

# SUDAN & NUBIA

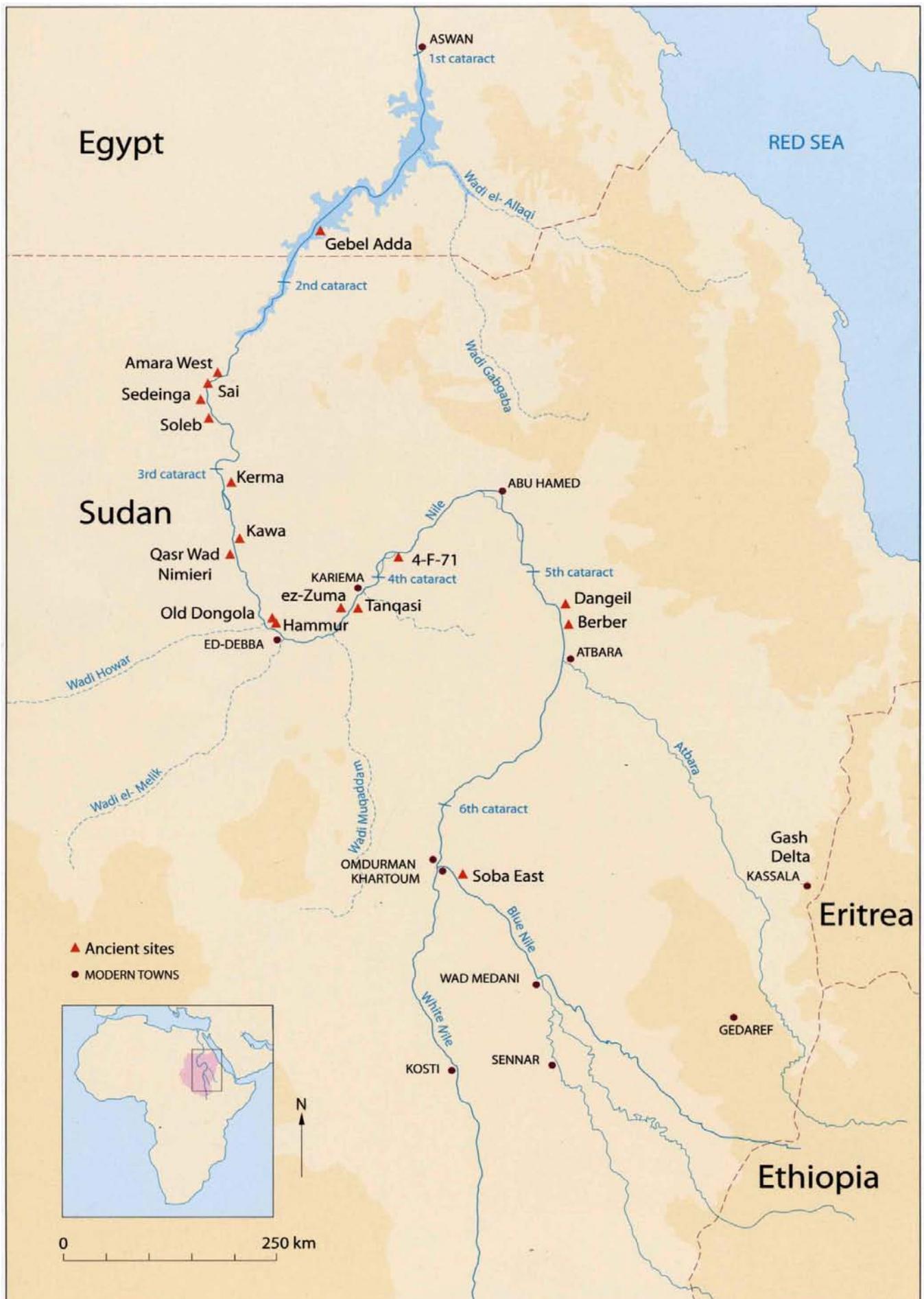
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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*Front cover:* Berber Meroitic Cemetery. Tomb, BMC 8, showing grave goods, the extended position of the skeleton and the remains of a coffin (photo: Mahmoud Suleiman Bashir).

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# A Recently Discovered Meroitic Cemetery at Berber, River Nile State, Sudan. Preliminary Report

Mahmoud Suleiman Bashir

## Introduction

The Meroitic cemetery of Berber was discovered when archaeological material consisting of pottery jars, bowls and human bone, were found while digging foundation trenches for a factory planned for plastic production. A team<sup>1</sup> of Antiquities inspectors visited the site in June 2009 to evaluate the damage caused by the trenches and to formulate plans to rescue the most endangered tombs. Protecting the site was the main concern during the initial visit to the area. The first decision was, therefore, to stop the building activities and to persuade the representatives of the state government and the manager of the plastic factory to shift the project to another location. As a result, the newly discovered site has been protected under the antiquities ordinance of 1999.

## The site

The newly discovered cemetery (BMC) lies on the east bank of the Nile about 12km south of the Kushite site at Dangeil. It is located east of the centre of Berber where the market is situated, east of Berber stadium and the modern cemetery and 200m west of the new road Berber – Abu Hamad (Figure 1). No evidence of ancient occupation has been found in the immediate vicinity of the site. Moreover, no traces of tomb superstructures have been identified. Seasonal rains and wind erosion most probably wiped out all surface indications. Such a site is impossible to identify by surface observations and a range of different human activities are normally responsible for their chance discoveries.

## The Excavations

The rescue operations started in July 2009 and continued for two weeks. Another rescue season was conducted in April 2010. The NCAM team has spent, in total, 21 days in the field. All the logistic and financial support were covered by NCAM. However, during the second fieldwork the *Section Française de*

*la Direction Antiquités du Soudan* provided a car for the mission.

The NCAM team visited the site in order to identify the exposed tombs and to estimate the cost of rescuing the remains cleared by the digging of a total of 112 trenches (2 x 2m in size and 2m deep) for the factory foundation (Colour plate XXVI). A total of 35 tombs have been destroyed partially or completely during the digging of these trenches. Pottery jars could still be seen inside the disturbed tombs, hence a total of 12 jars were collected (Plate 1).

The fieldwork strategy was based on evaluating the degree of damage in each tomb to define the rescue priorities. As a result, 15 tombs were selected for urgent excavation. The damage in these tombs had affected the burial niches and the tomb descendaries.

The first task was to carry out a topographical survey of the site and its surroundings to understand the spatial layout of the remains. To facilitate recording in such a rescue operation we adopted the factory foundation trench numbers as

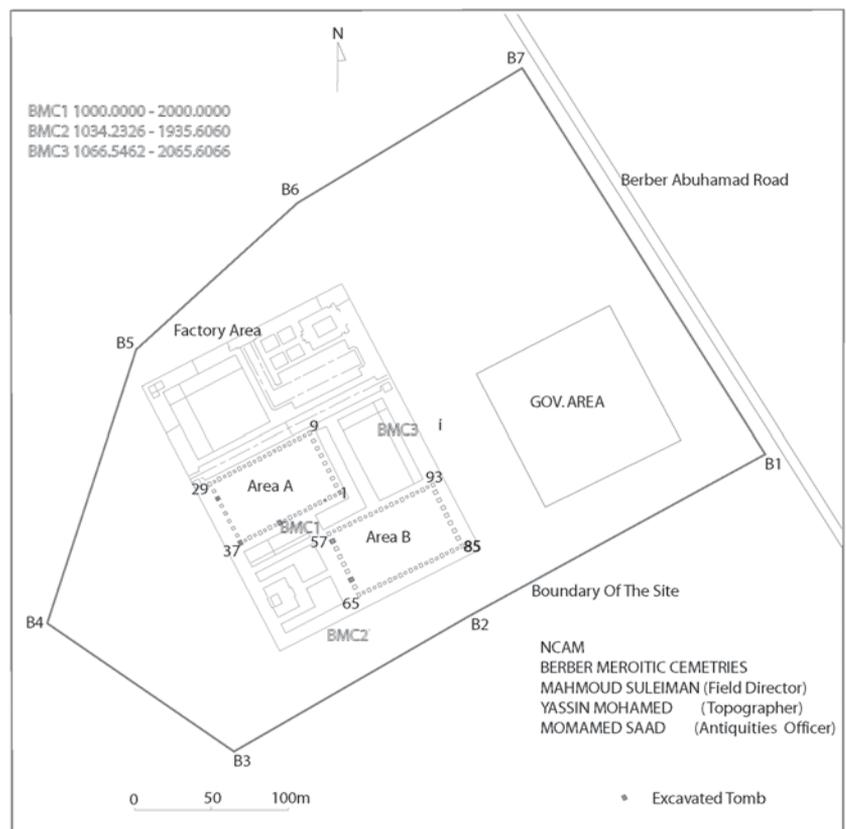


Figure 1. Berber Meroitic Cemetery (BMC) Site plan

well as separate tomb numbers. Before the actual work began, a photographic record of the site was made.

## BMC 1

This tomb was observed in trench no. 1. A pottery jar was found inside the trench indicating large scale damage in this tomb. The foundation trench cuts through the northern side of the burial niche and its blockage; however, the southern side retained part of an entrance blocking wall of fired bricks consisting of four courses 400mm high.

<sup>1</sup> The team members were Yassin Mohammed Saeed (Surveyor NCAM), Mohammed Saad Abdalah (Archaeologist. Assistant Antiquities Inspector NCAM), Saif Aldawla Abdelgafar and Hind Abdalah (Archaeologist. Tourism Office, the River Nile State), and the author (Field Director and Photographer).



Plate 1. The disturbed Tomb BMC 4.

The clearance of the blocking wall revealed evidence of ancient robbing activities. The base of a pottery jar was found in the filling over the blocking wall.

The burial niche was oval in shape, oriented north-south. An articulated skeleton was found in flexed position oriented north-south, the head in the south facing west. The hands rested in front of the body, the right on top of the left, in front of the pelvic area. In addition, the upper part of the skeleton was bent toward the west.

The funerary furniture consisted of one copper-alloy and three pottery bowls found around the body, together with three large pottery jars between the skeleton and the blocking wall. One of the jars is black in colour and decorated along the neck with a geometric pattern. A wooden kohl container was found in front of the hands on the western end in the burial niche.

#### BMC 2

In trench no. 54 a burial chamber located on the western side of the site was affected. The trench cut through the eastern side of the burial niche; therefore no remains of a blocking wall were found. The rescue operations consisted of removing the fill of the burial niche and they revealed an oval-shaped burial niche oriented north – south and about 1.7m deep.

A well preserved skeleton was recovered buried in a semi-flexed position on the left side oriented south-north, the head to the south facing west. The right hand was placed over the left, in front of the face. Some remains of textile were observed in the fill in association with the body, probably remains of wrapping of the body.

Three pottery jars were found beside the head on the southern side in the burial niche. A bottle of green glass was found under the right hand. A cylindrical wooden black kohl pot had been formed with 11 rounded mouldings, with the upper and lower ones decorated with incised lines. This object was found to the south of the skull, beneath one of the jars. In addition, a kohl stick made of copper was also found in the fill of the burial niche, and another two small,

wooden pots with lids (probably kohl containers) were also found, one behind the body and the other between the jars.

#### BMC 3

This tomb is located in trench no. 45. The damage affected the western part of the sloping descendary, just before the burial niche entrance. Traces of a blocking wall of mud bricks, human remains and part of a broken pottery jar were observed in the western section in this trench.

The clearance of the fill over the blocking wall revealed human bones from a disturbed skeleton and part of a pottery jar indicating earlier robbing activities. A copper-alloy finger ring was found *in situ*, and a complete light coloured pottery bowl found over the bones.

After lifting the bones and continuing the excavation of the mud-brick blocking wall, a complete articulated skeleton was recovered, buried in a flexed position on the left side oriented south-north, head to the south facing west, with the hands in front of the face. In addition, three large pottery jars were found in the northern side of the burial niche, two of them painted in floral decoration patterns in white. The third had a long neck, partially broken. Three pottery bowls were also found on the northern side of the burial niche.

#### BMC 4

This tomb (Plate 1) was cut by trench no. 37, which partially damaged the burial niche. The south-east corner of the trench retained part of a mud-brick blocking wall. In addition, a complete pottery bowl was found in this corner. The clearance of the fill in the disturbed side of the burial niche revealed undisturbed deposits in the southern side of the trench. After removing the fill in this area of the burial niche human bone fragments and a painted pottery jar with floral patterns, together with three pottery bowls, were discovered. The damage caused by the trench in this tomb permits us to see the burial entrance blocking wall from the inside, which is not possible in a normal archaeological excavation, but on the other hand, part of the burial contents were lost, as the trench cuts partly through the burial niche. The blockage consists of three courses of mud bricks, the upper row laid vertically to allow the closing of the oval-shaped burial niche.

An articulated skeleton was found in the southernmost end of the burial niche, at a depth of 1.6m. The body was in a semi-flexed position on the left side, facing west; the head to the south, with the hands in front of the face, the right over the left. Behind the body, two fineware pottery bowls were found, one of them painted and stamped along the rim. Faience beads were observed under the neck area.

The finds recovered from this tomb suggest the existence of multiple burials but the damage caused by digging the trench affected the northern part of the burial niche where a second skeleton may have been placed.

#### BMC 5

In trench no. 31 we observed remains of a completely destroyed burial. A mud-brick blocking wall can be seen on the

eastern side of the trench. After clearance, bone fragments were found on the northern side, in a niche about 1.6m deep and 2.1m long (north-south) together with a fragmented pottery jar, some faience beads and textile remains. The damage caused by the trench in this tomb allowed us to see the details of the blocking wall from the inside. All bricks were placed in a vertical position.

#### *BMC 6*

This tomb was observed in trench 63 in area B. The trench revealed part of the northern side of the burial niche. Bone fragments and potsherds were visible in the profile of the southern side in the trench. To identify the limits of the grave we started the clearance inside the burial niche. Thus, bone fragments of the lower parts of a skeleton and three complete pottery bowls were found. In the most southerly edge of the burial niche, we found a cylindrical kohl pot of black wood, probably ebony. While continuing to dig inside the burial niche, a second kohl pot of wood with semi-circular profiled ribs, was found made of the same type of wood. In addition, a complete pottery jar came from the fill on the western edge of the burial niche together with a flat piece of wood, the function of which is unknown.

As excavation continued we realised that the burial extended to the south and only a small part of the northern side of the burial niche had been destroyed by the trench. However, traces of robber activities were also observed through the disturbance of the burial contents. Therefore, checking the fill of the robber pit was useful, since at a depth of 100mm the northern edge of the descandary was identified, and at 320mm in the robber pit fill, we discovered a sandstone offering table measuring 250 x 220mm, inscribed in Meroitic.

Traces of looting clearly appeared when we found bone fragments of a disturbed skeleton inside the burial niche. After lifting all the bones, we found a well-preserved cylindrical kohl pot made of ivory, with a lid, and nearby a kohl stick (probably of wood) was also found.

#### *BMC 7*

This tomb is situated in area B and cut by trench no. 58. The damage affected the descandary near the blockage; in fact, the blockage and the burial niche are intact and parts of it can be seen clearly. The fill in the descandary at the south-west corner of the trench consists of light coloured soft sand, gravel and pebbles. The blocking wall was revealed at a depth of 1.4m. It consisted of four courses of mud bricks, oriented north-south and measuring 1.6m long and 300mm high. A robber pit has been identified in the southern part of the wall, where a number of bricks were missing and sherds were recovered from the fill in that area. In the intact side of the blockage to the north, four bricks were found on top of the wall, set vertically.

Inside the burial, seven pottery jars were found: four on the northern side and three in the middle of the burial. In addition, six pottery bowls, one of which was painted, were recovered in the centre between the two groups of jars.

A disturbed skeleton was found at the southern side of the burial; its destruction is a result of possible robbing activities. The position of the skeleton, based on observation of the long bones, suggests that it was an extended or semi-flexed burial on its left side. The body was oriented north-south, head to the south, facing west with the hands in front of the face. The legs were overlaid by one of the jars deposited in the middle of the tomb. The burial chamber measured 3.08m north-south and 1.63m east-west and was 1.63m deep.

#### *BMC 8*

Traces of this tomb were observed in the south-west corner in trench no. 59 in area B. The trench cut the central part of the descandary. A blocking wall of mud bricks consisting of five courses was found. The southern end of the blocking wall shows traces of a robbing pit in which only two rows of bricks were preserved. However, the fill over the missing part of the wall contained potsherds and fragments of mud brick which is an indication of ancient robbing activities.

After removing the mud-brick wall we identified the boundaries of a large oval-shaped burial chamber oriented north-south containing 13 pottery jars, five bowls, one censer, and one bowl of copper alloy. In addition, the skeleton was found in an extended position oriented south-north, the head in the south, buried between two large slats of wood. The later may be the remains of a coffin (Front cover).

The pottery jars show differences in form and colour, as well as decorative motifs. The finest example is a handmade black jar, shaped as if it were a double pot with one above the other and decorated with incised geometric patterns. This jar is most probably of an older tradition than the rest of the material and is dated to the early – middle Meroitic period.

#### *BMC 9*

This tomb is located in the south-west corner of trench 43 in area A. The damage caused by the trench mainly affects the descandary and the northern part of the burial niche. Traces of ancient looting were recognised on the basis of the existence of potsherds and a piece of copper alloy (probably part of a box fastener) found in the fill in front of the remaining part of the mud-brick blocking wall.

Inside the burial niche, two articulated skeletons were found, one at the southernmost side of the burial and the second in the middle toward the west end of the niche. Both are in a semi-flexed position, laid on their left side with the heads to the south. Only potsherds, a number of faience beads and a second part of the copper-alloy fastener were recovered from this tomb.

#### *BMC 10*

The clearly defined fill of the descandary of a tomb was observed in the north-west corner of trench no. 7 in area A. Remains of a mud-brick blockage consisting of four rows were found. Traces of ancient robbing in this tomb were evident, as a complete pottery bowl and fragments of bone were found in the fill over the blocking wall. However, three



pottery jars and a bowl with internal painted decoration were found in the middle of the burial and four pottery bowls were located on the northern side. One jar was red in colour with painted lines along the rim and shoulders, another was a black jar decorated with incised lines along the shoulders. The skeletal remains were completely disturbed as a result of the looting process.

#### *BMC 11*

This tomb was located in the south-east corner, in trench no. 3, area A. The damage partly affected the burial niche. In addition, recent robbing activities destroyed the burial contents. Broken pottery vessels were found inside the trench. As a result of the ancient and recent robbing activities, together with the damage caused by digging the trench, no remains of any skeletons were observed. This tomb provides another example where the mud-brick blocking wall could be viewed from inside the tomb.

#### *BMC 12*

This tomb is small in size (1.55 x 0.82m) and has been identified in the north-west corner, inside the same trench as BMC 11. After identifying the limits of the burial niche, we found that the damage caused by the trench affected the descandary, but modern robbing had also affected other parts, especially on the northern side of the burial niche.

Inside the burial niche, which is narrow and small in size compared to the other excavated examples, four pottery bowls and a small jar, two wooden kohl containers, and a number of faience, quartz and gilded beads were found.

Two skeletons were recorded. The first was found in the southern side of the burial niche in a semi-flexed position on its left side with the head to the south facing west. The second was a disturbed skeleton piled on the northern side of the burial niche.

#### *BMC 13*

This tomb was identified from the observation of a number of finds on the ground surface. The material consisted of potsherds and a fragment of a faience object around trench no. 111. This tomb has been almost completely destroyed by that trench. Apparently, the damage affected the burial niche and its contents were redeposited on the surface. Only a pottery cup was found at the western end of the remaining part of the burial niche. This encouraged us to check the piles of sediments around the trench where bone fragments had been found. A pottery bottle and a cup have been completely restored.

#### *BMC 14*

A tomb was located in the south-west corner of trench no. 15. The trench cut part of the descandary, but modern robbing activities have also caused damage mainly on the northern side of the burial niche. Remains of the mud-brick blocking wall were found; two courses with two bricks of the upper row remaining, laid in a vertical position.

Digging inside the burial niche revealed traces of ancient

robbing activities and later water penetration through the robber pit. However, a well-preserved articulated skeleton was found on the southern side in a contracted position, on its left side with the head to the south and with its hands in front of its face. One pottery bowl was found behind the body. Textile and leather, probably the remains of the wrapping materials, were observed around and under the body.

#### *BMC 15*

This tomb was cut completely by trench no. 55 in area B. What remains is the southernmost end of the burial niche. The southern profile of the trench showed a clear section of the descandary, as well as the mud-brick blockage and the burial niche. A pottery bowl and a skull were the only remains preserved in the grave.

### **Archaeological Finds**

The excavated tombs from this cemetery provided quite a large number of objects, with a great diversity in both the types of material and the quantity found in each tomb. Numerous pottery vessels were recovered including many Meroitic fineware open dishes with floral painted decoration on the interior. The finest example was painted with the design of a cobra surrounded by *ankh* signs (Colour plate XXVII). Comparable finds have usually been discovered from sites in the north and are rarely found in Meroitic cemeteries in central Sudan. In addition, large numbers of pottery jars were also found. The deposition of large pottery jars is a common tradition in Meroitic tombs. Among them were painted jars with floral patterns (Colour plate XXVIII) as well as some unique forms. The finest example was a black jar decorated with incised geometric patterns (Plate 2).

The abundant and well-preserved wooden objects were the most unusual objects found in several of the excavated tombs. Wooden kohl containers, probably of ebony, with lids, were found (Plate 3). These are of cylindrical shape, as well as coiled forms. In addition, a number of pieces of wood in different sizes were observed in the fill of the burial chambers in a number of tombs. The most important were two pieces 1.8m long, each about 200mm wide and 30mm thick, found protecting the body in tomb BMC 8. These indicate the possibility of the use of a coffin.

Among the archaeological material are copper-alloy finds consisting of bowls, rings, kohl sticks, and parts of fasteners. Other kinds of prestigious objects such as a glass bottle, a kohl pot of ivory (Plate 4), beads made of faience, stone and even gilded glass beads were also discovered in the excavated tombs at the Meroitic cemetery of Berber.

An offering table, with an inscription in cursive Meroitic running around the spout, was found in BMC 6 (Plate 5). It is considered one of the most important objects in this collection. Dr Claude Rilly, Director of the French Archaeological Unit (SFDAS), studied the offering table and reports as follows:-

Sandstone offering table (BMC 6 / 46). Height: 276mm,



Plate 2. The unique black jar from Tomb BMC 8.

Width: 274mm. The lower part, including the initial invocation and the beginning of the name of the deceased, is badly abraded. The decoration is attested from the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> to the middle 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

The paleographic style stands at the border between Transitional C and Late A. These elements fit with a date around the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (*c.* AD 250). If my reading of the personal name of the deceased is correct his name would be *Sobt* (pronounced Sobata). *Sob* is known from different texts, particularly Kharamadoye's inscription at Kalabsha, and

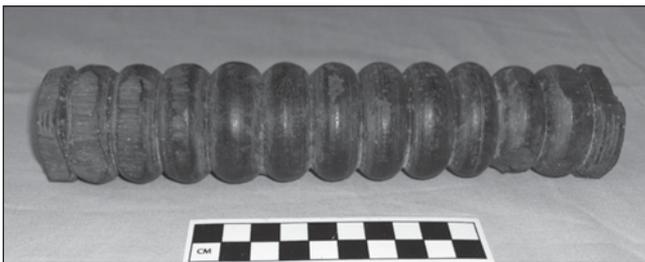


Plate 3. A wooden kobl pot.



Plate 4. Kobl pot of ivory.



Plate 5. Sandstone offering table from Tomb BMC 6.

is used to describe an unknown deity, whether it was actually the name of a god or an epithet is uncertain. *Sob-se-l* should mean "he (she) belongs to *Sob*".

### Chronology

It is too early to suggest an accurate date for these tombs. However, the finds indicate a long period of use. The sandstone offering table, as noted above, can be dated to the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The fineware pottery (stamped, painted etc.) is well-known from the middle Meroitic period. However, the distinctive black pottery jar indicates an earlier date, unless it had been reused in this grave.

The position and the orientation of the bodies reflect differing traditions, indicating a long period of usage for the cemetery, possibly from the middle to late Meroitic periods. Based on the size of the cemetery and the available evidence, the site can be provisionally dated between the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> to the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

### Concluding Remarks

The good state of preservation in this cemetery is an important feature especially when compared to similar cemeteries in the surrounding region. The survival of well-preserved skeletal remains and the fine wooden objects is a result of the dry soil. Although evidence of robbing activities in antiquity has been observed, the damage caused by the robbers in most of the excavated tombs has rarely impacted on the remains of the deceased and the grave goods.

The cemetery at Berber provides an example of burial traditions of the Meroitic period in central Sudan, when we consider the orientation of the body, the position and burial structure.



All the excavated tombs have an east-west descending, about 4m long, leading to an oval-shaped north-south burial chamber. Blocking walls in all the excavated graves consisted almost entirely of mud bricks, with two examples utilising red bricks (Plate 6). All the elements of the tomb structure reflect a common feature of burials dating from the Meroitic period in central Sudan (Edwards 1998; Mahmoud el-Tayeb and Kołosowska 2005, 53). Nevertheless, the discoveries in the cemetery show its considerable richness in grave offerings, raising the status of the site to that of an elite cemetery. In addition, the offerings and grave goods show similarities to tombs excavated further in the north (cf. Mills 1982; Török 1997, 529).

Although the tomb structures are similar, the positioning and orientation of the bodies exhibit a range of variation. Extended inhumation, with the hands resting on the pelvic area, is an early Meroitic tradition (Front cover). A slightly flexed position, as well as a tighter, contracted position in burials of later periods, is more frequent (Plate 7).



Plate 7. Example of an inhumation in a semi-flexed position from Tomb BMC 9.



Plate 6. Example of mud-brick blockage, Tomb BMC 4.

Archaeological research in the field of Kushite funerary practice has provided some information on the Meroitic phase of the Kingdom of Kush. Further analyses of the finds and samples from the excavated tombs at Berber as well as more systematic excavations will greatly enhance the data set, shedding much useful information on this field.

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*Colour plate XXVI. General view of the Berber Meroitic Cemetery site (BMC) showing the factory's foundation trenches.*



*Colour plate XXVII. Berber Meroitic Cemetery. The interior of a painted bowl decorated with a cobra and ankh signs.*



*Colour plate XXVIII. Berber Meroitic Cemetery. A painted jar.*