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EXCAVATIONS AT WADI HAJRYA ON SOQOTRA ISLAND (YEMEN)

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The island of Soqotra is located in the north-western part of the Indian Ocean. It lies directly on the sea route from the Red Sea to India and can be regarded as a good place to provide information on ancient and medieval trade in the Indian Ocean.¹ Investigations carried out there by the Russian Archaeological Mission to the Republic of Yemen have brought to light unexpected and extraordinary results.²

The northern part of the island is the most populated area, and it is here that Hadibo, the capital of Soqotra, is situated. The main area of our archaeological exploration was Wadi Hajrya, which runs to the sea at the very eastern end of the Hadibo plane. Several archaeological sites are located here, four of which were investigated.

The main site is Hajrya IV, located on the right bank of Wadi Hajrya. This settlement was discovered by V. Naumkin and A. Sedov in 1985.³ Naumkin identified it as a political and trade centre of Soqotra.⁴ Indeed, the size of the site is unusually large for the island – about 130×100 m (fig. 1). On its two sides (the north and the east) it is surrounded by a defensive wall.

All this area within the rampart is clearly divided into two parts: the western one is occupied with dwelling structures, and the eastern one with a vast cemetery. The grave structures are well visible on the surface, they come practically right up to the buildings. As a rule, graves form chains running from north to

¹ See Shinnie 1960; Naumkin 1988; Doe 1992.

² Naumkin 1989; Vinogradov et al. 2011.

³ Naumkin, Sedov 1993, 600–605; 1995, 224–229.

⁴ Naumkin 1989, 160.

south. A large building, rectangular in plan, is located in the south-western corner of the settlement. The walls have been preserved until today up to one metre in height, but 20 years ago they were higher.

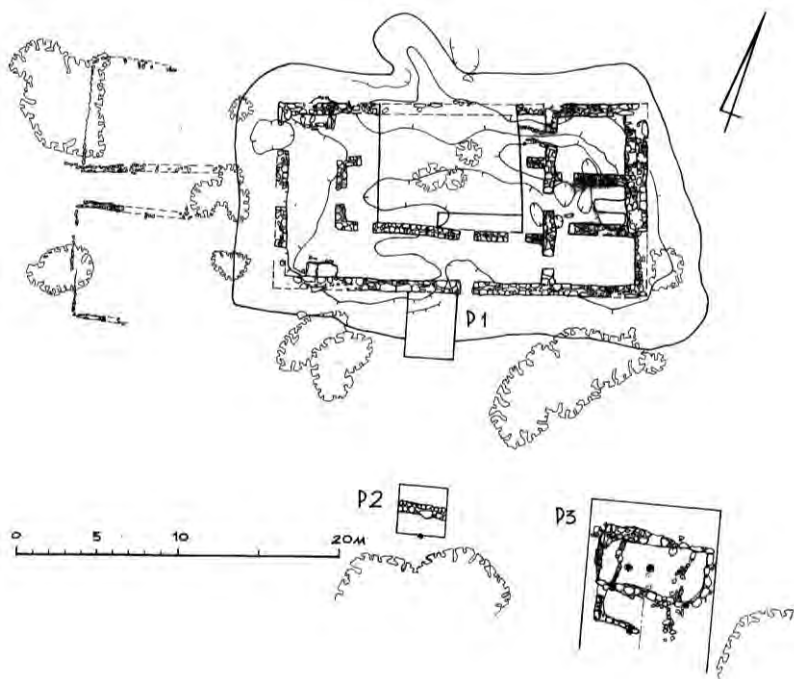


Fig. 1. Hajrya IV. Site's general plan.

In 1985 and 1987 Sedov made some soundings and excavated three graves at the site. The graves are typically Soqotrian. The burial chambers are of the “stone-case” type, and the walls are lined with stone masonry in one row.

The materials excavated in the soundings and discovered on the surface of the settlement led us to two basic conclusions:

1. The settlement of Hajrya IV emerged in the early centuries AD.
2. Life in this settlement must have ended in the 12th–13th centuries AD.⁵

Of course, it was necessary to verify these basic conclusions, and this was undertaken during the 2008-2010 field works at three trenches.⁶ Firstly, part of the fence which surrounded the settlement was explored (Fig. 1, P1). The foundation of this wall has a width of 0.65 m, and is built of undressed stones held together with clay mortar.

⁵ Naumkin, Sedov 1993, 605; 1995, 229

⁶ Vinogradov et al. 2011, 156–157

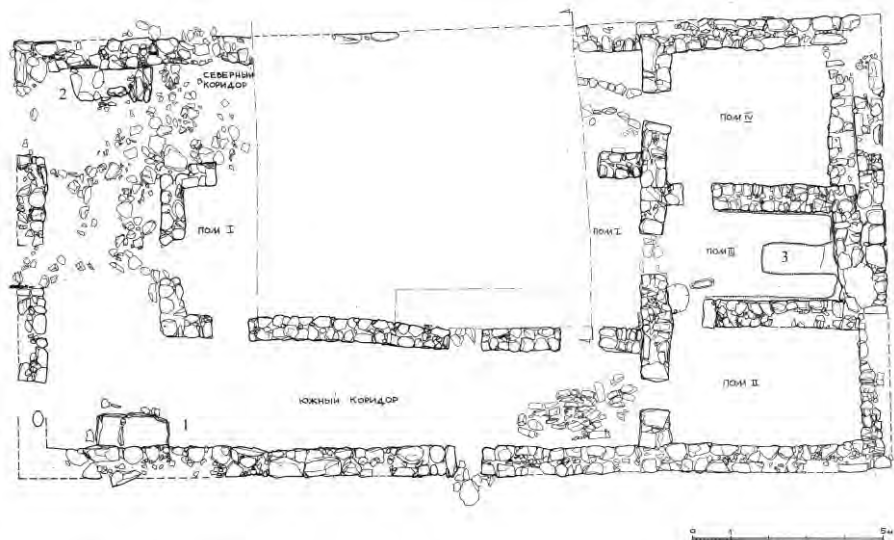


Fig. 2. The main building of the site. Plan.

Part of the large construction in the south-western corner of the site played an important role in our excavations (Fig. 1, P2), as it was identified as the settlement's main building (Fig. 2). Its walls are made of undressed stones. The interior of the house is largely filled with stones that have fallen from the walls. The size of the building was 23×11.5 m, and the construction was oriented along a west-east axis. The interior parts of the wall remains are still covered with white calcareous plaster. The many fragments of such plaster found at the side clearly indicate that the walls and the roof of the building were plastered.

On the western wall, there were three entries to the house. Behind the wall was a courtyard (10×3 m), from which the central part of the building can be accessed (Room 1). There were two anomalous constructions in the court, situated symmetrically near the southern and northern walls. Both are made of stones and slabs standing vertically, and very similar with graves. The southern construction was excavated, but it turned out to be empty. However, it is still interesting that its clay filling included lime powder.

Only a small part of Room 1 was excavated. It probably continues eastwards until the eastern rooms of the building. Near the northern and southern sides of Room 1 there were long corridors. The southern corridor of the building was completely excavated (Fig. 3). Its size is $12.5 \times 2.4-2.8$ m. There were three

asymmetrically situated entries from this corridor into Room 1. The northern corridor probably followed the same plan.

Three rooms (2–4) are situated in the eastern part of the building. Room 2 was located close to the southern corridor (Fig. 3), leading to Room 3. The size of this room is 5×3 m. Two levels of the floor were investigated there. On the higher level, the later floor, the millstone was found, while on the lower, the earlier floor, in the north-eastern and south-eastern corners two ceramic vessels were found lying upside-down. The finds of cooking pots were especially characteristic of this room. It can possibly be identified as a kitchen of the house.



Fig. 3. The Room 2 and the southern corridor of the main building. View from east.

The function of Room 4 (4.20×3.50 m) is still unclear; the excavations here were stopped at the latest floor. The investigations of the central Room 3 (4.50×2.40 m) were carried out completely. Four levels of floors were fixed here. The very important part of the main design of the building was found on the earliest one. It was a foundation of the rectangular altar made of clay and covered with plaster (Fig. 4). The size of the altar is 1.98×0.83 m, and the height of the construction is only 0.16 m.



Fig. 4. The altar in Room 3 of the main building. View from west.

The main part of the archaeological finds from all parts of the building includes the pottery of local production (Fig. 5). These are fragments of round-bottomed handmade vessels which sometimes have a thin carved ornament. The shape, ornamentation and mode of the manufacture of these pots suggest the traditional vessels of the modern Soqotrians. Some fragments belong to the imported vessels (Fig. 6), and there are also fragments of the Chinese celadon (Fig. 6, 5). These finds suggest that the building was built in the Middle Ages. In addition to pottery finds, many iron nails were found here (Fig. 7, 7–12), but the most remarkable objects are fragments of the small round-bottomed bronze vessels (fig. 7, 1–5).

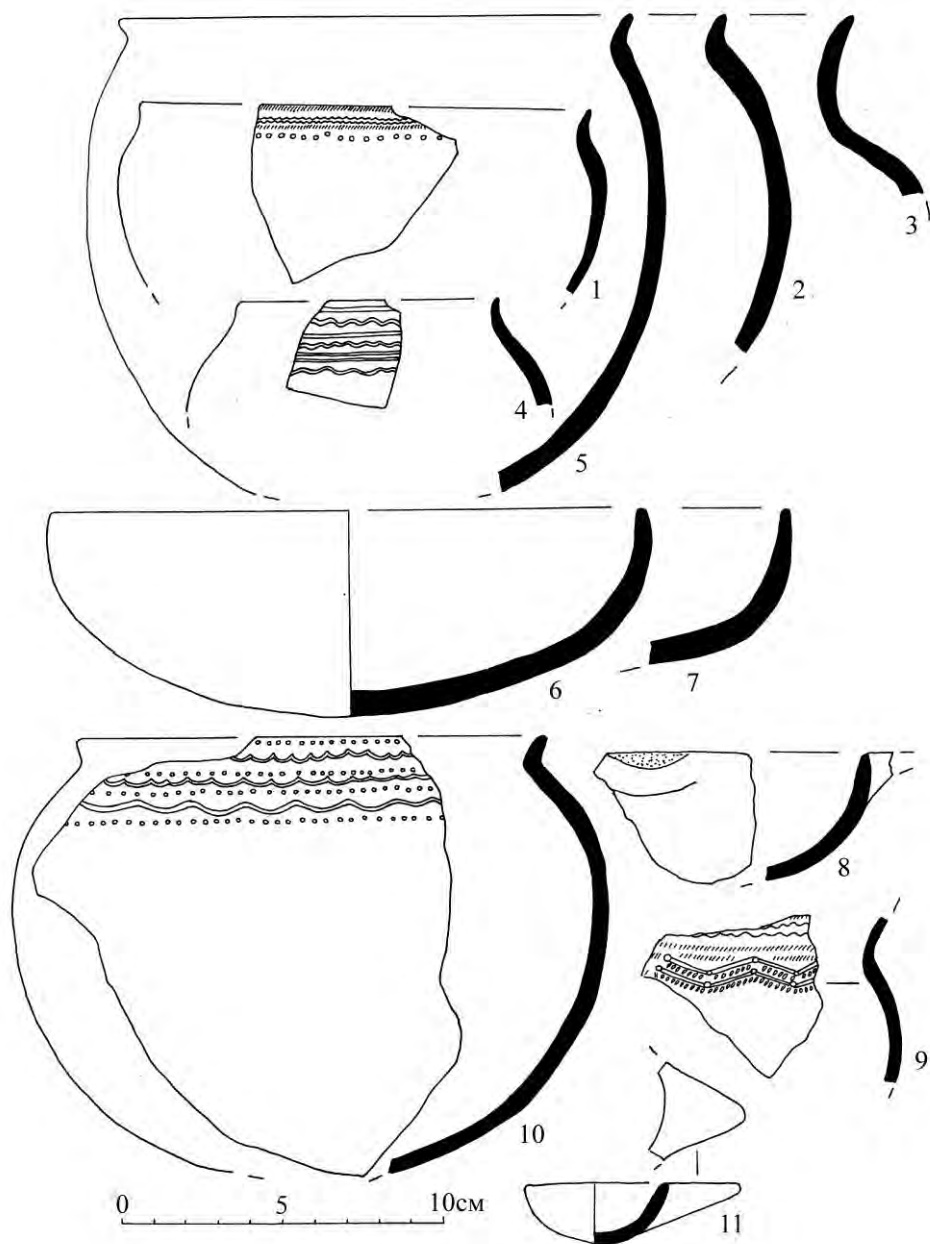


Fig. 5. Finds of local pottery from the main building.

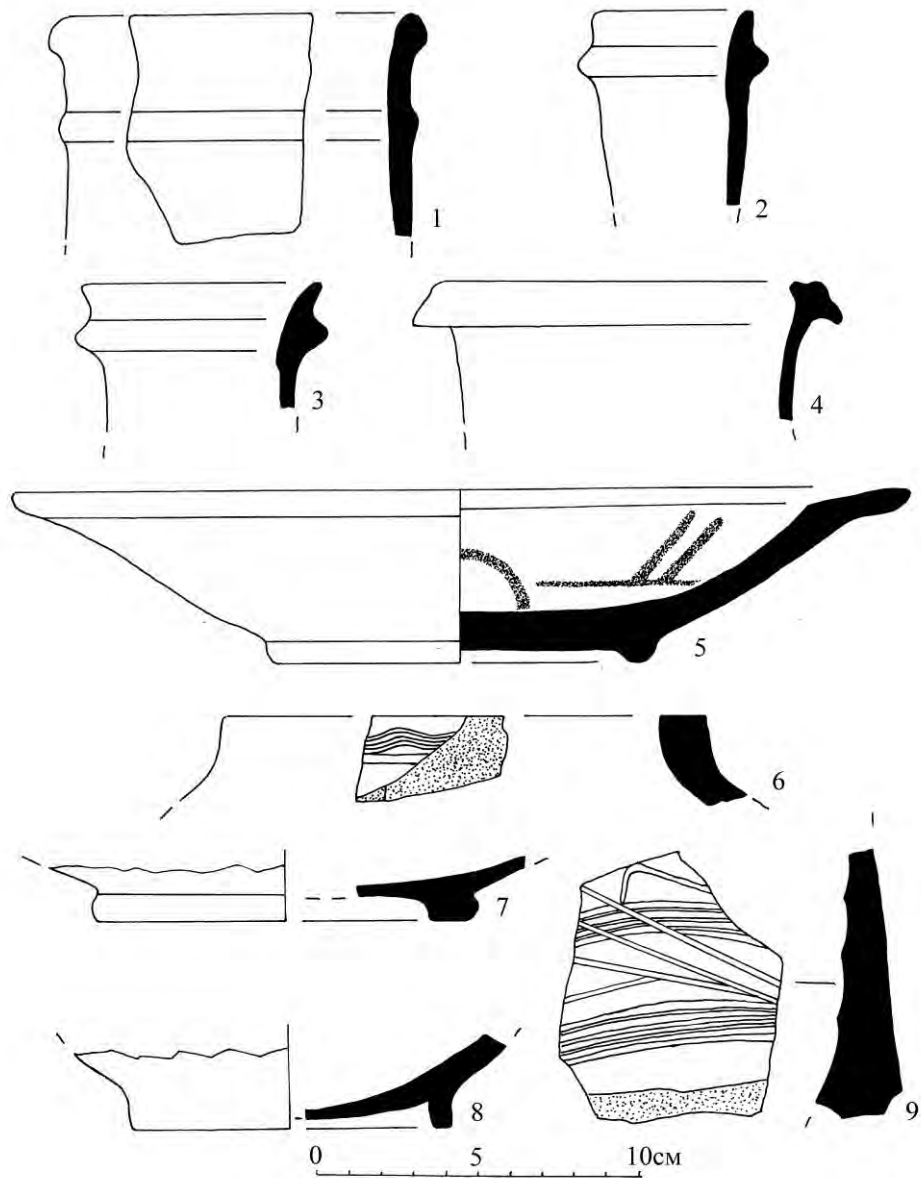


Fig. 6. Finds of imported pottery from the main building.

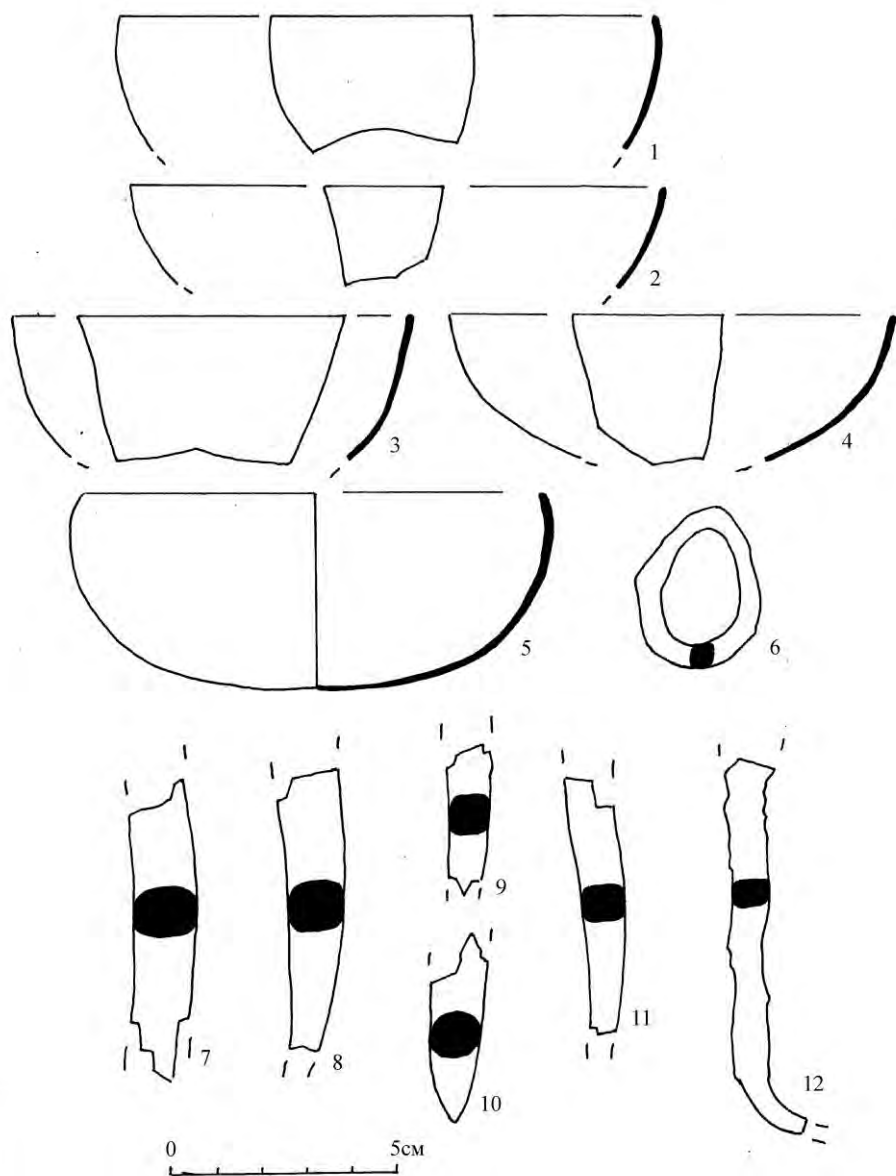


Fig. 7. Metal finds from the main building (1–5 – bronze, 6–12 – iron).

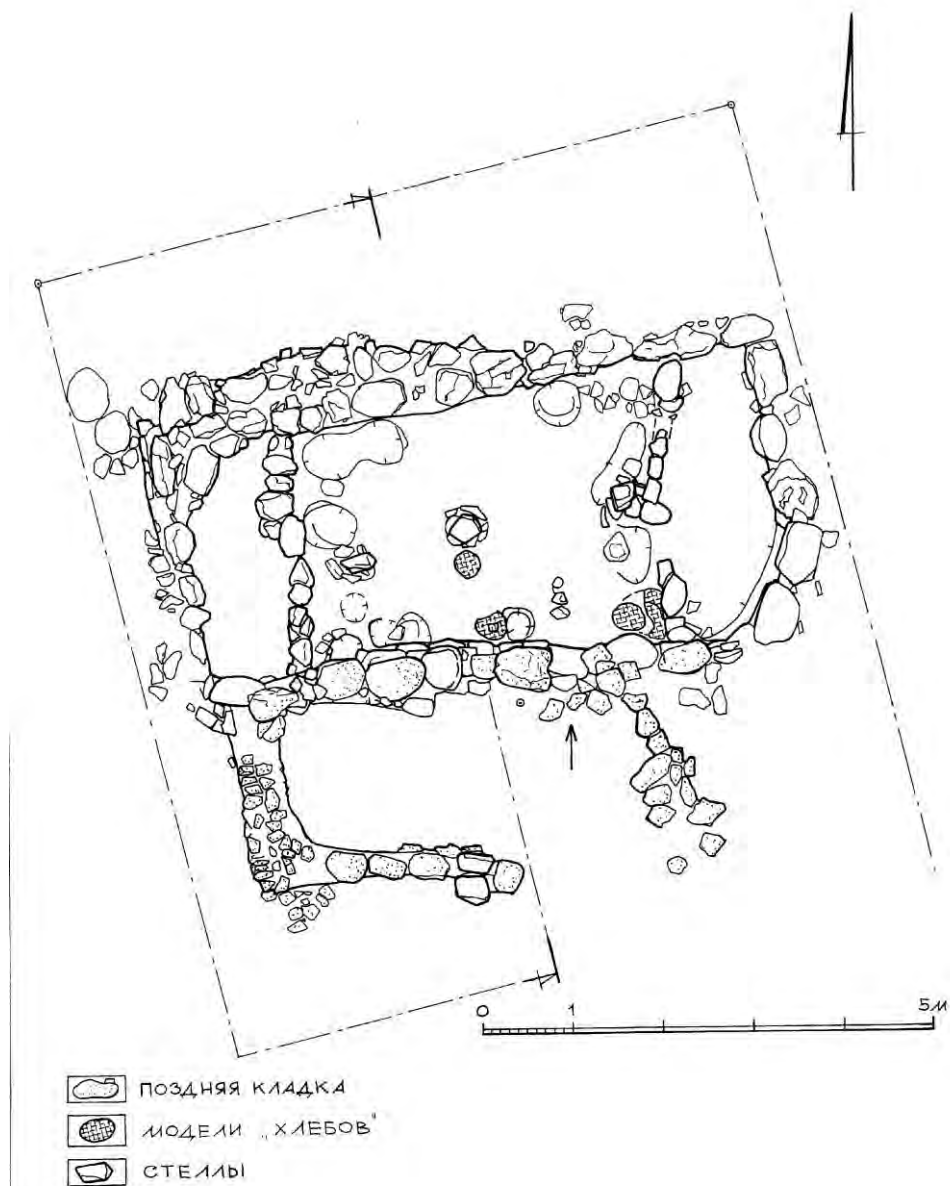


Fig. 8. The building in trench 3. Plan.



Fig. 9. The building in trench 3. View from east.



Fig. 10. The building in trench 3. View from west.

The results of the radiocarbon dating samples from Room 3 are very interesting:

Le 9440 – the layer of destruction: 1020 ± 150 AD

Le 9441 – first (upper) floor: 1370 ± 250 AD

Le 9442 – second floor: 860 ± 80 AD

Le 9443 – fourth (earliest) floor: 890 ± 100 AD.

From these results we can conclude that the building started to function in the 9th century AD. Because of the large size and the high quality of its construction (plastered walls, for example) we can assume that it was a public building. But what kind? A mosque or a church, or something else? We cannot see any signs of Islamic architecture there. No Christian cross was found here either, but the foundation of the altar seems to be typically Christian. Plans of similar designs were studied during investigations of Nestorian churches in the region of the Persian (Arabian) Gulf.⁷ It is well known that various forms of Christianity spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula,⁸ but it was Nestorians who inhabited Soqotra in the Middle Ages,⁹ and from these facts we can assume that the main building of the Hajrya IV settlement was the Nestorian church; however, this conclusion must be verified by future excavations.

An interesting construction, situated to the south-east of the main building, was excavated completely (Fig. 1, P3). Before our investigations started, it looked like a big heap of ash. These ash layers covered a building of rectangular form (7×3 m) with slightly curved angles (Fig. 8–10). The walls are built of large, undressed stones. The construction is divided into three parts by two lower parallel walls. Three stelae made of large undressed stones were dug in its floor. A building following a similar plan was investigated in another part of Soqotra,¹⁰ and we can assume that this planning of stone constructions was rather typical of Soqotra.

Four unusual objects made of white unburned clay were found on the floor. These flat objects (2 cm thick) have a round (0.28 and 0.33 m in diameter) or oval form (0.16×0.18 and 0.33×0.27 m), and they may have been connected with the cult sphere as votive breads or something similar. This building was probably used as a sanctuary. However, the bulk of finds is very typical of the sites of Soqotra (Fig. 11): fragments of handmade pottery of local production (Fig. 11, 1–10), rare fragments of imported vessels (Fig. 11, 11–12), small pieces of animals' bones and so on. Some fragments of Chinese celadon and glass were found too.

⁷ Fiey [1959], Pl. II, VI–X; Whitehouse, Williamson 1973, 42; Bernard., Salles 1991, 12; Bernard et al. 1991, 145–181; Potts 1994, 61–65; Langfeld 1994, 32–60; Dunlop et al. 1994, 69–70; Elders 2001, 47–57; 2003, 230–236; Carter 2008, 71–108

⁸ Finster 2010, 70

⁹ Naumkin 1988, 29

¹⁰ Weeks et al. 2002, 104–105, Fig. 8

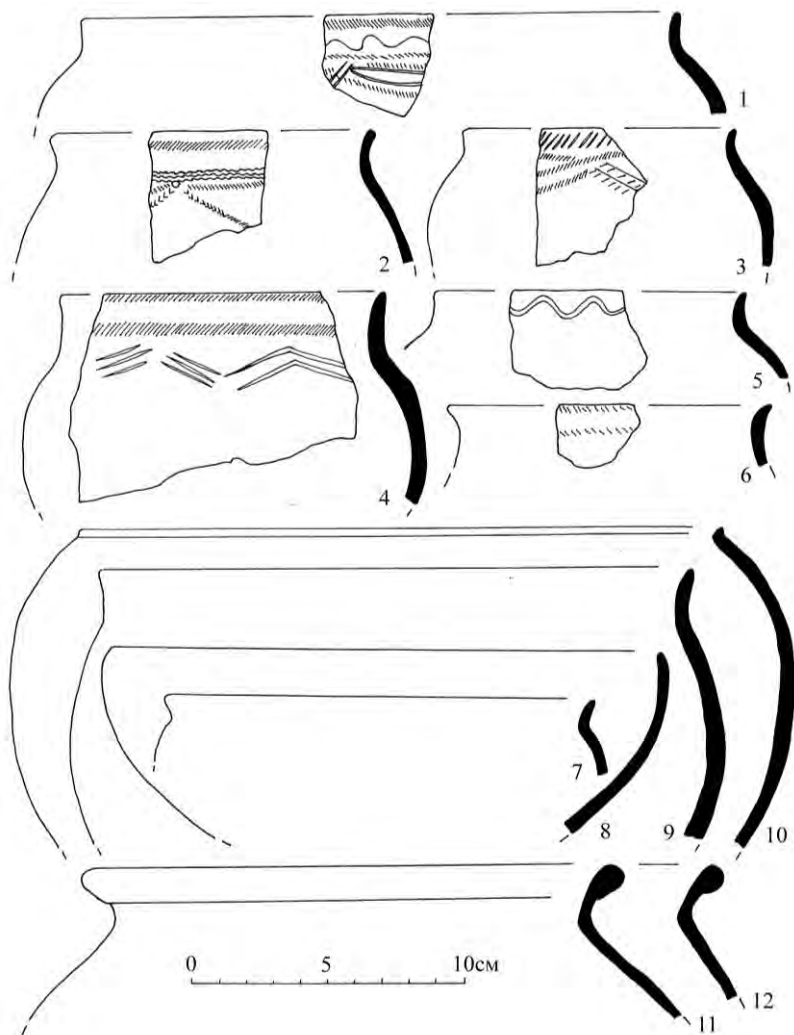


Fig. 11. Pottery finds from the building in trench 3.

The radio-carbon analyses give us three calibrated dates from this building:

DIN-14-120: 650 ± 100 AD

DIN-14-121: 570 ± 70 AD

DIN-14-122: 790 ± 100 AD.

These dates are earlier than those of the main building, and we can assume that a local sanctuary was situated at the site in the 6th-8th centuries AD. In the 9th century the Nestorian church was erected here.

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of the archaeological excavations of the Russian team on Soqotra, in the Wadi Hajrya region. At the Hajrya IV site the remains of the local sanctuary of the 6th–8th centuries AD were investigated. The Nestorian church was erected here in the 9th century.