

■ MOZAMBIQUE

The Swahili occupation of the Quirimbas (northern Mozambique): the 2016 and 2017 field campaigns.

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Figure 1: The Cabo Delgado province. The black dots correspond to documented Swahili sites.

Introduction

This article presents the results of the 2016 and 2017 excavations at the island of Ibo (northern Mozambique), the capital of the Quirimbas archipelago close to the border with Tanzania. These two fieldwork campaigns are part of a project launched in 2015 to study an area related to the core of the Swahili culture but significantly understudied, with the financial support of several Spanish public and private institutions. Combining systematic surveys of the main islands and area excavations, the project pretends to document the role of this region within the widest framework of the Swahili culture and the Indian Ocean trade networks. During the first year of the project the islands of Ibo, Quirimba and Matemo were surveyed (Torres *et al.* 2016), while the second and third

campaigns have been focused on Ibo, the current capital of the archipelago which gathers the better logistic and professional conditions for archaeological work and has also yielded the most interesting archaeological remains to date.

The Quirimbas archipelago stretches about 300 km parallel to the coast of northern Mozambique, from the Rovuma River to the north to the Quissanga Bay to the south. With a geological base of coral reefs, it's partially linked to the coast by sand bars and mangrove, with communication possible and at low tide communication between some of the islands. The navigation in the coast



Figure 2: Location of the 2016/2017 test pits. 1 Main Square 2 Church 3 Saint Joseph’s fortlet.

has been historically difficult due to the shallow waters -the lack of good natural harbors has always made impossible the access of large ships to the archipelago (Maris 1666: 30)-, a problem increased by the presence and numerous mangroves and the marked tidal fluxes. Although the Quirimbas have a hot and humid climate, rainfall is scarce (Teixeira 1993: 55) and only some of the bigger islands have permanent sources of water. This lack of fresh water, along with the low quality of the soils have always represented a major problem for the settlement of the islands, limiting agriculture to the bigger ones and making fishing and trade the main economic activities in the region.

The Island of Ibo

Although Ibo is currently the most populated island of the archipelago and its capital, its importance only started in the 18th century when security reasons led to the move of the Captaincy of the archipelago from Quirimba to Ibo, (Carrilho 2005: 21). Ibo gained importance due to the slave trade with the French and the Arabs until well into the late 19th century (Palmer & Newitt 2016) and the prosperity provided by this activity led to the development of a carefully laid urban layout, public buildings and fine houses which still can be appreciated in the center of the village.

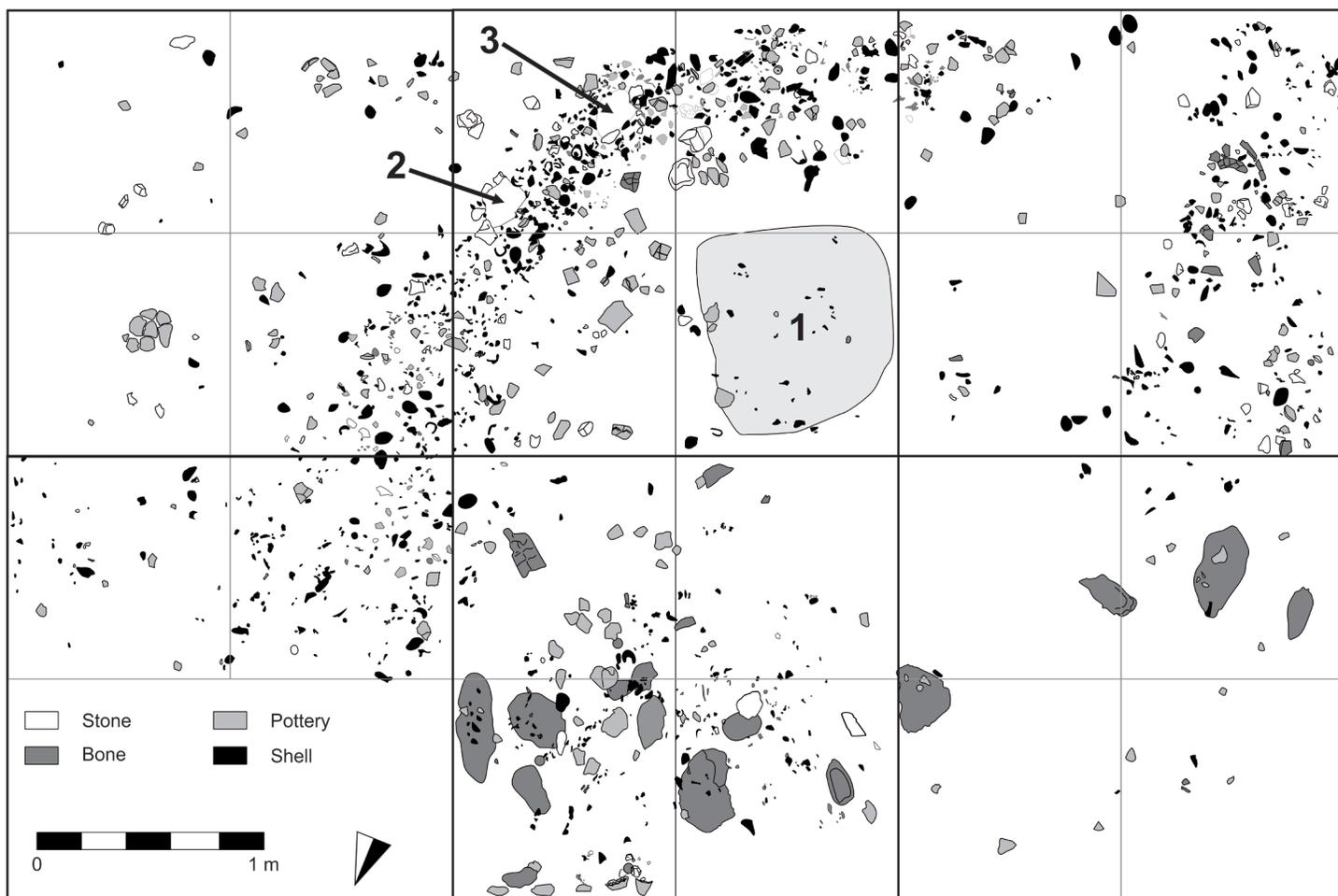


Figure 3: Section of C-400. 1 18th-19th layer 2 16th-17th layer 3 Sterile white sand layer 4 archaeological living floor.

Although the capital of Cabo Delgado province was moved to Porto Amélia (current Pemba) in 1904, Ibo remains the most important island in the Quirimbas Archipelago and the only one that currently provides accommodation for visitors and regular links with both the mainland and the surrounding islands. Not surprisingly, it has been the focus of the most consistent archaeological work in the archipelago, starting in 1978 when Paul Sinclair and Teresa Cruz from the University of Eduardo Mondlane in Maputo conducted a 2 x 2 meters test pit in the major square of the town and located three scatterings of archaeological material (Sinclair 1987). Two occupation phases were recorded at this test pit, dated in the late 12th-late 13th centuries and the 17th-19th centuries respectively (Sinclair 1987: 26).

The materials of the 1978 excavation were restudied by Teixeira Duarte and ascribed to the Kilwa II and IIIb/IV phases (1993: 76), but no additional excavations

were carried on until 2006, when USAID funded an archaeological project to promote and preserve the cultural heritage of Ibo, Matemo and Quirimba (Stephens 2006). Several test pits were excavated in Ibo during 2006 and 2007, yielding materials generally dated in the 18th-19th centuries, although an older occupation was documented near the Fortim de São José (Stephen 2006: 16). Unfortunately, after two campaigns the project came to an end and the results have never been fully published.

Ibo was surveyed in 2015 by our team, documenting most of the areas described by Sinclair and Stephens and two more sites in the interior and to the south of the island (Torres *et al.* 2016: 59-61). However, most of the materials found in all these places had a modern chronology (17th-19th centuries) and were not considered significant enough to plan an excavation. The exception was the area around the major square of the village, where both Sinclair and Stephens had documented older archaeolo-



Figure 4: Plan of the C-400 hut. 1 Hearth 2 Postholes.

gical remains. In the middle of the square, the removal of a tree left a hole around which a significant number of sherds of local and imported pottery and a dozen of glass beads were collected (Torres *et al.* 2016: 61), while the survey of the adjacent seashore recorded a remarkable amount of pottery both local and imported whose origin could be traced to the square area. Although none of the materials could be conclusively ascribed to a pre-Portuguese period, the characteristics of the site (an open space of 14,000 m²), its closeness to the natural harbor of Ibo and the amount of archaeological materials collected throughout the area made of this area the most logical option for the excavation.

The archaeological work started in 2016 with the excavation of three test pits of 2 X 2 meters (C-100 to C-300) in the main square and a fourth one (C-400) close to the fortim of São João, about 200 meters to the west. C-200 did not yield a significant amount of archaeological materials, while C-100 and C-300 provided a remarkable amount of items but no evidences of structures. Fortunately, in C-400 an *in situ* occupation floor was documented, providing an intact archaeological context which could be properly dated and studied. In 2017 the C-400 trench was extended up to a total of 24 m², documenting an irregular structure tentatively identified as a hut, with a square hearth in the middle and evidences of an internal and external living area.

The C-400 site

The stratigraphy of C-400 is simple (Figure 3), consisting of an occupation layer documented at a depth of about one meter and a half. The upper layers of the excavation area were interpreted as the rubble originated by the construction of the nearby 18th century fort and

an older phase of the 16th–17th centuries according to the materials collected. Below these, a layer of sterile white sand was located, which covered a layer of black soil full of archaeological and organic materials and interpreted as a living floor. Its state of preservation is directly related to the presence or absence of the upper white sand layer. To the south and the west of the excavation area, where this upper layer is thicker, the occupation floor is well preserved, reaching a thickness of around 20 cm and evidencing the presence of several structures and activity areas. It becomes thinner to the north and disappears at the northeast corner of the excavation area, where the white layer of sand is absent.

The excavation and documentation of this layer has identified several main areas or structures which have been tentatively interpreted as a hut and its surrounding area. At the center of the excavation, we located a roughly square hearth, with a hard, compacted surface of reddish color, dimensions of 90x82 cm and a thickness of 4-5 cm. Around this hearth a significant accumulation of shells, pottery, and fish and mammal bones were recorded, well preserved to the south and center of the excavation area –where it has a thickness of 12 cm and a width of 40 cm– and worse defined to the north and west. This accumulation of materials has been interpreted as the result of the activities carried on within the hut, which led to the accumulation of refused items against the now disappeared walls of the building, leaving their negative imprint. Two circular empty spaces of 17 and 19 cm of diameter and separated 42 cm were located in the exterior of the best preserved area of the accumulation, which could correspond to two of the postholes of the hut. The original shape of the hut is difficult to assert, as the erosion has scattered part of the materials thus making its limits poorly defined. However, the maximum distance between the sides of the accumulation is about 3.50 which would roughly set an area of 11 m² for the hut.

Differences between the area within and outside the perimeter of the hut are very clear. In the interior, soil and materials are very similar to those of the accumulation, although the size of the pottery sherds is bigger and the amount of materials is smaller. Most shells are concentrated to the south and west of the hut, while to the north big mammal or turtle bones are more common. In the zone identified as the exterior of the hut, materials

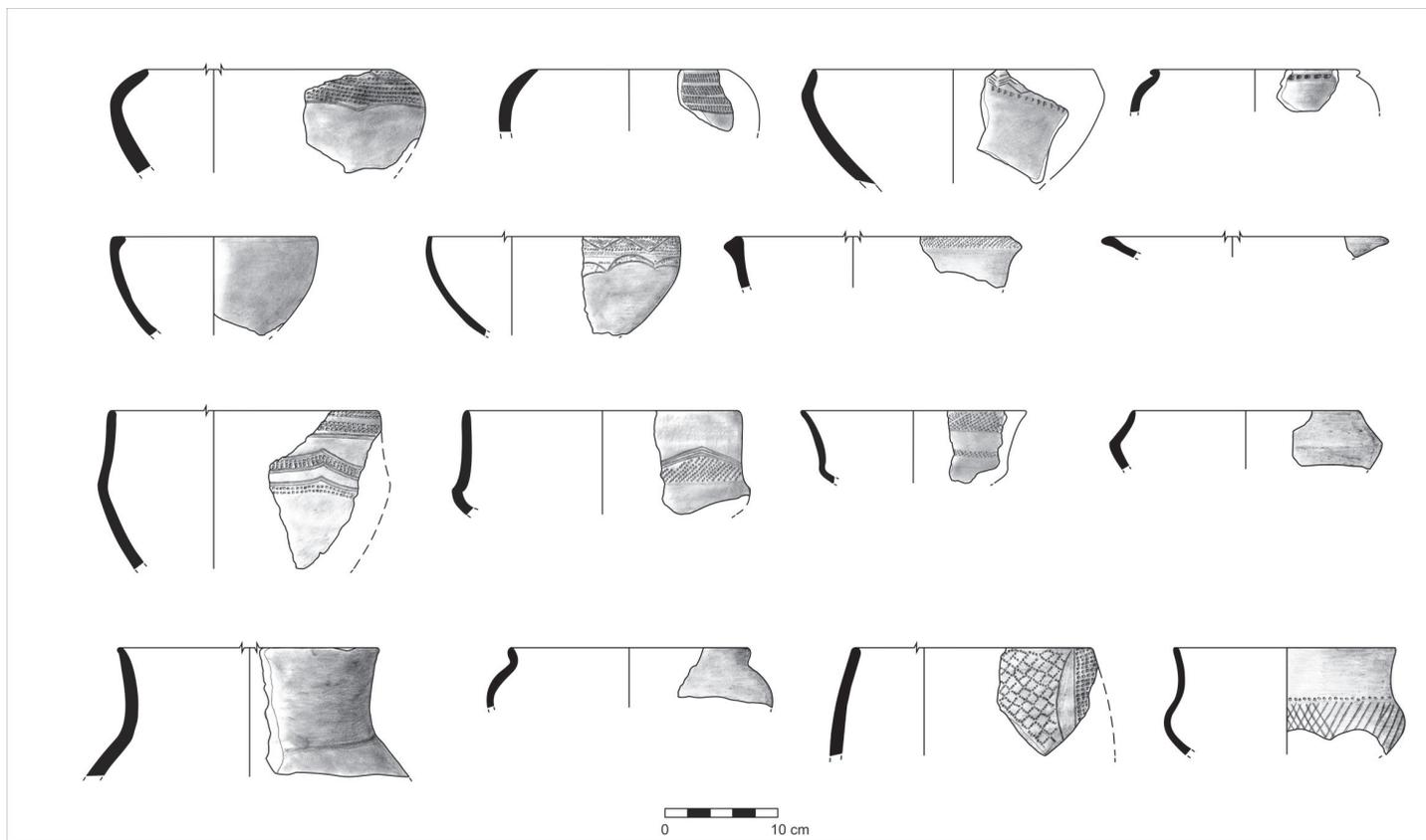


Figure 5: Main shapes of local pottery found at C-400.

are significantly scarcer but include several pottery pieces well preserved.

Despite its modest size and characteristics, the hut located and excavated in Ibo represents a benchmark in the archaeology of the Swahili archaeology in northern Mozambique, being the first site where an occupation layer has been documented. The discovery of this hut can shed light on what probably was a fairly common type of settlement throughout the archipelago, providing a framework for the archaeological materials recovered in other sites without such a context. Moreover, the set of materials recovered at Ibo show that even humble sites as this one were fully integrated in the international trade networks of the Indian Ocean since a very early period.

The material culture of Ibo

The material culture documented in Ibo is almost completely of local origin, consisting in hand-made pieces of medium quality with a remarkable variety of decorative types. Shapes, on the other hand, are quite simple and limited to globular, carinated and S-profile vessels of me-

dium and small size (Figure 5). Impression (using shells, fingers, nails or sharp objects or combs), incision and roulette are the most used decorative techniques, combined in a wide range of designs and located usually on the upper half of the vessel, in bands, crosshatches or zig-zag motifs where incised lines define areas infilled with impressions (the last being the most common type). Red slip treatment is common in the sample, usually in the exterior but occasionally in the interior of the pieces. A significant number of spindle-whorls (twelve) were located during the excavation, confirming the existence of textile activity described by the Portuguese in their first reports of the Quirimbas archipelago (Santos 1891 [1592]: 279).

The sample found at Ibo shows similarities to the so-called Lumbo and Sancul local traditions, named after two eponym sites south of Ibo and usually dated to the 13th-15th (Lumbo) or the 17th-19th (Sancul) centuries. However, our material can't be exactly ascribed to any of these two traditions, and some of the decorative patterns recorded in the hut are unknown in other Swahili places in Cabo Delgado. That's the case of a group of carinated or S-profile pieces decorated with deep and wide incisions

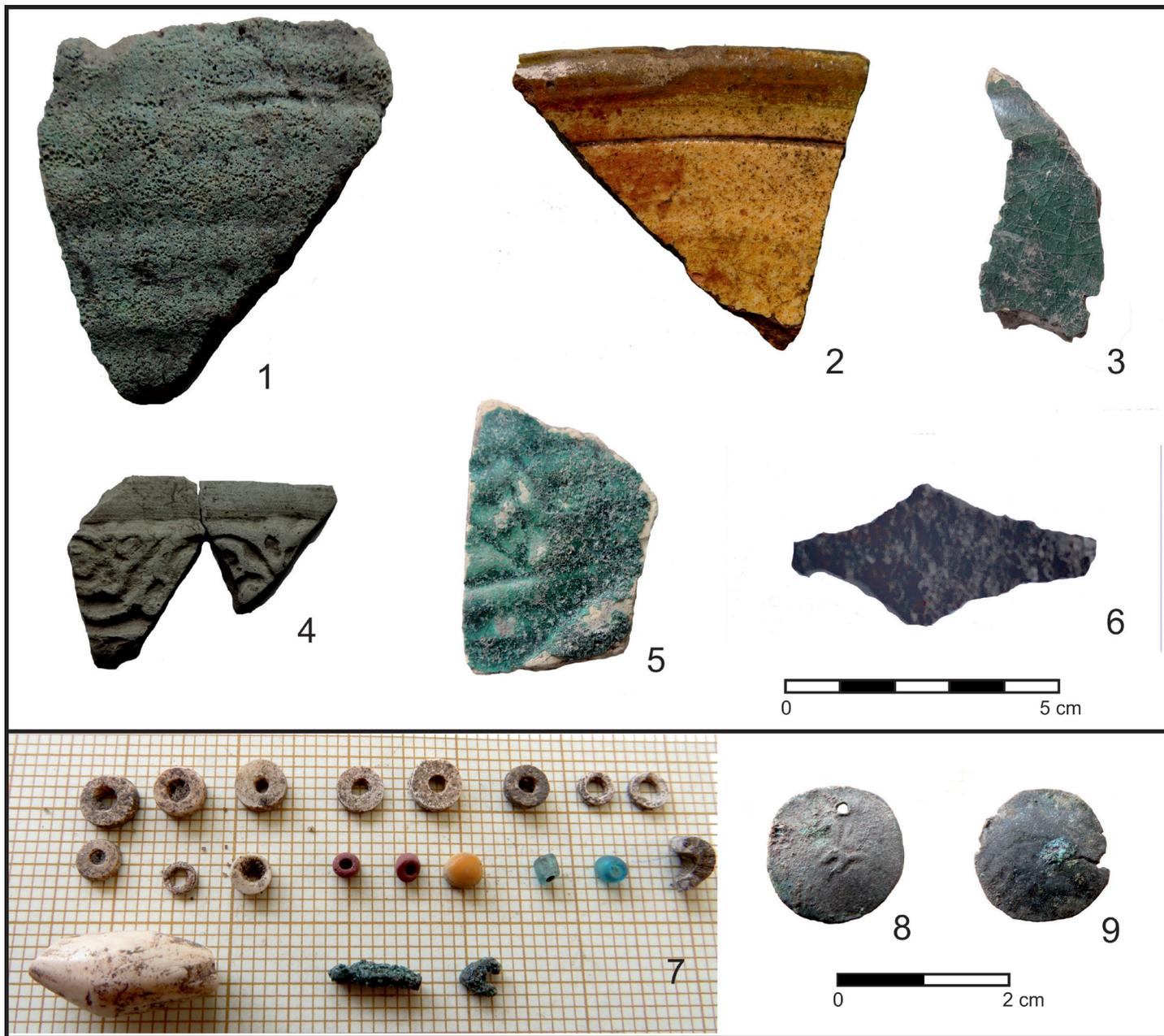


Figure 6: Imported and singular pieces. 1-3, 5 glazed pottery 4 Unglazed pottery 6 Iron arrowhead 7 beads 8-9 bronze coins.

in zig-zag, usually over the carination, which were found just over the occupation floor aforementioned. These differences have yet to be explained, but stratigraphic and material evidences point that the Ibo site could correspond to a period prior to the so-called Lumbo tradition, whose beginning has been established around the 13th century. A statistical seriation analysis conducted on the four pits' natural and artificial levels, according to the frequency of pottery decoration types, has showed a pattern of chronological variation, with impressions being more common

at the beginning and incisions being typical at the end of the sequence. The model is in accordance with the stratigraphic variation recorded in the test-pit excavated by Sinclair (1987), where the whole series was present at one single place, maybe because that area was constantly used during the human occupation of the island.

Several radiocarbon samples are currently being processed and will hopefully provide a well-dated framework for the materials recovered at Ibo. In the

meanwhile, the small sample of six recovered sherds of imported pottery can shed some light on the chronology of the hut (Figure 6). Significantly, none of them are Chinese porcelain sherds, common in most of the sites documented throughout the Quirimbas archipelago. Four of them are glazed, with honey, green and light blue colors, while the other two which correspond to the same piece are unglazed and have a moulded decoration and a whitish paste. These unglazed sherds (Figure 6, 4) show close similarities to wares from Southern Iraq and Southern Iran ranging from the 8th and the 13th centuries (Priestman 2013: 505-510, Watson 2004: 106-127). The glazed potteries are more difficult to identify due to their small size and poor state of preservation, but in one case (Figure 6, 2) the paste, color and glaze of a rim identify it as a sgraffiato with a chronology of the 10th to the 12th centuries. Another fragment (Fig. 6: 5) could be related to the Turquoise Alkaline-Glazed Ware productions described by Priestman (2013: 555-556, 693), dated between the 9th and the 10th centuries, coherent with the rest of the pieces. Therefore, the site could be tentatively dated between the 10th and the 12th centuries, and that will have to be checked with the radiocarbon dating results.

The other element that could provide a more accurate chronology for the site are the three bronze coins that have been located during the excavation (Fig. 6, 8-9), a remarkable amount for a small hut of about 9-12 sq. meters. All of them are of small size (1.7 mm of diameter) and one of them is perforated to be used as a pendant. Unfortunately they are terribly worn and almost illegible, and at this stage its origin and chronology are unknown. However, the fact that one of them was used as a pendant could imply an early moment of the presence of coinage in the region, where the symbolic value of the object was still higher than its monetary one. The coins are very similar to pieces found at Kilwa with chronologies dating back to the 10th century, although a restoration process and a thorough analysis have to be made before reaching further conclusions. The sample of metallic objects is completed with an iron arrow (Figure 6, 6), several bronze beads and other unidentified bronze objects.

Beads (Figure 6, 7) are relatively common but less abundant than in the rest of the test pits dug in the main square, where hundreds of them have been found associated to European and Chinese wares from the 16th to the 19th century. In the case of C-400, a total of 94 were

found within the hut and around it, mostly white (46%) and red (29%), although blue, yellow, green and bronze beads were also collected. Most of them were of small size (1-2 mm) and of cylindrical shape, but in one case a much bigger, biconical bead was also documented. As with the coins and imported pottery, they are currently under study.

Final remarks

The results briefly presented here show the importance of the site C-400 at Ibo to understand the historical dynamics of northern Mozambique during the Swahili period. Not only it's the first time that an *in situ* site is excavated in the region, but despite of its modest size the archaeological materials recovered prove a clear and very early integration in the trade networks that characterized the Indian Ocean. The results of the faunal remains –more than 100 kg of shells and fish bones were recovered during the excavation- will provide a deeper insight in the economic and environmental context in which the occupation of the Quirimbas archipelago took place, and how they were inserted within the larger Swahili culture throughout the Indian Ocean

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