

# **Kros Rockshelter: A jar burial site in Northern Mindanao**

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## **Introduction**

Jar burials have been found throughout the Philippines, and indeed in the entire Southeast Asian region (Bellwood 1997, Fox 1970, Solheim 1960). The first hypothesis attempting to explain this cultural phenomenon in the Philippines was articulated by H. Otley Beyer. According to him, the practice of jar burial was introduced in the archipelago by a “jar burial folk” descended from the Hakka tribes of Fukien, South China (Beyer and De Vera 1947). This jar burial culture supposedly first took root in the north, in the Batanes and Babuyan Islands during the Iron Age, and then spread southward along the eastern coast of the Philippines.

Many other researchers have disagreed with this simplistic view of this complex cultural practice. Solheim (1960) called for a reevaluation of this hypothesis, saying “By comparing jars, their position, and the associated artifacts from a number of sites it can be seen that the assumption of a single jar burial culture is probably incorrect” (Solheim, 1960: 116). He prefers to

view burials in jars as an “isolated practice, which may have diffused with or without the migrations of people.” Likewise, Fox (1970) states that the cultural assemblages of jar burial sites “show marked variation of which is not consistent with the view” that a single wave of migration brought the practice of jar burial. According to him, jar burials instead appeared with “a number of distinct movements of people” (Fox, 1970: 160) – some entering from the north, some, from the south.

Fox (1970) and Jocano (1975) have put the practice of jar burial to as early as the Late Neolithic, beginning by at least 1000 BCE, and is known to have persisted until the arrival of the Spaniards. Furthermore, some ethnographic instances have been recorded (Jocano 1970). The practice’s temporal range is matched by its spatial range. Jar burial sites have been discovered in the Batanes and Babuyan Islands (Dizon 1995-97, 1998-2003, Faylona 2003, Solheim 1960); Solana, Cagayan (Ronquillo, Evangelista and Flores 1992); Calatagan, Batangas (de la Torre 2005, Lacsina 2002); San Narciso, Tayabas (Solheim 1951); the Bicol Region in Cagraray, Albay (Fox and Evangelista 1957b); Bato, Sorsogon (Fox and Evangelista 1957a); Casiguran, Sorsogon (Dizon 1979); Makabog, Masbate (Solheim 1954); Quezon, Palawan (Fox 1970); Pokanin Cave, Mindoro Oriental (Beyer 1947); and Bacong, Negros Oriental (Tenazas 1974). The sheer diversity of jar burial assemblages – vessel forms, vessel designs, site locations – has led one author to comment: “The jar burial tradition in the Philippines was more highly developed compared to other areas in Southeast Asia” (Bautista 2003: 57).

### **Jar Burial in Mindanao**

While documented jar burial sites in Mindanao are somewhat sparser compared to the data available for Luzon and the Visayas (Belmonte 1996), what we do know gives the impression that the jar burial record of this area is no less impressive or diverse.

Solheim, in his 1972 survey of archaeological sites in Southeastern Mindanao, identified two jar burial sites, both in Davao (Solheim, Legaspi and Neri, 1979). Liog Cave in Davao Oriental is a probable jar burial site,

based on Solheim's analysis of the sizes of the pots. He determined that Liog Cave dates from the Metal Age, but before the arrival of porcelain. Asin Cave in Davao del Sur yielded numerous sherds, which Solheim described as "nice... in form, decoration and quality of manufacture" (Solheim, Legaspi and Neri, 1979:80) and belonging to the Sa Huynh-Kalanay Pottery Tradition (Solheim 2002). One of the recovered items was a superb jar cover, with a painted scroll design. Some sherds, according to Solheim, were large enough to contain primary flexed burials of relatively small individuals. Nonetheless, he is more inclined to think that these jars were used for secondary burials. Unfortunately, no direct dating has been done on the artifacts, though the absence of metal and porcelain in its assemblage suggests that this is a Neolithic site.

An exceptional jar burial site in the Maguindanao area is Ayub Cave (also called Pinol Cave) in Maitum, Sarangani. Several seasons of systematic excavations from 1991 to 1995 have revealed a remarkable assemblage of secondary burial jars, some with lids with extraordinary anthropomorphic features. These lids are decorated with clay human representations that "detail age, sex and appearance," and even facial expressions conveying emotions (Gatbonton 1996). Other associated artifacts were glass beads and bracelets, shell tools and ornaments, and decorated jarlets containing human teeth and phalanges. Some of the jars were painted freehand in black and red, reminiscent of the designs on the jar cover from Asin Cave. Again, Solheim (2002) identifies these jars as Kalanay related. Based on the typology of the designs on the pots, this site has been dated to the Metal Age Period, circa 500 BCE to 500 CE (Dizon 1993). Subsequently, a couple of radiocarbon dates have furthered narrowed it down to between 70 to 370 CE and 5 BCE to 225 CE (Dizon and Santiago, 1996).

At the Kulaman Plateau in Lebak, South Cotabato, several caves and rockshelters were explored and identified as jar burial sites. Both limestone and earthenware jars appeared to have been used as secondary repositories of burials. The vessels came in different forms and styles of decoration, as well as sizes, from large to small. The limestone jars were decorated with vertical fluting, and some lids feature anthropomorphic figures. According

to Briones and Chiong (1977), vessel forms could serve as relative chronological markers: quadrilateral jars were older than the circular jars. A single radiocarbon date, provided by Kurjack and Sheldon (1970), puts the site at 585 CE  $\pm$  85 years. Maceda believes that these finds are an indication that people had been living on the Kulaman Plateau for the past 2000 years (Dizon 1993).

Interestingly, Kurjack and Sheldon argue that the variety of pottery forms indicate that the pottery complex in Kulaman was early, quoting Solheim: "The pottery from the later sites of Porcelain Age is lesser in variety than from the earlier" (Kurjack and Sheldon, 1970: 17).

All the aforementioned sites are located in Southern Mindanao. A number of archaeological explorations have been conducted in Northern Mindanao since the 1960's, and many sites dating from the Neolithic to Contact Age have been identified (Bautista 1992, Neri *et al* 2004). Unfortunately, no sites containing definite or possible jar burials have been reported, though many of these sites fall within the time range of jar burials in the Philippines. In Cagayan de Oro, archaeological explorations and excavations revealed mostly ceramics and tool assemblages. Human remains have been found in several caves and rockshelters (Bautista 1992), though no definite jar burial sites have so far been confirmed.

### **Kros Rockshelter**

Kros Rockshelter is located in Sitio Balungis, Barangay Balulang, Cagayan de Oro City, on the property owned by the Xavier University College of Agriculture (XUCA). It has geographic coordinates of 8°27'23.3" North latitude and 124°37'43" East longitude (Neri *et al* 2004) and an elevation of 60 masl (Bautista 1992).

The National Museum (Bautista 1992) reported the site in its 1991 archaeological survey of Cagayan de Oro. From the many potsherds he collected from the rockshelter floor, National Museum archaeologist Angel Bautista was able to identify nine vessel forms and three rim types from these sherds. Some had incised or stamped designs. Bautista further reports that

some of the vessel forms collected from Kros could be considered “unique” to this rockshelter (Bautista, 1992: 16).

Aside from the pottery, Bautista also took note of four sacks of human bones inside the rockshelter. According to Mr. Hernando Pacana, XUCA farm manager, these bones had once littered the rockshelter floor. He related how he had ordered these bones to be placed inside sacks before Bautista conducted his survey. These sacks, which were left near the rockshelter’s mouth, initially numbered to around twenty, but had dwindled down to four by the time Bautista arrived (Neri *et al* 2004).

Though the site was already disturbed, Bautista reported that a portion of the rockshelter floor covered with loam and a boulder could be tested further. Among the 21 sites he located in his 1991 survey, Bautista singled out Kros Rockshelter as having “great potential” for future archaeological excavations (Bautista, 1992: 16).

### **The 2004 Exploration**

It was on this recommendation that a team from the Archaeological Studies Program of the University of the Philippines returned to Kros Rockshelter in October 2004. Aside from following up on Bautista’s report, the team also hoped to recover some samples for absolute dating (Neri *et al* 2004).

Upon arriving, the team observed that half of the rockshelter opening was blocked when a big portion of the rockshelter’s mouth collapsed. A treasure hunter’s pit was also spotted at the east side of the rockshelter. Potsherds littered the floor and the human bones, which had spilled from their sacks, were scattered around by the landslide.

The team tried to locate the spot Bautista identified in his report, but failed to find it. Chances are it had been buried in the landslide. The team then cleared debris away from a portion of the floor and attempted to excavate. However, the team could not even set up a grid because the nails for the grid corners hit tuff as soon as they were struck. Further investigations revealed that the rockshelter wall and floor was part of “one massive tuff formation”

and that excavation at this time was impossible (Neri *et al* 2004: 24). The excavation strategy then changed and the team proceeded to record the whole area and collect all surface finds instead. No features were found on the surface, though the team was able to retrieve 32 pieces of artifacts: 29 potsherds, a couple of shell fragments, and a single polished adze. Human bones were also collected, the fragments of which filled one sack.

### **The Artifacts**

*Bones* – As noted above, there used to be twenty sacks full of human bones in the rockshelter, a considerable amount. Of the remaining sample we were able to retrieve, it was determined that there are at least 14 individuals in the sample: 13 adults and one juvenile, around one year of age. This count is based on the mandible fragments. Unfortunately, not much more information can be gleaned from the bones from Kros, for they were extremely fragmented. None of the large, irregular bones (the skull and the pelvis) survived intact. The long bones are mainly represented by shafts, their ends having been broken off. Most of the recovered small bones, like the phalanges and patellae, remained intact, but were noticeably underrepresented.

We know of at least two episodes of disturbance that can account for this spotty record: first, when they were placed in sacks by XUCA personnel, and second, when these sacks were affected by the landslide. It is very possible that there were other episodes of disturbance, whether during contemporary times or in the past. If these individuals had indeed been redeposited in burial jars during ancient times, then complete skeletons in pristine condition can hardly be expected to begin with. There is a tendency to overlook small bones – like carpal and tarsal bones, or the bones of infants – whenever skeletal remains are moved. And bones naturally become brittle over time because of weathering and other environmental factors (Byers 2002).

*Pottery* – Aside from the bones, pottery is the other main archaeological material collected from the rockshelter. These numerous potsherds from Kros represent various vessel forms and bear different designs. The National Museum's 1992 Cagayan de Oro survey report lists nine vessel forms, namely:

- 1) Bowl
- 2) Plate with base
- 3) Cylindrical vessel
- 4) Vase
- 5) Dish
- 6) Jar
- 7) Bowl with base
- 8) Pot
- 9) Other undetermined vessels

As for the designs, the report identified six types:

- 1) 1) Incised and punctuate designs
- 2) Incised geometric designs
- 3) Excised stamped designs
- 4) Incised leaf designs
- 5) Excised designs
- 6) Stamped geometric designs

Solheim (pers. comm. 2005) has identified these designs (Figure 3) as belonging to “fairly early” Sa Huynh-Kalanay, definitely pre-porcelain and maybe even pre-metal. Such sherds are not commonly found in northern Mindanao, though their presence in the area is not surprising. Angel Bautista, who surveyed the site, is convinced that Kros is a jar burial site. He notes that “associated with the jars are ritual vessels in varying forms and designs” (pers. comm. 2005), the presence of which is evidence that Kros used to be a ceremonial area.

In 2004, the team was able to recover 29 sherds of earthenware with inorganic temper.

Sherd Acc. No. (X-91-S <sub>3</sub> )	Jar part	Thickness (in mm)	Surface color	Texture	Decoration
92	Shoulder	11	Dark brown to black	Smooth	None
93	Body	10	Reddish brown	Smooth	None
94	Rim (dia. 125 cm)	10	Black	Rough	None
95	Rim (dia. 15 cm)	6	Dark reddish brown	Smooth	None

96	Body	11	Light reddish brown (ext.) Black (int.)	Rough	None
97	Body	7	Orangey red (ext.) Black (int.)	Smooth (ext.) Rough (int.)	None
98/117/ 118	Body	10-13	Light brown	Smooth (ext.) Rough (int.)	None
100	Rim (dia. 16 cm)	7	Black	Smooth	None
101	Body	7	Light reddish brown	Rough	Carination
102/103	Body	4	Light reddish brown	Smooth	Carination
105	Rim (dia. 14 cm)	5	Dark brown to black	Smooth	None
106	Rim (dia. 12.5 cm)	6	Reddish brown	Rough	Incised lip
107	Rim (dia. 7.5 cm)	4	Reddish brown	Rough	Incised lip
108	Body	7	Dark grayish brown	Rough	None
109	Body	5	Grayish brown	Smooth	Carination
110	Body	6	Grayish brown	Smooth	None
111	Body	6-14	Black	Smooth	None
112	Body	4	Black	Smooth	None
113	Body	5	Dark gray	Rough	None
114/125	Body	6	Light reddish brown	Smooth (ext.) Rough (int.)	None
119	Body	8	Reddish brown (ext.) Dark gray (ext.)	Smooth	None
121	Body	6	Grayish brown (ext.) Reddish brown (int.)	Smooth	None



From these varied characteristics we can say that these potsherds represent a wide array of vessels once present at Kros. The diversity of vessel forms and pot designs, like the rim forms and carination (Figure 1), can be an indication that these pots were not simply utilitarian in nature. The thicker sherds (measuring more than 10 mm) could very well have come from larger jars (Figure 2); unfortunately they are all body sherds and reconstructing the vessel form is quite difficult if not impossible. Large jars often function as storage, but the context from which these artifacts were recovered rules this out. There are no indications that Kros rockshelter was a habitation site, and the only function these pots could have served in such a context and in association with human remains was for mortuary purposes. The same goes for the thinner sherds, which could have come from smaller pots. These small ritual vessels may have held offerings or grave goods, such as food, for the deceased (Kress 1978, Valdes 2003), or even certain parts of the skeleton, as in the Maitum burials (Dizon and Santiago, 1996). As with Bautista's (2005) assertion, the sherds recovered for this season also represent burial jars and ritual vessels of different sizes and colors.

*Adze* – The polished stone adze is made of basaltic material and measures 5.4 x 4.9 cm. Following Duff's (1970) typology, it can be classified as a Type 2 B adze. Unfortunately, it was not found in situ.

In the absence of samples for direct dating, we can rely only on the associated assemblage to give us an approximate time depth. Composed mainly of earthenware and a single adze, with no tradeware or metal, the assemblage suggests that this is a pre-porcelain and pre-metal site. Furthermore, Solheim raises the possibility that this is a Neolithic site, perhaps as early as the first millennium BCE (pers. comm. 2005).

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There are strong indications that Kros rockshelter was a jar burial site. The significant amount of human bones, which once filled around twenty sacks, tells us that people were once interred here. There are thick sherds belonging to jars that likely held the bones as a secondary repository. There is a high concentration of unique and decorated vessels, most probably used for ritual purposes. The rockshelter had no habitation features or related artifacts.

Unfortunately, much information that we could have gathered from Kros has been lost because of the site's disturbed condition. We cannot reconstruct how these jars were arranged or how associated ritual vessels were positioned. This is compounded by the impossibility of conducting an archaeological excavation in the rockshelter's interior.

However, this should not dampen our search for other jar burial sites in northern Mindanao. Jar burial practice in the Philippines is a complex cultural phenomenon expressed in many diverse ways. In Cagayan de Oro, many sites have only begun to be examined, and new caves and rockshelters continue to be reported to the archaeological community (e.g., Bautista, T. pers. comm. 2005). Any one of these represents a tantalizing new possibility in reconstructing Mindanao prehistory.

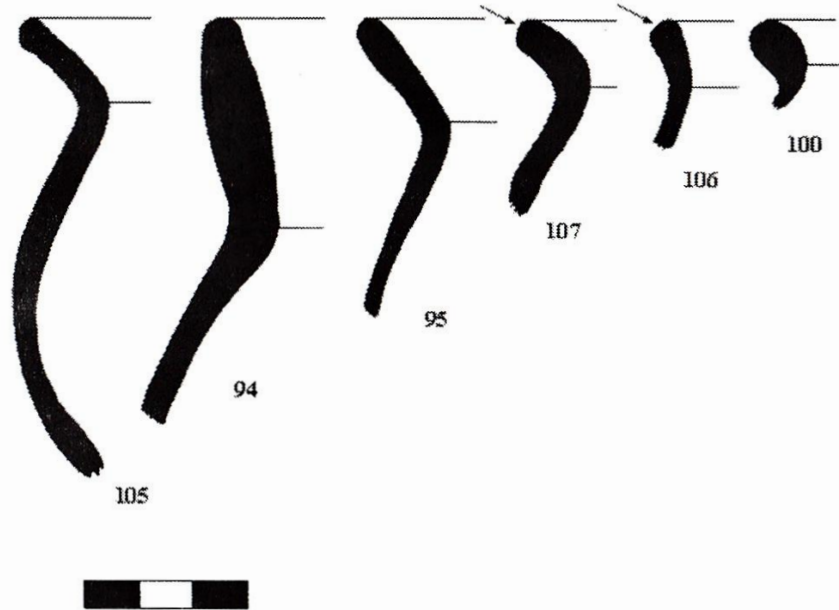


Figure 1

X-1991-S<sub>3</sub>-105, 94, 95, 107, 106, 100 Kros rockshelter rim profiles, arrows point to locations of designs

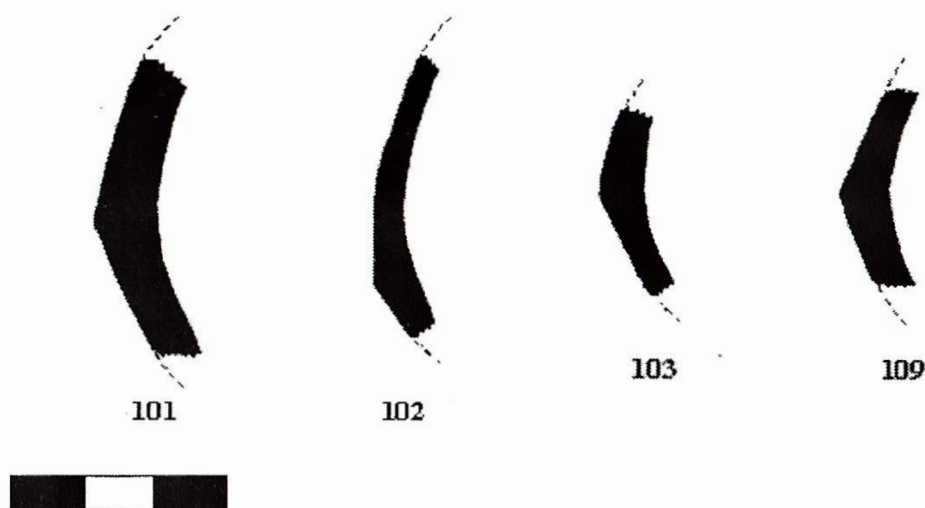


Figure 2

X-1991-S<sub>3</sub>-101,102,103,109 Kros rockshelter carination profiles

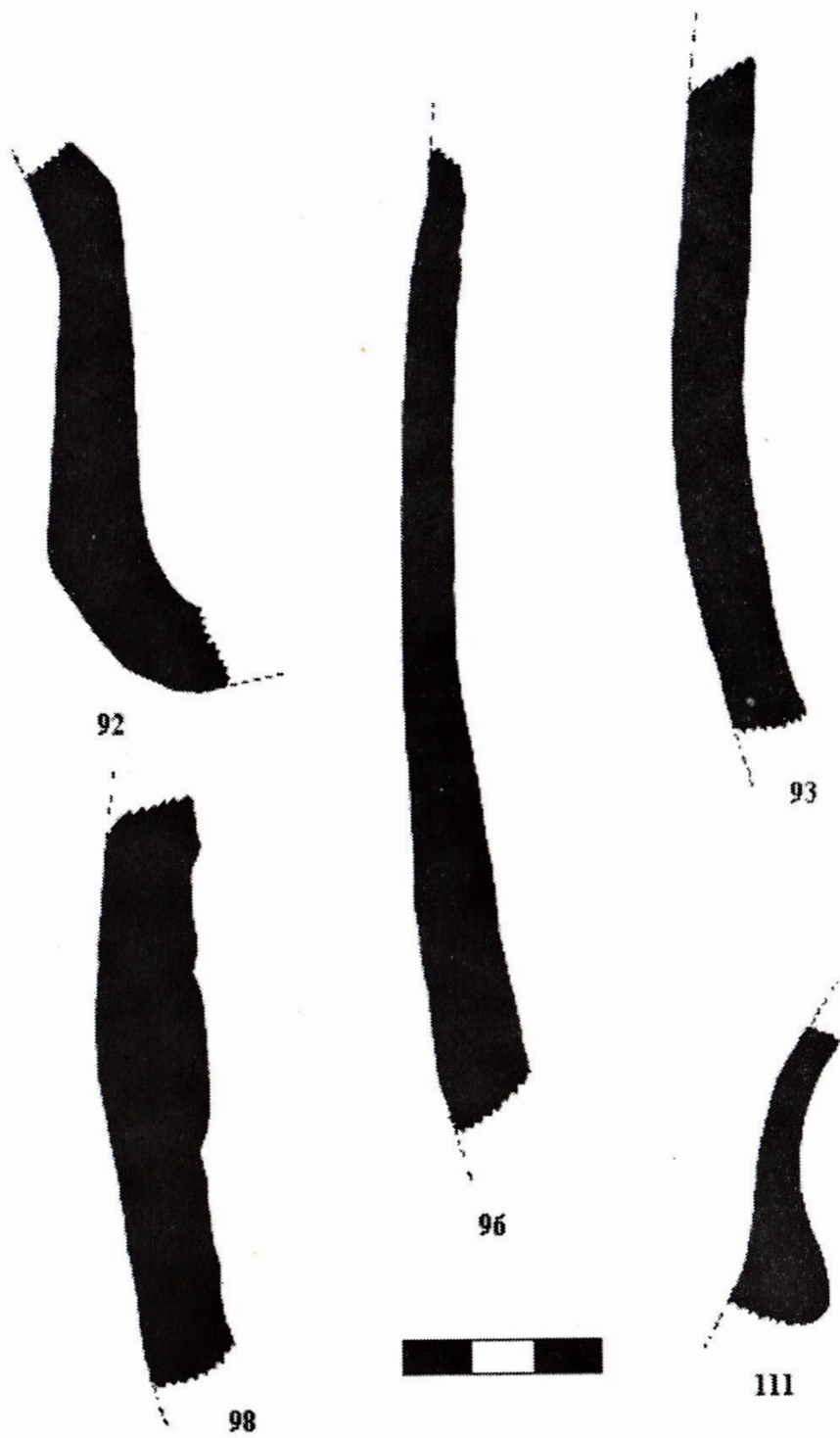


Figure 3  
X-1991-S<sub>3</sub>-92 thick shoulder sherd; X-1991-S<sub>3</sub>-98,96,93,111 thick  
body sherds

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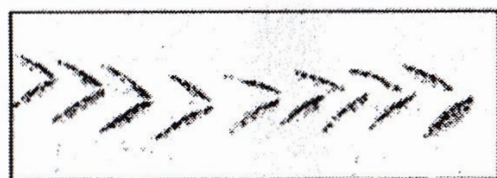
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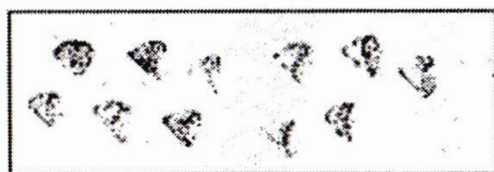
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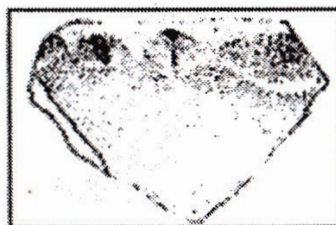
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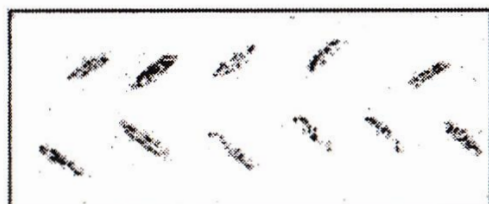
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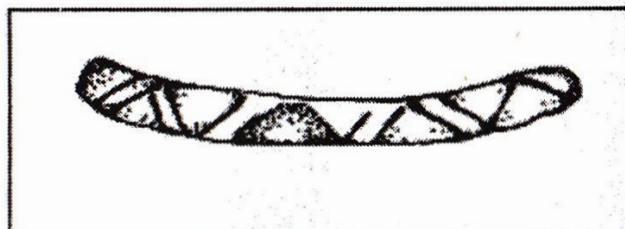
32



75



48



107



**Figure 4**

X - 1991 - S<sub>3</sub> - 34, 32, 48, 38, 75 types of designs on earthenware from Kros rockshelter (after Bautista, 1992); X - 1991 - S<sub>3</sub> - 107 design on lip

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**Abstract**

While several archaeological explorations have been conducted in Northern Mindanao since the 1960's, and several sites from the Neolithic to Contact Age have been identified, no definite jar burial sites have been identified. The Kros Rockshelter in Cagayan de Oro City showed potential as a jar burial site when it was first reported in 1992. A team from the Archaeological Studies Program returned in 2004 and took this opportunity to return to the site to conduct further studies. Unfortunately, the site has since been disturbed, and further excavation was impossible due to the geological characteristics of the rockshelter. The team was, however, able to collect a substantial amount of potsherds and skeletal material for analysis. Based on the potsherds present, it can be inferred from this assemblage that Kros Rockshelter indeed once contained burial jars, as well as votive jarlets. Kros Rockshelter may very well represent the first jar burial site to be documented in North Mindanao.

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