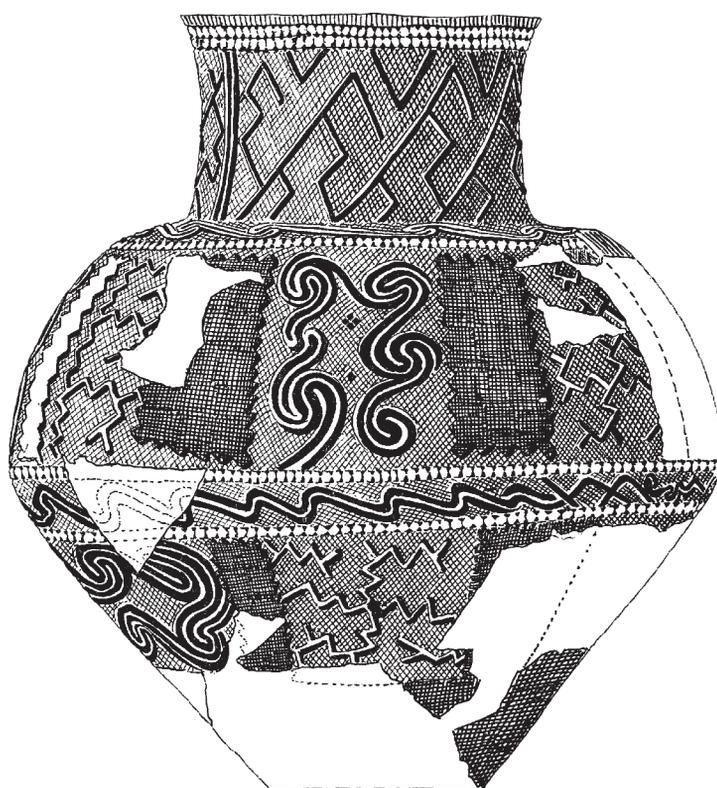


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ABREVIERI 245

Note on Vădastra excised pots

Alexandru DRAGOMAN*

Abstract: Taking for an example a defining ceramic category for the so-called "Vădastra culture" (southern Romania and north-west Bulgaria; approx. 5200-4900 CAL BC), namely the excised pots, in this note I tried to emphasize the alterity of the people in the past. The present note is born out of my dissatisfaction with the cultural-historical archaeology dominant in Romania. In cultural-historical approach the excised pots are reduced to the status of "guide fossils" (used for building historical narratives), strictly functional objects, "works of art" and/or propaganda objects. Alternatively, I suggested that the Vădastra excised pots, on one hand, and the human body, on the other, are metaphorically connected, that these vessels might have been perceived in the Neolithic as persons mediating between the world of the living and the world of the dead (ancestors), having transformative powers.

Rezumat: Luând ca exemplu o categorie ceramică definitorie pentru așa-numita "cultură Vădastra" (sudul României și nord-vestul Bulgariei; aprox. 5200-4900 CAL BC), și anume vasele excizate, în această notă am încercat să scot în evidență alteritatea oamenilor din trecut. Nota de față s-a născut din insatisfacția mea față de arheologia cultural-istorică, dominantă în România. În demersul cultural-istoric, vasele excizate sunt reduse la statutul de "fosile directe" (utilizate în construirea unor narațiuni istorice), obiecte strict funcționale, "opere de artă" și/sau obiecte de propagandă. Alternativ, am sugerat că vasele excizate Vădastra, pe de o parte, și corpul uman, pe de alta, sunt metaforic legate, că aceste vase ar fi putut fi percepute în neolitic ca fiind persoane ce mediază între lumea viilor și lumea morților (strămoșilor), având puteri transformative.

Keywords: Vădastra tradition, excised pots, anthropomorphic containers, figurines, red ochre, white paste, human bones, metaphors.

Cuvinte cheie: tradiția Vădastra, vase excizate, recipiente antropomorfe, figurine, ocru roșu, pastă albă, oase umane, metafore.

Introduction

As Bjørnar Olsen points out, following Bruno Latour, modernity created two totally different ontological zones, one of humans and one of non-humans (objects and animals), which led to the emergence of a border between us, the modern, and the rest, the pre-modern (B. Olsen 2003, p. 95). According to modernist philosophy, only humans can be considered to be persons, not also the objects. As I will try to prove in the first part of the text, taking for an example a defining ceramic category for the so-called "Vădastra culture" (southern Romania and north-west Bulgaria; approx. 5200-4900 CAL BC), namely the excised pots¹, Romanian archaeology not only separates in a modernist spirit people from things, but also establishes through classification artificial borders between various elements of material culture: pots, anthropomorphic figurines, human bones manipulated in the domestic space etc. In the particular case of ceramics, the significance of the pots is encompassed in the totalizing concept of "type", often equivalent to "guide fossil" of a "culture" or to "chronological indicator". This intellectual action in which classification often becomes an aim in itself, projects into the past the modernist sacred-profane, secular-religious dichotomy (for a critique see, for instance, J. Brück 1999). Within the archaeological field in Romania, in spite of the criticism brought by some archaeologists to the use of modernist dichotomies in the interpretation of prehistoric material culture (M. Anghelinu 2004; N. Ursulescu 2004; N. Palincaș *in press*), the epistemological foundations of the discipline remained unchanged. Moreover, under a deguised form, the critical discourse of some of these archaeologists is structured by the same dichotomies which, in their opinion, should be abandoned (see N. Ursulescu 2004).

Many ethnographic examples show us that the above mentioned division between persons and objects is not at all universal and we do not find it in pre-modern societies:

"Persons, in the Ojibwa world, can take a great variety of forms, of which the human is just one. They can also appear in a variety of animal guises, as meteorological phenomena such as thunder or the winds, as heavenly bodies such as the sun, and even as tangible objects such as stones that we would have no hesitation in regarding as inanimate."(T. Ingold 2000, p. 91)

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¹ Given the consecration of the term of "excised pottery" in Romanian archaeological literature, I used it too, but as a convention, although most decorative elements are grooved, not excised (see L. Thissen 2008, p. 117).

Along the same line of thought, in the second part of the text, I try to overcome the rigidly set limits of the prevailing archaeological discourse. Only put together, in the social context of their use in the past and/or in the archaeological context in which they were discovered, as a last moment of their biography, the objects can get other meanings, significance, closer to the Neolithic societies, and, at the same time, different from their enclosure into modernist metanarratives. More precisely, I suggest that the Vădastra excised pots might have been perceived as persons. I mention that such an interpretation is not new, as it was also proposed, for instance, in the case of the Funnel Beaker elaborately decorated pottery from Sweden (C. Tilley 1996, p. 318 ff.). I am convinced that my interpretation is not the only possible one, but nevertheless I think that there is a series of empirical data supporting it.

Vădastra excised pottery in texts

Since the excavations carried out at Vădastra-*Măgura Fetelor* by the middle of the '1920s (V. Christescu 1927-1932) (fig. 1), the excised pottery has been the focus of interest only from a cultural-chronological perspective. Methodologically, the greatest importance lies in the stylistic and typological analyses, as it was considered that "*they might lead to scientific results, if the objects in question can be related to certain archaeological cultures in which they developed like live organisms [...]*" (D. Berciu 1967, p. 52). The typological method was defined as "*the application of the Darwinian evolutionist principle in analysing and interpreting the tools and other products of human work*" (D. Berciu 1967, p. 51). From a cultural-historical viewpoint, any new type of vessel or pottery assemblage represents a new period in the evolution of a "culture" (L. Ellis 1984, p. 42). Consequently, the ultimate aim of the excavations in a series of Vădastra sites was "*resolving the issue of the origin and development of the Vădastra culture*" (M. Nica 1970, p. 32) and the success of the archaeological excavations allegedly consisted in "*clarifying the issue of the evolution of the Vădastra culture by phases [...]*" (M. Nica 1971, p. 31). That reflects also in the manner of publication: a current practice in Romanian archaeology is presenting the archaeological finds selectively, according to the cultural phases to which they were attributed and not on the archaeological contexts they were found in. The result consists in developing different, often contradictory periodization systems for "Vădastra culture", comprising two, four, or five phases (C.N. Mateescu 1961; 1965; D. Berciu 1966, pp. 93-98; M. Nica 1971). The very emergence of the Vădastra excised pottery is a debated topic: while some authors consider that the excised pottery develops from the Dudești incised pottery (M. Nica 1970; 1971; 1976), others consider that its emergence north of the Danube is the result of a southern "*cultural demic impulse*" whose area of origin might be north-west Anatolia and south-east Thracia (S. Pandrea 1999, pp. 21, 25).

As they were interested in clearing up the origin and the evolution of the "Vădastra culture", the archaeologists from Romania used two types of discourse that (often) coexist in the framework of the same text (tab. 1).

"BIOLOGICAL" TERMS	"WAR-LIKE" TERMS
Ingraftment	To enter into conflict
Crown (of a tree)	To leave (<i>sensu</i> to evacuate)
Mother-culture	To enter by force
Kinship	To reoccupy
To derive genetically from [...]	To expand
Descendancy	To take refuge
Filiation	Violent confrontation
Genetic links	Dispute
Birth	Territorial expansion
Branch/Branches	Instability
Culture roots	Pressure
Trunk	Chances of success
Direct progeny	–
Bibliographical sample: D. Berciu 1961, pp. 50-58; 1966, pp. 96, 100; E. Comșa 1998-2000, p. 303; Vl. Dumitrescu 1974, p. 54; M. Nica 1970, pp. 50-51; 1980, p. 54; 1997; M. Nica, I. Ciucă 1989, pp. 35, 41; N. Ursulescu 1993, p. 18.	

Tab. 1. Key-terms used in the archaeological discourses regarding the "Vădastra culture".
Termeni cheie utilizați în discursurile arheologice privind "cultura Vădastra".

In the first type of discourse the language used is one borrowed from biology: the "Vădastra culture" is born, lives, reaches maturity, mingles with another "culture", generates a new "culture" and dies out, either from natural causes or its death is triggered by another "culture". From that viewpoint an eloquent example is the periodization proposed by M. Nica following the excavations in the settlement at Hotărani-*La Turn* (M. Nica 1971):

1. Layer I. The technique of the fine wide incision of Dudești tradition prevails as compared to the excision;
2. Layer II. The technique of the excision begins to generalize;
3. Layer III A. *"It is the most flourishing age of the Vădastra culture, followed by an immediate decline"*; the technique of the excision *"reaches the highest accomplishment"*;
4. Layer III B. The decline: the excision is executed *"in haste and superficially"*.

In the second type of discourse the "Vădastra culture" plays on the stage of prehistory the role the nations play on the stage of history, as the social and political reality specific of modernity is projected into the past. The fact that the archaeologists regard an "archaeological culture" as a modern nation with an ethnic base is proven by the frequent use of expressions such as "Vădastra culture bearers", "Vădastrian populations" etc. Romanian archaeologists used Vădastra pottery as raw material for building historical narratives the content of which, extremely scarce, can be synthesized as follows: the "Vădastra culture" emerges from the "Dudești culture" and is tightly linked to the Vinča and Boian "cultures" (M. Nica 1970, p. 51); over the time, the Vădastra and Boian "cultures" could have clashed violently in the area of the terraces of the River Olt lower basin (M. Nica, I. Ciucă 1989, pp. 35, 41); the end of the "Vădastra culture" could have occurred after a confrontation with the "Boian culture" (E. Comșa 1998-2000, p. 303), or, on the contrary, the two "cultures" could have intermingled, generating the "Sălcuța culture" (D. Berciu 1966, p. 97).

Another characteristic feature of the way Vădastra excised pottery has been interpreted consists in including in the category of "ritual", either explicitly or implicitly, everything that does not correspond to the "common sense" outlook of the archaeologist. The pots or lids with human faces were published, together with the anthropomorphic figurines, in specially dedicated articles (M. Nica 1980; R.R. Andreescu 2007), as if there was no relation between these and "common" pots (without human faces). Even within texts where reference is made to all the categories of objects discovered in a Vădastra site, the anthropomorphic lids are presented along the anthropomorphic figurines, apart from the pots (see P. Mirea 2009). The separation that modernity makes between the sacred and profane is projected by archaeologists into the past, taking for granted that people in Neolithic thought and behaved the same way: thus, it is considered that the pots with human figures reflect *"the spiritual life of the Vădastra culture bearers"* (M. Nica 1980, p. 27), while, implicitly, the pots without human faces had only an utilitarian function.

Vădastra excised pottery has always fascinated Romanian archaeologists, as proven by the fact that in various texts we encounter the statement that *"Next to the painted pottery of the Eneolithic Cucuteni culture, Vădastra culture pottery undoubtedly constitutes the highest expression of the pottery making art in the entire European Neolithic [...]"* (Vi. Dumitrescu 1974, pp. 53-54; see also M. Nica 1971, p. 19; P. Mirea 2009). Consequently, Vădastra excised pots are present in works on prehistoric art in Romania, those written by Vladimir Dumitrescu being the most popular (e.g. Vi. Dumitrescu 1974). The latter starts from the premise that "art" cannot have an utilitarian aim, as it constitutes a field of independent activity, apart from any other (Vi. Dumitrescu 1974, p. 7; for a critique see M. Anghelinu 2004). Therefore, although the pots are attributed an utilitarian function, their decoration might be the result of a preoccupation relating to the domain of "art". Referring to the decoration, Dumitrescu does not exclude the possibility that, in many cases, the ornamentation of the pottery might have had *ab origine* a symbolic weight, but he is convinced that it was lost in time, as the decoration got a purely ornamental value (Vi. Dumitrescu 1974, pp. 23-24). In other words, the ornamentation of the pottery becomes art for art's sake.

The same perspective emerges in exhibitions. Vădastra excised pottery is supposed to be the very symbol of the Neolithic in Oltenia: for instance, on the cover of an exhibition catalogue called *Neolithic in Oltenia* is depicted such a pot (M. Iosifaru, C. Fântâneau 2004). At the same time, within a large international exhibition organized in 2008 at Olten, in Switzerland, and dedicated to the Neolithic Age in Romania, the so-called "Vădastra culture" is represented by the excised pottery (M. Wullschleger 2008, p. 53/fig. 5 and p. 143/fig. 97). In the exhibition catalogue published on that occasion, entitled *Neolithic art in Romania*, the exhibits (including two Vădastra excised pots) are defined as "works of art", their timeless aesthetic value being considered to be essential. In the

introductory chapter, signed by the general director of the project, a Swiss archaeologist, we read the following statement:

"There are cultures to be unveiled.

Unknown cultures, going back into the mists of time, when Man [sic] decided, for his own pleasure and that of his gods, to dare the gratuitousness of the creative act, to fashion the unimaginable. To bring the beauty created by his own hands into his environment, no longer contenting oneself with the beauty found in nature, that is the question raised by each of the masterpieces contained in this book." (L. Chrzanovski 2008, pp. 15-16)

And further on: *"What does it matter whether we are correct in our vision? Works of art communicate with us through their material presence and their immaterial emanation"* (L. Chrzanovski 2008, p. 16). The Romanian archaeologists share this point of view too: *"[...] I cannot escape the almost magic evocativeness of these objects, their direct beauty, their simple presence defying time. I hope this heritage of long past but ever present humanity evokes in you the same emotions"* (C. Mușețeanu in M. Wullschleger 2008, p. 88); *"Several thousands of years ago this same aesthetic sense drove man to majestically decorate ceramics [...]"* (D. Alicu in M. Wullschleger 2008, p. 194).

The main problem with this outlook consists in the fact that the objects are cutted off the social context they had belonged to and offered to the visitors in order to be appreciated in themselves. The exhibits are turned into consumer goods meant for the "general public". How inadequate this art for art's sake perspective is, is well shown by Alfred Gell:

"'aesthetic properties' cannot be abstracted, anthropologically, from the social processes surrounding the deployment of candidate 'art objects' in specific social settings. I doubt, for example, that a warrior on a battlefield is 'aesthetically' interested in the design on an opposing warrior's shield; yet it was so as to be seen by this warrior (and to frighten him) that the design was placed there. The shield [...] is indisputably a work of art of the kind interesting to the anthropologist, but its aesthetic properties (for us) are totally irrelevant to its anthropological implications. Anthropologically, it is not a 'beautiful' shield, but a fear-inducing shield. The innumerable shades of social/emotional responses to artefacts (of terror, desire, awe, fascination, etc.) in the unfolding patterns of social life cannot be encompassed or reduced to aesthetic feelings; not without making the aesthetic response so generalized as to be altogether meaningless." (A. Gell 1998, pp. 5-6)

Last but not least, by the type of the narratives developed, many archaeologists served/are serving, consciously or not, the dominant ideologies. As noticed in the accounts on pre- and protohistory, from the interwar period to the present (I. Nestor 1932; D. Berciu 1966; 1968; M. Petrescu-Dîmbovița 1978; Vl. Dumitrescu, Al. Vulpe 1988; N. Ursulescu 1998; M. Petrescu-Dîmbovița, Al. Vulpe 2001), the "Vădastra culture", with the "capital" in the eponymous settlement, became a link into a chain of "archaeological cultures" by which – explicitly or implicitly – the origins of the Romanian nation are pushed far back into the past. Surprisingly, the theme of ethnic continuity is tackled also at the end of a very stimulating article on the incrustation with white paste of the excised pottery from Vădastra and Crușovu:

"the fact that same sources of the white colour and the same techniques of using it lasted until the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries, when pottery making disappeared for good at Vădastra, proves also the uninterrupted ethnical continuity of the autochthonous population in this region." (Gh. Găță, C.N. Mateescu 1992, pp. 242-243)

An important role in disseminating this message was played/is played by exhibitions. For instance, during the '1970s and '1980s, in the exhibition organized at the National History Museum of the Socialist Republic of Romania, Vădastra excised pots were included in a visual narrative on the continuity and progressive development of the Romanian people from the most remote times to the "golden age" of Nicolae Ceaușescu. The many thousand year old Romanian nation was invoked to justify the policy of the communist regime. After 1989, the same type of narrative, changed in form, contributes to the justification of another political foundation – the European Union one. A case in point is the catalogue of the exhibition at Olten mentioned above, from which I selected, as an example, the text signed by the Romanian minister of foreign affairs:

"Knowledge about Romania's Neolithic civilizations is an indispensable key to understanding Europe's continental history. These 'ambassadors' [the exhibits] are evidence, both real and spiritual, of all that

represents the strength of our young Europe: the community of values which goes hand in hand with cultural diversity, a source of beauty." (L. Comănescu in M. Wullschleger 2008, p. 68)

Thus, the reader is stimulated to internalize the new dominant ideology, according to which the European Union member states have had a common identity since the Neolithic, that Romania and the West, in spite of different historical experiences, have belonged to the same world since prehistoric times. To put it simpler, the archaeological objects become "arguments" within a new project of social engineering: "the new man" in communism has been replaced by the "European" in capitalism.

Summarizing, in Romanian archaeological literature Vădastra excised pots still are reduced to the status of "guide fossils", strictly functional objects, "works of art" and/or propaganda objects. From my point of view, by tackling objects this way, archaeologists do nothing but to bring about common knowledge deguised in scientific appearances. Due to this approach, archaeologists learn nothing from the past, and only model it after the image of the present.

Vădastra excised pots as persons

According to the G.M. Feinman *et alii's* (1981) method for measuring the labour input in pottery manufacture, of all the Vădastra pottery categories, the excised pots require the greatest deal of time and work. As Laurens Thissen has noted, it is probable that more than one person was involved at working on such a vessel at the same time (L. Thissen 2008, p. 117). The technological analysis of a sample of sherds originating in the settlement of Vădastra showed that the excised pots contain less organic temper in comparison with the other ceramic categories, which might indicate that these pots were tempered with more care (Gh. Gâță, A. Dragoman 2004-2005). The exterior surface is always burnished/polished, while the inside surface is smoothed and sometimes burnished/polished. The colours prevailing on the outside are black, grey and brown. The decoration is abstract and geometrical. The excised motifs are associated with grooves or incisions, and the decorative elements consist in meanders, spirals, zig-zag bands, rhombs, rectangles and triangles, covering most of the vessel. The spaces between the decorative motifs were filled with white paste. The rim, the base and the undecorated parts on the body of the pots were painted with red ochre. The impact the excised pots have upon lookers is given by the effect produced not only by the contrast between colours (red and white, on one hand, and the background colour of the pot, on the other), but also by the polished surface. The excised pots are deliberately modelled as brilliant objects². Considering the polishing of the surface and contrast of the colours, it might be said that the pots are meant for the tactile sense, as well as for the visual one. As regards the senses involved in relation to the excised pots, it would have been important to investigate their content, but, unfortunately, such analyses have not been carried out until now. Typologically, the excised pottery presents a wide range of shapes: bowls, dishes, pedestal pots, footed pots, large storage jars, etc. Some excised fragments were discovered at long distance from their "home region": for instance, at the Békésszentandrás-*Furugy* site in south-east Hungary a decorated rim belonging to a Vădastra (or Boian?) vessel was found in a Szakálhát context; according to the author of the excavation the pot could have been brought to the settlement by itinerant tradesmen, or has been locally made by people originally from the regions lying to the south of the Carpathians (J. Makkay 2002, pp. 59, 60, pl. I/1).

Within this ceramic category, archaeologists have paid a special attention to the pots with human figures³. The faces were painted with red ochre. In a case, the human face originally painted with red ochre was later covered by white paste (M. Nica 1980, p. 42). Some of the pedestaled pots

² Among the Yolngu of Australia the brilliance of the paintings is associated to the presence of ancestral power (H. Morphy 1989), while in pre-Columbian America it was considered that spiritual and creative power is manifested in brilliant objects (N.J. Saunders 1999).

³ The sherd in fig. 2/3 was discovered at Vădastra-*Măgura Fetelor*, in layer II, in association with excised pottery. According to the description, except for the human face, the sherd is not decorated. The author of the excavations mentions that upon the fabric it belongs to a pottery category decorated by three techniques: incision, excision and incrustation. The pot from which the sherd comes was interpreted as "Gesichtsurne" (D. Berciu 1937, p. 6), which suggests that this type of containers might have had a funerary function. Based on a drawing published later (D. Berciu 1966, p. 94/fig. 6), another archaeologist classified this sherd as a pot decorated with channellings (A. László 1970, p. 45). Taking into account the data provided by the author of the find, the sherd might belong, in fact, to a pot decorated by incision/excision. Unfortunately, I did not have the possibility to see the object itself, therefore, the classification remains uncertain.

bearing human faces are not functional: they have hollow pedestals and the body of the pot has no bottom (fig. 2/1). On another type of pot one can notice the trace of a perforation that probably indicates the fact that it was either suspended or repaired (fig. 2/2). It is considered that the pots with human faces could have been used "for certain religious practices relating, perhaps, to the disappearance of a family or tribe member. [...] The goblets provided with human figures, decorated and preserved so carefully, represented, either the mortuary mask of the vanished one, or the objects used for funerary processions" (M. Nica 1980, pp. 42-43). It is true that there are ethnographic examples that might support such an interpretation: for example, the Yungur of north-eastern Nigeria make anthropomorphic vessels destined to ancestral spirits, each pot being modeled especially for containing the spirit of a deceased male leader or of a man who might have become leader (M.C. Berns 1990, p. 50). Similarly, in ritual contexts, the Mafa and Bulahay of Cameroon use pots for depicting God or the deceased or living family members (N. David *et alii* 1988, p. 371). To strengthen the idea of a relation between human faces/the masks on the pots and the face of the deceased, one might bring into the discussion also an archaeological find earlier than the Vădastra tradition⁴, the one of Cârcea-Viaduct, belonging to the Criș tradition; on the bottom of a pit there was found a human face, resembling a kind of mask, cut up a skull, probably that of a 15-16 year old girl (M. Nica, D. Nicolăescu-Plopșor, 1975). However, I do not think that only anthropomorphic vessels were used in funerary practices, that they might have been "more special" than the excised pots without human faces. Therefore, I draw attention upon the fact that, among some communities in Africa, not only specially made pots, but even daily use pottery, often become receptacles for the spirits of the dead (O.P. Gosselain 1999, p. 214).

From my point of view, the pots with human faces rather indicate the existence of a metaphorical link between the human body, on one hand, and the excised pots in general, on the other. Christopher Tilley has argued that "Metaphor is a primary way in which persons and cultures make sense of the world. When we link things metaphorically we recognise similarity in difference, we think one thing in terms of the attributes of another" (C. Tilley 2002, p. 24; see also C. Tilley 1999). The fact that in the Vădastra tradition there are no pots in the shape of the human body (at least until now) but only anthropomorphic depictions on "common" pots, makes me believe that we deal with a deliberate ambiguity. The human face on the pot can be noticed if the observer is positioned at a distance and in an angle enabling him/her to recognize it. From other angles or from a greater distance, the pot might seem a "common" one, but still, the human face is there, even if concealed. At the same time, anthropomorphized lids, like the one discovered at Măgura-Buduiasca / Teleor 003, on which there is a human face covered by red ochre (fig. 2/4), indicates that also the pots without human faces can be perceived the same way as the human body: together, the anthropomorphized lid and the pot on which it stands, make up a whole.

A further argument consists in the fact that in the Vădastra tradition the excised pots are decorated in the same manner as some of the anthropomorphic, female figurines (fig. 3). Several authors compared the decoration of these figurines either with a certain garment, "fota", or with clothing in general (*e.g.* M. Nica 1980, p. 41; I. Voinescu, C.N. Mateescu 1980, pp. 189, 194). Even the decoration of the pots was compared with an "embroidered cloth" (Vl. Dumitrescu 1974, p. 55). From this perspective, the decoration covering the body of the excised pots might represent the clothing, as the clothing might be considered to be "a second skin" (J.-P. Warnier 2006, p. 193; C. Tilley 1996, p. 318).

The painting of the excised pots with red ochre and the incrustation with white paste should also be taken into consideration. In south-east Europe, during the entire Neolithic Age, the association between ochre and the human body is frequently documented in graves, under the form of depositions of lumps of ochre in the funerary pit or of powdering the deceased with ochre (*e.g.* C. Lazăr, 2009). There are also cases when ochre is associated with disjointed human bones, such as that of the hoard of Csóka/Čoka-Kremenyák in northern Serbia: in a pot, next to many other objects (including *exotica*), six lumps of ochre and a fragment of burned human rib were deposited (P. Raczky 1994, p. 163). The symbolic value of red ochre in the Neolithic is proven also by its presence among

⁴ I took over this term from a work published by Christopher Tilley and use it for the same reasons and with the same meaning: "The term 'tradition' is consciously adopted as opposed to 'culture' in order to avoid the traditional archaeological connotation of the latter term as representing a prehistoric society. By tradition is meant a set of artifact types with a delimited range of stylistic and morphological variation which have no necessary unitary social significance in terms of representing a group of a people" (C. Tilley 1982, p. 5).

the exchange goods; the analysis of the red ochre used to decorate the Vădastra pottery indicates the existence of several sources of provenance: the Central and Southern Oltenia, the Danube Gorge, but also sources situated to the South and downstream the Danube (Gh. Gâță, C.N. Mateescu 1999-2001, pp. 191-192). Most often, red ochre was applied on the excised pots before firing. This preference was explained in strictly technological terms: *"the Neolithic potters had noticed the better adhesion of ochre paint before firing"* (Gh. Gâță, C.N. Mateescu, 1999-2001, pp. 188, 195). However, in my opinion, the technological choice is imbued with symbolism. The fact that ochre turns redder during firing, due to the gradual transformation of geotite into hematite (Gh. Gâță, C.N. Mateescu, 1999-2001, p. 188 and footnote 51), might have been considered in the Neolithic to be a manifestation of the magical properties of ochre. It was often said by archaeologists that red ochre symbolized blood and life. As a matter of fact, red ochre prepared under the form of a viscous paste or of a more fluid suspension, for the painting of the Vădastra excised pots, is similar to blood. The only archaeological example, known to me, confirming such an association is that of rock paintings at Rose Cottage Cave in South Africa. Most often used colours are red and yellow ochre; the white and, rarely, black are also present (B.S. Williamson 2000, p. 755). The tests showed that the yellow pigments contained blood, unlike the red ones, one of the possible explanations offered by the author of the study being that *"yellow paint may have needed the addition of blood because it lacked the appearance of blood natural to red pigment [...]"* (B.S. Williamson 2000, p. 759).

As regards the white paste incrustation, the analyses carried out on sherds from Vădastra and Crușovu proved that we deal with a limy substance whose source of provenance is local. The mode of selection of raw material indicates the intention to obtain a good whiteness (Gh. Gâță, C.N. Mateescu 1987; 1992). Even if it refers to the Boian tradition, it is worth mentioning the result of the tests on the white paste used in decorating incised and excised pots uncovered in the site of Gălățui-*Movila Berzei*: in one case, calcium carbonate and hydroxylapatite from bones were identified, while in another case only hydroxylapatite occurs (G. Niculescu 2003). Conducting more tests on some incised and excised pots uncovered in the same settlement resulted in the following: to prepare the white paste used as incrustation, human bones were probably used (M. Neagu, pers. com., Bucharest, September 2006). Therefore, the white colour, irrespective of the matter of which is made, might symbolize the bones (of the ancestors).

If we give credit to the symbolic associations proposed for red and white colours, then, it might be said that like the human body, the excised pots are made, in their turn, out of blood/flesh and bones. This interpretation seems to be also suggested by the way in which the two colours are used together on the same pot: red ochre is applied *on* the surface of the vessel (on the undecorated parts), while white paste is introduced *in* the surface of the vessel (in the grooved, incised and excised decoration).

Most excised pots are functional. However, there are vessels that are not functional, such as some pedestaled pots. Like the pedestaled goblets bearing human faces (see above), these non-anthropomorphized pots also have hollow pedestals, and an orifice at the joint of the pedestal with the body of the pot; the body of the pot communicates with the pedestal. It is interesting that the way these pots were modeled also refers to the human body, namely the anthropomorphic figurines with inner pipe (see I. Voinescu, C.N. Mateescu 1980) (fig. 3). Sometimes, this type of pots become containers for the bones of the deceased, as indicated by the presence in Pit no. 2 in the settlement of Hotărani of such a pot in which a human skull was deposited (fig. 4). A similar situation is mentioned also at Hotărani, but the author of the excavations does not provide details on the type of container, allowing the reader to understand that we deal with a functional one: among the remains of a house he discovered a pot (that he calls "goblet") containing the occipital of a person (M. Nica 1980, p. 53). In the last case, the pot with human bones either relates to the moment of deserting the house (possibly after the death of the person whose bones were deposited in the pot), or constituted a daily presence in the life of those in the house (a situation that does not exclude its deliberate "abandonment" in the moment of leaving the house). Both examples confirm the existence of a metaphorical link between the pots and the human body: the human body, represented only by (a part of) the skull, is symbolically reconstructed by the pot. The fact that the human body can be regarded as a container is also suggested by the containers with human head found at Vădastra (fig. 5). The two examples show us that there is no border between the domestic arena and the funerary one. As a matter of fact, the presence of the disjointed human bones is mentioned also in the case of other settlements: *e.g.* Vădastra, Măgura-*Buduiasca* (C. Lazăr 2009).

To sum up, the Vădastra excised pots and the human body are metaphorically connected: both are containers with orifices through which substances enter in or flow out (C. Tilley 1996, p. 318;

J.-P. Warnier 2006). Taking into account the effort made to produce them, the meticulous execution of the decoration (like a "second skin"), the white incrustation carefully selected and the painting with red ochre sometimes obtained from a long distance, as well as the association of these colours on the same pot (i.e. are made of blood/flesh and bones), it might be said that the Vădastra excised pots are not only objects to which human characteristics are attributed, but I think that, for the people in the Neolithic, they actually were persons mediating between the world of the living and the world of the dead:

VĂDASTRA EXCISED POT(S)

Red	White
Blood/Flesh	Bones
Liquid	Solid
Surface of the body	Interior of the body
Life	Death
World of the living	World of the ancestors

In other words, the excised pots make possible the link between people and their ancestors. In certain contexts they might become containers for the spirits of the ancestors. From that perspective, the excised pots might be, to borrow a term used by Andy Jones, "vehicles of remembrance" (A. Jones 2004, p. 174). However, far from me the intention of maintaining that these pots, unlike the other ceramic categories, had only a "funerary function": i.e. they might have contained the spirits of the deceased, possibly various substances as offerings for these, etc; that could mean I might perpetuate the same dichotomies between the domestic and the funerary, the profane and the sacred. I think that the role played by the excised pots consists in more than that.

At the same time, the excised pots might have had transformative powers: their content, no matter what it was, turns into ancestral substances necessary for the life of the community. The excised pots might be "containers of life", to use Silvia Forni's term (2007). Perhaps that is why, for example, the large storage vessels (some of them more than 50 cm high) are so intricately decorated (fig. 6); if we imagine that such pots might have contained grains, for instance, then, all the activities relating to these cereals (sowing, harvesting, milling, cooking, eating, etc.) are imbued with the spirits of the ancestors. The lids with or without human faces do not involve the notion of "hygiene"; I consider that such a perspective is characteristic of contemporary man, not of the Neolithic one. Instead, the lids might suggest the protection of this transforming process taking place inside the person-pot. Along the same line of thought, the pots without a bottom and with hollow pedestal (with or without human faces) and the anthropomorphic figurines with inner pipe mentioned might be considered to be material metaphors of the circulation of ancestral substances through human bodies. The female body itself is a container inside of which a transforming process takes place: the birth of children. That explains also the presence of female figurines in which pregnancy is rendered (e.g. I. Voinescu, C.N. Mateescu 1980, p. 191/fig. 5). An original "reading" of the incised/excised decoration of a female figurine was proposed by Ioan Voinescu and Corneliu N. Mateescu, who considered that certain elements of it represent "*a woman giving birth to a child*" (1980). Important seems the fact that also this figurine has an inner pipe (fig. 7). In a nutshell, by means of the excised pots, or better say, with their help, the ancestors are present in all the events in the daily life of people. Even broken, by depositing the fragments in settlements, the excised pots might carry on the link between the world of the living and that of the dead, like the disjointed human bones.

As a more general remark, it seems relevant to me that also the pots without human faces, functional or not, can be integrated in this web of meanings that metaphorically links the pots, figurines, other types of containers, the human body, the ochre, the white paste, etc. Daily social practices in which pots are involved, food consumption, transport and storage, people's gestures to produce and handle them, the style of displaying in houses, are included in this web of meanings, and, at the same time, by repetition maintain it and perpetuate it.

Instead of conclusions

Before ending, I will shortly tackle an ethnographic example that I consider stimulating for discussion, the one of king of Mankon in Cameroon, excellently documented by Jean-Pierre Warnier (2007). The body of the king of Mankon contains a series of substances specific of any human body, such as breath, speech, saliva and semen, which are turned into life substances in the moments in which the king visits the graves of the ancestors. On these occasions, the king brings offerings to the dead monarchs, invokes them, asks for their generosity and receives the vital breath from them. For Mankon, the ancestors are "*dead to the world in the foreground, yet well and alive in a world in the background which they occupy and in which their descendants can have access to them by addressing them and making offerings*" (J.-P. Warnier 2007, p. 118). The monarch is a pot-king. His bodily substances are multiplied and extended by other substances: raffia wine, palm oil, camwood powder. These last substances are preserved in a wide range of containers (e.g. the palace and the town/country), perceived as extensions of the monarch's body. Out of the multitude of types of containers discussed by Warnier I confine myself to mentioning the presence in the royal palaces in Grassfields of the heavily decorated pottery jars with a capacity of over 100 liters, used to store the raffia wine. The king's body is sacred, but not also the substances it contains. Both the bodily substances, and their extensions, are distributed by the king to all his subjects, either directly, or by proxy. Thus, the king's subjects are identified with containers that are more or less full of life substances. In short, under the form of a system of communicating vessels, the ancestral substances are distributed from the top of the hierarchy towards its base; at the top of the hierarchy there is the king and the notables whose bodies are filled by the ancestors, while at the base of the hierarchy there are the women and the unmarried men, the latter being perceived as empty containers. The king's body is refilled with ancestral substances following the visits he pays to the graves of the deceased monarchs. The substances contained in the monarch's body are absolutely necessary: "*They foster the life, reproduction and health of humans and livestock, the success of crops, the wealth of the households*" (J.-P. Warnier 2007, p. 114). In other words, "*the monarch mediates between the cosmic order of the ancestors and the prosperity of his people*" (J.-P. Warnier 2007, p. 35).

By this example I do not mean that in the Neolithic the metaphoric relation between the excised pots and the human body is a technology of power that legitimates and perpetuates an extremely hierarchical system, as the case with the Kingdom of Mankon. I gave this example only to show that people, ancestors, pots, fluids, graves are linked to each other by a silent narrative interpreting the social reality in a specific way. At the same time, this example shows us how far from the past are the prevailing archaeological discourses in Romanian archaeology. As I already said, in the particular case of Vădastra excised pots, an example that undoubtedly can be extrapolated to the entire positivist-empiricist archaeological approach, there is a double discourse. On the one hand, a discourse considered to be scientific turns the pots into "types", "guide fossils", chronological indicators; from that point of view, even the archaeological contexts are understood similarly, the "layers" being defined as simple containers of "types", equivalent to cultural phases. On the other hand, there is a discourse turning the pots into "works of art", cultural goods meant for the "general public", the "cultivated" one. Put together, the element joining these two discourses becomes more clear: the decontextualization of objects. The interpretations produced by cultural-historical archaeology annihilate the complexity of people in the past (their material culture), reducing them to the status of a collective character made to act in a historical play. I consider this type of approach a form of colonialism: in the name of an allegedly scientific mission, and, implicitly, objective, archaeologists appropriated the past, organized it in accordance with their contemporary common sense. Ultimately, the way the people in the past were tackled by the archaeologists whose research philosophy is positivist-empiricist represents an act of symbolic violence. Therefore, in this short text, I bore in mind to overcome the obsession of many Romanian archaeologists with typo-chronological analyses and the internal division of the "Vădastra culture" into phases, necessary from their point of view for building up a historical narrative, rather trying to look at the excised pots from another perspective. I like to think about the interpretation I suggested that it is not one that I would qualify as "colonialist", but one closer to the spirit of the ethnographic example with which I began these so-called conclusions. I mention that my text represents nothing else but a modest attempt at emphasizing the alterity of the people in the past.

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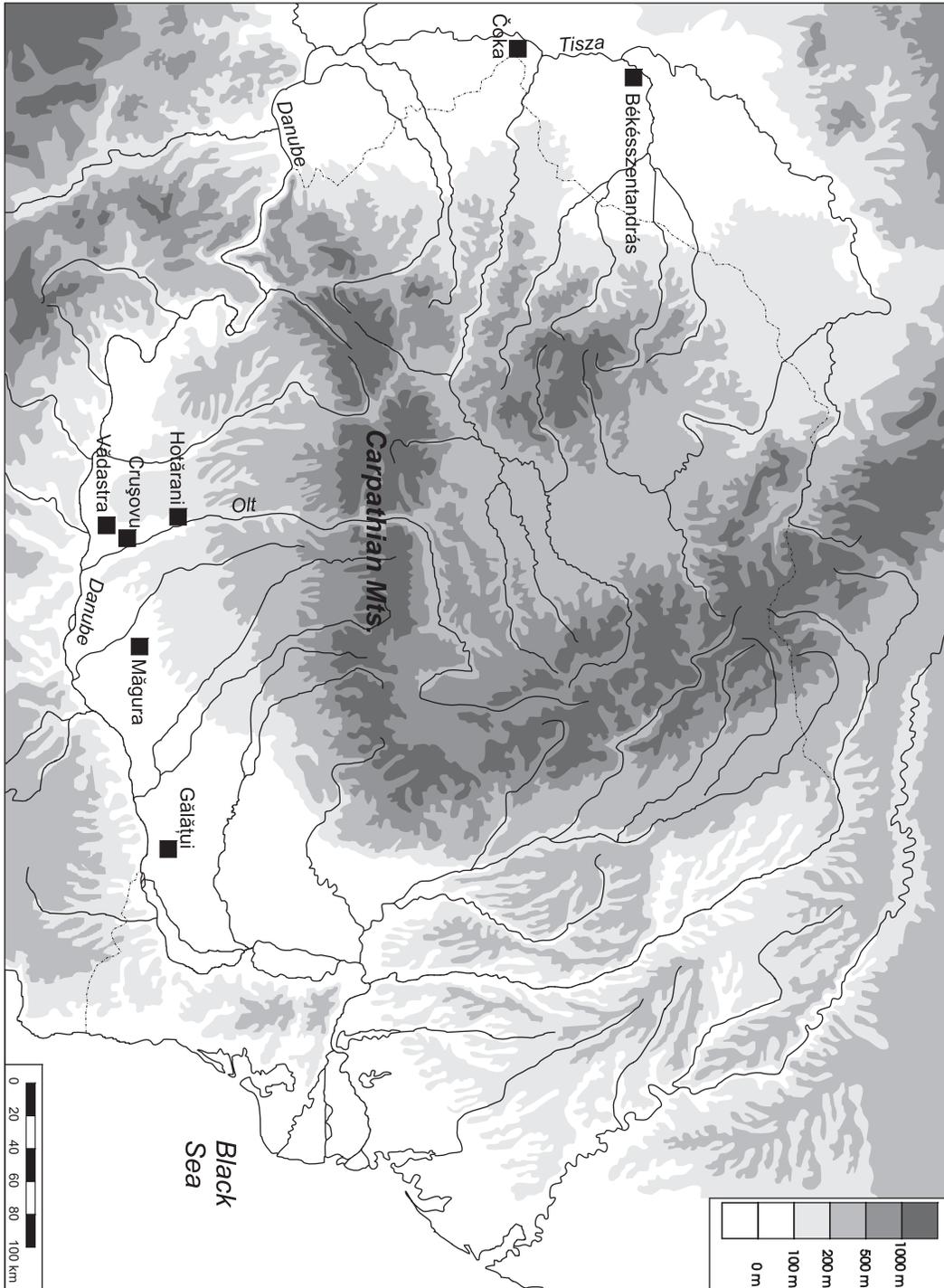


Fig. 1. Location map of Neolithic sites mentioned in the text.
Hartă cu localizarea siturilor neolitice menționate în text.

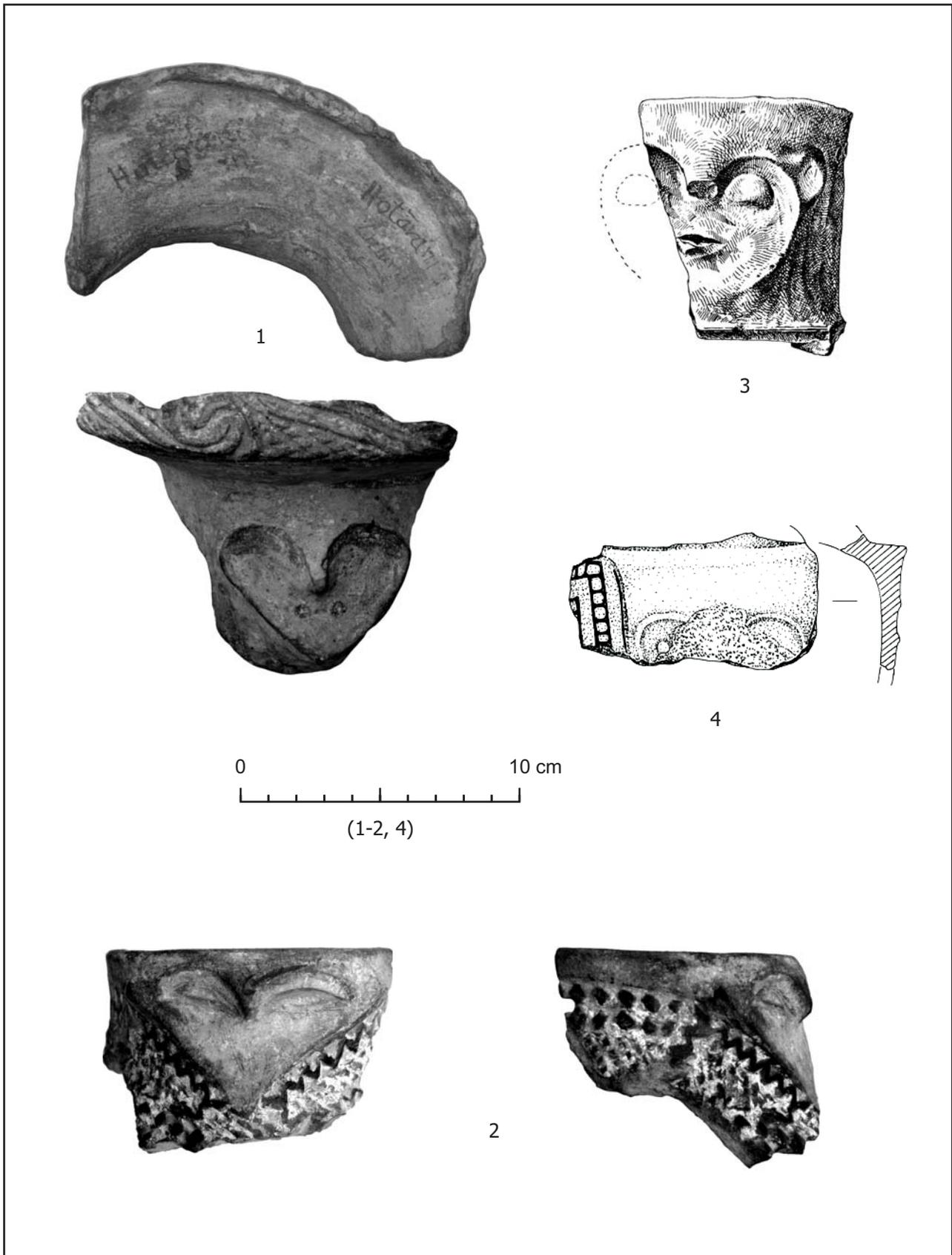


Fig. 2. Three vessels (1-3) and a lid (4) with human faces: (1) Hotărani; (2) Vădastra (1962 excavation season, square 39, -1.90/-2.00 m); (3) Vădastra (1934 excavation season; first published in D. Berciu 1937, p. 5, fig. 2/4); (4) Măgura/Teleor 003 (2001 excavation season, sondage 7, square 15, 0/-0.40 m; first published in R.R. Andreescu 2007, p. 64, pl. 5/4).
 Trei fragmente de vas (1-3) și unul de capac (4) cu fețe umane: (1) Hotărani; (2) Vădastra (campania 1962, careul 39, -1.90/-2.00 m); (3) Vădastra (campania 1934; publicat prima dată în D. Berciu 1937, p. 5, fig. 2/4); (4) Măgura/Teleor 003 (campania 2001, sondajul 7, careul 15, 0/-0.40 m; publicat prima dată în R.R. Andreescu 2007, p. 64, pl. 5/4).

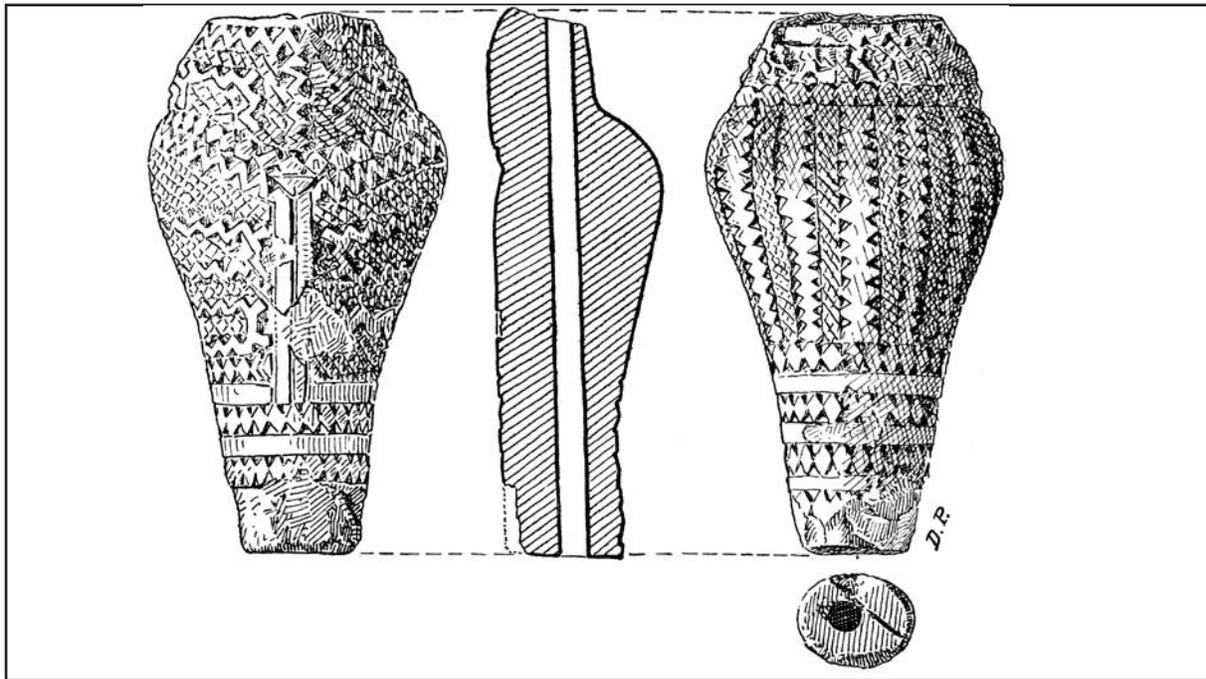


Fig. 3. Anthropomorphic figurine from Vădastra (first published in I. Voinescu, C.N. Mateescu 1980, p. 193/fig. 6).
Figurină antropomorfă de la Vădastra (publicată prima dată în I. Voinescu, C.N. Mateescu 1980, p. 193/fig. 6).

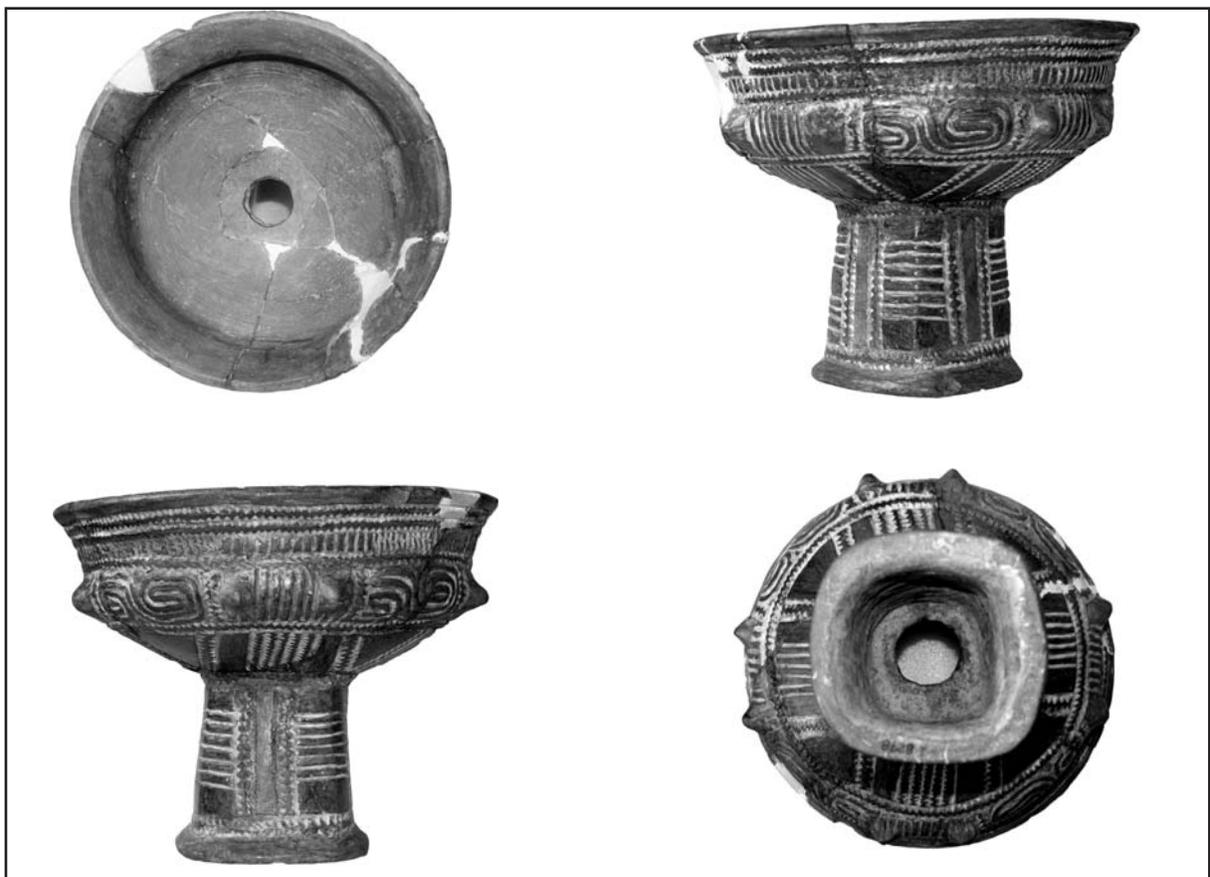


Fig. 4. Vessel from Hotărani (1969 excavation season; Trench IV, square 6, Pit no. 2; H=23 cm, Rim Dm.=28.7 cm, Base Dm.=12.5 cm; Museum of Oltenia, Craiova, Inv. no. I 8278; first published in M. Nica 1971, p. 18, fig. 6/6 and p. 20, fig. 7/1).
Vas de la Hotărani (campania 1969; Secțiunea IV, careul 6, Groapa nr. 2; H=23 cm, D buză=28,7 cm, D bază=12,5 cm; Muzeul Olteniei, Craiova, Nr. inv. I 8278; publicat prima dată în M. Nica 1971, p. 18, fig. 6/6 și p. 20, fig. 7/1).

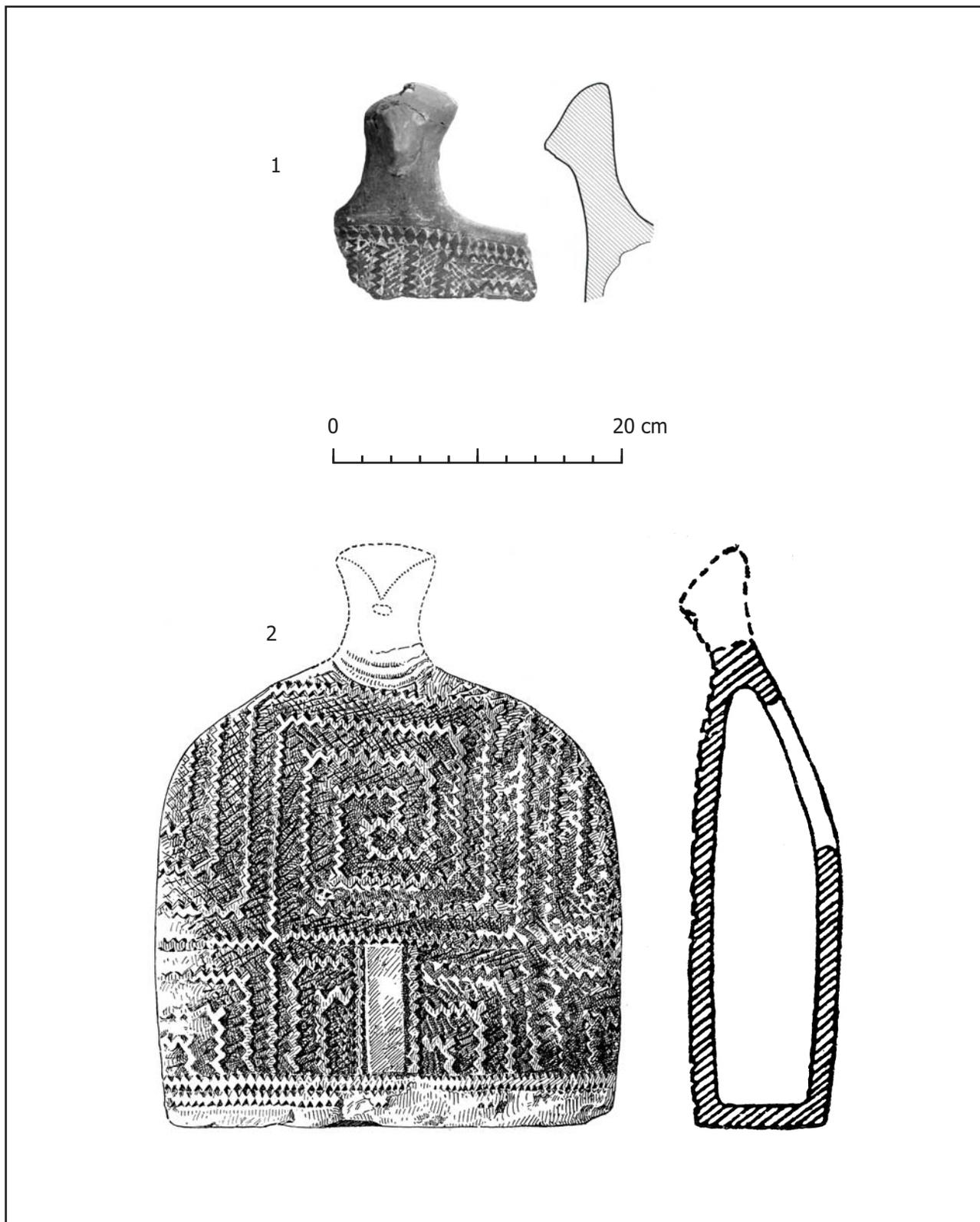


Fig. 5. Anthropomorphic containers from Vădastra; (2) modified after C.N. Mateescu 1970, p. 283/fig. 2 (National Museum of Romanian History, Bucharest, Inv. no. 15908).
Recipiente antropomorfe de la Vădastra; (2) după C.N. Mateescu 1970, p. 283/fig. 2, cu modificări (Muzeul Național de Istorie a României, București, Nr. inv. 15908).

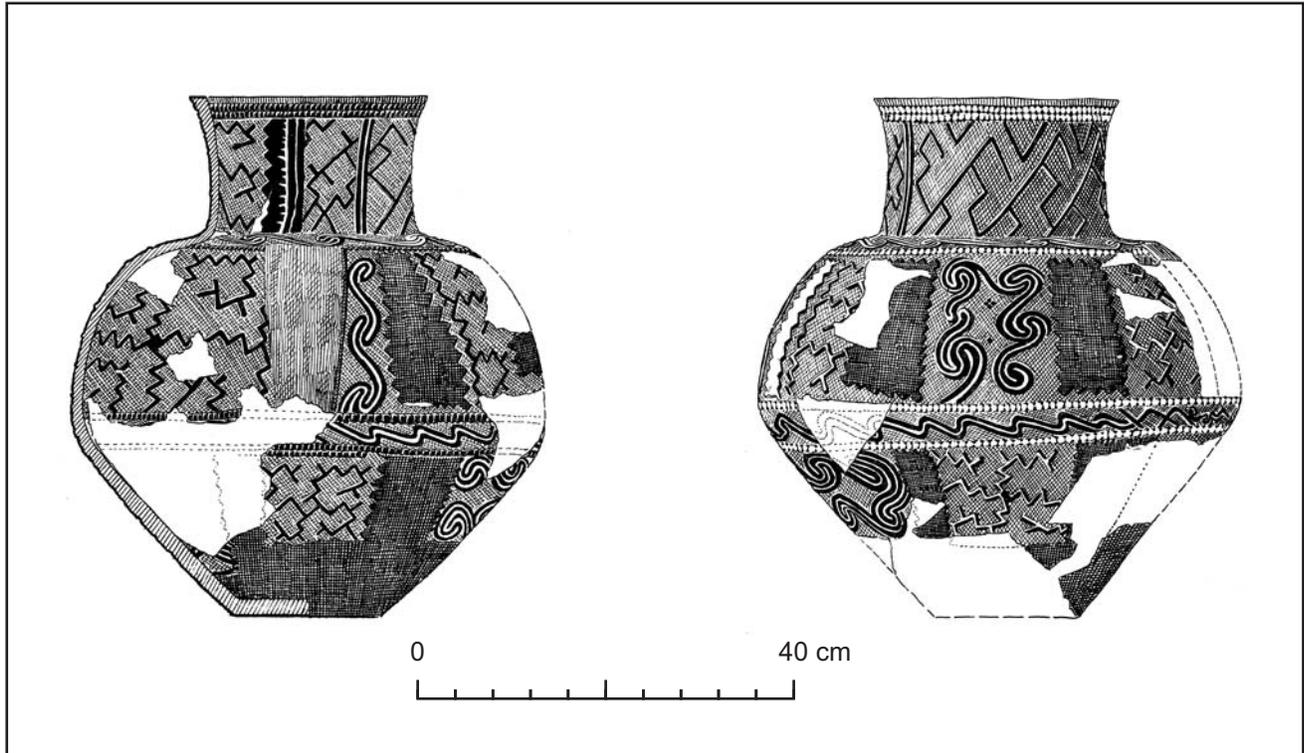


Fig. 6. Storage vessel from Vădastra (first published in C.N. Mateescu 1970, p. 286/fig. 5).
Vas de provizii de la Vădastra (publicat prima dată în C.N. Mateescu 1970, p. 286/fig. 5).

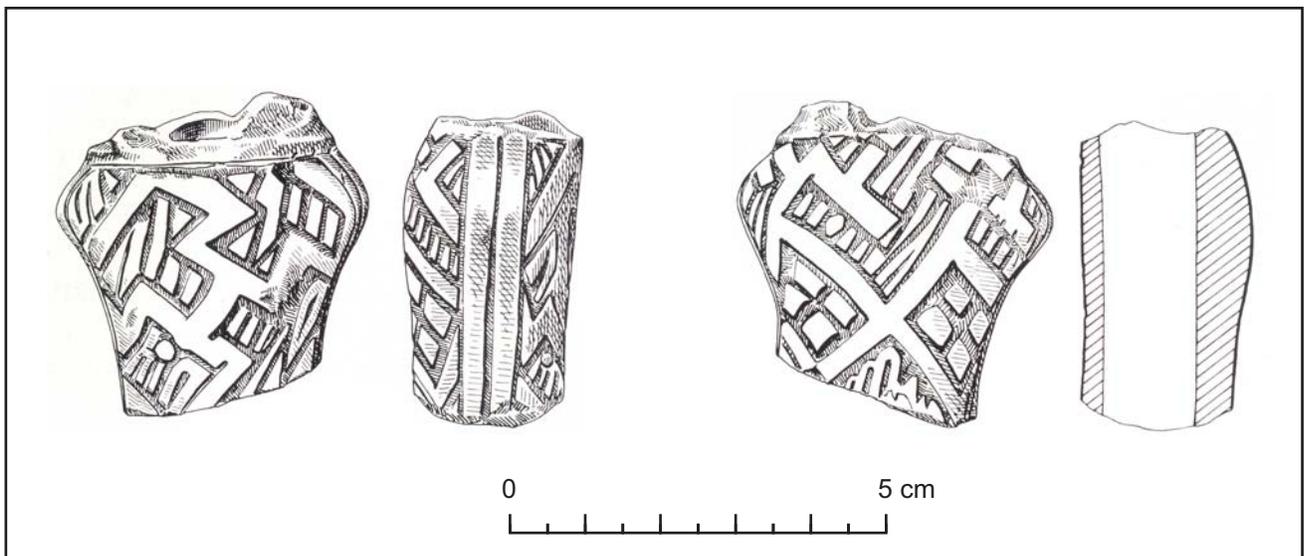


Fig. 7. Anthropomorphic figurine from Vădastra "representing a woman giving birth to a child" (1948 excavation season; square 4, -2.00 m; first published in I. Voinescu, C.N. Mateescu 1980, p. 188/fig. 3).
Figurină antropomorfă de la Vădastra "reprezentând o femeie dând naștere unui copil" (campania 1948; careul 4, -2.00 m; publicat prima dată în I. Voinescu, C.N. Mateescu 1980, p. 188/fig. 3).