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Late Roman Coarse Wares,  
Cooking Wares and Amphorae  
in the Mediterranean

Archaeology and archaeometry

The Mediterranean: a market without frontiers

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Cover illustration: Early Byzantine amphora from Pseira, Crete (photo by C. Papanikolopoulos; graphic design by K. Peppas).

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# AMPHORAE AND SPECIALIZED COARSEWARES OF RAS AL BASSIT, SYRIA: LOCAL PRODUCTS AND EXPORTS

PHILIP J.E MILLS<sup>1</sup>, PAUL REYNOLDS<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH, United Kingdom; cbmphil@aol.com

<sup>2</sup>ICREA Research Professor, ERAAUB, University of Barcelona, C. Montalegre 6-8, Barcelona 08001, Spain  
paulreynoldspot@hotmail.com

*This paper presents a preliminary typology of the specialized amphorae, mortaria, basins and dolia that were manufactured and exported from Ras el Bassit from the 1st to the 5th centuries AD. Their appearance in stratified deposits in Beirut is used to suggest date ranges as well as their role in interregional trade.*

**KEYWORDS:** BASSIT, SPECIALIST PRODUCTION, *MORTARIA*, *DOLIA*, AMPHORAE, BASINS

## Introduction

Ras el Bassit is located on the Syrian coast, some 50km south west of Antioch and 220km north of Beirut (Fig. 1). It is well known as the source of a distinctive 3rd century *mortarium* which was commonly exported to sites on the Levantine coast – with some examples even reaching the West (Hayes 1967; Vallerin 1994).

The current project, begun in 2000, is concentrated on the standing remains of a church and two buildings outside the church complex (Fig. 2). The site is of a 5th century synagogue, which was remodelled as a church in the mid 6th century (Mills and Beaudry 2010; Beaudry 2005a; 2005b; 2004; Courbin 1986; 1978). The church went through significant refurbishments, probably in the later 6th century. There seems to be a general abandonment in the early 7th century, with partial squatter occupation of the semi ruinous structure before its final collapse. The ruins of the apse were cleared and developed as a small chapel during the Frankish period, according to the glass and coin finds.

This paper presents new evidence for the range of amphorae and specialized forms produced in Bassit from the early Imperial to late Roman periods, many of which are attested as exports in Beirut, which has been used as a source of good supplementary dating evidence for these Bassit products.

## The pottery

To date, some 43,100 sherds including over 3,416 rims have been catalogued at Bassit. The material derives mainly from makeup layers, derived from rubbish middens from outside the settlement but also a mixture of contemporary pottery, make up and hardcore used for the first floor balconies contemporary with the early 6th century remodeling.

Much of this material is made up of the by-products of the extensive local production of *mortaria*, basins, *dolia*, amphora and kitchen wares. In addition much can be learnt from the large quantities of unstratified material found all over the settlement, as well as a number of type pieces recovered from Courbin's excavations in the 1970s.

## Local amphorae

Figure 3, nos 1-4, are Beirut examples of Bassit Form 1. These have a pale red, sometimes yellowish fabric, differing substantially from the typical dense, heavy, dark red or orange-brown fabric of the 4th to 7th centuries. Inclusions of quartz, basalt and lime are common in both fabrics, but sparser and finer in the earlier examples. John Hayes (1991) correctly suggested that this small flagon-like vessel with a ring foot and band rim was from Bassit. Two of many examples recovered from Bassit are shown in Figure 3, nos 4 and 5. It is the most commonly exported Bassit amphora to Beirut in the 2nd century, though is still relatively rare in Beirut. Note that two sizes of the shape were produced.

We can now add to this a good Bassit version of the Koan type (Fig. 3, no. 6: Bassit Form 3), from the Courbin excavations. Another new type is a large amphora, Figure 3, no. 5, also in the early Imperial fabric, which has the same handle type as the flagon form, though obviously the handles are larger (Bassit Form 2).

Two other vessels, Figure 3, nos 7 and 8, also from the Courbin excavations, may be two variants of another new form, and are perhaps mid Roman on the basis of their fabrics (Bassit Form 4A-B). Figure 4, no. 9 shows the already published vessel from Beirut, dating to the late 4th century, in the classic late fabric, with a rather globular body (Reynolds 2005, Plate 6, fig. 38) (Bassit

Form 5). Figure 4, no. 10, from Bassit, now provides the rim for this type, but its base is still unknown. The handles are distinctive in the way they are folded, leaving a deep central groove, a feature equally typical of Cilician early LRA 1s of the 3rd and 4th centuries (Reynolds 2005, 565-567, Plate 3; 2009, fig. 3). Handles of this type litter parts of the site. It was clearly a very common form.

Finally, the amphora production of Bassit appears to end with a version of LRA 1 (Fig. 4, nos 11 and 12), a previously unattested product that is clearly modelled on the early 5th century version of the Cilician form (Reynolds 2005, fig. 31). Unlike the latter, the Bassit version appears not to have been made for export. There are no examples in Beirut. So far no later forms of the LRA 1 type, of late 5th to 7th century date, nor LRA 13s have been identified in Bassit (or Beirut) and this would seem significant given the large excavated sample covering this period. The production for export of LRA 1 was confined to Cilicia and Cyprus and not Syria (a conclusion already proposed in Reynolds 2005, 565-567).

#### *Transport dolia*

We now come to another class of vessel we have named 'transport-dolia'. A complete example of this large, thick-walled form, with Koan-style rim, stepped neck and large double rod handles, is on display in the Antioch Museum. Vessel top and bases were recovered from the Fig Tree Bay Ship Wreck, off eastern Cyprus (Fig. 5, nos 13 to 15; Leidwanger 2010, fig. 7). The Koan-style top and handles suggests the form carried wine, for export in this case. Perhaps wine was fermented in these vessels prior to shipment. The latest date one could attribute to this wreck is the early 3rd century. A vessel published from Sinai is not an amphora as stated, but rather a transport *dolium* of this type (Fig. 5, no. 16 = Arthur and Oren 1998, 203, fig. 4, no. 6). These occur in the late Roman period in Sinai. The neck is shorter than the 3rd century form.

Two examples from Bassit, in the classic late fabric, are of the later form (Fig. 5, nos 17 and 18). A large number of similar rims and handles scattered across the site should also be classified as *dolia* rather than amphorae, again perhaps evidence for the large scale fermentation of wine.

#### *Dolia*

Bassit *dolia* with large collar rims (primarily for storage of water?) are occasionally found in Beirut in the 3rd and 4th centuries (Fig. 5, nos 19-21) but were superseded in the 5th to 7th centuries by Amrit-Tartus *dolia*, which are, in contrast, quite common in Beirut, Homs and North Palestinian sites.

#### *Mortaria*

Figure 6, nos 22 and 23, show rare Beirut examples of 2nd century Bassit *mortaria*, none of which have been recovered from the Bassit excavations to date. Typologically these stand apart from the far more important production of *mortaria* in Bassit that begins in the early 3rd century in the pale red Imperial fabric (Fig. 6, no 24). The fabric is dark brown, although earlier examples tend to be paler. It is hard with an irregular fracture and harsh sandy feel. It has inclusions of abundant basalt at 0.6mm and common subrounded lime at c. 0.3mm in a sandy matrix. The shape, the existence of Latin stamps, and Roman names in Greek are highly unusual in the East. Early 4th century examples have smaller rims (Fig. 6, no. 25). By the late 4th century the type, now in classic late fabric, is only a rare import in Beirut, sometimes being decorated with stamped circles (Fig. 6, nos 26 and 27).

In the early 5th century these were replaced by another Bassit mortar shape with its distinctive bevelled squarish rim, straight walls and flat base (Fig. 7, nos 28 and 30). A small spout is preserved on some examples. The rims become thinner through the 5th century (Fig. 7, no. 29). Whereas imports of this form are common in Beirut throughout the 5th century, but cease after c. 500, the shape would seem to continue in Bassit. The larger vessels with squared rim illustrated here (Fig. 7, nos 32 and 33) may be large mortars or basins.

#### *Basins*

Figure 8, no. 34 shows a deep basin with large strap handles, which appears in Beirut mid 3rd century contexts. Smaller, more open vessels were particularly common in the 5th century (Fig. 8, nos 35-38), recalling the pattern of Bassit mortar imports. Figure 8, no. 39 (early 6th century), a large form with a deep lid seat, is similar to the 3rd century form.

From the late 5th century, however, it was Amrit that provided the majority of basins, to not only Beirut but also to Homs and North Palestine, in turn reflecting the supply of Amrit *dolia* to the same sites (Fig. 8, no. 40).

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, alongside the more widely acknowledged *mortaria*, Bassit was producing a large number of other specialized vessels. Amphorae, apparently for wine, were produced for export from the Imperial period until the late 4th century. The importance of locally produced wine is underlined by the transport *dolia* defined here, these vessels probably serving both for the fermentation of the wine on site and for its export. Whereas Cilicia exported its wine in ever increasing quantities in LRA 1 from the late 4th century onwards, Bassit only produced its version of the type in the early 5th century and this was not for export.

Instead we find that from the 3rd to the 7th centuries Bassit was engaged in the export to Levantine coastal sites of *mortaria*, first, and then basins. This reached its peak in the 5th century, after which Bassit lost this market to Amrit.

### Acknowledgements

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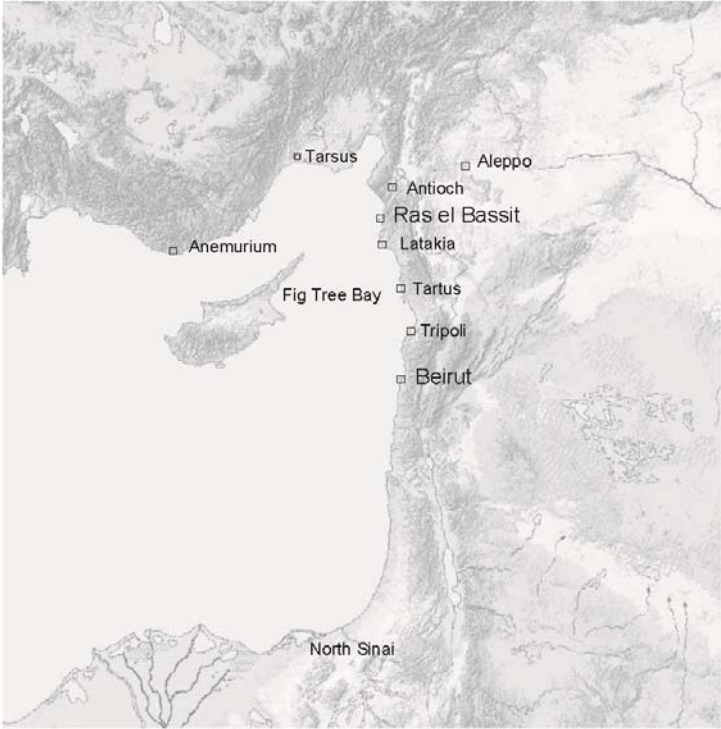


Fig. 1. Sites mentioned in the text

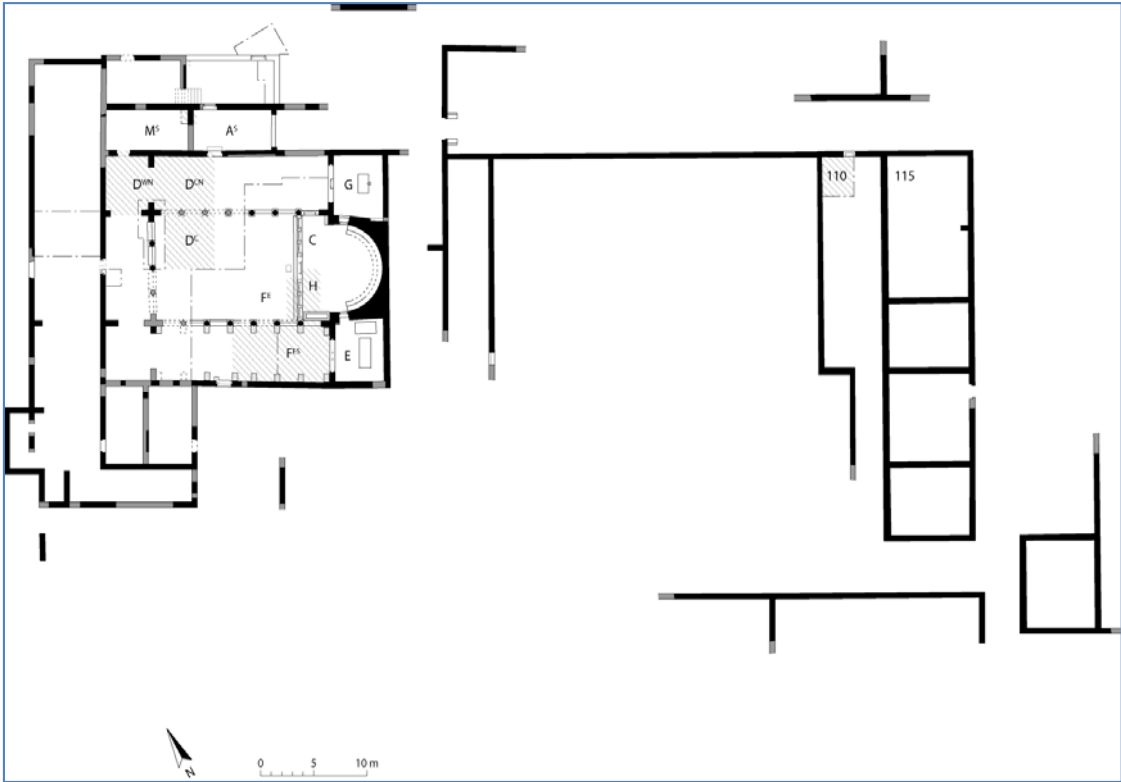
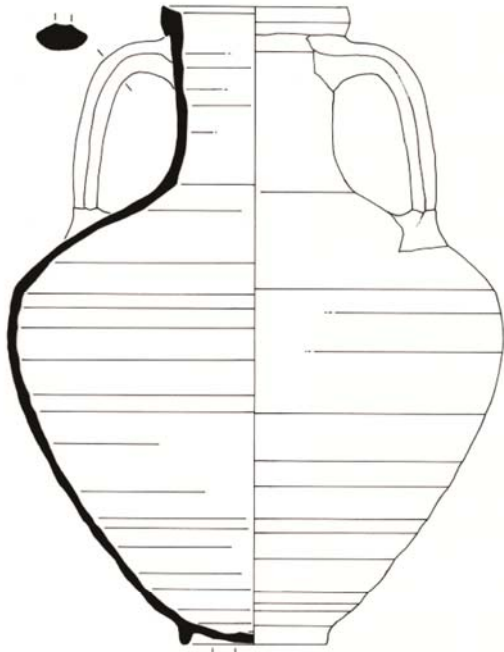
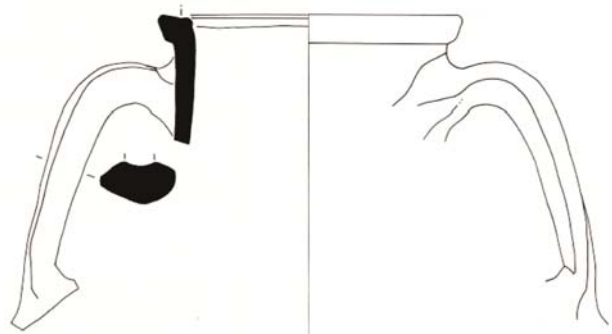


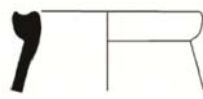
Fig. 2. Site plan



1. Beirut. AD 100-150  
BEY 045 1223.1



2. Beirut. Mid 2nd century  
BEY 006 13426.22

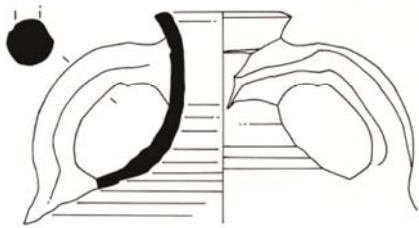


3. Bassit

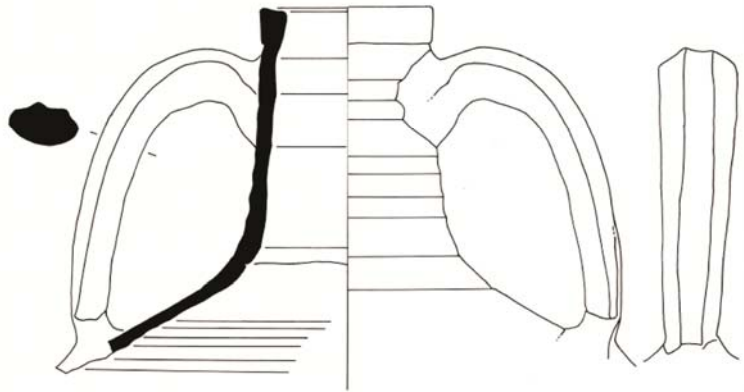


4. Bassit

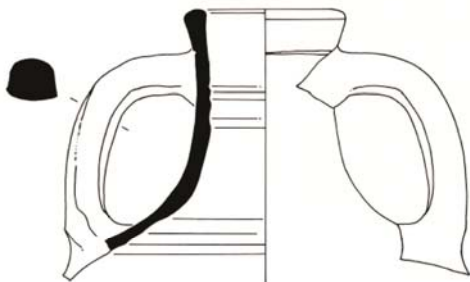
Bassit Form 1



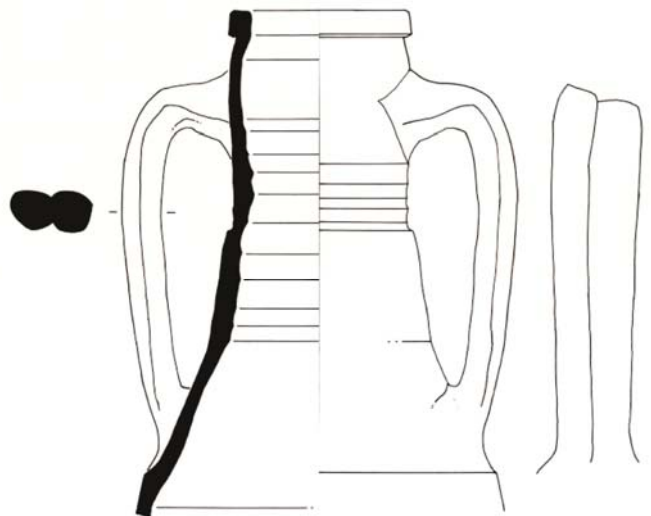
7. Bassit. Bassit Form 4A



5. Bassit. Bassit Form 2



8. Bassit. Bassit Form 4B

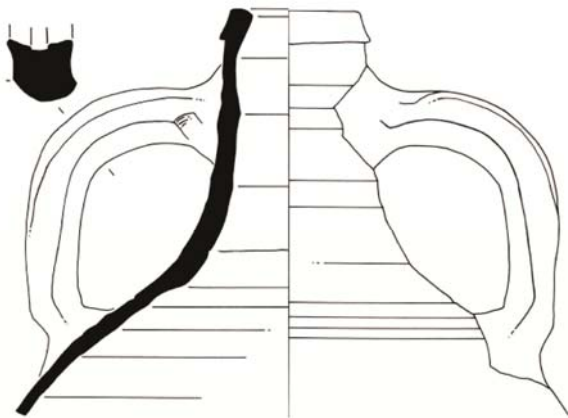


6. Bassit. Bassit Form 3 (Koan)

Fig. 3. Early Imperial Bassit amphorae



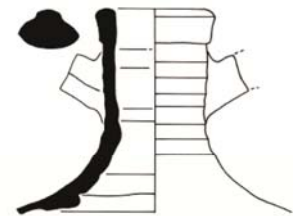
9. Beirut. Bassit Form 5  
Late 4th century. BEY 006 9429.68  
(handle = BEY 006 11036.49)



10. Bassit. Bassit Form 5  
Late 4th century



11. Bassit  
LRA 1  
Early 5th century



12. Bassit  
LRA 1  
Early 5th century

Fig. 4. Early Byzantine Bassit amphorae



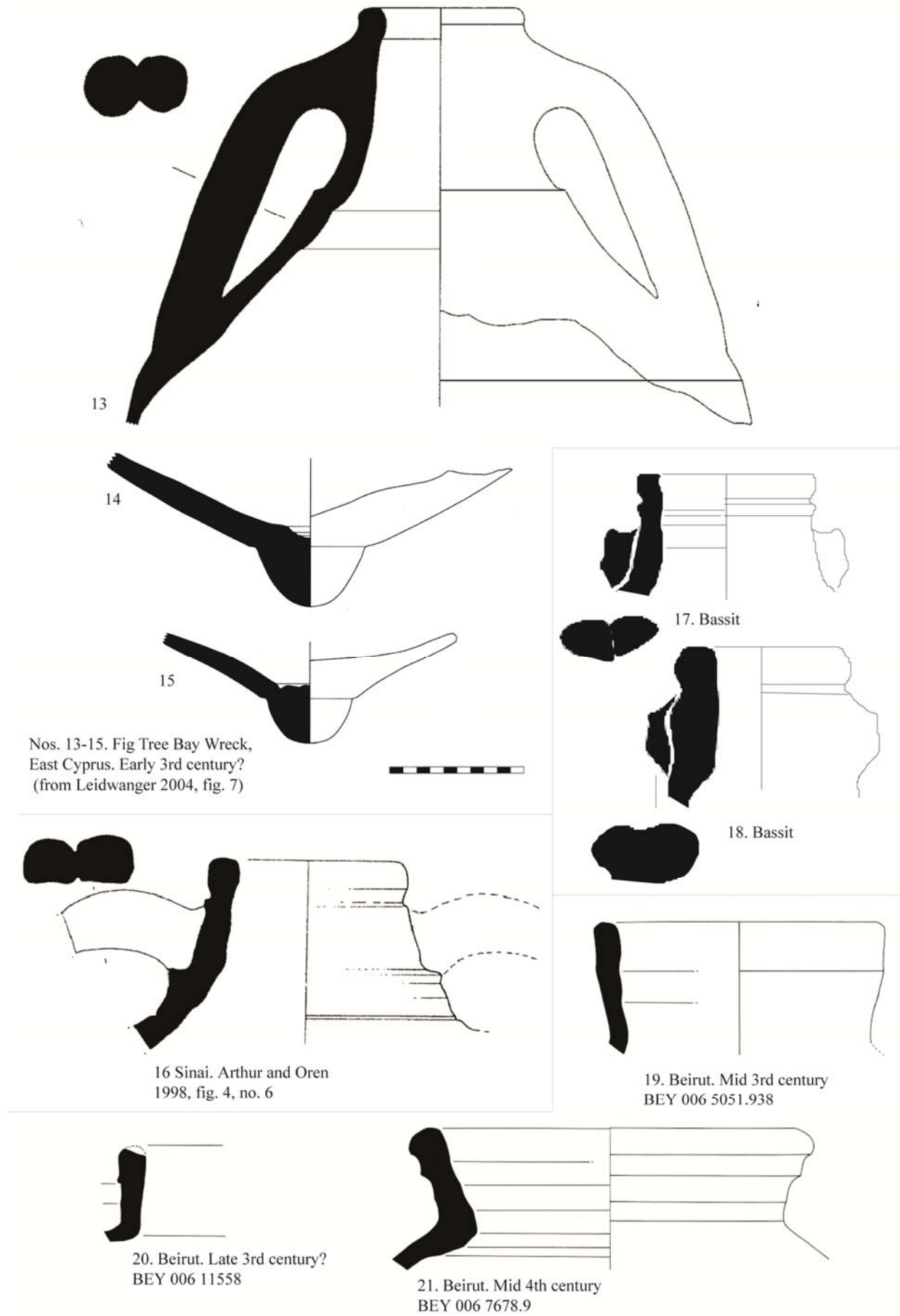


Fig. 5. Transport and storage *dolia*

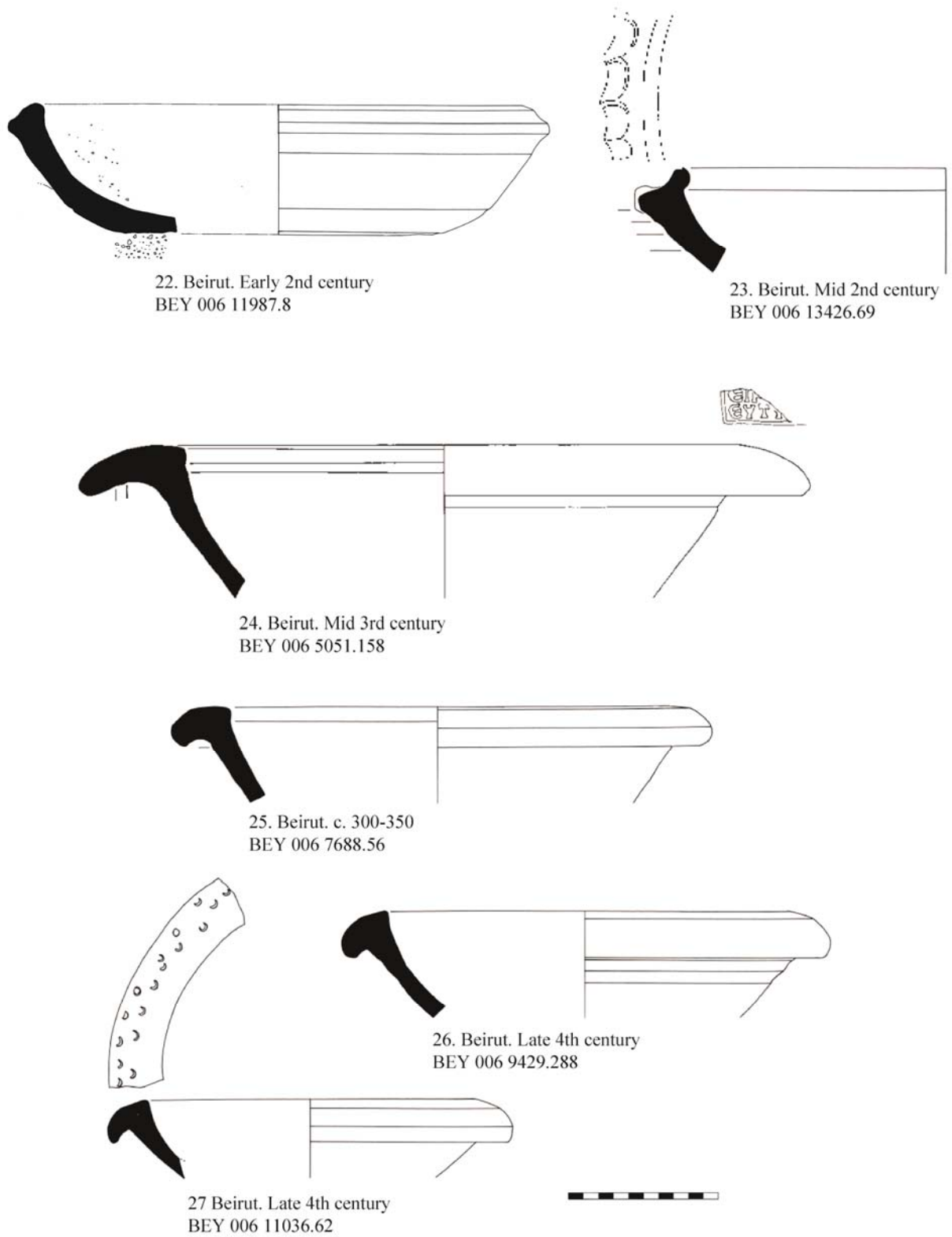


Fig. 6. Bassit *mortaria*, 2nd to 4th centuries

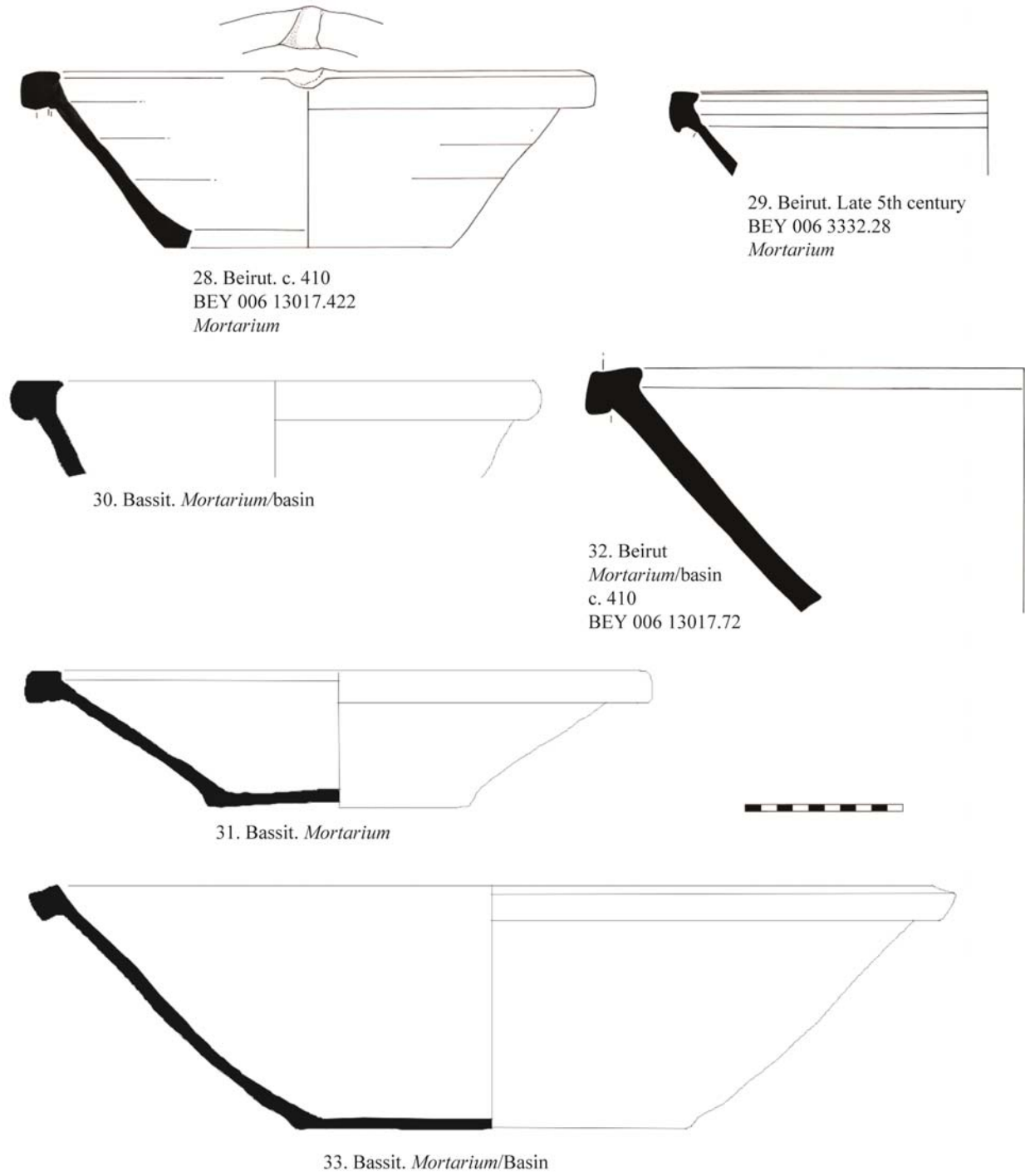


Fig. 7. Bassit mortaria and mortaria/basins, 5th to 6th centuries

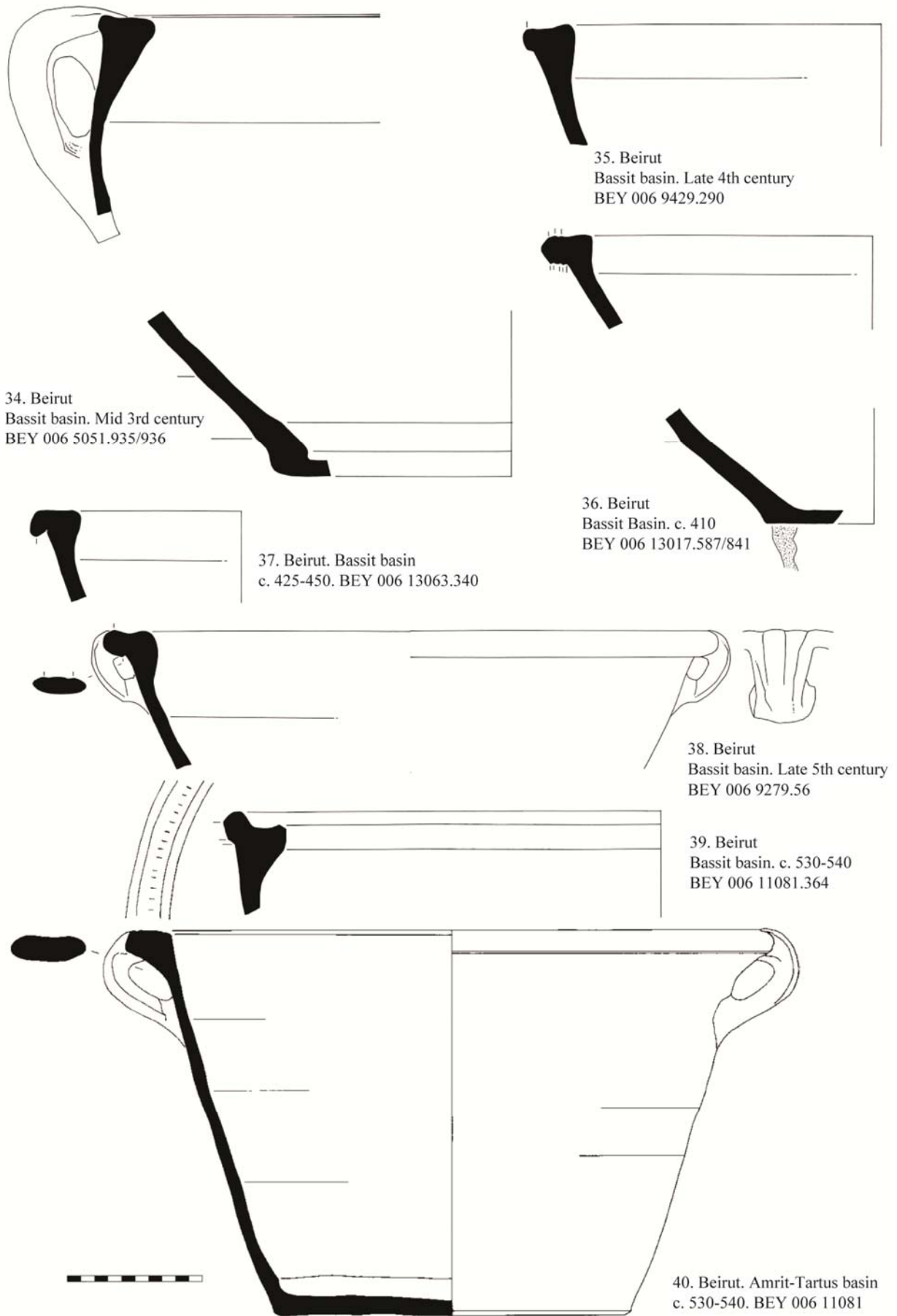


Fig. 8. Bassit and Amrit-Tartus basins