

THE 1998 EXCAVATION CAMPAIGN AT THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE NECROPOLIS OF SISIAN, ARMENIA

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One of the difficulties of the study of the Middle Bronze Age cultures of Transcaucasia is the unequal amount of research carried out to date, both in terms of cultural-chronological and of territorial aspects. To some extent the excavations undertaken by the expedition of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia in Siunik (South-eastern Armenia) fostered the formation of the representative database in the region adjacent to the Eastern Transcaucasia and North-western Iran, areas of closely related cultures characterised by painted pottery.

The necropolis under study is one of the MBA graveyards found along the course of the Vorotan River. In 1998 the expedition excavated two areas, called Sisian I and Sisian II, about 4 km from each other, located on the left side of the canyon and about 1650 m a.s.l. In the two areas different cultural and chronological complexes of the MBA are represented, probably part of a larger necropolis stretching along the bend of the Vorotan River.

At Sisian II, chronologically the more ancient, four adjacent tombs were excavated. These are shallow (45-70 cm) pit chambers, without a clear outline (ranging from 100×90 cm to 200×230 cm), partially surrounded by stones along the contour. Only grave 4 is surrounded by a regular circle of stones (diameter about 3.50 m) and also has a rectangular chamber (100×200 cm, 70 cm deep) outlined with stones and covered by unshaped basalt slabs.

No human remains were found in the burials. In graves 1 and 3 separate bones of cattle (?) extremities were found, decayed and reduced to dust.

The majority of the artefacts found in the graves are pottery vessels: in particular 14, 17, 22, 5. They were located close to each other, sometimes one on top of the other, and cover almost the entire floor of the chambers. In grave no. 1 a short spearhead or dagger (9 cm long) was found and a disk-shaped lid of basalt, and in every grave (excluding 4) there were large obsidian flakes.

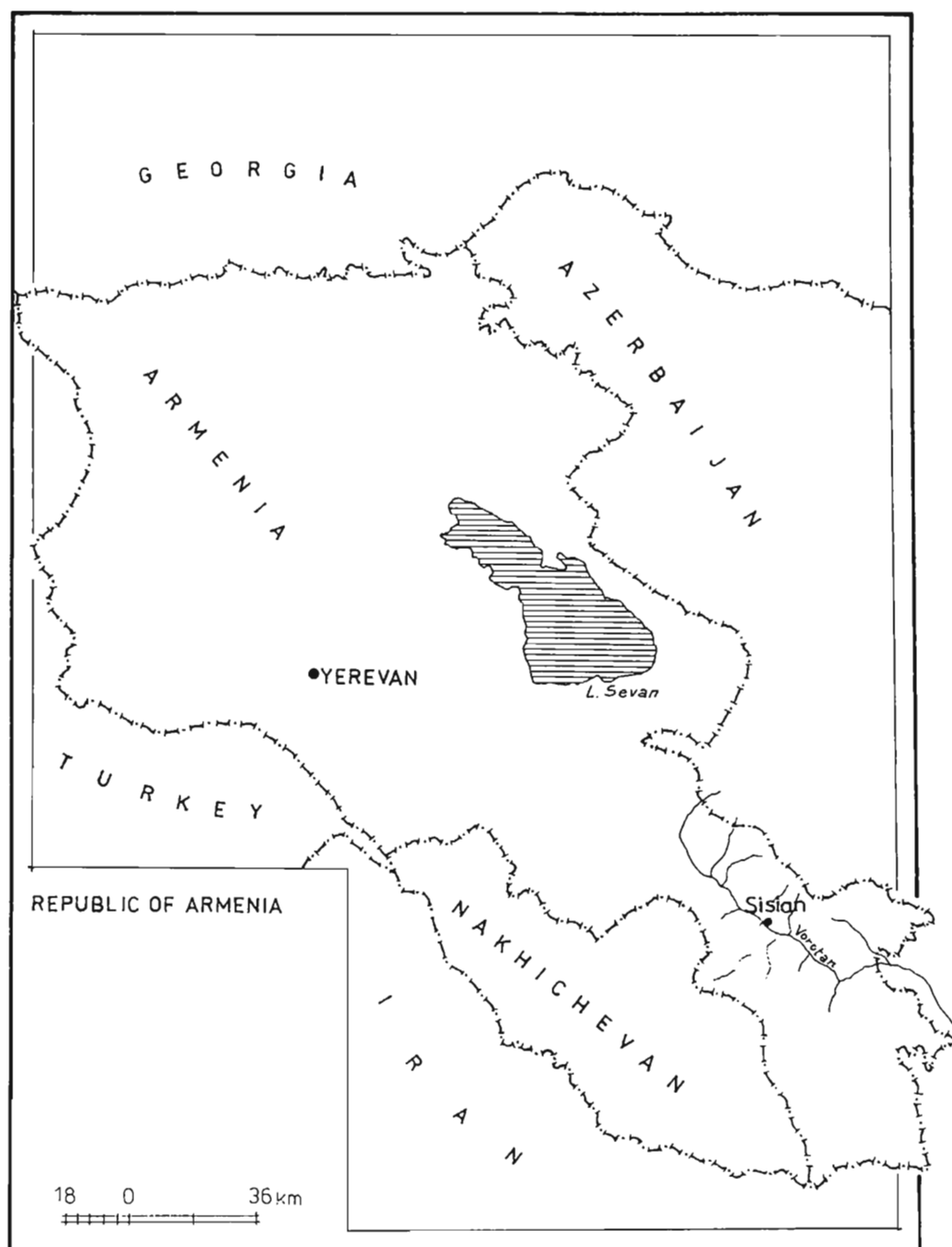


Fig. 1 – The Republic of Armenia with the location of Sisian.

On the basis of structure, ritual and morphological and decorative peculiarities of the pottery (black matte vessels with dotted and incised chevrons and triangles; spherical and conical grey-brown bowls with relief decoration of knobby protuberances) the graves of the Sisian necropolis can be compared to the sites of Trialeti and Javakheti, to the complexes of Nor Oshakan and Karashamb and to the materials from the MBA layers of the settlement of Ilto (Kuftin 1941; Dzhaparidze 1969; Dedabrishvili 1969; Oganessian 1990). These form the Trialeti-Vanadzor (Kirovakan) culture, dated to the second phase of the Transcaucasian MBA. At present, besides the area between the Kura and Araxes Rivers, the extension of this culture includes some regions of the Armenian Plateau and North-western Iran. No datation for this culture has yet been generally accepted. In the latest summarising work on Transcaucasian MBA the opinion formed in the Sixties and Seventies is accepted, according to which the graves dated to the “flourishing period” of Trialeti encompassed the whole span of Georgian MBA. In the other parts of the region it may only be supposed that there are sites contemporary with the third phase of the “flourishing period”, i.e. the 17th-15th centuries B.C. (Kushnareva 1997: 89-114). The available data on the Transcaucasian MBA has increased both qualitatively and quantitatively in recent years, and this is not only in obvious contradiction with the above-mentioned point of view, but also allows us to determine the typological composition of each cultural and chronological layer dated to the MBA, and to reconstruct their sequence on the basis of artefacts. In particular, excavations at Harich, Pevrebi and Natakhtari show that there is one more cultural and chronological group dated to the Middle Bronze Age, which is to be placed between the sites dated to the final stage of the Trialeti “flourishing period” and the LBA complexes. The lower chronological border of the Transcaucasian LBA is dated to the second half of the 16th-15th centuries B.C.

Within this chronological framework the burial of Sisian II, which are analogous to the complexes of the first and second group of the “flourishing period” according to some indicators, may be dated to the 22/21st – 20th centuries B.C.

At the graveyard of Sisian I six tombs were excavated and one destroyed burial was studied in depth. The burials are rectangular pit chambers (120-150×230-320 cm), covered by 3-5 stones. Grave 6 is square and covered by one stone. Grave 5, besides the main chamber measuring 120×230 cm, has a second chamber perpendicular to the first. While the depth of the burials is generally 75-140 cm, here and in burial 6 we have only 20 cm.

The graves contain individual burials, located in the western part of the chambers, with consistent positioning of the skeletons. In grave 1 the

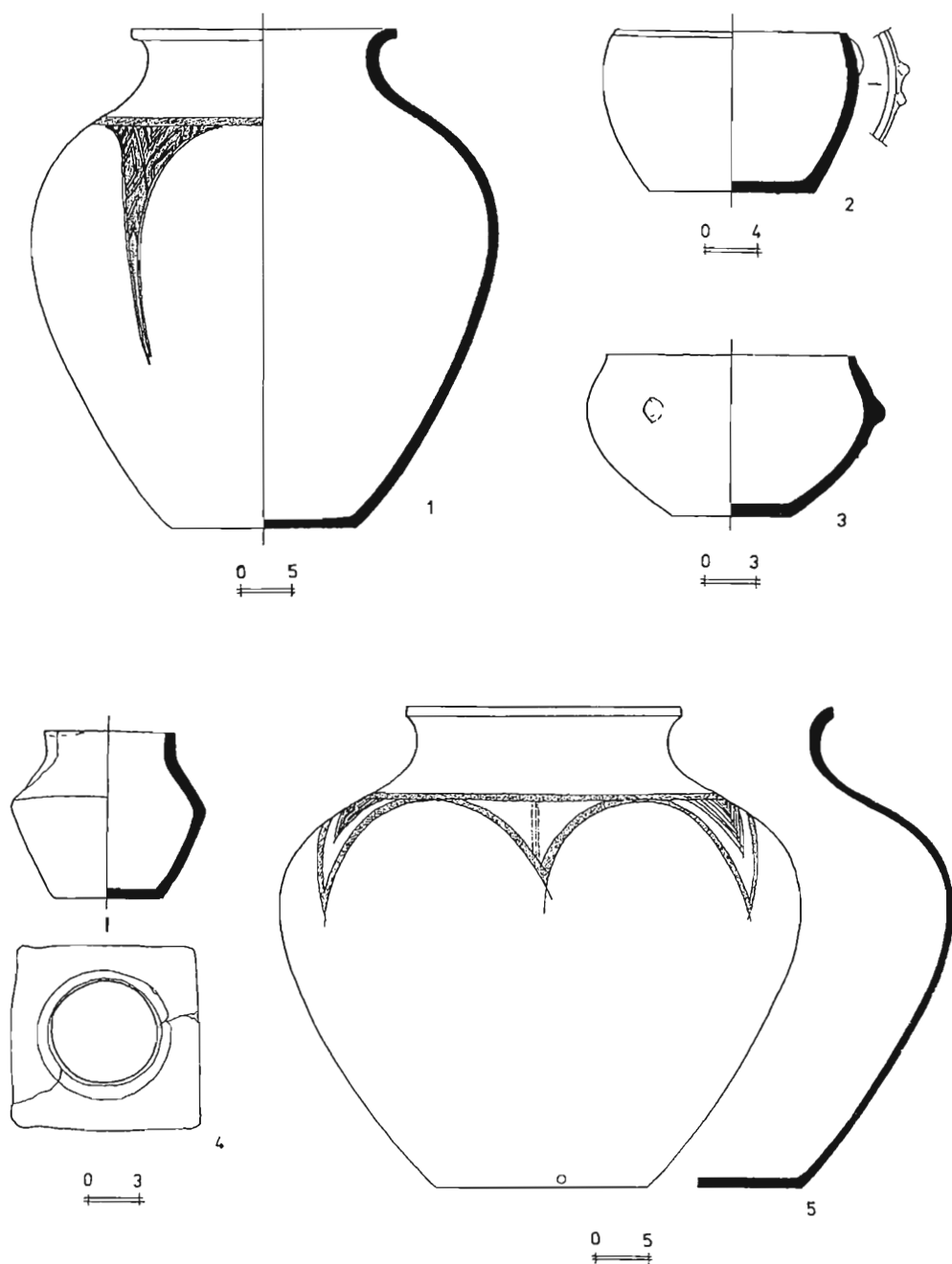


Fig. 2 – Necropolis of Sisian II. Nos. 1-2: grave 2; nos. 3-5, grave 3. Nos. 1, 5 dark matte pottery with incised and dotted decoration; nos. 2-4 pottery with dark brown surface.



Fig. 3 – Necropolis of Sisian I. Grave 4.

deceased lay on his back, in a contracted position, the head oriented to the east; in burial 2 the corpse was drawn up on the right side, head to the east; in 3 there were no human remains; in 4 the body lay in a foetal position, the head oriented to the east; in grave 5 there was a large quantity of coal and ashes.

In all of the graves a large number of sheep and cattle bones was found, in some cases relatively large parts of the carcasses were still anatomically connected. Pottery vessels are generally grouped in the centre of the chamber, sometimes one against the other. There is a notable tradition of placing small vases inside larger ones. In grave 5 the western chamber

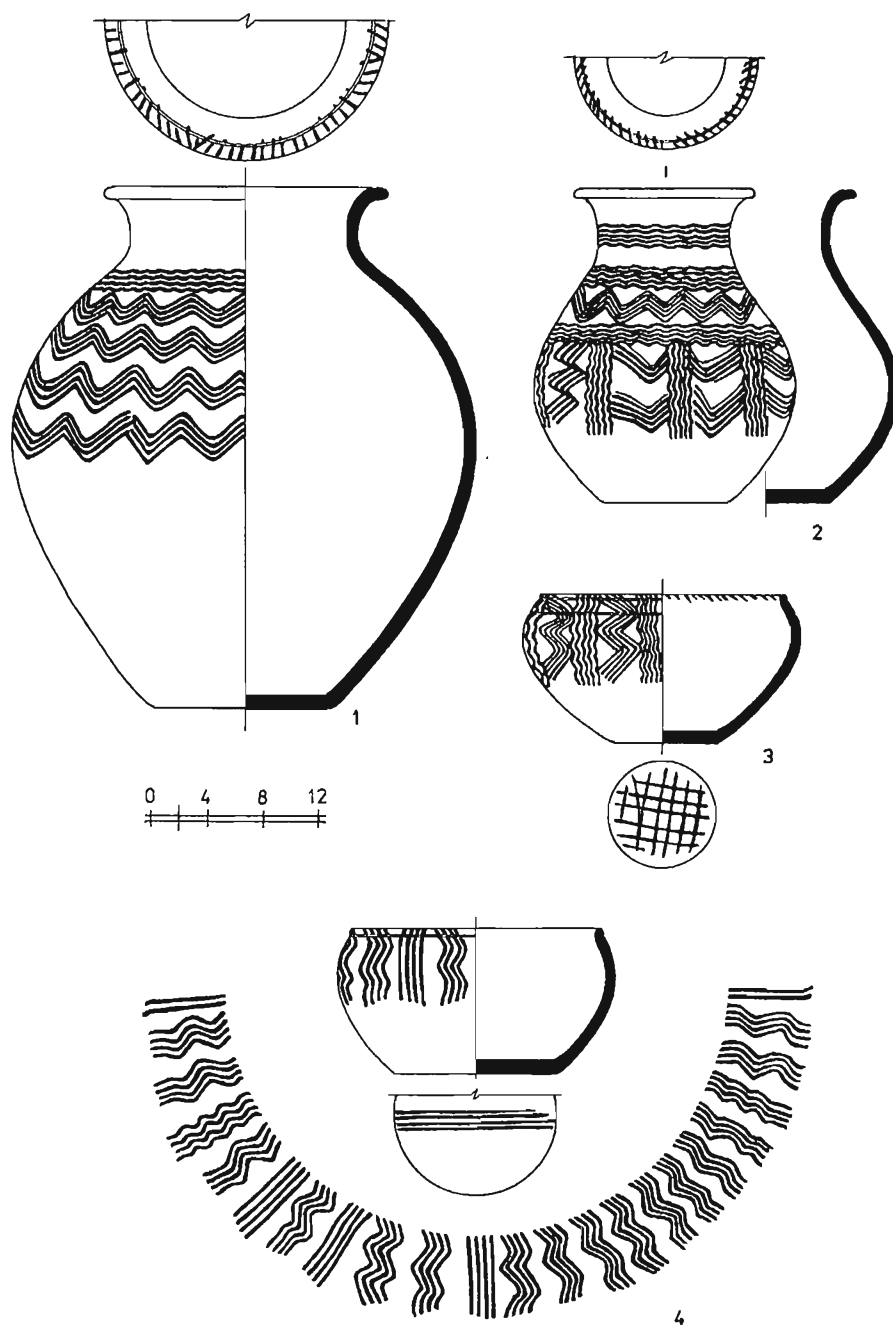


Fig. 4 – Necropolis of Sisian I, grave 4. Vases with dark painting.

contained only four vessels, the others and all the osteological material were located in the main chamber.

The graves of the Sisian I graveyard show diversified sets of artefacts of varying richness. There are a large number of painted, black-burnished and coarse pottery vessels (in particular nos. 21, 19, 24, 15, 12, 6); disc-shaped basalt (no. 4) and tuff (1, 2) lids; bronze spearheads (nos. 3-4), various bronze daggers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5), obsidian arrowheads with a deep notch on the base (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) and obsidian flakes (2, 4, 6); bronze pins with mushroom-shaped heads; parts of quivers (?), rings and beads (1, 2, 4, 5, 6); carnelian beads (1, 2).

The motives of the painted pottery are especially marked in the above-mentioned set. Among these we have large vessels, jars and bowls with black decoration on a red background (the most important elements of the decoration are horizontal and vertical lines, chequered elements, garlands or hatched lozenges). Black polished or matt vessels (bowls, "cups", jars) are decorated with arch-shaped motifs, chevrons filled with inlay and roulette-made dottings. The typology of the pottery is analogous to those from Uzerlik-tepe, 4th and 6th kurgan from Lchashen and burial no. 25 from Elar (Khanzadyan 1962, 1979; Kushnareva 1997). The pottery of the Sevan-Uzerlik culture is dated to the third phase of Armenian MBA.

Metal finds deserve a specific section. In burials of this period uncovered in Armenia, metal finds – and daggers in particular – are rare. To date only one type of dagger is known in the Karmirberd graves, synchronous with those of Sisian I. On the other hand, in the Sisian I burials (nos. 1-5 and the destroyed grave) seven daggers of different types were found. Furthermore, in the destroyed grave a bronze mirror was found. This is a peculiar event in the MBA culture of the region, like the shaft spearhead known only in the complexes of the Trialeti-Vanadzor culture.

The results of the excavations of Sisian I allow us to refine certain questions related to the dating of the Armenian MBA sites. Their relative chronology is determined by the stratigraphy of the settlement of Uzerlik-tepe, which is supposed to be continuous, without any break in the sequence (Kushnareva 1997). No pottery from the lowest layers was found in its upper layer or vice versa, notwithstanding the numerous typological correspondences among the two stratigraphical loci which presupposes the matching to a certain extent of the two typological assemblages. Therefore, the difference between the materials of the two layers suggests that there was a break in the sequence.

The finds from the graveyard of Sisian I fill this gap. Among them it is

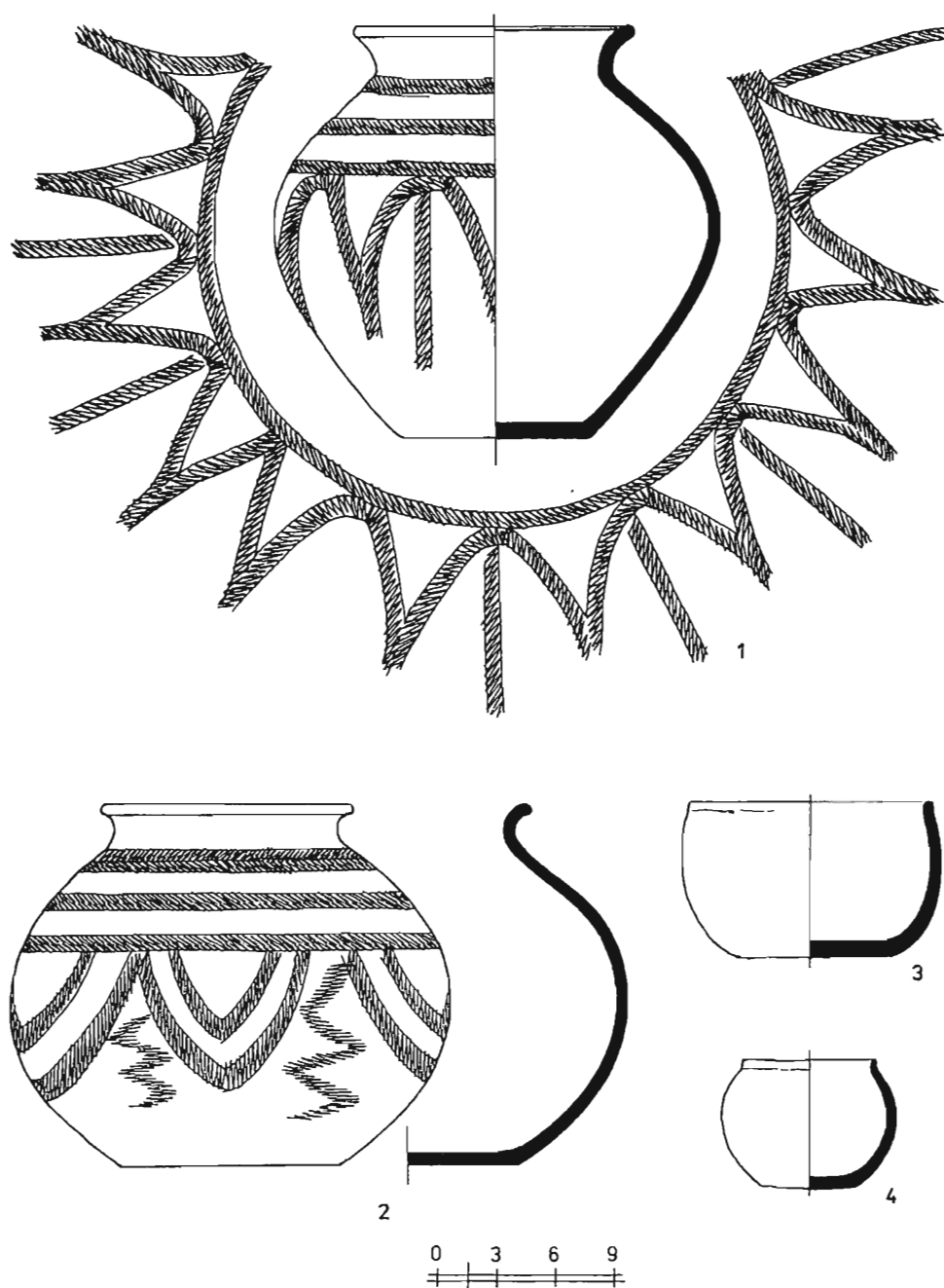


Fig. 5 – Necropolis of Sisian I, grave 4. Nos. 1-2, dark polished pottery with roulette decoration; nos. 3-4, dark-brown pottery surface.

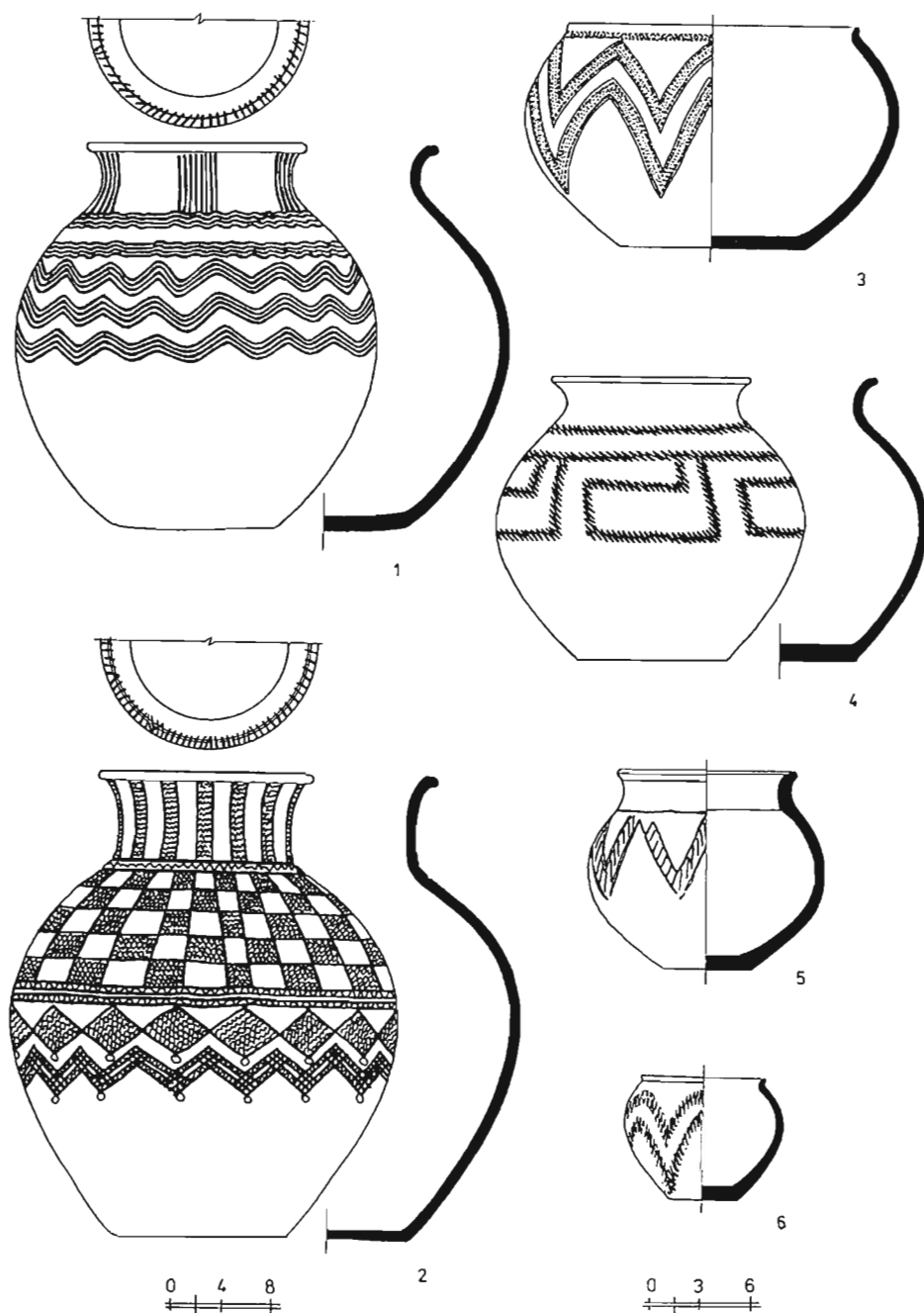


Fig. 6 – Necropolis of Sisian I. Nos. 1-2, grave 4, red vases with dark painted decoration; nos. 3-6, grave 1, dark polished vessels with decoration incised or impressed with roulette.

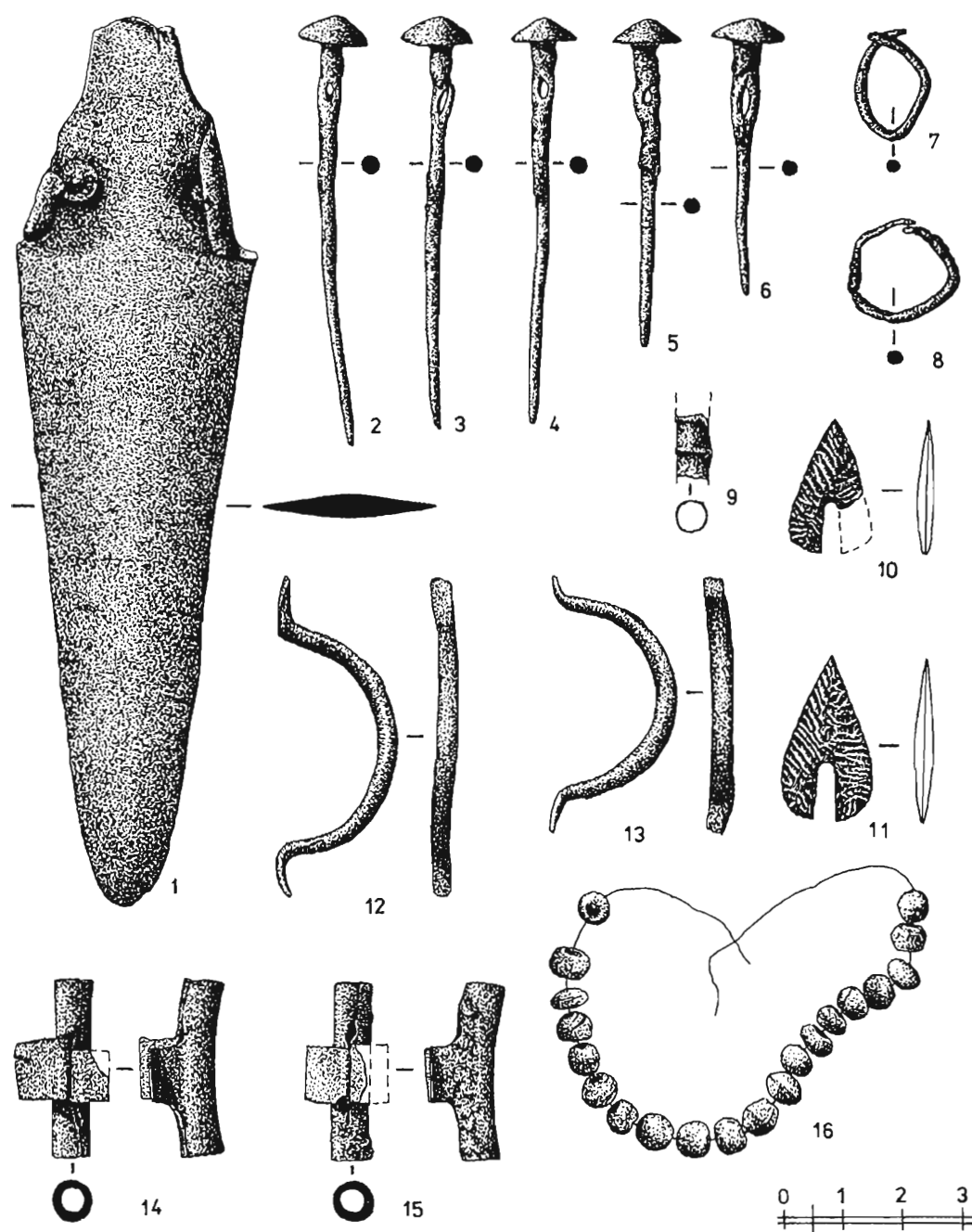


Fig. 7 – Necropolis of Sisian I, grave 1. Nos. 1-9, 12-15 bronze; nos. 10-11, obsidian; no. 16 carnelian.

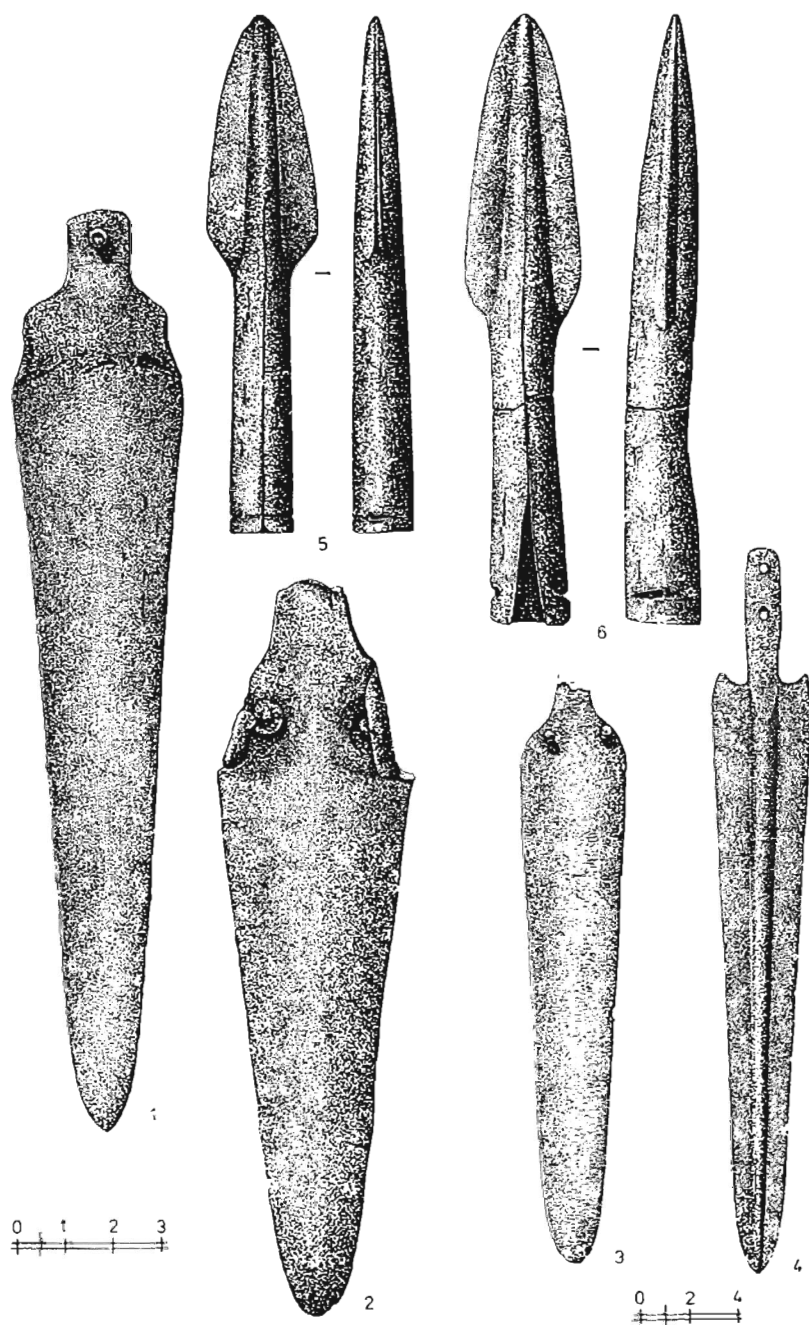


Fig. 8 – Necropolis of Sisian I. Bronze daggers and spearheads. No. 1, grave 4; no. 2, grave 1; no. 3, destroyed grave; no. 4 grave 2; no. 5 grave 3, no 6 grave 4.

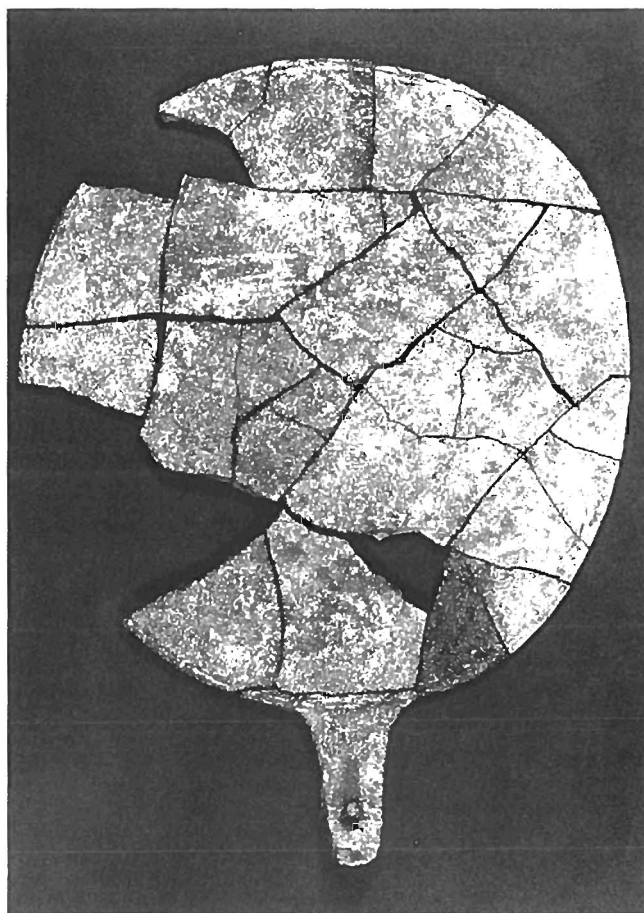


Fig. 9 – Necropolis of Sisian I, destroyed grave. Bronze mirror.

possible to find connections both with the upper and lower levels of Uzerlik-tepe. Therefore, the relative position of our complex lies between the lower and upper layers of Uzerlik-tepe, i.e. in 18th-17th centuries B.C.

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