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# Set in clay: altars in place at Cuina Turcului, Iron Gates Gorge

Piotr JACOBSSON[*]
Adina BORONEANŢ[**]

***Abstract:*** *The 1960s rescue excavation at the rock shelter of Cuina Turcului uncovered a large collection (over 100 specimens) of altar-pieces of Starčevo-Criș origin. The present paper investigates how and if these artefacts appear to create various zones of deposition on the terrace in front of the rock shelter or inside it and also if they provide evidence of mutual reinforcement of technological and "ritual" choices. Furthermore, they demonstrate the unusual character of the site, through high counts of endemic design forms and, conversely, extremely low counts of better – known types. Whilst the results are still highly preliminary they highlight both the importance of intra-site analysis in Neolithic studies, as well as the variation with the Starčevo-Criș culture.*

***Rezumat:*** *Săpăturile arheologice de salvare din adăpostul de la Cuina Turcului din anii '60 ai secolului trecut au dus la descoperirea a peste 100 de fragmente de altar de tip Starčevo-Criș. Articolul de față își propune să determine dacă aceste fragmente sunt grupate în zone de depunere discrete în interiorul adăpostului sau pe terasa din fața lui, precum și să pună în evidență anumite alegeri legate de un anume comportament ritual. Mai mult, prezența acestor fragmente subliniază caracterul deosebit al sitului, prin formele și tipurile diverse de altare și prezența în număr mic a celor binecunoscute până acum. Chiar dacă rezultatele sunt preliminare, ele subliniază importanța unei analize intra-sit în studiul neoliticului, punând încă o dată în evidență varietatea siturilor de tip Starčevo-Criș.*

***Keywords:*** *Iron Gates, Cuina Turcului, Starčevo-Criș, altar pieces.*
***Cuvinte cheie:*** *Porțile de Fier, Cuina Turcului, Starčevo-Criș, altare.*

The rescue excavations at the rock shelter at Cuina Turcului uncovered, besides the well quoted Epi-Paleolithic occupation and some possible Lepenski Vir-like artefacts (V. Boroneanţ 2000), a significant number of other finds (Al. Păunescu 1978). Three "Criș" layers were initially differentiated, although re-fitting of some of the ceramic fragments from different layers puts site stratigraphy into doubt (A. Boroneanţ 2010). However, despite the loss of fine contextual information, present material suggests that the rock shelter transgressed a place of brief, seasonal fishing or herding and played a different role in the life of the Iron Gates inhabitants. Hence, the vast amount of animal bones, the large amount of chipped stone remains, as well as an array of polished stone tools, beads and pendants (Al. Păunescu 1978) - all on a relatively limited area - point to conspicuous consumption and prestige-building, whilst the unusually good quality of the ceramic assemblage tells us of the material props of these practices. Within these possible props, the so-called "altars" constitute a curious form of creating human space, as shall be explored below.

## ◈ Altars in South – East European Neolithic(s)

Ceramic "altars" (fig. 1) have been reported throughout the Neolithic of South-Eastern Europe (Z. Maxim 2000; C. Minichreiter 1992, 2002; A. McPherron, D. Srejovic 1988; S. Karmanski 2005; J. Makkay 1999; in the Iron Gates context they have also been found in the definitely ceramic layers of "Lepenski Vir III" (D. Srejovic 1971)). They appear to be an indigenous phenomenon, in the face of the absence of such material in the Neolithics of temperate Europe, be they the incised linear pottery culture (eg. J. Pavuk 1980; I. Pavlů, V. Vokelek 1992), Cucuteni-Tripole (e.g. S. Marinescu-Bîlcu, A. Bolomey 2000) or the cultures of the TRB Neolithization (M. Malmer 2002). Such pieces have been attributed a vast variety of functions and meanings in the archaeological record (Z. Maxim 2000, p. 121-122; C. Minichreiter 2002, p. 23), although, to the current authors best knowledge, there has been no trace studies conducted so far, leaving statements of their use as an untested hypothesis.

[*] University of Edinburgh, School of History, Classics and Archaeology, Edinburgh U.K.; p.jacobsson@sms.ed.ac.uk
[**] Institute of Archaeology "Vasile Pârvan", str. H. Coandă, nr. 11, sector 1, Bucureşti; boro30@gmail.com

Another complication arises from their variety of forms (fig. 1). As pointed out nearly 80 years ago by V.A. Gorodzov (1933, p. 98), not only formal variety, but also purpose of the artefacts, as well as their broader contextual relations need to be taken into account when creating interpretive archaeological constructs. This is especially important in South-East Europe where the diversity of time and context of the Neolithic(s) requires a critical attitude towards the tendency of lumping cultural expression. Hence, the great formal variety of "altars" points to the question of the reliability of their grouping as a single entity. Within the specific case of Cuina Turcului this question can be approached from the angle of the attribute associations in altar production and their differential deposition within the site.

In generally accepted terminology of socio-cultural anthropology, "place" denotes a location created by human activity within it (S.M. Low, D. Lawrence-Zuniga 2003). As noted by P. Bourdieu (1977, 1979), a place also defines the activities taking place within it, also becoming a self-reproducing agent. Artefacts exist within a spatial dimension and are employed within places of human activity (sometimes, like in deep-sea exploration, they are the totality of human activity) hence also taking part in the intricate web of reproduction of the place and through these webs they are linked to other artefacts. This is well-appreciated in archaeological practice, as it is stability of such webs of interaction that create recurrence of "cultural space", the action of repeating acts of production and deployment of material, which gives rise to phenomena sometimes described as "archaeological cultures" (K.C. Chang 1967, p. 30). As a result of such effects of the people upon their surroundings, a spatial dimension is added to what L.S. Klejn described as a "working typology" – i.e. a typology which predicts recurrences of other artefacts, as well as absolute dates and hence generates further understanding of past behaviour (L.S. Klejn 1991). Hence the need to ask questions on how altar fragments at Cuina Turcului relate to one another and whether there are formal differences embodying significant cultural differences. And perhaps, what do altar fragments tell us of Cuina Turcului as a place?

## ◈ Questions Asked

The collection of 142 altar pieces recovered from Cuina Turcului in the 1965-1968 campaigns (tab. 1, fig. 4) allowed to define the following issues:

1. Due to their complicated geometries, recreation of an altar shape from a leg or a rim fragment only is impossible. One way of emergence from the bind is the application of zooarchaeological terminology of *specimen* and *element* – whereby the singular fragment of an altar is a *specimen*, but can also be recognized as an *element*, e.g. a leg, or a recipient (E.J. Reitz, E.S. Wing 2008). The main advantage here is that it avoids artificially increasing the statistic find when two fragments derive from the same object. Also, use of altar morphology using minimum counts as in case of pottery is difficult, due to the fact that recipient rims cannot be connected to particular legs if fragmented. This approach triggers the questions: what is the difference between various elements (fig. 2)? Are altars with bases significantly different from altars with legs? And how do rims/fragments of recipients relate to supporting elements (legs, bases)?
2. Having taken into account the variation of elements, we can proceed to the problem of their associations. Is there any apparent sorting of altar specimens? Have we got any evidence for their differentiation based on their material characteristics? And how did they in turn define the area surrounding the rock-shelter?

## ◈ Methodology

The analysis was conducted based on a table of attributes organized according to the sequence involved in creation and deposition of the altarpiece (fig. 3). It needs to be noted here that the observations regarding the clay and temper (texture) selections as well as firing procedures are conditional at this point and for confirmation need to be further explored by means of scientific analysis and experimentation. Furthermore, some specimens, due to their geometry, are in all likelihood derived from altars, yet are impossible to pin down to element. Such specimens have been noted as "unidentified".

Counts of specimens within their horizontal context was mapped, both in terms of the actual number of pieces retrieved in an excavation unit and of the proportion of pieces retrieved proportional

to the size of the unit, hence highlighting any general spatial patterns. Further juxtaposition of the data both in relation to element and context highlighted possible patterns[1].

## ◈ Comparison of element classes

In terms of both clay and temper proxies there was little observed different between various classes of elements, suggesting the use of similar raw materials for the production of a complete altar-piece. There is however a very well defined association between recipients and slip application (99.9% significant, V= 0.754, cf. tab. 2), potentially suggesting their use in display. Alternatively the slip and burnishing might have been employed to reduce the permeability of the recipient (C. Orton *et alii* 1993; A.O. Shepard 1956, p. 191) or for mere aesthetic reasons.

## ◈ Legs and bases

In terms of texture there seems to be some superficial difference between legs and bases, however it appears not to be supported within the 10% significance boundary. This means that we lack definite evidence that legs and bases were distinguished at the level of paste preparation. Furthermore, this lack of clear-cut differentiation is also apparent in the deposition patterns of the two classes of elements. Hence we lack any evidence for their differential use at this stage.

However, although most specimens in each category remain undecorated, the few motifs present are usually exclusive on either legs or bases (tab. 3, fig. 5). Whilst, due to the low amount of such specimens, making any decisive argument is difficult, it needs to be noted that the majority of decorative patterns do not seem to be constricted by the shape of the specimen – they could be executed both on legs and bases.

## ◈ Horizontal contexts

By horizontal context we mean the differentiation of the site into discrete trenches on the site plan. Two main concentrations have been observed (fig. 4): one towards the rock-shelter entrance and one towards the river. The key differentiating feature of the two is the higher incidence of slipped, burnished and decorated specimens in the first concentration (cf. tab. 4-5). This appears independent of the element classes as seen in comparison of specimens from trenches Int B and Cas O which had significantly different surface finish, but no reliable difference between element classes (no association within 90% margin for elements, but 95% reliable difference between surface finish).

Access to the vast majority of the second concentration allowed us to further refine its characteristics. It appears that throughout the concentration there is a stable amount of rim fragments (0.3-0.7/sqm). The amount of legs and bases on the other hand seems to peak in trenches Cas B, Cas E, Cas H and Cas G. Hence the proportion of rim/body to leg/base specimens between Cas O and of Cas B, E, H and G is 6/5 against 22/51 (with the mean proportion 5.5/12.75) respectively. The correlation is however significant only at 75%, meaning that there is one chance in four that it arose through random dispersal of elements. A further sub-division seems to suggest that Cas B and Cas G tend to have an increased incidence of decorated legs and bases, whilst the amount of such elements in Cas E and H is below expected site average (2 specimens out of 28 are decorated in trenches Cas E and H, as opposed to 11 out of 19 in Cas B and G).

## ◈ Altar variation within Cuina Turcului

There are two broad varieties of altar elements at Cuina Turcului: the slipped and the un-slipped, with the former recurrent amongst recipients, yet not exclusive to them. Only this distinction has a set of separate associations to be interpreted with confidence as a culturally relevant one. This does not mean that there are other dimensions of variety in the collection, but these are not objectified

[1] Where appropriate sample numbers were available these were subsequently tested to within at least 90% confidence interval or higher (M. Fletcher, G.R. Lock 2005), meaning the probability that the patterns described are the result of random distribution is less than 10%. This does account only for pure stochastic activity, not for site formation processes. All the quantitative analysis refers to contexts with 10 or more specimens identified.

by their context and hence there are insufficient grounds to state that they played an active part in the formation of Cuina Turcului as a place. The two-fold distinction gives a picture of two deposition areas – one towards the rock-shelter and one towards the river. Such difference might be the result of both synchronic and diachronic patterning. In the later case two different scenarios are possible:

1. The site has been used at two discrete phases and the technological variation bears the proof of that.
2. There was a continuous use of the site and the apparent grouping into two discrete areas is the result of site formation and poor resolution of the excavation units.

The problem with the diachronic interpretations is that both of them would require that across different phases different areas would have been used, resulting in a horizontal stratigraphy for which we have no evidence. The second alternative could possibly be defended under a scenario of an erosive environment removing a later phase from the sloping area outside the shelter, yet the thick stratification of sediments since the Neolithic gives evidence against existence of an erosive environment outside Cuina Turcului. This leaves the possibility of synchronic accumulation of the altar specimens.

This scenario triggers the question of whether there is further differentiation in the material between the two proposed areas. Here the difference between the slipped and un-slipped elements would be part of creating a spatial difference, but other classes of material would have to follow suit if this assumption was to be fully defended. Otherwise the difference between the two varieties would be countered by other cultural material, signs of negotiation and contestation of space.

Another interesting observation relates to the problem of the specimen provenance. Firstly, there are very few conjoining specimens (only 8 out of 142). Taking into account that the vast majority of the site was excavated and that altars appear to break into relatively large fragments, one can make the assumption that there are too few specimens present to claim that all the fragments of all the vessels represented were deposited at the site. Furthermore, there are broken fragments with fired fractures, which appear uniform in colour with the remainder of the vessel. The latter observation appears inconsistent with fracture in direct fire during use life, a point further supported by lack of smudge marks on the legs and bases and outer surfaces of the recipients. Hence one can make a case that the fractures are the result of accident in the firing process. Yet the lack of conjoining specimens suggests that either the firing has not occurred at Cuina Turcului itself (or outside, nearby it) and thus one can make the case that the altars might have been brought in as already broken fragments and deposited in accordance with variety, away from their primary contexts, or, some of the altar fragments might have deliberately been taken away.

## ◈ Altars from Cuina Turcului within their local and regional contexts

The key limitation on placing Cuina Turcului altars in their local context of the Iron Gates Neolithic is that the systematic study of this period is very limited, hence making any apparent similarities or differences between the sites more likely to be the result of variable publication and excavation recording. Possibly the best known ceramic altar pieces in the Iron Gates come from the Neolithic layers at Lepenski Vir (D. Srejovic 1971, see fig. 1-4), whose rim morphology and use of a base as support demonstrates strong parallels with the fragmented material from Cuina Turcului (fig. 5), yet lack of comprehensive ceramics report hinders further study.

In broader regional terms of South-East Europe, Cuina Turcului stands out with the sheer amount of recovered altar pieces[2] (142 as compared to 16 from Trestiana, cf. E. Popuşoi 2005) a fact highlighted by the small size of the site. This discrepancy would be in line with the hypothesis proposing that specimens from Cuina Turcului are fragments brought in from elsewhere or the site is a "fragmentation source".

Another discrepancy regards the morphology of altars. Whilst Cuina Turcului provided the evidence for a vast amount of bases as compared to legs (49 to 25), such proportion is, to the authors' best knowledge, not encountered anywhere else with a comprehensive ceramic report (one out of sixteen at Trestiana). Conversely the varieties common to numerous other locations are present at Cuina Turcului in small numbers.

[2] Real numbers in what the altar fragments are concerned have been put out for very few other sites.

## ◈ Conclusion

The altars from Cuina Turcului, as any kind of artefact, exist in webs of relations amongst themselves, as well as with other classes of archaeological material. A conclusion stemming from both the positivist schools of European archaeology (M. Malmer 2002; L.S. Klejn 1991; B. Soudsky 1973), as well as the post-processual approaches of anglo-american scholars (e.g I. Hodder, S. Hutson 2003, Ch. 8) is quite clear: it is unreasonable to observe an item only as a separate entity. As such, the conclusions regarding the structuration of place at Cuina Turcului are in themselves open to further exploration, a stance that applies to any conclusion in any research discipline. Hence, the end sentences of this study can only be posed in form of future questions regarding the nature of finds both within the cave sites adjoining to Cuina Turcului, as well as the relations to other classes of archaeological material retained from the original excavations. Here the stress may be worth putting on establishing some form of chronology for the collection from Cuina, as well as generating a description of technological processes behind the recovered altarpieces. The establishment of more concrete temper and clay classes, as well as better, possibly experiment-aided, understanding of the firing process of altars might prove especially beneficial in understanding the relationships between material discovered and hence its entanglement in the Neolithic worlds. The unusual nature of the Cuina Turcului collection offers a unique insight into these worlds and future research shall help to continue its further widening.

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| Element | Cas E | Cas H | Cas B | Cas G | Cas O | Int B |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rim | 7 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 10 |
| Body | 3 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Leg | 5 | 2 | 7 | 5 | 1 | 3 |
| Base | 13 | 8 | 6 | 6 | 4 | 3 |
| Unidentified | 1 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |

**Tab. 1.** Distribution of the 142 altar elements by area.
Distribuția celor 142 de fragmente de altar în zona cercetată.

| Surface finish | Rims and bodies | legs and bases |
|---|---|---|
| None | 7 | 58 |
| Slipped/Burnished | 16 | 2 |
| TO | 1 | 19 |
| TO+ Slipped/Burnished | 20 | 4 |

**Tab. 2.** Frequencies of different surface finish in lower and upper elements of the altars from Cuina Turcului. "TO" (technical ornamentation) refers to modification of the vessel geometry for decorative purposes.
Frecvenţele de apariţie a diferitelor tipuri de tratare a suprafeţelor fragmentelor superioare sau inferioare ale altarelor de la Cuina Turcului. "TO" (tehnica de ornamentaţie) se referă la modificarea geometriei altarului din motive decorative.

| | C6 | C8 | C11 | C13 | C14 | C15 | C16 | C17 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Leg | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Base | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Fit | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

**Tab. 3.** Classes refer to (all non-slipped): C6 - a field of incised cross-hatchings, C8 - impressed edge, C11 - Series of incised lines, C 13 - groves with asymmetrical profile, C 14 - groves with symmetrical profile, C 15 - Deep finger impressions, C 16 - Deep finger impressions and series of indentations (C1-C5 not present in the specimens in question).
Clasele se referă la (exclusiv fragmente fără slip): C6 - haşuri, C8 - muchie cu impresiuni, C11 - o serie de linii incizate, C13 - caneluri cu profil asimetric, C14 - caneluri cu profil simetric, C15 - impresiuni de deget adânci, C16 - impresiuni de deget adânci şi o serie de indentaţii (C1-C5 - nu sunt prezente în specimenele discutate).

| Surface | Cas E | Cas H | Cas B | Cas G | Cas O | Int B |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| non-modified | 18 | 17 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 4 |
| burnish/slip | 5 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| TO | 1 | 0 | 6 | 8 | 0 | 3 |
| TO + burnished/slip | 5 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 8 |

**Tab. 4.** Surface types on the various elements.
Tipurile de suprafeţe ale diverselor elemente.

| Surface | Cas E | Cas H | Cas B | Cas G | Cas O | Int B | Site |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| non-modified | 62% | 85% | 38% | 40% | 64% | 22% | 54% |
| burnish/slip | 17% | 10% | 12% | 0% | 9% | 17% | 13% |
| TO | 4% | 0% | 38% | 54% | 0% | 17% | 15% |
| TO + burnished/slip | 17% | 5% | 12% | 6% | 27% | 44% | 18% |

**Tab. 5.** Proportion of different surface finish across contexts discussed in text and comparison to general site average.
Proporţiile diferitelor tipuri de tratament ale suprafeţelor din contextele discutate in text şi o comparaţie cu media generală a sitului.

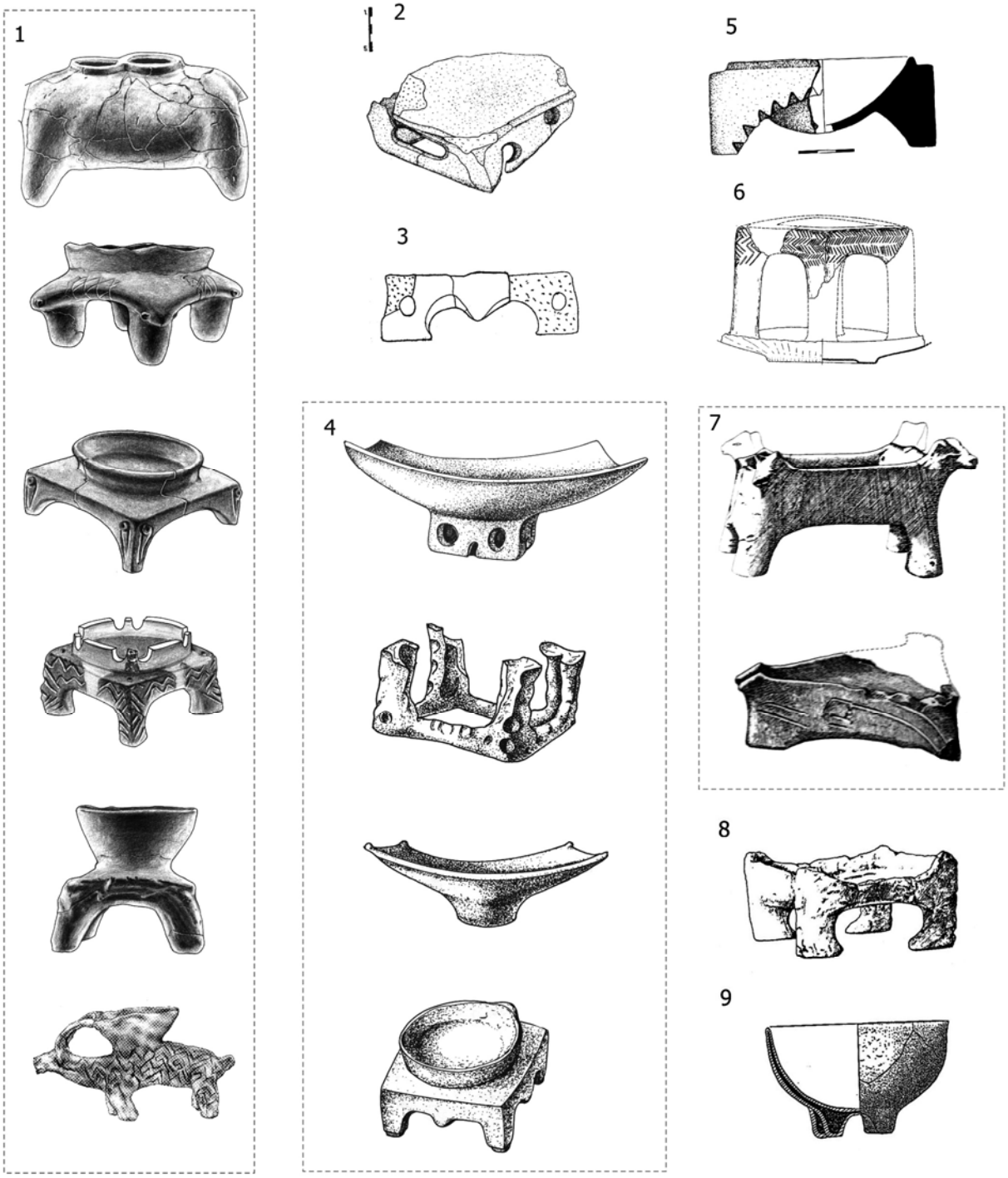


**Fig. 1.** Altars. 1 - Donja Branjevina, after S. Karmanski 2005, Plates XI, XXXIX, XLIII, XLIV, XLIX, LIV; 2 - Gornea, after Gh. Lazarovici 2006, fig. 36b; 3 - Pojejena Nucet, after S. Luca 1995, fig. 3; 4 - Lepenski Vir, after D. Srejovic 1971, Plates 12-13; 5 - Măgura, after R.R. Andreescu, P. Mirea 2008, fig. 11; 6 - Trestiana, after E. Popușoi 2005, fig. 47; 7 - Vinkovci, after K. Minichreiter 1992, Plates 5; 8 - Zadubravlje, after K. Minichreiter 1992, Plates 1; 9 - Pepelana, after K. Minichreiter 1992, Plate 3.

Altare. 1 - Donja Branjevina, după S. Karmanski 2005, Plates XI, XXXIX, XLIII, XLIV, XLIX, LIV; 2 - Gornea, după Gh. Lazarovici 2006, fig. 36b; 3 - Pojejena Nucet, după S. Luca 1995, fig. 3; 4 - Lepenski Vir, după D. Srejovic 1971, Plates 12-13; 5 - Măgura, după R.R. Andreescu, P. Mirea 2008, fig. 11; 6 - Trestiana, după E. Popușoi 2005, fig. 47; 7 - Vinkovci, după K. Minichreiter 1992, Plates 5; 8 - Zadubravlje, după K. Minichreiter 1992, Plates 1; 9 - Pepelana, după K. Minichreiter 1992, Plate 3.

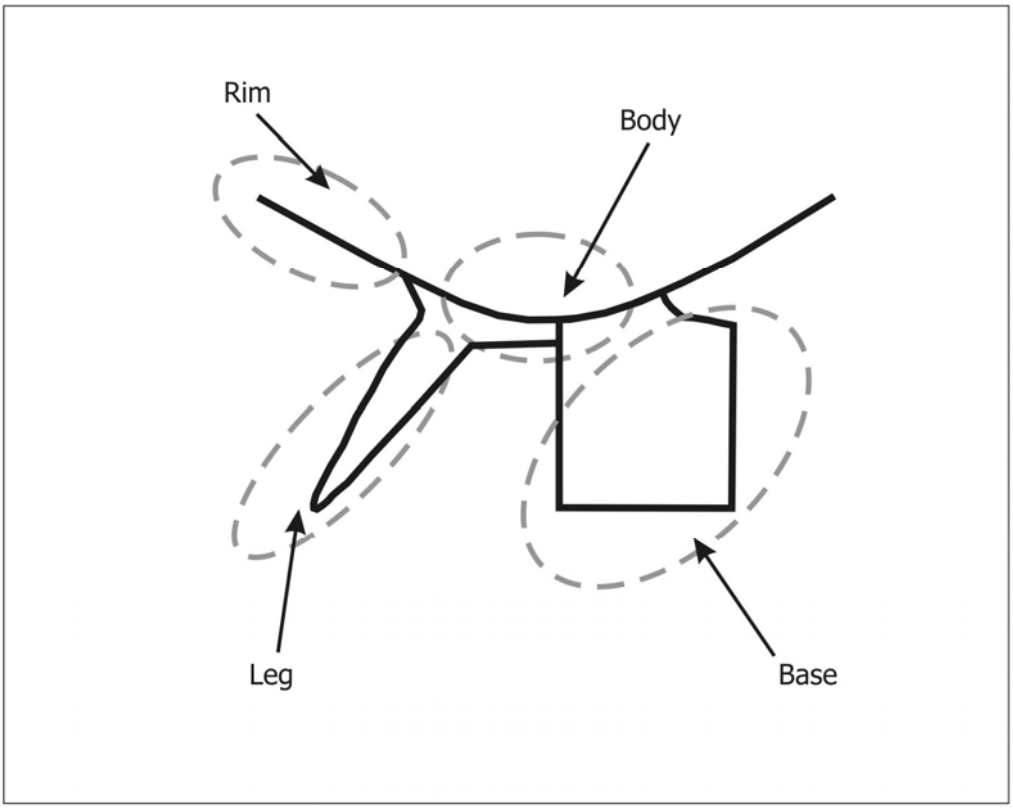


**Fig. 2.** Main elements of an “altar”.
Principalele elemente ale unui “altar”.

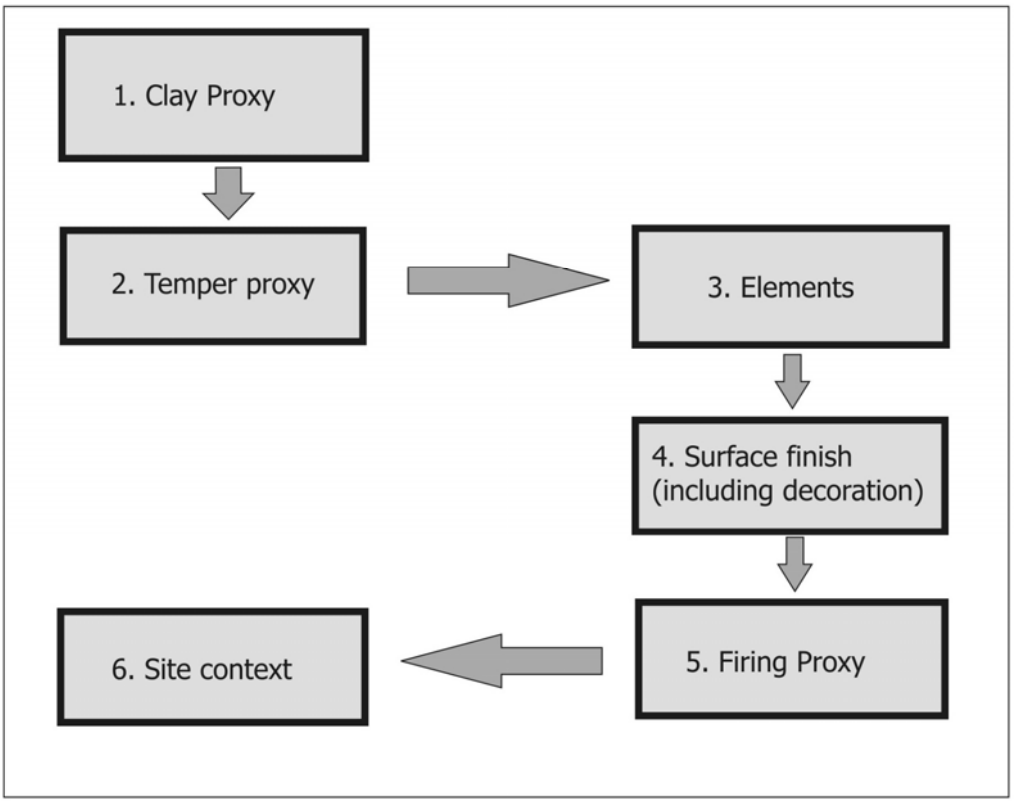


**Fig. 3.** Proposed operational sequence for “altar” study.
Propunere de secvenţă operaţională pentru studiul “altarelor”.

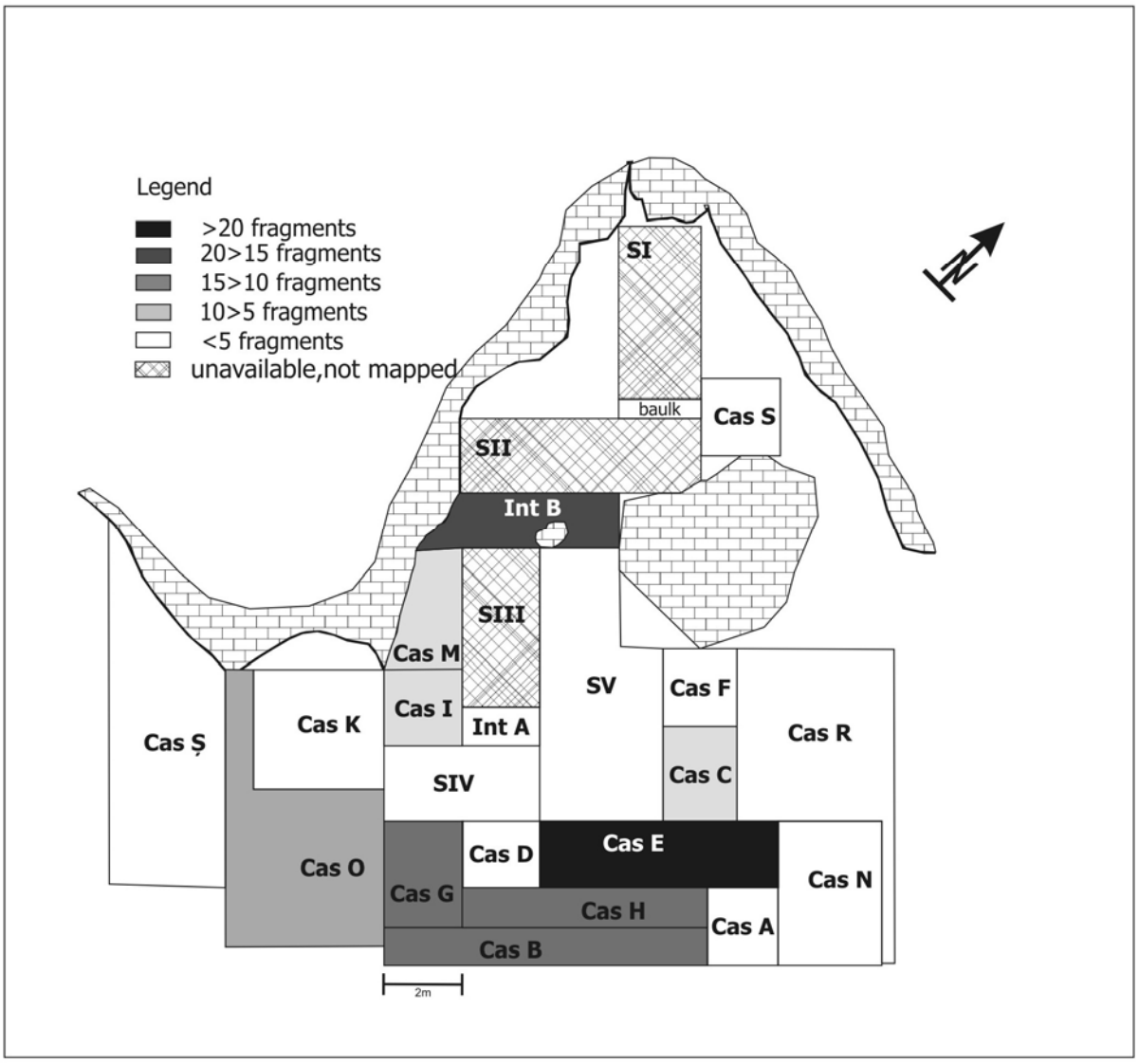


**Fig. 4.** Cuina Turcului rock shelter. Distribution of altar fragments within the trenches.
Adăpostul de sub stâncă de la Cuina Turcului. Distribuţia fragmentelor de altare pe secţiuni.

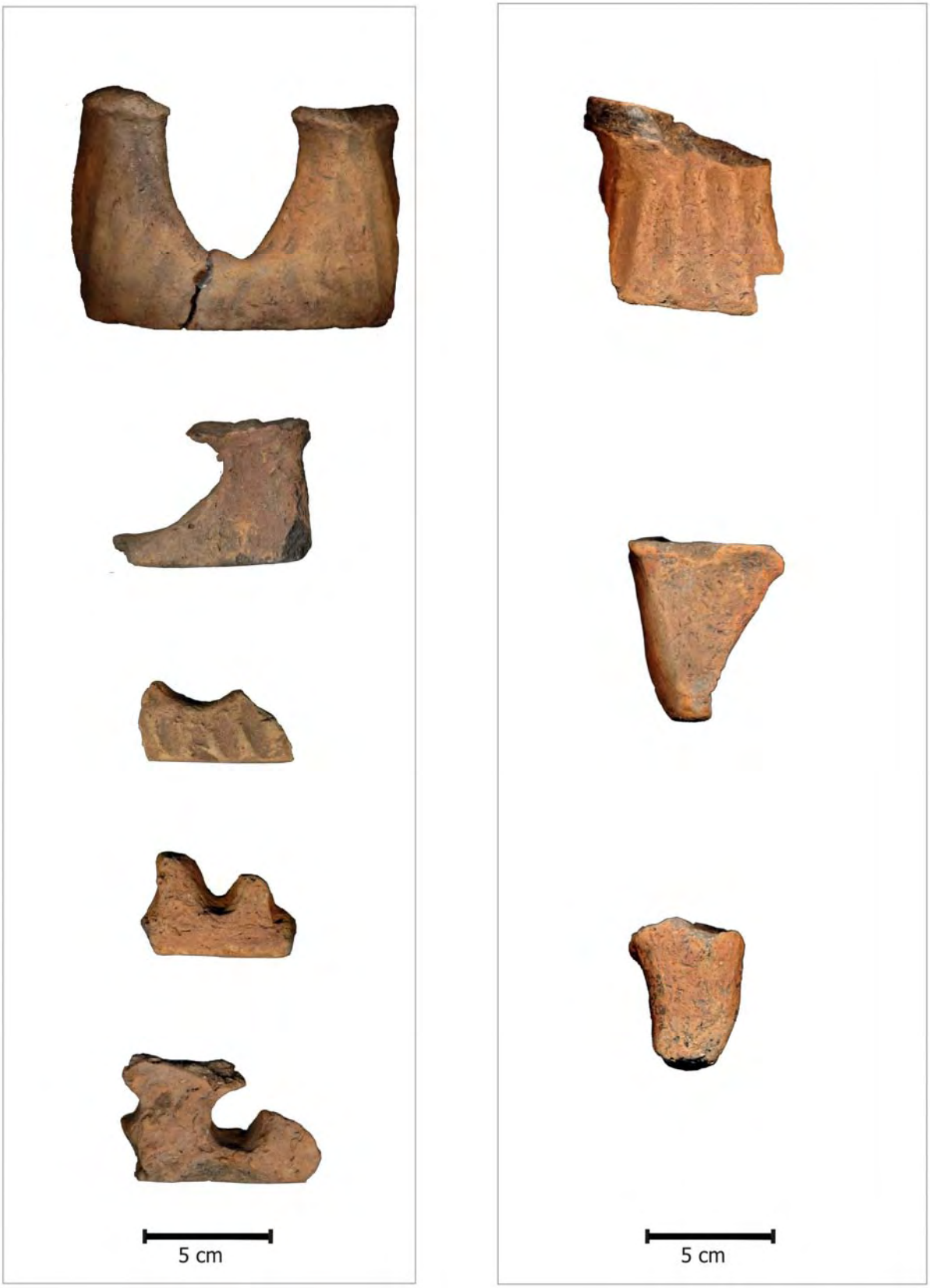


**Fig. 5.** Altar fragments from Cuina Turcului.
Fragmente de altar de la Cuina Turcului.