

WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO THE URBAN COURTS OF THE ANGEVINE DYNASTY AND SIGISMUND OF LUXEMBOURG IN VISEGRÁD?

Interpretation issues of archaeological find materials in the context of the excavation of a medieval plot

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Building research in Visegrád has a great past. While the investigations traditionally focused on the fortress system and the royal palace, settlement structure also got into the limelight in recent years. An important part of the history and topography of the medieval town has already been known from charters; however, only excavations can reveal more about the daily life of the one-time residents. By publishing the find material recovered by field projects in the medieval town, Visegrád became an important point of reference for the research of the material culture of urban settlements in the Kingdom of Hungary. The evaluation of the pottery record of the plot under 5 Rév Street is yet another chapter in this line of research. This record covers multiple historical periods from the time of the emergence of the town through the building of the first noble residences to the Late Middle Ages when the settlement became a market town, and illustrates excellently a characteristic of the settlement, namely that historical periods well-known from historical sources may only be present with an insignificant amount of find material in the archaeological record. Most people known from charters, belonging to the king's inner circles and having a role in state administration, had a residence in the town. However, the find material connected to them is conspicuously missing, in a sharp contrast to the image of a varied and lavish urban life emerging from written sources.

Keywords: Visegrád, Angevine Era, Sigismund Era, royal court, urban history, timber-framed building, pottery, stove tile, glass workshop

INTRODUCTION

The results of the research on the medieval Visegrád fundamentally determine our image of the royal centres of the Kingdom of Hungary. This research has included publications presenting the find material of the citadel and the royal palace, as well as evaluations of the pottery, glass, bone, and metal records of the medieval town (from 32 and 36 Fő Street, 1 Duna-parti Road, 2, 4, and 5 Rév Street, and the area of the Franciscan monastery). I have assessed the pottery recovered by Orsolya Mészáros on the plot under 5 Rév Street (for a detailed publication of the results, see GÓRA 2023, 493–601). This record is a suitable basis for investigating the almost three-century-long continuous inhabitation of the place and raising questions related to the dating and interpretation of certain finds. The primary aims of the evaluation included dating the pottery vessels and specifying their chronological position through analogies, as well as determining the position of the buildings that once stood on the plot in the life of the town in the respective eras. However, the continuity of use of the plot, assumed based on the unearthed features, is not reflected by the pottery record, which is characterised by an almost complete lack of finds from the Angevine Era and the reign of Sigismund of Luxembourg. In light of that, this paper focuses on the possible reasons behind the lack of the 14th-century find material, a phenomenon observed throughout the settlement. As the following illustrates, the uncontexted interpretation of the finds may help refine field observations and, occasionally, even the historical background emerging from written sources.

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RESIDENCE, TOWN, AND URBAN RESIDENCE

Since the beginning of the rule of Charles I, Visegrád has been a seat of the medieval kingdom with a royal chapel and permanent courts. The royal residence itself was an emblem of permanence, turning the town, already a seat of the country (KUBINYI 1999, 307), into a royal residence (like Buda at the time; MÉSZÁROS 2009, 13). The anchoring of these institutions (which were hardly mobile anyway) to a specific place was rarely problematic and brought about the appearance at a certain place of people close to the person and position of the king, who were always near the actual royal residence. Academia traditionally refers to this group, consisting of secular and ecclesiastical lords and representing an organic part of state administration, as ‘the royal court’ (ZSOLDOS 1994, 358; CSUKOVITS 2020). Identifying the archaeological traces of the presence of the officials of the royal court or *aula* requires a complex approach. We know that all of the highest secular and ecclesiastical lords had residences in the town as they issued multiple charters from there (MÉSZÁROS 2009, 28). By reconstructing a land register based on data from charters, Orsolya Mészáros identified 89 plots in the town, most of which could be linked with a particular castellan, bishop, archbishop, or *bán* (MÉSZÁROS 2009, 89). Every multi-room stone building unearthed in the town could be identified as a noble residence, corroborating previous assumptions on the late medieval structure of the town (with building complexes of peers with their retainers and servants and big plots (*Fig. 1*). But, as the term ‘royal court’ describes the institute rather than specific persons, the walls of the noble residences remain silent on the persons who once lived there. The lavish and more modest elements of the find material, however, may help us get closer to them.

RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION UNDER 5 RÉV STREET AND THE POTTERY RECORD OF THE PLOT

An excavation was carried out on the plot under 5 Rév Street in the early 2000s. The works brought to light a four-room residential building under a Baroque one and in its foundations (for a detailed description, see MÉSZÁROS 2010, 675–689), which was turned into a glass workshop with four furnaces in the 15th century. The cellar of another stone building was discovered north of that, while at the street end of the plot, a part of a timber-framed building destroyed by fire and a road section have been found. Traces of a building of identical structure have also been detected under the stone building (*Fig. 2*).

Evaluating the find material of the unearthed features, a brief summary of which is presented below, provided additional data completing the typochronological framework developed by Imre HOLL (1963, 335–394).

Mostly late 13th and some early 14th-century white potsherds have been recovered from the heavily burnt debris layer of the oldest building. The side of these pots is relatively thick, their elaboration is poor, and the decoration is rough and irregular. The technical marks observed on the cooking vessels indicate coiling and wheel-finishing on a slow wheel. Their bodies are often covered by an incised spiral.

The stone-paved road section certainly remained in use until the end of the Middle Ages, while, based on its find material, the wooden building only stood on the plot from the second half of the 13th to the second half of the 14th century at the latest, and nothing was built in its place later.

The bulk of the find material connected to the cellar and the four-room stone building came from mixed layers, namely a fill above the last floor level, probably deposited there during the levelling related to the resettling of the plot after the time of the Ottoman conquest. The pottery in these layers is characteristic of the final years of the Sigismund Era, the Matthias Era, and the first half of the 16th century.

The elongated white and red pots had mouths of diverse sizes (*Figs. 3–5*); the rim of most of them had a simple or complex segmented profile. Almost all were wheel-thrown, and the narrow vessel bodies were covered in a shallow channelled-ribbed pattern. White pottery started losing its predominance in the *medium regni* during the 15th century (FELD 1987, 269); accordingly, the proportions of white and red pottery in the respective find material are equal (*Figs. 6–7*), while the late 15th century record is characterised by a predominance of red ware (HOLL 1963, 352). The pottery record of the plot reflects the same trends.

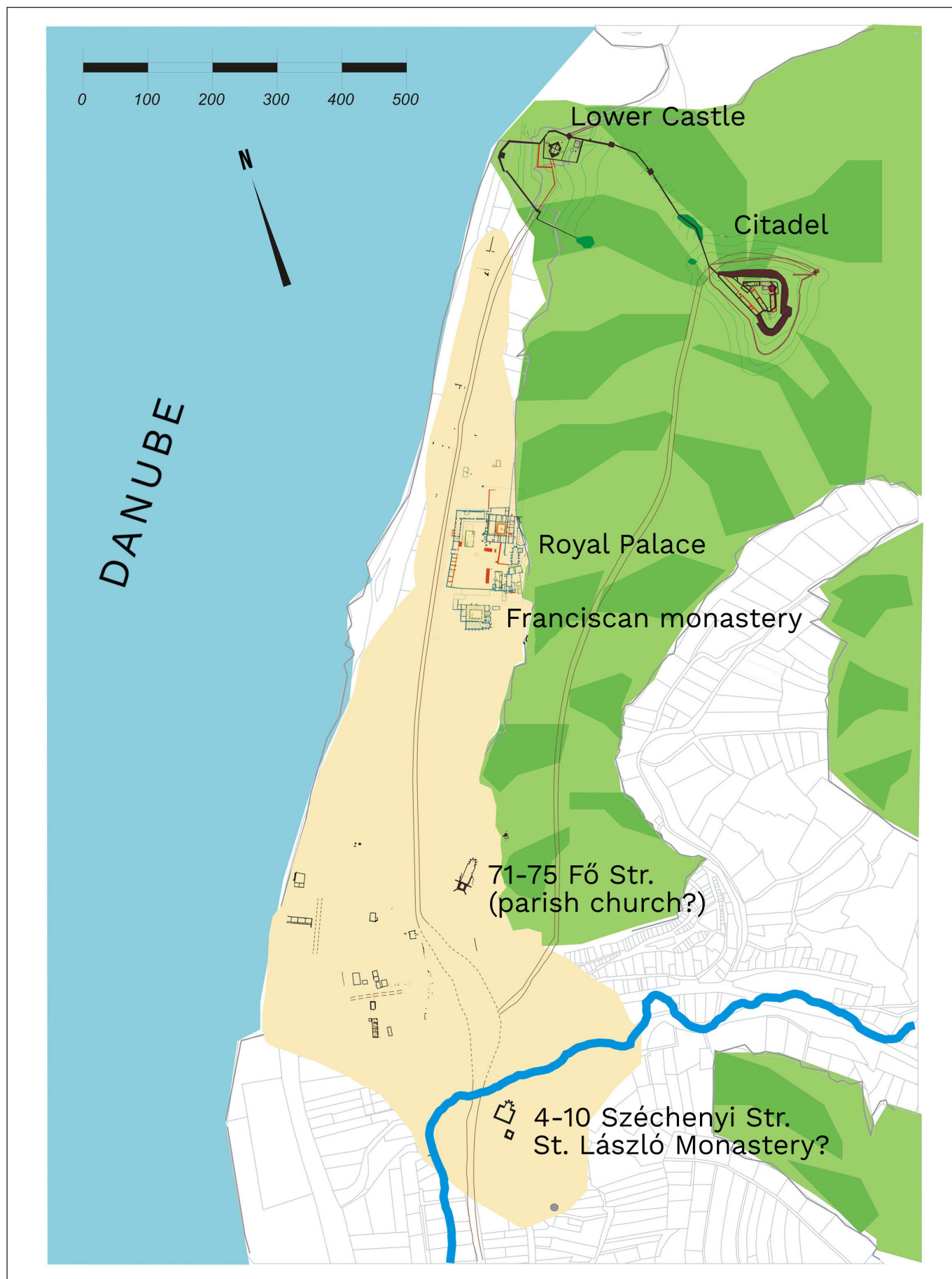


Fig. 1. Late medieval topography of Visegrád (map by Orsolya Mészáros)

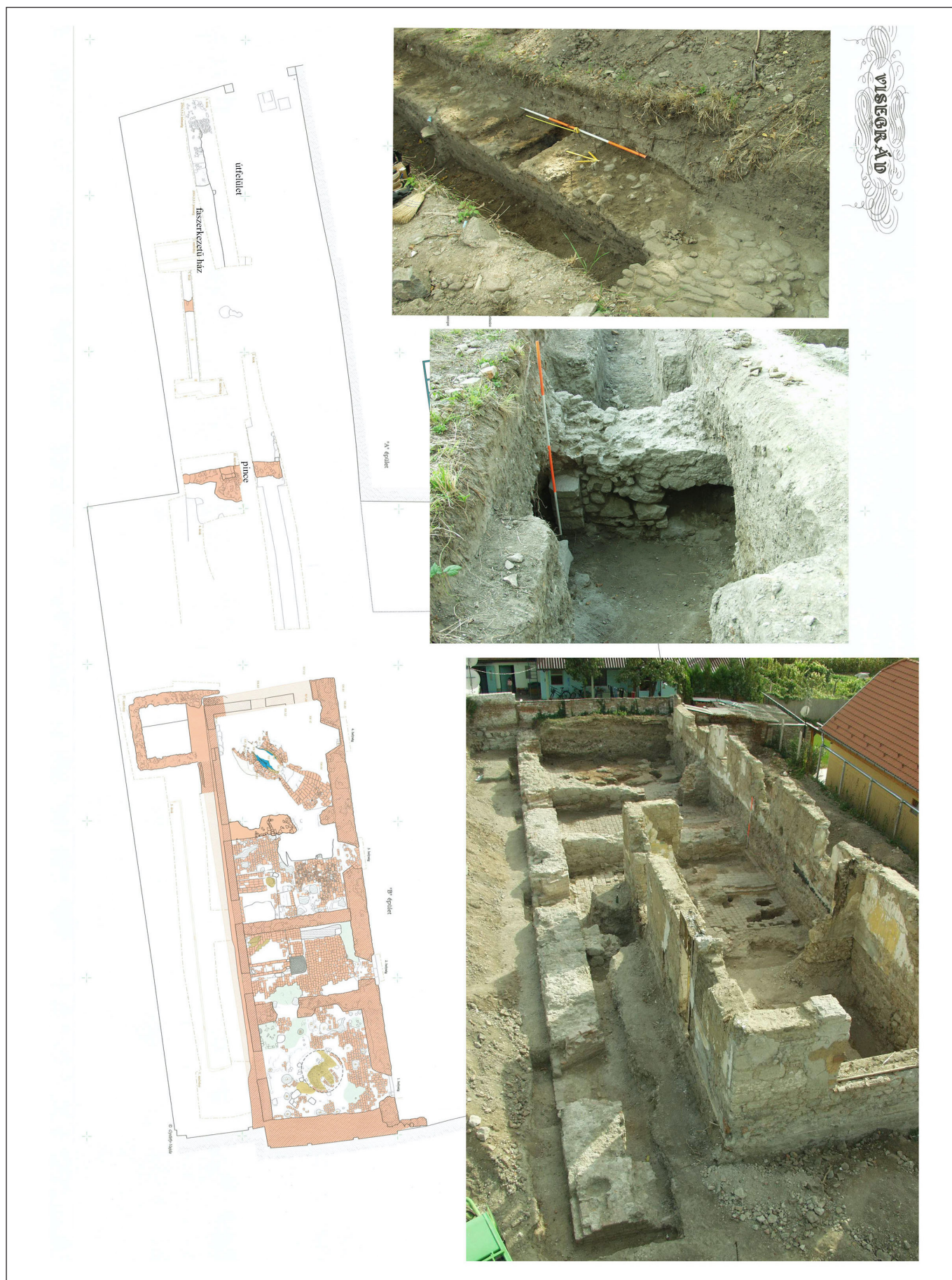


Fig. 2. Survey map of the excavation and the unearthed features (photos and map by Orsolya Mészáros)

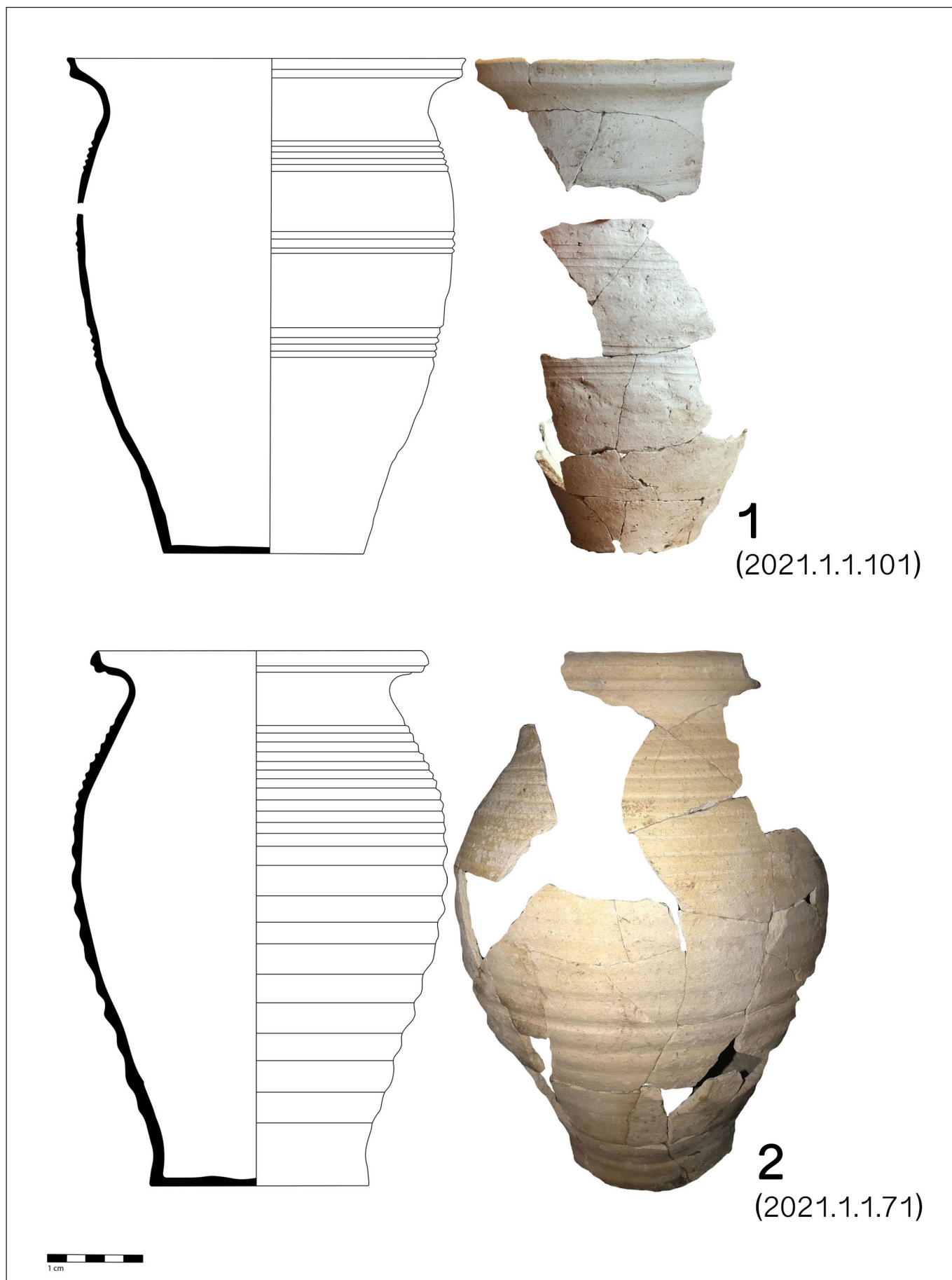


Fig. 3. White pots with a segmented rim (graphics by the author)

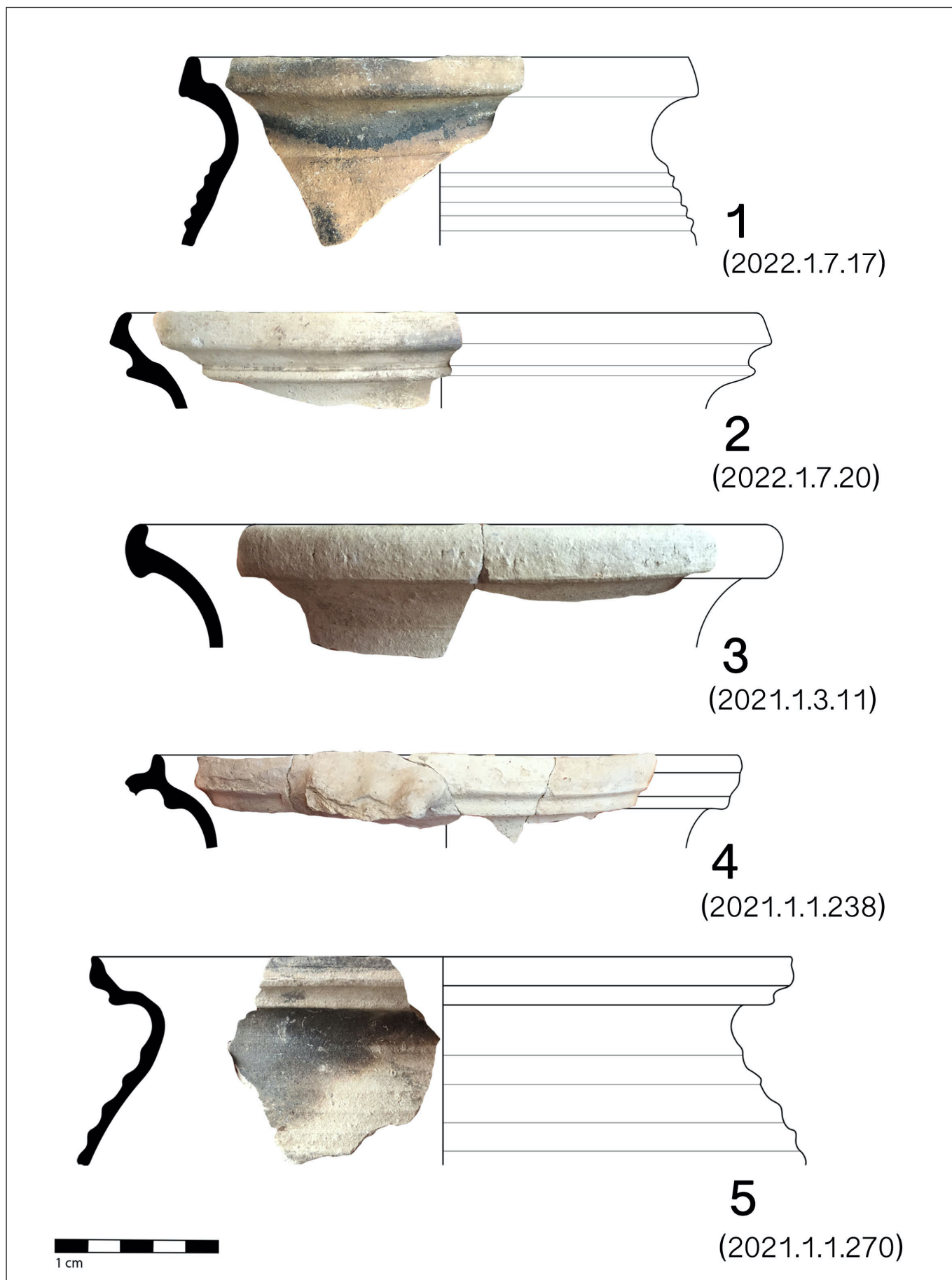
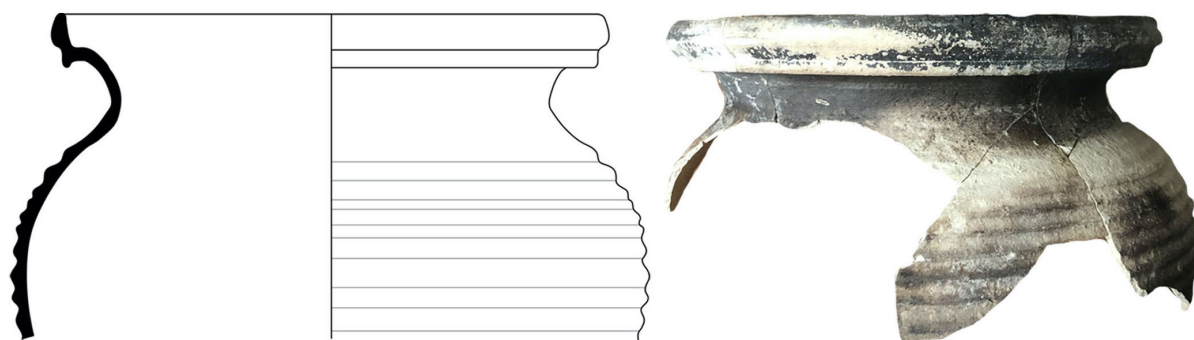
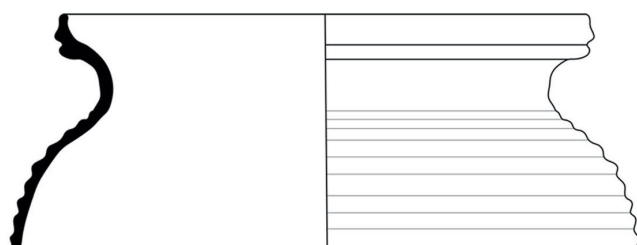


Fig. 4. White pots with a segmented rim (graphics by the author)



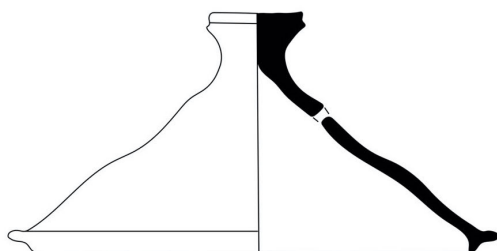
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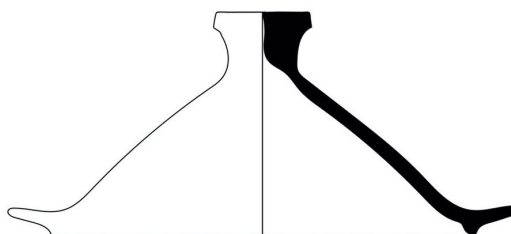
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*Fig. 5. White pots and lids (graphics by the author)*

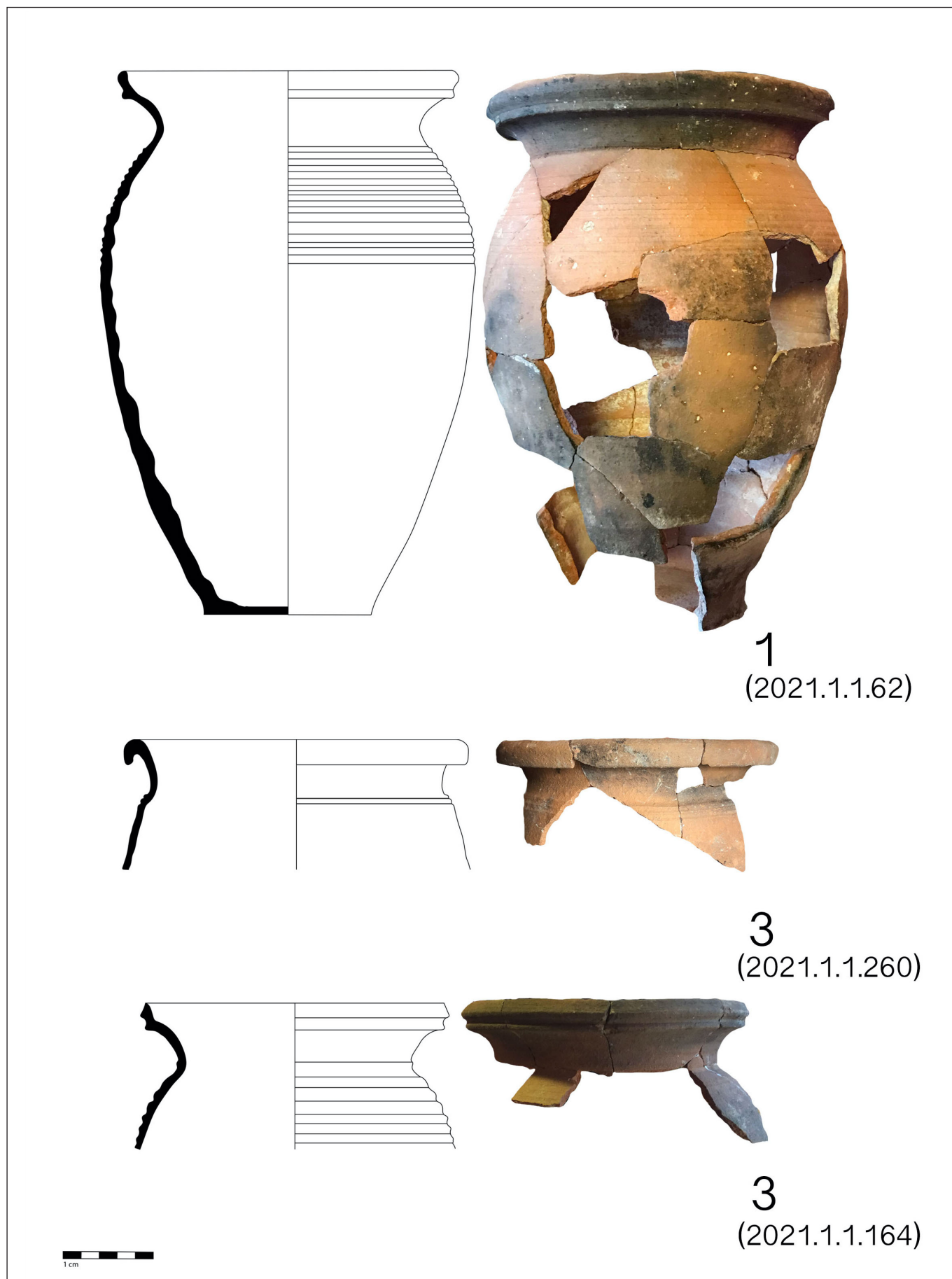


Fig. 6. Red pots with a segmented rim (graphics by the author)

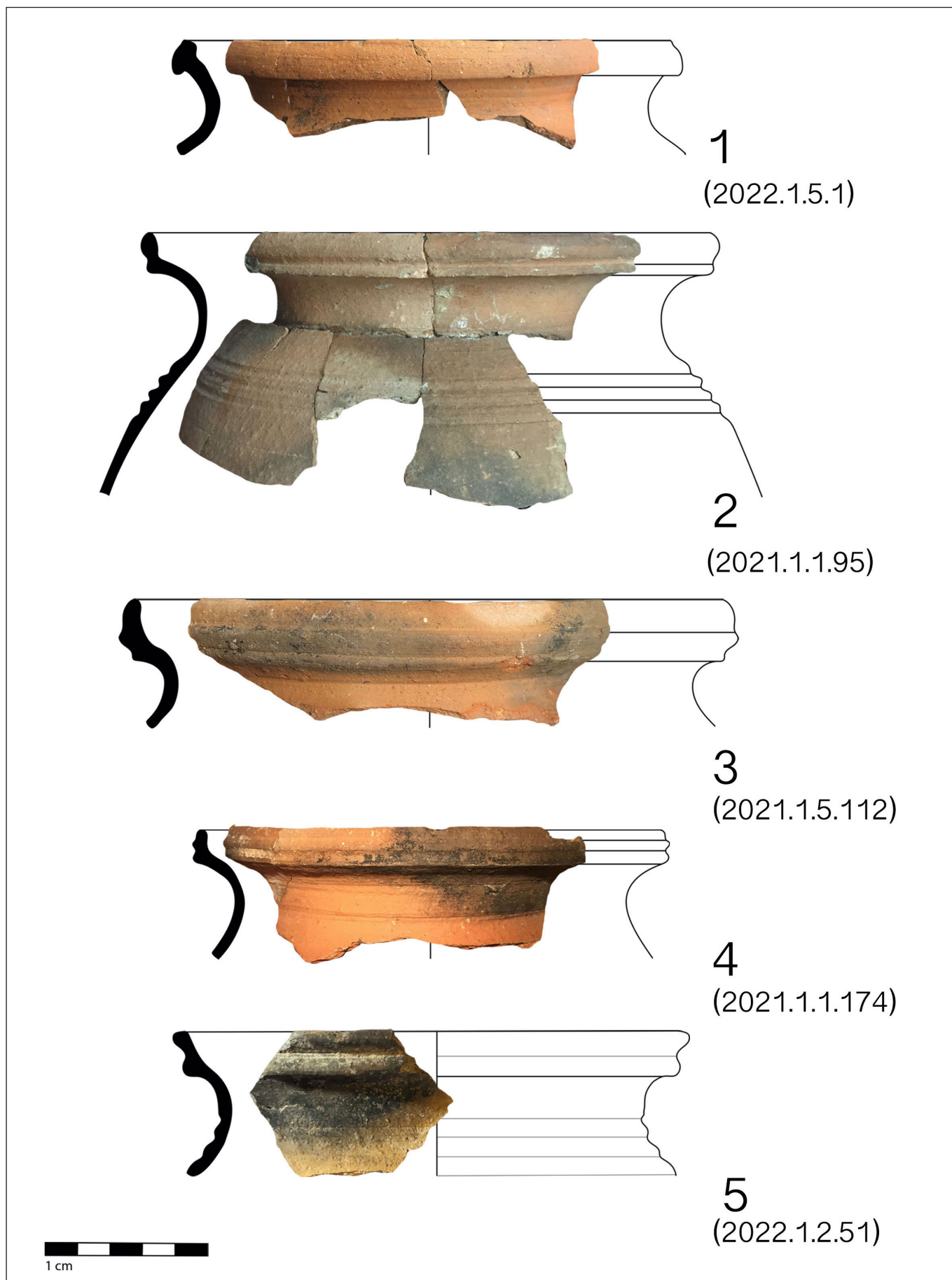


Fig. 7. Red pots with a segmented rim (graphics by the author)

The widespread use of red pottery can probably be linked to the change triggered by the so-called ‘red ware of Buda’ gaining popularity. These wheel-thrown vessels were fired to red and coated in an engobe layer on the outside and a layer of yellow or green tin glaze on the inside (HOLL 1963, 351; FELD 1987, 269). The red ware recovered from 5 Rév Street is a perfect analogy to the examples unearthed in Buda (Fig. 8).

The third major group of cooking pots is grey pots with rounded and rolled-down rims, fired in a reduction environment (Fig. 9). Some fragments come from vessels tempered with sand or micaceous gravel, while others from so-called Austrian vessels tempered with graphite (Fig. 10). The reference collection compiled by Mrs Vilmosné Bertalan helps dating the pots that bear a rim stamp: she observed during the evaluation of the pottery record of Óbuda [Old Buda] that in the 14th–15th century, ornamental stamps and incised marks became replaced by stamps designed after coat of arms matrixes (BERTALAN 1988, 181). The proportion of grey ware compared to red and white in the record is good evidence of the chronological position of these vessels. In the 14th-century pottery record of urban settlements of the *medium regni*, the proportion of grey pots was equal to, or even higher than, that of red and white ware. In Visegrád, the find materials obtained from under the Franciscan monastery (POLGÁR 2010, 11), 2 Rév Street (NICSOVICS 2013, 14), 4 Rév Street (SARKADI 2010, 9), and 32 Fő Street (MÉSZÁROS 2006, 150) are predominated by grey ware, while a few Austrian-type vessels and pots with a stamped rim have been recovered from 1 Duna-parti Road (BÁRDI 2014, 71). The proportion of grey ware is also high in the 14th-century record of the royal palace (HOLL 1963, 346) and Buda Castle (BENDA 2002, 539). Later, during the 15th century, this proportion shifts due partially to the increasing popularity of red pottery. As for the find material of 5 Rév Street, the proportion of grey vessels remains below both that of the popular red pottery and white cooking vessels, a type less widespread at the time.

Like cooking pots, tableware was also made in white, red, and grey pottery. Most recovered pieces came from red and white vessels (fired in an oxidation environment), while some had once been part of grey liquid containers. The functional types also reflect diversity: there are pitchers, jugs, large and small bowls, and cups amongst them (Fig. 11).

Only a single side fragment of a pot and a stove tile fragment from the mid-Sigismund Era represent the pre-workshop period of the excavated building; they were found under the level of the late medieval floor of one of the rooms (Fig. 12).

Save for specifying some points, the results of the pottery analysis corroborate the field dating of (some of) the unearthed features. It is certain that a timber-framed house stood at the street-side end of the plot in the Late Árpád Age or the early Angevine Era at the latest and that it burned down around the mid-14th century. The floor of the residential building erected after that (which was turned later into a glass workshop) was renewed multiple times; based on the finds found in the layers, this house was built in the second half of the same century at the earliest. The four-room noble residence in the southern part of the plot and the cellar north of it were built under the reign of Louis I or Sigismund I. Later, a probably multi-layer extension was added to the house, on the possible function of which the find material gave us no clue. The total lack of Ottoman-style and Ottoman Era finds indicates that the area had been abandoned by the mid-16th century, while the recovered early modern sherds testify to a resettling in the late 17th or early 18th century after the conquerors had been driven out of the country. Based on that, the area was continuously inhabited from the 13th century to the Ottoman occupation.

A glimpse at the pottery record and its composition reveals that it does not contain vessels from before the 15th century in significant quantities, as the items of an average late medieval urban household—better from the kitchen of a glassware maker than the table of a peer—make up the bulk of the find material. Therefore, it is hard to say anything about the 14th-century inhabitation of the plot (likely a noble residence then) based solely on the recovered artefacts.

While the paper focuses on kitchenware, an evaluation of ceramics must also include tile stove remains. The abundant cup-shaped and other stove tiles recovered from Visegrád deserve a separate study; this record also includes several fragments from the period under discussion (KOC SIS 2015, 2–15). Similar to the tile fragment presented here (Fig. 12), these belonged to heating instruments installed in urban residences.

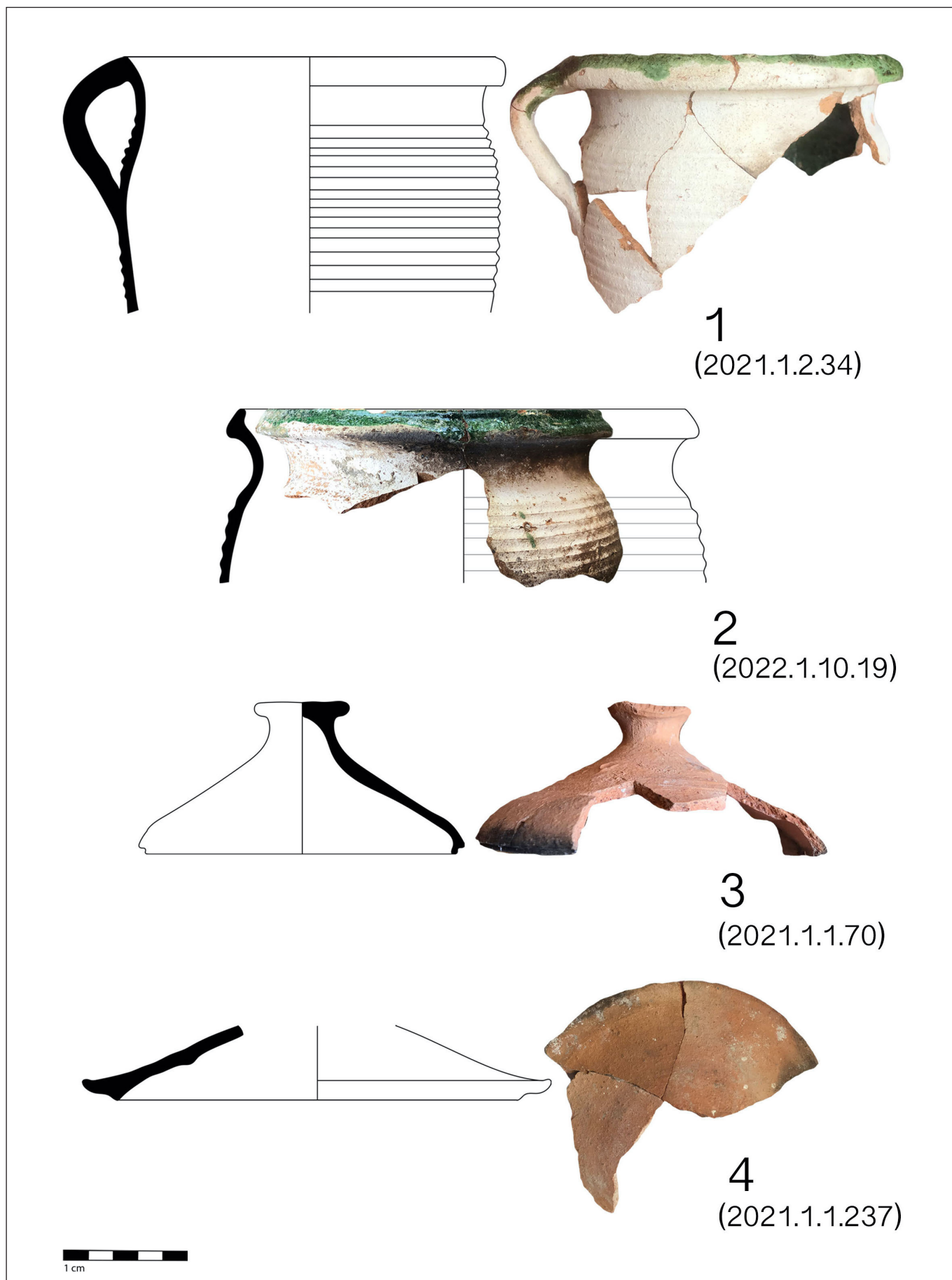


Fig. 8. Glazed pots and red lids (graphics by the author)

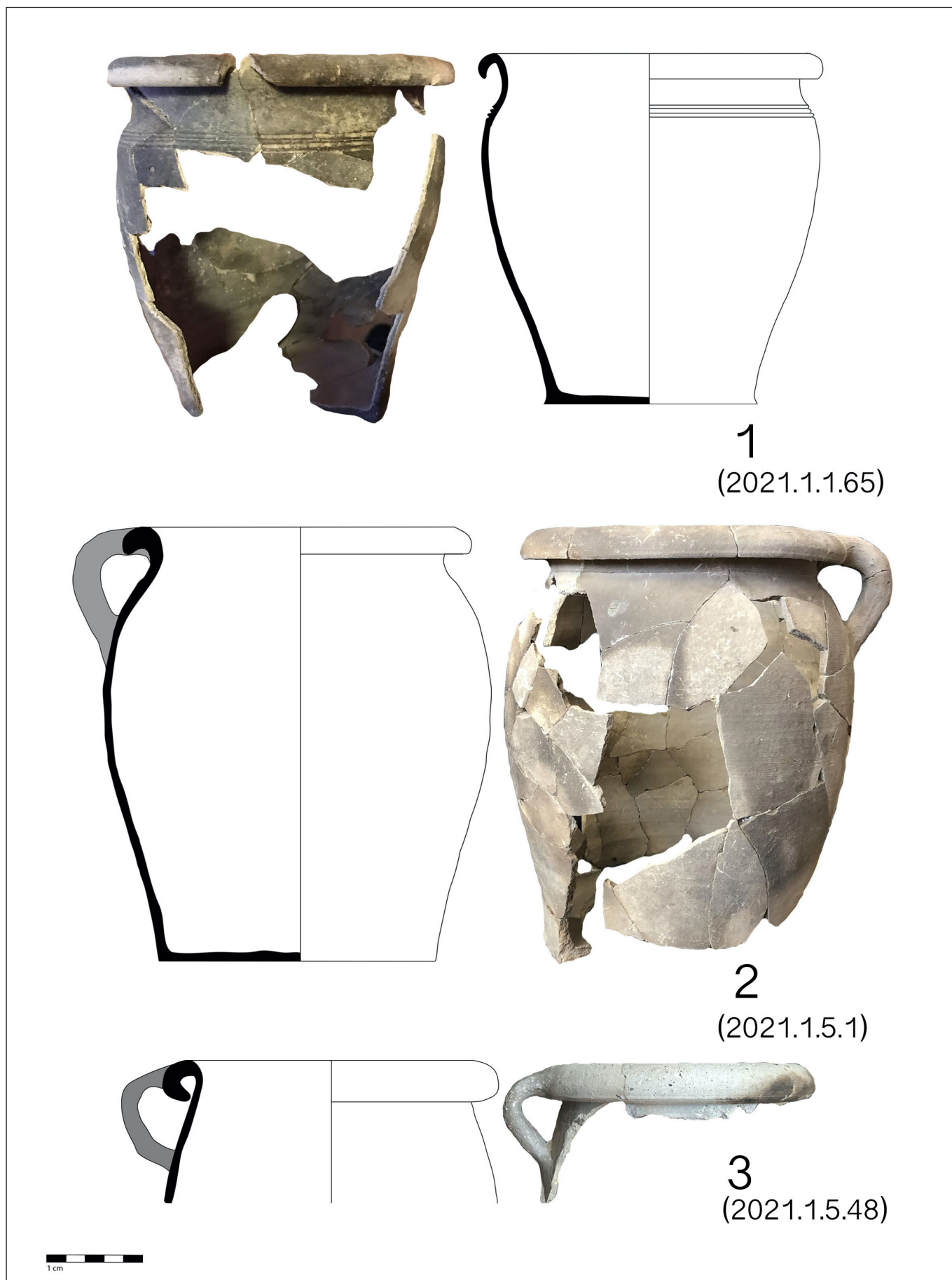


Fig. 9. Grey pots (graphics by the author)

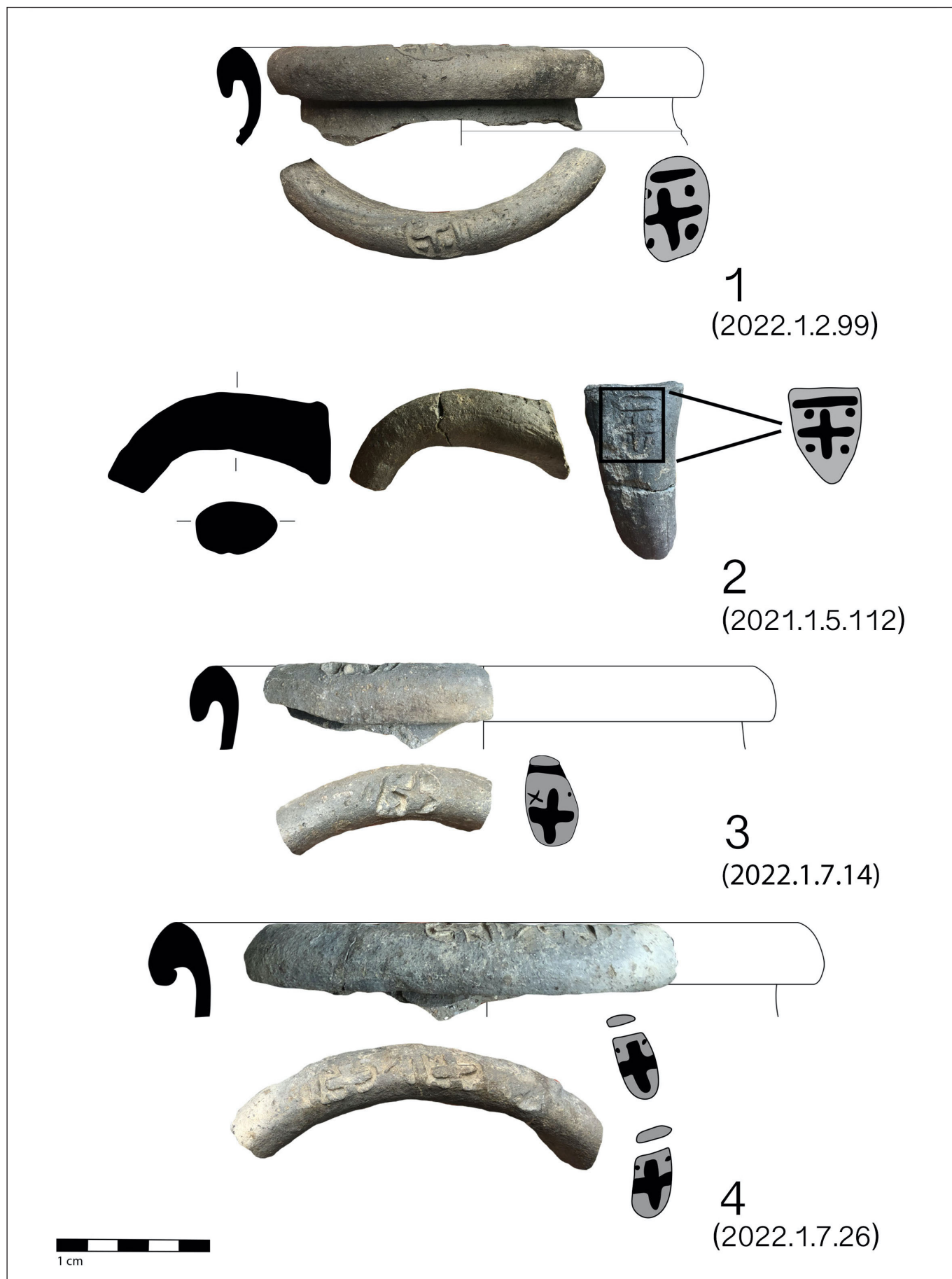


Fig. 10. 'Austrian' grey pots (graphics by the author)

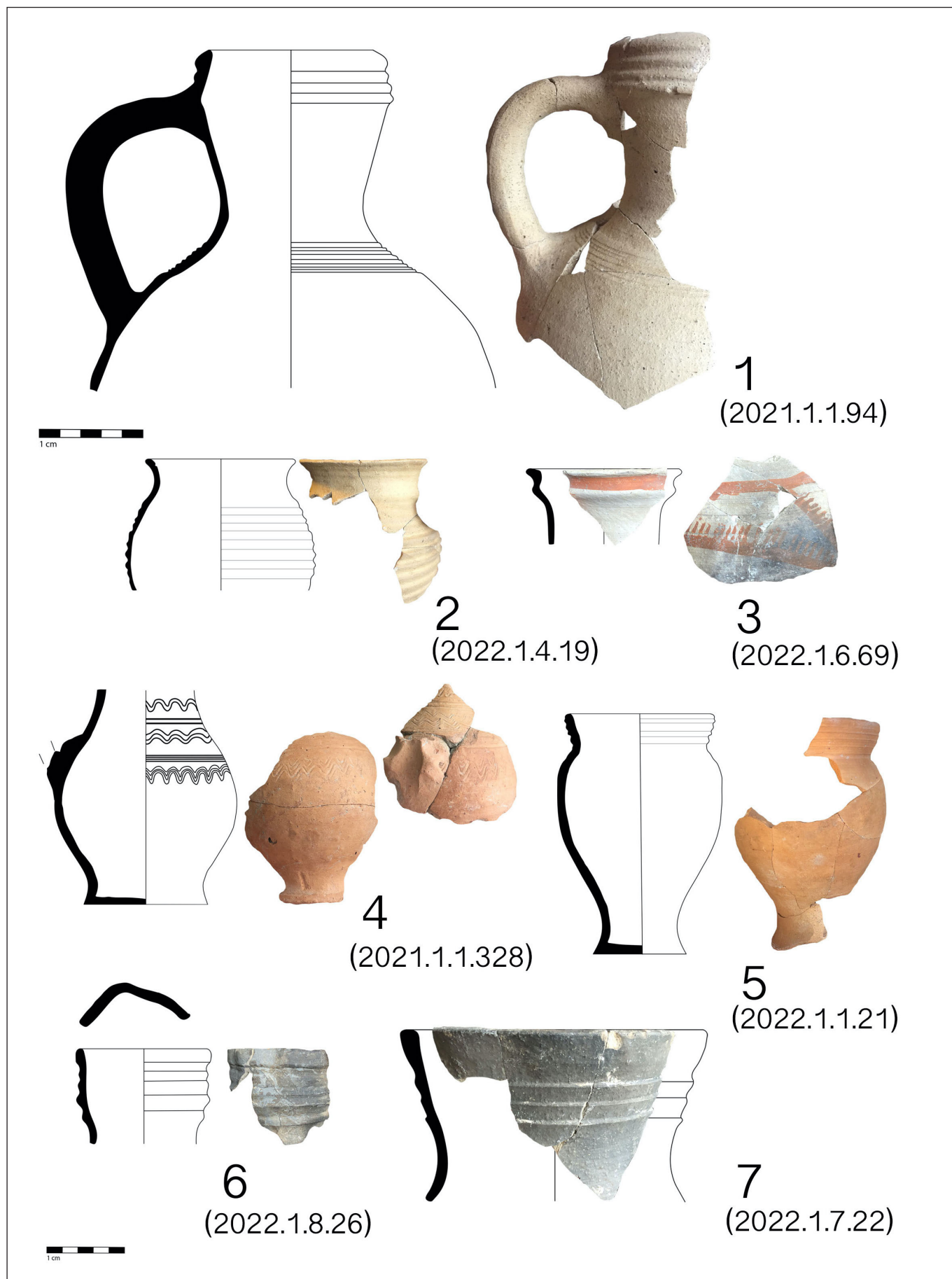


Fig. 11. Liquid containers (graphics by the author)

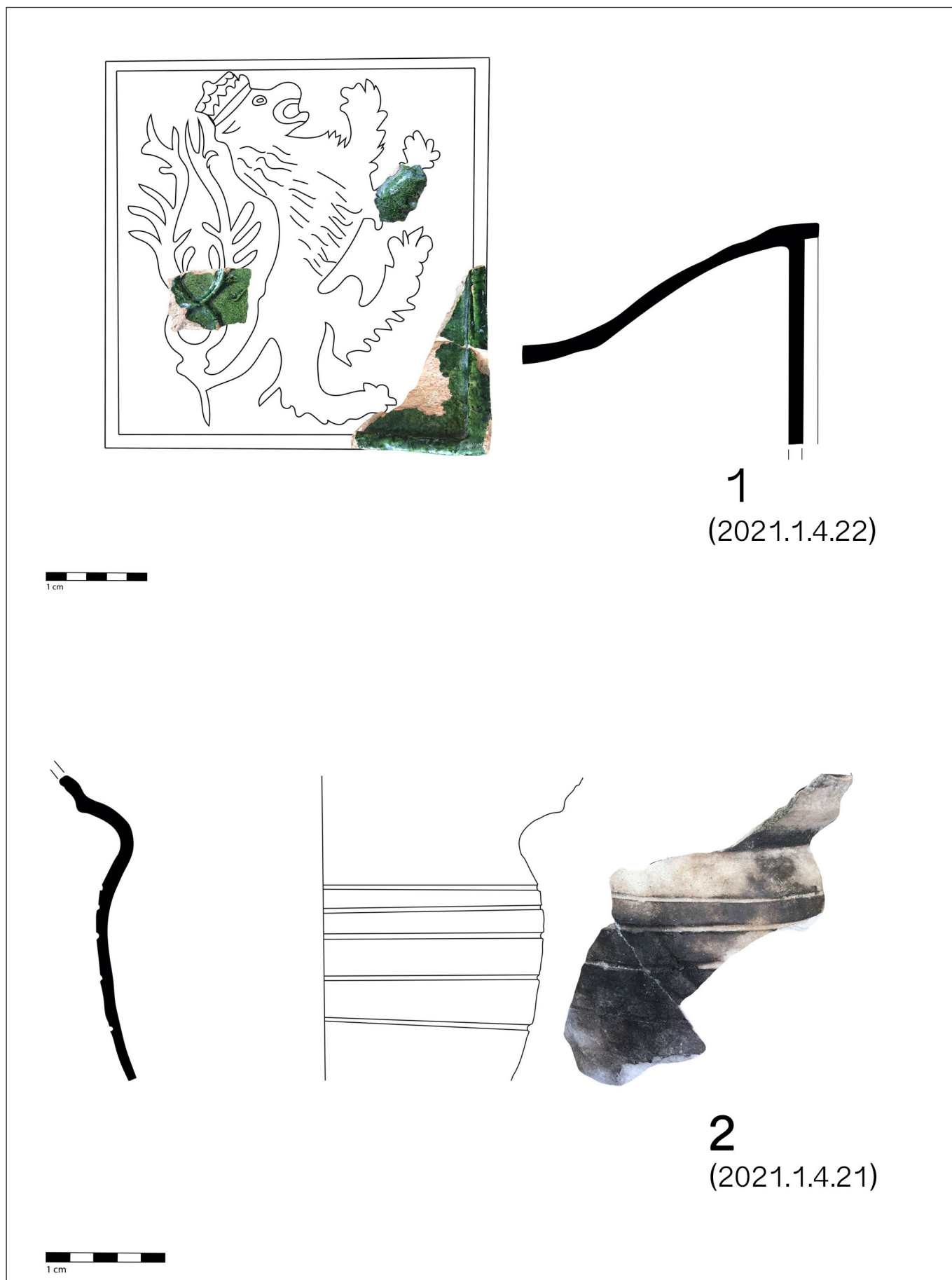


Fig. 12. Stove tile and a pot with incised decoration from the Sigismund Era (graphics by the author)

In summary, while the find material of 5 Rév Street contains, besides remarkable pottery vessels from the pre-Matthias Era, items that were obtained from a closed layer of the building identified as the noble residence of the Sigismund Era inhabitants of the plot, these items can hardly be interpreted differently than stray finds. Despite the general lack of finds, the occasional fragments of elaborate stove tiles scattered over the town are solid evidence of the urban life in Visegrád of the Sigismund Era elite.²

ISSUES OF INTERPRETATION OF THE FIND MATERIAL

The pottery records obtained from the residential buildings under 5 Rév Street and 32 Fő Street, as well as the sites themselves, has similarities. Importantly, the size of both buildings was in the range of the residence of a peer at the time, and both were turned into workshops at the end of the Middle Ages. The same happened to the stone building in the neighbouring plot, under 4 Rév Street; based on the many crucibles in the find material, the archaeologist who excavated it believes that a metalsmith workshop operated there once (KOVÁTS & MÉSZÁROS 2015, 649). Likely similar tendencies characterise almost every residential building unearthed in Visegrád: the 14th-century noble residences—for example, the large four-room building excavated under 36 Fő Street (KOVÁTS & MÉSZÁROS 2015, 657)—were turned into workshops in the 15th century to supply the construction of the royal side residence. Despite these large stone buildings having likely been erected on the order of high-ranking urban officials and the members of the royal court, their pottery records do not include imported liquid containers (MÉSZÁROS 2016, 160), and while they hold some graphitic vessels, the general quality of the recovered kitchen- and tableware remains under that of an urban noble residence. The find material of the shoemaker's workshop unearthed in Molnár Street in Pest is a good analogy: like our glass workshop, its pottery record includes quality white ware and imported Austrian vessels but significantly differs from that of the coeval houses on the neighbouring pots (IRÁSNÉ MELIS 1996, 12. kép), which also include fragments of some high-quality prestige vessels and maiolica floor tiles (IRÁSNÉ MELIS 1996, 14. kép), thus marking the difference between the living standards of craftspeople and nobles in the towns and cities. The abundance and variety of imported vessels in the find material of the royal palace also reflect the varied tastes in tableware of people in the era. The appearing Saxon vessels (KOC SIS 2010, 24. kép), stoneware from Dreihäusen (KOC SIS 2010, 23. kép), Loštice cups, and other decorative ware from the Matthias Era (KOC SIS 2010, 40. kép) are missing from the inventory of the houses in focus. It must be mentioned that the excavations in Szent György Square in Buda also brought to light a pottery record abounding with imported vessels and glazed footed pots, many of which came from closed, well-defined layers (BENDA 2002, 5–8. kép); despite that, there are very few spots even there where the 14th and 15th-century records can be separated. The fact that the houses in focus were thoroughly cleaned upon their transformation into a workshop may partially explain the lack of high-quality vessels in their pottery record; the change was also accompanied by a replacement of the material culture for one with simpler items. Accordingly, one must remember that when a site is continuously inhabited, the actions and phenomena linked with younger occupations often destroy or hide the traces of previous ones. As a result, while the evidence of charters and the built heritage provides irrefutable evidence of the presence of peers of the royal court in Visegrád, the find material cannot corroborate that.

While this research focuses on pottery, one must not omit metal finds from a comprehensive evaluation. The few fragments found in excavations throughout the town (BÁRDI 2014, 121–125; KOVÁTS & MÉSZÁROS 2015, 650) hardly indicate noble residents, and the artefacts obtained from the metal workshop also reflect daily life in a late medieval urban town. Moreover, most coins recovered date from the end of the Sigismund Era or later (VARGA 2015, 61–75).

Another aspect of the 15th-century history of the town can also be investigated by analysing the workshops. These represent indirect evidence of population exchange (as unjustifiably big residences were turned into diverse workshops). This period was preceded by an obscure one when more than a hundred houses in Visegrád stood empty. The town might have started depopulating already in the Sigismund Era,

² I thank Evelin Kocsis for drawing my attention to these important finds.

as indicated by King Matthias I's intent to have Saxon families settled down there in the second half of his rule, while later, he granted liberties to any kind of citizen residing there, which those in other towns and cities never had (VÉGH 2004, 73). Several questions emerge from the joint assessment of the available body of historical and archaeological data: Who were the customers of the workshops? Did all workshops supply the constructions of the royal palace and the Franciscan monastery, or was there a reliable customer base of urban citizens with solid purchasing power?

Another characteristic of the find material—which should be a primary concern in every evaluation—must also be kept in mind while interpreting the phenomena related to the replacement of the material culture: that the findspot and the place of use of an artefact are not necessarily the same. This is often forgotten, especially when the focus is the often abundant archaeological record of a residential building. Some vessels had certainly been used where they were found, but it is unrealistic to assume that the residents deposited their waste, together with thousands of pottery fragments, right where they lived. For example, the thousands of potsherds recovered from the house under study got to their respective findspots in a fill layer deposited there during landscaping works in the early modern period. This realisation marks the limits of small-scale urban excavations and the possible results drawn from them. The residents of the house deposited their waste most likely in a cesspit or small waste disposal pits, which belonged to a particular building complex or were used by many. Such features can only be researched effectively by large-scale excavations. A good example of this arrangement is the part of the medieval town of Vác unearthed in Piac Street, where plenty of ditches, pits, wells, and cesspits have been found amongst the houses; the results of the years-long work have been published in MÉSZÁROS 2016, 17–96.

New objects of everyday life may replace old ones, but this does not account for the complete vanishing of the latter. One might argue that social representation in the Kingdom of Hungary reached its peak only in the 15th century (bringing along unprecedented diversity in raw materials, shapes, and decorations, as also reflected by the pottery record), and that back in the 14th century, even relatively wealthy households did not possess spectacular tableware sets that would set their records apart from that of the rest of the population. The pottery inventories of wealthy households in the 14th century already included some imported decorative vessels, but the proportions between 14th- and 15th-century pottery records differ greatly. The lack of 'luxury' vessels from pottery inventories of the second half of the 15th century might be connected with the moving of the royal court back to Buda, which certainly caused a drop in the living standard of the urban citizens. Accordingly, any interpretation of the archaeological record of the medieval town of Visegrád must be made being aware that the find material from the first century of the town consists of 'average' utilitarian types that do not indicate the social position and living standards of a noble owner, while the finds representing the period from the moving of the royal court back to Buda to the Ottoman occupation are missing because of the absence of the potential owners.

In summary, one must accept that the find material lacks luxury tableware and imported pots and that the simple cooking pots do not allow assigning the one-time users to a specific social layer. Moreover, the nobles and *hospes* in the town might have had their meals cooked in similar vessels, the technical characteristics of which have barely changed with time and, thus, do not allow (at the current state of research) one to distinguish between the pottery made in the second half of the 14th century (i.e., the late period of the royal court residing in the town) and the first half of the 15th century. In light of the above, the typochronological distinctions made by previous scholars seem correct, only they do not represent sharp boundaries or linear development.

The royal and noble residences and citizen's houses mentioned by the charters and identified by archaeological excavations outline the cityscape of late medieval Visegrád: the residences of the important actors in state administration stood next to the royal palace. However, little is known about their stay and daily life in the town due to more than just one of the problems discussed above.

I believe these problems answer the lack of find material representing the heyday of Visegrád in the second half of the 14th century; the absence of the elements of the material culture specific to owners who were members of the royal court is a general characteristic of the archaeological record of the town. Future evaluations and excavations will hopefully overcome this obstacle.

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