

A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF SOME BRICKS AT GOZ EL-REJEB

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present a group of bricks from a site around the Jebel Tarerma in the area of Goz el-Rejeb, in the region of Kassala, Sudan. The bricks are characterized by incised symbols, some of them comparable with graffiti incised on pots and bricks found at the archaeological site of Soba.

The bricks have been found during the 2019 field season (January-February) of the Italian Archaeological Expedition to the Eastern Sudan of the Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" and the ISMEO - Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l'Oriente. One of the aims of the archaeological expedition was to survey some sites in the area of Goz el-Rejeb, already visited by the Italian expedition IAMSK directed by Rodolfo Fattovich and recorded for the first time by Burckhardt (Monneret de Villard 1935). In particular, the archaeological area around the Jebel Tarerma, in the middle of a desert plain, is characterized by clusters of tumuli surrounding the jebel, different in size, and made by rocks and other archaeological material (Manzo 2019, 269). On the northern side of the Jebel, the number of tumuli seems to decrease. There, a mound covered by red bricks has been recorded. Some of them appear burned, and others present some incised symbols. This is presumably the site also mentioned by Ugo Monneret de Villard (1935), who briefly described it, suggesting that the mound may be a compound of burials. This interpretation was perhaps proposed because on the top of the mound some concentrations of bricks look like the cover of the Christian graves. Nevertheless, at the moment it is impossible to give further information because the area has only been surveyed but not extensively investigated yet.

In "La Nubia Medioevale", Monneret de Villard described the mound as a tumulus covered by baked bricks decorated on the one face with geometric sketches, stars, fishes and crosses. He considered the mound as part of the huge funerary area at the base of the Jebel. Moreover, he said to have collected one brick with the inscription "Petros" and to have brought it at the National Museum of Khartoum, where are also preserved collections of ceramic material from the same site dating from the Prehistory to the 16th century AD. The different archaeological materials and structures attest a long use of the area of Goz el-Rejeb, from a period perhaps corresponding to the Mesolithic phase in the Nile Valley to the Hagiz and Gergaf group of Eastern Sudan (Manzo 2019, 269). The inscribed bricks recorded by Monneret de Villard suggest that the site was also used during the Christian Period.

BRICKS

During the last survey of the site, the author collected seven bricks from the mound. They appeared to be interesting because of the incised symbols characterizing them, most probably produced before firing, with a pointed tool with a rounded point.

Brick n°1 (Fig. 1): it has a rectangular section, with a length of 26cm, width of 13.5cm, and thickness of 6cm. The incision is on one of the main sides and consists of a sketch composed of a central rhombus with three smaller triangles representing the arms of a cross. The triangles are formed by the same continuous lines which draw the perimeter of the rhombus. On the bottom angle of the main figure is incised a figure composed of two segments, which appear to be a trident.

Brick n°2 (Figs. 2-3): it consists of a fragment of a rectangular brick, broken along its width. The maximum length of the remaining piece is 22cm, while the width is 20cm and the thickness is 6cm. On both the faces of the brick, there are some signs. On one face, a deep incision produced by a pointed tool with rounded point appears along the crack. Unfortunately, the break does not allow the identification of the incised sketch. Other smaller signs are on the left side of the same face. On the opposite one, there is a paw print, maybe a feline because of the lack of claws signs.

Brick n°3 (Fig. 4): it consists of a piece of a rectangular brick, broken along its width. The maximum length is 19.50cm, the width is 20cm and the thickness is 5.50cm. On one of the main sides, some signs occur. They consist of three segments. One represents a continuous curved line. The other two segments form a second curved line which crosses the first one. The whole figure seems similar to the sketched body of a fish. However, it is not possible to confirm this hypothesis because of the break.

Brick n°4 (Fig. 5): it is the middle piece of a rectangular brick. The length of the remaining piece is 23.5cm, the width is 18.5cm and the thickness is 8cm. The surface of the main face presents some shallow

grooves and signs. Some of them are incised with a tool with a rounded point. It is impossible to establish what the sketch represents.

Brick n°5 (Fig. 6): it consists of a fragment of brick. It includes some shallow grooves on the surface and some signs. The length of the piece is 22cm, the width is 18.5cm and the thickness is 4.5cm. It is possible to distinguish a vertical segment on the top of which are represented three others joining on one side. The whole figure is unclear.

Brick n°6 (Fig. 7): the fragment of brick is characterized by a burned surface. Its size is 22.5cm of length, 21cm of width and 6cm of thickness. On the main side, there is a sign perhaps complete. It is composed of a vertical segment, on the top of which a continuous line defines the perimeter of a triangle which is turned upside down, one extremity corresponds to the end of the vertical segment. The burned and almost vitrified surface suggests the brick was exposed to high temperature.

Brick n°7 (Fig.8): most of the broken brick is burned. The size is 16cm of length, 22cm width and 8cm of thickness. No signs have been recorded.

The most interesting bricks are numbers 1, 3 and 6. The others are excluded, at the moment, from this investigation because of their incompleteness, or because the signs characterizing them may be accidental scratchings. The symbols occurring on the bricks from Goz el-Rejeb could be compared with some graffiti of the Christian period especially found in the site of Soba. As Welsby (1998) suggests, in Nubia the tradition of symbols and marks on building material occurs throughout the historical periods, since the pharaonic period, like on the bricks of the fortress at Sai. In some contexts, letters and marks were used as guidelines for the correct order of assemblage of structures: this is the case of Musawwarat es-Sufra where a number of letters in Greek and Meroitic have been found on the back of stones and in the cathedral of Old Dongola. Christian monograms and symbols on red bricks also indicate the reused, during the Christian period, of the temple IIIa at Musawwarat es Sufra. Furthermore, it is worthy to note that in the Gash Delta, two fragments of red-bricks with letters in either the Greek or Ethiopian alphabet occur (Fattovich 1984, 400, pl. I). The presence of all these elements could testify a long-established tradition in Sudan.

The most interesting comparison is certainly the one with the symbols on the pottery and red-bricks found at Soba.

GRAFFITI FROM SOBA

The site of Soba was the capital of the kingdom of Alwa. The excavations conducted between 1981 and 1991 brought into the light pottery and red bricks characterized by several marks or symbols. They were divided into five categories: monograms; texts written in Greek, Coptic and Old Nubian; cryptograms; single letters and miscellaneous figures. The richest category is the one of the monograms, consisting in Greek and Coptic letters inscribed in a pattern which spelt a name. One of the most common is the monogram of the Archangel Michael but also personal monograms like Maria, David. The frequency of some recurring names, similar to sacred names, suggests that many inscriptions were intended to invoke divine blessing on the vessel. Sometimes the personal names could be written out in their entirety. Several graffiti include crosses, palm, fronds, fish and stars connected with the Christian faith. However, one may suggest that these graffiti were also executed by people living in a Christian cultural environment (Anderson 1998). Moreover, many of graffiti although found in Christian contexts do not have such clear association. This is the case of crosses, a motif noted on Meroitic pottery. However, every incised cross found at Soba is dated at period after the introduction of Christianity. There are many variants of the crosses, especially of the Greek cross, from simple forms to more complex patterns.

Some potteries are characterized by marks incised on the vessels before firing and inscriptions executed in paint by the pot painter. The marks are divided into different categories: monograms, texts, single letters including letters of the Greek alphabet and Miscellaneous. In some instances, difficulties occur in distinguishing some drawings from monograms, and in other cases the meaning of symbols escape to our comprehension.

Dealing with bricks, the majority of incised bricks of Soba come from deposits associated with buildings and graves. The symbols on the bricks include impressed decorations, letters of the Greek alphabet like delta, theta, lambda. Most of them represent circles, straights, curved lines, what may be a fish and simple crosses. These symbols could be interpreted as markers' marks, denoting the provenance from particular brickworks. This practice of the incised bricks at Soba appears to be confined to the early Medieval period (Welsby Sjöström 1998).

THE GOZ EL-REJEB MATERIALS IN CONTEXT

In the case of the bricks of Goz el-Rejeb, the presence of some similar symbols from the pottery and bricks of Soba should be remarked.

The symbol on brick n°1 is very similar to the cross incised on some potteries of Soba, formed by three triangles as arms and a central rhombus (Figs. 9-12) (Welsby 1998, 133, n° 250, 250-4, 250-6, 250-8). In turn, the sign engraved under the cross is most likely comparable with the incised decoration found on the ceramic (Fig. 13) (Welsby, Daniels 1991, 226, n°285). According to the hypothesis suggested by Welsby Sjöström of the symbol found on the red-brick of Soba n°17 (Welsby Sjöström 1998, 212), the incision on the brick n°2 probably refers to a fish (Fig. 14). The brick n°6 has a symbol which reminds to a sign on a brick (Welsby 1998, 211, n°1) interpreted by Welsby Sjöström as the Greek letter, delta (Fig. 15).

Even the brick found by Monneret de Villard could be part of a cultural tradition which appear for these few aspects similar to that Soba. However, it is worth to note that Monneret de Villard does not specify if the name "Petros" was in form of text or a monogram. The text of the brick "Petros" could be inserted in the category of the sacred name, like Maria, David, Ioannes. Maybe they refer to the Christian period, for the nature of the representation and the form of the cross, different from that used in Meroitic Period.

Now, the question is what does indicate that incised bricks and why they are at Goz el-Rejeb?

The mound of bricks was interpreted by Monneret de Villard as part of a huge cemetery, and probably the concentration of bricks on the top of the mound could be interpreted as graves. Other similar tombs have been found by the IAEES during the field season 2012, on the site UA126 (Manzo 2013). There, the bricks were used to cove. In that case the graves and the symbols incised on the top could be interpreted as an invocation of the divine blessing, like in the case of the pottery and bricks at Soba found in religious contexts.

The main part of the site at Goz el-Rejeb is characterized by tumuli and the mound with probably tombs of the Christian period, indicating a different tradition. The pottery collected there, except for that of the Prehistoric period, is dated at the Hagiz and Gergaf cultures (Perna 2018).

Vantini recorded the description of Ibn Hawqal about a ruler of a Beja tribe, the Baqlin, composed of nomadic herdsmen, inhabited the valley of the Gash, who during the 10th century was a vassal of the king of Alwa (Welsby, Daniels 1991, 8; Vantini 1975, 163)¹.

Also, Ibn Selim El Aswani talked about people living along a river, perhaps to be identified with the Atbara, "mixed" maybe because of marriages between the Nubians of Alwa and the Beja (Welsby, Daniels 1991, 8; Vantini 1975, 630). According to his hypothesis, it could be suggested that peaceful coexistence between the Alwan and their nomadic neighbours to the East did occur on occasion. According this information, two hypotheses should be proposed to explain the occurrence of bricks with Christian symbols at Goz el-Rejeb: if we interpret the concentration of bricks at Goz el-Rejeb as tombs, maybe they belong to people who were living in a Christian cultural environment assuming this specific cultural tradition. This hypothesis is also supported by the red bricks used in the superstructure of some of graves that were compared to the Christian cemeteries in Upper Nubia at site UA126.

Nevertheless, it should be also considered that most of bricks at Goz el-Rejeb are broken and burned, maybe exposed to high temperature. This could also suggest a reuse of the bricks. A scientific systematic investigation of the site may clarify the use of the mound and of the bricks. Moreover, analysis of the bricks can suggest the provenance. It cannot be excluded a production in the area near Goz el-Rejeb itself. In the area of Gash where Fattovich found other red-bricks with incisions, there are actually many brickworks where the bricks from Goz el-Rejeb may have originated.

¹ About Baqlin see also Fattovich 1984, 98-101.

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Fig. 1 - Brick n°1 from Goz el-Rejeb



Fig. 2 - Brick n°2 from Goz el-Rejeb

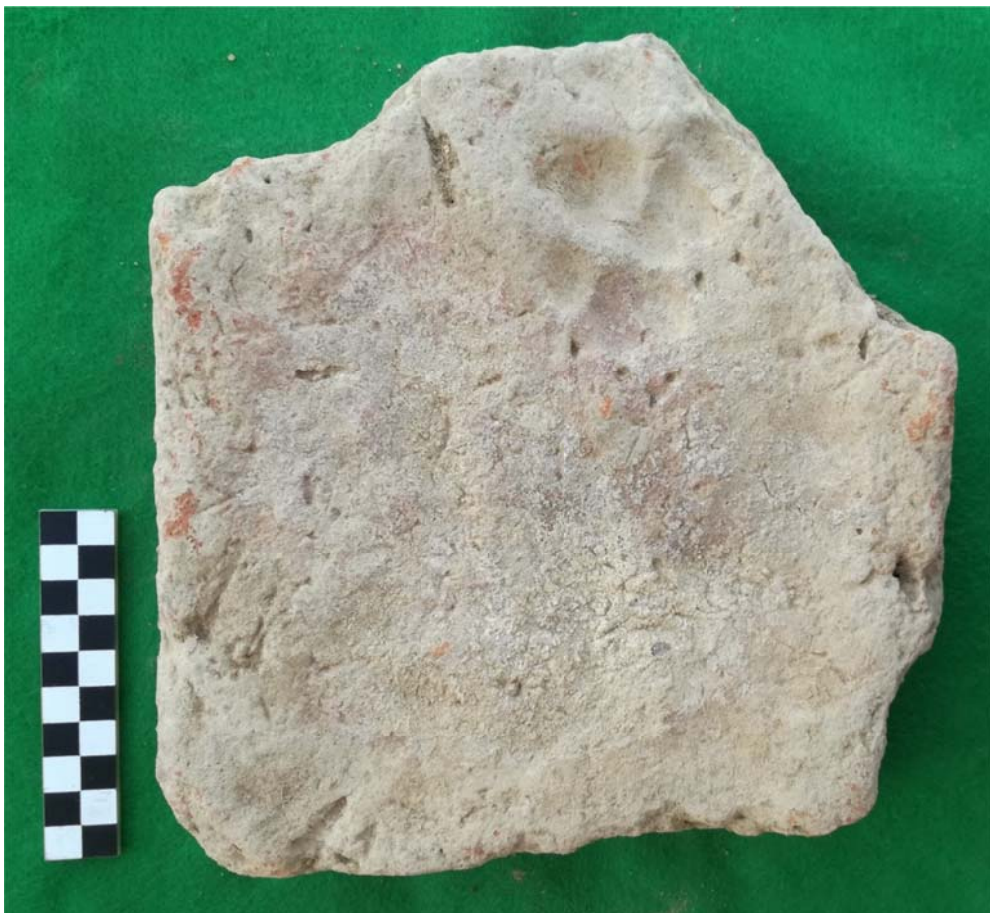


Fig. 3 - Brick n°2 from Goz el-Rejeb



Fig. 4 - Brick n°3 from Goz el-Rejeb



Fig. 5 - Brick n°4 from Goz el-Rejeb

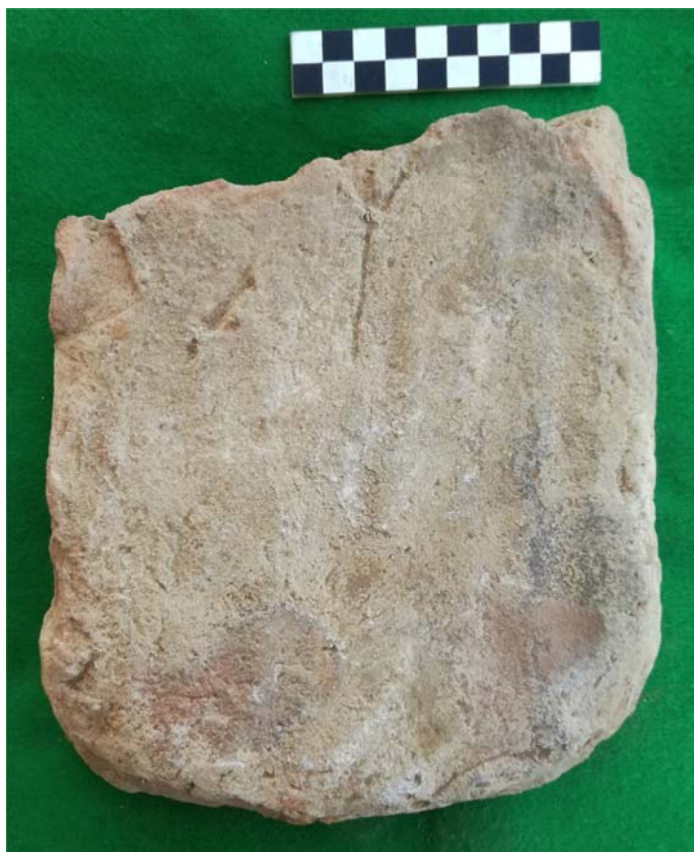


Fig. 6 - Brick n°5 from Goz el-Rejeb



Fig. 7 - Brick n°6 from Goz el-Rejeb

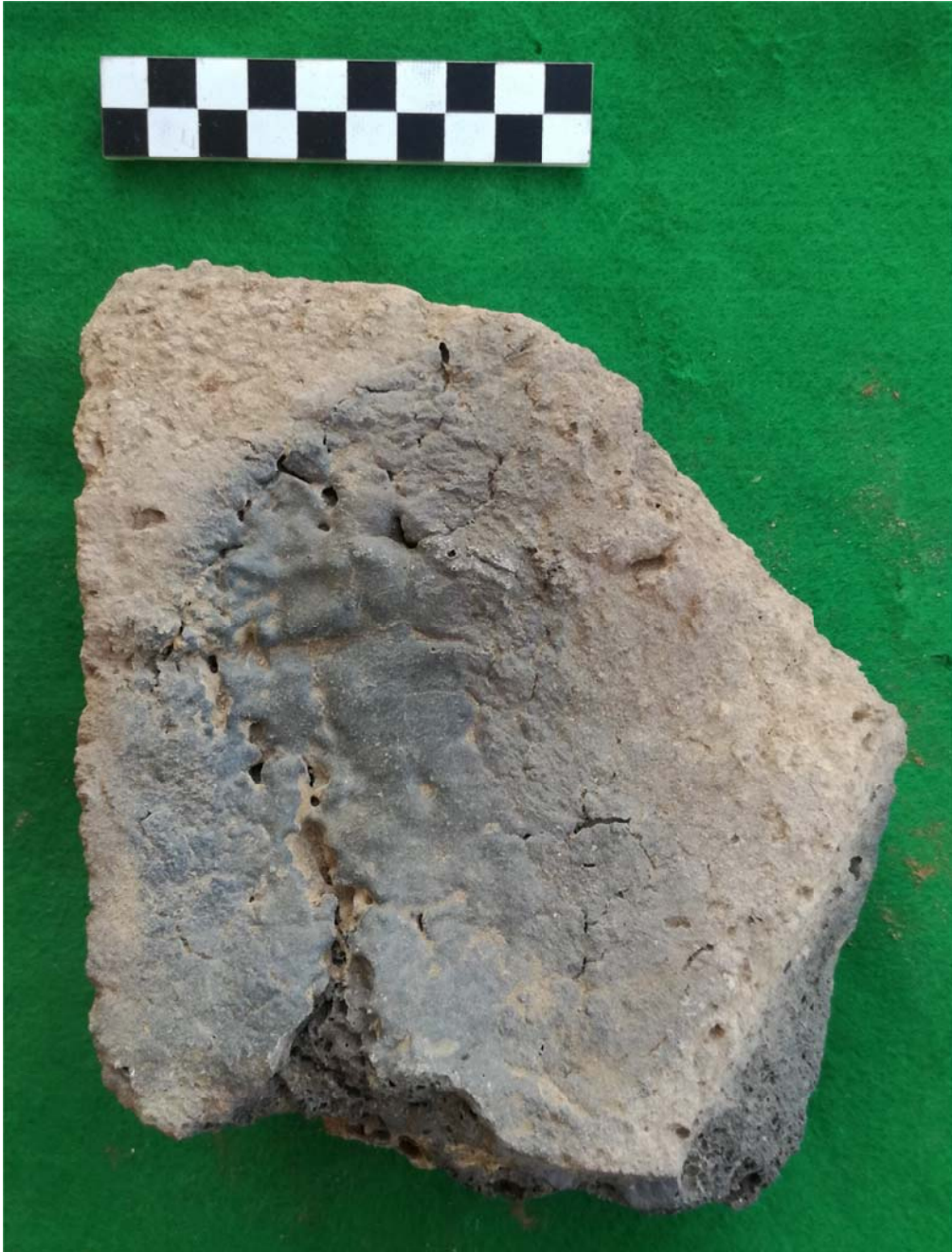


Fig. 8 - Brick n°7 from Goz el-Rejeb

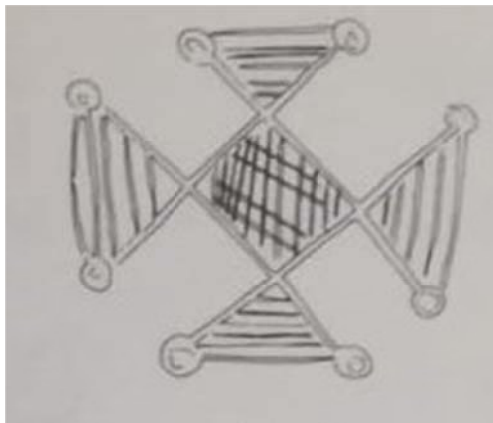


Fig. 9 - Cross engraved on pottery from Soba (Welsby 1998, 133, n°250)

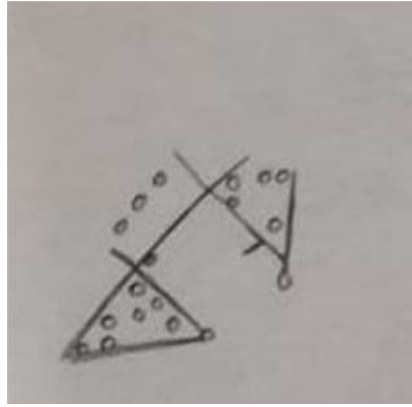


Fig. 10 - Cross engraved on pottery from Soba (Welsby 1998, 133, n°250-4)



Fig. 11 - Cross engraved on pottery from Soba (Welsby 1998, 133, n°250-6)

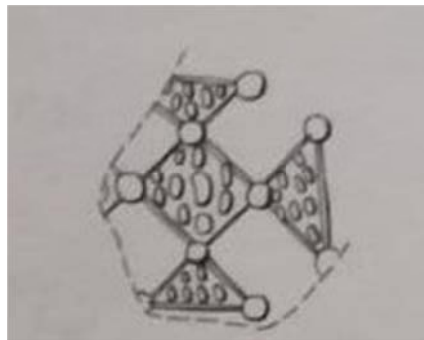


Fig. 12 - Cross engraved on pottery from Soba (Welsby 1998, 133, n°250-8)



Fig. 13 - Incised decoration on pottery (Welsby 1998, 226, n°285)

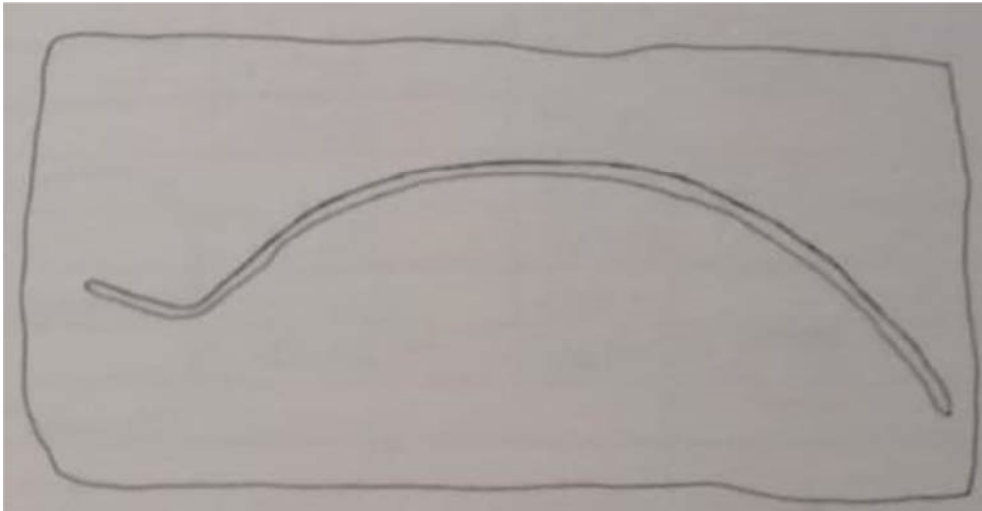


Fig. 14 - Redbrick from Soba (Welby Sjöström 1998, 212, n°17)

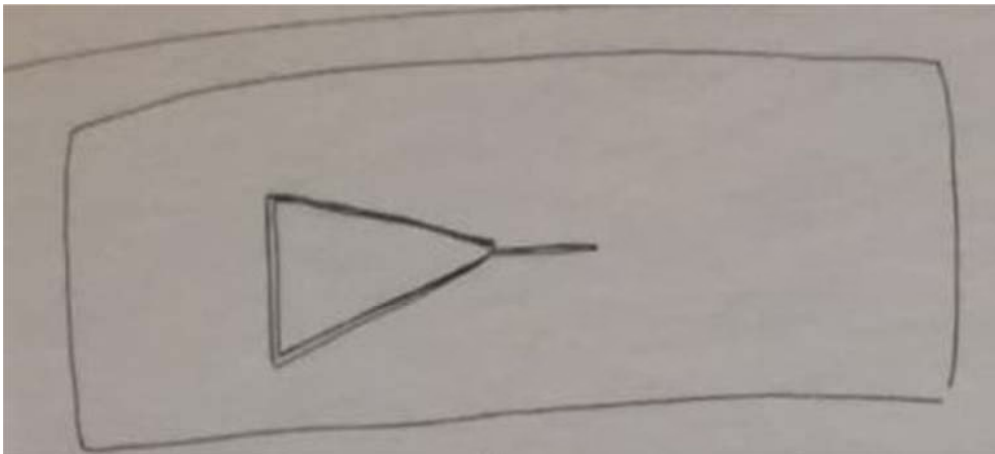


Fig. 15 - Possible Greek letter incised on a brick (Welby 1998, 211, n°1)