

The Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in North-West France

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The intention of this paper is to review current knowledge of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Early Iron Age in north-west France, the two forming, in the light of recent researches, a continuum which lends itself to a unified approach.

Two recent works have discussed the subject. The first is J.C. Blanchet's *Les Premiers Métallurgistes en Picardie et dans le Nord de la France* (1984). This is an exhaustive study of the material available which proposes a regional chronology for the Early Iron Age. The second is P. Brun's *La Civilisation des Champs d'Urnes, Étude Critique dans le Bassin Parisien* (1986). Brun uses an historico-cultural approach in reviewing urnfields, and proposes a chronology for the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Early Iron Age. From his study of cemeteries in the area of the marshes of Saint-Gond, in Champagne, and in the area of the confluence of the rivers Yonne and Seine, in Ile de France, he divides these periods into three stages.

STAGE 1

The first stage corresponding to Bronze final I and IIa (BfI-BfIIa), still betrays Middle Bronze Age influence, and is represented in eastern France by rilled ware.

To date no settlement of this stage has been dug in north-west France but, to judge from stray finds and hoards, it seems that this area was part of the Atlantic zone, though subject to continental influences from the East.

STAGE 2

The second stage corresponds to Bronze final IIb and IIIa (BfIIb-IIIa) and is characterised by the Rhin-Suisse-France-Orientale (R.S.F.O.) culture over a large part of France. This culture and period were the subject of discussion at Nemours (*Actes du colloque international de Nemours 1986, 1988*).

Cartographic study of the distribution of the R.S.F.O. culture has now taken place over a major part of Europe. In France, apart from a few peripheral areas, it is now apparent that its area of distribution is nearly the same as that of rilled ware. In the preceding Stage 1 north-west France appears to lack the rilled ware, but does seem to have been colonised by the R.S.F.O. culture, at least as far west as the Aisne and Oise valleys. Further west in the area along the Channel the situation is still uncertain because of the lack of

excavation. We think that this area remained within the Atlantic cultural sphere.

Burials

Several burial and settlement sites of this second stage have been studied. Recent excavations in the Ardennes and the Aisne valleys include Acy-Romance, a funerary site of the transition between Stage 1 and Stage 2, i.e. between BfIIa and BfIIb. Acy-Romance proved to be a site with burials ranging from the Late Bronze Age to the La Tène period. Three inhumation graves were excavated, and the associated material (two pins and a bracelet) permit comparisons to be made with the Lorraine and middle Rhine (Lambot and Talon, 1988). The presence of inhumation in a BfII context is difficult to explain, since this was a rite characteristic of the preceding BfI and Bronze moyen periods, and is very much at odds with the cremation which dominated from BfII onwards. The possibility is emerging of a regional group which retained inhumation in BfII, extending to the Lorraine and the Belgian and French Ardennes, where a few finds have also hinted at the persistence of this rite.

The initial R.S.F.O. expansion seems to have proceeded from the middle Rhine via the Aisne valley, with a second westwards extension from Switzerland via the Paris Basin.

The cemetery of Vieil-Arcy, situated in the Aisne valley, has produced cremation graves with vases of BfIIb and also typical shouldered goblets of this period.

Settlements

At Vieux-Moulin, in the Compiègne forest, south of the confluence of the rivers Aisne and Oise, the hillfort of St-Pierre-en-Chastres produced, in the last century, three hundred and fifty bronze implements, pottery of BfIIb including vases, in addition to shouldered goblets and bottles.

Further west lies the hillfort of Catenoy, where excavations were started in 1982 by J.C. Blanchet and the present writer (Blanchet and Talon, 1987). This hilltop proved to have been occupied in the middle Neolithic, in the Chalcolithic, and in BfIIIa. The site is a promontory 400 m long and up to 140 m wide. The defences consisted of a rampart and ditch.

In the interior, plans of a dozen rectangular houses were uncovered: buildings raised on stone foundation rafts. The dimensions of these houses varied from 2.5 - 8 m in length and 3.5 - 5.5 m in width. An important discovery was that their orientation changed from one period to another.

This observation allows us to define three phases of house construction, with house plans occasionally superimposed. The scatter of post-pits included groupings that can be interpreted as 'four-posters'.

The metalwork finds included bronzes typical both of the east, especially knives and pins, and of the Atlantic coast such as a sword mould and tongue chapes. The same mixture of influences is likely in the pottery, though the problem here is a general lack of knowledge of the pottery of Atlantic France. For the moment one can only note that Catenoy produced, along with some simple forms, others decorated scarcely or not at all, which have no parallel at the R.S.F.O. settlement of Fort-Harrouard in Normandy. Unfortunately settlements of this period in the Atlantic area of France, if they exist, have not yet been excavated, so their pottery remains unknown.

In Compiègne the settlement at Fond Pernant of the early La Tène period, dug in 1983 by B. Lambot and the present writer, produced several domestic pits of BfIIIa and the early Iron Age. Here, too, ceramic forms without obvious parallels occurred alongside shouldered goblets.

At these last two BfIIIa settlements a certain degeneration of the pottery from classic R.S.F.O. forms is already noticeable. This is evidence for the beginning of regionalisation, and the mixture which was going to be the main feature of the following stage.

STAGE 3

The third stage corresponds to Bronze final IIIb (BfIIIb) and to the beginning of the early Iron Age; the two periods being closely linked and forming a continuum characterised by the progressive regionalisation of R.S.F.O. culture. Viewed in this light it becomes possible to understand the relationship of all the settlements of the Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age transition.

Burials

Funerary ritual becomes more and more complex, as is clear from the many discoveries made in recent years. The mosaic of practices which they reveal is still being actively studied.

Cremation was still the main rite, but by the beginning of the Early Iron Age was being used in a variety of burial contexts. For example, the site of Mairy in the Ardennes, beside the river Meuse, shows that a cremation could still be placed in an urn in the long-established tradition, here with a razor and two small vases. But to the south, C. Toupet has revealed a very different type of cremation, in a small barrow, associated only with 'ring-money'. He named this type of burial the Longuesse group, after the eponymous site in the Oise valley, but it has also been found at Villeneuve-St-Germain in the Aisne valley (Toupet, 1983). 'Ring-money' was also discovered by C. Marolles in a domestic pit dated to BfIIIb at Mairy in the Ardennes.

A cremation was also present in the horseman's grave at Saulces Champenoise in the south of the Aisne valley, showing there, too, influences coming

from the east (Flouest and Stead, 1975).

At Acy-Romance B. Lambot was able to excavate a sanctuary dated to Stage 3 (Lambot, 1989). Two small oval enclosures were found in front of a huge oval enclosure measuring 68 m long by 12 m wide. Rectangular buildings were discovered inside these enclosures, together with pits. Detailed study of the fill of the pits suggests that the site was a sanctuary. The pottery discovered in the pits allows the small enclosures to be dated to BfIIIb and the biggest one to the beginning of the Early Iron Age.

Settlements

A few years ago B. Lambot excavated some domestic pits at Nanteuil-sur-Aisne, a few kilometres from Acy-Romance, which also dated to BfIIIb (Lambot, 1977). These yielded pottery very similar to material from one of the smaller enclosures at Acy-Romance. Yet the shapes at Nanteuil-sur-Aisne more often seem to relate to ceramic forms in the cemeteries of Court-St-Etienne and St-Vincent in Belgium, and Haulzy in Lorraine. P. Brun proposed a regional group for this area covering the Belgian and French Ardennes and a part of Lorraine (Brun, 1986).

In the Oise valley, on the other hand, ceramic shapes seem rather different in Stage 3. In the BfIIIb levels of the hillfort of Saint-Sauveur, near Compiègne, the pottery shows simple forms, usually plain, which recall the vases of non-R.S.F.O. type characteristic of the preceding stage.

At the beginning of the Early Iron Age, the hillforts were abandoned in favour of valley settlements.

Choisy-Au-Bac: the Early Iron Age chronology of the Oise Valley

An important valley settlement was excavated by J.C. Blanchet and the present writer a few years ago, at the confluence of the Aisne and the Oise rivers at Choisy-au-Bac. This covered an area of 2,000 square metres (Blanchet, 1984). These excavations revealed about ten levels of settlement following one after another over some two centuries; these successive occupations, sealed by silt resulting from periodic flooding of the two rivers, can be grouped into four main phases.

During the first phase clearance of the area to be settled was demonstrated by the palynological evidence. Settlement in these earliest levels was undefended. Rectangular houses were indicated by foundations consisting of a mixture of daub, ceramic and bones. There was also evidence of bronze-working.

During the second phase the village was defended by a rampart and ditch which closed off the V of the confluence. The structures of the second phase were very similar to those of the preceding phase.

The third phase seemed to be the most important one, revealing, in places, three or four occupation levels. This phase was characterised by the use of chalk stones in the house foundations, and by the appearance of iron metallurgy, indicated by the discovery of two furnace bases.

The fourth phase corresponded to the abandonment of the rampart, but the nature of the settlement in this phase is poorly known because of damage by ploughing and other later activity.

A detailed study of ceramic development through these four occupation phases has been carried out (Talon, 1987). The site yielded about thirty thousand sherds and from these it was possible to reconstruct some three hundred and fifty different forms.

The trends perceived were confirmed by the study of several small settlements in the Oise valley, contemporary with Choisy-au-Bac (Talon, 1989). The variety of shapes increased from one period to another, and overall forms were far more varied than in preceding periods.

In the first phase, which corresponds to the first period of Blanchet's chronology (Blanchet, 1984), the pottery is still close to that of the local Late Bronze Age, retaining R.S.F.O. features. The ceramic repertoire of this first phase is limited. Incised decoration, surviving from previous periods, is still evident, as well as finger-tip and other impressed decoration. A few shouldered and 'onion bulb' goblets still occur. Bowls tend to be more closed up than in preceding periods.

In the second phase shapes diversify. Plates and cups appear, together with terrines with straight inclined rims. Finger-tipped cordons become increasingly common. Incised and grooved decoration are both used.

In the third phase shapes are biconical or shouldered, and there is a trend towards more accentuated profiles. The bowls tend to be heavier, with thicker bottoms and sub-vertical sides. Plates are more and more numerous, and seem to take the place, little by little, of trunconic pans. Rims get wider, and grooving replaces incision.

The second and third phases at Choisy-au-Bac correspond to the second period of Blanchet's chronology.

For the fourth phase only a few shapes survive, sufficient to confirm the general ceramic trend in the settlement. Carination appears on the shallower shapes and can be quite sharp. A distinctive ceramic appearing for the first time is represented by numerous sherds with quartzite gritting. From these sherds a jar form has been reconstructed, with a rounded shoulder, quite tall, and with an everted rim that contributes to an elegant profile. A wavy combed decoration is placed on the upper body, and grooved lines are found inside the rim and on the interior at neck level. This decoration and shape and the composition of the paste raise numerous problems which are not yet resolved.

Somewhat similar decoration exists at Court-St-Etienne in Belgium (Marien, 1958), and of course in the south of France on the pseudo-Phocaeian pottery of the sixth century (Arcelin, 1976). In Britain, the settlement of Runnymede Bridge studied by D. Longley and S. Needham (1980), has yielded a few similarly decorated sherds, and everted rims with internal grooves, though apparently at an earlier period.

Several other settlements in the Oise valley confirm the sequence apparent at Choisy-au-Bac.

In Compiègne the settlement of Fond Pernant had several domestic pits contemporary with the

second and third phase of Choisy-au-Bac.

The fourth phase of Choisy-au-Bac, corresponding to the third period of Blanchet's chronology, can be fleshed out by bringing three other local settlements into the debate (Blanchet, 1984).

Longueil-Ste-Marie and Néry are two settlements with developed pottery shapes, yielding carinated plates and terrines fitting into the sequence which begins at Choisy-au-Bac with bowls with straight inclined rims and ends in the carinated plates of La Tène.

The cremation cemetery of La-Croix-St-Ouen, excavated early this century, provides evidence of a parallel development which remained Belgian or Atlantic in character, and demonstrates that adjoining the regional groups of the Ardennes and the Oise valley there existed other groups whose backgrounds must be sought elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

Recent excavations have considerably extended our understanding of some aspects of the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age in north-west France. Yet some basic problems have still to be solved. For example, little is known of Stage 1 in most areas, while the area along the Channel remains an almost total blank in all periods. New programmes of fieldwork and excavation will be required to fill in these gaps. The following questions can be posed in conclusion:-

- What does the pottery of the Atlantic area look like?
- Does it exist at Catenoy and how widespread is it in northern France?
- Apart from its abundance of metalwork, can we give an identity to the Atlantic area in terms of economic, military, and political power, in contrast to R.S.F.O. culture?
- In the same way that the R.S.F.O. culture has been shown to characterise one part of Europe around the turn of the Second and First Millennia (*Actes du colloque international de Nemours 1986*, 1988), does a comparable, rival Atlantic culture exist in any part of the west?

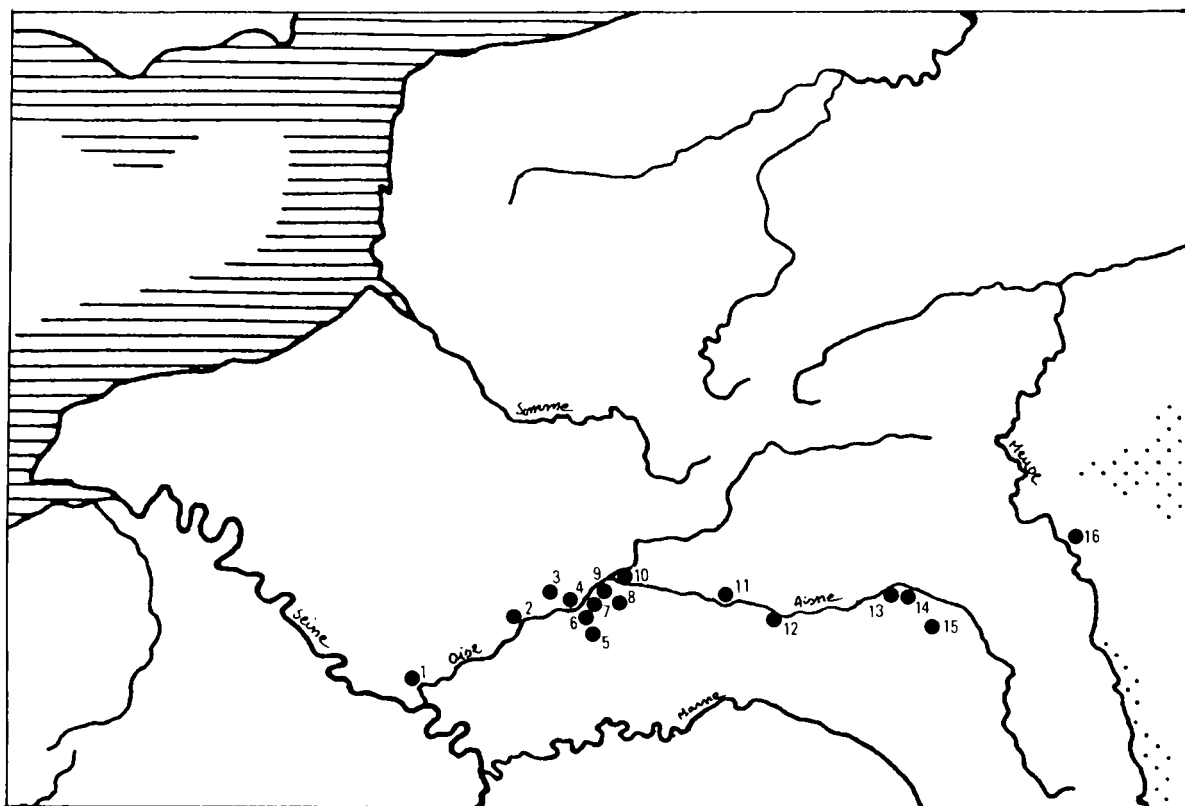
NOTES

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BRUN 1986	MULLER-KARPE	HATT	BLANCHET 84	SETTLEMENT	BURIAL
STAGE 1	BRONZE D	BZ final I	"		
	HALLSTATT A1	BZ final II a	"		
STAGE 2 (R.S.F.O.)	HALLSTATT A2	BZ final IIb	"	⑧ <i>Vieux-Moulin</i>	⑭ <i>Acy-Romance</i> ⑫ <i>Vieil-Arcy</i>
	HALLSTATT B1	BZ final IIIa	"	③ <i>Catenoy</i> ⑨ <i>Compiègne</i>	
STAGE 3	HAL. B2/B3	BZ final IIIb	"	⑬ <i>Nanteuil-S.-A.</i> ⑥ <i>Saint-Sauveur</i> ⑩ <i>Choisy ph. 1</i> ⑨ <i>Compiègne</i>	⑭ <i>Acy-Romance</i> ⑮ <i>Mairy</i> ① <i>Longuesse</i> ⑪ <i>Villeneuve-S.-G.</i>
	HALLSTATT C	HAL. ancien	Period 1 Period 2	⑩ <i>Choisy ph. 2-3</i> ⑨ <i>Compiègne</i>	⑮ <i>Saulces-Ch.</i>
	HALLSTATT D	HAL. moyen	period 3	④ <i>Longueil-S.-M.</i> ⑤ <i>Néry, Choisy 4</i>	⑦ <i>La-Croix-S.-O.</i>
		HAL. final	period 4	③ <i>Longueil-S.-M.</i> ② <i>Thiverny</i>	

Figure 1 Chronology and localisation of settlements and burials in north-west France

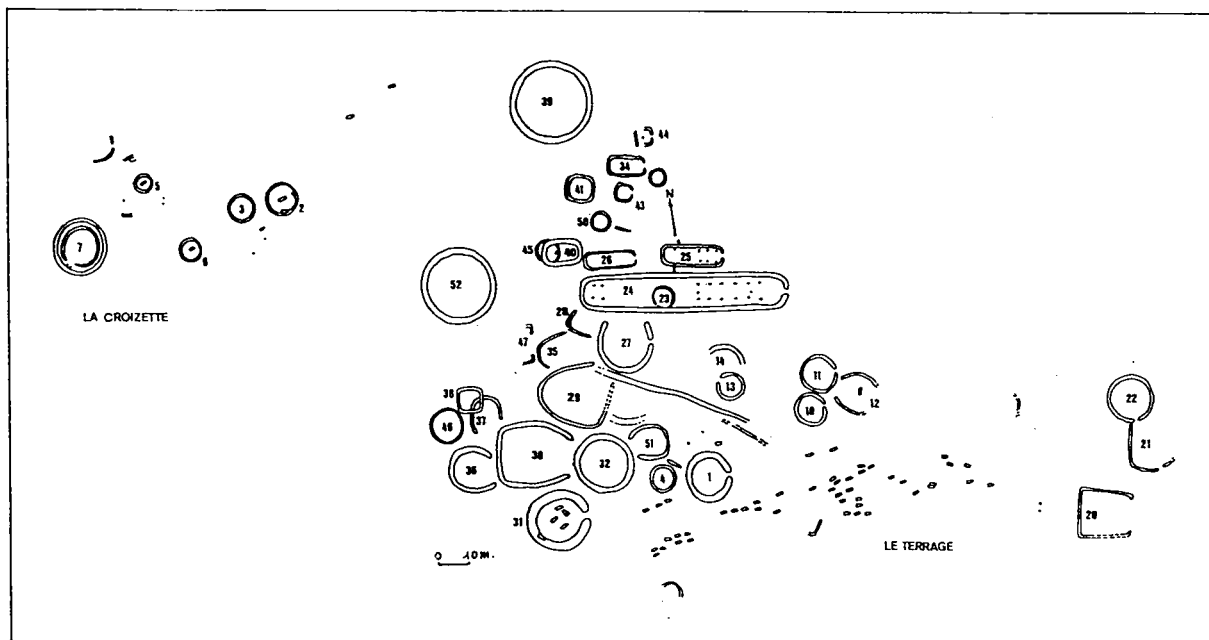


Figure 2 Excavations of the sanctuary and burials at Acy-Romance: from the Late Bronze Age to the La Tène period (BfIIa-LTI) (after B. Lambot)

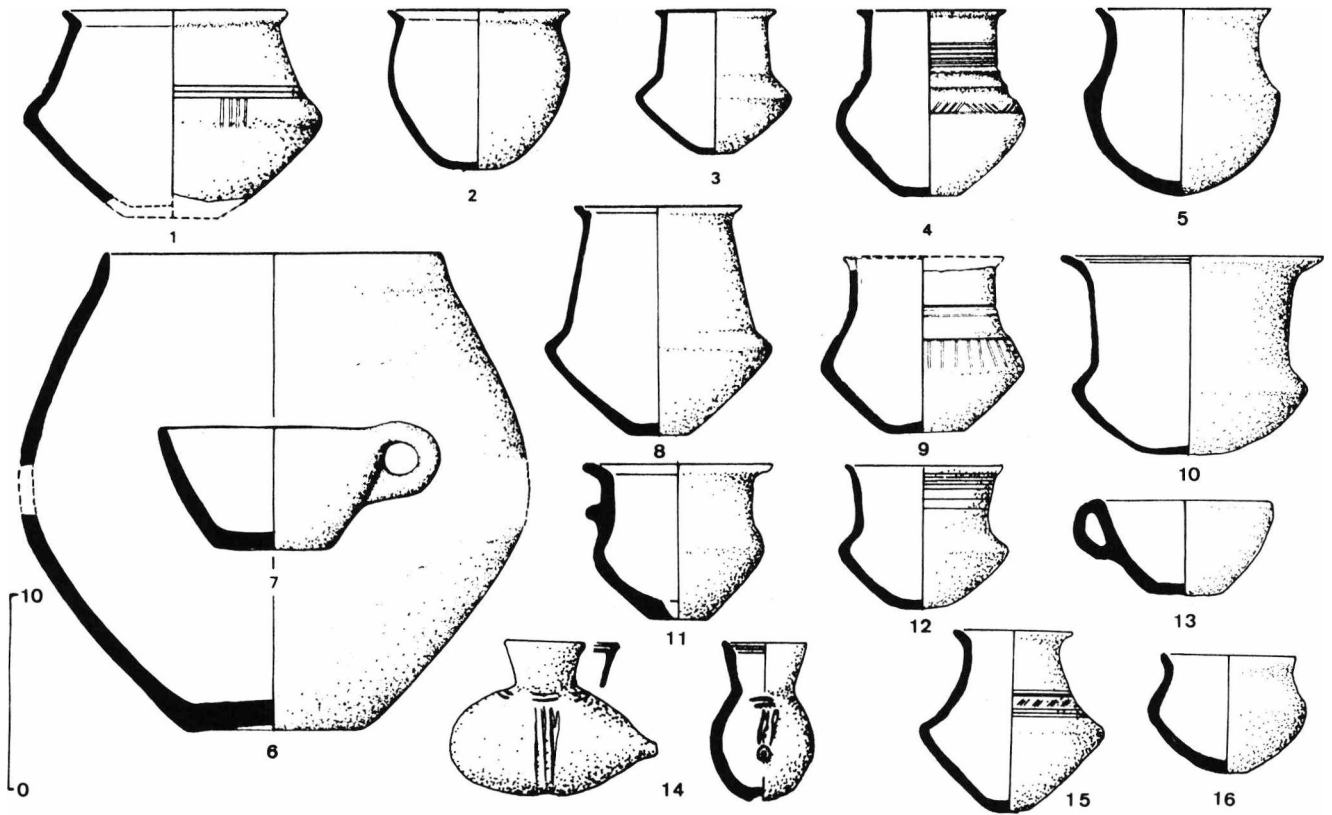


Figure 3 Some ceramic shapes of Stage 2 (BfIIb): 1-12: burials at Vieil-Arcy; 13-16: settlement Vieux-Moulin (after J.C. Blanchet, M. Boureux and R. Chevallier)



Figure 4 Plans of the houses at Catenoy, settlement of Stage 2 (BfIIIa) (after J.C. Blanchet and M. Talon)

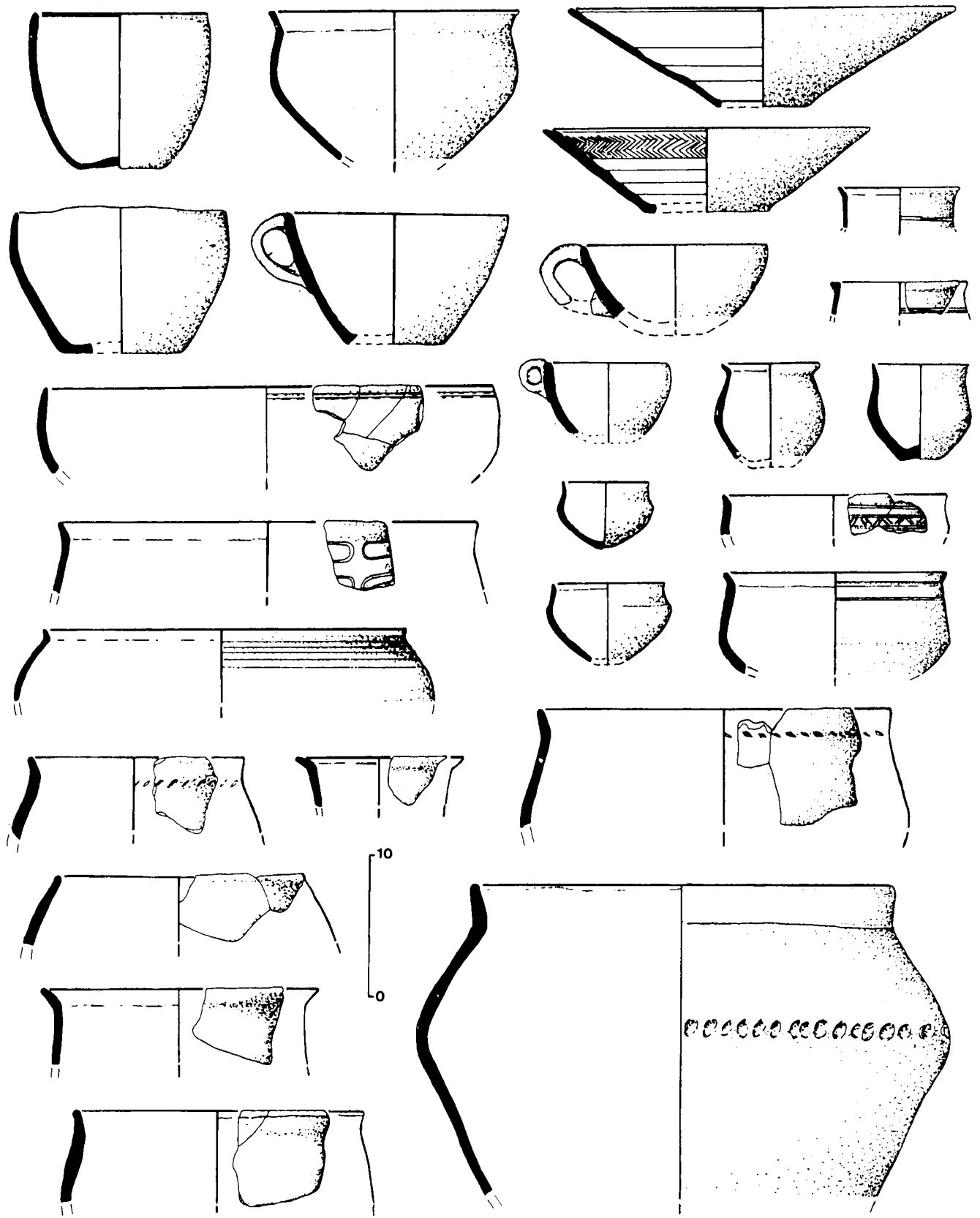


Figure 5 Some ceramic shapes from the Catenoy settlement, Stage 2 (BfIIIa) (after J.C. Blanchet and M. Talon)

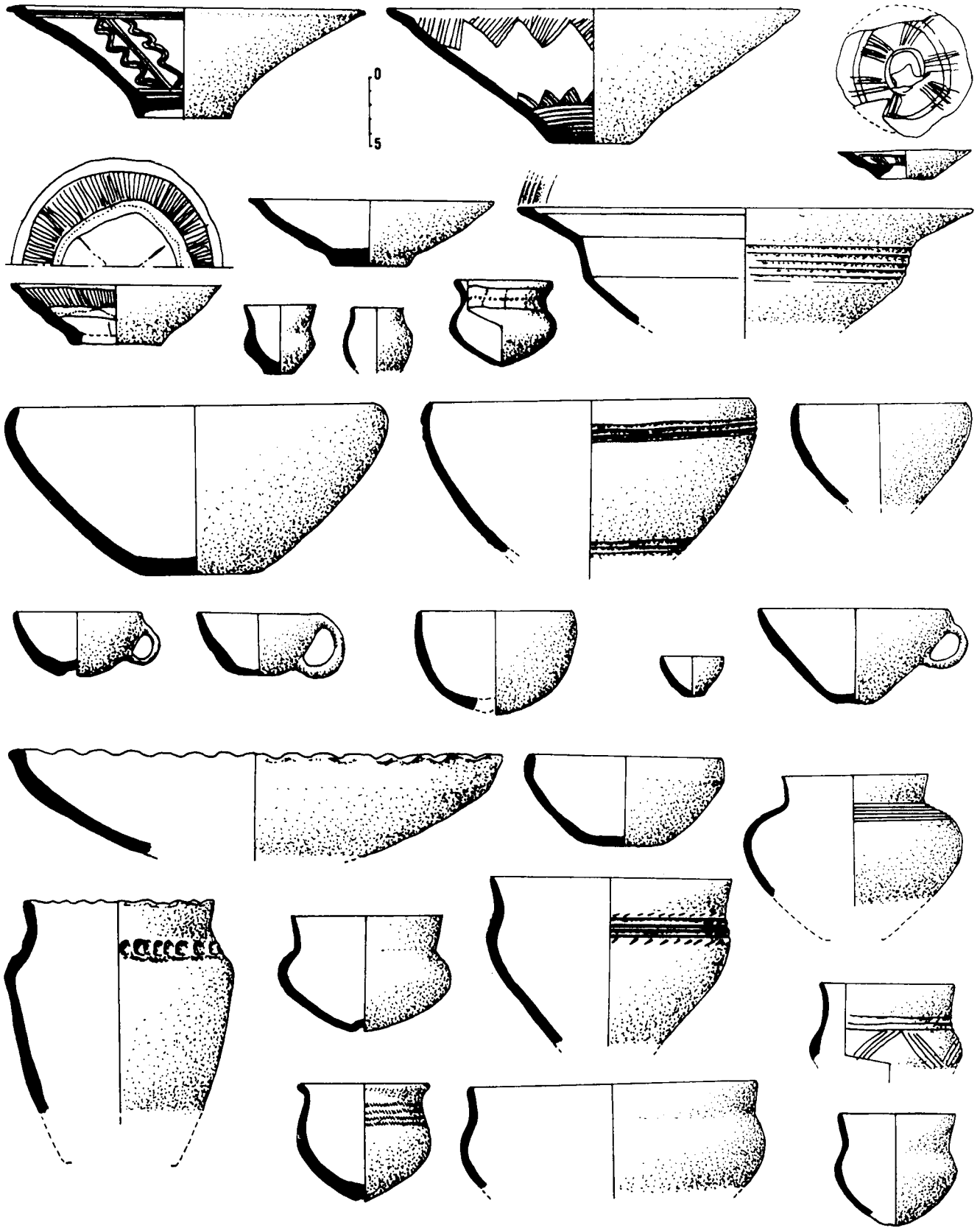


Figure 6 Some ceramic shapes from the Nanteuil-sur-Aisne settlement, Stage 3 (BfIIIb) (after B. Lambot)

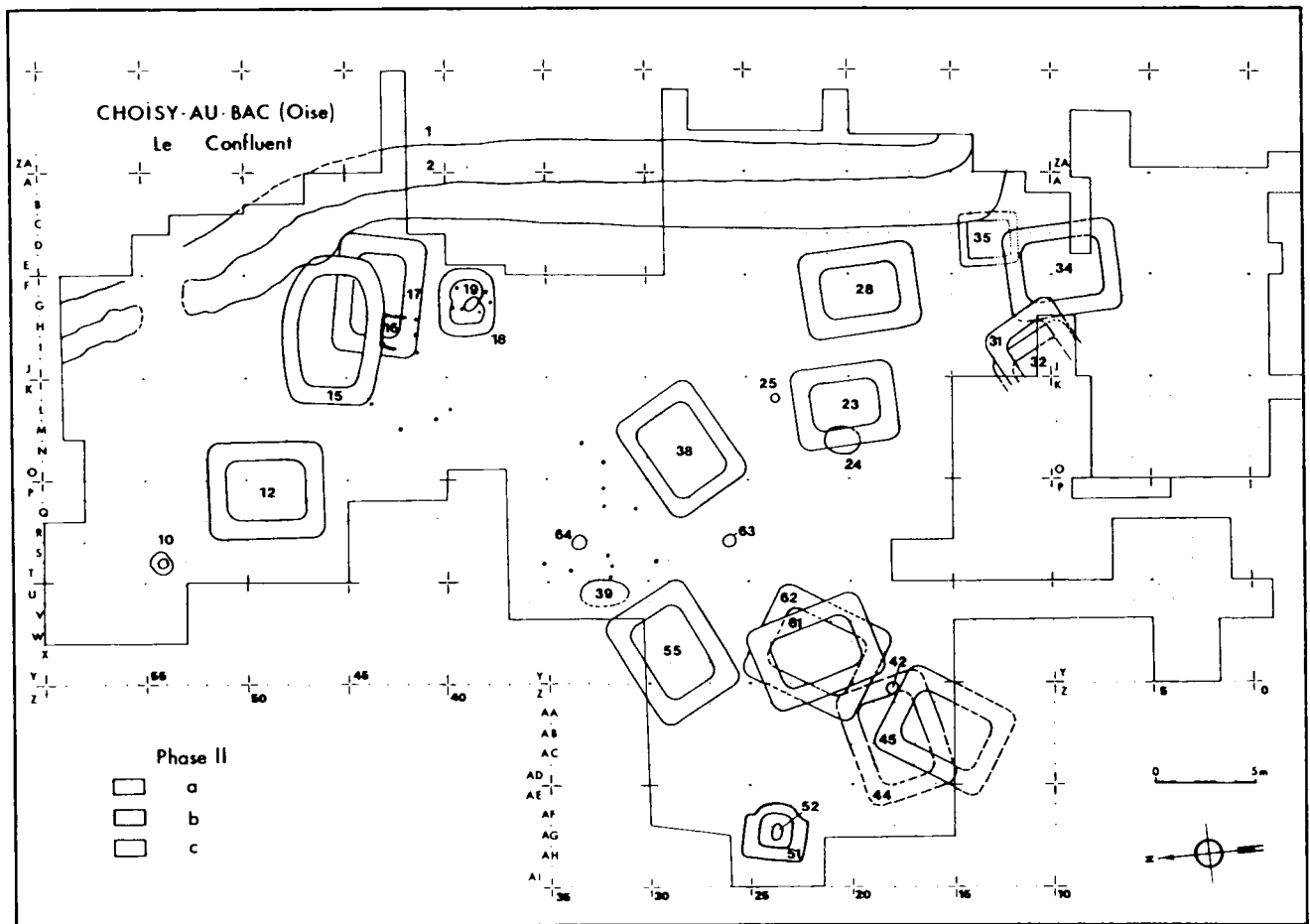


Figure 7 Plan of the Choisy-au-Bac houses (phase 2), settlement of Stage 3 (period 2) (after J.C. Blanchet)

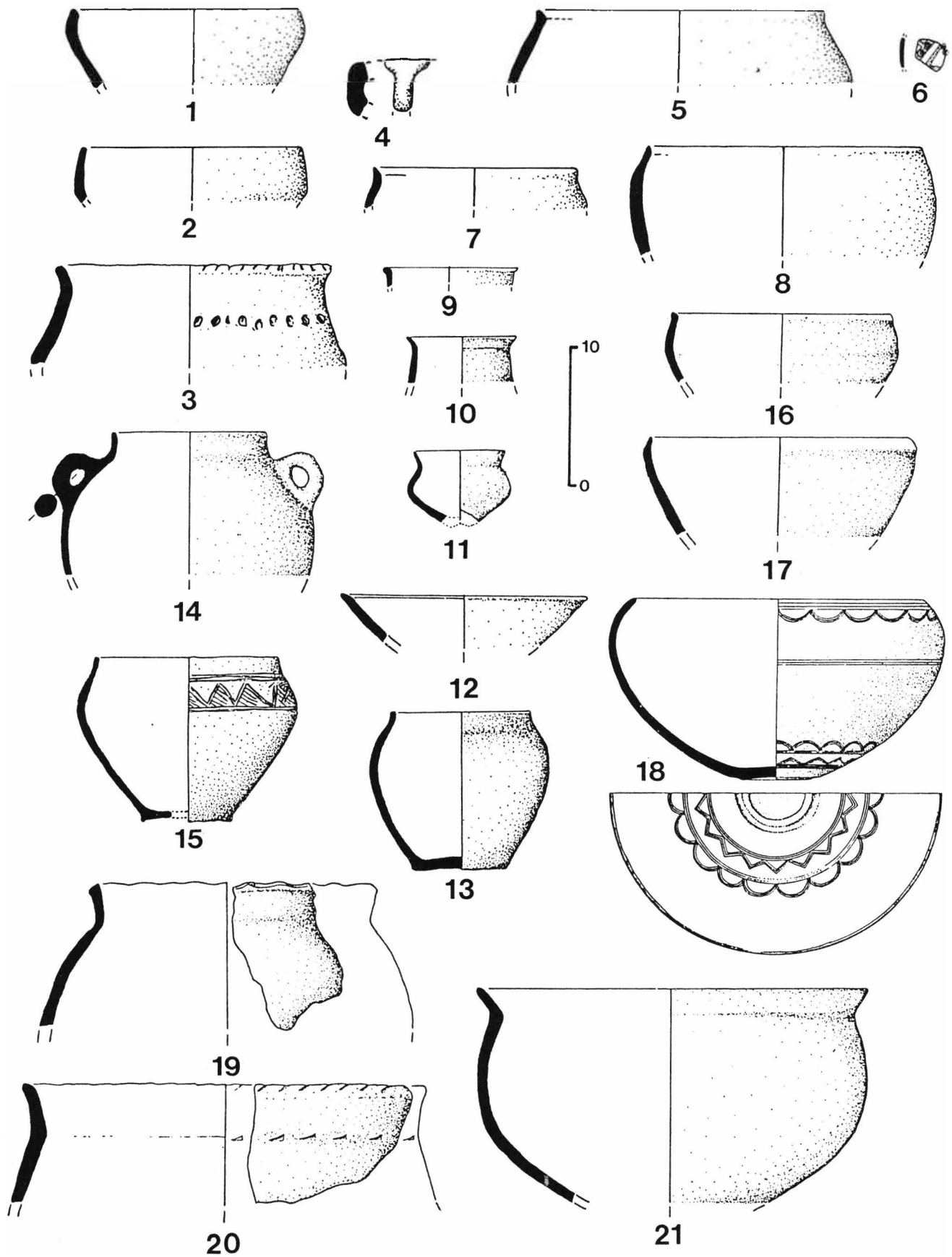


Figure 8 Some ceramic shapes of Stage 3 (period 2a): 1-4: settlement of Compiègne, pit 84; 5-6: *idem*, pit 81; 7-8: *idem*, pit 99; 9: *idem*, pit 19; 10-21: settlement of Choisy-au-Bac, phase 1 (after J.C. Blanchet, B. Lambot and M. Talon)

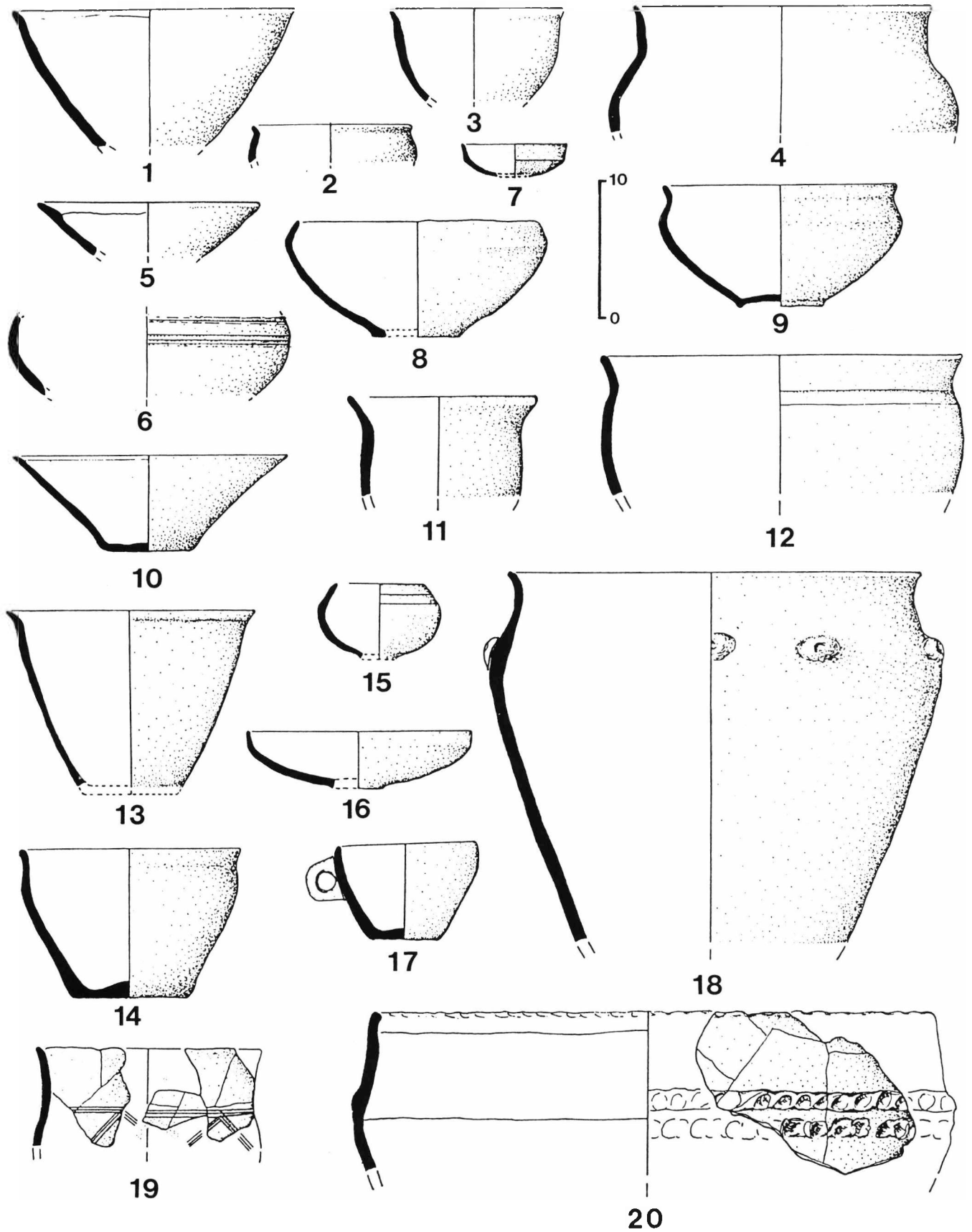


Figure 9 Some ceramic shapes of Stage 3 (period 2a): 1-4: settlement of Compiègne, pit 63; 5-6: *idem*, pit 78; 7-20: settlement of Choisy-au-Bac, phase 2 (after J.C. Blanchet, B. Lambot and M. Talon)

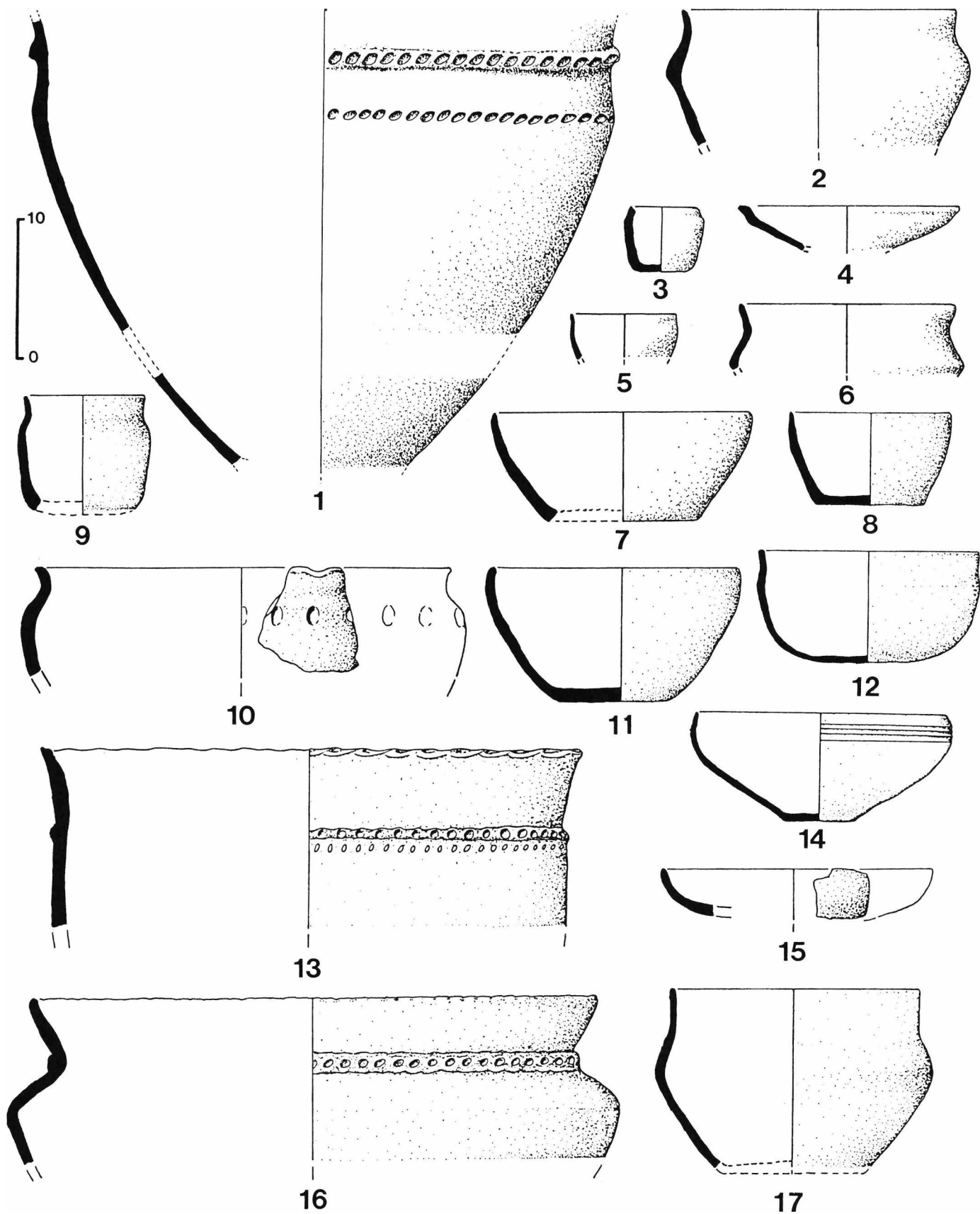


Figure 10 Some ceramic shapes of Stage 3 (period 2b): 1-4: settlement of Compiègne, pit 82; 5-7: *idem*, pit 87; 8-17: settlement of Choisy-au-Bac, phase 3 (after J.C. Blanchet, B. Lambot and M. Talon)

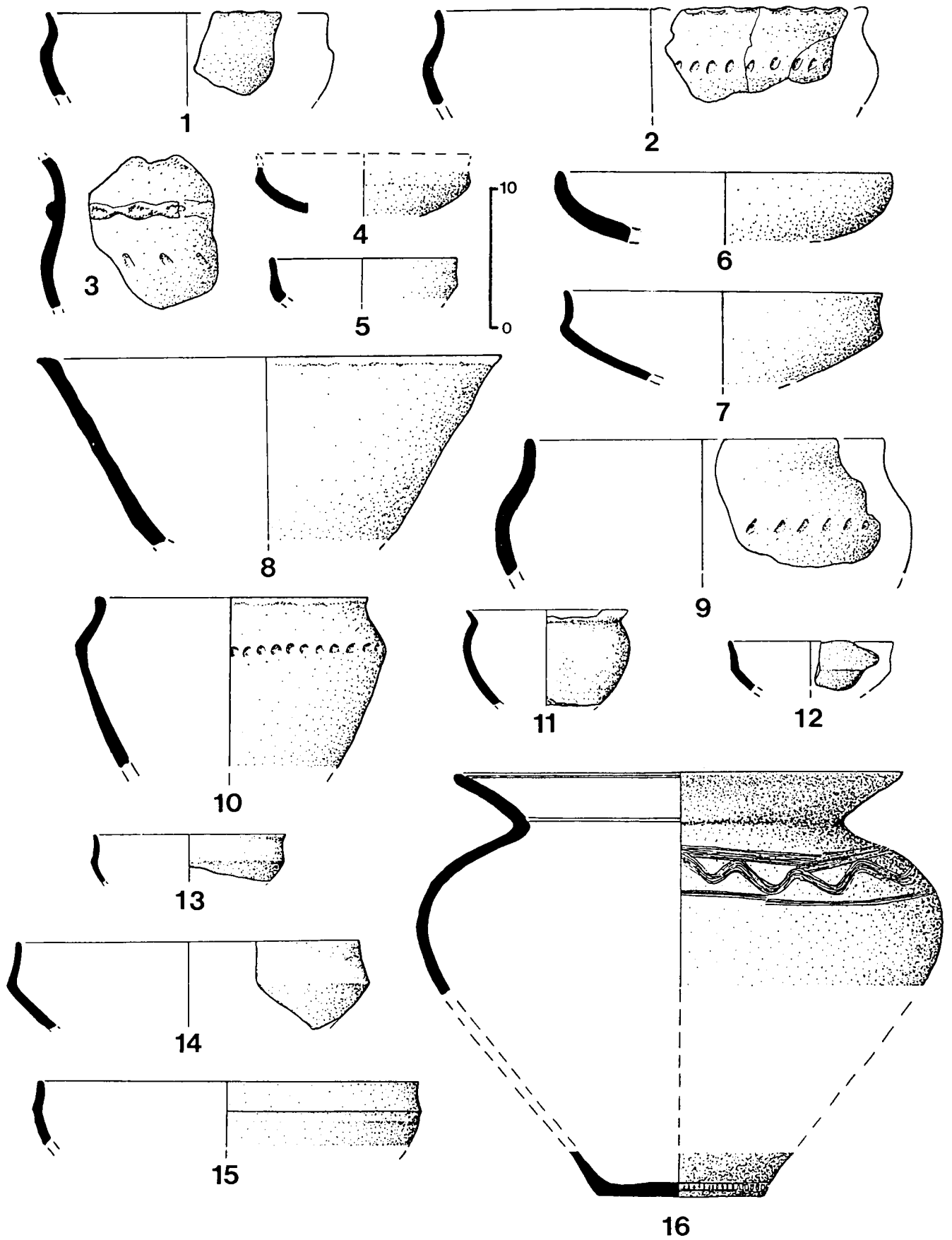


Figure 11 Some ceramic shapes of period 3: 1-5: settlement of Néry; 6-10: settlement of Lougueil-Ste-Marie; 11-16: settlement of Choisy-au-Bac, phase 4 (after F. Audouze, J.C. Blanchet, A. Decormeille, S. Laurent and M. Talon)