

## The Neolithic settlement at Breno Castle (Val Camonica): pottery and its contribution

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**ABSTRACT** - The original pottery complex found at Breno during the 1980-85 excavation programme is examined and compared. The abundant assemblage from the main site shows affinities to the Late Neolithic cultures of the plain, but includes a striking fine-vessel component which clearly evokes the transalpine Epi-Rössen tradition. The distribution of the Breno Black ware and its contribution towards a cultural assessment of the phenomenon are briefly discussed.

*Key words:* Central Alps, Val Camonica, Breno (Brescia), Pottery typology, «Mature» Neolithic  
*Parole chiave:* Alpi centrali, Valcamonica, Breno (Brescia), Tipologia ceramica, Neolitico «maturo»

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### 1. INTRODUCTION: THE NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT AT BRENO CASTLE

Explicit attempts at generating prehistoric sites independently of Val Camonica's well-known rock engravings were begun with a territorial survey in 1977 (FEDELE, 1979), and further pursued with an expanded archaeological programme, based on both survey and excavation, in 1980-85. Particular aims of the latter project were a search for habitation sites, the establishment of a precise cultural sequence for the area, on the basis of material culture alone, and the gathering of paleoenvironmental information (FEDELE, 1988). The choice of a research area fell on the Castle Rock at Breno, a prominent riser made of limestone rocks, which rather abruptly interrupts the valley between its lower and middle sectors. Although only reaching 400m a.s.l. it is surrounded by imposing alpine peaks.

Systematic survey and sub-surface tests, followed by open-area excavations at selected sites, succeeded to show in 1980-85 that the hilltop and the southern hillside had been settled repeatedly during a long period of time, from the end of the Palaeolithic to the metal ages. The castle itself revealed an interesting evo-

lution in architecture and use, culminating with the Venetian domination of the 15th-17th centuries AD. In addition to the cultural-stratigraphic sequence, a particularly interesting contribution was the discovery of prehistoric settlements, which belong to the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Middle Bronze Age periods (FEDELE *et al.*, 1983; FEDELE, 1985, 1988, 1989).

The Neolithic settlement possibly included, at some point, three or four large houses located on the terraced benches round the hilltop, presently within the castle enclosure. The main excavated site, BC3, coincides with a slightly hollowed terrace facing the northern and eastern quadrants. Identified through test pits in 1981, and soon recognized as the first Neolithic settlement to be discovered in the Central Alps (between the Adige Valley and Northern Piedmont, and the Po Plain and Liechtenstein), this site was extensively excavated and studied. A laboratory-style, roofed excavation yard was set up in 1983. Detailed recording procedures were employed, and total recovery was attempted through regular water sieving at 2-mm-mesh and froth flotation.

The BC3 excavations yielded a number of stratified features, among which a rectangular or trapezoid house, about 5x10m in size, and a complicated



structure nearby, connected with an extended male burial and interpreted as a "ceremonial" annex (Fig.2). The house had been truncated by a medieval wall foundation on its northern side. Inside the house, the stratified deposits are up to 40cm thick. Two main dwelling phases could be identified on the basis of excavation, during which, however, the building appears to have remained essentially unvaried.

Neolithic occupation continued at BC3 for some time after the house was abandoned, and the two excavated burials may belong to this moment. This sequence was followed by a probable interruption of several centuries, after which the BC3 and adjacent areas were reoccupied — for undetermined reasons — by Chalcolithic groups of the late 4th and early-middle 3rd millennium BC (calendar age). A stratigraphic profile and the general sequence are presented in Fig.3.

Historical-age disturbances, coupled with low sedimentation rates and tree-root activity, have occasionally altered the integrity of the BC3 Neolithic assemblages. Sedimentation after the end of the Neolithic occupation was so feeble that an admixture of Neolithic and Chalcolithic materials occurred at the soil surface in several places, affecting the precise attribution of a number of pottery finds on typological grounds alone. Both this fact and a certain continuity in site selection contribute to the impression of a Late Neolithic-Early Chalcolithic continuum.

The site contents turned out to be unusually rich and well preserved, amounting to more than 20000 artifactual and ecofactual finds of the most diverse kinds. Neolithic pottery features abundantly, and, through a combination of affinities and conspicuous originality, represents a particularly valuable source of information. Most of the collection came from inside the house, which provides the overall spectrum of the ceramic classes, but several broken or discarded pots were found immediately outside the house. A smaller assemblage was obtained from the "ceremonial" area to the south, where specialized activities evidently took place and, significantly, the pottery is characterized by a prevalence of the finer ware types. Neolithic materials are also known from other findspots on the hill.

Preliminary studies of the Breno pottery provided an opportunity to assess its significance within the Alpine Neolithic as then known (e.g. FEDELE *et al.*, 1983), and to stress its originality. This led to the suggestion that a particular culture group took shape within the Central Alps during the full colonisation of the inner Alpine territory, or "mature" Neolithic, and "Breno" — or "Breno-Borscht" — was proposed as a name (FEDELE, 1985, 1986, 1988 :213-21). The present paper offers a more detailed account of the Breno Neolithic pottery complex, currently under study, and attempts a preliminary re-evaluation of that original claim.

## 2. BRENO CASTLE: THE NEOLITHIC POTTERY COMPLEX

Only the ceramic material directly related to the two habitation phases of the BC3 Neolithic site will be dealt with in this article. On the bases of the technological attributes, and fabric in particular, two broad categories can be distinguished: coarse and fine ware.

### 2.1. Coarse ware

Coarse pottery is characterized by the abundant presence of filler. Binocular microscope examinations showed a regular predominance of quartz, always present, followed by metamorphic-rock fragments and occasional feldspar minerals, including biotite. Grit particles varies in size from 0.5mm to 10mm, in proportion to the body heaviness, with walls ranging in thickness from 0.5-2.5cm. The outside surface is rough and summarily treated, often with a pitted or finely cracked effect due to the cropping up of the filler; intentional rustication seems to be documented. The colour is usually reddish brown on the external surface and dark gray on the inside, according to effects of open-firing techniques.

#### 2.1.1. Decoration

Impressed decoration is done on the wet clay, using potting tools or fingers. The most common motifs include dragged fingertips impressions, arranged at random over the hole body (Fig.4:5,8-9), and fingernails impressions, usually running in wavy lines just below the rim. Oval and circular marks, made with the ends of straws, and corn stalk or rice-grain impressions are also recorded (Fig.4:4).

Plastic decoration, which consists in applying separately moulded elements, includes small lugs, knobs (Fig.4:12), and flat or hollow bosses (Fig.4:11, 6:3), commonly running across the body in parallel rows, as well as cordons of several kinds. These are especially placed in the upper portion of the vessel: impressed (Fig.6:11), wavy-section (i.e. more deeply marked; Fig.6:8), segmented (Fig.6:10) and plain types are known impressed and plastic decoration are frequently employed together (Fig.4:12).

#### 2.1.2. Morphological classes

Tronco-conical vessels (Fig.4:1-8) are clearly predominant and several variants can be distinguished on the bases of wall profile (straight, convex or slightly in-turned near the rim). The rim is rounded, flattened or thinned. It can be plain, or rather dot-impressed.



sed, scalloped, or even serrated; notching on the inside is fairly frequent.

Cylindrical vessels (Fig.4:10-12) are characterized by vertical walls and rounded or flattened rim, plain or impressed; decoration is similar to that of the tronco-conical vases. Ovoid vessels, larger in size than pottery of the previous two classes, have their surface usually left unadorned.

Bases appear to be exclusively flat, according to the site collection. A simple base with rounded or sharp angle is normally associated with more or less straight walls, while protruding-foot bases correlate with convex wall profile (Fig.4:9-15).

The majority of Breno coarse ware is represented by deep vessels of varying size. Diameter estimates for the rim indicate that the most frequent classes are those round the BC3 mean, with a mouth diameter between 20-25cm, followed by smaller vessels (12-17cm) and finally by a much lower percentage of larger pots (25-37cm).

## 2.2. Fine ware

The finer pottery group is characterized by almost pure clay, with no or little visible inclusions. The matrix is always micaceous. Where very fine clasts can be seen, they are represented by quartz, feldspar, and sometimes feldspar, less than 0.5mm in grain size. Vase body have very thin walls (0.3 to 0.6mm), polished and often burnished surfaces, dark hues in the black-brown-red range, and fairly uniform colour. The firing took place in an reducing atmosphere and had to be expertly and carefully controlled. Before firing the vessels were probably covered with a clay slip, which was usually damaged or lost because of postdepositional factors.

### 2.2.1. Decoration

Highly characteristic of the fine ware is the impressed decoration, executed on the upper part of the vase or along the keel line. It consists in punched or «stabbed» impressions, made with solid straw-ends or combs, in which individual C-shaped marks may be variously combined to create an S, or pairs of opposing S's, or peculiar rows (Fig.5:2). Other individual signs include triangles (Fig.5:13), dots (Fig.5:8-9), small circles, U-shaped arcs (Fig.5:3,6-7), etc. Such impressions are typically arranged in lines, bands, geometric figures, or even recurring «symbols» (Fig.5:1).

### 2.2.2. Morphological classes

Most of the fine ware is round-based. Open pots of medium depth are common. They include several

morphological types which may have functional meaning: bowls with sinuous or keeled profile (Fig.5:1-2,5-7,12; 3-4), cups with strap handles (Fig.5:10-12), hemispherical vessels with more or less continuous base-wall outline (Fig.5:8-9). Most bowls and cups are characteristically defined by a shared, rich decoration of the impressed or punched variety. A black burnished surface and highly stylized decoration, in particular, are the main diagnostic traits of what was termed the Breno Black ware (FEDELE, 1985; cfr. BARFIELD *et al.*, 1995, for the acceptance of the designation), whereas related variants can be grouped under a «Breno style».

Also recorded, but clearly less frequent, are large open bowls and brimmed vessels. A brimmed plate with flat base and combined punched-and-incised decoration shows a series of phytomorphic figures on the rim (Fig.6:7).

The fine ware vessels are smaller than coarse ones, as most of them have a rim diameter ranging from 10 to 12cm. Their shape, striking accuracy in fashioning, and ornament, suggest that they were used in special social contexts, such as drinking cups (FEDELE, 1991).

## 3. POTTERY TYPOLOGY AND NOTES ON CULTURAL INTERPRETATION.

### 3.1. Breno Black and related wares

This is the most distinctive aspect among the Breno Neolithic ceramics (FEDELE, 1988). It is a fine and accurately fired ware, whose decoration – as mentioned above – is an important trait. Shapes are mostly bowls or cups with a sinuous profile, a character that might be generally ascribed to a western tradition. On the contrary, its decoration cannot be easily compared with Po Plain or other Italian cultures. Motifs reveal formal and ideological relations in general with regions across the Alps, especially the Einstich-ornamented Epi-Rössen tradition of the middle and upper Rhine (see below). Some Breno BC3 fragments with Einstich triangle-filled triangles (Fig.6:13-14; see also FEDELE *et al.*, 1983, fig.69) have close counterparts in Rössen culture patterns (e.g. BÖFINGER, 1996, fig.22:3).

### 3.2. Pottery related to the Square Mouth Pottery tradition

This component can be compared with the coarse ware of the third and last phase of the Square Mouth Pottery culture, or rather tradition, and termed the «incision-and-impression» style because of its most com-



mon decoration (BAGOLINI & BIAGI, 1977). Related materials can be recognised at Breno in some sherds of deep square-mouthed bowls with impressed rim (Fig.6:15-16) and four-spouted or «quadrilobate» pots. Also decorations based on rows of small round impressions (circles, dots, etc; Fig.5:8-9), as well as paired herring-bone ribbons on hemispherical or slightly angular profiled bowls, may belong to the same tradition. Less distinct similarities may be recognized in ovoid or tronco-conical jars with fingertip «drag» impressions (Fig.4:5,8-9), coarse vessels with marked cordons on the belly (Fig.4:2-3), a base fragment with woven-mat impressions and a possible back-knob of a pintadera.

### 3.3. Pottery related to the Lagozza tradition

This component includes medium or large open bowls with a brim-like rim (Fig.6:1-2,4), and «S» profiled bowls with hollow protuberances (Fig.6:5-6), all in fine ware characterized by a meticulous finish. There are, in addition, coarse tronco-conical jars with applied knobs or bosses, including pastilles (Fig.6:3), and two spindle whorls with lenticular cross-section and incised decoration. These materials find similarities in the assemblage from the Lagozza type-site, near Besenzone (Varese; ODORE, 1998).

### 3.4. Comparisons and chronology

While radiocarbon determinations are awaited, the excavation contexts at Breno BC3 suggest that Neolithic pottery collection from the site basically represents a single unit, both culturally and chronologically, albeit with a certain degree of internal evolution.

Ceramic-typology comparisons with so-called Square Mouth Pottery Phase 3, or Rivoli Castelnovo – quite possibly an autonomous culture group, as suggested by L.H.Barfield (BARFIELD & BAGOLINI, 1976:50; cfr. FEDELE, 1986) – and with the Lagozza type-site collection, respectively dated to c. 4100-3700 and 3700-3400 cal BC, point to at least a part of the BC3 occupation falling within the first two or three centuries of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium cal. BC.

At the same time, the Rhine-Danube groups of the Epi-Rössen tradition, such as Aichbühl and Bischheim, as well as the Eastern Swiss Spätrössener Kugelbecher horizon, are securely dated to the 4500/4400-4200/4100 interval, calendar years (RAETZEL FABIAN, 1986; STÖCKLI, 1995). An outstanding find from Breno BC3, a single rim sherd with short neck and applied decoration of vertical rims down from the shoulder (Fig.6:12), is reminiscent of a well-known type from Saint Léonard in Canton Wallis (WINIGER, 1990,

fig.1:20), formerly dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium, but recently shifted by STÖCKLI (1995) to the later part of the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium cal BC. At about 4500-4400 cal. BC should be placed the latest manifestations of the Rössen Culture proper.

Thus Breno emerges as a regional entity, at the rank of the culture group, which can be attributed to the centuries between c. 4200 and c. 3700 cal. BC, and displays a specificity to the Central Alps and Pre-Alps within the framework of marked north-alpine connections. Whether the BC3 site may have lived through a longer period of time, within the Neolithic, remains to be seen. Also to be assessed are potential correlations with North- and South Alpine sequences, such as Isère La Torretta in the Adige Valley (DE MARINIS & PEDROTTI, 1997).

## 4. DISTRIBUTION OF THE «BRENO BLACK» WARE

At the time of discovery, in 1981, the Neolithic site BC3 at Breno Castle appeared problematic and hard to accommodate within any single Po Plain culture. Over the last decade, however, new sites have been found that include resemblances to the material culture from BC3, and, as mentioned in early accounts (FEDELE, 1986, 1988:213-221), some pre-existing finds which had eluded recognition could be classified in the light of the Breno evidence. No longer is Breno completely isolated, and an immediate contribution of the new sites and revisions is to outline the territorial dimensions of the Breno-style ceramic occurrences (Fig.1).

Within Val Camonica itself, downvalley from Breno, a site with abundant evidence of Breno Black ware was discovered on the rocky spur of Coren Pagà (Rogno, BG), where part of the Breno pottery range can be paralleled (FERRARI & PESSINA, 1997). Breno Black sherds have also turned up at Cividate Camuno, immediately South of the Breno corridor (POGGIANI KELLER, 1990a). Breno Black elements had long ago been found at Monte Covolo and Vhò di Nave, close to the Brescia Pre-Alps and not far from Lake Garda's western bank (BARFIELD *et al.*, 1995). In the Bergamo Pre-Alps to the West, similar finds are known from Clanezzo (POGGIANI KELLER, 1990b), and have been identified among older materials from Zogno (a handled cup with «S» punch-marks from the Grotta del Tabac cave site; POGGIANI KELLER, 1980) and Castione della Presolana (FEDELE, 1988:221). Away in the Mantuan lowlands, interesting finds were recently reported from a Square Mouth Pottery 3 site at Rivarolo Mantovano (ANGHINELLI & ANGHINELLI, 1996).



As Fig.1 shows, the occurrences are distributed between the Adda River in the West and the Salò Gulf of Lake Garda in the East. Rivarolo excepted, the majority of these sites is thus located in the eastern sector of the Lombardy Pre-Alps, Breno itself lying fairly inland in the Pre-Alpine belt. As to type of site, exception made for a burial cave (Zogno) and the problematic rock-perched site of Coren Pagà, all Breno Black occurrences correspond to settlements furthermore. Apart from Rivarolo, several correspond to hilltop, rock terrace, or isolated terrace locations, 400m in average elevation, overlooking a watercourse and occupying a dominating or even «strategic» position. If this indeed reflects a precise locational choice is premature to assess.

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**SUMMARY** - Original pottery assemblages characterize the Neolithic settlement at Breno Castle, the first such site to be discovered in Val Camonica and the Italian Central Alps. The main excavated portion of the hilltop site (BC3) includes a number of stratified features interpreted as a house and a "ceremonial" annex. In types and decorations, the abundant pottery combines affinities to the Square-Mouthed Pottery Phase 3 and Lagozza cultures of the Po Plain (Late Neolithic) with an outstanding fine-vessel component («Breno Black» and related wares). The latter is clearly reminiscent of the Epi-Rössen tradition north of the Alps, and the "mature" Neolithic of the Rhine-Danube region in general. On this basis, a Breno Group was proposed in 1985 and is more precisely defined in this paper. It is believed to represent a residential, evolving «mature» Neolithic culture of about 4200-3800 cal. BC, broadly connected with the permanent colonisation of the Central Alps.

**RIASSUNTO** - L'insediamento neolitico del Castello di Breno, il primo sito del genere ad essere stato scoperto in Valcamonica e nelle Alpi Centrali, è caratterizzato da alcuni insiemi ceramici originali. La porzione scavata del principale sito collinare (BC3) include una serie di resti stratificati interpretati come una casa ed un'area cerimoniale. L'abbondante ceramica accanto all'affinità di tipi e decorazioni con la terza fase dei Vasi a Bocca Quadrata e con la cultura della Lagozza (Neolitico tardo), è caratterizzata da una componente di ceramica fine di notevole importanza (Breno Nera e ceramiche affini). Questa risente chiaramente della tradizione Epi-Rössen del versante settentrionale delle Alpi, e del Neolitico «maturo» della regione renano-danubiana in generale. Su queste basi la definizione di un Gruppo Breno fu proposta nel 1985 ed è maggiormente precisata in questo contributo. Si ritiene che rappresenti una cultura territorialmente stabile, con una certa evoluzione interna, del Neolitico «maturo», risalente al 4200-3800 AC, in cronologia radiometrica calibrata, ampiamente connessa con la colonizzazione permanente delle Alpi centrali.

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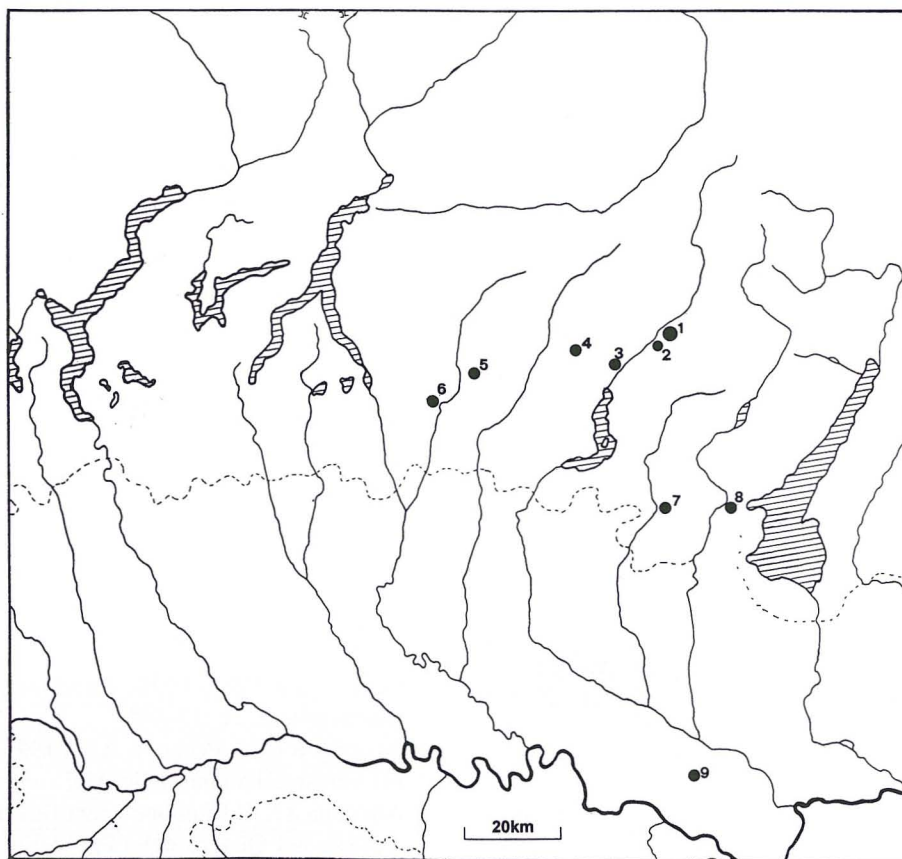


Fig. 1 - Distribution of the "Breno Black" ware: 1) Breno; 2) Cividate Camuno; 3) Rogno; 4) Castione della Presolana; 5) Zogno; 6) Clanezzo; 7) Vhò di Nave; 8) Monte Covolo; 9) Rivarolo Mantovano



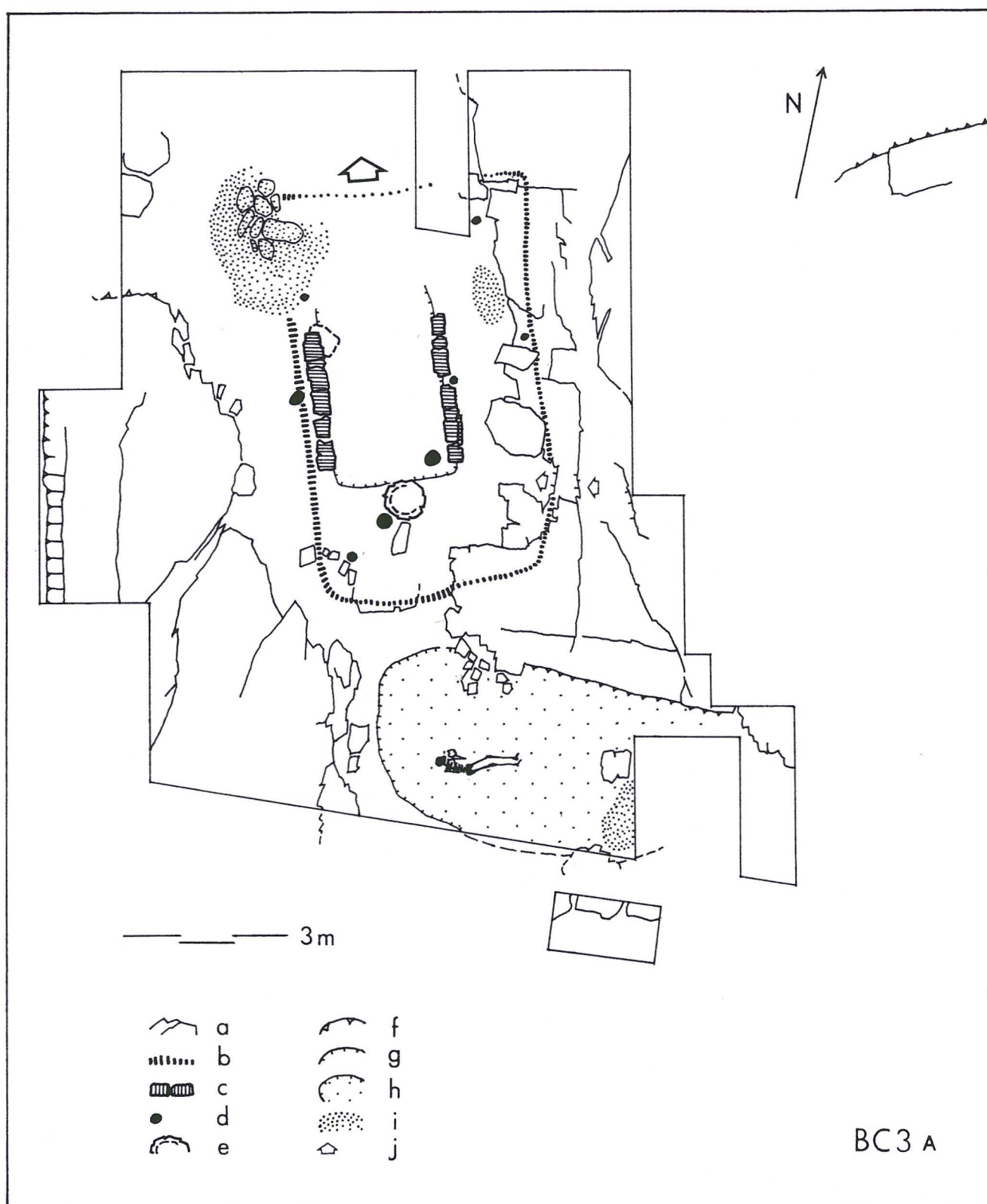


Fig. 2 - Breno Castle, simplified plan of the BC3 Neolithic site, showing its central portion with the house (b) and "ceremonial" area to the South (h). Other symbols: a) bedrock outcrops; c) stone bench; d) post holes; e) oven; f) step; g) depression; i) charcoal patches and hearths; j) possible entrance to the house (after FEDELE, 1989)

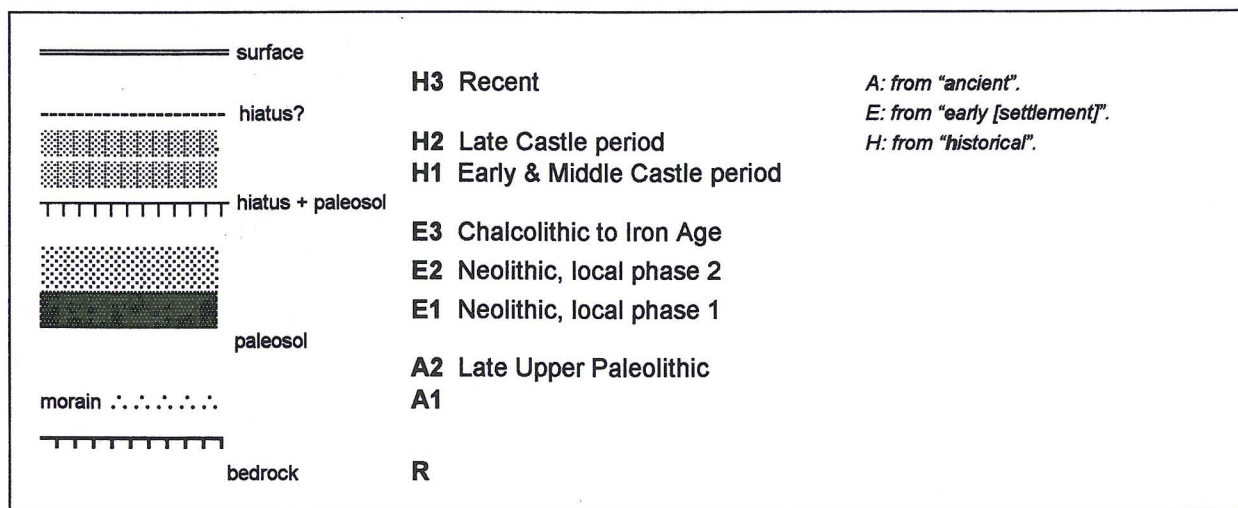
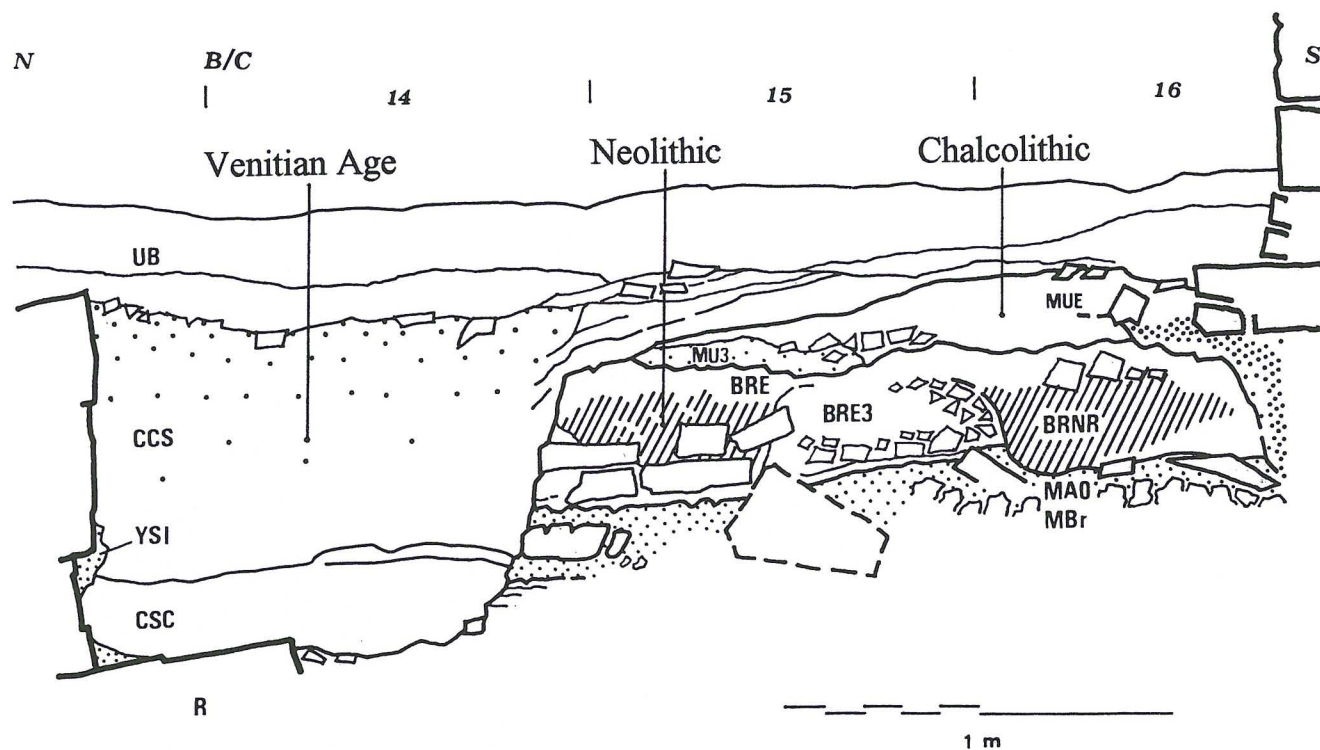


Fig. 3 - Breno Castle, area BC3-BC5: lithostratigraphy and cultural sequence. Above, stratigraphic profile from BC3 South; below, reference diagram (drawings by F.Fedele)



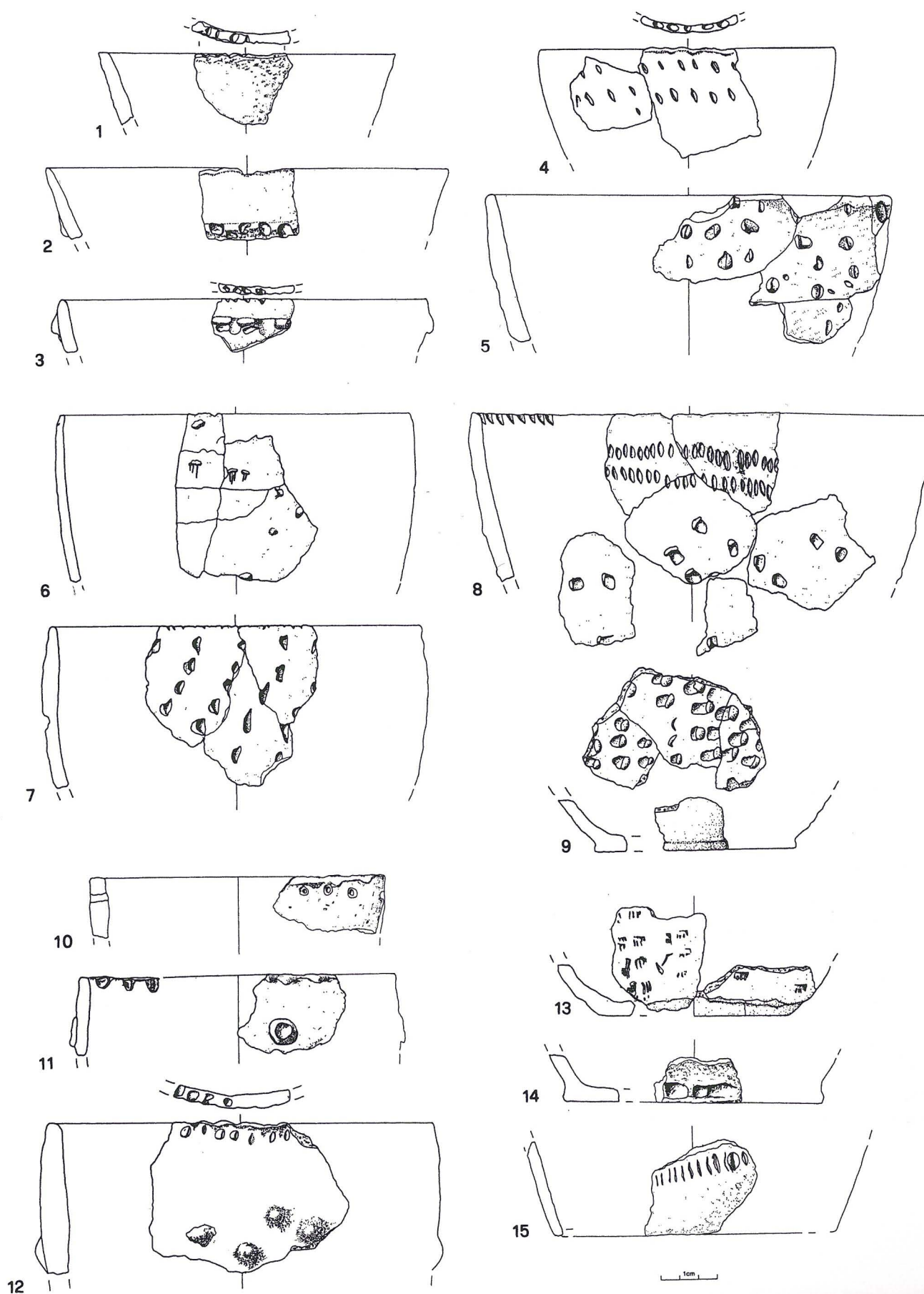


Fig. 4 - Breno Castle BC3. Coarse ware. 1-8) tronco-conical vessels; 10-12) cylindric vessels; 9, 13-15) flat bases

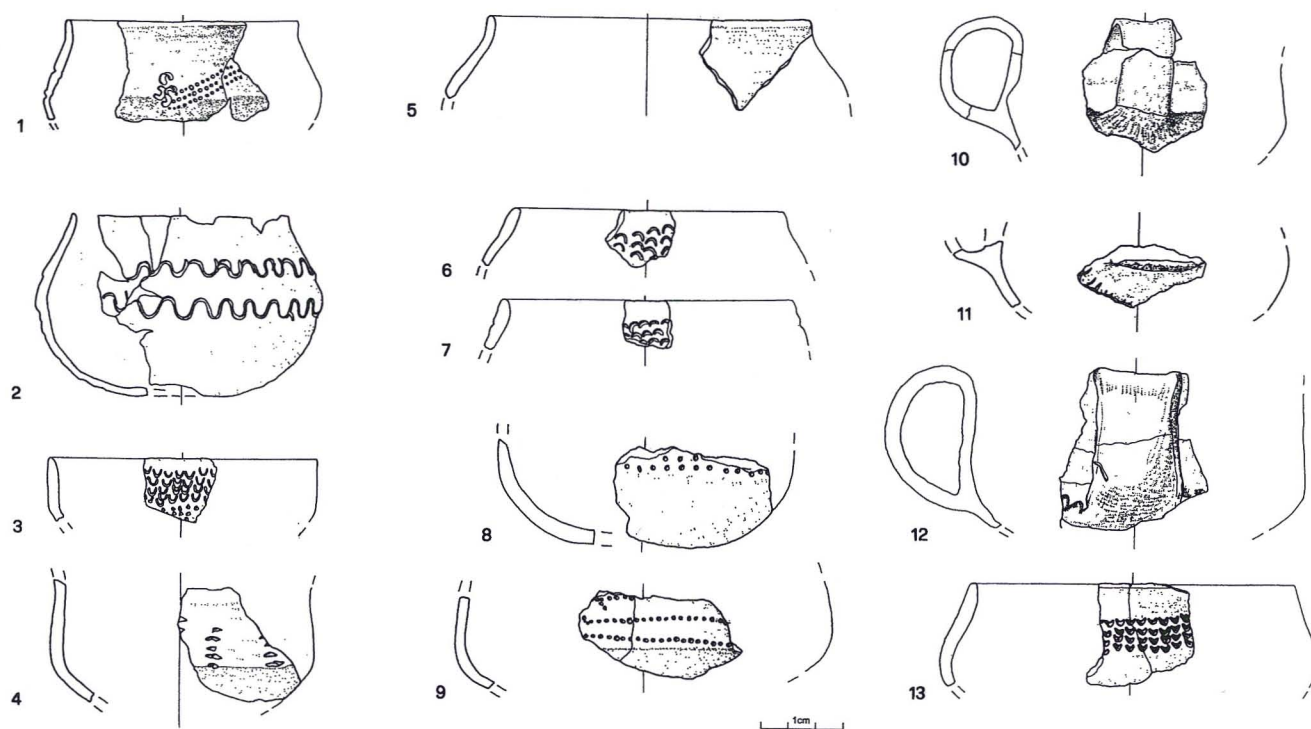


Fig. 5 - Breno Castle BC3. "Breno Black" and related ware: 1-2) urns with "C" punched motifs (including the "comet", 1) ; 3) 6-7, urns with panels of "U" punched motifs; 10-12) handled cups



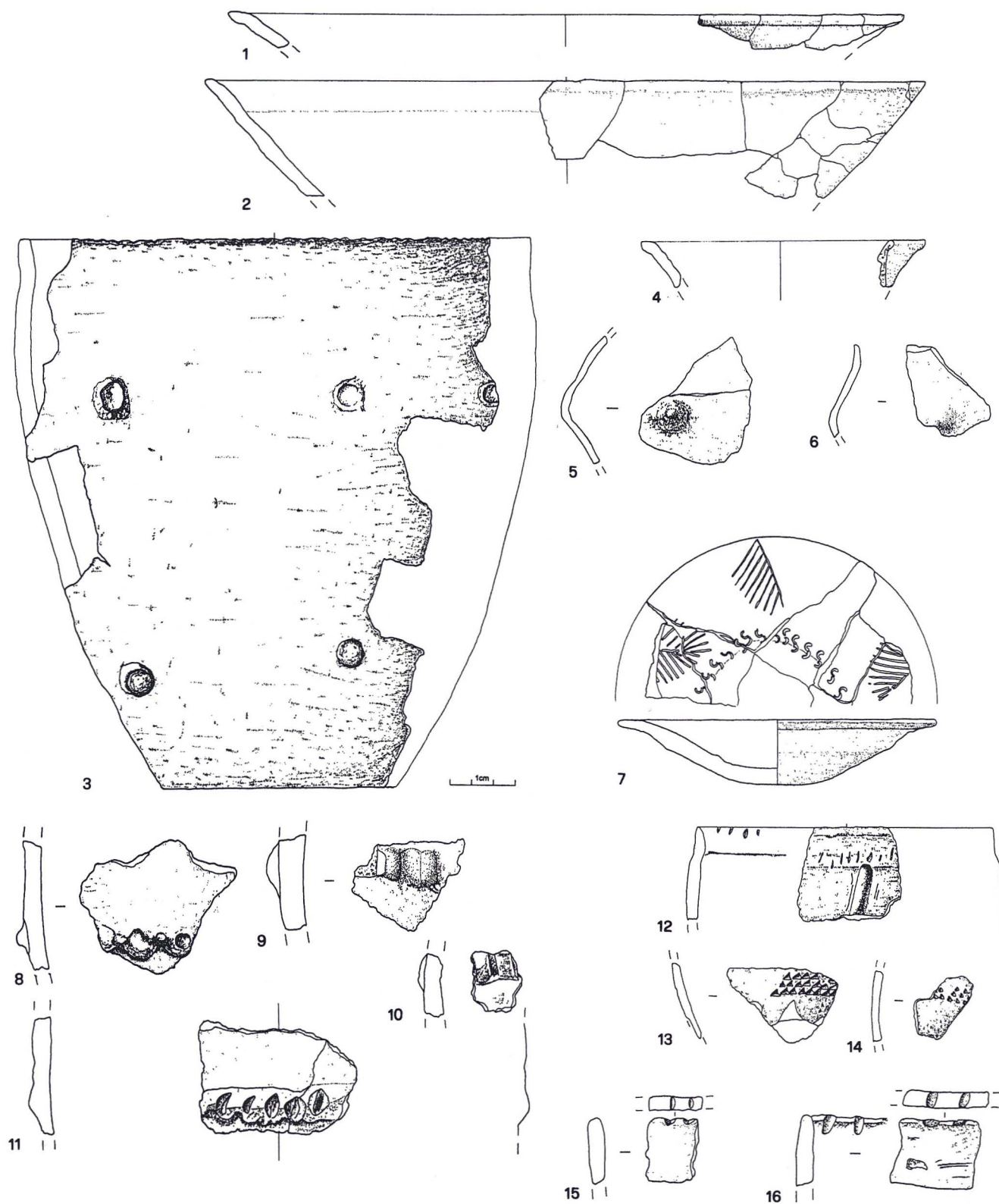


Fig. 6 - Breno Castle BC3. Pottery related to the Lagozza: 1-2, 4) brimmed, open bowls; 5-6) "S" profiled bowls with hollow projections, tronco-conical jar with applied pastilles. Pottery related to the tradition "incision-impression" style, Square Mouth Pottery tradition: 15-16) square-mouthed pot with stabbed rim; 7) brimmed dish with incisions and "Breno style" impressions; 8-11) coarse ware with impressed cordons; 13-14) sherds of Rössen-type vessels; 12) deep bowl similar to examples in Saint-Léonard-type Cortaillod