

## BAPSKA, A LATE NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT IN EASTERN CROATIA – A NEW PROJECT

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Prompted by new rescue excavations and only partially published material from preceding excavations at Bapska, this paper provides a history of the research, published materials, and insight into the vertical stratigraphy and chronology of the site. When possible, data from new excavations will be presented in order to present the current state of knowledge about Bapska and its position in the Balkan Late Neolithic.

The Bapska site has been present in the literature to a greater or lesser degree for many years, but relatively little data about it has actually been published. Many archaeologists know about the details of the site from “oral tradition”, i.e. from personal contacts with S. Dimitrijević (several of them said so themselves: N. Kalicz, G. Lazarovici, J. Chapman, B. Brukner, J. Maran), so great deal of knowledge on the materials, results, interpretations and dating fall into the *pers. comm.* category. V. Miložčić (1949) and S. Dimitrijević (1968) have written the most about the site, but both only wrote preliminary reports on a select portion of the materials. As ill fate would have it, this preliminary level cannot be improved by re-examining the old finds, as this area was beset by the whirlwind of war in the Balkans, during which most of the artefacts discovered during Dimitrijević’s research were lost or destroyed. What remains is not sufficient for quality analysis, and since the site is threatened by farming activities, new rescue excavations commenced recently to shed new light on this problem. The primary intent is to present the relevant data gathered by Schmidt, Miložčić and Dimitrijević to the greatest possible degree, and to highlight the similarities and differences in their stratigraphy and interpretations. As much as possible, this knowledge will be supplemented with data from new excavations that have only just commenced.

The prehistoric settlement, situated slightly more than a kilometre from the present-day village of Bapska, is actually called *Gradac*, like hundreds of other topographical sites in Croatia, but also throughout the Central and Western Balkans (another widely-known Gradac in the immediate vicinity is at Vučedol). In Croatian (as in Serbian, Slovenia, Bosnian, etc.), *Gradac*, *Gradec*, *Gradina*, *Gradišće*, *Grad* and similar names denote an elevated settlement, or hillfort in the wider sense of its meaning. In 99 percent of cases it is an archaeological site, usually prehistoric. The same situation holds in Gradac at Bapska – it is a late Neolithic tell situated on the initial western slopes of Fruška Gora Mountain in the area of Srijem (Eastern Croatia and Western Serbia).<sup>1</sup>

Gradac at Bapska, as an archaeological point in documents (archives in AMZ), has been known since the 1870s. At that time, Eastern Croatia was populated with a high number of ethnic German families (the so-called “*Volksdeutscher*”), who were settled there in the eighteenth century to raise the quality of local craftsmanship. Among these local ethnic Germans was Mato Epner, a teacher in a village school who collected a certain number of archaeological artefacts from the topsoil at Gradac. Just as it is today, at the time the site was covered with vineyards, where constant cultivation kept producing “fresh” discoveries. Epner reported these finds to the National Museum in Zagreb (today the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb), and became the museum’s official collaborator (*Ljubić 1880*, 25). Epner continued to collect surface artefacts with his pupils until 1872, when he decided to open a small trench to see what lay below the surface. After these “excavations”, the material was sent to the Museum (*Ljubić 1880*, 25). Naturally, there is no documentation and the notes have no scientific significance with reference to modern archaeology. Epner’s work triggered “extensive surveys” at Gradac, which are visible

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<sup>1</sup> GPS position: N45 11 06.4 E19 15 38.3 (WGS 84 datum).

in today's AMZ archives of letters from various villagers who offered what they had found to Museum director J. Brunšmid (*Schmidt 1945*, 121). When it became apparent that Gradac was an important archaeological site, the Museum took action and conducted the first scientific excavations in 1911. The report stated that "although the settlement dates mostly to the Stone Age, I have found some items from later prehistoric periods" (*Hoffiller 1928*, 252), and nothing more about this excavation was published. The third excavation at Gradac was conducted by a German scholar R. R. Schmidt, better known for his work excavating another Gradac mentioned in this text, the one at Vučedol. During the Vučedol excavation in 1939, he made a test trench in Bapska, 10 x 6 metres wide. He was surprised by its depth of five metres, so he finished it the following year (*Schmidt 1945*, 121). A small part of the material from Schmidt's excavation in Bapska is published in his monograph about Vučedol, but the quality and quantity of the published material is inadequate, since the monograph was dedicated to Vučedol. The first stratigraphic interpretation of cultural deposits in Bapska was made in reference to the 1939 excavations.

Schmidt mentions Starčevo culture potsherds (*Schmidt 1945*, 121). An eye-witness and excavation team member in Bapska was the young V. Miložčić, who later explained that the cultural debris in Bapska was 5 metres, but just below the fourth metre point they noticed the appearance of the Starčevo culture pottery. However, excavations never reached virgin soil (*Miložčić 1949*, 83), a vital point that bears emphasis here. Based on descriptions by Schmidt and Miložčić, the vertical stratigraphy of Gradac was specified as follows:

0-2 m: Baden and subsequent layers

2-3 m: Sopot III and Baden

3-4 m: Sopot II and Vinča C

4-5 m: Sopot I and Starčevo

Dimitrijević harshly criticized this rough breakdown into metres as unacceptable and entirely superficial, and he explicitly stated that he personally did not see any Baden and Vinča pottery older than Vinča C, as well as painted pottery<sup>2</sup> (Dimitrijević 1969: 14).

In the summer of 1964, as a part of his many years of research at a considerable number of sites in Slavonia, Dimitrijević came to Bapska, where he opened a test trench covering a surface of 12 x 6 metres<sup>3</sup>. During this excavation, virgin soil was reached at a depth of 4.5 metres. The entire test trench was divided into several horizons (A-H), wherein Dimitrijević divided the entire stratigraphy of the settlement into two principal cultural horizons:

A-D = Sopot culture

E-H = Vinča culture,

out of which the C2 and D horizons of life in Gradac show an intermingling with materials from the Vinča phase C, i.e. imports from the Vinča cultural sphere. These data show that Dimitrijević did not mention the Starčevo finds, certainly for the simple reason that he did not discover any, therefore bringing into question the stratigraphy established by Schmidt (Dimitrijević 1968: 13). It is worthwhile mentioning that Dimitrijević's excavation lasted for a month and that during this time a rather large test trench was excavated, so there is some question as to how thoroughly the research was conducted. In any case, we have a situation in which two different researchers (Dimitrijević and Miložčić), digging at a relatively small distance from each

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, Miložčić's division of the Vinča culture into phases A through D will be used, modified according to Dimitrijević in his publication of the closed units from Bapska. The modification of stages pertains to the transitional stage toward the late developmental phase of the culture, i.e. C2 or C/D, as Miložčić indicated, into D1 and D2 based on the finds made at Bapska. Namely, according to Miložčić the C2 period corresponds to a depth of 4.5 metres at Vinča, when light grey pottery appeared, but the typical dark coloured pottery was still present, while linear decorations began to disappear, very often in the Vinča C phase. In a later phase, grey pottery was particularly dominant over dark pottery, so that Dimitrijević "moved" the appearance of grey pottery out of stage C, and distinguished D1 (appearance of grey pottery) from D2 (predominance of grey pottery). Recent research in Bapska still cannot confirm nor refute Dimitrijević's assertion, because the necessary depth of excavation has not yet been attained, but so far the shallowest layers indeed indicate a predominance of grey pottery. The answer to this question is one of the priorities for new research in Bapska.

<sup>3</sup> Due to technical difficulties pertaining to removal of soil caused by the considerable depth of the test trench, after the second meter Dimitrijević narrowed it to 6 x 6 meters.

other,<sup>4</sup> interpreted the initial layers of life in Bapska differently: Miložčić with Starčevo components, and Dimitrijević without. The material from Schmidt's excavations can be found in the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, while Dimitrijević's material was also held in the City Museum in Vukovar, where most of it was destroyed during Croatia's recent Homeland War. What was left of this material was rescued such that it was transferred to a museum in Novi Sad (Serbia). It is today being processed at the University of Zagreb.

Based on research conducted in 1964, Dimitrijević drafted a stratigraphic sketch different from that of Miložčić:

- 0-0.5 m: Vinča D2, Sopot III, coarse Baden and some medieval pottery
- 0.5-0.7 m: Vinča D2, Sopot III (one potsherd)
- 0.7-0.75 m: transition from Vinča D2 to D1, Sopot III
- 0.75-0.9 m: Vinča D1 and D2, Sopot III, Lengyel import
- 0.9-1.25 m: Vinča D1 and Sopot III
- 1.25-1.95 m: Vinča D1 and some Sopot III finds
- 1.95-2.05 m: final Sopot II and one Vinča C potsherd
- 2.05-2.4 m: Sopot II, Vinča C and D1
- 2.4-2.5 m: Sopot II and one Vinča C potsherd
- 2.5-2.75 m: Sopot II
- 2.75-3.0 m: Sopot II and a few Vinča C finds
- 3.0-3.75 m: Sopot I and Vinča B2
- 3.75-4.1 m: prehistoric humus and Sopot I
- 4.1-4.3 m: mixed humus and sterile loess
- 4.3 m – loess

(Dimitrijević 1968)

Within these depths, he also distinguished several closed units in the form of dwelling floors:

designation	depth (m)	cultural sphere
Dwelling 1A	0.5-0.7	Vinča D2 Sopot III
Dwelling 1B	0.75-0.9	Vinča D1/D2 Lengyel Sopot III
Dwelling 1C	1.1-1.25	late Vinča D1
Dwelling 2A	1.45-1.55	Vinča D1
Dwellings 2B and 2C	1.60-1.95	Vinča D1
Dwelling 3A	2.05-2.3	late Sopot II late Vinča C, D1
Dwelling 3B	2.40-2.5	Sopot II Vinča C (one find)
Dwellings 4A, 4B, 4C	2.75-3.0	Sopot II Vinča C (few finds)

(Dimitrijević 1968)

The dwellings and their renewed floors, filled in with pottery finds, served Dimitrijević as the principal relative-chronological foundation for determining the stratigraphic picture of Bapska,<sup>5</sup> so they will be described below and illustrated with drawings of his excavations.

<sup>4</sup> The distance between Schmidt's and Dimitrijević's test trenches was roughly 70 meters, but both trenches are located in today's "pate" of the settlement.

<sup>5</sup> The numbers designate the number of the dwelling (appearing from the excavation's zero point – the surface), while the letters indicate the sequence of their renewal, which means that, e.g. Dwelling 4 underwent three restorations of its floor (A, B, C).

The first dwelling (1 A, B, C), with its floor 1A, appeared at approximately 50 cm beneath the recent humus. It contained materials of the Vinča D and Sopot III horizons. Floor A was destroyed in a fire, and its finds belong to the final (D-2) sector of the Vinča culture, a very few Sopot III imports, and the appearance of red crusted painting (*Dimitrijević 1968*, 19). An identical picture of finds is offered by dwelling 1/06 from recent research in Bapska (test trench B-G 06). Although this dwelling appears at a somewhat shallower level due to erosion caused by land cultivation (which corresponds to the difference caused by 40 years of ploughing between these two research projects), the fragmented finds show pottery forms identical to those from floor 1A from the previous research, Fig. 1 and Fig. 2<sup>6</sup> (*Dimitrijević's* research), and those from Dwelling 1/06, Fig. 13 from the recent research. It should be noted here that this type of literally and absolutely identical pottery in terms of manufacture, colour, cross-section, form, rendering and decoration motifs was discovered at Vinča itself in new research being conducted by the University of Belgrade,<sup>7</sup> so it would not be excessive to hypothesize that this was a case of direct importation of goods, meaning direct communication between the settlements in Bapska and Vinča, at least during the time of Vinča D<sup>8</sup> (*Burić 2007*, 34). The congruity of finds from both dwellings (from 1964 and 2006) is also apparent in the discovery of red crusted painting, fire damage, and the remains of vessels with a footed bowl, which places them in parallel to the last sector of life of the Vinča and Sopot cultures at Gradac. Dwelling 1 from the new test trench (B-G/06), although completely destroyed down to its floor by land cultivation, reflects certain construction indicators. It extends in a north-south direction for a minimum length of ten metres,<sup>9</sup> while its width was roughly four metres. There were almost no pottery finds in front of the eastern section, but a “concentration” of fishing gear was observed: several ceramic weights and one bone harpoon. The dwelling’s floor is burnt, as are several charred accumulations on the opposite (western) side, which indicate that during the fire the dwelling collapsed toward the west and burned out there. As of the writing of this text, research into the floor of Dwelling 1 has not been completed (floor A; research is scheduled to continue in the summer of 2008), so it is not yet known whether the dwelling will show signs of renewal of the floor, as was the case in the previous research in 1964. Behind the house, at the level of its partially renewed floor, in a separate context, carbonized wheat grains<sup>10</sup> were found, with traces of burnt wooden framework around them. Based on the current status of research into the dwelling, it can be assumed that the framework was a part of the dwelling, perhaps a food storage room, and that it belongs in the same chronological horizon as the dwelling itself, but since the research campaign has been concluded, it is uncertain as to whether this is a case of burial of provisions in a pit or the wheat was simply placed on the ground in a wicker basket or something similar. What is important is that this sample of wheat was forwarded for 14C analysis, which generated the following date:

Beta-241657 5690 +/-40 BP -23.6 0/0 5710 +/- 40 BP, cal. BC 4680 to 4460 (Cal BP 6630 to 6410). Although there is an absolute date, in this situation it is currently impossible to say anything more. The annual campaign came to a close before the key mutual relationship between the pit with grains, the surrounding charred accumulations and the layer in which the pit was buried could be examined in detail or, stated simply, it is impossible to say here which item intersected which. Without these data the date is worthless, except, of course, that it absolutely pinpoints the horizon from which it originates and corresponds to the dates of sites with Vinča D finds, as seen in the table below (graphic portrayal in chart 1):

<sup>6</sup> The scales for old excavations drawings provided when available.

<sup>7</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to once more thank Nenad N. Tasić and his research team for unselfishly providing their most recent and unpublished materials for review, and for the limitless advice given during the most recent research in Bapska.

<sup>8</sup> The distance in a straight line between Vinča and Bapska is 114 kilometres.

<sup>9</sup> The northern extension enters the trench’s profile so its precise length is not known.

<sup>10</sup> At the time of this writing, the wheat find was being analysed at Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece.

Site	Lab ID	BP	BC cal <sup>11</sup>
Grivac-Barice	Bln-868	6070±100	5286-4727 (95,4%)
Grivac-Barice	Z-1507	5600±140	4786-4071 (95,4%)
Valač	Bln-436	5895±80	4958-4550 (95,4%)
Vinča	Hd-17374	5855±27	4795-4619 (95,4%)
Vinča	GrN-1537	5845±160	5205-4356 (95,4%)
Bapska <sup>12</sup>	Bln-348	5820±80	4881-4488 (95,4%)
Bapska	Beta-241657	5690±40	4680-4460 (95,4%)
Banjica	GrN-1542	5710±90	4767-4358 (95,4%)
Banjica	GrN-1536	5670±120	4793-4270 (95,4%)

(based on Tasić, N. N. 1988; Lazarovici, C-M 2007: 292, Fig. 15, calibrated by Burić)

Floor 1B (▼ 0.75 m) contained an inventory of Vinča D1/D2 (Fig. 3), Sopot III (Fig. 4, 5, 6, 7<sup>13</sup>), and with such diverse cultural components it is one of the most important closed, chronological units from the research conducted in 1964 (*Dimitrijević 1968*, 19).

Floor 1C (▼ 1.1 m) is attributed to the end of Vinča phase D1, and there are no more details on it (*Dimitrijević 1968*: 18).

The next dwelling, no. 2, also contained three floor renewals (A, B, C). The finds from 1A were dated to Vinča phase D1, which contained the most finds, and one fragment each of a Sopot footed bowl and one Vinča C vessel (*Dimitrijević 1968*: 18). Dwelling 2 had the shape of a megaron, *templum in antis* type, and it only remains recorded in a photograph from *Dimitrijević's* research (Fig. 8). It has two rooms with pylons in front of the entrance (*Težak-Gregl 1998*, 81). Floors B and C contained six fragments of fine pottery, of which one belongs to Vinča C, three to Vinča D1 and one to a Sopot vessel with a hole on its foot (*Dimitrijević 1968*: 18).

Dwelling 3 consisted of two floors, A and B. This dwelling, according to *Dimitrijević*, belongs to the settlement's Sopot phase, i.e. the phase of the Vinča import.

Floor 3A at a depth of 2.05 metres provided the bulk of the materials that are typologically and culturally indeterminate, but which still show a high number of Vinča finds from the late phase C (Fig. 9). Here a particularly interesting find is a fragment of a small ceramic sacrificial table, and a damaged, very crudely rendered idol, with what are possibly signs of wear as an apparel item (Fig. 9 A, B). Floor B from Dwelling 3 (▼ 2.4 m) contained seven fragments of fine pottery, of which one belongs to Vinča C, and the rest to Sopot II (*Dimitrijević 1968*, 18).

Dwelling 4 (A, B, C), in its older (B) floor, generated finds of phase II of the Sopot culture. A typical Vinča-Sopot linear decoration filled with punctures is present on one fragment, which together with a cup on an oval pierced foot is a typical Sopot phase II category. Particularly important in this dwelling is the apsidal-ended architecture, and an exquisitely preserved hearth (Fig. 10) (*Dimitrijević 1968*, 17).

Briefly, this is everything that is worthwhile emphasizing from the older research with reference to stratigraphy and relative chronology of the closed units.

Besides the dwellings, *Dimitrijević's* test trench also provided another closed context in the form of pit no. 305.<sup>14</sup> Pit 305, or rather the items found in it, are all that remain of the excavations conducted in 1964. Thus, all aforementioned finds and the framework of the dwellings are today lost, as already noted, and the only data on them can be found in the monograph *Sopotsko-lengyelska kultura* (The Sopot-Lengyel Culture) already cited in this paper. As seen today in the drawing of the "northern" profile, the pit was a little less than one metre deep. The oldest floor of Dwelling 4 ended five centimetres above it, and this dwelling's layout partially covered the pit (Fig. 11). The elliptical form measured 2.4 and 4.2 metres. It contained a total of 115 fragments

<sup>11</sup> Calibrated with OxCal v 4.0

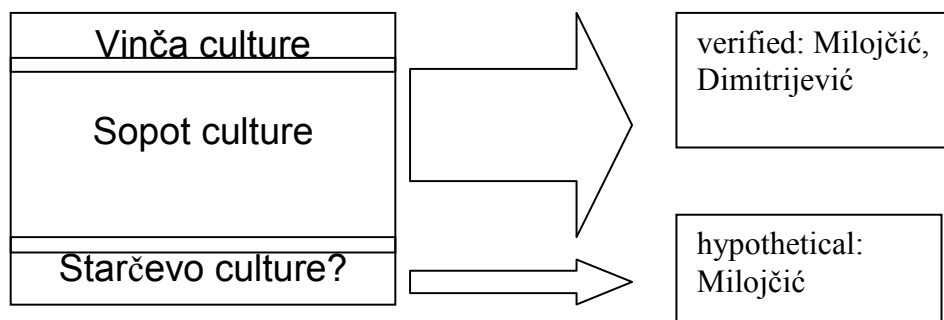
<sup>12</sup> Excavation in 1964.

<sup>13</sup> Fig. 7 characterized by *Dimitrijević* as import from Lengyel, is in fact the Late Sopot shape from by influences from classical Lengyel cultural sphere (*Dimitrijević 1968*, 78, fig. 15/4).

<sup>14</sup> The designation of the pit denotes the relative elevation at which it was found and not the number of pits at the site.

of fine pottery, of which only four belong to the Vinča culture (Vinča B2/C), while the rest are indeterminate or finds of Sopot phase I/II (Fig. 12) (Dimitrijević 1968, 13). Intermingling of Sopot and Vinča materials in this closed context point to the accuracy of Dimitrijević's interpretation of the mingling of Sopot and Vinča pottery in the layers as well, which is the greatest importance of pit 305.

Finally, based on the older research, this simplified stratigraphy for the site in Bapska follows:



Assuming that there truly is a Starčevo layer, by all indications it should belong to the late Starčevo culture, as is the case with both Starčevo sites in Srijem for which there are five absolute dates, all dated to the very end of the Starčevo culture. The dates at the sites – of which one is in the immediate vicinity of Bapska (Vizić, just under 16 km directly east) – are as follows:

Kudoš-Šašinci, OxA-8558

6770 ± 60 BP (5773-5561 cal BC)<sup>15</sup>

6520 ± 50 BP (5610-5372 cal BC)

(Whittle *et al.* 2002: 45).

Golokut, OxA-8505; (fragment of human bone in the layer, test trench 25a),

6550 BP (5620BC-5464BC (88.3%))

If this is truly the case, an early developmental phase of the Sopot culture may be seen at Bapska which emerged precisely in Srijem as a border area between the late Starčevo and early Vinča cultures, which would be of great importance to the beginning of the Late Neolithic in this region. However, at the moment this remains the subject of speculation and conjecture. Furthermore, the majority of the layers in Bapska consist of phases IB to III of the Sopot culture, meaning almost the entire sequence of this culture. In this cultural layer there are sporadic Vinča materials, but up to the late Sopot phase, the settlement belonged to the bearers of Sopot culture. The last layer of life in Bapska belongs to the late Vinča culture, throughout its entire final phase (Vinča D). Thus, at the very end of life in the Bapska settlement, it came into the possession of a Vinča population which was pushed westward from Banat and Vojvodina by the same mechanism which led to the disappearance of Vinča C in northern Banat (Draşovean 1996, 195). When the cultural diversity of the Bapska layers are viewed in their entirety, it is apparent (if one ignores the Starčevo layer on account of the ambiguous reports and differences in opinion between Miložčić and Dimitrijević) that the situation is slightly absurd: the Sopot culture which emerged under the influence of the Vinča culture is located beneath the Vinča in the stratigraphy. However, this is only the late Vinča, which under the onslaught of the Bubanj-Salkuţa group, i.e. “metal-age” groups, retreated westward and settled an area which it only bordered in preceding phases. The advancement of metallurgy increased production but also entailed the more rapid consumption of ore resources. Groups making metal products thus once more became mobile in their search for new resources, prompting the aforementioned migration. Evidence of the existence of these Eneolithic components at Bapska is generally present only in traces and in chance surface discoveries. It is certain that the Eneolithic horizon was at the very least minimally present in Bapska, but only in sporadic finds, although the intense ploughing

<sup>15</sup> Calibrated by OxCal v 4.0

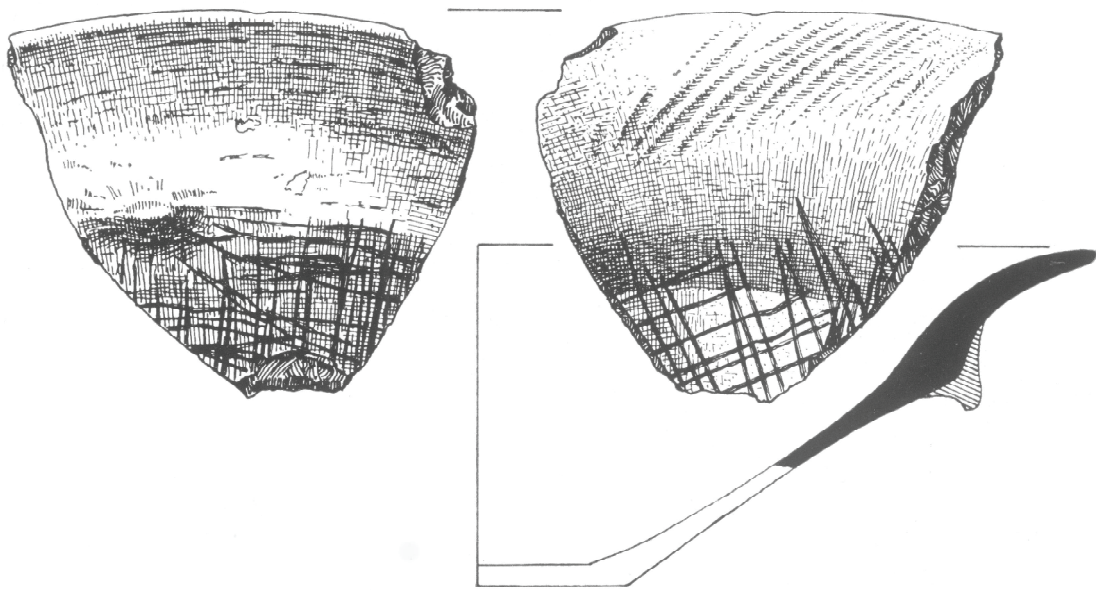
conducted at the site and its upper layers must not be forgotten, for this means that the opportunity to acquire certain knowledge of the genuine share of Eneolithic components in Gradac has been lost forever.

This situation is just another in a series of illustrations of the instability of this region at the end of the Late Neolithic.

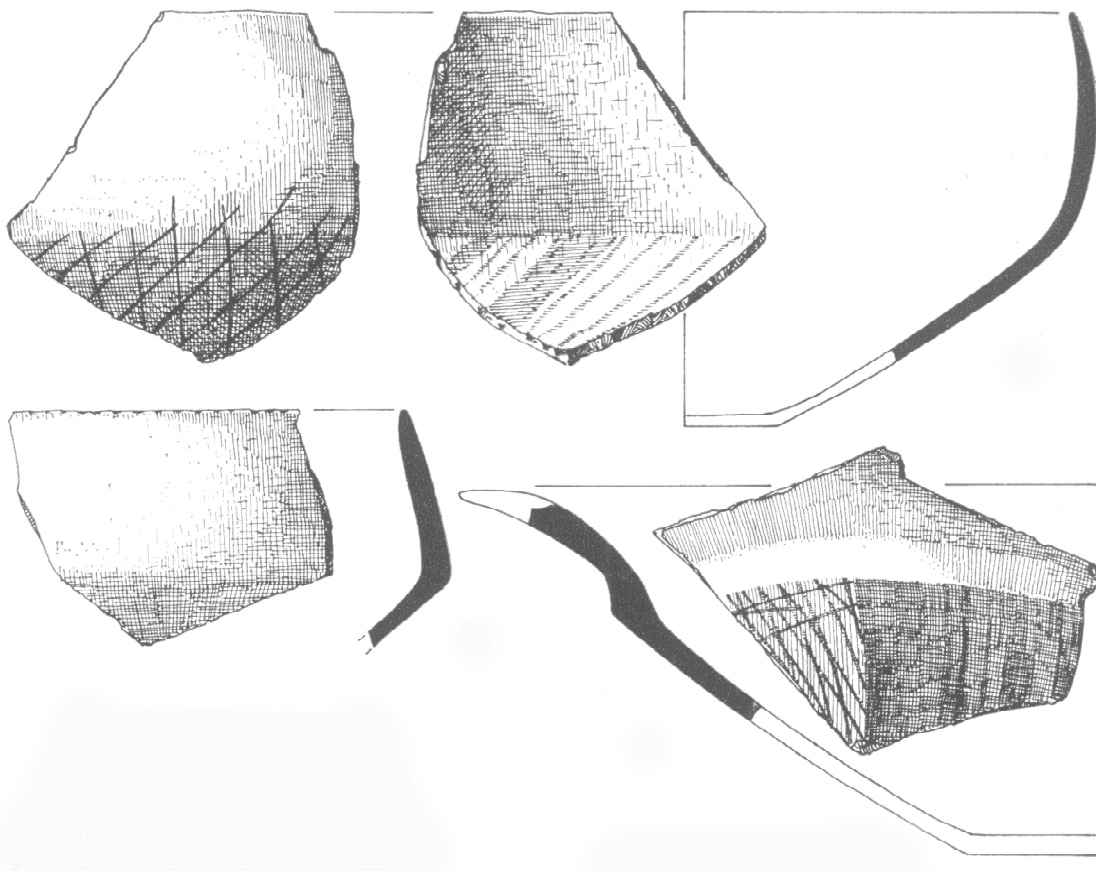
New research being conducted by the Archaeology Department of the University of Zagreb is only in its initial stages, so the data on Dwelling 1/06 must be deemed preliminary, all the more so since – as noted previously in the text – it has not been fully analyzed. What can be said is that this closed context, with the pottery materials found there so far, corresponds to what Dimitrijević discovered in his research at depths of 0 to 2 metres. Unfortunately, his documentation contains no data on absolute elevations, so it is impossible to know the relevant depth layer. Given the most modern agricultural technology, in recent years Gradac has been ploughed deeper than ever before, and almost a half-century has passed between Dimitrijević's research and the most recent research work, so without absolute points it is impossible to know how far the present initial excavation point is below the 1964 level due to erosion caused by land cultivation. Since the new research has only just begun (2006), there are still no closed units that could be used as analogies to those from 1964, but we hope that even this will be possible soon.

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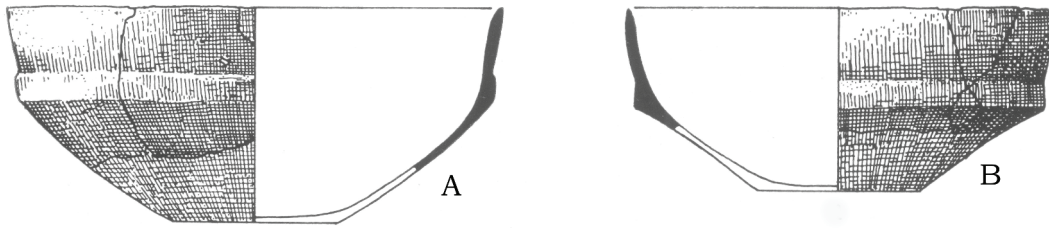


**Fig. 1.** The Late Vinča Culture potsherd with *politurmuster* decoration.



**Fig. 2.** The Late Vinča Culture potsherd with *politurmuster* decoration.

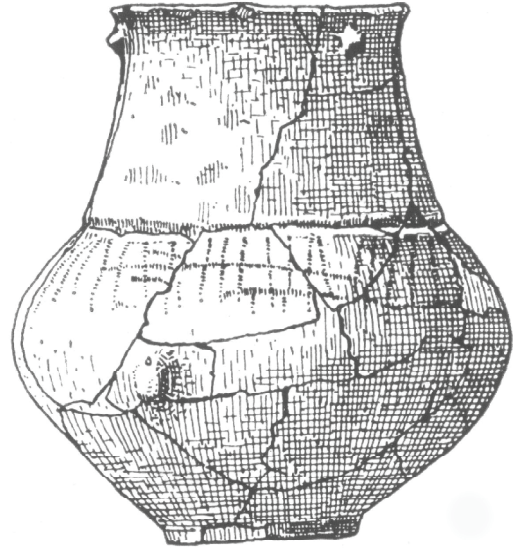




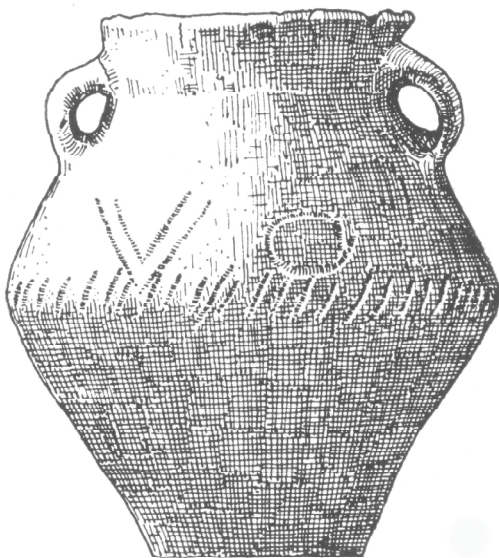
**Fig. 3.** The Late Vinča Culture shape.



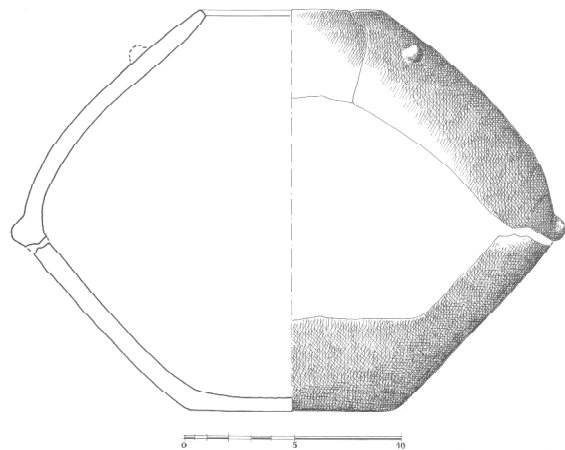
**Fig. 4.** The Late Sopot Culture shape.



**Fig. 5.** The Late Sopot Culture shape.



**Fig. 6.** The Late Sopot Culture shape.



**Fig. 7.** The Late Sopot Culture shape, influenced by classical Lengyel type.



**Fig. 8.** Excavations in Bapska in 1964. Dwelling 1.

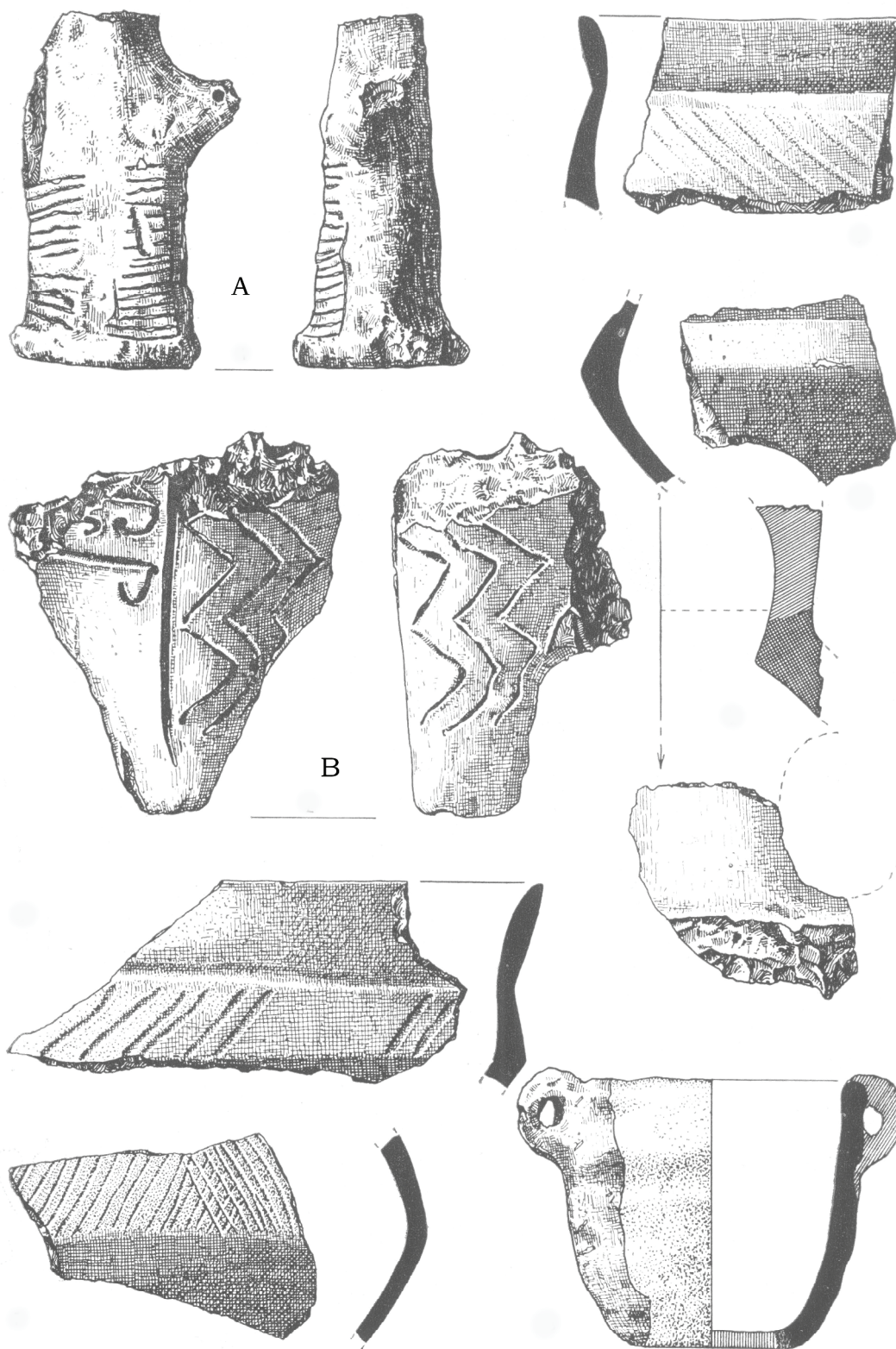


Fig. 9. The Late Vinča phase, Dwelling 3.

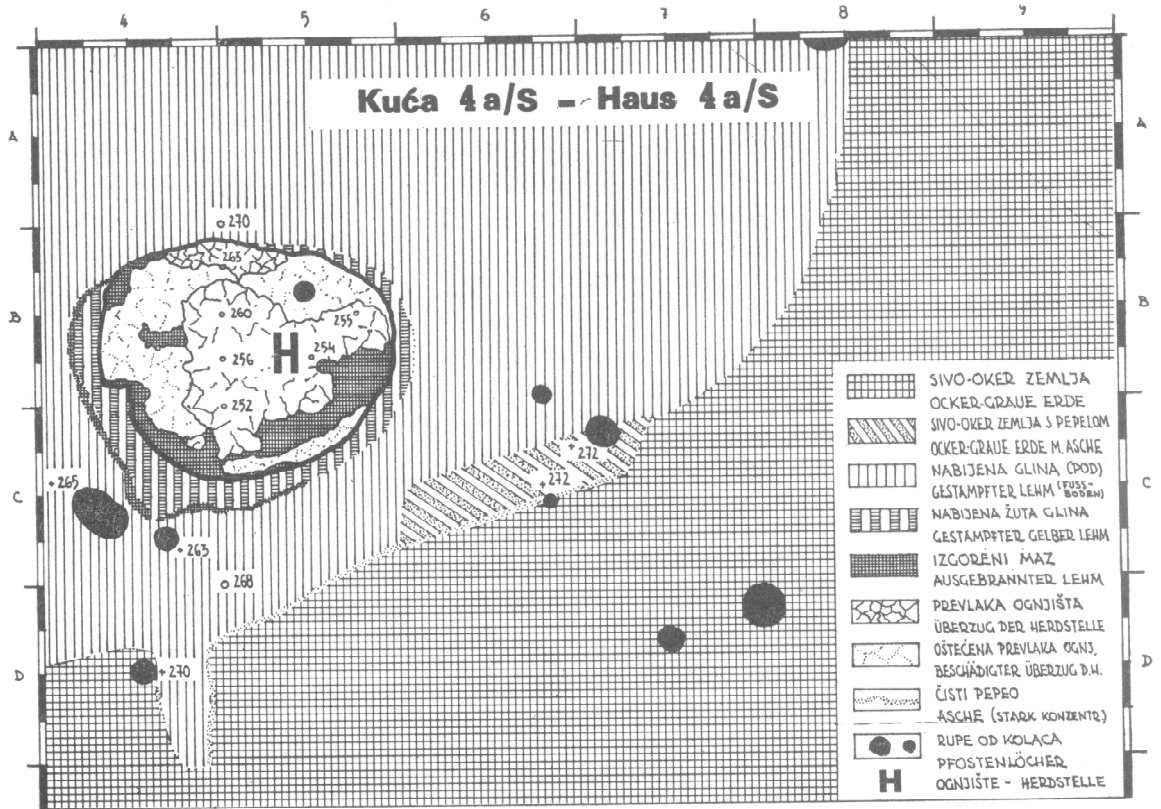


Fig. 10. Drawing of preserved hearth in dwelling 4.

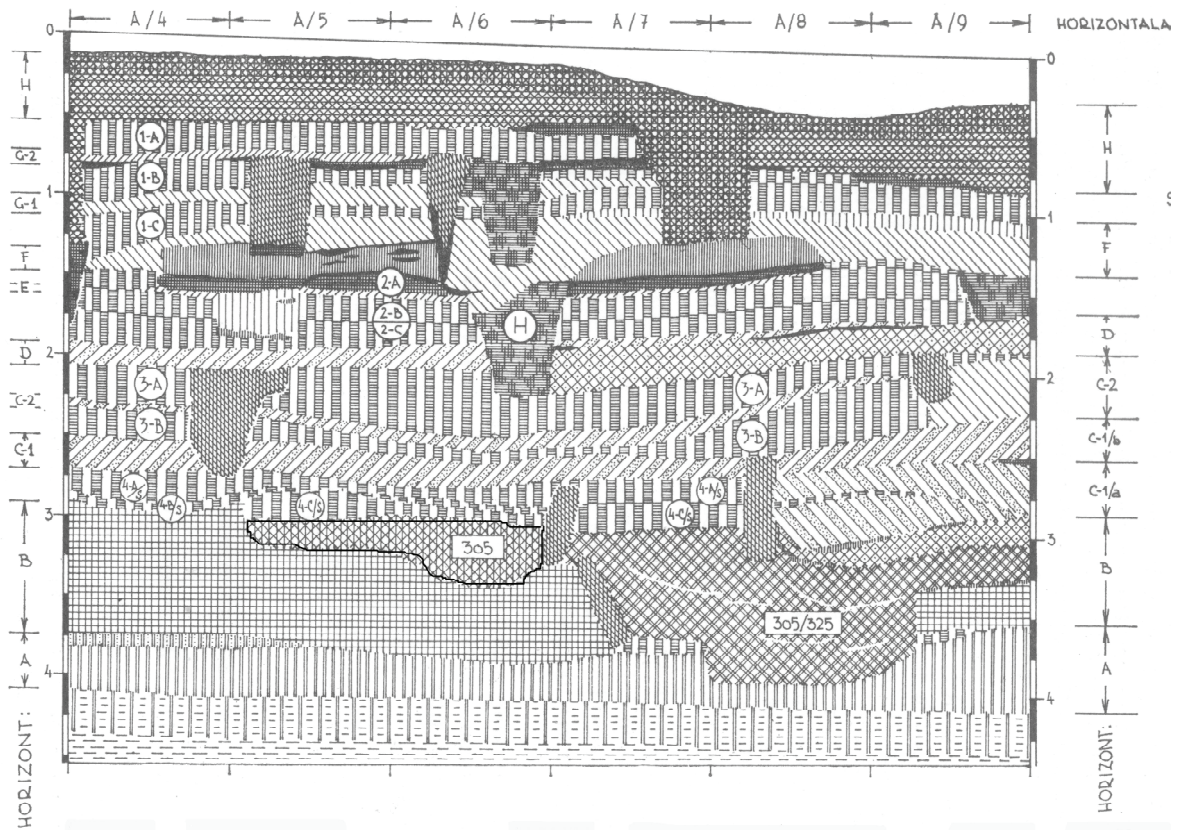


Fig. 11. Drawing of position of pit 305 on stratigraphical sketch.

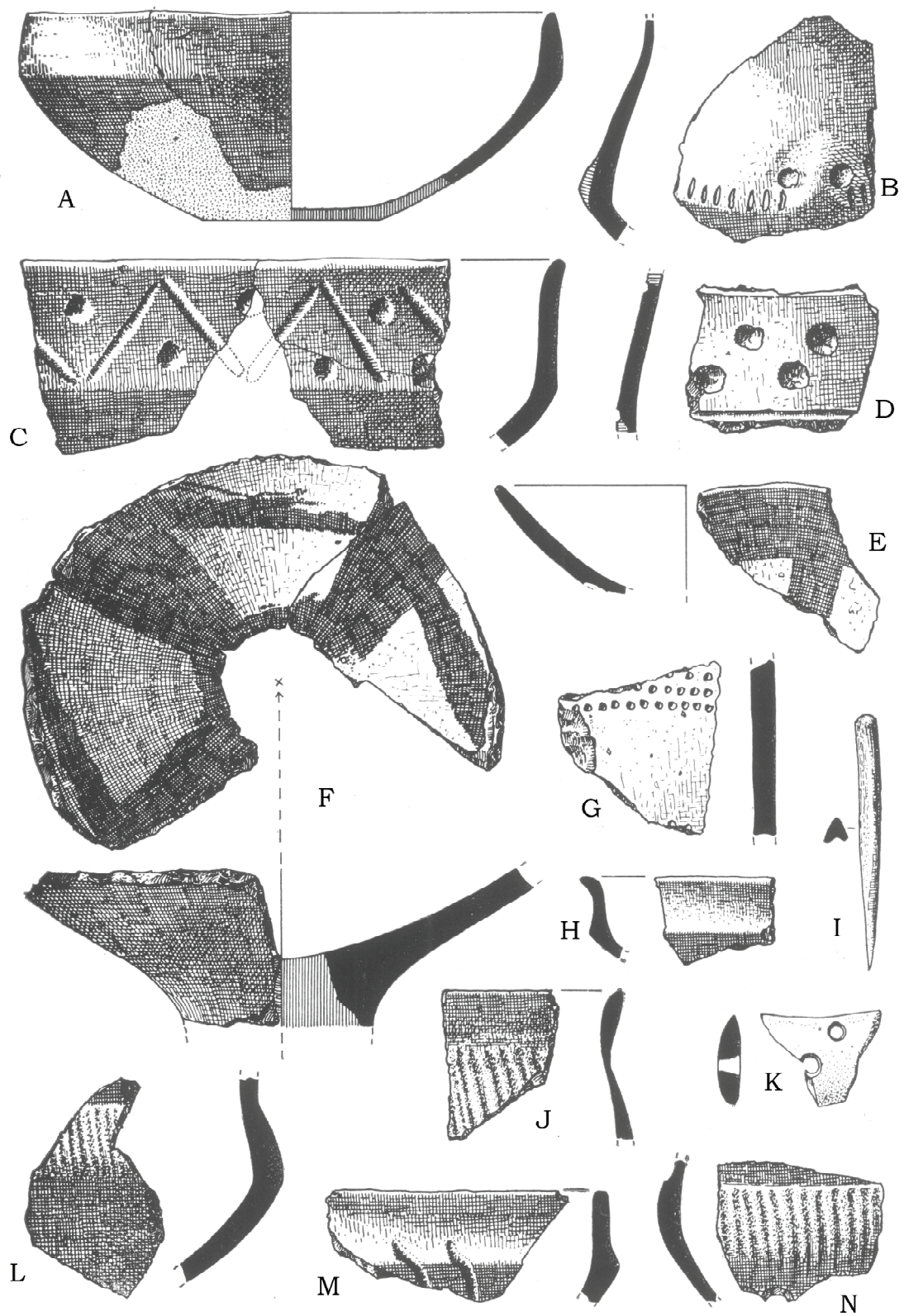
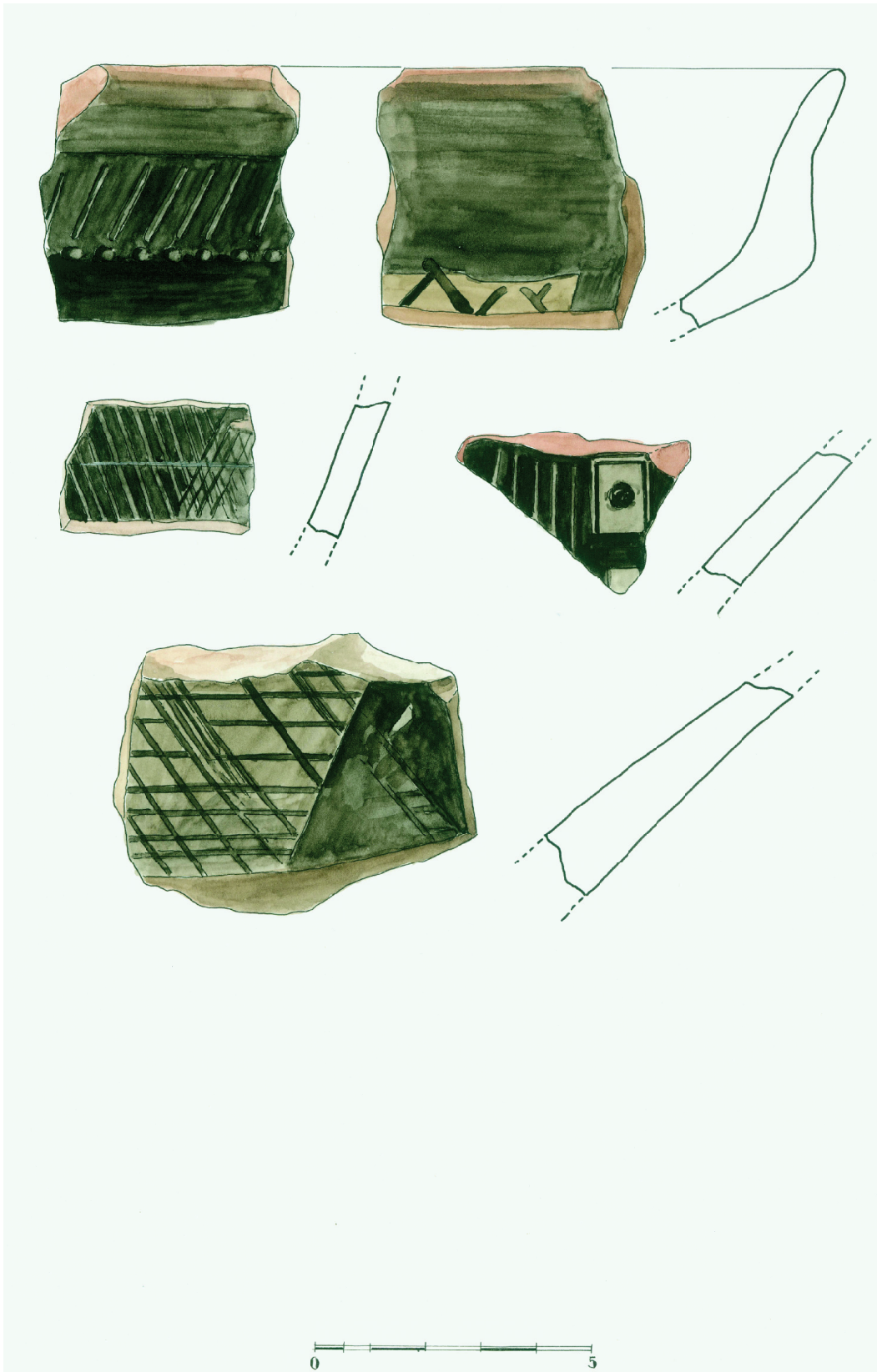
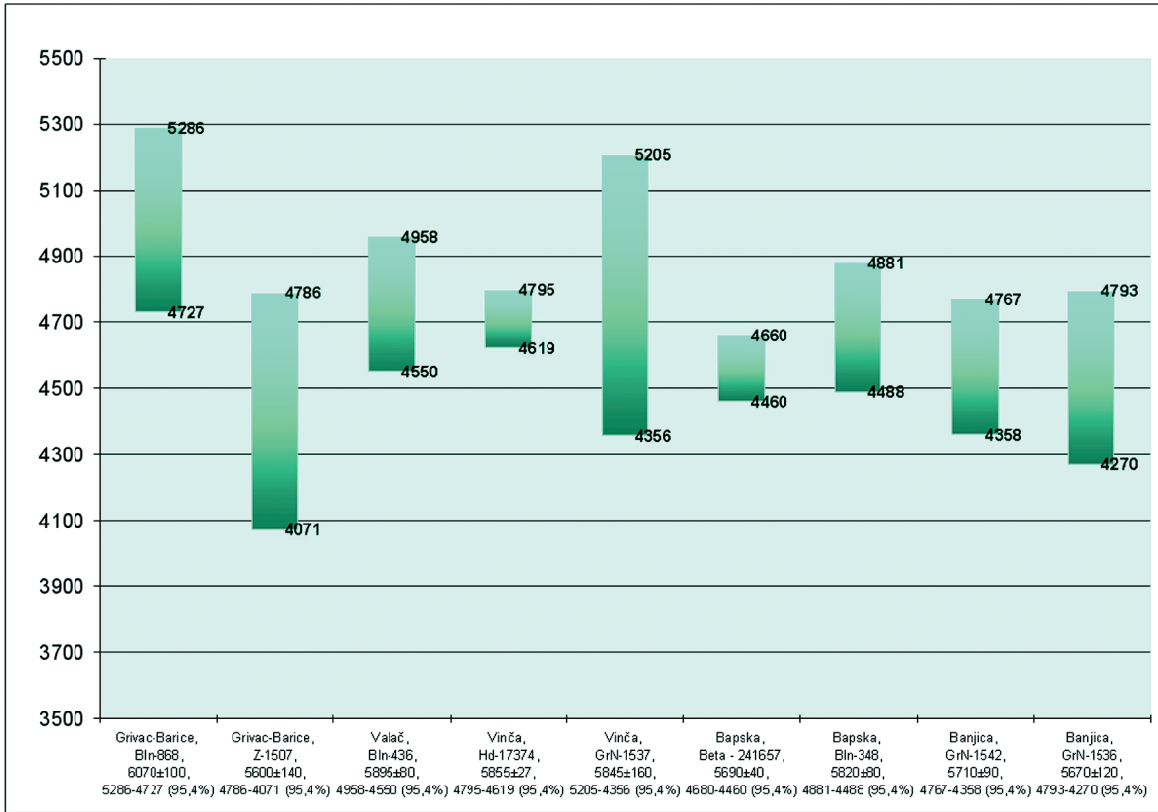


Fig. 12. Sopot I/II inventory in the pit 305.



**Fig. 13.** The Late Vinča potsherds from Dwelling 1/06 (new excavations).



**Fig. 14.** Graph of the C14 dates for the Late Vinča period (Vinča D phase).

