

Armenian-Italian Archaeological Expedition. Field Season 2004

The Armenian-Italian Archaeological Expedition of the Institute for the Study of the Civilisations of Aegean and of the Near East and of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia carried out its fieldwork in the former *rayon* (province) of Sevan, now part of the Gegharkunik *marz*, from 3rd to 13th July 2003.

The activities followed two lines: the archaeological survey and the excavation in the necropolis of Lchashen.

1 – THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Fieldwork concentrated mainly on the great fortress of Lchashen, about 2 km ESE of the village with the same name, on the old road to Gavar/Kamo. This impressive fortress (figs. 1-4) is the largest of the Sevan Lake basin, and one of the largest pre-Urartian fortifications of the Armenian Plateau. Its earliest frequentation goes back to the Early Bronze Age and perhaps to the Chalcolithic period, covers a surface of about 30 ha, extends over a series of hillocks (fig. 2) and is well-known in the literature. The extant remains form a veritable jungle of thick walls (up to 3.6 m) with external faces of large regular stones and filled with smaller ones, all taken from the nearby *chingils* (stone fields).

The defence power of the walls was enhanced both by buttresses and by broken-line projections. The south-western part of the upper wall of the citadel, located on a hill near the centre of the fortress, shows such a regularity in masonry and buttresses to suggest that this part of the structure was re-built in the Urartian period. The citadel has one main gate on the north-western side and a postern in the north-northeastern one. Excavations were carried out in different parts of the fortress, mostly in the central one (fig. 3). The citadel was almost totally excavated and other diggings were made in suitable areas, but unfortunately the materials were never published.

Buttresses, towers and broken-lines walls can be found in association almost all over the area, and this suggests that the main body of the fortress like we see it now was built in the Early Iron Age. The fortress is definitely the largest of the Sevan basin, so it could be interpreted as the 'capital' of a political structure which included at least the whole area of the lake. This anyhow contradicts the information gathered from Urartian inscriptions, which show clearly that in the Sevan basin existed no less than four polities. The problem of the discrepancies between archaeological and written sources is very complex, and only future research can clarify it.

Other sites besides Lchashen were studied. Among them the fort of Metsep, which lies on a hill immediately south of the city of Sevan, commanding it and the road to the Araxes valley along river Hrazdan (fig. 4, on the background). The fort is rectangular, oriented NW-SE and in a not good state of preservation. No pottery was found but the general characters suggest that it could be dated to the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age.

The fort of Aghli Berd (fig. 5), which lies on a hill WNW of the village of Norashen, is again subrectangular in shape, and well-preserved on the SW side. The surface is overgrown with bushes, and the pottery finds show that the site can be dated to the Late Bronze-Early Iron.

A few hundred metres towards the lake lies the fort of Khacher, much destroyed by later structures and by a small chapel. In this case too bushes are very thick and hide the ruins of the monument.

Near the village of Tsovaghyugh was visited the fort of the same name. This site too was much damaged by a contemporary graveyard, and the walls have been almost totally oblit-

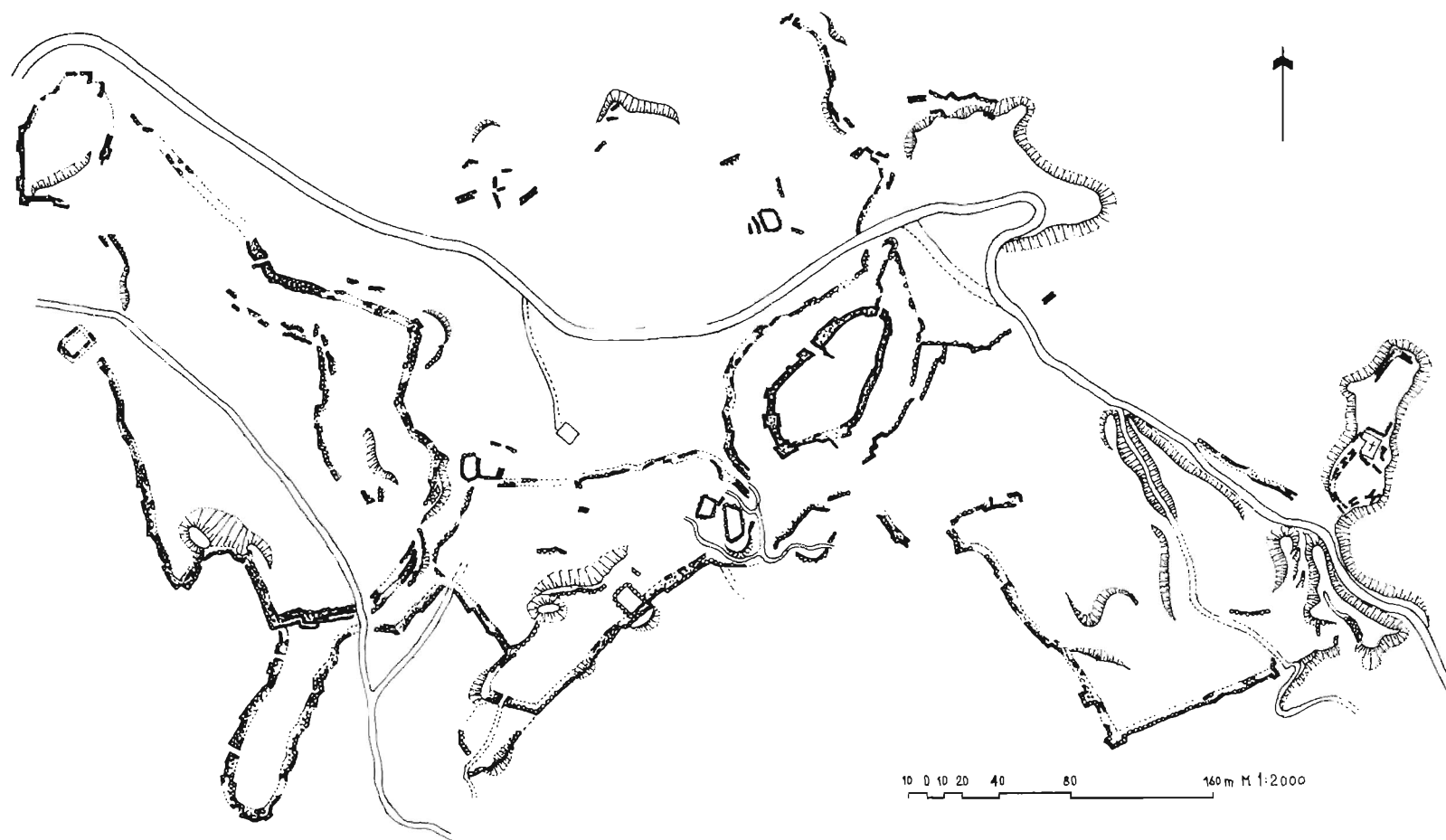


Fig. 1 – Lchashen. Sketch of the fortress.



Fig. 2 – Lchashen. Part of the complex of hillocks on which the fortress lies. The citadel is located on the second hill from the right. On the top of the third one are visible the remains of the upper structures and, on the slopes of the hills, the *chingils* (stone fields), from which were taken the blocks used for the walls.

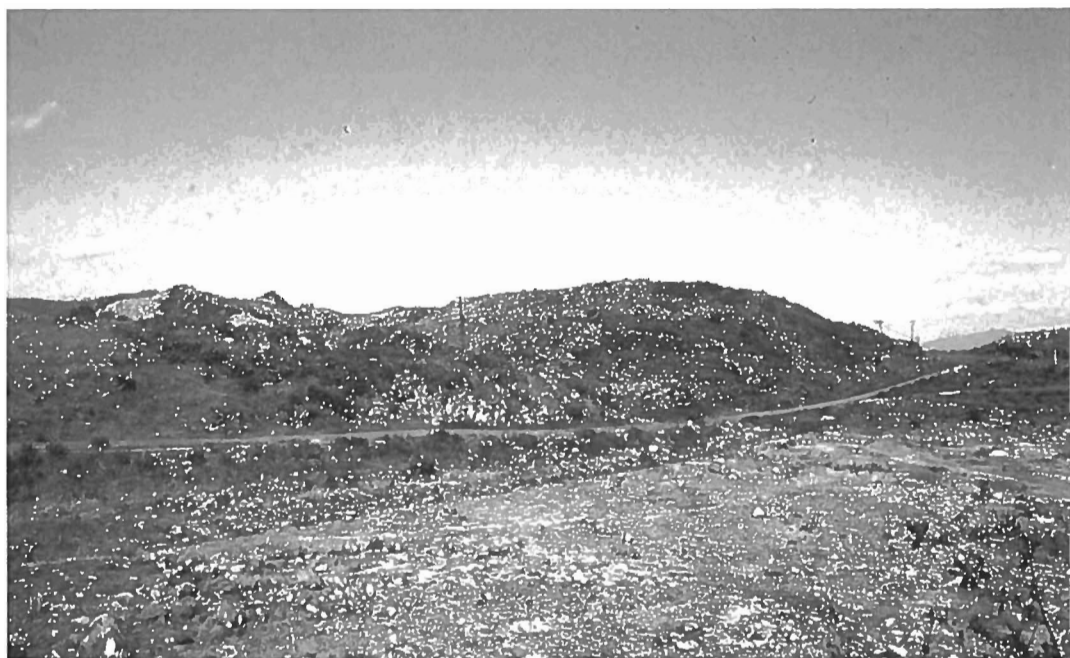


Fig. 3 – Lchashen. The south-eastern side of the citadel. The buttressed upper wall is scarcely visible on the top, while the remains of lower defensive circuits are clearer.



Fig. 4 – Lchashen. The northernmost part of the upper structures, with a large tower/hall rising from a *chingil*. On the hills in the background, above the city of Sevan, an arrow indicates the location of the fort of Metsep.



Fig. 5 – The hill on which lies the fort of Aghli Berd. The last houses of Norashen are in the foreground.

erated. The site, where was found very little pottery, can be dated to the Early Bronze Age and to later periods. It commanded the road to Dilijan.

Topographical work focused on the great fortress of Lchashen, whose map was made on the scale 1:500. The other sites shall be mapped in 2005, when the exploration of the former Sevan *rayon* will continue.

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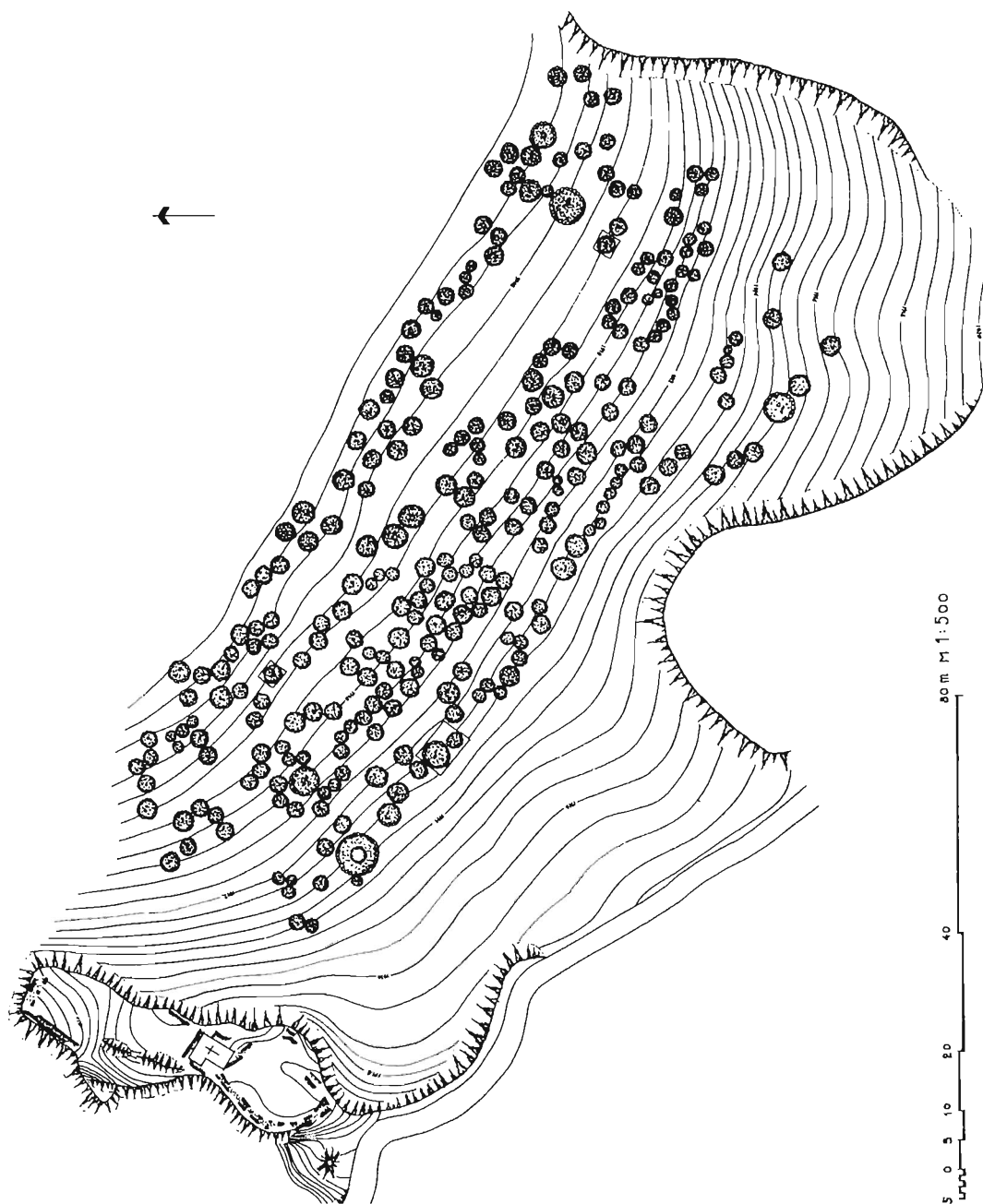


Fig. 6 – Lchashen. Sketch of the necropolis.

2. THE GEO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The geo-archaeological studies this year concentrated on the Lchashen necropolis, and included also the excavation of some graves. The fieldwork was carried out in collaboration with Dr. Levon Petrosyan, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, director of the section for researches on Lchashen. Architect Koryun Kafadaryan cured the graphical documentation.

Archaeological research in the basin of the Sevan Lake is especially important for the study of interactions between the natural environment and the human society. This accounts for the significance of the Lchashen necropolis, which was submerged under the lake waters until recently. The necropolis, which is about 1.5 km long and 200-300 m wide, lies near the north-eastern shore of the lake, between the villages of Lchashen and Chkalovka.

The necropolis was studied by H. Mnatsakanyan in 1950, soon after the waters of the Sevan Lake retired. He continued his research in the following years and excavated 230 graves and *kurgans*. Between 1970 and 1990 A. A. Avetyan excavated a considerable number of graves and between 1980 and 1990 Levon Petrosyan excavated 223 graves and *kurgans*. The research showed that practically the whole area was submerged and therefore the graves were not disturbed.

The graves are generally surrounded by stone circles, called in Armenian and Russian literature *cromlechs*, with a diameter ranging between 2.5 and 21 m and filled either with stones or with sand. The graves which were far from the shore, and therefore in deep water, are covered by thick layers of sand. The graves closer to the water-line were covered by a thick lime crust (Fig. 8, see below). Some of the graves seem to be regularly distributed, and this suggests that originally the burials were arranged in rows.

The influence of the Sevan lake waters on the environment once again was checked and confirmed by the fieldwork of the Armenian-Italian expedition in 2004. The new excavations confirmed the data on the impact of the lake waters on the surroundings and the grave structures.

Another important objective of the Armenian-Italian expedition was the study of the level variations of the Sevan Lake and their possible impact on the inhabitants of the area. Up to now the most ancient graves (graves 120 and 146 of Lchashen and grave 2 of Chkalovka) date to the Early Bronze, IV-III millennia B.C. Unfortunately there are no archaeological correlations with the water level, but the Chkalovka burial is located on a hill. Anyhow the geological data from the site of Norashen, not far from Lchashen, show that the first two transgressions of the Sevan Lake took place nearly 6300 years ago. (Aslanyan *et al.* 1984, 81-82).

At Norashen 3 layers of settlement, connected with variations of water level in III millennium B.C., have been determined. Stone tools and pottery show that they are typical of the Early Bronze of the Armenian highland (Kura-Araxes Culture).

Levels of the Middle Bronze Age were found in the fortress of Lchashen and some graves belong to this period (first half of the second millennium B.C.).

The C¹⁴ analyses of the wooden parts of the chariots excavated by Mnatsakanyan gave a date of 3600±100 and 3500±100 B.C. (Aslanyan *et al.* 1984, 82).

The geological data show that the transgressions of the Sevan Lake continued during the period of 4000-3300 B.P. (Sayadyan 2000, 44) and this is also confirmed by the archaeological data. Previous research and the result of the Armenian-Italian expedition show that the transgressions began around 4000 and ended around 3300 B.P., XIV-XIII centuries B.C.

The few graves of end of the XIV – beginning XIII centuries confirm this fact. According to the traces left by the water levels this was the highest one.

The part of the necropolis studied by this expedition lies east of the fortress and of the hillock where are the ruins of a IX century church (figs. 6-7). It is almost untouched, with

the exception of some graves excavated by Mnatsakanyan. The large electricity pylons did not damage any grave. The area lies about 300 m from the present coastline, beyond the modern road Sevan-Gavar. Originally the whole area was covered with graves, but now survives only this part, protected by a spur of the fortress, above the height of 1907 m a.s.l. Also the area to the present-day road was part of the necropolis and was excavated by Petrosyan, but everything was later destroyed by agricultural activities, therefore the excavation of the surviving graves, dating back to the Late Bronze Age, can give important results on burial ritual, typology of the graves and typology of grave goods.

The first two graves chosen for excavation were located on the shore line of the late Forties, 1911 m a.s.l. They have different dimensions and are close the one to the other, and one of the aims of the excavation was the possible significance of the different dimensions.

After having cleaned the surface it was evident that the surf of the lake waters covered the graves with a thick lime crust (fig. 8), so excavation was almost impossible. Two more graves were then chosen, about 1909 a.s.l., about 150 m far the one from the other. These are graves 226 and 227.

GRAVE 226 – 40° 30' 37,9" N 44° 57' 09,8" E

The grave was indicated by a circle of large stones, with an entrance on the eastern side. After the removal of the topsoil in the centre of the circle was found the burial chamber, formed and closed with large stone blocks (Figs. 9-10). The inside was filled by totally sterile, dark brown and compact earth. On the bottom there was a well-preserved skeleton crouched on the left side, with the face towards west, buried with 6 pots. On one of the vases lying east of the corpse there were fragments of animal bones. It is probably the burial of a rather tall male (Fig. 14, see below).

GRAVE 227 – 40° 30' 34,2" N 44° 57' 13,6" E

This grave has the same size of the previous one. In this case too the burial chamber is surrounded by a stone circle with a kind of entrance on the eastern side. The chamber, which does not lie exactly in the centre of the circle, was closed with stone blocks so large that their removal was difficult (Figs. 11-12). This grave too was filled with sterile, dark brown, compact earth, with a not well-preserved skeleton. The grave was divided in two parts by a wooden structure, on the northern side there was a small space where was only one small jar, while the other pots forming the grave-good was along and under the skeleton (Figs. 11-12-13 and 15). The corpse was in crouched position, with the face towards east. It is probably the burial of a female.

Both graves date to the Late Bronze Age, the same period of time of the famous Lchashen *kurgans* with their rich inventory of chariots, horses, oxen, arrows and bows, daggers, jewellery and many precious objects.

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Literature

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Fig. 7 – Lchashen. Part of the complex of necropolis during the excavation of graves 224 and 225, seen from the IX century church.



Fig. 8 – Lchashen. Grave 224. On the left can be seen the thick lime crust.



Fig. 9 – Lchashen. The beginning of the excavation of grave 226



Fig. 10 – Lchashen. The end of the excavation of grave 226.



Fig. 11 – Lchashen. The beginning of the excavation of grave 227



Fig. 12 – Lchashen. The grave 227 during the excavation.



Fig. 13 – Lchashen. The end of the excavation of grave 227.

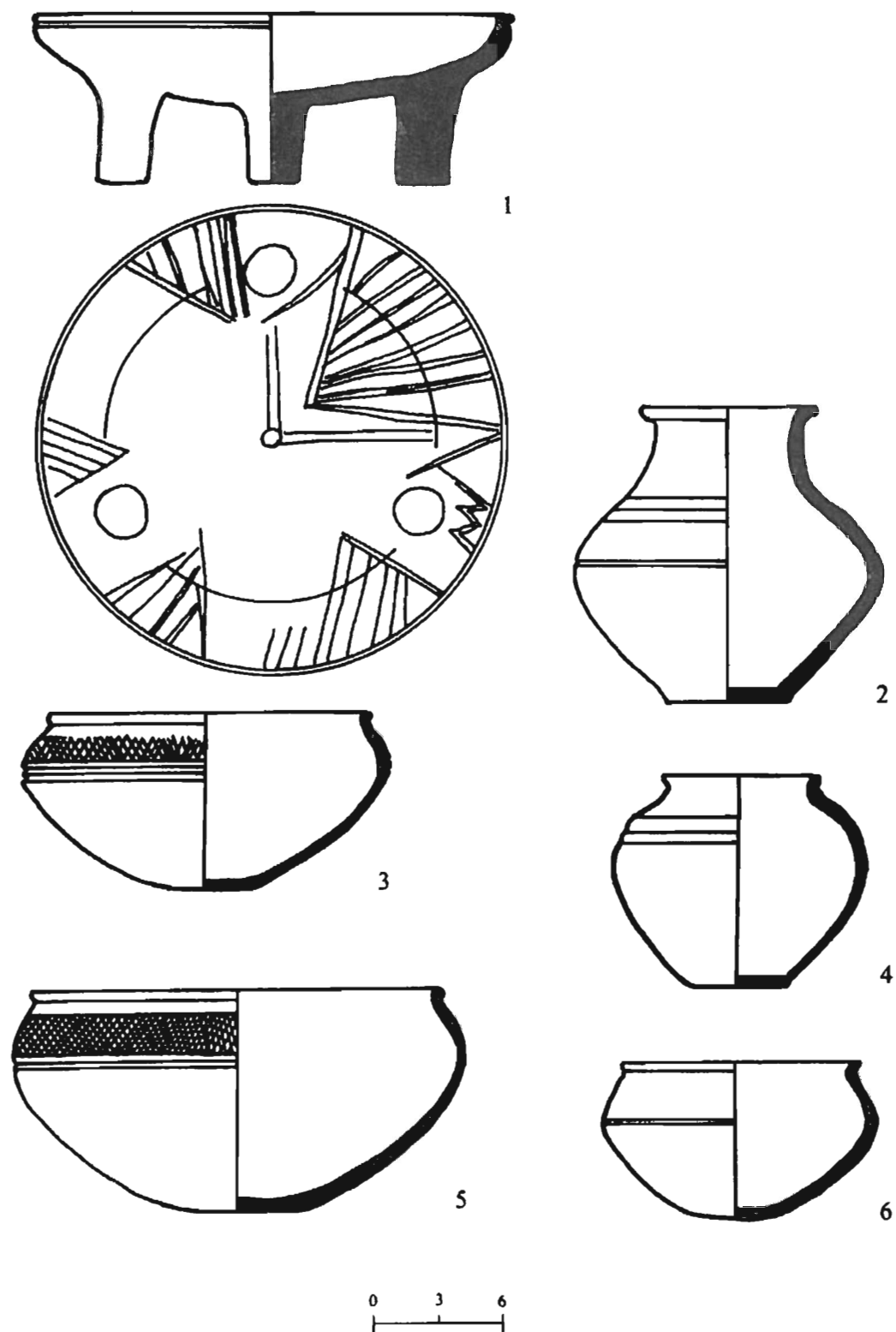


Fig. 14 – Lchashen. The grave goods of the tomb 226.

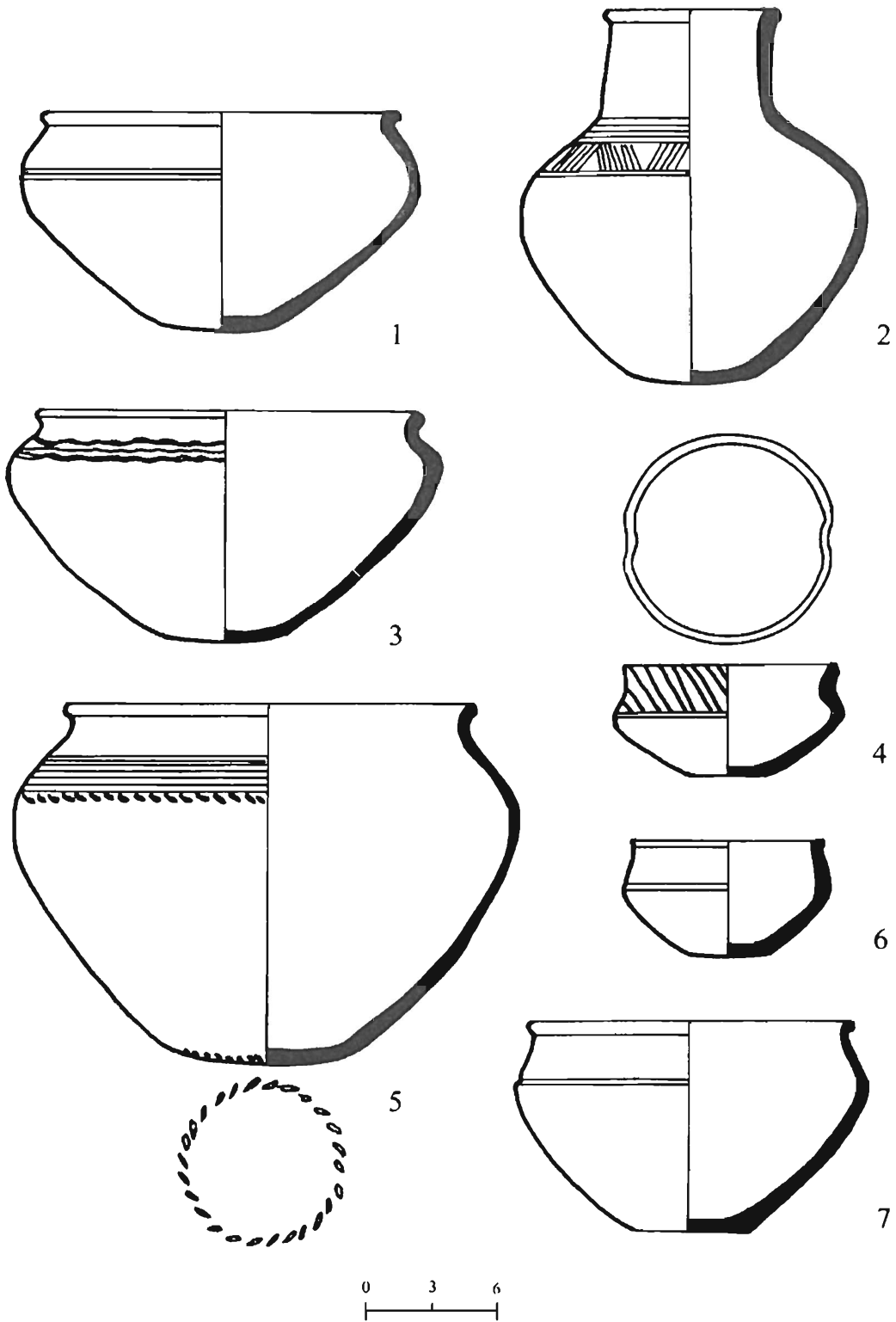


Fig. 15 – Lchashen. The grave goods of the tomb 227.