

# **The Hellenistic Period through the ceramic of Termez (Uzbekistan) and Balkh (Afghanistan)**

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## **Summary**

Located on both sides of the Amu Darya River (Oxus), Termez and Bactres constituted two main sites not far from each other, and an important part of the history of the occupation of Central Asia. They incorporate both in an urban area around which had developed an oasis-type economy through the development of many irrigation canals. They represent however two different urban phenomena in the Greco-Bactrian world.

Termez, as other sites on the right bank of the Amu Darya, is a political phenomenon of space occupation in the early times of the Hellenistic period. The archaeological evidence suggests that this settlement was limited to the surface of the citadel as many sites of this region. Termez remains a point of traffic control that will see its urban extension until the Yue-Chi period (1st BC- 1st AD).

Bactres was already an important town, the capital of Bactria during the Achaemenid period. Its existence follows on it, and continues to exist as an agglomeration and a strong leading role in an independent kingdom. Despite numerous excavations in 1923 and in 1949, no Hellenistic structure was mentioned. The new excavations of the French Archaeological Delegation of Afghanistan (DAFA) between 2004 and 2008 allow us to draw the limits of the city during the Greek period, in spite of the importance of underground water and the accumulation of many archaeological levels.

## **Text**

The pottery of Hellenistic Central Asia represents a corpus that covers a short period of time from Alexander the Great's conquest in 329 BC to the abandonment of Bactria by the Greeks around 145 BC. Geographically, the occupied area was bounded by the Syr Darya in the north and in the south by the Afghan plateau, and included two old Achaemenid satrapies: Bactria (fig. 1, 1) and Sogdiana.

The history of "Greek" ceramic is therefore associated with some degree of "Hellenisation" of the local culture, largely helped by the settlement of colonists from the armies of Alexander the Great and his successors. Ancient literary sources do not give a lot of information about these first settlements, and only mention numerous foundations and re-foundations as well as several revolts in 325 and in 323. We consequently know little of this region except the description of historical events: the Anabasis of Alexander and Antiochus III, the creation of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom by Diodotus, and numismatic studies<sup>1</sup>.

The Greek occupation in this area is therefore based on the study of archaeological sites, whose Ai Khanum is the main reference, and its ceramic the essential element of the chronology. The ceramic works of J.-C. Gardin and B. Lyonnet helped to establish a wide chrono-stratigraphy that continues to be refined through articles and publications. Eight different stages, related to levels of construction and restorations spread over a century and a half with three significant developments<sup>2</sup> : the persistence of some "Achaemenid" models, the appearance of gray ware and larger plates and the presence of black and red slip and Megarian bowls. Despite all efforts, the lack of significant time markers through numismatics only allows us to make assumptions about the duration of each of these periods. The exact details of its foundation remain uncertain as well as the time of its abandonment, which is mainly based on the inscription on a jar of oil found in the Treasury<sup>3</sup>.

Located on both sides of the Amu Darya River (Oxus), Termez (fig. 1, 2) and Bactres (fig. 1, 3) constituted two main sites not far from each other, and an important part of the history of the occupation of this territory. They incorporate both in an urban area around which had developed an oasis-type economy through the development of many irrigation canals. This infrastructure work, developed since the Bronze Age, served to extend the natural rivers of the surrounding reliefs : Balkh for Bactres, the Surkhan Darya for Termez. They represent however two different urban phenomena in the Greco-Bactrian world. Bactria was already an important town, capital of Bactria during the Achaemenid period. Its existence follows on it, and continues to exist as an agglomeration and a strong leading role in an independent kingdom. Termez, as other sites on the right bank of the Amu Darya, is a political phenomenon of space occupation in the early times. The archaeological evidence suggests that this settlement was limited to the surface of the citadel<sup>4</sup>. Termez remains a point of traffic control that will see its urban extension until the Yue-Chi period (1st BC- 1st AD).

### 1. Termez (Uzbekistan)

The Hellenistic levels of ancient Termez were completely ignored until 1973 when excavations were carried out in the citadel of Termez by E. G. Nekrasova and B. A. Kozlovskii<sup>5</sup>. In 1980, a new mission led by Š. Pidaev<sup>6</sup> opened a large trench in the central part of the citadel which brought to light 2.5 m of stratigraphy with abundant Greco-Bactrian material. Coins and sherds also led to the hypothesis of a Hellenistic occupation in a small natural hill northwest of the citadel, Mala Chingiz<sup>7</sup>. Despite resumption of the excavations of the citadel since 1993 by P. Leriche and the Archaeological Institute of Samarkand, it is only in 2006 that ceramic in layer context of this period had been found in a trench (Trench B), situated on the south side of the site.

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<sup>1</sup> Boppearachchi and Le Rider 1991

<sup>2</sup> Lyonnet 2001, p 141-142; Lyonnet 2010, p 143

<sup>3</sup> Rapin 1992; Lyonnet 2013

<sup>4</sup> Leriche, 2010, p. 157

<sup>5</sup> Nekrasova and Kozlovskii 1976

<sup>6</sup> Pidaev 1987 Pidaev 1991

<sup>7</sup> Al'baum 1985

### 1.1 The trench B (fig. 2, 1-5)

The Hellenistic ceramic assemblage essentially consists of a very large set of sherds (around 600) from a pit opened in 2006 in a trench on the south side of the citadel<sup>8</sup>, about ten meters away from (sou: N/S/E/W of) the trench excavated by Sh Pidaev in 1980.

The pottery consists of a clay body with fine mineral temper. Three categories can be identified. The first one is a beige paste without slip with a two-coloured surface (slightly pink in the lower part of the body and white in the upper one) imitating the pottery of the previous period. The second, most common one is a pinkish orange clay covered with a dark-to-red slip. The third type of clay, very rare, is black gray which characterizes the occupation of Ai Khanum from Period IV<sup>9</sup>. This type of paste will continue to be used during the early Kushan period under a light gray tint<sup>10</sup>.

This corpus is mostly constituted of tableware (plates, cups, bowls ) and some containers ( bowls , jugs, small jars) . The absence or presence of slips on the sherds is not a determining element in our approach because of the lack of stratigraphy. We should, however, note that some shapes are rarely engobed, such as fish plates, some bowls with entering neck and most of the closed containers including pitchers, small jars and jars. The rest of the tableware, as well as the large open vases (terrines and craters) are covered with an orange, red to brown slip. Among the shapes present in the two categories, those with a large diameter are most often with slip. Decorations are exceptional except for a groove inside the plates. Sherds with gray paste are very unusual (less than 1%) and do not differ from the entire corpus (bowl with carination, edge jug) except for a basin with a burnished decoration inside.

### Conclusion

The lack of real stratigraphical context and numismatic evidence makes it difficult to associate this corpus with an established chronology. However, the wealth of slips used and the presence of sherds in gray paste may provide us with a terminus post quem contemporary to the period IV of Ai Khanum<sup>11</sup>. The small number of sherds in fired reducing atmosphere raises, nevertheless, the problem of the pertinence of its presence as a time a marker in the right bank of the Amu Darya. During his excavations in the citadel of Termez, Shakir Pidaev considered that this type of ceramic paste only appeared in small amounts in phase III, ie from the last quarter of the third c.<sup>12</sup> AD. On the site of Kourganzol, this type of production is already present in the second state (dated mid-third century B. C. in comparison with Ai Khanum!)<sup>13</sup>.

Despite the difficulty of interpreting chronologically the various components of this corpus, it is

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<sup>8</sup> Leriche 2010, p. 166-167

<sup>9</sup> Gardin and Lyonnet 1978, p. 45-51

<sup>10</sup> Pidaev 1991

<sup>11</sup> Lyonnet 2001, p. 142

<sup>12</sup> Pidaev 1991, p. 223

<sup>13</sup> Sverčkov 2008, p. 147

interesting to note the existence of similarities with another ceramic set of the same period found during the excavation of the site of Khaitabad, 50km North of Termez. In 1995, the French-Uzbek mission of Bactria undertook the excavation of the fortifications of the lower town<sup>14</sup>. This allowed to identify the Hellenistic levels directly posterior to an occupation from the " Achaemenid " period<sup>15</sup>. The shapes as well as the clay and slip used there are very close from the ceramics of the citadel of Termez. This analogy could be interpreted as the indication of a new phase in the occupation of the Surkhan Dayra region, posterior to the first Hellenistic occupations at Kourganzol, and contemporary with the ceramic of Shortughai<sup>16</sup> dated between 275 and 150 BC.

### 1.2 In the rest of the citadel of Termez

Two other sectors were opened during the excavation of the citadel of Termez. One located farthest to the west is the resumption of an old trench<sup>17</sup> which had reached the bedrock. Despite the presence of sherds of the Hellenistic period, the deepest levels are chronologically later. The second sector is located at the southeast corner of the citadel of Termez<sup>18</sup>. The material from these two sectors does not differ significantly from that from the trench in the south side of the citadel. Few fragments of cups and plates were recorded with a smooth flame decoration on a dark red-brown slip. The presence of grey-black past is more significant (fig. 2, 6) but they should often be put in relation with earlier periods.

### 1.3 Outside the citadel

The sherds found outside the citadel are very limited in number. They are made of either beige paste without slip or beige to pink beige with a slip. The shapes and the slips hardly differ from what you can find elsewhere. The presence of gray-black paste is more common (fig. 2, 6), however, it can be confused with the Yue Chi period (2nd-1st BC). Despite the presence of a small number of Hellenistic sherds in several places of the city, the deepest levels, often in relation with the natural ground, showed no layer from this period. The only clue for a Hellenistic occupation is on the Mala Chingiz, where mud-bricks follow a Greek size module<sup>19</sup>.

## 2. Bactres (Afghanistan)

Until 1965 with the discovery of Ai Khanum, research in Hellenistic Bactria was disappointing especially for Bactres. Despite excavations in 1923 and in 1949<sup>20</sup>, studies on ceramics<sup>21</sup> and the study on the

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<sup>14</sup> Leriche and Annaev 1995, p. 11-12

<sup>15</sup> Šajdullaev 2000, p. 43-46

<sup>16</sup> Frankfurt , 2013, p. 175

<sup>17</sup> Nekrasova and Kozlovskii 1976 Stride 2001, p 125

<sup>18</sup> Gelin and Tonnel 2001

<sup>19</sup> Leriche 2010, p. 157

<sup>20</sup> Foucher and Bazin - Foucher 1942, Schlumberger 1949

<sup>21</sup> Gardin 1957

fortifications<sup>22</sup>, no Hellenistic structure was mentioned. The importance of underground water and the accumulation of archaeological levels over ten meters high often complicated the task and demotivated archaeologists. We had to wait for the discovery of several types Corinthian capitals in Bactres, similar to those of Ai Khanum to boost new excavations between 2003 and 2008<sup>23</sup> Three sites are currently being investigated<sup>24</sup> : one on Zargaran Tepe , the second on the northern rempart and the third on the Bala Hissar.

## 2.1 Archaeological context

### 2.1.1 Tepe Zargaran

This artificial hill ( 900x300m ) indicates the eastern boundary of the fortification of the city of Bactres and is cut by an artificial arm of the Bactres river. Excavations were installed in areas undisturbed by looters but bordering on agricultural land. Stratigraphical observations and geological analysis highlighted the importance of the dynamics of fluvial deposits in relation with the development of irrigation canals during different periods, using stone blocks of the Hellenistic and Kushan periods (1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> AD). Archaeological material was collected in the filling of a channel and could come from levels eroded by the river. Despite this context, the studied corpus only consists of material of the Hellenistic period and can be considered as representative, without any further interpretation. The sherds are, moreover, often fragmentary and damaged by their water-logged deposition. The majority of them belong to the tableware.

### 2.1.2 The northern Rampart

The second area is the northern rampart studied by M. Le Berre in 1955-56<sup>25</sup>. In view of the cuts made, the ancient massif (8m wide) could correspond to a Hellenistic phase. Large trenches within the city revealed only agricultural areas without traces of structures. The material collected in this study is relatively small because the search was mainly restricted to cleaning the visible faces of the fortification and to identify the deeper levels down to underground water. For this study, we only took into account the layers linked to the inferior massif. The upper levels had both Hellenistic and Yue Chi/early Kushan sherds (2nd BC-1st AD)

### 2.1.3 The Bala Hissar

Some Hellenistic levels were brought to light near a semi-circular tower built in mud brick and square in format (40x40cm). The tower is connected on the south side to a thick wall of mud brick with a similar format, of which only the outer face was discovered. The direction of the wall connected to the tower

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<sup>22</sup> Young 1955

<sup>23</sup> Marquis and Besenval 2007

<sup>24</sup> Balkh mission headed by R. Besenval (France, CNRS) in collaboration with Ph. Marquis (DAFA director)

<sup>25</sup> Le Berre , Schlumberger et al. 1964

differs from the current morphology of the Bala Hissar, but this area was heavily damaged by the expansion of modern habitations. The continuous orientation of the Hellenistic and Kushan fortification to the south-east doesn't include the current topography. They don't seem to be related to the wall called "serpentin", preserved on a high-rise between the village of Bactres and Tepe Zargaran.

## 2.2 The ceramic corpus

### 2.2.1 The ceramic of Tepe Zargaran (fig. 3) and the « northern rempart » (fig. 4)

The study of the ceramic from the northern rempart and from Tepe Zargaran revealed a very similar corpus in its physical and morphological characteristics. In addition, the analysis of the informations brought up during the excavation did not allow to justify any chronological division. Therefore, it seemed more appropriate to propose a single description of the overall material, even if the illustrations are offered by sites.

#### *Physical characteristics (fig. 5, 7-9)*

The clays used for tableware are dense and essentially contain a fine mineral temper. The majority of the colour of the sherds is in pink-beige and beige, and reveal the continuity of local traditions. The few sherds in gray-black (7-9%) paste are more dense and sonore and may represent an alternative to the lack of black glaze ceramic.

Ceramic vessels are often covered with a "red" slip: orange smooth, red. The slips burgundy and brown are less present and in bad quality. Finally, the black slips cover both, sherds in beige and in gray-black clay (fired in reducing atmosphere).

#### *The catalog*

The typology is relatively succinct and is divided into three groups: tableware, containers, cooking ware

#### Open Vessels

Among tableware, we find some morphological parallels to the Termez ceramic. The plates and bowls are the most significant contribution in the development of the typology, compared to the "achaemenid" period. The majority of the plates are the "fish plate" (fig. 3, 1 & 4, 1). The smaller forms (15-20cm diam.) are in beige paste without slip. Larger ones adopted a simple, flaring rim or a rim thickened on the interior, with an orange paste and covered with a red, dark brown slip. The decorations on Bactres ceramics are rare and limited to a few stamps of palmettes covered with a black or dark brown slip. This type of decoration is also present at the period Yue Chi.

Bowls (fig. 3, 2 & 4, 2) are also a very important part of the tableware. They are most often covered with a red to brown slip and show an incurved rim. As the plates, this type did not exist during the previous period. The decoration is very limited except for a small groove inside and sometimes burnishing. Some bowls adopted a carination on the lower body. In the following period, the period Yue Chi, the rim may be everted. The foot ring is large and prefigures the cups on pedestal of the following period.

Goblets (diam. 9-18cm) are present until the "bactro-achaemenid period" (fig. 3, 3 & 4, 3). Their morphological and technological characteristics persist throughout the Seleucid and Greco-Bactrian period. Originally without slip, as it is in Termez, most of the goblets found in Bactres received a red, brown or black slip with always a flat bottom. The other type of goblets is characterized by a carination in the upper part of the wall. They are covered with red, dark red smooth or black slip. There is no example in gray black slip. The introduction of a high foot, imitating the Kraters, mostly indicates the end of the Hellenistic period.

The large open vases (fig. 3, 4 & 4, 4), deep bowls and Krater, have often a pinkish beige clay body covered with a red to orange slip, and rarely in black. The first have a curved wall profile with a thick or inverted (?) rim (or stretched inside), or with folded exterior rim. The latter have a wall in S-profile, with a vertical upper portion. Finally, the others have a horizontal rim<sup>26</sup>. All forms may be dated between the 4th and the 8th period of Ai Khanoum.

Close vessel (fig. 3, 5-6 & 4, 5-6)

The pitchers are rare. They adopt a simple type with everted rim, bead or flat, but without slip. The form of the small jar is that of an amphora with flat bottom with one or two more or less short handles. They are mostly without slip, but small models can be in red slip.

Large jars of Bactres keep the pre-Hellenistic model with pink and beige clay that often offer a two-tone appearance between a light beige outer surface and inner pink. The rim is flat with (a tapered or flattened extremity) with a pointed edge?. It is associated with a tapered pointed bottom. This persistence of local traditions is one of the most interesting aspects at Bactres.

Cooking ware (fig. 3, 7 & 4, 7)

The clay of the cooking ware pots is easy to distinguish with its coarse temper and lack of slip. The shapes vary, including basins, pots with flaring collared or dropping rim.

2.2.2 The Balla Hissar (fig. 5)

A ceramic study about the achaemenid and hellenistic material of the Balla Hissar was conducted for a conference at Vienna by Nicolas Engel. This corpus has already been the subject of a study (unpublished). However, I will retain some elements to enrich our data.

From a stratigraphic view, the presence of pre- Hellenistic material is evidenced in many places at the same time enriching the chronological sequence located on of other sites. The presence of orange fabrics among the sherds is quite important. It refers in particular to the "Achaemenid" material whose exterior surface appearance is in creamy colour. The rest of the corpus has a beige fabric with or without red slip. The gray ware is very limited (2%)

The main forms collected in these levels are small open forms characteristic of the Hellenistic period. These are both plates "fish plates", bowls and cups with incurving rim with red slip. Small jars and pitchers are very similar to those of Tepe Zargaran with everted rim. Similarly, large containers are " Achaemenid " types with flat rim

#### Conclusion

The discovery of these Hellenistic levels seems all the more important. Since 1924, the reality remains of a Hellenistic occupation in Bactres were actively sought. Excavations from 2005 on various sites in the city have shown these remains and thus made certain assumptions about the extent of the occupation and the timeline.

One of the first lessons obtained through the study of cuts made on the northern rampart is the presence of a " Hellenistic " rampart in the deepest levels. If no structure of this period was clearly identified on the Zargaran Tepe. Contrary to what has been found elsewhere, both pre-hellenistic and hellenistic ceramic were found on the Balla Hissar and thus it represents the oldest part of the site.

From a chronological point of view, the ceramic study underlines interesting details corroborated by numismatic evidence. The most significant elements in the Tepe Zargaran or the northern rampart corpus are the sherds in beige fabric with brown, dark brown and black slip present on some large plates with stamped decoration, and high foot, that can be linked to the corpus of Afrasiab IIB<sup>27</sup>. Should we consider the black slip, as F. Allabe done for Dura Europos<sup>28</sup>, as a resurgence of some cultural identity through objects of everyday life, in opposition with a phenomena of "imminent Eastern absorption" in the middle of the 2nd C. BC

For the other ceramics, the chronological parallels with the corpus of Ai Khanum didn't give us any additional information, because B. Lyonnet underline the persistence of forms without slip, the diversity of red slips and the presence of gray paste sherds from the fourth period , ie around 250 BC . For shapes that

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<sup>26</sup> see B. Lyonnet in G. Lecuyot, House Kokcha

<sup>27</sup> Lyonnet 2010, p. 146

could found the earlier periods, that is to say the jars board flat, they are relatively numerous in the levels studied in Bactres. However, they mostly belong to a specific type of the large jars. Thus, they would have lasted longer than the simple pre- Hellenistic period because of the existence of a local culture established in Bactres. Other forms confirm near the end of the Hellenistic period, such as craters everted rim (X) TPQ , a bowl foot ring (X) , bowls reentrant wall (X) , sections on foot ring ducted and (X).

In August-October 2013, a mission numismatic study of the coins of Bactres (2005-2008) was conducted jointly by Mr. S. Heideman and Mr M. Naue from the University of Hamburg. A large number of coins has not been deciphered, but several Hellenistic coins from Tepe Zargaran have been identified. They extend from the reign of Euthydemus (225-220 BC) to that of Hélioklès (145-130 BC)<sup>29</sup>, thus corroborating the relatively early ceramic period.

Despite the difficulty of giving a clear stratigraphical reading of all archaeological features, chronological clues allow us to emphasize the importance of the Bactres city especially at the end of the third century BC, in the absence of earlier levels attested, especially with the north rampart. If this fact was proven, should we regard the expansion of the city as an isolated phenomenon or rather the realization of a wider political program.

Recently, Guy Lecuyot, in his publication about the houses of Ai Khanum<sup>30</sup>, underlined the importance of the urban development of the city from Antiochus III and the implications that had resulted. In particular, the introduction of ceramic models directly influenced by the major production centers of the Hellenistic world between 225 and 200<sup>31</sup>. Other epigraphic witnesses showed the involvement of the Seleucid kings in an integration of Greek colonists within their kingdom especially in Babylon during the reign of Antiochus the IV<sup>32</sup>. Later, we will highlight the will to build at Doura Europos, not a single fortress, but an urban area surrounded by a large fortification from the middle of the second century<sup>33</sup>.

Finally, it is also important to note the absence of imported ceramics from the Mediterranean world, though they are found at Ai Khanum. No " Megarian or Pergamenian bowl", oinochoai handle with to figurative motif, engraved vase polygonal decor, large plate engraved or stamped decoration have been found during excavations at Bactres, Termez, or Khaitabad. It is difficult to interpret this. Either excavations have not reached levels allowing us to discover this ceramic type or it did not exist. Perhaps we should consider that these products do not have the same appeal at Ai Khanum and Bactria. Therefore people present at both sites, despite urban importance, had different political position. Finally, the political events of the late Hellenistic period in Central Asia and the different monetary treasures reinforce the idea of the growing interest of Greco-Bactrian kings in the direction of India and its wealth. In contrast, the Parthian kingdom and the northern nomads posed increasing pressure on the kingdom.

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<sup>28</sup> Alabe 2012, p. 165

<sup>29</sup> Heidemann and Naue 2013, p. 33-34

<sup>30</sup> Lecuyot 2013, p. 210

<sup>31</sup> Lyonnet 2013, p. 187

<sup>32</sup> (Van der Spek 2009 Political, p. 107)



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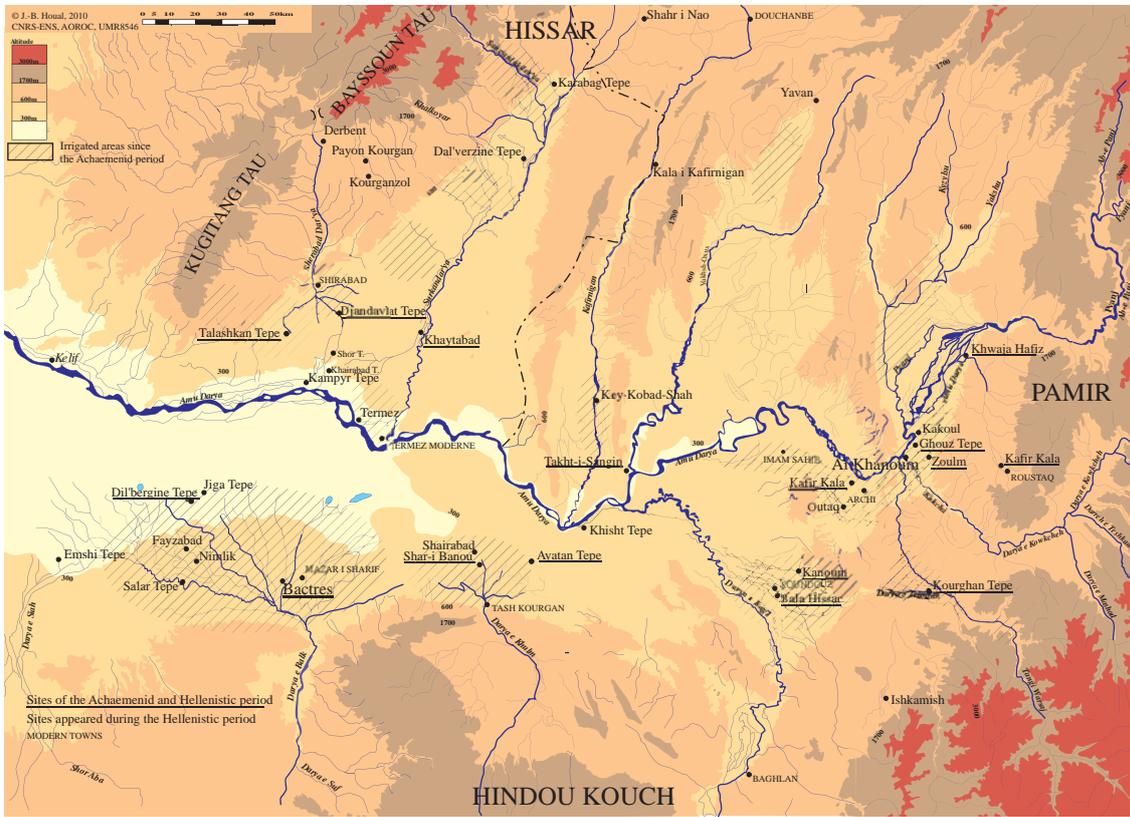
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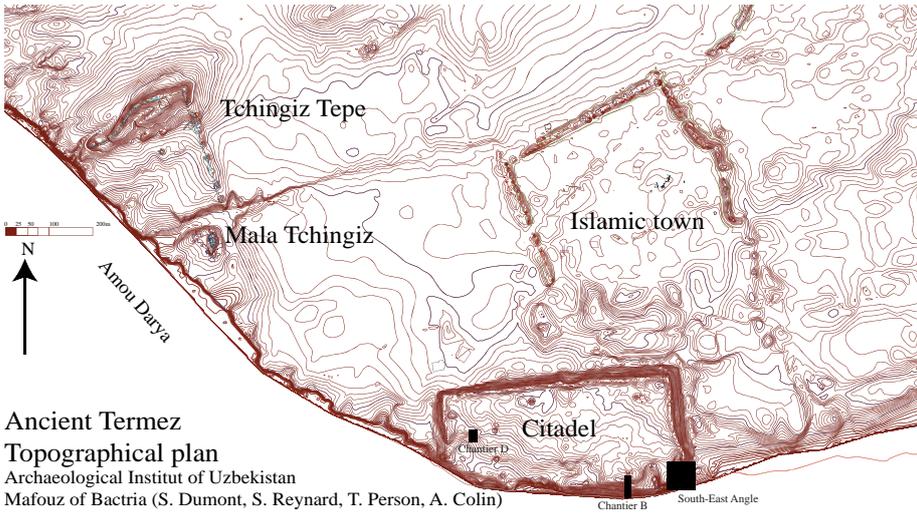
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1.



2.



**Ancient Termez**  
Topographical plan  
Archaeological Institut of Uzbekistan  
Mafouz of Bactria (S. Dumont, S. Reynard, T. Person, A. Colin)

**Geographical Map of Bactria**

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3.

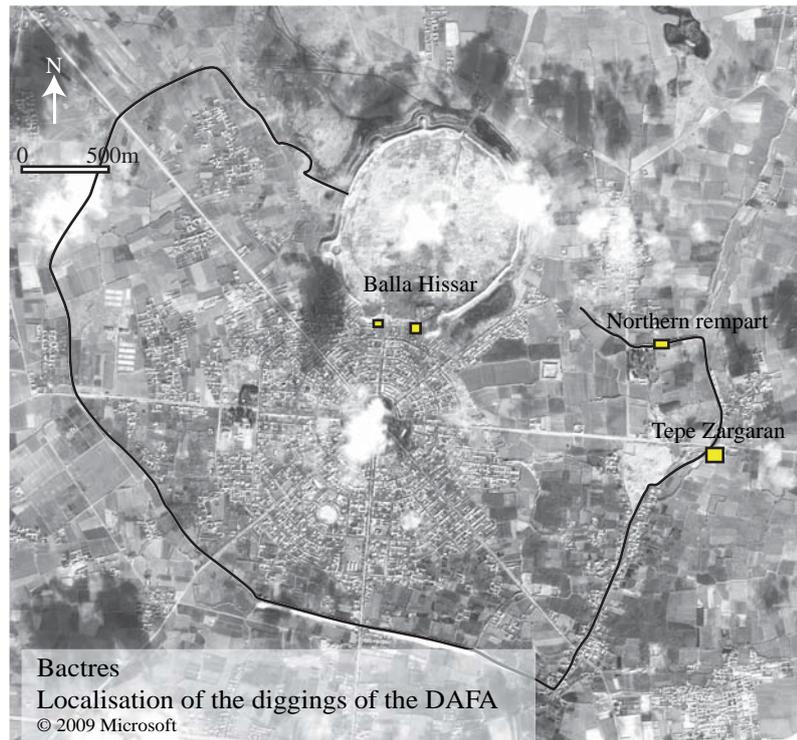
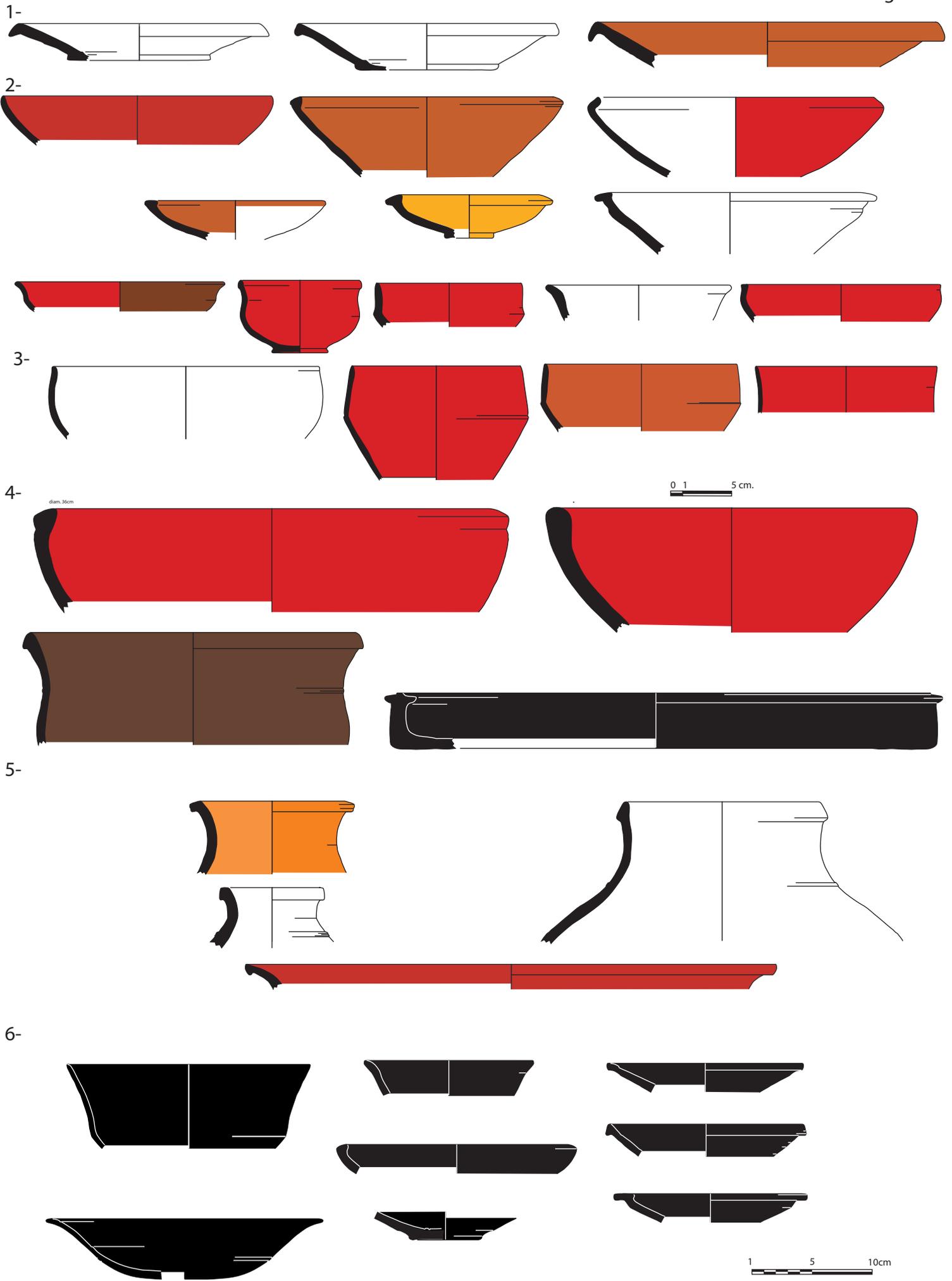


Fig. 2



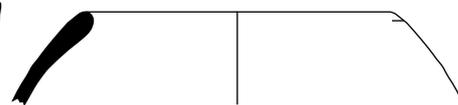
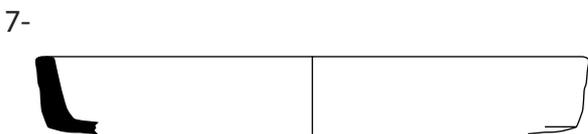
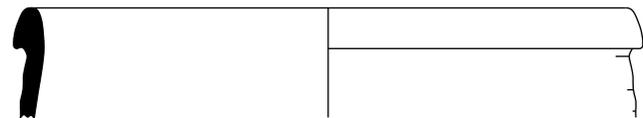
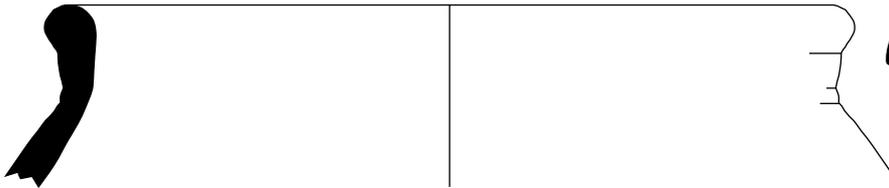
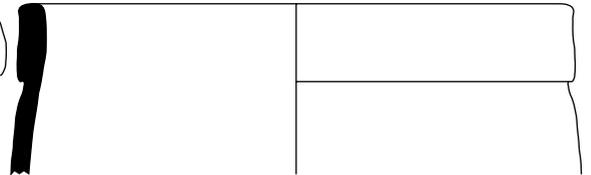
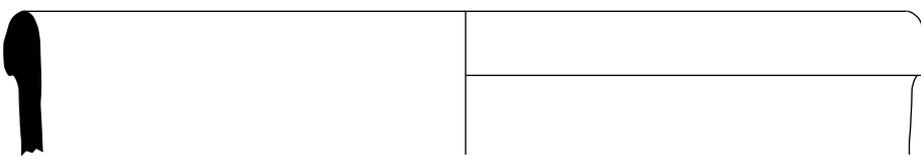
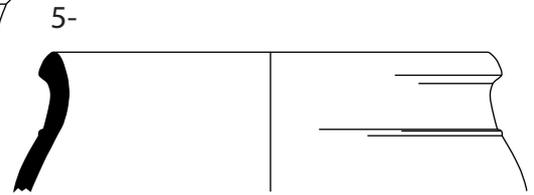
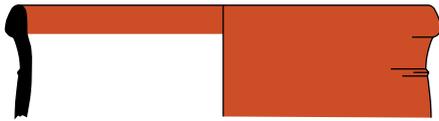
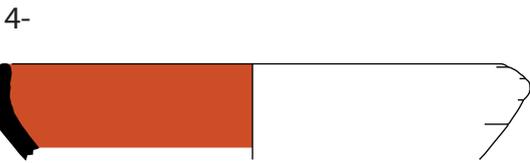
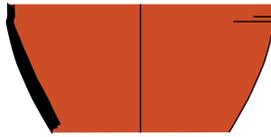
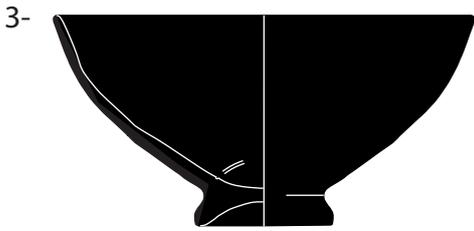
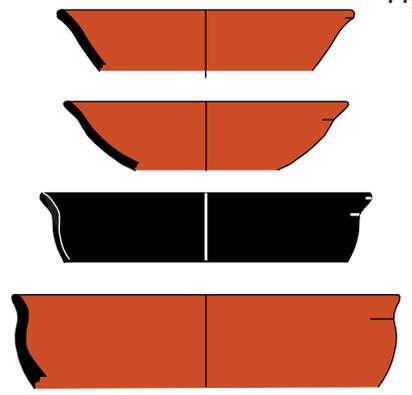
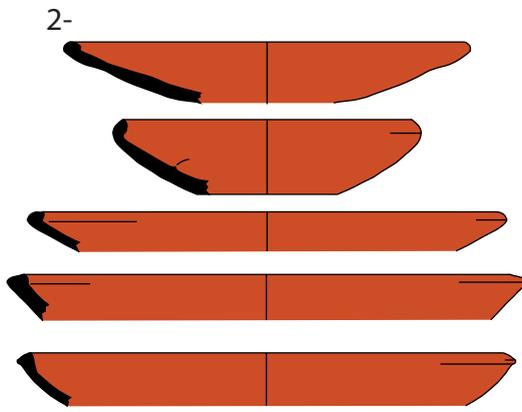
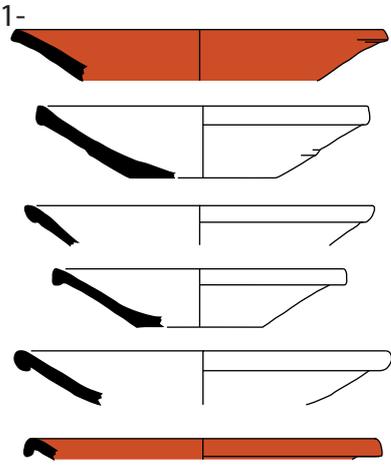
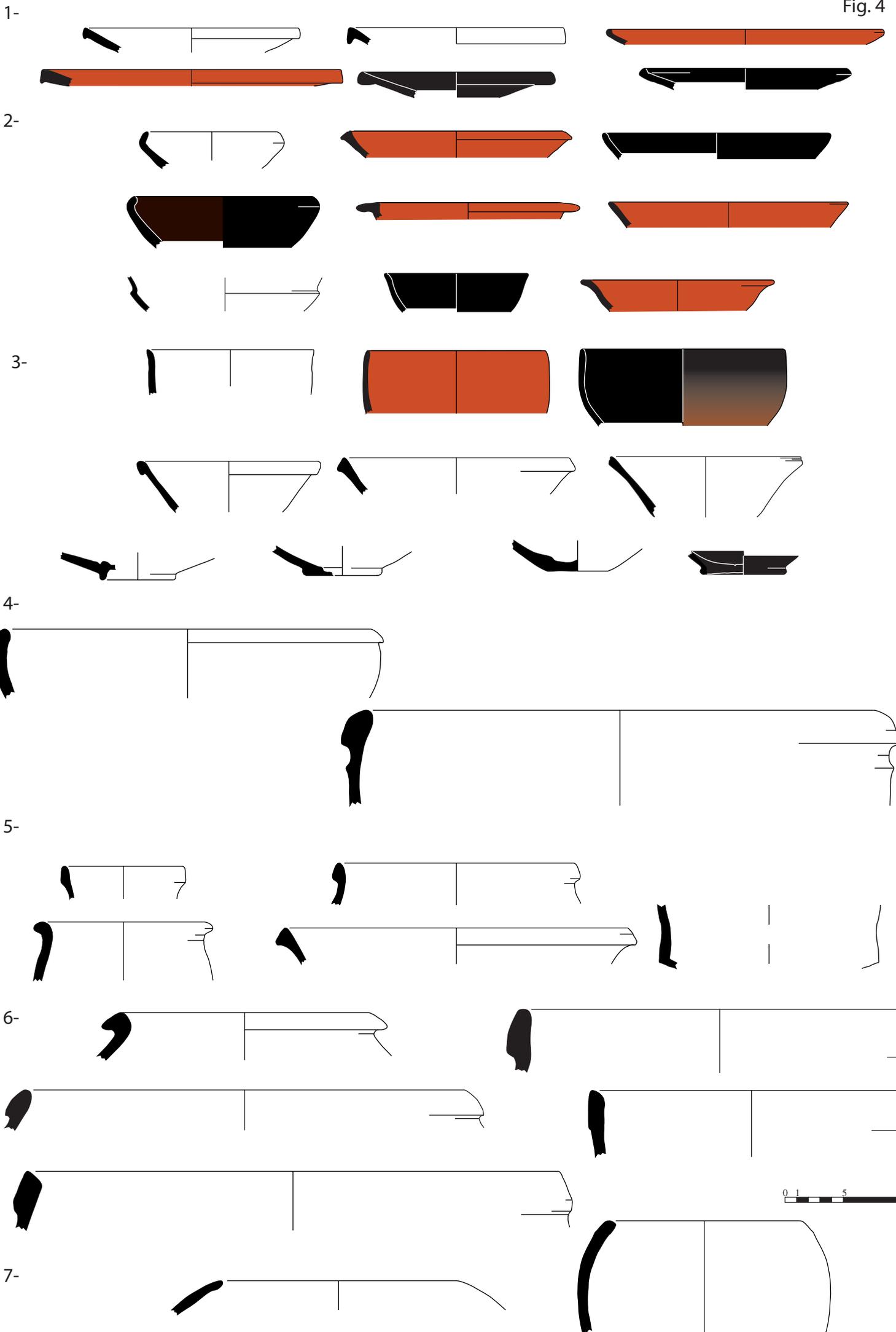
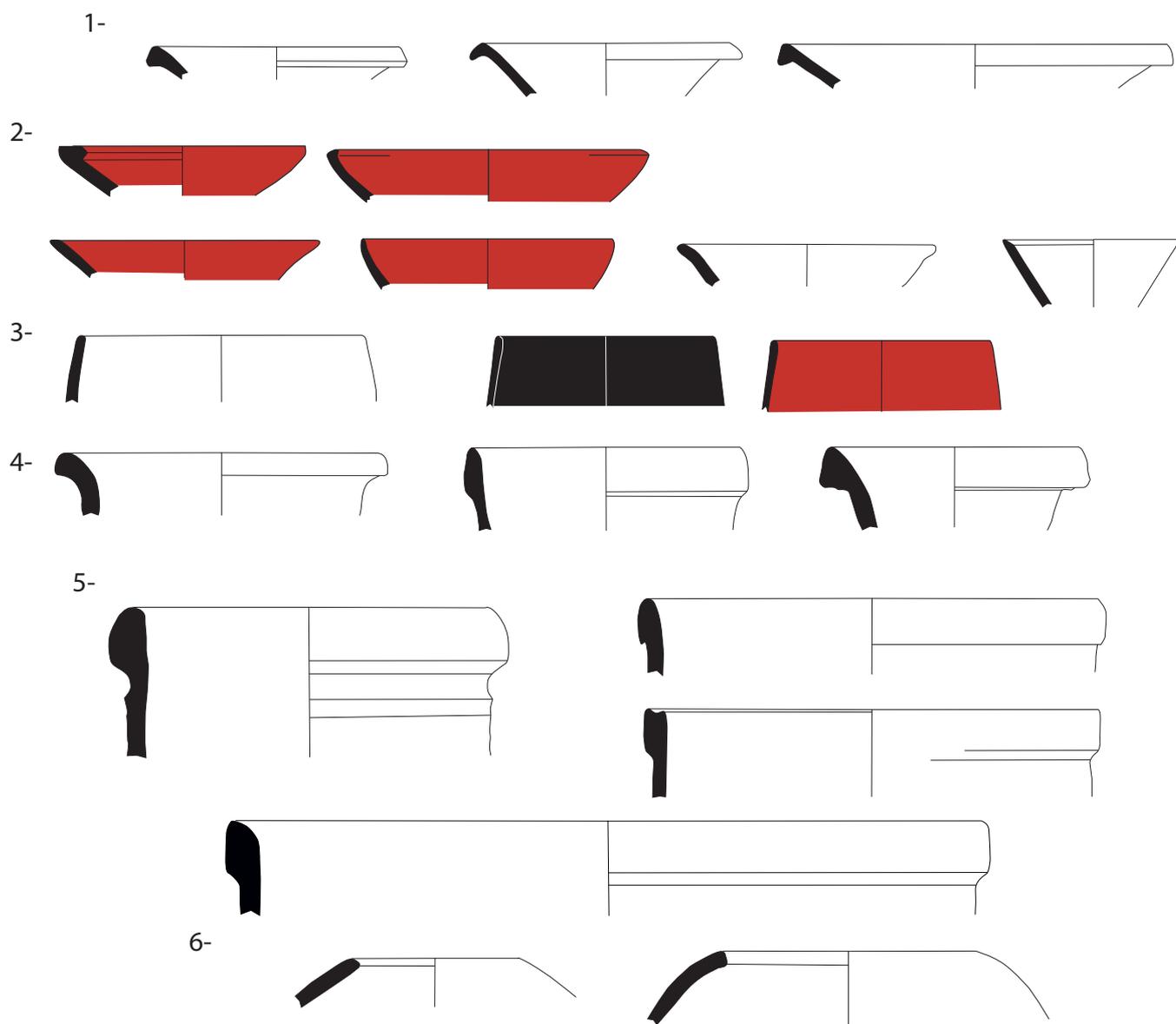


Fig. 4





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