

REDISCOVERING OLD FINDS? NOTES ON THE BRONZE AGE GRAVES WITH AMBER IN WESTERN SERBIA

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Keywords: amber, Bronze Age, graves, necropolises, tumuli, Western Serbia.
(Abstract):

The study is the result of rechecking details of funerary practices in the Bronze Age of Western Serbia. Potential presence of amber in grave inventories provided an impetus to examine burial contexts and ways how exotic goods reached the innermost parts of the Balkan Peninsula. Arrival of the first amber artefacts at the territory of Serbia is connected with the Middle Bronze Age, which is later than the earliest finds of the Baltic amber in south Europe and the Mediterranean. The sites with amber artefacts are neither numerous nor with even spatial distribution. The region of Western Serbia stands out from the rest of the broader zone because of its early excavated and early dated amber finds. In all of the cases, the amber finds have funerary context. Focal point of the study is on the rediscovered amber find from the necropolis in Stapari and its context. Based on the data from the documentation and publications, it is not very likely that the necropolis in Stapari can be defined as a flat one. All regional characteristics of synchronous funerary practices must be taken into consideration along with the state of preservation of the site in the 20th century. Consequently, the necropolis can be added to the large group of tumular necropolises, which comprised necropolis in Vranjani, which was analysed as well, due to a problematic amber find. Recent analyses confirmed the Baltic provenance of the amber from the West Morava basin, but contribution to at least partial reconstruction of regional routes which brought the material to this part of the Central Balkans has additional importance. The region settled by the bearers of the Belegiš culture, which was suspected to have served as a starting point for regional trade southwards, provided the first amber find with settlement context.

Introduction

Having recalled how neat and well organised Alexandru Szentmiklosi's Belegiš collection and depot in the National Museum of Banat had been, I realised that seldom did I have a chance to work in such conditions. It was easy for us, two "Banaters", to discuss Cornești-Crvenka or any other Banatian Bronze Age problem, when everything was at hand. One moment you take the material from the shelf and the next moment you have very clever argumentation in support of your attitude! More often I am faced with the fact that I am literally wandering around museums or libraries in search of specific remnants from the past or just the right information about them. The safest way to deal with any problem has proven to be sticking to resources of your own. However, omissions and mistakes are possible even then. This study is the result of rechecking details of funerary practices in the Bronze Age of Western Serbia and confirmation that no revision is in vain. Potential

presence of amber in grave inventories just provided an impetus to examine burial contexts and ways how exotic goods reached the innermost parts of the Balkan Peninsula.

Arrival of the first amber artefacts at the territory of Serbia is connected with the Middle Bronze Age, which is later than the earliest finds of the Baltic amber in south Europe and the Mediterranean. Having taken into consideration the most recent radio-carbon data and re-evaluation of cultural attribution of the finds, it can be stated that the appearance of the first amber finds is even later¹ than it was proposed in the comprehensive work prepared by A. Palavestra and V. Krstić². A glimpse of the map with amber finds (Fig. 1) is enough to infer that the sites are neither numerous nor with even spatial distribution. The Middle Bronze Age finds are grouped inside borders of two geographical units of the central Balkans: the one in western Serbia, comprising the basins of the Drina and West Morava and the other in the region of Kosovo and Metohija. In all of the cases, the amber finds

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¹ Ljuština 2019, 88; Ljuština-Dmitrović 2020.

² Палавестра-Крстић 2006, 50.

have funerary context. In contrast, the only finds from the Late Bronze Age come from the Pannonian part of Serbia: the hoard from Vršac-Majdan and the first amber find from a settlement context in Banatski Dvor³.

Bronze Age amber and funerary practices in the upper course of the West Morava

The region of Western Serbia stands out from the rest of the broader zone because of its early excavated and early dated amber finds. Comparison of the map shown on the Figure 1 with the previously published ones reveals one more site in Western Serbia, in the upper part of the West Morava basin.

Mala Gradina, Stapari village, Zlatibor county

Revision of data originating from the museum collections resulted with another grave unit, which was omitted from the comprehensive list of sites and map⁴. The precious rediscovered find came from the vicinity of Užice. The site itself, with all the details of funerary practices, deserves particular attention.

The site of Mala Gradina is situated in the village of Stapari, some 11km to the west from Užice, on the part of the ridge of a hilly slope descending southwards. On the opposite slope there were some Neolithic and Eneolithic finds (Fig. 2). Systematic excavations were conducted by M. Zotović in the period 1958–1960. According to the results published up to now, the necropolis on the site of Mala Gradina can be defined as flat. However, it is interesting to notice that M. Zotović⁵ initially explained the site as the “necropolis of the hillfort type”. On the occasion of rechecking published material and documentation, it is assumed that the definition is in accordance with the site’s topography and assumed belonging to a hillfort settlement on a slope opposite to the necropolis. Based on the burial practice and stratigraphic observations, the necropolis was divided into the southern sector, where the Bronze Age deceased had been incinerated in most of the cases, and the northern sector, which was used to inhumate the dead during the First Iron Age. The southern part is characterised by the strata of brown-yellowish hard soil up to 20cm thick, below which there was soft black soil of 1,5m in which the incinerated deceased were buried. Mediaeval burials, erosion and agricultural activities disturbed the original stratigraphic picture⁶.

Focus of the study is on the southern part of the necropolis and burial practices revealed there. The most instructive have proven to be the works by J. Đurić⁷ and K. Dmitrović⁸. As already mentioned, incineration prevailed in the southern sector. The process of incineration took place out of the necropolis. Residue from the pyre (soot, ashes, carbonised wood) and infrequent grave gifts were placed either directly to the soil or in the ceramic urns. The urns were poorly preserved due to the manufacture. Particularly important is the following set of Bronze Age graves. Grave 2 (trial trench I, square A) comprised a fragmented urn with wide flat rim and plastic band below it. It was surrounded by stone construction made from slabs and smaller rock parts. There were no grave goods. In trial trench III, sq. A, grave 11 belonged to an incinerated deceased whose bodily remains along with residue from the pyre were placed directly on the soil, without any grave goods, near the graves 12 and 13. A small zone of pyre residue comprising cremated human remains was defined as grave 12. The grave was without urn and any other goods. Grave 13 had an urn with cremated bones and pyre residue, but it was without grave goods. The urn had cylindrical neck and wide belly. Another grave came from the same excavation unit. It was defined as grave 14 and consisted of an urn with burnt bones and ashes, inside a stone construction. There were no grave goods. The urn had cylindrical neck with incised triangular decoration and wide belly. The shoulder was richly decorated with incised and stamped triangular and rhombic patterns organized in metopic and frieze zones. There were symmetrically arranged tunnel-shaped handles on the shoulder, too. The form and decoration of the vessel chronologically put the grave unit into the very beginning of the Bronze Age. The same chronological attribution is given to the rest of the mentioned units. The same set of graves comprises another unit – urn 1 from the trench XIII, in which there were cremated bones. The grave was partially destroyed by mediaeval burials. The grave inventory consisted of: lower cone of an urn, a fragmented coiled ornament (saltaleone) and an amber bead, circular in shape and with circular central perforation⁹. K. Dmitrović emphasized specific shape of the urn from the trench XIII, very different from the Early Bronze Age urns. The form of the urn, along with presence

³ Ljuština 2019, 88; Ljuština-Dmitrović 2020.

⁴ cf. Ljuština 2019, 88, Fig 1.

⁵ Zotović 1959, 74.

⁶ Zotović 1959, 74–75; Zotović 1985, 34.

⁷ Ђурић 2013.

⁸ Дмитровић 2015.

⁹ Zotović 1985, 34–35; Ђурић 2013, 80, 85, 87; Дмитровић 2015, 72–73.

of fragmented saltaleone and amber bead indicates a grave unit with later date¹⁰. Despite already M. Zotović and J. Đurić¹¹ stressed the long-term usage of the necropolis, from the Early Bronze Age to the 6th century BC, and cultural influences from the north and east, it is due to the meticulous work by K. Dmitrović that another phase of burials is recognised. It is now possible to attribute it to the late phase of Middle Bronze Age with more certainty.

The site in Stapari was defined as a flat necropolis in the works by M. Zotović¹², which would be a unique case in the wider region, generally characterized by tumular necropolises in the Bronze and Iron Ages. M. Zotović put the specific burial practice in connection with the flat necropolis in Svrackovo near Arilje and influence from the Urnfield cultural zone¹³. Interestingly, K. Dmitrović¹⁴ inclines towards different explanation. In her opinion, it is more important to debate the original landscape. As already noted by the excavator M. Zotović, it is possible that the necropolis was heavily damaged by erosion, agricultural activities and mediaeval inhumations, which led to a gradual loss of characteristic mound calottes and complete change of the necropolis appearance. J. Đurić shares this opinion, adding the information that the exploration in Stapari started with establishing coordinate grid system, typical for mound excavation, at a smaller mound-like elevation (Fig. 3). In the course of excavation, it turned out that the elevation was of natural origin, so the methodological approach was altered and primary segments were treated as trial trenches with squares¹⁵. However, based on the data from the documentation and publications, it is not very likely that the necropolis in Stapari can be defined as a flat one. All regional characteristics of synchronous funerary practices must be taken into consideration along with the state of preservation of the site in the 20th century.

Having returned to the grave unit with the amber bead¹⁶, it becomes obvious that it should be approached as an integral part of the cultural zone from the late phase of the Middle Bronze Age and the beginning of Late Bronze Age, characterised by the local development of the West Serbian group of the Middle/Late Bronze Age.

Veliki Lug, Vranjani village, Zlatibor county

In contrast to Stapari, revision of data about the site of Veliki Lug in Vranjani resulted in a grave unit without confirmation of already published amber find.

Veliki Lug is situated on the slightly elevated terrain of Vranjansko Polje, in the village of Vranjani, a few kilometres to the west from Požega. The necropolis comprised 30 mounds spread over some 15 hectares in specific arrangement: a huge mound (50m in diameter and 8–10m high) held central position, with the rest of the mounds around it. Most of the mounds were 10–25m in diameter and flattened by agricultural activities. Archaeological excavations were conducted by M. Zotović in 1969. Three mounds – A. Palvestra specified that two mound were from the Bronze Age¹⁷ – were explored, with additional protective activities over a destroyed mound, providing another small group of finds. In the vicinity of the site, there were groups of tumuli in Zdravčići and Mađer¹⁸.

Mound I, 16m in diameter and 1,06m high, was on the north-eastern periphery of the necropolis, in relation to the huge central mound. It had completely earthen construction. Based on the excavation results M. Zotović concluded that the zone planned for the tumulus erection had been subject to preparatory levelling and consolidation. Funerary ritual was performed there: ritually broken pottery was placed in the centre of the circular zone, which is followed by an earthen cover. Above the level, on the surface of interweaved bands of wooden bark remains (parts of skull, upper and lower jaw with teeth, right upper arm) of incompletely cremated younger female deceased were laid¹⁹. Incineration was done outside the mound area. After the cremated bones had been placed, jewellery and elements of attire without traces of burning were added and eventually covered by residue from the pyre²⁰.

When dealing with the find from the central grave from the mound I A. Palvestra²¹ gives a basic description of the inventory, mentioning a bronze torc, spectacle-shaped pendants, saltaleone, bracelets with motifs of swim bladder and an amber bead. He emphasizes that already at the time of his

¹⁰ Дмитровић 2015, 77–78.

¹¹ Zotović 1985; Ђурић 2013.

¹² Зотовић 1959; Zotović 1985, 34–35.

¹³ Zotović 1985, 46.

¹⁴ Дмитровић 2015, 76.

¹⁵ Ђурић 2013, 76, footnote 27.

¹⁶ Дмитровић 2015, Fig. 22/5.

¹⁷ Palvestra 1993, 140.

¹⁸ Зотовић 1978, 75–76; Zotović 1985, 39–40; Дмитровић 2015, 31.

¹⁹ Zotović 1985, 39.

²⁰ Зотовић 1978, 78–79; Zotović 1985, 39–40; Дмитровић 2015, 31–32.

²¹ Palvestra 1993, 140.

research there was no further information about the bead. What is additionally discouraging is that K. Dmitrović²² in her comprehensive work does not mention the amber find at all. She specifies that the jewellery collection from the grave unit consists of: a bronze torc with spirally shaped endings, two bronze spectacle-shaped pendants, four narrow bronze conical pendants (tutuli) with a central thorn, one bigger and two smaller bronze calotte-shaped buttons with a hoop, two bronze bracelets, triangular in cross-section, with motifs of swim bladder, parallel lines and garlands. Interestingly, neither her inventory description nor illustration comprise coiled ornaments (saltaleone) mentioned by A. Palavestra. Since it was not possible to check the situation in the museum in Užice, it was reasonable to leave the mark of presence of amber on the map until the final solution. There is still hope that a drawer or a forgotten box in the museum hides the tiny find of amber, perhaps accompanied by the bronze elements of a composite necklace, which will unexpectedly occur sometime in the future.

Notes on the arrival of the Bronze Age amber in Western Serbia

The question how exotic goods reached the innermost parts of the Balkan Peninsula merits careful attention. When the upper part of the West Morava basin is in focus, it is presumed that it was incorporated in the regional communication and exchange network of Western Serbia. Studies of the Bronze Age amber in different regions of Europe confirmed that the material was not subject to long-distance exchange exclusively. On the contrary – in many cases, its presence in archaeological contexts testifies to the existence of spatially and chronologically overlapping regional networks, in which amber travelled over limited distances, both in geographical and cultural sense²³.

The amber from the Bronze Age graves in Western Serbia most probably came to the region from Pannonia, from where numerous cultural impulses of the Tumulus culture influenced the local communities²⁴ now defined as the West Serbian group of the Middle Bronze Age or the Brezjak group. Recent studies recognised the Belegiš culture as the most important transmitter²⁵. Reflection of events at the turn of the Middle to Late Bronze Age can be easily recognised in

funerary practices, with amber as an important part of grave inventory. Amber is a common product in the Middle Bronze Age of central Europe, so the finds from the Drina and West Morava basins can be considered an extension, branch of the amber road. One of its branches was the direction exactly along the river Drina, as it was supposed for many other influences from the north²⁶. However, alternative routes cannot be neglected.

Quest for potential routes of arrival of amber in Western Serbia inevitably reaches the territory settled by the Belegiš culture communities. The site in the village Banatski Dvor, Central Banat county, provided us with a precious point on the route. The first amber find from a settlement context came thanks to the protection excavations on the pipeline route Gospođinci – Banatski Dvor, which were executed in 2008 and 2009. The part of the excavation in Banat was conducted by D. Anđelić in 2008. The Late Bronze Age was represented by the sites No 21 and 22, situated 5km to the west from Banatski Dvor. The sites reveal traces of a single settlement – the site 22 covering most of the settlement zone, the site 21 its periphery. The position of the settlement site is slightly elevated, on the eastern edge of the Novi Bečej – Zrenjanin loess terrace. The settlement itself was fortified by a ditch. Remains of earthen ramparts or palisades were not recognised. Inside the settlement zone there were two smaller ditches, whose purpose remained unknown. A number of waste pits were excavated, as well as four shallow objects with sunken floors, rectangular in shape and of larger dimensions (4 × 4m) presumably hut dwellings. Objects No 21 and 36 had pits of wooden roof supports. The waste pits and ditches contained a lot of fragments of house daub. Pottery from the site originated from closed units, pits, ditches and huts. The settlement pottery can be attributed to the Belegiš II – Gava cultural complex according to its forms, manufacture and decoration (Fig. 4/1–9). Based on the pottery analysis, the settlement in Banatski Dvor was chronologically attributed to the period Br D-Ha A1/A2²⁷. This makes the general frames to imagine the context from which the small globular amber bead, 0,5cm in diameter (Fig. 4/11)²⁸ came. It was found in the object 38 – a larger conical pit with flat bottom, the inventory of which comprised fragmented pottery (Fig. 4/1–9), a quern stone (Fig. 4/12) and

²² Дмитровић 2015, 31–32, pr. 8.

²³ Jaeger 2016, 212.

²⁴ Палавестра-Крстић 2006, 52.

²⁵ Ljuština 2017.

²⁶ Зотовић 1989, 68; Vasić 2003, 6; David 2002, 86; Ljuština-Dmitrović 2020.

²⁷ Христов 2017, 7–8, 12; Ljuština 2019, 97–98.

²⁸ Христов 2017, Т. 16/23.

a spindle whorl (Fig. 4/10). The remains of the settlement are everything but impressive, but their importance is incomparable. Despite the secondary archaeological context of the find – the waste pit – it is logical to presume the amber's primary usage in the settlement, be it a decorative element in somebody's attire, or even a commercial product and/or a raw material in a local workshop. It is almost certain that the number of amber artefacts found in settlement sites does not reflect the actual popularity and presence of amber among the Bronze Age communities. One of the important, but rarely mentioned factors, which led to the present time situation, is the specific methodology of archaeological research conducted in settlement sites with complex stratigraphy. In many cases, methodological shortcomings practically eliminate the possibility of detecting minor amber objects, even less their fragments. Meanwhile, only particular techniques of exploration can significantly increase the pool of artefacts²⁹. Having in mind protective character of the excavations in Banatski Dvor, significance of the find is even greater. One can expect that the settlement held a notable position in the regional and supra-regional networks of trade and exchange of both exotic and more common goods. Understandably, direct contact between the communities from Banat and upper Western Morava basin has to wait for more solid confirmation, but there is a possibility to imagine various situations in which goods from the Pannonian territory reached the zone of Užice and Požega.

Conclusion

The Middle Bronze Age communities of the West Morava basin, whose necropolises are the only material remains of their physical existence, can be imagined as deeply rooted in their traditional values, but with all their senses open towards sensations from abroad, and willing to accept selectively – sometimes embracing new elements of material culture together with new ideas and comprehensions, sometimes only the appealing material things without being aware what those things mean to their inventors and original users³⁰. Traditionalism in burial customs is most visibly confirmed by usage of burial mounds. It seems that even the necropolis in Stapani, which used to be known as a flat one, has potential to be joined to the large group of tumular necropolises in Western

Serbia. The necropolis in Vranjani belongs to the same group. People who buried their dead in the necropolises had access to exotica, amber in this instance, which obtained significance in their lives and reflected in grave inventory.

Recent analyses confirmed the Baltic provenance of the amber from the West Morava basin³¹, but contribution to at least partial reconstruction of regional routes which brought the material to this part of the Central Balkans has additional importance. Not only did the settlement sites in the region, which are expected to hold confirmation of usage of amber as well, remain unexplored, they were not even recognised in the landscape. Some of the settlements must have served as centres for local distribution, but this level of information is out of our reach. It is unclear where the local Bronze Age populations supplied with amber which was worn during the lifetime and ended up in graves. Fortunately, the region settled by the bearers of the Belegiš culture, which was suspected to have served as a starting point for regional trade southwards, provided the first amber find with settlement context. Up until early 2000s the zone to the north-east from Western Serbia was without any confirmation of contemporary use of amber, but the situation changed and the amber road is looming on the Bronze Age horizon. However we imagine the road's organisation, magnitude of its function mirrors even in the funerary practices, where these tiny amber artefacts, originating in remote hyperborean countries, became afterlife companions of the individuals who might have never left the Central Balkans in their lives.

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²⁹ Jaeger 2016, 208.

³⁰ Ljuština 2017, 346–347.

³¹ Ljuština-Dmitrović 2020.

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Figure 1: Map of the Bronze Age amber finds in Serbia (dots – necropolises, asterisks – settlements, squares – hoards): 1 – Šumar, Belotić village, Mačva county; 2 – Cerik Bandera, Bela Crkva village, Mačva county; 3 – Jovanin Breg, Banjevac village, Mačva county; 4 – Paulje, Brezjak village, Mačva county; 5 – Veliki Lug, Vranjani village, Zlatibor county; 6 – Ravnine, Jančići village, Moravica county; 7 – Ridevo, Iglarevo village, Peć county; 8 – Boka, Prčevo village, Peć county; 9 – Majdan, Vršac city, South Banat county; 10 – Banatski Dvor, Central Banat county; 11 – Mala Gradina, Stapani village, Zlatibor county (modified after Ljuština 2019, 88, Fig. 1).

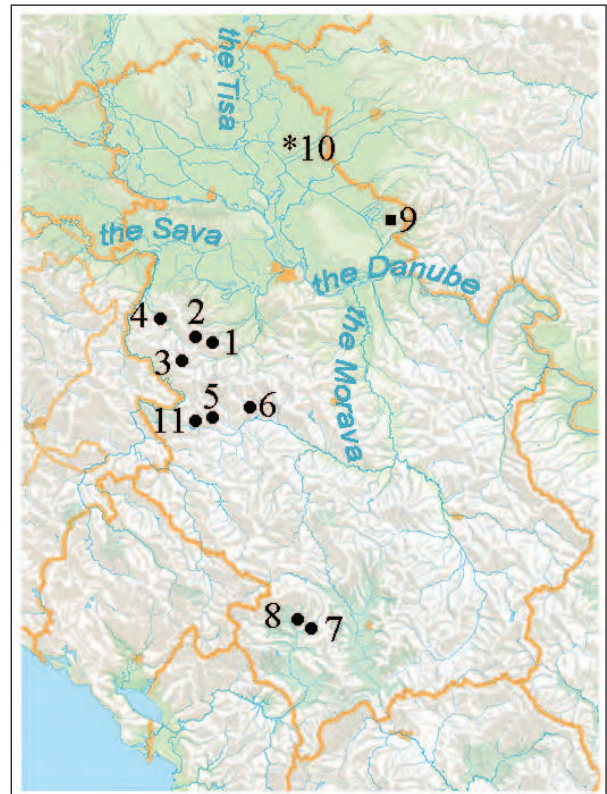


Figure 2: Village of Stapani, view of the sites Mala and Mala Gradina (after Ђурић 2013, 75, Fig. 1).

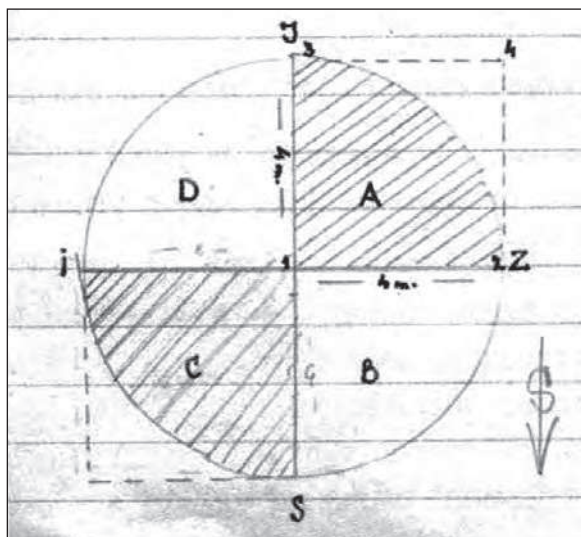


Figure 3: *Mala Gradina in Stapari – ground plan of the elevation with sondages: sondage I, square A, sondage II, square C* (after Бурн 2013, 77, Pr. 1 – based on the original documentation sketches).

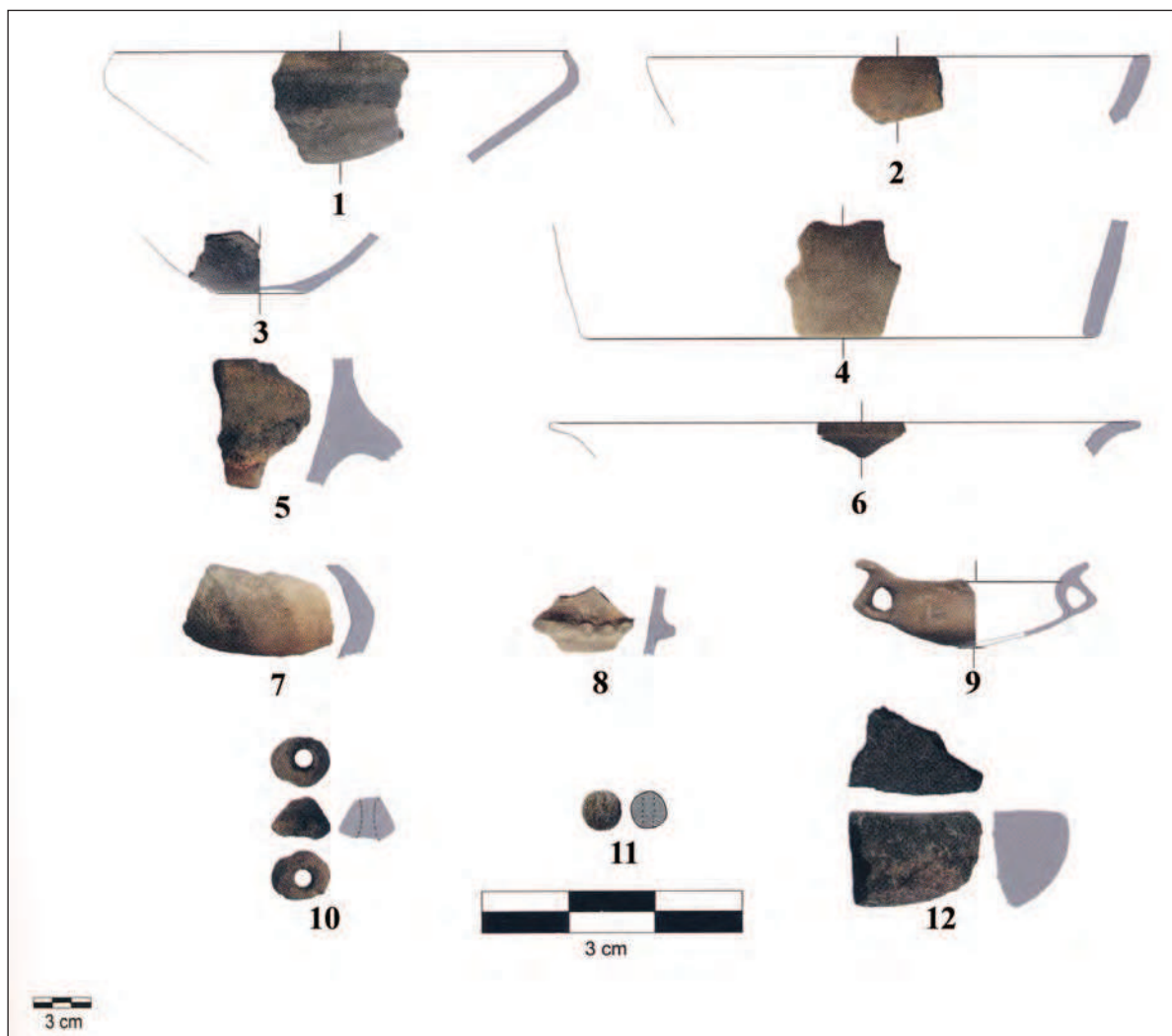


Figure 4: *Banatski Dvor: inventory of the pit 38* (modified after Хрумов 2017, T. 16).