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Chapter 23

Pottery and Chronology in the Southern Caucasus: New Insights from the Tsiteli Gorebi Cluster

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Abstract

The Chalcolithic period (c. 5000-3500 BCE) remains a poorly understood phase of the late prehistory of the Southern Caucasus. While a large number of materials from old excavations remains un- or only partially published, recent discoveries across the region have called into question traditional definitions of cultural (esp. ceramic) traditions ('Sioni', 'Tsopi', 'Chaff-faced Ware', etc.) and their chrono-spatial distribution. New investigations by the Georgian-Italian Lagodekhi Archaeological Project (GILAP) have firmly anchored the Tsiteli Gorebi 5 site to the Early Chalcolithic phase (5000-4800 cal BCE). This paper presents the ceramic material from the settlement and the material from old Georgian excavations at other sites of the same cluster, studied by the author in 2022. The aim is to contextualise these findings to better define the features of Early Chalcolithic ceramic production in the region.

Introduction

Between the late 1970s and the 1980s, the Kakheti Archaeological Expedition, led by V. Varazashvili, identified a group of Chalcolithic sites in the Alazani valley in the Kakheti region of Eastern Georgia, collectively referred to as 'Tsiteli Gorebi' in literature (Georgian წითელი გორები: 'the red mounds'). Of these sites, only Kviriatsqali/Tsiteli Gorebi 3 (Varazashvili 1980, 1992) and Damtsvari Gora (Varazashvili 1984, 1992) were excavated, while the remaining – Tsiteli Gorebi 1, 2, 4, Shavtskhala, Mtserlebis Mitza, Nadikari, Natsargora – were documented only through surface collections or minor soundings.

Varazashvili briefly described all the settlements of the cluster as low mounds with no traces of *in situ* architecture. Ditches, large pits and a few burials were identified as the most notable finds². The pottery assemblage was described as homogeneous, characterised by yellow, red and sometimes grey and brown surfaces. The fabric composition included exclusively mineral tempers and occasionally sand and gravel. Horizontal lugs were frequently observed, as well as mat impressions on the bases (Varazashvili 1984: 26).

These features pointed to a potential single dating for the cluster, which was considered later than (though connected with) the Shulaveri-Shomu Neolithic horizon yet preceding the Kura-Araxes phase. Therefore, it was attributed to the local Sioni horizon, which, according

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² Kviriatsqali/Tsiteli Gorebi 3 is a 1m-high mound, with remains of three Chalcolithic pit graves with no burial goods (Varazashvili 1992: 22-23). Damtsvari Gora is a 1m-high mound, characterised by the presence of more than 20 pits and large circular or oval ditches (Varazashvili 1984: 26).

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to the chronology in use at that time, was dated to the end of the first half of the 4th mill. BCE (Varazashvili 1980: 19-20; 1992: 21-32).

Excavations at Tsiteli Gorebi 5 and Work by the GILAP Group on the Tsiteli Gorebi Cluster

The parallels proposed by Varazashvili – based on well-known features that persisted from the Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age³ – along with the scarcity of published material, did not allow for an accurate placement of the cluster within the sequence of local cultures. Later attributions to the ‘Sioni complex’ or to the ‘Tsopi’ tradition by subsequent scholars did little to resolve this ambiguity⁴. Moreover, to date, the number and the precise location of most of the sites mentioned in Varazashvili’s publications have been lost, further limiting the possible interpretations.

Significant progress has been recently achieved thanks to the efforts of the Georgian Italian Lagodekhi Archaeological Project (GILAP) of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice in cooperation with the Lagodekhi Regional Department of the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Youth. Between 2018 and 2022, GILAP focused on a comprehensive study of the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster, specifically to clarify its chronological placement. In addition to relocating Damsvari Gora and identifying Kviriatsqali with Tsiteli Gorebi 3 (Fig. 1), the joint team excavated a new site, Tsiteli Gorebi 5 (Rova and Kvavadze 2023; Rova *et al.* in press), and re-examined the material from earlier Georgian excavations.

In particular, new data obtained from Tsiteli Gorebi 5 – whose ¹⁴C calibrated dates suggest a placement in the first quarter of the 5th mill. BCE – shed new light on the earliest part of the Chalcolithic period of the region. The site allows for a direct comparison with materials found by Varazashvili, mainly from Damsvari Gora and Kviriatsqali/Tsiteli Gorebi 3, presently held at the Sighnaghi Museum and Gurjaani Museum.

Tsiteli Gorebi 5 has already been presented elsewhere (Rova and Kvavadze 2023; Rova *et al.* in press), thus only a short summary of the excavation results will be provided here. The site was brought to the attention of the GILAP members by local informants, who knew of a previously undocumented settlement. Located south-east of the modern village of Tsitelgori, about 5km from a densely forested area flanking the current Alazani River course (Rova *et al.* in press), the site comprises two low mounds, cut along their southern edge by a modern drainage channel, and a flatter, undulating area. The combination of the results of an intensive survey in the area and of geomagnetic prospections allowed the team to estimate a total extension of 5ha.

Coherently with Varazashvili’s observations of other settlements in the cluster, this site is also monophasic, featuring an uninterrupted sequence of archaeological deposits of 60cm directly overlaying natural soil (Rova *et al.* in press). Despite significant post-depositional damages caused mainly by modern activities, a general plan of the site was elaborated, and some remains of domestic architecture were brought to light (Fig. 2). Although no artifacts were found *in situ*, the recovered items form a coherent assemblage, characterised by mineral-tempered pottery, chipped lithics (mostly obsidian) and a few worked bones.

3 For instance, the so typical *mangals* appeared in the earliest phases of the Chalcolithic but are still widely used – even if with some morphological modifications – during the Kura-Araxes period (Bedianashvili *et al.* 2019: 15-16, fn. 52).

4 T. Kiguradze, for example, proposed a different internal dating, with Kviriatsqali representing a slightly earlier phase and Damsvari Gora a later one (Kiguradze 2000: 322-323).

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Materials and Methods

We analysed all available sherds from the Tsiteli Gorebi sites, focusing primarily on diagnostic items, due to time constraints. This analysis included a total of 473 pieces, of which 264 from Tsiteli Gorebi 5 and 209 from the other sites of the cluster. To ensure consistency across the dataset, we applied the same standards of description originally used for documenting the pottery from Tsiteli Gorebi 5 to the entire corpus. We also preferred to use neutral terms such as ‘mineral-tempered’ or ‘vegetal-tempered’, to avoid interpretative bias associated with ‘traditional’ labels (e.g. Sioni/Tsopi/Berikldeebi/Amuq F, etc.).

Although Tsiteli Gorebi 5 is a monophasic site with a single occupational layer dating to the first quarter of the 5th millennium BCE, it serves as a crucial chronological reference for comparative analysis, as it is the only ¹⁴C-dated site of the cluster. By systematically comparing the pottery from Tsiteli Gorebi 5 with sherds from other sites in the cluster, we developed a more comprehensive ceramic typology that integrated items from across the cluster. This systematic comparison revealed notable differences in ceramic features among the sites, indicating that they were not strictly contemporary, but instead represented different phases within the same broader period.

Subsequently, we compared the typology derived from the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster with recently published ceramic corpora from neighbouring regions that have precise dating. This approach enabled us to place the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster within a wider chrono-cultural framework, clarifying its relationship to other Chalcolithic phases throughout the Southern Caucasus.

Pottery from the Tsiteli Gorebi Cluster

Pottery from the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster is all handmade, mainly using the slab-building technique. The firing process is generally irregular, as indicated by the high frequency of the so-called ‘biscuit effect’, characterised by grey core and lighter surfaces. Most vessels display patches of different colours on both surfaces, suggesting a quick firing process or exposure to irregular temperatures in an uncontrolled atmosphere. An important feature, already observed by Varazashvili, is the predominant use of mineral tempers such as mica, quartz and, in some cases, obsidian. In contrast, vegetal inclusions are very sporadic or accidental.

During the 2018, 2019 and 2021 excavation campaigns at Tsiteli Gorebi 5, three distinctive wares were tentatively identified, even if most fragments were heavily encrusted and in poor conditions (Rova *et al.* in press). Indeed, the same wares were also recognised in the repertoire from the other sites of the cluster.

Light Brown Orange Ware (LBOW) constitutes nearly 70% of the total ceramic assemblage. The fabric is mostly completely oxidised, with light-coloured surfaces that are generally orange or light brown; some pieces are smoothed and occasionally covered by a brown slip. Gray Ware (GW) represents 17% of the total, featuring completely reduced sections with dark grey surfaces that are rarely smoothed. Red Ware (RW) represents only 13% of the total, characterised by completely oxidised sections and frequently slipped surfaces, which are in most cases smoothed and occasionally slightly burnished. This ware stands out for the presence of obsidian inclusions. No functional differences were observed between wares; in fact, shapes and decorations tend to be transversal to all the ware groups. Shapes display a repetitive and relatively limited repertoire, shared by all the sites of the cluster. Among open shapes, bowls with flared or vertical walls and simple rims are quite common (Fig. 3a-c).

They generally exhibit flat/flattened bases and more rarely raised bases (Fig. 3d-e) and sometimes horizontal edges (Fig. 3f); one example of carinated cup is also attested in Tsiteli Gorebi 5 (Fig. 3g). Mangals featuring vertical, oblique or more curved walls are rather frequent as well (Fig. 3h-k). Distinctive features of this class of vessel include holes pierced before firing under the rims and the addition of horizontal lugs either below the rim or in correspondence to it. Additionally, flat bases sometimes incorporate large mineral inclusions and exhibit mat impressions (Fig. 3l-n). Trays with low, vertical or slightly flared walls are very rare, yet still present, at all sites of the cluster.

As regards closed shapes, holemouth pots and jars with simple or slightly everted rims are prevalent at Tsiteli Gorebi 5, but less common at the other sites of the cluster (Fig. 4a-d). Jars with low necks and straight or slightly everted rims (Fig. 4e-g); jars with narrow necks (Fig. 4h-j); ovoid jars with low straight necks are commonly found across all the sites. One noteworthy type of jar, known as ‘Sinuous Jar’, frequently encountered in sites like Damtsvari Gora or Kviriatsqali, has not yet been identified at Tsiteli Gorebi 5 (Fig. 4k-l).

Concerning bases, pottery at Tsiteli Gorebi 5 exhibits flat or flattened bases, while some raised bases can be observed at the other sites of the cluster. As previously mentioned, bases often display mat impressions on their outer surface (Fig. 5a-c). At Tsiteli Gorebi 5, handles are not present; instead lugs and ledges are quite common. In contrast, circular handles, generally positioned between the neck and the body of jars, are attested at other sites of the cluster (Fig. 5d-g).

Decorations across the entire cluster are infrequent and are particularly rare at Tsiteli Gorebi 5, although they are more attested at the other sites. Decorative elements include oblique incisions (also called ‘fingernail impressions’) and circular impressions on the rims (Fig. 5h-j), rows of perforations beneath the rims (not only in *mangals* – where a functional purpose is more likely – but also in bowls), relief decorations with the application of small circular clay knobs (Fig. 5k), applied horizontal bands with incisions or finger imprints positioned between the shoulder and the neck of the vessels (Fig. 5l-n). Notably, a single fragment from Tsiteli Gorebi 5 shows probable traces of painted decoration (Fig. 5o).

Discussion

Undoubtedly, the material from the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster shares several features with the Neolithic Shulaveri-Shomu tradition. The abundance of holemouth pots, the presence of mat impressions on bases, the application of raised circular knobs and a preference for mineral temper all closely resemble the production of Neolithic sites such as Arukhlo (Hansen *et al.* 2006; Lyonnet *et al.* 2012; Bastert-Lamprichs 2017), Gadachrili Gora and Shulaveri Gora (Hamon *et al.* 2016, 2018; Batiuk *et al.* 2017, 2019). However other elements, such as finger-impressed relief bands, ledge lugs on the rims, mangals, trays and pots with outturned rims – despite their wide chronological and geographical distributions – are absent in the Shulaveri-Shomu production and are more typical of Chalcolithic environments.

Moreover, a certain degree of internal variation has been observed within the cluster: several shapes, such as holemouth jars, and decorations, e.g. applied knobs and relief patterns, are fairly common at Tsiteli Gorebi 5 but less so at Damtsvari Gora or Kviriatsqali. This trend – which is similar to what was observed in the still elusive Neolithic-Chalcolithic mixed layer at Gadachrili Gora in the middle Kura Valley, in the Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia (Batiuk *et al.* 2019) – may suggest a slightly different date for the sites of the cluster,

with Tsiteli Gorebi 5 being the earliest and Tsiteli Gorebi 3/Kviriatsqali and Damtsvari Gora being slightly later than it.

The exclusive use of mineral tempers in the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster could easily suggest a connection with the ‘Sioni’ environment of the late 5th–first quarter of the 4th mill. BCE; however, key differences distinguish the Tsiteli Gorebi assemblage from Sioni pottery. Notably, features like mangals, relief knobs, and finger-impressed relief decorations are very frequent in the cluster, but are scarcely found (if not completely absent) at Sioni. Conversely, some of the most common elements of the Sioni assemblage (Menabde and Kiguradze, 1981; Kiguradze and Sagona 2003; Sagona 2017), such as wavy rims, flint-scraped surfaces and serrated rims, are only very sporadic in the Tsiteli Gorebi area. Taking these factors into account, we believe that the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster predates the ‘Sioni’ culture *stricto sensu*, that is the assemblage of the eponymous site.

On the other hand, other, more effective parallels can instead be drawn with contemporary sites in the neighbouring areas. For example, some similarities have been noticed in the material from Getahovit-2, a rock shelter located in the Tavush region of Armenia. Level IV and III of this site have been ¹⁴C dated between 5200 and 4100 cal BCE (Chataigner *et al.* 2020; Kalantaryan *et al.* 2012: 7; Noushig and Kalantaryan 2019: 25). They consisted of superimposed burnt layers, suggesting the periodic use of the cave as shelter for the stock, cleaned by fire at the end of every period of usage (Chataigner *et al.* 2020: 9). To date, only the pottery from level III has been published (Chataigner *et al.* 2020). Like the pottery from the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster, it is exclusively mineral-tempered, but it exhibits a more limited range of shapes and lacks any decorative elements (a fact which could however be linked to the specific nature of the site).

Although very limited information has been published about it so far, pottery from level 2 at Bavra Ablari, another rock shelter in the Javakheti plain of Georgia, dated between 5000 and 4200 BCE, also bears some similarity with our material (Varoutsikos *et al.* 2018: 246, fn. 8).

Even more interesting, however, are the parallels provided by roughly contemporary sites characterised by a production of mainly vegetal-tempered pottery. Notably, close similarities have been noticed with Mentesh Tepe in the Tovuz district of Azerbaijan (Lyonnet *et al.* 2017; Lyonnet 2018). In particular, level II, ¹⁴C dated to the second quarter of the 5th mill BCE, was an eroded level with no traces of standing architecture. Level II pottery, although relatively scarce, shows elements absent in the Tsiteli Gorebi area (such as the use of vegetal tempers or of a combination of mineral and vegetal tempers, and the presence of bitumen-painted decorations), paired with elements found also in the Kakheti material, like mangals, trays, bowls of large dimensions with slightly curved walls, applied knobs and finger-impressed decorations.

Although more limited, some potential parallels can be observed with contemporary sites located in the Nakhchivan republic, for example Nakhchivan Tepe (Bahşeliyev 2018, 2021; Kuliyeveva *et al.* 2018), Uzun Oba and Uçan Ağıl (Bahşeliyev 2021). Like Mentesh Tepe, these sites exhibit some similarities with the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster, although they primarily feature vegetal-tempered pottery and lack mangals and mat impressions. This suggests that these sites belong to a different cultural context, although not completely isolated from ours.

Additionally, the complex painted decorations and the manipulation of surfaces – present at Uçan Ağıl and Uzun Oba, very frequent at Nakhchivan Tepe, but apparently unknown

in the remaining areas of the Southern Caucasus – are indeed typical of the Dalma culture, which is found in north-western Iran at sites like Dalma Tepe or Culfa Kultepe.

Finally, a number of parallels can also be observed with other sites dating to the second half of the 5th mill. BCE, including Ovçular Tepesi (Marro *et al.* 2009; Marro 2011), Mentesh Tepe level III (Lyonnet *et al.* 2012), Godedzor, Aratashen (Badalyan *et al.* 2004; Palumbi 2007), and Areni-1 (Wilkinson *et al.* 2012; Areshian *et al.* 2012), among others. More ‘mature’ Sioni-like features (like a larger number of incised/impressed decorations on rims) are attested at all these sites; however, their assemblages are mainly characterised by vegetal-tempered pottery and include other morphological or decorative elements typical of the Chaff-Faced Ware tradition, which are totally alien to the Tsiteli Gorebi repertoire.

Conclusions

To sum up, the material from the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster exhibits features inherited from the Shulaveri-Shomu Neolithic culture, while marking the emergence of a local Chalcolithic tradition, that, in Eastern and Southern Georgia, as well as in Northern Armenia, would develop into the ‘Sioni’ tradition during the second half of the 5th mill. BCE. Indeed, in the first half of the 5th mill. BCE, some previously unknown elements are introduced into the local pottery repertoire, which will become typical – although with some modifications – of the whole Chalcolithic period in this region.

The emergence of these new features, such as finger-impressed decorations, lugs and ledges in the rim area, alongside a general scarcity of fingernail impressions on the rims, serrated rims and necked jars and the absence of wavy rims, coupled with the prominent use of applied knobs of Neolithic tradition, suggests that the Tsiteli Gorebi sites belong to an early phase of the Chalcolithic period, as is confirmed by the recent ¹⁴C dates from Tsiteli Gorebi 5 (Rova *et al.* in press). Considering all these factors, we propose a date for the cluster in the first half of the 5th mill. BCE, with Tsiteli Gorebi 5 (5000–4800 cal BCE) representing the earliest phase and Damtsvari Gora and Tsiteli Gorebi 3 being slightly later, yet all falling within the time frame between 5000 and 4500 BCE.

Overall, however, the Tsiteli Gorebi sites share many technological and morphological aspects with other contemporary settlements, characterised by a vegetal-tempered production, which is – as already said – completely absent in the Tsiteli Gorebi area. This is a particularly interesting aspect, which would deserve further and more in-depth considerations. Traditionally, in fact, the Chalcolithic period has been divided into two broad cultural traditions, which were thought to correspond to successive chronological phases (see for instance: Kiguradze 2000; Lyonnet 2007; Sagona 2017). The first one, known as Sioni or Sioni/Tsopi, was primarily identified by its mineral-tempered pottery and by a specific set of decorations and shapes. The second one, known as Leilatepe or Berikldeebi horizon/culture, or else as Chaff-Faced Ware horizon, was traditionally distinguished by the widespread use of vegetal-tempered pottery and was considered to be later than the Sioni horizon and of ‘external’ origin, given its clear parallels with the contemporary developments of Northern Mesopotamia (Lyonnet 2007; Smith *et al.* 2009; Marro 2011; Kohl and Trifonov 2014).

However, as several scholars have highlighted in the last few years, these cultural traditions lack clear morphological, spatial and chronological definitions, a fact which obscures the variety of local productions that developed during this period and the complex interactions that unfolded over the course of 1,500 years.

As we demonstrated, some features of the Tsiteli Gorebi repertoire, traditionally associated with the mineral-tempered ‘Sioni’ environment, are also present in the production of contemporary sites such as Mentesh Tepe, Uçan Ağıl, Uzun Oba and Nakhchivan Tepe, which are primarily characterised by vegetal-tempered pottery. While the most notable difference among these roughly contemporary sites is indeed the use of temper – which by the way shows a continuity with the previous Neolithic traditions – it is also evident that some elements of the morphological and decorative repertoire were shared across a wide geographical area and connected, to different degrees, not only Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, but also – possibly – north-western Iran and Eastern Turkey. This highlights, already during the earliest phase of the Chalcolithic period, a widespread exchange of technologies and knowledge and raises intriguing questions about the interconnections and cultural dynamics at play in this complex regional mosaic.

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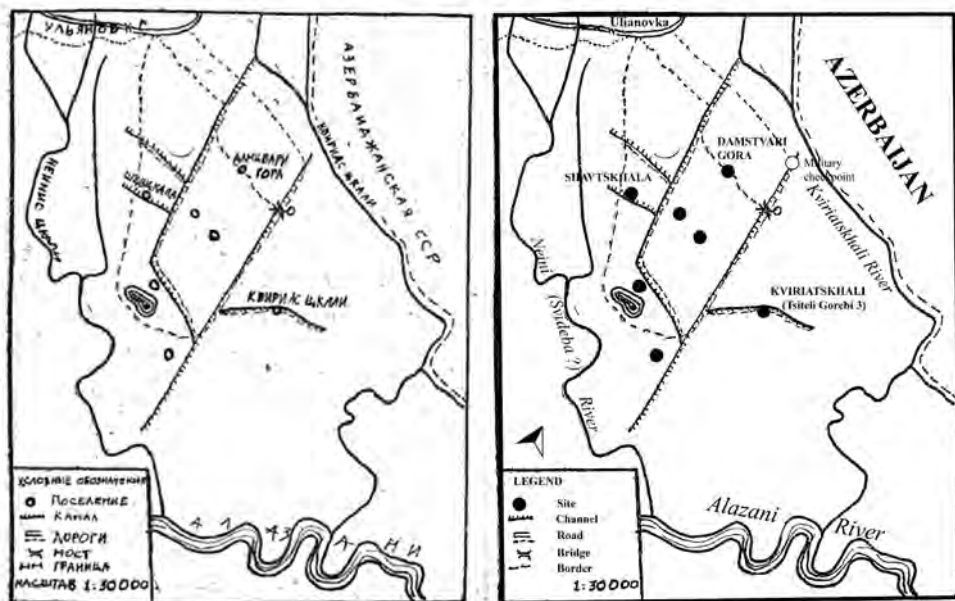


Figure 1. (Left) map of the Tsetli Gorebi sites as in Varazashvili 1992: 128, pl. I; (Right) map of the Tsetli Gorebi sites updated by the GILAP mission.

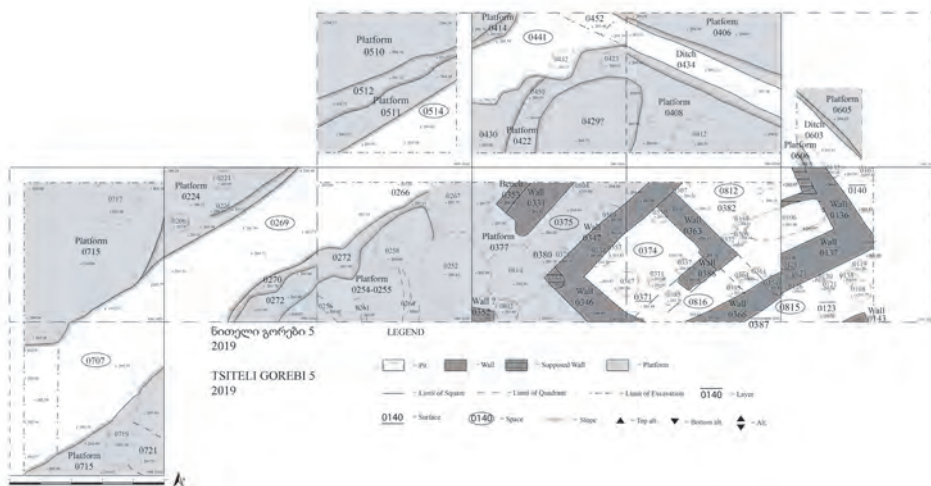


Figure 2. Plan of the Early Chalcolithic level of TSG 5, 2019 excavation (Rova *et al.* in press).

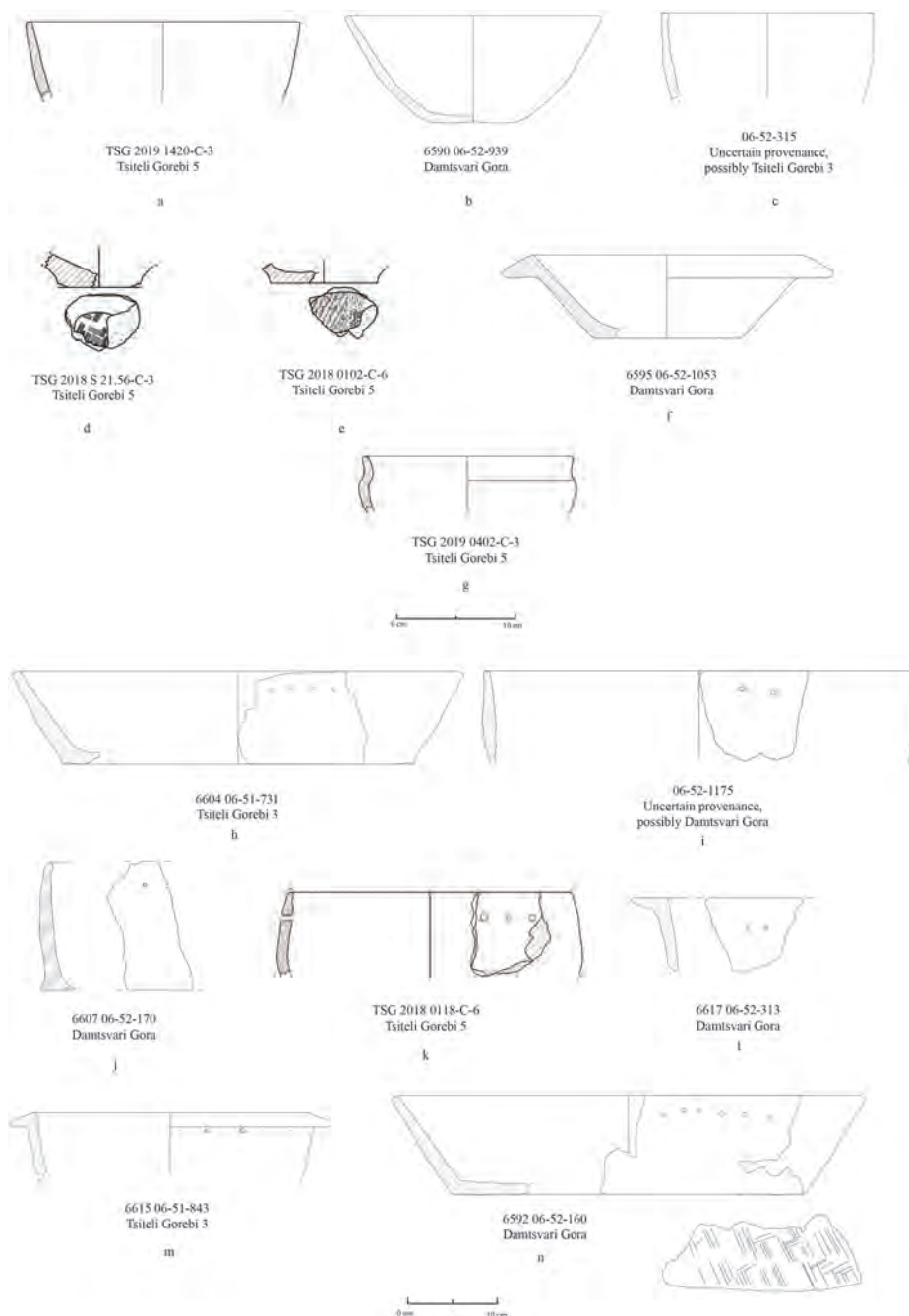


Figure 3. Open shapes from the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster.

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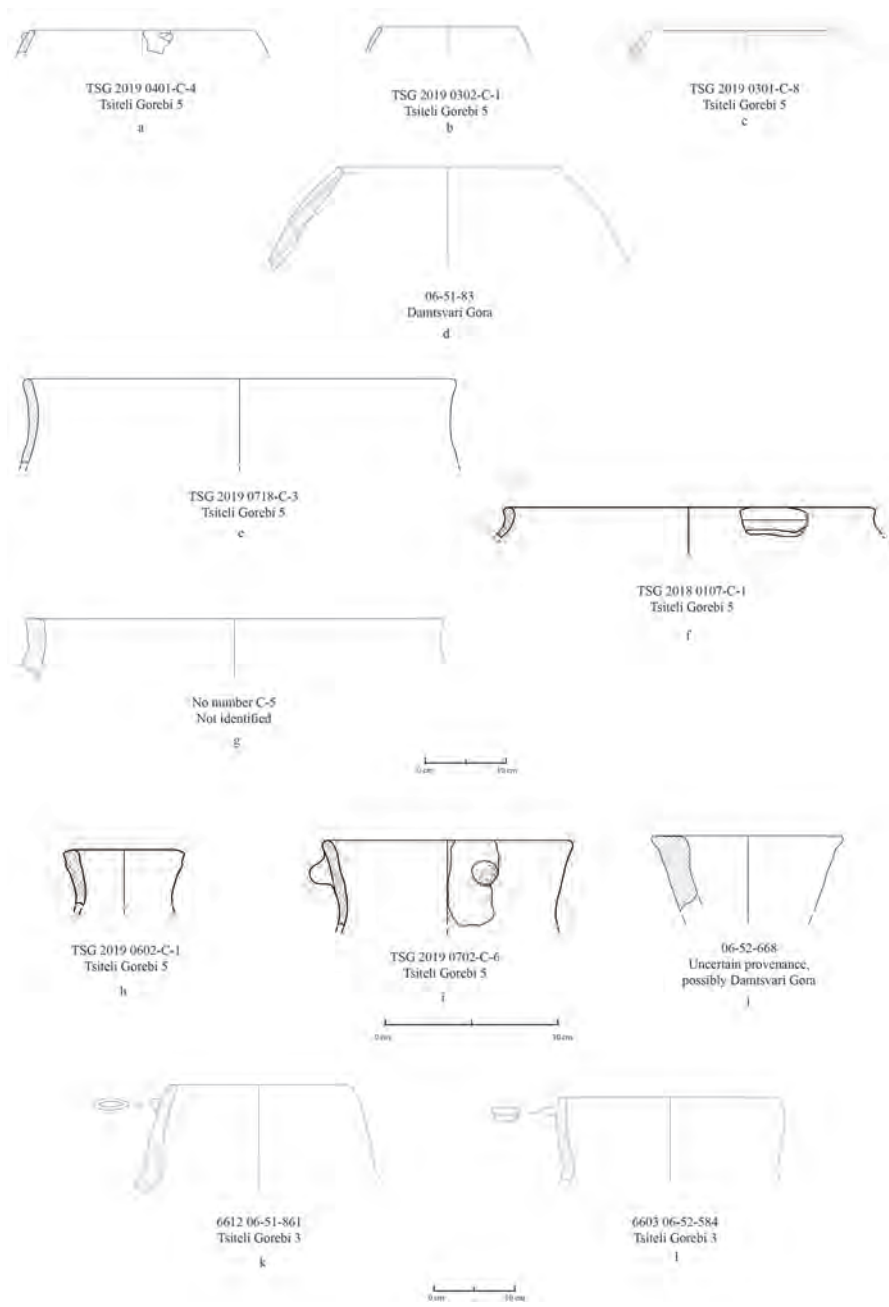


Figure 4. Closed shapes from the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster.

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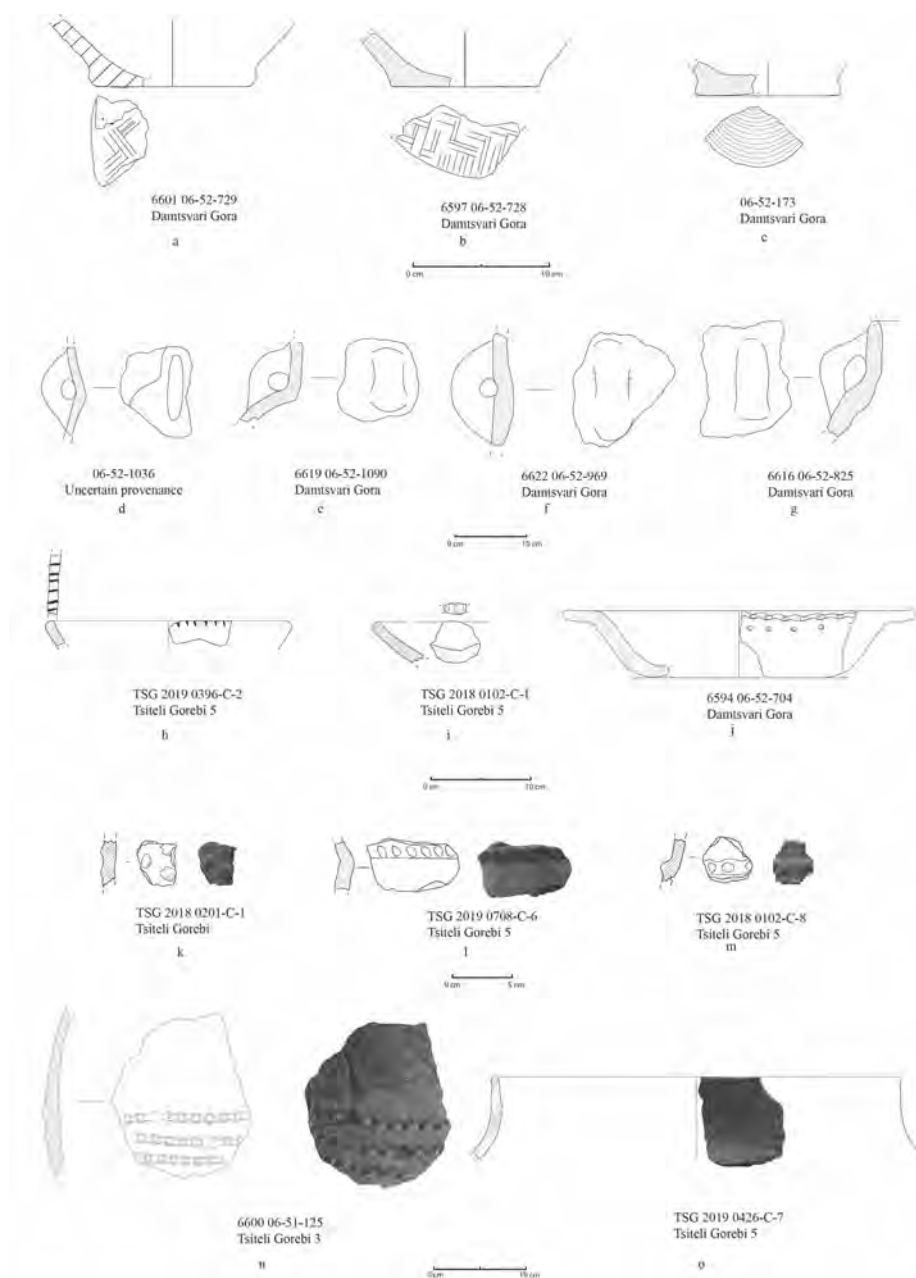


Figure 5. Pottery from the Tsiteli Gorebi cluster: examples of mat impressions on bases (a-c); handles (d-g); decorations (h-o).