating the impression of an ornament. The following types of vessels are represented: large medium-sized pots, fired light brown to black, with offset rims, cylindrical necks, flat bases and large handles.

Jugs (20 fragments) are mainly characterized by a thin fabric, fired pink and painted red, with tubular necks, round bodies and flat bases. One handle links neck and shoulder.

Jars (18 fragments), light brown through grey to pink fabric, with offset rims, grooved necks, elongated bodies and flat bases; without handles.

Bowls (24 fragments), light brown through grey to black, often with burnished exteriors, straight or truncated rims, ribbed bodies, flat or footed heels, no handles.

Pithoi (27 fragments), large, coarse-grained clay, light brown, through pink to grey fabric, with thick rims, short necks, swelling bodies and relatively narrow bases; without handles. The *pithoi* are ornamented with relief or hatched bands.

Large pots (34 fragments), large and medium-sized, without necks, light brown through pink to grey fabric, straight rims, round bodies, flat bases, rarely with handles that are round in section. The exteriors of most of them are covered with irregular incised or hatched lines.

Vessel with a trefoil rim (5 fragments), medium-thick fabric, fired light brown to pink, often painted red, trefoil rim, rounded body, flat base, one handle between neck and shoulder.

Small pot (16 fragments), light brown through grey to black, offset rim, short cylindrical neck, slightly swelling body and flat base, one handle between rim and shoulder; decorated with burnished lines and hatching.

Mug, 1 fragment. Fragments of a vessel with perforations. Grey and pink.

Vessel with a tube, 2 examples, pot-shaped, with a short tube for pouring, grey.

All these vessels had a household function. They included *pithoi*, large pots, jars, and sieves, that were kitchenware and food storage items. Bowls, small pots, jugs, drinking vessels with trefoil rims and the vessel with a tube were tableware.

Ornamentation is rare and simple. There were a total of 72 decorated items.

Painted with red and brownish slip, 8 fragments

Burnished exterior, 8 fragments

Patterns created by pressing, 5 fragments

Incised geometrical ornament, 3 fragments

Engraved irregular lines, 6 fragments

Relief band, 10 fragments

Relief hatched band, 7 fragments

Fluted, 2 fragments

Incised festoons, 1 fragment

Incised festoons on the shoulder and exterior smoothed with a piece of wood, 21 fragments

The Chorati settlement produced the following metal objects:

Iron knife blades: 7 items, mainly fragmentary.

Bronze pincers and a fragment of a pin, 2 fragments and a cross-like object. All of them are household and personal items.

Stone tools are sparsely represented: a grind-stone made from a pebble, two basalt scrapers, three flint scrapers, and 33 obsidian flakes with traces of wear.

Osteological material consisted of 292 items. Domestic animals included: horse, cow, pig, sheep, goat and hen; wild animals: deer, onager, fish.

The review of the Chorati settlement shows that the household pits excavated at the site had different functions. There are cases of secondary usage for pit-graves.

Three relatively well preserved hall-type rectangular buildings with stone foundations emerged during excavation. Large stone cushions were positioned in the corners for supporting columns. The roof was presumably flat. The fishbone masonry was bonded with an earth mixture. It is noteworthy that all these constructional features are close to what is termed 'Meskhetian architecture' known from the ethnographic record. This impression is supported by the bakery, the household pits, and the food storage pits arranged inside the buildings, as well as by the remains of kilns and smelting furnaces recovered at the other settlement.

In terms of architecture, the Chorati settlement is close to the sites of eastern Georgia, such as Urnisi (Chilashvili 1964, 110-117), Karniskhevi (Nikolaishvili 1995), Zhinvali (Chikhladze 1999, 32-55), Rustavi (Chikoidze, Chkhatarashvili 2005, pl. 28-32), Cheremi (Mamaishvili 2004, 106-111), etc. These sites have parallels with the Chorati material, and show that the settlement functioned in the early Middle Ages, in the 4th to 9th centuries AD.

It must also be stated that the archaeological data from the Chorati settlement coincide exactly with the historical situation. From the end of the 1st century AD, the kingdom of Kartli became progressively stronger. It expanded the area of its influence, mainly southwards and the territory of Samtskhe fell into its area. The cemeteries at Chorati and Orchosani that were investigated provide material evidence for this process. By the beginning of the 4th century this process had already come to an end. Parallels for our artefacts are only to be found in the territory of the kingdom of Iberia (Mtskheta, Aghaiani, Urnisi, Zhinvali, Rustavi, Bori, Kldeeti, etc.). Colchian influences apparent in the previous period are now absent.

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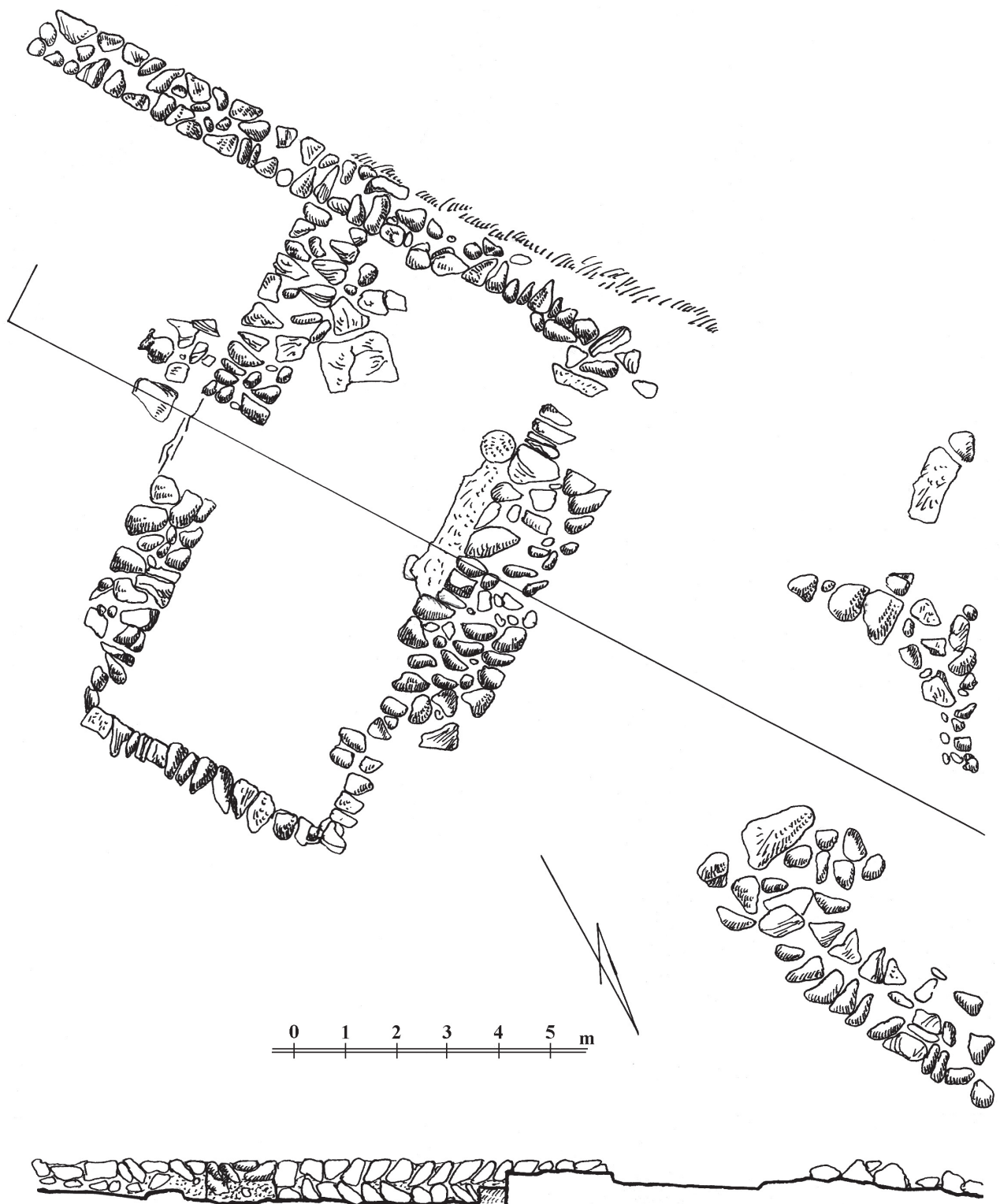
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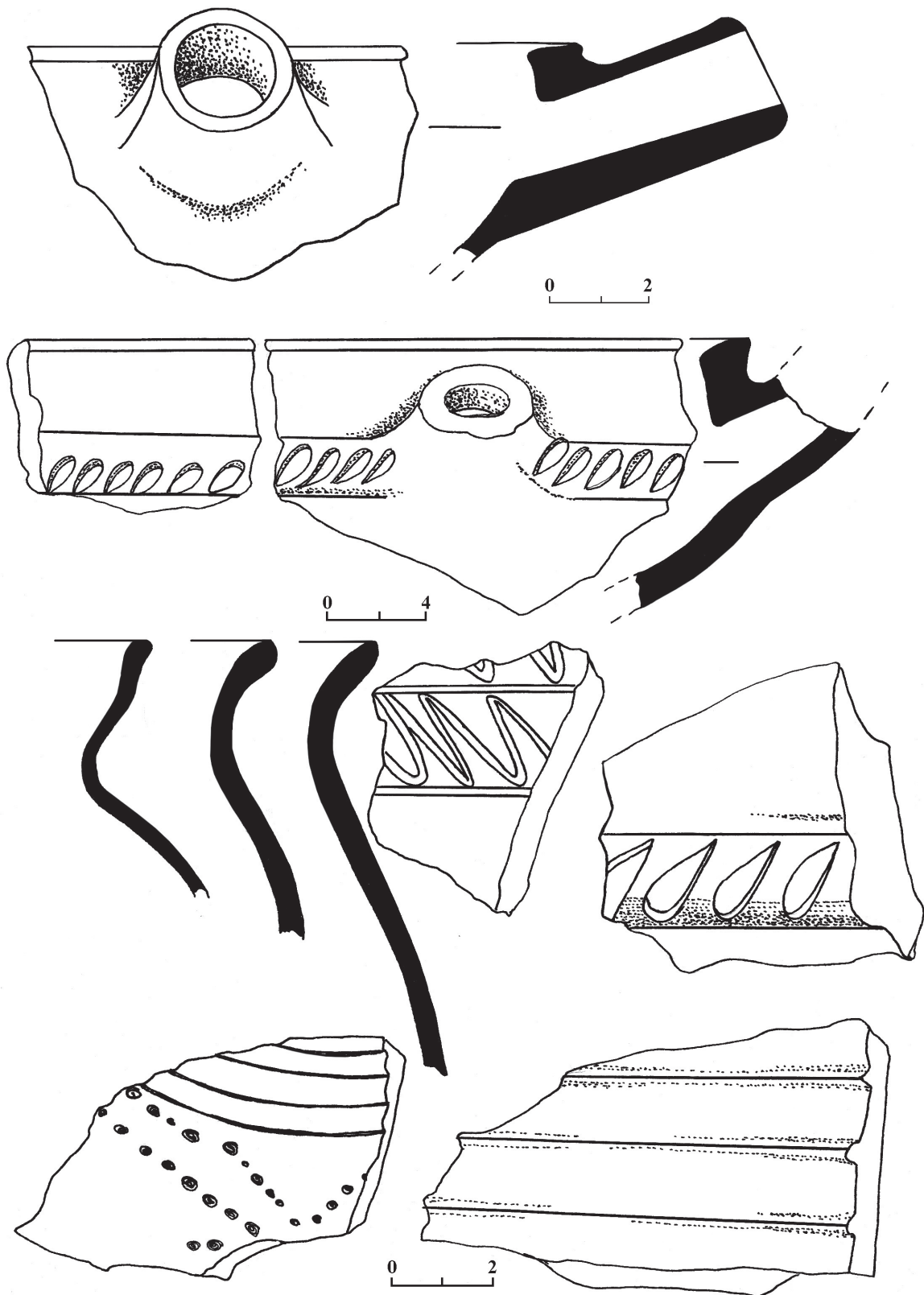
Illustrations:

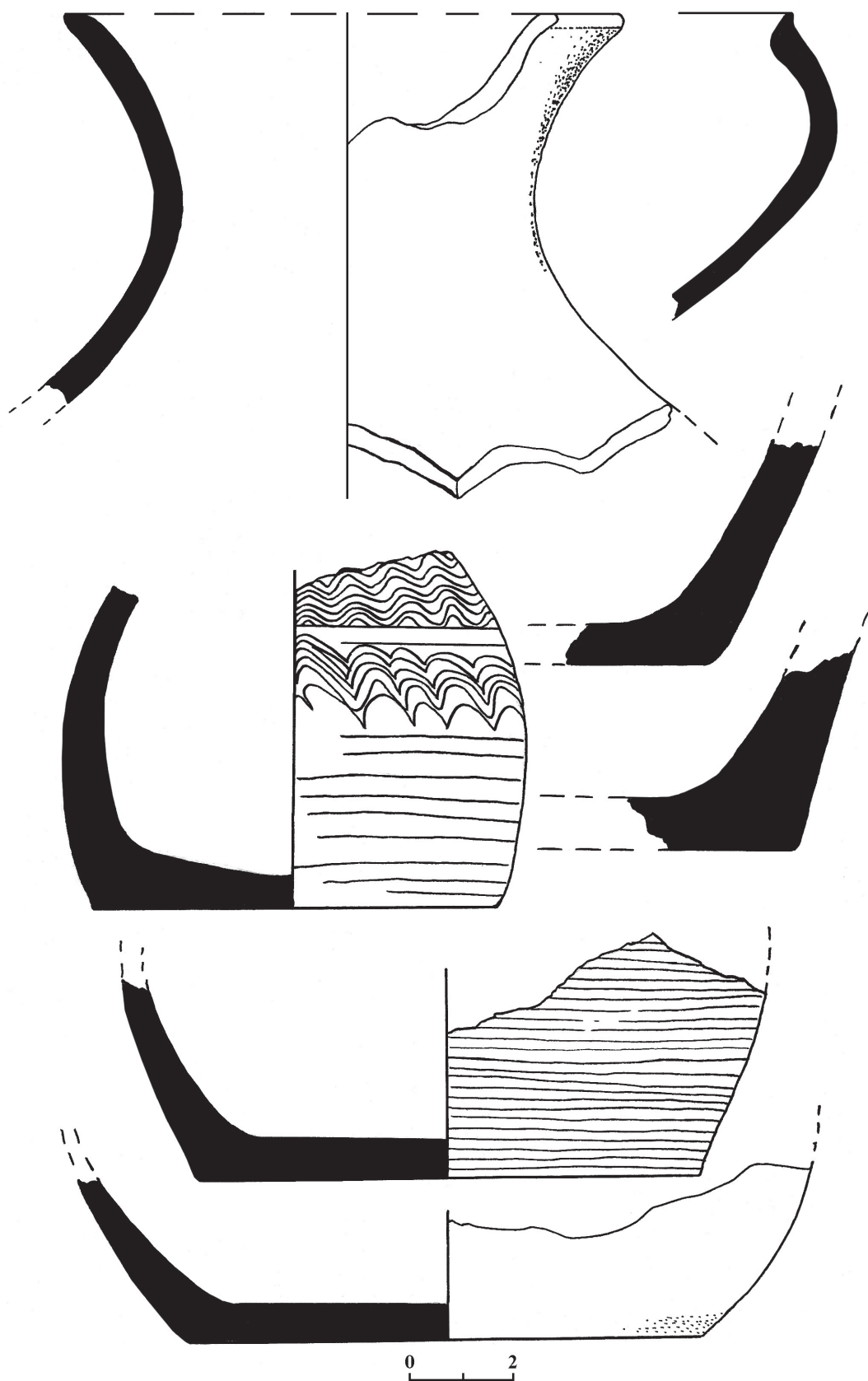
Fig. 1: Plan showing the distribution of rooms and household pits

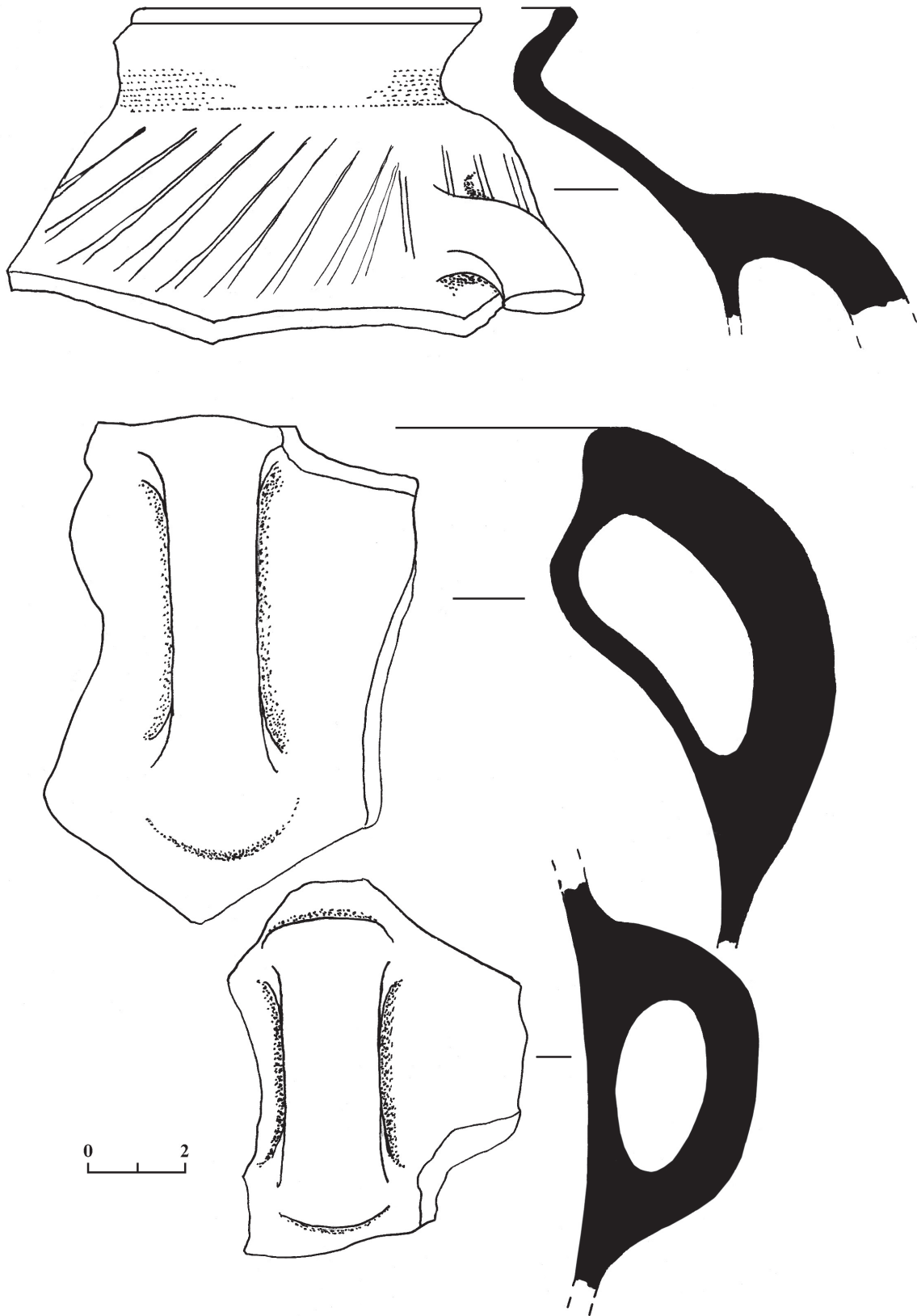
Pl. I: Room No. 1. Plan and section

Pl. II-VI: Finds from rooms and occupation levels

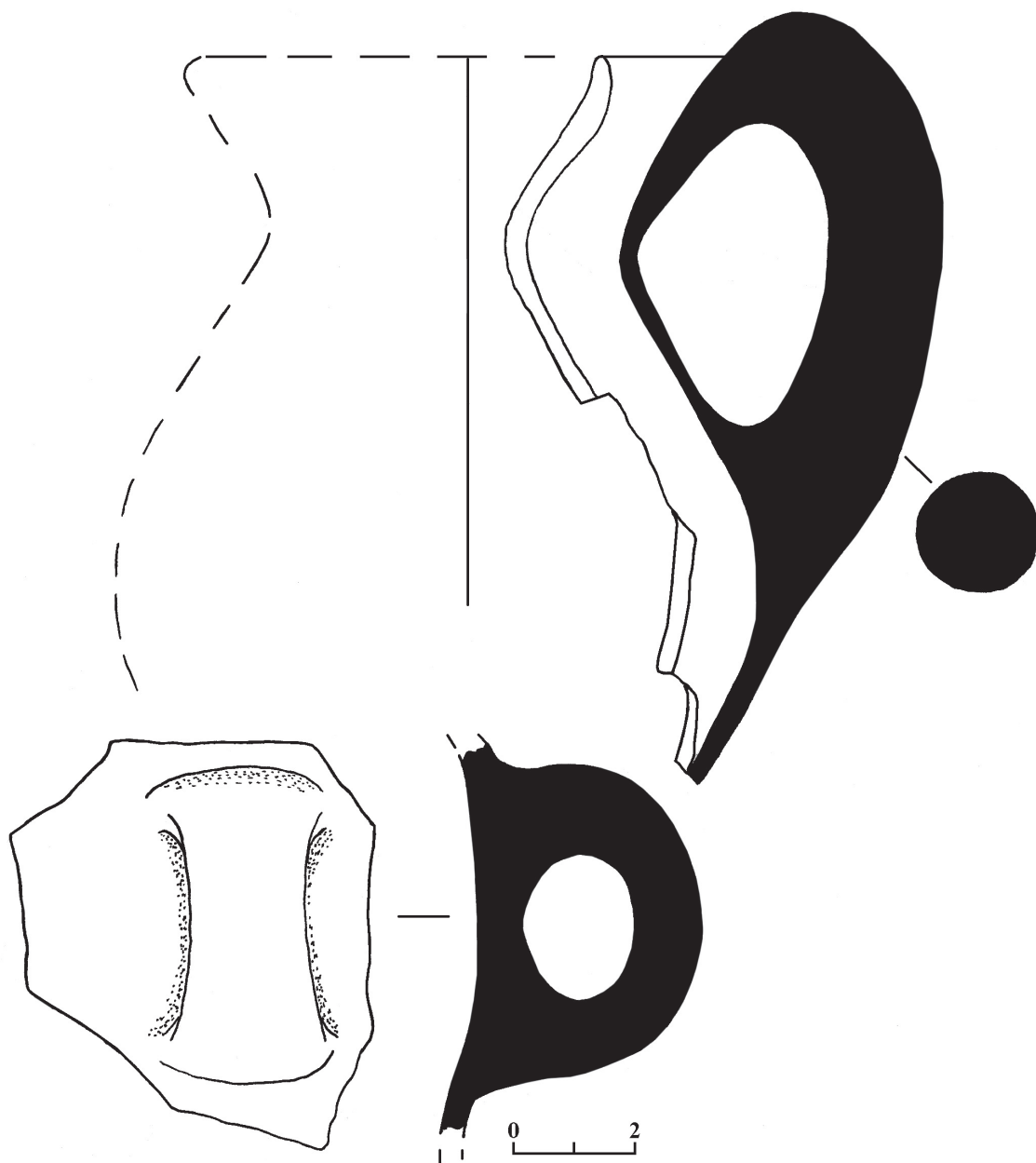
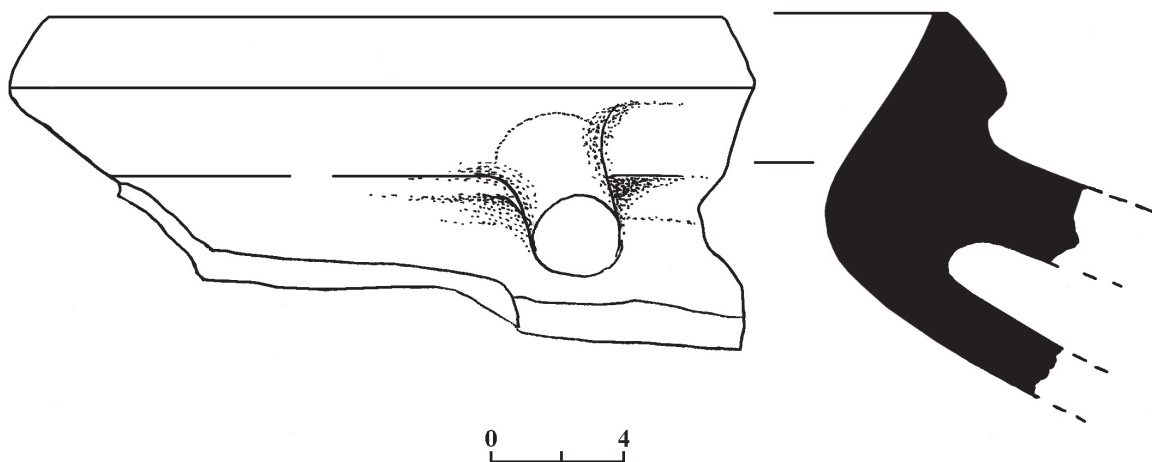








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