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New Final Neolithic cemetery E-09-4, Gebel Ramlah Playa, Western Desert of Egypt

Introduction

Gebel Ramlah Playa is a paleo-lake adjacent from the south to Gebel Ramlah, a prominent hill located ca. 150 kilometers west of Abu Simbel. Region of Gebel Ramlah belongs to Egyptian part of the Western Desert (Lybian Desert) that covers close to 3 million sq. kilometers and extends from the western edge of Nile valley to Lybian border on the west and from Mediterranean Sea to Sudanese border (Issawi *et al.* 1999). That is an upland part of Egypt with average altitude between 250 and 320 meters a.s.l. (Fig. 1). Southern part of that area was for many years a research area of the Combined Prehistoric Expedition (Wendorf and Schild 1980; 1995-96; 2001; Schild and Wendorf 2001; Wasylukowa 2001; Nelson 2002; Schild *et al.* 2002; 2005;). In 2008 season, during one day trip from Gebel Nabta Playa to

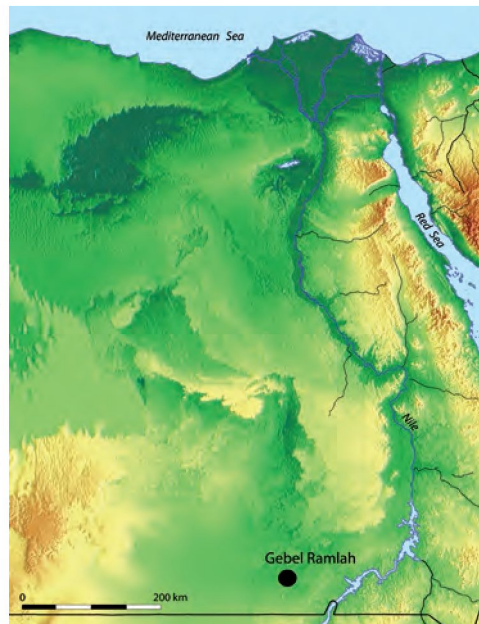


Fig. 1. Location of Gebel Ramlah Playa

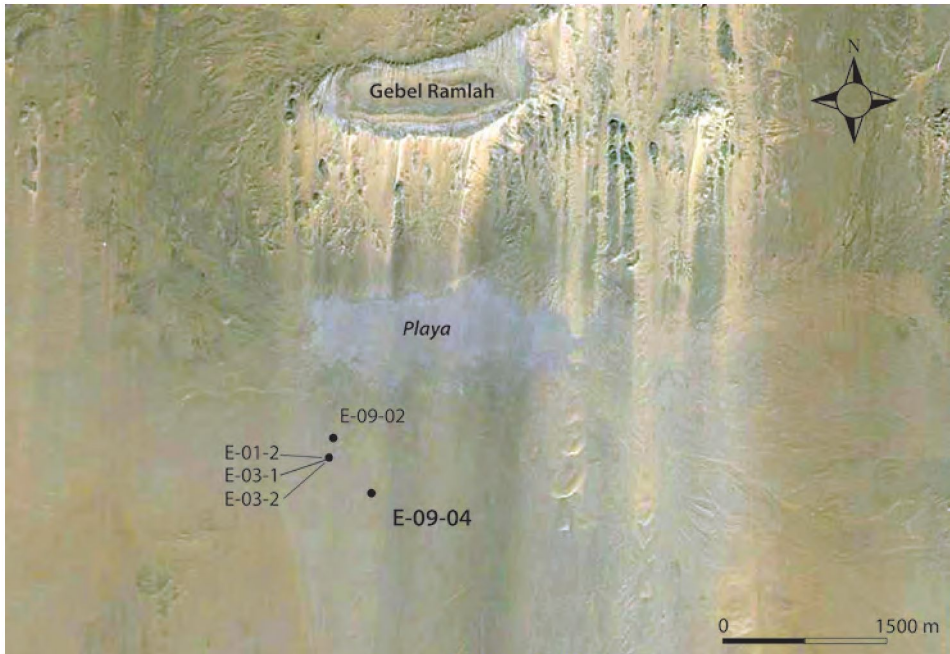


Fig. 2. Location of cemeteries of Gebel Ramlah

Gebel Ramlah, Marta Osypińska recorded an unknown settlement with eroded vessels, concentrations of animal bones and a fragment of bracelet made of shell.

In 2009 CPE field season A. Czekał-Zastawny and J. Kabaciński have surveyed the area around a Final Neolithic cemeteries of Gebel Ramlah, excavated by M. Kobusiewicz, J. Kabaciński and J. Irish in 2001 and 2003 (Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2004; 2010). During that research the area of settlement recorded in 2008 was carefully checked. Several dozen meters south of the settlement remnants of a new Final Neolithic cemetery were recorded, named as E-09-04. Like other sites discovered in that season (cemeteries E-09-01 and E-09-02 as well as a single burial E-09-3) it is located on the southern edge of Gebel Ramlah paleo-lake. Site E-09-04 is located about 600 meters east of already published Final Neolithic cemeteries and cemetery E-09-02 (Fig. 2).

Site location and description of finds

The site is located at the northern pronounced promontory of a small hill surrounded by two small stream valleys (*wadi*) (Fig. 3). It was identified by the presence of objects that are usually found in the burials of a Final Neolithic on a deflated surface of the desert. During test excavations remnants of at least 2 graves were recorded.

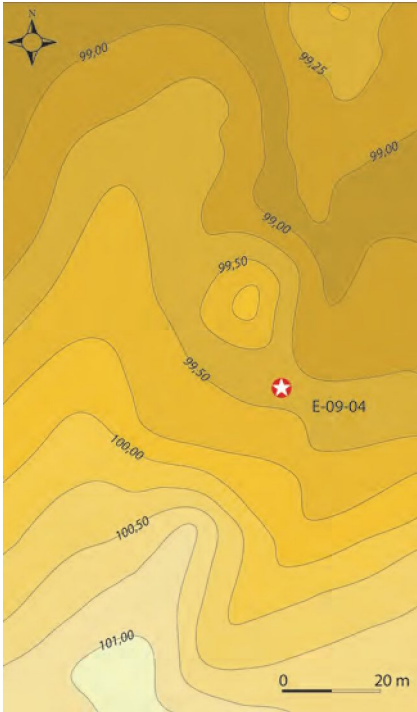


Fig. 3. Topographic map of E-09-04 cemetery area (after map of P. Wiktorowicz)



Fig. 4. Photograph of grave No. 1 before excavations

Grave No. 1.

On the top of the grave pit a large palette made of granite was recorded accompanied by two Red Sea shells of *Cypraea pantherina* and a piece of red ochre. Below these object a bottom part of grave pit was recorded to the depth ca. 10 cm below the surface. Horizontal dimensions of that pit were ca. 80 x 50 cm (Fig. 4-5). No human bones were preserved. Palette is rectangular in shape with rounded corners and measures 20,1 x 13,8 x 2,3 cm. On one of its surface traces of red colorant are visible (Fig. 6). Both *Cypraea pantherina* shells were of the same dimensions (8,4 x 4,3 x 5,2 cm and 8,5 x 4,1 x 4,8 cm), partially eroded and modified the same way: natural entrance to the shell was broadened by partial removal of denticulated edge (Fig. 7-9). One shell served as a container for malachite colorant. Traces of it are still visible (Fig. 10).

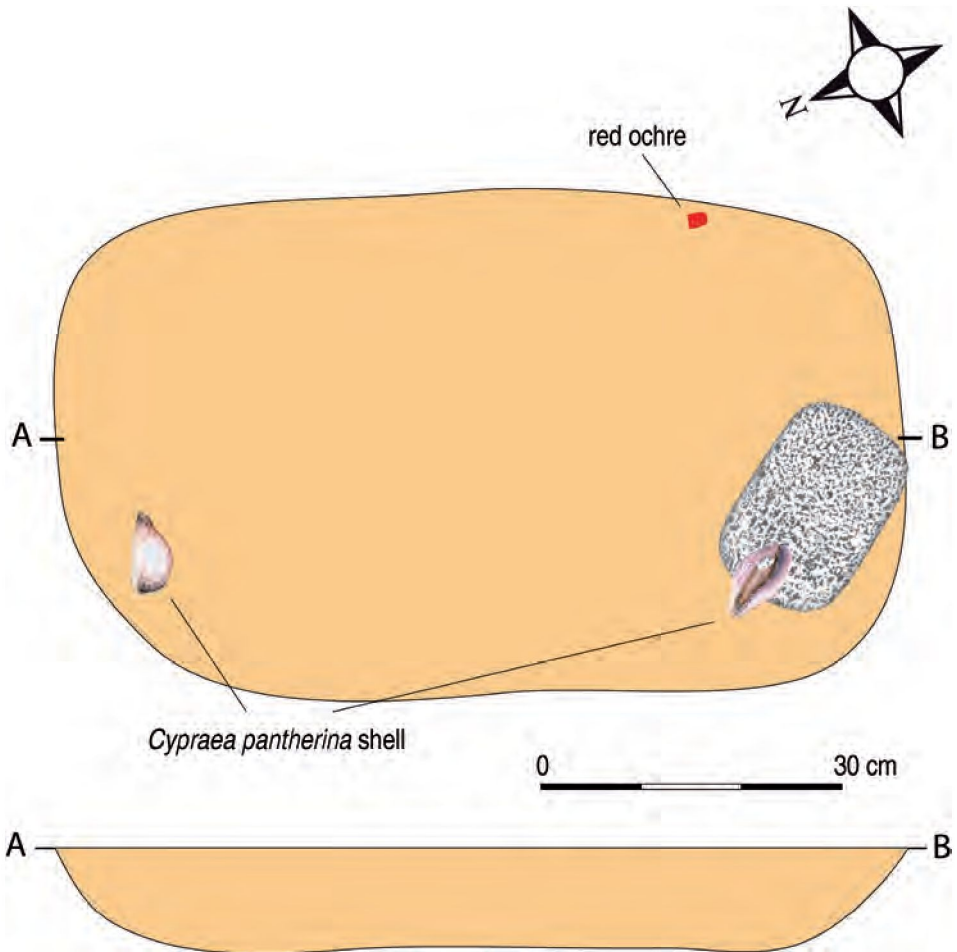


Fig. 5. Plan of grave No. 1

Grave No. 2

It was located ca. 1,5 meters north of grave No. 1. It was completely destroyed by deflation and neither grave pit nor human bones were preserved. It was identified by the presence of another *Cypraea pantherina* shell recorded on the surface. The shell itself was heavily eroded and only surface with modified entrance survived (Fig. 11).

Around above graves a few shallow, oval pits without any finds were recorded, most probably bottoms of other grave pits.

Final remarks

Site E-09-04 is another Neolithic cemetery identified on the shores of Gebel Ramlah paleo-lake. High degree of destruction do not allow to define its size and details of population buried here. However characteristic, even if scarce, grave goods allow us to synchronize that cemetery with a better preserved cemeteries of Gebel Ramlah located few hundred meters away. Good analogies of granite palette come from cemetery E-01-2 (Bur. 1, 2, 4, 6 and 12; Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2010, Fig. 1.8:2; 1.9:2; 1.13:21; 1.18:2; 1.21; 1.23:6; 1.24:5; 1.40:5; 1.41:9), E-03-1 (Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2010, Fig. 1.700 and cemetery E-03-2 (Bur. 6, 8 and 9; Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2010, Fig. 1.89:6; 1.90:5; 1.98:7; 1.99:1;

1.100:7; 1.101; 1.103:2). Also shells of *Cypraea pantherina* are found in the graves of Final Neolithic cemeteries of Gebel Ramlah, namely in burial No. 11 of a cemetery E-01-2 (Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2010; Fig. 1.38:4; 1.39:3; Kurzawska 2010) and burial 9 of cemetery E-03-2 (Kurzawska 2010; Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2010, Fig. 1.99:4; 1.100:2; 1.101).

Another site where analogous objects were recorded is a cemetery marked as R12 located much more to the south, in the Southern Dongola Reach. The cemetery is very large and was used for a long time (Salvatori and Usai 2008: Table 13.1), however at least part of burials can be synchronised with the Late or Final Neolithic of the south-eastern Desert of Egypt (Wendorf and Schild 2001). Of 154 burials some contained palettes made of granite - grave 44, 94, 101, 110, 129, 142, 144 (Salvatore and Usai 2008: Fig. 16.71:110; 16.77: 510, 511; 16.146:429; 16.157:443; 16.201:701; 16.232:890; 16.236:785; Pl. 5.6; 5.7). Another burial – grave No. 78 (Salvatore and Usai 2008: Pl. 11.18) was furnished with a shell of *Cypraea pantherina*.

In spite of a fact of total destruction of the E-09-04 cemetery, that is another evidence of a developed ceremonial behavior of the Late and Final Neolithic populations inhabited the area around Gebel Ramlah lake. A unique presence of chronologically different Neolithic cemeteries within the area of a few square kilometers makes exceptional chance to follow changes in burial rites in the younger part of the Neolithic.

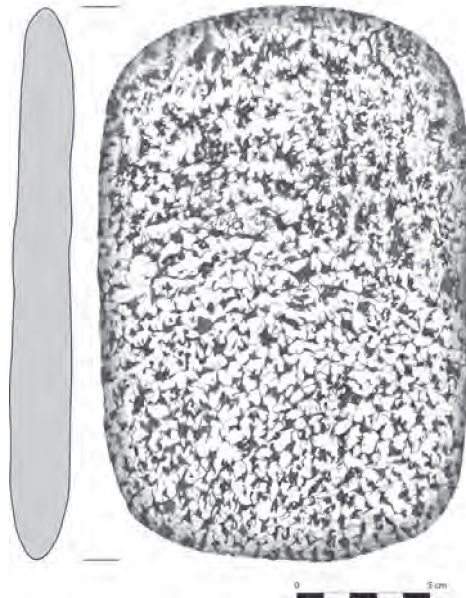


Fig. 6. Granite palette from grave No. 1 (drawn by J. Mugaj)



Fig. 7. Grave No. 1. Shell of *Cypraea pantherina* (drawn by J. Mugaj)

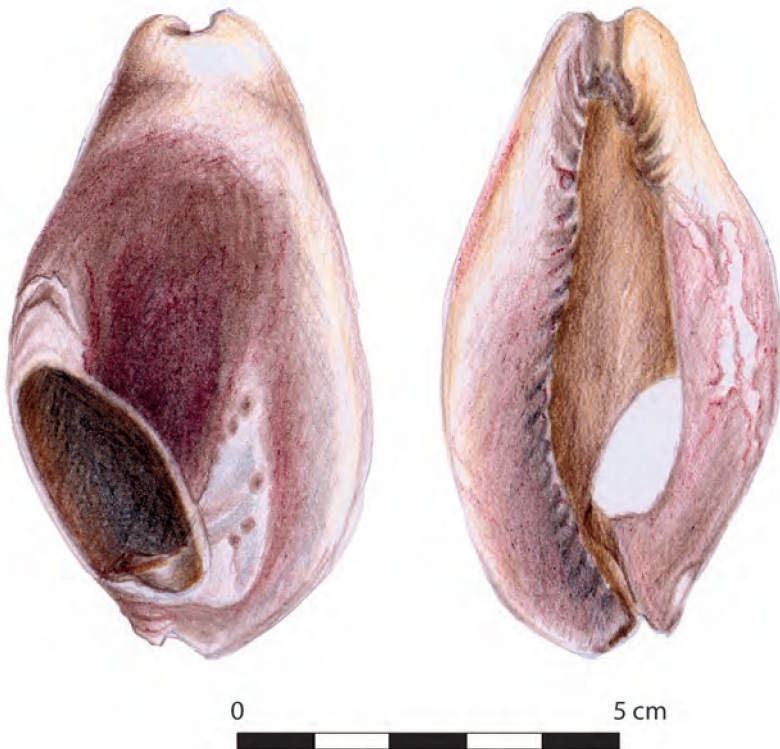


Fig. 8. Grave No. 1. Shell of *Cypraea pantherina* (drawn by J. Mugaj)



Fig. 9. Grave No. 1. Photograph of shells of *Cypraea pantherina*



Fig. 10. Grave No. 1. Photograph of malachite in a shell of *Cypraea pantherina*



Fig. 11. Grave No. 2. Photograph of shell of *Cypraea pantherina*

Acknowledgements

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