

# Glimpses on the Culture and Biology of the People of North East India



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Saratchandra Konsam

The book is divided into three sections, viz. Prehistoric, Archaeology, Social and Cultural Anthropology, and Physical Anthropology for the sake of convenience. From the diverse nature of the study, it will be of a good source of valuable materials for different aspects of human studies, specially on North-East Indian population and more specifically of Manipur, with its unique resources of Anthropology.

**Saratchandra Konsam** (b. 1944) is Professor of Anthropology, Manipur University. He was educated in General Anthropology for the M.Sc. degree (1969) at Poona University and then in Physical Anthropology for Ph.D. degree (1979) from the same university.

The author has participated in many national and international seminars in India and abroad. He worked as the Recorder of Anthropology and Archaeology section of the 78th (1991) and 79th (1992) sessions of the Indian Science Congress. He is also the life-member of many professional associations. His area of interest and publication includes the field of physical anthropology, human biology, health and nutrition, sports anthropology and human ecology.

At present, he is also working as the Chief of the Manipur University Employment Information and Guidance Bureau.

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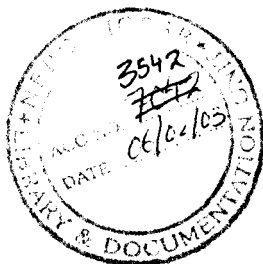
**SARATCHANDRA KONSAM**



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# I

## Secondary Pot Burials at Khaidem Mang, Manipur

*O.K. Singh*

### **The Site**

The site of Khaidem Mang lies 750 m amsl and located at 2 Km south-east of Sugnu Bazar, on a fan deposit at the foot of the western slope of Sokom Baite village, in the Chandel district of Manipur. Some years ago, about half a metre of top soil was reported to have been dug up thereby exposing some pottery fragments. Sri N. Jugindro Singh, a local School teacher also reported the discovery of a few ancient Manipuri coins from this site. In order to ascertain the archaeological potential of the site, a trial trench in the north-south orientation, measuring 2 x 1 sq metres was excavated during May, 1990. Between 15 and 20 cm below the present surface eight burial pots, a scissor and a bracelet were exposed near the eastern section of the trench, while at the depth between 13 and 15 cm near the northern wall six bell-metal coins as well as heavily weathered, powdery pieces of bone were found. Between 30 and 47 cm deep, ten more burial pots were exposed. These urns were covered by lids. Distribution of the burial pots in the trench is seen in Plate 1. At a depth of 50 cm two bell-metal coins, one ear-ring, seven anklets and several pieces of weathered, powdery bone were exposed. Also at this level, just below burial pot No. 2, one smoeing vessel of fired clay, seven beads and two anklets were also unearthed. The soil profile throughout the exposed section, in the trench, was the same.

The pots which were exposed at depths between 15 cm and 20 cm are numbered 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12(2), 17 and 18, while those

at depths between 30 and 47 cm are numbered 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 11, 12(1), 13, 14, 15 and 16.

## Findings

*Pottery:* The burial pots may be classed as small jars. The heights range from 290 mm to 146 mm and they have almost globular bodies, except for one which has a flattened body with a shouldered wall (Fig. 4:2A). These jars have convex bases. The majority of them are low convex (83.3%), while a few are deep convex (16.7%). The necks of these jars are mostly slightly flaring and medium in height, though a few tend to be almost straight (Figs. 3:2 and 7:2). High and low necked jars occur only very rarely. The rims are all flaring with rounded lips, and a few have externally thickened lips (Fig. 2:1).

The urns are covered with lids which are either a part of the broken jar or a complete bowl. Some of these lids of broken jars have stains of smoke-carbon, and which suggests reusing of unserviceable vessels. The types of bowls include ring-footed (Figs. 1:1A, 4), carinated (Fig. 2:1A) and flattened body (Fig. 2:2A) ones. The ring-footed bowls have a semispherical body with a widely opened mouth ranging from 200 mm to 114 mm and rim with thick rounded lips. Their heights range from 114 mm to 55 mm. The carinated bowls have an angle between the body and shoulder, and also have widely opened mouth with flaring rim (ranging from 235 mm to 187 mm in diameter), concentric neck, grooves on the shoulder and low convex base. The lips are rounded or beaded. Bowls with flattened bodies have very low convex base, and are characterised by the low curving angle between the body and shoulder. These have concentric neck, widely opened mouth with flaring rim, ranging in diameter from 143 mm to 268 mm and in height from 70 mm to 120 mm.

All the pots described above are made of fine clay tempered with mostly coarse sand. The pots are shaped by the hand and beater technique which is still used by the modern potters in Manipur. The pot surfaces are treated with slip and most of them are decorated in the pattern of herring bone, basketry, ribbed, chevron on the body, and diamond mostly on the shoulder, of which the chevron and diamond patterns are very rare. Jars with

plain surface are also very rare, though all the bowls are plain except for some grooves on the shoulder. The grooves seem to have been formed by pressing down with fingers. In colour the pots are mostly reddish to light red.

Inside these burial pots there are fractured bone pieces, and are buried with the grave-goods consisting of scissors, bracelets, anklets, finger-rings, ear-rings, mirror, coins, arrow head and iron pieces. In one of the burial a cloth piece is also found. The table below shows the distribution of grave-goods in the burial pots.

*Coins:* Among other finds coins are interesting, because this not only forms the largest item, but it will also enable us to ascertain the age of the burials. These coins are generally known as bell-metal coin; altogether there are 549 coins which are found inside the burial pots as grave-goods (Table 1). The maximum number of coins are found in the burial pot numbers 13, 14 and 15. The coins (PL. 3) bear legends 'Shri' in Devanagari, 'R', 'L', 'La', 'M', 'Ma', in Bengali/Assamese letters and 'M' in archaic Meitei letter. One coin incused with peacock is also included in the burial pot No. 13. All the coins are circular in shape, but vary in size and weight. The coins incused with Assamese 'R' include two sizes ranging in weight respectively from 210 to 150 mg and 600 to 540 mg. The weights of the coins with different legends are given in Table 2.

Table 2

<i>Legends</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Weights (in mg)</i>
Shri (Devanagari)	132	820 to 610
R (Assamese)	189	600 to 150
L (Bengali)	2	740
La "	1	870
M "	5	700 to 500
Ma "	4	710
M (archaic Meitei letter)	2	830
Peacock	1	1520

*Iron objects:* The iron objects include four scissors, one arrow head (barbed), one ferrule and a few pieces of iron, one of which



is flat (PL. 4). The scissor is very similar to the one still used by the Meitei. The arrow head is of double barbed type with a tang and this type is not seen now-a-days among the Meiteis.

*Bronze objects:* All the bronze objects are ornaments which include three bracelets, three anklets, five finger-rings and three ear-rings (PL. 4). The bracelets are hollow, made by very thin sheet of bronze, while anklets, finger-rings and ear-rings are made of solid cylindrical rods. These appear to belong to the burial of females and children.

*Glass Mirror:* It is a miniature mirror with metal frame. Such mirror is still available in the markets of Manipur and used in the rituals by the Meiteis.

Other findings include pieces of cloth from burial No. 5, stone and glass pieces.

*Discussion:* The burials in the trench are found at the depths of 15-20 cm and 30-47 cm from the present ground surface. But the actual depth may be more, as stated above the surface was dug up for about half a metre thick sometime ago. There are altogether 18 burials which contain fragments of human bone, except pot no. 10, which contains no relic. There are also grave-goods along with the bone fragments in most of the pots. The bones are too fragmentary for detail study (PL. 2); it varies and is few in each pot. Not a single charred bone is found in these burials. The bone fragments include the head parts of the limb bones; the size of these bone heads suggests that some of the burials belong to the adult individuals.

The burial pots are small handmade jars, the biggest one is 290 mm high and are covered with lids which are either of a complete bowl or part of broken jar. All the pots are decorated with the impressions of carved paddle in the basketry, chevron, herring bone patterns, some jars have diamond pattern on the shoulder and double triangles on the body (Figs. 6 & 7). These decoration patterns are still prevalent among the modern potters. Almost all the jars have globular body and low convex base, except one jar which has a flat body (Fig. 4:2A).

The bowls are also handmade and consist of ring-footed, carinated and flattened body types; of which the flattened body and carinated bowls have grooves on the shoulder, while the ring-footed bowls are plain. Such carinated bowls are not seen

among the modern potters in Manipur, but the ring-footed bowls are still available.

Among the grave goods, bell-metal coins are significant, because this not only forms the largest item but also the coins bear the legends 'Shri' in Devanagari, 'R', 'L', 'L', 'La', 'M', 'Ma', in Bengali/Assamese letters and 'M' in archaic Meitei letter. One coin incused with peacock is also included in the burial No. 13. All the coins have circular shape but vary in size and weight. The coins incused with Assamese 'R' include two sizes ranging in weight respectively from 210 mg to 150 mg and 600 mg to 540 mg. The weights of the coins with different legends are vary (Table 2).

To establish the antiquity of these coins we may consider some of the historical facts. That the King of Ava invaded Manipur during the reign of Marjit in 1819 A.D. and ruled for seven years under the protectoral kings until Gambhir Singh evacuated them in 1825 A.D. (Hall 1965: 566, Pemberton 1966: 48-49). Raghob Singh was one of the proteges who reigned in 1823-24 A.D. (*Cheitharol Kumbaba*, 1967: 217). Because of this unstable political situation, the economy of Manipur might have disturbed a lot leading to the reduction in the size of currency. The association of a peacock incused circular coin, which seems to be of the non local origin, with the 'R' incused coins in burial No. 13 again confirms the outside influence. It will be quite reasonable to date the bell-metal coins incused with 'R' to the reign period of Raghob Singh. According to Singh P. Gunindro (1983 : 12-13, 89), the initial letter of the name of the issuing king was most commonly incused on the bell-metal coins of Manipur and the circular coins depicting 'Shri' are of uncertain date. The statistics of the coins having different legends show that coins incused with 'R' in Assamese letter are more common and the second in order of quantity is 'Shri', while other coins are few in number. In all the urns which contain coins also show that 'R' and 'Shri' incused coins are more than others. Hence, these burials can not be earlier than 18th century A.D., because 'Shri' is used in Manipur only after the advent of Hinduism, and since 'Shri' and 'R' are found together it will be reasonable to date the burial to the early 19th century A.D.

**Conclusion**

The site of Khaidem Mang as the name suggests was the burial ground of the Khaidem Sagei, one of the family names of the Meitei of Manipur. According to Mr. Khaidem Yairen Singh, aged 83 years of Sugnu, there was a practice of the Khaidem Sagei till about three/four generations ago that the bones from the primary burial place were recollected and entered into the *Manglel* (Great common burial place) of the *Sagei*. Royal chronicle of Manipur records that the dead were buried before the advent of Hinduism in 18th century A.D. The present day Meitei also collect a piece of bone from the deceased's forehead during cremation and bury it near the cremation ground. It is then ceremoniously collected after six days. Those who have Hindu faith dispose the bone piece after some time throwing into the Ganges (Hodson 1975 : 117) or burying at a place in Brindaban, (U.P.). Burial of the dead body of a child below three years of age by putting into a small jar is still prevalent. Till about decades ago the Meiteis used earthen pots in cooking and when a death occurred in a family, the cooking pots of all the families of the *Sagei* (lineage) were either broken or kept in a corner outside the house. The finding of used pots in association with the burials of the present study may be a way of disposing such used vessels.

The burials of the present study contain pieces of bone, in some of them with grave-goods. As the quantity of the bone fragments varies and few in each burial and also the jars are small, the largest one is being 290 mm high, it suggests a secondary burial practice. Because of the too fragile and fragmentary nature of the bones it becomes difficult to study in detail, however, the size of the broken head-parts of limb bones suggests some of these belong to the adult. The barbed arrow head and the bangles may suggest male and female sex respectively. The association of bell-metal coins of the Meitei kings belonging to the 19th century A.D. with these burials suggests that the burials belong to a community who had close contact with the Meitei, if not of the Meitei. The striking similarity of the unearthed iron scissors with the present day Meitei iron scissor type is also another evidence of the relationship of these burials with the Meitei. If the identification of the site with the burial ground of the Khaidem Sagei is correct, it seems

that the burial practice by the Meitei particularly in the peripheral area like Sugnu lingered longer, even when it was stopped earlier in Imphal area.

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Plate - 1 : Distribution of burial pots in the trench at Khaidem Mang site.

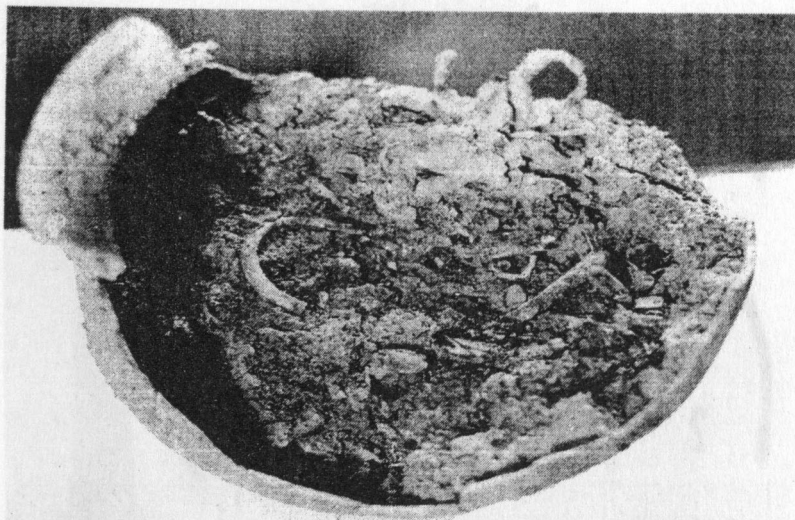


Plate - 2 : Bone fragments along with grave goods inside an Urn. From Khaidem Mang Site.

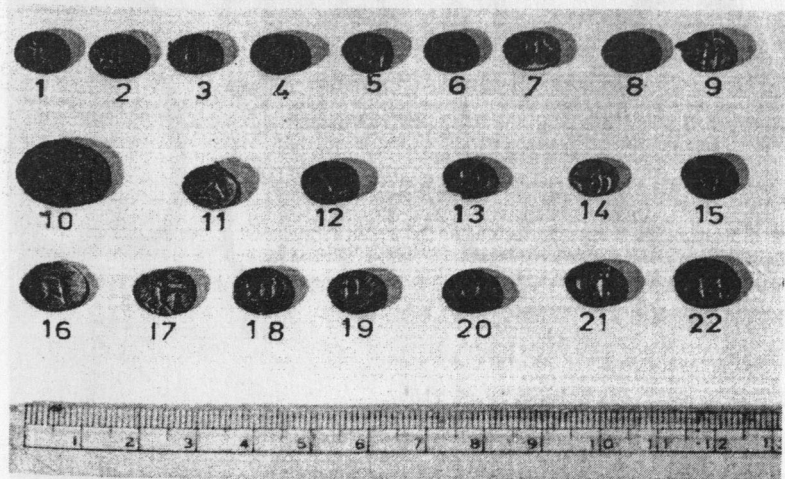


Plate - 3 : Bell-Metal coins from Khaidem Mang site, 1-9, incused with Shri; 10, incused with peacock; 11-15, incused with R; 16-17, incused with M; 18-19, incused with Ma; 20, incused with L; 21, incused with La; 22, incused with archaic Meitei letter M.

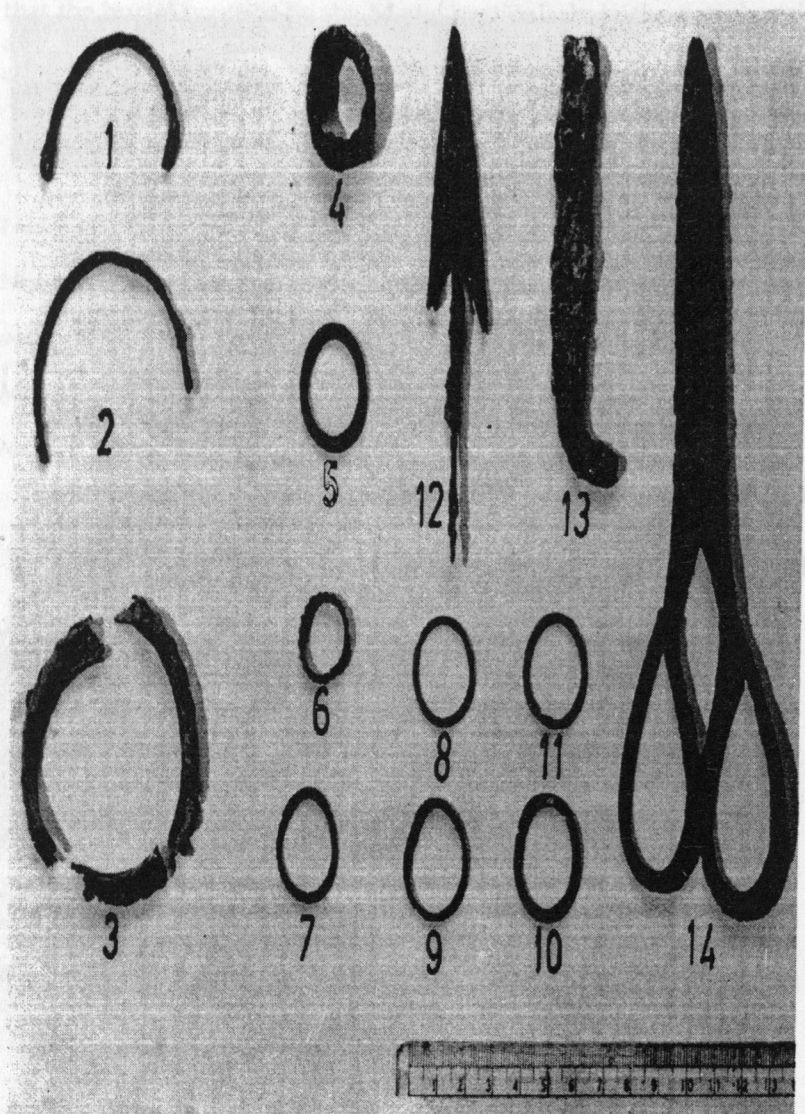
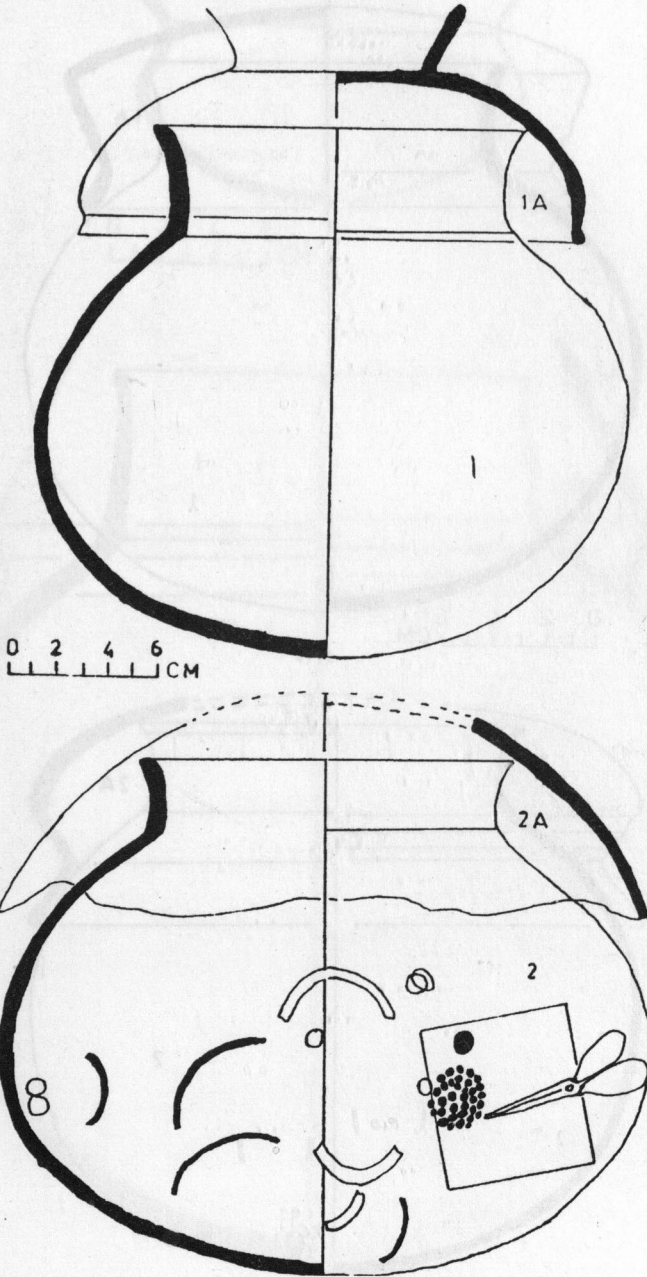
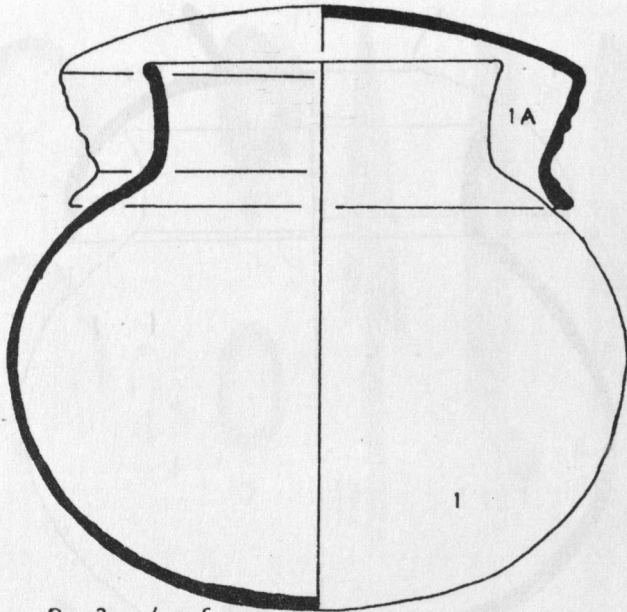
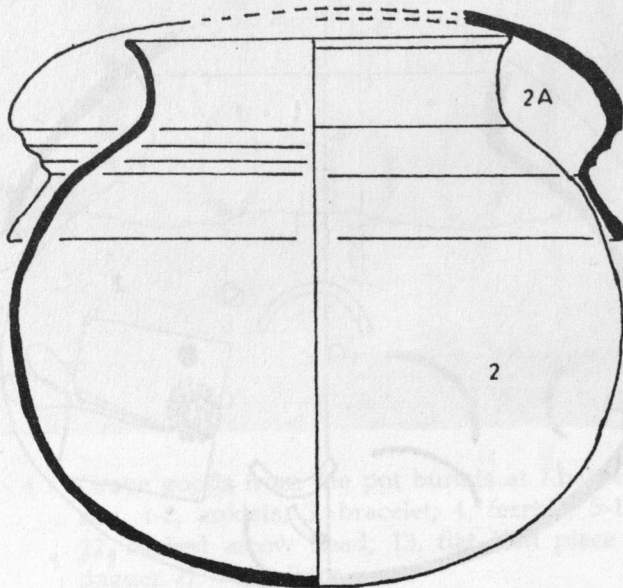


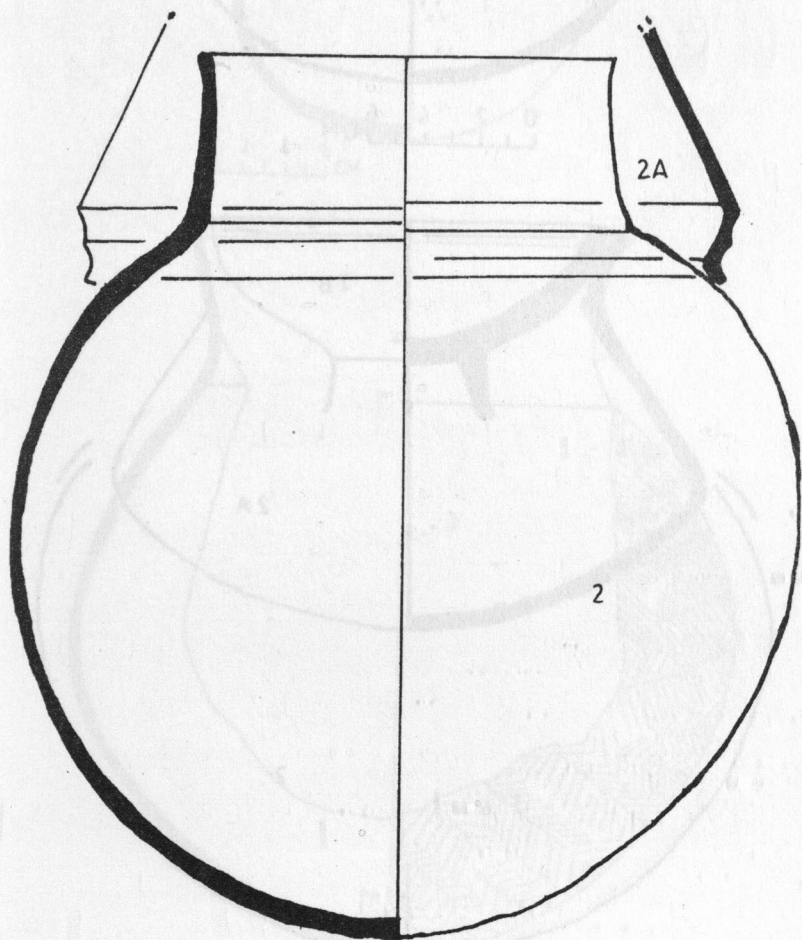
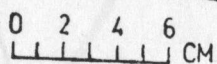
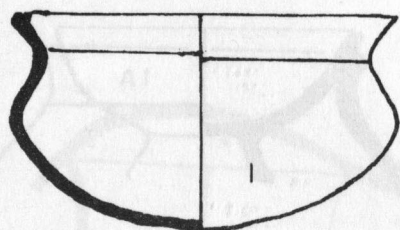
Plate - 4 : Grave goods from the pot burials at Khaidem Mang site, 1-2, anklets; 3, bracelet; 4, ferrule; 5-11, rings; 12, barbed arrow head; 13, flat iron piece (heel of dagger ?); 14, scissor.

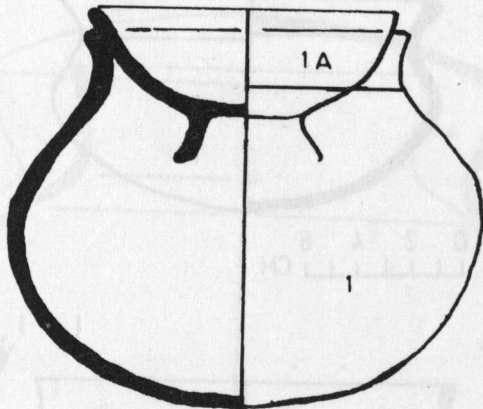




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