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KHirbat As Sār (Sārah), a Site between the Ammonite and Mamluk History of Jordan

Introduction

In 2018 and 2019, the team from the Polish Centre of the Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, conducted two seasons of fieldwork at KHirbat As Sār (Sārah), in the western outskirts of ‘Ammān. The aim of the research was to understand the nature and chronology of that spectacular site topped with a monumental architectural complex consisting of an “Ammonite tower” reused in the Roman period as a temple with an addition of an arcaded courtyard. Due to its situation on the edge of the plateau 972 masl (see photograph taken in 1983, Villeneuve 2020: fig. 7), at a point commanding the access to Rabbat Ammon/Philadelphia from both the west and southwest, the site must have been of considerable strategic importance in antiquity. However, its ancient name remains obscure, despite tentative identifications with settlements known from written sources such

as biblical Azor (Iazer), Jazer of the 2nd century BC, or “Birta of the Ammanitis” of the 3rd century BC (Młynarczyk and Burdajewicz 2018: 359–360).

In 2018, a reconnaissance survey was conducted within the area fenced by the Department of Antiquities (DoA permit no. 2018/4, see Młynarczyk and Burdajewicz 2018) during which a preliminary plan of the site was prepared (FIG. 1) based on the electric resistivity method (Ryndziewicz 2018) combined with the mapping of all architectural remains visible on the surface. This first stage of the project also included a detailed review of the earlier mentions and site descriptions starting from the second half of the 19th century (Młynarczyk and Burdajewicz 2018: 342–344), to which one should add the most recent paper by F. Villeneuve (2020). On the basis of observations by previous visitors to the site, supported by the evidence of potsherds collected on the surface, the

occupational span of KHirbat As Sār (Sārah) appeared to have covered the period from the late Iron (Ammonite) Age to the Middle Islamic and probably Ottoman periods (Młynarczyk and Burdajewicz 2018: 358–359, 361–366).

In order to verify these preliminary estimations, a short excavation season was undertaken in 2019 (DoA permit no. 2019/5). Its focus was the most prominent feature of the site, composed of a square *qasr* which was constructed of huge blocks of chert presumably in the Iron Age, with equally monumental Roman-period additions on its eastern side. The latter consisted of a vestibule constructed of mixed chert and limestone material and of a courtyard flanked by rows of arches on the northern and southern sides, built entirely of limestone. This courtyard seemed to have been closed on the north, south, and east by a boundary wall so as to form side aisles behind the arcades. During the 2019 season, a general ground plan of the tower, vestibule, and arcaded courtyard was made, significantly correcting the sketch plan published by H. C. Butler more than a hundred years ago (Butler 1919: 33, fig. 21), as well as the plan executed during the French survey (Villeneuve 2020: 316, fig. 9). Precise measurements taken within the sanctuary compound revealed an interesting feature of the courtyard layout (FIG. 2): not only are the rows of arcades not exactly parallel to each other, but also the respective width of the side aisles differs: while the southern aisle is 6.06m wide, the northern one is only 4.72m wide. The reason for this difference remains to be investigated in the near future. The foremost task for the 2019 season, however, was to gain first insight into the stratigraphy of the site. To this aim, three test trenches were opened in the eastern part of the courtyard (FIG. 2).

Trench Sq1

Trench Sq1, situated roughly on the courtyard's long axis, was opened to confirm the line of what would be the eastern border of the temple compound, as suggested during the surface survey. It was also expected to locate the main entrance into the sanctuary on the assumption that the compound was of an axial design. A section of a massive N-S wall uncovered in the trench was, however, far from being homogeneous in terms of its construction. It was constructed of limestone blocks in various sizes, most of them clearly reused from older buildings. Moreover, it contains two or three vertical sections of different chronology (FIG. 3): a diversity that obviously reflects different chronological phases of the habitation as confirmed by a series of superimposed floors which abut this wall on the east.

This eastern part of the trench is bisected by an E-W wall preserved to the same height as the N-S wall but much narrower than the former. Despite its poor construction, the E-W wall turned out to be founded at the same depth as wall N-S. The topmost "walking surface" on the northern side of the E-W wall (B002) was merely a thin level of trampled earth with a distinct trace of a hearth accompanied by burnt animal bones. That space, possibly an unroofed one, yielded a quantity of pottery (FIGS. 4–5) representing the HMGP (Hand-Made Geometric Painted), hand-made coarse and wheel-made glazed wares (monochrome glazed and with slip-painted decoration), all of the Ayyubid-Mamluk (perhaps into Ottoman) period (see Avissar and Stern 2005; Walker 2022) as well as a fragment of a mould-made lamp (FIG. 6: 001) dated to the second half of the 13th century and the 14th century (Hadad 2002: 112–114, type 45, no. 482; Avissar and Stern 2005: 128).

Remains of the fireplace visible as a deep pit filled with black soil in B002 continued in the same spot down to the next earthen floor (B004); in addition to abundant painted, glazed, and coarse pottery wares (FIG. 7), the layer connected with this floor yielded fragments of modest jewellery such as a small pendant and ring of bronze, and three glass bracelets (on this category of objects, see Spaer 1992). Three fragmentary oil lamps found in this context (see FIG. 6) seem to be heterogeneous in terms of their chronology: while wheel-made “open pinched” green-glazed lamp 004.03 is dated to the second half of the 13th and the 14th century (Hadad 2002: 117–118, type 50, no. 497), the other two would fall as early as the 9th–11th centuries; specifically, wheel-made coarse ware lamp 004.02 which approaches Hadad type 38 (Hadad 2002: no. 468), and mould-made lamp fragment 004.01 which represents the so-called Abbasid Standard type (Hadad 2002: 95–106, type 37). Underlying this earthen floor, was a debris of large stones and blocks (B005), most probably fallen from the final phase of the N-S wall, upon a light-brown-coloured surface of clayey earth probably with crushed limestone (FIG. 8). The ceramic contents of this layer did not generally differ from that of the previous one.

On the southern side of the E-W wall, an earthen floor (B006) was found, identified as a kitchen yard by pieces of charcoal, of a clay oven or another cooking device, and many sherds of very thick-walled cooking pots, accompanied by a couple of fragments of glass bracelets. Right below this “kitchen yard” were two sequential floors (B010 and B011–012), both virtually of the same texture: light-brown-coloured clayey earth with limestone bits; the lower one was of considerable thickness, perhaps

suggestive of a lengthy use. On both levels, a large burnt spot (of a fireplace?) was visible, as well as some blocks collapsed from the nearby walls. The pottery retrieved from upon and below the floors in question (HMGP, hand-made coarse cooking wares, and glazed wares) cannot be differentiated from each other.

The underlying layer (B014) was identified as another floor made of yellowish clayey soil mixed with crushed limestone; it corresponds to the top of the foundation offset (*ca.* 941.5 masl) visible under the N-S wall (see FIG. 3). This context yielded a significant amount of thin-walled cooking pottery of the Roman period (FIG. 9), but also large fragments of Ayyubid-Mamluk painted pottery (HMGP) and pieces of a glass bracelet found within a large patch of burnt soil. Most probably, this should be interpreted as a bottom part of a Mamluk cooking installation (hearth) dug into a Roman-period floor. The lowest course of wall E-W reaches this very depth; the Mamluk date of this wall leaves no doubt, as the cleaning operations of its construction yielded Mamluk potsherds (B008–B009). Despite its poor appearance, the E-W wall founded on a Roman level served several floors between the 12th and the 15th century (Ayyubid–Mamluk period) at least.

The Roman floor in question (B014) lies upon a layer (B015) of bits of stone which have been interpreted as a construction layer for the N-S wall or, more precisely, for the original part of it. The presumed construction layer covers a rather loose stone fill consisting primarily of large unworked stones with “pockets” of yellow-brown earth between them (FIG. 10). The moderate number of potsherds collected from this fill (B016–018, see FIG. 9) dates to the Early Roman period (1st and 2nd centuries AD), with some Hellenistic-period

ceramic inclusions. In all probability, that was the top of a make-up of a kind of platform connected with the construction of the Roman-period sanctuary compound.

At this depth (941.256 masl), the heterogeneity of the N-S wall can properly be assessed (see FIG. 3). What appears to be an original Roman wall section looks like a compacted pier, the lowermost part of which is a single ashlar block with drafted margins, doubtless reused from some earlier (probably Hellenistic) building. The southern part of the wall has a different construction technique and the foundation level is deeper by ca. 0.17m, but the chronological relation between the two sections of the wall cannot be specified at this stage of the research. The extension of the Roman wall to the north, beyond its joint with the E-W wall (doubtless of the Ayyubid–Mamluk date), certainly belongs to the Middle Islamic period, presumably to its early part. This northern extension, constructed with the use of Roman *spolia*, displays two distinct chronological phases, of which the second one is recognizable by blocking of the door (FIG. 11). The stone debris found on the above-mentioned floor B005 must have come from the wall in question. Exposing the foundation of this Islamic-period extension demonstrated that it was resting upon a floor of limestone aggregate (B020), apparently going back to the Roman (Late Roman?) period to judge by the pottery fragments found under it and dated to the 2nd (perhaps into the 3rd) century AD (see FIG. 9: 020–020BIS).

At this point, one must admit that the character of the N-S wall, which appears to have included three different sections, cannot be satisfactorily explained until further investigation is done. Contrary to what was expected,

that was not a homogeneous precinct wall of the Roman-period sanctuary. Instead, the original pier-like part of the wall, associated with the lowest layers containing Roman (and some Hellenistic) pottery, would perhaps pertain to a gate leading into the sanctuary courtyard. A moulded limestone block, 1.65 cm long, incorporated into the upper part of the wall in question, may have originally been either a door jamb or a lintel of a monumental doorway, perhaps to be associated with an ornate wall bracket found nearby on the surface (Młynarczyk and Burdajewicz 2018: fig. 4:AE 5); these elements may speak for the presence of an entrance leading into the Roman compound from the east. The Roman construction was then reused and extended northwards (perhaps also southwards), and alongside the E-W wall built against its eastern face, it became a part of a dwelling with at least three phases of occupation during the Ayyubid–Mamluk period, the chronological sequence of which remains to be studied.

Trench Sq2

Trench Sq2 was opened on the northern side of the easternmost arch preserved in the southern row of the arcade of the courtyard, the architectural style of which leaves no doubt as to their Roman-period origin (see FIG. 2). The trench was aimed at finding the original level of the courtyard, which was eventually located 4m below the top of the arch; the pillars of the arch are resting on a stylobate 0.62m high, constructed of carefully worked ashlar (FIG. 12). If there was any pavement, it had been robbed out; some irregular slabs visible under the stylobate blocks can be considered as the foundation. Unfortunately, due to the restricted size of the trench and difficult working conditions,

the sample of datable ceramic material is accordingly limited, which may impinge on the conclusions. It seems that the foundation of the stylobate rests on a fill of irregular stones like that present at the bottom of Trench Sq1. This fill yielded a couple of potsherds of a Hellenistic or even Persian-period date (B060) (FIG. 13: 060: 01–03). Above the top of the fill is a layer (floor or perhaps accumulation layer) probably corresponding to the original use of the arcade. This is an almost 0.55 m thick, yellowish-grey compacted layer of clayey earth mixed with gravel (B059), which yielded single fragments of Roman or Late Roman common-ware pottery (FIG. 13: 059.01–02). This layer was covered with a thinner one, similar in texture but more yellow in colour, level with the top of the stylobate; it should be identified as a floor corresponding to an Islamic-period re-use of the arch as attested by finds retrieved from above the floor's surface (B058). They include fragments of hand-made cooking pots, a few HMGP ware sherds and a single glazed one, as well as three wheel-made oil lamps (FIG. 14). The latter represent a type dated to the 9th–11th centuries (Hadad 2002: 106–108, type 40), which means that they would be of an Abbasid rather than of a later date. In that period, a N-S wall was built abutting the eastern pier of the arch to create a room (FIG. 15); on the opposite, western side, small, compacted stones visible in the archaeological section would be a kind of a makeshift partition wall. Another well-constructed wall closed the span of the arch on the south; it was provided with a door (or perhaps a window), the lintel block of which, with faintly visible engraving of a cross, had been spoliated from some Christian structure of an unspecified function (see FIG. 12). By adding the walls in question, the

space of the arch was transformed into a closed room, either part of a dwelling or a workshop.

This room must have been in use for a rather lengthy period, as suggested by the fact that it had a second phase of habitation in which the opening (door or window) was blocked, as well as by archaeological material found in a thick layer (B056) overlying the aforementioned floor. It was a layer of blocks and stones in dark-grey-coloured soil, which contained a range of Middle Islamic pottery wares (HMGP ware, hand-made coarse ware, and samples of wheel-made glazed wares) accompanied by pieces of charcoal and which was topped by floor B055, recognisable as a flat surface of yellowish clayey soil with some limestone bits and patches of burning. This second Middle Islamic floor, doubtless from the Ayyubid/Mamluk period and probably contemporary with the blocking of the door in the southern wall, bore clear evidence of domestic activity such as fragments of a clay oven and of a cauldron (crucible?), hand-made burnished vessels, HMGP ware, as well as monochrome glazed and slip-painted glazed ware ceramics. Debris of large blocks found above this floor in all probability comes from the western wall of the room. Finally, right below the level of the corbels of the arch pillars, a multiple burial (B051) containing bones of four adult individuals, probably Bedouins, was found. That was a trough grave *ca.* 0.50m wide inside, arranged against the southern wall and its blocked opening (FIG. 16), and bordered by a row of large blocks on the northern side; of the original covering slabs only one has been preserved. A kind of a walking level seemed to have been associated with the arrangement of that Bedouin resting place. The grave, probably of the late Ottoman period, has been badly

disturbed by tomb robbers, doubtless in modern times. This unexpected find confirms a piece of information about “sarcophagi under the arches” given by H. C. Butler (1919: 33), previously regarded as unreliable (Młynarczyk and Burdajewicz 2018: 349). This also means that at the beginning of the 20th century the graves (if there are more than the one described here) were still exposed and recognizable—no wonder, then, that they became subject to searching for valuables(?).

Trench Sq3

Trench Sq3 was opened at the eastern end of the northern row of the courtyard arcade; however, due to time limitations, it could be explored only to a depth of *ca.* 1.30m below the ground. The uppermost habitation level, attested by the find of an almost complete painted jug (amphora?) apparently *in situ* (FIG. 17), was located at *ca.* 0.20–0.30m right below the ground, corresponding to B002 in nearby Trench Sq1. Slightly deeper than that, a maze of walls has appeared (FIG. 18), confirming a dense occupation of the site during the Ayyubid/Mamluk period.

Concluding Remarks

After two seasons of fieldwork, it seems already possible to tentatively distinguish the main phases of the history of the KHirbat As Sār (Sārah) site as follows:

- Late Iron Age (7th–6th century BC?): settlement(?) connected with the square building, the so-called *qasr* that, in the opinion of F. Villeneuve, would belong to a fortified farm (Villeneuve 2020: 321); however, both the dating and the function of this structure call for further confirmation.
- Persian period: no objects identified so far, perhaps except for single pottery sherds that may tentatively be attributed to that period.
- Hellenistic period: presumably a fortress? (“Birta of the Ammanitis”?) from which some ashlar with characteristically drafted margins may have come; they can be found reused in the Roman and later structures; additionally, some pottery fragments can be identified as Hellenistic. In this period, the site became a part of the *chora* of the town, whose name was changed from Rabbat Ammon to Philadelphia around the mid-3rd century BC.
- Roman period: the site of an important sanctuary, with the *qasr* turned into a temple’s *cella*, an addition of a vestibule and a courtyard in front of the temple; in a later period, two rows of arcades were also introduced. The detailed chronology of the sanctuary’s development, however, remains to be investigated. The identity of the cult itself also remains obscure.
- Byzantine and early Islamic periods: single finds of pottery, a lintel decorated with an engraved cross found reused in the Middle Islamic-period wall.
- Middle Islamic period: several living levels. All three trenches opened in 2019 yielded evidence of dense habitation in the Middle Islamic (Ayyubid–Mamluk) period, when the earlier Roman structures were extensively reused.
- Late Ottoman period: Bedouin burials.

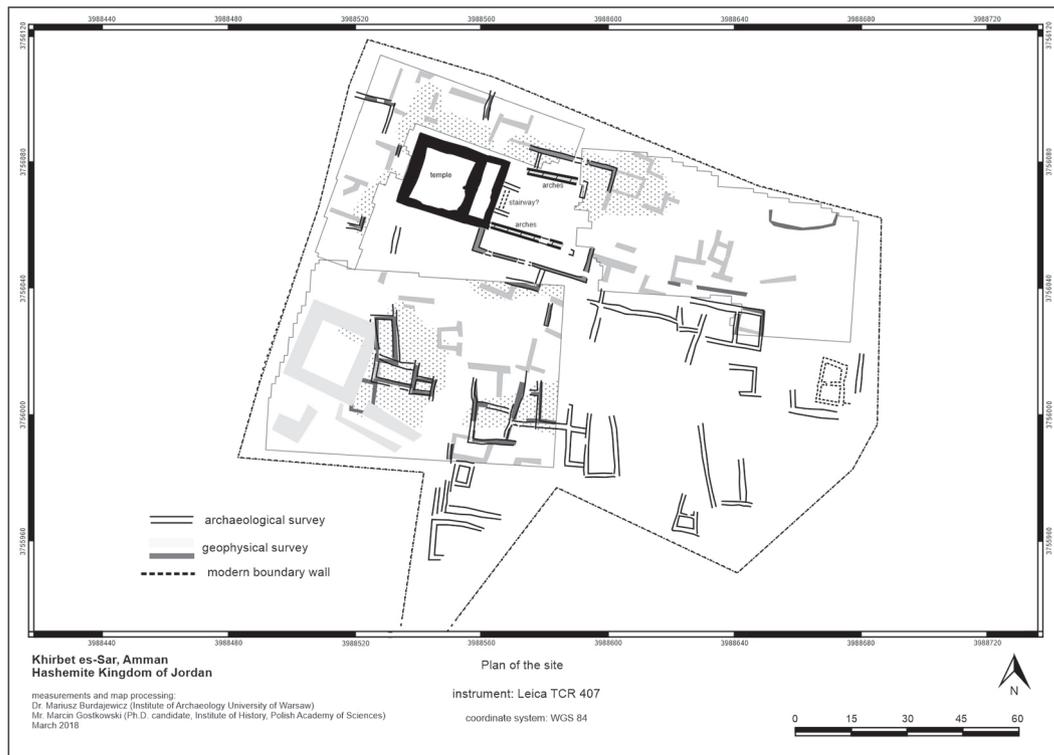
Considering the above, two principal research questions come forward. One of them is the necessity to fill the substantial gaps in the chronology of the site, such as its supposed origins during the time of the tribal kingdom of Ammon (see MacDonald 1999) and then the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Moreover, the striking absence of architectural remains confidently attributed to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods requires further investigation in the area.

Another important issue is that of the functional development of the site in a diachronic approach. Supposedly, the site of KHirbat As Sār (Sārah), at every major stage of its history, may have had a different nature and played a different role. It may have been a fortified farm(?) during the Ammonite Iron Age, a strategic military post in the Hellenistic period, an important cult place in the Roman period, and finally, after the Arab conquest, a settlement of unspecified character on the periphery of ‘Ammān; as regards the Ayyubid-Mamluk period, it seems to have had a rural or semi-rural character. Obtaining even a partial answer to these questions definitely requires intensification of archaeological research at that important site¹.

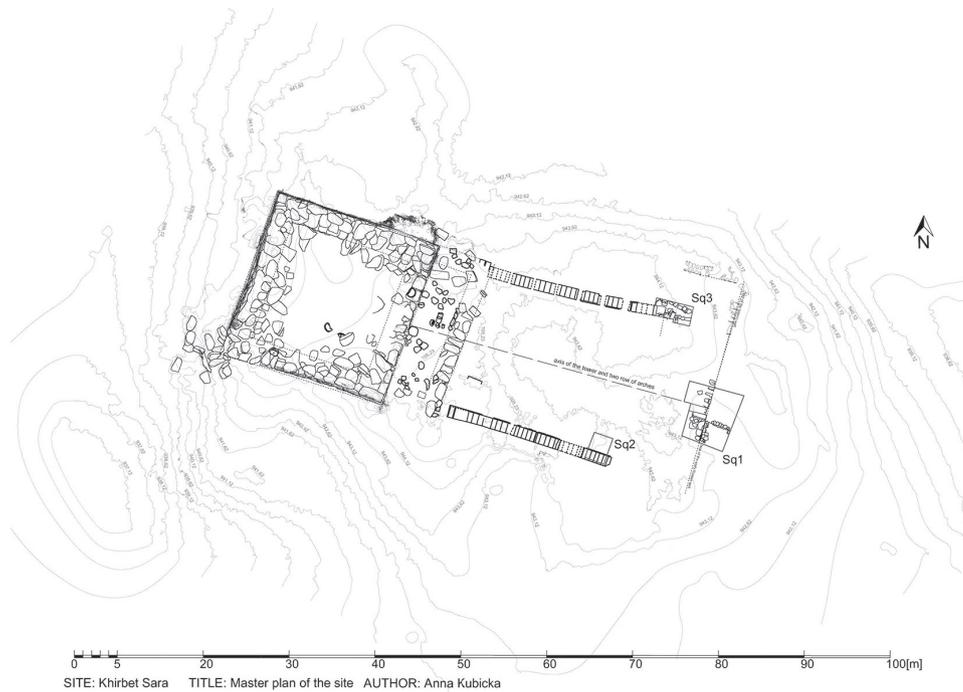
Acknowledgements

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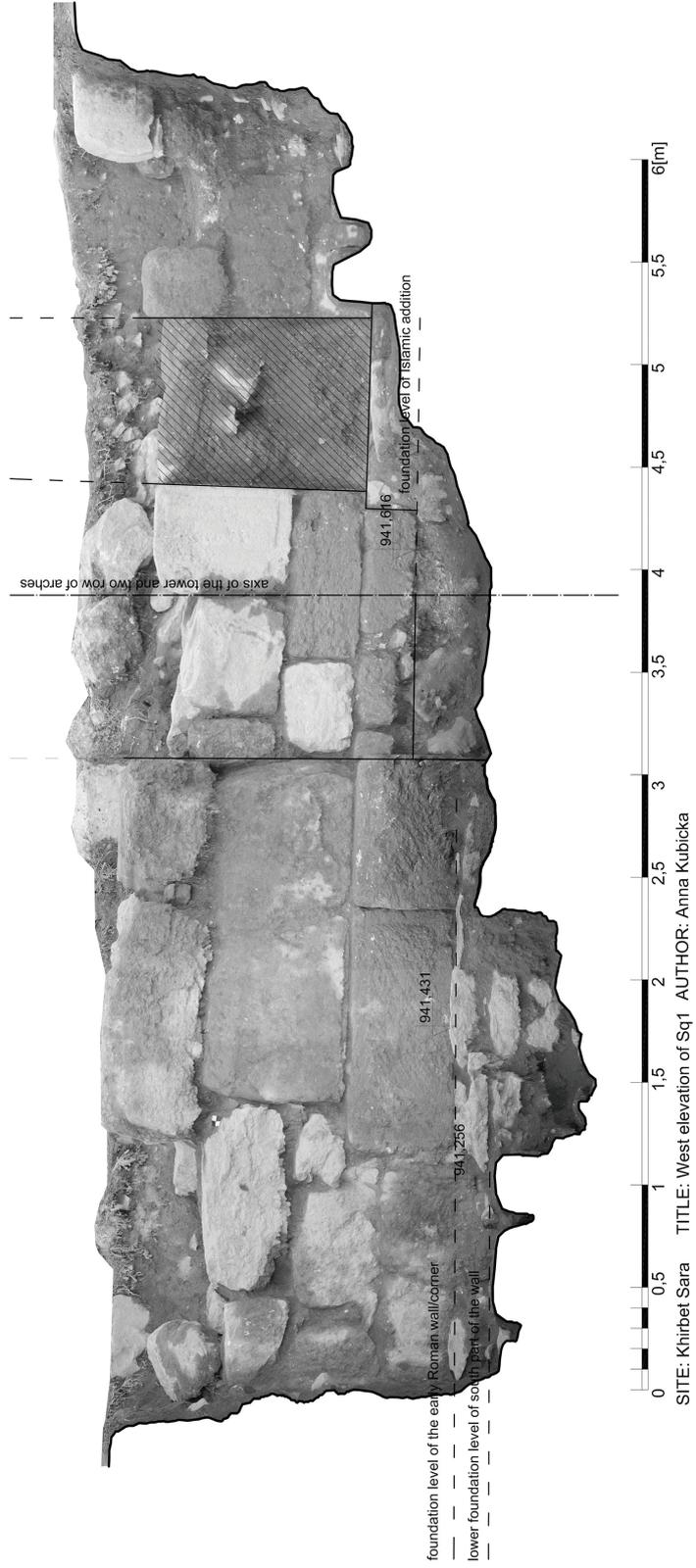
¹ The new session of archaeological research at KHirbat As Sār (Sārah) is being launched in 2023 within a framework of the National Science Centre (NCN) of Poland grant 2021/43/B/HS3/00813 entitled “In the shadow of Amman: city and its hinterland/periphery in Central Transjordan in the *longue durée* perspective, from the Iron Age through the Middle Islamic period.”



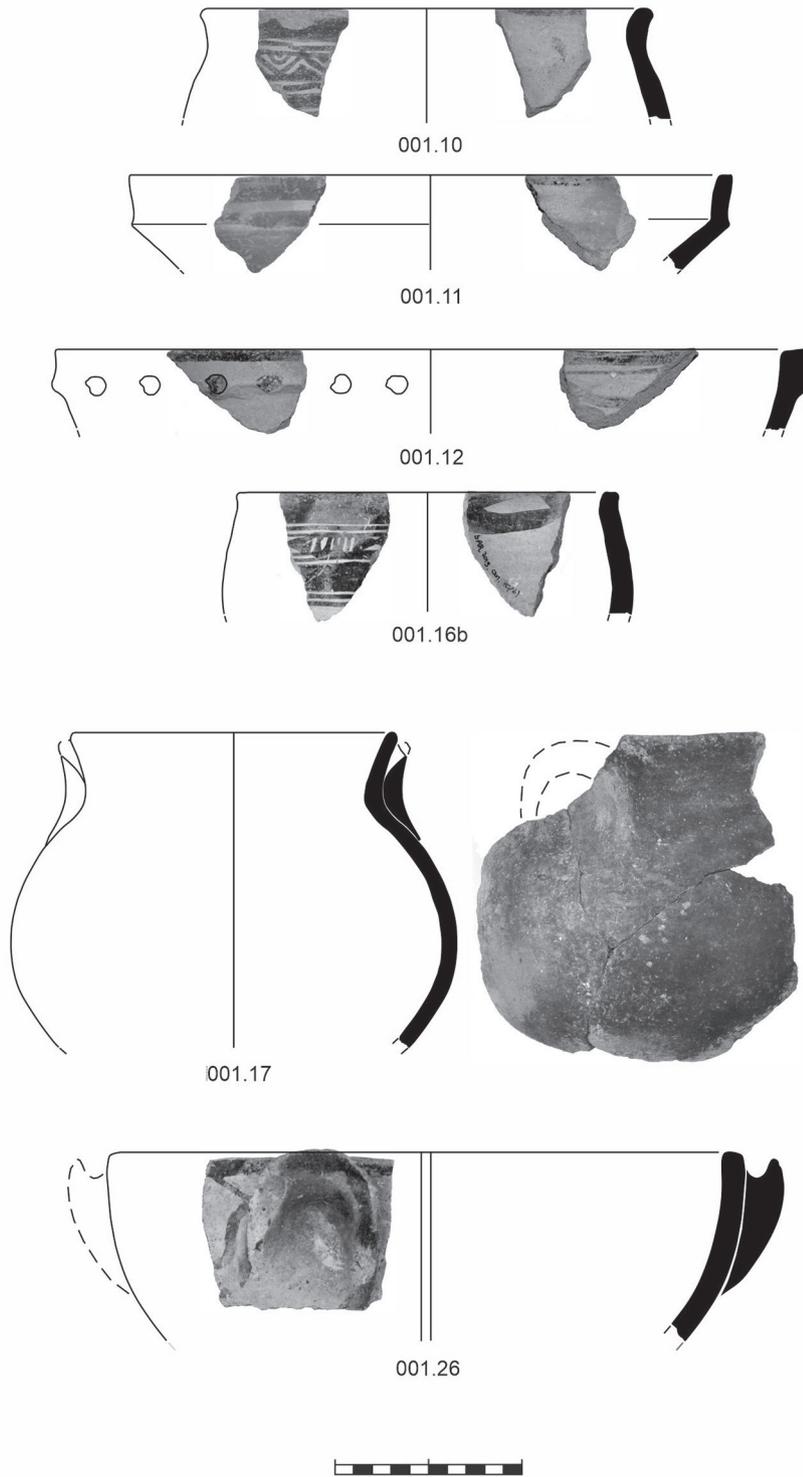
1. General plan of the site of KHirbat As Sār (Sārah): combined results of archaeological and electric resistivity surveys (after Młynarczyk and Burdajewicz 2018, fig. 2).



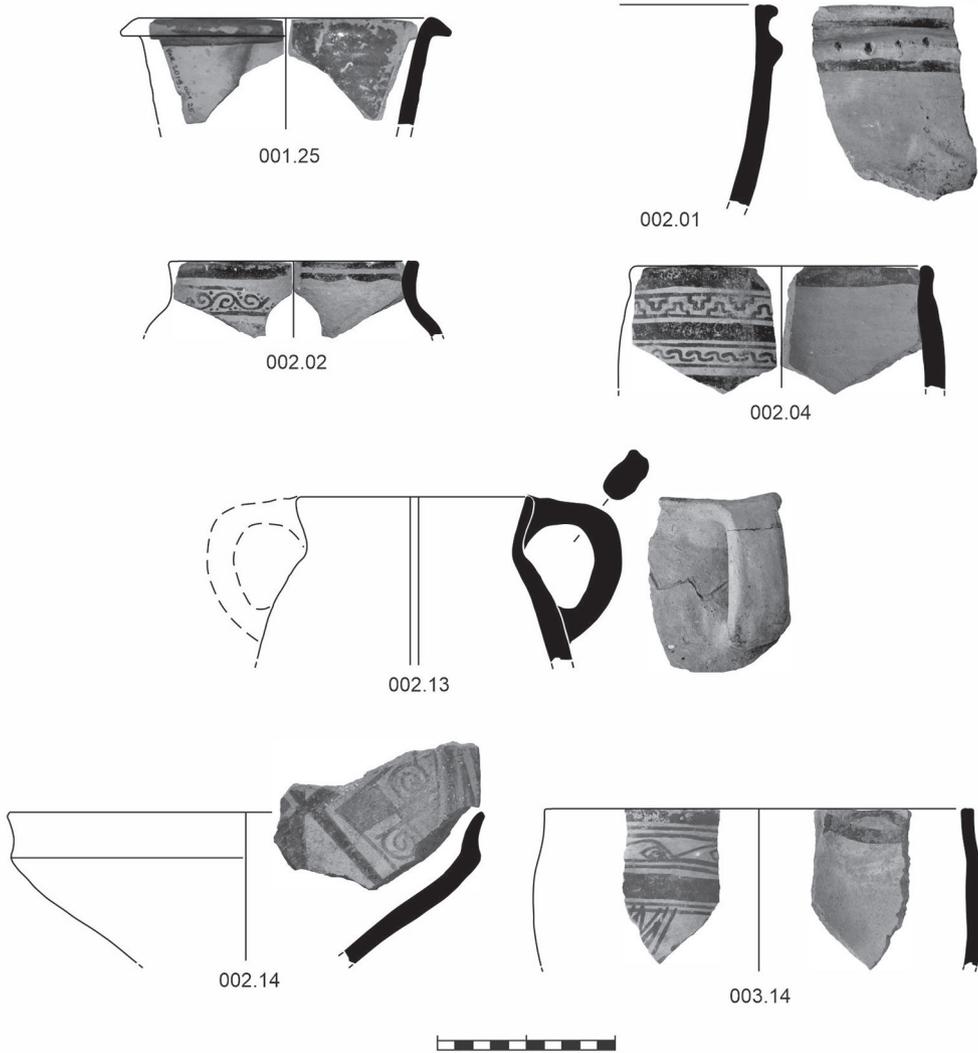
2. KHirbat As Sār (Sārah) 2019: the plan of the sanctuary compound with the location of the trenches (image by Anna Kubicka).



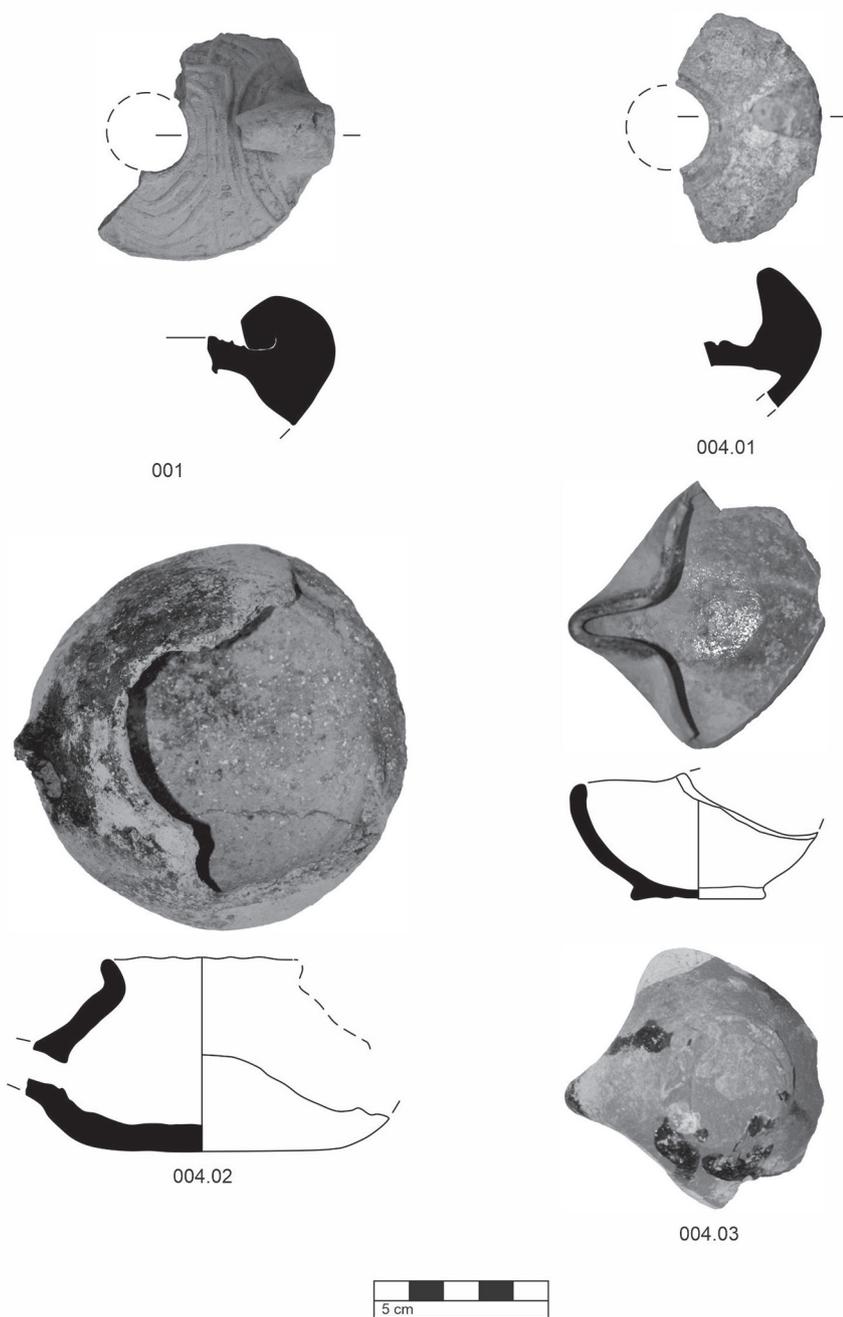
3. Trench Sq1: west elevation of the N-S wall (image by Anna Kubicka).



4. Select pottery of the Ayyubid-Mamluk period from the uppermost layer of Trench Sq1 (image by Mariusz Burdajewicz).

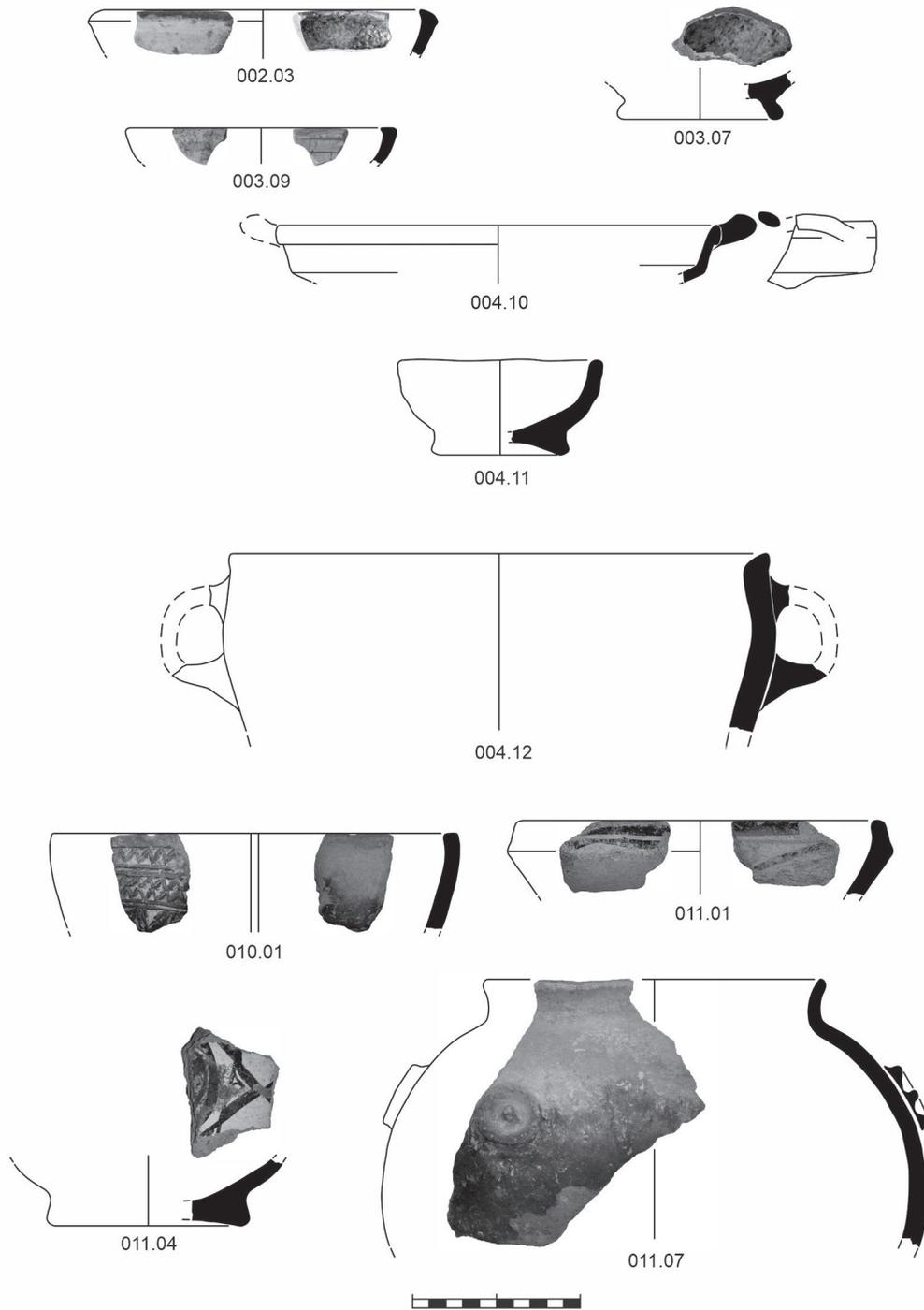


5. Select pottery of the Ayyubid-Mamluk period from the upper layers of Trench Sq1 (image by Mariusz Burdajewicz).



6. Fragmentary oil lamps from the upper layers of Trench Sq1 (image by Mariusz Burdajewicz).

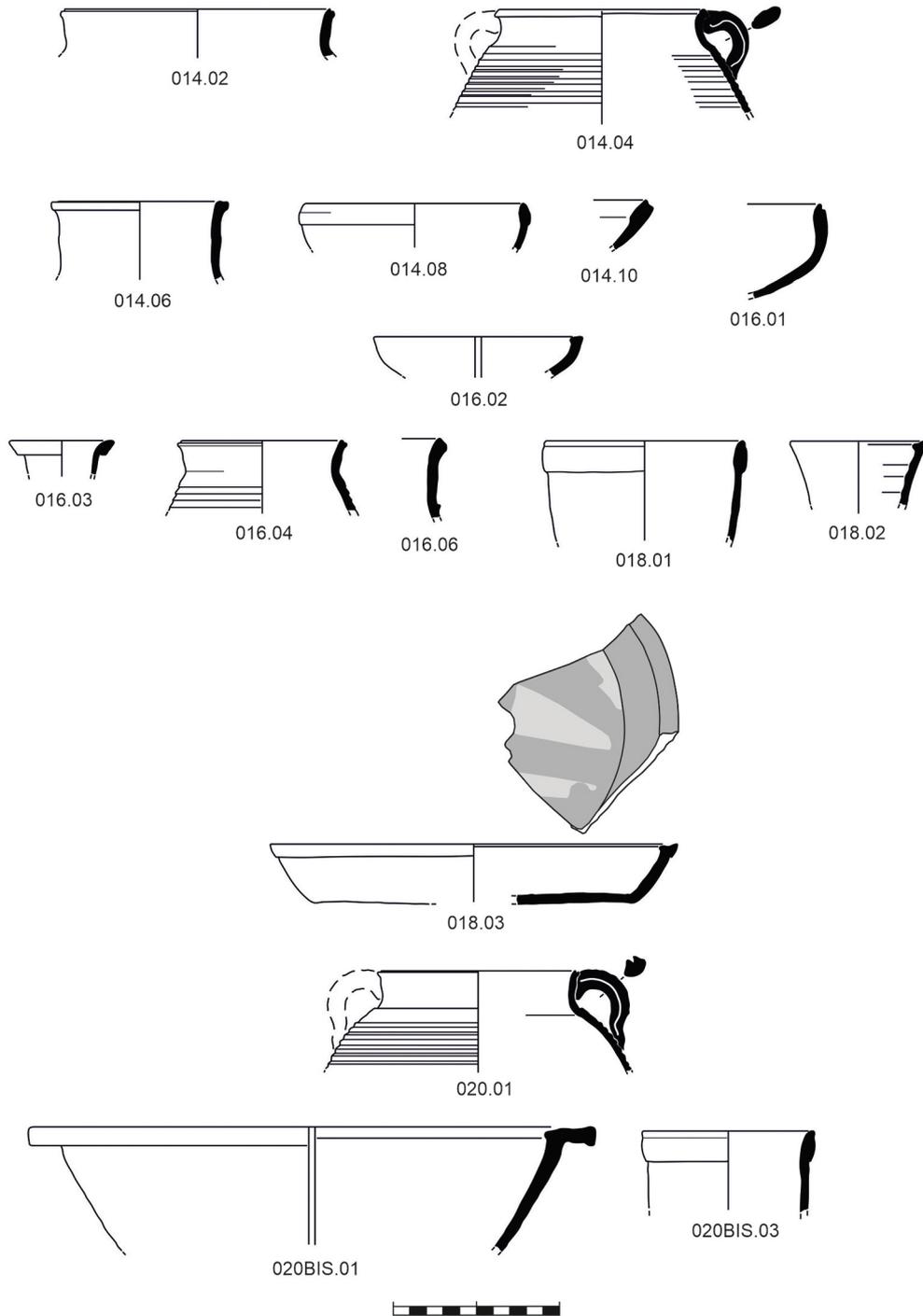
KHIRBAT AS SĀR (SĀRAH)



7. Select pottery of the Ayyubid-Mamluk period from Trench Sq1 (image by Mariusz Burdajewicz).



8. Trench Sq1 with the Mamluk-period floors on both sides of the E-W wall; view from the northeast (photo by Jolanta Młynarczyk).



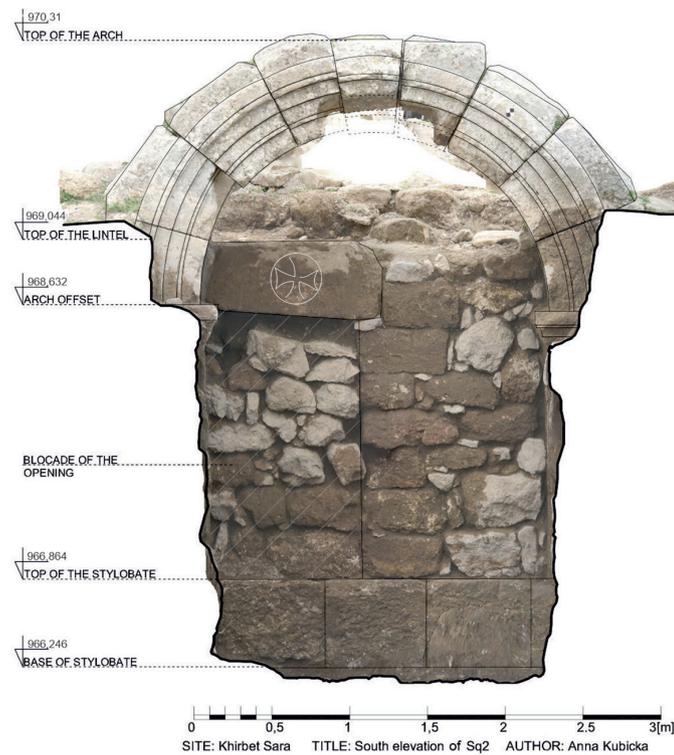
9. Select pottery from the lowest layers of Trench Sq1 (drawing by Jolanta Młynarczyk).



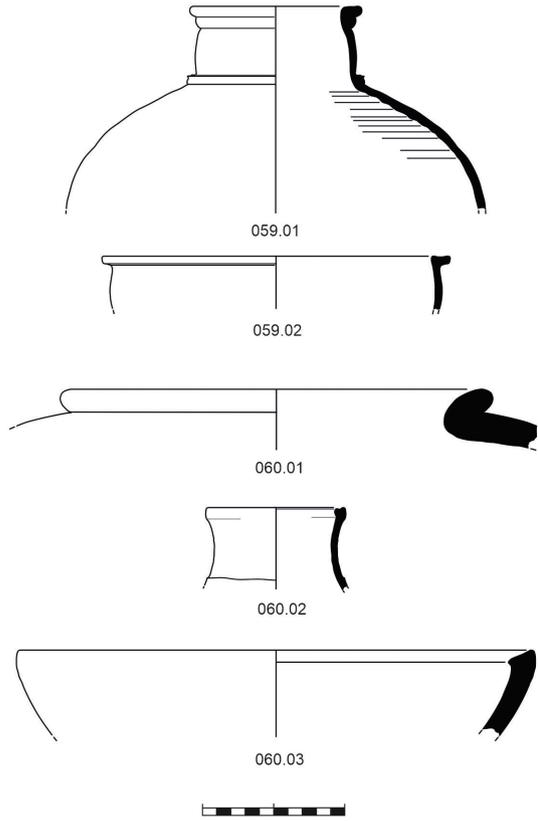
10. Trench Sq1: the foundation of the Roman-period part of the wall N-S atop a stone fill of the sanctuary platform(?) (photo by Jolanta Młynarczyk).



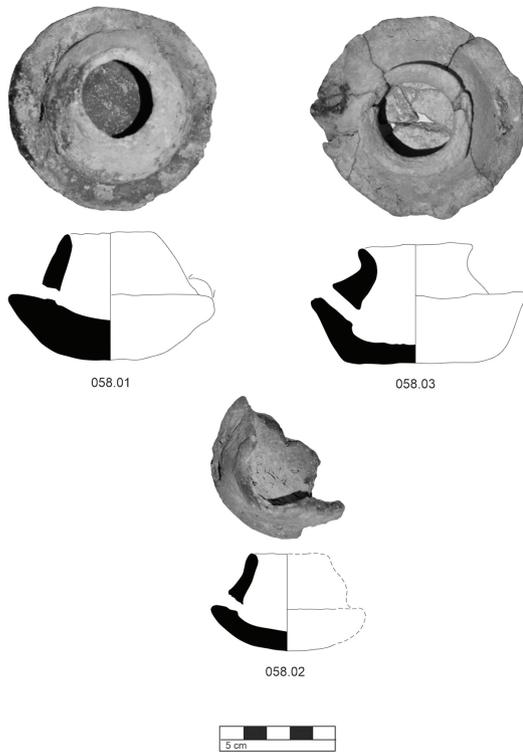
11. Trench Sq1: the Islamic-period extension of the N-S wall founded on a Roman-period layer; view from the northeast (photo by Jolanta Młynarczyk).



12. Trench Sq2: south elevation of the Roman arch with Islamic-period alterations including a re-used lintel with engraved cross (image by Anna Kubicka).



13. Select pottery from the lowest layers of Trench Sq2 (drawing by Mariusz Burdajewicz).



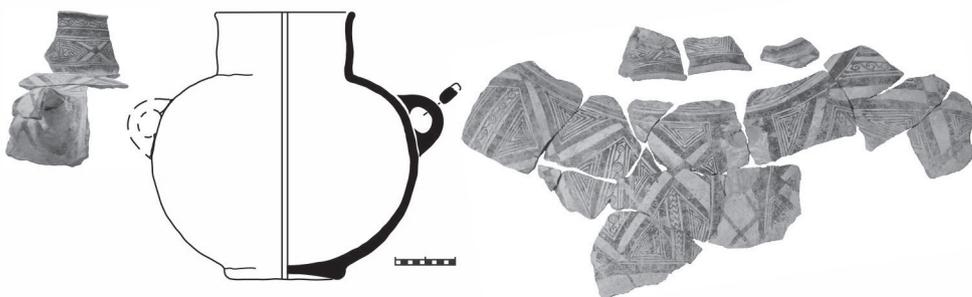
14. Oil lamps found on the floor of the first Islamic re-use of the arch in Trench Sq2 (image by Mariusz Burdajewicz).



15. General view of Trench Sq2 from the northwest (photo by Jolanta Młynarczyk).



16. Trench Sq2: the later floor of the Islamic period with the construction of the Ottoman-period grave in the background (photo by Jolanta Młynarczyk).



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17. A geometrically painted jug or amphora found in the upper layer of Trench Sq3 (image by Mariusz Burdajewicz).



18. Trench Sq3: a final state of exploration; view from the east (photo by Jolanta Młynarczyk).

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