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Uli Island: Preliminary Report

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ULI ISLAND
PRELIMINARY REPORT

Włodzimierz Godlewski, Artur Obłuski, Dobrochna Zielińska

Working within the framework of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project, an expedition from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University investigated Uli Island in the region of the Fourth Cataract in the period between February 8 and March 31, 2004.[1] *The work was done in close cooperation with the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) and Dr. Salah Mohamed Ahmed in particular.*

1 The team consisted of current members of the Old Dongola and Banganarti expeditions: Prof. Dr. Wlodzimierz Godlewski, Dr. Bogdan Żurawski, Mrs. Edyta Klimaszewska-Drabot, Mr. Artur Obłuski, Mr. Piotr Osypiński, Ms Dobrochna Zielińska, archaeologists; and Mrs. Marta Osypińska, archaeozoologist. Ms Habab Idris Ahmed representing the NCAM assisted the expedition most efficiently.

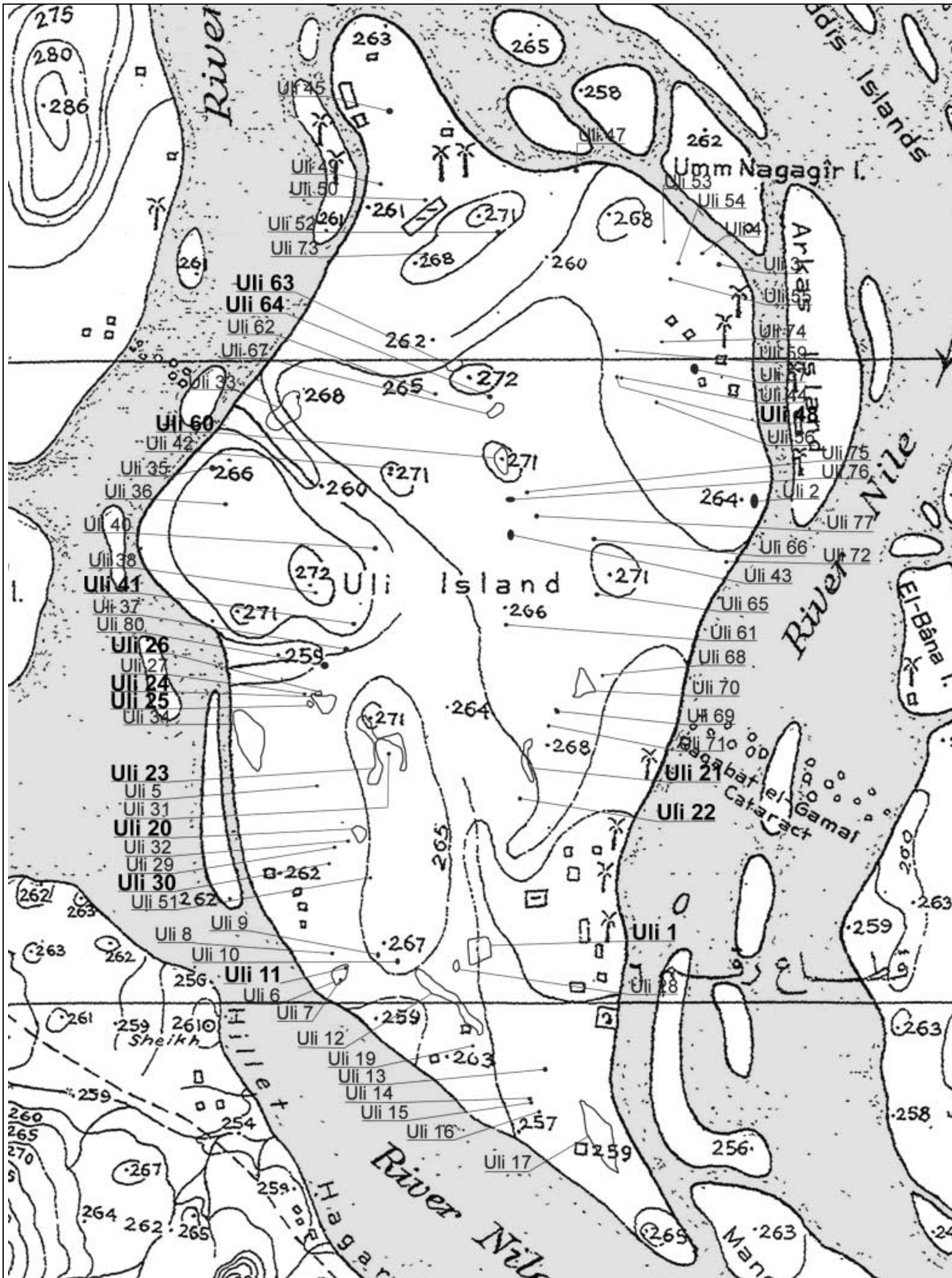

Fig. 1. Uli Island, Localization of recorded sites (sites in bold are discussed in this report) (Map NCAM, updated by P. Osypiński)

ISLAND SURVEY

A survey of the island resulted in over 77 sites being recorded, site categories including groups of graves, single graves, scatters of potsherds and stone artifacts (presumably reflecting temporary camps rather than settlements), and rock pictures. No monumental architecture other than modern was recorded. Earlier investigations of the island[2] had already identified some sites. A provisional chronology of recorded sites ranged from the Neolithic through the Kerma Horizon and the end of the New Kingdom/beginning of Napata Period to the Post-Meroitic and the Makurian kingdom, the latter two following a thousand-year hiatus. No Meroitic remains whatsoever were observed [*Fig. 1*].

Early remains were preserved on the surface only on the two rocky plateaus in the central and southern parts of the island. The flat sandy valley between them did not commence to be used before the Post-Meroitic period at the earliest. This is to be accounted for by geological observations indicating a division of the land into smaller units, especially at times of high water levels, in the early historical periods from the Neolithic to early Napatan.

EXCAVATIONS

Evidence of the earliest human activity on Uli Island, from the Middle Paleolithic and Neolithic, came in the form of scatters of stone artifacts and potsherds, identified during a survey of the island. Both categories were collected and are reported on in this volume.[3] None of the sites from this period provided any testimony of burial practices.

KERMA HORIZON GRAVES

Limited excavations were conducted on selected grave sites located on the central plateau: Uli 60, 63 and 64 in the west and center, and Uli 21 and 22 in the east. The graves occurred either singly or in groups of 10-12 [*Fig. 2*] and were all of similar construction: round cairns of stone measuring from 1.50 to 2.50 m across, from 0.40 to 0.60 m high depending on the state of preservation. The bodies were buried in round shallow pits. The skeletons lay mostly in contracted position. With the exception of grave T.3 in the Uli 22 cluster, where the head was oriented to the north, all the bodies were placed with the head due south. In a few cases, there was evidence of rope-wrapped shrouds made of leather. No grave goods of any kind were found. Occasional traces of post-burial penetration should be attributed to animals rather than humans.

Sherds collected from the surface bore incised or impressed geometrical decoration. Whole pots could be reconstructed, suggesting intentional breaking during funerary ceremonies rather than later grave penetration. They pottery decoration bears a distinct resemblance to Kerma period wares, thus attributing the burials provisionally to the Kerma Horizon.

One of the Kerma-Horizon graves on the plateau (T.2 in the Uli 60 cluster) was

2 By an Italian expedition working at Karima, cf. S. Donadoni, "A survey north of the Fourth Cataract:, in: *Der Antike Sudan* 5 (1995), 10-22, and by teams from the NCAM and from the University of Old Dongola in Karima.

3 For the stone artifacts, see communication by P. Osypiński appended to this report. For the pottery, see the contribution by E. Klimaszewska-Drabot in this volume, 357-368. She has also provided all the pottery dates presented in this report.

Fig. 2. Site Uli 63. Graves T.2-T.9 (Photo W. Godlewski)

Fig. 3. Site Uli 23. The superstructure of T.4. (Photo W. Godlewski)

Fig. 4. Site Uli 23. The burial chambers of Graves T.1 (top) and T.11 (bottom) (Photo W. Godlewski)

reused for burial in Christian times. Inside the stone ring, a low rectangular structure was observed. The body had been buried in a shallow pit, lying on its back, hands on the pelvis, the head oriented to the west.

Most of the tombs on the smaller plateau in the southern part of the island were situated in the shadow of monumental rocks, sometimes in groups of 3-4 tombs. One of the more fully investigated grave sites there was Uli 23. The stone cairns were mostly circular (although a few rectangular ones were observed), running from c. 1.50 to 2.00 m across and preserved to a height of 0.40 m [*Fig. 5*]. Often they were flat in the center and filled in with sand. The pits were shallow, either circular or rectangular, lined with slabs and filled in with dust [*Fig. 4*]. Wherever found undisturbed (most were definitely penetrated, although rather by animals than by humans), the skeletons were in contracted position with heads turned either to the north or to the south. Exceptions included graves T.10 and T.11 in this cluster, where the heads pointed respectively to the east and west, and T.6, where the head was to the north but the body was extended on its back. Obviously, there were no strictly enforced customs de-

Fig. 5. Black-tapped wheel-made bowl from grave U23.T.1 (Photo A. Obłuski)

Fig. 6. Site Uli 24. Tumuli 1-3 (Photo W. Godlewski)

termining body position at burial during this period.

In some of the grave pits, hand-made bowls were discovered next to the face of the buried individual. In one case (T.4 in the Uli 23 cluster), there were three pots: two bowls and one small wheel-made jar. The pottery, both from the pits and scattered on the ground around the tombs, especially the hand-made bowls, revealed many similarities with the Kerma tradition. One of the bowls, found inside grave T.1 of the Uli 23 cluster, was a black-topped wheel-made red ware vessel [*Fig. 5*]. Based on the ceramic evidence, the tombs on the smaller southern plateau were tentatively attributed to the Late New Kingdom/Napata periods.

POST-MEROITIC TUMULI

Four tumuli from the Post-Meroitic period (Uli 24-Uli 25), erected on the western side of a small mound rising from the valley floor, were investigated and in three cases found to be looted. One was fully preserved but there can be no doubt that the Uli tumuli belonged to rather poor people.

Rings of stones encircled sand-filled centers covering the grave pits, which were shallow and had burial chambers at the bottom in the case of Tumuli 1-2 (Uli 24) [*Fig. 6*] The fourth tumulus (Uli 25) had a much deeper pit (2.20 m) and a burial chamber off its southwestern side [*Fig. 7*]. The burial chamber yielded different kinds of beads (made of semi-precious stones, bone, glass, ostrich eggshells and faience), two earrings, one ring, arrowheads and a stone archer's ring. The two small bottles and one bowl, all hand-made, were found on the surface in the western part of the tumulus, in what is presumed to be the original position [*Fig. 8*]. The grave goods from the disturbed burial chambers of the other tumuli recorded a similar repertory, but without the archer's rings: mostly beads and arrowheads, and broken bowls and bottles.

CEMETERIES FROM KINGDOM OF MAKURIA TIMES

Two cemeteries dating from the times of the Kingdom of Makuria were recorded in the southern part of the island. The first (Uli 1) covered an extended territory, encroached upon today by modern buildings. All the tombs were rectangular constructions of stones. The bodies were laid on their backs in deep and narrow pits, the head pointing to the west. A surface scattering of red brick and lime plaster west of the cemetery was suggestive of a settlement, but archaeological testing brought to light no preserved structures, not even traces of foundations. Finds of red bricks, floor tiles and fragments of outside lime wall plastering indicated the presence, but not the exact location of a soundly constructed building, most likely a church. Sherds collected from the cemetery and presumed settlement resembled Dongola wares and could be dated to the Post-Classic Period.

The other Christian cemetery (Uli 25-26, located close to Tumulus 4 on Uli 25) was recorded in the immediate vicinity of a seasonally inhabited campsite. No structure or shelter of any kind was observed, only broken pottery, traces of fires and ash dumps. The two groups of graves were not very numerous. On Uli 24 there were 18 adult burials with well preserved rectangular stone superstructures (2.13-3.05 m in length, 0.90-1.10 m in width [*Fig. 9*]. Some of the tombs marked children's burials and in these cases the superstructures were correspondingly smaller (1.25-1.56 m long, 0.70-0.85 m wide). The other group (Uli 26) contained 12 children's graves with stone superstructures in good condition (L. 1.00-1.60 m, W. 0.55-0.90 m) [*Fig. 10*].

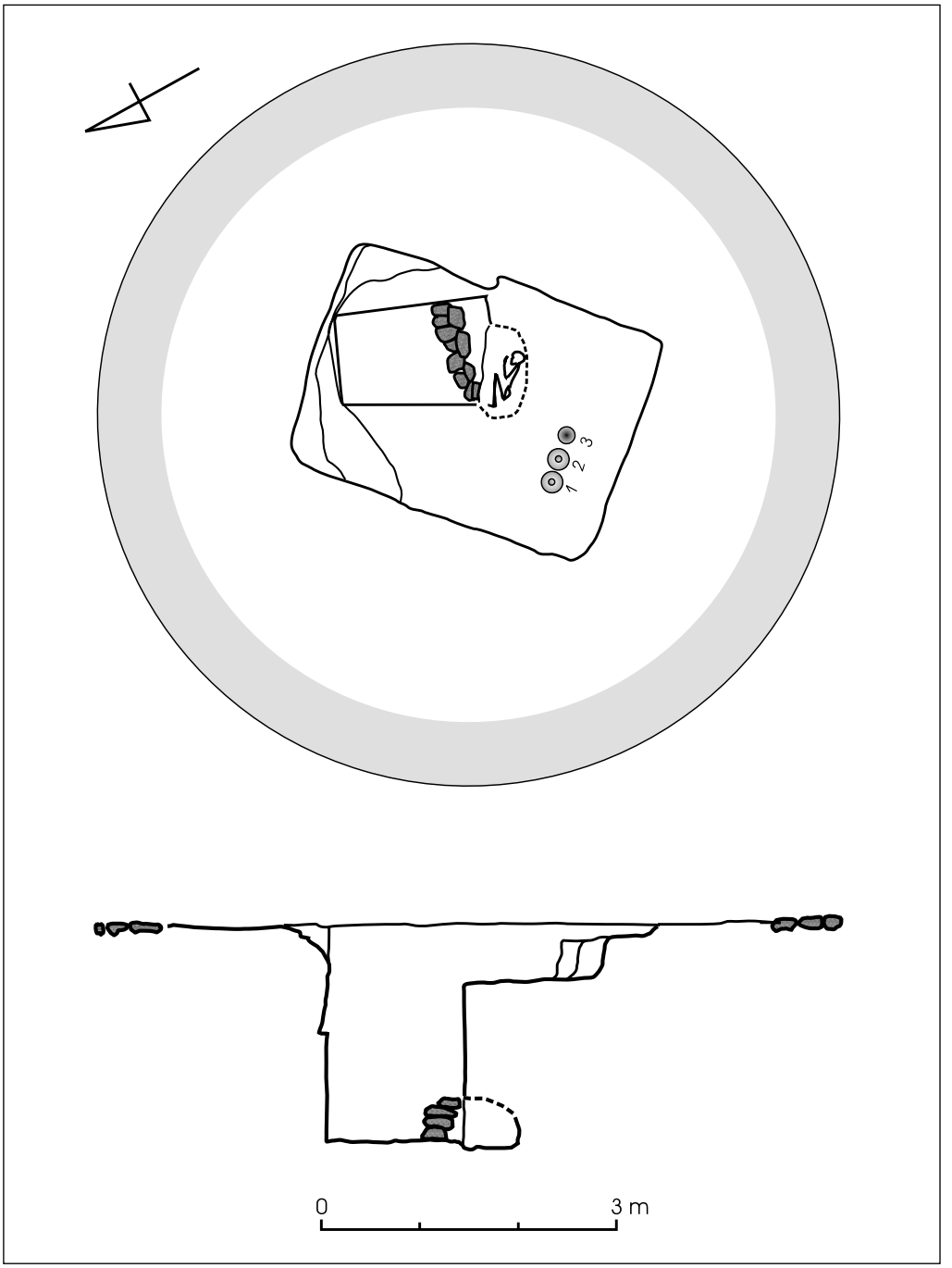

Fig. 7. Site Uli 25. Tumulus 4
(Plan and section W. Godlewski, D. Zielińska)

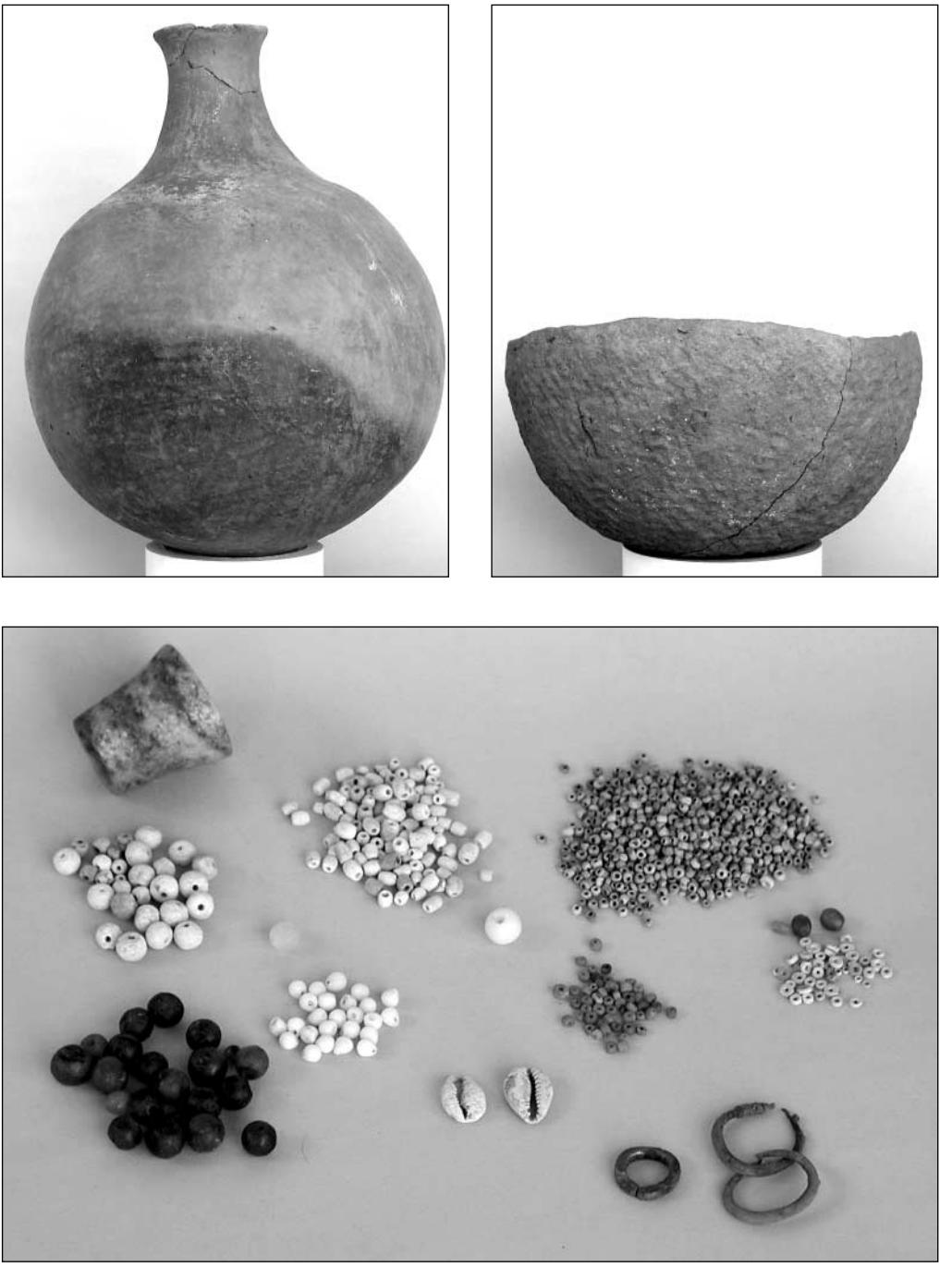

Fig. 8. Grave goods from the burial chamber of Tumulus 4 and pottery found on the surface of the mound (Photo W. Godlewski, A. Obłuski)

The burials were typical of Christian funerary practices: body laid in extended position with the head to the west. The narrow grave pits were rather deep and once the body was placed in them they were half-filled with sand and closed with roughly broken irregular slabs of stone laid flat. The rest of the shaft was then filled with sand and a stone marker of carefully positioned stones was erected on top. The sand between the stones was likely put there intentionally, although later penetration through the cracks between the stones cannot be excluded.

In the times of the Makuria kingdom, Uli Island seems to have been much more densely populated than in earlier periods, most probably approaching modern population figures.

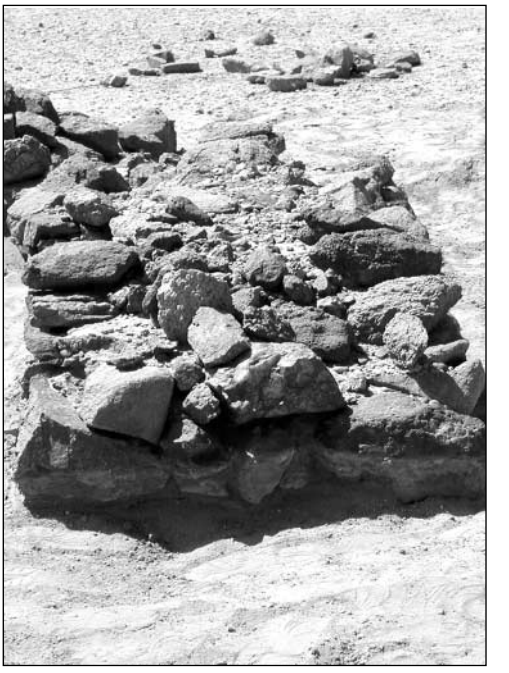

Fig. 9. Site Uli 25. The superstructure of grave T.10 (Photo W. Godlewski)

MODERN PERIOD

Two vast Muslim cemeteries situated in the northern and southern ends of the

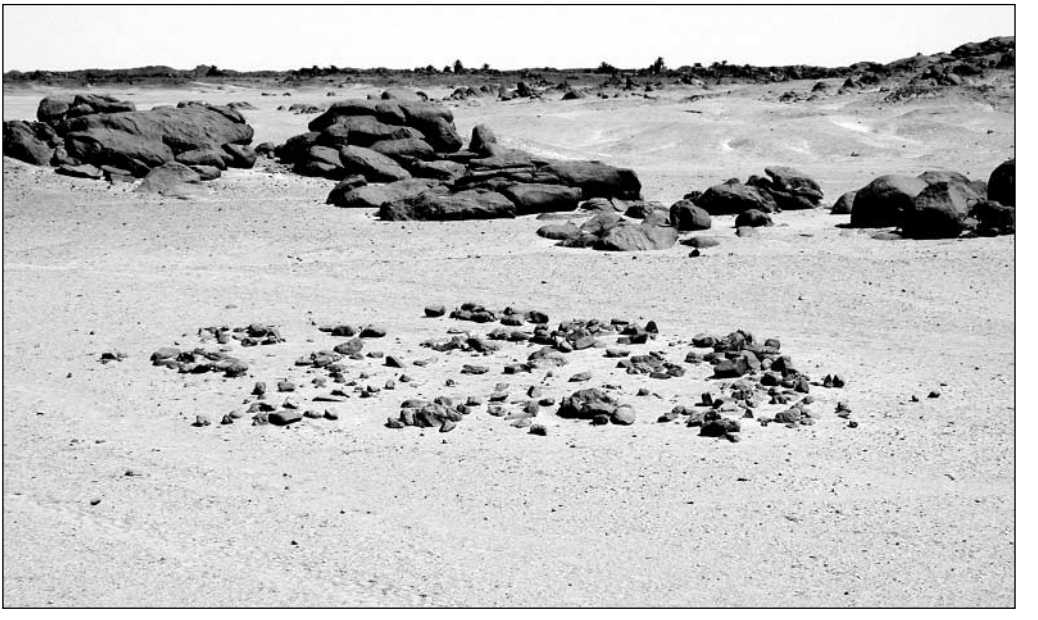

Fig. 10. Site Uli 26. Children's tombs (Photo W. Godlewski)

Fig. 11. The muslim cemetery at Al-Bideri (Photo W. Godlewski)

Fig. 12. Houses in the village of Al-Gurer (Photo W. Godlewski)

island, lying close to the modern villages, are most probably of modern age. Nonetheless, the presence of a *qubba* in the northern cemetery would suggest a fairly long period of use for this site [*Fig. 11*]

The expedition also made an effort to document conditions of life on the island today. The architecture of the abandoned modern houses was documented, including the wall paintings and graffiti left on the walls [*Fig. 12*].

Rock drawings of animals and people, and in one case a cross, were noted on more than a dozen sites.[4] Rock bells with clear evidence of use were observed in two places.

4 Cf. See, M. Osypińska's report on these drawings in the appendix below, 355-356

APPENDIX 1

STONE ARTIFACTS FROM ULI ISLAND

Piotr Osypiński

A survey of Uli Island revealed 19 sites of apparently occupational character with stone artifacts lying on the surface. Surface scatters of pottery were frequently identifiable, providing provisional dating of these sites to the Neolithic and in some case the Kerma Horizon. Not one Neolithic-period cemetery was identified, indicating that occupation at this time must have been of a temporary nature. A few sites could be identified as representing the Middle Paleolithic period.

The following is a presentation of selected material from some of these sites.

ULI 11: LATE NEOLITHIC / KERMA HORIZON SETTLEMENT

RAW MATERIAL	CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	L	W	TH	FIG.
Agate	Concretion					
Chert	Core	Levallois for flake	59	48	16	*Fig.13:a*
Chert	Tool	Denticulate	47	26	23	*Fig.13:b*
Chert	Flake	Splintered	48	40	19	
Chert	Flake	Cortical butt	21	37	6	
Chert	Flake	Cortical butt	27	29	6	
Chert	Flake	Cortical butt	36	35	11	
Chert	Flake	Flat butt	27	32	12	
Chert	Flake	Flat butt	44	28	9	
Chert	Flake	Prepared butt	39	19	6	
Chert	Flake	Fragment				
Chert	Flake	Fragment				
Chert	Flake	Fragment				
Chert	Flake	Fragment, burnt				

Mixed, two-phase assemblage. The Levallois core and some of the flakes, especially those with prepared butts, come from the Middle Paleolithic (rather later than earlier to judge by their size and raw material). The remaining products are connected with Late Neolithic and even Kerma Horizon occupation (provisional dating based on pottery evidence). The only tool is a massive denticulate made from a pebble without any chronologically distinctive features. The presence of splintered products in the context of an assemblage of late prehistoric date is notable (e.g. Uli 6, Uli 10).

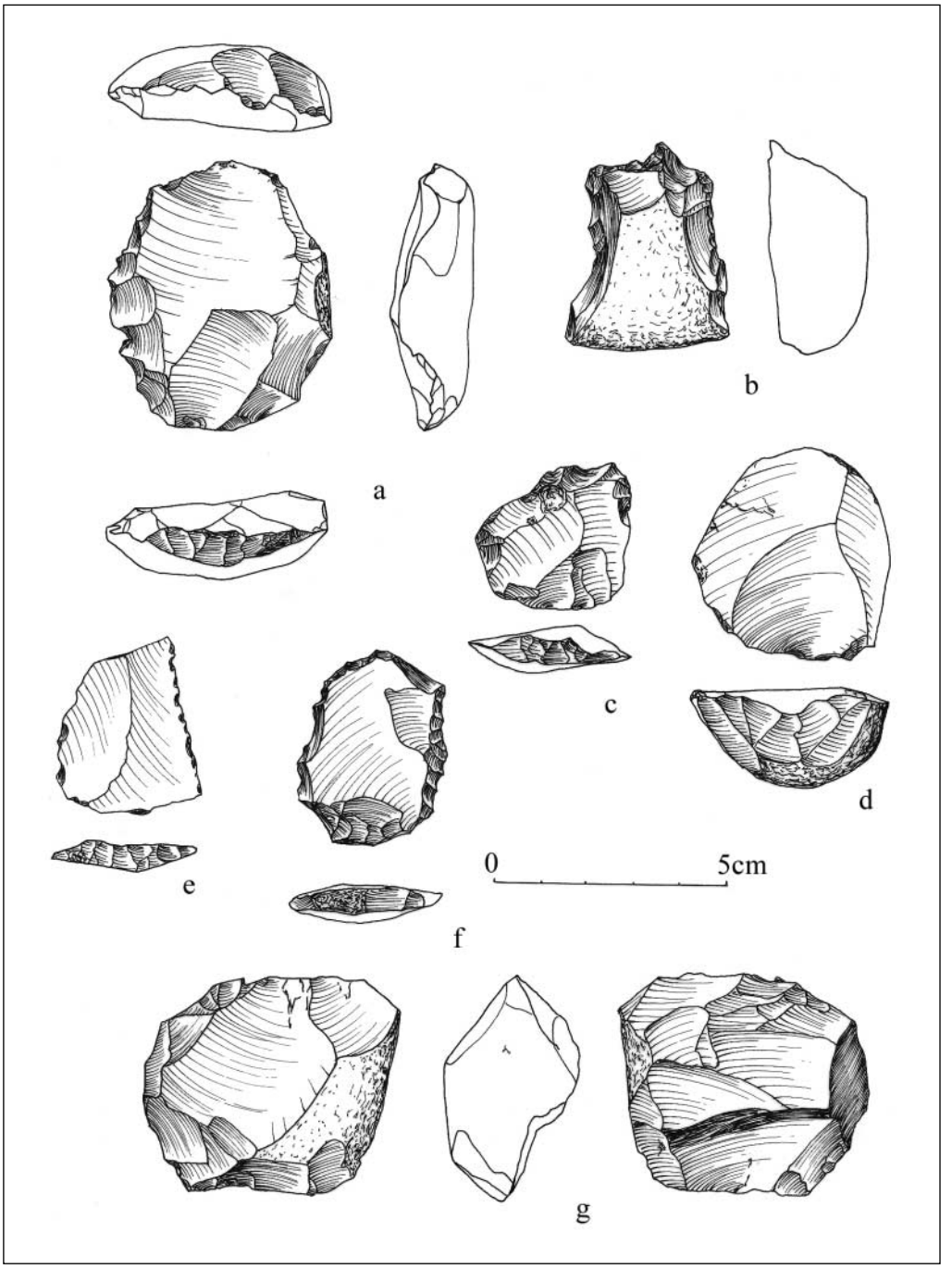

Fig. 13. Selection of stone artifacts from Uli Island: a - Uli 11/1; b - Uli 11/2; c - Uli 41/1; d - Uli 48/1; e - Uli 58/3; f - Uli 58/2; g - Uli 58/1 (Drawing P. Osypiński)

ULI 41: MIDDLE PALEOLITHIC CAMPSITE

RAW MATERIAL	CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	L	W	TH	FIG.
Quartz	Flake	Proximal fragment; prepared butt	(31)	36	10	
Quartz	Flake	Fragment	(47)	20	7	
Quartz	Flake	Fragment	(37)	46	12	
Volcanic rock	Flake	Prepared butt	56	26	7	
Chert	Flake	Prepared butt; denticulate retouch	31	34	7	*Fig.13:c*
Chert	Flake	Prepared butt	32	26	6	
Jasper	Core	Single-platform, initial	45	20	21	
Flint	Flake	Cortical butt	30	33	6	
Flint	Flake	Edge butt; use retouch	35	18	4	

All flake products bear evidence of discoidal processing. Platform preforming not very exacting, but usually faceted, unless cortical surfaces are in evidence. These features date the assemblage to the Middle Paleolithic, a later phase to judge by the variety of raw material used.

The single-platform core and elongated flake may reflect a later (Neolithic ?) intrusion.

ULI 48: MIDDLE PALEOLITHIC CAMPSITE

RAW MATERIAL	CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	L	W	TH	FIG.
Quartz	Flake	Flat butt	52	47	10	
Flint	Flake	Flat butt	37	29	18	
Flint	Flake	Flat butt	33	30	12	
Flint	Flake	Flat butt	33	29	14	
Flint	Flake	Fragment	(30)	35	9	
Flint	Flake	Fragment	(35)	24	10	
Flint	Flake	Cortical butt	43	31	13	
Flint	Flake	Cortical butt	31	30	7	
Flint	Flake	Cortical butt	35	21	11	
Flint	Flake	Cortical butt	25	35	8	
Flint	Flake	Prepared butt	40	23	3	
Flint	Flake	Prepared butt	26	27	6	
Flint	Flake	Prepared butt	52	33	7	
Flint	Flake	Prepared butt	50	26	8	
Flint	Core	Levallois blade	46	42	21	*Fig.13:d*
Agate	Core	Discoidal	39	31	11	
Agate	Core	Discoidal	33	32	14	

Agate	Flake	Flat butt	40	27	7	
Agate	Flake	Flat butt	26	13	4	

The set features characteristic discoidal, even Levallois processing. It contains three cores (of which one is a small form from which a triangular blade was struck) and flakes with prepared platforms. The remaining flakes represent early stages in cortex removing or discoidal exploitation but without platform preparation. The assemblage can be dated to the Middle Paleolithic, and the considerable variety of the raw material points to a later phase of the period.

ULI 58: MIDDLE PALEOLITHIC CAMPSITE

RAW MATERIAL	CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	L	W	TH	FIG.
Quartz	Flake	Cortical butt	42	38	13	
Quartz	Flake	Cortical butt	36	38	9	
Basalt?	Core	Discoidal	52	48	17	
Quartzite	Core	Single platform	53	45	35	*Fig.13:f*
Chert	Core	Discoidal with reversed orientation	49	53	27	*Fig.13:g*
Chert	Core	Discoidal	46	51	26	
Chert	Flake	Fragment	(32)	24	5	
Chert	Flake	Flat butt	27	23	6	
Chert	Flake	Flat butt	45	19	7	
Chert	Flake	Prepared butt	19	17	4	
Chert	Flake	Prepared butt	41	28	7	
Chert	Flake	Prepared butt	39	37	10	
Chert	Flake	Prepared butt	25	28	5	
Chert	Tool	Flake with prepared butt and denticulate retouch	23	22	4	
Chert	Tool	Flake with prepared butt and denticulate retouch. Broken.	(39)	31	6	*Fig.13:e*
Chert	Tool	Flake with prepared butt and denticulate retouch	43	31	6	
Chert	Flake	Very worn and patinated	21	29	8	
Volcanic rock	Flake	Very worn and patinated	40	29	7	

The set contains only discoidal products, whether cores, flakes or tools. One of the tools (damaged) could have been a blade. Two of the flakes have very worn edges and are heavily patinated on the surface, indicating another (older?) occupation phase or entirely different post-depositional processes working on elements of the same (technologically homogeneous) set. Technological features point to a Middle Paleolithic date for the set, a later phase to judge by the variety of raw material.

APPENDIX 2

ROCK DRAWINGS FROM ULI ISLAND

Marta Gauza-Osypińska

Rock petroglyphs were recorded on seven sites identified during the survey of Uli Island. The drawings were fairly legible. Most of them depicted animals. A chronological attribution of the petroglyphs is possible only in the case of Uli 5, where three Greek crosses can be discerned. On the other sites, the representations can be dated only on the grounds of archaeological material from the vicinity and the iconography and style of the representation.

Two representations of cattle were identified on the north face of a small rock formation designated as Uli 30. Both were outlined by picking with a stone on the rock surface. One is 0.46 m long and 0.40 m high [*Fig. 14 a*], the other 0.31 m long and 0.23 m high [*Fig. 14 b*].

The figures were depicted facing right. In both cases the back leg, back and neck with head were depicted with a continuous line. In the drawing on the left, the same line went on to depict the front leg. Another line outlined continuously the other front leg, belly and second back leg. The long tail ends in a bunch of hair. The horns are rather massive and curving to the back. In the middle of the body, a wide vertical band connects the back with the belly. The animal is depicted in standing position. In the other figure, the horns are curved up in an arch. The second line marks the head, dewlap, front legs and part of the belly of the animal. The front legs are shown stepping forward.

The two images are likely connected with Kerma-Horizon occupation, a site at-

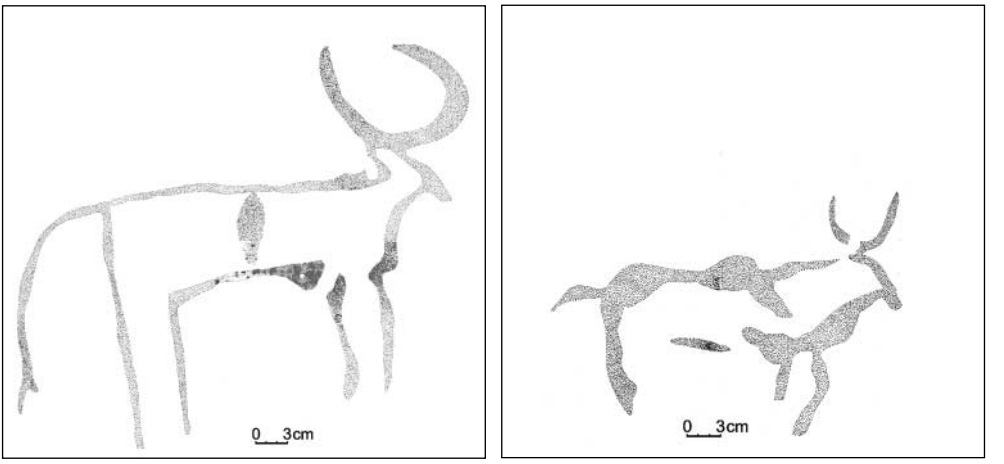

Fig. 14. Uli 30. Rock petroglyphs depicting cattle from Uli Island (Drawing M. Osypińska)

tributed to this period having been located in the immediate neighborhood.

The species represented in the petroglyphs is African humpback cattle, easily identifiable thanks to the characteristic hump and massive horns. These two features also indicate that most likely the animals depicted in the petroglyphs were meant to be bulls.