

Marek Chłodnicki and Krzysztof Grzymski

Kerma Culture in Letti Basin (Dongola Reach)

Letti Basin is located between the Third and the Fourth Nile Cataract in the so called Dongola Reach (Fig. 1). This fertile land was a perfect place for settlement since Palaeolithic times. Middle and Late Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Napatan, Meroitic, Post-Meroitic and especially Christian sites were identified there. It was only in the 1980s that the traces of the Kerma culture were also discovered in the area.

For the long time the southernmost known site of the Kerma Culture was Bugdumbush, to the north of the Letti Basin (Gratien 1978: 21). Although now we know that the Kingdom of Kerma extended further up the Nile beyond the 4th cataract our knowledge of what was going on in the 20 km long Letti Basin during the Kerma period was very limited. Similar situation exists around the Old Dongola, south of the Letti Basin. When compared to the finds from the Kerma Basin to the north and to those from the area between Karima and Abu Hamed further upstream, the material from the Letti Basin is very scant (Gratien 1978; Welsby 2003; Chłodnicki 2007; Osypiński 2007).

The present publication was provoked by a discussion during the Nubian Conference in Neuchâtel, September 2015, when the subject of the Kerma culture was brought up with suggestions that we know nothing about this culture in the Letti Basin. In fact, this is not the case, although our knowledge is admittedly very limited. The presence of the Kerma material in the region was known since the 1970. It was known mostly from the surface collection although one site has been exca-



Fig. 1. Location of the Kerma sites in Letti Basin

vated but, unfortunately, the results have not been published. Additionally, when these finds were briefly mentioned they did not attract much attention because they were published in a journal not commonly read by the nubologists (Kobusiewicz and Krzyżaniak 1975). The site in question was Kadakol where in 1970 Lech Krzyżaniak, member of the Polish Archaeological Mission of Old Dongola made some prehistoric research.

Kadakol, site 1 was located on the mound rising about 3 m above a flat terrain measuring about 200 x 250 m. The materials were scattered over the whole mound but it was decided to demarcate 17 squares 5x5 m arranged into 2 connected strips. The material was systematically collected within the squares. From the surface of 425 sq meters, a collection of several hundreds of potsherds and over one thousand stone pieces was obtained (Kobusiewicz and Krzyżaniak 1975: 181, fig. 2).

The material used for the production of the implements was mostly quartz (73%), but chert was also popular (25%). Some artifacts were made of agate (1%) and fossil wood (0,2%). Different types of cores and implements were identified in the collection: groovers made of chert and quartz, notches, toothed implements, massive retouched flakes, small retouched blade-like flakes, flakes with natural back, one point of Qadan type, two segments made of sandstone and chert, and an arrowhead. However, 95% of the collection was a debitage. The stone and flint material is characterized by an exclusively chipping technique, a general degeneration of the flint working technique and a predominant percentage of quartz used as a raw material (Kobusiewicz and Krzyżaniak 1975: 182-185, fig. 5-6).



Fig. 2. Pottery from the Kadakol 1 (Bugbugakutti) (photo: P. Silska)

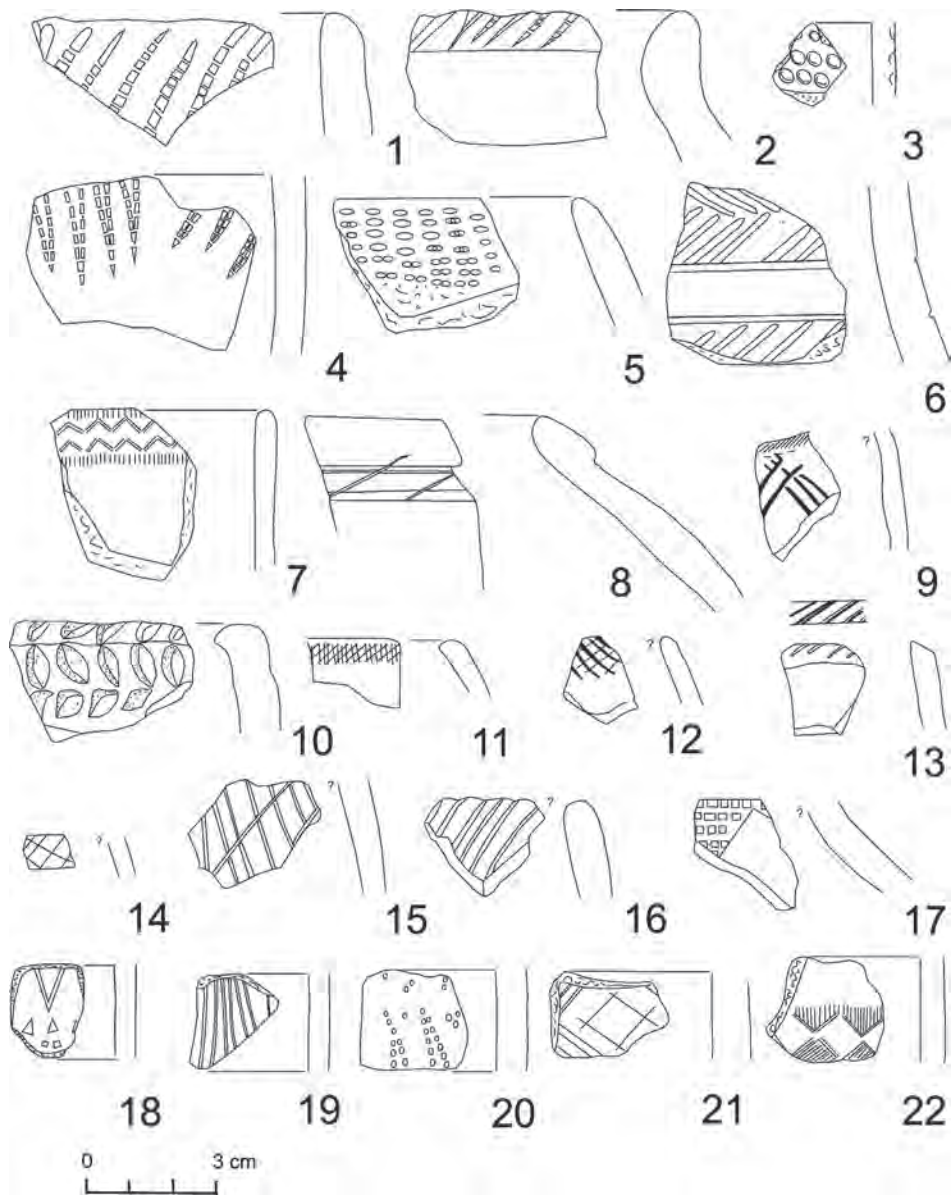


Fig. 3. Pottery from the ROM survey. 1-7. ROM 29 (1-2 – after Gratien 1994, fig. 1); 8-9 ROM 54 (after Gratien 1994, fig. 5), 10-22 ROM 79 (10-17 after Gratien 1994, fig. 2-4) (other drawings M. Chłodnicki)

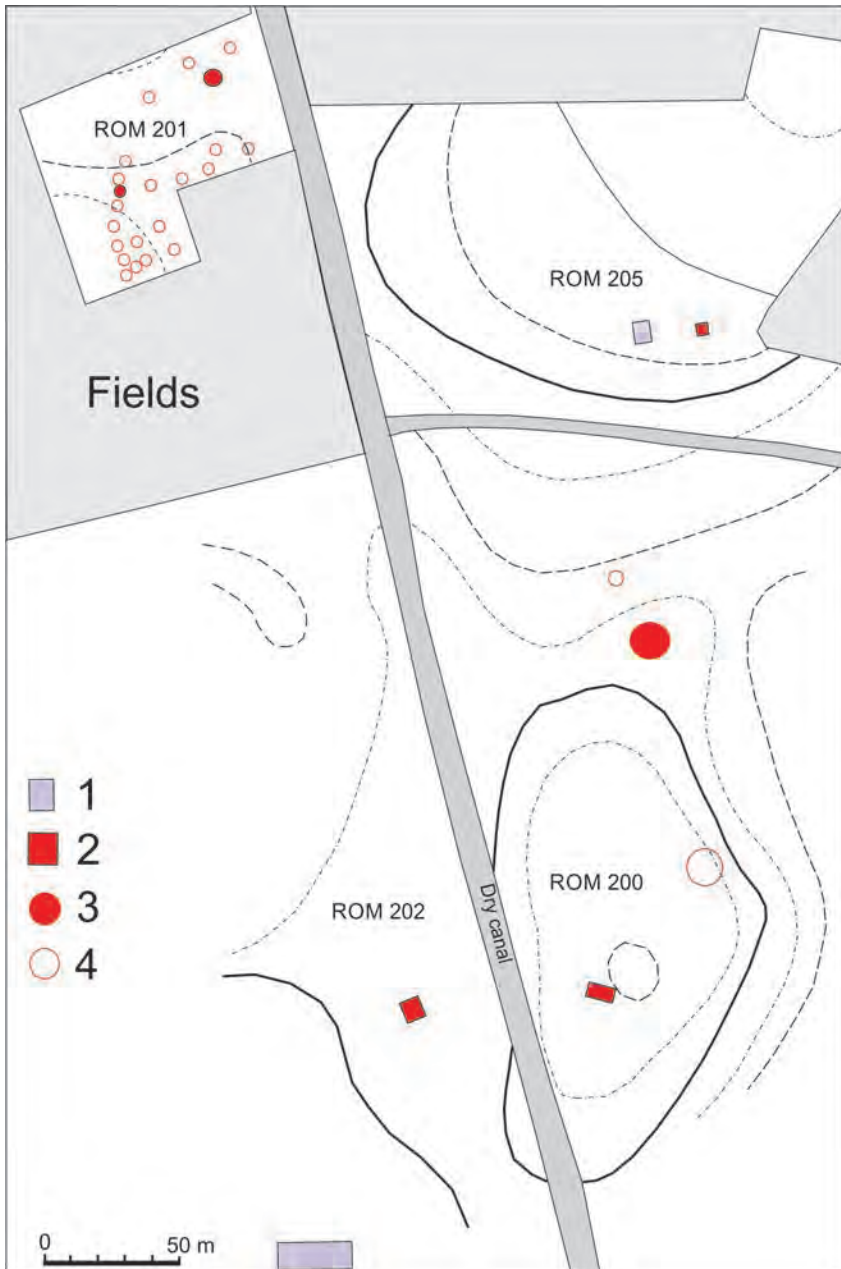


Fig. 4. Location of the sites ROM 200-205. 1 – buildings, 2 – archaeological trenches, 3 – excavated tumuli, 4 – other tumuli

Stone grinder and pottery were also collected from the investigated squares. The pottery was heavily eroded; the drawings and photos of a few sherds were published. The pottery was made of clay strongly mixed with chaff and sand temper. Material comes from the big pots, sometimes decorated with impressed patterns, mostly (90%) of the so called basket impressions. Sometimes red slip is preserved on the surface (Kobusiewicz and Krzyżaniak 1975: 181-182, fig. 3-4).

At the time of the publication the authors had problems with identifying the cultural affiliation of the Kadakol material. Firstly, it was not clear if it was a single or multi-phase settlement, and the secondly, there were no distinct parallels to it except for some slight affinities to the Cataract Tradition and the Abka industry. Lech Krzyżaniak noticed some similarity to the Kerma culture but was very careful not to say more about the chronological framework of the site. He described the site as a camp of the group of population living off fishing and hunting, dated between 2700-1800 BC. We must remember that at that time the Kerma culture was known only to the north of the Letti Basin (Kobusiewicz and Krzyżaniak 1975: 185).

We can now say that the material is characteristic to the Kerma flint industry but after the visit the site in 2002 we are also sure that this is a multi-phase site. The pottery collected on site confirmed for us that material which could be dated to the Early and Middle Kerma was there as one element of a multicultural site. Fortunately, part of material collected by Lech Krzyżaniak was stored in the Poznań Archaeological Museum. In this sample we also found small pieces decorated with zigzag made with rocker technique and a fragment of the vessel with black top (Fig. 2: 3-4).

Brigitte Gratien in her monograph of the Kerma culture, mentioned a wide tumuli cemetery dated to Kerma classic located in Bugdumbush, to the north of Letti, as the southernmost known site of that culture (Gratien 1978: 21). It is probably the same site discovered by Millet and Mills in 1978 in Zereib, north of Bugdumbush where they noted over a thousand graves with stone and bone fragments, and Kerma sherds scattered around (Grzymski 1987: 30).

In 1985 the expedition of Royal Ontario Museum, directed by Krzysztof Grzymski began the systematic investigation of the Letti Basin. Already in his first report Grzymski stated that:

„From the scholarly point of view perhaps the most interesting discovery was the existence of a number of Kerma sites in the Letti area. These are the most southerly sites presently known and further research is certainly worthwhile. We did not have the resources nor the time to excavate any of the Kerma sites, but we certainly hope that this will be done in the near future” (Grzymski 1985: 39).

Unfortunately no photos or drawings of the material were published at the time but some of the potsherds discovered by the Canadian team were later published by Brigitte Gratien (1994: 68-71) (Fig. 3:1-2, 8-17).

The number of the discovered Kerma sites in the Kerma Basin is not large but they show a potential of this area. Among the sites it is necessary to mention:

ROM 29. Bugbugakutti, District Kadakol. In this small roundish mound, material which was preliminary dated to Early Nubian (Grzymski 1987: 25) was found. Among the pottery fragments with the comb and mat impressions and fragments of tulip beakers, fragments made of pink or orange paste of Egyptian tradition what was frequent in Kerma (Gratien 1994: 68-69, Fig. 1) (Fig. 3:1-7) were also found. This is the same site described by L. Krzyżaniak and M. Kobusiewicz as Kadakol 1.

ROM 54. Kadakol-Teraza. District Kadakol. K. Grzymski during his first survey thought that it is the same site as Kadakol 1 published by Kobusiewicz and Krzyżaniak (Grzymski 1987: 25-26). It later became apparent that Kadakol 1 is to be identified with ROM 29, because the site of Kadakol (Teraza) has quite different appearance from the Kadakol described by the Polish archaeologists. Moreover, most of the pottery was dated to the Christian period and only a few could be identified as Kerma Classic. Fragment of the rim of fine ware with black paste and orange exterior as well as rims with simple geometric decoration were also found (Gratien 1978: 69, Fig. 5) (Fig. 3: 8-9).

ROM 55, Arab Hag El Madrasa. District Arab Hag. Unidentified bricks and stone slabs, possibly pre-Christian were discovered there. The exact dating of the site was not certain, but hand made mat-impressed pottery, possibly be Neolithic or early Nubian (Grzymski 1987: 26) were found.

ROM 60, Sections, basin 3. The site is located between the sand dunes on the west side of Khor Letti and east of Kadakol. A scatter of pottery fragments and chert flakes. There he found clearly Kerma potsherds (Grzymski 1987: 23).

ROM 61, Section 2, basin 5. The site is located on two low mounds on the edge of cultivation on the west side of Khor Letti across the desert from Kadakol. The diagnostic potsherds included Kerma (Grzymski 1987: 22-23).

ROM 79. Barakol. Section 1, Basin 3. The site was located to the east of Amentego. A scatter of lithics and hand made potsherds spread over the rather flat area right on the edge of cultivation was found (Grzymski 1987: 23, Pl. 3b). Grzymski proposed identified this site as early Nubian and Kerma. Pottery analysis by Brigitte Gratien confirmed that the pottery could be dated from the Ancient to Classic Kerma. Between the pots, pottery fragments with incised criss-cross



Fig.5. Stone structures on the site ROM 202

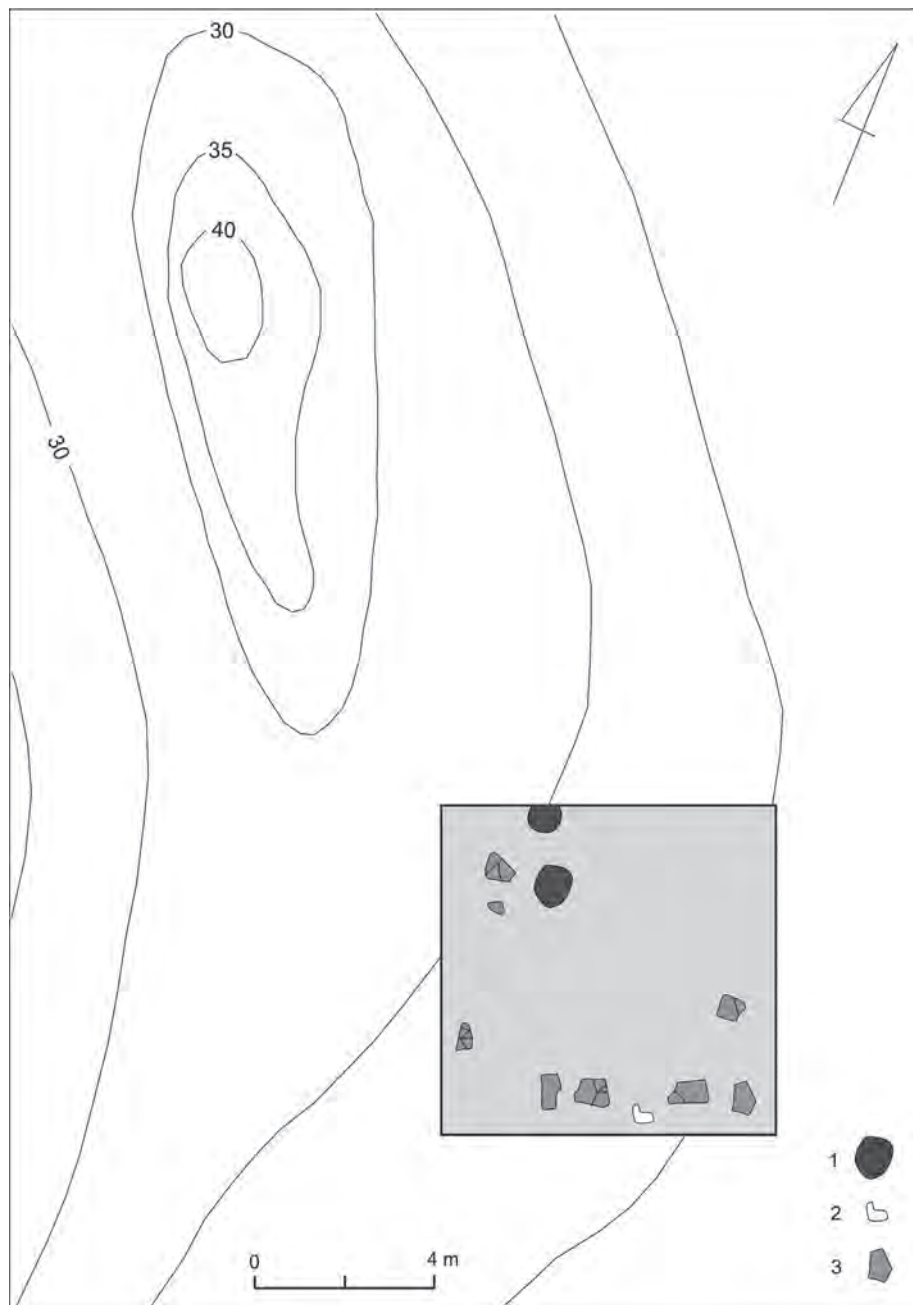


Fig. 6. Plan of the stone structures on the site ROM 202. 1 – fireplaces, 2 – remains of a plaster, 3 – stone blocks

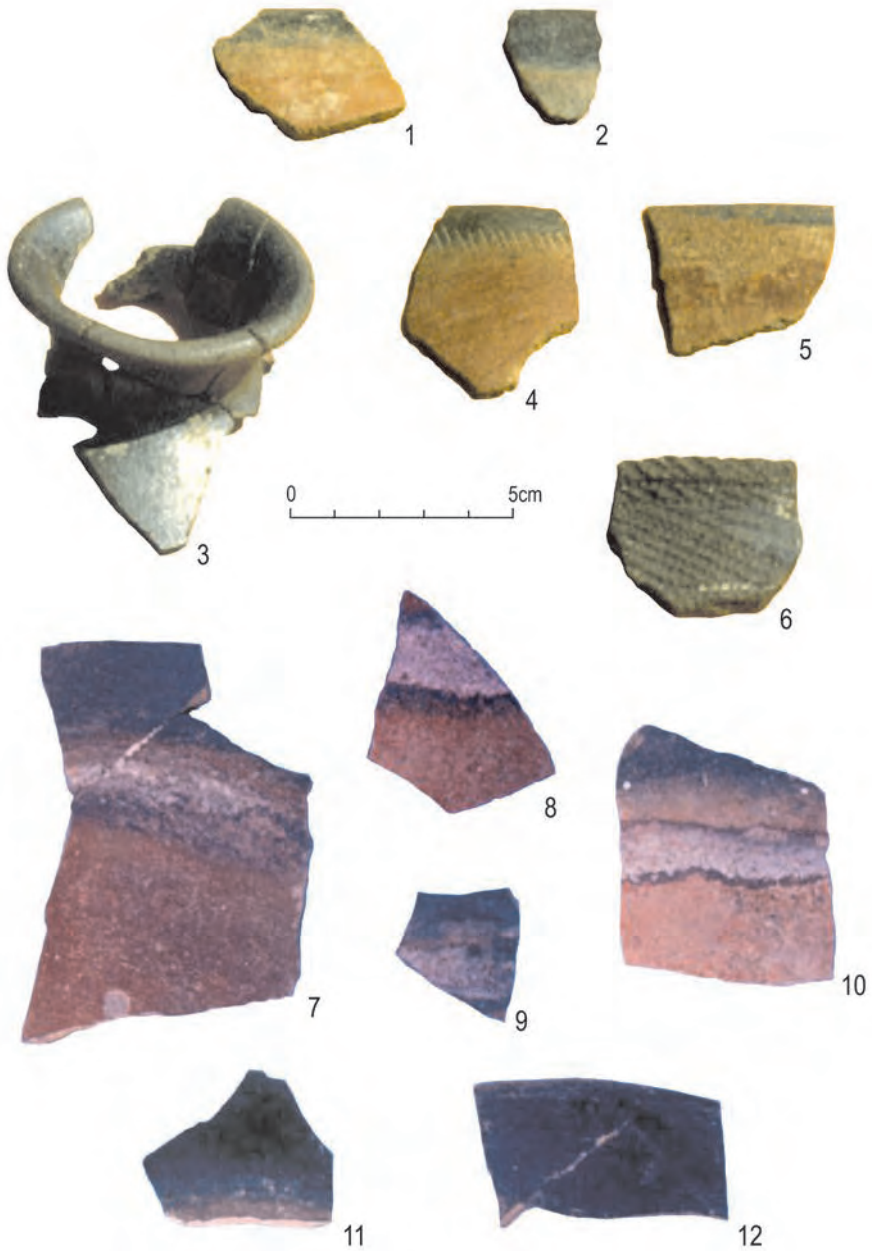


Fig. 7. Pottery from the site ROM 202 (photo: M. Chłodnicki)

lines, rim decorated with oblique incisions as well as with geometric decoration and mat impressions were found. Fragments of fine polished beakers were also collected (Gratien 1994: 69, fig. 2-4) (Fig. 3: 10-17). Some more potsherds were collected during the survey in 1998 (Fig. 3: 18-22).

ROM 80. Gerf el-Melik North, located north of Letti Basin, 2 km east of the Nile in the rocky desert near the lorry tracks. The site comprises up to 80 grave mounds of two types: 1 – conical pebble-covered mounds 3-4 m in diameter and 2 – mounds with the stone ring on top and usually a depression in the center, 6-8 m in diameter. Perhaps it dates to the Kerma period (Grzymiski 1987: 29).

When in 1995 the Royal Ontario Museum team, comprising also archaeologists from Poznan, started again a survey in the Letti Basin, the work was concentrated in its the southern part. Especially interesting was the area located between the newly constructed suq and a new school in Ghaddar. In this area we found remains of a Neolithic settlement (Chłodnicki and Kabaciński 2003: 57-62) as well as a group of cemeteries consisting of almost flat tumuli of different sizes and construction. Some of the tombs were excavated but, unfortunately, all of them were robbed. Some of them, because of the construction method and position of the body, were clearly of a later date, but several seem to belong to the Kerma culture, especially those found at site ROM 201 (Fig. 4).

During the research we paid attention to a group of stones lying on the truck route. Around them flints and pottery sherds were scattered and fragments of Kerma classic black-topped beakers were found among the potsherds. This site was marked as ROM 202.

Small trench, 7x7m covering all stone blocks visible on the surface was opened. All stones are flat and carry signs of cutting to achieve a flat top surface (Fig. 5-6). The thickness of the blocks did not exceed 20 cm. The blocks were placed in the silt and the cultural debris not exceeded 10 to 12 cm. We discovered traces of the fireplaces and charcoal between the blocks, but not necessarily connected with the building. Remains of, most probably, a plaster could be of the Kerma chronology. Inside the construction a Post-Meroitic grave was dug.

From the trench almost 650 fragments of pottery were collected. 95 % of them were connected with the Kerma culture. Others are of the Neolithic, Post-Meroitic and Christian periods.

Almost a third of the material comes from the black-topped beakers. Similar quantity constitutes of red polished pottery decorated with comb impressions or brown pottery covered with incised lines. The smallest group, is pottery decorated with the mat or basket impressions (Fig. 7-8).

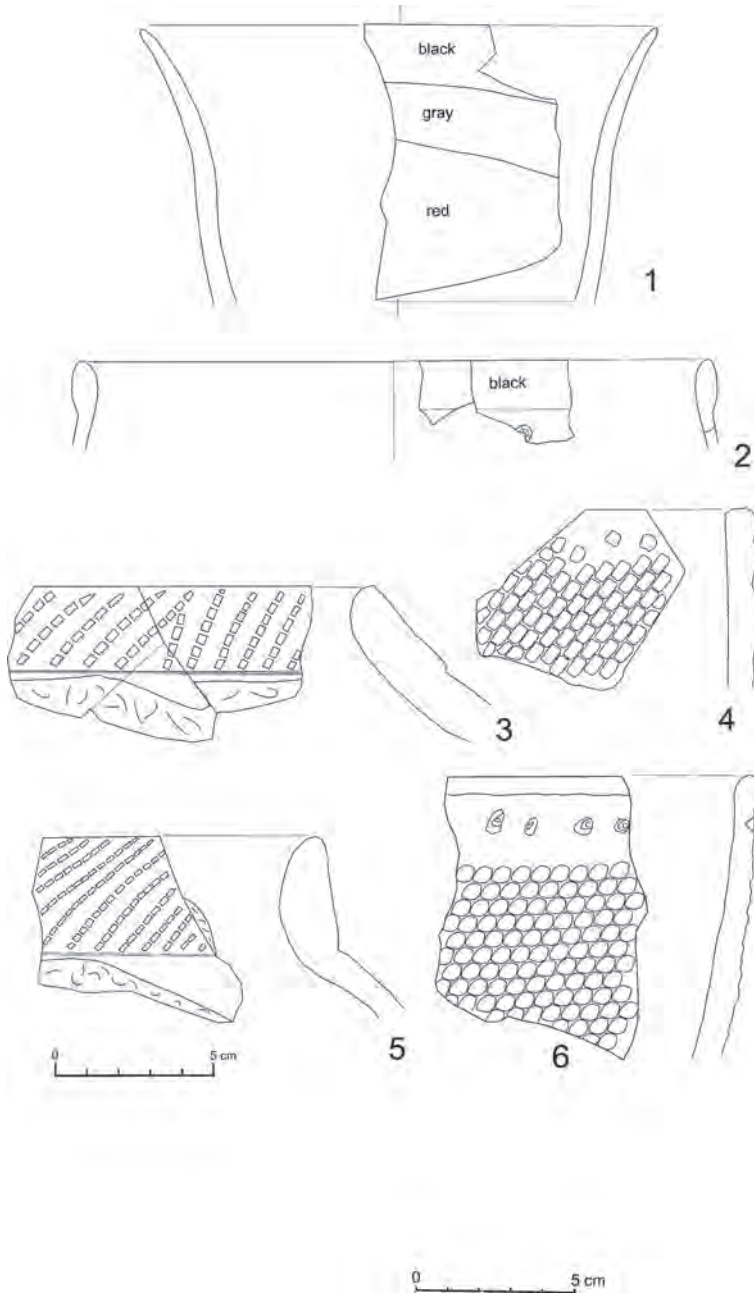


Fig. 8. Pottery from the site ROM 202 (drawings: M. Chłodnicki)

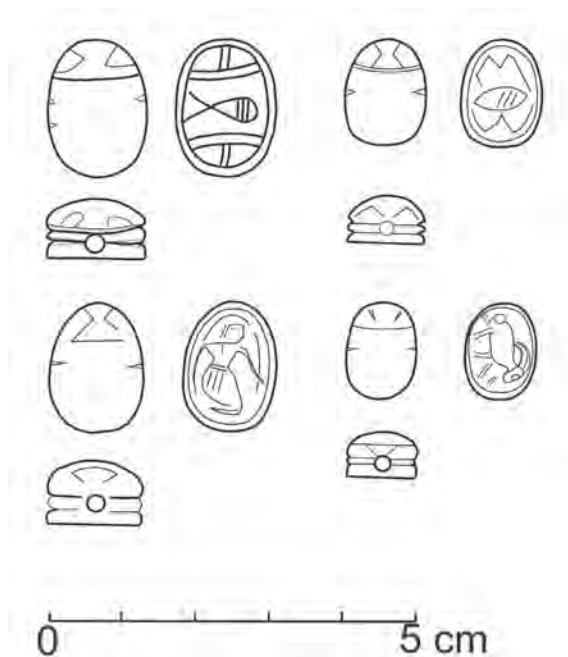


Fig. 9. Scarabs from the site ROM 202 (drawings: M. Chłodnicki)

Not only pottery was discovered. Among the stones we found a lip plug and beads made of ostrich egg shell, faience and rock crystal. Four faience scarabs are worth special attention (Fig. 9). Two are bigger and two smaller but all of them with the similar stylistic traits. Animals (gazelle, fish), humans, and signs resembling some hieroglyphs are depicted on them. All of them belong to the group of so called Hyxos scarabs dated do the 15th and 16th dynasty in Egypt, dated to about 1650-1540 BC, which corresponds well with the Classic phase of the Kerma culture (Śliwa 2003: 34-46). From and around the trench many flints were also collected¹. Generally, from the typological point of view, the material is similar to that from Kadakol. The only difference is that the dominant raw material was chert.

We can now say that the Letti Basin was inhabited by the people of Kerma from the beginning of that culture. We can observe there the continuation from

¹ The stone material will be analyzed by Jacek Kabaciński

the pre-Kerma phase to its Classic phase. Most of the sites have been eroded (as were the Neolithic sites), or covered by the huge mounds with Christian period remains. There is still a chance, however, that better preserved sites will be found in the area, but it requires further long term works in the Letti Basin. It seems that it is only a matter of time when more sites will be discovered in the Letti Basin.

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