



Revista de Cultures Medievales

Núm. 23 (Primavera 2024), 74-99 | ISSN 2014-7023

**THE MONASTIC COMMUNITY OF THE ISLAND OF
CABRERA (BALEARIC ISLANDS, 5TH-8TH CENTURIES).
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

LA COMUNITAT MONÀSTICA DE L'ILLA DE CABRERA
(ILLES BALEARS, SEGLES V A VIII DC). PERSPECTIVA ARQUEOLÒGICA

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Rebut: 28 setembre 2024 | Revisat: 11 desembre 2024 | Acceptat: 21 desembre 2024
| Publicat: 30 desembre 2024 | doi: 10.1344/Svmma2024.24.6

Abstract

The main goal of project “Recuperació, consolidació i museïtzació del monestir bizantí de l’illa de Cabrera” is to gain a better understanding of the all-male monastery that, according to Pope Gregory I’s Letter XIII, 47, written in 603, existed in island of Cabrera, in the Balearics. Following archaeological survey and the excavation of twelve trenches, the activity of a coenoby and several hermitages in the archipelago of Cabrera between the 5th and the 8th centuries was confirmed. This article presents the architectural features and archaeological materials found in relation to this monastic community, notably marble, ceramics, and glass, as well as an assemblage of inscriptions and seal impressions, often bearing Christian symbols.

Keywords:

Monasticism, Monastic Architecture, Early Medieval Archaeology, Late Antiquity, Marble, Pottery, Glass.

Resum

El projecte “Recuperació, consolidació i museïtzació del monestir bizantí de l’illa de Cabrera” té com a objectiu principal comprendre com va ser el monestir del qual parla l’Epístola XIII, 47 del papa Gregori I, una carta escrita l’any 603 que parla de l’existència d’una comunitat monàstica masculina a l’illa balear de Cabrera. Després de diversos treballs de prospecció i de la realització de dotze sondejos arqueològics, es pot continuar defensant l’existència d’un cenobi i de diversos eremitoris a l’arxipèlag de Cabrera, els quals haurien estat actius entre els segles V i VIII dC. En el present article es mostraran les estructures arquitectòniques i els materials mobles descoberts fins ara de la comunitat monàstica cabrenca. Entre aquests últims cal destacar-ne els marbres, la ceràmica i el vidre. També es presentaran unes col·leccions de grafit i d’estampilles, sovint amb representacions cristianes.

Paraules clau:

Monaquisme, arquitectura monàstica, arqueologia altmedieval, antiguitat tardana, marbres, ceràmica, vidre

Introduction

During the 5th and 7th centuries AD, population density in the archipelago of Cabrera was higher than in most other periods of its history. This is a remarkable fact, but one that is easily explained by the broader historical context.

Between the 4th and 5th centuries, Christianity had expanded throughout most of the Roman Empire, especially in urban areas. However, a significant proportion of the rural population was still pagan. In these areas, monks became the main agents of Christianisation. In this period, groups of monks began relocating in islands to live ascetically. According to the written sources, the pioneer of this phenomenon in the west was Martin of Tours, who withdrew to the island of Gallinaria around 360. This was followed by the foundation of numerous monasteries in islands or islets, for instance Capri, Gorgona, and Montecristo in the Tyrrhenian Sea, Hyères and Lérins off the Provence, and Circina off Tunisia. A letter written by Pope Gregory I the Great in 603 is the only written reference to the monastery in the island of Cabrera, in the Balearics (RIERA RULLAN 2017: 27-76).

The occupation of islands or islets by monks has been explained in different ways, but the most widely accepted argument is that they sought solitude to be closer to God. During this period, the belief that union with God was possible by forfeiting civilisation and living in isolated and uninhabited areas was widespread among Christians. The model had been set out by oriental monks, who escaped from the distractions and temptation of cities and towns to exile themselves voluntarily in the desert. In this way, many western monks tried to follow suit by seeking their desert in the sea and founding monasteries in small islands in both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic (RIERA RULLAN 2017: 29-30).

Owing to the scarcity of written sources, our knowledge about the organisation of these insular monastic communities is very limited, and for this reason we must rely almost exclusively on archaeology, although the number of well-preserved examples to have been comprehensively studied remains small. Fortunately, in recent decades a number of greatly interesting monastic communities of some complexity are beginning to emerge. Examples in the western Mediterranean include sites as the islets of Cullera (Valencian Country, Spain), Tinetto (Liguria, Italy), Porquerolles (Provence, France) and, particularly, Île Saint-Honorat (also Provence, France) (Riera Rullan 2015: 20-93; 2017: 37-70). The remains found in the subarchipelago of Cabrera, especially those presented here, are also of enormous interest.

The Subarchipelago of Cabrera

The subarchipelago of Cabrera is part of the Balearic Islands. It is approximately 10 km to the south of Mallorca (fig. 1) and comprises eighteen islands or islets, with an aggregate size of 1,836 ha. The two larger islands are Cabrera, 38 km in perimeter

and 1,154 ha in size, and Conillera, or Illa dels Conills, 6 km in perimeter and 137 ha in size. The rest are mostly abrupt small islets, some of which are almost inaccessible.

The island of Cabrera is by much the largest of the subarchipelago. It has a splendid natural harbour and a permanent spring (fig. 2). It also has several well protected coves and areas where drinking water accumulates, especially during rainy seasons. Therefore, Cabrera was an excellent refuge against choppy seas and a good place to stop, collect water, and repair ships during a voyage.

Although the subarchipelago of Cabrera appears isolated at first sight, in fact it was at the core of some of the main Mediterranean routes in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. It must be taken into account that ancient and medieval sailing techniques were heavily conditioned by two natural variables: currents and winds. Ancient sailors knew how to take advantage of both, making the Balearic Islands an ideal stepping stone for ships traversing the western Mediterranean. Some of the routes that passed near the archipelago of Cabrera were among the busiest seaways in the ancient world, including that which, beginning in the strait that separates Sicily and Carthage, ran south of Sardinia and the Balearics to follow the Mediterranean coast of the Iberian Peninsula towards the Strait of Gibraltar. A most important east-west route began in the Italian peninsula, passed the Strait of Bonifacio and, skirting the south of the Balearic Islands and the Iberian coast, reached the Strait of Gibraltar. This route also ran from west to east, again near the archipelago of Cabrera, whose islets stood as an excellent point of reference for navigators. Some north-south routes in the central western Mediterranean also passed by the subarchipelago, allowing ship crews to take advantage of its excellent conditions. Finally, it is worth recalling that some of the main routes between the Minorca, Mallorca, and the Pityusic Islands (Ibiza and Formentera) ran near the subarchipelago, which stood as an important port of call to collect water, rest the crews, and, if necessary, seek shelter (RIERA RULLAN 2017: 19-21).

The Monastic Community: The Hermitages

The archaeological record of Cabrera attests to the human colonisation of the island approximately 4,000 years ago, but the human presence did not become significant until the 5th century AD and, especially, the 6th century AD. In fact, remains dated to the 6th and 7th centuries are so abundant that suggest that this period witnessed the highest population density in the island until the 19th century.¹

1. Almost all the archaeological evidence presented in this article in reference to the subarchipelago of Cabrera are the result of archaeological survey and excavation works undertaken within the framework of project “Recuperació, consolidació i museïtzació del monestir bizantí de Cabrera”, largely funded by the City Council of Palma, the Spanish Government, the Direcció General d’Espais Naturals i Bio-

The results of archaeological survey and excavation campaigns, in combination with what the written record has to say about Christian monasticism in the 4th-8th centuries and the archaeological evidence from other monasteries in small isles and islets in the western Mediterranean and the Atlantic, suggest that Cabrera was a sacred island with two types of monastic sites: a coenoby and several hermitages. The coenoby housed most monks in the community, the monastic church, and the cemetery. The hermitages were home to one or a handful of monks, those that were most keen to eschew society. The archaeological evidence indicates that the coenoby was situated in Pla de ses Figueres, and that there were two hermitages in the largest island (Clot des Guix and Son Picornells) and perhaps another in Conillera, in a place known as Els Corrals (fig. 2) (RIERA RULLAN 2013; 2017).

The difficulties involved in understanding how coenobies were organised cannot be overemphasised, and this is even more the case with hermitages. The written sources are almost entirely silent on the matter. In addition, the archaeology of these hermitages is much harder to get a grip on, as they involved very simple buildings that leave little trace. In any case, the written sources indicate that they typically comprised an oratory (*oratorium*) and the monks' cells, sometimes surrounded by an enclosure (RIERA RULLAN 2017: 583-591).

The existence of a monastery like the one discovered in such a small island as Cabrera, which was important enough for the Pope to pay attention to it, makes it unlikely that any human settlement in the island was not directly related to the monastic community, especially since Cabrera may have even been regarded as a sacred island. These observations, in addition to the dating of the materials found in Clot des Guix and Son Picornells, the characteristic of some features identified there, and the comparison with parallels in other monasteries, suggest the presence of hermitages in those two locations, although further archaeological excavations are necessary for confirmation. More or less the same applies to the site of Els Corrals in Conillera, although the evidence in the latter is less clear, and less research has gone into it (RIERA RULLAN 2017: 199-240 and 583-591; 2023: 39-49).

The three alleged hermitages are located in some of the few areas apt for cultivation in the subarchipelago. In addition, Son Picornells and Els Corrals seem to reproduce the model observed in Clot des Guix, where a number of huts, a cistern, a pond, and an enclosure have been attested (fig. 3). It must be emphasised, however, that until further excavation is undertaken it cannot be confirmed that these features belong to the monastery of Cabrera, although it seems clear that at least

diversitat de la Conselleria de Medi Ambient, Agricultura i Pesca del Govern de les Illes Balears, and, from 2022, the Bisbat de Mallorca. I also wish to emphasise the support of the National Park of Cabrera and the Institut Català d'Arqueologia Clàssica. Currently, the project is directed by Magdalena Riera Frau, María José Rivas Antequera, and Mateu Riera Rullan.

most of them do. It is also important to stress that the vast majority of the materials found in Clot des Guix, Son Picornells, and Els Corralles are 5th- to 7th-century ceramic material, some of which bear stamps with Christian symbols or post-baking sgraffiti like the ones found in Pla de ses Figueres (see below).

The archaeological trenches opened in 2010 in the Central Complex in Clot des Guix, and in 2012 in Building 1 in Son Picornells, confirmed that these structures are coeval with the monastery of Cabrera, and also that the construction technique used is identical to that found in Space B in Pla de ses Figueres (RIERA RULLAN 2022; 2023: 39-40, 49). Another illustration of the good state of preservation of these sites is a ceramic specimen found by a police officer decades ago inside the cistern in the Central Complex in Clot des Guix, and handed over to the park managers (fig. 4). The piece can be related to the First Group of small Ibiza-made amphorae = RE-0206 = Key 72, likely made in the 6th or 7th century (RIERA RULLAN 2017: 281-285). Figure 4 also illustrates some of the specimens of “Terra Sigillata Africana D” collected by Joan Camps in the Central Complex of Clot des Guix. Three of them display pre-firing stamped decoration, and the other three post-firing sgraffiti.

The Monastic Community: The Coenoby in Pla de ses Figueres

The identification of the site discovered in Pla de ses Figueres with the coenoby of the monastic community of Cabrera is based on the fact the site has yielded the largest quantity of materials dated to the 5th- to 7th century in the subarchipelago. In addition, it is found in the largest expanse of land apt for agriculture and near the most important water source in the island. The site also includes the cemetery, where materials probably related to the church have been identified. This includes around twenty fragments of marble, probably imported from outside the Balearics, numerous fragments of glass lamps, and ceramic pieces that may have corresponded to eucharistic patens (RIERA RULLAN 2013: 58-59; 2017, 565-569).

To date, only three tombs have been excavated in the cemetery, which was likely closely connected to the church (Trench 2), but the existence of four more graves is documented. On the other hand, the position and distribution of the known tombs suggest that the necropolis was substantially larger. Four of the known tombs hosted a single body; all of them correspond to adult males (fig. 5). The associated ceramics and carbon dating of the three bodies exhumed to date indicate a date between the late 6th and the first half of the 7th century (RIERA RULLAN 2017: 125-143), a chronology in line with Pope Gregory’s letter in which reference is made to the monks of Cabrera.

All these facts strongly suggest that the cemetery corresponds to the monastery and that the four individuals attested were members of the community. In any case, it must be recalled that, during this period, many monasteries had servants who were not monks, and that they may also be buried near the community’s church.

On the other hand, it became increasingly common for secular persons foreign to the community to be buried in monasteries in order to meet the standards of piety recommended by the Church and also to ensure that the monks remembered them in their prayers to save their souls. Unfortunately, the excavation of the necropolis remains too partial to know for certain whether laypersons, servants of the monks or people come from Mallorca or elsewhere, were interred in Pla de ses Figueres.

The anthropological analysis of the three individuals exhumed to date in Pla de ses Figueres indicates that all three skeletons present traits compatible with agricultural toil. On the other hand, oral pathological markers point to a moderately soft and protein-dominated diet, with more animal- than plant-based nutrients (ALESAN, ALFONSO 2014). Stable isotope analysis confirms the same pattern: a diet dominated by terrestrial, but also marine, animal foodstuffs. The study of the animals remains found at the site also point to significant meat consumption, including sheep, goat, pork, chicken, birds (including seabirds), rabbits, hares, land snails, fish, and sea molluscs and crustaceans (RAMIS 2014; VAN STRYDONK, BOUDIN, RAMIS 2017).

One of the most significant finds in the area of the cemetery of Pla de ses Figueres is a fragment of amphora with a five-line inscription in Latin script (fig. 15). Although most of the words are hard to read, it seems clear that the text amounts to an epitaph. Another significant find is a fragment of marble with a leaf engraved on it, which may have been part of a headstone (RIERA FRAU, RIERA RULLAN, MAROT SALSAS 2014, 58; RIERA RULLAN, NADAL 2014; RIERA RULLAN 2023: 238-239, 243).

The find of marble fragments in Pla de ses Figueres is remarkable. By 2020, up to twenty fragments of some size had been found, although no marble is naturally found in Cabrera. Some of these fragments were examined by the archaeometry laboratory at Institut Català d'Arqueologia Clàssica (fig. 6), and even well-defined provenances were established: Almadén de la Plata (Seville); a greyish white marble with bluish grey veins possibly from the Pyrenees; Luni, modern Carrara (Italy); "greco scritto" marble, with two possible sources, near Annaba (Cap de Garde), that is, in the coastline near the ancient city of Hippo, or near ancient Efes, in modern Turkey; Docimiun (modern Iscehisar), near Afyonkarahisar (Turkey); the quarries near ancient Caristium, in the island of Euboea (Greece); and the highly coveted white marble from the island of Paros (Greece) (ÁLVAREZ ET AL. 2011; 2012; 2014; RIERA RULLAN 2017: 553-564; 2023: 235-243).

Although most of these marble fragments were found in contemporary topsoil, they may come from the monastery's church, as they were mostly found in the area of the necropolis, where 5th- to 7th-century materials abound. In addition, their morphology is a good match for the period (notably a basin and three *mensae*). On the other hand, the origin of the marbles also matches production areas for some of the ceramic types dated from the 5th to the 8th century found in Cabrera. Finally, one fragment of Carrara marble, which belongs to a plaque, was found in a collapse level dated between the 8th and 9th centuries (RIERA RULLAN 2017, 558-565; 2023: 235-239, 242-243).

Pla de ses Figueres yielded numerous stone objects foreign to the island, which in all certainty arrived in Cabrera when the monastery was active. The most common are fragments of stone plaques similar to schist. Fragments of vases carved in “*pietra ollare*” are also common (RIERA RULLAN 2005: 192, 216; 2017, 553-558; 2023: 235-240).

Although several small stones, roughly cubical in shape, had been found at the site, the existence of *tesserae* in Cabrera could not be securely attested until recently, as it could not be ruled out that they had adopted that shape fortuitously. In recent years, however, several pieces of stone and one of clay, with traces of mortar on one face (fig. 6) have clearly been identified as such. Moreover, one of the stone pieces-cum-mortar was found in a context dated to the 7th century. This suggests that the coenoby of Cabrera had a mosaic, although more evidence is needed to confirm it (RIERA RULLAN 2023, 236, 240).

The site has yielded a large number of post-baking sgraffiti on open table ware shapes, especially bowls and plates, in “*Terra Sigillata Africana D*” and also on a few pieces of Late Roman C wares. To date, a hundred such sgraffiti have been identified in Pla de ses Figueres (fig. 7), none of which were found in layers predating the late 6th century. In addition, the date proposed for the types identified suggests that these inscriptions were made from the second half of the 6th century to some time in the 7th century, the period during which the monastery was active. Similar sgraffiti have been found in common jars or small jars. Furthermore, although the ceramic material in Cabrera is as a rule highly fragmented, there is no doubt about the presence in these sgraffiti of Christian symbols. Some of the inscriptions are clearly in Latin, but a few are likely in Greek.² As noted elsewhere, the discovery of so many fragments of table wares with post-firing inscriptions is rare. The same phenomenon was attested in the monastery of Hamage (France) and perhaps in other monastic communities too, and, based on the variety and characteristics of the inscriptions found in Hamage and Cabrera, it has been suggested that the role of the inscriptions was to designate the user or each piece (RIERA RULLAN 2017, 534-542, 583; 2023: 272-273, 287-289).

Cabrera has also yielded a substantial number of examples of “*Terra Sigillata Africana D*” with stamped decoration, often with Christian motifs (fig. 8). The number of variety of these pieces has no parallels elsewhere in the Balearic Islands (RIERA RULLAN 2017, 397-403, 583; 2023: 169-174, 273, 290-294). On the other hand, especially of note is the large number of examples of shapes Hayes 90B (twelve rims), 90B/105 (two rims) and 105 (11 rims) in “*Terra Sigillata Africana D*”.³

2. I wish to thank Dr Bartomeu Obrador for his observations. For the reading of some of the best preserved sgraffiti see RIERA RULLAN, NADAL 2014; TANTIMONACO 2015.

3. In addition to the pieces whose drawings have been published elsewhere (RIERA RULLAN 2017; 2023), three more rims of type Hayes 90 were found in the 2011 season.

It is interesting to point out that Cap des Port (Fornells, Menorca), a place that seems to have hosted a monastery between the 5th and 7th centuries,⁴ yielded eight examples of the type Hayes 90B and three of the types 90/105. Owing to its shape and dimensions, the Hayes 90B can be argued to have played some role related to monastic activity, especially if we take into account that the shape is not particularly common in other contexts (GURT 2007: 220-223, 205). One of the specimens presents a cross-shaped stamped motif,⁵ and its use as an eucharistic paten has been proposed (GODOY 1995: 171). The base also presents a post-firing cross-shaped motif (NAVARRO 1982: 447). Cap des Port also yielded six examples of the type Hayes 105, three of which belong to a thick-rimmed variant. Like with type Hayes 90B and 90/105, J. M. Gurt argues that the dimensions and find spots of type Hayes 105 could indicate a relationship with monastic activities, and even that the abundance of the type could be taken as a marker of the presence of a monastery (GURT 2007: 205). P. Reynolds does not go that far, but he relates the presence these large bowls to the possible ecclesiastical nature of the site, pointing out their possible eucharistic uses (REYNOLDS 2010: 304).

Like with the marble,⁶ the ceramics found in Pla de ses Figueres come from multiple locations that span the whole Mediterranean. Considering that most of the site still awaits excavation, the large number of pieces found, especially dating to the 6th and 7th centuries, is remarkable. Concerning non-Balearic productions, the most abundant are north African wares from the region of modern Tunisia (RIERA RULLAN 2017; 2023), notably over 500 rims of “Terra Sigillata Africana D” bowls of the type Hayes 99 (fig. 9).⁷ The shape seems to have been the main type of table ware in the monastery, and this is in line with the fact that thickened-rimmed bowls are the most common shape in contemporaneous Egyptian monasteries. There is even evidence of the production of similar bowls in some monasteries, for instance Sant Simon (RIERA RULLAN 2017: 583).

The numerous fragments of marble found at the site demonstrate the purchasing power of the monks of Cabrera, and the same can be said about the imported pottery, especially eastern Mediterranean amphorae. The many shapes identified include specimens of LRA4 amphorae, used to haul one of the most highly-coveted wines of the period. The ships that carried these amphorae to Cabrera also brought eastern Mediterranean wares (RIERA RULLAN 2017; 2018; 2023), and no other site in the Balearics presents a comparable variety in terms of ceramic repertoire.

4. Arguments for this identification in RIERA RULLAN 2024.

5. Photographs and detailed drawings in RIERA RULLAN 2024: fig. 3.7.

6. Also present in Cap des Port de Fornells, where fragments of *mensae* (some from an altar) and large slabs with and without inscriptions, capitals, column drums and bases, and a slab with striations. In fact, some marble fragments are still visible at the site. Those collected in the 20th century present different colours and tones, suggesting various provenances, including, according to Dr Marc Mayer, from Carrara and the Proconessus (ALCAIDE 2011; RIERA RULLAN 2024).

7. Especially the sub-type 99C and variants.

Concerning ceramics, it is also worth pointing out that tile fragments have been found at the site in sufficient numbers to suggest their use in the church's roof. Unfortunately, we are still in the dark concerning the plan and morphology of this building.

Pla de ses Figueres has also yielded a remarkable collection of glass pieces dated from the 5th to the 8th century. Without archaeometric analysis, the provenance of these pieces is impossible to establish, but there are reasons to assign a Siryo-Palestine origin to the colourless pieces. Should this be proven, the economic prowess of the community, also suggested by the large number of glass fragments found, including numerous lamps, would be further demonstrated. It is worth emphasising that most of the fragments identified as lamps (fig. 10) have been found in the area of the cemetery, so probably most of them were used in the church (RIERA RULLAN 2013, 58-59; 2017: 565-569, 580-581; 2023: 227-232, 270-275).

Just on the edge of the cemetery, in the southernmost excavation trenches (fig. 11), two rooms have been found (Spaces B and C – Trenches 1 and 7). They have been interpreted as storage rooms or working areas built in the 7th century (RIERA RULLAN 2023).

Space C was overlain by a collapse level with masonry from the walls but also slabs fallen from above. Their number, characteristics, and distribution, as well as the discovery of numerous large iron nails indicates that they were part of an elevated pavement set upon beams; that is, the building had a second storey. The roof of this second storey was made of vegetal matter set on a structure of wooden beams. Beneath the collapse level, a pavement of dressed stone slabs, *tegulae* laid flat, and the odd raw stone slab was found *in situ*. The four walls, only the base of which is preserved, form a room 5.20 m long (NE-SW) by approximately 3.50 m wide (NW-SE), that is, an overall size of 17 m². This room was considerably bigger than Space B, also rectangular in shape and 13 m² in size: 4.80 m long (NE-SW) by 2.70 m wide (NW-SE). Spaces B and C shared a wall; all walls are similar, with a width ranging from 0.65 to 0.70 m. The pavement in Space B was made of clay, and no fragments of sandstone or iron nails were found. The fragments of baked clay found on it are likely to have come from the ceiling, like the charred remains of wooden beams, which must have supported the roof.

In the northern corner of Space C, the remains of the base of a wall, built using the same construction techniques and running NW-SE, like the ones that closed Spaces B and C to the east, was identified. Everything thus suggests that there was another room immediately to the NW of Space C. This has been tentatively interpreted as the three-part head of a church, but there is also abundant evidence against this interpretation. In any case, in the current state of our knowledge, it cannot be ruled out that this building was an early church that was later repurposed (storerooms, working areas, etc.). In any case, the structures (fig. 12) were anything but insignificant for the period in which they were built, in terms of size, architectural features,

the presence of lime mortar on the walls, the pavement in Space C, and the second storey above this same room.

It could be attested that Spaces B and C were in an advanced state of deterioration before being destroyed by fire. This suggests that the fire long postdates the construction of the complex. In the same sense, the almost total absence of material on the pavements indicates that the rooms were virtually empty when the fire occurred.⁸ As such, it is likely that the fire did not take place in the 7th century, but later. With the available evidence, a date in the 8th century, if not later, seems plausible (RIERA RULLAN 2023).

The distribution of 5th-to-7th-century settlements in the archipelago of Cabrera indicates that the monastic community exploited most of the land apt for cultivation in both Cabrera and Conillera. There is also evidence for wine production and the exploitation of marine resources. In Pla de ses Figueres, some features used in the production of wine and purple, dated to the 5th and 6th century, have been identified (Trenches 2 and 5). The carbon-dating of murex shells indicates purple production during the 6th century, and even beyond AD 580 (RIERA RULLAN 2017: 131-137).

Pla de ses Figueres (Trenches 3 and 4) also housed a complex of vats and a room (Space A) that, according to the evidence, was used for salting fish or preparing fish sauces (fig. 13). Although it is not totally certain that this task was undertaken by the monastic community of Cabrera, this was a common activity for monks during this period. The exploitation of marine resources by the monastery is also indicated by the find in 6th-7th-century contexts of considerable quantities of fish remains, a lead net weight, and numerous fishhooks. A group of hooks was found in association with the sort of shuttles used to make and mend fishing tackle. Two additional clay weights, likely to have been used in nets, and probably dated to between the 5th and the 7th centuries, were also found in a secondary position (RIERA RULLAN 2017; 2023).

Finally, it is worth recalling that Pla de ses Figueres has yielded various types of scoria that suggest the existence of one or more workshops to work glass or iron, another activity often associated with monastics communities (RIERA RULLAN 2017; 2023).

Final Considerations

2024 marked the 25th anniversary of the beginning of archaeological excavations in Cabrera. These, along with archaeological survey campaigns before and after 1999, have allowed us to know much more about the monastic community mentioned by

8. The fact that most of the floor of Space C is totally or partially blackened attests to the violence of the fire, indicating the presence of a significant amount of fuel. Is therefore possible that the room was used to store some flammable material, which totally disappeared during the fire. However, the almost total absence of materials on the pavement could also suggest that the blackened floors and the carbon fragments found, as well as the iron nails, correspond to the beam structure that supported the upper storey.

Pope Gregory. Research undertaken until 2016 has drawn a fairly comprehensive picture of the organisation of the monastery. After all, they were not an exceptional case and repeated a model that is by now fairly well understood. Small communities settling in small islands and islets but within the long-haul commercial networks active in the 5th and 7th centuries; and monks engaging in the production, acquisition, distribution, and consumption of many of the products then in circulation across the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the rivers of the former Roman Empire. The evidence of long-distance trade detected in these islands is related to a monastic diaspora which also became a commercial diaspora (RIERA RULLAN 2015; 2017).⁹

This work presents some of the main discoveries, up until 2021, concerning the monastic community that settled in Cabrera. As noted, very little work has been undertaken in the sites of Clot des Guix, Son Picornells, and Els Corralis; the eight trenches opened in Pla de ses Figueres cover a minimal proportion of the total area of the site (*c.* 10 ha), based on the surface scatter of 5th-to-7th-century pottery (fig. 14).

Cabrera is an exceptional site, the only pre-13th century monastery known in the Balearics. Also, no monasteries in the Iberian Peninsula predating the 8th century have been archaeologically documented with as much certainty as the one in Pla de ses Figueres. In fact, recognising Mediterranean monastic communities in the archaeological record, even identifying those mentioned in the written record, is often very difficult. It is, therefore, very important that work in Cabrera, where a monastic community has been attested with certainty, and some of whose remains are very well preserved, continues. A better understanding of the operation of this community will give us tools with which to better understand similar communities.

9. The historical contextualisation and interpretation of the archaeological record in Cabrera that I have presented is heavily indebted to the teachings and counsel of Miquel Barceló and Helena Kirchner, “supervisors” of doctoral dissertation “Arqueologia d’una instal·lació monacal primerenca a l’arxipèlag de Cabrera (Illes Balears) (segles V-VIII dC). Restes arquitectòniques, de producció, ceràmica i altres materials arqueològics” (RIERA RULLAN 2015).

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Figure 1. Map of the Balearic Islands with the location of the island of Cabrera (Josep Maria Puche/ICAC).



Figure 2. Spring and main settlements in the island during the activity of the monastery of Cabrera (Josep Maria Puche/ICAC).

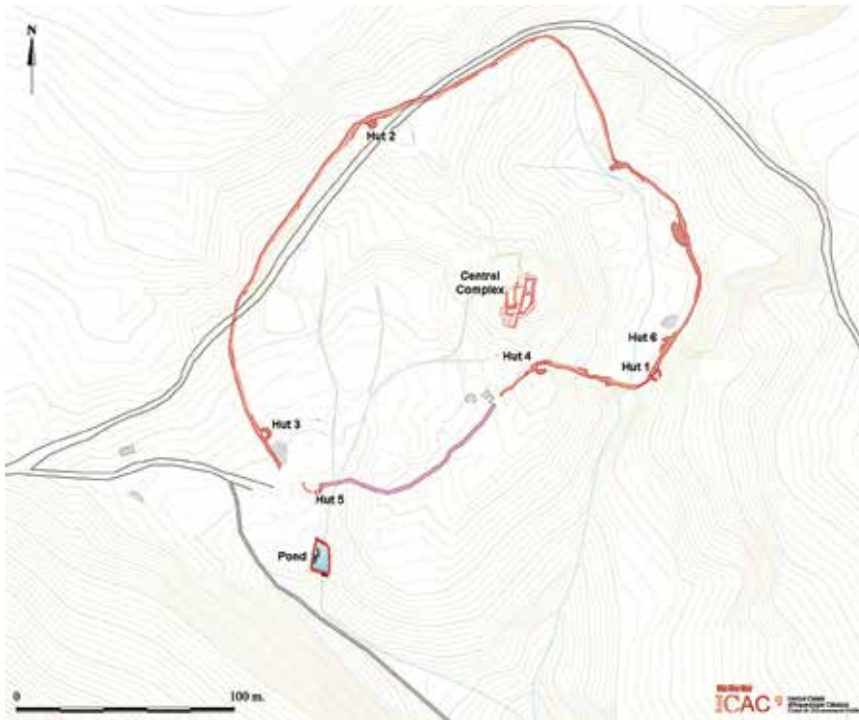


Figure 3. Plan of the features found in Clot des Guix. In red, remains possibly coeval with the monastery. Buildings in the Central Complex, including the cistern, the huts, the pond, and the enclosure (Josep Maria Puche/ICAC).



Figure 4. Drawings and photographs of some of the materials found in the Central Complex of Clot des Guix: Jar/small amphora (Antonia Martínez and Mateu Riera); “Terra Sigillata Africana D” (Víctor Guerrero, María José Rivas and Mateu Riera).

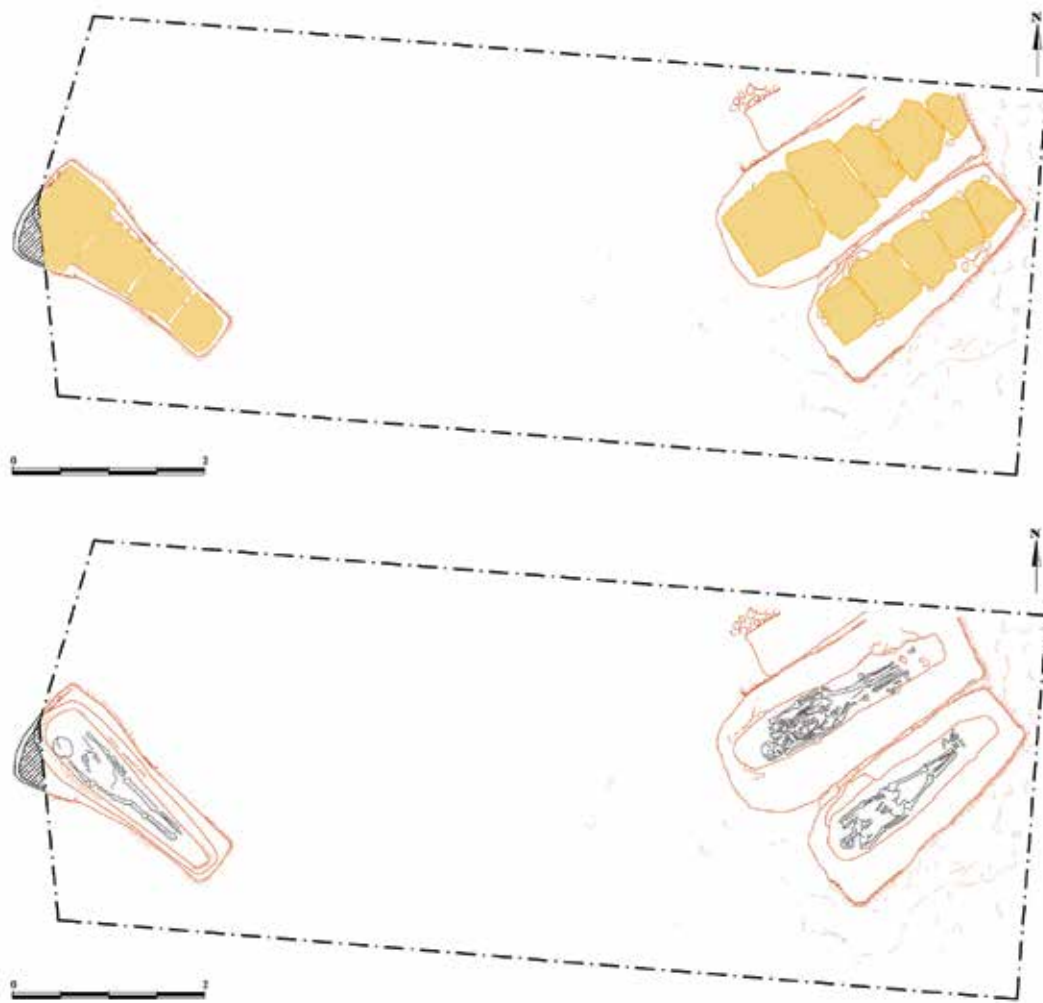


Figure 5. Plan of the three graves dug in Pla de ses Figueres (Josep Maria Puche/ICAC).

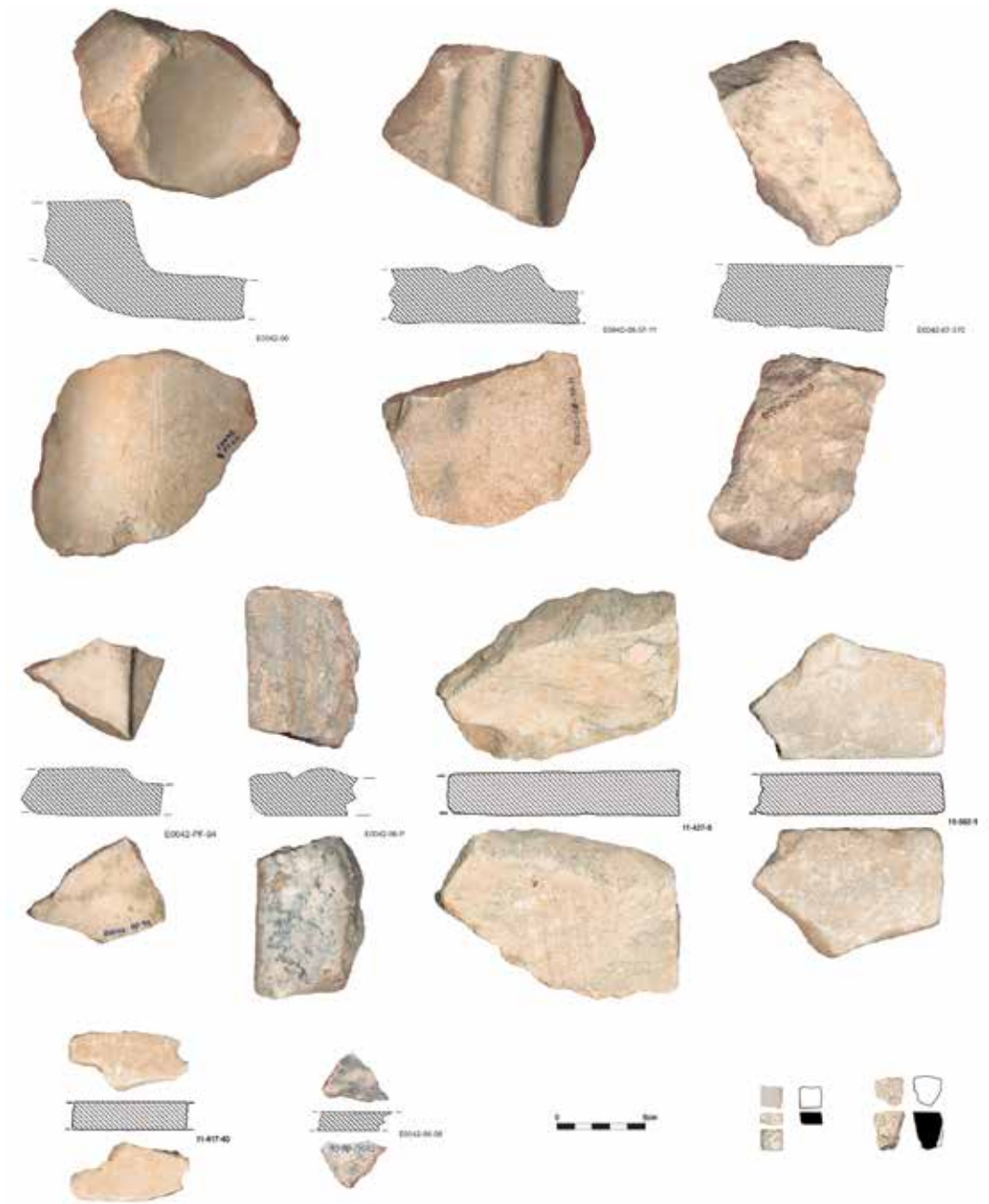


Figure 6. Marble fragments analysed by Unitat d'Estudis Arqueomètrics, ICAC and possible stone tesserae with remains of mortar (Mateu Riera).

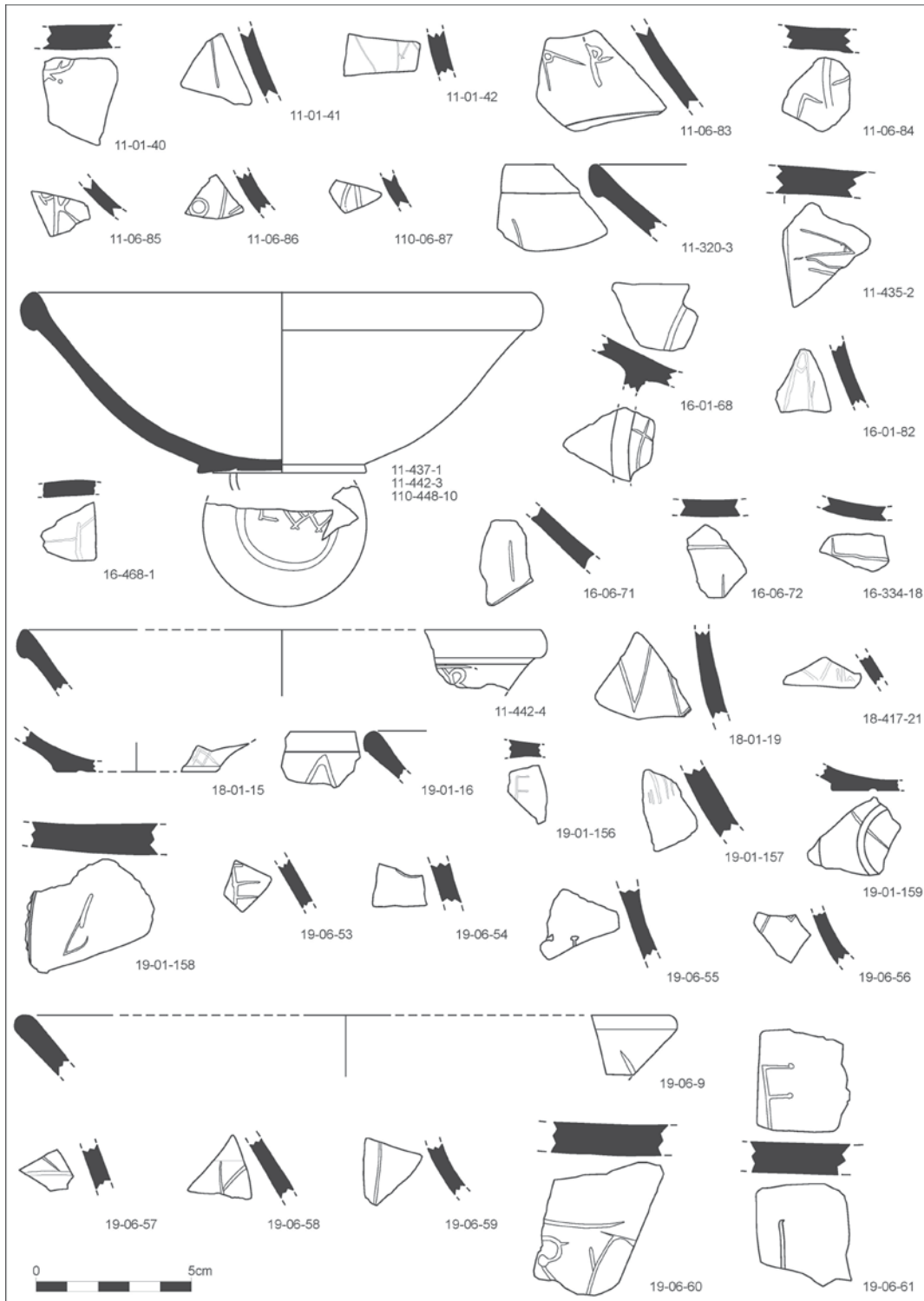


Figure 7. Specimens of “Terra Sigillata Africana D” with post-firing sgraffiti found in Pla de ses Figueres during the 2011, 2016, 2018, and 2019 seasons (Antonia Martínez, María José Rivas and Mateu Riera).

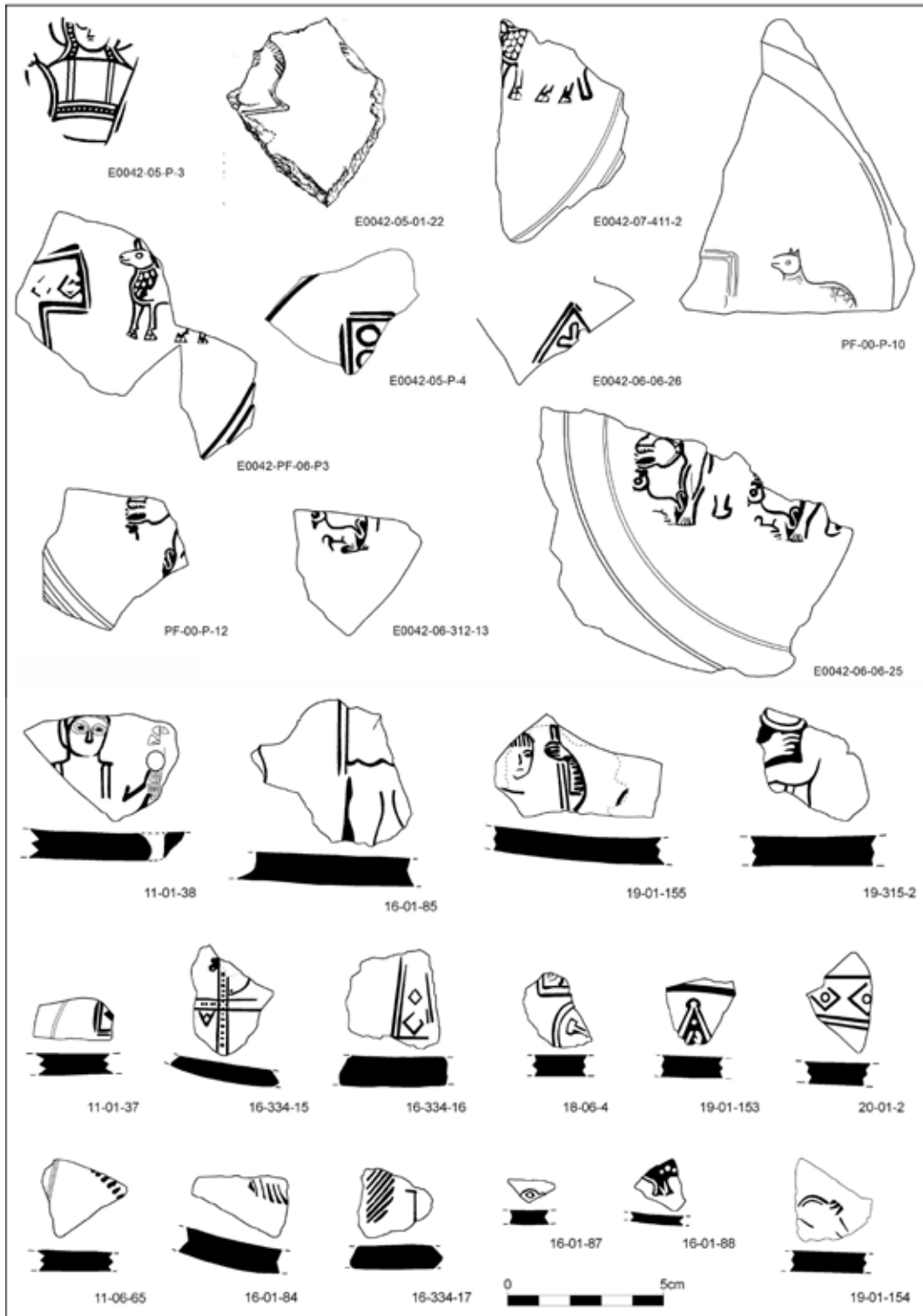


Figure 8. Specimens of “Terra Sigillata Africana D” with stamped decoration, apparently Christian, found in Pla de ses Figueres (Catalina Garau, Antonia Martínez, Mateu Riera, María José Rivas, Julio Román, and Miquel Trias).

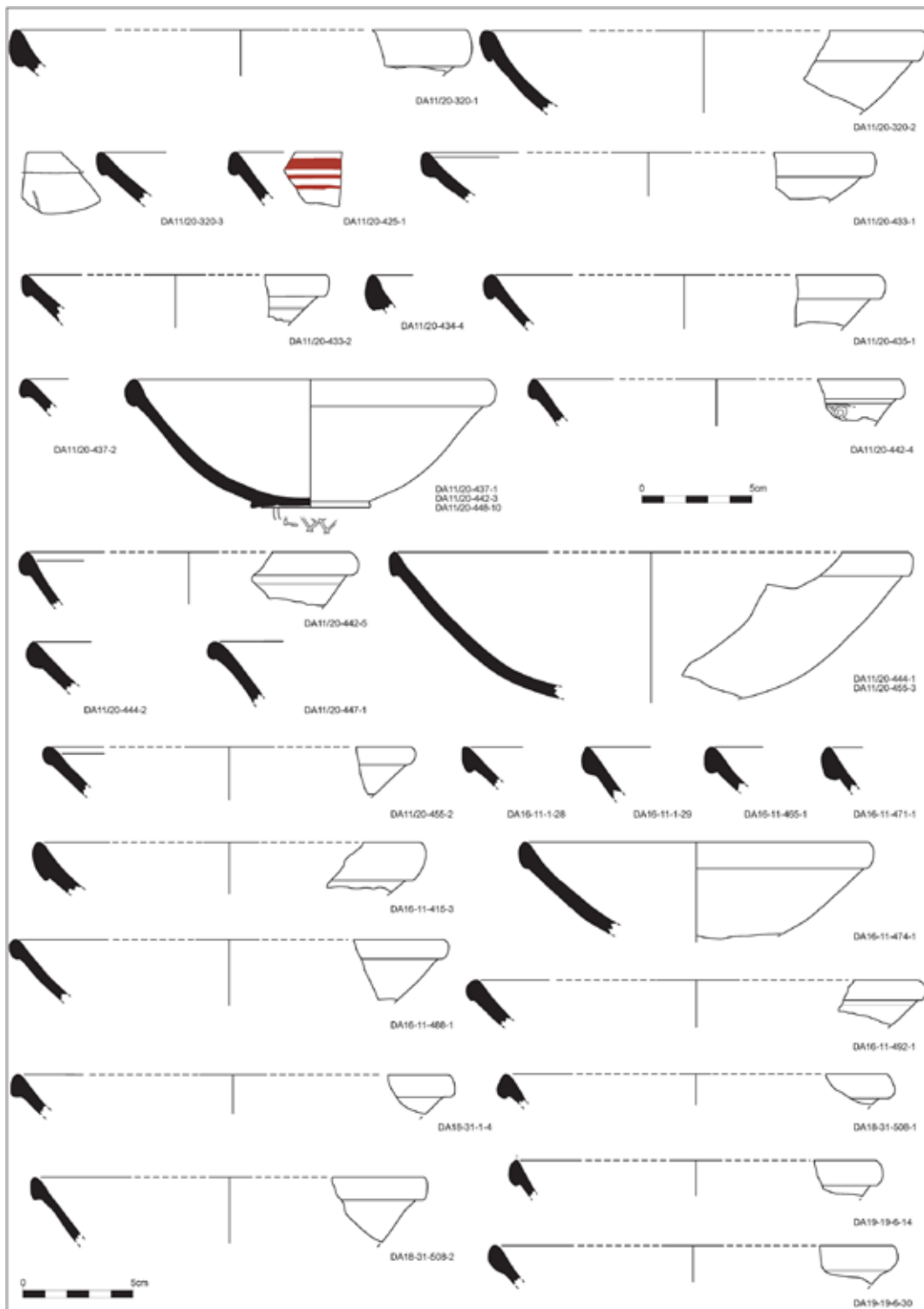


Figure 9. Examples of “Terra Sigillata Africana D” similar to some variants of type Hayes 99, many of which remain unpublished (Antonia Martínez, María José Rivas and Mateu Riera).

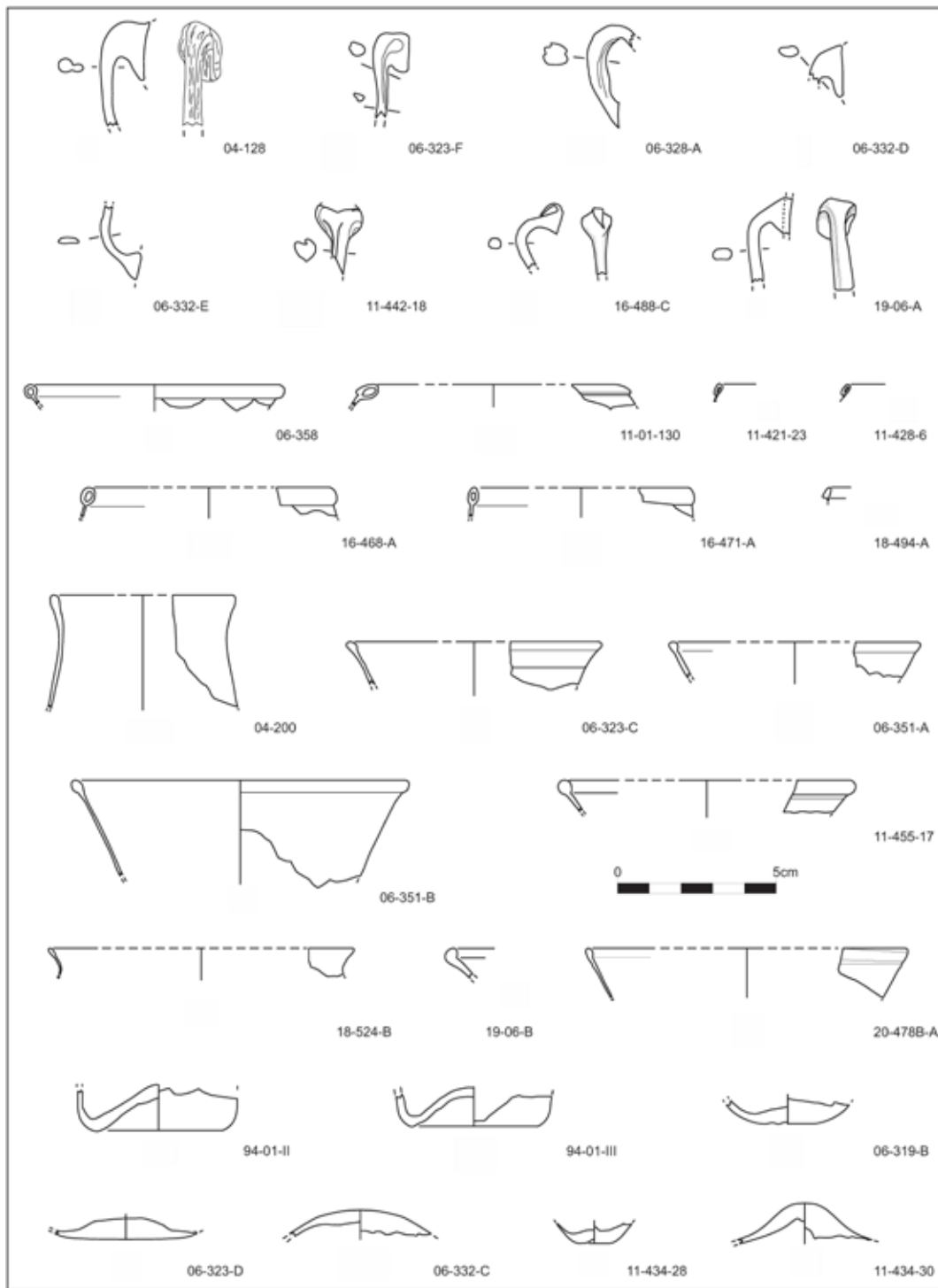


Figure 10. Glass lamps and possible lamps from Pla de ses Figueres (Antonia Martínez, Mateu Riera and María José Rivas).

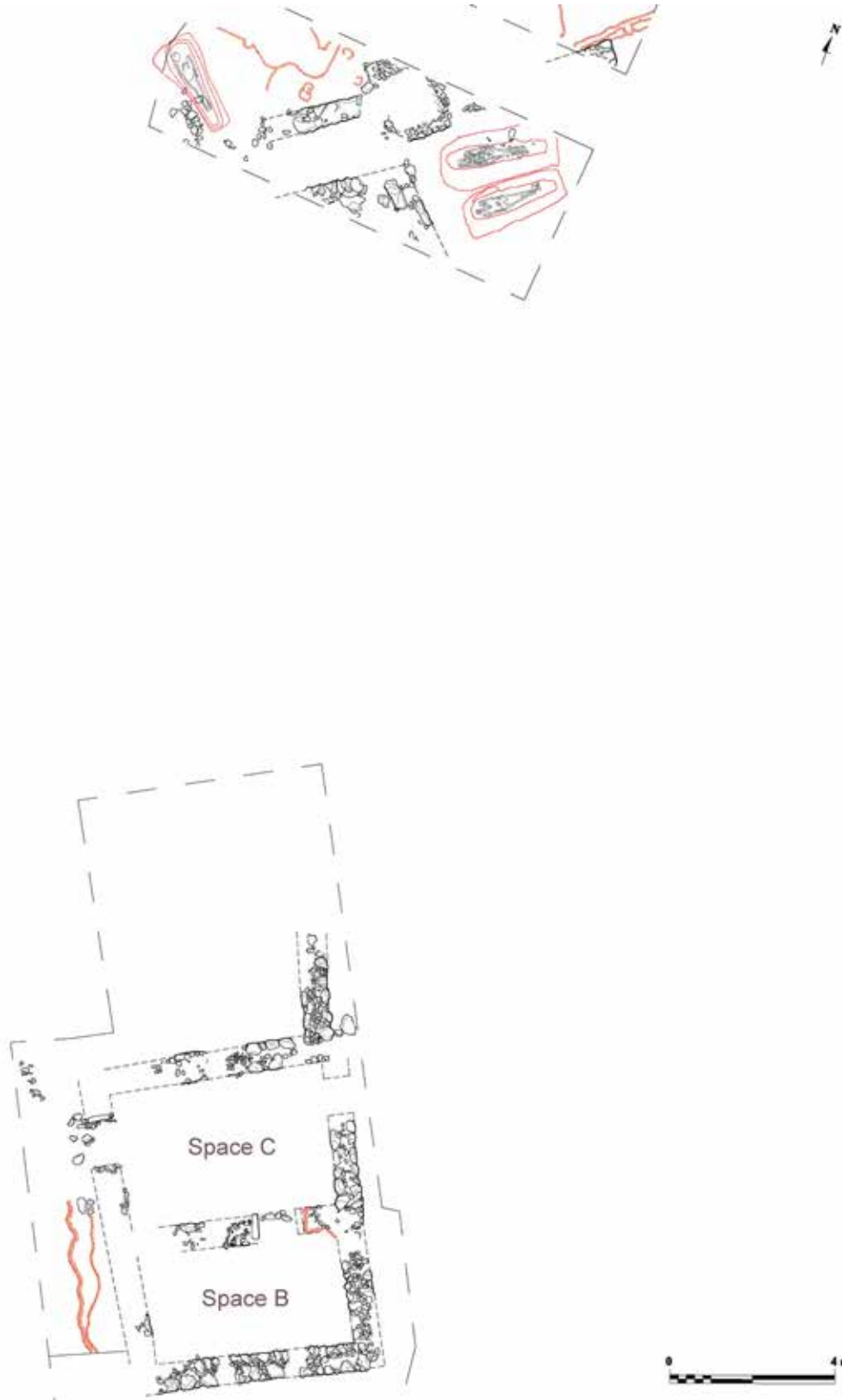


Figure 11. Area of Pla de ses Figueres where three tombs dated to the 6th-7th century, production features dated to the 5th-6th century, and several 7th-century rooms, have been found (Josep Maria Puche/ICAC and Mateu Riera).



Figure 12. Plan of the main features in Spaces B and C in Pla de ses Figueres (Josep Maria Puche / ICAC with modifications of Mateu Riera).

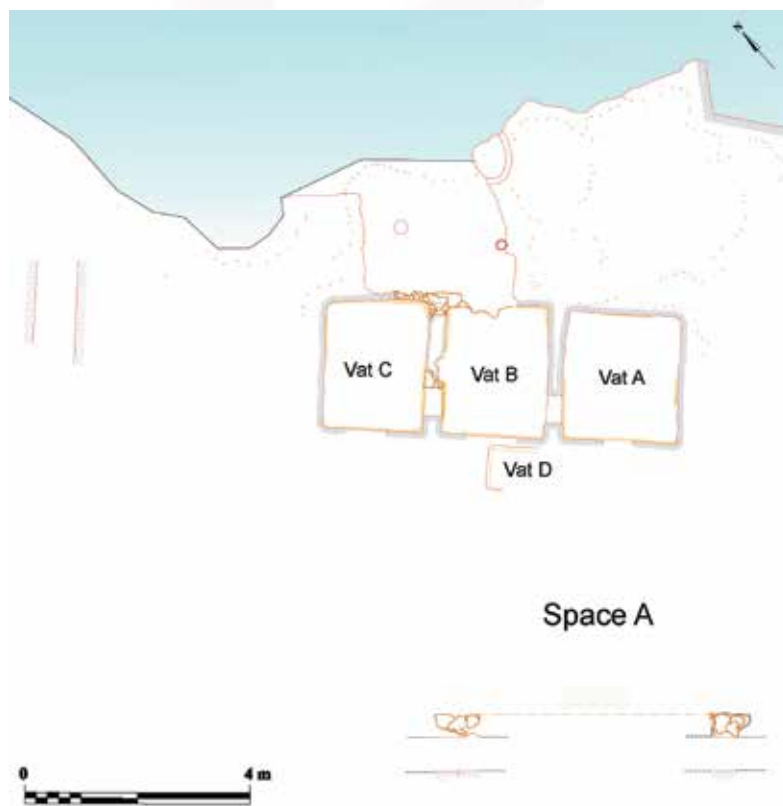


Figure 13. Plan of the fish-salting area in Pla de ses Figueres (María José Rivas, Mateu Riera Rullan and Josep Maria Puche/ICAC).

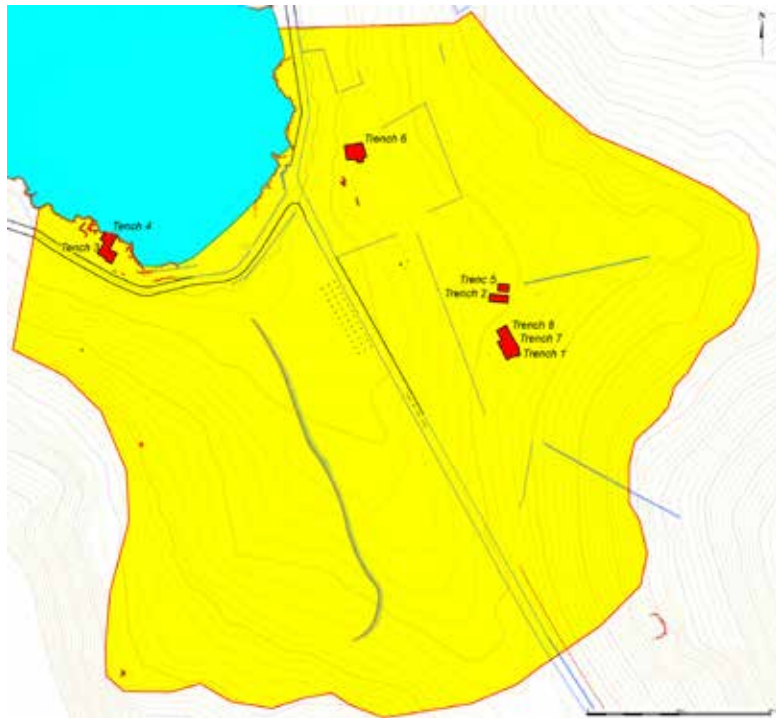


Figure 14. General plan of Pla de ses Figueres. In red, the archaeological trenches. In yellow, the dispersion of 5th-to-7th-century pottery on the surface (Josep Maria Puche/ICAC).



Figure 15. Inscription on pottery (Mateu Riera).