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Excavations of a Kerma-Period Cemetery at El-Sadda 4

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EXCAVATIONS OF A KERMA-PERIOD CEMETERY AT EL-SADDA 4

Michał Sip

Site 4 in the locality of El-Sadda (ES4) was discovered in January 2005 in the course of a survey carried out in the concession area of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw. It was provisionally dated to the Kerma Period. A week-long excavation between February 12 and 19, 2007, supervised by the present author, was carried out in order to establish the site chronology. Two trenches were excavated: T I (7 by 6 m), aligned E–W, and T II (8 by 8 m), located 36.30 m to the northwest of the first trench.

The site is located at the top of a hill, at the edge of a former Nile flood terrace (N19°17'22.5", E32°43'55.4"; 312.50 m a.s.l. measured by GPS) Eroded granite–gneissic bedrock and loose reddish gravel forms the first layer, superimposed on which is a surface layer of humus (approx. 15 cm thick).

The cemetery is composed of two groups of tombs: the southern one comprising only one tumulus (T1) and the northern one counting five or six stone structures. Tumulus T2 was chosen for exploration because it appeared to be the least damaged. The remaining tombs in this group were constituted by small and low stone rings (diameter from 1.00 to 2.30 m; maximum height 0.50 m).

TUMULUS 1

The tumulus measured 4.80 by 3.70 m and was 0.80 m high. The superstructure was an

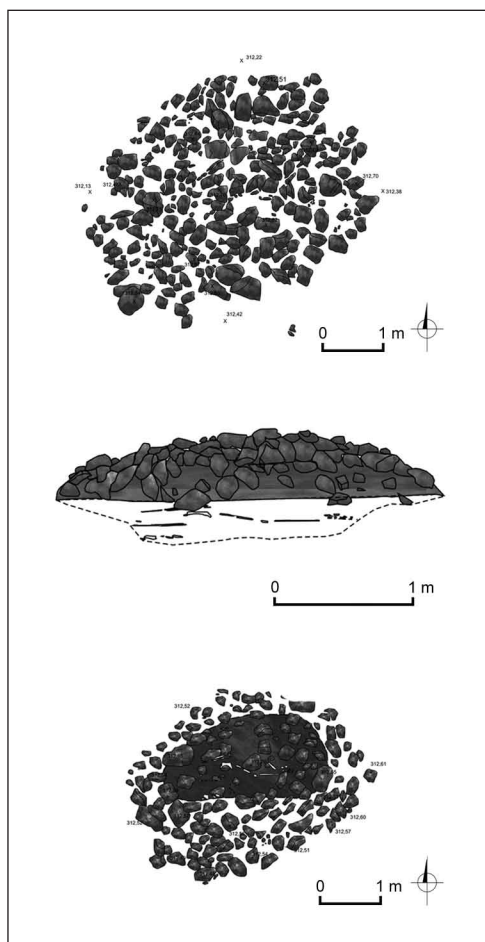


Fig. 1. *Tumulus 1: plan (top) and section looking north through the superstructure; plan showing outline of grave pit (bottom) (Drawing M. Sip)*

irregular stone cairn filled with gravel and stone chips of bigger size [Fig. 1]. It bore traces of plundering in the past. The burial chamber was discovered in the northern part of the feature. It was of irregular shape: 2.60 by 1.35 m, 0.35 m deep, filled with coarse gravel. The skeleton had been

heavily disturbed by plundering: the skull was crushed, the anatomical position lost. It was identified as a male, aged 20–30 years at death (*adultus*), approximately 170 cm tall (anthropological examination of the skeletons was carried out by Łukasz Maurycy Stanaszek from the State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw; see also above, appendix 3 to the present report). The grave could not be dated for lack of any kind of archaeological material from the feature.

TUMULUS 2

Tumulus 2 measured 6.05 by 4.75 m [Figs 2-3]. A pile of stones to the north of the mound may be evidence of a robbers' trench in the past.

A grave (G1) made of slabs of stone was recorded after the gravel-and-rock mound had been removed. It measured 2.35 by 0.88 m and was aligned NW–SE [Figs 2, *bottom*; 4]. The height of the casing and grave pit was 0.64 m. An ovoid-shaped handmade ceramic beaker was found in the southeastern corner of the grave, right under the flat slabs of the covering. The skeleton lay in flexed position on its right side with head to the northwest [Fig. 2, *bottom*]. The skull had been moved, but the mandible still in its proper anatomical position indicated that this must have occurred during the grave-robbing. A single cowry shell found next to the mandible may have been part of a stolen necklace. The buried individual was a man aged 40–50 years at death, who had suffered from rheumatism.

Another burial was recorded under the northern part of the superstructure, approximately 1.30 m from the first grave. There was no grave pit. A fragmentarily preserved skeleton lay directly on the ground, on its right side, aligned NE–SW with the head to the southwest. It belonged to a woman who had died at the age

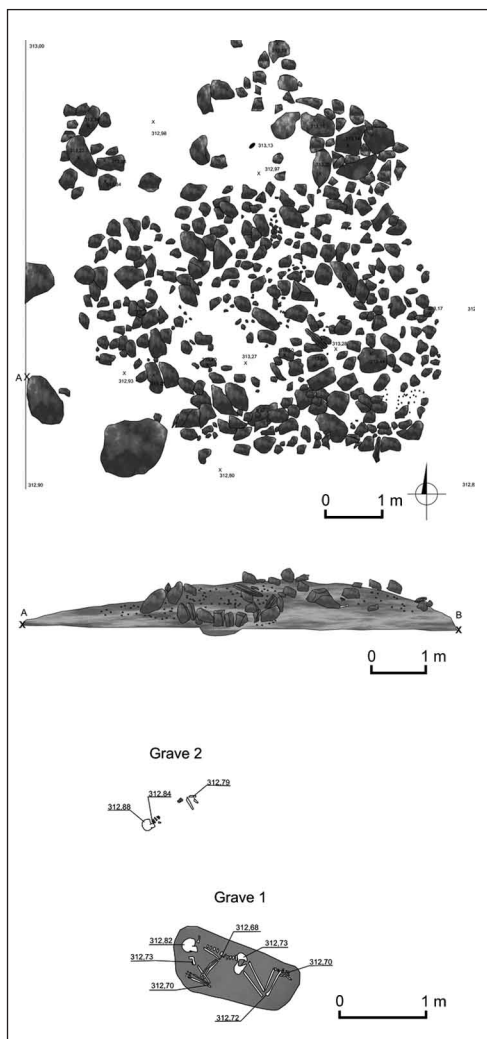


Fig. 2. *Tumulus 2: plan and section through the superstructure (top); position of graves 1 and 2 under the superstructure (Drawing M. Sip)*



Fig. 3. *Tumulus 2, view of the superstructure from the south*
(Photo M. Sip)

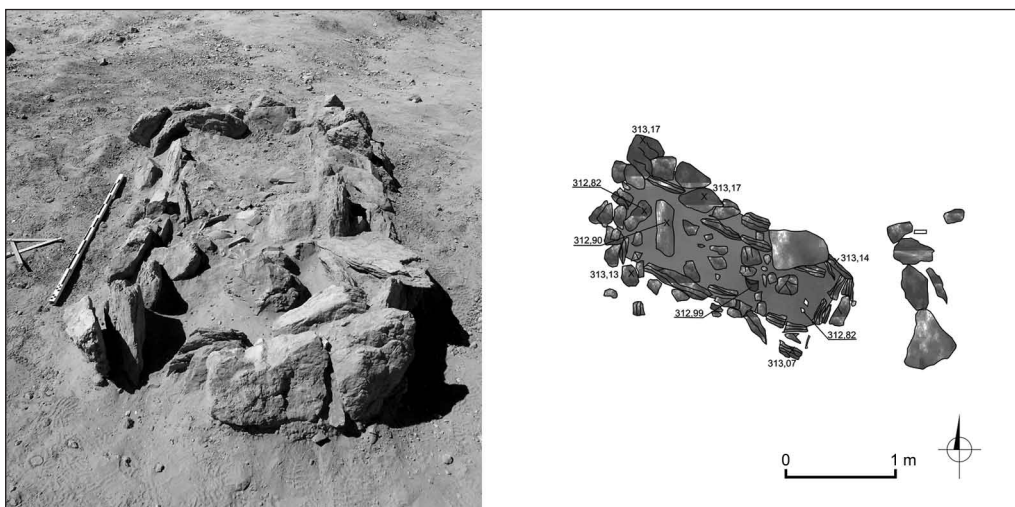


Fig. 4. *Grave 1 after clearing away the stone superstructure (left) and top plan of the burial*
(Photo M. Sip)

of 20–25 years. The skull had a hole with poorly healed edges (see above, appendix 3 to the present report). Two round beads of carnelian (dia. 0.60–0.65 cm; H. 0.30–0.35 cm) were found by the neck vertebrae (C3) [Fig. 5].

An unidentified stone object, 10.5 by 6.5 cm, was also found.

POTTERY FINDS

The pottery finds (82 sherds in total) comprised one vessel (reconstructed from 15 fragments), 10 rim fragments, one base and an assemblage of body sherds. Most of this material could be assigned to the Kerma horizon [Fig. 7]. The predominant ware was light brown with blackened rims, either smooth or coarse on the outside and mainly smooth inside. Rounded bowls with straight or thickened rim were definitely in the majority. The reconstructed beaker was an ovoid form with rounded bottom, rim diameter 14 cm, height 13.8 cm [Fig. 7, bottom right]. The ware was pale brown with the top third blackened. The outside

surface was smooth, the inside polished. In four cases the sherds were decorated with incised dots made with a sharp tool, incised double triangular zigzags and finger impressions. In two cases, there were small holes drilled just below the rim.

A few fragments of pottery identified as Neolithic in date came from the exploration of the tumulus superstructure and its immediate vicinity in trench II [Fig. 6 and top row in Fig. 7]. There was absolutely no pottery from trench I.

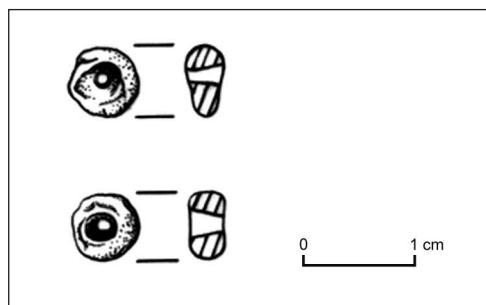


Fig. 5. Carnelian beads from the female burial in Tumulus 2 (Drawing K. Trawińska)



Fig. 6. Selection of Neolithic decorated sherds from Trench II (see also top row in Fig. 7) (Photo M. Sip.)

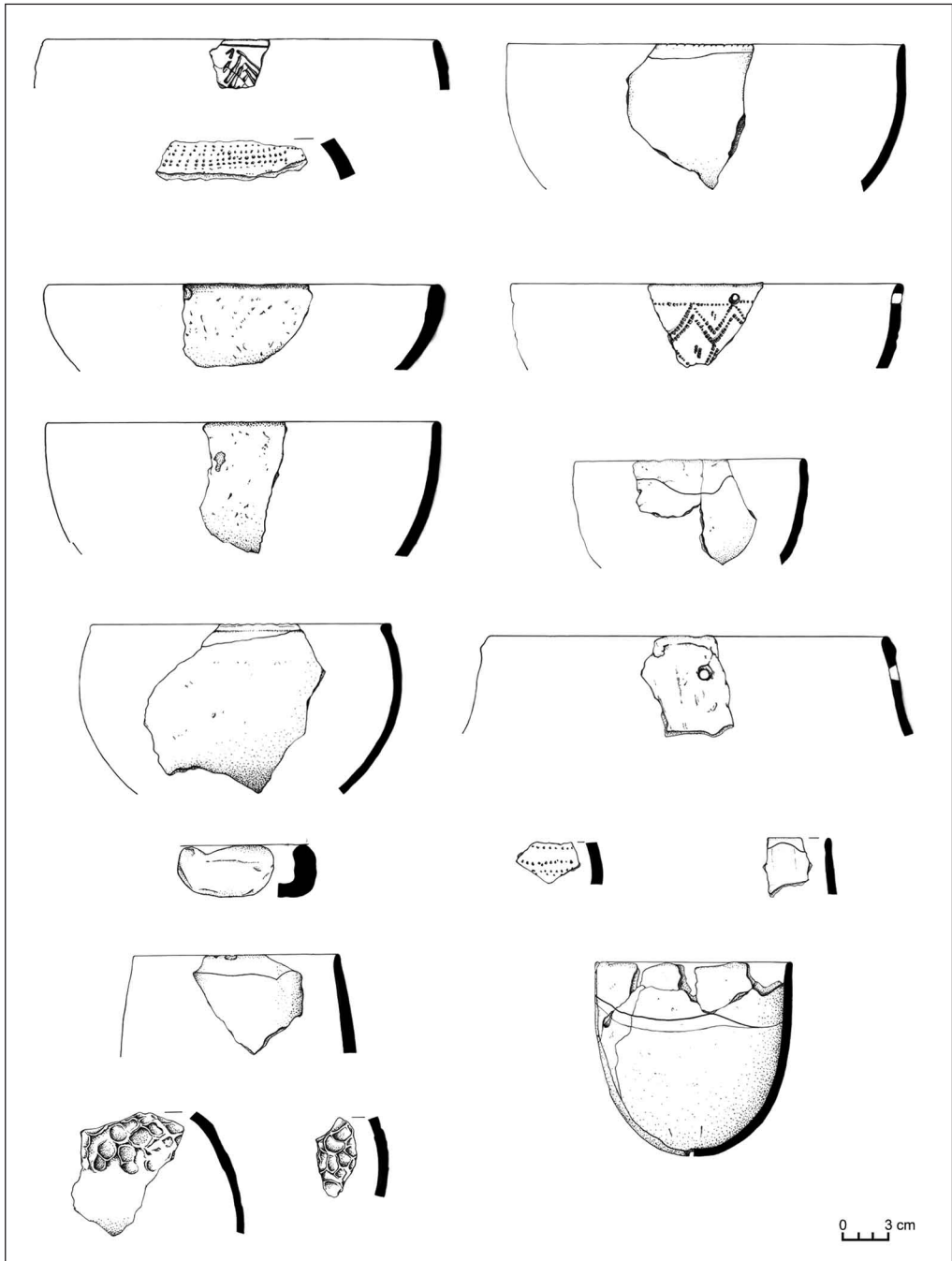


Fig. 7. Selection of Neolithic (top row) and Kerma horizon pottery from Trench II; ovoid beaker from Grave 1 in Tumulus 2 at bottom right (Drawing K. Trawińska)

Taking into consideration the character of the pottery assemblage and parallels for grave 1 in Tumulus II (e.g. grave 23 from site 549 explored by the GAME expedition, pers. comm. Mahmoud

El-Tayeb, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw), it can be said in conclusion that the cemetery at El-Sadda 4 represents a terminal phase of the so-called Kerma Horizon (Old Kush III).