

■ SWAZILAND

Preliminary results of the 1998 field survey of farming community sites in Swaziland

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Introduction

This is a preliminary report on a field survey undertaken in Swaziland during 1998. The aim of the field survey was to discover and examine the locational preferences of iron-using farming communities. Swaziland was thought to offer excellent scope for assessing the locational model as, within an area of less than 18,000 km², four major ecological zones are represented, each associated with particular climatic, vegetational and geological characteristics. These are (from west to east) the Highveld, Middleveld, Lowveld and Lubombo regions. As the country exhibits such a broad spectrum of environments, it has been said that Swaziland is a "micro-cosmos of the eastern part of Southern Africa" (Goudie and Price-Williams 1983) without the coastal environment.

A number of archaeological features were observed during the 1998 field season. These include Late Iron Age Sotho stone-walled settlements on the Highveld and a fortification on a granite hill in the Middleveld. In addition, potential evidence of pre-colonial mining activity was apparent near Kabuta in the Middleveld, as at least 15 tunnels were dug into the mountain side, possibly for gold exploitation. Moreover, an overwhelming amount of evidence of metal production comes from the Mkondvo valley, where over 60 smelting sites were recorded in the vicinity of iron ore deposits. Nonetheless, this article concentrates on introducing the different kinds of decorated pottery sherds that were found during the 1998 field season.

A survey was carried out in six sample areas of 10 km by 20 km, chosen from the different

ecological zones (Figure 1). The evidence was gathered from a pedestrian survey, supplemented by information from Swazi informants, between August and December 1998. It was felt most effective to set up random sample units that two people could comfortably cover in one day: i.e. 2 km². The number of sample units was roughly proportional to the area of each ecological zone and approximately a 15% fraction was covered in each area.

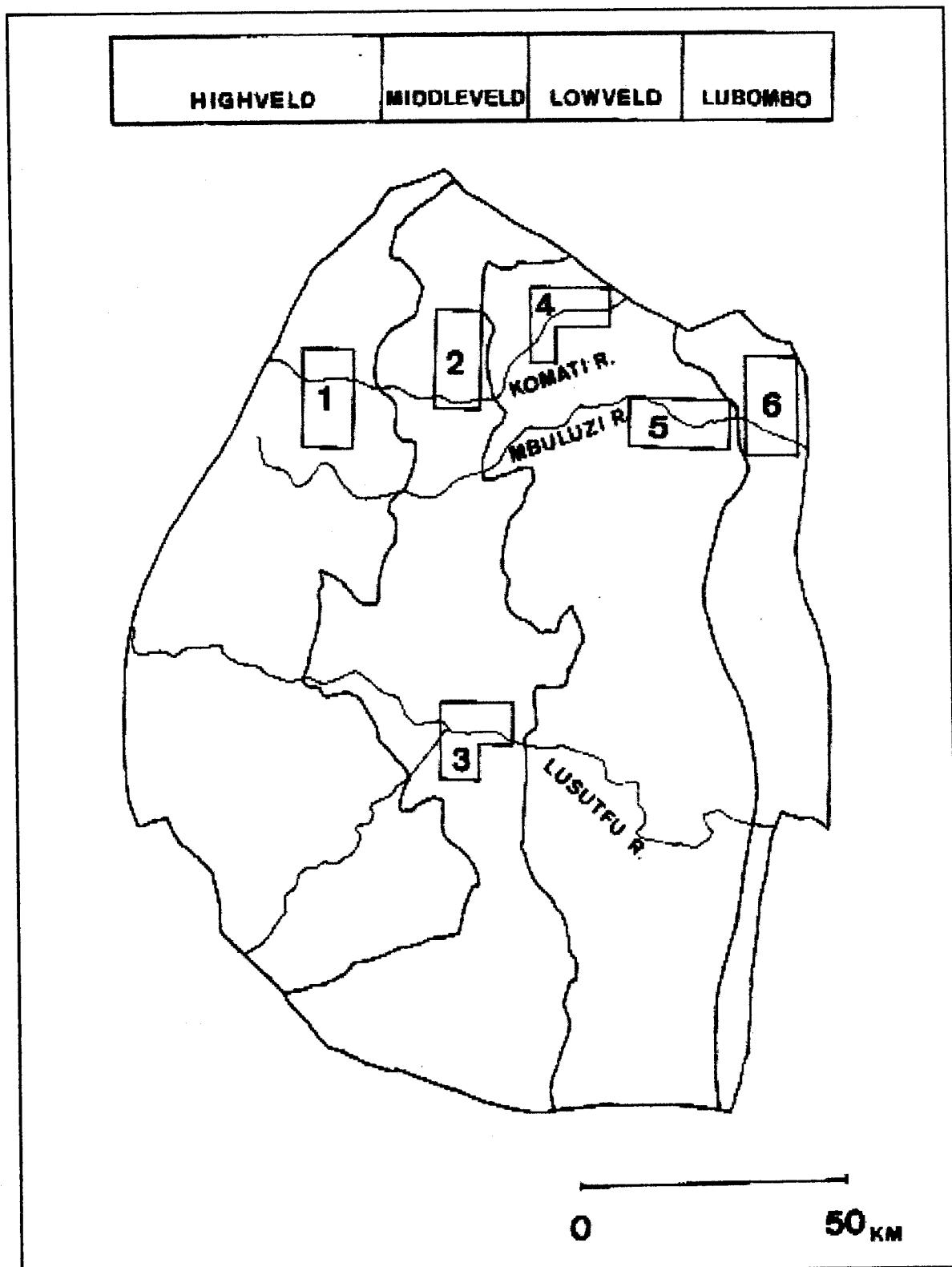
Results and discussions

During the 1999 field season, three main ceramic groups were identified:

(1) Group 1: This is similar to the Early Iron Age (EIA) Mzonjani group from KwaZulu-Natal, dated to c. A.D. 420-550 (Whitelaw and Moon 1996) (Figure 2: 1-5). Pots have an everted and often thickened rim that rises at an abrupt angle from the neck. Decoration on pot rims is common and the most common motifs include cross-hatching and oblique hatching, but a wide variety of motifs were observed. Incised hyphen-like decorations and oval dents on the everted rim of a bowl (Figure 2: 1 and 4) seem never to have been observed in KwaZulu-Natal (Maggs 1980; Whitelaw 1998; Whitelaw and Moon 1996). Only a few recognised sites in Swaziland contain Group 1 ceramics, all of them situated in mixed bush river valley locations with fertile soil, which is a similar distribution to that noted elsewhere in southern Africa (Whitelaw and Moon 1996). The existence of the Mzonjani group in Swaziland (Group 1) fits well into the pre-existing picture of the Early Iron Age, as the influence of the Urewe group can be seen both in KwaZulu-Natal (Whitelaw 1998) and in the Kruger National Park (Meyer, 1984; 1986). Ceramic groups such as Msuluzi, Ndondondwane and Ntshekane, which followed the Mzonjani group in KwaZulu-Natal were less prominent. If this archaeological signature is genuine, then the implication may be that the extent of the Kalundu Tradition did not influence the area as far east as Swaziland.

(2) Group 2: Pots of this group are usually sub-spherical in shape with no developed neck region and a clearly defined lip. Decoration includes deeply grooved parallel lines on the lower shoulder (Figure 4: 2, 4 and 5), with or without large vertically pointing triangles. These triangles are either blank inside or filled with parallel lines

Figure 1: Swaziland showing four ecological zones and the six survey areas.



(Figure 3: 1-2). Variations of the triangular motif can be recognised and some of them have smooth hill shapes, while others have a multi-lined outline (Figure 4: 3 and Figure 3: 3). The other motif consists of an interruption theme where vertical parallel lines cut into horizontal parallel lines (Figure 4: 1 and 6).

Group 2 is the most abundant ceramic group of the three and is found in all ecological zones of Swaziland, except the eastern Lowveld. Finds come from one of the bolted stone cave like structures in the Highveld, several modern clay pits in the Upper/Lower Middleveld and western Lowveld and ploughed fields in the Lubombo region. Group 2 ceramics are of particular interest as they have not yet been adequately dated. A similar, although small, ceramic sample has been tentatively dated in a test excavation at the Maguga Dam to c. a.d. 1400 (Huffman 1997). Similar ceramics are also known from SKI in the Kruger National Park and have been termed the "Mahlambamedube industry" (Meyer 1986), recently radiocarbon dated to c. a.d. 1400 (Meyer, personal communication, 1999).

(3) Group 3: Whenever it was possible to assess the shape, vessels of this group are often clearly sub-carinated at a lower shoulder or have a long and straight neck (Figure 5: 3-4). Decoration includes dotted comb-stamped motifs of single or multiple lines of triangular motifs. Sherds are often clearly decorated with red, black or blue slip. Some of the samples have shell impressions with spaced blocks of motif and others comb or bangle impressions. Group 3 is common in the Lubombo mountains (both on the top of the mountains and of their base) and in the eastern Lowveld, although it was not observed further to the west. Group 3 ceramics are also enigmatic, as their origins and relations with the other Iron Age pottery styles are unclear. One possibility is that they represent one of the ancestral groups for the later eastern Sotho-Tswana population, as Moloko itself cannot explain the entire Sotho-Tswana population. Alternatively, the strong carination and the position of the decoration resemble the ceramics of the coastal Tsonga people of KwaZulu-Natal and Mozambique (Lawton 1967).

Site location preferences

As only a handful of sites are recognized to belong to the same group as the EIA Mzonjani

phase in KwaZulu-Natal, the generalization does not carry much validity, but it seems that this early iron-using group preferred a mixed-bushveld river valley area in the Middleveld, which fits well with the situation known in KwaZulu-Natal. The ceramic distribution of Group 2, which is tentatively dated to the middle of the second millennium A.D., indicates that this group utilized, if not occupied, rather diverse ecological zones except for the driest eastern Lowveld. On the other hand, the distribution of Group 3 is confined to the Lubombo mountains and the driest eastern Lowveld.

If both dates for Group 2 and 3 are indeed correct and contemporaneous, then there are two possible implications. Firstly, both Groups were competing for land suitable for agricultural usage, with Group 2 the most powerful group in the area, leaving only the dry eastern Middleveld and the Lubombo mountain to the Group 3. Alternatively, Group 2 and 3 might have been practising different subsistence strategies altogether, utilizing different environments. In general, farming communities in southern Africa are believed to have kept livestock and to have grown sorghum and millet, prior to the introduction of maize. This kind of subsistence might have been true for Group 2 which seems to have occupied areas with high land capability and easy access to water sources. On the other hand, the subsistence of Group 3 which was distributed in the Lubombo mountain area and the dry eastern Lowveld, might have consisted more of millet, which is known for its drought resistance and greater ability to survive on poor sandy soils (Purseglove 1976). Much of the modern Lubombo and the eastern Lowveld has a low land capability and the area has more than a 60% drought hazard warning (Murdoch 1970).

The next step in understanding both Group 2 and Group 3 ceramics is to obtain large and better dated ceramic assemblages, preferably in association with other evidence for these groups' material culture and way of life. Therefore, test excavations of selected sites were conducted in 1999 and publication of the results of these is in preparation. Research of this kind will hopefully provide a better understanding of what remains an otherwise under researched period (A.D. 1300-1700) in southern African archaeology (Hall 1987).

Figure 2: Early Iron Age pottery sherds found during the field survey from 2531DC19 (Scale 2:3).

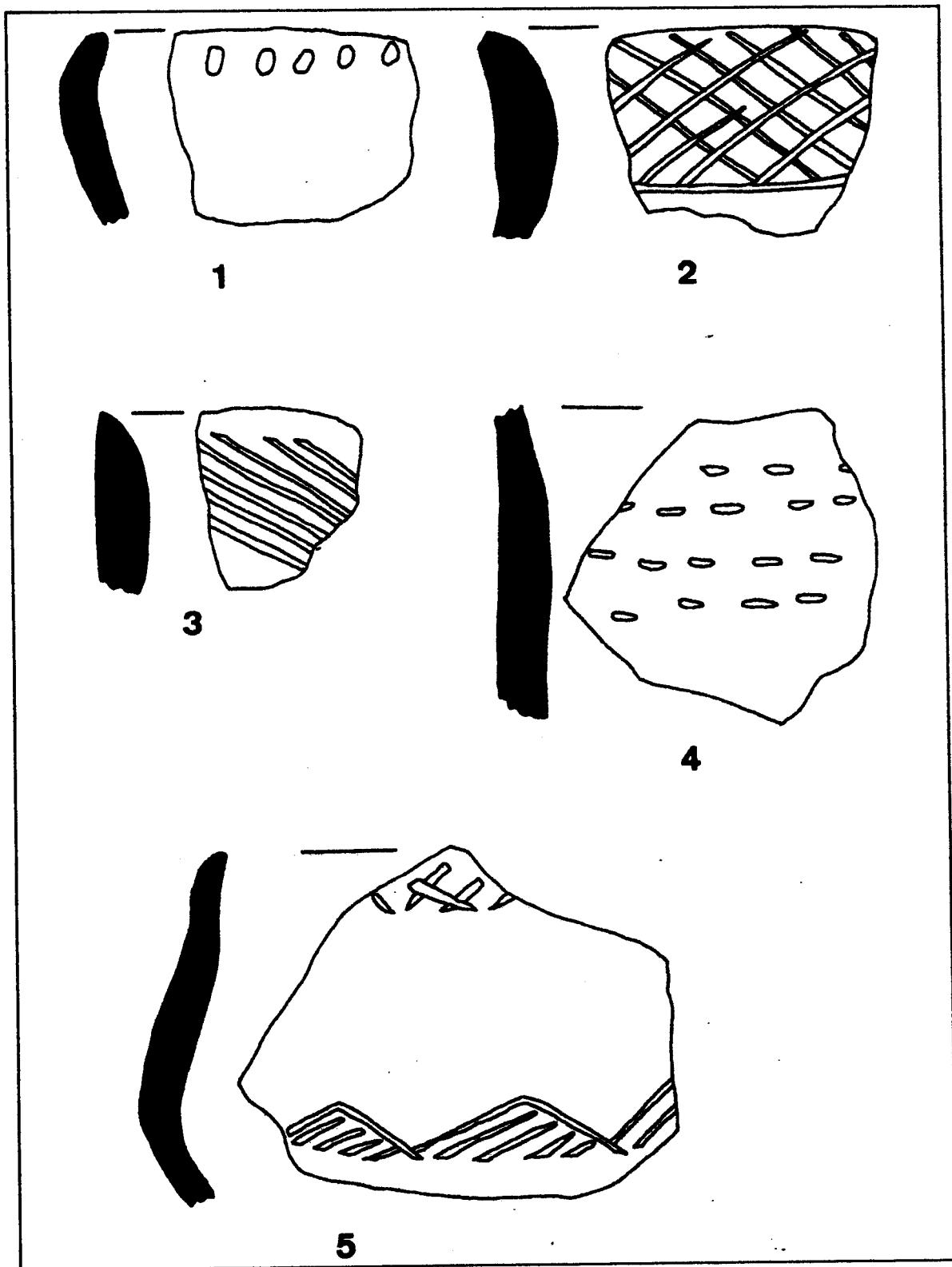


Figure 3: Group 2 pottery sherds found during the field survey. 1 is from 2531DC10, 2 from 2531DC28, and 3 from 2531DC29 (Scale 1:3).

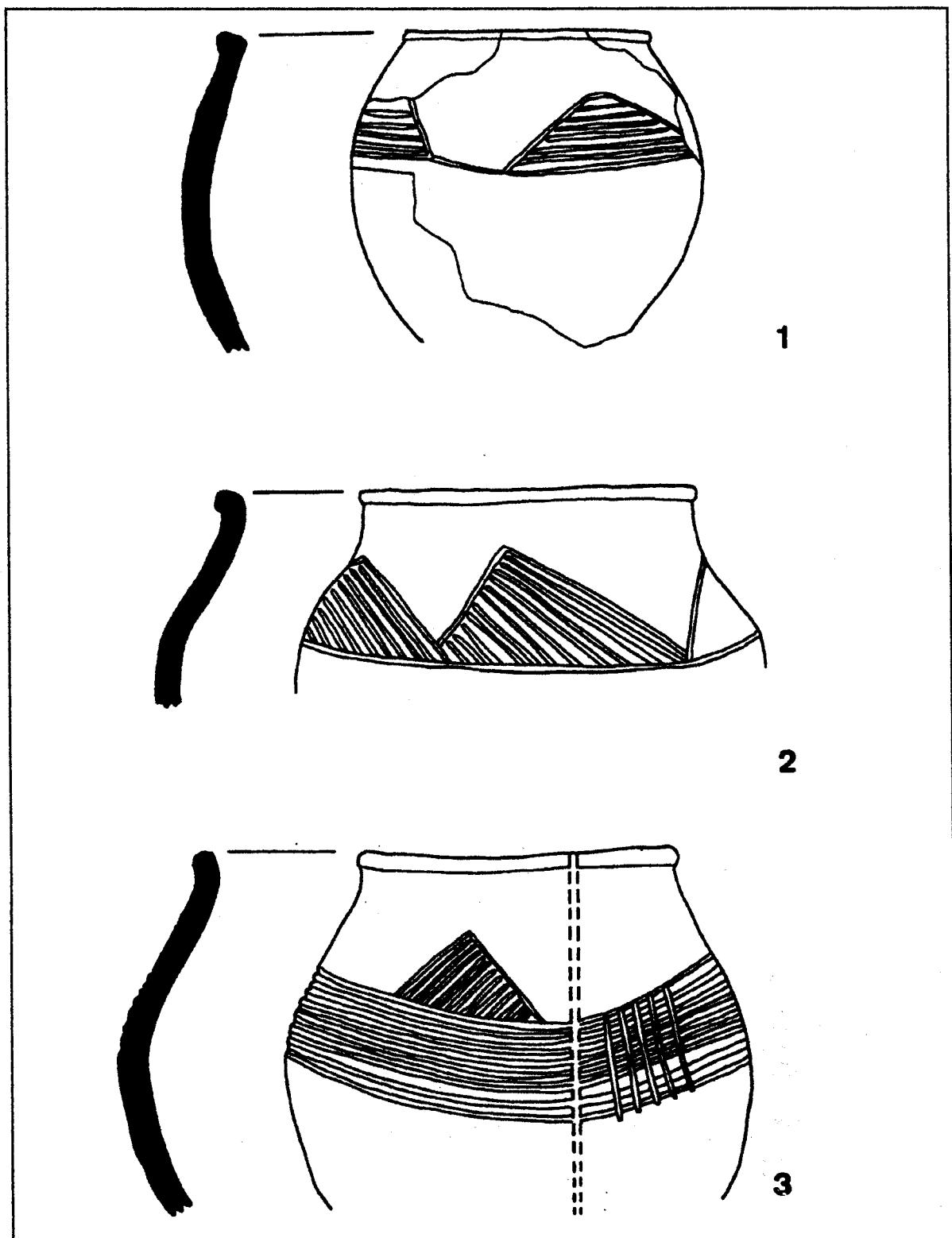


Figure 4: Group 2 pottery sherds found during the field survey. 1 and 3 are from 2531CDCB5, 2 and 6-7 from 2531DC22, 4 from 2531CDCB4, and 5 from 2531CDCB 1 (Scale 2:3).

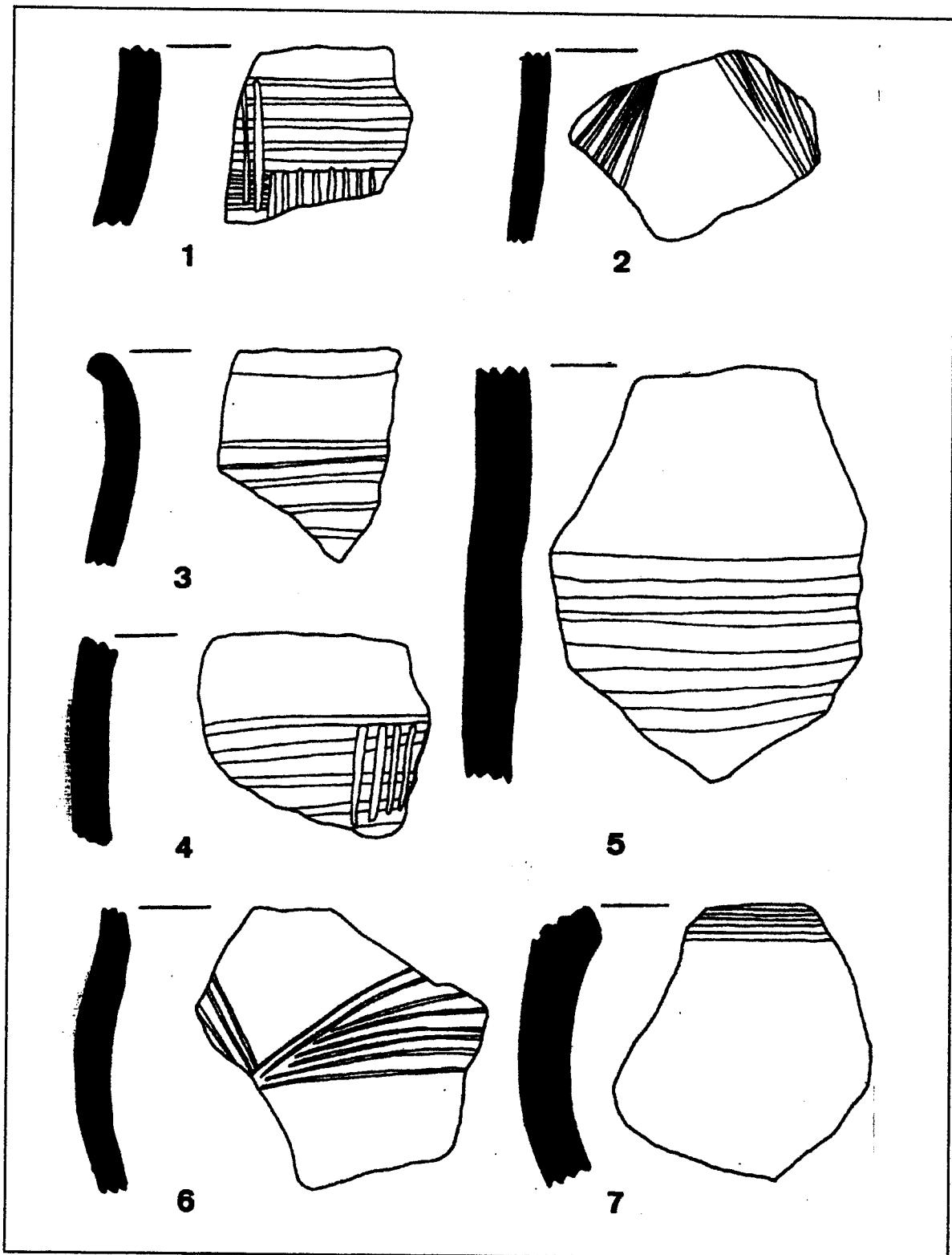
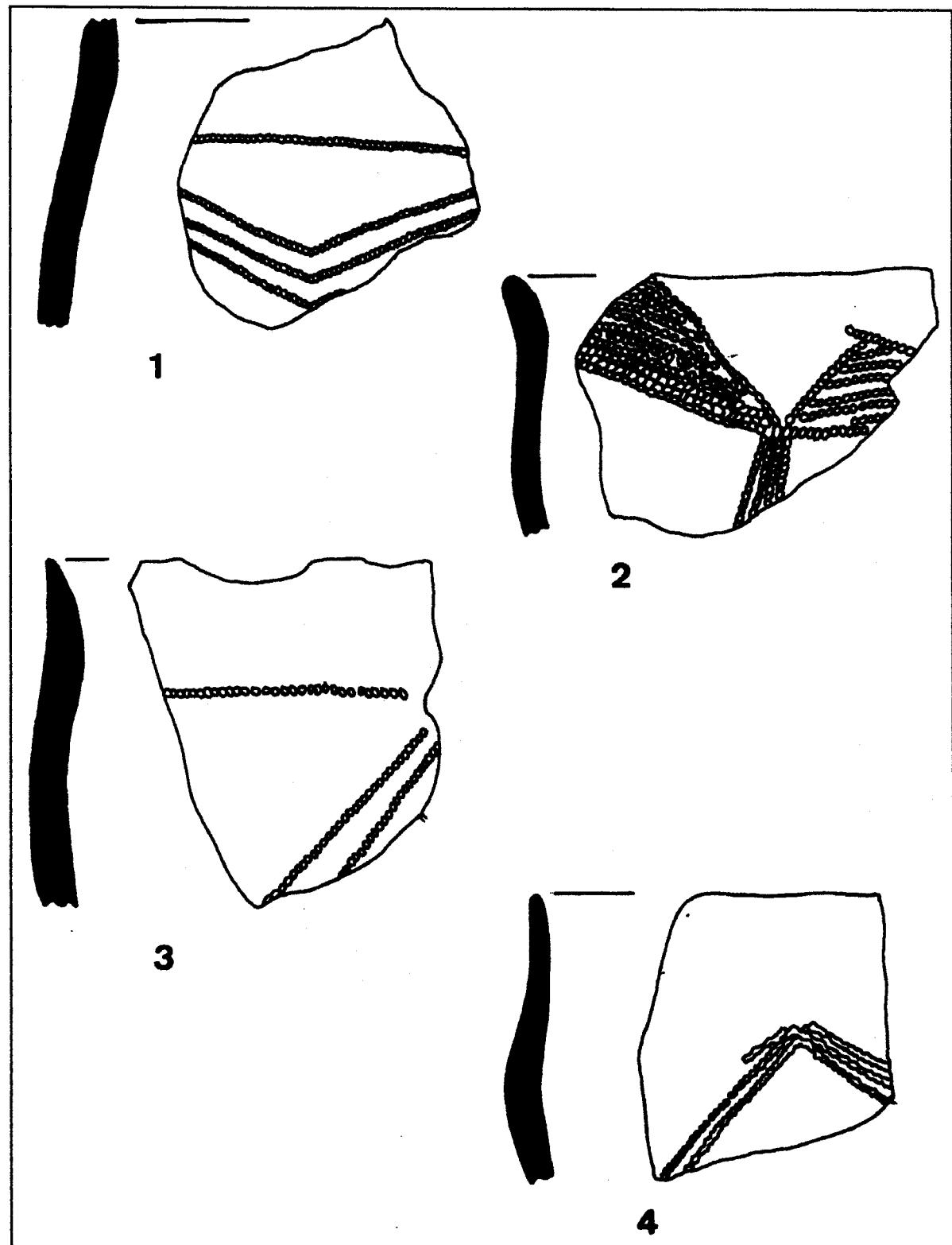


Figure 5: Group 3 pottery sherds found during the field survey. 1, 3 and 4 are from 2631BB12, 2 from 2531DC40 (Scale 2:3).



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