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Excavation on Saffi Island Sites 7, 48 and 32 : Preliminary Report, 2004

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 16, 329-337

2005

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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EXCAVATIONS ON SAFFI ISLAND SITES 7,
48 and 32. PRELIMINARY REPORT, 2004

Edyta Klimaszewska-Drabot & Artur Obłuski

Fieldwork carried out on Saffi Island in the 2004 season by an expedition from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology,¹ concerned altogether five grave sites: 7, 32 (which appeared to be a "quasi-mor-

tuary" site of stone cairns with no burials beneath them), 48, 56 and 63. The first three of these sites are reported on in this preliminary account (for their location see map in Fig. 1. on p. 326).

SAFFI 7

The site of Saffi 7 (N18°47'18.6"; E32°01'13.6") lies on the eastern edge of a broad wadi taking a westward course from the rocky plateau in the middle of the island. It comprised three tumuli featuring a stone coat (according to an earlier unpublished survey report by P. and M. Osypiński), two immediately adjoining ones and a third situated at a certain distance to the north. This isolated tumulus had suffered heavy damages from water penetration and was thus considered of little promise archaeologically, hence the choice fell on the other two.

The first grave to be excavated was covered with a stone coat measuring on the outside perimeter 5.10 x 3.80 m, with practically no stones preserved in the central part (1.60 x 1.90 m). The burial pit was oval, widening slightly on the eastern side, scooped just 0.10 m into the hard clay of the ground at a point just off to the north with respect to the mound center [*Fig. 1*]. The

body had been interred in contracted position, on its right side, head to west and hands in front of the face [*Fig. 2*]. Traces of ocher were present on the skull, shoulders and feet. Two shell objects were found in place. Similar objects were found during the Archaeological Survey of Nubia in the Early 20th century.² Some of them were of different shape, but they all seem to have served the same purpose. This has been interpreted variously by different excavators: as pendants, buttons, fasteners for leather garments and hair rings. At Saffi 7, the objects were found on the skull just above the ears, which would suggest a function either as earrings or as hair slides. If they were indeed earrings, they would have been put on the upper part of the ear. If they were hair slides, they would have been used to hold together locks of hair or braids just over the ears.

One potsherd was found inside the grave pit, next to the knee of the skeleton. All the

1 The expedition was directed by Dr. Bogdan Żurawski. The actual excavation team comprised Mrs. Edyta Klimaszewska-Drabot and Ms. Artur Obłuski. Ms. Habab Idriss Ahmed, NCAM Senior Inspector assigned to the mission, actively joined in the fieldwork. For the work on Saffi, see overview by B. Żurawski in this volume, 325-328

2 See G.A. Reisner, *The Archaeological Survey of Nubia. Report for 1907-1908* (Cairo 1910), 229-230, Pl. 70b. 8-9, cem. 7, grave 121; Pl. 70b.15, cem. 41, grave 529; C.M. Firth, *The Archaeological Survey of Nubia. Report for 1908-1909* (Cairo 1912), cem. 69, grave 36; id., *The Archaeological Survey of Nubia. Report for 1909-1910* (Cairo 1915), 123, Pl. 36e.2, cem. 101, grave 97.

other 24 fragments of pottery (nine of which belonged to the same vessel as the piece from the pit) came from the mound above the grave. This pot was a red bowl [Fig. 3:1] with straight rim and slight constriction below the rim, burnished on the exterior and bearing characteristic traces of smoothing of the interior surface with a rounded tool. The bowl was rather deep and its form referred to pottery of Middle Kerma date.³

The other sherds belonged to two other vessels. One was a big, polished, slightly carinated red bowl [Fig. 3:2] with blackened rim decorated with an exterior incised pattern consisting of zigzags, combined with vertical hatching above and below.

This ornament is very typical of Ancient Kerma pottery⁴ with variants occurring in Middle Kerma as well.⁵ The incompleteness of the form incapacitates more precise dating, as the basal shape of such bowls was very different in Ancient Kerma⁶ and Middle Kerma times.⁷

The other vessel proved to be a thin-walled red bowl [Fig. 3:3] with some dark spots (resulting from firing in a reduction atmosphere) and exterior decorated with infilled pattern of deeply incised lines. The rim is visibly notched on top. Parallels of Middle Kerma date have been noted among the GAME expedition material collected from the right bank of the Nile.⁸

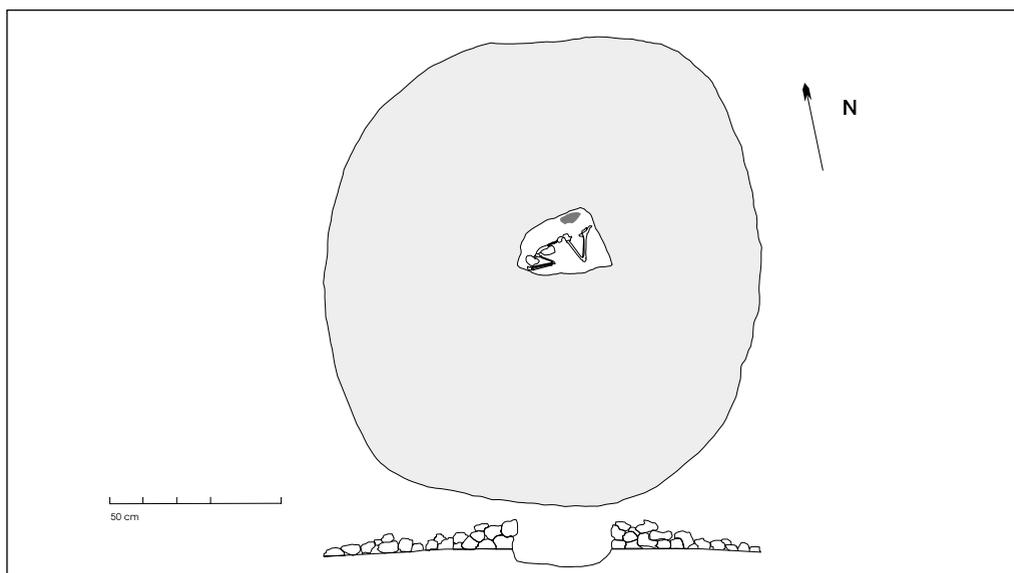


Fig. 1. Plan and E-W cross-section through the tumulus grave on Saffi 7 (Drawing A. Obluski)

- 3 B. Privati, "La céramique de la nécropole orientale de Kerma (Soudan): essai de classification", *CRIPPEL* 20 (1999), 46-48.
- 4 B. Gratién, *Les Cultures Kerma. Essai de classification* (Lille 1978), 149, Fig. 41.J.
- 5 Privati 1999, 59, Fig. 11.8 ; 61, Fig. 12.11.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 59, Fig. 4.10.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 59, Fig. 10.8; B. Privati, "Le matériel céramique associé aux édifices funéraires", in : Ch. Bonnet, *Édifices et rites funéraires à Kerma* (Paris 2000), Fig. 129.11.
- 8 E. Kołosowska, Mahmoud El-Tayeb & H. Paner, "Old Kush in the Fourth Cataract Region," *Sudan & Nubia* 7 (2003), 22, Fig. 3a.



Fig. 2. *The skeleton in situ in the tumulus grave on Saffi 7*
(Photo A. Obłuski)

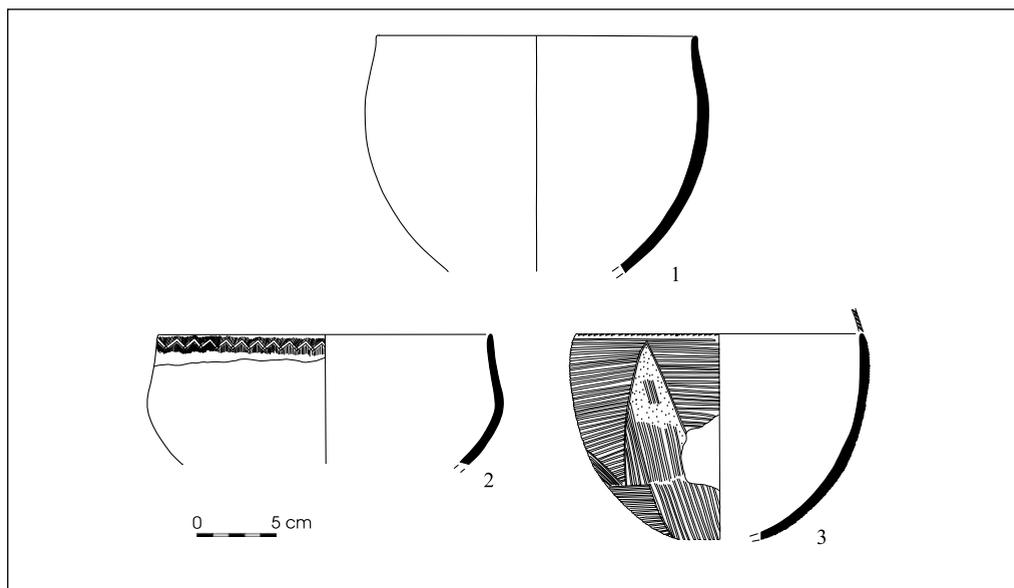


Fig. 3. *Pottery from the grave in Saffi 7: 1 - S7.1; 2 - S7.3; 3 - S7.2*
(Drawing E. Klimaszevska-Drabot)

SAFFI 48

The group of four graves making up site Saffi 48 lies at the western edge of a rocky plateau that occupies the center of the island. It is not far from Saffi 7. The distance between the stone circles ranges from a few to a few dozen meters. Three of the graves lie in a line aligned more or less N-S, the fourth, northernmost one was at a distance of a few dozen meters to the west.

The southernmost of the sepulchers, Grave 1 (N18°47'22.1"; E32°01'18.2") [Fig. 4] had the biggest superstructure: 5.40 m from north to south and 4.90 m from east to west. The mound comprised different size stones and partly enconced the grave pit, presumably avoiding the effort of hollowing it out in the rocky ground. Nothing but some small bone fragments and sherds were found in it. The same was true of grave 2 (N18°47'22.6"; E32°01'18.7")

which had a superstructure of equal size (5.45 m N-S by 4.75 m E-W), rising to 0.50 m in height [Fig. 5].

A stone circle, 4.90 m N-S and 4.00 m E-W, surrounded grave 3 (N18°47'23.8"; E32°01'19.2") [Fig. 6]; toward the east the stones of the circle were scattered up to 2 m away, possibly as a result of plundering activities. The remains of a child's skeleton – skull and leg bones – were found directly upon the rock in the northeastern part of the pit. The body must have been laid in contracted position, aligned NE-SW, with the head pointing to the northeast. Remains of a necklace, altogether 42 faience beads, were found near the neck. The last of the graves (no. 4, N18°47'25.4"; E32°01'18.8") also had a stone circle measuring 4.30 m in diameter. It was seriously destroyed. Only the leg bones re-



Fig. 4. Saffi 48, grave 1, looking east
(Photo A. Obtuski)

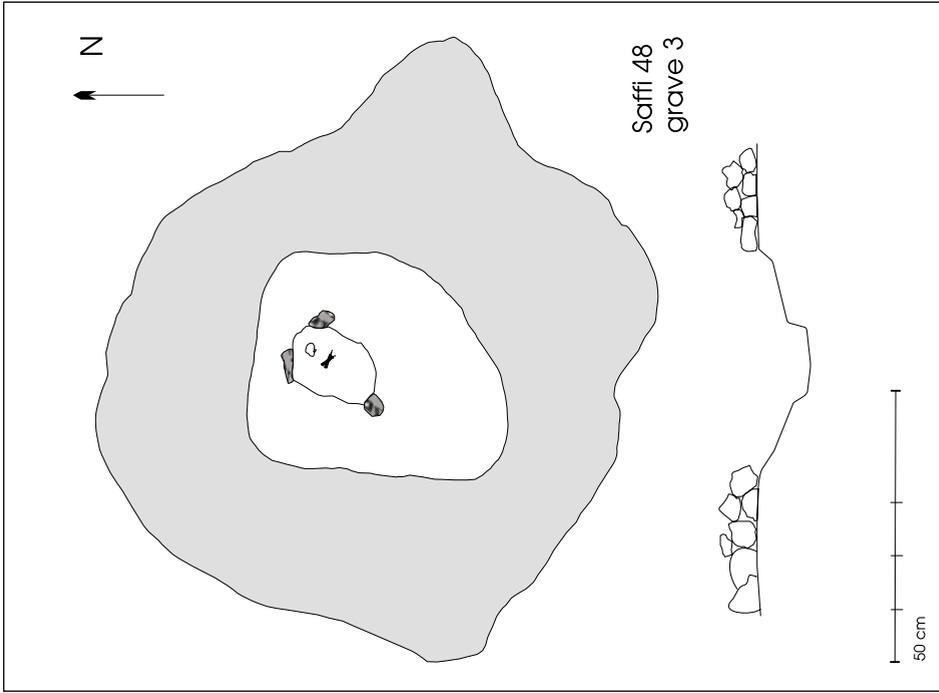


Fig. 6. Saffi site 48, grave 3, schematic plan (Drawing A. Obtuski)

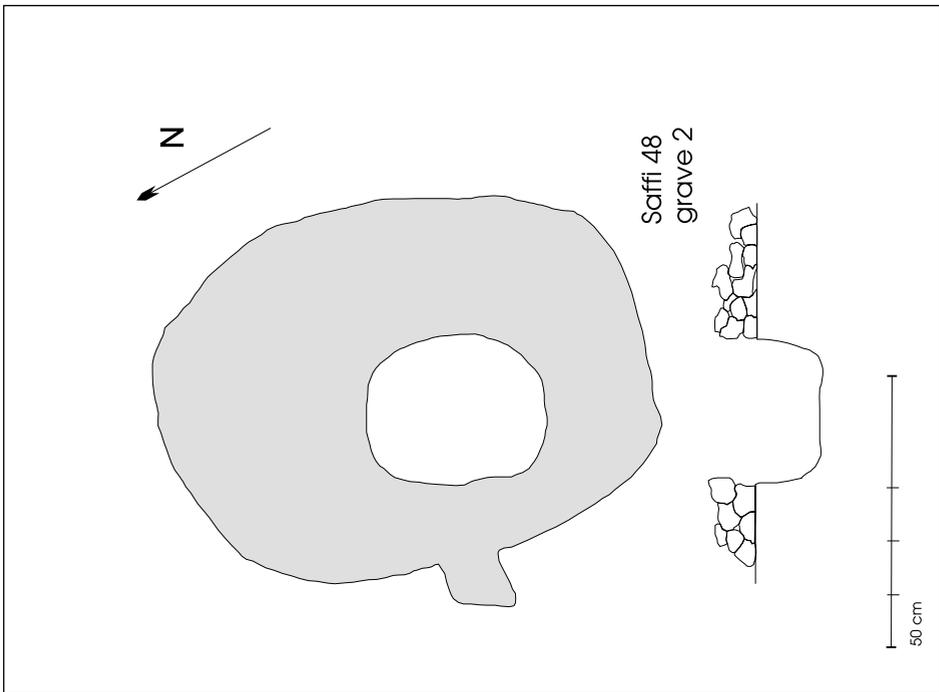


Fig. 5. Saffi site 48, grave 2, schematic plan and cross-section (Drawing A. Obtuski)

mained, but to judge by the size of the grave pit, the body had to have been in heavily contracted position.

Whatever pottery material was found, it was either from the fill of the graves or from surface scatters in the vicinity of the tombs. One was a fragment of hemispherical red bowl with finely smoothed exterior and interior, from the fill of grave 2 [Fig. 7:1], with blackened, slightly everted rim, resembling Middle Kerma types.⁹ Another was a thick-walled body fragment without rim or any diagnostic part [Fig. 7:2], but with an ornament falling easily within Middle Kerma¹⁰ or the very end of Ancient Kerma patterns.¹¹ A hemispherical open bowl was found during the exploration of grave 3 [Fig. 7:3]. It had a blackened rim

and shallow incised decoration all over the exterior, consisting of a band of vertical lines below the rim and horizontal or slightly oblique ones lower down on the body. Notches on the rim cut through to the outside.

Surface collection near grave 1 yielded sherds of many red-walled vessels, mostly rims with exterior incised decoration in the form of oblique lines at the top and three bands of impressed lines below [Fig. 7:4]. Some body and bottom fragments, possibly from one vessel to judge by the fabric or from a few similar ones, bear incised patterns of oblique lines converging in a rhomboidal motif [Fig. 7:6]. It could be a typical Middle Kerma variant of globular vessels with short decorated neck and rim

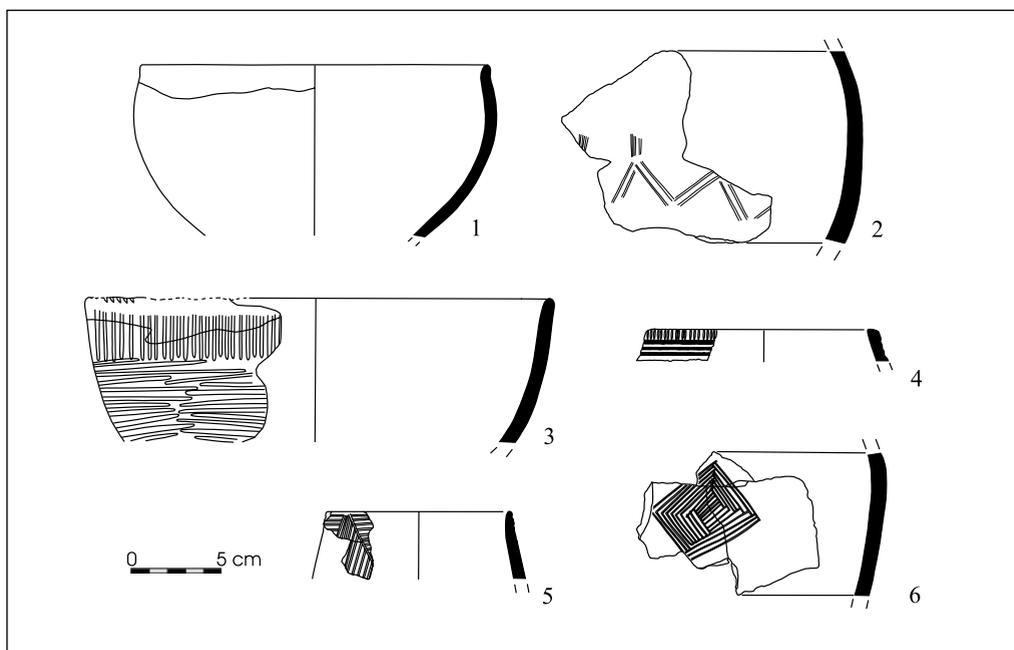


Fig. 7. Pottery from Saffi 48, grave fill: 1 - S.48.T2.1; 2 - S.48.T2.1; 3 - S.48.T3.1; surface: 4 - S.48.T1.2 ; 5 - S.48.T1.3 ; 6 - S.48.T1.1 (Drawing E. Klimaszevska-Drabot)

9 Privati 1999, Fig. 9.2, 12.2 ; Privati 2000, Fig. 132.13.

10 Privati 1999, Fig. 11.1.

11 Ibid., Fig. 8.4.

exterior, and body bearing various, mostly incised linear motifs. Similar basal decoration on a rounded bottom was noted on a whole bowl found by the GAME expedition.¹² The Saffi 48 sherds could have come from similar bowls, the rims belonging to another type, but the material is too fragmentary to be conclusive.

Another type represented among the sherds from the surface is a thin-walled

vessel [*Fig. 7:5*] decorated with incised pattern of lines in probably triangular zones covering the entire exterior surface. It also points to a Middle Kerma date, the period ceramics being characterized by a richness of incised decoration.¹³ Scattered fragments of wheelmade pottery, most likely from a single pot, were also found outside the grave. While no shape reconstruction was possible, the clay appears to be of Egyptian origin.

SAFFI 32

The last site to be excavated was Saffi 32 (N18°47'52.3"; E32°01'44.1"), located in the northeastern part of the island on a natural rock platform at the foot of a steep slope. The survey had registered four round,

apparently undisturbed stone structures, from 1.00 to 1.60 m in diameter, covered with smaller stones and gravel [*Fig. 8*].¹⁴ Some of the stones used in the construction attained even 0.40 by 0.80 m. The fill of



Fig. 8. Stone structure 2 from Saffi 32
(Photo A. Obłuski)

12 E. Kołosowska, Mahmoud El-Tayeb, "Pottery from the Fourth Cataract Region (Sudan)", *GAMAR* 2 (2003), 120, Fig. 3 - MD 2334.

13 I. Welsby Sjöström, "The Pottery from the Survey", in: D.A. Welsby, *Life on the Desert Edge. Seven thousand years of the settlement in the Northern Dongola Reach, Sudan*, vol. I (London 2001), 230-348.

14 For two other of the structures and a general view of the site, see Żurawski, op. cit., 213-214, Figs. 17-19.

these structures yielded absolutely no sherds, and only a few fragments were scattered in the immediate vicinity. Indeed bedrock was literally just below the ground here.

The structures may have served some sepulchral function, although the lack of any trace of burial makes this identification less than plausible. Neither do they seem to be settlement remains. The form of these structures and the absence of fireplaces, for instance, or any other material evidence of human activities typical of domestic sites, exclude such identification as well.

The surface collection from the site comprises both wheel- and handmade pottery that is absolutely not homogeneous in date. An Early Neolithic sherd [Fig. 9]¹⁵

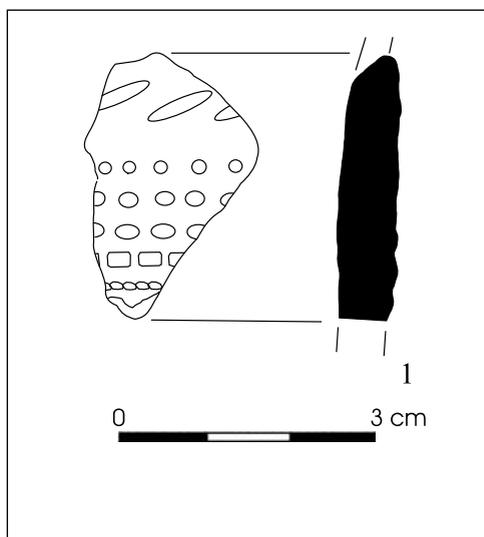


Fig. 9. Early Neolithic sherd from Saffi 32 (Drawing E. Klimaszewska-Drobot)

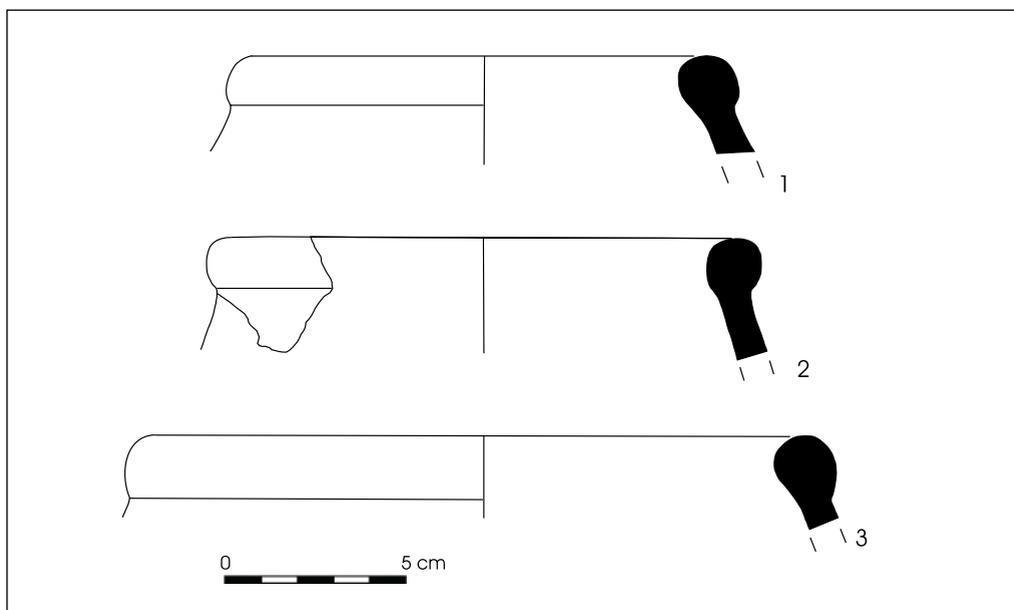


Fig. 10. Pottery from Saffi 32, surface collection: wheel-made containers (Drawing E. Klimaszewska-Drobot)

15 For photos of the collection, cf. J. Phillips, E. Klimaszewska-Drobot, "Saffi Island, 2004: An overview of the ceramics", *GAMAR* 4 (2005), 119-120, Figs. 6-7.

occurred alongside few and shattered Christian-period fragments, but the biggest concentration reflected a ceramic tradition from the end of the Kerma Horizon to the Napatan phase. While a strict classification is still pending, observation of the ceramic material from other sites on the island, as well as on neighboring Uli Island, demonstrates very likely parallels in this chronological horizon. Handmade vessels with 'mat'-impressions on the exterior and burnished rims find parallels in New Kingdom material from the Northern Dongola Reach¹⁶ and Letti Basin.¹⁷ Similar pottery

from the Southern Dongola Reach has been attributed to the Proto-Kushite period.¹⁸

Numerous rim and body fragments represented thick-walled wheel-made containers [Fig. 10:1-3], often retaining a red-slipped surface. Some body sherds with impressed rope patterns were observed as well. These could be of Egyptian origin, from the Late New Kingdom /Third Intermediate Period (between the 12th and 10th century BC).¹⁹ Impressed rope patterns were popular especially in this period, from the 12th through the mid 8th century BC.²⁰

CLOSING REMARKS

A few other mortuary complexes of the likes of Saffi 48 site have been located on higher ground. Hopefully, further excavations in 2005 will provide more data on burials of this kind. Saffi 7, on the other hand, appears to be the sole Kerma-related cemetery that was situated in a wadi. Post-Meroitic burial grounds were often placed

on the floors of wadis, but not so in earlier times.

Moreover, at least two other sites of the same kind as Saffi 32 were registered during the survey and recognized to have similar pottery evidence. Perhaps they will yield the necessary data to identify the true nature of these stone structures.

16 Welsby Sjöström, op. cit., 251, Fig. 5.5.

17 K. Grzymski, "The Debba Bend in the New Kingdom", Warsaw Egyptological Studies 1, Essays in Honour of Prof. Jadwiga Lipińska (Warsaw 1997), Fig. 2.

18 E. Klimaszewska-Drabot, "Proto-Kushite (?) ceramics, an archaeological enigma", in B. Żurawski, Survey and Excavations between Old Dongola and Ez-Zuma, *Nubia II*, Southern Dongola Reach Survey I (Warsaw 2003), 439, Pl. 5a.

19 D.A. Aston, "Egyptian Pottery of the Late New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period (Twelfth-Seventh Centuries B.C.). Tentative Footsteps in a Forbidding Terrain", *Studien zur Archäologie und Geschichte Altägyptens*, 13 (Heidelberg 1996), 300, Fig. 198.

20 Ibid., 81.