

Excavations at Khingar Mound 1991

Nepal-German Project on High Mountain Archaeology

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This communication gives an account of the presuppositions and of the main results of the Nepal-German excavations at the Khingar settlement-mound in the Mustang district. These excavations were executed by the German Archaeological Institute in co-operation with HMG Department of Archaeology. Thanks to the gracious permission given by the Director General of HMG Department of Archaeology a joint expedition represented by Mr. Ch. Tripathi from the Department and by Dr. H.-G. Hüttel from the KAVA¹ of the German Archaeological Institute (Bonn) started excavations at Khingar in August 1991.

These excavations mean the first step towards an "archaeology of protohistoric and medieval settlements and fortresses in Mustang" as it is outlined by a special research programme of the German Archaeological Institute within the scope of the "Nepal-German Project on High Mountain Archaeology"

In close collaboration with other scholars of different branches as in particular settlement geography, historical geography, tibetology and medieval history an archaeology of forts and fortified places ("castle archaeology" as you may call it) can contribute fundamental data to the settlement history of the Nepal-Tibetan borderlands in the northern Himalayas. As medieval Mustang (= upper and lower gLo) is very short of historical sources relevant to political history archaeological sources necessarily occupy an important position in reconstructing the medieval history of Mustang.

Above all castles or fortresses form a source-group of high evidence within an "archaeology of the early state and the formation of sovereign authorities". Block-castles or frontier fortresses in particular obviously prove the spatial effect of actions taken by the sovereign authority. Castle building as a reflex of a "castle policy" within a certain strategy of territorial organization provides evidence of governmental efficiency and

persistency as well as the range of government power. Within consistent settlement areas frontier fortresses as well as forts built to protect the trade-routes are evidence of a uniform political will, i.e. of a centralized region which is as one at least with regard to the means and manifestations of its political representation.²

Chronological or/and spatial density of castle building can give us standards to describe different grades of centralization and territorialization or vice versa tendencies of disintegration (particularism/separatism). As to the economy of the medieval strongholds the excavated materials provide evidence of the range of economical and cultural relations from local self-sufficiency up to far distance trade.³

Castles as military architecture in general are usually among the most characteristic features of its age less in respect of style than with regard to technique and the socio-political aspects of their strategic function.

As there wasn't executed previously any excavation either in the Muktinath Valley nor in Mustang (and Western Tibet) on the whole archaeological work first needs basic research laying a stratigraphical foundation for future research. So before digging up castles or fortresses in southern Mustang we made up our mind first to excavate a small but multi-layered settlement which shows promise of yielding a cultural sequence to serve as the backbone of a future chronology system of Mustang and adjacent regions in the northern Himalayas.

Another aspect of our investigations are the relations between protohistoric open-air settlements resp. castles and the pre- and protohistoric cave-sites of Mustang sometimes spoken of as "cave-cities".⁴

Were cave-sites and the protohistoric settlements nearby occupied at the same time by different people of different cultural levels or by men of different social status within the same community? Do cave-sites and open-air dwellings represent complementary forms of synchronous settlement or do they testify different evolutionary stages of high mountain settlement?

What about the people at the fortified places in northern Mustang or in the Muktinath Valley? Have they conquered the valley and expelled the former population from places then fortified? Did they take refuge in the caves?

Were the fortresses built up to protect men and trade-routes or to subject the original population to aggressive intruders either from the north (may be gLo or Tibet) or the west (e.g. Jumla)?

Some of the early cave dwellers may be called "troglodytes". Nevertheless, the age and the chronology of the caves on the whole is still unknown. We know that the caves don't form a homogenous unit but were occupied in different periods prehistoric as well as protohistoric and modern ones.⁵

To make final choices about the sites to excavate I have visited in 1990/1 many sites in the upper Kali Gandaki region as also in the Muktinath Valley and in the vicinity of Lubra (fig. 1: map). In agreement with HMG Department of Archaeology we selected for excavation the fortresses at Dzarkot as also a settlement mound nearby Khingar.

The Khingar settlement mound (also called Khingar II or Khalong) completely comes up to our expectations and presuppositions:

a) the mound is situated just opposite an extended cave system

b) situated directly by the roadside the mound is half-way between Muktinath and Kagbeni within sight of the fortresses at Dzarkot and Dzong

c) the pottery samples from surface collections correspond in many characteristics with samples collected from the fortresses as also from some cave-sites

d) preliminary analysis of surface collections as well as hints to stratigraphy as given by modern robber trenches prove a multi-stratified situation which let expect an according cultural sequence.

The Khingar mound is about 130 m long and 80 m wide. The mound is raising up to a height of about 11 m above the field-path at the western edge of the mound (fig. 2: contour map of Khingar mound). In the northwest the mound is bounded by Tashi's farm, in the south and west by stone walls fencing the surrounding fields.

From the surface we collected many pottery samples of great varieties as to shape, decoration and surface treatment. Many structural remains still to be seen on the surface level of the mound (fig. 2) prove a high density of architectural features all over the mound.

The joint Nepal-German team started the first excavation campaign within the "High Mountain Archaeology Project" at August 1st. This campaign we have concentrated on Khingar mound where our first season came to an end at September 17th.

We have laid three trenches within a grid-system. The grid-system was laid out with coordinate axis oriented strictly (magnetic) north. The intersecting point of the axis marks the datum plane resp. the benchmark of the excavation which is set at will to 100 m. The coordinate axis subdivide the

mound in four sectors A,B,C,D. Each sector is subdivided in areas measuring 10m x 10m. All areas are designated with Roman numerals and are subdivided in 100 metersquares ordered horizontally from the upper left each marked with Arabic numerals.

Contexts or features are marked with F numbered with Arabic numerals. The scale usually employed for plans (plana and sections) is 1:20 except few cases like burials when a 1:10 scale was adopted.

We have laid 2 trenches one by one with a baulk of 2m in between in sector B. Each trench measures 8m x 6m. Trench B XXI was taken down to a depth of about 2,50 m, whereas the last level reached in B XXII lay 1,60 under the surface level. A third trench we have opened in Sector A near the southwestern fringe of the mound. This trench AI/XI measures about 12m x 8m and came down to a depth of about 2m under the surface level (fig. 3 - 5).

Whereas the B-trenches are strictly laid within the orthogonal grid, the A-trench follows the contours of a huge building to cut it out of the mound like a piece of cake. This structure is called H(ouse)1; its eastern wall is towering up to 4m above the modern surface level inside the structure. We have excavated this structure almost completely.

In AI/XI we have observed at least 5 floors better called tramplings in all rooms of the structure except the small room H 1/4. As it seems this room may be interpreted as a remain of an older structure integrated later in the younger structure of H1.

Layer-stratigraphy as well as the stratigraphy of structures and architectural features indicate a multi-phase settlement which presumably covers

preceding structures of at least one elder settlement period of Khingar mound. In trench B XXI there is also strong evidence for an elder settlement preceding the younger period of house 2: In my opinion e.g wall 39 and most likely the drainage "channel" in the corridor between H(ouses) 2 and 4 are representing the elder occupation of the mound.

After only one season stratigraphic data are of course still too incomplete to give reliable data. What we know for certain now is the evidence for at least two settlement periods. We learn from the structures of the younger period that it can be subdivided in two (more probably three) phases of using. This is additionally proved by small partition walls in between the corridors one built upon another but each separated by a small almost sterile layer.

Within the younger period we have observed an interesting development which is well testified in trench AI/XI. Here we can study not only the tendency to enlarge the house but also to fortify its walls. The outer walls near the fringe of the mound are more than 1 m thick. So is the wall 12 (masonry with exterior faces with rubble interior; in German: *Zweischalenmauer*) which is more likely a fortification structure than a wall of a normal dwelling.

Future fieldwork has to look for other fortification structures in particular along the mound's fringe. At the moment there is no archaeological evidence for a castle or fortress at Khingar mound, but we have found in trench A striking indications of a fortified dwelling at least. Additional hints to a fortified place are given by the oral tradition of Khingar which connect the settlement mound with a place named Khalong. Khalong is said to be the castle-like residence of a local chief or "king", "the master of 100 horses

". The big house in AI/XI indeed reminds us to the "huge towering houses" of some Baragaon chieftains which were described by Fürer-Haimendorf as well as the structural remains on the whole remind us to "houses built wall to wall, in some cases forming fortress-like clusters" (e.g. Tetang).⁶

In the first campaign we have not found any evidence for warlike events either traces of destruction or any other effects of violence. None of the skeletons we have excavated in the houses indicated violent death. As far as we can judge all the dead found at Khingar died a natural death. They were deposited in the houses, but it seems that they were buried regularly.⁷

Among ca. 6000 pottery sherds only 5% (i.e. about 300 pieces) are of reliable diagnostic value as seen from the variety of shapes, decorations and surface treatment. As we have no cultural or pottery sequence for Mustang and the northern Himalayas imports from the south, i.e. from India, from Tarai or from Kathmandu Valley are of great importance especially with regard to a chronology based on historical dates. Among the predominant yellowish, red and brown wares of local/regional origin we have found a lot of red polished and red slipped wares as well as some painted (black on red) and black enameled pottery (Fig.). Similar forms and fabrics from the south are usually dated or found in contexts from the Licchavi up to the early Malla-period. Some of the red ware sherds with incised graffiti as well as some stamped and rouletted (?) pottery could even be dated earlier. When dating south asian pottery we always should have in mind that we often know the starting point of pottery developments the end of which, however, is unknown in most cases. This situation is due to the lack of excavations in the late historical period which is up to now too short of strati

ographies to give reliable data for the exact time-range of many pottery forms and wares. A thorough pottery study in preparation will help to answer the problems connected with the chronology and provenience of the Khingar pottery.

The small finds or antiquities excavated at Khingar has given no reliable information about the dating of the settlement. Some of the finds yield some evidence of the spiritual and religious culture of the settlement's last period. Worth to mention are in particular a tsacha with an abbreviated inscription "Bud(dh)a" written with Tibetan characters. Near the tsacha two miniature vessels were found and a flat fragmented red brick-tile with the Tibetan inscription "...me hum" (most probably the mantra: Om mani padme hum). These antiquities were all found in the upper levels of house 1 (Fig. 5).

Future research at the Khingar settlement mound has to prove whether there have settled tibetanized people or people of Tibetan stock and of Buddhist belief as indicated by these finds. The place name "Khalong" hints to an elder non-Tibetan stratum of Se-skad speaking people and so may be connected with the early medieval kingdom of Se-rib.⁸

Notes

1. KAVA = Kommission für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Archäologie, i.e. Commission for general and comparative archaeology.

2. H. Jankuhn: Einführung in die Siedlungsarchäologie (1977) 21.

3. From castle excavations we can expect "better" materials corresponding with the higher social

level of castle owners. Many frontier fortresses, however, were occupied by small garrisons only. In such forts archaeologists usually found standard military equipment: cp. A. Stein, Ruins of Desert Cathay (1912) 1:111 seq.; *ibid.* 350 seq.

4. G. Tucci: Journey to Mustang (1952; repr. 1982) 53 seq.

5. Prof. D. Schuh, Prof. R. Bielmeier, Dr. Chr. Cüppers, Dr. A. Simons and D. Gebauer have undertaken many cave surveys in the eighties. Especially from the results of surveys made in 1986 and 1990 we learnt much about the different using of caves in Muktinath Valley as well as about distinctive cave datings.

6. v. Fürer-Haimendorf: Himalayan Traders (1975) 160 seq.

7. Together with some physical anthropologists from the University of Gießen, Germany, I'll give a special report on the Khingar skeletons in the next issue of this journal.

8. D. P. Jackson, Notes on the History of Se-rib and near-by Places in the Upper Kali Gandaki Valley. In: Kailash VI, 1978, pp. 195 - 228.

Figures

Fig. 1 Map: "Upper Kali Gandaki Valley".

Fig. 2 Preliminary plan: "Khingar Settlement Mound".

Fig. 3 Trench B XXI: "Structures of the last settlement period; the water-channel as well as wall 39 in House 2/1 belong to an older settlement period".

Fig. 4 Trench B XXII: "Structures of the last settlement period".

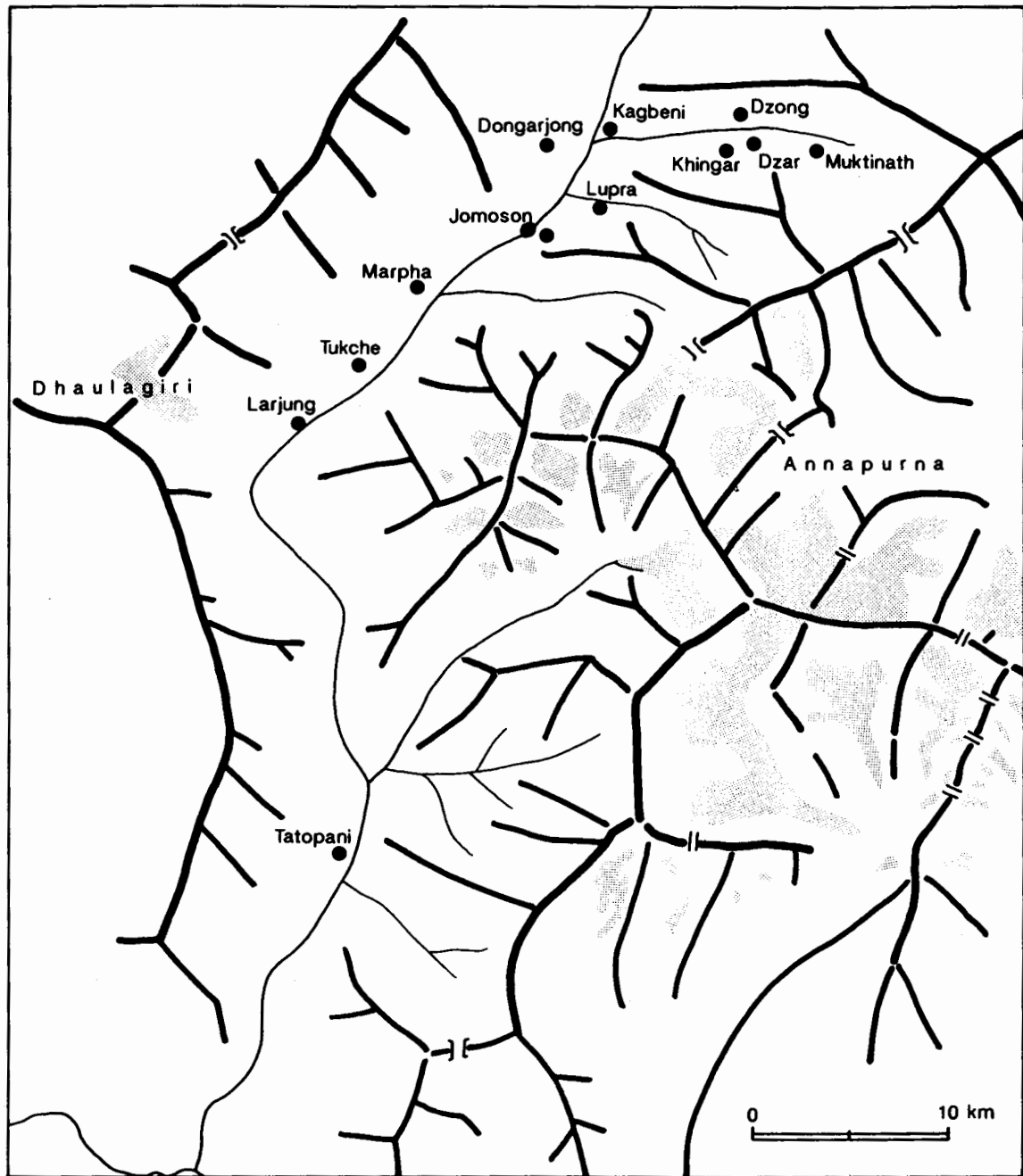
Fig. 5 Trench A I/XI: House 1

Fig. 6 Pottery from the south: 1 black enameled; 2-4.6 red slipped; 5 red polished; all from last settlement period.

Fig. 7 red-yellowish coarse wares: foreign shapes, but local fabrics (?); last period.

Fig. 8 Pottery from last settlement period: 2 black barbotine 1.3-8 red-yellowish coarse wares; 4 rouletted.

Fig. 9 Globular pots from last period: black-brownish coarse wares; the most typical shape among Khingar pottery.



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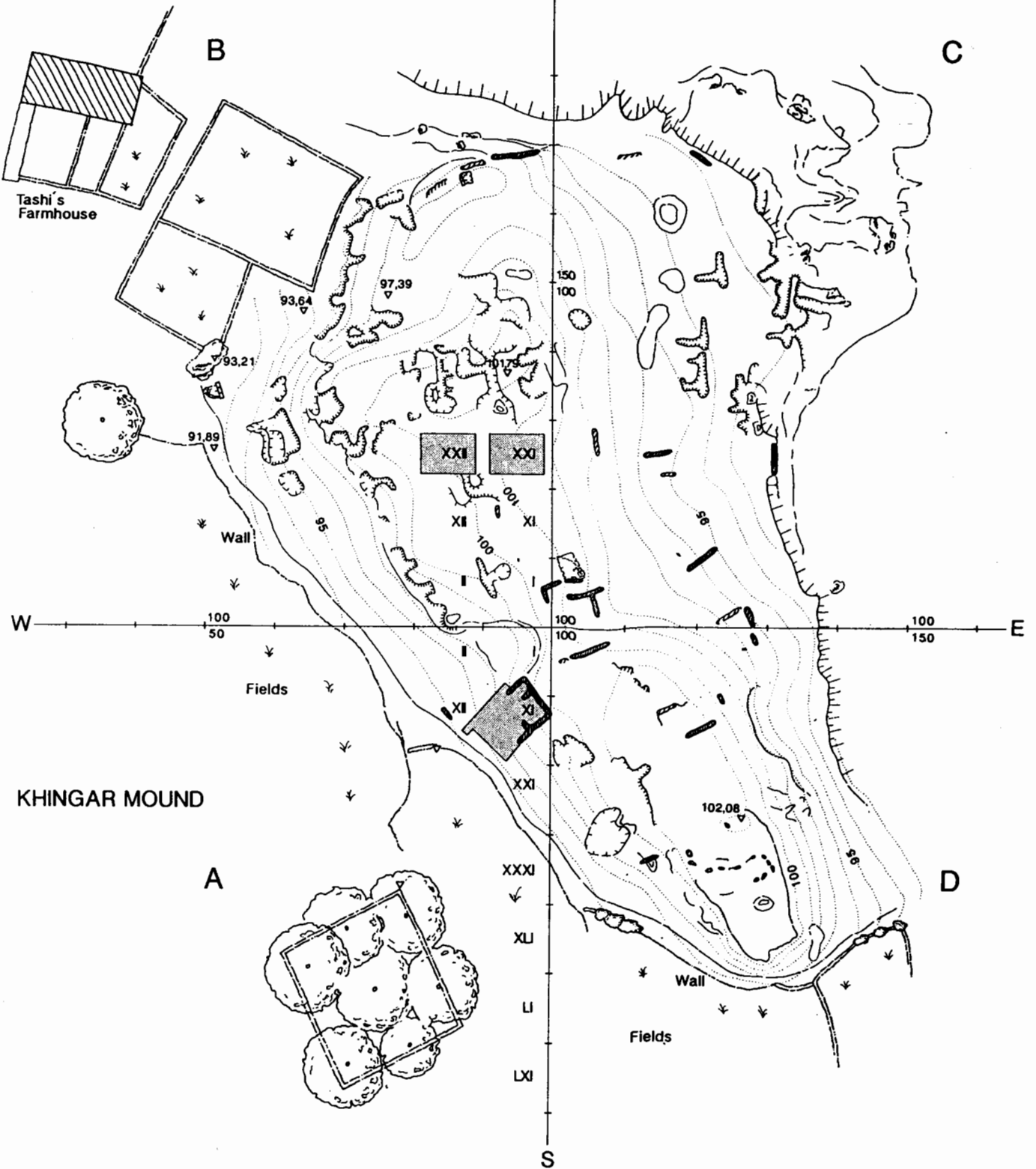
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D

A



Tashi's Farmhouse

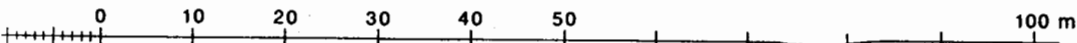
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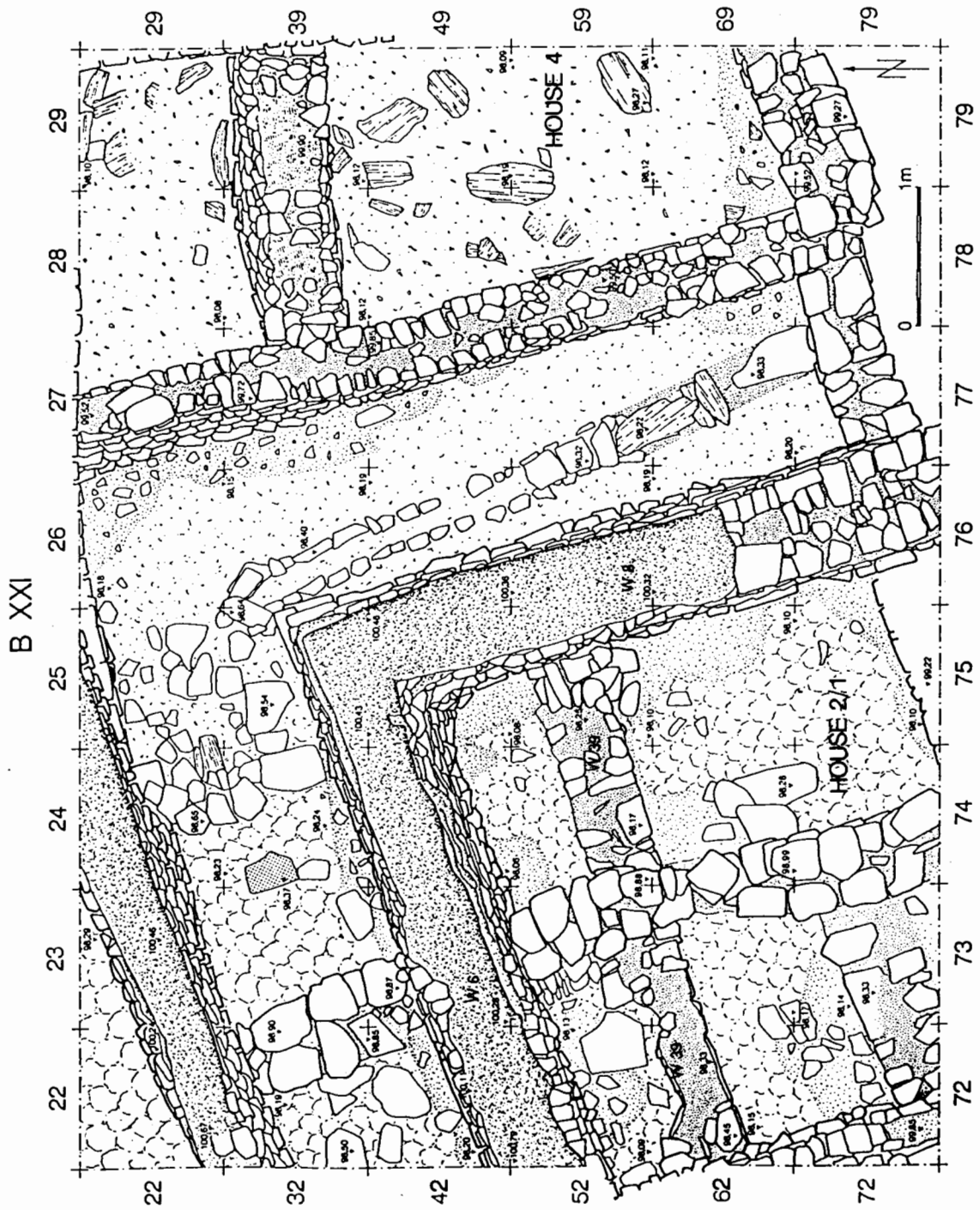
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KHINGAR MOUND

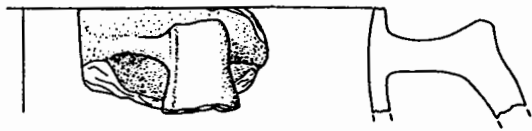
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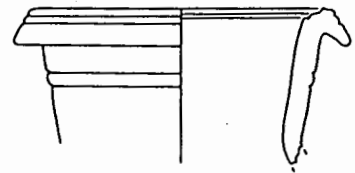




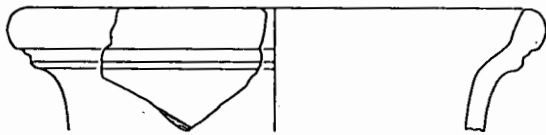




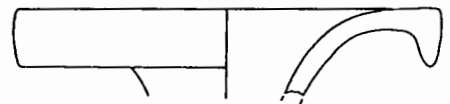
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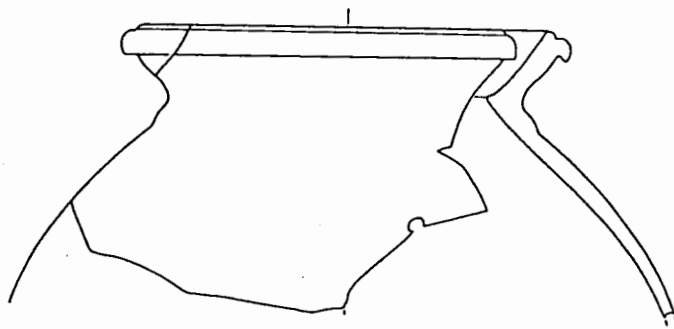
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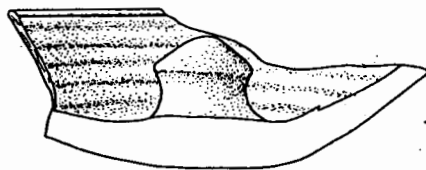
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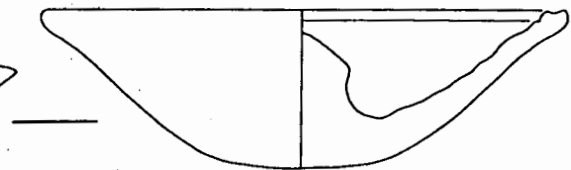
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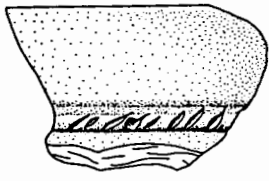
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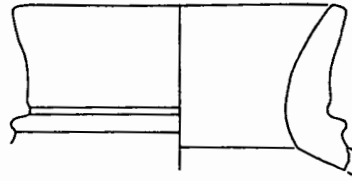
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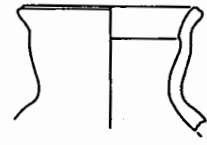
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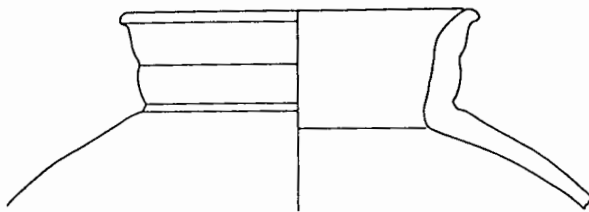
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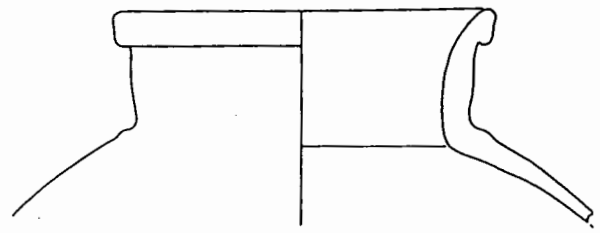
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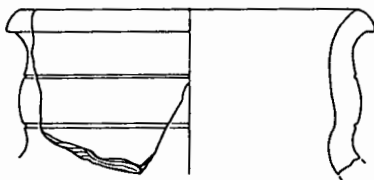
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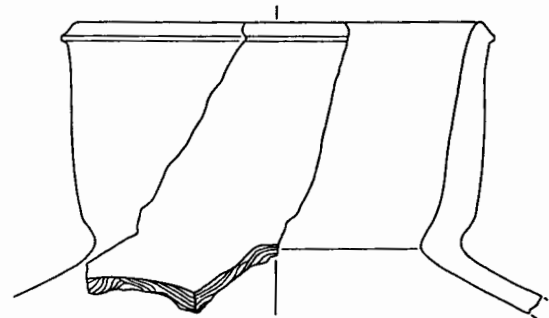
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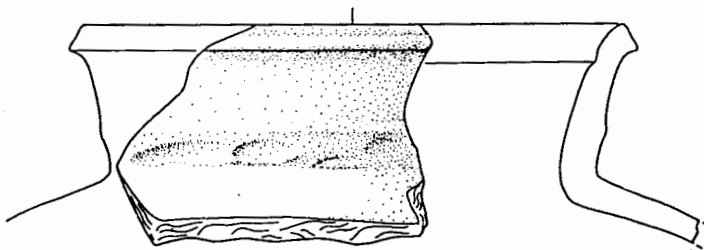
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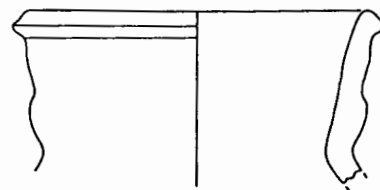
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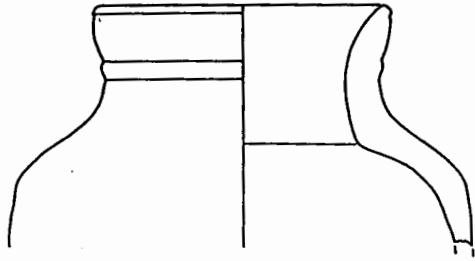


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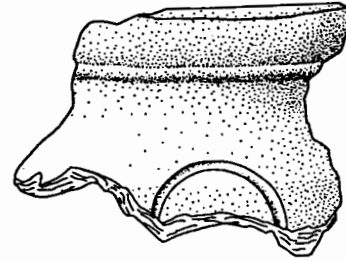


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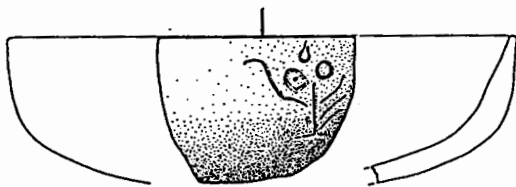
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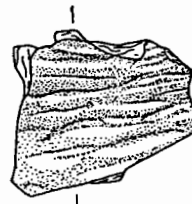
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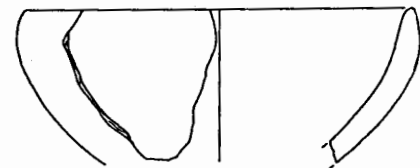
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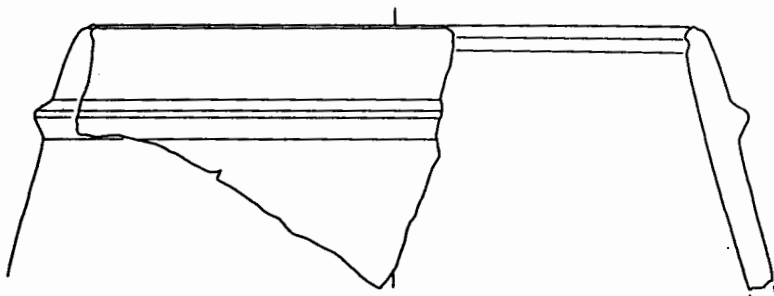
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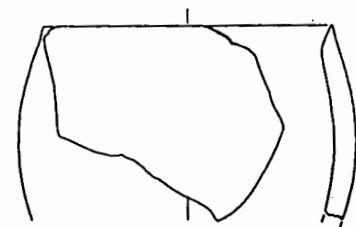
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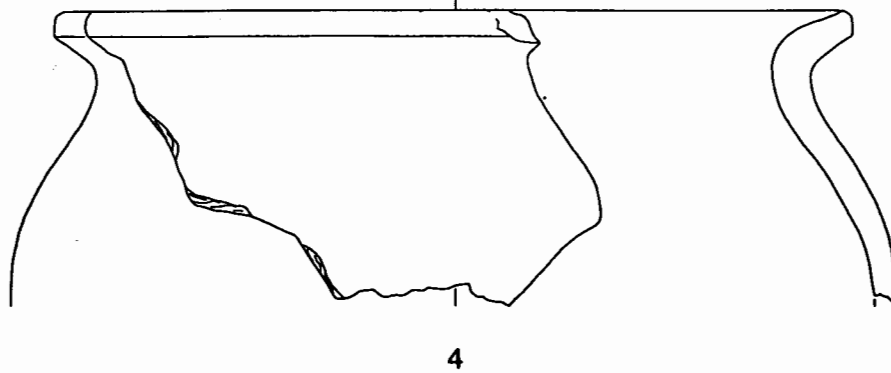
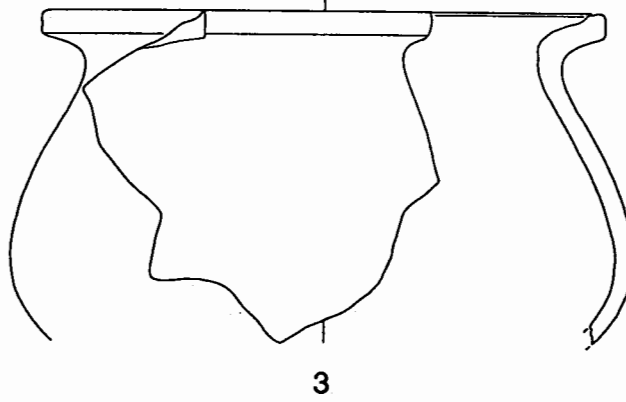
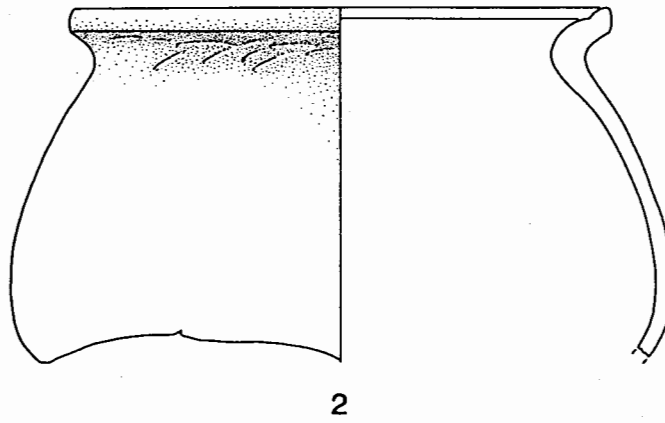
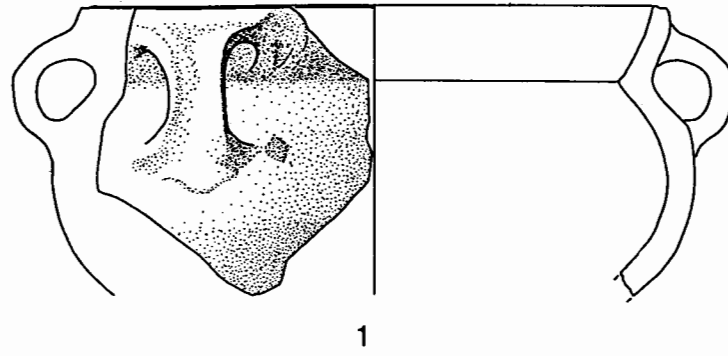
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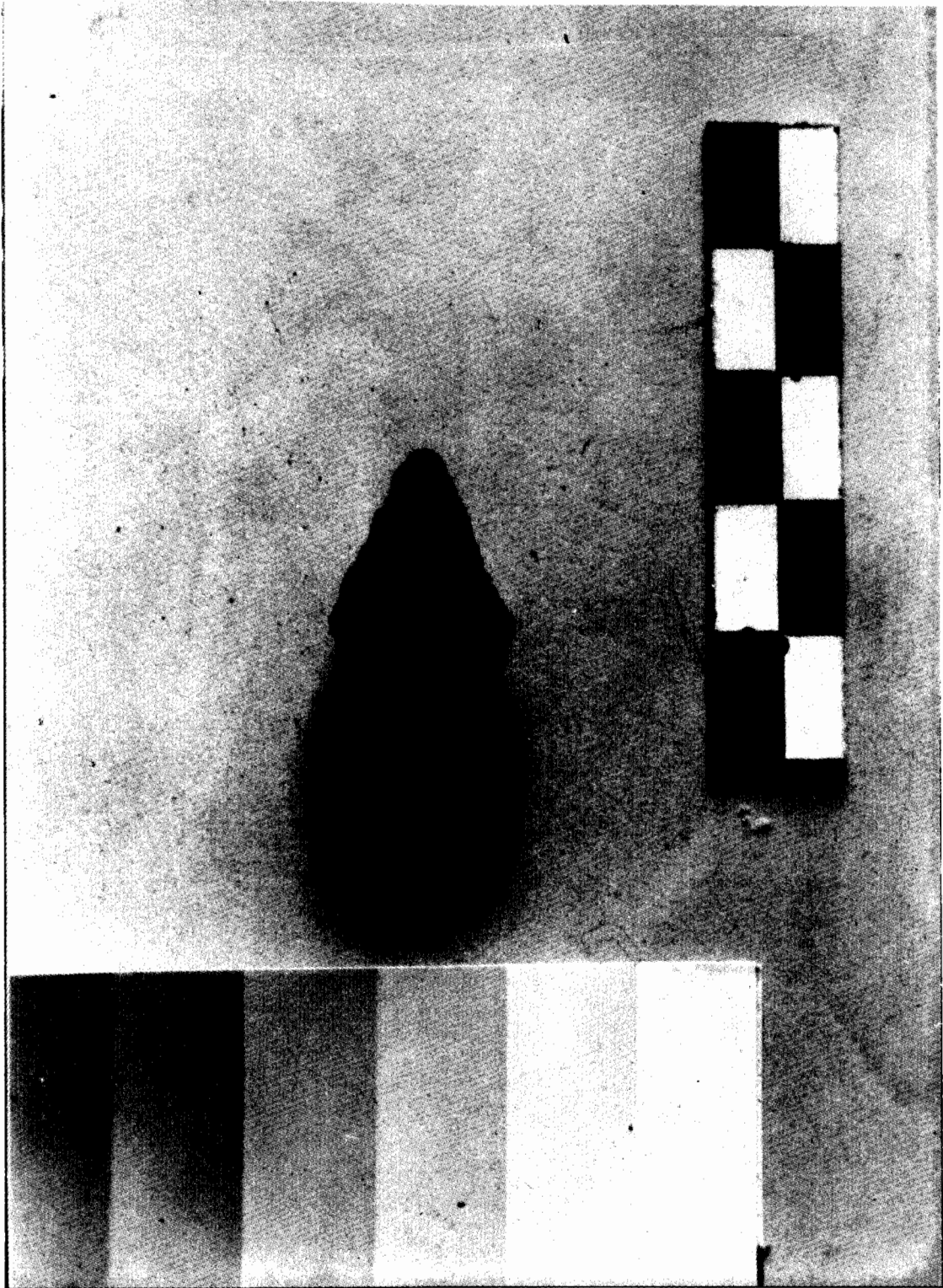


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