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Fourth Cataract: Survey and Excavations in Shemkhiya, Dar El-Arab and Saffi Island

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FOURTH CATARACT

SURVEY AND EXCAVATIONS IN SHEMKHIYA, DAR EL-ARAB AND SAFFI ISLAND

Bogdan Żurawski

The preliminary report from the work carried out by the Polish Joint Expedition to the Fourth Cataract in the winter of 2004/2005 has already been made known to the participants of the Berlin Conference on the Fourth Cataract that took place on 4-6 August 2005 and was duly submitted for publication in the conference papers. The following is a brief note aimed at providing readers with a full picture of the work being carried out in the Polish concession as part of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project.

The mission was in the field from 2 December 2004 until 20 March 2005. The second season of the expedition with its various subunits was organized by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University in association with the Research Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Poznań Archaeological Museum.¹ Topmost on the agenda were:

- 1. Survey and excavation on the left bank: Shemkhiya, Gamamiya, Kebellia, Hagar el-Beida and Es-Sadda (=Polish concession within the framework of the MDASP project);²*
- 2. Measurements and excavations in Dar el-Arab (Swueqi el-Gharb);*
- 3. Excavations on Saffi Island.*

1 Dr. Marek Chłodnicki directed the unit working on the Polish concession between Es-Sadda and Shemkhiya. For details of the fieldwork and staff members, see the following report in this volume.

The Dar el-Arab unit was established as a joint Polish-British project, the Polish team continuing the recording and excavation of the site that the SARS team directed by Dr. Derek A. Welsby had started earlier. The unit was headed by Dr. Bogdan Żurawski and included: Prof. Dr. Karol Piasecki, physical anthropologist; Mr. Piotr Osypiński, archaeologist; Mrs. Marta Osypińska, archaeozoologist and archaeologist; Ms Anna Błaszczuk, archaeologist and documentalist; Mrs. Edyta Klimaszewska-Drabot, archaeologist and pottery documentalist; Ms Marta Momot, documentalist; Mr. Roman Łopaciuk, geodesist; Mrs. Hanna Kozińska-Sowa, Mr. Artur Obłuski, archaeologists. Dr. Marcin Wiewióra lent his expertise, having already studied (on behalf of the GAME expedition) the fortress of Suegi esch-Sherak (that sits on the opposite bank of the river) in 2004. The fieldwork, which ran for six weeks in January and February 2005, was sponsored by Heidelberg Poland.

The same team moved to Saffi Island on January 14 and worked until February 20, part of the time commuting by a custom-built boat between the two sites. The second season on Saffi was a continuation of previous work reported on in the previous volume of *PAM*, the focus now being on site 56.

2 For a map of the Polish concession, see *PAM XVI, Reports 2004* (2005), Fig. 1 on p. 370.

CHRISTIAN STRONGHOLDS DOWNRIVER FROM
SHEMKHIYA TO ES-SADDA

The reconnaissance in December 2004³ brought to light a chain of Transitional/Christian cemeteries and three strongholds of matching period on the left bank of the river: El Ar, the biggest and no doubt the

most important; Hillet et-Tibra (=Shemkhiya 8);⁴ and Tanta Island, possibly the smallest and the latest of the lot. The average distance between the three forts in question is 5.9 km between the first two and 3.7 km



Fig. 1. Aerial view of the fortress of Dar el-Arab (=Swueqi el-Gharb), taken in February 2003 (Photo B. Żurawski)

3 M. Chłodnicki, B. Żurawski, "From Khor Umm Ghizlan to Shemkhiya. Archaeological survey in the Fourth Cataract region, December 2004", *PAM XVI, Reports 2004* (2005), 369-383.

4 See site gazetteer in *PAM XVI*, 382-382 and Fig. 10.

between the last two, surprisingly short compared to the average of 20 km that separates two neighboring fortresses in the densely populated area downriver.

The three strongholds in the Shemkhiya region have fueled a literally age-old discussion as to their *raison d'être*. The need to protect a huge gold mine located just a couple of kilometers inland from Hillet el-Tibra (which means Village of Gold(dust) in Arabic) would have been sufficient reason for building two strongholds of considerable dimensions, perched on hilltops overlooking the river and an extensive stretch of the left bank.

The gold mines were apparently not the only reason behind the presence of the three fortresses in Shemkhiya. The survey proved a considerable density of settlement pattern in the region throughout the Christian period, evidenced by a continuous chain of relatively big box-grave cemeteries (more than a thousand graves are still preserved, despite damage caused by encroaching agriculture, in a cemetery merely a kilometer away from the El Ar stronghold) located at the edge of almost every modern village. The strongholds were obviously meant to provide the settled population with shelter from raiding desert tribes.

DAR EL-ARAB (SWUEQI EL-GHARB)

The site, which lies at the southernmost end of the SAS Concession in the Fourth Cataract region [Fig. 1], had been visited in 1999 by Derek A. Welsby.⁵ An agreement with SARS opened the way for a Polish expedition to study the fortress, its chronology and stages of architectural development. A detailed plan of the fortress was plotted [Fig. 2] along with a contour plan of its immediate vicinity. The excavations were planned as 14 test pits dug inside the fortress and on the cemeteries on the western slope of the fortress hill.

The original fortress was probably associated with a landing place on the river. Charcoal samples taken from below the undisturbed foundation course of the original girdle wall in the lowermost, riverward part of the fortress, examined by the Poznań Radiocarbon Laboratory, have given a calibrated (95.4% probability) range date of AD 430-640. Once the defenses were extended up the precipitous river bank, the hilltop extension (called the

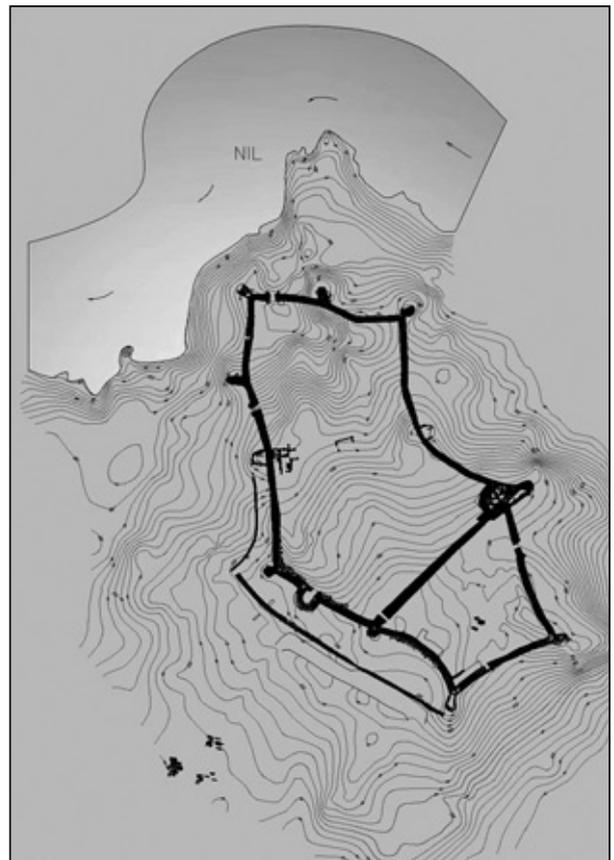


Fig. 2. Contour plan of Swueqi el-Gharb (Measured and drawn R. Łopaciuk)

5 D.A. Welsby, Survey above the Fourth Nile Cataract, SARS Publication 10 (London 2003).

Upper Courtyard) was built to secure the vulnerable approach from the southeast. Marcin Wiewióra's analysis of the fortifications revealed that the actual construction proceeded in a manner still practiced to some extent on the Middle Nile. Corner bastions are first built on eminences of the rugged terrain, followed by walls which run down from each bastion and usually meet somewhere in the middle between two neighboring towers, naturally negotiating the difficult spots of an uneven terrain. These joints where the two walls meet are easily discernible in the field.

In the next phase, the eastern and western walls were abutted with bastions of stone filled with mud brick (other bastions

were filled solid with stones) and then a drymoat was dug alongside.⁶ Still later a platform was raised around the easternmost bastion and the so called Tower Church was duly built. It was constructed mostly of sun dried bricks faced with fired ones.⁷

A small elite graveyard was located on the hilltop outside the original ("lower") fortress. The only reason one can think of why this cemetery was enclosed within the later girdle walls was the seeming sanctity of the place resulting from the high rank of those buried there, which could have attracted pilgrims and visitors, as well as provided holy protection for the settlement within the walls.⁸ The connection with the church seems obvious, as there was a flight of steps leading down from its southern entrance toward the burial ground.

The graves excavated inside the fortress walls presented an unusual architecture, not so much in the subterranean part, as above-ground. Instead of the usual parallelepipeds piled up of stones with no exterior plastering, the tombs from the "Upper Courtyard" cemetery had quite elaborate structures built of burnt bricks and plastered with hard lime mortar. Wedge-shaped bricks found in a concentration nearby further the theory that the graves in question featured a mausoleum-like structure provided with a vault (dome ?) supported on columns.

The skeletons of three males (who died in their 40s or 50s) were found enshrouded and wrapped in elaborately woven mats (the burials in the western-slope cemetery did not have mats). They were inhumed in earth-filled shafts covered with a row of flat stones [Fig. 3].

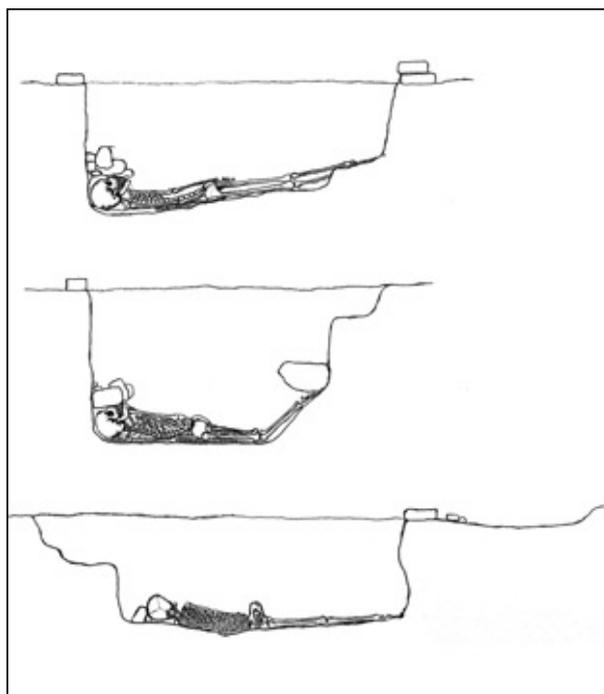


Fig. 3. Sections through graves in the "Upper Courtyard" of the fortress at Der el-Arab (Drawing A. Błaszczuk)

6 Ditches outside girdle walls were found in Bakhit, Serra and Faras. At Faras, the ditch was lined with bricks.

7 The layout appears to parallel closely the church of el-Turkab (site 3-Q-62) excavated by the SARS Anglo-German Mission, cf. P. Wolf and U. Nowotnick, "First Season of the SARS Anglo-German Survey at the Fourth Cataract", *GAMAR* 4 (2005), 193-195; Fig. 12.

8 This even prompted O.G.S. Crawford, *The Funj Kingdom of Sennar* (Gloucester 1951), 44, to propose that the forts on the Fourth Cataract were monasteries, a risky theory which is rightly considered outdated today.

J. Phillips' study of the ceramic evidence has shown that the fortress was abandoned soon after the collapse of the Christian kingdom of Makuria and never settled again. A preliminary analysis of the ceramics from the filling under the church indicates an *ante quem* date for its construction in the 12th century.⁹

Testing within the fortress walls revealed evidence of temporary shelters and solidly built houses raised mainly against the inner faces of the girdle walls. Regular well-oriented foundation courses made of huge boulders found in the center of the Lower Court could be the remains of a first fortress church, but this is entirely conjecture as no evidence of such a church has appeared.

The graves excavated outside the fortress walls on the western slope of the fortress hill fall into two groups: northern [Fig. 5] and

southern. Altogether they count no more than 100 tombs (25 of which were excavated, including the "Upper Courtyard" graves), much smaller than the huge cemeteries near the Shemkhiya strongholds. The graves, both inside and outside the walls, are mostly contemporaneous with the earliest occupation on the fortress hill. They considerably antedate the founding of the tower church. Possibly they served only the fortress garrison, while the populace had another burial ground elsewhere in the vicinity. Characteristically for the Christian burials in Nubia, the skeletons had the skulls protected as a rule between bricks placed on either sides, occasionally topped with a third one laid horizontally. Meriting attention is a cross reliquary (with a receptacle for the relics) that was found buried in Grave 7 of the southern group [Fig. 4].

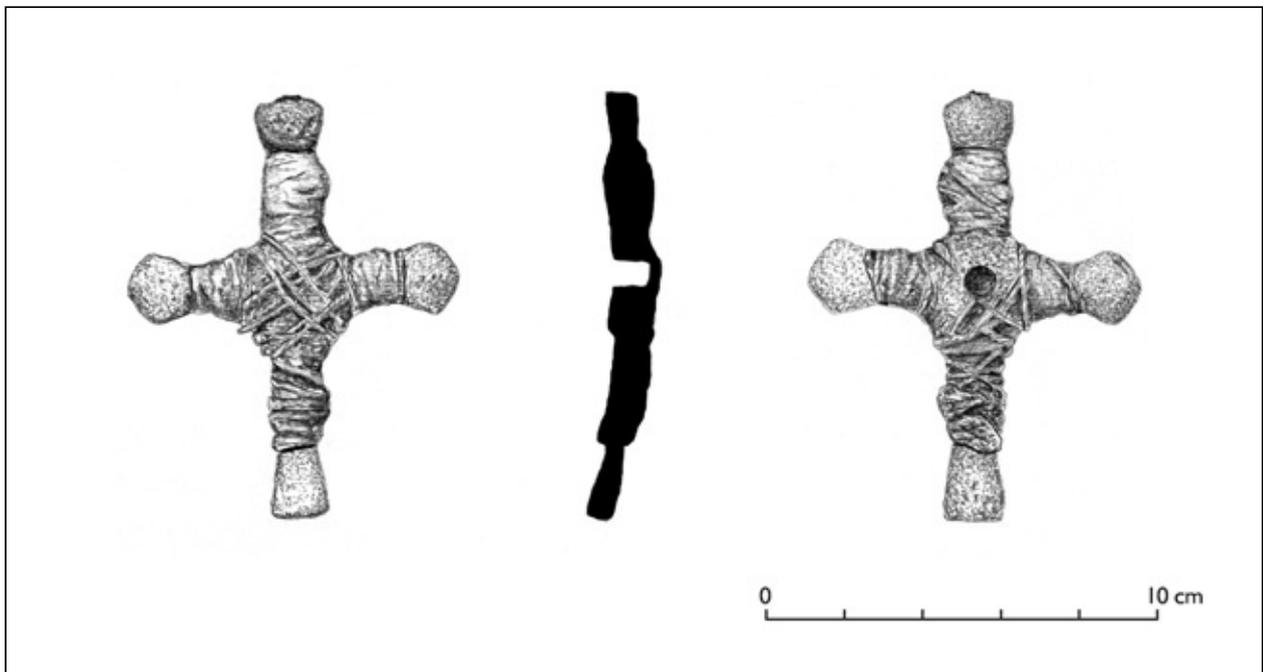


Fig. 4. Reliquary cross of copper alloy (DA/05/3)
(Drawing M. Osypińska)

9 To some extent corroborated by a Greek terracotta epitaph found in the fill, which according to Dr. Adam Łajtar of Warsaw University cannot be older than the 10th century.

FOURTH CATARACT
SUDAN

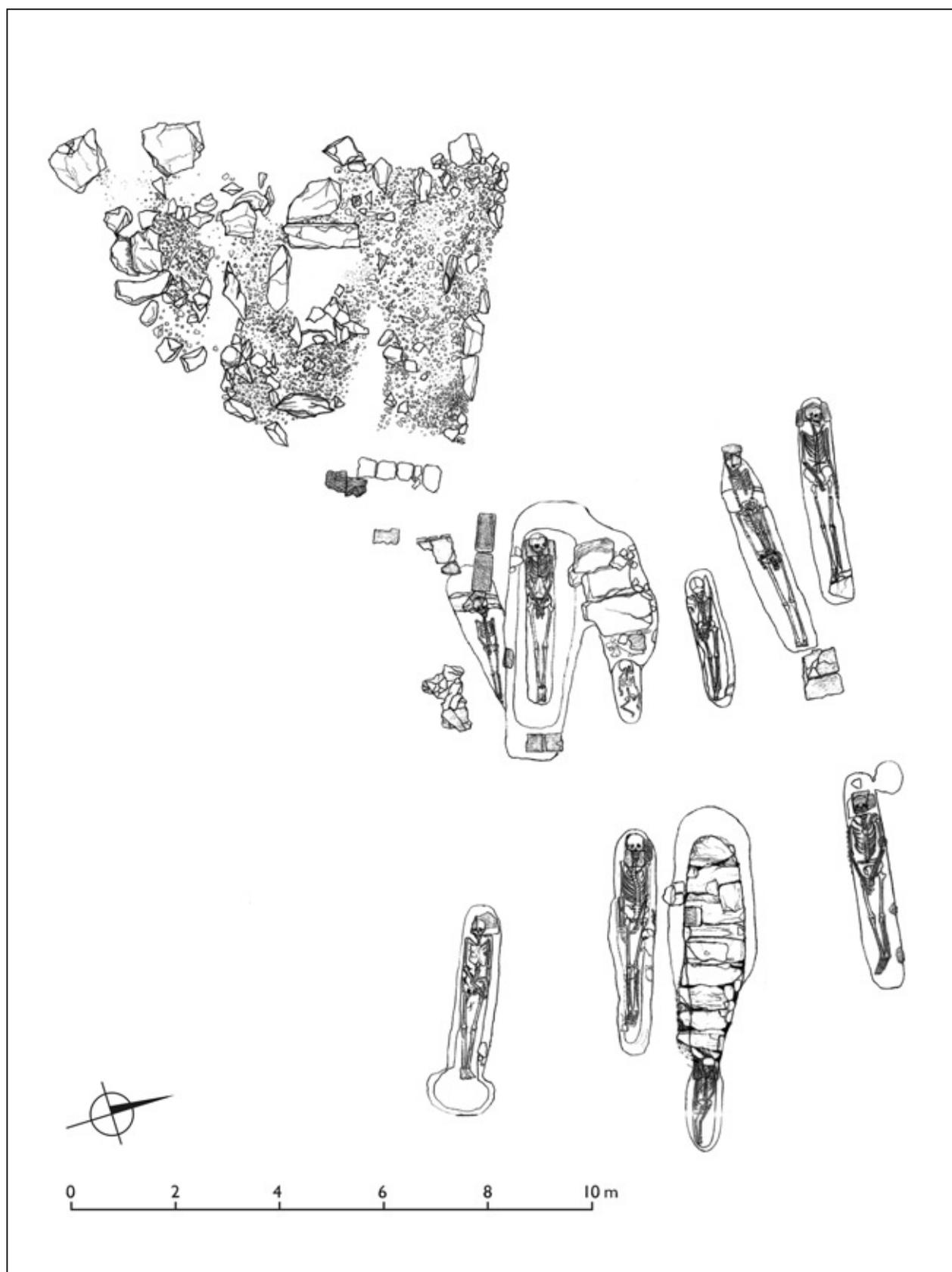


Fig. 5. Northern group (A) of graves in the western slope cemetery
(Drawing A. Błaszczyk)

EXCAVATIONS ON SAFFI ISLAND

The present fieldwork was a continuation of survey and excavations already done on the island in 2004.¹⁰ Another 31 sites were added to the 72 recorded already. Ten burial sites were now fully explored and another eight tested. Seventeen, mostly modern religious structures, were drawn, photographed and sampled. The main chantier was again the post-Meroitic tumulus cemetery coded as Saffi 56.

SAFFI 56

The excavations of 12 graves [Fig. 6] produced evidence similar to that obtained in 2004. The cemetery sits in the wadi bed and the connection with water (the wadi being definitely the spot of flash floods on occasion) is apparent. The reason for this should be searched for in the eschatology of the post-Meroitic population.¹¹ The grave goods represented a typical inventory of vessels [Fig. 7], arrowheads, basketry etc.

DAM CONSTRUCTIONS

The surprising nearly total absence of *qadus* jars from all the surface pottery collections from the island led the excavators to consider drystone structures that have been found blocking various wadis. Apparently, the dams served to catch water, rainfall being once much more abundant in the area as even the reports of 19th century travelers prove. The water was stored behind the

dams and later released for irrigation as needed. Indeed, the high banks of the island would have rendered useless water-lifting devices like the *shaduf* and *saqiya*.

Unfortunately the Saffi dams were not contexted by any substantial ceramic assemblages that could give evidence for dating. The only hints at a possible date of the dam on site Saffi 77 are 234 fragments of a huge relief-decorated Kerma cooking bowl of 50 cm in diameter found on the nearby site of Saffi 79 [Fig. 8].

EGYPTIAN POTTERY IMPORTS

The Kerma horizon was a time when the island was in its cultural and economical ascendancy, a fact convincingly demonstrated by site statistics and abundant ceramic imports. Trade contacts flourished with regions as far north as Fayum Oasis or even the Mediterranean. There is no doubt that at least three complete vessels of Egyptian origin were found on Saffi 23, a site dominated by Kerma Moyen ceramics and vessels of plausible early Napatan (?) origin (such as the curious bag-shaped vessels found in Grave 10, Fig. 9).¹² One of these was a piece of Marl C1 or C2, handmade jar probably brought from Fayum Oasis no later than the Late Middle Kingdom (1750-1650 BC) and probably deposited in a grave soon after [Fig. 10]. A pot from another grave in the same cemetery proved to be an

- 10 B. Żurawski "The Archaeology of Saffi Island (2004 Season)", *GAMAR IV*, (2005), 199-218; *PAM XVI*, op. cit., 325-337.
- 11 Interesting study on beliefs associated with the aquatic complex, C. Vandersleyen, "Le sens symbolique des puits funéraires dans l'Égypte ancienne", *Chronique d'Égypte* 50 (99-100) (1975), 151-157, esp. 153. Sepulchral customs of the Tijaha Bedouins connected with the presence of water, I.A. Jaussen, *Coutumes des arabes au pays de Moab* (Paris 1908), 99; cf. Goldzieher, *Wasser*, 29. The Sinai Bedouins' habit of burying the dead of a tribe beside the tomb of a *weli* that is almost always near a water-source and the Awlad Ali burying their dead near wells "to save the dead the trouble of fetching water", G.W. Murray, *Sons of Ishmael: A Study of the Egyptian Bedouin* (London 1935), 154 and 192.
- 12 The ceramic datings are based on the expertise of the team's pottery specialists Mrs. Edyta Klimaszewska-Drabot and Ms Mariola Orzechowska. Dr. Teodozja Rzeuska of the Polish Academy of Sciences kindly consulted the Egyptian imports.

FOURTH CATARACT SUDAN

Egyptian (Marl C) import provisionally dated to the Middle Kingdom. (It accompanied a disarticulated skeleton with traces of ocher on the bones, found in contracted position with head pointing to the northeast and some 50 faience beads of an average diameter of c. 2 mm (!) scattered near the wrists.) Finally, a superb Egyptian Middle Kingdom jar, accompanied by two locally made vessels, was found in grave 7.

This and other fragmentary evidence of Egyptian jars make for a surprisingly high percentage of northern imports in

assemblages on Saffi island. The *floruit* of this trade fell in the Middle Kingdom to Early New Kingdom times, that is, between 2000 and 1500 BC.

OTHER SITES

The four stone circles forming the Saffi 28 site sit on a flat plateau overlooking the Nile bank near the northern promontory of the island (where there is a concentration of cemeteries of all periods). The only grave good from Grave 1 was a Nile oyster shell buried together with an individual with

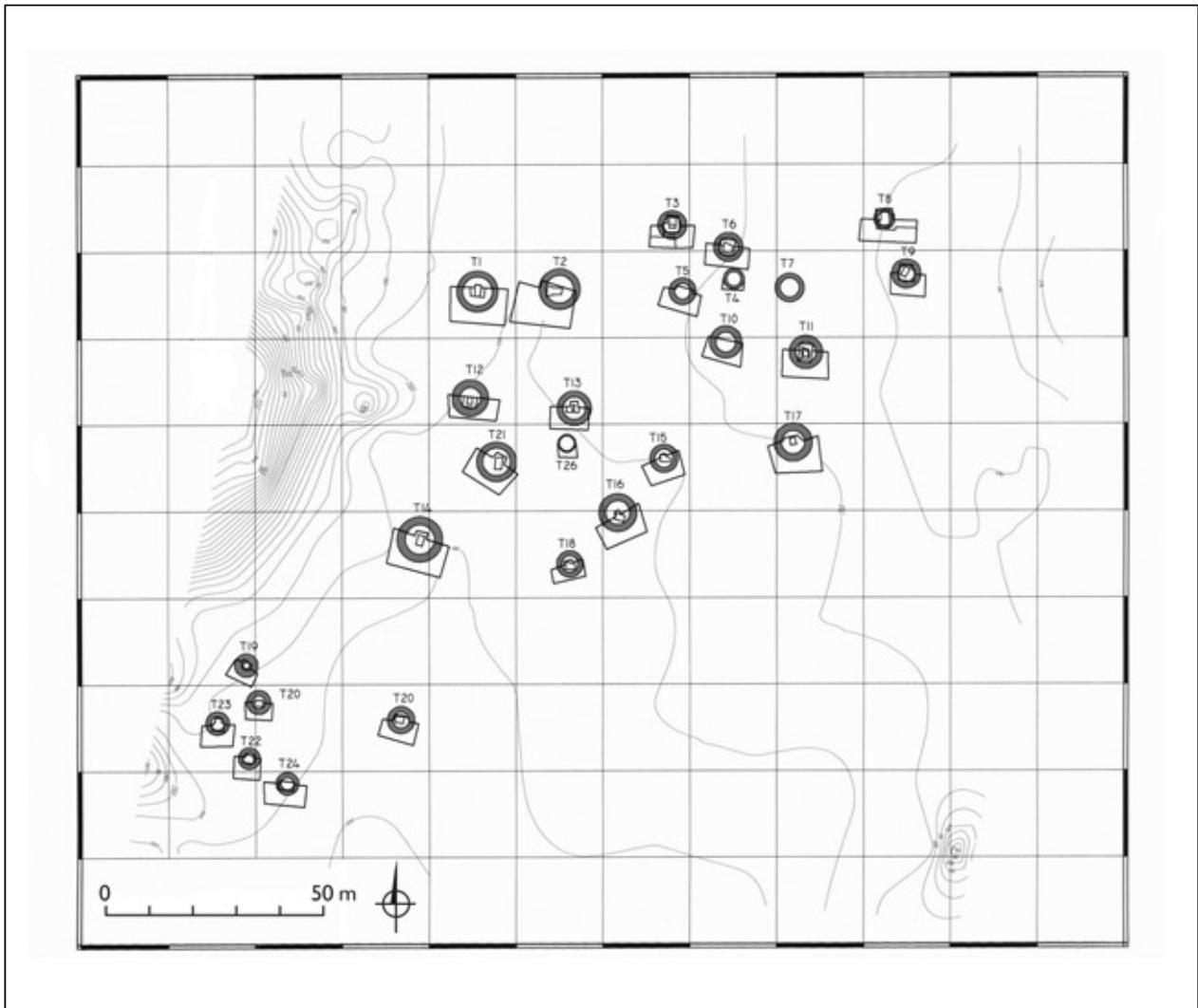


Fig. 6. Plan of Saffi 56 cemetery, after excavations in 2005
(Measured and drawn R. Łopaciuk)



Fig. 7. Vessels of Post-Meroitic attribution from graves at Saffi 56
(Photo R. Łopaciuk)

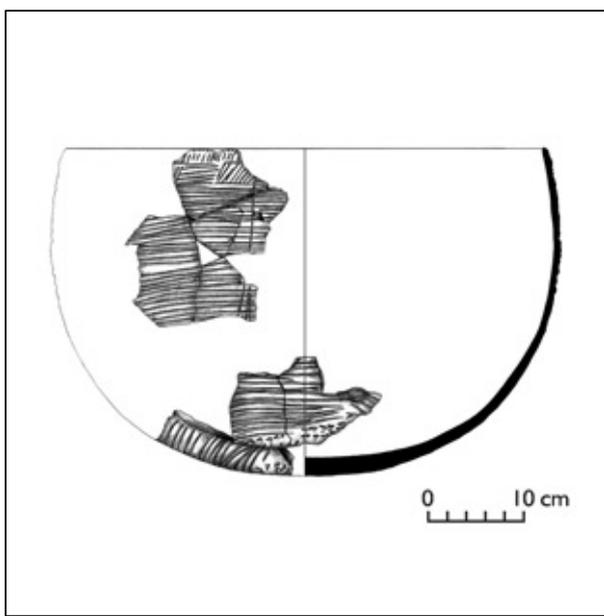


Fig. 8. Cooking bowl from Saffi 79, related to
Kerma ware
(Drawing M. Orzechowska)

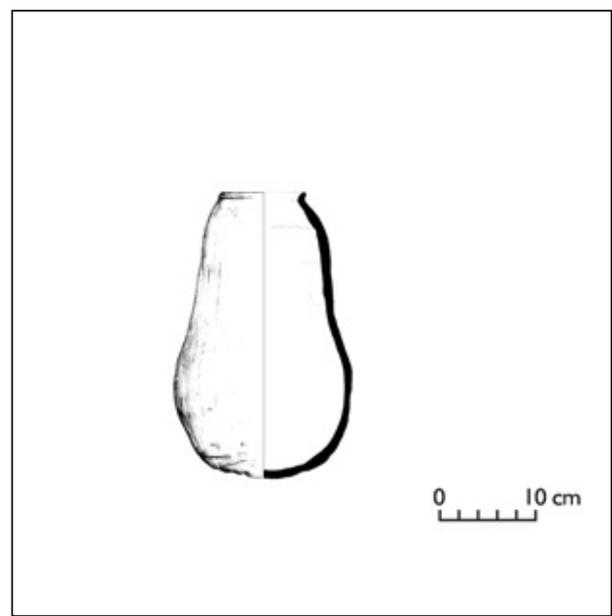


Fig. 9. Napatan (?) jar from Grave 10 on
Saffi 23 (Drawing M. Orzechowska
/E. Klimaszewska-Drabot)

head to the southwest and facing west. On the other hand, the cluster of graves coded 2, 3 and 4, yielded a varied assemblage of potsherds ranging from the Neolithic (90%) to the Kerma and Christian periods. Grave 4, marked by a cairn of stones c. 3 m in diameter, proved interesting, because of the unusual burial. Two children had been laid to rest on their backs with outstretched legs, heads pointing in opposite directions, to north and south, and faces respectively to east and west [Fig. 11].

Saffi 68 was located on a rocky elevation in the southeastern part of the island above the landing place opposite Uli Island. Beneath five of the round stone graves

disarticulated and eroded skeletons were found, inhumed in contracted position without any fixed orientation. The 'grave' under one of the stone rings proved to be filled with sand and stones (it had never been used as a tomb and was never breached by robbers).

The nearby site of Saffi 66 consisted of three stone rings and an extensive surface collection of Neolithic potsherds and disarticulated human bones, presumably left by the plunderers.

CHRISTIAN REMAINS

None of many Christian cemeteries was tested. The surface ceramics, orientation and

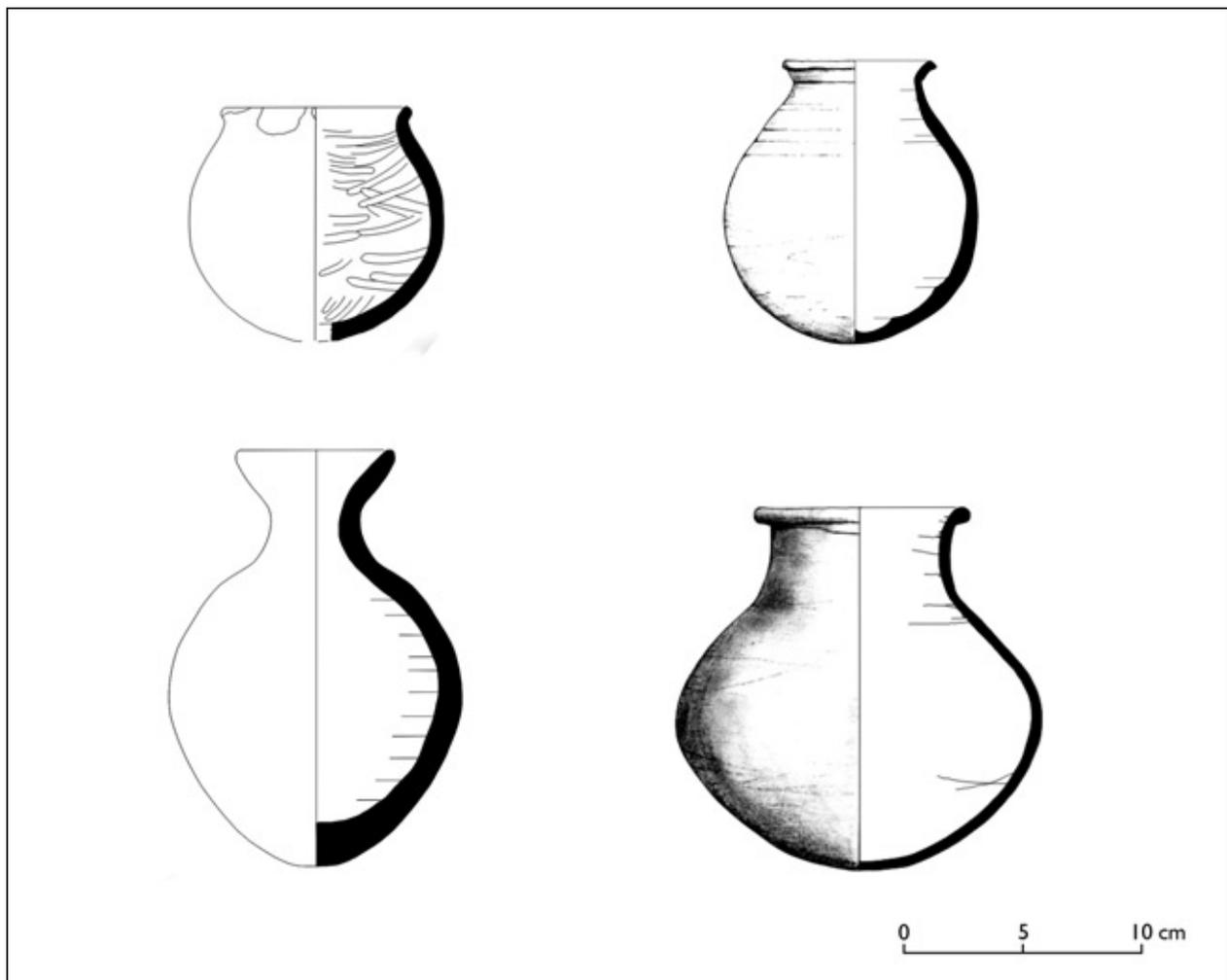


Fig. 10. Imported Egyptian vessels from graves 2, 6 and 7 at Saffi 23
(Drawing M. Orzechowska/E. Klimaszewska-Drabot)

peculiar construction of the superstructures were adequate grounds for firm chronological identification. Nonetheless, some ten Christian graves were accidentally opened on Saffi 46, which had originally been registered as a probable Kerma site (due to the misleading evidence of some Kerma-related potsherds found on the surface). A precise E-W orientation and extended supine position of the skeletons, which suggested Christian practice, were corroborated by tiny, but diagnostic fragments of potsherds.

The only structure on the island that might be interpreted as a "church" is Saffi 21. The edifice is 8 m long, preserved only in the foundation course, oriented E-W with entrance from the south, a screened off narthex-like space on the west and an apse on the east [Fig. 12]. It is well contexted with diagnostic Christian sherds. The proximity of a huge Christian cemetery on



Fig. 11. Cluster of graves 2, 3, 4 from Saffi 28 cemetery (Drawing A. Błaszczuk, E. Klimaszevska-Drabot)

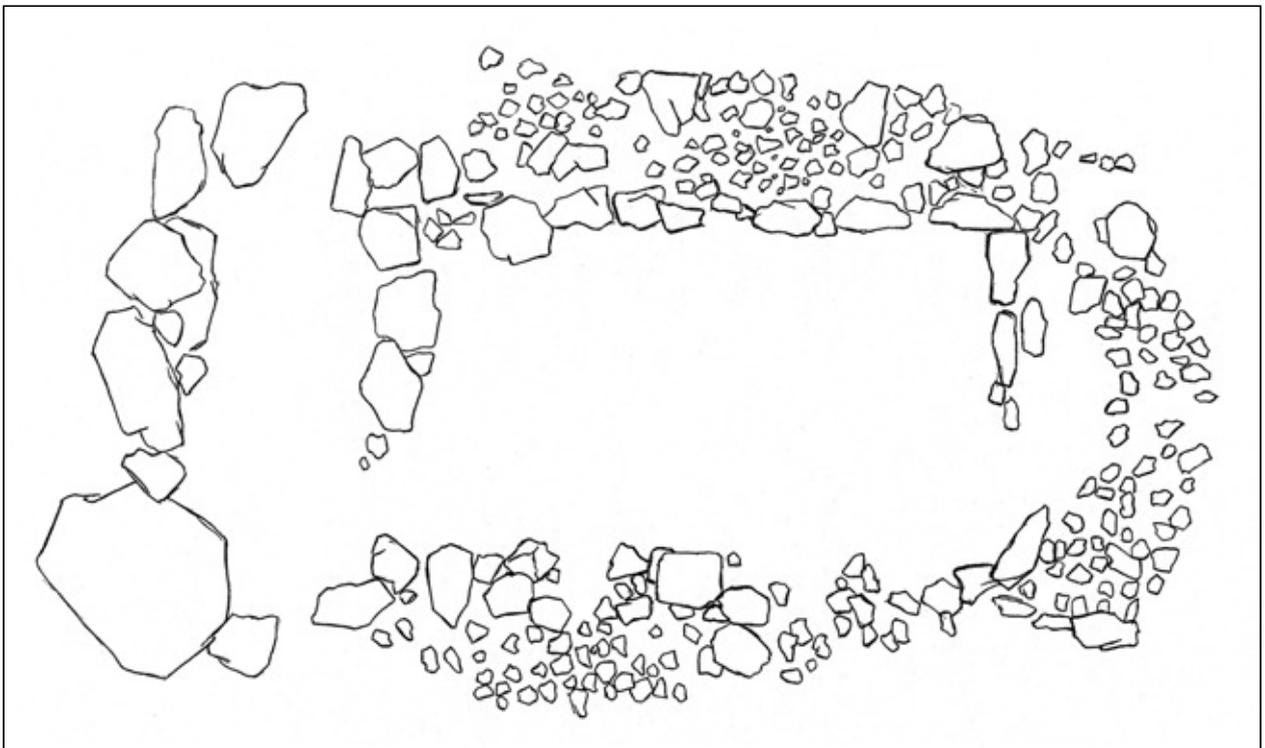


Fig. 12. The would-be church on Saffi 21 (Drawing M. Momot)

Saffi 11 (137 box graves) [Fig. 13] and at least seven more Christian sites nearby corroborate to some extent the identification of the building on Saffi 21 as a church.

ROCK ART AND GONG SITES

Most of the island rock art is grouped near its peak and on the slopes of Jebel Endeg, the highest point on the island, but in 2005

four more sites (bringing the total to nine) were recorded in the southernmost part of the island. Also, two more rock gong sites were found (bringing the total to five).

SUMMARY

New sites registered during the fieldwork of 2005 brought the site gazetteer to a total of 109. It did not, however, affect the statis-

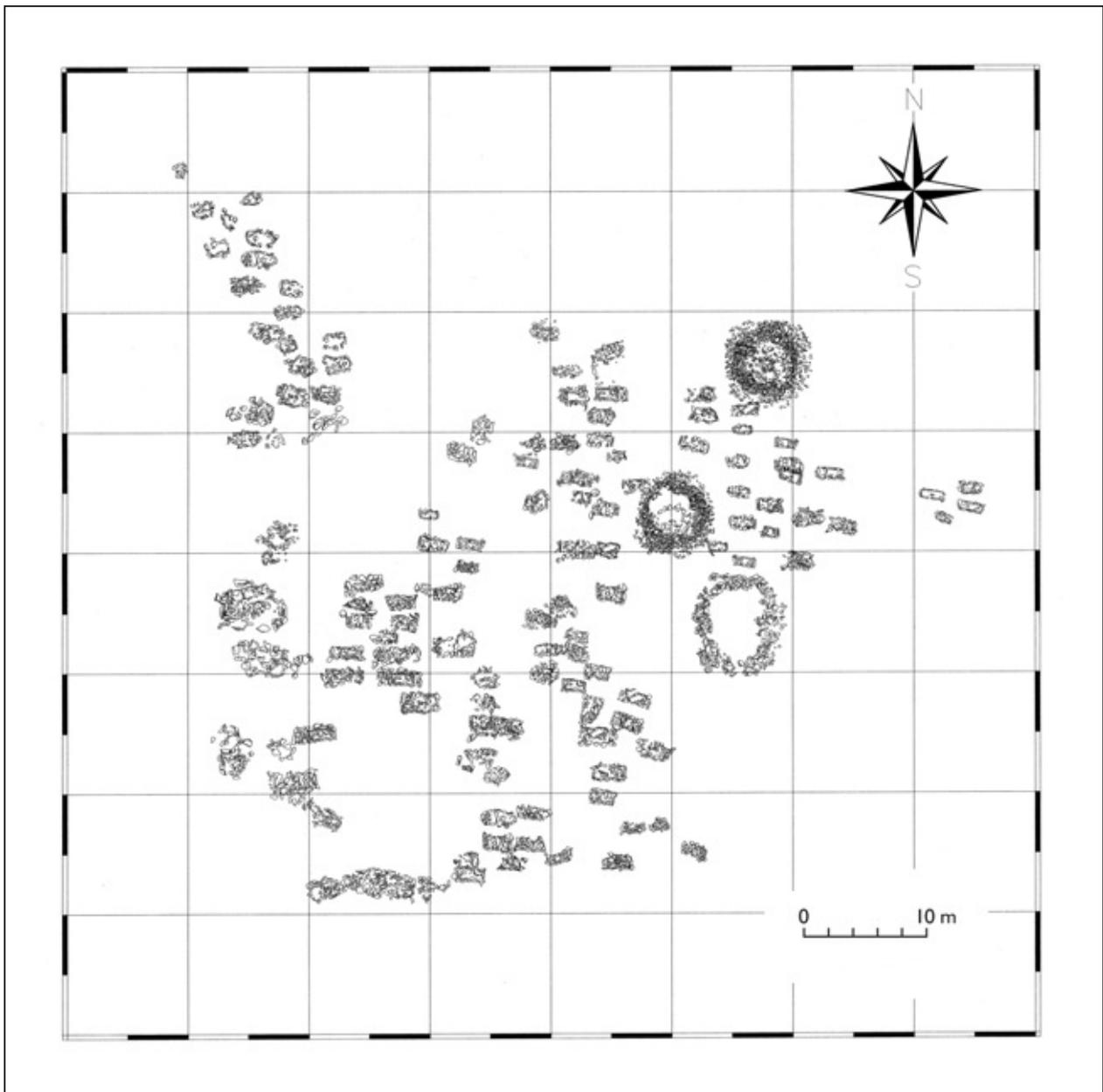


Fig. 13 *Saffi 11 cemetery: box graves and two tumuli*
(Drawing Anna Błaszczuk and R. Łopaciuk)

tics and the cultural profile of the island produced after the 2004 seasons. Most of the sites belonged to the Kerma Horizon, followed by an ample category of Dongola period sites. The number of sites does not

say much of their potential and size. Qualitatively, the Dongola period predominates. And just one Christian burial site, Saffi 11, contains more graves than the total of Kerma tombs registered on the island.