

A "Rhaetian" house at Riffian/Rifiano

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ABSTRACT - A Rhaetian structure was discovered with the typical corner corridor entrance with an imposing granite architrave. The position of the burnt wood suggests that there was an upper level in the tradition of the "Blockbau" technique. Some of the findings date the beginning of the settlement to the IV century BC, whereas the more recent evidence would chronologically place it to the end of the I century BC. It is obvious that a fire destroyed this house and probably all the settlement. This event could be related to the Druso campaign of the year 15 BC, even though we do not have any evidence to confirm this hypothesis at the moment.

Key words: Iron Age, Rhaetian house, Burgstall, Rifiano

Parole chiave: Età del Ferro, Casa Retica, Burgstall, Rifiano

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At the entrance of the Passiria Valley beyond the Riffian/Rifiano village (Fig.1-2) there is a very steep and large woody morainic hillock. On the southern side of the mound there are various small terraces where the perimeter of 12 buildings with the remains of walls can be identified (Fig.3). It was exactly for this reason that the place was named Burgstall. The place name as well as the legends on the area recollect the presence of a protohistoric settlement.

At the beginning of the century a treasure hunter brought to light an entrance corridor made of dry-stone wall (Fig.4). Nothing is known about any possible findings.

The first datable findings came to light during a small survey excavation carried out in 1977 on one of these terraces (NIEDERWANGER, 1978).

Systematic excavations on this protohistoric site, which was important not only for the regional history, were postponed for economic purposes. Therefore, the initiative of the Cassa Rurale of Riffian-Kiens/Rifiano-Caines for the celebration of its hundredth foundation anniversary, to finance nearly all the excavations and the restorations of one of the Rhaetian houses in Burgstall was very much appreciated.

The excavation¹ of House 1 started in May 1994 under the supervision of one of us (H.N.).

After having dug up a one to two metre stratum of fluvial material and fallen rocks, the first layer

was uncovered and findings were discovered (Fig.6:2,7:2).

The reddish clayey sandy pavement was completely burnt and there were fallen rocks and carbon fragments. It was probably a wooden structure covered with earth; or a threshing floor covered with clay, or otherwise it could have been a roof daubed with clods of earth. The walls may well have been painted with clay, as thick reddish layers were found especially in the corners (Fig.6:3,7:3).

In some places the walls were deformed by the growth of tree roots and the middle part of the wall including the foundations towards the mountain had fallen in (Fig.8-9).

For security reasons part of the protruding wall had to be pushed back to be able to continue the excavations and where it was not possible to do this, it was removed and reconstructed in exactly the same way on the basis of exact excavation information (Fig.6-7,12).

In the middle of the wall, towards the valley there was a niche, probably containing a wooden column (Fig.14).

Above the large sack-shaped partitioning wall, between the entrance and the internal room, there was probably an entrance to the upper floor (Fig.8,12-14).

This wall was also a support for the imposing granite architrave that weighed more than 4.2 tons and was about 240x140x50cm (Fig.8,12-14).

The position of the charcoal suggests that there was an upper floor according to the "Blockbau" technique (Fig.9). The basement had a wooden flooring and there were also signs of a thick wooden covering (Fig.10-11). There were other wooden structures in settlements that can be compared to these, for example in Stufels, Sanzeno, Doss Castel, Ciaslir of Monte Ozol, Montesei, Rotzo, Birgitz, Vill, Wattens, Stans (MIGLIAVACCA, 1993).

The position of the finding of a bronze fibula, a chisel with a cannon shaped hilt and an iron sickle also suggest that the structure was on two floors.

This supposition is also confirmed by the fact that the grinder (Fig.16:1) and the face stone (Fig.16:2) belonging to a hopper and lever quern were all found scattered in different places.

Another particular feature of this house is the arcuated wall on the side of the mountain (Fig.12,14), which was built on the already existing foundation, as well as the containment wall of the scarp, which was situated a little higher up. These types of walls have the advantage of supporting the pressure of the slopes.

There was a large rock with engraved signs similar to script, hidden obliquely in the soil near the top step of the stairs in the entrance. These stairs were almost completely destroyed by tree roots or even perhaps by clandestine excavations and have been reconstructed (Fig.12,16).

Unfortunately, this cannot be definitely interpreted as being the first step of the flight of stairs. It could have been intentionally placed vertically in the ground. The engraved signs (Fig.17) could have indicated the number or the house symbol; otherwise it could have been the family's name, just like the one found on the fibula in the same excavation.

Other stone findings were: a whetstone-shaped red sandstone (Fig.15:1), a gneiss hand quern (Fig.15:2), a porphyry fragment of a rotary hand quern and a grey-brownish sandstone face stone. This probably broke when the second floor collapsed.

The house was very large and the inner part measured 8,5x6,5m. It is worth noting that very few fictile materials were found in this house (Fig.18-19), whereas there were twenty iron hooks, fragments of nails, rings and fasteners (Fig.20), as well as a chisel (Fig.21:1) and an iron sickle (Fig.21:2). An iron construction, placed on two flat slabs of stones (Fig.22), could be a grate or the remains of an andiron², but unfortunately there were no traces of a hearth on that spot. Parallelism can be found between all the iron materials recovered in this house and the materials found in different Rhaetic settlements such as Himmelreich in Wattens/Volders and Burgberg near Stans (LIPPE, 1960) in the Inn Valley, but especially those of Sanzeno in the Non Valley (NOTHDURFTER, 1979).

The ornamental bronze objects consisted of a

"Tiroler Schüsselfibel" type fibula (a bowl-shaped fibula) (Fig.23:8), which can be compared to those found at Schloß Labers-Merano (LUNZ, 1980) in house XIII on the Hohe Birga, near Birgitz in the Inn Valley (GLEIRSCHER, 1987a), at Matrei a. Br., at Lavis and at Sanzeno (GLEIRSCHER, 1987b). There was also a small pendant in the shape of a small arrowhead (the attachment ring was missing) (Fig.23:6) and a piece of a thin band (Fig.23:7).

A bronze spatula with a perforated shovel (Fig.24:1) that could have been used as a weaving implement was also found³. The bronze handle of a ladle (perhaps used for wine?) with inscription signs (Fig.24:2) can be compared to the pail found at Großkarnell/Siebeneich in Bolzano (GLEIRSCHER, 1993), that is now in exposition at the Museo Ferdinandeum in Innsbruck.

A particular object found was a vertical eyelet-shaped handle with a long flat attachment base with two holes for fixing it to the vase (Fig.24:3)⁴. The actual length is 106mm and the original length was probably 186mm. The diameter of the 20mm long handle is 4.5mm.

The ring-shaped base segment is 16mm and the internal radius is 12.5cm with an average thickness of 1.2mm and was still attached to carbonized weave wicker by two bronze split pins.

Apart from the bronze ornamental objects found at Burgstall, there were also fragments of six glass bracelets. Two of these were two translucent fragments of a navy blue bracelet (Fig.5:13-14)⁵ from the 1977 investigation.

A blue cobalt glass fragment with a rounded triangular section was found in House 1. It was not transparent and had curvilinear decorations made with a navy blue fully smelted glassy mixture (Fig.23:1) similar to fragments found at St. Hyppolit-Tisens/Tesimo⁶ and at "Himmelreich" in the Inn Valley.

All the glass bracelets found at the Rhaetic settlement of Himmelreich at Wattens/Volders (APPLER, 1997) belong to Group 2 of the Haevernik typology (HAEVERNIK, 1960) but only differ in colour and dimension, while the glassy mixture is always non-transparent, similar to the Faience Pottery

There is also a cobalt blue translucent fragment with an opaque surface (Fig.23:1)⁷ and three fragments of trimmed bracelets with five ribs like the Haevernik type 7a-b. The first is transparent and of a very light greenish colour⁸ with an elongated air bubble inside the middle rib (Fig.23:3), while the others are translucent and purple (Fig.23:4), periwinkle blue (Fig.23:5), with yellow non transparent glass line decorations on the middle rib. There are similar findings at Ganglegg-Schluderns/Sluderno (SCHUBERT, 1992, abb.4:9,10), Kranzhof-Innichen/S.Candido (LUNZ, 1977, Abb.14) and at Hohe Birga-Birgitz (GLEIRSCHER, 1987).

The remains of an arched construction, situated 12 metres from House 1 could belong to a water tank. When this wall was found (Fig.25) the entrance of a second house was discovered⁹, in which two exceptional iron findings came to light. They was a small pipe with a little lid (Fig.26)¹⁰. This was probably used as a drug pipe by a shaman?¹¹.

Excavations on House 1 were finished in summer 1995. A wooden structure with a wooden scaled roof was built. Other houses on the Burgstall site will be uncovered in the future in order to learn more about the structure of the Rhaetian settlement and a sort of open-air museum will be founded.

The Burgstall settlement was inhabited by a late Iron Age population that culturally belonged to the Fritzens-Sanzeno Group and probably descended from the Rhaetian race of the Venostes.

A fragment of a cup with a flat S-shaped profile with rhombus shaped impressed decorations (Fig.5:7) hopper and lever quern date the beginning of the settlement to the IV century BC. The glass mixture bracelets as well as radiometric analysis¹² carried out on three pieces of charcoal from House 1 date the house back to the III century BC

The cup with a squashed body, with metope decorations and a tall distinct neck (Fig.18:1), as well as the bronze "Tiroler Schüsselfibel" type fibula are the most recent findings dating back to the I century BC

As the fibula dates to the third part of the I century BC and there are no Roman findings at Burgstall, we can hypothesize that this settlement was abandoned when, or just before, the Romans conquered the area.

It is obvious that this house and probably the

whole settlement were destroyed by fire. This could be related to the Druso campaign in 15 BC but there is nothing to prove this theory.

NOTES

- 1 - carried out by the authors along with people of the village.
- 2 - Similar to the one found at Piperbühel-Klobenstein/Collalbo (LUNZ, 1981:206, Taf. 90.4).
- 3 - A similar one made of antler with Rhaetian writing on the handle was found by K. Pohl on the Ganglegg / Schluderns in Venosta Valley. (in press)
- 4 - Quite similar to the small handle found by R. Perini on Mount Ozol. (PERINI, 1971, fig.14:64)
- 5 - Similar to the fragment from St. Hyppolit-Tisens/Tesimo, Mus. Ferd. Isbr., Inv. 1349
- 6 - Mus. Ferd. Isbr., Inv. 1347-48.
- 7 - Similar to the fragments from St. Hyppolit-Tisens/Tesimo, Mus. Ferd. Isbr., Inv. 1347-48
- 8 - cfr. Mus. Ferd. Isbr. Inv. 18227; LIPPE, 1960:41, abb.20:8
- 9 - As soon as other sponsors are found and excavations are authorized, work will continue in this area.
- 10 - All drawings and photos by G. Niederwanger
- 11 - Hyoscyamus luteus. Even as far back as G. Plinius Secundus, M. Pomponius and Strabon, the use of the "pipe" was quoted (BALABANOVA, 1994)
- 12 - The C14 dates were carried out by ETH (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule) Zürich/Zurigo

Lb. Nr.	AMS ¹⁴ C age [y BP]	d ¹³ C [0 / 00]	Calibrated [BC/AD]
ETH-17532	2.120 ± 60	19,6 ± 1,2	BC 255 -10 AD (87,6%)
ETH-17533	2.100 ± 55	21,4 ± 1,2	BC 208 -27 AD (93,9%)
ETH-17534	2.085 ± 55	23,5 ± 1,2	BC 202 -61 AD (98,5%)

SUMMARY - There is a hillock called Burgstall near the Riffian/Rifiano village. The place name reminds us of the protohistoric settlement from which the first datable findings came to light during a small preliminary survey undertaken in 1977. A systematic excavation was carried out in 1994-95 at this protohistoric site and a Rhaetian structure was discovered with the typical corner corridor entrance with an imposing granite architrave. The position of the burnt wood suggests that there was an upper level in the tradition of the "Blockbau" technique. Furthermore, the basement had wooden flooring and there were signs of thick wooden board coverings. The position of the findings would suggest that the structure was on two floors. Another particular detail of this house is the arcuated wall against the side of the mountain. In the entrance there was a staircase and a large rock with written signs, probably referring to the family name, similar to those on the fibula found in the same excavation. Some of the findings date the beginning of the settlement to the IV century BC, whereas the more recent evidence would chronologically place it to the end of the I century BC. It is obvious that a fire destroyed this house and probably all the settlement. This event could be related to the Druso campaign of the year 15 BC, even though we do not have any evidence to confirm this hypothesis at the moment.

RIASSUNTO - Vicino il paese di Riffian/Rifiano si erge un dosso chiamato Burgstall. Già il toponimo ricorda la presenza di un insediamento protostorico, dal quale i primi reperti databili vennero alla luce durante un piccolo sondaggio fatto nel 1977. Uno scavo sistematico in questo sito protostorico, eseguito nel 1994-95 ci ha permesso di scoprire una struttura di una casa Retica con il tipico corridoio d'entrata ad angolo dotato di un imponente architrave in granito. La posizione dei legni bruciati fa pensare all'esistenza di un piano superiore secondo la tecnica della Blockbau. Inoltre il vano interrato era dotato di una pavimentazione lignea e ci sono anche indicazioni per un rivestimento di tavoloni. Alla struttura su due piani di questa casa fa credere anche la posizione di ritrovamento dei reperti. Un'altra particolarità di questa casa è data dall'andamento arcuato del muro appoggiato al versante della montagna. All'ingresso, dotato di una scala, si trovava un masso con

dei segni a scrittura, che potrebbero essere stati un segno di appartenenza, come sulla fibula rinvenuta in questo stesso scavo. Alcuni reperti ci datano l'inizio dell'insediamento al IV sec. AC; invece i reperti più recenti si possono collocare cronologicamente nella fine I sec. AC. È evidente che questa casa, e probabilmente l'intero insediamento, venne distrutta da un incendio. Questo evento potrebbe essere messo in relazione con la campagna di Druso nell'anno 15 AC, anche se per il momento non abbiamo reperti che confermino tale ipotesi.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG - Nahe dem Dorfe Riffian erhebt sich eine Kuppe, die Burgstall genannt wird. Schon der Name, deutet auf eine vorgeschichtliche Siedlung hin, aus der die ersten datierbaren Funde anlässlich einer kleinen Sondierung 1977 ans Licht gelangten. Eine systematische Grabung, welche 1994-95 ausgeführt wurde, erlaubte uns ein Rätisches Haus mit dem typischen Winkleingang freizulegen, den ein gewaltiger Türsturz aus Granit überspannt. Die Lage der verkohlten Hölzer lässt an ein oberes Stockwerk denken, das in Blockbauweise ausgeführt war. Außerdem war der Kellerraum mit einem Holzboden versehen und auch Anzeichen einer Bohlentäfelung sind vorhanden. Auf einen zweistöckigen Bau dieses Hauses deutet auch die Fundlage der Fundstücke hin. Eine weitere Besonderheit an diesem Haus ist die bogenförmige Linienführung der bergseitigen Hangmauer. An dem, mit einer Treppe versehenen Eingang fand sich ein Stein mit Schriftzeichen, die ein Besitzzeichen darstellen könnten, wie es sich auch an der Fibel aus dieser Grabung andeutet. Einige Funde datieren uns den Anfang der Siedlung in das 4. Jh. V Chr.; dagegen lassen sich die jüngsten Fundstücke in das Ende des 1. Jh. V Chr. stellen. Nachdem auf dem Burgstall keine römischen Fundstücke zutage traten, können wir vorläufig annehmen, dass diese Siedlung bei der römischen Eroberung, oder kurz vorher verlassen wurde. Es ist eindeutig, dass dieses Haus, wahrscheinlich sogar die ganze Siedlung durch Brand zerstört wurde. Zu erwägen wäre es, dieses Ereignis mit dem Drusus-Feldzug im Jahre 15 v. Chr. in Verbindung zu bringen. Vorerst fehlen uns aber noch diesbezügliche Beweisfunde.

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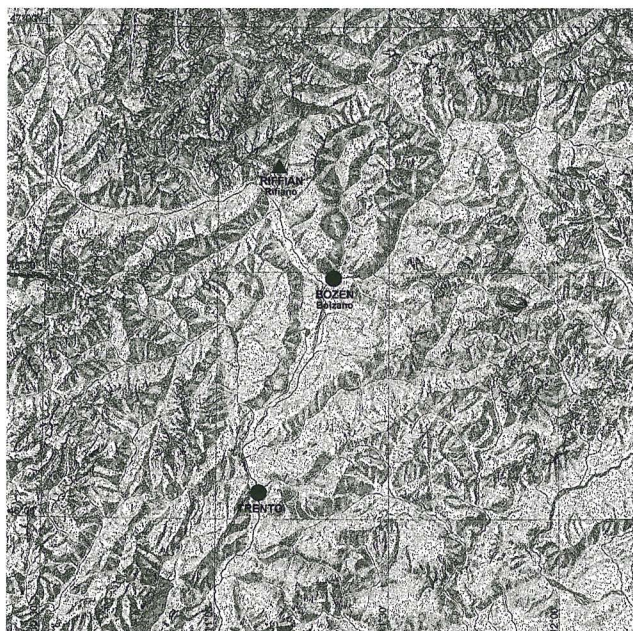


Fig. 1 – Geographical position of the site



Fig. 2 – The Riffian/Rifiano village with the "Burgstall" as seen from Verdins towards West

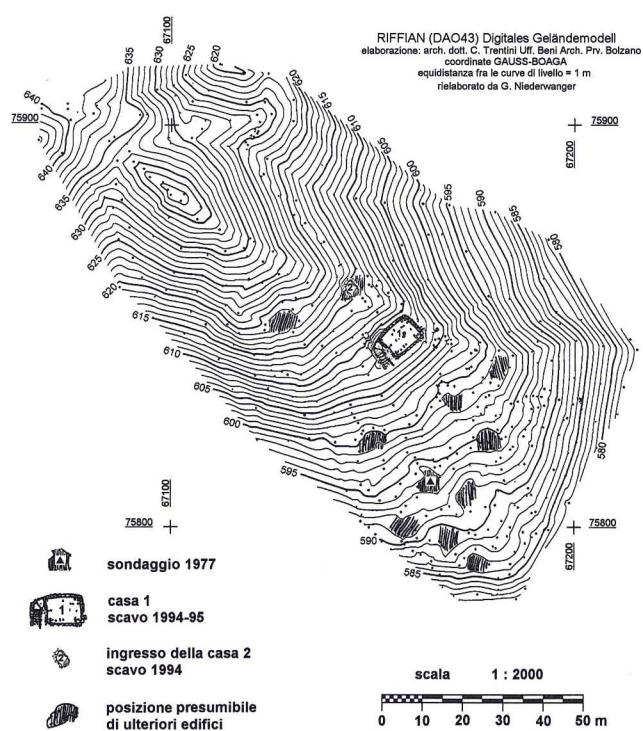


Fig. 3 – Digital model of the site



Fig. 4 – The entrance of House 1 before excavations

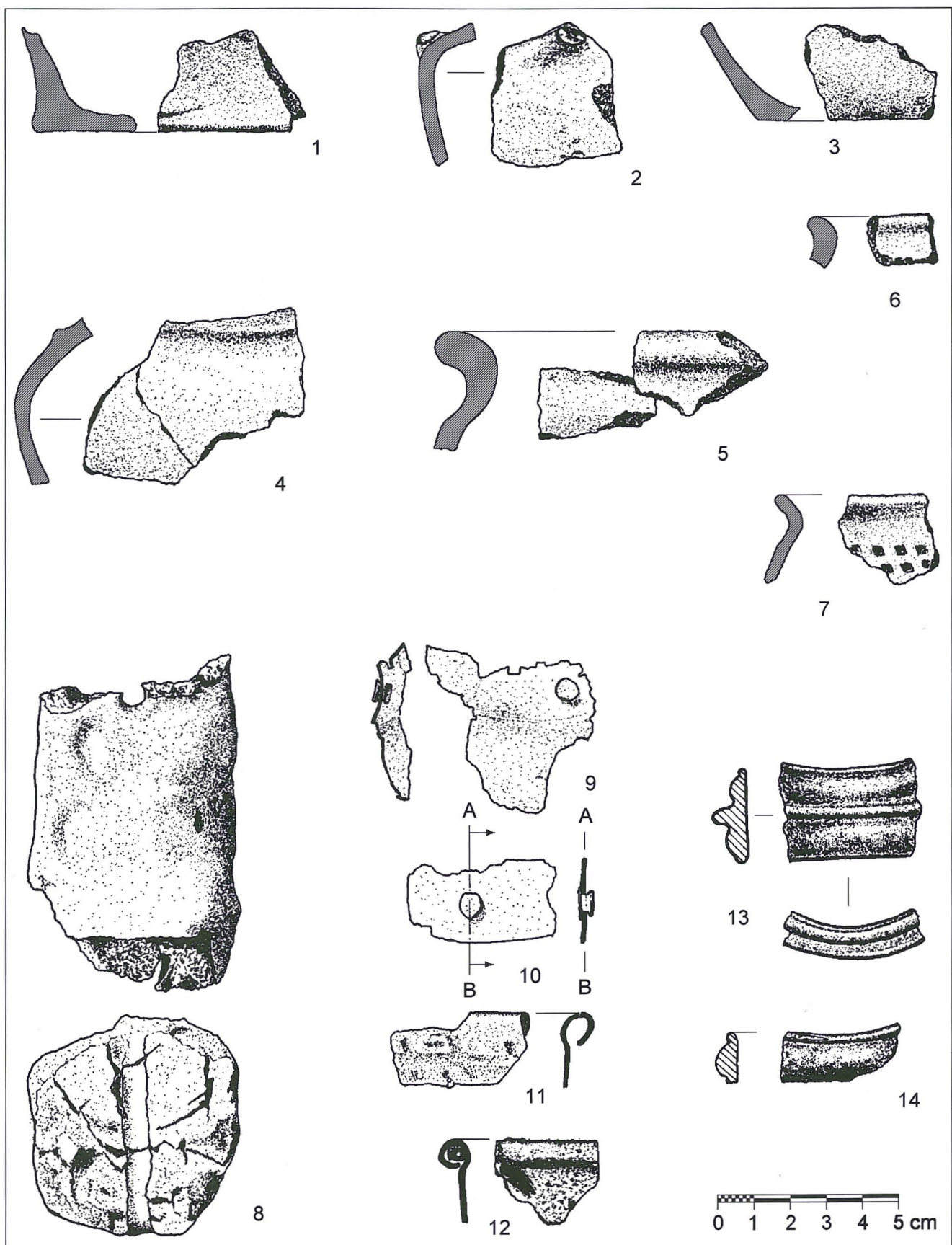


Fig. 5 – Findings of the 1977 survey: 1-8) ceramic; 9-11) bronze; 13-14) glass. (2/3 of the natural size)

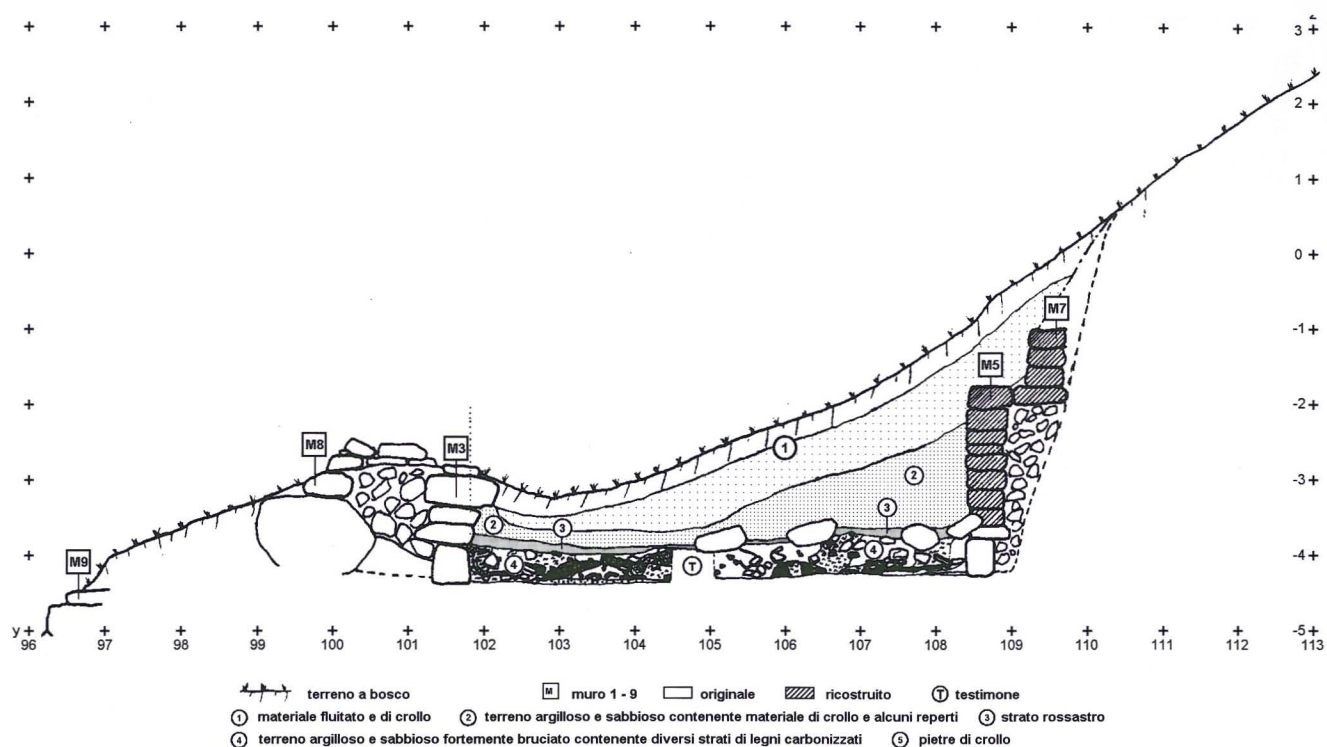


Fig. 6 – House 1: Section on x91 (transversal) view towards SW (1:100)

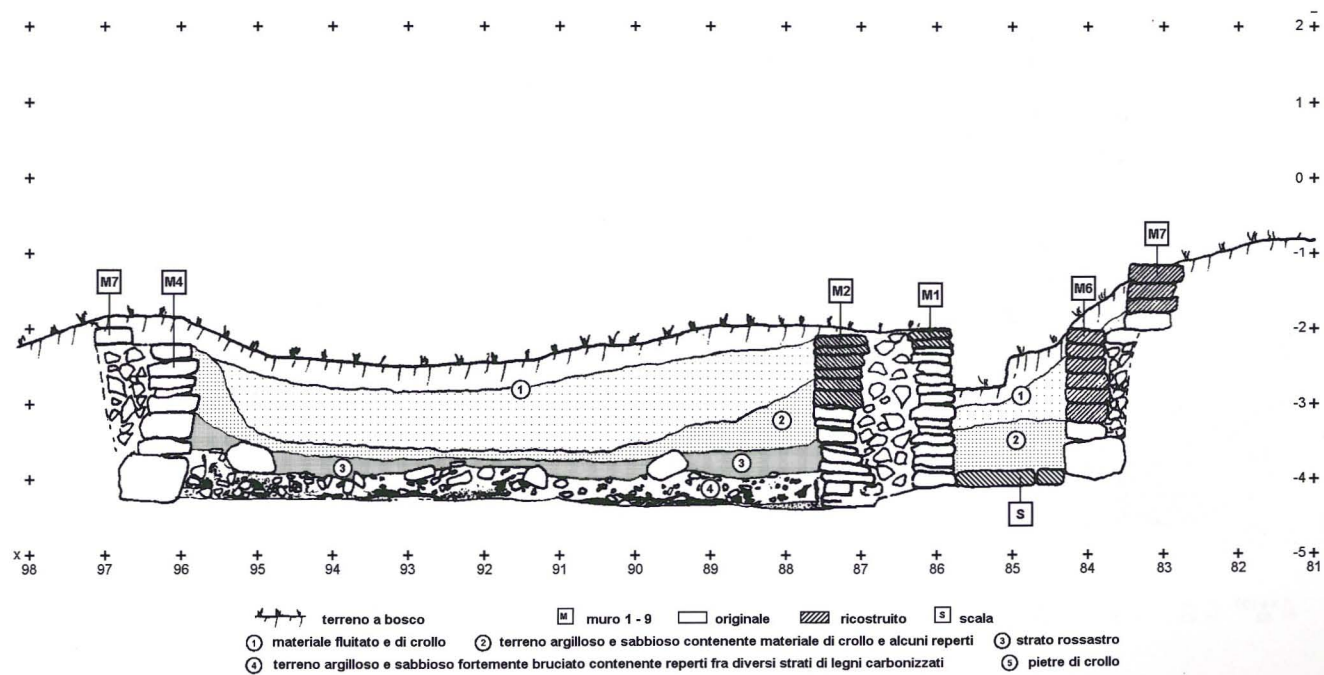


Fig. 7 – House 1: Section on y105 (longitudinal) view towards NW (1:100)

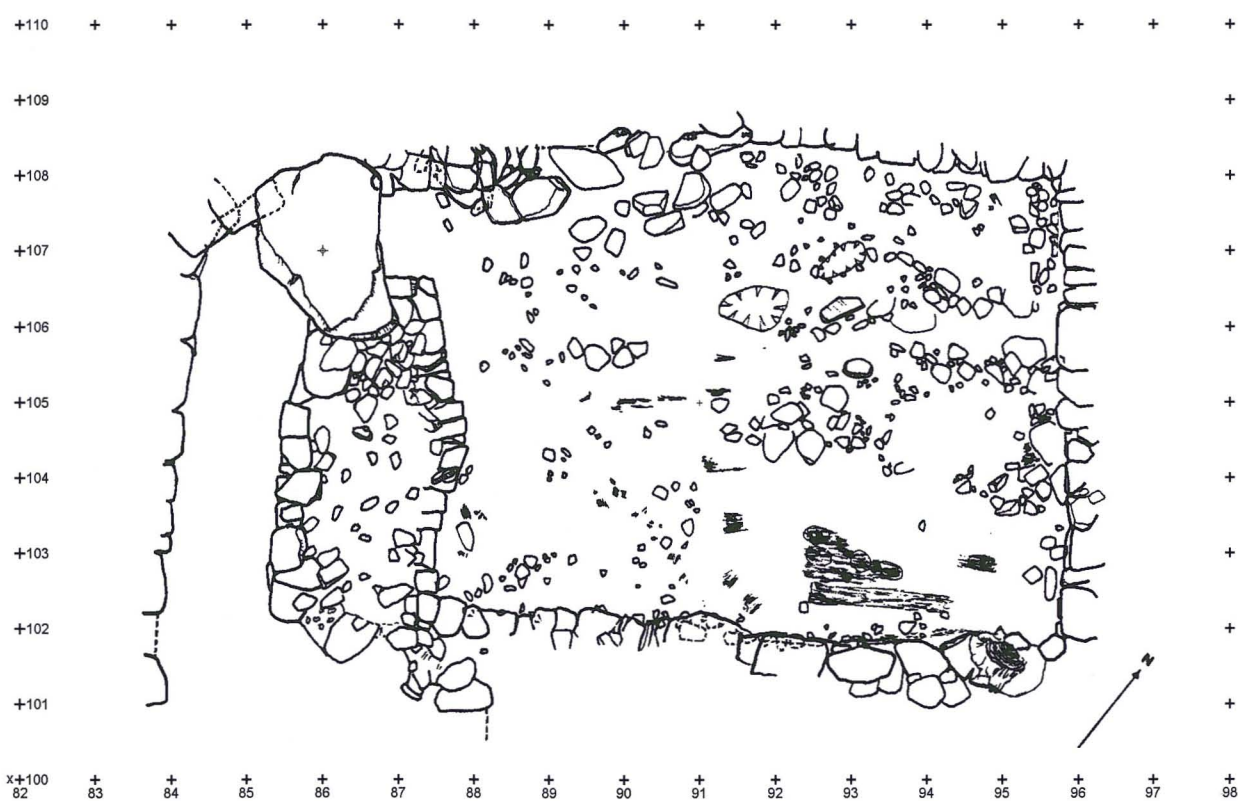


Fig. 8 – House 1: The first layout of stratum 4 with fallen rocks, stones from the upper part of the walls and the monolithic architrave (in the SE corner, the trunk of a chestnut tree) (1:100)

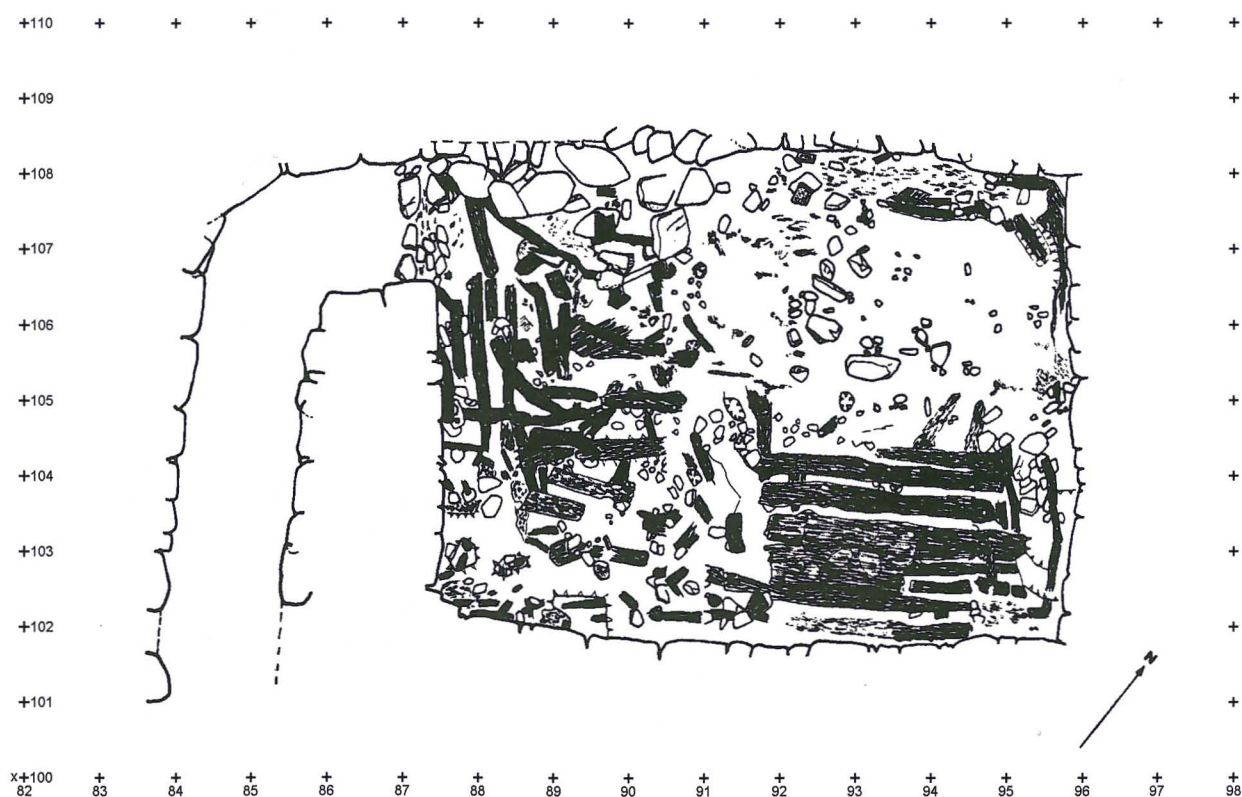


Fig. 9 – House 1: Second layout of stratum 4, delimited with foundation stones of the wall with burnt beams from the upper floor and fallen rocks (1:100)

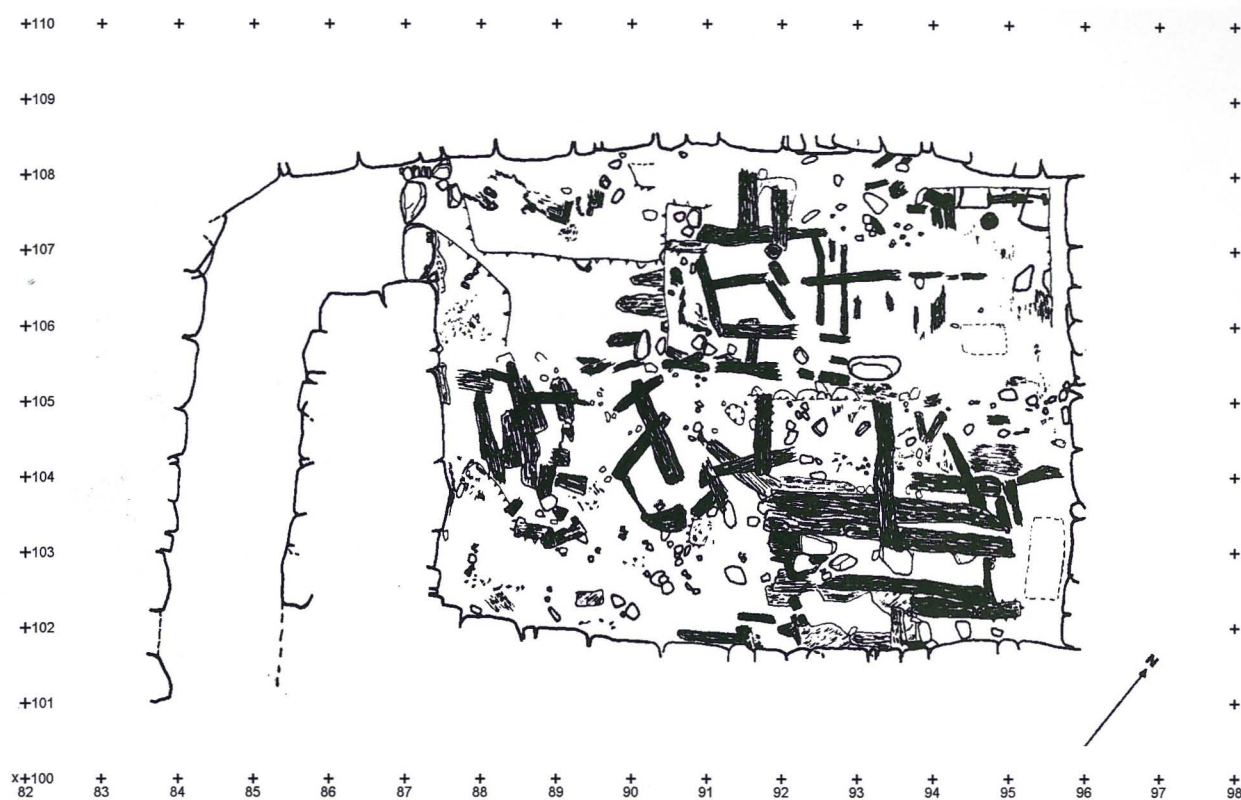


Fig. 10 – House 1: Third layout of stratum 4, delimited with foundation stones of the wall with burnt beams of the ceiling and the insoles and also with the threshold stones (1:100)



Fig. 11 – House 1: Fourth layout of stratum 4, delimited with foundation stones of the walls with burnt wood from the insoles and the flooring, stones of the threshold and of the base of the flooring (1:100)

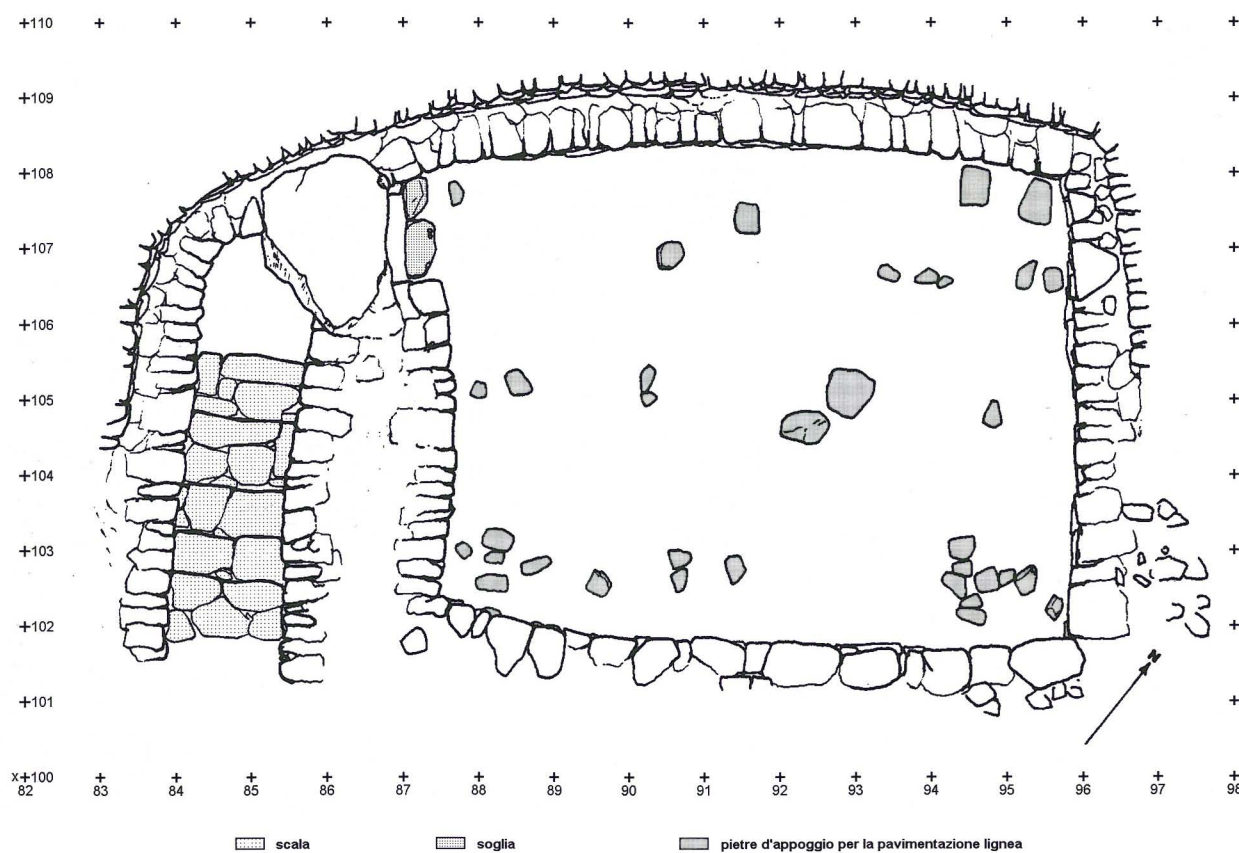


Fig. 12 – House 1: Stones from the upper part of the walls that had been repaired and the monolithic architrave (1:100)

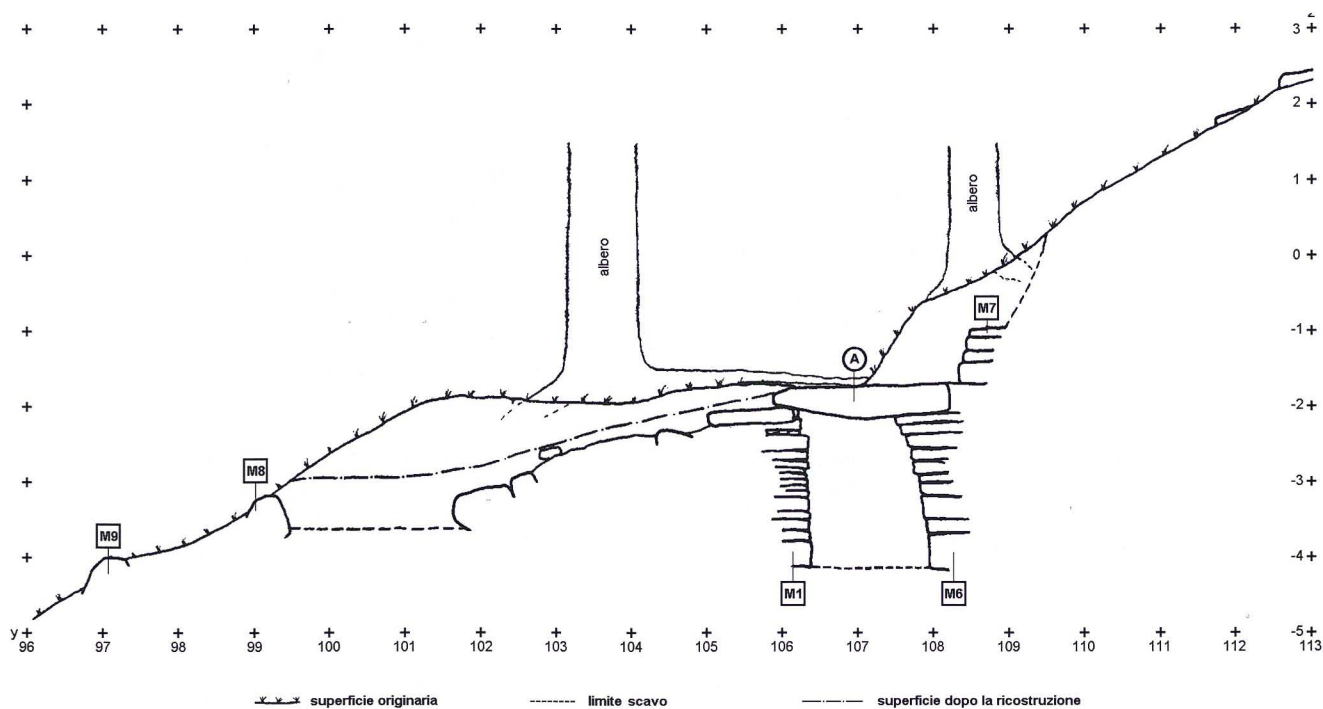


Fig. 13 – House 1: Section on x86 (transversal) view towards SW with the entrance walls and the monolithic architrave (1:100)



Fig. 14 – House 1 in the final phase of the excavation.

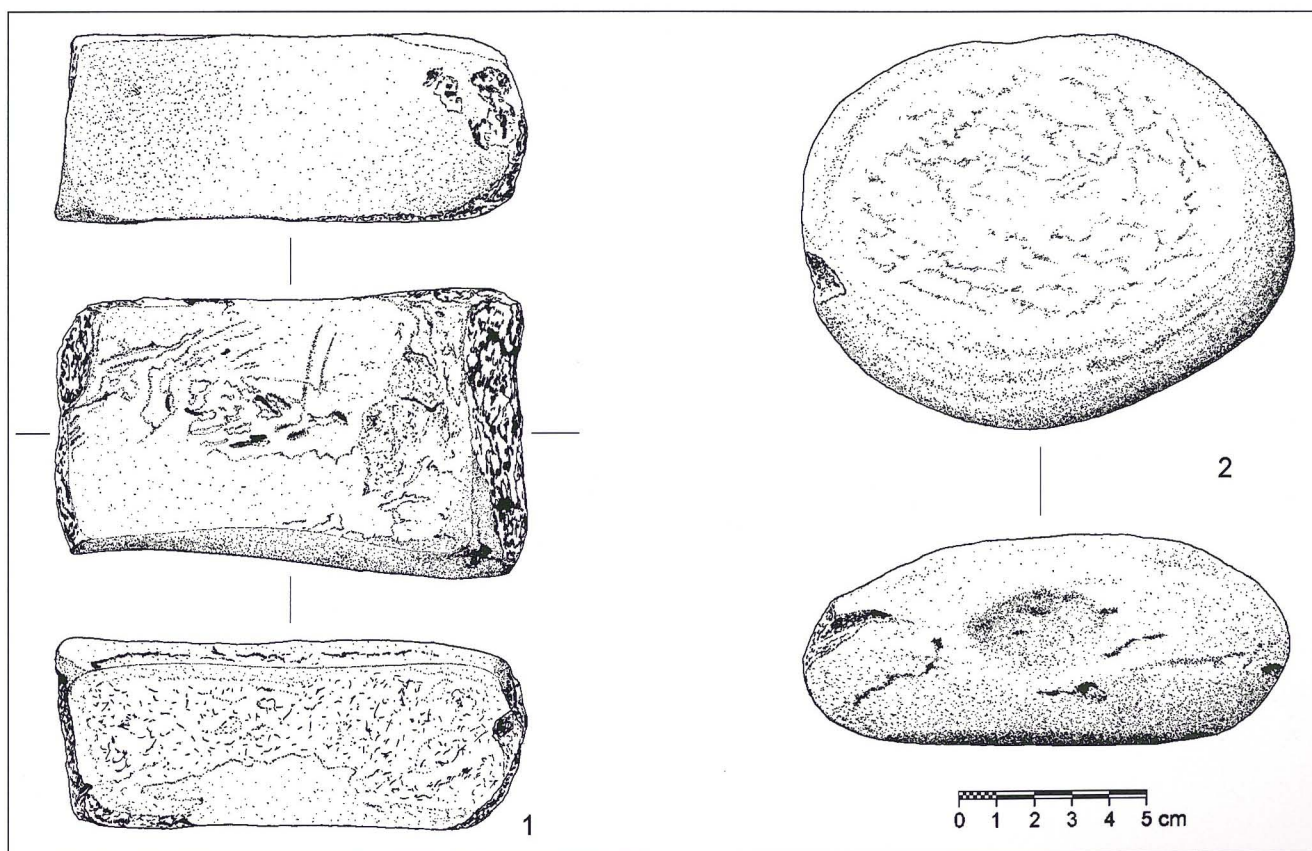


Fig. 15 – 1) Red sandstone whetstone; 2) gneiss handquern (1/2 of the natural size)

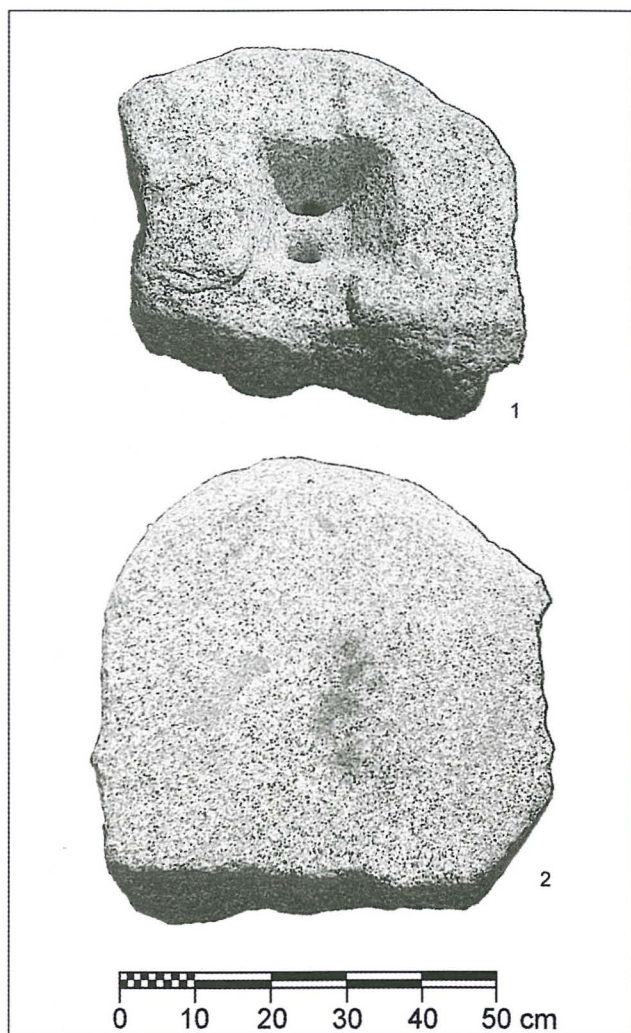


Fig. 16 – Granite face stone (1) and grinder (2) of a hopper and lever quern (1/10 of the natural size)

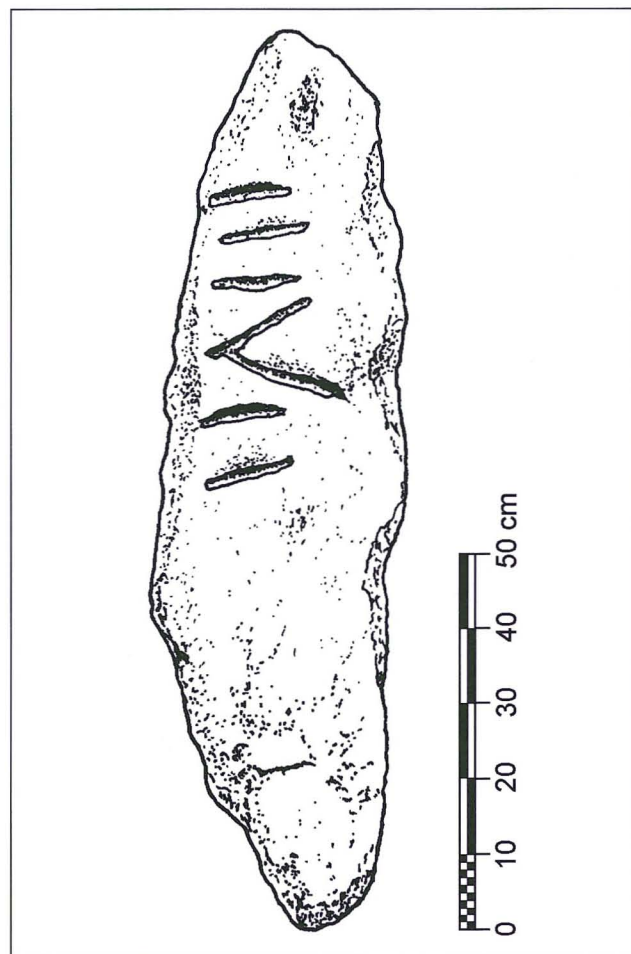


Fig. 17 – Gneiss stone with engraved signs similar to script (1/10 of the natural size)

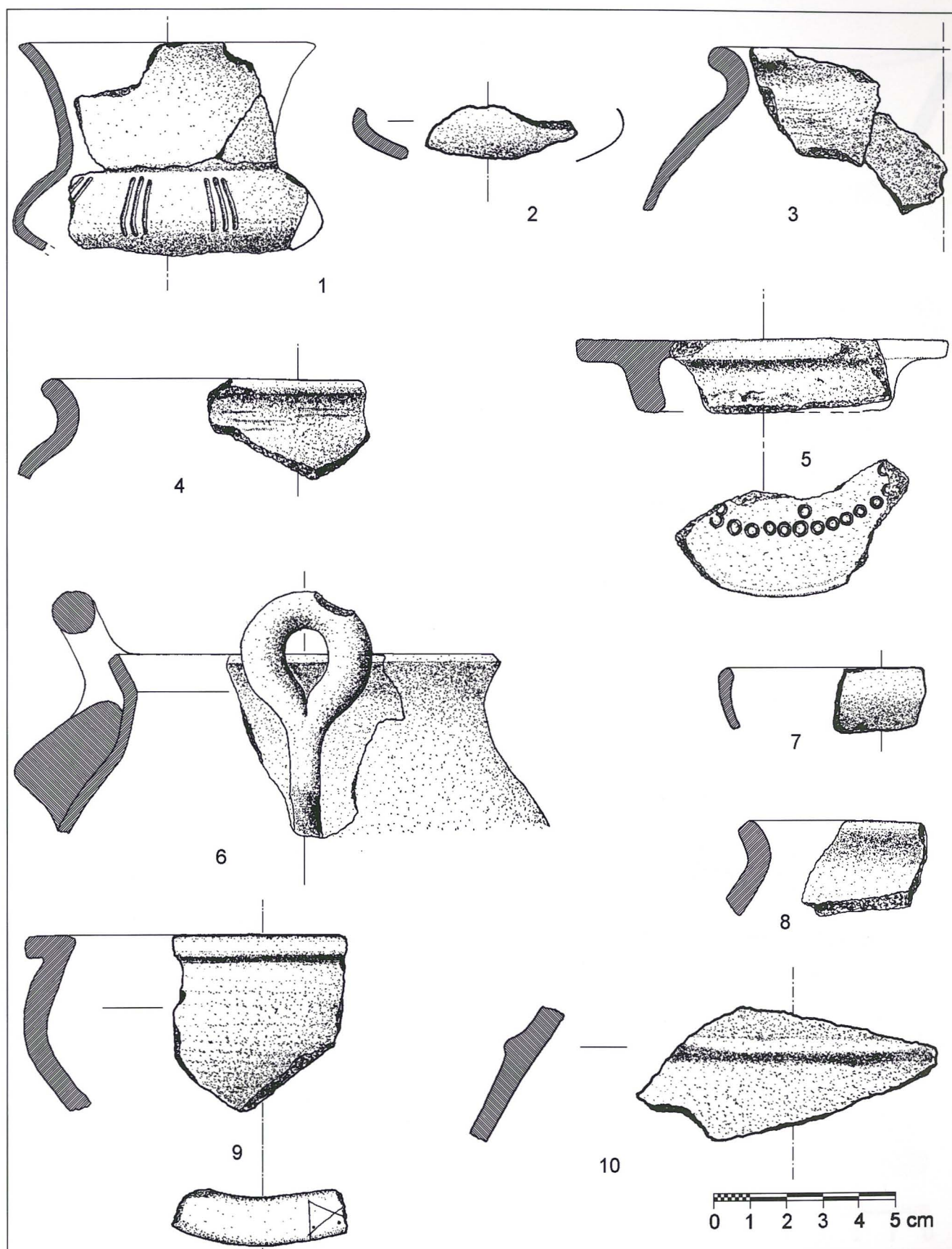


Fig. 18 – Ceramic fragments: 1,2,7) cups; 3,4,8) small ollas; 5) lid; 6) situla; 9) bowl with written signs on the rim; 10) vase with cordon decorations (2/3 of the natural size)

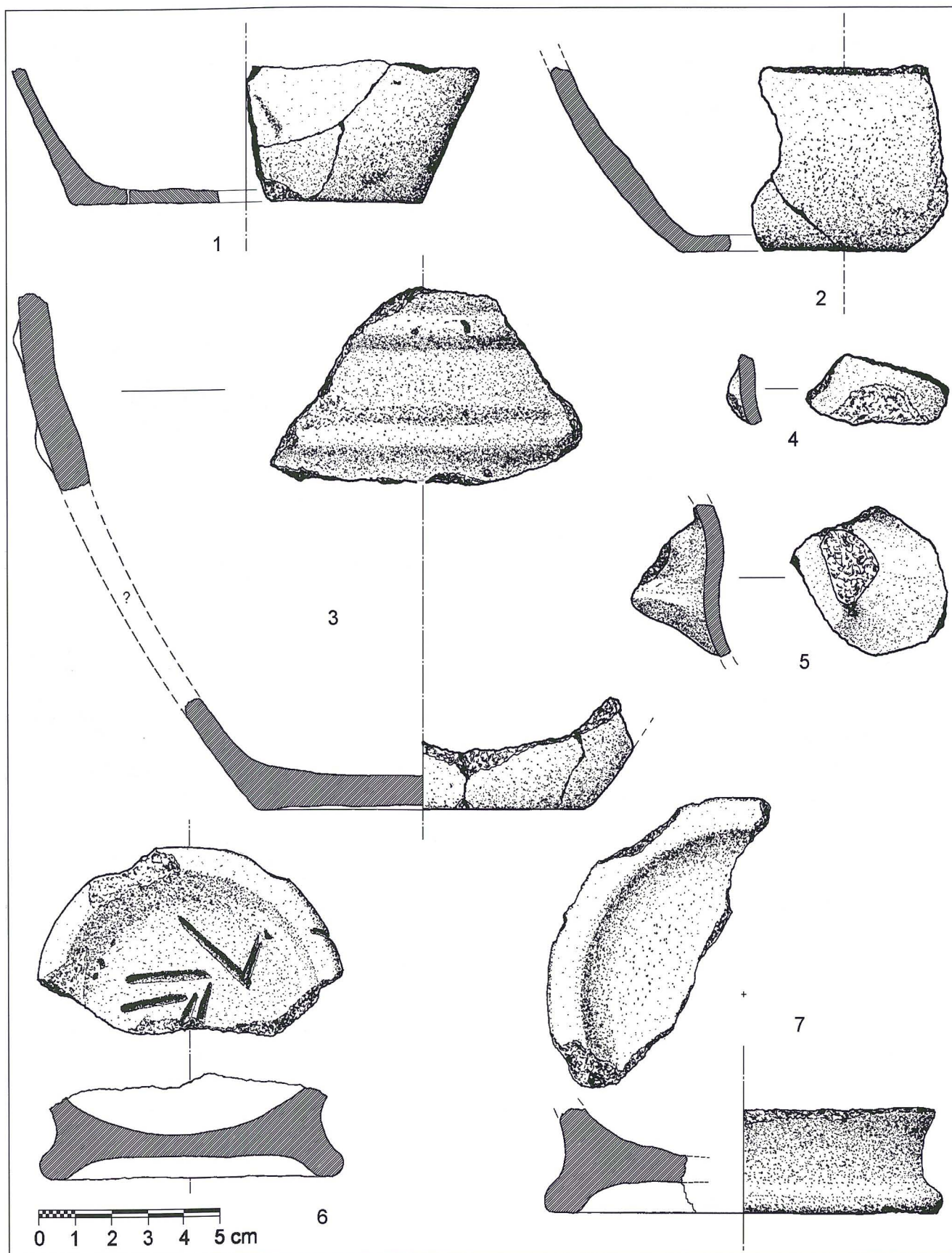


Fig. 19 – Ceramic fragments: 1) vase with cordon decorations; 2-3) bases; 4-5) handle attachments; 6) bottom of a jug with writing; 7) bottom of a jug (2/3 of the natural size)

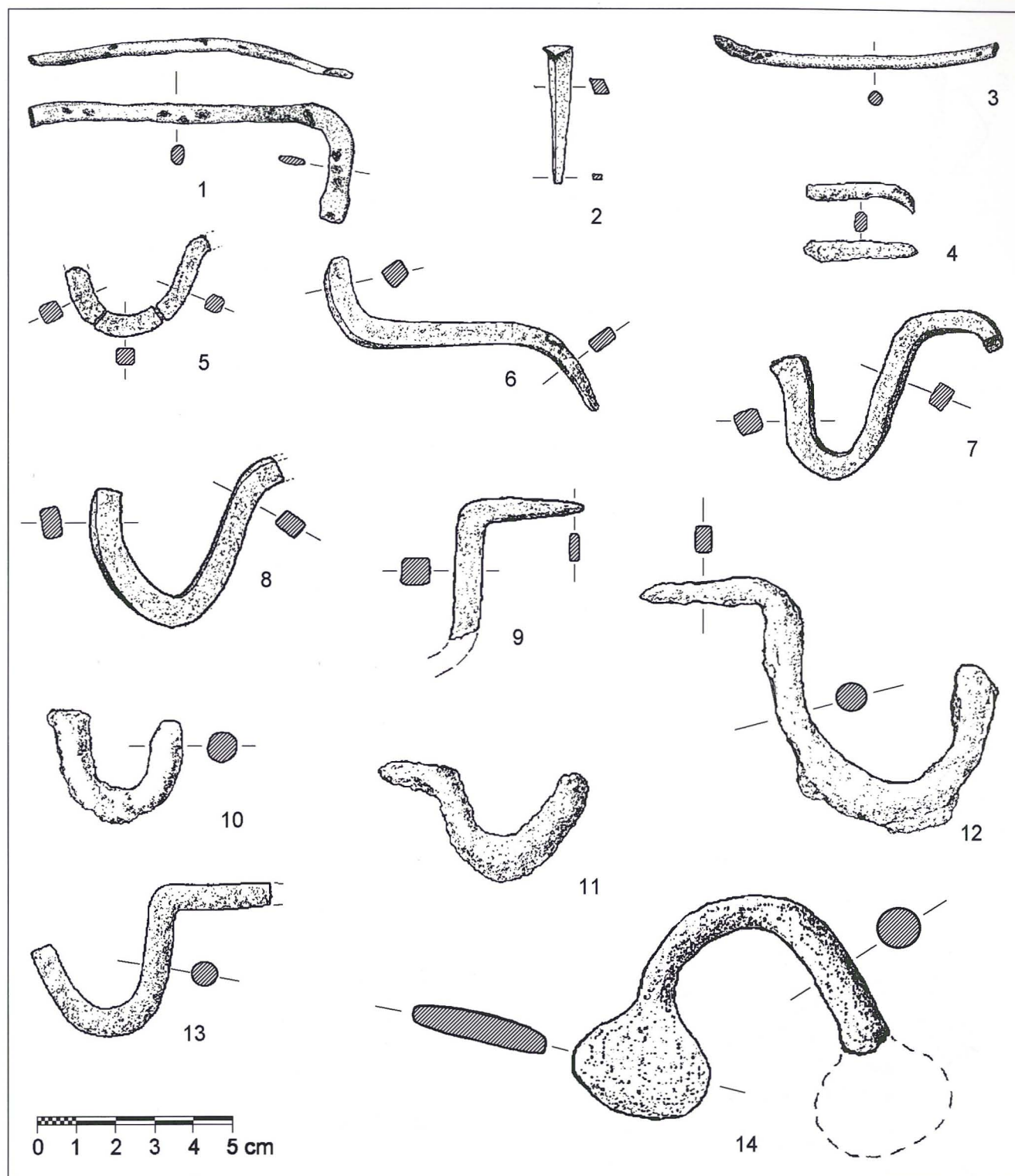


Fig. 20 – Iron findings: 1) fastener; 2-4) nails; 5-13) hooks; 14) handgrip (2/3 of the natural size)

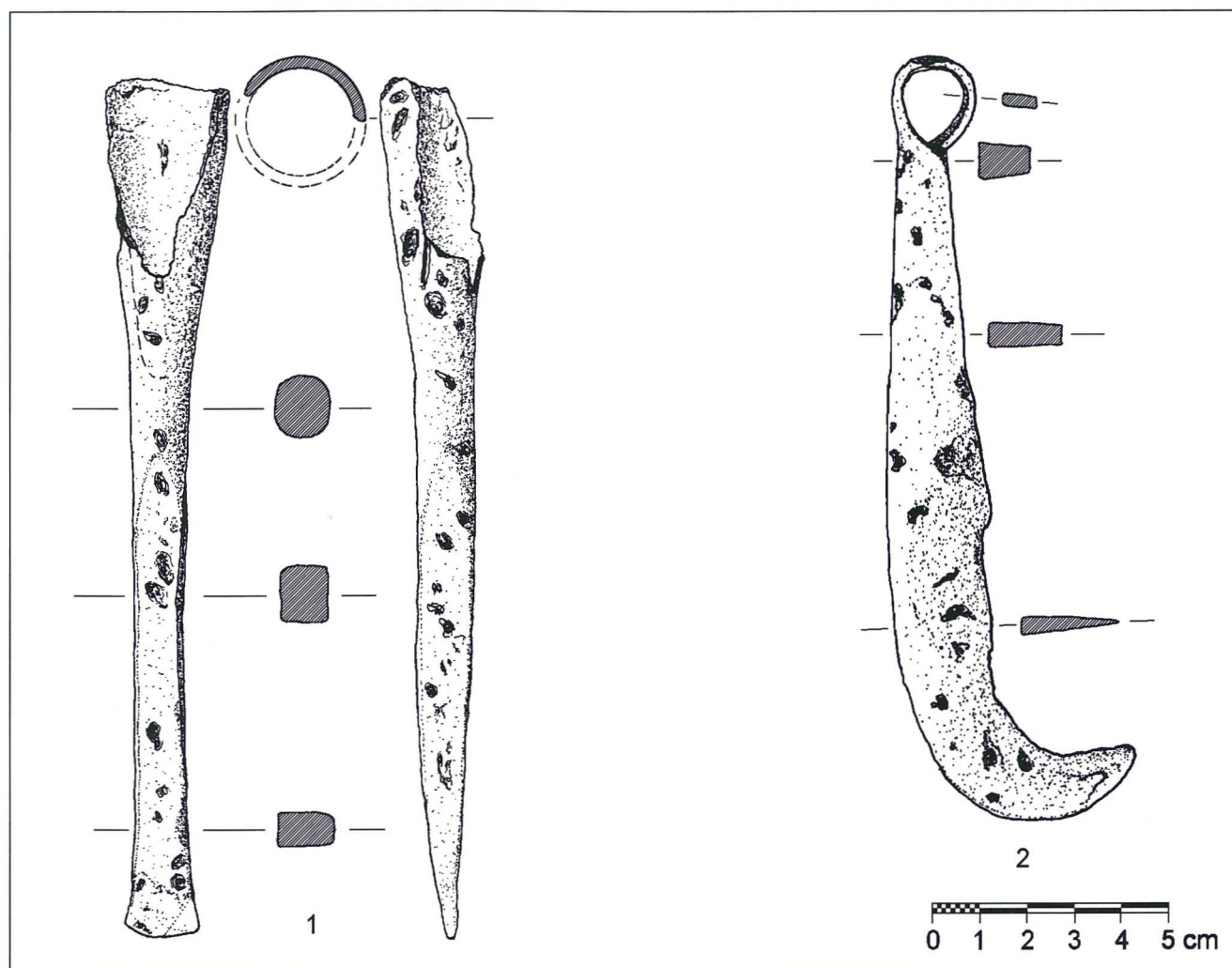


Fig. 21 – Iron findings: 1) chisel with cannon-shaped hilt; 2) sickle (2/3 of the natural size)

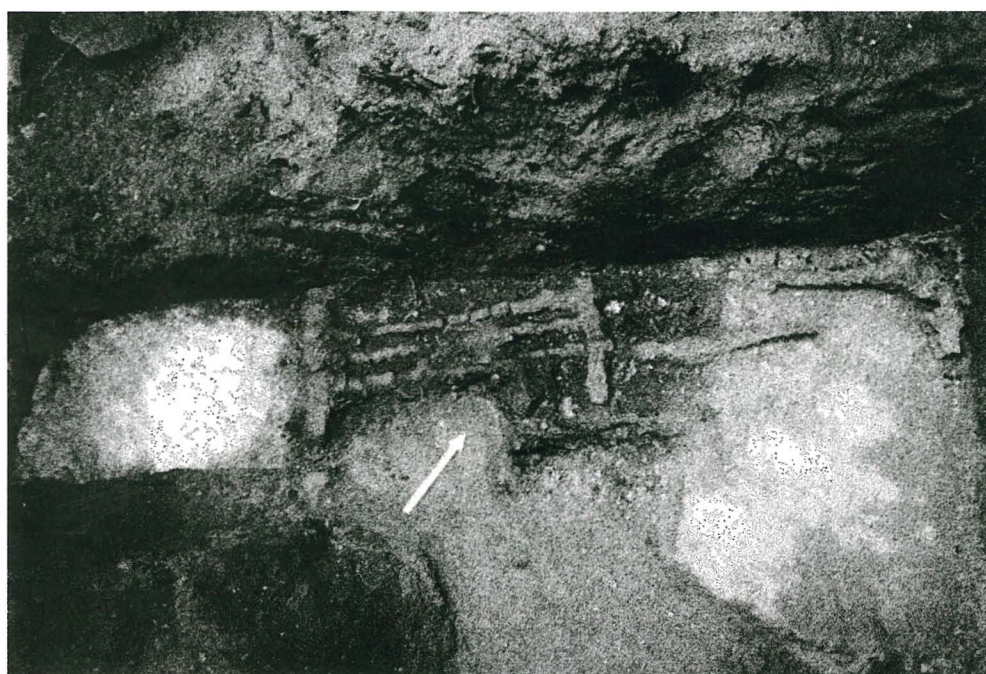


Fig. 22 – Iron finding: andiron (?)

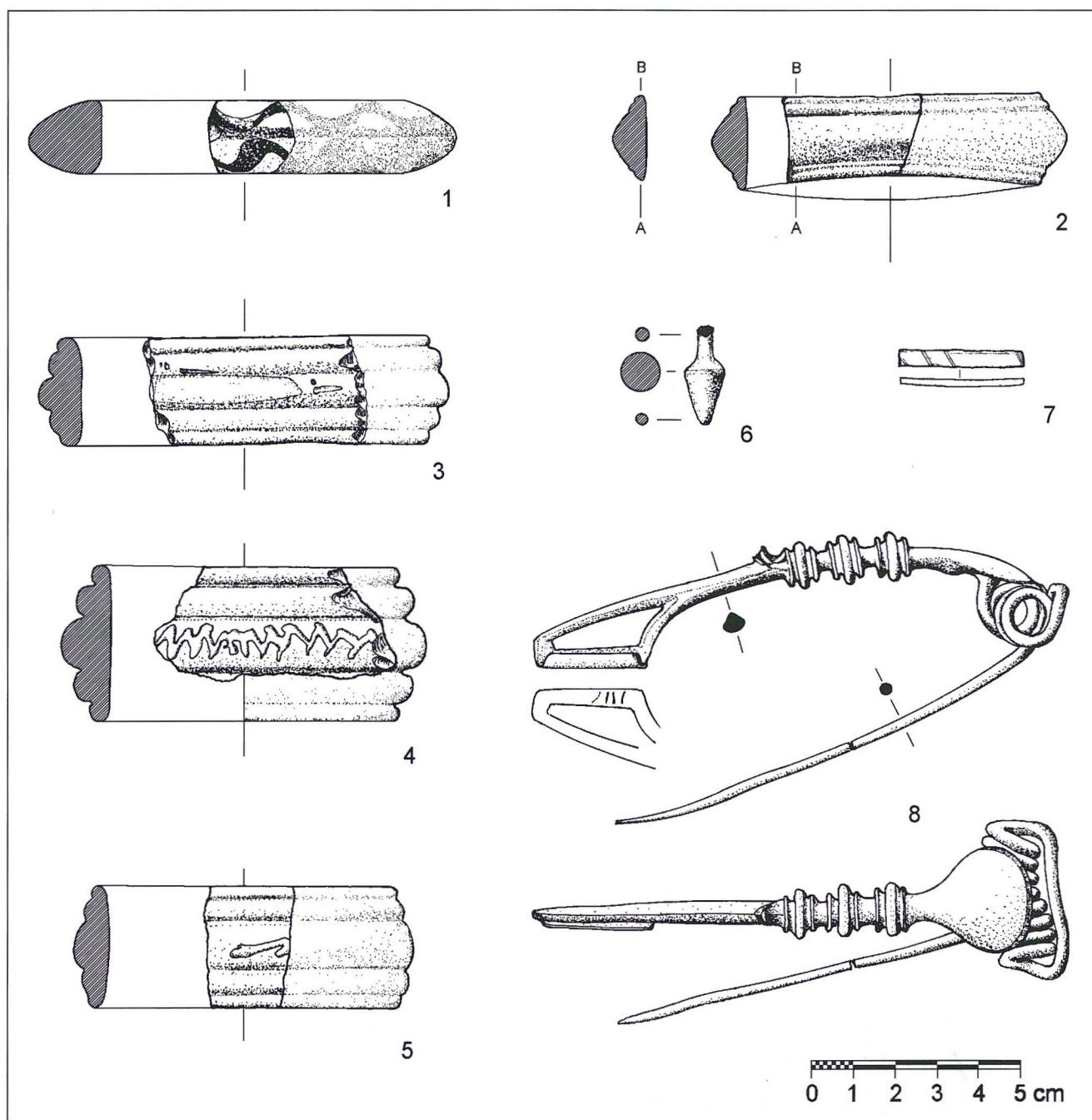


Fig. 23 – Glass ornamental objects: 1-5) bracelets. Of bronze: 6) small pendant; 7) band; 8) fibula with script (2/3 of the natural size)

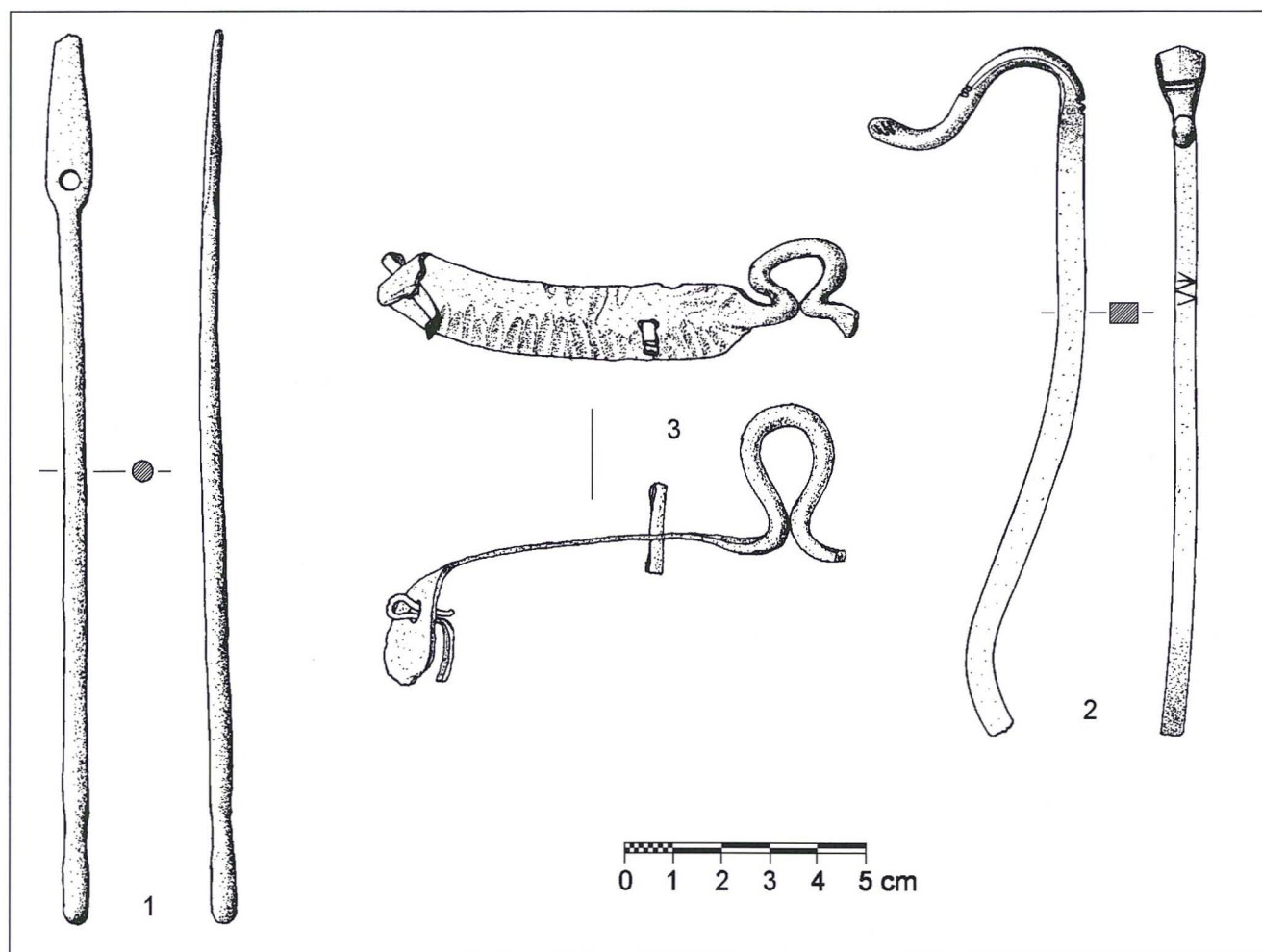


Fig. 24 – Bronze objects: 1) spatula with perforated shovel; 2) ladle handle with script; 3) eyelet-shaped handle with split pins (2/3 of the natural size)



Fig. 25 – Entrance wall of House 2

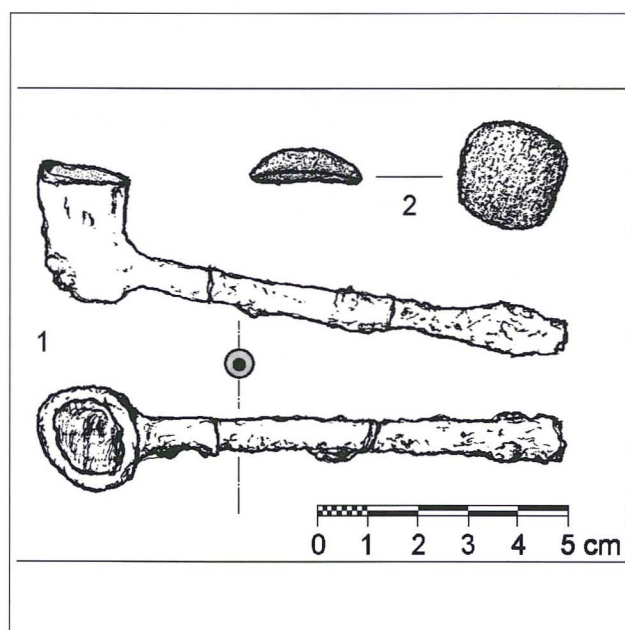


Fig. 26 – Iron findings of entrance 2: pipe (1) with lid (2) (1/2 of the natural size)