

## Selib 3. Pottery from the midden

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses some preliminary research on pottery from the refuse dump at Selib 3. The assemblage comprised a rich repertoire of tableware, cooking and transport vessels. A striking feature of this collection is the abundance of imported products, some fine ware vessels (plates, small bottles etc.) but mostly amphorae, from Egypt and from the Eastern Mediterranean. The material from Selib 3 represents a homogenous chronological assemblage that can be placed in the 6th and early 7th century AD.

**Keywords:** Selib, refuse dump, pottery, Transitional/early Christian period, 6th–7th century, tableware, cooking vessels, amphorae, oil lamps

The pottery discussed in this paper comes from a series of small trial pits that the author excavated at the site of Selib 3 in the 2014/2015 and 2016 seasons [Fig. 1]. The objective was to examine an area distinguished by a dense scatter of potsherds overlying a long anomaly observed on the magnetic map (for more on the results of the survey and archaeological work, see Żurawski 2016). Trial pits revealed a thick stratum of grayish-brown soil mixed with ashes, charcoal and red brick rubble intercalated with layers of aeolian sand.

The pottery deposit consisted of a large number of vessels, mostly in very fragmented state and often with traces of burning, hindering examination and interpretation of the material. Detailed quantification was undertaken with the general methods proposed by Orton, Tyers

and Vince (1993: 166–175) and involved class-by-class quantification of rims, bases, handles, and body sherds (RBHS), each quantified separately. The documentation process included records of: form, fabric, decoration, weight and sherd type. Overall, 350 kg of ceramics were processed, with the total number of sherds close to 11,000, including about 3000 diagnostic fragments.

The pottery from all the trial pits came from a single extended context, hence it was analyzed and presented as one group. As will be argued later, the chronological range of the material is rather tight and represents activities at the site that could have lasted no longer than a few decades, from 50 to 100 years.

For the purpose of a functional analysis, the fragments were divided into six typological vessel groups: table (29%

of the total assemblage), cooking (28.5%), storage (12.5%), transport (15%), *qawadis* (sing. *qadus*) for the *saqia* water-wheel

(14.5%) and miscellaneous ceramic finds that did not fit in the other categories (0.5%).

## TABLE VESSELS

Almost every third potsherd of the assemblage represented table vessels, used for consumption and distribution of beverages and food. This group consisted of small bowls with rounded base, middle-sized footed bowls and plates, middle- to larger-sized bowls with straight or flaring walls, as well as closed forms such as bottles with sloping shoulders or cylindrical neck, rounded squat pots, and singularly represented pitchers or flasks [Fig. 2]. Most of them were made of Nile silt, although mixed fabrics and use of

kaolinitic clay was also noted. There were also vessels of imported fabrics, mostly of Upper Egyptian or Lower Nubian origin.

Small bowls or cups with rounded bottoms were the most common in this group. Hemispherical or semi-globular bowls, as they are often described, are drinking-related vessels most fitted for individual use. They were indeed the most popular form in the assemblage, representing mainly the red-slip variant [Fig. 2: RHB type] (52% of the table ware, which equals 15% of the total assemblage) but

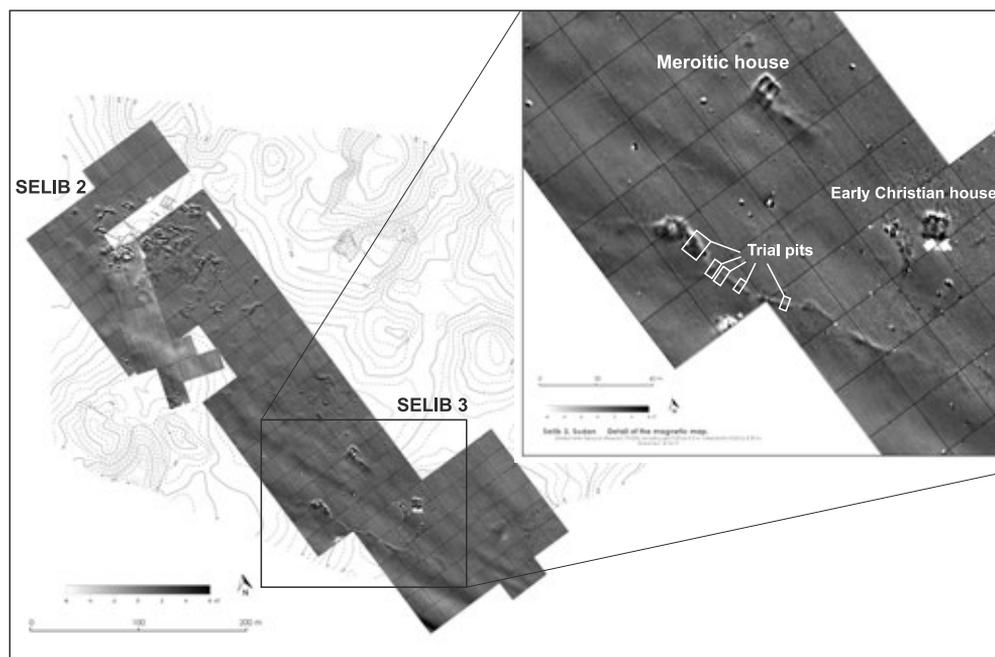


Fig. 1. Magnetic map of the Selib area with the location of trenches (Selib Project/plan T. Herbich, R. Ryndziewicz; editing A. Cedro)

vessels with white slip were also quite numerous (WHB, 3%) as were those in grey ware (GHB, 2%), the latter occurring very rarely among Nubian pottery (see Bagińska 2008: 366, Fig. 3a–c). While many vessel forms present in the assemblage follow models derived from late Roman pottery, and adopted from other regions, the hemispherical bowls are an indigenous contribution of Nubian potters. They were abundant in the earliest levels of the pottery kilns in Old Dongola (Pluskota 2001: 361–363, Fig. 6), and widespread in the whole region in the Transitional/early Christian period (see Phillips 2003: Pls 33, 40).

Red-slipped hemispherical bowls were usually found with one of two kinds of decoration: incised or painted. The first was in the form of grooves, from one to five, engraved 1–2 cm below the rim [Fig. 3: CSC.413, 415, 416]. This decoration was usually associated with more flattened

forms. Their origin can be derived from the post-Meroitic bowls with grooves, best known from tumulus graves, e.g., Jebel Ghaddar North (Żurawski and El-Tayeb 1994: 313–315) and Hammur Abbasiya (Phillips and El-Tayeb 2003: Pl. 4).

Painted decoration was often limited to a simple black stripe on the rim, sometimes, though, other elements, a single groove or painted motifs, were added. More complex ornaments were usually arranged in metope-like motifs or bands, with a yellowish background and black highlighting or these colors applied in reverse, using designs such as cross-hatching, diamonds, guilloche or festoon friezes, as well as Christian-related symbols, mostly variations of a cross [Fig. 3: CSC.242, 397, 245]. Identical motifs were found on vessels from the R1 pottery-kiln-site in Dongola (Pluskota 1991: 42–43)

The repertoire of motifs used in the decoration of white-slipped [Fig. 4: CSC.

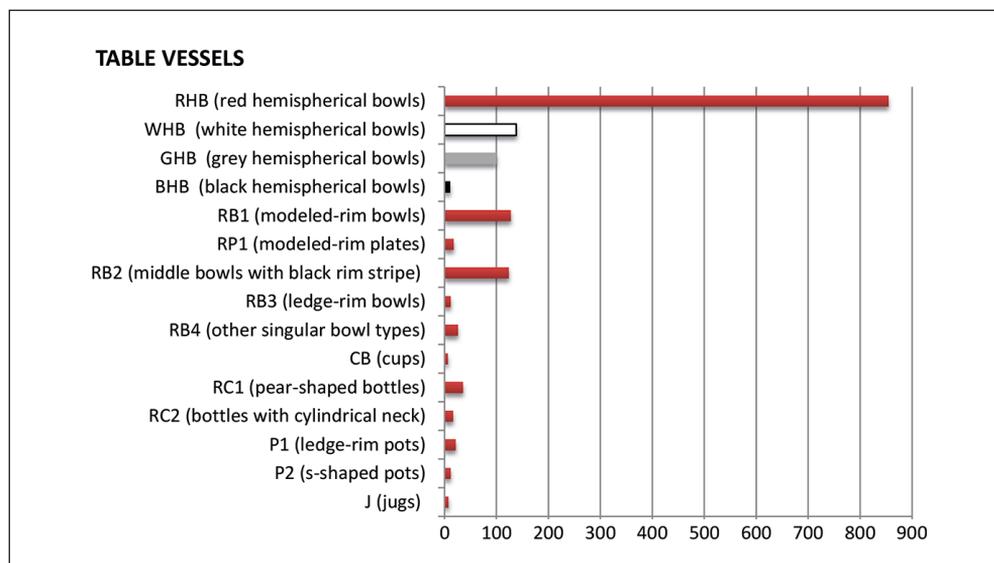


Fig. 2. Distribution of tableware vessel diagnostic sherds

31, 387, 388, 393, 447] and grey bowls [Fig. 4: CSC.39] was much more diverse. The layouts and patterns were unique. Some inspiration in the choice of motifs and techniques could have derived from Meroitic pottery traditions. Not only the decoration but also the excellent quality of these products continued in fact the technological achievements of the previous era.

Small bowls with extremely thin walls, made of kaolinite or mixed fine clay and often decorated with simple stamps, such

as concentric circles, ovals or diamonds, were exceptionally rare [Fig. 6]. These vessels represent the highest technology standard in Nubian pottery. They were fired either in an oxidised or reduced atmosphere, the latter resulting in vessels with hard bodies of a color ranging from light to very dark grey [Fig. 6: CSC.391, 505, 506].

Modest but noteworthy is a group of cups with grooved outer surface covered with dark-brown slip, additionally painted with yellow crosshatching, and white matt

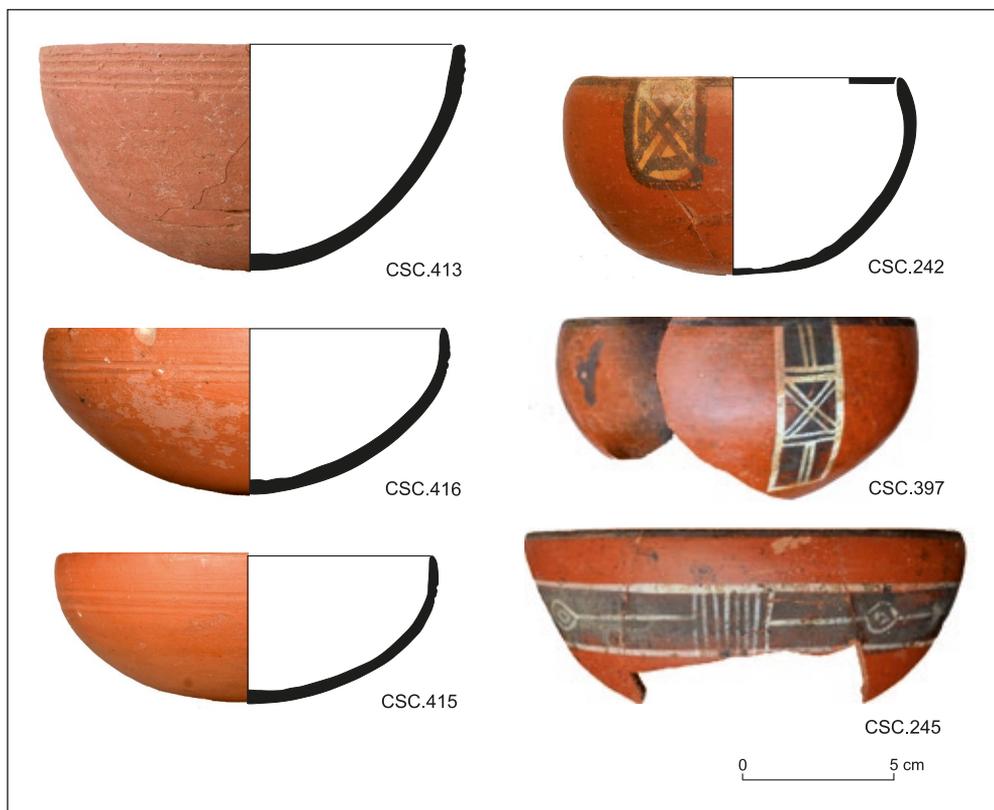


Fig. 3. Red ware hemispherical bowls

Selib Project/all drawings A. Cedro, photos P. Terendy and A. Cedro



Fig. 4. Rounded bowls of white and grey ware



Fig. 5. Cups with grooved and painted walls

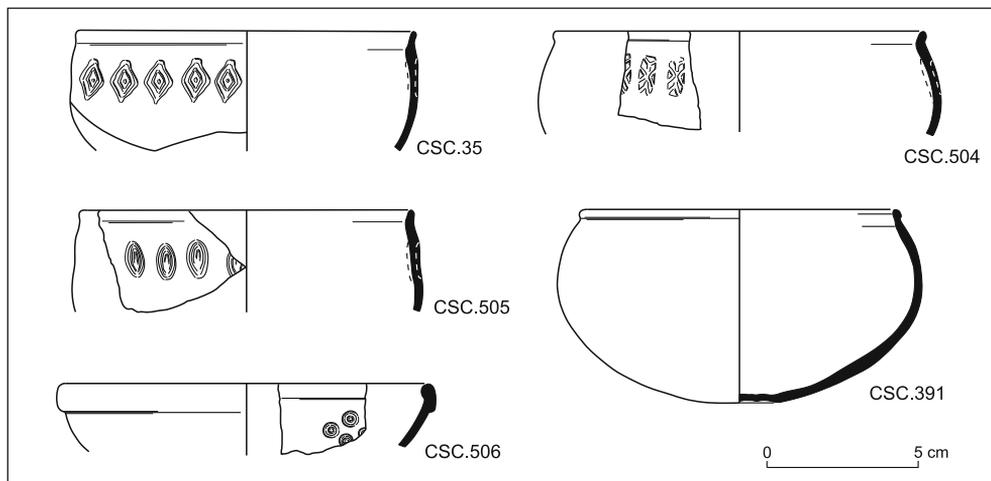


Fig. 6. White and grey bowls made of kaolinitic clay

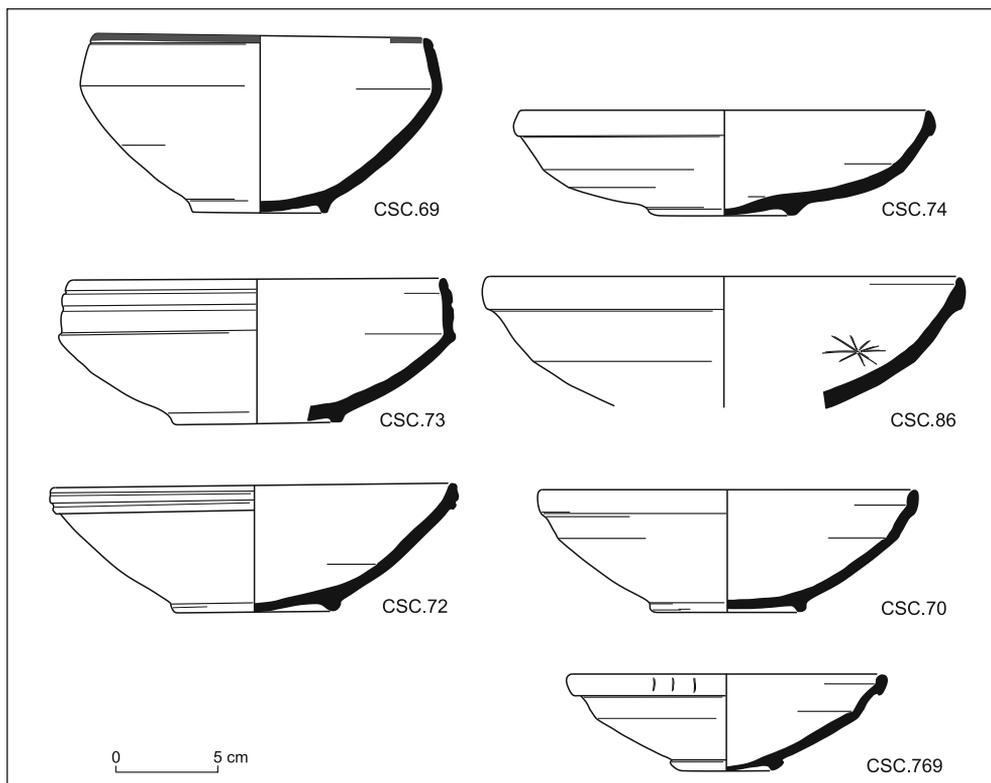


Fig. 7. Footed bowls and plates inspired by Late Roman pottery

interior [Fig. 5: CSC.228, 230]. They were made of a soft, powdery fabric of pinkish color and certainly were not a product of the local potteries.

Bowls [Fig. 2: RB1] and plates [Fig. 2: RP1] of the Red Ware family, distinguished by their ring bases and modelled or grooved rims were distinctive group, accounting for 9% of the table vessels (2.63% of the total assemblage) [Fig. 7]. They best reflect the aesthetic trends, mentioned above, that dominated the Mediterranean in the late Roman period. Similar forms were produced in many workshops along the Nile Valley in the 6th and 7th century AD, from Soba down to Alexandria (see Hayes 1972). Vessels from Selib were executed mostly

in local fabrics, possibly produced in the Dongolan pottery workshops (Pluskota 2001: Fig. 8), but some imported products of Upper Egyptian fabrics were also identified in the assemblage.

The percentage share of tableware closed forms: bottles, pots and pitchers [Fig. 8], was relatively low. All of them constituted less than 2.2% of the finds (7.57% of the table vessels). Among this group, red-slipped bottles with sloping shoulders, grooved rims, and rounded bottoms were predominant [Fig. 2: RC1]. Some of them bear decoration of a similar style as the hemispherical red-slip bowls, with black stripes over the rims, grooves on the shoulders or bands painted in yellow and black [Fig. 8: CSC.198, 199].

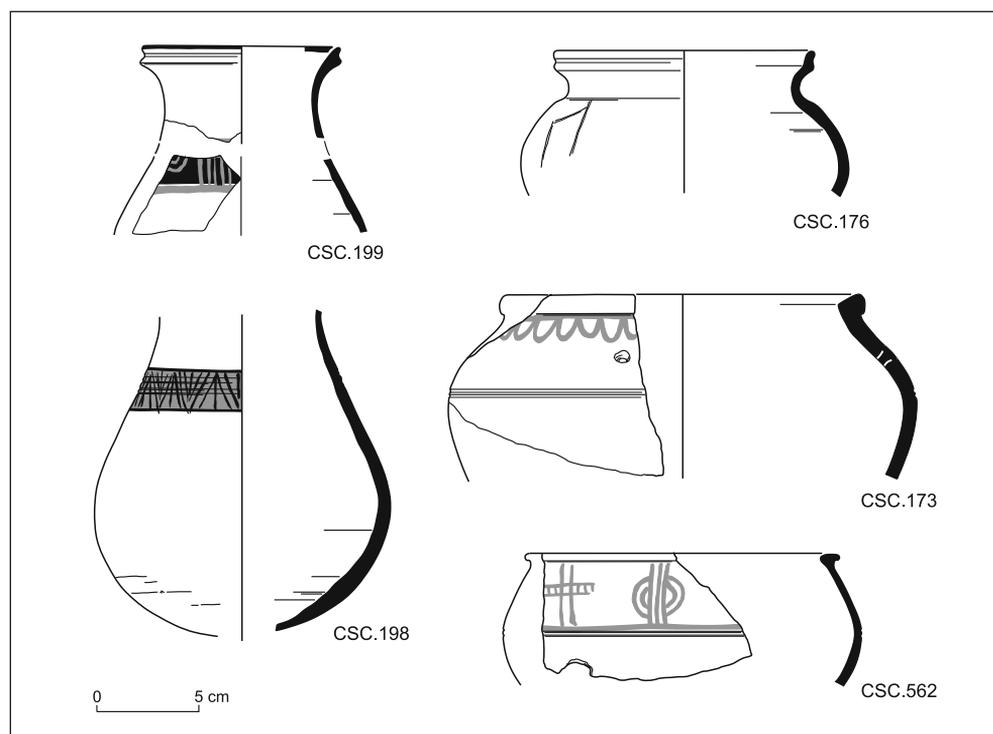


Fig. 8. Red ware closed forms: bottles (CSC.198, 199) and pots (CSC.176, 173, 562)

Similar vessels were also found in the earliest phases of the Dongolan ceramic potteries (Pluskota 1991: Fig. 47), and in the earliest phases of occupation on the Citadel or Kom A (Danys-Lasek 2012: 323, Fig. 6).

The group of closed forms also included small pots with everted or ledge rims and 'S-shaped' profiles. They were often decorated with a yellow painted stripe directly under the rim, and with attached festoons [Fig. 8: CSC.176, 173, 562].

## COOKING VESSELS

The group of pottery of utilitarian purpose associated with food preparation and processing consisted of three general types, with sherds distributed quite evenly between them: pots (8.9% of the total assemblage), bowls (11.4%) and *dokat* (sing. *doka*, 8.1%). They were all handmade using similar techniques. They also shared other traits such as the fabric, which was Nile silt with chaff temper in varying proportions, and surface treatment such as burnishing and/or texturing with mat impressions. Depending on the firing, the color of the surface, if not coated with soot or burned with use, was mostly red, ranging from dark-plum or brown-red (pots and *dokat*) to a lighter more orange shade (mostly found on bowls). Black vessels fired in a reduced atmosphere were very rare.

Cooking pots from the Selib 3 midden, globular with a rounded base and everted rim, represent one of the most common forms of Nubian pottery [Fig. 9: CSC.340, 349, 303, 330, 811]. Vessels of this kind are encountered in almost every settlement throughout the Christian era. But while they become quite standardized in later periods (from the Classic Christian onwards), the vessels from the analyzed assemblage still represent some range of variants, differentiated by the shape of rim and neck, surface finishing as well as

decoration, which is completely missing in the later forms.

Different techniques were applied usually in the surface treatment of the vessel body, which can be divided into three zones. The upper part, a few centimeters along the orifice outside and often inside as well, was red-slipped and burnished. Below the shoulders the main body was usually left rough, sometimes textured with mat, basket or fabric impressions [Fig. 9: CSC.349, 303]. This last feature is sometimes treated as decoration, but it resulted from the forming process and was primarily functional, giving additional friction and making the pot easier to grip. The only intentional decoration was usually in the form of an incised geometrical pattern on the shoulders where the burnished zone ends [Fig. 9: CSC.340, 330]. The bottom part was additionally roughed by impressing sticks or fingers, nicking, applying a clay solution and roughing the new surface [Fig. 9: CSC.811].

Pots differed in size and capacity: the smallest example had a rim diameter of 10 cm, while the biggest did not exceed 25 cm. However, two rim diameter sizes were the most common, namely 15–17 cm and 22–24 cm with an estimated capacity of 4.5–6 l and 7.5–10 l, respectively.

Bowl fragments were the most numerous in the cooking vessels category. Rim

diameters ranged between 16 and 40 cm (the most frequent being 21–25 cm). The interior of the vessels was carefully burnished as a rule. The same treatment was often repeated on the exterior, but only in the case of smaller vessels. Otherwise, the outer surface was rather roughed, usually with visible mat impressions. Some bowls had small lug handles attached to the rim, often with a finger-size dimple in the middle. Ornaments were extremely rare. One unique bowl, distinguished by its restricted form and black burnish, had simple decoration in the form of repeated

groups of four vertical incisions [Fig. 9: CSC.810]. Painted decoration, mostly in the form of white bands, occurred seldom. Two other bowls, with wide spouts of 5–6 cm in diameter, attached below the rim, were also identified.

The *doka* is a distinctive Nubian vessel for bread baking generally associated with pottery from the Christian and later periods. The *dokat* from the Selib assemblage [Fig. 10] resembled the bowls in many aspects and wall thickness was sometimes the only distinguishing criterion between the two

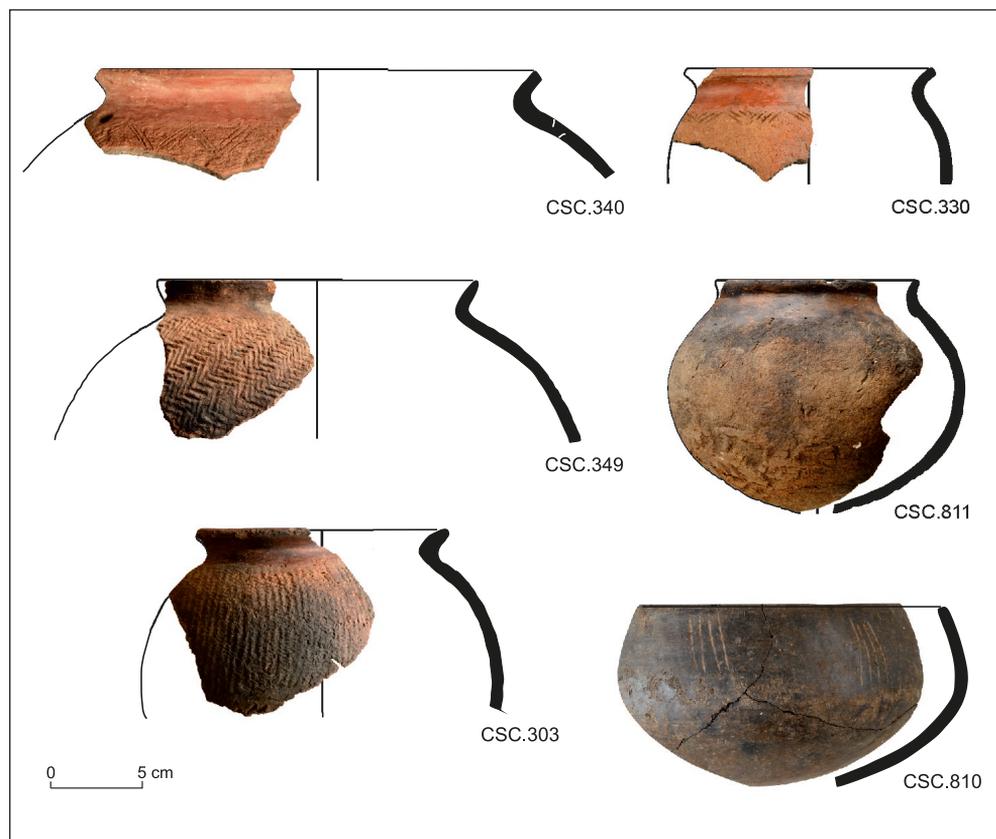


Fig. 9. Cooking vessels: pots (inv. nos CSC.340, 349, 303, 330, 811) and bowl (inv. no. CSC.810)

types. The *doka* rim was usually thickened and the top often incised with diagonal or crosshatched lines. The interior was precisely burnished, while the exterior was treated in ways similar to the cooking pots, that is, rough or mat-impressed surface; the almost-flat base was always roughened much like the pots [Fig. 10 top]. Recent evidence from Meroe (Grzymski 2003: 61) and the Fourth Cataract region (Thomas 2008: 66–67 and Fig. 3) has suggested that the *doka* may have actually been introduced into the middle Nile at an earlier date, possibly in the late Meroitic period (2nd–3rd century AD).

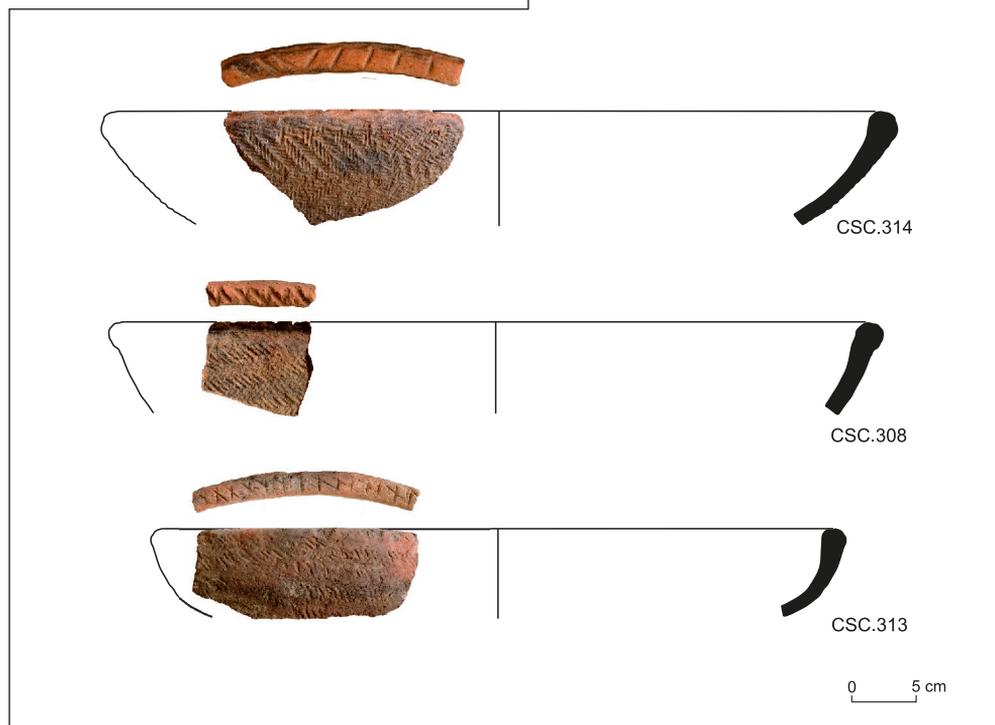


Fig. 10. *Dokat*: top, complete vessel with roughened bottom; bottom, fragments with incised rims

## STORAGE

A clear division between vessels used for cooking and for storage purposes is not always obvious as objects could have had multiple functions. Since the analysis of the assemblage from Selib 3 was based not on complete vessels but on sherds, usage identification was sometimes even more ambiguous. Therefore, for the sake of convenience, large vessels well suited to the purpose of keeping liquids or dry food products due to their size were placed in the storage category. They could be both hand-

and wheel-made and were characterized by thick walls and coarse fabric.

Wheel-made storage vessels included red-slipped and unslipped jars, both open and closed form, bottles and large bowls. The handmade group (2.5% of the total assemblage) consisted of bottles of the 'beer-jar' type, and short-necked, wide-mouthed jars [Fig. 11]. The first type was characterized by a tall narrow neck, with flaring rim, smoothed and accurately burnished from the rim to the shoulders,



Fig. 11. Necks of hand-made jars and bottles

and a globular body that often had an impressed mat pattern on the surface. Most of the fragments in the assemblage represented the upper part of the vessels, the tendency being for the vessels to break along the joint between neck and the rest of the body. Therefore, a full characteristic of the type cannot be established from this assemblage. There is no doubt, however, that they represent a type morphologically similar to the so-called beer-jars best

known from the post-Meroitic tumulus graves (see Phillips and El-Tayeb 2003: Pls 3, 5–6, 10; El-Tayeb 2012: Figs 32, 37).

Among the wide-mouthed jars, one particular neck fragment bears special significance, having an inscription in Greek letters, ΣΕΛΛΗΝΗ, incised on it [see *Fig. 11*: CSC.266]. It was interpreted as a record of the date based on a lunar calendar (see Żurawski 2016: 367, *Fig. 16*).

## TRANSPORTATION

Fragments of vessels used for transporting goods, mainly amphorae, made up a sizeable group (almost 15% of the total assemblage) and comprised both local and imported wares, the latter being significantly more common. Local products were represented by amphorae that can be associated with Dongolan workshops, well known from the first production levels of kiln R1 (Pluskota 2003: 363) and from other areas of the city (Danys 2015: 118–121). The fragmentary state of preservation does not allow for a specification of the type, but the form of the necks and fragments with light yellow painted monograms fall in Krzysztof Pluskota's earliest type A (2003: *Fig. 9*). Vessels of this type are said to imitate Upper Egyptian ware, produced mostly in the vicinity of Aswan and imported to Nubia in great numbers (Bagińska 2016: 35–41).

These pinkish south Egyptian products were predominant among the imported amphorae. Many were preserved as large sherds. Some examples [*Fig. 13*] are paralleled by type K715 from Elephantine, which was in use from the 6th to the end

of the 7th century (Gempeler 1992: 191, *Fig. 122,1–5*). Examples of Meroitic bag-shaped LRA 5/6 (see Dixneuf 2011: 142–145), characteristic for their yellow slip, combed decoration on the upper part and ribbing below, were present among the imported amphorae, although only as body fragments. In Nubia they were known from Nobadia, Qasr Ibrim (Adams 1996: Pl. 18c) and Meinarti (Adams 2001: Pl. 30e: 1, 2), but a significant representation of this type was identified in Dongola as well (Godlewski 2002: 209, *Fig. 5*; Danys 2015: 123–124).

Another small group of imported fragments represented the LRA 7 type [*Fig. 12*]. These products of Middle Egyptian workshops dominated the late Roman markets along the Egyptian Nile Valley and were recorded on Nubian sites as well (see Adams 1986: 567–568, for the more recent finds, see Danys 2015: 122–123). A few sherds of LRA 1 type produced in the Eastern Mediterranean, mainly Cilicia and Cyprus (see Empereur and Picon 1989: 236–239) were also identified; such vessels have been attested in Nubia mostly at sites associated with

post-Meroitic culture in the north, e.g., Ballaṅa and Qustul, as well as Faras (Adams 1986: 580). In Makuria, apart from the capital city of Dongola (Danys 2015: 124), LRA 1 fragments were recorded in the fortresses of Bakhit and Deiga (Żurawski 2003: 372)



Fig. 12. *Fragments of Late Roman Amphorae 7*

Fig. 13. *Imported amphorae from the Aswan area*



## QAWADIS

The *qadus* (pl. *qawadis*) is a vessel used for drawing water by means of a water wheel (*saqia*), and the type was singled out as a separate type category because of its distinctive function and a high

representation in the assemblage (more than 14%). The earliest water-wheel pots were attested in Lower Nubia, around the 3rd–4th century AD, e.g., in Arminna West (Trigger 1967: 32–33) and Qasr Ibrim

(Edwards 2004: 165). This technological achievement, which increased the farmland that could be cultivated and intensified agriculture along the Nile, was soon transferred to the regions upstream. Singular finds of *qadus* sherds were recently

identified in the Fourth Cataract region in a deposit dated to the 4th century AD (Thomas 2008: 66); however, it is not until the Christian period that the *saqia* became an inherent element of the Nile Valley landscape. Abundant finds of *qadus* sherds

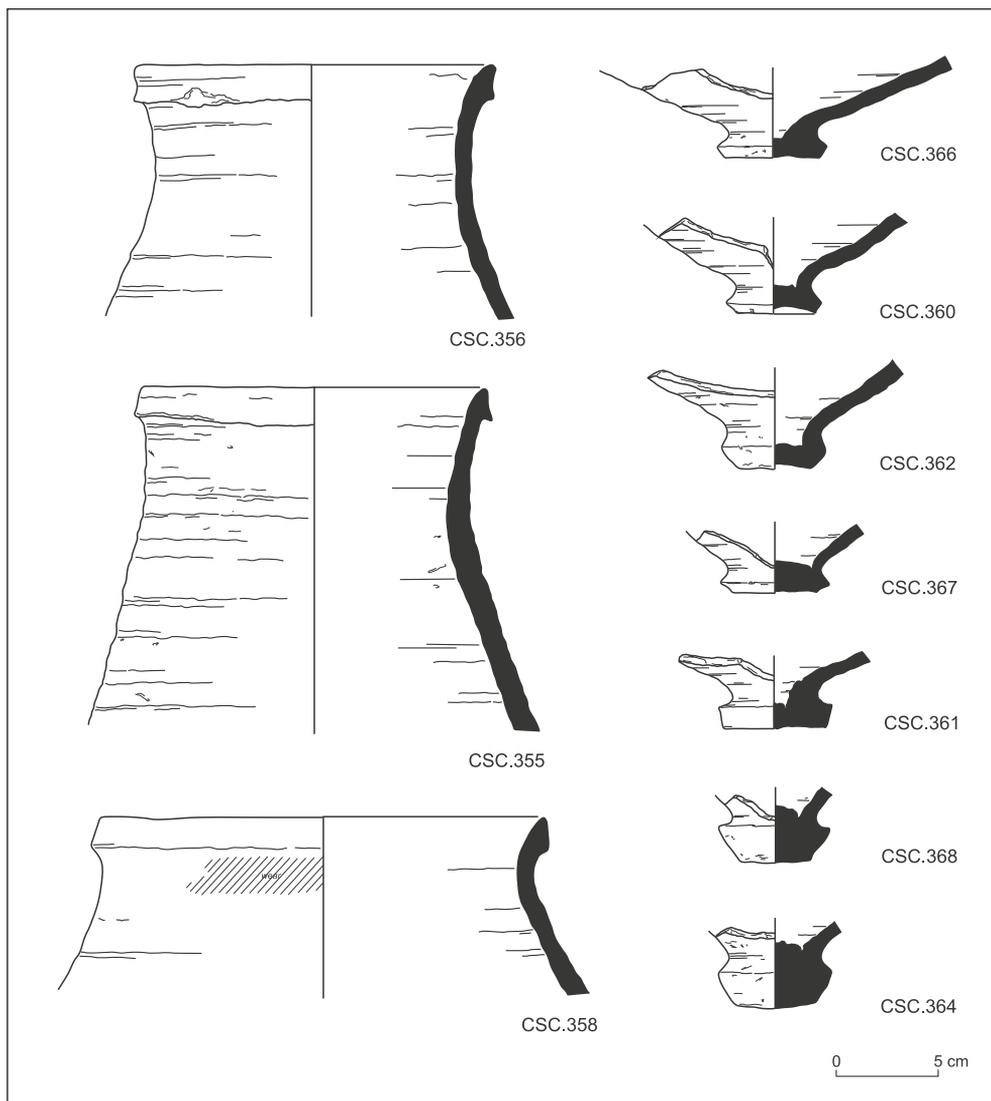


Fig. 14. *Qawadis*: examples of rims and knobs

in Selib indicate intensive use of the water wheel in the period associated with the use of this pottery. Traces of wear at places where the rope was attached were visible on many sherds [Fig. 14: CSC.358].

The suggestion put forward by William Adams (1986: 105) to use the *qadus* knob for determining its chronology is contradicted by the material from

Selib 3, where a variety of profile types comes from a limited time phase. The fragmented material from the deposit permitted only a generic characteristic of the pots: the walls were significantly thin, with distinct ribbing on the exterior. Rim diameters ranged from 15 cm to 23 cm [Fig. 14: CSC.356, 355, 358], while knob diameters were from 4 cm to 5.5 cm.

## MISCELLANEOUS

A group of vessels that did not belong to any of the main functional types described above included small bottles, flasks, oil lamps and some unidentified objects. Well represented were small, squat bottles with

flanged necks, made of pinkish, fine paste with slip that ranged from deep red to a light pink hue [Fig. 15: CSC.172, 527, 201, 524]. Their fabric suggests an Upper Egyptian/Aswan origin and analogous

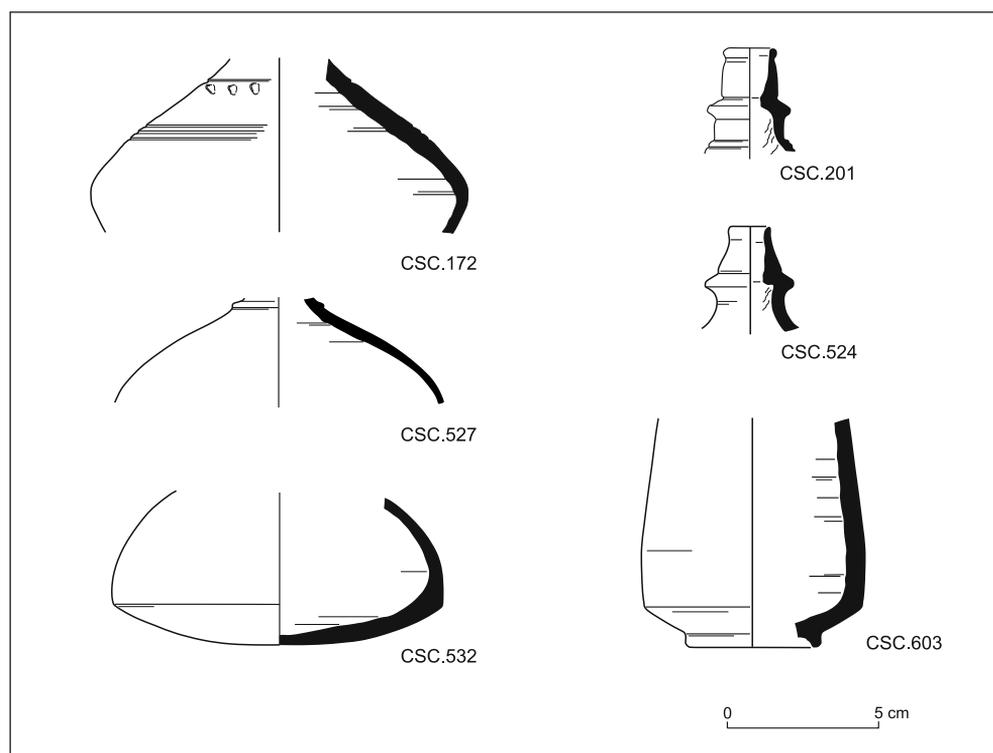


Fig. 15. Small bottles made of pink 'Aswan' clay

examples are known from 6th and 7th century Egypt (see Gempeler 1992: 236, Fig. 77,16–19). Recently they were found at the nearby site of Selib 1, in contexts

dated to the 6th/7th century AD (Cedro 2016: Fig. 25E).

Unique in the assemblage was a small chalice-like artifact, made of greyish marl

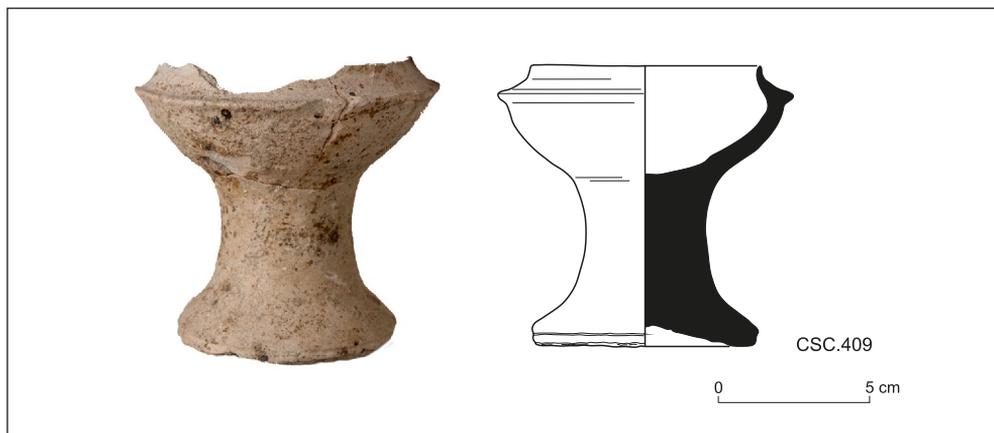


Fig. 16. Presumed censer



Fig. 17. Fragments of oil lamps

clay, almost complete with a small piece of the rim missing (new break) [Fig. 16]. The lack of slip and high clay porosity exclude its usage for liquids and it was interpreted as an incense burner, though no traces of burn or soot were visible.

The ceramic assemblage from Selib 3 contained also several fragments of oil lamps, including two almost complete examples, made of pinkish Aswan clay [Fig. 17]. Among the finds were two distinctive forms: a “candle holder” type

and the so-called Aladdin type, both associated with the pottery repertoire of the late post-Meroitic and Transitional/early Christian periods. The “Aladdin” type was conventionally attributed to Lower Nubia (Adams 1986: 104), but numerous discoveries of such oil lamps made recently on Makurian sites, e.g., Selib 1 (Cedro 2016: Fig. 20), Abkur, el-Zuma (El-Tayeb, Skowrońska, and Czyżewska 2016: Fig. 28) contradict this assumption.

## CONCLUSION

The deposit of ceramics from the trial pits excavated at Selib 3 contained a high proportion of tablewares and cooking vessels suggesting that it represents a habitable domestic context. A settlement connected with this pottery has yet to be found, but it should be near the refuse dump, the size of which suggests that it did not result from a single episode of rubbish removal. The homogenous nature of the fill excludes any longer interruptions, hence the accumulation of the rubbish must have been a continuous process, lasting a few decades conceivably.

Some features of the pottery from the Selib 3 midden can be attributed to as early as the late post-Meroitic period (late 5th to mid 6th century AD). This chronological premise should be treated with due caution as elements of material culture are well known to exceed the boundaries of set

historical dates. Most of the imported ‘fine ware’ and amphorae place this assemblage in the 6th or the beginning of the 7th century AD. This corresponds well with the dating of the local pottery, which is based on parallels with the products of Dongolan workshops dated from the mid 6th to the 7th century AD.

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