

# The archaeological site of Selib 2 in the Dongola Reach: remarks on the 2019 season



**Abstract:** The paper discusses recent fieldwork at the Meroitic settlement site of Selib 2, a town located on the west bank of the Nile between the Third and Fourth Cataracts, investigated by the Banganarti/Selib Polish Archaeological Mission since 2010. The fieldwork was concentrated on uncovering the earliest occupation strata from the 1st/2nd centuries CE. Two mud-brick buildings were fully excavated, along with contemporaneous occupational horizons, yielding, among others, unique bell-shaped decorated vessels, a copper plate, and a female clay figurine. Storage jars used as ovens and cooking places were present in all phases and can be considered as a characteristic furnishing of the explored households. Moreover, an archaeological reconnaissance extended the boundaries of the settlement eastward, providing new data for studies of the settlement plan and its various stages of development.

**Keywords:** Nubia, Meroitic, settlement, Selib, ovens, cooking places

The site of Selib 2, located on the west bank of the Nile in Sudan between the Third and Fourth Cataracts, was identified during the Southern Dongola Reach Survey (Żurawski 2000; 2002: 81) in 1997/1998 [Fig. 1]. The 6th-century-AD church at Selib 1 is less than a kilometer away and there is also an early Christian

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house, excavated in 2012, located midway between the two (Żurawski 2016b: 91–101). A survey in 2008 recognized the potential of the site, identifying a rectangular mud-brick structure (about 900 m<sup>2</sup>) and collecting an assemblage of pottery that suggested a Meroitic, 1st/2nd century AD date (Bagińska 2015). Excavations commenced in the 2010 season and were followed in 2013 and 2016 with a magnetic prospection. The function of individual households and the urban layout were the focus of the early fieldwork, which was continued in 2019 to examine the earliest occupation phases and verify finds from the geophysical survey.

The areas for exploration were selected based on an analysis of the magnetic mapping of the settlement. A trench was opened in an area west of the outer part of house S2/08/2015, excavated during the 2015 season (Żurawski 2016a: 365–367), where a concentration of pottery in a grey ash layer (S2/06/2015) was observed. Building S2/12/2019 was explored there.

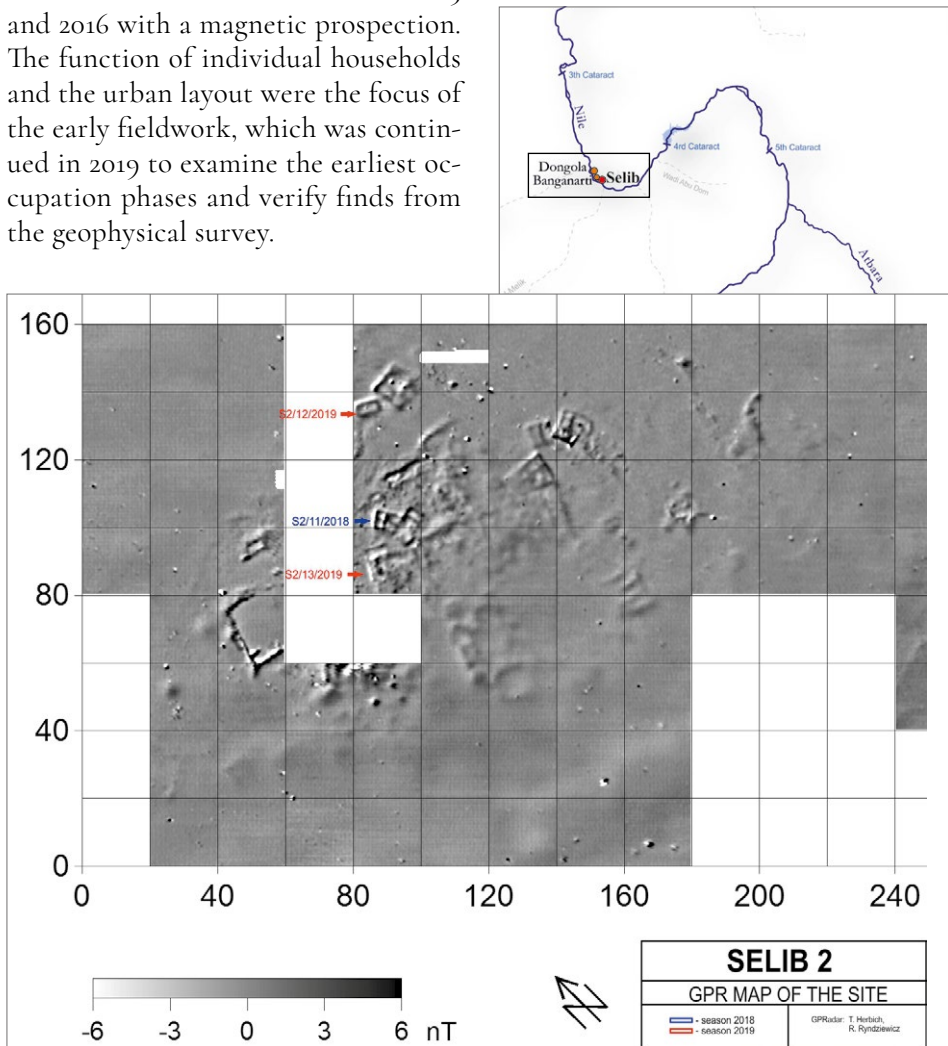


Fig. 1. GPR map of the Selib 2 site; inset, location of the site in the region (IKSiO PAN | processing T. Herbich and R. Ryndziewicz)

The other explored area was situated in the southern part of the site where a cluster of magnetic anomalies south of previously excavated houses (Hajduga 2013)

indicated the presence of more domestic architecture. House S2/13/19 was investigated, both inside (Trench 3) and outside (Trenches 4 and 5).

### BUILDING S2/12/2019

The building was a small rectangular structure, 4.50 m by 2.50 m, made entirely of mud brick [Fig. 2]. The walls were

preserved to a height of approximately 0.90–1.00 m. The entrance was located in the southeastern corner. The bondwork

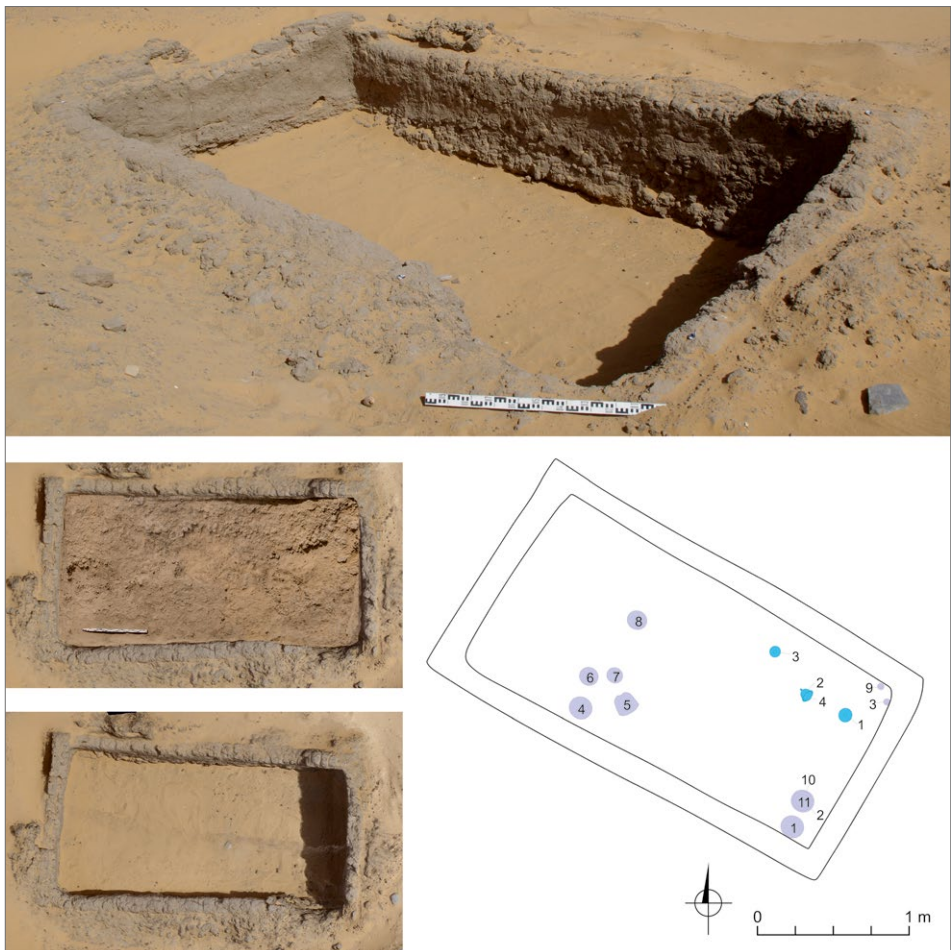


Fig. 2. Building S2/12/2019: top, the building after exploration; center left, view after cleaning the mud-brick rubble; bottom left, view of the collapsed wall; bottom right, plan showing pottery clusters (IKSiO PAN | photos, drawing, editing R. Hajduga)

was concealed under a well preserved coat of mud plaster, but based on the thickness of the walls (18 cm), a header bond should be assumed.

A thick layer (approximately 0.60 m) of mud-brick rubble covered the western, southern and eastern parts of the unit [see *Fig. 2* bottom left]. It turned out to be the upper part of a wall (S2/10), which had collapsed inside and sealed the occupational fill on the floor, composed of sand and ash (S2/12). This layer yielded five ceramic vessels, three bell-shaped, which is a form previously unparalleled at Selib [see *Fig. 2* bottom right]. The function of these bells, with the cups decorated with painted red stripes on a white slip surface [see below, *Fig. 12*],

remains speculative. They were found in an upside down position, thrown down and overturned presumably by the falling wall. The rest of the ceramic finds were typical of the kind of Meroitic pottery previously recorded in other domestic contexts excavated at Selib. The repertoire includes storage vessels, handmade bottles, and small handmade vessels with cut or combed decoration. An alabaster bottle, turned on a lathe judging by the characteristic traces inside it, is the first example of a stone vessel found at Selib 2 [see below, *Fig. 16*].

The structure should be interpreted as a small storeroom, similar in size and shape to a previously excavated building, S2/3/2012 (Żurawski 2015: 381).

## BUILDING S2/13/2019

Surface clearing of the selected site brought to light the full outline of mud-brick architecture in this part of the settlement. Thus, the first goal was achieved, adding new substance to the general plan of Selib 2 [*Figs 3, 4*].

The dimensions, building materials and construction techniques of this new building (S2/13/2019) largely resembled previously excavated structures. Overall, however, the rooms appeared to be smaller and the layout more complex.



Fig. 3. Building S2/13/2019: general view from the south (IKSiO PAN | photo R. Hajduga)

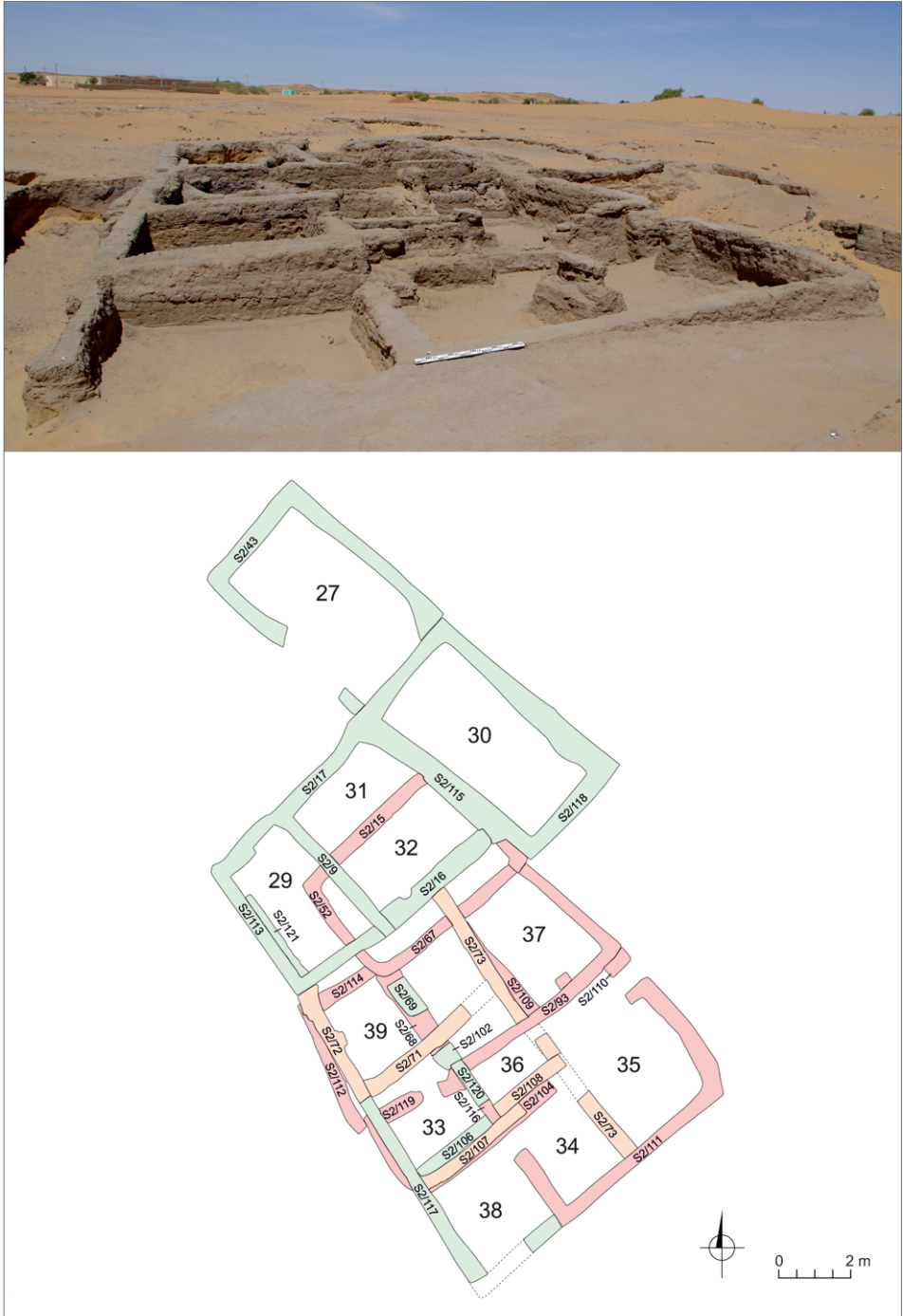


Fig. 4. Building S2/13/2019: plan indicating the three phases of construction; top, general view from the east (IKSiO PAN | photos, drawing, editing R. Hajduga)

The house was founded on a sand dune, which yields sherds and ash indicating earlier occupation, but no substantial structural remains. Three phases of construction were distinguished [see Fig. 4 bottom].

The walls of different house phases were superimposed in part, as has been observed also elsewhere at Selib 2, re-using space and building materials in a manner typical of Meroitic settlers. The state of preservation of these walls, standing up to one meter high, revealed no evidence of roofing or windows. One can speculate that rooms with a compact floor surface were likely to be roofed, while those with a sand floor may have been open and provided light and air-flow to other rooms.

**PHASE 1**

The first phase included Rooms 32, 37, 39, 35, 33 and 36, and is associated with the oldest excavated settlement at Selib 2 [Fig. 5]. A stretcher bond was used for wall construction using the ubiquitous mud brick.

The entrance to the house was from the north, leading into a spacious unit, Room 35, which had jars lined up along the east wall. A passage with a threshold opened into Room 37; the threshold was visibly worn. Room 39 had a doorway opening into a small unit, Room 33, which was otherwise closed. Rooms 37 and 39 do not appear to be interconnected during the first phase of use of the house, suggesting that there could have been a difference of levels between them.

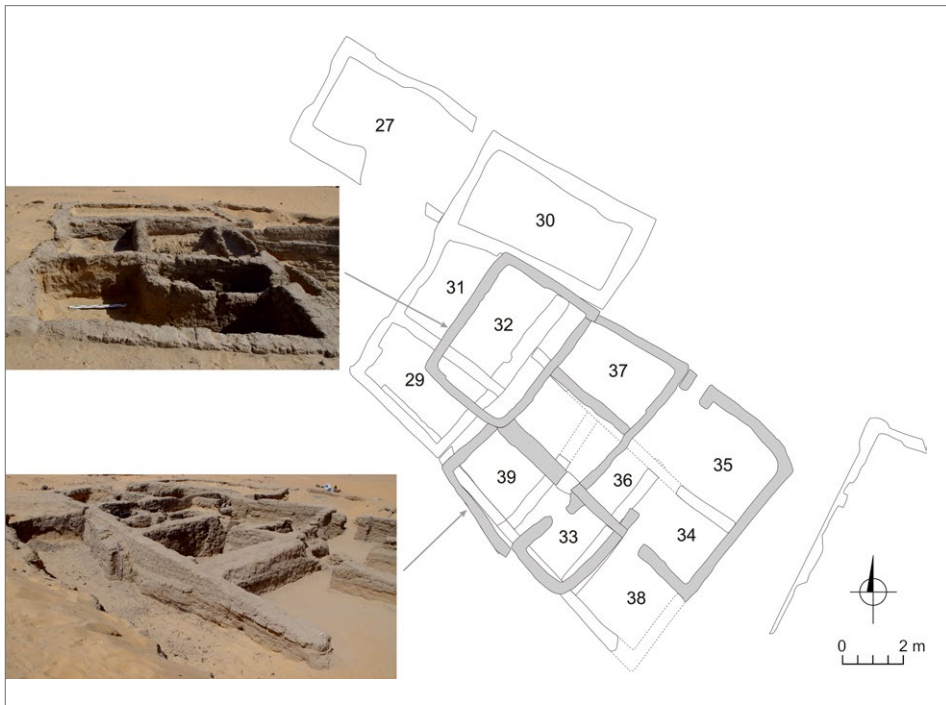


Fig.5. Building S2/13/2019: Phase 1 (IKSiO PAN | photo, drawing and editing R. Hajduga)

The storage jars found in this phase in Room 35, but also 37 and 39, were sometimes reused as open pot ovens, especially

those found in Room 39 [Fig. 6]. They were placed in the sand upside down, the upturned base cut intentionally to



Fig. 6. Building S2/13/2019: storage jars acting as cooking places inside the rooms, divided by phases (IKSiO PAN | photos, drawing, editing R. Hajduga)

be used for cooking. Eleven vessels of this kind formed two groups inside Room 39, which had a partition wall dividing it into two parts: six vessels were lined up along the partition wall and another five were located next to the south wall of the building (S2/14). Other vessels, presumably for cooking, were associated with cooking places, placed above the ovens or inside them. The cooking places were filled with ash and charcoal, as well as pieces of Doum palm fruit. The pot content was sampled for radiocarbon dating and biological residue analyses.

These fireplaces were used over an extended period and often renewed in the same spot, a procedure evident in the southern part of Room 39 and the northern part of Rooms 37 and 35 [see *Fig. 6*]. Over time, they gradually went out of use, disappearing under the sand-and-mud layers of successive phases.

A spindle whorl found in Room 32 (see below and *Fig. 15*) can be linked to the industry already associated with Selib 2 thanks to the loom weights and spinning bowls found in previous seasons (Hajduga 2016). Similar loom weights come from the Meroitic town in Hamadab (Nowotnick et al. 2014: 11). The households must have been engaged in yarn production, perhaps also textile weaving, most probably for personal use. Indeed, cotton clothing could have been made on a small scale. Archaeobotanical analyses have yet to be conducted at Selib, but similar findings from Qasr Ibrim testify to the presence of *Gossypium herbaceum* L., a domesticated variety of cotton, which was adapted to conditions in Nubia and developed many varieties. Traces of wool are less common; studies have shown

that quantities of archaeological wool increase with advances in the domestication of animals giving wool (Yvanez 2016: 154, 172).

## PHASE 2

In the second phase, the building was reconstructed and the floor surfaces inside the house were levelled, mainly inside Rooms 31, 29 and 39 [*Fig. 7*]. Rooms 31 and 29 (walls S2/18, S2/9 and part of S2/113) were built on old foundations and levelled mud-brick rubble of the earlier phase. The same construction techniques were used in the construction of the new walls. A foundation course one-brick thick was added to reinforce the south wall of Room 29 (S2/113).

Room 29 appears to have been used for food processing, judging by the occupational layers representing this phase and a vessel standing next to the west wall of the room. An iron axe was found next to the north wall, in a compact layer of mud brick tumble. A similar, well-preserved iron axe (S2/1/2010) was found in 2010 in the central storeroom at Selib 2, giving rise to a hypothesis about Meroitic metal production at the site. This find testifies to the presence of iron tools in use simultaneously with the stone tools at Selib 2 (Hajduga 2013: 291).

A compact layer of mud formed a walking surface throughout Rooms 32, 37, 39, and part of 33 [*Fig. 8*]. This floor concealed the jars used as ovens in the earlier phase. Evidently, the kitchens inside this house had ceased to function.

The southeastern corner of the house underwent extensive reconstruction [see *Fig. 4*]. The passage between the two parts of Room 39 was blocked, and a threshold



Fig. 7. Building S2/13/2019: phase 2 (IKSiO PAN | photos, drawing, editing R. Hajduga)

installed in wall S2/68 (S2/69) indicates that a doorway was put in this place. A new mud-brick wall covered blockage S2/101 and wall S2/104, probably reaching wall S2/106; however, it has not been preserved. A wall stretching east (S2/117) was added alongside the south wall of Room 39 (S2/114), overrunning wall S2/119 on the same axis. It continued further east

along wall S2/111, turned north and abutted it.

Rooms 27 and 30 in the northernmost part of the complex were the most poorly preserved. Room 27 was directly connected with the units east of the central warehouse (S2/1/2011), explored in 2011 (Żurawski et al. 2014: 336–338). Next to the west wall of this room, two vessels

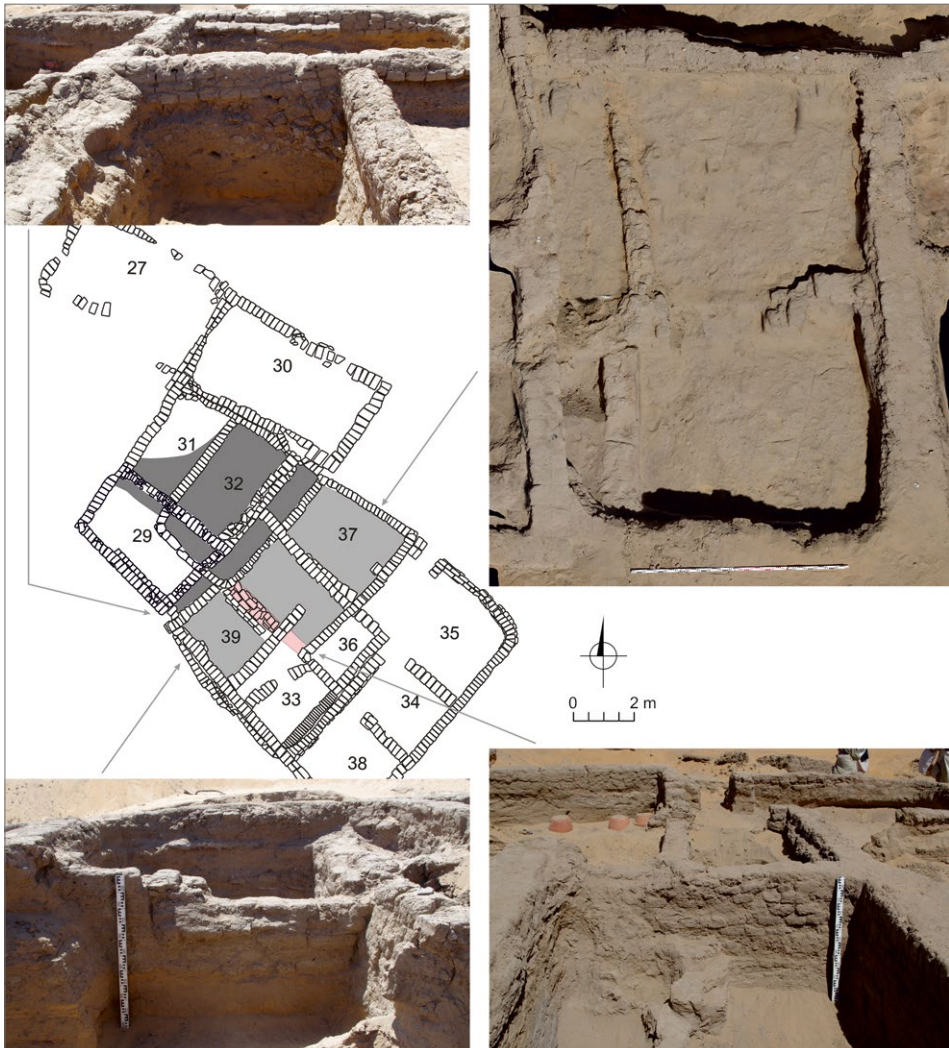


Fig. 8. Building S2/13/2019: mud walking surface (IKSiO PAN | photos, drawing, editing R. Hajduga)

were located in an ash layer, which suggests that food production was also carried out there; however, the poor state of preservation of this room does not support any further speculation in this regard.

**PHASE 3**

During the third phase, the building was enlarged with new units being added to the original structure [Fig. 10]. A platform was installed in the southwestern corner of Room 29, partly overlapping the mastaba against the south wall [Fig. 9]. This platform was placed on layers of ash and sand from the earlier occupational phases, and a storage jar was sunk into it. A bronze plate was found beneath it [see below, Fig. 15].

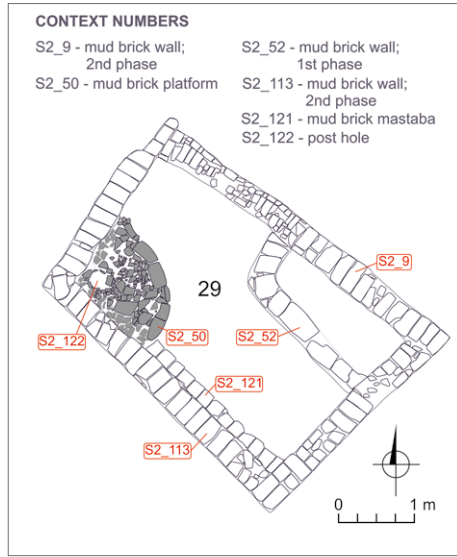


Fig. 9. Building S2/13/2019: phase 3, Room 29 (IKSiO PAN | drawing R. Hajduga)

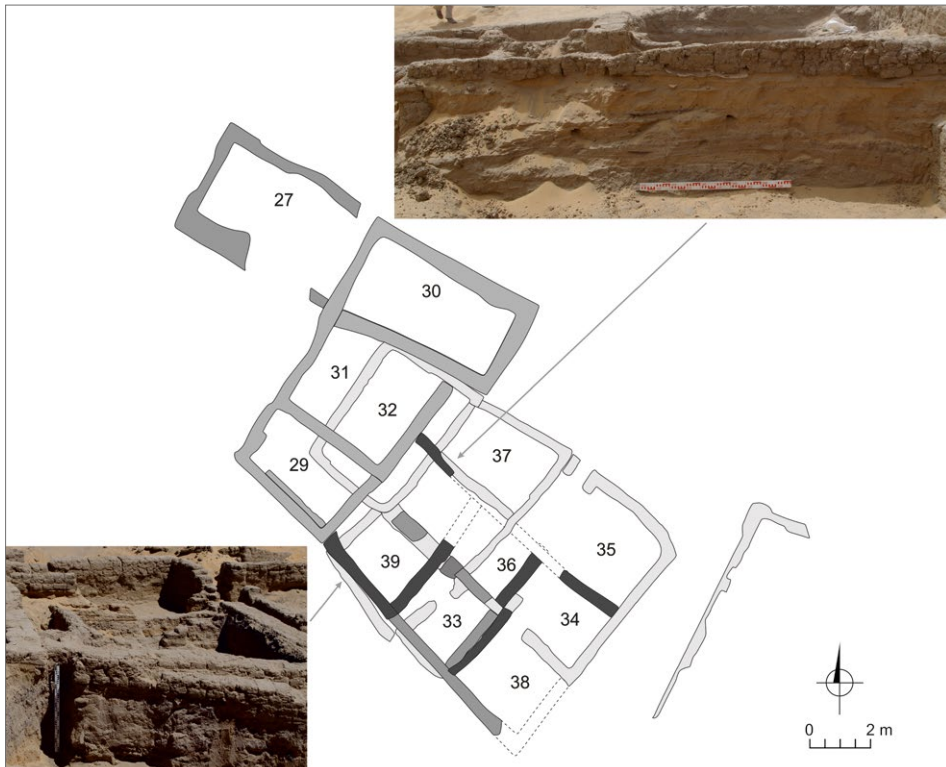


Fig. 10. Building S2/13/2019: phase 3 (IKSiO PAN | photos, drawing, editing R. Hajduga)

The south wall (S2/72), built over existing walls [see Fig. 4], was connected with the southeastern corner of Room 29. At the same time, a partition wall was built between Rooms 39 and 33; in the central part it lies under wall S2/73, and joins the east wall, S2/111. Inside Room 36, a perpendicular wall, S2/108, was added to wall S2/104, dividing Rooms 36 and 34. Inside Room 38, another wall (S2/107) was added to the west wall (S2/106). Storage vessels were lined up next to it. Vessels were located also in Room 32; one of these had been placed in the partly cut east wall of the room. Archaeobotanical samples were taken from all of these jars.

**TRENCHES OUTSIDE THE HOUSE**

Trenches outside house S2/13/19 were aimed at establishing the occupational sequence in these areas [Fig. 11]. Jars used as furnaces were located outside the building in Trench 4 opened north-east of the building. These jars appear to continue to the southwestern corner of house S2/11/18, thus confirming that the two households existed contemporaneously in Phase 1. The food-producing function of these installations was evident, indicating that cooking was an activity carried out also between the houses, perhaps in a common cooking space.

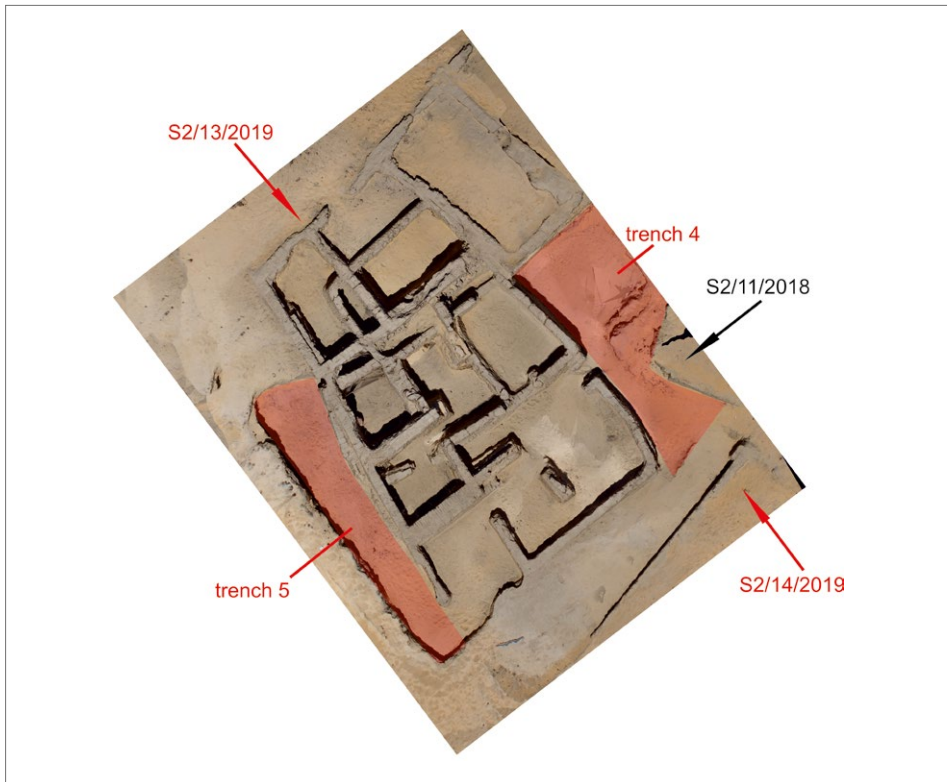


Fig. 11. Building S2/13/2019: location of trenches outside the building (IKSiO PAN | photo and rendering R. Hajduga; geodetic measurements R. Łopaciuk)

An accumulation of occupation layers was revealed in Trench 5, located south of the building [see Fig. 11]. These layers corresponded to layers of ash, charcoal and potsherds, associated with the first phase of occupation of S2/13/2019, both inside and outside Room 39. They could be considered as waste from the kitchen facilities operating in the southern part of Room 39, presumably reflecting pe-

riodic cleaning of the unit. These layers were found also outside the house, continuing along almost the entire length of the south wall. They correspond to the oldest phase of the house.

Another mud-brick structure, S2/14/2019, was observed south of the excavated trench [see Fig. 11]. It will be investigated in a future season of fieldwork.

**FINDS**

The excavation of houses has substantially increased the pottery corpus from the site with stratified material and complete vessels derived from primary contexts within Meroitic households, presumably dated from the 1st to the 3rd centuries AD. Complete vessels provide information about function, and additional analyses assist in differentiating manufacturing techniques, and identifying production centers. The pottery assemblage from Selib 2 presents a great range of fabrics, techniques and forms. Bottles, jars, bowls and fine-ware cups are present in the inventory.

The bell-shaped vessels from the storeroom S2/12/2019 are unparalleled not just in the Selib 2 material. These vessels were wheel-made, finely decorated on the outside, with red stripes on a white ground, and with an oblong knob handle on top [Fig. 12]. The inside was roughly worked, as if they had been a lid of sorts. A small cup/bowl was found inside one of them, seemingly supporting this notion. There were also two small handmade vessels, a few centimeters high, covered with a typical cut and combed decoration.

Handmade pottery accounts for roughly a quarter of the documented

assemblage. The ware is usually local Nile silt, often showing considerable artisanship in the crafting. The vessels



Fig. 12. Bell-shaped vessels and handmade jars with combed and cut decoration (IKSiO PAN | photos P. Terendy)

were fired in a reduction atmosphere, imparting a fine black color on the surface, frequently slipped and polished on the outside, frequently also decorated with comb impressions, rocker stamps and incisions. Fine wheel-made pottery

was fired at higher temperatures in an oxidizing atmosphere; it is often given a red slip or wash. The clay is usually alluvial, the forms cover a full spectrum of utility wares, from semi-fine vessels to big necked jars serving as liquid contain-



Fig. 13. Wheel-made and handmade pottery from Selib 2: 1, 4 – Aswan imports; 2, 3 – coarse ware; 5 – handmade vessel; 6 – handmade, burnished vessel; 7 – fine ware; 8, 9 – middle ware (IKSiO PAN | photos P. Terendy)

ers. Finer vessels, like cups, beakers and bowls, were made of kaolinitic clay with walls barely 5 mm thick, possibly used for consumption or fine goods [Fig. 13].

Among the transport containers were two examples of amphorae, probably imported from Aswan [see Fig. 13:1, 4].

Storage vessels dominated the assemblage. Big jars, up to 50 cm high, were installed in the kitchens and other rooms, serving as ovens [Fig. 14; see above]. Different shapes and production techniques are represented among these typical Meroitic products. At Hamadab, in horizon D (Meroitic level), large ceramic furnaces had been dug into the sand layers (Wolf, Nowotnick, and Wöß 2014: 104–120). Likewise, in Selib, most of the oven pots were placed upside

down and dug into a layer of almost pure sand. Some of the wheel-made jars of tall, slender shape were clearly reused for storage purposes; they were sunk into the floors or other occupational surfaces.

Finds included loom weights and spindle whorls, indicating the domestic character of the studied households. There was also a bronze plate decorated with concentric rings; it constituted the first find of a metal vessel from Selib 2. A clay seal, less than 3 cm long, has images incised on both sides, possibly a plant or animal motif. The image is schematic but it seems to recall a bronze seal ring with an image of an elephant collected from the surface by the nearby villagers (Hajduga 2013: 292) [Fig. 15].



Fig. 14. Typical Meroitic jars from Selib 2 (IKSiO PAN | photos P. Terendy)



Fig. 15. Small finds: top, loom weights; center left, spindle whorls and clay seal; bottom left, clay female figurine; bottom right, bronze plate (IKSiO PAN | photos P. Terendy)



Fig. 16. Alabaster bottle (IKSiO PAN | photos P. Terendy)



Fig. 17. Selib 2: plan of the site after the 2019 season (IKSiO PAN | drawing R. Hajduga; geodetic measurements B. Wojciechowski and R. Łopaciuk)

A schematic anthropomorphic figurine made of coarse clay was found in S2/13/2019 [see *Fig. 15*]. Both arms and the head are missing. The figure has a stippled decoration, made with a sharp tool like a bone pin or spindle. The dots are arranged in groups in semblance of jewellery, clothing or a body tattoo. It was apparently intended to represent a female. The rough craftsmanship indicates that it was rather a common object.

A set of stone grinders, pounders and querns was also collected, mostly from the layer of mud-brick rubble in the storeroom S2/12/2019. The finds included an alabaster bottle, hand-turned on a lathe. Since it is the first find of its kind from Selib 2, it is likely that it was brought to the site as a container for some luxury contents, such as fragrances or oils.

## CONCLUSIONS

The evidence from archaeological excavations indicates that Selib 2 was built without earlier planning. This form of urban development is frequently observed at other Meroitic sites. There is no information about earlier structures to demonstrate settlement continuity. The town grew by aggrandizement, several single domestic units merging into a final form and size. The buildings were situated on a sand dune. The earliest from a stratigraphic point of view is the fragmentary structure S2/14/2019 uncovered south of building S2/13/2019. The latter started out clearly as a square-shaped building constituting the base of the southern part of the complex, and gradually developed to the north, retaining however the orientation and for the most part also the course of the walls from Phase 1. The progressive growth of the houses was subject to a constant process of construction, repair and modification. The end effect was a densely structured residential house. New walls, additional rooms, and probably upper floors increasingly packed this house. The uppermost structures (from Phase 3), no more than 20 cm high, had a slightly different plan.

Neither house plans nor construction techniques appear to have been uniform. In general, unfired mud bricks were used for construction. Walls were usually one-brick thick, 1.5 or 2 bricks in a later building phase. Brick sizes differed: 330 × 170 mm; 340–350 × 190 mm; 350 × 200 mm.

There do not seem to have been any upper floors and the rooms appeared small, with evident places intended for craftwork and kitchen facilities. The size of the rooms, internal attributes, and artifacts characterize them as courts, living rooms, work areas, or kitchens, all of a principally domestic, household nature. There were no indications of any specified or official activities associated with administrative offices, trade or cults. Food preparation and textile processing, attested by finds of spindle whorls and iron tools, can be assigned to the domestic sphere. Storage jars, ovens and fireplaces constitute typical components of the Meroitic residential architecture. The distribution of vessels and hearths indicates that food was prepared inside several rooms within a home. The kitchen comprised several containers and storage jars that were dug into the ground. Apart

from these, other vessels were found in the corners of several rooms: tall wheel-made jars and big globular handmade vessels, sunk into the ground, probably served as water pots or storage containers.

The spindle whorl from one of the houses (Room 32) confirmed earlier findings, suggesting a developed textile craft at Selib 2 (Hajduga and Solarzka 2015). Distaffs and spindles with spindle whorls were used to spin yarn from wool or cotton, and the yarn was subsequently used to weave textiles. The loom weights in the assemblage from house S2/13/2019 are proof of a loom being installed there, thus providing the first indications of a daily occupation of some of the members of the Selib community.

After the 2019 season in the field, it was established that Selib 2 consisted of two parts: a large storeroom (S2/1/2010) and a sizeable suburban settlement around it (Żurawski et al. 2014: 336–338). However, there is no evidence of planning of the building plots, and little attention seems to have been paid to basic architectural conventions. The fairly regular residential and workshop complexes studied in Selib 2 resemble dwellings from Gaminarti, in which an entrance into a smaller room led from a larger one. Ballana mud-brick households of villagers from Gezira Dabarosa (Adams 2008: 20–23) and Meinarti (Adams 2000) were similar to Selib, being regular in shape, and were also systematically remodelled with additional structures altering their original shape.

There is no trace of an agrarian subsistence in the excavated structures, nothing to do with farming or breeding livestock. Therefore, these subsistence strategies must have been pursued in the neighbourhood. A town like Selib 2 should be expected to have merchants and separate facilities, like workshops and markets, for manufacture and trade. The urban population was probably occupied with housework, the production of goods for personal use and local markets, although they could have also crafted things for sale beyond the limits of the town or region.

No village cemetery has yet been identified near the site, which would undoubtedly provide more information about the living conditions and material culture of the villagers. Selib 2 is a Meroitic urban settlement giving an idea of what life was like in the village and the way in which it developed, seemingly without any pre-planning. The core of the site has yet to be determined, but the central storeroom has always stood out because of its size. The size of the settlement is another thing that has not been determined so far. Even so, finds scattered over the surface, including vast expanses of potsherds, suggest an eastward extension toward the Selib 3 site. The current work has not answered all of the questions concerning the settlement at Selib 2, but it has brought us closer to a fuller understanding of its nature and development.

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