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A new type of Late Chalcolithic zoomorphic cult tables

Stoilka TERZIJSKA-IGNATOVA*

Abstract: *There has been an increased interest in the recent years towards a certain category of clay finds yielded in large quantities by Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites in a vast area including Anatolia and the Balkans, Southeast and Central Europe. These are the so-called ceramic "cult tables" described in the various publications by a wide range of terms. The problem of the precise defining of these objects results from their uncertain function.*

Different researchers, despite the fact that most of them agree about the ritual function of these objects, use various denominations implying concrete meanings, this way determining their use, without having any firm proofs for it. Therefore, the use of more adequate denominations related to the "construction" of these objects rather than to their function will be more appropriate.

The author of the present paper proposes a differentiation of these artifacts at a basic level into two groups: "cult tables" (the ones with a flat table surface) and "cult tables with a receptacle" (inserted, semi-inserted or overbuilt).

The three cult tables from Tell Yunatsite are differentiated in a separate type based on their construction and stylistic characteristics. They differ from the rest of the cult tables yielded by other Chalcolithic sites in Bulgaria and the neighbouring regions. The three cult tables from Tell Yunatsite presented in the paper have zoomorphic typical features but the "body" of the tables is flat (slightly convex in one of the cases), horizontal and without receptacle. These artifacts can be defined as zoomorphic "figurines-tables". They also have an additional special feature – an opening in the central part of the body, which represents another common characteristic between the zoomorphic figurines and the zoomorphic tables presented in the article.

Rezumat: *În ultimii ani, a existat un interes crescut față de o anumită categorie de obiecte de argilă, descoperite în număr mare în situri neolitice și eneolitice dintr-o arie vastă ce include Anatolia și Balcanii, sud-estul și centrul Europei. Acestea sunt așa-numitele "măsuțe de cult" descrise în diferite publicații într-o gamă largă de termeni. Problema definirii precise a acestor obiecte rezultă din funcția lor incertă.*

Diferiți cercetători, în pofida faptului că cea mai mare parte a lor sunt de acord cu funcția rituală a acestor obiecte, utilizează diferite denumiri ce implică anumite înțelesuri, în acest fel determinând modul lor de utilizare, fără a avea o dovadă certă pentru aceasta. De aceea, utilizarea unei denumiri ce corespunde mai degrabă cu "modul de construcție" al acestora decât cu rolul lor va fi mai adecvată.

Autorul prezentului articol propune diferențierea acestor artefacte, la un nivel elementar, în două grupuri: "măsuțe de cult" (cele cu suprafață plană) și "măsuțe de cult cu recipient" (inserat, semi-inserat sau suprapus).

Cele trei măsuțe de cult din tell-ul de la Yunatsite se diferențiază într-un tip aparte, pe baza construcției și caracteristicilor stilistice. Ele diferă de celelalte măsuțe de cult descoperite în alte situri eneolitice din Bulgaria și regiunile învecinate. Cele trei măsuțe de cult de la Tell Yunatsite descrise în acest articol prezintă caracteristici zoomorfe tipice dar "corpul" măsuței este plan (ușor convex în unul dintre cazuri), orizontal și fără recipient. Aceste artefacte pot fi definite ca "măsuțe-figurine" zoomorfe. Ele au de asemenea o caracteristică specială suplimentară - o deschidere în partea centrală a corpului, care reprezintă un alt element comun pentru figurinele zoomorfe și măsuțele zoomorfe prezentate în articol.

Keywords: *Chalcolithic, Tell Yunatsite, ceramic cult tables, zoomorphic cult tables.*

Cuvinte cheie: *Calcolitic, Tell Yunatsite, măsuțe de cult din ceramică, măsuțe de cult zoomorfe.*

Recently, there has been an increased interest in the archaeological literature towards one particular category of clay finds, yielded in large quantities by Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites in a rather vast area including Anatolia and the Balkans, Southeast and Central Europe. These are the so-called ceramic "cult tables" described in various publications by a wide range of terms. The problem with the precise defining of these objects results from the uncertainty surrounding their exact function (H. Schwarzberg 2003; 2005b, p. 302-306; B. Николов 2007, p. 9). The fact that some of them have a receptacle¹, presumably used for pouring/storing liquids, is used by some specialists as a reason to define them as triangular or quadrangular vessels on legs, with a flat or concave surface

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¹ In this article I use the term "receptacle" summarizing the meanings of the words used for describing vessels for storing liquids but a different function also possible (Л. Андрейчин *et alii* 1973, p. 95).

(H. Schwarzberg 2005a, p. 255; 2005b, p. 247). According to other specialists, the zoomorphic shape of the body as well as the zoomorphic heads/heads and tails put part of these artifacts in the classification of zoomorphic vessels (В. Балабина 2001, p. 17). Detev also used the terms “table-like or zoomorphic vessels” when describing the tables with zoomorphic decoration from Yassatepe (П. Детев 1960, p. 26-28). In other publications these objects are described as small altars, lamps, vessels for paints or pigments, etc. (В. Николов 2007, p. 9; H. Schwarzberg 2003, p. 79-80 with ref.). Their function as vessels for burning incense or fragrant (anesthetic?) substances is also difficult to prove (A. Sherratt 1991, p. 53). Some authors believe that part of these finds are copies/models of large size altars such as the ones discovered during archaeological excavations and had the same function (S. Stankovič 1986, p. 92; X. Тодорова, И. Вайсов 1993, p. 216). The information provided by V. Mikov and N. Dzhabazov on the two cult tables found in the Devetaki Cave is also very interesting – at the moment of their discovery they were filled with ash. However, the authors neither provide further details regarding the ash, nor interpret the fact (В. Миков, Н. Джамбазов 1960, p. 94-95).

The term “cult tables” is introduced by P. Detev (В. Николов 2007, p. 9-11). Similar to the majority of authors, he also used it for describing both types of finds – tables with and without receptacle (П. Детев 1948, p. 9). V. Mikov also divides the tables into two groups – ones with flat surface and ones with a receptacle (В. Миков 1922-1925, p. 45).

The finds from Bulgaria (mainly those dated back to the Neolithic) have been studied by V. Nikolov and the results are published in a monograph (В. Николов 2007). He presents a review on the denominations of these objects in the publications and chooses the most often used and universal term describing these finds – “cult tables” (В. Николов 2007, p. 9-11, 113-128). He applies this name both to the objects with a receptacle and those with a flat table surface – in the review of the Chalcolithic finds (В. Николов 2007, p. 113-128). In some of his other publications, the same author differentiates between the Chalcolithic tables with inserted receptacle and those with a flat table surface but does not propose different terms for each type (В. Николов 2002, p. 324; В. Николов 2006, p. 126-130). I. Vajsov also divides the cult tables into tables with a flat table surface and tables with a low border (X. Тодорова, И. Вайсов 1993, p. 215-216 with ref.). V. Vozhilov divides the Late Chalcolithic tables from Kapitan Dimitriev into tables with and without a receptacle (В. Божилев 1999, p. 97). S. Chohadzhiev defines two categories – “cult tables” (with a flat table surface and a receptacle) and „altars” (a flat table surface with a conic shaped receptacle on it) (С. Чохаджиев 2006, p. 37).

The above research shows that, most of the authors use the word “tables” (except for those who regard them vessels) proceeding from the outer appearance of the objects – they stand on feet and probably something is placed on (or pored into) them. This function is indicated by the presence of receptacles (different in shape and depth), which are described by words designating vessels/storages for liquids – “small trough”, “small basin”, “reservoir” (Л. Андрейчин *et alii* 1973, p. 41, 382, 412, 873).

Summarizing the information presented above, the conclusion that can be made is the various researchers, although agreeing to the ritual function of these objects, use various denominations implying concrete meanings. This way, they assume what their use might have been, without having any concrete proof (H. Schwarzberg 2003, p. 80-81). Therefore, the use of more adequate denominations related to the “construction” of these objects rather than to their function (as it has become clear that the latter is impossible to be firmly defined for the moment) would be more logical.

Furthermore, it will be more specific if these objects are described as tables when they have legs and a flat horizontal table surface, i.e. when they really look like tables (Л. Андрейчин *et alii* 1973, p. 443); these include the Chalcolithic finds mainly. However, since term “cult tables” has become very popular, as the above research has shown, and each archaeologist can identify these finds under this term, it would be better to divide these artifacts at the first level to “cult tables” (the ones with a flat table surface) and “cult tables with a receptacle” (the receptacle being inserted, semi-inserted or overbuilt as defined by V. Nikolov - В. Николов 2007, p. 11). Later/At the next level, the taxonomic rows can recognize specific shapes, characteristics of the construction and ornamentation. This way, a unified classification about both Neolithic and Chalcolithic finds from this category can be applied.

At present, any attempt to answer the question whether these objects were used in the domestic rituals practices as small altars (providing special place for figurines or other cult objects in the houses), as vessels for storing liquids (related to *libacio* rituals), as altars (for burning various substances), as containers for pigments (for painting ritual decoration on the body or other cult

related objects), as incense-burners (for burning fragrant or anesthetic substances) or as oil lamps (used as illuminant in the house or maintaining ritual fire) lacks firm arguments and risks going into the direction of over interpreting these artifacts (H. Schwarzberg 2003, p. 79). However, it can be pointed out that the various shapes and ornamentation can hardly be regarded random, i.e. there are certain characteristics common for all artifacts, suggesting a similar function during a long time span (the Neolithic and the Chalcolithic). At the same time, there are specific features suggesting that certain types of these objects had special functions or special meaning was encoded in them. Another question which remains unanswered refers to the "functioning" of these artifacts as an element of a system, within a "set" together with other cult objects (e.g. various types of tables, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines and vessels) forming "ritual assemblages" used in various ritual practices. However, the scarce information about the context in which these finds were discovered does not allow reliable reconstructions (H. Schwarzberg 2003, p. 81). On the other hand, in very few cases we can be certain that the finds came from closed assemblages, i.e. when excavating a house, for example, we cannot be certain that the finds and the structures yielded by it provide correct information about the house interior and the objects used by its inhabitants under normal circumstances instead of offering a "snap shot" of the moment when the people had left their house under extreme circumstances. It is possible that the house inhabitants had had enough time to take away some or all belonging valued by them, undoubtedly including the cult objects, before the house was fired, demolished or abandoned due to other reasons related to constructional problems of the building, earthquake, enemy attack etc.).

I tried to make the denomination of the above mentioned artifacts more precise since in this article I will present a new type of these objects² – three Late Chalcolithic zoomorphic cult tables from *Tell Yunatsite*. Usually, new finds shed light on some problems related to the study of the available artifacts; however, it is also possible that sometimes they raise new questions. This is what has happened in this particular case.

The construction and the stylistic peculiarities of these three artifacts provide grounds to differentiate them as a separate type. They differed from the rest of the cult tables found at *Tell Yunatsite*³ and I was not able to find parallels in the published materials from other Chalcolithic sites in Bulgaria and the neighbouring regions.

Among the Chalcolithic artifacts found until present there are cult tables with a receptacle and zoomorphic elements – the shape of the "body" of the table, the legs, zoomorphic heads-protomes and tails (B. Балабина 2001, p. 27-32; B. Николов 2007, p. 113-128; С. Терзийска-Игнатова 2000, p. 115-116 with ref.).

The three tables presented here also have zoomorphic elements but the "body" of the table is flat (slightly convex in one of the cases), horizontal and lacks receptacle. These finds can be defined as zoomorphic "figurines-tables". They also have another typical feature – an opening in the central part of the body, which I will discuss later in this article (fig. 1, see no. 1-3).

One of the cult tables was redeposited and was found in the Early Bronze Age layer (fig. 1, see no. 1); the other two artifacts were yielded by the Late Chalcolithic level I (the final level) at *Tell Yunatsite* (fig. 2/2-3). Table № 2 came from a not very well defined context (from the space between house № 1 and house № 8, and does not have a fixed position). Table № 3 was found in the periphery of house № 2 among burnt debris, ash and animal bones (pl. 1). The house was destroyed by a huge fire and the skeletons of four of its inhabitants who had died in it were discovered under the ruins (B. Мацанова 2000, p. 121). Flint and bone tools as well as two more cult tables, zoomorphic clay figurine, three anthropomorphic ceramic legs and an astragalus were found in the region of this house and its surroundings.

² The use of the taxon "species" in this article is conditional since I present here only three finds from the entire collection yielded by the Late Chalcolithic structures at *Tell Yunatsite*. When developing a complete classification of the cult tables found at the site, these three finds will be classified in the relevant taxonomic row and it can be given another denomination in the hierarchical classification structure. Part of the cult tables with and without a receptacle from *Tell Yunatsite* has already been published but due to the fact that a small number of the finds have been studied, they are divided into two main groups (С. Терзийска-Игнатова 2000, p. 115-116). Currently, the cult table collection yielded by the site numbers several dozens of artifacts and there are cult tables with new shapes and ornamentation among them.

³ There are some more fragments from similar artifacts but they are so badly preserved that we cannot be certain that they belong to analogous artifacts.

Only half of the first table is preserved (fig. 2/1). The legs, which had oval section, are missing. The table surface is flat and horizontal. It is worth mentioning that it is not rectangular, it is wider at the corners where it had rested on the legs and narrows in the middle. Being shaped this way, the table anatomically resembles the back of a big, massive animal whose body is wider at the pelvis, at the hips. The corners are rounded and slightly thickened emphasizing the pelvic bones. Apart from this, the upper part of the table surface is decorated with incisions (probably depicting fur?). The apexes of the inscribed angles point to the middle of the surface table, the "backbone". It is the way the fur on the back of the cattle points out to the spine. This is similar to the fur structure on the back of cattle.

The back part of the second table is also preserved and in this case, there is an indicative element – a tail (fig. 2/2). The preserved leg is zoomorphic as well. The table surface is slightly convex marking the convex animal spine. The table is not decorated. It also has one more element, which is typical for a large number of the zoomorphic and all ornithomorphic figurines from *Tell Yunatsite* – a vertical opening in the central part of the body (S. Terzijska-Ignatova 2004).

There is no doubt that the third table, the best preserved one (only the legs are missing), is the most interesting among the three (fig. 2/3). The table surface- "body" is almost quadrangular with rounded angles. The angles, where the legs were, are thickened and slightly protruded. Similar to table № 1, they mark the shoulders of the animal. A tail has been attached at the back but it is missing now. The animal head is preserved – it is triangular, shaped by pinching the clay. Again, there is an opening in the central part of the table surface. Except for the marked anatomical typical features of the animal there is no additional ornamentation on the table.

It is difficult to determine whether tables № 1 and № 2 have also had heads at the front part, however, judging from table № 3 it is possible to assume that they have had similar forms.

The three tables presented above raise several questions. The first one concerns their size: they are too small being from 5-6 to 8-10 cm and it does not seem very probable that they had been used for some practical purposes, e.g. to put objects on them. The tables themselves are shaped as animal figurines. At this level of the research, it is not possible to answer the question why this eclectic approach was chosen provided that there were "ordinary" zoomorphic figurines and "ordinary" tables. The lack of a receptacle eliminates the hypothesis proposed by V. Nikolov, concerning one group of the Neolithic cult tables with a receptacle, which in his opinion present the womb of the Goddess Mother guarded by an animal/animals (probably a leopard) (B. Николов 2007, p. 107-108). The artifacts from *Tell Yunatsite* definitely depict large massive animals (an auroch or cattle) but shaped in a special way – as tables.

The openings in the central part of the surface table- "body" are another element which is worth commenting on. These openings have no function (e.g. to attach the table to something) since the table rests firmly on the four legs. As I have already mentioned, due to their small size it does not seem very probable that they were used to put other figurines or objects on them. The ornithomorphic figurines from *Tell Yunatsite* also have openings, which do not seem to have any function – they rest on a pedestal but have a vertical opening (again in the central part of the body!). The opening in the central part of the body was used for suspending the "flying" bird figurines (S. Terzijska-Ignatova 2004). The opening probably had another semantic meaning and in this case represents another common characteristics between the zoomorphic figurines and the tables presented above. Some of the Neolithic cult tables have small openings at the bottom of the receptacle but they definitely do not fit the context (B. Николов 2007, p. 107).

Regretfully, the three cult tables from *Tell Yunatsite* presented in this article do not shed light on the function of these objects; their role and place in the rituals of the prehistoric people also remain unclear. On the other hand, they contribute to the typological variety of these artifacts and are a proof of complex abstract ideas. The nature, the fauna were very important for the Chalcolithic people inhabiting *Tell Yunatsite*. Directly influenced by the environment, the people formed their beliefs and developed their religion and mythological system. They manufactured special objects bearing symbolic meaning and used them in various rituals (B. Николов 2007, p. 111-112). However, the concrete meaning and the function of these artifacts remain a hypothesis.

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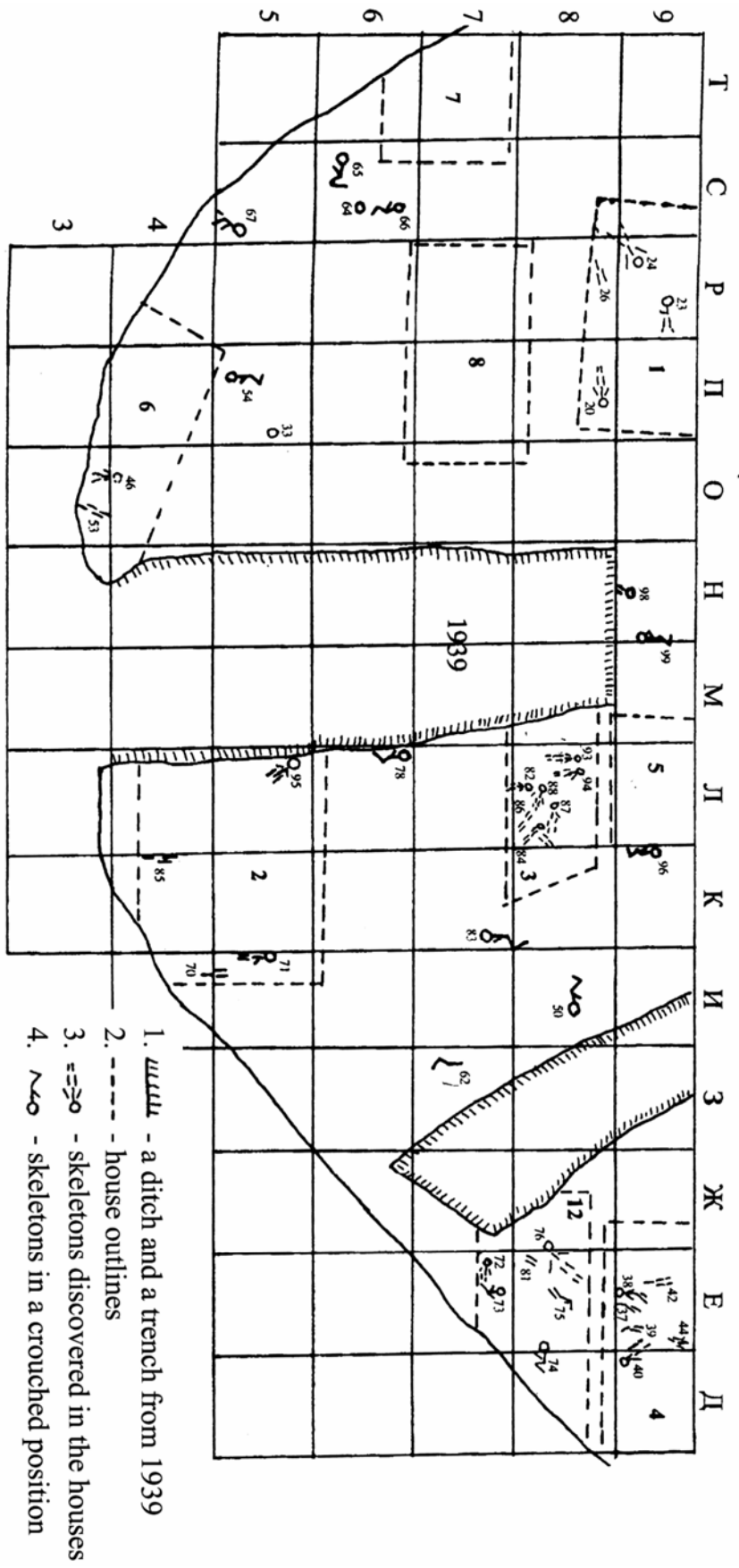


Fig. 1. Plan of the houses of Chalcolithic building level I at Te//Yunatsite (after V. Маданова 2000).
 Planul locuințelor din nivelul I de locuire eneolitic de la Te//ul Yunatsite (după V. Маданова 2000).

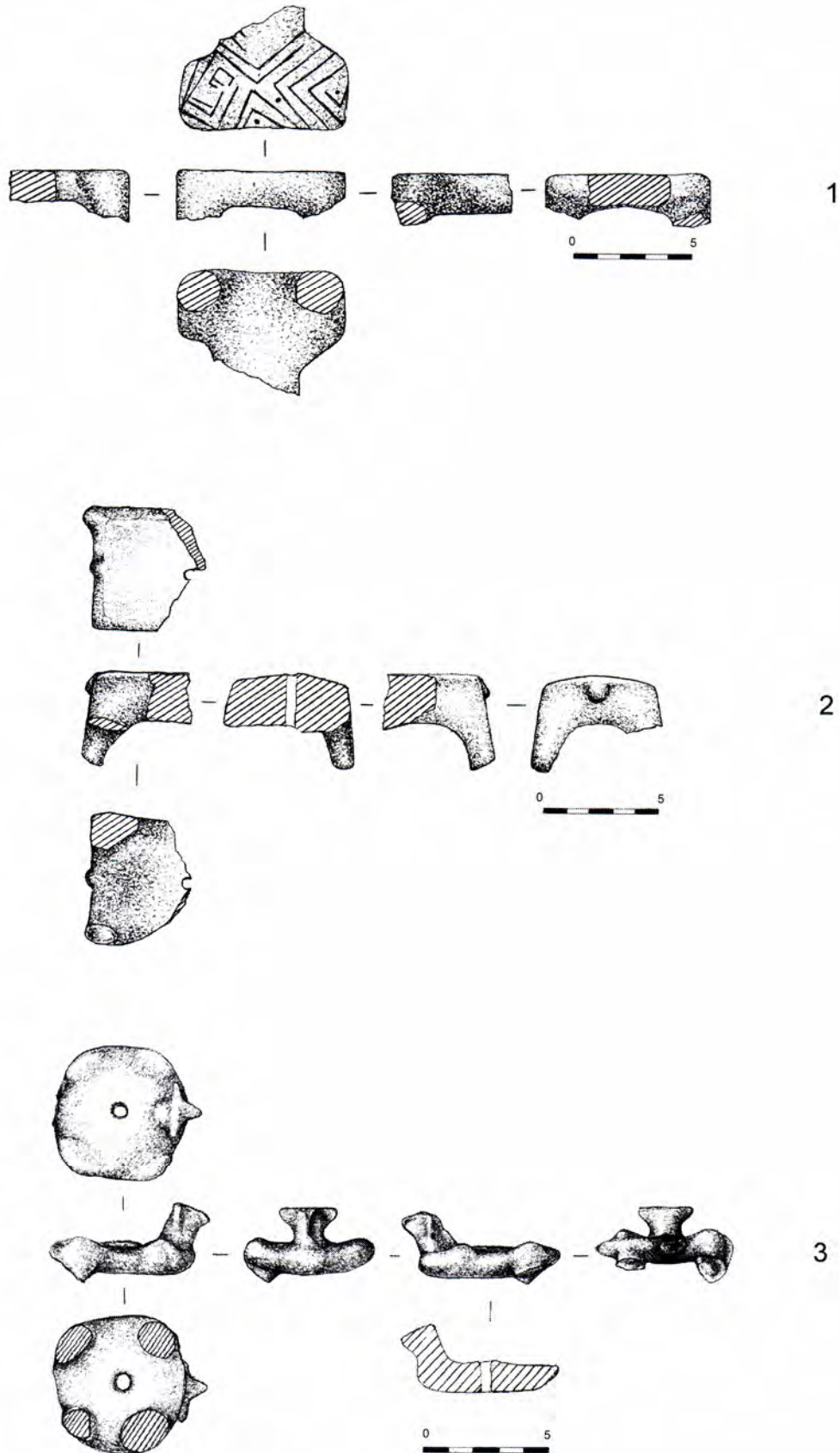


Fig. 2. Zoomorphic cult tables from *Tell Yunatsite* (bar scale in cm).
Măsuțe de cult zoomorfe din *Tell-ul Yunatsite* (scara în cm).