

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION AT AKSUM (ETHIOPIA) OF THE UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI NAPOLI "L'ORIENTALE"  
2013 Field Season: Seglamen

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with contributions by  
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### Introduction

In November 2013 the Italian Archaeological Expedition of the Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" (UNO) directed by Rodolfo Fattovich conducted the 4th field season of investigations at the site of Seglamen, northern Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>.

The site, 15km to the south-west of Aksum, was first recorded and partially excavated in the early 1970s (Schneider 1976; Ricci and Fattovich 1987; Bernard *et alii* 1991); from 2010 it is systematically investigated by the UNO as part of a broader research program in collaboration with Aksum University (Fattovich *et alii* 2011, 1; Fattovich *et alii* 2012, 112).

### Fieldwork

Field activities carried out in 2013 included surface survey at Addi Holahul and Koranu and excavations at Seglamen.

### Survey (D. Capra)

#### Addi Holahul

The site of Addi Holahul is located 1km south of Seglamen. It was first identified by Guish Assefa in 2010; on that occasion a preliminary survey was carried out by Laurel Phillipson, Luisa Sernicola and Guish Assefa. In 2013, a more systematic survey has been conducted to better define its extension and provide intensive collections of the exposed materials<sup>2</sup>.

The surveyed area consists of two farmlands, coded as HH 1 and HH 2, extending over about 360 and 90 square meters respectively. A non-systematic selective collection of visible

materials was carried out over the entire area. At HH 1 exposed materials include lithic artefacts (pre-cores, cores, flakes of different types, and fragments, Figs. 2, 3), at HH 2 pre-cores, cores, flakes, fragments and two handstones. A single ceramic specimen consisting of a fragment of Black Topped Ware was found at HH 1.

Given the proximity to the pre-Aksumite settlement at Seglamen, one might suggest that these stone tools could belong to the same period, but the locational factor is not sufficient to provide a dating. The only chronological/cultural marker is represented by the fragment of Black Topped Ware recorded at the site but, again, a single fragment is not enough for a reliable dating of the site at the pre-Aksumite period, when this type of pottery was produced. The density and typology of exposed lithics suggest that Addi Holahul was a quarry site used to obtain the materials necessary for the production of lithic tools subsequently used at Seglamen.

#### Koranu/Medogwe

The primary purposes of the survey carried out in 2013 in the area of Koranu/Medogwe were: a) to conduct a systematic collection of surface materials at the Proto- and Early-/Classic-Aksumite cemetery recorded in the 1950s (Gezau Hailemariam 1955, 50-55; de Contenson 1961, 15-23) and located by members of the UNO/AU expedition in 2012 (Sernicola 2014, 480-481), and b) to report the occurrence of potential new sites in the nearby. The site is located about 3km to the north/east of Seglamen (Fig. 1). The surveyed spots include two areas: MDG 1 and MDG 2. Lithic materials collected at MDG 1 may be dated to the Proto-Aksumite (ca. 400 - 50 BC) and Early/Classic Aksumite periods (ca. 50 BC - AD 350) on the basis of associated ceramics.

### Excavations

Archaeological excavations concentrated at site SG 1, a pre-Aksumite village extending for about 7 hectares at the easternmost edge of the

<sup>1</sup> Members of the 2013 expedition were Rodolfo Fattovich, research director, Luisa Sernicola, field director, Michela Gaudiello, ceramic analyst, Marco Barbarino, surface surveyor, Diego Capra, archaeologist (UNO, Italy), Laurel Phillipson, lithic analyst (UK), Bar Kribus, assistant archaeologist (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel). The expedition has been funded by the Ministero Italiano degli Affari Esteri, Cambiaso Risso Marine & Aviation Srl, Naples, UNO, Naples.

<sup>2</sup> The survey was conducted by Diego Capra, Zenash Kefyalew and Guish Assefa.

modern village of Seglamen. The site encompasses the localities of Amda Tsion and Mogareb where remains of a settlement and of a cemetery had been respectively identified and partially excavated in 2010, 2011 and 2012 (Fattovich *et alii* 2011; Fattovich *et alii* 2012; Sernicola *et alii* 2013; Sernicola 2014; Sernicola and Phillipson 2014).

In the previous seasons three major architectural phases alternated to intermediate occupations were identified at Amda Tsion and recorded as Phase I, II and III from the bottom of the sequence to the surface. In 2013 excavation in this sector was aimed at outlining the whole plan of the previously recorded structures and at better understanding their stratigraphic relation. Four new excavation units (Seg IX, Seg X, Seg XII, Seg XIII) were opened and the excavation of Seg II/2010 and Seg VIII/2012 was resumed and completed (Fig. 4).

At Mogareb a new excavation unit, Seg XI was established (Fig. 4) in order to acquire additional information on the funerary practices performed at the site.

#### SEG II, VIII, IX, X, XII, XIII

(*B. Kribus, D. Capra and L. Sernicola*)

Excavations at Seg II, VIII, IX, X, XII, XIII, provided significant additional information for each of the major architectural phases so far detected (Fig. 5).

Phase I: on the 2013 evidence, the most ancient structure consisted of four quadrangular rooms of various sizes arranged in an “L” shape, with three rooms (Rooms 1, 2, and 3) located one after the other along the northwest/southeast axis and the fourth one (Room 4) immediately to the west of the northernmost one. A fifth, rectangular living area, a room or presumably a paved open-air space, was located to the south of Room 4 and to the west of Rooms 1 and 2 (Fig. 6). Room 2, the southernmost one, was characterised by an L-shaped stone bench on top of which complete and almost complete pots were preserved. Traces of a wall probably delimiting an open-air space to the east of the building were also recorded. Finally, the remains of a hearth associated to an external living floor and a dump have been recorded about 5 m to the east of the building; these may be related to the exposed structure or to a different dwelling not yet recorded.

Phase II: evidence of this phase include a few walls, one semicircular hearth and the remains of a circular furnace, which were recorded

during the previous field seasons, as well as the remains of a circular wall with an internal stone bench, and another semicircular hearth (Fig. 7). Two additional features are associated with this wall: an external paved living floor and a soil deposit with the remains of a ceramic vessel, a grindstone and an ash cluster which can be interpreted as the internal occupation level associated with this structure.

Phase III: on the basis of the 2013 excavations the complete layout and size of the structure ascribed to this phase could be outlined (Fig. 8). This resulted to be a rectangular building divided into three sections by two NE/SW internal walls. Each of these sections is sub-divided by NW-SE walls into smaller rooms. Three rooms were uncovered in the northernmost section: Room 1, Room 2 and Room 5<sup>3</sup>. In Room 1 a square feature, 1.44m × 1.44m in size, made of roughly tabular stones and a soil mortar, was erected in the centre of the room, on top of a NE/SW wall. It may have supported a pillar sustaining the roof or a wood stairway giving access to an upper storey.

The central section is divided into three rooms, a large one to the east (Room 3), and two smaller ones to the west (Room 6 and 7), while four rooms occur in the southern section of the building (Room 4, Room 8, Room 9 and Room 10). All the rooms of the structure showed the remains of a floor foundation made of unworked stones mixed to hard-packed clay soil.

#### SEG XI (*L. Sernicola*)<sup>4</sup>

Excavation unit Seg XI at Mogareb (Fig. 4) brought to the light the remains of five tombs and four votive deposits.

Tombs include: Tomb 3, a roughly rectangular shaft and soil fill with complete and fragmented pots, lithics, ornaments and human bones; Tomb 4, a roughly rectangular shaft, a standing sandstone stela and soil fill with complete and fragmented pots, lithics, ornaments and human bones; Tomb 5, a roughly rectangular shaft and soil fill with complete and fragmented pots, lithics, ornaments and human bones; Tomb 6, a roughly rectangular shaft and soil fill with complete and fragmented pots, lithics, ornaments and human bones; Tomb 7, a roughly rectangular shaft and soil fill, one fallen sandstone stela has been recorded at the top of

<sup>3</sup> For detailed measures of the walls and rooms see Fig. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Excavation at Seg XI was supervised by Samuel Walker.

the shaft, a smaller stela in the filling, no traces of human bones have been detected.

Excavations at the cemetery so far conducted brought to the light traces of three, or possibly four, different funerary features which provide interesting insights in the burial practices performed by people occupying this area during the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. They include:

1. tombs associated to a stela: in this case a sandstone monolith, entirely or partly carved, is located inside the shaft together with the burial and the grave goods;
2. tombs without stela consisting of a roughly rectangular shaft with associated skeletal remains and grave goods;
3. votive deposits characterised by pockets of soil displaced around the graves, in the proximity of outcropping natural boulders.

A fourth evidence may be represented by a single specimen (Tomb 7) consisting of a roughly rectangular shaft with a standing stela erected into it and a smaller one therein buried. This feature may be interpreted as a cenotaph, but further evidence is needed to strengthen this hypothesis. Noteworthy, a similar funerary practice is attested at the cemetery of Ona Enda Aboy Zewge, on the hilltop of Beta Giyorgis, Aksum, since Proto-Aksumite times (ca. 400 - 150 BC) (Fattovich and Bard 1993, 41-71). The possible occurrence of cenotaphs with a buried stela replacing the deceased and a standing stela marking the tomb among the funerary practices recorded both at Seglamen and at the Proto-Aksumite cemetery at Beta Giyorgis, point to a population continuity in this region over a period spanning over the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC and the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD, but most likely pre-dating it. Other cogent examples in this sense are represented by the use of standing monoliths to mark funerary areas and in the continuity in knapping techniques and lithic artefacts style which will be described in a separate section.

#### *Pottery (M. Gaudiello)*

In 2013 the 40% of the pottery from Seg II, Seg VIII, Seg IX and Seg X at Amda Tsion and about the 60-70% of the ceramics from Seg XI at Mogareb were examined and described in conformity with the procedures used in the

former field seasons (Fattovich *et alii* 2011, 4-6, Fattovich *et alii* 2012, 117-120)<sup>5</sup>.

Analysed ceramics from the settlement were listed on the basis of their association to the major architectural phases and intermediate ones. Ceramics assemblages related to the building of Phase III are mainly characterized by Reddish Brown, Black, Red, Black Topped and Brown Micaceous Ware. Potshards from this phase mostly show polished and burnished surfaces; these treatments are often associated with bowls and jars. Brown Micaceous Ware was used to make bowls and open bowls with rough exterior and polished interior.

Ceramics assemblages from the building of Phase III analysed in 2013 come from three distinguished contexts: Room 1, Room 2 and Room 4. Assemblages from Room 1 are characterized by polished and burnished Reddish Brown bowls, polished Black Topped bowls and cups, Black polished bowls and jars, burnished Black bowls and cups, one polished Red bowl with notches on the lip, one Brown Micaceous bowl and one Reddish Orange smoothed jar. Assemblages from Room 4 present burnished shards of Reddish Brown bottles, Red Ware bowls, Black and Black Topped bowls, cups and deep bowls. In the same assemblage are counted polished shards of Reddish Brown open bowls and Brown Ware jugs suggesting that Room 4 was probably used as a store for service and cooking pots. The last assemblage related to Phase III comes from Room 2, but it counts only two decorated shards of Black Topped Ware with rows of punctuates and vertical burnishing on the exterior. The presence of polished Black Topped Ware in association with few samples of bowls with notches on the lip reminds the Middle Pre-Aksumite context at Mezber (D'Andrea & Welton in press).

Analysed ceramics from Phase II consist of abundant polished and burnished shards of Reddish Brown, Brown, and Red Ware. In addition to the shapes recorded in the upper levels, in this phase we observe an unpolished Black Ware flask, one miniature Red Coarse Ware cup and finally one fragment of incense burner with the incisions filled by coloured paste. Globular small jars with a comb decoration on the belly between two horizontal

<sup>5</sup> The ceramic typology has been outlined on the analysis of over 8,000 fragments and complete pots.

handles is another common shape produced with the Brown Micaceous Ware in use into the settlement area of SG 1.

The most ancient architectural phase, Phase I, shows completely different ceramic assemblages with different surface treatments and fabrics than the ones from the upper levels. The ceramics collected from the living floors and from the layers immediately above the bedrock includes mainly fragments of burnished Black, Black Topped, Dark Red Wares and slipped lustrous Red Ware.

Ceramics from the cemetery include beakers, small cups, miniature vessels, incense burners, pot-stands and open bowls. The shape and the surface treatment is completely different from the ones recovered in the settlement area. Surfaces are often unpolished, the clay is sandy and there is no evidence of real use of the objects. In Tomb 7 two complete small Black Topped beakers, one smoothed Black Mouth deep bowl, an almost complete incense burner with deep incisions on both surfaces, and a central part of another incense burner were collected (Fig.9). The other tombs and related votive deposits released abundant Black Topped beakers, smoothed Reddish Orange miniatures of cylindrical beakers and other objects. An intriguing aspect in the burial practice is the use of an open bowl to cover the skull of the deceased recorded in two of the tombs so far excavated (Fig. 10).

#### *Knapped and other lithic artefacts* (L. Phillipson)

Study of the lithic artefacts recovered from Seglamen in the 2013 increases our understanding of domestic and commercial economy and confirms the findings of previous seasons. While there is evidence that a wide variety of craft and industrial activities were conducted at Seglamen, mainstays of the local economy were the cultivation of cereal crops and the processing of animal hides. Some, or perhaps all, cultivation was done with stone hoes, and grain was harvested with knives whose composite blades consisted of replaceable knapped stone elements. Wheat and other grains were processed on concave or flat grindstones (Fig. 11), depending on the hardness of the grain, and were baked on ceramic trays lubricated with an oily paste of crushed seeds. While circular handstones with a hammered dimple and surrounding rubbed area were most probably used to oil baking trays, and sub-

rectangular handstones traces of a red clay slip probably relate to their production, there is relatively little lithic evidence that other ceramic wares were manufactured within the area of the Seglamen excavations. Other handstones with textures ranging from rasp-like to finely polished attest to various abrading processes. Chief among these was cleaning and refining animal skins to produce rawhide, vellum, and perhaps tanned leather. Other handstones were most probably used for woodworking, stoneworking, culinary and medicinal preparations, and perhaps as linen smoothers.

The very close similarity of lithic materials, knapping techniques and artefact styles predating the first building phase at Seglamen and continuing into the Aksumite period at Aksum and on Beta Giyorgis demonstrates a fundamental continuity of economy and population over a period pre-dating and spanning the introduction and development of social, political and possibly linguistic innovations that were superimposed on a well-established and enduring cultural and economic foundation. Among the many examples of a continuing lithic tradition, attention may be called to an obsidian backed bladelet with a shouldered tang (Fig. 12), which had been utilised as a hafted knife. It is almost perfectly duplicated in size, shape, material, the method of its hafting, and in use wear by a similar piece found at an early Aksumite site [LP33=TgLM 102] northwest of Beta Giyorgis hill (Phillipson 2009; pp. 20-21, pl. 13). Other cogent example of this continuity are provided by the pre-Aksumite circular handstone, that is presently being used by a local housewife in a manner that produces use-wear modifications duplicating those found on many excavated pre-Aksumite examples. Similarly, pre-Aksumite concave grindstones closely resemble present-day examples, and red-stained handstones are duplicated by modern examples of the same tool. Lithic evidence from Seglamen also supports an interpretation of fundamental cultural continuity, with minor regional variations, encompassing the pre-Aksumite sequences of north-western and eastern Tigray. Most notably, this includes the widespread occurrence of Levallois-style rectangular cores with approximately pyramidal profiles. Much work remains to be done to elucidate the extent and significance of temporal and regional variations within the broad continuities of the pre-Aksumite-to-Aksumite lithic sequence.

*Small finds (L. Sernicola)*

Small finds from the cemetery include metals (mostly copper alloy bangles and a small stamp-seal), clay objects (zoomorphic clay figurines (Fig. 13) and ceramic miniatures of cups and beakers), stone beads and pendants, and glass or glass paste beads. A special mention is required for the remains of a single necklace uncovered in Tomb 6, made of about 120 beads of various types including glass paste, chalcedony and chert beads. One single bone artefact was recorded in 2013, consisting of a circular bead uncovered in Tomb 3.

In the area of the settlement small finds consist of one metal earring, few clay objects including ear/lip-studs, stamp seals and fragments of a possible human figurine, stone beads and other ornaments and few small flakes of a pearly oyster (*Pinctada margaritifera*).

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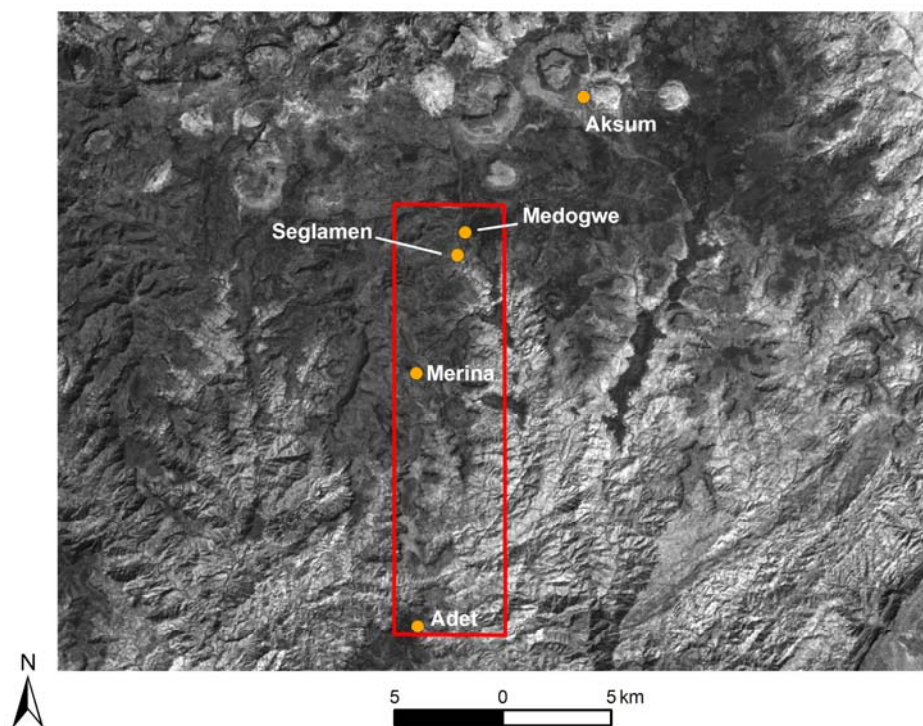


Fig. 1 - Map showing the study-area



Fig. 2 - Levallois-style flake from HH 1



Fig. 3 - Levallois-style cores from HH 1



Fig. 4 - Map showing the location of all the EUs from 2010 to 2013



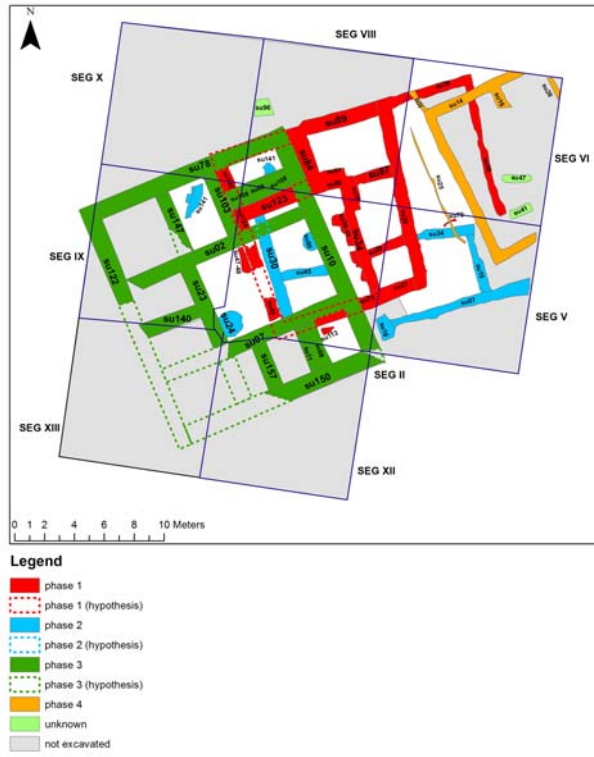


Fig. 5 - Plan of the three architectural phases so far detected from all excavation units

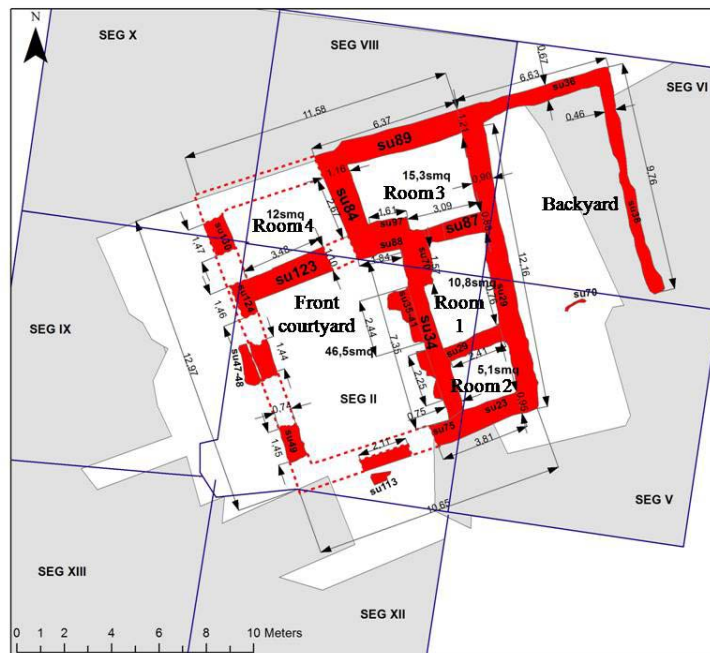


Fig. 6 - General plan of the building of Phase I

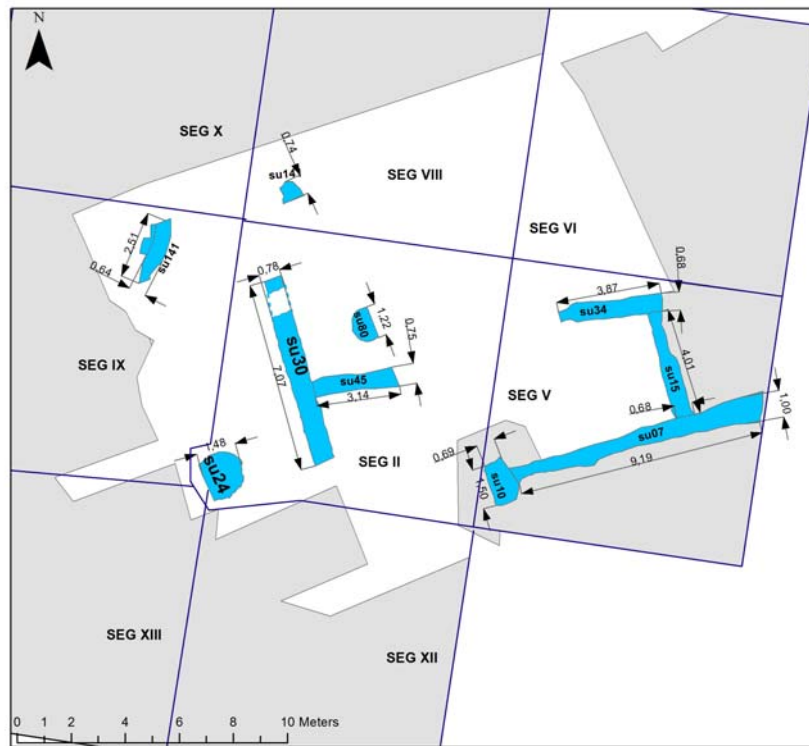


Fig. 7 - General plan of the features of Phase II

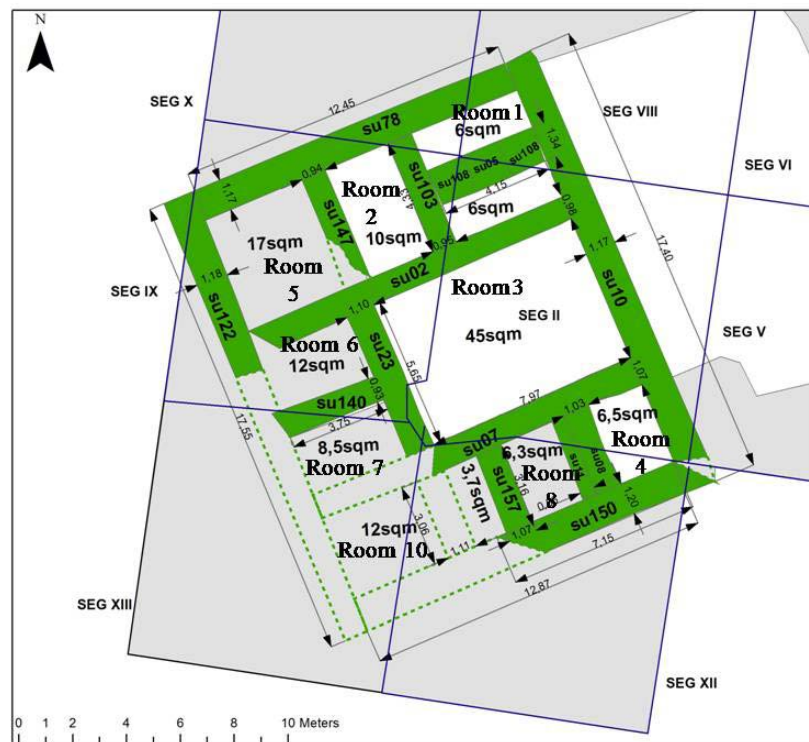


Fig. 8 - General plan of the building of Phase III



Fig. 9 - Pots from Seg XI, Tomb 7



Fig. 10 - Bowl from Seg XI, SU 23, Tomb 6



Fig. 11 - Seg IX, SU 155: flat grindstone with small vesicles



Fig. 12 - Seg XI, SU 1: obsidian bladelet



Fig. 13 - Seg XI, SU 18(votive deposit): clay zoomorphic figurine